

Psychological motives and tourist expectations: the influence of personal values on destination choice

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Abstract

Psychological motives and personal values represent key factors in the decision-making process of travel and destination choice, since travelers do not select destinations solely based on price, distance, or amenities, but also on those factors that provide them with meaning and direction. Understanding these processes is essential for comprehending tourists' needs to affirm identity, authenticity, and personal goals through travel. This review paper aims to analyze the relationship between personal values and tourists' psychological expectations, drawing on relevant empirical findings, their analysis, and interpretation. By examining the conceptualization of value dimensions and their influence on destination perception, the study explains the experience of authenticity and the evaluation of satisfaction after travel. It also considers the differences between hedonistic, collectivistic, altruistic, and status-oriented value systems, as well as their implications for market segmentation and the development of tourism offerings. The research findings indicate the need for validation and integration of psychological insights into management strategies aimed at the long-term design, maintenance, and enhancement of the tourist experience.

Keywords: psychological motives, personal values, tourist expectations, tourism, destination choice

1. Introduction

Tourism is regarded as one of the most significant global social and socio-economic phenomena, substantially influencing both the development of host countries and the formation of the profile of the modern traveler. Data from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2024) indicate that international tourism continues to grow and develop steadily, yet issues of tourist motivation and expectations are becoming increasingly complex. In destination choice, factors such as price, accessibility, or promotion are no longer decisive; instead, personal psychological processes, inner needs, and individual systems of values play a more relevant role in travel decision-making. Contemporary research viewed through a psychological lens significantly illuminates tourist behavior and facilitates its understanding. Traditional economic and sociodemographic models that once adequately explained tourist behavior through variables such as income, age, and education are no longer sufficient to comprehensively account for the diversity and dynamics of travel choices (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sirgy & Su, 2000). Psychological motives and personal values therefore provide a crucial framework for understanding individual preferences, tourists' evaluations of destinations, and the development of expectations based on prior travel experiences.

Psychological motivation in tourism is explained through the “push and pull” factors framework (Crompton, 1979), where the former refers to personal internal needs and impulses (such as the desire for rest, escape from everyday life, the pursuit of adventure, or self-actualization), while the latter encompass destination characteristics that attract tourists—natural beauty, cultural and historical landmarks, climate, and the destination's reputation. The interaction between these two groups of factors is causal and interdependent; neither function in isolation. It is conditioned by personal values, which influence how tourists perceive destinations and interpret their experiences. While push factors initiate the desire to travel, pull factors guide the selection of a specific destination.

Schwartz's theoretical framework of universal values (Schwartz, 1992, 2012) defines values as trans-situational goals that transcend specific contexts and channel or guide individual behavior. This model outlines key dimensions of values—

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such as hedonism, universalism, power, tradition, and security—that can be linked to distinct patterns of tourist behavior. Personal values serve as a mediating framework that determines motivational structures and directs decision-making in tourism. The theory of universal values conceptualizes values as enduring and universal goals that are not bound to concrete situations but shape behavior across various domains and situational contexts, influencing decisions, attitudes, and behaviors in different spheres of life. Some of the key value dimensions—such as hedonism, universalism, altruism, tradition, and power—can predict behavioral patterns in tourists' decision-making processes regarding destination choice. For example, hedonists tend to choose destinations that offer luxury, entertainment, and pleasure, whereas universalists and altruists prioritize ecotourism and culturally sustainable destinations (Steg et al., 2015). The system of value orientations inherently includes the concept of authenticity, as this concept represents a central psychological expectation in tourism. Wang (1999) argues that tourists are not only in search of objective authenticity (such as original cultural artifacts) but also seek existential authenticity, which provides a sense of fulfillment, personal meaning, satisfaction, identity affirmation, and meaningful experience. Both dimensions of authenticity are particularly evident among tourists whose personal priorities include self-actualization, universalism, and self-transcendence. The symbiosis of psychological motives and personal values is crucial for market segmentation and destination management, while the analysis and understanding of this interaction enable tourism professionals to develop effective marketing strategies and destination offerings that meet the expectations of most tourists, while simultaneously promoting long-term sustainable tourism. When psychological dimensions of tourism are properly considered, destinations can foster long-term satisfaction and loyalty. Information about potential tourists' choices and behavior in the process of destination selection can therefore serve as a foundation for planning effective marketing strategies.

