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TOURIST CHARACTERISTICS AS DETERMINANTS OF DESTINATION EXPERIENCE: EVIDENCE FROM SERBIA

Ivana Šagovnović

Department of geography, tourism and hotel management, Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Trg Dositeja Obradovića 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia

ivana.sagovnovic@gmail.com

Sanja Kovačić

Department of geography, tourism and hotel management, Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Trg Dositeja Obradovića 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia

sanja.bozic.89@gmail.com

Abstract

Tourists' socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics, such as travel companion or previous visits to the destination, play an important role in tailoring tourism offering to attract specific tourist segments. The principal aim of the present research was to examine whether differences exist in tourists' perception of emotional experience, destination personality and place attachment. The study sample consisted of Serbian tourists who visited the coastal tourist destination of Paralia, Greece. A total of 304 respondents participated in the survey research, which was conducted in July 2019, and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was

employed to test the research hypotheses. The main findings indicated that female tourists expressed higher levels of emotional experience, perceived the visited destination through the prism of personality traits to a greater extent, and developed stronger place attachment compared to their male counterparts. Also, statistically significant differences across the investigated constructs were identified based on respondents' age, education level, occupation status, monthly income, and previous visits to the destination. The practical implications of these findings are discussed in the paper.

Keywords:
Tourists' Socio-Demographic Characteristics, Travel-Related Characteristics, Emotional Experience, Destination Personality, Place Attachment

1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive tourism market, destinations must differentiate themselves not only through the quality of their tourism products and services but also by creating distinctive and meaningful experiences for visitors (Cibinskiene & Snieskiene, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2006). Beyond functional attributes, tourists increasingly value emotional and experiential aspects of destinations, which influence their overall tourism experience (Otto & Ritchie, 1996). Consequently, emotional experience, destination personality, and place attachment have emerged as important constructs for understanding tourists' evaluations of destinations and their subsequent behavioral responses (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2024; Yu et al., 2026; Yuksel et al., 2010).

Emotional experience reflects tourists' affective responses throughout their stay (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010), destination personality enables destinations to develop a distinctive identity that differentiates them from competitors (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006), whereas place attachment captures the emotional bond that develops between tourists and destinations and represents an important factor in explaining tourists' future behavioral intentions (Elsawy & Magdy, 2026; Yuksel et al., 2010). Together, these constructs provide valuable insights into how tourists perceive and connect with destinations and therefore represent important considerations for destination management and marketing.

Since tourists differ in their socio-demographic characteristics and travel behavior, understanding how these factors influence emotional experience, destination personality perception, and place attachment may contribute to more comprehensive understanding of tourist segments and support the development of targeted marketing strategies (Bilim & Bilim, 2014; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Kovačić et al., 2022; Tlili & Amara, 2016). Although previous studies have explored the role of tourists' socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics, these influences have generally been examined for individual constructs rather than within a single comprehensive framework. A simultaneous examination of these characteristics across emotional experience, destination personality, and place attachment can provide a more holistic understanding of differences among tourist segments and support the development of targeted destination marketing strategies. In particular, empirical evidence regarding the influence of these characteristics on destination attachment remains limited. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining the effects of the same set of socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics on all three constructs within a single research model.

2. Literature review

2.1 The influence of socio-demographic variables on emotional experience

Previous research has shown that tourists' emotional experiences may vary according to their socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics. Gender has been found to influence emotional experience (Tlili & Amara, 2016). Age is negatively correlated with hedonic aspects of travel, indicating that younger tourists tend to experience higher levels of Joy and Positive surprise. Hedonic experiences, as part of memorable tourism experiences, involve engaging in enjoyable and exciting activities that elicit positive emotions such as Joy, Love, and Positive surprise. Furthermore, marital status shapes emotional responses, as tourists in a relationship experience more hedonic aspects of travel compared to singles and widowers (Tešin et al., 2025). Education also influences emotional experience, with tourists holding lower education levels expressing higher levels of Joy than those with higher education (Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2021). Occupation has been identified as a factor shaping the emotional depth and meaning attached to tourism experiences (Tran, 2026). Similarly, monthly income affects hedonic experiences, with both lower- and higher-income tourists experiencing stronger positive emotions than those with average income (Tešin et al., 2025). Travel-related characteristics also play a role, as tourists traveling with

companions, particularly family and children, experience higher levels of Love than those traveling alone or with friends. In addition, first-time visitors experience higher levels of Positive surprise compared to repeat visitors (Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2021). Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Tourists' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, marital status, education, occupation status, monthly income) influence their emotional experience.

