Tourism image, evaluation variables and after purchase behaviour: inter-relationship

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Abstract

Numerous authors have pointed out the influence of tourism image on consumer behaviour. Tourism image will also exercise some influence on the quality perceived by tourists and on the satisfaction obtained from the holiday experience. This paper focuses on the relationship between the image of a destination as perceived by tourists and their behavioural intentions, and between that same image and the post-purchase evaluation of the stay. We will also examine the relationship between quality and satisfaction and between these variables and the tourist’s behaviour variables. We place the accent on a joint analysis of these relationships, using a structural equation model. The results of the empirical study show that tourism image is a direct antecedent of perceived quality, satisfaction, intention to return and willingness to recommend the destination. The role of image as a key factor in destination marketing is thus confirmed. With reference to the other relationships, on the one hand, it is confirmed that quality has a positive influence on satisfaction and intention to return and that satisfaction determines the willingness to recommend the destination. However, the influence of quality on ‘willingness to recommend’ and the influence of satisfaction on ‘intention to return’ cannot be corroborated. In this sense, further research could be necessary. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Tourism image; Perceived quality; Satisfaction; Intention to return; Willingness to recommend; Structural equation model

1. Introduction

There is broad agreement among authors regarding the influence of tourism image on the behaviour of individuals (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988; Mansfeld, 1992). Since tourism image is defined by many authors as an individual’s overall perception or total set of impressions of a place (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Hunt, 1975; Phelps, 1986), or as the mental portrayal of a destination (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Crompton, 1979; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993; Middleton, 1994; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Seaton & Benett, 1996), it is logical to think that it will exercise some influence over tourists’ behaviour (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, & Wanhill, 1993).

The image of a destination consists, therefore, of the subjective interpretation of reality made by the tourist. In this configuration intervene both cognitive and affective factors (Moutinho, 1987). Buying behaviour is also guided by cognitive and evaluative components (Verhallen & Raaij Van, 1986). It is here argued that image will influence a tourist in the process of choosing a stay, the subsequent evaluation of that stay and in his or her future intentions. It is with this latter part that this study is concerned, placing the emphasis on the analysis of the relationship between destination image and tourist behaviour, on the one hand, and between image and the post-consumption evaluation of the stay on the other. ‘Intention to return’ and ‘willingness to recommend the destination’ are conceived as behavioural variables and ‘perceived quality’ and ‘satisfaction’ are the evaluative variables.

In addition to this, the relationship between perceived quality and satisfaction and between these and the behavioural variables is examined. All the relationships are tested jointly using a structural equation model. The
empirical investigation was carried out in two major Spanish tourism towns, in the Valencia region.

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis

Tourists’ behaviour can be expected to be partly conditioned by the image that they have of destinations. This influence begins at the stage of choosing the holiday destination, so holiday choice cannot be explained exclusively in terms of the objective environment (Johnson & Thomas, 1992). The influence of tourism image on the choice of holiday destination has been considered by various authors in decision models (Crompton & Ankoma, 1993; Gartner, 1989; Goodall, 1988; Kent, 1990; Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Moutinho, 1987; Schmoll, 1977; Stabler, 1990). Therefore, it is thought that the destinations with stronger positive images will have a higher probability of being included and chosen in the process of decision making (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Johnson & Thomas, 1992; Telisman-Kosuta, 1994). The influence of image is not limited to the stage of selecting the destination, but also affects the behaviour of tourists in general (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988; Bordas & Rubio, 1993; Cooper et al., 1993; Mansfeld, 1992).

This paper is concerned with the influence of destination image on after-purchase behaviour, as well as the relationship between image and subsequent evaluation of the stay. The variables ‘intention to return to the destination’ and the ‘willingness to recommend it’ have been used as indicators of consumer behaviour in other fields (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991).

