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## Measuring Loyalty in Tourism Events: Evidence from the World Travel Market

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## **Measuring Loyalty in Tourism Events: Evidence from the World Travel Market**

### **Introduction**

Event tourism research is mainly focused on the examination of visitor attraction and the event value and experience it offers (Rosenbaum and Wong, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2016). Still, little is known about the formulation of event loyalty, even if events and festivals (especially the ones with short-term character) are considered as an essential tourism feature (Akhoondnejad, 2016; Getz, 2008).

The current research examines event loyalty using World Travel Market (WTM) in London as a case study. More specifically, it evaluates the impact of performance, the social, educational and emotional value, and the marketing activities of WTM on event loyalty formulation and development. In addition, it examines event loyalty in terms of occupational orientation (academia; industry) of an audience characterised in direct relevance with tourism domain.

The theoretical contribution of the study is two-fold. First, it adds up to the literature concerning event loyalty of short-term annual events that have an extensive impact on international travel, tourism and hospitality industry. Second, it further explains the influences affecting the formulation of loyalty in short-term events, and highlights a series of managerial implications.

### **The World Travel Market**

The World Travel Market (WTM) is an annual event of the global travel and tourism industry, held in London, UK since 1980 (WTM, 2016a). This three-day annual exhibition is the leading global event for travel and tourism (WTM, 2016b), bringing together key decision-makers of both, industry and academia, and giving them the opportunity to advertise themselves and conduct business deals (Exterior Media, 2016). More than 5,000 exhibitors from almost all countries participate each year through their demonstration of travel, tourism and hospitality products (WTM, 2016c), whilst its audience exceeds 50,000 people (WTM, 2016d). The business deals held each year in WTM largely exceed three billion USD (TTN, 2016), highlighting the significance of the event for the global travel and tourism industry.

### **Literature Review**

*Event Loyalty:* One of the dominant features of tourism marketing concerns event loyalty and their visitation intention (Yoon et al., 2010). For service providers these aspects are strongly related with profitability issues (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Previous research suggests that the degree of loyalty is defined by the word of mouth, recommendations, revisitation intention (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1996) and overall event satisfaction (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Lee et al, 2007 ). When the latter positively influences consumer behaviour, repurchasing or revisitation trends it is likely to create a purchase and repurchase or visitation and revisitation

intention (Oliver, 1999; Yoon et al., 2010). Moreover, quality aspects influence the perceived value of events, which in turn influence satisfaction and loyalty aspects (Cronin et al., 2000; Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000).

*Performance:* When talking about performance we actually refer to the quantification of effectiveness and efficiency of past actions (Neely et al., 2002). More specifically, effectiveness concerns the evaluation of the extent to which the requirements of consumers (or visitors) are met, whilst efficiency deals with the way the economic resources of a firm are utilized when providing a pre-specified level of customer satisfaction (Cho et al., 2012). The evaluation of performance includes aspects related with customer satisfaction, retention, and attraction (Johnston and Clark, 2008), and its success depends on issues such as the provided awareness of the product or event, the discounts offered, and the visitation growth (Panyik et al., 2011). As a result, the satisfaction gained by performance affects the loyalty of customers and visitors (Burton et al., 2003; Alejandro et al., 2011). Therefore the study has formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: Performance has a direct positive impact on event loyalty

*Social educational and emotional values:* Marketing and tourism literature presents substantial evidence for the significant influence of perceived value on consumer behaviour and satisfaction level (Kim et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2011). The complicated concept of perceived value depends on the social, educational and emotional benefits received (Xu et al., 2016), as well as the financial aspects dealing with the acquisition of products or services (in WTM case the latter is not present). In the case of events, the perceived value includes all aspects of the event, such as accessibility, event site environment, opportunities for social networking, and event activities (Lee and Min, 2013). Therefore, the loyalty of visitors concerning the event is directly connected with the perceived social, educational and emotional values (McDougall and Levesque, 2000; Yoon et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2016). Taking under considerations the above, three research hypotheses have structured:

