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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Being a ‘fan’ of a destination: conceptualising ‘destination fandom’ in tourism

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ABSTRACT

Many people develop profound and enduring connections with the destinations they visit, expressing a level of devotion and symbolic meanings that resembles fandom. While tourism research has extensively examined tourist–destination relationships, being a *fan* of a destination as a distinct and theoretically grounded phenomenon remains underexplored. This research conceptualises destination fandom for the first time through a qualitative, two-stage study design combining in-depth interviews and a netnographic analysis of destination-focused online communities. Findings reveal that the formation of destination fandom unfolds through six themes: *triggering experiences*, *emotional* and *mystical attachment*, *community integration* and *advocacy*, and *enduring devotion*. By revealing how destinations become objects of individual and collective devotion, this research opens a new research avenue at the intersection of tourism, consumer culture and fandom studies, while offering practical and social implications for destination stakeholders at multiple levels.

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Introduction

You can leave a place, but a place will never leave you.

– Boone Mortensen, widely shared across tourism destinations’ social media pages.

Many people develop profound and enduring relationships with tourism destinations, sometimes expressing a devotion resembling *fandom*. Within consumer culture theory, *fandom* is recognised as a subculture of consumption comprising an extremely affect-laden form of attachment and devotion towards a *focal object* (Seregina & Schouten, 2017). Once linked to obsession or deviant behaviour (i.e. *fanaticism*), fandom is now understood as ‘an individual process and/or collective movement’ (Fuschillo, 2020, p. 12) that gives rise to extraordinary levels of loyalty, passion, devotion and enthusiasm (Jenkins, 1992). Importantly, fandom is not confined to sport, media or popular culture. It may emerge around a wide range of objects and interests (Chung et al., 2018; Wang, 2019), where fans effervescently debate authenticity and cultural appropriation (Cruz et al., 2024), and may even travel across the world as pilgrims, following their cult interests and engaging in collective experiences (Kim et al., 2023). Destinations can thus represent the intersection of multiple fandoms (Kozinets

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& Jenkins, 2026), mutually shaping and informing each other (Sandvoss, 2013), as exemplified by the 'Fans of London' campaign (London & Partners, 2017).

Although fandom has increasingly attracted scholarly attention across multiple contexts, attention to destinations as primary objects of fandom is warranted. Existing tourism research has largely focused on fandoms that become attached to places through sport, film, music or other popular culture phenomena (e.g. Filo et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2023). These relationships are often shaped by external narratives and changing cultural trends (Lundberg et al., 2025). By contrast, destinations themselves may become focal objects of devotion, generating more intrinsic and enduring forms of attachment (Sandvoss, 2013). Unlike media products or commercial brands, destinations are collectively constituted through history, culture, place meanings and local communities (Baldi et al., 2025), suggesting a distinctive and potentially enduring object of fandom that warrants further investigation (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2026).

Despite growing anecdotal evidence of fan-like destination behaviours, particularly through social media practices such as symbolic content sharing, itinerary co-creation, community participation and advocacy, resembling other forms of collective consumption (Cova & Cova, 2002), the phenomenon of being a *fan of a destination* remains theoretically underdeveloped. An early and important attempt to link fandom to place-based contexts was provided by Sandvoss (2013) through the study of electronic dance music fans in Ibiza. Although insightful, the study did not conceptualise the destination itself as the primary object of fandom, nor did it identify the characteristics through which destination fandom may manifest as a distinct form of tourist–destination relationship.

Research on tourist–destination relationships widely recognises that destinations can become enduring objects of emotional and relational attachment (Yang et al., 2026). Destinations increasingly seek not only repeat visitation and recommendation, traditionally conceptualised as loyalty (Oppermann, 2000), but also deeper and longer-term relationships with visitors. Existing research has advanced understanding through concepts such as engagement (So et al., 2016), place attachment (Dwyer et al., 2019), psychological ownership (Kumar & Nayak, 2019), advocacy (Kim et al., 2010) and destination love (Swanson, 2017). While valuable, these perspectives remain largely embedded within loyalty-oriented and brand-centred frameworks and do not fully account for the collective, symbolic, identity-related and devotional dimensions associated with fandom.

At the same time, tourism research has identified several processes that may provide foundations for fan-like relationships. Transformative and eudaimonic experiences can generate enduring emotional bonds and reinforce destination attachment (Filep et al., 2024; Matteucci & Filep, 2017). Similarly, prolonged cultural immersion through study abroad, volunteering or culturally embedded forms of tourism may foster deep personal connections (Amaro et al., 2026; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). The symbolic acquisition of meaningful memorabilia may further contribute to the construction of destination-related meanings and identities (Lv et al., 2025). Although these studies offer important insights into profound tourist–destination relationships, they fall short of conceptualising the destination as an object of fandom.

Accordingly, this research aims to investigate whether a form of fandom towards tourist destinations may exist and, if so, to identify its (context-specific) characteristics. Neglecting this phenomenon limits understanding of a potentially enduring form of tourist–destination relationship that might extend beyond loyalty and from which destinations may substantially benefit. Theoretically, introducing fandom into a context that has traditionally served as a setting for other fandom forms opens new avenues at the intersection of tourism, consumer culture and fandom studies (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2026). Practically, recognising destination fans may help destination stakeholders cultivate long-term support, advocacy, stewardship and resilience in increasingly competitive and uncertain tourism environments (Baldi et al., 2025).

An interpretive approach informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was adopted. This study combined 33 in-depth interviews with a netnographic investigation of destination-focused online communities. By integrating individual lived experiences and collective online meanings (Mai & Liu, 2026), the analysis led to the development of a conceptual framework in

which destination fandom emerged through six interconnected themes: triggering experiences, emotional attachment, mystical attachment, community integration, community advocacy and enduring devotion.

Theoretical background

Fandom as a subculture of consumption

Fandom is a subcultural phenomenon of consumption rooted in religious and political *fanaticism* (Jenkins, 1992). Within consumer culture theory, fandom is commonly understood as an extremely affect-laden form of attachment and devotion towards a focal (fan) object (e.g. a brand, celebrity, media text, idea or activity), embedded across diverse spheres of consumption and everyday life (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2026; Seregina & Schouten, 2017).

Distinct from 'regular' consumption, fandom entails extraordinary levels of loyalty, passion, devotion and enthusiasm (Jenkins, 1992). It represents 'an individual process and/or collective movement' (Fuschillo, 2020, p. 12) through which fan relationships emerge and co-evolve with society (Jenkins, 2014). Fandom is thus closely linked to identity construction (Seregina & Schouten, 2017), unfolding through cultural and social systems of meaning and practice that sustain selfhood, sociality, religiosity, productivity, activism and alternative ideologies (Chung et al., 2018).

