EXAMINING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE, PLACE IDENTITY, AND DESTINATION LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

Emotions shape tourists' perceptions, experiences, and attachment to a destination, impacting loyalty. However, limited research has delved into the intricate relationships among these constructs. Based on the M-R Framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), the current study proposed and tested a destination loyalty model that examined tourists' emotional experiences and place identity. This study specifically aimed to explore the influences of love, joy, and positive surprise (as emotions experienced by tourists) on place identity and destination loyalty. Data obtained from 164 international tourists were utilized to examine the conceptual model by employing structural equation modeling. The study outcomes showed that joy and love significantly affected place identity and destination loyalty, and place identity significantly influenced destination loyalty. The study findings deliver important theoretical contributions for researchers by explaining the complex relationships among tourists' emotional experiences of, their sense of place identity, and loyalty toward a destination. From a practical perspective, the study's results entail various implications for destination policymakers and marketers. For example, exploring how tourists respond to their emotional experiences would assist destination marketers in the development of effective marketing strategies (e.g., segmentation and positioning) to foster loyalty among visitors.

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INTRODUCTION

In the current highly competitive marketplace, destinations face increasingly tough competition in attracting tourists, both domestically and internationally. In such a scenario, maintaining destination loyalty becomes a crucial focal point for ensuring the sustainability of the entire tourism industry (Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, destination loyalty has received significant attention as a critical metric (Tasci et al., 2022), and evaluating and understanding factors that affect tourists' destination loyalty has thus become a critical emphasis for destination marketers and tourism researchers (Jeong & Kim, 2019). It's important to recognize that sustainable success for a brand, product, or destination cannot be achieved through a one-time purchase; rather, it depends on repeat purchases from loyal customers (Assael, 1984; Lv et al., 2020). Hence, destination marketers must comprehend the factors that promote or hinder tourists' loyalty towards a destination, to ensure sustainable tourism development.

In previous literature, destination loyalty has preliminarily been attributed to a unique destination image (Chi & Qu, 2008). However, a deeper analysis reveals that even those destinations that have successfully cultivated a positive image face challenges in fostering loyalty among visitors (Lv et al., 2020). In this context, it is imperative to develop a more thorough and nuanced comprehension of the multifaceted factors that impact destination loyalty, surpassing the traditionally emphasized aspect of destination image (Kislali et al., 2020). While tourism researchers have started to place a greater emphasis on other factors such as tourists' emotions and their utility to elucidate their behaviors (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015; Lee et al., 2012; Prayag et al., 2017), a notable paucity of investigations exists specifically addressing the aforementioned complex relationship. On the other hand, prior studies argued that employing generic sets of emotions drawn from psychology overlooks the nuances within particular situations, resulting in inaccuracies in findings (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). This highlights the necessity for a more contextualized approach to the examination of emotions in tourism literature, recognizing the uniqueness of each setting to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the conclusions drawn.

Therefore, by adopting the M-R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and incorporating the Destination Emotions Scale created by Hosany and Gilbert (2010) into it, the present study formulated and empirically tested a theoretical model to evaluate international tourists' loyalty toward Nepal, a South Asian country, by scrutinizing their emotional experiences.

In addition to examining the association between emotional experiences of tourists and their loyalty toward the destination, place identity was integrated into the conceptual model to generate additional insights. The addition of place identity to the conceptual model serves as a strategic augmentation, justified by the inherently place-dependent nature of tourism (Wang & Xu, 2015). The current investigation sought to tackle the above-mentioned gaps by exploring the subsequent research questions:

1. *How do the emotional experiences of international tourists influence their destination loyalty toward Nepal?*

2. *How do the emotional experiences of international tourists affect their place identity toward Nepal?*

3. *How does the place identity of international tourists influence their destination loyalty toward Nepal?*

The present study significantly supports the corpus of literature in destination marketing domain. As tourists engage with the destination, their emotional experiences and interactions shape their place identity, influencing their attitudes, behaviors, and destination loyalty. In this regard, the theoretical model studied in the present study offers a nuanced and complete understanding of the intricate dynamics influencing tourists' behavioral intentions and commitment to a particular destination, shedding light on the position of identity formation in tourists' emotional experiences. From an applied standpoint, the study's outcomes offer several suggestions and implications for destination marketing and management organizations (DMO) and local policy makers in developing effective policies and implementing successful marketing programs to foster loyalty among international visitors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Emotion

Emotion has been defined as an affective condition described by intense episodes of feelings linked to a particular object or subject, which subsequently leads to specific behavioral reactions (Cohen & Areni, 1991). Scherer (2000) stated that emotions have several elements, including cognitive processes, neurophysiological activation, motivation (action tendencies), motor expression, subjective feeling, each with specific functions as follows:

- The cognitive element assesses objects and events.

- The neurophysiological activation is part of the somatic aspect of emotion. This element includes physiological responses in both central and peripheral aspects and is connected to the regulation function of the system.

- The motivational component, which involves alterations in action tendencies, serves as a means to prepare and direct actions.

- The motor expression element comprises facial and/or vocal expressions and psychophysiological symptoms, serving as a way to convey reactions and behavioral intentions through communication.

- The subjective feeling, which is synonymous with emotional experience, performs a monitoring role (Moors, 2009; Scherer, 2001; Tuerlan et al., 2021).

While there are conceptual distinctions, the terms "emotion" has often been used interchangeably with other affective concepts like feelings, moods, affects, and sentiments. Therefore, it is essential to explore how emotion differs from the aforementioned affective phenomena (Tuerlan et al., 2021).

