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Experience management as an innovative approach in emerging Mediterranean destinations

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Abstract

Recent experience-centric management theory stresses the quality of the interaction between the consumer and the company as the key contributor to the creation of value. The theory follows that understanding tourists' quality of service experience (QSE) is crucial if tourism managers are to effectively support the value cocreation experience. This study examines the impact of QSE on destination image, as well as the impact of these variables on positive word-of-mouth and revisit intentions. The

hypotheses are tested with data from a convenience sample of 1,362 tourists who were surveyed in seven emerging Mediterranean destinations. Notably, the variable QSE is considered to be a formative variable, with four main dimensions named in the literature review. The data analysis includes a multivariate analysis using SmartPLS 3.0. By confirming the set of hypotheses, the role of QSE as an antecedent of destination image and behavioral intentions is underlined. Managerial implications are also provided.

Keywords

Quality of service experience
Destination image
Word-of-mouth
Revisit intentions
Innovation
Mediterranean tourism.

1. Introduction

The essence of tourism is the development and delivery of travel and visitation experiences (Brent et al., 2011). Under the experience-centric management approach, companies believe that travelling is increasingly about experiences in which the interaction with the tourist is as highly relevant as is the tourist's participation and involvement in value creation (Ritchie et al., 2011; Zátori, 2016). The conceptualization of tourist experience-centric management states that the consumer experience is the focus of the value-creation process (Zátori, 2016). It is the quality of the interaction between the consumer and the company that contributes to the creation of value (LaSalle and Britton, 2003).

However, interest in experience-related papers is rather unequal among tourism journals (Wu et al., 2018; Moon & Han, 2018). Some journals show a moderately positive trend in their focus on tourism experience research and offer evidence associating tourism

experiences with destination choice, satisfaction, and postpurchase behaviors (Brent et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2018). Additional studies examine managerial concerns related to the designing and delivering of tourism experiences (Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2018; Wu, 2007; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

Understanding experiential phenomena in tourism is important because emotional reactions and decisions often prevail (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). The assessment of tourists' service experiences should include their emotional response (Otto and Ritchie, 1996); to do so, this paper includes the quality of service experience (QSE) as one of the study's main variables.

QSE is particularly relevant in the tourism context as it goes beyond the notion of service quality to include affective and holistic factors that are relevant for the tourist experience (Hosany and Witham, 2010; Lemke et al., 2011). Providing customers with QSE in tourist environments is increasingly significant (Chang and Horng, 2010), and it can be a relevant basis for companies to improve their performance and innovation (Jin et al., 2015).

Research into QSE is pivotal, according to academics and policy makers (Murray et al., 2010). Quality perceptions held by tourists bear a much closer relation to their personal experience than they do to the actual quality of the service provided (Chen and Chen, 2010). Consequently, assessing tourists' QSE provides a better understanding of experiential aspects and affective responses in tourism activities (Jin et al., 2015; Lam and Hsu, 2006).

The image of a tourist destination is one of the critical issues in the tourism literature (Tasci and Gartner, 2007). Its influence on prepurchase, in situ, and postpurchase decisions is well accepted (Beerli and Martin, 2004). Even so, there is lack

of clarity in defining this term. Research into destination image faces many difficulties due to this topic's subjective nature and complexity. Furthermore, destination image is a dynamic construct that varies with time and space, involving multiple elements and processes (Gallarza et al., 2002). Nevertheless, research into destination image is essential to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a particular destination (Chen and Uysal, 2002) and to guarantee that location's competitive success (Wu et al., 2018). Given the relevance of the image of a tourist destination, increasing knowledge about how QSE affects destination image requires further research (Govers et al., 2007; Jin et al., 2015).

Following from this, our study intends to fill the existing gap in the literature by empirically testing the formative nature of the QSE construct and its role as an antecedent to a tourist destination's image. We fill this gap by testing a model which also includes the influence of QSE on destination image and behavioral intentions. We shall confirm those links in the context of emerging Mediterranean destinations, using a sample of 1,362 tourists. Finally, we shall verify the direct influence of tourists' destination images on tourists' revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth (WOM). This outcome is also relevant, as previous results regarding the impact of destination image on behavioral intentions were inconclusive. Contrasting with the usage of reflective measures as default methods to develop scales (Cadogan et al., 2008), in the current analysis we consider QSE as a higher order formative construct based on the four components proposed by Otto and Ritchie (1996).

An added value of the current research is the context of placing emerging Mediterranean destinations in contrast with traditional research focused on mature Mediterranean ones. Our model is tested with data collected in seven lesser-known Mediterranean cities with the potential to emerge as tourism destinations based on their variety of natural and

heritage resources. Emerging tourism destinations in South-Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East have shown a strong increase in tourism in recent decades (World Tourism Organization i.e., UNWTO, 2016). As Pike (2010) posits, marketing research provides important means of accountability to stakeholders in an emerging tourism destination.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we present a review of the literature on QSE to justify our proposal that QSE is a formative index. We review recent contributions on tourist destination image literature and we propose several hypotheses about the relationships between those variables, revisit intention and word-of-mouth. To test the proposed model, a quantitative analysis with primary data from tourists to several Mediterranean destinations will be carried out. We describe the empirical work executed, its methods and results. Finally, we offer a discussion and conclusions, including managerial implications, and we suggest further lines of research.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1.The quality of service experience

Social theorists have long hypothesized that people identify and affiliate themselves with places to give purpose to their lives (Williams and Vaske, 2003). Places gather meaning through the attitudes, values and beliefs people attach to them (Sack, 1992). Understanding the symbolic meanings attached to destinations is important because these meanings positively influence tourists' perceptions and attitudes. When tourists visit a destination, they experience many phenomena, including the local tourism industry, the resident population and the environment. The quality of the tourist experience refers to the final product that tourists feel and perceive about the destination.

