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Destination branding and visitor loyalty: The case of agrotourism

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Abstract:

It has been established that strong destination brands are important in the agrotourism industry. Agrotourism brands provide the link between visitors and the agrotourism firms and destination, and tourists may or may not develop a degree of loyalty to relevant brands. The present study suggests that confidence in an agrotourism brand has high influence in development of brand loyalty. Based on hypotheses developed, confidence in an agrotourism brand is influenced by brand characteristics, agrotourism company characteristics and visitor characteristics. The present survey took place in Greece and examined the attitudes of visitors in agrotourism firms at the island of Lesbos. Survey results demonstrate that agrotourism firm brand characteristics appear more important in their impact on a visitor's confidence in a brand. It was also established that confidence in a brand is positively influencing loyalty. Recommendations are developed for agrotourism marketers in relation to building and maintaining visitor confidence in a brand.

Keywords: *agrotourism, destination branding, brand loyalty, brand confidence*

INTRODUCTION

Marketers in agrotourism, both at destination-level as well as at firm-level, have long been interested in the concept of brand loyalty because brand loyalty is a measure of the attachment that a customer has to a brand (Aaker, 1991). Brand loyalty brings the agrotourism firm many benefits, including repeat visits and recommendations of the agrotourism brand to friends and relatives.

Previous studies on brand loyalty focused on behaviour. Brand loyalty was construed to be a subset of repeat purchase behaviour (Brown, 1952; Cunningham, 1956) and intention to repurchase. Later, researchers like Guest (1955) and Jacoby (1971) argued that brand loyalty has two components: brand loyal behaviour and brand loyal attitudes.

Consumer attitude behind the purchase is important because it drives behaviour. While brand loyal behaviour is partly determined by situational factors such as availability (Jacoby, 1971; Christou, 2002; Martins, 2016; Mavragani et al., 2019), attitudes are more enduring. Unfortunately, despite its importance, brand attitudes have not attracted a corresponding degree of research interest (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2017; Mensah & Mensah, 2018). A compilation of definitions and studies on brand loyalty by Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) revealed that research on brand loyal behaviour outnumbered studies on brand attitudes three to one.

In past research, O'Shaughnessy (2000) suggested that underlying loyalty is always confidence, a willingness to act without calculating immediate costs and benefits. Hence, loyalty to an agrotourism brand involves trusting it. In agrotourism marketing, the concept of confidence is developed on a limited basis, though much effort has been spent in finding ways to build and maintain it. In that context, confidence is built on person-to-person relationships. Confidence in an agrotourism brand differs from interpersonal confidence because a brand is a symbol (Küçükaltan & Pinar, 2016; Misirlis et al., 2018; Mombeuil, 2018; Murphy, 2019). Unlike a salesperson, this symbol is unable to respond to the consumer.

In order to achieve loyalty in today's competitive tourism markets, agrotourism marketers have to embrace what is becoming second nature to business marketers (Donath, 1999) and focus on building and maintaining confidence in the visitor-brand relationship (Christou, 2003a). Unfortunately, the concept of confidence in agrotourism marketing is largely unexplored. The focus of this study is to examine some factors affecting the development of confidence in agrotourism brands, and to explore how that confidence relates to brand loyalty. By applying current interpretations of confidence to agrotourism brand loyalty, this study seeks to approach brand loyalty differently and to provide insights into consumers' motivation for loyalty to agrotourism brands.

BRAND LOYALTY IN AGROTOURISM

In past research, Copeland (1923) appears to be the first to suggest a phenomenon related to brand loyalty, which he labelled 'brand insistence'. Brown (1952) and Cunningham (1956) analysed summary measures of brand purchase patterns and found marked consistencies in consumers' purchase patterns of brands of various products. They concluded that individuals exhibit strong and operative brand loyalty. Others (Lipstein, 1959; Frank, 1962; Farley, 1963; Nella & Christou, 2014a) also verified the phenomenon. These spurred continuous inquiry into brand loyal behaviour.

