turyzm
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35 | no. 1
2025

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UNIWERSYTETU
ŁÓDZKIEGO
Łódź 2025

C O P E
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ISSN 0867-5856
e-ISSN 2080-6922

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.01 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E
Member since 2019
JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

The role of city parks in creating 'wellbeing societies': A case study of Piłsudski Park in Łódź, Poland

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How to cite (APA style): Smith, M.K., Kowalczyk-Anioł, J., Janiszewski, J., & Grabarczyk, K. (2025). The role of city parks in creating 'wellbeing societies': A case study of Piłsudski Park in Łódź, Poland. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 7–25. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.01

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of urban green spaces (UGSs) and city parks in fostering wellbeing among urban residents. UGSs are increasingly being recognized for their contribution to public health, mental wellbeing and social cohesion, and this research fills a gap in the understanding of these benefits in the context of Central and Eastern European cities. The current study presents research on the motivations, patterns of use, chosen activities and wellbeing benefits of visiting the largest city park in Łódź: Marshal Józef Piłsudski Park. The research utilizes a questionnaire-based survey of 238 park users to explore patterns of park use, motivations for visiting and perceived wellbeing benefits. Findings reveal that physical activities, such as walking, are the primary motivation for park visits, while mental benefits like relaxation and stress reduction are highly valued outcomes. Although social interactions are rated lower overall, they are particularly significant for younger and older users, as well as marginalized groups such as unemployed individuals. The study also highlights the role of proximity and the frequency of visits in amplifying wellbeing benefits. Despite the park's evolving infrastructure, aligning with modern trends, passive recreational activities dominate usage patterns. The research underscores the potential of urban parks to address health and social challenges, advocating inclusive and participatory urban planning. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable urban development and the creation of 'wellbeing societies' through urban green spaces.

KEYWORDS

urban green space, urban park, wellbeing

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
16 December 2024
Accepted:
3 March 2025
Published:
23 April 2025

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

1. Introduction

Recently, urban green spaces (UGSs), including city parks, have been attracting increasing attention from researchers, practitioners and users. From the very beginning, i.e. in the 19th century, the idea of (European) city public parks was aimed at contributing to improving health conditions for city residents, as well as enhancing urban aesthetics (Grochowski, 2023). The notion in the 20th century was to make city parks accessible public recreational spaces (although the modernist aesthetics of the parks varied). At the end of the 20th century, parks were assigned new roles in city development strategies (cf. the Parisian parks – La Villette and André-Citroën), and in the 21st century this became a common trend, at least in Europe (Bernacki, 2009). As a result, city parks have become not only a basis for the ecological system of urban greenery and an increasingly appreciated urban amenity, ideally in the close vicinity of residence (Sokołowicz, 2017), but also an increasingly desirable component for sustainable and liveable cities (Mouratidis, 2021; Wolff & Haase, 2019). Urban parks in Europe, especially the large ones, are undergoing changes in their landscape in the 21st century. Functional and spatial programs can be found, with growing importance in previously marginal functions, such as cultural or commercialization. There is also a growing emphasis on pluralism and participatory activities, as well as experimentation in design and attention to naturalization and the recycling of space (Bernacki, 2009; Ignatieva, 2021). More recent studies have emphasized the importance of recycling or adapting urban space to new functions (Gadomska, 2018), as well as (re-)naturalizing UGSs (Ignatieva, 2021; Rojas et al., 2021).

In post-socialist cities in Eastern Europe where the availability and accessibility of green areas and often their quality was lower than those in Western Europe (cf. Biernacka et al., 2020; Csomós et al., 2020; Kabisch et al., 2016), developers as far as possible started to look for ways to improve the potential of urban greenery. Hence, the aforementioned changes in city parks were also implemented in post-socialist cities (CEE), although it was suggested that urban sprawl was strongly connected to a scarcity of adequate green spaces in the inner-parts of those cities (Csomós et al., 2020; Koprowska et al., 2020). Many projects were undertaken that aimed to contribute to an increase in the overall level of greenery in a city, improving accessibility to UGS (Krzywnicka & Jankowska, 2021), as well as their functional usage and attractiveness (cf. Smith et al., 2024). It should be noted that accessibility has multiple meanings and can refer to proximity to the park on foot or by public transport, physical infrastructure within the park, ease and comfort of moving around, social dimensions relating to inclusion, and feelings of safety (Wojnowska-Heciak et al., 2022).

As shown by Kowalczyk-Anioł and Smith (2024), quite visible changes have taken place in the international discussion (in the field of the social sciences in particular) on the importance of city parks in the most recent decade of the 21st century. Initially, the contribution of green spaces or parks to the quality of life of residents was discussed, with the discussion on ecosystem benefits/services becoming more prominent over time. Today, in the broad debate on the role of parks and other green areas in the city, attention is increasingly being paid to the possibilities of reducing climate change in urbanized spaces, in addition to the various health and wellbeing benefits for residents. The growing role of UGSs as key spaces for experiencing nature for city residents (Melon et al., 2024), including their role in strengthening and building wellbeing, (including mental wellbeing[1]) is featuring increasingly in international health documents (e.g. World Health Organization [WHO], 2023a, 2023b).

In the latest (post-pandemic) document on wellbeing, WHO (2023a) emphasizes the need to focus national and local policies (including urban ones) on strengthening individual and community wellbeing to create 'wellbeing societies' in the field of public health and health promotion. Barton and Rogerson (2017) propose that, given the universal urgent need to improve the available health-promoting infrastructure for mental health, the potential of green spaces should be used, especially in urban environments. They argue that urban parks can play a key role in the mental health of the urban population. The question therefore arises to what extent do urban parks/ UGSs contribute to creating or strengthening 'wellbeing societies'. How significant are the benefits of visiting parks in the opinion of urban park users for various dimensions of their wellbeing? These issues are still insufficiently researched, especially in the context of CEE cities, where the attractiveness of urban parks is still being improved.

There is growing evidence to support the health-promoting effects of UGSs, especially during physical activity. In a recent review of the literature, Jabbar et al. (2022) emphasize that by providing an appropriate environment for physical activity, UGSs help to improve the physical, mental and social wellbeing of their users (see also Burrows et al., 2018). Today, experiencing nature itself is considered an important resource in preventing and reducing mental health problems (Bratman et al., 2019; Van den Berg, 2017), especially in reducing the stress associated with urban life (Hunter et al., 2019). Hence, the practice of prescribing nature ('nature pills') to motivate patients to take a break in nature has been growing in recent years in North America and Europe[2]. Many believe that regular, frequent visits to green spaces are key to mental health benefits (Ma et al., 2019; Pasanen et al., 2023).

Taking the above into account, the aim of the article is to present research on the motivations, patterns of use, chosen activities and wellbeing benefits of visiting Marshal Józef Piłsudski Park, the largest in Łódź, a post-industrial city located in the center of Poland. The research was conducted using a questionnaire, the design stages and construction of which are described in detail in section 3. The analysis conducted focused on finding answers to the following questions:

1. Who are the contemporary park users and what are their patterns of use in terms of frequency and duration of visits?
2. What are the motivations for using the city park in terms of activities and expected benefits?
3. What are the main wellbeing benefits of visiting the park?
4. Does proximity to residence and frequency of visit affect the wellbeing benefits of visitors?

Although there is already quite a rich literature about Łódź city parks, they are usually discussed using objectively measured data on accessibility, attractiveness, environmental justice and green gentrification. The topic of the wellbeing of users is under-researched and there has not been much detailed research on a single park. Moreover, as shown by Kowalczyk-Anioł and Smith (2024) studies on city parks in Poland still lack research on the benefits for the wellbeing of their users. Taking this into account, the article attempts to fill these knowledge gaps. It also supplements the international literature with a discussion of whether and how a city park contributes to creating or strengthening 'wellbeing societies', especially in a CEE city that is still in transition. The studied park (*Park na Zdrowiu*; Piłsudski Park) has been undergoing a transformation in recent years driven by city policy and participatory activities (projects connected to the so-called 'Citizens' Budget'). They are especially visible in the dimension of recreational development and sport amenities. Hence, its selection as a research site seems justified from theoretical, empirical and applied perspectives.

2. Literature review

Urban green spaces, especially parks, serve a number of important functions in cities: providing recreation, wellbeing and health benefits, improving the environmental quality, offering nature-based experiences and contributing to the conservation of biodiversity (Jabbar et al., 2022; Kabisch et al., 2016; Loughran, 2020; Szumacher, 2011). Parks and green spaces also play an important role in social interaction and community cohesion, bringing individuals together and encouraging them to use outdoor areas (Kumar & Vuilliomenet, 2021). These can include physical activities relating to fitness and sports, as well as meeting people, doing activities with children or walking a dog (Pinto et al., 2021). The use of urban parks for social activities and enjoying nature can contribute to a sense of place (van Dinter et al., 2022). Some authors have considered that UGSs play a role in enhancing economic development, for example, residential, commercial, retail and tourism (Lim & Xenarios, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn, 2018). In the case of leisure and tourism, the recreation function and social benefits of urban parks are more important than the conservation and ecological benefits (Du & Zhao, 2022). The connection between UGSs and tourism has been increasingly recognized by some researchers (Saari, 2023) who note the relaxation opportunities (Adiati et al., 2018; Jabbar et al., 2022), as well as the possibility of using city parks for staging cultural activities (Bunakov et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the role of green spaces in improving the quality of life in terms of a healthier environment and more sustainable development should not be under-estimated (Valánszki et al., 2018). Li et al. (2024) advocate developing strategies to protect and promote the sustainability of UGSs to ensure better health and wellbeing for residents. One systematic review showed that research on public urban green landscapes and human wellbeing has developed from focusing on health (e.g. physical activity, mental health, stress) to include ecology, biodiversity and ecosystem services. The topic of naturalness (the level of man-made elements) is also mentioned as an increasingly important factor that influences the aesthetic appreciation of the green space and can have a positive health impact (Reyes-Riveros et al., 2021). Clearly, climate change presents some new challenges for the maintenance and protection of UGSs. It is also important to note that there may be some conflicts between user groups in an urban park because of different needs and interests (Rollins et al., 2001) or because of visitor interactions and overcrowding (Aydemir et al., 2024). Pitas et al. (2024) refer to conflicts with the unsheltered homeless who use urban parks for several functions, including sleeping at night. Indeed, issues around perceived safety in city parks at night have been highlighted by some authors (Lis et al., 2023; Rahm et al., 2021).

A growing interest in the interaction between public UGSs and human wellbeing in the last decade or so has been noted in systematic reviews (Reyes-Riveros et al., 2021). One systematic review of urban park literature identified wellbeing as being the most common theme (Torabi et al., 2020). Samus et al. (2022) summarize the theories that support the impact of UGSs on community health and wellbeing which include biophilia theory, which posits that humans have an inherent affinity with nature, and attention restoration theory (ART) which recognizes that natural environments offer opportunities for restoration and stress reduction. Olszewska-Guizzo et al. (2022) also refer to stress reduction theory whereby natural environments promote recovery from stress. Urban greenness positively influences leisure satisfaction (Mouratidis, 2019) and contributes to quality of life (Valánszki et al., 2018) and it has been shown that sitting in an urban park for just five minutes enhances wellbeing (Neill et al., 2019). This is connected to creating opportunities for physical activities (Burrows et al., 2018) and social interaction (Kim & Jin, 2018) and it seems that the link between being in green spaces and improved mental health is quite significant, especially with frequent visits to city parks (Ma et al., 2019). The health benefits of being outdoors were especially recognized during the COVID pandemic (Kleinschroth & Kowarik, 2020).

It has been suggested that cities need to improve urban planning and design to maximize the positive impact of green spaces on mental health (Liu et al., 2020). However, it has been suggested that there is a lack of evidence-based guidelines for landscape architects and urban planners when designing urban green spaces to promote mental health and wellbeing (Olszewska-Guizzo et al., 2022). Ideally, green spaces should be located within easy reach of one's home (Liu et al., 2020) and there is a positive correlation between the number of parks in a local neighborhood and mental health (Wood et al., 2018). Accessing parks that are further away may present physical, mental or social challenges (Błaszczyk et al., 2020) and they are less likely to be visited (van Dinter et al., 2022). There have been some concerns that the availability of UGSs in Eastern and Southern Europe is relatively low compared to the number in Western and Northern Europe (Kabisch et al., 2016). Some studies of Eastern European cities showed that access to green spaces tends to be more limited for lower income residents (Farkas et al., 2022), while even quality of life studies that focus on smart cities have emphasized the lack of green spaces (Fekete, 2023).

There is still little research on the nightlife of urban parks. Ngesan et al. (2013) conducted research on night-time leisure activities in parks and designing them for night-time usage. Currently, more attention is paid to the (perceived) safety of users, for example, Rahm et al. (2021) and Lis et al. (2023) examine the relationship between urban green infrastructure, street lighting and safety.

Some studies have differentiated between user groups and their preferences. For example, van Dinter et al. (2022) show that older people (in the Netherlands) are more likely to visit a park to enjoy nature than to meet other people. Couples with children are more likely to engage in social activities, especially using playgrounds. However, this aspect seems to be relatively under-researched. Li et al. (2024) suggest that future research should focus on the differential health benefits of urban green spaces according to age, socioeconomic status and cultural background.

3. City park study – methodology

In preparation for the study, a systematic review following the PRISMA structure (Moher et al., 2009) was undertaken between 2017 and 2023 which consisted in searching for the terms 'urban green space' and 'wellbeing' in EBSCOhost. To qualify as useful sources, the articles needed to focus on nature connection, leisure and recreational use of green spaces. The term 'wellbeing' was used in preference to 'quality of life', as social science researchers seem to prefer this term when discussing the benefits of nature and landscape. A total of 40 articles were selected from 297. To be included, the articles needed to be written in English, to be based on urban green spaces, and to focus on human wellbeing. Types of UGSs analyzed in the articles include parks, botanical gardens, woods and urban forests which had become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially city parks (Kleinschroth & Kowarik, 2020). The majority of the articles (95%) focused on local residents and the most popular method for research was a questionnaire (used in 60% of the articles). A questionnaire with local residents was chosen as the main research tool for this study as well.

Many authors have shown that visiting parks contributes to physical and mental wellbeing (Burrows et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2020), others have emphasized the contribution to social wellbeing (Hajzeri, 2021; Pinto et al., 2021; Torabi et al., 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2017). Konijnendijk et al. (2013) used the term 'social cohesion', which included social interaction and inclusion, however, it was concluded that people mostly visit a park with someone they know beforehand, e.g. family members or friends. For the purposes of measuring social wellbeing, it was important to include who the respondents usually visit the park with. Some studies also include cultural activities and events (Bunakov et al., 2019). The questionnaire was designed with these domains of wellbeing in mind, as well as other motivations for visiting and the benefits including the most popular activities.

The questionnaire design took into consideration several studies that have focused on visitors' use of city parks. For example, a study of what visitors want from urban parks (Taylor et al., 2020), the services and benefits that promote wellbeing in urban parks (Konijnendijk et al., 2013), the mental, physical and social wellbeing effects of urban green spaces (Yilmaz et al., 2017)

Table 1. Questionnaire design and statements

Domains	Themes	Statements
Duration/ frequency/ journey	– Time spent in the park – Frequency of visits – Length of journey – Mode of transport	– How often do you visit the City Park? – On average, how long do you spend in the City Park if you visit? – How do you reach the City Park from home? – How long does it take you on average?
Companions	– Tendency to visit the park alone or with others	Who do you most often visit the City Park with? – Alone – With my dog – With my children – With my grandchildren – With my friends – With my partner – With my whole family – With my sports team – Other, please specify…
Motivations for visiting	– Physical activities (e.g. sports, fitness, walking, jogging) – Mental benefits (e.g. to relax, nature connection) – Social interactions (e.g. meeting friends, picnics, playgrounds) – Cultural attractions or events – Practical/functional (e.g. walking to work, parking, working) The statements were adapted from Yilmaz et al. (2017): *Physical health* – Walking – Cycling – Sports activities *Mental health* – Being alone with nature – Contact with nature (e.g. flowers, animals) *Socialization* – Meeting with others – Being together with friends Taylor et al. (2020) noted the importance of functional reasons, e.g. being able to easily access a park was a common reason for its utilization (i.e. being in transit)	Main motivations for visiting the City Park (Likert scale 1–7): *Physical* – To have a walk – To go jogging – To cycle – To use the sports facilities – To use the outdoor gym – Roller skating *Physical/social* – To walk my dog – To take my children to the playground *Social* – To meet friends *Mental* – To read ▪ *Mental/physical* ➢ To sunbathe (relaxation, Vitamin D, cultivating a tan) ▪ *Mental/social* ➢ To visit the cafes (alone or with others) ➢ To have a picnic (alone or with others) ▪ *Mental/nature connection* ➢ To sit on a bench and enjoy the surroundings ➢ To look at flowers and plants *Functional* – To work – To pass through on my way to work – To use the parking facility *Other…?*
Main benefits of visiting the park	– Physical (e.g. exercise, fitness) – Mental (e.g. feeling calmer, less stressed, connecting to nature) – Social (e.g. meeting or interacting with others) – Cultural (e.g. aesthetics, learning) The statements were adapted from Yilmaz et al. (2017): *Physical health* – I feel healthy – I breathe clean air *Mental health* – I feel healthy – I feel relaxed – I feel peace – I get rid of the daily stress of life – And keep away from the city noise – Contact with nature *Socialization* – Share life with my friends and my family Taylor et al. (2020) found that one in eight park users felt relaxed, happy, peaceful, calm	Main benefits of visiting the City Park (Likert scale 1–7): *Physical* – Improving my health – Improving my fitness – Feeling energized – Enjoying the shade on hot days – Enjoying fresher air *Mental* – Improving my health – Rest and relaxation – Spending time alone for myself – Feeling calmer and less stressed – Feeling less anxious or depressed – Feeling energized – Finding inspiration in the park – Escaping from the busyness of the city – Enjoying nature – Reconnecting to nature – Learning about trees, plants and flowers – Watching wildlife *Social* – Improving my social life – Socializing with others – Doing sports with others – Enjoying time with my children – Enjoying time with my grandchildren – Enjoying time with my dog

Source: authors.

and how urban park usage relates to the quality of life (Hamdan et al., 2017). The latter authors test the relationship between behavioral competences and psychological wellbeing using five variables: physical activity, health status, social interaction, levels of satisfaction and respondents' emotions. A study was also consulted that presented a toolkit for measuring health and wellbeing in urban green spaces (Wheeler, 2018). This included physical and mental health and social interactions.

One report that included a detailed systematic review (Konijnendijk et al., 2013) differentiates between the direct and indirect health effects of urban parks. Direct effects include improved self-perceived health, psychological wellbeing and reduced stress while indirect effects mainly refer to physical activity through sports and exercise facilities. Some authors differentiated between passive and active recreation (Taylor et al., 2020), and this was also taken into consideration in the questionnaire. Here, more passive activities include sunbathing, sitting on benches, looking at flowers and plants, observing cultural buildings from the outside while active recreation relates more to sport and fitness.

Taylor et al. (2020) address the question of why people visit parks and how they experience them using brief interviews about why they came, what they notice and how they feel. These responses were very useful in the design of the statements because they provided detailed information about motivation, activities and benefits using the following categories:

1. How people used the park (e.g. exercise, meeting others).
2. How people think about the park (e.g. safe, family-friendly, dog-friendly).
3. Proximity (i.e. close to home or the city center).
4. Transit (e.g. walking through the park on the way to work).
5. Nature (e.g. shady, cool, views of water, birds).
6. Internal processes (e.g. to relax, think).
7. To get away (e.g. to have a break from work, get out of the house).

The authors clustered 886 responses into themes like connection to nature (e.g. vegetation, wildlife, shade, fresh air), facilities (e.g. playgrounds, gyms, sports fields, parking) and culture (e.g. statues, memorials).

Table 1 shows how the questionnaire was designed in terms of domains, themes and statements. It was challenging to separate the domains of wellbeing from each other, especially the mental wellbeing category, as it could be considered that physical, social and cultural activities can create mental wellbeing benefits.

Some questions were also included about the management and general maintenance of the park, including cleanliness, safety and the availability of public toilets. Safety in parks can be especially important at night (Hajzeri, 2021).

The questionnaire was prepared on the basis of Table 1, translated into Polish, tested and finally used for field research. In the period from October 22 to November 23, 2024, face-to-face questionnaire interviews were conducted among 240 adult users of *Park na Zdrowiu*; the research sample was selected based on availability. Ultimately, 238 complete questionnaires were used, which were analyzed using contingency tables, and Pearson contingency coefficient *C* was used in relation to wellbeing benefits.

4. Piłsudski Park as a research area

As mentioned, despite the fact that there are several contemporary studies about Łódź parks (including Biernacka et al., 2020; Borowska-Stefańska & Wiśniewski, 2018; Feltynowski et al., 2023; Haase et al., 2022; Kronenberg et al., 2023; Łaszkiewicz, 2024), these omit wellbeing issues and usually focus on a set of parks. The research by Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska et al. (2017) showed that the residents of Łódź (69.9%) spend their free time in public parks and gardens more often than residents of other large cities (i.e. Poznań and Kraków). It is significant that the residents of these three Polish cities indicate that the main attractions of these spaces are anthropogenic factors (well-planned area, functional design) and biodiversity[3].

Marshal Józef Piłsudski Park is one of 34 in Łódź[4] and according to Biernacka et al. (2020), it is the most popular among residents with a good level of accessibility compared to others. It should be emphasized that a feature of Łódź is the presence of historical parks, which were created at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries (Wycichowska, 2015). City parks were designed to serve the residents of the overpopulated industrial city, while private parks (parks adjacent to villas and palaces) were meant to add prestige to their owners (factories). Among the city parks in Łódź, 12 historical (7 private and 5 city) are entered in the register (Wycichowska, 2015). The park under investigation is one of the historic city parks.

Marshal Józef Piłsudski Park (officially also called the *Park Ludowy* [People's Park]) or *Park na Zdrowiu*), is located in the western part of Łódź (Figure 1). It currently covers an area of approximately 169 ha, which makes it not only the largest of the Łódź parks but also one of the largest in Europe.

The park was established between 1919 and 1939. As Olenderek (2020) writes, the Marshal Józef Piłsudski *Park Ludowy* [People's Park] was the largest garden and recreational complex built in interwar Poland and Europe. It was located outside the Łódź circular railway[5] in the Łódka valley, on former areas of the

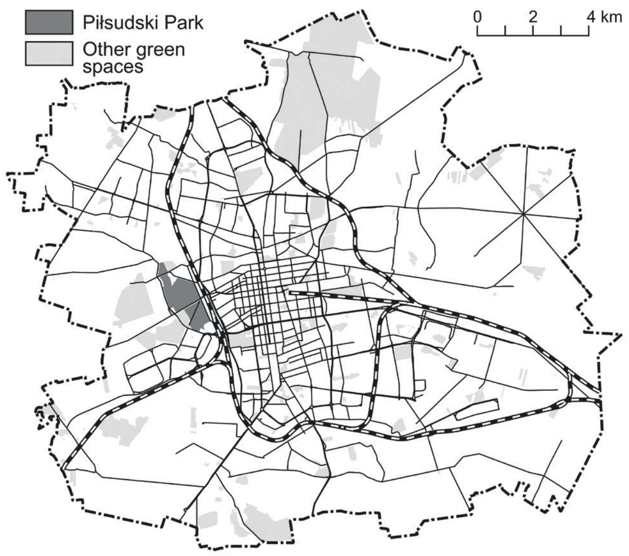

Figure 1. Piłsudski Park and other green spaces in Łódź
Source: authors

city forest (the Polesie Konstantynowskie reserve is a remnant of this large forest[6], which is adjacent to the park from the south-west). Part of the newly created park (e.g. the Zoo) included post-exploitation areas[7] (Kobojek, 2021). The final version of the plan that was adopted for implementation was in line with the then latest modernist tendencies of composing such huge park complexes of a forest-sports-recreational nature (Olenderek, 2020).

The construction of the park, modern for its time, aroused great interest in the country and abroad. Above all, the park's program (concept, design, functions) and its modernist architectural and landscape form stood out. According to the plans, this area was to meet a wide range of possibilities for common active and passive recreation, education and culture. Roads and ponds were built, sports and educational programs were created (memorial sites, thematic gardens, monuments), new trees and shrubs were planted. Ultimately, the planned cultural program was not implemented, because the work was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II[8] (Olenderek, 2020).

After the war (during the Polish People's Republic), attempts were made at various times to rebuild the destroyed facilities. Among other things, work on the water supply network was resumed, the road surface was modernized, lighting was installed, and the Zoo was expanded. In the 1960s, the Botanical Garden was built[9]. Work was also underway to monitor the condition of the trees (Olaczek, 2019) and in the 1970s, the area received significant investment. Among other things, a city amusement park was built (1974) and the *Fala* Aquapark (1976). The next decade was unfavorable with only the necessary cleaning and snow removal being carried out, while gardening works only in the central part. The great popularity of the amusement park led to the destruction of the vegetation, scaring away animals and littering the area.

It was not until the 1990s that comprehensive renovation works allowed the reconstruction of the neglected pre-war water system – a complex of park ponds (Wycichowska, 2012). At the beginning of the 21st century, the construction of a complex of sports fields and a complex of 'Jordan' gardens (including adaptations for disabled children) was completed in the vicinity of the amusement park, and outdoor strength training equipment was installed. The communication system was also modernized. A significant part of the funds for the conservation and revitalization of the historic greenery of Łódź, including the park under study, came and still comes from EU funds (e.g. Wycichowska, 2008). In the second decade of the 21st century, the initiatives and choices of residents became quite visible in the transformation of urban greenery in Łódź as part of subsequent 'Citizens' Budgets' for the city (Leśniewska-Napierała, 2017). In this way, further changes were initiated to increase the attractiveness of Piłsudski Park, both in terms of general equipment (e.g. Wi-Fi network, specialist benches for mothers with children, lighting system, bird nesting boxes, a green tunnel made of plants), recreational amenities (phased creation of the modern recreation, leisure and animation zone on the site of the former amusement park, running paths, cross-country skiing/ roller-skating classes, sports training, classes promoting a healthy lifestyle), the organisation of cultural events (the Polówka outdoor summer film festival) and inclusive activities (animation classes for families and people of all ages).

Nowadays, Piłsudski Park is an important element of the natural system of Łódź, it is a basic place of everyday recreation for the residents (Biernacka et al., 2020) and according to the cited authors, the park is characterized by good accessibility. The rich, publicly accessible functional program of the park (Figure 2) includes a modern recreation, leisure and animation zone with playgrounds for children and youth, an outdoor gym, football and basketball courts, bicycle tracks, pump tracks for cycling, ping-pong tables and a set of climbing and play equipment. Comfortable paths for walking, cycling, jogging or rollerblading have been planned throughout the park. In 2023, a local spatial development plan was adopted, which clarified the guidelines for the protection of natural, landscape and cultural values of a significant part of the historic area of the park[10]. As part of the protection of the cultural landscape, conservation protection includes the main compositional axes, the compositional layout of the paths, elements of the development plan with ponds, sports grounds and a shooting range. All activities, includ-ing greenery plantings, or projects from the civic budget must be consistent with this

Figure 2. Piłsudski Park in Łódź
Source: based on Olaczek (2019)

plan. The Monument of the Revolutionary Act has been defined as a contemporary cultural asset, covered by the preservation order, as well as an exhibition protection zone. The document also shows that there are two unpublicized archaeological sites from the Bronze Age. The only paid facilities (managed separately, but treated by users as integral parts of the Piłsudski Park) are the Zoo and the *Fala* Aquapark. In 2022, an Orientarium was created on the premises of the Zoo, the design of which was ap-preciated in international competitions for leisure architecture[11]. In the winter of 2024/2025, a temporary commercial lighting installation was arranged in the Orientarium: the Million Lights Park.

In order to complete the characteristics, it should be emphasized that the changes observed are largely consistent with trends in the development of contemporary European city parks, as defined by Bernacki (2009). Recreational infrastructure is strongly present in the functional and spatial design of the park while there are relatively few cultural facilities and modern conservation protection does not foresee any changes in this respect. However, the potential for educational activities related to the presence of archaeological sites, as well as the organization of cultural, educational and entertainment events can be indicated. The latter, including summer cinema screenings or other outdoor events promoting a healthy lifestyle, have been quite visible in recent years. It is also worth emphasizing that there are no officially available data on the users of Piłsudski Park, or research on their behavior or preferences.

5. Research results

Field research was conducted in the publicly accessible (free of charge) area of the entire Piłsudski Park in Łódź. The selection of the research sample was purposeful and accessible[12], with an attempt to include various types of park user. Analysis of the locations of the conducted interviews allows us to state that the most frequently used areas of the park are the area around Konstantynowska Street, the runners' path, ponds and the recreation zone (former amusement park).

5.1. Who are the users of Piłsudski Park and what are their patterns of park use?

The respondents were mainly permanent residents of Łódź[13] (74%), 22% were other types of residents (e.g. from elsewhere in Poland or another country), and 4% were short-term 'guests' – Table 2. This structure confirms the belief that city parks are used mainly by city residents and activities carried out in them should take into account their needs. The majority of the surveyed group are women (64%), while in terms of age, young people between 18 and 25 years of age (34%) predominate among although a sufficient presence of other age groups will allow for an investigation of age-related relationships. The respondents declared mainly completing secondary (47%) or higher education (42%) and are diverse in terms of their professional situation: 44% are professionally active, 26% are students, 20% are retirees or pensioners. Among the surveyed, 64% are in a relationships, and a fairly large number of single people are represented from all age groups.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 238)

Category		Total (%)
Sex	Women	152 (64)
	Men	86 (36)
Age	18–25	80 (34)
	26–38	57 (24)
	39–54	47 (20)
	55–73	29 (12)
	74+	25 (10)
Civil status	Married	87 (37)
	In a relationship	63 (27)
	Single	53 (22)
	Divorced/widow	34 (14)
Educational level completed	Primary school	4 (2)
	Vocational school	21 (9)
	Secondary school	112 (47)
	Studies	100 (42)
Occupational situation	Employed in a private company	78 (33)
	Self employed	14 (6)
	Civil servant/ public sector employee	13 (5)
	Retired/pensioner	47 (20)
	Student	63 (26)
	Unemployed	12 (5)
	On maternity/ parental leave	11 (5)
Residence	Permanent resident of Łódź	173 (74)
	Resident from elsewhere in Poland	28 (12)
	Resident from another country	5 (2)
	Temporary resident from elsewhere in Poland	15 (6)
	Temporary resident from another country	5 (2)
	Short-term guest in Łódź	10 (4)
Distance of residence	I live a few minutes away	92 (39)
	About 20–30 minutes	78 (33)
	< 30–60 minutes	48 (20)
	More than 60 minutes	20 (8)
Frequency of visits	Several times a week	50 (21)
	Once a week	69 (29)
	Once a month or more	51 (21)
	Several times a year	50 (21)
	Other	18 (8)

Source: authors.

Among the surveyed park users, 39% are those who 'live in close proximity' ("I live a few minutes from here"), while 33% indicated that they live 20–30 minutes away. Every fifth user lives 30 to 60 minutes from the park – Table 2.

To analyze the patterns of park use, the frequency of visits, their duration, the most common way of reaching the park and the company with whom they spend time there were determined: 29% visit the park once a week. People who visit more often ("several times a week") constitute 21% while the same share is held by those who use the park once a month or more. The park is often used (at least once a week) by retirees and those living nearby (up to 30 minutes). The vast majority of respondents spend 1–2 hours in the park (63.4%), 41.4% reach it on foot, and these are usually those who live closest to and visit the park most often. Men arrive by bike more often than women. The local reach of Piłsudski Park is evidenced by the significant share of people arriving by public transport (28.8%) or by car (18.4%). Although every fourth user is usually alone (26.4%), the majority indicate that they are accompanied (23.5% friends, 11% children, 10% the whole family); 12.4% most often come with a dog.

5.2. Main motivations for visiting the Piłsudski Park

Motivations were measured using a Likert scale (1–7: 1 – *not significant at all*; 7 – *very significant*), from which the central measure (arithmetic mean) was then calculated. In accordance with the previously presented structure of the questionnaire (Table 1), the responses were grouped into the following categories: physical activity (from walking to various forms of physical recreation), physical/social activity (playing with children in the playground and walking a dog), social activity (meetings with friends), mental – including reading (mental), sunbathing (mental/physical), picnic (mental/social), sitting on a bench and enjoying the surroundings (mental/ nature connection). The relationships between the categories of motivation and the socio-demographic variables were analyzed based on contingency tables (cross-tabulation) – Table 3. After the initial analysis, in the case of multi-component categories, the highest result was identified. For example, in the category of physical activity motivations, this component was "walking", and in the category of physical/social activity motivations "walking a dog" or "playing with children in the playground". The introduced solution was important to obtain a true picture of the hierarchy of motivations for visiting the studied park.

As a result, the general hierarchy of motivations for visiting *Park na Zdrowiu* is as follows. By far the strongest motivation to visit the park is physical activity in the form of walking (5.9 for all respondents) indicated by all types of park user regardless of age, gender, distance of residence or frequency of visits. Much less importance (2.2–3.1) was assigned to various active forms of recreation (cycling, running, using sports equipment and outdoor gyms), although they were indicated by people from all age groups. The unemployed rated the possibility of using sports infrastructure more highly (4.5).

However, short-term visitors (4.7) and those visiting the park the least frequently (4.6) indicated that psychological motivation – nature connection – was more important to them, while the unemployed (6.64) indicated that they were most motivated by the desire to meet friends (activity/social motivation) – Table 3.

Psychological motivations related to the possibility of experiencing nature (4.8) took second place in the hierarchy and turned out to be important for visiting the park, especially for women (5.20), those aged 55–73 (5.93), as well as those living closest to the park (4.7). It is significant that the frequency of visiting the park did not influence the choice of this answer.

There are also differences in the hierarchy of motives by age group. The youngest (5.26) and oldest (4.76) park users are noteworthy for whom social activity (meeting friends) was the second most important (after physical activity). Similarly, single people and students placed social motivation in the overall hierarchy (5.26). On the other hand, people with migration experience, especially residents from another country, considered it to be as important (6.75) as physical (walking).

5.3. How far do recreational developments motivate users to visit the park?

Referring to the importance of the Park's recreational infrastructure, it can be seen that although the use of recreational facilities is the second most important physical activity motivating people to visit, its rank (3.1) is much lower than that of walking. It is significant that the use of sports facilities/infrastructure in the park

Table 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and main motivations for visiting the Piłsudski Park (Likert scale: 1–7)

Category		Motivations for visiting the park									
		Physical		Physical/Social			Social activity	Mental	Mental/ Physical	Mental/ Social	Mental/ Nature connection
		Physical	Walking	Physical	Walk with the dog	Walking with children					
All		3,21	**5,89**	2,57	2,60	2,55	4,26	2,82	2,16	2,76	4,88
Sex	Women	3,05	**6,25**	2,89	2,27	1,84	4,43	2,89	2,30	3,14	5,20
	Men	3,46	**5,24**	2,06	2,80	2,98	4,03	2,64	1,94	2,11	4,29
Age	18–25	3,33	**5,41**	1,70	2,19	1,22	5,26	2,37	2,06	2,70	4,31
	26–38	3,57	**6,02**	3,28	2,54	4,02	3,77	2,65	2,10	3,06	5,02
	39–54	3,27	**5,41**	3,24	3,36	3,13	3,67	3,23	2,51	3,15	4,79
	55–73	2,86	**6,59**	2,67	2,63	2,70	3,67	2,85	2,11	2,41	5,93
	74+	2,47	**6,67**	1,98	2,42	1,54	4,79	3,33	2,04	2,08	4,75

Civil status	Married	3,18	**6,07**	3,11	2,37	3,86	3,46	3,12	2,18	3,09	5,28
	In a relationship	3,57	**5,58**	2,38	3,00	1,77	4,77	3,14	2,56	2,84	4,88
	Single	3,35	**5,63**	1,95	2,34	1,55	5,21	2,42	2,13	2,79	4,55
	Divorced	2,58	**6,46**	2,39	2,94	1,85	4,58	2,18	1,73	1,91	4,48
Educational level completed	Primary school	4,08	**6,00**	3,00	5,00	1,00	4,00	3,25	2,00	3,00	3,50
	Vocational school	3,58	**5,90**	2,88	3,05	2,70	4,20	4,15	2,90	3,10	5,85
	Secondary school	2,91	**5,91**	2,20	2,22	2,19	4,66	2,26	2,09	2,50	4,66
	Studies	3,38	**5,85**	2,90	2,80	3,00	3,90	3,04	2,08	2,96	4,93
Occupational situation	Employed in a private company	3,42	**5,89**	2,80	2,77	2,82	3,82	2,82	2,23	2,76	5,02
	Self-employed	3,15	**4,67**	2,42	1,92	2,92	2,92	1,42	1,25	2,42	3,92
	Civil servant/ public sector employee	4,12	**5,50**	3,10	2,40	3,80	4,80	3,90	3,90	4,70	5,20
	Retired/pensioner	2,55	**6,67**	2,38	2,58	2,18	4,16	3,20	2,07	2,27	5,36
	Student	3,33	**5,55**	1,72	2,13	1,32	5,26	2,45	2,24	2,76	4,34
	Unemployed	3,64	5,64	2,14	2,18	2,09	**6,64**	2,55	1,73	2,55	4,64
	On maternity/ parental leave	3,15	6,60	5,40	4,10	6,70	3,40	3,10	1,90	3,80	5,40
Residence	Permanent resident of Lodz	3,53	**5,94**	2,30	2,64	2,45	4,00	1,20	1,20	2,20	3,20
	Permanent resident (Polish resident) from elsewhere in Poland	3,03	**5,94**	2,55	1,82	2,65	4,22	2,83	2,04	2,65	4,94
	Permanent resident from another country	3,60	6,00	2,24	4,00	7,00	4,88	2,12	2,41	3,18	4,24
	Temporary resident from elsewhere in Poland	4,54	**5,50**	5,50	2,50	2,50	3,75	3,25	2,50	3,25	3,75
	Temporary resident from another country	4,15	**6,75**	2,50	2,50	2,25	4,38	3,88	3,50	3,75	6,13
	Short-term guest in Lodz	4,46	2,67	2,38	3,00	3,00	**6,75**	2,75	2,50	3,50	5,00
Distance of residence	I live a few minutes away	3,09	**6,25**	2,85	2,99	2,70	3,92	3,02	1,90	2,50	4,90
	20–30 minutes	3,42	**5,59**	2,34	2,29	2,40	4,40	2,86	2,08	2,78	4,63
	30–60 minutes	3,25	**5,80**	2,63	2,57	2,70	4,87	2,57	2,90	3,47	5,40
	More than 60 minutes	2,92	**5,08**	1,63	1,42	1,83	4,58	1,83	2,67	2,75	4,75
Frequency of visits	Several times a week	3,47	**6,15**	2,54	2,47	2,62	4,55	2,91	1,89	2,23	4,74
	Once a week	3,29	**6,00**	2,86	2,93	2,80	3,99	3,06	2,16	2,64	5,06
	Once a month or more	3,14	**6,04**	2,30	2,18	2,42	4,58	2,32	2,16	3,32	5,12
	Several times a year	2,90	4,50	2,79	2,71	2,86	4,36	3,29	2,71	3,71	**4,64**

Source: authors.

motivates people with the lowest level of education (5.0), the unemployed (4.5) and non-indigenous residents (6.0) to visit. Generally, however, passive activities are preferred among the types of physical activity, requiring fewer skills, less effort and little equipment.

Although the recreational development of the park was not considered by the park users as one of the main reasons for visiting it, users notice and appreciate it. In the open question "What do you like most about Piłsudski Park?" the most – 36% of respondents (85 people) – indicated recreational/leisure amenities – Figure 3.

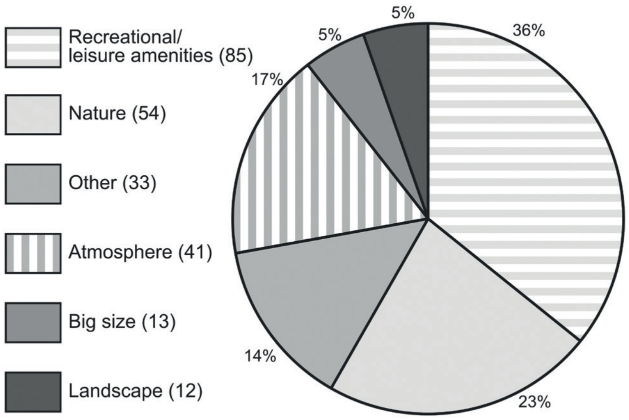

Figure 3. What do you like MOST about the Piłsudski Park?
Source: authors

The most frequently mentioned facilities were playgrounds, recreation areas (former amusement park), the Zoo, *Fala* Aquapark, benches, paths and pump trucks. As mentioned earlier, most of these recreation/leisure amenities are quite new, largely implemented as part of participatory tasks. Much fewer – less than a quarter of users – indicated that what they liked most about the park was nature (including "beautiful nature", "abundance of plants", "ponds", "ducks"). Of the remaining identified categories, 17% concerned the atmosphere of the place (peace, cleanliness of the park and silence), and 5% each the "beautiful" landscape or referred to the size of the park. The other category (14%) included proximity to home, the possibility of sports activities in natural surroundings, the variety of attractions, as well as "everything".

5.4. Wellbeing benefits of visiting Piłsudski Park: Does proximity to residence and frequency of visits matter?

As before, the benefits were measured using a Likert scale (1–7), from which the central measure (arithmetic mean) was then calculated. The analysis of benefits from visiting the park was conducted using contingency tables (Table 4). To measure the strength of the relationship, Pearson's contingency coefficient (*C*), a measure of correlation based on the chi-square statistic, was used to compare the relationship between age, proximity to home and frequency of visits, and the respondents' assessment of individual benefits for wellbeing.

According to Table 1, the benefits for wellbeing identified by respondents were grouped into three categories: benefits for physical wellbeing (improved health, improved fitness, feeling energetic, enjoying the shade on hot days and enjoying fresh air); mental wellbeing (rest and relaxation, feeling calm and less stressed, feeling less anxious or depressed, finding inspiration in the park, escaping the hustle and bustle of the city, enjoying nature, reconnecting with nature, learning about plants and observing wildlife); social wellbeing (improved social life, socialising with others, doing sport with others, spending time with children, spending time with a dog).

Among the above categories in the study group, the highest rated benefits were for physical wellbeing (5.44) and mental wellbeing (5.06). However, when we take into account partial ratings, in the study group the highest rated benefits were related to mental wellbeing: "rest and relaxation" (6.12), and also "feeling calmer and less stressed" (5.83) were highly rated. From the category of physical wellbeing, the highest rated were the fresh air (6.02) and the general improvement in health (5.97).

The highest rated benefit for mental wellbeing – "rest and relaxation" – is particularly appreciated by women (6.38), retirees and parents on maternity leave[14]. Pearson's contingency coefficient C in this case is $C = 0.37$ ($p < 0.05$) in relation to the age of the respondents and even lower for the frequency of visits ($p < 0.05$; $C = 0.3$) and distance of residence ($p < 0.05$; $C = 0.25$) – Table 4. Similarly, the average strength of the relationship ($p < 0.05$; C between 0.34 and 0.31) describes these variables and "feeling calmer and less stressed". Among the benefits for mental wellbeing, age quite strongly differentiates the observation of wildlife ($p < 0.05$; $C = 0.41$) and escape from the hustle and bustle of the city ($p < 0.05$; $C = 0.39$). They are increasingly appreciated with increasing age (but excluding the oldest respondents). In the study group, there is a tendency to assess the benefits for psychological wellbeing more highly in relation to mitigating the pressures of a big-city lifestyle (M1–M4) than to contact with nature (M6–M9). This type of benefit is assessed more highly by unemployed people (they declare a reduction in the feeling of anxiety or depression) and those with a migration history.

Interestingly, the age of the respondents differentiates statistically significantly ($p < 0.05$) the assessment of improved physical health ($p < 0.05$; $C = 0.42$). It is a particularly highly valued benefit for physical wellbeing by the elderly (people aged 74+ rated it 6.83), the unemployed, the self-employed, as well as those

Table 4. Socio-demographic characteristics of users and wellbeing benefits of visiting Piłsudski Park (Likert scale 1–7)

Category		Wellbeing benefits																				
		Physical (PH)						Mental (M)										Social (S)					
		All	1	2	3	4	5	All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	All	1	2	3	4	5
Total		5.44	5.97	6.02	4.84	5.46	4.91	5.06	6.12	5.83	4.87	5.23	5.35	5.41	5.29	3.14	4.27	3.51	4.92	4.56	2.72	2.84	2.53
Sex	Male	5.25	5.88	5.64	5.16	5.27	4.31	4.64	5.64	5.33	4.90	4.68	5.04	4.65	4.75	2.92	3.85	3.41	4.69	4.41	3.60	2.16	2.21
	Female	5.56	6.01	6.24	4.69	5.60	5.28	5.30	6.38	6.10	4.88	5.53	5.55	5.83	5.59	3.28	4.53	3.58	5.05	4.66	2.24	3.22	2.71
Age	18–25	5.08	5.68	5.64	4.61	5.10	4.39	4.76	5.94	5.48	4.89	4.85	5.35	4.95	5.05	2.44	3.95	3.56	5.69	5.54	3.23	1.31	2.05
	26–38	5.19	5.54	5.81	4.44	5.37	4.77	4.95	5.89	5.95	5.14	5.05	5.30	5.21	4.77	4.14	4.05	3.73	4.65	4.25	2.88	4.28	2.61
	39–54	5.64	6.17	6.34	5.17	5.60	4.94	5.10	6.04	5.64	4.60	5.19	5,26	5,45	5,36	4,00	4,34	3.53	3.83	3.55	2.83	4.17	3.26
	55–73	6.06	6.55	6.66	5.14	6.07	5.86	5.94	6.69	6.41	5.59	6.10	6,21	6,38	6,31	4,03	5,76	3.17	4.41	3.83	1.97	3.07	2.59
	74+	6.21	6.83	6.42	5.75	6.08	5.96	5.19	6.67	6.33	4.04	5.92	4,79	6,13	5,96	2,79	4,13	3.28	5.75	5.04	1.46	1.67	2.46
Civil status	Married/ in a relationship	5.44	6.07	5.94	4.95	5.45	4.80	5.02	6.05	5.77	4.79	5.20	5.19	5.36	5.27	3.19	4.38	3.60	4.89	4.41	2.91	3.17	2.61
	Single/divorced/ widow	5.57	5.89	6.28	4.82	5.59	5.26	5.19	6.29	6.03	4,94	5,42	5,68	5,65	5,49	2,95	4,24	3.42	5.10	4.98	2,46	2,00	2,55
Career situation	Employed residents	5.47	6.10	5.98	5.09	5.38	4.79	4.97	5.74	5.64	4,73	5,16	5,22	5,31	5,19	3,64	4,07	3.63	4.54	3.97	3,22	3,99	2,44
	Retired/pensioner	6.13	6.67	6.61	5.39	6.15	5.80	5.62	6.78	6.43	4.76	6.04	5.52	6.43	6.15	3.43	5.02	3.12	4.93	4.28	1.63	2.26	2.50
	Student	5.01	5.56	5.81	4.40	4.98	4.32	4.92	5.97	5.56	4.95	5.24	5.35	5.05	5.32	2.68	4.17	3.50	5.75	5.49	2.81	1.38	2.08
Residence	Permanent resident of Łódź	5.59	6.02	6.16	5.09	5.61	5.09	5.08	6.19	5.98	4.73	5.21	5.49	5.46	5.25	3.06	4.36	3.48	4.67	4.55	2.72	2.84	2.61
	Resident from elsewhere in Poland	4.96	5.81	5.52	4.26	4.93	4.26	4.92	5.74	5.00	5.11	4.89	4.85	5.52	5.30	3.48	4.41	3.70	5.85	4.96	2.74	2.81	2.11

Table 4 (cont.)

Category		Wellbeing benefits																			
		Physical (PH)						Mental (M)										Social (S)					
		All	1	2	3	4	5	All	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	All	1	2	3	4	5
Residence	Resident from another country	6.28	6.80	6.80	5.20	6.60	6.00	5.71	6.20	6.00	6.40	6.40	6.00	6.20	5.80	3.60	4.80	3.80	4.80	2.80	2.20	5.80	3.40
	Short-term visitor	4.22	5.30	4.80	3.60	4.20	3.20	4.76	5.40	5.00	5.40	5.10	4.10	5.40	5.40	2.60	4.40	3.66	5.50	4.30	2.90	3.40	2.20
Distance of residence	I live a few minutes away	5.61	6.07	6.33	4.93	5.59	5.11	5.16	6.21	6.03	4.77	5.41	5.50	5.58	5.47	3.10	4.36	3.41	4.60	4.05	2.15	3.27	2.95
	Around 20–30 minutes	5.61	6.14	5.79	5.24	5.73	5.12	4.90	6.10	5.85	4.69	4.74	5.36	5.21	4.95	3.18	4.04	3.45	4.62	4.55	3.24	2.51	2.35
	< 30–60 minutes	5.39	5.81	6.08	4.60	5.29	5.15	5.31	6.25	5.83	5.40	5.69	5.33	5.67	5.67	3.42	4.54	3.61	5.54	5.21	2.79	2.46	2.06
	More than 60 minutes	4.18	5.20	5.35	3.45	4.25	2.65	4.59	5.45	4.80	4.80	5.20	4.65	4.85	4.90	2.50	4.15	3.99	6.05	5.35	3.15	3.00	2.40
Frequency of visits	Several times a week	5.96	6.59	6.67	5.34	5.94	5.24	5.38	6.12	6.06	4.72	6.06	5.22	5.90	5.76	3.74	4.82	3.48	5.02	4.40	2.64	3.00	2.34
	Once a week	5.58	6.04	6.17	4.94	5.51	5.25	5.07	6.09	5.94	5.04	4.99	5.78	5.42	5.29	3.00	4.12	3.66	4.64	4.30	2.91	3.17	3.28
	Once a month or more	5.47	5.78	5.78	4.71	5.82	5.27	4.99	6.29	5.86	5.16	4.94	5.45	5.20	5.22	2.71	4.12	3.55	5.24	4.96	2.57	2.76	2.24
	A few times a year	4.83	5.50	5.50	4.36	4.76	4.04	4.88	5.90	5.48	4.76	5.20	4.82	5.24	5.00	3.20	4.34	3.55	5.04	5.02	3.04	2.52	2.12

Note: PH1 – improving my health, PH2 – enjoying fresh air, PH3 – improving condition, PH4 – feeling energy, PH5 – use the shade on hot days, M1 – rest and relaxation, M2 – feeling calmer and less stressed, M3 – feeling less anxious or depressed, M4 – finding inspiration in the park, M5 – escape from the hustle and bustle of city, M6 – enjoying nature, M7 – reconnecting with nature, M8 – learning about trees plant and flowers, M9 – wildlife watching, S1 – improving my social life, S2 – socializing with others, S3 – playing sports with others, S4 – spending time with children, S5 – spending time with your dog.

Source: authors.

who visit the park more often. In turn, improved fitness and the use of fresh air show a strong statistical relationship with the frequency of visiting the park ($p < 0.05$; $C = 0.43$; $C = 0.41$). The more often respondents visit the park, the higher they rate these benefits. In addition to frequent visitors, the value of fresh air in the park is rated very highly (above 6.0) by women, residents with migration experience (especially from other countries), those of working age, as well as people living in the immediate vicinity. A strong statistical correlation was noted between the distance from residence and the benefit of "enjoying the shade on hot days" (Pearson contingency coefficient $C = 0.41$; $p < 0.05$). Generally, this benefit was appreciated by people living up to an hour away from the park.

Although, as already mentioned, in the categories studied the benefits for social wellbeing were rated relatively lower (3.51), and it should be emphasized that "improving my social life" was of particular importance for those aged 18–25. The youngest respondents indicated "improving my social life" (5.69) in second place among all the benefits of visiting the park (after relaxation – a benefit for mental wellbeing). Improving social life through visiting the park was also appreciated by the oldest respondents (5.75). This is a very important benefit for those with a lower level of education, the unemployed, students and people with migration experience. "Improving my social life", similar to "socializing with others", shows a strong statistical relationship with the age of the respondents ($p < 0.05$; $C = 0.46$). The remaining benefits for social wellbeing were rated much lower.

6. Conclusions and discussion

The main aim of the article was to research the motivations, patterns of use, chosen activities and wellbeing benefits of visiting the largest city park in Łódź: Marshal Józef Piłsudski Park. The wellbeing benefits of using a city park have not yet been discussed in depth in the Polish context, therefore, the selected park turned out to be an inspiring 'research laboratory' for this topic and others.

The functional and spatial development of the Park is constantly evolving, although its fundamental design remains consistent with the original modernist aspiration to offer a multifunctional, attractive, accessible space for leisure and recreation for various users. It is essentially a space that responds to current social needs and offers possibilities for strengthening the wellbeing, especially mentally, of city residents. The obtained results correspond with the conclusions of Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska et al. (2017) indicating that for the residents of large Polish cities, including Łódź, anthropogenic elements (well-planned area, functional design) are a very important asset of city parks. This is an interesting issue that requires further research, including in the context of wellbeing.

The analysis enables the drawing of several conclusions. Firstly, in the overall assessment of the benefits for wellbeing, users strongly appreciate both the benefits related to physical and mental health, which is consistent with the results known from the literature (cf. Talal & Santelmann, 2021). It is interesting, however, that although the respondents indicated physical motivations to a greater extent, they ultimately assigned high scores to the benefits felt for both physical wellbeing and mental wellbeing. This is a favorable situation, noted in the literature (Jabbar et al., 2022), likewise in the context of promoting and strengthening subjective wellbeing through various forms of activity in public green spaces, even if in practice, passive forms of recreation dominate. Future research, and more importantly, action could aim to promote this not yet fully realized potential for all dimensions of health, including especially mental benefits. Returning to the motivations for visiting the park, the data showed that its diverse forms of sports and recreational activities are still not fully used, including by people living nearby and often using the park. At the same time, a large group of the respondents rated the attractiveness of recreational amenities highly, which, as shown, are one of the visible dimensions of the change currently taking place in the park.

A deeper analysis allowed for a nuanced valuation of wellbeing benefits, including in various social contexts. It was shown that social wellbeing benefits are highly valued by unemployed, less educated people, with migration experience, which is important in the context of common actions aimed at using city parks for social inclusion and social cohesion, as noted also by Seeland et al. (2009) and Rigolon (2016). The high social valuation of these spaces by the surveyed youth (including students) and the elderly confirms Pasanen et al.'s (2023) observations.

The presented study, like any other, has its limitations. They mainly result from the non-probability sample, which was nevertheless justified by objective considerations. However, it is not the statistical but the exploratory nature of the study that may constitute its value. It is the first attempt at an in-depth exploration of benefits for various dimensions of human wellbeing in the context of a Polish urban green space. The presented results may be useful for park managers, as well as public authorities responsible for shaping pro-health solutions. At a theoretical level, it should be emphasized that the article extends the UGS literature with an example from a CEE city in which green spaces are often lacking compared to their Western counterparts. The didactic aspect could also be mentioned, as the construction of the research tool itself encourages further studies on the possible contribution of contemporary urban parks to the wellbeing of metropolitan individuals and communities.

Endnotes

[1] As WHO (2023b) point out, the (globally) experienced mental health crisis particularly affects urban populations. For example, van Os et al. (2010) state that the risk of schizophrenia is twice as high in urban areas.

[2] Referring to these practices, Hunter et al. (2019) demonstrated that experience of nature in the city reduces stress in the context of everyday life, based on the salivary physiological stress biomarkers cortisol and alpha-amylase.

[3] In a study on formal and informal green spaces in Kraków, Łódź and Poznań, respondents attributed the greatest importance to city parks. Residents of Łódź (69.9%) especially indicated parks and public gardens as green areas where they spend their free time.

[4] Parks and squares together constitute 3% of the area of the city of Łódź (Biernacka et al., 2020).

[5] The Łódź Circular Railway, a line surrounding the city on all sides, was built in 1898 at the initiative of the Warsaw–Vienna Railway Company.

[6] According to Dmochowska-Dudek and Majecka (2014), the "Polesie Konstantynowskie" reserve, established in 1930, is one of the oldest forest reserves in Poland and one of the oldest in Europe located within an urban area.

[7] Areas of former exploitation of building materials (especially clay for brick production) for a developing industrial city.

[8] According to Olenderek (2020, p. 42) "the exhibition grounds in the area of the ŁKS stadium, planned as Park Wystawy Stałej [a Permanent Exhibition Park] adjacent to *Aleja Unii* (in the post-war period, a complex of swimming pools called the *Fala* Aquapark was built here) and the Park Wystawy Periodycznej [Periodical Exhibition Park] were not built. … The botanical garden with a palm house planned opposite the dendrological garden was not established (it was created in the post-war period…). Other buildings, such as the Dom Ludowy [People's House] or park pavilions for various purposes (exhibitions, cafes, changing rooms, showers, etc.) were not built. Łuk Triumfalny [The Arc de Triomphe], Pomnik Wolności [the Freedom Monument] and the Obelisk were not built, only Pomnik Poległych [the Monument to the Fallen]" [own transl. – J.K.-A.].

[9] According to the information from the Zarząd Zieleni Miejskiej [Municipal Greenery Board], the body managing the Piłsudski Park in Łódź, the Zoo and the Botanical Garden, originally part of the park, are now separate facilities (Zarząd Zieleni Miejskiej, n.d.). In the conducted study, the Zoo and the *Fala* Aquapark were treated as components of the Piłsudski Park, because this is their perception socially and the approach in the literature (cf. Biernacka et al., 2020).

[10] The studied area was covered by the local spatial development plan for the part of the city including Marshal Józef Piłsudski Park, located in the area of the streets: Konstantynowska, Krakowska, Siewna, Wieczność (*Uchwała nr LXXVII/2315/23 Rady Miejskiej w Łodzi* [Resolution No. LXXVII/2315/23 of the City Council in Łódź], 2023).

[11] The project won in two categories of the European Property Awards 2022–2023: Leisure Architecture and Public Service Architecture. The modern complex also won the title of "21st Century Construction" in the category of "Animal-Friendly Facilities" in the "Modernization of the Year & 21st Century Construction" competition.

[12] The park is a public facility, is not fenced and has multiple entrances. There are no statistics kept or measurements of the number of users, which would have allowed for a different research sample.

[13] The field research was conducted in the autumn when there may be fewer users in the park than in the summer. However, weather conditions were conducive to outdoor activities. In order to include the widest possible cross-section of users, the research was conducted at different times of the day and on different days of the week.

[14] Small subpopulations in the study group (e.g. pensioners, parents on maternity leave, the unemployed) are important to show different types of park user. Their inclusion in the analysis has a high cognitive value and indicates potential directions for further research.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.02 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Designing and delivering inclusive heritage tours: Good practices for engaging socially excluded audiences

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How to cite (APA style): Minnaert, L. (2025). Designing and delivering inclusive heritage tours: Good practices for engaging socially excluded audiences. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 27–38. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.02

ABSTRACT

People who experience social exclusion often face barriers to participation in recreation and tourism and tend to have limited engagement with culture and heritage. Yet, both sets of activities have been linked to a range of positive outcomes. This study focuses on heritage tours, a tourism product at the crossroads of culture, tourism and recreation. It examines how heritage tours can be designed and delivered in a way that promotes inclusion: removing barriers, creating a judgement-free environment, fostering inclusive oral communication, and providing an equitable experience for all participants. Addressing a gap in the tourism literature, the paper draws on audience development strategies that have been used in culture and the arts, including product-led and market-led approaches. It analyzes a case study initiative in Edinburgh, Scotland, to explore the effectiveness of its approach and evaluate whether it offers any good practices that can be replicated in other destinations or contexts.

KEYWORDS

inclusion, heritage, exclusion, tours, culture

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
3 January 2025
Accepted:
12 February 2025
Published:
23 April 2025

1. Introduction

People who experience social exclusion (for example children and adults living in poverty, people with disabilities and those with chronic, terminal or mental illnesses and their carers, people who have substance abuse issues or have experienced incarceration, etc.) tend to face barriers to participation in recreation and tourism, as well as in culture and heritage. Yet, participation in these activities has been shown to produce a number of positive outcomes that would be of particular benefit to these groups. This paper will focus on heritage tours: an activity that occupies the intersection between recreation and tourism on the one hand, and culture and heritage on the other. It will explore how, once the financial barrier to participation has been removed, heritage tours can be designed and delivered to be as inclusive as possible towards a diverse audience. To do so, it will draw on principles and practices in creating judgement-free spaces, inclusive oral communication, and audience development in culture and the arts.

While the tourism literature has addressed issues at the intersection of cultural heritage and social exclusion, it has failed to do so from the perspective of excluded people as tourists or participants. Some of the existing research focuses on the role of excluded communities in shaping how history and heritage are represented: for example Cole (2004) examines the duty of care museums and heritage attractions have to their subject community

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

in interpreting 'their' past, using the examples of mining heritage; and Harrison (2010) gives examples of disadvantaged communities using heritage and heritage tours to create an alternative to dominant interpretations of history and to build community. In addition, Gibson et al. (2019) discuss how after disasters, socially disadvantaged groups are often excluded from the decision-making process about the recovery and preservation of their heritage. These examples all place excluded communities largely outside of the heritage experience and while the authors argue they should have a say in how their heritage is presented, they are not themselves the target audience for the experience. This paper places excluded communities at the heart of heritage tourism participation, by exploring how these tourism experiences can be designed and delivered in an inclusive way.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social exclusion and the effects of participating in recreation and culture

Levitas et al. (2007, p. 9) describe social exclusion as a complex and multi-dimensional process, that "involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas". While the authors argue that poverty is a risk factor across all the dimensions of social exclusion, they emphasise that it tends to interact with other dimensions, such as access to public and private services, participation in culture and education, the living environment and health. Deep exclusion refers to exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, wellbeing and future life chances (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 9).

People who experience social exclusion often face barriers to participation in recreation and tourism and tend to have limited engagement with culture and heritage (Cole & Morgan, 2010; Kastenholz et al., 2015; Little, 2014; Mak et al., 2021). Yet, participation in these activities has been associated with multiple benefits, including a greater level of social inclusion, improvements to physical and mental health, and a deepening of social ties. Social tourism research, in particular, often focuses on the benefits of tourism participation for excluded groups including increased social and cultural capital, a more positive outlook on life, better interpersonal relationships and enhanced wellbeing (McCabe, 2009; Minnaert, 2020; Morgan et al., 2015). In addition, recreation and leisure participation have been shown to produce health benefits. For example, Iwasaki et al. (2010, 2013, 2014) outlined the benefits of participation in leisure and recreation activities for people with mental illness and these activities can help people cope with stress, reduce boredom, heal from trauma, and build positive and meaningful social relationships. Litwiller et al. (2017) similarly found that spending time in community recreation programs and spaces promoted the recovery and social inclusion (i.e. community integration) in individuals with mental illnesses.

When people who are socially excluded experience tourism, they typically do so domestically, at the regional or even local level. Not all definitions of tourism holistically include these activities, for example Becken (2009, p. 32) defines domestic tourism as "all trips over 40 kilometres outside one's usual environment which can be day trips or overnight trips for any given travel purpose". This study, however, includes local recreation experiences into the realm of tourism, in line with the UN Tourism (n.d.) definition:

> Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure.

Participation in culture was found to have positive effects also; Little (2014, p. 2) highlights that cultural activities that build on the interests of young people are a good mechanism through which they can build social capital. In that study, four heterogeneous groups of young people were considered: young carers, the looked after young, the disabled young and those at risk of offending or gang activity. Despite the considerable differences between these groups of young people, they were found to gain similar benefits from having their barriers to participation in culture reduced or removed. Focusing on adult populations, Morse et al. (2015) analyzed the effect of museum outreach activities on those who are in treatment for mental health and substance abuse-related conditions. They concluded that outreach programmes create spaces of conviviality, conversation and friendship, and that the social interactions they provide are key in their role as therapeutic interventions. They also argued that developing new interests is central in recovery because of the sense of pride and increased confidence participants gained after trying something new. Supporting the thesis that participation in cultural activities can be associated with positive health outcomes, Mak et al. (2021) found that going to cultural events (such as the theatre, opera, concerts or exhibitions) and visiting museums and heritage sites (including visiting a city or town with historic character) was tied to improvements in wellbeing, slower declines in cognition, reduced levels of isolation and loneliness, enhanced social wellbeing in the community and lower mortality rates. These benefits were found among healthy individuals as well as people with mental health problems, dementia, substance use addiction, carers, families living in deprived areas, asylum seekers and isolated adults. This has led to calls to encourage 'social prescribing' – this term refers to enabling primary care services to link with cultural organizations to offer their services as health interventions (Todd et al., 2017). In a similar vein, participation in cultural activities is an element in the recovery-oriented approach to mental health care which emphasises hope, social inclusion, goal-setting and self-management (Victorian Government, Department of Health, 2011).

Specifically focusing on heritage-related cultural activities, Lewis et al. (2018, p. 6) argue that heritage can be instrumental in enhancing social inclusion, developing intercultural dialogue, and shaping the identity of a territory. Grossi et al. (2019) found that that visiting a heritage attraction has significant positive impacts on both wellbeing and cortisol levels. Chauhan and Anand (2023) point out that heritage tours have educational benefits, as they offer an immersive and engaging way to interact with history. In addition, they may have social benefits, as they can help cultivate a sense of identity and belonging among the participants, particularly if they belong to marginalized communities who feel estranged from the heritage activities happening in their area.

2.2. Widening participation in cultural and heritage activities with socially excluded groups

Considering the extensive positive impacts that are associated with engaging in recreational culture and heritage activities, there is a clear incentive to engage in strategies that increase the participation of socially excluded groups. The European Commission (2012) highlights that the first step should be to remove some of the barriers these groups face: recommendations include ensuring access for people with disabilities, removing financial barriers by providing free or discounted tickets, and providing local engagement opportunities for communities who face geographical barriers to participation. Heasman and Atwal (2004) also mention removing barriers and securing access in the context of visitors with disabilities: they conclude that individuals with a disability desire similar experiences to other tourists, although they may require adaptations according to their type and degree of disability. Arguing that physical and communication access are equally important, the Scottish Government (2011) emphasize the need for inclusive communication by sharing information in a way that everybody can understand. Inclusive communication requires a recognition that people understand and express themselves in different ways, while ensuring that service users are getting information and expressing themselves in ways that meet their needs.

While these are all valuable recommendations, they omit the potential psychological barriers that may also be at play for socially excluded audiences. Todd et al. (2017, p. 52) point out that cultural settings like museums can be experienced as "physically intimidating or seen as places for only the highly educated; these perspectives create barriers for everyone, but perhaps more so for socially isolated people". This perceptual barrier can be a big deterrent: Trussell and Mair (2010) point out that socially excluded people are likely to have negative past experiences and may avoid situations that make them feel vulnerable. As a consequence, it is important to make them feel connected and not exposed. Leisure activities are presented as a helpful way to create interactions and form broader connections in a relaxed environment. The authors emphasize the need to create a judgment-free environment that fosters trust. Todd et al. (2017, p. 51) highlight the potential role of facilitators in creating this atmosphere of trust. In their study, they consider this in the context of museum outreach to socially excluded communities, and propose that "facilitators enabled new experiences, learning and social interaction, providing a human element by imparting knowledge and modelling confidence and enthusiasm for learning. The personal characteristics of the facilitators were pivotal in this". Roberts et al. (2011) explore the role of facilitators in an outreach initiative with carers in an art gallery setting, emphasizing the reciprocal exchange of knowledge or information. In their study, gallery staff felt they gained as much knowledge from carer-participants as they had been able to impart, and vice versa. In the context of heritage tours, the facilitators are the tour guides and these guides play different roles to varying degrees according to the people they are working with, namely, leader, educator, host, public relations representative, and conduit (Cruz, 1999). Furthermore, tour guides are expected to respond to the needs and expectations of diverse visitors, including those with special needs and from other cultures (Ham & Weiler, 2000).

2.3. Audience development in the cultural sector

Strategies that aim to widen participation in culture, applied specifically to museums, galleries and performing arts institutions, are referred to as audience development. While these strategies are not commonly applied to heritage tours, the concept is reviewed here to explore whether it can offer insights around effective strategies that can enhance the inclusivity of this cultural tourism product.

