



## Destination attractiveness and destination attachment: The mediating role of tourists' attitude



Bernd Frederik Reitsamer<sup>a,\*</sup>, Alexandra Brunner-Sperdin<sup>b</sup>, Nicola E. Stokburger-Sauer<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Innsbruck, School of Management, Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism, Universitaetsstraße 15, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria

<sup>b</sup> University of Applied Sciences Kufstein, Andreas Hofer-Straße 7, 6330 Kufstein, Austria

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 August 2015

Received in revised form 26 April 2016

Accepted 4 May 2016

Available online xxxx

#### Keywords:

Destination attractiveness

Destination attachment

Attachment theory

Embodied cognition

### ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the influence of destination attractiveness on tourists' destination attachment by examining the mediating effect of tourists' cognitive evaluations (i.e., their attitude). Data were collected using on-site interviews with 1232 international tourists in six Alpine destinations. Study 1 addresses the impact of destination attractiveness factors (i.e., accessibility, amenities, scenery and local community) on tourists' attitude. Study 2 validates the model and links it with tourists' destination attachment. Results obtained from SEM highlight the importance of a more fine-grained conceptualization of the antecedents of destination attachment. Findings reveal indirect-only mediation for access and local community, complementary mediation for amenities, and mediation with suppression for scenery. Without tourists' attitude as a mediating construct, however, only amenities show a positive, significant effect on attachment formation. The empirical findings provide destination managers and policy makers with valuable information about how to use destination perception and cognitive reenactment to increase destination attachment.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Research in environmental psychology, leisure, and tourism proposes that consumers develop strong attachment to places and recreation activities (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Williams & Vaske, 2003). In fact, people tend to relate to places, which help to facilitate their leisure experiences (e.g., Brown & Raymond, 2007) and therefore develop an emotional, cognitive, and functional bond to such places (Halpenny, 2006). Physical space thereby becomes the object of place attachment through tourists' interactions with the setting (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005). The literature has revealed that destination management organizations (DMOs) can enhance tourists' feeling of belongingness to a destination and their attachment with the destination through salient and unique bundles of services, such as attractions, historical monuments or local culture (Prayag & Ryan, 2011). Creating such a "sense of place" can serve as competitive advantage because tourists attached to a particular place will be less likely to change their destination choices despite attractive alternative offerings (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010).

Research has noted the relevance of destination attachment, and previous studies have investigated, for instance, the relationship

between destination attachment and tourists' motivation to travel (Prayag, Hosany, & Soscia, 2014), destination source credibility (Veasna, Wu, & Huang, 2013), destination image (Prayag & Ryan, 2011), tourists' involvement (Gross & Brown, 2008), and tourists' previous experience with a setting (Kyle et al., 2004). In particular, there is a common understanding that destination attachment is caused by a set of destination-specific resources and offerings that DMOs can facilitate and control (e.g. Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Veasna et al., 2013). While previous studies assumed a direct relationship between potential driving forces of destination attractiveness and destination attachment, we argue that tourists' cognitive evaluation of their stay is a necessary mediating factor for destination attachment to arise.

Applying embodied cognition (e.g., Barsalou, 2008; Clark, 1997), we assume that consumers form cognitive evaluations of their experience based on their direct responses to their environment. These cognitions are stored as mental representations (i.e., mental images of things both currently and not-currently seen or sensed by the sense organs) and are retrieved to form attachment with a setting. Attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) additionally argues that attachment is primarily facilitated and enhanced by mental representations that include self-cognitions, thoughts, and personal memories (e.g. Berman & Sperling, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Mental representations are therefore crucial to categorize a place as part of the self, to develop a positive feeling of "oneness" with a place (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), and to view a place's resources as one's own (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Mittal, 2006). Applied to the tourism industry, this notion suggests that

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [bernd.reitsamer@uibk.ac.at](mailto:bernd.reitsamer@uibk.ac.at) (B.F. Reitsamer), [alexandra.sperdin@fh-kufstein.ac.at](mailto:alexandra.sperdin@fh-kufstein.ac.at) (A. Brunner-Sperdin), [nicola.stokburger-sauer@uibk.ac.at](mailto:nicola.stokburger-sauer@uibk.ac.at) (N.E. Stokburger-Sauer).

as an experience occurs, the brain captures impressions from the environment using all five human senses, integrates these impressions, and stores them in memory (e.g., what a destination looks like, how it feels to ski down a mountain). These stored mental representations are then retrieved for attitude and attachment formation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Whereas previous studies in tourism have conceptualized attachment primarily as a person's affective, emotional, and symbolic investment with a setting (Yuksel et al., 2010) and focused on investigating its behavioral consequences, this study sets out to explore the cognitive, embodied side of destination attachment and investigates its driving forces from a destination-attractiveness perspective.

