

An exploratory study of place attachment from a community perspective in a World Heritage tourist context

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ABSTRACT

Attachment to place is a common concept referring to human psychological connections with environmental settings. It has attracted increasing interest from tourism and leisure researchers when examining attitudes and behaviors of tourists and host community. This paper aims to extend the current literature to World Heritage tourist destinations by exploring the nature of the attachment to place among local residents in this integrative research context.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-eight local residents living in Hoi An—a World Cultural Heritage site and a popular tourist destination in Vietnam. The qualitative data was analyzed using NVivo 10 and a thematic analysis approach. Three inter-related aspects of people-place relationships namely place affect (affective attachment), place identity (cognitive attachment) and place dependence (functional attachment) emerged from the analysis, confirming the complexity of place attachment and its multifaceted nature in heritage tourism. Among the three elements identified, the residents' place affect was revealed to be strongly associated with the characteristics of the place, especially the World Heritage prestige. The residents' World Heritage place affect consisting of pride, happiness and honor, is important and central to the place attachment concept.

Keywords: place attachment, local residents, World Heritage tourist site

Introduction

Attachment to place is a common concept which originated from the psychology literature (Ramkissoon, Weiler, & Smith, 2011). It reflects psychological connections that people tend to develop with a place or a specific environment where they were born, stay or live (Hernández, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). Attachment to place helps the understanding of certain types of behaviors or attitudes, leading to managerial implications (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Indeed, tourism researchers have paid increasing attention to this construct because empirical studies have provided evidence that attachment to place influences visitors' loyalty, revisit intentions or pro-environmental behavioral intentions, resulting in potential changes in planning, management and marketing strategies for tourism development and environmental protection (Lee, 2011; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013b; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010).

The main objective of this paper is to explore the nature and the extent of attachment to place among residents to develop a better understanding of their attitudes towards the host environment. It is thought that this may influence the propensity to respond to the call for “sustainable protection, conservation and management” at World Heritage sites (World Heritage Committee, 2015, p. 23). Currently, over one thousand places in the world (for instance, cities, forests, islands, or mountains) are listed and classified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as possessing outstanding physical and cultural values, which need to be conserved nationally and internationally. Many World Heritage sites become popular tourist attractions with increasing visitation, which in turns, challenges the balance between the exploitation of heritages for tourism and the protection of their values. This kind of heritage tourist location is the focus of interest of the current study in the sense that it sets the context to help understand and examine the diversity of the connection between residents and the place, which in turn, acts as a basis for subsequent studies and practical implications of heritage tourism management and heritage conservation.