

A General Model for analyzing the Factors that influence Tourists' Destination Loyalty in Rural Areas

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Abstract

The customers relationship management, through the development of the neo-industrial economy, have become a strategic value resource for the achievement of competitive advantage by enterprises. The customer is more and more in the central place of the supply systems in a growing number of business areas. In marketing decisions, the analysis of consumer behaviour and the study of relationship among some determinants of purchasing processes become critical factors, especially in contexts characterized by high variety and instability of demand. It is known that the main objectives of companies are focused on profit and economic growth, but we must emphasize that in market economies, these results can be achieved, in the long run, showing superiority towards competitors regarding customers satisfaction. In this perspective, it is necessary to verify, if these considerations can be applied to the tourism sector and especially in the context of rural tourism. The increase in demand for tourist consumptions add a requirement, on the supply side, of high quality standards, it has produced a considerable increase of destination competitiveness. Consequently, the development of management strategies in tourist markets is aimed at increasing a total value offered in order to foster customers' loyalty towards specific locality. Although the existing relationship between the level of loyalty shown by tourists and specific leisure services has been considered, the loyalty towards destination is still an important topic of investigation. On the basis of such considerations, this paper intends to investigate the evaluation of the tourists level of loyalty for specific destinations relating to rural tourism.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, rural tourism, customer loyalty, tourism destination, level of loyalty.

1. Introduction

Quality of service is considered the key of customer satisfaction and the precondition for the creation of loyalty towards different supplies, as well as it is essential in order to activate and to achieve a positive word of mouth among potential tourists. The quality of a service can be measured in terms of difference between the level of expectation and that of performance of the service. Thus, this gap has permitted the identification of the various aspects of the phenomenon.

This paper aims to examine the relationship between customers loyalty and a specific rural tourist destination. The paper is divided in two parts: the first part analyzes the principal features of the customer satisfaction and customer loyalty within the international literature; the second is to value the possibility to apply these concepts to a particular case as a rural tourism destination, paying particular attention to valorising the territory and to those activities able to activate multiplicative processes. We shall use an application of the Day Model, regarding the measurement of loyalty for the investigating on the existence of a relationship between customer/tourist loyalty and a certain locality in the context of rural tourism (Asciuto *et al.*, 2013).

2. General conceptual framework on the choices of the rural tourist

The conceptual framework is based on the processes that enhance the dynamics of value creation.

Value creation for customers as a fundamental element for the creation of economic value, requires a good knowledge of customer behaviour, in particular of cognitive and behavioural determinants of the processes that determine it, and of the influence that some generating factors of the product/service value

have on the customer behaviour (Brelík 2013). The customer satisfaction can be defined as the feeling that the customer has to achieve proper expectations. From this point of view, they gain satisfaction when the evaluation of the product/service meet or exceed customers expectations.

In the last few years, some social and economic phenomena have induced to overlook the excellence and the quality of the service and to focus their attention on the customer satisfaction (Cheng *et al.*, 2014).

Nevertheless, the customer satisfaction isn't a new phenomenon, notwithstanding the procedures which the enterprises use to pursue it, but it can be considered recent (Kim and Han, 2013).

For the enterprises customer satisfaction oriented, the elements of innovation can be related to numerous factors: business, sectional and macro-environmental (Hjalager 2014).

Examining the recent international literature it emerges that the renewed interest for the customer satisfaction is based on the increasing evolution of the relationship between demand and supply (Lanfranchi *et al.*, 2014).

