Destination brand image and its impact on tourists' post-visit behavior

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Résumé

La recherche étudie l'influence de l'image de marque de la destination sur les comportements post-visite des touristes à travers l'attachement à la destination, l'intention de revisite et l'intention de recommandation. Une étude empirique a été menée auprès de touristes français ayant séjourné sur l'île de La Réunion. Sur la base d'une phase qualitative préalable, l'image de marque a été mesurée de manière quantitative auprès de 149 touristes en fin de séjour. Les résultats obtenus par la méthode des modèles d'équations structurelles montrent les liens positifs entre image de marque et comportements touristiques.

Mots clés : Image de marque de destination, attachement envers le territoire, fidélité attitudinale, modèle d'équations structurelles.

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Abstract: Drawing on brand image theory in the particular context of the tourism destination, this study investigates the relationship between destination brand image and tourist behavior, in terms of attachment, intention of revisit and intention of recommendation. A first qualitative study has been achieved to establish the destination's brand image. Using a sample of 149 tourists visiting Reunion Island, and the structural modeling technique, the results reveal that destination image have positive effects on tourist behavior.

Key-words: active orientation, regulated access, involvement, motivation.

Introduction

With names such as « Only Lyon », « Montpellier Unlimited », « Auvergne New World », territorial brands have become more and more numerous in today's public communication landscape. A real global success, the 1975 « I love NY » slogan is still one of today's strongest territorial brands, used as a tool for differentiating and affirming the identity of the city. Driven by issues such as reputation and attractiveness, tourist destinations need to be easily identifiable, and to stand out by presenting a unique brand and image. From this perspective, the territory brand and its management constitutes an extension of marketing to non-traditional domains beyond market exchange (Cai, 2002; Pike, 2005). Thus, in practice, local decision makers and destination managers intuitively apply classical commercial brand theories developed in marketing to territories.

A tourist destination brand incorporates a strategic combination of elements used to identify and position it in the market place. As for mass consumption products, these elements can include one or more names, signs, logos, slogans, colors, typographies etc. Destination branding is considered successful when it is able to convey a simple, attractive, believable and unique image (Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

In the current study, the destination brand is taken to be the geographical name of the territory itself. Its image is considered as the sum of the network of functional or abstract associations directly or indirectly linked to this geographical name in tourists' long-term

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memory. In fact, even when a territory does not consciously manage its name as a brand, individuals still conjure up a certain image just at the mention of its geographical denomination (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). These individuals are also active participants in their tourism experiences and play a part in the formation of the image they have of the destination. Therefore, their presence is necessary and defines the subjective image of the tourism destination. The « tourist » is therefore an individual consuming, in an active and participative manner, all the services offered in a place situated outside his usual environment, for a continuous period of no longer than a year, for leisure, business or any other purposes.

In view of the above, the underlying hypothesis of this study is that a strong destination brand image provides a certain competitive advantage for the territory, as well as building long-term equity.

From the consumer's point of view, Keller (1993, p. 2) defines brand equity « as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand », based on public awareness of the brand and its capacity to produce meaningful associations. Thus, a strong and favorable brand image does not only serve the purpose of differentiation, but also guides behavior (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991; Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Changeur, 1999). Does this also apply to destination branding? How does territorial branding affect tourist behavior? How do we explain the influences different tourist behaviors have on one another?

A preliminary qualitative study was carried out to define the destination brand image. The influence of this brand image on tourist behavior was then examined through a quantitative study with 149 tourists visiting Reunion Island for purposes other than to see family and friends. The objective was to examine the relationship between the strength and nature of the territory brand image, attachment behavior to the destination and attitudinal loyalty to small tropical insular

destinations. The extremely competitive context and volatile market that these territories are confronted with highlight the importance of understanding the development of customer loyalty toward this type of destination which has experienced a real boom in recent years (Naidoo & Ramseook-Munhurrun, 2012). A second element of interest is the study of the relationship between different tourist behaviors following the visit.

From a conceptual point of view, tourism can be analyzed as a range of activities associated with travel to unfamiliar destinations. The individual acquires the status of « tourist » by engaging in activities related to transport, accommodation, eating out and leisure. The status of tourist is therefore determined before departure with the decision to purchase and carries on after the return home with the continued consumption of the product in post-purchase behavior such as positive recommendation and intention to revisit (Casarin & Andreani, 2002). In this study, we seek to better understand this final stage of the tourist consumption process by examining attachment to the destination following the visit and attitudinal loyalty.