Feelings, for example, encompass both physiological changes and cognitive evaluations of events (Sander & Scherer, 2009). They depict the perceptual and physical patterns closely correlated with the particular experience of an emotional occurrence. Additionally, feelings involve the focal demonstration of response organization influenced by the appraisal of emotions (Scherer, 2005). Mood is distinct from emotion, described by a less intense but relatively longer-lasting diffuse emotional state (e.g., cheerful, irritable, or depressed), typically lacking an apparent cause or trigger (Scherer, 2000). Affect is defined by a level of arousal that sets it apart from purely rational judgment, suggesting a heightened response. In a general sense, affect is often used to encompass various mental states, including emotions, interpersonal stances, moods, and affective dispositions. Lastly, sentiment is a construct rooted in cognition, characterized as a particular perspective encompassing attitudes, judgements, and thoughts (Sander & Scherer, 2009; Scherer, 2005).

Mehrabian – Russell Model (M - R Model)

Within the field of environmental psychology, there exists a model called the stimulus-organism response (S-O-R) framework, formulated by Woodworth in 1929. This framework delves into the connections between various elements, including inputs (stimulus), cognitive processes

(organism), and behavioral outcomes (response). S-O-R model elucidates how the cognitive processes within an individual act as intermediaries, influencing the connection between external stimuli and human behavior (Woodworth, 1929).

Drawing upon Woodworth's S-O-R framework from 1929, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) formulated their own S-O-R model. In their interpretation, they defined the "S" component (stimuli) as external factors, encompassing numerous factors within the physical environment (Bagozzi, 1986) and characterized the "O" component (organism) as comprising emotions, which are further broken down into three distinct and bipolar dimensions of emotion including *pleasure* (P), *arousal* (A), and *dominance* (D) (i.e., the PAD framework).

Pleasure denotes how much an experiences happiness or joy in specific circumstances. Arousal pertains to the degree of emotional stimulation, signaling both physical and rational awareness in reaction to external stimuli. Dominance, on the other hand, relates to the degree to which individuals perceives their ability to exert influence over their environment and maintain control over a given situation (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Subsequently, the researchers removed the dominance component from the model due to its irrelevant impact on behavior (Donovan et al., 1994; Russell & Pratt, 1980).

As outlined in the model (referred to as the M–R model hereafter), a range of environmental stimuli impact individuals' emotional condition (i.e., PAD dimensions) which, subsequently contribute to the formation of individuals' inclination to engage with (i.e., approach behavior) or refrain from certain behaviors (i.e., avoidance behaviors). Approach behavior encompasses a willingness to stay, engage in exploration of the surroundings, and interact with others in the environment. In contrast, avoidance behavior encompasses opposite actions, such as leaving the environment and disregarding attempts at communication from others (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The M–R model has been utilized and validated in service domains in various domains such as restaurants (Tan et al., 2022), themed hotels (Sun et al., 2021), Airbnb (Do et al., 2022) and consumer events (Manthiou et al., 2017).

The M-R model is useful in research that emphasizes the potential foundational aspects of customer emotions, namely their cognitive interpretations of environmental stimuli, rather than pinpointing the exact emotion elicited by external stimuli (Chamberlain & Broderick, 2007). In this context, the M-R model is well-suited for the current study since tourist

destinations frequently feature various elements that have the potential to trigger emotional responses in visitors, like welcoming tour guides, captivating exhibits, and enjoyable interactive activities (Kirillova et al., 2014; Pappalepore et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, earlier research contended that the application of basic sets of emotions derived from psychology tends to neglect the intricacies of particular contexts, resulting in inaccurate findings (Gilmore & McMullan, 2009; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). In addition, the measurement scale (i.e., PAD dimensions) within the M-R model provides a bipolar frame for gauging emotional reactions to external stimuli in the environment. While the primary structural aspect of emotional experiences is frequently identified as the widespread bipolar spectrum of pleasantness and unpleasantness (Russell, 1983), several constraints regarding its suitability in studies related to consumer emotions have been acknowledged (Jang & Namkung, 2009). For instance, Westbrook (1987) observed that the unipolar perspective seems more suitable when examining purchasing experiences, as the bipolar concept permits the coexistence of mixed emotions, where both pleasant and unpleasant conditions can occur simultaneously, where neither pleasant nor unpleasant conditions are experienced. Furthermore, Hosany and Gilbert (2010) highlighted the inadequacies of current emotion measurement scales, as they fail consider the distinctive characteristics of tourists and the destinations they visit.

To align more effectively with the realm of tourism, Hosany and Gilbert (2010) created a unipolar scale (i.e., Destination Emotion Scale - DES) encompassing three distinct dimensions: love, joy, and positive surprise, which they further confirmed their validity as documented in a subsequent research effort by Hosany et al. (2015). Therefore, based on the aforementioned discussion, we utilized the M-R model in the current study and replaced the PAD scale with DES scale to examine the impact of joy, love and positive surprise on place identity and destination loyalty.

Tourists' Emotional Experiences

The conceptualization of tourist emotions with multiple dimensions and the subsequent assessment of the influence of each dimension on tourists' behaviors present a promising avenue for advancing the comprehension of tourists' behavior within the field of tourism research. Emotions are crucial in affecting tourists' experiences and decision-making practices. By breaking down these emotions into multiple dimensions, researchers can delve deeper into the complex interplay of affective states, cognitive