The individual, quasi-religious, dimension stems from behaviours that may appear irrational, faith-driven or 'unreasonable', often involving intense forms of love, devotion and commitment. Such attachments may be expressed through extreme practices (e.g. tattooing the fan object; Thorne, 2003), or through perceiving the focal object as a transformative force that provides meaning and relief in one's life (Fuschillo et al., 2025). At the same time, the collective process materialises through shared common tastes, knowledge, practices and interests, supported by subject-specific jargon (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020), and embedded in social dynamics that generate camaraderie, belonging, and status within *communities* (Fuschillo, 2020; Hedlund et al., 2018).

Among *communitas* phenomena, fandom, brand communities and consumer (neo-)tribes are often discussed as related concepts (Fuschillo, 2020; Seregina & Schouten, 2017). Although they share common theoretical roots (Cova & Cova, 2002), they remain conceptually distinct (Goulding et al., 2013). Brand communities are structured, often brand-generated forms of aggregation, increasingly virtual and sometimes utilitarian (Chung et al., 2018). While they may host fans, they do not fully capture fandom's broader dynamics (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001), as illustrated by brand-centred groups such as sports teams or hotel brand communities (Cheung et al., 2021).

Consumer tribes, by contrast, are more socially grounded and characterised by fluid and transient bonds centred on linking value, collective 'we-ness', and group-based narcissism, often independent of, or even opposed to, brands (Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013). This is exemplified by practice-based communities such as dance music clubbers in Ibiza, where the linking value resides in the activity itself rather than in brand affiliation (Sandvoss, 2013). These distinctions suggest that fandom offers a broader lens for understanding the complex, intense and identity-driven dynamics that may emerge in relation to tourism destinations, beyond formalised group structures.

Fandom across contexts and tourism

Fandom is a sizeable social and cultural phenomenon influencing broader society (Jenkins, 2006), whose visibility and participation have been further amplified by social media and digital platforms (Feiereisen et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2025). Although individuals can become deeply devoted to a wide range of objects and interests (Chung et al., 2018; Wang, 2019), fandom manifests differently across contexts (Biscaia et al., 2024).

Sports fandom remains among the most prominent and extensively studied examples (Wann et al., 2025), characterised by competition, collective expression and ritual participation extending

beyond the sporting event itself (Yoshida et al., 2024). More than spectators, fans become part of the sport without directly participating in it (Wann et al., 2025). In this sense, sports teams exemplify how brands can become iconic by evolving into popular culture and objects of cult-like devotion, particularly when they enable consumers to express desired identities (Belk & Tumbat, 2005). Yet fandoms vary not only across industries but also within them (Jin et al., 2025), reflecting the heterogeneous ways consumers engage with focal objects (Fournier, 1998). This reinforces the importance of examining fandom as a context-specific phenomenon (Biscaia et al., 2024).

Tourism destinations frequently represent the intersection of multiple fandoms (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2026), where popular culture and place mutually shape and inform one another (Sandvoss, 2013). This is evident in celebrity pilgrimages, film and music tourism, festivals and sports events (e.g. Chen et al., 2026; Filo et al., 2013), echoing long-standing traditions of pilgrimage in which travel becomes a symbolic expression of devotion (Fuschillo et al., 2025; Mackellar, 2006). Examples include destinations associated with Korean popular culture (Kim et al., 2023) and Iceland's *Háifoss* waterfall, whose appearance in *Stranger Things* transformed it into a pilgrimage site actively leveraged for tourism promotion (Visit Iceland, 2026). Likewise, the 'Fans of London' campaign by the official city tourism board (London & Partners, 2017) leveraged multiple fandoms to attract visitors, rather than cultivating fans of London as a destination itself.

This suggests two distinct fan-tourist relationships with destinations. In some cases, destinations serve primarily as settings through which fandom is enacted, with visitation driven by external cultural influences (Li et al., 2025). Such relationships may be transient and shaped by evolving media narratives, symbolism and community engagement (Lundberg et al., 2025). In other cases, the destination itself may become the focal object of fandom, fostering more intrinsic and enduring attachments. Fans of the destination may become deeply attached, protective and actively engaged in its promotion and preservation, both individually and collectively, reflecting characteristics commonly associated with fandom across other contexts (Hedlund et al., 2018; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2026). Moreover, unlike media products or commercial brands, destinations are collectively constituted through history, culture and local communities and are, in principle, enduring entities, potentially making them salient objects of fandom. This possibility is reinforced by the shared foundations of tourism and fandom as acts of consumption and performance articulated across multiple communication platforms (Sandvoss, 2013).

While emerging evidence suggests that some tourists engage with destinations in affective, participatory and community-oriented ways, the phenomenon remains theoretically underdeveloped. An early attempt to link fandom to place-based contexts was offered by Sandvoss (2013) through the study of electronic dance music fans in Ibiza. Although insightful, the destination remained a setting for fan (or tribal) practices rather than the object of fandom itself. Consequently, a more intense and enduring form of tourist–destination relationship remains insufficiently understood, warranting closer examination within the tourism literature.

Tourist–destination relationships

Scholars widely recognise that destinations can serve as enduring objects of emotional and relational attachment (Yang et al., 2026). At the same time, destinations compete to attract and retain visitors in an increasingly globalised and interconnected environment (Swanson, 2017). Beyond revisit intention and recommendation, traditionally conceptualised as *loyalty* (Oppermann, 2000), destinations seek deeper and longer-term forms of connection. In this regard, Swanson (2017, p. 2) highlighted the importance of creating experiences that can turn a tourist into 'an avid fan of a destination'. However, while several attempts have examined tourist–destination relationships beyond purely transactional perspectives, fandom remains largely unexplored within this literature.

Tourist *engagement*, for instance, has been conceptualised as a psychological state reflected in cognitive, emotional and behavioural interactions within co-creative service relationships (So et al., 2016). However, compared to the substantial 'investments of time, money and emotional

and physical resources' characterising fandom (Chung et al., 2018, p. 4), engagement remains centred on measurable behavioural and psychological responses, without fully accounting for broader processes of identity construction, symbolic meaning and devotion (Baldi et al., 2025; SerEGINA & Schouten, 2017).

