

Article

Luxury Tourism Consumption in the Accommodation Sector: The Mediation Role of Destination Brand Love for Potential Tourists

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Abstract: The present study aims to investigate the determinants of luxury hotel choice, while also analyzing hotels' ability to promote their related destination. The relationship between Destination Brand Love, and the antecedent factors which determine the choices of potential tourists in the Italian territory were studied. Four hundred and seventy-eight potential tourists were recruited via an online questionnaire, which indicated their love for a non-visited destination. Structural equation modeling was used for model estimation. This study contrasts with the previous literature and shows that potential tourists formed a strong bond with a destination brand, demonstrating that Destination Brand Love was not only a post-travel bond. The findings prompted important suggestions relating to symbolic consumption and the emotional aspects of a luxury hotel experience. The predictors (Desire, Attitude Toward Act, Subjective Norms, and CBI) emerged as good antecedents for behavioral intention. Moreover, it emerged that Destination Brand Love mediates the relationship between predictors, behavioral intentions, and loyalty. This study improves the sparse literature on Destination Brand Love, and it offers a new perspective on the luxury hotel sector in the Italian territory. Incorporating potential tourists into Destination Brand Love studies could have both theoretical and practical value, and it also provides advantages for territory marketing.

Keywords: luxury tourism; brand; Destination Brand Love; loyalty; brand identification



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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the analysis and study of tourism as a phenomenon does not concern that which is exclusively geographical and economic, as it also focuses on psychological aspects relating to the choices the tourist has made. An in-depth analysis and description of the phenomenon should combine and integrate different areas without forgetting important psychological factors such as the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of the tourist, the intentions and motivations behind the tourist's behavior, the decision-making processes, and the personal traits of each individual [1].

A knowledge and analysis of tourist behavior are important elements with a double value: it both contributes to the success and better performance of the tourist service/product, and it is useful to tourist consumers, as it simplifies the organization of holidays, and contributes to a greater awareness that tourist goods are designed and conceived ad hoc, based on their expectations, requests, and needs [2–4].

However, it is also important to emphasize that other factors play an important role in the process of choice and purchase. For instance, values have a strong influence upon the choice of tourism brands and products [5,6], as do the motivations behind the decision-making process. Several studies have highlighted the role of one's self-concept and personality as crucial elements for decision-making, attitude changing, one's perception of innovation, and risk-taking. Expectations, attitudes, perceptions, satisfaction, trust, and loyalty are additional factors that should not be underestimated when describing

this specific consumer behavior. Regarding loyalty, for example, it was found that there is no lasting loyalty without trust [7]. McKercher, Denizci-Guillet, and Ng [8] argued that consumer confidence in the tourism sector had unique and special features: tourist consumers may be loyal to providers of tourist products, to the same tourist products, or to the real experiential, for particular types of holidays.

In recent years, the process that has characterized the tourism industry is the branding process [9]. Branding a tourism destination means offering place values or assigning a whole series of tangible and intangible attributes to the destination, that characterizes and distinguishes it from others. As repeatedly stated, this process incorporated both purely physical characteristics of a destination, and more abstract elements, such as emotions, feelings of trust, consistency, and a defined set of expectations [10].

For the tourist consumer, this process represents and develops a real promise relating to the tourist experience; that it will be memorable in all aspects. This experience is supported by the idea that it was ad hoc designed, considering tourists' needs, desires and expectations. In addition, as it offered an all-round service, it contributed to the creation and consolidation of a pleasant and stable memory, which will then encourage the feeling of loyalty, as well as a desire to return to the same destination. For any tourist, the destination it is essential for creating an identity that is engaging and competitive; therefore branding needs to reflect the experience that is promised, without betraying either the nature of the tourist destination, or the expectations of tourists-consumers.

The role of destination branding assumes a lot of significance, as evidenced by Hankinson [11], who identified four different functions carried out by this process: (1) destination brand as a means of communication, and a presentation of the product/service, which symbolizes a specific property; (2) destination brand as a symbolic identity that is linked to desires, needs, and more generally to the emotions of the tourist consumer; (3) destination brand as a representation of added value; and finally (4) destination brand as a relationship with the customer, which must be attentively cared for in order to make it stable and loyal.

Among the concepts and contributions that are linked to destination branding, there is, for example, the construct of territorial marketing. In recent years, this concept has highlighted how the strategic and functional marketing of a territory and/or destination is not exclusively based on the physical characteristics of the territory, but rather, is dedicated to the valorization of its potential, which also applies at a cultural and economic level [12]. A territorial marketing campaign aiming to merge lifestyles, personality, culture, and values, with all the accommodation facilities and experiences offered by a destination, is a process that has created a specific territorial identity, which is difficult to replicate, is more competitive, and forms a closer connection with the tourist consumer [9]. Therefore, territorial marketing is presented as being capable of producing and generating destination branding, and it represents a resource for stakeholders and tourists.

Consistent with other studies, Gnoth [13] suggested that a brand identity which is truly representative of a territory, is one that evaluates cultural, social, natural, and economic aspects. Kladou et al. [14] also provided their interpretation of the concept of destination branding, linking it to the more specific concept of place identity. In this sense, the place brand is described as being expressive, that is, capable of transmitting and fully expressing the destination's culture; reflective, or capable of contributing to the enrichment of the tourist destination with new meanings and symbols; relatable, that is, capable of allowing the tourist consumer to see themselves and identify with the brand, finding their own personality, lifestyle, values, and expectations reflected back at them; and finally, being able to impress, that is, capable of creating "impressions" with emotional meaning that are stable and useful for consolidation in the consumer's mind.

