

UNDERSTANDING TOURIST MOTIVATION: A REVIEW OF LEADING MODELS

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Abstract

Tourist motivation is a critical aspect of tourism research, providing valuable insights into why people travel and what influences their destination choices. This article aims to provide a systematic review of the leading models used to understand tourist motivation, examining both psychological and external factors that drive tourist behaviours. Key frameworks such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Push-Pull Theory, and Iso-Ahola's Motivation-Relaxation Model are explored to highlight the various intrinsic and extrinsic forces that motivate tourists. Additionally, models like Plog's Psychographic Typology and the Travel Career Ladder offer valuable perspectives on how travel motivations evolve with experience and personality traits. By synthesizing these diverse models, the review not only provides a broad understanding of tourist motivation but also underscores the complexity and multidimensional nature of travel behaviour. Understanding these models is essential for tourism practitioners, as it enables more targeted marketing strategies, improved destination management, and enhanced visitor satisfaction. This article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the motivations that shape tourism trends and to offer a framework for future research in the field.

Keywords: model, systematic review, tourist motivation, tourist behaviour

1. Introduction

In the context of studies on tourist behaviour, motivation stands out as one of the nine key concepts that consistently receives significant attention from tourism scholars (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2013). Understanding tourist motivation is crucial because it helps explain why people travel and what drives them to choose specific destinations or experiences. The quest to understand this question was first posed by Lundeberg, who, in 1972, asked, "Why do tourists travel?" His research identified 18 motivational factors from a socio-psychological perspective, providing early insights into why people take vacations (Lundberg, 1972). Despite the extensive research into this topic, scholars continue to grapple with the complexities of tourist motivation (Cohen et al., 2013; Huang, 2010; Moufakkir & AlSaleh, 2017).

One of the challenges of studying tourist motivation is that it is inherently complex and dynamic. Motivation is a psychological aspect that varies widely among individuals. Crompton (1979) argues that understanding why people travel is more difficult than merely describing when, where, what, and how they travel. Tourists' motivations are shaped by a variety of factors, including personal preferences, socio-economic status, and cultural influences, making it difficult to pinpoint a universal set of motivations. Additionally, motivation is not static and may change over time or across different life stages, making it even more challenging to study in a comprehensive way.

Furthermore, motivation varies not only on an individual level but also between different nationalities and cultural groups. Research has shown that tourists from different countries have distinct motivations for traveling. For example, Hanqin & Lam (1999) suggest that "the motivation dimensions may be unique to tourists from different countries," underscoring how national and cultural backgrounds influence travel behaviour. Previous studies have indicated significant differences in the motivations of tourists from countries like the UK and Japan, illustrating how cultural context can shape travel preferences. Moreover, motivation can also differ based on the type of destination or tourism activity. Studies have highlighted how motivations for rural tourism (Park & Yoon, 2009) differ from those for adventure tourism (Fluker & Turner, 2000), showing how specific types of tourism cater to distinct sets of motivations and expectations.

A particularly noteworthy challenge in studying tourist motivation is the reluctance or inability of tourists to fully articulate their real motives for traveling. Dann (1981) and Hsu & Huang (2007) have pointed out that tourists often have difficulty expressing their underlying motivations, as they may not be fully aware of them or may not feel comfortable disclosing them. This gap between what tourists consciously believe motivates them and their actual motivations can make research on this topic especially difficult. As a result, scholars must carefully consider these complexities when researching tourist motivation, recognizing that motivations are not always clearly defined or easily communicated by the tourists themselves.