Blackwell and Scaife (2016, p. 61) define audience development as "the varied approaches museums and galleries take to understand and expand their user base. … Such a strategy needs to recognize the barriers, perceived and real, that confront users and non-users". Ayala et al. (2020) distinguish two characteristics of effective audience engagement strategies: community engagement (whereby the institution gets to know its community and collaborates with local social and/or political 'agents'), as well as participatory processes and co-creation. Hayes and Slater (2002) distinguish between two types of audience development: 'mainstream', focusing on existing arts attenders, and 'missionary', focusing on traditional non-attenders. The latter type aims to extend engagement with cultural institutions beyond the "upper education, upper occupation and upper income groups" they tend to attract (Cerquetti, 2016, p. 35). Kawashima (2000) distinguishes between four types: audience education, cultural inclusion, extended marketing and taste cultivation. Audience education aims to improve the enjoyment and understanding of the arts. Cultural inclusion targets groups who are less likely to attend cultural events for social reasons which may be due to a number of factors, such as low incomes or ethnicity. Extended marketing focuses on people who are not yet customers but have high attendance potential. Finally, taste cultivation targets the existing audience but aims to encourage them to participate in different types of cultural activity. In this study, the cultural inclusion perspective of audience development is particularly relevant.

Audience development strategies do not only differ in their intended outcomes, but also in their approach: they can be either product-led or market-led. In a product-led approach, the institution chooses to offer the same product to existing and new audiences, whereas in the market-led approach, the product is adapted to the new audience's needs or expectations. These adaptations can either involve choosing certain products in an institution's cultural offering to present to a specific audience or making changes to its core offer for that audience. A product-led approach starts from the premise that while individuals possess different degrees of cultural competence, they have the same potential for cultural consumption and that cultural products offered will be relevant to most people. A market-led approach, in contrast, starts from the premise that people from different socio-economic backgrounds may not have the same level of cultural competence, therefore barrier removal alone (for example, through discounts or free entry) is not effective and different products must be packaged or devised to appeal to the different segments (Kawashima, 2000; Kawashima, 2006).

Expert opinions are divided as to which approach to audience development is most effective. Bamford (2011, p. 11) argues for a market-led approach, stating that "re-interpreting or re-positioning cultural services, manipulation of both the content (programming) and the context (e.g. location) of the offering, and making cultural activities into social activities have all been proven to work across all groups within society". Durrer and Miles (2009, p. 228) however highlight that market-led approaches have attracted "controversy and accusations of a 'dumbing down' of the arts to the lowest common consumer". Some scholars have viewed the attempt to invite in a new kind of visitor through Disney-style attractions or through more diversified and ethnicity-focused exhibitions, as a new kind of 'edutainment'. The latter criticism of market-led approaches however does not clarify whether they can be helpful in engaging socially excluded audiences with cultural tourism, as it does not reflect the viewpoint of the new audiences that are targeted but rather that of traditional audiences.

The question whether inclusive cultural tourism products – including heritage tours – should adopt market-led or product-led approaches to successfully engage excluded audiences, is not explored in depth in the existing literature. This study will analyze an inclusive heritage tour initiative targeted at excluded audiences in Edinburgh, Scotland, to explore the effectiveness of its approach and evaluate whether it offers any good practices that can be replicated in other destinations or contexts.

3. Case study: The Our Stories, Your City project

In April 2022, the Our Stories, Your City project was launched in Edinburgh, Scotland, as a collaboration between Mercat Tours, the largest walking tour company in Scotland, and the Grassmarket Community Project (GCP), a charity and community center that supports vulnerable people through transitions in their lives and reconnects them to mentoring, social enterprise, training and education. GCP explicitly targets people who experience social exclusion in the broadest sense: the organisation describes itself as "a family of people who have or still do feel isolated and need to share with, learn from and connect to others". The users of GCP are referred to as 'members' who self-refer to join the organization, and their experience of exclusion can be due to a variety of factors, including homelessness and precarious housing, disability, substance abuse, unemployment, former incarceration, experiences with violence, trauma, and many others (GCP, n.d.).

The project's goal was for Mercat tour guides (referred to as 'storytellers') to reconnect vulnerable communities with their city via heritage tours whilst simultaneously supporting local Living Wage jobs during the COVID recovery period. Different tours were offered, including visits to attractions such as Edinburgh Castle, the National Museum of Scotland and the Palace of Holyrood. An accessibility expert was hired to provide advisory services on the project around developing an inclusive and accessible guest experience. The Our Stories, Your City title for the initiative was a reference to VisitScotland's designation of 2022 as the Year of Stories (Mercat Tours, 2023).

The initiative was funded by visitor donations: paying guests on Mercat Tours were offered the opportunity to make a donation towards a tour for GCP members, led by a Mercat storyteller and supported by GCP staff members. In addition, the initiative was awarded a grant from the Scottish Tourism Leadership Programme which is Scotland-wide and supports business and community-led tourism enterprises taking the lead in the sector's COVID-19 recovery, funded by the Scottish Government's £25 million Tourism Taskforce Recovery Plan. The grant allowed for the appointment of a project manager and for setting up the payment platform for visitor donations (Mercat Tours, 2023).

4. Methodology

This exploratory study aimed to evaluate an inclusive heritage tour initiative aimed at socially excluded participants and – if possible – identify good practices in designing and delivering these tours. The research is based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with the different stakeholders who designed, delivered and experienced this program: executives of the organizations that coordinated the initiative (Mercat Tours and GCP), Mercat storytellers who led the tours, GCP members who participated, and the inclusion expert who supported the project. Six interviews were conducted, as well as one focus group with four participants, resulting in 10 respondents:

1. Mercat Tours:
   - Managing Director,
   - two storytellers who led Our Stories, Your City tours.
2. GCP:
   - Managing Director,
   - Service Manager,
   - four members who have each participated in at least one tour.
3. External consultant:
   - Inclusion Expert advising on the project.

Data were collected between January and March 2023. Three interviews were conducted via Teams, three were conducted in person. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The focus group (which lasted 75 minutes) was conducted on GCP premises and took place in one of the activity rooms of its community center. While the researcher and focus group participants occupied a separate table, GCP support staff were present in the room, at a different table, conducting their regular activities. The GCP support staff did not intervene in the focus group, but their presence aimed to reassure the focus group participants by not disrupting the usual routines at the center. This approach was agreed upon with GCP in the spirit of what Dempsey et al. (2016) refer to as sensitive interviewing with vulnerable groups; working collaboratively with influential gatekeepers, researchers are able to ensure the interests of participants in their place of care are protected, while also building rapport and fostering a sense of trust.

Testimonials recorded in this study refer to the first six months of the project, from April until October 2022. During this time, 20 dedicated Our Stories, Your City tours ran, benefiting 300 GCP members.

5. Findings

5.1. Removing barriers and creating a judgement-free environment

To widen the participation in cultural and heritage tourism of socially excluded groups, it is important that some of the barriers to their engagement are removed, whether they be financial, practical or psychological. By offering heritage tours at no cost, the Our Stories, Your City project removed a substantial financial barrier for its participants. In addition, it removed the practical barrier of booking and organizing the visits: this barrier can be substantial as many attractions in Edinburgh require timed tickets that are sold online. The GCP Service Manager highlights how valuable it was to have that barrier removed:

> The feedback we have from our members is that these opportunities are things that they really value because it's hard to organise. You know, if you've got challenges, loads of different things going on, just the step of organizing something like that or figuring out how to access it, is really difficult. So, to have someone organise it breaks down the barrier and I think that's what's the most valuable part about this partnership. It is just there for people to access. They don't have to go out and figure out how to get into Edinburgh Castle. They can just read the bulletin and have that opportunity there.

In addition, Todd et al. (2017) mention that cultural activities can be experienced as intimidating or only the highly educated as certain behaviors are expected that socially excluded people may be less familiar with. By including GCP support staff members on the tours, this psychological barrier was addressed and a sense of familiarity was created, as the GCP Managing Director explains:

> We looked into what prevents people like our members from accessing these attractions, and we identified a few barriers like stigma, low self-esteem, not feeling that they are welcome, not feeling like it is a place they are allowed to go to. "Maybe I will get it trouble, I am not allowed to be touching things". Then there is the language in which these tours are delivered, cost is obviously a factor… this partnership addresses all of that.

Trussell and Mair (2010) highlight that because of the negative experiences socially excluded people have experienced, they may shy away from showing themselves as vulnerable, hence, creating judgement-free environments, where they feel connected but not exposed, is important. This was echoed by the Inclusion Expert who advised on this project who clarifies that as a socially excluded person, it often feels as if society does not grant permission to enjoy certain places. He explains further that creating a sense of genuine welcome is vital in overcoming this:

> When I talk to tourism businesses, I often talk about the welcome. Because with my wheelchair, I am slightly conspicuous [ironic], I can usually tell within the first few seconds whether the visit is going to go well or not. If you don't hide behind the desk, if you step out and you greet me like everybody else, that is fabulous. Because that is not the normal experience when you have a conspicuous difference, whether you are on wheels or you are different like the members of the Grassmarket Community Project. The experience and the emotions are actually the same: they are experiences of rejection, disinterest… some people want rid of you.

Mercat Storyteller 2 comments explicitly about how she aimed to create a judgement-free and genuinely welcoming environment. She explains that for her, it was a useful learning experience to be exposed to people who absorb and engage with information differently, which has made her more mindful in her profession, and aware of the importance of inclusive communication:

> They might have problems with eye contact and maybe they look as if they're distracted and looking around but actually, they might be listening. That's just their way of coping with the situation they're in. And I think it's just helped me be a bit more mindful of things like that, and not to instantly dismiss someone. It does make you think and have an open-mindedness about people with more diverse needs than maybe your average person that that comes on the tour.

The Inclusion Expert emphasises just how much removing the psychological barrier to participation matters in achieving inclusive experiences:

> If you can create those moments when the disability, the social impairment, can be forgotten, then that is magical. You don't want to do it in a condescending way. … But if you can, for just one moment in time, make people forget about their situation so they can enjoy simply enjoy all of the stories like everybody else, that is magical. Because that's not normal to them.

5.2. The role of facilitators and local agents

In the literature, facilitators and local agents were mentioned as parties that can enhance the effectiveness of audience development initiatives. Todd et al. (2017) discuss the role of the facilitators who are usually internal to the cultural organisation. Facilitators direct any learning in the cultural experience, foster social interactions and model an enthusiasm for learning. They emphasise that the characteristics and personality of the facilitator are pivotal in achieving engagement. Roberts et al. (2011) point out that the information exchange between facilitators and participants is often reciprocal.

Both Mercat storytellers interviewed for this study emphasised their personal affinity with the project's goals, and their passion in seeing it reach its desired outcomes. Their genuine commitment was remarked upon by the GCP Service Manager and the GCP participants, and is illustrated by this quote from Storyteller 2:

> I was very, very honoured to be to be asked to do the very first tour. I really got the principles behind what they were trying to do. The idea that there's people living in the city that are not connected to the city, really, they've got no access to the heritage aspect of it. They've got no access to all this culture and history that's around them, that they should be very much part of because they've probably grown up and lived in Edinburgh their whole lives. So, the idea to be able to bring that back to those kinds of vulnerable people was just… I loved the idea. I thought it was great and was really, really keen to get involved.

In addition to internal facilitators, Ayala et al. (2020) suggest that effective engagement of non-traditional audiences also benefits from the involvement of local social agents, such as community groups. The Our Stories, Your City project was a collaboration between a tourism organisation and a community group, in which each partner had a distinct and important role to play: Mercat Tours delivered the tours, and GCP communicated the offer to its members and provided support during the tours. The GCP Service Manager explains the composition of each tour group:

> We had the tour leader and two members of staff and then 13 individuals that we're supporting. Our members of staff are able to support access, keep people engaged, and their members of staff can focus on giving the information.

A particular strength of the Our Stories, Your City project is that the collaboration between the tourism and community organizations in question was based on strong foundations and a long history of partnership, dating back to 2012. At that time, Mercat Tours bought furniture and upcycled wood items from GCP's woodworking social enterprise, but then started using GCP meeting spaces. Other examples of the longstanding ties between the two organisations include Mercat Tours selling merchandise produced by GCP artisans in its gift shop, while offering four free overnight stays per year to GCP in a rural group accommodation property it owns.

Because the collaboration between Mercat Tours and GCP dates back many years, it has evolved into a deep-rooted partnership, based on shared values and trust.

> The Grassmarket is a friendship and a partnership that we've grown over 10 years now. Community means, in its simplest sense, friendship and support and honesty, and we've always seen that the power of that,

explains the Mercat Tours Managing Director, and adds:

> The reason that we chose them is they are literally physically neighbors to us in the Old Town. But also, there's a real value match. We think the same, we have the same values.

This value match and basis of mutual trust allows for a collaboration whereby each partner can rely on the other for their expertise. Just as Mercat Tours is an expert in storytelling, the GCP is an expert in supporting their members and users so the two parties collaborated to create an experience that maximised the strengths of both. Mercat Storyteller 2 explains that she would always

> touch base with the people that are there from the charity, because they know the people, they've worked with them. They were involved with them much more than you've ever going to be. You're just taking them on one tour. They are with them every single day.

As an example of how that helped her deliver successful tours, she mentioned that GCP would advise on seating arrangements and diffuse tension between some of the participants where needed, so there was no antagonism. The Inclusion Expert supporting the project agrees with this recommendation and adds:

> Don't think you have suddenly got to be an expert in homelessness or disability or diversity, just do something very simple and ask. Assume nothing, just ask what you can do to make the tour amazing.

5.3. Product-led vs. market led approaches

The Mercat Tours respondents in this study strongly felt that a product-led approach was the best way to design and the deliver the tour experience. While the storytellers were aware that the GCP visitors faced certain levels of disadvantage in their lives, they did not want to make any generalizations about their needs or preferences, and approached them with respect for their individuality:

> I very much wanted to keep it as much a normal tour as I would normally do. They're no different to any other visitors that come on the tour. The only thing that will be slightly changed is knowing that they lived more locally, I didn't want to make the presumption that they wouldn't know anything. I didn't want to make it seem like I was being patronizing. (Mercat Storyteller 2)

> I was aware that I was dealing with a group of people who were not visitors. The people of the GCP are every bit as much a part of Edinburgh as I am. And we are aware that they are vulnerable people, each individual in their own right, and they all have their own needs and requirements. Some are more outgoing than others. I was aware of their vulnerability – I keep using that word, it's not at all disrespectful. (Mercat Storyteller 1)

Both storytellers strongly reject that the tastes and preferences of socially-excluded people can be predicted by their socio-economic status. Kolb (2000), when describing cultural audiences, refers to Gans and Bourdieu when describing popular or 'lowbrow' culture: these terms tend to refer to cultural products that are unambiguous and predictable, and that offer entertainment, relaxation and escapism. Mercat Storyteller 2 explicitly addresses the negative stereotypes she feels the Our Stories, Your City project can help overcome:

> I think society can make you think people from that background won't appreciate something like this, and it's not true. There're people out there that might want to engage with this kind of thing and just haven't had the opportunity. It's good to be a part of that and know that you can open those doors or people's eyes.

The Mercat Tours Managing Director agreed that it was paramount for her that the GCP had an experience that was no different to the one paying visitors were receiving, and that the two groups would be treated in the exact same way. However, she clarifies, that does not mean that adaptations cannot be made to better suit the needs of the GCP group. There is room for co-creation, and in fact, she argues, this is paramount in delivering any tour experience, for any audience:

> Every tour is adapted, depending on the guests or visitors that you have in front of you, where they're from, their language level, their age, their cultural backgrounds.

An example of a change that was made to better serve the GCP group, was to adjust the timing and length of the Our Stories, Your City tours, so that the GCP member and users could be back on time to enjoy the free lunch that is offered daily in the community center.

Another change that was mutually agreed upon, was to include a short break along the tour. Heritage tours tend to be rich in context and content, and the feedback from GCP participants was that a short pause during the tour would be helpful:

> One of the big feedbacks was to have a break to kind of process the information. Because on tours, it's just nonstop facts. A lot of the feedback was suggesting was that if we had like a 10–15 minute break in the middle just to have a recap or just a quiet moment just to kind of process all of that information. We've included that in the tour, and I think that's helped people. (GCP Service Manager)

A similar comment was made by one of the tour participants:

> Yeah, have a break. Cause it's a long walk, so you do need to have a little break. So, you can also come to terms with what you heard and share some of that knowledge, talk about what we have seen so far. (GCP Tour Participant 1)

The external consultant who advised on the inclusivity of the tour design commented that making these small adjustments, without changing the nature of the product on offer, can be a very effective to make the tour product more inclusive:

> Providing equality of experience is not just doing what you always do… it is the small things that make the biggest difference. (Inclusion Expert)

5.4. Impacts on participants

The effectiveness of the Our Stories, Your City initiative depends not only on how it was delivered, but also on what impacts – if any – it had on the participants.

Engaging in cultural activities is linked to increased wellbeing (Mak et al., 2021), and this effect was acknowledged by the GCP participants:

> It's a lot of walking but you are out in the fresh air. I just love doing it. (GCP Participant 3)

> It does make you happy. If you are walking it helps your mental health. (GCP Participant 4)

In addition, participation in recreational and/or cultural activities has been linked to fostering and creating social relationships, building community and reducing loneliness (Iwasaki et al., 2010, 2013, 2014; Litwiller et al., 2017). The social aspect of the tours was indeed important and as well as being an opportunity for strengthening bonds between people who already know each other, the tours were also an opportunity for meeting new people. Mercat Storyteller 2 comments:

> A lot of people go to the GCP for socializing and I think that needs to be stressed. They might be putting themselves out there to meet someone new. Joining a tour with someone they don't know and allow that person to take them around, that's quite a big step for some of these people.

Participating in heritage tourism activities has also been linked to educational benefits and can help spark an interest in the history of an area (Lewis et al., 2018; Chauhan & Anand, 2023). Mercat Storyteller 2 acknowledges that history was not always in the participants' usual sphere of interest:

> People think kind of negatively about history at school. History is kings and battles and dates – at Mercat we put that to one side. We want to tell a different side of history to engage you, to enthral you, to entertain you.

This was confirmed by GCP Participant 2, who credits the Our Stories, Your City experience with changing his perspective:

> Previously I didn't have an interest in history, no, not at all, because I didn't enjoy it in high school. If it wasn't for the tours being made available, I probably just would have continued not to be. It's the way is presented, isn't it – I was really pleasantly surprised. I thought that maybe – I have a cynical mind – that the effort they would put into it for us wouldn't match what they do for tourists, but it was absolutely fantastic. So, from the first one I was kind of caught, you know, it caught my attention, and I wanted to attend each one subsequently. The knowledge that they have is just so valuable. And it's really hard to absorb all of it, actually, if anything, if I go around again, I may take a wee notepad or something.

Morse et al. (2015) highlight another potential positive impact of engagement with culture as participants may discover new interests, which can help build confidence and can relieve boredom. This effect was indeed noticeable with the GCP participants and two offered suggestions for further tours they would like to participate in, highlighting interests the Our Stories, Your City tour had either sparked or rekindled:

> Definitely the arts. I think that is probably what enthuses me most. I have a background in music, and it is all linked anyway isn't it, the emotion you get from music and from the arts. Whether it'd be galleries, or maybe even theatres, for us to bring it all together like. (GCP Participant 3)

> I would like to go outside Edinburgh and look at the history outside Edinburgh. I would like to go look at old castles. (GCP Participant 4)

The participant testimonials above highlight that the Our Stories, Your City initiative achieved several of the benefits outlined in the literature. This indicates that the tours were effective. This finding is supported by the results of a satisfaction survey that was sent out on three occasions to participants on the tours by the GCP. While the response rate to the survey was low, with only 16 responses in total received, respondents were unanimous that the tours were inclusive. Question three of the survey asked participants to use a Likert scale to indicate their agreement with the statement: "The experience was inclusive and my needs were met". Ten respondents answered that they strongly agreed, and six that they agreed, with no respondents giving a lower score.

6. Discussion

Drawing on the evidence presented in this study, this section of the paper will propose good practices derived from the Our Stories, Your City case study that can benefit other destinations or organizations wanting to design and deliver inclusive heritage tours. Three good practices emerged from the data, and each was given a title that reflects how the respondents in the research worded their recommendations, verbatim:

1. "Do what you do well": This refers to the importance of partnerships, whereby each party contributes their unique strengths to the project and helps it succeed. An intentional and focused collaboration between a tourism business and a community organization that share a value match, provided a strong foundation for positive outcomes.
2. "Don't make it different": This refers to Mercat's strong conviction that a product-led approach was preferable over a market-led approach. While small adaptations were introduced to meet the participants' needs, the core product remained unchanged, with the objective to deliver an equitable experience.
3. "Every tour should be bespoke": This refers to the fact that any learning around inclusive heritage tour practices was framed as important not only for the Our Stories, Your City tours, but rather for all Mercat tours. This shows a broader dedication to a universal design approach to the tour product.

Each of these good practices will now be discussed in more detail.

6.1. Do what you do well

In the Our Stories, Your City project, Mercat Tours and GCP each had distinct and complementary roles, that allowed each organisation to draw upon its unique strengths. This, according to the Mercat Tours Managing Director, was central in making the initiative a success:

> I think what's really important is for the sake of a supposed dignity and respect for everybody involved, do what you do really well, do what you are an expert at. Just do it for this new community, a local association, that community, a vulnerable group. And for us, for example, it's storytelling.

As the tourism partner, Mercat Tours committed to delivering high quality visitor experiences, and as the community partner, GCP committed to communicating the initiative, building trust and creating a judgement-free environment. Trussell and Mair (2010) explain that there can be stigma attached to accessing subsidised resources, and that there can be potential embarrassment in thus admitting to having a certain need. A community partner like GCP can help overcome this. The Inclusion Expert in this study confirmed that tourism businesses cannot be expected to be specialists in homelessness, mental illness or social exclusion, therefore finding a partner with that expertise is vitally important. The shared history between Mercat Tours and GCP added to the strength of the collaboration, as there was already a proven value match between both organizations.

6.2. Don't make it different

While audience development is ambivalent on whether product-led or market-led strategies are better to help excluded audiences engage with cultural institutions, Mercat Tours felt very strongly that a product-led approach was most appropriate. This is illustrated by the following emphatic quote from the Mercat Tours Managing Director:

> I think what is really, really, really important is don't make it different.

This point was also emphasised by Mercat Storyteller 2, for whom much of the value of Our Stories, Your City was in the equity of experience it offered:

> Just give them the tour. That's what they're there for. They're there to get the experience that paying tourists come to have, you know. It might be tempting to try and create a whole different tour, or a whole different product for them, but that's defeating the point, in my opinion, because they're there for the experience of what everyone else gets. They're not asking for special treatment. They want to come on a tour as we do a tour.

This perspective is also expressed by Heasman and Atwal (2004) in the context of accessible tourism: the authors argue that individuals with a disability desire similar experiences to other tourists, with adaptations where needed depending on the nature of their disability, but without changing the core product. While Kawashima (2000) acknowledges that engaging with culture and the arts requires certain skills that socially excluded people may not have been formally or informally taught, product-led strategies do not start from this deficit perspective and assume that everyone has the same potential for cultural consumption. Conway and Devney (2019) propose that 'boundary brokers' can help facilitate this cultural consumption, and in the context of a heritage tour, tour guides are ideally placed to fulfil this role.

6.3. Every tour should be bespoke

Group tours are likely to include participants with different characteristics, such as their background, language comprehension, fitness and interests. Therefore, designing inclusive tours is not just important when working with socially excluded participants, it is a vital skill for any tour, as the Mercat Tours Managing Director explains:

> Whether it's [for] Grassmarket [participants] or not, every tour is bespoke.

While Mercat Tours hired an Inclusion Expert before the Our Stories, Your City project launched, she emphasized that any learning from this service would be applied across the organization's services. This point was reiterated by Mercat Storyteller 2:

> We are trying to make our tours more inclusive to people more widely. Not, as I said, not just for this initiative. Some people, for example if they've got something like autism, things like eye contact might not be a good thing for them. It's just kind of making yourself aware of little signs like that.

These quotes highlight that the organization is adopting an inclusive design approach to its programming. Inclusive design refers to "[t]he design of mainstream products and/or services that are accessible to, and usable by, as many people as reasonably possible … without the need for special adaption or specialised design" (University of Cambridge, n.d.). While the concept has its origins in the 1960s, it emerged in the 1990s as a way of linking social need with design and tackling assumptions about aging, disability and social equality (Clarkson & Coleman, 2015). Tourism businesses that adopt inclusive design principles will not only contribute to more equitable opportunities for all people to engage in their experiences, they will also enhance their potential market reach and profitability.

7. Conclusion

This study has addressed the under-researched concept of inclusive heritage tour design. While participating in leisure and recreation, as well as in heritage and culture, socially excluded groups have reduced opportunities to engage in them or be associated with their multiple benefits. Extant research highlights that in widening participation in recreational and cultural activities, it is important to remove barriers, whether they are financial, infrastructural, informational or psychological. However, in the context of widening participation in culture, there is no agreement in the literature on what is the preferable strategy, although product-led and market-led approaches are proposed as two options.

In this article, the Our Stories, Your City initiative in Edinburgh, Scotland was used as a case study to explore this question from a tourism-specific perspective, in the context of heritage tours. Funded by donations, this initiative was a collaboration between a private tourism business and a not-for-profit community organization. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with different stakeholders in the project (including the participants, tour guides, leaders in both organizations and an external inclusion expert), good practices emerged that enhance our understanding of inclusive heritage tour design. A first good practice highlights that the compatibility of, and the strength of the relationship between, the partners in the initiative can contribute to positive outcomes. When each of the partners offers a unique contribution underpinned by matching values, tour participants are presented with an equitable, high-quality experience in a judgement-free environment. A second good practice is that, with this strong scaffolding in place, the tourism partner may be more likely to opt for a product-led approach that showcases its unique strengths as a facilitator or cultural broker. Socially excluded participants, as highlighted in this study, are not typically seeking a different experience:

they are looking to enjoy the same or a very similar experience to what other participants are receiving. Small adjustments may be helpful, but they do not have to affect the core product, and can be co-created and responsive to specific needs, rather than generalized and based on stereotypes. It is important to note here that this study did not examine a market-led approach and therefore does not aim to discredit or critique it; instead, this paper has aimed to explain why in this case study example, the product-led approach was seen as a preferable practice. Finally, a third good practice is for tourism businesses to adopt inclusive design principles throughout their product offer, rather than to consider them only when working with socially excluded groups. Every group tour is likely to include people with different needs, characteristics and preferences, and therefore, every tour is unique and bespoke. Tour companies and their employees are able to draw on their experiences in serving diverse participants to mindfully enhance inclusion for every experience and guest.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.08 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

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Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Post-COVID-19 pandemic: Examining the moderating role of event image on visitors' intention to revisit major events

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How to cite (APA style): Lo, M.C., Mohamad, A.A., Thong, J.Z., & Law, F.Y. (2025). Post-COVID-19 pandemic: Examining the moderating role of event image on visitors' intention to revisit major events. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 39–53. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.08

ABSTRACT

Grasping the perspectives of consumers is a fundamental focus for those managing events and festivals. This study investigated the impacts of aspects of awareness and event experience, namely perceived value, service quality and event image on satisfaction, along with revisit intentions to major events. The study used a quantitative analysis based on 1265 valid responses collected from a survey conducted during several major events that were held in Sarawak, Malaysia. Via partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), the findings revealed service quality as a crucial motivator towards the attendees' satisfaction levels, and this led to their revisit intentions. The event image was found to enhance the association, while the impacts of awareness and perceived value on satisfaction were not significant. The study provides event organizers with valuable insights regarding attendees' perceived aspects of an event, enabling the effective planning and implementation of future major events post-COVID-19.

KEYWORDS

Malaysia, post-COVID-19, major events, revisit intention, PLS-SEM

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
13 June 2024
Accepted:
13 January 2025
Published:
9 June 2025

1. Introduction

As an important driver of tourism, the role of planned events within the sector is well established and has become increasingly important to enhance a destination's competitiveness (Getz, 2008). A total of five main categories of event are proposed (see Table 1). In recent years, the event industry has had significant growth in Malaysia, for its strategic location and richness in elements such as diverse ethnic communities, cultural heritage attractions, events and festivals (Mohamad et al., 2024). Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019, the event industry experienced an unprecedented surge in the numbers that are staged

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

in Malaysia, a country with diverse ethnic groups and their celebration of variety of event and festival types (Bouchon et al., 2015).

Table 1. Categories of events

No.	Category	Description
1.	Cultural celebrations	Religious events Commemorations Celebrations Festivals
2.	Political and state	VIP visits Political events Royal events
3.	Arts and entertainment	Ceremonies Concerts
4.	Business and trade	Fairs Assemblies Trade shows
5.	Educational and scientific	Clinics Conferences Seminars
6.	Sports competitions	Amateur Professional
7.	Recreational	Games
8.	Private events	Gatherings Weddings Parties

Source: Getz (2005).

However, the tourism industry has been severely impacted since the emergence of the pandemic. Borders were ordered to be closed, followed by the enforcement of mandatory quarantines, travel bans and the suspension of tourism activities (Gössling et al., 2020). Subsequently, Malaysia saw a decrease of 83.40% in international tourist arrivals, with only around 4.3 million tourists compared to the 2019 figure of 26.1 million. This significant drop resulted in a decrease in tourism receipts from RM 86.1 billion in 2019 to RM 12.7 billion in 2020 (Tourism Malaysia, 2021).

Sarawak, in Malaysia (illustrated in Figure 1), suffered as tremendous a loss as Peninsular Malaysia. The event industry in Sarawak, which is one of its significant tourism products and elements, was heavily affected by the pandemic with public or special events being suspended or cancelled to prevent any COVID-19 infection. The Sarawak tourism industry commenced various efforts to emerge from the pandemic after entering the National Recovery Plan (NRP) phases. As an initiative to rejuvenate domestic tourism and part of its post-COVID-19 Development Strategy (PCDS) 2030, numerous small and medium events were immediately held in the state. These are comprised of several events and festivals that are held on an annual basis, ranging from sports events, music and arts festivals to carnivals: the Rainforest World Music Festival (RWMF), Kuching Food Festival (KFF), Neon Borneo Festival, Sarawak Regatta and the Sunbear Festival (described in Table 2).

Although nations around the globe entered the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant shift in tourists and visitors' preferences was witnessed due to it, specifically from mass tourism to small groups or individual tours (Polukhina et al., 2021). This has revealed a particular interest in, and future trends towards local communities and culture along with events and activities (Chin, 2022). Moreover, the significance of events in the development of tourism has been highlighted in a wide range of previous studies (Eluwole et al., 2022; Fytopoulou et al., 2021). Researchers have postulated that events can serve as important motivators of tourism and are an integral part of most destinations' development and

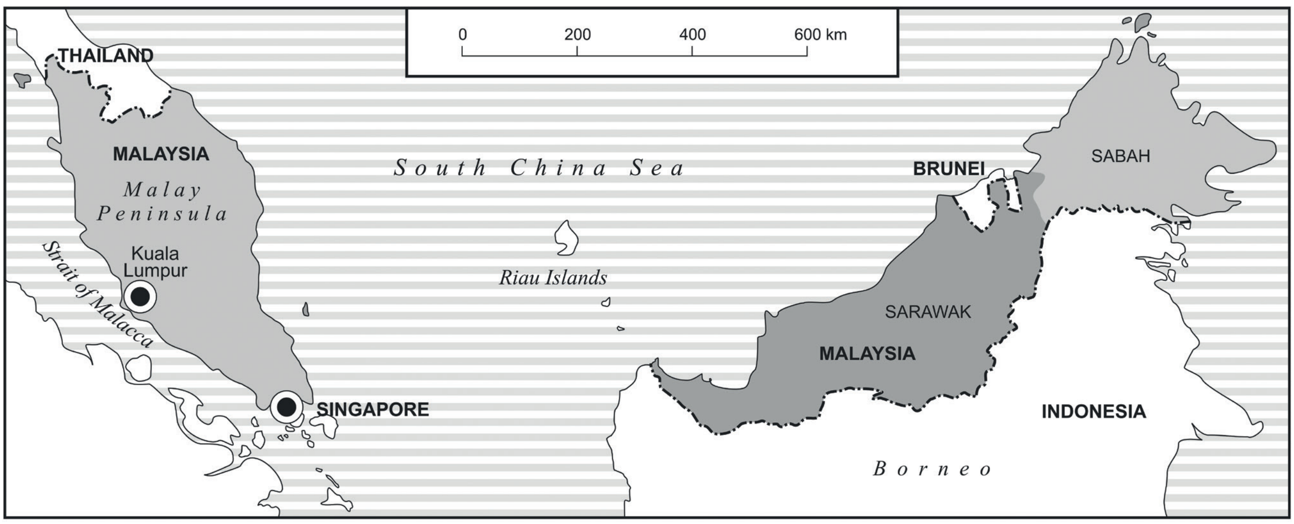

Figure 1. Location of Sarawak
Source: authors

Table 2. List of major events in Sarawak

No.	Time	Name	Category	Description
1.	July–August	Rainforest World Music Festival	Music festival	This event offers a variety of activities such as daytime music workshops, cultural and craft exhibitions, food vendors and evening performances on the main stage
2.	July–September	Kuching Food Festival	Food festival	The event takes place as part of the city's initiative to promote local tourism, activities include theatrical shows, live music performances, art exhibitions and writing competitions
3.	October	Neon Borneo Festival	Music festival	The festival celebrates Sarawak's rich heritage infused with contemporary elements, featuring traditional performances paired with Sarawakian cuisine and beverages
4.	October–November	Sarawak Regatta	Sports festival	The event features thrilling boat races with competitors from government bodies, private organizations, and neighboring nations such as Indonesia and Brunei
5.	December	Sunbear Festival	Music and arts festival	This event offers a fresh and innovative experience, combining diverse music genres with elements of art, fashion and various cuisines

Source: authors.

marketing strategies. Moreover, according to the study by Oklobdžija (2015), events can draw tourists who have a ripple effect on local economies by consuming products and services provided by local tourist companies such as lodging, food and transportation. Conversely, organizing an event in a specific location frequently encourages tourists to look for local suppliers, and this leads to several positive effects on the economic growth of the community hosting the event (Palrão et al., 2021). Ultimately, it is imperative for the understanding of the variables that influence an individual to travel; in fact, the literature on tourism now in existence has identified a number of push and pull factors (Chi & Pham, 2024; Thong et al., 2022).

Despite numerous empirical studies on various types of events and their impact on tourism development (Li et al., 2021; Mainolfi & Marino, 2020), there is inadequate evidence on aspects of how event experience (perceived value and satisfaction) can individually or simultaneously influence revisit intentions (Armbrecht, 2021; Sato et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2016). The present study has included event image to examine its moderating effect. Thus, comprehending pre-event awareness and the various dimensions of event experience, along with their influence on visitors' satisfaction as well as intention to revisit in a single framework, would be beneficial for event planners and tourism experts in developing successful high-quality events, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another study from Avraham (2021) highlighted that the success of an event is not only dependent on its ability to re-attract visitors, but also its capability to restore their confidence post-COVID-19, and to encourage them to revisit. Therefore, this study can eventually help event organizers and tourism practitioners to create successful events and generate long-term profitability. Overall, in line with Sarawak's PCDS 2030's strategic thrusts for the rejuvenation of the tourism industry post-pandemic, this study seeks to identify the impacts of visitors' awareness, along with several event experience components (perceived value and service quality), particularly on visitor satisfaction and subsequent intentions to revisit.

2. Literature review and development of hypothesis

2.1. Event experiences

Events and festivals represent a distinctive combination of tangible and intangible elements, creating challenges in assessing service quality and this aligns with expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Parasuraman et al., 1985), widely utilized for evaluating consumer service experiences (Theodorakis et al., 2015). While some studies (Oh & Kim, 2017) emphasize the proactive role of event organizers in responding to participant expectations, others (Choo et al., 2016; Shonk et al., 2017) underscore the causal link between service quality and satisfaction, reinforcing its centrality to business success. Recent methodologies have explored this relationship through surveys (Chang et al., 2022; Selmi et al., 2021), whereas observation approaches to a participatory event (Armbrecht, 2020) provide deeper insights into participant narratives. This comparative perspective highlights service quality as an integral factor influencing satisfaction, particularly in event settings (Kusumawati & Rahayu, 2020). In sum, by focusing on the participants' experience, event organizers can identify and prioritize areas of improvement and determine the effectiveness of their event planning and management strategies. This can lead to repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising, which can contribute to the long-term success of the event and its future growth.

2.2. Awareness and satisfaction

The literature on perceptual blindness indicates that people tend to be insensitive towards unusual occurrences in their vicinity if they are otherwise engaged (Kreitz et al., 2015; Simons & Schlosser, 2017). In general, awareness of an event can help to manage expectations and create a sense of anticipation prior to a visit, which can enhance the overall experience after the event (Polegato & Bjerke, 2019). Masmoudi (2021) has pointed out that being aware of an upcoming event that they can attend may increase their enthusiasm and excitement, which can lead to a sense of satisfaction when the event takes place. Fundamentally, visitor satisfaction is defined as the extent of affirmative awareness and emotion that has been shaped within an individual, particularly after participating in a selected activity (Beard & Ragheb, 1980; Zhang et al., 2018). Post-COVID-19, participating in events may give a sense of normalcy and a break from the monotony of pandemic-related restrictions, and this can contribute to their overall satisfaction (Chin, 2022; Zhu & Deng, 2020). Moreover, another study supported the relationship from awareness to satisfaction (Hermann et al., 2021), indicating the strong influence of information availability in promoting enthusiasm and perceptions, thereby leading to actual participation (Wise et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals who were aware of an event were more persuaded than those who were not provided with necessary information (Chan et al., 2022). Hence, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H_1: Visitors' awareness of an event is positively related to their level of satisfaction.

2.3. Perceived value and satisfaction

Earlier studies (Hume & Sullivan Mort, 2010; Jeong & Kim, 2020) emphasized that perceived value is a crucial factor in the success of any event because it directly impacts the customer's satisfaction and willingness to return or recommend the event to others. Perceived value refers to the customer's subjective assessment of the overall benefits they received, relative to the cost or effort they invested in attending (Kim et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2021), while satisfaction refers to how happy or pleased a person feels about their experience (Sung et al., 2021). Likewise, Lee and Back (2010) examined the connection between perceived value and satisfaction among tourists attending a Korean cultural festival, and they also observed a significant positive relationship between the two variables. Specifically, they found that participants who perceived high value from the festival were more likely to have positive experiential and emotional experiences, which in turn led to higher levels of satisfaction. Accordingly, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H_2: Visitors' perceived value is positively related to their level of satisfaction.

2.4. Service quality and satisfaction

Research (Grönroos, 1984; Hapsari et al., 2017) has consistently shown that when customers perceive service quality as high, they are more likely to be satisfied with their experience. This is because service quality directly affects customers' perception of how well the service has met their needs, expectations and preferences. Following this, Andersson et al. (2017) present a theoretical construct illustrating the interrelations between perceived quality, satisfaction, value and behavioral outcomes. Furthermore, Xiao et al. (2020) investigated the effect of service quality on participants' happiness at a business event, discovering that attendance satisfaction is significantly and positively impacted by service quality. Another study by Khoo (2022) has offered sector-specific implications, revealing the positive effect of service quality on satisfaction, particularly in the context of sport events. Overall, these studies, along with others (Song et al., 2022; Zhong & Moon, 2020), have explained that if the service quality is good, the customer is more likely to feel that their needs have been met, which leads to higher levels of satisfaction. Therefore, based on the above discussion, the hypothesis is constructed as follows:

H_3: Visitors' perceived service quality is positively related to their level of satisfaction.

2.5. Satisfaction and revisit intention

This study also investigates the relationship between visitor satisfaction and intention to revisit an event. Generally, the degree of satisfaction can be assessed from response to service experiences (Chen & Chen, 2010). It is presumed that visitors achieved satisfaction when a difference is seen between their anticipations prior to participation and experiences received from the experience (Cong, 2016). On the contrary, they will be unsatisfied when the experience resulted in unpleasant feelings (Cong, 2016). In the present context, Vassiliadis et al. (2021) explained that when someone is satisfied with an event, they are more likely to have positive feelings and memories associated with it. This can lead to a desire to relive those positive experiences in the future, and this can translate into an intention to attend the event again, as satisfaction tends to create a sense of loyalty and attachment to the event, which in turn can lead to repeat participation. Following this, another study found that satisfaction has a positive effect on the intention to revisit a sports event (Li et al., 2021). Overall, satisfaction with an event is a crucial factor in determining an individual's intention to revisit. Thus, another hypothesis has been proposed as follows:

H_4: Visitors' satisfaction is positively related to their revisit intention.

2.6. The moderating effect of event image

According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991), the overall image component is defined as the holistic impression of an individual, specifically on an event. Following this, previous scholars have argued that the overall image acts as a better attractor of visitors, as compared to other specified components of image (Akama & Kieti, 2003). Accordingly, several past studies have highlighted the significance of overall event image on visitors' behavioral intentions (de Lima Pereira et al., 2021; Stylidis et al., 2017). Based on these studies, it is deduced that the choice of participating in an event or festival is a cognitive process that combines self-improvement, action and the transformation of travel motivation into behavior. Thus, it is deduced that when satisfied visitors to major events receive a more positive event image, they may form greater revisit intentions to such an event. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H_5: Event image positively moderates the relationship between visitors' satisfaction and their revisit intentions.

2.7. Conceptual model

Based on the extensive review of literature above, the research model containing all the hypotheses formulated for the present study is depicted in Figure 2.

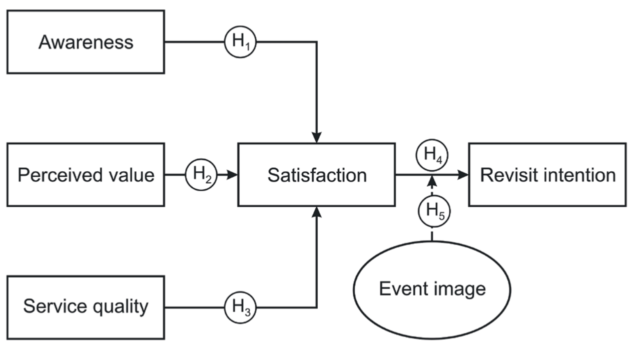

Figure 2. Conceptual framework
Source: authors

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling procedures and participants

This study was conducted from February 2022 to July 2022, particularly during major events that were held in Sarawak i.e. RWMF, KFF, Neon Borneo Festival, Sarawak Regatta, and the Sunbear Festival. The participants were diversified through various age groups and ethnicities to acquire responses from numerous perspectives, comprising local visitors who reside in Sarawak and visitors who originated outside (i.e. Sabah, Peninsular Malaysia and other countries). The present study employed an intercept survey method where the data collection only involved volunteers who have attended the events and met the minimum criteria of being at least 21 years old. This served to ensure that they could provide informed consent, and the data collected is reliable and valid.

Subsequently, as the border closures were only lifted a few months prior to commencement of collection (specifically on 31st December 2021) the questionnaire was designed in a hybrid form. Following this, to ensure the safety of both researchers and respondents, the surveys were also made accessible via Google Forms. To prevent possible COVID-19 transmission, the collection of data was performed and accomplished based on these steps. Following the survey, the respondents were provided with choices between physical (printed questionnaire) and virtual forms (Google Form); whichever suited them best. All participants were required to answer every measurement item to avoid the possibility of missing values.

In order to determine the required sample size, G*Power 3.1 – stand-alone power analysis software was utilized (Faul et al., 2007). This analysis indicated that a level of at least 0.80 was necessary to validate the relationship between the constructs (Cohen, 1988). Consequently, with the criteria of six predictors at a level of significance of 5%, a power of 0.95 and effect size of 0.15, the G*Power analysis identified that a minimum sample size of 146 was needed.

3.2. Measures and scale development

In this study, the questionnaire primarily consists of two sections, namely A and B. In general, the demographic characteristics of the respondents were collected in section A, followed by section B which encompassed questions on the research model as proposed. In general, as an exploratory approach was used in the current study, 25 measurement items in total were adapted from past studies (Murphy et al., 2020; Saefi et al., 2020; The British Red Cross Society, 2020; The United States National Library of

Medicine, 2020). To tailor to the Malaysian context, the items were translated into Malay, namely Bahasa Melayu using Google Translate, a reliable translation machine widely utilized for text mining analytics (Lee & Park, 2018). The respondents were required to answer the measurement items using a five-point Likert scale, where the scale used to measure the level of agreement or disagreement was asymmetric, with 1 representing *strongly disagree* and 5 *strongly agree*. Prior to the actual distribution, a pre-test was performed to ensure that the items accurately represented the present setting with adherence to the standards deemed necessary. A draft survey was presented to the target population, enabling cognitive interviews (Willis, 2016) where the respondents were required to answer accordingly. Thus, this allowed appropriate clarifications, expansions and adjustments to the draft survey to be consistent with the objectives of the study.

3.3. Statistical analyses

In this study, a quantitative approach was adopted, employing survey questionnaires to collect data. Subsequently, the gathered data underwent processing, which included eliminating straight-line responses through the use of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 28.0. A two-phase partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis was implemented in this research. The initial phase focused on evaluating the reliability and validity of the constructs, whereas the subsequent phase examined the associations among the hypothesized constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Accordingly, the PLS-SEM analyses were evaluated using WarpPLS 8.0 (Kock, 2022), and the findings are presented below.

4. Findings

4.1. Preliminary data analysis

A total of 1283 individuals voluntarily participated in this survey. After filtering out 18 responses due to straight-lining, specifically those showing a consistent pattern of selecting 3's, 1265 responses were retained for subsequent analysis. The discarded responses exhibited uniform patterns, and their removal helped maintain data integrity by addressing questionable response trends (Kaminska et al., 2010). Additionally, as shown in Table 3, the full collinearity variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all examined constructs were below 5, reinforcing the absence of common method bias (Kock, 2021).

Table 3. Full collinearity of constructs

Constructs	Full collinearity VIF
Awareness	1.03
Perceived value	1.22
Service quality	2.59
Event image	2.26
Satisfaction	2.40
Revisit intention	1.88

Note: VIF – variance inflation factor.
Source: authors.

4.2. Respondent profiles

The demographic profile of respondents participating in this survey is demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of participants (n = 1265)

Characteristics		No. of participants	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	642	50.80
	Female	623	49.20
Age	21–30 years old	410	32.40
	31–40 years old	393	31.10
	41–50 years old	271	21.40
	51–60 years old	136	10.80
	61 years old & above	55	4.30
Residency	Local	1214	96.00
	Foreign	51	4.00
Education	High school & below	298	23.60
	Diploma	346	27.40
	Degree or professional qualification	442	34.90
	Postgraduate	116	9.20
	Others	63	5.00
Occupation	Government sector	276	21.80
	Private sector	403	31.90
	Self-employed	212	16.80
	Student	223	17.60
	Unemployed	101	8.00
	Retiree	48	3.80
	Others	2	0.20

Income	Less than RM 2,000	402	31.80
	RM 2,001–RM 4,000	376	29.70
	RM 4,001–RM 6,000	317	25.10
	RM 6,001–RM 8,000	97	7.70
	RM8,001 and above	73	5.80
Experience (visit)	Yes	1067	84.30
	No	198	15.70

Source: authors.

The participants of the present survey were both male and female giving almost equal representation. Following the end of border closures in Malaysia on 31st December 2021, most sectors and industries, specifically tourism began to reopen and welcome visitors. Accordingly, as this survey commenced not long after the lifting of the national Movement Control Order (MCO), it mostly involved the participation of domestic than international visitors.

4.3. Assessment of the measurement model

For this investigation, the partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) methodology (Hair et al., 2019) was utilized to construct a more versatile measurement framework. This approach enabled the identification of the optimal model to fit the dataset. Due to the non-normal distribution of the 1265 gathered data points, the PLS-SEM technique was employed for analyzing the data.

To examine the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measures, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. Indicators with factor loadings below 0.50 were removed to maintain internal consistency (Bagozzi et al., 1991). The valid loadings that remained are presented in Table 5. For the measures to be deemed reliable and valid, composite reliability (*CR*) scores were required to surpass 0.70 (Memon & Rahman, 2014), and average variance extracted (AVE) scores needed to exceed 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results demonstrated that both *CR* and AVE values met these benchmarks. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for the dimensions under study, which encompassed perceived value, service quality, event image, satisfaction, and revisit intention, yielding satisfactory results, while the coefficient for awareness was considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 5. Summary of construct reliability and validity

Constructs	No. of items	Items	Loadings	*CR*	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
Awareness	4	Aware_01 Aware_02 Aware_03 Aware_04	0.55 0.73 0.76 0.73	0.79	0.65	0.50
Perceived value	4	Per_Val_01 Per_Val_02 Per_Val_03 Per_Val_04	0.63 0.76 0.76 0.77	0.82	0.71	0.54
Service quality	5	Serv_Qua_01 Serv_Qua_02 Serv_Qua_03 Serv_Qua_04 Serv_Qua_05	0.82 0.82 0.77 0.80 0.79	0.90	0.86	0.64
Event image	5	Pla_Img_01 Pla_Img_02 Pla_Img_03 Pla_Img_04 Pla_Img_05	0.79 0.78 0.78 0.78 0.78	0.89	0.84	0.61
Satisfaction	4	SatisF_01 SatisF_02 SatisF_03 SatisF_04	0.83 0.80 0.85 0.84	0.90	0.85	0.69
Revisit intention	3	Re_INT_01 Re_INT_02 Re_INT_03	0.84 0.91 0.90	0.92	0.86	0.78

Source: authors.

Table 6. Discriminant validity of constructs

Constructs	Awareness	Perceived value	Service quality	Event image	Satisfaction	Revisit intention
Awareness	0.70	–	–	–	–	–
Perceived value	0.11	0.73	–	–	–	–
Service quality	–0.07	–0.29	0.80	–	–	–
Event image	0.14	0.26	–0.33	0.78	–	–
Satisfaction	–0.06	–0.36	0.67	0.64	0.83	–
Revisit intention	–0.03	–0.36	0.61	0.53	0.61	0.88

Source: authors.

Subsequently, the values of AVE for each measure were square rooted and examined against inter-correlations among the research model constructs. As demonstrated in Table 6, all values have exceeded each construct's correlation (Chin, 2010). Furthermore, the measurement model was determined to be satisfactory, supported by evidence of reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity. Furthermore, the R-squared values for satisfaction and revisit intention were 0.48 and 0.38 respectively, thus achieving the threshold of 0.19 suggested by the 'rule of thumb' (Cohen, 1988).

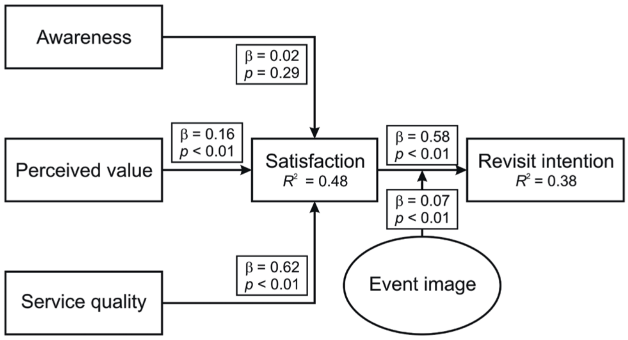

Figure 3. Structural model with path coefficients and p-values
Source: authors

Following that, Figure 3 and Table 7 demonstrate the outcomes obtained from hypotheses testing. Generally, as a 'rule of thumb', the value for probability, the p-value, must be less than 0.01 or 0.05 significance, particularly for one-tailed hypothesis testing. Subsequently, out of the four tested direct relationships, the statistical findings of this study have revealed that two hypotheses were supported. A significant relationship between service quality and the level of satisfaction among visitors was uncovered while the visitors' level of satisfaction was discovered to have a strong relationship with their intention to revisit ($p < 0.01$). Accordingly, the event image was revealed to have a significant moderating impact on the relationship between visitor satisfaction and revisit intention ($p < 0.01$).

Interestingly, the remaining two hypotheses, namely H_1 and H_2, which projected the significant positive relationships between visitor awareness and perceived value as well as satisfaction, were not supported by the findings which indicated that they were insignificant ($p = 0.29$) and negatively related ($\beta = -0.16$).

5. Discussion

The present study was conducted in Sarawak, Malaysia and aimed to investigate the perceptions of the visitors who have attended to any of the major events held after COVID-19 pandemic in Sarawak, such as RWMF, KFF, Neon Borneo Festival, Sarawak Regatta and the Sunbear Festival (Hui & Louis, 2022). Consequently, visitors' perceptions of awareness, perceived value, service quality, event image and satisfaction during their trips as well as their intention to revisit these major events were evaluated. The results, established on a voluntary response sample containing both domestic and international visitors, showed that most of them, totaling over 80% (Nulty, 2008), were repeat customers of these major events, The measurement items for each construct are presented in subsequent tables, particularly Tables 8 to 13 using SPSS 28.0 software.

Table 7. Summary of path coefficients and hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Path	Coefficients	Standard error	t-value	p-value	Decision
H_1	Awareness → satisfaction	0.02	0.03	0.55	0.29	Not supported
H_2	Perceived value → satisfaction	–0.16	0.03	–5.72	<0.01**	Not supported
H_3	Service quality → satisfaction	0.62	0.03	23.24	<0.01**	Supported
H_4	Satisfaction → revisit intention	0.57	0.03	21.38	<0.01**	Supported
H_5	Event image *satisfaction → revisit intention	0.07	0.03	2.57	<0.01**	Supported

Note: * moderating effect; ** p-value < 0.01.
Source: authors.

Table 8. Awareness of the event

Items	Awareness, n (%)	
	Yes	No
Do you know any of your friends attending this event?	923 (72.96)	342 (27.04)
Did you see the event information in other platforms?	798 (63.08)	467 (36.92)
Do you know about the similar event from other places?	982 (77.63)	283 (22.37)
Have you ever attended the similar event?	1050 (83.00)	215 (17.00)

Source: authors.

Table 9. Perceived value

Items	Perceived value, *n* (%)	
	Yes	No
Do you think this event will carry economic value?	1206 (95.34)	59 (4.66)
Do you think this event will carry social value?	1114 (88.06)	151 (11.94)
Do you think this event will carry emotional value?	1098 (86.80)	167 (13.20)
Do you think an overall value of this event is beneficial?	1144 (90.43)	121 (9.57)

Source: authors.

Table 10. Service quality

Items	Service quality, *n* (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
The quality of the activities available to visitors at the destination, such as festivals, events and entertainment, is excellent	17 (1.34)	67 (5.30)	296 (23.40)	568 (44.90)	317 (25.06)
The services or amenities at the destination are at high quality	7 (0.55)	65 (5.14)	327 (25.85)	559 (44.19)	307 (24.27)
The destination maintains a high level of cleanliness and hygiene	7 (0.55)	70 (5.53)	339 (26.80)	554 (43.79)	295 (23.32)
The destination is known for providing high-quality services, such as friendly and positive attitudes	6 (0.47)	49 (3.87)	258 (20.40)	638 (50.43)	314 (24.82)
The overall service provided was good	6 (0.47)	32 (2.53)	232 (18.34)	684 (54.07)	311 (24.58)

Source: authors.

Table 11. Event image

Items	Event image, *n* (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
The price of food at the event is reasonable	26 (2.06)	83 (6.56)	267 (21.11)	607 (47.98)	282 (22.29)
Expenditure during the event is low	12 (0.95)	109 (8.62)	283 (22.37)	503 (39.76)	358 (28.30)
The event is safe and secure	8 (0.63)	76 (6.01)	273 (21.58)	591 (46.72)	317 (25.06)
The people are friendly and helpful	2 (0.16)	44 (3.48)	257 (20.32)	596 (47.11)	366 (28.93)
The event is attractive and interesting	6 (0.47)	47 (3.72)	250 (19.76)	623 (49.25)	339 (26.80)

Source: based on Mohamad et al. (2024).

Table 12. Satisfaction

Items	Satisfaction, *n* (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
The event has met my expectations and I am content with it	6 (0.47)	35 (2.77)	121 (9.57)	752 (59.45)	351 (27.75)
The event has met my expectations	8 (0.63)	37 (2.92)	234 (18.50)	580 (45.85)	406 (32.09)
The event was worth my visitation	10 (0.79)	39 (3.08)	226 (17.87)	610 (48.22)	380 (30.04)
My time was well spent at this event	7 (0.55)	46 (3.64)	238 (18.81)	622 (49.17)	352 (27.83)

Source: authors.

Table 13. Revisit intention

Items	Revisit intention, *n* (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
I will attend similar events in the future	11 (0.87)	31 (2.45)	225 (17.79)	573 (45.30)	425 (33.60)
I would highly recommend this event	10 (0.79)	44 (3.48)	242 (19.13)	598 (47.27)	371 (29.33)
I will share the positive word-of-mouth to others	12 (0.95)	42 (3.32)	207 (16.36)	607 (47.98)	397 (31.38)

Source: authors.

As revealed by the statistical results, the majority of the visitors were well aware of the events. Following this, Table 8 shows that visitors are informed about their friends' participation (72.96%), conscious of the event information provided on numerous platforms (63.08%) and appraised of the history of similar events held at other places (77.63%). Interestingly, the results from the PLS-SEM discovered that awareness was not significantly related to satisfaction, thus not supporting hypothesis 1 (H_1). The result contradicts past studies where the sense of anticipation and excitement can enhance visitors' overall level of satisfaction (Polegato & Bjerke, 2019). However, this is explainable as most of the visitors to these major events, who are in this case repeat visitor, may already have a strong familiarity. These individuals might be less concerned about awareness as they do not rely heavily on external information or promotional efforts to shape their expectations. Furthermore, almost all these events are held on an annual basis, thus reducing the search cost for returning visitors, especially the need to source event information again. This finding underscores the importance of audience familiarity and prior engagement with an event, as the drivers of satisfaction might vary significantly between first-time and repeat visitors.

Following the outcomes in Table 9, almost every visitor perceived that the overall value generated by an event as beneficial (90.43%), where it helps to create economic (95.34%), social (88.06%) and emotional values (86.80%). Unexpectedly, the PLS-SEM analyses provided results by showing no evidence of a positive linkage between perceived value and satisfaction. As a result, hypothesis 2 (H_2) was not supported. This result contradicts prior research, which indicates that visitor satisfaction is typically driven by meeting their expectations on values received from an experience (Pandža Bajs, 2015). However, it is possible that these respondents placed more importance on other dimensions, such as functional factors like price, and communal factors (Sánchez et al., 2006). Therefore, despite these events producing economic value, they may primarily benefit the local community rather than the visitors themselves, leading visitors to undervalue the economic contributions of the events when evaluating their personal satisfaction.

Moreover, the discoveries in Table 10 demonstrated that most visitors find that the overall service provided by the mega-events in Sarawak was good (78.65%), as activities were offered at decent quality (70.0%), followed by high quality services or amenities (68.46%), and a clean and hygienic environment (67.11%), while other qualities such as staff attitudes and friendliness were presented pleasantly (75.25%). In regard to PLS-SEM, the statistical finding discovered the significance of service quality on satisfaction among visitors, thus supporting hypothesis 3 (H_3). In line with past studies, the quality of a service or product is regarded as fundamental for the satisfaction of a visitor (Lian & Wang, 2004; Muresan et al., 2019). To be sustainable in such a competitive industry, the quality of experience must be taken into consideration alongside individuals' personal satisfaction (Dioko & So, 2017; Thong et al., 2024).

Based on the present findings in Table 12, a large pool of respondents indicated that the events attended met their expectations (87.20%), were worth their visit (78.26%) and their time was well spent (77%). Subsequently, Table 13 shows that the majority of the visitors who participated in mega-events are willing to attend again in the future (78.90%), recommend the event (76.60%) and practice positive word-of-mouth in regard to them (79.36%). Following this, the statistical results from the PLS-SEM have indicated that visitors' level of satisfaction has a significant impact on their intention to revisit, hence supporting hypothesis 4 (H_4). This result is consistent with previous findings which highlighted the significant role of visitors' satisfaction in generating favorable future behavioral intentions (Chelliah et al., 2019). Therefore, it is wise for event planners and organizers to ensure the satisfaction of visitors to create a sustainable flow of customers, specifically revisiting consumers (Kim & Shim, 2019; Thiumsak & Ruangkanjanases, 2016) and this may eventually lead to long-term profitability.

As shown in Table 11, most visitors thought that the prices offered for the events were reasonable (70.27%), the environment was safe (71.78%), the staff friendly (76.04%) and interesting programs were presented during the events (76.05%). Following PLS-SEM, the event image perceived by the visitors was found to have a significant moderating impact on the association between satisfaction and revisit intention, hence the last hypothesis, namely hypothesis 5 (H_5), was supported. Undoubtedly, this discovery is congruent with studies in the past which postulated the important role of image in influencing visitors' behavioral intentions (de Lima Pereira et al., 2021; Stylidis et al., 2017). Henceforth, it is advisable for key players such as event hosts and coordinators to maintain or even enhance the overall reputation of upcoming events as well as festivals to promote the sustainable development of the tourism industry.

6. Conclusions

Despite numerous studies focusing on the intention to revisit Sarawak, the extensive variety of sectors within the region remains largely unexplored. Consequently, this research adds valuable insights into the existing literature on significant events in the state, specifically from the perspective of visitors and tourists. The present study has shed light on the multiple event landscape of Sarawak, unfolding the profound impact of event experience on customer retainment. Several major events in Sarawak were investigated, namely RWMF, KFF, Neon Borneo Festival, Sarawak Regatta and the Sunbear Festival. Based on the statistical findings obtained, the present study has provided empirical evidence to fulfil the research objectives, primarily in discovering the crucial role of the event experience aspect (service quality), in enhancing the degree of satisfaction among visitors as well as their intentions to revisit these events in the future. Besides, it draws attention to the importance of event image in enriching favorable behavioral intentions (revisit intention) through elements in relation to event experience.

7. Theoretical and practical implications

Moreover, the current results enhance the understanding of event experience aspects and their influence on satisfaction and subsequent intentions to revisit, particularly from a theoretical perspective. It is imperative for the associations between significant event experience components, satisfaction, event image and revisit intentions to be understood, specifically in the Sarawakian event tourism industry's effort to maximize profit. In this study, the service quality of an event was discovered as a significant contributor to attendee satisfaction. Hence, it is suggested that the relevant local industry players, which comprise event planners and organizers, should put high emphasis on improving their on-going activities, specifically during the major events. Although awareness was found not to significantly influence satisfaction in this context, targeted marketing campaigns can still be beneficial for first-time attendees. Thus, event organizers could tailor promotional efforts to highlight unique aspects of the events and leverage digital platforms to provide real-time, personalized information to different visitor segments. Also, the study demonstrates that the cross-validation methods, sourced from previous research (Murphy et al., 2020; Saefi et al., 2020; The British Red Cross Society, 2020; The United States National Library of Medicine, 2020), yielded consistent and credible scores. This confirms the reliability of these methods, making them suitable for future studies across various cultures and environments.

From a practical point of view, it is advisable for the key players to provide sufficient training for their event staff and perform regular check-ups on available facilities to ensure decency of quality in the services provided. For instance, developing a self-check-in platform such as a quick response tagging system as a substitution for the current manual check-in process which can eliminate the overcrowded waiting lines and ensure a systematic flow for the ticketing system. Moreover, there is a need for event organizers to address functional factors like convenience and the quality of facilities to meet visitors' expectations. These factors include regular maintenance and sani-tization of the amenities which can lead to high standards for cleanliness in the venue surroundings, safeguarding event attendees' health and hygiene. Moreover, by providing sufficient training programs and seminars for the relevant event staffs, it can lead to their increased efficiencies which eventually enhance the event experience and level of satisfaction among visitors. In today's fast-evolving world, events and festivals may face various unpredictable challenges like the recent COVID-19 outbreak. To maintain continuity in events, it is crucial for industry participants to develop robust management strategies that allow for close monitoring and optimal use of the key aspects under study.

Subsequently, the event image was found to have significant moderating value in enhancing the relationship between visitors' satisfaction and revisit intentions. As a consequence, satisfied visitors are very likely and willing to revisit similar major events in the future, especially when the image of these events is highly regarded. Thus, the enhancement of the overall image of these major events should be prioritized to generate favorable intentions, primarily among satisfied visitors in order to encourage revisiting and ensure profitability in the long run. Based on the present findings, it is crucial for event organizers and planners to put more effort into outlining effective marketing strategies. These include sponsored promotions through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, to ensure that the boosted content (e.g. event posters) can reach a broader customer base, thus encouraging revisiting of the promoted events. Simultaneously, it can create awareness among potential visitors, thus they are more informed and encouraged to visit the promoted events. Moreover, conventional channels can also be utilized as part of the event's marketing efforts. For instance, running advertisement campaigns through newspapers, radio and television enabling coverage for elderly customers and individuals who prefer such media due to individual security. In this context, such understanding can assist key players in the tourism sector, including business owners, local planners and policy makers, in drawing up effective development strategies for future major events. Consequently, it can foster the successful growth of major events, particularly during the vital phase of recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. Limitations and recommendations

Despite its contribution, this study has some limitations. The limited scope of study is regarded as one of the main constraints, as there are indeed other drivers of visitor satisfaction and revisit intentions including image, community support and attachment. Thus, it is recommended for future research to consider these variables. Additionally, the study was conducted using a cross-sectional approach, where data was collected at a specific point in time, instead of a longitudinal approach where data is collected over multiple timeframes (Thong et al., 2023). Moreover, this study is constrained due to the limited number of international visitors, mainly because the border closures were only lifted two months prior to the major events. Hence, upcoming research should aim to encompass a more diverse viewpoint and understanding from various participants including residents, industry stakeholders and those who have never attended any significant event. Furthermore, as the present study has only focused on major events, more types could be included in future studies, such as mega, regional and local, and community events. These approaches would enhance the generalizability of the findings and lead to more unbiased results. Presently, the tourism industry of Sarawak is indeed in the middle of rejuvenation following the COVID-19 pandemic. Undoubtedly, effective planning and strategic development should be the top priority among industry players. Following this, this study has provided meaningful insight with regard to visitors' perceptions of the drivers of their satisfaction, which could eventually lead to their intention to revisit major events in Sarawak.

As an important asset of the tourism-related sector, it is vital to understand both domestic and international visitors' perceptions to ensure long-term profitability. The present study is beneficial to industry practitioners by enabling them to understand visitors' perceptions towards enhancing their level of satisfaction and revisit intentions. Last but not least, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge, specifically based on visitors' perceptions of their satisfaction and intention to revisit, while being valuable to scholars by providing directions for future research on contributors to visitors' satisfaction and revisit intentions. Overall, these variables are thought to have a significant impact on improving visitors' satisfaction and their intention to revisit, thus contributing to the development of the tourism industry in the future. As more areas move towards the post-COVID stage, this research can provide useful recommendations for those places that are working to revitalize tourism industries, and as a reference for future event planners as well organizers related to satisfying visitors' needs during upcoming events.

Disclosure statement
The authors hereby declare the absence of potential competing interest.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.12 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Communicating tourism destinations through travel writing: A case study on travel content research in tourism co-creation[1]

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How to cite (APA style): Mansfield, C., Roberts, Z., & Potočnik Topler, J. (2025). Communicating tourism destinations through travel writing: A case study on travel content research in tourism co-creation. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.12

Abstract

This research explores the intersection of travel writing pedagogy and professional practice through the creation and analysis of a travel writing portfolio. One of the researchers compiled a portfolio of nine travel texts to test the efficacy of the aim, design, assessment (ADA) apparatus – a tool designed for planning and evaluating travel writing. The study utilised close reading techniques, drawing on established literary and semiotic theories, to analyse the portfolio and assess the role of pedagogic knowledge in professionalizing travel writing. The research highlights the importance of structured, reflective practices in producing travel texts that are both engaging and informative. Additionally, the study advances travel writing methodology by incorporating journaling into a Web 2.0 archive, offering new insights into the dialogic process between researchers and stakeholders. While the study's limitations include a lack of comparative data, it lays the groundwork for further exploration of travel writing's pedagogic and professional dimensions. The findings underscore the value of integrating pedagogic theory with practical application, providing a framework for future research and professionalisation of the genre.

Keywords

travel writing, portfolio, tourism destination, tourism development, dialogue journaling, co-creation

Article information details

Received:
26 August 2024
Accepted:
20 January 2025
Published:
4 June 2025

1. Introduction

Collaboration, and even cooperation between competitive stakeholders creates new opportunities, new offers, new knowledge, improves the quality of services and helps to alleviate difficulties, such as resource constraints (Czakon & Czernek-Marszałek, 2021). Taken as a whole, cooperative working contributes to the development of a tourist destination (Sainaghi et al., 2019). Travel writing also contributes significantly to this process by effectively communicating the unique qualities of a destination, thereby fostering connections

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

between stakeholders and enhancing the destination's appeal. Information and communication technology contributed significantly to increased cooperation among various stakeholders and to more efficient communication of tourism destinations (Pawłowska-Legwand, 2019). By the end of 2022 three key factors had reinvigorated travel and tourism, all of which offer innovative approaches to the upskilling of professionals in this area of development. The advances in dialogic education (Wegerif, 2019), the relative ease of access to low-cost Web 2.0 platforms as collaborative knowledge management systems in value creation (Melis et al., 2023), and the shift by research funding organisations to support economic development initiatives; one example being the Interreg Europe programme (Mansfield et al., 2025; Viesi et al., 2023). Engaging stakeholders has become one of the foundations of sustainable tourism (Iazzi et al., 2020) and further developing destinations. This article provides a pedagogical perspective on building a travel writing portfolio, following the methodology proposed by Mansfield and Potočnik Topler (2023) and Mansfield et al. (2025), and is also based on research for Roberts' Master's thesis. For clarity, in this study, pedagogy refers to "the discipline of travel writing and the theoretical education and scholarship of the discourse" (Roberts, 2016, p. 14). The study explores how to equip emerging professionals in heritage tourism, heritage interpretation, and destination image communication with essential technological and creative skills in a collaborative environment. These skills are significant in the co-creation and design of tourist experiences since they are interactive and participative (Campos et al., 2018; Potočnik Topler et al., 2024).