The evolution of demand involves an increase of the individual and inter-groups variability. The customers are becoming more and more sophisticated and the growth of the demand of personalization and the tendency to individualism can be noted. New needs emerge, the semantic value of good services overcomes the value of use (Di Trapani *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, the tendency of the customers is addressing a unique supplier for satisfaction of all the requirements. Therefore, the necessity to control and systematically conserve the satisfaction of demand emerges, because the inadequate satisfaction of a specific requirement is negatively reflected on the relationship of the whole supply system (D'Amico *et al.*, 2014). In fact, the profile of the new tourist includes specific characteristics that differentiate him from tourists of previous years: he is independent, with more experience, has good technological knowledge, he wants quality in

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products and services and wants to receive what was promised, is more active and willing to learn about other cultures, abandons group trips, and prefers air travel road. With a strong propensity for last minute holidays, prefers custom packages (no more "all inclusive"), chooses distant and destinations that are not crowded (Cândea *et al.*, 2009). The tourist looks for a direct relationship with the place visited, to know the history, culture and environment, for this reason the demand for rural tourism grows exponentially (Bogan *et al.*, 2014). A first analysis to be carried out is certainly one that allows us to understand the characteristics of rural tourism demand and its evolution, due primarily to the link between behaviour and motivations of the tourist: motivation means "what drives the individual to act" while for conduct we intend "the succession of multiple actions, aimed at the satisfaction of their needs" (Dissart and Marcouiller, 2012). The motivations of tourists vary according to several factors such as the fashion of the time, the availability of free time, the availability of income, etc. The formation process of the application follows a precise logical pattern that alternates in different stages:

identification of the need to satisfy → search for info → identifying and assessing various alternatives → choice → purchase

The configuration of tourism in a "mass phenomenon" has resulted in a more complex interpretation of the phenomenon itself: the more the demand grows, the greater is its heterogeneity (Mikhaylovna *et al.*, 2014). In fact, while in the past the main reasons for travelling were essentially cultural and spiritual enrichment, personal care, recreation, etc..., for some years now different reasons coexist that make the demand different, segmented and diversified (Kumar and Sharma, 2014). It, too, is particularly sensitive to external factors to the tourism sector itself, but which nevertheless are related to tourist destinations, such as the economic crisis that hit has many countries in recent years, the exchange rates, climate, socio-cultural, development, political stability and security and the sanitary conditions (Hyytiä and Kola, 2013). The new consumer knows that his purchasing power has increased, in fact analyzing the tourist demand it is noted that, today, the traveller knows how to find solutions based on his new needs and is aware that there may be free alternatives or at a low price or which present a mix of acceptable characteristics. Among the many components that have contributed over the years to the evolution of the tourist we can distinguish those related to the achievements in the field of employment with new working conditions or early retirement that allows a greater time for leisure; development and upgrading of roads and means of communication as well as the latest achievements in technology (Komppula 2014). Perhaps the element that gave a final push to the evolutionary process of the tourist was the technological revolution which took place in the early nineties, which has been accompanied by many new opportunities and challenges for the tourism industry (Muntean *et al.*, 2010). The so-called "Information Technology" has a fundamental importance for the tourism demand as a few other activities require the collection, processing, implementation and communication of information for their realization. The major change began with the advent of Web 2.0 that allows the active participation of consumers in meeting the need to share interests, experiences, emotions and communicate with the outside world; and continues with its approach to new mobile and digital technologies that enable to access and exchange information in any place and at any time (Wong *et al.*, 2009) The new user knows he can control and transform the tourist offer by leaving reviews, itineraries, tips and complaints on a brand or service and wants a company to be able to anticipate his needs even before they have been developed by the consumer himself. The satisfaction with the holiday will depend on the expectations that the tourist had before the consumption of the service. Generally, the expectations of the tourists are based on previous experiences, information, perception of the place, environment preferences, personality characteristics, advertising, socio-cultural influences, interests (Mazilu *et*

al., 2013). The comparison between expectation and previous holiday experience generates dissatisfaction in the tourist if the service received is below the standards promised.

Finally, the capability of the enterprise to increase the proper level of customer satisfaction, in comparison to competitors, has a notable influence on brand loyalty, both on firm image and on the relationships with customers.

