

Understanding the emotions of tourists' experience toward national parks: Antecedents of destination loyalty and satisfaction in Serbian national parks

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Abstract

The study enhances the limited body of knowledge on tourists' emotions in national parks by examining factors influencing destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction. By analyzing theoretical and empirical data on causal relationships among emotions, destination image, perceived quality, satisfaction, and destination loyalty, the study sought to provide an integrated method for understanding destination loyalty. Thirteen hypotheses were established within the framework of a proposed study model. The study used a quantitative approach to gather data, distributing questionnaires to domestic visitors to Serbia's national parks. Structured equation modeling, or SEM, was utilized to assess the data obtained from a total of 462 questionnaires. The findings demonstrated that satisfaction and destination loyalty are descendants of emotions (positive and negative), destination image, and perceived quality. Destination loyalty was positively impacted by visitor satisfaction as well. The study investigated how various tourist demographic traits affected these relationships. Based on the study's findings, implications for theory and management were concluded, and suggestions for further research were given.

Keywords: emotions; satisfaction; destination loyalty; perceived quality; destination image; national park experience.

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1. Introduction

The improvement of human welfare and preservation of the biodiversity are vital functions of national parks (NP) (Hausmann *et al.*, 2020). NPs can be considered to have two purposes: they are designed to preserve unspoiled nature and to make it easier for people to come and get the services they need (Sæþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2022). As NPs have developed into popular destinations for tourism and outdoor recreation (especially during COVID-19 pandemic (Kruczek *et al.*, 2023)), they have gradually established a reputation as exceptional and distinctive natural regions that draw an increasing number of visitors (Leiper, 1990; Sæþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2022; Reinius & Fredman, 2007). Since many outdoor activities in NPs provide intensive experiences for tourists, natural resources are crucial to the satisfaction of these visitors (Dissart & Marcouiller, 2012; Sthapit *et al.*, 2022).

Holidays and weekends in NPs are frequently spent on a variety of activities, which includes more passive pursuits like visiting nearby museums, trying out local cuisine or beverages, getting a spa treatment, and further amenities, as well as more intense pursuits like hiking, diving, running, cycling and sailing (Lebrun *et al.*, 2021). Thus, it is critical to comprehend people's emotions during experiences in NPs to enhance the psychological and physical benefits to visitors, increase destination loyalty, and promote long-term socio-political support for conservation (Al-Msallam, 2020; Hausmann *et al.*, 2020). People's reactions to visiting NPs can be both positive and negative (Al-Msallam, 2020; Terraube *et al.*, 2017). Positive feelings are evoked by NPs interaction with nature (Maller *et al.*, 2006). This can be achieved through enhancing one's physical, mental, and psychological well-being, lowering stress levels, speeding up the healing process from illnesses (Velarde *et al.*, 2007), encouraging social integration (Abraham *et al.*, 2010), and enhancing one's overall well-being (Puhakka *et al.*, 2017). These emotions foster a favourable bond with the environment and the destination, resulting in satisfaction and loyalty to the place (Al-Msallam, 2020; Hausmann *et al.*, 2020). On the contrary, negative emotions cause individuals to be dissatisfied with experiences or services, which can interfere with future travel plans and destination loyalty (Al-Msallam, 2020; Kil *et al.*, 2012). Controversial management, illicit hunting, fishing, lack of support for conservation, too much trash, etc., might cause people to have negative emotions (Gusset *et al.*, 2008; Lubbe *et al.*, 2019).

For many tourism researchers and destination marketers, comprehending the relationship between tourists' emotions, satisfaction, and loyalty to a destination— furthermore the relationship between destinations' image, tourism satisfaction, and loyalty—remains a significant challenge (Al-Msallam, 2020; Pestana *et al.*, 2020). Al-Msallam (2020) looked into how visitors' feelings affected their satisfaction and loyalty in Switzerland. Future research, according to the author, must concentrate on domestic travelers, examine their experiences in the summer and winter, and include additional variables in the model, such as destination image. One of the key pillars of any specific travel behaviour is the destination image, which plays a significant role in the decision-making process of travelers when choosing a destination as well as in assessing their level of satisfaction, expectations, and behavioural intentions (Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023). The process through which people attempt to create an impression of a specific destination is referred to as "destination image" (Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, including this component in the research model for NPs is very much needed.

In response to Al-Msallam's (2020) suggestion to expand models by including more factors, such as destination image, this study explores how emotions toward a specific type of destination (national parks), along with perceived quality and destination image, influence destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction. Accordingly, the present research offers a theoretical framework for examining how visitors' emotions, perceived quality and destination image explain satisfaction and loyalty. The study also extends the theoretical framework to supply empirical evidence on the proposed causal relationships among the above-mentioned constructs. In addition to data analysis, structured equation modeling, or SEM, was utilized to assess measurement and structural models. Moreover, this study

examines how various demographic factors of tourists influence these dynamics. The outcome of this study provides empirical knowledge in designing effective marketing strategies for tourism in NPs and contributes to enriching the tourism literature regarding emotional experiences in NPs. This research enhances the limited understanding of tourists' emotional experiences in nature protected areas (NPs). By focusing on the antecedents of satisfaction and loyalty, this study seeks to provide valuable insights for enhancing visitor experiences and promoting sustainable tourism in Serbia's protected natural areas. First, the literature review focuses on the emotions in NPs and introduces the components and creation of the hypotheses and research model. Second, methodology and follow-up findings are discussed. The study's findings were analyzed to offer management recommendations aimed at enhancing domestic visitors' satisfaction and loyalty in protected nature parks. Additionally, the research outlines theoretical contributions, acknowledges limitations, and suggests avenues for future studies.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. *Emotions in national parks: Impact on destination loyalty and satisfaction*

NPs are tourist destinations that generate income for countries all around the world (Mkwizu, 2023). NPs are important to society (Dudley, 2008) and they were originally designated in the past to protect a nation's natural legacy. Throughout time, their scope grew to include a wide spectrum of political, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects (Gissibl *et al.*, 2012). It is widely accepted that restoring people's connection to nature requires outdoor leisure, which can be provided through nature-based tourism (Gissibl *et al.*, 2012). People may experience both pleasant and negative emotions when visiting NPs (Terraube *et al.*, 2017). Numerous advantages can result from spending time in nature and participating in outdoor activities, including enhanced physical and mental health, lower stress levels, and an increase in well-being (Dean *et al.*, 2018; Hanna *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Pasanen *et al.*, 2014; Puhakka *et al.*, 2017; Willis, 2015). Positive emotions are evoked by nature interaction in the aforementioned manner (Maller *et al.*, 2010). On the contrary, negative feelings towards NPs can be sparked by unhappiness with experiences, services, and expectations, furthermore, by controversial management practices. This may trigger issues with attachment and discourage future park visits (Kil *et al.*, 2012).