Given the dynamic nature of motivation, the variety of influencing factors, and the challenges in accurately capturing tourists' true motivations, this topic continues to be a relevant and evolving area of research in tourism studies. Understanding tourist motivation is essential for tourism marketers, destination managers, and policymakers to create better-targeted strategies that meet the needs and desires of diverse tourist groups. Thus, this article provides a comprehensive synthesis of the various models used to study tourist motivation. By reviewing and comparing key motivation models, this research helps to clarify the complex and multi-dimensional nature of tourist motivations, offering valuable insights into the psychological, cultural, and situational factors that drive travel decisions. Additionally, by addressing the challenges in studying tourist motivation, this research contributes to refining future research methodologies and advancing the field of tourism studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourist behaviour

Consumer behaviour is "the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of goods, services, time, and ideas by decision-making units" (Jacoby, 1976). It reflects how a consumer

acquires, uses, or disposes of an offering at a point in time. After receiving an offering, the consumer may decide to use it or dispose of it. Therefore, consumer behaviour relates to many decisions. According to Solomon et al. (2019), "Consumer behaviour is the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires." This definition suggests treating the consumer behaviour study as a process, not only on the moment that a product or service is in the hand of the individual for use or consumption.

Consumer behaviour is an interesting but complicated topic, particularly in tourism (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Moutinho (1987) indicates the differences between consumer behaviour in tourism and consumer behaviour in other aspects. Firstly, tourist consumption is an investment with no tangible rate of return. The definition of tourism can explain this characteristic since tourism is an activity non-lucrative. An individual who takes a trip away from home may seek primarily for his intangible satisfaction (e.g., leisure, relaxation, knowledge, etc.) and may not expect any economic return on this purchase. Secondly, it may take considerable time to finalise the purchase through preparing, planning, and saving to buy.

In most cases, tourism consumers usually need time to make buying decisions. Because tourism is a leisure activity, the consumer only buys tourism products when they have free and disposable income. And even when people have money and free time, learning about the destination takes time before deciding. People tend to search and prepare for what they can visit, enjoy, and experience at a destination a few months before booking a tour or service. Another reason is that their decision-making process is possibly affected by many internal and external influences and motivators (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Admittedly, studying what these significant factors are, when and how they influence tourist choice is sophisticated and complicated (Moutinho, 2000).

Study on consumer behaviour is one of the critical research areas in marketing and tourism, with "tourist behaviour" or "travel behaviour" as equivalent terms (Cohen et al., 2014). Tourists behave more sophisticatedly during their vacation. Thus, research on tourist behaviour obviously must continue more sophisticatedly to explain it.

2.2. Tourist motivation

The term motivation is applied in tourism, namely tourist motivation or travel motivation. Social and personal factors of needs determine tourist motivation; tourists usually have multiple motives based on their expectations of purchase values (Moutinho, 1987). The conceptualization of tourist motivation is explored by sociologists, psychologists, practitioners, and marketers with a long history (Hsu & Huang, 2007). Lundberg (1972) was the earliest scholar who raised the question "Why do tourists travel?" to examine motivations for traveling. The author provides a list of the most important reasons for a person to take a trip, including 18 motivational factors using sociological and psychological perspectives. It is widely known that many intrinsic and extrinsic aspects influence tourist motivation. The topic still attracts significant attention from tourism scholars. Global citizens have experienced numerous changes in the twenty-first century, especially the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. After going through the worldwide health panic, everyday life has changed, which induces changes in human behaviour. It turns the new era on studying tourist behaviour and tourist motivation.

From the outset, tourist motivation research focuses on measuring the psychological dimensions of motivation (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977; Iso-Ahola, 1982). Regarding

