Drivers of Value Creation in An Ecotourist Destination: Disentangling the Links that Tie Travellers' Motivations and the Destination's Image

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Abstract Ecotourists' motivations are a fundamental concept in travel behaviour and determine different aspects of tourism activities, which will eventually reflect the value created by the travelling experience. This paper aims to evaluate the mediating role of the image of a destination on the perceived value of travellers. We analysed a sample of 382 visitors in three ecotouristic destinations located in Ecuador by using the partial least squares (PLS) methodology. Results show that utilitarian motivations related to enriching travellers lives (self-development) or to escaping from daily routines or social pressures (ego-defensive) are the most significant predictors of perceived value. Similarly, the social and emotional dimensions are the most important in the value assessment of an ecotourist destination. Managerial implications clearly arise from the results' discussion. Ecotourist destination managers will have to closely examine these motivations in order to adapt destination services to enhance aspects that reinforce travellers' motivations.

Keywords Destination image · Ecotourism · Motivations · Perceived value · PLS analysis

JEL Classification Z32 · Q56 · F64

1 Introduction

There are several definitions of ecotourism, but what most of them have in common is a focus on the natural environment. This tourism is also understood differently according to the characteristics in which the activity is developed (Cater, 2007).

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V. Katsoni and A. C. Şerban (eds.), *Transcending Borders in Tourism Through Innovation and Cultural Heritage*, Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92491-1_3

Ecotourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry (Das & Chatterjee, 2015); this type of tourism has grown much faster than tourism in general (Hultman et al., 2015). In this sense, due to the growing interest of tourists in the environment and the displacements directed towards the enjoyment of the natural environment, together with the greater dissatisfaction of tourists with mass tourism, a significant touristic market gap related to nature has recently arisen (Rivera, 2010).

In addition, due to its effectiveness in protecting the environment, education, recreation and job creation, areas related to ecotourism have become essential destinations as there has been a change in the touristic demand towards activities related to the environment that are found, mainly, in natural areas (Luo & Deng, 2008). The image and, therefore, the touristic attractions and destinations can be improved when deploying environmental management practices (Hu & Wall, 2005).

Furthermore, studies have indicated that the most effective predictor of tourism behaviour should be the behaviour itself, including the motivations behind it (Kotler et al., 2003; Carvache-Franco et al., 2019).

In this sense, motivation has become a fundamental concept for travel behaviour and determines different aspects of tourism activities, such as reasons for travelling, specific destination image or overall satisfaction with the trip (Allison & Severt, 2012; Chen & Petrick, 2016). In addition, the study of the motivations facilitates a better understanding of the expectations, needs and objectives of tourists and is a fundamental element to design marketing strategies and helps the positioning and competitiveness of the agents involved in destination image management (Pons et al., 2007; Carvache-Franco et al., 2019).

The existing relationships among the variables affecting value creation have been previously examined. For instance, Stydilis et al. (2017) modelled the interrelationships between behavioural intentions, satisfaction, perceived quality and destination image, but only in relation to domestic tourism. The moderating effect of previous visits on the cognitive tourist destination was studied by Rodriguez-Molina et al. (2013) and, in the same vein, Camprubí et al. (2013) highlighted the relevance of tourists as agents in destination image-formation processes. However, so far no study has explained the factors impacting the destination image, how they do this and how much this affects tourists' final perceived value of the destination image. That is why this paper aims to evaluate the mediating role of the travellers' perceived value of the destination image.

2 Literature Review and Hypothesis

Tourist motivations

Motivational factors determine behaviour (Ajzen, 2005). Knowing tourists' motivations will help to identify their expectations and predict their future behaviour regarding a destination (Jang & Feng, 2007; Pan, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). There

are a wide variety of motivations for why people visit a destination in general, and an ecotouristic destination in particular.

It is believed that there are differences between conventional and ecotourists' motivations (Chan & Baum, 2007); environmental factors tend to factor more in the decision-making process of ecotourists (Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2002; Wurzinger & Johansson, 2006). Similarly, visiting natural environments are more likely to motivate ecotourists (Wurzinger & Johansson, 2006). However, some authors have reported other related motivations in ecotourists such as personal and social values (Galley & Clifton, 2004; Eubanks et al., 2004; Giddy & Webb, 2018).

