turyzm tourism

34 no. 2 2024

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34 | no. 2
2024

WYDAWNICTWO
UNIWERSYTETU
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Łódź 2024

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ISSN 0867-5856
e-ISSN 2080-6922

Contents

Articles

DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.01 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

An investigation into resilience strategies in the medical tourism supply chain

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How to cite (APA style): Mohammadipour, E., & Nasrabadi, E.M. (2024). An investigation into resilience strategies in the medical tourism supply chain. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 7–34. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.01

ABSTRACT

The present study has adopted a mixed method approach to investigate the risks occurring in the supply chain for Iranian medical tourism, and suggests resilience strategies for their prevention and improvements to the current situation. The participants were experts in the medical tourism supply chain chosen via purposive and snowball sampling. The results obtained via thematic analysis of interviews, as well as failure modes and effects analysis (FMEA) and failure analysis after occurrence (FAAO) techniques, led to identifying 75 risks which were classified into five major categories: supply, demand, internal, external and supply chain management risks. Additionally, a literature review and interview results revealed several resilience strategies categorized as pre-risk coping or post-risk recovery strategies for tackling the risks. Furthermore, the resilience number of the medical tourism supply chain increased from 0.4 (pre-risk occurrence) to 0.5 (post-risk occurrence). Implications and suggestions for future research are presented.

KEYWORDS

coping strategies, medical tourism supply chain, recovery strategies, supply chain resilience, supply chain risks

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
18 July 2023
Accepted:
23 January 2024
Published:
25 July 2024

1. Introduction

Tourism, which is defined as travelling outside one's place of residence for different purposes such as business or entertainment for at least one night (Bovy & Stern, 1990), has evolved and modernized remarkably over recent decades (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017; Liu et al., 2017). Tourism is currently considered as one of the top 10 industries in the world since it plays an undeniably important role in generating considerable income and foreign exchange for governments (Burke, 2018; Ghaderi et al., 2018; Jones & Wynn, 2019; Okafor et al., 2022).

Medical tourism as an important type refers to travelling outside one's country to receive treatments which are not available in one's own (Habibi et al., 2022). As a growing global phenomenon and a significant branch of tourism, medical tourism has recently attracted considerable attention by both academia and professionals (de la Hoz-Correa et al., 2018) due to several reasons including, but not limited to, destination appeal and culture (Campra et al., 2022), technological developments, increased waiting time for receiving medical treatments in developed countries, the low cost of medical services in developing countries, and international exchange rates (Gholami et al., 2020).

Tourism supply chains cover a wide range including restaurants, hotels and travel agencies which aim to efficiently fulfil tourists' expectations (Ahmadimanesh et al., 2019). Coordination among these is considered as a very valuable competitive advantage, therefore managing supply chains could help organize and coordinate their operations (Mandal & Saravanan, 2019). Previous studies have found many challenges in medical tourism supply chains including limitations relating to physical infrastructure (Vishnu et al., 2020) and medicine supply (Jaberidoost et al., 2013), the competence of the medical staff (Ahmadimanesh et al., 2019), environmental disasters (Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2023), medical errors, patients' safety (Farrokhvar, 2013) and intellectual property (Vishnu & Regikumar, 2016). These challenges could cause serious problems for reducing expenses and promoting tourism sustainability, which can consequently cause risks and negatively affect the efficiency and competitive advantage of this business.

A considerable body of empirical research has focused on risk management in supply chains (e.g. Fan & Stevenson, 2018; Pfohl et al., 2011; Pournader et al., 2020; Rao & Goldsby, 2009). However, although risks in supply chains for medical tourism have negatively influenced the health system economy by neglecting infrastructure and natural resources, as well as reducing job opportunities, the number of foreign tourists and contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) (Doshmangir et al., 2018), they have received considerably less research attention vis-à-vis risks from other supply chains (e.g. production). Therefore, it is highly essential to take into account these risks and propose useful effective resilience strategies so as to improve the quality of health care (Bauer, 2017), generate more foreign exchange, create a better trade balance and promote medical tourism (Ramirez de Arellano, 2011).

Given the utmost importance of risks in the medical tourism supply chain, several studies have meticulously examined them and offered practical and constructive solutions. For example, some works have identified the major risks in the supply chains (e.g. Kumar et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2020). Another line of research has gone further by not only identifying the risks but also providing some general classifications (e.g. Elleuch et al., 2014; Vishwakarma et al., 2016). In addition, others have considered the risks and threats and offered strategies and measures for controlling them (e.g. Tukamuhabwa Rwakira, 2015; Wang, 2018). A careful review of the literature indicates that few studies have proposed a detailed classification of the risks identified (e.g. Raja Sreedharan et al., 2019; Vishnu et al., 2020) and, to the best of our knowledge, empirical literature on efficient coping and recovery strategies is still in its infancy. Therefore, the present study focuses on the medical tourism supply chain in Iran, as a popular destination for medical purposes, and identifies the existing risks. The resilience strategies used by different components of the supply chain are also explored and other potentially useful strategies are suggested.

2. Literature review

2.1. Medical tourism

Medical tourism, which refers to national and international trips made for medical purposes (Büyüközkan et al., 2021), using regular tourism services (Loh, 2015), consists of two key parts, namely, tourism and medicine. The tourism part includes components such as hotels, travel agencies, transportation companies and airlines (Kaczmarek et al., 2021). The medical element includes components such as hospitals as well as medical, facilitator and insurance companies (Secundo et al., 2019). This type of tourism is a highly profitable, economic activity based on the integrated services of the medical and tourism sectors (Momeni et al., 2018) to provide health care with the best quality, lowest cost and minimum waiting time for patients (Nikraftar et al., 2016).

Recent research indicates that lack of attention to educating professional physicians, investing in medical infrastructure, building modern clinics and hospitals, providing advanced medical equipment, and monitoring medical regulations can result in serious risks to supply chains (Davoudi & Hasanabadi, 2020). In addition, risks could be created by global economic crises and terrorist attacks (Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007). These can in turn lead to a significant decrease in tourism demand and negatively influence businesses (Jiang et al., 2019), therefore, supply chains in medical tourism are very susceptible to a wide range of risks from different sources.

2.2. Resilience in supply chains

Previous research has shown that risks can have destructive effects on supply chains (e.g. de Souza et al., 2019). Businesses can use resilience strategies to reduce the possibility of encountering risks and disruption as well as how to overcome them, which may in turn help businesses return to a sustainable state (Hall et al., 2023; Senbeto & Hon, 2020). Resilience strategies help supply chains become more responsible and improve a situation when unexpected events are encountered. As Sharma et al. (2021) maintain these strategies require attention to be paid to coordination, crisis management techniques, constructive relationships among all stakeholders, a supportive network, identification of risks and opportunities, and effective interventions.

Resilience in a supply chain can be defined as its ability to prepare for and adapt to unexpected events as well as respond to and recover from disruptions by keeping operations at a desirable level while controlling structure and function (Ali et al., 2017). Depending on when supply chains take measures to deal with risks, resilience strategies could be classified as either coping or recovery (Hohenstein et al., 2015). Coping strategies are specific behavioral efforts for preventing, controlling, tolerating, reducing or minimizing unexpected, stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Accordingly, there are three categories of coping strategy: assertive coping, avoidance and adaptive coping, which could be used based on the condition of an organization (Webster et al., 2016). A significant body of research has shown that these strategies could help prevent the occurrence of disruptions (Meneghel et al., 2019).

After the occurrence of a risk, supply chains must be resilient and able to quickly turn around by using recovery strategies. More specifically, they can use their resources to respond to risks and disruptions as soon as they occur or take effective measures in the long run which could help them stabilize and return to a sustainable condition (Scholten et al., 2014). Recovery strategies include remanufacturing, repurposing, repairing, reconditioning, cannibalization, redesigning, refurbishing and recycling services and products (Thierry et al., 1995).

Given that risks can inflict irreversible damage to industries and supply chains (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Truong Quang & Hara, 2017), it is vital to identify them and propose effective coping and recovery strategies. A review of the literature indicates that little attention has been paid to risks and strategies in medical tourism. Hence, the present study aims to address this research gap by identifying the risks relating to the medical tourism supply chain in Iran and examining different coping and recovery strategies to deal with them. The risks in the supply chain have reduced the number of medical tourists in some time periods, and this can justify the significance of focusing on resilience strategies. The findings of the present study could be beneficial for Iran and possibly other countries by suggesting practical strategies for enhancing resilience.

The current study was guided by the following research questions (RQs) relating to the hospital in this study:

RQ_1: What are the risks in the medical tourism supply chain?

RQ_2: How could these risks be classified?

RQ_3: What coping strategies are used in the medical tourism supply chain?

RQ_4: What is the resilience number before the occurrence of the risks?

RQ_5: What recovery strategies are used in the medical tourism supply chain?

RQ_6: What is the resilience number after the occurrence of the risks?

3. Methods

The statistical population of the present study is the supply chain for medical tourism in Iran. A total of 18 experts in this supply chain were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were having either an academic degree in management or at least five years of experience in this field. Detailed information about the participants (e.g. gender, age, academic degree, organizational position and working area) can be found in Appendix A. In addition, since the customers are considered as an integral part of the supply chain, their opinions were also checked by referring to the results of surveys previously conducted by other participants (e.g. hospitals and medical equipment companies).

The current case study used a mixed-method approach since the medical tourism supply chain is multi-faceted, i.e. it has several different elements closely related to each other, and this approach will be suitable in providing more in-depth and comprehensive findings. More specifically, qualitative and quantitative data were collected using interviews and questionnaires, respectively. Following Ravansetan (2017), the study was conducted in seven major steps from March 2020 to September 2022.

Phase one: Identifying the risks

This phase was exploratory, interpretative and qualitative. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 18 participants to explore their views on the risks related to the medical tourism supply chain in Iran. Theoretical saturation was achieved when 15 experts had been interviewed, although followed by three more for further assurance. Each interview took about 45–60 minutes and was conducted in the participants' first language, i.e. Persian, to ensure understanding. First the data were transcribed, next the transcripts were meticulously read several times, then the data were coded and recoded many times to ascertain higher-order codes from lower-order ones. Member checking was used to examine the validity of the results and, additionally, any discrepancies between the raters were resolved through discussion which led to an inter-rater reliability of 0.91.

Phase two: Prioritizing the risks

This phase was applied, positivistic and quantitative. Based on the interview results, 12 supply chain experts were chosen from the 18 who took part in the previous phase and was based on their academic degree, professional experience and familiarity with the concepts of risk and resilience. It should be noted that care was exercised to choose at least one expert from each part of the medical tourism supply chain. The experts responded to a five-point Likert scale questionnaire developed based on the interview results. The questionnaire comprised 75 items relating to the importance of the risks in terms of their probability of occurrence, severity and detection (Appendix B). Since the questionnaire was constructed based on experts' views, it was considered to have adequate construct validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three sub-scales ranged from 0.91 to 0.96. The data were then analyzed using failure modes and effects analysis (FMEA).

Phase three: Determining the strategies for coping with risks

This phase was similar to phase one, i.e. it was exploratory, interpretative and qualitative. After computing the risk priority number (RPN), 30% of the those with the highest RPN were chosen. The participants' views on the coping strategies extracted from the research literature were obtained, and their suggestions as to other useful strategies were added. The validity of the results was checked using member checking. Triangulation of sources (e.g. different experts) and methods (e.g. interviews, questionnaires and survey data) were used to investigate the reliability of the results. The transcribed data were carefully read many times to obtain different coping strategies.

Phase four: Calculating the resilience number before risk occurrence

This phase was similar to the second phase since it was applied, positivistic and quantitative. 12 experts responded to a five-point Likert scale researcher-designed questionnaire with 72 items by assigning coping strategies to resilience parameters (Appendix C). The questionnaire used in this phase was developed based on experts' opinions, thus it had sufficient construct validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the different sub-scales ranged from 0.96 to 0.99.

The resilience number was calculated based on Carvalho Remigio's (2012) equation:

$$RI = \left(\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{m} S_i}{5N_i}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} S_j}{5N_j}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{z=1}^{p} S_z}{5N_z}\right)$$

where: RI – resilience index, S_i – scores of resilience strategies relating to probability of occurrence, S_j – scores of resilience strategies relating to severity, S_z – scores of resilience strategies relating to detection, N – number of resilience strategies, m – number of resilience strategies related to the probability of occurrence, n – number of resilience strategies related to severity, p – number of resilience strategies related to detection.

Phase five: Prioritizing the risks after their occurrence

In this phase, the identified risks after their occurrence were prioritized using a researcher-made questionnaire with 75 items (Appendix D). The participants were asked to assess their importance in terms of time, cost and quality of recovery on a five-point Likert scale. Given that the questionnaire was designed based on experts' views, it had sufficient construct validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for different sub-scales were 0.91–0.96 and the data were then analyzed using failure analysis after occurrence (FAAO).

Phase six: Determining the recovery strategies

The RPN was calculated. Then, 30% of the risks with the highest RPNs were selected, followed by a determination of relevant recovery strategies. The participants were asked whether they used the researchers' suggested strategies and/or any others. The interview responses were carefully listened to, transcribed and thematically analyzed, which led to extracting several recovery strategies.

Phase seven: Calculating the resilience number after risk occurrence

The experts assigned recovery strategies to one or more parameters (i.e. time, cost and quality of recovery) and rated them on a five-point Likert scale. The data collection instrument in this phase was a questionnaire (56 items) with adequate construct validity, with a design based on experts' views (Appendix E). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the different sub-scales ranged from 0.97 to 0.98.

The resilience number was calculated based on Carvalho Remigio's (2012) equation:

$$RI = \left(\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{m} S_i}{5N_i}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} S_j}{5N_j}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{z=1}^{p} S_z}{5N_z}\right)$$

where: RI – resilience index, S_i – scores of resilience strategies relating to probability of occurrence, S_j – scores of resilience strategies relating to severity, S_z – scores of resilience strategies relating to detection, N – number of resilience strategies, m – number of resilience strategies related to the probability of occurrence, n – number of resilience strategies related to severity, p – number of resilience strategies related to detection.

4. Results

This section presents a summary of the results obtained from all phases of the study. Each sub-section is dedicated to one of the seven phases.

Table 1. Major categories and sub-categories of supply chain risks

Major categories	Sub-categories	Codes
Supply	Supplier	1. Problems related to working with suppliers
		2. Dependence on a limited number of suppliers
		3. Problems related to outsourcing
		4. Delays in supply
		5. Inadequate supply
	Medicine and medical equipment	6. Drug compatibility
		7. Drug and equipment referral
		8. Differences in the quality of medical items
		9. Counterfeit medicine
		10. Drug supply
		11. Problems related to drug therapy
		12. Pharmaceutical recall
		13. Insufficient raw materials
Internal	Financial	14. High taxes
		15. Accounting errors
		16. Errors in allocating budgets
		17. Receivable accounts
		18. Cash purchase
	Human resources	19. Dependence on a particular employee
		20. Recruitment
		21. Violation of laws
		22. Inadequate human resources
		23. Inappropriate training
		24. Mistakes made
		25. Health and safety
		26. Dissatisfaction with human resources
		27. Delays by the logistics staff
		28. Poor skills and inadequate knowledge
	Pricing	29. Fluctuations in exchange rates
		30. Pricing policies
	Marketing	31. Ineffective marketing
	Organizational equipment	32. Infrastructure
		33. Maintenance
		34. Equipment essential for production

Table 1 (cont.)

Major categories	Sub-categories	Codes
Internal (cont.)	Providing services and products	35. Services
		36. Differences in doctors' prescriptions
		37. Product development
		38. Intellectual property
		39. Insufficient scientific research
		40. Inadequate welfare facilities
		41. Suppliers' inability to adapt to competitive conditions
Demand	Customer	42. Failing to identify customer needs
		43. High-risk patients
		44. Demanding customers
		45. Customers' ignorance about the service procedure
	Demand	46. Random fluctuations in demand
		47. Adding to/changing one's needs
		48. Seasonal demand
Supply chain management	Transportation	49. Transport
	Inventory	50. Inventory corruption
		51. Inventory shortage
		52. Warehousing
	Information technology	53. Information technology
		54. Information system
	Coordination	55. Lack of coordination between supply chain components
		56. Lack of coordination within the organization
	Strategic	57. Partial perspective
		58. Process interference
		59. Decision making
External	Competitors	60. Competitors
		61. Black market
	Social	62. Negative news from the media
		63. Urban security
	Cultural	64. Cultural differences
		65. Behavioral problems in the supply chain
	Political	66. Problems in customs clearance
		67. Sanctions
		68. Terrorism
		69. Government policies
	Environmental	70. Natural disasters
		71. Environmental issues
	Legal/regulatory	72. Ineffective supervision
		73. Non-compliance with contracts
		74. Laws and regulations
		75. Poor coordination among regulatory organizations

Source: authors.

Table 2. The risk priority numbers (RPNs) assigned to risks before their occurrence

Codes	RPN	Codes	RPN	Codes	RPN
44	125	35	40	8	24
43	80	68	40	3	24
29	80	46	36	26	24
17	80	45	36	62	24
1	64	71	36	75	24
13	64	27	36	74	24
72	60	6	36	63	24
33	60	14	36	21	24
10	60	24	36	48	24
30	60	34	36	38	24
66	60	64	36	32	24
67	60	41	32	9	20
23	60	16	30	65	18
58	60	55	30	12	18
70	50	11	30	31	18
73	48	40	27	50	16
36	48	39	27	2	15
21	48	53	27	56	15
20	45	59	27	51	12
25	45	60	27	15	12
49	45	47	27	52	12
4	45	42	27	7	10
54	40	57	27	19	9
69	40	61	27	18	8
28	40	5	24	37	6

Source: authors.

Coding the risks

To answer RQ_1 and RQ_2, the interview results related to phase one were thematically analyzed, resulting in 107 codes. After removing several overlapping codes, a total of 75 remained, which were classified into five major risk categories and 21 sub-categories (Table 1).

Failure modes and effects analysis (FMEA)

In the second phase, a panel of experts, including 12 from the medical tourism supply chain in Iran, completed the FMEA questionnaire to prioritize the identified risks before their occurrence. More specifically, they determined the 'occurrence probability', 'severity' and 'detection' of the risks, and assigned numerical values to them. Accordingly, the RPN was computed by multiplying the numerical values assigned by the experts. Average RPNs were assigned to each risk based on their priority (Table 2).

Determining resilience strategies before risk occurrence (coping strategies)

In order to answer RQ_3, 30% of the FMEA outputs (N = 22) with the highest RPNs were selected for implementing corrective measures in the third phase. The expert panel identified pre-risk resilience strategies before risk occurrence (Table 3).

Table 3. Coping strategies

Risks	Resilience strategies
44. Demanding customers	1. Designing VIP and private rooms for health tourists
	2. Increasing flexibility in hotel services
	3. Establishing a unit for respect
	4. Assigning one particular host/hostess for each department
	5. Providing communication facilities such as the internet, TV and internet protocol television (IPTV)
43. High-risk patients	1. Obtaining informed consent before operations
	2. Rejecting high-risk patients
	3. Providing physical and mental health records
29. Fluctuations in exchange rates	1. Having alternative plans
	2. Inexpensive workforce
17. Receivable accounts	1. Continuous management of resources and consumption
	2. Using enterprise resource planning (ERP) software
	3. Accepting cash for some services
1. Problems related to working with suppliers	1. Having alternative plans in case of problems with a supplier
	2. Securing international contracts to claim damages
	3. Considering additional suppliers
	4. Using a 'black and white' list
13. Insufficient raw materials	1. Depot inventory
	2. Tracking deficiencies
	3. Securing appropriate agreement contracts
72. Ineffective supervision	1. Supervision of the treatment manager and supervisors
	2. Paying attention to rules and regulations of the supervisory agencies
	3. Auditing and online assessment of activities
33. Maintenance	1. Purchasing high-quality products with guarantees
	2. Maintenance
10. Drug supply	1. Supplying products from the local market
	2. Forming drug and treatment committees
	3. Using similar products
30. Pricing policies	1. Setting prices in proportion to increasing costs
	2. Providing services with different prices for various customer groups
66. Problems in customs clearance	1. Cooperating with the government for importing medical items
	2. Selecting and working with companies specialized in import
	3. Having a minimum number of documents for clearance
67. Sanctions	1. Cooperating with friendly countries
	2. Promoting collaborations with the Board of Trustees in foreign exchange savings when treating patients

23. Inappropriate training	1. Knowledge management for equipping employees and increasing their awareness
	2. Frequent and regular training
	3. Assessing the effectiveness of training courses
	4. Implementing PDP (Personnel development plan) system (ISO 1015)
58. Process interference	1. Promoting cooperation in the supply chain
	2. Running workshops for managers
70. Natural disasters	1. Having alternative plans
	2. Predicting epidemics, pandemics and nuclear threats
	3. Depot inventory
	4. Performing maneuvers for improving preparedness
73. Non-compliance with contracts	1. Securing appropriate agreement contracts
	2. Promoting relations with suppliers
	3. Receiving guarantees
	4. Determining damages in case of non-fulfillment of obligations
36. Differences in doctors' prescriptions	1. Using the treatment protocols of the Health Ministry
	2. Adapting the hospital medicine handbook with medical items approved by doctors
	3. Organizing clinical committees in hospitals
21. Inadequate human resources	1. Redundancy in the workforce
	2. Applying professional mobility for human resources
	3. Having a succession plan
	4. Establishing and maintaining relationships with universities and institutions and securing contracts
20. Recruitment	1. Recruiting workforce via exams
	2. Running training and internship courses
25. Health and safety	1. Annual examination
	2. Providing human resources with insurance
	3. Developing a framework for examining current and future health conditions
	4. Monitoring occupational risks (ISO 18000)
	5. Using personal protective equipment
	6. Providing a suitable place to relax
4. Delays in supply	1. Considering additional suppliers
	2. Improving transportation conditions
	3. Securing long-term and legal contracts
	4. Promoting supply chain accountability
49. Transport	1. Insuring cargos and patients
	2. Securing contracts with reliable and committed couriers
	3. Careful and ongoing monitoring of transportation of cargo, equipment and patients
	4. Using roofed vehicles and equipped
	5. Assigning trucks by companies

Source: authors.

Determining the resilience number before risk occurrence

For answering RQ_4, the experts rated coping strategies and assigned them to resilience parameters in the fourth phase. The mode of the experts' ratings was calculated and substituted in the equation of the resilience number. The resilience parameters at the pre-risk time include 'occurrence probability', 'severity' and 'detection' of the risks (Table 4).

Table 4. The modes of experts' rating of resilience strategies before risk occurrence

Resilience parameters	Risk code, strategy No.	Score	Resilience parameters	Risk code, strategy No.	Score
Occurrence probability	44-1	4	Severity	44-2	3
	44-3	3		43-1	5
	44-4	4		29-1	3
	44-5	3		29-2	4
	43-2	5		17-3	4
	17-1	5		1-1	4
	17-2	4		1-2	3
	13-3	3		1-3	5
	72-1	4		10-1	4
	72-2	4		10-2	4
	72-3	4		10-3	4
	33-1	5		30-1	4
	33-2	4		30-2	3
	66-1	4		67-1	5
	66-2	5		67-2	5
	66-3	5		70-2	5
	23-1	4		70-3	3
	23-2	4		70-4	4
	23-4	4		73-1	3
	58-1	4		73-3	4
	58-2	4		73-4	5
	73-2	5		36-3	4
	36-1	5		21-2	4
	36-2	5		25-2	5
	21-1	5		4-3	4
	21-3	3		4-4	4
	21-4	3		49-1	5
	20-1	3	Detection	43-3	5
	25-5	3		29-1	4
	25-6	3		1-4	4
	4-2	4		13-2	3
	49-2	4		23-3	5

Occurence probability (cont.)	49-3	3
	49-4	4
	49-5	3

Detection (cont.)	23-4	4
	20-2	4
	25-1	4
	25-3	4
	25-4	4

Source: authors.

Carvalho Remigio's (2012) equation was used for calculating the resilience number:

$$RI = \left(\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{m} S_i}{5N_i}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} S_j}{5N_j}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{z=1}^{p} S_z}{5N_z}\right)$$

where: RI – resilience index, S_i – scores of resilience strategies relating to probability of occurrence, S_j – scores of resilience strategies relating to severity, S_z – scores of resilience strategies relating to detection, N – number of resilience strategies, m – number of resilience strategies related to the probability of occurrence, n – number of resilience strategies related to severity, p – number of resilience strategies related to detection.

The resilience number, which falls in the range of 0 to 1, was calculated based on experts' responses to the questionnaire items. A value of 0 indicates that the organization is not resilient while a value of 1 shows its complete resilience. Therefore, 0–0.33 indicates poor resilience, 0.33–0.67 shows moderate resilience, and 0.67–1 indicates strong resilience. The amount of resilience for the medical tourism supply chain in Iran in the present study was computed as 0.4 before risk occurrence, which indicates the moderate resilience of its medical tourism supply chain.

Failure analysis after occurrence (FAAO)

In the fifth phase, similar to the second one, an expert panel performed FAAO by determining its main parameters, namely, time, cost and quality of recovery. Then, the effect coefficients were computed by multiplying the scores for time, cost and quality of recovery (Table 5).

Table 5. The effect coefficients assigned to risks after their occurrence

Codes	Impact coefficient	Codes	Impact coefficient	Codes	Impact coefficient
32	100	18	45	58	36
23	80	69	45	9	32
62	80	31	45	38	32
44	64	61	45	26	32
35	64	47	45	19	27
60	64	68	40	13	27
28	64	7	36	1	27
25	64	56	36	52	27
14	64	4	36	51	27
33	60	20	36	53	27
8	60	21	36	64	27
24	60	16	36	72	27
70	60	59	36	54	27
30	50	74	36	45	27
46	48	2	36	43	27
10	48	49	36	65	24
6	48	12	36	55	24
17	48	5	36	11	24

Table 5 (cont.)

Codes	Impact coefficient	Codes	Impact coefficient	Codes	Impact coefficient
3	48	37	36	39	24
29	48	34	36	50	24
73	48	27	36	21	24
36	48	57	36	63	24
67	48	48	36	42	24
71	45	41	36	15	20
40	45	66	36	75	18

Source: authors.

Determining resilience strategies after risk occurrence (recovery strategies)

In order to answer RQ_5, 30% of the risks (N = 23) with the highest effect coefficients were selected as FAAO outputs for taking corrective measures in the sixth phase. The panel of experts then identified the resilience strategies after risk occurrence for medical tourism in Iran (Table 6).

Table 6. Recovery strategies

Risks	Resilience strategies
32. Infrastructure	1. Using donors' support for expanding services and facilities
	2. Getting loans and bank facilities
	3. Reducing costs
	4. Using field equipment
23. Inappropriate training	1. Improving the quality of training courses
	2. Holding in-service training classes
62. Negative news by media	1. Transparency in sharing negative news
	2. Sharing positive news relating to the subject
	3. Establishing effective campaigns in cyberspace
44. Demanding customers	1. Increasing awareness of customers' wants by using survey forms
	2. Improving responsiveness to customers' needs by using supporting services
35. Services	1. Detecting and solving problems
	2. Holding weekly meetings with the patients' physicians
	3. Providing patients with free and fast treatments
60. Competitors	1. Offering special suggestions to customers
	2. Letting customers pay over an extended time period
	3. Cooperating with competitors
28. Poor skills and inadequate knowledge	1. Running theoretical training courses
	2. Organizing practical workshops
25. Health and safety	1. Using overtime to compensate for an injured worker
	2. Using temporary workers
	3. Training safety rules
14. High taxes	1. Obtaining tax exemptions
33. Maintenance	1. Detecting and solving problems
	2. Postponing related services
	3. Outsourcing services for a limited time

24. Mistakes made	1. Identifying and analyzing errors
	2. Using warnings, reprimands and dismissals
	3. Providing patients with free and fast treatments
8. Differences in the quality of medical items	1. Seeking feedback from customers, followed by mass production
	2. Conducting initial tests and then using a drug
70. Natural disasters	1. Using supporting capacities
	2. Establishing field hospitals
	3. Forming crisis management teams
	4. Postponing related services
	5. Using other buildings (e.g. mosques and schools)
30. Pricing policies	1. Providing some services in cash
	2. Offering profitable ancillary services
	3. Providing complementary services
46. Random fluctuations in demands	1. Using supply management policies (e.g. flexible capacity and inventory)
	2. Using demand management policies (commercial promotions and proportional pricing)
10. Drug supply	1. Using alternative drugs
	2. Purchasing from the black market
6. Drug compatibility	1. Analyzing patients' conditions
	2. Providing patients with free and immediate treatments
17. Receivable accounts	1. Using legal capacities
	2. Not directly cooperating with hospitals and working with intermediaries
	3. Managing financial resources to compensate for budget shortages
	4. Barter
3. Problems related to outsourcing	1. Using legal capacities
	2. Using supporting capacities
	3. Securing flexible contracts
	4. Using additional outsourcing
29. Fluctuations in exchange rates	1. Converting cash into properties
	2. Planning for customers at different levels
	3. Considering the average exchange rate and providing service packages
73. Non-compliance with contracts	1. Using legal capacities
	2. Using supporting capacities
	3. Working with supporting suppliers
36. Differences in doctors' prescriptions	1. Forming clinical committees in hospitals for analyzing prescriptions
67. Sanctions	1. Cooperating with friendly countries
	2. Using cheaper foreign exchange provided by the government

Source: authors.

Determining the resilience number after risk occurrence

To answer RQ_6, the resilience number was obtained for after risk occurrence based on the experts' rating of the strategies specified in FAAO in the seventh phase. Finally, the mode of the scores was calculated and substituted in the equation for the resilience number. Resilience parameters after risk occurrence were cost, time and quality of recovery (Table 7).

Table 7. Scores of resilience strategies after risk occurrence

Resilience parameters	Risk code, strategy No.	Score	Resilience parameters	Risk code, strategy No.	Score
Recovery quality	32-1	5	Recovery time	23-2	4
	32-4	3		62-3	5
	23-1	4		44-1	5
	62-1	5		35-1	4
	62-2	4		35-2	4
	62-3	5		35-3	4
	44-2	4		25-2	4
	35-1	4		70-1	4
	60-1	4		10-1	5
	60-2	4		17-2	3
	60-3	4		17-4	4
	28-1	5		3-3	3
	28-2	5		73-3	4
	25-1	4	Recovery cost	32-2	5
	33-3	5		32-3	3
	24-1	5		25-3	4
	70-2	4		14-1	5
	70-3	5		24-2	4
	70-4	4		8-1	4
	46-1	4		8-2	5
	46-2	4		70-5	4
	10-2	3		30-1	5
	6-1	4		30-2	4
	17-3	4		30-3	4
	3-3	4		17-1	3
	36-1	5		29-1	5
	67-1	5		29-2	4
	67-2	5		29-3	3

Source: authors.

The resilience number was calculated based on Carvalho Remigio's (2012) equation:

$$RI = \left(\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{m} S_i}{5N_i}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} S_j}{5N_j}\right) \times \left(\frac{\sum_{z=1}^{p} S_z}{5N_z}\right)$$

where: RI – resilience index, S_i – scores of resilience strategies relating to probability of occurrence, S_j – scores of resilience strategies relating to severity, S_z – scores of resilience strategies relating to detection, N – number of resilience strategies, m – number of resilience strategies related to the probability of occurrence, n – number of resilience strategies related to severity, p – number of resilience strategies related to detection.

The resilience number was computed as 0.5 after risk occurrence, which indicates the moderate resilience of the medical tourism supply chain in Iran after risk occurrence.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the risks occurring in the supply chain of Iranian medical tourism and suggest coping and recovery strategies for preventing their occurrence and improving the current situation. Regarding RQ_1, the participants referred to 75 risks, 36 of which had not been addressed in past research. Some of the risks found in this study were also reported in previous studies: delay in supply (Jaberidoost et al., 2013; Silva et al., 2020), poor skills and inadequate knowledge (Benazzouz et al., 2018; Wasswa & Namulindwa, 2020) and natural disasters (Kumar et al., 2019; Raja Sreedharan et al., 2019). However, risks including, but not limited to, demanding customers, high-risk patients, customer unawareness, inability to adapt with competitive conditions, different qualities of medical items, lack of coordination among different components of the supply chain, and negative news on the media have been highlighted in the present study.

As for RQ_2, the results showed that 75 risks were identified and classified in five major categories: supply, demand, internal, external and supply chain management risks. The proposed classification of risks in this study could be considered as comprehensive as it includes those which were not recognized in past research. For example, a recent study by Vishwakarma et al. (2016) categorized risks related to the health tourism supply chain in India into six groups: supply and supplier, strategic, logistics and network, government, and market and financial, while paying almost no attention to those concerning customers and their demands, human resources, environment, and medicine and medical equipment. Azizi Usefvand et al.'s (2017) study also failed to take into account external, internal, demand and supply chain management risks and only referred to those of supplier, producer, distributor and final customer.

Based on the findings, environmental risks, in comparison to others, had higher RPNs, which indicates their utmost importance in supply chains and this finding is in line with past studies highlighting their crucial importance (Wang et al., 2013; Zamora et al., 2013). The economic structure of developing countries like Iran is highly susceptible to undesirable environmental factors such as severe economic sanctions. Under such circumstances, businesses as well as factors relating to production and manufacturing are adversely affected. Hence, the efficient management of supply chain risks and sufficient support provided by governments can substantially promote the performance of private-sector companies which could consequently play a crucial role in the development and growth of those countries.

Regarding RQ_3, the results yielded several key coping strategies such as having minimum necessary documents for clearance, creating support campaigns in cyber space, providing some services in cash, offering special suggestions to customers and applying for tax exemptions. These were not found in past research. In line with previous studies (e.g. Lambaino, 2019; Tukamuhabwa Rwakira, 2015), other risks such as considering additional suppliers, depot inventory, redundancy in the workforce and knowledge management for equipping employees and increasing their awareness were also identified. Coping strategies are very effective as managers frequently encounter the undesirable impacts of uncertainties, risks and accidents in their supply chains. Therefore, significant measures in response to risks should be taken, i.e. they should have adequate resilience for reducing the risks and maintaining optimal performance before risk occurrence. A large number of the coping strategies found in this study were related to the categories of internal and supply risks, which were also reported by Tukamuhabwa et al. (2017). This finding indicates that these risks should be tightly controlled by businesses and prevented through reducing uncertainty. In addition, some coping strategies concerned environmental risks, i.e. those which cannot be controlled or prevented by supply chains. Therefore, it is essential to pay especial attention to the determining roles of policies, planning and the cooperation of governmental organizations.

As for RQ_4, the results of calculations indicated that the resilience number for the medical tourism supply chain was 0.4 before risk occurrence which indicates the moderate resilience of the Iranian medical tourism supply chain. Quantifying resilience helps monitor the supply chain at specific time intervals and evaluates the effectiveness of resilience strategies. In addition, assigning a resilience number to the supply chain of medical tourism in Iran may facilitate its comparison with supply chains in other countries.

In response to RQ_5, the participants referred to several different recovery strategies including using field equipment, establishing effective campaigns in cyberspace, obtaining tax exemptions and using a temporary workforce, which have not been reported in previous research. Additionally, they stated other strategies which existed in previous studies: cooperating with competitors (Tukamuhabwa et al., 2017), using supporting capacities (Carvalho et al., 2012), using supply management policies (e.g. flexible capacity and inventory), and using demand management policies (commercial promotions and proportional pricing) (Lambaino, 2019; Tukamuhabwa Rwakira, 2015). In this study, while most recovery strategies after risk occurrence were related to the categories of internal and demand risks, only a limited number concerned environmental risks. As environmental risks (e.g. those relating to politics and the economy) require national, comprehensive solutions, it is very important to take them into account, and this can help medical tourism supply chains adapt to the existing conditions and mitigate their undesirable effects.

Regarding RQ_6, the results of calculations showed that the resilience number of the Iranian medical tourism supply chain was moderate after risk occurrence ($RI = 0.5$). In fact, little attention has been paid to such risks as they require spending considerable time and a large budget to develop and use recovery strategies.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated the existing risks in the supply chain for Iranian medical tourism and suggested several coping and recovery strategies in order to prevent them and improve the current situation. A total of 75 risks along with their importance were identified. The findings indicated that resilience in the supply chain could be improved by examining how risks are created in organizations and could affect the behavior of the supply chain. Based on the findings, it is suggested that a risk management system be established to identify uncertainties which may directly or indirectly have resulted in their creation. In addition, significant measures could be taken to enhance patients' satisfaction with service quality. For example, surveys may be conducted to investigate and possibly accommodate patients' demands and preferences. Furthermore, the services provided to patients can be monitored on a regular basis to evaluate several factors such as service quality, average treatment time, patient recovery rate and customers' feedback.

Furthermore, using the coping and recovery strategies reported in this study can help prevent risks in the supply chain for medical tourism and play an important role in adapting to current conditions. These strategies could be useful for various components of the supply chain. For instance, suppliers can enhance resilience by ensuring efficient distribution, promoting inter- and intra-organization cooperation and managing inventories. Moreover, hospitals, as a major center for providing patients with medical services, can improve their infrastructure, manage receivable accounts, and increase the monitoring of their different parts, which may help enhance the resilience of the supply chain. Furthermore, regarding financial strategies, the government can provide subsidies for hospitals in both private and public sectors to decrease the costs of medical centers and suppliers, and this can encourage decision makers in supply chains to greater efficiency and enhance their income.

Given that tourists in medical tourism aim to find the best destination for receiving treatment services, it is highly recommended to consider the risks reported in this study and elsewhere (e.g. Jaberidoost et al., 2013; Silva et al., 2020) and take significant measures to overcome them, and this can in turn increase the number of tourists. For example, regarding human resources, it is recommended to employ qualified staff by administering recruitment exams and carefully considering the applicants' résumés, which can significantly help employ more competent personnel. In this vein, different factors relating to applicants' behavior, personality and competence could be evaluated by using psychological tests. Further, it is suggested that supply chain managers make comprehensive plans for human resources, introduce current employees to new ones, and establish objective evaluation criteria.

Since some of the suggested strategies (e.g. improving cooperation, assigning trucks by companies) are not widely adopted in the supply chain, future research could investigate not only the challenges and barriers to implementing these strategies but also their potential benefits. In doing so, further research could assess the impact of the risks identified in this study on performance.

This study has some limitations. First, only some members of the medical tourism supply chain in Iran (i.e. five out of nine components: hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, medical equipment companies, hotels and international facilitator companies) were involved. Thus, it is suggested that future studies focus on a larger number, or possibly all, of the supply chain components to achieve a greater in-depth understanding in medical tourism. Second, given the utmost importance of environmental risks, it is recommended that further research pays more attention to these risks by examining their undesirable effects on the whole chain.

The data in this study were collected via semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. To build upon this, future research could use other data collection techniques such as observation, life history narratives and ethnography to gather more detailed information about the risks. Last but not the least, care should be taken in generalizing the findings since the current study was performed in Iran, a country with its own unique political, social and economic features.

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Appendix A. Participants' demographic features

Participant No.	Gender	Age	Academic degree	Organizational position	Working area
P_1	Male	37	PhD	Manager	Hospital
P_2	Male	45	General practitioner	Manager	Hospital
P_3	Female	45	BA	Manager	Hospital
P_4	Female	40	MA	Expert	Hospital
P_5	Male	32	PhD	Technical director of the pharmacy	Hospital
P_6	Female	28	BA	Expert	Hospital
P_7	Male	40	BA	Manager	Hotel
P_8	Male	37	BA	Managing director	International facilitator company
P_9	Male	36	BA	Managing director	Pharmaceutical and medical equipment company
P_{10}	Male	34	BA	Branch manager	Pharmaceutical and medical equipment company
P_{11}	Male	37	MA	Manager	Hospital
P_{12}	Male	39	MA	Supply chain manager	Pharmaceutical and medical equipment company
P_{13}	Male	30	BA	Sales manager	Pharmaceutical and medical equipment company
P_{14}	Male	38	MA	Managing director	Medical equipment company
P_{15}	Female	26	BA	Sales expert	Pharmaceutical and medical equipment company
P_{16}	Female	43	BA	Supervisor	Hospital
P_{17}	Female	27	BA	Nurse	Hospital
P_{18}	Male	38	MA	Managing director	Pharmaceutical and medical equipment company

Appendix B. FMEA questionnaire

Dear participant,
Please kindly rate each risk in terms of its probability of occurrence, severity, and detection. Your answers will be completely confidential. Thank you very much for your beneficial cooperation.

Very poor	Poor	Medium	Good	Very good
1	2	3	4	5

Concept	Probability of occurrence	Severity	Detection
Demanding customers			
High-risk patients			
Fluctuations in exchange rates			

Concept	Probability of occurrence	Severity	Detection
Receivable accounts			
Problems related to working with suppliers			
Insufficient raw materials			
Ineffective supervision			
Maintenance			
Drug supply			
Pricing policies			
Problems in customs clearance			
Sanctions			
Inappropriate training of human resources			
Process interference			
Natural disasters			
Non-compliance with contracts			
Differences in doctors’ prescriptions			
Inadequate human resources			
Recruitment of human resources			
Health and safety of human resources			
Transport			
Delays in supply			
Information system			
Government policies			
Poor skills and inadequate knowledge of human resources			
Services			
Terrorism			
Random fluctuations in demands			
Customers’ ignorance about the services procedure			
Environmental issues			
Delays by the logistics staff			
Drug compatibility			
High taxes			
Mistakes made by human resources			
The essential equipment for production			
Cultural differences			
Suppliers’ inability for adapting to competitive conditions			
Errors in allocating budget			
Lack of coordination between supply chain members			
Problems related to drug therapy			

Concept	Probability of occurrence	Severity	Detection
Inadequate welfare facilities			
Insufficient scientific research			
Information technology			
Decision making			
Competitors			
Adding to/changing one's needs			
Failing to identify customers' needs			
Partial perspective			
Black market			
Inadequate supply			
Differences in the quality of medical items			
Problems related to outsourcing			
Dissatisfaction of human resources			
Negative news by media			
Poor coordination among regulatory organizations			
Laws and regulations			
Urban security			
Violation of laws by human resources			
Seasonal demand			
Intellectual property			
Infrastructure			
Counterfeit medicine			
Behavioral problems in the supply chain			
Pharmaceutical recall			
Ineffective marketing			
Inventory corruption			
Dependence on a limited number of suppliers			
Lack of coordination within the organization			
Inventory shortage			
Accounting errors			
Warehousing			
Drug and equipment referral			
Dependence on a particular employee			
Cash purchase			
Product development			

Appendix C. Resilience number questionnaire

Dear participant,
Please kindly rate each risk in terms of its probability of occurrence, severity, and detection. Your answers will be completely confidential. Thank you very much for your beneficial cooperation.

Very poor	Poor	Medium	Good	Very good
1	2	3	4	5

Resilience parameters	Resilience strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Probability of occurrence	Designing VIP and private rooms for health tourists					
	Establishing a unit for respect					
	Assigning one particular host/hostess for each department					
	Providing communication facilities such as the internet, TV, and IPTV					
	Rejecting high-risk patients					
	Continuous management of resources and consumptions					
	Using enterprise resource planning (ERP) software					
	Securing appropriate agreement contracts					
	Supervision of the treatment manager and supervisors					
	Paying attention to rules and regulations of the supervisory agencies					
	Auditing and online assessing of activities					
	Knowledge management for equipping employees and increasing their awareness					
	Frequent and regular training					
	Implementing PDP system (ISO 1015)					
	Having a minimum number of documents for clearance					
	Selecting and working with companies specialized in import					
	Cooperating with government for importing medical items					
	Purchasing high-quality products with guarantee					
	Maintenance					
	Promoting cooperation in the supply chain					
	Running workshops for managers					
	Promoting relations with suppliers					
	Using treatment protocols of the Health Ministry					
	Adapting the hospital medicine handbook with medical items approved by doctors					
	Having a succession plan					
	Redundancy in workforce					
	Establishing and maintaining relationships with universities and institutions and securing contracts					
	Recruiting workforce via exams					
	Using personal protective equipment					
	Providing a suitable place for human resources to relax					

Resilience parameters	Resilience strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Probability of occurrence	Securing contracts with reliable and committed couriers					
	Using roofed vehicles and equipped					
	Assigning trucks by companies					
	Improving transportation conditions					
	Careful and ongoing monitoring of transportation of cargo, equipment, and patients					
Risk intensity	Increasing flexibility in hoteling services					
	Obtaining informed consent before operation					
	Having alternative plans					
	Inexpensive workforce					
	Accepting cash for some services					
	Having alternative plans in case of problems with the supplier					
	Securing international contracts to claim damages					
	Considering additional suppliers					
	Depoting inventory					
	Securing appropriate agreement contracts					
	Supplying products from the local market					
	Using similar products					
	Forming drug and treatment committees					
	Providing services with different prices for various customer groups					
	Setting prices in proportion to increasing costs					
	Promoting collaborations with the Board of Trustees in Foreign Exchange Savings to Treat Patients					
	Cooperating with friendly countries					
	Predicting epidemics, pandemics, and nuclear threats					
	Performing maneuvers for improving preparedness					
	Receiving guarantees					
	Determining damages in case of non-fulfillment of obligations					
	Organizing clinical committees in hospitals					
	Applying professional mobility for human sources					
	Providing human resources with insurance					
	Insuring cargos and patients					
	Securing long-term and legal contracts					
	Promoting the supply chain accountability					
Recognition power	Providing physical and mental health records					
	Having alternative plans					
	Using a black and white list					
	Tracking deficiencies					
	Assessing the effectiveness of training courses					

Resilience parameters	Resilience strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Recognition power (cont.)	Implementing PDP system (ISO 1015)					
	Running training and internship courses					
	Annual examination of human resources					
	Developing a framework for examining the current and future health conditions of human resources					
	Monitoring occupational risks (ISO 18000)					

Source: authors.

Appendix D. FAAO questionnaire

Dear participant,
Please kindly rate each risk in terms of its time, cost, and quality of recovery. Your answers will be completely confidential. Thank you very much for your beneficial cooperation.

Very poor	Poor	Medium	Good	Very good
1	2	3	4	5

Concept	Time of recovery	Cost of recovery	Quality of recovery
Infrastructure			
Inappropriate training of human resources			
Negative news by media			
Demanding customers			
Services			
Competitors			
Poor skills and inadequate knowledge of human resources			
Health and safety of human resources			
High taxes			
Maintenance			
Differences in the quality of medical items			
Mistakes made by human resources			
Natural disasters			
Pricing policies			
Random fluctuations in demands			
Drug supply			
Drug compatibility			
Receivable accounts			
Problems related to outsourcing			
Fluctuations in exchange rates			

Concept	Time of recovery	Cost of recovery	Quality of recovery
Non-compliance with contracts			
Differences in doctors’ prescriptions			
Sanctions			
Environmental issues			
Inadequate welfare facilities			
Cash purchase			
Government policies			
Ineffective marketing			
Black market			
Adding to/changing one’s needs			
Terrorism			
Drug and equipment referral			
Lack of coordination within the organization			
Delays in supply			
Recruitment of human resources			
Inadequate human resources			
Errors in allocating budget			
Decision making			
Laws and regulations			
Dependence on a limited number of suppliers			
Transport			
Pharmaceutical recall			
Inadequate supply			
Product development			
The essential equipment for production			
Delays by the logistics staff			
Partial perspective			
Seasonal demand			
Suppliers’ inability for adapting to competitive conditions			
Problems in customs clearance			
Process interference			
Counterfeit medicine			
Intellectual property			
Dissatisfaction of human resources			
Dependence on a particular employee			
Insufficient raw materials			
Problems related to working with suppliers			
Warehousing			

Concept	Time of recovery	Cost of recovery	Quality of recovery
Inventory shortage			
Information technology			
Cultural differences			
Ineffective supervision			
Information system			
Customers' ignorance about the services procedure			
High-risk patients			
Behavioral problems in the supply chain			
Lack of coordination between supply chain members			
Problems related to drug therapy			
Insufficient scientific research			
Inventory corruption			
Violation of laws by human resources			
Urban security			
Failing to identify customers' needs			
Accounting errors			
Poor coordination among regulatory organizations			

Appendix E. Resilience number questionnaire

Dear participant,
Please kindly rate each strategy in terms of its appropriateness and effectiveness. Your answers will be completely confidential. Thank you very much for your beneficial cooperation.

Very poor	Poor	Medium	Good	Very good
1	2	3	4	5

Resilience parameters	Resilience strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Recovery time	Holding in-service training classes					
	Establishing effective campaigns in cyberspace					
	Increasing awareness about customers' wants by using survey forms					
	Detecting and solving problems					
	Providing patients with free and immediate treatments					
	Holding weekly meetings with the patients' physicians					
	Using temporary workforce					
	Using supporting capacities					

Resilience parameters	Resilience strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Recovery time	Using alternative drugs					
	Not directly cooperating with hospitals and working with intermediaries					
	Barter					
	Using additional outsourcing					
	Working with supporting suppliers					
Recovery cost	Getting loans and bank facilities					
	Reducing costs					
	Training safety rules					
	Obtaining tax exemptions					
	Using warnings, reprimands, and dismissals					
	Seeking feedback from customers, followed by mass production					
	Conducting initial tests and then using the drug					
	Using other buildings (e.g., mosques and schools)					
	Providing some services in cash					
	Offering profitable ancillary services					
	Providing complementary services					
	Using legal capacities					
	Converting cash into properties					
	Planning for customers at different levels					
	Considering the average exchange rate and providing service packages					
Recovery quality	Using donors' support for expanding services and facilities					
	Using field equipment					
	Improving the quality of training courses					
	Transparency in sharing negative news					
	Sharing positive news relating to the subject					
	Establishing effective campaigns in cyberspace					
	Improving responsiveness to customers' needs by using supporting services					
	Detecting and solving problems					
	Offering special suggestions to customers					
	Letting customers pay over an extended time period					
	Cooperating with competitors					
	Running theoretical training courses					
	Organizing practical workshops					
	Using overtime to compensate for the injured workforce					
	Postponing the related services					
	Outsourcing services for a limited time					
	Identifying and analyzing errors					
	Forming crisis management teams					

Resilience parameters	Resilience strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Recovery quality (cont.)	Establishing field hospitals					
	Using demand management policies (e.g., flexible capacity and inventory)					
	Using demand management policies (commercial promotions and proportional pricing)					
	Purchasing from the black market					
	Analyzing patients' conditions					
	Managing financial resources to compensate for budget shortages					
	Securing flexible contracts					
	Cooperating with friendly countries					
	Using cheaper foreign exchange provided by the government					
	Forming clinical committees in hospitals for analyzing prescriptions					

DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.02 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Customer-perceived importance of restaurant attributes for casual dining, fast food and coffee shops

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How to cite (APA style): Wiastuti, R.D., & Rashid, B. (2024). Customer-perceived importance of restaurant attributes for casual dining, fast food and coffee shops. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 35–46. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.02

ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the restaurant attributes that fit specifically into three different types of food and beverage businesses: casual dining, fast food and coffee shops. The notion is based on customer-perceived importance proposed for a specific one-generation cohort. There were 519 respondents from Generation Z, gathered in mid-2023 using both printed and online questionnaires. Data were analyzed using factor analysis with SPSS. The restaurant attribute consisted of five types based on past literature, food, service, ambiance, experience and safety. However, the findings for the Gen Z context, resolved into only three types: casual dining, fast food and coffee shops, consisting of 30, 23 and 27 items respectively. To add, despite female Gen Z demanding more cleanliness than its male counterpart, both agree that quality of taste is the most important attribute for choosing a restaurant. The result of this study provides valuable information for restaurant businesses to better grasp Gen Z market's dining habits. Restaurant operators will understand how customers evaluate the relevance of restaurant qualities differently.

KEYWORDS

casual dining, food attribute, restaurant attribute, safety attribute, service attribute

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
28 November 2023
Accepted:
4 March 2024
Published:
25 July 2024

1. Introduction

Attributes in the context of a restaurant are defined as the elements customers consider and use to select a restaurant brand (Rhee et al., 2016). According to Ha and Jang (2013), restaurant attributes can be divided into two fields: the first includes pull factor attributes from the company's point of view, and the second is push factor attributes from the customer side; where both are complementary. These authors derive the concept from attribute-value theory in which "individuals determine value based on which attributes are present and how important those attributes are to achieving an individual's end goal, as value is not only perceived but also desired" (Ha and Jang, 2013, p. 387). In other words, an individual might value attributes differently from one another (Rhee et al., 2016). Person A might value food and price attributes as a priority, while person B might prefer service and ambiance above others. Although the most salient attributes were found to be food, service, and ambiance, however these findings will vary depending on the research focus (Kwok et al., 2016).

The notion of a restaurant attribute's importance emanates from the concept of service quality or SERVQUAL by Parasuraman et al. (1988), consisting of five constructs (tangibles, assurance, reliability, empathy, responsiveness) and 22 indicators. The SERVQUAL model was the first to be created for service and retail establishments, and a further concept was developed by Stevens et al. (1995) that extends the SERVQUAL model to fit the restaurant industry. This concept, then named DINESERV, consists of five constructs from SERVQUAL but has 29 indicators with all constructs adhering to the restaurant context only.

However, instead of service quality, this present study emphasizes the perceived importance of service in the restaurant context. Later Cheng et al. (2020) argued that DINESERV was not able to show customer preferences comprehensively, thus they developed a new approach by combining the concept of food-related lifestyle to better measure a customer's choice of dining-related services. Both the concepts of SERVQUAL and DINESERV have been used in diverse studies in the context of food service, and in conjunction with the concept of perceived quality which includes several restaurant attributes. Customers then may regard some attributes as less or more significant than others, or even not relevant at all (Choi, Choi et al., 2020). Interestingly, customers perceived different important food attributes for different restaurant types. For instance, customers put value or convenience attributes onto fast food and quick service restaurant concepts (Ottenbacher et al., 2019). Meanwhile, service and product attributes were perceived as the most important for casual dining and fine dining restaurants (Do, 2020). This leads to the fact that different restaurant settings may lead to different results on how customers perceive the importance of its attributes. Acknowledging customer-perceived importance of restaurant attributes may have a significant impact on a restaurant's sustainability (Ponnam & Balaji, 2014) by satisfying customer end goals, needs and expectations (Souki et al., 2020). Therefore, the perceived importance of restaurant attributes is critical information for a restaurant business to understand how customers measure various attributes in their evaluation of the whole dining experience. Aligned with Pizam et al. (2016) who point out the need to identify what attributes are important to the customer can be valuable information for restaurant management.

In this study particularly, the researchers use the extended form above to elaborate on the importance of restaurant attributes from the customer perspective. Therefore, this it aims to explore the restaurant attributes that can fit into three different types of restaurants: casual dining, fast food and coffee shops, based on customer-perceived importance proposed for a specific single generation cohort: Generation Z. Further, this study tries to answer four research questions:

RQ_1: What are the Gen Z perceived importance attributes of a restaurant in general?

RQ_2: What are the Gen Z perceived importance attributes of casual dining restaurants?

RQ_3: What are the Gen Z perceived importance attributes of fast-food restaurants?

RQ_4: What are the Gen Z perceived importance attributes of a coffee shop?

2. Research methodology

The restaurant attributes (RA) are measured using five dimensions and 40 indicators as seen in Figure 1. The first dimension, food attributes (FA), consists of nine indicators adopted from Choi, Choi et al. (2020), Singh et al. (2021) and Canny (2014). The second dimension, service attributes (SA), consists of seven indicators adopted from Mohd Yusof et al. (2021), Erkmen and Hancer (2019), and Liu and Tse (2018). The third dimension, ambience attributes (AA), consist of nine indicators adopted from Singh et al. (2021), Yu et al. (2018) and Ahmad et al. (2017). The fourth dimension, experience attributes (EA), consists of seven indicators, adopted from Choi, Yang et Tabari (2020), Do (2020) and Harrington et al. (2011). Last, the fifth dimension, safety attributes (TA), consists of eight indicators adopted from Tuzovic et al. (2021). A six-point Likert scale was deployed as the measurement scale for all

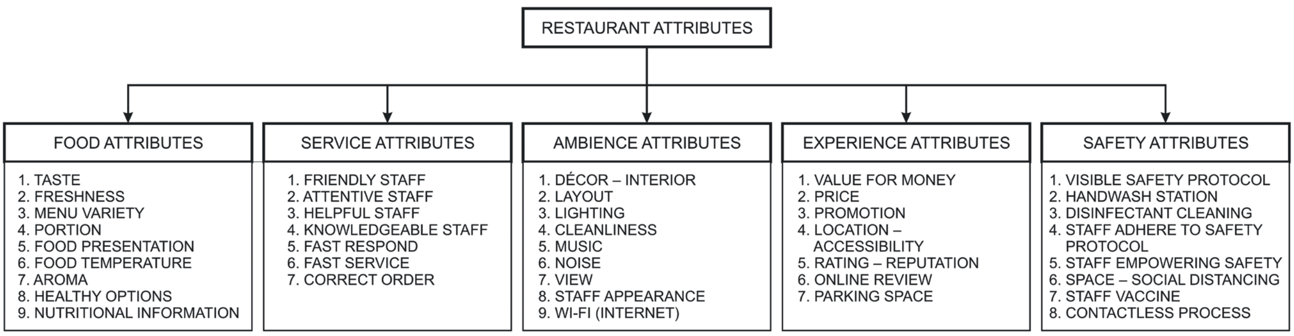

Figure 1. Restaurant attributes measurement
Source: authors

items, with 1 being *strongly disagree*, 2 – *disagree*, 3 – *likely disagree*, 4 – *likely agree*, 5 – *agree* and 6 – *strongly agree*. The questionnaire was written in Indonesian as the respondents' native language. In the screening questions for the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their dining experience in the last six months. Those who answered 'None' are directed to the 'Thank you' page. In other words, they cannot fill out the questionnaire since they did not meet the criteria. However, no information on dining frequency was asked for in the remainder of the questionnaire.

The study was conducted in Indonesia, involving 577 respondents across 12 cities. The survey used a questionnaire, delivered in two forms, printed and an electronic one using Google Forms distributed both online (using link) and offline (face-to-face) between May to July 2023. Three criteria for respondents were set: (a) must be Indonesian citizens, (b) categorized as Generation Z or born between 1997 to 2006, and (c) have had experience of onsite dining experience in food and beverage service premises for the past six months. Gen Z itself is those who were born between 1997 to 2012 (Dimock, 2019; Gomez et al., n.d.). However, this study sets a minimum age of 17, sufficient to be considered an adult in Indonesia, be able to express personal opinions and be independent. Therefore, the sample for this study is those who were at least 17 years old in 2023 or born in 2005. In contrast, this study did not set an earliest year of birth thus following the existing literature. In other words, the oldest was 26 years old in 2023. At the end of data collection, all participants received a gratuity of IDR 25,000 in the form of an electronic wallet or mobile credit, based on their preference. This study employs a non-probability sampling method as it requires no sampling frame, and participants are particularly chosen because they fit the desired criteria set by the researcher (Kolb, 2018, p. 55).

The population is unknown as there is no supporting data for the above criteria. However, the Gen Z population in Indonesia is greater than 75 million. Hair et al. (2014, p. 172) suggest using a sample size method of sample-to-variable ratios for an unknown population measured using a ratio of 15:1 to 20:1 for the number of samples and the variables used in the research. Since this study employs five variables, a minimum of 100 samples (5 multiple 20 ratio) is considered sufficient. To add, using a formula from the Raosoft sample size calculator, a minimum of 385 samples is adequate. Moreover, Kyriazos (2018) summarized various methods of calculating a sample size that should be applied to factor analysis. For instance, those with a size of 100 are considered as poor while 500 is considered as very good. Similarly, MacCallum et al. (1999) suggest a sample between 300 to over 500 as appropriate. Of the 577 respondents, only 519 were further processed for the analysis after excluding bias and incomplete data. Therefore, the sample size of 519 complies with the above minimum threshold and is also representative of the population based on the ratio of each city to the sample gathered. Data was processed using factor analysis with SPSS version 27. A pilot of 54 samples was processed before proceeding with the main analysis, indicating that the data was valid and reliable. However, a few wordings were revised to better present the questions and enhance the respondent's understanding.

3. Results

At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to choose one of their most visited restaurant types among three given options, casual dining, fast food and coffee shops, as a basis for their remaining answers in the questionnaire. The respondent's demographics for this study are 34.87% male (181 respondents) and 65.13% female (338 respondents), with their choices of the most visited restaurant type being 31.79% casual dining (165 respondents), 33.41% fast food (172 respondents) and 35.07% coffee shop (182 respondents). The big gap in ratio between male and female respondents is due to the sample criteria that accounts for more males than their female counterparts. For instance, in most tourism and hospitality higher education institutions in Indonesia, the number of female students is greater than male. To add, the city of Yogyakarta, one of the locations for data collection, has more female citizens than male.

Restaurant attribute measurement

The step-by-step process in SPSS uses the menu of → analyze → dimension reduction → factor → descriptive (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin [KMO] and Bartlett's test of sphericity), extraction (principal component, correlation matrix, based on an eigenvalue greater than 1), options (suppress small coefficients with an absolute value below 0.50).

In total, there are three factor analysis steps in this study. The first employs 40 items from its original literature review and as a result, one item (FA6) has a low loading of 0.485 (below the set value of 0.50) and five items (EA5, FA3, EA6, TA2, FA5) show high cross-loading to more than factor. Therefore, these six were deleted. The second analysis employs only 34 items after the six-item deletion from the first. The finding shows no item has a loading value below 0.50, but there is one item (EA7) that has high cross loading, and is therefore eliminated leaving 33. As a result, none have low loading or high cross-loading. All three steps result in forming three factors with statistical results such as KMO, Bartlett's significance, communalities, and cumulative total variance presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor analysis step by step

Step	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	Bartlett's significance	#Items cross loading	#Item loading <0.5	Cummulative total variance %	Factor 1 %	Factor 2 %	Factor 3 %
Step 1	0.984	0.000	5	1	76.79	69.53	4.42	2.84
Step 2	0.982	0.000	1	–	77.90	69.79	5.11	3.09
Step 3	0.982	0.000	–	–	78.12	69.70	5.24	3.17

Source: authors.

It can be posited that step 3 resulted in the highest cumulative total variance percentage (78.12%), compared to step 2 (77.90%) and step 1 (76.79%). Despite the increase for each step being less than 1%, it still enhances progressively, indicating that the 33 items better explain the restaurant's attributes than its 40 original items. Accordingly, the final factor analysis refers to the result in step 3, as seen in Table 2, which displays the statistical results for communalities correlation, and loading factors for 33 items. In addition, Cronbach's alpha value for all items is more than 0.9 showing high reliability.

Table 2. Measurement items statistical results

Items		Mean	*SD*	α	COR	COM	CM
FA1	Good taste	5.19	1.230	0.942	0.981	0.812	0.777
FA2	Freshness	5.07	1.178	0.943	0.982	0.802	0.778
FA3	Menu variety*	4.74	1.246	0.944	–	–	–
FA4	Portion	4.80	1.266	0.944	0.988	0.719	0.676
FA5	Food presentation*	4.74	1.268	0.942	–	–	–
FA6	Food temperature*	4.64	1.319	0.945	–	–	–
FA7	Aroma	4.84	1.235	0.943	0.986	0.709	0.643
FA8	Healthy option	4.50	1.327	0.945	0.978	0.703	0.594
FA9	Nutritional information	4.23	1.372	0.949	0.972	0.668	0.618
SA1	Friendly staff	5.06	1.248	0.971	0.985	0.849	0.785
SA2	Attentive staff	4.98	1.252	0.970	0.975	0.859	0.793
SA3	Helpful staff	5.00	1.234	0.971	0.979	0.842	0.773
SA4	Knowledgeable staff	4.94	1.283	0.973	0.985	0.803	0.761
SA5	Responsive staff	5.06	1.223	0.970	0.983	0.873	0.809
SA6	Fast service	5.08	1.240	0.973	0.992	0.849	0.803
SA7	Staff providing exact orders	5.14	1.208	0.975	0.977	0.853	0.825
AA1	Décor and interior	4.53	1.294	0.943	0.973	0.788	0.696
AA2	Layout	4.49	1.241	0.944	0.972	0.773	0.682
AA3	Lighting	4.74	1.271	0.944	0.984	0.756	0.549
AA4	Cleanliness	5.16	1.215	0.947	0.978	0.850	0.806
AA5	Music	4.32	1.342	0.946	0.977	0.773	0.760
AA6	Noise	4.57	1.326	0.949	0.985	0.654	0.639
AA7	View	4.64	1.290	0.944	0.988	0.737	0.620

AA8	Staff appearance	4.59	1.312	0.946	0.988	0.726	0.548
AA9	Wi-Fi	4.59	1.410	0.948	0.983	0.677	0.593
EA1	Value for money	4.88	1.279	0.942	0.982	0.722	0.669
EA2	Price	4.93	1.242	0.939	0.982	0.772	0.723
EA3	Promotion	4.82	1.311	0.942	0.984	0.671	0.594
EA4	Location and accessibility	4.93	1.258	0.938	0.986	0.754	0.689
EA5	Rating and reputation*	4.79	1.256	0.939	–	–	–
EA6	Online review*	4.63	1.301	0.941	–	–	–
EA7	Parking space*	4.72	1.310	0.946	–	–	–
TA1	Visible safety protocol info	4.57	1.312	0.964	0.981	0.829	0.734
TA2	Handwash station/disinfection*	4.82	1.269	0.964	–	–	–
TA3	Surface cleaning using disinfectant	4.68	1.341	0.962	0.983	0.866	0.777
TA4	Staff adhering to safety protocol	4.80	1.281	0.963	0.981	0.861	0.731
TA5	Staff empowering safety protocol	4.62	1.314	0.962	0.975	0.864	0.806
TA6	Space and social distancing	4.41	1.353	0.964	0.980	0.841	0.793
TA7	Vaccinated staff	4.71	1.344	0.965	0.984	0.776	0.710
TA8	Contactless process	4.59	1.332	0.966	0.983	0.751	0.710

Note: FA – food attributes, SA – service attributes, AA – ambience attributes, EA – experience attributes, TA – safety attributes; *SD* – standard deviation, α – Cronbach's alpha, COR – correlation, COM – communalities, CM – component matrix; * deleted items.
Source: authors.

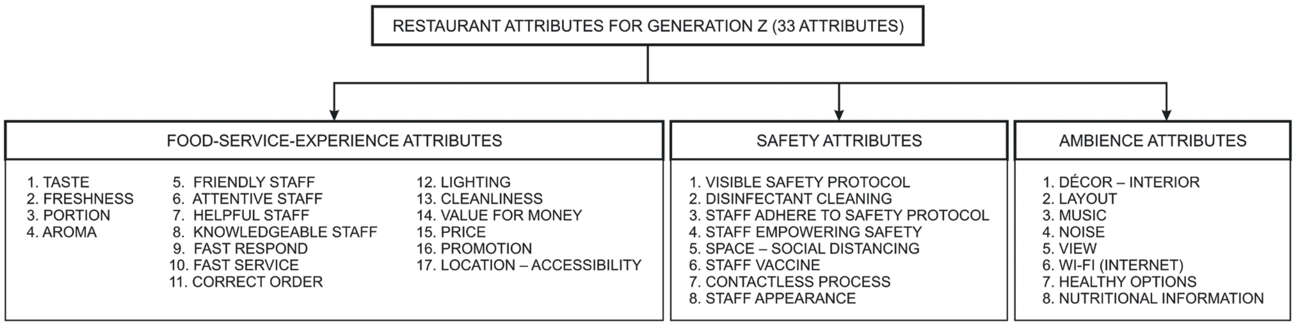

Figure 2. Restaurant attributes for Gen Z
Source: authors

Figure 2 shows the customer perceived importance of restaurant attributes (CPRI) for Gen Z in the restaurant context in general. This is the answer to address the first research question of this study. It is formed into three constructs from its original five. The first factor accounts for 69.70% of the total variance and consists of 17 items as a combination of the majority from the three original groups of factors, which are food, service and experience attributes. The second factor accounts for 5.24% of the total variance and consists of eight items, which are formed from seven safety attributes and one ambience attribute. The third factor accounts for 3.17% of the total variance and consists of eight items, which are formed mostly from ambience attributes and two food attributes. The next section presents Gen Z restaurant attributes based on three settings: casual dining, fast food and coffee shops using only 33 items of the 40 original items.

