

# Tourists' Food Involvement, Place Attachment, and Destination Loyalty

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Destination food has been increasingly appealing to tourists within adjacent markets. This trend has been widely recognised by destination marketers. Tourists' food involvement affects their place attachment and destination loyalty, as well as the differentiation of tourists with different lifestyles.

food tourism

food involvement

place attachment

destination loyalty

## 1. Introduction

At present, an increasing number of people are travelling to taste local delicacies in different countries <sup>[1]</sup>, and food plays an essential role in tourists' choices of tourist destinations <sup>[2]</sup>. The attractiveness of food to tourists and the importance of food to destinations have been recognised by destination marketers <sup>[3]</sup>. There is a limited understanding in the literature of how destination food affects food tourists' psychological states and behaviours.

In the highly competitive tourism market, an effective marketing strategy is one of the critical factors to success. Effective marketing should be based on a sufficient understanding of the tourists. In light of this aspect, numerous related studies have investigated tourists' experience, satisfaction, and loyalty <sup>[4][5][6]</sup>. In the field of food tourism research, food involvement has been one of the preferred entry points for research related to food tourism <sup>[7]</sup>. Loyalty has always been one of the hotspots in the academic circle of tourism and has also become an essential index for many tourism managers and researchers to evaluate the tourism market, resources, and products. Studying the antecedent variables of tourist loyalty has always been the core research topic in the literature <sup>[8]</sup>. Unfortunately, the relationship between food involvement and loyalty has been under-investigated as well as the relationship between food involvement and place attachment. From the current research results, satisfaction, tourism motivation, service quality, perceived value, and tourism destination image can be determined as the five essential antecedent variables that affect tourist loyalty <sup>[8]</sup>. In addition to the abovementioned variables, existing studies have indicated that place attachment can also have a significant positive impact on the loyalty factor <sup>[9]</sup>. However, the mediating effect of place attachment on the relationship between food involvement and loyalty remains unknown.

McCleary <sup>[10]</sup> highlighted that lifestyle segmentation is a powerful marketing tool in the tourism industry because it does not only consider demographic factors, but also focuses on tourists' values, attitudes, opinions, and interests, which places the focus on the tourist's identity. Compared with the demographic characteristic segmentation method, lifestyle is a market segmentation method that presents significant advantages and, in turn, can help to

thoroughly explore the psychological traits of tourists. Levitt et al. [11] conducted a study to identify different food tourist groups based on their food involvement and motivation to determine whether the potential food tourism groups differ in attitudes, a willingness to consume local food, or food tourism planning behaviours. Nevertheless, studies have yet to investigate whether there are differences present in the emotional and behavioural intentions of different food tourism groups towards food tourism destinations during travel.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

The stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) theory is the underpinning theory to explain the conceptual framework in this study. It is a framework from a psychological perspective that is used to delineate the process of individual behavioural formation and response. This theory identifies the following three primary components as the essential constituents: stimulus, organism, and response. Specifically, the stimulus comprises the external and environmental cues that exert an influence on the individual, which also functions as the triggering [12]. The organism, on the other hand, is the internal state, either emotional or cognitive, which is provoked and affected by the external stimulus [13]. Finally, the individuals' internal states are the antecedents forming their response, including decision making and the behavioural outcomes [14]. Therefore, external factors and environmental cues trigger an individual's internal feelings and emotions, which eventually guide their behaviour.

In tourism and hospitality research, the S-O-R theory is valuable in depicting tourists' and customers' behaviour and providing clear insight into the formation process. For example, Hsu, Agyeiwaah, and Chen [15] investigated the food festival attendees regarding their loyalty behaviour based on the S-O-R theory. The results show that the S-O-R framework provides a valuable interpretation for loyalty behaviour formation. Wu, Wong, and Lin [16] successfully explained tourists' behavioural intention by applying the S-O-R theory and identified that online atmospheric cues are an important influence. Similarly, Sohaib, Wang, Iqbal, and Han [17] concluded that the S-O-R theory serves as an adequate theoretical framework for clarifying the influence of nature-based solutions on green brand attitudes among hotel guests.

