

From First Visit to Future Choice: What Drives Destination Loyalty?

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Abstract

This critical systematic review synthesises 67 empirical and conceptual studies on destination loyalty published between 2022 and 2025. Drawing on a structured narrative synthesis guided by PRISMA principles, it examines how motivation, destination image, perceived value, and satisfaction combine to produce loyalty across the arc from first visit to future choice. The review identifies three persistent problems in literature. First, the cognitive mechanisms through which first-time and repeat tourists process destination images differ fundamentally, yet most models treat image as a static input. Second, perceived value remains the least examined of the four pillars, despite evidence that it operates as a competing mediator between image and satisfaction. Third, the satisfaction-loyalty link is contingent rather than universal, shaped by crowding, context, memory, and the affective bonds formed on site. The paper proposes a three-phase framework linking pre-visit motivation and image formation, on-site satisfaction and emotional bonding, and post-visit conversion into loyalty. Seven directions for future research are identified. The findings have implications for theory development and destination management practice.

Keywords: destination loyalty, destination image, tourist satisfaction, perceived value, travel motivation, systematic literature review

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1. Introduction

Destination loyalty has become one of the most extensively studied constructs in tourism research, yet the field continues to grapple with fundamental questions about how a first-time visitor becomes a loyal one. The dominant paradigm traces a linear chain from destination image through satisfaction to loyalty, a pathway replicated across dozens of contexts and populations (Kusumah & Wahyudin, 2024; Kusumah, 2024). This replication has produced empirical certainty in some areas but theoretical complacency in others. The very frequency with which the image-satisfaction-loyalty chain is reproduced may have discouraged scholars from interrogating its boundaries.

The question that motivates this review is not whether satisfaction predicts loyalty. That relationship is well established. The more pressing question is when, how, and for whom that relationship holds, and what else must be in place for a first visit to convert into a future choice. Recent work has begun to reveal that the chain is contingent on factors that the standard model treats as peripheral. Crowding can reverse the direction of the satisfaction-loyalty link depending on the city (Bak et al., 2025). Memory can moderate whether satisfaction translates into return intention at all (Fang & Liu, 2024). The cognitive mechanisms through which tourists form images

differ between first-time and repeat visitors in ways that standard measurement instruments do not capture (Qu et al., 2025). Emotional bonds formed with residents can reshape destination image and drive loyalty through pathways that bypass satisfaction entirely (Yang et al., 2022).

This review synthesises 67 studies published between 2022 and 2025, drawn from Web of Science and Scopus. It organises the literature around four constructs that recur across the corpus: motivation, destination image, perceived value, and satisfaction. Destination loyalty serves as the dependent variable of interest. The aim is not to catalogue every finding but to identify where the field's accumulated assumptions are strained by contrary evidence and to propose a framework that accounts for the full trajectory from first visit to future choice. The review proceeds through methodology, thematic analysis of each construct, an integrated framework, theoretical contributions, directions for future research, managerial implications, and limitations.

2. Methodology

This review employs a structured narrative synthesis approach, following the framework articulated by Greenhalgh et al. (2005). Unlike a systematic review that extracts effect sizes for meta-analysis, a narrative synthesis preserves the

contextual richness of individual studies while identifying patterns and contradictions across the corpus. This approach is suited to a literature in which constructs are measured diversely, samples are culturally heterogeneous, and research designs range from experimental to survey-based (Bigne et al., 2024; Qu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). The review follows PRISMA reporting principles to ensure transparency in study selection and coding (Figure 1).

The corpus was assembled from Web of Science and Scopus using search terms combining destination loyalty, destination image, tourist satisfaction, perceived value, and tourism motivation. The search was restricted to articles published between 2022 and 2025. After screening for relevance and methodological quality, 67 studies were retained. Approximately 70 percent of these studies employ either partial least squares structural equation modelling or covariance-based structural equation modelling. The remainder use experimental designs (Yu, 2024), neuroscientific methods combining eye-

tracking and electroencephalography (Bigne et al., 2024), fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (Wang et al., 2024), impact-asymmetry analysis (Mikulic et al., 2024), implicit association tests (Qu et al., 2025), agent-based modelling (Alvarez et al., 2025), machine learning approaches (Zang et al., 2025), and one systematic literature review of 88 studies (Yap et al., 2025).

