

# Food-based experiences as antecedents of destination loyalty

Antecedents of  
destination  
loyalty

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to test the value of experientiality as a determining factor for destination loyalty (LOYD) in the context of culinary tourism. The present research sees in memorability (MEM), Quality of Life (QoL) and place attachment (PA) experiential variables driving future loyal intentions to revisit a certain place.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The causal relationships between the concepts have been analysed using structural equation modelling and the partial least squares technique.

**Findings** – Results achieved confirmed that new concepts should be considered in order to reach a better understanding of the current experiential phenomenon and to provide destinations and practitioners with new strategies in line with the requirements of the sector and the modern consumers' expectations.

**Research limitations/implications** – Due to the application of a convenience sample, results should be understood within the context of this case study.

**Practical implications** – The conclusion of this research highlights the importance of delivering food-based experiences to travellers with the aim of generating a positive impact in individuals' lives, beyond the holiday time. This can result in QoL and PA which are strong antecedent of future loyal intentions towards a destination.

**Originality/value** – This work represent one the first attempts to measure the experiential value of food-based experiences lived on holidays and its effect on marketing results. This research outlines useful strategies for enhancing the competitiveness of destinations in the new experiential scenario.

**Keywords** Loyalty, Quality of life, Experiential marketing, Culinary tourism, Place attachment, Memorability

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The experiential trend that is challenging the modern tourism industry is pushing tourism practitioners to look into new strategies and products for the achievement of the satisfaction and loyalty of a new experiential consumer. Modern tourists expect to live an once-in-a-lifetime experience when travelling (Hall and Gössling, 2012), therefore it seems important to put forward new solutions capable of changing traditional tourism offerings into unique events. Food is a resource especially likely to provide a multi-sensorial experience; it is experiential in nature and is becoming sensual, ritualistic and symbolic, rather than just functional to a nourishing need (Ellis *et al.*, 2018; Hall *et al.*, 2003). Smelling and tasting are perceived as an experiential practice increasingly used by tourists agents to offer the most authentic aspects of the local culture, through a participative encounter with typical food and drinks. Culinary activities are exploratory in nature and lead tourists to attain a deep knowledge of local idiosyncrasies (Molz, 2007) which, in turn, can determine a special bond between consumers and places (Lin, 2014). Based on Crouch and Ritchie (2005) this research assumes that the competitiveness of tourism destinations is measured on the basis of their ability to deliver memorable experiences. Special flavours and dishes can induce positive feelings in consumers, and the reminiscence of its memory can drive future loyal behaviours, which can benefit a tourism destination in terms of intention to revisit



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(Kauppinen-Räsänen *et al.*, 2013; Kim, 2018; Kim and Ritchie, 2014; Lin and Mao, 2015; López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012; Richards, 2012).

Therefore, numerous destinations started to offer food-based experiential products, such as, cooking classes, local market tours, food tours, multiple-day courses, in order to help travellers to participate in memorable experiences based on local specialities.

This research is one of the first attempts aimed at measuring the experiential value of food-based experiences and how they determine positive marketing results, testing how some selected experiential variables (memorability (MEM), place attachment (PA), quality of life (QoL)) determine loyal intentions towards a destination, in the context of culinary tourism. The results achieved show that food tourism is a valuable tool for providing tourism destination with new experiential products, in line with current tourists' expectations. Partial least square (PLS) is used to test the causal paths connecting the variables involved in the research.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Memorability of culinary experiences