Tourism research into QSE is rooted in Otto and Ritchie's (1996) study on "service experience," which is also known as experience quality (Altunel and Erkut, 2015; Chang and Horng, 2010; Chen and Chen, 2010; Kim and Choi, 2013; Jin et al., 2015) and tourist experience (Abdul Aziz et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2015; Ren et al., 2016). The analysis of QSE is in line with the shift toward an experience economy that creates memorable consumption experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Thus, functional qualities are not enough since an emotional reaction includes a favorable experience (Cronin 2003; Sandström et al., 2008), which is in line with Mano and Oliver's (1993) study on utilitarian and hedonic consumption judgments. "Value-in-use" (Vargo and Lusch 2004) and "consumption judgments" are also related concepts. In both cases, the traditional focus on cognitive evaluations was extended to include service-elicited emotions and experiences (Edvardsson et al., 2005).

QSE holistically and subjectively assesses personal experiences and reflects affective responses. In other words, tourists' QSE refers to emotional judgements made by customers in regards to their entire experience, including their interactions with their physical surroundings and service providers, as well as other customers and other participants in the tourist service (Chang and Horng, 2010). Recent studies analyze tourists' experience quality and its link with their satisfaction and behavioral intentions in different tourism contexts, as shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

The current study explores tourists' perceptions of QSE, according to the seminal work by Otto and Ritchie (1996), which identifies the following four dimensions in the service experience:

(1) Hedonics. As one of the most important service experience dimensions, hedonics captures tourists' perceptions of doing what they like, being excited and creating memories to keep for themselves and to share with others. Tourism activities possess a predominantly hedonic component as tourists primarily pursue hedonic or pleasurable experiences (Kim, 2014).

(2) Peace of mind. This dimension refers to personal security, safety of belongings, comfort and privacy. Customers appreciate safety, security and privacy when visiting a destination (Kim et al., 2013). In a wide sample of Mediterranean tourists, peace of mind was the dimension with the QSE highest score (Schlesinger et al., 2015).

(3) Involvement. This dimension refers to tourists' willingness to participate in the service, to have some elements of choice in activities and to exert some control over the outcome. Involvement also includes the desire to be educated and informed about activities. Researchers have showed the positive link between involvement and QSE (Chen and Chen, 2010; Loureiro et al., 2013).

(4) Recognition. This dimension captures the idea that tourists like to feel important and want to feel that they are taken seriously by the service provider. The influence of this issue on QSE has also been confirmed by Wu and Li (2014).

Several recent studies have also used the approach by Otto and Ritchie (1996) to assess QSE (Schlesinger et al., 2015; Amoah et al., 2016; Astrapellos et al., 2010; Chen and Chen, 2010; Jin et al., 2015; Pérez-Cabañero et al., 2017).

2.2. Tourist destination image

Tourist destinations are an amalgam of several components. Transport, hotels, restaurants and heritage sites form a holistic experience of an area, place or country (Murphy et al., 2000). Tourist destinations comprise tangible and intangible components

(Hu and Ritchie 1993; Murphy et al., 2000; Hosany and Gilbert, 2010). Destination image plays an important role in tourists' decision-making before, during and after the tourist experience (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martin 2004; Zhang et al., 2014).

The conceptualization of a destination image has been examined extensively in the tourism literature (Pike, 2002). A review by Gallarza et al. (2002) concluded that there are as many definitions of destination image as scholars devoted to its analysis, mainly due to the subjective, complex, relativistic and dynamic nature of this construct. Recently, Lai and Li (2016) have recognized three main problems in the definition of destination image, namely, internal, external and foundational vagueness. In other words, these problems refer to a poor understanding of the nature of the concept, difficulty in differentiating it from other related concepts, and the inherent ambiguity of a mental image.

There have been several approaches to conceptualizing destination image. Echtner and Ritchie (1991) underline three continuum components, namely, attribute-holistic, functional-psychological and common-unique. Gartner (1994) simplifies this view by proposing that destination image is made up of cognitive, affective and conative components. Finally, Zhang et al. (2014) classify previous research according to the definition of cognitive image, affective image, overall image, cognitive-affective joint image and self-congruity. All in all, these studies highlight the complexity of this variable.

In a broad sense, destination image can be defined as an individual's mental representation of knowledge (i.e., beliefs), feelings and overall perception of a particular destination (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). Thus, destination image is related to the visitor's subjective perception of the destination's reality (Chen and Tsai, 2007). In other words, destination image is an interactive set of thoughts, opinions,

feelings, conceptions and intentions toward a destination (Prayag and Ryan 2012; Tasci and Gartner, 2007).

The recent contribution by Lai and Li (2016:1074) defines tourism destination image as "a voluntary, multisensory, primarily picture-like, 'qualia'-arousing, conscious, and quasi-perceptual mental (i.e., private, nonspatial, and intentional) experience held by tourists about a destination. This experience overlaps and/or parallels the other mental experiences of tourists, including their sensation, perception, mental representation, cognitive map, consciousness, memory, and attitude of the destination." The authors suggest that empirical research should test conceptual validity and offer tailor-made definitions.

2.3.Behavioral intentions: positive WOM and revisit intention

Research on behavioral intentions remains an important topic in the fields of marketing and tourism (Prayag et al., 2013), as these intentions have become a fundamental strategic metric to evaluate the success of a tourism destination. Behavioral intentions are a good proxy of destination loyalty, which is frequently reflected in tourists' intentions to revisit the destination and in their willingness to recommend it via WOM communications (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Chen and Chen, 2010; Jin et al., 2015; Lee, 2009; Liu et al., 2017; Loureiro, 2014; Wu and Li, 2014; Zhang et al., 2014).

Our approach of using positive WOM is consistent with the stream of research that focuses on positive WOM comments (Lu and Seock, 2008; Maxham, 2001). Positive WOM intentions may be among the most important outcomes of loyalty (Christopher et al., 2013; White and Schneider, 2000). Positive WOM in this context refers to the degree to which tourists offer positive comments to others about their experience on a trip or at

a destination (Lee, 2009; Um et al., 2006). Positive WOM is not only an indicator of a tourist's intention to continue the relationship with the destination but is also a reliable source of information for potential tourists (Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

Revisit intention refers to tourists' willingness or plans to visit the same destination again (Cole and Illum, 2006; Cole and Scott, 2004; Kao et al., 2008; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Revisit intentions have been examined as an outcome of affective situations (Kim et al., 2013) and are related to emotional components such as satisfaction and pleasure (Tosun et al., 2015).

