

Captivated by Place: The Psychology Concept of Destination Fascination

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ABSTRACT

A fundamental concept in modern tourism research is destination fascination, which refers to a destination's ability to captivate tourists, pique their interest, arouse their emotions, and elicit unforgettable memories. This article compiles current theoretical and empirical research on the role of fascination as an experiential and psychological mechanism influencing tourist behaviour, specifically in developing attachment and loyalty. Drawing on theories such as the Reasonable Person Model (RPM), Attention Restoration Theory (ART), and the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) model, this article examines the six dimensions of fascination, including mystique, attractiveness, richness, uniqueness, friendliness, and fitness. Measurement approaches, managerial strategies, ethical implications, and future research directions are then covered. This article provides a broader understanding of fascination as a psychological and strategic construct, essential to the competitiveness of destinations and sustainable tourism development, and integrates the latest research.

Keywords: Destination Fascination, Tourist Experience, Cognitive and Affective Responses, Destination Loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

Destinations in the current cutthroat tourism industry must do more than attract tourists; they need to engage their senses, provide an experience, and leave a lasting memory. All of this is portrayed by the concept of destination fascination, defined as the degree to which a destination can captivate, engage, and emotionally bond with tourists, resulting in meaningful cognitive and affective engagement (Dat et al., 2024; Hadzami, 2024; Liu et al., 2017; Pessoa et al., 2022; Shen & Wang, 2023; V.G. & Park, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2022). Fascination shapes tourists' experiences, memories, and opinions about destinations at a psychological level, rather than practical attributes such as accessibility or cost (Li et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2022). Therefore, certain destinations manage to garner remarkable loyalty and positive word of mouth, even with comparable physical infrastructure to competitor destinations, due to the emotional and cognitive connections tourists form with these destinations (Laela, 2024; Oliver, 1999; Pessoa et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020).

The concept of fascination has become a strategic tool on a global scale. Tourism destinations are required to offer tourists an engaging experience that promotes exploration and independence, enabling them to escape daily life and attain psychological rejuvenation (Shen & Wang, 2023). It allows destinations to distinguish themselves not only by their offerings but also by the emotional experiences they provide to tourists (Dat et al., 2024). The fascination of destinations reflects the complex dynamics of human-environment interactions (Li et al., 2025). Tourists respond positively to destinations that allow them to engage with and learn about the cultural and natural characteristics of the setting. Research provides strong evidence that tourists form place bonds when they become fascinated with a destination (Rezapouraghdam et al., 2024; Stylidis, 2020). The enduring bond between humans and their natural surroundings, as well as the insatiable curiosity to learn more about it, is reflected through this fascination. Hence, Laela (2024) observed that destination fascination determines tourists' willingness to revisit and, subsequently, to develop destination loyalty.

Fascination has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Previous research employed environmental psychology (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009) to quantify fascination in natural environments. Incorporating new technological features like augmented and virtual reality, academics in the field of tourism have expanded the notion to encompass urban tourism, heritage tourism, and experiential travel in recent years

(Akram & Kumar, 2017; Lee, 2024; Laela, 2024; Pessoa et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2016). In addition to validating a destination fascination scale, these researchers have expanded the body of literature on fascination. Notwithstanding these improvements, fascination remains an overlooked yet frequently implicitly utilised concept in the tourism industry (Liu et al., 2017; Pessoa et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020). To fill that gap, this article will take an in-depth examination of its theoretical underpinnings, dimensions, measurements, and managerial implications.

This study integrates the Reasonable Person Model (RPM), Attention Restoration Theory (ART), and the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) model to address theoretical gaps in understanding tourists' psychological engagement. The RPM argues that when individuals' informational and environmental requirements are met, they exhibit more rational behaviour (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009). ART supports this perspective by elucidating how authentic or visually appealing environments can captivate and reset attention through effortless interaction (Kaplan, 1985). The MTE model underscores the significance of novel, affective, and meaningful experiences in shaping enduring memories and influencing future behaviour, thereby capturing the emotional and experiential dimensions (Kim et al., 2012).