Strong bonds between individuals and destinations have been conceptualised as *place attachment*, rooted in environmental psychology (Altman & Low, 1992; Williams & Vaske, 2003). It is typically operationalised through measurable individual dimensions, such as place identity (cognitive; beliefs about one's relationship with the place) and dependence (conative; the extent to which a place is preferred over alternatives), both underpinning loyalty development (Dwyer et al., 2019), yet without accounting for more complex affective, collective and symbolic forms of attachment. Similarly, *psychological ownership* describes the extent to which individuals perceive a destination as 'theirs' (Kumar & Nayak, 2019). Typically operationalised through quantitative measures, it has been associated with recommendation and pro-destination behaviours, including stewardship, protection, sustainable practices and destination defence (Liu et al., 2025; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Although these behaviours resemble those observed in fandom contexts, the construct primarily captures perceptions of possession and territoriality (Kumar & Nayak, 2019) and remains confined to this specific cognitive–affective dimension.

A unique combination of attitudinal loyalty and engagement is represented by destination *advocacy*, reflected in behaviours through which tourists (or residents) actively endorse and promote destinations to others, expressing strong relational bonds and social identity (Kim et al., 2010; Kumar & Kaushik, 2017; Lever et al., 2021). While advocacy constitutes an important expression of fandom and is associated with stronger emotional attachment and customer–brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), it has been predominantly operationalised quantitatively as an outcome of loyalty and engagement (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). Consequently, it captures only a specific communicative and behavioural manifestation of the relationship (i.e. the propensity to recommend and engage in positive word-of-mouth) rather than its broader experiential, symbolic and identity-related dimensions.

A stronger emotional bond recently conceptualised in tourism research is destination (brand) *love* (Seyyedamiri et al., 2022; Swanson, 2017), adapted from marketing literature (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). It refers to an individual-level phenomenon capturing the degree of passionate attachment a satisfied tourist (i.e. post-experience) holds towards a trade-mark (e.g. brands, destinations), often considered a dimension of attachment but sometimes treated as a distinct construct (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). Initially conceptualised qualitatively by Swanson (2017) as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing antecedents, experiential and relational themes, and outcomes, destination love has subsequently been operationalised quantitatively (Aro et al., 2018) and positioned as a predictor of loyalty, word-of-mouth and advocacy (Amaro et al., 2021; Seyyedamiri et al., 2022). While conceptually closer to fandom than the preceding constructs, destination love remains predominantly individual, affective and rooted in a marketing and brand-centric perspective. As such, it captures the intensity of emotional attachment but provides only a partial account of the symbolic, collective and processual dynamics through which destinations may become objects of devotion and shared meaning. Appendix 1 summarises the conceptual boundaries between these perspectives and *communitas* concepts including fandom.

Symbolic and cultural tourist–destination connections towards fandom

Within tourism literature, there are fragmented indications of symbolic and cultural bonds that tourists may develop with destinations, which may be a prelude to fan-like relationships. Transformative tourism experiences can generate enduring psychological and symbolic change, personal growth, identity transformation and meaningful social interaction, reinforcing long-term attachment to destinations (Liang & Hsu, 2025; Matteucci & Filep, 2017). Such experiences may acquire ritualistic significance, functioning as fresh-start moments that renew one's sense of self through travel (Jimenez-

Barreto et al., 2025; Matteucci, 2022), and may evolve into forms of *eudaimonia*, understood as self-realisation and fulfilment beyond hedonic pleasure (Filep et al., 2024).

Particularly immersive forms of tourism (e.g. deep travel) appear especially relevant in this regard. Academic tourism can foster enduring emotional bonds through prolonged stays and cultural immersion (Amaro et al., 2026), while volunteer tourism may generate intense shared experiences and more spiritual, meaning-laden connections (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Yang et al., 2026). Likewise, cultural elements such as place-specific music (e.g. *Flamenco* in Seville) may evoke eudaimonic responses and strengthen attachment to destinations that come to be perceived as 'sacred centres' (Matteucci & Filep, 2017, p. 6). Relatedly, the symbolic acquisition of meaningful memorabilia materialises memories, identities and personal narratives, contributing to destination meaning construction (Lv et al., 2025).

While insightful, this literature primarily explains symbolic attachment, cultural immersion and personal transformation rather than the broader fandom process that may characterise certain tourist–destination relationships. As such, destinations may be understood not merely as physical locations, but as focal objects of devotion that are individually and socially constructed (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), interpreted through symbols and narratives as extensions of identity (Sandvoss, 2013) and capable of generating meaning, fulfilment and flourishing (Fuschillo et al., 2025; Yoshida et al., 2024). These characteristics suggest parallels with fan culture and point towards the possibility of *destination fandom*. Accordingly, this research seeks to conceptualise this intense and enduring tourist–destination relationship by examining whether and how destinations may become objects of fandom and identifying the characteristics through which such relationships emerge.

Methodology

An interpretive approach informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was adopted. Consistent with consumer culture theory, which examines how consumers construct meanings and relationships around focal objects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), this approach privileges contextual understanding over generalisation. A two-stage qualitative study combined in-depth interviews with netnographic analysis, enabling exploration of both individual lived experiences and collective meanings and practices (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Mai & Liu, 2026).

Stage 1: in-depth interviews

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to identify participants able to provide rich insights into their relationships with destinations (Yang et al., 2026). Participants were recruited through social media (LinkedIn and Instagram) and subsequently through snowball sampling (Swanson, 2017). Following Swanson (2017), prospective participants completed a short screening questionnaire indicating whether they felt a special connection with a destination and their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview without incentives. This procedure ensured the inclusion of individuals with meaningful destination relationships and the ability to reflect upon them. Given that fandom transcends national, cultural, demographic, racial, ethnic and class boundaries (Schouten & McAlexander, 2005), no *a priori* restrictions were imposed on participant characteristics.

Thirty-three participants took part in the first stage. Interviews were conducted by the lead author between June–November 2024 and January–April 2026, either in person or online. They ranged from 18 to 56 min (40 min on average; the pre-test interview was shorter), were audio-recorded with consent, and generated approximately 22 h of material. Participant characteristics are reported in Appendix 2. A semi-structured format enabled follow-up probing beyond the interview guide (Yang et al., 2026). Questions explored participants' profiles as individuals and tourists, preferred destinations, emotional connections, and experiences before, during and after travel (Appendix 3).

