

UNDERSTANDING THAI TOURISTS' MEANING- MAKING OF ATTACHMENT TO JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how Thai tourists interpret their attachment to Japan using a qualitative approach. Employing a four-dimensional framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 frequent Thai visitors to Japan. The narratives revealed all four dimensions of place attachment: place identity, place dependence, place social bonding, and place affect. Japan emerged as a unique destination offering irreplaceable travel experiences. Place dependence was most significant in fostering attachment, while place affect was an accumulation of the other three dimensions. The study found that attachment resulted from a combination of diverse factors rather than a single cause. It underscores the role of place attachment in promoting repeat visits and destination loyalty, providing insights to enhance Japan's tourism appeal. However, the reliance on qualitative methods limits generalizability. Future research should explore attachment in non-visitors, the longevity of attachment, and factors reducing attachment to a place.

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INTRODUCTION

With the successful introduction of the Japanese government's policy to establish the tourism industry in the country in 2003, aiming to position the tourism sector as a key industry in 21st century (Liu, 2023), the past decade has witnessed a significant surge in the number of foreign tourists (Japan National Tourism Organization - JNTO, 2023). In the period of 2013-2019, Japan welcomed international tourists from all around the globe, with the number increasing substantially each year (JNTO, 2023; World Bank Group, 2024). JNTO's (2023) data shows that the number of international visitors

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surpassed 10 million in 2013 and had risen to 31.9 million by 2019. This massive growth in inbound tourism reflects the significant contribution made by inbound tourism to bolster the Japanese economy (Nguyen, 2020).

The success of inbound tourism in Japan can be attributed to various factors, categorized as push and pull factors. Push factors, rooted in the internal needs of foreign visitors driving them to visit Japan, are largely associated with the characteristics of visitors, who are typically well-educated, intellectually curious, and highly inquisitive. They are inclined to deepen their understanding by immersing themselves in local traditions, cultures, and natural environments that differ from their own country (Kurihara, 2022; Shapoval et al., 2018). Shapoval et al. (2018) further highlight that specific motivations, such as attending conferences, participating in incentive travel programs, and pursuing educational opportunities, along with anticipated future experiences, are also significant push factors influencing tourism decisions. Regarding pull factors which involve the Japanese government's initiatives to boost the nation's image through various marketing campaigns, thereby increasing global recognition of Japan as a premier tourism destination. Furthermore, the relaxation of short-term visa requirements for foreign visitors (Liu, 2023) and Japan's unique attractions, including its cuisine, accommodations, shopping, transportation, entertainment, natural beauty, and cultural resources, play significant roles in drawing visitors to the country (Liu, 2023; Shapoval et al., 2018).

The substantial rise in the number of international tourists visiting Japan was also fuelled by several external factors (Andonian et al., 2016; Bangkok Post, 2015; Liu, 2023; Nguyen, 2020) including the depreciation of the Japanese yen, China's economic growth and the introduction of low-cost air travel options from various Asian countries to Japan (Andonian et al., 2016; Bangkok Post, 2015; Nguyen, 2020).

However, the tourism industry in Japan witnessed a significant downturn between 2021 and 2022 in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and the subsequent imposition of global travel restrictions (Yagasaki, 2021). JNTO (2023) reports a staggering 87 percent decline in the number of foreign visitors in 2020, with only 4.1 million people travelling to the country, compared to nearly 32 million in the previous year. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the number of international arrivals in 2021 dropped to an all-time low of 246,000, representing a 99 percent decrease from 2019 (JNTO, 2023; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2023). However, in the latter part of 2022, as the COVID-19

situation started to improve and the Japanese government relaxed its entry restrictions for foreign visitors, inbound tourism began to recover. The reinstatement of visa-free entry for foreign visitors also contributed to the resurgence of inbound tourism in Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). In the first two months of 2023, Japan experienced a marked rise in the number of international tourists, attracting approximately 2,972,600 visitors (JNTO, 2023).

According to data released by JNTO (2023) and JTB Tourism Research & Cons, Asia is the main source of international tourists visiting Japan, contributing to over 50% of total foreign visitors, with China and South Korea being the leading markets, followed by Taiwan, the USA, and Thailand. Thai visitors have emerged as a significant market for Japan's tourism industry, as evidenced by the visa exemptions for short-stay Thai tourists in July 2013 (Japanese Embassy to Thailand, 2014). Prior to the pandemic, Thai visitors ranked sixth in overall international tourist numbers and were the highest in Southeast Asia, with 1,318,977 people recorded in 2019 (JNTO, 2023). However, due to Japan's closed borders, the number of Thai visitors fell to 219,830 in 2020 and only 2,758 in 2021 (JNTO, 2023; Yagasaki, 2021). Since Japan reopened its borders at the end of 2022, the number of Thai tourists has rebounded quickly, reaching around 136,700 during January and February 2023 (JNTO, 2023). For several years, Japan has consistently been the most popular destination for Thai travellers (Bangkok Post, 2015). Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of this segment of Japan's tourism industry is imperative.