Brand loyalty is repeated purchases prompted by strong internal dispositions. Jacoby and Kyner (1988) viewed brand loyalty as a multidimensional construct involving attitudinal components and as a subset of repeat purchasing. Dick and Basu (1994) conceptualise loyalty as the strength of the relationship between the relative attitude towards a brand and patronage behaviour. Confidence is the expectation of the parties in a transaction and the risks associated with assuming and acting on such expectations (Deutsch 1958). Confidence is the willingness to rely on another in the face of risk; this stems from an understanding of the other party. Confidence is an expectation set within particular parameters and constraints; it involves confident positive expectation about another's motives with respect to oneself in risky situations Boon and Holmes (2001).

In recent years, agrotourism businesses face greater pressures as more customers become deal-loyal (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). To win back loyalty agrotourism marketers began to embrace the idea of building relationships with customers and winning their confidence (Christou and Kassianidis, 2002, 2005; Nella & Christou, 2014b). However, conceptualisations of confidence in the agrotourism marketing literature have generally been lacking. In the agrotourism market, there are too many anonymous customers, making it unlikely that the hotel firm could develop personal relationships with each customer. Thus, agrotourism marketers may have to rely on a powerful symbol (the brand) to build the relationship.

It is proposed in this paper that three sets of factors affect confidence in agrotourism brand. These three sets of factors correspond with the three entities involved in the brand-consumer relationship: the agrotourism brand itself, the agrotourism company behind the brand, and the customer interacting with the brand. It is also proposed that confidence in a agrotourism brand will lead to brand loyalty. Based on this approach, a conceptual model (Figure 1) is developed below. The brand's characteristics play a vital role in determining whether a consumer decides to confidence it. Drawing from previous research, it is concluded that individuals are trusted based on their reputation (Zucker, 1986), predictability (Remple et al., 1985), and competence (Andaleep and Anwar, 1996; Zafirooulos et al., 2016; Pirnar et al., 2019).

DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Brand reputation in agrotourism can be developed through marketing communication; it is also influenced by product and service quality and performance. Reputation of a party can lead to positive expectations, which leads to development of reciprocity between them (Christou, 2003b; Creed and Miles, 1996; Lyons and Branston, 2006; Vlastic et al., 2019). If a consumer perceives that other people think that a brand is good, he may confidence the brand enough to purchase it. Hence, it is hypothesised that: A visitor's perception that an agrotourism brand has a good reputation is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that brand (Hypothesis 1).

Predictability is about a party's ability to forecast another party's behaviour (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Nella et al., 2000; Gretzel et al., 2012). A predictable agrotourism brand allows its user to anticipate how it will perform at each visitation occasion. Brand predictability enhances confidence; the customer knows that nothing unexpected may happen. As such, predictability enhances confidence in a brand as predictability builds positive expectations. Hence is hypothesised that: A visitor's perception that a agrotourism brand is predictable is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that brand (Hypothesis 2).

Competent agrotourism brands have the ability to solve consumers' problems and to meet their needs. Sitkin and Roth (1998) considered ability as an essential element influencing confidence. A consumer may find out about a brand's competence through direct usage or word-of-mouth communication. Once convinced that a brand is able to solve his or her problem, a customer may be willing to rely to that brand (Nella & Christou, 2014b). Therefore, it can be hypothesised that: A visitor's perception that an agrotourism brand is competent is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that brand (Hypothesis 3).

The characteristics of the agrotourism company behind a brand can also influence the extent to which the brand is trusted. Company characteristics that affect a customer's confidence are the confidence in the company, its reputation

and the perceived company motives and integrity (Scheer and Steenkamp, 1995; Chenini & Touaiti, 2018). Hence it is hypothesised that: A visitor's confidence in an agrotourism company is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that company's brand (Hypothesis 4).