processes, and behavioral outcomes (Hosany et al., 2015). In addition, this approach offers the potential for capturing a wider range of emotions, their intensities, and the complexity of their impact on tourists' decision-making process (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Understanding the unique contributions of each dimension also allows for a complete and nuanced analysis of the factors that drive actions of tourists. This multifaceted approach not only enriches the theoretical framework of tourist behavior but also offers practical insights for tourism industry stakeholders seeking to optimize their services and marketing approaches grounded in a more precise comprehension of the emotional triggers and their effect on tourists' intentions. Consequently, this approach holds the potential to augment the effectiveness, competitiveness, and sustainability of tourist destinations and businesses (Hosany et al., 2015; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, this study utilized the DES to conceptualize various facets of emotions encompassing joy, love, and positive surprise. Joy, a fundamental emotional state characterized by positive affect, is intrinsically linked to a range of favorable outcomes, which is substantiated by seminal work in affective psychology (Izard, 1977). Notable scholars in the field, such as Izard (1977) and Lazarus (1991), have underscored the salient role of joy in promoting well-being and psychological health, demonstrating its importance in fostering resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms. The dimension of joy encompasses emotional elements like happiness and delight. Joy is linked with favorable results, particularly the attainment of something sought-after or desirable. It emerges when an individual perceives that they are making meaningful advancements toward the achievement of their objectives (Lazarus, 1991; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). In tourism, the pursuit of pleasure may become a central motive for individuals embarking on their travel journeys, constituting a primary intention underlying their tourist activities. This assertion finds support in the scholarly literature, with researchers like Goossens (2000) and Nawijn (2011) illuminating the centrality of pleasure-seeking as a driving force in tourist behavior.

Another emotional dimension, love, represents the fondness that consumers develop toward specific products and brands (Kleine et al., 1995). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) have defined brand love as the extent of consumers' fervent emotional connection to a brand. Fournier (1998) suggests that customers establish connections with brands and introduces six primary relationship types, one of which encompasses love. This emotional dimension is not confined solely to the domain of consumer goods and brands; it can also be readily extended to the context of tourist

destinations as tourists often develop a profound affection for certain destinations due to their unique attributes, and the personal connections formed during their visits (Ahuvia, 2005; Albert et al., 2008; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010).

Positive surprise includes emotions like amazement and astonishment and is typically described as a neutral valence emotion that develops through pleasant and unexpected events (Izard 1977; Meyer et al., 1997). In tourist destinations, positive surprises may be elicited by unexpected and delightful encounters, which may include scenic vistas, cultural discoveries, or exceptional service (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Tourists frequently look for new and unique experiences, and the element of surprise can enhance the overall appeal of a destination (Hosany et al., 2015; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010).

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Tourists' Emotional Experiences and Destination Loyalty Relationship

In a general context, destination loyalty denotes a tourist's commitment or allegiance to a specific destination, and it is envisioned as the foundation stone of destination brand effectiveness, that governs the destination competitiveness (Krishna & Schwarz, 2014). Destination loyalty as a dependent construct in tourism research has continued to gain attention, and there are two main reasons behind it. The first one is that loyalty generates much-needed sustainable income via positive recommendations from visitors, leading to decreased marketing expenses (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018). The second explanation is that tourists' destination selection is often a complex issue influenced by their novelty-seeking behavior (Chew & Jahari, 2014). This makes it harder for marketers to build destination loyalty among new tourists. Therefore, it is widely agreed upon within the field of tourism research that destination loyalty holds significant importance. The recognition of destination loyalty as a crucial construct highlights its fundamental role in understanding and studying the dynamics of the tourism industry. This consensus implies that researchers and industry professionals alike acknowledge the impact and value of cultivating loyal visitors and repeat customers for destinations (Tasci et al., 2022).

In tourism, the commonly employed measures to assess destination loyalty are the repeat visit intention and the intent to recommend the destination to others through WOM, and several previous researches have

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validated the conceptualization of destination loyalty as a combination of revisit and WOM intentions (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018; Chi & Qu, 2008; Meleddu et al., 2015; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). In a similar vein, we conceptualized destination loyalty as a combination of the intent to revisit and recommend it to others in our study.

These two measures (i.e., revisit and recommend) capture important aspects of customer loyalty in the tourism domain. Revisit intention reflects the desire of customers to return to a destination for future visits, indicating their satisfaction and positive experiences. It signifies their intention to engage in repeat patronage and further explore what the destination has to offer. On the other hand, WOM intention reflects customers' inclination to suggest the destination to other prospective tourists based on their positive experiences. Positive WOM serves as a powerful marketing tool, as it influences potential travelers' perceptions and decisions (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Lv et al., 2020; Oppermann, 2000). By considering both revisit intention and WOM intention as indicators of destination loyalty, researchers and industry practitioners gain a comprehensive understanding of customers' loyalty behaviors and intentions. This combined conceptualization recognizes the importance of both repeat patronage and the potential influence on others in fostering destination loyalty.

As a research construct, emotions have gained significant attention among researchers due to their association with tourist behavior. Past research has established connections between emotions, and tourist behavior highlighting emotions' positive influence on experience appraisal and loyalty (Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Prayag et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). In certain studies, tourist emotions have been regarded as more effective predictors of purchase/repurchase intention than satisfaction (Koenig-Lewis & Palmer, 2008). Martin et al. (2013) further strengthened this notion by emphasizing the significance of emotions and asserting that emotional satisfaction can accurately predict destination loyalty. Drawing upon data gathered through tourists who visited two distinctive destinations, namely Jordan and Thailand, the study carried out by Hosany et al. (2015) explored the impacts of joy, love, and positive surprise on travelers' behaviors, specifically their willingness to recommend the destination and inclination to revisit. The study highlighted that all the aforementioned emotional dimensions exhibited a favorable and statistically significant impact on travelers' behavioral intentions.

Thus, considering the aforementioned argument, the subsequent hypotheses are put forward:

H1: *Joy positively impacts destination loyalty.*

H2: *Love positively impacts destination loyalty.*

H3: *Positive surprise positively impacts destination loyalty.*

Tourists' Emotional Experiences and Place Identity Relationship

As one of the elements comprising place attachment, place identity found its way in tourism and leisure studies during the 1980s. Place identity is emotional link between individuals and a place, and the meaningful social dealings among them (Schreyer et al., 1981). Place identity denotes the linkage established between an individual and a particular environment, encompassing a range of recollections, understandings, concepts, and associated emotions regarding physical locations and various kinds of surroundings (Proshansky et al., 1983).