3. The new offering of products and tourist services as part of the rural economy: characteristics, attractiveness and competitiveness

Developments related to the rural tourism sector affecting the entire industry in its three main components: the destination, the consumer and the offering of products and tourist services (Carmichael and Ainley 2014). The destination evolves and is identified as "centre of attraction theme" capable of answering to the different aspects in which the needs of rural tourism of modern man occur. On the supply side, instead we can no longer talk about tourism in general but we must consider the phenomenon based on the needs of consumers (Wong *et al.*, 2010). We are talking about different tourism products, not only because different will be what motivates the demand but because different will be the requirements that destinations must meet to satisfy the needs of tourists. Different will be their behaviour and different will be the distribution channels and the actions of promotion and marketing to achieve them (Dulau *et al.*, 2010). The traveller is faced with a strong segmentation of the tourist offer. Each location proposes its tourist offer in the light of the resources available and the market potential that each product has; therefore it becomes essential to identify and analyze the capacity of being and becoming competitive in offering specific products. This process is called "portfolio choice" products. The variables that must be considered to evaluate the potential of a product in a specific area are:

- ❑ attractiveness: it depends on the potential that each product has in relation to specific characteristics (segment size, growth rate, spending power of tourists) and its consistency with the goals of development/quantity that the location intends to achieve;
- ❑ the competitive ability: results from a series of elements (environmental, human, infrastructural, economic, etc.) that represent the "keys to success", or rather the characteristics that the area must have to differentiate in respect to other destinations (Lanfranchi *et al.*, 2014).

The demand characteristics vary, together with the levels of attraction and competitive capacity, in relation to the individual products that are taken into consideration, and must be analyzed before being able to express an overall assessment of the potential of the same. Regarding the outcome of our analysis and research, we could mention as an example two products due to the new forms of tourism: the thematic rural and farm itineraries (Hwang *et al.*, 2012). The "thematic rural itineraries" are characterized by relatively short stays from one to five nights aimed at the discovery of the local rural territory following specific topics: art, history, culture, gastronomy, crafts or religious itineraries (Loureiro *et al.*, 2014). The product requires the identification and organization of resources that characterize each theme. The analysis shows the attractiveness of a product in rapid growth, even if it weakens especially in relation to the strong competition and low attractiveness of the offer in more distant markets (Lanfranchi and Giannetto 2014). The competitive ability of the product is instead often compromised by several deficiencies especially in the supply related to the inability to exploit existing resources even if when inserted in systemic strategies the may represent attractive products, logistics, the deficiencies in the system of information and assistance to tourists both at the human and technological level and finally to the poor accommodation capacity of the hinterland (Lanfranchi *et al.*, 2014). The overall

assessment of the product “thematic rural itineraries” shows us a scenario not too favourable if it is intended for an application to attract to the area exclusively by these issues, it is configured in principle as a complementary product to others that play a direct attraction function (e.g. the farm holiday). The farm holiday instead portrays a real standalone product with the power to direct the attraction of consumers, it is characterized by stays from three days to about two weeks, in “alternative” accommodation (farms, cottages or rural buildings) (Sgroi *et al.*, 2014). The holiday farm can have many purposes that may affect many sectors (bathing, hiking, sports), assuming a role of diversification of accommodation with the typical activities of the new concept of “active” tourism (horse riding, trekking, etc) (Sgroi *et al.*, 2014). The analysis of the attractiveness presents us with a product with great potential for development in terms of size and evolution of the application that make the product worthy of careful monitoring (Panyik 2015). It’s a product that locally is certainly strategic because it can be the solution to the problem of the rural exodus and the abandonment of the local areas. The measures necessary for the development of the product from the point of view of its competitiveness are: the strengthening of the accommodation capacity (the existing houses are few and often poorly equipped), and the improvement and consistency of the supply. The overall assessment is still showing some weakness of the product but that lends itself very well to be developed without excessive structural and organization investments, and you can certainly bring out its strategic value as a connecting point between the coast and the mountains. Over the past twenty years, the interest in alternative forms of tourism has greatly increased in proportion to changes in the consumer-tourists and the growing sense of responsibility of the tourists themselves towards social and environmental issues of the locations visited. Among the many configurations of alternative tourism for some years now in Europe on so-called Ecotourism or “green tourism” in which you leave the old model of “consumer resource” and you pursue forms of tourism more respectful of the natural ecosystems has established itself firmly, of the local identities that operate aiming at the redevelopment of the cultural, social and environmental characteristics (Kim and Lee, 2012).