the complexity of psychological constructs in leisure and tourist motivation, quantitative and qualitative approaches have been used to deal with motivation in tourism literature. In quantitative methodology, dimensions of tourist motivation are measured via a questionnaire with a set of predetermined motivation items. The quantitative approach is widely used in tourist motivation research which conveys a list of motivational factors found in tourism literature into a questionnaire (Beard & Ragheb, 1983; Fodness, 1994; Pearce & Lee, 2005; Ryan & Glendon, 1998). Evidently, it should be considered the importance of the questionnaire in this case because the validity of the research is entirely guaranteed based on the predetermined items of motivation listed in the survey. In the context of the qualitative approach, the research methodology adopted unstructured or semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to explore tourist motivation dimensions. Tourism scholars might refer to this method to investigate and generate awareness of tourist motivation based on responders' perspectives and to release the subjective lens of the researcher (Crompton, 1979; Klenosky, 2002; Li et al., 2016; Osman et al., 2020; Prayag & Ryan, 2011). Nevertheless, since tourists are unable and unwilling to express their real motives for traveling (Dann, 1981; Lundberg, 1972), the qualitative approach based on interviews may be limited by the difficulties of responders in answering the questions.

Several early theories and models of tourist motivation have been developed, including Pull and Push motivation (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977), Escape-seeking (Iso-Ahola, 1982), and Leisure Motivation Scale (Beard & Ragheb, 1983). Besides, since tourist motivation is included in human motivation, tourism scholars have applied Maslow's (1943) Hierarchical Needs and Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) to explore the motivation for traveling. In the review paper on consumer behaviour in tourism during 2000-2012, Cohen et al. (2014) found that even though these earliest models and theories have been tested and extended, the outset of these pioneering works remains their validity and applicability.

3. Methods

To carry out this study, previous research in the field of tourist motivation is synthesized and analysed systematically. The selected articles related to tourist behaviour, motivation, and key models of tourist motivation were chosen from reliable academic journals. These published articles from professional journals were prioritized to ensure the quality and reliability of the content. The selected articles were then analysed according to the guidelines of content analysis, which is a key tool for understanding the concept of tourist motivation, the benefits of understanding tourist motivations, and the various approaches to measuring them. The researchers synthesized the perspectives of scholars and tourism experts to identify the key strengths and weaknesses of each model. The findings of this analysis aim to provide an overview of the leading models of tourist motivation and how they have been applied in academic research.

