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## Research Paper

## Sustainable improvement of competitiveness in rural tourism destinations: The quest for tourist loyalty in Spain

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## ABSTRACT

Rural tourism in Spain has developed intensively in recent years and although this branch of tourism is now well established, it still faces some challenges that causal marketing research can address. Tourism destinations now must operate in extremely competitive markets, forcing destination managers to seek out innovative strategies and sustainable competitive advantage, including cultivating tourist loyalty. This paper focuses on developing a better understanding of how destination loyalty is generated in rural tourism by identifying factors that contribute to this loyalty. The paper first examines previous theoretical analyses of the importance of loyalty as a sustainable competitive advantage and the capacity of rural tourism destinations to generate tourist loyalty. It then presents a structural model that includes the main antecedents of destination loyalty that are applicable to Spanish rural tourism. Based on a sample of 464 rural tourists and data analysis using the partial least squares technique, the results indicate that image, quality and destination attribute satisfaction are the direct antecedents of rural tourism destination loyalty. The findings also show that these are indirect precursors of loyalty through overall satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism first appeared in Spain in response to such trends as the stagnation of traditional sun- and -beach tourism, which had reached a mature stage (Besteiro, 2006; Cánoves, Herrera, & Villarino, 2005b; García, 1996). Other 'alternative' types of tourism began to develop, including rural tourism, which was also strongly influenced by European institutions (Bardón, 1987). Throughout the 1990s, these organisations encouraged rural tourism to develop based on a dual perspective on rural areas. European policies initially emphasised agrarian contexts because rural tourism can help agricultural holdings in crisis. Rural tourism is also a new kind of tourism developing in Europe (Blanco, 1996) that satisfies the demands of those who seek to flee the cities and enjoy tranquil countryside experiences. The latter need to be authentic, customised, high quality, motivational, educational and more individualised (Cánoves et al., 2005b; García, 1996; Yagüe, 2002).

Rural tourism has thus become a new, relevant factor in rural development, drawing tourist flows into rural areas and

contributing to a better spatial and temporal distribution of these flows. Rural tourism also strengthens non-urban areas' profits through additional income and residents' better quality of life, improving infrastructure and employment levels, among other aspects (Bardón, 1990).

For these reasons, inland areas have increasingly benefitted from tourism and invested in their cultural and natural heritage to meet the growing demand for rural tourism as a new mode in which non-urban areas serve as a framework for extraordinary experiences (Besteiro, 2006; Cánoves et al., 2005b; García, 1996; Yagüe, 2002). However, rural tourism is often introduced into settings where residents are unfamiliar with providing services, much less regular tourism activities. This has created problems for the professionalisation of the rural tourism sector (Millán, 1999), which means that rural destinations and companies need technical assistance in developing management strategies.

This issue has not, however, slowed the extensive development of rural tourism in Spain. During the decade 2001–2011, the supply of, and demand for, these destinations expanded exponentially (Hernández, Campón, & Alves, 2011). The data reveal that Spanish rural tourism is now well established, with a steady tourist flow that creates jobs. This sector developed rapidly in response to a growing demand but in recent years researchers have observed

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that the growth in demand has slowed and that the average stay and occupancy rates have decreased. This situation has made it clear that the sector needs to be supported by research and expertise. The Instituto de Turismo de España (*Tourism Institute of Spain, 2014*) has confirmed that this exponential growth led to a fast expansion in tourism supply in rural settings, more specifically in 2006 and 2007, when more intense development was noticeable. At the same time, demand stagnated, which has since shrunk even further. Currently, a painful adjustment is needed to find a balance between supply and demand in Spain's rural tourism.

This difficult process includes addressing the problem of competitiveness in rural tourism, given global trends in which tourism destinations are now facing a quite complex, competitive environment. This situation could get even more complicated in the coming years (*Chi & Qu, 2008*). According to *Garrod, Wornell, and Youell (2006, p. 124)*, 'As the number of tourism destinations continues to rise, it is becoming increasingly difficult for tourism destinations to differentiate themselves from one another.' Researchers are, therefore, seeking to understand destination marketing, competitive positioning and ways to attract tourists and, in particular, sustainable forms of these strategies (*Blancas, Lozano-Oyola, González, Guerrero, & Caballero, 2011*). The current context has forced managers of tourism destinations to seek out innovative strategies and competitive advantages in a quest for customer loyalty, hoping thereby to increase the benefits of repeat visits and recommendations (*Fyall, Callod, & Edwards, 2003; Shirazi & Som, 2011*).