The S-O-R theory is ideal for this study as it can elucidate the formation process of tourists' loyalty to a destination. Food involvement, being a trait and characteristic, significantly influences tourists' perceptions and attitudes towards their food experience in the travel destination [18]. Consequently, it can be considered an essential element and feature of the stimulus [19]. In this study, food involvement influences tourists' reactions to the food-related environmental cues in the travel destination, serving as the stimulus that would elicit emotional states in tourists. Furthermore, place attachment emphasizes the emotional bond that individuals form with a specific place or environment [20]. In this research, place attachment represents an internal feeling characterized by a high level of affective components, functioning as the emotional state of tourists. Lastly, destination loyalty is a typical response to behavioural outcomes, which was identified in various studies [21][22].

## **3. Food Tourism and Food Tourists**

Food and tourism have been compelling areas of tourism research over the past three decades since the exploration conducted by Belisle [23] on this topic. Food strongly influences travellers' decisions when choosing a destination for a vacation [24]. Food consumption is one of the critical travel experiences and motivations [25]. Conceptually, food-based tourism or food tourism is characterised by food-related tourism, including the tasting of food, becoming familiar with the food production process [26], and experiencing local food culture [27]. Specifically, food tourism includes visits to food producers, food festivals, restaurants, and specific locations [28]. This type of tourism has also been labelled as culinary tourism [29], gastronomy tourism [30], and tasting tourism [31]. A certain degree of conceptual overlap exists between the different types of food tourism; however, subtle discrepancies can be identified. Food tourism focuses on food as the primary motivation in travel; culinary tourism focuses on the preparation of food and the process of cooking; gastronomy tourism focuses on the study of gastronomy; and tasting tourism focuses on the consumption of food and drink. In the context of this study, tourists visited Shunde to taste the local specialities and visit well-known local restaurants. The tourism phenomenon this study investigates is in line with the concept of food tourism.

Ignatov [32] first proposed the concept of "food tourists", referring to tourists who have travelled to a destination and participated in various activities. These activities include browsing or buying gourmet ingredients at retail stores or farms, tasting food at local restaurants, dining at internationally renowned restaurants, studying in culinary schools, or staying in gourmet restaurants with accommodation facilities. Wolfe [33] further suggested three scenarios specific to food tourists visiting a new restaurant within a one- or two-hour drive, visiting foreign grocery stores or food markets during overseas trips, and having a vacation associated with food festivals or seasonal fruit or vegetable plantations. Robinson and Getz [34] proposed a more segmented concept of food tourists called food fanatics. This group of people are interested in "eating" and "talking" about food. They care about where the food comes from, the preparation process, and even the raw materials used to achieve a more advanced level of food appreciation. In this study, food tourists are represented by those who travel to a destination to taste the local specialities and eat in well-known local gourmet restaurants. Robinson and Getz [34] proposed that destinations need to better understand tourists' involvement in food to attract foodies. Food tourists are composed of different levels of food involvement and motivations [35].

## **4. Food Involvement**

Involvement refers to the degree of psychological connection [36], the perception of personal relevance [37], and the degree to which a person is engaged in an object, activity, place, or experience [38]. Zaichowsky [39] defined involvement as a state of motivation, arousal, or interest, and the degree to which an individual perceives the importance of something based on their own needs, interests, and values. The concept of involvement first received attention in the field of food intake in the early 2000s [40][41]. Bell and Marshall [38] first defined food involvement as "the level of importance of food in a person's life" and pointed out that the level of food involvement may vary from individual to individual. They believe that cravings for new food flavours may increase food's importance in food consumers' lives. By combining scholars' definitions of involvement in the field of tourism and the definition of food involvement proposed by Bell and Marshall [37], we defined tourists' food involvement as the

importance of food for tourists during their journeys, and the perception of importance reflects their own needs, interests, and values.

