tourism and hospitality

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The Mediating Role of Place Attachment in Anime Pilgrimage: Linking Destination Attractiveness to Destination Loyalty

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Abstract

Traveling to sites appearing in anime works, commonly known as anime pilgrimages, has become prominent over the past two decades. Previous studies have shown that anime pilgrims exhibit strong destination loyalty, including positive word-of-mouth and site-enhancement activities. However, few studies have identified the causal mechanisms between destination loyalty of anime pilgrims and their antecedents. Based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) hypothesis, this study developed a hypothetical model to determine how place attachment mediates the causal link between visual media-induced destination attractiveness and destination loyalty in anime pilgrimage. Using online survey data from anime pilgrims in Japan (n = 365), this study analyzed the proposed model through structural equation modeling (SEM) and identified two main findings. First, place attachment as a second-order factor consists of two dimensions: place personal attachment and place social bonding. Second, place attachment has a significant mediating role in the relationship between destination attractiveness and anime pilgrims' loyalty. This study offers theoretical and managerial contributions for advancing tourism research and destination marketing in the context of visual media-induced tourism.

Keywords: anime pilgrimage; visual media-induced tourism; place attachment; destination loyalty; Japan

1. Introduction

Anime—Japanese animation—has garnered a massive global fandom, accompanied by rapid growth in both international market size and production volume (Nihon Doga Kyokai, 2025). Since the late 1990s, anime narratives have increasingly targeted young adults rather than children. Within this trend, Kyoto Animation, known for producing numerous slice-of-life and school-life works, played a significant role in popularizing visits to real-world locations featured in anime—commonly known as the "anime pilgrimage" (Tsugata, 2022). This phenomenon became particularly prominent in the late 2000s (Okamoto, 2015).

Anime pilgrimage is a form of visual media-induced tourism. Film-induced tourism is defined as "visitation to sites where movies and television programs have been filmed as well as to tours to production studios" (Beeton, 2016, p. 13). However, the term "filming" does not accurately apply to anime because this type of art is created through drawing instead of live action. Generally, the anime pilgrimage phenomenon refers to "on-location tourism," where tourists visit real places that appear in visual media, which differs from production studio visits (Beeton, 2016, pp. 14–17). Furthermore, it likely has distinctive characteristics as a tourism phenomenon (Tung et al., 2017). Existing literature on anime

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Lewis Ting On Cheung

Received: 17 December 2025
Revised: 24 January 2026
Accepted: 3 February 2026
Published: 9 February 2026

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pilgrimage studies has primarily focused on anime pilgrims' activities due to their unique behavioral patterns (e.g., Yamamura, 2009). Post-visit activities, such as strong revisit intention, word-of-mouth (WOM) engagement, and any other voluntary behaviors, are distinct (Okamoto, 2013, 2015; Yamamura, 2015). These activities can be viewed as forms of destination loyalty (Moore et al., 2013; Oppermann, 1999). Many tourism researchers are interested in destination loyalty and its predictors because it dramatically benefits tourist destinations: of these, place attachment (PA) has been treated as a significant antecedent (Han et al., 2019; Hosany et al., 2016; J. Lee et al., 2012; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Xu & Zhang, 2016; Yuksel et al., 2010). PA is a crucial concept in tourism and recreation research, conceptually defined as "human–place bonding" or "the interaction between humans and places," and it "often emerges as individuals get to know the setting and endow it with value" (G. Kyle et al., 2005, p. 155). Researchers have found that anime fans often develop a strong sense of attachment to places that were used as models for anime settings (Ocone, 2023), similar to the sense of place film tourists experience when visiting sites relating to screen scenes (Kim, 2010). However, anime pilgrims are more likely to feel PA towards anime locations (Tsumura et al., 2020). According to Mouri (2019), anime pilgrims' PA to anime-related places is more extreme than that of destination residents or students.

Accordingly, it is expected that the destination loyalty among anime pilgrims can be encouraged by strong PA toward their destinations. However, prior studies on anime pilgrimage have primarily been based on ethnological and descriptive approaches (Yamamura, 2020). As such, anime pilgrimage studies have not yet identified the causality between PA and destination loyalty, although anime tourism students have repeatedly referred to these variables. Although quantitative research has begun examining anime fans' motivation to visit anime-themed destinations (e.g., Kirillova et al., 2019; A. Ono et al., 2020), quantitative arguments on the preceding factors of anime pilgrims' behavior remain scarce. Exploring how a high PA level amongst anime pilgrims affects destination loyalty is crucial. Fundamentally, research examining how visual media fans' PA affects destination loyalty is scarce.

To fill these gaps, this study develops and tests a causal mediation model in which destination attractiveness serves as an exogenous antecedent of destination loyalty, with PA functioning as a key mediating mechanism in the context of visual media–induced tourism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Anime Pilgrimage

Anime refers to Japanese animation works (Napier, 2001). Unlike Western animated films produced by studios such as Disney and Pixar, anime has distinct production processes, market characteristics, and societal impacts (Tung et al., 2017). While Western animation is traditionally perceived as child-oriented entertainment, anime features diverse themes, settings, and narratives, appealing to a broad audience (Napier, 2001). Since the 2000s, the global anime market has expanded significantly, reaching approximately USD 25.3 billion (3.84 trillion JPY) in 2024, compared to approximately USD 9.0 billion (1.10 trillion JPY) in 2002 (Nihon Doga Kyokai, 2025).

Anime pilgrimage, as a form of visual media-induced tourism, can be broadly defined as travel to sites portrayed in or associated with anime (Tung et al., 2017), and it specifically refers to visits to locations depicted in anime works (Kirillova et al., 2019). The rise in mixed-media marketing strategies by anime companies since the 2000s—promoting anime across TV, films, books, and other media—has contributed to this tourism trend's growing popularity (Ocone, 2023; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015).