Stage 2: netnography

To further explore and complement the themes emerging from the interviews, a netnography was employed following the stages of initiation, immersion, investigation, interaction, integration and incarnation (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Netnography enables interpretive examination of naturally occurring online interactions, providing access to the symbolic, emotional and communal dimensions through which people can express connections with destinations (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2022), and is increasingly adopted in tourism research (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2022). The objective of the initiation phase aligned with Stage 1. It began with a prolonged immersion phase, during which the research team engaged in non-intrusive observation to develop contextual sensitivity before direct interaction, consistent with netnographic best practices (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Multiple online environments were explored to identify relevant discursive spaces, with Facebook selected as the primary platform due to its active user-driven communities and to ensure consistency in platform-specific dynamics, and a systematic immersion journal was maintained throughout the process (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

Based on this immersion, London (UK) and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) were selected as research contexts. London represents a mature global destination with a strong multicultural identity and extensive online presence, offering a rich setting for destination-related meaning construction (Stylidis et al., 2021). Rio de Janeiro provided a complementary context characterised by diverse tourism forms and marked socio-cultural contrasts, enabling exploration of varied expressions of tourist–destination relationships (Iranmanesh & Kamalipour, 2025; UNWTO, 2025).

Five Facebook groups (three dedicated to London and two to Rio de Janeiro, plus one public page) were selected as data sites (see Appendix 4) using RAIDR (relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, richness) criteria (Kozinets, 2019). Selection of these communities was due to their active membership, user-generated content, and the coexistence of everyday sharing and destination-related discussions (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2022). During the investigation phase, data were collected alongside the interview periods. Posts and discussions were selected based on recency, engagement, and thematic relevance, generating a dataset comprising textual, visual, and interactional content through which users articulated symbolic and affective relationships with destinations and with one another (Kozinets, 2019).

To deepen understanding and support the interaction phase, two elicitation posts were co-created with a community administrator and shared across Facebook and Instagram, prompting discussions aligned with themes emerging from the interviews (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; see Figure 1). Netnographic materials were integrated with reflective commentaries and analytical memos throughout the research process. The final dataset comprised 450 immersion journal entries (265 relating to London and 185 to Rio de Janeiro), each representing a reflexive synthesis of observed interactions (Appendix 5).



Figure 1. Post elicitation.

Data analysis

Data from interviews and netnography were analysed conjointly to inform the development of the final conceptual framework, including the ‘incarnation’ phase of the netnographic process (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). An iterative, inductive coding process was undertaken, involving constant comparison across cases and informed by insights from both datasets (Charmaz, 2006; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Mai & Liu, 2026). NVivo (v.15) supported data management and coding, while MS-Excel facilitated the organisation, comparison and synthesis of codes and themes across the research team. Together, these tools enhanced analytical transparency and rigour (Mai & Liu, 2026), while maintaining the interpretive tradition of consumer culture theory (Seregina & Schouten, 2017). Data were progressively abstracted into categories and higher-order themes (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Seregina & Schouten, 2017), which were subsequently integrated into a conceptual framework capturing the phenomenon as a holistic process rather than a causal model. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, with theoretical saturation reached at the twenty-first interview and subsequent interviews reinforcing the emerging framework (Mai & Liu, 2026).

Findings

Drawing on interview and netnographic data, the analysis conceptualises *destination fandom* as a distinct individual and collective process through which tourists develop intense and enduring relationships with destinations. The process unfolds through six interconnected themes: *triggering experiences*, *emotional attachment*, *mystical attachment*, *community integration*, *community advocacy* and *enduring devotion*. Appendix 6 summarises the analytical structure. The following subsections present evidence from both data sources (Respondent, R; Immersion Journal, IJ).

Triggering experiences

Participants who identified themselves as destination fans reported remarkably consistent patterns in their *first encounters*. These experiences acted as *triggers* for deeper, more enduring forms of relationship, and were frequently described as transformative, reshaping personal outlook and identity. They emerged across diverse contexts, including leisure travel (e.g. R1, R14, R32), internships (e.g. R19; R24; R28), study-related mobility (e.g. R5, R6, R17, R23, R25) and childhood family trips (e.g. R4; R33). Notably, participants associated these experiences with moments of first independence and *rites of passage* enabling personal growth and perspective change (e.g. R14). As R21 reflected, ‘*the first time I felt independent and truly alive*’, while R24 described India as ‘*a necessary chapter of my life, an experience that changed my worldview drastically*’. Longer stays, such as study-abroad programmes, further intensified these formative relationships (e.g. R5; R6; R17; R23; R25). As R5 noted, ‘*Studying in the US six months completely opened up new horizons*’.

In other cases, triggering experiences were rooted in childhood memories and emotionally significant relationships, including family ties (e.g. R4; R33) and experiences of loss (e.g. R5; R8). Similar dynamics emerged online through intergenerational narratives, as illustrated by one user: ‘*I’ve loved London since my dad and uncle took me to the museums (...). Later, I returned with my daughters and granddaughter to discover England*’ (IJ-171).

(Pop-)cultural influences also shaped the initial bond, linking imagined geographies with lived experience. Participants frequently described visiting destinations because of media, music or literature, only to develop deeper emotional connections once there. As R12 shared, ‘*I went for the Rolling Stones and Harry Potter, but then London completely drew me in*’. Similarly, R20 noted that: ‘*When I finally visited, it felt like an entire world unlocked*’. Online narratives echoed these sentiments: ‘          I love London for its history, I love the Victorian era, I love its timeless atmosphere, its contrasts, 1960s London’ (IJ-247).

Across accounts, participants also described initial discomfort, disorientation or emotional tension that later evolved into introspection, often experienced in solitude. We conceptualise

these instances as 'zero moments'. For example, R23 described how homesickness transformed into a defining memory of witnessing snow by the sea in Poland, while R6 recalled a solitary moment overlooking Lisbon at sunset that left a lasting emotional imprint. Similar dynamics emerged online through transformative encounters. One user wrote: *'The first time I fell in love was after seeing the view from Christ the Redeemer and Sugarloaf Mountain'* (IJ-370). Another reflected: *'I will carry with me the smile this young man shared with me (...) travelling reminds me that the world offers endless answers if I learn to listen'* (IJ-410).

Triggering experiences frequently unfolded in contemplative or sensorially rich environments, where atmosphere, nature and sensory immersion anchored emotional meaning (e.g. R23; R24; R29; R33). As R2 noted, *'What I found there was something completely different, something I don't think I would have found elsewhere'*. Comparable expressions appeared online (Figure 2). One user wrote:

London after sunset feels like a dream. The city lights twinkle, painting the historic buildings with a golden glow, while the gentle hum of my engine blends with the pulse of the city. Every turn unveils a new scene, (...) It's an evening full of life, elegance, and unforgettable moments. (IJ-105)

Similarly, reflecting on the Rio Carnival, another user noted: *'The production, dancers, music, art, colour ... it's indescribable'* (IJ-345), while others emphasised the rhythm of the city: *'I can feel the heat I can hear the sound in the beat of bossa nova, that girl from Ipanema just keeps running around'* (IJ-418).