Although Japan has become a favoured destination for international tourists, including those from Thailand, there is global competition from other destinations. To maintain Japan's competitive edge, destination management organisations (DMOs) and other stakeholders must devise effective strategies. One such approach could be to cultivate a sense of attachment to the country among selected markets. The literature recognises the importance of tourists' place attachment in driving repeat visits and loyalty to a particular destination (Isa et al., 2020; Patwardhan et al., 2019; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Zou et al., 2022). Developing a strong sense of attachment is also a key factor in branding destinations, and consequently contributes to their competitive advantage (Su et al., 2018; Veasna et al., 2013). By focusing on a comprehensive understanding of how the target tourists develop a sense of attachment to a country, and how enhancing such feelings of attachment, DMOs and other tourism-related stakeholders in Japan can ensure that the country remains an appealing

destination for its target tourists. Therefore, the importance of gaining insights into tourists' attachment to the country cannot be overstated.

The study of place attachment has gained significant attention from scholars and researchers in the tourism field in recent decades (Dwyer et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2018). However, the current literature on place attachment in the Japanese context is limited and predominantly quantitative in nature, emphasising the connection between tourists' attachment to a specific place and their behaviour. For instance, Uesugi & Kudo (2020) investigated the relationship between tourists' connection to a place and their tendency to adopt environmentally-friendly behaviours in natural areas; Abdulsalam & Dahana (2022) explored the connection between place attachment, overall satisfaction, and visit frequency; and Basu et al. (2020) examined the role of place attachment as a mediator between nature connectedness and human well-being. Although these studies have provided valuable insights, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the qualitative study of place attachment in the Japanese tourism context.

This study addressed the gap in the literature by investigating how Thai tourists made sense of their connection to Japan. This study focused on Thai tourists, as they contribute significantly to Japan's inbound tourism. Specifically, this study explored how Thai tourists interpreted their attachment to Japan in four different dimensions: place identity, place dependence, place social bonding, and place affect. The application of this four-dimensional framework lies in its ability to capture the intricate, dynamic, and multifaceted aspects of place attachment, addressing cognitive elements (knowledge and beliefs), emotional dimensions (feeling), and behavioural components (Brown et al., 2016; Han et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2017). By utilising this framework, the study contributed to a more holistic understanding of place attachment, as it took into account the cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of this construct.

The structure of this paper is as follows: it begins with an overview of Japan's inbound tourism industry, delving into the crucial role of place attachment in its successful development while also identifying a research gap in this area. Following this, a thorough literature review on place attachment concepts is presented, exploring meanings, determinants, significance, and components. The methodology section offers insights into the chosen approach, while the results report the findings. The final part of the article is the discussion and conclusion section, which analyzes and interprets findings within the existing literature, synthesizes implications,

acknowledges limitations, and offers suggestions for future research, providing a comprehensive overview of the study's contributions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Place attachment is a theoretical construct that was originally developed in the field of environmental psychology (Dwyer et al., 2019; Wang, 2023), and has since been adopted by various disciplines, including tourism studies (Dwyer et al., 2019; Han et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022). Within tourism research, place attachment has been a valuable tool for comprehending the ties that individuals establish with specific places, or both those held by tourists (e.g., Han et al., 2019; Hashemi et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Tonge et al., 2015; Woosnam et al., 2018a) and local residents (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Stylidis, 2018; Woosnam et al., 2018a).

Table 1. *Examples of definitions and terminologies used to describe place attachment*

| Definition | Terminology | References |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| The effective bond between people and place or setting | Topophilia | Tuan (1974, p.4) |
| A multidimensional construct comprising: (1) beliefs about the relationship between self and place; (2) feelings toward the place; and (3) the behavioral exclusivity of the place in relation to alternatives. | Sense of Place (SOP) | Jorgensen & Stedman (2001, p. 233). |
| The positive emotional bonds that develop between individuals and their socio-physical environment | Place attachment | Strzelecka et al. (2017, p.61) |
| The formulation of positive emotional bonds between individuals and their socio-physical environment. | Place attachment | Woosnam et al. (2018a, p.139) |
| [It] can be conceptualized in terms of two main dimensions: (1) relationship to place which refers to the different ways that people are linked to places and the types of bonds (genealogical/historical, narrative/cultural, economic, ideological, cosmological, and dynamic); and (2) place attachment which reflects the depth and types of attachments to one place (place identity, place dependence, affective attachment, social bonding, place memory, place expectation) | Sense of place | Chen et al. (2021) |
| Individuals' affective and cognitive bonds toward environments they perceive as meaningful | Place attachment | Lee et al. (2022, p. 726) |

Place attachment is a positive connection or bond that individuals form with a specific place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Su et al., 2018; Williams & Vaske, 2003) and the degree to which they identify with and value it (Moore & Graefe, 1994). According to Giuliani (2003), place attachment refers to both the process of connecting oneself to a place, which involves multiple reasons for attachment, and the resulting outcome of this process, which generates a sense of attachment. Place attachment is widely acknowledged as an important aspect of human-place relations, as it sheds

light on the complex ways in which individuals interact with particular physical and social environments (Dwyer et al., 2019). Table 1 details some of the definitions of place attachment and terminologies used to refer to this construct.