Several studies of the relationship between service quality, satisfaction and the behaviour of individuals have centred on the ‘intention to buy’ as the behavioural variable (Anderson & Sullivan, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Woodside, Frey, & Daly, 1989). Loyalty becomes a fundamental strategic component for the firm. In order to retain customers, organisations must seek to satisfy them, but a further objective must be to establish a lasting relationship (Bigné, 1997). This relationship marketing approach has been suggested in the general literature on marketing (Berry, 1983; Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 1993; Grönroos, 1994, 1996; Gummesson, 1996; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1994), but has only sporadically been applied to tourism (Rivers, Toh, & Alalou, 1991) and very little to destination marketing. Other studies have focused both on the intention to repurchase and on the willingness to recommend or positive word of mouth communication (Boulding et al., 1993; de Ruyter, Wetzels, & Bloemer, 1996; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

In tourism, Court and Lupton (1997) found as a result of their study of the image of New Mexico, that the image of the destination positively affected an intention to revisit in the future. The first two hypotheses, therefore, would be:

H1: The more favourable the image of a destination, the higher the probability that the tourist will return in the future.

H2: The more favourable the image of a destination, the higher the probability that the tourist will recommend it.

The variables relating to the evaluation of the stay used in this study are ‘perceived quality’ and ‘satisfaction’. It is important to highlight that we are interested in the tourists’ view rather than the providers’.

As Hurley and Estelami (1998) point out, service quality and customer satisfaction have not been successfully defined or distinguished in the marketing literature. Thus, there is still some confusion about the similarities and differences between the two constructs. However, some authors have made an effort to suggest a set of differences between service quality and customer satisfaction. Firstly, the expectations referred to in each case are different. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), while in the literature on satisfaction expectations are interpreted as predictions, in the literature on quality they are interpreted as wishes or an ideal result. Oliver (1997) also points out that each construct relates to a different type of expectations. Those of service quality are based on perceptions of excellence, whereas expectations of satisfaction refer to need or equity. Another difference suggested by Oliver (1997) is that service quality judgements are more specific (about particular attributes or key aspects) while customer satisfaction judgements are more holistic. In addition to this, the author links cognitive judgements with service quality and affective ones with customer satisfaction. Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann (1994) add two last differences. While in order to determine a consumer’s satisfaction, he or she must have made the purchase, this is not necessary in order to evaluate quality. Finally, satisfaction depends on price but quality does not.

The concept of perceived quality as a comparison between expectations and the performance perceived by the consumer has obtained wide acceptance following the studies of Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988). Quality is considered to be the overall judgement made by the consumer regarding the excellence of a service. More specifically, it is a type of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction, which is described as the degree and direction of the discrepancies between the perceptions of the performance and the consumer’s expectations of the service (Parasuraman et al., 1988).
Their well-known SERVQUAL scale, the object of diverse criticism (see Buttle, 1996; Ryan, 1999), has been a catalyst for significant research and debate. For consumer satisfaction, Giese and Cote (2000) make a thorough review of conceptual and operational definitions. The lack of agreement among these definitions hinders research into consumer satisfaction. After the literature review, the authors outline three general components shared by the definitions: (1) consumer satisfaction is a response, an emotional or cognitive judgement (the emotional response predominating); (2) the response refers to a specific focus (the object of the consumer satisfaction); (3) The response is linked to a particular moment (prior to purchase, after purchase, after consumption, etc.). Giese and Cote point out that specific definitions of consumer satisfaction need to be made according to the context, taking into account the above dimensions.

Another point to consider in the definition of consumer satisfaction is to distinguish overall satisfaction from satisfaction with individual attributes. Attribute-specific satisfaction is not the only antecedent of overall satisfaction (Spreng, ManKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996). Overall satisfaction is a much broader concept implying holistic evaluation after purchase (Fornell, 1992; Gnoth, 1994) and not the sum of the individual assessments of each attribute. It is precisely this notion of overall satisfaction that is adopted in this study.

