Memorable Experience, Tourist-Destination Identification and Destination Love

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper is aimed to investigate the impact of memorable destination experience and destination attractiveness on tourist-destination identification and destination love. It also investigates the moderating role of gender.

Design/methodology/approach – Using the cluster sampling method, the study selected cities of a developing country with the most popular destinations. A questionnaire survey was employed to collect data from a sample of foreign and domestic tourists. To test the research model, a covariance-based structural equation modelling approach was adopted.

Findings – According to the results, destination attractiveness and memorable experience had a positive effect on tourist-destination identification. Similarly, tourist-destination identification positively influenced destination love. In addition, destination love impacts the intention to revisit and word-of-mouth. Finally, the results indicate that gender moderates some of these relationships.

Originality/value – Understanding what items can create strong bonds between destination and tourist is of great importance. By providing a validated conceptual model that traces the relationship between memorable experience, destination attractiveness, and tourist-destination identification through cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions, this study attempts to answer prior calls for examination from the viewpoint of tourism scholars.

Keywords – Destination attractiveness; destination love; memorable travel experience; tourist-destination identification; word-of-mouth.

Paper type – Research paper

1. Introduction

In the current world, the importance of tourism cities for a country's economy becomes more significant, specifically through direct and indirect employment opportunities, income creation, and influence on the residents' quality of life (Shafiee et al., 2013). Therefore, the tourism industry studies have made great progress over the past few decades. Moreover, a considerable body of research has sought tourism destination marketing (Gartner and Ruzzier, 2011; Shafiee, 2018), the destinations as a brand (Garcia et al., 2012; Hankinson, 2015), and destinations and cities identity (Lai et al., 2021; Sadeque et al., 2020; Zandvliet et al., 2006) that lead us to the concept of tourist-destination relationship. Haumann et al. (2014) believe that identity is the base of this relationship. Destinations can be identifiable (Hallak et al., 2015), thus tourist-destination identification can explain relationships between tourists and destinations (Haumann et al., 2014), and can form a traveller's attitude toward a destination (Pereira et al. 2019). Swanson (2017) indicated that tourists, when visiting destinations, like to identify themselves with those destinations, and this identification impacts their behaviour. Various other studies have also focused on the relationships between place and identity (Foroudi et al., 2020) and determined effective factors in the relationship with tourist identification, as well as its outcomes (Kumar and Kaushik, 2018; Palmer et al., 2013; Shafiee et al., 2020; So et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2014; Ye et al., 2014). However, exploring different antecedents of tourist-destination identification and its outcomes needs more work (So et al., 2017).

Among the previous research, which explored these antecedents and outcomes, So et al. (2017) and Elbedweihy et al. (2016), for example, considered the effect of brand attractiveness on customer identification. Moreover, the effect of experience on identification was explored by Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012). Hosany et al. (2014) and Swanson (2015) have also shown that tourists can feel love for destinations. However, this research provides a number of important insights, particularly in regard to how memorable experience and destination

attractiveness relate to dimensions of tourist-destination identification and tourist behaviour in destination marketing (i.e., destination love, WOM, and revisit intention). These relationships are interesting because they bridge important domains of tourist research (i.e., experience, identification, and tourist behaviour) that seem related but seldom amalgamated. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the antecedents and consequences of tourist-destination identification.

The cities of Iran have diversity in ecology and historical symbology related to different periods of time, tombs of prominent people, unique architecture, rich culture, and unique music and customs that can attract tourists. Regarding the intense competition among tourism cities in attracting tourists, conducting research on key factors that affect tourist-destination identification, and pursuing their impacts on desirable outcomes can help gain competitive advantage. Thus, the contribution of this research is to extend this knowledge by providing a validated conceptual model that investigates the mentioned relationships in urban cities. Therefore, considering tourist-destination identification, and the ways to create it, can help to promote cities brand.

In the following sections, we first offer a brief review of the research constructs. Next, the methodology employed to examine the proposed conceptual model is described. Finally, the authors conclude with a discussion of the theoretical significance of this study and suggest avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

In this section, we elaborate on all the variables in our conceptual model, as well as their relationships, using previous literature to support the hypotheses. We first explain tourist-destination identification and its underlying theory. Then we describe the relationship between tourist-destination identification with memorable experience and destination attractiveness on

the one hand, and with destination love and its consequences (i.e., destination love, WOM, and revisit intention) on the other hand. We also elaborate on the moderating role of gender in the relationship between tourist-destination identification and destination love.

2.1. Tourist-destination identification

In today's world, the geographic and social boundaries have become blurred, due to globalization and the advancement of information and communication technology (ICT). With modernization and urbanization, people tend to open up and want to know more about the world. Societies share and exchange knowledge, culture, and ideas and influence each other (Drouhot and Nee 2019; Shafiee et al., 2013). This creates societies in which people's identities are determined by what they consume and where they visit. This also allows for a greater cultural experience, which in turn, can contribute to social identity (Chapman, 2010). Social identity theory explains how people tend to classify themselves into various social categories as a means of determining their identity with larger groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Jenkins (2000) believes social identity indicates the unity or similarity of individuals in a specific time and place. In other words, it is a sense of connectedness with the emotional significance of belonging to a group (Hultman et al., 2015).

