

Factors That Affect the Perception of the Tourist Destination of Braga

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Abstract: This study aims to understand the tourists' perception about the city of Braga (Portugal), bearing in mind four explanatory dimensions for choosing a destination – Destination's Loyalty; Destination's Identity; Destination's Competitiveness and Destinations' Image. This approach introduces a multidimensional concept of a tourist destination as a relationship between tourists and the places they visit. A cross-sectional study was conducted based on the administration of a structured questionnaire to a sample of 220 non-resident tourists in the city of Braga. Hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Squares and confirmed the four explanatory dimensions as variables impacting in the visitors' perceptions of this tourist destination. Results suggest that some demographic variables have a statistically significant effect on the perception of this touristic destination. This study brought to the discussion four explanatory factors of tourist destinations, focusing on the city of Braga. It provides clear insights on what to consider when strategically planning on how to make or keep Braga as an interesting place for tourists to visit and keep coming back.

Keywords: marketing, tourist destination, image, identity, loyalty, competitiveness

1. Introduction

Braga is a historic, young and dynamic city that gets the 2nd position (with 59.092 votes) in a study to choose the "Best European Destination 2019" promoted by the European Best Destinations. With this study, we seek to analyze the most relevant aspects in choosing this tourist destination, as well as its perception among visitants and intention to come back.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to evaluate the non-resident tourist's perception of the city of Braga using four explanatory dimensions of the destination: Destination's Loyalty; Destination's Identity; Destination's Competitiveness and Destination's Image. Specifically, it is intended to assess the impact of the competitiveness of the destination on the image of the destination, on the identity of the destination and, loyalty to the destination Braga; the impact of the destination image on the creation of the Braga destination identity and the impact on destination loyalty of the destination identity and the Braga destination image. For this purpose, a semi-structured questionnaire was applied to a sample of 220 non-resident tourists in Braga.

This study brought to the discussion four explanatory factors of tourist destinations, with a focus on the city of Braga. It provides a clear view of what to consider when strategically planning how to make or keep Braga an interesting place for tourists to visit and keep coming back.

The research contribute to the literature on tourism marketing by applying the four explanatory dimensions of the attraction of a tourist destination to the specific case of a Portuguese city - Braga. On the other hand, it provides a clear vision of the dimensions to be considered in the strategic tourist planning of cities and, in the specific case, of how to make or maintain Braga as an interesting place for tourists to visit and keep coming back.

2. Literature review

Destination loyalty seems to be related to the frequency of visits and the consumption or use of a tourist product or service in time (Valle, Silva, Mendes & Guerreiro, 2006). Visit frequency seems to depend on the connection established between the visitor -tourist, and the visited place. Thus, the greater the connectivity, knowledge, involvement and emotional "attachment" to a destination, the more often it will be visited, shared, and recommended to others. Tourist loyalty was conceptualized according to 3 approaches (Zhang et al., 2014) (1)loyalty in attitude -intention to recommend-; (2) behavioral loyalty -eg. repeated visits- and (3) composite

loyalty - combining the previous two. Loyalty to a destination results from the visitor's perception of satisfaction; the perceived satisfaction comes from the sum of experiences, stories, and moments experienced during the tourist visit (Valle et al., 2006).

