

The effects of Host-Guest interactions on destination image and loyalty

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Objectives | Over the years, destination image has been recognized as one of the most crucial elements of destination marketing, found to impact visitor loyalty and recommendation (Zang et al, 2014). Accordingly, both researchers and destination marketing organizations recognize the importance of understanding which factors can improve a tourist's perception of a destination. The behaviour of residents in response to tourist activity and their attitude towards tourism has received considerable attention within the academic community due to its significance in enhancing destination appeal and distinctiveness. Nevertheless, when it comes to their interactions with tourists, the existing knowledge remains limited, with some exceptions rather analysing such interaction from a qualitative perspective (Carvalho, et al, 2021; Kastenholtz et al, 2013) or not analysing the phenomenon from a comprehensive view. Specifically, the influence of residents' positive and amicable relationships with tourists on fostering a positive destination image is not yet comprehensively understood and needs further elucidation. The same argument holds when additionally considering the possible moderating effect of repeat visitation versus first visitation context. To address this gap, this paper analyses the impact of host-guest interactions, through social environment (residents' friendliness toward tourists) and emotional solidarity in the construction of the tourist destination's affective image and, in turn, on word-of-mouth about the destination. Emotional solidarity is exposed over 'sense of being welcome' (emotions tourists feel when welcomed by residents), 'emotional closeness' (affective bonds experienced by tourists and residents) and 'sympathetic understanding' (empathy between tourists and residents). This study also explores the potential differences between first-time visitors and repeat visitors, as both should engage differently with the destination and its residents, given previous experience of repeat visitors.

Methodology | An online survey was conducted among Portuguese tourists and a non-probabilistic convenience and snowball sampling procedure was used to disseminate the questionnaire. Considering their last tourist destination, respondents were asked to answer questions related to the previously mentioned variables under study. All constructs were operationalized with multi-item scales derived from the literature and five-point Likert scales anchored from 1 (strongly disagree)

to 5 (strongly agree). A total of 380 responses were validated. Data was analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. First, the measurement model was assessed in terms of internal consistency/ reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant. Through a structural model, it was analysed the veracity of the positive relations between 'social environment' and 'emotional solidarity' on the 'affective destination image' and the effects of the tourist destination's affective image on word-of-mouth. Next, a multigroup analysis was conducted to evaluate potential significative differences between first-time visitors and repeated visitors.

Main Results and Contributions | The PLS algorithm showed an R2 value of 0.420 for the endogenous variable affective destination image and 0.556 for positive word of mouth about the destination. The findings indicate that 'social environment', 'sense of being welcome' and 'sympathetic understanding' have a positive effect on 'affective destination image'. However, 'emotional closeness' did not show a significant impact on 'affective destination image'. In turn, tourists' affective destination image positively affects word-of-mouth about the destination. Moreover, the multigroup analyses show statistically significant differences between first-time visitors and repeat visitors as far as the relationship between social environment and destination affective image is concerned. Interestingly, for new visitors, social environment has a higher positive effect on the affective destination image.

Literature review showed few prior studies that used multiple group analysis in PLS to examine the impacts of interactions between residents and tourism on destination image, in different segments. In fact, this may be one of the first studies to focus on affective destination image differentiation between new and repeated visitors. Given that tourism is an industry with increasing competitiveness, having prior knowledge on how to attract and retain tourists boosts the destination's loyalty.

Limitations | This study is cross-sectional, based on a convenience sample of Portuguese tourists and uses self-reported data. Future studies could test the proposed model with other nationalities, as well as with other types of data.

Conclusions | This study provides important strategic implications for destination managers. Our findings highlighted that residents' warm and welcoming demeanour, characterized by their friendliness and empathy towards tourists, hold great importance in shaping the affective image of a destination and can be a powerful tool to enhance loyalty among tourists. Therefore, it is recommended to include residents as an essential element of destination management and branding. Additionally, the development of a marketing strategy focused on residents' friendliness towards tourists can be of great value to new visitors.

References

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