Numerous determinants that contribute to tourists' place attachment to a specific destination have been identified in existing literature in an attempt to unpack this complex construct, including recreational activities (Ednie et al., 2010; Wilkins & de Urioste-Stone, 2018), repeat visits (Moore & Graefe, 1994; Williams et al., 1992), destination image (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Veasna et al., 2013), destination reputation (Yuksel et al., 2010), satisfying or memorable tourist experiences (Halpenny, 2006; Trinanda et al., 2022), perceived value of tourism activities (Jiang & Hong, 2023), perceived authenticity of a place (Yi et al., 2021), nostalgia (Cho, 2021), local events, beautiful natural landscapes, significant people, symbolic meaning (Yuksel et al., 2010), and perceived solidarity (Woosnam et al., 2018b).

Place attachment is also a significant factor in influencing tourists' tendency to revisit a destination (Isa et al., 2020; Kil et al., 2012; Neuvonen et al., 2010) and their overall satisfaction with it (Hashemi et al., 2023; Loureiro, 2014; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Veasna et al., 2013; Xu & Zhang, 2016; Yuksel et al., 2010). Moreover, many scholars (Lee, 2003; Lee & Shen, 2013; Patwardhan et al., 2019; Wickham, 2000; Yuksel et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2022) have also emphasised the strong association between tourists' place attachment and their loyalty to a particular destination, and arguing that a sense of attachment to a place leads tourists to become more loyal to it, even when alternatives exist. Such findings are of particular significance to tourism industry professionals, who can utilise place attachment as a strategic tool to enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty towards a destination.

Several studies (e.g., Halpenny, 2010; Li et al., 2023; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Tonge et al., 2015; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001) also suggest that place attachment is critical in shaping tourists' sense of community and their propensity to engage in pro-environmental behaviours. For examples, studies conducted by Li et al. (2023) and Tonge et al. (2015) examined how place attachment affects visitors' intentions to engage in environmentally responsible behaviours and concluded that, once tourists develop a strong connection with a place, they are more likely to take actions that protect and preserve the environment. These studies provide empirical support for the idea that tourists' place attachment can lead to a sense of responsibility

towards and ownership of a particular destination, prompting them to act accordingly.

Place attachment is a complex and multi-faceted construct (Dwyer et al., 2019; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Williams & Vaske, 2003). While the emotional connection of individuals with a particular place is often highlighted, it is not the only factor that contributes to place attachment. As Vorkinn and Riese (2001) have observed, place attachment also involves cognitive and behavioural connections. Additionally, Knez (2014) underscores that the concept of 'places' extends beyond physical boundaries, and encompasses social, psychological, historical, and spiritual aspects. Consequently, an individual's attachment to a place may include physical features or social ties (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Lewicka, 2010).

During the initial phase of studying environmental psychology and tourism (e.g., Gross & Brown, 2008; Williams et al., 1992; Williams & Vaske 2003; Yuksel et al., 2010), place attachment was conventionally conceptualised as consisting of two key dimensions: place identity and dependence. However, scholars have acknowledged that this does not fully capture the multi-faceted nature of this construct (Tonge et al., 2015) and additional dimensions have been suggested (Halpenny, 2010; Ramkissoon et al., 2012). This study employed a framework of place attachment that encompasses four dimensions: place identity, place dependence, place social bonding and place affect. This framework has the capacity to comprehensively grasp the complex and multi-faceted nature of place attachment, as it encompasses essential elements of cognition (i.e., beliefs and knowledge), affection (feeling), and behaviours (Han et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2017; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015).

Place identity denotes the psychological bond between an individual and a particular setting (Proshansky, 1978; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001; Williams et al., 1992). It enables individuals to express, reflect and/or affirm their identities (Kyle et al., 2004; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). It also serves as a symbolic link between an individual and the place (Stedman, 2002), which can take many forms, such as ancestral or familial ties, spiritual or sacred significance, or commemoration of personally meaningful events (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010). Hence, place identity can be seen as a cognitive evaluation that results from an individual's attachment to a particular place.

Place dependence refers to the extent to which the distinctive physical features and conditions of a particular destination meet the desired goals and needs of tourists in relation to specific activities compared to other alternatives (Moore & Graefe, 1994; Ramkissoon et al., 2012; Stokols &

Shumaker 1981; Williams et al. 1992). It represents the functional connection that an individual develops with a particular place (Gross & Brown, 2008; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001), influenced by distinctive physical and social features or resources that facilitate leisure activities, like hiking and exploring local culture (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). Therefore, the assessment of place dependence typically relies on the appropriateness of the physical characteristics and conditions of a destination (Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

Place social bonding refers to an individual's interpersonal connections with others in a particular location such as family, close friends, social groups, and cultures (Kyle et al., 2005). Place serves as a significant context wherein individuals establish social relationships, share memories and the associated meanings of that particular place with others, and foster a sense of group membership (Low & Altman, 1992).