Regarding the marketing area, customers express their identities through their everyday choices. They are often looking for new ways to express their identities, and brands are used to meet those needs (Cătălin and Andreea, 2014), and signalling to others as to what kind of person they are. Thus, they use brands as symbols within an individual's identity and lifestyle (Stets and Serpe, 2013). Like brands, destinations have identities. In the tourism industry, identification is creating a meaningful connection between tourists and a place (Zenker et al., 2017), and a tourist defines him- or herself in terms of that feeling (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Culture, history, symbols, people, and lifestyle of a place can also become a part of a tourist's

self-concept and reflect strong symbolic human values (Hultman et al., 2015). Tourists often tend to identify themselves with particular places that reflect their self-identity (Foroudi et al., 2018). In other words, in tourist-destination identification, tourists assume the identity of the destination they feel they belong to. Thus, tourists can perceive the meaning and attributes of a place as a part of their own identity (Tuškej et al., 2013). Kim (2014) defines tourist-destination identification as the extent to which a destination defines and increases the identity of a tourist. So et al. (2017) considered identification as a multi-dimensional concept having three dimensions, which are cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions. While the cognitive dimension includes beliefs and awareness of the destination, and the affective dimension entails emotions toward the destination and its social benefits, the evaluative dimension of identification refers to the positive or negative evaluation of the destination (Torres et al., 2017).

2.2. Memorable destination experience and tourist-destination identification

Memories are an inseparable part of a destination. Both positive and negative experiences are memorable, because they are likely to either evoke negative emotions, such as frustration and anger, or positive emotions, such as joy (Kim et al., 2014). Several previous authors have regarded memorable experience as a pleasant association with a destination (Hudson and Ritchie, 2009; Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018). Kim et al. (2012) consider it as a sustainable competitive advantage in the tourism industry. The relationship between experience and identification has been considered in the customer-brand relationship field (So et al., 2013; Torres et al., 2017). In the tourism field, it is believed that tourist experience is the way of engaging the individual pursuit of self-identity (Selstad, 2007). In general, the interactions of tourists with each other and the characteristics of the destination can affect the tourist identity (Hough, 2011; White and White, 2009). Even if only visited once, destinations can affect

tourists' minds, leaving a memorable experience (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Delicious food, local setting, and entertainment are among a destination's offerings, which make a memorable experience (Chen et al., 2013; Lee, 2015; Zhang and Buhalis, 2018). Several scales can be found in the literature for measuring memorable experience (e.g., Barnes et al., 2014; Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2015; Kim and Ritchie, 2013). For example, Kim and Ritchie (2013) measured memorable experience with hedonics, novelty, local culture, rejuvenation, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge. Moreover, novel experiences, local hospitality, guides, tour operators' affective emotions, social interactions with people, the fulfilment of personal travel interests, and surprising experiences are among the variables that Chandralal and Valenzuela (2015) mentioned in their study. Servidio and Ruffolo (2016) explored the relationship between tourist memorable experience and emotional involvement. Creating a memorable experience can also affect tourists' desire to continue communicating with the destination (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2015). However, previous works did not fully consider the relationship between memorable destination experience and the dimensions of tourist-destination identification. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Memorable destination experience positively influences cognitive (H1a), affective (H1b), and evaluative (H1c) tourist-destination identification.

2.3. Destination attractiveness and tourist-destination identification

Benckendorff and Pearce (2003) regard attractiveness as a tourist's first motivation in choosing a destination. Tourists choose places that they find attractive, and that can fulfil their self-identification needs (Foroudi et al., 2018). Researchers have stated that attractiveness occurs under several factors and conditions, such as the natural, cultural, and social conditions of the destination (Dey et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2012). For example, Kim et al. (2012) studied destination attractiveness and reported it to be a result of natural conditions of the destination,

its availability, and the local people's attitudes. Communication characteristics, such as transportation facilities, as well as organizational and environmental services, are among other factors, which were studied by Bonn et al. (2007) and Gelbman and Timothy (2011). Reitsamer et al. (2016) have regarded destination attractiveness as a multi-dimensional variable using availability, compatibility, local communications, and scenery as its dimensions. They also proved that attractiveness can improve tourist attitude and attachment. Moreover, Mikulić et al. (2016) asserted that attractiveness includes the feeling of safety, entertainment opportunities, quality of accommodation, and natural and cultural heritage. Several recent studies have proven that attractiveness can improve tourist evaluation of the destination (Reitsamer et al., 2016; So et al., 2017; Wesselmann, 2019). Destination attractiveness is thus regarded as a competitive factor, which seems to create identification with destinations (Cracolici and Nijkamp, 2009; Navickas and Malakauskaite, 2009). The relationship between attractiveness and identification has been further explored in the customer-brand literature. For example, Elbedweihy et al. (2016) and So et al. (2017) show that when consumers find the brand attractive, they are more likely to define their identity with it. Other studies also suggest that customer perceptions of attractiveness can increase customer identification (Ahearne et al., 2005; Balmer et al., 2020; Marin and De Maya, 2013). Therefore, we further suppose in the tourism field that:

H2: Destination attractiveness positively influences cognitive (H2a), affective (H2b), and evaluative (H2c) tourist-destination identification.