The Destination's identity can be defined as aspects, circumstances, resources, experiences that are identified, involving, and connecting people to places or tourist destinations (Matza, 2014). According to Poladashvili (2015), decisions about places and fixation of locations have been debated in various fields of research, including philosophy, psychology, geography, sociology and natural resource management. Attachment to place refers to the bonds people develop with places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Giuliani, 2003; Pretty et al., 2003). Three components are explaining the attachment to a place: cognitive, affective, and conative (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Beliefs and perceptions constitute the cognitive component; the emotional connection to the place is the affective aspect. The desire to visit, use and enjoy is part of the conative component. The tourist destination itself remains a latent measure in the full dimension observed by people visiting these areas or tourist destinations, as suggested by some authors (d'Orey, 2015; d'Orey, Cardoso & Abreu, 2019). We can see that in the words of Mira, M., Mónico, L., & Breda, L. (2021), to strengthen this economic dynamic, policies must lead to a strategy of enhancing the economy and business, leveraged in the identity of destinations (Araújo, 2013; Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Della-Corte, 2013; Pillmayer & Scherle, 2014; Spyriadis, Fletcher & Fyall, 2013). Destination's competitiveness can be understood as a constant strategic and continuous adaptation of the tourist destination vis-à-vis its competitors or peers (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017). In other words, it consists of positive differentiation in terms of the preservation of the natural and built heritage, traditions, uses and customs, as well as the capacity for innovation in terms of the tourist attraction of a city or destination, concerning its peers or competing cities. Pais (2015) and Pike and Page (2014) argue that a competitive and sustainable destination requires two fundamental elements: resources (which are comparative advantages) and effectiveness in managing the destination.

Regarding resources, as means of achieving comparative advantages, Pike and Page (2014) mention that these can be understood as elements whose main role is to attract visitors to a destination. It is essential to have adequate and efficient management skills, in terms of material resources, talent management, and management of expectations. These management skills will contribute to building positive differentiation factors vis-à-vis any competitor. According to Mazanec, Wober, & Zins (2007), competitiveness is a factor that characterizes tourist destinations. They refer to internal and external elements: heritage and culture, economic and educational level of populations are internal elements of competitiveness of tourist destinations. Tourism growth, market share and distance to travel are external elements of competitiveness. Dwyer and Kim (2003) consider that companies, and market behavior in a given place indicate a micro vision of competitiveness; the population's income provides a macro view of the competitiveness of tourist destinations. On the economic value associated with competitiveness Silva, F. (2020) The destination's success depends on its ability to compete effectively and profitably in the market, ensuring that its general appearance and the experiences it offers are superior to those of alternative destinations of potential consumers (Fletcher et al., 2018; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2005; Dimoska & Trimcey, 2012) and maintaining or increasing its market position and share (Enright & Newton, 2005). The destination image is built as a result of the constant interaction between the visitor and the visited city. As the city is promoted, it is visited and communicated, ie, the tourist shares their experiences and this feedback helps in the construction of what we can refer to a destination image. Research in destinations image began to emerge after a study by Hunt on the subject in 1971 (Gallarza, Saura & García, 2002; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Pike, 2008; Pais, 2015). Gradually, since this study, numerous research works related to this topic have emerged in the last decades, being referred to as one of the most discussed topics in the context of tourism (Gallarza et al., 2002). Regarding the image of the destination for consumers and according to the authors Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, (2013) The image of the destination is an interpretation of a destination made by visitors and that influences consumer behavior (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011; Matza, 2014). According to Lopes and Fernandes (2020) and Even and Kozak (2018), two of the main tourism marketing challenges are the differentiation of a destination from the others and the recognition of this differentiation by potential visitors. Differentiation contributes to create a specific identity of the destination, promoting tourist satisfaction, revisit intentions and loyalty (Hultman, Skarmeas, Oghazi & Behesti, 2015).

Due to the growth in the number of tourist destinations, strategies that reinforce competitive advantages, allowing perceived differentiation aspects will contribute to improving a place's image (Hultman et al., 2015; Souiden, Ladhari & Chiadmi, 2017) and consequent destiny loyalty (Wong, 2017). As mentioned by Picazo and Moreno-Gil (2019), images used to promote a product or service are more effective than words, as images are

easier to remember and recognize. According to Ferreira and Fernandes (2019) image is an important tangible characteristic of any destination. Pike, et al. (2018) stated that all cities have unique characteristics (specific streets, monuments, gardens, leisure spaces, uses, and traditions) that reflect the distinctive mark of a city. It is difficult to control all the factors that influence a place’s image, but it is possible to do so by promoting the destination through creative events that interest both tourists and residents (Dean et al., 2019). Furthermore, the media have a prominent role in both the construction and management of the image of a tourist destination (Cristea, Apostol & Donescu, 2015).