Restaurant attributes for casual dining

Figure 3 shows the CPRI for Gen Z specifically for the casual dining restaurant setting. This addresses the second research question of this study. The casual dining concept was chosen as the most visited restaurant type by 31.79%, equal to 165 respondents. Based on the factor analysis, the KMO is 0.963, degrees of freedom

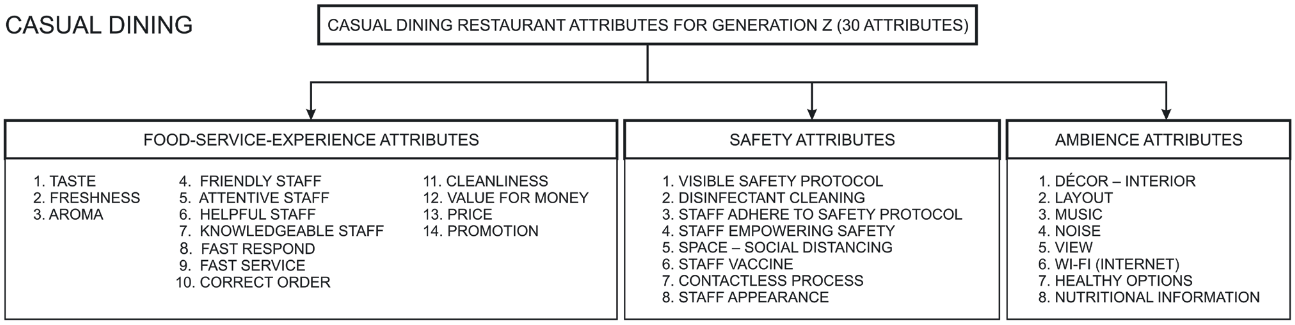

Figure 3. Casual dining restaurant attributes for Gen Z
Source: authors

Table 3. The new factor for casual dining

Total variance explained									
Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	19.795	65.983	65.983	19.795	65.983	65.983	10.688	35.626	35.626
2	1.834	6.115	72.098	1.834	6.115	72.098	6.549	21.828	57.454
3	1.282	4.273	76.371	1.282	4.273	76.371	5.675	18.916	76.371

Source: authors.

(*df*) is 435, and significance (Sig.) is 0.000. From 33 items, none show a loading factor less than 0.5, but there are three items that have high cross-loading (FA4, AA3, EA3) and are therefore deleted, only 30 items remain. According to Table 3, factor analysis for fast food Gen Z is formed into three factors of 30 items (components with an eigenvalue below one are not presented) with 76.37% cumulative. The first-factor accounts for 65.98% (14 items) of the restaurant attributes variance, followed by the second (eight items) and third factor (eight items) accounting for 6.11% and 4.27% respectively.

Restaurant attributes for fast food

Figure 4 shows the CPRI for Gen Z specifically for the fast-food restaurant setting. This addresses the third research question of this study. Fast food or the quick service concept was chosen as the most visited restaurant type by 33.41%, equal to 172 respondents. Based on the factor analysis, the KMO is 0.969, *df* is 253, and Sig. is 0.000. From 33 items, none show a loading factor less than 0.5, but there are 10 items which have high cross-loading (FA7, FA8, FA9, AA3, AA7, AA8, EA1, EA3, TA4, TA7), and are therefore deleted, only 23 items remain. According to Table 4, factor analysis for fast food, Gen Z is formed of three factors of 23 items (components with an eigenvalue below one are not presented) with 85.06% cumulative. The first-factor accounts for 77.05% (13 items) of restaurant attribute variance, followed by the second (five items) and third factor (five items) account for 5.09% and 2.91% respectively.

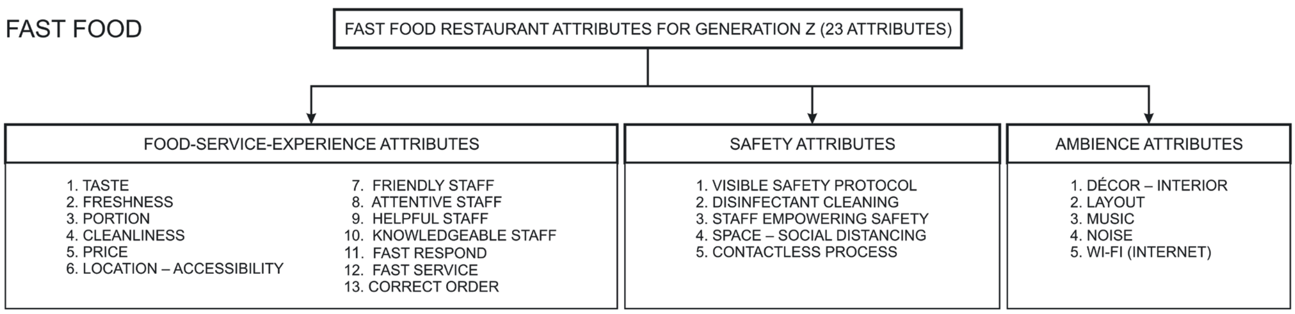

Figure 4. Fast food restaurant attributes for Gen Z
Source: authors

Table 4. The new factor for fast food

Total variance explained									
Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	17.723	77.055	77.055	17.723	77.055	77.055	9.586	41.678	41.678
2	1.172	5.096	82.151	1.172	5.096	82.151	5.278	22.949	64.627
3	0.670	2.913	85.064	0.670	2.913	85.064	4.701	20.438	85.064

Source: authors.

Restaurant attributes for coffee shops

Figure 5 shows the CPRI for Gen Z specifically for the coffee shop setting. This addresses the fourth research question of this study. The coffee shop concept was chosen as the most visited restaurant type by 35.07%, equal to 182 respondents, and the coffee shop intended in this study refers to the food service business that offers beverage-based (instead of food) main products. Based on the factor analysis, the KMO is 0.959, *df* is 351, and Sig. is 0.000. From 33 items, none show a loading factor less than 0.5, but there are six items that have high cross-loading (FA8, FA9, AA3, AA6, AA8, EA3), and are therefore deleted, only 27 items remain. According to Table 5, factor analysis for coffee shop Gen Z is formed into three factors of 27 items (components with an eigenvalue below one are not presented) with 78.48% cumulative. The first-factor accounts for 67.57% (15 items) of the restaurant attributes variance, followed by the second (seven items) and third factor (five items) accounts for 6.99% and 3.91% respectively.

Restaurant attributes importance

In terms of what matters most for restaurant customers, as seen in Figure 6, the findings show that they consider quality of taste (FA1 mean 5.19), cleanliness (AA4 mean 5.16), correct order (SA7 mean 5.14), fast service (SA6 mean 5.08) and freshness (SA2 mean 5.07) as the five most important attributes when deciding which

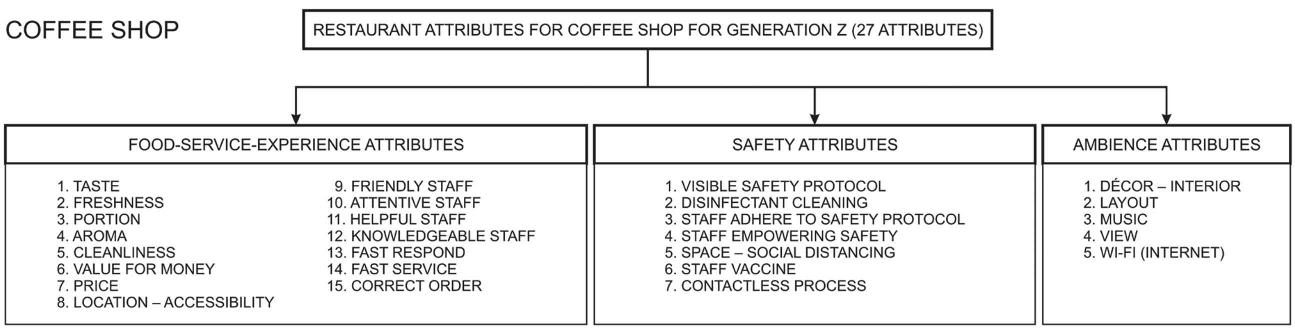

Figure 5. Coffee shop attributes for Gen Z
Source: authors

Table 5. The new factor for coffee shop

Total variance explained									
Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	18.246	67.577	67.577	18.246	67.577	67.577	10.229	37.884	37.884
2	1.889	6.996	74.573	1.889	6.996	74.573	6.579	24.367	62.251
3	1.057	3.915	78.488	1.057	3.915	78.488	4.384	16.238	78.488

Source: authors.

restaurant to choose. Similarly in the hospitality context, for instance in the hotel industry, Gen Z consider cleanliness as one of their top priorities (Wiastuti et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the top five least important attributes are nutritional information (FA9 mean 4.23), music (AA5 mean 4.32), social distancing (TA6 mean 4.41), layout (AA2 mean 4.49) and healthy options (FA8 mean 4.50). The findings however are quite contradictory as Gen Z consider food should be healthy, but in reality, they consider this as the least important when deciding to dine in food and beverage premises. In contrast with the older generation who overlook healthiness as very important (Scozzafava et al., 2017). On the other hand, nutritional information and healthy options are greatly determined by someone's lifestyle (Choi and Zhao, 2014) instead of generation cohort.

TYPE OF RESTAURANT	TOP 5 MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES FOR GEN Z	TOP 5 LEAST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES FOR GEN Z
FAST FOOD	1. GOOD TASTE 2. CORRECT ORDER 3. CLEANLINESS 4. FAST SERVICE 5. FRESHNESS	1. MUSIC 2. NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION 3. LAYOUT 4. HEALTHY OPTION 5. SOCIAL DISTANCING
COFFEE SHOP	1. GOOD TASTE 2. CLEANLINESS 3. CORRECT ORDER 4. RESPONSIVE STAFF 5. FAST SERVICE	1. NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION 2. SOCIAL DISTANCING 3. MUSIC 4. LAYOUT 5. STAFF APPEARANCE
CASUAL DINING	1. CLEANLINESS 2. CORRECT ORDER 3. GOOD TASTE 4. FRESHNESS 5. FAST SERVICE	1. NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION 2. MUSIC 3. SOCIAL DISTANCING 4. HEALTHY OPTION 5. WI-FI

Figure 6. Restaurant attributes for Gen Z
Source: authors

In terms of what matters most for casual dining customers, the findings show that Gen Z considers cleanliness (AA4 mean 5.25), correct order (SA7 mean 5.24), quality of taste (FA1 mean 5.18), freshness (FA2 mean 5.10) and fast service (SA6 mean 5.05) as the most important restaurant attributes when deciding which casual dining restaurant to choose. Meanwhile, the top five least important are nutritional information (FA9 mean 4.08), music (AA5 mean 4.17), social distancing (TA6 mean 4.36), healthy option (FA8 mean 4.45) and Wi-Fi (AA9 mean 4.47).

In terms of what matters most for fast food customers, the findings show that Gen Z considers quality of taste (FA1 mean 5.13), correct order (SA7 mean 5.03), cleanliness (AA4 mean 5.02), fast service (SA6 mean 5.02) and freshness (FA2 mean 5.00) as the most important when deciding which fast food restaurant to choose. Meanwhile, the top five least important are music (AA5 mean 4.28), nutritional information (FA9 mean 4.28), layout (AA2 mean 4.38), healthy option (FA8 mean 4.39) and social distancing (TA6 mean 4.40).

In terms of what matters most for coffee shop customers, the findings show that Gen Z consider quality of taste (FA1 mean 5.25), cleanliness (AA4 mean 5.20), correct order (SA7 mean 5.17), responsive staff (SA5 mean 5.15) and fast service (SA6 mean 5.15) as the most important restaurant attributes when deciding which coffee shop to choose. Meanwhile, the top five least important are nutritional information (FA9 mean 4.32), social distancing (TA6 mean 4.47), music (AA5 mean 4.50), layout (AA2 mean 4.56) and staff appearance (AA8 mean 4.61).

In addition, this study also extends to the degree of restaurant attribute importance based on gender: 34.87% equal to 181 respondents are male and 65.13% equal to 338 respondents are female. According to the descriptive statistic result, there are slight differences in how males and females choose what is important for them when dining, as seen in Figure 7. Both agree that quality of taste (FA1) is the most important attribute in the restaurant context, whatever the idea behind the premises. Followed by cleanliness, correct order, freshness and fast service for female Gen Z. Meanwhile for male Gen Z it was correct order, cleanliness, fast service and responsive staff.

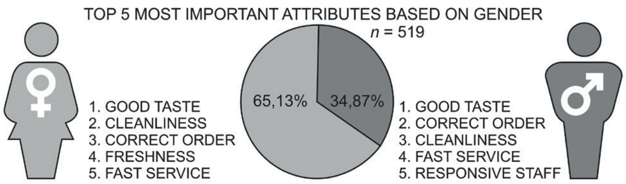

Figure 7. Restaurant attributes for male vs female Gen Z
Source: authors

4. Discussion

The discussion consists of two parts: the first aims to address the first research question "What are the perceived importance attributes of a restaurant in general for Gen Z?"; the second aims to address the second, third and fourth research questions "What are the perceived importance attributes for casual dining, fast-food and coffee shops for Gen Z?".

Generation Z – perceived importance of restaurant attributes

Past studies have explored and confirmed the literature on diverse restaurant attributes. However, in the context of the particular market of a generation cohort, here Generation Z, restaurant attributes can be measured through three factors of 33 items.

The first factor, formed from the combination of food-service-experience attributes, can be considered "core" as it contributes the most. It confirms 17 attributes: taste, freshness, portion, aroma, friendly staff, attentive staff, helpful staff, knowledgeable staff, fast response, fast service, correct order, lighting, cleanliness, value for money, price, promotion and location-accessibility. On top of that, none of the existing service attributes were excluded, and these indeed determine the dining behavior for Gen Z. By contrast, menu variety, food temperature, food presentation, rating-reputation, online review and parking space turn out not to correlate to Gen Z dining behavior. The fact that attributes of rating-reputation and online review are excluded contradicts the study of Harrington et al. (2011). In addition, parking space might be because most Gen Z, especially those in early college or high school are not eligible to have driving licenses in Indonesia and this includes those in early careers who might not yet be able to buy their own transport. Therefore, they did not consider the importance of parking space, or even its difficulty. In addition, since most Gen Z visit a restaurant with their family, most likely their parents are the ones who consider parking space attributes. Instructively, Gen Z consider food-service-experience as what determines importance.

The second factor is named safety attributes since seven out of eight are formed from this one only. However, this factor makes a slightly small contribution to restaurant attributes: visible safety protocol information, surface cleaning using a disinfectant, staff adhering to safety protocol, staff empowering safety protocol, space-social distancing, vaccinated staff, contactless process and staff appearance. The only safety attribute excluded in this result is the handwash station. This data is actually in line with recent post-pandemic conditions in Indonesia where starting in the first quarter of 2023 the government started to ease most of the COVID-19 safety procedures in public facilities, including restaurant premises. At this point, some restaurants have eliminated the handwash station but still provide hand disinfectant. On top of that, Indonesia officially announced its endemic status on June 21st 2023 and by the time respondents participated in this study, there were a mixture of different settings in terms of handwashing.

The third factor, formed from the combination of ambience attributes and food attributes, can be considered the least important in determining Gen Z dining behavior. It confirms eight attributes: décor-interior, layout, music, noise, view, Wi-Fi, healthy options and nutritional information. Surprisingly, none of the ambiance attributes were excluded showing that these attributes indeed determine Gen Z dining behavior. This finding supports the study of Stangierska et al. (2019) which found that nutritional information should be taken into account when discussing restaurants. Along the same lines, it also supports a study by Jeon et al. (2019) on the important role of Wi-Fi for Gen Z during dining and therefore fills the research gap. Apparently, 90% of Gen Z put high importance on an in-store WiFi connection to acquire their overall experiences (*Gen Z prioritizes in-store WiFi*, 2017) in order to stay connected with friends and access entertainment (Selig, 2024). This Wi-Fi alone, surprisingly can impact customer likelihood to revisit again (Cobanoglu et al., 2012).

Customer-perceived importance of restaurant attributes (CPRI) on different settings: The case for Gen Z

The majority of past studies explored CPRI in either a general restaurant setting or one specific setting. This study extends the domain into three specific settings: casual dining, fast food and coffee shops. These three were chosen among others (bars, fine dining and pubs) due to the market characteristics of this study location in Indonesia where there are more of these and they are the most commonly visited among Gen Z. CPRI for Gen Z in casual dining restaurants, fast-food restaurants and coffee shops can be distinguished through three major factors, consisting of 30 attributes, 23 attributes and 27 attributes. The most dominant factor for each setting is the combination of food, service and experience attributes and is in a similar vein to the discussion for a general restaurant setting. The difference is in the number of attributes is discussed further below.

Food attributes (FA) for (a) casual dining are determined by taste, freshness and aroma; (b) fast food by taste, freshness and portion; and (c) coffee shops by taste, freshness, portion and aroma. It shows that no matter what the restaurant setting is, quality of taste and freshness are two attributes that should be considered. Aroma, on the other hand, shows its significance only for Gen Z who dine at casual dining or coffee shops, and not for fast food customers. However, they expect to have a good portion of food to keep them full. It can be inferred that as long as fast-food customers find the food delicious and in a good-sized portion, then aroma does not matter. Service attributes (SA) for all three restaurant settings show the same result with seven attributes: friendly staff, attentive staff, helpful staff, knowledgeable staff, fast response, fast service and correct order. This shows that no matter where the customer is dining, service is crucial. The way restaurant employees deliver reliable and fast service is considered important for customers when dining out. There are no differences in restaurant types.

Ambiance attributes (AA) for (a) casual dining and (b) coffee shops are determined by décor-interior, layout, music, noise, view and Wi-Fi; (c) fast food by décor-interior, layout, music, noise and Wi-Fi. Here, view is the only difference. This makes sense since those who dine at fast-food restaurants tend to have quick meals with the main purpose being to eat, in contrast with those who dine at casual dining and coffee shops sometimes for social purposes and also leisure, and therefore the view becomes an important factor. Experience attributes (EA) for (a) casual dining are determined by value for money, price and promotion; (b) fast food by price and location-accessibility; and (c) coffee shops by value for money, price and location-accessibility. Here, the difference is quite interesting. Gen Z who dine at fast food restaurants are more sensitive to price and location-accessibility than for casual dining or coffee shops. This makes sense as fast food comes at an affordable price. For instance, starting at only 3US$ (45,000 IDR), customers can get one proper 'package' meal (rice with chicken or burger with fries and drink) in the majority of fast food restaurants in Indonesia such as McDonald's, KFC, Burger King and A&W. Customers look for a 'better' low-cost options in terms of price and furthermore, the location and accessibility of fast food can influence their choice of restaurant. Meanwhile, Gen Z diners in casual restaurants and coffee shops care about value for money. They may spend more than fast-food customers, thus, they believe that what they receive should be worth what they pay, not just in terms of price, but also in terms of time, ambience and experience. In addition, the promotion attribute only appears for casual dining customers. Among the three restaurant settings, casual dining is the one that is least affordable, therefore promotion becomes one of the important attributes that influence their experience during dining.

Safety attributes (TA) for casual dining are determined by visible safety protocol information, surface cleaning using a disinfectant, staff adhering to safety protocol, staff empowering safety protocol, space-social distancing, vaccinated staff, contactless process and staff appearance. Meanwhile, the safety attributes of coffee shops are similar to casual dining, only without staff appearance. This indicates that Gen Z who come to a coffee shop do not care about the staff's appearance as it does not influence safety. These types of customer are also more into casual dining ambiance once they are in a coffee shop. This is by contrast with those dining at casual restaurants who are sensitive to staff appearance. Further, the safety attributes of fast food are those having the least, just five attributes, and not including staff vaccine, staff appearance and staff adhering to safety protocol. Overall, what might not be considered significant for Gen Z for their dining behavior: (a) at casual diners portion, lighting and promotion, (b) at fast food – aroma, healthy options, nutritional information, lighting, view, staff appearance, value for money, promotion, staff adherence to safety protocol and vaccinated staff, and (c) at coffee shops – healthy options, nutritional information, lighting, noise, staff appearance and promotion. Surprisingly, promotion turned out not to be significant in all restaurant settings, contradicting the attributes studied by Choi, Choi et al. (2020). In sum, it can be inferred that different restaurant settings lead to different results on how Gen Z perceives the importance of their attributes.

5. Conclusion

Theoretical contribution

This study aims to explore the attributes that fit into three different types of restaurant: casual dining, fast food and coffee shops, based on customer-perceived importance for the specific one-generation cohort of Generation Z. In contrast with past studies that explore restaurant settings in general without any distinction for a particular market or generation, it turns out that casual dining has the most attributes (30 items – see Figure 3), followed by coffee shops (27 items – see Figure 4) and fast food (23 items – see Figure 5), from an original 33 items. As for restaurants in general, attributes can be measured through 40 items (see Figure 1), while attributes specific to the Generation Z market can be measured through 33 items and three dimensions (see Figure 2). It remains clear that each restaurant setting leads to different attributes, despite all exhibiting the same three factors and with the first being the most significant.

This study provides a theoretical contribution to knowledge about hospitality and tourism, particularly in the food and beverage context by empirically investigating attributes for various restaurant settings for certain generation cohorts. To the authors' knowledge, no similar research has been published. This study then confirms that restaurant attributes for the Gen Z market consist of three factors or dimensions, although these were derived from five factors. First, this study extends SERVQUAL and DINESERV to elaborate on the importance of restaurant attributes from a customer perspective, in line with a study by Choi, Yang and Tabari (2020). Second, this study extends to the customer-perceived importance attributes of a restaurant (CPRI), instead of its counterpart, customer-perceived quality attributes of a restaurant (CPRQ) which has received more focus. Accordingly, most past studies consider only food, service, ambiance, and value, convenience and price, while not highlighting safety with regards to the COVID-19 outbreak. This study covers not only mainstream restaurant attributes, as such food-service-ambiance but also additional ones that fit the recent food and beverage business environment and the distinctive characteristics of Generation Z. These new restaurant attributes can be used for future research should a study be designed for the Gen Z market and fit with those restaurant settings.

Managerial implications

This research proposes several recommendations for food and beverage business establishments, specifically those with Gen Z as some of their customers. To better grasp the Gen Z market for casual dining, restaurants should prioritize cleanliness above anything else. For fast food, one important thing to note is that customers are not seeking healthier choices. Fast food is identical to junk food and health risk issues such as cholesterol, therefore Gen Z, who have access to a wealth of information, are well aware of this reality. As a result, there is no need to try to persuade customers to consume a healthy menu, including awareness of nutritional information. On the contrary, the company must ensure that they deliver quick service, in keeping with their brand categorization as a fast-food restaurant. Many in Indonesia now strive to reduce unsold food waste by preparing it only after it is ordered, which has an influence on customer waiting times. For coffee shops, the company should understand that customers do not really care about staff appearance, therefore they need not focus on extravagant grooming and sophisticated uniforms. The same things apply to the layout inside the coffee shop. Instead, staff should be responsive. Thus, having a well-trained team and staff who can provide good service and be attentive is more important. Equally important, a considerable body of studies explored the impact of restaurant attributes that have proven to have positive and significant effects such as intention to revisit in the future (Halimi et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2019), satisfaction (Bae et al., 2018; Erkmen, 2019), provide recommendations (Chun and Nyam-Ochir, 2020), and perceived image (Marinkovic et al., 2015).

Limitations and future research

The first limitation of this study is the unbalanced male and female respondent populations, with roughly two-thirds being female. Therefore, future studies should consider providing a balanced gender response to avoid biased data. The second limitation is the study's restaurant settings which only include casual dining, coffee shops and fast food. Although there are other food and beverage settings, such as bars, fine dining and pubs, this study uses only those three owing to industry characteristics in Indonesia. Hence, future research should analyze the distinguishing characteristics of each and select what best fits the market. For example, because of their culture and government alcohol restrictions, Muslim countries tend to have fewer bars and pubs. Western and European countries, on the other hand, tend to be more accepting of alcohol. Less developed countries also tend to have fewer fine-dining restaurants because of their high prices, focusing instead on local culinary establishments that are not classified as those above. Furthermore, this study focuses just on one generation cohort, Generation Z. This is not to say that previous generations are unimportant. As a result, future research covering all generations would be enlightening, as most researchers investigate one or two generations only.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.03 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Uncovering online travel agency antecedents and their consequences in terms of consumer behavior: A retrospective analysis for future research

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How to cite (APA style): Singh, S., Prince, Aggarwal, N., & Dabas, D. (2024). Uncovering online travel agency antecedents and their consequences in terms of consumer behavior: A retrospective analysis for future research. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 47–67. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.03

ABSTRACT

The popularity of online travel agencies (OTAs) has been fueled by the growing use of internet technologies and the services they provide, and this makes it crucial to investigate consumer behavior (CB) towards them. The aim of the work is to identify the influencing factors/variables which affect CB and to provide empirical guidance on OTA antecedents and their consequences in terms of CB, based on a review of the existing literature using PRISMA protocol. An analysis of the 77 most pertinent articles has given a more thorough understanding of this revealing the most common influencing factors/variables (information, price, features, quality, customization & filters, user friendliness, etc.) used to measure the CB towards OTAs. Nevertheless, monetary value, trustworthiness, perceived value, website quality, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), service quality and information value are the most common antecedents, with customer purchase intention, satisfaction and loyalty as major consequences in terms of CB. This article represents the first effort to conduct a thorough literature evaluation of the influencing factors/variables, antecedents and consequences for CB. A greater grasp of these three aspects in the tourism sector can be helpful to researchers and to managers in the hospitality industry as well.

KEYWORDS

online travel agencies, consumer behavior, influencing factors, antecedents, consequences

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
23 October 2023
Accepted:
24 January 2024
Published:
6 September 2024

1. Introduction

The internet and the travel industry have both led to revolutions in CB. With the increase in internet usage, businesses have become more innovative and competitive in their efforts to provide customers with new and improved services. The way that customers plan, reserve and enjoy their travel plans has completely changed as a result of the explosive expansion of OTAs, online organizations which facilitate the services of travel booking via the internet. Purchasing travel services via OTAs is beneficial for both service providers and buyers and currently more than 400 exist, encompassing worldwide agencies, metasearch engines, hotel websites, vacation home rentals, and tour & activity resellers. These organizations, such as Expedia, Priceline and Booking.com, offer a wide range of products and services including flights, hotel accommodation, local tours and tickets to attractions (Vianna, 2023). According to the findings of a study conducted by Statista, the worldwide OTA market was reached to be worth $600 billion in 2023 and projected to increase to $800 billion by 2028 (Statista, 2024).

Understanding the consumer perspective on these platforms has become increasingly important for researchers and industry stakeholders as OTAs continue to influence the travel industry. Previous research has investigated various determinants that have had an impact on their acceptance and utilization by consumers, including trust, perceived utility, ease of use and website design, as evidenced by work of Gretzel et al. (2015). Previous studies have examined OTA effects on information quality and price competition and have tailored recommendations on consumer decision-making and loyalty (Talwar et al., 2020b).

An extensive review of these characteristics can provide insight into CB towards OTAs and will be helpful to researchers for further investigations. Additionally, it can offer significant data for OTAs to enhance their services and customize their products to more effectively fulfill consumer desires and expectations. The purpose of this research article is to assess and synthesize the body of knowledge already available on CB towards OTAs via a review of literature.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Online travel vagencies (OTAs)

A travel agency is an intermediary that facilitates travel-related services for individuals or groups. This includes arranging transportation, accommodation, tours and other travel-related services serving as a 'one-stop-shop', offering convenience by coordinating various aspects of trips. In the early stages, travel agencies were physical establishments which travelers visited to plan and book their trips (Cooper et al., 1993) but the advent of the internet in the late 20th century led to the rise of OTAs, enabling travelers to book flights, hotels and other services online (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The widespread use of smartphones has given rise to mobile OTA applications, allowing travelers to access and book services 'on the go' (Gretzel et al., 2015). OTAs have incorporated AI technologies, such as chatbots, for enhanced customer service, personalized recommendations and a streamlined booking processes while blockchain has been explored for its potential to enhance security and transparency in travel transactions (Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). Modern travel agencies are adapting to the growing demand for sustainable and experiential travel, offering eco-friendly options and unique travel experiences (Gössling et al., 2021).

2.2. Consumer behavior (CB)

Understanding CB has significant importance for firms in order to proficiently attract, involve and retain their intended customer base. Analysis of CB holds significant importance for organizations as it enables a deeper comprehension of their target demographic, facilitates the development of impactful marketing strategies, and fosters strong customer relationships. The study of CB is a complex and ever-evolving area of research that seeks to understand the cognitive processes involved in decision-making, the formation of attitudes and patterns of engagement.

Consumers make decisions, which includes problem identification, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision and post-purchase evaluation. Various aspects influence each stage of the decision-making process and their subsequent impact on CB, as outlined by Engel et al., 1995 in their seminal work. There is the impact of customers' perceptions of products, brands and marketing messages on attitudes and consumers show subsequent behavioral responses Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) as well as Keller (1993). The unique characteristics of CB in the online environment also affects several attributes, including online trust, perceived risk, website usability and online shopping experience, when engaging in online purchases (Liébana-Cabanillas et al., 2014).

CB is influenced by a multitude of factors including perception, motivation, learning, attitudes and personality traits, which are all psychological constructs (Usunier & Lee, 2013). Kotler and Armstrong (2016) conducted a study to investigate the manner in which consumers perceive and understand different marketing stimuli (cues), such as advertising messaging and product packaging, and the subsequent impact of those cues on their purchase decisions. CB is often influenced by social customs, opinions and suggestions from others. Situational factors such as time constraints, physical environment and social context can also significantly impact decision-making.

2.3. Consumer behavior (CB) and online travel agencies (OTAs)

The significance of online evaluations as a means of obtaining information and exerting social influence has witnessed a notable increase in customer decision-making on OTAs. Acquiring a thorough comprehension of CB in their context is crucial for scholars and professionals working in this field. Several studies have been conducted to examine the elements that influence customers' acceptance and usage. Consumers perceive them as significant instruments for accessing a wide array of travel services, facilitating rate comparisons and optimizing time and effort allocation (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Presently, consumers heavily depend on mobile applications and websites optimized for mobile devices to conveniently access and engage with OTAs. Research by Lim et al. (2022b) suggests that several factors, including ease of use, perceived utility and personalization, have an impact on consumers' utilization of mobile OTA services.

The implementation of personalization and customization strategies has become essential for OTAs in order to enhance the overall customer experience and cater to individual tastes. Previous research has examined the impact of personalized recommendations, customized services and customization options on CB, in terms of satisfaction and loyalty (Gretzel et al., 2015). The influence of CB on OTAs extends beyond the initial purchase decision, encompassing post-buy activity and reviews. Consumers are advised to utilize many OTA platforms in order to identify the most favorable costs and take advantage of value-added options. The development of consumer opinions on OTAs is heavily influenced by the importance of service quality and customer happiness. Numerous scholarly investigations have examined a number of dimensions of service quality, including website performance, responsiveness, reliability and promise fulfillment (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Favorable experiences and satisfaction can lead to repeated usage, favorable word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations and customer loyalty.

2.4. Research gap

Although previous research has provided useful insights, there is still a requirement to consolidate these findings in order to have a thorough knowledge of the factors that influence CB, its antecedents and consequences regarding OTAs. The primary objec-tive of this systematic literature review (SLR) is to fill this gap by analyzing a diverse array of works and synthesizing their outcomes. Through the implementation of a meticulous review process, encompassing a comprehensive search strategy, application of selection criteria, and extraction of relevant data, the primary objective is to present a comprehensive analysis of the existing body of knowledge. Additionally, this study aims to provide a valuable base for future research.

2.5. Research objective

Taken into consideration the above literature and the gap, the objectives for the current study are as follows:

1. To uncover the influencing factors/variables affecting CB towards OTAs based on the existing literature.
2. To provide empirical guidance on OTA antecedents and consequences in terms of CB based on the existing literature.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Review method

An SLR is a widely acknowledged research methodology that seeks to consolidate current knowledge in a systematic and organized manner, with the objective of guiding future developments in a particular domain, such as a discipline, a conceptual framework or an applied methodology (Palmatier et al., 2018). The scholarly publication authored by Lim et al. (2022a) offers a comprehensive evaluation of a taxonomy of review methodologies that can be employed to achieve the desired objective. The approach selected for this article is an SLR which aims to address inquiries surrounding current knowledge and future direction.

3.2. Search string

The Scopus advanced search function was utilized to retrieve relevant literature. The search query included the TITLE-ABS-KEY field to identify articles containing certain terms related to OTAs and their services. The terms included "OTA", "OTAs", "online travel agency", "online travel agencies", "online travel agency services", and "online travel agencies services". The search query also included the terms "customer*" or "consumer*" in the title, abstract and keywords.

3.3. Review procedure

The study employed the PRISMA protocol, a standardized approach for SLRs (Moher et al., 2009) as previous studies have demonstrated the application and advantages of this technology in diverse fields such as marketing (Lim et al., 2021; Ter Huurne et al., 2017). The methodology delineates four discrete phases: identification, screening, determination of eligibility and integration. The subsequent sections will provide a comprehensive description of each phase depicted in Figure 1.

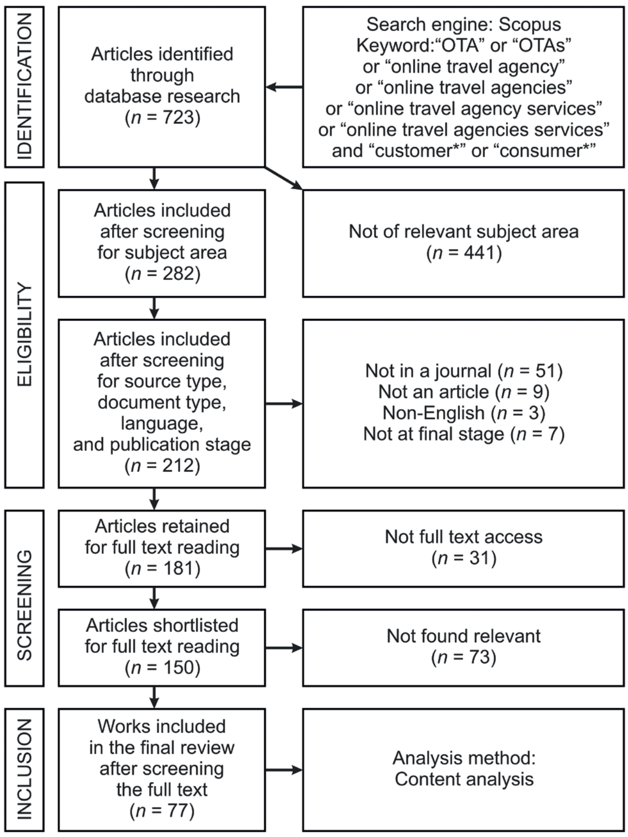

Figure 1. Review procedure based on the PRISMA protocol
Note: data extracted from Scopus database up to July, 2023
Source: authors

3.3.1. Identification

During identification, we used Scopus as a search engine to locate academic articles that contained specific keywords. This search engine is often regarded as being thorough and advanced, with the ability to efficiently index a vast array of items. This demonstrated the adequacy, suitability and logic of utilizing a limited yet pertinent set of keyword combinations.

3.3.2. Screening

During screening, we conducted a comprehensive assessment of articles, taking into consideration several factors such as subject area, source type, document type and language. We conducted a thorough assessment and made the decision to retain a total of 282 articles from the 723 found. Subsequently, an examination of the publishing source and document type was conducted, leading to the decision to exclude a total of 60 articles. Among these, 51 were excluded due to their publication in sources other than journals (such as books, book chapters, conferences and working articles), while the remaining nine were disregarded as they did not meet the criteria for being classified as an article (e.g. review, conference article, data article). The recommendation put forward by Paul et al. (2021) that non-journal articles should be excluded due to their tendency to exhibit insufficient rigor and an incomplete peer-review process was followed. Subsequently, the surviving articles underwent an examination to assess their linguistic quality and if they had reached the final stage of evaluation. Three articles written in languages other than English were excluded, along with seven that had not reached the final stage. A total of 181 articles satisfied the screening criteria and progressed to the stage of meeting the eligibility criteria.

3.3.3. Eligibility

In this phase, our objective was to obtain the entirety of the textual content as part of the eligibility process from the total of 181 articles surviving the screening phase. A total of 150 were available for a full text review with 31 being excluded due to lack of access to a full text, 73 were then removed because they were not relevant and therefore, a total of 77 were left and suitable for inclusion.

3.3.4. Inclusion

During the process of inclusion, a content analysis was conducted on the 77 articles sourced from Scopus. Crucial information regarding the factors that influence CB as well as antecedents and consequences, was extracted. In the present context, the researchers adhered to the framework as suggested by Lim et al. (2021) for the purpose of performing SLRs.

4. Results and interpretation

4.1. Summary of the articles reviewed

Table 1 presents a summary of all the selected 77 articles, showing authors details and in-text citations to support the research evidence and to justify the research. Secondly, Table 1 shows the objectives of every article included in the SLR to get a clear picture of its relevance for the current study. Further the findings shown in Table 1 are divided into three: influencing factors, antecedents and consequences in terms of CB towards OTAs.

Table 1. Summary of the articles reviewed (*n* = 77)

Authors	Objectives	Findings			Citations
		Influencing factors/ variables	Antecedents (factors having consequences)	Consequences (in terms of consumer behavior [CB])	
Kim and Lee (2005)	Comparing the fundamentals of web service quality between online travel agencies (OTAs) and suppliers to explain customer satisfaction	Information content, ease of use, security, personalization, responsiveness	Information content	Customer satisfaction	234
Miller (2005)	Emphasizes the necessity of creating e-consumer loyalty through hotel brands' proprietary websites	Customization community, character, contact interactivity, choice and trust	Lodging brands	E-loyalty	39
Kim et al. (2007)	Examines OTAs choosing factors for online customers	Web functions, user-friendliness, low fares, simple usage, useful, relevant content, booking flexibility, security, sorting options	Finding low fares and security	OTA selection	309
Ku and Fan (2009)	Examines the internet weightings of nine proposed core travel products	Quality of products, privacy, safety, cost, convenience and effect on the environment	Product quality, privacy and safety	Customer purchase intention	81
Fu Tsang et al. (2010)	Investigates how online consumers evaluate online travel agency e-services and also how these dimensions affect consumer happiness and repurchase	Information content, customer relationships, website functionality, information quality, safety & security, fulfillment & responsiveness, appearance and presentation	Website functionality, information quality & content, customer relationship and safety & security	Customer satisfaction and repurchase intention	223
Lin and Lu (2010)	Examines how corporate image and relationship marketing affect trust, how trust affects customer purchase intention, and how word-of-mouth (WOM) moderates this effect	Relationship marketing, corporate image, trust and WOM	Trust and WOM	Customer purchase intention	521
Chiou et al. (2011)	Assesses the efficacy of a travel-oriented website	Product variety, quality service, convenient shopping, innovative technology and best deals	Higher service quality	Customer satisfaction	161
Bernardo et al. (2012)	Examines how functional and hedonic e-quality affects customer loyalty and perceived value in OTAs	Functional and hedonic quality	Perceived value	Loyalty	210
Bernardo et al. (2013)	Examines how e-service quality and recovery affect customer happiness and loyalty in e-travel companies	E-service quality and recovery	E-service quality	Satisfaction and loyalty	57
Gao and Bai (2014)	Examines how customer perceptions of online ambient cues affect flow, buying intention and satisfaction	Informativeness, effectiveness, entertainment and flow experience	Flow experience	Purchase intention and satisfaction	358

Table 1 (cont.)

Authors	Objectives	Findings			Citations
		Influencing factors/ variables	Antecedents (factors having consequences)	Consequences (in terms of consumer behavior [CB])	
Gu and Ye (2014)	Analyzes the effect of management's reactions to 'customers' level of satisfaction	Social media, WOM and management response	Review, ratings, comments and management response	Customer response and customer satisfaction	472
Hao et al. (2015)	Uses design-science to create a genetic algorithm-based learning method to understand consumer satisfaction and psychometric characteristics	Ease of use, product presentation, website layout and monetary stability	Ease of use, product presentation, website layout and monetary stability	Customer satisfaction	129
Roger-Monzó et al. (2015)	Tests the idea that e-service quality is a multidimensional notion that positively affects value	Efficiency, reliability, system availability and privacy	Perceived value of e-service quality	Consumer loyalty	59
Ali (2016)	Investigates the interrelationships between perceived flow, hotel website quality, customer satisfaction and purchase intentions	Functionality, security, hotel website-usability and perceived flow	Perceived flow	Customer satisfaction, purchase intention	387
Berbegal-Mirabent et al. (2016)	Examines the factors that influence online purchase behavior, specifically focusing on the interconnections among service quality, perceived value and loyalty	Functional quality, hedonic quality and perceived value	Functional and hedonic quality perceived value	Loyalty	59
Ha (2016)	Understanding the impact of satisfaction on expectations and attitudes towards an OTA	Prior expectations, attitude, satisfaction and service quality	Satisfaction and service quality	Attitudes towards OTAs	30
Ha and Janda (2016)	The impact of satisfaction on the evolution of expectations and attitudes towards an OTA over time	Prior expectations, attitudes and perceived service quality	Overall satisfaction	Adjusted expectations and attitudes	8
Krawczyk and Xiang (2016)	Uses a text analysis methodology to construct perceptual maps based on the prevalent phrases extracted from a dataset obtained from an OTA. The objective is to gain insights into the mechanisms via which companies can establish distinctiveness within the consumer psyche	Online reviews, brand and brand position	Online reviews	Brand positioning	34
Liu et al. (2016)	Examines flow experience and repurchase intention, focusing on loyalty's mediating effects	Perceived ease of use, interactive speed, perceived usefulness, skill, challenge, telepresence and perceived control	Flow experience and loyalty	Repurchase intention	67

Masiero and Law (2016)	This research examines the decision-making process of customers in selecting various sales channels for the purpose of booking hotel accommodation	Hotel guest profile and hotel characteristics and channel for booking hotel	Booking channels	–	46
Ozturk et al. (2016)	A consumer loyalty model for mobile hotel bookings is empirically tested	Perceived ease of use, convenience, and compatibility	Perceived ease of use, convenience and compatibility	Loyalty	502
Sánchez-Franco et al. (2016)	Explores how major factors affect visitor ratings of OTAs	Guests review, features and amenities, hotel ratings	Features and amenities	Guests review	29
Scholl-Grissemann and Schnurr (2016)	Examines how OTAs affect consumers' booking intentions	Solution space, customization and process enjoyment	Consumers' preference insight	Booking intention	29
Ye et al. (2016)	Examines how customers evaluate OTAs using impact-range performance and asymmetry analyses, which are expanded versions of importance-performance analysis	Functional, informational security-related and customer relational characteristics	Security and customer relational characteristics	Satisfaction or dissatisfaction	59
Chen et al. (2017)	Examines how incidental emotion and mood-changing expenses affect internet hotel bookings	Incidental affect and mood-changing prices	Incidental affect and mood-changing prices	Booking intention	9
Dutta et al. (2017)	Examines OTA customer satisfaction factors	Customer expectations, perceived value and perceived quality	Customer expectations and perceived quality	Customer satisfaction and loyalty	44
Loosschilder et al. (2017)	Explores how sorting and filtering affect a hotel's initial search results booking page ranks and booking probability	Sorting and filtering functionality, price, quality and rank	Sorting and filtering function	Customer choice	8
Chang et al. (2018)	Investigates the relationship between offline and online satisfaction and behavioral intentions; additionally, factors that increase such satisfaction are investigated	Service, system, and information quality, customer expectations, functional value and monetary value	Service quality	Customer satisfaction and purchase intention	83
Kim et al. (2018)	Customer agency suggestions are affected by nationality-based culturally adapted review information and also explores how cultural differences affect rating, dispersion and linguistic substance in reviews	Information, review and WOM	Culture	Adjusted review and ratings	84
Tao et al. (2018)	In-depth investigation is needed to understand a conceptual framework that explains mobile hotel booking's complications and its effects on consumer loyalty	Ease of use, convenience, compatibility and performance expectancy	Convenience, compatibility, perceived ease of use and performance expectancy	Loyalty	30

Table 1 (cont.)

Authors	Objectives	Findings			Citations
		Influencing factors/ variables	Antecedents (factors having consequences)	Consequences (in terms of consumer behavior [CB])	
Wong and Wei (2018)	Analyzes customer internet buying activity and create a predictive model for future purchases	Price fluctuations, lead time and flight duration	Price fluctuations	Purchase intention	55
Aeknara-jindawat (2019)	Examines the main factors affecting internet tourist hotel reservations	Rooms, dining options and customer reviews	Rooms, dining options and customer reviews	Online booking intention	4
Casaló and Romero (2019)	Examines how social media monetary incentives and non-monetary marketing affect OTA customers' voluntary activities	Draws and contests, economic incentives, customers' suggestions, perceived support, WOM and social media interactions	Monetary incentives and non-monetary support	Customers' suggestions, (WOM) and social media interactions	39
Chang et al. (2019)	Examines OTA-hotel collaboration and competitiveness	Functional, emotional, social, and monetary values, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy	Perceived value	Intention to rebook	133
Pinto and Castro (2019)	Examines tourist purchase behaviors and internet travel brokers	Price, promotions, online reviews, photographs and socio-demographic characteristics	Best price deals and ease of use	Hotel booking via OTAs	43
Ye et al. (2019)	Social website engagement, brand experience, brand choice, price premium and purchase intention on OTA websites need further study	Brand experience, brand choice, social website interactivity and price premium	Social website interactivity	Brand choice and buying intention	87
Albayrak et al. (2020)	Investigates the interconnections between website quality, hedonic value, consumer trust and loyalty	Website quality, hedonic value and customer trust	Hedonic value, and customer trust	Loyalty	74
Kim et al. (2020)	Compares hotel preference in an OTA with large and limited price dispersion	Price dispersion and hotel destination	Price dispersion	Preference of hotel booking	45
Lu et al. (2020)	Investigates the influence of the distinct information environment found in online forums on consumers' acquisition of information, as well as its subsequent impact on their purchasing behavior	Specific product page, search/navigation pages and information	User-generated content	Consumers' travel purchase decisions	27
Lv et al. (2020)	Examines the long-term influence of OTAs on the hotel business and if electronic commerce has an equilibrium	Competitive attributes and advancements	Pricing and channel selection	Customers booking	65

Múgica and Berné (2020)	Ascertains the factors influencing customer loyalty towards direct and indirect online channels in the tourism industry, it is imperative to investigate the antecedents of such loyalty	Customer participation, distribution services, purchase risks and transaction costs	Customer participation and customer satisfaction	Loyalty	13
Rizal et al. (2020)	Communication, transaction, and relational elements are examined in connection to relationship quality and e-loyalty to OTAs	Communication, transaction and relational	Trust	Loyalty	11
Sun et al. (2020)	Examines how functionality and usability affect mobile payment repurchase intention and also how attitude, subjective standards and perceived behavior control mediate this link	Functionality, attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control and usability of website	Functionality and usability of website	Customer satisfaction	126
Sutherland et al. (2020)	Employs a deductive methodology to ascertain the dimensions of guest pleasure	Location, accommodation uniqueness and service quality	Accommodation uniqueness and service quality	Customer satisfaction	59
Talwar et al. (2020a)	Examines the barriers to positive OTA purchasing intentions	Privacy and security concerns, usage constraints, benefits barrier, vulnerability barrier, hygiene consciousness, visibility and age	Benefits barriers, visibility and age	Consumer purchase intention	138
Talwar et al. (2020b)	Uses consumption values theory to predict online travel agency customers' purchase intention	Money, quality-of-benefits, status, preferences, the importance of information, different levels of privacy and safety issues for different age groups, hygiene awareness and perceptions of visibility	Monetary, social status, quality-of-benefits, preference and information values	Consumer purchase intention	178
Wong et al. (2020)	Uses TripAdvisor data to analyze the relationships between service quality, perceived value and hotel guest satisfaction	Perceived value, service quality and hotel star ratings	Service quality	Customer satisfaction	22
Xie and Lee (2020)	Quality indicators, brand affiliation, incentives (including discounts and promotions), and search result position must be analyzed to understand how informational signals affect consumer behavior during online hotel searches	Industry rating, consumer rating, brand affiliation, incentives and search characteristics	Informational cues and incentives	Purchase decisions	8
Xue et al. (2020)	Looks at customer misunderstanding, such as price complexity and the appeal of other options, and how it relates to hotel bookings made online	Alternative attractiveness, price complexity, similarity confusion, overload confusion and ambiguity confusion	Overload confusion, similarity confusion and ambiguity confusion	Defer purchase decisions	15

Table 1 (cont.)

Authors	Objectives	Findings			Citations
		Influencing factors/ variables	Antecedents (factors having consequences)	Consequences (in terms of consumer behavior [CB])	
Christina and Yasa (2021)	Aims to determine the association between variables using the theory of planned behavior	Attitude toward the action, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms	Attitude toward the action, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms	Online booking intention	13
Gao and Bi (2021)	Strategic interactions between hotels and customers in online booking supported by OTAs are examined	Online booking, cancellation policy, refund rate and payment decision	Refund rate	Online payment decision and choice of booking	20
Huang and Lan (2021)	Examines OTA-hotel collaboration and competition	Information quality, system quality, functional value, emotional value, social value and monetary value	Website quality and customer value	Rebooking intention	5
Lai et al. (2021)	Examines the relationship between customer sentiment and online hotel ratings, concentrating on e-WOM reasons and review characteristics' moderating effects	Hotel information, reviewer information and review data	Customer sentiment	Consumer reaction in terms of hotel ratings	26
Li et al. (2021)	Investigates the perception of chatbot services in OTAs by users, specifically comparing human-like agents to technology-enabled services – it also explores the potential influence of technology phobia as a moderating factor in this context	Understandability, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and interactivity via chatbot service of OTA	Understandability, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and interactivity	Continuance usage and loyalty	80
Luo et al. (2021)	Examines the impact of the cover photograph displayed on OTA websites on customers' information-seeking behavior within the context of business establishments	Façade, type of place, room amenities and scenery	Façade and room amenities	Customer engagement	10
Mohamad et al. (2021)	Examines how mobile technology deployment affects smartphone hotel room reservations	Perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, perceived price value and perceived enjoyment	Perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, perceived price value and perceived enjoyment	Mobile hotel booking	29
Qiu et al. (2021)	Examines how celebrities' expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness affect tourist and hospitality industry consumer trust and engagement	Celebrities' expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness	Expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness	Consumer trust and consumer engagement	21

Ray et al. (2021)	Indicates that the quality of user-generated content online shows how customers feel about a business	Sentiment aspects, emotional aspect and speech tags	Sentiment aspects	Customers' brand opinions	24
Alderighi et al. (2022)	Customers' hotel stay evaluations are used to measure consumer opinions of price fairness	Price fairness, dynamic pricing, hotel characteristics and guest characteristics	Price fairness, and dynamic pricing	Adjusted customer decision	8
Cai et al. (2022)	Analyzes how chatbot anthropomorphism affects OTA consumers' chatbot use	Social presence cues, emotional message cues, perceived trustworthiness, intelligence and enjoyment	Social presence cues and emotional message cues	Usage intention	11
Chen et al. (2022)	Investigates the impact of customer experiences with OTAs on their perceived value	Information, visual appeal, ratings and reviews, service bundling, epistemic value, utilitarian value, social influence and behavioral intention	Epistemic value and utilitarian value	Customers' intention to book via OTAs	0
Giroux et al. (2022)	Analyzes how internet price dispersion may affect visitors' product appraisals and purchase intentions	Price dispersion, consumer demographics and travelers' childhood socioeconomic status	Price dispersion	Hotel choice	14
Gu and Wang (2022)	Examines the process through which consumers look for information, considering the trade-off between time investment and cognitive expenses	Information, price, consumer rating and discrete attributes	Time and cognitive costs	–	5
Han and Anderson (2022)	Aims to assess the latent loyalty status of customers by analyzing their observed behavior on OTAs	Customer feedback and manager response	Customer–manager engagement and feedback	Customer loyalty	4
Jo et al. (2022)	Examines how perceived affordability affects OTA buying decisions and post-purchase feelings	Explicit affordability, hidden affordability, and impulsive buying	Impulsive buying	Post-purchase discomfort and regret	11
Kurniati et al. (2022)	Examines how electronic e-WOM and perceived utility affect purchase intention, with a focus on online trust	e-WOM, perceived usefulness and online trust	Online trust, perceived usefulness, e-WOM	Purchase intention	0
Maia et al. (2022)	Examines how brand reputation and online reviews effect OTA consumer trust and buying intention	Brand, online reviews, reputation, information quality and e-WOM	Trust (brand equity) and online reviews	Purchase intention	2
Shi et al. (2022)	In order to comprehend the primary gamification features that are highly regarded by tourists and the fundamental incentives that drive their engagement with gamified OTA platforms	Gamification affordability and diverse value perceptions	Gamification affordability and diverse value perceptions	Purchase intention	32

Table 1 (cont.)

Authors	Objectives	Findings			Citations
		Influencing factors/ variables	Antecedents (factors having consequences)	Consequences (in terms of consumer behavior [CB])	
Son et al. (2022)	Uses social influence theory to analyze how hotel reviews are viewed as helpful	Quality of sleep, cleanliness, location, room, service value, word count, sentiment and hotel grade	Location, cleanliness, room, sleep quality, service and value	Positive reviews	0
Strebinger and Treiblmaier (2022)	Comprehensive research is needed to determine blockchain-based hotel booking business early acceptability factors	Demographic, psychographic and service-related traveler characteristics	Discounts, brand, education, income, techno-familiarity and gender	Adoption of blockchain-based hotel booking applications	17
Vo et al. (2022)	The primary objective of this article is to enhance the influence of guest online reviews within the context of the hotel sector	Guest online reviews, guest feedback and hotel management response	Guest online reviews and service quality	Customer decision-making	11
Yang and Kim (2022)	Examines the timing and conditions that influence customer choice of a hotel or OTA channel	Purpose of travel, demographics and booking channels	Business trip purpose, hotel familiarity, destination and prior visit	Online travel booking	0
Gao and Zhan (2023)	Examines mobile OTA search engine dynamic click-through decision factors	Ranking positions, price preference, refinement tool, search costs, and sorting and filter options	Top-ranking results and lower price rankings	Purchase decision	0
Kim et al. (2023)	Dark patterns and their effects on consumers' fairness perceptions and attitudes toward OTAs are detailed	Anchoring bias and false claims about discounts, hidden costs and the myth of "sunk costs", messages of high demand and low supply and shortage bias	False fairness and attitude	Purchase intention	1
Oumayma and Ez-Zohra (2023)	Examines how OTAs affect customers' purchasing behavior	Personal characteristics such as openness to others, compatibility, perception of relative advantages, experience, extroversion and creativity	Attitude, personal innovativeness and perceived relative advantages	Purchase intention	0
Wei et al. (2023)	Comprehensively analyzes how consumer negative emotions, relationship quality, forgiveness and repurchase intention affect service recovery	Consumers' bad feelings, the strength of their relationships, and their ability to forgive	Relationship quality	Repurchase intention	1
Zhu et al. (2023)	Examines how customers' impressions of AI chatbots affect their cognitive, emotional and behavioral intentions toward OTAs	Control, responsiveness, personalization, information quality, perceived usefulness and product familiarity	Chatbot stimuli interaction and information quality	Tourists' trust and purchase intention	3

Source: authors.

Table 2. Influencing factors/variables identified in the systematic literature review (SLR)

Influencing factors/variables	Authors
Information (information quality and content, etc.)	Kim and Lee (2005), Kim et al. (2007), Fu Tsang et al. (2010), Gao and Bai (2014), Ye et al. (2016), Chang et al. (2018), Kim et al. (2018), Lu et al. (2020), Talwar et al. (2020b), Huang and Lan (2021), Chen et al. (2022), Gu and Wang (2022), Maia et al. (2022), Zhu et al. (2023)
Price (best deals, price fluctuations, draws and contests, economic incentives, refund rate, etc.)	Kim et al. (2007), Ku and Fan (2009), Chiou et al. (2011), Chen et al. (2017), Loosschilder et al. (2017), Chang et al. (2018), Wong and Wei (2018), Casaló and Romero (2019), Chang et al. (2019), Pinto and Castro (2019), Ye et al. (2019), Kim et al. (2020), Múgica and Berné (2020), Talwar et al. (2020b), Xie and Lee (2020), Xue et al. (2020), Gao and Bi (2021), Huang and Lan (2021), Mohamad et al. (2021), Alderighi et al. (2022), Giroux et al. (2022), Gu and Wang (2022), Gao and Zhan (2023)
User friendliness (ease of use, booking flexibility, online booking, cancellation policy, etc.)	Kim and Lee (2005), Kim et al. (2007), Ku and Fan (2009), Chiou et al. (2011), Hao et al. (2015), Liu et al. (2016), Ozturk et al. (2016), Tao et al. (2018), Gao and Bi (2021), Mohamad et al. (2021), Zhu et al. (2023)
Quality (products and services, effectiveness, distribution services, system, etc.)	Ku and Fan (2009), Chiou et al. (2011), Bernardo et al. (2012), Bernardo et al. (2013), Gao and Bai (2014), Roger-Monzó et al. (2015), Berbegal-Mirabent et al. (2016), Ha (2016), Ha and Janda (2016), Dutta et al. (2017), Loosschilder et al. (2017), Chang et al. (2018), Albayrak et al. (2020), Múgica and Berné (2020), Sutherland et al. (2020), Talwar et al. (2020b), Wong et al. (2020), Huang and Lan (2021)
Customization and filters (personalization, choice, sorting options, etc.)	Kim and Lee (2005), Miller (2005), Kim et al. (2007), Liu et al. (2016), Ozturk et al. (2016), Scholl-Grissemann and Schnurr (2016), Loosschilder et al. (2017), Tao et al. (2018), Gao and Zhan (2023)
Responsiveness (interactivity, understandability, management response, etc.)	Kim and Lee (2005), Miller (2005), Fu Tsang et al. (2010), Gu and Ye (2014), Liu et al. (2016), Chang et al. (2019), Ye et al. (2019), Rizal et al. (2020), Li et al. (2021), Zhu et al. (2023)
Safety and security (privacy, reliability, financial, etc.)	Kim and Lee (2005), Kim et al. (2007), Ku and Fan (2009), Fu Tsang et al. (2010), Hao et al. (2015), Roger-Monzó et al. (2015), Ali (2016), Ye et al. (2016), Chang et al. (2019), Talwar et al. (2020a), Li et al. (2021)
Features (functionality, site design, system availability, values, entertainment, perceived usefulness and perceived flow, etc.)	Miller (2005), Kim et al. (2007), Fu Tsang et al. (2010), Gao and Bai (2014), Hao et al. (2015), Roger-Monzó et al. (2015), Ali (2016), Liu et al. (2016), Sánchez-Franco et al. (2016), Scholl-Grissemann and Schnurr (2016), Ye et al. (2016), Loosschilder et al. (2017), Chang et al. (2018), Wong and Wei (2018), Chang et al. (2019), Lu et al. (2020), Sun et al. (2020), Xie and Lee (2020), Huang and Lan (2021), Mohamad et al. (2021), Cai et al. (2022), Kurniati et al. (2022), Zhu et al. (2023)
Trust	Miller (2005), Lin and Lu (2010), Albayrak et al. (2020), Qiu et al. (2021), Cai et al. (2022), Kurniati et al. (2022),
Brand (corporate image, rank, industry rating, etc.)	Lin and Lu (2010), Krawczyk and Xiang (2016), Loosschilder et al. (2017), Ye et al. (2019), Xie and Lee (2020), Maia et al. (2022)
Prior experience and expectations (attitude, satisfaction, experience, etc.)	Ha (2016), Ha and Janda (2016), Dutta et al. (2017), Chang et al. (2018), Tao et al. (2018), Ye et al. (2019), Sun et al. (2020), Christina and Yasa (2021), Oumayma and Ez-Zohra (2023)
Relation building (relationship marketing, customer participation and relationships, etc.)	Fu Tsang et al. (2010), Lin and Lu (2010), Ye et al. (2016), Múgica and Berné (2020), Rizal et al. (2020)
Ratings and reviews (guests review, photographs, customers' suggestions, electronic word-of-mouth [e-WOM], and social media interactions, etc.)	Lin and Lu (2010), Gu and Ye (2014), Krawczyk and Xiang (2016), Sánchez-Franco et al. (2016), Kim et al. (2018), Aeknarajindawat (2019), Casaló and Romero (2019), Pinto and Castro (2019), Xie and Lee (2020), Lai et al. (2021), Chen et al. (2022), Gu and Wang (2022), Han and Anderson (2022), Kurniati et al. (2022), Maia et al. (2022), Vo et al. (2022)

Table 2 (cont.)

Influencing factors/variables	Authors
Hotel related (hotel ratings, rooms, dining options, location, amenities, etc.)	Masiero and Law (2016), Sánchez-Franco et al. (2016), Aeknarajindawat (2019), Kim et al. (2020), Sutherland et al. (2020), Wong et al. (2020), Lai et al. (2021), Luo et al. (2021), Alderighi et al. (2022), Han and Anderson (2022), Son et al. (2022), Vo et al. (2022)
Demographic (age, preferences, socioeconomic status, socio-demographic characteristics, etc.)	Pinto and Castro (2019), Talwar et al. (2020b), Giroux et al. (2022), Strebinger and Treiblmaier (2022), Yang and Kim (2022)
Barriers (alternative attractiveness, confusion, anchoring bias and false claims, hidden costs and the myth, etc.)	Lv et al. (2020), Múgica and Berné (2020), Talwar et al. (2020a), Xue et al. (2020), Kim et al. (2023)
Others (celebrities' expertise, attractiveness, sentiment aspects, effect on the environment, social presence cues, psychographic, impulsive buying, diverse value perceptions, behavioral intention, booking channels, etc.)	Ku and Fan (2009), Masiero and Law (2016), Qiu et al. (2021), Ray et al. (2021), Cai et al. (2022), Chen et al. (2022), Gu and Wang (2022), Jo et al. (2022), Shi et al. (2022), Strebinger and Treiblmaier (2022), Yang and Kim (2022), Gao and Zhan (2023), Oumayma and Ez-Zohra (2023), Wei et al. (2023), Zhu et al. (2023)

Source: authors.

4.2. Influencing factors, antecedents and consequences

In this section, the influencing factors (which affect consumer decisions), antecedents (independent variables with cause and effect relationship) and consequences (outcomes as result of the antecedents) are identified via the SLR, after evaluating the selected 77 research articles.

4.2.1. Influencing factors/variables

Influencing factors/variables are those elements which affect the decisions of consumers and Table 2 shows how they affect CB towards OTAs. Table 1 mentioned the factors/variables used in each article but Table 2 categorizes them for easier understanding.

4.2.2. Antecedents

After evaluating all these articles, it was found that attitude (Christina & Yasa, 2021; Kim et al., 2023; Oumayma & Ez-Zohra, 2023), compatibility (Ozturk et al., 2016; Tao et al., 2018), confusion (Xue et al., 2020), convenience (Hao et al., 2015; Ozturk et al., 2016; Tao et al., 2018), e-WOM (Aeknarajindawat, 2019; Gu & Ye, 2014; Krawczyk & Xiang, 2016; Kurniati et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2020; Maia et al., 2022; Vo et al., 2022), ease of use (Mohamad et al., 2021; Ozturk et al., 2016; Pinto & Castro, 2019; Tao et al., 2018), flow experience (Gao & Bai, 2014; Liu et al., 2016), functionality (Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2020), hedonic values (Albayrak et al., 2020; Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2016), information value (Fu Tsang et al., 2010; Kim & Lee, 2005; Talwar et al., 2020b; Xie & Lee, 2020; Zhu et al., 2023), monetary value (Alderighi et al., 2022; Casaló & Romero, 2019; Chen et al., 2017; Gao & Bi, 2021; Gao & Zhan, 2023; Giroux et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2020; Lv et al., 2020; Mohamad et al., 2021; Pinto & Castro, 2019; Strebinger & Treiblmaier, 2022; Talwar et al., 2020b; Wong & Wei, 2018; Xie & Lee, 2020), perceived value (Ali, 2016; Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2016; Bernardo et al., 2012; Chang et al., 2019; Christina & Yasa, 2021; Dutta et al., 2017; Kurniati et al., 2022; Mohamad et al., 2021; Oumayma & Ez-Zohra, 2023; Roger-Monzó et al., 2015), service quality (Chang et al., 2018; Ha, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2020; Vo et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2020), social value (Cai et al., 2022; Talwar et al., 2020b; Ye et al., 2019), trustworthiness (Albayrak et al., 2020; Fu Tsang et al., 2010; Hao et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2023; Ku & Fan, 2009; Kurniati et al., 2022; Lin & Lu, 2010; Maia et al., 2022; Qiu et al., 2021; Rizal et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2016), website quality (Chen et al., 2022; Fu Tsang et al., 2010; Hao et al., 2015; Huang & Lan, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Loosschilder et al., 2017; Son et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2020; Talwar et al., 2020b) and WOM (Han & Anderson, 2022; Lin & Lu, 2010).

Others such as accommodation uniqueness, assurance, amenities, attractiveness, brand, booking channel, chatbot stimuli interaction (Li et al., 2021; Lv et al., 2020; Masiero & Law, 2016; Qiu et al., 2021; Sánchez-Franco et al., 2016; Strebinger & Treiblmaier, 2022; Sutherland et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2023), consumers' preference insight, culture, customer expectations, diverse value perceptions, education (Dutta et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018; Scholl-Grissemann & Schnurr, 2016; Shi et al., 2022; Strebinger & Treiblmaier, 2022), emotional message cues, epistemic value, e-service quality, interactivity, management response, responsiveness, reliability, quality-of-benefits (Bernardo et al., 2013; Cai et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022; Chiou et al., 2011; Gu & Ye, 2014; Li et al., 2021; Talwar et al., 2020b), etc. are independent variables which were used as antecedents of CB towards OTAs. Figure 2 shows that the monetary value, trustworthiness, perceived value, website quality, e-WOM, service quality and information value are those that have been used repeatedly as antecedents.