Based on the above, the aim of this review paper is to investigate the relationship between psychological motives and personal values in destination choice, emphasizing the importance of empirical research in explaining contemporary tourist behavior. Special attention will be given to differences in value orientations (hedonistic, collectivistic, altruistic, and status-oriented) and their role in shaping destination perception, expectations of authenticity, and satisfaction. The results of this analysis can contribute to improved market segmentation and the development of destination management strategies that consider the psychological needs of contemporary tourists, promoting sustainability and the personalization of the tourist experience. Researching tourist behavior requires a complex methodology to identify which internal and external factors determine choices and decisions in the tourism market, as well as to understand how potential tourists make decisions regarding destination selection and what drives their choice of specific types of tourism products and services. This, in turn, enables marketing professionals to successfully anticipate customer reactions and preferences in terms of tourism products and services, for the purpose of analyzing the effects of promotional activities and enhancing sales.

2. Psychological motives and tourists' expectations: theoretical framework

Human behavior is a reflection of personality, and personality is the result of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. It develops through interpersonal relations and represents an aggregate of attitudes and knowledge that determine behavior through habits, patterns, and lifestyle. Although by definition personality implies consistency and stability, it changes over time under the influence of the mentioned factors, experiences, and circumstances. All of this is important as an introduction to the analysis and understanding of tourist behavior – since it requires insight into the psychological processes that shape travelers' motives and expectations. Tourism cannot be reduced to an economic transaction; rather, it represents a complex field in which inner needs and value orientations interact with the external offerings of a destination. Psychological motives are most often explained through various theoretical models, among which theories of motivation, developmental models of tourist needs, and concepts of expectations are particularly emphasized.

One of the significant contributions to the interpretation of tourist motives is Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that the basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – are universal drivers of human behavior. In the context of tourism, this theory helps to explain why tourists choose activities and destinations that allow them a sense of freedom, personal growth, or social interaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In addition, Pearce's Travel Career Ladder theory is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but adapted to the tourism context (Pearce, 2005). It demonstrates how travel motives develop throughout an individual's life cycle – from basic needs for rest and relaxation, through social motives, up to self-actualization and self-transcendence through travel. Empirical research confirms that younger tourists more often seek adventure and entertainment, while older tourists tend to prefer authentic and meaningful experiences (Šešić & Jovičić, 2002).

The concept of tourist expectations is particularly important, as it influences the way experiences are evaluated. The Expectation-Confirmation Theory explains tourist satisfaction through the relationship between expected and actual experience (Oliver, 1997). An increase in satisfaction and loyalty is a favorable outcome for destinations that exceed tourists' expectations, whereas incongruence between expectations and experience becomes a source of frustration and dissatisfaction. Domestic research indicates that tourists' expectations in the Balkans are often determined by cultural values and social norms (Kuzmanović & Petrović, 2017).

It is also important to mention the socio-psychological approach, which, alongside universal models, emphasizes the significance of identity and cultural context. Rot (1972) highlights that value orientations determine social behavior, consumption patterns, and leisure activities, thereby shaping tourism within a given cultural environment. Studies conducted in Serbia and Croatia suggest that tourists often use travel as a means of affirming personal identity and social status (Stojković, 2011; Mikulić & Prebežac, 2012).

Contemporary theoretical approaches emphasize the need to integrate psychological motives and expectations with the concept of authenticity. Once regarded as an objective category (MacCannell, 1976), authenticity is now increasingly understood in its existential dimension—through the sense of personal fulfillment and meaning (Wang, 1999). In the tourism of the region, authenticity is particularly linked to cultural heritage and tradition, where domestic authors (Marković, 2010; Jovičić, 2014) emphasize that tourists' expectations are often shaped by the desire to experience local values, customs, and hospitality.