If a customer perceives that other people think that the agrotourism company behind a brand is known to be fair and just, that customer may feel secure in acquiring and using the company's brand; this leads to greater confidence in that brand. Anderson and Weitz (1992) in the marketing channel context support this argument. It is thus hypothesised that: A visitor's perception that an agrotourism company has a reputation for fairness is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that company's brand (Hypothesis 5).

The extent to which a leader's behaviour is relevant to the followers' needs influences confidence and confidence in the leader (Jones et al., 1989; Christou & Kassianidis, 2002a); benevolence of motives is an important factor in a relationship. In the context of an agrotourism brand, when a visitor perceives the company behind it to be benevolent, the visitor will have confidence in that brand. Therefore, it is hypothesised that: A visitor's perception that an agrotourism company has benevolent motives is positively related to his confidence in the company's brand (Hypothesis 6).

The degree to which an agrotourism company is judged to have integrity depends on the consistency of its past actions, credible communications about it from others, belief that it has a strong sense of justice, and the extent to which its actions are congruent with its words; integrity is an antecedent to confidence (Butler, 1991; Sitkin and Roth, 1998; Christou, 2006; Trianafyllou et al., 2011). Hence, it is hypothesised that: A visitor's perception that an agrotourism company has integrity is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that company's brand (Hypothesis 7).

Similar characteristics between two parties may lead to confidence; as confidence begets confidence, common characteristics initiate a positive, reinforcing process of interaction (Bradach and Eccles, 1997; Christou & Kassianidis, 2002b). By conforming to a customer's opinions, values and standards an agrotourism firm can earn the customer's confidence (Bennet 1996). It is thus hypothesised that: Similarity between a visitor's self-concept and an agrotourism brand personality is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that brand (Hypothesis 8).

Based on Bennet (1996), to initiate a relationship, a party must be liked by the other. To form a relationship with an agrotourism brand, a customer must like it first. Therefore: A visitor's liking for an agrotourism brand is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that brand (Hypothesis 9).

Brand experience is about a customer's past encounters with the brand. In the development of process-based confidence, reciprocity (developed through recurring exchanges) is the key (Zucker, 1986; Christou, 2010a). Experience is likely to increase confidence in the partner; as a customer gains more experience with an agrotourism brand, he understands it better and grows to have more confidence in it. This experience is not restricted to positive experiences; any experience improves the customer's ability to predict the agrotourism brand performance. Hence, it is hypothesised that: A visitor's experience with an agrotourism brand is positively related to the visitor's confidence in that brand (Hypothesis 10).

Brand satisfaction is the outcome of the subjective evaluation that the chosen alternative brand meets or exceeds expectations (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Christou & Nella, 2010, 2016). In a continuing relationship, satisfaction with past outcomes indicates equity in the exchange; this increases the perception of the exchange partner's benevolence and credibility (Ganesan, 1994; Christou et al., 2000; Dermetzopoulos et al., 2009; Christou, 2011; AbuKhalifeh & AlBattat, 2015; Valeri, 2016; Volgger et al., 2017). Therefore, it is hypothesised that: A visitor's satisfaction with an agrotourism brand is positively related to the visitor's confidence in the brand (Hypothesis 11).

An important determinant of an individual's behaviour is other individuals' influence (Bearden et al., 1989); social influence is an important determinant of consumer behaviour. This is reflected in models of consumer decision-making that incorporate social norms (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) and interpersonal considerations (Miniard and Cohen, 1993; Christou, 1999; 2010b) as antecedents of behavioural intentions. Consumers may purchase products to conform with peer groups, in response to concerns of what others think of them (Bearden et al., 1989), or because others have provided credible information about a product (Cohen and Golden, 1987; Christou & Sigala, 2000, 2001, 2002; Sigala & Christou, 2002, 2006, 2014; Christou, 2015; Sotiriadis & Shen, 2017). Thus, it is hypothesised that: Peer support for an agrotourism brand is positively related to a visitor's confidence in that brand (Hypothesis 12).