The focus of the training, particularly in content writing, is to guide professionals in developing portfolios that effectively manage and communicate elicited knowledge in a manner accessible to destination institutions and attractions. Communication and writing skills are therefore fundamental as, according to Li et al. (2023), a sophisticated linguistic landscape is essential in 'place making'. Katsoni and Fyta (2021) discuss travel narratives from Pausanias to Baedeker and Trip Advisor and argue that over time, the "interaction between travel texts, travel information and distribution channels" (p. 11) leads to the creation of hybrid genres, and that these hybrid travel texts combine elements of travel narratives with information on arrangement services. Travel writing for that matter is a significant tool not only for enhancing creative non-fiction writing skills, but for connecting stakeholders in tourism, for creating value and consequently for 'place making' and for collaborating on sustainable tourism practices. Mansfield et al. (2025) introduce the dialogue journaling process model in travel writing, which has the potential to contribute to destination management in alignment with Agenda 2030. Balancing tourist satisfaction with the preservation of cultural heritage, natural habitats and local quality of life are key goals outlined in Agenda 2030, and dialogue is essential to achieving these objectives collaboratively. The protection and preservation of the environment through sustainable tourism practices must be implemented before 2030 as a core component of tourism development strategies across all destinations and applied by all tourism stakeholders and organizations within United Nations member states (Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023). This study aims to evaluate the value of reflective travel writing practice in tourism development, offering insights into its application and impact on the field.

2. Literature review

2.1. Communication of tourism destinations

The growth of tourism has created a need to enhance and elevate the appeal of tourism destinations, leading to a focus on creative tourism initiatives (Gato et al., 2022). Effective communication of tourism destinations is therefore essential for attracting visitors, shaping perceptions, and enhancing the overall tourist and visitor experience. The process involves a strategic blend of information dissemination, storytelling and branding, tailored to the unique characteristics of the destination and its target audiences. This narrative approach is particularly effective in conveying the cultural, historical and natural attributes of a destination (Mansfield & Potočnik Topler, 2021), making it more appealing and relatable to diverse audiences. Based on that and on their experience, they create their own narratives (Kaurav et al., 2024) that further co-create the image of the destination. Travel narratives play a crucial role in shaping the perception and image of destinations by impacting how places are understood and valued by potential visitors. These narratives, often rich in descriptive detail and personal experiences, go beyond mere information dissemination to evoke emotions, create mental imagery and establish a connection between the reader and the destination (Mansfield & Potočnik Topler, 2023). By combining factual information and subjective perspectives, travel narratives can highlight unique cultural, historical or natural aspects of a location, thereby constructing an appealing and memorable image that may motivate travel (Potočnik Topler, 2018). Furthermore, these narratives contribute to the broader discourse on place identity, affecting not only individual travel decisions but also the collective perception of destinations within the global tourism market (Kaurav et al., 2024; Mansfield & Potočnik Topler, 2023). Thus, travel narratives are instrumental in both the marketing of destinations and the development of their cultural and touristic significance.

Travel writers, when interpreting artefacts from cultural heritage, are engaging in an aesthetic and an ethical process. Their engagement is ethical because their own identity as creators of a new layer of cultural meaning is being brought into play as they write a new literary text. While entering dialogues that enable the production of good travel writing texts, and are, in fact, their foundation stones; writers should be good listeners as listening is a key to new knowledge and a successful conversation. In his philosophy of dialogue, Buber (1958) contends that genuine conversation arises naturally, without prior planning, where individuals communicate directly with one another and are capable of responding to each other's unexpected replies (Gordon, 2011). Martin Buber (1878–1965) emphasised the significance of the "I-You relationship" and the centrality of listening within the dialogical process (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024, citing Gordon, 2011). In collaborative settings involving tourism stakeholders, the quality of dialogue is paramount. Without the ability to truly listen and understand, moderators cannot foster quality dialogue. As a result, the insights and data gathered through such exchanges remain fragmented, potentially leading to flawed outcomes and misinterpretations (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024).

Stories have long been used to brand products, services and destinations because they can forge emotional connections between a tourism product, a destination and its target audiences (Ilić et al., 2021; Keskin et al., 2016; Potočnik Topler et al., 2024). Therefore, storytelling plays a crucial role in interpretation, as it allows for explanations to be woven into engaging narratives (Moezzi et al., 2017). Additionally, stories have the power to address complex issues and promote cooperation (Mourik et al., 2021). Often rich in information (Bassano et al., 2019), these narratives enhance the distinctiveness of a destination, thereby increasing its perceived value (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2021, Potočnik Topler et al., 2024). As Roberts (2016) and Potočnik Topler et al. (2024) have already noted, this is fundamental, because stakeholders who are reliant on selling product or on receiving income from tourists and visitors depend on visitors' engagement with the stories behind the products (Mossberg, 2007), and when it comes to applying storytelling in tourism, it needs to be pointed out that:

> the storytelling concept requires communication between different stakeholders: tourism policy makers, destination organisations and service providers. It includes tourism organisations, public administration at local and regional levels, private partners, different types of service providers (hotels, restaurants, museums and specialised visitor shops) and storytellers (individuals). (Vitić-Ćetković et al., 2020, p. 93, cited in Potočnik Topler et al., 2024)

Thus, effective storytelling can serve as a powerful resource for policymakers (Mourik et al., 2021), as it conveys expert knowledge through an accessible, multidisciplinary narrative format. As a result, tourism creatives must develop the skills to generate, capture, and preserve narrative knowledge within their work (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024).

2.2. Collaboration of stakeholders for improved tourism value

Improvements in tourism value require considerable effort by tourism professionals, acting in a network. Experience design and value co-creation theory (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) are only very slowly being understood and implemented by the travel industry since its establishment in the literature in 2004 (Melis et al., 2023). It is collaboration of stakeholders that facilitates value co-creation (Melis et al., 2023) and inclusion of the community (Singh et al., 2023), not simply the collaboration of the tourism customer at the end of the supply chain. The inclusion of stakeholders in tourism planning has been a significant topic since the 1980s. However, despite its importance, it has often been reduced to a mere buzzword (Spadaro et al., 2023). This reduction may be attributed to managers' challenges in effectively involving stakeholders, who represent various types and have divergent interests. Huy (2021) identified a broad spectrum of stakeholders in tourism, including locals, tourists, accommodation providers, tour operators, travel agents, local authorities, managers, owners, chief executive officers, employees, educators, students, farmers and other interested organizations. The collaboration among these stakeholders is crucial for effective communication of attractions by travel intermediaries and destination managers, and it plays a vital role in competitive performance (Amoako et al., 2022). However, this collaboration is complex due to factors such as differing communication styles, conflicting views and the interdependency of stakeholders (Saito & Ruhanen, 2017). Despite these challenges, the success or failure of a destination is largely determined by stakeholder involvement, making the management of stakeholder networks a priority for destination managers (Amoako et al., 2022). As Stokłosa et al. (2022) argue, teaching sustainable tourism is essential and when it comes to teaching, the role of information and communication technology. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that effective cooperation processes are underpinned by the DART model: dialogue, accessibility, risk assessment and transparency. While the expectation for stakeholders to form networked teams beyond their immediate supply chain connections is not frequently addressed in the academic literature, some studies explore related concepts. For example, Go et al. (1992) discuss community initiatives in small towns, Hwang et al. (2012) focus on community-based actions in tourism, and Hwang and Stewart (2017) examine collective action and social capital in rural tourism. These studies suggest that cooperation alone is insufficient; leadership is also required to initiate the crystallization of collaborative networks focused on value creation. Additionally, the identification of a catalyst – something around which the emerging network can cooperatively create – is essential for motivating collective action.

In some cases, these collaborative networks can evolve into living labs. A living lab is conceptualized as a movement, an approach and a platform for collective work, information exchange among stakeholders (including researchers, the public and industry partners), development and innovation, and as a testbed for novel solutions (Almirall & Wareham, 2011; Bergvall-Kareborn et al., 2009; Hossain et al., 2019; Leminen et al., 2015). The living lab process can occur in real-time or in virtual environments across diverse contexts (Hossain et al., 2019; Nyström et al., 2014). The existence of the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL, n.d.), an international non-profit organization, exemplifies the global adoption of this concept which supports participation and co-creation among academia, industry, government and citizens through the quadruple helix model (Tercanli & Jongbloed, 2022). Since its inception in 2006, ENoLL has registered 460 labs addressing challenges related to sustainability, health, water scarcity, technology, climate change, education, ageing societies and development, often bridging the gap between research and industry implementation. Living labs are frequently employed for public sector innovation (Fuglsang et al., 2021). Therefore, higher education institutions have organized numerous living labs as they are expected to connect with the industry, share knowledge, innovate and solve complex challenges (Tercanli & Jongbloed, 2022).

3. Methodology and originality of the study

This study distinguishes itself through its innovative approach to data collection. While tourism research often operates within fixed methodological structures that predetermine the type, scope, and format of data, this study adopts a processual methodology (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024) designed to enhance adaptability, whilst allowing the research to evolve in real time and respond to the specific concerns emerging within the tourism environments being studied (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024). This research adopts a reflective, practice-oriented approach that draws on sustained pedagogical and experiential engagement with travel writing, aiming to connect creative practice with action-oriented inquiry (Candy, 2006; Roberts, 2016). By integrating academic insights with industry applications through action research, the study aligns with the research questions and objectives, thereby contributing to the pedagogy and practice of travel writing. This integration of action research, practice-led research and reflective practice creates a research design particularly well-suited for the investigation and analysis of travel texts. The approach supports an iterative, reflexive process that enables the incorporation, implementation and analysis of pedagogic knowledge within the discursive practice of the genre, offering a tool for analytical practice, the aim, design, assessment (ADA) apparatus (Roberts, 2016).

The ADA apparatus serves as a planning and documentation tool aimed at enhancing the professional writing practice of travel writers, thereby increasing their potential for being commissioned for new projects. This apparatus is a structured mechanism, as described by Lisle (2006), that not only aids in categorizing the various forms of travel writing but also significantly contributes to the theoretical analysis of travel texts.. Resembling frameworks used in close reading (Paul & Elder, 2003) and action-oriented methodologies (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001; Ohrvik, 2024), the ADA tool facilitates in-depth examination and systematic evaluation of travel writing texts (Roberts, 2016). As Roberts (2016) noted, it allows practitioners or commissioners to introduce sections of a travel text with clearly articulated aims and design approaches or to use the apparatus retrospectively, after submission, to evaluate the effectiveness of the narrative in relation to its literary objectives and textual design. "The acronym ADA stands for:

- aim – what this section will do and how it should be judged or measured for success;
- design – which literary devices will be employed to achieve the aims;
- assessment – judge the section against its stated aims" (Roberts, 2016, p. 53).

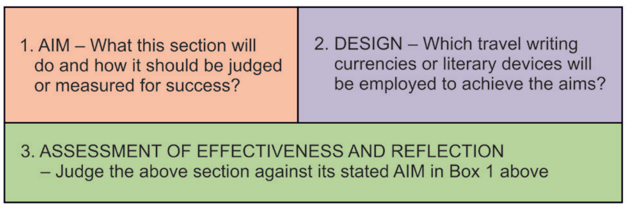

Figure 1. The ADA apparatus
Source: Roberts (2016, p. 53)

Dividing the framework into three elements enables authors to frame parts of a travel text and identify the narrative methods and stylistic choices that signal its alignment with the travel writing genre (Figure 1).

3.1. Action research

Action research enables practitioners to critically examine and develop their own professional practices (McIntosh, 2010; Roberts, 2016). The concepts of "reflection in action" and "reflection on action" are the foundation for "action research". This methodology, which has emerged relatively recently within social science research presents valuable components that can be applied to the field of design practice (Swann, 2002).

> Dick (1995) regards AR [action research] as a methodology intent on both action and research outcomes. He also recognises that the action is primary, and that in some [cases], the research element emerges as the understanding of those involved. In distinction, he continues, some approaches to AR include research as its main importance – the action is the dividend. … [F]inding inspiration from theoretical "demands for participatory and emancipatory research processes" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 10), the first conceptualisation of the action research process is attributed to Lewin (1952). (Roberts, 2016, p. 45, after Dick, 2023 and Zuber-Skerritt, 1992)

In summary, action and research function simultaneously across four key phases, as described in Zuber-Skerritt's (2001) analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. PAOR process

Short-form for acronym	Activity for the developer to complete
Plan	Problem analysis and strategic plan
Act	Implementation of strategic plan
Observe	Observation & evaluation of action by appropriate method and techniques
Reflect	Reflection on results of evaluation, and the entire action and research process. This may identify and actualise new research problems that appropriate the use of a new planning, acting, observing and reflecting cycle

Source: Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p. 19), cited in Roberts (2016, p. 46).

The ADA model created by Roberts (2016) reflects the structure of action research by aligning with its four core stages (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001) in its execution, as it structures the analysis of travel writing using "literary aims in the planning and drafting process, it observes the design practices needed to fulfil these aims and reflects on the implementation of these aims within its assessment" (Roberts, 2016, p. 46).

3.2. Practice-led research

Central to this research was the practice-led approach. This work allowed the process of the writer's own practice to lead each stage of the inquiry (Hamilton & Jaaniste, 2010) so that working know-how evolved out of the study undertaken. At the same time a diffractive interaction between the practices of the writer-researcher and the object under scrutiny is cultivated (Webb & Brien, 2008), which in turn leads to creative synthesis (Roberts, 2016). "Creative practice (often referred to as practice-led research) is considered the most common mode of creative writing research" (Roberts, p. 49, after Frayling, 1993). Each mode of arts research: *for* practice, *through* practice, and *into* practice (Frayling, 1993) occurs within the context of this inquiry (Roberts, 2016) (Table 2).

Table 2. Frayling (1993) three modes of arts research

Modes of arts research	Description
For practice	Activities supporting the artist in her work e.g. collecting materials to act as creative stimuli
Through practice	Creative drafting and editing
Into practice	E.g. observations of artists at work

Source: after Roberts (2016, p. 49).

4. Data analysis using a case study portfolio of travel writing practice

Throughout her master's degree (2014–2016), the researcher, Dr Zoë Roberts collated a portfolio of nine travel texts, including, prose, travel blog posts and a poem. This portfolio served as the practical foundation for analysing travel writing's currencies and pedagogical principles using a diverse range of travel texts to determine to what extent these can be used to professionalise a travel writer's practice. The findings that follow demonstrate how the writer applied recognised elements of the travel writing genre, Berger's (2004) framework of narrative conventions, Lisle's (2006) core criteria, and earlier studies on thematic and semiotic dimensions (Chicot & Mansfield, 2014; Mansfield, 2012; Roberts, 2015a, 2016) as a means of advancing her professional practice. This sustained travel writing practice was used to test the academic validity and reliability of the ADA apparatus, a planning documentation tool and design specification for travel writing practitioners and commissioners (Roberts, 2015b, 2016).

The action of the portfolio texts unfolds in multiple destinations in South-West England (e.g., the River Dart, Exeter, Totnes and Truro) and mainland Europe (e.g., Concarneau and Quimper, France and Amsterdam, Netherlands). The selection of these destinations was partially determined by their role as sites for the researcher's fieldwork practicum, which was designed to facilitate her practice-led investigation of travel writing:

1. "River Dart" – 786 words.
2. "Royal Cornwall Museum" – 383 words.
3. *Dart* poem – 183 words.
4. "Retracing Maigret's Footsteps: My Experience in Concarneau" *Bucket and Shade* travel blog – 5154 words.
5. "The Book Behind the Blue Door" – 712 words.
6. "Charlie's Search for Max: Part One" *Bucket and Shade* travel blog – 524 words.
7. "Charlie's Search for Max: Part Two" *Bucket and Shade* travel blog – 788 words.
8. "A Conversation with Eric: Table Service" *Bucket and Shade* travel blog – 514 words.
9. "72 Hours in Amsterdam" – travel article – 692 words.

Total word count: 9,736 words.

The writer launched the travel blog *Bucket and Shade* in 2015 using publicly available Web 2.0 technologies, with WordPress as the hosting platform. The blog featured four initial posts, with all reader comments made publicly visible alongside clear statements outlining the intended use and purpose of the collected data. To enhance the data's academic and public value, the blog was promoted through social media platforms such as Instagram and Google+ (Roberts, 2016).

During an academic conference at Plymouth University focused on river tourism and place writing, the researcher contributed a theoretical paper. She later compiled this work, alongside other conference submissions, into an edited e-book for which she assumed editorial responsibility (Roberts, 2016).

The study explored the postmodern conflicts of the travel writing genre by providing a nuanced understanding of the "formal and epistemological complexities, narrative devices and rhetorical dimensions" (Roberts, 2016, p. 143) in Alice Oswald's book-length poem *Dart* (2002). It provides a conceptual framework to aid critical understanding and genre classification, applicable across disciplines and textual preferences (Roberts, 2016). Focusing on three core objectives: (a) classifying the form linguistically, (b) evaluating travel writers' professional practice, and (c) assessing *Dart*'s place within the genre, the analysis addressed themes of commodification, generic boundaries, linguistics and cultural capital, highlighting Oswald's departure into travel writing. The researcher employed Calibre, a free, open-source software for managing e-book libraries (Calibre, n.d.) to convert and format the conference papers into an ePub file. After creating an account on Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), the e-book was published and made available for purchase on Amazon (n.d.) (Roberts, 2016).

4.1. The journey as a metaphor

The journey metaphor is a currency embedded throughout most of the portfolio texts (Roberts, 2016), symbolizing both the writer's physical travels and her professional development (Figure 2). This duality enriched the narratives, drawing connections between the writer's exploration of new destinations and her evolving identity as a travel writer. The journey metaphor emerged through literary devices such as evocative language, including terms like "search", "quest" and "treasure hunt".

> I must admit, I am relatively hopeless when it comes to any form of navigation and was extremely grateful I was not embarking on this quest alone. (P4)

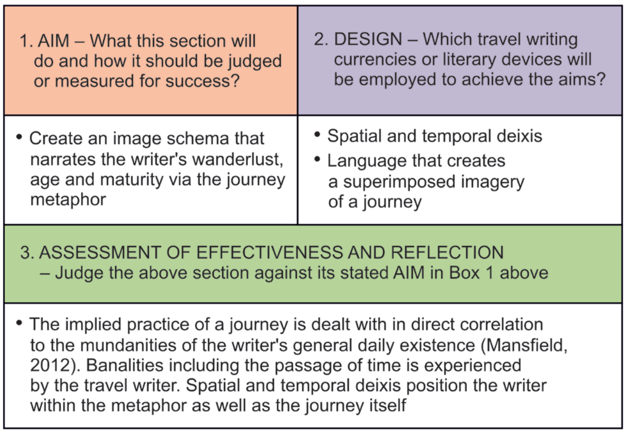

Figure 2. The journey as metaphor
Source: Roberts (2016, p. 88)

These terms emphasized the parallel between the physical journey and the writer's pursuit of professional growth and self-discovery. This is both entertaining for the reader and illustrative of the writer's decision to include this travel writing currency as a means by which to professionalise her practice (Roberts, 2016). While the journey as metaphor proved to be a compelling travel writing currency, its integration within the initial narrative plan could have enhanced its overall impact. For instance, the writer could have utilized the ADA apparatus to deliberately employ this currency with the narratives. The apparatus would have guided the design process by identifying the stylistic devices or techniques required to effectively incorporate the currency (Roberts, 2016). After completing these steps and drafting the text, the writer could then reflect and evaluate the design's success by comparing the text against the prescribed aims, revisiting the drafting process if the outcome proved unsatisfactory (Roberts, 2016).

4.2. Weather (Mansfield, 2012, after Rolin, 1995)

Weather, as noted by Psomadakis (2007), serves as another metaphorical element within the journey domain. It can be employed to elicit emotional responses, establish mood, signal narrative transitions, and shape the course of events, either hindering or enabling movement, making it a fundamental component in depicting setting (Roberts, 2016). Additionally, weather serves to simultaneously highlight veracity and literariness (Mansfield, 2012). Roberts (2016) illustrates that weather appears frequently and serves a significant function in the author's writing (see Figure 3). She suggests that weather-related commentary often enables the integration of other currencies common to travel narratives, such as references to clothing:

> Feeling the chill of the French weather even within the confines of a coach I reflected on my earlier fashion paradigm. (P4)

> Sunshine envelops the river's body throughout its core and then its tributary extremities. (P3)

1. AIM – What this section will do and how it should be judged or measured for success?	2. DESIGN – Which travel writing currencies or literary devices will be employed to achieve the aims?
• Use of weather to further illustrate the journey as a metaphor	• Figurative language and personification – used to build imagery of weather and climate
3. ASSESSMENT OF EFFECTIVENESS AND REFLECTION – Judge the above section against its stated AIM in Box 1 above	
• The writer's description of the weather in P4 is weak, however it did continue the writer's earlier stream of consciousness surrounding clothing choice, which as aforementioned, is indicative of the writer's self-currency and the journey as a metaphor • This could have been strengthened using pathetic fallacy – linking the writer's emotions with her physical environment, including specific aspects of weather and climate. The use of both pathetic fallacy and personification would have entertained the reader and further connected them to the destination and the narrative • This was also an opportunity for the writer to have included key tourism knowledge, expanding the text's role as a 'toureme' conduit. It was an opportunity to describe the destination's seasonality and consequently meet an expectation of the audience - transferring critical tourism knowledge within the overall narrative	

Figure 3. Weather
Source: Roberts (2016, p. 89)

Within her portfolio, the writer failed to sufficiently employ the weather currency as the assessment identified literary devices and stylistic techniques that could have been more effectively incorporated. To further professionalize her practice, greater and more consistent emphasis should have been placed on the weather currency throughout the writer's "portfolio, as indicated in the reflective practitioner's reflection. Weather is a key component of tourism knowledge that readers anticipate from travel writing and its role as a toureme conduit" (Roberts, 2016, p. 89).

4.3. 'Toureme conduit'

Roberts (2016) emphasises a core function of travel writing, suggesting that the genre possesses a distinctive capacity to create and share tourism-related insights with a range of audiences, including tourists, readers, and key stakeholders such as destination managers and branding professionals. In doing so, she frames travel writing as a "toureme conduit", a term derived from Mansfield's (2015) conceptualisation of the toureme. Mansfield (2015) describes the toureme as a symbolic point of engagement within the destination, where visitors encounter new meanings through a blend of experiences, social dynamics, and cultural resources. Roberts (2016) argues that travel writing not only captures these transformative encounters but also facilitates their emergence, thereby functioning as both a reflection and a driver of the toureme experience.

The setting in each portfolio entry is crucial, often serving as the foundation for key pieces of tourism knowledge embedded within the texts (Figure 4). For instance, P1 and P3 feature the River Dart as a natural backdrop. The toureme is activated in readers familiar with Westcountry locations, such as Totnes, as their cultural capital is invoked by recognizing these place names. This interaction between text and reader transforms familiar names into moments of recall, enhancing the reader's connection to the narrative. The toureme conduit concept is further demonstrated when the writer incorporates tourism knowledge through specific references, such as proper nouns, which anchor the river's geographic location. This exemplifies the transfer of tourism knowledge from writer to reader, reinforcing travel writing's dual role in educating and entertaining. The application of the ADA apparatus allowed for systematic examination of this currency:

> Driven by a friend, I travelled to the Brittany Ferries port from the outskirts of suburban Plymouth to meet with the University of Plymouth's lecturers and students also embarking on the impending fieldwork in Concarneau, France. Staring aimlessly out the window throughout the car journey, I started to reflect on what I had witnessed on the short drive from my home and tried to parallel this with the perceptions of tourists just arriving at the maritime city. (P4)

Within P4, the author integrates insights related to tourism, with a clear example being her reference to the Tourist Information Centre in Concarneau:

> Our first methodological port of call was the Tourist Information Centre. In my very best French accent I asked the lady at the counter for a map… (P4)

1. AIM – What this section will do and how it should be judged or measured for success?	2. DESIGN – Which travel writing currencies or literary devices will be employed to achieve the aims?
• Establish the scene and make it credible by naming destinations and attractions • Include tourism knowledge, that the reader expects from travel writing	• Use nouns that will be commonly known or easily found
3. ASSESSMENT OF EFFECTIVENESS AND REFLECTION – Judge the above section against its stated AIM in Box 1 above	
• Scene established; destination named via the use of pronouns • Plymouth – use of noun allows for geographical connotations. Tourism knowledge transferred from writer to reader by use of the phrase 'maritime city' • Brittany Ferries – example of transport currency and critical tourism knowledge • The Tourist Information Centre is crucial for tourism knowledge the reader wants to know when reading a travel text. The writer could have increased the … by describing the geographical location of the centre. A picture of the map described in this section of P4s narrative would have been useful in illustrating not only its location, but more visitor points of interest (Chicot & Mansfield, 2014) • All of the above points are indicative of travel writing's role as a toureme conduit	

Figure 4. Toureme conduit
Source: Roberts, 2016, p. 102

The portfolio texts meet audience and client expectations by incorporating relevant tourism knowledge. By leveraging travel writing's role as a toureme conduit, the writer successfully conveys factual information about the destinations featured in her journey. The reflective practitioner asserts that this demonstrates the writer's ability to professionalize her practice through the application of pedagogical insights into the genre.

5. Discussion, findings and limitations

5.1. Discussion

The research aimed to examine the relationship between travel writing's pedagogy and professional practice, and develop a method for planning and evaluating travel texts. Guided by Paul and Elder's (2003) framework, the researcher performed a close reading of the portfolio. Seeking to understand the pedagogy and practice of travel writing, this investigation engaged with the primary data by performing close readings of the portfolio entries to test the broader context of established travel writing currencies within the discourse (Roberts, 2016). Alongside Mansfield's (2012) structural analysis of travel writing, the researcher incorporated thematic and semiotic frameworks into the primary data analysis to support a detailed and deliberate close reading, a technique utilized by cultural historians and various humanities disciplines, though its application has changed over time and across different academic areas (Ohrvik, 2024; Roberts, 2016).

During the close reading performed on the portfolio, the researcher heeded the advice of Eagleton (2008) to ultimately extend further than the insistence on due attentiveness of the text and was "accompanied by purposeful, scaffolded instruction about the passage" (Fisher & Frey, 2012, p. 8) using the ADA apparatus (Roberts, 2016).

Close reading involves conscious readings of a text to make explicit comprehensive understandings of its meaning; understandings often shared by others in their criticisms or critical analyses (Brummett, 2010). Derivative from the Latin *lectio divina* (Burggraf & Grossenbacher, 2007), it is the investigation of a text utilising deconstruction or separation at word or phrase level to critically evaluate central idea(s) or theme(s) (Cummins, 2013; Dick & Wolfreys, 2013; Piette, 2013).

Close reading is a continuum that maps the progression from reading to a more explicit analysis (Brummett, 2010). Despite the clear distinctions between a close reading of poetry and analysing historical sources, reading remains a unique and essential methodology in contemporary humanistic disciplines (Ohrvik, 2024). In the analysis of travel writing, it is essential to consider specific linguistic and semiotic elements, including syntax, deixis, semantics, rhetoric and imagistic language, as these are integral to the subject matter (Crowe Ransom, 2003; Prendergast, 1990, Roberts, 2016). Additionally, semiotics plays a crucial role in this analysis (Roberts, 2015b), leading to the development of an ontological episteme that enables the reader to move beyond impressionistic modes of communication rooted in older belletristic traditions (Prendergast, 1990). This comprehensive understanding of the text facilitates the emergence of a critical discourse, providing a foundation for further analytical exploration. The thematic elements of each portfolio entry were considered to ensure an explicit close reading. Whilst noting 'anecdotal irrelevancies' (Eagleton, 2008, p. 38) the research agrees with Lipking (1987) in their suggestion that whatever the textual provenance, theory tends toward close reading (Roberts, 2016).

Holistically, the value attached to the portfolio centres on it being a tangible product/outcome of learning and skill development and a vehicle by which the ADA apparatus could be tested. The application of the ADA apparatus provided a structured approach to the professionalisation of the reflective practitioner's writing practice, allowing her to plan, assess and refine her travel texts, while "providing immediate synthesis as the data of the text is discussed" (Mansfield, 2015,

p. 179). A key focus was identifying the presence or absence of generic currencies (Berger, 2004; Chicot & Mansfield, 2014; Lisle, 2006; Mansfield, 2012; Roberts, 2015a, 2016) within the portfolio texts. As these currencies represent the established conventions, thematics and semiotics of travel writing that signal professionalisation in practice, they were incorporated to aid the analysis of travel writing when applied to the design element of the ADA tool (Roberts, 2016).

The research highlights the critical role of travel writing as a 'toureme conduit' (Roberts, 2016) a concept introduced to describe the genre's capacity to transmit tourism knowledge to its audience. "The setting of each entry plays a vital role and is often the catalyst for key tourism knowledges included within the texts" (Roberts, 2016, p. 101). The reflective practitioner's portfolio illustrates how travel writing can serve as an effective medium for conveying place-based information, guiding readers through the cultural, historical and geographical landscapes encountered on the writer's journeys. This function of travel writing is particularly important in the context of the tourism industry, where accurate and engaging narratives can significantly influence readers' perceptions and decisions (Mansfield, 2022). Travel writing can thus successfully be employed as an instrument in the promotion of tourist destinations, the enhancement of their images, and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024). Through quality narratives and descriptive accounts, travel writers can effectively present the unique attributes of a destination, thereby attracting potential tourists, influencing their perceptions and educating them.

"Travel writing has become obscured within a realm of theoretically conceived genres", striving for legitimacy despite sharing similarities with established literary forms (Roberts, 2016, p. 110). By identifying concrete currencies of the genre, the research aimed to aid future demarcation and evaluation of travel texts. Overall, the findings emphasise the role of pedagogy in professionalising travel writing practice. In other words, it emphasises the importance of a structured, reflective approach to travel writing, one that integrates pedagogic knowledge with practical application to produce texts that are both engaging and informative.

This research contributes to the advancement of dialogue-based methodologies in travel research (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024). Potočnik Topler et al. (2024) note that the continuous discovery of new evidence often leads participants to pose additional questions or identify further data requirements (MacInnis and Portelli, 2002; Potočnik Topler et al., 2024). A significant aspect of this study is the incorporation of journaling within a permanent Web 2.0 archive, which documents the ongoing, interactive exchanges between researchers and stakeholders. This digital archive not only refines the methodological framework but also provides interim results to stakeholders, enhancing transparency and fostering trust. Potočnik Topler et al. (2024, p. 470) explain that this aligns with the dialogic journaling processual methodology proposed by Mansfield et al. (2025) (Potočnik Topler et al., 2024).

5.2. Findings and limitations

A key conclusion is that knowledge of travel writing pedagogy demonstrably adds value to discursive practice. The close reading revealed that "skilful pedagogic knowledge, coupled with the knowledge of literary devices and schemas, signal a writer's efforts to professionalise their practice" (Roberts, 2016, p. 111). The research also substantiated "travel writing's role as a toureme conduit" – a critical function in transferring tourism knowledge to readers. This "provides a more nuanced understanding of the responsibilities of travel writing, aside from «writing about place»" (Roberts, 2016, p. 112).

Limitations of the study centre on the lack of comparative data as only one person's travel writing practice was included within the portfolio. A respondent group made up of various travel writers and commissioning editors, for example, could have provided valuable comparative data, allowing for an evaluation of the ADA framework's effectiveness and its value when applied in a real-world context (Roberts, 2016). Suggested future research directions include applying the ADA apparatus to established professional travel writing to analyse success factors, investigating guidebooks' use of the identified generic currencies, and distributing the ADA apparatus to travel writing commissioners/editors for use in tender and review processes (Roberts, 2016). Additionally, further exploring of the transfer of academic knowledge to commercial travel writing and testing the toureme conduit theory across a broader range of travel texts are proposed as future research avenues.

6. Conclusions

This research introduces an innovative approach to evaluating travel texts through close reading and the application of the ADA apparatus. By explicitly linking travel writing pedagogy with professional practice, it offers a structured framework for writers and commissioners to rigorously plan and systematically analyse travel texts. The identification of concrete currencies and the concept of the toureme conduit provide new insights into the generic identity and sociocultural functions of travel writing. Although further testing is needed, this lays the groundwork for a more rigorous evaluation and professionalization of travel writing, addressing the ambiguity that has long surrounded the genre.

This study employed a critically reflective, practice-based methodology, which enabled a nuanced exploration of both the instructional and creative dimensions of travel writing (Roberts, 2016). Such an approach offered meaningful contributions to understanding how pedagogical frameworks intersect with the development of professional writing practice, highlighting the role of education in shaping discursive output (Roberts, 2016). Drawing on insights from the literature review, the researcher identified a set of thematic and stylistic elements, termed 'currencies', which were then located and examined within the portfolio using close reading techniques. This process allowed for a direct evaluation of how theoretical knowledge informed the writing, particularly in relation to its professionalisation. The study ultimately demonstrated that combining the ADA analytical framework with the concept of generic currencies provided a productive method for assessing the quality and value of professional travel writing (Roberts, 2016).

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this research and article.

Endnotes

[1] This article is based in large part on Zoë Roberts Master's thesis, "Mapping Generic Territory: The Pedagogy and Practice of Travel Writing", submitted to University of Plymouth in 2016 (Roberts, 2016).

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.03 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E
Member since 2019
JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

The historical legacy of Norwegian mountain destinations: Current challenges and opportunities for development

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How to cite (APA style): Owusu, K., & Tjørve, E. (2025). The historical legacy of Norwegian mountain destinations: Current challenges and opportunities for development. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 67–83. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.03

ABSTRACT

This study explores the historical legacy of mountain destinations in the southeastern region of Norway to understand the challenges they face and their opportunities for development. It identifies exogenic (external) and endogenic (internal) factors that have influenced the destinations' development from historical accounts in order to understand the different levels of success among them. The literature study and the emerging discussion are based on locally-sourced documents in order to bridge the gap between academic literature and little known or less available sources of destination history and development. The findings are that exogenic factors such as transportation, climate change and commodifiable slopes, which may primarily affect all destinations for alpine skiing but are not sufficient to determine the variation in success between them. Endogenic drivers such as ownership, management and leadership qualities strongly explain the different levels of success in a destination's development. This study demonstrates those with favourable exogenic conditions struggle without effective endogenic drivers. Conversely, some destinations have overcome challenges from historical development and these are largely influenced by endogenic drivers. This research contributes a historical perspective of development that uncovers a range of underlying drivers, providing a framework for understanding how exogenic and endogenic factors shape mountain destinations' success, sustainability and capacity to innovate.

KEYWORDS

mountain-destination development, exogenic and endogenic factors, ownership and management, tourism evolution

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
6 December 2024
Accepted:
3 March 2025
Published:
4 June 2025

1. Introduction

Historians often argue that the future replicates the past, suggesting that it should be possible to scientifically analyse historical patterns to inform the present and shape the future (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2020). In this context, we ask what can insights from the stories of tourism destinations offer about the challenges they face and their current opportunities for development.

The history of Norwegian mountain destinations is not unique, yet their stories remain largely untold in academic literature. Much of the reason the literature's

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

discussion has become overly theoretical is the lack of a background understanding of how the destinations have evolved. Without a grounding in concrete historical examples, arguments about destination development often lack the context to fully understand successes and failures, or the different fates of individual destinations.

This approach is consistent with recent trends in tourism literature, which emphasise the importance of considering long-term historical perspectives when examining destination development (Brouder et al., 2016; Saarinen et al., 2019). Destinations with comparable histories and conditions sometimes exhibit very different levels of success. Which mountain destinations will succeed or survive under present or future conditions depends on many factors, which include changing visitor preferences and climate change. These may hit smaller destinations harder as these need a stronger economy for the investments needed. Other destinations will face problems due to their spatial attributes, for example, distance or travel time to main markets or lack of mountain slopes to expand the alpine area.

We identify these as exogenic factors as they influence destination development but are largely outside the control of stakeholders and management structures (Page, 2009; Welling & Árnason, 2016). We also find that they cannot sufficiently explain success, sustainability and the capacity to innovate, prompting us to look closely at endogenic factors. These affect the destination mostly through its internal forces (Mühlinghaus & Wälty, 2001), and examples include ownership, management models and leadership.

Destination development has been depicted as going through sequential phases or "stages", a directed and ordered inherently related succession (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2020). Knafou (1978) proposed four successional types of ski resorts in the French Alps. The first were created from old villages down in the valley, whereas in the three later stages resorts were created ground-up at higher altitudes, shaped by changing types of planning regimes.

Central to this idea is that succeeding stages depend on each other and that this process has a direction (e.g. Butler, 2006; Prideaux, 2004). However, these theoretical views may need further enhancement as destination development may be more complex than a mere linear history of sequential stages. McKercher (1999) compares tourism system complexity to those of ecological communities, which are also highly variable in space and time. Consequently, rather than an expectation of a rigid, predestined linear development, as predicted by Butler's (2006) tourism area life cycle (TALC) theory, we should expect more chaotic and unpredictable developments (Russell & Faulkner, 2004). This also means that the future effects of different driving factors are as difficult to predict today as they have been in the past, for example, some factors were essential in transforming summer-tourism destinations into ski resorts, causing the survival of some and the death of others. This would have been impossible to foresee when the first mountain destinations appeared about 150 years ago, therefore, in order to be able to discuss, understand and predict shifts in competitiveness, sustainability and ultimately the destiny of tourist destinations, it is pertinent to investigate what historical factors have influenced, and continue to influence until present day, as well as future opportunities and challenges for mountain destinations. The first step in doing so is to recapitulate the history of these destinations and to establish describable time periods. This in turn provides a foundation for identifying exogenic and endogenic driving factors that have shaped destinations and culled or promoted future possibilities. In doing so, we provide in the discussion examples of how the observed success of sample destinations may be explained by their historical legacy and how the importance of different driving factors for development changes through history.

In doing so, this research advances theoretical understanding through a historically grounded framework that integrates exogenic and endogenic factors. The framework extends beyond linear models to provide a nuanced tool for analysing destination development, whereas existing research largely overlooks historical influences on destination success, this historical perspective addresses that gap. The emphasis on context enhances its relevance to international tourism research, providing findings applicable to destinations worldwide.

In this study we review local and historical documents, which constitute a basis for the presentation of a historical framework followed by a discussion of the effects of historical legacies. However, first we establish a conceptual framework for destination development as a theoretical basis for the historical analysis.

2. Conceptual framework

Tourism destinations evolve through stages which are influenced by changing visitor preferences, facility renewal and attraction transformation (Butler, 2006). Theories like Butler's (2006) TALC model propose a destination development pattern based on the idea of a product life cycle, while the resort development spectrum (Prideaux, 2004) relates resort development to market drivers of supply. These prescribed unidirectional models propose that destinations follow a set evolutionary sequence; however, they often fail to capture the complex and diverse development paths of individual examples. Growth rates and evolutionary stages differ and this is crucial in order to recognize destination development (Agarwal, 2002).

Norway's mountain destinations have developed through diverse influences well suited to a discussion challenging linear development concepts. The classic development informs intervention possibilities (Poole et al., 2000); in the case of Norwegian mountain destinations it was pioneered by farmers and their families who began hosting visitors as early as the mid-19th century.

Increasing visitor numbers stimulated the creation of new businesses (Blekastad, 2001), triggered local government policy making (Hall, 2012) and destination 're-engineering' approaches (Agarwal, 2012). Soon, other local residents recognized tourist visits as an emerging market opportunity and engaged in entrepreneurial initiatives (Komppula, 2016) such as leadership functions (Kozak et al., 2014). This led to a shift in perspective that facilitated the transition from seasonal summer-farm operations to year-round tourism-oriented businesses, demonstrating adaptive supply chain management and entrepreneurship in response to visitor needs (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). Further, it highlights the role of tangible and marketable products in driving destination development (Presenza et al., 2015).

These interventionist approaches required creating several activities contributing to the gradual slow shift from primary economic activities (agriculture) to tourism-dominated communities (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2019). Nevertheless, later some destinations developed with little connection to local socioeconomic structures, with particular interest in heavy financial investment and generating economic benefits through corporatization (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2019). The Hafjell and Kvitfjell destinations, which were developed for the Lillehammer Olympic games in 1994, are prime Norwegian examples (Hanstad & Lesjø, 2020).

Structural forces beyond acting as just agencies of change become important in destination development patterns, emphasizing the co-adaptive (Bramwell, 2006) or nonlinear nature of change processes (Pavlovich, 2014). Such changes occur through heterogeneous connections of factors demonstrating how diverse driving forces of change can create novelty. Tourism destination development does not always follow a hierarchical pattern; change can occur unplanned (Pavlovich, 2014) or through externally induced events or even crises (Nordin et al., 2019; Pforr et al., 2014).

A key limitation of existing destination-development concepts is their tendency to oversimplify the complex, multi-factorial nature of change as it typically occurs through a prolonged series of interconnected events and processes (Haugland et al., 2011). Tourism research has traditionally categorized factors influencing destination changes as exogenic (external) and endogenic (internal) (e.g. Gill & Williams, 2011; Hall et al., 2024). This binary framework distinguishes between influences intrinsic to a destination and those from outside. We follow this established approach, discerning between exogenic and endogenic drivers, to analyse destination development. This dual categorization helps capture its complexity and provides practical value; by differentiating between controllable (endogenic) and uncontrollable (exogenic) factors, stakeholders can develop more targeted and effective strategies (Bramwell & Cox, 2009).

While the graphic models of exogenic and endogenic factors presented here are not exhaustive, they serve as valuable tools for illustrating historical development and guiding discussions about these legacy effects.

2.1. Exogenic driving factors

Exogenic drivers are external factors that influence destination development (Gunn & Var, 2002) but are largely outside the control of local actors, management structures and stakeholder efforts (Page, 2009; Welling & Árnason, 2016). They directly affect destinations by restricting or facilitating physical growth and indirectly by influencing the tourist markets. Mühlinghaus and Wälty (2001) find that exogenic drivers can create a feeling of helplessness among local actors, however Pröbstl-Haider et al. (2019) encourage tourism actors to find ways to adapt, mitigate or navigate through them to remain competitive and sustainable.

Exogenic drivers relevant in Norwegian destinations are outlined in Figure 1. The geography of the destination and its surroundings determine the presence of commodifiable nature (Kaltenborn et al., 2007); in this case, mountain slopes and pristine nature determine their placement, along with other spatial attributes such as distance to markets. Travel time depends not only on distance but also on accessibility through

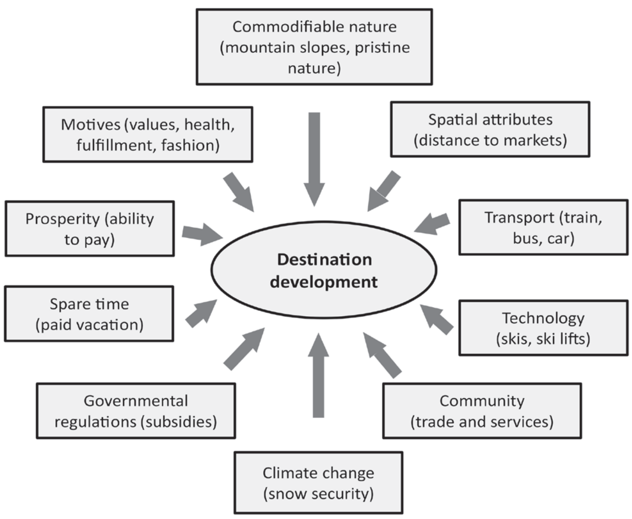

Figure 1. Exogenic driving factors
Source: authors

transportation. The tourism market's response to distance or travel time may be presented as a distance-decay relationship (Müller & Hall, 2018).

Technological advancements in skiing equipment and infrastructure (skis and ski lifts), influence the appeal of destinations (Mayer, 2019). A report from the Menon Economics (Dombu & Jakobsen, 2020) shows that Norwegian ski resorts with more cable cars, surface lifts and pistes consistently have more winter overnight stays and higher turnovers.

Governmental regulations and economic policies (e.g. taxation and subsidies) also affect destination development. For example, from 1946 to 1960, many mountain hotels received favourable loans from the Regional Development Fund to stimulate regional growth (Svalastog, 1992). Spatial planning regulations can influence such development by controlling access to areas suitable for establishing trade and services (Tjørve, 2022; Tjørve et al., 2022). The impacts of climate change will also vary heavily among destinations, impacting smaller businesses more than larger ones (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2019). Tourists' preferences may depend not only on trends in motives but also on historical and recent changes in prosperity and leisure time (Dwyer et al., 2020).

2.2. Endogenic driving factors

Endogenic factors affect the destination through ownership and management models, local governance, stakeholders and actor networks (Figure 2). Page (2009) refers to these factors as internal environment forces from within while the management model refers to the strategies and approaches used to operate and develop the destination (Flagestad & Hope, 2001). These are closely linked to the ownership type e.g. family-owned, corporate, community or public-private partnership. These models preserve essential functions such as planning, organising, leading and controlling (Ryan, 2020); functions are executed by and through networks of actors such as managers, businesses and organisations to achieve the objectives (Page, 2009). In a family-owned business both ownership and leadership are handed over to the next generation. Thus, leadership competence is also part of the legacy, securing not only economic stability but also the transfer of managing skills and knowledge about how to run a tourism business and the industry in general.

Local actors and networks, and also local destination management organisations (DMOs), are tightly related to management and ownership models. The influence of landowners and other stakeholders depends on ownership and network types (Beritelli et al., 2007). It may also be beneficial to discuss the characteristics of managers, including leadership style, knowledge and abilities such as fostering innovation, as leadership may constitute an important driving factor (Bichler & Lösch, 2019). Managers, even at the enterprise level, often find themselves involved in diverse destination- or community-level issues that extend beyond managing their individual enterprises (Valente et al., 2015).

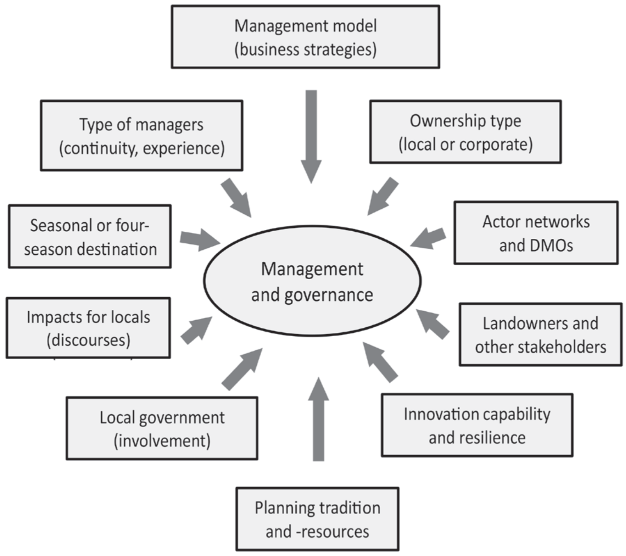

Figure 2. Endogenic driving factors
Source: authors

Planning traditions, local governance and other local involvement can be of great importance. For example, Tjørve et al. (2022) find that a neoliberal planning culture seems to have caused local governments to partly lose control over physical planning in mountain destinations. Seasonal choices of when to stay open may also challenge development (Hudson & Cross, 2007). Smaller destinations and even larger ones that operate only during snow seasons often face harder competition from other forms of vacation offerings, as well as challenges to recruitment and increased training costs; challenges that are amplified by loss of snow cover and a more variable climate (Engeset & Velvin, 2016).

3. Methodology and study area

3.1. Methods

Commercial mountain tourism in Norway has a rich history spanning more than 150 years. Regardless, most of these stories exist only in pieces from Norwegian-language sources and they deserve a more thorough treatment in the international academic literature. This literature analysis aspires to bridge this gap between the academic literature and local and regional accounts of destination history and development (Table 1) enabling a historical reconstruction and critical

Table 1. Written sources of local historical accounts (in Norwegian), including newspapers, destination websites and digital archives such as Digital Museum

Sources	Description	Access/Examples
Atekst (Retriever)	A news analysis tool that provides access to Retriever's database of local, regional and national newspapers	Accessed through the University of Inland Norway (INN) databases: INN (n.d.)
Norske elektroniske aviser [National Library's newspaper service]	Also provides full-text access to Norwegian newspapers. The library is currently digitizing its entire collection	Accessed through the INN databases: INN (n.d.)
Digitalt Museum [Digital Museum]	Houses an extensive collection of information from Norwegian museums. The platform makes its resources available for image searching, research, teaching and joint knowledge building	DigitaltMuseum (n.d.)
Store norske leksikon (SNL) [*The Great Norwegian Encyclopedia*]	The Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia, is an online encyclopaedia containing approximately 200,000 articles, with some entries dating back to 1906	SNL (n.d.)
Destination websites, historical books of some destinations (including landowners' history, agreements and contracts with new destination operators)		e.g. Blekastad (2001), Brusletto & Medhus (2023)

Source: authors.

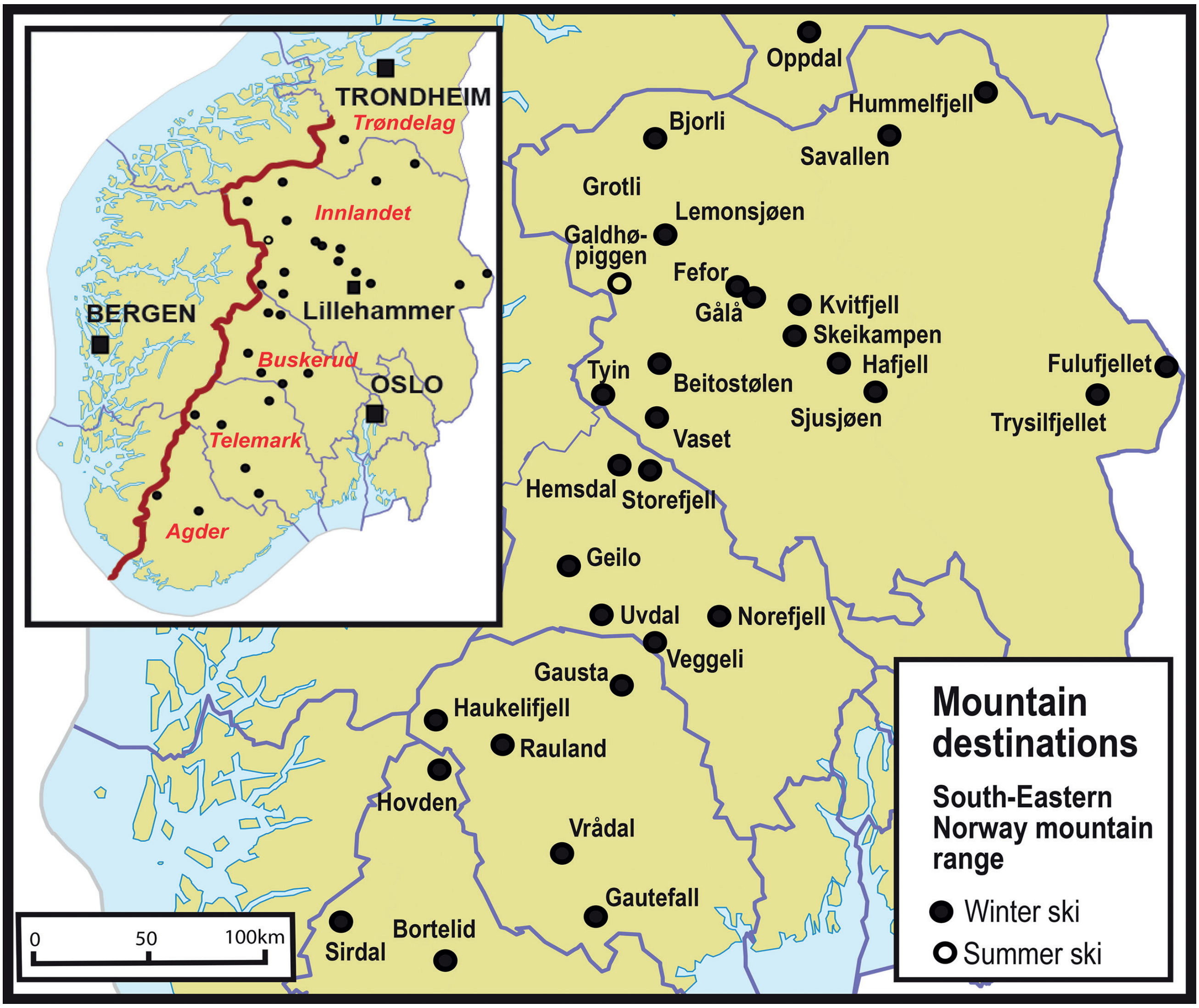

Figure 3. Present placement of the main destinations in the mountain regions of southern Norway with the unbroken lines delineating the counties

Source: authors

analysis of developmental patterns, revealing current challenges and opportunities. Several types of source are included to verify the information. In addition, common knowledge and personal observations are also reflected upon. Considering the wealth of information constituting the basis for the work, abstracting data from all these sources becomes inconceivable. Most of the material researched for the literature review will be in Norwegian and from sources that have not been accessed in the international research literature. Historical material from local, regional and national newspapers was accessed from the Atekst (Retriever) database, which goes back to 1945 (after World War II). This has been complemented with material from the Norske elektroniske aviser [National Library's newspaper service], which substantially overlaps with Atekst (Retriever). The webpage Digitalt Museum [Digital Museum] is a common database for Norwegian and Swedish museums and collections. Its purpose is mainly to present historic photographs and illustrations, but also with accompanying texts, covering all time periods of interest for this study. The website of *Store norske leksikon* (SNL) [*The Great Norwegian Encyclopedia*] will provide a number of relevant subject articles. In addition, magazine or journal articles and books (or edited books) from local-history societies and other local publishers also constitutes a rich source of information. Again, almost all of this information is in Norwegian and often difficult to find.

3.2. Study area

The study area comprises the mountainous parts of southern and eastern Norway (Figure 3). This region's mountain range has the highest number and the largest mountain destinations in the country. The main map in Figure 3 shows the most important destinations in study area, found (from north to south) in the counties of Trøndelag (southern part), Innlandet, Buskerud, Telemark and Agder. The inset shows the location of the study area relative to the three largest cities in Norway.

4. Destination legacy (findings)

There are significant differences in success, resilience and sustainability among Norwegian mountain destinations. However, many factors affecting opportunities and challenges are heavily influenced by destination history (Saarinen et al., 2019). Understanding the history and location of mountain tourism requires consideration of societal changes, technological developments, new ownership and management models, entrepreneurship, innovation and local involvement. Even the managers themselves, often charismatic and of local origin, may largely be products of a destination's legacy (Aguzman et al., 2021). The history of mountain tourism in Norway can be divided into distinct eras (e.g. Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2020), beginning with the first summer tourists to the Norwegian mountains.

4.1. Early beginnings: Summer farms as catalysts (1820–1870)

Mountain tourism first emerged in the 19th century at summer farms, which had begun to cater to summer tourists who initially came from urban areas. Cities had grown rapidly in size during early industrialization and this had also brought about the emergence of an upper-middle class and an intellectual elite. During this time, the upper classes embraced the national romanticism that swept over Europe, and with it came a search for a Norwegian identity and the ideal of wild, untamed nature, praised by contemporary poets and painters (Samios, 2020).

The exploration of mountains from the early 19th century attracted cartographers, botanists, geologists and landscape painters (Eiter & Potthoff, 2007). Foreigners, often British aristocrats, including salmon anglers, mountain climbers and other explorers, also arrived in search of adventure and unspoiled nature (Whalley & Parkinson, 2016).

Summer farming in the Norwegian mountains peaked during the mid-19th century, coinciding with the dawn of mountain tourism. Tønsberg (1875) describes how farmers in many places began offering accommodation in purpose-built cabins on their summer farms, which soon developed into regular guesthouses (Flognfeldt, 2006), along with the guiding of mountaineers by 'patent guides' from Den Norske Turistforening (DNT) [The Norwegian Hiking Society] (Bele et al., 2017). These developments mark the beginning of mountain tourism in Norway, and this explains why many old mountain destinations are situated in former summer-farm areas. It means that one important driving factor for early destination development was visitor motivation, evolved from national romanticism and the drive to explore, and facilitated by commodifiable nature that included summer farms which is still a part of the legacy with their early beginnings in this period (see Figures 1 & 5).

Today, summer farms, once a significant part of Norwegian romanticism and tourism, have largely disappeared despite their appeal. With the increased need to bolster summer seasons amid growing competition and climate change impacts on winter seasons, whether summer farms could be reintroduced in some destinations to help diversify tourism offerings may be more dependent on endogenic influences.

Figure 4. Gausdal sanatorium (four miles north of Lillehammer), the first large mountain hotel in Norway, opened in 1876

Note: this photograph has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights (CreativeCommons)

Source: Wilse (1935)

4.2. The sanatorium era (1870–1900)

The first large hotels in the mountains were built as "sanatoriums". They were inspired by those in the Alps, which offered "mountain therapy" with repose, short strolls and fresh air as healing remedies. They did not accept patients with tuberculosis or other grave conditions but were built for people in need of restitution from everyday toil, strain and low spirits. Those were the days when it was not shameful for a man (or woman) of the upper classes to feel anxious, frail and worn down.

The transformation of mountain tourism in Norway began with the introduction of the first railway in 1854, connecting Oslo to Lake Mjøsa. Visitors would then use the paddle steamer Skibladner (launched in August 1856 and still operational today) to travel to Lillehammer in less than a day. From there, they would journey either by horse-drawn carriage or on foot to reach the mountains on the following day. Tønsberg (1875, p. 107) writes:

> Travellers now generally take the rail to Eidsvold, proceeding from Eidsvold to Lillehammer, till the lake is frozen, by steamer. If you leave Christiania [now: Oslo] in the morning, you can reach as far as 3 or 4 miles north of Lillehammer, … before nightfall.

It is evident that main driving factors for the development of mountain destinations in this period were transportation and spatial attributes such as distance to markets (see Figures 1 & 5). It was the transportation revolution that laid the foundation for early destinations, noticeably the Skei summer-farm area, 40 km from Lillehammer. In this period, it developed into Norway's first full-blown mountain resort with a real mountain hotel, Gausdal høifjeldssanatorium [Gausdal sanatorium], that opened in 1876 (Blekastad, 2001; Figure 4). It could accommodate around 200 guests but attracted too few and went bankrupt within three years (Blekastad, 2001). Nevertheless, Skei soon became the first important mountain destination, though it quickly faced competition from several new mountain hotels in the same region. Examples include Fagerhøy (1882), Hornsjøen (1886), Gålå (1892), Fefor (1891) and Musdal (1901), and by the end of the century, more than seven new sanatorium hotels had opened within a 50 km radius of the first one (Granum, 2006; Gravråk, 2019; Grøndahl, 2013; Lauritzen, 2024; Skaug, 2019; Wedum, 2011).

Other counties in the mountain range also developed their "sanatoria" (see e.g., Brusletto & Medhus, 2023; Kløve, 1999; Mosebø, 2011), though not as many as in the Lillehammer region, which benefited from easy access via the new railway between Oslo and Trondheim. All these sanatoria were built in summer-farm areas, which today constitute several of the modern mountain destinations in southern Norway. As the new century dawned, most "sanatoria" changed their names to "hotels", mirroring similar trends in the Alps and Rocky Mountains.

Just a couple of decades later, Gosse (1898) noted that "The length of the railway system has increased fourfold…" (p. 534) and that "…inside the country there have sprung up in these last years a profusion of the most delightful little Alpine hotels … which form a distinct new feature of Norway" (p. 535). By 1898, the railway from Oslo (then: Christiania) had extended past Lillehammer to the town of Otta. The proximity of suitable mountain areas to Oslo and the new main railway was clearly the primary driver for the rise of this first mountain-destination cluster, featuring large hotels and budding winter tourism in the Lillehammer region.

In 1909, the railway from Oslo to Bergen opened, providing access to new large mountain areas for the development of mountain resorts easily accessible by train, such as Geilo and Finse. At Geilo, Dr. Holms hotel opened on the same day as the railway to Bergen, November 27, 1909 (Brusletto & Medhus, 2023; Kløve, 1999). Similarly, at Finse, accessible only by train, the first hotel opened the same year as the railway (Jørstad, 1998). Communities and destinations strategically positioned along the railway line leveraged and reaped the benefits of this new mode of transportation. However, with the later proliferation of bus transportation and, much later, private cars, Finse's golden age subsided due to its lack of road access. The changes in transportation and resort development during this period illustrate how new trends in transportation modes (as a driving factor) may alter opportunities and challenges for mountain resorts. However, the growth of a prosperous upper class in the cities also became an important driving factor during the "sanatorium era" (see Figures 1 & 5).

4.3. Dawn of winter tourism (1900–1930)

Up until the turn of the 20th century, mountain destinations had primarily been visited during the summer. However, the evolution of ski equipment, including Norheim ski bindings and waisted skis, along with the increasing popularity of cross-country skiing, created a market for ski tourism. Winter tourism commenced both in Scandinavia and in the Alps at the turn of the century (Barton, 2008; Kowalczyk, 2009). The first establishment to accommodate winter tourists in 1901 was Winge Sanatorium, north of Lillehammer (Skaug, 2019). Only a few years later, in 1905, Fefor Sanatorium also opened its doors for the skiing season (Lauritzen, 2024), and within a decade, several others had followed suit. At most destinations, winter tourism initially began with hotels opening during Easter. This first era of winter tourism was dominated by cross-country skiing, but the main driving factors behind winter tourism became the technological development of skis, combined with a surge in popularity of cross-country skiing during the first decades of the 20th century (see Figures 1 & 5).

Another important factor was the arrival of hotel buses. When the main railways were built, around the turn of the 20th century, guests were collected by horse and sled at the railway station in the valley below (Skaug, 2019). The 1920s marked the introduction of hotel buses, and throughout the 1920s and 30s, many hotels acquired their own coaches and later buses to collect guests from the train station, even in winter (Skaug, 2019). This development further benefited mountain destinations located close (but still not directly adjacent) to railway stations.

4.4. Growing winter tourism (1930–1960)

During the 1930s, the popularity of winter tourism increased sharply, especially during the Easter holiday. Still, at most of the old destinations summer was the main tourist season. However, during World War II, mountain tourism in Norway was all but absent, and many hotels were seized by the Wehrmacht and used as headquarters or for quartering.

The time after the war saw a drive to attract more tourists from abroad. Norway needed foreign currency, and the mountain destinations and their hotels offered such an opportunity. Therefore, the central government established in 1946 a loan fund for hotels, to provide cheap funding and subsidies (Svalastog, 1992). This boosted the expansion of mountain destinations and illustrates well a period where governmental regulations and subsidies appear as an important driving factor for destination development (see Figures 1 & 5).

Already before the war, ski lifts had made their arrival in both the Alps and North America. In Norway, the first ski lifts were built by sports clubs for their members: one outside Oslo in 1938 and another in Voss in 1948. It was only during the 1950s that the first Norwegian ski destinations opened their ski lifts: Fefor and Oppdal in 1952 (Gisnås, 2004), Geilo in 1954 (Brusletto & Medhus, 2023), Skeikampen in 1959 (Blekastad, 2001) and Hemsedal in 1961 (Bryhn & Jørgensen, 2024). This marked the beginning of the Alpine era, during which the summer season became less important. Even today, cross-country skiing remains an essential product for many destinations. However, for destinations without usable hills for alpine skiing, this shift marked the beginning of the end.

4.5. The alpine era (1960–1990)

The 1960s and 1970s became the golden era for the larger mountain hotels, with large dining halls and often also swimming pools and tennis courts. The growing prosperous middle class created a large new market. Now, several new destinations appeared, not necessarily at summer-farm areas but on valley and mountain slopes suitable for alpine skiing; for example at Hemsedal, Trysilfjellet and Myrkdalen. These were all built from the 1960s to the 2000s, primarily as ski resorts and they have therefore been struggling to become successful four-season destinations.

Even though at Norefjell the first lodge was opened in 1895, it only became a real destination with the construction of the venue and the first ski lift ready in 1952 for the winter Olympics (Viker, 1997). Two other destinations emerged after serving as venues for the 1994 winter Olympics, Hafjell and Kvitfjell, joining the new breed of "valley destinations", built as dedicated ski resorts. Other such winter destinations that emerged in this period include Hemsedal (Dokk & Snerte, 2003) and Trysilfjellet (Grundius, 2015), but most of the older destinations also developed in the direction of ski resorts: for example, Beitostølen, Skeikampen and Gålå. In this period the number of ski lifts in Norway increased from a mere nine in 1960 to 417 in 1990 (Teigland, 1991). With alpine skiing came the ski schools, for example at Beitostølen in 1965, (Møller, 2003), ski rentals and even on-site sports stores. Still, cross-country destinations and "combined" cross-country and alpine skiing destinations existed side by side, though the competition gradually greatly favoured the latter.

Until the end of the 1950s, most ski tourists came by train (Dahl & B.A., 2023). In Norway, the rationing of private cars was lifted in 1960, causing the number to double in just four years (Monsrud, 1999) and soon, proximity to the railway became less important than driving time from major cities and urban areas (Tjørve et al., 2013). This caused a major disruption in competition based on the location of destinations. The 1980s marked the start of the decline for traditional hotels which used to stay open all year (Flognfeldt & Tjørve, 2013). The summer season was still important in many places, but soon hotels began to close outside the skiing season, and more hotels than before changed hands, paving the way for the corporate invasion.

To sum up, for this period, important discerning drivers for destination development, determining legacy differences, include the presence of commodifiable slopes, technology for building ski lifts and transportation through the proliferation of private cars (see Figures 1 & 5).

4.6. Corporatization and second homes (1990–present)

Until this time, most mountain hotels were family-owned, but with the winter-tourism transition came larger companies and investors who began to buy up hotels, ski lifts and other businesses to gain control over destinations. A typical example is Skeikampen in the Lillehammer region. By the mid-1970s, it had three hotels owned by three different families which then had little more than 400 beds, but by the beginning of the new millennium, the number had increased to over 1500 (Blekastad, 2001). An investor with a city-hotel chain bought two of the three hotels in 1990 and 2000, including several chalets or cabins. In 2003, the investor also bought the then family-owned ski-lift company and invested heavily in new lifts and pistes (personal observation).

Family-owned hotels and establishments could no longer compete. Ski resorts had become big businesses requiring larger investments. The 1994 Lillehammer Olympics catalysed significant changes, especially in Hafjell and Kvitfjell, as these destinations underwent larger-scale development. The transformation had also spurred the construction of modern, high-standard second homes around these areas. At the same time, the Norwegians own increased international travel experience raised expectations for development at the domestic destinations, and in this period, several more of the largest became corporate-owned, including Trysil, Hemsedal, Hafjell, Kvitfjell and Myrkdalen.

Until the 1980s most second homes built in the mountains were rather primitive, without modern amenities, and they were primarily the choice of the working and lower-middle class, whereas the rich and upper-middle class typically stayed in the mountain hotels in the comfort of electric lighting and bathrooms with running water and water closets (Flognfeldt & Tjørve, 2013). By the 1990s this all changed. New large-scale second-home developments at almost every mountain destination provided the opportunity to have a modern second home with electricity, running water and sewage. The new second homes became as luxurious as the families' first home. Consequently, the Norwegian upper- and upper-middle classes largely abandoned the mountain hotels, and those Norwegians who stayed in commercial accommodation increasingly preferred to rent apartments, chalets or even private second homes (Flognfeldt & Tjørve, 2013).