4. Methodology, materials and methods used for the research

The perception of the quality of a service represents the key to customer satisfaction and the prerequisite for the construction of loyalty of the numerous supplies, moreover it is essential for the development of a positive word of mouth.

According to the paradigm “not all the satisfied customers are loyal customers and vice versa”, the factors, that affect the existing relation between loyalty and satisfaction, can be both subjective reasons and objective causes.

Among the first ones we can consider that many customers are linked by affection for the enterprise, which leads them to a substantial decrease of satisfaction expectance – over a certain level – before starting the abandonment process. The second case, on the contrary, must take into account the great costs in changing the supplier. For this reason, the loyal client, before abandoning definitively the enterprise, tries to consider if negative experiences were an accidental event. The customer satisfaction, consequently, represents a necessary but not sufficient condition for the success of enterprise and from this point of view, a lot of companies have begun to consider customer loyalty as a strategic factor of marketing in addition to customer satisfaction, and not only as its consequence (Lin *et al.*, 2009)

Therefore, the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is not objective: to have a loyal behaviour it is necessary that the instant customer satisfaction is bound by a sequence of positive experiences, which is the accumulated satisfaction. Thus, it is not enough, to base the analysis on the single experience of satisfaction to explain the existence of a loyal behaviour. In other words, a frequent purchase of a customer is synonymous of loyalty only if the customer has realised a sequence of purchases and use, thus it can be considerate linked to the brand, or connected with

the instant satisfaction, a sort of “capitals of satisfaction” that is the added satisfaction. On the contrary, there is an artificial loyalty, often caused by the total lack of alternatives (monopoly) or by the lack of diversified alternatives (Park *et al.*, 2015).

In this way for the enterprises customer loyalty oriented it is necessary to have the consolidation of the greatest number of potential relationships involving all enterprises’ stakeholders.

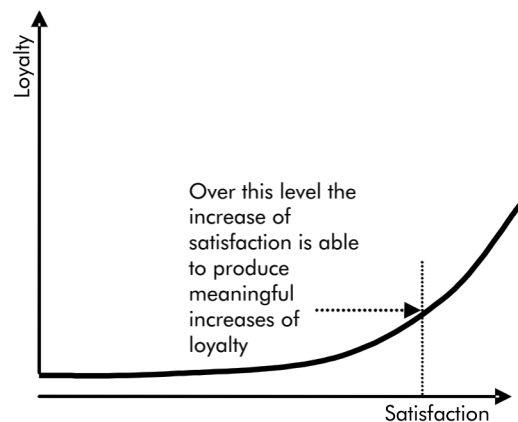


Figure 1. Relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (adapted form)

Source: own elaboration

5. Analysis of the most relevant investigating elements

The user of a service hasn’t the opportunity to evaluate in advance if what it purchases will really correspond to his expectations: to reduce the uncertainty he can search information regarding the service or trust the supplier.

Many consumers risk; for them, to be loyal and always buy from the same enterprise which represents a reduction of risk rather than maximizing the utility. The customer facing a wide range of services, to economize his own cognitive and temporal resources, in the phase of selection, uses the same strategies tested in the past, realizing an act of trust with the enterprise confiding in finding once more the same benefits. This attitude towards the enterprise practically represents a structural model of information that asks for a smaller effort and number of data to be able to evaluate and to choose the suitable supply; however, because this process happens, it is necessary to have a certain level of communication between customer and enterprise: a stable relationship. The relationship between enterprise and customers, generally, consists of the following phases: negotiation of contents, conditions of supply and delivery of service. In the long run, instead, the customers are considered not only as the beneficiaries of marketing efforts, but as an active component of the creating value process. This involves the creation of stable and continuous relationships based on the sharing of mutual benefits, without opportunisms from either side.