4. Results: Key models of tourist motivation

4.1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Need

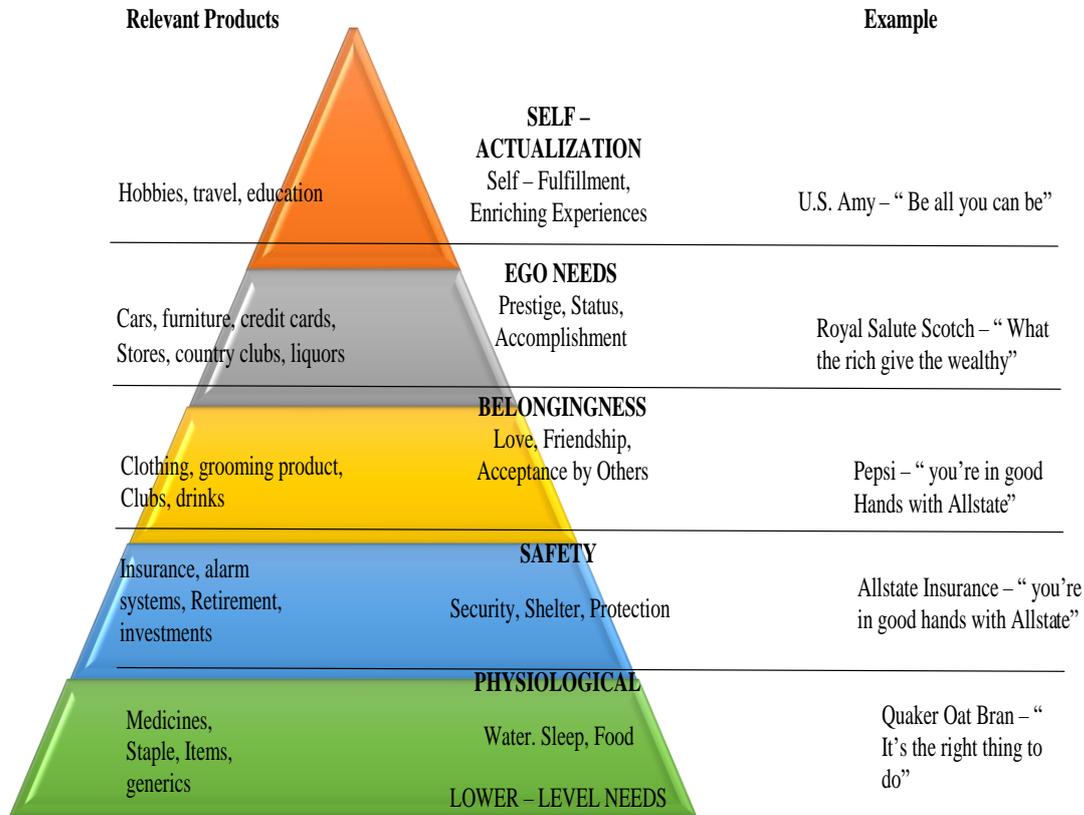


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierachy of Need (1943)

Maslow (1943) suggests that an individual's behaviour is targeted to satisfy their needs. There is a set of needs that range hierarchically. Figure 1 illustrates the Maslow's Hierachy of needs in a pyramid. In this pyramid, basic physiological needs build the bottom. The next level is safety needs, love, and belonging, esteem and self-actualization build up the following levels of the pyramid. Only when the needs in lower are satisfied the next level is activated.

First, physiological needs such as food, air, water, shelter, rest, and sex are the basic demands of our bodies to live and survive. Commonly, these needs are acknowledged as the priority before other demands are operated. However, some scholars have argued that addiction can urge people to ignore these basic needs. Second, safety needs indicate safety in its broadest sense encompassing both physiological and psychological angles. The third level of the need pyramid is love and belonging. The needs at this level reflect the feelings of belonging, which can result in depression and loneliness if absent. The fourth level is esteem. The level refers to the need to evaluate themselves and be positively evaluated by others. Esteem helps an individual to feel self-confident and capable, while the absence of esteem makes people feel helpless. The top of the pyramid is self-actualization. When people are at this level, all their needs are fulfilled. At this stage, people look forwards to ultimate values such as beauty, justice, and unity.

Although Maslow's hierarchy needs have received wide criticism from scholars, it is acknowledged as one of the most influential models for explaining and understanding consumer behaviour. The terms in his need pyramid have been used in hospitality marketing targeting tourists' specific needs with particular activities and tourism products.

4.2. Iso-Ahola's escape-seeking

The Escaping-Seeking framework is a conceptual model used to explain tourist motivations, developed from leisure motivation studies (Hsu & Huang, 2008; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987) propose a two-dimensional model to describe an individual's tourism and leisure experiences. According to this model, individuals are influenced by two primary motivations: escaping from daily routines and stress or seeking rewarding recreational experiences. These motivations can also be influenced by personal and interpersonal factors. For example, a person's motivations may range from escaping personal environments to seeking personal rewards, and from escaping interpersonal environments to seeking interpersonal rewards.

The Escaping-Seeking framework closely mirrors the Approach-Avoidance motivation model (Elliot, 2006; Elliot & Thrash, 2002), where behavior is influenced by the desire for positive, desirable experiences and the avoidance of negative, undesirable experiences. An individual's tendency to seek or escape through tourism often depends on their current level of stimulation or arousal in daily life. The concept of optimal arousal is central to understanding tourist motivation (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). For instance, if an individual faces overstimulating life situations, they may seek to escape by taking a vacation. Conversely, if their environment is under-stimulating, they may seek excitement through travel. Ultimately, people travel to either increase stimulation when their daily life feels dull or reduce overstimulation to achieve an optimal arousal level.

The Escaping-Seeking framework is also connected to fundamental socio-psychological motives and other experience-related constructs such as flow, peak experiences, and personality traits. These connections present valuable research opportunities for understanding tourist motivation and experience. However, despite its theoretical potential, the development and application of the Escaping-Seeking framework in tourism research have been limited and largely underexplored.