Anime pilgrimage is distinct from other forms of visual media tourism. It requires the anime pilgrim's proactive approach to integrate the real world with the virtual world of fictitious anime stories (C. Li et al., 2024). Before traveling, fans must watch or rewatch anime and learn about its content to make their pilgrimage meaningful. Sometimes, they must identify sites featured in the anime world by cross-referencing them with actual place information (C. Li et al., 2024). During visits, pilgrims are involved in activities, including taking photos, replicating anime scenes and re-enacting the protagonists' actions to immerse themselves (Liu et al., 2022). Anime pilgrims are likely to engage in social interaction with localities (Okamoto, 2015; A. Ono et al., 2020). Some enthusiastic anime pilgrims contribute to creating pilgrimage sites by leaving anime-themed goods at local landmarks (Okamoto, 2015). Post-pilgrimage activities are also highly proactive. They include behavior such as sharing positive impressions of anime locations online, publishing fan-made magazines for visit recommendations, and participating in cooperative activities, such as donations and environmental efforts after repeat visits (C. Li et al., 2024; Mori, 2022; Okamoto, 2015; Yamamura, 2009). Furthermore, several enthusiastic anime pilgrims prefer relocation to neighborhoods serving as anime models. Prior research claims that this action is likely caused by socialization based on exchanges with others during visits (Ebisu, 2021; Okamoto, 2015).

2.2. Place Attachment

Attachment to places has received significant attention in several research areas (Dang & Weiss, 2021). Most academics perceive PA as multidimensional (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) conceptualized it into two dimensions: place dependence and place identity, based on the argument that the values assigned to an object cannot be explained solely by its physical or "functional properties" (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989, p. 2). Place dependence refers to "the importance of a place in providing features and conditions that support specific goals or desired activities" (Williams & Vaske, 2003, p. 831). This dimension relates to "the qualities of a particular place and the relative quality of comparable alternative places" (Halpenny, 2010, p. 410). Visitors, depending on a specific destination's functions, will likely develop an attachment to that location. For instance, a beach could be evaluated as a place that best functions to fulfil one's desired marine sport. Place identity mentions "the symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life", a so-called "emotional attachment" (Williams & Vaske, 2003, p. 831). It contributes to "individuals' self-identity" (Halpenny, 2010, p. 410), as "places with which people identify often reflect components of their own identities" (G. T. Kyle et al., 2004, p. 443). An example is surfers' feelings when they see a particular beach as an extension of themselves.

Although place dependence and place identity have been effective constructs thus far in the literature, additional PA components have been identified to better capture the emotional and social dimensions of human-place connections. According to Dang and Weiss (2021), the most comprehensive argument encompassed four dimensions: place identity, place dependence, affective attachment, and social bonding. Place affect or affective attachment implies people's positive emotional bonds with places (Han et al., 2019; G. T. Kyle et al., 2004; Ramkissoon et al., 2011, 2012). For instance, a surfer has special emotional feelings for the beach where they used to surf. Another component is social bonding. It is one component of recognising a place as an opportunity to enrich relationships with others (G. Kyle et al., 2005). Visitors can experience a PA sense when a setting offers social relationships. The best example is that a surfer is likely to feel connected to the beach that their friends or family members prefer. Prior researchers, like Low and Altman (1992) and Jorgensen and Stedman (2001), suggested that PA comprises affective, cognitive, and

conative factors. G. T. Kyle et al. (2004) revealed the four-dimensional PA by linking it to the three factors. This study's PA dimensions align with the previous arguments.

Despite the research scarcity, film-induced tourism studies have developed a model using PA as a mediating variable. Several researchers examined how PA mediates the relationship between celebrity involvement and destination loyalty (Luong, 2023; Wong & Lai, 2015; Zhou et al., 2023). Additionally, Rajaobelina et al. (2019) identified the PA variable's effectiveness as a mediator between experiences at film and music festivals and WOM activities. Recently, studies have used the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model, which postulates a mediating effect of PA on the link between other variables (Isa et al., 2020; Ramkissoon et al., 2024). The model is a theoretical framework of user behavior that investigates the external environment's influence on human behavior (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). It proposes that external stimuli (stimulus) affect an individual's internal state (organism), eventually causing a particular response (Dini et al., 2024). It has been applied across various fields, and some studies have examined its application in behavior analysis in visual media-induced tourism (e.g., Luong, 2023).

2.3. Destination Loyalty and Anime Pilgrim's Behavior

In marketing literature, loyalty is considered crucial for companies' competitive advantages (Oliver, 1999). Tourism research has developed arguments on destination loyalty using marketing research (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). A common approach is to measure loyalty using pro-tourism behavior (PTB), primarily defined as revisit and WOM activities (S. Lee et al., 2019; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Teng & Chen, 2020; Vigolo, 2015; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). While researchers have relied on revisit and WOM activities, some studies have used only one indicator (e.g., Hosany et al., 2016; Wu & Lai, 2023). WOM is an excellent loyalty parameter (Velázquez et al., 2011). Shedding more light on WOM behavior among anime pilgrims is crucial, as they are likely to be highly active in WOM behavior (Okamoto, 2013, 2015).

Moreover, environmental psychology and recreation setting studies provide a noteworthy approach. They have explored the causal links between PA and loyalty regarding site enhancement activities, emphasizing that visitors to naturally protected destinations with high PA are likely to engage in pro-environmental behavior (PEB) (Halpenny, 2010; Ramkissoon et al., 2012, 2013; Tonge et al., 2015). PEB is "an action by an individual or group that promotes or results in the sustainable use of natural resources" (Halpenny, 2010, p. 410). It is likely operationalized in empirical studies based not on a single item but multiple items (Ramkissoon et al., 2012, 2013). These include volunteer efforts at destinations (such as picking up litter), willingness to pay fees or donations, signing petitions, and participating in public meetings (G. T. Kyle et al., 2003; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Tonge et al., 2015).

As mentioned above, anime pilgrims likely intend to implement wide-ranging activities such as WOM activities, site enhancement actions like PEB, or relocation (Okamoto, 2015; Yamamura, 2015). This study postulates that anime pilgrims' broader destination loyalty encompasses PTB, PEB, and other relevant activities.

2.4. Hypothesized Structural Model: Place Attachment and Anime Pilgrims' Loyalty in Anime Pilgrimage

Research on PA has diverged into two main streams: One treats PA as a dependent variable to identify PA factors or predictors (e.g., G. T. Kyle et al., 2004; Reitsamer et al., 2016), whereas the other posits it as an independent variable or mediator for exploring humans' behavioral patterns with an affective attitude towards a specific place (e.g., J. Lee et al., 2012; Stedman, 2002). This study focuses on the latter perspective to examine the relationship between anime pilgrims' PA and destination loyalty.