Therefore, the theoretical framework of psychological motives and expectations in tourism encompasses several levels: universal psychological needs, the development of motives throughout the life cycle, cognitive processes of evaluation, and cultural-psychological dimensions. This multilayered nature points to the necessity for tourism research not to rely solely on economic or demographic models, but to integrate psychological theories and local specificities in understanding tourist behavior.

3. The role of personal values in shaping tourist behavior

Some of the relevant reasons for traveling, among others, may include (Šuran, 2016): reduction of stress and anxiety, intellectual enrichment, the need and desire for intimate time spent with family, adventure, self-exploration and discovery of one's own personality, escape from the monotony of everyday life and professional obligations, and so forth. Within this context, one can also add goals such as visiting relatives or friends, experiencing natural beauty, enjoying favorable climatic conditions typical of a particular destination, entertainment and leisure, sports or recreational activities, camping, low prices, unusual foods and specialties, curiosity about different cultures and lifestyles, nightlife, the absence of hostile attitudes from local residents toward visitors, the desire to be a stranger in an unfamiliar place, and the adoption of new customs and traditions, among others. All these reasons or motives that influence an individual's decision to travel share a common denominator - pleasure.

Empirical research in the field of tourism confirms that personal values represent a strong predictor of destination choice, tourist satisfaction, and post-travel behavior. In practice, values function as a cognitive filter through which tourists evaluate offerings and experiences, thereby determining what they will consider desirable or significant in the decision-making process (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). One of the most consistent findings refers to the concept of congruence between destination image and travelers' self-perception (self-congruity). Studies show that the greater the alignment between personal values and the perceived image of a destination, the stronger the tourists' intentions to visit, as well as their satisfaction and loyalty after the visit (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Chon, 1992). This finding has been further confirmed in later empirical studies, where positive emotions and satisfaction mediated the relationship between personal values and tourist behavior (Beerli et al., 2007).

Studies show that tourists who value ecological and altruistic principles are more likely to choose environmentally responsible accommodation, participate in nature conservation, and support local products and initiatives (Steg, Perlaviciute, & van der Werff, 2015; Passafaro, 2020). This demonstrates that values play a key role in shaping sustainable tourism, as they represent deeply rooted motivational drivers within human nature.

Regional research conducted in the Balkans supports these findings, emphasizing the importance of cultural and emotional values in shaping tourist behavior. A study conducted in Dubrovnik found that the perceived value of the destination and the sense of authenticity significantly influence satisfaction and the intention to revisit, while financial factors have only a minor impact (Pandža Bajs, 2015). Research in Serbia has shown that visitors to peri-urban parks value the recreational and restorative aspects of these spaces, and that motives related to nature and environmental preservation are the dominant drivers of their behavior (Vasiljević, 2023). Similar findings in Croatia indicate that tourists' value orientations affect their perception of authenticity and the cultural attributes of a destination, which directly influence their loyalty and likelihood of returning (Mikulić & Prebežac, 2012). Thus, the findings suggest that personal values are not an abstract construct but a measurable factor that determines destination choice, experience, and behavior both during and after travel. The role of values is particularly evident in the context of hedonistic and sustainable choices, as well as in regional studies where cultural and emotional dimensions prove to be crucial for understanding tourist behavior. Understanding tourists' desires, needs, behaviors, and expectations of a given destination, along with its services and offerings, requires examining the entire process they undergo—from the choice of a specific destination to the conclusion of the journey. Departure from a destination entails achieving either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Hence, it is of key importance to investigate the psychological aspects of tourists' personalities, as internal drivers that generate tourism-related needs and thereby shape tourism demand.

