Sacred Journeys: Exploring Emotional Experiences and Place Attachment in Religious Tourism at Monasteries in Serbia

Sanja Obradović

Faculty of Science, University of Novi Sad, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia; sanjaobradovic992@gmail.com

Abstract: Religious tourism holds a significant place in travel experiences, particularly at monasteries, where visitors often encounter profound emotional experiences. This study aims to investigate the emotional experiences and place attachment of religious tourism at monasteries in Serbia, utilizing quantitative methods and an online survey approach. Through an online survey administered to visitors of Serbian monasteries, this study seeks to quantify and analyze the emotional experiences and two-dimensional place attachments reported by participants during their sacred journeys. The survey instrument includes measures to understand place attachment through place dependence and place identity, satisfaction, emotional experience, and destination loyalty under one framework. Additionally, demographic variables will be examined to identify potential differences in emotional experiences and place attachment among different visitor groups. The results indicate that place attachment is influenced by emotional experience and satisfaction, which further influences destination loyalty. The findings of this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the destination loyalty and place attachment aspects of religious tourism at Serbian monasteries, providing valuable insights for tourism management and destination marketing efforts.

Keywords: religious tourism; sacred journey; Orthodox monasteries; emotional experiences; identity; dependence; satisfaction; destination loyalty

1. Introduction

The literature on travel and mobility gives pilgrimage a unique place. It is among the earliest means of human migration and a key antecedent of contemporary tourism (Di Giovine and Elsner 2014). Among the first types of tourism is religious tourism (Rinschede 1992). Religious tourism has long been a prominent part of international travel, marked by pilgrimages, retreats, and visits to holy locations (Iliev 2020). Travelers visit religious sites for a variety of reasons, such as curiosity, admiration for spiritual lifestyles, and curiosity regarding new places (Gurija and Scortes 2023). Religious tourism derives its fundamental ideas from religion (Nolan and Nolan 1992) and is driven by highly specific reasons that are mostly connected to family values, religious heritage, and traditions (Gurija and Scortes 2023). Religious tourism has grown significantly in popularity throughout the years, contributing significantly to the travel sector (Durán-Sánchez et al. 2018).

Monasteries are special places for spiritual thought, contemplation, and worship among the many places that draw religious tourists (Robina Ramírez and Pulido Fernández 2018). Referred to as peaceful havens, monasteries are frequently tucked away in scenic settings and provide a chance for travelers and pilgrims to go on holy pilgrimages in search of comfort, wisdom, and spiritual contact (Aulet and Vidal 2018; Kamenidou and Stavrianea 2021). Monastery (monastic) tourism is the term used to describe the visiting of monasteries for religious or tourism-related causes. As stated by van Tongren (2014, p. 53), some people seem to go to monasteries only for spiritual or religious purposes, while others visit for a positive and enjoyable experience that does not, however, carry any primarily religious aspirations.
Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have been paying more attention to the phenomena of religious tourism in recent years, which is indicative of its growing significance in the world of tourism (Aulet and Vidal 2018; Božić et al. 2016; Durán-Sánchez et al. 2018; Kamenidou and Stavrianea 2021; Patwardhan et al. 2020a; Robina Ramírez and Pulido Fernández 2018). Within this broader context, monasteries emerge as focal points of religious tourism, drawing visitors from diverse backgrounds and faith traditions. This study investigates tourists’ emotional experiences in monasteries and their attachment, satisfaction, and loyalty. Whether situated atop rugged mountains, nestled in verdant valleys, or perched on serene lakeshores, monasteries exert a powerful allure and attract both tourists and pilgrims. In this introductory exploration of sacred journeys focused on monasteries, this research examines the significance of monastic destinations as sacred spaces and antecedents and descendants of monastery emotional experience. Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from the fields of religious studies, anthropology, psychology, and tourism studies, the current investigation aims to unravel the tourists’ emotional experience that defines the pilgrimage to monasteries. It concentrates on the connection between place attachment and emotional experiences. It also investigates the impact of emotional monastic experiences on satisfaction and loyalty. To the author’s best knowledge, previous research did not use all the above-mentioned constructs in the model regarding religious tourism and monastic experience. Also, the different effects of tourist demographic characteristics on these relationships are explored. Patwardhan et al. (2020b) focused on tourists’ loyalty to religious festivals but did not include satisfaction and considered only festivals. This study focuses on sacred journeys in Serbia, specifically on emotional experiences in monasteries. According to Božić et al. (2016), Serbia boasts a plethora of Orthodox monasteries that might potentially be featured on the global religious tourism map. The outcome of this study provides empirical knowledge in designing effective techniques for promoting religious travel focused on monasteries and contributes to enriching the tourism literature regarding tourists’ emotional experiences of sacred journeys. This research contributes to the limited body of knowledge addressing tourists’ emotions while visiting monasteries as sacred places.

This article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the domestic tourists’ experiences in religious trips and visits to monasteries in Serbia. First, the literature review focuses on the emotional experience, place attachment, destination loyalty, and satisfaction and introduces the components and creation of the hypotheses and research model. Second, the methodology and follow-up findings are discussed. The results were finally examined, and recommendations were made to the management of the monastery and tourists. In addition, theoretical contributions, limitations, and further study recommendations are provided.

2. Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

In Serbia, spanning from north to south, over 200 monasteries grace the terrain, with 54 officially recognized as cultural monuments. Additionally, a number of medieval Serbian sanctuaries enjoy international protection. Hence, among the UNESCO’s list of world cultural heritage sites, the following are included: Stari Ras with Sopočani, Studenica Monastery, and the Medieval Monuments of Kosovo and Metohija—Dečani, Gračanica, the Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, and the church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa (UNESCO 2024). Holy places that are thousands of years old represent the most important symbols of Serbian nationality, heritage, history, tradition, and religion (Podovac 2017). Constructed under the influence of Byzantine, Romanesque, and Baroque architectural styles, Serbian monasteries are characterized by great stylistic diversity and beautiful paintings (Radović and Radović 2017). Monasteries have the most exquisite frescoes of the Middle Ages painted in the style of the skilled painters of Byzantium. Apart from their magnificence, amazing architecture, and icons, monasteries are also significant because they contain the artifacts and relics of the most important figures of Serbian history, saints, rulers, and creators (Simić 2016). Their beautiful architecture, the artistic wealth they possess, and
the interesting stories they preserve attract not only believers but also artists and tourists. Their importance, size, and history amaze even those who are not committed to the faith. Most people in Serbia are religious believers (about 85% Serbian Orthodoxy). For all the previously mentioned reasons, the author believes that it is significant to examine the emotions (and how they are formed) that monasteries awaken among domestic tourists, how attachment is formed, and how this affects satisfaction and loyalty.

2.1. Place Attachment and Its Antecedents and Descendants

Examining the idea of “place” to understand human–environment interactions has gained importance in tourism since 1988 (Dwyer et al. 2019). The notion of place attachment, which has its roots in environmental psychology, is a significant term that captures the variety of meanings that locals and visitors alike attach to their physical surroundings (Dwyer et al. 2019; Rubinstein and Parmelee 1992; Scannel and Gifford 2010). A positive relationship or tie between an individual and a specific location is known as a place attachment, which has its roots in attachment theory (Williams and Vaske 2003, p. 831). Many scholars have distinguished between place dependency and place identity (Hosany et al. 2017; Maricchiolo et al. 2021; Son et al. 2023; Wan et al. 2022) and have typically thought of place attachment as a multifaceted concept (Martins et al. 2022). The recognition of place identity and place dependence as the psychological consequences of place attachment serves as the common thread connecting these disparate scholars’ points of view (Wan et al. 2022). Place dependence is identified as the functional relationship of a location, where a person’s needs are met by the conditions and characteristics of a place (Anton and Lawrence 2016). When someone develops a psychological attachment to a location through ideas, memories, feelings, and other individuals with whom they share the place, place identity—the emotional attachment to a place—emerges (Lalicic and Garaus 2022). Place attachment may be affected by social and demographic variables, including age, gender, income, length of residency, and home ownership (Anton and Lawrence 2016). Therefore, the following have been hypothesized:

**H1:** Place attachment—Place identity is influenced by the socio-demographic characteristics of tourists (H1a gender, H1b age, H1c education, H1d employment status, H1e traveling company).

**H2:** Place attachment—Place dependence is influenced by socio-demographic characteristics of tourists (H2a gender, H2b age, H2c education, H2d employment status, H2e traveling company).

According to Correia et al. (2017), emotional experience can foster a deeper sense of attachment to a destination. Positive emotions may contribute to the formation of lasting memories and the desire to visit the place again in the future (Bagheri et al. 2023). However, several studies have discovered that visitors will feel more positive about anything that will enhance the area’s character if they connect to it (Lalicic and Garaus 2022). Orth et al. (2012) pointed out that most studies ignore the power of emotional tourism experience in predicting place attachment, and there is a need to investigate this relationship more. A tie that develops over time as an outcome of a pattern of emotional experiences toward a certain site is called place attachment, according to Morgan (2010). Sensations of affection, passion, and love are linked to a strong connection—attachment (Mugge et al. 2010). It is confirmed by Cardinale et al. (2016) that arousal and pleasure have a favorable relationship with brand attachment. Place attachment is formed in part by feelings associated with the experience of the location (Morgan 2010). Using Morgan’s (2010) developmental theory of place attachment, this study model felt emotions as antecedents of place attachment. This leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Place attachment (place identity a; place dependence b) is positively and significantly influenced by emotional experiences.
Based on research by Hosany et al. (2017) and Lee et al. (2012), as well as Morgan’s (2010) theory of place attachment, satisfaction is a prerequisite for place attachment. Numerous researchers have confirmed this association. Hosany et al. (2017), for instance, found that emotional experiences and satisfaction are the precursors of place attachment. Su et al. (2011) and Lee et al. (2012) have found that tourist satisfaction is an anticipator of place attachment, which includes place dependence and place identity. Therefore, it makes sense to believe the following:

**H4:** Place attachment (place identity a; place dependence b) is positively and significantly influenced by tourist satisfaction.