Considering anime pilgrims' behavioral characteristics, loyalty must be broadly defined. Some tourism researchers have attempted to operationalize loyalty extensively,

encompassing PTB and PEB (Kim et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2013). We assumed destination loyalty to be a composite construct consisting of a broad range of behaviors. The reasoned action theory hypothesizes that intention is a significant antecedent of actual behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). For this theory, we use behavioral intentions as measurement items. In tourism research, many researchers use intentions to measure destination loyalty (Halpenny, 2010; Tonge et al., 2015).

Visitor literature commonly assumes that PA is a multidimensional concept. Accordingly, we assumed the sub-dimensions of PA to be place dependence, place identity, place affect, and place social bonding, which prior studies have commonly supported (G. T. Kyle et al., 2004; Han et al., 2019; Martins et al., 2022; Ramkissoon et al., 2012, 2013). The current study treats PA as a second-order construct composed of sub-dimensions. An advantage of the second-order approach is that it uses a smaller number of parameters to realize a parsimonious and interpretable model (Han et al., 2019). Ramkissoon et al. (2013) emphasized the superiority of a second-order factor model because it is necessary to confirm how first-order factors collectively encapsulate PA as a second-order factor (Ramkissoon et al., 2013, p. 557), which is also supported by other literature (e.g., Han et al., 2019; Hosany et al., 2016; Martins et al., 2022). We use the concept of place attachment, though it is also possible to refer to it as destination attachment (Reitsamer et al., 2016; Yuksel et al., 2010). "Place" encompasses diverse specific characteristics (Low & Altman, 1992).

This study focuses on PA's distinct aspect in visual media-induced tourism, relying on the S-O-R theoretical model. Tourists' most important aim in visual media-induced travel is reliving the cinematic world. Anime pilgrimage studies have stressed that a fundamental motivation of the audience is to relive the anime world (Hatakeyama, 2012; Nishijima, 2020). Kusumi and Yoneda (2018) clarified that an anime pilgrim's emotional experiences positively enhanced immersion in the anime world compared to other media tourism. Anime fans are expected to have a positive psychological impression of destinations where they can immerse themselves in their favorite anime world. We postulate anime pilgrims' destination attractiveness through reliving experiences as a stimulus variable in the S-O-R perspective. Destination attractiveness is the "perceived ability of a destination to satisfy tourists' needs" (Vigolo, 2015, p. 565). Destination attractiveness can be broadly defined using two axes: objectivity-subjectivity and demand side-supply side (Pompurová et al., 2024). We treat it as tourists' subjective perception of the visited destination (Dini et al., 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2024).

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model incorporating destination attractiveness (stimulus), PA (organism), and destination loyalty (response). Here, PA is a second-order construct comprising the following first-order constructs: place dependence, place identity, place affect, and place social bonding. The hypothesized model proposes two causal pathways, based on Cheng et al. (2013), that examine a mediation model in which destination attractiveness directly influences PEB and indirectly affects PEB through PA. The first path, based on the S-O-R hypothesis, suggests that the independent (stimulus) variable affects the dependent (response) variable through a mediator (organism) (Destination attractiveness $\rightarrow$ PA $\rightarrow$ Loyalty). The second hypothetical path posits that the independent variable directly influences the dependent variable (Destination attractiveness $\rightarrow$ Loyalty), in line with previous research on film tourism (Kim, 2012; Kim et al., 2019; Teng & Chen, 2020). As shown in Figure 1, this study examines the proposed structural equation model by estimating the total, direct, and indirect effects of all hypothesized paths, thereby providing a comprehensive test of the study hypotheses.

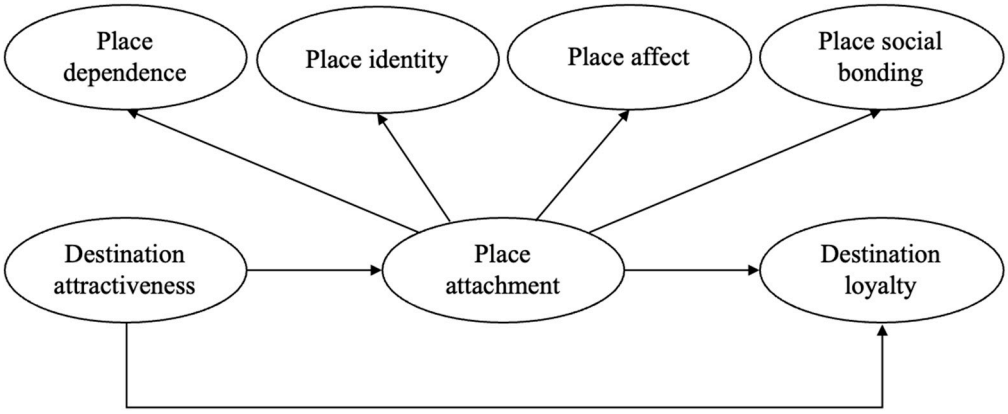

Figure 1. Hypothesized structural model.

3. Methods

We developed a quantitative analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM has several advantages for complex multivariable analysis, such as examining multiple interrelated causal dependencies and integrating unobservable (latent) variables into the analysis (Isa et al., 2020; Tonge et al., 2015). We conducted an online questionnaire survey by employing the survey company Macromill, which is based in Japan. This company, including its partner institutions, maintains a survey panel of approximately 36 million registered survey panellists who have opted to participate in market and social research. This extensive panel enables researchers to extract applicable samples for their research aims (Fukase et al., 2023). Numerous studies have used the Macromill panel data (e.g., Fukase et al., 2023; Maeda et al., 2022). The panel consists of individuals residing in Japan, although their nationalities were unidentified. Survey participation was voluntary, and respondents could discontinue the survey at any time. Participants who completed the survey received reward points from Macromill, which could be redeemed for goods or cash.

While prior anime pilgrimage studies have often used on-site surveys, which may be susceptible to site-based sampling bias (Williams & Vaske, 2003), this study employed a cross-sectional online panel to reduce such sampling bias. Online questionnaire surveys have gained legitimacy as a data collection technique for researching "hard-to-reach populations" (Vigolo, 2015, p. 568; see also Kirillova et al., 2019; Y. K. Lee et al., 2019; Teng & Chen, 2020). The online panel survey method has been particularly effective (Kim et al., 2019; Oh & Kim, 2020).

