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ADVANCES IN GLOBAL SERVICES AND RETAIL MANAGEMENT: VOLUME 2

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A Conceptual Framework for the Mediating Role of the Flow Experience Between Destination Brand Experience and Destination Loyalty

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Abstract

The global tourism economy has created a competitive industry, and the customer experience in destination branding has emerged as a competitive tool for practitioners. It has also been attracting attention in the tourism literature. Individuals who experience high degrees of flow tend to feel more engaged in activities during their travel experiences. However, the antecedents of the flow experience and its outcomes are still limited in the literature. Considering the gaps in the literature, this study is aimed at developing a conceptual model for the mediating effect of the flow experience on the relationship between destination brand experience and destination loyalty by reviewing the extant literature. Accordingly, it has been conceptualized that the relationship between destination brand experience and the outcomes, such as satisfaction and loyalty is mediated by the destination perceived flow.

Keywords: tourism, destination brand experience, flow experience, satisfaction, loyalty

Introduction

Today, cities compete for enhanced economic development (Bobek, Maček, & Jankovič, 2015). With the increasing competition in the global market, it has become a necessity for destinations to create unique identities to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to attract tourists (Meng, 2006; Berrozpe et al., 2019; Tsaur et al., 2016; Rather et al., 2020). In this study, a destination is expressed as "a defined geographical region understood by its visitors as a unique entity with a political and legal framework for tourism marketing and planning" (Buhalis, 2000; Kumar & Kaushik, 2018). A destination is defined by consumers as a complex product that is subjectively evaluated according to its natural beauty, its cultural background, and the purpose of the visit (Buhalis, 2000). It is not enough to provide only physical facilities when creating a successful destination brand. When a visitor comes, the expectation of an experience must be provided, and an emotional bond must be established with him or her. In this respect, it is necessary to create more unforgettable-experience promises by addressing emotions more in experience branding (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Kim & Malek, 2017; Kumar & Kaushik, 2017). A successful destination brand increases the value of the destination and positively affects the destination's tourism revenues, sales, and competitiveness (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017; Milicevic et al., 2017). It

ultimately translates into an increase in spending by reducing search costs and the perceived risk of tourists (Blain et al., 2005). With a unique flow experience being offered to tourists, tourists will be able to enter the flow state by being involved in an experience process physically, emotionally, and mentally, and the tendency to return to that destination may increase (Coffey & Csikszentmihaly, 2016).

The concept of customer experience is gaining more attention in different fields, including tourism (Ali, Kim, Li, & Jeon, 2018; Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). Among the various branding elements, such as brand personality, love of the brand, brand trust, and brand loyalty, brand experience involves utilizing consumer behavior as a resource for providing a competitive advantage in a holistic way (Pine, Pine, & Gilmore, 1999; Smith & Wheeler, 2002). For example, in the context of tourism, brand experience includes not only the tastes of tourists but also their general emotions with various destination stimuli (Kumar & Kaushik, 2018). Recent studies showed that a successful destination brand should meet the expectations of tourists by offering an unforgettable travel experience at the destination to which they travel (Barnes, Mattsson, & Sørensen, 2014). The most important outcome is for tourists to develop positive, meaningful, and unforgettable memories in the destination. These experiences affect behavioral intentions and increase the behavior of re-visit (Io & Wan, 2018), thus fostering loyalty to the destination (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018; Chen and Rahman 2018; Vada et al., 2019).

Only a few researchers have attempted to reveal the role of destination brand experience in the tourism destination literature (Barnes et al., 2014; Kumar & Kaushik, 2018). A destination brand, which is also defined as a complex experiential brand (Barnes et al., 2014), refers to meeting the needs of tourists who are visiting a given destination by providing them with enjoyable experiences there (Brakus et al., 2009; Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2019). Considering the gaps in the literature, this research study is aimed at broadening previous theories (i.e., evaluation theory and flow theory) and examining the dimensions of the flow experience as a tool in the relationship between brand destination experience dimensions and destination loyalty. It is also thought that this study will make an important contribution to understanding the effect of the flow experience on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. The aim of the study is to examine the mediating effect of the flow experience on the relationship between destination experience and destination loyalty as a conceptual model.