Lee et al. (2014) used a classification of the eco-travellers' motivations based on the Functional theory (Katz, 1960). Motivations can be originated by the desire to obtain information to understand the world (knowledge function), to maximise reward and minimise penalties (utilitarian function—reward, self-development and escape), to reduce anxiety due to an internal or external reality (ego-defensive function), or to interact with their reference social groups (social-adjustive function).

There is then a wide variety of motivations for ecotourists to visit a specific destination, but there is no agreement on a dominant driving force (Wight, 1996).

The selection of the destination is influenced by the destination image travellers have (Goossens, 2000). How this image is created is influenced by the tourists' motivations (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004).

An analysis of this relation has determined that motivations have a direct impact on both the cognitive (Llodra-Riera et al., 2015) and the affective dimension of the image (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

Based on the above, we propose:

H1 Ecotourists' motivations positively impact the formation of the cognitive image of a destination.

H2 Ecotourists' motivations positively impact the formation of the affective image of a destination.

Destination Image

A destination image gathers customer beliefs and impressions about a destination (Crompton, 1979). The destination image is built based on the attributes and features that characterise a destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Jenkins, 1999). Subsequently, local resources and the supporting activities and infrastructure available in the destination become a vital factor in the decision to visit (Beerli & Martin, 2004). When confronting an objective evaluation of a destination, there is a subjective perception of the destination's attributes. The existing literature defines these two perspectives, building an image of the cognitive and affective dimensions (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2000; Martin & Bosque, 2008). The affective image is based on the feelings created during a previous experience of a destination's attributes. Thus, as the cognitive image is based on the knowledge of a destination's attributes, this cognition will affect the customer's feelings, suggesting that the cognitive image can influence the affective image (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H3 Cognitive image positively affects the affective image.

Destinations can attract tourists, creating the proper destination image. As mentioned previously, the image will be constructed based on what tourists are offered, such as the destination resources available or the activities proposed, and on the expectations created based on the previous experiences of the potential visitor. Several authors have deemed the destination image to be an essential factor affecting the perceived value (Kim et al., 2013).

Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H4 Destination image positively affects the perceived value.
H4a Cognitive image positively affects the perceived value.
H4b Affective image positively affects the perceived value.

Perceived value is evaluated against the expectations to generate satisfaction (Chi & Qu, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2012) and, eventually, this experience will affect future intentions (Chen & Tasi, 2007).

Perceived value

The concept of perceived value relates to the customer's assessment of the utility of a specific product or service (Zeithaml, 2000). This evaluation is based on the perception of the relationship between benefits and sacrifices. In other words, what is obtained related to what is given? Therefore, perceived value is related to customer behaviour and intentions (Cronin et al., 2000; Oh, 2000).

Benefits and sacrifices can cover different aspects, such as economic, personal or social. Thus, perceived value is a construct describing the evaluation of a wide variety of trade-offs made by the customer (Cronin et al., 2000; Grewal et al., 1998).

Several authors have studied the different dimensions of perceived value. These studies propose a different number of dimensions. They agree on the existence of an economical and quality (functional) perspective (Chen & Hu, 2009; Deng et al., 2010; Williams & Soutar, 2009). The economic perspective refers to the utility derived from the product/service due to the reduction of its perceived costs (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), and the functional value relates to the utility derived from the perceived quality of the product/service (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

These two dimensions relate solely to a cognitive and rational approach. However, perceived value is generated after experiencing the product or service, so it is exposed to the subjective or emotional reactions generated by the customer (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Thus, this affective approach captures the feelings or emotions generated by the products or services. Most researchers agree on categorising them as a social dimension and an emotional dimension (de Ruyter et al., 1997; Deng et al., 2010; Grönroos, 1997; Kim & Park, 2017; Sánchez et al., 2006; Sheth et al., 1991; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Sweeney et al., 1999; Williams & Soutar, 2009; Yang & Jolly, 2009). The social dimension refers to the utility derived from the product/service's ability to enhance social self-concept (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), while the emotional dimension refers to the

utility derived from the feelings or affective states that a product/service generates (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

The perceived value of a destination is evaluated after experiencing it based on the evaluation of these dimensions. Thus, the expectations created by the customer establish the baseline for the comparison between what the customer gets and what is given. As customers' expectations are based on the cognitive and affective image that they have, image is a significant inductor of the perceived value of the destination (Chiu et al., 2014).