Data were collected from a survey of anime pilgrims conducted in October 2018. In order to elucidate the essential nature of the anime pilgrimage phenomenon, the year 2018 is a critically important reference point. First, the late 2010s marked a peak in the number of releases of both TV anime series and theatrical anime films over the past two decades, indicating that opportunities for anime viewing—an essential precondition for anime pilgrimage—were adequately ensured. By contrast, since 2020, the number of anime releases has steadily declined due to labor shortages (Nihon Doga Kyokai, 2025). Second, given that the increase in isekai anime production has been particularly evident since 2019 (Atherton, 2025), anime works depicting real-world locations in everyday settings have become relatively less prominent than in earlier periods. Using data up to 2020, Maieria (2021) empirically confirmed a trend since 2019 whereby isekai anime depicting imaginary worlds increased, while anime works primarily set in real-world locations became less dominant. This phenomenon suggests that anime production trends have undergone a structural change over the past half-decade. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed severe constraints on tourism. Since then, distinctive post-pandemic tourist behaviors, such as revenge travel (J. Wang & Xia, 2021; Zaman et al., 2021), have been identified. This

evidence indicates that data from 2018 capture the anime pilgrimage phenomenon prior to recent structural changes on both the demand and supply sides, thereby functioning as a benchmark for future longitudinal and comparative studies.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify qualified participants (Teng & Chen, 2020; Yen & Croy, 2013; Chen, 2018). Two screening questions were used in this study. The first was a yes/no question regarding the presence or absence of experience of anime pilgrimage to Japanese sites that appeared in anime (yes/no). The second was how interested the participants were in anime pilgrimage, which was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = extremely interested, 1 = not interested at all). Respondents who chose "yes" to the first question and any number other than "1 = not interested at all" to the second question were selected as participants for this research. The data screening targeted 30,000 research panel members aged 18–49 years, which excluded high school students who were unlikely to have opportunities to make travel decisions. The subsequent survey aimed to collect 500 samples, following the recommended criteria: appropriate sample size for SEM ($n \geq 200$) (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Boomsma, 1985; Garver & Mentzer, 1999) and "10 cases per variable" rule (Nunnally, 1967; Wolf et al., 2013, p. 2).

Quota sampling was also conducted to support "the representativeness of the sample" (Kim et al., 2019, p. 288). First, based on the screening survey's second question, quotas were designed to encompass respondents with diverse levels of interest in anime pilgrimages, ranging from high- (300 who selected 7 [extremely interested] or 6 [very interested]), middle- (100 who chose 5 [fairly interested] or 4 [moderately interested]), and low-interest pilgrims (100 who selected 3 [mildly interested] or 2 [slightly interested]). The reason for allocating a larger quota to respondents with high interest was to ensure the accuracy of respondents' memories and to minimize the possibility that respondents visited the destinations for reasons other than anime pilgrimages (Kim et al., 2019). Second, questionnaires were randomly distributed among potential respondents for each of the three interest quotas above, ensuring equal proportions of gender (male and female) and age (18–34 and 35–49). All questionnaires were completed in Japanese.

Participants were asked to identify the anime-setting model site of their favorite anime. The model sites were limited to regions within Japan. Respondents who had only been on an anime pilgrimage once were instructed to answer based on the pilgrimage location. This survey defined the target destination as a municipal-wide jurisdiction to align the respondents' awareness levels of answers. When the anime-setting model sites were scattered across several municipalities, the participants identified the most memorable municipality as their target destination.

Altogether, 155 samples were removed from the dataset for two reasons. First, the invalid samples containing inaccurate information were excluded. Second, respondents with residency experience at the targeted destinations were excluded. Distinguishing between residential and visitor attachment to places is critical. Thus, we concentrated solely on anime pilgrims with no prior experience residing in the targeted destinations to underscore the findings' significance. Consequently, 365 valid responses were obtained.

Measures

This study defined PA as a second-order construct with four dimensions: place identity (PI), place dependence (PD), place affect (PAF), and place social bonding (PSB). Nine items for PI (three items), PD (three items), and PAF (three items) were mainly from G. T. Kyle et al. (2004) and Ramkissoon et al. (2012, 2013). We borrowed the items used in PEB research focusing on place enhancement in relation to four-dimensional PA, aligning with our research interests. While one item of specialty (PAF2) often used in existing literature was included, this study required modification to apply it to the four-dimensional model,

as researchers have treated PA as a one- or two-dimensional concept (Hosany et al., 2016; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Tonge et al., 2015; Williams & Vaske, 2003). We incorporated it based on Huang et al. (2018), who posited it as an item within an affective attachment construct. Four items for PSB were adapted from Tonge et al. (2015), who stressed the sense of community that anime pilgrims are likely to share. Additionally, we arranged the items in the context of anime pilgrimage (Okamoto, 2015).

We adopted three items to measure destination attractiveness (DA) based on prior studies (Development Bank of Japan Inc., 2017; Hatakeyama, 2012; A. Ono et al., 2020). The present research narrowly defined DA as a vicarious experience of the anime world because previous studies have stressed that this experience constitutes the most prominent source of attractiveness for anime pilgrims (Hatakeyama, 2012; Kusumi & Yoneda, 2018; A. Ono et al., 2020). In line with Cheng et al. (2013), who distinguished between core attributes and augmented attributes of attractiveness, we operationalized DA items using two core attributes (immersing oneself in a character and experiencing the world of the anime story) and one augmented attribute (enjoying a scenic landscape). The two core attributes represent the essential values of anime pilgrims, emphasizing immersion in anime characters and the anime world. The augmented attribute serves as a physical basis that strengthens the core attributes. Scenic landscapes and symbolic landmarks are often chosen as models for anime settings (e.g., S. Ono, 2025). Such visually evocative landscapes boost anime pilgrims' imagination of the narrative world and reinforce their vicarious experiences. Accordingly, this research operationalized DA using three conceptually interrelated items.