Despite many traditional hotels having closed, there is still a large overcapacity of hotel beds. Bankrupt hotels are often sold again and again, with the bank

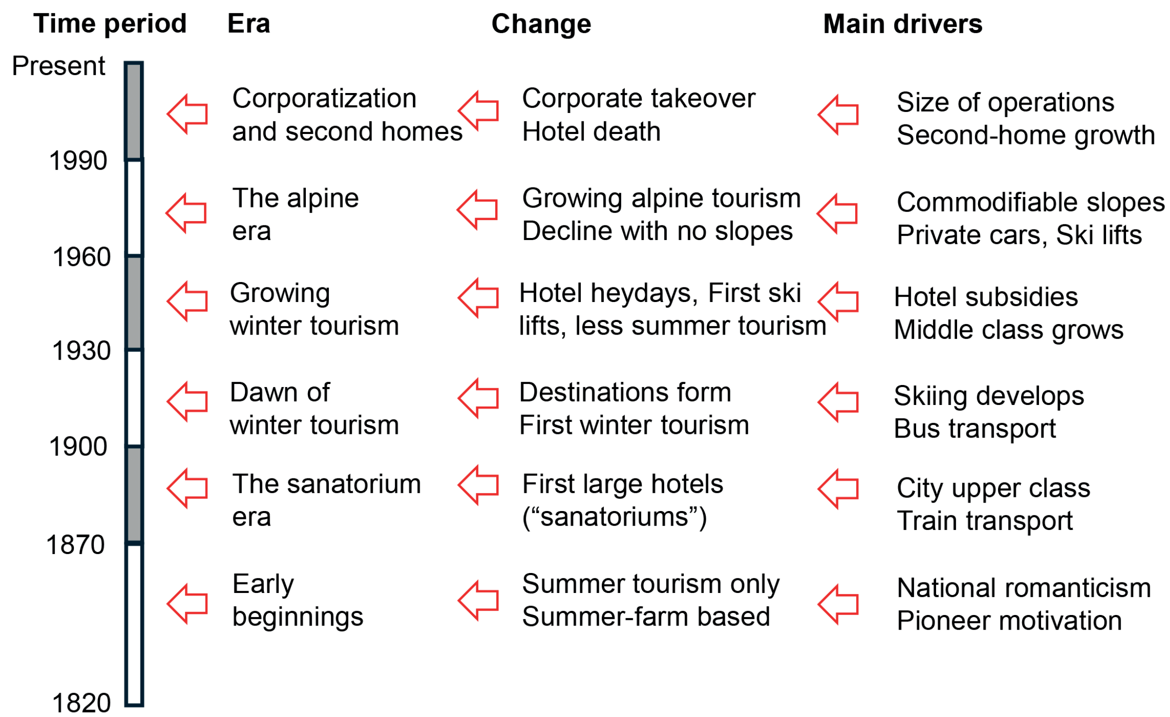

Figure 5. Summary of the successive eras of tourist development, changes that occurred and the main drivers of change for each period or year. These only reflect some of the changes and drivers discussed for the era
Sours: authors

giving loans and taking the financial loss. It appears that the willingness to change strategy or innovate may sometimes be lacking. Despite the era of large hotels being on the wane, many new hotels have been built and old ones refurbished. One new trend is the building of so called “lodge hotels”, as found in large destinations such as Hafjell, Geilo, Trysil and Hemsedal. Lodge hotels are large blocks of rental apartments, or a combination of hotel rooms and apartments, typically with facilities such as restaurants, bars, spas, training facilities and shopping. Some new lodge hotels are purpose built, whereas others are merely repurposed old hotel buildings.

Today, foreign tourists are crucial for the survival of the remaining traditional mountain hotels. At the large destinations, for example Hemsedal and Trysil, they make up more than half of the hotel guests (e.g. Mangelrød, 2017). Despite increasing numbers of foreign tourists, most mountain hotels continue to struggle with a low number of guests. Foreigners are often repeaters, returning to the same destination that they have visited before. During their first visit, they often stay at a hotel, but on returning they typically prefer an apartment or other self-catering accommodation (Tjørve et al., 2018).

A main driver in this last period has been the rapid increase in numbers of modern, high-standard second homes. Now, every other Norwegian has access to a second home and of approximately half a million close to 150,000 are found in the mountains (Tjørve & Tjørve, 2022). The new modern second homes are used more frequently than traditional second homes, not only during vacations but also during weekends throughout the year. The desired distance from home has therefore shrunk, from “vacation distance” to “weekend distance” creating a significant second home market for destinations (Tjørve et al., 2013) and which means that those further away than a three-hour drive from home have become less desirable. Foreign markets are not affected as they necessarily lie within vacation distance; markets dependent on air travel, however, may be affected by distance from the inbound airport. The newest trend is that more foreigners are acquiring second homes at the most popular, largest Norwegian mountain destinations (e.g. Hyvang, 2024).

Today, tourists increasingly tend to prefer larger or “complete destinations” with a wide offering of organized leisure activities, shops, restaurants, bars, etc. As ski tourists, visitors gravitate towards large alpine areas with a considerable number of pistes, modern chair lifts, cable cars and snow cannons (e.g. Hudson & Hudson, 2015). Modern destinations are expensive to run and require large investments, therefore there is a trend towards seeking to keep them open all year round, creating “four-season destinations”. Some larger, successful destinations manage this, whereas others have resorted to closing down for larger parts of the year. The pressure for non-snow activities is further exacerbated by climate change and loss of snow

Table 2. Summing up some differences between a selection of destinations in the region

Destination	Skeikampen	Beitostølen	Geilo	Trysil	Hemsedal
Origin (area)	Summer-farm	Summer-farm	Summer-farm	Valley slope	Valley slope
First hotel	1876	1964	1880	1966	1905
First ski lift	1959	1960s	1954	1966	1961
No. lifts (pistes)	11 (21)	7 (23)	20 (46)	31 (69)	20 (52)
Corporatisation	Hotel chain	Family corporate	Ski resort & fragmented ownership	Ski-resort corporate	Ski-resort corporate
Acquisition year	1990–2002	1987–2003	2017	2005–2015	2000
Second homes	2000	1600	5000+	5000+	3000
Travel time (car) from main markets (hours)					
Oslo	3.0	3.5	3.5	2.5	3.5
Bergen	7.0	5.0	3.5	8.0	4.5
Trondheim	4.7	5.0	7.0	5.0	6.7

Note: "acquisition year" refers to the time when the main providers at the destination were bought up by a corporate or investor.
Source: authors; ski-lift history is taken from Støyva (2009) and the present number of ski lifts (Fnugg, n.d.).

Table 3. Ski hill altitudes (top and bottom), altitude range (vertical drop) and the number of ski days including those with artificial snow

Destination	Ski-hill bottom (m a.s.l)	Ski-hill top (m a.s.l)	Altitude difference (m)	Ski days 1986–2016	Ski days 2050/2080
Lemonsjøen	875	1250	475	169	163/159
Hovden	775	1150	375	173	162/149
Beitostølen	900	1100	400	172	158/138
Vaset	850	1050	300	171	158/145
Hemsedal	650	1450	800	169	155/148
Skeikampen	775	1125	350	169	152/138
Gålå[a]	800	975	175	169	152/138
Trysil	400	1100	700	169	151/145
Oppdal	575	1125	550	165	147/143
Geilo	800	1150	350	164	146/134
Norefjell	200	1175	975	156	145/129
Sirdal	625	800	175	154	131/126
Bortelid	575	825	250	148	126/121
Hafjell[b]	200	1050	850	137	119/88
Gautefall	450	650	200	140	121/74
Gaustablikk	750	1150	400	132	112/50
Vrådal	275	725	450	129	87/18

[a] Some lifts are closed.
[b] High-altitude pistes may stay open longer.
Source: authors; altitudes and altitude range are calculated from the official Norwegian map site (Norgeskart, n.d.), whereas ski days are taken from Gildestad et al. (2017).

cover, so the need to offer non-snow activities is bringing back more "community-type actors" or locals into destination planning. These actors, or local entrepreneurs, specialize in small-scale activity suppliers of "bucket list" products, compensating for the large destination businesses stern concentration on only core products.

From the above we can identify the main driving factors in this period and this is characterized more by changes in endogenic than exogenic drivers. With the increasing importance of the size of operations, the industry has seen a shift in ownership type and management model towards the corporate (leaving aside the community model; Flagestad & Hope,

2001) (see Figures 1 & 5). Corporatization comes with professionalization, capital injection, better control of the value chain, new robust marketing strategies, service quality and efficiency (Flagestad & Hope, 2001), allowing destinations to compete internationally. However, concerns over the loss of family or local ownership, a neoliberal planning culture and questions about the distribution of economic benefits within local communities keep growing. Moreover, corporatization may cause loss of family-transferred managerial skills and knowledge across generations.

5. Legacy effects (discussion)

Many of the driving factors behind destination development have historical origins. Thus, the history or historical legacy continues to affect significantly their future opportunities and challenges. This is evident when comparing eras as during the summer farm period, destinations primarily faced basic infrastructure challenges while capitalizing on opportunities presented by national romanticism and pristine landscapes. In contrast, the modern corporatization era brings more complex challenges, including climate change adaptation, the need for year-round operations and pressure to diversify offerings.

Figure 5 summarizes some of the most important driving factors and changes within each era (or time period), illustrating how conditions and driving factors have changed through time, determining future competitiveness and sustainability.

The impact of historical legacy varies in significance across destinations. While many locations face common exogenic factors, such as spatial placement, transportation access, commodifiable slopes, climate change and local community 'availability', these manifest differently in each destination based on its unique historical context. Similarly, endogenic factors like ownership, management models and actor networks have evolved distinctly at each location, influenced by their historical differences.

5.1. Commodifiable slopes

Destinations that arose during the early beginnings were, as mentioned, created around summer farms (see examples in Table 2). Their recent success or failure depends primarily on whether there were commodifiable mountain slopes nearby enabling them to become alpine winter destinations. Present ski or mountain resorts started as summer destinations and at the time there was no need for usable slopes for winter sports. Examples of destinations lacking this opportunity include Nordseter and Hornsjø (in the Lillehammer region).

Nordseter, one of the old "summer-farm destinations", 14 kilometres northeast of Lillehammer, did not have slopes suitable for modern alpine skiing. These destinations struggled to compete with destinations with mountain slopes, such as Skeikampen, Geilo, Norefjell and more. Consequently, although the two large traditional commercial hotels survived at Nordseter for decades, they eventually had to close.

5.2. Climate change

Today, natural snow is still more important than artificial snow. The number of days with snow sufficient for alpine skiing already differs significantly between Norwegian alpine skiing areas but is likely to increase dramatically in the coming decades (Gildestad et al., 2017). The lower-altitude slopes and the coastal areas will be disproportionally more affected than the higher-altitude valley destinations leading to those relatively low-lying being more susceptible to climate change than those at higher altitudes (see Table 3). However, stakeholders generally believe that Norwegian destinations will have more snow for more days in the future compared to the Alps. This should stimulate endogenic drivers, providing more opportunities for future planning, with innovation capacity playing a key role.

Nonetheless, a culture of too much focus on alpine skiing has been evident among the destinations for quite some time now. This comes with challenges such as vulnerability to climate change, the need for more infrastructure investments and concerns with snow fluctuations. Again, endogenic forces should leverage finding innovative solutions to mitigate and adapt to changing climate conditions and the consequences of market fluctuations.

5.3. Local community

Old-established ski destinations developed in former summer-farm areas that had no year-round residents and the local communities were mainly situated in the lower valleys. These destinations have rarely developed into complete destinations, with commerce covering many trades and services or with a significant local resident population.

More commonly, destinations in municipalities with larger resident populations can sustain trade and service offerings; Trysil and Geilo are prime examples. However, smaller destinations have very limited offerings within their communities, and consequently, they face challenges such as losing potential revenue, having limited employment opportunities and experiencing depopulation, which affects tourism and, to an extent, local economies. For instance, tourists heading to Spåtind often shop in Dokka, while those visiting Nore and Uvdal bypass local options to shop in Kongsberg. Similarly, tourists to Bjorli in Lesja Municipality do not attract visitors from Vestlandet beyond the Skjåk community centre (unpublished data). What these destinations have in common is that their development has progressed at a minimal pace.

Beitostølen is an exception to the rule that destinations close to larger communities grow faster as it has developed from a summer farm to a complete destination with a considerable resident population and a high level of trade and services rivalled by few of the same size. This development results from its success in creating four-season attractions with stable year-round employment. Through these successes, the destination further boosts its opportunities to be more successful and sustainable through continued diversification of trade and services such as shops, a bank and, recently, electronic charging locations for modern vehicles. Later discussion may show that the key to all these opportunities results from endogenic forces such as leadership and management.

5.4. Spatial placement and transportation

The historical legacy of spatial placement and transportation infrastructure has profoundly shaped the development paths of the destinations. Their placement depends heavily, not only on the distance to markets, but also on the dominating mode of transportation at the time of its formation. The growth of many of the older destinations was promoted by proximity to the expanding railway network at the turn of the 20th century. A mountain destination with winter sports developed at Finse as a direct result of the railway being built from Oslo over the mountains to Bergen and this railway also brought about another one at Geilo. However, only Geilo survived as a ski resort and today it is one of Norway's largest. Finse failed because it had no road access; when the private car took over, in about 1960, it was all over as the upmarket winter destination it once was.

Road access is crucial today, as are commodifiable slopes for alpine skiing. Nonetheless, with traditional "accommodation markets" losing customers to "second-home markets" (Flognfeldt & Tjørve, 2013), some destinations have also fallen outside the "weekend distance" from the major markets such as Oslo, Trondheim and Bergen. This illustrates that those outside the proximity of weekend distances to second homes may struggle to increase visits (e.g. Ericsson et al., 2022; Slätmo & Kristensen, 2021).

For Geilo, its early growth was catalysed by its proximity to the Oslo–Bergen railway which reached the town in 1908. This early access to efficient transportation gave Geilo a significant headstart in tourism development. In contrast, Beitostølen's growth was initially hampered by poor accessibility. Despite a railway extension to nearby Fagernes in 1906, the final 40 km to Beitostølen remained a low-quality road until much later. This transportation deficit delayed its development, with car winter access only becoming possible during Easter in 1946 and significant growth not occurring until the 1960s private car boom.

These contrasting histories demonstrate how transportation infrastructure can act as a catalyst or as a constraint for mountain destination development. Geilo's early railway access allowed it to establish itself as a prominent destination well before the era of mass car ownership. Beitostølen, on the other hand, had to wait for the democratisation of car travel before it could fully capitalise on its tourism potential. Today distances to airports and good roads are the most important.

Interestingly, both destinations have experienced strong growth in recent years despite being situated more than three hours from some of Norway's largest cities, a distance that puts them at the outer limit of weekend travel for many potential visitors. This further suggests that while historical transportation advantages were crucial for early development, other factors may now be more important in driving destination success.

Geilo and Beitostølen have diversified their offerings beyond just skiing, now providing a wide range of year-round activities. This diversification strategy appears to be helping them overcome the potential disadvantage of their distance from major population centres. It also highlights how destinations can adapt to changing transportation realities – what was once a prohibitive distance for frequent visits has become more manageable as car ownership has increased and road quality has improved.

The cases of Geilo and Beitostølen thus illustrate how the legacy of historical transportation infrastructure continues to shape mountain destinations today. They also demonstrate the potential to overcome initial disadvantages through strategic development and diversification, thus bringing into the discussion the importance of endogenic forces as important drivers for creating opportunities for development.

5.5. Ownership

For several larger destinations, endogenic drivers such as ownership have changed; for example, the transition from family-owned businesses to corporate (examples in Table 2). The smaller destinations are still primarily comprised of many small family-owned or landowner-owned businesses, however they struggle to provide enough activities and amusement for the contemporary tourist. Even developing and maintaining modern alpine skiing facilities may become difficult, as seen in the Gålå, which has recently experienced several hotel bankruptcies and has lost three out of four alpine areas (Utgård, 2023).

Corporates are less interested in small destinations, which, to a greater extent, struggle economically. Still, as many hotels and alpine skiing facilities have gone bankrupt, some of them have been bought by non-local investors. Consequently, many of the larger destinations have one dominant owner, such as Trysilfjell, Skeikampen, Beitostølen and Hemsedal. However, Geilo has been, up until now, a significant destination with no dominant owner and many companies, though the larger hotels have been concentrated in fewer hands, and most of the ski lifts have now been bought up by a single owner (Berglihn, 2017). Beitostølen again differs from the pattern, where a local family started their acquisition in 1987 and, through the 1990s and early 2000s, bought up, among others, four hotels and the ski-lift company.

Beyond these endogenic forces, destinations today are challenged to compensate for non-snow seasons and shorter winters with increasing non-winter offerings. This brings more "community-type actors" or local activity suppliers into destination planning and marketing strategies. Examples are seen in larger destinations, such as Geilo, Trysil and Beitostølen where ownership is starting to become complex. Such catalytic development depends to a greater degree on the actions of local governments and local communities (Żemła, 2004).

5.6. Management models and leadership

The management model, as well as the type and competence of managers, is an important endogenic determining factor for the success or failure of a destination. Local knowledge and competencies handed down within families are valuable assets that may be lost with investor or corporate takeovers. Not only local background but also charismatic leadership with an ability to build relationships and make the best use of these assets is expected to promote opportunities for innovation and destination sustainability (Aguzman et al., 2021; Paulsen et al., 2009).

Hjalager et al. (2008) assert that the Beitostølen has had such a "visionary" entrepreneur for decades. It is reasonable to presume that endogenic forces, to a degree, explain Beitostølen's success and its ability to build a mature innovation system concerned with managerial innovation (Hjalager et al., 2008).

The discontinuation of family ownership may cause the loss of the leadership legacy. However, some corporations pursue engaging such successful leaders with local or former family ties to the industry. The Swedish corporation Skistar, which owns two Norwegian ski resorts, has employed Norwegian site managers with local and family ties to manage both destinations. This illustrates how the importance of leveraging endogenic forces such as the legacy of local expertise, family ties or local family businesses can create opportunities for destinations to develop (Chauhan & Madden, 2020; Engeset, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Histories differ between Norwegian mountain destinations and ski resorts. Consequently, so do the opportunities and challenges the destinations are facing. Some exogenic factors (Figure 1) are the same for all: motive, prosperity, spare time, government regulation and climate change. It is understandable that some exogenic factors differ more between destinations, such as distance to markets, road access, alpine slopes, high-altitude position and a local community with trade and services, and these determine success and sustainability. Introducing new technologies such as ski lifts, cable cars and snow-making machines requires capacity to invest, though it ultimately depends on whether there is commodifiable nature, meaning usable mountain slopes, to start with.

Favourable exogenic factors do not sufficiently explain success or sustainability. Today two destinations, Beitostølen and Skeikampen, are both corporate owned and both with favourable and comparable conditions. Still, at Beitostølen, the commercial tourism industry seems to be thriving, and Hjalager et al. (2008) describe its "performance and development" in later years as impressive. At Skeikampen, on the other hand, traditional tourism actors have been in decline and it has been heading towards becoming a second-home destination with ski hills.

Destinations without readily marketable natural features, notably mountain slopes, face even more dire challenges, such as in the case of Nordseter, where the hotels, built in the pre-alpine era, have all been forced to close down. At the other end of the spectrum, Beitostølen has grown to about 2000 commercial beds, with two traditional hotels and one large apartment hotel open all year, as well as more than 15 restaurants and pubs.

Realizing the need to innovate and create resilient and sustainable destinations, it is timely to ask whether the ownership and management models, or the qualities or qualifications of the managers or leadership, can explain the very different fates, success, sustainability and ability to innovate in Norwegian mountain destinations.

We recommend that future research builds upon the approach employed in this study to investigate additional driving factors and conduct in-depth analyses of those factors that exert the most significant influence on destination development across diverse geographical contexts. We realize that our historical accounts and discussion are far from exhaustive. It is evident that the histories of the Norwegian mountain resorts, their legacy and impact on present and future opportunities and challenges, deserve further attention.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.05 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E
Member since 2019
JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Social media and mountain visits – is this 'friendship' sustainable?

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How to cite (APA style): Cholakova, S., & Dogramadjieva, E. (2025). Social media and mountain visits – is this 'friendship' sustainable? *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 85–98. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.05

ABSTRACT

The role of social media in tourism has already been acknowledged in the academic literature but still little is known about its specific influence on mountain tourism in the context of the growing popularity of outdoor activities that threaten to harm fragile areas. The aim of this article is to find out the effect of social media on such visits, to outline patterns of tourist behaviour, as well as to reveal social media–induced effects, both negative and positive, regarding the sustainability of mountain tourism. Using an online survey among the members of a Bulgarian mountaineering Facebook group, we found out that it was information of practical use that was mostly searched for by its members, and which in turn can be easily converted into real visits to the area, and as such mainly attracting novice mountaineers. The study uncovered purely pragmatic perceptions in terms of sharing information and pictures about places in the mountains, with limited awareness about the possible negative environmental effects from the over-popularisation of these areas. This could be classified as a consumerist attitude towards the mountains that is nurtured by social media. On the positive side, such unawareness can be tackled by social media due to its mass informative power.

KEYWORDS

mountain tourism, Facebook, overtourism, online groups, protected areas, social media

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
18 July 2024
Accepted:
14 November 2024
Published:
30 May 2025

1. Introduction

The creation of user-generated content (UGC) is a unique feature of the so-called social media, or applications based on Web 2.0, allowing the exchange of information and communication between individuals, communities and organisations, with an effect on their real-life behaviour (Öz, 2015; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Starting being mainly text-based, social media nowadays presents much more visual and live content (Gretzel, 2019). The mass usage of smartphones and access to the mobile Internet have also contributed to the importance of social media in everyday life, including tourism (Amaro et al., 2016). It should be noted that there are differences in social media use and its impacts between different nationalities because of varying

Funding information: 'Young Researchers and Post-Phd Students – 2' Programme, Council of Ministers of Republic of Bulgaria, No 206/07.04.2022. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. **Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** The Authors used IBM SPSS Statistics 26 for statistical data processing. They then conducted a thorough review of the text, focusing on potential false, incomplete, or biased information, plagiarism, and authorship attribution, and revised it accordingly.

cultural, social and economic backgrounds (Gretzel et al., 2008; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

The role of social media in tourism decision-making has already been defined as very important (Hays et al., 2013), with tourist behaviour being its most studied element (Lu et al., 2018). Social media impact has been now acknowledged in two aspects: in travellers' decision making, and in tourism management and operations (Leung et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2018). Social media reduces uncertainties in travel planning, thus making tourism more accessible. On the other hand, platforms like Facebook (FB) and Instagram could be blamed for increasing the so-called 'last-chance' tourism – overexposing endangered destinations, which on its own stimulates further environmental deterioration (Aldao & Mihalic, 2020).

Despite the rising popularity of studies on social media's impact on tourism, limited research has been done on the effect of these platforms in the context of outdoor activities in the mountains. Taking into account the various health and safety risks and physical challenges involved in mountain tourism, it is interesting to uncover if social media have the same influence on it as on other forms of tourism. Also, the impact of social media on the visits to these areas should be acknowledged and monitored as it may lead to environmental problems, conflicts or even safety issues (Barros et al., 2020; Pickering et al., 2020).

Mountain tourism is defined as a type of tourism activity which takes place in hills or mountains with specific characteristics in terms of landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity and local community (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and World Tourism Organization [FAO/UNWTO], 2023). These activities can be classified into two main subgroups: (a) leisure (standard) – like camping, cycling, walking, hiking, wildlife observation and skiing and (b) sport (extreme) – like alpinism, canoeing, caving, climbing, mountain biking, trail running, trekking and ski-mountaneering (FAO/UNWTO, 2023).

Although mountain tourism is estimated to represent between 9% and 16% of total international tourism arrivals, lack of data remains a key challenge (FAO/UNWTO, 2023). Despite the fact that adequate information is of critical importance in terms of protected area planning and management (Dogramadjieva, 2018; Mitova, 2020), particularly in Bulgaria, neither the volume and dynamics of the visitor flow, nor the patterns of tourist behaviour are really known even for places of very high natural and landscape value that have attracted the utmost public interest because of serious environmental degradation and pollution (Mitova 2021). As the authors of the article have previously pointed out (Cholakova & Dogramadjieva, 2023, p. 130), this research gap can be partially filled by obtaining and analysing metadata through the application programming interfaces of social media platforms (Barros et al., 2020; Hausmann et al., 2018; Heikinheimo et al., 2017; Moreno-Llorka et al., 2020; Pickering et al., 2020; Wilkins et al., 2021) or through downloading tracks and routes from activity platforms (Barros et al., 2020; Norman & Pickering, 2019). Research has shown that these methods can provide sufficiently accurate and reliable information to complement the traditional sources (Heikinheimo et al., 2017; Pickering et al., 2020; Wilkins et al., 2021). Gössling (2017) states that a wide range of information technology implications for sustainability in tourism are insufficiently understood, giving an example with the potential of technologies to contribute to education and environmental learning, despite the lack of correlation between environmental knowledge and awareness on the one hand, and behavioural change on the other. Furthermore, the development of new technologies and the spreading of online surveys might be very helpful in overcoming difficulties in conducting visitor studies. The mass adoption of social media, as well as the development of online travel communities, allow easier access particularly to the target population of mountain tourists as opposed to traditional resource-intensive monitoring methods (Cholakova & Dogramadjieva, 2023).

The aim of this article is to find out the effect of social media on mountain visits, to outline patterns of tourist behaviour specific to this particular context, as well as to reveal social media–induced effects, both negative and positive, regarding the sustainability of mountain tourism. To achieve this, we have conducted an online survey among a Bulgarian mountaineering Facebook group. This online community is one of the largest in the country and currently has approximately 52,000 members. Thus, we were able to reach a relevant target audience and obtain valuable, albeit exploratory, information about a specific aspect of the relationship between social media and tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media impact on tourism

The user-generated content, or electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), differs from the traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) mainly by the fact that it offers non-commercial, i.e. relatively unbiased, information to be received not only by the close social network, but also from internet users all around the world (Leung et al., 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). Due to technology, the e-WOM provided by social media, could be considered even more practical and useful to travellers because of the different formats in which the information could be presented (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). According to Tham et al. (2013), e-WOM is to be treated as a unique entity and differing from traditional WOM by the source-receiver relationship, with options for extra questions and answers, varied types of presentation, as well as the varied motivations for sharing the information. Among the factors that determine the power of e-WOM are perceived usefulness, the ability to provide current and diverse information, as well as the travel experience of the UGC creator (Leung et al., 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011; Yoo et al., 2009). To these factors, Zeng & Gerritsen (2014) add the knowledge other users have of the UGC author and their own travel and social media experience. Trustworthiness is also assessed by users on the basis of message content, style, extremity and available personal information (profile picture, registration date, experience, online activity) of the UGC author (Filieri, 2016). Those who more often use social media in their daily life, take much greater advantage of it for travel related purposes and have higher income and education (Öz, 2015). An interesting finding is that less experienced users trust the online reviews and comments much more, compared to those with a greater degree of travel experience (Filieri, 2016) who tend to be more confident and spontaneous in their choices (Aldao & Mihalic, 2020).

There are conflicting results in the literature regarding which WOM – the traditional or the electronic – is more trusted by travellers (Leung et al., 2013; Sultan et al., 2021; Tham et al., 2013; Zeng & Garritsen, 2014). The same is valid for the comparison of e-WOM and other traditional sources of information like official or governmental tourism websites (Cox et al., 2009; Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Tham et al., (2013) argue that e-WOM is less credible than WOM, but this is compensated for by its easier accessibility. While Cox et al. (2009) see the UGC only as an additional source of information for travellers, Leung et al. (2013) predicted that e-WOM trustworthiness would increase in future as it is so widely accepted. The main issue with the trustworthiness of e-WOM is the relative anonymity of users (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), while its main advantage is the fact that it provides unbiased and relevant information (Öz, 2015), tested by real people (Burgess et al., 2009) with no commercial interest (Casaló et al., 2011; Sultan et al., 2021). Trust in the shared content is also influenced by the perceived value and enjoyment of the users (Kitsios et al., 2022). Overall, Xiang et al. (2015) claim that social media does not substitute traditional travel information sources, but rather adds to their variety. The factors that mostly determine the frequency of using social media for travel related purposes are age (Hysa et al., 2021; Tešin et al., 2022), gender (Tešin et al., 2022), travel and social media experience (Tešin et al., 2022; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) and income (Hausmann et al., 2018).

Social media users turn the uploaded images both into a perceived and emitted image of tourism destinations (Pickering et al., 2020). The spread of information via UGC leads to destination image formation and potential future visits (Joo et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2013; Shang et al., 2021; Sultan et al., 2021; Tham et al., 2013). Liu et al. (2020) define two main roles of social media, direct and indirect, with the indirect being the major one in the choice of travel destination. The direct effect happens when the availability of information reduces uncertainty and risk, while the indirect is when the shared information contributes to image formation, but without immediate effect on visits (Shang et al., 2021; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Social media is found to increase awareness and as a result leads to action in the long run, rather than immediate visits (Fotis et al., 2011; Kane et al., 2012; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Additionally, social media could be the final stimulating factor for people to visit 'bucket list' destinations (Liu et al., 2020). Further on, the degree of influence on destination choices is higher in the context of strong social media engagement, novel destinations and travel planning complexity (Tham et al., 2020).

None of the results discussed above have been tested in the context of mountain or any other adventure type of tourism. Still, they provide a solid ground for comparison.

2.2. Online groups

Casaló et al. (2011) define online communities as a phenomenon that leads to changes in consumer behaviour in the travel sector. They determine the factors affecting a consumer to follow advice from a travel community: attitude toward the advice, trust in the community, result of perceived honesty, benevolence and competence, usefulness of information, susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Casaló et al., 2011). Further on, membership of online travel groups fortifies self–identification (Leung et al., 2013) and a sense of belonging to a community which leads to knowledge sharing, community promotion and behavioural changes (Qu & Lee, 2011). Social aspects like user interaction and relationships increase UGC influence (Huertas, 2018), and members' demographic characteristics have been shown to have an impact on the type of need and participation in online travel communities (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004).

2.3. Social media and overtourism

Usually, overtourism is seen as mainly an urban issue, but it can be observed, often seasonally, in other spaces like parks, beaches and other attractions (Gössling et al., 2020). A bibliometric analysis of research on mountain tourism (Ng, 2022) revealed that despite issues such as sustainable development and tourism management being among the most studied areas, overtourism is still not a major theme. Few recent studies cast light on specific observations in different parts of the world that are related to this topic in the context of mountain tourism. In the case of a wilderness area in Iceland, overtourism has led to lower visitor satisfaction (Sæþórsdóttir & Hall, 2020). Gamba (2024) provides examples of mountain destinations in USA, Italy and Switzerland where overcrowding has occurred as a result of sudden popularity on social media.

In general terms, social media has been linked in the public domain to the phenomenon of overtourism, although its relationship with tourism is not so direct or simple (Gretzel, 2019), and exploratory studies only confirm a possible correlation (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2019). On the contrary, Vandenberg (2023) states that in many of the examples of overtourism, the number of visitors began to escalate rapidly after the establishment of the most popular social media platform after 2010. Gretzel (2019) concludes that social media use is not the only, and likely not the most important, reason for overtourism, but it certainly encourages behaviours that lead to crowding, and it perpetuates images that influence others to travel to certain places.

On a positive note, some researchers see social media itself as able to lead to environmentally-friendly patterns of behaviour and perceptions in its users (Kane et al., 2012). It can be used, in conjunction with other measures, as a tool to combat overtourism by promoting sustainable tourism behaviour, by educating stakeholders and the public about the causes and consequences of overtourism, as well as by providing data for an early-warning system to trigger crowd management (Gretzel, 2019).

3. Study methods

The aim of the survey was to identify the role social media plays in the visitation of fragile mountain destinations. It had a total of 37 questions, six of them open-ended, in three sections. Section 1 was dedicated to the general role of social media. Section 2 was to be answered only by those who have visited the case study area. Section 3 contained socio-demographic questions about the age of participants, their gender, education, standard of living, mountain experience and the frequency of practicing walking and hiking in the mountains, as well as the frequency of entering Facebook or other social networks, and how long they have been members of the 'Mountaineers' group.

Our questionnaire was distributed among members of a specialized Facebook group called 'Mountaineers'. Facebook was chosen because it is the most popular social media platform in Bulgaria – as of August 2023, 70% of the Bulgarian population uses it (NapoleonCat). The group was founded in 2009 and is currently one of the largest specialized travel groups in Bulgaria, with over 52,000 members (Cholakova & Dogramadjieva, 2023, p. 132). Using Google Forms to create the questionnaire, an online survey was posted as a link in the group in April 2023 and was closed in three weeks. For this period of time, we gathered 229 submissions and the study sample is presented in Table 1. Our questionnaire was filled in online mostly by people aged 26–55, i.e. by the most active group in the mountains. A significantly bigger proportion of women participated, which is not uncommon in surveys (Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022). As expected for such a target group, 63% of the respondents hike in the mountains regularly and 32% qualify themselves as experienced mountaineers.

Table 1. Characteristics of survey respondents

Major categories	Sub-categories	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	62	27
	Female	167	73
Age	Up to 25	20	9
	26–40	76	33
	41–55	102	45
	Above 55	31	14
Education	High school	43	18
	Bachelor/Masters	180	79
	Higher degree	6	3
Standard of living	High	29	13
	Medium	191	83
	Low	9	4
Frequency of mountain activities	Every week/ weekend	69	30
	Once/twice a month	76	33
	Few times a year	75	33
	Maximum once a year/ less	9	4
Mountain experience	Long-standing experience	74	32
	Some experience	131	57
	Little or no experience	24	11
Total		229	100

Source: authors.

As mentioned above, the article analyses the answers from section 1 of the survey. Based on the main themes uncovered in the literature review, these questions aimed to uncover the benefits obtained from FB group membership, how important was the trust in shared information, the types of stimuli to visit a certain mountain area, the most popular sources of information and their effect on visits. Finally, a group of four questions examined attitudes towards the sharing of pictures and mountain routes related information in social media. Answers to these questions were cross-tabulated with the socio-demographic information obtained from section 3, thus outlining differences by various subgroups of respondents.

Answers were analysed using the SPSS software. Considering the categorical type of the variables under study, the authors applied descriptive and bivariate data analysis – similar to their previous research (Cholakova & Dogramadjieva, 2023, p. 132). Using Cramér's V correlation and the chi-square test of independence, associations between variables were found and their statistical significance was tested. Both significant and insignificant results are discussed in the article because they are indicative of the patterns of tourist demand and behaviour, despite not always being generalisable.

4. Results

4.1. Social media, e-WOM and the mountains

To start with, we wanted to know why people joined the specialized FB group under study. Results on Table 2 reveal that being able to receive useful information is seen as the most important benefit, highlighted by 81% of the survey participants. Although social media is usually picture-focused, in the case of this Facebook group, access to beautiful pictures of mountain areas is rated in second place but supported by a significantly lower share of respondents (13%). The ability to communicate online with like-minded people appears least important (2%).

Table 2. Perceived benefits from the membership in the 'Mountaineers' Facebook group – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Perceived benefits	Total	Membership benefit evaluation*					Mountain experience			Gender	
		Very low	Rather low	Average	Rather high	Very high	Long-standing experience	Some experience	Little / No experience	Male	Female
Useful information (%)	81	14	64	86	86	78	74	84	88	74	84
Access to beautiful landscapes and pictures (%)	13	14	36	11	12	14	16	12	8	15	13
Other (%)	3	71	0	0	1	4	8	2	0	6	2
Communication with interesting people (%)	2	0	0	3	1	4	1	2	4	5	1
No. of respondents	229	7	11	74	86	51	74	131	24	62	167
Cramer's V		0.397					0.142			0.155	
p-value		0.000					0.163			0.137	

Note: * association significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

There is a direct connection between the positive appraisal of the benefits of membership and the useful information pointed out as the most important. Though not statistically significant, some association is found with the respondents' mountain experience and gender (Table 2). Results show that the information regarding trails, huts, weather, etc., is more valued by those participants with little or no mountain experience (88%) and by women (84%). The pictures are more frequently valued by the experienced mountaineers (16%) compared to those with little or no mountain experience (8%).

Trust in the shared information is a key topic in research into the influence of social media on tourism. When it comes to mountain tourism, this aspect becomes even more important, considering the element of risk in the activities practised. In our study, a very large proportion of respondents (80%) trust highly the information their fellow members share, but still would make an extra check (Table 3). Only 2% completely believe everything that is published in the FB group, while the share of those who do not believe is also relatively low at 7%.

Table 3. Extent of trust in the information shared in the Facebook group – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Extent of trust	Total	Membership benefit evaluation*					The most important benefit from the Facebook group*				Visiting a place based only on Facebook recommendation*		
		Very low	Rather low	Average	Rather high	Very high	Useful information	Communication with interesting people	Access to beautiful landscapes & pictures	Other	Yes	No	Not certain (depends on the place)
I trust to a big extent, but check additionally (%)	80	43	45	78	86	84	83	80	63	63	88	47	74
I can't tell, depends on the occasion (%)	10	0	27	14	9	6	10	20	17	0	7	21	14
I'd rather disbelieve and check other sources (%)	7	57	27	8	3	2	5	0	17	38	3	26	11
Completely believe (%)	2	0	0	0	1	8	2	0	3	0	2	5	1
No. of respondents	229	7	11	74	86	51	186	5	30	8	134	19	76
Cramer's V		0.275					0.170				0.228		
p-value		0.000					0.019				0.001		

Note: * association significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

Results revealed in Table 3 indicate statistically significant association between the extent of trust regarding the information shared in the FB group and membership-benefit evaluation, as well as with the type of expected benefits and intentions to visit a place based only on FB recommendations. Logically, the lower appraisal of membership benefits is related to a lower level of trust and vice versa. Furthermore, 83% of those who see useful information as the biggest benefit from the FB group express a lot of trust in the information shared there, while relatively high proportions of distrust are observed among the limited number of respondents who have become members mainly for the ability to look at landscape pictures in their news feed (17%) or for other reasons (38%). It is not a surprise that visiting a place just because it has been recommended in the FB group is tightly related to the high level of trust (88%). On the other hand, respondents who would not pay such a visit are much more hesitant about the information shared there. While 47% of them trust the provided information to a great extent, they would not 'go blind' to a certain destination. Still, despite that a considerable number of respondents are not certain whether they would go somewhere based only on FB advice, 74% of them rank their trust relatively high.

Related to trust are answers to the question whether Facebook group members would follow an idea to visit a new place in the mountains (Table 4). Study results indicate that most of the respondents would follow some sort of online recommendation (59%), while for 33% of them it would depend on the place and only 8% stated that social media would not influence their travel plans.

With statistical validity, these answers are related to the extent of perceived benefits of group membership – positive stands are expressed by 71% and 67% of those who rate it 'rather high' and 'very high'. On the contrary, the largest share of negative responses is observed (43%) among those who rate membership benefits as very low. The highest share of undecided (45%) is found among those who rate the benefits from group membership as rather low or average or have concerns about the quality of information that can be obtained by fellow members. An interesting result is that 28% of those who have already visited or planned to visit a place they learned about from the FB group are undecided if they would go somewhere based only on online recommendations, while 45% of respondents who have not visited such a place are positive about doing so merely because it is promoted in the group. No significant association of answers is found with reference to respondents' mountain experience, gender or age. Still, the results show, similar to the answers in Table 2, that people with little or no mountain experience (75%), female (62%) and younger (70%) respondents are those who would visit a place entirely due to Facebook recommendation.

Table 4. Willingness to go somewhere, only because it was recommended by members of this Facebook group (by pictures, comments, etc.) – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Willingness	Total	Membership benefit evaluation*					Already visited / planned to visit a place, learned about from the Facebook group*		Mountain experience			Gender		Age			
		Very low	Rather low	Average	Rather high	Very high	Yes	No	Long-standing experience	Some experience	Little / No experience	Male	Female	Up to 25	26–40	41–55	Above 55
Willing (%)	59	29	36	45	71	67	67	45	55	57	75	50	62	70	58	59	52
Undecided (depends on place) (%)	33	29	45	45	24	29	28	42	34	34	25	39	31	25	36	31	39
Unwilling (%)	8	43	18	11	5	4	5	13	11	8	0	11	7	5	7	10	10
No. of respondents	229	7	11	74	86	51	138	91	74	131	24	62	167	20	76	102	31
Cramer's V		0.245					0.232		0.098			0.110		0.074			
p-value		0.001					0.002		0.358			0.252		0.868			

Note: * association significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

When it comes to mountain tourism, various factors may stimulate a visit to a destination, including limiting factors like the physical ability of tourists to perform the planned walk. Therefore, we tried to rate the importance of social media among other factors (Table 5). The results show that social media is among the least important factors (3%), while the highest priority factors is given to the place being new and unvisited (84%), as well as the technical difficulty of the walk (52%). However, beautiful pictures of the area would attract 40% of the respondents so it remains questionable what proportion of such pictures are

Table 5. Factors determining the decision whether to visit a place in the mountains – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Decision factors	Total	Frequency of visits to the mountains*				Mountain experience*			Gender*	
		Every week/ weekend	Once or twice a month	Few times a year	Maximum once a year or less	Long-standing experience	Some experience	Little / No experience	Male	Female
A place not visited so far (%)	84	93	90	75	56	93	83	63	95	80
Difficulty of the walk (%)	52	48	54	55	44	41	55	71	39	57
Beautiful pictures of the area (%)	40	39	34	43	78	42	37	50	29	44
Duration of the walk (%)	37	28	42	40	44	23	42	54	34	38
Place popularity on social media (%)	3	1	3	5	0	1	3	8	2	4
Other (%)	3	0	8	1	0	5	2	0	7	2
No. of respondents	229	69	76	75	9	74	131	24	62	167
Chi-square		39.240				38.468			22.263	
Degrees of freedom (*df*)		18				12			6	
p-value		0.003				0.000			0.001	

Notes: a multiple response question – the sum of percentages exceeds 100% as the respondents could give more than one answer; * differences significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

Table 6. Effect of shared information in the Facebook group on the planning of mountain walks – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Effects	Total	Trust in the shared information in the Facebook group*				Frequency of visits to the mountains*			
		I'd rather disbelieve and check other source	I can't tell, depends on the occasion	I trust to a great extent, but I check additionally	Completely believe	Every week / weekend	Once or twice a month	Few times a year	Maximum once a year or less
Consider visiting the place (%)	79	82	63	83	40	77	80	87	33
No itinerary ideas taken from FB group so far (%)	11	18	33	8	20	9	9	9	67
Visit as soon as possible (%)	9	0	4	10	40	14	11	4	0
No. of respondents	229	17	24	183	5	69	76	75	9
Cramer's V		0.224				0.271			
p-value		0.001				0.000			

Note: * association significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

Table 7. Sources of information about places visited / to be visited – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Sources of information	Total	Mountain experience*			Age*				Impact on information shared in Facebook group*			The most important benefit from the membership in the Facebook group*			
		Long-standing experience	Some experience	Little / No experience	Up to 25	26–40	41–55	Above 55	Visit as soon as possible	Consider visiting the place in future	No itinerary ideas taken from FB group so far	Useful information	Communication with interesting people	Access to beautiful landscapes and pictures	Other
Online maps / stories / blogs on internet sites (%)	72	80	68	67	80	72	77	48	57	76	50	75	40	57	63
Friends and acquaintances (%)	69	69	72	54	55	66	72	77	67	68	77	67	100	80	50
Social media (%)	48	45	47	63	70	58	40	36	62	52	8	50	40	47	25
Maps and guidebooks (%)	40	54	34	25	20	49	36	42	33	41	35	41	40	27	63
Other (%)	2	3	2	0	0	3	2	0	0	2	4	1	0	0	25
No. of respondents	229	74	131	24	20	76	102	31	21	182	26	186	5	30	8
Chi-square		19.835			32.605				32.742			45.168			
Degrees of freedom (*df*)		10			15				10			15			
p-value		0.031			0.005				0.000			0.000			

Notes: a multiple response question – the sum of percentages exceeds 100% as the respondents could give more than one answer; * differences significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

actually viewed on social media. Social media is slightly more used by people who visit the mountains a few times in a year (5%) and have little or no mountain experience (8%).

Data in Table 6 indicate that the majority of respondents will put the idea of a new mountain destination taken from the FB group in a 'bucket list' and go there in the future, when it is possible or convenient (79%). Considering a future visit to the recommended place is the preferred option regardless of the extent of personal trust in the FB group and the frequency of mountain visits. This general tendency of a 'postponed' visit is probably a result of the specifics of mountain tourism compared to other forms of travel and type of destination when extra factors like suitable season and weather have to be taken into account. Despite the generally low share of people who would visit a place recommended by the FB group as soon as possible (9%), results reveal a higher proportion of such respondents among those who believe the information shared on Facebook completely or to a great extent as well as those who are regular walkers (Table 6).

The growing importance of social media for visits to mountain areas can be clearly seen in the answers to the question regarding the most popular sources of information tourists use when they design their routes (Table 7). Traditional forms of mountain information (maps and guidebooks) are chosen by 40% of participants while their electronic versions are selected by 72%. A similar share of respondents uses information from friends and acquaintances (69%) which is a classical WOM channel for learning about an interesting route in the mountains. Social media (48%) appears more important than printed materials, but still less significant than specialised internet sites where the information is better structured and easier to search and find. Social media is used to a greater than average extent by those with little mountain experience (63%) and who are likely to visit a new place as soon as possible (62%). A clear relationship is found with age: the younger the tourists, the higher the share of those who use social media as a major source of information. Despite being ranked in third place by those who seek useful information, social media is still considered important by 50% of them. Those respondents who are group members because of the opportunity to see beautiful pictures, would mostly rely on traditional WOM by friends and acquaintances (80%).

4.2. Over-tourism and over-publicity

It was interesting to explore the perceptions of the Facebook group members on the possible threats that social media might present to fragile mountain areas (Table 8). Most of the respondents approve the mass sharing (i.e. popularisation) of information and pictures about mountain areas (55%) while only 16% are negative towards this trend. Hesitation on the question is expressed by almost one third of the survey participants. The approval is related to the appraisal of

Table 8. Approval of the mass sharing of pictures / discussions regarding certain mountain areas – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Opinion	Total	Benefit evaluation*					Visiting a place based only on Facebook recommendation*			Trust in the shared information in the Facebook group*				Gender*	
		Very low	Rather low	Average	Rather high	Very high	Yes	No	Not certain (depends on the place)	I'd rather disbelieve – I question and check other sources	I can't tell, depends on the occasion	I trust to a great extent, but I check additionally	Completely believe	Male	Female
Approve (%)	55	43	45	41	58	76	67	47	37	18	42	60	100	37	62
Undecided (%)	29	29	27	35	30	18	21	21	45	35	38	28	0	35	26
Disapprove (%)	16	29	27	24	12	6	12	32	18	47	21	13	0	27	11
No. of respondents	229	7	11	74	86	51	134	19	76	17	24	183	5	62	167
Cramer's V		0.209					0.224			0.224				0.246	
p-value		0.010					0.000			0.001				0.001	

Note: * association significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

benefits members get from the travel group which is higher among those who ranked these benefits as high (58%) or very high (76%). A similar correlation is valid for those who have a high level of trust the information in the group who highly approve the popularisation, in contrast to those who trust group information less. Those who welcome sharing pictures and information are also more inclined to visit a new destination based only on online recommendations (67%). It is women who support the sharing of pictures (62%) compared to only 37% of male respondents.

The vast majority of participants in the survey (92%) approve the naming (or positioning) of the locations shared as pictures in FB (Table 9). With statistical significance, answers to this question are associated with the trust the members of the group have in the shared information as those who believe it are much more for the provision of full data regarding interesting locations in the mountains. The same relation is valid for membership benefits appraisal: the higher the perceived benefits, the greater the share of positive responses.

The questions above are related to social media users' actions and responsibility regarding the protection of the mountains. Results clearly indicate that respondents do not see any personal fault in the process of over-popularization of certain mountain areas. The perceptions are different when it comes to the impact of social media in general (Table 10). A greater share of group members (46%) agree that social media might contribute to overcrowding in the mountains. The greatest share is among those who least trust the information published in the FB group (76%) and who have

Table 9. Approval of the naming of the places on the landscape pictures shared on social media – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Opinion	Total	Benefit evaluation					Trust in the shared information in the Facebook group*			
		Very low	Rather low	Average	Rather high	Very high	I'd rather disbelieve and check other source	I can't tell, depends on the occasion	I trust to a great extent but I check additionally	Completely believe
Approve (%)	92	86	91	91	92	94	88	83	93	100
Undecided (%)	5	0	9	5	5	6	0	17	4	0
Disapprove (%)	3	14	0	4	3	0	12	0	3	0
No. of respondents	229	7	11	74	86	51	17	24	183	5
Cramer's V		0.114					0.167			
p-value		0.655					0.046			

Note: * association significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

Table 10. Expressed opinions if sharing of places on social media makes them too popular and crowded – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Opinion	Total	Trust in the shared information in the Facebook group				Mountain experience*			Gender	
		I'd rather disbelieve and check other source	I can't tell, depends on the occasion	I trust to a great extent, but I check additionally	Completely believe	Long-standing experience	Some experience	Little / No experience	Male	Female
Yes (%)	46	76	50	43	20	57	43	29	53	43
No (%)	33	24	33	33	60	32	34	33	34	33
Undecided (%)	21	0	17	23	20	11	24	38	13	24
No. of respondents	229	17	24	183	5	74	131	24	62	167
Cramer's V		0.151				0.154			0.126	
p-value		0.106				0.028			0.161	

Note: * association significant at least at the 0.05 level.
Source: authors.

Table 11. Opinion whether some places must be 'protected' from over popularity – share by selected subgroups of respondents

Opinion	Total	Trust in the shared information in the Facebook group				Membership in the Facebook group			Mountain experience			Age			
		I'd rather disbelieve and check other sources	I can't tell, depends on the occasion	I trust to a great extent, but I check additionally	Completely believe	Between 2009 and 2019	Since 2020	I don't remember	Long-standing experience	Some experience	Little / No experience	Up to 25	26–40	41–55	Above 55
Yes (%)	56	71	58	56	20	57	48	66	62	54	50	60	62	58	35
No (%)	28	24	33	27	80	28	32	25	24	33	17	15	26	28	42
Undecided (%)	15	6	8	17	0	15	20	9	14	13	33	25	12	14	23
No. of respondents	229	17	24	183	5	86	79	64	74	131	24	20	76	102	31
Cramer's V		0.149				0.107			0.140			0.143			
p-value		0.120				0.264			0.062			0.155			

Source: authors.

long-standing mountain experience (57%), as well as by male respondents (53%).

Table 11 indicates that the share of those who think that some places in the mountains might eventually need 'protection' from being popular is even higher (56%). No statistically significant differences by subgroup of respondents are found in this regard. Yet, results reveal that those who sense such a threat prevail most strongly among the ones who trust the Facebook group least (71%), but are among its oldest members (57%) and are experienced mountaineers (62%). Participants in the highest age group see social media and publicity as a danger for the mountains considerably less than other groups.

5. Discussion

Even though social media nowadays is associated with visual ways of presentation (pictures, videos), the survey demonstrates that in the case of Facebook users with a special interest in mountain tourism, clearly the main focus is on useful practical information that may contribute to a safe walk. This appears to be the main strength of UGC and a reason for its popularity in general as discussed in the literature (Leung et al., 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011; Yoo et al., 2009). Therefore, it can be concluded that the main beneficiaries are users with little travel (in our case – mountain) experience, as found in Filieri (2016).

Still, a very high proportion of mountaineers were found to prefer traditional WOM (information from friends and acquaintances). This finding corresponds to the results from Leung et al. (2013), Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), Tham et al. (2013) and Sultan et al. (2021). Nowadays, tourists prefer to receive information in electronic form, but the UGC, or the information received from social media, is still a compliment to information obtained elsewhere, as in Cox et al. (2009), or presents it in another form as in Xiang et al. (2015). One of the reasons for this could be the fact that it is not rich and detailed enough, due to the format in which it is presented (Zhou et al., 2020). This currently low usage of social media information can be due to the nature of mountain tourism, as it involves sometimes risky outdoor activities and therefore requires even more secure information compared to other forms of tourism. Of course, it can also be specific to the studied population as pointed out by Leung et al. (2019).

Our findings indicate that the information shared in the mountain travel group is very much trusted, which goes in line with previous research by Leung et al. (2013). This is especially true for women, and the younger participants who presumably are less experienced in mountain conditions, similar to Filieri (2016). The trust in the shared information correlates with a high proportion of people following or planning to follow the advice. In the case of a mountain trip, they still require an extra source of information, so it is not considered completely credible (Tham et al., 2013). According to our results, the majority of respondents will not visit places recommended in the group immediately but will create a future 'wish list'. As in Kitsios et al. (2022) our survey also shows that trust is strongly related to the anticipated benefits and the usefulness of the information received. Similar to other tourism studies (Hysa et al., 2021; Tešin et al., 2022; Zeng

& Gerritsen, 2014), we indicate that those who are most likely to visit a new place in the mountains because it was somehow recommended in the social media, are inexperienced tourists, women, and the youngest Facebook group members.

In the case of mountain tourism there are technical limitations (like difficulty and duration of the walk) that should be taken into account when a trip is planned and organized. However, even though social media are rated very low as a factor for choosing a place to go, we argue that the popularity of a new place, seen online in beautiful landscape pictures, can still be traced to the indirect influence of social media as in Liu et al. (2020). It is confirmed in the literature on tourism in general (Fotis et al., 2011; Kane et al., 2012; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) that the effect of social media on mountain tourism is also indirect, with no immediate impact on visits. In our survey, the only exclusion from this rule refers to regular tourists for whom social media is a source of constant new ideas for mountain walks, similar to Tešin et al. (2022). The study did not observe any connection regarding levels of income and education as in Öz (2015) because our sample almost entirely consisted of highly educated respondents of at least a medium standard of living.

The two main stimuli for Facebook group members to visit the mountains are pictures of the area and practical information. Pictures provide inspiration to experienced mountaineers, while the detailed instructions shared online stimulate visits among the less experienced mountain lovers and therefore contribute to the increase in visits of those areas to a higher degree (Tham et al., 2020). Being highly rated by the less experienced and new mountaineers, without a real-life social circle where they can acquire this specialized valuable information, it is not surprising that these respondents do not see social media and the popularization of fragile mountain areas as a problem. Since social media is seen mainly as an important and trusted information source (Leung et al., 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), the vast majority of Facebook group members in our study consider it right that it should provide the maximum possible information required. In the case of mountain tourism then, the overcrowding effect of social media (Gretzel, 2019) will be generated more as a result of distributing practical information, than sharing images of the destination.

On the other hand, the social media threat of over-popularization is recognized to a high degree among the respondents, though much more as a general perception of the effect from social media, rather than demonstrating real understanding of the possible effects on the mountain environment. A possible response to this danger, as stated by Kane et al. (2012) and Gretzel (2019), is to promote sustainable ways of practicing tourism using the information power of social media. One of the big advantages is that it can reach and educate the two main groups of users who are most influenced by social media – the younger and less experienced. Social media can also be used as a research tool on tourist behaviour in mountain areas in order to prevent signs of overtourism (Barros et al., 2020; Cholakova & Dogramadjieva, 2023).

In more general terms, by seeking to uncover the major effects of social media on mountain visits and patterns of tourist behaviour in a fragile environment influenced by this powerful communication channel, our study can be framed within the paradigm of 'moral geography' (Brunn, 2021) which raises morality and ethical questions regarding various pressing issues that the present world faces. This concept aims to explore in greater depth philosophical questions regarding human behaviour, institutional structures, environmental conditions and public policy. As Brunn (2021) stresses, the sustainability issues, along with media worlds and cyberspaces (social media included) are themes worth having serious discussion about, through the moral geography prism.

6. Conclusion

The online survey among members of a Facebook mountaineering group revealed that the attitude of tourists towards user-generated content shared through social media is purely pragmatic. The group members seek mainly trusted information that will be useful for them to plan their future trips. Clearly, there is a lack of awareness among social media users who do not realise the potential risks that the spreading of information may cause to fragile areas in the mountains. This attitude can be classified as consumerist and clashes with the sustainability paradigm. While preventing beautiful places from becoming too popular is not taken as a personal responsibility, the negative role of social media in general seems to be perceived more highly. Yet, it is hard to tell whether this is related simply to an anticipated negative tourist experience as a result of overcrowding or reveals an increased environmental concern. Nevertheless, it is possible to turn the defect into an effect and turn the information powers of social media and their technological opportunities into modern tools to enhance nature protection.

The limitations of this study refer mostly to the non-probability sample which is inevitable when conducting an online survey. The results cannot be automatically transferred to other populations, and if so, probably some cultural and national differences will be observed. The impact of social media on mountain visits has its own specifics compared to other forms of tourism which are still not examined in depth. To do so, the technological opportunities these platforms provide should be maximised by employing a mixed methods approach comprising online surveys, geolocated big data and visual methods. This way future research could obtain valuable information on actual visits to specific mountain areas and develop forecasts for patterns and trends in tourist behaviour. Both of them would be very useful for protected area management.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.09 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Possible impacts of *Tren Maya*: The residents of Chetumal's perspective, Quintana Roo, Mexico

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How to cite (APA style): Ramírez-Hernández, O.I., Barrón Arreola, K.S., & Cruz Jiménez, G. (2025). Possible impacts of *Tren Maya*: The residents of Chetumal's perspective, Quintana Roo, Mexico. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 99–110. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.09

ABSTRACT

The aim is to analyze the possible impacts of the *Tren Maya* megaproject on the city of Chetumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico, through the perceptions of its residents. The theoretical framework used is that of social representations, as this approach helps understand how people organize, interpret and give meaning to information in their environment. The methodology is qualitative, involving surveys and in-depth interviews with residents of the study area. The analysis of the results is based on trends and excerpts from interviews that illustrate and contrast the impacts perceived by the local community. The main findings indicate that *Tren Maya* is viewed as an opportunity for economic improvement and will invigorate the production and tourist activities of Chetumal, however negative impacts on the environment are acknowledged. It is concluded that social representations can assist in creating comprehensive strategies to mitigate potential negative impacts and enhance the benefits from the implementation of *Tren Maya* in Chetumal.

KEYWORDS

tourism impacts, social representations, *Tren Maya*, Chetumal, local community

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
4 June 2024
Accepted:
13 January 2025
Published:
11 June 2025

1. Introduction

The study of the impacts of tourism megaprojects holds fundamental importance in comprehending and responsibly managing regional and socioeconomic development (Girma & Singh, 2019; Hübscher & Ringel, 2021). These projects can generate a range of complex and far-reaching consequences from economic momentum to the disruption of local ecosystems and significant changes in the cultural elements of host communities (Hübscher, 2021). A thorough understanding of these impacts is essential to minimize potential negative effects, maximize sustainable benefits, and safeguard the cultural, environmental and social integrity of the regions where these megaprojects are located.

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

The *Tren Maya* project has emerged as a point of interest in Mexico due to its purpose of connecting and promoting development in southeastern Mexico (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2020; Gasparello & Nuñez Rodríguez, 2021; Reyes Maturano, 2022), however, given its imminent implementation, the evaluation of its potential impacts has become an imperative need (Palafox-Muñoz, 2020; Vidal Fócil et al., 2020). In the academic literature, various aspects of *Tren Maya* have been addressed from its economic implications (Reyes Maturano, 2022; Vidal Fócil et al., 2020) to its environmental (Casanova Casañas, 2021; Gómez et al., 2020; Reyes García et al., 2019;) and social effects (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2020; Gasparello & Nuñez Rodríguez, 2021).

However, there is a notable gap in research focusing on the perception of the potential impacts of the megaproject in Chetumal, the capital of the state of Quintana Roo. In this context, the article aims to analyze the social representations of the population of Chetumal regarding the potential impacts of *Tren Maya*. Identifying these perceptions is crucial to understanding the diversity of opinions, concerns and expectations in a region particularly affected by the implementation of the megaproject.

Previous studies have not covered the impacts of *Tren Maya*, particularly in the study area of Chetumal, which possesses distinctive social, environmental and economic conditions. As the cradle of mestizaje and the state capital, it serves as a key space for analyzing multicultural dynamics, public polices and urban development (Secretaría de Desarrollo Agrario Territorial y Urbano, 2018). Additionally, its tourism identity, rooted in cultural and natural heritage, provides a sustainable alternative to the predominant sun-and-beach tourism in the Mexican Caribbean.

The inclusion of theories aimed at understanding perceptions, both positive and negative, has also been incorporated. The purpose of this study is to provide an informed basis for decision-making both at the governmental level and in the strategic planning of the stakeholders involved. The objective is to promote responsible and equitable tourism that responds to the needs of local communities and the preservation of the natural environment. Thus, it is justified by the relevance of offering a comprehensive and contextualized view of the potential effects of *Tren Maya* in such a key area as Chetumal.

Through a qualitative methodology that has allowed residents' perceptions to be captured, this work comprises a literature review on megaprojects and the use of social representations for the study of impacts. It is followed by contextualization of the study area, the methodological process, the main findings, discussion and finally the conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Megaprojects, tourism and impacts

The discussion around megaprojects and their impacts has been the subject of attention by various academics and experts in recent years (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Girma & Singh, 2019; Pitsis et al., 2018; Söderlund et al., 2017). Megaprojects, characterized by their monumental scale and technical and financial complexity, have captured the imagination of governments, businesses and citizens around the world (Delphine et al., 2019; McLeod, 2023). However, behind their apparent promise of development and progress, megaprojects have also come under intense scrutiny due to their potential negative impacts on the environment, local communities and the broader economy (Delphine et al., 2022; Söderlund et al., 2017).

From an environmental perspective, numerous studies have highlighted how megaprojects can trigger a series of adverse consequences such as deforestation, soil degradation and loss of biodiversity (Caldas & Gupta, 2017; Charest, 1995; Diaz & Fainstein, 2008). For example, the construction of hydroelectric dams has been associated with the flooding of vast areas of land, resulting in the loss of natural habitats and the disruption of river ecosystems (Ansar et al., 2014; Gutierrez et al., 2019).

Regarding social impacts, it has been documented how megaprojects can cause the forced relocation of entire communities, as well as socioeconomic and cultural conflicts (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2020; Lehtonen et al., 2016; McLeod, 2023). Mining projects, for example, have been criticized for displacing indigenous and peasant populations from their ancestral lands, and generating tensions and inequalities in the affected areas (Brahm & Tarziján, 2015; Conde & Le Billon, 2017; Silva et al., 2018).

From an economic perspective, although megaprojects are often presented as drivers of growth and development, some studies have questioned this narrative (Korytárová & Hromádka, 2014; Oyegoke & Al Kiyumi, 2017). It has been argued that the real costs of these projects are often underestimated, while the promised benefits may not materialize or be unequally distributed (Lehtonen et al., 2016).

However, it is important to recognize that megaprojects can also have positive impacts, especially in the tourism sector (Dembicz & Carrillo, 2021; Girma & Singh, 2019; Hübscher, 2021). Many of these projects are designed to improve infrastructure and connectivity in tourist destinations, which in turn can boost visitor arrivals and stimulate local economic growth (Dembicz & Carrillo, 2021). For example, the construction of international airports or the expansion of transportation networks can facilitate access to remote destinations, increasing their attractiveness for tourists (Monterrubio et al., 2020).

In this sense, megaprojects can play a crucial role in the development and promotion of tourism in various regions (Dembicz & Carrillo, 2021). However, it is essential to address the potential negative impacts associated with these projects, such as environmental degradation and social conflicts, to ensure sustainable and equitable development (Girma & Singh, 2019; Söderlund et al., 2017). Ultimately, careful planning and management of megaprojects are essential to maximize their potential benefits while minimizing their risks and negative repercussions.

2.2. Social representations and tourism megaprojects

The theory of social representations originated with Serge Moscovici (1988) and this proposal has regained relevance in academia due to the work of Jodelet (2008). Social representations are mental constructs shared by individuals within a society that enable them to understand, interpret and give meaning to phenomena, objects or situations (Jodelet, 2008; Moscardo, 2011; Moscovici, 1988). These representations are shaped by culture, and individual and collective experiences, and manifest themselves through communication, language and social interactions (de Moraes Prata Gaspar et al., 2020).

While the central concept in the theory of social representations is "representation", referring to how individuals interpret and give meaning to their social environment, different authors (Kim & Park, 2023; Melendrez-Ruiz et al., 2020; Moscovici, 1988) emphasize various elements for approaching them. Generally, it is agreed that certain elements form the basis of the theory:

1. Central core: contains the most stable and coherent information of the representation, forming the basis for shared understanding.
2. Peripheral system: Encompasses more variable and flexible elements related to the adaptation of the representation to different contexts and situations.
3. Represented object: What the representation is built upon, including concepts, ideas, social groups, tangible objects, etc.
4. Social subjects: Individuals who share this representation in a community or society.
5. Sociohistorical context: The cultural, historical and social environment influencing the formation and evolution of these representations.

Similarly, for the study of social representations, Valencia et al. (2021) recommend categorizing them into three large groups. The first is hegemonic representations, reflecting dominant ideas, values and beliefs accepted as "normal" or "natural" in society. Emancipated representations, the second group, emerge as a counterpoint to hegemonic representations, questioning, challenging or seeking to change ideas established by the dominant society, often promoted by social movements, minorities or groups aiming to transform existing social structures. The third group is polemical representations, generating debates, discrepancies and tensions within society due to their controversial, ambivalent or contradictory nature, typically related to sensitive issues for social groups. It should be clarified that these three types of social representation are not static; they can evolve, transform or be challenged as social, cultural and political dynamics change in any society (Valencia et al., 2021).

Moreover, the use of social representations theory has been an invaluable tool for understanding the impacts of tourism on diverse communities and how these representations shape perceptions and behaviors toward this activity (Atzori et al., 2019; Moscardo, 2011; Valencia et al., 2021; Wassler & Talarico, 2021). In the context of tourism, social representations have been used to analyze how local communities (Kim & Park, 2023; Lai et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021; Sarr et al., 2021) and tourists (Aquino & Andereck, 2018; Atzori et al., 2019; Shaheer & Carr, 2022) construct and share ideas about specific tourism destinations. These representations not only affect individual decisions but also influence the planning, development and sustainability of tourism areas (Aquino & Andereck, 2018; Atzori et al., 2019; Nugroho et al., 2021; Valencia et al., 2021).

Likewise, in the study of tourism megaprojects, social representations theory offers a framework for understanding how collective visions about these large-scale projects are constructed (Murekian et al., 2018; Pitsis et al., 2018; Rodríguez Lozano & Tarazona Morales, 2015). Social representations can reveal how different groups perceive and negotiate the benefits and challenges associated with these projects. For example, some representations may idealize economic potential and job creation (Moscardo, 2011; Nugroho & Numata, 2020; Sarr et al., 2021), while others may relate to environmental elements (Boager & Castro, 2022; Monterrubio et al., 2020; Sinclair-Maragh et al., 2015).

Therefore, the use of social representations theory in the study of tourism megaprojects is justified, as it allows for a profound understanding. This understanding can be crucial for planners, governments and local communities when assessing the social, economic and cultural impacts of these large-scale projects (Li et al., 2021; Moscardo, 2011; Murekian et al., 2018).

3. Chetumal and *Tren Maya*

Quintana Roo, located on the eastern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, is a region recognized for its tourism activity, particularly in the north, where its world-famous tourist destinations are located, such as Cancun, Playa del Carmen and Tulum (Brenner et al., 2018). However, beyond these tourist centers, the southern region of Quintana Roo is growing significantly, as places such as Mahahual, Bacalar and Chetumal are experiencing growth in the number of visitors.

Chetumal is a city located within the municipality of Othón P. Blanco, situated in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, located on the border with Belize (see Figure 1). With a population of 233,648 inhabitants, only 5.51% belong to an indigenous group (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2020). It is the capital of the state and is in a region associated with Mayan culture, boasting cultural, historical and natural diversity. Additionally, it is part of the Chetumal Bay Manatee Sanctuary State Reserve (Dirección de Desarrollo Turístico, 2020). The city has witnessed significant growth in recent decades due to its strategic location and tourist appeal.

Economic activities in Chetumal are diverse, encompassing work in government agencies (state and municipal), commerce, tourism, fishing and agriculture, all playing pivotal roles in the local economy (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2020). The city acts as a gateway to the Costa Maya region and nearby tourist destinations, such as Bacalar, a developing tourist spot that has experienced notable growth due to its attractions (Dirección de Desarrollo Turístico, 2020).

The tourist offer in the city of Chetumal currently includes 79 hotels with 2,220 rooms of varying quality. Additionally, in 2022, the Ministry of Tourism (Secretaría de Turismo, 2022) announced the Magical Neighborhoods program (*Barrios Mágicos* in Spanish) of which the historic center of Chetumal is a part (Gobierno de México, 2022). The purpose of this program is to expand the range of tourist experiences and foster community development with a social dimension. Furthermore, according to the Ministry of Tourism (Secretaría de Turismo, 2022), the Magical Color Routes program has been implemented in Chetumal aiming to rehabilitate the urban image of tourist destinations.

The *Tren Maya* project has sparked considerable interest and debate in Mexico as it constitutes a megaproject set to impact the entire Yucatan Peninsula. This infrastructure initiative aims to connect various tourist destinations in southeastern Mexico through a rail network (Gobierno de México, 2020). According to González (2023), *Tren Maya* comprises seven sections (see Figure 2):

1. Chiapas to Campeche: Palenque – Escárcega.
2. Campeche: Escárcega – Calkiní.
3. Campeche to Yucatán: Calkiní – Izamal.
4. Yucatán to Quintana Roo: Izamal – Cancún.
5. North Quintana Roo: Cancún – Playa del Carmen and South Quintana Roo: Playa del Carmen – Tulum.
6. Quintana Roo: Tulum – Chetumal.
7. Quintana Roo to Campeche: Chetumal – Escárcega.