1. Conceptual framework

1.1. Tourism destination brand image

In traditional marketing, brand image is defined as the sum of the associations and impressions held in the consumer's memory in relation to a given brand (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991). Within tourism research, a distinction has been made between the induced image, organic image and complex image formed following a tourist stay. The organic image comes from consumers' exposure to non-touristic sources of information such as newspapers, magazines, TV reports, films and the opinion of friends. Hence, an individual who has never travelled to a given place, and who would never have even considered it as a potential tourist destination, will still have an image of it. On the other hand, induced image, derives from communications by tourism

stakeholders (advertisements, brochures, tourist guides, advice from travel agents) whose primary objective is to « sell » the destination and provide information for consumers. The exposure to this information can modify the initial organic image formed by the consumer. There may then be confusion and a general lack of knowledge about the diversity of tourism products available in the destination. Finally, following a tourist stay, tourists modify both the induced and organic image for what is termed a « complex » image (Frochot et al., 2010). Thus, there are major differences between the image formed before a visit to a destination and the modified version following the visit. Tourists can therefore develop a more positive or negative image after a trip. This difference is linked to a lack of knowledge that limits their perception of the scope and diversity of the tourist offering of the destination. As a result, tourists have a simplified image of the destination that does not include everything that the destination has to offer, a visit being the only way to assess this (Frochot et al., 2010).

Moreover, in the context of tourism, brand image has been recognized as a decisive factor influencing the choice of tourism destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Equally, this choice in the early stages of the purchasing process depends on the ability of the destination to generate a positive image, notably by communicating about its unique and beneficial attributes (Gartner, 1989). Thus, when several destinations are competing against each other, a strong and distinctive image allows the destination to occupy an important position in the minds of tourists. Hunt (1975) was the first to define country image as the impressions people hold about a country in which they do not reside. Image is also linked to the sum of the beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has about a destination (Crompton, 1979). Our research is grounded in a cognitive paradigm: we focus on the mental and abstract processes that form the brand image. For the purposes of this study, we refer to Cai (2002) who, similarly to Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), defines the destination brand image as all the perceptions

about a destination, as reflected by the associations held in the tourist's memory.

1.2. The relationships between destination brand image and tourists' attitudinal loyalty

Traditionally, the study of loyalty has been based on two complementary approaches: the behavioral approach and the attitudinal approach. As a consequence, customer loyalty is explained by a positive attitude toward the brand, and also by repurchase behavior (Trinquecoste, 1996). In the context of tourism, attitudinal loyalty is most often studied in the form of intention to revisit and recommend the destination (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011). The overall image of the territory is also one of the most important factors explaining such behaviors (Bigné et al., 2001; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Murray, 1991).

Casarin and Andreani (2002) point out that, prior to departure, a tourist possesses limited information, in particular when visiting a destination for the first time. Consequently, the tourist seeks information before, during and after consumption of the tourism product. Maunier (2008) adds that for certain forms of consumption, such as trips, word-of-mouth constitutes one of the main sources of information. Thus, a trip is considered to be a complex product requiring the use of intermediaries to inform decision making due to the large number of tourism providers and the distance separating the tourist from the destination. These elements add to the difficulty of making decisions (Maunier, 2008) and demonstrate the importance of positive recommendation.

Traditional theories state that strong and positive associations exist in the mind of the consumer that influence the overall positive attitude toward the brand (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993; Park & Srinivasan 1994; Krishnan 1996; Changeur & Dano 1998). This literature suggests that the strength of the image, which

is its ability to create utility and brand loyalty behavior, mainly depends on four factors:

(1) The strength of the associations, which refers to « the intensity of the connection consumers establish in their memory between the brand and its different related associations » (Changeur, 1999);

(2) The dominance of the associations, which is defined as « the fact that a given association is more strongly connected in memory to a brand than to competing brands » (Changeur, 1999);

(3) The valence of the associations, which corresponds to « the more or less positive nature of associations related to the brand » (Changeur, 1999);

(4) The cohesion of the associations, which corresponds to « the degree of shared content and meaning between associations » (Changeur, 1999).

Thus, according to Keller (1993), only associations that the consumer considers to be positive, strong, unique and in cohesion contribute to building the strength of the image. They have an influence on overall preference for a brand and on repurchase behavior.