The geographic distribution of the corpus reveals a concentration in East Asia, which accounts for roughly 40 percent of studies, and Europe (Bak et al., 2025; Kusumah, 2024). Africa, South Asia, and Latin America are under-represented (Gautam, 2025). Each study was read in full and coded for theoretical construct, measurement approach, sample characteristics, analytical method, and key findings. Attention was paid not only to confirmed hypotheses but to those rejected or untested, since absent and null findings are often the most informative for a critical synthesis.

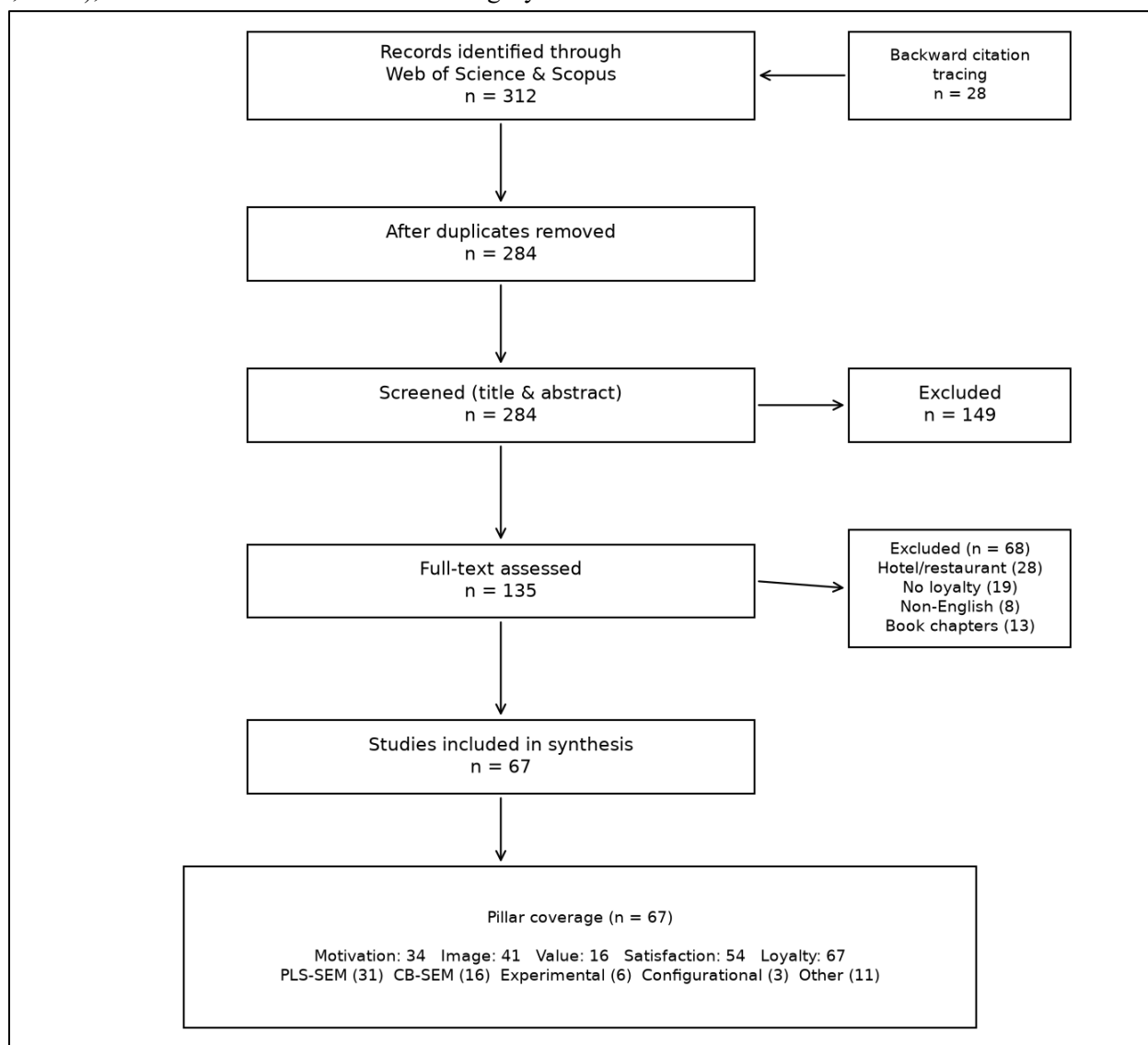


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing study selection process.