In this sense, events are important ways to promote and give visibility to touristic places; they can be disclosed using traditional media but, also, on social media. The internet allows organizations and individuals to spread information, therefore, tourism marketing must bet on integrated communication; Dedeoglu (2019) and Picazo and Moreno-Gil (2019) advocate in favor of a conscious choice of images to be shared by tourism marketers. Because image seems to impact on tourist destination loyalty (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011).

3. Conceptual model

Being the main purpose of this study to evaluate the non-resident tourist's perception of the city of Braga, a (structural) model was built (Figure 1) composed of four latent variables: destination’s competitiveness, destination’s image, destination’s identity and destination’s loyalty.

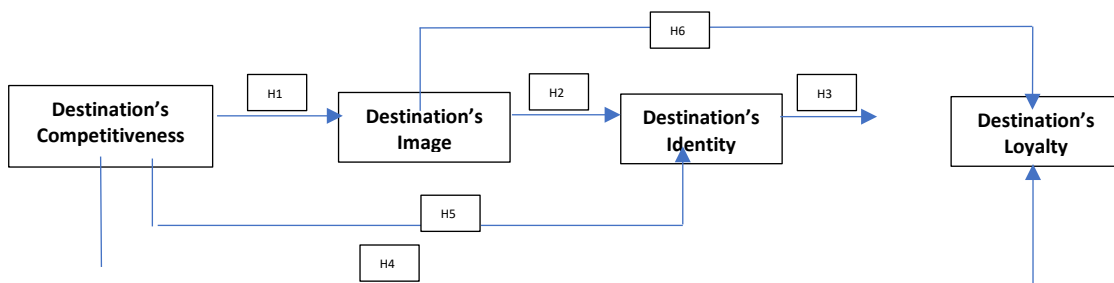


Figure 1: Conceptual model

The latent variables image, identity, and loyalty of the destination are endogenous and the latent variable competitiveness of the destination is exogenous. The relationships established between the latent variables were as follows: there is a direct effect of competitiveness on the destination's image; a direct effect of the image of the destination on the identity of the destination and an indirect effect of competitiveness on the identity of the destination; a direct effect of destination identity on destination loyalty and an indirect effect of destination competitiveness, image, and identity on destination loyalty.

Following the proposed conceptual model and the relationships established between the variables, the following hypotheses were formulated, as represented in Figure 1:

H1: The competitiveness of the destination has a positive impact on the image of the destination – the city of Braga (Pike & Page, 2014; Andrades & Dimanche, 2017).

H2: The image of the destination has a positive impact on the identity of the destination – the city of Braga- (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011; Matza, 2014)

H3: The identity of the destination has a positive impact on loyalty to the destination – the city of Braga (Souiden, Ladhari & Chiadmi, 2017; Hultman, Skarmeas, Oghazi & Beheshti, 2015).

H4: The competitiveness of the destination has a positive impact on the identity of the destination – the city of Braga- (Pike & Page, 2014; Andrades & Dimanche, 2017)

H5: The competitiveness of the destination has a positive impact on loyalty to the destination – the city of Braga (Pick & Page, 2014; Wong, 2017).

H6: The image of the destination has a positive impact on loyalty to the destination – the city of Braga (Pike & Page, 2014; Andrades & Dimanche, 2017).

4. Methodology

We used a quantitative approach to make it possible to test the study’s main objective and the created hypotheses. Quantitative studies present a significant number of advantages, like (1) allowing the establishment of relationships between the variables collected in the questionnaire, (2) replicating the methods and techniques for other samples and, if the sample is significant, (3) generalizing the achieved results (Mody, Hanks & Cheng, 2021; Khoo-Lattimore, Mura & Yung, 2019; Walle, 1997).

First, a statistical analysis of the dependent and independent variables was performed, and then the Partial Least Square (PLS) method was applied to the structural model.