Human-place bonds are the outcome of social ties between travelers and the place. Place identity is associated with emotions of belonging to a place and travelers often see the place as part of their extended self (Gursoy et al., 2019). Place identity pertains to visitors' comprehension of the symbolic significance of destinations and their profound internal connection to the place (Hallak et al., 2012). Place identity can manifest in one's perceptions and attitudes regarding the historical or cultural roots of the destination (Gursoy et al., 2019).

The association between the place and people involves several positive emotions like adore, joy, love, delight, and gratification (Hosany et al., 2015; Scannell & Gifford 2010). Prior literature review shows that there is often convergence between emotions and place attachment. Emotions experienced by tourists during their visits to specific places can shape and influence their attachment to those places. Positive emotions including joy and love have been found to foster a stronger sense of connection and attachment to the destination (Hosany et al., 2017). These emotions contribute to the development of positive memories and experiences, which in turn strengthen the emotional connection that exists between individuals and the place they have visited (Goolaup et al., 2018). Considering the earlier argument, it is logical to expect that when tourists' experience positive emotions toward the destination they visit, they will cultivate a heightened sense of attachment and connection to that destination. Hence:

H4: *Joy positively impacts place identity.*

H5: *Love positively impacts place identity.*

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H6: *Positive surprise positively impacts place identity.*

Place Identity and Destination Loyalty Relationship

When individuals develop a deep-rooted connection and identification with a place, it fosters a feeling of loyalty and attachment, motivating them to revisit that destination in the future. Place identity serves as a psychological link between individuals and the destination, influencing their desire to maintain and strengthen their relationship with the place through repeat visits (Patwardhan et al., 2020a; Lee & Shen, 2013).

Prior studies have established an association between place identity and loyalty toward a destination. For example, a study by Patwardhan et al. (2020b) examined visitors' loyalty to a destination by examining their emotional connection with the place, specifically focusing on place identity. The study collected data from visitors during the Attur Church Feast in Karkala, India, and found that place identity had an impact on destination loyalty. Lee and Shen (2013) proposed and tested a behavioral model to investigate the correlation between place identity and destination loyalty amongst individuals who visit urban parks for recreational purposes. The empirical findings revealed that place identity was a reliable antecedent of loyalty amongst recreational visitors to urban parks. In research undertaken by Lee et al. (2012), the research delved into the intricate facets that shape festival visitor loyalty towards host destinations. The empirical results of their research unveiled a salient positive association between place identity and visitors' willingness to revisit the destination. Another study conducted by Mechinda et al. (2009) examined the influence of place identity on domestic and international tourists' loyalty toward Chiangmai, Tailand. The research findings substantiated the association between place identity and attitudinal loyalty; however, it was observed that place identity exerted a statistically significant impact solely on the behavioral loyalty of international tourists, with no discernible impact on domestic tourists. In a more contemporary investigation, Plunkett et al. (2019) also confirmed the significant influence of place identity on tourists' behavioral loyalty. Consequently, the following hypothesis is posited:

H7: *Place identity positively impacts destination loyalty.*

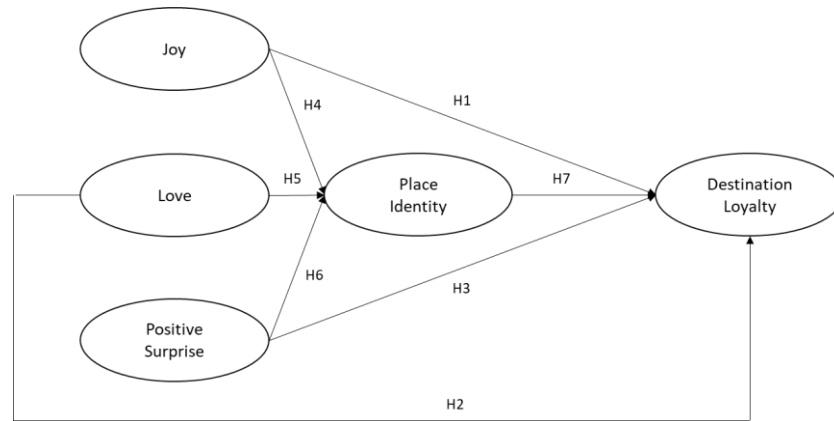Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework employed in the study.

Figure 1. *Research Model*

METHODOLOGY

Study Site

Nepal is a small country situated between India and China, renowned for being home to the Himalayas, which house the world's tallest mountain range, and Mount Everest, the highest peak of the world. Nepal is blessed with hospitable people, diverse culture, and breathtaking beauty, particularly in the form of the majestic Himalayas, which attracts visitors from all over the globe (Thapa, 2004). The tourism sector plays a crucial role as a fundamental pillar of Nepal's economy and is widely recognized as a significant avenue for its development. A noteworthy example of this is the significant role that tourism plays in alleviating poverty in Nepal. Therefore, it can be confidently stated that tourism holds immense potential in Nepal and serves as a catalyst for its overall development.

Nepal began welcoming foreign tourists in 1951, and by 1964, it hosted 9,526 tourists. This number steadily increased over the years, reaching a record of 1.19 million in 2019 before the Covid-19 Pandemic (Napal Tourism Statistics, 2019; Sah et al., 2020). However, on January 23, 2020, Nepal recorded its first case of imported COVID-19, and upon confirming a second imported case on March 23, 2020, the government enforced a nationwide lockdown and ceased all domestic and international air travel (Sah et al., 2020). Nepal resumed standard international airline operations on August 17, 2020, nearly four months following their suspension as a measure to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma, 2020). In 2022, Nepal welcomed 614,148 foreign tourists, signifying a notable resurgence in the country's tourism industry when

compared to the figures of 230,085 visitors in 2020 and 150,962 in 2021 (Himalayan News Service, 2023).