H2: Social value directly affects event loyalty

H3: Educational value directly affects event loyalty

H4: Emotional value directly affects event loyalty

*Marketing activities:* Several studies support the strong link towards marketing activities and the enhancement of customer-based brand equity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Kim and Ko, 2012). Most scholars agree that a strong brand equity substantially contributes to an increased brand preference and strengthens customer loyalty (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Godey et al., 2016). Events possess the ability to attract visitors due to value propositions that can adequately fulfil an array of visitor needs (Kim and Chalip, 2004). Therefore, proper marketing activities on events can strengthen the loyalty of visitors (Cruceru and Moise, 2014), and minimise the potential from

disappointed consumers to find ‘compensation’ from another event held concurrently (Xu et al., 2016). These findings have led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H5: Marketing activities can positively impact event loyalty

### **The proposed model**

The study model has its roots on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). In TPB people tend to have a specific behaviour (in this case formulation of event loyalty), based on specific motivational factors (in our case event performance; marketing activities; social, educational, and emotional value) that influence this behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The extent of TPB’s behavioural predictability has led to an extensive application in travel and tourism domain (Quintal *et al.*, 2010; Pappas, 2016), since it is considered to be one of the most widely used models for the explanation and prediction of individual behavioural intention (Hsu *et al.*, 2006).