5. Participants

The sample of this study consists of 220 participants; answers were collected through a questionnaire made available online and sent by e-mail to non-resident tourists who visited the city of Braga between July 2020 and 2021. We used an already validated scale in previous studies (D’Orey, 2015). The questionnaire consists of 25 questions that were divided into five groups: (G1) destination’s competitiveness with nine questions; (G2) destination’s image, with five questions; (G3) destination’s identity, with two questions; (G4) destinations’ loyalty, with five questions and (G5) sociodemographic characteristics of respondents with four questions. As previously done, we used a 5-point Likert scale, being 1 – I totally disagree, and 5 – I totally agree. A pre-test was also carried out to a total of 20 responses. Answers were validated with a Cronbach Alpha of 0.841 (reference value being 0.70, according to Hair et al., 2019).

6. Sample description

Our sample was composed by 56,4% of man and 32,6% of women. The majority of the participants were between 26 to 55 years of age (23,60% and 37,70%, respectively). More than half of respondents have a graduate degree; 94,55% of the individuals were Portuguese. It should be noted that the sample was collected during the pandemic and, as such, the movement of foreign tourists in Braga was reduced due to all the restrictions imposed by the Health Authorities.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Women	96	43,60%
Men	124	56,40%
Age		
15-25	47	21,40%
26-40	52	23,60%
41-55	83	37,70%
More than 55	37	16,80%
Education		
Doctorate	49	22,27%
Graduate/Bachelor	79	35,91%
Postgraduate/Master	75	34,09%
Intermediate/Secondary	14	6,36%
Other	3	2,50%
Nationality		
Portuguese	208	94,55%
Other	12	5,45%

7. Statistical analysis

As suggested by Ringle et al. (2015), we applied the Partial Least Square (PLS) and used the Smart PL^{3.0} software. PLS is a variance-based method that combines multivariate statistical techniques such as factor analysis and regression estimation. According to Hair et al. (2019), the PLS has as assumption the non-normal distribution of data and allows, even in small samples, to establish significant relationships between latent variables and, also, between these latent variables and the indicators that measure them.

The sample size was previously validated and in order to verify its suitability for the application of the PLS method (Hair et al., 2019). We decided to apply the PLS algorithm to the conceptual model (figure 2):

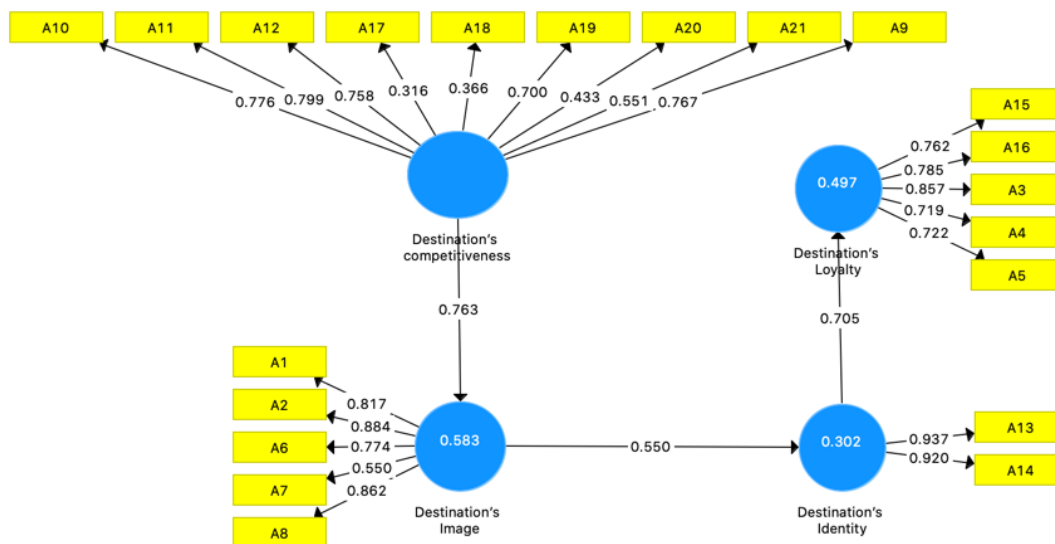


Figure 2: PLS model

The theoretical model includes four latent variables (represented in circles), such as competitiveness, image, identity and loyalty of the destination and 21 indicators (represented in rectangles) that measure the latent variables.