Table 1. Methodological characteristics of included studies (N = 67)

Methodological approach	Number of studies	Representative sources
PLS-SEM	31	Hamdy et al. (2024); Kim et al. (2024); Kusumah (2024); Li & Lai (2024); Zaman (2024)
CB-SEM	16	An & Yamashita (2024); Bak et al. (2025); Fang & Liu (2024); Gautam (2025); Han et al. (2025)
Experimental design	6	Bigne et al. (2024); Qu et al. (2025); Yu (2024)
Configurational/asymmetric	3	Mikulic et al. (2024); Wang et al. (2024)
Other (agent-based, ML, SLR, qualitative)	11	Alvarez et al. (2025); Yap et al. (2025); Zang et al. (2025)

3. Findings

This section synthesises the 67 studies across five thematic pillars: motivation, destination image, perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty. Table 2

summarises the distribution of studies across these pillars and identifies the key gaps that the review addresses.

Table 2. Distribution of studies across the five pillars and identified gaps

Pillar	Studies (n)	Coverage (%)	Key gap identified
Motivation	34	50.7	Rarely traced to loyalty outcomes; stops at intention
Destination image	41	61.2	Static measurement ignores cognitive transition (first-time vs. repeat)
Perceived value	16	23.9	Least examined pillar; competing mediator role untested
Satisfaction	54	80.6	Assumed linear and symmetric; asymmetry and context ignored
Destination loyalty	67	100.0	Predominantly intention-based; few behavioural measures

Table 3. Key findings and evidence gap by pillar

Pillar	Key finding	Representative source
Motivation	Richly conceptualised but rarely traced to loyalty; stops at intention	Crompton (2024); Dedeoglu et al. (2023)
Destination image	First-time and repeat tourists process images through different cognitive mechanisms	Qu et al. (2025); Styliadis & Terzidou (2024)
Perceived value	Functions as a competing mediator alongside satisfaction, not merely an antecedent	Hamdy et al. (2024); Kim et al. (2024)
Satisfaction	Asymmetric and context-contingent; not universally related to loyalty	Mikulic et al. (2024); Bak et al. (2025)
Loyalty	Multi-layered outcome shaped by memory, emotional bonds, and cognitive transition	Han et al. (2025); Li & Lai (2024); Fang & Liu (2024)

3.1 Motivation: An Antecedent Without a Destination

Motivation is commonly positioned at the origin of the destination-choice process, yet its empirical connection to loyalty remains the weakest link in the chain. The most comprehensive recent conceptualisation comes from Crompton (2024), who proposes a six-motive taxonomy comprising curiosity, boredom alleviation, disinhibited play, biophilia replenishment, reinforcing bonds, and ego-enhancement. This taxonomy is conceptual rather than empirical and does not extend to downstream loyalty constructs. Its value lies in providing a vocabulary that recognises the plurality of push factors driving travel. Yet the very richness of the taxonomy exposes a limitation: if motivation has six or more distinct dimensions, treating it as a single

composite predictor of downstream constructs is theoretically reductive.

Empirical studies that link motivation to satisfaction and behavioural intentions tend to focus on specific segments rather than testing the motivation-loyalty link directly. In spa and wellness tourism, motivation has been shown to positively influence service quality perception and tourist satisfaction, though the path to satisfaction is weaker than the path to service quality evaluation (Xia et al., 2024). In the same context, emotional wellness emerges as the strongest predictor of perceived emotional value, and all three dimensions of perceived value predict behavioural intentions (Kim et al., 2024). In sport tourism, achievement and escape function as motivational factors that shape event attitude, which subsequently generates both event and destination loyalty through the mediating role of destination image (An &

Yamashita, 2024). Consumer-generated content and envy have been shown to boost intrinsic travel motivations, which then shape the desire to visit and visit intention, though this model does not extend to loyalty (Dedeoglu et al., 2023).

The aggregate picture is that motivation is richly conceptualised but weakly linked to loyalty. The field has sophisticated taxonomies of push factors (Crompton, 2024) but few studies tracing any specific motivational dimension through repeat visitation or recommendation. Motivation studies frequently stop at intention, leaving the gap between intention and loyalty behaviour unexamined. This absence of a motivation-loyalty linkage represents one of the most consequential structural gaps in the reviewed literature.

3.2 Destination Image: The Cognitive Transition Problem

Destination image is the most frequently examined antecedent of both satisfaction and loyalty in the corpus. The construct is typically operationalised as having cognitive and affective components, sometimes extended to include a conative dimension (Stylidis & Terzidou, 2024). It has been studied through an unusually diverse range of methods, including self-report surveys, implicit association tests, eye-tracking combined with electroencephalography, social media content analysis, and machine learning (Bigne et al., 2024; Qu et al., 2025; Zang et al., 2025). This methodological diversity reflects the construct's complexity and reveals that image is far less stable than the standard model assumes.