The intention of travelers to return and to suggest the place to others has been used to measure destination loyalty (Hung et al. 2021; Stylidis et al. 2020). Among the most renowned noneconomic theories (Luong 2023; Patwardhan et al. 2020b; Stylidis et al. 2020) that explain destination loyalty is place attachment. The likelihood of destination loyalty may be impacted by the degree of attachment to the place (Chen et al. 2023; Woosnam et al. 2018). According to studies on tourism, visitors’ intentions to return or suggest the location to others are positively impacted by both the identification and dependence elements of place attachment (Chen et al. 2023; George and George 2004; Loureiro 2014). Three aspects of place attachment—place dependence, place identity, and affective attachment—were found by Yuksel et al. (2010) to have an impact on destination loyalty both directly and indirectly through overall satisfaction. However, Lee et al. (2012) showed that word of mouth is predicted by place dependence. Prayag and Ryan (2012) show that place identity and location dependence predict recommendation intention at the destination level. Patwardhan et al. (2020a) investigated religious festivals and concluded that loyalty is directly influenced by place attachment. In light of empirical research findings and the widespread belief that place attachment precedes tourist behaviors and attitudes, the subsequent hypothesis is put forth:

**H5:** Place attachment (place identity a; place dependence b) has a positive and significant impact on destination loyalty.

### 2.2. Emotional Experiences and Their Antecedents and Descendants

There is a wealth of research on emotions in the fields of psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy. However, research on emotions in the tourism context has recently broadened, though it is still primarily based on consumer behavior, frequently integrated into cognitive psychology, and typically published by marketing academics (Volo 2021). According to Mulligan and Scherer (2012), emotions are affective states that are defined by intense feeling episodes connected to a particular referent (a person, an object, or an event) and elicitting particular response behaviors. Prior studies in tourism (Hosany et al. 2021; Pham et al. 2021; Prayag et al. 2017; Quynh et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2023) emphasize the feelings connected to different destinations, venues, and types of tourism (from festivals through heritage sites to dark tourism). In the religious tourism context, the emotional experience is generated by the interaction between tourists and sacred objects as well as with local people at the destination (Patwardhan et al. 2020a). It is thought that variables like gender, age, income, education, and so forth are reliable indicators of the tourist market and can be utilized to forecast traveler behavior (Kara and Mkwizu 2020; Ma et al. 2018). Travelers’ socio-demographic traits influence their emotional experiences, as shown by studies by Hosany and Prayag (2013) and Šagovnović and Kovačić (2021). According to the previous research results (Šagovnović and Kovačić 2021; Kim et al. 2015), there were notable differences in how respondents perceived their emotional experiences depending on their socio-demographic characteristics, including their degree of education and their travel partner. They shed light on the various ways that various demographic groups could react emotionally to travel experiences. As a result, the following hypothesis is put forth:
H6: Emotional experiences are influenced by socio-demographic characteristics of tourists (H6a gender, H6b age, H6c education, H6d employment status, H6e traveling company).

The literature emphasizes the importance of emotional experiences as precursors to satisfactory tourist experiences and destination loyalty (Quynh et al. 2021; Prayag et al. 2017). People analyze and integrate affective memory traces, which are left behind by the emotions they feel during consumption, to create post-consumption satisfaction assessments (Peter and Olson 2010). Previous studies confirmed the relationship between emotional experience and tourist satisfaction (Biswas et al. 2021; Kim and Ritchie 2014; Quynh et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2023) and emotional experience and loyalty (Hosany et al. 2013; Kim and Ritchie 2014). Research conducted by Han and Jeong (2013) and Hung et al. (2021) demonstrated that there is a favorable association between tourists’ satisfaction and their emotional experiences and their impact on future behavioral intentions, including the building of loyalty. Destination loyalty and satisfaction are positively correlated with emotional experiences, as demonstrated by Hsu and Huang (2012) and Prayag et al. (2017). As a result, the subsequent hypotheses are put forth:

H7: The emotional experiences of tourists have a positive and significant impact on their level of satisfaction.

H8: The emotional experiences of tourists have a positive and significant impact on their loyalty to monasteries.

2.3. Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty

Tourism literature indicates that tourists’ satisfaction is among the most crucial elements when selecting a destination; if they are happy with their experience, they are likely to return or suggest others to visit the destination (Kanwel et al. 2019; Hwang et al. 2020). Liro (2024) particularly focused on tourist satisfaction in six popular pilgrimage centers in Poland and pointed out its importance. According to earlier studies (Hwang et al. 2020), visitor satisfaction is a reliable indicator of tourist loyalty to a destination. The level of satisfaction that tourists experience determines whether or not they stick with the destination (Bagheri et al. 2023). Several researchers (Kusumah 2023; Hung et al. 2021) have looked into the connection between destination satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, it would appear appropriate to put out the following hypothesis:

H9: Travelers’ loyalty to the monastery is positively and significantly impacted by their level of satisfaction.