Providing memorable experience can have a significant impact on outcome variables such as satisfaction and loyalty (Ali *et al.*, 2014, 2016; Hoch and Deighton, 1989; Kim, 2014, 2018; Kim and Ritchie, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2012). From a marketing perspective, experiences are valuable, as long as they are stored in the individuals' memory system (Kim, 2010). The connections between food tourism and memories have not been extensively explored by scientific literature. The majority of the contributions that consider gastronomy as a unique travel resource refer to its memorability (Kauppinen-Räsänen *et al.*, 2013; Lin and Mao, 2015; Mathis *et al.*, 2016; Quan and Wang, 2004; Tsai, 2016). According to Kauppinen-Räsänen *et al.* (2013), this aspect assumes certain relevance, as memories can affect attitudes and determine food acceptance, which, in turn, can influence consumers' desire of reliving the experience in the future. Few studies confirm the positive impact that memorable tourism experiences have on loyal behaviours (Ali *et al.*, 2014, 2016; Hoch and Deighton, 1989; Kim, 2014; Kim and Ritchie, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2012). However, recent scientific literature is demonstrating that experiential tourism is bringing about other outstanding concepts that intervene in the causality path from memorability and marketing outcomes. QoL and PA are the ones considered in this research and assumed as linking variables between memorability and loyal intentions. Given these considerations, the following hypotheses are posited:

H1. MEM positively influences individuals' QoL.

H2. MEM positively influences PA.

H3. MEM positively influences LOYD.

### 2.2 Quality of life

In tourism, QoL is receiving major attention from both an academic and a practical perspective (Bronner and de Hoog, 2016; Filep, 2014; Gilbert and Abdullah, 2004; Neal *et al.*, 2007; Sirgy, 2010; Su *et al.*, 2015).

In tourism literature, there is a general consensus on considering tourism experiences as QoL's enhancers (Chen and Petrick, 2013; Kruger *et al.*, 2013; McCabe and Johnson, 2013; Sirgy *et al.*, 2011; Tokarchuk *et al.*, 2015; Uysal *et al.*, 2016). Oppermann and Cooper (1999) maintain that engaging in memorable experiences, rather than material goods, enhances the subjective feelings of well-being. According to Mkono *et al.* (2013), food consumption is associated with enhancements in personal fulfilment. The linkages between what and how people eat and individuals' perception of personal self-satisfaction are receiving little, but increasing attention

in scientific tourism literature (Sirgy *et al.*, 2011). Food and drinks are being considered one of the main pillars of well-being and proper vehicles for achieving a better QoL.

Kruger *et al.* (2013) empirically demonstrate how the participation in wine festivals can have a positive impact on tourists' QoL. The findings of this research show that wine festivals can impact various life domains such as the social, travel, intellectual, culinary and leisure life, which, in turn, contribute to enhancing QoL. Kim *et al.* (2015) confirm that QoL positively influences future behaviours. Lin (2014) found that cuisine experiences and QoL have a positive impact on revisiting intentions. Considering the preceding the following causal paths are hypothesised:

*H4.* QoL positively influences LOYD.

### 2.3 Place attachment

PA indicates the emotional and psychological bonds existing between an individual and a specific setting (Williams *et al.*, 1992). Within the tourism sector, the term is used in reference to the personal ties that travellers feel towards the destinations they visited (Ramkissoon *et al.*, 2013). According to Tsai *et al.* (2011, p. 176), "the sense of physically being and feeling 'in place' is what determines PA, as this feeling demonstrates that emotional ties with the place have been created".

Some authors (Kyle *et al.*, 2003; Lee and Shen, 2013; Prayag and Ryan, 2012; Tonge *et al.*, 2015; Vaske and Kobrin, 2001) explore PA as a driver of specific future behaviours. Their results show that the perception of certain places as particularly meaningful may induce practical behaviours in a person's life, such as environmentally responsible habits (Vaske and Kobrin, 2001; Tonge *et al.*, 2015). Kyle *et al.* (2003) show how PA drives positive attitudes towards premium prices. Lee and Shen (2013) and Prayag and Ryan (2012) maintain that this construct drives loyal behaviours. Therefore, PA has been recently used as a key element for understanding the tourists' decision-making process (Hwang *et al.*, 2005). This paper considers PA as a key variable within the experiential culinary tourism context. Thus, memorable tourism experiences are assumed to be positive drivers of emotional bonding with places, which in turn can induce future loyal behaviours. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H5.* PA positively influences LOYD.