Moreover, in recent years, we have been witnessed exponential growth in the luxury tourism sector, which is an effect of massive globalization and changes to consumer behavior [15]. The desire for luxury, which has always been common among all individuals, seems to be established as a fundamental criterion in the process of choice and in the act of purchase [16]. According to the theoretical literature, luxury is defined as a product or

service that has very particular effects and characteristics: the simple use of a product, or experiential participation in a service, confers consumer esteem by satisfying and focusing upon psychological and functional needs [17,18].

Further contributions underlined the symbolic nature and specific social and cultural significance of luxury consumption, including the tourism and hotel sectors. Due to the complex nature of luxury hospitality, there is a call for further research to understand the underlying structure of the luxury hospitality experience, to identify antecedents and consequences of luxury customer experience, and to develop marketing and management strategies for the industry. Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels [19], for example, stated that personality, social, functional, and financial characteristics are the main motivations behind the consumption and choice process; conversely, in their contribution, Sung et al. [20] focused on the link between these luxury brands, specific satisfaction in terms of utilitarian benefit, and symbolic meanings for the tourist consumer; and finally Lee [21] linked luxury brands to psychological and social aspects, especially of a relational and social nature.

The specific sector of luxury tourism is constantly growing, sustaining a steady and significant growth rate despite the crisis. What emerged, particularly in relation to this industry, was a real democratization of luxury, where the product/service chosen and purchased is not only seen as desired and desirable, but it is also a possibility to occasionally allow the best for oneself [1]. Despite the different luxury tourism travel typologies, a central and common element to all typologies appears to be the experiential one, which is entirely consistent with what has been indicated above. The luxury hospitality sector is also moving in this direction, assigning equal importance to different needs: on the one hand, there is a focus on style, comfort, service, and pampering, and on the other hand, there is a search for a connection with the territory, and an effort to propose full emotional and intense tourism experiences. The contemporary luxury traveler is no longer interested in classic destinations and locations, but in engaging, new, and unique destinations, where experiences, images, and memories are factors that matter. For these reasons, analyzing this specific kind of tourism allows stakeholders, territories, and the scientific community to be more aware of the implications facing this sector.

The importance of this paper could be summarized in three main points: the analysis of luxury hotels as one of the most promising lines of inquiry for luxury tourism; the approach toward the issue of sustainability and the involvement of a particular sample for the study; the potential tourists, as a means of understanding tourism and consumer behavior in the COVID era. In spite of the considerable volume of research in the area of luxury consumption, much remains to be understood about the relationships between the motivating factors behind purchase intention for luxury brands [22]. The luxury hotel sector is growing, and is one of the most dynamic sectors in the luxury market.

Over time, little attention has been paid to the description of luxury services, despite numerous studies that focus on luxury products. The need to study this phenomenon in depth arises because the theories that elaborate upon luxury consumption are based exclusively on luxury products, and therefore, they need to be adequately calibrated to the peculiarities and nature of luxury accommodation, which is characterized by an intangibility and variability that is absolutely distinct from physical products. The study of the hospitality sector also ties in perfectly with the theme of experiential marketing, concretizing exactly how the tourist experience connotes with emotional components [1,23]. The luxury hotel sector, as well as food and wine in general, not only represent style, comfort, taste, and the pursuit of particular raw materials, but it allows for a complete experience [1,24].

Therefore, the luxury hotel sector is a powerful attraction for luxury tourism, and thus, it is of interest to better investigate the drivers behind it, to understand them, and to offer good indications and suggestions for management. A deep understanding and a study of the antecedent factors can help management to better connect the needs and wishes of customers.

The present study is also linked to the topic of sustainability. Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as

strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process as it requires constantly monitoring impacts, and introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction, and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues, and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them. Sustainable tourism aims to promote the knowledge and appreciation of local cultures and traditions, while respecting the environment and the lifestyles of the host countries, territories, and populations. The present study aims to investigate potential tourists' determinants of choice for luxury hotels, while also analyzing hotels' ability to promote their related destination in a sustainable way.

It is well known that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the tourism industry globally. This pandemic has had a great impact on tourism, especially in terms of the number of tourist visits. A surge in the number of tourist visits after the COVID-19 pandemic has been predicted to occur; however, due to their economic condition during the pandemic, people will likely prioritize their primary needs, so potential post-pandemic tourists are most likely to be premium tourists. In accordance with Deniz and colleagues, [25] these types of tourists will plan their tourist activities [26]. In this situation, it seemed prudent to explore the post-COVID-19 travel behavior and intentions of potential tourists, and to generally examine changes to tourist consumer behavior. Enrolling a sample of potential tourists, and having an insight into this category of tourists, means a better and deeper comprehension of consumer behavior, particularly premium tourists (i.e., those most interested in luxury consumption). In tourism research, most studies have focused on the study of place attachment and the consumer behavior of residents [27,28], tourists [29,30], or employees [31], with the emphasis on the post-experience context. In contrast, little has been examined in relation to the pre-visit context. Chen and colleagues [32] revealed that tourists, or potential tourists, could develop attachment to the destination through listening to destination-related songs. Cheng and Kuo [33] found that the familiarity of destination elements for tourists who had yet to make their first visit had a positive correlation with their attachment to the destination. For destination marketing, Chen [34] explored the positive influence of celebrity involvement on the audience in terms of their place attachment and destination brand love. Hosany and colleagues [35] proposed that the potential tourist could develop an attachment to the destination through persona media [36].