Still, with these statistics, Nepal is often regarded as a nation with immense tourism potential, yet it has not fully capitalized on this opportunity. Therefore, nurturing loyalty among past visitors becomes crucial for the economic sustainability and the growth of Nepal.

Sampling and Data Collection

The study data was collected from international tourists who were visiting the five most popular tourist spots in Nepal (i.e., Thamel, Basantapur Darbar Square, Patan Durbar Square, Jamsikhel, and Tribhuwan International Airport). A convenience sampling technique namely, intercept survey technique was used to gather the study data. Graduate students were employed to administer the surveys after they were trained. The survey administrators approached international tourists and provided the self-administered paper-based surveys to the tourists at their respective sites between September 1 and November 30, 2019, which coincided with the peak tourist season in Nepal. Before distributing the surveys, screening questions were employed to confirm that the participants had visited Nepal from other countries, were comfortable communicating in English, and had spent at least five days in Nepal at the time of the survey.

Additionally, the respondents were presented with information about the study's objective and the voluntary nature of their involvement. They were also assured that their answers to survey questions would remain anonymous, and a consent form was made available for them to acknowledge their willingness to participate. In total, 180 surveys were collected, and after eliminating the incomplete surveys, the data analyses included a total of 164 surveys.

While there is no universally accepted technique for evaluating sample size for SEM, scholars frequently consider aspects including the number of observed variables (items) and the parameters estimated. For example, it is generally accepted that a ratio of at least five cases per observed variable is typically considered adequate when latent variables consist of multiple indicators (Bentler & Chou,1987). Additionally, Kline (2015) recommended a ratio of 20 participants per estimated parameter in a research model. The research model in the present study consisted of 22 observed variables (items) and seven estimated parameters. Therefore,

considering the information provided above, the size of the sample was deemed appropriate for data analyses in this study.

Measurements

In the present study, established scales were modified to assess the constructs under investigation. The scales used to measure love, joy, and positive surprise were all derived from the DES (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010) and five-items scales were utilized to assess these constructs. Place identity was assessed by five items scale barrowed from Kyle et al. (2004). Finally, destination loyalty was measured with four items, which was modified from Lee et al. (2008) and Grappi and Montanari (2011). A Likert-type scale with seven points, ranging from a strongly disagree to a strongly agree, was employed to quantify the study variables. A pilot test was completed to affirm the clearness and the comprehensiveness of the study survey.

Data Analyses

The first step of data analysis involved conducting an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (i.e., with Varimax rotation) to identify the underlying dimensions associated with emotional experience. The second phase of the data analysis included performing a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the measurement model by integrating the emotional experience dimensions obtained from the EFA with the other variables comprising place identity and destination loyalty. In the last step, the researchers employed covariance based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) as a method to evaluate and validate the study's hypotheses. Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) was utilized to perform both the measurement and structural model analyses.

In this study, the use of CB-SEM appeared to be a more suitable statistical analysis method when compared to partial least squares SEM (PLS-SEM). It is crucial to highlight that both approaches are supplementary rather than mutually exclusive, and the selection of a particular method is contingent upon the research objectives. PLS-SEM proves advantageous when the researcher seeks prediction and theory development. Conversely, if there is a necessity to validate and test an existing theory or a conceptual model derived from an existing theory, the suitable method is CB-SEM (Hair et al., 2017).

In this study, employing a confirmatory approach and utilizing pre-validated scales, our primary aim was to examine and affirm a research

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model derived from established theories. In other words, our focus was not on prediction, and we did not formulate a theory to structure our research model. Consequently, we opted for CB-SEM as a suitable data analysis approach to assess the study hypotheses.

RESULTS

Respondents' Profile

Table 1 displays the properties of the participants. The results indicated that 56% of the participants were male and 44% of the respondents were female. Around 35% of the participants belonged to the 25-34 age group. Regarding the education level, a bachelor's degree was possessed by 37% of the participants. The respondents were from 31 different nations such as United States (15%) Australia (14%), India (9%), and China (7%). Around 84% of the participants visited Nepal for the first time. Finally, around 67% of the respondents were travelling with friends, partners, or families.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the Sample*

Characteristic		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	92	56
	Female	72	44
	Total	164	100
Age	18-24	40	24
	25-34	58	35
	35-44	29	18
	45-54	12	7
	55-64	9	5
	65 years and older	12	7
	Missing	4	2
	Total	164	100
Education Level	High school or Associate degree	36	22
	Bachelor's degree	61	37
	Master's degree or higher	67	41
	Total	164	100
Country of Origin	United States	25	15
	Australia	23	14
	India	15	9
	China	11	7
	Others	90	55
	Total	164	100
Travel Frequency	First time	138	84
	Second time	14	9
	Third time or more	12	7
	Total	164	100
Membership in a Group	Alone	54	33
	With partners, friends or families	110	67
	Total	164	100

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Exploratory Factor Analysis

Measure of sampling adequacy (i.e., Kaiser-Meyer-Oaklin Test) and Bartlett's test were performed to check if the data of the study was appropriate to run exploratory factor analysis. Bartlett's test was found to be significant (i.e., 1689.876), and measure of sampling adequacy value for the KMO test surpassed the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.5. (i.e., Measure of Sampling Adequacy 0.904). The findings verified that the selected study sample was appropriate for conducting factor analysis (Hair et al., 2010).