Emotional attachment

Participants developed deep emotional attachment to 'their' destinations, expressing visceral affection, freedom and nostalgia. Attachment often fluctuated between intense, almost 'honey-moon-like' feelings (e.g. R7; R9; R13), sometimes accompanied by forms of personification (R5; R11) and more mature reflections that acknowledged imperfections while maintaining strong emotional bonds. As R20 noted, *'it is imperfect, but perfect for me'*.

Similar oscillations emerged in netnographic data, where users expressed both unconditional admiration (Figure 3), and ambivalent forms of attachment. Posts celebrated destinations in

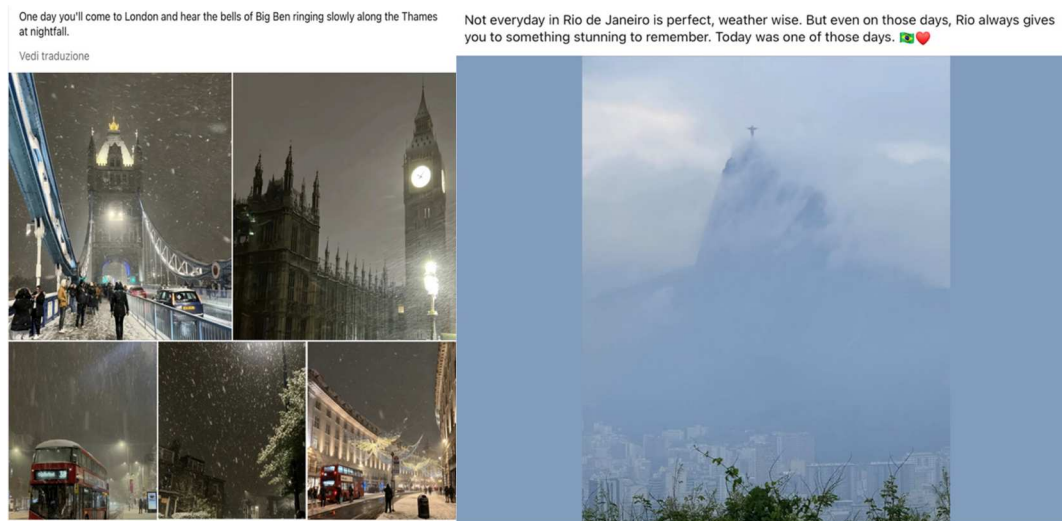


Figure 2. Environmental triggers.



Figure 3. Love declarations.

highly affective terms, such as '*cidade maravilhosa*', IJ-409, '*Loved every minute of it*', IJ-350, while others explicitly recognised '*Rio is a complicated place (...) but one of the best emotional experiences for me. Now I'm waiting for my fifth visit*' (IJ-370). Likewise, users acknowledged: '*I know it's not for everyone, but for me, it's perfect*' (IJ-318).

A recurring dimension of emotional attachment was freedom. Participants described destinations as spaces enabling identity exploration and self-expression. As R22 noted, '*It's a place that lets you be whoever you want to be*', while R16 similarly stated, '*London lets me be what I want to be*'. R9 shared: '*Lisbon reveals itself to you at every turn, as if you're finding hidden pieces of yourself along with the city*'. Similar sentiments emerged online (e.g. '*I feel free there*', IJ-244; '*The area has been a refuge for us over the years*' (IJ-294)).

Nostalgia was another recurring and multi-layered sentiment, rooted not only in the destination itself but also in formative life stages (as triggers) and emotionally significant relationships (e.g. R2, R4, R6, R10, R16, R17). For some, destinations carried the emotional weight of loss and remembrance (e.g. R5; R15). As R15 noted, '*It's a place that reminds me of someone who's no longer here*', while online narratives similarly evoked intergenerational continuity: '*4 generations of my family have been to this square ...*' (IJ-315). Importantly, nostalgia was often accompanied by a form of protective ambivalence. Participants expressed apprehension about returning, fearing that changes might disrupt cherished memories. As R2 admitted, '*I almost fear going back, as if it might be different*'. Comparable concerns emerged online. One user lamented that '*Parts of my beautiful London's skyline have changed forever ... so sad ...*' (IJ-100), while another expressed: '*[I'm] scared it won't live up to the hype they've heard from me*' (IJ-282). Others emphasised the fragility of sensory experiences: '*I loved the beach and the sounds of water and people. I wouldn't want that drowned out by big buses going by*' (IJ-308).

Mystical attachment

For many participants, the connection to 'their' destinations assumed a mystical, quasi-religious quality (i.e. 'something that cannot be explained'), transcending physical boundaries through

processes of sacralisation, symbolic artefacts and personal rituals. R3 described their destination as 'a sanctuary', a perception echoed online: *'Brazil is heaven on Earth'* (IJ-275). In some cases, participants framed this connection in terms of fate or divine intervention. R8 reflected *'In every place, you leave a part of your soul'*, while another user expressed *'thank God for leading me to this amazing city'* (IJ-318), illustrating how sacred and profane meanings intertwined within mystical attachment (Figure 4).

Symbols preserved in memory further reinforced this connection. R4 reflected: *'the boat moored at the harbour. Every time I return, I look for it everywhere'* and expressed the desire to tattoo the image, while other participants marked their attachment through destination-related tattoos (e.g. R5; R6; R10; R23). For instance, R5 tattooed the Liberty Bell of Philadelphia, while R28 planned to tattoo a symbol associated with Barolo wine in Alba (Italy). Material keepsakes similarly functioned as symbolic artefacts. R7 described a Sicilian bracelet as *'a lucky charm'*, while R26 kept a stone from Capri as a personal relic. Rather than generic souvenirs, these objects acted as tokens of a deeper bond. Comparable meanings emerged online: *'A dancer gave me a small piece of her costume during the show. That is not typical, and I will cherish it forever'* (IJ-345). Another user described an annual birthday pilgrimage to London and, when unable to return, purchased a personalised necklace engraved with a familiar city slogan (Figure 4).

Rituals also played a central role in sustaining attachment. Participants described repeated practices, such as walking familiar streets (R4), dining at the same restaurant (R6) or revisiting specific locations (e.g. R2; R10; R13; R20; R33). As R25 noted: *'Every time I arrive in London; I go straight to Piccadilly Circus. It's my way of grounding myself in the city'*. Similar patterns appeared online, where users referred to recurring places and practices: *'Posto 7 pegado al Arpoador! Amo Ipanema'* (IJ-426) and *'My must-do is always hanging out around Ipanema Beach ... that's become my Rio ritual'* (IJ-386).