2.4.Hypotheses

The literature review shows the relevance of the variables dealt with in this study, their complexity and their varied conceptualizations. In this paper, we offer a different approach since we consider the QSE to be a formative measurement of the tourist's emotional experience, and we connect QSE with destination image and behavioral intentions. Based on the existing literature, this section articulates past research on the links between the variables under study to support a set of hypotheses.

2.4.1. The impact of QSE on destination image

Tourists' previous stays can influence tourists' perception of destination image (Baloglu 2001; Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Hu and Ritchie 1993; Jenkins 1999; Jin et al., 2015), and the number of visits has a positive relationship with the overall destination image (Rodriguez-Santos et al., 2013).

The different factors that make up a destination's image can be classified as stimulus factors and personal factors (San Martin and Del Bosque, 2008). Within the category of stimulus factors, many studies have found that the tourist's previous experience has a significant effect on the perceived image of a tourist destination (Baloglu

and McCleary, 1999; Hsu et al., 2004; Litvin and Ling, 2001; San Martin and Del Bosque, 2008; Vogt and Andereck, 2003). However, while many studies consider the destination image as an antecedent of tourist satisfaction and other behavioral variables (Barroso et al., 2007; Chen and Phou, 2013; Chen and Tsai, 2007; Chi and Qu, 2008; Prayag and Ryan, 2012), only a small number of papers empirically analyze the impact of the tourist experience on the tourist destination image (for example Govers et al., 2007; Jin et al., 2015). Recent research confirms that the quality of a tourist's experience positively impacts the image of the destination (Jin et al., 2015). This experience quality concept is similar to the present QSE as it encompasses the tourist's affective responses from a visiting experience (Chan and Baum, 2007; Jin et al., 2015). Consequently, we posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Tourists' QSE positively impacts destination image**.**

2.4.2. The impact of QSE on behavioral intentions

In spite of its relevance to tourism, there is little prior research about the relationship between QSE and behavioral intentions. In the service literature there is a clear link between consumers' perceived quality and loyalty regarding repurchase intention and positive recommendations (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Similarly, we expect a positive link between QSE and behavioral intentions because, as previously stated, QSE accounts for more than the service quality alone by including emotional aspects and assessing the tourist's entire experience. Tourists are more likely to return in the future when they have enjoyable experiences (Hui et al., 2007). There is evidence that customer experience positively impacts revisit intention (Cole and Illum, 2006; Kao et al., 2008; Manthiou et al., 2014), along with advocacy (Fernandes and Cruz, 2016). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Tourists' QSE impacts positively on revisit intention.

Tourists will have a higher propensity to recommend a particular destination when their overall assessment of the trip (i.e., their QSE perception) is positive. Recent studies demonstrate that the experience quality has a positive effect on tourists' recommendation intention (Altunel and Erkut, 2015; Kang and Gretzel, 2012). Therefore, we state the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Tourists' QSE impacts positively on positive WOM

2.4.3. Destination image and behavioral intentions

Research on the role of image as an antecedent to behavior intentions in tourism is a growing area of interest (Chen, 2008; Chen and Chen, 2010; Gongmin et al., 2008; Hutchinson et al., 2009; Zabkar et al., 2010), but it has brought contradictory results. There seems to be no consensus in the literature regarding this type of relationship. Chi and Qu (2008) did not find a significant direct link between destination image and loyalty in a sample of visitors to Eureka Springs (Arkansas, USA). Similarly, Jin et al. (2015) and Wang and Hsu (2010) did not find evidence to support the link between tourist destination image and behavioral intentions. Other researchers report that destination image has an effect on the willingness to make a recommendation (WOM) and on the interest in revisiting a destination (Bigné et al., 2009; Byon and Zhang, 2010; Cai et al., 2004; Court and Lupton, 1997; Faullant et al., 2008; Hanzaee and Saeedi, 2011; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000; Prayag and Ryan, 2012; Yang et al., 2009). Recently, Zhang et al. (2014) concluded that destination image impacts tourist loyalty behaviors directly, as well as via mediation from other factors. To examine behavioral intentions, we shall analyze revisit intentions and positive WOM independently.

Destination image is an influential factor on people's destination choice, especially for repeat tourists (Tosun et al., 2015). Several studies support the positive link between destination image and revisit intentions (Kandampully et al., 2011; Oztürk and Qu, 2008; Tosun et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Destination image impacts positively on revisit intention.

Prior research confirms that the more positive the image of a destination held by tourists is, the greater the likelihood that they would recommend it to other potential tourists (Barroso Castro et al., 2007; Hung and Petrick, 2012; Prayag, 2009; Prayag et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, a positive effect is hypothesized for destination image on tourists' positive WOM intention as follows:

Hypothesis 5: Destination image impacts positively on positive word-of-mouth.

We summarize the set of hypotheses to be tested in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

3. Method

Context: Emerging Mediterranean destinations

The Mediterranean has a long tradition of trade, travel and cultural exchange. The interaction of peoples and cultures from the lands surrounding the Mediterranean dates back thousands of years to the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Persia, Ancient Egypt, the state of Carthage and the Hellenistic kingdoms (World Tourism Organization, 2016).

