

# LINKING MOUNTAIN IMAGE WITH PLACE-ATTACHMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Mountain tourism represents 15–20% of the tourist industry, corresponding to receipts of around 70–90 billion US\$ per year. Mountains are attractive tourism destinations because people view them as natural and sacred places with plenty of social, cultural and symbolic meanings. The present study is a conceptual work that debates the link between mountain destination image with place-attachment by summarizing, systematizing and discussing the distinct, yet connected, image and place-attachment constructs.

Based on an extensive literature review focusing on the concepts of place-attachment, destination image and social and cultural meanings of mountains, the study provides a framework which allows the assessment of the emotional and functional bonds that tourists can establish with mountain places. Systematization of the literature review should permit a deeper understanding of the diverse meanings and values associated with mountains, increasing our awareness of their social and cultural value. The model sheds light on the diverse dimensions of mountain destination image and their potential link to tourists' place-attachment, which is most interesting for sustainable mountain tourism development. Although the model's validation would further improve our understanding of the relationships between the constructs, the relations already identified in the literature review justify a consideration of the presented dimensions. This more detailed comprehension may enhance tourist mountain destination planning, as well as marketing and management, thus helping mountain DMOs promote distinct and unique mountain features that attract tourists and involve them emotionally with the mountain areas visited and dreamt of.

**Keywords:** Mountain Tourism; Destination Image; Place-attachment; Social Representations; Literature Review; Sustainable Development.

**JEL Classification:** Z32

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research shows that people are attracted to and develop emotional links to natural environments for a variety of reasons. In fact natural environments, such as mountains, offer a range of physical, psychological and social benefits that make them attractive leisure and tourism destinations, potentially providing affective links with their visitors.

Place-attachment influences what individuals see, think and feel about a place and therefore includes emotional and symbolic meanings they attribute to them. People develop a sense of belonging, identity, and dependence regarding certain places that they visit or live in, making place-attachment a multidimensional construct. This construct incorporates

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four dimensions that have recently been applied to the field of tourism, namely: (1) *Place-dependence*, which represents the functional dimension of a place, describes visitors' attachment to a specific place and their awareness of its unique setting for certain activities (e.g. making a particular mountain the ideal place for hiking, as judged by the individual); (2) *Place-identity* which refers to the location's symbolic dimension, to the connection between a place and one's personal identity, containing both cognitive and affective elements; (3) *Place-affect* means the emotional link to a place; and (4) *Place-social bonding* which is related to socially shared experiences that are associated with a place.

When considering destination image as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that an individual has of a destination (Crompton, 1979), it is also necessary to include cognitive and affective components (Kastenholz, 2002; Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008; Silva, 2011). The cognitive image component consists of beliefs and knowledge about a destination, primarily focusing on tangible physical attributes of a place (Stabler, 1988; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Smith, 2005). The affective image component, on the other hand, represents feelings about a destination (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Beerli & Martín, 2004).

Previous research suggests that a place's attractiveness is an important determinant of place-attachment, particularly in the domain of tourism (Silva, Kastenholz & Abrantes, 2013). It is therefore important to understand the dimensions of mountain destination image that reveal these destinations' attractiveness and their possible link to the diverse dimensions of place-attachment. In this sense, the study seeks to analyze, in a holistic and multi-disciplinary manner that considers inputs from academic literature in psychology, sociology, tourism and marketing, the relation between tourists' destination images and place-attachment associated with mountain destinations.

## 2. MOUNTAIN IMAGES

Mountains are cultural, natural, social and physical spaces but they are also socially, cognitively and emotionally constructed sites. Mountain destinations' attractiveness is more than a collection of functional and physical attributes (Russo & van der Borg, 2002). It is their symbolic meaning and significance that attracts tourists to and involves them with mountains (Silva, Kastenholz & Abrantes, 2013).

Myths, images and imagining of mountains are inseparable (Blake, 2005) and the social meanings of mountains change overtime (Silva, Kastenholz & Abrantes, 2011). However, some of these meanings remain and stand out as relevant for most mountain destinations, namely: natural/ecological, social and prestige, sport and leisure, historic-cultural and affective meanings, as detailed next.

### 2.1 Natural/Ecological

Characterized by the intense natural beauty of its sceneries (Nepal, 2008), the mountain has become a symbolic expression of the landscape itself and the formalization of the sublime (Pisón, 1998). The mountain is frequently seen as an ecological, scenic and environmental sanctuary of nature (Krauchi, Brang & Schonenberger, 2000; Veyret, 2001).