Items that exhibited loadings ≥ 0.7 were retained for further assessment, and factors that had eigenvalues equal to or exceeding one were considered significant and included in the data analysis (Kaiser, 1960). One positive surprise item (i.e., I feel fascinated) was rejected from further analysis due to its low loading. The outcomes of the EFA produced a model consisting of three factors, and these three factors collectively explained 71.06% of the variance. The first factor, namely Love, accounted for 51.47% of the variance, while the second factor, Joy, explained 12.63%, and finally, the last factor, Positive Surprise, contributed to 6.96% of the total variance. Factors' reliabilities were evaluated by Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The calculated values for all the factors varied between 0.826 to 0.916. These values surpassed the recommended benchmark of 0.70, illustrating that the scales were deemed reliable for subsequent analyses. (Nunnally, 1959) (Table 2).

Table 2. *Exploratory Factor Analysis*

Factors	Factor Loadings	Eigen Values	Variance Explained
Factor 1 (Love)		7.72	51.47
1. Sense of love	0.845		
2. Sense of affection	0.815		
3. Sense of tenderness	0.787		
4. Sense of warm-hearted	0.733		
5. Sense of caring	0.707		
Factor 2 (Joy)		1.89	12.63
1. Cheerful	0.793		
2. Sense of enthusiasm	0.765		
3. Sense of joy	0.761		
4. Sense of delight	0.710		
5. Sense of pleasure	0.700		
Factor 3 (Positive Surprise)		1.04	6.96
1. Sense of amazement	0.813		
2. Sense of surprise	0.781		
3. Sense of astonishment	0.770		
4. Sense of inspiration	0.735		

Measurement Model

Prior to conducting an examination of the measurement model, an evaluation of skewness and kurtosis values was undertaken to substantiate the normal distribution of the study data. The outcomes revealed that all skewness and kurtosis values adhered to the stipulated range of -2 and +2, thereby affirming the fulfillment of the normality assumption (George & Mallery, 2010).

Table 3. *Measurement Model*

Constructs	Loadings	CR	AVEs
Love *(During my visit to Nepal I feel…)*		0.914	0.682
1. … a sense of love.	0.867		
2. … a sense of affection.	0.892		
3. … a sense of tenderness.	0.818		
4. … a sense of warm-hearted.	0.789		
5. … a sense of caring.	0.750		
Joy *(During my visit to Nepal, I feel…)*		0.917	0.688
1. … cheerful.	0.815		
2. … a sense of enthusiasm.	0.845		
3. … a sense of joy.	0.815		
4. … a sense of delight.	0.846		
5. … a sense of pleasure.	0.826		
Positive Surprise (*During my visit to Nepal, I feel…)*		0.833	0.557
1. … a sense of amazement.	0.713		
2. … a sense of surprise,	0.781		
3. … a sense of astonishment.	0.819		
4. … a sense of inspiration.	0.660		
Place Identity		0.838	0.571
1. I identify strongly with Nepal,	0.895		
2. I have a special connection to Nepal.	0.727		
3. I am attached to Nepal.	0.534		
4. I have lots of fond memories about Nepal.	0.819		
Destination Loyalty		0.923	0.753
1. I will recommend visiting Nepal to other people.	0.898		
2. I will say positive things about Nepal to other people.	0.918		
3. I will revisit Nepal in the future.	0.933		
4. I will encourage friends and relatives to visit Nepal.	0.702		

A CFA was performed to assess the measurement model. Several fit indices were calculated to assess the measurement model fit. As mentioned previously, the CFA analysis included the factors obtained from the EFA (i.e., joy, love, and positive surprise) and the other study constructs including place identity and destination loyalty. The findings from the CFA indicated a reasonable model fit, as evidenced by a significant chi-square statistic (chi-square = 419.121; df = 199), along with other fit indices that met the acceptable criteria with RMSEA (.049), NFI (.90), CFI (.91), and GFI (.91) (Hair et al., 1998). The constructs' reliability was evaluated using Composite

reliability (CR) values. The determined CR standards for all study constructs surpassed the suggested value of 0.70, affirming that all the study constructs were reliable (Table 3).

The convergent validity for all study constructs was achieved because all of the factors' AVE standards were higher than 0.5 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) (Table 3). Furthermore, the square root values of AVEs were larger than the correlations among variables, indicating that discriminant validity was established (Table 4). Furthermore, the HTMT (i.e., heterotrait–monotrait) ratio of correlations was computed to consider the discriminant validity of the variables. The results disclosed that all HTMT values were below 0.85, affirming that there were no concerns regarding discriminant validity in this study (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 4. *Discriminant Validity*

|	Destination Loyalty	Love	Joy	Positive Surprise	Place Identity
Destination Loyalty	**.868**				
Love	.502	**.826**			
Joy	.562	.777	**.830**		
Positive Surprise	.562	.455	.589	**.746**	
Place Identity	.569	.611	.571	.587	**.756**

Off-diagonal values = Inter-construct correlations
Values in bold = Squared root of AVEs

Structural Model Analysis

As mentioned earlier, SEM was performed to explore the suggested linear structural connections between the variables in the current study. The findings revealed that the structural model exhibited a favorable fit. The ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom was 2.106, which was below the suggested threshold of 3. Other fit indices demonstrated appropriate values including RMSEA (.50), NFI (.90), CFI (.91) and GFI (.91) (Hair et al., 2014).