Hypothesis 2: Tourists' travel-related characteristics (travel companion, previous visits to the destination) influence their emotional experience.

2.2 The influence of socio-demographic variables on destination personality

The perception of destination personality is not uniform among tourists, as previous studies suggest that it may differ according to tourists' socio-demographic profiles and travel characteristics. Kim et al. (2017) identified gender differences in destination personality perception, with male tourists perceiving the destination as exciting to a greater extent than female tourists. Age influences brand personality perception, as older consumers rely more on stable personality traits, such as competence and sophistication, whereas younger consumers place greater emphasis on affective elements (Bekk et al., 2017). Marital status may influence destination personality perception, as married tourists have been found to hold more favorable destination image perceptions than unmarried tourists (Cheng et al., 2013). Bilim and Bilim (2014) showed that tourists with lower education levels perceive the destination as more charming compared to those with higher education levels. Božić (2016) found that retired tourists perceived the destination as sophisticated to the greatest extent. The same study also indicated that tourists with no income perceived the destination as sophisticated to the least extent. Cheng (2017) showed that different travel parties influence certain aspects of tourists' travel behavior, which may affect tourists' perceptions of destination attributes, including destination personality dimensions. Furthermore, Šagovnović and Kovačić (2021) found differences in the perception of Sophistication depending on previous visits to the destination, with first-time travelers perceiving the destination as less sophisticated than repeat travelers. Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Tourists' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, marital status, education, occupation status, monthly income) influence their perception of destination personality.

Hypothesis 4: Tourists' travel-related characteristics (travel companion, previous visits to the destination) influence their perception of destination personality.

2.3 The influence of socio-demographic variables on place attachment

Previous research has explored the role of socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics in the development of tourists' place attachment. De Cicco (2023) found that gender influences place attachment, with male tourists expressing stronger bond with the destination. Age has been found to influence attachment-related processes and emotional bonding (Ilicic et al., 2016), which suggests that age may also play a role in the development of place attachment. Marital status has been found to influence attachment formation, with single individuals developing weaker attachment due to higher attachment avoidance (Chen et al., 2026). Therefore, marital status may represent another relevant factor in place attachment. Tourists with lower levels of education developed stronger place attachment compared to those with higher education (De Cicco et al., 2023). However, the influence of occupation status on place attachment has received limited attention in tourism research. Previous research has indicated that occupation status may influence tourists' emotional experiences and the personal meaning associated with tourism activities (Tran, 2026). Given that occupation status may be associated with differences in tourists' experiences and engagement with destinations, it may also represent a relevant factor in the development of place attachment. Monthly income has been shown to shape attachment-related processes (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019), which indicates that it may also influence place attachment. Since companion presence has been found to influence tourists' positive affect and well-being (Su et al., 2025), travel companion may also contribute to the development of place attachment. Familiarity has been identified as an important element of tourists' emotional bond with destinations (Elsawy & Magdy, 2026), which suggests that previous visits may contribute to the development of place attachment.

Hypothesis 5: Tourists' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, marital status, education, occupation status, monthly income) influence their place attachment.

Hypothesis 6: Tourists' travel-related characteristics (travel companion, previous visits to the destination) influence their place attachment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 304 Serbian tourists who visited Paralia, Greece, a coastal tourist destination located on the Thermaikos Gulf in northern Greece. A convenience sampling strategy was employed, with participants recruited from organized tourist groups returning from their holidays.

3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was part of a broader research project. While the broader project also examined destination loyalty and satisfaction, the present paper focuses on socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics, emotional experience, destination personality, and place attachment. The first section collected socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, marital status, education, occupation status, monthly income) and travel-related information (travel companion and number of previous visits). Tourists' emotional experiences were measured using the Destination Emotion Scale (DES) (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Destination personality was assessed with the Destination Personality Scale (DPS) (Kovačić et al., 2020). Place attachment was measured using the eight-item scale by Tlili and Amara (2016). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree).

3.3 Procedure

Data were collected in July 2019 from Serbian tourists returning from their holidays in Paralia. Paper-pencil questionnaires were distributed by tour guides and escorts traveling with the tourists, who informed respondents about the research purpose, anonymity, and voluntary participation. A total of 304 valid questionnaires were obtained.

3.4 Statistical methods

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23.0.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Results of the independent samples t-test

To explore whether there are differences in perception of emotional experience, destination personality, and destination attachment between male and female tourists, an independent samples t-test was performed (Table 1).