4. The tourist decision-making process in destination choice: integration of values, motives, attitudes, and expectations

Tourist behavior is a multilayered phenomenon shaped both by psychological processes and by individual value systems. Instead of focusing on demographic or economic predictors of tourism as in traditional studies, contemporary research highlights the central role of cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors in understanding destination choice and related experiences (Kozak, 2002; Pearce & Lee, 2005). This is of crucial importance not only for academic research but also for practical applications in tourism management and marketing.

Psychological determinants encompass internal processes that initiate travel decision-making, as well as personality traits, risk perception, the need for novelty, and emotional responses. For example, individuals high in sensation-seeking tendencies are more likely to engage in adventure tourism and choose destinations that provide high levels of stimulation, whereas those with a lower tolerance for risk tend to prefer safe, familiar, and predictable experiences (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001).

Researchers have examined the correlations among destination image, perceived quality, tourist satisfaction, and tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend destinations. Using structural equation modeling, they analyzed the influence of these variables on tourist behavior. The results indicate that destination image directly affects perceived quality, satisfaction, revisit intention, and destination recommendation. Cognitive evaluations—such as expectations of satisfaction with the destination, anticipated enjoyment, and perceived self-efficacy in navigating the destination—further influence tourist behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The decision-making process regarding destination choice thus represents a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, in which psychological motives, personal values, attitudes, and expectations intersect to shape final behavioral intentions. Unlike earlier linear models that explained destination choice solely through economic or demographic indicators, contemporary research suggests that the decision is not a mechanical calculation of price, distance, and accessibility, but rather a deeply subjective process in which internal psychological mechanisms play a dominant role (Decrop, 2010; Sirgy & Su, 2000). In this sense, the decision to travel may be viewed as a manifestation of identity, since tourists, through their choice of destination, affirm, extend, or redefine their own system of values.

Most frequently, the classical decision-making model is analyzed, which treats the potential tourist as an individual who solves personal needs through the choice of a destination. This model consists of the following five stages (Djeri, 2006):

- awareness of need,
- information search,
- evaluation of alternatives,
- purchase decision of a tourism product or service,
- post-purchase evaluation.

The first step in the decision-making process is the recognition of the need for a change of the usual environment, rest, or the acquisition of new experiences. In fact, the process begins when a potential tourist becomes aware of a specific need (e.g., the need for travel, change of surroundings, leisure, and so forth). If the need is sufficiently strong, or transformed into a desire, the potential tourist is motivated to search for information about tourism destinations that can satisfy that need. Information search is significantly determined by the level of involvement of the potential tourist in the decision-making process, as well as by the manner in which information is obtained. These needs are not universal but are largely mediated by personal values that shape the individual perception of priorities. For example, values oriented toward security and stability encourage preferences for destinations that provide comfort and predictability, while values related to self-actualization and openness to experience direct attention toward destinations that promise authenticity, exploration, and personal growth (Schwartz, 2012; Chen & Phou, 2013). Thus, motives and values operate synchronously: the motive represents the driving force, while the value directs this energy toward a particular type of destination.

Following the recognition of need comes the phase of information search and processing, during which tourists selectively gather and evaluate data based on their value orientations. Studies show that personal values determine the selection of information sources and evaluation criteria: hedonists focus on content related to pleasure and entertainment, whereas individuals who prioritize socio-cultural values seek information about cultural heritage and interaction with the local community (Mura & Kljucnikov, 2017). In this way, values influence motivations and structure the manner in which information is perceived, evaluated, and incorporated into the decision-making process. In the next phase, the potential tourist, based on the available information, identifies alternatives and establishes criteria for choosing the most suitable option, i.e., a tourist destination. At this stage, attitudes toward different types of tourism offerings become evident. In the evaluation of alternatives, tourist choice becomes a space where cognitive, affective, and evaluative elements intersect. The cognitive component refers to the beliefs and knowledge that the tourist holds about the destination, the affective component to the emotional response and anticipated experience, while the evaluative dimension represents the value framework within which the destination is assessed as consistent with internal standards and expectations. This evaluation

