

## Experiences of love in diaspora tourism

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### ABSTRACT

The paper reports on a study which explored how a sense of love is experienced in diaspora tourist experiences. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the Sierra Leonean community in London, England, accessing feelings and meanings of the tourists. Following thematic analysis, it was revealed that the emotion of love manifested itself as a tourist motivator, as on-site experience emotion and as an outcome of the visiting experience. The paper adds to the body of knowledge on diaspora tourism and positive tourism, tourism and positive psychology. The article reveals the non-economic value of diaspora tourism with regards to developing countries.

### KEYWORDS

Tourist experiences;  
diaspora tourism; love,  
Sierra Leone

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### Introduction

Emotions are the foundations of tourists' experiences as they affect tourists' memories, attitudes and behaviours (Volo, 2017). Love is a basic human emotion (Shaver et al., 1996) yet it has been under examined in tourism (Singh, 2019). Research shows love is triggered at destinations by people, places and environments (Singh, 2019). In tourism, the concept of love has been linked to studies on motivations (Bauer & McKercher, 2003), sex (Berdychevsky et al., 2013) and emotional connections to destinations and brands (Swanson, 2017). This paper examines love in diaspora tourism. Specifically, the paper reports on a study that aimed to explore how a sense of love was experienced by diaspora tourists as they reflected on their tourist experiences, following their trips. Diaspora is defined as a population dispersing from an original homeland with a strong ethnic group consciousness (Vertovec, 2004). Diaspora tourists are those who travel to ancestral homelands to re-connect with their personal heritage (Li et al., 2019).

Research was carried out in collaboration with the Sierra Leonean immigrant community in London, England. No major tourism research had ever been conducted with this community. It is recognised diaspora tourism facilitates connections among significant people and the significant places (Duval, 2003). However, it is rather surprising that the literature on diaspora tourism has not more explicitly dealt with the theme of love. Few studies have closely examined the value of human relationships in diaspora tourism, albeit not with African diaspora communities. For example, Lee (2004) examined travel by second generation Tongans living abroad, suggesting that if support for their homeland is to be sustained in the long term they will need to develop a secure sense of belonging and deep care for their loved ones, something which can only be facilitated by regular travel to Tonga.

The paper first defines love based on conceptualisations from psychology, then presents an exploratory study using in-depth interviews to understand diaspora tourists' experiences of love. Following the discussion of the findings, it concludes with implications of research.

### Defining love

Love as a complex basic emotion is challenging to define. For Velleman (1999) love is an aspect of morality, while Nussbaum (2013) sees love as a vehicle for social justice. As such, love can serve as a tool to educate people about sustainability and a common good (Robin-Ramirez et al., 2020). The paper, however, adopts a more micro perspective – a psychological conception of love – based on similar works on tourist experiences (Filep & Matteucci, 2020). Fehr (2006) concluded that most psychological theories of love can be categorised based on whether they explain companionship or whether they explain passion. That is, love is defined as sex drive, infatuation, sexual intimacy (labelled under the term "passion"), but love is also friendship, intimacy in a non-sexual way and care (labelled under "companionship"). This dichotomy between passion and companionship is evident in other conceptualisations. For example, Lee's (1977) *eros* and *ludus* are akin to passion while *storge* is akin to companionship. Lee's (1977) *mania* seems to also describe passion while *pragma* and *agape* apparently describe companionship.

### Methodology

The research draws from a relatively homogeneous group of tourists and it was deemed that this sample of informants held substantial information power. The participants, whose profile is shown in Table 1, were of the Sierra Leone ethnicity, living in London. Only those who have travelled to the country in the last 5 years were of interest to the research team. Contact details of potential participants were obtained from their friends and relatives in Sierra Leone who were well known to two of the authors from previous research projects. This convenience sampling approach allowed for participants to be selected on the basis of access. Every interview lasted about an hour and was conducted in people's homes in January 2019. Interviews commenced with general questions, followed by questions on relationships with friends, relatives. Interview questions were open-ended allowing for rich, nuanced, data to emerge about love. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim by the authors. The participants were then asked to read the transcripts, and discuss any transcription issues with the authors.

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted by the first two authors on two levels: semantic, latent levels. Analysis comprised of coding of words or fragments of sentences; assessing linkages between codes; identifying differences and commonalities, causes and consequences; and, finally crafting a set of higher-order themes. Emergent themes were then deductively analysed by the first three authors, following Filep and Matteucci's (2020) three-phase approach to analysing love in tourist experiences. This approach assumes love is present in tourist motivations, as well as in on site experiences and recollections.

