

## **Factors Influencing Destination Loyalty of Tourists at Historic Cities in Malaysia: A Proposed Model**

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**Abstract:** Cultural heritage tourism in Malaysia is facing fierce competition in the Southeast Asia region as there are more new emerging cultural heritage destinations that have been recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS). The increase in competition can have an adverse impact on the tourist arrivals to Malaysia as tourists will have many choices of cultural heritage destinations to select from. Hence, it is important for destination managers to devise strategic plans to target more on loyal tourists. In order for destination managers to derive destination management and marketing strategies, an understanding of the factors that can influence tourists' destination loyalty is necessary. Therefore, this study aims to propose a conceptual framework on the factors that can influence the destination loyalty of tourists at historic cities in Malaysia, namely Penang and Melaka. The factors proposed are destination factors (destination image; destination familiarity) and personal factors (perceived authenticity; tourist interactions; tourist emotions). Satisfaction is also discussed as a factor that can influence destination loyalty as well as a mediating variable between the factors and destination loyalty. This study will also discuss the hypotheses that are developed based on the model and the measurement of the constructs. As this is a conceptual study, the results of the testing of the model are not available but this paper establishes the relationships among the constructs which are useful for warranting further research. The significance of this study will provide a conceptual framework that can be tested in the context of cultural heritage tourism.

**Key words:** Destination loyalty, cultural heritage tourism, satisfaction, conceptual framework, Asia

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of new cultural heritage destinations, especially those that are listed as UNESCO WHS is increasing the level of competitiveness within the Southeast Asia region. Countries like Cambodia, Indonesia and Myanmar have been showing higher growth rates than Malaysia and this can have an impact on the tourist arrivals to Malaysia. Furthermore, the growth rate in Malaysia, particularly in Penang and Melaka has not been stable since the inscription of both cities as UNESCO WHS. This fluctuation in growth rates is not sustainable in the long run and hence, it is important for destination managers to identify ways to develop destination loyalty of tourists. In order to derive these strategies, destination managers or marketers will firstly need to find out what are the factors that can influence destination loyalty.

Destination loyalty has been researched extensively but there are still limited studies done in relation to tourist experience at cultural heritage sites (Waterton and Watson, 2010). However, in recent tourism literature, there have been discussions on the influence of destination image, authenticity and satisfaction on loyalty (Fong *et al.*, 2012; Prayag *et al.*, 2013). This study extends on these literature by proposing a conceptual framework that hypothesizes the influence of destination image, destination familiarity, perceived authenticity, tourist interactions, tourist emotions and satisfaction on destination loyalty. There is a need to identify other possible antecedents of destination loyalty as it can allow for better understanding of tourist behaviour. As destination loyalty is a complex construct, further exploration of its operationalization and other possible relationships with other influencing factors will be useful for decision makers to develop marketing strategies for different cultural heritage sites.

**Literature review:** Destination loyalty has been gaining interest among scholars since the 1990s with Oppermann (1997) introducing the relationship between previous purchase with future purchase behaviour. It was found that the frequency of past visitation had an influence on future destination choice (Oppermann, 2000). Focusing on past visitation only looks into the behavioural aspect of loyalty and it was argued that destination loyalty does not necessarily have to depend on repeat visits but can be viewed from the attitudinal aspect which is the willingness of tourists to recommend a destination to others (Chen and Gursoy, 2001). Since then, more studies have started to adopt both concepts of destination loyalty by incorporating behavioural and attitudinal dimensions (Chi and Qu, 2008; Prayag, 2009; Chen and Chen, 2010). In recent literature, there has been a new conceptualization of destination loyalty where loyalty is viewed as a bigger tourism network that does not only focus on a single destination but focuses on vertical, horizontal and experiential loyalty (McKercher *et al.*, 2012). Experiential loyalty refers to tourists who are loyal to a particular activity or lifestyle and this is applicable in the context of cultural heritage tourism as tourists may prefer to visit cultural heritage sites at various destinations. Although, there are different conceptualizations of destination loyalty, these studies also examined the factors influencing loyalty and one common factor is satisfaction.

Satisfaction has been researched extensively in consumer studies with various conceptualizations and the most common is the disconfirmation model by Oliver (1980). Based on the disconfirmation theory, satisfaction is conceptualized as the comparison of expectations and perceived performance. This concept had been adopted in tourism studies but has been disapproved by some due to measurement issues of expectation that occurs during site surveys (Millan and Pizam, 1995). Due to this, Tse and Wilton (1998) developed the perceived performance model that emphasized evaluating current performances without referring to expectations. This conceptualization has been adapted by others who have defined satisfaction as the evaluation of destination attributes (Kozak, 2003) and overall satisfaction of the visiting experience (Wu, 2007). Satisfaction has been postulated to have a positive relationship with destination loyalty and has been posited as an antecedent to destination loyalty (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Chen and Chen, 2010) even in the context of cultural heritage tourism (Wu, 2007). Besides being an antecedent, satisfaction has also been proven to be a mediator between destination image and destination loyalty (Shen *et al.*, 2014). Even though satisfaction has been researched a lot, its relationship with other possible

determinants of destination loyalty is still scarce and this paper proposes a conceptual framework that establishes the relationships with other antecedents.

