Visitors' loyalty to religious tourism destinations: Considering place attachment, emotional experience and religious affiliation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of visitors' place attachment and emotional experience on destination loyalty. Furthermore, religious affiliation was examined as a moderator within the model. Survey data from Attur Feast attendees (n = 812) were analysed using a series of multiple regression analyses to test proposed hypotheses. Visitors' emotional experiences were found to mediate the effect of place attachment dimensions (i.e., place identity and place dependence) on loyalty. Additionally, visitors' religious affiliation was found to moderate place attachment and emotional experience effects on destination loyalty. Furthermore, visitors' religious affiliation moderates only the indirect effect of place dependence on destination loyalty via emotional experience and this effect was strongest for Christian visitors compared to Hindu or Muslim visitors. In sum, we found that perceived emotional experiences mediate the relationship between place attachment and destination loyalty. Implications, limitations and directions for future research are offered.

1. Introduction

Religious festivals provide opportunities for attendees to learn about customs and practices, and they also serve to strengthen deeply held beliefs among individuals subscribing to a particular faith (Getz & Page, 2016). Depending on individuals' intentions, motivations abound as to why individuals engage in these celebrated events, ranging from casual sightseers who enter for free to intentional attendees who participate in a 'one-of-a-kind' festival that serves to perpetuate beliefs. As such, the potential to engage in cross-cultural exchange (Small, Edwards, & Sheridan, 2005) at these festivals exists which can provide visitors the opportunity to learn about heritage, traditions, ethnicity, cultural landscapes, and religious values while interacting with the local community.

Oftentimes, the locations in which such festivals occur are so unique that participants possess a high level of place attachment for the site (Ruback, Pandey, & Kohli, 2008). Such an attachment to place has immediate implications for how an individual experiences an event and the emotions that form as a result. While exploring the multiple dimensions of place meaning, Manzo (2005) examined the development of an array of emotions and experiences as a result of the richness and diversity of peoples' emotional attachment to places. Hence, for a

religious tourist, the tangible and intangible components of the destination experience is of high personal value and associated with gratifying positive emotions. These consumption-related emotional experiences are essential determinants of post-consumption behaviors such as satisfaction, attachment to the place, destination choice, and revisit intentions/loyalty (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010).

Individuals' attachment is extremely important in planning for tourism development given tourism affects not only the appearance of local places, but also the meanings of places and the connections individuals have with others and the various venues within the destination (Kaján, 2014). While place attachment essentially involves emotions (Giuliani, 2003) as well as people-place interactions (Lewicka, 2011), its association with a number of variables have been considered as the primary foci of more recent research studies. The proposed and observed association between place attachment and its antecedents such as festival satisfaction (Lee, Kyle, & Scott, 2012), destination image (Prayag & Ryan, 2012), destination loyalty (Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2017; Morais & Lin, 2010; Patwardhan, Ribeiro, Payini, Woosnam, Mallya, and Gopalakrishnan, 2019; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010), attitudinal loyalty (Lee, Graefe, & Burns, 2007), and personal involvement (Gross & Brown, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2012) is well established within the tourism literature. To date however, minimal research has

considered the role of place attachment in explaining emotional experiences at the destination (in the context of events and festivals) and how that translates to behavioral loyalty (i.e., willingness to revisit and recommend the destination to others) to the venue and destination. Furthermore, the role that religious affiliation may play in these relationships (i.e., as a moderator or mediator) has received little attention within the literature. As such, these relationships are vital to examine within the context of religious festivals.

This work focuses on the Attur Church Feast, also commonly known as "Jatre" among festival attendees throughout Karkala, India, given its openness to religious diversity (embracing Christians, Hindus, and Muslims), long history, and high levels of repeat visitation. The overarching aim of this paper is to examine an integrative moderated mediation model considering place attachment and emotional experience as antecedents of destination loyalty. In so doing, the mediating role of emotional experience on the relationship between place attachment and destination loyalty is considered. Additionally, religious affiliation is treated as a moderator within the model. An examination of the antecedents of destination loyalty in this context will not only contribute to the theoretical advancement of the construct but also assist festival managers in planning for sustainability of events such as Jatre. Furthermore, results will provide key strategies by which managers and planners can manage for and promote religious festivals and events by acknowledging the role that attendees' attachment, on-site emotional experiences, and religious affiliation play in contributing to loyalty. In other words, managers and planners may better determine who their target markets are in considering these model constructs.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Relationships between place attachment, emotional experience and destination loyalty

Tourism and leisure literatures have provided a wealth of evidence that place attachment contributes significantly to the understanding of tourist behavior (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2002; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003; Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004). Although tourism scholars have analyzed place attachment as a multi-faceted concept (Ram, Bjork, & Weidenfeld, 2016), many studies have focused on the interrelationship between only two dimensions of place dependence and place identify (Hosany, Prayag, Van Der Veen, Huang, & Deesilatham, 2017; Hosany, Buzova, & Sanz-Blas, 2020; Lee et al., 2012; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Williams & Vaske, 2003; Woosnam, Aleshinloye, Strzelecka, & Erul, 2018). The connecting thread that binds these viewpoints of different researchers together would be the acceptance of place identity and place dependence as the psychological upshots of place attachment (Counted, 2016). Further, the work by Smith (2017) mentions that peoples' bonding to a place is not discrete, rather, an integrated approach which is more powerful to understand the reinforcing qualities between people and place. Drawing on the outcomes of the aforementioned research studies within the festival tourism context, the well-established two-factor structure of place attachment (Gross & Brown, 2008; Kim et al., 2017; Patwardhan et al., 2019) will be considered in relation to emotional experience, religious affiliation, and ultimately, visitor loyalty.

Christianity as one of the most widespread religions in the world, along with its Roman Catholic faith and churches have profound influence on the development of pilgrimage sites and promotion of religious tourism. In the Catholic tradition, visitation to pilgrimage sites takes the form of a large scale gathering on the occasion of significant dates, anniversaries, and visitation of religious sites (Vukonic, 2006). Visiting these sacred sites helps to foster a greater sense of unity with other believers, which ultimately serves to strengthen individuals' faith (Vukonic, 2006). According to Richards (2011), an experience considered 'religious' by the experiencer must be interpreted as 'authentic,' though the word "authenticity" is debatable. Reisinger and Steiner

(2006) argue that the travel experiences of contemporary tourists are the conceptualization of "existential authenticity" which is predominantly experience-oriented. Here the interconnections between social meanings, personal experiences, and physical environments need to be considered. As far as authenticity of religious experiences in the context of Christian pilgrimages are concerned, Belhassen, Caton, and Stewart (2008) opines that it is shaped by religious beliefs, places visited, and activities undertaken by the pilgrims. Though place attachment is considered as a predictor of authenticity (Ram et al., 2016), the study results of Jiang, Ramkissoon, Mavondo, and Feng (2017) offer a different perspective in concluding that existential authenticity is a positive antecedent of all dimensions of place attachment. More specifically, in the context of festivals, authenticity enhances festival emotional experiences and loyalty of visitors (Girish & Chen, 2017). Positive emotions in experiential decisions describe the emotional nature of consumer decision making for experiential products and services (e.g., vacations, dining, and travel). Emotions influence the creation of events that are pleasurable, memorable and meaningful by fusing tangible and intangible attributes (Fuchs, Chen, & Pizam, 2015; Kwortnik & Ross, 2007; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). In tourism research, emotions appear as antecedents of visitor experiences as well as place attachment (Correia, Oliveira, & Pereira, 2017). As suggested by Prayag, Hosany, and Odeh (2013) there is a need to consider emotional experiences while modeling the antecedents of satisfaction and loyalty. The academic literature on tourism confirms the direct link between place attachment, tourists' attitudes, emotional experiences, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Prayag, Hosany, & Chiappa, 2017; Tlili & Amara, 2016).