2.4. Tourist-destination identification and destination love

Destination love can be defined as a strong emotional bond between a tourist and a destination (Yuksel et al., 2010). Numerous studies have shown the importance of love in destination marketing (e.g., Amaro et al., 2020; Aro et al., 2018; Lee and Hyun, 2016; Swanson et al., 2017). For example, it has been considered that the creation and increase of feelings towards

destinations are necessary for motivating positive tourist behaviour (Amaro et al., 2020) and resistance to a negative attitude (Swanson et al., 2017). A study by Hosany et al. (2014) suggests that tourists can love their destinations, but this concept has been rarely investigated in the tourism literature (Aro et al., 2018; Swanson et al., 2017). However, previous studies confirmed the relationship between identification and love (Alnawas and Altarifi, 2016; Albert and Merunka, 2013). For example, Alnawas and Altarifi (2016) explored the relationship between brand identification and love, and their effects on loyalty. Hultman et al. (2015) asserted that tourists' psychological bond and attachment to a destination is an identification outcome. Tuškej et al. (2013) also considered love as a customer's reaction to identification with a brand. In the tourism field, Swanson (2017) believes that love and destination can come together and form the concept of destination love. Aro et al. (2018) show the relationship between destination love and identification. We further investigate this relationship between identification dimensions and destination love:

H3: The cognitive (H3a), affective (H3b), and evaluative (H3c) dimensions of tourist-destination identification positively influence destination love.

2.5. Gender's moderating role

One of the questions addressed by the authors of this study, while collecting data, was whether or not the participants' gender affects the relationship between the identification dimensions and destination love. The main concern was the possibility of a discrepancy between men and women in different dimensions of identification (cognitive, emotional, and evaluative). Previous studies have also shown the moderating role of gender. For example, Baudrillard (2016), Miles and Miles (2004), Giddens (1991) have focused on identity in their work and have shown that gender plays an important role in this regard. Singh et al. (2019) considered gender as a moderator in the relationship between identity and organizational citizenship

behaviour. In the tourism field, Hallak et al. (2015) focused on the role of gender and indicated that destinations can create identity. Gender also moderates consumer preferences (Boyd et al., 2019). Therefore, having referred to the current literature, we suggest other hypotheses:

H4: Gender of the tourists moderates the relationships between tourist-destination cognitive (H4a), affective (H4b), and evaluative (H4c) identification and destination love.

2.6. Destination love, WOM, and revisit intention

As has been shown in previous studies, revisit intention and WOM are among the final goals in destination and tourism marketing (Hwang and Lee, 2018; Kim, 2018). Destination love is one of the antecedents of tourist behaviours, like revisit intention and WOM (Aro et al., 2018; Lee and Hyun, 2016). Batra et al. (2012) revealed that love has been used to define the difference in consumers' positive WOM. Tsai (2012) also proved that it leads to revisiting and recommending a destination to others. It has also been proven that a high dependency on a place leads to revisit intention and WOM for visitors and locals, thereby increasing revenue for that place (Beckman et al., 2013). In a recent study, Amaro et al. (2020) confirmed the positive effect of destination brand love on WOM, recommendation, and revisit intention. So, those tourists who express love of the destination, are expected to put forward positive WOM and show revisit intention toward the destination. Therefore, this study assumes that:

H5: Destination love positively influences WOM (H5a) and revisit intention (H5b).

H6: WOM positively influences revisit intention.

Based on a review of the theoretical background and the above-mentioned hypotheses, our conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

<<<Insert Figure 1>>>

3. Research Method

The current study consists of a descriptive survey research and a cross-sectional study, drawing upon a questionnaire, which was employed to collect data from a sample of tourists that visit a developing country, Iran. With more than 80 million people, Iran has a mosaic of cultures and naturally beautiful landscapes, which transcends the perception of the country in the international arena (irantourismnews.com, 2019). However, it is a comparatively under-researched country in terms of tourism. According to irantourismnews.com (2019), Iran holds 10th place on tourism Attractions, and 5th on Ecotourism, with many registered sites at UNESCO World Heritage. This study selected the cities of Iran with the most popular destinations. These cities are Isfahan, Shiraz, Tehran, Mashhad, Rasht, and Mazandaran. Based on the Statistics Centre of Iran (2018), these six cities were visited by more than 45% of foreign tourists in 2018 (amar.org.ir, 2019).