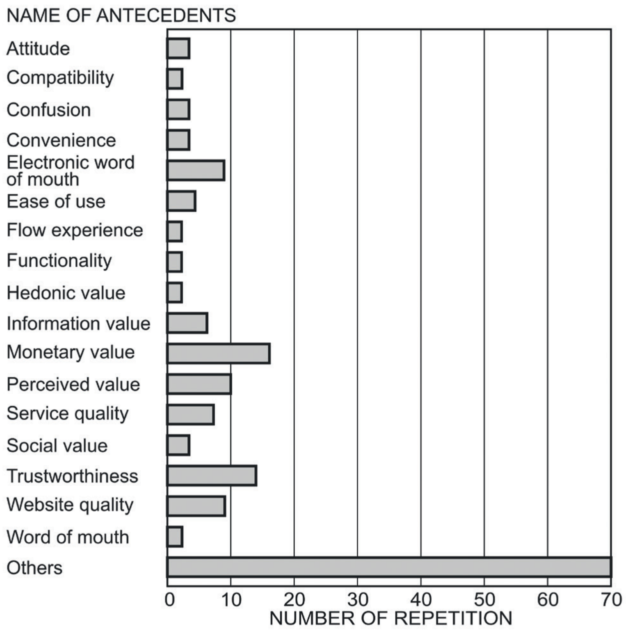

Figure 2. Antecedents identified in the systematic review (SLR)
Source: authors

4.2.3. Consequences

The SLR reveals that several studies have discovered multiple consequences in terms of CB such as customer response (Gu & Ye, 2014; Loosschilder et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2021; Son et al., 2022), customer decisions (Aeknarajindawat, 2019; Chen et al., 2022; Christina & Yasa, 2021; Gao & Bi, 2021; Kim et al., 2007; Lv et al., 2020; Mohamad et al., 2021; Pinto & Castro, 2019; Vo et al., 2022; Yang & Kim, 2022), purchase intention (Ali, 2016; Chang et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2017; Gao & Bai, 2014; Kim et al., 2023; Ku & Fan, 2009; Kurniati et al., 2022; Lin & Lu, 2010; Maia et al., 2022; Oumayma & Ez-Zohra, 2023; Scholl-Grissemann & Schnurr, 2016; Shi et al., 2022; Talwar et al., 2020a; Wong & Wei, 2018; Ye et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2023), purchase decision (Gao & Zhan, 2023; Xie & Lee, 2020), customer satisfaction (Ali, 2016; Bernardo et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2018; Chiou et al., 2011; Dutta et al., 2017; Fu Tsang et al., 2010; Gao & Bai, 2014; Gu & Ye, 2014; Hao et al., 2015; Kim & Lee, 2005; Sun et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020), loyalty (Albayrak et al., 2020; Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2016; Bernardo et al., 2012; Bernardo et al., 2013; Dutta et al., 2017; Han & Anderson, 2022; Li et al., 2021; Miller, 2005; Múgica & Berné, 2020; Ozturk et al., 2016; Rizal et al., 2020; Roger-Monzó et al., 2015; Tao et al., 2018), repurchase intention (Chang et al., 2019; Fu Tsang et al., 2010; Huang & Lan, 2021; Liu et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2023).

Others such as adjusted customer decisions, expectations, review and ratings (Alderighi et al., 2022; Ha & Janda, 2016; Kim et al., 2018), adoption of blockchain-based hotel booking applications (Strebinger & Treiblmaier, 2022), attitudes towards OTAs (Ha, 2016; Ha & Janda, 2016), brand choice, brand positioning, customers' brand opinions (Krawczyk & Xiang, 2016; Ray et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2019), choice of booking, deferred purchase decisions, hotel choice, preference of hotel booking (Gao & Bi, 2021; Giroux et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2020), guests reviews, customers' suggestions, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, social media interactions, word of mouth (Casaló & Romero, 2019; Sánchez-Franco et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2019), usage intention, tourists' trust, post-purchase discomfort and regret (Cai et al., 2022; Jo et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2023). Figure 3 shows the consequences and it is seen that purchase intention, satisfaction and loyalty are the three major characteristics that have been most commonly utilized in research articles considered consequential in relation to CB.

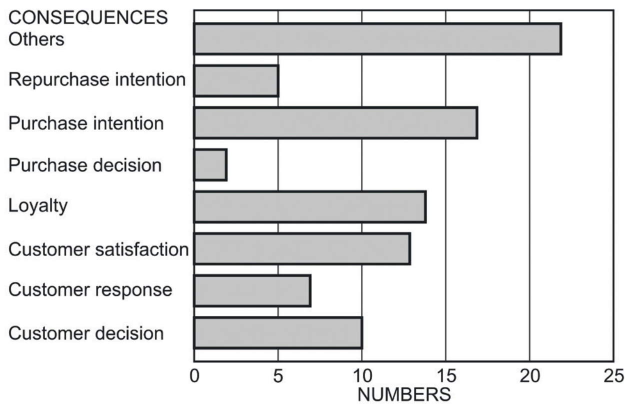

Figure 3. Consequences identified in the systematic review (SLR)
Source: authors

4.3. Distribution of articles on the basis of date

Seventy-seven research articles related to the consumer behavior towards online travel agencies were used for the analysis. To know the frequency of the published articles in a single year and to see annual trends, the temporal pattern of publication is shown on the accompanying graph (Figure 4). The publications chosen for analysis span the period from 2005 to 2023.

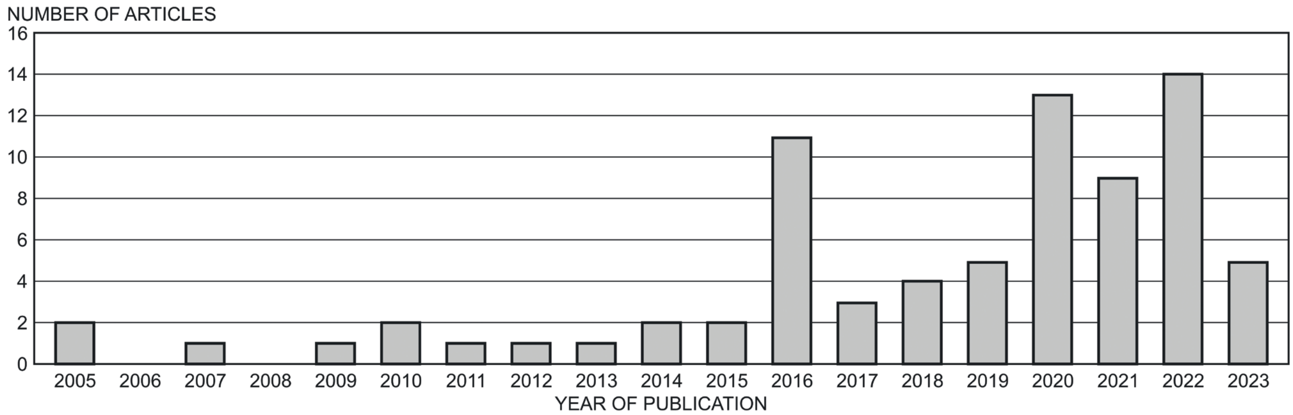

Figure 4. Number of articles by year
Source: authors

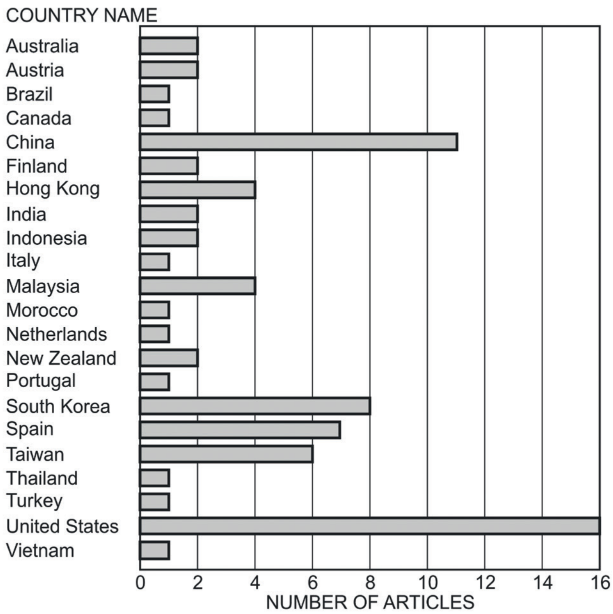

Figure 5. Articles by country
Source: authors

The first relevant publications were from 2005 with two articles. The number ranges from 0 to 2 articles per year from 2005 to 2015. After falling in 2017 the figure rises again to 2020. Figure 4 clearly illustrates these trends.

4.4. Distribution of articles on the basis of countries

The number of articles specific to each country is represented graphically below from the 77 that were chosen comprising 22 countries (Figure 5). The USA and China are top of the list with 16 and 11 articles respectively, followed by South Korea (8), Spain (7) and Taiwan (6).

4.5. Distribution of articles based on journal and publishing house

The chosen research articles out of the 77 selected for review were allocated by journal name and publication organization as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. List of the journals and publishers (total articles: $n = 77$)

Journal name	Publisher name	No. of articles
African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	Africa Journals	1
Annals of Tourism Research	Elsevier	1
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	Routledge	2
Brazilian Business Review	FUCAPE Business School	1
Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	SAGE Publications	1
Decision Support Systems	Elsevier	1
Electronic Markets	Springer Science and Business Media Deutschland	1
Heliyon	Elsevier	1

Industrial Management and Data Systems	Emerald Group Publishing	1
Information and Management	Elsevier	1
Information Technology and Tourism	Springer Berlin Heidelberg	3
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	Emerald Group Holdings	2
International Journal of Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Research	Emerald Group Publishing	1
International Journal of Data and Network Science	Growing Science	1
International Journal of Hospitality Management	Elsevier	4
International Journal of Information Management	Elsevier	1
International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change	Primrose Hall Publishing Group	1
International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management	Emerald Group Holdings	1
Internet Research	Emerald Group Holdings	2
Journal of Business Research	Elsevier	4
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	Emerald Group Publishing	2
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	Emerald Publishing	5
Journal of Interactive Marketing	Elsevier	1
Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality and Tourism	Routledge	2
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	Elsevier	1
Journal of Revenue and Pricing Management	Palgrave Macmillan	1
Journal of Services Marketing	Emerald Group Publishing	1
Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	MDPI	1
Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing	Routledge	7
Journal of Travel Research	SAGE Publications	3
Jurnal Pengurusan	Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	1
Management Science	INFORMS Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences	1
Production and Operations Management	Wiley-Blackwell	1
Psychology and Marketing	Wiley-Liss	1
SAGE Open	SAGE Publications	1
Scientific African	Elsevier	1
Service Business	Springer Science and Business Media Deutschland	1
Sustainability (Switzerland)	MDPI	4
Total Quality Management and Business Excellence	Routledge	1
Tourism and Hospitality Management	University of Rijeka	1
Tourism and Management Studies	University of Algarve	2
Tourism Management	Elsevier	6
Tourism Review	Emerald Publishing	1

Source: authors.

5. Discussion

This study presents an integrated SLR of the 77 articles selected describing their objectives, findings (in the form of the influencing factors, antecedents and consequences), citation level, year of publication, country of publication, and publications on the basis of journal & publishing house. This section also shows the commonly used influencing factors, major antecedents of OTAs and consequences in terms of CB. The elements that have been examined in relation to the establishment of confidence in OTAs include website design, online reviews, security measures and customer service quality (Chang et al., 2019). Several key factors have been identified as critical variables, including perceived utility, convenience, price competition, trust and ease of use (Gretzel et al., 2015). The study conducted by Xiang et al. (2017) examines the impact of online reviews on consumer perceptions, trust and purchase intentions along with the impact of price comparisons, discounts, promotions and loyalty programs on consumer decision-making and loyalty towards OTAs. Research has examined how post-purchase experiences, customer pleasure and customer assessments affect WOM communication, customer loyalty and repeat usage. Some works provide influential factors, and some discuss antecedents and consequences. But none comprise all three and this is the uniqueness of this study in providing base to the further researchers.

6. Conclusions

This research offers a comprehensive analysis of CB in relation to OTAs, focusing on the various factors that influence it, as well as the antecedents and consequences associated. The Scopus database was utilized as a retrieval tool in the investigation. To report in a SLRs, this review follows the PRISMA procedure. The initial pool of publications consisted of 723 entries, which were subsequently subjected to a comprehensive (detailed) analysis using the PRISMA methodology, resulting in the review of 77 articles.

The hotel industry has been recognized as the most extensively studied sub-sector within the field. Table 1 presents a comprehensive analysis of 77 publications employing SLR methodology, sourced from credible academic journals and well-established publishing organizations. As noted by earlier researchers, there remains a significant gap in our current understanding of the complex interplay of influencing factors, antecedents and consequences that shape CB towards OTAs shown in Table 1.

Table 1 had already shown the factors used in the researched articles in the SLR but Table 2 categorized them under some headings for better understanding. The study incorporates graphs that depict the antecedents (Figure 2), consequences (Figure 3), annual distribution of publications (Figure 4) and the distribution of publications across different countries (Figure 5). Meanwhile, Table 3 provides the names of the journals and publishers associated with the articles, thereby offering valuable insights to scholars. These visual aids serve to inform and facilitate access, offering insights into publication trends and the geographic focus. This is also useful for managers working in OTAs to get ideas about which factors affect CB and which factors are leading to the cause-effect relationship (antecedents) to get the desired outcomes (consequences) in terms of CB. It is recommended to the managers that they should read such articles to get to know the factors that negatively impact or restrict the consumer from using OTAs and provide improvement.

There is still ample opportunity for the implementation of more prevalent and all-encompassing frameworks that consider both the factors leading to and the consequences of CB towards OTAs. The focus for future research is the need for increased attention on the specificity of CB features. This can be achieved through the development of scales and procedures that are different for each sub-sector that scholars are interested in. This study offers a range of starting points for practitioners and researchers to delve into the study of CB, along with its possible causes and consequences. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that numerous unresolved issues exist that necessitate further examination. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations, as it focused solely on an SLR of the articles sourced from the Scopus database. Possible directions for future study could include an integrated approach of bibliometric and SLR.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.04 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

The experience economy of the largest walking event in the world The case of the *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse*

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How to cite (APA style): Glaap, T., & Ermolaeva, P. (2024). The experience economy of the largest walking event in the world: The case of the *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse*. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 69–77. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.04

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to investigate the successful factors behind the largest walking event in the world, the *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse* in the Netherlands, through the prism of a visitors' experience economy. The study explores the demographic characteristics of the respondents, the visitors' reasons to attend, as well as an interpretation of their experience. A total of 327 visitors completed a survey expressing their positive recommendation for others to visit the event and the huge interest (99.4%) to re-attend. This was due to a universal level of satisfaction and the diversification of the entertainment provision amongst Dutch, German and other Europeans with a high educational level, aged 20 and above. Most visitors attended the event with their families and friends, for professional and personal training, as part of a military program or for self-development. The main reasons to take part were firstly, to observe the walkers, secondly, to support friends and family and, lastly, for the atmosphere around the city and its history. The experience has been introduced through Pine and Gilmore's (1998) realms where all four aspects played a huge role in its successful implementation, specifically of the esthetic and entertainment realms. The participants searched mostly for harmony, a pleasant environment and differentiation of cultures. Moreover, the attendees mentioned the educational side as a simplistic curiosity rather than intentional learning, however, they still highlighted that it also mattered as a part of the successful event. Lastly, only small relevance was found in becoming a different person and experiencing a completely different world through escapism. Finally, practically all participants expressed their wish to re-attend the event considering it successful.

KEYWORDS

Pine and Gilmore's realms, memorable experience, reasons, repeated attendance, sports event

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
14 February 2024
Accepted:
31 May 2024
Published:
13 September 2024

1. Introduction

The *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse*, also known as the International Four Days Marches, is the biggest and the most popular walking event in the world (Aparna et al., 2022; Sinkeldam, 2018). The event promotes exercise through sports activities with after four days of walking successful participants receiving a medal while on the last day spectators bestow gladioli on the walkers. Every year in the third week of July, participants walk up to 50 kilometers per day depending on their age and sex. In 2024, the walking event is being staged for the 106th time (Sinkeldam, 2018).

From the 1970s the organizers endeavored to make the walking event more attractive by arranging additional activities such as music festivals, amusements, food stands, other performances and sport/exercise related activities. To organize and run the *Vierdaagse*, several partners are involved. These include the *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse* Institution, supported by three main partners: City of Nijmegen, the Military and the Royal Dutch Walking Association (De 4daagse, n.d.). Additionally, the organization attracts numerous sponsors, hundreds of volunteers (from several associations like the Dutch Red Cross). There are only a handful of paid employees.

The current event, being a large-scale authentic gathering of like-minded individuals, attracts an incredible number of 40,000 participants which is growing every year. Nordvall and Heldt (2017) have investigated the factors for failure of other major events which have already peaked in numbers, so in order to prevent failure, it would be essential to identify what is behind so many attendees and to dwell on their reasons for visiting and the re-attendance pattern, through the relationship between Pine and Gilmore's experience realms which are widely utilized as the main measurement tool (Ferreira & Teixeira, 2013; Hosany & Witham, 2010; Jurowski, 2009; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Oh et al., 2007; Walls et al., 2011). Moreover, other scholars recommend examining customer experiences in different sectors of tourism and other events to compare with work already completed to revalidate or oppose the results (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Kusumah, 2023; Oh et al., 2007). Not to forget, an outcome of the current research will be a major contribution to the *Vierdaagse* organisers in terms of maintaining and improving the success of the event, as well as for city marketers to identify an up-to-date image of the area and the potential to grow. In addition, this study will provide a better understanding for other large sporting events when it comes to needs and wants, allowing their organisers to compare and readjust the processes.

2. The experience economy

Looking at the definition of experience, a handful of interpretations are introduced. Andersson (2007) described experience simply as the result of consumption and production, however the most recent data views experience as a personalized and a customized approach to interaction among consumers (White et al., 2023). To add to that, the key to a successful event lay in the emotions the participants experience (Keskin et al., 2024) and other studies have claimed that an innovative approach through gamification leads to a memorable experience (Mileva, 2023). Walls et al. (2011) focused on the description of tourism experiences, considering those as private responses to spectating or participating. Furthermore, the authors added the notion of a relationship established by a host and a guest defined through the provision of an emotional aspect of personalized memorable moments (Hosany et al., 2022). Not to forget that tourism experience is viewed as the center of a destination's appeal as well as a prominent determinant of economic growth, tourist behavioral intentions and decision-making (Bernaki & Marso, 2023; Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Pine & Gilmore, 2014).

2.1. Realms of experience

According to Oh et al. (2007), the theory was devised to measure customer involvement and interactions between those attending an event. Moreover, four realms of experience were identified (Figure 1). According to Pine and Gilmore, experiences can be positioned on this two-dimensional diagram based on the extent to which consumers actively or passively participate (the horizontal axis) and their absorptive or immersive involvement in events (measured on the vertical axis). Active participation occurs when consumers personally influence the event or performance, for example skiing or asking questions at a lecture. On the other hand, passive participation occurs when a customer has no influence on events (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Radder & Han, 2015). During passive participation the customer is mentally involved with an activity, for instance watching a rock concert. The vertical axis in Pine & Gilmore's theory measures the connection that customers have with their surroundings during a performance. Immersion on the other hand is defined as "becoming physically (or virtually) a part of the experience itself" (Loureiro, 2014, p. 2). Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) summarised the absorptive-immersive difference as customers having a certain distance from the experience when absorbed; while customers are drawn into or become part of performances when immersed.

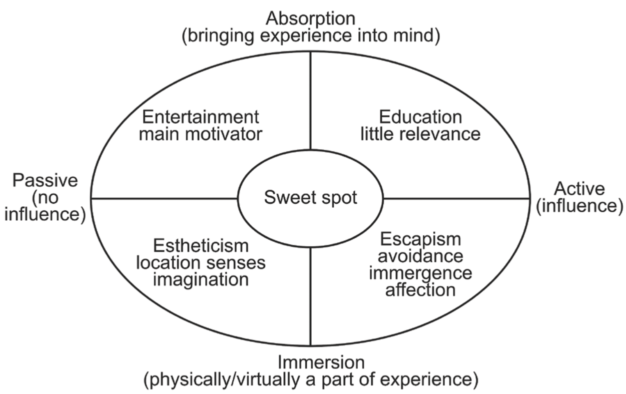

Figure 1. The four realms of the experience economy
Source: authors

Pine and Gilmore labelled the four quadrants of Figure 1 as corresponding to four experience realms, namely: entertainment, education, estheticism and escapism. Each realm represents unique characteristics contributing to the overall customer experience. To achieve the ultimate experience, also called the "sweet spot" which is shaded white in the figure, all four realms should be included, so combining the level of participation with both absorption and immersion (Ho & Tsai, 2010; Thanh & Kirova, 2018).

Vorderer (2001) sees entertainment as an essential motivator, temporarily changing perspectives on reality, although the customer is only passively involved. According to Oliver and Bartsch (2010, cited in Bartsch & Harmann, 2017) entertainment experiences are measured by a composite of factors including entertainment, fun, appreciation and suspense. Nevertheless, Bartsch and Hartmann (2017) note that the entertainment experience is focused on maximizing pleasure and minimizing negative aspects. However, as can be seen in Figure 1, the entertainment realm is associated with passive absorption (Ali et al., 2014; Shim et al., 2015). Being passive, customers do not influence the environment and are not part of the performance. Being absorptive, they maintain distance from the activity, observing and absorbing the situation mentally. From the organizational perspective, entertainment is offered to catch and engage a customer's attention (Oh et al., 2007).

The educational realm is focused on learning new things. In Pine and Gilmore's approach this is a combination of absorption (the upper part of the vertical axis in Figure 1) and active participation (to the right on the horizontal axis) (Güzel, 2014). In other words, Oh et al. (2007) describe this as a person observing a performance but actively engaging. Depending on the visitor's needs and interests, Boswijk et al. (2012, cited in Radder & Han, 2015) state that acquiring information leads to meaningful experiences. For example, educational experiences are one of the key motivators for wine tourism, playing a vital role in the creation of memories and satisfaction (Chen & Chen, 2012, cited in Hwang & Lyu, 2015; Thanh & Kirova, 2018). Hwang and Lyu (2015) found that multiple sporting events utilize educational experiences to increase the knowledge of attendees. Yet not all events have educational elements, Shim et al. (2015) reported that the educational realm is of little relevance in casino visits.

The esthetic realm is based on passive consumer participation and being immersed in the surroundings of an event (Shim et al., 2015). The visitor is mentally immersed within the environment but does not exert influence on the event or be involved in other interactions, as occurs in educational experiences (Jurowski, 2009; tom Dieck et al., 2018). Esthetic experiences appeal to visitors' senses which can be heightened by their physical surroundings. Examples that generate esthetic experiences are Niagara Falls, Golden Gate Bridge and the Grand Canyon (Ali et al., 2014; Hwang & Han, 2016). Moreover, esthetic heritage experiences more generally are associated with location, infrastructure and intangible elements that stimulate visitors' senses and imagination (Radder & Han, 2015). Bitner (1992, cited in Hosany & Witham, 2010) divided the physical environment into three dimensions (signs, symbols and artefacts; ambient conditions; spatial layout and functionality) to measure the level of estheticism.

In its core, escapism means that most people have, due to unsatisfying life circumstances, repeatedly to leave the reality they experience on an emotional and cognitive level (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Thanh & Kirova, 2018). According to Güzel (2014), the escape realm underpins the closest relationship between experiences and individuals. This realm of Pine and Gilmore's theory (1998) is based on actively participating and being immersed within the environment (Jurowski, 2009; Song et al., 2015), people are more physically involved in an event than for educational and entertainment experiences. Performances that result in escape experiences require immersion and a high level of participation. To understand escapism in Pine and Gilmore's conception, Oh et al. (2007) suggest the following three types of escapist destinations: first, travelling to temporarily leave normal lives, avoiding daily tasks; secondly, people to immerse themselves in, i.e. destinations exerting a pull attracting visits. By doing so, visitors undergo an escape, even though they had no reason for escaping their daily lives. In the third and last type, people select a destination and become involved in the activities on offer which act as instruments for escape experiences. In this type, choosing the destination and the desire to escape ordinary life are only secondary considerations. Oh et al. (2007) point out that all three types are incorporated within Pine and Gilmore's approach to escape.

2.2. Evidence of the experience economy in the hospitality industry

Pine and Gilmore's theory has been applied widely in hospitality and tourism including studies of bed-and-breakfast stays (Oh et al., 2007), tourism in general (Jurowski, 2009), cruise experiences (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Hwang & Han, 2016), a leisure farm (Ho & Tsai, 2010), an ice music festival and Maihaugen museum (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011), Malaysian resort hotels (Ali et al., 2014), Pamukkale city in Türkiye (Güzel, 2014), rural tourism (Loureiro, 2014), a golf tournament (Hwang & Lyu, 2015), heritage museums (Radder & Han, 2015), temple stays (Song et al., 2015), and a science festival (tom Dieck et al., 2018). Most of the hospitality and tourism research was quantitative, using self-administered and online questionnaires (for example, Ali et al., 2014; Güzel, 2014; Jurowski, 2009; Loureiro, 2014; Oh et al., 2007; Radder & Han, 2015; tom Dieck et al., 2018).

Several researchers established the existence of the four realms of experience in the hospitality sector (Ali et al., 2014; Güzel, 2014; Hosany & Witham, 2010; Hwang & Han, 2016; Jurowski, 2009; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Oh et al., 2007; Song et al., 2015). Radder and Han (2015) found three museum experience dimensions: edutainment, escapism and esthetic, where 'edutainment' is a combination of education and entertainment for visitors to a heritage museum. Visitors at a leisure farm in Taiwan were mainly escaping from daily life in an esthetic environment (Ho & Tsai, 2010). Apparently, leisure-farm visitors, mainly city inhabitants, become part of the natural landscape and embrace the more primitive life of the countryside in Taiwan. While the escape and esthetic dimensions were major determinants of visitor experiences, Ho and Tsai (2010) recommended that to enhance experiences at the leisure farm, services and facilities related to education and entertainment should be improved. In other research, fewer than four realms were found to be important, despite researchers aiming to achieve all four. For example, Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) found that all four were not needed at an ice-music festival, as escapism and esthetic influenced satisfaction, but education and entertainment did not.

A substantial body of evidence suggests estheticism is the main contributor to experiential outcomes (Güzel, 2014; Hosany & Witham, 2010; Loureiro, 2014; Oh et al., 2007; tom Dieck et al., 2018). According to Loureiro (2014), esthetics are the most effective drivers of overall experience among rural tourists. In temple-stay programs, esthetic experiences are created through cultural exploration and mountain activities, where visitors take in colorful surroundings during autumn (Song et al., 2015). Jurowski (2009) concluded that estheticism can add value to offerings by resort operators and might enhance marketing and travel packages. Some studies point to linkages between the realms of experience. Loureiro (2014) found that estheticism is closely related to education, reflecting the similar findings of Oh et al. (2007) and Jurowski (2009). Before joining cruises for esthetic reasons, passengers seek to learn new things, hoping for educational experiences (Hwang & Han, 2016). Jurowski (2009) found that escape enhances willingness to seek entertainment. Additionally, escape and entertainment can influence emotional and functional values at temple stays (Song et al., 2015).

3. Methods

The current study applied a quantitative research approach which has previously been successfully utilized in other works with the Pine and Gilmore model, containing the multidimensional scale of experience (education, escapism, entertainment, esthetics) with five to seven statements (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Oh et al., 2007). The research instrument consists of a 5-point scale measuring relevance from (1) *strongly agree* to (5) *strongly disagree*. Furthermore, the mean as well as the standard deviation are presented on the chart.

The pilot study was successfully tested amongst family members and friends of the authors who had previously attended the event and minor changes were applied accordingly. The authors planned to gather data on whether visitors could relate the realms of experience to the event as well as the main reasons of revisiting, recommendations to attend and the demographics of the attendees based on random sampling. The items of each construct, apart from Pine and Gilmore's model, were measured using percentages and put in a table. After gathering the data, each respondent was numbered, and all responses were coded into an Excel file. Finally, the research was coded with the use of automated computing (Lash et al., 2014), and the findings were reviewed by several people including the tutors and co-authors (Yarborough, 2021).

4. Results

In total, 327 completed surveys were obtained at the *Vierdaagse*, of which 176 were from participants and 151 came from spectators. As can be seen in Table 1, nearly two-thirds of respondents (60.6%) were male and those aged 60 and over accounted for more than a fifth (21.7%). In addition, more than a third (35.2%) were between 40 and 60 years old, around i.e. six out of every eleven respondents (56.9%) were over 39.

Fourteen different nationalities responded to the survey; according to De 4daagse (n.d.), 69 different nationalities attended the event. As can be seen in Table 1, most respondents (71.3%) were from the Netherlands, almost a tenth (9.8%) were German and another 12.8% from other European countries (0.3% Belgium; 1.2% United Kingdom; 3.7% Nordic countries; and 7.6% other). A further 2.4% were Asian, mainly Indonesians living in the Netherlands.

The highest level of education achieved is also presented in Table 1. The results show that the highest qualification of most of those surveyed was either a 'junior college' degree (36.7%) or a bachelor's (38.5%) i.e. more than three quarters (75.2%) of the research sample have one of these qualifications.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 327)

Characteristic	Categories	Percent
Gender	Female	39.4
	Male	60.6
Age	Under 18	3.1
	18–20	5.8
	21–24	9.2
	25–29	8.0
	30–34	9.8
	35–39	7.3
	40–44	7.3
	45–49	9.5
	50–54	9.5
	55–59	8.9
	60 or over	21.7
Education (highest level)	No school education	0.3
	Elementary school	1.8
	Junior high school	9.2
	High school	4.0
	Junior college	36.7
	Bachelor's degree	38.5
	Master's degree	8.6
	Doctorate degree	0.9
Birthplace	The Netherlands	71.3
	Belgium	0.3
	Germany	9.8
	United Kingdom	1.2
	Nordic countries	3.7
	Other European countries	7.6
	Asia	2.4
	North and South America	3.7
Occupation	Director	1.2
	Manager	8.9
	Self-employed office worker	5.5
	Self-employed technical worker	2.1
	Professional (doctor, lawyer, teacher or similar)	4.9
	Technical occupations (trades worker, administrative or similar)	9.2
	Labourer	17.4
	Student	14.7
	Retired	17.4
	Housewife	0.6
	Other	18.0

Source: authors.

The response "Other" was given by 18% as their occupation and a total of 59 were in military service as soldiers. The next largest category is made up of 17.4% reporting themselves as retired as well as the same percentage for "Labourers" from physical and unskilled work across several industries. Smaller groups were represented by students, directors, managers and others.

4.1. Reasons for attendance

Participants were asked with whom and why they took part in Table 2. Just over 40% attended with family, friends or partners who were also taking part; another 25.6% participated as individuals. Others were present as a part of large groups, either military (29.0%) or non-military (5.1%). Spectators were asked to select as many reasons as possible for attendance, from a list of eight.

Table 2. Types of participants and spectators at *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse* (n = 327)

Responses		Percent
Participant type	Alone	25.6
	With friends or family members	40.3
	As part of military activity	29.0
	As part of other group	5.1
Reasons for being a spectator	A friend/relative/partner is participating	47.0
	To watch the walkers	60.9
	For the atmosphere	41.1
	Live in Nijmegen	10.6
	Work in Nijmegen	9.9
	Work at the event	10.6

Note: number of participants = 176 (percentage of all respondents = 53.8%); number of spectators = 151 (percentage of all respondents = 46.2%).
Source: authors.

Most spectators (60.9%) stated they visited the event to watch the walkers, 47% percent selected to support a friend, a partner or a family member. In addition, 41.1% of were there for the atmosphere. Furthermore, 20.5% lived in Nijmegen (10.6%) or worked there (9.9%), with the remaining 10.6% coming to the *Vierdaagse* to work at the event as presented in Table 2.

4.2. Previous attendance

As presented in Table 3, 95.4% of all respondents had attended previously, i.e. only 15 of the 327 respondents were at the *Vierdaagse* for the first time. To narrow it down,

Table 3. Previous attendance at *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse* (n = 327)

Previous attendance type	Percent	Range of attendances	First quartile	Median	Third quartile
Total (all types)	95.4	1 to 71	3	7	15
Participant	58.4	1 to 44	0	2	9
Spectator	62.4	1 to 71	0	2	6
Both	25.4	2 to 65	7	13	22
Never been a participant	37.0	NA	NA	NA	NA
Never been a spectator	33.0	NA	NA	NA	NA

Note: NA – not applicable.
Source: authors.

58.4% had been to the event before as a participant, 62.4% as spectators and 25.4% had previously spectated but on other occasions had participated. As a check, the sum of the percentages for participants and spectators is 120.8%, however, subtracting the percentage for both gives 95.4% (which is the percentage of all 327 respondents who had attended previously). The reasons for the high levels of previous attendance comes from the history of the event, the popular image created through the years, the atmosphere in the city, recognition for participants, and the appreciation of friends and family.

Participants and spectators were asked questions about recommendations to others and their own revisit intentions. As shown in Table 4, 97.6% of the 327 respondents would recommend to others that they should visit the *Vierdaagse* as a spectator. There is slightly less agreement (91.4%) that respondents would recommend visiting as a participant i.e. walking one of 30, 40 or 50 kilometers on four successive days. Most remarkably, out of all 327 respondents, 99.4% said they would like to visit the *Vierdaagse* again; as 312 of the 327 respondents had already attended previously, it follows that there is a near universal intention to revisit yet again.

Table 4. Recommendations on re-visiting and personal intention to re-attend (n = 327)

Percentage saying "Yes"	
Recommend that others attend as:	
Spectator	97.6
Participant	91.4
Personally re-attend	99.4

Source: authors.

4.3. Experience realms at the *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse*

Firstly, in Table 5 the distribution of responses to statements directed at the education dimension is shown. The statement "the event stimulates my curiosity" stands out as nearly two thirds of respondents (65.8%), *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the event simulates their curiosity. For the other three education statements, more than a fifth *strongly disagreed* or *disagreed* with the statement. However, the main response to each of these statements lies between *neutrality* and *agreement* and the standard deviation suggests a roughly equal spread of responses around means.

Table 5. Responses to Pine and Gilmore's (1998) statements on realms of an experience

Responses		*Strongly disagree*	*Disagree*	*Neither disagree nor agree*	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*	Mean	Standard deviation
Education dimension	The event stimulates my curiosity	4.0	13.5	16.8	40.7	25.1	3.69	1.107
	It increases my knowledge about sport/exercising	7.0	19.6	24.5	33.9	15.0	3.30	1.153
	The 'Nijmeegse Vierdaagse' is a learning experience	6.7	15.3	20.2	38.2	19.6	3.49	1.164
	The event stimulates my curiosity to learn new things	4.9	18.7	27.2	29.7	19.6	3.40	1.141

Entertainment dimension	The activities/events are amusing to watch	0.0	2.4	4.9	25.1	67.6	4.58	0.700
	Watching others perform is captivating	0.3	2.8	8.9	37.0	51.1	4.36	0.782
	I have fun during this event	0.3	0.3	2.8	20.8	75.8	4.72	0.561
	I feel emotionally stimulated with this event	3.1	16.8	25.7	36.4	18.0	3.50	1.065
	I have an unusual experience during this event	5.5	21.1	26.6	26.9	19.9	3.35	1.175
	I interact with other participants/spectators at the event	0.9	5.2	9.2	38.2	46.5	4.24	0.889
Escape dimension	I feel that I am living in a different time or place	6.4	22.0	16.2	38.8	16.5	3.37	1.180
	The event gives me the opportunity to escape daily routine	4.0	10.7	15.3	38.2	31.8	3.83	1.110
	I feel that I am in a different world during this event	8.3	22.9	17.4	30.6	20.8	3.33	1.263
	I forgot my daily routine during the 'Nijmeegse Vierdaagse'	5.2	14.7	22.0	31.8	26.3	3.59	1.173
	It feels that I am a different person during this event	18.0	28.7	30.9	14.7	7.6	2.65	1.159
Aesthetic dimension	The event creates a sense of harmony	0.0	0.0	2.4	21.7	75.8	4.73	0.495
	The 'Nijmeegse Vierdaagse' is very attractive	0.3	0.6	4.6	44.3	50.2	4.43	0.642
	Being present during this event is very pleasant	0.0	0.9	4.3	51.7	43.1	4.37	0.612
	The event has a pleasing physical environment	0.0	0.6	7.3	49.2	42.8	4.34	0.640

Source: authors.

In the case of the first, second, third and final statements in the entertainment realm, the level of agreement was about 75% or very much more. The greatest percentages of *agreement* of *strong agreement* were for the statements, "The activities/events are amusing to watch" (92.7% agree) and "I have fun during this event" (96.6%). Corresponding to this, both statements had means of 4.58 and 4.72, indicating that in general respondents tended to *strongly agree* with the pair of statements.

The opinions of respondents on escape statements vary widely over the 5-point Likert scale. On three statements, *agreement* or *strong agreement* overshadowed *disagreement* or *strong disagreement*, but the sum of the percentages of *agree* responses were in the fifties. The statement "It feels that I am a different person during this event" scored higher on disagreement than on agreement (46.7% of respondents *disagreed* while 22.3% were in *agreement*). Other statements within the category such as "I live in a different time and I escape from a daily routine" were very high in agreement (38.2% and 38.8%). Furthermore, this statement had the lowest mean emphasizing that most of the people *disagreed* or answered *neutral*. All five statements had a standard deviation above 1, with the highest being 1.263.

Finally, in Table 5, esthetic factors were favorably regarded. For each statement over 90% of the respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed*. This means that of the 327 respondents, 300 or more, found the event harmonious, very attractive, very pleasant and took place in a pleasing environment where diversity of cultures was appreciated. Each mean score was above 4.34 or above, which signifies that most of the respondents answered *agree* or *strongly agree*. In addition, the standard deviation is very low, meaning there is little spread or deviation of responses away from the mean (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

5. Discussion

As stated in the introduction, it is essential to further investigate the experience of the guests within the tourism and hospitality events to compare results and to highlight similar or opposing findings (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Kusumah, 2023; Oh et al., 2007). Experience from the attendees of this event can be described as a personalized approach between a consumer and the offer, however, not only for the purpose of its acquisition (White et al., 2023), but also for consumption. Moreover, on top of the emotional aspect between a host and a guest (Hosany et al., 2022), entertainment and education play a vital role in creating a memorable experience during events. Lastly, current research supports the idea that tourism experience is a prominent determinant of the intention to revisit and economic development (Bernaki & Marso, 2023; Pine & Gilmore, 2014).

When it comes to the realms of experience, all four were ideal for the participants in proving Ho and Tsai's (2010) and Thanh and Kirova's (2018) findings that disagreed with other scholars that all four dimensions impact the overall experience (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Radder & Han, 2015). Entertainment is one of the essential motivators to attend (Vorderer, 2001) though not the most predominant in an event like the *Nijmeegse Vierdaagse*. One of the highly regarded realms is the esthetic aspect meaning a creation of harmony, a pleasant environment and appreciation of diverse cultures which revalidates previous findings (Güzel, 2014; Hosany & Witham, 2010; Loureiro, 2014; Oh et al., 2007; tom Dieck et al., 2018). There is also great curiosity to see what is happening during the event which belongs to the educational realm.

Moreover, escapism has been found as the least profound element although previously highlighted by other scholars (Güzel, 2014; Hwang & Han, 2016; Song et al., 2015; Thanh & Kirova, 2018).

6. Conclusion and recommendation

Having seen from the survey results, many of the visitors are males, fully retired or close to retirement with a college or a bachelor's degree from the Netherlands or other European countries. Those participating could be divided into three main groups: individuals, family/friends, military. The main reasons to take part were, firstly, to watch the walkers, secondly, to support friends and family and, lastly, for the atmosphere around the city. The revisit intention percentage is huge as well as encouragement for others to come and experience the event due to its history, the atmosphere during the days and the recognition of participants.

Moreover, visitors pointed out that the event stimulated their curiosity rather than their ability to learn more about activities, showing the educational dimension to be only slightly present. Unlike the entertainment realm, where the attendees agreed on experiencing amusement, fun and emotions, the escape dimension seems to be not so relevant to the event where only some participants felt as if they were escaping from daily life and almost no one related being in a completely different world or being a different person. Finally, the esthetic realm found its highest relevance amongst every group. It appeared that the majority of those questioned viewed their experience as harmonious, pleasant, cultural and attractive. Therefore, it can be concluded that the entertainment and the esthetic realms were considered the most essential and it can be suggested that due to these dimensions individuals appear to return and encourage others to take part.

According to Pine and Gilmore's theory, the sweet spot can be achieved if all four realms are relevant and find a positive response from the guests, hence, it could be useful for the organizers to work on elements of escapism and education. For instance, when it comes to the walkers, some pre-event videos could be sent and for the spectators an educational form such as quizzes or workshops which could be organized during the days of the event around the city. Nevertheless, it could be interesting to discover what aspects of escapism, on top of the avoidance of daily routine, are viewed as useful during such events.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.05 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

The effects of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on tourists' decisions to visit the Magetan Refugia Garden (indigenous tree flora) in the COVID-19 pandemic era

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How to cite (APA style): Hapsari, V.D., Riptanti, E.W., & Khomah, I. (2024). The effects of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on tourists' decisions to visit the Magetan Refugia Garden (indigenous tree flora) in the COVID-19 pandemic era. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 79–88. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.05

ABSTRACT

The internet of things (IoT) era has seen the flow of information evolving from word of mouth (WOM) to electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). One example of e-WOM's role in the tourism sector is agrotourism in the Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG) in Indonesia. The purpose of establishing this agrotourism site is to control pests in the area, but which has both agricultural and tourism functions. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has lessened the number of visitors, a strategy to enhance the number of visits is required. This study aims to figure out how e-WOM influences visitors' decisions to come. A basic descriptive-analytical approach was employed in conjunction with a survey technique, with a purposive sampling method utilized to gather the research sample (a total of 140 respondents). The results of the questionnaire were checked using structural equation modeling-partial least squares (SEM-PLS). The findings have revealed that e-WOM has a negligible direct effect on the decision to visit this tourist destination. It is assumed that other factors therefore influence shifts in behavior due to the COVID-19 epidemic, such as uncertain public health and finances which have a negative impact on the number of tourists visiting the Magetan Refugia Garden.

KEYWORDS

refugia, indigenous tree flora, agrotourism, destination image, social media

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
22 January 2023
Accepted:
18 March 2024
Published:
13 September 2024

1. Introduction

Refugia consist of indigenous tree flora that strives to remove pests near agricultural sites and to preserve biodiversity (Sitepu et al., 2018). Planting refugia not only preserves biodiversity but also imparts knowledge and experience in the practical management of food source production (Hardiansyah et al., 2021). Refugia are formed of indigenous plants that provide shelter and food for natural 'enemies' like predators and parasitoids (Abidin et al., 2020), a pest control method that uses the integrated pest management technique.

Since it does not use chemicals that are harmful to plant health, this technique is considered more cost-effective and environmentally friendly (Mokoginta & Mohamad, 2022).

In Indonesia, refugia gardens are used for agrotourism and agriculture and thus can increase farmers' incomes while conserving land around agricultural locations (Sufiyanto et al., 2021). The Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG) is an agrotourism site that uses the refugia as a tourism theme. The establishment of the garden has a noteworthy influence on the local economy, social culture and environment, as well as providing a healthy tourist destination (Lee & Li, 2019). This agrotourism refugia was appropriate for travel during the COVID-19 pandemic when people were concerned about stress, confusion and panic (Rezaei et al., 2021). Because of the emotional impression or affective image that is built related to the attractive plants, this tourist destination is capable of restoring the community's freshness and mental health (Prameswari et al., 2020). The refugia planting in this tourist destination takes up 2.5 ha of agricultural land and are found among various cultivated plants, such as vegetables (long beans, cabbage and spinach), to control existing pests (Snyder et al., 2020).

The tourism industry in Indonesia has suffered due to the COVID-19 pandemic which was exacerbated by the government's travel ban (Hidayat & Husadha, 2021). As a result, the number of tourists visiting the MRG has decreased (Chin et al., 2021), caused by a variety of factors, including the closure of agrotourism sites, leading promotion to halt for a period of time. Hence, management must make efforts to increase the number of tourist visits because the existence of refugia is critical (Trung & Mohanty, 2023).

The rapid development of technology as a result of the 4.0 industrial revolution has also driven the tourism sector. All forms of developments and changes in this revolution began with the use of the power of digitizing information, which is known as the internet of things (IoT) (Kumar et al., 2019). The IoT era has resulted in the dissemination of information becoming entirely digital via social media. This is where e-WOM comes into play, as it is the most effective marketing tool for increasing the number of tourist visits (Suryaningsih et al., 2020). The use of e-WOM in the tourism sector, including in the MRG, is an effective source of information seeking that shapes the destination's image and people's interest to visit (Doosti et al., 2016).

Magetan Refugia Garden must also strengthen its image for the recovery of the tourism industry because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The garden needs a strong image in terms of service quality, tourism value, characteristics and uniqueness compared to other destinations (Alzaydi, 2021). Therefore, this paper aims to determine and examine the influence of e-WOM on decisions to come to this tourist destination during the pandemic. The outcomes of the study are believed to lead to an increase the number of tourists visits and make the MRG a main destination for travel.

2. Research method

Descriptive analysis (Paendong et al., 2020) was the basic method used in this research. Both primary and secondary data sources and data types were employed and data were gathered from questionnaires, observation and documentation (Riptanti et al., 2020) in June–September 2022. The research locations were chosen based on the purposive sampling technique (Thomas, 2022), including tourism attractiveness and the opportunity to be researched and developed (Trung & Mohanty, 2023).

Non-probability sampling was used to determine the samples (Kumalasari et al., 2018), determined purposefully through particular considerations, based on certain characteristics (Marie et al., 2020): namely tourists over the age of 17 who actively use social media (such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) at least once per day, found information about the MRG on the internet, and had visited the site at least once. This study included four latent variables and fourteen indicators (Table 1). Consistent with Hair et al. (2012), the sample size is at least 10 times the number of indicators so that the total was 140 respondents, collected directly at the research site with questionnaires collected using a Google Form.

Table 1. Latent variables and indicators

Latent variable	Indicator
Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (X)	The credibility of e-WOM sources (X1)
	The characteristics of message sources (X2)
	The characteristics of message contents (X3)
Tourist destination image (Z1)	Cognitive image of the tourist destination (Z1.1)
	Unique image of the tourist destination (Z1.2)
	Affective image of the tourist destination (Z1.3)
Interest in visiting (Z2)	Attention (Z2.1)
	Interest (Z2.2)
	Desire (Z2.3)
	Action (Z2.4)

Visitor's decision (Y)	Stability of a product (Y1)
	Habits on a product (Y2)
	Giving recommendations to others (Y3)
	Repeating purchase (Y4)

Sources: authors based on Fadlullah et al. (2021), Prameswari et al. (2020), and Wang (2015).

The data were analyzed using SEM-PLS with measurement model, evaluation testing, structural model evaluation testing and hypothesis testing (Saragih & Arifiansyah, 2021). The software used was SmartPLS 3.0. There are nine hypotheses proposed, seen in Figure 1.

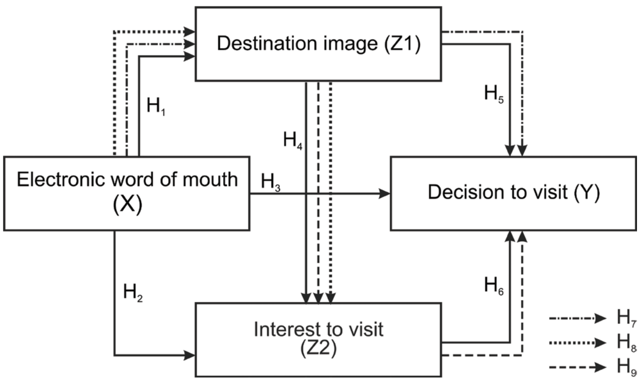

Figure 1. Research hypothesis model
Source: built by authors

Based on Figure 1, the hypotheses in this research can be explained:

1. The relationship between e-WOM variables and destination image: promotion of MRG destinations spread through social media will influence the image of the destination. This is reinforced and proven by research from Agyapong and Yuan (2022). Proposed hypothesis:

   H_1: It is suspected that e-WOM has a positive effect on destination image.
2. The relationship between e-WOM variables and interest in visiting: the dissemination of information on social media via e-WOM will influence a person's interest in visiting a destination. The more positive a tourist's response to a tourist attraction, the higher the interest of potential tourists to visit (Maulana et al., 2021). Proposed hypothesis:

   H_2: It is suspected that e-WOM has a positive effect on interest in visiting.
3. The relationship between e-WOM variables and visiting decisions: e-WOM is a way of exchanging consumer experiences via social media platforms about the positive or the negative from a tourist site. The results of Andriani et al.'s (2019) research stated that there was a positive influence of e-WOM on interest in visiting. Proposed hypothesis:

   H_3: It is suspected that e-WOM has a positive influence on the decision to visit.
4. The relationship between destination image variables and interest in visiting: destination image is used as an evaluation for potential consumers in determining destination choices. A positive brand image can increase consumer trust, loyalty and interest in consuming a product (Cardoso et al., 2022). Proposed hypothesis:

   H_4: It is suspected that the image of the destination has a positive influence on interest in visiting.
5. The relationship between destination image variables and the decision to visit: the good and bad impact of a destination's image will influence a person's interest in visiting and thereby tourists' decisions (Jebbouri et al., 2022). Proposed hypothesis:

   H_5: It is suspected that the destination image has a positive and significant influence on the decision to visit.
6. The relationship between the interest in visiting variable and the decision to visit: interest in visiting can determine a person's level of decision. A high interest in visiting will encourage increased decisions to visit (Anjela et al., 2022). Proposed hypothesis:

   H_6: It is suspected that interest in visiting has a positive and significant influence on the decision to visit.
7. The relationship between e-WOM variables and visiting decisions through destination image: e-WOM is able to shape public perception and destination image so that it can produce a decision. Tourists' visiting decisions are influenced by what information they get through social media. According to Widyastuti and Satifa Putri (2023), destination image is able to fully mediate the increase in e-WOM on visiting decisions. Proposed hypothesis:

   H_7: It is suspected that destination image mediates increasing use of e-WOM on visiting decisions.
8. The relationship between e-WOM variables and interest in visiting through destination image: a person's positive perception of a destination is obtained by searching for information, thereby increasing interest in visiting. E-WOM is able to influence and foster interest in visiting to form a destination image which is mediated by the destination image (Aprilia & Kusumawati, 2021). Proposed hypothesis:

   H_8: It is suspected that destination image mediates an increase in e-WOM in visiting interest.
9. The relationship between destination image variables and the decision to visit through interest in visiting: the positive image of a destination will increase someone's interest and can influence someone to decide to visit. This is in accordance with research conducted by Arif and Sari (2022) which show that interest in visiting mediates the influence

of destination image on the decision to visit. Proposed hypothesis:

H_9: It is suspected that interest in visiting mediates improving the destination's image on the decision to visit.

The research instruments were examined for validity and reliability using a sample of 30 respondents. The validity test incorporated loading factor and average variance extracted (AVE) value parameters (Farida, 2018). Based on loading factor values, all indicators in this study were >0.7 so they were declared to have a high level of validity. The AVE values of the X, Z1, Z2, and Y variables met the requirements for confirmatory and exploratory research (>0.5) (Henseler et al., 2015).

The reliability test for reflective indicator construct was carried out in two ways, namely Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (Cheung et al., 2023). Based on the test results, the values of Cronbach's alpha for variables X, Z1, Z2, and Y were >0.60, which satisfies the requirements. The composite reliability value was >0.7 for all variables, therefore meeting the criteria for confirmatory research (Riptanti et al., 2022). The instruments could be used for further research (Koento, 2020).

3. Results and discussion

The research sample was 140 visitors (90 women and 50 men) to the MRG. The respondents were dominated by the 17–25 age group, who tend to visit and explore new tourist attractions. The majority have a recent education level of senior high school or bachelor degree. Local and inter-provincial tourists from Magetan, Ngawi, Madiun, Ponorogo, Karawang, Pacitan, Surakarta, Boyolali, Surabaya, Magelang and Medan visited this agrotourism site.

3.1. Goodness of fit test

Referring to the analysis results, the standardized root mean residual (SRMR) value was 0.093; the model was then declared fit when the SRMR was <0.10 but was unfit when the SRMR value was >0.15. The chi-square value obtained was 277.895 (>0.05), signifying that the empirical data used in this study are strongly identical to the underlying theory. The normed fit index (NFI) value was 0.656 (<0.90), indicating a good model. The SRMR, chi-square and NFI values showed that the model is fit for this study (Hooper et al., 2008).

3.2. Measurement model (outer model) evaluation

This study uses a model with reflective indicators because those existing are influenced by latent variables and are inter-correlated. This evaluation process considered the convergent and discriminant validity of the indicators, as well as the composite reliability of the indicator blocks (Hair et al., 2012).

Convergent validity

Loading factor and AVE parameters are used in convergent validity. Here, the loading factor for each indicator was >0.70, meaning that each one represented can explain its impact on the latent variable by more than 70%, and the indicator is considered to have data validity and accuracy high enough for respondents to understand (Nainggolan et al., 2021). Figure 2 depicts the results of the loading factor measurement.

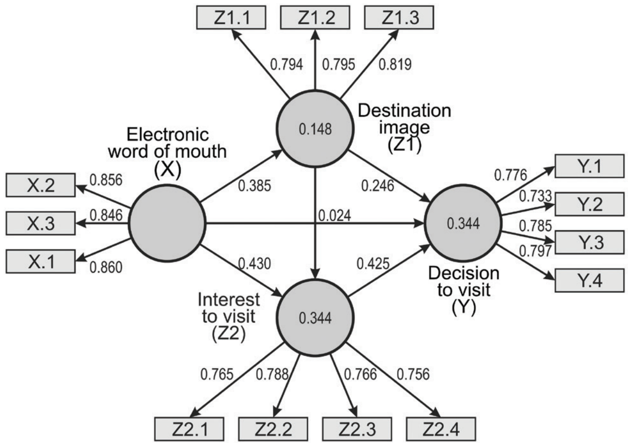

Figure 2. Review procedure based on the PRISMA protocol
Note: data extracted from Scopus database up to July, 2023
Source: authors

The variables were all valid because the AVE value was >0.5 (Thaothampitak & Wongsuwatt, 2022). This suggests that the variables can account for the variation in all indicators and there is no convergent validity problem in the model being tested. Therefore, it can be concluded that the diversity is more than 50% seen from each indicator when viewed from the AVE value.

Discriminant validity

The cross-loading value determines the discriminant validity. If the criteria are met, the indicator is declared to be capable of explaining the variable (Henseler et al., 2015). The cross-loading value of each indicator on its latent variable was >0.7. This suggests that each construct has a high value relative to the latent variable. It can be concluded that all constructs or latent variables already have a better discriminant validity than indicators in other blocks (Thaothampitak & Wongsuwatt, 2022).

Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha

The reliability of a construct in reflective indicators can be tested in two ways: composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha (Nainggolan et al., 2021), as detailed in Table 2. The composite reliability for all variables was >0.7 and this demonstrates that the variables used in the study meet the criteria for confirmatory research. The composite reliability value shows that the reliability level of each latent variable in the study is more than 70%, and the other 30% is an error value (Riptanti et al., 2022).

Table 2. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values

Variable	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha	Description
Electronic word of mouth (X)	0.890	0.814	Reliable
Destination.image (Z1)	0.845	0.727	Reliable
Interest in visiting (Z2)	0.853	0.773	Reliable
Decision to visit (Y)	0.856	0.775	Reliable

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output.

Table 2 also demonstrates that these variables can be relied on and applied to subsequent data processing. Cronbach's alpha value for all variables was >0.6, which signifies that the variables fulfill both confirmatory and exploratory research. It shows that there is a close correlation between the indicators for the same latent variable where a high level of reliability for each latent variable used in this study was shown (Cheung et al., 2023).

3.3. Structural model (inner model) evaluation

Structural model evaluation is used to examine the correlation between latent constructs. The inner model was estimated using the coefficient of determination and predictive relevance (Al-Marsomi & Al-Zwainy, 2023), as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Coefficient determination value (R^2)

Endogenous variable	Value (R^2)	Adjusted R^2	Predictive relevance value (Q^2)	Category
Destination image (Z1)	0.148	0.142	0.020	Weak
Interest in visiting (Z2)	0.344	0.324	0.105	Moderate
Decision to visit (Y)	0.344	0.330	0.109	Moderate

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output.

The R^2 value for Z1 is weak. This is presumably because the model is not strong enough to predict its value, as only 14.8% of the X data correctly project it, whereas the rest are caused by other variables outside the model, such as health and declining income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the R^2 values for Z2 and Y variables are considered moderate. This denotes that the independent variable is adequate for explaining the dependent variable (Satyarini et al., 2017).

In addition, the value of the observations raised by the model and also the parameter estimation using the predictive relevance measurement (Q^2) can also be measured. The predictive relevance (Q^2) for each variable was >0, indicating that the model is highly predictive. This signifies that the observation value of the model and the parameter estimates are considered good (Thaothampitak & Wongsuwatt, 2022).

3.4. Hypothesis testing

A statistical test was used to test the hypothesis on each path. The bootstrapping method is a process to measure the level of significance of direct and indirect effects (Satyarini et al., 2017) as demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. The results of bootstrapping-path coefficients

Hypothesis	Variables	Original sample	*t*-statistics	*p*-values
H_1	X → Z1	0.385	4.294	0.000
H_2	X → Z2	0.430	5.488	0.000
H_3	X → Y	0.024	0.241	0.810
H_4	Z1 → Z2	0.255	3.337	0.001
H_5	Z1 → Y	0.246	3.321	0.001
H_6	Z2 → Y	0.425	4.033	0.000
H_7	X → Z1 → Y	0.095	2.513	0.012
H_8	X → Z1 → Z2	0.098	2.311	0.021
H_9	Z1 → Z2 → Y	0.108	2.748	0.006

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output.

The effect of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the destination image in Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG)
The *p*-value and *t*-statistic of H_1 indicate that the hypothesis is accepted. The finding of this research agrees with those of Torlak et al. (2014), Luong et al. (2017) and Setiawan (2014), which have concluded that e-WOM has a positive and significant effect on destination image. The e-WOM latent variable consists of three indicators, namely the credibility of the e-WOM source, the characteristics of the message source, and the characteristics of the message content. Based on the findings of the data analysis, the e-WOM source credibility indicator has the greatest influence on tourist perception. The respondents' feedback has proven that Instagram is the most credible and valid source of e-WOM. The Instagram account of '@kebunrefugiamagetan'

has shared up-to-date information and the interesting side of agrotourism through its content. In addition, respondents have admitted that they have seen many positive comments and recommendations from other tourists to visit the MRG.

Because it is a place where various plants with striking colors such as sunflowers, celosia flamingo, cosmos and bougainvilleas, as well as various vegetables such as long beans, eggplant and tomatoes grow, the image built from this agrotourism site is tourism in a fresh agricultural environment. The results of this research are in line with research by Edi and Rustam (2021) that a beautiful environment increases healthy living habits. This is consistent with respondents' perceptions that agrotourism is suitable for relieving stress and refreshing the mind as a result of changes in tourism trends where people prefer tourism that is safe and away from crowds (Mahanani et al., 2021). The positive attitude and perception of the community cannot be separated from the existence of e-WOM (Maro-Kulczycka, 2012) which allows the community to learn about MRG.

The effect of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on interest in visiting Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG)

The *p*-value and *t*-statistic suggest that H_2 is acceptable. Several studies, including by Kesumayuda et al. (2020) and Andriani et al. (2019) have reported this relationship. Instagram and YouTube are popular e-WOM media among respondents (Kebun Refugia Magetan YouTube channel). Various interesting content are presented through this e-WOM, such as folk performances at the MRG, including the "bonsai and ornamental plants exhibition festival" which has a positive influence on people's interest in visiting this tourist destination. With this strategy, tourists can share their impressions of the tourist destination and influence other people who are gathering information about the place. The variety of information presented, as well as positive responses from other tourists, have influenced respondents' interest in visiting the MRG. The results of this research are in line with research by Herrera et al. (2018) that positive visitor responses increase the number of visitors to Copper Canyon, Mexico.

The effect of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the decision to visit Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG)

The *p*-value and *t*-statistic suggest that H_3 is rejected. This finding differs from that of Andriani et al. (2019), that e-WOM has a direct effect on the decision to visit, but consistent with those of Verinita and Indrianti (2019), Taryadi and Miftahuddin (2021), that e-WOM has no direct effect on the decision to come to a tourist destination. The insignificant effect is thought to be due to other factors such as unstable public health and lack of income that contribute to the changes in behavior attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a consequence, reviews on agrotourism cannot reach potential visitors effectively, resulting in fewer visits to the MRG.

Although statistically insignificant, the results are consistent with the five-stage model of consumer purchasing procedure by Kotler (2000), in which other factors influence the decision to visit after searching for information on e-WOM. Based on the respondents' answers, agrotourism promotion is less intense due to the pandemic, which has forced tourism to close temporarily. The management, on the other hand, has used the closing of this agrotourism site to build and improve the tourist area. When the agrotourism site is officially reopened, the image of the destination in the minds of tourists may improve since the renewed MRG may attract visitors, although not as many as before the pandemic. This is why e-WOM has a positive but insignificant influence on the decision to visit the MRG. The research results differ from Arta and Yasa's (2019) research that e-WOM has a significant and positive effect on purchasing decisions.

The effect of destination image on the interest to visit Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG)

The *p*-value and *t*-statistic for H_4 indicate that this hypothesis is accepted, and is consistent with the findings of the research by Aprilia and Kusumawati (2021). The data analysis results show that the affective image of the tourist destination image indicator has the greatest impact on tourist interest in visiting a destination. The respondents believe that this agrotourism environment can create a pleasant atmosphere and excite them. The cognitive image of the tourist destination indicator also produces positive results because tourists believe that all groups can access the completed infrastructure and facilities, as well as afford the agrotourism rates. Respondents have also testified that replicas of peacocks and giant rabbits created from existing plants are examples of the unique destination image. However, there are still flaws, such as the frequently collapsing guard rails. Despite the shortcomings, the presence of tourist attractions, such as the *reog* (traditional Javanese dance in an open arena, containing magical elements, the main dancer using a lion-head with a peacock feather decoration, several masked dancers, and Kuda Lumping) of "Krido Mudo Taruno" have the potential and competence to promote locally distinct arts to encourage community appreciation (Herfino et al., 2021). The agrotourism site's strategic location and cool weather also contribute to its positive perception. Consequently, it is settled that the destination's image is an important factor in generating interest in visiting the MRG. This result is in line with research by Dileep

Kumar et al. (2020) that visitors who are satisfied with the destination image will be loyal to re-visit that tourist destination.

The effect of destination image on the decision to visit Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG)

The *p*-value and *t*-statistic of H_5 denote that the hypothesis is approved, and this is coherent with the research produced by Sudigdo et al. (2019). The result has revealed that beautiful refugia, adequate facilities and cool weather are the top aspects of the destination image remarked by the respondents. These are what motivate tourists to come to the MRG, suggesting that a better image and erception of a tourist destination contributes to those who decide to visit the place. This signifies that prospective tourists' perceptions, the uniqueness of tourist attractions (Herfino et al., 2021), as well as the adequate infrastructure and facilities have an influence on decisions to come to the MRG.

The effect of an interest in visiting on the decision to visit Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG)

The *p*-value and *t*-statistics for H_6 show that the hypothesis is accepted, and this result corresponds to that of Fadlullah et al. (2021). The respondents' responses have shown that their interest to visit the MRG is strong. Interest plays the most significant role in decisions to visit the tourist destination. The respondents have stated that agrotourism promotion through social media has piqued their interest in the MRG because they can thoroughly research information on the garden and finally visit the place based on their interest. This research is in line with Damayanti and Rasyid (2022) that promotional strategies via social media increase the number of visitors more quickly.

Effect of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the decision to visit the Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG) mediated by the destination image

When viewed based on the *p*-value and *t*-statistic, H_7 is accepted, and this is similar and related to the results of Farrukh et al.'s (2022) research. The majority of respondents have admitted that they chose to visit because they frequently read reviews about the MRG on websites, such as 'kominfo.magetan.go.id' and 'jatim.liputan6.com'. Furthermore, social media promotions and the image built by agrotourism management meet the criteria for a tourist destination. The respondents have decided to visit the site based on this suitability and stated that they will recommend it to their acquaintances.

The effect of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on an interest in visiting Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG) mediated by the destination image

The *p*-value and *t*-statistic prove that H_8 is acceptable, meaning that a change in e-WOM related to the destination image may affect the tourists' interest in visiting the MRG. This finding is consistent with that of Aprilia and Kusumawati (2021). Social media reviews on a tourist destination that offers tourism promoting pest controlling using refugia, are aware that this destination is worth visiting. Furthermore, it piques their interest and desire, as well as enticing them to come to visit as soon as possible.

The effect of destination image on the decision to visit Magetan Refugia Garden (MRG) mediated by the interest to visit

The *p*-value and *t*-statistic signal that H_9 is accepted. That is, a change in the destination image attributed to an interest in visiting the destination can influence tourists' decisions to visit the MRG. This outcome follows that of Arif and Sari (2022). The destination image that has been built about the MRG is good and positive, attractive and unique, and draws tourists' interest. The growing interest in agrotourism will prompt them to visit the site. This is in line with research by Purnami and Oka Suryawardani (2018) that visitors feel satisfied so they decide to return to visit this tourist spot.

The limitation of the research is the sample selection of respondents aged 17–25 years. The ease of today's technology makes it possible for those aged less than 17 or more than 25 years old to access social media easily. This could possibly influence the research results.

4. Conclusion

The factors underlying visitors' decisions to come to the tourist destination will provide information and become a consideration for agrotourism managers and local government officials as a reference to increase the number of tourist visits. The relationship between e-WOM and the decision to visit is influenced indirectly by the destination image and tourists' interest in visiting the site. The increased use of e-WOM will result in a multiplied number of tourist visits. The findings of this study have revealed that the direct effect of e-WOM on the decision to visit is not statistically significant. This minor effect is due to other factors influencing e-WOM as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which also caused a decrease in the number of visitors to the MRG. Therefore, an increase in e-WOM is required through vigorous, massive promotion, and can advance all interesting aspects of the MRG through official social media accounts. Furthermore, the MRG's identity as an agrotourism site to control pests should be maintained and developed to attract domestic and international visitors.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.06 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E
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Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

The dynamic trio: The relationship between passion, perseverance and job satisfaction

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How to cite (APA style): Gorenak, M., Uršič, N., & Rajner, I. (2024). The dynamic trio: The relationship between passion, perseverance and job satisfaction. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 89–101. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.06

ABSTRACT

This work aims to enhance the understanding of the dynamic relationship between passion, perseverance and job satisfaction among tour guides, recognizing the interconnected nature of these elements and their impact on tourism experience. A quantitative survey was conducted among a representative sample of tour guides using two pre-existing validated questionnaires, allowing the results to be generalized to the entire population. The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics within the tourism industry, particularly regarding tour guides. While passion, perseverance and job satisfaction are interrelated, their correlations exhibit specific characteristics; passion does not directly dictate job satisfaction, whereas perseverance is a significant contributor. This research emphasizes the importance of commitment, combining both passion and perseverance, and offers insights that can inform managerial decisions and human resources (HR) policies concerning tour guides in tourist agencies.

KEYWORDS

tour guide, passion, perseverance, job satisfaction, tourism

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
8 July 2024
Accepted:
5 August 2024
Published:
24 September 2024

1. Introduction

Passion for work is highly valued by employers across various fields (Jachimowicz & Weisman, 2022). For jobs with challenging conditions such as long hours, physical demands and time away from family (Lunner Kolstrup et al., 2013), it is crucial that employees have both passion and perseverance. Job satisfaction, a key factor affecting employee well-being (Kumari et al., 2014), is a complex, multidimensional construct (Choy & Shih, 2022), closely related to passion and perseverance, especially in tour guiding. Tour guides shape travellers' experiences at historical sites, cultural destinations and natural wonders through storytelling (Stasiak, 2020) and humour, creating meaningful experiences (Alegro & Turnšek, 2020). This article aims to assess the dynamic trio of passion, perseverance and job satisfaction in tour guiding.