In this study, agrotourism brand loyalty is conceptualised as behavioural intention to adopt a brand of an agrotourism product and to encourage others to adopt that brand. When a customer has confidence in an agrotourism brand and is willing to rely on it, that customer may form a positive buying intention towards the brand. Hence, it is hypothesised that: A visitor's confidence in an agrotourism brand is positively related to the visitor's loyalty to that brand (Hypothesis 13).

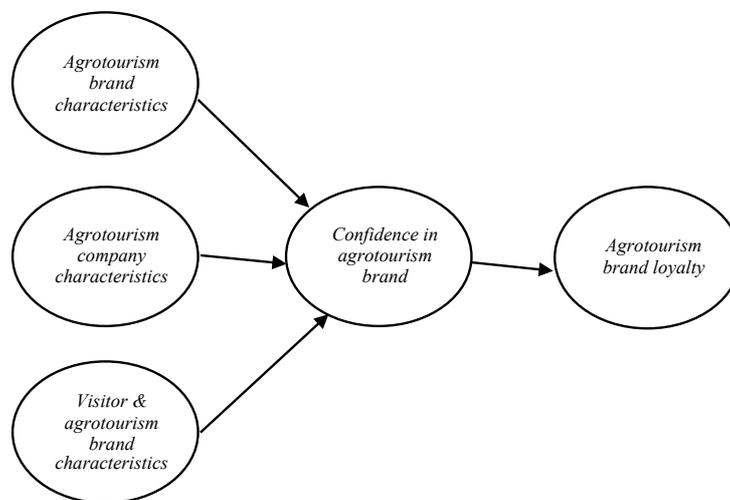
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Target population for the study was Greek consumers who have made a purchase decision for any agrotourism product or service at the island of Lesbos. Quotas on gender and age, corresponding to the distribution of Greek residents, were used to ensure a representative distribution of participants in the sample. A shopping-mall intercept survey was used; the method has merits in speed, economy, and control of respondent type. Three shopping malls were selected in the island of Lesbos in Greece. Two interviewers and 30 questionnaires were assigned to each mall – a total of 150 questionnaires. The interviewers were briefed on the quota sampling method and given instructions on the respondent interviewing process. Respondents were asked to identify an agrotourism brand for which they had often

made a visitation/purchase decision. They were then requested to think about that agrotourism brand as they completed the entire questionnaire.

The measures of each construct were from a variety of sources; some were established measures while others were modified or developed for this study. A new scale was developed to measure perceived brand reputation; it was measured by tapping the respondent's perception of how the agrotourism brand is known to be and what other individuals have said about the brand. Brand predictability involved items measuring the agrotourism brand's consistency in quality and the extent the respondent perceived the brand to perform as expected (Remple et al., 1985; Eaton & Christou, 1997; Samy, 2016; Chatzigeorgiou & Simeli, 2017). Brand competence involved items to measure the agrotourism brand's perceived relative competence. Confidence in the company was measured by tapping the respondent's faith in the agrotourism company (Larzelere and Huston, 1992; Slak Valek, 2015; Hernandez et al., 2016) Company reputation was measured by asking respondents to rate the agrotourism company in terms of its reputation for fairness and honesty (Anderson and Weitz, 1996; Christou et al., 2004; Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016). Perceived company motives were operationalised by creating a new scale. Perceived company integrity was operationalised by tapping perceptions of the agrotourism company's values in areas such as ethics, honesty, and consistency of its actions with its promises.