### 2.2 Social and Prestige

Mountains are places that allow individuals to establish social relationships where they may enjoy positive experiences of interaction and may also learn about and share the values of local communities, whose life is shaped by their relation with these extraordinary places (Smith & Eadington, 1995; Urry & Crawshaw, 1995; Formica & Uysal, 1996).

Mountains are also unique and alternative places from the tourists' point of view and are considered fashionable places that enjoy a good reputation, giving prestige to those who visit them (Vengesai & Mavondo, 2004).

### **2.3 Sport and Leisure**

Another social meaning of mountains combines mountainous areas and adventure sports. The most popular and typical mountain sport activities are (depending on the season and corresponding climatic conditions) hiking, skiing and snowboarding; however, other extreme sports, such as mountain climbing, bungee jumping, rafting, paragliding and canyoning are becoming increasingly demanded, especially by affluent urban thrill-seekers (International Year of Mountains Coordination Unit, 2002). In fact, adventure sports like mountain climbing continue to attract the more adventurous mountain lovers, making them ideal places for living real adventure sport experiences and challenges (Bourdeau, Corneloup & Mao, 2002).

### **2.4 Historic-Cultural**

Mountains are viewed by many as unique cultural sites (Smethurst, 2000). They are historically and culturally distinct places (Stepp, Castaneda & Cervone, 2005) because they are part of the human history and often represent borders between cultural groups. They are home to distinct, sometimes isolated and very distinctive cultures of thousands of different groups of indigenous communities (Griggs, 1994), from whom tourists can acquire knowledge and with whom they may share unique experiences (Urry & Crawshaw, 1995).

### **2.5 Affective**

The affective image of mountains refers to the emotions associated with these places (Li & Vogelsong, 2006). These images are emotional responses that translate into feelings about places (Proshonsky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993; Hernández-Lobato *et al.*, 2006; Royo-Vela, 2009).

The affective image is conceptualized as a two-dimensional bipolar space that is defined by a set of variables (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Kastenzholz, 2002), such as stimulating or boring, awake or asleep (Russell & Lanius, 1984), pleasant or unpleasant, happy or sad, novel or familiar (Otto & Ritchie, 1999). Some refer to a global emotional image that may be described as good or bad (Lee *et al.*, 2005; Son, 2005), interesting or uninteresting, important or unimportant (Vitterso *et al.*, 2000; Lawton, 2005).

Tourists frequently perceive mountain destinations as pleasant, exciting, awakening, relaxing, interesting, happy, important and good places (Silva, Kastenzholz & Abrantes, 2013).

## **3. PLACE-ATTACHMENT**

Place-attachment refers to one's sense of place and relation to it. It includes functional, symbolic and emotional dimensions (Hwang, Lee & Cheng, 2005), typically reflected by a positive affective bond between individuals and specific places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Moore & Scott, 2003; Giuliani, 2003).

In tourism, place-attachment is analyzed as a multidimensional construct, which generally distinguishes two or more sub-constructs (Hawke, 2011; Ramkissoon, Smith & Weiler, 2013; Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2017). Based on the work developed by Kyle, Mowen & Tarrant (2004) and Ramkissoon, Smith and Weiler (2013), it is possible to divide place-

attachment into four categories of place linkage: place-identity, place-dependence, place-affect and place-social bonding.

### **3.1 Place-Identity**

Individuals establish emotional bonds with places through the symbolic relationship developed with them over time (Brocato, 2006). Place-identity is thus a relationship between the self and the place, which is based on the ideas and feelings about this place and the linked personal meanings attributed to it (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983).

### **3.2 Place-Dependence**

This dimension refers to the way a place is viewed as permitting an individual to reach one's specific goals (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Individuals evaluate places according to how those places meet their functional needs (Brocato, 2006). Place-dependence occurs when individuals reveal a functional need for a place that cannot be transferred to another place (Stokols & Schumaker, 1981). Place-dependence refers also to the set of social and physical resources that meet an individual's specific needs regarding desired activities, which are unique to the place, making it differ from other alternative or similar ones (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Kyle *et al.*, 2004).

### **3.3 Place-Affect**

This is the emotional dimension of a place. In a tourism/leisure context, the affective connections with natural locations generate a sense of psychological well-being amongst visitors (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Korpel *et al.*, 2009). Natural settings tend to further increase positive emotions in individuals about a place (Ulrich, 1979; Hartig *et al.*, 1996).