The current study measured destination loyalty (DLY) based on the cognitive-affective-conative (CAC) model (Oliver, 1999), focusing on the attitudinal dimension. In the existing tourism literature, CAC-based measurements have been widely developed (Back & Parks, 2003; Yuksel et al., 2010), whereas loyalty has been traditionally operationalized using conative indicators of PTB, such as revisit intention and WOM intention (Chi & Qu, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). We adopted the "relationship perspective" for understanding loyalty proposed by Fournier and Yao (1997, p. 468), who operationalized loyalty through three dimensions: concern, strong liking, and allocation (p. 455). This perspective is particularly useful for clarifying the characteristics of anime pilgrims, who tend to seek intimate human–place links. We aligned the three loyalty dimensions with the corresponding CAC components, while emphasizing the benefits of a parsimonious research approach. Cognitive loyalty and affective loyalty correspond to the dimensions of concern and strong liking (Fournier & Yao, 1997) and were operationalized using single-item measures representing the core psychological state of each dimension. Conative loyalty items reflected several behavioral intentions of anime pilgrims as shown in prior studies. We included multiple intentions encompassing behavioral orientations differing in their nature: WOM intention, community support intention, and relocation intention. In particular, the relocation item implies the highest level of anime pilgrims' psychological commitment to the destinations. Previous research has found that anime pilgrims evoked relocation intentions through socialization with others (e.g., Okamoto, 2015). Because in anime pilgrimage, ordinary streets and buildings are likely to be visited places rather than specific sites for tourists such as theme parks and studio facilities, it is reasonable to measure destination loyalty using the relocation intention in the context of anime pilgrimage.

All the above items were carefully interpreted for the Japanese cultural and social contexts (e.g., Odagiri, 2018) while preserving the original English phrasing of the items as much as possible. Responses to all items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree).

4. Results

Table 1 presents the sample's sociodemographic characteristics. Among the respondents, 38.6% were aged 30–39, followed by those aged 40–49 (32.3%) and 18–29 (29.0%). Only a few had purchased significant quantities of anime-related merchandise. Altogether, 34.8% were identified as "specific" tourists who prioritize anime experiences when choosing destinations, followed by "general" tourists who visited anime locations while doing something else and "serendipitous" tourists who happened to visit the location of the anime setting (Macionis, 2004, p. 87). For the purpose-of-visit item, the "Others" category (n = 6) captures infrequent open-ended responses not covered by the predefined options, such as accompanying others, work-related purposes, and vague or nonspecific reasons. Overall, 41.1% of the respondents were repeat visitors, whereas 58.9% were first-time visitors. The destinations chosen were primarily those places appearing in *Your Name* (18.6%) followed by locations served by *Spirited Away* (9.9%), *My Neighbor Totoro* (6.0%), *Anohana* (4.9%), *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (4.7%). Additionally, the data encompassed anime titles that previous studies have stressed as prominent cases in anime pilgrimage, including *Girls und Panzer*, *K-ON!*, *Love Live!*, and *Lucky Star*.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (n = 365).

	n	**%**		***n***	**%**
Gender			Purpose of visitation		
Male	181	49.59	Specific	127	34.79
Female	184	50.41	General	157	43.01
Age group			Serendipitous	75	20.55
18–29	106	29.04	Others	6	1.64
30–39	141	38.63	Purchase level of the anime-related goods		
40–49	118	32.33	Extremely	38	10.41
Marital status			Very	30	8.22
Single	169	46.30	Fairly	74	20.27
Married	196	53.70	Moderately	48	13.15
Visitation level			Seldomly	52	14.25
First-time visitor	215	58.90	Barely	44	12.05
Repeat visitor	150	41.10	Not at all	79	21.64

Table 2 illustrates the means and standardized deviations of the items used. For PA, PD3 had the highest value (4.307), followed by PAF1 (mean 4.225). The three DA items ranged from 3.841 (DA2) to 4.912 (DA1). Among the destination loyalty items, WOM (DLY2, mean 4.236) was the highest, followed by community development support (DLY3, mean 4.074). The lowest mean (3.066) appeared for relocation intention (DLY4).

Table 2. Data description.

Items		**Mean**	**SD**
Destination attractiveness			
DA1	The destination has a place where I can fully enjoy a scenic landscape.	4.912	1.497
DA2	The destination is a place where I can fully immerse myself as a character.	3.841	1.800
DA3	The destination is a place where I can fully experience the world of the anime story.	4.723	1.698
Place attachment			
PD1	For what I like to do, I could not imagine anything better than the settings in this place	3.696	1.728
PD2	For the activities I enjoy the most, the settings in this place are the best	4.025	1.709
PD3	I enjoy staying in this place more than any other places	4.307	1.654
PI1	I identify strongly with this place	3.723	1.760
PI2	I feel this place is a part of me	3.159	1.816

Table 2. *Cont.*

Items		Mean	SD
PI3	This place says a lot about who I am	3.575	1.872
PAF1	I am very attached to this place	4.225	1.727
PAF2	This place is very special to me	4.066	1.853
PAF3	This place means a lot to me	3.893	1.849
PSB1	A feeling of community runs between me and other fan visitors in this place	3.381	1.893
PSB2	A feeling of community runs between me and local people in this place	2.951	1.807
PSB3	Someone would be disappointed if I were to start visiting other places than here	2.592	1.778
PSB4	The associations I have with other people here at this place mean a lot to me	2.959	1.861
Destination Loyalty			
DLY1	Always be concerned about the present and future of this place	3.866	1.796
DLY2	Say positive things about this place to other people	4.236	1.692
DLY3	Support community development in this place	4.074	1.728
DLY4	Relocate to this place	3.066	1.759
DLY5	Really love this place	3.992	1.712

This study used AMOS (ver.29) to conduct the analyses required for SEM. We first tested the measurement model of PA to evaluate the factorial validity of the hypothesized four sub-dimensions. To examine whether the four sub-dimensions were empirically distinguishable, we estimated and compared alternative CFA specifications for PA, as follows: a one-factor baseline model, a correlated first-order four-factor model, a second-order four-factor model, and a second-order two-factor model. As reported in Table 3, the one-factor baseline model fit the data poorly, and the second-order four-factor model did not provide a satisfactory fit. Although the correlated first-order four-factor model improved fit, the latent correlations among PI, PD, and PAF were very high (PI–PD = 0.879, PI–PAF = 0.869, PD–PAF = 0.873), indicating limited discriminant validity among these facets. Given this empirical overlap, and guided by a set of diagnostic information (e.g., standardized loadings, modification indices, and correlated residuals) as well as theoretical interpretability, we refined the item set and specified PA as a second-order construct with two first-order dimensions; the complete item retention/exclusion list and decision criteria are documented in Appendix A. Figure 2 shows the final measurement model after item refinement and model respecification. The refined second-order two-factor model demonstrated good fit, as summarized in Table 3 (Kline, 2016; J. Lee et al., 2012; Roster et al., 2016). The first was a composite dimension encompassing three PAF items, one PI item (PI3), and one PD item (PD3). We labeled this dimension place personal attachment, based on prior studies that posited place dependence, place identity, and place affect as reflecting a direct self-place link (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Song & Soopramanien, 2019). The other construct was place social bonding, which was dominated by four PSB items. It stressed socially mediated relationships that shape feelings of place attachment, rather than a purely direct self-place association (G. Kyle et al., 2005; Ramkissoon et al., 2013).