4.3. Push and Pull Motivation Theory

The push and pull theory of tourist motivation, widely accepted in tourism studies, explores why people travel and why they choose specific destinations (Azmi & Marzuki, 2015). This theory has been applied across various niche markets, including rural tourism (Park & Yoon, 2009), golf tourism (Kim & Ritchie, 2012), backpacker tourism (Chen et al., 2014), cultural tourism (Chen & Huang, 2018), and coastal tourism (Carvache-Franco et al., 2020). According to Michael et al. (2017), push and pull motivations offer insights into travel behavior, decision-making, and preferences for tourist activities or experiences. Push motivation explains why people leave home, while pull motivation describes why they choose a particular destination (Crompton, 1979; Khuong & Ha, 2014).

Crompton (1979) suggests that people travel due to internal needs, influenced by socio-psychological factors, and external attraction factors tied to destination attributes. These internal needs are aligned with Maslow's (1943) theory of needs, where human behavior—including tourist behavior—seeks to satisfy biological, social, ego, and self-actualization needs.

Iso-Ahola (1982) developed the "escape-seeking" model, which highlights that both escaping and seeking are crucial to tourist motivation. Escape is a push factor, where people seek to break free from their everyday life, while seeking represents the desire for personal rewards like relaxation or learning. These motives are interrelated and include both psychological (personal) and social (interpersonal) aspects. Iso-Ahola's model proposes four motivational dimensions: personal seeking, personal escape, interpersonal seeking, and interpersonal escape.

Uysal & Jurowski (1994) distinguish between push factors, which drive intrinsic desires like escape or relaxation, and pull factors, which relate to extrinsic desires such as destination attributes. Push factors include desires for rest, relaxation, prestige, health, and social interaction. Pull factors are destination attributes like natural and cultural resources, recreation facilities, and accessibility, which attract tourists to specific locations (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Jang & Cai, 2002). Push factors reflect socio-psychological needs, while pull factors highlight the external qualities of destinations that influence tourists' choices.

4.4. Plog's Model of Psychocentric/Allocentric

Plog (1974) has introduced his psychographic model typology of tourist for the first time in the journal titled "Why destinations rise and fall in popularity". Then, he has extended and revised the model many times in his later publications (Plog, 2001, 2004). The main purpose of the study is to understand the motivation of non-flyers/flyers and to recommend to the airlines how to broad their market by turn more non-flyers into flyers. The research is carried out both in qualitative and quantitative methods and used the sample of 1,600 home surveys in American. The results classify traveller types following personality-based traits which are described along continuum ranging from allocentric on the right to near-allocentric, mid-centric, near-psychocentric and finally psychocentric on the other end. Plog explains the word "allocentric" comes from the root word "allo" meaning varied in form and "centric" meaning as a focusing of one interest pattern on varied activities. Allocentrics are adventurous people who feel confident in their choice, pleased to face the risk. Conversely, psychocentrics are self-conscious people who think strongly about their safety and prefer the familiar things and choices, the psychocentric word is constructed on the word "psyche" meaning self and "centric" meaning the centring of one's thought or concern on the small problem in one's life. In the middle of the continuum place, mid-centrics prefers the tourists who have both psychographic traits. Plog (1974) states that the majority of participants in his research are allocated as mid-centrics, however, some bended to the psychocentric side calling near-psychocentric and the other disposed on the other spectrum namely near-allocentric. In his latest research, Plog has conveyed his psychographic model to venturesomeness model, the term "psychocentric" to "dependable" and "allocentric" to "venturer".