Figure 1: Research model based on hypotheses



For measuring the extent of similarity between the visitor's self-concept and the brand's personality, respondents rated themselves and the agrotourism brand along two identical scales adopted from Malhotra (1991). The difference in scores for each item in the scale indicates the difference between the respondent's self-concept and agrotourism brand's perceived personality. Brand liking involved measuring consumer's preference for the agrotourism brand over others, and by asking directly if he liked the brand. Brand experience examined respondents' usage/visitation of the agrotourism brand, from the first time they recalled using the brand. Brand satisfaction involved adapting Westbrook and Oliver's (1996) relevant twelve-item scale. Peer support was measured by asking the respondent if friends supported/recommended the agrotourism brand visitation/purchase. Confidence in the brand involved asking respondents if the agrotourism brand is doing what it is supposed to do and if they are willing to rely on it – scales were adapted from Remple et al.'s (1985) study. All constructs' items were ordered randomly. 7-point Likert scales were used where possible; the remaining questions were either open-ended or required the ticking of relevant boxes. The questionnaire was administered to 34 individuals for pre-testing.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

144 usable questionnaires were collected, and the general profile of the respondents was comparable to the distribution of gender, age, race, income and education of Geek residents. There were an almost equal proportion of male (47.8%) and female (52.2%) respondents, and they were aged 18 to 74 years. The gross household median monthly income was €1,500-2,000. Seventeen agrotourism brands and twenty-three agrotourism product types were named in the survey. Examination of Pearson's correlation matrix for all the items revealed no problems with convergent and discriminant validity. Scale items belonging to the same construct had higher correlations (coefficients ranged from 0.51 to 0.93), while those relating to different constructs had lower correlations (coefficients ranged from 0.38 to 0.44). Construct validity of the measures was examined through factor analysis; a factor loading of at least 0.3 was used to identify whether a variable is part of a factor (Nunnally, 1978). Items meant to measure the same construct clustered together, suggesting that they measured the same conceptual space. Factor loadings for the variables ranged from 0.487 to 0.653, satisfying Nunnally's (1978) 0.3 threshold. Cronbach coefficient alpha was calculated in order to examine internal

consistency and the reliability of the scales; a Cronbach alpha of 0.70 or higher is sufficient (Nunnally, 1978). All scales used exceeded the reliability threshold of 0.70 Cronbach alpha.

Pearson's correlation coefficients for the corresponding variables specified in the hypotheses are presented in Table 1. The results support *Hypothesis 1 to Hypothesis 13*. Hence, it has been established that all the proposed brand, company, and visitor-brand characteristics influence confidence in an on-line brand. It was also established that confidence in an on-line brand lead to brand loyalty. The correlation coefficient between the two variables is 0.86 and the percentage of variation shared by the two variables or the coefficient of determination is 0.788.

To examine the significance of the model formed by the hypotheses (Figure 1), regression analysis was performed; confidence in an agrotourism brand was the dependent variable while the agrotourism brand, agrotourism company and visitor-brand factors were independent variables. The model was significant at $p < 0.01$ level and the adjusted R^2 was 0.922. In addition, the independent variables were checked for multicollinearity (where two or more independent variables used in the regression are correlated). All correlations among the independent variables did not exceed the threshold of 0.90 which is indication of collinearity (Hair *et al.*, 1995). Also, pairwise and multiple variable collinearity was assessed by calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF), which tells the degree to which each independent variable is explained by the others; large VIF values (over the threshold of 10) denote high multicollinearity (Hair *et al.*, 1995). All VIF values found were below 10 hence, did not exceed the acceptable threshold. Five constructs were significant (at $p < 0.05$ level) in explaining confidence in an agrotourism brand. These constructs, found to be important (as their respective beta coefficients indicated), are agrotourism brand predictability, agrotourism brand liking, agrotourism brand competence, agrotourism brand reputation and confidence in agrotourism company.

Through this study it has been established that a agrotourism brand contributes to behavioural intention of brand loyalty. Hence, it is worthwhile for agrotourism marketers to build consumer confidence in their brand. Agrotourism brand characteristics, particularly brand predictability, brand competence and brand reputation, are relatively more important in establishing and maintaining customer' confidence in a agrotourism brand. Agrotourism brand liking and confidence in the agrotourism company were also important factors.