Table 3. Model Fit Comparison of Competing CFA Models for Place Attachment.

Model	One-Factor	First-Order (4 Factors)	Second-Order (4 Factors)	Second-Order (2 Factors)
Items	13	13	13	9
Chi-square (χ^2)	910.723	243.046	300.638	86.237
CMIN/df	14.011	4.119	4.697	3.317
p-value	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
NFI	0.805	0.948	0.935	0.972
TLI	0.779	0.947	0.937	0.973
CFI	0.815	0.960	0.948	0.981
RMSEA	0.189	0.092	0.101	0.080

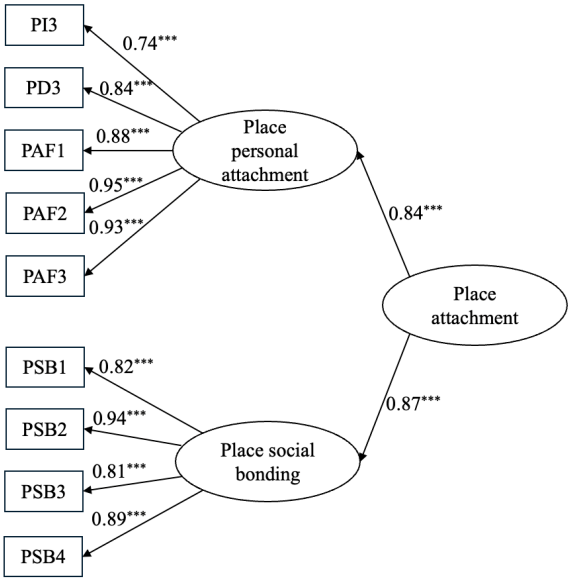

Figure 2. Consequent Measurement Model of PA. Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

The measurement model was verified by examining its convergent validity and discriminant validity. We used composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) for convergent validity. As illustrated in Table 4, CR (place personal attachment = 0.939, place social bonding = 0.924, and place attachment = 0.849) met the cutoff of above 0.7 (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012), and AVE (place personal attachment = 0.756, place social bonding = 0.752, and place attachment = 0.738) satisfied the cutoff of above 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The discriminant validity between the two dimensions was examined by comparing the squared correlation between the latent constructs and each construct's AVE value. The AVE values were higher than the squared coefficient (0.529), and discriminant validity was supported (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Constructs and Items	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Destination attractiveness			
DA1	0.628	0.767	0.526
DA2	0.801		
DA3	0.736		
Place attachment		0.849	0.738
Place personal attachment			
PI3	0.740	0.939	0.756
PD3	0.841		
PAF1	0.879		
PAF2	0.944		
PAF3	0.928		
Place social bonding			
PSB1	0.818	0.924	0.752
PSB2	0.942		
PSB3	0.812		
PSB4	0.891		
Destination loyalty			
DLY1	0.875	0.908	0.664
DLY2	0.817		
DLY3	0.784		
DLY4	0.716		
DLY5	0.871		

The relationships between the first-order factors and the second-order factor (PA) were significant because of the high standardized factor loadings: 0.84 (place personal attachment, $p < 0.001$) and 0.87 (place social bonding, $p < 0.001$). The data showed different results from previous research that supported the four sub-dimensions of PA (Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Martins et al., 2022), but explaining that PA is a multidimensional concept is possible. Specifically, the model comparison results suggested that PI/PD/PAF exhibited limited empirical separation in this context, whereas PSB remained a distinct dimension (see Appendix A).

Table 4 presents the CFA results for the overall measurement model. Consistent with prior studies (Kline, 2016; J. Lee et al., 2012; Roster et al., 2016), the model showed acceptable fit: $\chi^2 = 456.283$ ($p < 0.001$), CMIN/df = 4.002, NFI = 0.921, TLI = 0.928, CFI = 0.940, and RMSEA = 0.091. Figure 3 shows the structural model results. Because the structural model used exactly the same set of latent variables, indicators, and measurement specifications as the CFA model, the overall model fit indices were identical. Only the structural paths among the latent constructs were added in the SEM step. To test PA's mediating role in the relationship between destination attractiveness and destination loyalty, we performed a mediation analysis using the bias-corrected bootstrapping method with 2000 resamples. The indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.510$, 95% CI [0.135, 0.887], $p < 0.05$). The direct effect of destination attractiveness on destination loyalty was also significant ($\beta = 0.440$, 95% CI [0.061, 0.874], $p < 0.05$), and the total effect was $\beta = 0.951$, 95% CI [0.905, 0.995], $p < 0.001$. Overall, these results indicate partial mediation, as both the indirect effect via PA and the direct effect of destination attractiveness on destination loyalty were significant. In addition, the indirect effect was larger than the direct effect.