This article aims to bridge theoretical gaps in understanding destination fascination by pursuing three primary objectives. Initially, it defines destination fascination as a multifaceted construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and experiential elements that shape tourists' interactions with destinations. Secondly, it aims to identify the extent to which fascination fosters tourists' psychological connections, emotional responses, and future behavioural intentions, including loyalty, recommendations, and satisfaction. Finally, it aims to establish an integrative theoretical framework by utilising the ART, RPM, and MTE models to elucidate the mechanism by which environmental signals, cognitive restoration, and meaningful experiences in the tourism context generate fascination. These objectives aim to enhance conceptual understanding and convey practical insights to foster destination fascination and tourist loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Integrated Conceptual Framework of Destination Fascination

A source of restoring both individuals' mental and physical resources, based on Attention Restoration Theory (ART), is destination fascination (Kaplan, 1995). The information tourists acquire about a destination can captivate them even before they arrive, or at a specific spot within the destination itself (Zheng et al., 2022). ART suggests that enjoying nature may positively affect tourists' mental state (Rezapouraghdam et al., 2024). In addition, Basu et al. (2024) observed that nature's tendency to engage attention while permitting adequate cognitive space for reflection facilitates the "essential mental housekeeping" required to resolve lingering, unsettled concerns that could otherwise exhaust attentional resources. The ability to involuntarily sense environmental cues without mental effort is called fascination, and ART believes that engaging with or exploring natural settings may alleviate mental fatigue (Kaplan, 1995; Pessoa et al., 2022). Thus, based on Laela's (2024) findings, ART identified six elements of destination fascination: mystique, friendliness, uniqueness, fitness, attractiveness, and richness.

Subsequently, the Reasonable Person Model (RPM) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human behaviour and decision-making in different contexts. It was developed by Kaplan and Kaplan (2009) and Basu and Kaplan (2015). The model is particularly beneficial in fascinating environments that promote well-being and effective functioning. Given the strong correlation between emotional and information processing, several researchers have postulated that tourists are more inclined to behave rationally in environments that serve their need for understanding and information (Dat et al., 2024; Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009; Wang et al., 2020). Through RPM, there are three stages: model building, effectiveness, and meaningful action. Researchers stressed that model building (information acquisition) will stimulate meaningful action (destination loyalty) if it is first effective (destination fascination) (Li & Monroe, 2019; Shen & Wang, 2023). Collectively, these theoretical viewpoints provide a solid groundwork for explaining the cognitive and affective mechanisms of fascination.

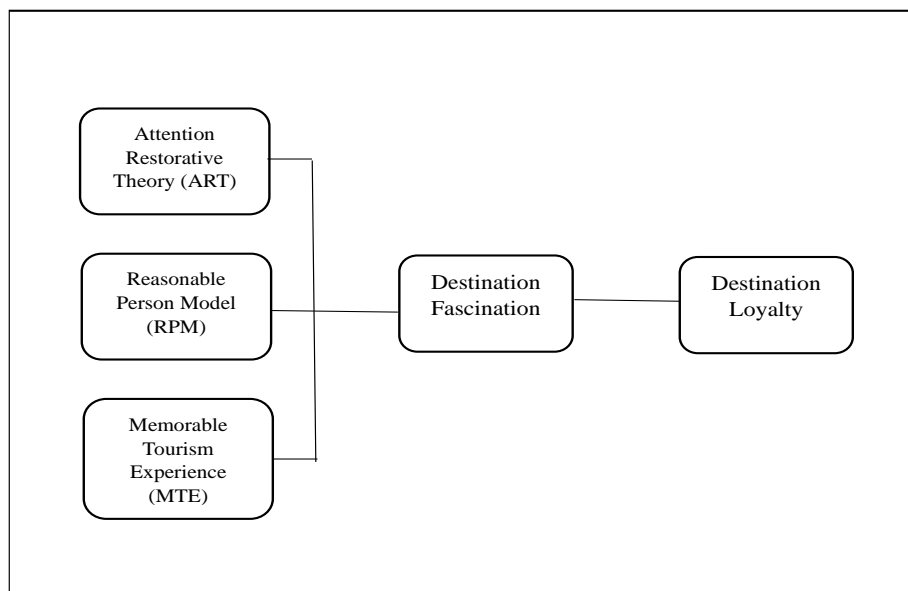
Finally, the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) is conceptually defined as a tourism experience that is pleasantly remembered and recalled post-event (Kim et al., 2012). This aligns with previous research by Sthapit and Coudounaris (2018), which indicates that tourism research highlights the relevance of memorable