A scale to measure food involvement was derived from the personal involvement scale proposed by Zaichkowsky [39]. In this scale, involvement can be conceptualised as the degree to which a person associates themselves with an activity or product through attractive, powerful, interesting, valuable, exciting, thrilling, desirable, wanted, and meaningful aspects to explore tourists' food involvement [42]. Another scale specific to food involvement was proposed by Bell and Marshall [40], which measures food involvement stages, including food access, preparation, cooking, eating, and handling-related activities. Kim et al. [43] utilised the abovementioned scale to study the food involvement of Korean kimchi festival tourists. Caber et al. [7] also used this scale when studying the impact of food involvement on local food consumption. However, for the purpose of this study, the items related to preparation and processing were removed, and the items related to diet, acquisition, and cooking were retained. As a result, in this study, the food involvement scale proposed by Bell and Marshall [40] was believed to be more pertinent, and the questions presented were more context specific. Therefore, a modified scale adopted from Bell and Marshall [40] was used for this study.

## 5. Place Attachment

According to Stokols and Shumaker [44], place attachment is the degree to which an individual functionally associates themselves with a place. Place attachment reflects an emotional bonding activity between an individual and a specific spatial environment [45], or the emotional investment in a place [46].

Scholars disagree over the dimensions of place attachment. Place identity and place dependence are two dimensions widely adopted by place attachment studies in various contexts [47]. William and Vaske [48] adopted psychometric methods to design a place attachment scale to validate a two-dimensional conceptual framework (i.e., place identity and place dependence) for tourism destinations. Harmon et al. [49] added an independent structure of emotional attachment to the original model, which is considered to be an individual's emotional attachment to a place, giving it meaning [50]. Other scholars believe that place attachment possesses additional dimensions, such as place affect and place social bonding [51][52]. Based on the research's similarity and the model's reliability, the place attachment model constructed by place dependence and place identity was adopted in this study.

Place identity refers to people's identification with a place they consider unique [51] or a place that matches their own identity [53]. The tourism environment can express and affirm one's own identity. Therefore, place identity can increase one's sense of belonging to a tourist destination [54]. In this study, food lovers who travel to a widely recognised food city may affirm their identity as foodies and thus develop a sense of attachment to this place.

Place dependence refers to a functional attachment to a place [55], which reflects the importance of the place in achieving one's functional goals (or activities) [56]. This functional dependence is reflected in the physical characteristics of the destination or region [48]. Places that can meet multiple needs generate more profound and

broader place dependencies for tourists than those that meet limited needs <sup>[44]</sup>. Simply put, when a person emotionally connects with, identifies with, or feels as though they belong to a place, an identity with the place is then developed. If the environment of a place can meet an individual's functional needs, they will develop a dependence on the place.

## **6. Tourist Loyalty**

Studying tourists' loyalty is helpful for the marketing and management of a given destination <sup>[57]</sup>, which is pivotal for the profit and sustainable development of the destination <sup>[58]</sup>. Loyalty is defined as repeat purchase behaviour characterised by repurchase intention, word-of-mouth communication, and recommendation intention (Lee et al. <sup>[59]</sup>). Oliver and Burke <sup>[60]</sup> highlighted that loyalty depends on customer satisfaction, which is considered to be the consumers' judgment of goods and services. Travel loyalty has long been perceived as an extension of customer loyalty in the travel environment <sup>[61]</sup>. A destination can be regarded as a product and satisfy customer needs, or loyal tourists may revisit or recommend it to others <sup>[6]</sup>.

The concept of loyalty can be understood via the following three dimensions: behavioural, attitudinal, and comprehensive loyalty. Behavioural loyalty refers to the behaviour of repeat purchases or the proportion of purchases, and this dimension focuses on outcomes. Attitudinal loyalty is "customers' stated preferences, commitments, or purchase intentions" <sup>[62]</sup>. In tourism, attitudinal loyalty refers to the psychological outcomes of tourists, such as the intention to visit a particular destination repeatedly or recommend it to others. Comprehensive loyalty is a combination of loyalty-related attitudes and behaviours <sup>[63]</sup>.