Community integration

Participants frequently described a profound sense of belonging to their destinations, perceiving themselves as integrated members of the local community rather than temporary visitors. This integration was often grounded in shared values and cultural norms (e.g. R13; R16; R30), through which participants came to feel part of the community itself. As R26 explained, *'Following my daily routine in line with the local customs made me feel part of the community'*, while R13 recalled, *'The people made me feel part of a family'*. As R33 summarised, it became a *'home away from home'*. Similar expressions emerged online, where users distinguished themselves from conventional tourist identities: *'When you're back you are in a special destination, you are not gringo [Brazilians referring to tourists]'* (IJ-267).

This sense of belonging was strongly anchored in cultural immersion and a desire to experience destinations as locals do. Practices such as exploring less-touristic areas, visiting local markets and engaging with local language and customs (e.g. R11; R13; R20; R21) reflected efforts to understand

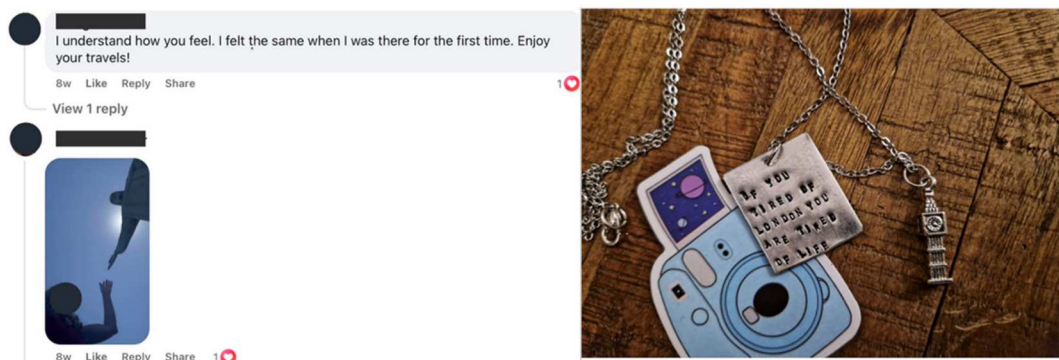


Figure 4. Mystical attachment.

everyday life. As R9 noted, '*a way to stay connected with the true heartbeat of the city*'. Similar patterns appeared online (Figure 5), where users expressed integration with local identities and practices (e.g. 'Carioca Clássico [Brazilian inhabitants] ... Nossa Praia BR       '; IJ-316). One user vividly captured this connection:

The elderly and pets in Hyde Park, street singers, traffic lights in the UK, pedestrians on the street, roadside restaurants, outdoor gatherings of workers in the evening, lively markets, and even park seats engraved with the names of deceased relatives. (IJ-56)

Social interactions further reinforced integration. These extended beyond physical presence and unfolded across online spaces, where participants engaged with locals, fellow 'fans' and prospective visitors. Many distanced themselves from institutional or commodified representations, preferring grassroots communities, personal accounts and locally embedded contents (e.g. R2; R5; R6; R19; R23; R29). Online exchanges reflected ongoing engagement: '*UPDATE! it was the most incredible experience ... my FB post after I came back ...*' (IJ-327), as well as encounters between community members: '*Always great to have a rando encounter with a group member*' (IJ-324). The following post illustrates the convergence of all community integration sub-themes:

Lunch at Colombo, fresh coconuts by breathtaking beaches, Portuguese history, welcomed by people with big smiles and no T-shirts        Brazil feels like home   Beyond thankful for my time in Rio. I wish everyone could experience this beautiful and safe tourist destination (Rio de Janeiro), at least once in their lifetime. If you need any info about my 10 d itinerary in Rio, please don't hesitate to DM me. Thank you Brazil BR From USA us. (IJ-336)

Community advocacy

Feeling integrated into the local community and culture, and no longer perceiving themselves as mere tourists, led participants to engage more actively with 'their' destinations, often positioning themselves as knowledgeable insiders (Figure 6). Over time, many reported continuous learning, becoming recognised sources of travel advice and informal experts. Similar dynamics emerged online, where users explicitly acknowledged such roles: '*Just thought I'd hit up the group since you all are travel pros, experts, gurus*   ' (IJ-344), or '*You're certainly a great ambassador for Rio (...) If I do visit Brazil, I will certainly be asking you some advice*' (IJ-276).

Some participants described themselves as honorary citizens of their preferred destinations (e.g. R23, R26). As R13 noted, '*I love taking my friends to see the real London (...) and guess what? They even pay for my trips just to have me show them around!*'. In more extreme cases, this involvement extended into professional or long-term commitments. For instance, R13 pursued English studies



Figure 5. Market scenes.



Figure 6. Community advocacy.

and later became a teacher, R11's first trip to Japan evolved into cultural expertise, leading to curated museum exhibitions and a magazine on Japanese traditions, while R28 opened a restaurant inspired by their visit to Alba.

Advice-giving was also highly visible online, where users shared insider knowledge and recommendations. One user suggested the best period to visit Rio 'for better sunsets, lower humidity, and cheaper prices' before concluding: 'Thank me later!' (IJ-339). Discussions also reflected detailed destination knowledge, ranging from airport infrastructure to broader political and cultural issues (e.g. IJ-37; IJ-46; IJ-47). Advocacy also took the form of stewardship. Users frequently challenged negative media portrayals through counter-narratives such as '*It's way safer than what the media says*' (IJ-362) or celebrated experiences that contradicted dominant stereotypes (e.g. IJ-393; IJ-408).

Participants similarly expressed stewardship towards 'their' destinations (e.g. R2, R3, R9), sometimes through direct involvement, such as R9 volunteering at a rehabilitation centre in Lisbon. These practices were often linked to concerns about authenticity and sustainability. Participants expressed resistance to commercialisation, overtourism, and environmental degradation. As R19 noted, '*I wish it were less popular to allow for more sustainable tourism*'. R24 argued that '*the unique essence must be preserved*' and R26 feared the destination becoming 'too touristy'. Comparable concerns emerged online through criticism of exploitative tourism practices, particularly favela tours in Rio (e.g. IJ-285; IJ-391), and recommendations encouraging visitors to move beyond overcrowded attractions (IJ-12).

Enduring devotion

Participants expressed a strong and enduring desire to return to 'their' destinations, including among those who had not yet returned or doubted they ever would. In more extreme cases, this desire was framed as a 'destiny' or even an 'addiction' (Figure 7). Similar expressions emerged online: '*Yes, Rio de Janeiro is my drug of choice*' (IJ-269), and '*You've taken the drug called Rio and now you are addicted!*' (IJ-272). Even among those who had not returned, the connection remained intense and was often shaped by ambivalent nostalgia. As R2 explained: '*I haven't returned yet because I fear going back and finding things different from how I remember them. It's a trauma, but one day, I will*'. For others, this desire assumed a more existential tone. '*London always calls me, and I always want to return before I die*' (R13). Similar sentiments appeared online: '*I'd like to return one last time*' (IJ-175), while another user reflected: '*I have always dreamed of returning to Brazil, but I never could, and now I am 80 years old and it is no longer possible*' (IJ-335).