Plog (1991 as cited in Griffith & Albanese (1996)) summarizes his 28 instruments of personality characteristics into three main group including territory boundedness, generalized anxieties, and a sense of powerlessness. Over 45 years, international scholars have applied mainly the Plog's psychographic model to examine psychographic typology and motivation or to test the model's ability to predict destination choice or to focus on destination lifecycle. Mohamed (2005), Kim et al. (2019) have been strongly affirmed that the allocentric/ psychocentric characteristics are an effective tool to understand and predict tourist behaviour. However, Plog has received a considerable critique from Smith (1990a, 1990b) who concluded the failing to test Plog's psychographic model.

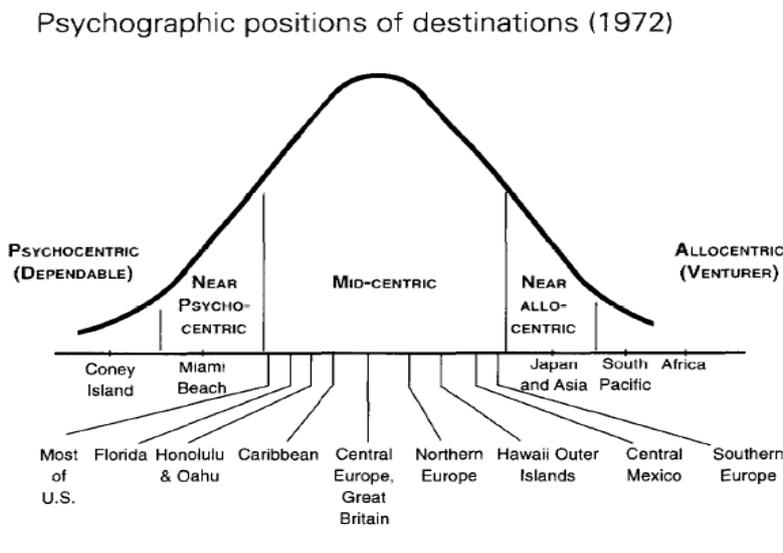


Figure 2. Plog’s Psychographic model

4.5. Travel Planned Behaviour

Ajzen proposed Travel Planned Behaviour (TPB) in 1985 based on the Reasoned Theory (Ajzen, 1985). The original Theory of Reasoned Action suggests that an individual's intention is under control rather than voluntary. TPB was enhanced from the predictability of the actual Theory of Reasoned Action by adding perceived behavioural control. There are five components in TPB: attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, behaviour intention, and actual behaviour, representing an individual's power towards the behaviour. The TPB asserts that the behavioural result depends on the intention and behavioural control. It verifies three principal beliefs: behavioural, normative, and control. TPB predicts an individual's intention at a specific destination at a particular time. The theory is also efficiently used to predict different behaviours and intentions of politicians (Flynn et al., 1998) and relate health such as smoking, drinking, or healthcare services consumption (Godin & Kok, 1996).

Despite existing over a few decades and proving behavioural predictability, TPB is assumed to need more enhancement in several facets. To verify, the meta-analyses of the TPB indicate that intention and perceived behaviour control make up 34% of overall behaviour (Godin & Kok, 1996). According to Maisarah & Salmi (2015), TPB does not always show the achievement of the behaviour results in intention. The scholar also states the theory still needs further empirical testing.

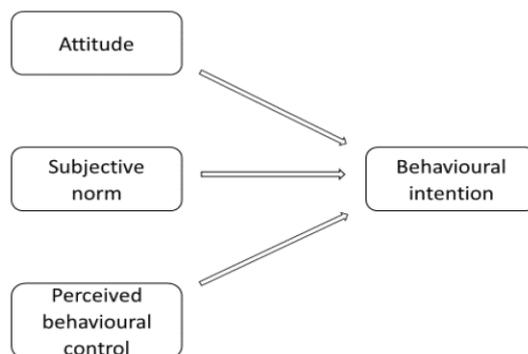


Figure 3. Travel Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985)

4.6. The Travel Career Ladder (TCL) and Travel Career Pattern (TCP) models

Pearce and his colleagues made significant contributions to the theoretical exploration of tourist motivations (e.g., Moscardo & Pearce, 1986; Pearce, 1982, 1988; Pearce & Caltabiano, 1983; Pearce & Lee, 2005). Building on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, Pearce (1982) conducted research based on travel narratives from over 200 tourists. He found that higher-level needs like self-actualization were more commonly reported in positive experiences (35%) compared to negative experiences (1%). This led to the development of the Travel Career Ladder (TCL) model, which posits that individuals with more travel experience tend to have motivations that align with higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy, such as love, belongingness, and self-actualization.