While reviewing studies on festival and event motivations, Li and Petrick (2006) identified a list of motivation items that are consistent across multiple types of festivals. In most cases, motivation characteristics are associated with demographics, satisfaction, and behavioral indicators. At a wider scale, the interaction between "pious pilgrims" and "secular tourists" explains the religious system that comprises religious attractions, pilgrimage shrines, and festivals (Raj, 2012). At the same time, researchers speculate the existence of mixed evidence for the relationship between emotions and behavioral intentions (Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005; Grappi & Montanari, 2011; Lee et al., 2007; Soscia, 2007), nonetheless, they recognize that the emotional reactions of tourists are essential determinants of post-visit behaviors. Moreover, religious emotions are considered as a coherent subclass of general emotions (Ferran, 2019), and in religious contexts, emotions are the ultimate source of religious experiences (De Bie, 2013). However, keeping emotional experience as a primary criterion to evaluate the truth of religion, Cohen, Keltner, and Rozin (2005) argue that Judaism, Catholicism, and Hinduism consider social and duty-based motivations as primary agents in social explanation.

Destination loyalty is operationally defined as the level of tourists' perceptions of a destination as a recommendable place (Chen & Gursoy, 2001) or the level of a tourist's intention to revisit the destination (Oppermann, 2000). The construct is viewed as an extension of customer loyalty and is a powerful indicator of success within the tourism industry. Loyalty has been primarily measured as a behavioral, attitudinal or composite (combining both behavioral and attitudinal aspects) construct (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). The behavioral approach is characterized as consumptive behavior such as a purchase sequence or the probability of purchasing. On the other hand, the attitudinal approach concerns tourists' intention to revisit, willingness to recommend, and psychological commitment (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). The composite approach is an integration of behavioral and attitudinal measures (Backman & Crompton, 1991). To date, several scholars have recommended destination loyalty should be simultaneously measured from both behavioral and attitudinal approaches (Backman & Crompton, 1991; Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Within the tourism literature, the link between place attachment, destination image, satisfaction, and

destination loyalty has been widely discussed (Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Meligdis, 2006; Jiang et al., 2017; Morais & Lin, 2010; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon, 2016; Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013; Yuksel et al., 2010). In particular, place attachment was perceived as an independent construct to measure visitors' attitudinal loyalty (Lee et al., 2007), as well as destination loyalty and satisfactory holiday experiences (Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Yuksel et al., 2010). It was also viewed as a mediator and moderator between tourists' attitudes, festival quality and visitors' behavioral intentions to re-visit (Kim et al., 2017; Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

Hence, at a broader level, integrating the effects of emotions on post-consumption behavior, it is hypothesized that emotional experiences associated with the travel destination induces revisit intentions of festival visitors.

H1(a,b). Emotional experience mediates the relationship between place attachment: a) place identity and b) place dependence on destination loyalty.

2.2. The moderating role of religious affiliations

Religion and religiosity influences visitor behavior at different sites of religious significance and those visitors with different religious affiliations behave differently based on their perceptions of the site which indirectly affect visitation patterns (Griffith & Griggs, 2001; Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003; Shackley, 2001). Stated differently, we postulate that the relationship between place attachment, emotional experience and destination loyalty may depend on the religious affiliations of the visitors. Individuals of a certain religion who visit a location associated with their faith are motivated to do so for spiritual reasons more so than other visitors (Metreveli & Timothy, 2010; Shackley, 2001; Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Religion has a profound influence on an individual's relation to place and for the believer, religious places help contribute to the development of identity and self (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). In religious destinations, believers can experience strong emotions (Geertz, 1966) due to the characteristics of the place while interacting with other members of the same faith (Mazumdar & Mazumdar 1999) because religious emotions are natural emotions that include characteristic cognitive, individual and practical aspects (Lemmens & Herck, 2001). Places associated with significant events (Bowen, 2002) bestowed with special properties help visitors to establish reciprocal relationships between place and religion. To substantiate this, an article on the behavioral characteristics of Christian pilgrims to holy sites by Collins-Kreiner and Kliot (2000) explains the special nature of visits motivated by religion, spirituality and belief. The Christian visitors portrayed themselves as "religious-tourists" who believed in the spiritual aspect of the visit, yet were also interested in non-religious activities that combined religion, culture, and history. Collins-Kreiner and Kliot (2000) termed such visits by these individuals as "secular visits". As Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel (2015) purported, these visitors travel in organized groups and their trips are seasonal, occurring often during holidays and ceremonies. In Christianity, religious emotion as part of devotional activities at sacred sites is integral to the practice of religion (Corrigan, 2007). Although motives for participating in religious experiences are associated to religion, in India there is a freedom to live by one's religious beliefs, religious freedom of individuals, and respect for the sentiments of all religions (www.ncert.nic.in). An evidence to this is a study by Nyaupane et al. (2015) where Hindus and Christians with religious and cultural motivations collectively visit the birthplace of Buddha (i.e., Lumbini). Moreover, according to the Supreme Court of India, Hinduism is not a "religion," but a way of life. This concept of secularism (e.g., diversity in religion, language, culture, and caste) allows Indians to practice and participate in multi-religious cultural and traditional festivals. Hence, we maintain a view that segregating visitors on the basis of their strength of religious affiliations in a site known for monotheistic religion may help to explain the visitation

patterns of tourists with diverse religious affiliations. Moreover, in Christianity the emotional component in religion has a profound meaning in shaping the religious life, including ritual, gender, sexuality, music, and material culture.

As Timothy (1997) precisely pointed out, many of the historic heritage sites may not be internationally well-known, but these sites of local fame greatly contribute to local heritage experience, stir emotions, and provide an experience which others may not be able to relate as they are part of a community's early pioneering efforts. He suggested that heritage attractions should be considered at world, national, local and personal levels. An engagement with the range of interrelated components such as motivation, interest, experience, setting etc. at personal, social and physical realms determines the depth of the visitor experience and visitation patterns (Poria et al., 2003). Moreover, as given in the four realms of the experience model, these dimensions decide the active and passive involvement of visitors (Kempiak, Hollywood, Bolan, & McMahon-Beattie, 2017). The authors mention that pre-visit motivations, and decision making during the actual heritage experience drives the re-visit intentions and WOM referrals.

Work linking place attachment and spiritual environments have been noted within the literature, which have aided in explaining individuals' affective bonds with a place (Giuliani, 2003). Considering tourism as a source of spiritual meaning as well as emotional well-being in the context of rural tourism, Jepson and Sharpley (2014) described the enhancement of sense of place through the inextricable intertwinement of place attachment and emotional/spiritual experiences of tourists. Thus, in the present context, not from a behavioral psychology paradigm, but from the perspective of a community's sense of appreciation of place, theorizing the interpersonal bonds between place and people, however, becomes meaningful. As Derrett (2003) opined, the interactions between residents and visitors during festivals is a signifier of a community's sense of self and an expression of its sense of place. It is in this sense, the religious affiliations of visitors could carry an overarching effect associated with feelings and perceptions of experiencing a place in all its dimensions (Najafi & Shariff, 2014). While research concerning place attachment is well established in the festival tourism literature (Lee et al., 2012; Ruback et al., 2008; Tsai, 2012; Woosnam, Jiang, Van Winkle, Kim, & Maruyama, 2016; Yuksel et al., 2010), its application to visitors' religious affiliations is rather scant. Exceptions to this were two studies on sacred places by Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1993, 2004) that explain the reciprocal relationship between place and religion as well as significance of place and place characteristics in religious place attachment to sacred sites.