The most provocative challenge to conventional image theory comes from evidence that first-time and repeat tourists process destination images through fundamentally different cognitive mechanisms. Using an Implicit Association Test across three experiments, Qu et al. (2025) demonstrate that for repeat tourists, implicit and explicit image measures are significantly correlated, while for first-time tourists, no such correspondence exists. Familiarity mediates this relationship: when familiarity is controlled, the visit frequency interaction loses significance. This finding has profound implications for the standard model. If first-time visitors cannot reliably access the explicit images that questionnaires measure, then the cognitive foundation of the entire chain is unstable for precisely the population that loyalty models seek to convert. The image that drives a first visit may not be the same image that sustains loyalty, a distinction that existing models fail to accommodate (Qu et al., 2025).

The image formation process has also been shown to differ between non-visitor subgroups. Among individuals with no interest in visiting a destination,

cognitive image drives both affective and conative image, and familiarity shapes cognitive image. Among those who cannot visit due to constraints, novelty seeking drives all three image components, and familiarity has a stronger effect on affective image (Stylidis & Terzidou, 2024). This demonstrates that the psychological mechanisms converting non-visitors into potential visitors are segment specific. The practical implication is that conversion strategies must differentiate between non-visitors who lack interest and those who face constraints.

The content of destination image varies not only by familiarity and visitor status but by cultural context and the method used to measure it. Metaphorical destination slogans have been shown to enhance travel intention specifically for unknown destinations through increased imagery processing, reinforcing the familiarity-as-moderator pattern observed across the corpus (Yu, 2024). Neuroscientific evidence reveals that user-generated content is perceived as more persuasive than firm-generated content and that self-reported and unconscious measures of image processing diverge, suggesting that survey-only studies may miss critical attentional and emotional dynamics (Bigne et al., 2024). Computational analysis of 16,085 social media reviews using topic modelling has revealed that historical culture generates the highest positive sentiment among destination image attributes, while ticket purchasing and service facilities generate the highest negative sentiment (Zang et al., 2025). Sustainability-based decompositions of image have shown that the socioeconomic dimension is the strongest predictor of satisfaction, exceeding both cultural and environmental dimensions (Kusumah, 2024). And in a culturally specific extension of image theory, Muslim-friendly destination image dimensions have been shown to independently drive perceived value and satisfaction among Muslim travellers (Hamdy et al., 2024).

The collective implication is that destination image is not a static construct measured uniformly across populations. It varies by familiarity, by the tourist's reasons for non-visitation, by cultural context, and by the method used to measure it. The field's reliance on self-report surveys of explicit image may be systematically misrepresenting the cognitive processes that underlie the image-satisfaction-loyalty chain.

3.3 Perceived Value: The Missing Mediator

Perceived value appears in fewer than 25 percent of the studies in the corpus, making it the least examined of the four pillars. This scarcity is theoretically consequential because value may function as a competing mediator to satisfaction rather than as a mere antecedent. When both value and satisfaction

are modelled simultaneously, they exert independent effects on loyalty, suggesting that tourists make loyalty decisions based on both affective evaluations and cognitive cost-benefit assessments (Hamdy et al., 2024). Studies that omit value may attribute its explanatory power to satisfaction, thereby inflating the apparent strength of the satisfaction-loyalty link.

The most complete treatment of perceived value demonstrates that it mediates the relationship between destination image and satisfaction, and that both value and satisfaction independently drive actual visit behaviour (Hamdy et al., 2024). This dual pathway finding challenges the standard model in which value, if it appears at all, is positioned as an antecedent of satisfaction alone. The fact that value exerts a direct effect on behaviour independent of satisfaction suggests that a tourist can be satisfied yet not perceive sufficient value to return. Multi-dimensional decompositions of value into emotional, utilitarian, and epistemic components have revealed that all three predict behavioural intentions, with emotional value emerging as the strongest predictor (Kim et al., 2024). The dominance of emotional value reinforces a broader pattern observed across the corpus: affective dimensions of the tourist experience consistently outperform cognitive ones in predicting downstream outcomes.

If value operates as a competing mediator alongside satisfaction, then models that omit it may be misattributing to satisfaction effects that properly belong to value. The field cannot determine the relative contributions of value and satisfaction as long as the majority of studies fail to measure value at all. This specification problem represents a structural blind spot that the next generation of loyalty models must address.