Many variables related to destination loyalty have been examined in the literature. One of these variables is tourist satisfaction (Bowen & Chen, 2001; Kim & Thapa, 2018). However, tourist satisfaction alone is not enough to create destination loyalty. In the studies examined, it was determined that the experiences that tourists remember in a given destination have an important effect on the formation of loyalty (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2010). Considering past studies examining the relationships among travel experience, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty (Ekiz & Khoo-Lattimore, 2014; Kim & Brown, 2012; San Martin et al., 2013; Sangpikul, 2018), it has been found that these are not quite enough by themselves. In this respect, the study is expected to fill this gap in the literature by considering brand experience, the perceived flow experience, and tourist satisfaction as variables that can be effective for destination loyalty.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Destination Brand Experience

In the literature, experiential marketing and brand experience are investigated as new approaches for gaining a competitive advantage in almost every sector (Kazancoğlu & Dirsehan, 2014). Destination branding involves identifying and differentiating a destination, conveying an unforgettable travel experience associated with the destination, and reinforcing such an experience (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005; Richie & Richie, 1998). According to Govers, Go, and Kumar (2007), tourism is a consumption experience that "determines aspects of consumer behavior related to the multi-sensory, fantasy, and emotional aspects of a person's product experience" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 92). The concept of "experience" is a relatively new area in branding to explain the comprehensive assessment of consumer responses to brands (Kumar & Kaushik, 2018), and not enough studies feature different conceptualizations of the subject (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). Basically, the term "experience" is used to refer to offers involving hedonic consumption in service settings, such as travel, restaurants, and hotels (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Subsequent research coined the term "customer service experience" with the introduction of the "experience economy" (Pine et al. 1999). Previous research shows that experiences occur when consumers seek, acquire, and consume products (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zhang, 2008). From the consumer's point of view, "experiences are enjoyable, interesting, unforgettable encounters for those who consume these events" (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007).

Limited studies have been conducted based on destination brand experience in tourism (Barnes et al., 2014; Kirillova & Lehto, 2015; Dahiya et al., 2020). Destination brands are expected to keep their promises by providing intangible services through creating different and unforgettable experiences for tourists. Brand experience dimensions consist of sensory, emotional, intellectual, relational, and behavioral experiences (Schmitt, 1999). In this study, the city experience dimensions of Kazançoğlu and Dirsehan (2014) were used by adapting them to the destination experience dimensions (Social Activities & Leisure Time Experience, Affective Experience, Observable Experience, Taste Experience, Disturbing Sensory Experiences, Nature-Related Experiences).

Destination Brand Experience and Perceived Flow

The global tourism economy has created a competitive industry in which destination managers must find competitive advantages (Pike & Page, 2014). The destination, which is a mixture of various touristic products, is also a complex product. Destination is a perceptual concept that consumers can interpret subjectively depending on travel routes and cultural activities (Barnes et al., 2014). For the purposes of this study, destinations are recognized as "a defined geographic area understood by their visitors as a unique entity with a political and legal framework for tourism marketing and planning" (Buhalis, 2000, p. 97). At this point, unique and memorable experiences can be considered to be opportunities for destination differentiation and advantages (Mei, 2014). Destination branding consists of the perceived experiences of a visitor who creates a positive image and emotional bonds with visitors (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004).

As the principle of continuity suggests, "every experience that is realized and passed changes the person who acts and takes it, while this change affects the quality of subsequent experiences"

(Dewey, 1963; Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). Thus, it is hypothesized that the destination brand experience leads to the perceived flow of the destination.

- H1. Destination brand experience has a significant positive effect on the destination perceived flow.

Destination Brand Experience and Tourist Satisfaction, Destination Loyalty

The destination brand experience influences the satisfaction of customers as well as their intentions to visit again and to recommend the destination to others (Barnes et al., 2014). Tourists' positive travel experiences and satisfaction with destination characteristics increase their likelihood of revisiting the destination as well as their willingness to share positive travel experiences with friends and relatives (Ekiz and Khoo-Lattimore, 2014; Kim and Brown, 2012; San Martin et al., 2013; Polnyotee & Thadaniti, 2014; Sangpikul, 2018). Therefore, the following hypotheses have been developed.

- H2. Destination brand experience has a significant positive effect on tourist satisfaction.
- H3. Destination brand experience has a significant positive effect on destination loyalty.

Perceived Flow

The flow experience relies on people's perceptions of control, time disruption, and attention focus to develop positive emotions and satisfaction with an activity (Wu & Liang, 2011). The experience of flow is "a situation where people are involved in such an activity that nothing else seems important; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at a great cost for the sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Flow theory has been used in tourism research in recent years (Chang, et al., 2012; Chang, 2014). If a tourist experiences a high pleasant flow level by experiencing recreational and natural environments, this encourages exploration activities, with pleasure being derived from the flow situation (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000; Kim & Thapa, 2018).