It is a fact that the Mediterranean region is one of the most visited tourist destination areas in the world. Currently, an estimated 342 million tourists visit the Mediterranean region on an annual basis, spending close to 217 billion Euros, which is

23% of the world total; international tourism represents an average income of €414 per inhabitant in the Mediterranean (UNWTO, 2016). The Mediterranean is the world's most-visited tourist destination, thanks to its 30,000 kilometers of coastline (Almeida, 2008). The Mediterranean Sea Basin is a land of amazing diversity. This highly biodiverse, culturally rich geographical region with its multiple religions, languages and varied customs has immense tourism potential. However, there is significant disparity of growth in the tourism sector. Certain well-known destinations with traditional appeal have been growing very rapidly, thereby contributing immensely to the state level GDP, whereas certain other regions are lagging behind. There are lesser-known destinations in the North and South Mediterranean Sea Basin, which have the potential to emerge as tourism destinations.

Insert Figure 2 here

The Mediterranean Sea basin includes the countries along its coast and islands, including countries from Europe, the Maghreb and the Middle East. The Mediterranean Basin has two subzones, namely, the northern arch (e.g., Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Albania, Cyprus, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Malta and Turkey) and the southern arch, which is formed by countries of the Maghreb and the Middle East (e.g., Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, plus Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) (Colom & Saez, 1999), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Today, there are two diverse economic and cultural models in the Mediterranean. In the northern Mediterranean, countries are highly industrialized, democratic and predominantly Christian. In contrast, southern Mediterranean countries are Muslim and have varying degrees of economic development. Despite these notable differences between the north and south, certain cultural factors are common to both zones.

Gastronomy, social relationships and some cultural aspects are similar throughout the Mediterranean (Maestre, 2006).

However, despite having ample tourism resources, the tourist inflow into emerging destinations is hardly encouraging. Destinations in southeastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East welcomed 100 million tourists in 2014, representing 29% of the Mediterranean total (UNWTO, 2016). Recent European growth is driven by the extraordinary results in southern and Mediterranean Europe (+13%). Western Europe (+7%), northern Europe and central and eastern Europe (both +5%) also recorded robust growth (UNWTO, 2017). According to the latest edition that discusses tourism in the Mediterranean area (UNWTO, 2016), emerging economy destinations are expected to increase their market share in the Mediterranean from 31% in 2010 to 44% in 2030, with advanced economy destinations decreasing from 68% to 56%. It is thus considered imperative that suitable measures be undertaken for the successful promotion of the region. It may still be worthwhile for lesser-known tourist destinations that have not been aggressively marketed to examine their current destination image, the tourist's SQE and loyalty intentions.

Sampling

We surveyed tourists in seven emerging Mediterranean destinations, namely, Tafilah (Jordan), Tyre (Lebanon), Maamoura (Tunisia), Oristano (Italy), Latina (Italy), Sicily (Italy) and Cullera (Spain); these cities are all part of a European Union Project "New Cities of the Mediterranean Sea basin" (NEWCIMED) that focuses on the enhancement of cultural heritage and territorial planning capabilities of the so-called New Towns, which is an urban phenomenon in the Mediterranean area. The first three destinations belong to the southern Mediterranean Basin (in North Africa and the Middle

East), and the remaining four belong to the northern Mediterranean Basin (in Europe). These destinations offer a range of tourist sites, including beaches and cultural heritage sites. Development in the tourism industry also varies among the destinations. The respondents were selected by way of convenience sampling among those tourists who had just completed a visit to a tourist site. Tourists were intercepted during their visit to a historical tourist site. The survey yielded 1,362 valid responses (see Table 2). Regarding the characteristics of the sample, 47.6% of respondents were women, and the average age was 37.4 years. The level of education was tertiary (college/university) in 43.4% of the sample and average (secondary) in 46.8%. The tourists mainly visited the destination for leisure motives (68.8%), working motives (11%) or personal motives (20.2). The number of overnight stays at the destination was fewer than four nights for 45.7% of the respondents.

Insert Table 2 here

We applied a quantitative approach using data from a structured questionnaire that included questions on tourists' QSE, destination image, behavioral intentions and classification items such as gender, country of origin, education and other demographic data. The data analysis included multivariate analysis using SPSS 19 and SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle et al., 2015).

Measurements

To gather data on QSE, we used the scale by Otto and Ritchie (1996). This scale has been widely used by researchers in different tourist contexts (Mon and Han, 2018; Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2018; Astrapellos et al., 2010; Chen and Chen, 2010; Cole and Scott, 2004; Kao et al., 2008). Originally, the scale consisted of 23 items grouped into four dimensions, namely, hedonics, peace of mind, involvement and recognition.

Although most authors report descriptive results, some have recently tested causal links between QSE and other variables, such as perceived value, satisfaction and behavioral intention (Chen and Chen, 2010; Jin et al., 2015). In those papers, researchers consider QSE as a reflective scale. In contrast, in the current analysis, we consider QSE as a higher-order formative construct. Our proposal responds to authors' complaints that academic research into scale development is dominated by the reflective approach (Bruner and Hensel, 1993; Collier and Bienstock, 2009). Content specification is essential to defining a formative index; therefore, we adopt the original scale created by Otto and Ritchie (1996), whose development followed the procedure laid out by Churchill (1979). This process ensures that the complexity of the tourist service is embraced in the four dimensions ultimately reported.

There are additional reasons that support the formative nature of QSE. First, the causality direction. In formative measurement modeling, the causality direction moves from the items to the construct. Then, a change in the indicator affects the underlying latent construct (Bagozzi, 2007; Jarvis et al., 2003). Regarding QSE, the causality should move from the indicators to the construct as QSE is in essence formed by the indicators.

Second, indicators may correlate positively, negatively or not at all in formative measurement models (Cadogan et al., 2008). Trade-offs between different facets can arise in a multifaceted formative construct (Cadogan et al., 2008). These aspects are inherent in the nature of QSE. For instance, a trade-off between hedonics and peace of mind is possible when a tourist willing to share his or her memorable experience with others is far less concerned with privacy. Third, in formative measurement models, indicators do not need to be interchangeable (Jarvis et al., 2003). That is, they do not need to represent similar content. Therefore, dropping one indicator in a formative model may modify the

definition of the construct. The four components of QSE (i.e., hedonics, peace of mind, involvement and recognition) are unique, distinguishable and not interchangeable. Finally, formative indicators do not need to have the same antecedents and consequences as one another (Jarvis et al., 2003). Antecedents of QSE are clearly different, as the factors with impact in hedonics may not impact on involvement (i.e., an amazing natural environment may have an impact on hedonics but not on recognition, as the latter deals with how important the customer feels due to the service provided). Thus, we consider that a formative approach is more appropriate when assessing QSE, but this has not yet been empirically tested.