The mediating role of destination image

The literature has so far found evidence that ecotourists' motivations have a positive impact on tourists' intention to revisit a destination (Lee et al., 2014). Some contributions have positively associated the perceived value of an ecotouristic destination to satisfaction and, consequently, to loyalty (Kim & Park, 2017). Along this line, other authors found that motivations affect both the cognitive and affective image of a destination (Llodra-Riera et al., 2014) and the latter affects the perceived value of a destination (Chiu et al., 2014). Therefore, we can presume that ecotourists' motivations may affect the perceived value of the destination through other variables, such as destination image, that may act as mediators in the relationship. We consider it is necessary to identify the potential mediator effect in such a link. Hence, based on this theoretical analysis, we propose:

H5 Destination image mediates the relationship between a traveller's motivations and the perceived value of an ecotouristic destination.

The concept of perceived value is a crucial factor in achieving a competitive advantage and a good predictor of behavioural intentions (Parasuraman, 1997; Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000). Confirming destination image as a mediator between customer motivation and perceived value would have significant implications. Hence, identifying the most critical motivation of this image and its value perception would allow destination managers to create the right atmosphere to increase the perceived value of the destination. Working around those attributes that relate to key motivations and creating experiences to evoke the proper feelings will facilitate this, and destination managers would be able to direct communication strategies more effectively and efficiently. However, they will have to ensure that the experiences delivered are aligned to the projected image of the destination in order to increase the perceived value and satisfaction.

3 Sample and Method

We have chosen three ecotouristic destinations located in the Guayas region in Ecuador. More precisely, the research study was limited to the Santay, Puerto Morro and Samanes protected areas. We randomly surveyed a total of 382 travellers in these areas. 10.9% of the respondents had less than 20 years old, 60.9% were

aged between 20 and 29 and 19.3% between 30 and 39. The vast majority (98.8%) of these individuals were Ecuadorian nationals. Women represented 57.3% of the respondents.

Since the analysis used existing validated scales, we focused our efforts on adjusting the survey to the Ecuadorian context and translating the language into Spanish, as used by the respondents. Besides the respondents' information, including age, gender, area of origin, and profession, the questionnaire was coded in a Likert 1–5 measurement scale, in which the range of responses was 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

We analysed the data from the survey using the partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modelling methodology with Smart PLS 3 (Ringle et al., 2012). We used PLS because it focuses on prediction and introduces a new structural path based on a previous study (Chin, 2010).

We followed the two-step approach modelling the hierarchical constructs as reflective-formative because the motivations and perceived value were second-order constructs created by the aggregation of different dimensions (first-order constructs), in addition to our interest in the higher order variables. According to Becker et al. (2012), this approach leads to unbiased results and produces excellent estimates leading to a more parsimonious model. In this case, the dimensions became the observed indicators of second-order factors, and their weights indicated the importance of these drivers.

As we aim to test the mediating effect of the destination image on the relationship between the eco travellers' motivations and perceived value, we used Niltz et al.'s (2016) approach. That is, we evaluated the effects of travellers' motivations on perceived value by introducing the mediators as these effects may be affected by a variety of direct and indirect forces (Hayes, 2009). This method allows us to determine the existence of either full or partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

4 Results

Measurement model

Regarding the measurement model, for the reflective measures in first-order constructs, we first assessed the individual item reliability (Table 1). Item loadings were generally above the accepted threshold of 0.7 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). We excluded individual items with loadings under the suggested threshold. We assessed their construct reliability, checking that composite reliabilities (CR) were greater than 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Additionally, the constructs showed sufficient convergent validity as their average variance extracted (AVE) rates were higher than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Table 1). For discriminant validity, we noted that the square root of AVE (Table 2) was greater than its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1 Quality criteria of the first-order and second-order constructs