With reference to the operationalisation of consumer satisfaction, there is wide acceptance of the disconfirmation of expectations model (Oliver, 1980; Spreng, ManKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996; Tse & Wilton, 1988). This model, like that of perceived quality, considers satisfaction to be the result of a comparison between expectations and the perception of the performance, so that the consumer will feel satisfied whenever the performance exceeds the expectations. There is certainly less agreement over the process of disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980). Whereas some authors consider that disconfirmation is the most immediate antecedent of satisfaction, others think the process is more complex, such as Churchill and Suprenant (1982), who argue that perception will affect satisfaction in two ways: by disconfirmation and by direct experience.

Despite broad agreement about the disconfirmation model, some authors have pointed out that there are situations where perceived performance can be used as a good approach to consumer satisfaction as well as to service quality. Consequently, both models, disconfirmation and perceived performance, are used for operationalizing the constructs (Hurley & Estelami, 1998).

In the tourism industry, Kozak and Rimmington (2000) cite different empirical or conceptual articles about customer satisfaction. They concern different fields such as specific tours, tour guides, travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, recreation facilities and destinations. Moreover, they mention some studies carried out in specific tourist destinations using different approaches to measure tourists’ satisfaction.

In this particular paper, perceived quality and satisfaction refer to the tourists’ evaluation of their holiday experience. Both are therefore based on post-purchase judgements of the stay. Moreover, we focus on overall evaluation rather than analysing the individual components of the constructs. The operationalisation of these constructs will be discussed later.

Tourism image exercises a positive influence on perceived quality and satisfaction, because it moulds the expectations that the individual forms before the visit, and these variables depend on the comparison of such expectations with experience (Font, 1997; Phelps, 1986), as suggested by Grönroos (1984). Furthermore, the evaluation of the experience at the destination will also influence the image and modify it (Chon, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Ross, 1993).

Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (1996) consider that the following sequence could be established: image ⇒ quality ⇒ satisfaction ⇒ post-purchase behaviour. In this way, image would affect how customers perceive quality. Consequently, perceived quality will improve if the organisation has a positive image. The Nordic School of Service Quality also reflects this idea in the so-called Image Model, which considers that the quality perceived by the consumer is influenced by three factors: technical quality, functional quality, and corporate image (Grönroos, 1990). Perceived quality will in turn determine the satisfaction of consumers (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996), because the latter is the result of the assessment by the customer of the perceived quality (Anderson et al., 1994; Gnoth, 1994; Kotler et al., 1996). In tourism, Appiah-Adu, Fyall, and Singh (2000); Heung and Cheng (2000) and Kozak and Rimmington (2000) suggest that perceived quality is an antecedent of satisfaction. Consequently, the third, fourth and fifth hypotheses can be enunciated as follows:

H3: The more favourable the image of a destination, the higher the quality perceived by the tourist.

H4: The more favourable the image of a destination, the higher the tourist’s satisfaction.

H5: Perceived quality has a positive influence on tourists’ satisfaction.

Satisfaction has a positive influence on post-purchase behaviour (Anderson & Sullivan, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Fornell, 1992; Keaveney, 1995; Oliver, 1980; Oliver & Swan, 1989). It seems reasonable, despite its singularity, to extend these relationships to the field...
of tourism as Appiah-Adu et al. (2000) suggest. Consequently,

H6: The greater the tourist’s satisfaction with the holiday experience, the more likely it is that he or she will return in the future.

H7: The greater the tourist’s satisfaction with the holiday experience, the more likely it is that he or she will recommend it.

Finally, the literature on marketing has shown that there is a positive relationship between perceived quality and intentions after the purchase (Boulding et al., 1993; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Keaveney, 1995; Ruyter De, Wetzel, & Bloemer, 1996; Zeithaml et al., 1996; Zeithaml, 2000). However, this topic has not received the same attention in tourism. The two final hypotheses are, therefore:

H8: The higher the quality perceived by the tourist, the more likely it is that he or she will return in the future.

