

‘Some places stay in your soul and skin’. **Is it possible to be a *fan* of a tourist destination?**

Giovanni BALDI¹, Rui BISCAIA², Antonio BOTTI¹

Abstract. Tourists are exhibiting behaviours akin to sports fans, such as getting tattoos of place-specific symbols or engaging in social media communities. This study aims to explore the existence of destination fans, who seem to exist in practice but are absent in the existing literature. Drawing on related research on tourist behaviour and fan engagement, fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted using an abductive grounded approach. The results identify fans of the destination that can be categorised based on factors such as first travel motivation, duration, traveller type, memorable experiences, cultural immersion, and local community interaction, among others. This study identifies destination fans as a new segment of travellers - no longer just tourists - providing valuable implications for scholars, and with significant social impact for destinations, businesses and communities.

Keywords: Destination fans; Destination loyalty; Fan engagement; Fan tourists

1. Introduction

“That place has left an indelible mark on my soul... and on my skin” – a respondent.

An increasing number of individuals form deep attachments to places where they have undergone transformative experiences, sometimes even commemorating these connections through tattoos as personalised souvenirs (Dresler, 2021). Others cling to objects that become amulets, immerse themselves in the culture or language of the destination, eventually becoming its ambassadors, or gather in online communities on social media (Lever et al., 2023). This form of ‘intense behaviour’, though not necessarily negative, is often observed among sports or music fans.

Tourism and *entertainment* may be closely intertwined, as fans frequently travel across the globe to follow their passions and idols, often remaining loyal to the destinations associated with these experiences (Krupa & Nawrocka, 2020; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). However, there appears to be a deeper phenomenon at play. Increasingly, passionate travellers are gathering in online communities on social media and forums, where they share memories of their favourite destinations and exchange travel advice—paralleling the behaviour of fan communities in other contexts. This suggests that the relationship between travellers and destinations may extend beyond attachment, loyalty, or love. Nevertheless, while these concepts have been explored in tourism literature (Filo et al., 2011; Sandvoss, 2014; Swanson, 2017), the notion of ‘being a fan of a tourist destination’ remains largely ignored, despite

¹ University of Salerno, Department of Business and Management

² University of Bath, Department for Health

anecdotal evidence suggesting its existence. This pioneering study seeks to investigate whether destination fandom exists and, if so, to identify its characteristics. The theoretical, practical, and social implications of such a phenomenon may be significant, as it could reveal an unexplored segment of tourists who seek alternative experiences and may collaborate with local communities and stakeholders. Like sports fans, these individuals may go to great lengths to preserve their connection to 'their' destination. Thus, if such destination fans exist, they should be identified, analysed, profiled, and ultimately conceptualised. To address this purpose, the study adopts a qualitative approach by drawing on related literature and conducting in-depth interviews.

2. Consumer fandom and tourist behaviour towards destinations

Fans constitute a subculture of individuals who share a common interest and use specialised terminology, existing in all aspects of human life and consumer activities (Wang, 2019). In the marketing literature, scholars examining fanaticism within the framework of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) often employ the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) to describe the progression of an individual from initial *awareness* to *attraction*, *attachment*, and ultimately *allegiance* in becoming a fan (Funk & James, 2001). This framework is instrumental in understanding the development of sports and leisure fandom, which could be similar for tourists in destinations. Within the literature on sports audiences, *Fan Engagement* behaviour is defined as the voluntary and extra-role contributions that fans make towards the success and well-being of sports organisations through value-adding activities (Yoshida et al., 2014). Engagement transcends the simple consumption of sports products, encompassing the co-creation of resources with the sports brand, acquisition of knowledge, ritualistic behaviours and habits, as well as collaboration with the brand and like-minded fans to help the sport brand (Yoshida et al., 2024).

Similar to sports fans, *tourists* are also no longer passive 'spectators' but active 'participants' in shaping and experiencing destinations - even beyond their physical journey - according to the Tourist Gaze theory (Urry, 1992). In fact, an increasing number of individuals develop deep relationships with both the places they visit and the local communities, driven by a sense of 'belonging'. This bond often evolves into being loyal and always returning to that place. *Destination Loyalty*, one of the most studied and debated constructs in tourist behaviour (Oppermann, 2000), is typically measured by a tourist's intention to return to a destination and to recommend it to others (Gursoy et al., 2014) and it is influenced by aspects such as satisfaction and place attachment. *Place attachment* refers to the intrinsic bond between an individual and an environmental setting, reflecting an emotional connection to a place (Yuksel et al., 2010). This concept includes aspects such as place dependence (functional benefits of the location), and place identity (individual's self-identification with the place). Although attachment can be temporary, it often starts as a relationship of convenience between an individual and a place, eventually leading to a sense of ownership. *Psychological ownership* arises when travellers feel a sense of possession over a part of the destination, typically satisfied and destination-perceived-value (Kumar & Nayak, 2019). This perception is not inherently negative, as it can foster extra-role behaviours such as citizenship, stewardship, and pro-environmental actions (Lyu et al., 2023),

where tourists who love a destination become genuinely committed to its well-being, much like in the context of sports fandom. *Destination Brand Love*, derived from Ahuvia's (2005) concept of brand love, signifies a deep allegiance to beloved destinations (Strandberg & Styvén, 2019). Swanson et al. (2017) developed a model explaining the phenomenon of love towards destination brands, yet the behaviours of tourists who engage with destinations beyond mere brand consumption remain largely unexplored.