Travelers frequently seek out emotional encounters since emotion enhances travel experience (Ortony *et al.*, 1990; Malone *et al.*, 2017; Rahmani *et al.*, 2018). According to research (Gnoth & Zins 2008; Hosany *et al.*, 2015; Prayag *et al.* 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2014), emotion has an impact on travelers' behavioural intentions, motives, satisfaction, and loyalty. Even with these initiatives, research on the emotional experiences of tourists is still lacking (Malone *et al.*, 2017; Shoval *et al.*, 2017). Positive and enjoyable emotions are important components of tourism experiences (Rezaei *et al.*, 2023). According to Richins (1997) joy as a positive emotion and fear as a negative emotion are worthy of research attention since they affect loyalty. The contact between visitors and locals in NPs creates an emotional experience, particularly when it comes to the process of receiving specific services at the location (Quynh *et al.*, 2020). However, some travelers may have unpleasant emotions as a result of their interactions with service providers at specific locations (Al-Msallam, 2020; Quynh *et al.*, 2020) or with their dissatisfaction with NP management (Kil *et al.*, 2012).

Previous studies have found a favourable correlation between visitors' positive emotions, destination loyalty and satisfaction (Al-Msallam, 2020; Hashemi *et al.*, 2023; Ruiz-Mafe *et al.*, 2016; Quynh *et al.*, 2020; Wei *et al.*, 2023). For instance, Al-Msallam's work focuses on how emotions play a moderating role between tourists' perceived experiences and loyalty to a destination, suggesting that managing emotional responses may be crucial for tourism companies. Another example is study by Hashemi *et al.* (2023), who highlighted that positive emotional experiences significantly enhance overall tourist satisfaction, but also have a strong influence on the intention to revisit or recommend the destination to others.

Contradictory outcomes, however, occur when satisfaction and/or destination loyalty are descendants of negative emotions. According to theory, negative emotions ought to lower loyalty and satisfaction levels (Al-Msallam, 2020; Hashemi *et al.*, 2023; Wei *et al.*, 2023). In light of earlier research findings, the next hypotheses are presented:

- H1: Tourist satisfaction is directly positively impacted by positive emotions, like positive surprise and joy.*
- H2: Tourist satisfaction is directly negatively impacted by negative emotions, like sadness, fear, and anger.*
- H3: Destination loyalty is directly positively impacted by positive emotions, like positive surprise and joy.*
- H4: Destination loyalty is directly negatively impacted by negative emotions, like sadness, fear, and anger.*

Among the most crucial elements for the success of tourist destination is the satisfaction of the tourist. According to Tapak *et al.* (2019), a growing number of businesses in tourism consider visitor satisfaction to be a critical component in assessing the effectiveness of their operations. Tourist satisfaction is attained by the establishment of suitable processes that ensure the services rendered align with their expectations (Tapak *et al.*, 2019; Zhou *et al.*, 2022). The literature on tourism reveals that one of the most essential factors in choosing a destination is the tourists' satisfaction; if they are satisfied with their experience, they are likely to recommend the destination to others or come again (Amrollahi Biuki & Nazari Dehaghi, 2015; & Akbar, 2016; Salleh *et al.*, 2013; Tapak *et al.*, 2019). Previous research (Liu *et al.*, 2017; Chen & Chen, 2010) claim that visitor satisfaction is an accurate predictor of whether or not they will recommend the place to others and return. Tourists' degree of satisfaction influences whether or not they continue to be loyal to destination or not (Hung *et al.*, 2021). Numerous scholars (Al-Msallam, 2020; Hung *et al.*, 2021; Jeong & Kim, 2020) have examined the connection between destination loyalty and satisfaction. Jeong and Kim (2020) concluded that tourists who were satisfied with their experiences had a stronger sense of loyalty to the destination. In other words, satisfaction increases tourists' attachment to a destination, which in turn fosters loyalty and increases the likelihood of repeat visits and referrals. Al-Msallam (2020) highlighted that emotional satisfaction fosters behaviours like returning to the destination and recommending it to others. Consequently, it seems reasonable to propose the next hypothesis:

- H5: Destination loyalty is positively impacted by visitor satisfaction.*

2.2. Perceived quality: Impact on destination loyalty and satisfaction

Perceived quality is the customer's evaluation of the item (product), or service's overall quality or superiority in comparison to its intended use (Aaker, 1991). According to Pike *et al.* (2010), destination-perceived quality is the basis of customer-based brand equity. It describes how a customer evaluates the standard (quality) of the destination's products and services, including lodging (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007) and interaction between customers (tourists) and employees (Tsaor *et al.*, 2015).

Tourist satisfaction is largely determined by perceived quality (Aliman *et al.*, 2016; Han *et al.*, 2021; Haji *et al.*, 2021; Zaibaf *et al.*, 2013). According to research by Haji *et al.* (2021), tourist satisfaction is directly positively impacted by the destination's perceived quality (such as cleanliness, friendliness of the locals, and quality of accommodations). Tourists will not be satisfied if they do not think the value, they are getting outweighs the cost (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, it seems reasonable to propose that:

- H6: Visitor satisfaction is positively impacted by perceived quality.*

In this instance, travelers will assess the perception of a place's quality after visiting it and having travel-related experiences. If they view it positively, they will feel good, be satisfied, and remain loyal to the destination. However, if they have a poor impression of the destination, they will likely feel dissatisfied, have negative emotions, and decide not to go back. Furthermore, the association between perceived quality, loyalty and satisfaction has been validated by numerous empirical investigations (Bhattacharya

et al., 2023; Jeong & Kim, 2020; Meeprom & Silanoi, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2017). According to Keller and Lehmann's 2003 research, brand loyalty is preceded by the perception of quality. Therefore, the following hypothesis arises:

H7: Destination loyalty is positively impacted by perceived quality.