Dimension/question	Item	Loading	AVE	CR	Weights	Loadings	VIF
Knowledge function—nature appreciation	Mot_1		0.9	0.947	0.086 n.s	0.476	1.37
To be close to nature	Mot1_1	0.941					
To gain a better appreciation of nature	Mot1_2	0.956					
Utilitarian function-reward	Mot_2		0.584	0.894	0.112 n.s	0.711	2.254
To experience new things	Mot2_1	0.792					
To explore the unknown	Mot2_2	0.799					
To develop my personal interests	Mot2_3	0.802					
To have fond memories	Mot2_4	0.710					
To gain a sense of self-achievement	Mot2_6	0.753					
To experience different cultures	Mot2_7	0.724					
Knowledge function—building personal relationships	Mot_3		0.744	0.921	0.021 n.s	0.748	2.524
To meet new people	Mot3_1	0.858					
To meet people with similar interests	Mot3_2	0.877					
To meet the locals	Mot3_3	0.862					
To be with other if I need them	Mot3_4	0.853					
Utilitarian function—self-development	Mot_4		0.723	0.954	0.287*	0.882	3.475
To have a chance to get to know myself better	Mot4_1	0.854					
To understand more about myself	Mot4_2	0.870					
To gain a new perspective on life	Mot4_3	0.873					
To think about good times I have had in the past	Mot4_4	0.840					
To know what I am capable of	Mot4_5	0.883					
To gain a sense of self-confidence	Mot4_6	0.899					
To feel inner harmony/peace	Mot4_7	0.743					

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Dimension/question	Item	Loading	AVE	CR	Weights	Loadings	VIF
To be independent	Mot4_8	0.832					
Social-adjustive and value function—interpersonal relationships	Mot_5		0.75	0.937	0.203*	0.828	2.882
To reminisce about parents' times	Mot5_1	0.894					
To contact with family/friends who live elsewhere	Mot5_2	0.892					
To feel that I belong	Mot5_3	0.876					
To strengthen relationship with my family	Mot5_4	0.829					
To strengthen relationship with my family	Mot5_5	0.836					
Utilitarian function—escape	Mot_6		0.733	0.916	0.177*	0.699	1.633
To avoid interpersonal stress	Mot6_1	0.833					
To be away from the crowds of people	Mot6_2	0.874					
To be away from daily stress	Mot6_3	0.897					
To escape from routine	Mot6_4	0.818					
Ego-defensive function	Mot_7		0.834	0.938	0.368***	0.867	2.258
To join people's interest	Mot7_1	0.887					
To join social discussion	Mot7_2	0.942					
To follow current events	Mot7_3	0.910					
Cognitive image			0.686	0.916			
Ecological system is properly maintained	Img1_1	0.774					
Rich fauna and flora	Img1_2	0.803					
An area of ecological conservation	Img1_3	0.885					
An area of environmental education	Img1_4	0.836					
Natural and cultural attractions	Img1_5	0.838					
Affective image			0.764	0.907			
An arousing destination	Img2_1	0.864					
An exciting destination	Img2_2	0.914					
A pleasant destination	Img2_3	0.843					
Economic value			0.835	0.938	0.172 n.s	0.658	2.394

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Dimension/question	Item	Loading	AVE	CR	Weights	Loadings	VIF
Service is economical	ValP1_1	0.894					
Good for the price	ValP1_2	0.936					
Value for money	ValP1_3	0.912					
Functional value			0.775	0.912	−0.071 n.s	0.688	2.888
Acceptable standard of quality	ValP2_1	0.877					
Well organised Convenient for me	ValP2_2	0.905					
Convenient for me	ValP2_3	0.858					
Social value			0.881	0.957	0.647***	0.916	1.697
Gains social approval from others	ValP3_1	0.918					
I feel like a special person	ValP3_2	0.953					
Make a good impression on other people	ValP3_3	0.945					
Emotional value			0.835	0.938	0.421***	0.816	1.683
Enjoyable	ValP4_1	0.891					
Makes me feel happy	ValP4_2	0.922					
Positive feeling	ValP4_3	0.929					

*** Significant at $p < 0.001$, ** significant at $p < 0.01$, * significant at $p < 0.05$

We modelled second-order constructs as formative measures. Additionally, we modelled motivation as a composite of multiple underlying dimensions because they are distinct in nature. We evaluated the absence of multicollinearity problems by checking the variance inflation factor (VIF) and the Condition Index, as suggested by Belsley (1991). VIF factors were generally lower than the suggested threshold of 3.3 and condition indexes were far less than 30. After evaluating the significance of the item weights (Table 1), we decided to keep all the indicators in the model as per Hair et al.'s (2014) suggestions, as factor loadings of the different facets were greater than zero (see Table 1). The weights of the lower-order constructs were especially vital as they represented the actionable drivers of the ecotourists' motivations. Similarly, weights in the perceived value construct provided information about how each perceived value dimension contributed to the aggregated perceived value of the ecotouristic destination.