Sections one to five south commenced operations in December 2023, while the remaining sections, including the one involving Chetumal, are scheduled to begin operations in February 2024 (González, 2023).

Initially, Chetumal was not part of the established route; however, by the end of 2021, it was decided to include it as an additional station to facilitate train maintenance and connect the city to the international airport (Gobierno de México, 2020). While this development could potentially boost tourism and economic development in the capital, it has also sparked concerns and discussions regarding its environmental, social and cultural impact.

Figure 1. Study area
Source: based on Google Maps, elaboration by Jesús Roberto Flores Rodriguez

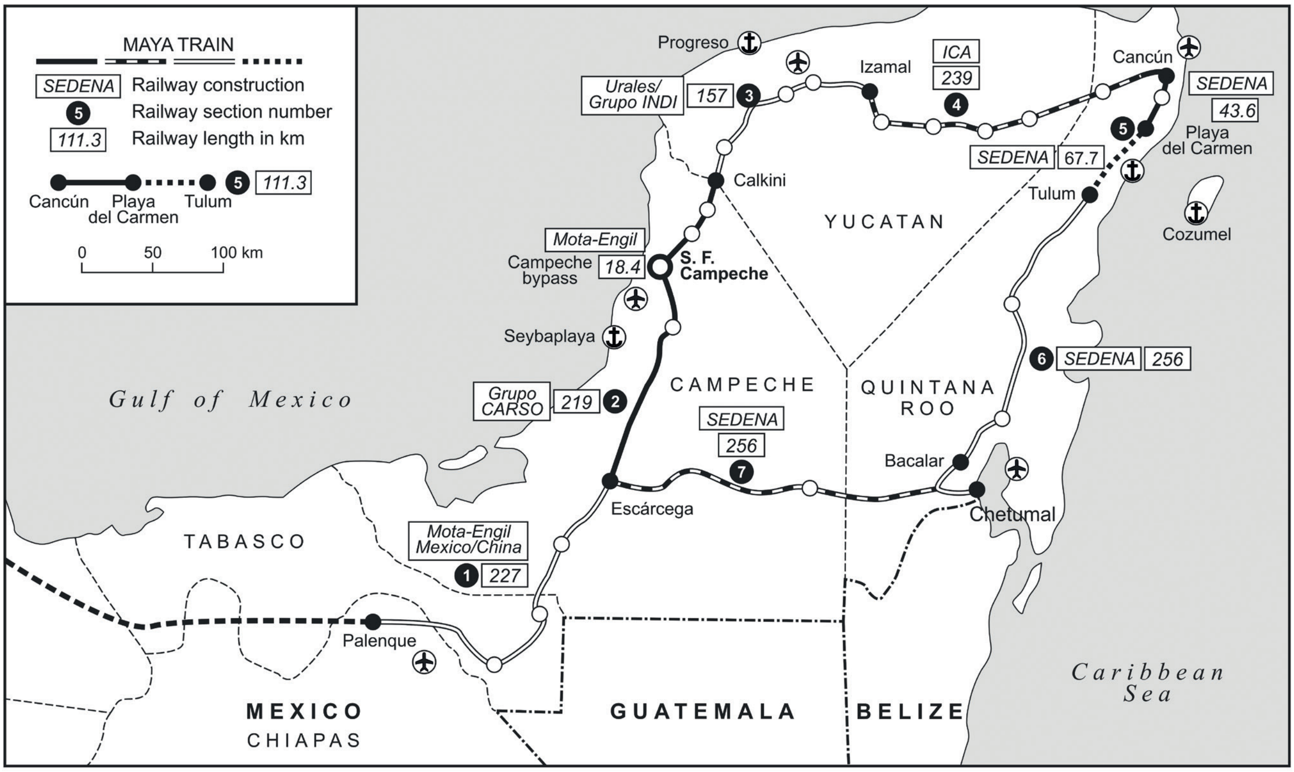

Figure 2. *Tren Maya* map
Source: based on Tren Maya Trips (n.d.)

4. Methodological process

The present research adopts a descriptive scope, aiming to characterize and comprehend the knowledge and perceptions of Chetumal's population concerning the *Tren Maya* project, along with assessing the potential economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts associated with it. The mixed approach was chosen to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem by integrating the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research (Bryman, 2012). This approach is well-suited for capturing the complexity of social representations and individual perspectives (Moscardo, 2011; Sarr et al., 2021).

Two research techniques were determined: the first being a survey, chosen for its efficiency in data collection, capacity for result generalization, facilitation of statistical analysis, and consistency in data collection (Bryman, 2012). The second was the interview, deemed valuable, especially when seeking to understand the complexity and subjectivity of social, cultural or individual phenomena (Valencia et al., 2021).

The instruments were designed based on an analysis of literature (Monterrubio et al., 2020; Moscardo, 2011; Pitsis et al., 2018) where aspects related to the impacts of tourism and mega-projects were considered. A structured questionnaire with five sections was employed (Ramírez-Hernández et al., 2023). The first focused on identifying informants' profiles, while the next evaluated the degree of knowledge about the *Tren Maya* project in Chetumal. The remaining three sections addressed tourism impacts, classified as economic, environmental and socio-cultural utilising a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. An open-ended question was included at the end, allowing participants to mention other impacts related to *Tren Maya* and express interest in additional interviews. The instrument achieved a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.832.

The interview script comprised two sections: the first aimed at identifying the informant's profile, while the other contained open-ended questions to delve deeper into the economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts that could be caused by *Tren Maya*. The selection of interviewees and informants was conducted using a purposive sampling method to ensure the inclusion of individuals with relevant expertise and experience related to the topic under study. Key stakeholders were identified based on their roles in the development, management and impact of the analyzed projects, as well as their knowledge of local dynamics. This approach allowed for the collection of diverse perspectives including representatives from government agencies, local businesses and community organizations.

Questionnaires were distributed by a convenience sample through Google Forms, involving Chetumal residents of legal age, resulting in a total of 478 participants. Interviews were conducted concurrently, with a total of 26 participants, nine of whom were recorded, while the rest were documented through detailed notes to capture essential perceptions.

For the analysis of information obtained from the questionnaires, trends were identified to recognize patterns and common characteristics in responses. Regarding the interviews, recordings were transcribed and analyzed alongside notes taken during non-recorded interviews. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, emerging patterns and variations in responses to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of Chetumal's population regarding *Tren Maya*.

To categorize the social representations of the *Tren Maya* project, a thematic analysis was conducted, drawing from survey responses and in-depth interviews with key informants. This process involved systematically coding qualitative data to identify recurring themes and patterns. The classification was guided by three main criteria: the prevalence of the representation in the responses, the underlying perspective (optimistic, critical or ambivalent), and its focus on specific aspects of the project, such as economic, environmental or social dimensions.

The categorization resulted in three distinct types of representation:

1. Hegemonic: identified as the dominant and widely shared perspectives within the community, reflecting optimism and high expectations regarding *Tren Maya's* potential benefits – examples include improvements in tourism infrastructure, job creation and enhanced connectivity.
2. Emancipated: focused on advocating active citizen participation and equitable distribution of benefits highlighting the importance of involving local communities in decision-making to ensure inclusive development. And
3. Controversial: embodying ambivalence and conflicting viewpoints, often juxtaposing environmental concerns with potential economic gains.

5. Results

The section will be divided into two significant parts: the first identifies the profile of the informants for the two techniques used, while the second considers social representations, presenting hegemonic, emancipated and controversial examples.

5.1. Profile of the informants and knowledge about *Tren Maya*

The informants who responded to the questionnaire exhibit demographic diversity reflective of Chetumal's population (see Table 1). A slight male predominance stands out, representing 52%, while 47.1% are women, and 0.9% preferred not to specify their gender. The majority of informants are of Mexican nationality (98%), with 2% of foreign origin. Regarding age, a diverse range is observed, with the 35–44 group being the most represented covering 45.1% of the informants, followed by the 25–34 group with 16.7%, and the 45–54 group with 15.7%.

Table 1. Respondents' profiles

Variable	Value	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	47.1
	Male	52.0
	I'd rather not say	0.9
Nationality	Mexican	92.0
	Foreign	8.0
Occupation	Public official	34.3
	Retired	8.1
	Teacher	12.9
	Trader	16.7
	Military	4.1
	Student	15.7
	Tourism sector worker	4.9
	Tren Maya worker	3.1
Age (years)	18–24	12.9
	25–34	16.7
	35–44	45.1
	45–54	15.7
	Over 55	9.6
Length of residence (years)	0–10	21.6
	11–20	19.6
	21–30	34.3
	Over 31	24.5
Level of education	Elementary school	2.3
	High school	31.9
	Technical degree	13.2
	University	34.3
	Postgraduate	18.3

Source: authors.

Concerning the length of residence in Chetumal, a varied distribution is evident: 34.3% have lived in the city between 21 and 30 years, while 24.5% have lived there for 31 or more; 21.6% between 0 and 10 years, and 19.6% between 11 and 20. Regarding educational level, there is significant diversity: 34.3% have a bachelor's degree, 18.3% have a postgraduate degree, 31.9% have a high school diploma, 13.2% have a technical diploma and 2.3% have only elementary education.

In relation to occupation, the informants cover various professional areas: 34.3% identify themselves as public officials, while 8.1% are retired, 12.9% are teachers, 16.7% are traders, 4.1% are linked to the military, 15.7% are students, 4.9% work in the tourism sector, and 3.1% are workers on *Tren Maya*. Regarding dependence on tourism for economic income, it is notable that 71% indicate that their income does not depend on tourism, while 17% have very low dependence, 4% have low dependence, 7% have moderate dependency, and only 1% has high dependence.

All the informants are residents in one of the localities in Chetumal. The distribution of their residence locations is heterogeneous, with 17% residing in Las Américas, 13% in Caribe and 21% in Centro. Other neighborhoods, such as Jardines, Solidaridad and Aeropuerto, are also represented, although to a lesser extent.

Regarding knowledge of the *Tren Maya* project, familiarity varies with 3% not being familiar and 17.6% considering themselves very familiar. The most used means of information are social networks (39%), followed by conversations with friends and family (22%), websites (15%), TV news (11%) and statements from government agencies (13%).

The groups of interviewees were chosen based on their expressed interest in the questionnaire to continue providing information for the research, aiming for a diversity of profiles (see Table 2). The interviewees are mainly composed of women (15) with the rest (11) being men, all of Mexican nationality. Regarding age, a predominance is observed in the range of 35 to 44 years, with a total of 14 interviewees, followed by 45 to 54 with nine, and three interviewees were over 65. This distribution suggests a balanced representation from diverse generations.

Table 2. Interviewees' profiles

Variable	Value	Frequency
Gender	Male	15
	Female	11
Occupation	Public official	12
	Retired	3
	Teacher	4
	Trader	3
	Military	1
	Student	1
	Tourism worker	1
	Tren Maya worker	1
Age (years)	35–44	14
	45–54	9
	Over 65	3
Length of residence (years)	0–10	4
	21–30	13
	Over 30	9
Level of education	Elementary school	2
	High school	6
	University	14
	Postgraduate	4

Source: authors.

Regarding the length of residence in Chetumal, 13 interviewees have lived in the city between 21 and 30 years, nine for more than 31, and four between 0 and 10. The location of residence of the interviewees is distributed heterogeneously, highlighting the presence of interviewees in different areas such as Centro, Calderitas, Lomas del Caribe, Caribe and Las Américas.

In relation to educational level, the majority of those interviewed have higher education, with 14 participants who have reached a university degree, four with a postgraduate degree, six with a high school diploma, and two with only elementary education. Regarding occupation, the group of interviewees presents a diversity of job profiles. The majority identified themselves as public servants, with 12 interviewed, followed by retirees (3), teachers (4), traders (3), and a single presence in roles such as the military, student, a tourism sector worker and a *Tren Maya* worker.

5.2. Social representations of *Tren Maya*

The hegemonic social representations of Chetumal residents regarding the potential impacts of the *Tren Maya* project reveal an optimistic and hopeful image shared by the majority of the community. Specifically, they anticipate improvements in tourist services (94%), expect a significant generation of new jobs both overall (98%) and in the tourism sector (96%), foresee the diversification of local tourist activities (81%), anticipate enhanced facilities for merchandise transportation (88%) and improved connectivity of the city with the peninsula (88%). Moreover, they envision the creation of local enterprises and businesses (93%), the promotion of tourist sites (94%), the development of gastronomy (89%) and crafts (89%) in Chetumal, and an increase in the overall quality of life for Chetumal residents (86%).

Hegemonic social representations are reinforced by various interviewees. For instance, a professional trader indicates:

> The connectivity offered by *Tren Maya* will allow Chetumal to overcome the isolation that has persisted for decades. It serves as another route and also functions as advertising to visit the capital of Quintana Roo.

Similarly, a housewife comments:

> The train will benefit many men and women who need income to cover family expenses and contribute to the well-being of their loved ones.

Among the emancipated social representations, there is an emphasis on the significance of citizen participation in both the planning and execution of the project. This focus aims to empower the community and prevent unilateral decisions. Additionally, there is an advocacy for policies and measures that steer clear of economic inequality in the benefits of the project, ensuring that prosperity is distributed equitably among the population. The importance of utilizing the train to bridge social gaps and enhance the quality of life in areas facing challenges related to access to services and opportunities is underscored.

In this sense, one of the interviewees, who is a teacher, indicates:

> I agree with what has been carried out so far, but I would also like to see more consideration given to nearby towns.

In the same line, a development approach must be established that considers the preservation of natural resources, promoting tourism and transportation practices that minimize the environmental impact. The safeguarding of local cultural identity is sought, advocating measures that protect and promote the historical and cultural heritage of the region.

The controversial social representations reveal a series of concerns and ambivalent perceptions within the Chetumal community regarding the *Tren Maya* project. The community expresses a mixed and ambivalent feeling, reflecting a blend of emotions that oscillates between pride and identity.

The most prominently expressed controversial perspective regards contributing to deforestation, with a marked 85% of respondents expressing this, a perception reflecting a deep concern about the direct environmental impact of the project in terms of the loss of forest areas. Likewise, during the interviews, various people expressed concern about the environmental impact, such as the case of an informant who works as a public servant, stating:

> The piece of jungle that they removed to build it will affect everyone, not only the animals that lived there, but all the living beings that are in this ecosystem.

In the same way, a retiree mentions:

> … [the jungle] will never recover; they took it away, and it will begin to affect the climate. For example, this year it was warmer, and there began to be more garbage near the construction site. I recognize that there may be greater insecurity, greater contamination because the city is not prepared for this type of project.

In a similar sense, another social representation indicates that the consumption of natural resources also emerges as a significant concern. Given this, a teacher explains:

> I consider that it could increase the number of residents in the city, and this could cause a lack of basic services such as water and electricity since they would have to cover a broader sector.

Although these representations speak of negative things expected by *Tren Maya*, or that already happen, they are controversial because there are other positions that disagree with the development of the train, identifying that the development justifies its environmental impact. This is how a trader puts it, stating:

> It could be a loss of biodiversity in nearby ecosystems. I don't think it is the only project that affects it, but it is one that can bring development, promotion and more tourism to the city, so we would also benefit.

These results demonstrate the existence of diverse social representations, which reveal environmental concerns but also hope for the potential development of the city.

6. Discussion

The implementation of *Tren Maya* has sparked analysis and debate regarding its potential to boost tourism, generate employment, foster economic development and its environmental impact in Chetumal and its surroundings. The results uncover widespread perceptions that anticipate various benefits with the railway project's implementation in the region. This reflects a shared expectation of economic, cultural and social progress for the area, aligning with other studies where economic benefits are perceived from tourist activities (Kim & Park, 2023; Moscardo, 2011; Valencia et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the results show that inhabitants are concerned about preserving the environment, protecting archaeological sites, and maintaining the cultural identity of indigenous communities along the *Tren Maya* route. This indicates perspectives that extend beyond simple acceptance or rejection of the project, aiming to positively influence its implementation for the benefit of the local community while respecting the cultural and natural environment. This corresponds with other research findings (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2020; Gasparello & Nuñez Rodríguez, 2021; Reyes Maturano, 2022), emphasizing the importance of ensuring that the benefits of *Tren Maya* genuinely reach local communities.

This ambivalence suggests a nuanced perception, wherein residents experience mixed feelings about the connection between tourism megaprojects, economic benefits and existing natural resources (Murekian et al., 2018; Nugroho et al., 2021). This situation, combined with apprehension towards potential environmental impacts, implies that the Chetumal community is divided in its perception of the *Tren Maya* project, highlighting the complexity of the interaction between development and conservation in the local context.

The implementation of *Tren Maya* in Chetumal elicits a diverse range of perceptions and expectations in the community. The results from hegemonic social representations reflect an optimistic majority vision, anticipating significant benefits for the local economy, employment and tourism promotion. This perspective suggests a deep connection between the positive perception of the project and expectations of improvement in the quality of life. However, addressing the ambivalence in social representations, where a significant segment of the population expresses mixed feelings towards *Tren Maya*, is essential. This ambivalence could stem from the complexity inherent in balancing development with cultural and environmental preservation.

These perspectives underscore the need for an inclusive and sustainable approach in executing any tourism project (Murekian et al., 2018). The discussion should explore how the local community can be integrated into decision-making processes (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2020), ensuring that *Tren Maya* not only provides immediate economic benefits but also respects and strengthens local cultural identity while preserving the region's natural resources for future generations.

The results of this study show that the social representations of the *Tren Maya* project in Chetumal reflect both positive expectations and concerns regarding environmental, social and economic impacts. These findings align with those of other megaprojects, where local communities often have an optimistic view of the potential benefits, such as job creation and improved infrastructure (Boothroyd et al., 1995; Charest, 1995; Delphine et al., 2022); but also raise concerns about environmental sustainability and the equitable distribution of benefits (Ansar et al., 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Oyegoke & Al Kiyumi, 2017). Similarly, projects like the construction of large-scale transportation infrastructure in other regions (Delphine et al., 2022; Korytárová & Hromádka, 2014; Rothengatter, 2019) have generated ambivalent perceptions, with communities expecting economic development but also facing tensions related to the disruption of the natural environment and equitable access to benefits.

The results also distinguish the *Tren Maya* project from other megaprojects, as its strong connection to the region's cultural and natural heritage presents a unique challenge in terms of preserving local identity. While, in other cases, megaprojects may be perceived as an external imposition with no clear link to local identity (Dembicz & Carrillo, 2021; Hübscher & Ringel, 2021; Witz et al., 2021), in the case of Chetumal, there is a greater concern about balancing development with the protection of the cultural and natural environments. This difference highlights the need for policies that promote active citizen participation and the integration of sustainability measures to ensure that the project's benefits are distributed equitably, minimizing negative impacts on communities and the environment.

The survey results reflect an over-representation of individuals with higher levels of education. This demographic profile may influence the findings, as highly educated respondents might have greater access to information or exhibit specific attitudes and perspectives. While this provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge that this demographic imbalance could limit the generalizability of the results to the broader population.

The discussion about the possible impacts of *Tren Maya* in Chetumal must address these complexities and aim for comprehensive development that is socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable and culturally respectful. Additionally, mitigation and sustainability strategies that seek to balance development with the preservation of the region's valuable natural heritage must be carefully considered (Boager & Castro, 2022; Monterrubio et al., 2020).

7. Conclusions

This study delved into the potential impacts of *Tren Maya* in Chetumal, revealing a complex and multifaceted panorama that mirrors the diversity of perceptions in the community. The results affirm that Chetumal residents harbor optimism regarding the economic benefits of the railway project an optimism intertwined with expectations of an enhanced quality of life, local economic development and cultural progress. However, the study emphasizes the crucial need to carefully address the inherent tensions between development and cultural and environmental preservation.

There is a notable concern about deforestation, environmental degradation and the alteration of migratory routes, underscoring the necessity to incorporate mitigation and sustainability strategies into the project's implementation. Consequently, this study contributes empirically by supporting the potential development of strategies in collaboration with the local community, integrating solutions that harmonize progress with conservation.

On the other hand, the results underscore the inherent complexity in the interaction of social, economic and environmental factors, demanding ongoing study. Therefore, its limitation lies in the variability of individual perceptions, the evolving dynamics of the community, and the potential impact of new events or policies that could alter the study's context. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of considering the temporality of perceptions since they can evolve as the project progresses.

The findings can serve as a guide for designing territorial and regional development strategies that balance the economic benefits of the *Tren Maya* project with environmental sustainability and social inclusion. The identified social representations highlight the need to strengthen citizen participation in decision-making, implement policies that equitably distribute economic benefits, and mitigate potential environmental impacts. In this regard, local policies could focus on promoting sustainable tourism entrepreneurship initiatives, protecting the region's natural resources, and improving urban infrastructure to accommodate the anticipated increase in population and economic activity.

Future research endeavors could focus on long-term monitoring to assess how social representations evolve in response to real events related to *Tren Maya*. Additionally, delving more deeply into the factors influencing the formation of these representations and comparing experiences with other communities that have undergone similar projects, could enhance the understanding of *Tren Maya's* potential impacts and more precisely guide future planning and management decisions. One important future line of inquiry would be to ask the residents of Chetumal about the impacts they experience once the train is fully operational, as this would provide valuable insight into how the functioning of *Tren Maya* influences local perceptions and attitudes.

Ultimately, the research highlights the necessity for a holistic and balanced approach in the implementation of *Tren Maya* in Chetumal. This entails carefully weighing economic benefits without losing sight of the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage. The crux of the matter is that the long-term success of the project will be intrinsically linked to the ability to manage the complexities and tensions in Chetumal, seeking development that is truly sustainable, equitable and respectful.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.15 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Relevance for tourist visiting decisions – destination branding vs destination image: Case study from Lariti Beach, Bima Regency

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How to cite (APA style): ZA, S.Z., & Tricahyadinata, I. (2025). Relevance for tourist visiting decisions – destination branding vs destination image: Case study from Lariti Beach, Bima Regency. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 111–121. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.15

ABSTRACT

Today, there are disciplines that concentrate on tourism, some of which highlight a tourist's visiting decision; this is not only associated with the brand or reputation of a destination but also its image. From this premise, this study aims to find the relationship between destination branding and destination image on tourists' visiting decisions. With a focus on tourists visiting Lariti Beach, Bima Regency (Indonesia), data collection via interviews based on non-probability sampling techniques were made. Using the partial least squares (PLS) method, the results of the study reveal that both destination branding and destination image affect tourists' visiting decisions systematically. When compared, destination branding is the more important instrument for increasing visiting decisions compared to image. Therefore, this research opens space and attention for further studies to consider destination image as a critical function in stimulating visiting decisions. Future implications include tourism policies that lead to optimal branding and image.

KEYWORDS

destination branding, destination image, visiting decisions, partial least squares, PLS, Lariti Beach

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
19 March 2024
Accepted:
10 February 2025
Published:
13 June 2025

1. Introduction

In accordance with the modernization of the era, a brand can not only be owned by a product but also by a city, commonly labeled as 'place branding' or 'city branding', and this leads to progress in various directions. In principle, the premise of city branding has pioneered the term 'destination branding'. According to Ilmi et al. (2022) and Kasapi and Cela (2017), destination branding describes the image management of a destination through innovation and coordination of social, economic, commercial, cultural and government regulations. Destination branding can be linked as a strategy from a particular country or region to create a strong position in the minds of tourism actors (Insch, 2014). Like the positioning of a service or product, its orientation needs to be widely recognized throughout the world (Donner

Funding information: Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Mulawarman, Samarinda City, Indonesia. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

& Fort, 2018; Kindermann et al., 2021; Oliva et al., 2022; Rua & Santos, 2022; Saqib, 2019).

In destination development, the above perspective is in line with the arguments expressed by Audouin (2022) and Setianti et al. (2018), which state that destination branding is one of the solutions for supporting the image management of a destination through government regulations. Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca (2019) define a brand as a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of all of them to identify a tourism product. The status of 'destination branding' means that the characteristics of competitors' products can be distinguished.

Technically, several cities in Indonesia have focused their attention on branding to explore their potential, use local wisdom, and take advantage of regional identity. Such is the case in Java, where Solo, as a pioneer city synonymous with the 'spirit of Java', is considered one that has succeeded in popularizing city branding. Apart from these areas, Batu has also had dedicated destination branding with the tag 'shining Batu' since it was launched in May 2013, when it coincided with the celebration of National Awakening Day. Previously, Batu had also introduced the tag 'Batu Tourism City / Kota Wisata Batu' (KWB) and the change of from KWB to 'shining Batu' was triggered by its strong meaning covering the foundations of Batu community life (Panjaitan, 2020; Zahrah, 2023).

At the same time, West Nusa Tenggara is one of the provinces in Indonesia with extensive tourism market segmentation, and where one of the most stunning destinations is Lariti Beach. This coastal tourism site is located in Soro Village, Lambu District, Bima Regency. Lariti Beach has made a breakthrough because of its own advantages and uniqueness compared to other beaches. In addition to a natural panorama that is still sustainable and a beautiful atmosphere, Panrai Lariti is supported by management skills in serving tourists. Every year, Lariti Beach is visited by foreign and domestic tourists, and it has experienced an increase in visits over time. When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in early 2020, the majority of open-air destinations that triggered crowds of visitors were closed, including Lariti Beach, and it experienced a critical decline. In 2021, the level of decline detected amounted to 487,560 domestic and 5,069 foreign tourists. Lariti Beach, which has a natural beauty with a unique beach that is split into two, is highlighted, so that it is made one of the top priority beach destinations for tourists. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, especially during 2016–2019, there was progress in increasing tourists for holidays, festivals and religious celebrations. Therefore, the tourism management for Lariti Beach promotes and boasts this destination with the term 'Pantai Kekinian'.

From a holistic viewpoint, tourism is an activity that distributes accommodation, food, transportation, recreation and other services concerning the tourism trade, which allows for the involvement of various dimensions including social, cultural, economic, environmental, security and the exchange of insights that contribute to tourism affairs (Capineri & Romano, 2021; Chuang, 2023; Rodríguez Rangel et al., 2020). Tourism has been one of the sectors that supports the economy in several countries (Holik, 2016; Manzoor et al., 2019; Naseem, 2021; Rasool et al., 2021). The position of the tourism sector can contribute to the welfare of local residents, especially with growing income from entrance fees to tourist sites, parking fees, hotel rentals and other aspects that enable transactions in the tourism economy. In its role as a favorite destination in Bima Regency, Lariti Beach has the attraction that it is integrated into the coastal tourism assets in Bima Regency and must be protected.

It is known that although Lariti Beach is growing as a destination, it is not yet fully popular compared to similar destinations with great reputations located in Bima Regency, such as Pink Beach and Lawata Beach. The area discussed in this paper however is Lariti Beach. To get there, visitors need a time allocation of from 75 minutes to two hours from the Regency center (Woha District) via the land route called 'Raba–Sape' using four-wheeled or two-wheeled vehicles. The main obstacle to Lariti Beach not being better known is because promotional techniques are less than optimal (Taufiqurrahman et al., 2023). Ideally, by promoting through certain attractions, festivals and events, a tourist destination can have strong branding (Khairunnisah, 2022; Purwadi et al., 2023). With beautiful natural panoramas, it is hoped that Lariti Beach can take advantage of this prospect through strengthening its branding.

The study approach here is based on the direct interview method, where the sampling technique is operated by collecting information face to face. The interview data was then tested using PLS.

The motivation for this paper is to identify the effects of destination branding and destination image on tourists' decisions to visit Lariti Beach. The results of the investigation are useful in determining the direction of policies to strengthen destination branding and destination image in the future. In addition, it will evaluate which factors indicate success in accommodating tourist interests at Lariti Beach. The article is divided into six parts. First, the introduction reviews the issue, background, motivation and contribution. Second, a literature review contains the theoretical basis for developing proposed hypotheses. Third, materials and methods contain data classification, sample determination criteria, variables and data analysis. Fourth, details of the findings are given based on objectives and hypotheses. Fifth, the discussion justifies the study results based on the existing situation with a comparison of empirical literature. Sixth, the conclusion summarizes the results, implications and policy suggestions, and states the study's weaknesses as follow-up preferences for the direction of future work.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination branding

In essence, city branding is used to market a region by providing branding to make it better known. In its interactions, destination branding can generate tourist interest by highlighting a uniqueness that is different from other cities, thus reflecting the branding and tagline attached to each city. The concept of city branding has similarities with destination branding and the two are in fact interrelated and cannot be separated. Most striking is the memorability of the brand. With a brand that is appropriate to a city, positive perceptions and enthusiasm are given and influences visiting decisions (Castillo-Villar, 2018; Chan et al., 2021; Mišič & Podnar, 2019; Mujihestia et al., 2018; Purwanto & Soliha, 2017; Putra et al., 2019). Operationally, there is a difference between destination branding and destination image. According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), destination branding is realized by complex efforts that go beyond just building symbols and slogans, but also creating a destination with multidimensional strategies to develop relationally, emotionally and functionally. Another goal of destination branding is to form a parallel network of unique associations in the minds of consumers (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). In the marketing context, a brand is a sign in the form of an image, name, word, letters, numbers, color arrangement or any combination of these elements that has distinguishing features and is applied to the routine trading of goods and services (Avis & Henderson, 2022). Rita et al. (2019) and Zhimin (2007) consider a brand as more than just quality assurance because it includes the following six pillars: (a) attributes; (b) benefits; (c) value; (d) culture; (e) personality and (f) usage. Based on these premises, the first hypothesis is formulated:

H_1: There is a partial connection between destination branding and visiting decisions.

2.2. Destination image

Išoraitė (2018), Kaur and Kaur (2019) and Stern et al. (2001) articulate brand image as a form of trust embedded in the minds of consumers towards associations that last in the memory. Theoretically, the image represents the accumulation of exposure, knowledge and experience in an individual's mind towards certain entities, such as sites or places. Broadly speaking, destination image is a derivative of city image which is how individuals perceive and navigate the urban landscape (Avraham, 2004; Badami, 2025; Hu & Gong, 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Su et al., 2023). Specifically, Balmer and Gray (2000), Balmer and Yen (2017), Melewar et al. (2017) and Zenker and Braun (2017) divide destination image into three different stages of communication: (a) primary, related to communication channels from all tourism sectors; (b) secondary, which aims to calibrate formal and planned communications; and (c) tertiary, related to word of mouth (WoM) in connection with communication media and competitors.

In its terminology, destination image is the perspective through which tourists make decisions before traveling to a particular destination, a key pillar of which is tourist loyalty. Lopes (2011) represents destination image as an expression of the emotional thoughts, imagination, prejudice and objective knowledge held by individuals or groups about certain locations. In the tourism sphere, destination image consists of a combination of feelings, impressions, ideas and beliefs about tourist sites that come from direct and indirect information (Jebbouri et al., 2022).

The key to implementing a brand strategy in city image communication is to increase market share (Ma et al., 2021; Mohamad et al., 2022; Prilenska, 2012; Primorac, 2018). The most rational reason is that if a city has a brand foundation, it can change how it is perceived as it may have been originally identified by a poor image both internally and externally. With a strong brand, it can form a model or vision for the future for city residents and stakeholders in a sustainable manner. Then, by triggering a consistent representation and helping a create a bond through increasing awareness of the city's position at regional, national and global levels. Finally, it can eliminate and replace stereotypes that are detrimental to the destination. To that end, it makes sense to construct a second hypothesis as follows:

H_2: There is a partial connection between destination image and visiting decisions.

2.3. Visiting decisions

From the main literature, visiting decisions are similar to purchasing decisions which reflect consumer behavior after the process of obtaining information about a desired product, and tools for conducting assessments and making decisions by choosing the option that is considered the best (Tao et al., 2022). Nuraeni et al. (2015) and Saito and Strehlau (2018) investigated the fact that the decision to visit is an option that tourists choose before visiting a place. Based on these preferences, buying decisions can also be compared with visiting decisions (Cai et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2022; Hanaysha, 2018). Basically, the visiting decision is a desire by individuals before traveling to an area by considering several criteria (Perdue & Meng, 2006). Dahiya and Batra (2016), Do and Shih (2016), Kim et al. (2021), Liu et al. (2020) and Orden-Mejía et al. (2022) describe the decision to visit as tourist insights into selecting the most preferred travel pattern.

3. Materials and method

3.1. Participants and data

In the existing scheme, the sample is drawn from all tourists visiting Lariti Beach (Bima Regency). With a non-probability approach, the study provides an equal opportunity for each respondent to be selected as part of a sample. The tools for classifying the sample were set via purposive sampling which can verify the compiled material to serve as a data source (Tricahyadinata et al., 2020). The sample was selected based on the population of tourist visits in 2023 and the number of respondents was 541, which is a combination of foreign and domestic visitors. The respondents interviewed form two basic categories: respondents who have visited Lariti Beach (minimum twice) and respondents within age limits (minimum 18 years and maximum 57), with the assumption that the age thresholds contain those considered mature enough to make decisions that affect return visits.

The data collected is primary, obtained directly from informants without intermediaries. Data collection was done by distributing questionnaires at Lariti Beach. To facilitate data documentation, an offline face-to-face questionnaire was also implemented. The questionnaire model is in a closed format where respondents are only allowed to answer or give opinions based on the answer choices provided. The instrument used in filtering the data according to the Likert scale guide, where each answer choice has its own rating with the following details: 1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *don't agree*, 3 – *neutral*, 4 – *agree*, and 5 – *strongly agree* (ZA et al., 2021).

Based on the list of questionnaire scores, the scale range is estimated as follows:

$$\mathrm{SR} = \frac{m - n}{b} \tag{1}$$

$$\mathrm{SR} = \frac{5 - 1}{3} = 1.33 \tag{2}$$

where: SR – scale range; m – maximum value of the questionnaire scale points; n – minimum value of the questionnaire scale points; and b – number of points on the questionnaire scale.

From the statistical guidelines above, the scale range score is 1.33. The lowest rating is 1 + 1.33 = 2.33, while 2.34 + 1.33 = 3.67 forms the medium rating, and the highest is calculated as 3.68 + 1.33 = 5.01 or rounded down to 5.

3.2. Variables and data processing

The key variables that become attributes in this study include visiting decisions (dependent variable) and city branding and destination image (independent variables). Within the theoretical scope, each variable has limitations, which are summarized in Table 1. In this case, the total number of indicators of the three variables is fourteen. In substance, the visiting decision variable consists of five indicators, while destination branding and destination image each have four.

Table 1. Variable description

Variable name (code)	Indicators		Adopted from
Visiting decisions	VD.1	Service	El Fikri et al. (2020), Lutfie and Marcelino (2020)
	VD.2	Travel agent	
	VD.3	Type of trip	
	VD.4	Cost and time	
	VD.5	Destination area	
Destination branding	DB.1	Place	Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska (2015), Hereźniak et al. (2018), Soleimani Sheijani et al. (2023), Vahabian et al. (2021)
	DB.2	Tourists	
	DB.3	Awareness	
	DB.4	Potential	
Destination image	DI.1	Presence	Asnawi et al. (2018), Mohamed Thabet (2022), Su et al. (2023)
	DI.2	Behavior	
	DI.3	Affective	
	DI.4	Cognitive	

Source: authors.

In the processing phase, the data is tested with partial least squares (PLS) whose function is to analyze the link between destination branding and destination image on visiting decisions. To confirm the closeness of the relationship between variables, an evaluation of the outer and inner models is carried out. First, the outer model reviews convergent validity, the discriminant validity of indicators and reliability. Second, the inner model follows up on the proposed hypothesis through the R-squared and partial test. Finally, after statistical analysis of the data has been carried out, the next step is verification and justification of the findings from the field.

4. Findings

4.1. Respondent demographics

Table 2 describes the characteristics of the respondents who visited Lariti Beach: 45.1% were female and 54.9% male. According to nationality, 62.5% of them were domestic, while 37.5% were foreign. The professional backgrounds of the respondents varied greatly: 29.9% (university students), 22% (private employees), 16.5% (high school students), 14.8% (self-employed), 12% (state employees) and 4.8% (entrepreneurs). In terms of age, 34% were 42–49, 27.9% – 18–25, 23.1% – 34–41, 8.7% – 26–33 years, and 6.3% – 50–57 years.

Table 2. Profile of respondents ($n = 541$)

Profile	Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Man	297	54.9
	Female	244	45.1
Nationality	Foreign	203	37.5
	Domestic	338	62.5
Profession	State employees	65	12.0
	Private employees	119	22.0
	Self-employed	80	14.8
	Entrepreneurs	26	4.8
	University students	162	29.9
	High school students	89	16.5
Age	18–25	151	27.9
	26–33	47	8.7
	34–41	125	23.1
	42–49	184	34.0
	50–57	34	6.3
Visit repetition	2 times	218	40.3
	3 times	200	37.0
	4 times	79	14.6
	> 4 times	44	8.1

Source: authors.

In 2023, 40.3% of respondents had visited Lariti Beach at least twice, 37% of respondents claimed to have visited three times, 14.6% four times, and the rest (8.1%) more than four times.

4.2. Evaluation of the outer model

In testing the outer model via convergent validity, variable indicators are assessed based on scores from the outer loading (*OL*) weights. In its interpretation, the correlation score is calculated through the components of the model construct measurement (see Table 3). The requirement for an *OL* score is more than 0.7. Quantitatively, of the seventeen indicators evaluated, only three were invalid with each variable having one invalid indicator: VD.2 (*OL* = 0.633), DB.2 (*OL* = 0.524) and DI.4 (*OL* = 0.606). Interestingly, all fourteen other indicators met the required figure (*OL* > 0.7). The convergent validity score with the highest performance for the visiting decision variable was VD.3 (*OL* = 0.919). Then, looking at the other two variables (destination branding and destination image), it is evident that the highest are DB.3 (*OL* = 0.893) and DI.2 (*OL* = 0.939).

In addition to measuring validity based on the *OL* score, the indicator validity test can also be identified by cross loading (*CL*). Cross loading values are converted to average variance extracted (AVE). This model is an alternative series to improve and evaluate invalid indicators based on convergent validity. In reality, the indicator is assumed to be valid if the AVE score is higher than 0.5.

Through the discriminant validity parameter, only the visiting decision variable has valid indicators, while there is one indicator for both destination branding and destination image which is not valid. Surprisingly, there was a shift in the indicators from the previously valid *OL* values to invalid, based on the AVE calculation. The two indicators are DB.3 (AVE = 0.416) and DI.3 (AVE = 0.345). Even so, the AVE score is slightly better than the *OL* because fifteen indicators matched expectations (AVE > 0.5). Table 4 ensures that there are no contradictions in the respondents' reactions to understanding the questionnaire. Based on the second scenario using AVE per indicator, Table 4 above presents VD.3 (AVE = 0.860) as the largest indicator representing the visiting decision variable. The two indicators (DB.4 and DI.2) which are the constructs of destination branding and destination image, have the highest AVE scores, reaching 0.939 and 0.943.

Table 5 describes the reliability results supported by two parameters. Firstly, for composite reliability (*CR*), the criteria use a minimum standard above 0.6. Second, for Cronbach's alpha (α), the minimum requirement is more than 0.7. Thus, of the three variables destination branding and destination image have *CR* (> 0.6) and Cronbach's alpha (> 0.7) values that exceed the threshold and are thus concluded to be reliable. When compared, based on the acquisition of each score on both parameters, destination image is the more dominant variable for *CR* and α than the other two where the statistical output shows scores of 0.956 and 0.944.

Table 3. Convergent validity

Variable	Indicators and questions		Outer loading (*OL*)	Remarks	
				Valid	Not valid
Visiting decisions	VD.1	Services provided according to speculation	0.905	+	–
	VD.2	Travel agents have ideal standards	0.633	–	+
	VD.3	Travel type accessible to tourists	0.919	+	–
	VD.4	Cost and time to the destination according to the estimated route	0.892	+	–
	VD.5	Strategic destination areas are easy to reach	0.915	+	–
Destination branding	DB.1	The places I've visited have changed significantly	0.841	+	–
	DB.2	Tourists are presented with stunning attractions	0.524	–	+
	DB.3	I realize that the destinations visited correspond to reality	0.893	+	–
	DB.4	This tourism has the potential to be developed	0.884	+	–
Destination image	DI.1	The presence of this destination gives me new enthusiasm	0.916	+	–
	DI.2	Friendly behavior from destination managers and local residents in welcoming tourists	0.939	+	–
	DI.3	I feel that this destination presents beautiful nature	0.905	+	–
	DI.4	The condition of this tour is better managed than before	0.606	–	+

Source: authors.

Table 4. Discriminant validity

Variable	Indicators questions		Average variance extracted (AVE)	Remarks	
				Valid	Not valid
Visiting decisions	VD.1	Services provided according to speculation	0.792	+	–
	VD.2	Travel agents have ideal standards	0.728	+	–
	VD.3	Travel type accessible to tourists	0.860	+	–
	VD.4	Cost and time to the destination according to the estimated route	0.813	+	–
	VD.5	Strategic destination areas are easy to reach	0.746	+	–
Destination branding	DB.1	The places I've visited have changed significantly	0.893	+	–
	DB.2	Tourists are presented with stunning attractions	0.884	+	–
	DB.3	I realize that the destinations visited correspond to reality	0.416	–	+
	DB.4	This tourism has the potential to be developed	0.939	+	–
Destination image	DI.1	The presence of this destination gives me new enthusiasm	0.905	+	–
	DI.2	Friendly behavior from destination managers and local residents in welcoming tourists	0.943	+	–
	DI.3	I feel that this destination presents beautiful nature	0.345	–	+
	DI.4	The condition of this tour is better managed than before	0.906	+	–

Source: authors.

Table 5. Reliability test

Variables	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Composite reliability (*CR*)
Visiting decisions	0.952	0.933
Destination branding	0.950	0.929
Destination image	0.956	0.944

Note: all values are reliable.
Source: authors.

4.3. Evaluation of the inner model

Concerning the strength of the relationship, which is clarified using the coefficient of determination (R^2) which reaches 0.799, it is concluded that the visiting decisions is influenced by destination branding and destination image. Linking the two variables to visiting decisions, the figures lie within the higher criteria, indicating that destination branding and destination image are reliable measures, although there is a coefficient value of 0.201 that is outside the study model (see Table 6). Kurniawan et al. (2023) states that there are five classifications where 0–0.20 indicates a very low coefficient, 0.21–0.40 a low coefficient, 0.41–0.60 a moderate coefficient, 0.61–0.80 a high coefficient and 0.81–1 a very high coefficient.

Based on Table 6, it was found that the two hypotheses offered were in line with partial significance. The calculation of significance uses the *t*-statistic value (minimum requirement is 1.96). In SmartPLS, each hypothesized relationship is simulated by bootstrapping the sample data. Testing bootstrapping is also intended to minimize the problem of abnormalities in observations. As a result, there is a positive causality between both destination branding and destination image on visiting decisions: destination branding (*t*-statistic = 35.998) and destination image (*t*-statistic = 13.922), the most dominating was the relationship between destination branding and visiting decisions. Table 6 also verifies that both destination branding and destination image have a significant impact however on the decision to visit. Overall, both first and second hypotheses are accepted.

5. Discussion

This study ensures that by involving two important instruments in tourism such as destination branding and destination image, an impact on visiting decisions can be made. Tourists who have confidence in a choice directly have full awareness of making the right decision. In this case, a destination with a positive record will affect perceptions that lead to positive emotional ties. Conversely, a bad reputation for a destination will have a negative effect on tourist interest.

A series of studies link causality between destination branding and destination image on visiting decisions. To strengthen the decision to visit, a relevant program is needed. Take, for example, destination branding. Successful tourism destinations rely on being attractive in the eyes of tourists (Baloch et al., 2022; Caprioli et al., 2021; Chiang & Chen, 2023; Dakwah et al., 2022; Majeed et al., 2024; Roostika, 2012; Srivastava et al., 2022). The experience during the visit will be a positive benchmark mediated by WoM. Often, the increasing level of tourist satisfaction further increases the loyalty of tourists who enjoy traveling to several developing markets: Swat District (Pakistan), *hygge* style in Denmark and *fika* phenomenon from Sweden, Pier-2 Art Center (Taiwan), Lombok Island (Indonesia), Prambanan Temple in Yogyakarta (Indonesia) and India.

Another justification put forward by Al-Kwifi (2015), Fatmawati et al. (2023), Moustaka and Constantoglou (2021) and Susanti et al. (2023) relies on strengthening the destination image to increase visiting decisions through experiments in Doha (Qatar), natural destinations in Yogyakarta (Indonesia), mountainous city destinations (Greece), or tourists who are domiciled in East Java (Indonesia). What is more, the presence of social media can make it easier for millennial tourists to plan, get to know, select and compare types of tourism before deciding on a destinations. Also, the advantage of electronic WoM is that it can track feedback based on the comments of previous tourists who have visited certain places.

From various other empirical examples, destination branding has a crucial impact by allowing tourists to make decisions, increase their interest in visiting, give more value to a destination compared to similar ones, and help them to look for differences between

Table 6. Path coefficient

Linkages	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	*t*-statistic	*p*-value	R^2
Destination branding → visting decisions	0.894	0.895	0.025	35.998	0.000	0.799
Destination image → visiting decisions	0.874	0.876	0.063	13.922	0.000	

Source: authors.

one destination and another (Damarwulan, 2021; Guo et al., 2024; Marchat & Camelis, 2017; Widayati et al., 2020). With an attractive tagline and design, destination branding will become the foundation for various marketing patterns to promote destinations and attract new visitors. Furthermore, Yadindrima et al. (2021) has stated that destination image influences tourist behavior in making decisions about which destination to choose. In turn, destination image is also integrated into the desire to revisit and increase satisfaction (Al-Kwifi, 2015; Noviana et al., 2022; Satyarini et al., 2017).

6. Conclusions

This study is committed to examining the link between destination branding and destination image on visiting decisions targeted at tourists at Lariti Beach during 2023. Using the PLS method, it is concluded that:

1. Destination branding and destination image have a significant impact on visiting decisions.
2. Destination branding and destination image, which are growing, are increasingly influencing tourists' visiting decisions.
3. The implication shows that by providing a comprehensive destination branding and destination image system at Lariti Beach, it has facilitated tourist interest, and this has a positive synergy with visiting decisions.

Despite these positive results, the barriers that are the weaknesses for each indicator trigger disruptions in travel that need to be solved. First, the roots of the problem, based on convergent validity assessment, are travel agents, attractions and tourist conditions. Second, the obstacles that result in uncertainty in visiting decisions based on discriminant validity parameters are tourist awareness and affective factors. By looking at these six issues, the main recommendation is directed to destination managers to conduct more detailed dissemination on marketing aspects. Post-pandemic economic recovery, especially in the business sector, is not easy. However, managers need to rearrange marketing strategies that can transition according to trending patterns. Also, further suggestions to the local government as a bureaucratic actor can consider regulations that make it easier for visitors. In that context, this includes reducing restrictionx on entry routes to Bima Regency without ignoring health protocols. With careful control in the tourism development plan, it will automatically open up a wide tourist network. It also appreciates the interests of tourists who are planning to visit.

For the long-term sustainability of tourism, the distribution of information that prioritizes transparency regarding the situation of destinations must also be implemented, thereby reducing discriminatory actions. Considering the present findings, there are still weaknesses in this work, such as testing with three variables that are considered limited. Therefore, there are hopes that in the future attention will be paid to the composition of variables referring to issues with the aim of surpassing the empirical results of this article. Another limitation of the current study is the sample size while further studies need to consider broader sample characteristics.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.11 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

The influence of virtual reality tourism on travel intentions: Enhancing travel decisions with immersive experiences

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How to cite (APA style): Ahmed, T., & Rifat, M.H.I. (2025). The influence of virtual reality tourism on travel intentions: Enhancing travel decisions with immersive experiences. *Turyzm/Tourism*, *35*(1), 123–135. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.11

ABSTRACT

The tourism sector has evolved due to the incorporation of virtual reality (VR) into deeply immersive travel experiences, altering traditional tourism practices and offerings. The study examines how VR tourism affects visitors' desires, brand truthfulness and travel ease. This study used qualitative methods by engaging fifteen participants in VR travel simulations and participating in semistructured interviews within a controlled environment. Research results indicate that users participating in VR tourism connect deeply with their minds while their dreams of exploration intensify along with reduced traditional travel barriers. The widespread adoption of VR faces significant obstacles due to the diverse preferences of users, high implementation costs, and the limited technological skills of potential travellers. The study demonstrates how virtual reality functions as an expansion pathway for conventional tourism activities, if industry actors can resolve the practical and sensory obstacles linked to its operational deployment.

KEYWORDS

virtual reality tourism, VR, immersive experience, perceived satisfaction, travel intentions, consumer behavior, travel decision making

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
21 June 2024
Accepted:
14 April 2025
Published:
12 June 2025

1. Introduction

Virtual reality (VR) advancements have influenced travel and tourism businesses due to continuous developments in artificial intelligence and data communication (Zheng et al., 2022). Through VR, consumers can have an intensive realtime experience that enables them to discover uncharted territories (Cruz-Neira et al., 2023). Current technological evolution has created VR tourism which delivers an attractive solution for non-physical travellers by handling conventional limitations such as travel budget restrictions, safety concerns and logistical challenges. The increasing popularity of VR creates substantial doubt about its comprehensive and intricate effects on travel consumer behaviour. Throughout the 1960s, Sutherland created the fundamental concepts of VR which enabled rich full sensory human engagements (Mazuryk & Gervautz, 1996) and today destination

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

development organisations and policymakers employ extensive VR technologies to overcome travel barriers while simultaneously broadening their involvement in the sector (Gössling et al., 2021).

Nunez San Juan (2017) notes that the travel industry has experienced significant advancements due to the integration of VR and the web and innovation has led to a new era known as virtual tourism. The digital transformation of the travel industry is causing significant changes in how tourists behave (Disztinger et al., 2017; Heldal, 2007). Perry Hobson and Williams (1995) suggested that using VR to meet visitor's goals enhances the interaction between consumers and suppliers innovatively and is expected to enhance travel-related offerings and experiences significantly. According to Guttentag (2010), the growth of VR technology is expected to increase the number of applications and digital devices in the tourism industry. A notable recent development in this area is the Apple Vision Pro, which was introduced in June 2023, a device set to redefine the concept of VR in tourism. Research suggests that VR technology is a significant element employed to address problems and improve the organization of the tourist system (Gössling et al., 2021; Schiopu et al., 2021). While several studies reveal VR's ability to provide detailed tour reports and stimulate interest for destinations, little focus has been directed to how it impacts numerous demographic categories, especially travel decisions and motivations (Guttentag, 2010). However, issues resulting from excessively romanticized VR representations are typically not discussed in the literature. For example, users' expectations and happiness when traveling to these places in the real world may be influenced by deceptive representations (Gössling et al., 2021). Additionally, whereas money-related and security challenges are regularly seen as noteworthy barriers to travel, there is a need for observational research on how VR can address these issues among distinctive user groups (Schiopu et al., 2022). The majority of researchers have employed quantitative approaches to examine several facets of the VR tourism industry which, although robust, do not effectively capture the complex cognitive and affective nature of tourism experiences in VR tourism (Ahmed & da Silva Åkesson, 2022). Bridging these gaps will improve the comprehension of VR as a progressive resource in tourism and direct its economic impact.

This research explores the relationship between perceived authenticity of VR and its effect on travel choice. Additionally, it investigates the impact of VR tourism on decision making by considering emotional and cognitive engagement, overcoming physical and financial obstacles, along with how demographic and psychographic factors influence these aspects. Furthermore, the study highlights the positive effects of VR on the tourism industry. It also addresses the challenges and difficulties encountered in integrating VR into the travel decision-making process.

2. Literature review

Traveller decision-making and preferences are closely linked to the notions of value creation and value co-creation. Understanding and integrating the concept of "value offering" is essential for tourism businesses to effectively market their offerings and attract travellers (Gallarza & Saura, 2006) and the modern literature acknowledges the importance of VR applications in numerous industries in terms of value creation and new product development (Hacikara et al., 2022). Although it is evident from multiple studies that VR tourism has significant potential, as a relatively new field, multiple aspects of VR tourism need to be examined from an academic perspective to understand and predict the trends (Ahmed & da Silva Åkesson, 2022). A substantial body of research supports the idea that VR tourism has the potential to mitigate the travel barriers that conventional tourism frequently struggles to address (Phang & Kong, 2023; Schiopu et al., 2022). This technology allows busy tourists to enjoy quick escapism between a busy schedule, helps sustainability conscious travelers to be less worried about their carbon footprint, and assists the physically challenged to finally taste the excitement of mobility (Srifar, 2018). Several contemporary studies in the relevant field conducted by researchers are presented in Table 1.

The study explores the expansion of VR travel experiences which transcend financial barriers, physical disabilities, safety issues and other travel impediments. It investigates the ways VR functions as an obstacle breaker while revealing knowledge about visitor preferences affected by these elements. Several well-known publications regarding the current topic will be compared by the authors in the subsequent section.

2.1. Value in virtual reality tourism

Everyone has unique thoughts and perspectives which ultimately determine an individual's choice, opinion and judgment (Ahmed & da Silva Åkesson, 2022). The idea of "value" may be found included throughout diverse realms of knowledge, it has a conceptual and financial base, yet it exhibits a greater importance within the sphere of business. To obtain a complete grasp of the process of creating value, researchers need to investigate numerous categories and models associated with consumer value (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2009).

Table 1. Contemporary studies on virtual reality (VR) travel intentions

Authors	Title	Methodology	Findings
de Lurdes Calisto and Sarkar (2024)	A systematic review of virtual reality in tourism and hospitality: The known and the paths to follow	Systematic review	VR tourism greatly enhances tourist participation, affects travel choices, and is a powerful marketing tool
Godovykh et al. (2022)	VR in tourism: A new call for virtual tourism experience amid and after the COVID-19 pandemic	Conceptual approach	VR tourism has a notably positive impact on the information quality, system functionality, technology acceptance, and affective involvement, shaping VR tourism experiences, which respectively influence tourists' attitudes and intentions towards destinations
Kim et al. (2022)	Virtual tours encourage intentions to travel and willingness to pay via spatial presence, enjoyment, and destination image	Experimental approach (*n* = 118)	VR tourism has a positive impact on tourists' travel intentions and willingness to pay by increasing enjoyment, spatial presence, and positive destination image
Lu et al. (2022)	The potential of virtual tourism in the recovery of tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic	Mixed-method approach (*n* = 1288)	VR tourism, guided by the theory of planned behavior, significantly influences people's destination choice and serves as a successful marketing strategy, contributing to sustainable tourism and offering experience opportunities that can facilitate the tourism industry's recovery during and after the COVID-19 pandemic
Oncioiu and Priescu (2022)	The use of virtual reality in tourism destinations as a tool to develop tourist behavior perspective	Exploratory study (*n* = 824)	VR destination marketing applications have the goal to create a specific image of a travel destination and present this to the outside world in a uniform and concerted manner
Merkx and Nawijn (2021)	Virtual reality tourism experiences: Addiction and isolation	Qualitative approach	VR tourism may make users more involved, it could also result in temporary fatigue and addiction symptoms

Source: authors.

Usually value has been seen as subjective, context-dependent and individualistic (Holbrook, 1999). The combination of sound, image and three-dimensional representation enhances the value of information in VR (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). As stated by Mohamed and Naby (2017), its use is already popular and used as a tool to add value in numerous areas, such as rides in amusement parks, interactive entertainment services and immersive motion films. The Thomas Cook Group exemplifies the use of VR as a marketing strategy to add value by promoting holiday destinations and attracting more travelers. The firm gives consumers the chance to travel by letting them use a VR tool to see the pyramids in Egypt, fly over Manhattan in a helicopter, or even go on a pretend vacation to Rhode Island via VR tourism offerings (Nunez San Juan, 2017).

Based on the research by Pestek and Sarvan (2021), as society's level of digital literacy rises, VR technology will advance and become more widely available. Customized products may be created with the unique capabilities of VR technology, significantly enhancing customer satisfaction with their acquisitions. Consumers may choose from an extensive array of virtual experiences.

2.2. Travel intentions in virtual reality tourism

Virtual reality technology can entice both emotional and physical reactions from a person (Macedonio et al., 2007; Riva et al., 2007) and enables consumers to achieve complete immersion in a virtual environment by effectively eliminating sensory input from the real world (Fox et al., 2009). Researchers found that when participants pay attention to the VR environment, they feel more present and in control, which positively affects how participant's post-VR perceptions of the tourist destination change (Wang et al., 2009). Virtual reality tourism now allows the physically impaired to be given virtual mobility to temporarily feel the sensation of moving to a popular destination or the economically insolvent to overcome the barrier of money and digitally visit expensive tourist attractions (Lu et al., 2022). Even destinations with ancient ruins and heritage sites can enhance their visitor engagement with immersive VR tools, leading to a better revisit ratio (Verma et al., 2022).

Moreover, tourists have found a sustainable alternative way (Sarkady et al., 2021) to travel to some destinations with political instability (Eid et al., 2019), travel restrictions (Perry Hobson & Williams, 1995) and security issues (Yang et al., 2023). The use of VR tourism programs and the number of virtually-mapped destinations are rapidly increasing (Schiopu et al., 2022). Additionally, as new interactive technologies such as 360-degree video combined with VR headsets enable viewers to visualise and feel the products and services, they are creating new channels for advertising modalities and providing rich mediated experiences (Ahn & Bailenson, 2011; Feng et al., 2019; Yim et al., 2012).

2.3. Travel decisions in virtual reality tourism

Virtual reality tourism is presented as a sustainable, affordable, convenient and reliable option for travel (Yang et al., 2023). In the context of VR, 3D technology plays a crucial role in establishing a simulated environment and according to Guttentag (2010), it allows users to fully immerse themselves in the real three-dimensional visual experience of the real world. As a in the definition of VR, the use of 3D technology is crucial for establishing a simulated environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way travelers behave (Lu et al., 2022); they are more conscious about their physical safety, more alert about sustainable practices, and more careful about the perceived values of the tourism services they are willing to purchase (El-Said & Aziz, 2022; Lips, 2021; Sarkady et al., 2021). Most industry experts and academics have accepted VR technology as a positive addition to existing tourism services (Lee et al., 2020); a convenient alternative to save time, money and physical exhaustion (Malecki, 2017); and a form of experiencing luxurious destinations economically (i.e. underwater or space tourism) (Wang et al., 2009).

2.4. Psychological and cognitive frameworks in virtual reality tourism

According to the uses and gratifications theory (UGT), people actively seek useful ways to enjoy leisure activities, regardless of whether they provide entertainment, informational value or an opportunity to escape reality (Katz et al., 1973). Travellers use modern digital technologies in VR tourism to discover locations, overcome budgetary or physical limitations, or gain immersive pre-tour knowledge. Studies indicate that VR can deliver immersive, sensory-rich landscapes to fulfil the need to explore (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). However, UGT also identifies a potential alignment gap between expectations that consumers build through VR and their actual tour experiences, which can potentially lead to dissatisfaction (Verma et al., 2022).

According to the perception information processing (PIP) model, user involvement and pride are strongly influenced by perceived realism. Perceived authenticity and spatial presence powerfully influence users' emotional responses towards approximate locations in VR tourism (Gössling et al., 2021). For example, consumers are more likely to increase positive intentions when VR environments are representative of real-world factors like weather, population trends or cultural sensitivities (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). On the other hand, excessively idealized representations also widen the difference between virtual and real global accounts, resulting in dissonance and reduced satisfaction (Godovykh et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach

A qualitative research method is critical to understanding how people talk and what emotional standards and perspectives they have because it describes how people express their world knowledge (Bryman, 2016). For testing the causal influences of VR tourism experience on travel intentions, this study drew up a framework to integrate qualitative outcomes. From the application of semi-structured interviews within constrained laboratory settings, this study makes an effort to account for the richness of experiences of users coupled with nuanced subtleties in emotional engagements and ultimately present an enhanced richer conception of how VR experience influences the decision making process (Choi et al., 2024; Lips, 2021). This method is consistent with a number of recent empirical studies where research has concentrated on the same method by giving more weight to the assessment of qualitative traveller feedback as a key factor (Agag & El-Masry, 2017; Nie et al., 2020). Exploratory research deals with phenomena or behaviors that lie 'in the cracks', analyzing them from different ends. This search-oriented approach coupled with elements of both inductive and deductive reasoning was superior to earlier practices in its academic scrutiny of the data collected (Stylos et al., 2021). Taking an exhaustive examination of most components, the authors have concluded that an exploratory method would be most advantageous as a method of experimentation utilizing VR technology (Lee et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024).

3.2. Study area, sample size and technique

Cautious examination of the population parameters is required in order to determine valid examples for significance testing (Silverman, 2021). According to Liat et al. (2017), a specific population should use a specific measuring instrument. The aim of this research is to investigate planned travel in a research context of simulated control where the participants used VR technology to navigate VR travel. A random sampling procedure was followed to select fifteen participants from the population who were then approached for participation in the survey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the participants, where each one was given a different set of questions so that accurate data could be collected from each. A diverse group of challenging and meticulous participants completed the questionnaire with a diverse age group and travel patterns.

The objective of this study was to investigate the process of planned travel in a systematic research environment where participants traveled through VR technology in a simulated environment. The authors used random sampling to select fifteen participants from the cohort and requested them to participate in the survey. The subjects were interviewed via semi-structured interviews where each one had a unique set of questions in order to ensure that accurate information was obtained from each individual. A range of participants completed the questionnaire and there was a great disparity of age and travel desires (Kallio et al., 2016).

Participants in this study were interviewed one-on-one and varied from 20 to 40 minutes. They all participated in VR explorations in calm, controlled environments on the Helsingborg and Lund City campuses of Lund University in Sweden, which helped to reduce the impact of outside stresses. The authors of this study scheduled each consultation in December, starting at 10:00 am and ending at 2:00 pm, in order to maintain consistency. In addition, the authors promised to build a rational structure that would allow VR simulations to feature all aspects of travel, including changes in energy levels and emotional states at different points. In this controlled laboratory study, OCULUS Quest 2 VR headsets were utilised which are now very user-friendly, requiring only a small amount of storage space and an internet connection (Ahmed & da Silva Åkesson, 2022).

3.3. Sampling and population

To get an accurate representation for this research, the participants' demographic characteristics had to be identified (Alvi, 2016). This study utilised a purposive sampling method, choosing participants based on their specific experiences rather than through random selection. Table 2 presents the demographic profiles of the 15 participants, encompassing their age, gender, nationality, and occupation. Participants of this study represented various nationalities, aged 20 to 50, and came from a broad spectrum of professional backgrounds.

Table 2. Demographic information

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Occupation
1.	Jihad	40	M	Bangladesh	Private service
2.	Smith	34	M	Brazil	Programmer
3.	Josephine	24	F	Australia	Student
4.	Liam	49	M	UK	Teacher
5.	Nancy	36	F	China	Fitness trainer
6.	Karlos	43	M	Austria	Game developer
7.	Diana	25	F	Russian	Student
8.	Edward	23	M	Germany	Web developer
9.	Dinesh	29	M	India	Teacher
10.	Bravo	30	M	France	Athlete
11.	Dipika	26	F	India	Air host
12.	Imran	25	M	Pakistan	Content creator
13.	Rachael	24	F	USA	Consulting coordinator
14.	Jabin	30	F	Bangladesh	Entrepreneur
15.	Vinicius	32	M	Brazil	Businessman

Source: authors.

Table 3 presents a comprehensive overview of each participant's virtual reality experience, encompassing the type of content, duration of the session, and classification within groups. The participants encompassed a diverse array of nationalities, ranging in age from 20 to 50 years, and hailed from a wide variety of professional backgrounds. The interview was a customised VR tourism session lasting 20 to 40 minutes for each participant, adapted to their specific travel preferences. Among these activities were scuba diving, cultural site visits and outdoor landscape exploration. Semi-structured interviews were performed to gather qualitative data regarding emotional engagement, perceived realism and alterations in travel preferences following the VR experience.

To mitigate potential bias, participants were categorised into two distinct groups according to their familiarity with VR technology: VR familiar and VR naive. The VR session began with an introduction that covered the basics of VR before the 20–40 minute encounter. The authors meticulously developed a protocol for data collection that all participants followed in order to guarantee data comparability. Before the study, a pre-screening questionnaire to assess their familiarity with VR technology and previous travel experiences was completed. Seven

Table 3. Virtual reality (VR) experience details of the participants

No.	Name	Category	Content of VR experience	VR experience duration	Time of interview	Date
1.	Jihad	VR-familiar	Monkey and elephant safari	30 min	12 pm–2 pm	15/12/2023
2.	Smith	VR-naive	Jungle in South America and safari in Indonesia	30 min	10 am–12 pm	15/12/2023
3.	Josephine	VR-naive	Dive in ocean	20 min	10 am–12 pm	20/12/2023
4.	Liam	VR-naive	Monkey safari and nightlife in Tokyo	40 min	10 am–12 pm	21/12/2013
5.	Nancy	VR-familiar	Antarctic experience and Machu Picchu	40 min	12 pm–2 pm	23/12/2023
6.	Karlos	VR-familiar	Theme park and museum tour	40 min	12 pm–2 pm	24/12/2023
7.	Diana	VR-naive	Sky diving	20 min	10 am–12 pm	13/12/2023
8.	Edward	VR-familiar	Dive in ocean	20 min	12 pm–2 pm	15/12/2023
9.	Dinesh	VR-familiar	VR tour in Rome	40 min	12 pm–2 pm	23/12/2023
10.	Bravo	VR-familiar	Amazon jungle	25 min	12 pm–2 pm	25/12/2023
11.	Dipika	VR-naive	Safari in Borneo and visit Kenya Maasai tribe	20 min	10 am–12 pm	25/12/2023
12.	Imran	VR-familiar	Diving with sharks in the ocean	20 min	12 pm–2 pm	26/12/2023
13.	Rachael	VR-naive	Space tour	20 min	10 am–12 pm	29/12/2023
14.	Jabin	VR-familiar	Beach in Bali to relax and Indonesian jungle	20 min	12 pm–2 pm	24/12/2023
15.	Vinicius	VR-familiar	Monkey and elephant safari	20 min	12 pm–2 pm	25/12/2023

Source: authors.

participants were novices, while eight had previous experience with VR.

Additionally, six participants had travelled in the preceding three months, whereas nine had not travelled for over a year. The selection process meticulously assessed participant attributes. Those lacking prior travel experience were asked about their present travel objectives. Individuals who had not travelled recently were asked about their physical travel challenges and their travel aspirations. This study examined whether VR tourism could serve as a substitute or complement to physical travel across diverse demographic groups. By incorporating these factors we were able to mitigate participants' prior exposure to VR and travel experiences.

3.4. Data collection

This exploratory study employed semi-structured interviews to facilitate open dialogue between respondents and interviewers, trying to better understand the beliefs and attitudes of the participants (Smith, 1995). We analysed their initial and subsequent travel plans, post-VR experience, through interviews designed to investigate their emotional and cognitive responses. The authors conducted a thematic analysis of the responses, uncovering enduring patterns and unique findings.

During the experiment, the interviewers posed icebreaker questions to participants and gathered their general perspectives on the concept of VR tourism. The interviewers subsequently provided the participants with VR headsets and directed them to choose an application that offers a VR tourism experience for a duration of 20 to 40 minutes. This step guaranteed a uniform approach throughout the data collection process.

The final phase of data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews, which were recorded in audio format and lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. For conducting a thematic analysis for this article we used Kallio et al.'s (2016) methodology.

Moreover, the interview transcripts were examined several times to ensure their precision and completeness. Reviewing helped the researchers to identify themes; systematic classification, organisation and interconnection of responses exposed relationships among them. The investigation and debate were meticulously considered to reach unambiguous, theoretically supported results enabled by the analysis (Kallio et al., 2016). The advantage of this analytical approach is that it not only made the findings more valid but also gave more insight into recurring patterns in the data. The researchers used a rigorous framework to close the gap between theory and practice in a way that offers useful guidance for future studies in the area.

4. Analysis of results

4.1. Enhancing emotional attachment via virtual reality experiences

Virtual tourism initiatives have great potential to increase travel intentions by providing realistic, captivating and highly detailed simulations of different locations. Most participants had indicated that they had formed deep emotional connections to their virtual experiences. One respondent of this study, Mr Smith, expressed:

> When the video started, I didn't think much of it. But after a while, I felt I was in the jungle. A bird flew near my hand, and I observed a deer in the distance. The tiger roared. These viewing experiences were truly incredible.

Through VR systems users can experience something so authentic that it modifies their itinerary planning. Research conducted by Lee et al. (2020) shows that implementing immersive features within travel experience creates a significant impact on consumer travel judgment and decision-making processes. Through realistic simulations, destinations efficiently capture user attention which leads to visits to real locations. Diana took part in the study with considerable interest in diving activities because she believed the VR diving simulation was incredibly awesome. Diana shared with us,

> After enjoying VR travel, I fell in love with skydiving. Now, I want to have the experience of skydiving in real life. I want to spot the difference between these two thrilling experiences.

