

DETERMINATION OF THE ROLE OF CONSUMERS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS IN THE LOYALTY FORMATION PROCESS BASED ON SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE ASPECTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an appropriate strategy for hotel companies to minimize their negative impacts while increasing their positive effects both in the natural environment and the local communities where they operate (Martínez *et al.*, 2012). The concept of CSR is defined as the assumption by companies of a series of responsibilities that go beyond shareholders and clients, taking into account society as a whole (Holloway, 2004).

Today, many companies in the sector have developed various initiatives to show their commitment to this corporate philosophy. In addition, many hotel companies are now struggling to increase their market share due to increasing international competition and over-supply in mature markets (So *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the companies in this sector are developing strategies focused on the retention of their customers.

However, in order to attract and retain “more responsible” consumers, it is necessary to identify the factors that define them. Recent research has shown that not only altruism affects the purchase of “sustainable” or “responsible” products, but the consumption of this type of products and the support to companies that invest in CSR is determined by demographic and socio-economic as well as cultural aspects (Balderjahn, 1998; Pivato *et al.*, 2008). In this sense, the socio-demographic characteristics of gender, age and educational level have been identified as the most important variables influencing the relationship between consumers and companies and the loyalty of consumers towards their products or services (Homburg and Giering, 2001; Walsh *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, the main goal of this study is to explore the impact of these three socio-demographic characteristics on the loyalty formation process based on CSR aspects.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Most studies of gender differences in social behavior are based on the social role theory and evolutionary psychology. These theories suggest that men and women socialize differently and play different roles in society (Archer, 1996; Buss, 1996). Previous research indicates that gender plays a key role in maintaining patterns in social behaviors (Han *et al.*, 2009; Luiz and de Matos, 2015; Saad and Gill, 2000). The impact of gender on buying behavior is widely recognized in marketing and consumer behavior literature. In particular, several studies have explored the role of gender differences in the consumption of various products and services (Homburg and Giering, 2001, Laroche *et al.*, 2001, Mittal and Kamakura 2001, Walsh *et al.*, 2008). On the basis of these ideas, the authors propose their first research hypothesis:

H₁: The gender of consumers will moderate their process of formation of loyalty based on socially responsible aspects.

Age is another determinant of buying behavior. However, results of previous studies on the influence of age on consumer behavior and their decision-making process are varied and inconclusive. The important role of age in the purchasing process based on responsible issues is also identified in previous studies (Han *et al.*, 2009; Perez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Roberts 1996, Sandhal and Robertson 1989; Wakefield and Baker, 1998). In general, these studies show that consumers who more often support CSR initiatives are older than average (Pivato *et al.*, 2008; Sandhal and Robertson, 1989). Given this empirical evidence, it is proposed that:

H₂: The age of consumers will moderate their process of formation of loyalty based on socially responsible aspects.

Finally, the authors analyze the influence of the educational level of consumers in their loyalty formation process based on CSR. Several studies have shown that consumer loyalty is inversely related to their level of education, to a higher level of consumer education a lower level of loyalty (Mittal and Kamakura, 2001). In general, consumers with higher educational levels develop more detailed cognitive processes and carry out more extensive information searches. In this sense, people with higher education are expected to be more aware of the products of the competition and, in general, to be able to evaluate more options. In general, it is shown that socially responsible consumers are better educated than the general population (Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2003, Pivato *et al.*, 2008, Roberts, 1996). In this way, we propose the third research hypothesis:

H₃: The educational level of consumers will moderate their process of formation of loyalty based on socially responsible aspects.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the relationships between the constructs. In this study, the sequence followed for data analysis corresponds to the two steps proposed in the academic literature: (1) the measurement model and (2) the structural model (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Finally, to test the differences between groups, a multi-sample analysis was carried out to analyze the moderating effect of the demographic characteristics of consumers.

4. RESULTS

It is observed that consumer gender influences the formation of loyalty based on CSR aspects. In particular, gender moderates the relationships between CSR associations and satisfaction, satisfaction and loyalty, and the relationship between consumer-company identification and loyalty. In general, all the relationships are stronger among women. When the age variable is considered as a moderator, the results show that this demographic variable moderates three relationships in the process of loyalty formation: the effect of CSR associations on identification, the influence of satisfaction on loyalty, and trust on loyalty. It seems that the relationship between CSR associations and the degree of identification is greater in younger consumers while the effect of satisfaction and trust on loyalty is greater for older consumers. Similarly, the educational level of consumers moderates three relationships of the proposed model: the effect of satisfaction and trust in loyalty, and the influence of CSR on trust.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

This study presents several practical implications for hotel managers. Our findings suggest that in order to improve customer loyalty based on CSR, communications on these aspects should be tailored to the different consumer groups and communicate the initiatives companies carry out in different ways for each segment of the market. In this sense, it would be interesting that the communication campaigns were directed mainly to the male and younger consumers. This would be easily achieved by using personal communication channels (e.g., mailing, social networks ...) rather than using mass media. Likewise, social-based communication campaigns appear to have a greater impact on consumers with lower educational level, as consumers with higher education levels rely on more functional aspects such as price and quality. Thus, managers should develop plans to identify client groups with similar personal characteristics and compare their intentions to the company based on CSR aspects.

Likewise, it is recommended to sensitize the segments most reluctant to this type of initiatives. So that, managers can "educate" all customers to understand the true motivations behind the socially responsible initiatives developed by the companies in the sector and the benefits that come from them, not only for companies but also for local communities and the natural environment. In this way, it is advisable to carry out informative

campaigns and/or seminars as well as to provide information in the hotel establishments themselves either through brochures or print media or through the employees themselves.

However, this study presents some limitations that also suggest new research work. In the first place, the context of this study was the tourism sector, specifically hotel companies. By choosing a particular area of research, this study allows for the detection of moderating effects in a specific context, but future research could also explore other industries, especially given the contextual character that has been recognized in the CSR practice. Likewise, future studies may consider the inclusion of additional moderating variables that have not been taken into account in the present study. For example, it would be interesting to include in the analysis the psychological traits of consumers to better explain the loyalty process formation. Also, future studies could incorporate characteristics of the companies (e.g., image or reputation), as these intangible assets can affect the process of loyalty formation.