The results showed significant differences across all three dimensions of emotional experience. Female tourists expressed higher levels of Joy (M=3.93), Love (M=3.72), and Positive surprise (M=3.27) than male tourists (M=3.46, M=3.33, and M=2.90, respectively). These findings are consistent with previous findings showing that gender contributes to differences in tourists' emotional experiences (Tlili & Amara, 2016).

In terms of destination personality perception, the findings indicated that female travelers perceived the visited destination as more exciting (M=4.12), sincere (M=4.07), competent (M=3.83), and rugged (M=3.43) compared to their male counterparts (M=3.76, M=3.71, M=3.44, and M=3.05, respectively). This finding is consistent with Kim et al. (2017), who also reported gender differences in tourists' perception of destination personality.

Statistically significant differences between male and female respondents were also identified in place identity. Female respondents expressed higher levels of place identity with visited destination (3.32) compared to male respondents (2.96). This finding is consistent with previous research showing that place attachment differs according to gender (De Cicco et al., 2023).

Table 1: *Results of the independent samples t-test for emotional experience, destination personality, and place attachment by respondents' gender*

Dimensions	***Mean values***				***t-values***	***Sig.***
	Male (n=83)		*Female (n=221)*			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Joy	**3.46**	1.12	**3.93**	1.02	-3.346	.001
Love	**3.33**	1.19	**3.72**	1.12	-2.537	.012
Positive surprise	**2.90**	1.06	**3.27**	1.06	-2.695	.008
Excitement	**3.76**	1.08	**4.12**	.935	-2.646	.009
Sincerity	**3.71**	1.08	**4.07**	.972	-2.623	.010
Competence	**3.44**	1.11	**3.83**	1.04	-2.778	.006
Ruggedness	**3.05**	1.16	**3.43**	1.12	-2.551	.012
Sophistication	3.11	1.29	3.41	1.18	-1.870	.064
Place identity	**2.96**	1.48	**3.32**	1.35	-1.931	.045
Place dependence	2.68	1.38	2.93	1.37	-1.377	.170

4.2 Results of the one-way ANOVA

To analyze differences in perception of emotional experience, destination personality, and place attachment among tourists with different socio-demographic variables and previous travel experience (including the number of previous visits to the destination), a one-way ANOVA with an LSD post hoc test was performed (Table 2).

The results showed that tourists differ in their responses according to age group, education level, occupation status, monthly income, and previous visits to the destination.

Tourists aged 51-60 years perceived the visited destination as sophisticated to a greater extent than those aged 31-40 and 41-50 years. Moreover, tourists aged ≥61 years perceived the destination as sophisticated to a greater extent than younger tourists (aged ≤20, 21–30, 31–40, and 41–50 years). These findings are consistent with previous research (Bekk et al., 2017), which suggests that tourists of different age groups perceive destination personality differently. Additionally, tourists aged 51-60 expressed higher levels of place identity compared to younger tourists (aged ≤20, 21–30, 31–40, and 41–50 years). This finding is consistent with previous research showing that age influences attachment-related processes and emotional bonding (Ilicic et al., 2016).

Travelers with elementary education showed higher levels of Joy compared to those with higher levels of education (three-year college, bachelor's, and master's degrees). Likewise, respondents with a high school diploma expressed higher levels of Joy compared to those with a bachelor's degree. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that tourists with lower education levels tend to experience higher levels of positive emotions than those with higher education (Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2021).

According to occupation status, retired tourists perceived the visited destination as rugged and sophisticated to a greater extent than pupils, students, and employed. This finding is consistent with Božić (2016), who also reported that retired tourists perceived destinations as more sophisticated than other respondents. Moreover, pupils and employed respondents showed lower levels of place identity compared to retired and unemployed respondents. Additionally, retired tourists expressed higher levels of place dependence compared to pupils and employed tourists. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that occupation status influences the emotional depth and meaning attached to tourism experiences (Tran, 2026).

Regarding monthly income, tourists with above average income expressed lower levels of Joy than tourists with average, below-average, and no income. Similarly, tourists with average and below-average income showed higher levels of Joy compared to those with no income. These findings are partially consistent with previous research indicating that tourists' emotional experiences vary across income groups (Tešin et al., 2025). Travelers in the highest income category exhibited lower levels of Love at the visited destination compared to those with average and no income. A similar pattern was observed for Positive surprise, as travelers in the highest income category expressed lower levels of Positive surprise compared to those with average, below-average, and no income.

Respondents with the highest monthly income perceived the visited destination as sincere to a lesser extent than respondents with no income. Likewise, tourists in the highest income category perceived the destination as rugged to a lesser extent than those with average and no income. These findings are consistent with Božić (2016), who also identified differences in destination personality perception across tourists with different income levels. Moreover, tourists with above-average income perceived the destination as sophisticated to a lesser extent than those with average and no income, whereas respondents with below-average income perceived the destination as sophisticated to a greater extent compared to respondents with no income.