For all these reasons, the aim of the present study is to identify the determinants of choice of luxury hotels, while also analyzing hotels' ability to promote their related destination. The role of some predictive variables were analyzed (Subjective Norms, Attitude Toward Act, Desire, Customer Brand Identification (CBI)) in terms of Behavioural Intention (BI), and on the ability to generate destination brand loyalty for potential tourists in the luxury sector. Furthermore, the possible mediating role played by the destination brand love construct was analyzed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Extending the Theory of Planned Behaviour to Predict Tourism Behaviour*

In this study, assuming tourist behavior is a form of consumer behavior means extending the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [37] to predict tourism behavior.

This theory is applied in a lot of studies relating to the tourism sector. Ajzen and Driver [38], for example, in their analysis relating to leisure activities, identified that behavioral, normative, and control beliefs constituted the foundation for certain views, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. Their study also showed that participation in specific recreational activities is profoundly influenced by what friends and family members think, or from the awareness of having enough resources to actively participate in activities.

Han and Kim [39] also emphasized the importance of individual components in their study of determinants of choice for green hotels, supporting the TPB model in a lightly extended version. The authors argued that adding individual dimensions was congruent with the TPB model, and carried a better explanation of consumer and tourist behavior.

For this reason, our first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1. *Attitude Toward Act, Customer Brand Identification and Subjective Norms are predictors of the behavioural intention toward a specific destination.*

2.2. The Application of Self-Regulation Theory in the Tourism Sector

The Theory of Planned Behavior, even if useful and complete in its interpretation of consumer and tourist behavior, has been repeatedly criticized for having underplayed consumer actions as a simple reaction to other significant behaviors, without considering that they could depend on the adaptation process [40]. Between the formation of an intention, and the moment in which the actual action is performed, a set of subprocesses with motivational and cognitive components occur. In this sense, self-regulation theory, as proposed by Bagozzi [41], could explain the defects and criticisms of the TPB, as it deals with the study of the relationship between attitudes, subjective norms, intentions, and behaviors, while similarly considering cognitive, emotional, social, and volitional subprocesses.

An innovative element in this model was the introduction of the desire variable, a motivational component that contributed to action fulfilment, starting with the formation of a favorable and positive attitude [42]. This element is evident during the luxury product choice and purchase process, which includes the tourism sector. The consumption of luxury goods represents the most striking example of a type of consumption having a double value, one that is more of a hedonic type than a utilitarian type [43]. For this reason, it was hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2. *Desire is also a predictor of the behavioural intention toward a specific destination.*

2.3. The Emerging and Predicting Role of Customer Brand Identification

The construct of Customer Brand Identification has recently emerged as a very important construct in both the hospitality and tourism sectors. It could be defined as the psychological state of a customer who has perceived, evaluated, and felt a sense of belonging with a brand [44]. As a matter of fact, identity is an important issue for each individual, both from an individual and social perspective [45]. Since consumers need to build their sense of self (self-definition), they usually satisfy their need in their relationships with brands through expressing themselves, identifying, and relating to them [45,46]. The higher the identification with a brand or organization, the more satisfied the customer will feel with the companies' offers/services, making them prone to consuming and purchasing their goods. In turn, this will lead to positive outcomes, including positive word of mouth, willingness to try new products/services, resistance to negative publicity, intensity of consumption and so on [47,48]. For these reasons, it was hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3. *CBI is a predictor of Behavioural Intentions, Destination Brand Love and Destination Brand Loyalty.*

2.4. The Brand Loyalty as Outcome and Goal of Tourists' Behaviours

Destination brand loyalty has emerged as one of the most vital strategic elements of tourism marketing that is linked to organizational performance, and more specifically, to the reputation of the destination in many countries and tourist locations. It is possible to measure the degree of a tourists' loyalty to a destination by examining their specific intentions to revisit that destination, and their desire and willingness to positively recommend that place or site [49,50]. According to Pike and colleagues [51], brand loyalty represents the level of attachment to the destination, and is one of the main goals of territorial marketing.

Customer loyalty has been highlighted by many scholars as an important driver of continued stability and growth in any organization [52–54]. The success of a destination is strongly linked to the degree of satisfaction and loyalty it generates in cus-

tomers/consumers. One of the most important and significant drivers of loyalty is customer satisfaction, but there are also some important predictors that have yet to be studied. The success of a destination is strongly linked to the degree of satisfaction and loyalty it generates in customers/consumers. One of the most important and significant drivers of loyalty is undoubtedly customer satisfaction, but there are still important predictors that have yet to be studied. Word of mouth, and recommendations to others (especially significant others such as family and friends), play very important antecedent roles [50]. The satisfaction derived from the purchase, previous desire, or even a positive attitude towards the completion of the purchase, are important predictors of this outcome. A brand that triggers emotions (desire or brand love) is more likely to have an influence on the creation of the consumer's experience or attitude, which translates into a purchase, and if it justifies expectations, into brand loyalty. This is especially verified in the tourism sector, where the destination, embodying both intangible and tangible assets, generates a strong feeling of loyalty, even among potential tourists. Bearing in mind the new trends in tourism that COVID-19 has brought, which linked desire, virtual experience, subjective norms, attitude, and identification, translating that to a real visit intention and a loyalty bond [55–57], it was hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 4. *Attitude Toward Act, Customer Brand Identification, Subjective Norms and Desire are predictors of the Destination Brand Loyalty.*