However, according to Ryan (1998), the TCL model is difficult to validate empirically. Pearce and his colleagues then developed the Travel Career Pattern (TCP) model (Pearce & Lee, 2005), which builds on empirical data without strictly following Maslow's hierarchy. The TCP model suggests that more experienced travelers are more motivated by factors like host-site involvement and nature-related factors, while less experienced travelers prioritize stimulation, personal development, relationships, self-actualization, nostalgia, romance, and recognition. Interestingly, both experienced and inexperienced travelers share core motivations, including escape, relaxation, relationship enhancement, and self-development.

While Pearce's contributions to tourism motivation are significant, the TCP model still lacks theoretical clarity and is more of a framework than a fully developed theory. Few studies have applied the TCP model, but notable examples include Paris and Teye (2010), who explored backpacker motivations, and Song and Bae (2018), who studied international students in Korea. Additionally, Wu et al. (2019) compared the travel life cycle to the TCP model and found that core travel motives do not vary across stages of the travel life cycle, supporting the TCP framework.

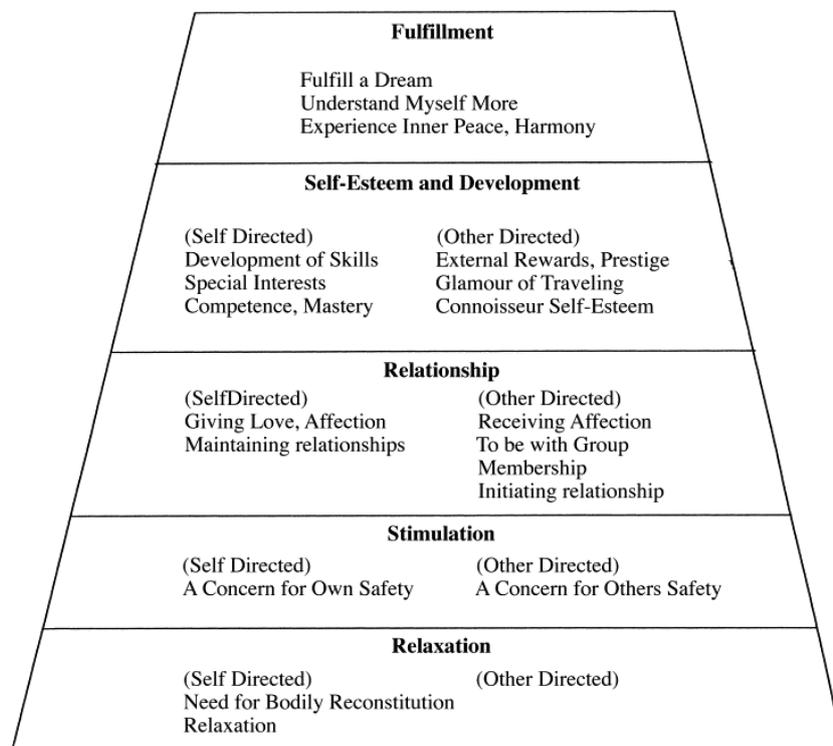


Figure 4. The Travel Career Ladder (Pearce, 1993)

5. Discussion

The review of key tourist motivation models highlights the diverse factors that influence travel behavior. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a foundational psychological perspective, suggesting that individuals travel to satisfy a range of needs, from basic survival to self-fulfillment. Despite criticism for its lack of empirical validation and cultural universality, the model remains influential in tourism marketing. It allows destination managers to tailor experiences that align with different motivational levels. For example, luxury resorts may appeal to esteem or self-actualization needs, while budget travel satisfies physiological and safety concerns. Overall, Maslow's theory offers a structured yet flexible framework for understanding consumer motivations.

