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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23571485>**Exploring Destination Brand Love and Loyalty in Swat Valley: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective****Taskeen ud Din**

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muhammad.alam@riphah.edu.pk**Abstract**

This study investigates the structural relationships among destination-driven and tourist-centered factors on development of Destination Brand Love (DBL) and tourist loyalty in Swat Valley of Pakistan. Underpinned by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study examined how destination authenticity and experience co-creation (autonomy/relatedness) coupled with self-congruity and self-transformation form emotional attachment and subsequent behavioral outcomes. The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design. Data were collected using structured questionnaires from 400 valid tourist responses. The measurement and structural models were estimated using Smart PLS 4. Bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples was used to test hypotheses and mediation effects. The empirical findings reveal that destination authenticity, experience co-creation, self-congruity and self-transformation significantly predict Destination Brand Love, which in turn drives destination loyalty. Furthermore, mediation analyses indicate that DBL acts as a vital mechanism, fully mediating the influence of identity-based tourist factors on loyalty behaviors. These insights advance experiential tourism theory by integrating SDT frameworks and offer actionable guidelines for developing sustainable, participatory marketing strategies in emerging tourism destinations.

Keywords: Destination Brand Love, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Destination Loyalty, Experience Co-Creation, Self-Congruity, Swat Valley Tourism

1. Introduction

The transformation of tourism from a service-centric to an experience-centric industry has reshaped the dynamics of value creation processes, positioning tourist's not as passive consumers but as active co-creators of their own experiences (Campos et al., 2018; Buhalis et al., 2023). Especially in experiential destinations like Pakistan's Swat Valley—renowned for its culture and heritage besides natural landscapes, co-creation experiences, embedded within social interactions and authentic cultural exchanges, generates heightened emotional bonds with the destinations. Given the increased role of tourists as co-creator of their own

experiences and destination image, it is indispensable for the tourism destinations to develop and nurture positive, mutually beneficial relationships with the tourists. In this connection destination brand love (DBL) has emerged as an important relationship marketing concept that influence relational outcomes such as WOM and Destination loyalty (Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2025).

Rooted in consumer-brand relationships, DBL encompasses feelings of passion, connection, and positive affect toward a place (Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2022). Recent literature has identified some key antecedents that drive destination brand love, recognizing it as a vital construct in destination marketing and branding (Rather, 2023; Manzoor et al., 2022). These scholars have highlighted both tourist-related factors, such as self-congruity (Kumar & Nayak, 2022), perceived value, and emotional experiences (Huang et al., 2023), and destination-related factors, including destination image (Quintal et al., 2024), authenticity (Gulzar et al., 2022), service quality, and unique cultural offerings (Rather & Hollebeek, 2023), as central drivers of this emotional bond. These antecedents contribute to brand love by shaping tourists' perceptions and feelings during their visit, leading to affective commitment and loyalty behaviors. Additionally, experiential dimensions such as memorable tourism experiences, co-creation, and meaningful interactions with local communities have also emerged as strong predictors (Kim et al., 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of destination brand love as a critical driver of tourist loyalty and advocacy, existing research remains fragmented, with limited integration of both tourist-related and destination-related antecedents within a unified framework. Moreover most prior studies have explored well-established tourism markets, leaving emerging destinations like swat valley in Pakistan underrepresented. Swat valley not merely offer scenic beauty; there is potential of cultural storytelling, traditional crafts making, and locally hosted nature excursions where tourist can co-create their own unique narratives and experiences that can be shared with the world on social media. *Despite the strategic potential of these participatory experiences, empirical research remains scarce regarding how such co-created value translates into emotional brand attachment and subsequent behavioral intentions (Ali et al., 2024).*

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how tourist-related factors (such as self-congruity and transformation) and destination-related factors (such as destination experience quality and authenticity) jointly influence the development of destination brand love and its subsequent impact on tourist behavioral outcomes. The study used Swat Valley as a case study and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as the theoretical framework. According to Self-determination theory (SDT) tourists' intrinsic psychological need of autonomy is fulfilled by destination factors (Destination authenticity and experience co-creation) while competence is fostered through self-congruity and self-transformation during the tourism experience (Huang et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2025). These factors are posited to elicit Destination Brand Love (The relationship) which in turn catalyzes loyalty. However there are limited studies that explored the tourist destination loyalty under the scope of self-determination theory (Çıkkı & Tanrıverdi, 2023).

The specific **objectives of the study** are as following.

1. To assess how destination authenticity and experience co-creation foster Destination Brand Love.
2. To examine the influence of self-congruity and self-transformation on Destination Brand Love.
3. To evaluate how Destination Brand Love mediates the relationship between antecedent factors and tourist behavioral intentions.