experiences, as memory serves as the primary source of information for existing tourists when deciding to revisit and when transmitting word-of-mouth. Memorable tourism experiences may be shaped by fascination with the destination (Pessoa et al., 2022). Tourists evaluate their experiences more favourably when a destination fascinates them, a phenomenon attributable to the interplay between elevated expectations and their subsequent fulfilment through experience (Laela, 2024). Subsequently, Wang et al. (2020) reported that long-term positive experiences tourists obtained from their travel may develop destination loyalty. Therefore, destination fascination serves as a psychological gateway to deeper emotional engagement by integrating ART, RPM, and MTE concepts.

Therefore, the previous discussion clearly demonstrated that integrating ART, RPM, and MTE linkages stimulates destination fascination, ultimately leading to destination loyalty (Dai & Tang, 2023; Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009; Pessoa et al., 2022). Thus, this suggests that these theories alone are insufficient for clarifying how destinations retain tourists in the long term (see Figure 1). Destination fascination arises at the convergence of these processes, embodying a broad state of intense attention, emotional engagement, and a sense of immersion that extends temporary satisfaction (Dat et al., 2024; Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009; Wang et al., 2020). Critically, this integrative perspective fundamentally addresses significant limitations inherent in the individual theories. ART primarily focuses on the short-term restoration of cognitive function (Laela, 2024), offering limited insights into subsequent outcomes after a visit. On the other hand, RPM emphasises cognitive engagement and environmental understanding (Kaplan, 1985); however, it insufficiently addresses emotional depth. While MTE focuses on the development of emotive memories (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018), it lacks a strong basis in environmental and cognitive processes.

Consequently, integrating these perspectives, destination fascination serves as a mediating mechanism that transforms cognitive and emotional responses into enduring psychological connections with destinations. This framework advances tourism theory by extending beyond the mere definition of existing models. Therefore, this framework systematically examines how fascination cultivates destination loyalty. On the other hand, Kaplan (1995) further differentiated between hard and soft fascination in terms of content. Intense fascination may arise from observing motor racing, whereas gentle fascination can emerge during a lakeside walk, both of which offer opportunities for reflection. Kaplan (1995) elucidates the various types and sources of fascination, highlighting the possibility of studying and developing multiple dimensions of destination fascination, which will be further discussed in the next section. Figure 1 shows a new framework that combines three theories: ART, RPM, and MTE. It suggests that these three factors create Destination Fascination, which acts as the spark for traveller engagement. This fascination then turns a memorable visit into long-term Destination Loyalty, mapping the journey from a traveller's first visit to their lasting commitment.

Figure 1: Research Model



Source: (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010; Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Oliver, 1999)

Measurement and Operationalisation of Destination Fascination

Recent tourism research advocates the use of multidimensional approaches to encompass diverse experiential phenomena, including attention, emotion, and extensive psychological engagement, rather than relying on specific indicators or satisfaction-based metrics (Liu et al., 2017; Tasci, 2018). Liu et al. (2017) specifically emphasise that tourists' substantial cognitive and emotional involvement with destinations may not be adequately captured by conventional evaluation metrics alone, thereby highlighting the necessity for integrative constructs that embody persistent fascination. Consequently, destination fascination can be conceptualised as a higher-order construct that incorporates cognitive attentional processes, emotional responses, and sensory depth, reflecting tourists' sustained psychological involvement with the destination rather than fleeting assessments.