Tourists with above-average income showed weaker place identity and place dependence compared to tourists in the remaining income categories. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that monthly income shapes attachment-related processes (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019).

Table 2: *Results of the one-way ANOVA test for emotional experience, destination personality, and place attachment*

		F - value	***Sig.***	***LSD post hoc***
Age	Sophistication	2.733	.020	5>3,4; 6>1,2,3,4
	Place dependence	2.348	.041	5>1,3,4; 6>1
Education level	Joy	2.799	.026	1>3,4,5; 2>4
Occupation status	Ruggedness	2.485	.044	4>1,2,3
	Sophistication	2.916	.022	4>1,2,3
	Place identity	2.899	.022	1,3<4,5

	Place dependence	2.906	.022	4>1,3
Monthly income	Joy	6.225	.000	1<2,3,4; 2,3<4
	Love	4.202	.006	1<2,4
	Positive surprise	6.427	.000	1<2,3,4
	Sincerity	2.704	.046	1<4
	Ruggedness	3.296	.021	1<2,4
	Sophistication	3.522	.015	1<2,4; 3<4
	Place identity	3.955	.009	1<2,3,4
	Place dependence	2.830	.039	1<2,3,4
Previous visits to the destination	Joy	8.564	.000	1<2,4; 2<4
	Love	4.447	.004	1<2,3,4
	Positive surprise	7.770	.000	1<2,4
	Excitement	7.958	.000	1<2,3,4; 2<4
	Sincerity	4.520	.004	1<2,4
	Competence	5.572	.001	1<2,3,4
	Ruggedness	4.209	.006	1<4
	Sophistication	5.236	.002	1<2,3,4
	Place identity	22.517	.000	1<2,3,4; 2<4
	Place dependence	17.277	.000	1<2,3,4; 2<4

Note: The numerical values in the LSD post hoc column refer to the following category codes: Age: 1=≤20 years, 2=21-30 years, 3=31-40 years, 4=41-50 years, 5=51-60 years, 6=≥61 years; Education level: 1=high school, 2=three-year college, 3=bachelor's degree, 4=master's degree, 5=PhD; Occupation status: 1=pupil, 2=student, 3=employed, 4=retired, 5=unemployed; Monthly income: 1=above average, 2=average, 3=below average, 4=no income; Previous visits to the destination: 1=first visit, 2=two to three visits, 3=four to five visits, 4=more than five visits.

The results further showed significant differences in tourists' emotional experience according to the number of previous visits to the destination. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that previous visits influence tourists' emotional experiences (Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2021). Specifically, tourists who visited the destination for the first time expressed lower levels of Joy compared to those who visited it two to three times and more than five times, whereas tourists who visited the destination two to three times expressed lower levels of Joy than those who visited it more than five times. First-time travelers to the visited destination exhibited lower levels of Love compared to travelers who visited the destination two to three times, four to five times, and more than five times. A similar pattern was shown for Positive surprise, as first-time travelers expressed lower levels of Positive surprise than those who visited the destination two to three times and more than five times.

Significant differences in destination personality perception were also identified according to the number of previous visits. These findings are in line with previous research showing that previous visits influence tourists' perception of destination personality (Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2021). First-time respondents perceived the visited destination as exciting less strongly than respondents who visited the destination two to three times, four to five times, and more than five times. Additionally, respondents who visited the destination two to three times perceived the destination as exciting less strongly than those who visited it more than five times. Furthermore, first-time tourists perceived the destination as sincere at lower levels than tourists who visited the destination more frequently (two to three times and four to five times). Similarly, first-time tourists perceived the destination as competent with lower intensity than tourists who visited the destination two to three times, four to five times, and more than five times. First-time travelers perceived the destination as rugged less strongly than tourists who visited the destination more than five times. In addition, they perceived the destination as sophisticated to a lesser extent than those who visited it two to three times, four to five times, and more than five times.

The analysis also revealed significant differences in place attachment according to the number of previous visits. These findings are consistent with previous research identifying familiarity as an important element of tourists' emotional bond with destinations (Elsawy & Magdy, 2026). Tourists who visited the destination for the first time expressed lower levels of place identity and place dependence compared to those who visited it two to three times, four to five times, and more than five times. In addition, tourists who visited the destination two to three times showed lower levels of both dimensions of place attachment than those who visited the destination more than five times.

Overall, the findings supported all six proposed hypotheses (H1–H6).

