



From lost space to third place: The visitor's perspective



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Activity involvement positively affected place attachment.
- A positive relationship exists between activity involvement and visitor loyalty.
- A positive relationship exists between place attachment and visitor loyalty.

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ABSTRACT

Although studies on place attachment in tourism have expanded greatly during the past decade, most have focused on nature-based settings, thereby neglecting the social dimension of place. The triadic relationship of activity involvement, place attachment, and visitor loyalty has received limited attention. In response, we investigated visitors' attachment to activities and settings within cultural creative districts (CCDs) in a manufacturing hub of China, with the aim to advance the theory of place attachment and elucidate geographic and psychological factors that can affect visitor experience. Results of an onsite questionnaire (n = 252) indicated that: 1) activity involvement positively affected place attachment; 2) attraction and social bonding were strong predictors of visitor loyalty. We identified a more effective way to implement CCDs as part of urban-regeneration strategies—namely, to become visitors' favourite third places, CCDs need to offer high-quality social encounters with a suitable mix of physical, cultural, and entertainment amenities.

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1. Introduction

As the most favoured manufacturing destination for foreign direct investment (FDI) (Fingar, 2015; Luken & Rompaey, 2007), China has made significant progress in shifting toward a market-oriented economy and, in turn, lifting millions of citizens out of poverty during its rapid development over the past 30 years. However, observers have raised the question of sustainability in China, a country that grapples with the challenges of pollution, intensive energy use, and resource depletion (KPMG., 2011). The current rebalancing act in China marks a shift from a pattern of growth based on heavy industry, investment, and exports, to one based on service industries, consumer spending, and imports. As a result, the shift has created tremendous opportunities for companies that provide services to consumers, including the tourism

and hospitality sector.

In recent years, China has undergone a dramatic process of urban growth and transformation, and industries facing overcapacity have been forced to consolidate. The continuous adjustment of urban functions and industrial structures has prompted significant debate over demolition and recycling, especially regarding the reconstruction of urban villages and abandoned industrial areas, known as *lost spaces*. At the same time, as Wang (2013, p. 9) addressed in her study of urban planning culture, China has entered 'a critical era of modernity, a society in which to retrieve the socio-spatial meaning for people is a much more powerful force than only focusing on economic success'. Redeveloping such lost spaces has the potential to open up new opportunities for achieving far-reaching goals, including social integration alongside economic gains (Swapan, 2013). Taking the shift as a turning point for tourism planning and development, we sought to investigate visitors' attachment to activities and settings in cultural creative districts (CCDs) in one of China's manufacturing hubs.

As research has increasingly recognised, cities are not merely

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buildings and material structures, but also networks of people and intangible elements, including social relationships, emotional experiences, and cultural identities (Sepe & Trapani, 2010). Earlier on, in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida (2002) popularised the concepts of creative cities, creative industries, and creative districts, and as Flew (2005) later noted, the development of CCDs has particularly constituted a more direct attempt to manage urban space in order to promote creativity and solve urban problems. Indeed, such creative hotspots are often perceived to act as magnets for the consumption power of the creative class and tourists (Richards, 2011). At the same time, CCDs are typical cultural and social places—old factory buildings and industrial and commercial spaces—that can contribute to cultural consumption and therefore strengthen a sense of belonging and identity among citizens (Mommaas, 2009). Projects of urban regeneration via cultural districts such as China's CCDs also facilitate and promote technological and commercial orientations (e.g., pop music, festivals, fashion, design, and animation), components of leisure and entertainment (e.g., retail, going out, and nightlife), and diverse elements in bars and restaurants, designers' shops, and art hotels (Mommaas, 2009). Many CCDs contain several *third places*, described as typical gathering places of informal public life that provide a neutral space for social encounters independent of associations at home (i.e., the first place) and at work (i.e., the second place) (Bereitschaft, 2014). The development of these specific districts not only forms a creative landscape, but also becomes part of broader creative city approach aimed at attracting tourists (Alvarez, 2010; Meethan & Beer, 2007). However, transforming sites from lost spaces to highly engaging third places has emerged as a considerable challenge for urban regeneration and city innovation (Swapan, 2013).