2.3. Destination image: Impact on destination loyalty and satisfaction

The notion of the destination image refers to the collection of perceptions, assumptions, expectations, and beliefs that arise from assessing specific characteristics at a particular destination (Crompton, 1979; Dichter, 1985; Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Nguyen Viet *et al.*, 2020). Since 1970, scholars have focused on the image of tourist destinations (Crompton, 1979; Chu *et al.*, 2022; Dichter, 1985; Quynh *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2014) furthermore, a factor influencing travelers' intentions to visit and return (Erawan, 2019; Viana *et al.*, 2021). A subjective interpretation of perception, impression, and mental representation is another definition of destination image (Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022). Chi & Qu (2008) claimed that travelers' perceptions of destinations should influence their behaviour to some extent. Travelers' perceptions will affect their decision-making when selecting a destination, how they assess their experience afterward, and what they plan to do going forward. The positive relationship between destination satisfaction, image, and loyalty has been verified by a number of researchers (Assaker *et al.*, 2001; Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022; Sun *et al.*, 2013; Viana *et al.*, 2021; Wang & Hsu, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Prior research has demonstrated an affirmative relationship between satisfaction, loyalty and destination image (Bigne *et al.*, 2001; Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022; Quynh *et al.*, 2020), emphasizing that destination image precedes satisfaction and loyalty. Wu (2016) pointed out that destination image and satisfaction are among the essential determinants of destination loyalty. As a result, following hypotheses are proposed:

H8: Visitor satisfaction is positively impacted by destination image.

H9: Destination loyalty is positively impacted by destination image.

2.4. Socio-demographic characteristics

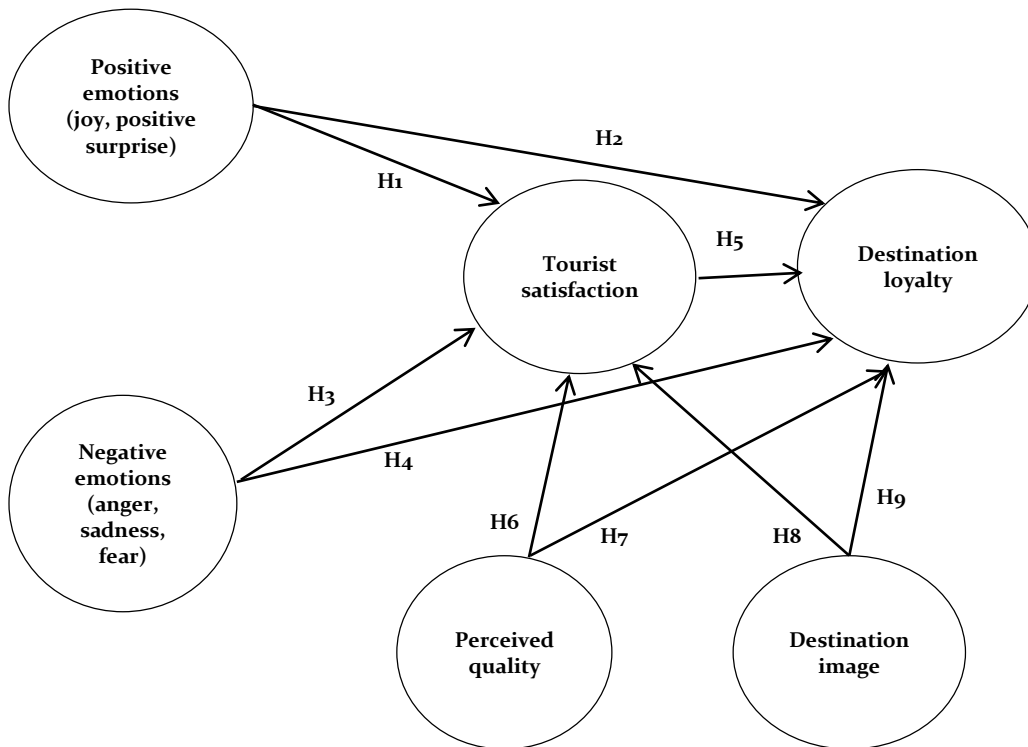
Prior research has highlighted the significance of taking demographic characteristics into account when examining tourist perceptions of destinations (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018) and customer behaviour in the tourism industry (Kostić & Kovačević Berleković, 2021; Pasaco-González *et al.*, 2023). Due to these factors, a number of research studies (Milićević *et al.*, 2020; Okumus *et al.*, 2021; Pasaco-González *et al.*, 2023; Sthapit *et al.*, 2019; Šagovnović *et al.*, 2022; Zhao *et al.*, 2020) have focused on examining how particular demographic characteristics, like gender, age, and educational attainment, may affect consumer attitudes towards a tourism product, service, or destination. The aforementioned study's findings clearly express the significance of tourist demographics when assessing the tourism experience. In light of this, the current study sought to ascertain the relationships among demographic variables, emotions, destination image, perceived quality, destination loyalty and satisfaction. Considering the aforementioned facts, the following hypotheses were put forward:

H10: Emotions, perceived quality, destination image, destination loyalty and satisfaction differ according to tourists' gender.

H11: Emotions, perceived quality, destination image, destination loyalty and satisfaction differ according to tourists' age.

H12: Emotions, perceived quality, destination image, destination loyalty and satisfaction differ according to tourists' education level.

H13: Emotions, perceived quality, destination image, destination loyalty and satisfaction differ according to tourists' employment type (Figure 1).



Socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, employment status) H10-H13

Figure 1. Suggested research framework

3. Methodology

3.1. Serbian National Parks: Case Study Area

NPs in Serbia (Figure 2) are vital for preserving diverse ecosystems, stunning landscapes, and cultural heritage while promoting sustainable activities. Serbia currently has five NPs, each offering distinct natural beauty and recreational options. However, due to political reasons, Šar Planina NP, located in Kosovo (not under the administration of Serbia; no data on tourist visits) will not be discussed further. Additionally, efforts are underway to designate Kučaj-Beljanica and Stara Planina mountains as NPs. Managers of NPs are public companies with the same names of NPs. These public companies focus on natural and cultural resources conservation, habitat and plant preservation, but also on tourism, sustainable development and enabling an adequate quality of life for people in the NP through the development of social, cultural and economic activities (INCS, 2024).