H9: The higher the quality perceived by the tourist, the more likely it is that he or she will recommend it.

If verified, these hypotheses would clearly lead to two types of conclusions. From a destination management perspective, the utility of improving the image and the perceived quality of a destination. From the research point of view, the conclusions reached in other services are reinforced.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this research is to clarify the inter-relationships among destination image, perceived quality, satisfaction, intention to return and willingness to recommend the destination. In order to accomplish this main objective, a set of hypotheses will be tested jointly.

3.1. Sample design and data collection

The empirical study was carried out in two important Spanish tourist resorts on the coast of the Valencia region: Peñíscola and Torrevieja. The individuals who were visiting the above resorts at the time of the survey were considered to be the target population. Since accurate data as to the size and location of this population were not available, probabilistic sampling techniques could not be applied. The sample selection was a result of a combination of the convenience method, the interviewer’s judgment and the quota method. As to size, 251 tourists were interviewed in Peñíscola and 263 in Torrevieja. Since the size of the population is unknown, statistical tables were applied to determine the sample error made in the case of an infinite population, this being about 6.33% for a confidence level of 95.5% ($p = q = 50$).

The data were gathered during the month of August 1996. The questionnaire was administered personally to the respondents. The survey points were chosen at random, covering both the town and the beach areas. Within these points, the selection of individuals was done so as to meet a set of quotas regarding the following sociodemographic variables: gender, age, education level, occupation and household size. The quotas were established on the basis of a previous study of the tourists that visit Valencia carried out by the Instituto Turístico Valenciano (ITVA, 1994). This public organisation is responsible for the tourist policy of the Valencia Region. The sample profile (displayed on Table 1), therefore, can be judged to be fairly representative of the target population.

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3.2. Questionnaire design and operationalisation of constructs

The same questionnaire was applied to both destinations as part of a broader study of the two towns. It consisted of five sections: questions on the travel habits of the respondents; sources of influence in the choice of holiday destination; the visitor’s opinion of the attractions and services provided; sociodemographic variables; and questions concerning overall image and evaluative and behavioural variables. This study focuses on the latter section.

Operationalisation of image. Most studies of destination image have been undertaken either with a multi-attribute approach or with non-structured techniques, with the first option predominating (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 1993). In the multi-attribute approach, tourism image is evaluated through a battery of attributes assessed by means of a Likert scale or a semantic differential scale, obtaining the overall image as an average or sum of the attribute scores. In this study, however, overall image was measured using a single five-point rating item by asking respondents: ‘How would you describe the image that you have of …?’ The responses can range from highly unfavourable (1) to highly favourable (5). This single measure was chosen for two reasons. On the one hand, the purpose of our study is to analyse the inter-relationships among destination image and other variables and not an in depth analysis of the construct. On the other, image has been described as an overall impression greater than the sum of its parts (Oxenfeldt, 1974). Attribute lists may be incomplete by failing to incorporate all of the relevant characteristics of the destination image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1989). Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) state that a complete operationalisation of destination image involves measuring both attributes and holistic impressions, i.e., a combination of structured and unstructured methodology is required. Therefore, the average or sum of the attribute scores is not an adequate measurement of the overall image. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) measured overall destination image by means of a single-item rating scale, the purpose of their study being to test a model of destination image formation using path analysis.

Operationalisation of perceived quality. Perceived quality was measured by asking respondents ‘How would you describe the stay in relation with what you had expected? Very much below expectations (1)… Very much above expectations (5).’ Although in the gap model and the SERVQUAL scale Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) measure both expectations and perceptions, respondents were asked to judge their stay in comparison with their expectations directly. This approach agrees with Carman’s proposition (Carman, 1990) that data be directly collected in terms of the perception–expectation difference, rather than questions about perceptions and expectations being asked separately (LeBlanc, 1992). Perceived quality was measured by means of a single-item-rating scale for similar reasons. Again, the purpose of the study determines the type of measure to be used. Likewise, even Zeithaml et al. (1996) used an overall single-item rating scale for measuring service quality along with a multiple-item scale.