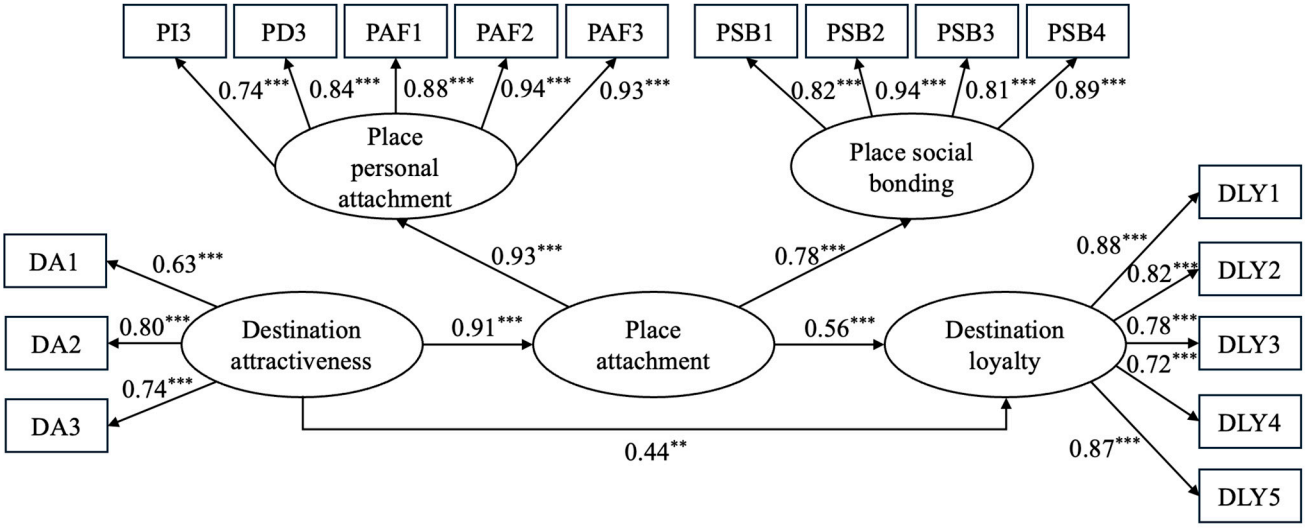

Figure 3. Structural Model Results. Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$. Standardized path coefficients (β) are presented here. The indirect effect is discussed in the text.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Findings

This study explores the causal structure of destination loyalty among anime pilgrims, focusing on the significance of place attachment (PA). This present study examined the subdimensions of a second-order PA, positing that it comprises four dimensions. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) investigated two constructs: place social bonding and a composite dimension called place personal attachment.

Additionally, based on the S-O-R model, this study elucidated that PA was a key mediating variable, facilitating destination loyalty stemming from destination attractiveness

formed through reliving experiences. While a significant direct link between destination attractiveness and destination loyalty was also observed, the significant indirect effect supported the causal path "Destination attractiveness → PA → Destination loyalty." In conclusion, PA plays an essential mediating role in the relationship between destination attractiveness and destination loyalty, as supported by Cheng et al. (2013).

5.2. Theoretical Implications

First, our findings contribute to the theoretical development of PA and destination loyalty in tourism. Considering the PA concept as a second-order factor is highly significant because PA can compose a broad range of dimensions. The CFA revealed that PA sub-dimensions were consolidated into two elements that primarily relate to individual-place emotion and bonding with others. Despite literature supporting the existence of four sub-dimensions for PA, the data did not support this hypothesis. Our results are not fully consistent with previous studies that emphasized place identity and place dependence as the two dominant dimensions (e.g., Hosany et al., 2016; D. Lee & Lee, 2017; Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989). This current research indicated that place affect (PAF) and place social bonding (PSB) can be core factors of PA. PAF and PSB may play a significant role in PA as a predictor of destination loyalty. Isa et al. (2020) clarified the causal relationships between the external environment (physical environment and atmosphere), PA, and loyalty by applying a S-O-R theoretical model within island tourism. Noteworthy was the finding that social bonding and affective attachment, newly proposed as PA dimensions, were identified as key components, surpassing the variables of place identity and place dependence. The argument supports our findings, indicating that infrastructure and atmosphere in destinations for reliving experiences lead to anime pilgrims' behavioral intentions, mediated by personal attachment and social bonding.

Affect-led place personal attachment and place social bonding can be theoretically explained using two concepts: setting attachment and social attachment (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; G. Kyle et al., 2005). Place personal attachment refers to attachment to the physical environment, whereas place social bonding refers to attachment to the social environment. Anime pilgrims experience emotional feelings such as "becoming a part of the anime world" (Endosu, 2015, p. 60) when encountering anime-featured places. This suggests that involvement in the anime world evokes affect toward the physical environment. Affect is defined as "emotional responses or activity in the sympathetic nervous system, as reflected in heart rate, galvanic skin response, or verbal self-reports" (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001, p. 237). In contrast, place social bonding is embodied through the formation of human relationships within destinations. Anime pilgrims described places featured in the TV anime *Lucky Star* as "our shared place" (Otani et al., 2018, p. 129). This perception emerged from joyful experiences of being accepted by, and interacting with residents (Otani et al., 2018). It has also been noted that anime-featured places function as sites where fans engage with one another (Tanimura, 2012). These situations suggest a mechanism through which anime fans enhance their sense of place toward destinations as places where their sense of self are acknowledged and affirmed by others. Through this process, such locations come to be regarded as sacred sites (*seichi*) for anime pilgrims.

Moreover, the results of this study suggest that, in certain tourism contexts, PA tends to reflect the unique characteristics of tourists and may not conform to the four-dimensional conceptualization typically indicated by previous PA studies. J. Lee et al. (2012) argued for the possibility of dimension integration in PA, demonstrating that predefined dimensional structures may not fully reflect the underlying construct of PA in festival tourism. The present study develops the argument that PA dimensions may be integrated in tourism research, depending on contextual conditions.

Second, the current study's findings expand existing theoretical arguments on the positioning of a PA variable. An important theoretical contribution offered by this study is to support studies treating PA as a mediating variable. Whether PA should be treated as an independent variable or a mediating variable is subject to various arguments (Halpenny, 2010; Hosany et al., 2016; T. Li et al., 2023; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Yuksel et al., 2010). However, in line with the literature review by Dang and Weiss (2021), only a few researchers have discussed PA as a mediating variable, while prior studies using PA as an independent variable are mainstream. Considering the significance of the S-O-R model, it should be stressed that PA has an important role as a mediating variable. The S-O-R theoretical scheme encourages researchers to develop further exploration of the PA variable.

Finally, this study concepturalized destination attractiveness from audiences' reliving experiences as an independent variable. While visual media-induced tourism studies (Beeton, 2016; Hatakeyama, 2012) argue that reliving the visual media world is an essential driver of tourist behavior, reliving-driven destination attractiveness has not yet been used in destination loyalty analysis. Although some researchers on visual media-induced tourism have highlighted celebrity involvement as an independent variable (Luong, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023), our analysis contributes to expanding the scope of previous research.