Loyalty can be described as an attitude toward purchasing a product on the basis of previous experience and brand preference (Oliver, 1999). According to Oliver's (1999) attitudinal approach, loyalty intentions are measured using two indicators, namely, intention to repurchase and recommendation to others. Both indicators are usually employed in the tourism literature (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Chi and Qu, 2008; Faullant et al., 2008; Hanzaee and Saeedi, 2011). We measure these indicators using scales adapted from Kao et al. (2008).

Based on the literature review, a list of attributes that are generally used to measure destination image was created, including cognitive and affective aspects of image. We selected a bundle of general items as we surveyed several tourist destinations. Our items are adapted from previous researchers and refer to cognitive aspects such as the landscape and tourist services provided (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Jin et al., 2015; San Martín and Del Bosque, 2008). The measurement also includes affective aspects related to the residents' hospitality and friendliness. According to the review made by Gallarza et al. (2002), residents' receptiveness was the attribute most mentioned (20 out

of 25 studies), followed by landscape and/or surroundings (19 out of 25 studies). We also incorporated websites' contributions to the scale, as some authors propose that the interactive nature of the internet can add new dimensions to the possibilities of projecting destination images (Govers et al., 2007).

All the variables were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

4. Results

Analysis of the measurement model

QSE represents a multidimensional construct with four dimensions, each of which includes various facets of QSE. From the four types of second-order models, we selected type II because it combined formative and reflective measurements (Jarvis et al., 2003). Since our focus was on explaining an endogenous construct, variance-based methods, such as partial least squares (PLS) analyses, were best suited to our study's aims. Another reason for choosing PLS for the present study was that this method can handle reflective and formative scales, both of which were present in the model. Specifically, QSE was modeled as a formative index (Chin, 1998; Haenlein and Kaplan, 2004). We performed a PLS-model estimation using SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle et al., 2015) and calculated the indicators suggested by Hair et al. (2017) to assess validity and reliability.

We developed and evaluated the measurement model before estimating the structural equation model to test our set of hypotheses. The results of the psychometric properties of the model appear in Table 3. Reliability indicators yielded good results, which is evident because all values for Cronbach's alpha were around or above 0.7 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). A composite reliability (CR) of greater than 0.6 in all cases and an

average variance extracted (AVE) of greater than 0.5 confirmed the reliability of the tested model (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Regarding the additional indicator of CR of Rho by Dillon-Goldsteins, we confirmed that all Rho values were above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006). Convergent validity was confirmed because all loadings were significantly different from zero and greater than 0.7 (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). At this stage, we eliminated three indicators from the QSE hedonic dimension (i.e., EQH1, EQH5 and EQH10) and one indicator from involvement (i.e., EQI1). Eliminating these indicators did not affect our theoretical background. Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the square root of the AVE with the correlations between the factors. We confirmed that the correlations were lower than all the square roots of the AVE. The HTMT ratio method recently proposed by Henseler et al. (2015) and Hair et al. (2017) was also applied to assess the discriminant validity. Since every ratio was lower than 0.85, no problems resulted (Clark & Watson, 1995).

Insert Table 3 here

The dimensions or first-order factors of QSE became the observed indicators of the second-order factor. We checked for multicollinearity through the variance proportion, condition index and low variation inflation factor (VIF). Each of these four measurements was lower than 3.3 (Hair et al., 2011), thereby indicating that multicollinearity in the research data was not a concern (see Table 3).

The results show that the measurement model was statistically robust with the four dimensions included in the formative construct. Thus, as proposed, QSE is a formative index, whereas destination image, positive WOM and revisit are reflective variables.

The validity of formative variables can be assessed using the statistical significance and the size of the weights (coefficients) of the indicators (Chin, 1998). For formative constructs, the weights indicate the relative importance of each dimension with respect to the dependent variable. Since these indicators may not be correlated, traditional indicators of reliability are not applicable (Bollen, 1989).

Analysis of the Structural Model

After evaluating the psychometric properties of the instrument, we estimated the structural model using a SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle et al., 2015) analysis. As with the evaluation of the measurement model, the structural significance of the estimated coefficients was performed using a bootstrap approach (Chin, 1998). We used a bootstrapping procedure (5,000 samples) to assess the significance of the hypothesized paths and the amount of variance in the dependent variables attributed to the explanatory variables (Chin, 1998). Table 4 shows the path coefficients. Bootstrapping also yielded the calculation of the standard error of the parameters and the t-values. All hypotheses were supported since these surpass the minimum level indicated by a one-tailed Student's t-distribution and n-1 (n = number of resamples) degrees of freedom.

Insert Table 4 here

The criteria used to assess the structural equation model were the coefficient of determination (R^2) for endogenous variables and the estimation of path coefficients (β) (Henseler et al., 2009). To assess the predictive capacity of the structural model, we first evaluated R^2 values, as per Falk and Miller (1992), who reported that R^2 values must exceed 0.1. Lower values, even if they were significant, would not be acceptable. Table 5 and Figure 2 show that R^2 for the dependent factor was higher than 0.1.

Additionally, we calculated the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR= 0.075). Henseler et al. (2015) describe the SRMR as a goodness of fit measure for PLS-SEM that can be used to avoid model misspecification. A value less than 0.08 is considered a good fit.