### 2.4 Destination loyalty

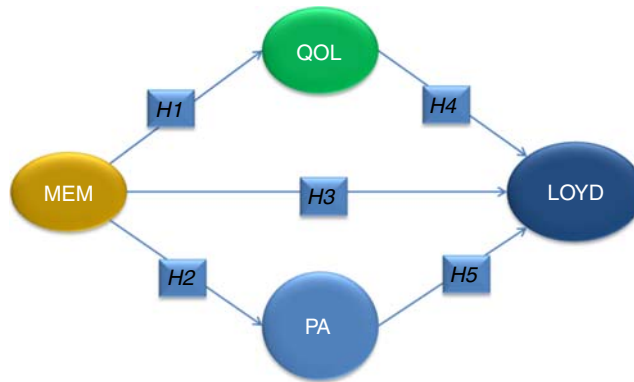
Oliver (1999, p. 34) mentioned that "loyalty is a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future [...]". According to Flavian *et al.* (2011), loyalty is regarded as the measure of the success of marketing strategies. In tourism research, many authors conceptualise loyalty from three different perspectives: behavioural (actual purchasing behaviours), attitudinal (expresses consumers' strength of affection towards a brand) and composite (a combination of the previous two) (Mechinda *et al.*, 2009; Prayag and Ryan, 2012).

In line with many authors (Loureiro, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Lin, 2014; Mechinda *et al.*, 2009), this paper defends pure attitudinal measurements, considering behavioural intentions as a good and reliable proxy for future behaviours. Figure 1 below shows the proposed model.

## 3. Materials and methods

### 3.1 Sample and data collection

The population of this research is represented by all the tourists who had a culinary experience during one of their holidays or trips. This includes food and drink tours, gastronomic routes, tasting experiences, culinary tours, cooking classes and workshops and similar activities. Data



**Figure 1.**  
Proposed model

have been collected with an online survey, completed with a paper-and-pencil method, to reach a larger sample. A non-probability sampling strategy has been adopted. The final sample was composed of 425 observations. This sample size is suitable for data analysis with PLS-structural equation modelling (SEM) (Hair *et al.*, 2012). Respondents were intercepted on the Facebook page of 75 companies offering culinary experiences through all over the world. Potential respondents have been identified in all the users who left a comment or post making clear their previous participation in the food experience. The questionnaire was elaborated in Spanish, English and Italian, with the help of native people in the three languages. The tool used to conduct the survey has been an original and structured questionnaire, previously submitted to a pre-test (15 experts among academics and practitioners) and pilot test (17 people of different ages and nationalities). See Table I for technical details.

### 3.2 Variables and measurement

MEM has been measured with a three-item scale adapted from Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013). PA is assumed to be a two-dimension construct, defined by place identity (pi) and place dependence (pd). Both dimensions have been assessed following the operationalisation proposed by Filo *et al.* (2013). The five items measuring QoL are based on Sirgy *et al.* (2011). The measurement of LOYD is based on Kim *et al.* (2015).

All the items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Descriptive analysis of data was carried out using the statistical programme IBM-SPSS statistics, Version 21. Data analysis has been performed using SEM, and PLS was the

Population	Tourists who had at least one culinary experience during one of their holidays or trips
Geographical scope	International
Data collection method	Internet-based and paper-based survey
Sampling frames	Not available
Informants	Tourists who had at least one culinary experience during one of their holidays or trips
Population size	Unknown
Sampling technique	Non-probability convenience sampling
Fieldwork	March–September 2016
Achieved entries	563
Valid entries	425

**Table I.**  
Technical details of  
the empirical work

approach used to test hypotheses. PLS-SEM was the preferred method as it boasts some advantages of special interest in the present research: it suits exploratory studies; it is more flexible when considering models with formative constructs; it is focused on prediction and works with small samples (Hair *et al.*, 2012). SmartPLS 3 is the statistical software used for the assessment of the structural model (Ringle *et al.*, 2015).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Characteristics of the sample