By adopting previous studies, questionnaires were created in Persian and English versions. Based on a recommendation by Harpaz et al. (2002), the translation-back-translation procedure was applied. Questions in Persian were modified to adapt the questionnaire to the Iranian culture. Four academics who are proficient in both English and Farsi reviewed the questionnaire. Survey questionnaires were also pre-tested using 55 tourists. Using experts' view, the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by the face validity. Cronbach's alpha was used to verify the reliability. The values were greater than 0.70 (Cronbach, 1951). The items were measured with a five-point Likert scale ranging from extremely disagree (1) to extremely agree (5). After reviewing the existing literature and comparing available scales to our variables, we adapted the most suitable ones. We made only a few modifications. Specifically, *memorable destination experience* scale was borrowed from Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) and Zhang et al. (2018). To measure *destination attractiveness,* we used studies such as Mikulić et al. (2016) and Wesselmann (2019). Moreover, *tourist-destination identification*

was measured by the scales introduced by Lam et al. (2013), So et al. (2017), and Torres et al. (2017). *Destination love* was measured by borrowing from Aro et al. (2019), Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), and Lee and Hyun (2016). We also used the research of Anggraeni (2015) and Hosany and Prayag (2013), to measure *WOM*, and Kumar and Kaushik (2018) and Zhang et al. (2018), for *revisit intention*. The final questionnaire items are illustrated in Table 1.

<<<Insert Table 1>>>

A cluster sampling method has been used with regard to selected tourism zones in the selected cities. We first divided the tourist population into smaller groups, known as cities, and then randomly selected among tourism zones in each city, to form the samples. We chose tourist attractions, as well as several hotels in each city, to approach potential respondents. Based on Hair et al. (2010), and regarding two types of visitor (domestic and international), the ideal size of the sample was considered as 400 tourists. With thanks to six research assistants, who helped us collect data, 450 self-administered questionnaires were distributed among international (212) and domestic (248) tourists in total. Of these, 439 were usable (97.5%). Data was gathered from November 2018 until April 2019, as this period of time usually shows a greater number of tourists than other times. To test the hypotheses, the structural equation modelling (SEM) approach was used. SPSS23 and AMOS23 were used to analyse the data.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic profile

The results of the demographic data analysis by SPSS showed that 56% of the participants were Iranian and 44% were non-Iranian, who were visiting from Europe, Turkey, and Persian Gulf countries. Other demographic features of the statistical sample are illustrated, for foreign and domestic tourists separately, in Table 2.

<<<**Insert Table 2**>>>

For all variables, the inter-correlations, means, and standard deviations are shown in Table 3. The results show that memorable destination experience is more correlated with the cognitive dimension of identification (r = 0.56, p < 0.001), while destination attractiveness is highly correlated with evaluative (r = 0.63, p < 0.001) and affective (r = 0.59, p < 0.001) dimensions of identification. Moreover, among three dimensions of identification, affective dimension has the most positive correlation with destination love (r = 0.71, p < 0.001). Detailed results are presented in Table 3. These results generally support the research model.

In the next step, to estimate the measurement models, the structural model, and the total model, as well as to test the research hypotheses, the structural equation modelling (SEM) approach was carried out, using AMOS 22 software.

<<<**Insert Table 3**>>>

4.2. Measurement Models

To investigate the measurement models, several criteria were used, including composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), and factor loadings. Cronbach's alpha, as well as CR, were used to verify the reliability of the measurement models. Since all of the coefficients are above 0.70, a good reliability is revealed. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS that showed the construct validity. AVE was computed to consider convergent validity. All AVEs exceeded 0.5 and were acceptable. Factor loadings were higher than 0.6 and thus significant (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Means, standard deviations, and other detailed results are presented in Table 1. Moreover, to check the discriminant validity, the Fornell and Larker (1981) criterion was used, which indicates that the square root of each construct's AVE is larger than its correlations between that construct and other

constructs. The results in Table 3 confirm adequate discriminant validity. Altogether, these results confirm the fitness of the measurement models.

4.3. The structural and overall model

For estimating the structural and overall model, as well as testing the research hypotheses, the covariance-based SEM approach was adopted. According to the results in Table 4, all path coefficients are statistically significant, and all of the hypotheses of the study are supported at a significance level (<0.05). The fit indices of the structural model are all above the standard, which shows the suitability of the model. Indices such as the goodness-of-fit (GFI = 0.908), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.052), the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.914), and $\chi 2$/d.f. (CMIN/DF= 2.816) were used for investigating the overall model fitness.