Finally, *place affect or affective attachment* pertains to an individual's emotional or affective bond with a particular place (Halpenny, 2010; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Some researchers (Ramkissoon et al., 2012; Relph, 1976) note that spending time in a specific place can evoke positive emotions, leading to the formation of emotional bonds with that place. Additionally, Blondin (2021) notes that individuals who have an emotional bond with a specific place have enhanced adaptability and increased capacity to endure staying in that place.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how Thai tourists interpreted their attachment to Japan. It did not focus on any specific area in Japan but studied the Thai tourists' attachment to Japan in general. This decision was motivated by the desire to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the country's overall appeal from the perspectives of Thai tourists. This approach allows the researcher to explore common themes and factors contributing to attachment that may transcend geographical boundaries, providing insights that can inform broader strategies for tourism promotion and destination management.

Following the interpretive paradigm and employing qualitative research, this study strategically chose respondents based on their potential to provide in-depth insights. The criteria aimed at selecting Thai tourists who exhibited a strong attachment to Japan through frequent visits before and after the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, the study established the following selection criteria: (1) being Thai tourists who had visited Japan at

least once a year before the COVID-19 outbreak and had also visited the country after the outbreak; and (2) being eighteen years old and above for ethical reasons.

Similarly, the determination of the total number of respondents followed a technique commonly used in qualitative studies. Guided by data saturation, where information is collected until no new insights emerge (Patten & Newhart, 2018), the selection process aimed at achieving a rich, in-depth understanding of Thai tourists' place attachment to Japan. In contrast to quantitative practices, which typically involve statistical considerations for generalization, this approach was considered more suitable for the study's specific goal of nuanced exploration rather than broad statistical inference. As a result, a total of 28 participants were selected.

The first group of participants (eight individuals) were recruited using purposive sampling, based on their direct experiences and potential to provide in-depth insights, through the researcher's personal connections. The remaining respondents (20 individuals) were identified through snowball sampling, whereby participants nominated others who met the selection criteria and were willing to participate. The respondents consisted of 13 males and 15 females, with ages ranging from 20 to 58 years old. The detailed profiles of the respondents are shown in Table 2.

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method for this study. An interview guide, informed by relevant literature, directed the interviews. This data collection approach was chosen due to its potential to facilitate the researcher's understanding of the multi-faceted nature of the sense of attachment that Thai tourists have to Japan. The technique allowed the participants to express their perspectives and experiences without undue constraint (Carey, 2013) while also allowing the researcher to probe further (Jennings, 2011). This enabled a thorough exploration and more comprehensive understanding of the issue of tourists' place attachment. Interview questions focused on the respondents' perception of their connection with Japan and centred on the "how" and "why". Examples of such questions include, "*what do trips to Japan mean to you, and why?*", "*why do you visit Japan frequently?*", "*what sparked your initial interest in Japan, and how has that interest grown over time?*", and "*how do you feel when you are in Japan?*", "*What emotions or sensations do you associate with the country, and why?*" A pilot study was carried out with six participants to confirm the interview guide's effectiveness and clarity of the questions (Jennings, 2011). Additionally, the pilot study helped to familiarise the

researcher with the interview questions (Jennings, 2011). The primary study was then conducted from December 2022-February 2023.

Table 2. *Profiles of the respondents*

| Codename | Gender | Age | Approx. number of visits to Japan per year | Total number of visits to Japan |
|----------|--------|-----|--|---------------------------------|
| R1 | M | 21 | Twice | More than 10 |
| R2 | F | 43 | Two or three times | More than 15 |
| R3 | F | 20 | Twice | More than 10 |
| R4 | F | 42 | Two or three times | More than 15 |
| R5 | M | 39 | Once | More than 10 |
| R6 | M | 34 | Once or twice | More than 10 |
| R7 | F | 20 | Once | More than 5 |
| R8 | F | 26 | Once or twice | More than 10 |
| R9 | M | 42 | Once | More than 15 |
| R10 | F | 55 | Once or twice | More than 15 |
| R11 | F | 39 | Once | More than 10 |
| R12 | F | 58 | Once or twice | More than 10 |
| R13 | M | 38 | Once | More than 5 |
| R14 | F | 47 | Once or twice | More than 10 |
| R15 | M | 50 | Once | More than 10 |
| R16 | F | 58 | Twice | More than 10 |
| R17 | F | 52 | Twice | More than 10 |
| R18 | F | 32 | Once | More than 5 |
| R19 | M | 29 | Once | More than 5 |
| R20 | M | 31 | Once | More than 5 |
| R21 | F | 37 | Once or twice | More than 10 |
| R22 | M | 41 | Once or twice | More than 10 |
| R23 | F | 42 | Once or twice | More than 10 |
| R24 | M | 26 | Once | More than 5 |
| R25 | M | 29 | Once | More than 5 |
| R26 | F | 37 | Once | More than 10 |
| R27 | M | 49 | Once | More than 10 |
| R28 | M | 55 | Once or twice | More than 10 |

Each interview, ranging from 55-90 minutes in duration, was audio recorded with the interviewees' consent for the sake of convenience in data analysis. All interviews were conducted online using either Zoom or the Line Application with respondents who were located in Thailand at the time. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their information. Pseudonyms were used in the publication and their shared information was utilised solely for research and educational purposes. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. As the interviews were conducted in Thai, they were initially transcribed in Thai and subsequently translated into English by the researcher. To ensure the accuracy of the translation, a native English-speaking lecturer at a Thai university who is fluent in Thai reviewed the translation.