Following this previous research, and drawing on the work of Chandon and Zenaidi (2009), we suggest that attitudinal loyalty to a destination depends on the strength and the valence of its image. Ultimately, it is expected that a tourist possessing strong and positive associations toward the destination brand will be more likely to revisit and recommend it to others. We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Destination image has a direct and positive influence on intention to revisit

H2: Destination image has a direct and positive influence on intention to recommend

1.3. The relationship between destination image and destination attachment

In marketing, brand attachment research has its origins in work on object attachment and interpersonal attachment. Nearly all this research draws on a « relational perspective ». Derbaix and Pham (1989) add that the notions central to the concept of brand attachment are, among others, loyalty, commitment and trust.

In the context of tourism destinations, attachment is a specific affect that develops between the individual and the place. Thus, tourists develop « strong feelings » toward the different places they visit (Merunka & Ouattara, 2006) and form real emotional bonds with them (Yuksel et al., 2010). In other words, the feeling of being attached to a destination is the sign that an individual has created an emotional connection directly related to this place. Personal experience and social interaction are therefore the main dimensions underlying the meaning the tourist gives to the destination and that make the place part of his or her own identity (Rubinstein & Parmelle, 1992). Halpenny (2006) considers that destination attachment can develop even before the first visit through word-of-mouth, or the images and symbols broadcast by the media. For the purpose of this research, it therefore seems relevant to look at the use of concept of attachment in relation to destination marketing and, in particular, the study of post-visit behavior. Thus, we make the hypothesis that the stronger and more positive the destination image, the more likely tourists are to develop a strong attachment to the destination.

H3: Destination image has a direct and positive influence on destination attachment

1.4. The relationship between destination attachment and the attitudinal loyalty of tourist consumers

In recent years, several research studies have addressed attachment from a relational perspective (Cristau, 2001; Heilbrunn 1996, 2001; Lacoeuilhe, 2000), and its positive relationship with loyalty has been demonstrated in the context of retail outlets for example (e.g. Sirieix & Valette-Florence, 1995). In the case of destination marketing, destination attachment could would possibly be a factor predicting intention to revisit. In one study, Chen and Phou (2013) used word-of-mouth intention as an indicator of loyalty. In the specific context of insular tropical destinations, to our knowledge, little work addresses the central importance of attachment for understanding post-visit behavior. One of the main studies on this subject was conducted in Mauritius by Naidoo and Ramseook-Munhurrun (2012). We propose the following hypotheses:

H4: Destination attachment has a direct and positive influence on intention to revisit

H5: Destination attachment has a direct and positive influence on intention to recommend

1.5. The relationship between the nature of the destination image and tourist behavior

Tourists who visit certain destinations make explicit reference to functional associations such as « visit Paris to see the Eiffel Tower and its museums », or abstract associations such as « visit Ibiza, it's the place to be ». These behaviors derive directly from the associations held in the tourist's mind linked to the destination brand. Regarding the impact of the type of associations, Lacoeuilhe (2000) postulates that abstract associations form the basis of brand attachment. In line with this, Korchia (2001) suggests that it is probable that not all brand associations have the same impact on behavior: associations carrying symbolic benefits would have a greater influence than those carrying functional benefits. Although previous literature has shown that the effect of brand associations varies considerably depending on their type (Park & Srinivasan, 1994), to our knowledge, no research has ever studied the influence of the nature of the destination image on tourist behavior, even though the « intimate » tourist fantasy, naturally more abstract, forms the basis of tourist expectations and behavior (Badiang & Dankoco, 2012). For this reason, we make the following hypotheses:

H6: The abstract image of the destination has a direct and positive influence, greater than that of the functional image, on intention to revisit the destination

H7: The abstract image of the destination has a direct and positive influence, greater than that of the functional image, on intention to recommend the destination

H8: The abstract image of the destination has a direct and positive influence, greater than that of the functional image, on destination attachment

Figure 1 : Theoretical model
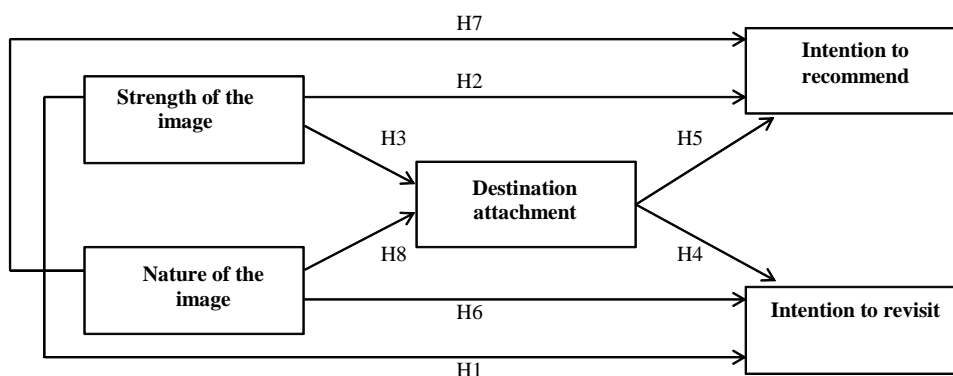
2. Methodology of the empirical study