3. Results

A total of 502 domestic tourists participated in the survey research regarding Serbian monasteries (Table 1). The participants’ average age was 43 (SD = 16.6467; range = 19–85 years). Regarding employment status, most respondents were employed (64.9%). A high school degree (53.0%) and a bachelor’s degree (36.3%) were held by the great majority of respondents. Tourists who participated mostly traveled with family (49.2%) but also with friends (22.7%), a partner (16.5%), alone (4.0%), and others (7.6%). Since the survey showed that tourists visited most Serbian monasteries equally, this has not been mentioned in Table 1.
Table 1. Socio-demographic attributes and travel-related information of the respondents (n = 502).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Status of Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age = 43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. = 16.6467</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range (19–85)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree/PhD degree</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel companion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for all analyzed variables, including Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, which is higher than 0.7 for all factors, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Barbera et al. 2021).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and measurement model validity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>CR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place attachment—place identity</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.942</td>
<td>0.655</td>
<td>0.905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place attachment—place dependence</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>0.509</td>
<td>0.754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional experience</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>0.957</td>
<td>0.696</td>
<td>0.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination loyalty</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td>0.526</td>
<td>0.847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.926</td>
<td>0.568</td>
<td>0.839</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model fit and the constructs’ validities were evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) before the suggested hypotheses were tested (Hair et al. 2019; Grimm and Widaman 2012). The model fit indicates demonstrated that overall statistics for the model were acceptable, close to excellent $\chi^2$ (257) = 621, $p = 0.001$, CMIN/DF = 2.42, RMSEA = 0.053, SRMR = 0.045, NFI = 0.999, RFI = 0.986, IFI = 0.997, GFI = 0.998, AGFI = 0.971, TLI = 0.992, CFI = 0.999. A better match is indicated by higher values. Since the previously mentioned indexes are above 0.95, it is considered an excellent fit for the model (Shi et al. 2019). With respect to their individual factors, each item was statistically significant. The 23-item, 5-dimensional model was confirmed by the dataset.

The results showed that the model fit was good, even exceptional, and went beyond the conventional cut-off criteria (Fan et al. 2016; Hair et al. 2021; Kang and Ahn 2021). The RMSEA score was approximately 0.05, and the NFI, RFI, IFI, GFI, AGFI, TLI, and CFI were above 0.95. Apart from evaluating the goodness-of-fit of a measurement model, CFA offers a rigorous examination of its construct validity (Nye 2023). The degree of common variance that a concept’s items have with the latent construct is tested by convergent validity. Hair et al. (2021) and Hox (2021) recommend that all factor loadings be statistically significant and have loadings of 0.5 or above in order to demonstrate convergent validity. According to Cheung et al. (2023), convergent validity should be evaluated using an average variance extracted (AVE) of more than 0.5. Each construct’s AVE was higher than the desired 0.5. Reliability is the third prerequisite for convergent validity. Internal consistency is demonstrated by construct reliability (CR) values higher than 0.7, which indicates that all items on the scale consistently assess the same latent concept (Hair et al. 2021; Cheung et al. 2023). Strong convergent validity was indicated by the factor loadings for each item, which ranged from 0.586 to 0.871 and were all above the 0.5 limit (Maskey et al. 2018). Furthermore, each dimension also had a high CR, which ranged from 0.754 to 0.932. According to Hilkenmeier et al. (2020) and Hair et al. (2021), discriminant validity was examined to determine how unique each construct was from the other components in the model. Table 3 displayed the examination of discriminant validity by comparing
the correlation estimates between latent constructs with the average variances extracted (AVEs) for each latent variable. Cheung et al. (2023) state that an AVE extracted that is higher than the correlation value is a sign of discriminant validity. The results show that the investigated dimensions have appropriate discriminant validity (Hilkenmeier et al. 2020).

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PI</th>
<th>PD</th>
<th>EE</th>
<th>DL</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place identity</td>
<td>0.809</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place dependence</td>
<td>0.801</td>
<td>0.713</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional experience</td>
<td>0.783</td>
<td>0.692</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination loyalty</td>
<td>0.691</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>0.738</td>
<td>0.725</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.418</td>
<td>0.447</td>
<td>0.496</td>
<td>0.601</td>
<td>0.754</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These convergent and discriminant test results demonstrate the model’s construct validity and provide further structural analysis of the relationships. The next step was to examine the connections between the research constructs and evaluate the hypotheses. In order to determine this, covariance analysis was applied (Table 4).

Table 4. Hypothesis test using CFA (covariances).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Status of Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H3a</td>
<td>Emotional experience to place identity</td>
<td>Beta 0.737, Std. Error 0.055, CR (t) 13.342</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3b</td>
<td>Emotional experience to place dependence</td>
<td>Beta 0.721, Std. Error 0.047, CR (t) 13.152</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4a</td>
<td>Satisfaction to place identity</td>
<td>Beta 0.331, Std. Error 0.039, CR (t) 8.530</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4b</td>
<td>Satisfaction to place dependence</td>
<td>Beta 0.326, Std. Error 0.031, CR (t) 8.251</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5a</td>
<td>Place identity to destination loyalty</td>
<td>Beta 0.539, Std. Error 0.044, CR (t) 12.315</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5b</td>
<td>Place dependence to destination loyalty</td>
<td>Beta 0.523, Std. Error 0.040, CR (t) 12.114</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>Emotional experience to satisfaction</td>
<td>Beta 0.324, Std. Error 0.033, CR (t) 9.942</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7</td>
<td>Emotional experience to destination loyalty</td>
<td>Beta 0.551, Std. Error 0.041, CR (t) 13.292</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8</td>
<td>Satisfaction to destination loyalty</td>
<td>Beta 0.315, Std. Error 0.027, CR (t) 11.525</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The independent construct of emotional experience was covariant with the dependent constructs of place dependence, place identity, satisfaction, and destination loyalty; the independent construct of satisfaction was covariant with the dependent constructs of place dependence, place identity, and destination loyalty; and the dependent construct of destination loyalty was covariant with the independent constructs of place dependence and place identity (refer to Figure 1). Six of the hypotheses were validated, as indicated in Table 4, and every association in the model was positive and significant, with a 99.9% confidence level (sig. p-value = 0.001).