Some previous research has revealed that the perceived flow experience has an impact on tourists' satisfaction and purchasing behaviors (Kuo et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2018; Chen et al. 2017; Jeon et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2012; Kim & Thapa, 2018). If tourists' experiences meet their expectations and they enjoy their vacations, then customer satisfaction will increase (Bilgihan, Okumus, Nusair, & Bujisic, 2014; İlban et al.2016; Kim & Thapa, 2018; Wu & Liang, 2011; Wöran & Arnberger, 2012; An et al., 2021; Gao & Bai, 2014).

According to studies examining the relationship between the flow experience and satisfaction, consumers feel more active, able to concentrate, happy, joyful, and satisfied, and feelings of enthusiasm and satisfaction occur when they enter flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Kuo et al., 2016). In this context, the flow experience is also an important factor for creating customer satisfaction, as it allows consumers to fulfill their wishes (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). In the field of tourism, tourists' previous experiences have provided them with satisfaction (Pizam, Shapoval, & Ellis, 2016; Bilgihan, Okumus, Nusair, & Bujisic, 2014; Wu & Liang, 2011). Therefore, visitor satisfaction depends on a destination's fulfillment of tourists' requests for

authentic experiences (Hanna, Font, Scarles, Weeden, & Harrison, 2018; Morgan, Elbe & de Esteban Curiel, 2009). Therefore, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

- H4. The perceived flow has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction.

Based on the hypotheses H1, H2, and H4, we can infer that in addition to the direct effect, the effect of destination brand experience on tourist satisfaction is also transmitted through the mediating variable, destination perceived flow. Studies have found that the flow experience has a positive effect on customers' subsequent attitudes and behaviors, directly affecting their intention to revisit a given destination as well as the possibility of recommending it to others (Lin, Fang & Tu, 2010; Kuo et al., 2016). Especially according to Chen and Rahman (2018), an unforgettable tourism experience has significant positive effects on loyalty. It consists of experience, pleasure, control, difficulty, and concentration. As tourists gain experience with streaming, this are more likely to affect their intention to revisit the destination (Chang, 2014; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Wu and Liang (2011) stated that the flow experience is an important moderator variable in the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. Thus, the next hypothesis was developed below:

- H5. Perceived flow experience has a positive effect on destination loyalty.

Based on the hypotheses H1, H3, and H5, we can infer that in addition to the direct effect, the effect of destination brand experience on destination loyalty is also transmitted through the mediating variable, destination perceived flow.

Tourist Satisfaction

Satisfaction occurs when a customer's perceived expectations for a product or service are fulfilled by the results of their consumption experiences (Oliver Richard, 1997; Hanna, Font, Scarles, Weeden, & Harrison, 2018). In the field of tourism, satisfaction is associated with tourists' assessments of destination quality based on their previous experiences (Pizam, Shapoval, & Ellis, 2016). Satisfaction has been a widely researched structure in the tourism literature, as it produces behavioral results and provides managerial guidance in the industry (Danaher & Haddrell, 1996; Jang & Feng, 2007; Kozak, 2001).Ttourist satisfaction is one of the most important antecedent variables in the success of destination loyalty (Chi & Qu, 2008; Mohamad, Ali & Ghani, 2011; Bowen & Chen McCain, 2015; Kim & Thapa, 2018; Cossío-Silva et al. 2019). In this context, the more satisfied tourists are happy with their destination experiences; they will want to go to a given destination again and recommend the destination to others, thereby increasing loyalty to that destination (Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Meligdis, 2006; Bramwell, 1998; Oppermann, 2000). Tourists are more willing to share their positive destination experiences with their friends and relatives, as well as to recommend the destination (Mohamad, Ali, & Ghani, 2011; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Chi & Qu, 2008; Bigné, Sánchez & Sánchez, 2001; Gürsoy, Chen & Chi, 2014; Clemes et al., 2011; Petrick et al., 2001; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Therefore, the following suggestion has been hypothesized:

- H6. Tourist satisfaction has a positive effect on destination loyalty.