From a cognitive-affective lens, measurement may utilise indicators of effortless attention, interest, emotional resonance, and psychological engagement with destination traits. Research grounded in environmental psychology and destination image studies indicates that fascination-related cognition is intricately linked with perceptions of coherence, clarity, and meaningful perception of a destination, whereas affective components encompass emotions such as happiness, enjoyment, and a sense of curiosity (Kaplan & Berman, 2010; Hosany et al., 2017; Styliadis et al., 2020). These variables enable researchers to differentiate destination fascination from general perspectives or satisfaction by measuring both cognitive engagement and emotional intensity throughout destination encounters.

In practice, location fascination is supported by memorable, novel, and personally meaningful tourism experiences. Studies on memorable tourism experiences indicate that immersion and perceived distinctiveness are crucial for forming enduring psychological connections with destinations and fostering future loyalty behaviours (Kim, 2018). In terms of methodology, destination fascination can be represented by reflective higher-order constructs using structural equation modelling frameworks, such as PLS-SEM, which is suitable for establishing theories and sophisticated constructs (Hair et al., 2014). For optimal robustness, further studies must validate the construct across various tourism contexts and cultures, emphasising measurement consistency and cross-national comparisons (Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Dimensions of Destination Fascination

This study extends the concept of destination fascination proposed by Liu et al. (2017) into a multidimensional framework comprising six dimensions: mystique, attractiveness, richness, uniqueness, friendliness, and fitness. The following clarifies these dimensions.

Mystique

This study classifies mystique in destination fascination as the degree to which a destination stimulates tourists' desire to seek and uncover its narratives. Kaplan (1995) posited that fascination might be encountered through a process. Liu et al. (2017) subsequently contended that "storytelling" exemplifies a process of fascination. Furthermore, mystique enhances the tourist experience of both hard and soft fascination. For instance, when exploring haunted Scottish sites at midnight, tourists may encounter the hard fascination described by Kaplan (1995) during a thrilling and terrifying experience. Conversely, sightseeing in Shangri-La enables tourists to attain total tranquillity, engage in mental reflection, and appreciate the serenity of the natural environment, as described by Kaplan (1995) in his concept of soft fascination.

Attractiveness

This study identifies attractiveness in destination fascination as the degree to which a destination encourages tourists to spend time in a pleasurable experience. Tourists' personal aesthetic evaluations mostly influence destination attractiveness (Kirillova et al., 2014). Destination attractiveness is closely linked to tourists' subjective preferences. Botti et al. (2008) conducted a literature analysis on destination attraction, categorising it into major and minor attractions. The major attraction of a destination can endure, facilitating both exploration and escape for tourists. Conversely, a destination's minor attraction can sustain only a brief period and shape visitation experiences. Breiby and Slåtten (2018) demonstrated that destination attractiveness enhances tourists' attachment to a destination by fostering strong relationships with it. The literature consistently indicates that

attractiveness plays an essential role in destination fascination by diverting tourists' attention from their daily routines to the destination's environment.

Richness

This study explains richness in destination fascination as the variety of tourism resources in a destination. Abundant richness draws tourists' attention to the diverse and essential tourism resources within a destination. The richness dimension encompasses an aspect of the notion of extent, as defined by Kaplan (1995), requiring a sense of being "rich enough" in terms of destination fascination. From a tourist's perspective, the abundance of tourism resources, encompassing both natural and cultural assets, is crucial to a destination's competitiveness (Ching et al., 2019). Liu et al. (2017) showed that the abundance of tourism resources enhances the intention to revisit and enables tourists to engage in diverse activities within a single visit. The literature indicates that destination richness enhances perceived restoration and sustains the destination's competitiveness by fostering high revisit intentions among tourists.