For those who returned, or aspired to return, devotion was often expressed through selective sharing. Participants wished to introduce only specific individuals, typically significant others (e.g. R30), or to pass this passion intergenerationally (e.g. R13). As R5 noted, '*I wouldn't take just anyone to see my place*', while R23 added '*I want them to experience it as I did*'. Similar dynamics appeared online: '*I always wanted to return to Rio, but no one ever wanted to come with me ❤️ when my son said he would like to spend New Year's Eve in Rio, I started looking and finally my wish will come true!!!!*' (IJ-402).

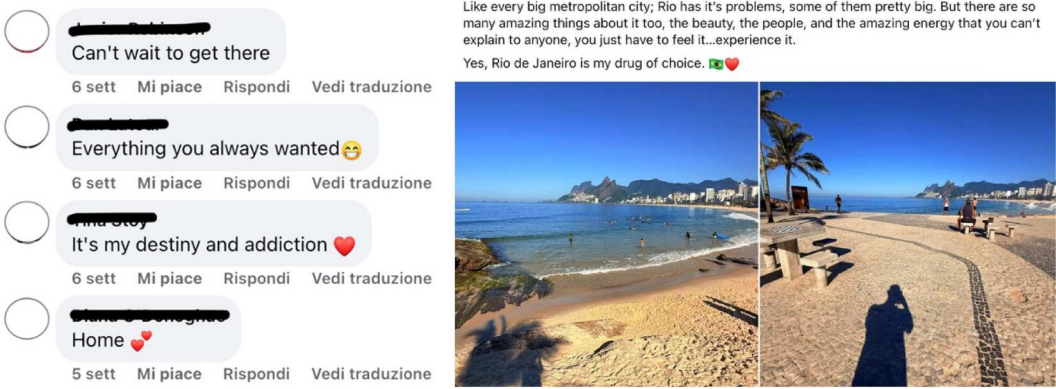


Figure 7. Enduring devotion.

Importantly, the enduring devotion extended beyond physical presence. Participants maintained ongoing connections through daily routines, conversations, media consumption and destination-related practice. For example, R26 continued to brew Neapolitan coffee 'to keep Naples close', R19 maintained a New Zealand tea ritual, and R10 sought out Irish pubs wherever she travelled: 'I love finding Ireland around the world'. Comparable practices appeared online: 'I fell in love with Brazil and the Brazilian people. I've already started looking for Brazilian markets and restaurants near me because I'm not ready to let the culture go just yet' (IJ-345).

Participants also expressed a desire to deepen their relationship with destinations over time. Some imagined living there, even while recognising its improbability. R13 noted 'Before I die, my dream is to have even the tiniest place in London', while R17 stated 'That's the only place I've ever visited where I can confidently say I would want to live there!'. Others simply wished to return, stay longer, and explore further (without living there) (e.g. R5, R19, R21; R27). Similar dynamics appeared online: 'You'll see, you'll catch the "Brazil bug" ... we all started like this and then ended up moving there' (IJ-404), to which another user replied, 'Living there, I don't think so, I am very limited (...) but going back and exploring more, and more of Brazil, definitely!' (IJ-405).

Discussion and implications

This research examined whether tourists may develop fan-like relationships with destinations and how such relationships can be characterised. The findings indicate that destination fandom emerges as a distinct form of tourist–destination relationship (Figure 8), extending tourism,

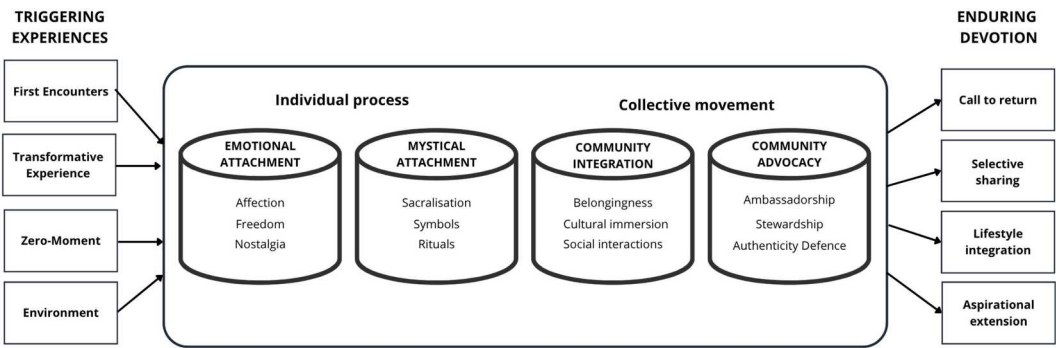


Figure 8. Destination fandom.

consumer culture and fandom research and can be defined as: *a socio-culturally embedded form of tourist-destination relationship in which, following a triggering experience, a destination fan develops individual and collective forms of devotion that extend beyond the visitation.*

Unlike existing tourist–destination relationship constructs, which capture only partial dimensions of the phenomenon, destination fandom reflects a broader relationship in which destinations assume the role of fan objects, around which destination fans develop both individual (i.e. triggering experiences, emotional and mystical attachments) and collective processes (i.e. community integration and advocacy) that sustain *enduring devotion* (Fuschillo, 2020; Seregina & Schouten, 2017). This phenomenon extends across destination types, including villages, cities and nations.

At the same time, although destinations may function as intersections of multiple symbolic and cultural influences (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2026; Sandvoss, 2013), including fandoms originating in other contexts, destination fandom is not simply a transposition of fandom as observed in other domains (e.g. watching a match and engaging in *tifo* practices; Wann et al., 2025, or producing spin-off *brandzines*; Fuschillo, 2020). Rather, it represents a context-specific manifestation shaped by the distinctive nature of the fan object, namely destinations as collectively constructed, historically layered and experientially lived environments. Unlike many fandom contexts organised around temporally bounded events (e.g. media releases, concerts or competitions), destinations remain continuously available as objects of enduring devotion. Such devotion may be enacted through visitation but also sustained imaginatively when physical access is not possible through destination-related consumption, everyday cultural practices and online engagement (Baldi et al., 2025).