Destination Loyalty

Loyalty is defined as a deep commitment to repurchasing a particular product or service (Oliver, 1999; Rivera & Croes, 2010). Customer loyalty provides a sustainable income, low-cost, competitive advantage; customers are more willing to pay and are less price sensitive (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Oliver, 1999; Oppermann, 2000; Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018). In terms of tourism, destination loyalty means tourists' commitment to a destination (Chi & Qu, 2008). Destination loyalty is widely used to measure the intention of tourists to revisit the same destination as well as their willingness to recommend the destination to others (Chi & Qu, 2008; Oppermann, 2000; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Cossío-Silva et al., 2019; Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Sangpikul, 2018; Stylidis et al.2020). In other words, loyal tourists re-visit the same destination and want to stay longer, spend more, participate more in various social and cultural activities, and exhibit positive behaviors toward destinations (Fu, 2019; Stylidis et al. 2020). Destination loyalty generates a sustainable competitive advantage for destinations through low marketing costs (Polo-Pena, Frias-Jamilena and Rodriguez-Molina, 2013; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018; Cossío-Silva et al., 2019; Lv et al. 2020). Loyalty is based on exceeding expectations and on providing unique experiences based on tourists' perception that a destination is worth seeing (Vinerean, 2014; Chenini & Touaiti, 2018; Cossío-Silva et al., 2019).

Planned Research Methodology

Research Model

Emotional states are essential for understanding tourist behavior, as it has experiential components (del Bosque & San Martín, 2008). Emotional response has been used in the tourism literature as Lazarus's (1991) appraisal theory suggests (del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2005). Based on this theory, this study views destination brand experience dimensions as evaluations, whereas the flow experience is viewed as an emotional state, and destination loyalty is viewed as the outcome of a flow experience. The conceptual model prepared based on the extant literature is illustrated in Figure 1. This model is planned to be tested in a sample consisting of individuals who went on holiday in the last year, during the pandemic period.

Measurement Development

The questionnaire used in this study was developed by considering the existing scales and corresponding items in the literature. First, J Joško Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) suggested that brand experience is a multifaceted construct, and experiences provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational values that replace functional ones (Schmitt, 1999). J Joško Brakus et al. (2009) developed a brand experience scale covering the sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral components of brand experience. Barnes et al. (2014) further adapted the scale in the destination context . However, applying the sensorial and affective dimensions of the scale developed for conventional product brands, such as Apple, Coca-Cola, and BMW, at the destination causes several doubts. In addition, some items, such as "the destination is interesting in a sensory way" or "destination gives me bodily experience," might be incomprehensible for tourists at the destination (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). Thus, the City Experience Dimensions that Kazancoglu and Dirsehan (2014) developed were used as reflections

of destination brand experience. The scale is based on the studies of Schmitt (1999) and J Joško Brakus et al. (2009). The scale was developed from 116 items by considering the city marketing literature and expert opinions. The final version of the scale resulted in six factors with 21 items, where the reliability and the validity were tested following two consecutive studies in two major cities in Turkey: Istanbul and Izmir (Kazancoglu & Dirsehan, 2014).

We referred to Novak, Hoffman, and Duhachek (2003) and Kuo, Chang, Cheng, and Lin (2016) for the three items measuring the perceived flow. In addition, we referred to Jang and Feng (2007) for the two items measuring tourist satisfaction. The first item involved the overall level of satisfaction with the destination that the travelers reported, and the second one was based on equity theory of customer satisfaction, which measures travelers' feelings regarding whether their trips were valuable. Finally, Sun, Chi, and Xu (2013) and Kim and Thapa (2018) adapted the items measuring destination loyalty. Oppermann (2000) underlined that frequent patronage is not always a true indicator of destination loyalty because it may be spurious (when individuals visit a destination frequently without very positive attitudes). Instead, examining destination revisit intentions as Jang and Feng (2007) suggested may be of great significance. The suggested items for the measurement tool are summarized in Table 1.
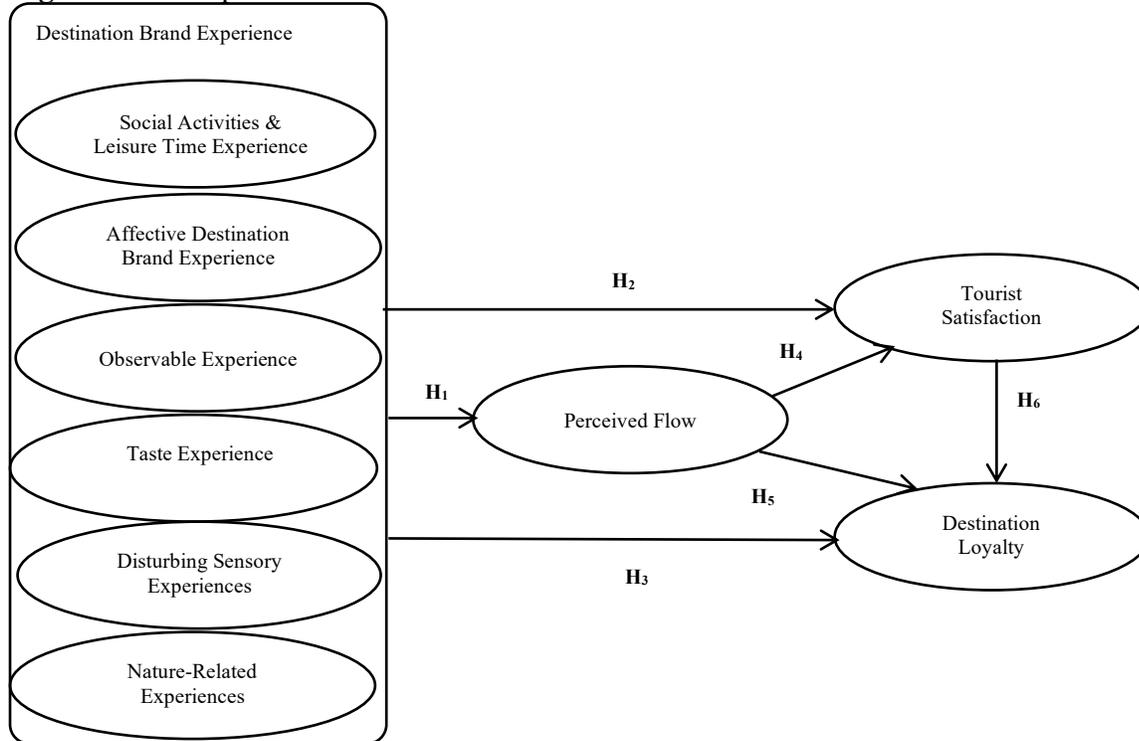
Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Table 1. List of Constructs and Their Items