Figure 1: The proposed model

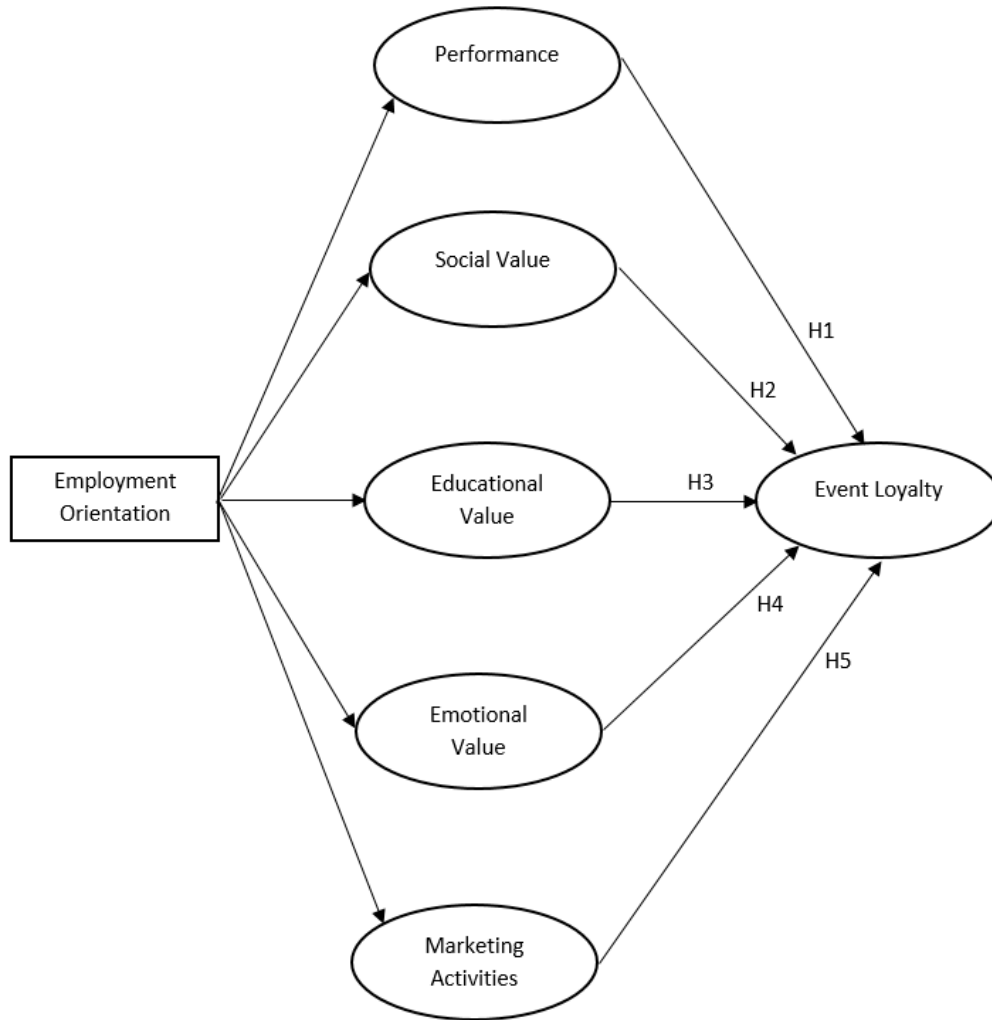


Figure 1 illustrates the study model, which has its theoretical basis in TPB and builds on previous research by Panyik et al. (2011), Papatheodorou and Pappas (2016), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), Xu et al. (2016), and Yoon et al. (2010). It suggests that the event loyalty (with special reference to WTM) is influenced by the extent of performance, social value, educational value, emotional value, and marketing strategies, whilst the employment orientation (industry; academia) affects the aforementioned constructs.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The research was held at Exhibition Centre London (ExCeL) during WTM's exhibition (7<sup>th</sup> till 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016). Structured questionnaires were distributed to WTM's visitors, since this was considered as the most appropriate method of obtaining the primary data, due to anonymity built, the response rate, and the examination potential of a substantial portion of the population in a short period of time (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). Since the exhibition's location encourages accessibility and mobility, the results of the research have increased the perspective of representativeness and minimisation of potential bias (Hamilton and Alexander, 2013).

### *Sample size determination*

The mode for sample size determination was made following the study of Akis et al., (1996). In cases where the proportions of the population are unknown, the sampling size is defined following the conservative format of 50/50 (the assumption that 50% of the respondents have a positive and 50% a negative response). The minimum level of confidence has been defined in 95 percent, with a maximum statistical error of 5 percent. Therefore, the sampling size is defined as follows:

$$N = \frac{(t - table)^2 (hypothesis)}{S^2} \Rightarrow N = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.5)(0.5)}{(0.5)^2} \Rightarrow N = 384.16$$

***Rounded 400***

The calculation of sampling size is independent of the total size of the population, hence the error is determined by the size of the sample (Aaker and Day, 1990). In total, 400 individuals were approached during the three-day event, and 274 usable questionnaires (response rate: 68.5 percent) were selected.

### *Measures*

Previous research was used as the basis for drawing a questionnaire consisting of 25 Likert Scale statements (1 strongly disagree; 5 strongly agree). More specifically, five statements examining performance aspects were adopted from the study of Panyik et al. (2011); four statements evaluating social value were taken from Sweeney and Soutar (2001); five statements focusing on educational value were used from the research of Xu et al. (2016); four statements from the study of Yoon et al. (2010) dealt with emotional value; finally four statements concerning marketing activities were adopted from the study of Papatheodorou and Pappas (2016). In addition, the grouping variable of 'Employment Orientation' (Industry; Academia) was also included in the questionnaire.

### *Data Analysis*

The data were analysed through descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, significance, kurtosis and skewness), factor analysis and regression. The research has employed Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) for the evaluation of the linear relationships. KMO and Cronbach Alpha (A) were also used for the examination of the reliability and validity of the model. The findings were significant at the 0.05 level of confidence.

## **Results**

In total, the study includes 274 useful responses. In terms of the grouping variable (employment orientation) 213 of the participants were related with travel, tourism and hospitality industry, whilst 61 respondents appeared to have an occupational background in academia.

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) reveal that in terms of performance, the respondents tend to agree in all statements, with the highest agreeable trend concerning the establishment’s host capacity (P5), and the lowest one in the provided discounts (P3). Dealing with social value, the highest proportion of agreements concerns the interaction with other people (SV4) followed by network expansion opportunities (SV1). Gained experience sums up most agreements (EdV1) in educational value, whilst new knowledge (EdV5) has the fewer ones. Focusing on emotional value, the most important aspect appears to be the time worthiness of visitation (EmV1). Dealing with marketing activities, word-of-mouth (MA4) seems to have the highest influence of all. Finally, the highest proportion of agreements in event loyalty concerns the positive word-of-mouth spread-out (EL1), followed by collegial recommendation (EL3), and continuation of attendance (EL2). In terms of employment orientation, statistical significance appeared in seven statements, whilst comparing between constructs, performance was the one with most of them (P1; P2; P3).

As far as it concerns factor analysis, the research focused on the important components of the research. Thus, in order to achieve higher coefficients, absolute values of less than .4 were suppressed. The correlation matrix revealed numbers larger than .4 over most factor loadings in the examined statements. The KMO – Bartlett’s test was 0.767 (higher than the minimum requested 0.6 for further analysis), whilst statistical significance also existed ( $p < .01$ ).