Passion, an intrinsic motivator (Vallerand et al., 2003), drives tour guides to share their enthusiasm for the world's wonders and become adept storytellers, transforming their work into a meaningful endeavour.

Understanding how passion influences tour guides' decisions and actions is crucial for comprehending their commitment, however, perseverance is equally vital, as guides face challenges in the evolving tourism industry. The ability to adapt, remain resilient and pursue excellence (Fiksel, 2015) is essential for navigating uncertainties and maintaining dedication. Satisfaction reflects overall feelings and perceptions towards a job (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011), evaluating how fulfilling, rewarding and enjoyable it is.

Exploring the connections between passion, perseverance and job satisfaction among tour guides reveals these elements to be interwoven, influencing the tourism experience. Job satisfaction, from the interplay of passion and perseverance, impacts tour guides' well-being and motivation, leaving a lasting impression on travellers (Trdina & Pušnik, 2023). These customer experiences are directly related to service quality, a key to organizational success (Padlee et al., 2019), and research by Zabukovec Baruca and Čivre (2022) shows that unique experiences reinforce the perception of quality. Delivering excellent service enhances profits and energizes employees to perform to their full potential (Padlee et al., 2019). In tour guiding, the interplay between passion, perseverance and job satisfaction profoundly impacts the well-being and motivation of guides and the quality of service delivered to travellers. Understanding and optimizing these factors is paramount for both individuals and the broader tourism sector.

2. Working in tourism, working as a tour guide

2.1. Working in tourism

Tourism, a rapidly growing global activity (Rangus & Brumen, 2016), continues to evolve, offering diverse travel experiences worldwide. As one of the most dynamic industries (Zhang et al., 2009), tourism constantly changes, prompting new strategies, individualized approaches, ecological awareness and digitalization. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) recognize tourism as a significant social, cultural, and economic phenomenon, impacting economic development and various industries (The World Tourism Organization & International Labour Organization, 2014). The tourism sector contributes around 10% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) and generated approximately 330 million jobs in 2019 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020), highlighting its economic importance globally (Aynalem et al., 2016). Understanding the evolution of work is essential for modern tourism.

Historically, perspectives on work have evolved: the ancient Greeks saw it as a necessity, primarily for slaves; early Christianity valued contemplation over work, while in modern times employment has become crucial for social involvement, with workforce exclusion impacting other aspects of life. Modern capitalists reshaped work, reducing wages but promoting productivity, thus elevating work's societal importance (Ambrož, 2005).

Despite tourism's positive employment impact, it faces challenges such as low wages, difficult conditions, limited growth opportunities and ambiguous roles (Baum, 2015). Effective people management can improve work quality and business outcomes (Baum, 2015) and human resources are vital in tourism, bringing diverse knowledge, skills and abilities (Tetik, 2016). Understanding the role of work in tourism requires a multidisciplinary approach, examining aspects of the labour market (Ladkin, 2011) with researchers (Baum et al., 2016) classifying tourism labour studies into three levels: macro, meso and micro. The macro level covers societal context, labour market dynamics, policies, trends, and regulations; the meso level focuses on organizational strategies and human resources (HR) practices; while the micro level delves into individual behaviours, attitudes, skills, emotional labour and psychological capital. Despite challenges, Baum (2015) is optimistic about the future, anticipating adaptation and progress.

This article analyses the complexities of work in tourism, exploring the challenges and opportunities in tour guiding. By highlighting the multifaceted nature of tourism work, we aim to provide insights to inform policy decisions, improve HR practices and contribute to the sustainable growth of this crucial industry.

2.2. The role of tour guides in tourism

The effective organization of oneself, work and others is crucial in the tourism industry, especially for tour guides. Those in this profession need knowledge, skills and a drive to excel (Gorenak, 2017). The World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA) defined a tour guide in 2003 as someone who guides visitors in their chosen language, interprets cultural and natural heritage, and has an area-specific qualification (WFTGA, n.d.). Cetin and Yarcan (2017) add that a tour guide must be a professional who efficiently and interestingly informs visitors about the destination.

The tourist guide profession dates back to ancient Greece and Rome, gaining prominence in the late 19th and increasingly in demand in the 20th centuries (Gorenak, 2017). Tourist guides aim to create enjoyable experiences by providing information entertainingly and educationally, acting as intermediaries between destinations and visitors, ensuring quality experiences and visitor satisfaction, especially during short visits (İrigüler & Güler, 2016). Guides serve as interpreters, educators, ambassadors and facilitators between local culture and tourists (Cetin & Yarcan, 2017). However, tour guiding can be stressful (Akkuş & Arslan, 2023) due to health problems, burnout, turnover, low productivity, poor performance and low service quality (Ayaz & Demir, 2019), with working conditions and hours being significant stressors (Arslan & Akkus, 2023). Seasonality, low earnings, and changing economic conditions also impact the profession (Kruczek et al., 2020).

In 21st century tourism, tour guides need an experience-centered approach to stay relevant and must provide engaging, memorable, interactive and personalized experiences. Adapting to technological and socio-demographic shifts (Alegro et al., 2023), guides must use diverse communication strategies. The future of tour guiding relies on their ability to create collaborative experiences (Weiler & Black, 2015), requiring adapted communication skills to meet client expectations (Weiler & Black, 2021).

Thus, the importance of passion, persistence and job satisfaction for tour guides is increasingly crucial. This 'dynamic trio' needs further examination to understand their interplay and mutual influence.

3. Commitment: Passion and persistence at work

Before delving into the central research concepts of our study, it is pertinent to provide a preliminary definition of human personality and personality traits, as they lay the foundation for the subsequent exploration of our physical, mental and behavioural attributes. The term personality traits refer to individual characteristics that manifest and vary across different situations and contexts (Roberts & Wood, 2006) which enable the description of individuals and facilitate the understanding of differences among them. As posited by Avsec et al. (2017), personality traits also aid in predicting behaviours, both of others and ourselves. Musek (2010) further elaborates within the framework of personality structure, comprising distinct interrelationships among them. They are regarded as fundamental units of personality, encompassing a range of levels, from specific attributes to more intricate and multifaceted dimensions. Subsequently, the discussion will revolve around passion and persistence in the context of work, which collectively contribute to the commitment exhibited in performing a specific job or profession.

3.1. Commitment at work

Duckworth (2016) defines commitment as the sustained pursuit of a singular goal with passion and perseverance over time, combining determination, patience and enthusiastic endeavour towards long-term ambitions, denoting profound emotional attachment and loyalty. Duckworth and Quinn (2009) assert that commitment predicts success in demanding domains, surpassing innate talent. Highly committed individuals show unwavering dedication, prioritizing persistence over fear of failure, even in risky situations (Lucas et al., 2015). Persistence is more crucial than intensity (Duckworth, 2016) but commitment profiles vary globally (Rangus et al., 2020) influenced by genetic and environmental factors. Traits like commitment and talent are shaped by both genetics and life experiences (Duckworth, 2016) while Adams Miller (2017) defines authentic commitment as the fervent pursuit of challenging goals that inspire personal growth.

Duckworth and Quinn (2009) present commitment as a hierarchical trait, with persistence representing resilience, and passion signifying sustained dedication. Commitment can be achieved through challenging or easy paths, requiring either perseverance or acceptance. Exposure to committed individuals can enhance commitment level and committed individuals believe in their ability to succeed, displaying a positive attitude that influences their well-being. They perceive challenges differently from those with lower commitment levels (Jin & Kim, 2017).

Duckworth (2016) identifies four characteristics of commitment: interest, practice, purpose and hope. Interest arises from genuine enjoyment of pursuits, while practice involves daily discipline for personal development. Purpose involves fulfilling a life mission, emphasizing creative, experiential and attitudinal values (Musek, 2010) and hope is the expectation of achieving solutions, involving cognitively oriented thinking and action, with goals deemed attainable and paths feasible.

The cultivation of commitment remains a subject of inquiry. Duckworth (2016) suggests it can be nurtured through internal interests and external conditions as it is contagious, like habits and behaviours (e.g. smoking, weight gain and happiness). According to Duckworth's global research, commitment encompasses two equally important factors contributing to exceptional success.

3.2. The power of passion in work

Passion for specific actions emerges when individuals exhibit enduring, devoted and consistent interest in a particular goal over the long term. It functions as a guiding compass that requires deliberate shaping through effort and dedication, leading individuals towards their true desires on their often-convoluted journeys.

Irrespective of life pursuits, individuals eventually recognize that sustained commitment to their work or actions hinges on approaching them with fervent passion (Duckworth, 2016). Within the framework of the psychology of life, Musek (2010) describes passion as a distinctive facet of human personality and its potency in work is derived from a personal fascination with a specific field, direction or activity. Crucially, it necessitates self-awareness of the purpose behind work and the belief that such endeavours hold intrinsic meaning and value for others (Lee & Duckworth, 2018). Duckworth (2016) asserts that passion for work develops through a moment of revelation or discovery, subsequently evolving over the long term and deepening throughout a lifetime. Various factors influence the amount of time individuals invest in their work; some seek additional financial rewards, while others may be driven by work addiction or a desire to impress employers, thus increasing their chances of advancement. However, there are also individuals who invest substantial effort solely due to their genuine love for what they do, exemplifying the development of passion for their work. Although passion is distinct from work motivation, these two concepts are interrelated (Houlfort et al., 2014).

Passion can manifest itself in two forms: harmonious and obsessive. Harmonious passion arises from an autonomous internalization process, wherein individuals freely choose and pursue their activities. On the other hand, obsessive passion emerges from internally controlled passionate engagement, involving a process of controlled internalization (Houlfort et al., 2014).

3.3. The power of perseverance in work

Perseverance constitutes the second essential facet of dedication. Initially, many activities in life may appear uninteresting and superficial to individuals. However, as they engage in these endeavours, they gradually recognize the multidimensional nature of each action, with previously unnoticed aspects and unresolved complexities emerging. When faced with such challenges, individuals must exercise perseverance, persistently engaging with the task until its completion (Duckworth, 2016). Khan and Khan (2017) underscore the significance of perseverance on par with intelligence, highlighting that individual differences often lie in temperament rather than intellect. Focusing on perseverance fosters dedication by bolstering sustained efforts, while an emphasis on pleasure can impede dedication by diverting enduring interests over time (Von Culin et al., 2014).

However, it is crucial to recognize that perseverance emerges from a profound internal interest. Merely liking something does not guarantee exceptional performance (Duckworth, 2016). Self-confidence plays a significant role in fostering perseverance, as individuals' beliefs in their capabilities stem from their interactions with others in their lives (Duckworth, 2016). Lucas et al. (2015) discovered that highly dedicated individuals are unwilling to abandon their unfinished goals, even when offered monetary rewards to do so and exhibit a preference for persevering until they achieve their objectives, even if it entails the risk of failure.

3.4. Commitment of tour guides

Having established that commitment to work entails both passion and perseverance, it is clear that tourist guides need both to show true commitment. The profession offers advantages like flexible scheduling, dynamic job nature, continuous learning and opportunities to travel and meet people. However, it also has downsides such as intense work demands, seasonal employment, low pay, frequent interactions with people, rapid changes and poor working conditions. It is hypothesized that committed tourist guides are driven by a profound passion for working with people and traveling, and they demonstrate perseverance despite these negatives. Commitment can manifest positively or negatively, and negative commitment occurs when dedication to something fails to bring joy or satisfaction, aligning with others' goals at the expense of personal happiness (Adams Miller, 2017).

The interplay of passion and perseverance significantly influences the professional stability of tourist guides. Passion motivates them to invest time and effort, leading to noteworthy achievements, while perseverance helps them pursue goals, overcoming challenges and maintaining commitment despite negative factors that might tempt them to quit. This among other factors affects job market fluctuations for tourist guides.

The pursuit of meaning and engagement in a profession is linked to challenges and the development of personal skills and virtues that require long-term perseverance. In contrast, the pursuit of mere satisfaction is less likely to maintain interest and striving for long-term goals (Von Culin et al., 2014). Our research focuses on dedicated tourist guides seeking long-term meaning rather than mere pleasure. Those who prioritize pleasure may show lower dedication and might switch careers, thus we posit that truly committed individuals find meaning in their job, driving professional success through personal satisfaction and happiness.

4. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a dynamic and multifaceted psychological state encompassing emotions, motivations, perceptions and contextual factors within work. It reflects overall contentment, pleasure and fulfilment derived from work experiences and conditions. Researchers like

Duckworth (2016) emphasize the importance of personal interests and alignment with passions in fostering job satisfaction as when work resonates with intrinsic desires and values, it enhances engagement and accomplishment, leading to dedication and happiness (Duckworth, 2016).

Job satisfaction also depends on perceptions of various aspects of the work environment (Ahmad et al., 2018) while Yakın and Erdil (2012) describe job satisfaction as affection towards the overall scope of work or specific elements within it. This perception shapes engagement and effectiveness (Tetik, 2016). Psychological factors like perceived significance, competences, self-affirmation and influence also contribute significantly to job satisfaction (Tetik, 2016).

The intrinsic motivation theory of Maier and Brunstein (2001) links job satisfaction to how work inspires personal and professional goals. Mihalič (2008) reinforces this by highlighting the relationship between job satisfaction and commitment as content employees tend to develop strong organizational allegiance, underscoring the connection between satisfaction and loyalty. İrigüler and Güler (2016) explore the impact of emotional labour on job satisfaction among tourist guides, emphasizing the cyclical relationship between positive emotional states, satisfaction and organizational orientation.

For tourist guides, Tetik (2016) finds that perceived role significance greatly influences job satisfaction and Gorenak (2011) identifies factors affecting Slovenian tourist guides' job satisfaction, including working conditions, relationships, rewards and organizational culture.

In essence, job satisfaction is influenced by multiple factors. The alignment of personal passions, the significance attributed to work, and the interplay of emotions and perceptions collectively shape job satisfaction. Understanding job satisfaction reveals the intricate web of influences dictating an individual's contentment in their professional journey.

5. Methodology

For the purposes of this article, we are using data that was gathered in a wider survey. The data in this section, as well as in *Research analysis* and the sub-section named *Formatting merged variables*, is presented for explanatory purposes so that readers are able to understand fully the wider survey.

5.1. Research question and hypotheses

The aim was to answer the research question: how do passion, perseverance and job satisfaction interact with each other in the case of tour guides?

H_1: Personally satisfied tour guides report a greater passion for their work compared to less personally satisfied tour guides.

H_2: Personally satisfied tour guides, despite obstacles, report a higher level of perseverance in performing their work compared to less personally satisfied tour guides.

H_3: Tour guides with higher expressed levels of passion also express higher levels of perseverance.

5.2. Instrument

The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first relates to measuring the level of dedication of tourist guides to their work and was prepared based on a publicly available dedication scale (Duckworth, 2016) which the author developed for her own research and has been used in various studies. This section includes ten statements associated with passion and perseverance. Responses to the statements are rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all like me*, to *very much like me*. The second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth statements are reverse-scored compared to the others. All marked points on the questionnaire are added and divided by ten and the results can be compared with the Duckworth (2016) dedication scale. The second part measures the individual overall level of satisfaction. As a measurement instrument for assessing the satisfaction of tour guides, a questionnaire for measuring employee satisfaction was used (Mihalič, 2008). This choice was partially made due to the fact that it is geographically specific since the author of the survey is from the same country as the respondents. The questionnaire contains 25 items and a 5-point rating scale, ranging from *I am very dissatisfied*, to *I am very satisfied*. The final third part of the questionnaire consists of demographic questions concerning gender, age, education, employment status and monthly income.

5.3. Sample and validity

As noted before, the survey was undertaken amongst tour guides from Slovenia, where a total of 987 officially licensed tour guides worked at the time of the survey (Škerbinc, 2022). Out of this total, 775 are listed on the register of Turistično gostinska zbornica Slovenije (n.d.) and are accessible publicly, a database where the e-mails of those who have consented exists. We sent an email to each of them, asking them to fill out an online survey. A 30-day period was allowed for completing it and a total of 190 responses were acquired representing 24.5% of the tour guides whose e-mails are listed on the database.

Out of a total of 987 who have a tour guide license in Slovenia, 551 are men and 436 are women with an average age is 45.3 (Škerbinc, 2022). The representativeness of the sample was examined in two ways, namely by comparing the obtained data on tour guides from the report by Škerbinc (2022), with *t*-test analysis and the calculation of means and chi-square tests. To assess validity, we selected two variables from the demographic section (gender and age).

In the first step, we used a one-sample *t*-test to check the mean value of 45.3 years obtained from TGZS data, against the calculated mean value of our sample at 44.6 years. The one-sample *t*-test yielded a value of –0.859 and a significance *p*-value of 0.391. Considering a significance level of α = 0.05, we can conclude that the sample is comparable to the population, as the significance value is greater than the significance level. Based on the measurement for the age variable, we can infer that the surveyed sample is representative of the entire population. In the second step the chi-square goodness of fit test for the age variable in relation to gender was calculated, the mean value for males was 45.4 years, and for females, it was 43.9 years, with a *p*-value of 0.907. The differences between the obtained TGZS data and the calculated values were negligible. Considering a significance level of α = 0.05, we can conclude with 95% confidence that the sample we surveyed is representative of the entire population for both age and gender variables. With this set we have proceeded to conduct the analysis. Basic demographics are represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of demographic data

Variable		Number	Valid percent
Gender	Male	80	42.6
	Female	108	57.4
Age by groups	From 18 to 30	19	10.1
	From 31 to 50	115	61.2
	Above 51	54	28.7
Average age		45.3 (obtained data)	44.6 (calculated value)
Level of education	High school diploma	26	13.8
	Vocational college diploma	27	14.4
	Applied sciences degree	25	13.3
	University degree	82	43.6
	Masters' or PhD	28	14.9

Source: authors.

From Table 1, we can initially observe that among the respondents who answered the gender question, there were 80 males, accounting for 42.6% of all received responses, and 108 females, representing 57.4% of the responses. The same table also provides the average age of the respondents, which is 44.59 years: the majority fall within the age group of 31 to 50 years (61.2%), followed by above 51 (28.7%), and finally between 18 and 30 (10.1%). Additionally, we can see the information about the current level of attained education among the respondents. The highest proportion hold a university degree (43.6%), almost equally followed by those with a completed master's or doctorate degree (14.9%) and those with a vocational college diploma (14.4%), while the smallest proportions have a high school diploma (13.8%) or an applied sciences degree (13.3%).

6. Research analysis

First, we tested the validity of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha test, calculating the coefficients for each set of variables. We have performed this test on variables which pertain to the passion and perseverance of tourist guides to their work; the value was 0.713, indicating an acceptable and sufficiently high value reliability of measurement. Secondly, we performed this test on variables that measured job satisfaction; the value was 0.943, thus indicating a great reliability of measurement. According to Cronbach's (1951) research, values indicate an acceptable to great reliability of measurement. Regarding the composition and characteristics of the sample, it is representative.

6.1. Formatting merged variables

The structure of the questionnaire used in the survey demanded some variables to be merged and not used individually. The values of some variables that were formed intentionally in negatively form statements were transformed before creating composite variables but were not changed into a positive form.

Before conducting the factor analysis of variables related to passion and perseverance, we performed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The results show a KMO value of 0.788 and a significance of 0.000 for Bartlett's test of sphericity, thus proving that the sample is appropriate for factor analysis to be conducted. After this initial step, factor analysis was conducted on the first set of 10 variables that measured passion and perseverance. Out of 10 variables all of them positioned themselves into two different factors with suitable weights. Results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

We have identified the factors determined in Tables 2 and 3 with the first representing passion and the second perseverance.

Table 2. Characteristics of variables that measured passion and perseverance

Variables		Mean value	Standard deviation
Factor 1: Perseverance (24.04% explained variance)	I am diligent. I never give up	4.10	0.87
	I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge	4.28	0.70
	I finish whatever I begin	4.06	0.81
	I am a hard worker	4.26	0.83
	Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily	4.10	1.10
Factor 2: Passion (9.90% explained variance)	I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest	3.53	1.07
	I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one	3.51	1.02
	My interests change from year to year	3.13	1.20
	I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete	3.75	1.10
	New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones	3.44	1.14

Source: authors.

Table 3. Factor analysis of variables that measured passion and perseverance

Variables	Factor 1	Factor 2
I am diligent. I never give up	0.780	–
I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge	0.709	–
I finish whatever I begin	0.551	–
I am a hard worker	0.480	–
Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily	0.459	–
I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest	–	0.738
I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one	–	0.531
My interests change from year to year	–	0.509
I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete	–	0.459
New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones	–	0.375

Source: authors.

Since job satisfaction as a whole is important for our study, we have decided not to subdivide it further, a decision partially due to the very high reliability value of Cronbach's alpha seen before. Thus, we have merged all the variables into a single one. The characteristics of individual variables that comprise the newly merged "job satisfaction" variable are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Characteristics of variables that measure job satisfaction

Variable → My motivation is determined by …	Mean value	Standard deviation
… the type of tasks or assignments I receive	4.29	0.60
… my close colleagues with whom I work	4.11	0.70
… the educational opportunities available to me	3.52	0.97
… the leadership style practiced by my supervisor	3.67	0.84
… the assigned working hours	3.81	0.85

Table 4 (cont.)

Variable → My motivation is determined by …	Mean value	Standard deviation
… the quantity of tasks or assignments I receive	3.88	0.76
… the payment for my work	3.42	0.88
… the level of job security and reliability	2.54	1.17
… the possibilities for career advancement I have	3.04	0.98
… the demonstrated efforts for my professional development	3.31	0.96
… the effectiveness of health protection at work	3.02	1.06
… the intensity of rewards I receive	3.01	1.06
… the working space I have	3.91	0.88
… the opportunities for creative work I have	4.10	0.80
… the feedback I receive	3.91	0.84
… the professionalism in the organization	3.86	0.89
… the physical conditions and work environment I have	3.60	0.89
… the implementation of discipline, rules in the organization	3.60	0.83
… the possibilities for developing competencies I have	3.79	0.89
… the care for my well-being that I receive	3.41	0.93
… the challenges I face at work	4.05	0.75
… the methods of motivation I receive	3.55	0.97
… the opportunities for me too participation in decision-making	3.58	0.94
… the interpersonal relationships prevailing in the organization	3.81	0.88

Source: authors.

6.2. Pearson's correlation analysis

The first analysis we did was Pearsons' correlation analysis, so we could see which of the merged variables correlate among each other, and the results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlation between individual merged variables

Variable	Passion	Perseverance	Job satisfaction
Passion	1	–	–
Perseverance	-0.282^{**}	1	–
Job satisfaction	0.030	0.182^{*}	1

Note: * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: authors.

The results presented in Table 5 show the correlation between the merged variables of perseverance, passion and job satisfaction.

There is a statistically significant negative correlation between passion and perseverance ($r = -0.282$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that individuals who display higher levels of passion are likely to report lower levels of perseverance, and vice versa. In other words, those who are highly passionate about their work may tend to exhibit lower levels of perseverance when encountering obstacles or setbacks. Conversely, those who persist and show consistent effort in the face of challenges may be less likely to demonstrate intense passion for their work.

There is a weak, non-significant positive correlation between passion and job satisfaction ($r = 0.030$, $p > 0.05$). This implies that there is no significant linear relationship between these two variables. It suggests that having a high level of passion for one's work does not necessarily guarantee higher levels of job satisfaction and other factors may play a more critical role in determining job satisfaction beyond individual passion for the work.

There is a statistically significant positive correlation between perseverance and job satisfaction ($r = 0.182$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that individuals who demonstrate higher levels of perseverance are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction. The ability to persist and maintain efforts despite difficulties may contribute to a sense of accomplishment and contentment in the workplace, leading to higher job satisfaction.

6.3. Analysis of relationships between merged variables and demographics

Furthermore, we have decided to conduct an analysis of relationships between merged variables and demographics. The results are shown in Tables 6 to 9.

As we can see in Table 6, based on the statistical analysis, there are no significant differences between male and female concerning their scores on passion, perseverance and job satisfaction. The *p*-values for all three variables are greater than the usual significance level of 0.05, indicating that any observed differences between gender are likely due to chance and not meaningful in this context.

Table 6. Statistically significant differences between individual merged variables and gender

Variable	*t*-value	*p*-value	Mean value	
			Male	Female
Passion	–1.676	0.759	2.65	2.47
Perseverance	–1.796	0.983	4.08	4.23
Job satisfaction	0.558	0.574	3.66	3.61

Source: authors.

As we can see in Table 7, based on the statistical analysis, there are no significant correlations between age and the individual merged variables of passion, perseverance and job satisfaction, however there is an indication that age and passion have a negative correlation, same is true for age and job satisfaction, however age and perseverance have positive correlation. It is important to note, that correlations are not statistically significant.

Table 7. Correlation between individual merged variables and age

Variable	Passion	Perseverance	Job satisfaction
Age	–0.056	0.043	–0.014

Source: authors.

Also in Table 8, based on the analysis, there are no statistically significant differences in passion, perseverance and job satisfaction scores among individuals in different age groups. This implies that individuals across different age ranges experience similar levels of passion, perseverance and job satisfaction in their work.

Table 8. Statistically significant differences between individual merged variables and age groups

Variable	*F*-value	*p*-value	Average	Mean value	
				Category	Value
Passion	0.228	0.798	2.53	From 18 to 30	2.60
				From 31 to 50	2.53
				Above 51	2.49
Perseverance	0.945	0.390	4.16	From 18 to 30	4.12
				From 31 to 50	4.12
				Above 51	4.25
Job satisfaction	1.969	0.143	3.63	From 18 to 30	3.80
				From 31 to 50	3.56
				Above 51	3.70

Source: authors.

Table 9. Statistically significant differences between individual merged variables and level of education

Variable	*F*-value	*p*-value	Average	Mean value	
				Category	Value
Passion	0.203	0.937	3.45	High school diploma	3.56
				Vocational college diploma	3.43
				Applied sciences degree	3.43
				University degree	3.42
				Masters' or PhD	3.48

Table 9 (cont.)

Variable	*F*-value	*p*-value	Average	Mean value	
				Category	Value
Perseverance	0.978	0.421	4.16	High school diploma	4.15
				Vocational college diploma	4.16
				Applied sciences degree	4.28
				University degree	4.08
				Masters' or PhD	4.30
Job satisfaction	1.318	0.266	3.63	High school diploma	3.82
				Vocational college diploma	3.55
				Applied sciences degree	3.66
				University degree	3.63
				Masters' or PhD	3.47

Source: authors.

Finally in Table 9, based on the statistical analysis, there are no statistically significant differences in passion, perseverance and job satisfaction scores among individuals with different levels of education which implies that individuals with varying educational backgrounds experience similar levels in their work.

7. Findings and practical implications

The notion of commitment, entailing the fusion of passion and perseverance, holds a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of professionals across various fields, including the niche domain of tourist guiding. As expounded by Duckworth (2016), commitment encapsulates the sustained pursuit of goals driven by the amalgamation of passion and perseverance. This chapter intricately navigates the interplay of commitment, passion, perseverance and job satisfaction within the realm of tourist guides, shedding illuminating insights on how these dimensions collectively sculpt their professional journey.

The analysis employing Pearson's correlation examines the complex tapestry of relationships binding passion, perseverance and job satisfaction. A thought-provoking revelation emerges from the negative correlation between passion and perseverance ($r = -0.282$, $p < 0.01$), explicitly confirming that an intense emotional investment in work might impede an individual's capacity to endure challenges. In contrast, individuals exhibiting unwavering determination may surmount obstacles without being hindered by the heightened emotional intensity associated with passion. This underlines the intricate equilibrium to be maintained between enthusiasm and resilience in the occupational sphere. This equilibrium, as evidenced, is vital for nurturing enduring commitment among tourist guides.

Conversely, a weak and statistically non-significant positive correlation between passion and job satisfaction ($r = 0.030$, $p > 0.05$) brings forth an intriguing revelation– having an ardent passion for one's work doesn't necessarily translate into elevated levels of job satisfaction. The intricate nature of job satisfaction suggests that it is shaped by an array of factors extending beyond individual passion. Work conditions, rewards and relationships play pivotal roles in shaping job satisfaction (Tetik, 2016). This explicit rejection of the hypothesis underscores the multifaceted nature of job satisfaction and amplifies the necessity for a comprehensive exploration of the myriad factors contributing to contentment within the workspace, extending beyond the boundaries of individual passion.

In contrast, the statistically significant positive correlation between perseverance and job satisfaction ($r = 0.182$, $p < 0.05$) robustly spotlights the transformative role of perseverance in nurturing a sense of accomplishment and contentment within the professional domain. Individuals exhibiting higher levels of perseverance are inclined to experience enhanced job satisfaction, thus affirming the hypothesis. This reiterates the centrality of resilience and persistence in navigating challenges and setbacks, culminating in elevated satisfaction stemming from achievements. In the case of tourist guides, the capability to doggedly surmount obstacles emerges as a propellant behind their professional contentment, thereby accentuating the importance of tenacity in augmenting job satisfaction.

A more profound scrutiny of the relationships between amalgamated variables and demographics reveals insights. Gender, age and educational attainment do not exert significant influence on the levels of passion, perseverance and job satisfaction among tourist guides, further corroborating the universality of commitment within the profession. Irrespective of gender, age or educational background, both males and females demonstrate levels of commitment, passion and job satisfaction. This universal commitment attests to the profound devotion characteristic of the tourist guide profession.

The conceptual framework underpinning this study imparts invaluable understanding to engagement within the tourism industry, particularly as manifested in the role of tour guides. The concept of commitment, encompassing passion and perseverance, emerges as a cornerstone in the pursuit of job satisfaction. This framework accentuates the interwoven nature of passion and perseverance, underscoring their momentousness in nurturing dedication and personal evolution. The dynamic interplay between commitment and job satisfaction gains special salience for tourist guides, fashioning their career progression and holistic well-being.

In summation, the findings gleaned from Pearson's correlation analysis, juxtaposed with the exploration of relationships with demographic parameters, and buttressed by theoretical commitment and job satisfaction, culminate in an all-encompassing comprehension of the intricate dynamics within the tourism industry, with specific emphasis on tourist guides. The symbiosis between passion, perseverance and job satisfaction, coupled with the absence of substantive demographic disparities, echoes the universality of commitment within this profession. This comprehensive inquiry furnishes insights that can underpin policies, practices, and strategies designed to elevate the experiences of individuals laboring within the tourism sector, thus ultimately catalyzing sustainable industry growth. The fostering of commitment, in passion and perseverance, emerges as a catalytic force for the enrichment of the professional journey of tourist guides, consequently propelling the vitality of the tourism industry at large.

This study set out to investigate into the interplay between passion, perseverance and job satisfaction in the context of tour guides within the tourism industry. The research question aimed at comprehending the dynamics between these variables, with hypotheses providing precise expectations about their interrelationships.

Hypothesis 1 (H_1) posited that tour guides content with their work would display heightened passion compared to their less content counterparts. We have rejected this hypothesis. Although a slight positive correlation existed between passion and job satisfaction was found, it was not statistically significant ($r = 0.030$, $p > 0.05$). This infers that overall job contentment might not be exclusively steered by passion for the work.

Hypothesis 2 (H_2) conjectured that content tour guides, despite adversities, would manifest greater perseverance in their tasks compared to those less content. This hypothesis was confirmed, given the statistically significant positive correlation between perseverance and job satisfaction ($r = 0.182$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that heightened perseverance substantially contributes to heightened job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3 (H_3) advanced the notion that tour guides with greater passion would likewise exhibit higher levels of perseverance. This hypothesis was rejected, as the outcomes showed a statistically significant negative correlation between passion and perseverance ($r = -0.282$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that heightened passion might, in fact, correspond with diminished perseverance, thus implying an equilibrium between emotional involvement and resilience.

The results emerging from Pearson's correlation analysis cast light on the intricate relationships among passion, perseverance and job satisfaction. They underscore the interplay of these facets and their cumulative impact on tour guides. Furthermore, the scrutiny of connections with demographic factors accentuate that neither gender, age nor education show substantial influence over the levels of passion, perseverance and job satisfaction in tour guides. This emphasizes the universal commitment across the profession, transcending these demographic differentiations.

In synthesis, this research advances a holistic comprehension of the dynamics intrinsic to the tourism industry, particularly concerning tour guides. While passion, perseverance and job satisfaction interrelate, their correlations carry nuanced characteristics. Passion may not linearly dictate job satisfaction, yet perseverance emerges as a significant contributor. The ramifications of these findings echo through the tourism sector, shaping policies and strategies aimed at elevating the experiences of tour guides and steering sustainable growth. Ultimately, the study accentuates the role of commitment, rooted in the union of passion and perseverance, as an indispensable catalyst for enriching the professional journey of tour guides and driving the vitality of the wider tourism sector.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study investigate the intricate relationships among passion, perseverance and job satisfaction within the unique context of tourist guides in the tourism industry. The findings shed light on the complex interplay of these dimensions and their collective impact on the professional journeys of these guides. The symbiotic nature of commitment, encapsulating both passion and perseverance, emerged as a cornerstone in shaping job satisfaction and personal growth among tourist guides.

Contrary to hypothesis 1, the study revealed that while there was a slight positive correlation between passion and job satisfaction, it was not statistically significant. This suggests that job contentment is influenced by factors beyond individual passion, highlighting the multifaceted nature of job satisfaction. On the other hand, hypothesis 2 was confirmed, as the statistically significant positive correlation between perseverance and job satisfaction indicated that unwavering determination significantly contributes to heightened satisfaction in professional life.

Hypothesis 3, however, was rejected, with the discovery of a statistically significant negative correlation between passion and perseverance. This implies that an intense emotional investment in work might compromise an individual's ability to endure challenges. The delicate balance between passion-driven enthusiasm and resilience thus becomes crucial for sustained commitment among tourist guides.

The investigation into demographic factors demonstrated that gender, age and education did not exert substantial influence on the levels of passion, perseverance and job satisfaction among tourist guides. This universality of commitment within the profession underscores the deep devotion shared by individuals regardless of their personal characteristics.

In summary, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the tourism industry, particularly focusing on the role of tourist guides. While passion, perseverance and job satisfaction interact in complex ways, their correlations are not straightforward. The study's implications extend to the formulation of policies and strategies aimed at enhancing the experiences of tourist guides and fostering sustainable growth in the tourism sector. Ultimately, the study highlights commitment, formed by the fusion of passion and perseverance, as a catalyst in enriching the professional journeys of tourist guides and driving the overall vitality of the broader tourism industry.

Further research could explore additional dimensions that influence job satisfaction among tourist guides, such as specific work conditions, rewards and relationships. Comparative studies across diverse cultures and regions could provide insights into the impact of cultural contexts on commitment and job satisfaction. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of commitment and job satisfaction over time could also offer valuable information about the dynamic nature of these variables. Additionally, qualitative research methods could uncover in-depth perspectives on how passion and perseverance influence decision-making and coping strategies among tourist guides when facing challenges.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.07 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Using Japanese pop cultural heritage to create a tourist product
Exploring otaku tourism

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How to cite (APA style): Severino, F.S. (2024). Using Japanese pop cultural heritage to create a tourist product: Exploring otaku tourism. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 103–114. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.07

ABSTRACT

The impact of Japanese pop culture on global tourism patterns is substantial, specifically in the promotion and growth of otaku tourism. Japan has become a hub for global tourists due to its ability to attract with the allure of interacting with the environments and storylines of their beloved pop culture media. This study examines the distinctive combination of traditional and contemporary cultural aspects, evaluating its influence on Japan's tourism industry and on global perception. The economic and cultural benefits of using cultural exports to enhance the attractiveness of tourism are revealed through a literature review, with theoretical perspectives. This emphasizes the change in travel motivations towards genuine cultural experiences and the strategic significance of popular culture in promoting destinations. The findings indicate that Japan's strategy of blending its abundant cultural heritage with modern cultural manifestations provides valuable lessons for other destinations seeking to attract tourists based on cultural identity. This movement highlights the capacity of cultural experience to influence tourism preferences, positioning Japan as a prominent illustration of how culture impacts international tourism dynamics.

KEYWORDS

cultural heritage, destination branding, Japan, Japanese pop culture, otaku tourism, tourism

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
20 February 2024
Accepted:
31 May 2024
Published:
10 October 2024

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global tourism landscape, Japan stands out for its unique blend of ancient traditions and vibrant contemporary culture, illustrating the impact of cultural identity interwoven with global media in establishing a nation's prestige as a premier travel destination (Craig, 2020a; Freedman & Slade, 2018). A prime illustration of this is Japan's pop culture, celebrated for its eclectic mix of elements that spark diverse interests and curiosities internationally (Tajima et al., 2018). Referred to as the epitome of contemporary Japanese culture, this phenomenon encompasses multiple facets of everyday life in Japan, such as manga (Japanese comic books), anime (Japanese animated movies and TV shows), video games, fashion, and cosplay (the act of dressing up as and personifying well-known characters from these forms of media) (Kawamata et al., 2017; Severino & Silva, 2023). The diverse array of cultural manifestations in

Japan is widely recognized as a substantial element in its attractiveness to tourists, including those from Western nations (Rich, 2011; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Simeon, 2006).

This study examines the wide-ranging attraction of Japan, focusing specifically on the significant impact of Japanese popular culture on the emergence of a distinct form of tourism, known as contents tourism. Analyzed particularly through the lens of otaku tourism, this burgeoning subgenre is driven by a worldwide desire to engage with media content deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Japan (Okamoto, 2015; Seaton et al., 2017). The primary objective of this research is to investigate how elements of Japanese pop culture contribute Japan's appeal as a tourist destination. It explores how the integration of Japan's cultural heritage with its contemporary pop culture attracts international tourists and influences their travel preferences. The research aims to understand the mechanisms through which cultural exports, particularly those related to entertainment and media, significantly shape Japan's tourism sector and stimulate economic benefits.

The captivating nature of Japanese popular culture has not only enhanced the nation's reputation on an international stage but has also significantly influenced the desires and encounters of foreign visitors (Craig, 2020a). Anime and manga, being fundamental components of this cultural export, have surpassed their initial audiences to motivate an international fan base that is progressively gravitating towards Japan to immerse themselves in the authentic environments depicted in their preferred stories (Kawamata et al., 2017; Tajima et al., 2018). This has led to the emergence of otaku tourism, which is a distinct form of contents tourism in which enthusiasts embark on journeys to renowned sites in popular culture (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Okamoto, 2015; Severino, 2022).

This promising manifestation of tourism highlights a substantial transformation in the incentives for travel where a quest for genuine cultural experiences and the interest in participating in media narratives converge (Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Seaton et al., 2017). This exemplifies a more extensive pattern in which tourist destinations are selected not solely on account of their historical or scenic value, but also due to their affiliations with pop culture. Japan's skillful use of its popular culture to augment its tourism attractiveness provides valuable lessons for other countries aiming to exploit their cultural exports to attract tourists.

Further, the research acknowledges the ramifications of these patterns for parties involved both domestically and internationally. It contributes to the scholarly discussion regarding the intricacies of destination branding, cultural tourism dynamics, and the changing motivations of tourists in the era of globalization. Professionals in the tourism sector can enhance their ability to cater to the interests of this distinct traveller segment through the creation of targeted marketing strategies and on-site experiences informed by their comprehension of the allure of popular culture.

By integrating an examination of tourism dynamics and a comprehensive literature review with theoretical perspectives, this research endeavors to present a thorough exposition of the ways in which Japan's popular culture has come to symbolize the country's status as a tourist hotspot. It aims to investigate the wider implications of contents tourism and otaku tourism on management and marketing strategies for destinations. This research contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the intricate dynamics that influence the international perception of a nation, by analyzing Japan's adeptness in blending traditional and modern cultural elements to appeal to tourists from around the world.

2. Literature review

This article meticulously analyzes scholarly literature to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how Japanese pop culture influences tourism, particularly its appeal to international visitors. This review examines 115 references, including academic articles, books, conference proceedings and reputable websites, each contributing insights into Japan's role as a culturally rich and geographically unique tourist destination. These sources, which range from seminal works to recent studies, collectively explore how Japan's distinctive cultural characteristics and geographical features engage and attract tourists. The extensive and varied literature underscores the depth of the research involved. Given the scarcity of integrated scholarly inquiries that link this cultural phenomenon to tourism activities, this review rigorously assesses how Japan, often perceived as geographically and culturally distant, has crafted an appealing persona. This crafted image is potent enough to foster deep emotional engagement, compelling individuals to travel and immerse themselves in the experiences it promises.

This literature review begins by examining how Japan's unique cultural traditions and geographical features contribute to its attractiveness as a tourist destination. The study then examines Japanese popular culture's global impact on audiences, providing examples for countries looking to boost tourism with pop culture. Thus, this theoretical undertaking advances knowledge of the dynamic relationship between culture and tourism and offers practical advice for capitalizing on cultural phenomena to boost tourism.

2.1. Japan's cultural and geographical appeal

Japan is a country that fascinates with its blend of traditional and contemporary cultures, drawing visitors from around the globe to experience its unique identity (Berger, 2010; García, 2011). Known as the Land of the Rising Sun, it is esteemed for its safety, boasting one of the lowest crime rates worldwide, making it a highly secure destination for tourists (Berger, 2010). The Japanese people are often described as polite, hospitable and friendly, though they also maintain a conservative and somewhat nationalistic stance towards non-natives, indicative of a deep-rooted desire to preserve their cultural integrity (Bardsley & Miller, 2011; Berger, 2010; Komisarof et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

The distinctiveness of Japan's cultural identity, even compared to other Asian nations, is largely attributed to its geographical isolation as an archipelago and its rich historical tapestry that extends over millennia (García, 2011; Henshall, 2019; Otmazgin, 2016; Walker, 2015). This isolation, coupled with significant periods of self-imposed solitude from the global stage, has enabled Japan to cultivate a culture that is markedly different in a globalized era. Influences from China have been pivotal in shaping Japan's religious, linguistic and governmental frameworks, while the era of seclusion fostered the development of uniquely Japanese traditions. Moreover, Japan's transformation into an imperial power and its subsequent economic resurgence post-World War II have played critical roles in its national identity (García, 2011; Walker, 2015).

The Japanese language, with its three distinct writing systems (Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji) and layers of formality, mirrors the country's complex societal structure and philosophy towards life (García, 2011). Its intricate geography, comprising roughly 14,000 islands and stretching across the North Pacific Ocean, is characterized by a mix of rugged mountains, active and dormant volcanoes, including the iconic Mount Fuji, and a vast array of flora and fauna that enriches its ecological tapestry (The Tokyo Okinotorishima and Minamitorishima Islands, n.d.; Watanabe et al., 2024; Woolley, 2005).

Climate-wise, Japan experiences a wide range due to its extensive latitudinal span and geographic diversity, from the cold, humid continental climate of Hokkaido to the subtropical warmth of Shikoku and Kyushu (Chen & Chen, 2013; Hobbs, 2009; Shirane, 2012; Watanabe et al., 2024). This climatic variation supports a rich biodiversity and contributes to the seasonal beauty that Japan is known for, especially the springtime cherry blossoms and the vivid autumnal foliage (ElQadi et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019).

Its natural beauty is matched by its susceptibility to natural disasters, including frequent earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and seasonal typhoons that bring heavy rains and storms, showcasing the country's dynamic and often risky relationship with nature (Nishimura & Iguchi, 2011; Watanabe et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, Japan's approach to harmonizing with its environment is evident in its meticulous care for nature and the built environment, reflected in pristine streets, organized urban planning, and well-preserved natural landscapes (García, 2011).

Japan's intricate structure combines ancient mythology and significant historical events, positioning the emperor as a descendant of divine origins, highly respected within its cultural framework (García, 2011; Henshall, 2019). This reverence underscores its profound connection to its past, highlighted by archaeological discoveries dating back to the Jomon period, evidencing a civilization that has evolved significantly over millennia (Walker, 2015). The advent of Europeans in the 16th century, particularly the Portuguese, introduced a period of cultural exchange, subsequently leading to a phase of isolation aimed at preserving Japan's unique identity (Henshall, 2019; Walker, 2015; Yamashiro, 1989). The 19th century Meiji Restoration marked its leap into modernity, adopting Western technologies and governance, which propelled the nation into rapid industrialization and established its status as a major global power (Henshall, 2019; Kitaoka, 2018; Zatko, 2017). Despite challenges, including natural disasters and the aftermath of World War II's aftermath, Japan's resilience and the international appeal of its pop culture have been pivotal in its economic revival and global stature (Henshall, 2019; Koshino, 2019; Walker, 2015; Zatko, 2017). Hosting global events like the Olympics has showcased its blend of rich heritage and modern achievements, reinforcing its unique position on the world stage with particular focus in its unique and considered exotic culture (Craig, 2020a; García, 2011; Zatko, 2017).

Culturally, Japan is a treasure trove of experiences, from witnessing the ancient ritual of sumo wrestling to the refined elegance of geisha performances (Berger, 2010; Ochiai & Takeda, 2001; Stanley, 2013). The country's adoption of baseball, its serene rock gardens, and vibrant festivals like the Sakura (cherry blossom) viewing and Sanja Matsuri (a religious festival) offer a glimpse into Japan's multifaceted identity (Ikei, 2000; Moriuchi & Basil, 2019; Tekinalp & Yerli, 2017; Van Tonder & Lyons, 2003). Modern Japan is equally captivating, with its cutting-edge technology evident in everyday life, from high-tech toilets to the ubiquitous presence of pachinko parlors and the global phenomenon of its pop culture, including anime and manga (Brooks et al., 2008; García, 2011; Schilling, 2000).

The culinary landscape of Japan is another facet of its appeal, with traditional dishes such as sushi showcasing the nation's affinity for seafood, alongside the popular bento boxes that represent the Japanese knack for presentation and balance in cuisine (Berger, 2010;

García, 2011; Nishimoto et al., 2015). Convenience stores and 100-yen shops reflect the efficiency and pragmatism of Japanese society, catering to the needs of its people with a variety of goods and services (Nishimoto et al., 2015; Rahman, 2019).

Tourism in Japan has seen a significant uptrend, with the nation welcoming millions of visitors drawn by its exotic and diverse cultural and historical heritage, bustling cities, natural beauty, and the seamless blend of tradition and modernity (Arba, 2024; Berger, 2010; Funck & Cooper, 2013; García, 2011). Key attractions include the metropolitan allure of Tokyo and the historic charm of Kyoto, with visitors particularly flocking during the cherry blossom season and summer festivals. Major sources of tourists include neighboring countries like China and South Korea, as well as Western nations such as the United States and European countries, underscoring its global appeal (Japan Tourism Statistics, 2024a; Japan Tourism Statistics, 2024b).

Visitors are drawn not only by the iconic elements of Japanese culture, but also by the opportunity to engage with its rich historical narrative and experience the warmth and hospitality of its people (Berger, 2010; Funck & Cooper, 2013; García, 2011; Zatko, 2017). Japan's continuous growth as a tourism hotspot is a testament to its enduring charm and the curiosity it sparks among travellers seeking unique and enriching experiences (Berger, 2010).

In conclusion, Japan's identity as a destination is deeply rooted in its cultural richness, historical depth and the juxtaposition of its ancient traditions with cutting-edge modernity. This complex tapestry offers a broad spectrum of experiences, from the tranquility of natural landscapes and the solemnity of traditional ceremonies to the vibrancy of contemporary life and technological advancement. Japan's ability to preserve its heritage while embracing the future makes it an endlessly fascinating place for tourists, offering insights into a society that respects its past while looking forward to its future.

2.2. Japanese pop culture as a tourist resource

The profound impact of Japanese pop culture, particularly through the mediums of anime and manga, on global tourism and cultural exchange is both vast and nuanced (Condry, 2013; Craig, 2015; Craig, 2020b; Freedman & Slade, 2018; Napier, 2005; Sato, 2007; Schodt, 1983). This cultural export has not only solidified Japan's place in the international arena but has also attracted a diverse global audience, drawn to the country to experience its unique pop culture phenomena firsthand (Kawamata et al., 2017; Lobo-Fernandes, 2005; Sheehan, 2017). The allure of Japanese pop culture, characterized by its captivating anime and manga, engaging video games, the enchanting 'kawaii' culture, and much more, transcends mere entertainment, embedding itself into the fabric of daily life and influencing various aspects of consumer culture worldwide (Kawamata et al., 2017; Lamerichs, 2013; Sabre, 2013; Tajima et al., 2018).

Anime and manga represent the cornerstone of this cultural phenomenon, offering intricate storytelling, diverse characters, and unique art styles that captivate audiences across the globe (Condry, 2013; Napier, 2005; Sato, 2007; Tajima et al., 2018). These forms of media have transcended cultural and linguistic barriers, fostering a global community of fans and enthusiasts. The narratives found in popular series such as *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1996–present), *Dragon Ball* (Toriyama, 1984–2024; series will persist), and *One Piece* (Oda, 1997–present) not only provide entertainment but also offer insights into Japanese culture, history and societal values, sparking a worldwide interest in exploring Japan beyond the screen (Bainbridge, 2014; Craig, 2020b; Mínguez-López, 2014; Singh, 2021; Sumilang-Engracia, 2018).

Anime, a highly esteemed cultural product from Japan, surpasses the traditional notion of cartoons by encompassing a wide range of genres and narratives that captivate a diverse audience beyond just children and adolescents. With their intricate storylines, rich histories and well-developed characters, anime appeals to a broad spectrum of viewers (Napier, 2005). It is a pivotal component of the Japanese entertainment industry, exerting significant influence across multiple domains such as film, video games and television, both domestically and globally. An acclaimed aspect of this medium is its extensive range and diversity, encompassing genres such as romance, comedy, tragedy and adventure. Additionally, it stands out from conventional Western animations and live-action films due to its profound exploration of psychological themes (Condry, 2013; Napier, 2005; Sato, 2007). Manga, acknowledged as Japanese graphic novels, is another vital element of Japan's popular culture, exerting a substantial impact on both domestic book sales and the worldwide dissemination of Japanese language and culture (Craig, 2020b; Sato, 2007; Schodt, 1983). Since World War II, it has become a significant primary source for anime productions and has undergone a transformation into its contemporary form (Schodt, 1983). Manga, in contrast to Western comics, possesses a wide-ranging appeal that spans all demographic groups, rendering it a distinctive and significant sector within Japan's publishing industry (Craig, 2020a; Santos, 2017). Manga encompasses a wide range of genres and employs unique narrative techniques, such as expressive character designs featuring exaggerated eyes, which intensify emotional involvement (Craig, 2020b; Santos, 2017). These elements emphasize manga's distinctive narrative style and its capacity to effectively communicate intricate emotions and stories, distinguishing it from Western counterparts (Cooper-Chen, 2011).

The global fan base for Japanese pop culture is notably diverse, encompassing casual fans who appreciate the artistry behind anime and manga; core fans who deeply engage with the culture through extensive content consumption; and enthusiastic fans who actively participate in the culture through cosplay, attending Japanese pop culture events, and contributing to fan-driven content such as fan art and fan fiction (Kawamata et al., 2017; Okamoto, 2015; Tajima et al., 2018). This categorization underscores the broad appeal and inclusive nature of Japanese pop culture, which welcomes individuals with varying levels of interest and engagement, thereby creating a vibrant, interactive community around all the elements that belong to Japanese pop culture (Gushiken & Hirata, 2014; Katsumata, 2012; Kawamata et al., 2017).

At the heart of the worldwide appeal of Japanese popular culture lies the dynamic and diverse ecosystem it engenders, distinguished by a mutually beneficial association among producers, distributors, and enthusiasts, alongside an assortment of components that cater to the interests of all, including but not limited to anime, manga, video games, fashion, gastronomy, sports, events, and art (Craig, 2020b; Severino & Silva, 2023). This ecosystem flourishes through the creation of both original content, produced by companies, and derivative content, created by consumers and active fans using material from the original content (Kawamata et al., 2017; Seaton et al., 2017; Tajima et al., 2018). This content is then distributed across multiple platforms, such as television, internet streaming services and printed media (Chambers, 2012; Clements, 2018; Craig, Adams et al., 2020; Denison, 2015).

The active participation of the fan community, through fan art, fan fiction, and especially cosplay, enriches this cultural landscape, fostering a rich, participatory culture that contributes to the continuous evolution and spread of anime and manga (Kawamata et al., 2017; Okamoto, 2015). For example, successful manga series and dõjinshi (fan-created or self-published works) often lay the groundwork for anime adaptations, video games, movies, and a wide range of merchandise, creating a synergistic effect that amplifies the popularity and visibility of both media forms (Craig, Adams et al., 2020; Denison, 2015).

Video games, another significant pillar of Japanese pop culture, have achieved global recognition and success, with iconic franchises like *Pac-Man* (Iwatani, 1980–present), *Donkey Kong* (Miyamoto, 1981–present), *Final Fantasy* (Sakaguchi, 1987–present) and *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1996–present) becoming integral aspects of cultural exchange (Atkins, 2017; Craig, Cuellar & Lirdluckanawong, 2020; Koizumi, 2016). These games, alongside revolutionary gaming consoles from companies like Nintendo and Sony, have showcased Japan's ability to merge technology with storytelling, providing unique gaming experiences that draw heavily on Japanese culture, folklore, and aesthetics (Craig, Cuellar & Lirdluckanawong, 2020; Hutchinson, 2019). This fusion of traditional and modern elements in video gaming has not only entertained but also piqued global interest in the broader aspects of Japanese culture (Freedman & Slade, 2018).

The 'kawaii' culture, emphasizing cuteness and innocence, represents another aspect of Japan's cultural export. It influences global fashion, art and consumer products, with characters like Hello Kitty achieving iconic status and driving international interest in Japanese products and lifestyle (Koma, 2013). The global phenomenon of 'kawaii', with its emphasis on youthfulness and charm, appeals to a wide demographic, further enhancing Japan's cultural allure and contributing to the country's identity as a cultural powerhouse (Craig, 2020c; Freedman & Slade, 2018).

Recognizing the immense potential of pop culture as a strategic tool for tourism and diplomacy, the Japanese government launched the "Cool Japan" initiative (Close, 2018; Craig, 2020a). This ambitious strategy aims to promote Japanese arts, crafts, fashion, cuisine and entertainment worldwide, showcasing the country's innovative spirit and cultural richness (Craig, 2020a; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2014). By supporting industries related to anime, manga, video games, and 'kawaii' culture, the "Cool Japan" initiative seeks to expand its cultural influence and attract tourists eager to experience both the modern and traditional facets of Japanese life.

Tourist attractions in Japan often capitalize on the popularity of pop culture, with locales featured in anime and manga becoming pilgrimage sites for fans (Kaneko, 2013; Okamoto, 2015; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015). These attractions offer immersive experiences that blend entertainment with cultural exploration, drawing tourists in search of authentic pop culture experiences (Kawamata et al., 2017; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Severino, 2022). Attractions such as the Ghibli Museum and Pokémon Centers not only celebrate Japan's creative industries but also serve as key destinations for cultural tourism, reflecting the significant impact of Japanese pop culture on fans and tourists alike (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Seaton et al., 2017).

In essence, Japanese pop culture, with anime and manga at its heart, is a formidable tool for tourism, leveraging its extensive appeal to attract visitors from around the globe (Kawamata et al., 2017; Severino & Silva, 2023). Through the "Cool Japan" initiative and other efforts, it harnesses this cultural capital to enhance its global image, stimulate economic growth, and promote cultural exchange (Craig, 2020a). This multifaceted approach not only celebrates Japan's creative output but also positions the country as a leading destination for cultural tourism, offering insights into a society that respects its past while innovating for the future (Tajima et al., 2018). The enduring charm of Japanese pop culture and the curiosity it sparks among global audiences underscore its invaluable role in Japan's tourism and international relations strategy, strengthening its status as a significant cultural and economic asset.

2.3. Globalization, otaku tourism and anime pilgrimage

The rise of Japanese pop culture on the global stage has not only altered entertainment landscapes worldwide but has also significantly impacted global tourism trends, giving birth to a new era of travel motivated by a desire to engage with the cultural phenomena of anime, manga and video games (Akbaş, 2018; Hashimoto, 2011; Isshiki & Miyazaki, 2016; Iwabuchi, 2002; Kawamata et al., 2017; Palumbo & Calabrò, 2017; Rich, 2011; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Shōji, 2010). This wave of globalization, driven by the universal appeal of Japanese narratives and characters, has transcended traditional entertainment, embedding itself into the development of global tourism, creating a vibrant intersection where culture, entertainment and travel converge (Kawamata et al., 2017; Martin, n.d.; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015).

The Heisei period, from 1989 to 2019, marked a critical phase in the globalization of this Japanese trend, significantly contributing to Japan's economic growth and international stature. From this period onwards, Japanese popular culture assumed a significant role in the country's promotional strategies, as evidenced by its conspicuous appearance at major national and international events, including the 2020/21 Olympics and the countdown to the changing government era (Heisei to Reiwa period) (Craig, 2020a; Kelts, n.d.; Severino, 2022).

The worldwide influence of Japanese pop culture is clearly demonstrated by its widespread consumption (Parrot Analytics, 2018), with 42% of U.S. millennials identifying as anime enthusiasts (Carollo, 2023). This cultural phenomenon is also reflected in substantial attendance at events such as Japan Expo and Comiket (Kawamata et al., 2017; Severino & Silva, 2023). Notably, Comiket, considered the foremost global event for Japanese pop culture, recorded a significant increase of 31.57% in attendee numbers from 2018 to 2019 (Comic Market Committee, 2024). Such trends have notably impacted tourism in Japan (Martin, n.d.; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015), with areas like anime, fashion, and manga contributing to 16.2% of the principal motives for tourist visits to Japan (Arba, 2024).

Since the 1980s, and particularly with the advent of the new millennium, there has been a significant increase in the exposure and translation of Japanese films, books, animation series and video games for Western audiences, targeting the expanding fanbase of this culture (Iwabuchi, 2002). For instance, in 2023, the anime market alone in Europe constituted approximately 14% of the market share. Concurrently, the global valuation of this area (one of the key components of the Japanese pop culture trend), was estimated at 29 billion euros in the same year (Grand View Research, 2024).

At the heart of this cultural globalization lies the phenomenon of anime, a cornerstone of Japanese pop culture that has captivated audiences beyond its native shores (Isshiki & Miyazaki, 2016; Kelts, 2006; Miller, 2019; Ramírez, 2018; Shiraishi, 1997). Anime's has received international acclaim with series like *Dragon Ball* (Okazaki et al., 1986–present), *Doraemon* (Shibayama et al., 1973–present), *Sailor Moon* (Satô et al., 1992–2016), and *Pokémon* (Yuyama et al., 1997–present) spearheading this popularity. This medium has been instrumental in popularizing Japanese culture globally, challenging the perception of animation as solely for children's entertainment and underscoring its essential role in Japan's global cultural outreach (Craig, 2015; Napier, 2005). The fascination for its narratives extends beyond mere viewership, compelling fans to embark on journeys to Japan, seeking the landscapes and cities that serve as backdrops to their favorite series (Kawamata et al., 2017; Tajima et al., 2018). This pilgrimage, driven by a blend of admiration and curiosity, is a testament to the profound impact of Japanese pop culture on its global audience (Okamoto, 2015; Yamamura, 2015).

Manga plays a similarly influential role in shaping international perceptions of Japan. The diverse genres and themes explored in manga have attracted a wide readership, further broadening the appeal of Japanese pop culture (Napier, 2005; Shōji, 2010). The tangible nature of manga, coupled with the immersive worlds it creates, has spurred fans to visit Japan, not only as tourists but as enthusiasts eager to explore the origins of their beloved narratives (Hernández-Pérez, 2019; Kawamata et al., 2017; Mori, 2022; Seaton et al., 2017). This influence is particularly notable in France, where manga titles represent a significant portion of new literature translations, indicating the widespread acceptance of Japanese pop culture (Bouissou, 2014).

Other examples of this globalization are related with the film industry, with iconic Japanese contributions like *Godzilla* (Honda et al., 1954–present) and the works of director Hayao Miyazaki (like the Oscar-winning movie *Spirited Away*, 2001) having profound impacts, influencing major American productions, and demonstrating the global resonance of Japanese storytelling and artistic techniques (Chambers, 2012; Clements, 2018; Miller, 2019; Tsutsui, 2010; Yang, 2017).

The broad appeal of Japanese pop culture, extending to video games, fashion and cuisine, underscores its characteristic diversity and global acceptance (Allen & Sakamoto, 2014; Kawamata et al., 2017). Brands such as Hello Kitty have become household names internationally, illustrating the universal appeal of Japanese merchandise, series, and films (Yano, 2018). Japanese cuisine has similarly gained international recognition, with exports and adaptations of Japanese dishes, such as the California Roll, exemplifying the global acceptance of Japanese culinary culture (Sakamoto & Allen, 2011; Tajima et al., 2018).

Japan's deployment of 'soft power' through its pop culture has successfully captured the attention of a broad audience, positioning Japan as an innovative, unique, and intriguing destination (Akbaş, 2018; Isshiki & Miyazaki, 2016; Iwabuchi, 2002; Palumbo & Calabrò, 2017). This appeal has been further enhanced by global celebrities, such as pop star Gwen Stefani and rock band Linkin Park, who have integrated elements of Japanese pop culture into their music and videos, respectively (Mikami, 2011).

Prominent international brands originating from Japan, such as Pokémon, have achieved worldwide recognition, with Pokémon identified as the highest-grossing franchise globally in 2019, surpassing other iconic American brands like Mickey Mouse and Star Wars (TitleMax, n.d.). This underscores the significant impact of Japanese pop culture on the global stage, with other Japanese brands also leading in international revenue generation.

The "Cool Japan" initiative has indeed successfully branded Japan as a 'cool' destination. This campaign has positioned Japan as a cultural superpower, celebrated by generations for its contributions to anime, manga, video games, and other elements that are popular in Japanese culture (Craig, 2020a; Seaton et al., 2017). The dissemination of Japanese cultural products as a significant element of the contemporary cultural landscape demonstrates the strategic use of artistic works in media as an effective tool for Japan's international promotion. This strategy has cultivated a growing fanbase worldwide, with 'otakus' increasingly engaging with Japanese pop culture through various media, events and travel, seeking firsthand experiences of the culture (Hashimoto, 2011; Sabre, 2013).

This global engagement has given rise to contents tourism, a form of travel motivated by media content such as films, books, and, notably and more recently, to the dynamic worlds depicted in anime and manga (Seaton et al., 2017; Yamamura, 2020). Contents tourism encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, from visiting filming locations to attending fan events (Seaton & Yamamura, 2015). It is characterized by a desire to experience firsthand the settings and cultures depicted in various media, with Japanese pop culture serving as a significant draw for international tourists. This form of tourism transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, inviting enthusiasts to immerse themselves in the real-life counterparts of their fictional universes, thereby blurring the lines between reality and fantasy (Seaton et al., 2017). Japan, with its rich array of cultural exports, and owing to its influential pop culture that has captivated a global audience, has emerged as a focal point for contents tourism (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Kaneko, 2013; Okamoto, 2015; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015).

Within the realm of contents tourism, otaku tourism emerges as a distinct segment. Otaku denotes individuals with a passionate interest in elements related with Japanese pop culture, as anime and manga (B-Ikeguchi, 2018). Otaku tourism, a specific subset of contents tourism, caters to fans of Japanese anime, manga, video games, and related pop culture segments (Craig, 2020a; Okamoto, 2015). It is characterized by visits to locations celebrated in anime and manga, including shops, cafes, museums, and districts like Akihabara in Tokyo, dubbed the 'holy land of otakus' for its comprehensive offerings related to anime, manga, merchandise, and video games (Galbraith, 2019; Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, 2014; Seaton et al., 2017). This area, among others, has developed services and infrastructure, such as museums, cafes, restaurants and theme parks, to accommodate tourists and day visitors, thereby bolstering local economies (Craig, 2020a; Okamoto, 2009; Seaton et al., 2017). This form of tourism enhances local economies through the growth of tourism (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Mori, 2022).

Anime tourism and anime pilgrimage are targeted at fans whose travel goals are closely linked to anime and manga (Denison, 2010; Okamoto, 2015). Anime tourism refers to the act of visiting certain locations that are connected to these visual Japanese pop culture elements (Matsuyama, 2022). This form falls under the genre of otaku tourism, encompassing a range of activities that involve Japanese popular culture (Okamoto, 2015; Yamamura, 2015). These activities include attending themed events, visiting museums, touring coffee shops and restaurants, and appreciating sculptures. The act of visiting these real-world settings allows fans to transcend the boundary between fiction and reality, offering a tangible link to the fictional worlds that have captivated their imaginations (Severino, 2022; Tajima et al., 2018).

Anime pilgrimage, the most immersive aspect of anime tourism, involves fans visiting specific sites featured in anime, often to replicate scenes, take photographs, and engage in local traditions or festivals depicted (Okamoto, 2015; Ono et al., 2020). This practice not only fosters a deeper appreciation for Japanese culture among international fans but also stimulates local economies. Towns and cities featured in popular anime have experienced an increase in visitors, leading to the establishment of new businesses and services catering to these fans (Okamoto, 2015; Steine, 2019). Furthermore, anime pilgrimages often extend beyond simple visits,

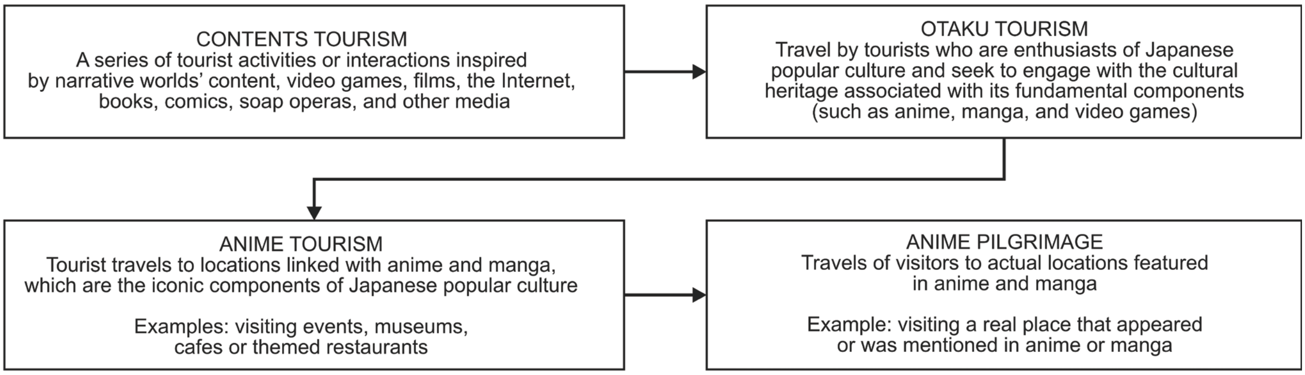

Figure 1. Relationship between concepts of tourism and otaku pilgrimage
Source: author, based on: Brazo and Fonseca Filho (2018), Okamoto (2015), Seaton and Yamamura (2015), Severino (2022), Steine (2019), and Yamamura (2015)

as fans participate in activities that deepen their connection to the narrative, such as engaging in local customs, supporting community projects, or attending events celebrating the anime (Okamoto, 2015; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Yamamura, 2015).