The survey was conducted on an international basis. The final sample features individuals of different nationalities who had culinary experiences over the five continents. The majority of respondents are from the USA (26.4 per cent), Italy (18.6 per cent), Spain (10.6 per cent) and Britain (7.3 per cent). Results about the place of origin are heterogeneous. Females (61.9 per cent) were more willing to take part in the survey than males. Most of respondents declared to be in the age range “41–50” ( $n = 105$ ) and to have a university-level degree. The majority of respondents (64.7 per cent) lived their culinary experience in 2016 (33.4 per cent) and 2015 (31.3 per cent), which indicates that it was recent and easy to be recalled. People having experienced culinary activities during their holidays in Italy (35.1 per cent), Spain (16.9 per cent) and Thailand (8.5 per cent) are the most numerous. The study covered 17 destinations. “food tour” is the most popular activity chosen by those who wanted to learn about the gastronomy of the destination visited (53.9 per cent).

### 4.2 Model estimation

PA is a second-order construct which implies the application of the “two-step” approach in order to perform a correct measurement and structural assessment of the model:

- Step 1: at this step, all the models involved have a reflective nature. Their measurement assessment is done with regard to individual item and internal consistency reliability, convergent and discriminant validity (see Table II).  
Values for individual item reliability (outer loadings,  $\lambda$ ) are higher than the threshold of 0.707 (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). With regard to composite reliability, all the values are above the critical levels: 0.7–0.9 or 0.6–0.7 for exploratory studies (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Convergent validity is assessed with the average variance extracted (AVE) which gives positive results, as all the scores are above the critical value of 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2011). Finally, the model boasts discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) (see Table II).
- Step 2: the second-order construct (PA) is now modelled, and its sub-dimensions are identified as two formative indicators. The model shows a new nomological structure that needs to be reassessed in its measurement validity, considering that specific statistics have to be performed in order to check formative variables. Table III shows the results of the measurement model assessment with regard to its reflective variables (MEM, QoL, LOYD).

Formative variables have to be assessed by calculating items’ weights (Hair *et al.*, 2012) and the variance inflation factor (VIF) (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). VIFs higher than 5 show a risk for multi-collinearity (Hair *et al.*, 2012). A 5000-sample bootstrap test permits ascertaining the weights of the items and their statistical significance. The threshold for this test is set by the significance value assumed for a one-tailed  $t$ -test. VIF resulted to be acceptable for the formative variable included in the hypothesised model. The formative indicators used in the model do not set out any multi-collinearity issue (see Table IV).

The structural model also needs to be assessed. Path coefficients and  $R^2$  are the figures addressed to check for the causal relationships and the predictive power of the hypothesised

**Table II.**  
Assessment of the  
measurement model

	Loadings (λ)	Composite reliability	Convergent validity (AVE)	MEM	Discriminant validity			
					QoL	PAI	LOYD	
MEM				0.972	0.636	0.521	0.400	0.652
mem <sub>1</sub>	0.971	0.981	0.944					
mem <sub>2</sub>	0.971							
mem <sub>3</sub>	0.972							
QOL								0.627
qol <sub>1</sub>	0.898	0.946	0.779		0.883	0.513	0.700	
qol <sub>2</sub>	0.899							
qol <sub>3</sub>	0.880							
qol <sub>4</sub>	0.913							
qol <sub>5</sub>	0.822							
PAI								0.526
pai <sub>1</sub>	0.919	0.948	0.858		0.926	0.700		
pai <sub>2</sub>	0.956							
pai <sub>3</sub>	0.903							
PAd								0.486
pad <sub>1</sub>	0.922	0.953	0.871					
pad <sub>2</sub>	0.947							
pad <sub>3</sub>	0.930							
LOYD								0.889
loyd <sub>1</sub>	0.897	0.938	0.791					
loyd <sub>2</sub>	0.934							
loyd <sub>3</sub>	0.889							
loyd <sub>4</sub>	0.834							