By positioning tourists as active agents in value co-creation and brand formation, this study contributes to advancing experiential tourism theory and offers actionable insights for destination marketers seeking to leverage emotional brand-building strategies. The findings of this study are expected to offer significant

theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, integrating destination-specific and tourist-centric factors contributes to advancing experiential tourism models and enriches existing loyalty theories. Practically, insights from this research can guide destination marketers in designing more personalized and authentic tourism offerings that resonate with tourists' self-concepts and foster transformative experiences. Ultimately, this study aims to support sustainable destination management strategies by facilitating repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth, critical for long-term destination competitiveness.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Tourist Motivation

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000), provides a robust foundation for understanding intrinsic motivation in tourism contexts. According to SDT, human motivation is driven by fulfilling three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In tourism research, these needs manifest through design their experiences actively (autonomy), experience personal growth (competence), and have emotional bond with the destination and its people (relatedness) (Huang et al., 2024). The relevance of SDT in tourism is increasingly recognized, particularly in experiential and sustainable tourism research, as it highlights the importance of intrinsic satisfaction over extrinsic rewards (Lee et al., 2025). While most studies in tourism have applied SDT to explain initial visitation motivations (Lin et al., 2025), its role in post-visit outcomes—such as Destination Brand Love (DBL) and loyalty intentions—remains underexplored. This study extends SDT's application by positing that both destination and tourist factors fulfill autonomy and competence needs, thereby driving emotional attachment to the destination brand.

2.2. Destination Factors as Co-Creation Drivers

2.2.1. Destination Authenticity

Destination authenticity refers to tourists' perception of genuine cultural, historical, and natural elements within a destination (Kolar & Zabkar, 2019). Authentic environments satisfy tourists' relatedness needs by connecting them to local traditions, stories, and lifestyles (Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019). Authenticity is especially critical in emerging destinations like Swat, where cultural and environmental authenticity remain relatively intact (Ali et al., 2024). Prior research demonstrates that authentic experiences foster emotional attachment and loyalty behaviors (Lee et al., 2025).

H1: Destination authenticity positively influences destination brand love.

H2: Destination authenticity positively influences destination loyalty.

2.2.2. Experience Co-Creation

Experience co-creation emphasizes the participatory role of tourists in constructing their own unique experiences (Campos et al., 2018). Co-creation involves interactions with hosts, local communities, and the environment, facilitating intrinsic enjoyment and personalized outcomes (Buhalis et al., 2023). In experiential destinations, tourists value hands-on activities and personalized service encounters that enable active involvement in experience creation (Chathoth et al., 2022). Co-created experiences satisfy relatedness needs by enabling tourists to feel socially connected to the destination and its people (Huang et al., 2024). Recent studies highlight that tourists who perceive their experiences as co-created demonstrate stronger emotional ties to the destination, increased satisfaction, and higher likelihood of engaging in positive word-of-mouth (Campos et al., 2026; Lin et al., 2025). However, empirical research linking experience co-creation directly to DBL remains limited, especially in underexplored markets like Pakistan. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H3: Experience quality positively influences destination brand love.

H4: Experience quality positively influences destination brand love.

2.3. Tourist Factors: Identity-Based Motivations

2.3.1. Self-Congruity

Self-congruity theory posits that tourists are drawn to destinations that reflect their own self-concept (Sirgy & Su, 2000). When tourists perceive alignment between their self-image and the destination's brand personality, stronger emotional attachment develops (Liu et al., 2024). Self-congruity satisfies the competence need by affirming one's identity and personal growth through tourism experiences (Huang et al., 2024). In experiential tourism contexts, self-congruity enhances the depth of the experience and emotional engagement with the destination brand (Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019). Despite its relevance, limited studies have empirically examined the direct impact of self-congruity on DBL, particularly in non-Western destinations (Ali et al., 2024). It is therefore hypothesized that:

H5: Self-congruity positively influences destination brand love.

H6: Self-congruity positively influences destination loyalty.

2.3.2. Self-Transformation

Self-transformation refers to personal change and growth resulting from tourism experiences (Pritchard & Morgan, 2023). Transformative experiences satisfy tourists' competence needs by fostering a sense of achievement, insight, and emotional enrichment (Chen et al., 2025). Experiential tourism, especially in nature-based and culturally rich settings like Swat Valley, offers tourists opportunities for introspection and personal development (Huang et al., 2024). Emerging research indicates that transformative experiences contribute to emotional attachment to destinations (Campos et al., 2026). However, few empirical studies have integrated self-transformation as a direct antecedent of DBL. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H7: Self-transformation positively influences destination brand love.