The results (Table 1) illustrated that the ego-defensive ($w = 0.383$, $p < 0.001$), utilitarian functions of self-development ($w = 0.287$, $p < 0.001$) and scape ($w = 0.177$, $p < 0.05$), and interpersonal relationships ($w = 0.203$, $p < 0.05$) motivations significantly contributed to building the motivation of a traveller to visit an ecotouristic destination. Similarly, the social ($w = 0.647$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional value ($w =$

Table 2 Discriminant validity assessment

	Affective image	Cognitive image	Economic value	Emotional value	Functional value	Social value	Mot 1	Mot 2	Mot 3	Mot 4	Mot 5	Mot 6	Mot 7
Affective image	0.874												
Cognitive image	0.631	0.828											
Economic value	0.331	0.327	0.914										
Emotional value	0.437	0.364	0.521	0.914									
Functional value	0.353	0.382	0.756	0.582	0.880								
Social value	0.428	0.317	0.496	0.537	0.595	0.939							
Mot 1	0.309	0.182	0.275	0.211	0.237	0.203	0.948						
Mot 2	0.411	0.378	0.243	0.318	0.268	0.286	0.506	0.764					
Mot 3	0.366	0.344	0.320	0.313	0.273	0.454	0.308	0.633	0.862				
Mot 4	0.451	0.401	0.341	0.424	0.333	0.487	0.377	0.622	0.688	0.850			
Mot 5	0.406	0.353	0.335	0.369	0.327	0.524	0.294	0.522	0.649	0.781	0.866		
Mot 6	0.416	0.324	0.237	0.361	0.257	0.287	0.271	0.458	0.405	0.512	0.415	0.856	
Mot 7	0.456	0.364	0.299	0.369	0.331	0.536	0.301	0.482	0.623	0.625	0.625	0.564	0.913

0.421, $p < 0.001$) represent the most important dimension in the composition of the perceived value of the ecotouristic traveller.

Structural model

We assessed the structural model by estimating the path coefficients, their significance, the variance explained and the predictive relevance of the model. Applying the method developed by Niltz et al. (2016) evaluated the total, direct and indirect effects after performing a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples (Henseler et al., 2009) (Table 3).

Table 3 Structural model results

Direct effects	Coefficient	CI 95%	BC CI 95%	Explained variance
Motivations → perceived value	0.446***(7.42)	[0.074, 0.218] sig	[0.074, 0.218] sig	26.21%
Motivations → cognitive image	0.444***(10.17)	[0.366, 0.535] sig	[0.366, 0.535] sig	19.7%
Motivations → affective image	0.316*** (6.13)	[0.218, 0.422] sig	[0.218, 0.422] sig	16.89%
Cognitive image → affective image	0.491***(10.33)	[0.396, 0.581] sig	[0.396, 0.581] sig	31.03%
Cognitive image → perceived value	0.048 n.s	[−0.091,0.179] n.s	[−0.091,0.179] n.s	1.9%
Affective image → perceived value	0.224***(3.70)	[0.105, 0.342] sig	[0.105, 0.342] sig	11.01%
Indirect effects				VAF
Motivations → cognitive image → perceived value	0.021	[−0.041, 0.083] n.s	[−0.041, 0.083] n.s	4.40%
Motivations → affective image → perceived value	0.073	[0.031, 0.123] sig	[0.029, 0.121] sig	14%
Motivations → cognitive image → affective image → perceived value	0.050	[0.022, 0.082] sig	[0.021, 0.081] sig	10%
Total indirect effect	0.143***(3.85)	[0.074, 0.214] sig	[0.074, 0.214] sig	24.4%