Operationalisation of satisfaction. Satisfaction is a complex construct that has received broad attention in the marketing literature (see Babin & Griffin, 1998). As discussed earlier, overall satisfaction is not the same as satisfaction with individual attributes (Fornell, 1992; Gnoth, 1994; Spreng, ManKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996). Although multi-item scales are the most commonly used measures of satisfaction, several authors have used a single measure of overall satisfaction in their studies (Andreasen, 1984; Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998; Bolton & Lemon, 1999; Crosby & Taylor, 1982; Fornell et al., 1996; Herberlein, Linz, & Ortiz, 1982; Tse & Wilton, 1988). The tourist’s satisfaction with the holiday experience, therefore, was measured by a single-item five point rating scale by asking the respondents: ‘How would you describe your stay?’ Respondents were asked to rate along a five-point scale (1 = very unsatisfactory to 5 = very satisfactory).

Operationalisation of behavioural variables. Intention to return and to recommend the destination were also measured using a single five-point rating item, following Boulding et al. (1993), by asking the respondents: ‘Would you return to…? ‘Would you recommend it to someone?’ Responses can rate from ‘Definitely yes’ (1) to ‘Definitely no’ (5).

3.3. Hypothesis testing

The data were processed with the statistical package SPSS 8.0 and Lisrel 8.3. In order to determine the direction and significance of the relationships, the hypotheses must be tested simultaneously. With this aim, a path analysis was carried out which considers jointly all the hypotheses put forward.

4. Analysis of results

As a previous step to the analysis by structural equation model (SEM), we examined the relationships between each pair of variables as suggested in the hypothesis. Chi-square statistic, analysis of variance and Spearman coefficient were used, all the relationships being significant (p<0.01). However, as some authors point out (Hair, Anderson Tatham, & Black, 1998) SEM is the preferred mode of analysis, providing stronger tests. Therefore, in order to test the set of
hypotheses, path analysis was used. SEM may be preferable to conventional statistical methods, for example, where a multiple regression is required to test for several dependent variables from the same set of independent variables simultaneously, particularly if it is possible for one dependent variable to simultaneously cause another (Reisinger & Turner, 1999; p. 72).

In the marketing literature, we can find several studies that link quality with satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1994; Fornell et al., 1996; Gnoth, 1994; Kotler et al., 1996); quality and satisfaction with behaviour (Anderson & Sullivan, 1990; Boulding et al., 1993; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Ruyter De, Wetzels, & Bloemer, 1996; Woodside et al., 1989; Zeithaml et al., 1996); image with perceived quality and satisfaction (Kotler et al., 1996; Font, 1997; Grönroos, 1990; Phelps, 1986); image with behaviour (Court & Lupton, 1997) or even image with satisfaction and behaviour (Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998). However, none of them has carried out an integral analysis of all the above variables. Hence, the purpose of this analysis is to test the relationships between the different pairs of variables as a whole, in order to determine the direction and significance of these relationships. The results are reflected in Figs. 1 and 2.

In general, most of the hypotheses considered hold good for both tourism destinations (see Table 2), so it can be said that it is the image of the destination that determines quality and the visitors’ satisfaction (hypotheses 3 and 4), though this level of satisfaction is also affected by the perceived quality (hypothesis 5). Also, the image determines whether people recommend the destination (hypothesis 2) and the intention to return (hypothesis 1). Quality and satisfaction are other variables influencing behaviour. The influence of perceived quality on intention to return is confirmed, as well as the influence of satisfaction on the willingness to recommend the destination (hypotheses 8 and 7). However, with reference to the relationship between quality and intention to recommend (hypothesis 9) and between satisfaction and intention to return (hypothesis 6), the results diverge. Hypothesis 9 holds good only for Peñíscola, hypothesis 6 only for Torrevieja. Therefore, it cannot be affirmed that satisfaction is a determining factor in the intention to return nor that perceived quality determines willingness to recommend. Acceptance or rejection of both hypotheses cannot be made general, further research being necessary.