Table 3. *The themes, associated codes and examples of the respondents' extracts*

| Theme | Associated Code | Example of the Respondents' Extract |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| 1. Place identity | 1.1 A sense of belonging to Japanese society (e.g. "belong", "true self", "feel like it is more suited with my personal value" etc.) | "I feel like I belong more to Japan than to Thailand" (R21). |
| | 1.2 Concerns/worry about possible loss of certain value (e.g. "worried about the loss of traditional value"; "pity to see some undisciplined behaviour" etc.) | "I am worried that one day in the future, some of the good Japanese values will disappear" (R19). |
| | 1.3 Nostalgic experience (e.g. "bringing back memories"; "recalling the past"; "invoking memories" etc.) | "Visiting Japan brought back joyful memories of my youth" (R24) |
| 2. Place dependence | 2.1 Japan's unique attributes align with travel motivations/ expectations (e.g. "meeting my expectation"; "no better destination for skiing"; "matching my preferences" etc.) | "Japan is always my favourite destination with a lot of things to do and places to visit" (R9). |
| | 2.2 Opportunities to experience activities and sight learned from manga and drama (e.g. "seeing how...actually like"; "witnessing the real-life version of ..." etc.) | "I could see what Shinto shrines and Japanese castles actually looked like after seeing them in the manga" (R14). |
| | 2.3 Loyalty to the country (e.g. "never getting bored of Japan"; "many things left to do"; "my ever-favourite country" etc.) | "Although I have visited Japan many times, I still want to visit it in the future... There are still many great places left to visit" (R17) |
| 3. Place social bonding | 3.1 A place where a sense of shared joy and satisfaction is being developed (e.g. "having a good time with..."; "having a great shared moment with..." etc.) | "My family and I always had a great time when we visited Japan together" (R3) |
| | 3.2 A destination marking a memorable occasion in lives (e.g. "a special place for my life"; "marking a memorable occasion" etc.) | "Japan is the first overseas country I visited with my family" (R11). |
| | 3.3 Good relationship with Japanese people (e.g. "becoming friends with..."; "friendship" etc.) | "I met one Japanese girl during one of my trips to Japan... We became good friends since then" (R19). |
| 4. Place affect | 4.1 Positive emotion (e.g. "highly impressed"; "memorable"; "enjoyable" etc.) | "Japan is always the most enjoyable destination" (R9) |
| | 4.2 Unpleasant feelings due to being unable to visit Japan during the COVID-19 (e.g. "missing..."; "longing to revisit" etc.) | "I miss Japan a lot" (R10) |
| | 4.3 Worry and sadness arising from the natural disaster occurring in Japan (e.g. "sad"; "worried" etc.) | "I was sad when I heard the news about natural disasters in Japan" (R21) |

In terms of data analysis, the research did not utilise any statistical software or tests but employed thematic analysis, a well-known qualitative approach. Despite the availability of computer software for qualitative data,

such as Nvivo, the researcher chose manual analysis to immerse herself in the information. Personally, transcribing the interviews, though time-consuming, proved a valuable process that fostered a deep familiarity with the data. Thematic analysis is renowned for allowing themes to organically emerge from the data in a flexible manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Unlike strictly deductive or theory-bound approaches, this technique facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes within a given dataset (Braun & Clarke 2012). Although this study was guided by the four-dimensional framework of place attachment, as mentioned earlier, the data analysis not only sought latent themes aligned with the theory but also aimed to uncover semantic themes that explicitly reflected participants' expressions. However, the main results of the analysis only revealed latent themes.

The analytical process adhered to the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, the researcher familiarised with the data by carefully reading the transcripts. Subsequently, the author interpreted the data, searching for patterns and meanings, and generated initial codes based on the prevalent ideas and recurring meanings observed in the data. Relevant data extracts were then grouped together within each code. The identified codes were then reviewed and analysed alongside their corresponding extracts to discern recurring themes. During this process, the meaning of each code and its connections with others were examined and analysed. Consequently, themes were derived from the compiled codes and their associated extracts. These themes were developed and named based on the meaning of the data extracts or the narrative they conveyed. All identified themes, codes, and grouped data extracts were thoroughly scrutinised to ensure they effectively addressed the research objective. Table 3 illustrates the themes, associated codes and examples of the respondents' extract.

RESULTS

The data indicated that all the respondents made yearly visits to Japan, with the number of trips per year varying from one to three. Some respondents also disclosed that while they also travelled to other countries, Japan was always their first choice. When asked why, participants expressed a sense of attachment to Japan. Even though some participants did not explicitly use the terms 'attachment', 'bond' or 'connection', other expressions indicated a sense of attachment to the country, as shown in the following examples: "*Visiting Japan never fails to excite me, and I doubt I will ever tire of it*" (R4); "*My husband and I eagerly anticipate our winter vacation so we can visit*

Japan" (R2); "Each time our journey in Japan comes to a close, I am left with the certainty that I will be back to the country in the near future" (R12); and "During our free time, my wife and I make it a habit to discuss and plan out the places to explore and the activities to experience during our upcoming trips to Japan" (R15). The strong attachment of the respondents to Japan was vividly conveyed during discussion of the period in which the country closed its borders to international tourists due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Several respondents expressed their longing to return to Japan, and eagerly awaited the reopening of the country to international tourists, emphasising their fondness for and deep connection to Japan. Some participants also stated that they monitored updates on when Japan would reopen to international tourists and were among the first Thai people to visit the country when the government began to ease its entry restrictions.