The outcome analysis (Table 4) shows that all the proposed hypotheses are supported. Support for H1, H2 and H3 shows that QSE exerts a significant positive influence on destination image, revisit intention and positive WOM. Consequently, tourists' QSE positively affects tourists' perceptions of destination image and postpurchase intentions. H4 and H5 are also statistically supported, which confirms the positive and direct influence of destination image on revisit intention and positive WOM. The impact of destination image on postpurchase intentions is significant, although this impact is relatively low compared with the influence of QSE on the same variables. Values for the Q^2 measurement illustrate the model's acceptable predictive capacity (these values are above 0 in all cases), as shown in Table 4. Figure 3 illustrates the outcome model.

The study also measures the total effect size (f2) to see the contribution for each construct. As suggested by Cohen (1988), levels of approximately 0.02 denote a weak effect size; levels higher than 0.15 denote a moderate effect size and 0.35 denotes a strong effect size. In this study, the effect size for the QSE on destination image is strong, as the f2 is 0.543; the effect size for destination image on positive WOM and revisit intention are also strong (0.395 and 0.249 respectively).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The experience management approach underlines QSE as a main contributor of value creation in tourism. The current research highlights the role of QSE as an antecedent of destination image and behavioral intentions. Only a handful of studies examine the influence of QSE on the tourist's destination image once the visit has finished; therefore, this aspect is a primary contribution of this paper. The paper also examines the impact of both variables on positive WOM and revisit intention. In addition, we extend the knowledge of QSE by considering this variable as a second-order formative construct in a proposed model of relationships between the variables under study.

We have confirmed that QSE is an important antecedent of tourists' destination image and behavioral intentions. Therefore, the overall assessment of the tourist experience has an impact not only on well-known postpurchase behaviors, such as positive WOM and revisit intentions, but also on the image of that destination. The influence of QSE on behavioral intentions is both direct and indirect through destination image. This direct relationship has been rarely examined by previous literature, as most research on QSE and behavioral intentions includes satisfaction as a mediator variable (Amoah et al., 2016; Cole and Scott, 2004; Chen and Chen, 2010; Jin et al., 2015; Kao et al., 2008; Pérez-Cabañero et al., 2017). Only Chen and Chen (2010) explored the direct link between QSE and behavioral intentions, but they did not find a significant relationship. Thus, this study confirms that a positive QSE will enhance the intention to revisit that destination and recommend that location to family and friends on many future occasions. Personal recommendations are relevant, as they are reliable information sources that impact potential tourists' decisions and destination image formation (Zhang et al., 2014). Additionally, findings show that the direct impact of QSE on destination

image is higher than that on behavioral intentions. The direct link between QSE and destination image was also proved by Jin et al. (2015). In other words, once at the destination, the overall personal assessment of the trip shapes the image held by tourists at that destination. The direct impact of destination image on behavioral intentions was explored by Jin et al. (2015), but no confirmation was found. Current results state that the image held by tourists of a destination they have already visited impacts their revisit intention and their willingness to recommend it to acquaintances. Prayag et al. (2017) also reported a direct link between overall destination image and intention to recommend that destination.

Finally, the usefulness of a formative approach to assess QSE has been confirmed. Although QSE has been considered as a reflective measure in previous research (for instance, Amoah et al., 2016; Jin et al., 2015; Wu and Li, 2014), we proved the convenience of considering QSE as a formative measure in order to capture the complex nature of QSE. Consequently, we encourage researchers to consider this formative approach in future works.

Managers with an experience-centric approach should be aware of the current results. The analysis of QSE dimensions in a particular destination must guide destination management organizations in designing what is offered to tourists in order to enhance the tourist experience. As Zátori (2016) stated, on-site interaction is the most crucial factor for tourist experience value formation. Therefore, in order to increase hedonics, tourism managers should integrate the physical environment as an essential part of the tourist on-site experience by, for example, introducing the history behind every heritage site by storytelling. Additionally, the application of sensorial marketing strategies could also enhance memories of the trip, as sensory-based emotional information leads to positive

arousal and stronger memory formation (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Regarding peace of mind, ensuring security conditions at the destination and making such measures visible will reduce tourists' perception of risk. Involvement and recognition could be enhanced by considering the role of the tourist in the cocreation of the service experience. Recruiting staff with empathy and providing specific training of first-line employees are also advisable managerial recommendations for improving the quality of the interaction.

Positive experiences during the visit will shape the destination image and have an impact on tourists' intentions. Thus, managers should create memorable experiences in order to influence tourists' revisit intention and positive WOM (Fernandes and Cruz, 2016; Kim et al., 2012). Tourism programs should be thoroughly evaluated to determine whether they potentially satisfy each of the identified QSE components. Visitor surveys that specifically ask about individuals' QSE could help destination managers to understand how tourism stakeholders perform. From an experience-centric approach, service innovation should be a knowledge-intensive process aimed at providing an appropriate context to enable the creation of value during the tourist experience (Caru and Cova, 2007; Zátori, 2016). Knowledge of QSE can help experience-centric managers to design more attractive destinations where tourists actively participate in creating emotional and fulfilling experiences. The collaboration of various stakeholders, such as public destination management organizations, private companies, tourism employees, and residents, among others, is required to innovate those tourism programs that improve QSE. In the long-term, a longitudinal analysis of QSE perceptions will show the evolution of tourists' assessments of the four dimensions comprising the QSE.

Destination image plays a key role in developing and maintaining a destination's competitive advantage. Tourism destination managers use promotion and marketing

communication strategies to influence the destination image (Beerli and Martín 2004; Govers et al., 2007), which must be consistent with the aims of that destination's positioning. These promotional strategies related to destination image can help tourism managers to retain customer loyalty sustainably (Zhang et al., 2014). However, the impact of QSE on destination image can interfere with managers' efforts to promote a destination. Consequently, the tourist experience designed by destination management organizations must be in line with the main claim of the destination's positioning strategy in order to reinforce the targeted QSE and destination image. Otherwise, the QSE may modify the tourist's perception of destination image in an undesired direction.