Uniqueness

This study discusses the uniqueness of destination fascination and the hardship of switching between destinations. Tourists assess a destination's uniqueness based on their perceptions and the difficulty of replacing it with other options. As Kaplan (1995) stated, destination fascination arises when a unique element captures involuntary attention, prompting tourists to explore the destination's uniqueness through a fascinating experiential process. The findings of Liu et al. (2017) indicated that a unique image should be highlighted as both a cognitive and an affective image in destination branding to improve tourists' intention to revisit and foster positive word-of-mouth. In short, destination uniqueness allows tourists to encounter extraordinary experiences unattainable in everyday life, hence strengthening their overall fascination with the visit.

Friendliness

This study illustrates friendliness in destination fascination as tourists' subjective assessment of the friendliness of human interactions and services. Destinations that foster a sense of friendliness welcome tourists, alleviate their worries about unfamiliar surroundings, and encourage exploration of fascinating locales. However, contact with local citizens may provide the human connections tourists need to assess a destination's friendliness, particularly when the attraction is predominantly shaped by its local populace, such as during festivals (Liu et al., 2017). In addition to human connections, tourists may also evaluate the friendliness of destinations by considering the design of facilities or supporting policies that promote tourism, such as provisions for disabled tourists (Wang et al., 2019). Friendliness in destination fascination can be experienced through various methods, including human connections, considerate facility arrangement, and supportive policies.

Fitness

This study defines fitness within destination fascination as tourists' personal perceptions of the fit between their self-image and a destination. The suggested dimension, fitness, is distinct from Kaplan's (1995) notion of compatibility. Kaplan (1995) defined compatibility as the fit between an individual's objectives and preferences and the environment. This study defines fitness as the perception that tourists' encounters at a destination fit with their self-image, enabling them to express themselves and authentically enjoy involuntary attention. Destination studies typically employ the idea of fitness in relation to perceived self-congruity with a destination. Elshaer et al. (2024) indicated that congruence between tourists and a destination strengthens their identification with the destination, thereby fostering their willingness to return. In this regard, elevated destination fitness leads to higher tourist loyalty and an increased willingness to invest in sustaining a long-term engagement with the destination.

Differences of Destination Fascination, Destination Attachment, and Destination Attractiveness

Most significantly, previous research has adopted terminology related to, but not synonymous with, the concept of destination fascination, including destination attachment (Arya et al., 2018) and attractiveness (Chen & Huang, 2018), both of which have been thoroughly examined in the tourism literature. Theoretically, regarding foundational dimensions and evaluation techniques, these concepts are distinct from destination fascination,

though they share certain similarities, particularly their potential impact on destination loyalty (Nasir et al., 2021; Styliadis et al., 2020). Therefore, achieving conceptual precision and explaining destination fascination within the wider framework of tourist-destination connections requires addressing these distinctions.

In this context, several terms in the tourism field share conceptual similarities with destination fascination; however, they differ in scope, foundational theory, and assessment techniques. Destination attachment refers to the emotional bond a tourist forms with a familiar location, signified by their physical presence there (Yuksel et al., 2010). This concept is grounded in attachment theory, which encompasses destination identity and destination dependence (Pantelidis et al., 2024). Conversely, destination attractiveness concentrates on tourists' perceptions of natural and cultural attractions, along with the ability to meet their specific travel needs regarding expense, timing, and accessibility (Nasir et al., 2021), employing push and pull theory to encompass both tangible and intangible characteristics (Nieves-Pavón et al., 2025).

Accordingly, destination fascination broadens to encompass a more comprehensive and enduring fascination with a place, marked by heightened cognitive engagement, emotional commitment, and enduring curiosity beyond mere attachment and attraction. The psychology of curiosity and environmental preference theory underpin the notion that fascination induces an attentional pull that may subsequently maintain engagement and generate destination loyalty (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009). Therefore, accurate differentiation is essential for theoretical clarity and to prevent ambiguity.