Fruška Gora NP, situated on the southernmost point of the Pannonian Plain and beside the Danube River, represents Serbia's oldest NP, declared in 1960 (INCS, 2024). Encompassing a total area of 266.72 km² (Mesaroš *et al.*, 2004; Obradović *et al.*, 2023), Fruška Gora boasts a diverse geological composition spanning from the Paleozoic to the Quaternary periods (Micić-Ponjiger *et al.*, 2021). This diversity has contributed to its unique natural heritage, featuring rich fossil fauna from the former Pannonian Sea (Lazić *et al.*, 2008). Located near Novi Sad in northern Serbia, Fruška Gora NP is characterized by its picturesque landscape of rolling hills, vineyards, and medieval monasteries. Forests cover 90% of the park's surface, housing a remarkable array of biodiversity including approximately 1,500 plant species, 60 mammal species, 13 amphibian species, and 11 reptile species. NP is also a sanctuary for birdwatchers, boasting 211 bird species, including the rare golden eagle, which nests exclusively in this region within

Serbia (INCS, 2024). Renowned for its hiking trails, cycling routes, and wine tasting opportunities, Fruška Gora NP offers visitors a chance to explore its natural wonders and cultural treasures. Frequently called the "Jewel of Serbia," the park's scenic beauty and diverse attractions make it a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts and cultural explorers alike. In 2022, total tourists visited Fruška Gora NP was 81,481, of which 65,828 were domestic and 15,653 international (SORS, 2024).



Figure 2. A location map of Serbian National Parks

Source: <https://www.freeworldmaps.net/europe/serbia/map.html> (modified)

Đerdap NP, located beside the Danube River on the eastern border of Serbia with Romania, was declared in 1974 and encompasses a vast area totaling 638 km² (INCS, 2024). Renowned for its breathtaking gorges and ancient Roman ruins, the park is celebrated for its dramatic limestone cliffs and rich cultural heritage. The Đerdap Gorge, one of the biggest river gorges in Europe, is located at the center of Đerdap NP (Bjedov *et al.*, 2014). This natural wonder features towering cliffs of limestone and is adorned with ancient Roman ruins, adding to its allure and historical significance. The gorge, which the powerful Danube River sculpted over millennia, is evidence of the might of nature's forces (Pavlović *et al.*, 2019). Home to an extensive range of fauna and flora, the park boasts over 1,100 plant species, including the rare Đerdap tulip (*Tulipa hungarica*), found exclusively within the gorge. The park's rich biodiversity extends to its avian and mammalian populations, with over 150 bird species and numerous mammals (Protected Natural Resources in Serbia, 2007). The NP offers visitors an array of activities, including boating, hiking, and archaeological exploration. The Đerdap Gorge provides stunning panoramas and serves as a captivating destination for nature lovers and history enthusiasts alike. In 2022, total tourists visited Đerdap NP was 9,421, of which 5,684 were domestic and 3,737 international (SORS, 2024).

Tara NP, nestled in western Serbia, draws visitors in with its breathtaking mountain vistas, dense forests, and the majestic Drina River canyon. Established in 1981, the NP encompasses a total area of 249.92 km², making it a cherished natural treasure (Radović *et al.*, 2005). Mount Tara distinguishes

itself by rugged terrain, deep gorges and canyons, as well as lush, dense forests dominated by indigenous conifer species. Renowned as the most forested mountain in Serbia and Europe, Tara is home to an extensive range of flora, approximately 1,000 plant species, including rare species like the Serbian spruce. The NPs rich biodiversity extends to its fauna, with 130 bird species and numerous mammals (INCS, 2024). The NP offers visitors a wealth of outdoor activities, from hiking amidst pristine forests to wildlife watching opportunities (Brankov *et al.*, 2022). The Drina River canyon provides a breathtaking setting for exploration, while cultural landmarks like the historic Drina River house provide insight into the region's heritage and charm. In 2022, total tourists visited Tara NP was 54,857, of which 50,439 were domestic and 4,418 international (SORS, 2024).

Kopaonik NP encompasses the highest and most well-preserved sections of the Kopaonik mountain range, located in the heart of southern Serbia. Established in 1981, the NP spans a total area of 119.69 km² (INCS, 2024) and is renowned as a beloved destination for outdoor enthusiasts, particularly during the winter months (Protić *et al.*, 2024). Featuring a remarkable degree of biological diversity, Kopaonik is adorned with diverse ecosystems teeming with numerous animal and plant types. With over 1,600 species of plants documented on the massif, including 50 species listed on Serbia's Red List and several species listed on the European Red List, Kopaonik stands as a biodiversity hotspot. There are six types of reptiles and six types of amphibians, eight of which are protected in Serbia, along with a rich bird fauna comprising over 170 species and a mammal fauna boasting more than 40 species (INCS, 2024). The NP holds significant scientific, ecological, educational, and tourist value (Ristić *et al.*, 2019). Renowned as Serbia's largest and most beautiful winter tourist center, Kopaonik offers world-class ski resorts, pristine forests, and opportunities for wildlife encounters, including sightings of brown bears and golden eagles (Cvetković *et al.*, 2021). During the summer months, visitors can immerse themselves in a range of outdoor activities, such as hiking, mountain biking, and exploring picturesque alpine meadows (Brankov *et al.*, 2019). Kopaonik NP was visited by 146,852 tourists in 2022, of which 116,442 were domestic tourists and 30,410 international (SORS, 2024).

3.2. Sample of the study

The research was conducted on domestic visitors to NP in Serbia, citizens of Serbia who are 18 years old and older. 462 valid questionnaires were received, after three were excluded due to the ambiguity regarding the status of the Šar Mountain NP. Participants were selected using convenience and snowball sampling methods, where initial respondents were asked to share the questionnaire with others who fit the study criteria. Since convenience and snowball sampling methods were chosen, it made it possible to approach a wide range of perspectives of NP visitors in Serbia. In order to ensure a comprehensive sample, the study did not impose restrictions based on gender, education level, income, age groups, or geographical regions within Serbia. It is also important to note that the research primarily focused on individuals who recently visited the NP (within the past year), which allowed the answers to be based on current or recent experiences. The formation of the sample can be affected by the way it is distributed (via personal connections and social networks), potentially biasing it towards certain demographic groups that are more active online or in certain social circles.

3.3. Instrument

The survey was structured into six distinct sections, each designed to capture specific aspects of the tourist experience. The initial section gathered information related to the trip, including the destination name, duration of stay, accommodation type, and travel companions, alongside sociodemographic details of the respondents such as gender, age, education, and employment status.