H8: Self-transformation positively influences destination loyalty.

2.4. Destination Brand Love (DBL) and Loyalty Outcomes

DBL, adapted from brand marketing literature, is defined as tourists' emotional attachment to a destination brand developed through accumulated positive experiences (Bıçakçioğlu et al., 2022). In tourism, DBL fosters not only Destination loyalty but also spontaneous advocacy, such as word-of-mouth recommendations (Chen et al., 2025). DBL embodies both cognitive evaluations and emotional experiences, serving as a critical mediating construct between antecedent factors (destination/tourist-related) and loyalty behaviors (Lin et al., 2025). While existing studies link destination image and service quality to DBL (Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019), fewer investigations explore how co-created and identity-affirming experiences drive emotional brand attachment. Moreover, most studies have focused on established tourism markets, neglecting emerging destinations like Swat. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H9: Self-transformation positively influences destination loyalty.

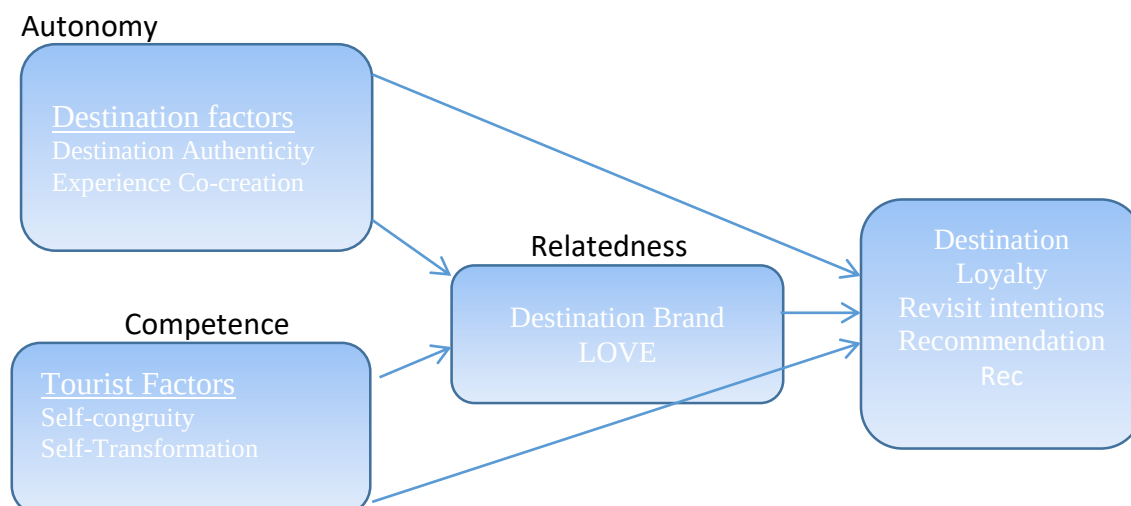


Figure1. Conceptual framework underpinned by theory of self-determination.

3. Methodology

3.1 The study setting *Population and sample*

A survey was conducted to collect data from domestic and international tourists visiting Swat in Jun 2025. Swat Valley, a rapidly developing tourist destination in northern Pakistan, is renowned for its natural landscapes, cultural authenticity, and immersive host-guest interactions. Given its post-conflict recovery and promotion as an eco-cultural tourism hub, Swat provides a suitable empirical setting for this study. This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, using structured questionnaires to assess the proposed conceptual framework.

A purposive Sample of 400 tourists visiting various tourist attractions of swat valley (Malam Jabba, Kalam, Fizatagat Park) were targeted on the basis of their illegibility of language, willingness and diversity. Respondents were offered an incentive of inclusion for lucky draw for a free one night stay at marghazar hotel in swat next year. Validated measurement scales from previous tourism studies were adapted: Destination Authenticity was captured on 5 items adapted from Kolar & Zabkar (2019). Experience Co-Creation was captured on 5 items from Campos et al. (2018). Self-Congruity on 4 items adapted from Liu et al. (2024). Self-Transformation on 4 items based on Pritchard & Morgan (2023). **Destination Brand Love** on 5 items from Bıçakçioğlu et al. (2022). Destination loyalty was measures using 4 items from Chen et al. (2025).

3.2 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics. SmartPLS 4 for measurement model assessment (reliability, validity) and structural model evaluation (path coefficients, mediation analysis)

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

Data were collected from 412 tourists visiting various locations in Swat Valley. After excluding incomplete responses, 400 valid questionnaires were analyzed. The demographic profile is summarized in Table 1: Gender: 53% male, 47% female. Age: 24% below 25 years; 39% between 25–35 years; 25% between 36–45 years; 12% above 45 years. Nationality: 87 % domestic tourists, 13% international tourists. Purpose of Visit: 62% leisure, 21% adventure tourism, 17% cultural exploration, others.