Considering the correlation findings (Table 5), older and employed tourists develop more attachment through identity and dependence on monasteries. On the contrary, less educated tourists tend to develop dependence on the monasteries they visit. Older respondents tend to have more emotional experiences when visiting sacred places. Regarding traveling companions, people who visit monasteries in smaller groups develop more connections with them, as well as deeper emotions.
Considering the correlation findings (Table 5), older and employed tourists develop more attachment through identity and dependence on monasteries. On the contrary, less educated tourists tend to develop dependence on the monasteries they visit. Older respondents tend to have more emotional experiences when visiting sacred places. Regarding traveling companions, people who visit monasteries in smaller groups develop more connections with them, as well as deeper emotions.

Table 5. Correlation analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourists Characteristics</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Travel Companion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place identity</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.157 **</td>
<td>−0.064</td>
<td>0.103 *</td>
<td>−0.188 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place dependence</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.185 **</td>
<td>−0.115 **</td>
<td>0.145 **</td>
<td>−0.140 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional experience</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.094 *</td>
<td>−0.054</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>−0.130 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** At the \( p = 0.01 \) level, correlation is significant; * at the \( p = 0.05 \) level, correlation is significant.

4. Methodology

4.1. Study Sample Overview

This study focused on domestic visitors to monasteries in Serbia, with a total of 502 participants included in the research. Since the domestic tourists have been surveyed, most of the people who visited monasteries are believers (considering Orthodox believers in Serbia) and tourists. Each participant was required to be a Serbian citizen aged 18 or older. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods were employed due to this study’s requirement for participants to distribute the questionnaire to others.

4.2. Instrument

The survey was divided into six sections (Appendix A). The first contained some travel-related information (name of last visited monastery, travel companion) along with the respondents’ socio-demographic details (gender, age, education, and employment status).

Section 2 of the survey assessed place identity (five items). The survey’s Section 3 asked about place dependence (six items). The items from the second and third sections were modified from earlier studies by Kyle et al. (2004) and Yuksel et al. (2010). Section 4 assessed emotional experience. This section includes six items that were modified and obtained from earlier research (Biran et al. 2011; Boley and McGehee 2014; Poria et al. 2003). Section 5 asked about tourist satisfaction (four items). The items were adapted from an earlier study conducted by Wu et al. (2019). The last section assessed destination loyalty. This section includes five items that were modified and obtained from earlier research (Antón et al. 2014; Bigné et al. 2001; Hernández-Lobato et al. 2006; Ribeiro et al. 2018). In Sections 2–6, using a Likert scale (5-point), the participants were requested to rate how much they agreed with the statements that were being provided (1 being strongly disagreed with and 5 being strongly agreed).
4.3. Procedure

To ensure the questionnaire’s clarity and simplicity, it underwent initial development and scrutiny to match this study’s objectives. An online questionnaire was crafted using Google Docs for data collection conducted from mid-January till April 2024. Distribution of the questionnaire took place across various social media networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, aiming to engage travelers who had visited Serbia’s monasteries for religious tourism purposes, particularly religious tourism groups. Each respondent was provided with an explanation detailing this study’s goals, emphasized the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, and assured them that the gathered information would be utilized solely for scientific and research purposes.

4.4. Statistical Methods

First, Pearson’s correlation in IBM Software SPSS (SPSS 21) was used to assess the questionnaire’s validity. Every single item was independently evaluated using the correlation and the item’s total score, or rxy. Next, to test the relevancy of the data, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test was used. The KMO was 0.900, which is higher than the generally advised value of 0.6 needed for a good factor analysis (Kaiser 1970). Additionally, the results of Bartlett’s test of sphericity demonstrated the data’s reliability with a significant result ($\chi^2 (253) = 14,611.020, p = 0.000$). Additionally, Harman’s single-factor test was utilized to look into the common method bias, also known as the common method variance. A single element’s overall variance of 33.11% leads one to conclude that CMB had no effect on the data, which is less than the recommended threshold of 50% (Aguire-Urreta and Hu 2019). To test the normalcy of the data, kurtoses and skewness were used. All the items in our analysis have kurtosis and skewness within the permitted range of $+/−1$ (Mishra et al. 2019).

The proposed model for this study was tested using structural equation modeling, or SEM. The analysis was carried out using the AMOS program. The model’s fit was estimated using the following indices: the comparative fit index, the adjusted goodness-of-fit index, the relative fit index, the standardized root-mean-square residual, the Bentler–Bonett normed-fit index, the Tucker–Lewis index, the RMSEA (root-mean-square error of approximation), and the goodness-of-fit index. Modifications of the model were made using modification indices in AMOS software (AMOS 21). Additional analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive understanding of the tourist’s emotional experience and place attachment within the framework of religious monastery tourism in Serbia. Socio-demographic characteristics of travelers and travel companions can affect place attachment and emotional experiences. Place attachment’s antecedents—both place dependence and place identity—are emotional experiences and satisfaction. Furthermore, emotional experiences influence satisfaction and destination loyalty. In the end, destination loyalty is impacted by place attachment (both place dependence and identity) and tourist satisfaction. All the proposed hypotheses (partially related to demographic characteristics) are supported by the empirical results.