Alternate research streams theorize the affiliation between emotions, satisfaction and/or behavioral intentions/loyalty (Grappi & Montanari, 2011; Lee et al., 2007; Prayag et al., 2013) but have neglected to consider the role that religious affiliation plays in understanding these constructs. In summary, our study focuses on the role of religious affiliations as a moderator to test the relationships between the three constructs. Identification of the moderator is important to understand the proposed relationships and outcome variables as it may differ depending on the context. We speculate that the positive relationship between place attachment, emotional experience and destination loyalty is stronger in the absence of religious affiliations per se. This assumption is anticipated based on the findings of an empirical study by Hosany et al. (2017) who theorized the interrelationship between tourists' emotional experience, overall destination image, satisfaction and intensions to recommend a destination where the dimensions of emotional experience having differential effects on the overall image and satisfaction. With the potential for religious affiliation to serve as a moderator, we formulate three additional hypotheses below expressed within Fig. 1.

H2(a,b). Religious affiliation moderates the positive relationship between place attachment: a) place identity and b) place dependence on destination loyalty.
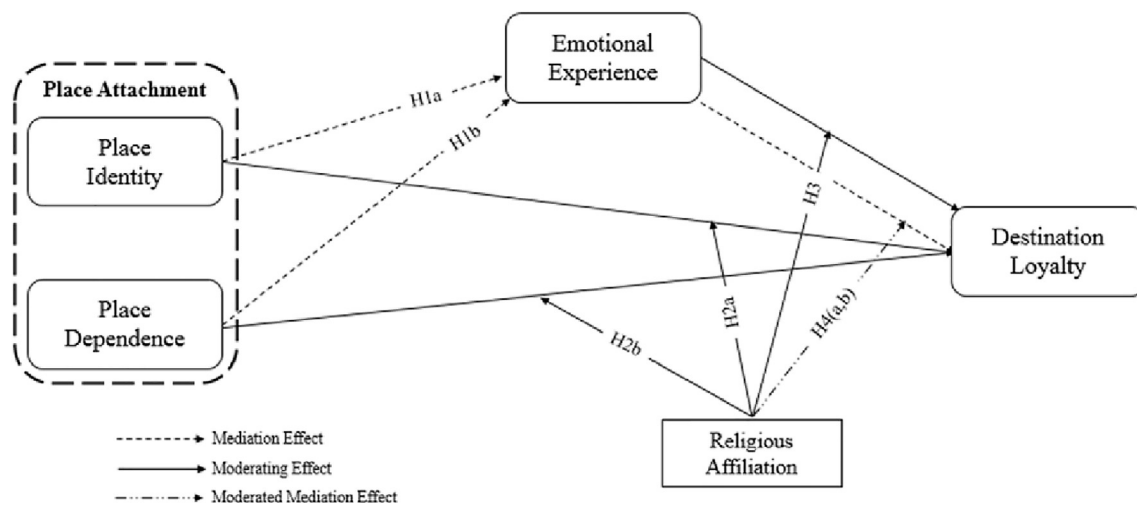
Fig. 1. Proposed hypothesized model.

H3. : Religious affiliation moderates the positive relationship between emotional experiences on destination loyalty.

H4(a,b). The indirect effect of place attachment: a) place identity and b) place dependence on destination loyalty through emotional experience is moderated by visitors' religious affiliation such that the indirect effect is stronger for Christian visitors than other religious groups.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

Well-known for its religious diversity, St. Lawrence Minor Basilica, Attur, Karkala attracts devotees from all religions each year during the annual feast. The annual religious feast known as "Jatre" in the local language, is celebrated each year (for five days) during the last week of January—drawing over a million visitors. Built in 1759, the church is known throughout the region for its miracles, devotions, faith, and social activities. The church was built based on Hindu, Christian, and Muslim architecture as a symbol of communal harmony. It is the only religious center of the Udupi District that attracts devotees and pilgrims of all religions. Though there are umpteen number of religious and cultural festivals celebrated in the region than anywhere else, this unparalleled religious festival encourages visitors of various religions beyond spiritual attachment and religious faith. Although characterized as a major Christian religious festival, the uniqueness lies in its long tradition of enculturation from the Hindu traditional practices of the region. Moreover, regardless of caste, creed, social and economic status, Indians have a religious bent of mind, it is religious festivals that attract massive gathering without any barriers. Motivations to visit sacred sites in India appear to be related to inner desires and supernatural experiences and not just driven by external factors (Bandyopadhyay, Morais, & Chick, 2008). The diversity of respondents is one of the core characteristic attributes of the study location (Poria et al., 2003), in addition to its historic religious significance. According to church records, in 2015, 12 lakh (i.e., 1.2 million) pilgrims of different religions attended the feast (http://www.daijiworld.com, 2017). The inter-religion festival has occurred for approximately 250 years and involves 43 masses offered in Kannada, Konkani, English and Malayalam languages to serve the large number of devotees visiting from throughout India (Devotees throng Attur minor basilica for annual feast, 2017).

We tested our theoretical model (Fig. 1) with a cross-section sample collected from visitors to the Attur Church Feast (held at the St. Lawrence Minor Basilica Shrine) during a five-day period (January 22–26, 2017), in Karkala, India. To collect the data, a team of seven researchers (i.e., three research faculty and four members of student research forum) intercepted visitors as they left the Church. Respondents were approached and asked to complete an on-site self-administered survey regarding their attachment to the church and festival, their experience during the festival, their religious affiliation, travel behavior, and other sociodemographic questions to better profile the visitor. A systematic sampling strategy with a random start was employed to guarantee a representative sample of the visitors. Beginning with a randomly selected visitor, every third attendee was approached and asked if: 1) they were a tourist and 2) if they would be willing to fill in the survey. Those who consented were given a copy of the questionnaire which took roughly 10 min to complete. When a visitor refused, and to alleviate non-response bias, researchers requested the next immediate visitor to respond to the questionnaire. Each day, researchers selected different times for data collection to avoid response biases. Data were collected from 11 am to 5 pm on the first day, 12 pm to 6 pm on the second day, 3 pm to 7 pm on the third day, and 4 pm to 8 pm on the fourth and fifth days of the festival.

To diminish coverage error in the sampling process, only departing visitors were targeted. The survey instrument was provided in participants' native language to avoid systematic biases. The field researchers were conversant and well aware of the local language to provide participants with the appropriate questionnaire and provide identical information regarding the research study. The method of back translation (Brislin, 1970) by native speakers was used to retain the intent and meanings of the original instrument. During the five-day period of data collection, a research team consisting of nine members approached approximately 4500 visitors and asked them to participate. Though the researchers were stationed near the main gate of the church, many individuals declined to participate citing that they were either there to pray or were in the midst of praying. Overall, 813 individuals agreed to participate and completed the survey instrument. Slightly less than two-thirds (61%) of the survey participants were between the ages of 20 and 35. A similar percentage (57%) were male. Interestingly, 48.2% of the study participants self-identified as Hindus, 44.3% as Christians and 7.5% as Muslims. Although it is an annual religious observance related to Christians, people of all faiths come together in Attur to celebrate the on-going five-day church festival of St. Lawrence which is known as "Church of Miracles." Hence, devotees of all religions attend the rituals. This was evidenced by the research team meeting an equal number of Hindus and Christians at the church. For the residents of nearby townships, St, Lawrence is fondly known as "God of Karkala" (Karkala is name of the region). A large percentage (40%) possessed an undergraduate degree, while most of the remaining participants either had a

professional degree (28%) or higher secondary and primary education (30%). In terms of travel behavior, a preponderance of participants (78%) arrived from Udupi and Dakshin Kannada districts and the remaining from other parts of the country with a very small group (0.5%) of international visitors. The average group size was between four and six members. Slightly more than one-in-three visitors had visited Attur Church between six and ten times in the past. Nineteen percent have visited between 11 and 15 times, 4% had visited between 16 and 25 times and 3% had visited more than 26 times in their lifetime and 39% visited the Church for the first time. Seventy-four percent of the participants visited the Church once during the festival and 26% visited between two and five days.