In the narratives of all the respondents, it was evident that multiple factors played a role in their attachment to Japan, including its natural beauty, unique culture and values, tourism activities, the hospitality of local people, nostalgia, satisfying and memorable tourism experiences and the symbolic meaning of Japan. Respondents highlighted that their attachment to Japan was not based on a single factor, but rather arose from a combination of diverse factors that made Japan stand out as a distinctive, providing travel experiences that could not be replicated elsewhere. For example, R10 noted that

"While I do find attributes like cherry blossom, autumn leaves, and snowy mountains in Japan to be particularly noteworthy, they alone may not be enough to compel me to repeatedly visit the country. What makes Japan truly special and irreplaceable to me is the combination of its many unique attributes that set it apart from other countries and renders it irreplaceable."

The findings from the data analysis were classified based on the dimensions of the place attachment concept (identity, dependence, social bonding, and affect), each discussed below.

Place Identity

Only six respondents provided narratives that were interpreted as place attachment in the form of place identity. Out of these, three respondents expressed a sense of belonging to Japanese society. This was due to their perception that the culture, values, and/or lifestyles of Japanese people were more closely aligned with their personal values and lifestyle preference than the Thai society. They also found that their visits to Japan gave them greater clarity in understanding their true selves. This point was clearly

illustrated by R9 who expressed his admiration for Japanese people's discipline and respect for others: *"Whenever I'm in Japan, I can't help but imagine living there permanently. I feel like I belong more in this type of society than in Thai society."* He also shared his concerns about the possible loss of certain Japanese values over time, which could result in Japan losing its appeal. He revealed that, on his last visit to Japan, he observed a lack of discipline among some Japanese teenagers compared to older generations. Specifically, he recounted an instance where he saw teenagers crossing the road while the traffic light was still red, and this suggested to him a lack of traditional values, which made him sad. R21 said expressed that Japan allowed her to express her true self more freely through fashion, saying that

"I have a great admiration for the way Japanese people dress and I enjoy emulating their style. However, it might be perceived as peculiar to wear Japanese clothing in Thailand and draw unwanted attention. That's why I long to visit Japan, where I feel free to express my authentic self through fashion."

Among the six respondents, two mentioned that they had become acquainted with Japanese culture through popular manga, drama, and song during their youth. Their visits to Japan, therefore, were nostalgic experiences that brought back memories of their happy and carefree days. For example, R23, who grew up reading Doraemon and Sailor Moon manga, had always dreamed of visiting Japan. When she finally had the change to do so, the experiences rekindled happy memories of her youth, leaving her feeling content.

Place Dependence

The data analysis indicated that the narratives of respondents predominantly reflected their attachment to Japan through a sense of place dependence. According to the respondents, Japan's physical features, activities, culture, weather and other attributes were the perfect match for their travel motivations and expectations. They highly praised various attributes, including but not limited to cherry blossom, snowy mountains for winter sports, autumn leaves, hot springs, food, cultural activities, public transportation networks, accommodation, clean cities, safety and more. For example, *"For me, there's no better destination for skiing than the snowy mountains of Hokkaido, which is why I go there every year"* (R9); *"Compared to other countries, I find travelling in Japan incredibly convenient. The food is incredible, the public transportation is top-notch, and the accommodation is immaculate. Everything seems to be just right"* (R17); *"Japan has lots of great places to visit and things to do. I will always love visiting there and never get bored"*

(R11); and *“Japan is a destination that can be visited year-round. The country is beautiful in all seasons. Personally, I find the country’s nature to be among the most exquisite in the world”* (R8).

Some respondents expressed that trips to Japan allowed them to experience activities and sights that they had learnt from Japanese manga and drama. This view was predominantly shared by middle-aged and older respondents, who were born at a time when Japanese culture was widely popular in Thailand through various forms of media. For example, R27 stated that

“When I was young, I loved reading Japanese manga and watching Japanese dramas. I often wondered if the things like castles and shrines I saw in them looked the same in real life. I also wanted to try Japanese fish-shaped cake and a pancake called ‘Dorayaki’ that I saw in a Doraemon manga. Later on, I got the chance to visit Japan, and I finally got to see those castles and shrines and taste those sweet treats. Looking back, I believe that my familiarity with Japanese culture and the satisfying experiences I had there have forged a deep connection to the country within me.”

The respondents’ attachment in the form of place dependence was also demonstrated by their loyalty to the country. Several participants cited the steep increase in the expense of travelling to Japan after the country reopened to international tourists. They noted that the cost of airfares, lodging, food, and transportation within the country had risen significantly since the COVID-19 outbreak. However, despite the high cost, they still expressed their desire to revisit Japan. They thought that the experiences they would have there were unique and priceless, and they could not get them anywhere else. For example, R15 said that:

“Although travel expenses to Japan, including airline tickets, accommodation and train tickets, have significantly increased since the COVID-19 situation, my wife and I are still eager to visit the country, as we believe that the unique experiences it offers are still well worth the additional expense.”