3.4 Satisfaction: Asymmetry, Context-Dependency, and Configurational Logic

Satisfaction is the most studied construct in the corpus, appearing in approximately 80 percent of studies, and the image-satisfaction-loyalty chain is the most replicated pathway in the literature (Kusumah & Wahyudin, 2024; Kusumah, 2024). This replication has produced confidence but also complacency. The most innovative recent studies are precisely those that reveal the limitations of the standard satisfaction model, exposing it as nonlinear, asymmetric, and contextually contingent.

The assumption that attribute performance is symmetrically related to satisfaction has been directly challenged by impact-asymmetry analysis. Most wellness destination attributes function primarily as dissatisfiers rather than satisfiers, meaning their poor performance penalises satisfaction far more than excellent performance rewards it. Cleanliness, personal safety, and punctuality have significantly

greater potential to generate dissatisfaction than satisfaction, while only service quality and destination atmosphere function as delighters (Mikulic et al., 2024). This nonlinearity is invisible to the linear structural equation models that dominate the corpus. The image-satisfaction-loyalty chain may break at the satisfaction formation stage when basic attributes underperform, regardless of how strong the destination image is. Reinforcing this finding, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis has demonstrated that multiple equifinal paths lead to high satisfaction and that causal asymmetry exists: the configurations producing high satisfaction are not mirror opposites of those producing low satisfaction (Wang et al., 2024).

The contextual contingency of satisfaction has been demonstrated through multi-city comparative designs. A study of London, Paris, and Rome revealed that crowding perception has opposite effects on destination satisfaction across cities: crowding increases satisfaction in Rome but decreases it in London, with travel satisfaction moderating these effects differently across contexts (Bak et al., 2025). This finding challenges the universal applicability of the satisfaction-loyalty chain and demonstrates that single-city studies cannot capture the contextual variability that characterises the relationship. Further complicating the picture, evidence from a festival context shows that none of the mediation paths through place attachment were significant, suggesting that satisfaction's effect on loyalty is largely direct rather than transmitted through attachment (Gautam, 2025). This null finding challenges the assumed universality of attachment-mediated loyalty pathways.

The technological context in which satisfaction is formed represents another dimension that the standard model does not accommodate. A systematic review of 88 smart tourism technology studies has identified perceived ease of use, usefulness, personalisation, and perceived enjoyment as key antecedents of technology-mediated satisfaction, with technology readiness and innovativeness serving as moderators (Yap et al., 2025). Satisfaction with smart tourism technology drives behavioural intentions including revisit intention and loyalty, positioning technological experience as a distinct satisfaction domain operating alongside traditional destination-attribute satisfaction.

3.5 Loyalty: From Behavioural Intention to Multi-Stage Commitment

Destination loyalty is the outcome variable around which the entire corpus is organised, yet its conceptualisation varies considerably across studies. Most studies operationalise loyalty as a combination of intention to revisit and intention to recommend, while few measure actual behaviour. This reliance on behavioural intention rather than behaviour is a

limitation that pervades the literature. Recent work, however, has begun to unpack loyalty into sequential stages and to identify drivers beyond satisfaction that expand the construct's theoretical boundaries.

The application of Oliver's (1997) four-stage loyalty framework to senior film tourists has demonstrated that the experiencescape predicts cognitive loyalty, which drives affective loyalty, which in turn generates conative loyalty (Han et al., 2025). Critically, affective loyalty also predicts overall destination image and destination attachment, reversing the conventional image-to-loyalty direction. Rather than image driving loyalty, loyalty at the affective stage reshapes image. This causal reversal suggests that emotional bonding formed through experiences can fundamentally alter how destinations are perceived. A complementary chain mediation model has shown that emotional bonds with residents form first, reshape destination image, and ultimately drive loyalty, rather than image preceding emotion (Yang et al., 2022). The convergence of these findings reinforces the view that the standard model's causal ordering may be incorrect.

The relational bonds a tourist forms with a destination have been shown to matter more for loyalty than transactional satisfaction. In a model integrating destination relationship quality, attachment emerged as the strongest direct predictor of loyalty, followed by satisfaction, while trust operated only through indirect paths (Li & Lai, 2024). In community tourism, tourist interaction has been identified as the strongest predictor of subjective well-being, which in turn drives both satisfaction and loyalty (Li et al., 2024). The role of social interaction in producing the emotional outcomes that drive loyalty underscores the limitations of models that treat loyalty as a purely cognitive evaluation of destination attributes.