This study’s results explained the influence of tourists’ demographic characteristics on place attachment and emotional experiences (H1-3a not confirmed; H1-3b and e confirmed; H2c confirmed; H1-2d confirmed). This study’s results show that gender does not affect either place identity/place dependence or emotional experience. That result contrasts with the survey by Quynh et al. 2021, which determined that female travelers develop stronger emotional experiences. A study by De Cicco et al. (2023) concluded that gender plays an important role in place identity, as opposed to place dependence. Older travelers tend to develop emotions on holy journeys, to feel attached to the monastery, and to identify with it. In contrast, previous research by De Cicco et al. (2023) showed that age was not a significant variable for attachment toward historical places in Italy. Conversely, though, current results
seem to be aligned given the widely held belief of cultural visitors (Vergori and Arima 2020). Employees and senior travelers believe that specific monasteries are really important and very special to them. Attending a religious liturgy in a particular monastery makes them very proud and helps them develop spiritual values. Less educated tourists are also more likely to develop attachments to sacred objects. De Cicco et al. (2023) also concluded that lower-education tourists obtain a stronger sense of attachment. Smaller group visits to monasteries lead to greater emotional connections and attachment. The current findings support the study by Šagovnović and Kovačić (2021) that travel companions, as well as education level, can influence emotional experience.

The results of this study show that place attachment (both identity and dependence) antecedents are emotional experiences and satisfaction (Hypotheses 3 and 4 confirmed). As emotional experiences develop during a visit to a monastery, attachment to the place also develops. This coincides with the result obtained by Correia et al. (2017) that emotional experiences lead to a deeper level of attachment. On the contrary, the study conducted by Lalicić and Garaus (2022) claims that visitors feel positive if they are first related to the place. The results of current studies support Morgan’s (2010) place attachment development theory, which refers to the fact that connection with a certain place is a process that is realized over a certain period of time as a consequence of feelings encountered. Following and supporting Morgan’s (2010) theory of place attachment, the results of Serbian monasteries also show that satisfaction is a prerequisite for place attachment. If the visitors are satisfied, it will deepen their connection with the monastery, and they will feel that the monastery is the best place for their needs. This result supports previous studies (Su et al. 2011; Lee et al. 2012; Hosany et al. 2017), which believe that tourist satisfaction leads to place attachment.

Additionally, the results indicate that emotional experiences are antecedents of destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction (Hypotheses 6 and 7 supported). After the visit to the monastery, when the tourist summarizes their feelings and experiences, it leaves an impression on their satisfaction and desire to visit the monastery again and to share their experience with others. This finding supports previous studies that confirmed the relationship between emotional experience and tourist satisfaction (Biswas et al. 2021; Kim and Ritchie 2014; Quynh et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2023), but also emotional experience and loyalty (Hosany et al. 2013; Kim and Ritchie 2014; Prayag et al. 2017; Quynh et al. 2021).

The satisfaction of visitors to monasteries in Serbia is very high (M = 4.35). They believe that the visit to the monastery exceeded their expectations and was totally worth it. This implies that they will recommend a visit to the monastery to others and that they have a wonderful image of this religious object as religious tourism. This is very important because tourism literature (Kanwel et al. 2019; Wan et al. 2022) indicates tourists’ satisfaction is the most crucial element when selecting a destination, deciding to revisit it, and sharing experiences with others. This study’s results confirmed that loyalty is influenced by satisfaction (Hypothesis 8 confirmed).

Destination loyalty has a high mean value (4.05), which means that domestic visitors gladly remain loyal to monasteries in Serbia. There is a great chance that they will revisit it and spread good words about it. It has been confirmed that antecedents of loyalty are place attachment (identity and dependence), emotional experiences, and satisfaction (H5, H7, and H8 confirmed). Travelers who develop certain emotions during the monastic experience get more attached to the monastery, are more satisfied, and will always gladly come back to visit them. These findings are consistent with Bagheri et al. (2023), who claimed that if the emotional experience is positive, the tourist will come back and recommend the destination to others. The outcomes align with previous research (Chen et al. 2023; George and George 2004; Loureiro 2014), which concluded that visitors’ intentions to return or suggest the location to others are positively impacted by both the identification and dependence elements of place attachment. And, of course, in the end, a satisfied tourist is mostly loyal to the destination, which agrees with Bagheri et al. (2023) that satisfaction determines whether they stick with the destination.
6. Conclusions

