The satisfaction–place attachment relationship: Potential mediators and moderators

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ABSTRACT

Researchers use place satisfaction as a dependent variable extensively since place has implications for a range of performance measures. This study reverses the relationships suggesting place satisfaction as a useful antecedent to place attachment. Place satisfaction, measured as visitors' summative evaluation of their experience is likely to be more positively associated with place dependence, identity, affect, and social bonding. The findings of this study support this contention and establish that one of the principal mechanisms linking place satisfaction to place attachment is pro-environmental behavioral intention (PEB). The study further finds that gender moderates the relationship between PEB and place attachment. The conditional indirect effect of place satisfaction on place attachment is significant only for male visitors. The article closes with implications of the study for academics and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Research on satisfaction exhibits different conceptualizations with some using satisfaction as the dependent variable (Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Song, van der Veen, Li, & Chen, 2012; Williams & Soutar, 2009; Yeh, 2013) while others view satisfaction as an antecedent (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001; Tudoran, Olsen, & Dopico, 2012). The two uses lead to potentially contradictory findings. In either conceptualization there are also inconsistent findings (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013a). Several reasons occur for these inconsistent findings of which the following may be important. First, those using satisfaction as a dependent variable assume it is related to such outcomes as business performance. This may be a stretch given the differences in the unit of analysis. Second, only a limited number of studies have specifically suggested the mechanisms that link place attachment and satisfaction and vice versa (Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013b; Veasna, Wu, & Huang, 2013). Studies that explain the possible existence of mediators and moderators in these relationships have additional limitations. The investigation of mediators moves studies beyond the idea of direct relationships, allowing a more accurate description of the relationship between predictors and outcome variables (Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2013; Wu & Zumbo, 2008). While mediators explain the mechanism that links predictors to dependent variables,

moderators influence the strength and direction of relationships (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Developing and testing a moderated mediation model will allow the refining of the theoretical relationships among the constructs and hence contribute to further theory development.

Visitor satisfaction is a concept widely studied in nature-based tourism. It has an assumed impact on visitor behavior depending on the strength with which they are satisfied with the (tourism) product (Tudoran et al., 2012). Given that satisfying experiences predict future intention (Lee, Kyle, & Scott, 2012; Oliver, 2010), it is important to understand the extent to which visitor satisfaction contributes to emotional ties with natural settings (e.g., national parks) to encourage future visitations. These emotional ties are commonly referred to as place attachment in the environmental psychology and tourism literature (Lai, Hsu, & Nepal, 2013; Mowatt & Chancellor, 2011; Rackić & Chambers, 2012). Rooted in developmental psychology, the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) provides a framework for investigating place attachment in nature-based settings. The attachment theory has expanded over the last 30 years to include other social ties (Wiles, Allen, Palmer, Hayman, Keeling, & Kerse, 2009) binding individuals to specific settings along with their place-related actions (Low & Altman, 1992). Recent studies have called for further clarifications of the inconclusive findings on the association between place satisfaction and place attachment in nature-based settings (Lee et al., 2012; Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

This study seeks to close these gaps and make the following contributions: first, the study seeks to establish the relationship between place satisfaction and place attachment by measuring the variables on the same unit of analysis (the individual visitor). This keeps the findings consistent. Second, in this study we propose that pro-environmental

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behavioral intention is one of the key mediators in the relationship between place satisfaction and place attachment. This provides an explanation as to how and why place satisfaction and place attachment are linked. Finally, the study provides boundary conditions for the relationships by examining gender as a moderator. This conceptualization should lead to further theorizing by emphasizing simultaneously mediation and moderation and providing a deeper lens to examine the relationship embedded in our model.

2. Literature review

2.1. Place satisfaction

From a marketing perspective, satisfaction is a critical element in measuring customer experience with a product (Tudoran et al., 2012; Tzokas, Hultink, & Hart, 2004). In the consumer behavior literature, the satisfaction construct is defined as the consumer's response to attitudes including judgments following a purchase or a series of consumer–product interactions (Lovelock & Wirthz, 2007). Due to its known effect in predicting customer behavior (but not emotions), satisfaction has been associated with many desirable characteristics in tourism marketing research (Wang & Davidson, 2010). These desirable outcomes include revisit intention, superior business performance, positive word-of-mouth recommendation, and willingness to stay longer at the tourist destination (Lam & Ozorio, 2012; Nam, Yuksel, & Whyatt, 2011; Theodorakis, Alexandris, Tsigilis, & Karvounis, 2013; Zboja & Vourhees, 2006).