The achievement of agrotourism brand predictability requires consistency; this asks for ensuring the consistent quality of every product and service sold by the agrotourism firm. It also requires stringent operating and quality control procedures. To achieve agrotourism brand predictability, marketers should try not to make too many drastic changes to products and services too frequently; if major product changes are necessary, agrotourism marketers should communicate to customers carefully regarding the changes, so that they know what to expect from the modified product or service. Brand predictability can also come from repeated interactions between the customer and the agrotourism brand. Marketers should try to provide as many opportunities for customers to interact with the agrotourism brand as possible. In addition, brand predictability can be developed through consistent communications with customers; agrotourism marketers should ensure that they are saying fairly similar things about the product to consumers through all different communication channels used. Marketers should also be careful about making promises regarding their agrotourism brand because if these promises are broken then customers may perceive the brand as being unpredictable.

Table 1. Pearson correlations

| No. | Hypothesised relationship | Outcome | Pearson correlation |
|-----------------------|---|------------------|---------------------|
| H1 | Brand reputation and confidence in an agrotourism brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.82^*$ |
| H2 | Brand predictability and confidence in an agrotourism brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.84^*$ |
| H3 | Agrotourism brand competence and confidence in a brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.81^*$ |
| H4 | Confidence in a company and confidence in agrotourism brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.81^*$ |
| H5 | Company reputation and confidence in an agrotourism brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.80^*$ |
| H6 | Company benevolent motives and confidence in brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.74^*$ |
| H7 | Company integrity and confidence in an agrotourism brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.74^*$ |
| H8 | Similarity between visitor's self-concept and agrotourism brand personality and confidence in agrotourism brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.81^*$ |
| H9 | Agrotourism brand liking and confidence in a brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.89^*$ |
| H10 | Agrotourism brand experience and confidence in a brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.83^*$ |
| H11 | Satisfaction with an agrotourism brand and confidence in a brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.94^*$ |
| H12 | Peer support for an agrotourism brand and confidence in a brand | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.80^*$ |
| H13 | Confidence in an agrotourism brand and brand loyalty | <i>supported</i> | $r = 0.92^*$ |
| * $p < 0.01, n = 144$ | | | |

Confidence in agrotourism brand competence is usually perceived as domain-specific (Zand, 1982; Valachis *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Revilla Hernández *et al.*, 2016; George, 2017); hence, agrotourism companies should try to establish their competence in a few key areas and manage their brands within these. Marketers should carry out research to find out consumers' needs and concerns related to the product area, so they can develop competence which are relevant to them (Kido-Cruz, 2016). In addition, marketers should make judicious use of key opinion leaders, who are viewed as

authorities in specific areas, to speak on behalf of the company's agrotourism brand. For developing and maintaining a good reputation for a brand, it is essential that the brand please its customers; this calls for genuine quality and delivering on its promises. Other efforts include all marketing communications and promotion, and visitors should be encouraged to spread positive word-of-mouth. Complaint handling is also important, in order to avoid negative word-of-mouth. There should be a publicised channel through which feedback can be easily directed, so unhappy customers can easily contact the agrotourism company.

The aesthetic and functional aspects of the agrotourism brand cannot be overlooked. Marketers should make sure that the agrotourism installations do not just focus on their technical aspects alone but should also consider its appearance and aesthetic aspects as well. Marketers can also develop brand liking by associating the agrotourism brand with situations in which customers have positive feelings. Also, the brand can be associated with a well-liked person or opinion-leader.

CONCLUSIONS

The research results reported in this paper show that confidence in an agrotourism brand and confidence in the company behind the agrotourism brand are two issues strongly interconnected; one cannot be achieved without the other. Agrotourism marketers can develop confidence in the company by using marketing communications to strengthen the company's image. The link between the agrotourism company and the brand can also be strengthened since the two can reinforce each other. The performance of other products and brands within the agrotourism company can affect confidence in the company, and as a result, confidence in another brand belonging to the same company (this is rather usual in the agrotourism industry). Therefore, marketers should adopt an integrated approach with regard to the management of different agrotourism brands belonging to the same company.

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