8. Model validation

Once the PLS model is obtained, it lacks validation in terms of predictive precision, reflective measures and discriminant validity.

The predictive precision is evaluated using the R Square (R²) values of the endogenous (dependent) latent variables, that is, destination's image, destination's identity and destination's loyalty. The values of R² are shown in Figure 2, within the circles, with the latent variable destination's image having an R² of 0.583, destination's identity an R² of 0.302 and destination's loyalty an R² of 0.497. According to Cohen (1988) an R² greater than 0.35 represents a "high" effect, thus, all latent variables have a high R².

To assess the internal consistency of the latent variables, we used composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha. To assess the convergent validity, the outer loadings (individual indicator reliability) and the average variance extracted (AVE) were analyzed. According to Hair et al. (2019), composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha have reference values of 0.70; our data shows values that are higher than the reference values (Table 2) and thus, the internal convergence is "satisfactory to good". The outer loadings (OL) of the model explain at least 50% of the variance of each latent variable, with the exception of indicators A17 (OL > 0.316), A18 (OL > 0.366) and A20 (OL > 0.433) referring to the latent variable Destination's Competitiveness. As far as AVE measures, according to Hair et al. (2019), we need to consider 0,50 as the reference value. Table 2 shows that all AVEs are above the reference value, reinforcing the good internal consistency of the PLS model presented.

Regarding discriminant validity, the Fornell Larcker Criterion was used (Table 2). We conclude that there is discriminant validity in each of the four latent variables since the square root of each AVE of the latent variables is superior to all the squared correlations of the latent variables.

Table 2: Reflective measures and discriminant validity

	Destination's Identity	Destination's Image	Destination's Loyalty	Destination's competitiveness
Cronbach's Alpha	0.840	0.839	0.830	0.810
Composite Reliability	0.926	0.888	0.879	0.847
AVE	0.862	0.619	0.594	0.502
Fornell Larcker Criterion				
Destination's Identity	0.928			
Destination's Image	0.550	0.787		
Destination's Loyalty	0.705	0.713	0.771	
Destination's Competitiveness	0.654	0.763	0.704	0.834

9. Results

Regarding the variables for the formation of tourist destinations (competitiveness, image, identity and loyalty of the destination), table 3 shows their statistics (average and standard deviation).

Table 3: Statistics of the training variables of tourist destinations

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Destination's Competitiveness		
A9 - The people residing here are kind and hospitable	4,35	0,678
A10 - I am satisfied with the quality of the services provided by the city	4,14	0,702
A11-This City has unique locations that must be visited	4,43	0,762
A12- I consider that this City is rich in cultural heritage (history / tradition / gastronomy)	4,51	0,674
A17-I limited my stay to Braga due to the price of the tourist offer	2,78	1,185
A18-The price of the stay was the main criterion of choice	2,51	1,223
A19-I consider the management of Braga to be well organized	3,81	0,906
A20-During my stay I visited (or had the opportunity to visit) several museums	3,15	1,224
A21-During my stay I visited (or had the opportunity to visit) historical sites	4,26	0,826
Destination's Image		
A1 - I had pleasant moments during my stay at Braga	4,32	0,725
A2 - Visiting this City was a pleasant experience	4,40	0,694
A6 - I feel that these holidays were relaxing	4,02	0,814
A7 - I felt safe during my visit to this City	4,57	0,672
A8 - This place is very pleasant	4,44	0,706
Destination's Identity		
A13- My personality is perfectly suited to this city	3,89	0,953
A14-I feel that this place is part of the person that I am	3,43	1,18
Destination's Loyalty		
A3 - I am very pleased with this City	4,22	0,745
A4 - I am pleased with the quality of the tourist services provided	3,96	0,742
A5 - I was pleased with the way I was welcomed in this City	4,26	0,699
A15-I believe I will visit this place again	4,40	0,834
A16-I believe this place is the perfect holiday destination	3,18	1,185

As far as Braga destination competitiveness, the answers that showed the highest average agreement were those to questions A12 (4.51) regarding the cultural tourist wealth of Braga, A11 (4.44) regarding the fact that Braga has unique places that must be visited and the A9 (4.35) considering Braga’s population to be kind and hospitable.