2.5. The Concept and Theory of Brand Love Applied in the Luxury Tourism

Brand love is a recent concept which is studied a great deal in the field of consumer behavior. It is generally defined as “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” [58] (p. 81). One of the main theories that is debated, which describes this phenomenon, and is the most suitable for understanding consumer behavior is Sternberg's [59] Triangular Theory of Love, which interpreted this emotional attachment and divided it into three factors: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment [60–63].

In the context of consumer behavior, passion could be described as a deep emotional involvement that a consumer feels towards a product/service. This involvement also generated a profound relationship that often resulted in a sort of separation distress from the object of love, which persisted and remained stable in the consumer's mind. The intimacy factor, on the other hand, was closely linked to the emotional investment in the relationship, and to the brand's ability to understand the customer; when the customer consumer experienced the feeling of brand love towards a product/service, they firmly believed that the brand understood them, that it fully satisfied their needs and expectations, and that it was well linked to his personality, lifestyle, and values [64]. Finally, the last factor, is that of decision/commitment, which refers to the cognitive decision taken by the consumer. They perceived themselves as permanently engaged, and in a long-term relationship with the brand, therefore placing themselves in a relationship akin to the ones we have with individuals.

Recently, hospitality and tourism literature have paid increased attention to brand love because of its influence on several aspects of marketing. It affected positive word of mouth (WOM), repeat purchase intentions, resistance to negative information about the brand, resistance to switching brands, and willingness to pay a premium price [62,65]. There are several contributions that have dealt with this phenomenon in tourism.

Tsai [66], for example, identified brand love as one of the most powerful tools that achieve customer loyalty in the hotel industry, claiming that it prevents the customer from switching to a competitor.

An interesting variant relating to brand love, when applied to the tourism sector, is the concept of Destination Brand Love. This construct is supported by countless studies [67,68] which identify how the construct and sentiment of brand love could be well linked to an

entire destination, thus properly supporting the principle that destination branding has important consequences.

For example, Albert et al. [64] identify 11 different dimensions of Destination Brand Love; passion for the brand, desire to maintain the relationship for a long time, perceiving the brand to be congruous with the self, dreams, memories, pleasure, attraction, uniqueness, trust, and declaration of affect. Likewise, Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen [69] had identified similar sub-factors. These factors allowed us to detect how powerful the effect and influence generated by the Destination Brand Love could be: it had a strong influence on tourist consumer satisfaction, but it also triggered a profound effort towards action, and a strong and constant loyalty to a destination. Thus, it was hypothesized:

Hypothesis 5. *Destination Brand Love predicts both Behavioural Intentions toward a specific destination and Destination Brand Loyalty.*

Hypothesis 6. *Destination Brand Love has a mediating role in the relationship between antecedents (Subjective Norms, Attitude Toward Act, Desire CBI) and outcomes (Behavioural Intentions and Destination Brand Loyalty).*

Moreover, establishing a bond with a specific destination does not necessarily require a physical and concrete experience: fantasy and imagination could be useful for establishing a strong attachment and feeling of love [70]; therefore, potential tourists are also likely to fall in love with a destination. Information and knowledge about the brand, and consumers' affective reactions toward the brand, could precede their choice process. Tourists could acquire information and develop a feeling of love towards a specific destination in ways other than experiencing it, such as watching advertisements, reading books, communicating with family or friends, or being influenced by celebrities and social networks [71].

Studying this construct is interesting because it provided a deeper understanding, it gave attention to what tourist consumers felt when visiting a destination, how they experienced all the destination experiences offered to them, and how this may influence their choices.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants and Procedure

Data collection involved a sample of 478 potential tourist consumers from the Italian territory. More specifically, it used convenience sampling, because it recruited individuals via an online survey. Some luxury hotels contributed to the study, and encouraged the diffusion of the questionnaire among their customers. Through social media and the help of some local luxury hotels, the sample was achieved. By clicking on the provided link, an information sheet, instructions, and an informed consent form were presented to each of the respondents. In order to obtain an adequate sample and suitable responses, two control questions were asked: one selected consumers and tourists who were knowledgeable and close to the luxury hospitality sector, and the second one indicated what the desired and loved destinations were. The participation was voluntary. An individual and anonymous questionnaire was used with several scales that required approximately 20 min to be completed.

The sample was composed of 259 women and 219 men aged between 19 and 70 (Mage = 37.8; SD = 11.3). Additional socio-personal information has been recorded. Notably, the sample was largely composed of employees from private companies and freelancers, who have an annual income of over EUR 35,000.