3.2. Measurement instrument

All items included in the data collection instrument were borrowed from existing scales in the extant literature. Place identity and place dependence were assessed using items adopted from Kyle et al. (2004) and Yuksel et al. (2010). Nine items were used to measure the two dimensions of place attachment: six items (α = 0.91) were used to measure place identity and three items (α = 0.89) were used to measure place dependence. The emotional experience scale was measured using six items (α = 0.91) adapted from Biran, Poria, and Oren (2011), Boley and McGehee (2014), Poria, Reichel, and Biran (2006). Destination loyalty was measured using five items (α = 0.88) adapted from Antón, Camarero, and Laguna-García (2014), Bigné, Sánchez, and Sánchez (2001), Hernández-Lobato, Solis-Radilla, Moliner-Tena, and Sánchez-García (2006), and Ribeiro, Woosnam, Pinto and Silva (2018). All items included in the survey instrument were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 '*strongly disagree*' to 7 '*strongly agree*'. Lastly, sociodemographic variables (e.g., gender, age, and religious affiliation, level of education, employment status and income) as well as travel behaviour variables (i.e., frequency of visits, number of individuals in group, etc.) were added to the instrument to better understand the characteristics of the respondents.

3.3. Control variables

Following prior research on visitors' behaviour, we included several control variables in all the steps of analysis as appropriate, rather than a blanket application of controls (Becker, 2005; Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). However, we controlled only for travel-related variables (e.g., travel distance, frequency of visit, length of stay and source of information), since existing research makes it clear that proxy (e.g., demographics) variables should not be treated as statistical control (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Bernerth, Cole, Taylor, & Walker, 2018). With that said, it is expected that travel distance, destination familiarity, length of stay and source of information are important determinants of both visitor destination experience and future behaviour (Chi, 2012; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). In doing so, destination familiarity was found to be an important determinant of visitor experience at the destination and their likelihood to revisit and recommend the destination to others (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Chi, 2012). We control for this variable by including the variable concerning previous experience with the destination, which was measured by the number of previous visits to the destination (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006; Chi, 2012).

Next, we controlled for visitor length of stay and distance between place of residence and the destination. Several studies (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Milman & Pizam, 1995) have pointed out that length of stay at the destination and physical distance between visitors' place of origin and their destination may play an important role in their experience at the destination and influence their future behaviour. Lastly, we also controlled for visitor source information (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Numerous past studies (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; McDowall, 2010) state that source of information is an important determinate of visitors' experience and future behaviour. Taken together,

these control variables were included in this study based on a sequence of methodological choices and grounded in theoretical understanding related to visitors' experience and behaviour. Concomitantly, it is important to emphasize that the pattern of the findings described in this study remain the same and significant whether we control for these variables or not.

3.4. Analytical approach and data analysis

Prior to testing the specific hypotheses, we mean-centered the variables and created interaction terms using the centered variables. To test the role of emotional experience in linking place identity and place attachment to destination loyalty (Hypothesis 1_a and 1_b), we first conducted a series of regression analyses. Specifically, as presented in Table 2, we first regressed emotional experience on the block of control variables in Model 1 and place identity and place dependence in Model 2 and Model 3 respectively. Afterwards, we regressed destination loyalty on the block of control variables in Model 4 followed by place identity in Model 5, place dependence in Model 6, and lastly emotional experience in Model 7. We then tested the statistical significance of the indirect effects of place identity and place dependence on destination loyalty using a bootstrap resampling procedure using Hayes (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 10,000 bootstrap resamples.

To assess the moderating effect of religious affiliation on the relationship between place identity and place dependence on emotional experience (Hypothesis 2_a and 2_b), emotional experience on destination loyalty (Hypothesis 3) and the moderated mediation relationships (Hypothesis 4_a and 4_b), we again used the PROCESS macro (Model 14) bootstrap resampling procedure to determine whether the indirect effects of place attachment on destination loyalty were conditional upon levels of religious affiliation. Specifically, we first regressed emotional experience on the set of control variables, place identity, place dependence, religious affiliation, and the emotional experience x religious affiliation interaction to determine if the stage 2 mediation effects (i.e., emotional experience to destination loyalty) were moderated by religious affiliation. We then regressed destination loyalty on a block of variables that included the controls, place identity, place attachment, religious affiliation, emotional experience × religious affiliation interaction, and destination loyalty. Finally, we calculated bias-corrected confidence intervals on the conditional indirect effects of place identity and place dependence on destination loyalty through emotional experience using 10,000 bootstrap re-samples.

4. Results

4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis and preliminary analysis

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test whether the anticipated four constructs measured during the Attur Feast are different from each other. The CFA was conducted by using AMOS 25.0 with a maximum likelihood (ML) estimation. The CFA results showed that the 4-factor model fit the data reasonably well (χ^2 = 423.99, df = 122, $p <$ .001, Goodness-of-Fit index [GFI] = 0.95, Normed Fit Index [NFI] = 0.97, Relative Noncentrally Index [RFI] = 0.95, Incremental Fit Index [IFI] = 0.98, Tucker-Lewis index [TLI] = 0.96, Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = 0.98, standardized root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.055, and standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = 0.034) and all factor loadings were above 0.60 and significant at a 1% level.

Reliability and validity of the measurement model was also assessed. As presented in Table 1, the model demonstrated reliability with composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) figures for all the four constructs all above the suggested cut-off figures of 0.70 and 0.50 respectively (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). Construct validity of the model was checked by examining both convergent and

Table 1
CFA results.

Constructs and indicators	Factor loadings	T-value	CR	AVE
Place identity (α = 0.88)			0.90	0.60
I am attached to this religious festival venue	0.64	–N/A[a]		
Visiting this religious festival venue says a lot about who I am	0.73	19.82***		
I identify myself strongly with this religious festival venue	0.83	19.27***		
This religious festival venue means a lot to me	0.80	17.53***		
I am attached to this religious festival venue	0.80	16.32***		
This religious festival is very special to me	0.84	16.61***		
Place dependence (α = 0.72)			0.89	0.73
Doing what I do at this religious festival venue is more important to me than doing it in any other event	0.83	N/A[a]		
I would not substitute any other religious festival venue for doing the type of things I do at this festival	0.86	28.90***		
This religious festival venue is the best place for what I like to do	0.87	29.26		
Emotional experience (α = 0.86)			0.89	0.58
I feel emotionally involved in this religious festival	0.73	N/A		
I feel a sense of belongingness attending this religious festival	0.71	37.42***		
Attending this religious festival makes me proud	0.78	25.85***		
I rediscover myself attending this religious festival	0.78	21.71***		
Attending this religious festival helps me to develop spiritual values	0.76	20.99***		
Attending this religious festival helps me to develop personal values	0.78	21.16***		
Destination loyalty (α = 0.86)			0.87	0.57
I am willing to revisit this religious festival venue in future	0.80	N/A		
I am willing to recommend this religious festival venue to my family and friends	0.82	33.43***		
I stay longer period in this religious festival venue compared to any other festival	0.70	20.17***		
I come with more companions to this religious festival venue	0.73	18.03***		
I have wonderful image of this religious festival venue as a pilgrimage destination	0.75	21.88***		

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strong Agree.
[a] In AMOS, one loading has to be fixed to 1; hence, t-value cannot be calculated for this item.**
  *** $p < .001$ level (one-tailed); CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

discriminant validities. Convergent validity was assessed based on the statistically significant ($p < .001$) item loadings (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) showed in Table 1.

