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**DETERMINANTS OF TOURIST ATTACHMENT  
TO SELECTED DESTINATIONS:  
THE INFLUENCES OF SELECTED VARIABLES  
ON DESTINATION ATTACHMENT**

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## **Abstract**

This study applied the concept of place attachment to tourism setting and investigated the relationship between tourist attachment to a destination and selected travel behavior variables. A random sample of 1,008 residents from the Seneca-Clemson area in South Carolina, were utilized to study travel behavior to one of three destinations in South Carolina: the Myrtle Beach area, the City of Charleston, and Hilton Head Island.

The following six variables were identified as having significant relationships with destination attachment – destination attractiveness, satisfaction, and past experience with a destination, travel to a destination as a family tradition, familiarity with a destination, and the age of the tourists at his first visit. The results of a multiple regression analysis revealed two important predictor variables -- destination attractiveness and travel to a destination as a family tradition. These two had the strongest relationship with tourist attachment to a destination for both the Myrtle Beach area and the City of Charleston. However, their order of importance was reversed for the two destinations. While traveling as a family tradition was the most important variable for predicting tourist attachment to the Myrtle Beach area, attractiveness to a destination was the most important variable to the City of Charleston. Several recommendations for practitioners for destination markers and future study were also presented.

## **Introduction**

People experience strong feelings to objects and places. Specifically, many individuals have strong emotional associations to a range of places such as homes, communities, parks, and even countries (Brown, 1990). As individuals have strong feelings toward their residential communities (McCool and Martin 1992), tourists may form a sense of attachment to a destination.

The topic of place attachment has received interest in selected areas in the social sciences. Place identity is one of the dominant views from environmental psychology that has been adapted to the leisure field as a framework for investigating an individual's attachment to a place. Proshansky (1978) refers to place identity as an individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment. In other words, a place is identified as an essential part of oneself, involving a strong emotional attachment to it. Williams, Patterson, and Roggenbuck (1992) suggested that place is probably understood by focusing on the symbolic and emotional meanings associated with the place as a whole rather than the sum of the attributes of the place.

While there has been increasing research into the topic of place attachment, the study of tourists attachment to a destination is very limited (Brown 1990). Traditionally, the study of tourist perceptions about destination has been the multiattribute approach, identifying the features of the destination that support the tourists specific activities or desired experiences and describing destination as collections of features appealing to tourists (Hu and Ritchie 1993). However, recently, psychological attachment to a destination has been emphasized as an important issue in understanding tourist behavior (Lee, Backman, and Backman 1997).

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate empirically the applicability of place attachment to a tourism destination. Specifically, the study examined the effects of past travel, travel satisfaction, attractiveness of a destination, and other potential predictor variables on a tourist's attachment to a destination. Past research has indicated that these constructs are related to the concept of place attachment (Williams et. al., 1992; Moore and Graefe 1994).

The objective was to identify the relationship between tourist attachment to a destination and satisfaction with, past experience with, attractiveness of a destination, and other potential predictor variables for the total sample and across the destination area.

### **Research Methods**

The study areas were three coastal destinations in South Carolina: 1) the Myrtle Beach/Grand Strand area, 2) the City of Charleston, and 3) Hilton Head Island. Using a systematic random sampling, 1,008 residents of the Greater Seneca-Clemson area were selected from the White Pages of the 1998 telephone directory after eliminating business listings. The area represents a mix of semi-urban and rural residential areas of South Carolina. After the pilot test, the final survey instrument consisted of socio-demographic information and travel characteristics. Respondents were asked to respond to questions about their last trip to the study areas. Variables about travel behavior (i.e., past experience and satisfaction with a destination) were measured using 9-point Likert scale with values ranging from (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) for each item. Destination attractiveness was measured using the weighted 14-item series of questions while destination attachment was measured with 18-items. The methods consisted of the initial mailing and a post-card reminder, and a telephone follow-up for all non-respondents. Data were collected from June to August 1998 through a self-administered mail questionnaire. The data collection resulted in 458 surveys with an adjusted final response of 48.5%.

To test for the nonresponse bias, a random sample of 90 nonrespondents was selected, telephoned, and asked to respond selected questions. There was no major systematic bias between the respondents and nonrespondents for 14 of the 16 selected variables, the exceptions being the education level and the most recently visited destination area. The results revealed that respondents were more highly educated than the nonrespondents and that they had taken more vacations to the study areas. Questionnaires were checked and analyzed using the SPSS Statistics Package. The statistical tests used included Pearson correlation analysis and standard multiple regression.