### **3.4 Place-Social Bonding**

This dimension is related to socially shared experiences associated with the place. An individual can value a place because it facilitates interpersonal relationships (Hammit, 2000; Scannell & Gifford, 2010a,b) and fosters "group belonging" (Hammit, Kyle & Oh, 2009). Natural settings set the context for social experiences which, if maintained in these settings, are likely to lead to higher levels of attachment (Kyle *et al.*, 2004). This social bonding should occur in contexts of challenging mountain activities (e.g. mountain climbing) where group members (including local guides) highly depend on each other while also overcoming challenges together. Also particular social encounters with local communities may trigger such place-social bonding in mountain destinations.

## **4. LINK BETWEEN DESTINATION IMAGE AND DESTINATION-ATTACHMENT**

Despite the increased attention by researchers regarding both constructs separately, little attention has been given to the relationship between destination image and place-attachment, resulting in only a few studies that focus on the link between those concepts (Fan & Qiu, 2014) that particularly consider their diverse sub-dimensions.

The existing literature indicates that destination image affects tourists' place-attachment to that destination (Lee, 2001; Wang, Weng & Yeh, 2011; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Veasna, Wu & Huang, 2013), that image is the antecedent of destination attachment (Prayag & Ryan, 2012), and that place-attachment is of great importance to destination image when considering its formation process (Chiang, 2016).

Fan, Qiu and Wu (2014) state that destination image has a direct effect on place-dependence and place-identity. Moreover, the authors consider that place-attachment plays a mediating role between tourists' destination image and tourists' behavior (Fan, Qiu & Wu, 2014). Considering the diverse place-attachment dimensions, Jiang, Ramkissoon, Mavondo and Feng (2017) suggest that destination image has a positive and significant effect on place-dependence, place-identity, place-affect and place-social bonding. Given the identified meaning of each of the identified destination image dimensions, their respective link to place-attachment dimensions may be hypothesized, as discussed next.

## **5. METHODOLOGY**

This paper suggests a conceptual model, based on the previously presented literature review, which provided the grounds for delimitating dimensions and suggesting their operationalization.

The place-attachment variables considered pre-established dimensions and scales taken from the tourism literature review (25 studies) regarding place-identity, place-dependence, place-affect and place-social bonding. The central studies contemplated here were those conducted by Kyle, Mowen and Tarrant (2004) and Ramkissoon, Smith and Weiler (2013).

The tourism destination image variables were similarly chosen based on contents retrieved from an extensive literature review (125 studies) regarding the cognitive and the affective dimensions of destination image, as well as social meanings and representations of mountains as destinations. The main studies considered were those from Baloglu (2001), Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001), Nepal & Chipeniuk (2005), and Silva, Kastenholz and Abrantes (2013).