In summary, as shown in Figure 1, the anime pilgrimage is a facet of anime tourism, a broad notion that encompasses the world of anime and manga within the context of otaku tourism. These interconnected forms of tourism, driven by Japan's soft power and global cultural outreach, underscore the significant impact of pop culture on international tourism trends (Seaton et al., 2017). They reveal a growing segment of travellers motivated by a desire to connect with the cultural artifacts of their beloved media, offering a unique blend of cultural immersion, fandom celebration, and economic engagement (Seaton et al., 2017; Steine, 2019). Through contents tourism, otaku tourism, anime tourism and anime pilgrimage, Japan has not only expanded its tourism sector but also cultivated a global community united by shared interests and passions, further consolidating its status as a cultural superpower in the contemporary world.

3. Conclusion

This study reveals the dynamic interplay between Japan's rich cultural heritage and its vibrant pop culture, illustrating their collective impact on shaping Japan's global identity as a captivating travel destination. Japan's adept fusion of tradition with innovation not only attracts a global audience but also fosters a deep engagement with its diverse cultural landscape. The strategic leveraging of pop culture, especially through phenomena like anime and manga, serves as a testament to Japan's effective use of soft power, enhancing its tourism industry and facilitating cultural exchanges that underscore its international appeal.

The "Cool Japan" initiative exemplifies Japan's innovative approach to harnessing cultural capital, illustrating the powerful synergy between entertainment and tourism. This not only deepens global appreciation for Japanese culture but also contributes to economic growth and cultural diplomacy. The enthusiastic global response to otaku tourism activities highlights the significant role of pop culture in promoting cultural heritage while stimulating international tourism interest.

When contemplating the future direction of otaku tourism, it is crucial to acknowledge both the extensive opportunities and the potential challenges that may emerge. As Japan continues to capitalize on the global appeal of its pop culture, the influx of tourists drawn specifically to otaku-related activities is expected to grow. This surge offers substantial potential to broaden and enhance Japan's tourism offerings, promoting deeper cultural exchange and understanding, while also stimulating economic activity in lesser-known areas featured in popular media. However, managing this growth is imperative to ensure sustainability and to protect local cultures and environments. Overtourism, which could lead to overcrowding at popular destinations, poses a significant risk, potentially compromising the quality of visitor experiences and the integrity of local communities (Lee, 2022).

Looking forward, Japan's commitment to blending its historical legacies with modern advancements promises to further solidify its position as a premier cultural tourism destination. The allure of its pop culture, coupled with its historical and natural attractions, positions Japan as a unique destination for those seeking comprehensive cultural experiences. This underscores the importance of cultural identity in destination branding and suggests potential strategies for other nations to enhance their tourism appeal through cultural assets. The discussion also points to the need for further research into the impacts of globalization on cultural identity and tourism sustainability.

Japan's example highlights the transformative power of culture in bridging global communities, advocating a balanced approach to promoting cultural heritage that respects authenticity and encourages mutual appreciation. By leveraging its unique cultural offerings, Japan not only enhances its tourism appeal but also sets a precedent for cultural exchange and globalization. This study not only reaffirms Japan's influential role in the global tourism landscape but also encourages a broader reflection on how culture can be a pivotal force in shaping destination images and fostering global understanding.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.08 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Spatio-temporal tourism land use changes: A case study of a typical tourism district in Song County, China

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How to cite (APA style): Li, H., Kerimkulova, M.K., Wang, S., Cheng, J., & Zhang, W. (2024). Spatio-temporal tourism land use changes: A case study of a typical tourism district in Song County, China. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 115–125. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.08

ABSTRACT

The research aims to analyse the spatial and temporal changes in tourism land use based on the example of a typical region and to substantiate the possible environmental, economic, socio-cultural and other types of consequences of such modifications. The study was conducted using methods of cognition: system analysis, synthesis, specification, generalisation, abstraction, deduction and formalisation. Based on the research results, potential spatial and temporal changes in those territories involved in tourism activities were identified, the peculiarities of the dynamics and directions of such changes were analysed, and the most influential factors and methods of management identified. In addition, possibilities for resolving the consequences are studied and the effectiveness of risk management assessed. The practical significance of the results obtained lies in the opportunity to apply them to the process of forming decisions for tourism land use activities and further management of tourism processes. An effective analysis of spatial and temporal changes in a typical tourism district can serve as a guide for rational planning of tourism activities.

KEYWORDS

kernel density analysis, standard deviation ellipse, Song County of China, domestic tourism

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
18 December 2023
Accepted:
23 May 2024
Published:
10 October 2024

1. Introduction

The *Report on World Tourism Economy Trends (2023)* states that total global tourism arrivals reached $9.57 billion in 2023 and total global tourism revenues reached $4.6 trillion (World Tourism Cities Federation, 2023). Global international tourism revenue growth was much faster than that of global trade in 2022, and tourism is recovering rapidly and growing, with China developing more quickly than international tourism. China will enter the era of mass tourism with the implementation of the "14th Five-Year Plan" for tourism development. Reviewing the development process of China's tourism industry in recent years, although it has been affected by the impact of COVID-19, it has also brought opportunities (Shen et al., 2020). In the context of China's rural revitalization strategy, development has been promoted once again, and along with the rapid growth of the tourism economy, its physical scale has continued to expand, land used for tourism and industry are increasingly in conflict. At present, there are many issues with China's tourism land use management, such as its blind growth and irrational pattern which leads to difficulties in secondary development later and makes it difficult to adapt to new needs. Therefore, by analysing the transformation between tourism and other land uses, and mapping its spatial layout and evolution, it is important to plan its rational development and to strengthen high-quality tourism.

1.1. Study area

The earliest research on tourism land use in China can be traced back to 1988. With the development of tourism, the research on the land it occupied has tended to diversify into six main research areas: evaluation (Sun & Wang, 2022; Wang, 2022), change (Sweetman et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2015), property (Santana-Jiménez et al., 2019; Zhou & Li, 2018), resort land use (Boavida-Portugal et al., 2016), type and functional structure (Yu et al., 2019), management and sustainable development (Sun & Wang, 2022; Tang et al., 2021). Scholars have discussed in depth many issues in its management and classification process in terms of different aspects, giving reasoned explanations and further promoting its development. However, due to the specificity and complexity of such land use, there is no unified formulation among Chinese scholars as far as its definition is concerned. Tourism land use has been studied from various perspectives and several definitions have been proposed, synthesized into the following two views: it is generally considered that all the land within scenic areas at all levels identified by the government at or above the county level through approval and publication is recognized as 'tourism land'. The other view is in a broader sense, considering that it includes not only the land within a scenic area, but also the sum of land that meets tourism demand, providing direct or indirect services and management for tourists, and is related to tourism patterns. Although this definition of tourism land use goes beyond the narrow scope, it is still inconsistent with China's current land classification, and both this and tourism development are still limited.

At present, research on tourism land use mainly involves qualitative research, only a very few studies use quantitative methods, and some scholars apply aerial remote sensing technology to investigate and analyse such land (Magige et al., 2020; Rosalina et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). The classification system, land use change and landscape pattern have been extensively and fruitfully researched, but there is still room for more on the depth and breadth of tourism and land use. Therefore, this paper selects Song County, Luoyang, in China as the study area, and uses current land use data from Song County as the data source to analyse changes in tourism land use in the past ten years, focusing on the transformation relationship between tourism land use and other types, and changes in the spatial pattern of tourism land use.

Song County is not only rich in mineral and plant resources, but also has a variety of natural wonders and historical buildings, its tourism resources are abundant, and the local government is committed to the development of local tourism. However, due to the current existence of different development entities in Song County, conflicts between them are prominent and obvious. Rural tourism in Song County also has an irrational allocation of resources, differing interests, infrastructure imperfections and other issues in the development process. Moreover, there are problems such as irrational use of land and insufficient environmental protection when developing tourism in Song County. However, up to now, due to its marginal nature, the study of tourism land use is still at the stage of academic exploration. Thus, this article classifies the types of land in Song County on the basis of existing research on tourism land use, mapping that land use, and analysing and researching its spatio-temporal changes in order to further enrich the development of tourism land use. It will also provide reference for the rational planning and management of tourism land use in Song County, while providing support for academic theoretical research. Song County is in Luoyang, China, located in its southwestern part.

It is 60 kilometres from the ancient capital of Luoyang. The geographical location of Song County is between 111°24′–112°22′E and 33°35′–34°21′N, about 62 km from east to west and 86 km from north to south, with a total area of 3009 km^2. Song County is located in the watershed area of the Yangtze, Huang Ho and

Huai Rivers, its topography is low in the northeast and high in the southwest. Song County is rich in tourism resources and is a large eco-tourism district with a scenic area of about 600 km^2. There are locations such as Baiyun Mountain and Muzaling Scenic Areas, Luhun Reservoir, Wolong Valley and the Millennium Ginkgo Forest. The gross regional product of the region reached 20,584 billion yuan in 2020, of which the total value of the tertiary sector is 10,705 billion yuan, accounting for 52.1%. The per capita disposable income of the residents reaches 19,887 yuan, an increase of 4%.

2. Methods

The data sources of the study area are mainly for land use, including for Song County in 2010 and land use data in 2020, mainly from the Natural Resources Bureau of Song County. All land use types are divided into seven major categories: arable, forest, grassland, water, construction, tourism and other; digital elevation mapping for Song County, is mainly from the public data resources of the Geospatial Data Platform (2023); administrative division data, including China's national boundaries, administrative boundaries of cities in China, of districts and counties in Luoyang and of Song County, from China Standard Maps; socio-economic data, including Song County population, economic and tourism data, were obtained from the *Song County Yearbook 2010* and *Song County Yearbook 2020*, as well as the Song County Culture, Radio, Film and Tourism Bureau.

The land use transfer matrix is a two-dimensional mathematical matrix, which can both reflect increasing and decreasing changes of different land use types in the study area at a specific time visually and in detail, and can also clearly show the characteristics of the pattern and size of land use types in a specific time period (Wang et al., 2021). The mathematical formula for the land use transfer matrix is (1):

$$B_{jj} = \begin{bmatrix} B_{11} & B_{12} \dots & B_{1n} \\ B_{21} & B_{22} \dots & B_{2n} \\ B_{n1} & B_{n2} \dots & B_{nn} \end{bmatrix} \tag{1}$$

where: B_{jj} denotes the area of the use type transformed into j land use type; n – the number of land use types.

By constructing a land use transfer matrix and analysing changes to different types, the authors explore tourism land use changes in the last 10 years, using 2010–2020 as the time period. The specific processing method is to take spatial land use data in the study area for two years, overlaying using ArcGIS, and then importing the intersected data into Excel for statistical presentation. Taking the land use data for 2010 as the columns, and the data for 2020 as the rows, sum for the areas and as a result the land use transfer matrix is generated.

Kernel density is a visualization tool in geostatistical studies. The basic principle of which is to study the distribution characteristics of a sample by analysing the spatial variation of the density of sample points in the study area. The greater the density of sample points, the greater the concentration, and the less, the more dispersed. The kernel density estimation (KDE) method is used to analyse the clustering characteristics of the spatial distribution of tourism land use in Song County. In the analysis, the search is generally performed in a circular area by setting appropriate 'bandwidth' values centred on each grid point to be calculated. Locations falling into the search area for tourism use have different weights, with points near the centre of the search being given greater weight and, conversely, less to the more distant (Tan et al., 2021). The distribution function of the sample is as follows (2):

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{n}(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n) \tag{2}$$

where: $f(x)$ is the kernel density estimate; n is the number of tourist land; x is spatial point.

The density estimation function equation is as follows (3):

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{nd}\sum_{i=1}^{n} K\left(\frac{x - x_i}{h}\right) \tag{3}$$

where: K is the kernel function indicating the spatial weight; d is the bandwidth threshold, i.e., the distance decay threshold with the estimated point as the centre point, $h > 0$; $K((x - x_i)/h)$ is the kernel function, where $(x - x_i)$ is the distance from the estimated value point x to the measured point x_i. It reflects the aggregation state of point elements in the study area, the larger it is, the denser the distribution of point elements.

The principle of standard deviation ellipse (SDE) analysis is to construct the centre of standard deviation ellipse, the rotation angle, and the distance to the X and Y-axes respectively from the geospatial coordinates of sample points, to precisely reveal the centre, dispersion and direction of the spatial distribution of elements (Wei et al., 2021).

By calculating the standard deviation ellipse, its ellipse rotation angle indicates the main direction of the spatial distribution of each tourism land; the X-axis and Y-axis characterize the degree of deviation from the centre of the distribution of tourism land use in both main and secondary directions, reflecting the centripetal and discrete nature of its spatial distribution. The magnitude of the difference between the X-axis and the Y-axis is related to the strength of the directionality; the larger the difference, the stronger the directionality. When the lengths of the X and Y axes are exactly equal, it means that there is no directional feature. The area and the centre of the standard deviation ellipse characterize the breadth and the centre of the distribution of tourism land use in the region.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of land use change

The land use transfer matrix reflects the overall change of different land use types in Song County during the 10 years from 2010 to 2020. Each column indicates the area of a land use type converted to other types, and each row indicates the area of a land use type converted to another land use type. It can be seen from the Table 1 that there is an area conversion between tourism land use and other types in Song County. During the 10 years, tourism land use in Song County increased from 0.63 km^2 in 2010 to 2.59 km^2 in 2020, an increase of 304.72%. Among them, the main sources for conversion are construction, arable and forest, with 1.05 km^2, 0.45 km^2 and 0.34 km^2 respectively, and the conversion of these three types reached 70.93% of total tourism land use in 2020. At the same time, a small amount under tourism has been converted to other types during the decade, mainly to forest.

Spatially, the conversion of tourism to other land use types forms two core areas in the northeast and southwest of Song County (Figure 1). The north-eastern part of which is mainly concentrated around Luhun reservoir, mostly for the conversion of land used for construction into tourism, but also a small amount of water and forest. In the southwest, the conversion of land use types is mainly concentrated in the vicinity of Wumasi Forestry in Baihe, where land used for tourism has been mainly converted from forest and construction. The conversion from tourism to other land use types is mainly concentrated in Tonghe and Gem in Checun, and Beiyuan in Chengguan. Among them, Tonghe has two types of conversion: tourism into forest and tourism into construction, while there are also a small number of cases of conversion into water. Baoshi is mainly a case of the conversion of tourism into forest; Beiyuan into farmland, with a small amount into construction found as well.

Overall, the spatial distribution of tourism land use in Song County in 2020 is still largely aggregated, but with

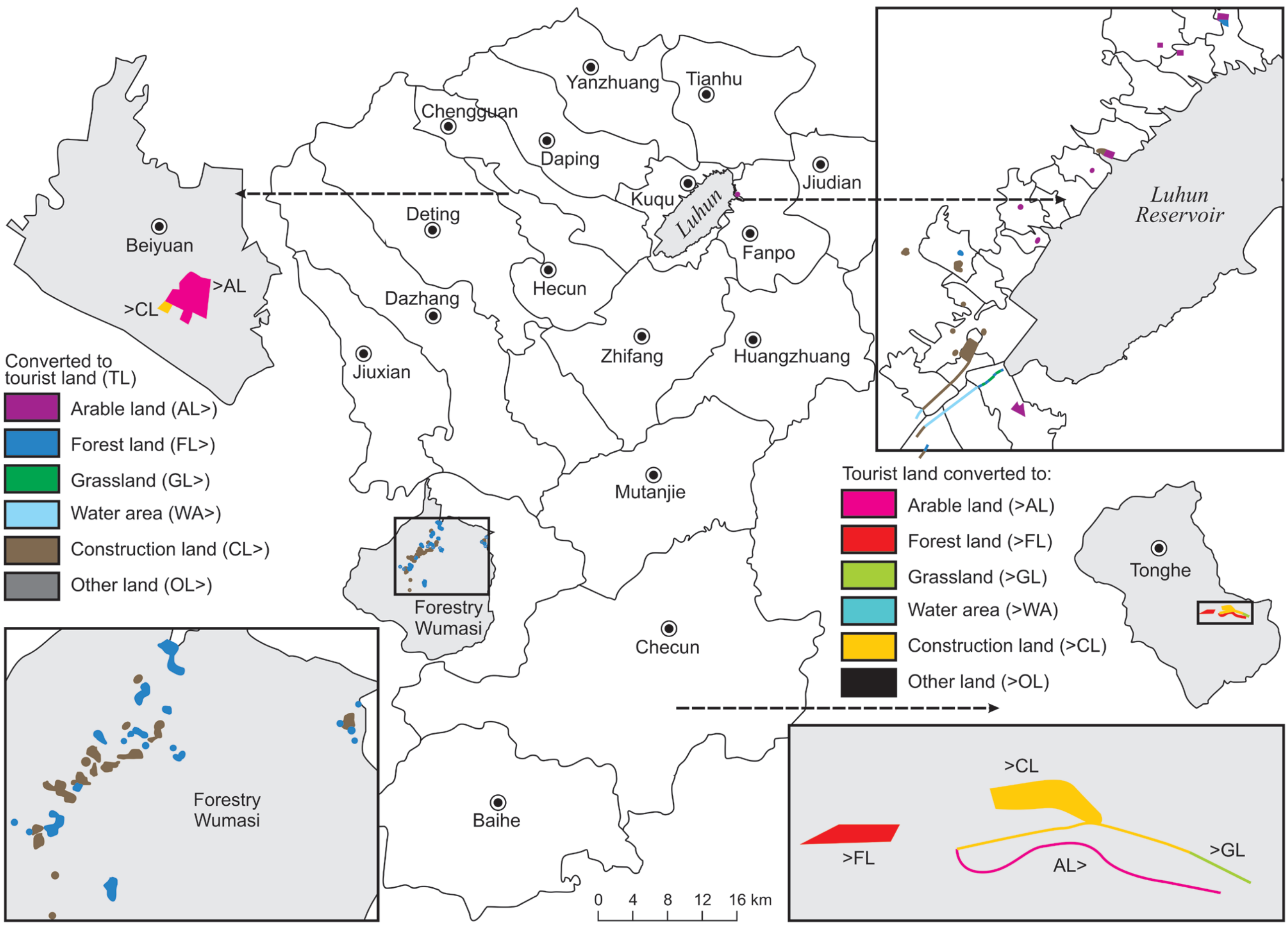

Figure 1. Transformation between tourism and other land use types
Notes: AL – arable, FL – forest, GL – grassland, WA – water, CL – construction, TL – tourism, OL – other
Source: Geospatial Data Cloud (2023)

Table 1. The land use conversion matrix for Song County from 2010 to 2020 (km^2)

Land use type	Arable	Forest	Grassland	Water	Construction	Tourism	Other	Total (2020)
Arable	389.44	38.79	33.65	3.60	11.35	0.054	2.76	479.64
Forest	111.88	1947.72	94.99	6.21	27.17	0.180	16.4	2204.55
Grassland	6.62	7.01	59.58	0.39	1.86	0.000	1.86	77.32
Water	3.01	6.08	0.97	84.74	1.29	0.020	0.09	96.20
Construction	19.60	16.36	2.70	3.09	82.46	0.070	0.87	125.15
Tourism	0.45	0.34	0.13	0.29	1.05	0.310	0.02	2.59
Other	3.87	1.83	1.54	0.31	4.30	0.000	10.64	22.49
Total (2010)	534.87	2018.13	193.56	98.63	129.48	0.630	32.64	3007.93

Source: World Tourism Cities Federation (2023).

the development of tourism, its distribution around Song County is gradually increasing. In northern Song County it is mainly distributed in Chengguan, Hecun and Kuqu as well as the northern part of Zhifang, in the south it is mainly located in the north-western part of Baihe, concentrated in some of the villages there. Tourism land use in Checun shows a trend of spreading from east to west in its central part, and concentrated in the middle.

3.2. Changes in spatial patterns of tourism land use

Kernel density estimation was conducted for tourism land use in Song County in 2010 and 2020, and the natural break method was used to classify the results of the density analysis, resulting in the tourism land use density distribution map of Song County (Figure 2). Overall, during the period from 2010 to 2020, concentration in Song County has grown rapidly, with

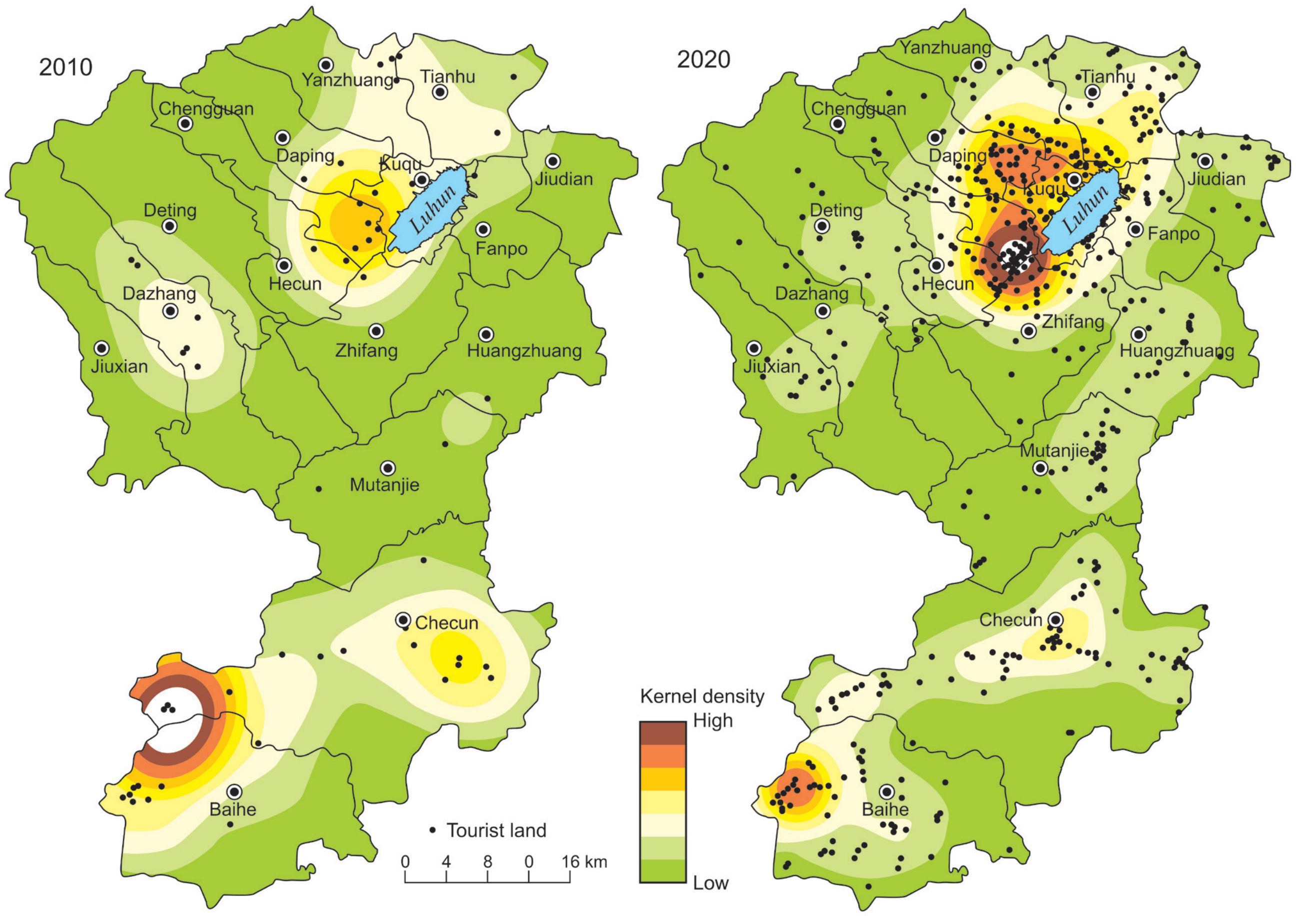

Figure 2. Distribution of kernel density of tourism land use in Song County: 2010 and 2020
Source: Geospatial Data Cloud (2023)

the highest density value increasing from 0.11 in 2010 to 1.07 in 2020.

In 2010, tourism land use in Song County was concentrated in the northeast and southern regions. The northeast region was mainly centred around Chengguan, while the southern region had two concentrated areas of tourism land use, one in the northwest of Baihe and the other in the east of Checun. The northwest of Baihe had the highest density value, while other areas had relatively less, most of the villages within Checun are have tourism land use. In 2020, the spatial clustering in Song County was significant, mainly concentrated in the northern and south-western parts and was distributed in all parts of the county, showing a trend of spreading from cores to the periphery. Among them, Chengguan, Hecun and Luhun in the north, and the northwest of Baihe in the south, had the highest number of distributions, gradually expanding into the surrounding areas.

Based on the density distribution map of tourism land use in Song County, the characteristics of changes in the spatial layout over the past 10 years can be analysed as follows:

1. In 2010, tourist land use in Song County was concentrated in two core areas in the northeast and southwest regions. By 2020, it had developed into a pattern of distribution in all towns and villages in the county, with two new core areas in the northwest and central regions, in addition to the existing ones in the northeast and southwest.
2. In terms of direction, the northern region of Song County has seen the most significant growth. In 2010, in Song County it was concentrated in Chengguan and Hecun but by 2020, tourist land use in Song County had expanded widely, with Chengguan, Hecun, Luhun and Zhifang as the central distribution areas, showing a trend of spreading towards the periphery. In the western region of Song County, tourism land use was concentrated in the southern part of Jiuxian in 2010, and by 2020, it had developed into a situation where it was found in Dazhang, Deting and Jiuxian. In the southern region of Song County, tourism land use, which was concentrated in the eastern part of Checun and the northwest part of Baihe in 2010, had developed into a situation where it was found in various towns in the northwest region by 2020.

3.3. Directional characteristics of tourist land use in Song County

By analysing the standard deviation ellipses of tourism land use in Song County in 2010 and 2020, the directional characteristics in the past 10 years can be determined (Figure 3). The rotation angles of the standard deviation ellipses of tourism land use in Song County in 2010 and 2020 are 16.37 degrees and 16.69 degrees, respectively, with a small difference between them, indicating that the main direction in Song County in its entire area is "southwest-northeast", and it is basically consistent. In terms of ellipse area, the standard deviation ellipses in 2010 and 2020 are 1620.22 km^2 and 1577.3 km^2, respectively, indicating that by 2020, development in Song County has become more concentrated, and the area has become more centralized.

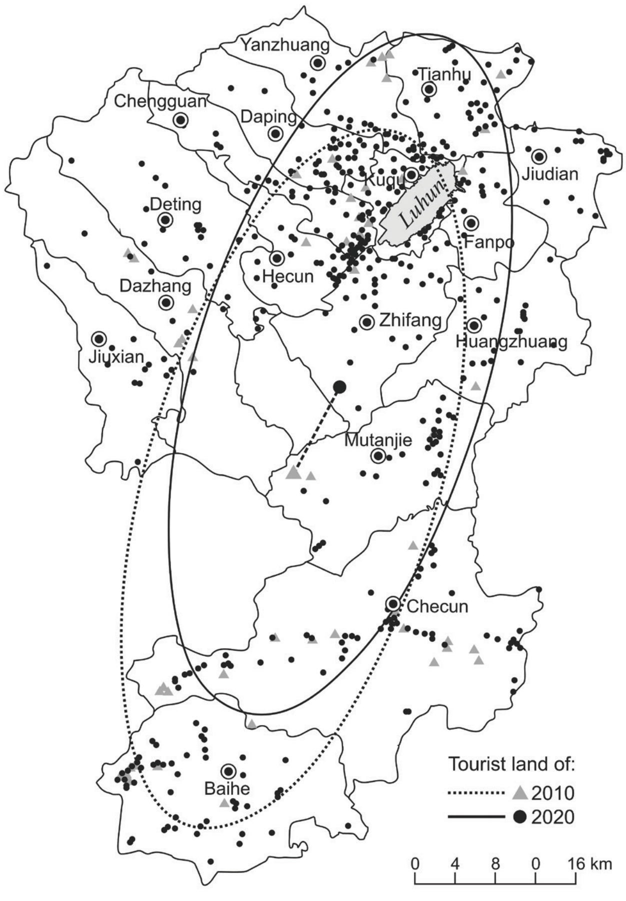

Figure 3. Analysis of standard deviation ellipses of tourism land use in Song County
Source: Geospatial Data Cloud (2023)

The geometric centre of tourist land use in Song County in 2020 is located to the northeast of the centre in 2010, with a distance of 11.41 km between the two centre points. This indicates that by 2020, it has become more concentrated in the northeast, and tourism resources in this part of Song County have become more centralized.

This study mainly analyses and discusses the spatio-temporal changes of tourism land use in Song County from 2010 to 2020. Over this period, its area in Song County has shown rapid growth over the past ten years. In terms of space, it is mainly clustered. The advancement of urbanization has provided opportunities for the increase in tourism land use. From 2010 to 2020, the urbanization rate of Song County increased from 20.14% to 41.35%. The continuous development of urbanization has promoted rural economic development, the transfer of rural labour force to non-agricultural sectors, and a large amount of arable land lying idle, providing conditions for the intensive use of land and the construction of basic tourism facilities. The take-off of the tourism industry is inseparable from the favourable development environment formed by China's economic and social development. From 2010 to 2020, China's per capita disposable income increased from 12,500 yuan to 32,200 yuan, and the domestic tourism revenue increased from 1.26 trillion yuan to 2.23 trillion yuan.

In August 2021, China's NBC released the data of the third national land survey, which is mostly based on remote sensing or unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) images with a resolution above one metre, combined with professional manual interpretation and field sampling verification to obtain highly accurate land use data. After statistical analysis, the difference between China's cultivated land area in widely used remote sensing datasets and the data published in the third land survey, is more than 10%. Thus, official land management data can more accurately and truthfully reflect the status of cultivated land resources.

Today, China is in a period of "three peaks": population, industrialisation and urbanisation. Social development is facing serious challenges, such as maintaining high-quality green economic development, ensuring green construction, protecting cultivated land and food security, and achieving the goal of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality. At the same time, the international situation is complex and volatile, with the COVID-19 epidemic intertwined with wars, and the food crisis in many countries worsening. The protection of cultivated land is therefore facing unprecedented pressure. Looking to the future, the protection of cultivated land in China should focus on quantity, quality and ecology. The demand for outbound tourism continues to increase, and the requirements for supporting facilities at tourist attractions continue to improve. This is a general trend to maintain the sustainable and healthy development of the tourism economy on the basis of improving the overall efficiency of land use. The Song County government has seized the opportunity, actively implementing the concept of "green mountains and clear waters are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver", and promoting the high-quality development of the local tourism industry.

During the study period, arable, forest and construction in Song County became the main land types encroached upon by tourism. Song County has flat arable land and good soil conditions, which results in lower development and utilization costs, making it conducive to the construction of tourism infrastructure. The development of tourism is characterized by beautiful mountain scenery, with a high forest coverage rate throughout the county and a rich variety of rare plant species, which itself has a certain tourism value, promoting the transformation of forest into tourism land use. In the current situation of continuous development of the local tourism industry, some rural residential areas are gradually transitioning to tourism supporting facilities such as farmhouse restaurants and homestays. With the continuous encroachment on arable land, forest and rural residential land, land occupied by tourism continues to increase.

The overall layout presents a "southwest-northeast" direction, mainly influenced by the topography of Song County. The terrain rises from northeast to southwest, with an altitude ranging from 245 to 2212 meters. Many tourist attractions have been built along the mountains in Song County and well-known scenic spots, such as Baiyun Mountain Yuhuangding, Longchi Manfeng and Tianchi Mountain Park, have all been built relying on the main mountain ranges. With the increase in the number of tourists, the construction of tourist attraction infrastructure has been carried out on the basis of existing attractions, basically in the "southwest-northeast" direction. On the other hand, since ancient times, the population, economic and administrative centre of Song County has been located in the northern part of the county along with historical and cultural resources and related cultural relics. In addition, transportation in the northern part is more convenient and therefore, tourist resources are also found there.

3.4. The process of creating tourism regions in the USA and Europe

The creation of tourism regions is a multifaceted undertaking that necessitates the involvement of diverse stakeholders, such as government entities, private enterprises and local communities. The process frequently seeks to advance economic development, safeguard cultural heritage and conserve the environment commencing by identifying potential areas that exhibit natural beauty, historical significance, cultural richness or unique experiences. Peripheral regions in Europe, such as the Scottish Highlands or the Greek Islands, have been specifically developed for tourism because of their natural and cultural attractions. Similarly, in the USA, regions like the Southwest or New England have been actively promoted for their distinctive landscapes and cultural histories (Nakipova et al., 2023; Shayakhmetova et al., 2020).

After identifying a region with tourism potential, the subsequent step typically involves the development of infrastructure. This entails the development of transportation, including roads, airports and train stations, as well as lodging establishments such as hotels, resorts and bed and breakfasts (Butler, 1980). The level of development is contingent upon the tourism strategy employed. Certain regions may prioritise high-volume tourism and construct extensive infrastructure, whereas others may concentrate on sustainable tourism and only selectively develop infrastructure (Seken et al., 2019).

Once the essential infrastructure is established, the region is actively marketed and promoted to prospective tourists. Possible strategies may include implementing advertising campaigns, participating in travel trade shows, organising familiarisation trips for travel agents and journalists, and establishing partnerships with airlines and tour operators. The marketing strategy frequently emphasises the distinctive selling propositions for a region and focuses on specific demographic groups (Lesik et al., 2021).

With the expansion of tourism, it is imperative to implement effective management and regulation measures to guarantee the long-term viability of the industry. This may entail the establishment of regulations for tour operators, the enforcement of zoning regulations and the creation of protected areas. Within Europe, the European Union implements a range of policies and programmes to facilitate the advancement of sustainable tourism in outlying regions. Active participation from the community is essential in the development of tourist destinations. Residents can offer distinctive opportunities for tourists, including authentic gastronomy, indigenous handicrafts and cultural festivities. Furthermore, they can make a positive impact on the conservation of cultural heritage and the environment. Community-based tourism initiatives have, in certain instances, effectively facilitated economic development while simultaneously safeguarding local culture and the environment (Shahini et al., 2022).

Regular monitoring and evaluation of a region's tourism impact is essential. This may entail monitoring the number of tourists, quantifying the economic advantages, evaluating the environmental consequences, and assessing the level of tourist contentment. Modifications can be implemented to the tourism strategy to guarantee sustainable development, taking into account the obtained outcomes.

To summarise, the development of tourism regions necessitates a systematic approach that entails meticulous strategizing, active participation of stakeholders, and continuous supervision. While it can yield substantial economic advantages, tourism also poses difficulties in regard to safeguarding the environment and preserving cultural heritage.

4. Discussion

The study of the law of spatial and temporal changes and factors that influence cultivated land resources contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the current state of cultivated land use, disclosure of the driving mechanism of change, scientific justification of the rational use of land resources, policy formation and the forecasting of trends.

Despite the numerous publications on spatial and temporal dynamics in the tourism sector and the popularity of the industry today (Boavida-Portugal et al., 2016; Magige et al., 2020; Rosalina et al., 2023), a lack of research focusing on modifications in tourism due to the impact of spatial and temporal changes, and land use interrelationships within ecological and economic systems, is still present. The dynamism and scale of tourism, and its socio-economic consequences are the objective basis on which the social order for geographical tourism research has been formed, according to modern researchers Santana-Jiménez et al. (2019) and Shen et al. (2020). They interpret tourism as a continuous, dynamic and multifunctional phenomenon, characterised by a constant diversification of functions following changes in trends of socio-economic development, innovations in the scientific and technological sphere, and political fluctuations.

Sun and Wang (2022) define the tourism sector as a polylinear process with a clearly defined chronological vector of development, which determines the geospatial content of tourism as a phenomenon. The nature of this content, according to scientists, is the systemic and structural spatial and temporal coordination of processes taking place in this area. Sweetman et al. (2019) extend this idea, emphasising that the spatial and temporal properties of the process of formation of the tourism services market, as well as how the specifics of functioning and the impact of globalisation have led to the formation of certain patterns of geospatial organisation of tourism.

A group of researchers led by Tan et al. (2021) focused on the permanence of spatio-temporal coordination and on the structure of the tourism market. At the same time, they note that the imbalance lies in the inertia of the components of the market, which is measured by the time between the emergence of demand and the possibility of meeting it. Elimination of structural imbalances, temporal, territorial or component, is the essence of tourism policy. Tang et al. (2021) studied the factor of regional isomorphic motivation, which is manifested in the formation of specific tourist flows. They also emphasise the phenomenon of spatial centrality, which is the formation of hubs of tourist activity as a result of the synergy of financial, economic, information, innovation and technological processes. The dynamism of these processes causes change in the spatial hierarchy of the tourism market and, accordingly, creates the basis for spatial and temporal changes in tourism.

Wang et al. (2021), Wang (2022) and Wei et al. (2021) correlate with the conclusions of this study the fact that tourism development and ecosystem services are a process of two-way interaction, complementing each other due to changes in land use patterns. By integrating tourism resources in the region, the effect of spreading tourism central hubs can be achieved. The development of the tourism sector is based on the ecosystem, so changes in the regional ecosystem affect the sustainability effect in the sectoral market. Comparing the results of this study with Yu et al. (2019), it is worth noting that it is obvious that among the numerous approaches to the study of tourism resources and their effective management, it is necessary to distinguish those that position them as a type and object of natural resources. Based on this, tourist resources are considered as a spatial part of the natural environment, which is the basic aggregate natural resource, soil cover, vegetation, subsoil, water, fauna and the community of natural recreational resources (Zhou & Li, 2018).

The specific direction of tourism research and its methodological basis have been formed relatively recently. However, currently, there is an increase in the involvement of methodological tools for the rational use of available resources, sustainable development in tourism land use planning, as well as the study of the dynamics of the latter and its modelling concerning the impact of various factors (Zhang et al., 2021). Based on the results obtained in this study, it is possible to form promising vectors for further optimisation of management in the tourism sector in the context of spatial and temporal analytics. Among them are the following:

1. It is necessary to adhere to a sustainable model of tourism development, while the trade-off between tourism revenues and environmental degradation should be taken into account in the process of tourism development in the region under study.
2. The introduction of a dynamic planning and monitoring system is optimal.
3. It is imperative to create a buffer zone in tourism locations, which helps to reduce the burden on the ecosystem, reduce emissions of pollutants and, in particular, greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, as well as improve connectivity between landscapes and increase biodiversity.

Effective rational development and allocation of tourism resources should be aimed at strengthening the role of ecological and environmental support, providing a stimulating force for urbanisation, and increasing the level of internal coordination between the tourism system, land use and the environment. Su et al. (2022) emphasise the need to consider the added value effect of ecosystem services at tourist destinations, which will effectively contribute to the coordinated and joint development of cities, preventive environmental protection and mitigation of destructive effects, development of the tourism sector in the region and community development.

Yang et al. (2022) considered various factors, including comfort, tourist experience and health, in their research to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the suitability of the environment of 684 cities in China for tourism, including a detailed comparative analysis of temporal and spatial models for the environmental suitability of cities, as well as factors of influence. The results of this study correlate with the conclusions of scientists and can be used to make effective decisions on further improving the tourist environment. In the spatio-temporal aspect, according to Liu et al. (2022) it is also necessary to consider the influence of a set of factors that have the pole position for the development of the tourism sector. Among them are climate change, an increase in the area of built-up land, anthropogenic reclamation and land pollution. At the same time, it is necessary to introduce effective buffer zones within areas of tourism land use, strict control over construction processes and an increase the number of green spaces. It is also necessary to introduce strict control over land use approvals and to seriously address misuse and illegal land use to reduce pressure on land in tourism regions. Implementation of dynamic scientific planning and monitoring norms is considered optimal.

The compromise between environmental protection and tourism development requires adherence to the model of sustainable tourism development in a region, as studied in this research. For further work, it seems advisable to develop effective innovative approaches to the spatial and temporal identification of changes in the tourism sector, as well as the use of innovative forecasting and modelling capabilities.

Figure 4 represents the domestic tourist arrivals from 2010 to 2020. The Y-axis displays arrivals in millions, while the X-axis shows the years.

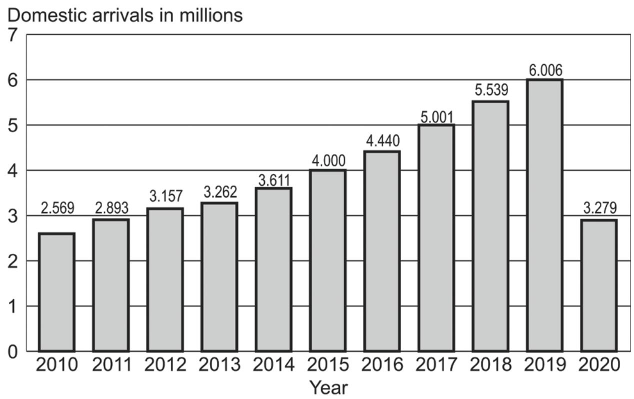

Figure 4. Arrivals of domestic tourists in 2010–2020
Source: Statista (n.d.)

The Figure 4 depicts an overall increasing trend in domestic tourist arrivals during the given period, with the highest value of 6,006,000 recorded in 2019. Subsequently, there was a significant decline in tourism for the year 2020.

Thus, effectively handling spatial and temporal fluctuations in tourist areas is a crucial element for promoting sustainable tourism growth. It entails tactics to regulate the movement of tourists, safeguard the environment and bolster local communities. Land use planning and zoning are effective strategies for managing spatial change. By delineating precise zones for tourism expansion and safeguarding other regions from excessive development, destinations can guarantee the sustainable management of growth. Carrying capacity assessments can aid in the management of spatial changes by establishing the upper limit of tourists that a destination can support without causing undesirable environmental, social or economic consequences (Shayakhmetova et al., 2020).

To effectively handle change over time, seasonal spread strategies to evenly distribute tourism activities throughout the year can be employed. One possible approach is to encourage tourism during periods of the year that are not typically popular, by implementing strategies such as marketing campaigns, reduced prices, or creating new attractions and activities that are attractive during different seasons. Visitor management systems can also facilitate the regulation of tourist influx by controlling the movement of visitors. This may entail implementing reservation systems for popular attractions, establishing quotas for the daily number of visitors permitted, or utilising technology to monitor and control visitor movements (Lesik et al., 2021).

Community-based tourism is an alternative method for handling spatial and temporal transformations. By engaging residents in the process of tourism planning and management, destinations can guarantee that development is both sustainable and advantageous for both tourists and local communities. Sustainable tourism practices can aid in the management of spatial and temporal changes by mitigating the environmental and societal effects of tourism. This may entail advocating environmentally sustainable lodging options, promoting activities that have minimal negative impact on the environment, and providing assistance to local enterprises. Regular monitoring and evaluation of tourism impacts can effectively manage spatial and temporal changes by providing accurate data on tourist numbers, environmental impacts and economic benefits. This data can be utilised to modify tourism strategies and policies as necessary.

To summarise, effectively handling spatial and temporal transformations in tourist destinations necessitates a holistic strategy that encompasses planning, regulation, community engagement, sustainable methodologies and continuous monitoring and assessment. By implementing these strategies, destinations can ensure that tourism development is both sustainable and advantageous for all stakeholders.

5. Conclusions

This study has selected Song County, a typical tourist county, as its research object. Based on land use data for Song County in 2010 and 2020, methods such as land use transfer matrix, kernel density analysis and standard deviation ellipses are used to analyse the changes in tourism land use in Song County over a period of 10 years. From 2010 to 2020, the tourism land area in Song County rapidly increased. The growth mainly derives from forest, construction and arable land. Due to the advantages of arable land, such as its own resource endowment and proximity to residential areas and main roads, it has become the main type encroached upon by tourism expansion. From 2010 to 2020, due to the advancement of urbanization, the concentration of tourism land use in Song County has rapidly increased. The highest kernel density value increased from 0.11 in 2010 to 1.07 in 2020. During the 10-year period, tourist land use increased throughout the county, with a concentration in the northern part. By 2020, a core increase area had been formed, mainly in the northern part of Chengguan, Hecun, Kuqu and the northwest part of Baihe. Due to the unique topographical influence of Song County, mainly created with natural landscape resources, it presents a "southwest-northeast" distribution throughout the county. From 2010 to 2020, tourism land use in Song County has become more concentrated, and its distribution centre has shifted significantly towards the northern part.

Funding
This work was supported by the Key Disciplines of Tourism Management in Henan Province, the Collaborative Innovation Center of Smart Tourism in Henan Province, the Key R&D and Promotion Projects in Henan Province Key projects of soft science research (grant number 232400411024); the General Research Project on Humanities and Social Sciences in High Schools in Henan Province (grant number 2024-ZZJH-420); and the Soft Science Research Program of Henan Provincial Science and Technology Department in 2022 (grant number 222400410351, 222400410315).

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.09 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

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Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Influence of personality trait on business performance: The mediating role of risk aversion in hybrid tourism entrepreneurs

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How to cite (APA style): Dar, S.A., & Bashir, N.U. (2024). Influence of personality trait on business performance: The mediating role of risk aversion in hybrid tourism entrepreneurs. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 127–137. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.09

ABSTRACT

Even though the occurrence of hybrid entrepreneurs (people who work somewhere else but also own enterprises) is quite common, their personality traits and their influence on business performance have not yet been broadly studied, especially in the context of the tourism industry. Collecting data from tourism entrepreneurs in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India, the current study investigates how the Big Five personality traits of tourism hybrid entrepreneurs influence business performance. Further, risk aversion has been investigated through mediation to test whether the association between personality traits and business performance is affected in its presence. To achieve this goal, hierarchical regression analysis was used to study this influence and the results revealed that hybrid entrepreneur extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience produces a favourable influence. In addition, risk aversion partially mediates the association between personality traits and business performance. Further interaction helps in explaining variance in a better way. The current study is the first to present data demonstrating the necessity for hybrid entrepreneurs to be investigated as a distinct category in personality-focused entrepreneurship research.

KEYWORDS

hybrid entrepreneurship, tourism, Big Five personality traits, business performance, risk aversion

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
19 November 2023
Accepted:
17 April 2024
Published:
10 October 2024

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is generally recognised as the strength of the economy (Cope, 2005; Jin et al., 2021; Yousaf et al., 2021), and an entrepreneur is someone who is considered a catalyst for entrepreneurial activity (Cope, 2005; Feng & Chen, 2020; Parker, 2013). As a result, it is critical to research entrepreneurs as they embody the core of entrepreneurship. Despite the fact that an increasing number of young graduates are joining the entrepreneurship boom, a significant number of entrepreneurs fail every year, and mortality rates for new ventures remain quite high (Klimas et al., 2021; Lattacher et al., 2021). According to statistical data, only two-thirds of small enterprises persist for a minimum of two years, and half fail before their fifth year (Jawula, 2021). The failure of an enterprise might be attributed to insufficient entrepreneurial preparedness. Due to a lack of proper entrepreneurial preparation, new firms find it challenging to deal with a market situation that is fraught with uncertainties. In order to avoid failure and to deal with some of the challenges that come with being an entrepreneur, consequently, some choose not to indulge in the luxury of starting their firm full-time, so they combine employment with establishing a business venture, a practice known as hybrid entrepreneurship (Folta et al., 2010). In the literature, numerous studies have begun investigating "hybrid entrepreneurship" to identify and understand the transition processes (Raffiee & Feng, 2014). Literature highlights that establishing a career as an entrepreneur necessitates a significant career transition from salaried employment to a kind of self-employment or business proprietorship (Dyer, 1995). Such career changes are conducted in phases, with paid employment ongoing, while launch efforts for a new business are being initiated (Folta et al., 2010; Raffiee & Feng, 2014).

1.1. Research background

An emerging field of research that appears to contradict traditional conceptions of entrepreneurship is that of hybrid entrepreneurship. Hybrid entrepreneurs continue working on the regular job market as well as within their own enterprises. This particular group of business owners suffers from a series of resource limitations that differentiate them from typical full-time entrepreneurs, and as a result, they are expected to identify resources and make business decisions differently (Ferreira, 2020). Despite how widespread this phenomenon is, it has not attracted a lot of specialized academic interest (Folta et al., 2010). Most entrepreneurship research exhibits a bias in favour of full-time business owners. One factor contributing to this neglect is the difficulty in identifying individuals who are involved in hybrid entrepreneurship. Due to this, full-time and hybrid entrepreneurs have been included in the same category in general and policy entrepreneurship studies (Schulz et al., 2016). Therefore, it is suggested that scholars should keep highlighting the presence of hybrid entrepreneurship in research by refuting orthodox notions and proving that the hybrid variety is both a practical way to full-time entrepreneurship as well as a stand-alone state (Ferreira, 2020).

Even though hybrid entrepreneurship generally takes place during the primary phases of entrepreneurial growth, it is imperative to note that starting a business on a part-time basis does not inevitably indicate an aspiration to embrace full-time entrepreneurship (Viljamaa et al., 2017). Nevertheless, hybrid entrepreneurship might be preferable in some circumstances for various reasons and a major one for this approach to entry into entrepreneurship is the learning process (Folta et al., 2010) and thus avoiding some risks involved in business operations. It is crucial to keep in mind that the decision to take a leap from hybrid to full-time entrepreneurship might not be a simple one but the culmination of several choices that might lead to a cyclical relationship between the two types. Learning theories provide an example of how this process is circular since one can only accurately assess newly acquired skills once they are actually put to use (Folta et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2013). These hybrid entrepreneurs are believed to provide a favourable environment for studying entrepreneurial processes due to their dedication in continuing to hold two jobs during this career change phase (Folta et al., 2010). Hybrid entrepreneurs are likewise more creative than people who leave their employment to begin a business (Schulz et al., 2017) as in the hybrid phase, they can experiment with business ideas at an early stage.

Risk aversion has been clearly mentioned in the literature on hybrid entrepreneurship as a driver (Block & Landgraf, 2016; Raffiee & Feng, 2014; Solesvik, 2017; Viljamaa & Varamäki, 2014). According to Block and Landgraf (2016), and Raffiee and Feng (2014), keeping a paid job while starting a business lets hybrid entrepreneurs dramatically minimize the level of risk they carry owing to lower profit pressures and need for constant income. The same point has been made by Viljamaa and Varamäki (2014), who argue that risk aversion might be a motivator for pursuing hybrid rather than full-time entrepreneurship. Risk aversion influences how entrepreneurs establish their enterprises for those who intend to shift to full-time entrepreneurship, implying that people with great risk-averse levels are expected to engage in hybrid entrepreneurship as a preliminary stepping stone to full-time. The relation established between risk aversion and the early phases of business progress revealed that those who demonstrate lesser levels of risk aversion, in comparison to the overall population, are expected to enter full-time rather than hybrid entrepreneurship (Raffiee & Feng, 2014).

However, adequate emphasis has also been placed on the association between risk-taking behaviour and business performance. So, the existing study seeks to offer an understanding of the performance of tourism businesses through the mediating mechanism of risk aversion. Since, there has been no research that examines the effect of personality traits on the performance of tourism firms, with risk aversion acting as a mediator in the perspective of hybrid tourism entrepreneurship, the current study will take these variables into consideration while investigating hybrid tourism entrepreneurs and their business performance. There are two reasons to use risk aversion to test mediation between personality traits and business performance. To begin with, starting a new business is a hazardous endeavour with a high potential for foundering (Goldenstein et al., 2019; Hoogendoorn et al., 2019) and secondly, many people are undoubtedly unwilling to incur the risk (Baroncelli & Landoni, 2019).

2. Review of literature

2.1. Business performance

As a variable, 'performance' has multiple meanings and may be analysed from many perspectives at several levels. Baron (2007) and Zhao et al. (2010) describe performance in terms of a company's profitability, survival and expansion. Success can be assessed in numerous ways, the most common of which are sales, shares in the market, employment, physical productivity, assets and profits (Akinboade, 2015; Shepherd & Wiklund, 2009). Since there is no agreement on the optimal indicators of small and medium enterprise (SME) performance, scholars select the best indicators, develop a multiple-indicator index, or employ other metrics on an individual basis (Isaga, 2018). Consequently, the majority of scholars use indicators that are easy to collect instead of incorporating relevant factors (Shepherd & Wiklund, 2009). Furthermore, many do not explain the reason behind choosing one indicator over another (Birley & Westhead, 1994; Shepherd & Wiklund, 2009). This propensity has led to conflicting outcomes in studies of small business growth (Delmar & Wiklund, 2008). Shepherd and Wiklund (2009) made a sizeable contribution to the literature in this respect by greatly expanding the understanding of business performance. According to their research, the most preferred measures are sales performance, employment, assets and profit. Moreover, this result is reinforced by Achtenhagen et al. (2010) who discovered sales performance to be a prominent metric employed to gauge business performance and most researchers find this a more appropriate performance indicator than the others (Shepherd & Wiklund, 2009; Shibia & Barako, 2017).

2.2. Personality traits

Personality is a consistent reaction to external circumstances that causes an individual to act in a particular way. For theorists, the personality of an individual may be used to foresee their conduct. In multiple meta-analyses, it has been noted that personality characteristics influence an individual's decision-making and behaviour, thus determining their success as an entrepreneur (Zhao et al., 2010). Ciavarella et al. (2004) found that business owners with strong attributes allied with good performance are expected to maintain their companies over the long term. People with specific personality types prefer engaging in entrepreneurial activities because they find them worthwhile and enjoyable. Conversely, those who lack these key attributes allied might lose interest in engaging in such activities after failing in their initial initiatives. Researchers have long been drawn to the Big Five personality traits scale due to its reliability (Goldberg, 1993), and it has been claimed that these traits could be employed to represent the essence of an individual's personality. Furthermore, the Big Five characteristics may be utilized to determine the potential of an individual for entrepreneurship (Zhao et al., 2010).

2.3. Personality traits and risk aversion

2.3.1. Conscientiousness and risk aversion

The ability to manage oneself determines how action dread, action uncertainty or action aversion will negatively influence that person (Van Gelderen et al., 2015). These emotional instabilities can either raise or lessen one's risk aversion. Regardless of the threat associated with a new business, people with a great level of drive and self-control are willing to make risky decisions. People who are less risk-averse tend to be high-risk takers i.e. they are eager to take risks. While Nicholson et al. (2005) discovered a negative association between conscientiousness and risk propensity, it is expected that conscientiousness will negatively affect risk aversion in the perspective of the research investigation and based on the outcomes of other researchers.

2.3.2. Openness to experience and risk aversion

Being open to new experiences might be seen as a complement to taking risks (McCrae & Costa, 1997). People that are extra receptive often embrace change and innovation more readily, are more tolerant of ambiguity, and do not actively resist changes in their lives. They are less risk-averse and open to original ideas. Additionally, Nicholson et al. (2005) discovered that people with great openness to experience had high-risk propensities for aspects affecting their health, finances, safety, leisure, careers and society. Similarly, Pak and Mahmood (2015) discovered that openness to experience had a considerable influence over risk tolerance.

2.3.3. Extraversion and risk aversion

In contrast to conservatives, extroverts are positive and experience positive emotions. Their enthusiasm and sense of supremacy improve their confidence due to which they accept opportunities. Such people concentrate on the positives, instead of dwelling on undesirable thoughts, for instance fear of losing. They tend to take more risks and are less risk-averse. Nicholson et al. (2005) discovered that extraversion is strongly allied with risk aversion. Risky activity is predicted by extraversion as a way to increase and satisfy emotional experiences (Cooper et al., 2000) because extroverts have a generalized desire for stimulation (Eysenck, 1973).

3. Hypotheses development

Based on the previous literature, it has been found that there is a significant relationship between the study variables. The Big Five personality traits have been found to be predictors of business success in previous research work. Further, risk aversion is directly or indirectly associated with the Big Five personality traits, which offers a theoretical justification for using these variables in the study simultaneously.

3.1. The Big Five personality traits and business performance

Personality traits and business performance have previously been directly related. In terms of the association between the personality qualities of the owner and the performance of the company, Yakubu and Onuoha (2022) found that small enterprise performance is associated to the owner's personality. It is commonly known that personality and business performance are related (Zhao et al., 2010) and as a result, the relevance of this relationship is well acknowledged. Researchers believe that the features of an entrepreneur influence business performance directly or indirectly, even though results concerning personality traits have been inconclusive (Isaga, 2018). According to Obschonka and Stuetzer (2017), greater levels of openness, extraversion and conscientiousness are connected to entrepreneurship. Meta-analysis led by Zhao et al. (2010) has also indicated that openness to experience and conscientiousness were the most substantially related to business performance.

3.2. Extraversion and business performance

Extraversion is linked to performance, group work and training as claimed by Barrick et al. (2002). Franco and Prata (2019) have revealed that extrovert entrepreneurs actively participate in business work and also work on improving themselves. Extraversion has a crucial impact on enterprise success because small business operations require social interactions and thus extroverted owners are more closely involved. This particular trait is linked to better business performance as claimed by Franco and Prata (2019), and Zhao et al. (2010), since extroverted owners are expected to be more engaged in the day-to-day operations of their business, this shows favourable effects on the firm's performance (Franco & Prata, 2019). Based on the above discussion, it can be hypothesised that:

H_1: There is a significant influence of extraversion on business performance.

3.3. Conscientiousness and business performance

A conscientious manager is cautious, obedient, diligent, trustworthy, methodical, reliable, well organised, capable of restricting personal wants, and devoted to the goals of the business (Barrick et al., 2002). Therefore, Penney et al. (2011) have stated that an owner with a greater level of conscientiousness has good attitude and performs well (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). Similarly, Antoncic et al. (2018) argue that a conscientious owner develops as a result of efficacy, accountability, correctness and organisation. Obtaining positive results through purposeful activities is one illustration of what conscientiousness entails (Caspi et al., 2005). In today's competitive market, this particular personality feature is critical for boosting the growth, financial performance and promotion of a business (Ramadani et al., 2015). Ciavarella et al. (2004) have proved that strong managerial conscientiousness has a beneficial impact on business performance and the survival of small enterprises. Thus, we can hypothesise that:

H_2: There is a significant influence of conscientiousness on business performance.

3.4. Openness to experiences and business performance

Individuals who are open to new experiences are more adaptable and tolerant of other ideals (Zhao et al., 2010). These characteristics may help hospitality owners to recognize client demands and build the capacity to deal with competition and market fluctuations. As a result, a shift in how tasks are completed has a direct impact on how well the firm performs in general (Zeffane et al., 2018). In terms of the association between openness to experience and performance of a firm, Zhao et al. (2010) revealed that the former has a strong association with latter. Further, Shane and Nicolaou (2013) revealed the link between openness to experience and a company's financial performance. Similarly, Franco and Prata (2019), and Hachana et al. (2018) found that openness to experience has a significant and favourable effect on business performance. Contrarily, Ciavarella et al. (2004) revealed that openness to experience is inversely linked to business performance. Thus, we can hypothesise that:

H_3: There is a significant influence of openness to experience on business performance.

3.5. The mediating role of risk aversion

The traits of openness to experiences, such as inquisitiveness, inventiveness and open-mindedness, encourage people to make riskier decisions (Nicholson et al., 2005). In addition to being less risk averse, those who are interested in novel experiences incline to be extra curious to learn about unique ideas (Ariani, 2015), and thus more committed to their business performance. Conscientiousness correlates with one's degree of motivation and desire for success (Costa & McCrae, 1992). It is believed that conscientious people have high-risk tolerance because they are less negatively influenced by action dread (Van Gelderen et al., 2015). Similarly, extraversion has an influence on risk aversion because extroverts are more risk-tolerant and optimistic than introverts (Pak & Mahmood, 2015). Several researchers have related personality to risk-taking behaviour, and the findings are consistent with this association (Chitra & Sreedevi, 2011; Pak & Mahmood, 2015). Thus, we can hypothesise that:

H_4: Risk aversion plays a mediating role between personality traits and business performance.

4. Research methodology

This study is quantitative in nature. The goal of the current work is to study the influence of personality traits on business performance among hybrid tourism entrepreneurs, and assess the function of risk aversion as a mediator. This work aims to discover a generalized pattern of this association between study variables from the perspective of the tourism sector of Jammu & Kashmir. To collect primary data, a questionnaire was created by adopting measurement scales from different authors for the selected variables of interest. The questionnaire examined the respondents' demographic profile in the first part while the second measured "personality traits", "firm performance" and "risk aversion". All variables were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale extending from 1 to 5 (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). To examine these objectives, hierarchical regression analysis was used. According to Cohen (2001), hierarchical regression is appropriate for sequentially testing theory-based hypotheses because it enables evaluation and comparison of the influence of each individual variable on the predictive ability of the dependent variable (Petrocelli, 2003). In addition, particularly in the realm of entrepreneurship, regression analysis is viewed as a rigorous and beneficial method. Recent articles in the top entrepreneurial periodicals often use regression analysis as a powerful technique to evaluate their theory-driven assumptions regarding entrepreneurship and business success (Anglin et al., 2020; Cacciotti et al., 2020; Michaelis et al., 2020).

4.1. Sampling and measures

4.1.1. Sampling and demographics

The current study has employed a multi-channel approach to reach hybrid entrepreneurs, including targeted e-mails, social media platforms, etc. A total of 210 tourism entrepreneurs who started their enterprises as part-time businesses took part in the research survey, with some of them planning to switch to full-time entrepreneurship. Only those who were hybrid in terms of business were included thus excluding full-time entrepreneurs. After eliminating those with missing data, a sample of 187 was selected as the sample for the study. The questionnaire was pre-tested with numerous hybrid entrepreneurs, and small adjustments were made to eliminate ambiguity. According to the outcomes of the demographic profile, most respondents were men (89.14%), between the ages of 28–38 (56.82%), married (52.96%), and with post-graduate education (48.05%). It was found that the majority of participants (61.15%) run travel agencies but were working somewhere else as employees, next were those involved in the food and beverage industry (14.85%).

4.1.2. Measures

Business performance

The hospitality sector is primarily made up of small and medium-sized businesses (Getz & Carlsen, 2005) due to which it is difficult to obtain objective performance data owing to their unwillingness to openly disseminate such data and the fact that such organizations' financial reports are not publicly available (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Murphy et al., 1996). As a result, the examination of subjective performance measurements has become common. In business research, performance has frequently been self-assessed by owners/managers (Dess & Robinson, 1984; Runyan et al., 2008) which has been shown to be a reliable method of evaluating business performance by Dess and Robinson (1984), and Wall et al. (2004). To assess performance in the current investigation four items were borrowed from Aydin and Emeksiz (2018).

Risk aversion

To assess risk aversion, the current study employs four statements taken from Gomez-Mejia and Balkin's study (1989). The particular scale is established in theoretical work given by Slovic (1972) and has been employed by Gupta and Govindarajan (1984).

Personality traits

To measure personality traits, the five-factor model developed by John et al. (1991) was used. Among the Big Five personality traits, only three (extraversion, openness to experience and conscientiousness) have been taken for research investigation in the context of the current study. After being employed in career development studies (Li et al., 2015) and intrapreneurship research, the five-factor model was confirmed as suitable for the goals of this study (Sinha & Srivastava, 2013).

Control variables

The respondents were asked about demographic information: age, gender, marital status and educational level. To account for any potential confounding influence, the present study controlled for three variables, gender, educational background and the age of the entrepreneur, which are acknowledged to influence performance. As gender affects performance, it is believed that female entrepreneurs have a lower chance of success due to detrimental effects on profitability and sales (Harada, 2003) while education has also been shown to influence the success of a new firm (Baron & Markman, 2004; Baum et al., 2001). Similarly, Harada (2003) stated that sales, profitability and income tend to deteriorate with age, hence it was incorporated as a possible control variable in the current study. Beatty and Zajac (1994) have found that younger women's firms face more challenges in terms of accessing resources and building robust social networks as the entrepreneur's age is alleged to provide inadequate assurance to financiers, creditors and dealers. Further, there is an indication that an entrepreneur's age has a significant influence on business profitability (Wang et al., 2016).

Prior to data analysis, Cronbach's alpha test was used to examine the reliability of each dimension. Cronbach's alpha scores were for extraversion (0.88), conscientiousness (0.68), openness to experience (0.79), firm performance (0.833) and risk aversion (0.821). All three dimensions of personality traits, as well as performance and risk aversion were over the permitted limit of 0.60 (Nunnally, 1967).

5. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for the study's variables have been depicted in Table 1. All coefficient values were less than 0.65, which is the threshold limit (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012), thus revealing no serious issue of multi-collinearity. Additionally, all the variables were mean-centred to prevent the negative impacts of multi-collinearity on the regression analysis according to the recommendation given by Iacobucci et al. (2017). Mean-centring was employed in the study to eliminate multi-collinearity and investigate the influence of personality factors on business performance. Additional steps were made to investigate multi-collinearity concerns by computing the variance inflation factor (VIF) for all of the regression coefficients. The VIF for each individual variable was less than 3. As a consequence, multi-collinearity was not a concern for the current analysis (Neter et al., 1985) as it was discovered that each individual figure was below 3.0, far below the critical value of 10 (Hair et al., 1998).

The mean value of the constructs as shown in Table 1 revealed that hybrid entrepreneurs in the tourism industry score more highly on openness to experience and risk aversion, which signifies that hybrid entrepreneurs are very interested in exploring new ideas.

5.1. Hierarchical regression analysis

Based on hierarchical linear regression analysis, it has been determined which model, universal or contingency, best matches the data. When studying interaction terms in regression analysis or, more broadly, when studying strongly connected independent

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficient

Constructs	Mean	*SD*	EXTRA	CONS	OPEN	RA	FP
EXTRA	3.93	0.50	1.000	–	–	–	–
CONS	3.96	0.55	0.177	1.000	–	–	–
OPEN	4.05	0.87	0.301	0.576	1.000	–	–
RA	4.21	0.96	0.422	0.077	0.204	1.000	–
FP	3.98	0.68	0.341	0.120	0.107	0.772	1.000

Note: *SD* – standard deviation, EXTRA – extraversion, CONS – conscientiousness, OPEN – openness to experiences, RA – risk aversion, FP – firm performance.

Source: authors.

variables, the hierarchical method is applicable (Bagozzi, 1984; Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The procedure's validity has been demonstrated statistically (Arnold, 1982; Cohen & Cohen, 1983) as well as through computer simulations (Stone & Hollenbeck, 1984). In every phase of the hierarchical analysis, increases in R^2 and F tests of statistical significance are examined for the next higher degree of interaction (two-way interactions). An interaction effect arises only if the interaction term contributes significantly more than the direct impact of the independent variables (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

5.2. Results

To partially isolate the influence of control variables from the relations of major interest, the control variables were included prior to the independent variables, followed by the inclusion of the main effects in the universal model, and finally, all independent and mediating variables were included as the two-way interaction term in the contingency model.

Model A

The control variables were first added in column 2 in Table 2. The control variables of gender, age of entrepreneur and educational level explain 23% of the variation in performance at a 1% significance level. The first model with the control variables gives an adjusted R^2 value of 0.22 (F = 15.13, p > 0.01). Overall the first model revealed no significant effect of control variables on business performance, implying that control variables do not affect the dependent variable.