In the sectors characterized by a great competition, the customers who can count on the loyalty of their supplier obtain various real advantages such as:

- ❑ *innovation of product and process*: the creation of a stable relationship with the enterprise and the participation in the decisional and operational processes allows customers to increase their competences of a product/service and therefore to be able to individualize new attributes which increase the quality and the perceived satisfaction;
- ❑ *reduction of management costs*: the request for assistance of administrative information requires a very short time if the customer has a stable relationship with the same supplier;
- ❑ *reduction of conversion costs*: all changes of the delivering service processes determine a certain level of stress among stakeholders. If the relationship between suppliers

and customers grows on cooperative and collaborative basis these problems diminish greatly.

The orientation to loyalty, if correctly managed, represents the most important factor that determines the corporate profitability and turn over as an advantage for the enterprise. The enterprise, in fact, improving the relationships with the customers can achieve both lower costs and income increase.

In regards to income, the advantages connected to customer loyalty are the following:

- ❑ *great receipts*: loyal customers assure, to the enterprise, a constant/generally increasing flow of receipts, which derives both from increase of the frequency and greater quantity of purchases;
- ❑ *reduction of competitive interdependence*: the loyal customers are less sensitive to the actions of competitors;
- ❑ *interdepartmental diffusion*: the enterprise can use customer loyalty in different competitive frameworks, and this allows them to realize strategic competitive advantages (opportunity of extension of supply, best management of production and fixed advertising costs, etc.);
- ❑ *making a cross-selling*: knowing the purchase behaviour of customers, the enterprise can offer, also, the other products un-experimented, thus increasing the general profitability. The cross-sales can be also considered within strategies of co-marketing among different enterprises which however address their supply to the same customers target;
- ❑ *premium price*: when the enterprise has a good competitive position, and the customers recognize the added value, it has a possibility to apply a *mark-up* in comparison to direct competitors;
- ❑ *creation of a positive word of mouth*;
- ❑ *develop innovative products*: the interaction with the loyal customers increases the capability of a constant improvement of the supply system;
- ❑ *greater motivation of human resources*: the satisfaction of its own customers represents the basis for the construction of a favourable working environment.

6. Economic considerations

The total value of an enterprise that maintains good relationships with its customers can be measured by the evaluation of its portfolio, which is the addition of single customers. This value is referable not only to the income flows produced by the enterprise in the short term, but mostly to its capability to realize – also in the future and for a long time – such positive flows. The loyalty, strengthening the mechanisms of the isolation inter and infra sector (reducing the risk), causes the reduction of capitalization rate and influences the profitability of the equity capital, as well as the profit rate (ROE – capitalization rate).

The ROE index (Return on Equity), in fact, grows thanks to:

- ❑ adoption of policies of premium price;
- ❑ control the marketing investments through the inter-personal communication activated by the consumers and the their little attention to the initiatives of competitors;
- ❑ reduction of customer management costs;
- ❑ capacity to rely, under the same conditions, on a higher trend rate of development of customers portfolio which, considering for every consumer the *Life Time Value*, represents a substantial increase of the positive and negative components of income (Camarda *et al.*, 2010).

From the customer loyalty comes the Life Time Value (LTV), the so-called forecast on average seniority of the customers portfolio, or the number of years in which, considering the average loyalty, the customers will repurchase the analysed service.

$$LTV = \text{Average purchase value} \times \text{Frequency annual purchasing} \times \text{Average customer life cycle} \quad (1)$$

Multiplying the net margin of annual sales by the average seniority and discounting this flow, it is easy to show the actual customers' value for the enterprise and the development opportunities of such value (connected to the increase of the rate of loyalty).

Customer back period: calculating the difference among profitability of the potential loyal customer it is necessary to distinguish between: market value of the new customer and the value of the same customer in the future. The consumer's value in the first year can be negative, showing a loss, especially in the sector of services, where the pay back period often overcomes the first year. For this reason the ability to manage the commercial relationships with customers, for a period in order to achieve the balance, represents a critical success factor for the enterprise.