In order to demonstrate the influence of the strength and nature of the destination image on post-visit behavior, an empirical study was conducted in several stages with French tourists visiting Reunion Island. A preliminary qualitative study was carried out prior to the elaboration of the quantitative stage (cf. Table 1).

2.1. Choice of destination for the study

This study concerns Reunion Island. Recently awarded the title of most beautiful island in the world by the online community site wayn.com, and in view of its reputation within the tourism label « Vanilla Islands », Reunion Island appears to be one of the most competitive and robust French overseas destinations in terms of tourist attractiveness. These factors make the Island an ideal choice for understanding the relationship between destination image and tourist behavior.

In the context of Reunion, given the limited number of beaches, its tourism strategy is to provide a full range of services and outdoor and adventure holidays (Duret & Augistinu, 2002). Sports tourists are therefore the most visible (paragliding, mountain biking, canyoning, trekking). However, certain stereotypes are encouraged by tourists' travel stories. For example, a study based on open questions, conducted with 32 customers from the Apollonia Hotel in Saint-Leu, revealed a degree of fantasy in their accounts and also the impression they would like to give of their holiday visit. Hence, most of the people questioned (81 %) referred to the « blue sky, beautiful sea » category, while fewer than half mentioned the mountainous nature of the island, which is a main feature of the destination.

During the first half of 2015, 197 400 tourists visited Reunion, representing 5.3% more than in the first half of 2014 (INSEE 2015). Visitors from mainland France still represent the majority, but their importance is declining (77 % of tourists in 2015 as opposed to 80% in 2014). With a 2 % increase in French tourists, numbers are rising more slowly than for visitors coming from the rest of Europe (+ 17 %), notably from Germany and Belgium. Tourism to visit family and friends, which is the main form of tourism, remains stable (INSEE 2015).

Finally, while tourism destinations traditionally favored by travelers, such as Paris, London or New-York, still attract as many visitors, smaller insular destinations (SIDs) also appear to be faring quite well. SIDs are popular due to their ability to « reenchant » tourists in search of new horizons, through an unprecedented break from the « familiar » and the « ordinary ». Thus, in the collective imagination, the island is the very symbol of the rupture with everyday life, this desire for separation is reflected in the quest for a change of scenery and escape (Bernardie-Tahir, 2005). At the same time, for SIDs the tourist is an undeniable ally for increasing the dynamism of employment and the economy, which highlights the importance of general research objectives focused on understanding the development of loyalty in travelers visiting this type of destination.

2.2. Preliminary qualitative study: associations with the destination brand

The aim of this preliminary qualitative study was to identify all the associations constituting the brand image of the destination « Reunion ». At a later stage, these associations were to be presented to respondents answering our quantitative study to measure the characteristics of these associations and establish a possible relationship with the other constructs.

There has been much debate in the literature concerning the methods used to identify associations forming the brand image (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Changeur & Dano, 1996; Krishnan, 1996; Changeur, 1999). A consensus has been reached regarding the necessity of using qualitative techniques and, in particular, the direct quotation method. Aaker (1991)

specifies that an open question should be used in order to identify brand associations stored in the memory and to understand the meaning of the brand for the consumer. Typically, consumers are asked to reply to a question such as « can you tell me everything that comes to mind about brand X » (Krishnan, 1996). Each element mentioned is then reexamined and the respondent is encouraged to think more deeply by giving synonyms or a brief explanation (multiple quotes).

Although this method presents many advantages, such as speed and ease of analysis, some scholars point out its limits. The first is the superficiality of the associations identified. Only the primary associations of the semantic network are revealed, when in fact secondary associations also reveal knowledge strongly associated with the brand (Changeur & Dano, 1996). As a result of only obtaining primary associations, the total number of associations generated remains limited. This is problematic since the variation in the number of associations constituting the brand image is an antecedent of brand equity (Krishnan, 1996). It is therefore important to be able to establish their number more accurately. Ultimately, only having access to primary associations has an impact on the type of associations studied. Associations directly linked to the brand node generally remain very functional, while secondary associations are more abstract in nature. The type of associations also has an impact on brand equity (Park & Srinivasan, 1994), which is why it is necessary to be able to access different types of associations by uncovering deeper associations.