<<<Insert Table 4>>>

The effect of memorable experience on the three dimensions of tourist-destination identification is positive and significant. The effect of memorable experience on tourist-destination affective identification (β = 0.65) and on tourist-destination cognitive identification (β = 0.53) were more than on tourist-destination evaluative identification (β = 0.39). Therefore, the hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H1c are significantly supported. The effect of destination attractiveness on tourist-destination identification was also confirmed. Its effect on affective tourist-destination identification (β = 0.54) and on cognitive identification (β = 0.22) proved bigger than on evaluative tourist-destination identification (β = 0.16). These results support the significance of H2a, H2b, and H2c.

In the analysis of the effect of tourist-destination identification dimensions, (H3a) cognitive -> destination love, (H3b) affective -> destination love, and (H3c) evaluative -> destination love, the results confirm significant relationships. The affective dimension has the biggest

effect on love (β = 0.27) followed by the evaluative (β = 0.18) and cognitive (β = 0.11) dimensions. Finally, the positive effects of destination love on WOM (β = 0.78) and revisit intention (β = 0.50), and the positive effect of WOM on revisit intention (β = 0.32), were also confirmed.

4.4. Moderating effects of gender

The hypotheses H4a, H4b, and H4c concern the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between tourist-destination identification and destination love. The approach recommended by Hayes and Matthes (2009) and Preacher et al. (2007) was used to analyse the moderating effect. The results show that gender moderates the effect of cognitive, affective, and evaluative identification on destination love. The results further show that various aspects of tourist-destination identification, under the influence of gender, affect destination love differently. It was found that the effect of the cognitive aspect of identification on destination love was more significant for male participants (β = 0.486; $p \leq 0.001$), as opposed to female participants (β = 0.344; $p \leq 0.001$), whereas the effect of the affective aspect of identification on destination love was more noticeable with females (β = 0.603; $p \leq 0.001$) compared to males (β = 0.212; $p \leq 0.001$). Since insignificant results were obtained for the interaction effect of evaluative identification and gender on destination love (β = 0.081; p = not significant), there was no significant difference between male and female participants in the evaluative aspect. Table 4 displays the detailed results.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Destination identification with its three dimensions are among the most considerable factors, which significantly influence tourist behaviour toward tourism cities. It is thus of great importance to research the antecedents of destination identification as well as its outcomes.

This research considered two critical antecedent factors, which shape different aspects of destination identification (i.e., cognitive, affective, and evaluative). We identified these influencing factors as memorable destination experience and destination attractiveness. Memorable destination experience seems to be more related to a tourist's perception and knowledge about a destination, while destination attractiveness is more related to the physical features of a destination. However, both aspects can shape different aspects of destination identification with different levels of significance. Our results also revealed that strengthening the dimensions of tourist-destination identification through destination attractiveness and memorable experience as antecedents, can positively affect the destination love, which is modified by a tourist's gender. In addition, destination love can affect the behaviour of tourists, including their desire to revisit and promote WOM effects.

Our finding on the tourist positive destination experience, and their desire to identify themselves with their surroundings, are in line with Kumar and Kaushik (2018) and Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto (2018). Nevertheless, we studied, more specifically, the important aspect of tourist behaviour of identification, based on social identity theory. Positive communication and the creation of pleasant moments for tourists are related to memorable experiences by satisfying their self-defining needs. This study suggests that destination attractiveness can meet the self-defining needs of individuals. This is because attractive destinations bring many social benefits, such as social prestige and positive social identity. The studies of So et al. (2017) and Elbedweihy et al. (2016) have supported these results. The positive impact of cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of tourist-identification on destination love indicates that tourists want to develop positive feelings and interests with those cities that are well-identified to be similar to tourists' self-identity. Alnawas and Altarifi (2016), Aro et al. (2018), and Swanson (2017) have the same results. The emotional bond between the destination and the tourist has the greatest impact on the creation of destination love, which affects women more

than men. Our results are consistent with the Baudrillard (2016) and Miles and Miles (2004) findings.

The effect of destination love on WOM and revisit intention shows that the formation of an emotional and affective relationship with destinations will not only cause tourists to intent to visit the beloved destination again, but to also share their experiences in different ways with others, and to give useful recommendations about the destination. In this way, the destination has been introduced to others more effectively, than by any other promotional tool. Studies by and Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Hosany and Prayag (2013), in a context different than tourism, support this conclusion. However, in the tourism setting, Zhang et al. (2018) showed the impact of memorable experiences on revisit intention.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Based on the social identity theory, our study proposes a validated framework on tourist-destination identification and its key antecedents and outcomes to explain how tourists define themselves with destinations they visit. Tourist identification with a city seems to reflect a tourist desired self-concept. Cities with strong identities can create strong bonds with tourists and many tourists travel to different cities every year to identify themselves and redefine their identities (Carter et al., 2007) through these tourist cities. Memorable experience of a destination, and its attractiveness are among key factors, which will enable a tourist to join and connect with groups belonging to these cities, and categorize himself/herself as belonging to the destination.