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. n.s. = Not significant; sig. = significant at $p < 0.05$; t values in parentheses

All the paths were significant except for the relation between cognitive and perceived value. The results confirmed the positive impact of motivation on the destination image, affecting both the cognitive image (H1: $\beta 1 = 0.444$, $p < 0.001$) and the affective image (H2: $\beta 2 = 0.316$, $p < 0.001$). We confirmed the impact of cognitive image on the affective image (H3: $\beta 3 = 0.491$, $p < 0.001$) and the positive impact of the latter on the perceived value (H4a: $\beta 4a = 0.224$, $p < 0.001$). However, the cognitive image hypothesis regarding the perceived value of an ecotouristic destination was not confirmed (H4b: $\beta 4b = 0.048$, not significant at $p < 0.05$).

The cumulative effect of motivation on perceived value was 0.587 ($p < 0.001$), confirming the impact of tourists' motivations on the perceived value of the customer in an ecotouristic destination. The direct path between motivation and the perceived value was quite high and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.446$, $p < 0.001$), indicating the absence of a full mediation. However, the indirect effects of motivations through the affective image (0.073, $p < 0.05$) and through the cognitive and then affective images (0.05, $p < 0.05$) were statistically significant. In addition to the abovementioned, we evaluated the strength of a partial mediation. We calculated the ratio between the indirect and the total effect. This ratio is called the Variance Accounted For (VAF) value. The VAF values (see Table 2) indicate that mediation through the affective image explains approximately 24% of the variance on the perceived value, confirming a complementary partial mediation of the affective image. Therefore, although their destination image is acting as a mediator, the mediation is done exclusively through the affective image and so the mediated portion (24%) is relatively low, partially confirming H5.

Regarding the variance explained by the model, we evaluated the R2 values. The model was able to explain 39.1% of the variance of the perceived value. Additionally, the results demonstrated the affected image had good predictive power (R2 = 47.9%), where the variance explained by the cognitive image (31.03%) almost doubled that of the motivations (16.9%).

Furthermore, we evaluated how well-observed values are reproduced by the model through the Q2 value (Geisser, 1975; Stone, 1974). The test pointed out values greater than 0, implying that the model has satisfactory predictive relevance for the three endogenous constructs (see Fig. 2).

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings are an essential contribution to the knowledge of how ecotourists' motivations affect loyalty to a certain destination. We focused on the links between motivations, destination image and perceived value.

The tourist motivation approach has been used to identify expectations (Pan, 2008). Perceived value is related, albeit through other factors, to customer expectations for a service (Bolton & Drew, 1991). On the other hand, destination image depends on the attributes and feelings an individual has regarding the destination.