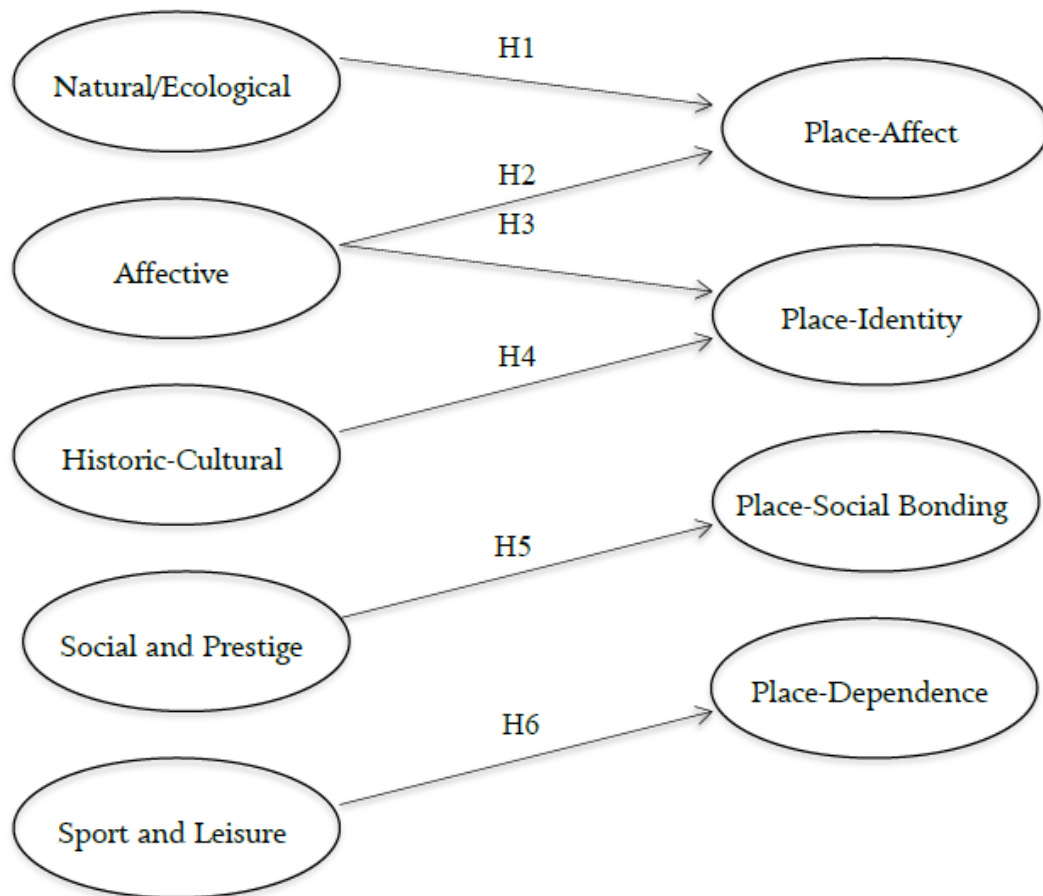
The link between destination image and place-attachment, proposed in our conceptual model, is based on the studies undertaken by Fan, Qiu and Wu (2014), Jiang *et al.* (2017) and Silva, Kastenholz and Abrantes (2013).

## **6. CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

The conceptual model proposed considers the previously identified five mountain destination image dimensions and four categories of place-attachment.

The hypothesized conceptual model that is proposed is depicted in Figure 1. This model suggests that each dimension of mountain image dimension will positively predict one or more particular dimensions of place-attachment, resulting in the following six hypotheses, as justified below.

Figure 1. Hypothesized conceptual model: Mountain destinations: Tourists' image and place-attachment



Source: Own Elaboration

**H1** – *The natural/ecological image of mountains positively influences the affective bond between the tourist and the mountain destination.*

The earlier discussion of individuals' preference for natural environments (Knopf, 1987) should also be reflected in the positive association between nature and affective attachment to the nature-shaped place. In fact, people are attracted to natural environments (see Knopf, 1983, 1987; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) and create and strengthen, over time, affective links with these natural spaces (Kyle, Mowen & Tarrant, 2004).

Natural environments, such as mountains, offer a range of physical, psychological and social benefits that make them attractive tourism destinations (Ulrich, 1979; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich *et al.* 1991), and reinforce the affective link between tourists and mountains (Silva, Kastenholz & Abrantes, 2013).

**H2** – *The affective image of mountains positively influences the affective bond between the tourist and the mountain destination.*

People develop affective assessments of destinations before they meet, experience, and visit them. The affective image is related to the emotional atmosphere of the place, and the affective quality of the destination's environment affects the emotional link that people establish with that place (Russell & Snodgrass, 1987; Korpel *et al.*, 2001, 2009), justifying the suggested relation between affective mountain image and the place-affect dimension in the scope of place-attachment.

**H3** – *The affective image of mountains positively influences place-identity a visitor feels regarding the visited mountain destination.*

Natural environments such as mountain places are often described as favorite places (Korpel *et al.*, 2001). The more familiar these nature spaces are, the more people tend to like them and the more preferable they become, causing people to identify with them (Sonnenfeld, 1968; Wohlwill, 1983). This suggests a natural link between affective destination image and place-identity regarding the visited mountain (Korpel *et al.*, 2009).

**H4** - *The historic-cultural image of mountains positively influences place-identity regarding to the visited mountain destination.*

Mountains are seen as untouched by modernization and thus as preserving their historical character and authenticity (Braasch, 2008), a feature that post-modern travelers tend to seek and identify with (Munt, 1994; Silva, Kastenholz & Abrantes, 2013).

The mountains constitute historical cradles and many of them are true guardians of their historical heritage and traditions and hold strong community identity values, as recognized and valued by the tourist (Goeldner, Ritchie & McIntosh, 2003), who may strongly identify with the place by positively connecting to its culturally shaped character.