Serbia hosts an array of Orthodox monasteries with the potential to ascend the ranks of global religious tourism destinations. Beyond its sheer abundance, these monasteries exhibit architectural brilliance, house revered icons and artifacts, and boast a rich historical legacy. Their profound cultural and religious significance, coupled with their imposing stature and historical depth, captivates the interests of both devout adherents and secular observers alike. Therefore, it was important to determine the precursors of place attachment and loyalty to monasteries in Serbia. In that way, tourism developers will get to know and understand tourists’ needs better and be able to attract not only domestic but also foreign visitors. This study’s results showed that when certain emotions related to the experience are awakened, as well as satisfaction with the visit, the connection with the monastery (both identity and dependence) is affected. Then, connection, emotional experience, and satisfaction are reflected in loyalty, i.e., repeat visits and recommendations. In addition, demographic characteristics such as age and companionship are most reflected in the emotional experience and attachment. It also partly refers to the level of education and level of employment. The findings showed that individuals who visit monasteries in smaller groups tend to forge stronger connections and experience deeper emotions with these sacred sites. The only demographic variable that has no influence is the gender of the tourist. These results offer a supplement to the knowledge about tourist experiences in monasteries and the attachment with them on sacred journeys and their predecessors and successors. Among the theoretical contributions is that, to the author’s best knowledge, previous research did not use all the above-mentioned constructs within one research framework regarding religious tourism and monastic experience. This study addresses several gaps in the existing literature on religious tourism and the visitor experience at monasteries in Serbia. Firstly, it integrates various constructs such as emotions, satisfaction, and place attachment within a single research framework, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing tourist behavior in these settings. Perhaps prior research concentrated on individual components without taking into account how they are related to one another. Secondly, compared to previous research, the impact of various socio-demographic variables on emotional experience and two-dimensional place attachment is included here. In this way, a new, fresh perspective on the experience in monasteries and how the attachment to a place is formed is gained. Furthermore, this research highlights the significance of smaller group visits in fostering stronger connections and deeper emotional experiences at monasteries. By identifying this trend, this study underscores the importance of tailored visitor experiences and group dynamics in enhancing place attachment and visitor satisfaction.

Apart from its theoretical contribution, this study’s outcomes hold important and very useful practical implications. This study proved that loyalty is affected by emotional experiences, two-dimensional place attachment, and satisfaction, so destinations can focus more on these elements and ensure loyal visitors who are very happy to recommend the destination in a way that attracts more tourists. Monastery and tourism managers can focus on enhancing visitors’ emotional experiences during their visit. This could involve organizing events, guided tours, or immersive activities that evoke positive emotions and create memorable moments for visitors. In that way, tourists will develop more attachment toward monasteries and visit them again. Since satisfaction has a great influence on place attachment and destination loyalty, it is essential for tourism managers to identify areas where visitor satisfaction can be improved within the monastery premises. To meet or exceed visitors’ expectations, this can entail making improvements to the facilities, services, interpretative materials, or tourist amenities. Monastery management and tourism developers can implement strategies to foster a sense of place attachment among visitors. This might provide an opportunity for tourists to interact with the local people and the surrounding environment, as well as narrate the monastery’s history, cultural value, and spiritual legacy. Increasing visitor satisfaction and place attachment might eventually result in more people becoming loyal to the monastery. Management of monasteries and tourism
creators/developers might concentrate on cultivating devoted patrons by offering unique experiences, customized services, and continual interaction and communication to maintain a connection between tourists and the monastery throughout time. Finally, it is very important to cooperate with the local authorities, local people, monastery management, and tourist organizations to increase the satisfaction of tourists and their attachment to monasteries and strengthen loyalty. Through cooperation, stakeholders can identify opportunities for improvement and implement strategies to maximize the monastery’s appeal and long-term sustainability. Marketing strategies may also focus on these two components, promoting the monastery through unique architecture, relics, hospitality, opportunities to experience local culture, specific cuisine, etc. Moreover, marketing events on-site and providing mobile applications that let visitors personalize their experiences are another way to boost place identification and place dependence.

This study also has certain limitations that can be investigated in further studies. Specific contextual elements that are particular to the monastery under study, including its location, size, or cultural significance, may have an impact on the findings. Future studies should look into how, in various monastery settings and other sacred objects, these contextual elements affect the relationships between emotional experiences, satisfaction, place attachment, and destination loyalty. This study may have had an impact on how broadly the results can be applied. In order to guarantee broader coverage, future research might try to include a bigger and more varied sample. This study included only domestic travelers; however, future research might include international visitors as well and check into potential differences. This study did not indicate whether respondents have visited the monasteries once or multiple times and future studies should include this. Future research can focus on conducting longitudinal studies to examine how emotional experiences, satisfaction, and place attachment evolve and their long-term effects on destination loyalty. Furthermore, it can be helpful to investigate potential moderating and mediating variables that may influence the relationships between emotional experiences, satisfaction, place attachment, and destination loyalty, such as visitor motivations, cultural factors, or environmental conditions. Finally, a potential framework for future research is qualitative research in order to complete the picture and gain deeper insights into visitors’ experiences, perceptions, and motivations related to monasteries, allowing for a richer understanding of the underlying mechanisms driving destination loyalty.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Grants No. 451-03-66/2024-03/200125 & 451-03-65/2024-03/200125).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review was waived because the study was anonymous, the people who took part in the study did so voluntarily, and all were adults.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

**Appendix A**

**Questionnaire**

**Gender**
- Male
- Female

**Age**

**Education**
- Elementary school
- High school
- Bachelor’s degree
- Master’s degree/PhD degree

Status of employment:
- Student
- Employed
- Unemployed
- Retired

State which monastery in Serbia you visited last ____________.