5.3. Practical Implications

This study offers important implications for destination marketers and practitioners. First, destination choice and visitation decisions can be significantly influenced by audiences' motivation to relive the anime world. Protecting scenic landscapes can promote destination attractiveness, as Isa et al. (2020) argued that external stimuli such as physical infrastructure and atmosphere are significant predictors of loyalty. For instance, municipal governments are encouraged to preserve public buildings so that they maintain appearances consistent with those depicted in anime. This is because anime fans may experience strong disappointment when featured sites are altered or closed (Shimoda City Council, 2017). If the imagination formed through visual media viewing differs from a destination's actual infrastructure and atmosphere, tourists are likely to feel disappointed (Beeton, 2008; Michalkó et al., 2015). Thus, it is important for local policymakers and destination marketers to make deliberate efforts to ensure that destinations represent the anime-world atmosphere.

Second, because social bonding and affective attachment were more salient components of PA, tourism managers should consider emotional bonds between people and places in destination promotion. For example, organizing events in which anime pilgrims and local communities collaborate and participate, as well as developing relevant memorabilia, can enhance visitors' PA (Okamoto, 2015; Yamamura, 2015). Moreover, destination marketers should encourage the dissemination of diverse information, not only to guide these visitors toward appropriate behaviors but also to help residents better understand the anime pilgrimage phenomenon, thereby minimizing potential conflicts between anime pilgrims and local communities.

5.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, more research is needed to reconsider PA's sub-dimensions. Although we theoretically predicted four dimensions, the data did not support this prediction. While the reconceptualization of PA has been argued for by several researchers (Dang & Weiss, 2021), our findings indicate that redesigning the PA concept to reflect the unique characteristics of enthusiastic visitors, such as anime pilgrims, is necessary. Second, the present study did not explore predictors that may impact destination loyalty, such as destination image (Kasai & Hsu, 2012), tourist experiences (Kim, 2012),

tourist engagement (Teng, 2020), or celebrity attachment (Teng & Chen, 2020), which are often used in visual media-induced tourism research. Further integrative research should explore how these antecedents influence destination loyalty in the context of anime viewers. Third, despite its benefits, an online panel survey entails sampling bias that likely chooses viewers of popular blockbusters over less popular choices such as adult- or adolescence-oriented anime, which resonate with the more enthusiastic anime fans that are likely to conduct anime pilgrimages (e.g., Yamamura, 2015). On-site surveys must be conducted at prominent destinations (A. Ono et al., 2020) or with online anime fan communities (Kirillova et al., 2019) to capture a broader perspective. Fourth, the present study relied solely on quantitative data and did not incorporate qualitative insights from anime pilgrims, such as in-depth interviews. Further research adopting qualitative approaches could provide a deeper understanding of the underlying processes through which PA influences destination loyalty. Finally, this study did not target international anime pilgrims. Considering the global expansion of anime fandom, further research is required. Regarding familiarity with destinations, the motivations and behavior of domestic anime fans may differ from those of international fans. Future studies should adopt comparative designs across visitor groups to examine the generalizability and cross-cultural validity of the current findings.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.M. and H.T.; methodology, H.M. and H.T.; validation, H.T.; formal analysis, H.T.; investigation, H.M.; data curation, H.T.; writing—original draft preparation, H.M.; writing—review and editing, H.M. and H.T.; visualization, H.T.; supervision, H.M.; project administration, H.M.; funding acquisition, H.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This study was supported by the internal research funds of the University of Kitakyushu.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the University of Kitakyushu's research ethics code.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent for participation was not required according to the University of Kitakyushu's research ethics code.

Data Availability Statement: Due to Macromill's data use agreement, datasets containing free-answer responses cannot be publicly shared. The data may be made available upon reasonable request and subject to contractual restrictions.

Acknowledgments: During the revision of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT (version 5.2) for text editing and for improving the structure and clarity of the manuscript. The authors reviewed and edited all generated content and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Item Diagnostics and Retention/Exclusion Decisions for the Place Attachment Scale

This appendix summarizes the item-level diagnostics (standardized loadings, modification indices [MIs], and correlated residuals) and the resulting retention/exclusion decisions used to refine the place attachment measurement model.

Table A1. Item diagnostics and retention/exclusion decisions for the place attachment scale.

Item	Retained	Final Construct	Std. Loading (Correlated 4-Factor Model)	R^2 (Correlated 4-Factor Model)	Key Diagnostics (MI-Based Flags)	Substantive Rationale
Place dependence						
PD1	No	–	0.871	0.759	Redundancy: MI suggested correlated residual PD1↔PD2	Redundant with PD2; wording likely overlaps with affective appraisal in a visitor context
PD2	No	–	0.886	0.785	Cross-loading tendency: MI suggested PD2→PAF/PI/PSB; Redundancy: MI suggested correlated residual PD1↔PD2	Cross-loading tendency + redundancy; weak discriminant separation as a PD indicator
PD3	Yes	Place personal attachment	0.834	0.695	Cross-loading tendency: MI suggested PD3→PAF	Retained as representative "preference for being here," consistent with personal self–place linkage
Place identity						
PI1	No	–	0.702	0.493	Cross-loading tendency: MI suggested PI1→PSB/PD	Lowest loading within PI; strong identity wording may blur with affect/social meanings
PI2	No	–	0.843	0.710	Redundancy: MI suggested correlated residual PI2↔PI3	Semantic redundancy within PI items; "part of me" wording may be too extreme for episodic visitation
PI3	Yes	Place personal attachment	0.835	0.698	–	Retained identity indicator capturing symbolic self-expression suitable for a fan/visitor context
Place affect						
PAF1	Yes	Place personal attachment	0.873	0.762	–	Core affective attachment indicator
PAF2	Yes	Place personal attachment	0.955	0.912	–	Core affective attachment indicator
PAF3	Yes	Place personal attachment	0.926	0.858	–	Core affective attachment indicator
Place social bonding						
PSB1	Yes	Place social bonding	0.813	0.660	–	Socially mediated attachment indicator
PSB2	Yes	Place social bonding	0.943	0.890	–	Socially mediated attachment indicator
PSB3	Yes	Place social bonding	0.816	0.666	–	Socially mediated attachment indicator
PSB4	Yes	Place social bonding	0.890	0.792	–	Socially mediated attachment indicator

Note: MI denotes the modification index. Flags summarize large MIs from the correlated four-factor CFA, suggesting item redundancy (correlated residuals) or potential cross-loading tendencies. Final standardized loadings for the refined second-order two-factor model are reported in Figure 2. In this table, → indicates MI-suggested cross-loading tendencies, whereas ↔ indicates MI-suggested correlated residuals.

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