Domestic tourists' loyalty to a local natural tourist setting: Examining predictors from relational and transactional perspectives using a Zambian context☆

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ABSTRACT

Developing long-term relationships between domestic tourists and local natural tourist settings still remains a challenge for most developing countries, particularly, Zambia. To address this challenge, this study explored the concept of destination loyalty by investigating its antecedents from relational and transactional perspectives thereby extending the theoretical understanding of the concept. Data for this study were collected using on-site self-administered surveys from 1060 Zambian domestic tourists at the Victoria Falls World Heritage site and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling. Empirical results showed that to foster destination loyalty, both transactional and relational antecedents of loyalty are fundamental with the relational variable being slightly more powerful as a predictor. Consequently, practitioners and policy-makers, especially in Zambia can promote domestic tourists' longterm relationships to local natural tourist settings by encouraging relational connections to the settings in addition to providing high service quality, as well as valuable and satisfactory experiences at the natural tourist settings.

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1. Introduction

Natural tourist settings provide diverse benefits for tourists who visit such settings (Ramkissoon, Smith, & Kneebone, 2014; Weaver & Lawton, 2011) given that natural environments offer a variety of psychological, social and physiological benefits not typically found in constructed environments (Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004). Besides providing pleasure and satisfaction, natural settings also support human functioning by permitting exhausted people who visit such settings to regain effective functioning through recovery from mental fatigue (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). In return, visitors to natural tourist settings serve as an essential source of operational revenue and proactive support such as positive word of mouth referrals (Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Visitor revenue may also serve as an incentive to maintain such spaces in pristine conditions so that tourist flows and attendant revenues continue to be attractive (Lindberg, Enriquez, &

Sproule, 1996). Consequently, cultivating long-term relationships between tourists and natural tourist settings is valuable. However, developing long-term relationships between domestic tourists and local natural tourist settings still remains a challenge for most developing countries, especially, Zambia.

The extant literature reveals that few Zambians visit local tourist settings (Husbands, 1989; Pope, 2005; Sinyenga, 2005). Findings of previous studies were supported by the views of representatives of both public and private tourism institutions in Lusaka and Livingstone during preliminary interviews conducted by the first author in January 2014. The following excerpts exemplify this:

> "Zambians generally do not like anything with to do with touristic visits to natural settings such as national parks…when on holiday [vacation] they prefer to go out of the country".

> "From a population of about 13 (thirteen) million people, only a few…I mean very people take time to visit and enjoy our natural treasures when on holiday [vacation]…"

> "Zambians need a complete change in mindset regarding visits to national parks… The issue of thinking that a visit to the national park or game park is for foreigners should die out…our plan now is to encourage Zambians to take pride and relate with what we are blessed

with… the natural resources and enjoy the benefits of using these resources."

"Most locals [Zambians] don't visit the country's natural tourist attractions regularly… even though these resources are meant to benefit them…we need to have patriotic local tourists… people who appreciate and make use of our very own natural treasures…we are making efforts to encourage them to begin to do that."

Given the poor relationship between domestic tourists and local natural tourist settings in the country, the Zambian government is embarking on fostering long-term domestic visits to local tourist settings. The government's endeavor to promote domestic visits to local tourist settings is highlighted in the 2014 marketing plan of the Zambia Tourism Agency, ZTB (2014) and the Tourism Strategic Plan (MTA, 2013). However, while the government's desire to cultivate stable visits to local natural tourist settings is evident, an understanding of how to foster domestic tourists' long-term relationships with these settings is still poorly understood.

A concept that provides potential for exploring avenues of promoting long-term relationships between domestic tourists and local natural tourist settings, especially in Zambia, is destination loyalty. The importance of understanding, predicting and influencing tourists' intentions to patronize specific destinations has motivated research on the concept of destination loyalty (e.g. Campon-Cerro, Hernandez-Mogollon, & Alves, in press; Chi, 2012; Chi & Qu, 2008; Meleddu, Paci, & Pulina, 2015; Oppermann, 2000; Ramseook-Munhurrun, Seebaluck, & Naidoo, 2015; Tasci, 2016; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). Consequently, loyalty has become a critical component of destination marketing and management research (Lee, 2003) with tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend the destination being used as indicators of destination loyalty (Chi, 2005; Zhang et al., 2014). Behavioral intentions rather than actual behavior has been used to reflect destination loyalty in that studying actual behavior is difficult and costly (Halpenny, 2010). Moreover, behavioral intentions have proven to be effective indicators of future behaviors (Ajzen, 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Kraus, 1995).