Travel companion
- Alone
- Family
- Friends
- Partner
- Other

**Place identity and place dependence** (answer the following questions in relation to the monastery you last visited).

Please express your level of agreement with the offered statements, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

| I am attached to this religious object (monastery). | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| Visiting this religious object (monastery) says a lot about who I am. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I identify myself strongly with this religious object (monastery). | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| This religious object (monastery) means a lot to me. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| This religious object (monastery) is very special to me. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| Doing what I do at this religious object (monastery) is more important to me than doing it in any other event. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I would not substitute any other religious object (monastery) for doing the type of things I do at this object (monastery). | 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Emotional experience** (answer the following questions in relation to the monastery you last visited).

Please express your level of agreement with the offered statements, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

| This religious object (monastery) is the best place for what I like to do. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I feel emotionally involved to this religious object (monastery). | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I feel a sense of belongingness attending to this religious object (monastery). | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| Attending the liturgy in this religious object (monastery) makes me proud. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I rediscover myself visiting this religious object (monastery). | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| Visiting this religious object (monastery) helps me to develop spiritual values. | 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty** (answer the following questions in relation to the monastery you last visited).

Please express your level of agreement with the offered statements, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visiting this religious object (monastery) helps me to develop personal values.</th>
<th>1 2 3 4 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am willing to revisit this religious object (monastery) in future.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am willing to recommend this religious object (monastery) to my family and friends.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I stay longer period in this religious object (monastery) compared to any other objects.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come with more companions to this religious object (monastery).</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have wonderful image of this religious object (monastery) as a pilgrimage destination.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting this monastery went beyond my expectations.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was worthwhile to visit this monastery.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was really a nice day to visit this monastery.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is worthwhile to experience this monastery.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


Anton, Charis E., and Carmen Lawrence. 2016. The relationship between place attachment, the theory of planned behaviour and residents' response to place change. Journal of Environmental Psychology 47: 145–54. [CrossRef]


Bagheri, Fatemeh, Manuela Guerreiro, Patricia Pinto, and Zahed Ghaderi. 2023. From Tourist Experience to Satisfaction and Loyalty: Exploring the Role of a Sense of Well-Being. Journal of Travel Research. [CrossRef]


Cardinale, Sylvia, Bang Nguyen, and T. C. Melewar. 2016. Place-based brand experience, place attachment and loyalty. Marketing Intelligence & Planning 34. [CrossRef]


Durán-Sánchez, Amador, José Álvarez-García, María De la Cruz Del Río-Rama, and Cristiana Oliveira. 2018. Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: Bibliometric Overview. Religions 9: 249. [CrossRef]

Dwyer, Larry, Ning (Chris) Chen, and Jenny (Jiyeon) Lee. 2019. The role of place attachment in tourism research. Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing 36: 645–52. [CrossRef]


Han, Heesup, and Chul Jeong. 2013. Multi-dimensions of patrons’ emotional experiences in upscale restaurants and their role in loyalty formation: Emotion scale may matter in restaurants too! *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 33: 525–37. [CrossRef]


Hosany, Sameer, Girish Prayag, Robert Van Der Veen, Songshan (Sam) Huang, and Siripan Deesilatham. 2017. Mediating Effects of Place Attachment and Satisfaction on the Relationship between Tourists’ Emotions and Intention to Recommend. *Journal of Travel Research* 56: 1079–93. [CrossRef]


Kim, Jong-Hyeong, and Brent J. R. Ritchie. 2014. Cross-Cultural Validation of a Memorable Tourism Experience Scale (MTES). *Journal of Travel Research* 53: 323–35. [CrossRef]


Lalicic, Lidiija, and Marion Garas. 2022. Tourism-Induced Place Change: The Role of Place Attachment, Emotions, and Tourism Concern in Predicting Supportive or Oppositional Behavioral Responses. *Journal of Travel Research* 61: 202–13. [CrossRef]
Lee, Jenny (Jiyeon), Gerard Kyle, and David Scott. 2012. The Mediating Effect of Place Attachment on the Relationship between Festival Satisfaction and Loyalty to the Festival Hosting Destination. *Journal of Travel Research* 51: 754–67. [CrossRef]


Loureiro, Sandra Maria Correia. 2014. The role of the rural tourist economy experience in place attachment and behavioral intentions. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 40: 1–9. [CrossRef]


Robina Ramirez, Rafael, and Manuel Pulido Fernández. 2018. Religious Experiences of Travellers Visiting the Royal Monastery of Santa María de Guadalupe (Spain). *Sustainability* 10: 1890. [CrossRef]


Son, Jung Young, Jae-Jang Yang, Sanghyuk Choi, and Yong-Ki Lee. 2023. Impacts of residential environment on residents’ place attachment, satisfaction, WOM, and pro-environmental behavior: Evidence from the Korean housing industry. *Frontiers in Psychology* 14: 1217877. [CrossRef]


Wan, Calvin, Geoffrey Qiping Shen, and Choi Stella. 2022. Pathways of place dependence and place identity influencing recycling in the extended theory of planned behavior. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 81: 101795. [CrossRef]


 Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.