Destination fandom is articulated through six analytically distinguishable yet empirically intertwined dimensions (Figure 8), which together point to a qualitatively distinct form of tourist–destination relationship. Triggering experiences resonate with research on transformative, eudaimonic and culturally immersive tourism experiences (Amaro et al., 2026; Liang & Hsu, 2025; Matteucci & Filep, 2017). However, they also appear to function as enduring reference points that anchor subsequent attachment and devotion, echoing the role of origin experiences in fandom contexts (Chung et al., 2018). The emergence of reflective and often solitary ‘zero moments’ further points to a liminal process in which disorientation and sensory immersion contribute to meaning construction (Matteucci, 2022).

Emotional and mystical attachment captures the individual dimension of destination fandom. Emotional attachment extends established concepts such as place attachment and destination love (Aro et al., 2018; Williams & Vaske, 2003), as participants’ accounts reveal a more reflexive and ambivalent form of attachment. Consistent with fandom research (e.g. Seregina & Schouten, 2017), attachment encompasses admiration, imperfection acceptance, identity exploration and nostalgia. This suggests a bond that extends beyond satisfaction-based evaluations (Fournier, 1998) and becomes embedded within broader identity projects, including the perceived freedom to become one’s desired self. Mystical attachment similarly resonates with research on the quasi-religious dimensions of fandom and consumption (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Thorne, 2003), as well as tourism scholarship on eudaimonic experiences (Filep et al., 2024; Matteucci & Filep, 2017). However, rather than being confined to particular experiences, rituals, symbols (also tattooed) and sacralisation practices appear to sustain an enduring connection over time. Destinations may therefore function as symbolic and ritual anchors incorporated into everyday practices and personal narratives, much like fan objects become incorporated into the *self* (Seregina & Schouten, 2017).

Community integration and advocacy capture the collective dimension of destination fandom. Community integration reflects a sense of belonging grounded in cultural immersion, shared meanings and social interactions. While tourism research has acknowledged the role of social interaction (e.g. Liang & Hsu, 2025), the findings indicate a more profound and identity-relevant form of integration. Consistent with fandom research, where shared knowledge, practices and cultural codes foster belonging (Fuschillo, 2020; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020), destination fans appear to develop an aspirational identification with local culture and everyday life that extends beyond

tourist-oriented experiences. These bonds are further reinforced through both offline and online interactions, similarly to other fandom contexts (Fuschillo, 2020). Community advocacy highlights the active role destination fans assume in relation to the destination. While advocacy and pro-destination behaviours have been widely examined as outcomes of engagement and loyalty (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017; Liu et al., 2025), the findings suggest that such behaviours are embedded within broader systems of meaning and identity formation. Destination fans position themselves as knowledgeable insiders, ambassadors, stewards and defenders of authenticity. This aligns with fandom research emphasising the preservation of fan objects (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2026), while extending it through the ethical, cultural and environmental concerns associated with destination-based contexts. Unlike some fandom and tribal settings, where fans actively reinterpret or transform the object (Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013), community advocacy appears primarily oriented towards preserving perceived cultural authenticity and resisting forms of superficial or exploitative tourism.

A final dimension of destination fandom, enduring devotion, captures the temporal extension of the relationship beyond physical visitation. While tourism literature has traditionally conceptualised loyalty in terms of revisit intention and recommendation (Oppermann, 2000), the findings point to a more persistent form of commitment. Destination fans experience an enduring 'call for return', alongside a selective willingness to share their 'sacred' (places within) destinations only with significant others. This protective and partially exclusionary tendency, while loosely resonating with notions of deliverance (Fuschillo, 2020), has received limited attention in previous fandom research. Notably, even when visitation is not possible, destination fans maintain connections through everyday practices and imagined futures, including aspirations to return, relocate or deepen the relationship over time. Consistent with the enduring nature of fandom relationships (Chung et al., 2018; Thorne & Bruner, 2006), the destination remains embedded within ongoing identity projects even in the absence of continued travel.

Practical and social implications

Destination fandom carries important practical and social implications. For destination managers, marketers and policymakers, it is vital to help foster triggering and transformative experiences. This may involve promoting local culture and cultural production (e.g. traditions, customs, music, literature, film and popular culture), encouraging longer-term forms of visitation (e.g. students, workers and digital nomads) and enhancing access to atmospheric, natural and everyday urban environments, including less-touristic areas.

Beyond the initial experience, destinations may seek to support emotional and mystical attachment, community integration, advocacy and enduring devotion. Drawing on mechanisms observed in other fandom contexts, participatory and reward-based initiatives, rather than traditional loyalty programmes, may foster identity, engagement and advocacy. Recognising destination fans as informal yet influential stakeholders may also encourage more decentralised and authentic forms of destination communication, for example through symbolic recognition systems (e.g. official badges or ambassador programmes) that motivate pro-destination behaviours with broader social and environmental implications.

At the same time, these practices raise important ethical considerations. The intentional cultivation of fan-like devotion requires careful attention to avoid manipulative forms of engagement, particularly where emotional and symbolic attachments are involved. Rather than engineering attachment, destination governance should facilitate authentic, culturally grounded and voluntary connections while preserving the integrity of both destinations and individuals. Initiatives such as local 'greeter' programmes, for instance, may encourage spontaneous and meaningful encounters with local culture and everyday life.

Destination fans may therefore represent valuable allies in addressing challenges such as over-tourism and cultural commodification, contributing to the authenticity, resilience and sustainability

of destination narratives. This implies a shift from managing tourists as consumers to engaging them as meaning-making participants, while maintaining clear ethical boundaries. Finally, the incorporation of destination-related culture and products into everyday life may create ongoing opportunities for engagement, with implications for both the preservation of cultural heritage and the sustained economic value of local products and cultural goods.

Limitations and future research

This research presents limitations that offer directions for future investigation. First, although destination fandom is grounded in consumer culture theory, its manifestations may vary across cultural contexts. Future research could therefore examine destination fandom through alternative cultural and theoretical lenses, including non-Western perspectives, and further explore the ethical implications of intentionally cultivating fan-like devotion towards destinations. Second, this study does not focus on differences across destination types. Future research could examine how destination fandom manifests across different contexts (e.g. urban versus rural, heritage versus contemporary destinations) and explore the role of different forms of physical and virtual communities. Third, while the netnographic component complements the interview data, it focuses on two large and globally recognised city destinations. Future studies could investigate destination fandom across other destinations, digital environments and emerging forms of AI-mediated interaction. Finally, quantitative and longitudinal approaches could further examine the dimensions of destination fandom, their interrelationships and their evolution over time. Future research may also explore how the individual and collective dimensions of destination fandom develop, as well as how residents and other destination stakeholders perceive and interact with destination fans.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Giovanni Baldi**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Rui Biscaia**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing; **Antonio Botti**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the University of Salerno.

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