3. Method

An abductive grounded approach was employed to achieve the research objective, given the absence of an existing conceptual framework for the phenomenon (Rahmani & Leifels, 2018). The study began by reviewing relevant literature to develop a semi-structured interview guide, which was then used to conduct in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of randomly selected international tourists. These participants were initially drawn from the authors' personal contacts, with subsequent participants recruited through snowball sampling. The interviews did not adhere to a strict script, but explored themes derived from related literature, resulting in in-depth discussions. Fourteen interviews were conducted, with the majority of participants being Italian (60%) and aged between 24 and 33 years. The interviews were recorded with prior consent, with an average duration of 38 minutes, ranging from 18 to 54 minutes. Recordings were transcribed automatically using MS Word, followed by manual review and refinement. The coding process and analysis were supported by Nvivo software v.14. A thematic analysis was conducted, and emerging themes were presented to a research team comprising experts in tourism and sports fandom to reach a consensus and develop an initial conceptualization (Cascio et al., 2019).

4. Findings

The findings suggest the existence of a traveller profile that extends beyond mere destination loyalty, exhibiting certain characteristics akin to those of sports fans.

Firstly, the findings suggest that these individuals can be segmented based on *travel motivation, companionship, personality, and length of stay*. Those who travelled for the first-time during childhood or adolescence—whether alone, with schoolmates, or with family, especially for study or cultural exchanges—tend to develop a stronger propensity to become avid fans. Individuals who prefer cultural trips over leisure, immerse themselves in the local population, maintain relationships post-trip, those who are curious, and are inclined to engage with local cuisine and traditions - are more likely to develop a deep affection for, and actively promote the culture, thus becoming dedicated fans of the place. Additionally, the longer the initial stay, the greater the tendency to develop this connection. Similar to sports, being a fan towards a destination can be passed down through the family.

Secondly, a *memorable tourist experience*, often marked by a '*Zero Moment*,' seems to be crucial for fostering attachment and subsequent fandom. Respondents frequently described their experiences as unique, personal, intimate, and 'life-changing,' citing examples such as connecting with the natural beauty of the place, feeling integrated into the local community, or experiencing profound personal

moments, such as witnessing a panoramic sunset, volunteering in a recovery community, or surfing. Tourist fans can develop an attachment to the destination irrespective of their affinity for a specific attraction, sports brand, film, or music, as long as other destination factors are present.

Thirdly, surprisingly, *loyalty* does not seem to significantly influence the propensity to become a fan. Often, destination fans have visited only once and are reluctant to return, fearing that a second visit might diminish the magic of the initial experience. However, they are inclined to share the place with special individuals, transforming it into an intimate experience. Nonetheless, visiting the destination at least once appears to be a prerequisite for developing this deep attachment, which contrasts with brand love, where attachment can occur even before visiting. Moreover, while they may be open to visiting and loving other places, they hold their favourite destination in an untouchable regard, feeling a deep affinity and identification with it, much like other types of fans.

Fourthly, fans feel a strong sense of (positive) *ownership* over the destination. They love it despite its flaws and, while recognizing that change may be impossible, are still committed to supporting the environment, aiding the local population, or assisting other travellers, as is the case for sports fans.

Furthermore, fans generally avoid commercial ‘brand’ associations and promotions, perceiving them as tourist-centric. They do not see themselves as mere tourists but as something more profound. Rather than opting for typical ‘pop’ souvenirs like magnets or branded objects, they prefer items that embody a deep, intense memory, almost akin to amulets. Some even go as far as getting tattoos of symbols from the destination, demonstrating their deep devotion – as for sports fans.

Finally, when returning to the destination, fans tend to engage in the same activities as part of a *ritual*, much like sports fans. Interestingly, *social media engagement* is not a determining factor, as it varies depending on the type of ‘social consume’. Initially, fans seem to follow social media pages primarily to gather information, but over time, these sources appear to become less necessary. Nevertheless, all fans tend to follow social media pages and groups, particularly those not generated by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), which they perceive as more authentic. These platforms allow them to stay connected with the destination, specific cherished places, the local community, and other fans—similar to the dynamics observed in sports fandom.