	Loadings ( $\lambda$ )	Composite reliability	Convergent validity	Discriminant validity		
				MEM	QoL	LOYD
MEM		0.981	0.944	0.972	0.636	0.652
mem <sub>1</sub>	0.971					
mem <sub>2</sub>	0.971					
mem <sub>3</sub>	0.972					
QoL		0.946	0.779		0.883	0.627
qol <sub>1</sub>	0.898					
qol <sub>2</sub>	0.899					
qol <sub>3</sub>	0.880					
qol <sub>4</sub>	0.913					
qol <sub>5</sub>	0.822					
LOYD		0.938	0.791			0.889
loyd <sub>1</sub>	0.898					
loyd <sub>2</sub>	0.934					
loyd <sub>3</sub>	0.888					
loyd <sub>4</sub>	0.834					

**Table III.**  
Step 2: assessment of the measurement model (reflective models)

Construct	Items	Weights	<i>t</i> -test <sup>a</sup>	VIF
PA	pai	0.285**	3.025	1.528
	pad	0.779***	9.718	1.528

**Notes:** 5,000 bootstrapping procedure used. <sup>a</sup>Critical values for a one-tailed *t*-test: values: \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001; 1.645 → 10 per cent level of significance; 2.327 → 5 per cent level of significance; 3.092 → 1 per cent level of significance

**Table IV.**  
Weights and significance of formative models

model. Scores for  $R^2$  fluctuate from 0 to 1. Values close to 0.75, 0.50 and 0.25 correspond to substantial, moderate and weak levels of accuracy, respectively (Hair *et al.*, 2013).

Values for path coefficients are standardised on a range from -1 to +1, indicating the strength of the relationship (Hair *et al.*, 2014). A bootstrap test of 5,000 samples is used to test for significance (See Table V).

With regard to the predictive power of the model, MEM can explain the 40.5 per cent of QoL, the 27 per cent of PA. LOYD as a result of a memorable culinary experience lived on holidays is explained in its 52.8 per cent, being the major part of its variance (23.8 per cent)

Hypotheses	$R^2$	Direct effect ( $\beta$ )	Correlation	Explained variance (%)	<i>t</i> -statistics <sup>a</sup> (bootstrap)	Test result
QoL	0.405 (moderate)					
MEM → QoL		0.636***	0.636	40.5	14.975	+
PA	0.270 (weak)					
MEM → PA		0.520***	0.520	27	12.855	+
LOYD	0.528 (moderate)			52.8		
MEM → LOYD		0.366***	0.652	23.8	5.375	+
QoL → LOYD		0.283***	0.627	17.7	4.675	+
PA → LOYD		0.205***	0.549	11.3	4.052	+

**Notes:** 5,000 bootstrapping procedure used. <sup>a</sup>Critical values for a one-tailed *t*-test: values: \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001; 1.645 → 10 per cent level of significance; 2.327 → 5 per cent level of significance; 3.092 → 1 per cent level of significance

**Table V.**  
Effects on endogenous variables and structural model results

explained by MEM. In general, the hypothesised model shows a moderate predictive power.  $R^2$  shows weak-moderate results, which are still valuable considering the novelty of the variables selected, the relations hypothesised and the study context of the research. Finally,  $\beta$  coefficients resulted to be significant, and the hypothesised relationships can be accepted (See Table V).

## 5. Discussion of results

The results achieved in the present research confirm the importance of considering new experiential variables as significant determinants of positive marketing outcomes in the current tourism market. It has been found that MEM is a new fundamental component of the tourism activities capable of driving future LOYD. Therefore, in line with findings of previous works (Ali *et al.*, 2014, 2016; Hoch and Deighton, 1989; Kim, 2014; Kim and Ritchie, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2012; Loureiro, 2014), this research confirms the relationship between MEM and positive outcomes. The results achieved are in line with previous works, which demonstrate that perceived improvements in QoL and PA, prompted by holiday experiences, are driving elements for positive future intentions and loyal behaviours (Kim *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Lam and So, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Lin, 2014; Loureiro, 2014; Tsai, 2016). Although  $R^2$  shows moderate-weak values, the results achieved in this research are still valuable considering the novelty of the research topic, the variables involved and the causal relationships hypothesised. LOYD is the outcome variable of the model and the most explained in terms of variance (52.8 per cent), confirming the appropriateness of the general structure of the model and, specifically that MEM, QoL and PA are proper determinants for LOYD. The role of MEM stands out in the determination of the predictive power of the model, as it explains the 40.5 per cent of QoL, the 27 per cent of PA and the 23.8 per cent of LOYD. These figures are in line with previous researches, which considered the same variables linked by similar causal relationships and study contexts (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Lee and Shen, 2013; Lin, 2014; Loureiro, 2014; Nawijn, 2011; Tsai, 2016).