To develop strategies based on destination loyalty, managers must gain a better understanding of how this kind of loyalty functions, including which factors most contribute to tourist destination loyalty (*Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Chi & Qu, 2008; Eusébio & Vieira, 2013*) to facilitate the long-term sustainability of the destination (*Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Eusébio, 2006*). This need is even more accentuated in an activity as specialised as rural tourism, which features many micro-destinations. *Blancas et al. (2011)* emphasise that heterogeneity must be taken into account when developing these rural destinations' infrastructure and facilities. Thus, planning strategies need to be designed to be applicable regardless of differences between particular destinations. According to *Kastenholz et al. (2006)*, loyalty has been identified as a factor in the long-run success of a destination, specifically in the creation of a sustainable destination strategy for rural destinations.

To date, little research has been done on factors that generate loyalty to rural tourism destinations (e.g. *Kastenholz et al., 2006; Li, Cai, Lehto, & Huang, 2010; Phillips, Wolfe, Hodur, & Leistriz, 2013; Rajaratnam, Nair, Sharif, & Munikrishnan, 2015*). More studies of these factors are needed to reinforce strategies fostering customer loyalty as a source of sustainable competitive advantage over time.

Rural tourism fosters endogenous improvements since it seeks to achieve integrated rural development that complements agricultural activities, conserving and taking advantage of regional resources (*Besteiro, 2006*). Moreover, rural tourism businesses require only light infrastructure and take the form of small- and medium-sized enterprises and micro-enterprises. However, as discussed previously, these rural firms need tools to improve their competitiveness: a challenge met most effectively and efficiently through marketing (*Campón, 2007*). While rural tourism is still a booming sector, these destinations present challenges that require technical support, in order to manage and commercialise better a relevant supply and, therefore, to increase their competitiveness. As a result, research on sustainable tourism in rural destinations has attracted the attention of both academics and practitioners (*Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012*). Sustainable tourism policies require that both public and private agents participate in implementation, but not enough information is available about how to create better

sustainable practices in tourism destinations (*Blancas et al., 2011*). Therefore, the present study sought to develop a deeper understanding of how to improve the long-term socio-economic outcomes of tourism in rural settings, with a special emphasis on enhanced loyalty as a key driver.

In this context, this study's objective is to understand better how rural destination loyalty functions by identifying the factors that generate loyalty. A more complete understanding results in strategies that offer rural tourism destinations sustainable ways to improve their competitiveness through tourist loyalty. The study therefore sought to provide managers of rural tourism destination with a useful guide to how to improve loyalty levels, thereby fostering their destinations and companies' profitability through repeat visits and recommendations. The research took place in Spain, but the results are applicable to other countries and regions where rural tourism has developed and faces similar challenges.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first introduces the focus of this study, including its purpose and relevance. Next, the theoretical context of the research is presented, along with the research hypotheses. The methodology is then discussed, after which the results are described. Finally, the main conclusions are presented, along with implications, limitations and future lines of research.

## 2. Loyalty in rural tourism destinations

### 2.1. Destination loyalty's strategic importance for sustainable competitiveness

The research on consumer satisfaction has been extensive. However, loyalty has recently attracted more attention than satisfaction has because many companies understand that a database of loyal customers can greatly increase profits (*Oliver, 1999*). Despite the equally wide body of literature on destination loyalty, this is still considered an emerging field (*McKercher, Guillet, & Ng, 2012*). In particular, the literature on loyalty reveals problems in conceptualisations, which need to be resolved using empirical methods and operational definitions, depending on each study's objectives (*Riley, Niininen, Szivas, & Willis, 2001*).

Research on loyalty in the tourism industry began in the late 1980s (*Oppermann, 2000*). However, although widely studied in this sector, loyalty remains difficult to translate from theory into practice (*McKercher et al., 2012*). Furthermore, the concept of destination loyalty in particular has received little attention in the literature (*Oppermann, 1999, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005*). This, according to *McKercher et al. (2012)*, is due to two factors: tourists appear to be inherently disloyal and existing models of loyalty produce poor results when applied to tourism.

The debate is therefore still open about which specifications to apply to destination loyalty and whether tourists can never become loyal. Research has shown that tourists to have a high propensity to be loyal due to the intangible, heterogeneous and inseparable nature of tourism products. However, these products have to be paid for at a distance, without proof of their quality before purchases. Hence, tourists must endure a high level of uncertainty and run the risk of bad experiences in new destinations, which tourists reduce by returning to known destinations (*McKercher & Guillet, 2011*). Nonetheless, as *Alegre and Juaneda (2006, p. 686)* point out, 'Some tourism motivations ... inhibit destination loyalty', such as the desire to break the monotony of everyday life, seek out new experiences or come into contact with new places, people and cultures. However, people with risk aversion can feel compelled to revisit familiar destinations.

At this point, a relevant research question is to consider which patterns of tourist consumption behaviour can be interpreted as

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