5. Conclusions

This study provides initial evidence of the existence of destination fans, who share remarkable similarities with sports fans, and to outline their initial characteristics. Given the anecdotal evidence of their existence—demonstrated by behaviors akin to sports fandom—but without any recognition in the literature, the study delved deeper through initial interviews, grounded in related tourism and consumer fandom literature. Destination fans seem to be positioned between tourists and locals and create lasting and meaningful connections with places, often serving as informal ambassadors. They prioritize authentic, personal experiences over commercialized aspects and engage with the destination in a responsible manner, including environmental stewardship.

The concept of *destination fandom* could hold valuable theoretical implications as it extends beyond the traditional notion of attachment, loyalty, and destination love, opening a new avenue of research for destination marketing. Practically and socially, this concept could have significant implications, as DMOs and other stakeholders could leverage this emerging segment to enhance the positive impact of tourism while simultaneously addressing the challenges of irresponsible tourism, thereby contributing to more sustainable and resilient tourism practices. Future research should further investigate the existence and characteristics of this new concept of destination fans.

References

- Cascio, M. A., Lee, E., Vaudrin, N., & Freedman, D. A. (2019). A team-based approach to open coding: Considerations for creating intercoder consensus. *Field methods*, 31(2), 116-130.
- Dresler, E. (2021). Tattoo as a personalised souvenir: pictorial presentation of tourism experience. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 26(9), 1007-1023.
- Filo, K., Funk, D. C., & O'Brien, D. (2011). Examining motivation for charity sport event participation: A comparison of recreation-based and charity-based motives. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 43(4), 491-518.
- Funk, D. C., & James, J. (2001). The psychological continuum model: A conceptual framework for understanding an individual's psychological connection to sport. *Sport management review*, 4(2), 119-150.
- Gretzel, U., & Scarpino-Johns, M. (2018). Destination resilience and smart tourism destinations. *Tourism Review International*, 22(3-4), 263-276.
- Gursoy, D., S. Chen, J., & G. Chi, C. (2014). Theoretical examination of destination loyalty formation. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 26(5), 809-827.
- Hao, A. (2020). Understanding consumer fandom: literature review and conceptual framework. *Handbook of research on the impact of fandom in society and consumerism*, 18-37.
- Krupa, J., & Nawrocka, E. (2020). Fan tourism and fan tourists: discussion on definitions and research issues. *Turyzm/Tourism*, 30(2), 27-33.
- Lever, M. W., Elliot, S., & Joppe, M. (2023). Pride and promotion: Exploring relationships between national identification, destination advocacy, tourism ethnocentrism and destination image. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 29(4), 537-554.
- Lyu, C., Jiang, Y., & Balaji, M. S. (2023). Travelers' psychological ownership: A systematic review and future research agenda. *Journal of Travel Research*, 62(8), 1623-1646.
- Oppermann, M. (2000). Tourism destination loyalty. *Journal of travel research*, 39(1), 78-84.
- Rahmani, F., & Leifels, K. (2018). Abductive grounded theory: a worked example of a study in construction management. *Construction management and economics*, 36(10), 565-583.
- Reichenberger, I., & Smith, K. A. (2020). Co-creating communities: Fandoms in tourism spaces. *Tourist Studies*, 20(2), 166-181.
- Sandvoss, C. (2014). "I ♥ Ibiza": Music, Place, and Belonging. In M. Duffett (Ed.), *Popular music fandom: Identities, roles, and practices* (pp. 115-145). New York, NY and London, UK: Routledge.
- Strandberg, C., & Styvén, M. E. (2019). What's love got to do with it? Place brand love and viral videos. *Internet Research*, 30(1), 23-43.
- Swanson, K. (2017). Destination brand love: managerial implications and applications to tourism businesses. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 10(1), 88-97.
- Thorne, S., & Bruner, G. C. (2006). An exploratory investigation of the characteristics of consumer fanaticism. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 9(1), 51-72.
- Urry, J. (1992). The tourist gaze and the Environment'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 9(3), 1-26.
- Wang, C. L. (Ed.). (2019). *Handbook of Research on the Impact of Fandom in Society and Consumerism*. IGI global.

- Yoshida, M., Gordon, B., Nakazawa, M., & Biscaia, R. (2014). Conceptualization and measurement of fan engagement: Empirical evidence from a professional sport context. *Journal of Sport Management*, 28(4), 399-417.
- Yoshida, M., Biscaia, R., Uhrich, S., Gordon, B. S., Huettermann, M., & Nakazawa, M. (2024). Fan Engagement Behavior: Validation of a Theory-Based Scale. *Journal of Sport Management*, 38, 133-150.
- Yuksel, A., Yuksel, F., & Bilim, Y. (2010). Destination attachment: Effects on customer satisfaction and cognitive, affective and conative loyalty. *Tourism management*, 31(2), 274-284.