Individual or group interviews seem to be a useful addition to the first method used as they provide access to richer and more in-depth information and reach the secondary associations of the network. As group interviews do not offer any real advantages over individual ones, many scholars recommend the use of semi-structured individual interviews (Aaker, 1991; Park & Srinivasan, 1994).

The preliminary qualitative study was conducted with French tourists during their visit to Reunion Island. The sample was composed of 13 individuals aged from 23 to 68 years, with an average age of 40 years. Data saturation was reached at the 8th interview. The data collected was then analyzed using a categorical content analysis. The final result is in the form of a list of 40 functional and abstract associations.

2.3. The quantitative study

The aim of the quantitative study was to examine the influence of the destination image on loyalty and attachment to the destination. To do this, it was necessary to measure the valence of the associations, their strength, attachment to the destination, intention to revisit and intention to recommend. Image-related variables can either be measured simultaneously or separately. The choice was made to separate the two sets of data so as to reduce the size of the questionnaire and make the respondent's task easier. As a consequence, the quantitative study was divided into two steps: the first exclusively measured the valence of the 40 associations constituting the destination image, with 32 respondents at the end of their tourist stay; the second, based on the results of the first step, measured the strength of positive associations along with post-visit behavior. Table 1 provides a complete overview of the research methodology.

Table 1 : Research methods

StudiesConducted	Constructs	Method	Comments
Preliminary qualitative study (Roland Garros Airport) 13 tourists	Destination image	Direct quotes and semi-structured interviews	Obtention of a list of 40 associations constituting the territory brand image.
First quantitative study (Roland Garros Airport) 32 tourists	Valence of the associations constituting the brand image	An association is said to positive (or negative) if at least 2/3 of respondents declare it to be positive (or negative) for the brand (Changeur, 1999)	Respondents were asked to consider each strong association and to code it as positive or negative for the brand (Krishnan 1996).
Second quantitative study (Roland Garros Airport) 149 tourists	Strength of the associations constituting the brand image	Strong associations are those that meet the following two criteria: (1) Their average score on the typicality of associations scale (7-point representativeness scale) is equal or superior to 4 (2) They have been declared strong by at least 50 % of respondents (direct measure).	Respondents were asked to consider to what extent each word (association) was representative of the idea or image they had of the brand (Changeur, 1999).
	Tourist behavior	Study of brand attachment, intention to revisit and recommend (Lacoeuilhe, 2000; Bigné, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2001; Kozak, 2003).	Destination attachment was measured with 4 items using a 7-point Likert scale. Attitudinal loyalty was measured with 2 items using a 7-point Likert scale: 1 item for intention to revisit and 1 item to measure the likelihood of recommendation.

2.3.1. Description of the sample

The first part of the study was carried out at Reunion Airport with 32 tourists, 18 men and 14 women, with an average age of 45 years. The second study involved 149 French tourists visiting Reunion for purposes other than to see family and friends, 34% of whom were male and 66% female, aged between 35 and 45 years, who were at the end of their stay. The most represented occupational groups were the intermediate professions (32%), employees (20.7%) and retirees (18.7%).

2.3.2. Measures of destination image

Keller's (1993) work suggests that the brand image is the main indicator and source of brand equity. However, he specifies that to create brand equity, associations must be strong, favorable and unique. In addition to these characteristics, some authors suggest that the total number of associations also has an impact on the ability of the image to create value for the brand (Korchia, 2001; Krishnan, 1996). In line with this work, the present study proposes to measure various indicators.

- **The valence of associations**

The valence of associations refers to « *the more or less positive nature of associations for*

the brand » (Changeur & Dano, 1998, p4). After asking to what extent each territory association was positive, negative or neutral for the destination, 26 positive destination brand associations were retained.

- **The strength of associations**

The strength of associations refers to « *the intensity of the connection that the consumer holds in memory between the brand and the various associations related to it* » (Changeur, 1999). Thus, all the positive associations were evaluated by the respondents. They were asked to what extent the stated association was strongly or weakly associated with the image they had of the destination « *Reunion Island*". An association was considered to be strong when its score was equal or superior to 4 on a 7-point semantic differential scale. It was then possible to calculate the number of positive associations held by each individual.