Constructs		Items	Reference
Destination Brand Experience	Social Activities & Leisure Time Experience	The destination … is an active destination. The destination … hosts important political, cultural, artistic, and sport event activities. There are enough recreation areas in the destination…. There are many alternatives for shopping in the destination …. I can watch impressive shows in the destination ….	(Kazancoglu & Dirsehan, 2014)
	Affective Destination Brand Experience	Living in the destination … enthuses me. Living in the destination … is entertaining. Living in the destination … makes me feel happy. I love the destination …. The destination … makes me feel free. It is worth seeing the architectural buildings of the destination ….	
	Observable Experience	The destination … is a mystic city. The destination … is impressive due to its historical richness. There are interesting places in the destination ….	
	Taste Experience	I know the cuisine specific to the destination …. I enjoy the cuisine specific to the destination ….	
	Disturbing Sensory Experiences	Some places in the destination … smell unpleasant. There is noise pollution in the destination …. There is visual pollution in the destination ….	
	Nature-Related Experiences	The destination … preserves its natural beauty. The green areas of the destination … are extensive.	
Destination Perceived Flow		I felt fascinated when I visited …. I felt that time passed quickly when I visited …. I felt nothing at … tour.	(Kuo, Chang, Cheng, & Lin, 2016; Novak, Hoffman, & Duhachek, 2003)
Destination Satisfaction		overall satisfaction with the destination perceived value for money from visiting the destination	(Jang & Feng, 2007)
Destination Loyalty		I will revisit …. I will recommend … to others. I will encourage other people to visit	(Kim & Thapa, 2018; Sun, Chi, & Xu, 2013)

Conclusion and Implications

This study is aimed at developing a conceptual model for the mediating effect of the flow experience on the relationship between destination brand experience and destination loyalty. In recent years, with the understanding of the effect of brand experience on the economic and relational benefits of companies gaining competitive advantage, destination brand experience has started to be included in the tourism literature. During the time periods that tourists spend at a given destination, tourists have different experiences when participating in various activities depending on the characteristics of the region and its attractiveness. It can be said that allowing tourists to experience different flow experiences and leaving the tourists happy with the destination afterward are very important for the destination to gain a competitive advantage. In this regard, every aspect of the brand experience should be designed with a focus on creating a unique and unforgettable brand experience. One should organize different activities, such as swimming,

cycling, hiking, sightseeing, shopping, entertainment, climbing, and water sports, that will enable tourists to be active in creating emotional value for themselves. This will help to meet the needs of the target customers. In addition, the uniqueness of the attraction centers should be revealed: They must be shown to have cultures and heritages. Therefore, destination managers should focus on establishing a high level of tourist satisfaction to create positive post-purchase tourist behavior and maintain destination competitiveness.

The conceptual model presented in this study needs to be validated with quantitative research. For this reason, a quantitative research is designed using the presented measurement tools. The quantitative research findings are expected to demonstrate if the hypothesized mediating effect, which is destination flow experience, plays a significant role in the relationship between destination brand experience and tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

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