Despite the contributions of this study, some limitations should be acknowledged. The study used a convenient and relatively large sample (n=1362), but the selection entails diversity from tourists surveyed in distant emerging Mediterranean destinations, as this is the study area of this research. In the future, other sampling procedures could be used to generalize the results to the population under study. Segmentation analysis could be applied in further research by using techniques such as Finite Mixture PLS segmentation (FIMIX PLS) or Predictive-oriented segmentation (PLS-POS). Furthermore, this paper only focused on tourists' perceptions of QSE; however, other stakeholders could also play a relevant role in the value-formation process. Therefore, this paper suggests new pathways for further research. As regards QSE, additional analysis could validate this formative measurement instrument in other contexts. Further research is therefore required to generalize the current findings to other Mediterranean destinations, such as mature Mediterranean locales.

Additionally, an interesting line for further research is the analysis of the impact of the internet and connected systems on QSE. The internet and connected systems have caused

a profound change in the tourism industry; these systems have changed people's consumption habits to place the tourists' interactive experience as the center (Li et al., 2017).

Destination image is one of the most explored fields in tourism research (Wu et al., 2018; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000). However, further analysis could be carried out in order to deepen our knowledge about its formation. Such analysis could include assessing the role of the psychological aspects of different segments and how new information and communication technologies, such as peer-to-peer evaluations and social media, may influence destination image, positive WOM and negative WOM. In addition, the image of Mediterranean destinations can be enhanced by further research into other promising variables, such as the quality of interactions between residents and tourists. These analyses should enable destinations to improve their positioning and competitiveness.

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Table 1. Literature review on QSE

Authors	Survey context	Variables under study
Otto, & Ritchie (1996)	Canada: Vancouver tourists assess 3 tourism industries: airlines, hotels and tours & attractions	Service experience scale development
Cole, & Scott (2004)	USA: Tourists from Northeast Ohio	Performance quality, experience quality, overall satisfaction, and revisit intentions
Kao, Huang, & Wu (2008)	Taiwan: customers in Hualien Ocean Park	Consumers' experiential quality scale development, experiential satisfaction, loyalty intention
Astrapellos et al. (2010)	Greece: tourists in outdoor recreational activities	QSE assessment
Chang, & Horng (2010)	Taiwan: College students patronizing Easy Shop (a women's underwear store), a national museum of marine biology and Starbucks coffee shop.	Experience quality scale development
Chen & Chen (2010)	Taiwan: Heritage tourists in Tainan city	Perceived value, experience quality, satisfaction and behavioural intentions
Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick (2012)	U.S. college students at a large Midwest university with travelling experience	Scale development for memorable experiences
Kim & Choi (2013)	Korea: high school students recalling services received at a city tour, university tour, folk village, museum, historical and modern monuments.	Experience quality, customer loyalty
Wu & Li (2014)	China: Heritage tourists at Macau	Experiential quality scale development, perceived value, heritage image, experiential satisfaction, and behavioural intentions
Altunel, & Erkut, (2015)	Turkey: cultural tourists in Istanbul	Experience quality scale development, satisfaction involvement and recommendation intention
Jin, Lee, & Lee (2015)	South Korea: customers of a water park	Experience quality, satisfaction, perceived value, water park image, and behavioural intentions
Kim, Woo, & Uysal (2015)	South Korea: Elderly tourists	Involvement, perceived value, satisfaction with trip experience, leisure life satisfaction, overall quality of life, and revisit intention
Schlesinger, Cervera & Pérez-Cabañero (2015)	7 Mediterranean destinations: Tourists at beach and heritage sites	QSE assessment
Amoah (2016)	Ghana: customers of guesthouses in 4 cities	Experience quality, satisfaction and behavioural intentions

Source: own elaboration

Table 2. Sampling features

UNIVERSE	Tourists at seven emerging destinations in the Mediterranean Sea basin						
SAMPLE	Total southern Mediterranean n = 557			Total northern Mediterranean n = 808			
	Tafilah (Jordan)	Tyre (Lebanon)	Maamoura (Tunisia)	Oristano (Italy)	Latina (Italy)	Ustica (Italy)	Cullera (Spain)
	155	202	200	208	200	201	199
Inhabitants (approximately)	40,000	120,000	7,000	32,200	120,000	1,500	24,000
Historical-tourist site	Al Barbayta mineral water springs	Roman Hippodrome (UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites)	Caves of Bousalaa	The Tower of St. Christophoros	Villa di Tiberio	Archaeological Museum Tower of St. Mary	Cullera Castle
Total sample	1,362 tourists						
Geographical scope	Mediterranean Sea basin						
Data collection method	Self-report questionnaire						
Sampling procedure	Non-probabilistic method: convenience sampling						

Table 3. Psychometric properties of the measurements

Factor		Weight (t-value) Bootstrap 2nd-order formative VIF	Indicator	Loading (t-value) Bootstrap	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Quality of Service Experience (QSE)	DIM1. Hedonics	0.50 (58.15) *** VIF 2.07	I am doing something memorable that enriches my life.	0.76(49.71) ***	0.88	0.90	0.56
			This experience is exciting.	0.76(44.72) ***			
			I am having a "once in a lifetime" experience; I feel much better about things and myself after this trip.	0.80(66.31) ***			
			I am being challenged in some way.	0.77(28.92) ***			
			My imagination is being stirred.	0.76(52.60) ***			
			It feels like I am on an adventure.	0.78(58.93) ***			