The study findings demonstrated that positive surprise positively influenced destination loyalty and place identity (H3 and H6 were supported) and love significantly influenced place identity (H5 was supported). The study results further demonstrated that place identity positively impacted destination loyalty (H7 was supported). However, the study results revealed that joy did not have a statistically significant influence on destination loyalty and place identity (H1 and H4 were rejected) and Love was not associated with destination loyalty (H2 was rejected). The results of hypotheses testing, along with their corresponding path coefficients, are displayed in Table 5 and Figure 2. In addition, variance

explained (i.e., R²) was %49 for place identity and %44 for destination loyalty.
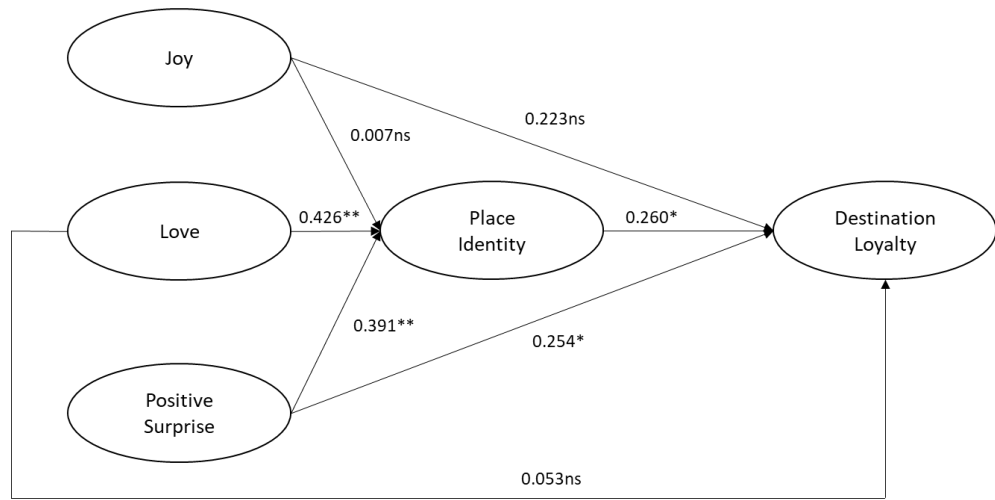
**p< 0.01; *p< 0.05;
"ns" represents non-significant relationships.

Figure 2. *Structural Model*

Table 5. *Hypotheses Testing Results*

Hypotheses	Standardized Path Coefficients
H1: Joy → Destination Loyalty	0.223ns
H2: Love → Destination Loyalty	0.053ns
H3: Positive Surprise → Destination Loyalty	0.254*
H4: Joy → Place Identity	0.007ns
H5: Love → Place Identity	0.426**
H6: Positive Surprise → Place Identity	0.391**
H7: Place Identity → Destination Loyalty	0.260*

**p< 0.01; *p< 0.05.
"ns" represents non-significant relationships.

After finding a not significant (direct) effect of love on destination loyalty, and a significant association between love and place identity and place identity and destination loyalty, we conducted additional analyses to examine if place identity serves as a mediator on the proposed model. In this regard, the indirect effect (i.e., mediation) of place identity on the associations between love and destination loyalty and positive surprise and destination loyalty were tested by using a bootstrap method in AMOS. The results demonstrated that the positive relationships between love and destination loyalty and positive surprise and destination loyalty were mediated by place identity (Table 6).

Table 6. *Indirect Effects*

Paths	Standardized Coefficient	Bootstrap Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals (% 90)		p-value	Result
		Lower	Upper		
Joy → Place Identity → Loyalty	0.002	-0.068	0.121	0.921	No Mediation
Love → Place Identity →Loyalty	0.102	0.018	0.246	0.046	Full mediation
Pos. Surprise → Place Identity → Loyalty	0.111	0.014	0.250	0.036	Partial Mediation

DISCUSSION

This study examined the impacts of emotional experiences of tourists (i.e., joy, love, and positive surprise) on place identity and destination loyalty. In addition, the impact of place identity on destination loyalty was examined. In accordance with prior studies (Prayag et al., 2013; Su & Hsu, 2013), the study findings indicated a positive correlation between positive surprise and place identity and positive surprise and destination loyalty. These findings suggested that when tourists are amazed and/or inspired by the unexpected situations (e.g., positive surprises derived from unexpected kindness from host community or unscheduled special events within the destination), then they are more likely to develop place identity and loyalty toward the destination (Jeong et al., 2022; Lee, 2014). Conversely, the study outcomes demonstrated that joy did not significantly impact place identity and destination loyalty. These findings were contradicting with prior studies (Hosany et al., 2017; Prayag et al., 2013; Su & Hsu, 2013), which explored a positive association between joy and place identity and joy and destination loyalty.

Some interesting findings were discovered regarding the relationships among love, place identity, and destination loyalty. Consistent with previous literature (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Hosany et al., 2017; Prayag & Ryan, 2012), The study findings demonstrated that love had a positive effect on place identity, which consequently positively impacted destination loyalty. Nevertheless, love was not directly associated with destination loyalty. However, a significant indirect association between love and destination loyalty was observed in the current study. More specifically, study results indicated that the association between love and destination loyalty was fully mediated by place identity. These outcomes suggest that tourists' one of the positive emotions, love, may not be sufficient to foster destination loyalty unless they also develop a sense of place identity with the destination.

Theoretical Contributions

This research donates significantly to the theoretical understanding of destination loyalty. Primarily, drawing on the theoretical framework established by Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) M-R Model, this study empirically tested a conceptual framework elucidating the dynamics of destination loyalty. The comprehensive examination yielded affirmative results, affirming the relevance and applicability of the M-R model within the intricate domain of tourist behavior. These findings add to the broader comprehension of the nuanced interplay between emotional experiences and destination loyalty, substantiating the theoretical underpinnings of the M-R Model in the context of tourism research.

As previously delineated, the integration of Hosany and Gilbert's (2010) Destination Emotions Scale (DES) into the M-R model was undertaken to scrutinize the distinct influences of joy, love, and positive surprise on destination loyalty. The empirical findings elucidated the success of incorporating the DES scale into the M-R model, thereby affirming its efficacy and applicability within the overarching framework of the M-R model. These outcomes contribute substantively to the refinement and validation of the M-R model, offering nuanced insights into the intricate dynamics of emotional experiences and their role in shaping destination loyalty.