The findings in this article align with Tussyadiah et al. (2018), which proves that VR duplicates spatial presence and triggers an emotional involvement that results in modified travel destination impressions. Virtual reality serves as an exceptional instrument for travel planning because it effectively establishes powerful emotional connections. Study participants detected variations between VR and actual reality which indicates further development is needed in the VR system of audio audiovisual capabilities to enhance simulated experiences.

4.2. Diverging perspectives on revisiting physical destinations after virtual reality experiences

The study by Perry Hobson and Williams (1995) investigated how VR could discourage actual travel by its affect on visitors. One of the participants, Nancy, had a VR viewing of Machu Picchu, a location she had once physically visited. She claimed that virtually visiting a place that one has previously been to is a new kind of experience that alters your preconception of a destination. She noted that she could virtually enjoy every scene with all the time needed, free from time restrictions and physical labour. During her previous physical tour, the guide had unfortunately limited her observation time because they were part of a group tour with a fixed schedule. She also expressed her satisfaction with not needing to pay multiple tolls for entry fees. She was happy with the fact that, just by paying a nominal fee to subscribe, she could access these VR tourism programs as much as possible. Nancy commented,

> I felt myself instantly pulled back in time. I once more gazed upon the Maya civilisation. Helped me to forget that I was surrounded by virtual reality. After that, I began to doubt the reason behind in-person travelling. It brings so much pressure and stress. Virtual reality vacations seem to be a lot more practical and immersive way to relax. Virtual reality destinations provide a more personalized experience.

Another participant, Rachael, lost interest in revisiting a place physically after having experienced it virtually. She remarked,

> Virtual reality drives obsession in you. You will not be motivated to physically visit the same location again once you start VR travelling. I will never be rich enough to pay for the special trips I take in VR in real life. Virtual reality will be my most chosen form of travel if it develops to let me experience food and touch.

Significantly, there were no discernible variations between the real and virtual experiences in terms of visitors' emotional involvement, spatial presence or behavioral intention (Godovykh et al., 2022).

4.3. Threats caused by idealized destination images

While VR tourism has its benefits, it can give travelers the wrong idea of what the real places are like by showing them an over-the-top picture of a clean, conflict-free environment. One participant, Jabin, who experienced a crowded market in VR, said,

> In VR, the market was colorful and calm, but I've been to real markets and they're often chaotic and noisy.

Similarly, a participant, Vinicius, who toured a beach destination in VR, noted,

> The beach I visited in VR looked pristine and empty, but these beaches are usually crowded with tourists and vendors.

Most of these circumstances depend on the challenges they encounter, consequently referred to as well-designed operations which are mostly related to logistic constraints, environmental damage or the problems that underprivileged communities experience. These difficulties could conceal the intended advantages and cause opposition from society and increase governmental investigation. Overcoming these obstacles calls for a plan that incorporates the need to involve stakeholders and apply sustainable practices. According to Gössling et al. (2021), consumers are creating irrational expectations that could have adverse consequences on user experience. Elements that better correlate VR models to their real world equivalents include realistic elements (e.g. seasonal changes, subtleties of cultural settings).

4.4. Addressing barriers to physical travel

Lips (2021) states that when someone cannot go from one place to another, it creates a bodily barrier for them. Researchers have identified different causes that can lead to this condition, such as advanced age (Srifar, 2018), physical impairments that affect motor function, intellectual disability (Perry Hobson & Williams, 1995) and more. Imran and Bravo love adventure tourism, both of them have some physical barriers, but VR provided a real experience of their intended destination through physical barriers. Bravo commented,

> The diversity of life in the Amazon jungle is quite amazing. That's somewhere I have always wanted to see. But problems with my legs have had me limited to a wheelchair. I hence never tried to visit the Amazon rainforest. But VR helped me to make my unreachable travel possible.

On this, another participant, Imran shared,

> Virtual reality diving experience, sharks were humming around me. Since I'm not a good swimmer and I cannot go underwater, it was like I was diving into the ocean, Something I could never really do.

Virtual reality offers a safe and accessible alternative to experiencing the underwater world. As a result, VR travel experiences provide a variety of benefits to users, including minimalistic or budget-friendly tours, ethical and sustainable travel alternative options, and easy access to exclusive and futuristic tourism experiences (Verma et al., 2022). However, contributors highlighted a lack of utilitarian aspects in VR encounters. Imran additionally said,

> Virtual reality is quite good for adventure. However, if a VR advertisement is used to advertise a location, it will not equip you for real-world travel challenges including travel delays, overcrowding or weather-related issues.

4.5. Addressing financial and security challenges with virtual reality tourism

Many times, financial limits prevent travellers from reaching their intended destination. On the contrary, with VR travel, all you need is a VR device, a subscription to the VR travelling app, and a nominal fee to keep enjoying the program. On this note, Dinesh said,

> Given my financial circumstances, I cannot afford some of the travel sites, including the Opera House, Eiffel Tower, etc. But with VR tools, I could experience what it's like. And, I only had to pay once. In VR, I could visit it several times or assist my friends in doing so.

Another participant, Jihad, left a noteworthy comment,

> I have a strong passion for travelling. Although I want to travel, I am unable to since I cannot manage leave from work and the required travel expenses. But virtual reality allowed me to travel anywhere, anytime.

For Dinesh and Jihad, the primary advantages of VR travel are its cost-effectiveness and convenience relative to conventional tourism. By doing so, VR tourism is mitigating the financial barriers and time constraints associated with traditional travel activities (Guttentag, 2010).

Additionally, a security barrier is another important block for traditional travel activities. Virtual reality tourism is a secure and innovative alternative for people who are afraid for their safety while visiting destinations with security issues (Schiopu et al., 2022). In some areas, VR may resolve safety concerns, especially for those who visit countries that are perceived to have a security threat, for example, a participant, Dipika, who refuses to travel to non-European countries out of safety concerns. Dipika revealed,

> Ladakh, on the disputed China-India border, is one of the world's most beautiful places. But unfortunately, political tension is always unbearable for that destination. This makes me afraid to visit. But virtual reality gave me a real experience. Virtual reality made walking on Ladakh's stunning slopes seem real. I felt safe and the travelling experience felt authentic.

Virtual reality allows insecure tourists like Dipika to feel secure about virtually visiting unsafe destinations. This allows travelers to discover and enjoy new destinations from the safety of their own homes.

4.6. Theoretical perspectives on virtual reality tourism

Holbrook argues that consumer value theory (CVT) emphasizes consumers' hedonic and affective experience and that VR tourism can enhance the experience of traveling by offering the tourist previously unknown vague and weird experiences (Holbrook, 1999; Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2009). As a result, it can help people form strong emotional connections with destinations and experience them in ways that traditional tourism cannot. As a result, it may foster strong user-generated emotional connections and assist in the creation and co-creation of value. Edward, one of the participants, for instance, stated his ideas as follows:

> The VR trip did not fully prepare me for the extreme weather or the other dangers I might face in the deep sea. In VR, when I used VR to dive into the deep sea, I wasn't in real danger. There was no thrill of being chased by a shark or feeling the pressure of the water. Still, the trip offered me a taste of what visiting that location is like. No other technology available today can produce such an immersive impression. Virtual reality is a great way to explore new locations before really visiting them since everything felt extremely real and engaging.

Virtual reality tourism cannot fully replicate real-life events or provide visitors with accurate information about the physical surroundings of the destination. This is crucial for experience education and the ability of VR tourism activities to influence tourist decision making (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). This enables us to underline the concept that non-public goals commonly direct our media intake, but the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) holds that when people examine their virtual experiences in reality, false expectations could possibly create unhappiness.

Josephine, a participant in this study, stated,

> With virtual reality, I can live out fantasies that would otherwise be out of my reach. The technology helped me to break free from my boring daily life. The virtual world provided me with an escape, allowing me to enter completely new environments through digital means. Even though I knew it was fake, the simulated experience felt real enough to satisfy my curiosity about the dream destination for a short time. My VR experience does not compare to actual travel because it lacks the natural uncertainties of the outdoors, the distinct sensations of different climates, and spontaneous encounters with locals. Virtual reality creates such a convincing illusion that users have inflated expectations for their real-life travel experiences.

Furthermore, the perception-information-processing (PIP) framework clarifies user interaction with VR material. The great emotional involvement and high degree of participation of the participants draws attention to the relevance of their perspective of reality. Another participant, Liam, said,

> The VR experience was so immersive that I lost awareness of my actual surroundings; a small space like my home can cause me to fall or cause accidents. Especially during the safari travel, I almost felt the urge to start running after encountering a snake.

However, PIP theory warns that expecting too much idealised realism will only increase dissatisfaction with the gap between perceived expectation and experience. Such issues could be resolved by integrating immersive design with realistic representations (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Technological developments in the future could possibly solve these flaws and removing them will increase the demand for VR tourism activities as they will offer more value.

4.7. Consequences for sustainable tourism promotion

Virtual reality producers and tourism stakeholders must set realistic expectations by creating detailed representations of their destinations. Virtual reality tourism activities can accomplish more realism and authenticity if they address environmental and cultural constraints, incorporate tools to foster social connections and develop technology to experience smell and taste in the VR world. The enhanced sensory and social aspects of VR systems will surpass simple visual experiences to provide a real alternative to the traditional travel experience (Beck et al., 2019). According to Gössling et al. (2021), the problem is that we provide overly appealing information without ensuring a balanced level of detail in order to set reasonable expectations for users and encourage responsible and sustainable travel activities. Karlos, one participant explains,

> Although VR travel is fascinating, it will never be my first choice. I still want to hold hands, eat great food, and fully engage in social interactions with total strangers during my travels. I understand that traditional tourism contributes to environmental degradation, but no significant efforts are being made by the tourism stakeholders to address it, and the alternatives simply do not feel as fulfilling. Maybe the day VR can completely replicate these rich sensory experiences will be the day people start to move away from mass tourism, so lessening the demand on natural sites.

Participants believe that VR tourism cannot replicate all of the sensory experiences found in traditional tourism. The current state of technology allows for immersive VR experiences that provide users with limited previews of the actual destination travel experience. The system cannot deliver an authentic experience of human interaction and cultural exchange and the opportunity to taste local foods while sharing handshakes. The study results highlight the importance of accurate displays in fostering knowledge and facilitating more responsible and ethical travel decisions. Virtual reality tourism developers aim to integrate artificial intelligence systems into their experiences because they want to establish authentic environmental and cultural elements to achieve better virtual immersion levels. Virtual reality technology promises to develop complete sensory duplicates of conventional tourism that might provide an environmentally-friendly substitute in the future.

5. Findings and discussion

Virtual reality tourism has the potential to achieve a traveler's travel goals through vivid, engaging and immersive simulations of different destinations. This study found that VR can create a sense of spatial presence and elicit emotional engagement and this increases perceptions of tourist destinations (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Most of the participants stated that they made strong emotional connections with their virtual visits which, as a result, enhanced their desire to visit these places in real life. They were linked to the sensation of being immersed in natural landscapes or historical sites, and many were motivated to address that excitement, to develop a desire to visit them and enjoy being immersed in those places in person. Having a positive outlook on VR is important, but it is not enough. Visitors who have an overly romanticised view of virtual environments' destinations may be disappointed when these destinations do not meet their expectations. On this note, Edward explains,

> Virtual reality creates the illusion of a utopian destination which can leave people feeling disconnected from reality. While virtual travel is certainly enjoyable, we should not celebrate it without considering the larger implications. Should technology and corporate interests control every aspect of our lives? What will happen to the individuals and families whose livelihoods rely on the tourism industry? Before embracing VR as a substitute for real travel, we must critically assess the potential economic and social consequences. I was enjoying the VR experiences, but in the back of my mind I was also thinking these things.

The mismatch between VR tourism content and realistic depictions of destinations, requires VR designers and tourism promoters to establish proper balances between real and virtual authenticity. While immersive, VR tourism can present sanitised, conflict-free versions of many locations and consequently creating a false sense of safety and security. Particularly in areas experiencing political unrest, economic difficulty or overpopulation, such images can prevent visitors from fully appreciating the actual sociopolitical and environmental conditions. According to Beck et al. (2019), these types of misinterpretations create unrealistic expectations that create perceptions different from real-world travel realities. Gössling et al. (2021) suggest that VR travel presents promising benefits for digital tourism but also poses significant risks that can lead to the development of unrealistic and unsustainable destination images. Without proper management of this idealised view, tourism decision makers may be swayed to engage in travel activities that have adverse effects for visitors and local communities. Nancy shared similar emotions during her VR travel to Machu Picchu, a well-known ancient site:

> The process of actually visiting destinations can become quite chaotic. To reach the site, you must travel to remote areas, take time off work, spend your savings and confront security issues. However, even after going through all that, your tour operator might ruin the trip by changing the itinerary, your ticket might be cancelled or you might fall sick during your whole trip. Popular destinations are always busy and provide an unwelcoming vibe for introverts like me. But destinations in VR seem very calm and relaxing; I could hear the history lessons given by the guide, I could see the historical ruins in their actual forms, and I could even zoom in and out to observe the artefacts with all the time in the world and it was really cheap.

Successful development of VR tourism depends on accurate and unique depictions of particular places. Holbrook's theory of consumer value helps us to provide a useful framework for understanding how individuals create various degrees of meaning during their virtual travel contacts. Developers who set VR tourism to reflect cultural aspects and social dynamics together with environmental elements will create an authentic experience providing consumers with more meaningful and immersive satisfaction. In this context, one of our respondents, Dipika explains;

> The VR safari tour was incredibly enjoyable and unique, but it did not fully replicate a real safari experience. I didn't have any previous safari experience to compare to. In VR tourism, I did not have to face real world issues like intense heat, unpredictable wildlife, or large crowds. Virtual reality excels in simulating images and sounds, but it lacks the physical and sensory immersion that provides real travel with such power. Still, I think

> VR has a lot of potential if it can make its programs include more realistic cultural and environmental elements. Although it might never fully supplant more conventional forms of travel, it can be a valuable asset when it comes to immersive learning and vacation preparation.

People acquire different perceptions of VR experiences and reality, giving the impression that VR provides a more polished presentation than what exists in real life. Due to this issue, VR developers and tourism stakeholders should incorporate genuine dynamic components into their simulations. As Figure 1 shows, VR tourism offers two-fold advantages that simultaneously improve tourism experiences and solve industry challenges.

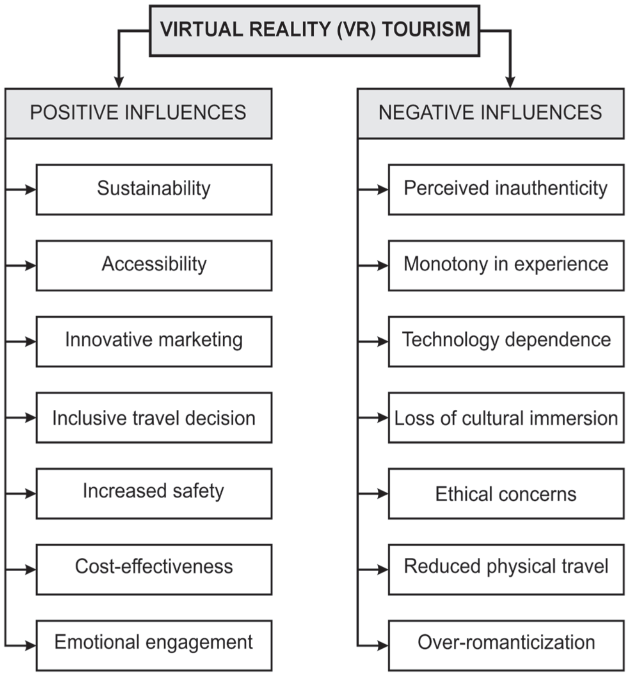

Figure 1. Positive and negative influences of virtual reality tourism
Source: adapted from study findings

To create VR destinations that provide authentic virtual travel experiences, tourism companies should invest more in research and development sector to develop and integrate new sensory elements, imitation of seasons and cultural diversity. Both Beck et al. (2019) and Gössling et al. (2021) agree that future VR advancements should aim for more realism by balancing idealised and realistic portrayals. Virtual reality tourism, by combining these components, allows travellers to gain a comprehensive understanding of destinations and set appropriate expectations for actual visits. The improvement of VR credibility by this method will result in environmentally-friendly, informed travel methods.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that tour intentions can be modified through virtual tourism due to its appealing characteristics, psychological connection and user-friendly interaction. The results demonstrate that VR tourism fosters deep emotional connections and this has the potential to encourage people to travel. For humans with financial difficulties, protection issues or bodily handicaps, it provides safe, less costly alternatives, appreciably lowering their travel limitations. Participants in the semi-structured interviews indicated that their desire to visit those sites in real life grew after seeing them virtually.

Virtual reality provides a powerful and inclusive way for people who cannot travel due to economic or physical barriers to experience the world; it makes travel accessible to everyone. This study highlights the opportunity for VR to enhance sustainable tourism techniques by minimising the call for physical visits, even if they are a pleasurable desire for exploration and enjoyment. This underscores the need to create VR content that blends compelling observation with practical descriptions, thereby aligning purchasers' expectations with reality. These findings show that VR tourism is a significant addition to the traditional one, with the potential to improve options and expand the tourism industry's reach to underserved demographic groups. By constantly improving VR reviews and addressing identified challenges, stakeholders can leverage their ability to act as a long-term and influential asset for the future of tourism.

In future studies, it will be necessary to amplify those findings by addressing the challenges that are currently being faced and investigating every element of VR tourism. Longitudinal research can be conducted to evaluate destination loyalty, tour frequency and traveller satisfaction to review the evolution of VR influence on travellers. Such an approach will enrich our understanding of user engagement and provide insights into the evolving preferences of travellers in the digital age. By exploring these dynamics, researchers can develop more effective VR experiences that cater to the needs and expectations of diverse audiences.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.04 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Determinants of tourist attitudes toward local food and intentions to visit a destination: A case study from Iran

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How to cite (APA style): Choshaly, S.H. (2025). Determinants of tourist attitudes toward local food and intentions to visit a destination: A case study from Iran. *Turyzm/Tourism*, *35*(1), 137–148. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.04

ABSTRACT

This study examines the predictors of tourist attitudes towards local food along with intentions to visit a destination. This study is of great interest to research tourism in Iran. Specifically, it is the first to examine the impact of belief and familiarity as psychological factors on tourist attitudes towards local food and intentions to visit a destination. The sample consisted of 200 Iranian tourists visiting the city of Lahijan. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and structural equation modelling and the findings recognized familiarity as the most influential factor affecting attitudes toward local food, followed by epistemic, emotional, health and prestige value as well as food neophobia. However, interaction value, price and taste are not associated with attitudes towards local food. The article offers practical marketing strategies for tourism marketeers regarding the important determinants of intentions to visit a destination. This research can help authorities in charge of business promotion as to what is more likely to attract tourists and their use of tourism resources.

KEYWORDS

consumption value, food neophobia, attitudes, local food, destination visiting

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
21 June 2024
Accepted:
13 January 2025
Published:
30 May 2025

1. Introduction

Food is a critical and obligatory component of tourists' travel experience (Stone et al., 2018) and it is proven that foods offer benefits such as pleasure and entertainment and help in the understanding of a new culture and new people (Hegarty & O'Mahony, 2001) as local food is special and important for attracting tourists. The unique aspects of local cooking in terms of taste, history, nutritional and associated cultural values add to its appeal, and trying local food is important for tourists to have a good time, making them want to come back again. Foods of a particular area represent domestic, geographical and individual identity and improve the destination image while consumption value is an essential concept in consumer behavior and marketing research. It is important to understand the potential actions of tourists to discern how local food practices affect its value and several empirical studies have attempted to define its nature in terms of definition and dimensionality (Chang et al., 2011; Mak et al., 2017). The theory of consumption value (TCV) is one of the most widely used models to explain consumer choices (Sheth et al., 1991) and consumer behavior identifies TCV as a valuable theory that can be applied dynamically and widely to analyze the concept (Mason et al., 2023).

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication. **Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** The author utilized ChatGPT to assist in creating alternative text for figures.

This framework can be utilized to analyze purchasing patterns in food consumption and tourist products (Dash et al., 2023).

Several studies have applied the concept of food TCV to predict tourists' attitudes toward local food, which in turn affects behavioral intentions (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020; Soltani et al., 2021). Different factors related to food, such as motivation (Kim et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2013), have been examined and food-related personality characteristics have been introduced as a key factor in food choices with researchers also explaining the relationship between food neophobia and food choice (Eertmans et al., 2005). However, there is a lack of an integrative model that considers personal and psychological factors.

Familiarity is one of the psychological factors that affects consumption behavior. Tourists are often willing to try unfamiliar local foods but such foods are often accompanied by uncertainty and risk. Food neophobia can cause tourists to be afraid of trying new foods, so they end up eating the same things all the time which stops them from experiencing different tastes. Some studies have looked at how tourists' preferences affects their behavior as knowing something well and being comfortable with it is one of the things that can affect how tourists choose what to buy and do. Tourists often want to try new and unfamiliar foods from the local area, however, when it comes to trying new foods in a different place, there is usually a feeling of not being sure and the potential danger involved (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). Sometimes, tourists prefer to eat foods that they are already familiar with. However, not many studies have looked at psychological factors that affect how people feel about local food and their willingness to take action (Chang et al., 2010).

In Iran, promoting regional and local tourism is an effective way to support and develop the agricultural sectors of the local economy. This can be achieved by preserving culture and adding value to the business community while expanding and enhancing regional and local tourism resources (Akhavan et al., 2020). This study specializes in the tourism region of Lahijan, which is located in Iran's Gilan province, a popular tourist destination due to its diverse landscapes, including weathered mountain ranges, green forests, interesting folklore and unique local cuisine. Therefore, this study is among the first to examine the impact of consumption value, psychological factors and food neophobia on attitudes towards local food and behavioral intentions; it especially uncovers how belief and familiarity act as predictors of tourists' attitudes towards local food.

The rest of this article is divided into sections: first the theoretical background of the study is discussed, then the methodology and results are presented; the final part includes discussion and conclusions.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Food tourism in Iran

Culinary tourism aims to educate and encourage food lovers which can be achieved by participating in cultural immersion in selected locations around the world. Culinary tours can include activities related to cooking, food tasting and culinary trends. In addition to restaurant weeks in different cities, culinary events and cooking competitions, culinary tourism has a lot to offer (Sharbatian & Mireskandari, 2014). Lahijan is one of the most important cities in Gilan Province which itself borders the Caspian Sea to its north. With beautiful landscapes and natural attractions, the city is considered one of the main tourist destinations in the country and its district including Rudbaneh has a population of 168,829. Of the total population, 97,697 live in urban areas, and 71,132 in rural areas. The main local foods of Lahijan include morgh, fesenjan, alo-mosamma polo, baghlaghatogh, mirzaghasemi, sabziko ku ku, aash, shole zard and reshteh khoshkar (Payandeh et al., 2022).

Theory of consumption value (TCV) and tourists' behavior

Consumer choice behavior is influenced by different types of consumption value (functional, emotional, social and epistemic) according to TCV, with each type having a different impact in a different situation. The value of consumption means the satisfaction or usefulness that a person gets from using a product and the idea has been used to study how people enjoy food when they travel (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). The concept of consumption value has been applied to food consumption in tourism. Earlier research has described functional value as that related to the quality, price or any other practical feature of a product or service (Perrea et al., 2015). It is important for tourists to have good food and enjoy its taste while dining, as this helps in creating positive attitudes. Additionally, when tourists look at food choices they must make sure that it will not make them ill, so the healthiness of the food is very important to consider (Kim et al., 2010). Price is another important aspect of functional value. Customers who think that the restaurants have fair prices, start to like the food that the restaurants serve (Lai, 2015). Emotional value means the joy and fun that come from tourism activities (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) while regarding social value, individuals choose products that reflect the norms of their friends and convey the social image they wish to project (Williams et al., 2015). Goolaup and Mossberg (2016) explained that when tourists have meals with their friends and family, it is an important part of the holiday experience. Curiosity, new things and wanting to learn are seen as important for gaining knowledge and regarded as epistemic value

(Sheth et al., 1991). Tourists enjoy trying local food because it is new and exciting for them and it helps to fulfill their desire for something different (Perrea et al., 2015). Theory of consumption value is very relevant in the food tourism context as it recognizes the multidimensional structure of consumer value and provides several dimensions for measuring it in the hospitality field (Babin et al., 1994). There are a few important things that affect how people feel about something, including the kind of meals they have, and especially how the food tastes (Torres, 2002). Health value is an important factor of consumption value, price is another. Lai (2015) found that value-conscious customers who think Hong Kong tea restaurants provide good value for money are also happy customers who build positive attitudes towards the food offered. Many tourists like to try local food when they think it is cheaper than they thought it would be (Yee, 2015). Emotional value has a direct impact on consumer evaluations of tourism products (Hyun et al., 2011). Research shows that people who find emotional value in something are happier and more likely to go back to an ethnic restaurant (Ha & Jang, 2010) as tourists are hoping to feel happy and fulfilled by trying local food. Other research reveals that emotional value is the most influential predictor of consumer behavior (Mason et al., 2023).

Prestige value is an important variable in hospitality and tourism (Perrea et al., 2015), it is thought prestigious to eat at a nearby restaurant. Sharing food with friends at a place can also show how popular and important you are while the way people talk and connect with each other during a trip is important for building relationships (Williams & Soutar, 2009). Epistemic value is another important factor. Researchers have proved that meaning plays a crucial role in the way people feel about tourism and shown that there is a connection between epistemic value and behavioral intentions (Thomé et al., 2019). When tourists try food from a different place, they can learn about its culture so it provides epistemic value for them (Ha & Jang, 2013). In another study, Choe and Kim (2018) confirmed the relevance of quality/taste, cognitive and emotional value in predicting attitudes toward local food and behavior. Rousta and Jamshidi (2020) and Basami et al. (2020) found significant results for quality, reputation, taste, emotion, price and health. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_{1a}: There is a significant relationship between taste value and tourist attitudes towards local food.

H_{1b}: There is a significant relationship between health value and tourist attitudes towards local food.

H_{1c}: There is a significant relationship between price value and tourist attitudes towards local food.

H_{1d}: There is a significant relationship between emotional value and tourist attitudes towards local food.

H_{1e}: There is a significant relationship between prestige value and tourist attitudes towards local food.

H_{1f}: There is a significant relationship between interaction value and tourist attitudes towards local food.

H_{1g}: There is a significant relationship between epistemic value and tourist attitudes towards local food.

Psychological factors

In consumer behavior, psychological variables are very important concepts affecting individual decision-making. Researchers have explored whether belief has a direct impact on behavioral intentions and according to a study, motivation, familiarity and personality have a direct impact on dietary behavior (Choshaly & Tih, 2015).

Belief

Belief is another important psychological factor in consumer behavior, meaning an understanding possessed by a person without any justification. Belief has been identified as an important predictor of sustainable tourism (Choshaly & Mirabolghasemi, 2019). Another study showed that beliefs significantly influence consumer confidence towards eco-labeled products (Choshaly & Tih, 2015). Choshaly and Tih (2017) found that when people strongly believe in environmental causes, they are more likely to want to buy products that have been labeled as eco-friendly. In one study, belief in online advertising had a direct influence on consumer attitudes towards such advertising, which in turn impacts consumer behavior (Wang & Sun, 2010). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_{2a}: There is a significant relationship between belief and tourist attitudes towards local food.

Familiarity

Familiarity can be defined and measured in two approaches. One focuses on how much an individual really knows about the product, and the other focuses on perceived familiarity (Park & Stoel, 2005). Familiarity with foods will increase food acceptance or rejection (Tourila et al., 2001). In the study of online advertising (Wang & Sun, 2010) not only belief but familiarity had a direct influence on consumer attitudes. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_{2b}: There is a significant relationship between familiarity and tourist attitudes towards local food.

Personality traits

Food-related personality traits are defined as an important factor that affects decisions regarding food. Personality traits are important predictors of attitudes (Cohen & Avieli, 2004) and studies suggested that food neophobia is an important predictor for tourist attitudes toward destinations (Ritchey et al., 2003).

A neophobic tendency means that people naturally do not like or are suspicious of new and unfamiliar foods but on the other hand, a neophilic tendency means that people like to try out new and unfamiliar foods (Rozin & Rozin, 1981). Food neophobia is negatively related to food consumption (Mak et al., 2017) and empirical research has indicated that tourists with a high level of food neophobia are not interested in local food consumption (Wu et al., 2016). Ji et al. (2016) have proven a negative correlation between tourists' neophobia and their local food consumption intentions. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H_3: There is a significant negative relationship between food neophobia and tourist attitudes towards local food.

Attitude and behavioral intention

Behavioral intention is defined as the desire to participate in and consume a product or service in the future (Han & Hyun, 2017). Tourism studies suggest that tourist attitudes and destination image influence their intention to choose or return to a destination (Lee et al., 2019). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) introduced and defined attitudes as a learned disposition that always responds favorably or adversely to something particular. Attitudes are considered in this study as a person's positive or negative feelings towards local food while several studies have shown positive associations between attitudes and behavioral intentions (Lai & Li, 2005).

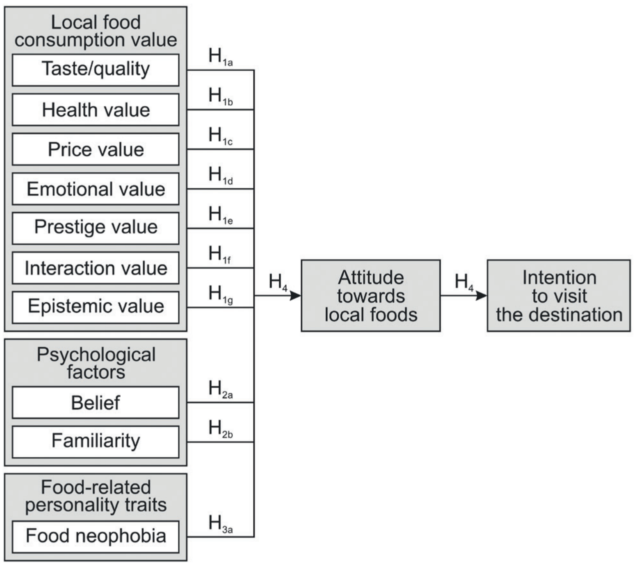

Figure 1. Conceptual research framework
Source: author

Another study indicated that there is a positive relationship between attitudes and eco-friendly behavior (Lee & Moscardo, 2005) while a positive link between attitude and intention to select or revisit a destination has been demonstrated as well (Huang & Hsu, 2009). In a study by Phillips et al. (2013), it was found that diners' positive attitudes toward Korean food influenced and encouraged them to visit Korea (Choe & Kim, 2018). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H_4: The attitude of tourists towards local food is positively related to their intention to visit a destination.

The research framework (Figure 1) illustrates what will be examined in this research.

3. Methodology

In this study, a descriptive research design was employed which explains the existing situation instead of interpreting it or making judgments (Rossi et al., 2013). "[A] descriptive survey is a suitable method when knowledge of a phenomenon is not too underdeveloped, the variables and the context can be described in detail and the objective is to understand to what extent a given relationship is present" (Zheng, 2020, p. 16). This study also utilizes a nonprobability sampling technique that is convenience sampling which is usually used for collecting a large amount of data (Wacker, 1998). Therefore, a structured questionnaire was used to measure the constructs and the variables were measured using scales adapted from previous literature – presented in Table 1. The variables of consumption value, attitudes and intentions were measured using 29, 4, and 3 items, respectively, and all items were adapted from Choe and Kim (2018). For the variables of belief and familiarity, nine and two items have been used, adapted from Sabbe et al. (2008). For variable food neophobia, 10 items were adapted from Fenko et al. (2015). A 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) was used to measure the items. In order to calculate the total sample size, G*Power was used (Faul et al., 2009). The results of a priori analysis are shown in Figure 2, which shows that a minimum sample size of 184 respondents will be needed for this analysis (Seltman, 2018).

Table 1. Questionnaire

Factor	Statements
Taste	I think the food is tasty
	I think the food provides appealing flavors
	I think the food provides a variety of ingredients
	I think the food provides good quality ingredients
	I think the food provides a high standard of quality
Health	I think the food provides good nutrition
	I think the food makes me healthy

Health (cont.)	I think the food is hygienic
	I think the food is safe
Price	I think the food is reasonably priced
	I think the food offers value for money
Emotional	I think the food makes me feel excited
	I think the food gives me pleasure
	I think the food makes me feel happy
	I think the food changes my mood positively
	I think the food makes me crave it
	I think that I am fascinated by the food
Prestige	I think eating well-known food gives me prestige
	I think I have higher social status when eating well-known the food
	I think that it is worth showing pictures of the food experiences to others
	I think that eating the food gives me a chance to show off the food experiences to others
Interaction	I think that eating the food helps me to interact with the people I travel with
	I think that my friendship or kinship with my travel companion has increased while eating the food together
Epistemic	I think that I learned the dining habits through the food experiences
	I think that my knowledge of the culture has increased
	I think that eating the food is a good opportunity for me to learn new things
	I think that I am more curious about the food
	I think that I want to seek out more information about the food
	I think that I want to try more diverse the food
Belief	This food has a pleasant taste
	This food has the desirable color
	This food has a pleasant smell
	This food has an attractive appearance
	I will consume this food because I am sure that this food will not cause harm to my body
	This food does not contain something that endangers my stomach
	The origin of this foods and the way it is prepared makes it appealing
	Any dish that contained the tiniest amount of this food would be appealing
	This food creates a pleasant feeling in my stomach
	Eating this food does not make me nauseous
Familiarity	I like the food that I have eaten since I visited here
	I only consume food that I am familiar with
	I am only familiar with the food that resembles the food that I tried before in Lahijan
	I only would eat food that resembles the food of Lahijan
Food neophobia	I am constantly sampling new and different foods
	I do not trust new foods
	If I do not know what is in a food, I won't try it
	I like foods from different countries
	Ethnic food looks too weird to eat
	In the future, I will try a new food
	I am afraid to eat things I have never had before
	I am very particular about the foods I will eat
	I will eat almost anything
	I would like to try new restaurants in the future
Attitude	I think the food is very good
	I think the food is very favorable
	I think the food is very positive
Intention	I would like to revisit Lahijan to explore more foods
	I would like to travel to Lahijan for food
	I would like to come back to Lahijan to enjoy the food

Source: author based on: Almli et al. (2013), Muhammad et al. (2016), and Choe (2017).

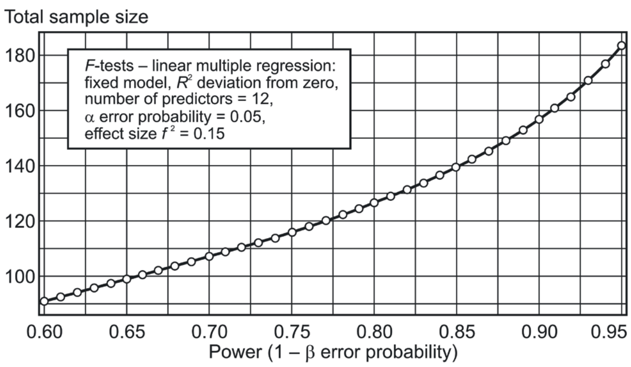

Figure 2. Total sample size
Source: author

The area in this study is Lahijan City, which is located in Gilan Province. Lahijan has several tourist attractions and Figure 3 shows its geographical location and the area of the study.

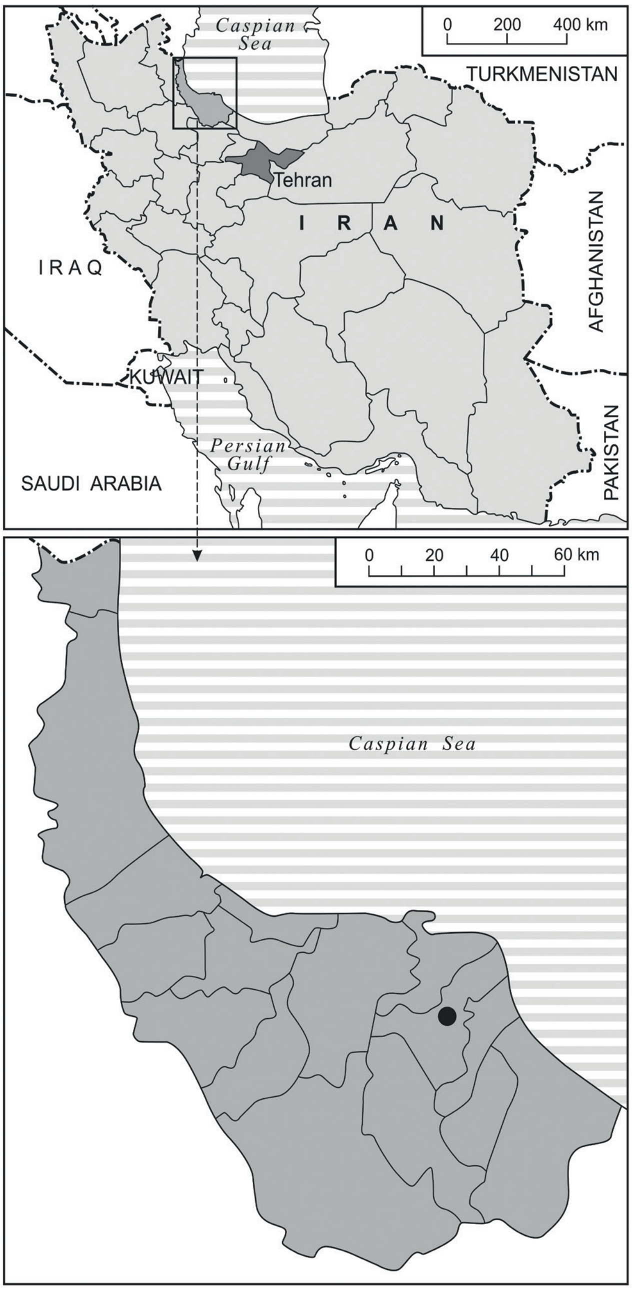

Figure 3. Map of Iran showing geographical location of Gilan province and the study area of Lahijan district
Source: author

From April to June 2022, the survey was carried out conducted by researchers and students at various tourist attractions in Lahijan, including Sheytan Kooh (Devil Mountain), Lahijan Pool and Bame Sabzz (Green Roof of Lahijan). These areas were selected because there were a lot of local restaurants in which tourists selected to dine. The survey contained two screening questions: "Was the food of Lahijan one of the main motivations for your visit?" and "Was it an important part of your trip to experience the foo d of Lahijan?". When respondents reacted negatively to both questions, they were removed from the study and 200 completed questionnaires were received.

4. Results

4.1. Profiles of the respondents

Based on Table 2, it can be stated that the majority of the respondents were female (55%). The age groups were as follows: aged below 20 (10%), 21–30 (35%), 31–40 (35%), 41–50 (10%), and more than 50 (10%). The majority were business owners (40%) or employed (33%). Those with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees made up 37% and 36%, respectively and most held incomes of 4 to 6 million Tomans (79%). The largest group of respondents (34%) have visited Lahijan 3 to 5 times a year.

Table 2. Demographic information of survey respondents

Demographic		Frequency (n = 200)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	90	45
	Female	110	55
Age	<21	20	10
	21–30	70	35
	31–40	70	35
	41–50	20	10
	>50	20	10
Work	Student	19	9
	Employed	67	33
	Business owner	81	40
	Unemployed	33	16
Education	Postgraduate	72	36
	Undergraduate	75	37
	Diploma/certificate	40	20
	Other	13	6
Income	Below 1 million toman[a]	41	20
	1–3 million toman	53	26
	4–6 million toman	79	39
	Over 6 million toman	27	13
Number of visits to Lahijan in a year	Less than 2 times	34	17
	3 to 5 times	68	34
	6 to 10 times	66	33
	More than 10 times	32	16

[a] Toman is a super unit of the official currency of Iran, the rial: one toman is equivalent to 10,000 rials.
Source: author.

The next part of this study involved testing the model by using partial least squares (PLS) (Ringle et al., 2005). In order to avoid common method bias (CMB), full collinearity of variance inflation factors (VIFs) was tested (Liang et al., 2007). Based on the results in Table 3, CMB is not an issue as all VIFs values were less than 5 (Kock, 2017).

The first step in the use of the PLS-SEM is to draw a diagram that shows a well-organized representation of relationships. The PLS-SEM algorithm's output for this investigation is displayed in Figure 4.

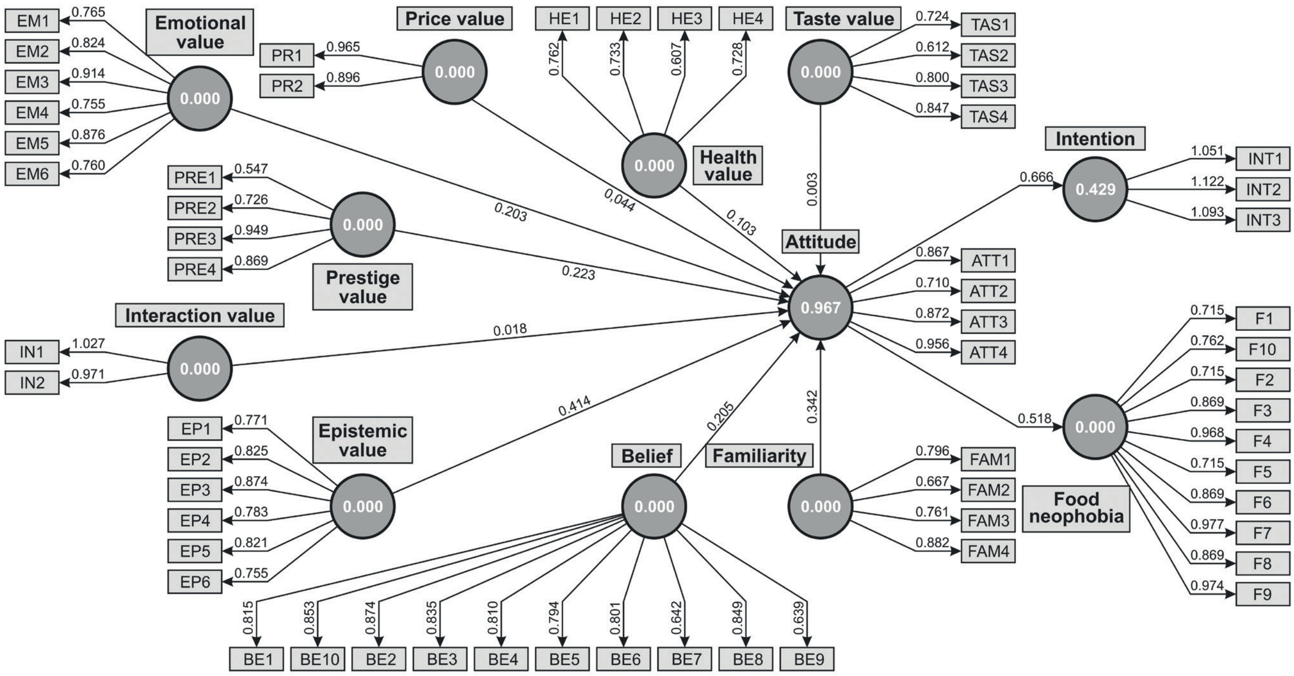

Figure 4. PLS-SEM algorithm
Source: author

Table 3. Full collinearity

Variables	Inner variance inflation factor (VIF) values	
	Attitudes towards local foods	Intention to visit the destination for food tourism
Taste value	1.088	0.000
Price value	2.044	0.000
Prestige value	4.711	0.000
Interaction value	2.530	0.000
Health value	2.127	0.000
Emotional value	3.198	0.000
Epistemic value	4.199	0.000
Belief	5.009	0.000
Familiarity	4.964	0.000
Food neophobia	4.668	0.000
Attitude	0.000	1.000

Source: author.

4.2. Evaluation of the measurement model

Reliability involves the degree to which repeated trials obtain identical results from a measurement process. In order to test the reliability of the model, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used: the Cronbach alpha ranged from 0.812 to 0.944 and the composite reliability from 0.802 to 1.000 which are adequate. For measuring convergent validity, the average variance derived (AVE) was conducted and the results are presented in Table 4: the value for all constructs was greater than 0.5 which indicates strong convergent validity (Hair et al., 2014). Therefore, the model has adequate reliability and convergent validity.

Table 4. Results of reliability and convergent validity tests

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (*CR*)	Average variance derived (AVE)
Taste/quality	0.844	0.836	0.564
Health value	0.891	0.802	0.504
Price value	0.817	0.929	0.867
Emotional value	0.920	0.923	0.669
Prestige value	0.812	0.863	0.620
Interaction value	0.873	1.000	0.999
Epistemic value	0.912	0.917	0.649
Belief	0.939	0.950	0.635
Familiarity	0.821	0.861	0.609
Food neophobia	0.953	0.962	0.722
Attitudes towards local foods	0.853	0.916	0.733
Intention to visit the destination for food tourism	0.944	1.000	1.186

Source: author.

Table 5. Results of the Fornell-Larcker criterion test

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Taste/quality	0.784	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Health value	0.475	0.710	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Price value	0.608	0.514	0.931	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Emotional value	0.674	0.765	0.563	0.818	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Prestige value	0.730	0.653	0.411	0.802	0.787	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Interaction value	0.601	0.528	0.505	0.725	0.721	0.999	–	–	–	–	–	–
Epistemic value	0.647	0.515	0.546	0.670	0.739	0.610	0.806	–	–	–	–	–
Belief	0.687	0.553	0.538	0.744	0.657	0.712	0.801	0.797	–	–	–	–
Familiarity	0.635	0.481	0.609	0.633	0.771	0.565	0.800	0.747	0.780	–	–	–
Food neophobia	0.737	0.525	0.503	0.674	0.651	0.633	0.799	0.732	0.769	0.850	–	–
Attitudes towards local foods	0.230	0.475	0.608	0.674	0.780	0.601	0.647	0.787	0.735	0.837	0.856	–
Intention to visit the destination for food tourism	0.655	0.310	0.731	0.504	0.433	0.511	0.562	0.557	0.643	0.556	0.655	1.089

Source: author.

For measuring discriminant validity, AVE is calculated, and the square root of AVE was bigger than the connections between variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Based on the results of Table 5, the discriminant validity was suitable in this study.

4.3. Results of testing the structural model

The structural model is checked when the construction steps are deemed effective and correct which involves looking at how the different parts work together and how well the model can predict. Checking the structural model will help researchers to see if the data supports the ideas in the model (Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010). The results from the structural model are shown in Table 6.

According to Table 6, health value ($\beta = 0.103$; $t = 3.465$; $p < 0.000$), emotional value ($\beta = 0.203$; $t = 3.816$), prestige value ($\beta = 0.233$; $t = 2.742$), epistemic value ($\beta = 0.414$; $t = 3.827$), belief ($\beta = 0.205$; $t = 2.874$) and familiarity ($\beta = 0.342$; $t = 5.827$) are positively related to attitude. Food neophobia ($\beta = 0.518$; $t = 3.459$) is negatively related to attitude, while taste/quality value ($\beta = 0.019$; $t = 1.307$), price value ($\beta = 0.044$; $t = 1.881$) and interaction value ($\beta = 0.017$; $t = 0.696$) are not related to attitude. On the other hand, attitude ($\beta = 0.655$; $t = 11.902$) is positively

Table 6. Results of testing the structural model

Hypothesis	Path coefficient		*p*-value	*t*-value	Result
H_{1a}	Taste/quality → attitude	0.019	0.192	1.307	Not supported
H_{1b}	Health value → attitude	0.103	0.000	3.465^{**}	Supported
H_{1c}	Price value → attitude	0.044	0.061	1.881	Not supported
H_{1d}	Emotional value → attitude	0.203	0.000	3.816^{**}	Supported
H_{1e}	Prestige value → attitude	0.233	0.006	2.742^{**}	Supported
H_{1f}	Interaction value → attitude	0.017	0.487	0.696	Not supported
H_{1g}	Epistemic value → attitude	0.414	0.000	3.827^{**}	Supported
H_{2a}	Belief → attitude	0.205	0.004	2.874^{**}	Supported
H_{2b}	Familiarity → attitude	0.342	0.000	5.827^{**}	Supported
H_3	Food neophobia → attitude	–0.518	0.000	3.459^{**}	Supported
H_4	Attitude → intention to visit	0.655	0.000	11.902^{**}	Supported

Note: * $p < 0.05$, t-value greater than 1.645, ** $p < 0.01$; t-value greater than 2.33; R^2: 0.96 and 0.54.
Source: author.

related to a tourist's intention to visit the destination. Moreover, in order to examine in-sample predictive power, R^2 is calculated (Chin, 1998). Based on the R^2 value, 52% of variance in intention is explained by attitudes, and 96% of variance in attitude is explained by independent variables, which can be considered substantial according to Henseler et al. (2009).

5. Discussion

This research assessed the significant impact of consumption value, psychological factors and food neophobia on tourists' attitudes towards local food and their intention to visit a destination. According to the results, H_{1a} is not supported; this indicates that tourists who perceived high taste value did not have a positive attitude towards local food. This finding is not consistent with previous studies of Kim and Eves (2012) and Kivela and Crotts (2006). This may be because tourists do not care about having local food when they visit Lahijan, and they do not appreciate the value of trying local food. Marketeers and those who give food to others should make sure that the local food they offer is delicious and of really good quality. Supporting H_{1b}, tourists with high perceived health value have a positive attitude towards local food in Lahijan. This supports previous studies that proved that health value is positively related to attitudes towards local food (Kim et al., 2009; Sparks et al., 2003) indicating that health benefits and the cleanliness of local food should be communicated to tourists. Regarding H_{1c}, which was not supported, the finding indicates that there was inherently no favorable attitude towards local food in Lahijan for tourists with high price values. This finding is against previous studies that indicate tourists who perceive value for money are likely to generate a positive attitude towards food (Yee, 2015). Many of the tourists may have found local food prices expensive. Therefore, the local food service providers at a destination should provide a reasonable price for local food. Hypothesis 1d is also supported; this indicates that tourists with high emotional value had a positive attitude towards Lahijan's food. This is in line with other studies; the impact of emotional value on the customer assessment of a hospitality and tourism product has been shown (Babin et al., 1994; Ha & Jang, 2010) and during the eating out experience, tourists in Lahijan feel positive emotions. Supporting H_{1e}, the finding shows that tourists with high prestige value have a positive attitude towards local food, which supports previous researchers who have proved the positive relation between sharing local food-related memories and social status (Chang et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009).

Surprisingly, H_{1f} was not supported, as the finding indicates that tourists placing a high value on interaction did not have a positive attitude towards Lahijan's local food. Compared to previous studies this outcome is somewhat unexpected (Williams et al., 2015) and shows that eating local foods in Lahijan with others did not increase tourists' friendship with their travel companions. Supporting H_{1g}, the finding indicates a positive relationship between epistemic value and attitudes towards local food consistent with previous studies showing that epistemic value is an important predictor of attitudes (Jang & Feng, 2007; Williams & Soutar, 2009). By experiencing Lahijan food, tourists who increased their awareness of Lahijan food culture formed positive attitudes towards it. Therefore, marketeers and food providers can learn new things and provide better food consumption experiences for tourists in Lahijan.

Supporting H_{2a}, the finding indicates that tourists with higher beliefs regarding local food had a favorable attitude towards it. This is in line with previous research that proved a positive relationship between beliefs and attitudes (Zacharia, 2003), therefore, marketeers and local food providers need to improve tourists' beliefs regarding the local food of Lahijan. Supporting H_{2a}, the finding indicates familiarity is positively related to attitudes towards local food and the results of the present study confirmed previous research indicating that familiarity affects attitudes and intentions (Sun & Wang, 2010). Therefore, marketeers and food providers need to provide foods more familiar to tourists. Hypothesis 3 is supported; the findings indicate that tourists are scared to eat new foods which aligns with previous studies that showed that being afraid to try new foods is linked to eating less food (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Eertmans et al., 2005). Supporting H_4, the study shows that tourists who have a positive opinion of local food are more likely to want to visit a destination for food tourism agreeing with previous research which says that attitudes have a positive effect on how tourists act (Phillips et al., 2013; Ryu & Han, 2010). When tourists like the local food in Lahijan, they think of it as a good place to try different foods, tell other people and might come back to visit again in the future.

6. Conclusion

Food is recognized as an important factor in tourists' experiences, and knowing tourists' wants is very important in the hospitality business, requiring more academic investigation (Santich, 2007). This study has examined the impact of consumption value, psychological factors and food neophobia on tourists' attitudes and intentions to visit a destination. It differs from previous research as it is the first attempt to examine the impact of psychological factors on tourists' attitudes and intentions. Based on the findings, familiarity is the most influential factor affecting attitudes toward local food, followed by epistemic value, emotional value, health value, food neophobia and prestige value. On the other hand, interaction, price and taste values are not related to attitudes which are recognized as an important predictor of a tourist's intentions to visit a destination.

The results of this study offer theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this work expands the evidence for a theoretical relationship between consumption values, psychological factors and new-food phobia, to tourists' attitudes towards local cuisine and intention to visit a destination in Iran. Specifically, this study can serve as a basis for further research on the contribution of belief and familiarity on attitudes towards local cuisine and intentions to visit a destination in other countries. Practically, this research also has strong implications for a travel service provider in developing new travel experiences. Traders should advertise local foods, emphasizing their consumption value. This helps local producers improve the overall quality of local food, taking into account factors such as epistemic value, emotional value, health value, food neophobia and prestige value. Marketeers should implement strategies to provide healthy and high-quality local food while restaurant owners in Lahijan should make sure that the food provided for tourists is healthy and safe. Local businesses need to emphasize that Lahijan food can bring happiness and positive moods and in order to improve epistemic value, local food businesses should offer chances to gain knowledge through eating local food. They can make smart decisions to help people become more familiar and less afraid of trying local foods.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, it only used a designed questionnaire to collect data. Future studies can be examined by utilizing other sources like focus groups and interviews. Secondly, it was conducted on a sample of domestic tourists in Lahijan City, therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all tourists. This opens up interesting prospects for future research as tourism organizations and the media could use this opportunity to promote tourism in universal destinations. Third, convenience sampling techniques were used; future research could use cluster sampling. This study did not examine the impact of other variables on attitudes and the visiting intentions of tourists while a future study could also examine the mediating effect of attitude. Moreover, researchers could use other theories in examining intentions to visit a destination for food tourism.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.14 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

C O P E Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

The effects of service quality and memorable tourism experience toward revisit intentions: Investigating the mediating role of tourist satisfaction

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How to cite (APA style): Eviana, N. (2025). The effects of service quality and memorable tourism experience toward revisit intentions: Investigating the mediating role of tourist satisfaction. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 149–159. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.14

ABSTRACT

Revisit intentions play a pivotal role in the tourist market, predicting both tourist revisits and the financial sustainability of tourism enterprises while also influencing effective destination management. This study aims to examine the impact of service quality (SQ) and memorable tourism experiences (MTE) on revisit intentions (RI), with tourist satisfaction (TS) as the mediator. Using quantitative research methods, including cross-sectional surveys through a questionnaire, this investigation has focused on the Old Town of Jakarta – a significant historical landmark – with 204 tourists participating as respondents. Through PLS-SEM analysis of the data, the findings highlight that only MTE and TS directly and significantly impact RI, with TS emerging as the most influential predictor. Furthermore, SQ positively contributes to both MTE and TS, with MTE serving as a determinant of TS. Indirectly, SQ and MTE influence RI mediated by TS. Therefore, enhancing SQ in managing the Old Town of Jakarta is crucial to providing a memorable and satisfying travel experience, thereby fostering positive future behavioral intentions.

KEYWORDS

service quality, tourist experience, memorable tourism experience, tourist satisfaction, revisit intention

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
19 March 2024
Accepted:
10 February 2025
Published:
13 June 2025

1. Introduction

As one of the largest industrial sectors, tourism drives socio-economic development and job creation, it also plays an essential role in promoting welfare and community empowerment. Considering the enormous contribution to the gross domestic product, tourism is designated one of the leading sectors of national economic development. Various countries therefore continue to accelerate tourism growth to become competitive world tourist destinations. With the massive growth of these destinations, it is crucial to strive for growth of tourist revisit intentions to gain success in the tourism market.

The theory of planned behavior explains the relationships between attitudes and human behavior which can predict individual behavior based on attitudes and intentions (Liobikienė et al., 2016). Therefore,

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

understanding individual attitudes and intentions can be used to predict behavior. The revisit intention (RI) is an aspect that is widely discussed in the tourism market because it can be used as a predictor of tourist revisits (Pai et al., 2020). Understanding the tourist revisit intention and its underlying factors is essential for tourism destination managers to build a sustainable business since it provides profit projections, business sustainability, and a success indicator for tourist destination management.

Revisit intentions denotes an individual's inclination or willingness to revisit a tourist destination after an earlier visit. Its significance to the sustainability of a tourist site is profound, as it bears the potential for fostering the development and longevity of the attraction. When visitors intend to revisit, it can precipitate heightened visiting rates thereby bolstering tourism revenue[1]. Revisiting tourists often exhibit increased expenditure, augmenting the local economy and facilitating sustainable economic expansion within the region. As noted by Lin (2024), tourists' revisit intentions and behaviors are crucial factors in a highly competitive tourism industry. Revisit tourists can serve as a key indicator for evaluating destinations' development and classifying their growth stages.

In a highly competitive industry, providing unique and memorable experiences helps tourism service managers differentiate their products from competitors, making them more attractive and enhancing their reputation (Nowacki & Niezgoda, 2023). According to Coudounaris and Sthapit (2017), memorable tourist experiences are an antecedent that positively affects behavioral intentions. Tourists having a pleasant impression of tourist destinations, such as friendly locals, beautiful natural scenery and unique local culture, are more likely to have an enjoyable travel experience, encouraging RI (Zhang et al., 2018). Given the importance of memorable tourism experiences (MTE) in promoting tourists to revisit, tourism service managers need to guarantee and give more attention to creating MTE in every interaction with tourists (Chen et al., 2020). To develop competitive tourist destinations, it is crucial for destination managers to successfully identify the factors that underlie the creation of MTE. Some empirical studies explain that a positive and memorable travel experience will positively yield a solid attachment to the destination and RI (Lu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Studies have proven that memorable travel experiences have a more decisive influence on RI than other factors (Tsai, 2016) and are the most potent predictor (Zhang et al., 2018). However, Munawar et al. (2021) revealed a different finding: that MTE makes no contribution to RI. The other findings on the MTE and RI relationship, thus raise the assumption of the existence of variables that mediate it.

Some studies explained that tourist satisfaction (TS) could affect RI (Cakici et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2022; Pai et al., 2020). Tourist satisfaction is essential in evaluating the performance of tourism destination management and the sustainability of the tourist market. Satisfaction affects tourists' choice of destination, consumption of the products and services offered, and RI (Milman & Tasci, 2018). Tourist satisfaction is a gap analysis between expectations before the trip (pre-trip) and post-trip experience with a destination (Haque & Momen, 2017). If a tourist destination's actual performance or attributes align with or are even better than the tourists' expectations, they will be positively satisfied and willing to revisit or recommend it to others. On the other hand, the discrepancy between high expectations and low performance will lead to dissatisfaction (Liao et al., 2021). Tourist satisfaction is a psychological condition obtained after gaining travel experience and empirical research explains that the travel experience significantly influences a tourist's satisfaction/dissatisfaction and loyalty (Chandel & Bansal, 2014; Kim, 2018). Based on this explanation, it can be assumed that TS mediates the influence of travel experience on RI. The presumption is in line with Kim (2017), confirming that satisfaction mediates the effect of MTE on RI.

Qualified service is an essential priority in today's competitive era, considering that the competition to satisfy tourists lies in product and service qualities. Service quality (SQ) could be a differentiation tool for creating uniqueness and providing a competitive advantage for service providers. Furthermore, higher SQ can ensure a competitive advantage, encouraging customer engagement with products or services (Alam & Noor, 2020). Service quality dimensions are put as stimuli to explain the relationship between the quality of the service and loyal customers. Therefore, every product and service provider urges the measurement of the SQ provided to tourists and they will then measure the quality of the services offered too. Empirical studies indicate the positive and significant impact of destination SQ toward RI (Rismawati & Sitepu, 2021; Tosun et al., 2015).

Various empirical research findings define that SQ is the most crucial antecedent variable in customer satisfaction (Afthanorhan et al., 2019; Fida et al., 2020). Other research by Le et al. (2020) in the port logistics service sector using the five dimensions of SERVQUAL also confirms the positive effect of SQ on customer satisfaction. Managers of tourism attractions should focus on boosting the quality of products and services to ensure TS and encourage RI. Therefore, management needs to strive for better service delivery to increase TS.

The existing literature on the influence of SQ and MTE on RI, mediated by TS, presents a mixed picture.

Rismawati and Sitepu (2021) found that TS mediates the relationship between MTE and RI but not between SQ and RI. Tsai et al. (2021) identified a significant impact of memorable experiences on TS and RI. Gholipour Soleimani and Einolahzadeh (2018) focused on the influence of SQ on RI, with customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth as mediators, without directly addressing the role of memorable experience.

A research gap exists in understanding the specific mediating role of TS in the relationship between SQ and RI, particularly in the context of MTE. This research, therefore, attempts to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the effects of SQ and MTE in the context of enhancing RI, with TS serving as a mediating variable.

2. Literature review

2.1. Service quality (SQ)

Service quality identifies gaps between customer perceptions and expectations, aiming to minimize those gaps to achieve high customer satisfaction (Shafiq et al., 2019). Sirimongkol (2022) states that SQ contributes to customers' trust and RI among restaurant customers. Even SQ is considered a strong predictor of influencing TS and RI (Richardson et al., 2019). According to Sthapit et al. (2022), SQ is one critical variable shaping memorable experiences. The statement aligns with Thoo et al. (2019), explaining that providing excellent SQ will certainly increase a deep impression on the travel experience. Thus, SQ becomes an antecedent to MTE in technical and functional quality.

The impact of SQ on TS has been widely discussed in the context of tourism. Tourism destination managers should ensure that TS fosters tourist revisits and loyalty as a survival effort in an increasingly competitive business environment. The SQ and TS relationship is aligned with the SOR model (stimuli-organism-response), identifying SQ as a stimulus, satisfaction as an organism, and loyalty as a response (Famiyeh et al., 2018). Various empirical studies explained the significant role of SQ in influencing TS (Chan et al., 2022; Masri et al., 2017; Shafiq et al., 2019).

Service quality can be considered one of the superior strategies contributing to the success of business processes (Suhail & Srinivasulu, 2021) as it increases TS and also has a positive impact on RI. The previous study confirms that satisfaction can mediate the influence of SQ on behavioral intentions (Suhail & Srinivasulu, 2021). Gholipour Soleimani and Einolahzadeh (2018) revealed that travel agent consumers found a positive and significant effect of SQ on RI mediated by TS. Zhang et al. (2018) and Gholipour Soleimani and Einolahzadeh (2018) emphasized that SQ can increase visitor satisfaction, which will increase RI and positive word-of-mouth. These findings confirm the ability of TS to mediate the SQ and RI relationship.

2.2. Memorable tourism experience (MTE)

In travel activities tourists experience after receiving services related to restaurants and accommodation, or while in tourist destinations their assessment produces MTE (Kim et al., 2012) and influences future intentions (Boavida-Portugal et al., 2017). Tourists' different backgrounds and interests possibly affect their interpretations of tourism products while their moods and personal feelings influence their interpretation of the experience (Ooi, 2005).

Some studies have shown that MTE is an essential predictor of positive emotions such as pleasure and intention for future tourist behavior (Chen et al., 2020), furthermore, tourism experience and revisit intention have a positive and significant relationship (Kim et al., 2015) because tourists with memorable experiences during their travel will have a strong RI (Lu et al., 2022). Therefore, the MTE becomes the prime factor that influences RI to revisit in the future (Chan et al., 2022). A study by Zhang et al. (2018) confirmed that MTE positively affects RI.

Sthapit and Coudounaris (2018) summarize that an impressive travel experience affects recreational activities and, in the long term, also impacts life satisfaction. The research of Chen et al. (2016) explained that individuals who can control what they want, feel relaxed and free from working routines, have new and challenging experiences during their vacation trips, and tend to have satisfaction with their vacation experiences and their lives. Furthermore, empirical research findings explain that MTE has a positive effect and even becomes a determinant factor of TS (Rismawati & Sitepu, 2021; Su et al., 2020). Gohary et al. (2020) partially found the influence of MTE through indicators of hedonism, involvement, knowledge, meaningfulness, novelty, and refreshment of RI mediated by TS. Rismawati and Sitepu (2021) confirmed TS as a mediator in the relationship between MTE and RI.

2.3. Tourist satisfaction (TS)

In tourism, satisfaction is the tourists' emotional state after having experienced tourist destinations (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Mutanga et al., 2017), and this strongly predicts RI in the future or encourages recommendations to others. According to Wang (2016) and Wu et al. (2015), several attributes can be used to measure TS, including brand loyalty, consumers' complaining behavior, word-of-mouth referrals, continuance, recommendation to others, and repurchase intention or repeat visits. Tourist satisfaction is one of the substantial evaluating factors for the marketing performance of tourist destinations because it influences tourists to choose destinations, consume products and services, and intend to revisit (Chan et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2021; Milman & Tasci, 2018; Rismawati & Sitepu, 2021; Suh & Youjae, 2006).

2.4. Revisit intentions (RIs)

Revisit intention is considered a pivotal factor in fostering sustainable destinations because it can generate revenue for destination management (Chen & Chou, 2019). Revisit intention is understood as a consumer's motive to re-enjoy the same product, service, place or area, and the intention and decision to re-establish future long-term relationships with product/service providers (Lai et al., 2020; Lan et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2012). The intention to revisit is correlated with tourists' pleasurable experiences associated with specific tourism destinations which can manifest as a behavioral inclination, contingent upon the inclination to recommend and the intention to revisit (Chen & Phou, 2013; Munawar et al., 2021). Theoretically, RI is a product or service's post-purchase or consumption stage; in tourism, RI is the post-visit stage of a destination and satisfied tourists will return to destinations and even recommend them to others (Rismawati & Sitepu, 2021).

Based on the previous results, we hypothesize that:

H_1: SQ has a positive impact on RI.
H_2: SQ has a positive impact on MTE.
H_3: SQ has a positive impact on TS.
H_4: MTE positively affects RI.
H_5: MTE positively affects TS.
H_6: TS mediates the effect of MTE on RI.
H_7: TS mediates the effect of SQ on RI.
H_8: TS has a positive impact on RI.

Based on the proposed research hypotheses, the theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

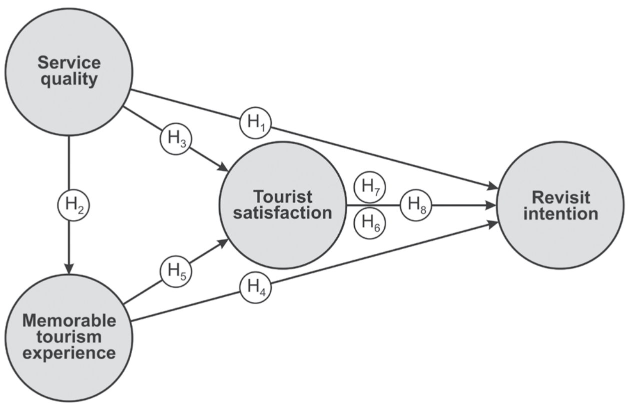

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Source: author

3. Methodology

This research employed quantitative methods with a cross-sectional survey design, utilizing a questionnaire as the data collection instrument. The SQ construct was elaborated using five indicators: tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy (Morgan & Xu, 2009). The construct for TS followed Wang (2016). Memorable tourism experience (MTE) encompassed eight indicators: knowledge, involvement, hedonism, novelty, meaningfulness, serendipity and surprise, refreshment and local culture (Bigne et al., 2020). Revisit intention (RI) drew on indicators presented by Wang (2016). Measurement employed the Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (scored as 1) to *strongly agree* (scored as 5).

Questionnaires were tested for validation and reliability with a sample of 30 respondents. Validity assessment employed the Pearson's product-moment correlation where all items demonstrated validity with an *r*-count exceeding 0.361 (*r*-table). Reliability evaluation used Cronbach's alpha values, confirming all constructs possessed alpha values > 0.7, thus indicating their reliability (Kılıç, 2016). The study was conducted in the Old Town of Jakarta, which is recognized as one of the city's prominent historical tourism destinations.

A total of 300 printed questionnaires were distributed to tourists visiting the Old Town of Jakarta using a convenience sampling technique. Of these, 204 respondents completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 68%. The sample size is deemed adequate, following the minimum R^2 method (Kock & Hadaya, 2018) considering the response rate (de Vaus, 2013). The minimum sample size can be calculated as ten times the number of indicators comprising a construct (Hair et al., 2017) but a sample size greater than 100 is recommended (Hair et al., 2019). Data analysis employed PLS-SEM, a method widely utilized in tourism studies due to its capacity to estimate complex models without necessitating conformity to data normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2017) and provides robust results. The analytical process comprises two distinct stages: the first involves testing the measurement model to assess the correlation between indicators and constructs, while the second entails conducting structural model testing to examine the relationships among constructs (hypothesis testing purposes).