From the perspective of the tourist destination, revisiting and recommending it to others are thought to be related to behavioural loyalty <sup>[6]</sup>. This viewpoint is also supported by Opperman <sup>[64]</sup>, who claims that the tourist experience at the destination is a product, and their loyalty can then be reflected in the behavioural intention to revisit the destination and recommend those experiences to friends and family. However, some scholars classify it as attitude loyalty because it presents a positive attitude towards the destination. This attitude strongly indicates an individual's tendency to recommend destinations to other tourists, even when they do not revisit them at all <sup>[65]</sup>. To sum up, this study defines tourist loyalty as the comprehensive loyalty of willingness to revisit and present positive information, and it uses the two elements of intention to revisit and recommendation to relatives and friends to predict tourists' loyalty to certain tourist destinations <sup>[6]</sup>.

## **7. Lifestyle**

The term "lifestyle" comes from the fields of psychology and sociology. It was first studied in depth in the 1960s by psychologist Alfred Adler, who emphasised the uniqueness of the individual, but also recognised the similarity between the individual and their way of life. Lazer <sup>[66]</sup> defined lifestyle as a systematic concept, attributing this particular pattern to the aggregation and development of people in society. In addition, lifestyle also emphasises social and cultural values and behaviours and is often used to describe the daily life of consumers <sup>[67]</sup>. Later,

scholars proposed the concept of lifestyle as sociological, describing it as the way individuals allocate time and money, the way they display activities and things that interest them, and their views on various issues [68][69]. Hawkins et al. [70] regard lifestyle as an embodiment of self-concept, suggesting that lifestyle is shaped by past experiences, intrinsic characteristics, and the environment at the time. Plummer [71] believes that lifestyle can be divided into the following two concepts: the mode of lifestyle and the way of market segmentation based on lifestyle. In marketing management studies, it is crucial to understand customers' needs through their lifestyles. Marketers can effectively communicate with and market to customers by knowing and understanding their lifestyles [71]. As a result, lifestyle is also considered an effective segmentation tool in marketing research and is widely adopted by marketers [63].

Plummer's [71] AIO (Activities, Interests, and Opinions) scale is often utilised by researchers to measure people's lifestyles [72][73]. Activities include work, hobbies, social activities, vacations, and community; interests include family, entertainment, food, and media; and opinions include education, culture, social issues, and business. Another scale, the Values and Lifestyle Survey (VALS) [74], incorporates the concept of value into the measurement tool and reinforces the integrity of the AIO scale in measuring lifestyle. It divides individuals into the following eight groups: thinkers, believers, innovators, achievers, strugglers, survivors, experiencers, and creators. While studies using the AIO or VALS methods yield insightful and meaningful data, they require extensive investigation and analysis and are operationally difficult [73][75], as these studies typically use 300 or more items [73]. Furthermore, Chinese consumers' perceptions and behaviours are quite different from those in Western countries [76], and AIO and VALS may not be suitable for Chinese consumer research. Based on the complexity of the AIO and VALS scales and the particularity of China's national conditions, this study uses a less-complicated scale validated in the Chinese context [77]. The scale was derived from the AIO-based scale developed by the authors of [78]. Tian [77] combined tourism motivation as an index and selected ten measurement indices, including health, family, sports, travel, work, adventure, culture, novelty, leisure time, and environmental awareness, and constructed a lifestyle measurement index.

## 8. The Relationships among Food Involvement, Place Attachment, and Tourist Loyalty

Previous studies have examined the relationships among the three constructs in various contexts. For instance, Brown et al. [79] conducted a survey on tourists during the London Olympics and demonstrated that sports involvement positively impacts place attachment, thereby influencing tourists' willingness to revisit a place. In a study by Hsu and Scott (2020) [18], it was suggested that food experience plays a crucial role in positively influencing place attachment in travel destinations. Similarly, Wang et al. [80] conducted a study on rural tourism and found that tourism involvement significantly influences place attachment. Furthermore, Chen [81] investigated the relationship between involvement and place attachment in film tourism and discovered that celebrity involvement affects tourists' place attachment to the destination. Moreover, Plunkett et al. [82] confirmed that place

identity and place dependency exert a significant influence on behavioural loyalty. Additionally, tourist involvement has been found to impact the perceived value of the destination experience [82].

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