In the tourism literature, Ramkissoon, Weiler, and Smith (2012) define place satisfaction as the perceived quality of a setting, meeting the visitor's needs for the physical attributes and services. Tourism scholars have attempted to identify place attachment as an antecedent of place satisfaction in natural settings (e.g., Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005; Ramkissoon et al., 2013a). Individuals who are more place attached to a natural setting, are more likely to experience satisfaction with the place (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon et al., 2013b). Place satisfaction and place attachment are perceived as central to the success of nature-based attractions in today's competitive market (Tonge, Moore, & Taplin, 2011). Yet, few studies have examined the association between these two constructs as proposed in this study with findings being far from conclusive. Some researchers report a positive relationship between place attachment and satisfaction (Ramkissoon et al., 2013a,2013b; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). However, ambiguities exist as to whether place satisfaction is an antecedent of place attachment or vice versa (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Stedman, 2002). In Ramkissoon et al. (2013a) study, four dimensions of place attachment (dependence, identity, affect, social bonding) had a significant positive influence on visitors' level of place satisfaction with a national park in Australia. Place dependence and identity were important antecedents of place satisfaction in Taiwan's national parks (Hwang et al., 2005). Further, Yuksel et al. (2010) suggest that place attachment is an antecedent of visitor satisfaction. Likewise, Veasna et al. (2013) suggest that destination attachment is an antecedent of destination satisfaction.

Others argue that attachment with a place is predicted by past visitation (George & George, 2004) and overall level of satisfaction with the setting (e.g., Petrick, Backman, & Bixler, 1999). This assumes that the visitor is making a repeat visit or has received positive word-of-mouth recommendation (Nikolova & Hassan, 2013). Lee et al. (2012) observed that festival satisfaction had a direct positive effect on festival attendees' place dependence and identity/social bonding. However, the mechanism that links satisfaction with place attachment is missing in their study. Some researchers argue that satisfaction with one's neighborhood is closely related to an individual's place identity (Stedman, 2002). In examining the relationship in a national park context, Halpenny (2006) concluded that an individual's level of satisfaction with the settings had a positive effect on overall place attachment. Likewise, George and George (2004) argue that satisfactory tourist

experiences led to higher levels of place attachment. Yet, other researchers (e.g., Lee & Allen, 1999; Mesch & Manor, 1998) found no significant relationship between place attachment and place satisfaction. Lee and Allen (1999) observed that visitor satisfaction was not directly related to attachment to coastal destinations in South Carolina, in the United States. This suggests there may be mediators that were omitted in prior studies. We propose one of these missing links is pro-environmental behavior.

2.2. Place attachment

A plethora of terms describing the relationship between people and spatial settings exists in the literature across sub-disciplines in the humanities such as place marketing, geography and environmental psychology. The continuing debate on the conceptualization and operationalization of the term has been challenging for leisure and tourism researchers to assimilate the multiple place attachment terms used in literature (Ramkissoon et al., 2012; Tussyadiah & Zach, 2012). Place attachment reflects the intensity of the human-place bond through an understanding of dimensions of dependence, identity, affect and social bonding (Ramkissoon et al., 2013b; Wynween, Kyle, & Sutton, 2012).

While place attachment is most commonly conceptualized as place dependence (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992) and place identity (Prohansky, 1978), at least two additional dimensions, place affect (Halpenny, 2010; Wynween et al., 2012) and place social bonding (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005) are also being used to operationalize the term. Applying these dimensions in a national park context, Ramkissoon et al. (2013a) identify the relevance of these additional dimensions of place attachment in predicting visitors' pro-environmental behavior and place satisfaction.

Place dependence depicts how well a setting's resources facilitate users' enjoyment of activities (Lopez-Mosquera & Sanchez, 2011; Lee et al., 2012) in meeting their functional goals (Lai et al., 2013; Moore & Graefe, 1994) or serve instrumental values (George & George, 2004). Some contradictions in literature exist as to whether place dependence is an antecedent of place satisfaction or vice versa. George and George (2004) and Lee and Allen (1999) remarked that place dependence was predicted by satisfactory experiences of visitors. Place dependence was not a significant predictor of visitor satisfaction in other studies (e.g., Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2010; Yuksel et al., 2010). There remains a paucity of research exploring the associations between place satisfaction and place dependence.

Place identity refers to the cognitive connection (Wynween et al., 2012) depicting the symbolic link between a person and a place (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Place identity emerges through an accumulation of experience with a place (Budruk, Thomas, & Tyrrell, 2009; Cheng, Wu, & Huang, 2012). The physical and social attributes at natural attractions may give rise to a strong sense of place identity (Gu & Ryan, 2008) involving not only localized experiences but also specific memories about how others feel about the place (Therkelsen, Halkier, & Jensen, 2010). In considering the associations between place identity and satisfaction, some researchers (e.g., Hwang et al., 2005; Kyle et al., 2010; Yuksel et al., 2010) established a significant and positive influence of the former on the latter. On the other hand, research also suggests that the greater the satisfaction, the stronger the place identity (Lalli, 1992; Uzzell, Pol, & Badenas, 2002). This suggests that there is a need for more clarifications of the direction of the association between satisfaction and place attachment.

Other researchers have explored the affective dimension of place attachment (Ramkissoon et al., 2013b; Tonge, Valesini, Moore, Beckley, & Ryan, 2013). This emotive dimension of place attachment, conceptualized as place affect allows individuals to build their sentiments about a place and giving meaning to it (Tuan, 1977). Strong emotional attachment to a product leads to higher levels of satisfaction (Esch, Langner, Smitt, & Geus, 2006; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). Place affect gains special meanings in natural settings generating a sense of