Our study further adds to the literature by understanding the three key aspects of tourist-destination identification, and their relationship with other key factors in our model. It is important to examine tourist-destination identification as a multi-dimensional concept in order to understand how this identification can be configured. Although previous studies (Alnawas

and Altarifi, 2016; Elbedweihy et al., 2016; So et al., 2017; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2017; Tuškej et al., 2013) have considered customer-brand identification in the marketing literature, tourist-destination identification and its multidimensional nature has not been empirically investigated, by considering its relationship with memorable experience and destination attractiveness. This research is also of great significance for those who study Iran as a tourist destination, because Iran up to now has been an under-researched destination that is rarely investigated. The research provides an understanding of the most influential factors relating to destination love, WOM, and revisit intention. For the purpose of generalization, we tested our model by collecting data not only from domestic tourists, but also from foreign tourists, who visited Iran's most popular tourism destinations. Another contribution of this study is that it empirically investigates the moderating role of gender on the relationship between tourist-destination identification dimensions and destination love.

5.2. Practical implications

The current study helps practitioners in the tourism industry, particularly managers of tourism-related organizations, decision-makers, and organizers, gain a more profound insight into the attraction of destinations. Tourism, as an industry, requires effective policy-making to create strong bonds with tourists. Destination identification can play a vital role in creating such a bond. Many tourists travel to different cities every year, experience them, and evaluate their attractiveness, so that they can identify themselves with those cities. Tourist cities' practitioners and policymakers should then oblige themselves to periodically assess chosen tourism cities in terms of tourist perception, as well as physical characteristics of destinations, which greatly influence the image of the cities, and consequently affect tourist behaviour, such as attachment to the city (Jawahar et al., 2020).

Governments and policymakers should provide strategic destination plans for tourism cities to either attract new tourists or to retain the current visitors. As a central element of a city tourism plan, they should concentrate on the importance of identification, as well as its antecedents and outcomes, which are investigated in the present study. It should be noted that the key to the effectiveness of the long-term relationship with tourists is to pay attention to their identification with destinations. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) can play a vital role in this, especially considering the competition between tourism cities (Ivanov and Webster, 2013).

Destination studies in developing countries, such as Iran, have a great potential for making financial gains for tourism-related companies. Due to the unique historical features and cultural richness, which attract many tourists every year, Iranian tourist cities have a great significance to motivate a tourist's feeling of belonging. Thus, DMOs should consider investing in tourist attractions of these cities, such as museums, national parks and gardens, historical and heritage sites, and the showcasing of traditional festivals. They should also make interesting documentaries about the cities and tourist locations, which has rarely occurred so far. Creating inviting social places in these cities by equipping them with comfortable seating, conducting joint marketing programs to attract guests to these places, introducing local products, handicrafts, souvenirs, and customs, and using branding strategies for cities by turning them into destination brands, are among the activities that DMOs should consider so that tourists identify with these cities.

Policymakers should also pay attention not to allow for tourism cities to be forgotten. They should try to give them a notable identity by using different campaigns, local national festivals and events, like, for example, Nowruz (Iranian New Year), Yalda (longest night of the year), and other holidays, and by giving handicraft gifts (i.e., a bookmark with a picture of the shrine of Hafez or a coin, which featuring a prominent city landmark) and rewards (i.e., restaurant

and/or hotel vouchers). Creating pages on social networks can improve tourist experience of tourism cities and lead to tourist-destination identification. Iran's tourism cities and places have a great potential to supply such a campaign with memorable and attractive content and to encourage tourists to share their experiences. Developing a long-term and sustained friendship with experienced tourists who already visited these cities, and page followers who may influence potential visitors, as well as providing ample information about tourism destinations by giving their background, and collecting views of those who have already visited (particularly celebrities) to be used in advertisements, are among other suggestions to help improve the identification of tourists with tourism cities.

Tourists often have sophisticated criteria for choosing a city as a destination to visit and identify themselves with. Tourism practitioners must therefore use valid and reliable tools to measure the bond between destinations and tourists, and try to strengthen the bond of identification, so that tourist-destination identification can become stronger. This identification can assure long-term relationships between tourists and destinations, and lead to destination love, as well as other positive behaviours, such as WOM and revisit intention.

Furthermore, improving attractiveness of the destinations, like transportation facilities and infrastructure, providing a variety of residence services, and service improvement in tourism cities (Mikulić et al., 2016, Gelbman and Timothy, 2011) should be included in the plans defining long-term policies by authorities for the destinations. It should be understood that any investment in the city infrastructure, like accommodation and transport facilities, has economic returns and can lead to tourism industry development, because of the interaction between technological progress and tourism industry development (Shafiee and Izadi Najafabadi, 2016), especially in developing countries.