The two models considered have one degree of freedom and are significant as a whole \((p > 0.05)\). It is also important to highlight that the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) reaches a value close to one (0.999 in Peñíscola and 0.997 in Torrevieja), as well as the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (0.991 and 0.949, respectively). These results provide a satisfactory support for the model.

The structural equation model, therefore, confirms the following causal relationships:

\[
\text{Image} \Rightarrow \text{Quality} \quad \text{Quality} \Rightarrow \text{Satisfaction} \\
\text{Image} \Rightarrow \text{Satisfaction} \quad \text{Quality} \Rightarrow \text{Return} \\
\text{Image} \Rightarrow \text{Recommendation} \quad \text{Satisfaction} \Rightarrow \text{Image} \Rightarrow \text{Return} \quad \text{Recommendation}
\]

If we compare these results with the scheme reflected in the conceptual framework (Kotter et al., 1996): Image \(\Rightarrow\) quality \(\Rightarrow\) satisfaction \(\Rightarrow\) post-purchase behaviour; we can conclude as follows: On the one hand, it is true that the image is one of the determinants of perceived quality. It will also directly determine

![Fig. 1. Path analysis for Peñíscola. Chi square with one degree of freedom = 0.38; \(p = 0.540 > 0.05\). GFI = 0.999; AGFI = 0.991; RMSR = 0.014. For each of the relationships considered, the value of the parameter appears in first place and then, in parentheses, the \(t\)-value that determines the significance of this parameter. When this value is below 1.96 the relationship is not significant (n.s.).](image-url)
satisfaction and behavioural variables. Regarding perceived quality, only its influence on satisfaction and intention to return has been proved adequately, but definite conclusions cannot be drawn for the willingness to recommend the destination. Nevertheless, since perceived quality is a determinant of satisfaction, and this in turn determines recommendation, in this indirect manner quality would affect the intention to recommend. Finally, satisfaction only significantly affects recommendation, but we cannot draw definite conclusions for the intention to return. Consequently, the model outlined in the conceptual framework is confirmed for the most part, although the exceptions pointed out above must be taken into account. Further research is needed on these points. However, this makes it clear that, in order to achieve the loyalty of an individual, destination image plays an essential role and the relationship with the tourist must be handled proactively to develop it into a lasting relationship beneficial to both parties (satisfaction of a punctual transaction is not enough).

5. Conclusions and managerial implications

The path analysis indicates that destination image has a positive effect on behavioural variables as well as on the evaluation variables. An improvement in the overall image of a place held by an individual enhances his or her intention to return and to recommend it in the future. It also increases the propensity to make a positive assessment of the stay and to perceive a higher quality.

Regarding the relationship between perceived quality and satisfaction and between them and the behavioural variables, the structural equation model shows that, while perceived quality has a positive influence on satisfaction and intention to return, its influence on willingness to recommend the destination cannot be satisfactorily proved. And with regard to satisfaction, only its positive influence on the willingness to recommend gets enough support. We would like to emphasise that these results, although they do not sustain these hypotheses, do not offer enough proof for rejection either. We think that further research should be carried out, extending the study to different types of destinations and deepen the multidimensional nature of the variables.

So, with regard to the sequence image ⇒ quality ⇒ satisfaction ⇒ post-purchase behaviour, suggested by the review of the literature, the analysis of the interrelationships as a whole confirms this model in large part, although we must be cautious with regard to the last link.