The subsequent section evaluated tourist emotions, both positive and negative, utilizing frameworks from Prayag *et al.* (2013) and Richins (1997). Positive emotions were assessed through elements like joy and positive surprise, while negative emotions encompassed feelings such as anger, sadness, and fear.

The third section focused on perceived quality, incorporating six items adapted from Žabkar *et al.* (2010) to measure tourists' perceptions of service and experience quality during their visit.

The fourth section assessed tourist satisfaction using three items modified from studies by Sun *et al.* (2013) and Chen & Chen (2010), which inquired about overall satisfaction, the perception of the visit as a wonderful experience, and the ranking of the destination among the best visited.

The fifth section measured destination loyalty through three items adapted from research by Bigne *et al.* (2001) and Wu (2016), evaluating tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend the destination.

The final section examined the destination image using 19 items modified from Chi & Qu (2008), capturing tourists' perceptions and mental representations of the destination.

In sections two through six, participants rated their agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert scale, where one indicated strong disagreement and five indicated strong agreement.

3.4. Procedure

To enhance the clarity and effectiveness of the questionnaire, a comprehensive translation and validation process was undertaken. Initially, the questionnaire was developed and tailored to align with the study's objectives. A Serbian version was then created, following best practices for questionnaire translation, which emphasize not just linguistic accuracy but also cultural relevance to ensure that the translated items resonate appropriately with the target audience.

To verify the translation's effectiveness, a back-translation method was employed, where the Serbian version was translated back into English. This step helped identify and resolve any discrepancies or nuances that might have been lost or altered during the initial translation.

Subsequently, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of national park visitors. This pretesting phase involved cognitive debriefing interviews, where participants completed the questionnaire and provided feedback on its clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. This feedback was instrumental in refining the questionnaire to ensure it effectively captured the intended data.

Once the translation and content validity were confirmed, the finalized online questionnaire was administered between October and December 2023. It was distributed via social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, targeting visitors who had frequented Serbia's national parks during the summer of 2023. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, assured of the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation, and notified that their responses would be used solely for scientific and research purposes.

3.5. Statistical methods

The data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS software, employing various statistical techniques to ensure the robustness and validity of the findings. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire items, with a threshold of 0.7 indicating acceptable reliability. Descriptive Statistical Analysis provided an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the distribution of key variables. Pearson Correlation Analysis was performed to evaluate the relationships between individual questionnaire items and the overall construct scores, aiming to establish the validity of each item. A two-tailed significance level of 5% was applied to determine statistical significance.

To examine the structural relationships among the research variables, IBM SPSS AMOS was utilized for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was conducted to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis, yielding a KMO value

of 0.831, which exceeds the commonly recommended threshold of 0.6, indicating meritorious sampling adequacy.

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was also performed, producing a significant result ($\chi^2 (1128) = 31,040.802$, $p = 0.000$), confirming that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and that factor analysis is appropriate.

To address potential Common Method Bias (CMB), Harman's Single-Factor Test was employed. The results indicated that a single factor accounted for 39.13% of the total variance, which is below the 50% threshold suggested by Fuller *et al.* (2016), implying that CMB is unlikely to have significantly affected the data. Additionally, the distributions of kurtosis and skewness were examined to assess the normality of the data, with all values falling within the acceptable ranges specified by Brown (2006), further supporting the data's suitability for analysis.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to validate the measurement model, with several goodness-of-fit indices evaluated. A Comparative Fit Index (CFI) value of 0.95 or higher is generally considered indicative of a good fit. Other fit indices, such as the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), were also assessed to ensure the model's adequacy. These comprehensive analyses collectively support the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments and the robustness of the structural model employed in this study.

4. Results

4.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics and Travel-Related Information of Respondents

A total of 462 domestic tourists participated in the survey, with a significant majority identifying as female (80%). The respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 73 years, with an average age of 43 (SD = 12.56). Regarding employment status, 85% were employed, and 55% held a bachelor's degree.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics and Travel-Related Information of Respondents (n=462)

Gender		Status of employment		Duration of stay		National Park	
Female	80%	Student	7.10%	Average duration = 4 days		Fruška gora	53.5%
Male	20%	Employed	84.80%	Std=3.5811			
Age		Unemployed	4.10%	Stay range (1-20 days)		Tara	32.5%
Average age = 42		Retired	3.90%				
Std. = 11.0818		Travel Company		Type of accommodation		Kopaonik	5.30%
Age range (21 – 73)		Alone	3.20%	Hotel	14.70%		
Level of education		Family	60.80%	Vacation	31.20%	Đerdap	8.70%
				house/cottage			
High school	30.30%	Friends	19.70%	Room/apartment	22.50%		
Bachelor's degree	55.5%	Partner	11.90%	Other	31.60%		
Master's degree/PhD degree	14.70%	Other	4.30%				

The majority of respondents visited Fruška Gora National Park, a protected area located in the southern Pannonian Plain along the Danube River in Vojvodina, Northern Serbia. Established as a national park in 1960, Fruška Gora spans approximately 26,672 hectares, representing about 26.25% of the mountain's total area. Its proximity to major cities like Belgrade and Novi Sad enhances its accessibility to both domestic and international tourists. Most of the participants stated that they used a room/apartment as a type of accommodation (31%), or other types of accommodation (visiting family, Airbnb, etc.) (32%).

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling

The model's input was the first round of preliminary analyses. Table 2 displays the extent of the created model's goodness of fit values. The majority of the goodness of fit indices have values that satisfy Schumacker & Lomax's (2016) criteria and fall within good and acceptable limits. Therefore, the goodness of fit ratings demonstrate the full validity and consistency of the model's interactions with the data sample.

Table 2. Goodness-of-Fit Results (48 items, $n=462$)

Fit indices	Goodness-of-Fit Obtained	Fit Situations
χ^2	$16 \leq 16.972$ ≤ 40	Acceptable
CMIN (χ^2/sd)	$16.972/8$ $= 2.12$	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.049	Good
SRMR	0.008	Good
NFI	0.994	Good
RFI	0.972	Good
IFI	0.997	Good
GFI	0.992	Good
AGFI	0.955	Good
TLI	0.985	Good
CFI	0.997	Good

Note: df (degrees of freedom) =8;

The internal consistency of all variables was confirmed, as Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded 0.7 (see Table 3). The overall scale reliability was 0.93, further supporting the reliability of the measurement instruments.