- **The strength of the image**

In their formative measure of brand equity, Chandon and Zenaidi (2009) suggest that the strength of the brand image comes from the most strongly connected associations among those already present in the consumer's mind, but also from those evaluated the most positively. They propose the sum of Strength x Valence of associations as an indicator of brand image strength. Similarly, we propose to create an indicator of the ability of the brand image to build equity and performance based on the sum of two traditional indicators: the average strength of the positive associations held by an individual and the number of strong associations held by this same individual.

- **The nature of the image**

The type of associations is a nominal variable with two modalities classifying each of the 24 positive associations retained: functional associations vs abstract and symbolic associations. In line with previous research, but this time in relation to the destinations, associations retained were considered as functional when they were directly related to the physical characteristics of the destination, to associated activities or to tangible resources. They were classified as

abstract and symbolic when they called upon the imagination of consumer-tourists or upon the immaterial and intangible symbols developed during their tourism experience. Similarly, Echtner and Ritchie (1993) remind us that destination image should be seen as having two main components: those directly based on the attributes of the destination and those of a holistic nature. Thus, each of these components has more tangible functional characteristics or more abstract psychological ones. For this reason, the authors propose a destination image continuum distinguishing between directly observable and functional characteristics, and less tangible ones that are not directly measurable. Each association had been previously assigned to one of the two categories by three coders.

Following the semi-structured interviews, the information obtained from the recordings was interpreted and used to situate each association in its context. After transcription, a first coding system was elaborated based on the definition given of functional and abstract associations, taking into account the context. A second coding was carried out by two marketing experts and the researcher. Each association was classified based on the content of the interviews, their context and the typology proposed.

2.3.3. Measures of tourist behavior

The scale measuring destination attachment is adapted from Lacoeuilhe's (2000) scale and is comprised of 5 items measured on a 7-point scale. The reliability and validity of this measurement tool was tested with a confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS. The internal consistency was good (α=.95; ϱ=.95). The convergent validity was demonstrated by significant standardized regression coefficients superior to .73 (t test > 1.96). The average extracted variance was satisfactory (ρvc = .80). The overall fit of the model was at the limit of the acceptable level with a RMSEA slightly above the .10 threshold (RMSEA = .189). The AGFI was .79 despite a GFI of .93 and

a standardized RMR of .02. Finally, the incremental indexes were very satisfactory (NFI = .97; TLI = .94).

Attitudinal loyalty was measured with a 2-item, 7-point Likert scale: 1 item for intention to revisit and 1 item to measure the likelihood of positive recommendation, both adapted from traditional scales measuring tourist-consumer behavior (Bigné, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2001; Kozak, 2003).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The strength of Reunion Island's brand image

With regard to destination image, our study measured the strength and the valence of the 40 associations identified in the preliminary qualitative study. This resulted in the selection of 16 functional associations with a strength varying between 6.933 (mountain) and 4.266 (historic heritage), and 8 abstract and symbolic associations with a strength varying between 6.820 (French department) and 4.786 (unique island) (cf. Table 2).

Table 2 : The strength of Reunion Island's brand image

The strength of Reunion Island's brand image		
Associations	Strength	Type
Mountain	6.933	Functional
Insular region	6.880	Functional
Sun	6.866	Functional
French department	6.820	Abstract
Spectacular landscapes	6.813	Functional
Welcoming people	6.780	Functional
Ethnically diverse population	6.580	Functional
Variety of landscapes	6.573	Functional
Safe island	6.473	Functional
Sporting activities	6.080	Functional
Lush vegetation	6.033	Functional
Green island	5.986	Abstract
Exoticism	5.760	Abstract
Change of scenery	5.533	Abstract
Spices and fragrances	5.253	Functional
Island of escape	5.113	Abstract
Island of adventure	5.020	Abstract
Island with character	4.913	Abstract
Volcano	4.866	Functional
Mountain lodge	4.840	Functional
Unique island	4.786	Abstract
Lagoon	4.613	Functional
Creole cuisine	4.340	Functional
Historical heritage	4.266	Functional

3.2. Causal relationship test: structural equation modeling

In order to test all the theory-based relationships between independent and dependent variables, we used structural equation modeling. A first model tested the influence of the destination brand image on tourist behaviors (H1-H3), along with the influence of attachment on these same behaviors (H4-H5). A second model was then elaborated to test the influence of the nature of the image on tourist behavior (H6-H8). The values of the model fit indexes all reach or are close to the accepted threshold (cf. Table 3). Our results show that:

(1) The strength of the image has a direct and positive influence on intention to revisit (56% of explained variance) and attachment (16% of explained variance);

(2) The strength of the image has no direct influence on intention to recommend, but exerts an indirect influence through attachment (7% of explained variance) ;

(3) When we introduce the type of association, abstract and symbolic associations are the only ones to significantly explain destination attachment(16% of explained

variance) and intention to revisit (54% of explained variance);

(4) The nature of the image has no influence on intention to recommend.