The results achieved in this research contribute to a better understanding of the experiential tourism phenomenon and set the bases for the elaboration of innovative strategies in the context of culinary tourism for developing new experiential proposals and achieve loyal consumers for all those destinations that see a significant asset and a valuable tourism resource in gastronomic heritages.

## 6. Conclusions

This research arises from the general consideration of whether the connections between experiential variables could provide innovative tourism models capable of increasing destinations' competitiveness and consumer's loyalty. The rise of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Schmitt, 1999) introduced a new way of understating tourism consumption by both consumers and practitioners. Tourism service providers are now in the need of turning their product/service into an experiential offering in order to stay competitive in modern markets. Tourists approach consumption with the expectation of achieving experiential value, beyond functionality. According to Alagöz and Ekici (2014), consumers are nowadays emotional as much as they are rational.

This research proposes a model focused on understanding how memorable tourism experiences can influence loyal attitudes through PA and the perceived enhancement of individuals' QoL. Previous scientific contributions on these topics provide theoretical and empirical support to the individual relationships proposed in this research (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Lin, 2014; Lee and Shen, 2013; Loureiro, 2014; Tsai, 2016). However, so far, there are very few attempts to test their joint effect, with a special reference to the introduction of QoL as a consequence of MEM and as antecedent of LOYD.



Based on the results achieved, it can be concluded that, within the culinary context, experientiality can lead to new positive results for the sector. MEM can influence individuals' perception of their QoL, making tourism consumers more satisfied with their holidays and happier, in general. In addition, in line with results achieved by Lam and So (2013), it is confirmed that happy tourists are more likely to assume future loyal behaviours towards a destination. PA is also determined by MEM, which signifies that good memories about a specific experience at a destination are germane tools to improve the emotional connection that tourists feel with a place, which, in turn, drives future loyal intentions in term of revisiting or recommending it in the future. These considerations bring to the surface a new scenario for the tourism industry where emotions, memories and personal involvement represent the added value that consumers seek in tourism products. Food tourism is a particularly suitable context for the enhancement of experientiality. The connections linking food experiences with MEM, QoL, PA and LOYD are clear and offer a new field for tourism innovation.

Tourism practitioners should recognise the role of typical food and food-based activities as MEM and QoL enhancers and try to take advantage of it by drawing new offerings capable of impacting consumers' memory over the long-term. Memorable value can be provided by, first, delivering a once-in-a-lifetime experience, improving the emotional implication of tourists during the visit and, second, defining memories' recollection strategies in order to make travellers relive the emotions and the happy feelings associated with certain flavours, culinary practices or products tasted on holidays.

The present work has limitations that offer avenues for future works. First, the application of a convenience sample compromises the capability of generalising the results achieved. Results should be understood within the context of this case study, and future research should be conducted with different tourism practices in order to check how experiential variables work in other contexts.

People who took part to the survey have been intercepted at different moments after their trips, so the vivacity of their memories and the consequent opinions about the experience they were asked to make judgements on, could be different due to the time passed since the holiday occurred. Future works should consider the standardisation of the moments in which data are collected and the repetition of the survey over time. In addition, the application of neuro-marketing techniques is highly recommended in order to achieve more tangible data about the emotions and feelings that tourists express going through during a tourism experience and if they can effectively be considered important predictors for positive marketing outcomes. The aforementioned avenues of research give continuity to a promising body of research deserving further efforts from academics and practitioners, and whose potential must be further explored in the future.

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