In addition, the M-R model employed in the present study was extended through the inclusion of an additional place-oriented construct, specifically place identity. This augmentation served to enhance the comprehensiveness of the model, offering a more nuanced and intricate framework for understanding the interplay of emotional experiences and place-related perceptions in the context of tourist behavior. This strategic extension contributes to the refinement and sophistication of the M-R model, aligning it more closely with the intricacies inherent in the dynamics of destination loyalty and place identity.

Furthermore, this research brings attention to the construct of place identity's mediating function in the association between specific emotions and destination loyalty, uncovering new and significant insights. One notable discovery was that the association between love and destination loyalty was fully mediated by place identity. This result indicated that the emotional experience of love toward a destination influences loyalty primarily through the development of a strong sense of place identity. Additionally, this research indicated that place identity played a role of partial mediation in the association between positive surprise and

destination loyalty. Positive surprises experienced by tourists contributed to the growth of a sense of place identity, which in turn influenced their loyalty towards the destination. Although place identity only partially mediated this relationship, it still demonstrates the significant role it plays in shaping tourists' loyalty. These findings highlight the importance of fostering a profound emotional bond with the destination, as it enhances the formation of a strong sense of place identity, ultimately leading to increased loyalty. By uncovering these novel findings, this research expands our comprehension of the intricate interaction among emotions, place identity, and destination loyalty. It highlights the mechanisms through which specific emotions influence loyalty and emphasizes the crucial role of place identity as a mediating factor. These findings contribute to the existing body of literature on destination loyalty and provide constructive insights for researchers that specialize on destination marketing.

Finally, this study addressed a significant research gap identified by previous studies, which called for the testing of an integrated loyalty model in a developing country setting (Prayag et al., 2017; Wang & Hsu, 2010). By proposing and testing a loyalty model, this research lays the groundwork for future investigations to validate and further examine the research model in various developed and developing country contexts.

Practical Implications

On the practical side, the results of the study carry several significant implications for destination marketing experts and destination policy makers. Inevitably, destination loyalty represents a central objective for all stakeholders involved in a destination. This study highlights the significance of incorporating emotions like love and positive surprise as key mechanisms of destination marketing strategies aimed at building destination loyalty. By acknowledging the influential role of these emotions, destination marketers can develop targeted initiatives and campaigns that evoke and amplify these positive emotions in tourists.

For instance, destination marketers can strategically concentrate on curating memorable experiences that evoke profound feelings of love, such as orchestrating special events, cultural festivities, or romantic settings, to enhance visitors' emotional connection with the destination. Additionally, surprise elements can be tactically integrated into the tourism experience, manifesting through unexpected delights like exclusive tours, hidden gems, or novel attractions that captivate and intrigue tourists. By implementing

such strategies, destinations not only foster positive emotions but also create a distinctive and unforgettable identity, contributing to the overall satisfaction and loyalty of visitors.

Moreover, the integration of emotions in destination marketing can contribute to a more holistic comprehension of loyalty toward a destination. By recognizing the function of love and positive surprise, marketers can go beyond traditional measures of satisfaction and highlight the emotional aspects that truly resonate with tourists. This approach aligns with the growing recognition that emotions play a crucial role in shaping customer behavior and the processes involved in decision-making.

The present study also unveiled significance of place identity in the connection between emotions (i.e., love and positive surprise) and destination loyalty. In this regard, destination marketers should focus on cultivating a unique and distinctive identity for their location. This can be accomplished by emphasizing local culture, traditions, history, and natural beauty. By creating a strong sense of place, marketers can enhance the emotional bond among visitors and the destination.

Destination marketers should also emphasize authentic experiences that allow visitors to engage with the local community and immerse themselves in the destination's culture. This can be done through activities such as local festivals, traditional food and beverages, and interactions with local residents. Authentic experiences contribute to the development of place identity and enhance visitor loyalty. Furthermore, destination marketers should utilize storytelling techniques to communicate the unique characteristics and identity of the destination. This can be achieved through various marketing channels, including social media, websites, and promotional materials. Sharing compelling stories about the destination's history, landmarks, and local heroes can help create a sense of place and emotional connection with potential visitors.

Effective collaboration with local stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and community organizations, is imperative in the establishment and sustenance of a robust place identity. Consequently, destination marketers should actively engage these stakeholders in destination branding and marketing initiatives. This inclusive approach, incorporating local perspectives and community involvement, serves to enhance the authenticity and credibility of the place identity. Additionally, destination marketers must meticulously uphold consistency in brand messaging across diverse channels (e.g., destinations' official website, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) and touchpoints. The messaging should

harmonize with the established place identity, eliciting the desired emotions and associations. The maintenance of uniform branding contributes to the reinforcement of the place identity, cultivating a distinct and recognizable destination image.

In conclusion, by recognizing the importance of place identity and implementing these practical implications, destination marketers can enhance visitor loyalty, differentiate their destination from competitors, create a memorable and meaningful experience for visitors, cultivate destination loyalty and drive sustainable growth in the tourism sector.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study possesses certain limitations, and further investigation is necessary to validate and expand upon its findings. The current study primarily focused on international tourists visiting Nepal, which, as a destination, attracts its distinct types of tourists. Owing to this, the outcomes may not be generalizable to the tourists visiting other nations. Hence, the replication of this study in different Asian countries is recommended.

Another limitation is that the study assessed only tourists' positive emotional experiences including love, joy, and positive surprise. Future studies, which include negative emotions such as terror, grief, sadness, and anger would provide valuable insights. In addition, the study has concentrated explicitly on place identity due to its association with feelings, memories, and experiences. Scholars are encouraged to investigate the mediating impacts of other variables such as satisfaction, quality, image on tourists' destination loyalty.

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