Model B

In step 2, the second model of the analysis examines the universal influence of the Big Five personality dimensions (extraversion, openness to experience and conscientiousness) and also risk aversion on business performance. These main variables explain a further 14% of the variation in business performance, as demonstrated in model B of Table 2 at a 1% significance level. All three Big Five personality dimensions, extraversion (β = 0.396, p = 0.000), conscientiousness (β = 0.312, p = 0.000) and openness to experience

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis

Variables			Control variables model (A)			Universal model (B)			Contingency model (C)		
			β	*SE*	*p*	β	*SE*	*p*	β	*SE*	*p*
Control variables	Gender		0.020	0.174	0.480	0.051	0.176	0.464	0.063	0.185	0.420
	Marital status		0.043	0.191	0.156	0.279	0.079	0.031	0.289	0.089	0.029
	Age of entrepreneurs		0.066	0.133	0.119	0.070	0.031	0.293	0.087	0.133	0.213
	Education		0.097	0.185	0.210	0.019	0.143	0.861	–0.038	0.146	0.738
Main effect	Extraversion		–	–	–	0.396^{***}	0.091	0.000	0.232^{**}	0.095	0.030
	Conscientiousness		–	–	–	0.312^{***}	0.067	0.000	0.271^{***}	0.063	0.000
	Openness to experience		–	–	–	0.463^{***}	0.076	0.000	0.259^{***}	0.075	0.000
	Risk aversion		–	–	–	–	–	–	0.322^{***}	0.071	0.000
Interaction effect	Two-way interaction	Extraversion × risk aversion	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.319^{***}	0.073	0.000
		Conscientiousness × risk aversion	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.164^{**}	0.043	0.002
		Openness to experience × risk aversion	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.155^{**}	0.044	0.028
	R^2		0.23			0.38			0.420		
	Adjusted R^2		0.22			0.35			0.420		
	ΔR^2		0.23			0.15			0.040		
	ΔF		15.13			8.57			0.468		
	F value		15.13^{***}			12.92^{***}			7.780^{***}		

Note: β – beta co-efficient, *SE* – standard error, × – simultaneous effect of independent variables (Big Five traits and risk aversion) on dependent variable (business performance), R^2 – amount of variance explained, ΔR^2 – increase in R^2 (amount of variance explained) from the model A to the model C, ΔF – analysis of statistical significance; ** p-value < 0.05, *** p-value < 0.001.

Source: authors.

(β = 0.463, p = 0.000) have a substantial statistically favourable association with business performance. On the basis of the findings of the study, it has been found that openness to experience contributes more towards business performance among the independent variables, i.e. higher business performance is linked with greater openness to experience. Further risk aversion also shows a considerable positive impact on business performance (β = 0.322, p = 0.000).

Model C

In step 3, the researchers simultaneously regressed risk aversion, and all three personality factors on business performance. Results from model C show that although the impact of extraversion (from 0.396 to 0.319), conscientiousness (0.312 to 0.164) and openness to experience (0.463 to 0.155) on business success were reduced after adding risk-aversion simultaneously, it was still statistically significant. This shows that risk aversion plays a role in mediating the association between all three personality traits and business performance. The two-way interactions between risk aversion and extraversion (β = 0.319, p = 0.000), conscientiousness (β = 0.164, p = 0.002) and openness to experience (β = 0.155, p = 0.028) were also found to be statistically significant at the 5% significance level. The contingency model considerably increases the level of explained variance by 4% ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$) from model B to model C, which suggests that the interaction does help in explaining the associations between the personality dimensions and business performance in the presence of risk-aversion in a better way.

6. Discussion and conclusion

As the economic significance of hybrid entrepreneurship has grown, research on the subject has become more prevalent, attempting to academically study and demonstrate the personality dimensions of hybrid entrepreneurs and their influence on the success of their start-ups. The research presented in this article indicates that personality traits like extraversion, openness to new experiences and the conscientiousness of hybrid entrepreneurs have a favourable influence on the performance of a tourism business. Further, risk aversion has a favourable impact on the success of tourism firms. However, these key impact relationships only offer a partial picture of the performance of tourism firms so when risk aversion, and other three personality attributes are taken into account together, a deeper understanding may be achieved. In addition to the main-effects-only model, the two-way interactions in the contingency model offer further information.

Since the current study indicates that extraversion, openness to new experiences and conscientiousness, positively associate with the business performance of tourism firms, these results are consistent with Duval et al. (2012), Farrington (2012), Leutner et al. (2014) and Mhlanga (2019). Due to their creative skills, Duval et al. (2012) claim that entrepreneurs who exhibit these characteristics are more expected to succeed in small enterprises. Based on this rationale, it is predicted that those who score more highly on personality learning qualities allied with entrepreneurial roles are expected to be highly effective entrepreneurs (Zhao et al., 2010). In addition, the mediating role of risk aversion has been brought in, and the results have revealed that it partially mediates the link between all three personality traits and the business performance of tourism hybrid entrepreneurs. A hybrid entry into entrepreneurship can ease a number of sources of failure for the hybrid entrepreneur. The reason for this is that the safety net of continuing to receive a salary and the advantages that go along with it tends to lessen worries related to failing (Ferreira, 2020). According to Mungaray and Ramirez-Urquidy (2011), full-time entrepreneurs suffer considerably harsher repercussions from venture failure than hybrid entrepreneurs since the latter tend to put less weight on their enterprises' rapid success, which lowers the likelihood of failure as revealed by Block and Landgraf (2016), and Brown and Farshid (2017). Similarly, it has been suggested that the likelihood of making the switch from hybrid to full-time entrepreneurship is increased due to the learning that occurs during the hybrid stage, which includes entrepreneurial competency development and a decrease in risk aversion (Ferreira, 2020).

Personality traits are one of the essential components for effective business performance in very unstable business conditions. The present study aims to look at the association between the Big Five personality dimensions and business performance. Additionally, the function of risk aversion as a mediator was also ascertained. The current study conducted a survey of hybrid entrepreneurs in several sub-sectors of the tourism industry in Jammu and Kashmir in India to fulfil its objectives. The study's findings were as follows: firstly, it was evident that among the sub-factors of personality dimensions such as extraversion, openness to new experiences and conscientiousness, all had an impact on business success. Secondly, connections between the three selected personality traits and business performance are partially mediated by risk aversion. Generally, it can be said that the present study has verified the significance of personality traits as important and significant determinants of the performance of the hybrid entrepreneur and the success of a tourism business. This results in an explicit direction for future research, as well as in entrepreneurial practice, acknowledging the personality of the entrepreneur as an appropriate criterion for a business's success.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.10 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E
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Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Exploring the role of cultural values, trust and empathy on satisfaction: Research on hotel customers

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How to cite (APA style): Özden, A.T., Yapıcı, O.Ö., & Korjani, M. (2024). Exploring the role of cultural values, trust and empathy on satisfaction: Research on hotel customers. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 139–154. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.10

ABSTRACT

Hotels that serve customers having different cultural values should improve their service capabilities to achieve customer satisfaction. This study researches how empathy, trust and cultural values affect hotel customer satisfaction and looks at the combinations of these components that lead to high customer satisfaction. The current literature on Hofstede's five-dimensional cultural values, cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy, trust and customer satisfaction were used to develop the research model and present recommendations. To ensure cultural diversity, a face-to-face survey was administered to 553 tourists from six countries. The data obtained were evaluated using partial least squares structural equation modelling and fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). According to the results, the effects of hotel customers' empathy levels on their satisfaction occur through their trust in the business. The fsQCA revealed combinations of cultural values, empathy and trust that would generate high levels of satisfaction. The present study contributes to the relevant literature by addressing the relatively under-emphasized components that ensure that hotel customers are highly satisfied.

KEYWORDS

customer satisfaction, customer empathy, cultural values, trust, fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis, fsQCA

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
2 April 2024
Accepted:
12 July 2024
Published:
29 October 2024

1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction is the most valuable element for all businesses (Čuka & Gregorová, 2020) because it affects customer loyalty and the financial performance of hotels (Suhartanto et al., 2020). It is difficult to please tourists with different cultural values simultaneously, therefore previous studies have investigated the satisfaction of tourists (Jia, 2020) and the antecedents that provide such satisfaction (Xu & Li, 2016). With the spread of international tourism, understanding tourists with different cultural values has become vital (Wei et al., 2023). Although it has been proven that cultural values affect tourist satisfaction (Gallarza-Granizo et al., 2020;

Zhang et al., 2020), the antecedents, together with cultural values, have not been sufficiently taken into account. In our study, we considered two important premises influenced by cultural values, empathy and trust, which are determinants of satisfaction (Kumra & Sharma, 2022).

Researchers have overlooked customer empathy by focusing on the empathy levels of hotel employees (Ngo et al., 2020). In this study, we consider customer empathy (referred to simply as empathy), although employee skills have improved, the low empathy skills of the tourists may negatively affect satisfaction. The mediating role of trust in this relationship between empathy and satisfaction should also be taken into account. Customer satisfaction is complex, and the impact of these antecedents, along with cultural values, on satisfaction remains unclear. In this study, we argue that empathy and trust levels differ according to cultural values and that this has an impact on customer satisfaction.

Hosfstede's cultural values model helps classify consumers according to such values and leads to developing marketing strategies (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). In his research that comprised more than 60,000 participants, Hofstede (2001) demonstrated a five-dimensional system of cultural values: masculinity (MAS), power distance (PD), uncertainty avoidance (UA), collectivism (CLV) and long-term orientation (LTO). Hofstede's work facilitates the formulation of hypotheses (Soares et al., 2007) and establishes norms for international marketing studies (Leonavičienė & Burinskienė, 2022). Cultural values are related to the self, identity, image (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2011), attitudes and behaviors (Latif et al., 2019), and values (Luna & Forquer Gupta, 2001). Therefore, we believe that cultural values may also be related to such factors as trust and empathy. For instance, Chien et al. (2016) state that cultural values affect consumer trust and, as a result, consumer behavior. Collectivist consumers do not express negative emotions, therefore, they do not share their dissatisfaction (Liu & McClure, 2001). Despite these studies, cultural value dimensions have not yet been evaluated within trust and empathy frameworks. This study expands the perspective of customer satisfaction in the tourism sector in terms of cultural values, empathy and trust. In summary, we sought to answer two research questions:

RQ_1: How do cultural values, trust and empathy affect hotel customers' satisfaction levels?

RQ_2: Which combinations of these factors cause an increase in satisfaction levels?

In our study, we adopted the fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) method to understand which combinations provide higher customer satisfaction which provides the opportunity to identify configurations that guarantee high performance under outcome conditions (Kraus et al., 2018). It differs from previous studies in terms of its contributions: first, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the relationship between each dimension of cultural values and empathy (cognitive and emotional) and trust; second, we fill a gap in the relevant literature by presenting configurations that allow hotels to achieve high customer satisfaction in terms of these dimensions; third, our findings reveal the impact of cultural values on empathy. Thus, we provide hotel managers with a different perspective to increase customer satisfaction, with applicable suggestions for tourists to improve their empathy skills. These recommendations increase the ability of hotels to act according to different customer profiles. Finally, we expand the relevant literature by considering calls for more studies on empathy, trust and cultural values (Kumra & Sharma, 2022; Yaghoubi Jami et al., 2024).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The second section discusses the theoretical background and relevant literature; the third develops hypotheses; the fourth explains the methodology and the fifth examines the findings. The sixth part discusses the findings and the theoretical and managerial implications. Afterwards the limitations of the study are emphasized, and recommendations are made for future studies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural values

Culture is defined as a cognitive system that encompasses beliefs, norms and human behaviours distinguishing one group of people from others (Geertz, 2000). Cultural values shaping beliefs and attitudes differ from country to country and can be explained as follows (Huang & Crotts, 2019; Yoo et al., 2011):

1. Masculinity (MAS): societies in which men are at the forefront in the distribution of roles between women and men; success, and being strong and fast, are important in masculine societies.
2. Power distance (PD): this refers to the degree to which class differences in the distribution of power in society are accepted.
3. Uncertainty avoidance (UA): this expresses the level of tolerance for risk and uncertainty.
4. Collectivism (CLV): refers to the level of group members' sense of belonging and the prioritization of group interests. Individualism is the opposite of CLV.
5. Long-term orientation (LTO): indicates perspectives on business life and relationships. In long-term orientation, values such as modesty, dedication, hard work and savings are important.

Studies conducted indicate that Hofstede's model classifies the cultural values of customers according to countries (Hwang & Lee, 2012). There are a limited number of studies in the literature examining the effects of cultural values on customer attitudes and purchasing behaviour in tourism (Weber et al., 2017). Tourists from different cultures have different values, and these consumers may be satisfied at different levels with the hotels they receive. It should be noted that intercultural management differs between chains and independent hotels. Indeed, studies show that individual hotels offer different standards of service (Siguaw et al., 2000) and that management styles differ according to cultural values (Beydilli & Kurt, 2020). While chain hotels aim to increase efficiency by adopting globalized strategies (Whitla et al., 2007), independent hotels have the advantage of offering differentiated services because they can be autonomous in decision-making processes (Moreno-Perdigón et al., 2021). Hotels have implemented strategies that cater to the diverse preferences of their target audience as customers exhibit varying tastes (Bonhard et al., 2006). For example, even in Western Europe, there are differences between Spanish and Dutch hotels (Moro et al., 2020). Therefore, acting in accordance with differences in cultural values is an effective strategy for providing personalized services.

2.2. Empathy

Conceptually, empathy has been defined as an understanding of the emotions and feelings of another person in the situation they are in, or as putting oneself in another person's shoes (Lee & Cheng, 2018). Empathy is a two-dimensional structure: cognitive and affective. Cognitive empathy (CE) is an understanding of how others think, while affective empathy (AE) is an understanding of how they feel (Umasuthan et al., 2017).

Empathy is associated with customer satisfaction (Arun Kumar et al., 2010) and is used to overcome the problems that customers encounter while benefiting from a service, or as feedback on services provided to customers (Manola & Papagrigoriou, 2019). Empathy plays an important role in achieving healthy intercultural communication and satisfying customers in tourism (Ülker et al., 2021). Wieseke et al. (2012) stated that empathic customers were more likely to forgive when they encountered unsatisfactory service, while customer empathy decreased the negative effects on customer dissatisfaction and loyalty.

2.3. Trust

Trust is defined as the belief that businesses that provide long-term products, goods and services to customers can protect their interests (Crosby et al., 1990). Trust is particularly important in the service sector and is a fundamental dimension for evaluating service quality. For example, hotel customers purchase services when they trust a business (Wu et al., 2019) and service quality positively affects satisfaction (Gu, 2023). Distrust occurs when customers take risks and this affects purchase intention negatively (Rehman et al., 2020). Customers make hotel reservations specifically by reducing service uncertainty and collecting more information (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). One reason for this is to gain a sense of trust before purchasing a service. Trust positively affects satisfaction in the tourism sector (Mao & Lyu, 2017). Shin et al. (2021) considered trust as a driving factor affecting satisfaction and loyalty. It should also be considered that trust can negatively affect satisfaction and there can be two reasons for this. First, consumers with high expectations may be more sceptical about the service provider or its businesses, and the feeling of trust may negatively affect satisfaction as expectations increase. Pre-consumption expectations are effective for service purchases. Second, when service performance is below expectations, quality is perceived as low (Lai et al., 2018), and satisfaction decreases.

2.4. Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the evaluation resulting after customers use a service and is important for long-term profitability in terms of business (Ribbink et al., 2004). Customers who leave a business with satisfaction spend more than other customers and effectively promote the service they have received (Le et al., 2020). After an increase in customer satisfaction, customers may establish closer relations with the business (Kelley & Davis, 1994). Evaluation of customer satisfaction in hotels starts after providing a service and with communication between the customer and business.

Customer satisfaction results from service quality (Ahrholdt et al., 2017) which is evaluated by comparing consumer expectations of the service with its perceived performance. Customer satisfaction is directly affected by service quality (Tan et al., 2014) and quality is vital in the service sector (Ansari et al., 2023). However, evaluating service quality is difficult due to its tangible and individual features (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Therefore, various service dimensions should be considered when standardizing service quality assessments. Different approaches have been used to evaluate service quality (Ladhari, 2012) and the most commonly accepted approach is the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). In this model, service quality includes responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, reliability and empathy.

In line with the relevant literature, the effects of trust, empathy and cultural value antecedents on customer satisfaction should be considered. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by (a) examining the effects of each dimension of cultural values on empathy and trust, (b) determining which combinations of these components provide the highest customer satisfaction, and (c) evaluating the effects of cultural values on empathy in terms of the empathy skills of customers, not service employees.

3. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Theoretically this study has been shaped by five cultural value factors (Yoo et al., 2011), basic empathy skills (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) and trust in the quality of the relationship (Crosby et al., 1990). Cultural values are widely used to understand different cultures and find marketing strategies for them (Johnston et al., 2023; de Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). Basic empathy has two dimensions, cognitive and affective, and they are used to explain different consumer behaviours (Ngo et al., 2020; Wieseke et al., 2012). Trust is a dimension of relationship quality and measures trust in service personnel (Crosby et al., 1990) and these factors serve to provide customized service. As mentioned earlier, cognitive and affective empathy and cultural values are important reasons affecting consumer behaviour and they may help in explaining consumer satisfaction. The research model shown in Figure 1 was developed in these terms.

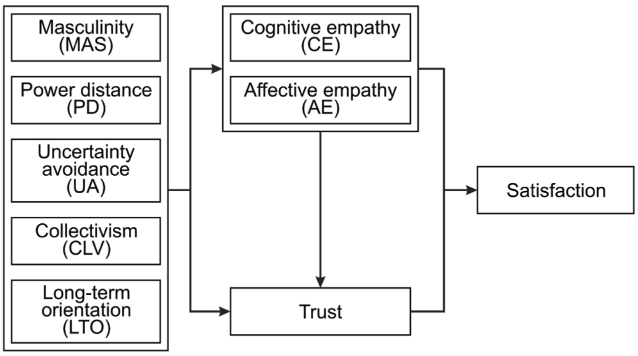

Figure 1. Research model
Source: authors

The hypotheses of this study were formulated based on the components of trust and empathy in terms of cultural values and customer satisfaction, as explained below.

3.1. Empathy in terms of cultural values

Empathy is affected by culture and its related values (Yaghoubi Jami et al., 2024). Customers whose expectations are not met in countries where the MAS dimension is weak are more flexible (Qi et al., 2023). Those with high femininity place more importance on the opinions of others (Kim, 2019). For the PD dimension Xu et al. (2021) reported that consumers with a low power distance view businesses more empathetically when transgressing occurs. Customers with high UA attach more importance to service quality and satisfaction and do not want to encounter undesirable results (Hanzaee & Dehkordi, 2012). Another dimension, collectivism, affects empathy positively (Yaghoubi Jami et al., 2019) as in collectivist societies, consumers depend on society and indirect communication is dominant. For example, the Turks have idioms about expressing themselves through their implications. An original version of one idiom is *Kızım sana söylüyorum, gelinim sen anla* which can be translated into English: "Girl, I am telling you, my bride, you understand". This idiom explains that the message to be conveyed is not said directly to the target person, but to another who will convey this message to that person. In conclusion the indirect expression has come to the fore in Turkish society, where collectivist culture predominates. Therefore, CLV encourages consumers to be more empathetic in understanding indirect communication. Finally, studies have shown that high LTO increases ethical values (Tsui & Windsor, 2001) and the likelihood of investing in interpersonal relationships (Guo et al., 2018). Therefore, we argue that these consumers have higher empathy levels. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H_1: The cultural values of customers will affect their basic empathy levels.

H_{1a}: An increase in MAS will affect CE negatively.
H_{1b}: An increase in MAS will affect AE negatively.
H_{1c}: An increase in PD will affect CE positively.
H_{1d}: An increase in PD will affect AE positively.
H_{1e}: An increase in UA will affect CE positively.
H_{1f}: An increase in UA will affect AE negatively.
H_{1g}: An increase in CLV will affect CE positively.
H_{1h}: An increase in CLV will affect AE positively.
H_{1i}: An increase in LTO will affect CE positively.
H_{1j}: An increase in LTO will affect AE positively.

3.2. Trust in terms of cultural values

In the tourism sector, trust is an effective tool for reducing the complexity of human behavior in uncertain situations, and comparisons of trust worldwide show heterogeneity among countries (Hashemi & Hanser, 2018). In the relationship between cultural value dimensions and trust, it has been determined that masculine consumers have higher feelings of trust (Sığrı & Tığlı, 2006). Regarding the PD dimension, egalitarianism is dominant in societies with low PD, and individuals use other individuals as references (Roozmand et al., 2011). Therefore, as PD increases, trust weakens (Furrer et al., 2000). Societies with high LTO focus on permanent relationships and trust is extremely valuable to them (Oly Ndubisi, 2004). Since consumers with a high level of UA are loyal to sources of information, businesses should be more reliable (Oly Ndubisi, 2004). According to Hwang and Lee (2012), individuals with low UA level tolerate risks and they do not need this trust. In individualistic cultures, consumers focus on sales process results, whereas collectivist consumers primarily want to establish relationships and trust (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). Individualistic consumers anticipate higher quality and believe that businesses should be more empathetic and trustworthy (Donthu & Yoo, 1998) while in-group trust is more intense in collectivist societies for reasons like sharing the same fate (Yamagishi et al., 1998). Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize:

H_2: Cultural values of customers will affect their trust.

H_{2a}: An increase in MAS will affect trust negatively.

H_{2b}: An increase in PD will affect trust negatively.

H_{2c}: An increase in UA will affect trust positively.

H_{2d}: An increase in CLV will affect trust positively.

H_{2e}: An increase in LTO will affect trust positively.

3.3. Empathy and trust in customer satisfaction

In the present study, we argue that empathy has a two-dimensional structure: cognitive and affective (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2006). Cognitive empathy (CE), which constitutes basic empathy, includes a social skill that enables consumers to predict the next move of others, in other words their cognitive process, to understand when they are lying and provide foresight in intercultural functionality. Whereas AE entails understanding the feelings of others, thinking of others more than oneself, and being emotionally sensitive (Smith, 2006). This study discusses the empathy skills of customers, their skills in understanding the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of the personnel and giving appropriate responses (Delpechitre et al., 2019). As a matter of fact, empathic customers can forgive the negativities they encounter (Wieseke et al., 2012), focus on the good things and have a positive perspective (Pera et al., 2019), and they tend to be more satisfied with the service they receive. In other studies on customer empathy, it was found that consumers with high levels of empathy were more controlled even towards robots they received service from (Paiva et al., 2017), they were less angry and complained less (Konstam et al., 2001). Thus, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H_3: Basic empathy levels of customers will positively affect their satisfaction with the hotel where they stay.

H_{3a}: CE levels of customers will positively affect their satisfaction with the hotel where they stay.

H_{3b}: AE levels of customers will positively affect their satisfaction with the hotel where they stay.

Empathy contributes to individuals' trust in others (Aggarwal et al., 2005). Cognitive and affective empathy have been proven to have a strong emotional effect on trust (Weißhaar & Huber, 2016). Cognitive and affective empathy have an impact on the intention to maintain relationships with businesses, and trust plays a mediating role in this effect (Kumra & Sharma, 2022). We propose the following:

H_4: The effect of customers' empathy levels on their satisfaction with the hotel where they stay will occur through their trust with the hotel.

H_5: Basic empathy levels of customers will positively affect their trust in the hotel where they stay.

H_{5a}: CE levels of customers will positively affect their trust in the hotel where they stay.

H_{5b}: AE levels of customers will positively affect their trust in the hotel where they stay.

Customers' need for trust is much higher in accommodation and in this study trust is discussed as trust in business personnel (Crosby et al., 1990). We aim to benefit from the advantages of being short, simple and generalizable by discussing trust in service personnel as one-dimensional (Gefen, 2000). Trust reduces anxiety and uncertainty (Pavlou et al., 2007), increases the desire to maintain a relationship with the business (Luo & Zhang, 2016), and ensures customer loyalty (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000). In addition, trust plays a mediating role in the effect of satisfaction on the intention to purchase again (Liang et al., 2018) and has a positive effect on satisfaction (Namasivayam & Guchait, 2013). Thus, it is anticipated that:

H_6: The trust customers have in the hotel where they stay will have a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

4. Methodology

4.1. Survey administration and data collection

Data collection was carried out with the face-to-face survey method. All the scales used for the survey were taken from previous studies, the validity and reliability of which had been proven. Our study used the same customer satisfaction scale as that of Jin et al. (2015) while statements on the cultural values scale were derived from Yoo et al.'s (2011) scale. The trust dimension of relationship quality consists of expressions used in the research conducted by Crosby et al. (1990). The basic empathy scale comprises statements used by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) in their research. The last part of the survey includes demographic questions about the participants' age, gender, educational status and nationality. The study was conducted with Danish, English, Japanese, Turkish, Dutch and Italian tourists, selected for cultural variations according to the results of work by Hofstede (2001) and whose 1984 research is the most comprehensive (Kirkman et al., 2006). Many subsequent studies support the theoretical relevance of his work (Soares et al., 2007) and these cultural values are the norm in international marketing research (Sivakumar & Nakata, 2001). According to Hofstede, these countries have distinct cultural values and by choosing them, the aim was to reach participants with different cultural values and to provide diversity.

The survey statements were translated into the official languages of the participants with the help of language experts, and then translated again by a linguist who knew both the translated official language and English. Thus, the translations were compatible with the survey statements.

Pilot application was completed with 53 (29 males and 24 females) customers of two different hotels accommodating individuals from different nationalities – 14 of these were Japanese, 11 were English, 11 Italian, 10 Dutch and 7 Danish. As a result of the pilot application, we found that the participants responded to surveys without any problems. We found that the validity and reliability scores of the data obtained with pilot test were acceptable (Hair et al., 2016).

All participants were told that they would be giving informed consent when they started to fill in the surveys. The items in the scale are 5-Likert type responses and the study was carried out between January and April 2023. The surveys were administered in İstanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Muğla, Aydın, Mardin and Nevşehir, the cities receiving the highest number of tourist visits in Turkey. These are also where many international tourists stay because of natural beauty, cultural and historical value. Participants were not limited to their demographic characteristics because excessive limitations may limit the development of a generalizable theory (Litvin et al., 2004). For a similar purpose, no distinction was made between the types of hotel in which participants stayed so both chain and independent hotels were included in the evaluation. However, tourists residing outside the countries covered by the sample were not included. The reasons for choosing these countries were as follows (Hofstede, 2001): with the exception of collectivism, Danish consumers scored low on all dimensions; the English are among the countries with the lowest collectivism scores; Japanese consumers score high on long-term orientation and uncertainty avoidance; Dutch consumers had one of the lowest masculinity scores; Turkish consumers were among those with the highest power distance and collectivism; Italian consumers were among the most masculine countries. By choosing these countries, the aim was to reach participants with different cultural values and provide diversity.

Tourist guides and intern students in these cities were contacted and the questionnaires were sent to them. They carried out surveys voluntarily and were not paid. The surveys were completed by 586 participants, and it was found that 18 of them did not complete the survey and 15 left unanswered items. For this reason, the surveys of 553 participants were evaluated.

When the population of research is between 1 million and 100 million, a sample size of 384 with a sampling error of 0.05, $p = 0.05$ and confidence interval of $q = 0.05$, is sufficient (Gill et al., 2010). Non-random sampling in which the sample group to be selected from the main population is determined by the judgments of the researcher, is called convenience sampling (Taherdoost, 2016). Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) can be used where there are more than 50 cases (Fainshmidt et al., 2020). For these reasons, it was determined that the 553 participants reached were sufficient. Table 1 shows the descriptive information of the participants.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($n = 553$)

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Age	Between 18 and 28	88	15.9
	Between 29 and 39	132	23.9
	Between 40 and 50	181	32.7
	51 and older	152	27.5
Gender	Male	261	47.2
	Female	292	52.8
Educational status	Primary	53	9.6
	Undergraduate	283	51.2
	Postgraduate	76	13.7
	High school	141	25.5
Nationality	Denmark	76	13.7
	Netherlands	97	17.5
	England	83	15.0
	Italy	92	16.6
	Japan	82	14.8
	Turkey	123	22.2

Source: authors.

4.2. Data analysis

Two different models were used in the data analysis part of this study and the purpose of choosing two is to give a more comprehensive examination of the relationship between variables (Küçükergin et al., 2021). One of these models is partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2016). When there are more than one dependent and independent variable, this method provides a quantitative and reliable evaluation of the causal relationships between them (Chen et al., 2021). It evaluates whether the measurement structures of the model are reliable and valid and also that of the structural model in which the hypothesis tests are conducted (Bawack et al., 2021).

After it was found with PLS-SEM that the data were valid and reliable, fsQCA was used in the second stage. PLS-SEM was chosen for the definition of clear effects and to define the asymmetric models (Küçükergin et al., 2021). Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) is a method of analysing set relationships that can be used to examine complex configurational conceptual models (Ragin, 2009) and is used in the field of marketing to explore the complex structure and different factors for consumer behaviour (Fang et al., 2016), therefore, it allows two or more antecedents to be examined together (Woodside, 2015). Unlike qualitative methods that focus on in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases, this method enables cross-case comparisons (Finn, 2022). In complex systems such as tourism, interdependence between conditions is more common than the influence of an independent variable (Çizel et al., 2021). For this reason, fsQCA is a suitable method for evaluating a complex structure with more than one antecedent such as customer satisfaction in the tourism sector.

In the analysis stage, data calibration is made first; in other words, all variables are turned into fuzzy sets, groups that represent the degree of membership in a given condition (Woodside & Zhang, 2013). In fuzzy sets that allow for different degrees of membership, the value of 1 means full membership of a state in a particular category, the value 0 means complete non-membership and the value 0.5 means neither membership nor non-membership (Woodside, 2015). Cut-off points were determined through fsQCA software including 0.05 for cut-off full non-membership threshold; 0.50 (median) for maximum membership uncertainty transition point and the 0.95 percentile for the full membership threshold (Ragin et al., 2008). A three-step analysis is performed after the calibration of fuzzy sets (Çizel et al., 2021): verification table, needs analysis and capability analysis. A needs analysis is performed to determine whether the antecedents are required for the result. With the obtained calibration, a verification table is created by using the fuzzy set algorithm (Ragin et al., 2008). Capability analysis is performed with the results of verification table. As a result of the analysis, it was found that the level of cases that can represent to what extent the antecedent configurations explains the highest level of customer satisfaction was reached (Ragin et al., 2008). In this study, the cut-off consistency value reached 80%; if the consistency value in a model is above 70%, the solution can be said to be informative (Ragin et al., 2008).

5. Results

5.1. Measurement model analysis

For internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha value should be ≥0.60, and composite reliability (CR) coefficients should be ≥0.70. When Cronbach's alpha and CR coefficients are examined for internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha value for the sub-dimensions is between 0.734 and 0.975, and the CR value was found to be between 0.734 and 0.975. According to these coefficients, internal consistency reliability was provided.

The results regarding the differential validity of the measurement model (Fornell-Larcker) are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Differential validity of the measurement model (Fornell-Larcker criterion)

Variable	UA	CE	AE	MAS	Trust	PD	CLV	Satisfaction	LTO
UA	**0.898**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
CE	–0.412	**0.723**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AE	–0.521	0.521	**0.883**	–	–	–	–	–	–
MAS	0.615	0.118	–0.117	**0.857**	–	–	–	–	–
Trust	–0.006	0.076	0.235	0.174	**0.673**	–	–	–	–
PD	0.522	0.231	0.029	0.850	0.152	**0.852**	–	–	–
CLV	0.577	0.153	–0.020	0.838	0.197	0.848	**0.860**	–	–
Satisfaction	–0.033	0.186	0.187	0.194	0.348	0.211	0.235	**0.710**	–
LTO	–0.149	0.492	–0.009	0.185	–0.031	0.300	0.141	0.037	**0.802**

Note: UA – uncertainty avoidance, CE – cognitive empathy, AE – affective empathy, MAS – masculinity, PD – power distance, CLV – collectivism, LTO – long-term orientation.

Source: authors.

Table 3. Differential validity of the measurement model (heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation [HTMT])

Variable	UA	CE	AE	MAS	Trust	PD	CLV	Satisfaction	LTO
UA	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
CE	0.410	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AE	0.518	0.534	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
MAS	0.647	0.145	0.142	–	–	–	–	–	–
Trust	0.169	0.149	0.246	0.170	–	–	–	–	–
PD	0.524	0.231	0.047	0.860	0.130	–	–	–	–
CLV	0.584	0.168	0.050	0.862	0.186	0.857	–	–	–
Satisfaction	0.087	0.183	0.184	0.189	0.366	0.213	0.243	–	–
LTO	0.166	0.482	0.038	0.187	0.114	0.314	0.164	0.095	–

Note: UA – uncertainty avoidance, CE – cognitive empathy, AE – affective empathy, MAS – masculinity, PD – power distance, CLV – collectivism, LTO – long-term orientation.
Source: authors.

As shown in Table 2, since the square root coefficients of AVE obtained were higher than the correlation coefficients in their own row and column, discriminant validity was ensured. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation (HTMT) results are shown in Table 3.

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation coefficients are another criterion developed for discriminant validity. As shown in Table 3, in order to ensure discriminant validity, HTMT coefficients should be below 0.90. Since all of the HTMT coefficients obtained were below 0.90, discriminant validity was ensured.

The third items of LTO (3, 4, 5) were excluded from PD. Items 1, 4, 5 were excluded from CLV. Thus, the discriminant and convergent validity of the measurement model was ensured.

Table 4. PLS-SEM results and hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Hypothesized paths	Standarized beta (β)	Standard deviation	Test statistics	*p*-value	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Decision
H_{1a}	MAS → CE	0.131	0.138	0.949	0.343	0.516	0.512	Not supported
H_{1b}	MAS → AE	–0.185	0.119	1.552	0.121	0.479	0.474	Not supported
H_{1c}	PD → CE	0.185	0.116	1.592	0.111	0.516	0.512	Not supported
$\mathbf{H_{1d}}$	**PD → AE**	**0.529**	**0.142**	**3.723**	**<0.001**	0.479	0.474	Supported
$\mathbf{H_{1e}}$	**UA → CE**	**–0.712**	**0.064**	**11.183**	**<0.001**	0.516	0.512	Supported
$\mathbf{H_{1f}}$	**UA → AE**	**–0.849**	**0.060**	**14.064**	**<0.001**	0.479	0.474	Supported
$\mathbf{H_{1g}}$	**CLV → CE**	**0.252**	**0.111**	**2.273**	**0.023**	0.516	0.512	Supported
$\mathbf{H_{1h}}$	**CLV → AE**	**0.232**	**0.116**	**2.002**	**0.045**	0.479	0.474	Supported
$\mathbf{H_{1i}}$	**LTO → CE**	**0.264**	**0.046**	**5.791**	**<0.001**	0.516	0.512	Supported
$\mathbf{H_{1j}}$	**LTO → AE**	**–0.286**	**0.046**	**6.172**	**<0.001**	0.479	0.474	Not supported
H_{2a}	MAS → trust	0.226	0.165	1.367	0.172	0.118	0.106	Not supported
H_{2b}	PD → trust	–0.153	0.181	0.841	0.400	0.118	0.106	Not supported
H_{2c}	UA → trust	–0.126	0.135	0.933	0.351	0.118	0.106	Not supported
H_{2d}	CLV → trust	0.230	0.161	1.425	0.154	0.118	0.106	Not supported
H_{2e}	LTO → trust	–0.003	0.075	0.045	0.964	0.118	0.106	Not supported
$\mathbf{H_{3a}}$	**CE → satisfaction**	**0.135**	**0.058**	**2.307**	**0.021**	0.141	0.137	Supported
H_{3b}	AE → satisfaction	0.022	0.057	0.384	0.701	0.141	0.137	Not supported
H_{5a}	CE → trust	–0.144	0.100	1.436	0.151	0.118	0.106	Not supported
$\mathbf{H_{5b}}$	**AE → trust**	**0.294**	**0.081**	**3.643**	**<0.001**	0.118	0.106	Supported
$\mathbf{H_{6}}$	**Trust → satisfaction**	**0.329**	**0.060**	**5.500**	**<0.001**	0.141	0.137	Supported

Note: UA – uncertainty avoidance, CE – cognitive empathy, AE – affective empathy, MAS – masculinity, PD – power distance, CLV – collectivism, LTO – long-term orientation; R^2 – corrected goodness-of-fit.
Source: authors.

5.2. Structural model

The structural model results present the findings of the analyses conducted to test our research hypotheses. The results revealed whether the hypotheses were supported. Structural model results are as shown in Table 4:

1. MAS had no effect on CE (H_{1a}) and AE (H_{1b}).
2. PD has no effect on CE (H_{1c}), but has a positive effect on AE (H_{1d}).
3. UA had a negative effect on CE (H_{1e}) and AE (H_{1f}).
4. CLV had a positive effect on CE (H_{1g}) and AE (H_{1h}).
5. LTO had a positive effect on CE (H_{1i}).
6. LTO had a negative effect on AE (H_{1j}).
7. Cultural values had no effect on trust (H_{2a}–H_{2e}).
8. CE had a positive effect on satisfaction (H_{3a}), but AE had no effect (H_{3b}).
9. CE had no effect on trust (H_{5a}), whereas AE had a positive effect (H_{5b}).
10. Trust had a positive effect on satisfaction (H_6).

The mediator model results for testing H_4 are presented in Table 5. As shown in Table 5, the indirect effect of AE on trust through satisfaction was found to be statistically significant (p = 0.003). Therefore, H_4 was confirmed. Further, indirect relation was significant and positive; thus, the mediation type was complementary partial mediation for the examined relations.

The path coefficients of the structural model are shown in Figure 2.

Table 5. Results of the mediation analysis

Variable	Indirect effect	Standard deviation	Test statistics	*p*-value
CE → trust → satisfaction	–0.047	0.036	1.317	0.188
AE → trust → satisfaction	0.097	0.033	2.934	**0.003***

Note: CE – cognitive empathy, AE – affective empathy; *$p < 0.001$.
Source: authors.

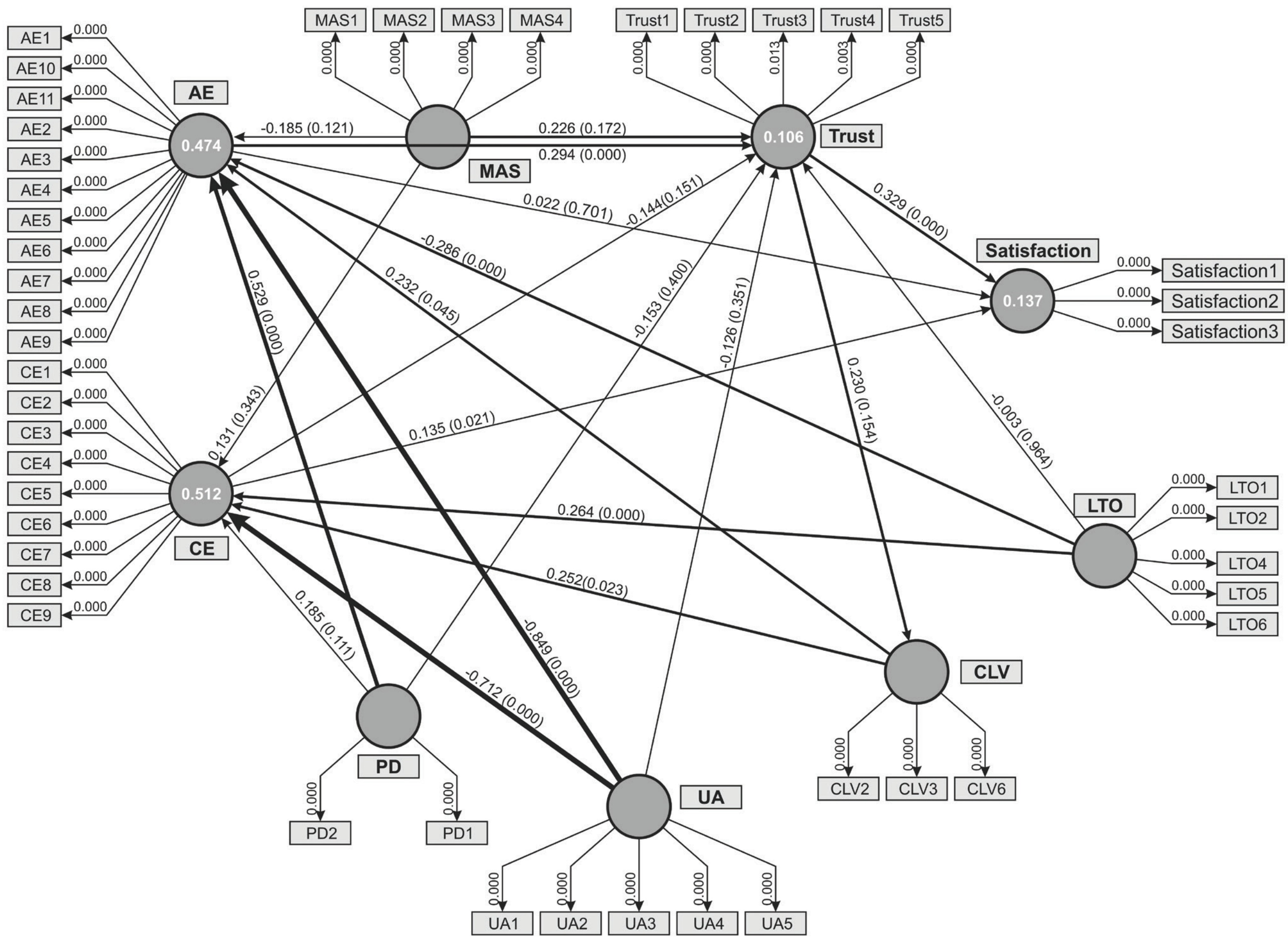

Figure 2. Path coefficients of the structural model
Source: authors

The predictive power results of the model are presented in Table 6. As shown in Table 6, Q^2 values higher than 0 indicate that the model has predictive power for the dependent variables and that the obtained values are significant. The predictive power of the models created for the dependent variables of cognitive and AE was obtained as a medium. The predictive power of the model created for the dependent variables of trust and satisfaction was low.

Table 6. Predictive power results

Variable	Q^2
Cognitive empathy (CE)	0.245
Affective empathy (AE)	0.319
Trust	0.045
Satisfaction	0.061

Note: Q^2 – predictive relevance.
Source: authors.

5.3. Results of fuzzy set analysis

Configurations explaining customer satisfaction were calculated separately for citizens of each country. Each table (Table 7–12) shows their coverage and consistency. Plus signs indicate the presence of the variable, while minus signs indicate that the specific variable was not considered in the solution.

Table 7. Main configuration for high satisfaction: Turkey

Configuration	Solutions		
	1	2	3
Power distance (PD)	+	+	+
Uncertainty avoidance (UA)	+	+	+
Collectivism (CLV)	+	+	+
Long-term orientation (LTO)	–	–	–
Masculinity (MAS)	+	+	+
Affective empathy (AE)	+	–	+
Cognitive empathy (CE)	–	+	+
Trust	+	+	+
Consistency	0.577	0.945	0.946
Raw coverage	0.711	0.628	0.625

Source: authors.

Table 8. Main configuration for high satisfaction: Denmark

Configuration	Solutions		
	1	2	3
Power distance (PD)	–	–	+
Uncertainty avoidance (UA)	–	–	+
Collectivism (CLV)	–	–	+
Long-term orientation (LTO)	–	–	+
Masculinity (MAS)	–	–	+
Affective empathy (AE)	+	+	+
Cognitive empathy (CE)	+	+	+
Trust	+	–	+
Consistency	0.908	0.881	0.986
Raw coverage	0.675	0.780	0.377

Source: authors.

Table 9. Main configuration for high satisfaction: England

Configuration	Solutions		
	1	2	3
Power distance (PD)	–	–	–
Uncertainty avoidance (UA)	+	+	+
Collectivism (CLV)	–	–	–
Long-term orientation (LTO)	–	–	–
Masculinity (MAS)	–	–	+
Affective empathy (AE)	+	–	–
Cognitive empathy (CE)	+	+	+
Trust	+	–	+
Consistency	0.864	0.771	0.759
Raw coverage	0.707	0.550	0.764

Source: authors.

Table 10. Main configuration for high satisfaction: Italy

Configuration	Solutions			
	1	2	3	4
Power distance (PD)	+	+	+	+
Uncertainty avoidance (UA)	–	–	+	+
Collectivism (CLV)	–	+	–	+
Long-term orientation (LTO)	+	+	+	+
Masculinity (MAS)	+	+	+	+
Affective empathy (AE)	+	+	+	+
Cognitive empathy (CE)	+	+	+	+
Trust	+	+	+	+
Consistency	0.944	0.941	0.954	0.955
Raw coverage	0.635	0.576	0.574	0.539

Source: authors.

Table 11. Main configuration for high satisfaction: Japan

Configuration	Solutions		
	1	2	3
Power distance (PD)	+	+	+
Uncertainty avoidance (UA)	+	+	+
Collectivism (CLV)	+	+	+
Long-term orientation (LTO)	+	+	+
Masculinity (MAS)	+	+	+
Affective empathy (AE)	–	+	+
Cognitive empathy (CE)	+	+	+
Trust	+	–	+
Consistency	0.915	0.909	0.937
Raw coverage	0.694	0.755	0.650

Source: authors.

Table 12. Main configuration for high satisfaction: Netherlands

Configuration	Solutions
	1
Power distance (PD)	–
Uncertainty avoidance (UA)	–
Collectivism (CLV)	–
Long-term orientation (LTO)	+
Masculinity (MAS)	–
Affective empathy (AE)	+
Cognitive empathy (CE)	+
Trust	+
Consistency	0.899
Raw coverage	0.760

Source: authors.

The results show a high level of solution coverage and consistency for participants from each country. For Turkish participants, solution 3 explained this high level of consistency (0.946) and coverage (0.625) (Table 7) showing that the best solution is to create a high level of customer satisfaction is the existence of all cultural values except LTO. For Danish participants, the highest consistency is in solution 3 with (0.986) and a significant rate of coverage (0.377) (Table 8). This shows that all cultural values, empathy factors and feelings of trust explain the high satisfaction. In the results of the English participants, the highest consistency (0.864) and highest coverage (0.707) were in solution 1 (Table 9). This shows that the UA factor of cultural values, dimensions of empathy and trust provide high satisfaction. For Italian participants, the highest consistency (0.955) and significant coverage (0.539) were observed in solution 4 (Table 10). Similar to Danish participants, this means that all cultural values and dimensions of empathy and trust, have created high customer satisfaction. A similar result can be seen for Japanese participants: consistency (0.937) and coverage (0.650), providing the highest customer satisfaction, were in solution 3 (Table 11). Finally, the solutions for Dutch participants were high consistency (0.899) and coverage (0.760) (Table 12), showing that for LTO, dimensions of empathy and trust provided high satisfaction.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to determine how the dimensions of cultural values, trust and empathy affect customer satisfaction, and to explore which combinations of these factors that lead to the highest level of satisfaction. According to the findings:

1. SEM-PLS and fsQCA analyses show that each variable increased customer satisfaction and additionally trust in an enterprise played a mediating role in the effect of empathy. These results are consistent with the relevant literature. Geebren et al. (2021) and Pop et al. (2022) found that trust has a positive effect while Elbaz et al. (2023) stated that trust has a moderating role in the relationship between satisfaction and destination loyalty. In the cultural value dimension, Hanzaee and Dehkordi (2012) found that cultural values (UA, LTO) are related while in the empathy dimension, Wieseke et al. (2012) and Davis et al. (2017) stated that customer empathy has positive effects. Although the current study supports the findings of these studies, to our knowledge, no other study in the tourism sector has comprehensively addressed the effects of the components of customer empathy, trust and cultural value on customer satisfaction.
2. The dimensions that make up cultural values do not affect trust. This result shows that, although the feeling of trust affects customer satisfaction, it does not change according to cultural values. In the relevant literature, different results were obtained to those from the current study. Yuki et al. (2005) found that cultural values affect trust in interpersonal relationships more in Eastern societies. Thanetsunthorn (2022) reported that consumers with high PD and UA cultural values tend to trust others less, whereas consumers with low CLV and high LTO cultural values are likely to trust others more.
3. Cultural values have been found to have an impact on empathy and some studies have shown similar evaluations (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010). To

communicate sensitively to cultural diversity and understand customer profiles, it is necessary to have an idea about the empathy skills of hotel customers.
4. First of all, it should be noted that the participants in the current study do not represent the population of a country as these findings represent only the participants included in the study. According to the fsQCA analysis, solutions that create high customer satisfaction are also noteworthy. These results suggest that cultural values, empathy and trust affect customer satisfaction although the increase varied according to different cultural values. According to Hofstede's (2001) scoring system, Japan and Italy had the highest cultural values for MAS. Turkey and Japan had the highest for PD and CLV, while LTO was high in Japan and the Netherlands. Studies conducted in subsequent years have yielded similar results to those of Hofstede (Moonen, 2017; Woodside et al., 2016) and this study obtained similar results. According to the results with the highest consistency in fsQCA, high scores increased satisfaction for Turkish participants for all cultural values except for LTO. For Danish, Italian and Japanese participants, high scores for all cultural values resulted in satisfaction. For Dutch participants, LTO did and for English participants, a high UA score indicated satisfaction. Although the participants were of different nationalities, high values for MAS, PD, UA, LTO and CLV increased their satisfaction. However, as observed in the fsQCA results for the participants of these countries, the cultural values that increase satisfaction vary. These results are similar to those obtained using SEM-PLS.

This study explored how cultural values, empathy and trust influence hotel customers' satisfaction and the combinations that lead to high levels. Tourism has a structure that brings together different cultures and it is difficult for businesses to create common satisfaction among customers. This study revealed that PD, UA, MAS, CLV and LTO can provide high satisfaction while empathy and trust are the factors that increase it. In addition, cultural values affect empathy (except MAS). As a result, this study offers solutions that will create satisfaction in customers whose effects of cultural values on empathy skills have been determined. Cultural values had no effect on trust, but they positively affected customer satisfaction. The importance of trust, independent of cultural values, was proven in this study. We hope that the contributions will encourage hotels to provide better services to their customers with different cultural values, improve customer experience and encourage researchers to examine customer satisfaction from different perspectives.

Our study yielded important theoretical and practical results which are summarized below.

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our work has made various contributions to the literature on tourism and accommodation. First, it responds to calls for increased research on trust and empathy in service marketing in the digital world where the sharing of emotions is objectified (Kumra & Sharma, 2022).

Second, by considering cultural values within the customer satisfaction framework, a comparative study was conducted, and an attempt was made to fill the gap in the relevant literature. Although comparisons have been made regarding cultural values (Qi et al., 2023), such a comprehensive evaluation has not been made in recent years. This limits the ability of multinational accommodation businesses to act according to different consumer profiles.

Third, empathy in the service sector is generally considered from the perspective of service personnel (Iglesias et al., 2019). In this work, we discussed the empathy of customers, revealed the importance of empathy, and enriched the literature by contributing to the limited number of studies.

Fourth, we identified the most effective components for achieving customer satisfaction by demostrating the effects of cultural values on customer satisfaction. To our knowledge, no study has ever focused on cultural values or customer satisfaction using this method. By demonstrating that certain cultural values create greater satisfaction, this study significantly contributes to the literature.

6.2. Managerial implications

In line with the results above, the following recommendations were developed for businesses.

First, customers' empathy levels can be determined using a short empathy scale administered during check-ins or reservation. To be economically viable, it would be appropriate to design this scale as a short-answer, fun digital game and provide instant results to hotel managers. We believe that it will be easier to provide customized services to customers whose empathy levels have been determined. For example, various privileges, such as food and drinks, can be offered to customers with low empathy levels during their stay. Considering that it is more difficult to satisfy customers with such low levels, we believe that the privileges offered to them will be helpful.

Second, hotel personnel responding appropriately to customers' emotions can facilitate the development of empathy. Praising customers' empathetic behavior can also increase their own empathy.

Third, accommodation can include creative drama activities in their services to help increase customers' empathy levels. Creative drama is a learning method through play suitable for individuals of all ages. Studies have shown that creative drama is important for effective communication, empathy and tolerance (Ulubey & Gözütok, 2015), and many are entertaining and awareness-raising enough to be added to the hotels' animation shows.

Finally, considering the result that cultural values affect satisfaction; hotels whose leaders are strong and decisive, whose rules are defined, whose promises are clear, whose male role models are at the forefront, who act with the "we" spirit, who are hard-working, self-sacrificing and economical, will gain higher satisfaction.

6.3. Limitations of the study

Causal relationships were discussed in this study, but the associations between variables were not. Future studies should investigate the associations between these variables. Managers' cultural values, empathy and trust levels may be discussed, as well as how these variables affect personnel and their relationships with customers.

This study was conducted on customers who stayed at a hotel, however, this cannot be generalized to the entire service sector. Therefore, the results of these variables in different sectors should be evaluated. Online services are distant; therefore, algorithms regarding empathy can be developed from consumers' digital footprints. Our study emphasized only the dimensions of trust and empathy related to consumer satisfaction. Studies that include other service quality dimensions can provide a more comprehensive perspective.

The data used in this study was limited to 553 hotel customers which can be expanded in future with a larger number of participants. Although this work attempted to reach consumers with as many different cultural values as possible, there is a need for more extensive studies that include other cultures. It is also thought that addressing the demographic variables of participants will be effective for the customization of service delivery.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.11 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Mapping the landscape of virtual word of mouth (v-WOM) in the tourism sector: A bibliometric review

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How to cite (APA style): Jyoti, & Kumar, J. (2024). Mapping the landscape of virtual word of mouth (v-WOM) in the tourism sector: A bibliometric review. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 155–169. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.11

ABSTRACT

The increasing significance of virtual word of mouth (v-WOM) in the digital era has the potential to revolutionize consumer decision-making across a wide range of markets such as tourism. The objective is to review the literature on v-WOM published between 2013 and 2023 and the research employs bibliometric analysis to examine 718 documents from the Scopus database. For performance and science mapping analysis, Biblioshiny and VOSviewer were utilized. The growing trend in publication and citation numbers shows that v-WOM is a growing field and the prominent journals involving tourism research are *Tourism Management* and *International Journal of Hospitality Management*. Robert Law is a well-known author and China has the greatest number of publications. The conceptual themes of v-WOM literature were formed by the co-occurrence analysis of keywords and bibliographic coupling networks. In order to provide insights for the future, a word cloud analysis of 549 documents published in the previous four years was also carried out.

KEYWORDS

virtual word-of-mouth, v-WOM, online reviews, tourism industry, science mapping, bibliometric analysis

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
23 January 2024
Accepted:
28 May 2024
Published:
28 November 2024

1. Introduction

Consumer action and decision-making processes have advanced greatly as a result of the ongoing development of information technology (Web 2.0) and the introduction of new communication methods (Verma & Yadav, 2021). Numerous service providers have changed their focus in their marketing strategies and operations management as a result of these advances (Pelli, 2021). Virtual word of mouth (v-WOM) refers to virtual communication between consumers who have never met in real life (Gruen et al., 2006; Park & Lee, 2009), whereas electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) refers to any positive or negative comment made by prospective, real or past customers about a product or company. It is made available online to a wide range of individuals and organizations, and has completely changed the way consumers research products and make decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). This shows that there is a difference between the two terms (Parry et al., 2012). The authors use the term v-WOM to refer specifically to virtual word-of-mouth communication between consumers who do not know each other and also, it rules out some forms of electronic communication (e.g. landline and cellular telephone calls) that are typically used for word-of-mouth. Over the last 15 years, the importance of v-WOM has increased with the explosion of web sites offering product reviews written by consumers and online forums containing consumer discussions of product features and benefits. Virtual word of mouth is one of the key elements influencing consumer preferences for online businesses. The pervasiveness of v-WOM and its capacity to swiftly impact consumer behaviour highlights the significance of this study and it refers to a consumer-driven online information exchange technique (Wu & Wang, 2011; Zubac Musa & Mabić, 2022). It also includes any text or audio about specific products, services or organizations that is available online for everyone to read, whether it is favorable or unfavorable (Tobon & García-Madariaga, 2021). Positive v-WOM is regarded as a free marketing tool for the travel and hospitality sector (Chen & Law, 2016; Rajendran & Arun, 2021).

Through online communities such as newsgroups, chat rooms, email list servers, personal blogs and other online formats that foster community building, consumers are trading and sharing virtual word-of-mouth (Kozinets, 2002). Web evaluations are considered more valuable and trustworthy sources of information because they are predicated on consumers' past experiences (Park & Lee, 2009).

Virtual word of mouth is important from two angles: firstly, it helps consumers to gather essential information that aids in the decision-making process when making a purchase; secondly, it helps businesses to create value by generating leads for the company (Liang et al., 2018; Nam et al., 2020). Prior to engaging in a formal purchasing procedure, it can be challenging to accurately gauge the quality of the intangible services delivered by the hotel and tourism sectors (Yang et al., 2018) which highlights how important it is to get authentic v-WOM from clients prior to completing an online transaction (Liu and Park, 2015). Pourfakhimi et al. (2020) suggest that more than any other business sector, the hospitality and tourism industry depends heavily on v-WOM.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector played a vital role in promoting corporate expansion and job opportunities globally, especially for women, youth, immigrants and local communities. It accounted for one in ten jobs worldwide and almost 10% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) (Citaristi, 2022). Many nations' economies rely heavily on the tourist sector which raises GDP and employment rates. The development of digital platforms in recent years has drastically changed the nature of tourism, making the value of v-WOM a crucial factor in travellers' intention to buy (Huete-Alcocer, 2017; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

Recent years have seen a large number of literature reviews on measuring the impact and composition of v-WOM in the hospitality and tourism sector (Abd-Elaziz et al., 2015; Roy et al., 2021; Serra-Cantallops et al., 2020; Serra Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Yan et al., 2018). Given the newly emerging nature of the field, conducting periodic reviews and summaries of current research could prove beneficial for academics as a whole (Leung et al., 2017). A thorough multidisciplinary quantitative literature review involving a sizable corpus of manuscripts could undoubtedly provide insightful information by highlighting the main points of emphasis of research, the connections between these emerging themes, and the variety of categories within the chosen corpus (Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2015). Even though a small number of bibliometric studies on e-WOM have been carried out (Donthu et al., 2021; Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020; Verma & Yadav, 2021), including a thorough literature assessment of recent publications while performing bibliometric analysis for mapping the v-WOM literature specifically in the tourism industry, to the best of the author's knowledge, no review research utilizing bibliometric analysis that focuses on v-WOM literature has been published so far. Therefore, the author has performed a comprehensive bibliometric analysis on v-WOM in tourism.

To address this gap, a systematic bibliometric analysis of v-WOM literature will be made. Specifically, the following research questions (RQs) are addressed in this study:

RQ_1: What is the current trend in the number of publications and citations in the v-WOM domain over time?

RQ_2: Which author, document, country and journal are the most prominent in v-WOM?

RQ_3: What are co-citation analysis of authors, co-author analysis of countries, and co-occurrence analysis of keywords?

RQ_4: How has the focus of research within v-WOM shifted over time based on the bibliographic coupling of documents?

RQ_5: What are the emerging research trends based on bibliometric data in the v-WOM domain?

This article is structured as follows: the methodology, screening procedure and data analysis tools utilized for bibliometric analysis are covered in section 2. The results of the bibliometric analysis are presented in section 3, along with trends in publication and citation, as well as information on prominent journals, prominent authors, prominent documents, prominent countries, co-authorship analysis, co-occurrence analysis, co-citation analysis and bibliographic coupling of documents. Section 4 delineates the discussion and conclusions including limitations and future research directions, based on word cloud analysis results from the years in which the number of publications has been increasing (2019–2021).

2. Research methodology

2.1. Data collection process and methodology

Elsevier Scopus provided the data used in this bibliometric analysis, the largest database of academic articles (Comerio & Strozzi, 2019) with 60% more coverage than Web of Science, according to Norris & Oppenheim (2007). For this reason, this review was conducted using Scopus employing two stages of content screening strategy. In the first stage, the following search query: "virtual word-of-mouth" OR "digital word-of-mouth" OR "electronic word-of-mouth" OR "online reviews" OR "web reviews", and in the add search field "tourism" OR "travel" OR "travel industry" OR "tourism industry", was placed. The initial search results showed 1165 published articles. Through a rigorous review process, only research articles and review papers published in journals were taken into consideration during the second stage of screening, which involved filtering the documents based on subject categories and document type (Sahoo et al., 2022). Additionally, the articles were filtered according to their time frame, which is 2013–2023. Only publications written in English were taken into account for this research. Ultimately, as Figure 1 illustrates, 718 research articles were incorporated into the investigation. This study uses bibliometric analysis to investigate the newly-emerging topic of v-WOM, a methodical and thorough approach for examining and evaluating large amounts of data (Donthu et al., 2021) widely used for getting a quantitative picture of a field (Iskandar Putri, 2021). Figure 1 presents the methodology flow.

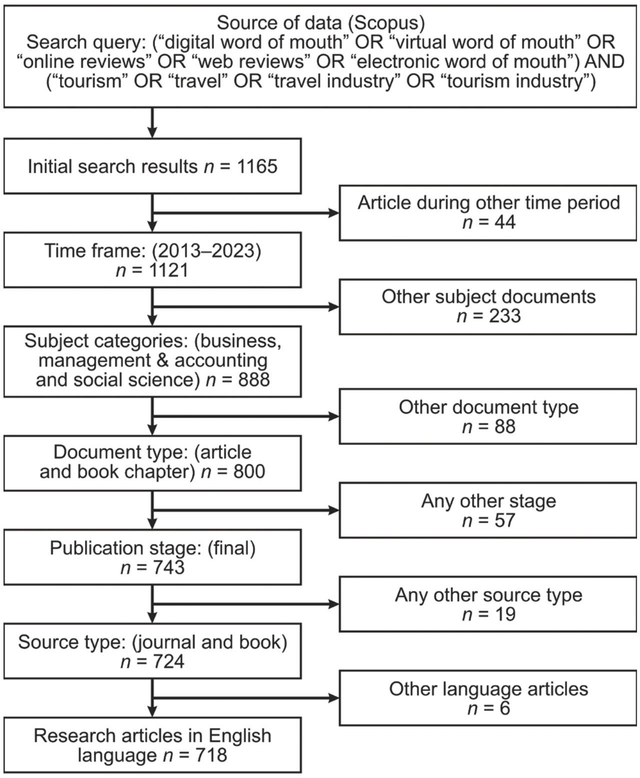

Figure 1. Methodology flowchart
Source: authors

2.2. Data analysis methods

Donthu et al. (2021) have proposed a two-stage analytical technique for bibliometric analysis: performance analysis and scientific mapping. Science mapping illustrates the relationships between research constituents, whereas performance analysis consists of descriptive data indicating the contribution of research constituents e.g. authors, documents, countries and journals (Donthu et al., 2021). The research structure is shown in Figure 2. The Biblioshiny app, an R-Cloud tool, was used for performance analysis (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Using descriptive data comprising the most prominent authors, documents, countries and journals, research trends were categorized and examined individually. Furthermore, network analysis of co-authorship, co-occurrence, co-citation and bibliographic coupling were mapped and visualized using VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). In order to identify the future components of the study, a word cloud consisting of 549 articles over the last four years (2019–2023) was created.

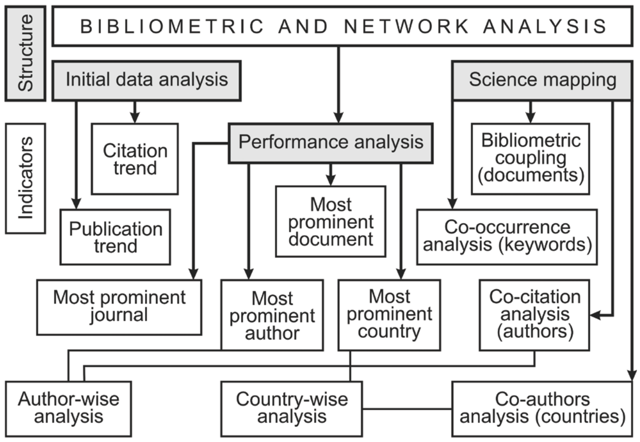

Figure 2. Data analysis
Source: authors

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Initial data analysis

Publication and citation trends in the field of virtual word-of-mouth (v-WOM)

As Table 1 shows, there are 718 documents in the Scopus database. While the concept of v-WOM is not new, documents published on v-WOM were less than 20 in 2013 and 2014. Publications have risen gradually since 2015 and v-WOM's yearly publication trend is shown in Figure 3, which demonstrates its steady growth over time. The subject has become more relevant as technology has advanced, particularly with the emer-gence of social media. The table displays the trend in v-WOM publication, structure of citations and pattern of authorship (number of contributing authors, articles with a single author and articles with multiple authors) for those published between 2013 and 2023.

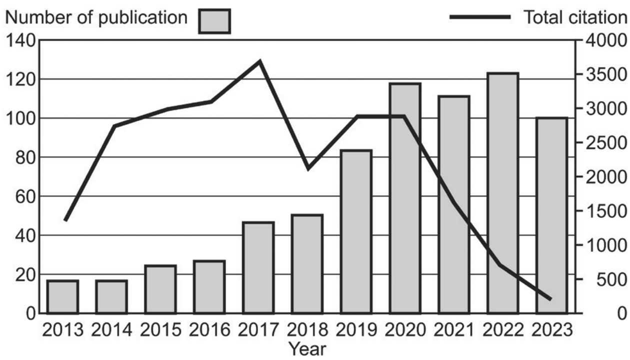

Figure 3. Time profile of virtual word of mouth publications
Source: authors

3.2. Performance analysis

Performance analysis looks at the contributions made to a certain research field by different individuals, organizations, journals and countries. Performance evaluation is used to identify the most prominent publications, authors, countries and journals as well as to identify broad patterns in the growth of the discipline.

Most prominent authors

The most prominent authors in the v-WOM field aid understanding of those who have made a substantial contribution to the v-WOM domain. The authors who have been constantly publishing in the field of v-WOM are listed in Table 2. With 30 publications and a total of 2,030 citations, Rob Law is at the top of the list. His total of 30 publications has been cited at least 900 times, with 19 of his articles receiving 19 citations each. Law has done research on a variety of variables including online reviews, user-generated content, e-WOM, tourism and hospitality etc., individually and collectively. His research has focused on the role of social media in tourism and hospitality, progress in information com-munication technologies in hospitality and tourism, influence of user-generated content on traveller behaviour, smart tourism etc. Though Law has worked on other variables including tourism management progress, smart tourism etc. identification of the most prominent author (part of the objective of this work) is based on the total number of citations. The most cited articles (Law TC: 6099) are related to the linkage of e-WOM in tourism entitled "Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and

Table 1. Publication trend and citation structure

Year	*N*	TC	SA paper	CA paper	NCA	*h*-index	*g*-index
2013	16	1351	4	12	31	12	16
2014	16	2764	0	16	47	13	16
2015	24	2982	5	19	67	17	24
2016	27	3119	3	24	72	20	27
2017	47	3688	6	41	141	30	47
2018	50	2123	4	46	138	25	46
2019	84	2896	10	74	245	30	52
2020	118	2906	10	108	340	32	47
2021	112	1613	8	104	356	24	33
2022	124	712	10	114	388	15	19
2023	100	213	8	92	308	8	11

Note: *N* – number of publications in a specific year, TC – total citations, SA – sole authorship, CA – co-authorship, NCA – number of contributing authors in various years.
Source: authors.

Table 2. Most prominent authors

Author	Previous year start	TC	*N*	*h*-index	*g*-index	*m*-index
Law R.	2014	2030	30	19	30	1.900
Li H.	2014	626	16	8	16	0.800
Liang S.	2017	406	12	6	12	0.857
Liu Y.	2017	373	8	6	8	0.857
Rita P.	2015	350	12	6	12	0.667
Brochado A.	2015	295	10	8	10	0.889
Moro S.	2023	281	11	5	11	0.714
Mariani M.M.	2018	279	8	6	8	1.000
Kim J.M.	2018	119	9	5	9	0.833
Zhang X.	2020	94	10	4	9	1.000

Note: TC – total citations, *N* – number of publications of each author.
Source: authors.