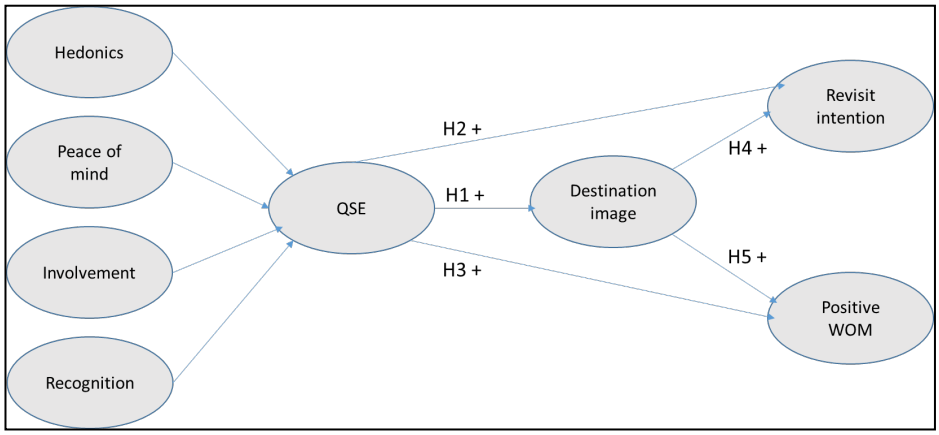
			This travel experience provides me with fun.	0.73(44.43) ***			
			This trip makes me feel that I am doing something new and different.	0.73(51.24) ***			
	DIM2. Peace of Mind	0.81 (32.48) *** VIF 1.64	Visiting this city lets me feel physically comfortable.	0.84(81.72) ***	0.87	0.91	0.76
			Visiting this city lets me feel that my property is safe.	0.85(67.71) ***			
			Visiting this city lets me feel relaxed.	0.86(75.77) ***			
			Visiting this city lets me feel a sense of personal security and safety.	0.84(65.41) ***			
	DIM3. Involvement	0.89 (49.48) *** VIF 2.02	I feel that I am involved in the process of this trip.	0.83(62.52) ***	0.87	0.91	0.72
			That there is an element of choice in the process.	0.87(88.79) ***			
			That I have some control over the outcome.	0.89(119.95) ***			
			That I am being educated and informed.	0.81(56.19) ***			
	DIM4. Recognition	0.79 (26.17) *** VIF 1.86	That I am being taken seriously.	0.94(203.48) ***	0.87	0.94	0.88
			That I am important.	0.94(183.38) ***			
Destination Image		N/A	I think the quality of the tourist services in the municipal area is good.	0.74(39.10) ***	0.82	0.87	0.54
			I think the service offered by employees in the tourist industry is good.	0.78(36.10) ***			
			I think there is an adequate level of protection of natural resources.	0.74(39.72) ***			
			I think the brand image represents the values that attract tourists to the destination.	0.75(43.14) ***			
			I think public and private websites provide good quality information on the destination.	0.73(30.00) ***			

			I think the local people are hospitable and friendly.	0.70(31.30) ***			
Positive WOM		N/A	I am willing to recommend this place to my relatives/friends as a vacation destination to visit. I am willing to encourage others to visit this place.	0.97(96.02) *** 0.97(113.29) ***	0.94	0.97	0.94
Revisit intention		N/A	I am willing to revisit this place in the future. If I had to choose again, I definitely would.	0.93(51,45) *** 0.92(31.20) ***	0.84	0.92	0.86
VIF: variation inflation factor; CR: composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted; N/A: not applicable.; ***p < 0.001. *p<0.05							

Table 4. Structural model results

Relationship **model with direct effect**	**Hypotheses**	**β** **standardised**	**Value T** **bootstrap**
H1 QSE → Destination Image	Accepted	0.582***	7.346
H2 QSE → Revisit intention	Accepted	0.557***	4.873
H3 QSE → WOM	Accepted	0.522***	4.458
H4 Destination Image → Revisit intention	Accepted	0.162*	1.674
H5 Destination Image → positive WOM	Accepted	0.210*	1.854
*p< 0.05; **p< 0.01; ***p< 0.001 R^2 (Destination Image) = 0.34; R^2 (revisit intention) = 0,44; R^2 (positive WOM) = 0.45 Q^2 (Destination Image) = 0.16; Q^2 (revisit)= 0.33; Q^2 (positive WOM) = 0.36			

Figure 1: Conceptual model

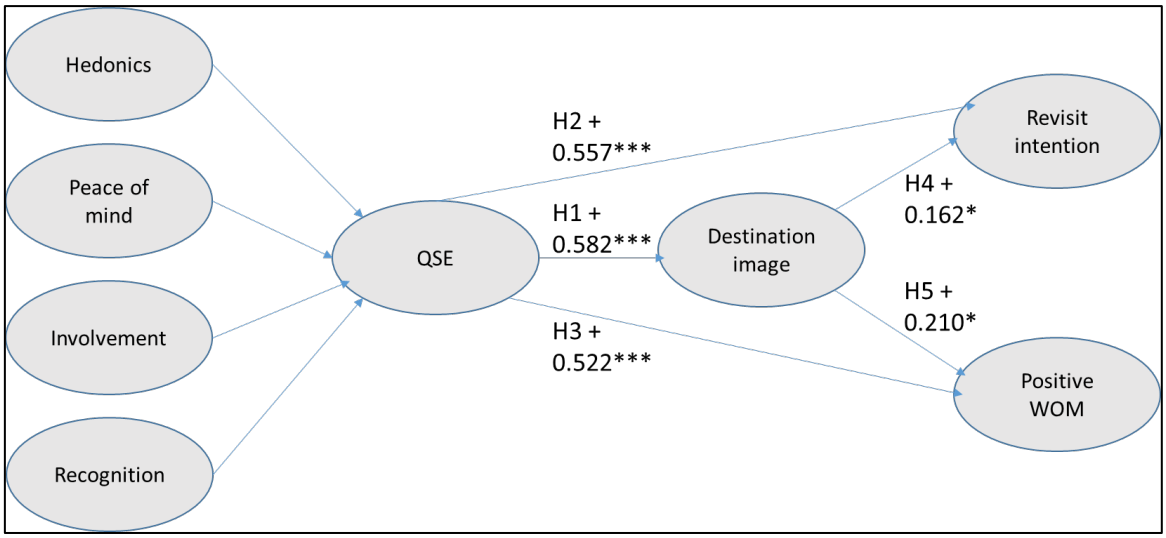


Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2: The Mediterranean Sea Basin

Source: Own elaboration

Figure 3. Results of structural equation model



***p<0.001. *p<0.05.