The Iso-Ahola Escape-Seeking model offers a dynamic lens through which to view tourism as both an escape from daily life and a search for positive experiences. This duality reflects the emotional and psychological complexity of travel decisions. The model emphasizes the role of personal and interpersonal motivations, making it applicable across various travel contexts. It also introduces the concept of optimal arousal, suggesting that tourists seek a balanced level of stimulation. However, the limited application of the model in empirical research suggests that its potential is underutilized. Future studies could further explore how different types of travelers experience arousal and relaxation through tourism.

The Push and Pull Motivation Theory presents a balanced view of internal desires and external attractions. Push factors, such as the need to escape or gain prestige, explain why people leave home, while pull factors describe why they choose particular destinations. This model has been widely used in different tourism sectors due to its adaptability and practicality. It also aligns closely with Maslow's theory, as both emphasize needs-based motivations. The theory's strength lies in its ability to segment tourist markets and support destination branding. Nonetheless, the overlap between push and pull factors can sometimes make it difficult to distinguish the primary motivation.

Plog's Psychocentric-Allocentric Model adds a personality-based dimension to tourist motivation. It classifies travelers along a continuum from adventurous allocentrics to safety-seeking psychocentrics. This typology helps explain why certain individuals prefer remote, novel destinations while others seek comfort and familiarity. Despite its innovative approach, the model has been criticized for being difficult to test empirically. It also assumes that personality traits remain stable over time, which may not always hold true. However, it continues to offer useful insights into destination preferences and tourism trends.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) shifts focus to the cognitive processes behind tourist decisions. It suggests that attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control shape an individual's intention to travel. This theory has been effective in predicting travel behavior in various contexts, from health tourism to political travel. However, it only explains a portion of actual behavior, indicating that other variables may be at play. Emotions, past experiences, and spontaneous decisions can also significantly influence travel choices. While TPB remains a valuable tool, it may benefit from integration with affective or experiential components.

The Travel Career Ladder (TCL) and Travel Career Pattern (TCP) models recognize the evolving nature of tourist motivation. TCL proposes that motivations change with travel experience, moving from basic needs to more complex desires like self-actualization. TCP refines this idea by allowing for greater flexibility and empirical grounding. Both models highlight core motivations such as escape, relaxation, and relationship

enhancement, regardless of travel experience. Although TCP is less rigid than TCL, it still lacks a fully developed theoretical framework. Nevertheless, these models contribute to understanding how motivations shift over a tourist's life course.

6. Recommendations

The findings suggest that understanding tourist motivation requires a flexible, multi-model approach. Tourism marketers should segment audiences based on psychological needs, travel experience, and personality traits. For example, using Maslow's and Plog's models, destinations can design tailored experiences offering novelty and risk for allocentric tourists, and comfort and familiarity for psychocentric ones. Combining frameworks, such as Iso-Ahola's escape-seeking and the Theory of Planned Behavior, can help explain both emotional drives and perceived travel constraints. This integrated perspective supports better product development and communication strategies that address both internal desires and external influences. Additionally, motivations evolve with travel experience, as shown in the Travel Career Ladder and Pattern models. Tourism providers should offer varied experiences, from introductory to advanced, to engage travelers at different stages of their journey. Finally, more empirical studies are needed to update these models in light of changing trends such as digital media, sustainability, and post-pandemic behavior. Applying these models across different cultural and geographic contexts will enhance their practical relevance. Overall, aligning tourism offerings with diverse and evolving motivations is key to sustainable and satisfying travel experiences.

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