In order to test the validity of variables, the study made an analysis using Cronbach’s Alpha (Table 2), whilst the overall reliability was .719. All variables were over .7, which is the acceptable minimum value as defined by Nunnally (1978). The loadings were reasonably high with the exception of P1 (.374). Due to low commonality, this loading was dropped out from further analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Statement	Means			Sig.	S. D.	Kurtosis	Skewness
	Total	Industry	Education				
P1	3.60	3.68	3.34	<b>.001</b>	1.105	-.432	-.556
P2	3.45	3.46	3.38	<b>.019</b>	1.009	-.086	-.572
P3	3.41	3.43	3.33	<b>.007</b>	.922	.113	-.354
P4	3.59	3.63	3.48	.058	1.041	-.144	-.578
P5	3.65	3.66	3.62	.219	.965	.232	-.701
SV1	4.39	4.34	4.57	.784	.545	-.948	-.102
SV2	4.24	4.22	4.32	<b>.023</b>	.575	2.857	-.528
SV3	4.28	4.21	4.52	.162	.571	2.975	-.553
SV4	4.43	4.40	4.52	.622	.532	-1.211	-.088
EdV1	4.20	4.15	4.38	.599	.711	-.494	-.434
EdV2	4.00	3.99	4.02	.999	.693	-.903	.005
EdV3	4.17	4.16	4.20	.774	.719	-1.033	-.268

EdV4	4.16	4.09	4.41	.509	.700	-.944	-.238
EdV5	3.91	3.91	3.90	.364	.730	-1.109	.148
EmV1	4.03	4.00	4.10	<b>.003</b>	.832	1.083	-.856
EmV2	3.81	3.76	3.98	.116	.926	.596	-.784
EmV3	3.77	3.76	3.84	.955	1.023	.084	-.753
EmV4	3.68	3.65	3.77	<b>.002</b>	.960	.293	-.668
MA1	3.90	3.92	3.84	.830	.757	-.794	-.038
MA2	3.86	3.85	3.87	.700	.826	.153	-.439
MA3	3.65	3.74	3.36	.753	.957	-.440	-.393
MA4	3.95	3.94	3.95	.332	.732	.448	-.423
EL1	4.03	4.03	4.05	.239	.895	.307	-.744
EL2	3.79	3.72	4.02	<b>.005</b>	.960	.785	-.890
EL3	3.96	3.92	4.10	.714	.772	1.894	-.943

Statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ) is indicated in bold

The model fit includes the following indexes:  $\chi^2=392.524$ , difference (df) = 208, and  $\chi^2/df=1.887$ , which falls within the acceptable limits ( $0 \leq \chi^2/df \leq 2$  [Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003]). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is .892 which is regarded as an acceptable value close to 1.0 (Weston and Gore, 2006). Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is .478. As indicated from Browne and Cudeck (1993), the acceptable limit for RMSEA is when it is lower than .5. The Standardised Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR) = .762 (the acceptable limit is  $< .8$  [Hu and Bentler, 1999]). As highlighted in Figure 2, the examination of the study constructs revealed that the overall  $R^2$  for the model was .391 ( $p < .01$ ). This result indicates an adequate model performance and consequent importance. All constructs were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). The standardised coefficients confirmed that the primary factors affecting event loyalty were marketing activities ( $\beta=.378$ ;  $p < .01$ ), performance ( $\beta=.279$ ;  $p < .01$ ), educational value ( $\beta=.243$ ;  $p < .05$ ), emotional value ( $\beta=.204$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and social value ( $\beta=.187$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