10 years after the Internet: The state of e-tourism research" (Buhalis and Law, 2008). It is fascinating to observe that the majority of authors have employed social media platforms (online reviews and ratings) as their main v-WOM platforms to research their influence on travellers' purchasing intentions. Additionally, tourism and hospitality management have appeared as the key sector from the themes of many experts. 'Top 10' journals have published 24 of his 30 articles, and these include *Tourism Management*, *International*

Table 3. Prominent documents

Authors	Title	Journal	Year	Total citations (TC)	TC per year
Ert, E., Fleischer, A. and Magen, N.	Trust and reputation in the sharing economy: The role of personal photos in Airbnb	*Tourism Management*	2016	874	109.30
Munar, A.M. and Jacobsen, J.K.S.	Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media	*Tourism Management*	2014	663	66.30
Liu, Z. and Park, S.	What makes a useful online review? Implication for travel product websites	*Tourism Management*	2015	630	70.00
Filieri, R. and McLeay, F.	E-WOM and accommodation: An analysis of the factors that influence travellers' adoption of information from online reviews	*Journal of Travel Research*	2014	601	60.10
Guo, Y., Barnes, S.J. and Jia, Q.	Mining meaning from online ratings and reviews: Tourist satisfaction analysis using latent Dirichlet allocation	*Tourism Management*	2017	585	83.57
Serra Cantallops, A. and Salvi, F.	New consumer behavior: A review of research on eWOM and hotels	*International Journal of Hospitality Management*	2014	561	56.10
Xiang, Z., Du, Q., Ma, Y. and Fan, W.	A comparative analysis of major online review platforms: Implications for social media analytics in hospitality and tourism	*Tourism Management*	2017	499	71.29
Filieri, R., Alguezaui, S. and McLeay, F.	Why do travellers trust TripAdvisor? Antecedents of trust towards consumer-generated media and its influence on recommendation adoption and word of mouth	*Tourism Management*	2015	499	55.44
Fang, B., Ye, Q., Kucukusta, D. and Law, R.	Analysis of the perceived value of online tourism reviews: Influence of readability and reviewer characteristics	*Tourism Management*	2016	415	51.88
Schuckert, M., Liu, X. and Law, R.	Hospitality and tourism online reviews: Recent trends and future directions	*Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*	2015	401	44.56

Source: authors.

Journal of Hospitality Management, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* and *Current Issues in Tourism*. Thereafter, authors like Li, H., Liang, S., Liu, Y. and Zhang, X. have also researched other v-WOM platforms like online review forums, online travel booking websites, and travel bloggers and vloggers to understand the impact of online reviews and ratings.

Most prominent documents

It is crucial to identify the most prominent documents in the v-WOM literature, much like the most prominent authors. In the field of v-WOM research, highly cited publications are regarded as more notable, indicating the effect and significance of an article. The top 10 citation scores in the Scopus database are shown in Table 3. The paper by Ert et al. (2016), published in *Tourism Management* has received 874, making it the most cited in v-WOM which suggests that the availability of photographs may have a significant impact on visitors' decision-making. In addition, the work by (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014) shows that social media is becoming a more significant component of tourism practices that impact travel destinations and enterprises, focusing on how social media platforms for tourists are being adopted in technologically sophisticated markets with high ICT usage rates. Qualitative aspects of reviews were identified as the most influential factors that make travel reviews useful, according to the study by Liu and Park (2015) and the implications of these findings contribute to tourism and hospitality marketers to develop more effective social media marketing. This document is followed by Filieri and McLeay (2014), and Guo et al. (2017), which have been cited 601 and 585 times, respectively.

Most prominent countries

Table 4 provides a list of the most prominent nations that contributed to the v-WOM sector as a country's research-focused activities influence its growth and development to some extent. China is ranked first among the top 10 nations, followed by the USA, UK, Spain, Australia and Hong Kong whose documents have been cited a combined total of more than 1000 times. Authors from China have 3,500 citations made to 132 publications, amounting to an average of 26.52 citations per article. If we examine the production of articles from 2013 to 2023, China had the highest frequency (0.184) and has also showed an increasing trend. In 2013, it only produced three publications of academic value, but by 2023, that number had risen to 451. China is the only country having 63 single publications (SCP), the most of any nation. China, the United States and the United Kingdom were the top three contributors, accounting for 59.01 percent of all articles. According to citations, Israel has the highest citations per article (C/A), with 461.50, followed by Denmark with 331.50 and the United Kingdom with 63.88. The articles from Israel, Denmark and the United Kingdom have more citations per article than those from other countries, indicating a greater influence.

Most prominent journals

Table 5 reveals the most productive journals with the highest number of articles published in the v-WOM field along with their citation counts. The journal *Tourism Management* topped the list, followed by the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* that have each

Table 4. Prominent countries

Country name	*N*	TC	Average AC	NSP	SCP	MCP	Frequency (%)	MCP ratio
China	132	3500	26.52	451	63	69	0.184	0.523
USA	65	2778	42.74	254	43	22	0.091	0.338
United Kingdom	42	2683	63.88	135	21	21	0.058	0.500
Spain	49	1875	38.27	175	42	7	0.068	0.143
Australia	24	1186	49.42	82	16	8	0.033	0.333
Hong Kong	19	1045	55.00	–	5	14	0.026	0.737
Israel	2	923	461.50	5	2	0	0.003	0.000
Portugal	32	776	24.25	110	26	6	0.045	0.188
Denmark	2	663	331.50	6	1	1	0.003	0.500
Korea	38	659	17.34	111	25	13	0.053	0.342

Note: *N* – number of publications produced by each nation, TC – total citations of each nation's papers, AC – article citations, NSP – number of scientific productions, SCP – single country publications, MCP – multiple country publications.
Source: authors.

Table 5. Prominent journals

Source	Publication year	TC	*N*	*h*-index	*g*-index	*m*-index	CS	SJR	SNIP	IF	*Q*-score
Tourism Management	2013	8171	62	39	62	3.545	19.8	3.561	3.643	12.879	1
International Journal of Hospitality Management	2014	2381	35	21	35	2.100	18.0	2.928	2.694	10.427	1
Journal of Travel Research	2014	1298	20	15	20	1.500	16.0	3.249	3.062	8.933	1
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	2015	1269	31	21	31	2.333	14.6	2.500	2.074	9.231	1
Annals of Tourism Research	2015	1144	13	9	13	1.000	17.0	3.426	2.742	9.010	1
Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing	2013	1043	14	12	14	1.091	11.5	2.126	2.134	8.178	1
Current Issues in Tourism	2015	778	25	15	25	1.667	13.6	2.062	2.547	7.578	1
Sustainability (Switzerland)	2017	726	52	16	25	2.286	5.7	0.664	1.198	3.900	1
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	2013	456	21	9	21	0.818	6.8	1.460	1.414	5.576	1
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	2014	90	11	6	9	0.600	7.4	0.981	1.303	5.470	1

Note: TC – total citations, *N* – number of publications, CS – cite score, SJR – SCImago Journal Rank, SNIP – Source Normalized Impact per Paper, IF – impact factor, *Q*-score – quartile score.
Source: authors.

been cited more than 1200 times. *Tourism Management* has contributed 62 articles on the subject and has been cited 8,171 times globally from 2013 when it first began to publish articles. The *h*-index of the journal reveals that it has published at least 39 papers, each of which has received at least 39 citations and its *g*-index reveals that a total of 62 articles have been cited at least 3,844 times. The impact factor (IF), at greater than 12, is also excellent. The SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), which is 3.561, is the highest of all journals and its Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP) is 3.643, which is also the highest. The most cited paper in this journal is "Trust and reputation in the sharing economy: The role of personal photos on Airbnb" by Ert, Fleischer and Magen (2016), which is also one of the most highly prominent papers in the v-WOM domain. The top five journals, as presented in Table 5 have published around 22.4% of total publications on Scopus.

3.3. Science mapping analysis (co-citation, co-author, co-occurrence analysis and bibliographic coupling)

Co-citation analysis of authors

Figure 4 displays the network of prominent authors' co-citations. Each author's article has received a certain number of citations, represented by the size of the bubbles while the co-citations between two authors are also represented by the strength of the lines that connect two bubbles (Leung et al., 2017). The cluster with which the article is associated is indicated by the bubble color. Analyzing all 38,416 article citations is all but impossible and to select the most prominent works, McCain (1990) advises using a cut-off. A minimum of 50 citations for an author is required to meet qualification standards here and 241 authors have met the criteria. Four clusters are shown in Figure 4: red, green, blue and yellow. The literature on v-WOM has been used to categorize them.

The first cluster (red) with 72 items, named "Technology-mediated communication and tourism", joined authors who have published on the role of social media marketing, digital marketing and v-WOM in the hospital, travel, tourism and leisure industries. This cluster includes prominent studies like the one by Gretzel and Yoo (2008) who has focused on consumer generated content (online travel reviews) and its impact on travel-related decisions. Furthermore, Buhalis (2020) has focused on e-tourism and analyzed the applications of information and communication technology in the travel and tourism industry. Accordingly, the development of blogs and other social media platforms facilitates the interaction of all users for travel decisions. Lastly, this cluster also includes work published on the role of v-WOM in online consumer behavior and accepting v-WOM communication on social media.

The second cluster (green) with 66 items, named "Smart tourism", suggests joining authors who have exclusively researched on the strategic implications of information technologies. The authors of this cluster

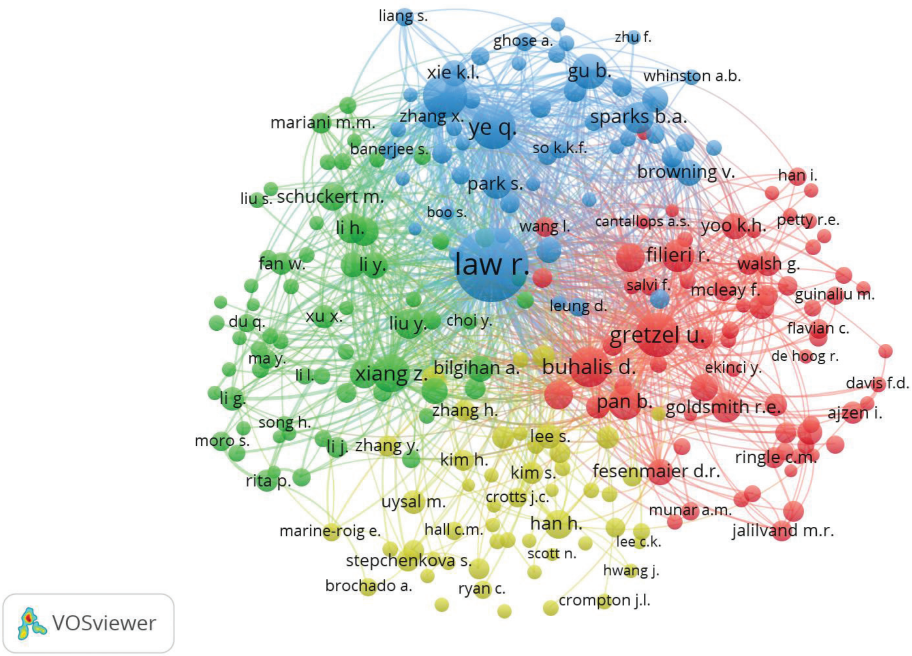

Figure 4. Co-citation analysis of authors
Source: authors

have focused on the role of market intelligence, artificial intelligence, hotel reviews and ratings, and user-generated content in tourism design and consumer travel decision making. This cluster has additionally focused on mar-keting issues involved in tourism, hospitality and service industries.

The third cluster (blue) with 52 items, named "Tourism review dilemma", has recommended joining authors who contribute to learn about the impact of positive and negative online reviews on travel decision making, tourists' satisfaction and virtual destination image.

The last cluster (yellow) with 51 items, named "Multidisciplinary tourism and trustworthiness", has focused on analyzing the role of online reviews and v-WOM communication in building trustworthiness in the hospitality and tourism industry specifically in sustainable tourism and wine tourism.

Co-author analysis of countries

In Figure 5, it can be seen that 30 countries have formed seven clusters, visualized with different colors on the map based on citations. It should be emphasized that the visualized link between any item pair on the map created with VOSviewer demonstrates the correlation or the proximity between the items. The strength of each link is identified with a positive numerical value. The higher the value, the stronger the link (van Eck & Waltman, 2022). The analysis of Figure 5 demonstrates that China ranked first with 6,406 citations in the relevant field of research and was connected to 22 countries with a total link strength of 141. China and the USA have the strongest connection with a link strength of 37. The USA, in second place with 4,978 citations, is linked to 20 countries with a total link strength of 104, while the UK has the second strongest link with China, a link strength of 15. The UK ranked third in highest total link strength (59), with 5,483 citations in total, and had citation links with 18 countries. According to 2022 data, these three countries were among the top 10 countries in research and development spending (Bowman, 2022).

Co-occurrence analysis of keywords

An author keyword co-occurrence cluster was produced using VOSviewer software. A co-occurrence analysis was carried out on 70 keywords that were chosen from 2119, where the minimum number of occurrences of a keyword was six, as depicted in Figure 6.

It can be seen that the research theme of v-WOM in the tourism industry has roughly formed eight clusters in the above figure. Out of the eight, the clusters having more than 10 items were analyzed as follows:

1. Cluster 1 (red): Virtual word of mouth-AI synergy (automated content analysis)
   This cluster with 16 items gathered publications with keywords focusing on online reviews, big data, data mining, machine learning, big data analytics, text mining and text analytics.
2. Cluster 2 (green): Influence of v-WOM on tourism perceptions
   This cluster includes 14 items that show the impact of v-WOM on various variables like destination image, revisit intention, tourist satisfaction, consumer

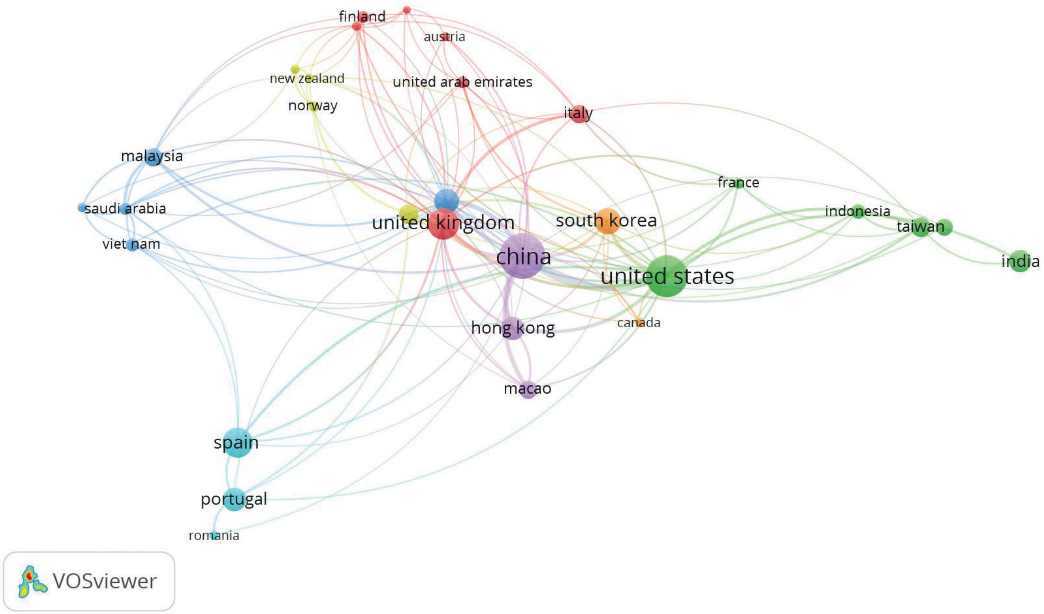

Figure 5. Co-author analysis of countries
Source: authors

behavior and consumer experiences. Consumers often turn to v-WOM to find unbiased and trustworthy information about products and services, which they may not find in marketer-generated information. This shows that v-WOM has become a pervasive and influential force in the digital age, affecting how individuals make decisions and engage with products and services.

3. Cluster 3 (blue): Exploring trust and decision making in v-WOM (theoretical insights)

This cluster comprises 14 items and it mainly includes publications focusing on theories such as the elaboration likelihood model and the information adoption model for identifying the role of online reviews on traveller decision making. Cluster 3 also, centers its attention on trust as a mediating variable. Trust plays a vital role in the influence of v-WOM as consumers are more likely to adopt information and recommendations from sources they trust. Understanding the mediating variable

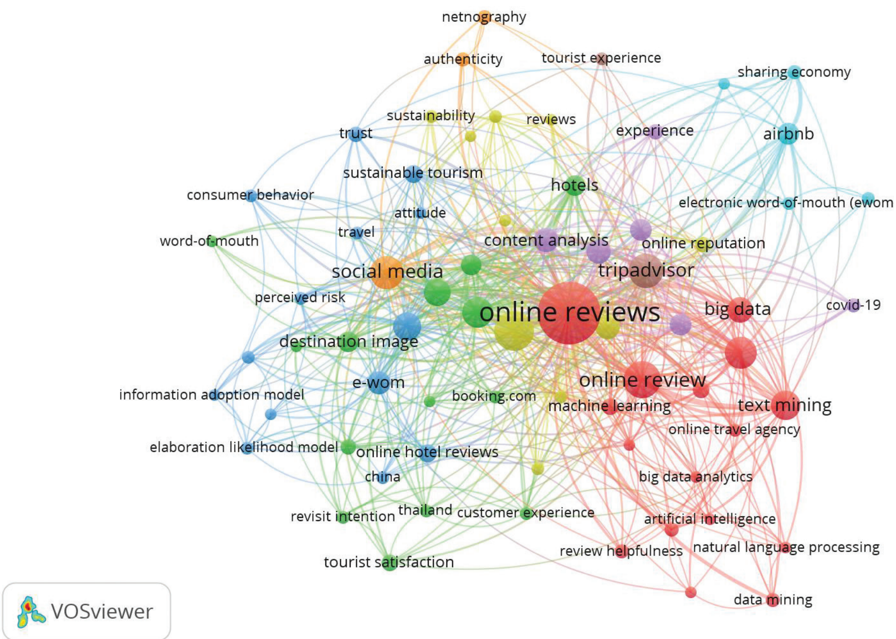

Figure 6. Keywords co-occurrence analysis
Source: authors

and theoretical insights can help the researchers in exploring the dynamics of online reviews and their impact on consumer behaviour.

Bibliographic coupling of documents

To determine the subjects at the forefront of v-WOM research, bibliographic coupling was employed. Four main research fronts were discovered by using bibliographic coupling on articles from the years in which the number of publications were at a maximum (2019–2021), and which match the aforementioned keyword clusters as mentioned in Figure 7. For instance, cluster 1 (v-WOM-AI synergy: automated content analysis) and research front 1 (niche tourism: online platforms and v-WOM) are intimately related. In a similar vein, cluster 2 (influence of v-WOM on tourism perceptions) and research front 2 (cognitive components of v-WOM) are intimately related.

Research front 1 (red): Niche tourism (online platforms and v-WOM)

In this cluster, authors have explored various dimensions and dilemmas faced by the tourism industry and the role of online platforms in disseminating information and shaping perceptions about various forms of niche tourism, including sustainable, halal and medical. Authors such as Boğan and Sarıışık (2019), Junaidi (2020) and Rasul (2019) discuss the trends, opportunities and challenges within the halal-friendly tourism sector, which can be shared and discussed on v-WOM platforms like social media and travel forums. Similarly, studies by Cronjé and du Plessis (2020), and Yoopetch and Nimsai (2019) mapping sustainable tourism development and measuring tourism destination competitiveness can spark conversations on v-WOM channels informing travellers about sustainable practices and destination options. Overall, v-WOM serves as a conduit for sharing insights, experiences and recommendations related to niche tourism markets, contributing to their visibility and growth.

Research front 2 (blue): Cognitive components of v-WOM

This cluster of papers focuses on researching how online traveller reviews affect purchasing decisions. The author has concentrated on issues linked to the cognitive components of word of mouth in publications on this research front. The articles are all examined from the perspective of the consumer. By conducting a sentiment analysis of online feedback reviews, tourist's revisiting behavior is analyzed by Park et al. (2020). By comparing the utilitarian and hedonic values, Ham et al. (2019) studied the subjective perception patterns of online reviews while Li and Liang (2020) explored the importance of marketer-generated content and fake online reviews in travel-decision making. Virtual word of mouth may affect a consumer in different ways, thus the cognitive components of this phenomenon are a crucial topic of investigation.

Research front 3 (purple): Virtual word of mouth in sustainable tourism

The integration of sustainability principles into the tourism industry has attracted significant attention in recent research and v-WOM plays a crucial role in disseminating information about sustainable tourism practices and initiatives. Through v-WOM channels such as social media, online reviews and travel blogs, tourists can share their experiences, recommendations and concerns regarding sustainability efforts within the

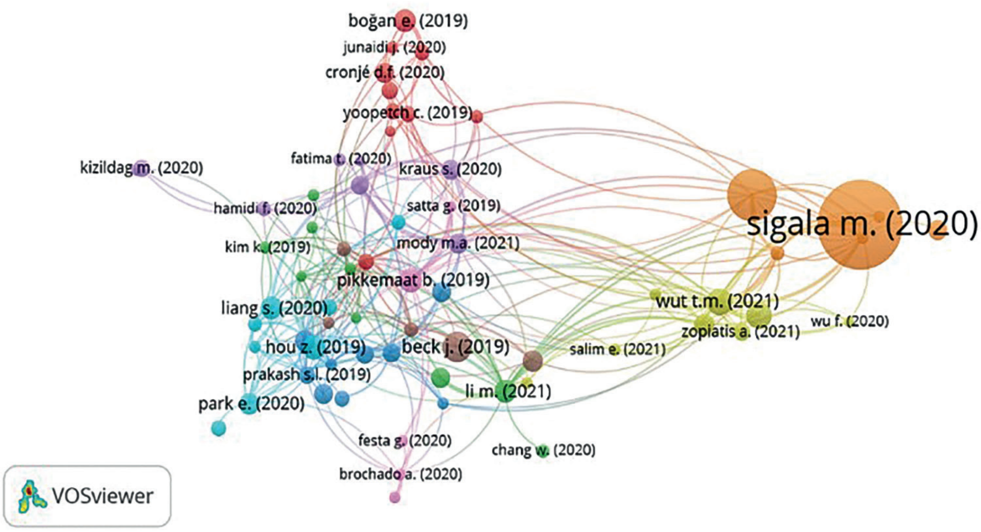

Figure 7. Bibliographic coupling of documents
Source: authors

industry. Blockchain has the potential to support the growth of sustainable tourism by improving the local economy, managing the food supply chain and reducing food waste, ensuring visitor satisfaction, influencing visitors' sustainable behavior and addressing awareness issues, according to the investigation by Erceg et al. (2020). Kraus et al. (2020) and Mody et al. (2021) shed light on how the sharing economy not only drives social and economic progress but also facilitates the sustainable development of the travel sector, leading to cost reductions and mitigating adverse environmental and societal impacts. This digital dialogue not only amplifies awareness but also influences consumer behavior, encouraging more responsible and sustainable travel choices.

Research front 4 (orange): The role of v-WOM in managing ethical issues in tourism

This cluster includes articles that discussed the role of v-WOM in managing the ethical issues related to tourism. Virtual word of mouth platforms such as social media, online forums and review websites provide a widespread platform for individuals to discuss and amplify ethical concerns within the tourism industry. Issues such as financial leakage, environmental concerns, deceptive advertising, unethical customer behavior and workplace ethics (Hua, 2020) and animal ethics in tourism (Prakash et al., 2019; Winter, 2020) gained significant visibility through v-WOM. Since tourism is known to increase jobs, the economy and everyone's learning curve, it is crucial to increase awareness of the problems that local communities worldwide face so that future advances can be sustainable (Jiang, 2023).

3.4. Emerging research trends

Even though this study gathers all the v-WOM research from the preceding 10 years, further research is still needed because there are countless other avenues for future study that researchers might take. Finding new and exciting research areas in v-WOM in the tourism industry is the goal of our fifth research question (RQ_5). To promote more work in this area, a word cloud was created that concentrated on current publications published in last four years in the fields of tourism and v-WOM (2019–2023). The word cloud was generated by selecting author keywords as shown in Figure 8 which provides insight into the main topics and research trends of the v-WOM domain.

Tourism innovation is seen as a multi-level phenomenon. From the perspective of the travel industry, v-WOM communication offers a wide range of opportunities for travel agencies like TripAdvisor, Airbnb etc. by enabling them to objectively portray travel-related goods and services with fewer costs and frequently with larger effects on sales and competition. These travel agencies can use sentiment analysis to analyze those of online reviews and comments about tourist destinations. Sentiment analysis classify these as positive, negative or neutral. These aggregated figures can provide an overall sentiment score for each listing which helps users quickly assess the quality and popularity of a place. Thus, using sentiment analysis technique by travel booking websites will help the users in making informed decisions about destination image and also will be helpful in providing valuable insights for a business. Further, along with sentiment analysis, the researcher can use a content analysis approach for analyzing and categorizing the sentiments expressed in online reviews and comments in various forms of communication like text, audio, video etc. The tourist industry is multi-disciplinary, thus theories and frameworks such as the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the technology acceptance model (TAM), looking into the social and psychological elements of v-WOM, can also be applied. These theories can be deeply understood by a content analysis approach. Virtual word of mouth can also serve as a rich source of unstructured text data that can be subjected to text mining, big data analysis and machine learning to extract valuable insights about consumer sentiments, product performance, brand reputation and market trends. The findings of the study also open the scope for future studies on the impact of v-WOM on consumer behavior and customer satisfaction.

Figure 8. Visual depiction of the last four years' (2019–2023) textual data using a word cloud
Source: authors

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. Discussion

The emergence and growth of the Internet has paved the way for a massive transformation in the patterns of communication between people as well as the way companies carry out their business activities. With the emergence of the Internet, v-WOM has become an important factor affecting consumers' product evaluation, especially in a multidisciplinary field such as tourism. This study offers a thorough overview of the numerous literature related both to v-WOM, and to v-WOM in the tourism industry, and presents a current and comprehensive summary of high-quality research on the v-WOM domain. The authors examine five research questions using a bibliometric approach to provide an overall retrospective of v-WOM.

RQ_1 is related to publication trends and citation structures. By 2018, v-WOM had accumulated 50 publications up from the 16 publications up to 2013, and showed moderate growth. Then, there was a sudden rise from 2018 with the total number rising from 50 in 2018 to reach 124 by 2022, and showed high growth. Along with the number of publications, citations had also increased from 1,351 in 2013 to 3,688 by 2017, reflecting the impact of v-WOM research. There was a sudden fall in total citations from 2017–2018, but from 2018 again the total has risen, also the number of authors increased from 31 in 2013 to 308 by 2023. These figures thus show an impressive growth in the number of publications, authors and total citations.

RQ_2 discusses prominent authors, documents, countries and journals in the v-WOM domain. The answer to this question was given through the use of R Studio. Law was found to have been the most prominent author in the v-WOM domain, with 30 articles and 2030 total citations. The document by Ert et al. (2016) entitled "Trust and reputation in the sharing economy: the role of personal photos in Airbnb" published in *Tourism Management* in 2016 has received 874 total citations and is the top document in the v-WOM domain. Most v-WOM research has been conducted by authors affiliated from China and the USA and the country analysis reflects that most v-WOM research has been done in developed countries, so there is a lot of scope for future research in emerging economies. *Tourism Management* has published 62 publications on Scopus and has 8,171 total citations topping the journal list.

RQ_3 aimed to demonstrate the co-citation analysis of authors, co-author analysis of countries and co-occurrence analysis of keywords, conducted through VOSviewer. Co-citation analysis of authors suggests the formation of four main clusters: technology-mediated communication and tourism, smart tourism, tourism review dilemma and multidisciplinary tourism and trustworthiness. Co-author analysis of countries demonstrated that China ranked first with 6,406 citations in the relevant field of research and was connected to 22 countries with a total link strength of 141. The highest link strength was between China and the USA (37), followed by the UK (15). Co-occurrence analysis of 70 author keywords suggests the formation of eight clusters and three have more than 10 items in each cluster: synergizing v-WOM and artificial intelligence; v-WOM's influence: impact on key variables; and unlocking v-WOM (online reviews): mediators and theoretical insights.

RQ_4's focus was to discover how research within v-WOM has shifted over time, based on the bibliographic coupling of documents. The cluster analysis conducted through bibliographic coupling reveals four major research themes:
- current trends in tourism;
- online travel reviews and consumer decision-making;
- sustainability in tourism;
- ethical issues in tourism.

These themes also suggest finding emerging research trends based on bibliometric data, which is RQ_5. This is answered through word cloud analysis in which tourism innovation, v-WOM with sentiment analysis and content analysis are all at the emerging stage and they open scope for future studies. Also, text mining, big data analysis and machine learning are at developing stage and these can make v-WOM data more structured.

4.2. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research offers a comprehensive overview of v-WOM research within the tourism industry, examining its growth, impact, prominent contributors, key themes and emerging trends. The findings underscore the increasing relevance of v-WOM in shaping consumer behavior and decision-making processes in the digital age. As technology continues to advance and consumer preferences evolve, v-WOM research will remain a vital area of study, offering valuable insights for businesses, policymakers and researchers alike. By addressing emerging research trends and exploring innovative methodologies, future studies can further enrich our understanding of v-WOM dynamics and its implications for the tourism industry.

4.3. Limitations

This work, like many, has inherent limitations. First, while choosing keywords, the research theme is the only consideration. Researchers may get different results if they use various search queries because the data extraction process was carried out using certain keywords. Secondly, Scopus served as the research data source. If the data are taken from various databases, the work's conclusions could be different. For the bibliometric study of articles on v-WOM, future researchers might make use of different datasets. Furthermore, a more thorough bibliometric study can be conducted on each of the distinct v-WOM dimensions. Thirdly, the data extraction process included many filters, resulting in the inclusion of research publications published only in English. Conference papers, books and other review articles were not included in this analysis. Fourthly, the themes in the current study have been identified through the use of co-citation, co-occurrence, co-author analysis and bibliographic coupling; however, bibliometric analysis can yield quantitative insights as well. Therefore, there can be bias in the definition and labelling of the clusters the study found. Lastly, more research, especially systematic in-depth literature reviews, sentiment analysis and content analysis, could improve this evaluation and produce more insightful results.

4.4. Future research directions

In light of the comprehensive overview provided in the article, the future research direction lies in delving deeper into the nuanced intersections between virtual word-of-mouth dynamics and the evolving landscape of tourism. Moving forward, studies could explore the integration of emerging technologies like virtual reality and artificial intelligence in shaping v-WOM practices and their impact on tourist decision-making processes. Additionally, there is a need for cross-cultural analyses to understand how v-WOM varies across different regions and cultures, as well as investigations into the role of specific social media platforms in shaping v-WOM dynamics within the tourism sector. Furthermore, researchers could focus on developing standardized metrics for measuring the effectiveness of v-WOM strategies, exploring ethical considerations surrounding v-WOM practices, and investigating the potential of v-WOM in promoting sustainable tourism practices and crisis management within the industry. By exploring new avenues such as the integration of emerging technologies, cross-cultural analyses and ethical considerations, researchers can offer valuable insights for businesses, policymakers and scholars. This ongoing exploration will not only enrich the comprehension of v-WOM but also inform strategies for destination marketing, management and sustainability efforts in the tourism industry.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.12 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

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2024, *34*(2)

The significance of the digitalization and online communication tools used by five-star restaurants in Bulgaria

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How to cite (APA style): Stankova, M., & Kaleychev, S. (2024). The significance of the digitalization and online communication tools used by five-star restaurants in Bulgaria. *Turyzm/Tourism, 34*(2), 171–180. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.12

ABSTRACT

The changes undergone by the tourism industry in the past four years have dramatically affected its way of doing business and communicating with customers. A trend in this process is the penetration of digital technologies and their use as a communication channel and tool of influence. A new way of interacting with tourists has arisen, accompanied by adaptive and innovative business strategies. Bearing in mind these structural and functional changes, the present study aims to analyse one of their aspects, namely the significance of the usage of various online communication tools in the restaurant sector in Bulgaria. The assumption that the interactivity of restaurant websites helps to increase interest and attract visitors, thereby stimulating development, is investigated.

The study focuses on five-star restaurant websites and outlines specific insights and challenges related to digital experiences. Through the use of qualitative and quantitative methods, new knowledge is generated for the digitalization of the high-end restaurant sector in Bulgaria and its importance to business success. The results are indicative of the need to rethink the development policies of these restaurants, especially as regards the follow-up and integration of new approaches to operating.

KEYWORDS

tourism, digitalization, restaurant business, online communication tools

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
13 March 2024
Accepted:
25 September 2024
Published:
28 November 2024

1. Introduction

The last 50 years have seen great economic progress, significant welfare improvements and technological advancement worldwide. Revealing these changes, all sectors of social and economic life have been affected by the digitalization process. Its manifestations are indisputably significant and have an increasingly relevant meaning, giving a fundamental character to the change it has caused. The fact is that digital technologies have completely reshaped ways of life, communication, business and social relationships. As a result of the inherent evolutionary development and, to a large extent, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry is completely transforming its communications approach to real and potential consumers. It has moved into digital space and is considering the challenge of being intriguing to quite different consumers. New communities are emerging, especially in the online reality which is becoming more and more fascinating and sets the direction for decision making in everyday life (Gugueva, 2012). In this new reality, atypical forms of communication have emerged, including in the tourism industry. In this different market environment, all the businesses in the industry are faced with the need to transform themselves and their familiar strategies into new and innovative models for interacting with consumers.

In view of these transformation trends, the present study points to an analysis of the penetration of digital technologies into the restaurant business in Bulgaria. The focus is on the current state of online communication tools especially in high-end establishments: five-star restaurants. The choice made is justified in the context of changes and the vulnerability of the tourism industry of Bulgaria where the series of crises in recent years has significantly affected the tourism sector and rearranged the goals of many market players. The process was also affected by the COVID pandemic, as a result of which many of the smaller and 1-, 2- and 3-star establishments closed or remained understaffed. However, new market niches have been created, with new preferences and expectations, in which, evident from the specifics of the Bulgarian situation, digitalization has created challenges for the restaurant business as a whole. Regarding this, based on a precise review of the data available online, it is found that, in fact in Bulgaria on a national level, the greatest information is available for high-category restaurant establishments. By region, mostly in urban areas of course, online information is also available for smaller establishments. This regional "fragmentation" is also the reason why the current study focuses on a total of 59 five-star restaurants, visible on a national level. Their websites have been studied in detail for the presence of different digital tools in order to define the extent of their usage and the number; names, type and location of the restaurants have been extracted from the Bulgarian *National tourist register* (Ministerstvo na Turizma, n.d.). The study, in fact, aims to prove the assumption that websites with a high degree of interactivity can increase interest and attract visitors. Additionally, it presumes that the interactivity of restaurant websites helps to create specific digital experiences that form positive associations in the minds of customers, thereby stimulating development.

Current research is a continuation of previous work (Stankova & Kaleychev, 2023), for the purpose of which the authors, based on published books, reviews and analyses, identify a set of nine tools that digitize information and content intended for tourism users. Kotler et al.'s (2017) publication is used as the main reference introducing the so-called "customer's new path" of digital experience and the following instruments are considered: chatbot, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), reservation application, inspiring story video, link for quick access to social networks, customer reviews, online location, virtual guide to the area and online blog. They are all thought of as main contact points on the customers' path to digitalizing their experience with the restaurants. The methodological assurance of the research relies on quantitative and qualitative analysis. With expectations to reveal the picture of digital confidence in the communication tools of high-end restaurants in Bulgaria, data has been extracted from the web. Together with other collected, summarized and analyzed knowledge, and based on expert analysis, they serve as a guideline for unveiling the direction of challenges and opportunities that can be expected within the sector strategic development.

2. Specifics of the digital tools studied

Undoubtedly, in the modern way of doing business, the restaurant industry is strongly influenced by digital technologies. Their inevitable implementation in practice transforms traditional business strategies operating effectively before, looking for opportunities to achieve a new competitive advantage associated with development that is thought of as sustainable. In this transformed reality, digital technologies and tools turn out to be essential components of the modern restaurant business. Logically, an assumption arises that the use of digitalization and related tools, facilitates and personalizes communication with potential customers and, in fact, positively affects the business performance of restaurants.

Following this direction of thought and expectation, the active websites of five-star restaurants in Bulgaria have been established, checked and researched, targeted with respect to the above set of digital tools.

Instruments such as those listed are characterized by electronic, and especially by computerized technologies (Steils & Hanine, 2019), and are actually defined as "programs, websites, applications and other Internet and computerized resources" (WalkMe, 2023, para. 1). It is well known that they "facilitate, enhance and execute digital processes and overall digitalisation efforts" (WalkMe, 2023, para. 1), which is why they are important for businesses that have set themselves up for transformation under the influence of digital trends, such as those in tourism. Examining the variety of opportunities, in many cases the attention of managers is directed towards the so-called "Big Five": digital tools owned by GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) (WalkMe, 2023, para. 13).

Of course, the choice of a digital toolkit is of key importance and should be made in view of the goals pursued by the business. In the case of restaurants in Bulgaria in particular, one with an effect on both consumers and business was sought, which is why attention is directed to the following list:

1. Chatbot: depicting software or a computer program that simulates conversation using text or voice interaction usually over the Internet (Oxford University Press, n.d.). In most cases, it is an interested customer who seeks quick answers to questions which guide a decision, including on the occasion of consumption of certain goods and services.

   In recent years, mainly as a result of the strong computerization of business activities, business to customers (B2C) or business to business (B2B) interaction occurs frequently using chatbots in simple communication. In tourism, in restaurants chatbots are traditionally used to contribute to the higher efficiency of the sites, as well as to improve the quality of customer service (Stefanowicz, 2024). At the same time, chatbots enable the reduction of personnel costs as well as providing 24/7 service.

   Depending on their degree of complexity, chatbots are capable of holding a conversation of varying degrees of complexity in accordance with some basic characteristics of the needs of the users. While, according to the settings, they can monitor the behaviour and previous purchases of a given user, and on this basis offer answers and new buying suggestions.

   This undeniably interesting digital tool, as observations show, is able to present a menu, make reservations and take orders, answer frequently-asked questions, track order status, provide feedback, etc. In addition to the site of the restaurant, the chatbot can also be integrated into a messaging platform, according to the specifics of the location. And, in addition, it stimulates sales and satisfaction with the services offered, as well as effectively developing organizational policy for communication with potential customers. As many visitors expect restaurants to be reachable 24 hours a day, chatbots can be perceived as a response to their changing needs and growing expectations due to the ability to largely replace live contact.

2. Virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR)

a) Virtual reality: by definition is a type of technology that allows users to perform actions in a digital environment, while generating feelings and sensations largely resembling real physical surroundings. Usually, this artificial environment created by computer technology, induces experience through sensory stimuli (such as views and sounds) provided by a digital device in 3D. As according to Beal (2024, para. 3) "the user feels as if they were in the real world – they experience and manipulate the environment perceived by devices known as headphones or a virtual reality helmet" (Iberdrola, n.d., para. 1). According to Bardi (2024), the most recognizable component of virtual reality is the head-mounted display (HMD), "technology that allows a user to carry out actions in a simulated three-dimensional (3D) digital environment yet feel as if they are immersed in a physical environment" (Beal, 2024, para. 1).

b) Augmented reality: could be explained as "an enhanced version of the real world, achieved through the use of computer-generated digital information including visual, sound and other sensory elements" (Hayes, 2024, para. 1). Therefore, it is assumed that the added reality involves superimposing sensory information to improve the user experience. Its practical application is reflected in "image glazing, digital information and/or 3D models, adding real-time directions, inserting notations, changing colours and changing the appearance of the user or his environment through filters on Instagram, Snapchat and other applications" (Houston, 2020, para. 4). As Taco Bell did, for example, using AR in their 2020 campaign, integrating visuals within Instagram that allowed people to include their face directly in the middle of the dishes, becoming one with the taco or just being a taco (Taco Bell [@tacobell], n.d.).

   This type of technology makes it possible to improve the quality of the user experience, inducing an improvement of the quality of service and efficiency for the restaurants. In general, since VR contributes the simulation of different frames of mind and enhances customer experience, while boosting sales through the tactical approach of becoming a trend. However, VR together with AR are also tools to gamify the experience for the customers, as well as to embolden staff performance and loyalty. Virtual reality or augmented reality assist personnel in providing detailed information about the menu, the ingredients of dishes, possible allergens etc. Virtual reality or augmented reality technology can be used as well in training employees in an interactive way.

3. Reservation applications (booking engines): used in the restaurant industry to help streamline operations by allowing the automation of tasks such as online reservations, email and chat responses, customer notifications and reservation reminders. By itself, having a proper booking engine can go a long way in incentivizing consumers to spend more. Through this digital tool on the website, restaurants facilitate customers in organizing their dinner or event in a way matching their individual preferences. On the other hand, it is an important channel especially for customers to book and pay safely for the individual stages of their experience. The app also allows employee offloading: it can replace a real person or

save time taking inquiries via email or phone bookings; thus generating more free time for direct communication with the guests. Therefore using the digital reservation application improves business efficiency for restaurants and provides benefits for customers.

Such a digital booking system allows the collection of large data sets and helps management to be informed in real time about basic business parameters such as financial income and expenses, therefore it is perceived as a reference point for company planning and market positioning. Through the reservation app, restaurants could connect various social platforms, for example, Facebook, allows tourists to book with a similar hyperlink to the restaurant sites. Especially when traveling, it is particularly important for visitors (for a destination) to be informed in real time about dining options, availability and prices, as well as to make a reservation (SiteMinder, 2024).

4. Video of an inspiring story: according to Brenner (2023) using a story to connect the brand with customers, is one of the most popular marketing approaches and which is used in the modern restaurant industry too. Its main advantage is the initiation of an emotional connection with other people through co-experience. This effect serves as a basis for promotion as it retains the attention of real and potential web users. Expert team at TrainingAid.org in the article, *Destination storytelling to effectively promote local stories and engaging travel experiences* (2022), point out that an inspiring story is a

> means of conveying and interpreting experiences in a way that engages those you are sharing the story with. The sharing of experiences is most effectively done through characters – people with unique individual perspectives. And memorable stories have a plot that enriches the experience by illustrating such components as challenges, conflict and change (TrainingAid, 2022, para. 4).

At the same time, using an inspiring story video for a restaurant, creates a key competitive advantage, as it is associated with "stories of the local communities and their cultural traditions, stories told by expert local guides, and stories about the travellers themselves that become part of the travel experience" (TrainingAid, 2022, para. 2).

5. A link for quick access to social networks: as they are key tools for digital marketing and impact on real and potential tourists; traditionally, almost every website consists of a link for quick access to social networks. It could be used for different purposes, although in general it allows users to be informed about the restaurant, as well as encouraging them to share their experiences after a visit. As a result, they build trust based on real reviews and opinions.

Usually, the restaurant sector is presented on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. Arun and Antony (2018), ascertain that Facebook is "the most popular among them with 1.55 billion users a month and more than 450 million users a day; 42% of them publish more travel-related content, than on any other topic" (p. 206). Of course, Instagram is no less significant as an impact factor and this impact is primarily on communication between business and consumers. Instagram attracts users by turning them into followers and is mostly used by young people in their 20s, who form a very active group. "You should follow the travel hashtags and create your own to maximize the popularity of your posts" (Tas, n.d., para. 14). Twitter, on the other hand, "numbers almost 320 million users, 32% of whom were born at the beginning of the century, and is another channel for selling with 37% of … users … buying from the brand that follows" (Arun & Antony, 2018, p. 206). However, in Twitter, the users can share information about travel and promotions, as well can initiate short but clear communication.

Social networks transform ways of building preference and loyalty. Tik Tok, for example, promotes the service in a fun way: "For the tourism industry, the era of brochures and billboards is over. The key to business success is the collection of social sharing, positive user reviews and customer satisfaction on social media" (Tas, n.d., para. 18). Therefore, the links for quick access to social networks on the websites of restaurants can be used to create unforgettable digital experiences, transforming and complementing the satisfaction of the customer's stay.

6. Customer reviews: found on various websites or social networks have a significant impact on the perceptions, preferences and actions of consumers.

Dharel (2020) considers customer reviews as "healthy discussions made on various platforms that influence and motivate someone's perception of an organization, brand or event" (p. 12). They also affect so-called "independent reservations" for restaurants, organized and operated entirely online. Traditionally, "Good reviews work as advertisements and encourage other users to buy this service or product. Negative reviews give them a chance to correct" (Schuckert et al., 2015, p. 3).

For the restaurant sector, consumer opinion is of particular importance for business effectiveness. Seemingly from a study cited by Dixon "In the United States, 62% of respondents stated that online customer reviews were very helpful" (Dixon, 2024, para. 2), as "people doubt everything they hear, all of what they read, and most of what they see" (Pinvidic, 2019, para. 6). Therefore, restaurants should be proactive in order to maintain customer satisfaction and encourage the sharing of positive reviews online.

7. Online location: is one of the most important digital tools used as a guide to finding a restaurant.

   It is usually an integral part of the functionality of each site. Access to an exact online location can have an extremely positive or negative effect on the way customers will perceive the restaurant, for example. According to *Location tracking: The key to unlocking your audience's needs in marketing* (YOOSE, 2024, para. 1) "it has become an increasingly popular tool. By using location data, businesses can gain valuable insights into their customers' behavior and preferences". Also

   > Whether it is a map application like Google Maps or a navigation app like Waze, most people have likely used location tracking technology in some form or another. As this technology continues to evolve, businesses are finding new ways to use location data to better understand their customers (YOOSE, 2024, para. 1).

8. Virtual guide for the area: representing simulation of an existing location with the help of sequential videos or still images, as well as often integrating other multimedia elements like music, sound effects, floor plans, etc. (Webb, 2024). And, as Fredericks (2023, para. 5) adds "Viewers can access virtual tourism content using a virtual reality headset for the most immersive experience, but they can also usually view the content on a normal computer or even a mobile device".

   > While virtual experiences will never be a true replacement for real-life exploration, they have become a part of our daily lives, satisfying our need to travel in the short-term. As humans, we've adapted to a way of seeing the world virtually and I think it's a trend that will continue long term (Winderl, 2020, para. 9).

9. Online blog: defined as "a hybrid form of Internet communication, combining a column, an agenda and a directory, the term, also known as a «web diary», refers also to a frequently updated collection of short articles on various topics with links to additional resources" (Arimetrics, n.d., para. 1).

   "Blogs are characterized by hypertextual-based navigation, with an abundance of multimedia content, the active participation of users (who can create profiles, evaluate records or create knowledge) and has a character, generally closer than that of other websites. Blogs publish articles categorized by date and categorize topics using tags" (Arimetrics, n.d., para. 2).

   In tourism, when communicating to potential or real customers, the blog as a tool is highly preferred, mainly used in order to provide users with interesting facts, news and useful information, which in most cases are not entirely related to the specific activity. Also, the online blog is functionally suited to users who want to share their own experiences by posting in multimedia format. Thus, online blogs help to disseminate information in the case of restaurants, presenting them, their location and surroundings, and their offers.

Being strongly influenced or even dependent on digital technologies, restaurants nowadays enjoy novelties. Therefore, all the digital tools described here have their role in shaping the future of a business, its effectiveness and communication success with customers, and influencing their satisfaction as well as their activity. Considering the very nature of innovation and the capabilities of digital tools, it seems to be of great importance that restaurants use them actively and purposefully to present their characteristics and competitive advantages.

3. Methodology

For the purposes of this study, a mixed-method approach is used (Verhoeven, 2022) integrating observation, synthesis, expert techniques, web-based processes and comparison. Regarding the identified set of digital tools, data are collected and analysed applying the web mining method (Ivanov, 2016; Singh, 2024). The interview method is also applied and aimed at professionals working in the restaurant sector. The time frame of the research was the beginning of 2024 and was constructed in two stages: first extracting information directly from web documents and services, and web content using the technique of the 'decision tree' to gain insight into digitalization trends in the restaurant sector; and second following a web survey – systematizing a questionnaire and conducting interviews with marketing managers of five-star restaurants regarding the importance and usage of different digital tools in this sector in Bulgaria.

From a constructive point of view, the analysis is aimed at electronic media, namely the websites of the five-star restaurants in Bulgaria. However, in order to identify them, official information on the state of the restaurant sector in Bulgaria had been previously studied through that available on the websites of the Ministry of Tourism and the National Tourism Register (Ministerstvo na Turizma, n.d.).

The information on the websites of 59 existing five-star restaurants was analyzed in relation to the presented nine digital tools. Based on this information, the formal characteristics were compiled according to basic parameters, namely: volume of information, capacity of information, physical size, informativeness, etc. The following tools are used in the restaurants:

- VR/AR – Admiral, Braziers, Salini, Grand Primorets, Ambassador, Anelle;

– digital reservation app – Admiral, Kasa Boyana, Este, Anelle;
– video of inspiring story – Salini;
– social network link – Admiral, Salini, Monty, Kasa Boyana, The Revolutionary, Regency Club, Este, Anelle;
– customer review – Este, The White Lagoon;
– online location – Admiral, Salini, Monty, Kasa Boyana, Este, The White Lagoon;
– online blog – Este.

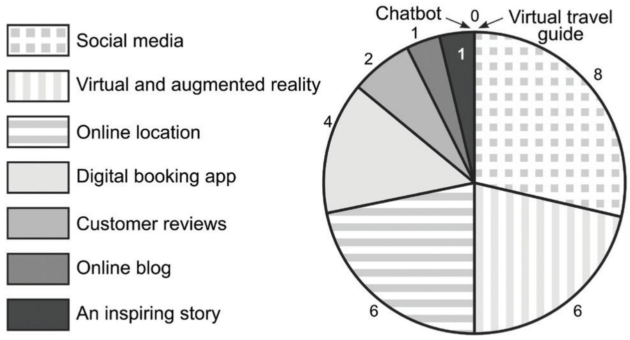

Figure 1. Number of digital tools available on five-star restaurant websites
Source: authors

4. Research design

For the selection of each of the 59 five-star restaurants, the National Tourism Register was referred to. The scope of the study is oriented according to the principle of information sufficiency and the availability of certain digital tools in the website for each of the investigated establishments.

Apparently from the collected data, on the basis of a total of 59 five-star restaurants, only on the websites of twelve of them is the presence of at least one of all nine digital tools detected. Their number is largest on the Este Restaurant's website (situated in the city of Sofia), where five digital tools are present. This restaurant definitely stands out against the backdrop of the high-end sector in the country, focusing its overall marketing policy and brand management on customer preferences and requirements, following current trends in digitalization. The second position is shared by two establishments: Admiral (Sveti Vlas) and Salini (Bourgas), whose websites operate four tools each. Casa Boyana and Anel (Sofia) offer three while Monti (Varna) and Byala Laguna (Kavarna) have no more than two. Thus, referring to the processed information, it can be seen that in most restaurants in Bulgaria, even in the high-end of the sector, no more than one digital mode of communicating with users is found on their sites.

In detail, the observations thus made are presented in Figure 1 and of all 59 restaurants covered by the study, none uses chatbot as a communication device. VR and AR are present on the websites of six and, in fact, is the second most widespread digital tool. A booking engine is available on the websites of four of the studied restaurants while a video of an inspiring story is only found on one.

It is noteworthy that the most preferred tool among the identified nine in the studied restaurants is the link for quick access to social networks which can be found on eight of the websites. Online location has a strong presence too and occurs on the websites of six. However the findings show that the customer review tool occurs only on two of the websites, and the online blog, is found on only one. The virtual guide is not used at all.

The reviewed five-star restaurants in Bulgaria are distinguished by their location. With this in mind, as well as in order to specify the degree of digitalization by location, the 59 restaurants are territorially identified as presented at Figure 2.

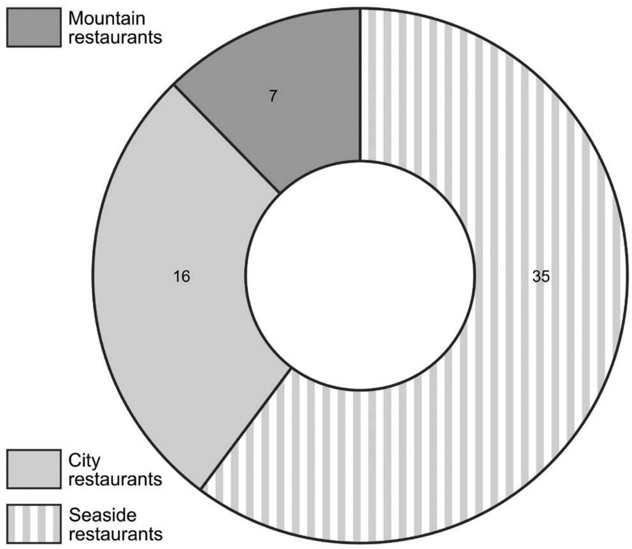

Figure 2. Number of restaurants studied in groups
Source: authors

The differentiation of these groups makes it possible to depict certain trends regarding digitalization in the high-end restaurant sector in Bulgaria, following the specifics of position, specialization and market orientation. Based on their location, the investigated 59 restaurants are divided into three typical areas – the seaside, the mountains (especially Rila and Pirin) and in the biggest urban centres.

The systematization of the information leads to the impression that, in general, the use of digital tools in this type of restaurant is not particularly widespread. Out of all 59, only twelve have opted for digitalization. However, in an attempt to describe the situation with the idea of identifying a trend, the following clarification should be made: out of a total of 16 high-end restaurants located in an urban environment, seven use digital tools for communication with consumers; out of a total of 35 five-star seaside restaurants, only five have digital tools for communication on their websites; of the seven mountain restaurants, none uses similar digital means of contacting consumers (Figure 3).

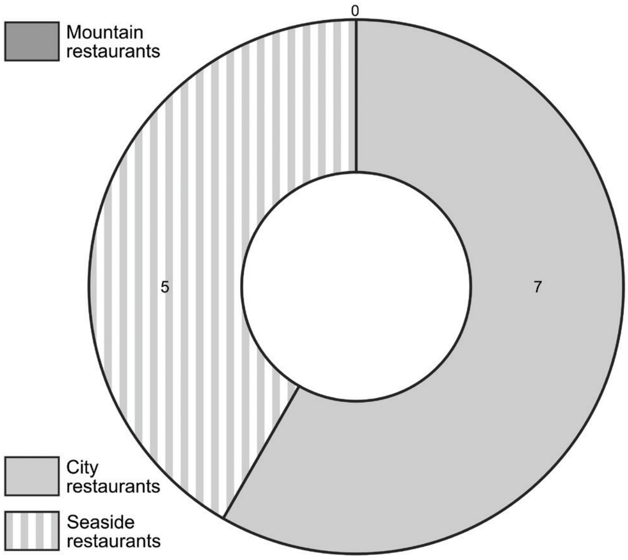

Figure 3. Number of restaurants by group providing digital tools on their websites
Source: authors

Apparently, the collected information reveals that in 92.92% of the high-end restaurants in Bulgaria digitalization does not make a trend and they do not have or use any digital tools. The analysis also shows that at least one digital tool can be found in only 7.08% of the explored websites (Figure 4).

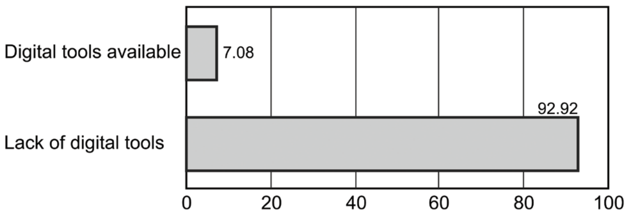

Figure 4. Percentage ratio between available and missing digital tools on the websites of five-star restaurants in Bulgaria
Source: authors

In order to complete the profile of the research, an additional aspect of the attitudes of representatives of five-star restaurants is presented. In the period March–April 2024, an interview was conducted among marketing managers from the sector, within the framework of a short questionnaire previously agreed with them. The leading idea was to present the attitude and expectations of the respondents regarding the usage of digital tools and their influence on the contemporary restaurant sector.

The approach conforms to a set of standard rules bearing in mind that as a type is usually used when it is necessary to study the opinion of experts with a high level of awareness on a topic or in a separate narrow field of knowledge (Haralampiev & Marchev, 2017). The requirement for the neutrality of the interviewer who does, however, register the answers in a text file, is also respected. All or almost all questions, are "open" (Chengelova, 2016, p. 31), allowing the respondents to answer freely in as much detail as possible. As a result, the structured questionnaire consists of five questions, as follows:

Question 1: Do you think that digital tools on the websites of five-star restaurants can have an impact on the preferences of their potential customers?

Question 2: Do you think it is important for the restaurant's website to provide digital experiences?

Question 3: Do you think that the nine digital tools presented in this study can be defined as sufficient for the optimal and effective presentation of a certain website in the digital space?

Question 4: From the presented nine digital tools on the websites of five-star restaurants, which do you think is the most important for the success of the organization?

Question 5: Is it possible for the digital experiences on the websites of five-star restaurants to be defined as the future of the restaurant industry in Bulgaria?

Unfortunately, in the course of the research, only three interviews were actually conducted. Three marketing managers responded to the questionnaire, and the following answers were given to question 1:

> Yes, for sure, as they change the way you communicate with potential customers, turning it into a new kind of additional experience (Manager 1).

> Of course. The past global pandemic accelerated their entry into the business, building a completely new way of communication and interaction between restaurants and their customers (Manager 2).

> Yes of course, my practice shows that it is digital tools that become a real competitive advantage in crisis conditions (Manager 3).

The following answers were given to question 2:

> It is important, because modern reality has determined the need for new and fascinating experiences that will attract customers to the offered products (Manager 1).

> It is important, because digitalisation determined the emergence of new and unknown experiences, which formed a long-lasting interest in the products offered in the restaurant industry (Manager 2).

> It is important, because during the global pandemic of COVID-19, it was digitalization that allowed the creation of new experiences that would attract and stimulate customers to visit five-star restaurants (Manager 3).

The respondents answered question 3 as follows:

> Yes, I think you have suggested an effective combination of digital tools (Manager 1).

> I think your selection of digital tools shows the current trends in the restaurant business (Manager 2).

> The digital tools you have selected fully match my understanding of the digital experiences that businesses can currently offer (Manager 3).

The following answers were received for question 4:

> Booking engine (Manager 1).

> Virtual and augmented reality (Manager 2).

> Video of an inspiring story (Manager 3).

The following answers were given to the final question, question 5:

> Yes, it is possible, as modern customers are constantly looking for new experiences in the highly competitive restaurant business (Manager 1).

> Yes, it is possible, as more and more foreign tourists visit our country, which motivates restaurants to implement the latest digital technologies. Which, in turn, determines the future of the restaurant industry in Bulgaria (Manager 2).

> Yes, it is possible, as digitalisation could present services and products in a completely new way, which enables customers, regardless of where they are in the world, to form within themselves a motivation to visit a specific restaurant. The effective presentation of the advantages of Bulgarian restaurants will shape their future development (Manager 3).

As can be seen from the above answers, in high-end restaurants in Bulgaria, there is an interest in various digital tools used for informing and communicating with consumers. Of course, the fact that only three managers responded to the request for an interview is disconcerting, especially since they are the ones who could mark the direction of development in the sector. This is also a serious limitation to the research, because on the one hand, technical issues and digitalization are gaining more and more importance, and on the other hand, the sector is clearly not ready to talk about this. Nevertheless, based on the results of the sector study, findings and recommendations can be made, which we present below.

4.1. Findings

At five-star restaurants in Bulgaria, a limited presence and corresponding application of digital tools is registered. The managers of these tourist enterprises understand the importance of digitalisation, but do not orient their marketing policy on the advantages of using digital technologies. The scope of the present study includes nine digital tools, searched for on the websites of high-end restaurants in Bulgaria, but discoverable in only 7% of them. This percentage is extremely low and worrisome, as it raises the question of how successful communication is. At the same time, there is also the feeling that it is possible that in five-star restaurants the personal recommendation of customers is of greater importance – a specific aspect that requires further investigation from the point of view of the sensitivity of the type of customers in question.

With the not so high level of digitalization in the five-star restaurant sector in Bulgaria, the focus point should be on the need to refine communication strategies. The issue facing the restaurant business is largely related to the characteristics of the customers, which differ according to the type of restaurant. On the basis of personal observations, as well as in the course of conversations with marketing managers, it was found that the main customers of city five-star restaurants are local with a medium to high social profile. Bulgarian customers are also present in seaside and mountain restaurants, but the share of foreign guests there is also significant. Unfortunately, no officially presented information in this regard can be found, just as there are no studies on the extent and significance of digitalisation in the restaurant sector in Bulgaria. Some of the available publications (Angelov & Savova, 2023) primarily present general trends without focusing on specifics. At the same time, it is particularly important since the digital tools discussed have a serious potential to influence users by provoking and promoting their interest. Such a dynamic trend should be exploited by restaurants in Bulgaria for all categories, as it is directly related to the economic indicators of the business.

4.2. Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has largely changed the ways in which customers reach the information they need respecting the contemporary restaurant business. Many restaurants in Bulgaria underwent an instant digital transformation to ensure their functioning, starting by adapting menus and home delivery, thus completely changing the way they communicate with customers. A large number have also taken advantage of the convenience of food-delivery platforms, through which they become easily discoverable to consumers and get a ready-made online ordering system and a team to handle the deliveries (Subscribe, 2021). However, it is often observed that their representation in digital space is insufficient, relying above all on the assistance of intermediaries. In an attempt to illustrate the ongoing processes in Bulgaria, during research on the high-end restaurant sector, problems were identified for which different solutions are needed. In this regard, the following recommendations can be made to the specifics of Bulgaria as a tourist destination and its five-star restaurants:

– to develop and maintain their own interactive websites, paying attention to the set of digital tools that they should integrate so as to ensure effective communications with customers;
– to consider the connection between the effects of using digital tools and branding, in the direction of achieving a key market advantage and a means of positioning in the minds of consumers;
– to consider the stimulating effect for consumers that digital experiences have and develop it through websites so as to provoke interest and desire to consume, but also lasting attachment and loyalty to the brand.

5. Conclusions

Against the background of complex and dynamic processes in the world of economics and politics, the tourism industry is undergoing changes. Some of which are tied to digitalization which stimulates the development of innovation, improves the economic performance of organizations and accomplishes globalization. The significance of the usage of various online communication tools in the restaurant sector in Bulgaria is important, and to be explored in terms of successful market and branding positioning, so these issues are of interest to researchers and practitioners. In the particular case of five-star restaurants, digitalization has not been sufficiently studied, therefore, the present study is an attempt at a research analysis of the available information to outline the picture in the sector. In the result, it confirms the fact that digitalization is a key factor, determining change for the contemporary restaurant sector. Changing ways of life, demands and expectations of consumers for faster, and full, access to information should be a model for the transformation of five-star restaurants. The observed process of digitalisation in Bulgaria is happening rapidly, is ubiquitous and poses challenges, revealing at the same time new business opportunities and unprecedented digital experiences that should set new priorities for Bulgaria's restaurant business. The development of the processes, as well as their research, is forthcoming, however, it can definitively be stated that they will not deviate from international trends.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.13

e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E
Member since 2019
JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies: A qualitative content analysis on the alternative destination image of Malaysian Borneo among Chinese outbound tourists

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How to cite (APA style): Zhang, K., Kler, B.K., & Wong, S.F. (2024). Sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies: A qualitative content analysis on the alternative destination image of Malaysian Borneo among Chinese outbound tourists. *Turyzm/Tourism*, *34*(2), 181–192. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.13

Abstract

The purpose of this work is to explore the online destination image perceived by Chinese tourists visiting Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Employing Leiper's tourism system as a guiding framework, the research utilized qualitative content analysis (QCA) to scrutinize a purposefully selected sample of thirty-seven Douyin contents, which is known outside China as TikTok. Findings indicate an alternative destination image, with Chinese tourists highlighting sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies as prominent attributes, deviating from the conventional association of sun, sea and sand. This distinctive perception contrasts with the perceptions held by Western tourists of Sabah. Informed by Leiper's tourism system, this study emphasizes the importance for coastal destination marketing organizations to convey a destination image that extends beyond the conventional sun-sea-sand concept. Effective communication requires a nuanced understanding of unique destination images tailored to specific market segments based on their respective tourist generating regions. This approach aligns with Leiper's emphasis on the interconnected relationships between the tourist generating region and the tourist destination region, providing insights for strategic destination marketing that cater to diverse tourist perspectives. The findings interpret user-generated content (UGC) within Leiper's tourism system, consolidating the importance of projected online destination images.

Keywords

Leiper's tourism system, online destination image, qualitative content analysis, QCA, China, Douyin

Article information details

Received:
1 February 2024
Accepted:
28 June 2024
Published:
28 November 2024

1. Introduction

The significance of image in marketing in order to distinguish a destination is emphasized due to intense rivalry among tourist destinations (Kislali et al., 2016). Tourist decision-making process, destination selection and level of satisfaction with visits are significantly impacted by their subjective perceptions of a destination (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2020; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The literature provides evidence to support the notion that a distinct or exceptional destination image has a positive impact on tourists' motivation and intention to travel there (Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018). Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have implemented diverse strategies to enhance the competitive advantage of their destination. A key approach involves the cultivation of an appealing destination image, which aims to shape the perceptions of potential tourists and ultimately influence their choice of destination (Ji & Wall, 2015). Destination marketing organizations possess an in-depth comprehension of the images derived from destination attributes that effectively meet the anticipations of prospective tourists, thereby exerting a positive influence on tourists' motivations (Pike, 2009; Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018). However, DMOs are no longer the only source of projected images and destination attributes. The rise of user-generated content (UGC) where tourists rely on social media for consumption choices has overtaken DMOs (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015). As suggested by Wengel et al. (2022), such informal UGC 'campaigns' allow destinations to gain excessive attention or 'self-branding' which could leave DMOs ill-prepared for the influx of visitors seeking alternative attributes.

Coastal destinations have always been promoted as sites for leisure and recreation through the use of the traditional images of sun, sea and sand, known as the 3S model, which laid the groundwork for mass tourism in the Caribbean in the 1960s and Europe in the 1980s (Cameron & Gatewood, 2008; Mendoza-González et al., 2018). Over time, many coastal DMOs have either retained the same 3Ss or expanded them to 4S (sex) or even 7S (safari, surfing, skiing and sky-viewing) in order to disseminate appealing destination images to their target markets (Cameron & Gatewood, 2008; Mendoza-González et al., 2018; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014; Stupart & Shipley, 2013; Xu et al., 2018). The purpose was straightforward: to enrich the contents of a destination's image attributes and eventually to improve their competitiveness. For the region of Sabah, located in northern Malaysian Borneo, the DMO, Sabah Tourism Board (STB), strategically promotes an image of a tropical destination emphasizing the key attributes of nature: picturesque landscapes, flora and fauna, pristine beaches, islands; adventure – scuba diving, jungle trekking; and culture with over 35 indigenous groups (Kler & Wong, 2018). Although a popular nature and adventure destination, few studies have explored the perceptions of domestic and international tourists towards the destination image of Sabah in Malaysia (Kani et al., 2017; Kler & Wong, 2018; Mat Som et al., 2012; Zain et al., 2015). In contrast to Western tourists who tend to perceive Sabah primarily as a destination for marine, nature and cultural experiences, Chinese tourists, who constitute the largest group in Sabah based on arrival statistics (Sabah Tourism Board, n.d.), may have a different perception of this destination due to their distinct cultural background in terms of motivation, behavioral patterns and perceptions (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2018; Fawzi et al., 2018; Li & Lu, 2016; McCartney, 2008). However, there is a limited body of work that examines the perception of Chinese tourists, as the largest source market, on Sabah's destination image as a tourist destination. Since the portrayal of a tourist destination plays a crucial role in attracting a larger number of potential tourists, this impacts the sustained expansion of the destination within the mass tourism sector. However, the utilization of standard attributes across several target markets may hinder the efficacy of marketing efforts due to the presence of diverse cultural backgrounds. There is a need to identify the online destination image (ODI) as portrayed by UGC and, in the context for Sabah, to understand the attributes projected by Chinese tourists in relation to the DMOs. Therefore, the following research questions are raised:

RQ_1: What ODI of Sabah do Chinese tourists share during or after their visits?