Table 1 Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographics	Categories	Percentage
Gender	Male	47%
	Female	53%
Age	Below 24 years	24%
	25–35 years	39%
	36–35 years	25%
	Above 45 ears	12%
Nationality	Domestic tourists	87%
	International tourists	13%
Purpose of visit	Leisure and recreation	62
	Adventure/trekking	21
	Cultural exploration	17
	Other	10

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

Using Smart PLS 4, the reflective measurement model was evaluated for reliability and validity: **Internal Consistency Reliability:** Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) for all constructs exceeded **0.70**. **Convergent Validity:** Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from **0.56 to 0.73**, exceeding the 0.50 threshold. **Discriminant Validity:** Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios were all below **0.85**, confirming discriminant validity. **Table 2** presents full reliability and validity results.

Table 2 Reliability of the constructs

Construct Scale	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR	Cronbach Alpha (α)
Destination Authenticity	DA1	0.62	0.52	0.75	0.70
	DA2	0.83			
	DA3	0.70			
	DA4	0.82			
	DA5	0.72			
Experience Co-creation	XCC1	0.81	0.77	0.91	0.84
	XCC2	0.91			
	XCC3	0.90			
	XCC4	0.73			
	XCC5	0.74			
Self-congruity	SC1	0.80	0.77	0.90	0.85
	SC2	0.92			
	SC3	0.90			
	SC4	0.71			

Self-transformation	ST1	0.72	0.55	0.87	0.83
	ST 2	0.76			
	ST 3	0.78			
	ST 4	0.78			
Destination Brand Love	DBL1	0.66	0.52	0.86	0.81
	DBL2	0.78			
	DBL3	0.76			
	DBL4	0.75			
	DBL5	0.71			
Destination Loyalty	DL1	0.73	0.65	0.88	0.81
	DL2	0.83			
	DL3	0.83			
	DL4	0.82			

Table 3 Discriminant Validity of the constructs

Constructs	Destination Authenticity	Experience Co-creation	Self-congruity	Self-transformation	Destination Brand Love	Destination Loyalty
Destination Authenticity	0.71					
Experience Co-creation	0.38	0.87				
Self-congruity	0.45	0.84	0.87			
Self-transformation	0.35	0.42	0.62	0.74		
Destination Brand Love	0.42	0.43	0.65	0.41	0.72	
Destination Loyalty	0.40	0.34	0.44	0.61	0.62	0.80

4.3 Structural Model Assessment

Structural relationships were analyzed using bootstrapping (5,000 samples). The **explained variance (R^2)** for Destination Brand Love (DBL) was **0.61**, indicating that 61% of its variance is explained by destination and tourist factors. R^2 values for **Destination loyalty** 0.56.

Table 4 Hypothesis testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
Destination Authenticity → DBL	0.38	7.22	0.001	Supported
Experience Co-Creation → DBL	0.41	8.10	0.001	Supported
Self-Congruity → DBL	0.27	4.35	0.001	Supported
Self-Transformation → DBL	0.30	5.02	0.001	Supported
DBL → Destination loyalty	0.46	9.15	0.001	Supported

Note: DBL: Destination brand love.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Mediation effects of Destination Brand Love were tested using **indirect effect analysis**:

Table 5 Mediation Analysis results

Hypothesis	β	t-value	P-Value	Result
Destination Authenticity → DBL → Destination loyalty	0.01	1.06	0.28	Not Supported
Experience Co-Creation → DBL → Destination loyalty	0.07	1.75	0.15	Not Supported
Self-Congruity → DBL → Destination loyalty	0.33	4.38	0.01	Supported
Self-Transformation → DBL → Destination loyalty	0.26	7.68	0.01	Supported

Note: DBL: Destination brand love.

These findings indicate that while destination factors exert direct effects on loyalty outcomes, tourist factors influence behavioral intentions primarily through emotional attachment (DBL).

4.6 Summary of Key Findings

Destination Authenticity and Experience Co-Creation are significant predictors of Destination Brand Love, validating the importance of authentic and co-created experiences in experiential tourism contexts like Swat. Self-Congruity and Self-Transformation significantly influence Destination Brand Love, confirming tourists' psychological involvement in destination attachment. Destination Brand Love strongly predicts both Destination loyalty and Word-of-Mouth, confirming its mediating role in transforming experiences into loyalty outcomes.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the understanding of tourist behavioral intentions in experiential tourism by integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with the Destination Brand Love (DBL) framework. Key findings confirm that both destination-related factors (destination authenticity and experience co-creation) and tourist-centered factors (self-congruity and self-transformation) contribute significantly to the formation of DBL, which in turn drives tourists' Destination loyalty behaviors.