### **Findings**

The reliability of the items of destination attractiveness and destination attachment was measured with a Cronbach alpha. The destination attachment scale was high, approximately at the 0.96 level and the destination attractiveness was also high, approximately 0.88 across the study areas.

The first analysis was conducted to determine the correlations between the variables of travel behavior and destination attachment across the study area. There was no indication of multicollinearity due to high tolerance levels. The Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated that the five independent variables had significantly high correlations with destination attachment across the three destinations. They included the overall attractiveness of the destination ( $r=0.57$ ), travel to a destination as a family tradition ( $r=0.56$ ), satisfaction with a destination ( $r=0.52$ ), familiarity with a destination ( $r=0.45$ ), and previous travel to a destination (0.32). These five variables were retained for the multiple regression analysis based upon their conceptual importance and overall correlation ratios ( $r>.30$ ).

The second analysis was done to examine the contribution of each predictor variable to destination attachment across the study areas. An overall examination of the multiple regression considering all three areas produced an adjusted R-squared value of 0.4805, explaining 48.05%

of the variation in destination attachment measures ( $F=66.30$ ;  $df=5, 348$ ;  $p\leq.01$ ). These variables were attractiveness of a destination ( $\beta=.3683$ ), travel to a destination as a family tradition ( $\beta=.2021$ ), satisfaction with a destination ( $\beta=.1881$ ), and past experience with a destination ( $\beta=.1270$ ).

The Myrtle Beach-specific model demonstrated consistency with the overall regression model with an adjusted R-squared value of 0.4805 ( $F=35.21$ ,  $df=5, 180$ ;  $p\leq.01$ ). The significant variables also included attractiveness of a destination ( $\beta=.2937$ ), travel to a destination as a family tradition ( $\beta=.2514$ ), satisfaction with a destination ( $\beta=.1892$ ), and past experience with a destination ( $\beta=.1464$ ). The Charleston-specific model produced a model with an adjusted R-squared value of 0.5115, explaining 51.15% of the variation in destination attachment ( $F=28.02$ ,  $df=5, 124$ ;  $p\leq.01$ ). Unlike the previous two models, this model had only two significant variables, attractiveness of a destination ( $\beta=.5440$ ) and travel to a destination as a family tradition ( $\beta=.2106$ ). In contrast, the independent variables in the Hilton Head Island-specific model did not significantly contribute in explaining destination attachment. The smaller sample seemed to contribute to the failure of the Hilton Head Island model.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

For the overall model and the Myrtle Beach-specific model, the perceived attractiveness of a destination was the most important factor in explaining the destination attachment, followed by travel to a destination as a family tradition, satisfaction with a destination, and past experience with a destination. For the Charleston-specific model, attractiveness of a destination and travel to a destination as a family tradition were the only two factors that influenced respondents' attachment to a destination.

Findings from the present study support the recent understanding of the tourism destination as a whole experience rather than one with multiattribute characteristics. As the evolutionary relationship between the multiattribute view and emotional view of place implies, it was not surprising that attractiveness was the most important factor in predicting destination attachment. In addition, travel to a destination as a family tradition was another important factor in estimating tourist attachment to a destination. The current findings suggest valuable information for tourism marketers to create tourist attachment to the study areas. Destination marketers in the Charleston area need to preserve the southern attractiveness of the city while diversifying other aspects of the destination, such as promoting festivals/events in the area. In contrast, Myrtle Beach needs to continue its emphasis on the family travel experience; at the same time, it needs to broaden its appeal (i.e., ecotourism features) rather than concentrate on the existing ones (i.e., mini golf courses). Doing so could appeal to parents who want to educate their children about the importance of the nature preservation and cultural assets of the area.

Although this research supported the applicability of place attachment to tourism destination and provided fertile results for the future, the outcome also suggested some areas for further study. The multidimensional approach for measuring satisfaction with a tourism service appears to be more appropriate than the use of global measurement (Chadee and Mattsson 1995). Future study should concentrate on replicating the findings of this study with other destinations such as national parks that attract tourists primarily with their natural attractions. This research could be expanded to include the level of attachment to a destination and possibly segment tourists based on their level of attachment (i.e., high and low attachment). These approaches may shed some light on tourist behavior and attitudes and help expand the body of literature in the field of tourism. Extending the topic of destination attachment, based on this empirical

study, would help to create a body of literature that may one day develop into a theory of tourist attachment to a destination.

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