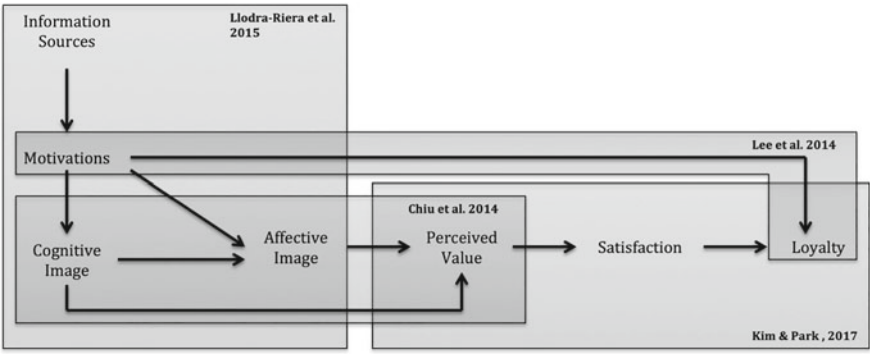

Fig. 1 Theoretical framework. *Source* self-compiled

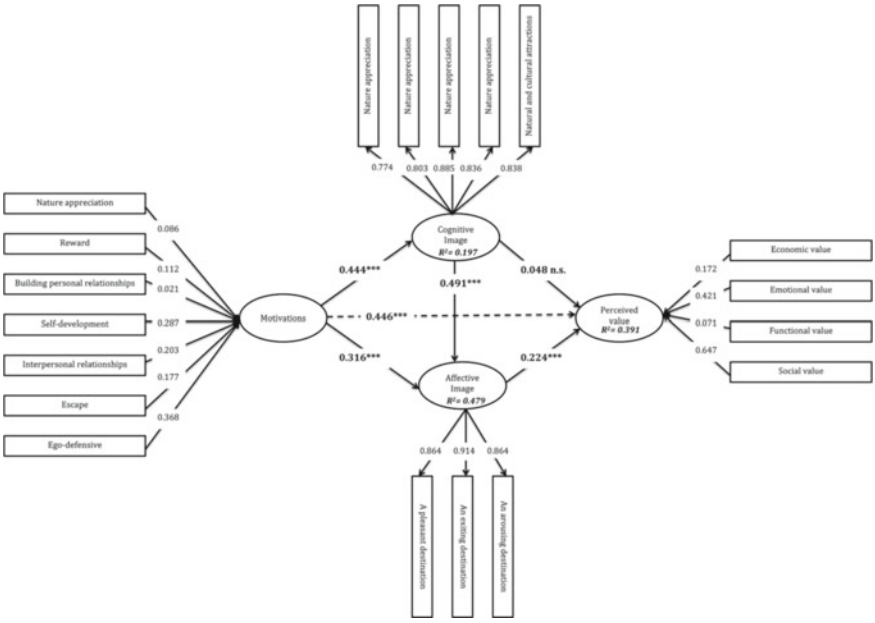

Fig. 2 Model with the mediated effects

It is based on beliefs and impressions (Crompton, 1979) and contains the accumulated expectations towards a place over time (Kim & Richardson, 2003); it is therefore dependent on tourists' subjective perception. Subsequently, both motivations and destination image might create travellers' expectations. In addition, motivations influence the image perceived (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004).

Previously, we showed that the model predicted 39.1% of the variance of ecotourists' perceived value; ecotourists' motivations provided most of this explanatory power. Additionally, we observed that the affective image of a destination also

has a role on the value perceived, while the cognitive image becomes irrelevant. Although Kim et al. (2013) modelled destination image as an antecedent variable to the perceived value, and Chiu et al. (2014) found a significant positive relationship between cognitive image and perceived value, they did not evaluate tourists' motivations. The results in our study indicate that tourist motivations play a more predominant role in the perceived value than the tourist image of the destinations. Thus, it contradicts Ryan and Gu (2008), who stated that the destination image was the start of tourists' expectations.

The partial mediation of the destination image on the relationship between motivations and perceived value reinforces this. The dominant role of motivations might indicate that, although the tourists' cognition and feelings regarding a destination might influence whether an individual travels to the destinations, it is the travelling motivation what determines the expectation to which the experience is evaluated. In other words, the destination image might impact the decision about where to travel but tourist will perceive value in a destination if the experiences there fulfilled the expectations created based on the tourist particular motivations.

The latter prompts a number of questions such as what motivations are the most important to ecotourists and have a greater impact on the perceived value? Alternatively, what aspects of the value proposition of a tourist destination are vital for ecotourists?

This research uncovers that utilitarian motivations related to enriching travellers' lives (self-development) or escaping from daily routines or social pressure (ego-defensive) were found to be the most significant predictors of the respondents' perceived value. Ecotourist destination managers will have to look closely at these motivations in order to adapt the destination services and enhance those aspects that reinforce travellers' motivations. Consequently, destination communication and marketing strategies should also be aligned to create the proper destination image.

Similarly, the social and emotional dimensions are the most important in the value assessment of an ecotouristic destination. Thus, activities and experiences in the destination should be designed and configured to focus on appealing to the emotional and social needs of ecotourists because of their influence on visitors' perceived value. We can clearly observe how dominant motivations are related to their counterpart's dimensions of the perceived value.

Finally, our study has a few limitations that should be addressed. First, the sample was obtained from three specific ecotouristic destinations in Ecuador. Thus, the results cannot be generalised, and replication of the study in other similar areas in other regions or countries is recommended. Second, most of the visitors were international travellers, which might be conditioned by specific cultural values affecting both service delivery and visitor experience. Third, the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are diverse. As a future line of research, we can study the different patterns between the different socio-demographic groups.

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