Past research reveals two distinct approaches to understanding tourists' intentions to revisit a destination and recommend it to others; relational and transactional (Morais & Lin, 2010). The two approaches are distinct in terms of the factors that influence tourists' intentions to patronize a destination. Transactional antecedents influence tourists' intentions to patronize a destination based on evaluative information arising from the destination experience while relational antecedents influence tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend a destination driven by relational bonds with the destination (Choi & Cai, 2012). When contrasting the relational and transactional approaches, two competing research paradigms have emerged in the marketing field: transactional marketing and relational marketing (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Gronroos, 1994). These paradigms are understood to be situated on opposite ends of a continuum (Jackson, 1985). One end of this continuum would be tourists engaging in transactions with the destination exchanging money for goods and services, while the other end of the continuum would have tourists engaging in relational exchanges with the destination (Morais & Lin, 2010). In between would be tourists engaging in destination choices involving both transactional and relational characteristics (Morais & Lin, 2010). In line with this notion and contrast to situating relational and transactional antecedents on opposite ends of a continuum, in the present study we posited that while transactional and relational antecedents are important predictors of destination loyalty, transactional antecedents can also influence destination loyalty through the relational antecedent. Studies examining predictors of destination loyalty from such perspectives are still rare, especially in an African context.

Tourist behavior literature examining destination choices from a transactional perspective has established that perceived value, service quality and satisfaction are predictors of visitors' loyalty to a destination

(Campon-Cerro et al., in press; Chindaprasert & Yasothornsrikul, 2015; Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., 2015; Su, Hsu, & Swanson, 2014). Studies examining destination choices from a relational perspective indicate that tourists' attachment to a destination is a significant predictor of destination loyalty (Chen & Phou, 2013; Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Morais & Lin, 2010). Therefore, to examine predictors of destination loyalty from both relational and transactional perspectives in the present study, place attachment constituted the relational predictor while satisfaction, service quality and perceived value were transactional antecedents. Even though the individual constructs have received considerable attention from tourism scholars and practitioners, the conceptual model and empirical studies pertaining to causal relationships among these constructs have not been examined simultaneously. Consequently, the present study extends the theoretical understanding of destination loyalty by examining perceived value, service quality, satisfaction and place attachment as its antecedents from both relational and transactional perspectives.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

Most of the early literature on place attachment stem from studies in geography (Tuan, 1974) and environmental psychology (Low & Altman, 1992). The quest for a better understanding of the attachment people feel for particular places drives the scientific exploration of this phenomenon (Chen & Phou, 2013; Ram, Bjork, & Weidenfeld, 2016; Xu & Zhang, 2016). In the present study, the conceptualization of place attachment draws from studies that considered human-place bonding in terms of two components: place identity and place dependence (Morais & Lin, 2010; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Williams & Vaske, 2003). Proshansky (1978) conceptualized place identity in terms of cognitive connection between the self and the physical environment. In this sense, settings accord individuals the opportunity to both express and affirm their identity (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003; Ram et al., 2016). Place dependence, first introduced by Stokols and Shumaker (1981) concerns how well a setting serves goal achievement given an existing range of alternatives (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). It reflects visitors' awareness of the significance of a place in providing amenities necessary to meet their desired activity needs relative to other alternatives (Kyle et al., 2004; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992). In this sense, a place can be considered important to an individual because of its functional value (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981; Ram et al., 2016).

The application of place attachment to the tourism field began in the 1980s. Research on place attachment as it relates to tourism stems from the fact that places are venues for visitor experiences (Snepenger, Snepenger, Dalbey, & Wessol, 2007) and set the context for interactions between people and the place (Ramkissoon, Weiler, & Smith, 2012). Viewed as a multidimensional concept (Gustafson, 2001; Halpenny, 2010), place attachment incorporates several aspects of the people-place bonding of affect, emotion, and behaviors in connection with a place (Chow & Healy, 2008; Ram et al., 2016; Xu & Zhang, 2016). It serves as an affective link which people develop with an environment (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). It is also considered as an important part of self which evokes strong emotions that would influence a person's behavior, including loyalty (Brocato, 2006; Kyle et al., 2003; Simpson & Siquaw, 2008). Past studies indicate that place attachment is a relational variable (Morais & Lin, 2010; Ram et al., 2016). Therefore, to examine predictors of destination loyalty from a relational perspective, this study examined the direct effect of place attachment on destination loyalty. The following hypothesis was tested:

H₁.: Place attachment has a positive direct effect on destination loyalty.

Satisfaction plays a fundamental role in planning marketable tourism products and services (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Distinct approaches to its definitions range from cognitive and/or affective perspective to