Place Social Bonding

Majority of the respondents visited Japan with their partners, family members, or friends. They mentioned that Japan was a preferred destination for both themselves and their companions, which enabled them to share positive experiences with their loved ones, and creating a sense of shared joy and satisfaction. For example, R2 said that, *“My husband and I love skiing, admire Japanese culture, and are fans of Japanese food. Japan offers us the opportunity to engage in enjoyable activities together.”* Moreover, three

respondents indicated that Japan was a meaningful destination for them as it marked a memorable occasion in their lives. R11 recollected that Japan was the first foreign country she had visited with her family, and that this trip had left a lasting impression because she had so much fun with her family. R18 associated Japan with the moment her husband proposed to her, while R5 reminisced about visiting Japan on honeymoon. It is evident that Japan represents a place of pleasant memories for all three participants.

R9 shared that, on one of his trips to Japan, he met and befriended a Japanese couple who owned a guesthouse. Since then, he had stayed at their guesthouse every time he visited Japan as he valued the relationship with the couple. He emphasised that his friendship was one of significant motivators for his continued interest in visiting Japan, as illustrated below:

“During one of my trips to Japan, I stayed at a charming guesthouse where I became friends with the owners, a very kind and polite couple. Since then, we have become good friends, and I make it a point to stay with them every time I visit Japan, and our friendship has only grown stronger over time. In fact, they have become one of the main reasons why I keep going back to Japan.”

Place Affect

The respondents expressed a diverse array of emotions when sharing their views on Japan, all of which demonstrated a strong emotional connection to the country. These feelings can be classified into three distinct categories. The first group can be characterised as positive emotions arising from fulfilling experiences gained through visits to Japan. The respondents used terms such as ‘highly impressed’, ‘memorable’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘amazed’, ‘peaceful’, ‘relaxed’, ‘safe’ and ‘warm’ to convey their attachment to Japan. It is evident that the respondents’ positive sentiments were clearly influenced by satisfying encounters with various aspects of Japanese culture, tourism infrastructure and facilities, leisure activities, and the hospitality of local people during their trip. Furthermore, the joy of experiences these things with companions contributed to these positive feelings. For example, R10 stated that, *“My family and I always find Japan to be the most enjoyable destination.”*

The second group of emotions were unpleasant feelings that arose when they were unable to visit Japan, during the period when Japan closed its borders to international tourists due to COVID-19. The respondents expressed emotions such as *“missing many things in Japan”, “longing to visit the country again”,* and *“feeling like something was disappearing in my life”*.

The final group of emotions were worry and sadness at the frequent occurrence of natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis in Japan. This concern was expressed by four respondents, who were also concerned at the potential damage to cultural landmarks and infrastructure in the affected areas, reflected their emotional attachment. When asked about their reasons continuing to visit the country despite the risk of natural disasters, three respondents, including R19 who had first-hand experience of an earthquake in Japan, expressed confidence in the Japanese government's ability to handle such situations. R18 stated that she was not fearful of such incidents and believed that if it did happen during her trip, it would simply be a matter of fate.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data analysis indicates that the respondents' frequent visits and loyalty to Japan were primarily attributed to their strong sense of attachment to the country. This reinforces the argument in the existing literature that highlights the critical influence of place attachment in shaping tourists' propensity to make a return visit to a destination and develop loyalty towards it (Isa et al., 2020; Kil et al., 2012; Neuvonen et al., 2010; Patwardhan et al., 2019; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Zou et al., 2022). This study also finds that attachment to Japan reduced the likelihood of participants considering alternatives. This was demonstrated by the respondents' assertion that Japan was an irreplaceable destination, again supporting the existing literature (Lee, 2003; Lee & Shen, 2013; Patwardhan et al., 2019; Wickham, 2000; Yuksel et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2022).

The participants in the study had varying interpretations of their connection to Japan, which can be classified into four dimensions: place identity, place dependence, place social bonding, and place affect. Some respondents shared narratives that reflected their bond with Japan across all four dimensions, while others mentioned only two or three dimensions. This finding is in line with earlier studies that emphasise the complex and multi-faceted nature of the concept of place attachment (Dwyer et al., 2019; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Williams & Vaske, 2003). This study yields an interesting finding regarding the relative significance of the four dimensions of place attachment. All respondents had a strong place attachment towards Japan in the form of place dependence. This consistently emerged as the primary aspect mentioned by participants when describing their connection to the country and was cited by all respondents. This highlights the crucial role that Japan's unique features

play in fulfilling the respondents' desires and expectations. This form of connection influenced their decision to choose Japan over other destinations. As such, this study suggests that place dependence plays a more critical role than other dimensions in fostering a sense of attachment to a place.