3.2. Measures

The data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The variables analyzed were:

- Subjective Norms [72], which assessed the individual's propensity to satisfy the expectations of people they considered important (friends, family). This variable is

measured using 3 items on a 4-point Likert scale (from “totally true for me” to “totally false for me”);

- Attitude Toward Act, that is, the evaluative and affective attitude that tourist consumers developed towards luxury hotels. In order to obtain detail, a 7-point semantic differential scale [73] consisting of 17 bipolar pairs were used for this measurement: 10 couples were used to measure the evaluative attitude (e.g., useful, useless, etc.) and 7 couples were used to measure the affective attitude (e.g., pleasant, unpleasant, etc.).
- Behavioural intentions [72] (i.e., the measurement of the intentions that lead to the actual purchase and consumption action), were specifically aimed at the luxury hotels sector. This variable is measured with 3 items on a 4-point Likert scale (from “very unlikely” to “very likely”);
- Desire [72], that is, the variable measured which represents a more crucial motivational commitment than simple attitude, providing a greater push to act. This variable is measured from 2 items, on a 4-point Likert scale (from “totally true for me” to “totally false for me”);
- Destination Brand Love [58,74], for the measurement of the construct related to Destination Brand Love which is specifically aimed at luxury hotels. The choice of this scale was made as it was appropriately validated and is specifically used for the hotel sector. More specifically, 24 items were used and measured on a 7-point Likert scale (from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”);
- Customer Brand Identification [75], was the variable related to the measurement of possible identifications that the tourist consumer made with the brand. The scale consisted of 5 items, measured on a 7-point Likert scale (from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”);
- Destination Brand Loyalty [76], measured the loyalty that tourist consumers felt towards the destination, which was also measured as switching resistance. This variable is measured on a 3-item scale on a 7-point Likert scale (from “Completely disagree” to “Completely agree”).

3.3. Data Analysis

SPSS (version 27.0 for Windows; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) was used for the descriptive and correlation analysis of the variables in this study. To test the hypotheses and the conceptual proposal model, it structural equation modelling (SEM) was used. Tests were completed in AMOS 25.0 [77].

Cronbach’s alpha was used to ensure the internal consistency and reliability of all the scales used in this study. This important procedure demonstrated the value of the scales used, showing how they could be credible and reproducible, even in different contexts.

To guarantee construct validity, convergent validity was assessed, as was discriminant validity. Convergent validity was confirmed by size of factor loading, average variance extracted (AVE) values, and composite reliability (CR) values. CR should be greater than AVE and AVE should be greater than 0.5 to confirm convergent validity [78].

It the square roots of AVE values were also included to compare with the correlation coefficients between constructs. Discriminant validity is achieved if these values (square roots AVE) are greater than the correlations between two variables [78]

A series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were performed on the dataset to identify the model with the best fit for our dataset. Harman’s single-factor test [79] was used to examine the common variance problem (CMV). The goodness of fit of the models was assessed through several indices. In particular, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Goodness-of-Fit statistic (GFI), the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) were used. The GFI index has traditionally been recommended to have an omnibus cut-off point of 0.90 [80]. RMSEA in the range of 0.05 to 0.10 has been considered as an indication of discrete adaptation and values above 0.10 denote marginal adaptation [81]. An RMSEA in the range of 0.08 to 0.10 provide poor adaptation and below 0.08 indicated

good adaptation [81]. However, more recently, a cut-off value close to 0.06 [82], or a strict upper limit of 0.07 [83], appears to be the general consensus. The range of values for CFI is from 0 to 1 with Bentler and Bonnet [84] suggesting values above 0.90 for a good fit. Earlier suggestions claimed that the cut-off criterion should be $TLI \geq 0.95$ [82]. A cut-off criterion of $CFI \geq 0.90$ was first proposed, however, other studies have shown that a value of $CFI \geq 0.95$ is now recognized as indicative of good adaptation [82,85]. Values for SRMR range from zero to 1.0 with well-fitting models obtaining values of less than 0.05 [86,87]. An SRMR of 0 indicates a perfect fit.

Moreover, χ^2 and $\Delta\chi^2$ values between competing models were presented, but being sensitive to the sample size [88], the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) were used instead. In general, lower values indicated a better fit.

In order to test the indirect relationship between Destination Brand Love, its antecedents, and outcomes, mediation analysis was performed using a structural equation model. Following the recommendations of James and colleagues [89] and of Shrout and Bolger [90] on expected proximal and distal effects, two regression models were simultaneously applied, assuming that the total effect of the dependent variable on the independent variable is different from the direct effect of the variable. The indirect effect was tested using a bootstrap estimation approach on 2000 samples and a percentile method corrected for 95% bias [91].

4. Results

4.1. CFA of Model's Variables

A series of CFA were carried out, and as a result, the model fit was quite good: (χ^2 (52) = 193.844 ($p < 0.001$); NNFI = 0.91; CFI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.05); AIC = 211.67 and BIC = 189.38. All the indexes proposed were acceptable and adequate; therefore they were good models for analyzing and describing the possible direct and indirect effects of the variables analyzed. As stated by Bentler [92] and Hu and Bentler [82], this model had acceptable adhesion.

The results related to Cronbach's alpha showed a good internal consistency, and therefore, they demonstrated good reliability. All the variables have Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7. The results also indicated that the AVE is greater than 0.65, and that CR is greater than 0.8 for all constructs; thus construct validity, specifically convergent validity, was guaranteed (Table 1) [78].

The correlations between variables are all significant at $p < 0.001$ (Table 2). The square roots of AVE values were also included to be compared with the correlation coefficients between constructs. As shown in Table 2, the square roots of AVEs (along the diagonal line), were higher than the correlation coefficients, and thus, they demonstrated an acceptable discriminant validity.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha values and construct validity.