5.3. Limitations and future directions

Like other research, this research has limitations. This study was conducted in Iran, and could bring slightly different results, when applied in other countries. However, Iran, as one of the most ancient countries, has well-known evidence of historical civilization, as well as internationally established tourism destinations with great numbers of international visitors annually. Therefore, future studies are recommended to research this country as their case. We also suggest repeating this study in other countries and tourism cities, especially in developing countries, in order to compare the findings and to develop the model. In addition, further studies can also be repeated in developed countries (such as the UK, France, Germany, or Italy) for generalization of the outcome. We recommend that other research explore the relationships between introduced variables (e.g., memorable experience, destination attractiveness, tourist-destination identification, destination love, and tourist behaviours) in other tourism cities and compare the results.

This study was cross-sectional, thus the results should be interpreted with caution when considering other tourism destinations. The findings can be more reliable by collecting more data from other destinations to verify the model. There are also other related constructs to destination identification, destination experience, and destination love that may be recognized by future research through conducting in-depth interviews and qualitative studies. We investigated only two antecedent factors on tourist-destination identification. Finding other effective factors on tourist-destination identification and classifying them based on importance, defining more indicators of attractiveness, as well as studying their outcomes, can be regarded as future research subjects. For example, future research can investigate the relationship between tourist-destination identification and destination competitive advantage.

We are aware that not all tourists in all circumstances identify with tourist destinations. Although our findings clearly show that a majority of tourists show a stronger tourist-

destination identification after having had positive experiences in the tourist destination, future studies are recommended to further investigate the social identity theory within different groups of tourists. Moreover, Future studies are recommended to categorize tourists based on the purpose of their visits, such as religion, healthcare, and business, and correlate between these segmentations and other destination-related constructs.

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Table 1: Study constructs, items, and scale validation

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Dev.	AVE	CR	Cronbach α
Memorable Destination Experience					0.64	0.83	0.92
	I have many memorable experiences with this destination	0.88	3.22	1.28			
	Thinking of this destination brings back good memories	0.96	3.15	1.32	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012); Zhang et al. (2018)		
	I have fond memories of this destination	0.48	3.18	1.31			
Destination Attractiveness					0.48	0.74	0.86
	I like what this destination represents	0.65	3.07	1.28			
	I think that this destination is attractive	0.74	3.08	1.29	Mikulić et al. (2016); Wesselmann (2019)		
	I like what this destination embodies	0.69	3.44	1.28			
Tourist-Destination Cognitive Identification					0.49	0.74	0.84
	This destination embodies what I believe in	0.57	3.16	1.33			
	I perceive many overlaps between myself and this destination	0.84	3.22	1.22	Lam et al. (2013); So et al. (2017); Torres et al. (2017)		
	My sense of who am I overlaps with what this destination represents	0.68	3.13	1.27			
Tourist-Destination Affective Identification					0.54	0.77	0.89
	I am attached to this destination	0.84	3.56	1.15			
	I feel a strong sense of belonging to this destination	0.65	3.36	1.24	Lam et al. (2013); So et al. (2017); Torres et al. (2017)		
	This destination is like a part of me	0.69	3.34	1.20			
Tourist-Destination Evaluative Identification					0.55	0.78	0.89
	This destination is valuable for me	0.77	3.42	1.20			
	This is an important destination for tourists	0.66	3.66	1.10	Lam et al. (2013); So et al. (2017); Torres et al. (2017)		
	I am a privileged tourist to see this destination	0.78	3.47	1.20			
Destination Love					0.56	0.86	0.93
	This is a wonderful destination	0.57	3.52	1.10			
	This destination is very awesome	0.56	3.27	1.24			
	I have particular feelings about this destination	0.85	3.36	1.18	Aro et al. (2019); Carroll and Ahuvia (2006); Lee and Hyun (2016)		
	I love this destination	0.82	3.20	1.22			
	This destination makes me feel exceptional	0.87	3.39	1.13			
Word-of-mouth					0.45	0.76	0.87
	I talk about this destination with others	0.63	3.54	1.14			
	I recommend this destination to friends/family	0.81	3.60	1.11	Anggraeni (2015); Hosany and Prayag (2013)		
	I spread the good words about this destination	0.55	3.06	1.25			
	I give a lot of positive word-of-mouth about this destination	0.65	3.40	1.23			
Revisit Intention					0.51	0.80	0.90
	I intend to revisit this destination again	0.71	3.09	1.35			
	I would rather travel to this destination among other destinations	0.68	3.14	1.38	Kumar and Kaushik (2018); Zhang et al. (2018)		
	There is possibility to travel sometime to this destination again	0.62	3.16	1.42			
	This destination is the next vacation place for me	0.83	3.21	1.38			

Table 2: Demographic profile (N = 439)