In addition, this study also revealed a relationship between the four dimensions of place attachment, with place affect being influenced by the other three dimensions. This was reflected in the respondents' expressions of their sentiments towards Japan, as they consistently linked their emotions to particular attributes or experiences. For instance, they attributed their joy at discovering and expressing their true selves (place identity), their amazement to the opportunity at Japan's natural beauty (place dependence), and their happiness at the creation of shared memories with loved ones (place social bonding).

Several factors were discovered to affect the respondents' attachment to Japan, all of which have also been reported in previous studies. These include, but are not limited to, engaging in various leisure activities (Ednie et al., 2010; Wilkins & de Urioste-Stone, 2018), making repeated visits (Moore & Graefe, 1994; Williams et al., 1992), satisfying or memorable travel experiences (Halpenny, 2006; Trinanda et al., 2022), perceiving value in tourism activities (Jiang & Hong, 2023), feelings of nostalgia (Cho, 2021), and the presence of beautiful natural landscapes, the hospitality of local people and symbolic meanings (Yuksel et al., 2010). However, this study finds that no single factor was enough to create a strong sense of attachment to Japan among the respondents by itself. Rather, their attachment was the result of a combination of diverse factors that made Japan a unique and irreplaceable destination.

One interesting finding from this study is that individuals developed a sense of place attachment to Japan before they visited it, and this attachment was significantly heightened during the actual visit. Respondents already had a bond with Japanese culture from their youth, through exposure to popular manga, dramas, and songs. Visiting Japan brought fond memories of their earlier experiences, and they felt a stronger connection to the country as a result. Furthermore, this study reveals that place attachment of individuals may be demonstrated in the form of concern for the fragility of a destination's cultural values and worry and sadness about potential damage to the destination caused by natural disasters. Interestingly, this study also finds that the respondents were not discouraged from visiting Japan by the possibility of natural disasters

themselves, as they had faith in the government's ability to handle such events or believed them to be a matter of fate. Additionally, it was also discovered that the respondents' emotional connection to Japan was expressed through unpleasant feelings that arose when they could not visit the country, leading them to yearn to return.

This study adds to the existing knowledge on tourists' place attachment, particularly in the context of Japanese tourism, by providing additional empirical evidence. First, this study employed a qualitative approach, which allowed deeper investigation of the topic. The findings not only support previous quantitative research on the complex and multi-dimensional nature of place attachment, its role in repeat visits and loyalty to a particular destination, and the factors that contribute to it, but also shed light on how individuals perceive and interpret their attachment to the destination. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing knowledge on tourists' place attachment by highlighting the crucial role of place dependence, as compared to other dimensions, in cultivating a sense of connection. The study also illuminates the relationship between place affect and the other three dimensions of place attachment, as well as the combined effects of various factors in fostering attachment. Finally, the study underscores the diversity in expressions of tourists' attachment, which may manifest as concerns, worries and/or sadness over changes in the destination and unpleasant feelings arising from the inability to visit the country.

The findings of this study have practical implications for DMOs and other tourism-related stakeholders in Japan. The respondents identified a combination of unique attributes that make Japan a unique destination, which has important implications for promotion efforts. To maximise the appeal of Japan as a tourist destination and foster a sense of attachment among both current and potential visitors, it is essential that DMOs and other stakeholders emphasise the country's unique attributes and underscore that these can only be experienced in Japan. Additionally, they should provide information on how these unique attributes can enhance visitors' tourism experiences, such as recommending the best times of the year and places to engage in specific tourism activities, such as viewing cherry blossom or autumn leaves, engaging in winter sports or trying local cuisine. It is also crucial to make this information available in multiple languages and to direct it towards both current and potential visitors.

This study has some limitations that require attention. The first relates to the generalisability of the findings, which is a common issue with

qualitative studies. The findings of this study were obtained by analysing and interpreting data gathered from a small group of respondents via non-probability sampling. Therefore, the findings only apply to the respondents of this study and cannot be generalised to other respondents. However, the primary objective of this study was not to achieve generalisability, but to obtain a detailed and thorough comprehension of the issue being studied. The study's second limitation pertains to the exclusive use of semi-structured interviews, which limited triangulation. Using other data collection methods, such as a focus group, in conjunction with semi-structured interviews, could have provided additional data. The researcher originally intended to organise at least one focus group discussion, but it proved impossible due to conflicting schedules. Consequently, the findings may lack some insights that might have been gained from multiple participants engaging in a discussion with one another.

The present study has yield certain insights that require further investigation. One noteworthy discovery was that an individual's attachment to a specific destination can manifest even before their physical visit. This raises the question of how non-visitors form a sense of place attachment to a specific destination. Therefore, future research may delve into the construct of place attachment among individuals who have not yet visited a particular place by examining the factors that contribute to the development of attachment in non-visitors. Moreover, the research findings also reveal that, despite some concerns for travellers visiting Japan, such as higher travel costs and the potential of natural disasters, many respondents still expressed a desire to visit the country. This raises important questions about the durability of an individuals' attachment to a specific place and to what extent external changes can impact such attachment. Furthermore, this also underscores the significance of identifying the factors that can potentially reduce visitors' sense of attachment to a particular place. Future researchers may seek to investigate these issues, as the insights gained could prove valuable to DMOs seeking to sustain visitors' sense of place attachment.

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