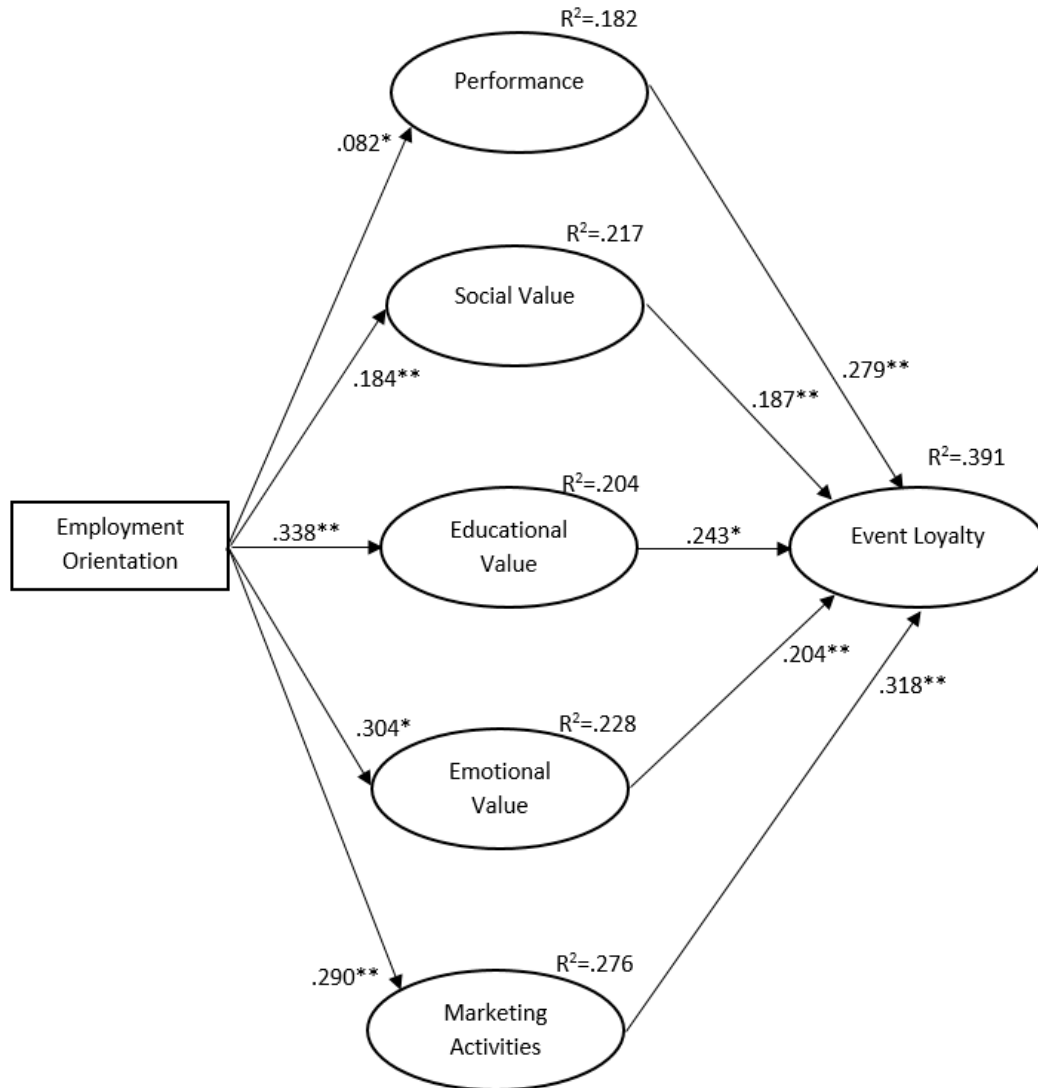
Table 2: Cronbach A and factor loadings



<b>Statements</b>	
<i>Performance</i>	
P1	The awareness provided by WTM about the event affects my visitation decisions
P2	The visitation growth of WTM affects my decision to come to the event
P3	The discounts provided during WTM's event have affected my intention to visit the exhibition
P4	I am satisfied with the way WTM is promoted
P5	Host capacity of the establishment is an important factor for me to visit WTM
<i>Social Value</i>	
SV1	Visiting WTM offers me network expansion opportunities
SV2	Visiting WTM allows me to make good impression to potential partners and colleagues
SV3	Visiting WTM allows me to make good impression to existing partners and colleagues
SV4	Visiting WTM allows me to interact with other people in my field
<i>Educational Value</i>	
EdV1	Visiting WTM is a good way to gain experience in my field
EdV2	WTM satisfies my curiosity on current trends in my field
EdV3	WTM allows me to improve my knowledge
EdV4	WTM helps me to develop better knowledge on my field
EdV5	WTM allows me to learn something new
<i>Emotional Value</i>	
EmV1	Coming in WTM worth my time to visit the event
EmV2	A visitation in WTM is enjoyable
EmV3	A visitation in WTM makes me feel good
EmV4	Visiting Exhibitions such as WTM allows me to better enjoy my work
<i>Marketing Activities</i>	
MA1	Direct marketing activities (i.e. direct mail and e-mails) influenced my decision to visit WTM
MA2	The 'above the line' promotional activities (i.e. TV and radio advertisements) influenced my decision to visit WTM
MA3	WTM's branding influenced my decision to visit the event
MA4	Word-of-mouth concerning WTM within my work environment influenced my decision to visit the event
<i>Event Loyalty</i>	
EL1	I will spread positive word-of-mouth about WTM
EL2	I will keep attending WTM
EL3	I will recommend WTM to my colleagues