Similarly, studies on the relationship between destination image with destination familiarity, tourist interactions and tourist emotions have been minimal especially in relations to cultural heritage sites. Most studies done on destination image have utilized the concept by Crompton (1979) which refers to the beliefs, ideas and impressions of an individual towards a destination. Being viewed as the overall impression of a destination, destination image has also been defined as the knowledge and beliefs of the destination attributes and destination image has an influence on satisfaction (Chen and Phou, 2013). However, other studies have found that destination image indirectly influences destination loyalty through satisfaction (Kim *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, a study done in Malaysia showed a direct relationship between destination image, revisit intention and recommendation to others (Som and Badarneh, 2011). Based on these literatures, it is hypothesized that destination image influences both satisfaction and destination loyalty.

Destination image and destination loyalty have been found to be influenced by destination familiarity where it had been operationalized as previous visitation (Milman and Pizam, 1995). However, this operationalization may not be accurate as not all tourists who have previously visited a destination will be more familiar with the destination. Due to this, another definition of destination familiarity has been developed and it consists of experiential familiarity and informational familiarity (Baloglu, 2001). Experiential familiarity refers to tourists being familiar with a destination because of previous experience while informational familiarity refers to tourists being familiar because of exposure to information related to the destination. It will be interesting to identify if tourists who are more familiar with a destination, display higher destination loyalty or not. According to the studies conducted by Kozak *et al.* (2005) and Fong *et al.* (2012), destination familiarity does contribute to intention to revisit. Therefore, destination familiarity will be included in the proposed conceptual framework as one of the factors influencing destination loyalty at cultural heritage sites.

Another factor that deserves attention is perceived authenticity as this factor has close connections with cultural heritage sites and very little research has been done on it due to the complexity to operationalizing it (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Authenticity has different forms and it can be divided into objective authenticity, constructive authenticity and existential authenticity

(Wang, 1999). Most tourism literature on authenticity explore objective authenticity as it covers the artifacts, buildings and any objects that are considered as original. Constructive authenticity on the other hand is any toured objects that is considered as authentic based on the perception of tourists. Existential authenticity is rather different as it focuses on the tourist's experience of activities at a destination that are considered as authentic to the tourist. Kolar and Zabkar (2010) studied the influence of objective and existential authenticity and found that both have an influence on destination loyalty at cultural heritage sites. On the other hand, Shen *et al.* (2014) found that constructive authenticity is not an influencing factor of destination loyalty but existential authenticity does have an influence on destination loyalty. Since, there are differing views, further investigation is needed to clarify the relationship between perceived authenticity, satisfaction and destination loyalty.

In tourism settings, tourist interactions are very important because they can have an impact on tourists' experiences. There are different types of tourist interactions and they can be divided into tourist-to-service personnel interactions, tourist-to-tourist interactions and tourist-to-local community interactions (Pearce, 2005). Although, tourist interactions with service personnel have been researched a lot, less emphasis has been given to tourist-to-tourist interactions particularly on its impact on satisfaction (Cohen *et al.*, 2014). Pearce (2005) suggested that there are two types of tourist-to-tourist interactions. They consist of intragroup and intergroup where the first refers to the interactions of tourists with people whom they travel with and the latter refers to interactions with people that they meet during the travel. It will be informative to know if these interactions can have an impact on future loyalty behavior. So far, only a few studies have established links between customer interactions with satisfaction and loyalty and they are in the area of cruise holidays and tour groups (Wu, 2007). This scarcity of research calls for the inclusion of the tourist interactions factor into relationship marketing models as this will benefit the business relationship with the customers (Morais *et al.*, 2004). Hence, tourist interactions is added to the proposed conceptual framework for this study.

During the course of interactions among tourists, there may be involvement of emotions as some tourist may be friendly to other tourists and this can generate a positive experience for both tourists. It has also been suggested that tourist interactions and tourist emotions may be related in the context of tourist interaction with the

locals in cultural heritage sites (Kastenholz *et al.*, 2013). Studies on tourist emotions are still new but are slowly gaining interest amongst scholars. Tourist emotions are strong feelings that a tourist may have developed from a destination and they can have relationship with certain behaviour (Prayag *et al.*, 2013). This is very similar to the definition of emotions by Hosany where emotion is intense feeling towards something. Due to the affective state of emotions, there can be a relationship with satisfaction which can potentially affect tourists' loyalty toward a destination. Moreover, scholars have already established that emotions have relationship with satisfaction and loyalty (Prayag *et al.*, 2013). However, there are other studies that have concluded that emotions and loyalty are not related (Lee *et al.*, 2008). To further investigate on the relationship between tourist emotions, satisfaction and destination loyalty, this construct will be added to the the proposed conceptual framework.