7. Results of the research: determining the factors that affect the fidelity to the rural tourist destination

Therefore, satisfaction is an emotional reaction which marks the memory, appreciates or criticizes the service and increases the customer affection towards the supplier.

This concept, applied to the rural tourism destination, aims to emphasize the meaning that the phenomenon assumes in the travel and vacation framework, as well as the crucial determinants that can contribute to its realization.

To this aim, the satisfaction based on the past experience results essential in the process of selection of the destination because it represents the most important source of tourists information, therefore, it determines the belonging of the locality within the totality of destinations at the moment of choice and prevents its classification in the negative selection, composed by discarded alternative options, which will be ever more considered in the future decisional processes. Moreover, the level of pleasure of the first stay in a specific tourist destination represents an essential element to repeat the visit.

On one hand we are sure of the importance that satisfaction assumes in the relationship customer-supplier on the other hand, just in recent times, some studies have gone into observing the phenomenon in the tourist sector, and the weight of the satisfaction in the determination of loyalty towards the tourism services has led to even more important results.

The analysis of destination, associated to the territory and to its exploitation, emphasizes elements regarding both the tourist attraction factors, for instance natural or historical resources (monuments, Churches, etc.) and the production of a typical product such as the typical food and tradition (Lanfranchi *et al.*, 2014). In relation to the number and the index of territorial attractiveness and degree of professionalism, you can create a matrix (Fig. 2), identifying four different types of offer within rural tourism.

		Territorial Attractiveness	
		Low	High
Professionalism	Low	Tourist structures – rural OCCASIONAL	Tourist structures – rural INACTIVE
	High	Tourist structures – rural of SERVICE	Tourist structures – rural PROFESSIONAL

Figure 2. Matrix Territorial Attractiveness

Rural occasional tourist facilities are characterized by poor rural occasional territorial attractiveness, the services are limited in quantity and quality, in fact, they are often limited to only meals, the prices are low or medium-low and the communication and promotion is poor. The rural tourist structures are inactive, but have a high territorial attraction that pulls the territorial demand, but the services are limited to food and accommodation but are of good quality (D'Amico *et al.*, 2014). Generally prices are average and the effort of communication and promotion is average (such tourist facilities are included in catalogues or network-guides). Tourist rural service facilities have a limited territorial attractiveness, for this reason, the offer must create demand (standalone). The services are not limited to food and accommo-

dation and are of high quality, in fact they are often very specific (horse riding, trekking, taste workshops, educational farms). The prices are fairly high and the effort of communication/promotion is high (inclusion in networks and/or catalogues-"sector" guide magazines; their own website). Finally the tourist facilities have high professional rural territorial attractiveness, the offer is complete and the quality is high. The services, food-accommodation are articulated and complemented by many other services. The prices are high and the effort of communication and promotion is high (inclusion in networks and/or catalogues-"sector" guide magazines; their own website, the inclusion in the promotion of the area).

The situation, which emerges from the customer/tourist purchasing behaviour, could be transformed into an action able to also valorise the commercial supply. This process can be a basis both of a traditional tourist flow, through customer loyalty programmes, and to attract new tourists' target. In this way, a great value can be created, not only for the tourist operators but also for the customers, generating therefore, in the local economy, multiplicative processes.

In such a framework, if commerce, intended as an activity for the territory valorising, connects its objectives with the elements of tourist attraction to the area, we can not speak only of tourism or commercial/other supply, but of the territory supply, which means the creation of a territorial tourist product (Fig. 3).

Thus, the destination becomes a precise rural tourist product able to activate involvement processes between the tourist/customer, capable of producing single or protracted purchasing processes.