Variable	Category	Iranian domestic tourists		International tourists	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Men	155	35.3%	114	26%
	Women	91	20.7%	79	18%
Age	16-25	71	16.2%	52	11.8%
	26-35	103	23.5%	77	17.5%
	36-45	61	13.9%	55	12.5%
	46 and above	11	2.5%	9	2.1%
Education	High school	23	5.2%	35	8%
	Bachelor	123	28%	79	18%
	M.SC	79	18%	68	15.5%
	PhD	21	4.8%	11	2.5%
Partnership status	Single	72	16.4%	63	14.4%
	Married	174	39.6%	130	29.6%
Whom travel with	Family	182	41.5%	115	26.2%
	Without family	64	14.6%	78	17.8%
City	Isfahan	41	9.3%	38	8.7%
	Shiraz	40	9.1%	36	8.2%
	Tehran	48	10.9%	39	8.9%
	Mashhad	43	9.8%	28	6.4%
	Rasht	32	7.3%	29	6.6%
	Mazandaran	42	9.6%	23	5.2%
Staying time	Less than 3 days	63	25.6%	35	18.1%
	3-10 days	94	38.2%	89	46.1%
	10-30 days	52	21.1%	46	23.8%
	More than 1 month	37	15%	23	11.9%
Visiting experience	First-time	105	42.7%	116	60.1%
	Revisiting	141	57.3%	77	39.9%
Travel main purpose	Visiting friends/relatives	43	17.5%	30	15.5%
	Medical	19	7.7%	11	5.7%
	Educational	23	9.4%	14	7.3%
	Religious	41	16.7%	29	15%
	Business	37	15%	26	13.5%
	Enjoyment/relaxation	83	33.7%	83	43%

Table 3: Correlation matrix, discriminant validity, means, and standard deviations

Construct	Memorable Destination Experience	Destination Attractiveness	Cognitive Identification	Affective Identification	Evaluative Identification	Destination Love	Word-of-mouth	Revisit Intention	Mean	SD
Memorable Destination Experience	0.80								3.18	1.30
Destination Attractiveness	0.55**	0.69							3.20	1.28
Cognitive Identification	0.56**	0.36**	0.70						3.17	1.27
Affective Identification	0.54**	0.59**	0.25*	0.73					3.42	1.20
Evaluative Identification	0.49**	0.63**	0.29**	0.49**	0.75				3.52	1.17
Destination Love	0.60**	0.60**	0.42**	0.71**	0.44**	0.75			3.35	1.17
Word-of-mouth	0.53**	0.66**	0.30**	0.60**	0.53**	0.58**	0.67		3.40	1.18
Revisit Intention	0.29**	0.33**	0.19*	0.21*	0.29**	0.46**	0.39**	0.71	3.15	1.38

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.001, Diagonal values: the square root of each construct's AVE

Table 4: Hypotheses testing

Hypothesized Path			β	S.E	C.R	*p*	Results
H1a Memorable Destination Experience	->	Tourist-Destination Cognitive Identification	0.525	0.079	7.95	***	Supported
H1b Memorable Destination Experience	->	Tourist-Destination Affective Identification	0.653	0.070	8.93	***	Supported
H1c Memorable Destination Experience	->	Tourist-Destination Evaluative Identification	0.391	0.056	3.44	***	Supported
H2a Destination Attractiveness	->	Tourist-Destination Cognitive Identification	0.218	0.055	3.93	***	Supported
H2b Destination Attractiveness	->	Tourist-Destination Affective Identification	0.538	0.056	8.59	***	Supported
H2c Destination Attractiveness	->	Tourist-Destination Evaluative Identification	0.158	0.045	3.60	***	Supported
H3a Tourist-Destination Cognitive Identification	->	Destination Love	0.107	0.039	2.73	.006	Supported
H3b Tourist-Destination Affective Identification	->	Destination Love	0.266	0.046	4.83	***	Supported
H3c Tourist-Destination Evaluative Identification	->	Destination Love	0.179	0.049	3.41	. 002	Supported
Interaction Effect			*β*	*t*	*p*	R^2 *(Change)*	Results
H4a **Cognitive identification × gender**			0.115	3.73	***	0.622 (0.017)	Male > Female
Male			0.486	6.33	***		
Female			0.344	5.14	***		
H4b **Affective identification × gender**			0.214	-3.61	***	0.712 (0.013)	Female > Male
Male			0.212	4.15	***		
Female			0.603	9.19	***		
H4c **Evaluative identification × gender**			0.081	1.04	.108	0.573 (0.003)	No significant difference
Male			0.244	3.89	***		
Female			0.323	4.86	***		
Hypothesized Path			β	S.E	C.R	*p*	Results
H5a Destination Love	->	Word-of-mouth	0.777	0.070	9.35	***	Supported
H5b Destination Love	->	Revisit Intention	0.498	0.098	6.04	***	Supported
H6 Word-of-mouth	->	Revisit Intention	0.316	0.043	5.04	***	Supported

Notes: GFI = 0.908; RMSEA = 0.052; CFI = 914; CMIN/DF = 2.816; AGFI = 0.894; TLI = 0.903; *** p < 0.001

Figure 1: The conceptual research model