Table 3 : Coefficients and model fit indexes

			Standardized coefficients	Hypothesis	Validation
Model 1. Influence of destination image on tourist behavior					
Image	→	Intention to revisit	.18*	H1	Validated
Image	→	Intention to recommend	_	H2	Not validated
Image	→	Attachment	.40*	H3	Validated
Attachment	→	Intention to revisit	.66*	H4	Validated
Attachment	→	Intention to recommend	.26*	H5	Validated
RMSEA = .159, RMRs = .054, GFI = .879, NFI = .923, TLI = .904, CFI = .938 Chi² /ddl=4,7 CAIC > 0					
Model 2. Influence of the nature of the image on tourist behavior					
Nature of the image	→	Intention to revisit	.14*	H6	Validated
Nature of the image	→	Intention to recommend	_	H7	Not validated
Nature of the image	→	Attachment	.40*	H8	Validated
RMSEA= .172, RMRs = .1, GFI = .845, NFI = .893, TLI = .860, CFI = .911) Chi² /ddl=5.3 CAIC > 0					

Figure 2. Research model and hypothesis validation

———————▶ Hypotheses validated

- - - - - - - - - -▶ Hypotheses not validated
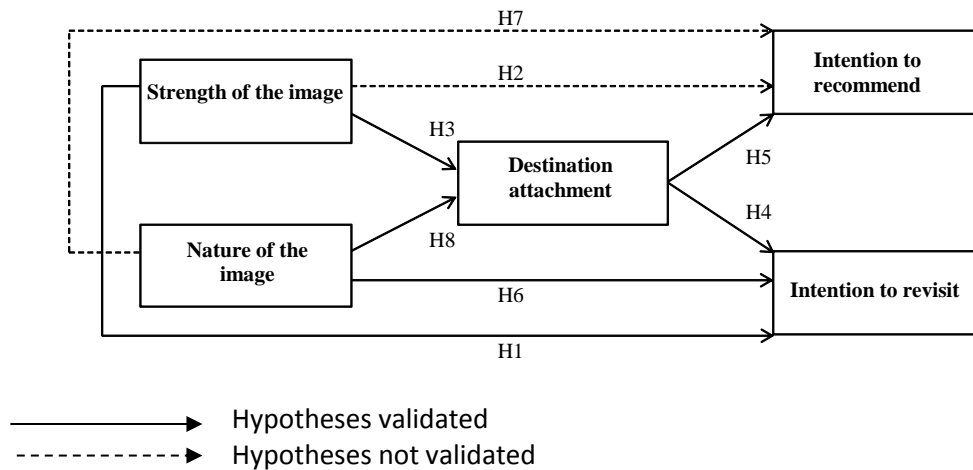
The main purpose of this research was to evaluate the influence of tourism destination brand image on attachment and the attitudinal loyalty of tourists, as well as the influence these behaviors have on one another. The unique contribution of this research lies in its field of application to small insular tropical destinations.

This study demonstrates that post-visit behavior is influenced by the strength of the destination image. Ultimately, this study shows that 16 functional associations and 8 abstract and symbolic associations directly influence two dependent variables: destination attachment and intention to revisit. Our results confirm the relationship established in traditional literature between brand image and brand attachment. Thus, in the specific context of destination branding, the stronger the brand image, the more

tourists develop an attachment to the territory. They also confirm the assumed relationship between brand image and attitudinal loyalty, but only for intention to revisit. Hence, the stronger the brand image, the more likely tourists are to revisit the territory. However, it should be noted that in the present study brand image did not directly influence intention to recommend, but instead exerted an indirect influence through attachment.

Regarding post-visit tourist behavior, the results also indicate that the more tourists are attached to the destination, the stronger their intentions to revisit and recommend. Finally, our results continue the debate about the influence of the type of associations on the above concepts, showing that the more the brand image is composed of strong abstract and symbolic associations, the more attached tourists are to the destination and intend to revisit, although this has no impact on intention to recommend.