Convergent validity was assessed by examining the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) values. According to Hair *et al.* (2021), convergent validity is established when item-to-factor loadings are substantial, the AVE score for each construct is greater than 0.5, and the CR is higher than 0.6. In this study, all constructs met these criteria, with AVE values exceeding 0.5 and CR values above 0.7, indicating strong convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the square root of the AVE for each construct with the correlations between constructs. The results showed that the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with other constructs, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

These findings collectively demonstrate that the measurement model possesses both high reliability and validity, ensuring the robustness of the constructs used in this study.

Table 3. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Factors	Description of the item	Factor loadings	M (mean values)	Alfa	CR	AVE
Positive emotions	During my visit I felt...					
	joy.	0.738	4.11	0.92	0.90	0.51
	pleasure.	0.704				
	cheerfulness.	0.756				
	enthusiasm.	0.742				
	fascination.	0.697				
	inspiration.	0.669				
	surprise.	0.789				
	astonishment.	0.637				
	amazement.	0.693				
Negative emotions	During my visit I felt...					
	frustration.	0.817	1.50	0.94	0.93	0.63
	anger.	0.895				
	irritation.	0.844				
	depression.	0.710				
	sadness.	0.833				
	misery.	0.818				
	fear.	0.708				
	panic.	0.720				
		0.628				
Perceived Quality	Reached the national park without difficulty.	0.628	3.87	0.88	0.86	0.51
	The national park is generally clean.	0.712				
	Variety of historical and cultural landmarks within the national park.	0.822				
	Accommodations' quality.	0.655				
	The kindness of the locals.	0.693				
	Rest areas within the national parks.	0.765				
Satisfaction	Overall, I had a better experience than I had anticipated with Serbia's national parks.	0.672	3.88	0.84	0.79	0.56
	Traveling to Serbia's national parks was a fantastic experience.	0.789				
	Serbia's national parks rank among my all-time favourite travel spots.	0.775				
Destination Loyalty	I would advise others to go to Serbia's national parks.	0.812	4.35	0.93	0.86	0.67
	In the future, I plan to visit national parks in Serbia.	0.822				
	I'll talk positively about Serbia's national parks.	0.823				
Destination image	Environment of national park is safe and secure.	0.844	3.68	0.93	0.95	0.50
	Environment of national park is clean and tidy.	0.649				
	Local people at the national park are kind and friendly.	0.641				
	Beautiful valleys and mountains.	0.693				
	Magnificent landscapes and natural wonders.	0.779				
	Gorgeous parks/lakes/rivers.	0.814				
	Pristine wilderness and intriguing fauna.	0.682				
	Wonderful caves and subterranean structures.	0.714				
	Broad range of restaurants/cuisine.	0.652				
	Broad range of shop facilities.	0.689				
	A large selection of lodging options.	0.722				
	The location is very accessible.	0.657				
	Parking spaces are available in the downtown area.	0.663				
	Thrilling water sports and activities (fishing, boating, etc.).	0.642				
	Excellent locations for hiking/picnicking/camping/hunting.	0.708				
	Many possibilities for outdoor leisure.	0.622				
	Affordable rates for lodging and meals.	0.742				
	Excellent financial value.	0.763				
	Affordable costs for activities and attractions.	0.740				

The 48-item model's concepts all have adequate internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 4. *Discriminant Validity*

Research elements	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Positive emotions	0.714					
Negative emotions	-0.377	0.794				
Perceived quality	0.577	-0.442	0.714			
Satisfaction	0.625	-0.382	0.548	0.748		
Destination loyalty	0.492	-0.390	0.517	0.714	0.818	
Destination image	0.632	-0.306	0.685	0.662	0.484	0.707

* the diagonal elements, which are the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE); the off-diagonal elements indicate the correlations between different constructs.

The assessment of discriminant validity was conducted by comparing the correlation estimates between latent constructs with the squared AVE values for each latent variable, as presented in Table 4. This method aligns with the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which suggests that discriminant validity is established when the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than its highest correlation with any other construct.

According to Hamid *et al.* (2017) and Rönkkö & Cho (2022) an AVE value exceeding 0.50 indicates adequate convergent validity, and when the square root of the AVE surpasses the correlation values, discriminant validity is confirmed.

4.3. Assessing the hypotheses

The path model was conducted to test the suggested hypotheses of the study (Table 5). Covariance analysis was conducted between the independent constructs (positive emotions, negative emotions, perceived quality and destination image) and the dependent constructs - tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty, between the independent construct destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction like a dependent construct (see Figure 1).

Table 5. *The covariance-based hypotheses test's results*

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standardized path coefficient	Std. Error	C.R.(t)	The state of the hypothesis
H1	Positive emotions - tourist satisfaction	0.384	0.035	11.052***	Supported
H2	Negative emotions - tourist satisfaction	-0.295	0.043	-6.875***	Supported
H3	Positive emotions - destination loyalty	0.314	0.033	9.570***	Supported
H4	Negative emotions - destination loyalty	-0.273	0.042	-6.540***	Supported
H5	Tourist satisfaction - destination loyalty	0.570	0.044	13.065***	Supported
H6	Perceived quality - tourist satisfaction	0.403	0.039	10.315***	Supported
H7	Perceived quality - destination loyalty	0.359	0.037	9.821***	Supported
H8	Destination image - tourist satisfaction	0.426	0.036	11.847***	Supported
H9	Destination image - destination loyalty	0.294	0.031	9.342***	Supported

Note: ***p < 0.001

Table 5 illustrates that all nine hypotheses were supported, with the correlations identified in the research model being both significant and positive at a 99.9% confidence level (p -value = 0.001). Specifically, the study found that the examined constructs—positive emotions, perceived quality, and destination image—positively influenced destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction, confirming hypotheses H1, H3, and H6 through H9. Conversely, hypotheses H2 and H4, which posited that negative emotions adversely affect destination loyalty and satisfaction, were also validated. Additionally, hypothesis H5, suggesting that tourist satisfaction impacts destination loyalty, was confirmed.

Overall, the results provide empirical support for the proposed relationships in the research model, offering valuable insights for destination marketers and policymakers aiming to enhance tourist experiences and foster loyalty.