Several novel loyalty drivers have been identified that introducing dimensions the standard model does not accommodate. Travel fear of missing out has been positioned as a mediator between destination competitiveness and loyalty, introducing a social-comparison-driven anxiety mechanism into the loyalty framework (Zaman, 2024). Memory has been shown to moderate the satisfaction-to-loyalty pathway, suggesting that loyalty conversion depends on how vividly satisfaction is retained over time (Fang & Liu, 2024). These emergent mechanisms collectively suggest that loyalty is not a simple function of satisfaction, but a multi-layered outcome shaped by memory, social bonds, psychological anxieties, and emotional attachment (Fang & Liu, 2024; Li & Lai, 2024; Yang et al., 2022; Zaman, 2024).

A revealing tension emerges when the studies replicating the standard chain are compared with

those that complicate it. The full-mediation result, in which satisfaction fully mediates the image-loyalty relationship, appears in contexts where the destination is secondary to the event being attended (Kusumah & Wahyudin, 2024). Studies examining contexts where the destination is the primary object of evaluation tend to find that the chain is incomplete, reversed, or moderated by factors the model does not include. This pattern suggests that the standard model may hold only in contexts where destination loyalty is incidental rather than central to the tourist's experience.

4. An Integrated First-Visit-to-Future-Choice Framework

Drawing on the synthesis above, this review proposes a three-phase framework that traces the trajectory from first visit to future choice. The framework is not a new structural model but an organising logic that highlights what the standard model obscures (Figure 2). The first phase, the pre-visit phase, encompasses motivation and image formation. During this phase the tourist forms initial images of the destination through marketing exposure, social media discourse, and motivational readiness. The studies reviewed demonstrate that this image is not uniformly formed. It varies by familiarity, by cultural context, and by the cognitive mechanisms through which it is processed (Bigne et al., 2024; Qu et al., 2025; Styliadis & Terzidou, 2024; Yu, 2024). The cognitive transition problem is most acute here. The images that first-time tourists hold may not correspond to the explicit images that standard instruments measure, making the downstream chain unstable for the population that matters most for loyalty formation (Qu et al., 2025).

The second phase, the on-site phase, encompasses satisfaction, perceived value, and emotional bonding. During this phase the tourist evaluates the destination through cognitive and affective processes. Satisfaction formation is asymmetric, with basic attributes functioning as dissatisfiers whose poor performance disproportionately penalises satisfaction (Mikulic et al., 2024). Perceived value operates as a parallel cognitive assessment alongside affective satisfaction, producing effects on behaviour independent of satisfaction (Hamdy et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024). Emotional bonds, including attachment and solidarity, form alongside or even prior to cognitive evaluations and may reshape the image that the tourist holds (Han et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2022). Place attachment and memorable experiences deepen the relational bond beyond transactional satisfaction (Fang & Liu, 2024; Gautam, 2025).

The third phase, the post-visit to future choice phase, encompasses the conversion of satisfaction and emotional bonds into loyalty. This conversion is not

automatic. Memory moderates the satisfaction-loyalty pathway (Fang & Liu, 2024). Familiarity, accumulated through repeat visitation, changes the cognitive mechanisms through which images are processed, shifting tourists from bottom-up, stimulus-driven processing to top-down, schema-driven processing (Qu et al., 2025). Transport mode and cultural context moderate the crowding-satisfaction-loyalty chain (Bak et al., 2025). The sequential loyalty stages described by Han et al. (2025) and the

relationship quality chain proposed by Li and Lai (2024) capture the progressive deepening of the tourist-destination bond through satisfaction, trust, commitment, and attachment. The framework's central claim is that loyalty is not the endpoint of a linear chain but the outcome of a dynamic process that unfolds across three phases, each of which introduces contingencies that the standard model treats as absent.