**Table 1. Informants' profiles**

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Place of origin	Number of years living in London
Sahr	M	61	Kono District, Eastern Province	31
Sia	F	54	Kono District, Eastern Province	22
Tamba	M	51	Kono District, Eastern Province	31
Aiah	M	43	Pujehun District, Southern Province	14
Komba	M	44	Port Loko District, North West Province	18
Kai	M	40	Kambia District, North West Province	19
Safia	M	53	Born in London /Kono District, Eastern Province	43
Mani	M	48	Koinadugu District, Northern Province	23
Foday	M	36	Freetown, Western Area	16
Kumba	F	45	Kailahun District, Eastern Province	19
Yai	F	61	Kono District, Eastern Province	22
Finda	F	27	Born in London / Kono District, Eastern Province	27

## Findings and Discussion

### *Commitment to family and cultural heritage*

The sense of commitment to family back home was the dominant travel motive for 10 out of 12 participants, as exemplified by Sia's account:

*I've got obligations because I've got my nieces that I support. They go to school... I'm actually a benefactor if I can put it that way. I am a benefactor because their parents cannot afford it. So, I have taken the responsibility to support them through their education. So, I send money regularly and travel (Sia).*

This sense of commitment is a common theme in motivations for diaspora tourists (Otoo et al., 2021) and here represents a manifestation of companionship form of love. In another study about Caribbean diaspora communities from England, Chamberlain (2017) showed that tourists' trips back to the Caribbean region explained their desire to provide intimate care to their families in their homelands. The following excerpt from Komba indicates that this motivation was also deeply tied to a sense of cultural heritage:

*I mean, anytime, you see them [family in Sierra Leone], it's like reliving that relationship. I mean, the mere presence of family is always, um, a renewal. You know, a bond, you have with your family...once you are there, you are always reminded of your heritage (Komba).*

For Komba, family is equated to Sierra Leone. It is where his heritage lies and where his true connections are. This commitment to family in Sierra Leone acts as a powerful motivator for him to travel there.

#### *Attachment to the land*

Love as on-site experiences manifested itself among the Sierra Leonean participants as attachment to the land. The connection to the land emerged as a major theme in Singh's (2019) study of love, and in Swanson's (2017) work on how and why tourists come to love a destination. In this research study, for about half of the sample, attachment to the land was intricately linked to the Sierra Leoneans' fond childhood memories, which are brought back through everyday activities during their holidays in their land, such as walks in nature. For instance, Sahr articulated: "*Sometimes I go to just to take a walk in the bush. It brings back memories of when I was growing up. I feel very at home*". Here, childhood memories are revived through walks in nature; that is a sensual re-encounter with textures, colours, sounds and smells. These sensory cues give Sahr a sense of who he is, where he belongs to. The walks in nature allow Sahr to reconnect with his own cultural self. A number of informants have expressed feelings of intimate comfort and profound attachment to the land in Sierra Leone. For instance, Tamba commented:

*Always the warmth, I mean, the physical warmth, back then it was the emotional warmth, in the 70s and 80s, but nowadays it's mostly the physical warmth. Ah the food, um, the humidity, um, being back, feeling like I'm home. Um, it's also the shock to the system, which is kind of invigorating (Tamba).*

#### *Emotional sense of satisfaction and therapeutic value*

Finally, we were interested in how the emotion of love was experienced as an outcome of the tourist experience. The research participants recorded memorable reflections on their visits to Sierra Leone, following their return to London. Love has been identified as an aspect of post-hoc satisfaction (Singh, 2019), but in this context descriptions of love accounted for strong positive emotions that led to heightened, positive outcomes. For instance, when Kai says that "*you mingle with them, people have time for you, people talk to you, people smile to you from the bottom of their heart. It draws you back to them*", he remembers his relatives' smiles and these memories bring forth moments of uplifting delights. Beyond this emotional sense of satisfaction, the visits were therapeutic in nature, as noted by 8 out of 12 participants. Charura and Paul (2018) noted the importance of love in the healing of the human psyche and Sia similarly reflects upon the therapeutic value of her trip.

*Visiting Sierra Leone is all about coming together and a feeling at home...Because when I'm there I feel at home, I don't have to think about getting up in the morning going to work, you know, the normal routine here. I'm out of the routine, I don't think about it... So it's all refreshing, yeah. And coming back, you come back refreshed. (Sia)*

## **Conclusion**

Overall the study has revealed that love is experienced throughout the diaspora tourist experience, before, during and after the actual trip. The findings point to the intrinsic value of diaspora tourism for facilitating connections among significant people and significant places. The work extends previous anthropological analyses of intimacy in diaspora tourism (Chamberlain, 2017) and social capital in diaspora tourism (Li & Chan, 2020) to examine the

concept of love. The findings specifically highlighted the commitment to family and cultural heritage as a characteristic of love. Prior work on African diaspora tourism (Otoo et al., 2021) focused on appraising the effects of diaspora tourists' motivations on experiences. This study more closely examines the dynamics of African diaspora tourism by revealing the profound attachment to the land. Finally, the study adds to positive tourism literature (Filep, 2014; Filep & Matteucci, 2020) by revealing the well-being effects of the diasporic relationships, such as the emotional sense of satisfaction and the therapeutic value of the trip. At a practical level, the investigation increased the visibility of the Sierra Leonean community to international audiences. Future studies can examine the extent to which love is maintained in relationships over longer periods of time, through longitudinal investigations.

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