4.4. Correlation analysis, Independent Samples T-test and ANOVA test

To examine the relationships between sociodemographic characteristics and various tourism-related factors—including positive and negative emotions, destination loyalty, destination image, perceived quality, and tourist satisfaction—correlation analysis, Independent Samples T-tests, and ANOVA tests were conducted, as detailed in Table 6.

The analysis revealed a weak negative correlation between age and both perceived quality (Pearson correlation coefficient = -0.093; $p < 0.05$) and destination image (Pearson correlation coefficient = -0.096; $p < 0.05$). This suggests that younger travelers tend to have a less favourable perception of both the quality and image of the destination.

Table 6. *Independent Samples T-test and ANOVA test*

Independent Samples T-test				ANOVA test Level of employment		
Factors		Male	Female	Factors	F-value	LSD post-hoc test
Positive emotions	Mean	3.97	4.15	Positive emotions	12.702*	1,2,4>3
	F	1.337		Negative emotions	2.821*	2>1
	p	0.248		Destination image	10.123*	1,2>3,4
Negative emotions	Mean	1.66	1.46	Perceived quality	3.266*	1,2>3
	F	10.154		Tourist satisfaction	4.877*	1,2>3
	p	0.002*		Destination loyalty	2.796*	4>1,2,3
Destination image	Mean	3.78	3.66	Education		
	F	0.379		Positive emotions	25.066*	3>1,2
	p	0.539		Negative emotions	2.174	/
Perceived quality	Mean	3.56	3.94	Destination image	12.002*	3>1,2
	F	4.748		Perceived quality	19.316*	3>1,2
	p	0.030*		Tourist satisfaction	23.062*	3>1,2
Tourist satisfaction	Mean	3.54	3.96	Destination loyalty	14.980*	3>1,2
	F	7.689		Level of employment: (1) student; (2) employed; (3) unemployed; (4) retired		
	p	0.006*				
Destination loyalty	Mean	3.99	4.44	Education: (1) high school; (2) bachelor's degree; (3) master's degree/PhD degree		
	F	21.055				
		p	0.000**			

* $p < 0.05$ level of significance; ** $p < 0.01$ level of significance

The findings indicate that male visitors have slightly more negative emotions than female visitors. On the other hand, female tourists visiting Serbia's NPs have a more favourable opinion toward perceived quality, and they also tend to be more satisfied and loyal. Visitors with higher levels of education are

more likely to have positive emotions and favourable perceptions of quality and image. They are more satisfied with and loyal to the destination. Retired visitors showed less positive emotions in NPs than others (employed, students and unemployed), but they are the most loyal to NPs. At the same time, employed visitors have more negative emotions than students. Employed tourists and students have more favourable perceptions of quality and image and are also more satisfied. ANOVA test was applied to test differences between NPs. No significant differences between NPs have been determined.

5. Discussion

Tourist satisfaction is essential for destination success, as satisfied visitors tend to stay longer, return, and spend more, boosting competitiveness through positive reviews (Sukiman *et al.*, 2013). This study explored how emotions, destination image, and perceived quality influence destination loyalty and satisfaction in NPs. Results confirmed that these factors significantly impact loyalty and satisfaction, while demographic factors affect tourists' emotional responses and perceptions. The data support all hypotheses, reinforcing the study's theoretical framework and contributing to understanding tourist behaviour.

NPs are essential tourist destinations, protecting natural resources while offering physical and mental health benefits. Research confirms that visiting NPs creates positive emotional experiences (Al-Msallam, 2020; Quinh *et al.*, 2020). Satisfied visitors are more likely to return and speak positively about their experience (hypotheses 1 and 3 supported), aligning with previous studies (Al-Msallam, 2020; Hashemi *et al.*, 2023). However, negative emotions can harm attachment, satisfaction, and loyalty, discouraging future visits (hypotheses 2 and 4 supported). This was confirmed by Al-Msallam (2020) in a study on Switzerland. In Serbian parks, positive emotions (mean 4.11) are more prevalent than negative ones (mean 1.50), leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty. Negative feelings such as anger and frustration are rare. There appear to be relatively few dissatisfied tourists in Serbian national parks. However, since the convenience sample was used, this finding may not fully reflect the broader population of park visitors. The study places a strong emphasis on how emotions function as predictors of destination loyalty and satisfaction. The study advances knowledge about the emotions that NPs evoke in visitors and examines the ways in which both positive and negative emotions influence tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. According to research on tourism, a key consideration when selecting a destination is the tourists' level of satisfaction; if they had a positive experience, they are more prone to visit again or recommend the place to others (Amrollahi Biuki & Nazari Dehaghi, 2015; Tapak *et al.*, 2019). The majority of respondents stated that they were satisfied with their experiences in the NPs of Serbia, with an average satisfaction score of 3.88. However, because the sample was based on convenience and may not be fully representative, these results may not apply to all park visitors. Most say the whole trip was better than they had anticipated and that it was a beautiful experience. The present study's results supported the hypothesis that destination loyalty and satisfaction are positively correlated in NPs (H5 confirmed). This aligns with other research findings (Al-Msallam, 2020; Chi & Qu, 2008; Hung *et al.*, 2021; Jeong & Kim, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2008; Liu *et al.*, 2017) that assert that visitor satisfaction is a powerful indicator of whether or not they will return and promote the location to others. While earlier studies have looked at visitor loyalty and happiness in a variety of settings, this study focuses on these elements in the context of Serbian NPs. This emphasis offers distinctive perspectives on the elements affecting tourists' behaviour in these pristine environments.