RQ_2: What are the dominant attributes of Sabah's ODI as perceived by Chinese tourists?

This exploratory study contributes to understanding ODI based on the cultural background of the tourist generating region (TGR) (Leiper, 1979). The literature section presents four overviews: the 3S model, tourist destination image and the influence of culture on destination image, the role of user-generated content in shaping destination image, and a brief critique of Leiper's tourism system for destination image. This is followed by findings, discussion, conclusions and limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. 3S tourism model

As the distinctive tourism resource in tropical regions, 3S has been utilized by the majority of coastal tourist destinations in the Caribbean islands since the 1960s, as these 3S attributes provide an appealing environment differing from an individual's daily life (Stupart & Shipley, 2013). The 3S tourism model is representative of mass tourism and the influx of inbound tourists, relying on appealing themes for attraction (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014), particularly from TGR that do not have similar attractions (Leiper, 1979). Tourist destinations, particularly those in coastal areas, have promoted their tourism sector by emphasizing the 3S imagery (Mendoza-González et al., 2018; Stupart & Shipley, 2013). Nevertheless, the rise of niche tourism has meant the 3S model no longer remains as the focal point for tourists. Contemporary tourists are seeking experiences that go beyond the traditional 3S, so diminishing the allure of these elements (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014). Pike (2009) observes that in the era of UGC, the exclusive emphasis of coastal destination marketers on conventional destination characteristics, such as the traditional 3S, poses challenges in discerning any exceptional traits of a specific location. Therefore, it is imperative for tourism destinations that possess tourism resources related to 3S to actively seek out new and innovative tourism attractions, services, facilities and images to avoid stagnation. This requires a collective endeavor to go beyond the limitations of the 3S and explore other options (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2015; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014), grounded in the cultural background of the TGR.

2.2. Tourist destination image (TDI) and the influence of culture

Potential tourists make travel decisions based on destination images divisible into cognitive, affective and conative properties of thought, emotion and action that are used to assess attributes, evoke sentiments and motivate visits (Baloglu et al., 2014; Kislali et al., 2016). Understanding these three elements of a destination image is crucial for developing an efficient marketing and promotion plan for the destination (Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018). In the context of tourist destination marketing, two primary trajectories exist for the purpose of constructing a tourist destination image (TDI): the projected image and the perceived image (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). The projected image refers to the dissemination of ideas and perceptions about a particular destination, primarily through the efforts of DMOs or other entities within the tourist industry (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018) while perceived image holds significant influence in the tourists' decision-making process (Chen & Tsai, 2007). However, the concept of perceived image pertains to a cognitive framework that arises from the interplay between the projected image and an individual's personal attributes. This construct is primarily oriented towards tourists and is regarded as a motivating factor, commonly referred to as a push factor, that influences tourist behavior (Chan & Zhang, 2018; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The compound nature of TDI is perceived as comprising identifiable and quantifiable elements of a location linked to the reactions of tourists throughout their travels. Perceived TDI by tourists is considered to be the precursor of the projected image, as it plays a substantial role in shaping it (Chan & Zhang, 2018; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). The perception and selection of a tourist's ultimate destination are influenced by the combination of an accurate projected image and efficient marketing methods (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). Studies demonstrate the presence of disparities between the perceived image by tourists and the projected images conveyed by DMOs (Chan & Zhang, 2018; Ji & Wall, 2015; Mak, 2017; Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). Such incongruities inevitably lead to confusion among tourists regarding the portrayal of tourist destinations, thereby negatively affecting destination marketing efforts. Hence, the ability to recognize these discrepancies or disparities between anticipated visual representations and actual visual experiences empowers destination marketers to effectively adapt their strategic approaches in order to communicate precise messages to prospective tourists (Li et al., 2015). According to Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell (2018), there exists a positive correlation between the alignment of projected images and perceived images, and the effectiveness of a destination's positioning and promotional endeavors.

Destination image plays a pivotal role in shaping a destination's development trajectory and establishing its brand equity (Day & Kour, 2021). Essentially, it encapsulates the perceptions and impressions that individuals hold about a particular destination influenced by a myriad of factors such as marketing efforts, word-of-mouth recommendations, historical and cultural significance, and personal experiences (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2018). Moreover, TDI is not merely a passive construct but rather an active and dynamic asset that is cultivated and shaped by various stakeholders (Day & Kour, 2021) and based on their cultural worldview.

Studies have indicated that the formation of TDI is significantly influenced by a range of internal and external factors, including demographic, psychological and cultural factors (McCartney, 2008; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Culture is commonly seen as the amalgamation of an individual's knowledge, beliefs, values, habits, rituals and principles within a certain society (Fawzi et al., 2018). One notable feature of mass tourism is the influx of tourists with diverse cultural norms originating from various countries and regions to specific places (Wengel et al., 2022) resulting in varying interpretations of things and phenomena. Consequently, tourists from different cultural backgrounds are likely to possess distinct perspectives of the value to be attributed to a particular place (Fawzi et al., 2018). According to McCartney (2008), variations in geography and culture contribute to divergent perceptions of tourist destinations. Bonn et al. (2005) indicated the marketing communication approach for a destination should primarily rely on the image perceptions derived from the originating source. Chen and Tsai (2007) illustrated that tourists originating from diverse geographical regions and possessing distinct national cultures exhibit varying perceptions towards a shared destination. Studies assert that perceptions of a certain tourist destination are profoundly shaped by psychological variables, specifically cultural values, which exert a substantial influence on the formation of a destination's image (Fawzi et al., 2018; Kim & McKercher, 2011). For a nation engrossed in UGC, and comprising the largest outbound tourist market, there is a need to explore the types of destination images being projected by Chinese tourists through UGC.

2.3. User-generated content (UGC) and online destination image (ODI)

User-generated content (UGC) is often regarded as a digital manifestation of word-of-mouth (WOM) and refers to a collection of internet-based apps that fall under the category of Web 2.0. These applications facilitate user interaction, as well as the creation and sharing of information (Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015). Some notable examples of popular social media platforms are Douyin (China's TikTok), Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, TripAdvisor, Twitter and other blogs. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) refers to individuals' inclination to recommend a destination through verbal comments and visual resources to other internet users who are looking for relevant information (Hidalgo Alcázar et al., 2014; Lee & Tussyadiah, 2010; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). The proliferation of e-WOM has led to the perception of UGC as a credible and valuable resource for obtaining information. Travelers generally place more trust in personal travel experiences that are posted on blogs as compared to the information provided by DMOs (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016; No & Kim, 2015).

The advent of the Internet's quick advance has led to significant changes in the way travelers seek and disseminate information regarding tourism suppliers and destinations (Kim et al., 2018). User-generated content, as an outgrowth of this development, is an important evaluative source of secondary information that has a role in shaping the perception and image of a tourist destination (Hidalgo Alcázar et al., 2014; Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Li et al., 2015; Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011). Consequently, the influence of UGC on the development of TDI experiences is continuous (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2020; Li et al., 2015; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2016). Hidalgo Alcázar et al. (2014) assert that UGC plays a significant role in the transmission of information and has an impact on tourists' opinions of destinations. Moreover, UGC places significant emphasis on two main aspects pertaining to TDI. One is to explore the perceptions of different marketing segments towards various destinations. Another aspect to consider is the contrast between TDI created by UGC and that presented by different travel brokers, government sources and general media. The literal images and visual images offered by DMOs serve as a significant factor in enticing prospective tourists, and to influence tourists' perceptions about a particular destination (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011). Now however, there is competition from UGC which produces a separate ODI.

The significance of ODI in determining the success of a destination brand is linked to its effect on tourists' intentions to visit, as demonstrated by the effects of e-WOM and virtual experiences (Zhou, 2019). The term "ODI" is used to describe the online portrayal of a place, encompassing its collective thoughts, knowledge, sentiments, beliefs and overall impressions, as documented on the internet and social media (Mak, 2017). The utilization of online technologies, specifically social media platforms and the dissemination of e-WOM, has brought about significant changes in the tourism sector. Online platforms have the potential to impact tourists' inclinations to visit a particular destination (Litvin et al., 2008). The influence of UGC and e-WOM plays a significant role in shaping the ODI of a brand (Williams et al., 2017). This is particularly important because potential tourists often have limited familiarity with destinations they have not yet visited, and therefore rely heavily on the perceived image of a destination as portrayed through the information sources they consult to make informed decisions.

2.4. Leiper's tourism system and destination image

Leiper's tourism system (Leiper, 1979), serves as a comprehensive theoretical framework that explores the intricacies of the tourism process elucidating the interconnected relationships among three key components: TGR, transit route and tourist destination region (TDR). Tourist generating region represents the origin of tourists and its influence on motivations and behaviors. The transit route encompasses the journey from TGR to TDR, incorporating various stops and experiences. Tourist destination region, as the ultimate destination, includes attractions, accommodation and the overall tourism infrastructure. Leiper's tourism system offers a comprehensive viewpoint on the movements of tourists and the interconnected services that facilitate them, incorporating ideas such as tourist flow and the tourist industry. It is highly beneficial in the field of destination image as it aids in understanding tourist behavior, and facilitating tailored destination marketing strategies based on the preferences of diverse tourist markets. The system emphasizes the alignment of the projected destination image with the perceptions held by potential tourists, crucial for effective destination management. The system sheds light on the impact of cultural values from TGR on tourists' perceptions of specific places, offering a structured approach to studying cultural influences on TDI. Overall, this system serves as a versatile tool for researchers and practitioners, providing comprehensive insights into managing and enhancing TDI. However, few attempts have been made to link differences in TGR and TDR from an ODI perspective as proposed by this study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study setting

The study setting is Sabah situated in the northern region of Borneo. Sabah holds the distinction of being the second biggest state in Malaysia and is commonly referred to as the Land Below the Wind. Sabah is renowned for its key tourism resources, namely its rich marine biodiversity, abundant wildlife resources and distinctive cultural heritage. These remarkable attributes have consistently captivated a vast number of international tourists, drawing millions to explore the region. In 2018, the number international tourists arriving from China was 593,623 (Sabah Tourism Board, n.d.) via scheduled and chartered direct flights into Kota Kinabalu, the capital. On Ctrip, Sabah was chosen as a top ten destination for close to 6.5 million outbound Chinese tourists (Jaipragas, 2018).

3.2. Research method

This study employed an interpretivist inquiry methodology to explore Sabah's destination image as expressed by Chinese tourists on Douyin. The research design was led by a qualitative content analysis (QCA), a systematic approach for the encoding and interpretation of symbolic texts or pictures within the realm of communication (Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). This study collected a purposive sample of Douyin contents for the purpose of data analysis and interpretation.

Douyin is widely recognized as one of the most prevalent mobile applications in China; the rest of the world calls it TikTok. The application has garnered significant attention and engagement within the realm of Chinese internet culture. Users disseminate their emotions and perceptions of the world and articulate their individual perspectives on societal matters via this platform. Its short-form video format enables anyone with a mobile device to create, watch, and share short videos. The total number of Douyin users had surpassed 732 million at the end of 2023 (Lai, 2024) gaining recognition as a valuable platform for marketing promotion due to its robust sociability and wide reach. Consequently, it has garnered considerable attention from marketers in the tourism sector (Zhou, 2019).

The objective of this study was to identify Sabah's ODI through the perceptions of Chinese tourists. The researchers opted for purposive sampling as a method to deliberately select information-rich samples that align with specific research objectives (Palys, 2008). Furthermore, given the constraints of time, resources and personnel, as well as the extensive number of primary samples (exceeding 10,000 videos of Sabah on Douyin), the utilization of purposive sampling emerged as the most suitable approach (Palys, 2008).

3.3. Data collection

Data collection proceeds through keyword searches deemed relevant: 'Sabah', 'Sabah tourism', 'KK tourism', 'Kota Kinabalu', 'Yabi' (the Chinese name for Kota Kinabalu), 'sceneries of Sabah', 'Malaysia Sabah', 'Semporna' and 'Semporna Tourism'. Significantly, the utilization of keyword search yielded a substantial corpus of over 10,000 videos pertaining to the region of Sabah, spanning the temporal range from March 2018 to December 2021. The data gathering process was centered around the extraction of videos that met specific purposeful sample criteria as follows: (a) videos that received a minimum of 5000 'likes'; (b) videos posted by commercial influencers or vloggers excluded; (c) both textual comments and visual content of the videos must focus on tourism; and (d) nine specific keywords (mentioned above) guided the selection process. A total of 37 videos as shown in Table 1, together with their corresponding literal comments, were chosen for the purpose of QCA to identify and analyze the essential attributes of Sabah's ODI. In essence, once a video satisfied the established criteria, it was observed and pertinent information was recorded. In order to maintain precision, video comments underwent a consecutive translation procedure (Griffin & Dimanche, 2017). The researchers translated every chosen comment from Chinese to English and subsequently engaged another bilingual researcher, fluent in both English and Chinese, to review the translated content, a step taken to confirm the translations' accuracy. Once the assessment of the 37 videos no longer indicated novel insights nor categories, data collection was discontinued as it had reached the point of data saturation (Charmaz, 2006).

Table 1. The purposive sample of Douyin contents

No	Vlogger	Citation	Likes	Destination image attributes
1	静 byakuyai (Jing byakuyai)	One of the world's top three sunsets; are you aware of its location? It is beyond descriptionally gorgeous	1,617,000	Sunset
2	Diodes	Experiencing the most exquisite sunset from the preeminent hotel in Sabah	29,000	Sunset
3	Cecilia	The sunset of unparalleled beauty in Sabah	159,000	Sunset
4	金达慧馆 (Jin da hui guan)	Sabah's picturesque sunset galvanizes visitors from around the globe. It truly is magnificent	40,000	Sunset
5	无规则的鱼 (Wu gui ze de yu)	Musang King durian is glutinous and fragrant	538,000	Durian
6	萝 bird (Luo bird)	The mermaid island is in Sabah, Malaysia	76,000	Island
7	礼拜五 (Li bai wu)	Desire to never return home	58,100	Sunset
8	Diodes	Traveling downtown in order to savor seafood	277,000	Seafood
9	魔女柠檬 (Mo nv ning meng)	Sabah at sunset has a more stunning sunset glow	13,400	Sunset
10	罗玺纳商贸有限公司 (Luo xi na shang mao you xian gong si)	Awesome!	4,705,000	Semporna water resort
11	小小皮妈妈 (Xiao xiao pi ma ma)	The sunset that is most picturesque in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia	16,000	Sunset
12	Joan	The magnificent sunset over K.K.	224,000	Sunset
13	大英雄jk凌 (Da ying xiong jk ling)	Seafood at the night market in K.K. is available for a very low price	13,000	Seafood
14	Cynthia	This island is Mataking	561,000	Island
15	我想静静 (Wo xiang jing jing)	The video on Douyin entices me to pay a visit to Semporna. It is beneficial to spend the night in the water resort	2,084,000	Semporna water resort
16	专打妖魔鬼怪 (Zhuan da yao mo gui guai)	It takes me two hours to go to the top of the mountain to see the amazing view of Semporna	47,000	Mountain hiking
17	Qing 青 (Qing qing)	As a boy lacking nationality, he is unable to spend his entire existence on land	543,000	Sea gypsies
18	Venice	Super seafood is available at reasonable prices at the seafood night market in K.K., and tiger shrimp are enormous	7,000	Seafood
19	欧尼 (Ou ni)	Flying with Mama in K.K.	96,000	Parasailing
20	陈教授 (Chen jiao shou)	The ideal place to enjoy the world's most magnificent sunset	6,000	Sunset
21	悦己者2018 (Yue ji zhe 2018)	At last, the enigmatic floating boat comes into view. Living in the amazing water house is terrific	240,000	Sea gypsies
22	涵之图 (Han zhi tu)	In Semporna, I also noticed this child dozing off on the boat. I bought a coconut from his sibling for ten RM	164,000	Sea gypsies
23	缓特星-爱嘉 (Huan te xing – ai jia)	Malaysia Sabah, Land Below the Wind	22,000	Sunset

24	国服张飞 (Guo fu zhang fei)	With the exception of traffic signals, Sabah excels at every aspect	76,000	Seafood
26	是 dogogi 呀 (Shi dogogi ya)	The sound of 'wow' from a street vendor selling durian drew me in	18,000	Durian
27	小叮当老姨妈 (Xiao ding dang lao yi ma)	Sabah's Holy Mountain, Malaysia's most beautiful paradise	6,128	Mountain Kinabalu
28	叫做你的那个人 (Jiao zuo ni de na ge ren)	I live with the years before accompanying you to the light of day	10,000	Sunset
29	陈敏之 sharon chan (Chen min zhi sharon chan)	Steam train in KK, Sabah, Malaysia	17,000	Steam train
30	Xinerchok	Malaysia/ Fantastic sea view/ Sabah/ Semporna	5,402	Sea, sand, sun
31	虫虫长城队 (Chong chong chang cheng dui)	Take a glass of water from the sky! Doesn't that mean it's here?	13,000	Scuba diving
32	爱格妈 (Ai ge ma)	The sea gypsies in Semporna	20,000	Sea gypsies
33	盐城小猪猪 (Yan cheng xiao zhu zhu)	After seven days of traveling, diving, watching the sunset, eating seafood, curry and bakKutteh, and swinging on a firefly in Malaysia, I decided that the world was worth it	13,000	Mermaid island, sunset, seafood, snorkeling
34	路人甲生活记 (Lu ren jia sheng huo ji)	I took my parents abroad for the first time in 2019, and they stated it will be a trip they remember for years to come	200,000	Sea gypsies, KK cityscape, seafood, Gaya street, sunset, scuba diving
35	Hulu shiba	There is always the most breathtaking scenery on the journey. # Semporna Kapalai Water house	7,186	Semporna water resort, mangrove, proboscis monkey, firefly, sunset, Mount Kinabalu, Desa Dairy Farm, paragliding, skybus
36	幺幺那个幺幺 (Yao yao na ge yao yao)	The sixty-second video in which I declare my admiration for the beautiful Semporna	122,000	Pearl island, sea gypsies, snorkeling, sunset, seafood, fruits
37	珊珊大宝贝 (Shan shan da bao bei)	I'll return after my vacation is over	26,000	Island

Source: authors.

4. Data analysis and findings

4.1. Category development and data coding

In qualitative content analysis, the coding frame comprises a primary category and two subordinate categories (Schreier, 2014). The primary category encompasses a wide range of study, potentially incorporating supplementary information that can be further explored in a concept-driven manner. Subcategories pertain to the specific details within the material related to the main category, which can be generated through a data-driven approach (Schreier, 2014). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) suggest the coding frame can be informed by existing theory or research. In this study, coding categories were based on two sources. First, the TDI attributes of Borneo (Markwell, 2001) namely, nature, adventure and culture (NAC), were used as the coding frame to analyze the key attributes of Sabah's ODI. Secondly, Wong et al. (2017) identified eight subcategories for Borneo's TDI, which also informed the Douyin comments and videos. Data was subjected to iterative review and analysis until no novel concepts were discerned. Subsequently, the subcategories were interpreted and consolidated into overarching categories. Table 2 presents the definitions of the NAC coding frame utilized in this study.

Table 2. Coding frame categories, definitions and sub-categories

Main category	Definition	Subcategories
Nature	The inherent natural features of Sabah, including landscapes, flora and fauna	a) flora and fauna b) landscapes
Adventure	The tourism activities in Sabah, including exploration and experience	a) hard adventure b) soft adventure
Culture	The values, beliefs or manifestations of native people, including local arts, handicrafts, traditions, customs and cuisines and tribes	a) architecture b) cuisines c) tribes d) artificial attractions

Source: adapted from Wong et al. (2017).

4.2. Data analysis and findings

The nature, adventure and culture (NAC) coding frame includes the first category coded as "nature", referring to the intrinsic natural attributes of Sabah's destination image with two subcategories: 'flora and fauna', and 'landscape' based on the data-driven contents of texts and videos. The second category was coded as "adventure", with two subcategories: hard adventure, a tourism activity with high risk requiring high levels of professional skills; and, soft adventure, a tourism activity with low risk requiring a lower level of professional skills. The final category was "culture" referring to local people's values, beliefs and manifestations, as well as the intangible and tangible cultural attributes of Sabah. Architecture, cuisine, tribes and artificial attractions are within this category.

The perception of Sabah's ODI among Chinese tourists involved an analysis of the chosen Douyin contents and literal comments, followed by a comparison to provide a table outlining the predominant features associated with Sabah within each category, as defined by the NAC coding framework. Table 3 provides a summary of the code counts for the categories and their corresponding subcategories.

Table 3 presents perceptions derived from the tourists' personal trip experiences and judgments revealing the category of nature as the main theme. This category was further divided into two subcategories: flora and fauna, and landscapes. Of the several natural aspects of Sabah, the sunset held the utmost significance in shaping its image. Fifteen Douyin contents garnered a substantial number of likes showcasing Sabah as a popular tourist destination for its breathtaking sunset vistas.

Table 3. High-frequency attributes in Sabah's online destination image (ODI)

Main category	Subcategories	Attributes	Frequency
Nature	Flora and fauna	Proboscis monkey	1
		Firefly	1
		Mangrove forest	1
	Landscapes	Sunset	15
		Islands	5
		Sea, sand, sun	1
		Mount Kinabalu	2
		Desa Dairy Farm	1
	Total		27
Adventure	Hard adventure	Scuba diving	2
		Snorkeling	3
	Soft adventure	Parasailing	2
		Hiking	1
	Total		8
Culture	Architecture	KK cityscape	1
		Semporna water resort	3
	Cuisine	Seafood	7
		Special fruits	3
	Tribes	Sea gypsies	6
	Artificial attractions	Skybus	1
		Steam train	1
	Total		22

Source: authors.

Adventure can be defined as the result of the interaction between tourists and their surroundings. The findings illustrate four distinct attributes of tourism activity associated with the concept of "adventure" including snorkeling (3), scuba diving (2), parasailing (2) and mountain trekking (1). These at-tributes were not regarded as significant components of Sabah's destination image because just eight videos met the established criteria. Additionally, the quantity of 'likes' was significantly lower compared to other qualities. According to Kler and Wong (2018), Chinese tourists tend to consider Sabah as a leisurely tourist destination with lower levels of risk and time commitment, in contrast to Western tourists who predominantly associate Sabah with its reputation as a scuba diving paradise.

The categorization of Sabah's ODI for culture was condensed to six distinct attributes: Semporna water resort (3), seafood (7), sea gypsies (6), distinctive fruits (3), KK cityscape (1), skybus (1), and steam train (1). The portrayal of seafood and sea gypsies as the predominant qualities associated with Sabah's ODI was commonly observed within this particular category. The significance of partaking in local gastronomy has been widely recognized as one of the key incentives for tourists when selecting a destination. Findings revealed that Chinese tourists hold particularly favorable perception towards the seafood offerings in Sabah, mostly due to the affordable prices and diverse selection of fresh seafood available. Douyin contents have been utilized to depict the sea gypsy communities and water resorts situated in Semporna. Concurrently, the enigmatic tribes characterized by their nomadic and maritime lifestyle, along with their indigenous architectural structures, provided a remarkable encounter for Chinese tourists. Consequently, these distinctive attributes of Sabah's ODI were likely to be perceived in a favorable manner. Furthermore, it was apparent from the contents and accompanying comments that Chinese tourists were attracted to the 'Musang King' durian variety due to its esteemed reputation and popularity in China. The sales performances employed by the vendors also contributed to the tourists' perception of the fruit as an exotic and pleasurable experience.

5. Discussion

This study employed Leiper's tourism system as a lens to understand the dynamics of Sabah's perceived ODI through an analysis of 37 Douyin contents, particularly how the TGR and the TDR interact. The interaction occurs through the act of sharing UGC by tourists, bound by their cultural background, on a visit to a coastal destination. This study interprets the tourism system by adding UGC to explain how eWOM is shaped by tourists producing an alternative ODI. Figure 1 indicates that UGC assumes the pull factor at the TDR based on experiences that are shared on via Douyin contents. Even before tourists depart for home, both the transit region and TGR are exposed to an alternative ODI to the one projected by DMOs. This is the power of eWOM through UGC which this study proposes is worth further consideration. Three key findings are discussed next.

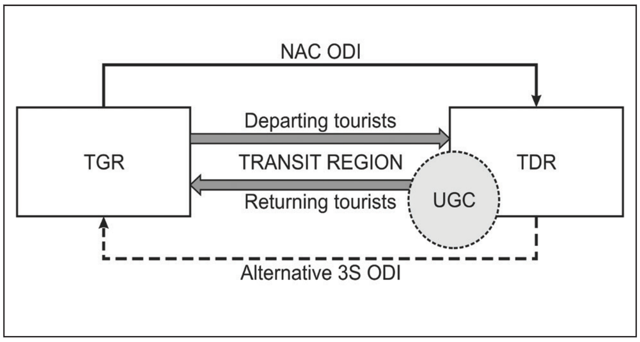

Figure 1. An interpretation of UGC-based ODI within Leiper's tourism system
Note: NAC – nature, adventure and culture, UGC – user-generated content, TGR – tourist generating region, TDR – tourist destination region, ODI – online destination image
Source: authors

First, Chinese tourists perceived Sabah's ODI as a tropical tourist destination that offers awe-inspiring beach sunsets. The following attribute focused on gustatory experiences of delectable seafood which is a cultural experience. However, the next cultural attraction was completely different to the projected image by DMOs featuring instead stateless sea gypsies. Notably, the sea gypsies are a contentious attribute as they are an unofficial addition to the tourism context in Sabah, a discussion which is beyond the scope of this article but worthy of future study as Douyin content is promoting these 'mysterious' peoples. Ultimately, the findings revealed a different perceived image among the Chinese which conforms to Leiper's notion on how cultural values influence TDI. These findings challenge the traditional 3S model by identifying an alternative 3S ODI shared by Chinese tourists indicating that they were influenced by the unique cultural context, shaping their preferences for participating in tourism activities they cannot experience at their TGR (Li & Lu, 2016). Influenced by Confucian philosophy and collectivism, they recognize the need for maintaining a balanced state of mind and emotional well-being, highlighting the importance of understanding the psychological aspects of the tourist experience (Kwek & Lee, 2010). In Sabah, this included gazing at, enjoying and photographing sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies. Hence, eWOM appeals to those seeking relaxation on holiday (Anantamongkolkul et al., 2017). This alternative 3S model provides more than just a picturesque view and unique cultural experience, it represents an indelible and distinctive holiday encounter for Chinese tourists, offering a departure from their routine environment. The marked difference potentially elevates tourists' sense of joy to a level that prompts them to share their experiences through Douyin contents. The distinction between the TGR and the TDR plays a pivotal role in shaping travel motivations. Understanding this interplay between the TGR and TDR through Leiper's lens allows for a deeper exploration of the emotional aspects influencing Chinese tourists' travel decisions. The alternative 3S model is in contrast to activities sought by Western tourists, who have a greater inclination towards scuba diving and wildlife observation (Wong et al., 2017; Zain et al., 2015). Leiper's tourism system highlights the dynamic interplay between the TGR and the TDR, emphasising the significance of viewing the tourism experience. In tourism marketing, it is important to ensure projected and perceived image are coherent as a way to increase brand equity for destinations as this will effectively attract tourists and enhance the effectiveness of marketing efforts.

User-generated content is acknowledged as a reliable source for shaping the perceptions of potential tourists regarding a destination (Hidalgo Alcázar et al., 2014; Wengel et al., 2022). Leveraging platforms like Douyin, where video content is widely shared, becomes a significant aspect of this dynamic. The vivid portrayal of Sabah's alternative 3S image on Douyin has the potential to significantly shape the perceptions of potential tourists in China, providing them with a virtual experience that goes beyond conventional marketing approaches. Visual stimuli can act as motivating factors in the tourist decision-making process for destination selection (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Kislali et al., 2016; Pike & Page, 2014). In essence, the sunsets portrayed on Douyin became a symbolic bridge in Leiper's tourism system, as well as the dominant attribute of Sabah's destination image perceived by Chinese tourists, connecting the motivations, and the ultimate decision to choose Sabah as their preferred tourist destination. This nuanced understanding is crucial for destination DMOs who aim to utilize the influence of social media in shaping the ODI and attracting a wider range of tourists.

Lastly, Leiper's tourism system framework offers valuable insights into the dynamics of any promotional strategy emphasizing the interconnected relationships among the TGR and the TDR. Findings indicated that Chinese tourists exhibited a greater inclination towards an alternative destination image of sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies compared to the expectations set by the official projected image. This discrepancy suggested that the DMOs promotional efforts may need to consider the specific preferences and motivations of the Chinese TGR. There is an opportunity for the STB to diversify its promotional approach beyond the traditional focus on 3S for coastal-based destinations. This strategic diversification aims to enhance the overall appeal of these destinations and stimulate their development while aligning with the preferences of the target tourist market. Consequently, the implementation of effective marketing and promotion methods becomes essential in navigating the complexities of a diverse tourism system (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018).

6. Conclusion and limitations

This study delved into the role of Douyin in shaping the destination image of Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. To answer RQ_1, the findings illuminated a distinct perception towards Sabah's ODI among Chinese tourists, setting them apart from the Western tourists. The emergence of the novel trio, coined as the alternative 3S (sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies) challenges the traditional 3S (sun-sea-sand) image typically associated with Sabah achieving RQ_2. This study makes a few propositions. First, Chinese tourists share a different ODI from Western tourists due to different cultural values. Secondly, Chinese tourists have alternative ODI of coastal destinations that challenges the traditional 3S model. Lastly, UGC such as Douyin is useful for exploring tourist's perceived image and closing the gap between projected and perceived images. Coastal tourist destinations must undertake significant initiatives to enhance their brand equity, which entails expanding beyond the conventional 3S offers, utilizing alternative strategies to effectively convey a tailored image to the potential tourist market. Moreover, it is imperative for DMOs of TDR to adeptly disseminate the perception of ODI to diverse tourist markets, considering the specific regions from which these tourists originate (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). By understanding the dynamics between TGR and TDR, DMOs can leverage this knowledge to shape a comprehensive and appealing ODI.

The theoretical implications suggest that destination branding strategies should not only focus on the traditional elements but also embrace alternative narratives and experiences that resonate with evolving tourist preferences. Moreover, this study highlights the significance of understanding the cultural dynamics between TGR and TDR in shaping the overall destination image, due to UGC which transforms e-WOM. Findings provide DMOs with valuable insights to craft tailored marketing strategies that effectively engage diverse tourist markets.

Three notable limitations are addressed. Firstly, the absence of a well-defined conceptual framework establishing the internal relationships between culture, TGR, and TDR raises concerns. Secondly, the findings are contextual and cannot be generalized. Thirdly, this study explores ODI solely based on the perspective of nationality. Due to the different nature of destinations' target markets, there are numerous criteria for target market segmentation. To enhance the accuracy of evaluating any target market's perceptions of an ODI, future work can employ various variables for a more precise assessment. Therefore, future work endeavors should aim to empirically validate these findings. The exploration of the impact of social media, particularly on platforms like Douyin and others, warrants further exploration within the realm of ODI research.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.14 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

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Turyzm/Tourism
2024, *34*(2)

Stimulating agritourism loyalty in the Mid-Atlantic states of the USA

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How to cite (APA style): Ceylan, R.F., Govindasamy, R., Ozkan, B., & Pandey, S. (2024). Stimulating agritourism loyalty in the Mid-Atlantic states of the USA. *Turyzm/Tourism*, *34*(2), 193–204. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.34.2.14

ABSTRACT

Agritourism as a niche tourism market has become an alternative income-generating sector for conventional farmers that focus on both production and marketing. Agritourist activities involve joining production and harvest, receiving education and on site-training. However, unless individuals endeavor and they consistently demand these activities, agritourism cannot be promoted among farm operators. In other words, agritourism is a demand-driven sector and requires the loyalty of participants which was measured with respect to more than a single take up of agritourism in the past two years. With this research, the loyalty of agritourists and the factors affecting their persistent participation were estimated based on a sample from the Mid-Atlantic states of the USA. The findings infer that agritourism loyalty is stimulated by the rising level of agritourist education and increasing income. Married people with children also prefer rural participation. Agritourists, who have the potential to become loyal, focus above all on buying fresh and high-value products. Following this, they demonstrate a rising tendency to learn about agricultural production, and to spend quality time with family/friends. These results suggest that with proper marketing strategies, supportive actions designed for farmers that seek alternative income, and the involvement of regional/local authorities in decision making and promotional processes, may contribute to the development of agritourism and expand its market through assuring customer loyalty.

KEYWORDS

agritourism, demand, loyalty, discrete choice, probability, COVID-19

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
9 July 2024
Accepted:
5 September 2024
Published:
29 November 2024

1. Introduction

Agritourism, an increasingly popular niche within the tourism sector, combines elements of agriculture and tourism to create experiences that foster a deeper connection between visitors and rural life. Over the past few decades, agritourism has evolved into a crucial economic strategy for farmers, offering them additional revenue streams beyond traditional agricultural practices via utilization of available resources. In the post-productivism era, multifunctional use of farmland and the countryside, and provision of services as well as products, has become a new economic segment of agriculture (Flanigan et al., 2015). Agritourism was considered as demonstration of economic power earlier, especially in Europe, and modern or proto-agritourism was initiated by the socialization esteem of aristocrats in Europe (Lamie et al., 2021). Farms have been considered as social gathering places all over the world and gained social characteristics.

Definition and promotion of new tourism service packages that provide accommodation and various activities on farms and other enterprises began in the early 1990s. This development of services appeared to be a financial extension strategy for large agricultural actors. At the same time, agritourism was presented and promoted to small enterprises as part of a financial survival strategy (Evans & Ilbery, 1992). Even if agritourism has numerous definitions, in most cases it is acknowledged as rural tourism attached to farm operations, with involvement in activities and at some level including on-site training. Accommodation in farmhouses or on non-working farms is a part of rural or countryside tourism (Lamie et al., 2021). Therefore, agritourism is also a method of farm income diversification that enables management of the rising costs of production and supplies, and the preservation of agricultural and rural holdings (Lucha et al., 2016; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Recent research on Polish 81 agritourism farm owners indicated that these farmers decided to extend their activity scope to enrich their income via providing leisure and accommodation on their farms confirming the financial view of tourist services supporting agricultural production (Roman et al., 2020).

Looking from a broader perspective, agritourism has been gaining in importance for the survival of small farms and the sustainability of production. When the recent data was checked, it was understood that the global agritourism market had a size of $69.24 billion by 2019 and is expected to rise to $197.37 billion by 2032 due to the statistical projections (Fortune Business Insights, 2024). The major destinations will still be found in Europe and Northern America. In the data framework, it was observed that the market in the USA was below $200 million in 2002, which more than tripled to $950 million as recorded by an agriculture census (Whitt et al., 2019). Yet, it is important to keep in mind that alternative tourism service development is more of a demand-driven approach and the socio-economic indicators of development of this alternative service niche are especially worth investigating. Accordingly, it was intended with this article to understand those demand inducing factors in the Mid-Atlantic region of the USA.

The Mid-Atlantic region holds great economic importance and is characterized by the core values of the USA, including diversity, resilience and innovation. It encompasses Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and parts of Virginia and West Virginia. The region boasts dominance in various industries and services.

Despite its industrial and service sector-oriented development and production capabilities, rising income potential will be promising for population shifts from metropolitan to less-populated rural areas. This shift should be planned and promoted for the region, which has a very low rural population. According to the 2020 census results, the rural population share for the most prominent states of the region can be indicated as follows (United States Census Bureau, 2020): the lowest rate was observed in New Jersey with 6%, while it was around 14–15% in Delaware, Maryland and New York. The highest shares, on the other hand, were observed in Pennsylvania and Virginia with 26%. In addition, following a decade of decline, the non-metropolitan rural population in the USA has been rising since 2020 as noted by USDA (Davis et al., 2023). In other words, increasing income generation potential in the rural districts of the region can also contribute to this population shift from urban to rural and increasingly tourism practices can be attached to these objectives.

Considering the extension of services, the tourist significance of the region is noteworthy. In addition to conventional tourist activities, alternative forms of tourism have been on the agenda of economic policymakers, with agritourism as a viable alternative. The Mid-Atlantic region features multi-purpose farms, and agritourism empowers these farms to diversify their revenue streams beyond the traditional agricultural practices which alone may not be sufficient for economic viability. The importance of agritourism here has been underscored by the need to diversify farm income in the face of rising costs and the changing dynamics of agricultural markets. It not only provides financial benefits to farmers but also plays a vital role in preserving the agricultural landscape and heritage of the region. It also offers a platform for educating the public about agricultural practices, promoting local products and fostering a sense of community between urban and rural populations. In this context, understanding the factors that influence agritourism loyalty – defined as the likelihood of visitors to repeatedly engage in agritourism activities – is essential for the sustained success of agritourism operations.

Here loyalty was considered arbitrarily as being a frequent agritourist and relying on the concept of 'destination loyalty'. Destination loyalty occurs following satisfactory experiences and if the individual continues to visit similar sites and/or do similar activities (Oppermann, 2000). Besides, promotion of agritourism among agricultural operators is also related to a projection of continuous demand, which is again related to loyalty (Andjelic & Ilic, 2022). With agritourism loyalty, participation in similar or different activities or specific venues was not taken as a reference point. In other words, individuals engaging in activities of production/ harvest/ training/ accommodation frequently were considered loyal disregarding their attendance on the same farm or enterprise. Accordingly, it was intended to differentiate between an agritourism trial and continuity of demand in the scope of probability theory.

Through agritourism, farmers and local businesses have capitalized on an additional source of income, contributing to the economic vitality of rural communities. Tourist engagement in activities such as pick-your-own or cut-your-own produce, farm tours, farm stays and agricultural festivals, seasonal events, farm museums and on-site teaching of farming practices generates revenue for farmers (Bhandari et al., 2024). These environmentally-oriented activities have the potential to revitalize local economies through spending on lodging, dining, and other goods and services.

Therefore, the region has a potential for agritourism supply. This potential can be discussed and converted into sustainable policies via analysis of the demand for and reasons affecting frequent participation in agritourism activities. Prior to analysis and evaluation of agritourism demand, previous research on agritourism strategy development has been overviewed briefly for the world and for the region.

2. Literature review

Despite the growing importance of agritourism, challenges remain in understanding and harnessing its full potential. One of the key challenges is identifying the factors that drive repeated visits, crucial for developing effective marketing strategies and ensuring the long-term sustainability of agritourism businesses. Studies have indicated that factors such as visitor demographics, motivation and the quality of the agritourism experience all play a role in determining visitor loyalty (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). For instance, visitors who seek educational experiences or who have strong connections to rural life are more likely to become frequent visitors (Flanigan et al., 2015).

The increasing importance of agritourism for the Mid-Atlantic region can be emphasized by examining agritourism endeavors in different parts of the world. Much previous research has focused on the value-added potential of agricultural activities, which can be realized through the inclusion of services such as tourism.

Recent studies have shown that agritourism has the potential to significantly impact the economic sustainability of rural communities by attracting a diverse range of visitors, including families, educational groups and eco-tourists. Findings from a survey in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship, Poland, where agritourism substantially contributes to household income, inferred information on the relationship between services provided and agritourism income (Jęczmyk et al., 2015). Food services play a crucial role in the success of activities and there is a strong correlation between agritourism income and revenue from providing meals to visitors. Data analysis from the Canadian Travel Activities and Motivation Survey showed that agritourists share similarities with other groups participating in rural tourism activities in terms of socio-demographic characteristics (Ainley & Smale, 2010).

Another paper explored the growth of agritourism in the rural communities of the USA and proposed a model addressing the needs of farm families, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and agritourists (McGehee, 2007). Through effective communication and the application of Weber's rationality principles (United States Census Bureau, 2024), the model aims to foster mutually beneficial relationships, offering decision-support tools for enhancing economic sustainability and community well-being in agritourism. Pevetz (1991) discussed the unique geographical and functional connections between tourism and agriculture in Austria, highlighting its rarity elsewhere. The article emphasizes the exceptional nature of this interrelation, particularly in Central Europe, and underscores the benefits both sectors derive from each other, including more revenue streams for farmers through direct and indirect involvement in tourism activities. Neate (1987) examined the evolution of farm-based tourism in the Scilly Isles, UK, emphasizing its socio-economic and environmental significance highlighting how the unique historical development of land agreements and farming practices there led to a small-scale farm structure uniquely reliant on tourism. This structure is related to operational aspects of farming conducive to diversification without compromising primary agricultural activities, resulting in a transformed rural economy while maintaining traditional family-run holdings. Frater (1983) explored the intersection of growing tourism demand and farmers' recognition of financial opportunities, prompting research on their involvement in the tourism industry in Britain and Europe. It aims to offer factual insights into the participation of farmers in farm tourism and the preferences of visitors using such accommodation, defining farm tourism as supplementary enterprises on working farms.

Previously quoted research by Bhandari et al. (2024) noted that the profitability of agritourism operations in Maryland is closely associated with factors such as the quality of visitor experience, the diversity of activities offered, and the ability to market these experiences effectively. Similarly, Whitt et al. (2019) suggested that the growth of agritourism in the US has been driven by an increasing demand for authentic and educational experiences that allow visitors to engage directly with farming activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the resilience of agritourism as a sector. As traditional tourism activities declined due to travel restrictions, agritourism provided an alternative that met the public's growing desire for outdoor, socially distanced activities. Callahan (2023) notes that it played a crucial role in helping farmers in California mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic by attracting local visitors who were unable to travel internationally. This trend was mirrored in the Mid-Atlantic region, where agritourism operations saw a surge in demand as people sought safe and meaningful leisure activities closer to home.

At this moment, situating and promoting agritourism as an alternative can be achieved through analysis and management of the demand. In the light of these considerations, this study aims to explore the factors that stimulate agritourism loyalty in the Mid-Atlantic region of the USA. By analyzing the socio-demographic characteristics and motivations of agritourism visitors, the study seeks to provide insights that can help agritourism operators and policymakers enhance the appeal of destinations, thereby contributing to the economic vitality of rural communities in the region.

3. Materials and methodology

3.1. Materials

An online survey was conducted with residents of the Mid-Atlantic states in 2020 under the coordination of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, to assess individual views on agronomic topics including agritourism demand. The probability of frequently taking part in agritourism activities – more than once in the past 24 months – was estimated, with 428 participants showing their interest on agritourism through previous involvement. The analysis and inference relied on agritourism loyalty, as all individuals in the survey declared previous participation and frequency was taken as a reference point for loyalty. Agritourism, as pre-defined, was used to indicate frequent visits to agritourism venues relying on the 'destination loyalty' concept. Among these 428 individuals, 64 (15%) had participated in these activities once, while 364 people were classified as loyal agritourists, having participated in at least two activities in the past two years, representing 85% of the respondents.

In addition, the correlation between food, agricultural purchases and agritourism preferences was assessed based on whether the person bought agricultural and food products during the activity and how much the person normally spent on fresh fruit and vegetables per month. The impact of COVID-19 was also measured, concerning changes in the frequency of participation due to the pandemic, as the data collection period coincided with its onset.

3.2. Methodology

The aim was to estimate the probability that being a loyal agritourist develops the idea of stimulating and promoting agritourism among agricultural producers and farm operators. In estimating the existence of a situation in discrete or scaled form that does not have a normal distribution, different probabilistic methodologies such as logistic, probabilistic and tobit regression were used. Binary outcomes are estimated in general terms, while the dependent variable converges to a normal distribution as it ranges within limits. The difference between logit and probit is related to the distribution function. When the estimates are expected to have a normal distribution, probit might be more appropriate, however, with non-balanced binary dependent variables, inference on logit estimates appear to be more convenient. The probability of being a loyal tourist or participating in agritourism activities more frequently in the scope of this research was estimated using binary logistic regression in the Python statistical package. Logistic regression analysis entails estimating the likelihood of occurrence of an event versus non-occurrence. In this research, instead of focusing on nonoccurrence, randomness was considered in relation to loyalty. The basic model is presented below:

$$\text{logit}[Pr(Y=1|X;D)] = \ln\left[\frac{Pr(Y=1|X;D)}{1-Pr(Y=1|X;D)}\right] = \\ = \sum \beta_i x_i + \sum \alpha_i D_i + \alpha_0$$

where: Y – binary dependent variable 1: being a loyal agritourist, with more than once participation in the past 24 months, 0: otherwise meaning participation of one time. Among explanatories x_i represents quantitative – continuous variables explaining the probability of being a loyal agritourist and coefficients (β_i) represent the quantitative degree of the effects. Finally, D_i represents dichotomous or polychotomous variables (demographics) explaining the probability of being a loyal agritourist and their coefficients (α_i) were estimated in this scope; α_0 denotes the constant (intercept) in the model.

The quantitative – continuous variables (x_i) used as explanatories were household size, number of household members below 17 years old, age and annual income level. In addition, payment on fresh fruit and vegetables (FFVs) per month ($) was considered as a potential continuous determinant.

The dichotomous or polychotomous variables (D_i) were categorical socio demographic factors such as gender, marital status, education and employment status. The origin of the respondent as being white American, African American, or other (Hispanic/Indian American/Hawaiian/Asian) was evaluated as well in correlation to the other factors. Residency was another social comparison aspect. Individuals were categorized as being from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, North Carolina and Virginia. Tourism season preference of the correspondent was also classified as spring, summer, autumn or winter. Individual specific decisions were also considered as potential effective categorical factors. As the respondents were already aware of agritourism, their source of information and their situation regarding product purchases during tourism participation were investigated categorically. In addition, the main motivation for agritourism participation was also categorized, aiming to differentiate between the objectives of being an agritourist only once or frequently. Therefore, the following objectives or motivations of being an agritourist were evaluated as separate binary variables:
1. To purchase fresh FFVs.
2. To purchase value added products.
3. To support local farmers.
4. To enjoy rural scenery/nature.
5. To spend time with family/friends.
6. To learn local food production.
7. To learn where products are grown.
8. It is close and convenient to visit.
9. To receive farm experience.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-demographics

The 428 participants surveyed exhibit diversity in terms of their major socio-demographic characteristics. Firstly, the number of individuals classified as loyal agritourists, meaning they participated in activities more than once, was 364 (85%), while 64 (15%) participated only once. Thus, the survey participants were experienced in agritourism. The main socio-economic features of the sample are demonstrated in Table 1 and individuals were from six states in the Mid-Atlantic region: New York (113), Pennsylvania (77), North Carolina (66), New Jersey (60), Virginia (60) and Maryland (42).

Table 1. Socio-economic attributes of the individuals ($n = 428$)

Socio-economic profile		Number of observations
State	New York	113
	Pennsylvania	77
	North Carolina	66
	New Jersey	61
	Virginia	60
	Maryland	42
Gender	Male	165
	Female	263
Origin	White American	334
	African American	59
	Other	35
Education	No schooling	6
	High school	80
	College	120
	Bachelor of Arts (BA) / Bachelor of Science (BSc)	114
	Master of Science or higher (MSc+)	108

Source: authors.

Most of the sample comprised females, 263 participants (61%), while 165 (39%) were male. The average age of the respondents was between 33 and 40, signing a middle-aged sample. There was a visible dominance in terms of origin, with 334 participants, accounting for 78% of the sample, being white Americans. The average level of education among participants was significant, which may be related to awareness. The lowest education level was secondary, with 80 high school graduates, followed by 120 college and technical school graduates (28%), 114 bachelor's degree holders (27%), and 108 with a master's degree or higher (25%). Therefore, 52% held at least a tertiary level degree.

The average household size was three, but with 51 families consisting of at least five members. The presence of young household members is one of the specific factors considered to affect agritourism loyalty. However, in 201 families (47%), there were no young members below 17 years old, and 94 households declared having just one. The income level of the sample was scaled to from below $20,000 to above $200,000 and demonstrated in Figure 1.

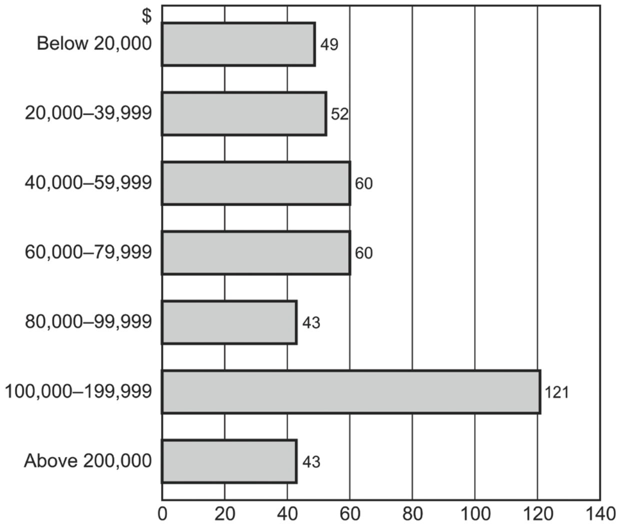

Figure 1. Income distribution of the sample (n = 428)
Source: authors

It was seen in the figure that 28% of the sample declared an income ranging between $100 to $200,000 per year while the income of 53% fell between $60,000 and $200,000. The average monthly expenditure typically made by these individuals on food products was $360, with an average annual income ranging between $60,000 and $79,000. Thus, the respondents had reached a medium level of income.

Following this summary, the subsequent section mostly focuses on measuring the impacts of these diversified factors.

4.2. Probability of reaching agritourism loyalty

Initially, responses collected from 428 individuals were analyzed against all 43 indicators listed earlier. The accuracy of estimation of the full model was 84% based on the F_1 statistic, and the pseudo-R^2 was 51%. The

Table 2. Factors affecting the probability of being loyal agritourists – full model

Factor	Estimate	Factor	Estimate
Season – spring	0.38*	Married	0.07
Season – summer	–0.24	Other	–0.19
Season – autumn	0.76**	Single	0.07
Season – winter	–0.15	Education – high school	1.48*
Learning center	1.15***	Education – college	1.75*
Fresh fruits and vegetables (FFVs) purchase during activity	0.54**	Education – Bachelor of Arts (BA)	1.11
Food payment	0.15	Education – Master of Arts+ (MA+)	1.96**
To purchase fresh FFVs	–0.13	Full time employed	0.10
To purchase value added products	0.59*	Self-employed	0.01
To support local farmers	0.05	Student	0.38
To enjoy rural scenery/nature	–0.13	Retired	0.31
To spend time with family/friends	–0.08	White American	0.85**
To learn local food production	–0.31	African American	3.01***
To learn where products are grown	0.28	Other origin	–1.28**
It is close and convenient to visit	0.45*	Annual income	0.06*
To receive farm experience	–0.39	Age	–0.94**
WTP for farmlands	0.22	State – New York	0.78
Change – COVID-19	0.35*	State – New Jersey	0.37
HH	–0.31*	State – Pennsylvania	0.19
HH17	0.47*	State – Maryland	0.05
Gender (male = 0, female = 1)	0.11*	State – North Carolina	0.67
		State – Virginia	0.49

Note: significance levels: *0.10, **0.05, ***0.01.
Source: authors.

likelihood of the fit of the estimates was –68.08, with a probability value below 5%. Before evaluating the success of the full model, parameter estimates were demonstrated in Table 2 and assessed.

First of all, the base for evaluation of the effective factors was gender of the participant. Accordingly, gender have no effect on the odds and estimated probability for males. Yet, the probability rises for female participants due to initial findings. The seasonal preference for participation in agritourism in spring and autumn leads to a higher probability of visiting venues than in summer or winter. Highly educated individuals tend to participate more in agricultural activities during their vacation times. This demographic inference may include having young household members below 17, in contrast to having more household members. In other words, large families have lower tendencies, while families with younger members are more inclined to enjoy these activities. Similarly, individuals willing to pay for forest and farmland preservation are more sensitive towards nature and are more likely to visit agritourism districts. Rising income also appeared as another appreciating indicator in conformity with expectations. The difference in seasonal preference can be attributed to the nature of activities, as people tend to be more active in the environment when the weather is temperate, as in spring and autumn. This preference is confirmed earlier in New Jersey, where the fall season is mostly preferred for such involvement (Infante-Casella et al., 2021). The seasonal preference for spring and autumn was also validated for New York, according to research conducted by extension specialists (Roth & Ochterski, 2016).

However, this full model was tested for variation caused by its explanatory variables. The variance inflation factors for education were considerably higher than the baseline of 10 and it can be noted that education at all levels has an appreciating effect on agritourism loyalty. An African American origin also seemed to be a variance inflation factor with some recent studies indicating that African American farm owners tend to open their farms for tourism, mostly in cooperation with tourist service providers (Carter & Alexander, 2020). Therefore, their tendency to take part in activities, both as service providers and beneficiaries, can be higher. Residency in some states of the region also appeared to increase the variation. Participants from New York and Pennsylvania, which also host the highest number of households, were removed from the explanatory variables. However, it is worth noting again that residing in New York state had a positive effect on demand, while it was negative for Pennsylvania. Marital status had multilayered involvement in explanatory variables, and due to multicollinearity detection, these variables were reduced to one with the variable comparing married participants against others being kept in the model. Therefore, an alternative model was also estimated with the reduction of these variables.

With reduced variables, the fit statistics changed. Goodness of fit with pseudo-R^2 was reduced to 48%. However, the likelihood ratio inferred significance of the findings at –72.01, and the accuracy score was 84%. These fit statistics showing information on the accuracy of the estimated models are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Fit statistics of models

Model	Pseudo-R^2	Likelihood ratio	Accuracy (F_1)
Full	51%	–68.08 (ϱ = 0.05)	84%
Reduced	48%	–72.01 (ϱ = 0.05)	84%

Source: authors.

The outcomes of the reduced were interpreted with reference to odds ratios and marginal effects. While odds ratios refer to the direction of the impact, marginal effects signal the magnitude of change in percentages.

Subsequently, the relevant statistics for the probability impact of 30 demographic and situational variables were demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Factors affecting the probability of Mid-Atlantic residents' agritourism loyalty: odds ratios and marginal effects of the reduced model

Indicator	Odds ratio	Marginal effect	Indicator	Odds ratio	Marginal effect
Annual income	1.01	<0.0001	High school	1.31*	0.064
Gender (male = 0, female = 1)	1.09*	0.007	College/ technical school	1.38	0.077
Marital status – married – others	1.21	0.015	Bachelors of Arts (BA)	0.91*	0.045
No of households including those below 17 years old	1.49***	0.029	Master of Arts+ (MA+)	1.75***	0.092
Household size	0.89*	–0.013	To purchase fresh FFVs	1.04	<0.0001
Age	0.52	–0.051	To purchase value added products	1.63***	0.039

Table 4 (cont.)

Indicator	Odds ratio	Marginal effect	Indicator	Odds ratio	Marginal effect
Origin white American	1.44*	0.036	To learn where the products are grown	1.27	0.019
Origin African American	3.86	0.149	It is close and convenient to go	1.36	0.022
Origin other	0.55**	–0.065	To learn local food production	0.80	–0.017
New Jersey	1.04	0.006	To receive farm experience	0.66	–0.026
North Carolina	1.31	0.021	Agri and food purchases	1.69**	0.038
Virginia	1.21	0.011	Dollars spent on FFVs	1.01***	0.009
Retired	1.16**	0.011	Willingness to pay for farmland	1.24	0.013
Seasonal preference – spring	1.16	0.009	Where s/he learned about agritourism	2.41**	0.059
Seasonal preference – autumn	1.72	0.039	Change due to COVID-19	1.22	0.019

Note: significance levels of parameter estimates reflected odds ratios: *0.10, **0.05, ***0.01.
Source: authors.

The positive impact of education being considered as a common factor, the employment situation was checked to study the socio-economic situation of the participants. The analysis found that the probability of being a frequent participant is lower for non-registered workers, however, the probability rises for married people with young household members. Referring to the initial question of the research, it can be said that these mostly white-collar individuals use rural tourism opportunities more often. After removing the African American respondents because of unusual data variation, results concluded that being white American is a positive factor for preference towards agritourism, while the effects were negative for other groups. The low-income average of Hispanic households can be cosidered as a reason for this negative effect, as recorded by central authorities. According to the United States Census Bureau (2024) the share of Hispanic families who are below the poverty line was 14.8% in 2020 and rose to 15.2% in 2022. A Senate report prepared by the Joint Economic Committee (Maloney, 2019) indicated that the average median income of Hispanic households was $20,000 lower than that of White Americans for whom it was $51,450.

Another factor that leads to a rising probability for an individual's agritourism participation appeared as the intention to purchase more value-added products nearby where it is convenient and to learn where local products are grown. We found that people who would prefer to buy FFVs in agricultural districts and who have a desire to learn farming practices are less likely to be loyal or else they can enjoy these activities but do not become consistent participants. People who find agritourism destinations convenient, have a 2.2% higher probability of becoming loyal participants.

With age, the likelihood declines by 5.1% for the concerned sample of 428 and this can be expected for agritourism due to its activity scope. While enlarged families are 1.3% less likely, families that involve young members are 2.9% more likely to become loyal participants. When the origin of the correspondent was evaluated, it was seen that African Americans had an almost 15% greater tendency, followed by white Americans at 3.6% and those outside these categories are less likely by –6.5%. The residency indicators refer to a rising tendency with 2.1% in North Carolina, followed by Virginia with 1.1%. The residents of New Jersey have a positive tendency too but with a lower marginal value of 0.6% while the remaining were detected to have a much lower negative and multicollinear impact on the probability. Considering the base of evaluation, the gender of the participant, it was confirmed that females have more tendency to become loyal agritourists but the quantitative effect is almost negligible. Being a female neither increases the probability significantly in accordance with other positive factors, nor it has a strict offsetting effect to negative factors with its below 1% marginal effect.

Education has a positive effect on the probability of attending rural and agricultural leisure activities. In detail, individuals holding master's or higher degrees have the highest likelihood with 9.2%, followed by college-technical school graduates (7.7%), and high school graduates (6.4%). The positive but lowest likelihood are those that hold Bachelors of Arts (BA)/ Bachelors of Science (BSc) degrees (4.5%). This educational variation can be related to the occupational positions of respondents. Employment status factors were mostly ineffective, but for those who were retired by the time of the survey, the tendency to enter in agri/rural tourism activities appeared to be higher at 1.1%. Rising annual income is almost ineffective, with a negligible reducing impact. However, the rising amount spent on agricultural and food products contributes to the probability positively by around 4%.

The frequency of participation in activities rose during COVID-19 and the positive impact of the pandemic can be observed with a 2% rise in the probability. Recent research in the USA confirms the role of agritourism activities in compensating for the losses of Californian farmers during the pandemic (Callahan, 2023).

Briefly, with rising education, awareness and economic prosperity, the desire to be a loyal agritourist increase. People who have been seeking information and who have tried to reach that information from various sources are more interested in the activities as well, with almost 6% likelihood of participation. Seasonal preferences of the Mid-Atlantic residents surveyed were restricted to spring and autumn due to the significance of estimates and positive contribution to the tendency. In many travel-oriented countries, seasonal preference ranges from spring to autumn as well, as these times are planting and harvesting periods such as in Germany (Bosmann et al., 2021) or Italy (Domi & Belletti, 2022).

5. Conclusions and discussion

The findings of this research emphasized how individuals become loyal agritourists with the influence of various socio-demographic factors and attitudes towards agritourism. Our research also facilitates policymakers and stakeholders in understanding the role of these factors which is crucial for them in developing effective strategies and policies to promote agritourism and capitalize on its potential for agri-food production and marketing.

According to research, individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in agritourism activities. This finding proposes that educated individuals may have a greater admiration for the cultural and educational aspects of tourism, and they attempt to find opportunities to learn about local food production and agricultural practices. There are similar findings in the literature signaling the importance of formal and non-formal education. The cluster analysis findings of a survey conducted with 1003 agritourists visiting Colorado between 2005 and 2007 inferred that rising education and interest in learning by experience increases the agritourism participation and loyalty of individuals (Gascoigne et al., 2008). The level of education is not the only sign of attraction to alternative leisure activities. The extensive information available on internet resources and social media both stimulates and increases interest in alternative tourism demand. This is also valid for the supply side. The intention of farm operators to get involved in agritourism activities was found to rise with the impact of social media and smartphone usage on the responses of 160 Tennessee farmers (Holland et al., 2022). This also implied the role of the internet and online resources for agritourism to thrive.

The second effective factor is employment status. The research highlighted that employed individuals are more likely to have the financial means and flexibility to engage in leisure activities and this could be attributed to factors such as disposable income, time availability and lifestyle preferences.

According to our research, household composition, particularly families with younger members, may consider this niche tourism market as a valuable opportunity for educational and recreational experiences gained within family time. Marital status may intersect with other socio-demographic factors or lifestyle preferences, but research found that marital status unveils a mixed influence on loyalty. Married individuals show the highest probability of frequent participation in agritourism activities, followed by single, separated and divorced individuals.

Factors like seasonal preferences, motivation for participation and willingness to support local farmers or economically contribute to the sustainability of farms significantly influenced the frequency of participation. Therefore, environmental protection was found to be effective for increasing agritourism loyalty. This environmentalist view needs to be watched closely by the supply side as the success of agritourism firms in natural preservation is expected to grant them more visitors and agritourism revenue, relying on findings of a principal component analysis (PCA) undertaken in Italy (Brandano et al., 2018).

Research found that seasonal preferences, particularly for spring, summer and autumn activities, were positively associated with higher probabilities of frequent participation. This finding underlines the importance of aligning agritourism offerings with seasonal attractions and activities to affect and retain visitors throughout the year. Motivations such as spending time with family and friends, supporting local farmers and purchasing fresh products are strong participation predictors for loyalty.

The intention to purchase local products appears as a significant positive predictor in frequency of participation attracting visitors and encouraging repeated visits. Ultimately, promotion of local food systems and highlighting unique agricultural products can be attached to the services. In their research Huber et al. (2020) surveyed 780 individuals that visit (133) or plan to visit (647) agritourism farms in Switzerland to understand the future potential. It was understood that while potential customers for agritourism are interested in rural and regional authenticity and local products, actual customers care more about comfort and consumption confirming the importance of local/regional products in promotion of agritourism. Besides, the relation between food purchases and agritourism demand needs to be considered as bidirectional. The survey conducted with 328 agritourists participating in on-site activities on six farms in North Carolina in 2018–2019 suggested that increasing recreational activity promotion also increases farm sales that then contribute to farm income (Brune et al., 2021). It is important to pay attention to this inference in agritourism policy development and promotion.

The research found various implications for policymakers, agri-food marketers and tourism operators who seek to enhance the attractiveness and viability of destinations. Targeted marketing and promotion directed to appeal to educated, employed individuals with young families can help increase participation. Emphasis on the educational and recreational benefits of agritourism experiences may resonate with this demographic. The importances of on-farm experiences and educational incentives have been considered in different parts of the world as well. Vazin and Alavijeh (2023) undertook a field survey on service demand in Iran. They reached the conclusion that the main inducers of agritourism demand are related to agri-recreation, agri-experience and agri-accommodation interests. Diversification of offerings may motivate participation towards attracting a broader audience and encouraging visit repetitions. Themed events, educational workshops and family-friendly activities can increase the number of agritourism destinations, attractions and engagements throughout the year.

Enhancing accessibility to agritourism destinations and investing in infrastructure can remove barriers to participation and enrich the overall visitor experience. It is a promising idea to improve signage, transportation options and amenities to make destinations more attractive and accessible to visitors of all backgrounds. This implication is not only valid for the research region, but rather can be generalized and adapted to other districts.

6. Policy implications for promoting agritourism participation

The analysis of socio-demographic factors influencing loyalty reveals insights into the preferences and behavior of individuals engaging in rural tourism activities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for formulating effective policies to promote and sustain agritourism initiatives. Based on the results obtained from the study, several policy implications emerge aiming to enhance agritourism participation and its socio-economic benefits.

The impact of education, employment status and being informed by external resources were previously measurable in the region as well. Govindasamy and Kelley (2014) assessed the socio-economic attributes of 972 individuals participating in wine tasting activities in the Mid-Atlantic region as an example of agritourism activities. This research has been one of many stimulants of the current research and analysis of purchases. The previous research conducted with logistic regression inferred that individuals having a greater tendency to taste wines were above 50 years old, had a graduate degree and were mostly self-employed. Besides, it was understood from the audience surveyed in 2010 that they were stimulated by advertisements and information from news articles. The changing factors that affect the decisions of individuals, and their continuous demand for alternative tourism activities related to agricultural practices, provide insight for future planning. The resemblance of findings as well as differences helps confirm recent research and enable making policy suggestions that may enlighten future strategies as well.

6.1. Targeted marketing strategies

Given the observed influence of education, income and geographical location on participation, policymakers should tailor marketing strategies to resonate with diverse demographic segments. Targeted campaigns highlighting the experiential and educational aspects of agritourism can be developed to attract individuals with higher educational attainment and disposable income. Moreover, emphasizing the seasonal appeal of destinations, particularly during spring and autumn, can capitalize on preferences for temperate weather conditions.

6.2. Support for local farmers and producers

The intention to purchase fresh and value-added products emerges as a significant motivator for frequent agritourism participation. Policy interventions aimed at facilitating direct sales between farmers and consumers, such as farmers' markets and farm-to-table initiatives, can bolster the economic viability of operations. Providing incentives for the production and promotion of local products can further incentivize consumers to engage in activities while supporting the sustainability of rural economies.

6.3. Community engagement and collaboration

Promoting agritourism requires fostering partnerships between local communities, agricultural stakeholders and tourism agencies. Encouraging collaboration among farmers, tour operators and hospitality providers can enrich the experience by offering diverse activities and accommodation options. Community-based initiatives, such as festivals and cooperative marketing efforts, can enhance the visibility and appeal of rural destinations, driving visitor engagement and economic growth.

6.4. Resilience and adaptation in response to external factors

The positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agritourism participation underscores the resilience of this sector in times of crisis. Policymakers should recognize this importance as an economic driver and prioritize measures to support its continued growth and adaptation. This includes investing in infrastructure improvements, digital marketing capabilities and risk management strategies to mitigate the impact of future disruptions and ensure the long-term sustainability of agritourism enterprises.

The policy implications outlined above provide a framework for fostering inclusive, sustainable and resilient agritourism ecosystems. By addressing the diverse needs and preferences of participants, promoting local entrepreneurship and fostering collaboration within communities, policymakers can harness the potential of agritourism to drive economic development, preserve cultural heritage and promote environmental stewardship in rural areas. The regional orientation of the research and methodological contribution appear to be enlightening for future planning. Effective implementation of these policies requires concerted efforts from government agencies, industry stakeholders and local communities to unlock the full socio-economic benefits of agritourism for all.

Declarations of interest

There is no conflict of interest between co-authors or with third parties.

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Published by Lodz University Press

First Edition. W.11469.24.0.C

Printing sheets 25.75

Lodz University Press
90-237 Łódź, 34A Jana Matejki St
tel. +48 42 635 55 77
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