**H5** – *The social and prestige image of mountains positively influences the social bonds values the tourist associates with the mountain destination.*

In the environmental psychology literature, the importance of social ties to a place is largely recognized (e.g. Low & Altman, 1992; Mesch & Manor, 1998; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001).

Tourists also visit places to consume the social atmosphere provided by the destination (Murphy, Pritchard & Smith, 2000), referring to both local communities and the social context encountered at the destination, which is also shaped by other tourists who are present. Mountains allow tourists to experience socializing in a very distinct setting that is different from daily routine, where people cultivate social relations that are perceived as authentic (McCool, 2002); these experiences also provide prestige (Ryan, 1991; Vengesai & Mavondo, 2004), which together should increase the mountain's place value in terms of social bonds. Particularly in the context of shared high-risk activities, such as mountain climbing, social bonding should be a relevant experience dimension that can later be recalled and associated with the place. Also, the habit of repeating mountain tourism activities, e.g. in mountaineering camps, may "strengthen place meaning through the creation of individual and collective memories shared with those people who use the camp spaces year after year" (Reid & Palechuk, 2017: 191). All these image elements should also add social bonds to the destination, particularly when the place is linked to repeated shared experiences with a certain travel group as well as with local mountain guides.

**H6** – *The sport and leisure image of mountains positively influences the dependence bond between the tourist and the mountain destinations.*

Mountains represent places of escape, which offer a sort of active experiences associated with sport and leisure activities (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). These outdoors activities are frequently very dependent on the specific features of the mountain, its landscape, geological and natural particularities. However, since mountain destinations are viewed as inaccessible and fragile areas (Messerli & Ives, 1997), specific tourism infrastructures adapted to mountain regions' particularities are also needed (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005), meeting the functional needs of tourists and increasing safety and risk control in a challenging experience context. That is why the realization of particular outdoors activities should very much depend on the nature and eventually infrastructure/facilities provided in a mountain destination, making

them specifically appropriate or preferred for certain activities by certain tourists, who might develop place-attachment to a mountain destination due to its perceived capacity of presenting optimal conditions for realizing a particular activity (Reid & Palechuk, 2017).

## 7. CONCLUSION

This article provides a conceptual framework which links tourists' mountain destination image dimensions with place-attachment in the context of mountain destinations. The literature review points at a positive correlation between natural/ecological image of mountains and place-affect; affective mountain image with place-affect and place-identity; historic-cultural mountain image with place-identity; social and prestige mountain image with place-social bonding; and sport and leisure with place-dependence.

The study intends to increase social, cultural and scientific knowledge of mountains and their images and meanings as tourism destinations. This should allow a deeper understanding of mountain values stirring awareness for mountain preservation and for these areas' sustainable development as precious tourism destinations. The understanding of images and meanings associated with mountains could have practical implications for tourist mountain destination planning, marketing and management, by highlighting distinct benefits, themes and meanings associated with mountain destinations and leading to place consumption. This knowledge should be essential for attracting tourists to these unique places and involve them emotionally, through market communication and also experience product development, setting these unique assets, themes and meanings into value, and possibly enhancing mountain place-attachment and destination loyalty.

Rather than focusing exclusively on the tangible and objective proprieties of mountain environments, mountain destination managers should focus on the subjective, emotional and symbolic meanings associated with these territories and the personal bonds or attachments people develop through both social construction of place and meaningful place experiences. The suggested model may enhance our understanding of specific relationships between certain image and place-attachment dimensions; however, they require empirical validation through a survey of mountain visitors, desirably at distinct mountain destinations. The model's possible limitations need to be recognized, since it may omit and thus neglect other relevant dimensions of mountain image, while also additional relationships between single image and place-attachment dimensions may exist. Further research is also required to investigate how these constructs – image and place-attachment – are associated with other variables, such as tourists' past travel experience, their motivations and expectations, and type of residential area (urban or rural) of origin. On the other hand, and due to the fact that place-attachment includes cognitive, affective, functional and social linkages, different social groups, such as tourists and residents or visitors with a different cultural background from the host culture, may develop a different level of belongingness to the destination. This distinct social and cultural background of the perceiver could also be a particularly interesting moderator variable to analyze. Finally, the resulting, eventually heterogenous travel behavior in terms of repeat visitation and sustainability-enhancing behavior (in terms of environmentally friendly behavior, and also economically, socially and culturally beneficial behavior) should be worthwhile studying. Such understanding may help mountain destination managers to not only help improve destination experiences, image and place-attachment, but also to contribute to its sustainability.



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