There are many different types of tourists at a particular destination and each of the tourists may display different behaviours and preferences. Therefore, it is important to learn the perceptions of different tourists based on their characteristics such as nationality, age, gender, education level, marital status, income level and length of stay. This information on tourist characteristics will be useful for decision makers to devise suitable tourism products and services according to their influence on tourist behaviour (Prayag, 2012). Further more, it is vital to determine tourist characteristics for the implementation of marketing strategies of cultural heritage destinations (Gaffar *et al.*, 2011). Studies have found that tourist characteristics have a relationship with tourist behavior. Prayag (2012) identified that there are differences in image perceptions of tourists from different nationalities with different marital status and lengths of stay. Similarly, Teo *et al.* (2014) and Gaffar *et al.* (2011) have also recorded differences in the behaviour of tourists according to their nationality. Socio-demographic characteristics of tourists such as nationality, age and education have also been examined as a moderator on the relationship between satisfaction and destination loyalty (DaCosta *et al.*, 2010). In this study, tourist characteristics will also be conceptualized as a moderator between satisfaction and destination loyalty.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The proposed conceptual framework has to be tested in order to examine if relationships exist between all the factors discussed and destination loyalty. This study will be further developed by conducting a quantitative research using a cross-sectional survey at cultural

heritage sites in Melaka and Georgetown, Penang. These two cities have been proposed because of their WHS status and they have been receiving higher tourist arrivals in comparison with other states in Malaysia. Hence, there will be a good representation of the tourists visiting cultural heritage sites in Malaysia. The survey instrument will focus on incorporating all destination factors, personal factors, satisfaction, tourist characteristics and destination loyalty. In order to test the proposed conceptual framework, Partial Least Squares (PLS) will be used as it allows for testing a complex model such as the proposed model and the main focus of PLS is on prediction (Hair *et al.*, 2012).

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Proposed conceptual framework and hypotheses development:** Based on the review of various literature, the conceptual framework as illustrated in Fig. 1 was developed. This proposed framework is meant for cultural heritage tourism settings where it gives attention to the loyalty of tourists to cultural heritage sites. The conceptual framework hypothesizes the relationship between destination factors, personal factors and destination loyalty. This framework has been developed

based on an extension of the model by Yoon and Uysal (2005), also known as the Tourism Destination Loyalty Theory (TDLT). The TDLT explains the relationship between motivation, satisfaction and destination loyalty and has been adopted by other tourism scholars even in the context of UNESCO WHS (Saumell *et al.*, 2013). The TDLT operationalized destination loyalty as both attitudinal and behavioural measures that consist of two items, which are intention to recommend and revisit intention. These two measures are also proposed for this conceptual framework. In addition, the experiential loyalty construct introduced by McKercher *et al.* (2012) will also be considered as another measure for destination loyalty. As this study focuses on the factors influencing destination loyalty, the factors are grouped into destination factors (destination image; destination familiarity) and personal factors (perceived authenticity; tourist interactions; tourist emotions). In this study, satisfaction is also considered as one of the influencing factors that influences destination loyalty (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Chen and Chen, 2010) and therefore the following hypothesis is developed:

- $H_1$ : satisfaction significantly influences destination loyalty

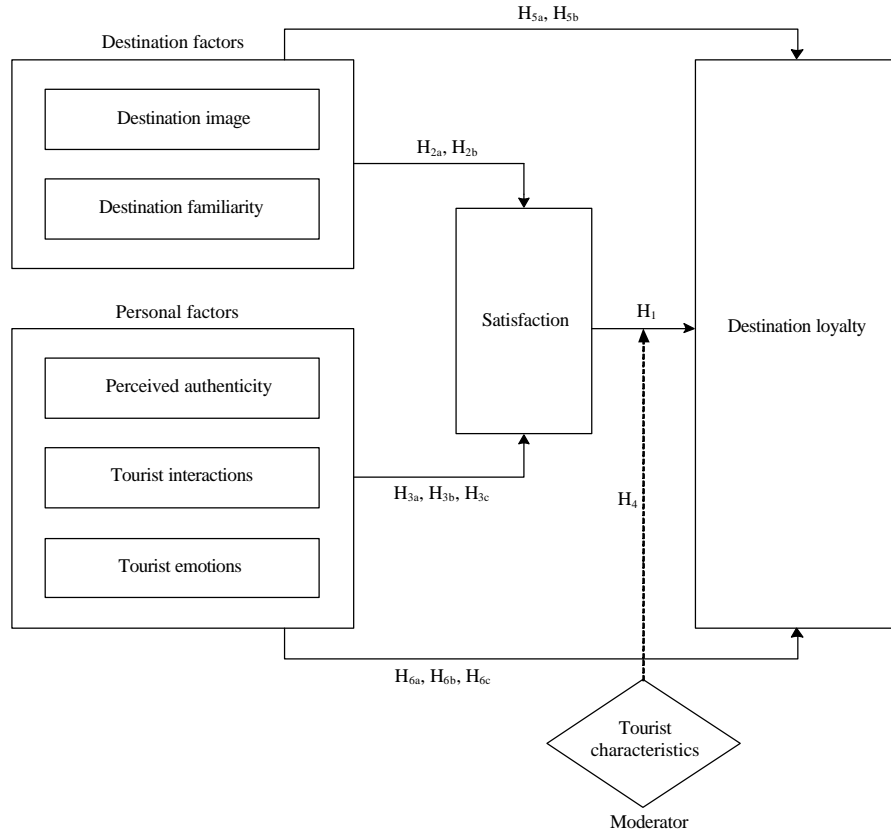


Fig. 1: Proposed conceptual framework for destination loyalty at cultural heritage sites

As presented in the literature review, satisfaction has been proven to be the mediator between destination image and destination loyalty as the more favourable the perceived image about a destination, the more satisfaction occurs and this will influence destination loyalty. In addition, destination familiarity has been identified as having an influence on destination loyalty (Kozak *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, the following hypotheses have been developed:

- H<sub>2a</sub>: satisfaction mediates the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty
- H<sub>2b</sub>: satisfaction mediates the relationship between destination familiarity and destination loyalty

Satisfaction and loyalty have been determined to have a positive relationship with perceived authenticity (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Huang and Hsu also determined that tourist interactions and satisfaction are positively related and suggested that loyalty should be included as the consequence to satisfaction. Furthermore, satisfaction has been concluded to be a mediator between tourist emotions and loyalty (Saunell *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it has been hypothesized that:

- H<sub>3a</sub>: satisfaction mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and destination loyalty
- H<sub>3b</sub>: satisfaction mediates the relationship between tourist interactions and destination loyalty
- H<sub>3c</sub>: satisfaction mediates the relationship between tourist emotions and destination loyalty

As mentioned previously, tourist characteristics can lead to different tourist behaviours (Gaffar *et al.*, 2011; Prayag, 2012) and in the case of cultural heritage sites, it will be interesting to examine if tourists of different age group or gender will have different satisfaction or loyalty. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

- H<sub>4</sub>: tourist characteristics moderate the relationship between satisfaction and destination loyalty

Destination image and destination familiarity are both proposed as destination factors that can influence destination loyalty. Studies have established the links between destination image and loyalty and between destination familiarity and loyalty (Kim *et al.*, 2013). It will be interesting to explore if the overall image that a tourist obtains while at cultural heritage sites can contribute to destination loyalty. In addition, it will be useful to determine if a direct relationship exist between familiarity

and loyalty as highlighted in the study by Wee *et al.* (2012). In this respect, the following two hypotheses have been derived:

- H<sub>5a</sub>: destination image positively influences destination loyalty
- H<sub>5b</sub>: destination familiarity has a positive influence on destination loyalty

Personal factors that have been proposed in the conceptual framework consist of perceived authenticity, tourist interactions and tourist emotions. All these factors are proposed as they relate to the perceptions, social experiences and emotions of tourists at cultural heritage sites. Perceived authenticity has been identified as having an influence on loyalty (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010) and tourist emotions and tourist interactions have also been found to have a relationship with loyalty (Prayag *et al.*, 2013). By examining the influence of these factors on destination loyalty, it can allow destination managers to develop suitable strategies for enhancing the overall visiting experiences of tourists without forgetting the authenticity of the sites. With this thought in mind, it is thus hypothesized that:

- H<sub>6a</sub>: perceived authenticity positively influences destination loyalty
- H<sub>6b</sub>: tourist interactions positively influence destination loyalty
- H<sub>6c</sub>: tourist emotions positively influence destination loyalty

## CONCLUSION

The conceptual model proposed in this study is an extended model based on the review of tourism literature. The main purpose for proposing this model is to address the gaps in the literature by examining all the factors in the same model and identifying which factor is a better predictor of destination loyalty. Although, destination loyalty has been researched often in tourism literature, limited studies have been done on cultural heritage tourism, especially in relations to tourist interactions and tourist emotions. Furthermore, experiential loyalty will be considered as another measurement of destination loyalty unlike in most other literature which have focused on intention to recommend and revisit intention. Therefore, it is timely to develop a framework that captures the possible influencing factors of destination loyalty for cultural heritage sites which will be useful for the development of marketing ideas for cultural heritage sites.

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