Destination Fascination and Destination Loyalty

Wang et al. (2020) employed a model based on the RPM (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009) in their study of destination loyalty. Wang et al. (2020) used the model to examine the relationship between destination fascination and destination loyalty. Consequently, Shen & Wang (2023) and Wang et al. (2020) have investigated situations in which destinations can provide tourists with experiences that are infrequently encountered in their regular lives, rendering them fascinating. This fascination is likely to affect their loyalty and willingness to return. The friendliness and attractiveness of a destination enhance tourists' happiness and fulfilment, thereby encouraging their loyalty towards the destination (Dat et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2020).

An essential and well-supported criterion for tourist loyalty is destination fascination (Laela, 2024). The destination fascination dimensions, as explained earlier (Liu et al., 2017), directly enable the deep mental relaxation required by ART by providing an intense feeling of 'fascination' and 'being away,' which is how this phenomenon operates in accordance with fundamental psychological mechanisms. Intense, restorative involvement like this allows tourists to feel relief and serves as a crucial element of MTE (Rizqy & Roostika, 2023). As demonstrated by Hadzami (2024), this enriching experience greatly increases the likelihood of returning. It cultivates long-term loyalty, underscoring the importance of being fascinated as a precursor to subsequent favourable measures taken after a visit.

Managerial Strategies for Creating and Sustaining Fascination

Marketers and managers of destinations can benefit greatly from the concept of destination fascination, as it outlines specific strategies for building and promoting experiences that encourage customer loyalty and repeat visits. Marketers should stop marketing to tourists' basic attractiveness and start targeting the unique aspects of a destination that tourists find fascinating, such as its mystique, attractiveness, richness, uniqueness, friendliness, and fitness. This entails constructing narratives that stimulate genuine curiosity and motivate tourists to engage more deeply, transforming them into passionate explorers rather than passive consumers. Research indicates that fostering fascination, especially through visual media such as films, significantly increases a tourist's inclination towards a destination, which is the essential first step in encouraging a trip (Veenus et al., 2025).

As a source of crucial information for product strategy and operational planning, fascination is a vital tool for destination managers. In addition to ensuring tourists are satisfied, it is important to make sure they feel amazed even after they leave. To keep tourists from becoming frustrated, managers should prioritise authentic cultural and historical preservation, provide high-quality narrative and interpretation (through activities such as themed tours and interactive exhibitions), and ensure operations run smoothly. By incorporating these features, managers translate a temporary fascination into actual destination attachment. This strong, pleasant emotional state is

essential for generating a highly valuable marketing tool: word-of-mouth promotion. A fascinated tourist will likely recommend the destination and express solid behavioural intentions to revisit, thereby securing sustained income and consistency (Wang et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Destination fascination is beyond mere marketing strategy; it is a psychological mechanism that stimulates emotional connection, enhances memorability, and cultivates loyalty. The majority of studies indicate that fascination arises from a combination of natural and cultural resources, immersive experiences, narrative, and social engagement. Theoretical frameworks such as ART, MTE, and RPM provide a robust basis for understanding the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying fascination. Furthermore, in experience-intensive tourist contexts, including historic cities and post-pandemic urban destinations, destination fascination becomes particularly essential.

For destination managers, fascination serves as an effective approach for distinctiveness and persistent competitive advantage. By accumulating actual assets, creating immersive experiences, and narrating captivating stories, destinations may forge meaningful emotional connections with tourists. Conversely, as global tourism progresses, fascination will remain crucial in how destinations attract attention and cultivate long-term relationships with tourists. Consequently, destinations that genuinely fascinate will not only entice tourists but also encourage them, cultivate loyalty, and unlock greater, more sustainable tourism potential.

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