Consequently, when it comes to marketing insular destinations, the results indicate that attachment and intention to revisit are mainly based on a strong image with symbolic value. Thus, destination attachment and intention to revisit are fed by abstract and symbolic associations coming from the tourist imagination and developed during the experience, as opposed to a more rational orientation based on the physical attributes of the destination. This finding is consistent with the fact that a trip is, by nature, a series of experiences involving a flow of emotions and feelings elicited by the symbolic dimension of places, the unspoilt nature, local identity, authenticity and even human warmth (Badiang & Dankoco, 2012). By contrast, in our study, intention to recommend was not directly affected by the destination image, be it functional or abstract and symbolic. This result could be explained by the non-inclusion of individual variables or measures of satisfaction. Indeed, in their study of Cyprus's historical sites, Yoon and Uysal (2005) found that intention to recommend a site was positively influenced by satisfaction with the tourist experience and individuals' own motivations. Other studies also indicate that tourist satisfaction, together with perceived quality and value, are among the determinants of loyalty (Bigné et al., 2001; Yuksel et al., 2010).

From a managerial perspective, our research calls for a brand image management strategy adapted to insular tropical tourist destinations. Without neglecting functional associations that form « *naturally* » during the visitor experience, it appears necessary to implement communication strategies before, during and after the experience, so as to develop and strengthen the abstract and symbolic associations that are part of the territory's identity. Therefore, whether communication takes place before or after the tourism experience, it should take into account these associations, both in terms of the medium of communication and content of the message. Furthermore, the key role of attachment in understanding loyalty behavior demonstrated in this study underlines the importance of sustaining this abstract and symbolic image over time and after the experience. In this way, communication can continue to convey the most beneficial destination image attributes and contribute to strengthening destination attachment.

At the operational level, a strong abstract and symbolic image can be achieved through the creation of new tourist products. The purpose of this is to offer products that generate symbols. The organization of a series of sightseeing tours immersing the tourist in a mythical environment would be one possible application of our findings. Through the use of legends, fairy tales and emblematic stories from the region, the aim is to be seen as unique through the organization of excursions primarily based on fiction, fantasy and the extraordinary, maintaining a strong abstract and symbolic image.

Conclusion

This research examined the relationship between the concept of brand image in the particular context of tourism destinations, and post-visit behavior. It also looked at the influence of behaviors on one another. It provides destination managers with two possible ways of building a long-term relationship with tourists. The first involves the implementation of brand communication strategies based on an abstract and symbolic image before, during and after the tourism experience. The second consists in the creation of a tourist offering generating symbols likely to lead to destination attachment and intention to revisit.

The methodological contribution of this research lies in the measure of brand image and brand image strength employed. In fact, in order to bring out every attribute of the destination, previous researchers have mainly applied structured methodological approaches, using preexisting differential semantic and Likert scales, to evaluate cognitive aspects (friendly welcome, value for money, beauty of the scenery, climate) and affective aspects (exciting atmosphere, romance) (Hankinson, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). However, these approaches mean that individuals have to assess predetermined attributes that do not necessarily correspond to what tourists really have in mind. By using a semi-structured method and by also measuring image strength, this research contributes to broadening measurement techniques used in the context of tourism destinations.

One of the methodological limits of this research concerns data collection and is directly related to the insularity of the region studied: in fact, all the studies of post-visit behavior were conducted on the island before tourists left, although the tourists questioned had all reached the end of their visit. More research is needed to look at post-visit behavior after return to the source market. Furthermore, satisfaction, motivation and perceived quality are likely to influence the long-term relationship with insular destinations. On this theme, the literature presents various conceptual models explaining how customers evaluate service quality and its impact on attitudinal loyalty. These models can be divided into two categories: models focusing on service attributes and models examining service structure (Boyer & Nefzi, 2007). One direction for future research would be to apply an established model, such as Langlois's (2003) model of perceived quality of tourist products, to research on attachment to insular destinations. In addition, following numerous criticisms of the concept of attitudinal loyalty and given the constant search for novelty, stimulation and even excitement through consumption, N'Goala (2003) recommends « *focusing more on the overall relationship between the consumer and the brand rather than being limited to the study of product repurchase (observed or intentional)* ». Thus, loyalty needs to be conceptualized within a more innovative analytical framework that highlights the expression of the relationship with the product or service over time. The study of customer behavioral commitment could also enhance the study of post-visit tourist behavior. And finally, with the aim of adding to the results and improving their external validity, it would be useful to replicate this study with contrasting tourism features such as urban, beach, cultural, contemporary or historic, in different types of destinations.

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