5. Conclusion

The principal aim of the present research was to explore whether there are differences in tourists' perception of emotional experience, destination personality, and place attachment based on their socio-demographic characteristics and previous travel experience. The findings confirmed that several socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics significantly influence these three constructs, although the effects varied across individual variables.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The present study also extends the existing literature by providing evidence for relationships that have received limited attention in tourism research. In particular, the findings highlight the role of occupation status, travel companion, and monthly income in place attachment, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the factors associated with tourists' emotional bonds with destinations. In addition, the study broadens previous research by examining the influence of travel companion on destination personality perception.

5.2 Practical implications

The findings suggest that destination marketers and managers should tailor their strategies to different tourist segments. The results showed that female tourists experienced higher levels of Joy, Love, and Positive surprise, perceived the destination as more exciting, sincere, competent, and rugged, and expressed stronger place identity than male tourists. Accordingly, promotional messages targeting women should emphasize emotionally rich experiences that evoke Joy, Love, and Positive surprise while portraying the destination as exciting, sincere, competent, and rugged. This can be achieved through storytelling, visual content highlighting authentic local interactions, memorable experiences, and opportunities for exploration and discovery. Furthermore, communication strategies should reinforce opportunities for tourists to develop a personal connection with the destination by emphasizing experiences that reflect their values, lifestyles, and self-concept, thereby fostering stronger place identity.

The results further indicated that tourists aged 51 years and older perceived the destination as more sophisticated and expressed stronger place identity than younger age groups. These findings suggest the need for differentiated positioning strategies. Promotional content targeting this segment should emphasize the destination's sophistication through cultural attractions, heritage, gastronomy (e.g., wine tasting tours, authentic culinary workshops), and high-quality services, while also communicating opportunities to develop meaningful and lasting connections with the destination, thereby strengthening place identity. In contrast, campaigns targeting younger tourists may focus on more dynamic, interactive, and experience-oriented activities (e.g., adventure sports, local music festivals, interactive digital guides) that encourage engagement with the destination and the development of emotional bonds.

Occupation status also differentiated tourists' perceptions, with retired tourists perceiving the destination as sophisticated and rugged to a greater extent and expressing stronger

place identity and place dependence than employed tourists, pupils, and students. Therefore, marketing activities aimed at retired tourists should emphasize destination sophistication, comfort, and opportunities for longer or repeated stays (e.g., specialized health and wellness packages) that foster place attachment. In contrast, promotional activities targeting employed tourists, pupils, and students should encourage continued interaction with the destination through thematic events, short cultural experiences, seasonal programs, and opportunities for repeat visitation. Such activities may strengthen tourists' place identity and place dependence over time.

The findings also revealed significant differences according to monthly income. Tourists with higher incomes experienced lower levels of Joy, Love, and Positive surprise, perceived the destination as sincere, rugged, and sophisticated to a lesser extent, and expressed weaker place identity and place dependence than other income groups.

These results suggest that tourists with higher incomes may require more personalized and premium experiences (e.g., boutique accommodation, private guided tours, exclusive VIP access) to enhance positive emotions and strengthen place attachment. Destination managers could therefore develop customized services and unique experiences tailored to this segment. For tourists with average and lower incomes, marketing communication may continue emphasizing emotionally rewarding experiences that evoke Joy, Love, and Positive surprise while reinforcing their emotional connection with the destination. Promotional messages may also highlight opportunities for tourists to strengthen both place identity and place dependence through meaningful interaction with local attractions and repeat visits.

Finally, previous visitation proved to be an important determinant of tourists' emotional experiences, destination personality perceptions, and place attachment. First-time tourists consistently experienced lower levels of Joy, Love, and Positive surprise, perceived the destination as exciting, sincere, competent, rugged, and sophisticated to a lesser extent, and expressed weaker place identity and place dependence than repeat tourists. Accordingly, destination managers should focus on creating memorable first impressions through personalized welcome experiences and well-designed itineraries. These initiatives can facilitate tourists' interaction with local attractions, encourage positive emotional experiences, and strengthen destination personality perceptions. Over time, they may also contribute to the development of place identity and place dependence, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat visitation.

5.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample included only Serbian tourists, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to tourists from other countries. Second, the study was conducted in only one type of destination, a coastal destination. Future research should include tourists from different countries and examine other types of destinations, such as mountain, urban, rural, and spa destinations, in order to compare the findings across different tourism settings.

Future studies could also expand the research model by examining the influence of socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics on additional constructs, such as destination brand experience. In addition, tourists' personality traits could be included to examine whether this individual characteristic influences tourists' emotional experience, destination personality perception, and destination attachment.

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