In the image of the destination, the greatest agreement, in average terms, was found in the answers to question A7 (4.57) and A8 (4.44), referring, respectively, to the sense of security felt in Braga and the recognition that Braga is a pleasant city. In the identity of the destination, respondents agreed that their personality fits with the city of Braga (A13– 3.89) and, as far as loyalty to the destination, question A15 (4.40) shows the intention to visit Braga again.

After validating the PLS model, we carried out a bootstrap analysis, a non-parametric procedure that allows testing the statistical significance of the relationships established between latent variables (Ringle et al., 2015).

The results obtained from the application of the bootstrap analysis are shown in table 4 and we can conclude that all the relationships established between the latent variables are very significant, for $p = 0.000$.

Table 4: Significance testing results

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
H1: Destination’s _competitiveness -> Destination’s _Image	0.763	0.770	0.028	27.402	0.000*
H2: Destination’s _Image -> Destination’s _Identity	0.550	0.554	0.048	11.515	0.000*
H3: Destination’s _Identity -> Destination’s _Loyalty_	0.705	0.711	0.035	20.266	0.000*
H4: Destination’s _competitiveness -> Destination’s _Identity	0.420	0.427	0.045	9.298	0.000*
H5: Destination’s _competitiveness -> Destination’s _Loyalty_	0.296	0.305	0.043	6.876	0.000*
H6: Destination’s _Image -> Destination’s _Loyalty_	0.388	0.395	0.049	7.931	0.000*

Note: * $p=0.000$. Source: authors’ own calculations.

We can conclude that Braga’s destination competitiveness has a direct positive impact ($\beta = 0.763$) on the image of the destination, confirming the H1. A 10% variation in the competitiveness of the destination has a positive impact of 76.3% on the image of the destination for non-resident tourists. The factors that most contribute to the competitiveness of the destination are Braga’s cultural tourist wealth, the fact that Braga has unique places that must be visited, and the kind and hospitable of the Braga population. The image that is created about a destination is a source of competitive advantages, attracting visitors to a destination (Pike & Page, 2014). However, this competitive advantage must be supported by adequate and efficient management of both physical and emotional resources, namely tastes and expectations. It is the management of these resources that make a destination different, therefore requiring continuous adaptation in terms of strategic adaptation (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017).

The image of the destination has a direct positive impact ($\beta = 0.550$) on the identity of the city of Braga, confirming H2. When there is a 10% variation in the image of Braga, there is a 55% impact on the identity of the Braga destination. The factors that most contribute to the image of the Braga destination are the feeling of security and the recognition that Braga is a pleasant city. The destination image is an interpretation of the visitor, influencing consumer behavior and creating loyalty (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011). On the other hand, destination identity arises from the identification of aspects, circumstances, resources and experiences that involve, and connect people to the place visited (Matza, 2014). In the case of Braga, the feeling of security and the recognition that Braga is a pleasant city are the elements that visitors identify as the identity features of this destination.

The identity of the destination has a direct positive impact ($\beta = 0.705$) on the loyalty to the Braga destination by non-resident tourists, confirming H3. When the identity of the Braga destination varies by 10%, loyalty to this destination varies by 70.5%. Respondents identify essentially with this destination since they consider their personality to fit in with the city. Loyalty to a destination depends on the perception and absorption by visitors of the different elements, contributing to the image of the destination (Hultman et al., 2015; Souiden, Ladhari & Chiadmi, 2017) and, therefore, to loyalty (Wong, 2017).). By creating a specific identity for a destination, as in the case of Braga where most tourists associate their personality with the Braga destination, the visitor is creating a specific identity for this destination, increasing tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Hultman, Skarmas, Oghazi & Behesti, 2015).