By confirming that destination authenticity **and** experience co-creation satisfy tourists' relatedness needs—leading to emotional brand attachment—this research extends prior work that typically centers destination image and service quality (Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019; Lee et al., 2025). Notably, experience co-creation emerged as a stronger predictor of DBL than destination authenticity, highlighting tourists' active role in crafting experiences as critical for brand attachment and subsequent loyalty.

Furthermore, the study reveals that self-congruity **and** self-transformation satisfy tourists' competence needs, significantly influencing DBL. This supports recent calls to examine tourists as identity-seeking and meaning-making agents (Huang et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024), rather than passive experience consumers. The finding that these tourist factors exert their influence primarily through DBL (full mediation) emphasizes that psychological connection precedes loyalty behaviors.

These insights position DBL as a critical mediating mechanism translating both environmental and psychological drivers into concrete loyalty outcomes. This extends the conceptual scope of DBL literature, typically confined to cognitive predictors, by validating its role within a motivational framework anchored in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

5.2 Practical Implications

For destination marketers and tourism stakeholders in Swat Valley, several actionable insights emerge: **Facilitate Authentic and Participatory Experiences:** Policymakers should focus on preserving cultural authenticity while enabling tourists to participate actively in local activities—such as guided nature walks, handicraft workshops, and homestay programs—to enhance co-creation. Investment in host-guest interaction platforms can deepen tourists' emotional connection. **Target Identity-Based Segments:** Marketing strategies should emphasize self-expression and personal transformation in promotional campaigns. Highlighting Swat's role in offering identity-affirming and growth-oriented experiences can attract tourists seeking deeper meaning from their travels. **Leverage Brand Love in Loyalty Strategies:** As DBL significantly predicts both Destination loyalty and word-of-mouth, destination branding should shift from functional attributes to emotional narratives. Storytelling campaigns focusing on tourists' personal journeys in Swat can encourage spontaneous advocacy. **Support Host Community Empowerment:** Given the centrality of co-creation, empowering local communities to become experience co-creators—not merely service providers—can sustain authentic interactions and enhance tourists' perceived value.

5.3 Policy Implications

At the policy level, the findings suggest that tourism development in Swat should prioritize experience-based value creation over mass-tourism infrastructure. Sustainable policies that protect environmental and cultural authenticity while nurturing participatory tourism ecosystems can enhance destination competitiveness. Collaboration between public agencies and local communities can ensure that tourism growth aligns with cultural preservation and visitor satisfaction.

5.4 Conclusion

This study explored how both destination-driven factors (destination authenticity, experience co-creation) and tourist-centered factors (self-congruity, self-transformation) influence Destination Brand Love (DBL) and, in turn, drive destination loyalty among tourists visiting Swat Valley, Pakistan. By integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this research underscores that tourists' psychological needs for autonomy and competence are satisfied through both environmental encounters and personal identity-based experiences, culminating in emotional brand attachment.

Key findings demonstrate that experience co-creation and destination authenticity significantly enhance tourists' emotional connection with the destination, supporting the critical role of participatory, authentic experiences in experiential tourism. Likewise, identity-related factors, namely self-congruity and self-transformation, foster Destination Brand Love by affirming tourists' sense of self and personal growth. Importantly, DBL mediates the relationship between these antecedents and loyalty behaviors, confirming its pivotal role in converting both destination experiences and psychological outcomes into Destination loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

For tourism marketers and policymakers in Swat Valley, these findings highlight the importance of designing participatory, authentic experiences that resonate with tourists' identity and personal growth aspirations. Strengthening Destination Brand Love through emotionally resonant marketing strategies and community-driven co-creation initiatives can enhance tourist loyalty and advocacy, supporting sustainable tourism growth.

Overall, this study contributes theoretically by expanding the application of SDT within tourism branding and destination loyalty research, while offering practical pathways for experience-based, sustainable destination development in emerging markets.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers significant contributions, it has limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences; future longitudinal studies could explore long-term impacts of DBL on loyalty behaviors. Moreover, the focus on Swat limits generalizability; replication in other Pakistani and global emerging destinations is encouraged. Future research should also examine additional psychological constructs such as nostalgia, place attachment, or flow experience to enrich understanding of emotional drivers in experiential tourism.

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