Though the number of publications in leisure and tourism addressing place attachment has increased greatly in the past decade, most studies on the topic have focused on nature-based settings, including ski resorts (Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Meligdis, 2006), national parks (Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005), and scenic trails (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004b), with some recent applications for communities (Gu & Ryan, 2008), destinations (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010), and events and festivals (Hixson, McCabe, & Brown, 2011; Lee, Kyle, & Scott, 2012). Consequently, place attachment remains hardly examined in terms of CCDs. Furthermore, because studies have focused on the two-dimensional construct of place attachment—that is, tested place dependence and place identity—the social dimension of place in the formation of place attachment remains unexplored.

The literature reveals another gap in the research—namely, limited attention to the triadic relationship of activity involvement, place attachment, and loyalty—despite investigations of involvement and place attachment (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004a), involvement and loyalty (Backman & Crompton, 1991), and place attachment and loyalty (Lee et al., 2012). In response, we conducted this study to advance the theory of place attachment and elucidate geographic and psychological factors that can affect visitor experience and loyalty. By evaluating the relationships among activity involvement, place attachment, and visitor loyalty, we aimed to identify a more effective way to implement CCDs as part of broader urban regeneration strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept and measurement of place attachment

Though the definition of *place* has often proven slippery, Lalli (1992) has emphasised that the term prioritises areas that people can experience directly and that are subjectively meaningful. This perspective on place takes support from Tuan's (1974) concept of

topophilia, which earlier stressed the vitality of the emotional connection between people and places. Later, Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) proposed the term *place attachment* in the context of exploring the emotional and symbolic relationships that individuals form with meaningful places. Recently, their concept has gained academic attention and found application in a variety of contexts in macroscale (e.g., countries and cities) and mesoscale places (e.g., national parks, ancient towns, and rural destinations), usually at the expense of microscale ones (e.g., tourist streets, shopping streets, events, and festivals) (Gong & Mao, 2013). The concept of place attachment has moreover gained ground in various disciplines as a means to study human–place bonds, all of which vary across activity-related contexts and setting types, as well as in terms of individual characteristics (Lee et al., 2012). Across studies of place attachment, however, a recurring challenge has been reconciling the diversity of approaches available at the theoretical and empirical levels (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001).

When Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) first proposed place attachment, they referred to a two-dimensional concept consisting of place dependence and place identity. On the one hand, as a functional attachment, *place dependence* refers to the importance of a place in providing features and conditions that support specific goals or desired activities, if not both (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Place dependence is embodied in an area's physical characteristics and can increase when the place is close enough to allow frequent visitation (Williams & Vaske, 2003). On the other, as an emotional attachment, *place identity* refers to a person's emotional connection to an area as part of a process of environmental self-regulation (Hwang et al., 2005). Place identity increases feelings of belonging to one's community and is an important component of communication about environmental values and policies (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Researchers have validated place attachment's two-dimensional construct in different kinds of places, including festival-hosting destinations (Lee et al., 2012), landscapes (Brown & Raymond, 2007), and natural settings such as the Appalachian Trail (Kyle et al., 2004b) and national parks (Hwang et al., 2005).

However, researchers interested in the sociocultural dimension of place have argued that the two-dimensional model of place attachment is inadequate. Altman and Low (1992) have posited that places, along with their capacity for physical and emotional attachment, often possess a strong social element given their frequent function as repositories or contexts within which social interactions occur. In 1970s, Henri Lefebvre claimed that in human society, all 'space is social: it involves assigning more or less appropriated places to social relations' (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 186). In linking social dimensions to material spaces, Lefebvre's view conceives place with a unique social purpose for various human activities (Liu, 2014). By extension, the rise to prominence of creative cities (Landry, 1991), the creative class (Florida, 2002), and creative industries (Hartley, 2004) has prompted increased interest in creative clusters and CCDs, the development of which improves social connectivity and nurtures wealth creation, a sense of place, and liveability in the area (Liu, 2014). The settings of creative clusters are moreover expected to reshape patterns of social interaction among actors, thereby increasing opportunities for collaboration and innovation. These social connections to place have been called *social bonding*, which refers to the feelings of belonging or membership to a group of people, as well as the emotional connections based on shared history, interests, or concerns (Raymond, Brown, & Weber, 2010). In our study, we have therefore considered social bonding as the third dimension of place in the formation of place attachment. Our conceptualization responds in part to the facts that few studies have investigated the social dimension of place in culture-based settings such as CCDs and that visitors' perceptions of social bonding in places also remains neglected.

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