Many researchers (Aliman *et al.*, 2016; Han *et al.*, 2021; Žabkar *et al.*, 2010) agree that perceived quality significantly influences tourist satisfaction. Most visitors to Serbian NPs report a high perception of quality (mean 3.87), including easy access, excellent lodging, and friendly locals, which are key to satisfaction. As Žabkar *et al.* (2010) noted, aspects like cleanliness and quality accommodations directly impact satisfaction. This study confirmed that perceived quality enhances both satisfaction and loyalty (H6-H7 supported), consistent with previous research (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2023; Jeong & Kim, 2020;

Meeprom & Silanoi, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2017). Earlier studies (Crompton, 1979; Dichter, 1985; Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Nguyen Viet *et al.*, 2020) show that travelers' perceptions influence destination choice, experience evaluation, and future plans. Serbian NPs are perceived as safe, scenic, friendly, and affordable, enhancing their destination image (mean 3.68). The positive relationship between destination image, satisfaction, and loyalty has been confirmed by several studies (Assaker *et al.*, 2001; Jebbouri *et al.*, 2022; Viana *et al.*, 2021). This study demonstrated that destination image positively correlates with satisfaction and loyalty, with image influencing both (H8-H9 confirmed). Destination loyalty had the highest mean value (4.35), showing strong domestic loyalty to Serbian NPs, with high chances of revisits and positive word-of-mouth. Emotions, satisfaction, destination image, and perceived quality were confirmed as key drivers of loyalty. The study also highlighted how demographics influence perceptions: female visitors had more positive perceptions and were more satisfied and loyal, while younger travelers had poorer perceptions of quality and image. Higher-educated visitors showed positive emotions and greater satisfaction. Retirees, while loyal, displayed fewer positive emotions, and employed visitors experienced more negative emotions compared to students. The findings (H10-H13 confirmed) underline the significant role of gender, age, education, and employment in shaping destination perceptions and behaviour, offering insights for targeted marketing and management strategies. In conclusion, positive experiences in NPs generate emotions like joy and happiness, leading to tourist satisfaction and a desire to revisit and recommend the destination. The emotional connection formed encourages return visits and positive word-of-mouth. Additionally, demographic characteristics influence visitors' feelings about a destination. These findings provide insights into tourist satisfaction and loyalty, highlighting that satisfied tourists are more likely to return and recommend the parks. The results are valuable for tourism stakeholders and park management, allowing them to tailor services to meet visitor expectations and enhance the overall experience.

6. Conclusion

This research utilized national parks (NPs) as a case study to enhance the understanding of destination loyalty and tourist satisfaction, along with their antecedents. The study validated the proposed framework's effectiveness in capturing the relationships among satisfaction, loyalty, and their antecedents, including emotions, destination image, and perceived quality. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which emphasizes the role of visitor satisfaction and place attachment in fostering destination loyalty within national park settings. These routes highlight the importance of investigating antecedents of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty, helping marketers and managers of NPs in the creation and improvement of NPs experience, and creating satisfied tourists who will happily come back. Overall, by analyzing these phenomena in the particular setting of Serbian NPs and pinpointing the precise elements that affect visitor behaviour in these settings, the study contributes to the body of knowledge on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. The impact of socio-demographic characteristics was also supported by the study. The study's results provided evidence in favour of the notion that tourists whose experience is positive, quality perceived and have a positive destination image will be satisfied with the overall experience and gladly come back to NPs. These findings offer a new light on loyalty and satisfaction in NPs as tourist destinations as tourists have a higher intention of returning and recommending when they are happy. This can help managers learn how to improve and what to focus on to keep them satisfied or to improve their experience.

When the experience is positive, there are positive and beautiful emotions such as joy, happiness and naturally tourists will be satisfied and want to visit the destination again. If they rate the product positively and are satisfied with aspects of the NP's management and the employees, they will be satisfied and loyal. If they think that the destination is accessible, attractive, with lots of activities, they will be satisfied and happy to return. Certain demographic characteristics such as gender, education,

age and employment status can influence how they view the products in the destination and the destination. These differences were found in the present study.

Based on the results, tourists of NPs in Serbia have a high opinion of the destination and its products. NPs and activities in them, products and services evoke more positive emotions than negative ones, and this is reflected in their loyalty and satisfaction. That leads to the conclusion that there are not so many dissatisfied tourists in NPs located in Serbia, but NP management and tour operators should be aware of possible unpleasant emotions that can occur. Lastly, the study's findings will broaden the body of knowledge regarding destination loyalty and visitor satisfaction within the framework of tourism, especially NP tourism. This research contributes to a deeper comprehension of emotions in NPs and how they affect destination loyalty and visitor satisfaction.

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations may be made to raise the probability that Serbia's NPs can successfully strengthen and improve their relationship with tourists. One of the primary objectives of the current research was to develop a solid model that can explain how various elements affect satisfaction or dissatisfaction levels and destination loyalty. Three significant factors are identified to determine destination loyalty and satisfaction: perceived quality, destination image and emotions (both positive and negative). To improve the service process, NP managers are recommended to take an active creative approach. Tourists will have an interesting and thrilling experience as a result, which will increase their satisfaction and devotion to the destination. Even though domestic tourists are now satisfied with Serbian NPs, this does not guarantee that they will remain satisfied and loyal. The management of NPs and tourism marketers should always strive to enhance the experiences and services provided to visitors. Additionally, destination management must recognize the significance of contemporary technology and take a more active part in promoting NPs. Nonetheless, in order to strengthen and improve a favourable perception in the eyes of travelers, destination managers had to make greater use of social media networking platforms. They may concentrate on posting fascinating narratives about NPs, eliciting pleasant feelings from visitors. Additionally, one way to personalize services and leave a pleasant impression on tourists is to consider their comments. This will increase the number of positive reviews, improve the destination's image and attract new visitors. To put it briefly, in order to promote their destination extensively, NPs and tourism operators must stay up to date with emerging technological developments. In this manner, NPs tourists will remain satisfied and devoted.

The current study has various limitations that are applicable in future research. First, foreign visitors' opinions were not included; only the opinions of domestic guests were solicited. Foreign visitors, which are increasingly important in Serbia, have been ignored. They should be included in further research to see what emotions are awakened while visiting NPs and what factors influence their loyalty and satisfaction. Furthermore, future research could include additional moderator variables like destination attributes and memorable (unforgettable) tourism experience. Thirdly, it's necessary to remember that the current study only included two indicators-joy and positive surprise - that were representative of positive emotions. As a result, it is suggested to add more indicators - like love and pleasure - to future research to gain a deeper knowledge of the characteristics of positive emotions. Additionally, the tourists' experience as positive and negative emotions in this study is not on-site (an online questionnaire was used) and may not be accurate memory, which could be a limitation of the study. This should be taken into account in future studies. In addition, questions regarding the frequency of visits should be included in the questionnaire. Furthermore, it is essential to have a deeper comprehension of negative emotions. Interviewing the visitors would be a great way to learn what triggers their negative feelings. In addition, some conclusions should be interpreted with the caution that a convenience sampling method was used, so the findings may not fully reflect the broader

population of park visitors. Lastly, this model should be applied to additional tourist destinations and cultural settings in future research.

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