Discriminant validity was measured by comparing all pairs of factors in two-construct CFA models, where each model was measured twice, with one constraining the correlation between the constructs to be one and the other allowing free estimation of the parameter. Discriminant validity is achieved if a significantly lower χ^2 value is obtained for the unconstrained model (Bagozzi & Phillips, 1982; Nunkoo, Ribeiro, Sunnassee, & Gursoy, 2018). As presented in Table 2, this requirement was achieved, giving support for discriminant validity.

After confirming the validity of all latent constructs, a preliminary analysis was undertaken. Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics and zero-order (bivariate) correlations among the study variables and Table 4 shows the results of the regression analyses to test hypothesis 1. The set control variables explained a significant amount of variance in emotional experience ($R^2 = 0.10$, $p < .001$). Physical distance ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < .001$), length of stay ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < .001$), and source of information ($b = -0.08$, $p < .05$) were each statistically related to emotional experience. By adding place identity in Model 2, a greater amount of incremental variance in emotional experience ($\Delta R^2 = 0.45$; $\beta = 0.71$, $p < .001$) was explained. The addition of place dependence to Model 3 also explained a great amount of variance on emotional experience despite being slightly lower than place identity

($\Delta R^2 = 0.43$; $\beta = 0.68$, $p < .001$).

In Model 4, the set of control variables explained a significant amount of variance in destination loyalty ($R^2 = 0.09$, $p < .001$). Physical distance ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < .001$), length of stay ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < .001$), and source of information ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < .001$) were each associated with destination loyalty. The addition of place identity in Model 5 also explained a good amount of variance in destination loyalty ($\Delta R^2 = 0.30$; $\beta = 0.575$, $p < .001$). Similarly, in Model 6, place dependence explained a slightly lower but significant incremental amount of variance in destination loyalty ($\Delta R^2 = 0.21$; $\beta = 0.48$, $p < .001$). Ultimately, in Model 7, emotional experience explained a great amount of incremental variance on destination loyalty ($\Delta R^2 = 0.38$; $\beta = 0.71$, $p < .001$).

4.2. Hypotheses testing

All hypotheses were tested using Models 1, 4 and 14, respectively, of Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro in SPSS 25.0, requesting bootstrapped estimates from 10,000 samples bias-corrected confidence intervals. PROCESS uses an ordinary least squares regression-based path analytic framework to estimate direct and indirect effects and allows for the estimation of moderated mediation (conditional indirect effect) models. PROCESS also provides several important statistics useful for testing mediation and conditional indirect effects, such as the *index of*

Table 2
Discriminant validity result.

Comparisons		Unconstrained model		Constrained model		Chi-square difference		Discriminant validity
		χ^2	DF	χ^2	DF	$\Delta\chi^2$	ΔDF	
PI	PD	101.80	12	113.12	13	11.32	1	Yes
	EE	168.17	25	171.70	26	4.53	1	Yes
	DL	81.73	16	91.20	17	9.47	1	Yes
PD	EE	50.46	18	52.61	19	2.15	1	Yes
	DL	51.73	11	59.19	12	7.36	1	Yes
EE	DL	152.37	24	159.39	25	7.02	1	Yes

Note: DL = Destination Loyalty.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations (n = 812).

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Religion	–	–	0.005	−0.090*								
2. Place of residence	1.83	1.08	−0.058	−0.127**	0.040							
3. Frequency of Visit	3.32	1.30	0.030	0.115**	−0.033	−0.044						
4. Length of stay	1.64	1.26	−0.213**	0.055	0.001	0.121**	−0.015					
5. Source of information	4.29	2.74	−0.048	0.052	−0.016	0.044	0.009	0.107**				
6. Place identity	5.43	1.26	−0.021	0.128**	0.002	−0.128**	0.062	0.185**	−0.107**			
7. Place dependence	5.18	1.36	−0.018	0.037	−0.055	−0.084*	0.004	0.205**	−0.065	0.715**		
8. Emotional experience	5.37	1.17	−0.064	0.131**	−0.032	−0.216**	0.063	0.151**	−0.063	0.728**	0.699**	
9. Destination loyalty	5.55	1.19	−0.025	0.032	0.005	−0.196**	0.042	0.143**	−0.132**	0.604**	0.514**	0.670**

Note: Visitor gender (1 = male; 2 = female). Visitor religion affiliation (1 = Christian; 2 = Hindu; 3 = Muslim).

  * $p < .05$ (2-tailed).
  ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

moderated mediation, which require the combination of parameters across multiple equations (Hayes, Montoya, & Rockwood, 2017). Model 4 in this macro represents a simple mediation model (Hypothesis 1), whereas Model 14 represents a conditional indirect effects model in which an indirect effect is moderated at the *b*-path. Conditional indirect effects were probed for significance different groups of religious affiliation (Christian, Hindu and Muslim), and the *index of moderated mediation* was examined as an additional significance test for the conditional indirect effects. A significant *index of moderated mediation* indicates that "any two conditional indirect effects estimated at different values of the moderator are significantly different from one another" (Hayes, 2015, p. 2). Control variables included a number of visitors' travel characteristics.

Hypothesis 1$_{(a,b)}$ posits that emotional experience mediates the effect of place attachment (through its two dimensions of place identity and place dependence) on destination loyalty and it was tested using Hayes's (2018) Model 4 PROCESS macro. The confidence intervals of the indirect effect of place identity on destination loyalty (H1$_a$: $\beta_{PI \to EE \to DL}$ = 0.336, 95% CI [0.258, 0.380] and place dependence on destination loyalty (H1$_a$: $\beta_{PD \to EE \to DL}$ = 0.353, 95% CI [0.292, 0.431]) via emotional experience did not straddle zero. However, given that the direct effects of both place identity and place dependence were significant, lead us to conclude that emotional experience partially mediated these relationships. The patterns of results suggested that emotional experience is an important link between visitors' attachment to religious place and their future behavior, providing support for Hypotheses 1$_a$ and 1$_b$.

Hypothesis 2$_{(a,b)}$ states that visitor religious affiliation (Christian, Hindu, or Muslim) moderates the relationship between place

attachment and destination loyalty such that these relationships are higher for Christian visitors. The moderating role of religious affiliation in the relationship between place identity and destination loyalty (H2$_a$: $\beta = -0.090$, $p < .05$, CI [−0.171, −0.009]) and place dependence and destination loyalty (H2a: $\beta = -0.089$, $p < .05$, CI [−0.169, −0.011]) were significant. The significant interactions show that the associations of both place identity and place dependence on destination loyalty differ across the visitor's religious group. Process Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) was further used to probe the interaction effects and compute the simple slopes for each visitor's religious group. Figs. 2 and 3 depict these significant interactions and clearly demonstrate that the slopes estimating the effects of place identity and place dependence on destination loyalty were significant and higher for Christian visitors ($b_{PI} = 0.60$, $p < .001$; $b_{PD} = 0.71$, $p < .001$) than Hindu ($b_{PI} = 0.54$, $p < .001$; $b_{PD} = 0.66$, $p < .001$) and Muslim ($b_{PI} = 0.49$, $p < .001$; $b_{PD} = 0.61$, $p < .001$) visitors. This result revealed that Christian visitors were more likely to be loyal to this religious festival than Hindu and Muslim visitors, providing support to Hypothesis 2$_a$ and 2$_b$.