The present study makes the following two core contributions. First, we argue that attractive destination resources serve as a necessary precondition and driving force for attachment formation. Destination attractiveness refers to a demand-side perspective regarding destinations as suppliers of spatial tourist services with specific attractiveness features to be managed effectively. An in-depth review of the literature on destination attractiveness reveals that four key factors (i.e., accessibility, amenities and infrastructure, scenery, and local community) have the potential to encourage people to visit and spend time at a destination and therefore significantly influence a tourist's destination choice, attachment, and expected behavior (Henkel, Henkel, Agrusa, & Tanner, 2006). We accordingly consider these same factors of destination attractiveness as important driving forces for tourists' cognitive evaluations and their subsequent formation of attachment. This approach is crucial since it creates opportunities for tourism marketers and DMOs to influence tourists' cognitive evaluations by means of attractive destination resources.

Second, rooted in a complex network of mental representations, we propose that tourists' attitude acts as necessary and sufficient mediating variable between their perceived attractiveness of a destination and their formation of destination attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Attachment is therefore formed only after prior attitude formation, with attitude acting as an attachment facilitator increasing tourists' bond with a destination.

To test these relationships, we carried out two empirical studies using data gathered from face-to-face interviews in six Alpine destinations during the winter seasons of 2013/14 and 2014/15. We made use of a total sample of 1232 responses. Study 1 addresses the impact of destination attractiveness factors on tourists' attitude; Study 2 validates these associations and links them with tourists' destination attachment.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

### 2.1. Destination attractiveness and destination image

The concept of destination attractiveness and its measurement has received much attention from both tourism research and policy makers in recent decades (Formica & Uysal, 2006; Kim, 1998; Lee, Huang, & Huery-Ren, 2010). Destination attractiveness refers to tourists' perceptions about a destination and its ability to satisfy their needs (Mayo & Jarvis, 1982; Vengesai, 2003). Two broad streams of destination attractiveness research have evolved in the tourism literature. One stream of literature defines destination attractiveness based on the physical attributes of a destination, that is, an inventory of tourism resources (Formica & Uysal, 2006). In today's global tourism marketplace, however, destinations are no longer perceived as distinct natural, cultural, or environmental resources, but rather as an overall appealing product available in a certain area (Buhalis, 2000). Offering such a multifaceted set of products and services has therefore become a prerequisite to create an attractive, memorable destination experience (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2008; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The second stream addresses destination attractiveness on the basis of tourists' image perception of a destination (Formica & Uysal, 2006). Integrating these two streams of literature, we argue that a destination's attractiveness factors are crucial for both image formation

and memorability of the staged destination experience. Tourists increasingly seek unique experiences that go beyond mere consumption of products or services. Tourism operators are accordingly shifting from a "delivery-focused" service economy to a "staged" experience economy (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Although the importance of memorable experiences has been acknowledged in previous research (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Oh et al., 2007), the literature has not yet established a common understanding of what exactly makes tourism experiences special and memorable. The memorability of consumption experiences, however, is argued to be an important pre-condition for the formation of destination attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Tourism operators and destinations should, therefore, facilitate the realization of positive, memorable tourism experiences. Because experiences are highly subjective and occur over varying time frames and with varying intensity (Meyer & Schwager, 2007), DMOs cannot directly deliver memorable experiences to tourists. Destination management organizations can, however, increase the probability of memorable experiences by providing attractive destination resources.

Research on factors that constitute an attractive destination has mainly centered on a destination's accessibility, amenities and infrastructure, scenery, and local community. More precisely, it is the natural form and landscape of a destination that constitutes the most basic element in attracting tourists to a location (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012). Besides scenery, a destination's accessibility has long been recognized as a major driving force of destination attractiveness (Kim, 1998). The broad category of amenities, including the availability of accommodation, lodging opportunities, and restaurants, constitutes another important factor (Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000). The local community can complement natural and experiential resources in a destination and refers to a connection with local people (Kim et al., 2012). The importance of local community for tourists' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses has lately received increasing attention. Individuals who closely experience local community and culture, for instance, are more likely to have memorable tourism experiences (Kim et al., 2012) and report higher levels of pleasure and satisfaction (Murphy et al., 2000).

Although previous research has attempted to define a set of factors establishing destination attractiveness, the majority of studies have focused on an exploratory approach based on expert interviews, panel data, or secondary data analysis. Empirical investigations have primarily focused on specific forms of tourism (e.g., forest recreation tourism; Lee et al., 2010), the creation of attractiveness profiles for certain tourism regions (e.g., Virginia, USA; Formica & Uysal, 2006) or on establishing an index of destination attractiveness (e.g., Var, Beck, & Loftus, 1977). Apart from a supply centered perspective focusing on destinations' resources and offerings, investigations of the demand side provide crucial information for tourism scholars and policy makers since tourists' (cognitive) evaluations of their experience affect the competitiveness, success, and survival of any destination (Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010). This study therefore extends prior investigations on destination attractiveness by examining the influence of a destinations' attractiveness potential on tourists' attitude.

### 2.2. Destination attractiveness and attitude toward a destination

Attitude describes the psychological tendency individuals express by their positive or negative evaluations of an object or experience (Ajzen, 1991). Similarly, attitude toward the destination describes the psychological tendencies tourists express through their positive or negative evaluations of a destination experience (Lee, 2009). It refers to a learned predisposition tourists own to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner to a given object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Attitude toward an object (e.g., a tourist destination) is therefore a function of the belief about the object and its implicit evaluative responses. Such evaluations ascend both naturally and inevitably that people form them when thinking about the object (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10491085>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10491085>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)