P1 has been excluded from further analysis due to low commonality (<.4)

Figure 2: Influential factors of event loyalty formulation



\*Coefficients are significant at .05 level

\*\*Coefficients are significant at .01 level

### Conclusion and Discussion

In tourism and hospitality domain, there is a number of studies examining satisfaction aspects and consumer loyalty. Still, as also previously mentioned, there is research scarcity concerning the formulation of event loyalty, even if events and festivals are very important for the tourism industry feature (Akhoondnejad, 2016). This study examines the extent of consumer loyalty in a tourism event, with a special reference to WTM. As described by Lee et al. (2006), loyalty is the behaviour of consumers and visitors that is characterised of repetition and of repurchasing intentions, word-of-mouth-communication, and recommendations. The descriptive results of the study have illustrated the importance of the repetitive aspects in terms of visitation intentions (EL2), the potential of recommendations (EL3), and word-of mouth influence (MA4; EL1). Apart from the confirmation of Lee's et al. (2006) research, this also provides an initial

indication of WTM's loyalty potential. Moreover, it gives evidence to event organisers about the aspects that determine the extent of visitor loyalty in tourism events.

The construct that appears to have the highest influence on the formulation of event loyalty is marketing activities. This finding confirms the studies of Papatheodorou and Pappas (2016) and Godey et al. (2016), also pinpointing the importance of aspects concerning direct and 'above the line' marketing activities, event branding, and word-of-mouth issues. It further provides evidence to event organisers concerning the marketing and promotional aspects that can strengthen the success of a tourism event and establish high levels of visitor satisfaction and consequent loyalty. Thus, marketing aspects should include a well-defined and targeted array of activities, addressed to the market segments of interest.

The study further highlights the importance of event performance for the formulation of event loyalty. The significance of aspects such as the provided awareness of the event, the discounts offered, and the visitation growth, as well as their influence on customer satisfaction, retention, and attraction, confirm the previous studies of Johnston and Clark (2008), and Panyik et al. (2011). These findings also provide managerial implications concerning the extent of event success indicators, and their consequent communication to visitors, potential attendees, and event participants (i.e.: exhibitors). They also create the grounds for better evaluation of event performance and success, and comparison with other similar events, through the establishment of similar quantitatively comparable indicators (i.e.: growth in numbers in terms of visitors and exhibitors).

In terms of perceived value, the findings also confirm the previous studies of Sweeney and Soutar (2001), Xu et al. (2016), and Yoon et al. (2010). All three perceived values (social; emotional; educational) substantially influence event loyalty and determine the success of the event. Even if the economic value is not direct in terms of visitation costs (thus it was not included in the model), the financial output of WTM is unquestionable through trade negotiations and agreements, generating way more than three billion USD each year (TTN, 2016). Managerially-wise, the preservation of the equilibrium through the different modes of perceived values is important for the establishment, continuation and further growth of event loyalty.

Despite the theoretical contribution of the study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First if the research is repeated in a different event the findings may vary, since some aspects like event performance outputs of perceived value and marketing and promotional activities, can produce different outcomes. Thus, any research implementation any interpretation should be made with caution. Second, further research into event exhibitors and organisers, may shed light to different aspects about the evaluation and importance of event loyalty. In addition, the comparison of outputs from researches held in different interest groups can provide a better understanding on the formulation of event loyalty perspectives. Finally, visitor behaviour is affected by a large number of aspects and issues, creating a high complexity (Papatheodorou and Pappas, 2016). Therefore, it is advisable for further research to progress from linear to asymmetric analysis, as well as to compare the extent that each of those can examine, analyse, and interpret the behavioural patterns of visitors.

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