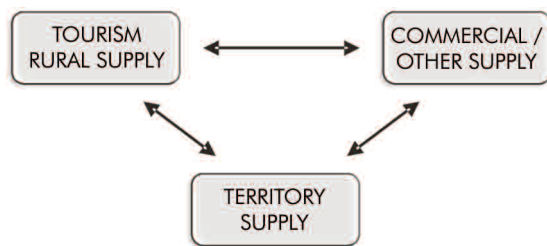


Figure 3. Territorial supply system
Source: own elaboration

Some authors create a classification of purchasing behaviour based on level of customer involvement and on the differentiation of different brands available of a product, they underline that the difficulty of the process consists in the differences existing among the alternative brands supplied, if the product is expensive, it is rarely purchased and it assumes a particular meaning for the customer. Therefore the choice of a tourist destination represents a solution to a complex problem: it usually involves a large expenditure; it generally requires a certain temporal planning; the choice in most cases is established considering a great number of alternative destinations. Some studies have shown a relationship between the loyalty for a particular alternative of supply and the involvement in the purchasing process: the probability involves a certain level of loyalty which increases when a higher involvement of the purchaser exists. In the tourism framework, it has been pointed out that the involvement undeniably influence the loyalty level expressed by tourists towards air companies, hotels and specific leisure services also in the field of rural tourism.

In respect to the relationship between loyalty to tourist destination and involvement, it has been showed that there is a real connection between the repetition of a visit and the risk of an adverse personality, without providing a closer examination on the theme.

8. Discussions and considerations on the research

The objective of this research is, as mentioned, to investigate the tourist involvement, to understand which is the possible relationship of the loyalty to a specific tourist destination.

According to these results, the analysis of loyalty in the tourist sector has begun in recent years, which is ascribable to two principal aspects: in the first place, for a long time, tourism has been considered as "natural fruit" of environmental and cultural resources of a territory; in the second place, the idea of loyalty, above all, applied to rural tourism destination results not very significant because the studies, finalized at investigating the motivations on the place to spend vacations, have attributed a nearly exclusive role to the desire of the individual to have new experiences.

Some economists define the tourist experience as the fourth form of economic supply separated from the services, products and commodities. In the service purchasing, the consumer pays a price for many intangible features, but for experience acquisition the consumer pays to spend his time living events created to involve him generating a deep relationship. The analysis of consumption behaviour and purchasing motivations linked to the experience have been studied for marketing with reference to different aspects, and finding application in the strategies of different operators. In fact, we can notice a propensity towards marketing strategies that connect more and more the brand, product, service and purchase place to the emotional sphere of the customer, using the creation of considerable experiences as a competitive lever. This lever can be used, apart from in enterprises, also in marketing actions focussed to develop the territorial supply creating trails of purchase able to centre experience of travel on the existing relationship between product and territory. The marketing actions based on experience can be adopted both by commerce (points of sale) and by tourism supply – to create in both cases a higher flow of travellers/customers.

However, the constant increase of the tourism demand together with advanced requirements of progressively high qualitative standards of supply, increasing the competitiveness among rural tourist destinations, has determined the progressive development of technique, of management and of tourist market finalized at enhancing the total value supplied to customers in order to create customer memory towards a certain locality (Lanfranchi *et al.*, 2014).

As the rural location can become a successful tourist destination, the specific territorial advantages (natural, architectural, historical, etc.), once considered as enough to face the market, must be transformed into real competitive advantages with the realization of specific marketing strategies directed at customer/tourist satisfaction.

Moreover, if the search of "novelty" could represent for people the most important reason of all the activities correlated to a holiday, the literature emphasises the existence of groups of individuals which tend to choose, year after year, the same resort, showing a level of loyalty.

The first studies aimed at investigating the phenomenon showed that there are five reasons that induce the repetition of a visit to the same location: the desire to reduce the risk of a possible wrong alternative choice, the opportunity of meeting the same people, the existence of an emotional bond with a particular place; to better discover the destination, the desire to promote the destination to other people.

At this point, the problem is the evaluation of the level of loyalty of tourists towards a specific destination. In the tourist industry, the segment of "habitual visitors" was considered as a homogeneous group. In fact, the literature emphasized that the phenomenon requires the measurement of a multidimensional concept (behaviour and aptitude), and these characteristics can determine different levels of loyalty to a specific service/brand.