Figure 2. First-Visit-to-Future-Choice Framework

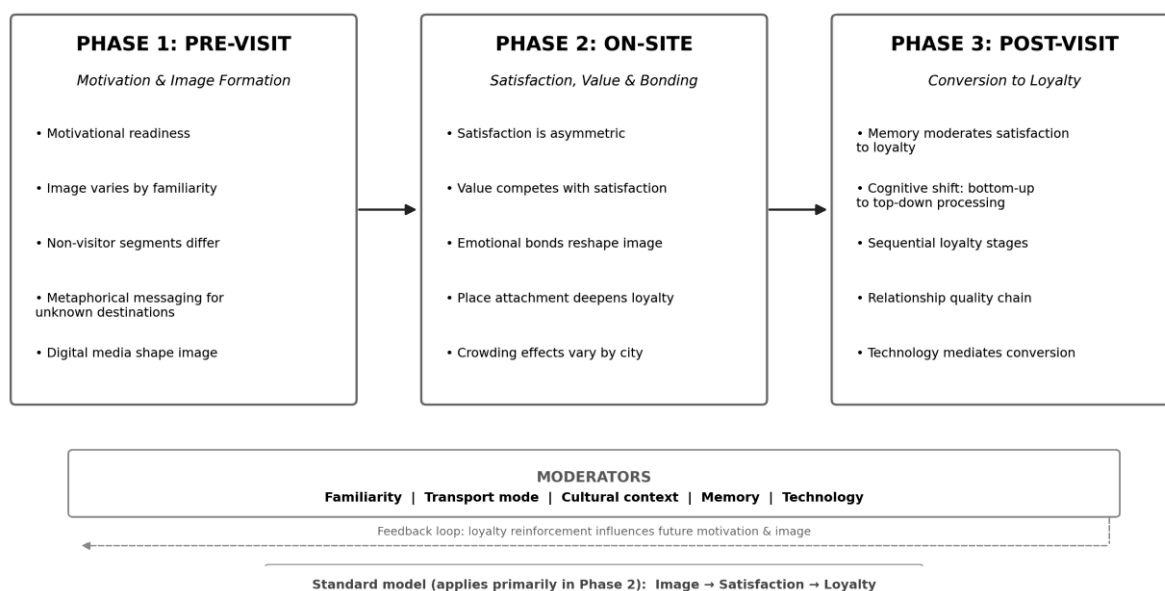


Figure 2. First-visit-to-future-choice framework: A three-phase model of destination loyalty formation

5. Theoretical Contributions

This review makes three theoretical contributions to the destination loyalty literature. The first is the identification of the cognitive transition problem. The standard model assumes that image is measured identically across populations, but this assumption is violated for the very population that loyalty models seek to convert. The cognitive transition from first-time to repeat visitor is not merely a matter of accumulating information but involves a shift from implicit to explicit image processing that current measurement instruments do not capture (Qu et al., 2025). This implies that loyalty models must be phase-specific rather than universal.

The second contribution is the identification of perceived value as a missing competing mediator. When value and satisfaction are modelled simultaneously, they exert independent effects on loyalty (Hamdy et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024). The majority of studies in the corpus omit value entirely, which means that the standard model may be misattributing to satisfaction effects that properly belong to value. The widely replicated image-satisfaction-loyalty chain may be a truncated version

of a more complex structure in which image leads to both value and satisfaction, which then independently drive loyalty. Until value is routinely measured alongside satisfaction, the field cannot determine the relative contributions of these two constructs to loyalty.

The third contribution is the demonstration that the satisfaction-loyalty link is contingent rather than universal. Attribute-satisfaction relationships are asymmetric, with most attributes functioning as dissatisfiers whose poor performance disproportionately penalises satisfaction (Mikulic et al., 2024). The same attribute can have opposite effects on satisfaction across cities (Bak et al., 2025). Mediating mechanisms assumed by the standard model are not always operative (Gautam, 2025). These contingencies are invisible to the linear, symmetric, single-context structural equation models that dominate the corpus, and they indicate that the satisfaction-loyalty link is moderated by context, by the asymmetry of attribute performance, and by the presence or absence of mediating mechanisms that the standard model assumes are always present.

6. Directions for Future Research

Seven directions for future research emerge from this synthesis. Table 4 summarises these priorities alongside their rationale and suggested methodological approaches. The first concerns the motivation-loyalty chain, which remains under-mapped. The field has rich motivational taxonomies

(Crompton, 2024) but few studies tracing specific motivational dimensions through to actual loyalty behaviour. Future research should link specific push factors to repeat visitation and recommendation, not merely to intention (Dedeoglu et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2024).

Table 4. Seven priority directions for future research

Priority	Research gap	Rationale	Suggested approach
1	Motivation to loyalty	Motivation is rarely traced beyond intention	Longitudinal tracking of motive profiles
2	Perceived value	Competing mediator role untested in most models	Dual-mediation SEM with value and satisfaction
3	Linear model dominance	Asymmetry and nonlinearity missed by SEM	Impact-asymmetry analysis, fsQCA
4	Cognitive transition	First-time vs. repeat image processing differs	IAT-based measurement, separate models
5	Methodological monoculture	85% of studies use PLS-SEM or CB-SEM	Neuroscience, experiments, longitudinal
6	Geographic concentration	East Asia and Europe over-represented	Cross-cultural multi-site studies
7	Technology and loyalty	Technology-mediated satisfaction under-studied	Mixed-methods, technology-integrated models

The second concerns perceived value. The under-examination of value means that the field's models may be systematically misattributing effects (Hamdy et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024). Future studies should routinely measure value alongside satisfaction and should test whether value and satisfaction operate as competing mediators or as sequential ones.