	Mean	SD	Alpha (α)	AVE	CR
Desire	3.84	0.70	0.93	0.75	0.85
Attitude Toward Act	5.43	0.65	0.81	0.65	0.79
Subjective Norms	3.08	0.72	0.84	0.69	0.87
Customer Brand Identification	5.39	0.67	0.77	0.66	0.87
Destination Brand Love	4.26	0.93	0.75	0.69	0.92
Behavioral Intention	3.45	0.76	0.84	0.71	0.88
Destination Brand Loyalty	5.17	0.92	0.86	0.73	0.91

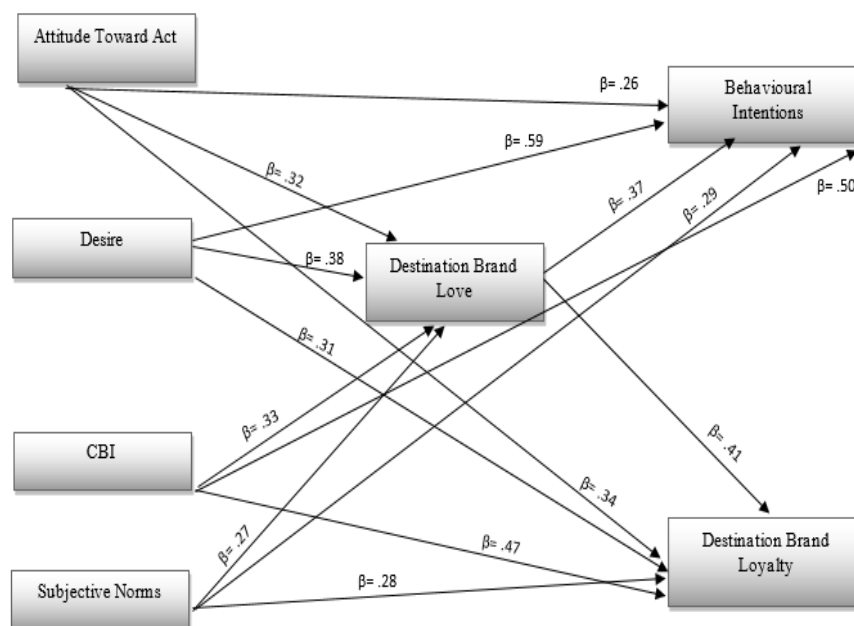
Table 2. Correlations and square roots AVE values.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Desire	0.86	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Attitude Toward Act	0.51 **	0.81	-	-	-	-	-
3. Subjective Norms	0.32 **	0.22 **	0.83	-	-	-	-
4. CBI	0.36 **	0.60 **	0.26 **	0.81	-	-	-
5. Destination Brand Love	0.36 **	0.47 **	0.29 *	0.45 *	0.83	-	-
6. Behavioral Intentions	0.22 *	0.39 **	0.21 **	0.36 *	0.22 **	0.84	-
7. Destination Brand Loyalty	0.32 **	0.36 **	0.32 **	.023 **	0.53 *	0.25 **	0.85

** $p < 0.001$ (2-code), * $p < 0.05$ (2-code).

4.2. Mediation Analysis

In the proposal model, the variables Desire, Subjective Norms, Attitude toward act, and Customer Brand Identification were intended to be exogenous variables, while Destination Brand Love, Behavioral Intentions, and Destination Brand Loyalty variables were used as endogenous variables. The model in Figure 1 reported the proposal model and the mediation analysis.

**Figure 1.** Path diagram of the model.

The results prompted some interesting considerations. In the model considered, all the variables were good predictors of the outcomes (Behavioral Intentions and Destination Brand Loyalty), thus confirming the hypotheses. Results are shown on Figure 1 and Table 3.

These results revealed that Desire ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$), Subjective Norms ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), Attitude toward act ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), and CBI ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$) had a direct effect on Behavioral Intention. Moreover, it emerged that the same variables had a direct effect on Destination Brand Loyalty (DBLOY): path Desire-DBLOY $\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$; path Subjective Norms-DBLOY $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$; path Attitude Toward Act-DBLOY $\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$; path CBI-DBLOY $\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$. Regarding the Destination Brand Love construct, it was revealed that it had a direct effect on Behavioral Intentions ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$) and on Destination Brand Loyalty ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$).

Regarding the mediating role of the Destination Brand Love, it emerged that it mediated the relationship between Subjective Norms and BI (SE = 0.23, $p < 0.001$); Attitude Toward Act and BI (SE = 0.17, $p < 0.001$); Desire and BI (SE = 0.22, $p < 0.001$); CBI and BI (SE = 0.26, $p < 0.001$); and CBI and Destination Brand Loyalty (SE = 0.19, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Mediating effect of Destination Brand Love.