Similarly, the results also lend support for H3, which predicted an interaction effect between visitors' emotional experience and destination loyalty (H3: $\beta = -0.08$, 95% CI [−0.163, −0.001]). Fig. 4 illustrates a graphical representation depicting a significant interaction and that the effect is higher for Christian ($b = 0.71$, $p < .001$) than Hindu ($b = 0.66$, $p < .001$) and Muslim ($b = 0.61$, $p < .001$) visitors, providing support to Hypothesis 3. These findings again suggest that Christian visitors are more likely to have a more pronounced emotional experience during the festival and are more prone to recommend and revisit the destination than other religious groups.

Lastly, we tested Hypothesis 4 by examining the conditional indirect

Table 4

OLS regression analysis of the relationships between place Attachment, emotional experience and destination loyalty.

	Emotional experience			Destination loyalty			
Control variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Physical distance	−0.22***	−0.13***	−0.15	−0.21***	−0.13***	−0.16***	−0.07*
Destination familiarity	0.05	0.01	0.05***	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.01
Length of stay	0.16***	0.03	0.02	0.17***	0.06*	0.07*	0.07*
Source of information	−0.08*	0.01	−0.02	−0.15***	−0.07*	−0.10**	−0.09***
Dependent variables							
Place identity		0.71***			0.575***		
Place dependence			0.68***			0.48***	
Emotional experience							0.65***
R^2	0.10	0.55	0.53	0.09	0.39	0.30	0.47
Adj. R^2	0.09	0.45	0.52	0.09	0.38	0.30	46
F	11.27***	108.64***	99.62***	10.36***	57.2***	38.97***	78.59***
ΔR^2		0.45	0.43		0.30	0.21	0.38

Note: The regression coefficients reported are standardized.

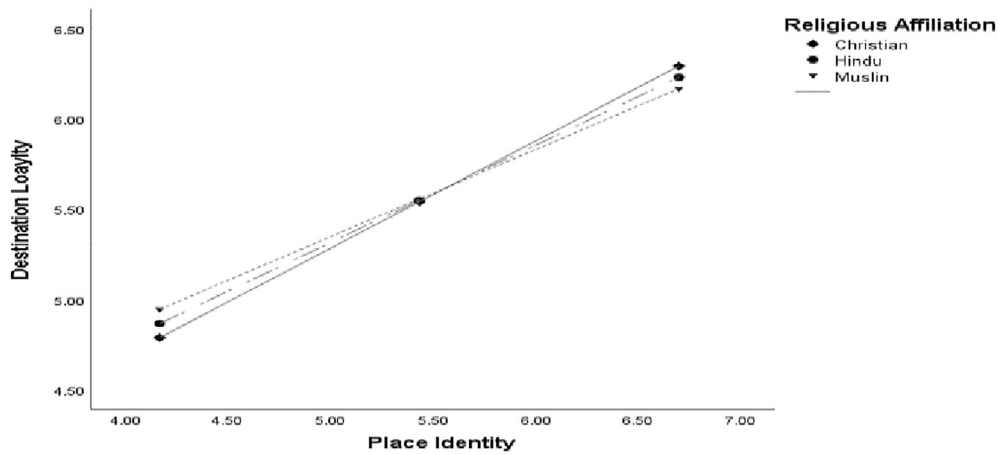 * $p < .05$.
  ** $p < .01$.
  *** $p < .001$.

Fig. 2. Plot of significant interaction between place identity and destination loyalty.

effects (Preacher, Rucker & Hayes 2007) using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro model 14 with a 10,000 bootstrap sample. As shown in Table 5, the *index of moderated mediation* for the indirect relationship between place identity and destination loyalty via emotional experience was found to be insignificant ($\beta = -0.040$, $Boot_{SE} = 0.029$, 95% CI [-0.097, 0.018]). Since the confidence interval of the *index* crossed zero, Hypothesis 4_a was rejected.

Similarly, as summarized in Table 6, Hypothesis 4_b posits that the relationship between place dependence and destination loyalty via emotional experience will be moderated by visitor's religious affiliation. Results revealed that the mediation is moderated since the *index of the moderated mediation* ($\beta = -0.054$, $Boot_{SE} = 0.027$, 95% CI [-0.107, -0.001]) is entirely below zero, revealing that the indirect effect of place dependence at values of different religious groups is negatively related to destination loyalty. This second stage of moderated mediation is depicted graphically in Fig. 5. The conditional indirect effect was stronger for Christian visitors (b = 0.380, 95% CI [0.314, 0.448]), than for Hindu (b = 0.347, 95% CI [0.288, 0.408), or Muslim (b = 0.313, 95% CI [0.244, 0.385]) visitors. Taken together, the result revealed that the conditional indirect effect is conditioned on different groups of religious affiliations, lending support for Hypothesis 4_b.

5. Discussion and implications

Extending previous models concerning destination loyalty (Grappi & Montanari, 2011; Lee et al., 2012; Prayag et al., 2013; Prayag et al., 2017), this work examined relationships between dimensions of place attachment, on-site emotional experiences, and religious affiliation.
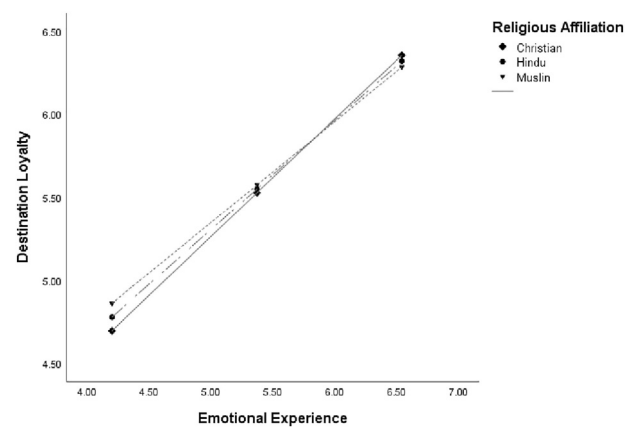

Fig. 4. Plot of significant interaction between emotional experience and destination loyalty.

More specifically, this work provides a glimpse into how visitors from various religious backgrounds arrive at behavioral loyalty for a festival through the mediating role of emotional experiences and moderating role of religious affiliation. Four hypotheses were proposed within the model and we found that perceived emotional experiences mediate the relationship between place attachment and destination loyalty. Nevertheless, visitors' religious affiliation was a second-stage moderator of emotional experience mediating the relationship between place dependence and destination loyalty, and the mediating effect of emotional experience between place dependence and destination loyalty was
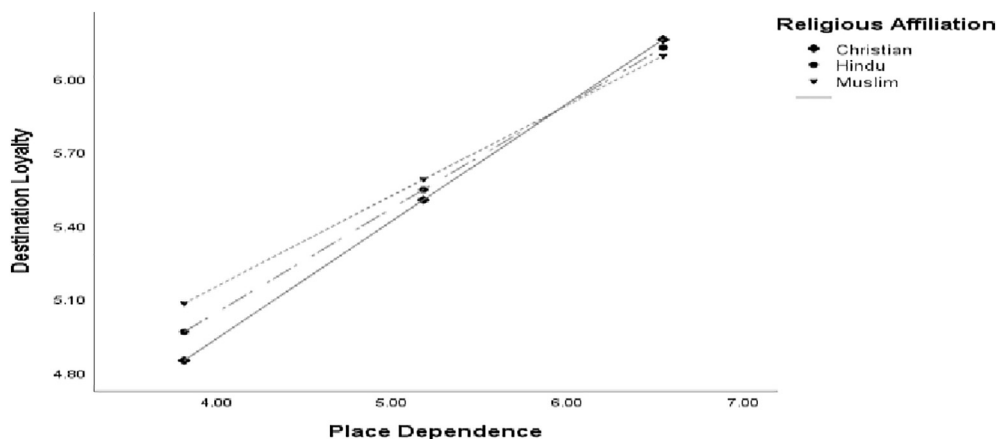

Fig. 3. Plot of significant interaction between place dependence and destination loyalty.