Although different studies have verified that customer satisfaction leads to greater loyalty and positive word-of-mouth communication, Mittal and Lasar (1998) point out that satisfaction does not always imply
customer loyalty. The literature has shown the positive relationship between repeat purchase behaviour and satisfaction, but some authors suggest that satisfaction may not be enough to explain repurchase intentions (Oliver, 1999). In general, the explanation lies in switching barriers (Fornell, 1992). Furthermore, a dissatisfied customer may continue with the same provider if he expects nothing better from competitors, and alternatively a satisfied customer may wish to change provider hoping to obtain even more satisfactory results.

The special peculiarities of tourism must also be taken into account. The consumption of a tourism product will occur in the future, and tourists are relatively unsure of their intention to return when asked some months before (Sirakaya, McLellan, & Uysal, 1996), as they may seek variety or be dependent on their family budget and time availability. In fact, on many occasions tourists do seek variety and prefer to visit new destinations. Thus, the tourists' satisfaction with their experience in the destination does not guarantee their return. Our empirical study does not allow us to accept hypothesis H6 (though neither can we reject it altogether) in the case of Peñíscola. In Torrevieja, satisfaction does influence the intention to return, perhaps because this destination is more habitual as a second residence. However, tourists are willing to recommend the destination and this is another aspect of their loyalty. The managers of a destination, therefore, should take special interest in verifying the intention to recommend the destination, as well as satisfaction and intention to return.

Since quality is an immediate antecedent of satisfaction, and affects intention to return both directly and through satisfaction, its measurement and improvement are a crucial aspect for those in charge of the destination. It should be taken into account that our study measures overall perceived quality, referring to the whole vacational experience. Many private and public agents and many elements intervene in the configuration of this experience, from the providers of specific services of accommodation, transport or leisure, among others, to the tourism information offices, the local inhabitants, natural and artificial resources, etc. It is therefore no easy task to achieve a high overall perceived quality, and co-ordination and co-operation among all those involved and full awareness of the importance of delivering quality and diagnosing it are essential. The situation becomes even more complicated when we take into account that, as pointed out by Ryan (1999), a single unpleasant incident can lead to a negative overall valuation, depending on how important it is for the tourist.

Unfortunately, destination management is slower than that of other fields in applying quality improvement measures. On occasions the added difficulties mentioned above lead to unco-ordinated provision.

Image is shown in this study to be a key factor in the hands of destination managers. It is a direct antecedent of perceived quality and satisfaction (evaluation of the stay) and of the intention to return and to recommend the destination (future behaviour). It is also a key factor in influencing the choice of holiday destination, though this has not been analysed in our study. Destination managers should therefore not delay in taking a serious approach to their image. Although it is not possible to control all the elements intervening to form the image of a destination, it is possible to manipulate some of them such as advertising, tourist information offices, public relations, advising travel agents and tour operators and promotional instruments. Also, since one's own experience, or that of friends, acquaintances or family, is very important in forming an image, all efforts aimed at improving that experience will result in an improved image (since this is modified by each new item of information or stimulus received by the individual). As a consequence of the above, tourism destinations must take special care of the image that they attempt to communicate and the quality of the services and products that they offer, as these will affect visitors' satisfaction and their intentions for future behaviour.

The conclusions of the study are subject to several limitations. Among them, the restriction of the scope of the study to current tourists and, therefore, the non-inclusion of potential tourists. Consequently, the image studied would correspond to the complex image (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991), i.e., the image formed after the holiday experience. Also the number of variables considered should be increased, as tourist behaviour has many dimensions more than the intentions to return or to recommend the destination.

Despite these limitations, it seems to be beyond doubt that tourism destinations should concern themselves with improving their image if they are to compete successfully in the competitive holiday market, because the image that tourists hold of them will affect their post-purchase evaluation and the word of mouth communication that takes place, as well as the intention to return in the future. In addition to this, achieving a lasting relationship with customers passes through the improvement of the quality of the holiday experience as perceived by tourists.

References