is often based on the process of self-congruity, i.e., the alignment of the destination's image with the tourist's self-identity and values, which significantly increases the likelihood of destination choice (Kastenholz, 2004; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). The attitudes formed during the evaluation stage play a key role in the transition from consideration to intention and final decision. Attitude is the result of cognitive-affective synthesis and functions as a relatively stable predictor of behavior. However, its strength depends on its congruence with values and on the realism of previously formed expectations. When there is clear harmony between values, motives, and expectations, the attitude toward the destination will be strongly positive, leading to strong intention and a higher likelihood of choice. In this context, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) confirms that attitudes, together with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, are the main determinants of intention and, consequently, of behavior.

The final decision regarding destination choice is shaped through a compromise between internal psychological factors and external constraints such as financial resources, time availability, political and security conditions, or visa regulations. Nevertheless, even in the presence of objective constraints, values remain decisive, as they guide tourists toward alternative solutions that can, to the extent possible, satisfy their internal motives and expectations. There is evidence that when objective conditions prevent the realization of the ideal destination, tourists often choose substitute destinations that symbolically and in terms of values replicate the desired experience (Cohen et al., 2014). The final decision occurs in the fourth phase, when the potential tourist opts for one of the available alternatives and moves from the status of "potential" to the status of an actual tourist consumer. In practice, this means purchasing a specific package arrangement or partial tourism products and services at the chosen destination.

The decision-making process concludes with a post-purchase evaluation, usually based on the degree of satisfaction after returning from the destination, i.e., after consuming the chosen tourism product or service. In practice, the level of satisfaction with the selected destination largely determines whether the tourist will return to the same destination and use the same agency in the next purchase. Following the realization of travel, a feedback loop is established, in which the actual experience is compared with previously formed expectations. If the experience meets or exceeds expectations, a positive post-attitude is formed, strengthening destination loyalty and motivating future recommendations and repeat visits. Conversely, if disappointment occurs, tourists reassess their own values, redefine expectations, and potentially change their motives for future travel. In this way, the decision-making process acquires a cyclical character, whereby prior experience shapes the next round of decisions, confirming the dynamic nature of the relationship between values, motives, attitudes, and expectations (Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Gnoth, 1997). Involvement, in terms of the level of interest of potential tourists in making a decision about destination choice, demonstrates the importance of choice and problem-solving activity, as well as the strength of motivation in certain phases of the decision-making process and the realization of travel.

5. Conclusion

Understanding tourist behavior requires an approach that transcends traditional economic and demographic frameworks and incorporates deeper psychological processes and individual value orientations. An analysis of motives and personal values reveals that the decision to travel is not a random act but rather the result of a complex interaction of inner needs, emotional aspirations, and expectations projected onto the chosen destination. The tourist is an active participant in creating the tourist image of a country, as their values and attitudes influence the overall perception and evaluation of the destination. This means that tourists cannot be regarded as passive consumers of services. Tourism, therefore, can be understood as a "space" in which various levels of human personality intersect—from basic needs for rest and relaxation to the pursuit of self-development, authenticity, and belonging. This demonstrates that the psychological dimension of the tourist experience is highly significant, as it not only provides immediate satisfaction but also shapes memories, attitudes, and future travel decisions and destination choices.

Understanding psychological motives and personal values contributes to the development of personalized products and services, which can foster long-term attachment to a destination. Recognizing the values that influence sustainable behavior supports the development of tourism that meets the needs of local communities while positively contributing to the preservation of natural resources. In this way, tourism is not defined merely as an economic activity but as a domain in which social, cultural, and ecological goals are realized.

It can ultimately be concluded that psychological motives and personal values are essential for understanding the profile of the contemporary tourist. They link individual travel decisions to broader social contexts, offering a framework for shaping the future of tourism toward greater authenticity, sustainability, and mutual human understanding. Such an approach enhances the quality of the tourist experience and opens the way for the development of more responsible and human-centered tourism on a global scale.

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