Table 5
Conditional indirect effect of place identity on destination loyalty via emotional experience as a function of religious affiliations.

Antecedent		Consequent			
		M (emotional experience)		Y (destination loyalty)	
		Coeff. (SE)		Coeff. (SE)	
X_1: Place identity	$a_1 \rightarrow$	0.651^{***} (0.023)	$c'_1 \rightarrow$	0.221 (0.035)	
M_1: Emotional experience	–		$b \rightarrow$	0.595^{***} (0.076)	
W: Religious affiliation	–		$c'_2 \rightarrow$	0.377 (0.220)	
M*W: Emo Exp. x rel. Affil.	–		$c'_3 \rightarrow$	−0.065 (0.040)	
U_1: Place of residence	$a_1 \rightarrow$	-0.140^{***} (0.026)		-0.084^{**} (0.029)	
U_2: Frequency of visits	$A_2 \rightarrow$	0.012 (0.021)		0.005 (0.023)	
U_3: Length of stay	$A_3 \rightarrow$	0.022 (0.023)		0.049 (0.025)	
U_4: Source of information	$A_4 \rightarrow$	0.005 (0.010)		-0.032^{**} (0.011)	
Constant	$i_M \rightarrow$	2.130^{***} (0.186)	$i_Y \rightarrow$	1.388^{***} (0.419)	
		$R^2 = 0.549$		$R^2 = 0.495$	
		$(F(7, 804) = 139.926, p < .001)$		$(F(10, 801) = 78.668, p < .001)$	

Moderator	Conditional indirect effect		
Religious groups	Eff.	SE (boot)	Boot 95% CI
Christian	0.363	0.033	[0.229, 0.429]
Hindu	0.338	0.029	[0.283, 0.397]
Muslim	0.313	0.035	[0.248, 0.383]
Index	SE (boot)	Boot 95% CI	
Index of moderated mediation	−0.040	0.029	[−0.097, 0.018]

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

found to be highest among Christian attendees (compared to Hindu and Muslim participants). Conversely, the moderating role of religious affiliation within the meditating effect of emotional experience between the relationship of place identity and destination loyalty was insignificant. Hence, our study elucidates under what circumstances the mediation effect between emotional experience and destination loyalty varies for different groups of festival attendees and suggests that this effect is negatively higher for Christians (relative to Hindu and Muslim attendees). In a nutshell, this study sheds lights on the process whereby the effect of visitors' (from various religions) bond to an event place on their behavior that is shaped by the emotion they experience on-site. As such, implications exist for both the academy and management.

Table 6
Conditional indirect effect of place dependence on destination loyalty via emotional experience as function of religious affiliations.

Antecedent		Consequent			
		M (emotional experience)		Y (destination loyalty)	
		Coeff. (SE)		Coeff. (SE)	
X_1: Place dependence	$a_1 \rightarrow$	0.583^{***} (0.022)	$c'_1 \rightarrow$	0.076^{*} (0.032)	
M_1: Emotional experience	–		$b \rightarrow$	0.745^{***} (0.074)	
W: Religious affiliation	–		$c'_2 \rightarrow$	0.539^{*} (0.226)	
M*W: Emo Exp. x rel. Affil.	–		$c'_3 \rightarrow$	-0.092^{*} (0.041)	
U_1: Place of residence	$a_1 \rightarrow$	-0.164^{***} (0.027)		-0.083^{**} (0.030)	
U_2: Frequency of visits	$a_2 \rightarrow$	0.042^{*} (0.022)		0.012 (0.024)	
U_3: Length of stay	$a_3 \rightarrow$	0.016 (0.022)		0.060^{*} (0.026)	
U_4: Source of information	$a_4 \rightarrow$	−0.009 (0.010)		-0.038^{**} (0.011)	
Constant	$i_M \rightarrow$	2.576^{***} (0.183)	$i_Y \rightarrow$	1.388 (0.419)	
		$R^2 = 0.527$		$R^2 = 0.474$	
		$(F(7, 804) = 128.112, p < .001)$		$(F(10, 801) = 72.263, p < .001)$	

Moderator	Conditionals indirect effect		
Religious Groups	Eff.	SE (boot)	Boot 95% CI
Christian	0.380	0.034	[0.314, 0.448]
Hindu	0.347	0.031	[0.288, 0.408]
Muslim	0.313	0.036	[0.244, 0.385]
Index	SE (boot)	Boot 95% CI	
Index of moderated mediation	−0.054	0.027	[−0.107, −0.001]

* $p < .05$.
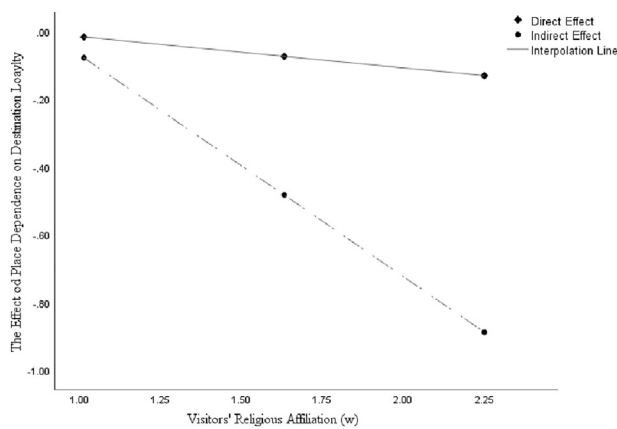** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Fig. 5. Visual representation of the indirect effect of place dependence on destination loyalty via emotional experience at different value of visitors' religious affiliations.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study has several theoretical implications. First, this study aids understanding of how future behavior of visitors depends on how their bond with a place (St. Lawrence Basilica) is mediated by the emotions they experience during the event. Rooted in previous studies within a religious festival context (i.e., Patwardhan et al., 2019; Terzidou, Scarles, & Saunders, 2018), this study demonstrated that affect (e.g., emotional experience) acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between place attachment and individuals' loyalty toward said festivals. In doing so, this study explains the mechanisms that link the effect of place attachment on loyalty via emotional experience. Additionally, this study explores the role of religious affiliation as moderator in the proposed relationships. Understanding how different group of individuals with different religious affiliation form their behavior is important for event planners and destination managers.

Secondly, the findings demonstrate that visitors' emotional experience with the event mediates the relationship between the two dimensions of place attachment and destination loyalty. While the literature does not reflect this link, our results challenge previous research (i.e., Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Hosany et al., 2017), which demonstrates that emotions are antecedents of peoples' bond with the place. Our study carried out in a religious context showed that visitors' emotional experience in a sacred place enhances their sense of attachment to the place and positively influences their future behaviour (Patwardhan et al., 2019; Terzidou et al., 2018). However, our research is in line with previous research (Bigné et al., 2005; Grappi & Montanari, 2011; Lee et al., 2007; Soscia, 2007) showing that emotional experience is an antecedent of visitors' future behaviour. Taken together, our finding indicates that individuals' emotional experience developed in a sacred place is a mediator of people-place bonds and the influences on future loyal behaviour to the festival. This finding fills this gap in the literature by providing evidence that individual's connections with a sacred place depend on emotion experiences occurring on-site.