The competitiveness of the destination has an indirect positive impact (Destination's competitiveness \rightarrow Destination's Image \rightarrow Destination's Identity) on the destination's identity ($\beta = 0.402$), confirming H4. A 10% variation in the competitiveness of the destination, makes the identity of this city vary by 40.2%. And, the competitiveness of the destination has an indirect positive impact (Destination's competitiveness \rightarrow Destination's Image \rightarrow Destination's Identity \rightarrow Destination's Loyalty) on the loyalty of non-resident tourists to the city of Braga ($\beta = 0.296$), confirming H5. Thus, a 10% variation in the competitiveness of the city of Braga makes the loyalty to this city vary by 29.6%. Destinations become competitive through distinctive physical and human resources, contributing to the tourist's image of a destination. It is these features that create the image of the destination in the eyes of a visitor. Consequently, this image creates an identity for the destination (Pike & Page, 2014; Andrade & Dimanche, 2017). Identity with the destination will create loyalty to the destination, making the tourist want to return to that destination again (Pick & Page, 2014; Wong, 2017). Finally, the image of the destination has an indirect positive impact (Destination's Image \rightarrow Destination's Identity \rightarrow Destination's Loyalty) on loyalty to the city of Braga ($\beta = 0.388$), confirming H6 and also previous research (Quet et al., 2017). When the image of Braga to non-resident tourists varies by 10%, loyalty to this destination varies by 38.8%.

We can also conclude that loyalty to the city of Braga is directly influenced by the identity of the destination and, indirectly, by the competitiveness and image that non-resident tourists have of the city of Braga.

10. Conclusions

The main purpose of this study is to understand the perception of non-resident tourists about Braga as a touristic destination, using four explanatory dimensions already introduced in previous research: Destination's loyalty, Destination's Identity, Destination's Competitiveness and Destination's Image.

We verified that identity, loyalty, competitiveness, and image are relevant variables to support their decision.

According to data, competitiveness has a positive impact (76.3%) on the image of the destination, and the factors that most contribute to this are the cultural wealth, the unique places, and the hospitality of the people of Braga. The city's image has an impact of 55%, having as differentiating aspects the safety, and the feeling of being a pleasant space. On the identity of the destination and regarding loyalty, it has an impact of 75%; tourists feel that their personality fits with the city. On loyalty, this has an impact on 38.8% of tourists.

Thus, we can see that the variable with the greatest impact on tourists is their competitiveness and the one with the least impact was the loyalty of tourists to this city. This study sought to understand how 4 specific variables contribute to the formation of tourist destinations and how they are interconnected, focusing on Braga. It helps understand which aspects of the different explanatory factors impact tourists choosing to visit this city. This is the main contribution of the research – theoretical and practical approach to better understand the motives that make tourists visit Braga, by using already validated variables.

The main limitation of this study is the fact that it only analyses one specific town, using mainly individuals that were a part of the authors' network. Using a representative sample could bring clear insights, as well as replicate this study to some other Portuguese and European cities. A qualitative study, seeking to understand the attitudes and behaviors that lead tourists to choose this destination and which emotional reasons contribute to the attractiveness and loyalty of tourists to this city could allow accurate results. We can suggest doing in-depth interviews or applying a Delphi study with some experts and/or responsible for tourist organizations in Braga, trying to match their opinions and experiences with those transmitted by tourists. This study is original because it is the first time that attraction to the destination Braga is studied through loyalty, identity, image and image

of the destination, contributing to the literature on tourist marketing. Thus, this study provides a clear view of the dimensions to be considered in the strategic tourist planning of cities and, in the specific case, of how to make or maintain Braga as a place of interest for tourists to visit and continue to return.

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