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	Estimate	E	BC 95%		CI	
					LL		UL	
Subjective Norms	Destination Brand Love	Behavioural Intentions	0.23 **	0.01	0.015		0.0247	
Attitude Toward Act	Destination Brand Love	Behavioural Intentions	0.17 **	0.03	0.073		0.046	
Desire	Destination Brand Love	Behavioural Intentions	0.22 **	0.05	0.037		0.244	
CBI	Destination Brand Love	Behavioural Intentions	0.26 **	0.04	0.174		0.320	
CBI	Destination Brand Love	Destination Brand Loyalty	0.19 **	0.01	0.155		0.069	

** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussions

The hospitality industry is going through one of its most difficult times due to COVID-19, which exposed the fragility of the industry, but it also showed incredible resilience and commitment to innovation. They have had to redefine the meaning of service, space, and safety, and they have had to realign with consumer desires and needs. Hospitality, in general, is not immune to the ‘grey’ aspects of life, and the luxury sector has experienced the same, if not greater, difficulties. This study is meant as a way of understanding and supporting hotel management, providing them with useful elements for restructuring and planning a successful future.

The aim of the present work is to identify the specific determinants of the choice for luxury hotels, analyzing the mediating effect of the Destination Brand Love variable. In order to connect with the specific and current conditions, we chose to enroll a sample of potential tourists. The choosing of that sample also derived from recent studies, which confirmed that the incorporation of potential tourists into the concept of Destination Brand Love can have both theoretical and practical value, and can provide us with important information on pre-visit behavior [93]. Indeed, these studies suggested that the image a tourist forms of a tourist destination, particularly of a country, could influence the decision to choose the destination.

McCartney, Butler and Bennett [94] mention that Guun’s “dimorphic theory” of image suggested that the image of a destination can either be formed via an actual visit (organic), or via externally received (induced) information from sources such as broadcast and print media, and word of mouth. Furthermore, according to the three-order hierarchy model [95], and the Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) model [96] of marketing communication, for high involvement products and services (such as luxury brands and hotels), consumers’ affective reactions to the brand (i.e., brand love) precede their behaviors (i.e., a sequential ‘affective–behavioral’ response). Furthermore, brand cognition (i.e., brand information and knowledge) can lead to affection (i.e., brand love); therefore, potential tourists may fall in love with a destination they have never been to. Tourists may acquire some knowledge about a specific destination brand in ways that differ from the actual experience, such as watching advertisements, reading books, and communicating with others [71,97].

This study confirmed that potential tourists could form a strong bond with a destination brand, contrasting with the previous and prevailing literature, which had exclusively focused on Destination Brand Love as a post-travel bond [98]. The results that emerged are interesting for the current literature, as they offer important suggestions relating to symbolic consumption and the emotional aspects of a luxury hotel experience [62]. From the analysis of data, it emerged that the variables which are considered as predictors (Desire, Attitude Toward Act, Subjective Norms, and CBI), could be considered as good antecedents of behavioral intention, as forecast in the hypotheses. These data are consistent with many studies [39,99,100], and above all, with the leading reference theories, Theory of Planned Behavior and the Self-Regulation Theory. The findings indicated that a growth

in favorable tourist consumer attitudes, subjective norms, and desire had a strong impact on behavioral intentions [101]. A common practice of each trip or tourism experience is to imagine the destination and form related expectations; if the marketing strategies had worked well, there was a higher probability that tourist consumers experienced a greater desire to visit that destination, a more positive attitude, and were more influenced by what their significant others said and thought. Desire, in particular, seemed to be linked to luxury goods consumption, as it showed the double nature and value of this type of consumption and choice; on the one hand, it was linked to utilitarianism, in giving oneself a luxury holiday, to satisfy the need and the idea of relaxation, comfort, and pampering; on the other hand, it was linked to the consumer's need to feel appreciated, valued at a personal and group level [102].

Moreover, the results demonstrated the important role played by Customer Brand Identification. This variable proved to be an excellent predictor of behavioral intention, underlining the close link that exists between consumer choice (including tourism-based choices) and the construction of one's self-concept, both current/real, and ideal/desired [103]. An association between CBI and Destination Brand Love also emerged, consistent with other studies, which underlined and affirmed that an antecedent to the love emotion is "the judgement that the loved one provides something the person wants, needs or likes" [104] (p. 1078). More specifically, in the hotel industry, what contributed to generating strong attachments and positive feelings is the possibility that consumer tourists would be able to express themselves in the destinations, both in terms of values and lifestyle, and would additionally perceive themselves as being absolutely understood and valued by the destination brand.

Regarding the Destination Brand Love construct, an interesting mediating role emerged between the predictors described above, behavioral intentions, and loyalty. The powerful emotional bond that brand love establishes with the destination, induces a sort of anticipated separation distress, a strong switching resistance, and in general, a better feeling of trust and loyalty that is associated to the destination and to the brand. Consistent with the theoretical background, emotional bonds with the destination brand enhanced long-term customer relationships [105], had a positive effect on brand loyalty and on customer satisfaction [62,106], promoted awareness of a greater affinity with the brand, stimulated the spread of positive word of mouth, and provided intrinsic, and enhanced extrinsic, rewards. These results confirm that the bond between tourists and a destination can be classified into pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit bond categories [107], but most of all, that it is important to study, and have insight on, the pre-visit behavior. However, most of the studies in destination branding have mainly focused on the post-visit bond. Potential tourists' Destination Brand Love provides an important theoretical perspective for studying the tourist–destination relationship.