4. Results

The respondents' profiles can be seen in Table 1. Figure 2 illustrates a structural equation model (SEM) that investigates the effects of service quality and memorable tourism experience on tourist satisfaction and revisit intention. Service quality is assessed using five indicators, with the lowest factor loading of 0.877. Memorable tourism experience is measured through eight indicators, with the lowest factor loading of 0.713. Tourist satisfaction is represented by five indicators, with the smallest factor loading of 0.769, while revisit intention is measured by three indicators, with a minimum factor loading of 0.841. The model illustrates the direct effect of service quality on revisit intention (β = 0.132), service quality on memorable tourism experience (β = 0.584), service quality on tourist satisfaction (β = 0.244), memorable tourism experience on revisit intention (β = 0.221), memorable tourism experience on tourist satisfaction (β = 0.658), and tourist satisfaction on revisit intention (β = 0.538). Indirect effects between variables can be derived by multiplying the respective direct path coefficients. These indirect effects are detailed in Table 6 (see p. 154). Figure 2 displays the predictive power (R^2) of each endogenous variable: memorable tourism experience (R^2 = 0.338), revisit intention (R^2 = 0.665), and tourist satisfaction (R^2 = 0.677), indicating the proportion of variance explained by the model for each construct.

Table 1. Respondent profile

Criteria		*n*	%
Gender	Male	70	34.31
	Female	134	65.69
Age	Less than 17	9	4.41
	17–25	132	64.71
	26–35	12	5.88
	36–50	39	19.12
	More than 50	12	5.88
Frequency of visits	1	63	30.88
	2–4 times	102	50.00
	More than 5	39	19.12

Source: author.

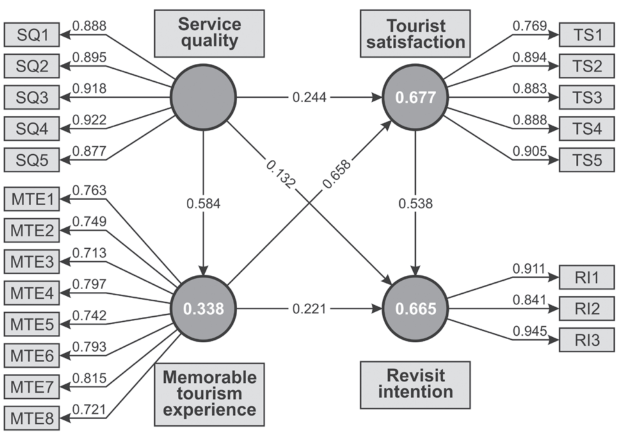

Figure 2. Factor loading
Source: author

The convergent validity testing showed that all indicators had a loading factor value > 0.7, which meant the construct could explain the indicators (Henseler et al., 2014). All indicators also had fairly good validity in defining the construct of latent variables, as evidenced by the average variance extracted (AVE) value for all variables which was 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2014) (Table 2). Reliability testing was to determine the consistency of the measurement results (Ovan & Saputra, 2020), using the composite reliability (*CR*) value and Cronbach's alpha. The test results showed the value of *CR* and Cronbach's alpha > 0.7, complying with the reliability minimum requirement (Table 2).

Table 2. Measurement model testing

Constructs	Indicator	Loading Factor	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (*CR*)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Memorable tourism experience	MTE1	0.763	0.897	0.917	0.581
	MTE2	0.749			
	MTE3	0.713			
	MTE4	0.797			
	MTE5	0.742			
	MTE6	0.793			
	MTE7	0.815			
	MTE8	0.721			
Revisit intention	RI1	0.911	0.882	0.927	0.810
	RI2	0.841			
	RI3	0.945			
Service quality	SQ1	0.888	0.942	0.955	0.811
	SQ2	0.895			
	SQ3	0.918			
	SQ4	0.922			
	SQ5	0.877			
Tourist satisfaction	TS1	0.769	0.918	0.939	0.755
	TS2	0.894			
	TS3	0.883			
	TS4	0.888			
	TS5	0.905			

Source: author.

The heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) values of all constructs are < 0.9 to ensure discriminant validity between the two reflective constructs (Henseler et al., 2015) (Table 3).

Table 3. Discriminant validity using heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) criteria

Constructs	MTE	RI	SQ	TS
Memorable tourism experience (MTE)	–	–	–	–
Revisit intention (RI)	0.817	–	–	–
Service quality (SQ)	0.634	0.657	–	–
Tourist satisfaction (TS)	0.880	0.883	0.676	–

Source: author.

Multi-collinearity testing ensured the absence of solid inter-correlation between latent variables, indicated by the VIF values < 5 as the threshold value (Hair et al., 2017). The results showed that all variables had a VIF value < 5 which proved no problems with multi-collinearity (Table 4).

Table 4. Multi-collinearity testing

Constructs	MTE	RI	SQ	TS
Memorable tourism experience (MTE)	–	2.875	–	1.519
Revisit intention (RI)	–	–	–	–
Service quality (SQ)	1.000	1.705	–	1.519
Tourist satisfaction (TS)	–	3.129	–	–

Source: author.

The model fit test measures the compatibility of the relationship observed in the model with the data using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value (Hu & Bentler, 1999) (Table 5).

Table 5. Model of fit testing

Indicator	Saturated model	Estimated model
Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)	0.050	0.050

Source: author.

Table 6 showed that SQ did not affect RI directly, as evidenced by the *t*-statistic value of 1.723 < 1.96 and *p*-value of 0.086 > 0.05. Service quality, on the other hand, it directly affected MTE significantly, as evidenced by the *t*-value of 10.835 > 1.96 (*t*-table) and the *p*-value of 0.000. In addition, the SQ–MTE path coefficient of 0.584 meant that a unit increase of SQ increased MTE by 58.4%. Service quality had a strong and significant influence on TS, as evidenced by the path coefficient of 0.244, *t*-value of 3.721 > 1.96, and *p*-value of 0.000 or < 0.05. The SQ contribution on TS was (+)0.244, which meant that an increase in a unit of SQ increased TS by 24.4%. Memorable tourism experience had a positive and significant direct effect on TS and RI, respectively, as explained by the *t*-statistic value of > 1.96 and *p*-value < 0.05. The contribution of MTE to TS and RI was positive, which meant that an increase in MTE would also impact TS and RI. The path coefficient of the indirect effect of MTE on RI mediated by TS was 0.354, obtained by multiplying the direct effect of MTE on TS by 0.658 and the direct effect of TS on RI by 0.538. A path coefficient of 0.354 meant that a unit increase in MTE would indirectly impact increasing RI by 35.4% through TS. The indirect impact of MTE on RI through TS was more significant, indicating a more robust contribution. Tourist satisfaction partially mediates the effect of MTE on RI, owing to MTE's direct and significant influence on RI. Tourist satisfaction significantly mediated the effect of SQ on RI, as evidenced by the

Table 6. Hypothesis testing

	Relationship between constructs	Path coefficient	*t*-statistics	*p*-values	Supported
H_1	Service quality → revisit intention	0.132	1.723	0.086	No
H_2	Service quality → memorable tourism experience	0.584	10.835	0.000	Yes
H_3	Service quality → tourist satisfaction	0.244	3.721	0.000	Yes
H_4	Memorable tourism experience → revisit intention	0.221	2.951	0.003	Yes
H_5	Memorable tourism experience → tourist satisfaction	0.658	10.745	0.000	Yes
H_6	Memorable tourism experience → tourist satisfaction → revisit intention	0.354	6.020	0.000	Yes
H_7	Service quality → tourist satisfaction → revisit intention	0.131	3.268	0.001	Yes
H_8	Tourist satisfaction → revisit intention	0.538	7.146	0.000	Yes

Source: author.

Table 7. Predictive power testing and prediction relevance testing

Constructs	R^2	SSO	SSE	Q^2 (= 1 – SSE/SSO)
Memorable tourism experience (MTE)	0.338	1632.000	1323.888	0.189
Revisit intention (RI)	0.665	612.000	284.362	0.535
Tourist satisfaction (TS)	0.677	1020.000	504.149	0.506

Note: R^2 – coefficient of determination, Q^2 – Stone-Geisser's, Q^2 as the predictive relevance measurement, SSE – sum of squares of errors, SSO – sum of squares of observations.

Source: author.

t-statistic value of 3.268 > 1.96 and p-value of 0.001 < 0.05. The path coefficient of SQ on RI through TS was 0.131. It meant that a unit increase in the SQ would indirectly increase RI by 13.1% through the TS variable. Tourist satisfaction also significantly mediated the impact of MTE on RI. This finding was evidenced by the t-statistic of 6.020 > 1.96 and p-value of 0.000 < 0.05. Tourist satisfaction also positively affected RI, as evidenced by the p-value < 0.000 and the t-statistic 7.146 > 1.96, contributing about 53.8%. The path coefficient of MTE–TS was 0.658, indicating that MTE was the most prominent predictor of TS, compared with SQ and MTE. The study also found that the effect of MTE on RI increased when mediated by TS.

The model's predictive power (R^2 value) showed that SQ significantly could explain the variance of MTE by 33.8% and was categorized as a weak model. The ability of SQ and MTE as antecedent variables in explaining the variance of TS was 67.7% and was classified as a moderate model. Furthermore, these findings proved that SQ and MTE were the most prominent antecedent variables in determining TS. In total, the ability of all SQ, MTE and TS exogenous variables to explain RI variance was 66.5% and considered a moderate model (Table 7).

The MTE–RI and MTE–TS are 0.051 and 0.893, respectively, indicating that MTE had a more significant effect on TS than RI. Conversely, the effect sizes of SQ–MTE, SQ–RI and SQ–TS were 0.519, 0.031 and 0.122, respectively, proving that SQ had the most substantial effect on RI compared to RI and TS (Table 8).

Table 8. Effect size

Constructs	MTE	RI	SQ	TS
Memorable tourism experience (MTE)	–	0.051	–	0.893
Revisit intention (RI)	–	–	–	–
Service quality (SQ)	0.519	0.031	–	0.122
Tourist satisfaction (TS)	–	0.280	–	–

Source: author.

The Q^2 value measured the relevance level of a construct model by determining the accuracy level of exogenous prediction toward endogenous variables. Data showed a value of Q^2 > 0.05; it can be concluded that the exogenous variables SQ, MTE and TS were appropriate for predicting the RI variable (Table 7).

5. Discussion and implications

In the tourist market, RI predicts tourist revisits and can provide projected profits and sustainability for tourist market management. Considering the importance of RI to sustain the tourist market, tourism destination managers should optimize the factors contributing to increasing tourists' RI. The research results show respondents' positive responses to RI indicators proving tourists strongly intend to revisit the Old Town of Jakarta. Most tourists also consider the Old Town the leading destination of choice to visit in the future and the number of tourists who revisit is about 69.12%, and 19.12% of respondents have revisited more than five times (Table 1). Data supports the previous statement that respondents intend to revisit the Old Town of Jakarta.

About 87.7% of respondents positively responded to items to measure the level of TS in the Old Town of Jakarta. The path coefficient of TS towards RI is 53.8%, higher than the influence of MTE (0.221) and SQ (0.132) supporting that TS is the most prominent contributor to fostering tourist RI in the Old Town of Jakarta. This finding aligns with previous empirical studies explaining that TS is the primary and fundamental factor influencing post-purchase behavior in RI because it can increase insight into products and services (Abdullah & Lui, 2018; Chan et al., 2022). Even TS can be an evaluation tool for the marketing performance of tourist destinations, to know what influences tourists to choose destinations and have the intention to revisit (Liao et al., 2021; Milman & Tasci, 2018; Suh & Youjae, 2006).

The satisfaction of tourists significantly shapes their inclination to revisit, signifying their intent or willingness to return to specific attractions on subsequent visits. A positive experience during a prior visit typically heightens the likelihood of tourists considering a return. Enhancing RI hinges on ensuring tourist contentment, a goal attainable through the provision of top-tier services, crafting captivating experiences, attentiveness to tourist needs and preferences, and fostering positive rapport. Amplifying TS not only fortifies the likelihood of return visits but also substantiates the sustainability of the tourist destination.

The results also explain the positive effect of MTEs on TS and RI. The data shows that tourists have a memorable experience during their travel activities in the Old Town of Jakarta; the architecture of the buildings that represent Jakarta's Old Batavia period, various tourist attractions, and other supporting facilities providing a memorable experience. A deep impression affects the level of fulfillment of expectations and encourages TS. The influence of MTE on TS is in line with the previous study that MTE has a positive effect and becomes a determining factor for TS (Rismawati & Sitepu, 2021; Su et al., 2020). Memorable tourism experience also encourages positive behavior in the future and also directly influences RI, as evidenced by the positive response of tourists to MTE items, associated with the 69.12% of respondents who revisit the Old Town of Jakarta (Table 1). It proves that memorable experience is the main factor influencing RI to the same destination. These findings support the results of previous research that MTE is a predictor of RI (Chan et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2018).

About 83.73% of tourists responded positively to evaluate the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL of the Old Town of Jakarta. Therefore, SQ will form a memorable experience, as evidenced by 89.64% of tourists getting a pleasant and unique experience distinguished from other destinations. This finding aligns with the research of Kim et al. (2012), revealing that excellent SQ can increase the impression of the travel experience; this supports the hypothesis that good SQ is an antecedent to an increase in MTE.

However, SQ had no direct effect on RI, and a zero effect toward RI is possible because of the absence of a supporting process, including adequate extrinsic and intrinsic tourist motivation which correlates with SQ and RI. This finding differs from previous studies that SQ is a strong predictor of RI (Richardson et al., 2019; Rismawati & Sitepu, 2021; Sirimongkol, 2022).

Examining the research model contributes valuable insights into enhancing SQ variables and MTE to optimize tourist RI, with TS as a mediating factor in the Old City of Jakarta. The study findings delineate that only MTE and TS directly impact RI, where SQ affects MTE, and MTE influences TS[2]. Additionally, SQ manifests an indirect yet notable positive impact on RI, facilitated through its mediation of TS. Furthermore, MTE also indirectly and significantly contributes to enhancing RI.

Given the paramount significance of SQ, it remains imperative for the management of the Old Town of Jakarta to persistently enhance various facets of service provision. This encompasses elevating infrastructure standards by implementing enhancements such as signage accuracy, efficient information services, restroom facilities and sufficient rest areas, all tailored to ensure optimal tourist convenience. The pursuit of improved SQ also necessitates the provision of accessible facilities to accommodate individuals with disabilities.

The cultivation of MTE significantly fosters recurrent tourist visits, necessitating managerial efforts to curate these experiences within Jakarta's Old Town. Establishing a profound emotional link with the destination is pivotal, as it incites a yearning for subsequent visits and prompts the generation of favorable online feedback. To achieve this, managers ought to engineer interactive and immersive encounters, fostering active tourist engagement through curated cultural events and historical presentations, ideally in partnership with local authorities. This concerted endeavor will yield lasting and memorable tourist experiences, and finally stimulate repeat visits.

As a strategic recommendation, the managers of the Old Town of Jakarta must prioritize delivering exceptional services. This will not only foster heightened tourist engagement but also contribute to creating memorable travel experiences and satisfaction, thereby catalyzing the development of positive behavioral intentions in the long run. Enhancing service quality involves the creation of distinctive tourist attractions that offer unique and memorable experiences, the refinement of tourism facilities, and the elevation of staff competence.

6. Conclusion

The empirical validation of the research model enhances a better understanding regarding increased SQ and the creation of a MTE to optimize TS and foster RI. While SQ does not directly impact RI, a positive service encounter facilitates the formation of a MTE and TS, thereby triggering a revisit. The research outcomes elucidate the pivotal role of consumer satisfaction as a paramount metric for success within the tourism industry. In the context of this study, the management of the Old Town of Jakarta should focus on enhancing service quality and creating memorable experiences to ensure TS.

These findings substantiate existing theories positing that SQ not only serves as a prerequisite for ensuring satisfaction but also functions as a determinant influencing the overall travel experience. Recognizing the critical role of travel experience is fundamental to comprehending customer satisfaction and its consequential impact on fostering RI. Furthermore, the research findings contribute an additional layer to models of consumer behavior wherein the intention to revisit is shaped not only by satisfaction but also by the quality of service and the overall travel experience.

One of the weaknesses of this study is the limited sample size. Additionally, as all respondents were Indonesian, the results may not be generalizable to different destination contexts. Visitor satisfaction partially mediates the influence of SQ and MTE on RI. Other unmeasured variables may also play a significant role in explaining the relationship between SQ, MTE and RI. For future research, it is recommended to consider other mediating variables, such as hedonic well-being, to further elucidate the relationship between service quality, memorable tourism experiences and revisit intentions.

Endnotes

[1] The 2nd and 3rd sentences of this paragraph were translated from Indonesian into English using ChatGPT-3.5 in January 2024. The author assured that the original meaning of the sentences was preserved after the translation, so they did not affect the result.

[2] The 2nd sentence of this paragraph was translated from Indonesian into English using ChatGPT-3.5 in February 2024. The author assured that the original meaning of the sentence was preserved after the translation, so it did not affect the result.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.07 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

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Investigating the relationship between e-tourism ethics and e-revisit intentions: The mediating roles of e-satisfaction and e-web trust

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How to cite (APA style): Basheer, S., Farooq, S., Mudasir, A.M., & Hassan, V. (2025). Investigating the relationship between e-tourism ethics and e-revisit intentions: The mediating roles of e-satisfaction and e-web trust. *Turyzm/Tourism*, *35*(1), 161–174. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.07

ABSTRACT

The emergence of e-tourism in the current digital era has completely changed how people plan their trips and enjoy their entire trip. The goal of the current study is to ascertain how e-tourism ethics and e-revisit intentions are related. Additionally, the current study examines how e-web trust and e-satisfaction mediate this association. Based on previous research, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the validity and reliability of a questionnaire that was created from the body of existing literature and given to the respondents. Using a descriptive strategy, the study employed an approach that involved analysing a sample of 420 questionnaires. Convenience sampling was used to collect data from respondents, and SPSS version 20 was used for data analysis. AMOS software and the structural equation modelling (SEM) approach were used to assess the assumptions. The investigation's findings indicated that e-tourism ethics and e-revisit intentions were positively correlated. Additionally, the results of the study demonstrated the mediating impacts of e-web trust and e-satisfaction by demonstrating a strong indirect influence. For those involved in e-tourism enterprises looking to build long-lasting relationships with their online travel clientele, the insights provide valuable information.

KEYWORDS

e-tourism ethics, e-satisfaction, e-revisit intention, e-web trust

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
12 December 2023
Accepted:
2 October 2024
Published:
12 June 2025

1. Introduction

While recent improvements have complicated the working environment of the tourist sector, it continues to grow and has become one of the world's major industries. It may benefit destinations significantly, but it may also endanger local inhabitants and the environment. Due to the intrinsic diversity of the business, other industries have passed it by and already embraced the 'triple bottom line' of sustainability,

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

which consists of social, environmental and financial responsibilities. The tourist sector must address the issue of ethical travel as ethical tourism is beneficial for everyone. Assuring a destination's continued success provides tour operators with an advantage in competition and safeguards the future of the tourism sector as a whole. Vacations that take advantage of a destination's speciality provide visitors with a richer experience. This is in the best interests of the people who live there and of those who strive for growth since it may help in the battle against poverty and contribute to sustainable development. Integral to the current tourism scene, visitor satisfaction and the likelihood of a return visit are web trust and ethical practices in e-tourism (Ku & Chen, 2015).

E-tourism services and destination experiences have a noteworthy impact on visitors' overall gratification (Jeong & Shin, 2020). Belief between service providers and visitors is bolstered by the use of ethical principles in e-tourism with factors such as experiential value, perceived 'service quality' and 'destination' image being investigated in the expanding field of tourism studies (Buhalis, 2020; Chang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2016).Travellers' decisions are greatly affected by their level of trust in online travel resources in terms of those that are safe, dependable and genuine (Buhalis et al., 2023). It has been shown that when visitors work with reputable businesses, they have better overall vacation experiences. A visitor's perception of a location may reflect their faith in it, which may influence their degree of satisfaction and willingness to return (Kim, 2018). The intersection of ethics, web trust and traveller satisfaction is best illustrated through smart tourism technologies (STTs) whose use improves trips and generates a virtuous cycle of increased trust and satisfaction. In addition, research shows that addressing visitors' worries increases their sense of security and satisfaction (Casillo et al., 2019).

There is a lot of rivalry in the 'tourism industry', therefore tour companies are under increasing pressure (Gretzel et al., 2020). After the basic holiday needs are addressed (location/facilities, affordability, availability), consumers will reportedly consider ethical considerations like working conditions, the environment and charitable giving before making a final decision (Chang et al., 2009). In addition, they have higher expectations for the quality and depth of their travel experiences. In this market, it is significant for online 'travel agencies' to set themselves apart from the competition by catering to certain needs (such as morality). In this context, and especially in the last few years, a new topic known as 'ethics in tourism' has emerged requiring that all those involved in the tourism business follow such guidelines and help ensure the sector's long-term success.

This study looks at the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to better understand the tourism industry's ethical difficulties.

2. Literature review

The earliest conceptualisation of the factors influencing ethical decision-making in the field of ethical marketing research was in the late 1960s with Bartels' (1967) seminal work. Since then, the number of contributions has increased, which may be indicative of rising public consciousness of unethical marketing practices such as false pricing, misleading promotion and putting consumers at risk (Román, 2007). However, the importance of ethics in marketing was not widely accepted by business practitioners until the early 1980s, when many businesses and 'professional bodies' began to embrace particular 'codes of ethics' in how they conducted their operations. Academic interest in the topic has increased dramatically and, consequently, several investigations have been carried out (for examples, see reviews by Kim et al., 2010 and Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010). Ethical considerations in online marketing were assessed by Bush et al. (2000) in a survey of 292 marketing experts. Since there was little prior literature from which to derive scaled items, the authors resorted to an open-ended questionnaire (Bush et al., 2000). The most commonly mentioned ethical concern with regards to online marketing was safety in financial transactions and concerns which have to do with illegal behaviour (in this order: fraud, hacking, privacy and the honesty/truthfulness of internet content). When the researchers Evanschitzky et al. (2004) started research on online privacy concerns they focused primarily on German consumers. According to their research, opinions on privacy generally and the duties of businesses and the government to protect it, play a part in shaping views on internet use and online behaviour.

According to Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010), the three key ethical concerns with the internet are 'privacy, identity theft and phishing. Kracher and Corritore (2004) highlighted the significance of access, intellectual property, privacy and informed consent, child protection, information security and trust, in their examination of a distinct e-commerce ethics. Concerns about making purchases online were evaluated by Miyazaki and Fernandez (2001). Three out of the four most common worries identified in a survey of 189 consumers were ethical in nature. In the first group, known as 'privacy', people voiced worries about things like the secret monitoring of their spending habits and the unauthorized distribution of their personal data. Worries of possibly malevolent actors breaking technological data protection barriers to obtain consumers' financial and personal information fell under the second category, system security. Concerns regarding internet retailers' fraudulent behaviour, such as wilful deception or non-delivery of merchandise, were the subject of the third category, 'online retailer fraud'. Forsythe et al. (2006) additionally created a three-factor measure to assess the perceived hazards of online buying, one of which was the possibility of financial loss due to ethical concerns. The potential for a net loss of money was encompassed in the definition of financial risk, which may explain why some consumers are uneasy about using their credit cards online. Given this, it is clear that there is little connection between the ethics of online shopping and consumer satisfaction, in the present literature on e-ethics (Román & Cuestas, 2008). Finally, there is a lack of research into the connection between consumer ethical views and national culture (such as individualism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance), despite the importance of understanding this topic for predicting consumer satisfaction.

2.1. E-tourism

Because it shapes the consumer's mental picture of a place and simulates their visit, the information featured on e-tourism sites is crucial (Masri et al., 2020). Websites for public tourism have the ability to increase the effectiveness of public administration by improving user convenience, performance, and accessibility to government services and information (Putra & Aprilson, 2022). Tourists typically use internet connections to view public websites which serve as hubs for a variety of information and services from government agencies (Gholipour Soleimani et al., 2018) and in most cases, e-service transactions are started by the end users themselves. Public website functions are classified as either 'informational', 'transactional' or 'operational' (Polyak et al., 2010) and access to public sector information is facilitated by the informational functions via website portals, online publishing and broadcasting. Visitors to the site can transact business with the public tourism sector by making purchases and payments online (Oviedo-García et al., 2016). When we talk about 'operational functions', we are referring to those 'internal public sector' operations that place a high priority on the interoperability of different e-tourism methods as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of operations.

It is crucial that government websites be made with user-friendliness in mind, as many countries have realised the potential of the internet for e-tourism marketing and e-commerce. Recognising that information research and analysis is one of the most crucial behavioural processes defining a travel decision, these countries have set up an online presence to advertise their e-tourism offerings and grow their market share in the cut-throat global e-tourism market. In other words, governments need to pay special attention to how they present data on the web.

2.2. Web trust

Due to the concurrent nature of tourist product manufacturing and consumption, destination marketers must guarantee the provision of advertised and promoted services (Altınöz et al., 2013). Trust among vacationers is established when a location's service offerings are seen to be honest and open (Bae & Han, 2020), an important factor in determining whether or not a consumer will return (Basheer, Walia et al., 2023). Although research throughout the tourism industry acknowledges that destination image and trust function through WOM and e-WOM in terms of travel intentions, the subtleties of this argument with regard to revisit intentions are still being investigated (Chang, 2014). The tourism sector is becoming increasingly aware of how important ethical business practices are to improving visitor experiences and loyalty, and sustainable development now depends heavily on ethical tourism which adheres to the values of social, environmental and financial responsibility. According to research, ethical e-tourism practices have a major impact on 'tourist satisfaction' and confidence, and this in turn affects inclinations to return. Research by Basheer, Farooq et al. (2023) show that ethical travel improves visitor pleasure and loyalty. Additionally, it is becoming increasingly clear how smart tourism technologies (STTs) promote satisfaction and trust (Basheer, Hassan et al., 2023) as building visitor loyalty and enhancing their experiences requires visitors to have complete faith in online travel services. Ethical guidelines in e-tourism boost consumer confidence in service providers, which increases consumer satisfaction and encourage return business, while Farooq et al. (2024) emphasize how important it is for travellers to have access to trustworthy and dependable internet information while making decisions. According to recent studies, trust plays a crucial role in determining how visitors interact with websites and one of the most significant features of 'tourism' is consumer satisfaction, which may be described as their reaction to demands being met. This is impacted by emotional and cognitive elements associated with the trip (Basheer et al., 2024) demonstrate that return intentions are highly predictable as a result of satisfaction from initial visits. The significance of resolving ethical issues to improve consumer retention is highlighted by the influence of ethical practices on satisfaction and loyalty (Buhalis, 2020; Schoefer, 2008).

There is a significant study vacuum concerning the intermediating roles of e-satisfaction and e-web trust in the link between e-tourism ethics and return intentions, despite the fact that ethics, satisfaction and trust in e-tourism have been covered extensively. Furthermore, not much research has looked at how these associations may be used in marketing plans and the creation of online travel products. Closing this gap is crucial to giving the sector useful information (Ku & Chen, 2015).

2.3. Tourist satisfaction

According to Bam and Kunwar (2020) and Loi et al. (2017) satisfaction is seen to be one of the most important elements of tourism and may have received the most attention. According to Nguyen Viet et al. (2020), tourist satisfaction is commonly defined as the entire amount of enjoyment one experiences when travelling, or as the consumer's reaction or evaluation of how well a product fulfils a need and the degree to which it results from taking a vacation (Hultman et al., 2015). The emotional reaction brought on by service-related cognitive reactions, encounters or the contrast between pre-trip expectations and post-trip impressions, will determine how tourists are evaluated (Torabi et al., 2022). In other words, when compared to initial expectations, after unpleasant sensations resulting from travel experiences, people may not feel satisfied (Köseogluet al., 2010). Additionally, tourist satisfaction refers to how a consumer feels after engaging with or being disappointed by an experience with a service or product (Rehman et al., 2023). The 'buyer's cognitive state' is a term used to describe visitor satisfaction about the appropriateness or unsuitability received in exchange for the skilled service (Pai et al., 2020). To put it another way, the distinction in how people perceive pre- and post-benefit satisfaction the product or service. Tourist satisfaction is frequently assessed by emotional components in addition to cognitive factors (Shafiee et al., 2016).

Consumers' cognitive responses come from their mental faculties, whereas their emotional responses are reflected by emotional reactions. Evaluation considers cognitive and emotive factors in reviews of a good or service (Assaker & Hallak, 2013). When it comes to the tourism sector, the evaluation of a location by consumers, their degree of satisfaction is largely determined by both cognitive and emotive factors (Assaker & Hallak, 2013). When tourists compare the value they receive for their money to the consistency of food and service, the emotive elements serve as assessments of the satisfaction and delight they take away from the encounter as a sense of personal well-being (Alegre & Garau, 2010).

2.4. Revisit intentions

There are typically two types of people who use tourist services: newcomers and regulars (Nguyen Viet & Nguyen Van, 2021). A first-time consumer's expectation of a positive experience with a tourism service provider is formed based on the research they have conducted (Sadat & Chang, 2016). The hospitality field has examined this anticipation as 'intention to visit' and prospective consumers are the focus of the literature which examines the impact of various predictors on their decision-making processes. However, those with a desire to return are likely to be tourists who have already experienced the service firsthand. Most research (Zhang et al., 2021) has concluded that first-visit satisfaction predicts a consumer's likelihood to return aiming to increase the prevailing body of knowledge by demonstrating the predictive power of 'e-tourism' ethics and trust on repeat visits (Soonsan & Somkai, 2022).

According to Buhalis (2020) and Buhalis and Karatay (2022), a first-time consumer's expectation of a satisfying encounter with a tourist service provider is shaped by the research they have done. This expectation has been studied by the hotel industry as 'intention to visit'. The literature focuses on potential consumers and looks at how different variables affect their decision-making, still travellers who have previously used the service are probably the ones who would wish to come back. Most studies have found that a consumer's chance of returning is predicted by their level of pleasure on their initial visit. By illustrating the predictive value of e-tourism ethics and trust on return visits, this study seeks to advance current information (Buhalis et al., 2023).

3. Hypotheses development

3.1. E-tourism ethics, e-satisfaction, e-revisit intentions

Businesses might choose to use aggressive marketing techniques to draw in new clients or defensive marketing techniques to keep their current clientele. Businesses like to concentrate on keeping repeat clients since they produce more income due to the high costs of replacing lost consumers. Consumers' past e-service experiences are a critical factor in determining whether they will return to a website and this is important for online service providers. Consumers are more inclined to use the internet due to the abundance of accessible opportunities, thus it is critical for businesses to offer excellent online services to boost retention rates.

Consequently, the current investigation suggests the following hypotheses:

H_1: E-tourism ethics affects e-satisfaction.

H_2: A significant relationship exists between e-tourism ethics and e-web trust.

3.2. E-tourism ethics and e-revisit intentions

Academic interest in ethics in marketing has increased dramatically and, as a result, numerous studies have been conducted (for example, see reviews by Kim et al., 2010 and Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010). Ethical considerations in online marketing were assessed by Bush et al. (2000) in a survey of 292 marketing experts. Since there was little prior literature from which to derive scaled items, the authors resorted to an open-ended questionnaire (Bush et al., 2000).

H_3: E-tourism ethics positively affect e-revisit intentions.

3.3. E-web trust and e-revisit intentions

E-tourism ethics play a more vital role in the success of online businesses than factors like low costs or a strong web presence, as they are rooted in consumer expectations of service performance (Grönroos, 1984). Al-Nasser and Hajilee (2016) investigated the impact of e-tourism ethics, culture, trust and perceived risk on e-web trust and consumers' intentions to revisit. Their hypothesis suggests that consumer trust in virtual environments is positively shaped by adherence to e-tourism ethics.

H_4: E-tourism ethics has a direct positive impact on e-web trust.

3.4. E-satisfaction and e-revisit intentions

Consumers with a positive perception of an online retailer are referred to as 'e-satisfied', a state that promotes repeat business (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003). This concept encompasses two dimensions: attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. E-satisfaction reflects the likelihood of consumers returning for future purchases, sharing positive word-of-mouth, and maintaining a favourable attitude toward the retailer. However, due to the ease of accessing information and alternatives online, shoppers often switch between retailers seamlessly, as transitions in e-commerce can occur with just a single click (Keiningham et al., 2005). Consequently, online retailers need to cultivate a dedicated consumer following. Satisfaction is characterized as the reaction of consumers to their sense of fulfilment (Oliver, 2014). Anderson and Srinivasan (2003) define e-satisfaction as the level of satisfaction a consumer derives from their previous experiences with a particular e-commerce company. Previous research suggests that satisfied consumers are more likely to engage in repeat purchase behaviour (e.g. Changet et al., 2009). Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that content online consumers will demonstrate their allegiance to the e-retailer. This indicates:

H_5: The influence of e-satisfaction on a consumer's intention to revisit online platforms is positive.

3.5. E-tourism ethics, e-satisfaction, e-trust and e-revisit intentions

Wu et al. (2016) have explored the mediating roles of variables such as e-satisfaction and e-web trust in different contexts. The ongoing study has formulated the following hypothesis based on the results obtained:

H_6: The relationship between e-tourism ethics and revisit intentions is mediated by e-web trust.

H_7: The role of e-satisfaction is pivotal in mediating the connection between e-tourism ethics and intentions to revisit.

4. Research framework

This study seeks to evaluate the associations between e-tourism ethics, e-web trust, e-revisit intentions and e-satisfaction. A research paradigm was developed after a thorough literature assessment was conducted on these factors (Figure 1).

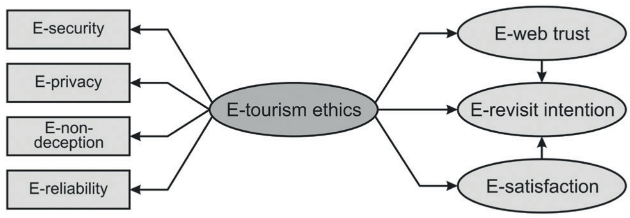

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Source: author

5. Research methodology

5.1. Design

This investigation employed a quantitative methodology, using a self-administered questionnaire crafted from insights gained in earlier studies. The questionnaire underwent rigorous testing prior to data collection with preliminary testing involving nine researchers, seven faculty members, and three industry experts to capture the core aspects of the study. After the pre-testing phase, the questionnaire was distributed to 35 respondents as part of a pilot study to assess its reliability. The reliability coefficients for each construct exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency and supporting the robustness of the measurement scales used in this study.

5.2. Instrument development

This study involved the selection and adaptation of various constructs from previously validated scales, which were modified to suit the specific requirements of the investigation.

5.3. Common method bias (CMB)

To address the potential impact of common method bias (CMB), researchers have developed various statistical techniques. In this study, the Harman single-factor test was employed to assess CMB. This test evaluates whether a single factor or general factor explains the majority of the covariance (over 50%) among the measured variables, which would indicate the presence of significant common method variance. The test results here revealed that the variance explained by a single factor was 26.57%, indicating the absence of CMB in the data.

5.4. Population of the study

The subjects of the investigation comprised tourists who had journeyed to different regions of North India.

5.5. Data collection, sampling technique and sample size

The study employed a combination of primary and secondary sources for data collection. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire featuring statements aimed at representing various constructs. Between June and August 2023, a total of 657 questionnaires were distributed using convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method. Non-probability sampling techniques, often utilized in social science research (Rowley, 2014), are regarded as practical and well-suited for fieldwork studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

5.6. Response rate

After removing improper questionnaires, a total of 420 legitimate ones remained for the final analysis, making up 63.92% of the total responses. Questionnaires were discarded: (a) when they contained numerous unanswered questions (missing data); (b) when participants provided identical scores across all items, suggesting a lack of serious engagement with the questions.

5.7. Ethical considerations

During the data collection process, a strong dedication was maintained to follow ethical standards concerning the participants. To prioritize the rights and well-being of the participants, informed consent was sought from each individual, ensuring that they had a thorough understanding of the objective and potential consequences of the study. The commitment to maintaining anonymity and confidentiality was executed with utmost diligence, ensuring that personal information remained secure from any potential disclosure.

6. Data analysis and results

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents, including gender distribution, age groups, place of residence, education level, frequency of travel website use, and daily internet usage, is presented in Table 1. These demographic data provide a comprehensive overview of the sample population, aiding in understanding the characteristics of the participants involved in the study. The total sample consist of 420 respondents, with 52.85% males ($n = 222$) and 47.15% females ($n = 198$).

Table 1. Demographic results

Socio-demographic profile		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	222	52.85
	Female	198	47.15
Age	Less than 20	45	10.72
	20–30	156	37.15
	30–40	145	34.53
	40–50	42	10.00
	Over 50	32	7.32
Residence	Kashmir	177	42.15
	Jammu	115	27.38
	Punjab	56	13.34
	Delhi	42	10.00
	Mumbai	25	5.96
	Other	5	1.19
Education	Junior high school	46	10.95
	Senior high school	85	20.23
	College	182	43.34
	University	104	24.76

Frequency of use of travel websites per week	Less than one time	96	22.85
	2–5 times	65	15.47
	6–10 times	92	21.90
	10–15 times	89	21.19
	Over 15 times	78	18.57
Average hours of use of the internet per day	Less than one hour	82	19.52
	1–3 hours	66	15.71
	3–6 hours	101	24.04
	6–9 hours	82	19.52
	9–12 hours	42	10.00
	Over 12 hours	47	11.19

Source: authors.

Initially, the data was screened for missing values and unengaged responses. After screening, the reliability of the instrument was checked through Cronbach's alpha and its results for each construct were found to be above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978; Singh et al., 2022). The results of the reliability statistics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the reliability test

Construct	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
E-security	5	0.874
E-reliability	4	0.756
E-privacy	4	0.880
E-non-deception	4	0.893
E-tourism ethics	17	0.790
E-web trust	5	0.860
E-satisfaction	4	0.882
E-revisit intentions	3	0.780
Overall scale	29	0.870

Source: authors.

6.1. Measurement model

E-tourism ethics was defined as a second-order construct, with e-security, e-reliability, e-privacy and e-non-deception privacy functioning as first-order constructs. Second-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was utilised to validate the primary construct, specifically e-tourism (Hair et al., 2019) ethics, which comprises four sub-constructs. The four latent sub-constructs were assessed through their corresponding items (Byrne, 2013). The model fit criteria established by Hair et al. (2019) suggest that the results from the CFA in this study demonstrate an appropriate fit of the model to the data (Najar & Rather, 2023). The evaluation of the model is based on several fit indices. The chi-square statistic is 172.776, with a degree of freedom (*df*) of 115, yielding a probability level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). The CMIN/*df* ratio is 1.502. The goodness of fit indices are as follows: GFI = 0.953, AGFI = 0.938. The incremental fit indices include IFI = 0.989 and CFI = 0.989. The Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) is 0.987. Additionally, the root mean square residual (RMSR) is 0.035, and the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) is 0.046.

The factor loadings for both first-order and second-order constructs exceeded the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70, as indicated. Specifically, the estimates were as follows: e-tourism ethics to e-security at 0.76; e-tourism ethics to e-reliability at 0.80; e-tourism ethics to e-privacy at 0.79; and e-tourism ethics to e-non-deception at 0.78 (Table 3). All factor loadings demonstrated significance at the $p < 0.01$ level. Additionally, the convergent validity, indicated by an average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.565 and composite reliability (*CR*) of 0.837 for the second-order constructs, exceeded the minimum threshold values of 0.5 and 0.7, respectively (Schreiber et al., 2006). Consequently, the 17-item e-tourism ethics scale demonstrated acceptable convergent validity and a satisfactory overall assessment of the model fit criteria when subjected to validation through second-order CFA. The findings indicate that the suggested factor structure of e-tourism ethics received validation. The graphical presentation of second-order CFA of the construct e-tourism ethics is shown in Figure 2.

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis (overall model and second order CFA results of e-tourism ethics)

Construct	Item	Factor loading	*CR* (above 0.7)	AVE (above 0.5)
E-tourism ethics	E-security	0.860	0.837	0.565
	E-reliability	0.770		
	E-privacy	0.700		
	E-non-deception	0.660		
E-security	ES2	0.846	0.924	0.708
	ES5	0.826		
	ES3	0.881		
	ES1	0.818		
	ES4	0.834		
E-reliability	ER2	0.885	0.905	0.705
	ER1	0.824		
	ER4	0.812		
	ER3	0.836		

Table 3 (cont.)

Construct	Item	Factor loading	*CR* (above 0.7)	AVE (above 0.5)
E-privacy	EP1	0.844	0.876	0.638
	EP2	0.794		
	EP3	0.750		
	EP4	0.805		
E-non-deception	ENP3	0.860	0.915	0.729
	ENP2	0.884		
	ENP1	0.846		
	ENP4	0.825		
E-web trust	EWT4	0.937	0.939	0.754
	EWT5	0.865		
	EWT2	0.908		
	EWT3	0.837		
	EWT1	0.787		
E-satis-faction	ESAT2	0.988	0.910	0.723
	ESAT4	0.979		
	ESAT1	0.712		
	ESAT3	0.670		
E-revisit intentions	ERI2	0.813	0.820	0.603
	ERI3	0.787		
	ERI1	0.728		

Note: *CR* – composite reliability, AVE – average variance extracted.

Source: authors.

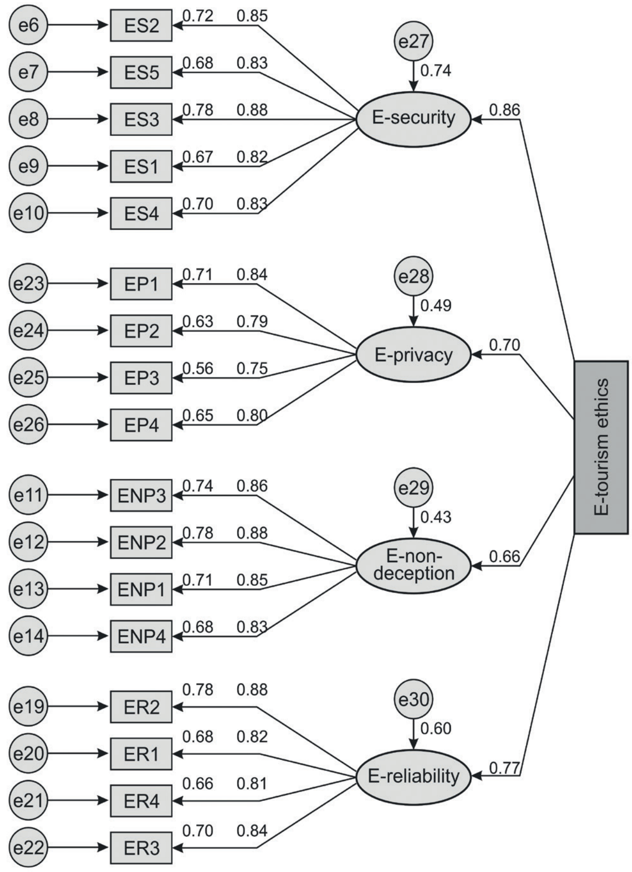

Figure 2. Second order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)
Source: authors

6.2. Analysis of measurement model (overall CFA)

The comprehensive measurement model encompassed three additional variables: e-satisfaction, which consisted of four items; e-web trust, comprising five items; and e-revisit intentions, featuring three items. Furthermore, the comprehensive measurement model encompassed e-tourism ethics, which consisted of four dimensions: e-security featuring five elements, e-reliability comprising three elements, e-privacy with four elements, and e-non-deception also with four elements. The investigation utilized a measurement model that included seven first-order constructs and one second-order construct, specifically e-tourism ethics, all of which were interconnected. The criteria for model evaluation encompassed absolute fit indices like CMIN/*df*, GFI, RMSEA and RMSR, in addition to incremental and relative fit indices such as TLI, CFI, and IFI. Alongside the chi-square statistic, various other indices of goodness of fit, including CFI, IFI, GFI, AGFI and RMSEA, were employed to assess the model's fit. The values of $\chi^2 = 684.227$; $df = 367$; CMIN/$df = 1.864$; CFI = 0.966; IFI = 0.967; GFI = 0.902; and RMSEA = 0.045 indicate that the data for the model fit were assessed, leading to an evaluation of the overall measurement model. Therefore, it suggests an appropriate alignment for the model. The remaining psychometric properties of the scale were assessed regarding reliability and validity.

Table 3 demonstrates that the composite reliability (*CR*) values for all constructs in the proposed model exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Koufteros, 1999). Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were above the benchmark of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), confirming the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs. Additionally, the square roots of the AVE values were found to be greater than the correlations among the constructs, further validating their discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The comprehensive findings of the CFA are presented in Tables 3 and 4 while as the overall results of CFA are shown in Figure 3.

Table 4. Discriminant validity results

Construct	*CR*	AVE	E-revisit intentions	E-web trust	E-satisfaction	E-tourism ethics
E-revisit intentions	0.820	0.603	0.777	–	–	–
E-web trust	0.939	0.754	0.352	0.868	–	–
E-satisfaction	0.910	0.723	0.242	0.241	0.850	–
E-tourism ethics	0.837	0.564	0.130	0.098	0.033	0.751

Note: *CR* – composite reliability, AVE – average variance extracted.
Source: authors.

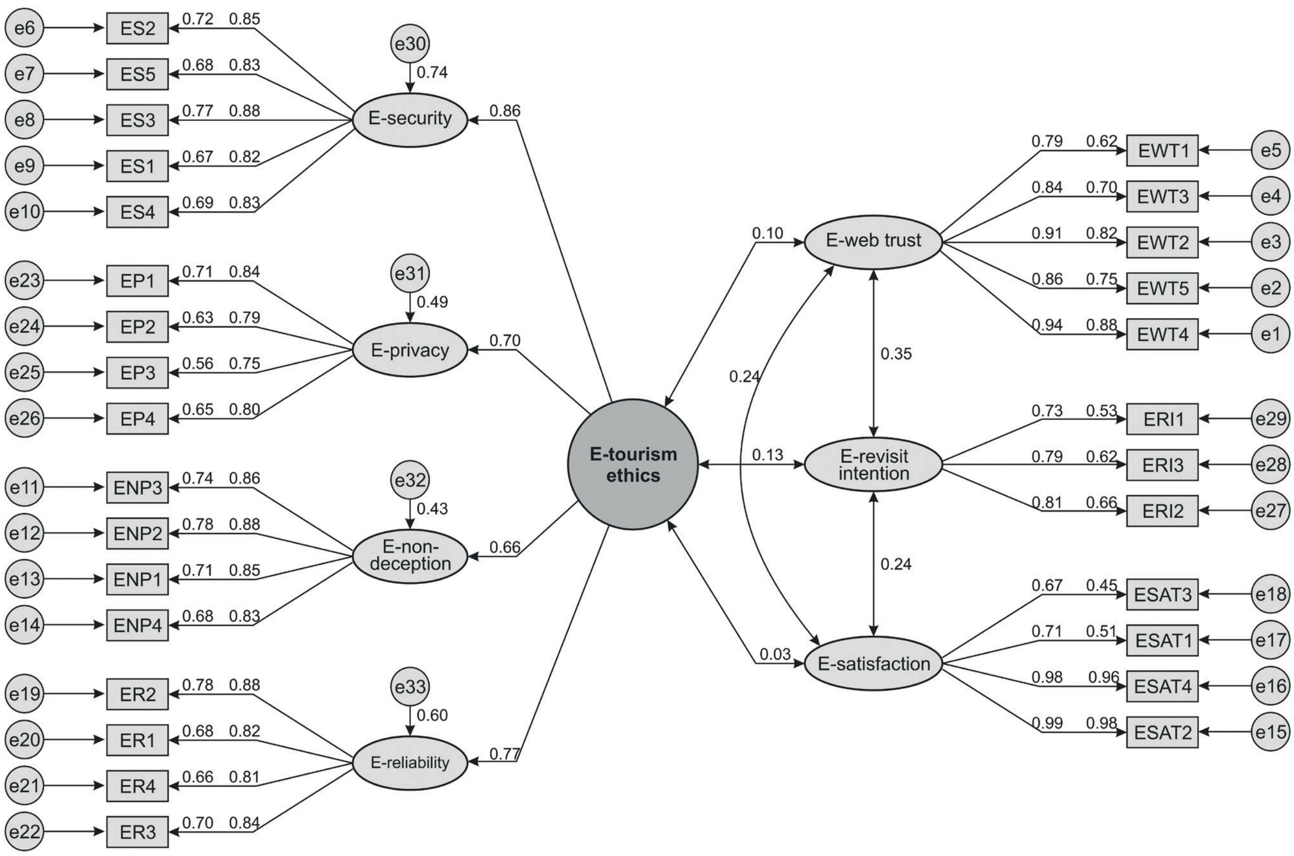

Figure 3. Overall confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results
Source: authors

6.3. Hypotheses testing

Following the CFA, the subsequent phase involves testing the hypotheses utilizing SEM with AMOS software. The results indicated that e-tourism ethics positively influences e-satisfaction ($\beta = 0.27$; $p < 0.05$); e-tourism ethics also affect e-web trust ($\beta = 0.24$; $p < 0.05$); further, e-tourism ethics contributes to e-revisit intentions ($\beta = 0.19$; $p < 0.05$); and e-web trust impacts e-revisit intentions ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.05$). Additionally, the findings reveal a significant positive relationship between e-revisit intentions and e-satisfaction ($\beta = 0.18$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, hypotheses H_1, H_2, H_3, H_4 and H_5 all received support. A summary of the hypotheses results is presented in Table 5, while the outcomes of the structural equation modelling and the path coefficients are illustrated in Figure 4.

Table 5. Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses		Estimate	Results
H_1	E-tourism ethics → e-satisfaction	0.27	Supported
H_2	E-tourism ethics → e-web trust	0.24	Supported
H_3	E-tourism ethics → e-revisit intentions	0.19	Supported
H_4	E-web trust → e-revisit intentions	0.29	Supported
H_5	E-satisfaction → e-revisit intentions	0.18	Supported

Source: authors.

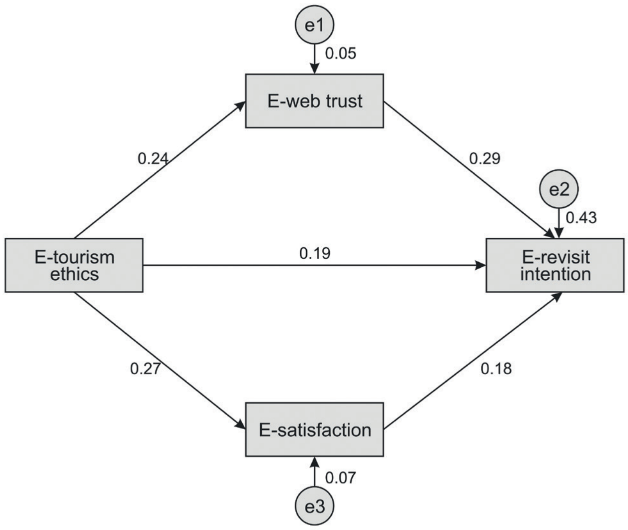

Figure 4. The estimated SEM path model
Source: authors

6.4. Mediation results

The model examined the mediating roles of 'e-web trust' and 'e-satisfaction' in the relationship between 'e-tourism ethics' and 'e-revisit intentions'. The findings revealed a significant direct effect of 'e-tourism ethics' on 'e-revisit intentions' ($\beta = 0.19$; $p < 0.05$). Additionally, the total effects of 'e-web trust' and 'e-satisfaction 'on 'e-revisit intentions' were also found to be significant. The study further demonstrated significant indirect effects of 'e-web trust' ($\beta = 0.069$; $p < 0.05$) and 'e-satisfaction' ($\beta = 0.04$; $p < 0.05$), indicating partial mediation by these variables in the relationship between 'e-tourism ethics' and 'e-revisit intentions'. These results validated hypotheses 6 and 7.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The study's findings provide useful insights into the correlation between e-tourist ethics, e-satisfaction, e-web trust and e-revisit intentions within the tourism sector. The findings presented enhance our comprehension of the influence of ethical considerations in e-tourism on visitor satisfaction and the probability of further visits. The study revealed a statistically significant and positive correlation between e-tourism ethics and e-satisfaction ($\beta = 0.27$; $p < 0.05$). This finding is consistent with prior studies conducted in the realm of tourism ethics, which have underscored the significance of ethical conduct and responsible business strategies in augmenting tourist satisfaction.

Additionally, the research findings indicate a statistically significant and positive association between e-tourism ethics and e-web trust ($\beta = 0.24$; $p < 0.05$). This finding aligns with prior research that emphasizes the positive relationship between ethical conduct in the online tourism sector and the establishment of trust among travellers. In addition, the results of the study demonstrated a significant impact of e-tourism ethics on e-revisit intentions ($\beta = 0.19$; $p < 0.05$). This highlights the significant influence of ethical factors on tourists' inclinations to revisit a particular area or engage again in online tourism services, aligning with the research conducted by Román (2007). Additionally, the research findings revealed a significant correlation between e-web trust and e-revisit intentions ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.05$) aligning with previous scholarly investigations on the significance of trust in the context of e-tourism. It underscores the notion that tourists who place faith in online platforms and service providers tend to exhibit a higher inclination to engage in repeat visits.

The findings of the analysis also revealed a significant association between e-revisit intentions and e-satisfaction ($\beta = 0.18$; $p < 0.05$), providing further support to the notion that contented visitors are more likely to revisit a place or engage with e-tourism services again. Furthermore, the results of the study indicated that there were notable direct impacts of e-tourism ethics on e-revisit intentions ($\beta = 0.19$; $p < 0.05$). This emphasizes the significant impact of ethical considerations on tourists' intentions to engage in repeat visits, hence emphasizing the imperative for firms to promote ethical standards in their operational strategies (Chang et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the study underscored the substantial overall impact of e-web trust and e-satisfaction on e-revisit intentions, hence the collective significance of these factors on tourists' intentions. The study additionally presented findings that suggest a partial mediation effect of e-web trust and e-satisfaction in the association between e-tourism ethics and e-revisit intentions. This implies that ethical considerations indirectly influence individuals' intentions to revisit e-tourism platforms through the intermediating factors of trust and satisfaction. The discovery highlights the interconnectedness of these variables in influencing tourists' choices to engage in repeat visits, in accordance with the theoretical framework.

To summarize, the findings of this study emphasize the significance of e-tourism ethics, e-web trust and e-satisfaction in shaping visitors' intentions to engage in repeat visits. Moreover, these results provide insights into the intricate connections between these variables. These findings offer significant insights for professionals operating within the tourist industry, underscoring the importance of ethical conduct and trust-building approaches in order to augment consumer satisfaction and foster return visits. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to the long-term viability and sustainability of the e-tourism sector.

8. Managerial implications

The findings of this research carry significant managerial implications for companies working within the e-tourism industry. The prioritization of e-tourism ethics is of utmost importance as it has a direct impact on consumer satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat visits. It is imperative for tourism enterprises to develop and effectively convey unambiguous ethical principles and protocols, encompassing environmental stewardship and equitable treatment of indigenous populations, in order to foster confidence and loyalty among their clientele in the digital realm.

Moreover, the research underscores the importance of e-web trust in shaping travelers' inclinations to engage in repeat visits. It is imperative for online tourist platforms and service providers to allocate resources towards establishing and preserving trust with their clientele through the implementation of secure transaction systems, provision of transparent information and delivery of dependable services. Trust-building tactics, such as the utilization of consumer evaluations and testimonials, can significantly impact the establishment and maintenance of trust in various contexts.

Furthermore, it is imperative for organizations to acknowledge the interconnectedness between e-revisit intention and e-satisfaction. It is imperative to prioritize the improvement of the whole consumer experience, as contented tourists exhibit a higher propensity to engage in repeat visits. This may encompass enhancing the caliber of services, immediately addressing consumer grievances, and providing tailored experiences that respond to individual tastes. Furthermore, the research outcomes pertaining to the indirect impacts of e-tourism ethics on e-revisit intention, mediated by e-web trust and e-satisfaction, underscore the interdependence of these variables. In order to increase the probability of return visits, it is advisable for managers to embrace a comprehensive approach that encompasses ethics, trust-building and satisfaction enhancement.

9. Theoretical implications and practical implications

The findings presented in this work have significant theoretical implications that add to the greater understanding of e-tourism and consumer behavior. The study highlights the importance of ethical considerations within the domain of e-tourism. The topic of ethics has been extensively discussed in the existing body of tourism literature. However, this particular study contributes to the field by presenting empirical evidence that demonstrates the direct influence of ethics on e-satisfaction and e-revisit intentions in the context of e-tourism. Consequently, this research enhances our theoretical comprehension of the significance of ethics in the realm of electronic tourism. Furthermore, the results of this study contribute to the current body of theoretical knowledge by emphasizing the intermediary functions of e-web trust and e-satisfaction in the association between e-tourism ethics and e-revisit intentions. This study proposes that trust and satisfaction serve as channels through which ethical considerations impact consumer behavior, offering a more holistic understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

Moreover, this works serves to strengthen the significance of trust within the realm of e-tourism, thereby harmonizing with existing trust-related ideas found in the domains of e-commerce and online service literature. The present study suggests that trust continues to play a crucial role in shaping tourists' intentions, and this finding is applicable in the domain of e-tourism as well. In summary, this research contributes to the development of our theoretical comprehension of ethical considerations, trust dynamics, satisfaction levels and intentions to revisit inside the realm of e-tourism. The empirical evidence supports the notion that there is a strong connection between these aspects. Furthermore, it provides a more detailed understanding of how ethical issues influence consumer behavior within the digital tourism industry. These findings contribute to the continuing academic discussion in the subject of tourism and e-commerce, and can serve as a basis for researchers to conduct future investigations into the intricate dynamics of consumer behavior in the context of e-tourism.

The findings have important ramifications for companies involved in e-tourism. Transparent and honest marketing techniques are examples of ethical marketing initiatives that might increase potential visitors' confidence and trustworthiness. By quickly resolving ethical issues, consumer relationship management systems can track and enhance client satisfaction. Enhancing client happiness and loyalty may be achieved through the utilization of smart tourism technology (STT) to offer customized and ethical travel experiences. Creating online tourism goods that put ethical factors like security and privacy first might also draw in morally conscientious tourists. E-tourism companies may stand out in a crowded market by implementing these useful apps, which will foster long-term client loyalty and steady growth. This method closes the current research gap and offers a thorough framework for integrating moral principles into marketing plans and the creation of online travel products.

10. Limitations and directions for future study

Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize the quantitative study's constraints. Future work could use moderation approaches to look at how moderators affect the connection between the quality of e-services and intentions to return. Additionally, other variables that can affect the relationship between 'e-service quality' and 'revisit intention' ought to have been taken into account. Future research may take into account the mediation of e-loyalty, which was not examined here.

Due to differences in geography, culture and other factors, this study is restricted to the tourism business in Kashmir and cannot be generalized to other states or nations. The findings might only be relevant in the particular setting of Kashmir's tourism business. Both CFA and PLS-SEM were used as statistical methods in the current investigation. Future research utilizing more cutting-edge statistical techniques, such as PLS-predict, blinding, neural networks and IPMA, may help to better understand the proposed model. To ascertain the significance of the variables between males and females, *t*-tests and chi-square tests could be carried out.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.10 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

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2025, *35*(1)

Tourism eco-efficiency: Progress and prospect

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How to cite (APA style): Rahawarin, M.F., Mizuno, K., & Karuniasa, M. (2025). Tourism eco-efficiency: Progress and prospect. *Turyzm/Tourism*, *35*(1), 175–192. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.10

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse relevant literature on tourism eco-efficiency which has arrived since this terminology was proposed almost two decades ago. This study was conducted using bibliometric analysis based on literature findings from the Scopus database, filtered by the ROSES framework, which resulted in a collection of 99 articles between 2005 and 2023, further analysed using the Biblioshiny package in R. We conducted five analyses, including general and source-based – to explore the most relevant and impactful journals, author-based – to highlight the most frequently cited productive researchers, and country-based – to identify those with consistent research networks and an abundant output on related topics. Additionally, there was keyword-based – emphasizing the evolution of tourism eco-efficiency discourse over time. This keyword-based analysis is further divided into factorial – clustered keywords; and thematic – grouping keywords into quadrants offering retrospective insight and identifying unexplored topics for future research. The findings of this study propose valuable insights into the topic of tourism eco-efficiency and propose further research directions, including those on spatial analysis, tourism spillover effects, integration with environmental regulations and interdisciplinary collaborations.

KEYWORDS

tourism eco-efficiency, bibliometrics analysis, systematic review

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
4 May 2024
Accepted:
2 December 2024
Published:
9 June 2025

1. Introduction

Global tourism activities have significantly increased during the past seventy years. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2025), stated that the number of international tourists has increased significantly from 25.2 million per year in the 1950s to 1.46 billion in 2019, while the World Bank Group (2019) reports an increase in numbers from 1.08 billion per year in 1995 to 2.4 billion in 2019. It is undeniable that the far-reaching impact of tourism encompasses environmental sustainability, profoundly manifested through emissions and ecological footprints.

Funding information: School of Environmental Science Universitas Indonesia via Internal Grant PKS-0018/UN2.F13.D1/PPM.01.04/2023.
Conflicts of interests: None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

The intensifying global tourism industry is expected to generate up to 8% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) output (Lenzen et al., 2018). This harmful trend adversely affects air quality, deterring tourist inflow into host countries and nearby regions (Su & Lee, 2022), while simultaneously worsening the ecological footprint in tourist-destination countries. An alarming revelation about the environmental impact is shown while examining the top ten countries with the highest number of international tourist arrivals (Li et al., 2022; Nathaniel et al., 2021), it highlights the negative consequences of global tourism activities. Furthermore, global tourism activities also contribute significantly to solid waste generation (Zambrano-Monserrate et al., 2021), its footprint produced by global tourism activities is approximately 11.2 billion tonnes per year, which contributes to 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.). Consequently, global attention toward tourism that prioritizes a balance between social, economic and environmental dimensions – commonly referred to as sustainable tourism – continues to grow. As a concept, sustainable tourism does not stand on its own; it is intertwined with other relevant terminologies, such as ecotourism (Prerana et al., 2024), green tourism, blue tourism, circular tourism (Niñerola et al., 2019), and even recently, the emerging framework of regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2022). Amidst the variance of sustainable tourism derivative terms, one topic that receives significant focus is tourism eco-efficiency.

As a concept, tourism eco-efficiency is initially based on environmental efficiency as proposed by Freeman et al. (1973) and emphasized further by Schaltegger and Sturm (1990) as ecological efficiency or eco-efficiency. It was then defined by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2000, p. 3) as "providing goods and services at competitive prices to fulfil human needs and improve quality of life while striving to minimize ecological impact and resource use following the Earth's carrying capacity". Tourism eco-efficiency as a phrase or term, on the other hand, was coined by Gössling et al. (2005), based on a viewpoint that aims to balance economics and an environment that operates from macro to micro levels (Yang et al., 2008) focusing on an array of composite indicators. It suggests a method to improve the effectiveness of utilizing natural resources for economic purposes (Kytzia et al., 2011), including utilization of energy, water and other material expenses as input with their inherent consequences and externalities on the environment, both natural and built (Kelly & Williams, 2007), and in supply chain interactions (Xia et al., 2022).

This study aims to analyse the idea of tourism eco-efficiency which was established in 2005 aiming to include bibliometric analysis procedures as methods used in the process and further the comprehensive review of the results. It will then provide a detailed understanding of the present research landscape on tourism eco-efficiency and pinpoint promising areas for future research.

2. Data and methods

The work employs bibliometric analysis. A thorough search of the Scopus database was conducted, following a process aligned with the reporting standards for systematic evidence syntheses (ROSES), recommended by Haddaway et al. (2018) designed for reviews in conservation and environmental management using bibliometric analysis. This is executed through a comprehensive performance evaluation and mapping procedure (Donthu et al., 2021), facilitated by the adept utilization of Bibliometrix (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), an R-based package known for its flexibility and robustness, surpassing its counterpart, Vosviewer, in performance evaluation and mapping procedures (Arruda et al., 2022). Biblioshiny, an extension of

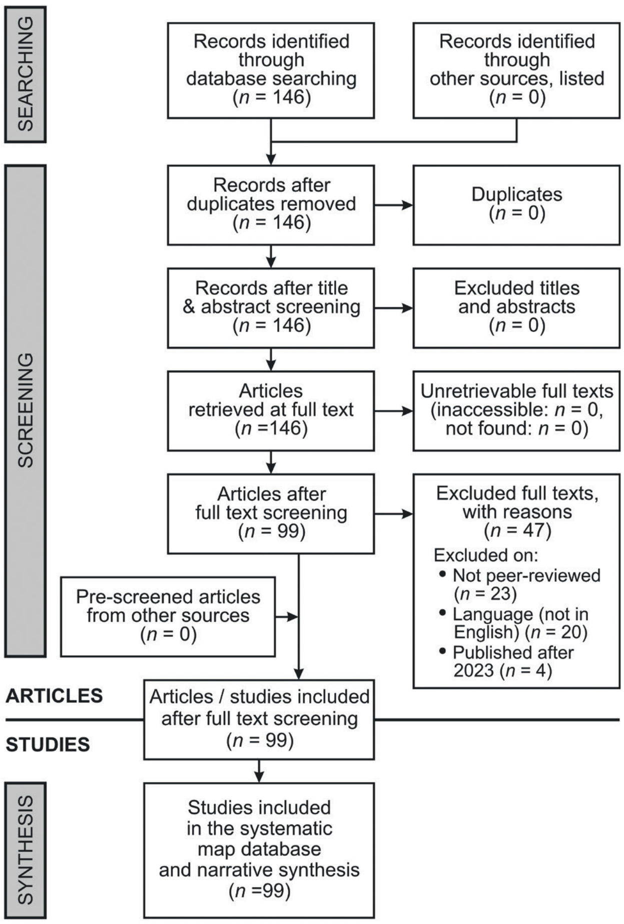

Figure 1. Location of Sarawak
Source: authors

Bibliometrix, stands out for its user-friendly interface and ability to create several visualization formats, providing helpful insights for further study (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020).

An extensive search was carried out on the Scopus database focusing on titles, abstracts and keywords employing the following search criteria: tourism AND eco-efficient*, OR ecoefficient*, OR "ecological efficient*". The search resulted in a total of 146 publications, including 125 peer-reviewed articles, 11 conference proceedings, five books, and five book series. Subsequent refinement of the dataset filters it down to peer-reviewed articles that were published before 2024. Furthermore, the articles published were also reduced to only those in English and excluded articles in Chinese (19), Finnish (1) and Spanish (1). After screening, 99 peer-reviewed articles then went undergo rigorous bibliometric analysis. The filtering and article selection process is carefully guided by the ROSES flow diagram was for systematic maps (Haddaway et al., 2017), as depicted in the following Figure 1.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. General findings

The analysis of 99 publications using Biblioshiny revealed that they were sourced from 52 journals and collectively they produced 3995 citations, averaging 40.35 citations per article. The general findings also suggest that the typical article has a publication age of about five years and in this time there has been a notable rise in publications focusing on tourism eco-efficiency. Figure 2 illustrates this increase, with the number of articles published after 2019 surpassing the average annual publication rate of previous periods. Some even had zero between 2009 and 2015. The general findings also indicate that together all papers employed a substantial number of references, totalling 4956. Keywords plus (ID)-based keywords come to 573, much surpassing author's keywords (DE) which totalled 329. Furthermore, out of 277 authors who contributed to the publications, only nine were single authors, while the remaining 268 collaborated in groups to write the other 90, with an average of 3.7 co-authors for each. The engagement in collaborative writing, however, is not matched by opportunities for international cooperation among authors, with only 22.5% of international co-authorship taking place throughout the analysis period of the 99 papers discussed. The general findings are shown in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1. General findings on articles selection

Main information	
Timespan	2005–2023
Sources (journals)	52
Articles	99
Annual growth rate (%)	18.11
Articles average age	5.16
Total citations	3995
Average citations per article	40.35
References	4956
Keywords plus (ID)	573
Author's keywords (DE)	329
Authors	277

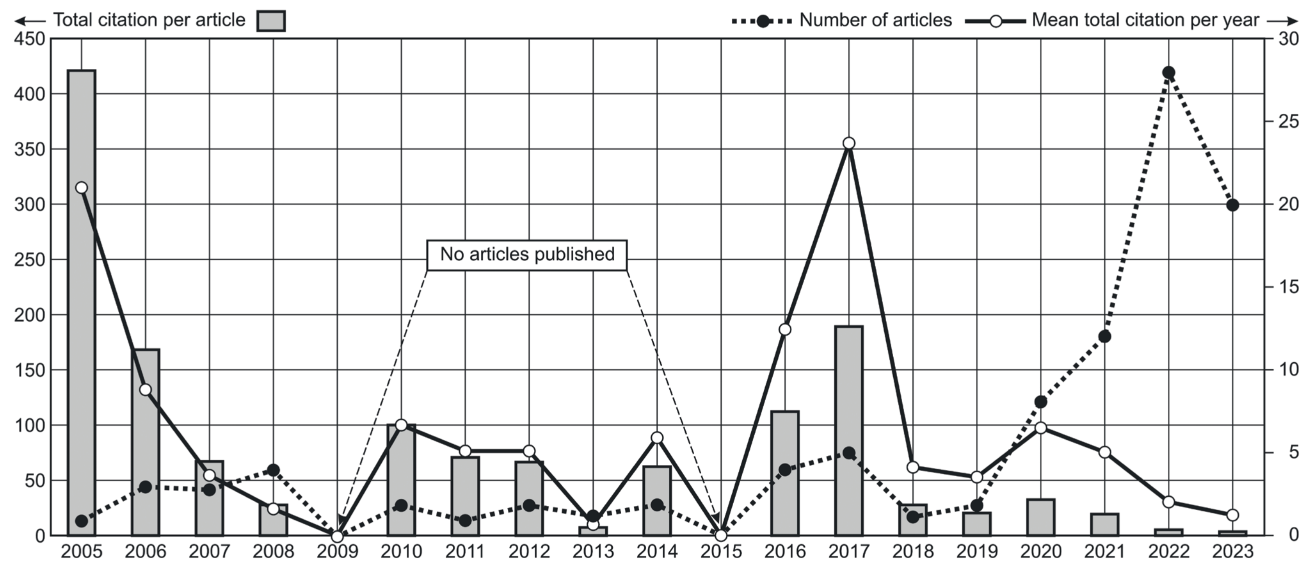

Figure 2. Articles and citations
Source: authors

Table 1 (cont.)