The third concerns the dominance of linear, symmetric models. The findings from impact-asymmetry analysis and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis demonstrate that linear structural equation models miss nonlinearities and asymmetries central to the satisfaction process (Mikulic et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Future research should employ configurational and asymmetric approaches to test whether the image-satisfaction-loyalty chain holds under all attribute-performance conditions.

The fourth concerns the cognitive transition problem. The finding that first-time and repeat tourists process images through fundamentally different mechanisms demands research that develops measurement instruments capable of capturing implicit as well as explicit image (Qu et al., 2025). Future research should test separate models for first-time and repeat visitors rather than treating all visitors as a homogeneous population.

The fifth concerns methodological monoculture. Approximately 85 percent of the corpus employs variance-based or covariance-based structural equation modelling with cross-sectional survey data (Yap et al., 2025). Neuroscientific approaches (Bigne et al., 2024), implicit association tests (Qu et al., 2025), agent-based modelling (Alvarez et al., 2025),

and longitudinal designs remain rare. Diversifying methods would strengthen causal inference and capture subconscious processes invisible to self-report.

The sixth concerns geographic concentration. The over-representation of East Asia and Europe and the under-representation of Africa, South Asia, and Latin America means that the field's models are built on a narrow empirical base (Bak et al., 2025; Gautam, 2025; Kusumah, 2024). Future research should prioritise under-studied regions as tests of whether the standard model holds where cultural, economic, and infrastructural conditions differ.

The seventh concerns the technology-loyalty pathway. A systematic review of 88 smart tourism technology studies has identified technology satisfaction as a distinct domain, yet few studies in the main corpus link technology-mediated satisfaction to destination loyalty (Yap et al., 2025). As augmented reality, virtual tourism, and AI-driven personalisation reshape the pre-visit and on-site experience, the technology-loyalty pathway requires dedicated investigation.

7. Managerial Implications

The findings carry several implications for destination managers. The most immediate is that satisfaction is necessary but not sufficient for loyalty. Managers who invest in raising satisfaction scores without attending to perceived value may find that increases in satisfaction do not translate into repeat visitation, given that value and satisfaction exert independent effects on behaviour (Hamdy et al., 2024). The asymmetry of attribute-satisfaction

relationships implies that managers should identify which attributes function as dissatisfiers and allocate resources first to eliminating deficiencies in these before investing in delighters (Mikulic et al., 2024). The contextual contingency of crowding effects demonstrates that crowding management strategies must be city-specific, as what reduces satisfaction in London may enhance it in Rome (Bak et al., 2025). The role of memory in moderating the satisfaction-loyalty pathway implies that post-visit engagement strategies should focus on memory reinforcement to amplify the satisfaction-to-loyalty conversion (Fang & Liu, 2024). The relationship quality chain implies that loyalty-building interventions should target progressively deeper relational stages, moving from satisfaction through trust and commitment to attachment (Li & Lai, 2024).

8. Limitations and Conclusion

This review has several limitations. The corpus was restricted to articles published between 2022 and 2025, which means that foundational studies published earlier are referenced but not systematically reviewed. The structured narrative synthesis approach, while preserving contextual richness, does not produce the pooled effect sizes that a meta-analysis would. The geographic imbalance in the corpus means that the framework proposed here is built on a sample that under-represents several major world regions (Bak et al., 2025; Gautam, 2025).

Despite these limitations, the review's central argument holds. The standard image-satisfaction-loyalty model has served the field well as a first approximation, but the evidence accumulated in recent years reveals that it is incomplete in three specific ways. It does not account for the cognitive transition that distinguishes first-time from repeat visitors (Qu et al., 2025). It does not accommodate perceived value as a competing mediator (Hamdy et al., 2024). It treats the satisfaction-loyalty link as universal when it is contingent (Bak et al., 2025; Gautam, 2025; Mikulic et al., 2024). The three-phase framework proposed here directs attention to the phases and contingencies that the standard model neglects. The trajectory from first visit to future choice is more complex, more dynamic, and more contextually sensitive than the linear chain suggests. Realising the research agenda outlined above will require methodological diversification, longitudinal designs, and an explicit accounting of the cognitive mechanisms that distinguish visitors at different stages of the loyalty trajectory.

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