Third, the results also revealed that visitors' religious affiliation is a significant moderator on the effect of the two dimensions of place attachment on destination loyalty. Using visitors' religion affiliations (Nyaupane et al., 2015), our results demonstrate how affect interacts with religious faith to impact behavior (destination loyalty). Results from our study indicate a significant moderation effect of visitors' religions affiliation on the relationship between place identity and place dependence on loyalty. Grounded in the effect of place attachment on destination loyalty (Patwardhan et al., 2019) we posited that these effects would be higher for Christian visitors compared to Hindu and Muslim visitors. This finding is consistent with current religious

research which indicates visitors of certain religions who attended a religious event related to their faith are likely to develop a stronger bond to the place and the event and be more loyal than other visitors from different faiths (Metreveli & Timothy, 2010; Nyaupane et al., 2015). As anticipated, our study confirms this assumption as Attur Feast is a Christian religious ceremony, however attended by people from different faiths and beliefs (Patwardhan et al., 2019).

Fourth, our findings also showed that the relationships between visitors' emotional experience and destination loyalty is moderated by religious affiliation. This result demonstrates that the effect of visitors' emotional experience developed during Attur Feast ceremony on their future behavior is stronger for Christian attendees than visitors from other faiths. This result is consistent within an affect-behavior system (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) that demonstrates the impact of affect (emotional experience) on behavior (destination loyalty). Our results support previous studies by linking emotional experience to future behavior (Prayag et al., 2013). However, our results also show that this relationship is stronger for Christian visitors than Hindus or Muslims. With that said, religious affiliations of visitors carry an overarching effect associated with feelings and perceptions of experiencing all dimensions of the event (Najafi & Shariff, 2014).

Lastly, we proposed that the indirect effect of place attachment on destination loyalty via emotional experience is moderated by visitors' religious affiliation such that this relationship is stronger for Christian visitors. This hypothesis was partially supported since the indirect effect of place identity on destination loyalty via emotional experience was not to be moderated by visitors' religious affiliation. This may be related to the fact that place identity captures the symbolic or emotional bond to a place as well as addresses how places offer individuals the opportunities to express and affirm their identity (Woosnam, Aleshinloye, Strzelecka, & Erul, 2018) which contribute to a feeling of place belongingness. Conversely, the indirect effect of place dependence on destination loyalty via emotional experience was moderated by visitors' religious affiliation. This makes sense given place dependence captures the importance of a place in supporting visitors' goal achievement and desired activities. To this end, place dependence refers to how a place's physical characteristics (sacred places) or specific attributes (religious event) satisfy visitors' needs (Fu, Yi, Okumus, & Jin, 2019). Our findings demonstrate that the effect of visitors' place dependence on their future behavior, via emotional experience developed during an event, varies according to individuals' religious affiliation. In our case, this relationship is stronger for Christians compared with than other festival participants from different religions.

All in all, the findings contribute to the body of knowledge within heritage tourism by highlighting the need to adopt an experientially based approach to better understand this niche form of tourism (Timothy, 1997; Poria et al., 2004; Kempiak et al., 2017) along with the great opportunities to learn about heritage, traditions, ethnicity, cultural landscapes, and religious values while interacting with the local people (Small et al., 2005). As such, our works makes this additional contribution to the literature.

5.2. Practical implications

This study also provides some important practical implications for destination management organizations (DMO), sacred place managers, events managers and entrepreneurs who are keen to promote the event as a tourist attraction in order to generate economic and social benefits for local hosts. In doing so, it is crucial for DMOs and event planners to work in tandem as they design marketing strategies that capitalize on the events as an emotional experience for visitors and showcase the key role place plays in this such an experience. Findings from this study offer support for the notion that visitors' emotional experiences play a pivotal role in developing bonds to the event setting, which will ultimately contribute to loyalty for the place. In this sense, DMOs and event managers should recognize that visitors' emotional experience is an

important determinant of visitor loyalty to the destination. It is vital for managers to design strategies that allow for the venue and its residents to receive visitors in an intimate and emotional manner by including individuals from the latter group throughout planning and delivery phases of the event—this would not only empower residents but also likely translate into a greater 'buy in' to embrace intimate connections with visitors. Understanding this link can help the destinations and events settings to develop a long-lasting bond with their visitors that, ultimately, will result in visitor loyalty. And of course, when considering loyalty, though it can be difficult, it is more cost effective to retain visitors than attract first-time attendees (Oppermann, 2000).

Our findings also suggest that Christian festivalgoers are those who showed the strongest bond to the festival, highest emotional experience and most pronounced degree of loyalty to the festival. Planners' efforts should be focused on continuing the promotional outreach to potential Christian attendees in an attempt to maintain existing loyalty among individual of the faith. This would be the equivalent of a 'keep up the good work' approach based on an importance-performance analysis (Deng, 2007). However, festival managers and DMOs should develop additional strategies focused on attracting and retaining Hindu and Muslim visitors in order to enhance their bond with the place and enhance their emotional experience. However, such an approach would have to be in accordance with local residents' wishes in attracting additional tourists. In line with this thinking, an initial assessment of residents' desires would be necessary to gauge if indeed, more tourists would be wanted. Careful consideration would need to be made to plan with sustainability in mind so as not to encourage the potential for overtourism in the future.

5.3. Limitations and future research opportunities

Numerous opportunities for future research arise from our findings as well as from study limitations. Though it was by design that the Attur Church Feast was selected (due to participants from multiple religious backgrounds), it is rather difficult to generalize our findings to similar sites. Further research can replicate our model in similar contexts that embrace individuals from various religious backgrounds to determine if consistent relationships within the model exist. Competing models can even be assessed to see whether contextual aspects of the destination or festival contribute significantly to overall behavioral loyalty. Given individuals had a limited amount of time to complete the on-site questionnaire (targeting only departing visitors), we were constrained by the number of measures to include on the self-administered instrument. As such, the model examined was not as robust as we would have liked it to be. Future work may consider amending our model to include additional psychological concepts such as emotions (Hosany et al., 2017) and perceived authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), religious tourism destination images (Huang & Pearce, 2019) as well as intentional measures like willingness to pay (Prayag et al., 2018) or behavioral measures such as prior attendance or length of visit to explain a greater degree of loyalty. Finally, the incongruent finding that the relationship between place identity and destination loyalty via emotional experience was not moderated by religious affiliation needs further attention. Arguably, this may be explained by the fact that identity may be more superficial and not as intimate as the functional nature of place dependence (Woosnam et al., 2018). Further research should incorporate more than just the two dimensions of place attachment (such as place affect and place social bonding as Ramkissoon et al. (2013) have utilized in their recent work) to determine if the conditional indirect effect of religious affiliation on the model relationship is better explained acknowledging additional measures of attachment.

Author statement

Vidya Patwardhan, Valsaraj Payini and Jyothi Mallya were responsible for the data collection and the literature review writing.

Manuel Alector Ribeiro has been involved in the conceptualization of the paper, data analysis and writing-up of the methods, results and discussion and conclusion together with Kyle Maurice Woosnam, who was also responsible for the writing-up of the introduction and the revision of the whole manuscript.

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