The evaluation of the loyalty level of the customer is really complex because it regards a multidimensional concept. The significance of loyalty can be referred both to a repeated purchasing behaviour through a single alternative supplied and to a cognitive component represented by the preference level that the customer has for the same alternative. Both dimensions are essential in order to identify the real customer loyalty because the presence only of a behavioural aspect is a necessary condition but not sufficient enough to determine the existence of the effec-

five loyalty in choosing the supply. Applying Day's equation, in the tourism sector, it emerges that loyalty may be represented as follows:

$$L_i = P[B_i] \times A_i = f(X_1, X_2, \dots, X_K) \quad (2)$$

Where:

L_i = tourists' level of loyalty towards a specific service / brand m
 $P[B_i]$ = the proportion of total tourist service purchases that the customer assigned to a specific brand m in a certain period
 A_i = tourists attitude towards the service / brand m
 X_1, X_2, \dots, X_K = descriptive variables of loyalty.

The equation has given the possibility to construct a matrix which shows four different types of loyal tourists, identified by the intersection and graduation of the two dimensions, the behaviour and aptitude. Figure 4 shows that the "true loyalty" emerges only in the presence of high repetitiveness of purchases and is supported by a very favourable attitude towards the considered option; the manifestation of a high repetition but followed by a poor attitude identifies the "spurious loyal" because the repetition, in time, can be given only because of habit, laziness or lack of alternatives, and can be easily stopped when the market proposes new available supplies or better prices. When there are both, low repetition of purchase and poor attitude result in a "low loyal"; while the presence of a strong attitude with a weak repetition determine a "latent loyal".

Behavioural loyalty	High	Spurious loyalty	True loyalty
	Low	Low loyalty	Latent loyalty
		Weak	Strong
		Attitude loyalty	

Figure 4. Matrix – Loyalty to a specific tourist service
 Source: own elaboration

The main objective, through this matrix, is to appreciate if these categories of loyalty, with validity in other sectors of activities, can also be applied in rural tourist destination and if it can really give useful operational suggestions for its management (Nistor *et al.*, 2010). The descriptive variables in the above equation may influence the different levels of customer loyalty towards a specific service/brand through three key factors: the level of involvement in the process of purchasing service, the perception of quality differences in a service supplied and the satisfaction for the purchased service. Tourist "true loyalty" is a person involved in purchasing decisions that perceives high differences of quality between the different services supplied and is satisfied by his travel experience.

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9. Conclusions

This work has set as its main objective to investigate the loyalty in rural tourism, but concluded that, given the complexity of the issue addressed, it is indispensable, that more research is primarily aimed at deepening some specific issues that the limits of this research did not allow us to treat.

First of all, the necessity to emphasize more clearly the bonds, between the loyalty phenomenon and variables that define the involvement and the quality of the destination, requires more detailed analysis on the choosing and purchasing process of a "tourist destination product", for which there are not many research studies in literature. These aspects largely discussed in the traditional marketing literature but are still little investigated and measured in the tourism sector.

Secondly, the analyses should regard more and different destinations and must consider various periods. It is possible that the approach to a holiday can be different even for the same tourist in different contexts and times and thus influence his loyalty for the destination.

In the model realized by Day: the segment of repetitive visitors to a destination may be related to the real existence of a sub-segment of tourists with different levels of loyalty characterized by different behaviour, attitude and age. The two categories of extreme tourists, the "loyal" and "inconstant", represent two extreme points of a continuum within which intermediate situations can emerge.

The identification of these different groups of customers gives to management of the destination the opportunity to value, on the basis of available resources, which positioning choice is able to obtain competitive stable advantages in the long run and to respond adequately to the following issues: it is preferable to centre the attention on the real target of the true loyalty, which allows to economize on long-term marketing costs, through a mix of a suitable supply for senior customers; or investing principally to improve the proper turn over, through important investments in advertising to attract new tourists; or in the end, to accept the risk and focus on latent segments of tourists in order to change them into true loyalty.

The new challenges of the market, such as tourist destinations, are highly competitive and characterized by a sophisticated and changing demand, which requires operators able to face these issues repetitively.

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