6. Contribution and Limitations

6.1. Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the theoretical knowledge of several areas, including the luxury accommodation sector, the brand love construct, and pre-visit behavior. Firstly, this paper will add to the literature on luxury branding. Despite the amount of existing research in the field of luxury services, the study of hospitality and luxury still has many research gaps. Indeed, most luxury research investigated luxury goods and not luxury service experiences. Although luxury goods refer to rarity and exclusivity, luxury experiences are an important area for specific experience-based research. Due to the complex nature of luxury hospitality, there is a demand for further investigation, in order to better comprehend the framework underlying the luxury hospitality experience, to identify the antecedents and consequences of the luxury customer experience, and develop marketing and management strategies for the industry. This study covered the investigation of consumer behavior (i.e., the area of customer attitudes and behaviors towards loyalty, luxury image, motivation configuration, internal beliefs and the whole luxury experience).

As such, the research theoretically adds to the literature on luxury services by exploring luxury hospitality services and the specific predictors of this choice.

Concerning the construct of Destination Brand Love, this study offers important insights for academics. This construct is indeed a relatively new concept, but it could provide interesting insights, including managerial ones. The construct of brand love has been widely studied when considering consumer behavior in general and in relation to specific products or services, but it has not been used for understanding the tourist–destination relationship. Only a limited number of empirical studies have examined Destination Brand Love, but they give very interesting results regarding its significant impact on tourists’ attitudes and behaviors towards a destination.

Examining the Destination Brand Love antecedents and its underlying mechanisms, this study provides destination marketers with new insights on how to improve a destination’s competitive advantages. Compared with most existing constructs, which have focused only on on-site or post-visit experiences, Destination Brand Love covers the full range of pre-visit, on-site and post-visit experiences, and thus opens up a completely new perspective in the study of tourist–destination ties. Since Destination Brand Love could be used as a tool to retain previous visitors, and to attract more potential tourists, using it in the present study allowed us to obtain important and useful theoretical information.

Many of the studies carried out on tourism behavior in relation to COVID-19 have tried to identify key predictors of post-pandemic travel intentions, including people’s intra-pandemic risk perceptions [108–110]; destination health risk images [111–113]; travel fears and anxiety [114,115]; and perceived knowledge [116].

Although this evidence provides important information, especially when it is related to the impact of destination images during the pandemic and subsequent behavioral intentions, these studies have significant weaknesses. The academic and non-academic communities call for more emphasis on investigating the possible differences between tourists’ perceptions with, and without, past experience of a particular destination, focusing on how and whether their post-pandemic travel intentions could change. Our study specifically aims to fill this gap, as it concerns pre-visit behavior and the identification of antecedents to a destination visit without past experience [117].

Attracting tourists to a tourist destination is important, especially in light of a global pandemic and a deep crisis within the tourism industry; however, the ability to convey information that forms a positive image in the minds of tourists/consumers could be a very challenging but almost necessary task in this situation. Our study aims to provide guidance and suggestions to help all stakeholders in building a successful and attractive destination image.

6.2. Management Implications

Encouraging domestic and international tourism activity is the overarching goal for post-pandemic recovery strategies in many destinations. However, the perceived health risk, and the pandemic in general, has negatively affected destination image, tourists’ perceptions, and their travel intentions. As a response, appropriate interventions will play critical roles in mitigating the effects of the pandemic on tourists and their behavioral intentions and choices; therefore, the findings of this study provide important managerial implications, and essential insights, for destination marketers in particular to deal with the current evolution of tourists’ perceptions and destination image during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, it emerged that Destination Brand Love could be used by destination marketers as a strategic tool to gain competitive advantage. Previous studies and the present paper confirmed that both potential tourists and previous visitors are profoundly influenced by Destination Brand Love, which induces significant emotional and behavioral responses. It is therefore important to inform destination marketers that developing, promoting, and paying attention to this construct could become a strategic tool to attract new tourists, to keep existing ones, and to be more competitive in today’s market. Our

study and future research could contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon, and could help management structure strategies to enhance this feeling.

As a pioneering study, this research tried to investigate pre-visit behavior and identify the determinants of a destination choice. As previously reported, many studies have used previous experience as the most important significant factor among the choice criteria. Our study focuses instead on how the formation of a destination image could generate a feeling of brand love, while creating intention and loyalty, even without prior experience.

Studies such as this are important for destination marketers, who can deduce that they have an important role in conveying the choices of potential tourists. Good communication and promotion, for example, can generate desire, positive word of mouth, and can connect to the individual's ideal self. It is particularly important in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to identify how to reach and attract potential consumers. Forming a positive image of the destination increases the chance of a future intent to travel; our study reflects on this, and provides an overview.

6.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This empirical research would be an interesting starting point for further research, due to its limitations and new perspectives.

First, future studies are needed to replicate the results in other countries and for different kinds of tourism. A larger sample could confirm these results, or underline new and interesting aspects of the study. Second, this study needs to examine other antecedents and outcomes, such as the role of influencers, social media, and all other forms of media. Third, Destination Brand Love is quite a new topic, refers especially to potential visitors. Future researchers could employ a mixed method approach to improve this research, or they could undertake a longitudinal design to replicate this study.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study is part of a limited number of contributions that has tackled this issue from a psychological and social point of view, offering an interesting contribution to the comprehension of these variables and this phenomenon. Investigating potential tourists' consumer behavior is important both for stakeholders and consumers to promote their well-being with regard to tourism. Knowing that potential tourists could also experience Destination Brand Love, and could thus change their intentions and enhance their loyalty, is an interesting point of view for territorial marketing and for thinking about deep engagement strategies that could enhance Destination Brand Love.

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