Main information	
Single-authored articles	9
Multiple authors articles	90
Co-authors per articles	3.74
International co-authorships (%)	22.5

Source: authors.

3.2. Source-based analysis

The 99 articles were sourced from a total of 52 publications. Specifically, 36 originated from a single journal source, while the remaining 63 were distributed among 16 different sources. Figure 3 displays Bradford's law framework (Bradford, 1934), categorizing the 52 current journal sources into three zones (Brookes, 1969; Shenton & Hay-Gibson, 2009). Zone 1, referred to as core sources, consists of five journals; zone 2, known as the intermediate domain, includes 15 journals, four of which published only one article; zone 3 includes 32 journals, each of which produced only one article. Table 2 provides a list of journals categorized under the three zones, including the publishers' origin and the number published during the period of analysis. Elsevier is the leading publisher with 15 journals contributing a total of 28 articles while MDPI follows closely, with six journals publishing 26 articles on average in the past two years.

The classification carried out according to Bradford's law is only decided by the number of articles and does not represent relevancies or impacts. Analysis from Biblioshiny also assesses the relevance of journal sources by considering the number of articles per source journal, while the impact is evaluated using the citations number from the source journals and the average number of citations per article in that journal.

Table 3 shows the 15 journal sources with the highest number of articles that correlate with Bradford's law, all of which fall into zones 1 and 2. On the other hand, Table 4 presents the impact of 15 articles, however, this does not strictly align with Bradford's law due to variations in the number of source journals from different zones and the inconsistent correlation between the number of articles produced by each source journal and their impact based on citations. This is shown by the numbers in zone 1 (two source journals) and zone 2 (five), compared to those from zone 3 (eight). We highlight six journal sources in the Table 3 and Table 4 with shared categorize as relevant and important, including *Ecological Economics*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Tourism Management*, *Waste Management* and *Current Issues in Tourism*.

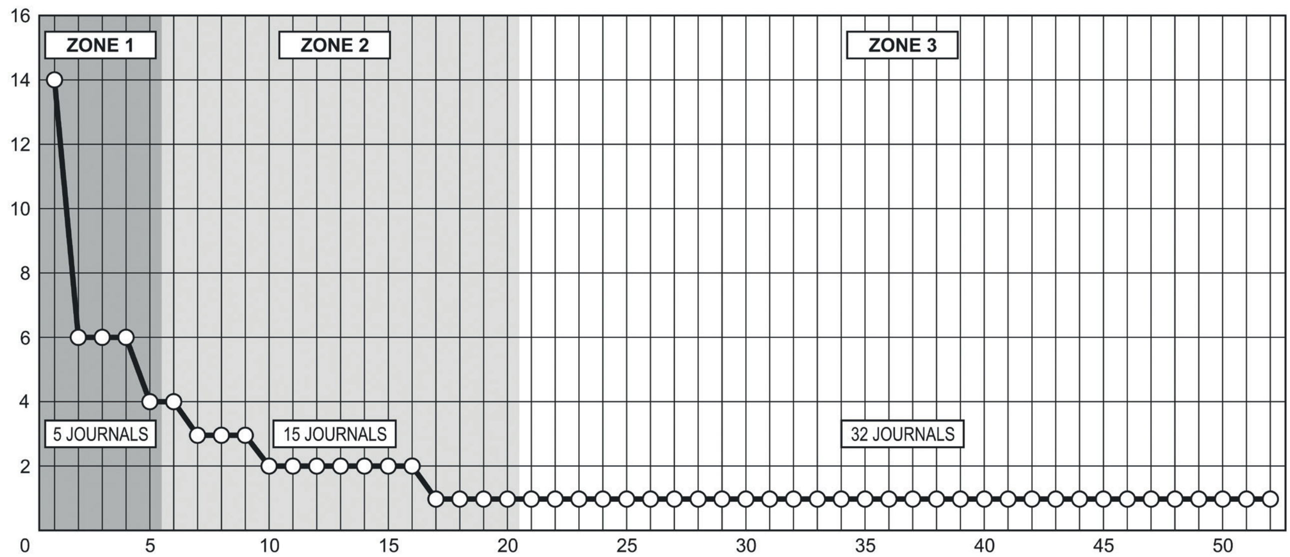

Figure 3. Bradford's law
Source: authors

Table 2. List of sources based on Bradford's law

Rank	Sources	Publishers	Articles published	Zone
1	*Sustainability*	MDPI	14	1
2	*International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*	MDPI	6	
3	*Journal of Cleaner Production*	Elsevier	6	
4	*Tourism Management*	Elsevier	6	
5	*Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*	ASERS	4	

6	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*	Taylor & Francis	4	2
7	*Environmental Science and Pollution Research*	Springer	3	
8	*Forests*	MDPI	3	
9	*Frontiers in Environmental Science*	Frontiers	3	
10	*Current Issues in Tourism*	Taylor & Francis	2	
11	*Ecological Economics*	Elsevier	2	
12	*Environment, Development and Sustainability*	Springer	2	
13	*Journal of Environmental Management*	Elsevier	2	
14	*Journal of Environmental Protection and Ecology*	Scibulcom	2	
15	*Waste Management*	Elsevier	2	
16	*Waste Management and Research*	SAGE	2	
17	*Acta Ecologica Sinica* (now *Ecological Frontiers*)	Elsevier	1	
18	*Applied Ecology and Environmental Research*	ALÖKI Institute	1	
19	*Arabian Journal of Geosciences*	Springer	1	
20	*Clean Technologies and Environmental Policy*	Springer	1	
21	*Ecological Informatics*	Elsevier	1	3
22	*Economies*	MDPI	1	
23	*Energies*	MDPI	1	
24	*Engineering Reports*	Wiley	1	
25	*Environmental Impact Assessment Review*	Elsevier	1	
26	*Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*	Springer	1	
27	*Environmental Science and Policy*	Elsevier	1	
28	*Frontiers in Public Health*	Frontiers	1	
29	*International Journal of Low-Carbon Technologies*	Oxford University Press	1	
30	*International Journal of Services, Technology and Management*	Inderscience	1	
31	*International Journal of Sustainable Engineering*	Taylor & Francis	1	
32	*Journal of Coastal Research*	BioOne	1	
33	*Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management*	World Scientific	1	
34	*Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing*	Taylor & Francis	1	
35	*Journal of Travel Research*	SAGE	1	
36	*Land*	MDPI	1	
37	*Landscape and Urban Planning*	Elsevier	1	
38	*Leisure/Loisir*	Taylor & Francis	1	
39	*Mathematical Problems in Engineering*	Hindawi	1	
40	*Ocean and Coastal Management*	Elsevier	1	
41	*PLoS ONE*	PLOS	1	
42	*Portuguese Economic Journal*	Springer	1	
43	*Research in Transportation Economics*	Elsevier	1	
44	*Scientific Programming*	Hindawi	1	
45	*Scientific Reports*	Nature	1	
46	*Social Responsibility Journal*	Emerald	1	
47	*Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*	Elsevier	1	
48	*Sustainable Development*	Wiley	1	
49	*Tourism Economics*	SAGE	1	
50	*Tourism Planning and Development*	Taylor & Francis	1	
51	*Travel Behaviour and Society*	Elsevier	1	
52	*Urban Forestry and Urban Greening*	Elsevier	1	

Source: authors.

Table 3. Most relevant sources

No.	Sources	Articles published	Citations	Impact (citations per article)	Zone	Publisher
1.	*Sustainability*	14	188	13.43	Zone 1	MDPI
2.	***Journal of Cleaner Production***	6	1044	174.00	Zone 1	Elsevier
3.	***Tourism Management***	6	548	91.33	Zone 1	Elsevier
4.	*International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*	6	47	7.83	Zone 1	MDPI
5.	***Journal of Sustainable Tourism***	4	554	138.50	Zone 2	Taylor & Francis
6.	*Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*	4	4	1.00	Zone 1	ASERS
7.	*Environmental Science and Pollution Research*	3	75	25.00	Zone 2	Springer
8.	*Forests*	3	16	5.33	Zone 2	MDPI
9.	*Frontiers in Environmental Science*	3	16	5.33	Zone 2	Frontiers
10.	***Ecological Economics***	2	436	218.00	Zone 2	Elsevier
11.	***Waste Management***	2	76	38.00	Zone 2	Elsevier
12.	***Current Issues in Tourism***	2	67	33.50	Zone 2	Taylor & Francis
13.	*Journal of Environmental Management*	2	32	16.00	Zone 2	Elsevier
14.	*Waste Management and Research*	2	7	3.50	Zone 2	SAGE
15.	*Environment, Development and Sustainability*	2	7	3.50	Zone 2	Springer

Note: highlighted in bold are six journals with most articles published and highest citations per article.
Source: authors.

Table 4. Most impactful source

No.	Sources	Impact (citations per article)	Citations	Articles published	Zone	Publisher
1.	***Ecological Economics***	218.00	436	2	Zone 2	Elsevier
2.	***Journal of Cleaner Production***	174.00	1044	6	Zone 1	Elsevier
3.	*Environmental Science and Policy*	161.00	161	1	Zone 3	Elsevier
4.	***Journal of Sustainable Tourism***	138.50	554	4	Zone 2	Taylor & Francis
5.	*Ocean and Coastal Management*	130.00	130	1	Zone 3	Elsevier
6.	***Tourism Management***	91.33	548	6	Zone 1	Elsevier
7.	*Environmental Impact Assessment Review*	91.00	91	1	Zone 3	Elsevier
8.	*Landscape and Urban Planning*	79.00	79	1	Zone 3	Elsevier
9.	*Acta Ecologica Sinica* (now *Ecological Frontiers*)	49.00	49	1	Zone 2	Elsevier
10.	*Journal of Travel Research*	49.00	49	1	Zone 3	SAGE
11.	*Research in Transportation Economics*	43.00	43	1	Zone 3	Elsevier
12.	***Waste Management***	38.00	76	2	Zone 2	Elsevier
13.	***Current Issues in Tourism***	33.50	67	2	Zone 2	Taylor & Francis
14.	*Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*	29.00	29	1	Zone 3	Elsevier
15.	*Journal of Coastal Research*	29.00	29	1	Zone 3	BioOne

Note: highlighted in bold are six journals with highest citations per article and most articles published.
Source: authors.

3.3. Author-based analysis

The articles were analysed for their impact by examining citations, which are categorized as local or global. Local citations refer to the number that a specific article received from the 98 others included in the analysis. Global citations, on the other hand, refer to the total number received by an individual article. What makes this analysis intriguing is that there is overlap between the two groups from both a local and a global viewpoint, as well as contrasting pieces. This indicates that content has a high number of global citations but very few, or even no, local citations. These citations are not displayed appropriately in Biblioshiny when analysing data using the most recent database, as opposed to the older one. We conducted data scraping from the list of 4956 co-citation references and performed the calculations individually.

The results are shown in Table 5 and Table 6. Table 5 displays 15 articles with the highest number of global citations, ranging from 79 to 600 indicating that four focusing on the global issue but have very few mentions in local contexts: D'Amato et al. (2017), Scheepens et al. (2016), Lynes and Dredge (2006) and García-Melón et al. (2012). The article by D'Amato et al. (2017) briefly touches on eco-efficiency in tourism, highlighting its criticisms of consumption incentives and promoting regenerative solutions within a circular economy and bioeconomic frameworks. The connections between eco-efficiency in tourism and its relationship with the notion of the circular economy were also discussed by Scheepens et al. (2016) in their study on water-based tourism. Lynes and Dredge (2006) and García-Melón et al. (2012), on the other hand, briefly discussed eco-efficiency in the aeroplane industry and resorts as part of tourism.

Table 5. Most global citations

Author(s)	Global citations	Citations per year	Local to global citations ratio (%)	Article title	Source/Journal	Publisher
D'Amato et al. (2017)	600	75.00	0.50	Green, circular, bio economy: A comparative analysis of sustainability avenues	*Journal of Cleaner Production*	Elsevier
Gössling et al. (2005)	**422**	**21.10**	**10.43**	**The eco-efficiency of tourism**	***Ecological Economics***	**Elsevier**
Scheepens et al. (2016)	254	28.22	0.79	Two life cycle assessment (LCA) based methods to analyse and design complex (regional) circular economy systems: Case: Making water tourism more sustainable	*Journal of Cleaner Production*	Elsevier
Becken and Patterson (2006)	**246**	**12.95**	**4.47**	**Measuring national carbon dioxide emissions from tourism as a key step towards achieving sustainable tourism**	***Journal of Sustainable Tourism***	**Taylor & Francis**
Perch-Nielsen et al. (2010)	**161**	**10.73**	**6.83**	**The greenhouse gas intensity of the tourism sector: The case of Switzerland**	***Environmental Science and Policy***	**Elsevier**
Peeters and Schouten (2006)	**145**	**7.63**	**4.83**	**Reducing the ecological footprint of inbound tourism and transport to Amsterdam**	***Journal of Sustainable Tourism***	**Taylor & Francis**
Liu et al. (2017)	**130**	**16.25**	**16.15**	**Tourism eco-efficiency of Chinese coastal cities – analysis based on the DEA-Tobit model**	***Ocean and Coastal Management***	**Elsevier**
Kelly et al. (2007)	**129**	**7.17**	**10.08**	**Stated preferences of tourists for eco-efficient destination planning options**	***Tourism Management***	**Elsevier**
Lynes and Dredge (2006)	117	6.16	0.00	Going green: Motivations for environmental commitment in the airline industry: A case study of Scandinavian Airlines	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*	Taylor & Francis
Peng et al. (2017)	**112**	**14.00**	**25.00**	**Eco-efficiency and its determinants at a tourism destination: A case study of Huangshan National Park, China**	***Tourism Management***	**Elsevier**

Table 5 (cont.)

Author(s)	Global citations	Citations per year	Local to global citations ratio (%)	Article title	Source/Journal	Publisher
Sun (2016)	107	11.89	4.67	Decomposition of tourism greenhouse gas emissions: Revealing the dynamics between tourism economic growth, technological efficiency, and carbon emissions	*Tourism Management*	Elsevier
García-Melón et al. (2012)	91	7.00	0.00	A combined ANP-Delphi approach to evaluate sustainable tourism	*Environmental Impact Assessment Review*	Elsevier
Cadarso et al. (2016)	89	9.89	5.62	Calculating tourism's carbon footprint: Measuring the impact of investments	*Journal of Cleaner Production*	Elsevier
Becken (2008)	80	4.71	3.75	Developing indicators for managing tourism in the face of peak oil	*Tourism Management*	Elsevier
Tyrväinen et al. (2014)	79	7.18	1.27	Towards sustainable growth in nature-based tourism destinations: Clients' views of land use options in Finnish Lapland	*Landscape and Urban Planning*	Elsevier

Note: Highlighted in bold are seven articles with both high global and local citations.
Source: authors.

Table 6. Most local citations

Author(s)	Local citations	Local to global citations ratio (%)	Article title	Source/Journal	Publisher
Gössling et al. (2005)	**44**	**10.43**	**The eco-efficiency of tourism**	***Ecological Economics***	**Elsevier**
Peng et al. (2017)	**28**	**25.00**	**Eco-efficiency and its determinants at a tourism destination: A case study of Huangshan National Park, China**	***Tourism Management***	**Elsevier**
Liu et al. (2017)	**21**	**16.15**	**Tourism eco-efficiency of Chinese coastal cities – analysis based on the DEA-Tobit model**	***Ocean and Coastal Management***	**Elsevier**
Zha et al. (2020)	18	39.13	Eco-efficiency, eco-productivity, and tourism growth in China: a non-convex metafrontier DEA-based decomposition model	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*	Taylor & Francis
Qiu et al. (2017)	17	34,69	Tourism eco-efficiency measurement, characteristics, and its influence factors in China	*Sustainability*	MDPI
Kelly et al. (2007)	**13**	**10.08**	**Stated preferences of tourists for eco-efficient destination planning options**	***Tourism Management***	**Elsevier**
Becken and Patterson (2006)	**11**	**4.47**	**Measuring national carbon dioxide emissions from tourism as a key step towards achieving sustainable tourism**	***Journal of Sustainable Tourism***	**Taylor & Francis**
Perch-Nielsen et al. (2010)	**11**	**6.83**	**The greenhouse gas intensity of the tourism sector: The case of Switzerland**	***Environmental Science and Policy***	**Elsevier**

Kytzia et al. (2011)	10	13.89	How can tourism use land more efficiently? A model-based approach to land-use efficiency for tourist destinations	*Tourism Management*	Elsevier
Díaz-Villavicencio et al. (2017)	10	18.52	Influencing factors of eco-efficient urban waste management: Evidence from Spanish municipalities	*Journal of Cleaner Production*	Elsevier
Romano and Molinos-Senante (2020)	9	16.98	Factors affecting eco-efficiency of municipal waste services in Tuscan municipalities: An empirical investigation of different management models	*Waste Management*	Elsevier
Kelly and Williams (2007)	7	31.82	Tourism destination water management strategies: An eco-efficiency modelling approach	*Leisure/Loisir*	Taylor & Francis
Peeters and Schouten (2006)	**7**	**4.83**	**Reducing the ecological footprint of inbound tourism and transport to Amsterdam**	***Journal of Sustainable Tourism***	**Taylor & Francis**
Reilly et al. (2010)	7	16.28	Moving towards more eco-efficient tourist transportation to a resort destination: The case of Whistler, British Columbia	*Research in Transportation Economics*	Elsevier
Sun and Pratt (2014)	5	14.29	The economic, carbon emission, and water impacts of Chinese visitors to Taiwan: Eco-efficiency and impact evaluation	*Journal of Travel Research*	SAGE

Note: Highlighted in bold are seven articles with both high global and local citations.
Source: authors.

Further, seven articles are included in both tables which are significant within the topic of tourism eco-efficiency and for the broader scientific community. The articles consist of four significant publications that were released at the start of this topic's development: Gössling et al. (2005), Becken and Patterson (2006), Peeters and Schouten (2006) and Kelly et al. (2007), along with three additional articles by Perch-Nielsen et al. (2010), Liu et al. (2017) and Peng et al. (2017). Perch-Nielsen et al. (2010) published a significant article that examined both top-down and bottom-up approaches to GHG impacts on the tourism industry in Switzerland. On the other hand, Liu et al. (2017) and Peng et al. (2017) initiated a surge in articles on tourism eco-efficiency from China, some of which utilized the data envelopment analysis (DEA) method, the most implemented in this field. The seven articles are highlighted in bold font in both tables.

3.4. Country-based analysis

In the country-based analysis, we compiled each of the 10 countries with the highest productivity levels and impacts. Both are shown in Table 7 and Table 8 where China is the leading country in both categories, having published 59 articles with a total of 999 citations. However, there is a huge discrepancy between single country publications (SCP) and multiple country publications (MCP), indicating the rare involvement of authors from other countries. Spain and Chile were the second and third most prolific producers of papers, indicating a strong level of collaboration between them.

Table 7. Most productive countries

No.	Country	Single country publications (SCP)	Multiple country publications (MCP)	Articles	Total
1.	China	55	4	59	220
2.	Spain	3	3	6	30
3.	Chile	1	4	5	11
4.	Canada	3	1	4	10
5.	Switzerland	3	0	3	7
6.	Australia	1	1	2	3
7.	Finland	1	1	2	11
8.	Italy	1	1	2	4
9.	Netherlands	2	0	2	7
10.	New Zealand	2	0	2	4

Source: authors.

Table 8. Most impactful countries

No.	Country	Total citations (TC)	Average citations (AC)	Total citations in Vosviewer (TCV)
1.	China	999	16.9	892
2.	Finland	679	339.5	689
3.	Sweden	422	422.0	428
4.	Netherlands	399	199.5	829
5.	New Zealand	326	163.0	374
6.	Canada	311	77.8	311
7.	Switzerland	243	81.0	243
8.	Spain	215	35.8	245
9.	Australia	91	45.5	208
10.	Chile	81	16.2	142

Source: authors.

We also analysed the same data using Vosviewer as a comparison. From Vosviewer data, Germany, the United Kingdom, the USA, Italy and France should be included as the most impactful countries because they have a high number of citations as some of the authors are among the co-authors of Gössling et al. (2005). Four nations, excluding Italy, are classified as 'others' in the analysis of the most productive countries. This classification prevents the identification of the number of articles published by authors from or affiliated with institutions in these countries. Another important highlight is Taiwan which was identified as a contributor nation in Vosviewer but not in Biblioshiny. We suspect that this is because of the potential impact of the high number of articles coming from China in recent years.

We proceeded with the country-based network analysis, as depicted in Figure 4, categorizing the 22 countries into six clusters. The figure also confirms the preceding two paragraphs that China holds a prominent position as illustrated with a substantial node size. The strong connection between Spain and Chile is also highlighted by the thick line representing their relationship. On the other hand, according to the Biblioshiny data we analysed, 27 countries were expected to be identified, while the Vosviewer data revealed 29. Excluded from the network analysis were Kazakhstan, Peru, Portugal, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates. Taiwan and Hong Kong were identified in Vosviewer but not in Biblioshiny.

3.5. Keyword-based analysis

The keyword-based analysis covers comparable keywords typically seen in the context of tourism eco-efficiency. The analysis uses a clustering mechanism and a quadrant-based approach using keyword dynamics, particularly keyword plus, to obtain new insights. Keywords plus holds the largest number of keywords on a database, specifically 573. This conceptual structural analysis framework is categorized in two forms: factorial analysis and thematic analysis. Factorial analysis forms a cluster based on two dimensions using the correspondence analysis method, while theme analysis involves quadrant-based mapping, temporal change and a combination of both.

Figure 4. International collaboration networks
Source: authors

3.5.1. Factorial analysis

We conduct factorial analysis using the correspondence analysis method, which limits dimensions division to two, unlike multiple correspondence analysis, which splits into more than two dimensions. We further limit the number of words described to a maximum of 170 as this quantity is deemed sufficiently representative. Despite using up to 573 keywords, the analysis only included a set of 78 articles out of the total 99. We also divided the parameters into eight clusters whose distribution and division of these clusters are shown in Figure 5.

Cluster 1 in red consists of various keywords that discuss the intersection between the economy and the environment within the tourism sector. Some of the 51 keywords in this cluster are economic impact, environmental pollution, industrial development, sustainability, strategic approach and technological development. This cluster contains 36 publications, four of which are considered noteworthy in the works of Gössling et al. (2005), Becken and Patterson (2006), Perch-Nielsen et al. (2010) and Peng et al. (2017).

Cluster 2, denoted in blue, encompasses 37 keywords associated with conservation and environmental management in specific ecosystems, including conservation, artificial wetlands, parks, national parks, forest parks, river water, forest ecosystems and ecosystems. In addition, this cluster incorporates keywords on methodological frameworks utilized in environmental analysis, such as social network analysis, regression analysis, optimization, network and geographical analyses. Notable contributions within this cluster include works by Sun and Hou (2021), Wang et al. (2022) and Guo et al. (2022) among the 12 articles.

Cluster 3 (green) mostly highlighted efficiency-related analysis, particularly with various techniques based on the process of measurement or assessment. The widely used DEA and stochastic-based techniques, e.g. stochastic frontier analysis (SFA), are among the techniques listed. There are only three articles in this cluster: Liu et al. (2017), one of the significant articles, and Díaz-Villavicencio et al. (2017) with Sala-Garrido et al. (2022) which are closely related to the following cluster on the topic of waste management in tourism.

As its name implies, cluster 4 (purple) displays 24 terms associated with waste management as an undesirable output in tourism eco-efficiency as well as a function of population dynamics. Additionally, two country keywords – Spain and Chile – with studies that most frequently address this subtopic are included in cluster 4. The six studies in this cluster are Romano and Molinos-Senante (2020), Llanquileo-Melgarejo and Molinos-Senante (2021), Delgado-Antequera et al. (2021), Molinos-Senante et al. (2023a, 2023b) and Sala-Garrido et al. (2023).

The discussion in the next cluster 5 (orange) is more focused on tourist destinations as markets, including their relevance to tourist management and behaviour. Several of the 18 keywords in this cluster are typically names of places or tourist destinations, such as Asia or Europe, and a few nations like Taiwan and Switzerland. This cluster contains eleven articles including Peeters and Schouten (2006), Kelly et al. (2007), Lynes and Dredge (2006), and Sun (2016).

Even though there are just 14 keywords dispersed throughout cluster 6 (brown), it has a larger coverage

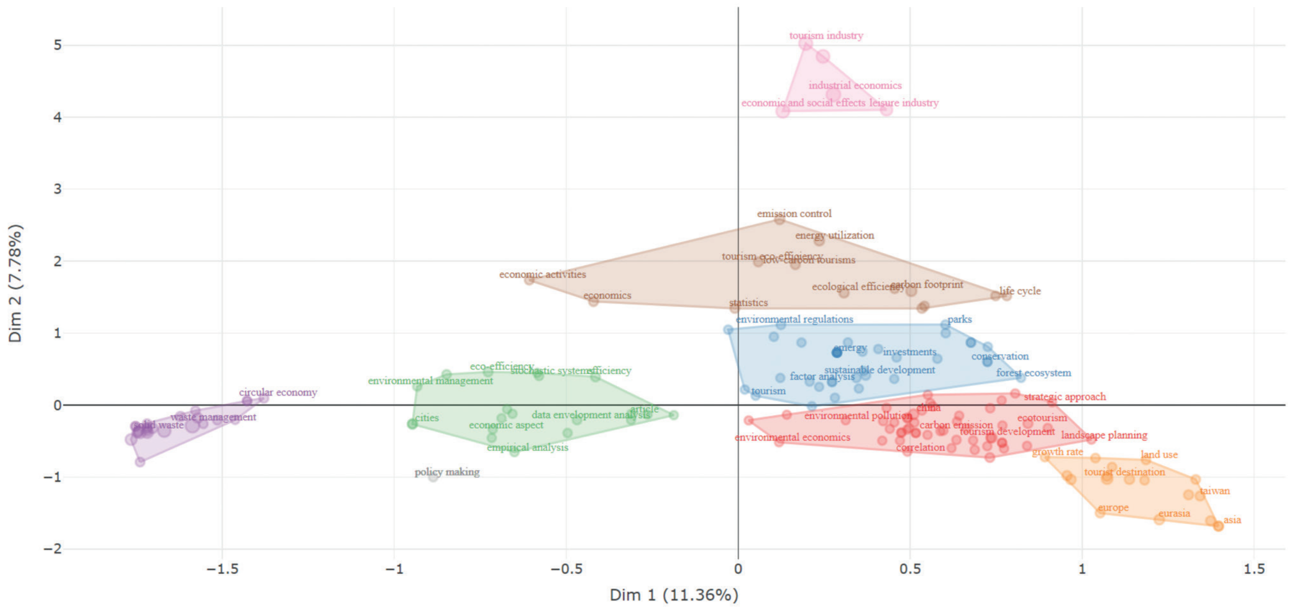

Figure 5. Factorial analysis
Source: authors

area than the others. This cluster frequently includes themes like energy utilization, low-carbon tourism, ecological efficiency and others that deal with the relationship between the economy and the environment. This cluster consists of eight publications, including D'Amato et al. (2017), Scheepens et al. (2016) and García-Melón et al. (2012) which have received high citation numbers.

For the last two clusters, cluster 7 (pink) includes five keywords that tend to discuss the industrial side, while cluster 8, which is grey in this instance, is mostly concerned with creating supportive tourism-related policies. Each of the clusters was based on one article. The primary source for cluster 7 is the paper on the bamboo industry written by Wang et al. (2021) as supporting commodities for the economic benefits of tourism and environmental sustainability. Llanquileo-Melgarejo et al. (2021) in cluster 8 discuss policy making related context in waste management to support tourism management. Table 9 provides a detailed and concise explanation of the clusters, as well as the breakdown of keywords, numbers of keywords and articles in each cluster.

3.5.2. Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis combines two elements from the previous analysis which concentrated on categorizing themes into thematic quadrants, comprising four categories: motor, basic, niche and emerging or declining. Cluster formation is determined by centrality measures consisting of betweenness, closeness and page rank, rather than being dependent on occurrence frequency. A high proximity centrality value suggests that the keyword serves as a crucial link between clusters and has a significant effect within the cluster. Page rank centrality is used to analyse the relationship between citations and important keyword patterns.

Figure 6 shows that keywords are categorized into 13 different clusters, with a total of 157 extracted from 55 out of the 99 articles reviewed. There are five clusters in the motor themes quadrant which have the largest centrality measures. These are cluster 5: China (64 keywords), cluster 9: efficiency (39), cluster 7: sustainable tourism (8), cluster 3: agglomeration (9), and cluster 1: cluster analysis (11). Keywords include tourism, sustainable development, efficiency, China, data

Table 9. Factorial analysis clusterization

Cluster		Selection of keywords	No. of keywords	No. of articles
1	Environmental and economic implications	tourism development, human environmental protection, environmental policy, pollution, sustainable development goal, economic impact, environmental pollution, industrial development, sustainability, strategic approach, technological development, environmental impact, etc.	51	36
2	Environmental management and conservation	forestry, conservation, constructed wetland, parks, national park, forest park, river water, forest ecosystem, ecosystems, wetlands	37	12
3	Efficiency analysis and productivity	efficiency, data envelopment analysis, eco-efficiency, cities, productivity, decision making, efficiency measurement, environmental factor, bootstrapping, socio-economic factor, stochastic model, stochastic systems, valuation	20	3
4	Waste management, population, and circular economy	waste management, municipal solid waste, solid waste, recycling, municipal solid waste management, circular economy, Chile, Spain, undesirable output, eco-efficiency assessments, population densities, population statistics, population density	24	6
5	Tourism market and destination	tourist destination, tourism management, tourism market, tourist behaviour, Eurasia, Taiwan, Asia, Australia, Europe, Switzerland, growth rate, greenhouse gas, input-output analysis, land use	18	11
6	Ecological and economic interactions	carbon footprint, ecological efficiency, ecology, economics, statistics, energy utilization, emission control, life cycle, low-carbon tourisms, tourism eco-efficiency	14	8
7	Tourism and leisure industry	economic and social effects, industrial economics, agricultural robots, leisure industry, tourism industry	5	1
8	Policy making and regulation	policy making	1	1

Source: authors.

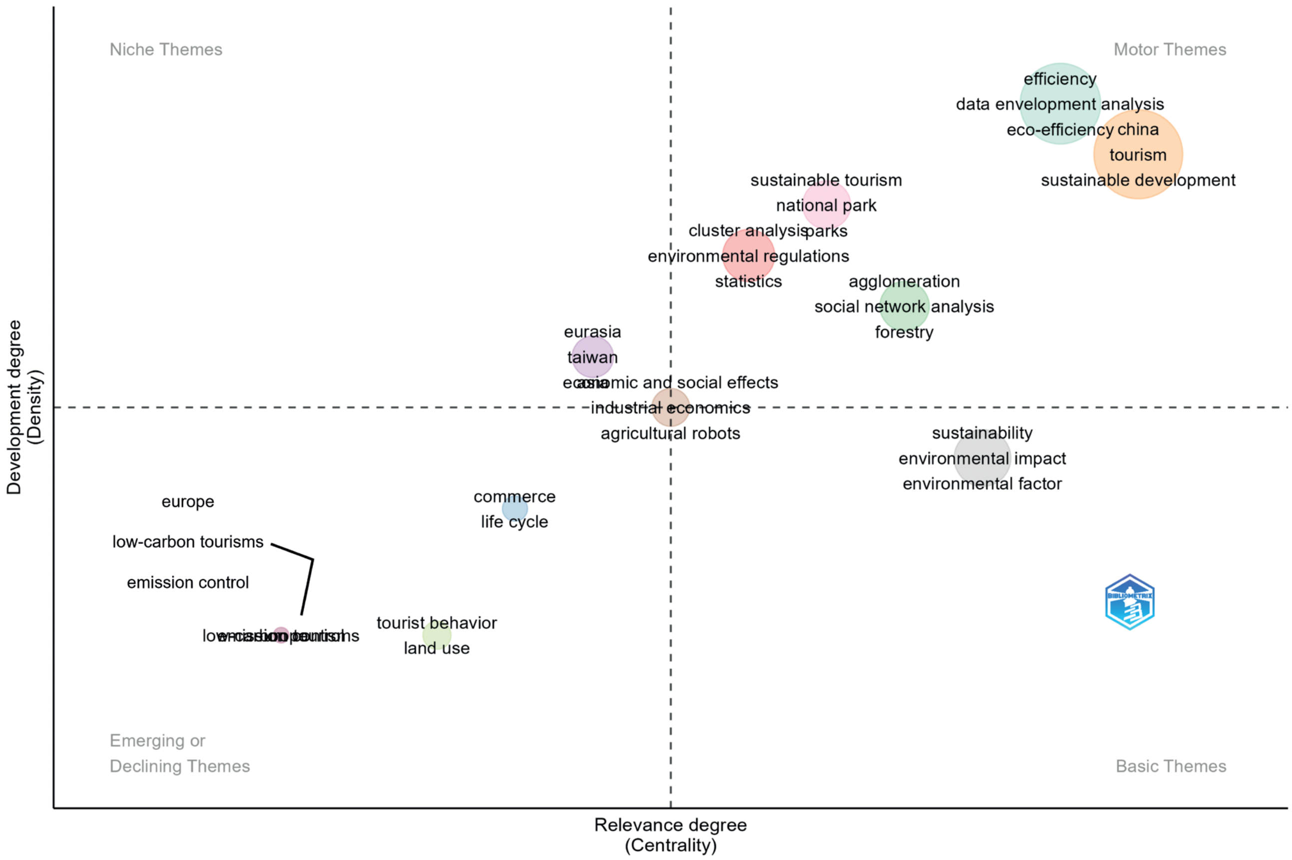

Figure 6. Thematic clusters
Source: authors

envelope analysis, carbon footprint, spatiotemporal analysis, waste management, decision-making, etc. There are 131 keywords with 680 total occurrences distributed among the five clusters in the motor theme quadrant. These keywords have appeared as the dominant discussion topics in tourism eco-efficiency.

In the basic theme quadrant, there is only one cluster, identified as cluster 8: sustainability, consisting of 10 keywords. Cluster 4, Eurasia, consists of five keywords associated with tourism destinations categorized in the niche theme quadrant. Cluster 6, focused on economic and social effects, is the only one that is included in the four clusters, indicating moderate connectivity within the network. Lastly, there are five minor clusters containing seven keywords in the emerging (or declining) theme quadrant. Figure 6 displays two distinct clusters: cluster 2 focuses on commerce and cluster 13 focuses on tourist behaviour. Additionally, three overlapping clusters are identified as cluster 10: Europe; cluster 11: low-carbon tourism and cluster 12: emission control.

3.5.3. Thematic evolution

We further conducted a thematic analysis by splitting the data into four different periods, allowing us to pinpoint shifts in the discourse surrounding the tourism eco-efficiency subject across time. To find themes that are infrequently mentioned throughout each period, we concentrate on niche and emerging or declining themes. For instance, as Figure 7 illustrates, during the first phase (2005–2008) the integration of the concept and framework of tourism eco-efficiency was still developing, therefore the focus remained on tourism development. In the next period (2010–2014) as shown in Figure 8, the tourist destination cluster, which also contains tourism development keywords, was contained in both quadrants, signifying the lack of discussion on this topic after 2009 when there were no articles published on the tourism eco-efficiency theme.

During the next period (2016–2019), keywords that were formerly associated with emerging themes have now been incorporated into motor themes. As shown in Figure 9, in the tourism development cluster, keywords such as China and DEA were significant, consistent with research carried out in China at different levels, including national, subnational and local or municipal levels (Han, 2019; Liu et al., 2017; Peng et al., 2017; Sun & Hou, 2021; Wu et al., 2019). It is also connected to DEA as the primary method for assessing eco-efficiency in tourism, such as Peng et al. (2017) who employed the slacks-based measure DEA (SBM-DEA) to evaluate the eco-efficiency of the tourism industry and Liu et al. (2017) with the DEA-Tobit model to assess the efficiency of tourism destinations.

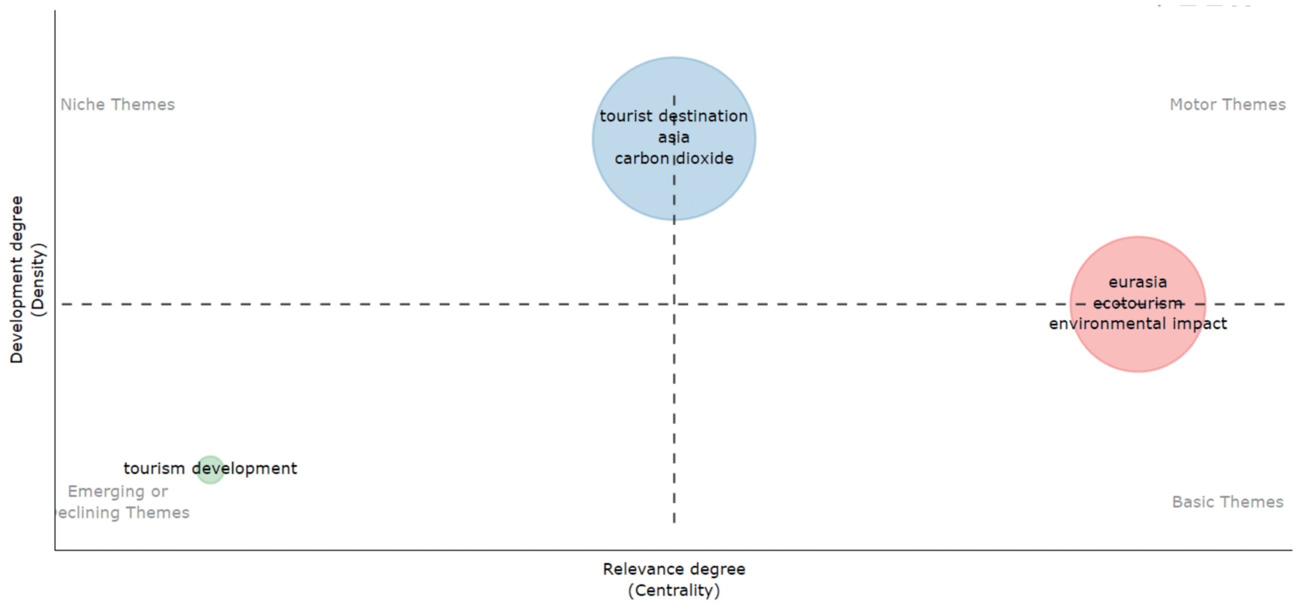

Figure 7. Thematic evolution 1 (2005–2008)
Source: authors

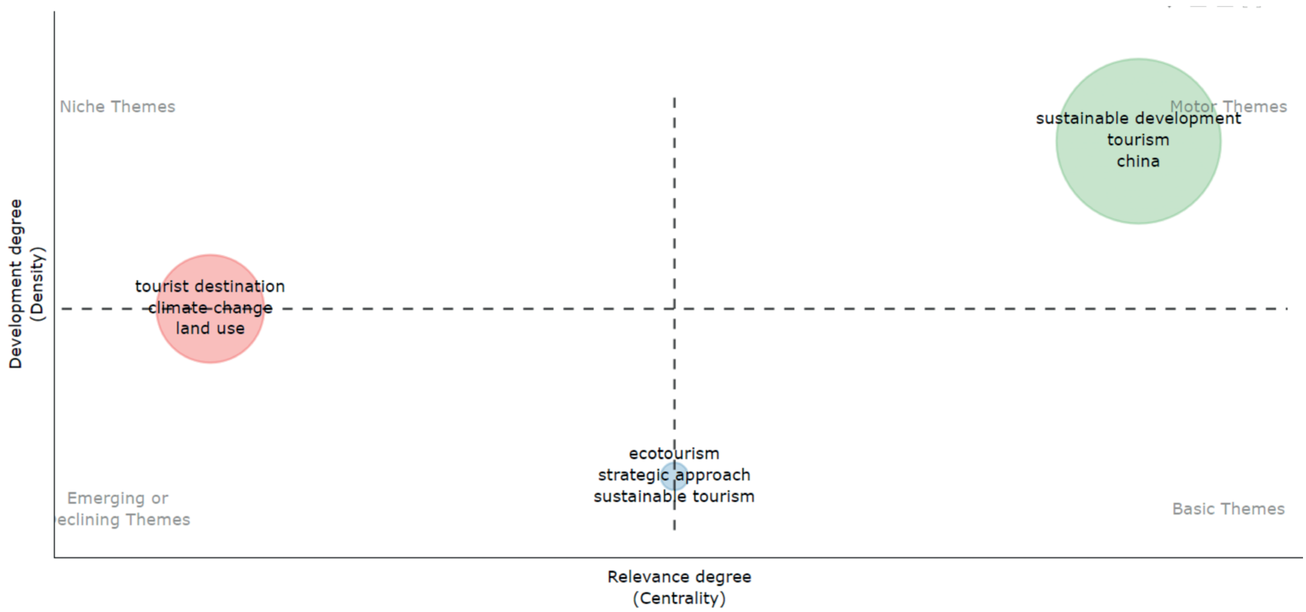

Figure 8. Thematic evolution 2 (2010–2014)
Source: authors

The cluster life cycle, exhibited as emerging themes, is supported by rising citation rates in studies by Scheepens et al. (2016) and Cadarso et al. (2016).

The recent period demonstrates how three major clusters that contain multiple keywords – China, DEA, efficiency, tourism development, ecotourism, investment, spatiotemporal analysis, etc. – have solidified as motor themes. One of the causes is the rise in articles written by Chinese authors using the DEA method, such as Haibo et al. (2020), Sun and Hou (2021), Li et al. (2021) and Lu et al. (2021). However, clusters like low-carbon tourism, emission control, cluster analysis and optimization belong to niche and emerging or declining themes. It is evident that while some clusters and keywords in the thematic analysis are congruent with niche and emerging or declining themes, others cross over into motor themes, particularly in the recent period of thematic evolution. We highlight that low-carbon tourism and emission control tend to represent declining themes. In the meantime, other clusters that we evaluate will develop into niche or emerging themes; some of them have even begun to become motor themes, and will include keywords like optimization, factor analysis, spatial analysis/variation, cluster analysis, environmental regulations, spillover effect, emission control and low-carbon tourism. These are all shown in Figure 10.

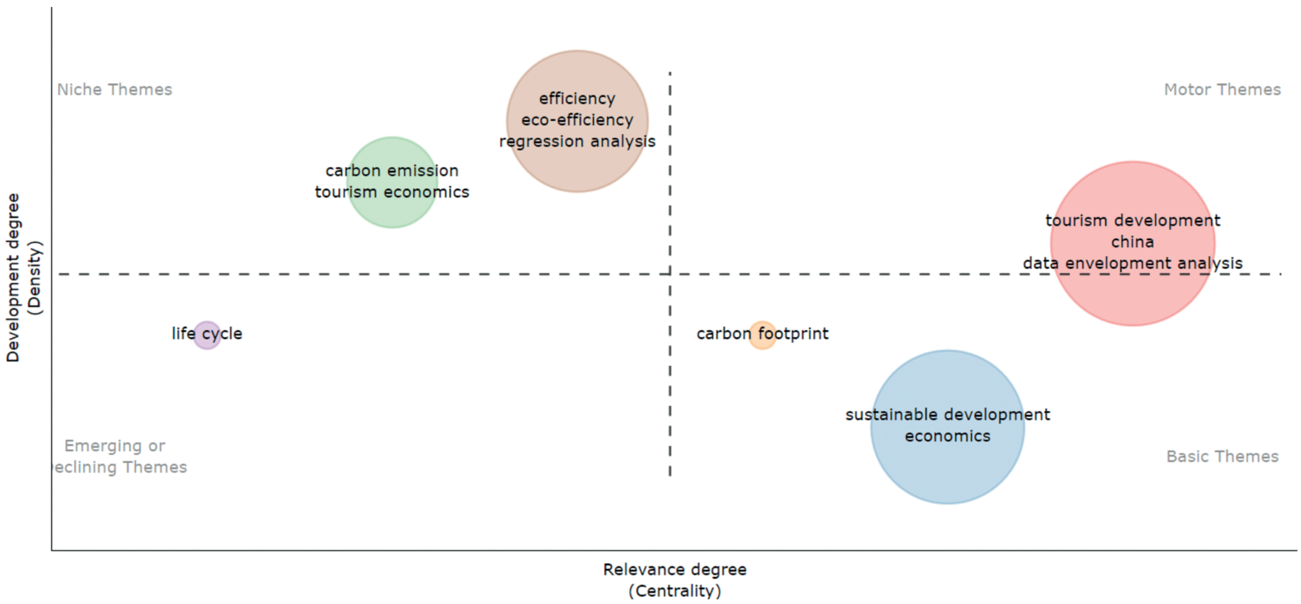

Figure 9. Thematic evolution 3 (2016–2019)
Source: authors

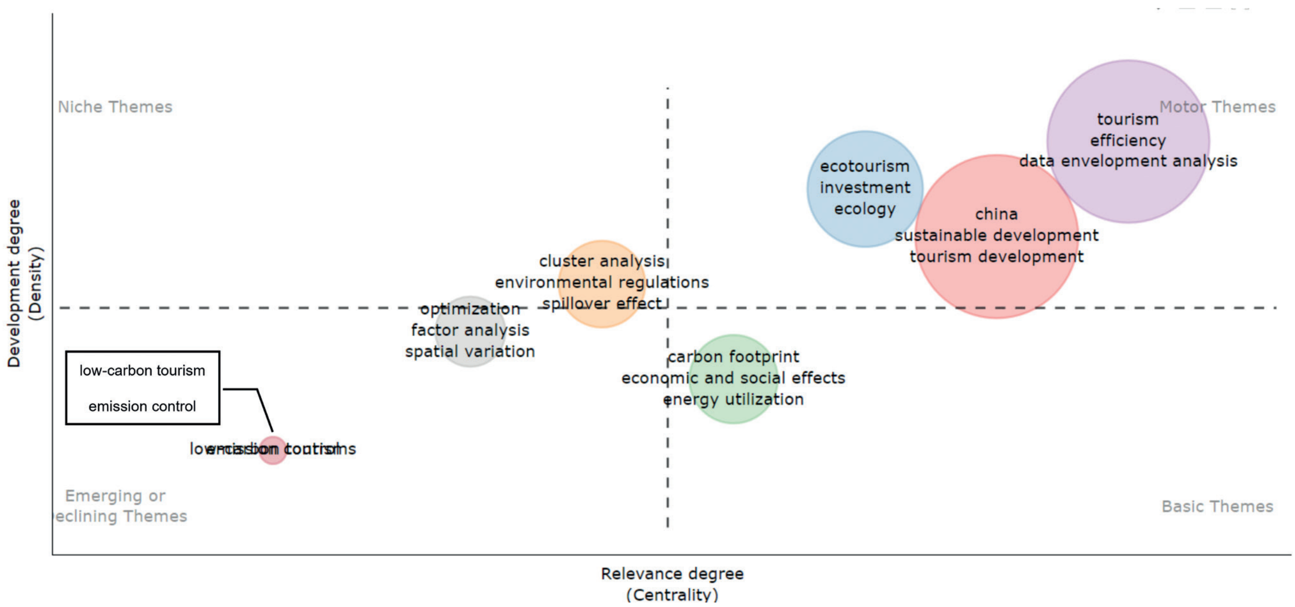

Figure 10. Thematic evolution 4 (2020–2023)
Source: authors

4. Conclusions

This study has examined the evolution of tourism eco-efficiency as a research issue over almost two decades and explores future opportunities for the research area. We conducted five analyses, beginning with a general, followed by source-based, author-based, country-based, and an in-depth keyword-based. The latter serves as a critical variable for exploring future thematic research potential, employing factorial and thematic analyses, and their evolutionary dynamics. From the general analysis, we observed that out of the 99 articles reviewed since 2005, the majority were published after 2019, indicating a significant rise in academic interest in the field of tourism eco-efficiency over the previous five years. Despite this growth, there remains many opportunities for future research collaboration, as the number of articles involving international co-authorship is still relatively low.

In source-based analysis underlining the significance of six key journals: *Ecological Economics*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Tourism Management*, *Waste Management* and *Current Issues in Tourism*, emerged as both relevant and impactful as discourse platforms for the tourism eco-efficiency topic. Further, in the author-based analysis, contrast between local and global citations reveals a mix of overlap. This study also identified 15 articles with the highest global citations, of which four address global issues but receive minimal local recognition or citations, while also highlighting seven pivotal articles in the field of tourism eco-efficiency, including foundational works and recent contributions that utilize data envelopment analysis (DEA) as main method in tourism eco-efficiency research, particularly from China. The increase in publications using DEA also serves as one reason for China's status as most productive and impactful country, as evidenced by its citation number in the country-based analysis. This is further supported in network analysis, wherein 22 countries having divided into six clusters, China had become the country with the highest number of connections to research institutions in other countries. The expansion in international research collaboration and the tendency to employ diverse, interdisciplinary methodologies will be critical focal points moving forward.

The keyword-based analysis of tourism eco-efficiency identified 573 keywords through a clustering mechanism and a quadrant-based approach, which then analysed through factorial and thematic analyses. In factorial analysis, 78 representative articles were divided across eight clusters, while thematic analysis categorized thirteen clusters of keywords from 55 articles into motor, basic, niche and emerging or declining themes based on centrality measures. The quest to identify potential future research topics is informed by an examination of the evolving dynamics within the quadrants representing niche and emerging or declining themes. To this end, we undertook a thematic analysis grounded in temporal segmentation, which unveiled a range of promising keywords for exploration. These include concepts such as optimization, factor analysis, spatial analysis/variation, cluster analysis, environmental regulations, spillover effects, emission control and low-carbon tourism, all of which warrant further exploration.

At last, while this study offers insights into the field of tourism eco-efficiency, it comes with certain limitations. First, the bibliometric analysis, albeit extensive, relies on the Scopus database, potentially excluding relevant sources from other databases such as Web of Science, JSTOR, etc. The bibliometric techniques employed may introduce biases, especially if certain journals or regions are over-represented, as highlighted by China's publication dominance, and technical errors that boost such biases, especially author identification. This article is also limited by not involving non-English publications, which potentially skews the representation. The study's reliance on quantitative metrics may not fully capture the nuanced or qualitative aspects of the articles.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.13 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

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Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

Global trends in business tourism research

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How to cite (APA style): Hernández-Andrés, V., de Frutos Madrazo, P., Frechoso Remiro, J.C., & Martín-Cervantes, P.A. (2025). Global trends in business tourism research. *Turyzm/Tourism*, *35*(1), 193–216. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.13

ABSTRACT

Business tourism is a key economic driver in the regions where it is present. In recent decades, the remarkable growth of academic research both in quantity and diversity of articles, makes it necessary to structure and organize this segment of tourism to identify trends in the sector and facilitate the work of the community in the research process. Using Scopus as a bibliographic database, this article performs a systematic analysis of the academic research that has addressed business tourism in the period from 1970 to 2021. Through a robust methodological approach that includes the use of bibliometric tools, the study analyzes data to identify patterns, key actors and emerging trends in the field. It examines the main research trends and provides an analysis through strategic diagrams of the keywords found in business tourism which has not been done to date. The main findings confirm the consolidation of academic research in the meetings industry over the past two decades. We also identify the main trends, including the progressive integration of its activities in line with sustainable development criteria, the use and integration of new technologies, and the increasing need for professionalization in a growing sector.

KEYWORDS

business tourism, meeting tourism, MICE tourism, MICE industry, meeting industry

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
17 November 2024
Accepted:
10 February 2025
Published:
12 June 2025

1. Introduction

Business tourism has become an important activity worldwide that has aroused the interest of the international organizations charged with managing it. In one of its annual global reports, the World Tourism Organization [WTO] places this activity as a key market niche in the tourist activities sector (WTO, 2014). The current concept of business tourism is intrinsically linked to the activities carried out by the

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

economic agents involved in this segment of tourism and that differ to a certain degree from the traditional holiday tourist. Prominent amongst these activities are meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions, to name but a few (Getz, 1989; Lawson, 1982).

Yet despite the recent interest shown by the literature in this regard, people have been travelling for business reasons since trade and human civilizations first emerged. Marques and Santos (2017) highlight that it was after the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century that an increasing number of business trips were made – and to places further afield – spurred by the development of transport (Borodako & Rudnicki, 2014; Vázquez Varela & Martínez Navarro, 2016). In the late 19th and early 29th century, academic, industrial and political associations began to organise large-scale meetings worldwide, which aroused the interest of the cities chosen to host them, given the benefits which such meetings generated (Hodur & Leistritz, 2006; Ritchie, 1984; Shone, 1998). Yet it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the trends reflecting this growing business tourism – as both a product and from the perspective of those involved in the sector – were to first emerge (de Lara & Har, 2008; Getz, 1989; Lawson, 1982; Weidenfeld & Leask, 2013). The gradual growth of the airline industry (Derudder et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2008), together with a lowering of the costs involved (Owen, 1992), and coupled with the lucrative business of medical meetings (Carney et al., 2001), established the foundations of what we now know as business tourism and led to its expansion towards new sectors of the economy (Davidson, 1993; Hall & Coles, 2008; Owen, 1992; Smith, 1991).

The number of stakeholders involved in the meetings industry thus grew gradually (Alananzeh et al., 2019; Todd et al., 2017), and came to include more economic agents who offered increasingly comprehensive service packages in an effort to boost the competitiveness of the venues and so attract this business (Jepson & Clarke, 2014; Nelson, 2014). In an attempt to meet this demand, public bodies – such as the convention bureaus in the host cities – began to emerge, charged with promoting business tourism in their area, as did private entities known by their acronym in English DMC (destination management companies), who offered global solutions for organising and hosting an event at a specific location (Nardiello et al., 2017; Rojas Bueno et al., 2020; Smith, 1991; Strick et al., 1993). The key role played by institutions such as convention bureaus in promoting intellectual capital and innovation is reflected in works such as Getz et al. (1998), where convention bureaus contribute to the growth of business tourism, highlighting their role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge in MICE (*meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions*) destinations, or Celuch (2019), which highlights the strategic role as intermediaries that connect local and international stakeholders, focusing on effective management practices, such as marketing, governance, sustainability and the integration of stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem.

Yet even though over the last few years the scholars involved in the field of the meetings industry have analysed the sector in an effort to define it (Getz, 1989) and to outline the research trends in a growing sector (Getz & Page, 2016; Lawson, 1982; Owen, 1992), these studies have only been partial and have proved insufficient, since they fail to explore the last few decades in which the sector has experienced substantial growth. To date, the academic literature is notoriously lacking in comprehensive analyses that explore the evolution of the field from a longitudinal and global perspective. This research addresses that lack through a systematic review of the literature, providing a comprehensive overview of global trends in tourism research on meetings between 1970 and 2021. This work stands out for its scope and depth, offering a more complete picture that allows us to identify emerging patterns and persistent gaps in knowledge. In this sense, our contribution lies not only in systematizing previous advances but also in contextualizing their inadequacy, highlighting how this analysis fills a critical gap in the existing literature, thus strengthening the foundation for future research in the area. The main objective of this study is to identify global trends in business tourism research during the period 1970–2021 through a systematic bibliometric analysis. This overall objective is broken down into the following key points:

1. Analysis of the historical evolution of academic production around business tourism.
2. Identification of the main actors (researchers, institutions and countries) that have led academic production in this field.
3. Examination of the keywords and emerging themes related to the MICE sector, and to highlight patterns and research gaps.

To achieve these objectives, a modern methodology based on bibliometric tools such as Bibliometrix and VOSviewer has been chosen which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been applied in this particular segment of tourism. This methodology offers advanced capabilities for the analysis of conceptual, intellectual and social structures. These tools have been chosen because of their flexibility and efficiency in the graphical representation of data and in the identification of trends and relationships in academic production. In addition, the use of strategic diagrams has allowed a deeper assessment of central and emerging issues in the field, which reinforces the novelty and relevance of our approach. The relevance of the present research lies in the novelty of the methodology used for the analysis, with the study drawing on modern data processing techniques that have provided the results and conclusions to emerge (Costa et al., 2017; Maia et al., 2019). This methodology was based on a systematic approach structured in five stages. Search criteria were defined with keywords relevant to the MICE sector, applied in the Scopus database for its broad and multidisciplinary coverage. Subsequently, the database was cleaned to eliminate duplicates and inconsistencies, obtaining a representative sample to which the bibliometric tools already described were applied to obtain the results of the present work.

In order to achieve these goals, the paper is organised as follows. The literature review looks at the state of the art of academic research and the following section puts forward the methodology used in the bibliometric study. This is followed by the results to emerge from the work. We then present the discussion of the results before finally offering the conclusions reached.

2. Literature review

The available academic literature related to business tourism reflects a very characteristic development in the period covered by this article. During the 1960s and 1970s, the events sector was not recognised as a field of study in its own right but was explored within the framework of leisure tourism (Getz, 2008). Only in the following decade did academic production in this area really begin to boom (Getz & Page, 2016). The topics addressed by authors evidence a wide array of approaches, and certain works even show diverse simultaneous perspectives within the same study. One frequent approach is to use economic impact studies that examine the economy of a particular region, although studies often explore the different stakeholders involved in the sector in question. Recent decades have also witnessed other kinds of approach, prominent amongst which are those related to sustainable development, the professionalisation of the sector or the inclusion and use of new technologies. There are other approaches which have been applied in a smaller number of associated studies, but which nonetheless display enormous potential, such as those examining the public sector and governance or other more recent works such as those related to exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted business tourism. Whilst by no means offering a fully comprehensive review, the following is, nevertheless, representative of some of the principal topics addressed.

The first topic offers a regional approach, wherein the literature focuses on three main areas; Europe, Asia-Pacific, and North America. Studies addressing Europe include impact studies at a local or regional scale (Chirieleison et al., 2013; Monge & Brandimarte, 2011; Pechlaner et al., 2007), at a country level (Marques & Santos, 2016; Pinho & Marques, 2021; Weber & Ladkin, 2003), and adopting a block analysis (Davidson, 1993, 2018). It can be seen how certain authors have taken an interest in exploring this economic segment given its potential economic development in Central Eastern European countries, with studies that look at Romania (Baltălungă et al., 2014), Serbia (Bjeljac et al., 2013; Dragićević et al., 2012; Štetić et al., 2014) and Slovakia (Kasagranda et al., 2017). Prominent amongst the studies addressing the Asia Pacific block are those which examine China, with numerous studies conducted at city level (Go & Zhang, 1997; Iacuone & Zarrilli, 2018; Zhou, 2011), regional level (Long et al., 2009; McCartney, 2008, 2014; Whitfield et al., 2014; Wong, 2011) or national level (Jin et al., 2013; Lu, 2017; Xu et al., 2020). There are also a large number of studies for Thailand (Intapan et al., 2019; Uansaard & Binprathan, 2018), Australia (Gnoth & Anwar, 2000; Mules & Faulkner, 1996; Stokes, 2006b) and New Zealand (Smith, 2007; Tsui et al., 2017; Xie & Gu, 2015), and which reflect to a large extent the business tourism existing in this area. Other countries in the region of Asia that have also attracted the attention of researchers include Singapore (Henderson, 2014b), Korea (Kim et al., 2015), Kazakhstan (Mussina et al., 2019; Ziyadin et al., 2019), and Japan (Ghosh, 2021). In the Americas, the United States has traditionally been the focus of academic inquiry (Daniels, 2007; Paxson, 2009; Pearlman, 2016; Yang & Gu, 2012), with more and more authors now also turning their attention towards Latin-American countries (Bonn & Boyd, 1993; Tejeida-Padilla et al., 2016). Other areas of the world also now merit interest, such as Africa (Matiza, 2020; Mxunyelwa, 2017; Rogerson, 2015a, 2015b) or the Middle East (Abulibdeh & Zaidan, 2017; Henderson, 2018; Monshi & Scott, 2017; Sutton, 2016).

The second topic that merits highlighting is that of impact studies which look at the stakeholders involved in the business tourism industry. This has often led authors to focus on the stakeholders who operate at a specific destination or to approach the subject from a more global development perspective. The main stakeholders who provide the focus for these studies are the event organisers and suppliers, the venues and the participants. Impact studies are common when examining the issue of event organisers and suppliers (Kim & Uysal, 2003; Papadopoulos et al., 2014) and examples of these studies are analyses of the hotel sector, whether by conducting a study at city level (Leslie & Craig, 2000; Wootton & Stevens, 1995), national level (Ali et al., 2017; Fenich, 2014) or for larger regions, such as central and Central Eastern Europe or Australia (Johnson & Vanetti, 2007; McCabe, 2014). Analyses can be also be carried out for associated structures (Smith, 1991) and their links to suppliers (Borodako et al., 2015; Kim & Qu, 2012; Shin et al., 2017), as well as the marketing or success factors found in the host cities – from the perspective of organisers and other stakeholders (Capriello, 2018; Pan et al., 2014). Ultimately, works such as Shaadi Rodríguez et al. (2018), which identifies the stakeholders involved in meetings tourism management and analyzes their interactions in Aguascalientes, Mexico, or Pulido Fernández and López Molina (2023), for four cities in Ecuador, demonstrate the prospects for real collaboration and synergies between various stakeholders in the meetings industry, local governments, and the cities that host them and the enormous potential they harbor.

Often linked to regional impact studies, research into the venues where the meetings take place has emerged as highly relevant in the academic literature, where much attention is devoted to exploring the mechanisms involved in how the host city is selected and how competitive the latter is (Falk & Hagsten, 2018; Fawzy & Samra, 2008; Haven-Tang et al., 2007; Zhou et al., 2017). The concept of brand image for a MICE city has been developed (Hankinson, 2005; Lennon, 1999; Weru, 2021; Ye & Li, 2011) with the aim being to ascertain what the key success factors for business events might be (Chang, 2014; Huang, 2016; Tanford & Jung, 2017) as well as for the cities that host them (Robinson & Callan, 2005). What impact events have on the venue and on local residents is also often the subject of analysis (Chen, 2011; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Jackson, 2008). Evidence of this can be found in works such as Wahl and Walker (2024) which identify the short-term results and long-term legacies of five national and international conferences held in 2022 in Vancouver, Canada, or those which highlight the impact of business events beyond the economic one on issues such as innovation, education or the establishment of social and commercial networks (Edwards et al., 2011).

Gaining insights into event participants has proved to be of enormous appeal to academic inquiry, where numerous studies can be found that seek to measure participants' levels of satisfaction (Chen, 2011; Li, 2011; Swart & Roodt, 2020), motivation (Egresi & Kara, 2014; Mair, 2015; Millán et al., 2016; Yan & Halpenny, 2019), selection mechanisms (Ariffin et al., 2008; Caber et al., 2017; Carlson et al., 2016; Mody et al., 2016), and profile (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2015; Nicholson & Pearce, 2000; Vila et al., 2020). Other issues – such as what impact distance has on participants (Ho & McKercher, 2014; Nilbe et al., 2014) – have also been explored. The last few years have, however, have witnessed a growing interest in new topics that have given rise to increased academic production in the meetings industry. Amongst other questions, these topics mainly concern sustainable development, the gradual professionalisation of the sector, and integration through the development of new technologies, all of which we now look at. Firstly, the question of sustainable development is becoming increasingly common, with authors putting forward works that offer general studies on environmental impact (Ahmad et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2020; Mair & Jago, 2010) as well as different proposals to include sustainable practices in the industry through various case studies in Asia (Abd Hamid et al., 2013; Buathong & Lai, 2019; Chang & Chang, 2020; Wee et al., 2017), Europe (Cosmescu & Tileagă, 2014; Werner et al., 2017) and Africa (Okech, 2011). The concept of green MICE has recently been developed and is included in the circular economy (Ranacher & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014; Tinnish & Mangal, 2012; Yuan, 2013; Zeng et al., 2013) and corporate social responsibility (Musgrave & Woodward, 2016; Smagina et al., 2017). In recent years, the ESG (environmental, social and governance) framework has gained prominence as a key tool for assessing and guiding sustainability in the meetings industry. In this regard we find works such as Dathe et al. (2024) and Nyurenberger et al. (2022) with a clear practical approach for stakeholders who wish to implement it in their professional activities. Climate change has also been evaluated when deciding how to plan business events (Jones et al., 2006; Pandy & Rogerson, 2019).

Secondly, we see increasing interest in the sector with regard to training professionals who are specialized in the meetings industry (Lee et al., 2020). The literature has put forward a number of country-level case studies aimed at proposing, planning or enhancing training programmes in South Africa (Landey & Silvers, 2004), the USA (Fenich & Hashimoto, 2010), Asia (Tang, 2014) and Australia (Lawrence & McCabe, 2001; McCabe, 2008; Wilson & von der Heidt, 2013). However, from the research perspective, the most relevant topics being proposed concern the perspectives for remodelling the academic paradigm, and educational standards for training new professionals (Hsieh, 2013; Karpova & Khoreva, 2014; Sox & Strick, 2017; Sperstad & Cecil, 2011).

Thirdly, the influence of technology and other technological developments on business tourism has not gone unnoticed (Ergen, 2020; Koba, 2020; Shi et al., 2013). In 2012, the enormous potential for virtual meetings (Flowers & Gregson, 2012), the coming together of electronic commerce and the MICE industry (Lee & Lee, 2014; Wei-ling, 2013), and the use of social networks by event participants came to the fore (Choi, 2005; Lee & Lee, 2014; Unurlu, 2020). Big data technology also emerged (Kim et al., 2016; Ruoxin & Yujun, 2019) and the use of mobile applications began to come under the microscope (Silva-Pedroza et al., 2017). Recent years have witnessed the appearance of the concept of smart MICE, which has gone hand in hand with this gradual integration of the latest technologies (Han et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020) and the development of new ones for data security and protection, such as blockchain technology (Bodkhe et al., 2020).

Finally, other analytical approaches that merit highlighting include those which focus on the role of the public sector and governance (Burgan & Mules, 2001; Devine & Devine, 2015; Roche, 1994), which can be assessed by conducting a local case study (Stokes, 2006a; Yermachenko et al., 2015), carrying out cost benefit analysis *vis-à-vis* environmental policies (Bovenberg et al., 2017), and more specific or innovative methodological proposals (Morgan & Condliffe, 2006). The last two years of research have produced studies gauging the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as a logical response to the sector's having ground to a halt due to health restrictions (Aburumman, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021; Khalfan & Ismail, 2020; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021). Other innovative topics include personal data protection (Esen & Kocabas, 2021) and issues related to social inclusion and diversity (Dashper & Finkel, 2020).

3. Data and methodology

In order to conduct a thorough analysis of MICE tourism over the last fifty years – highlighting its particular features and the main trends to emerge from this specific area of the tourist industry – we opted to apply a method subdivided into processes or stages, which is very similar to other recent works such as Costa et al. (2017), Maia et al. (2019) and Parrales Choez et al. (2022). Specifically, following the operational diagram set out in the flowchart in Figure 1, our research was structured consecutively in the following differentiated stages or phases: (a) establishing the most relevant bibliographical search criteria associated with academic research into MICE tourism, (b) applying these criteria to the Scopus database, (c) debugging the database initially developed in the previous phase, (d) applying the bibliometric tools chosen in this research and (e) obtaining the results which are presented later.

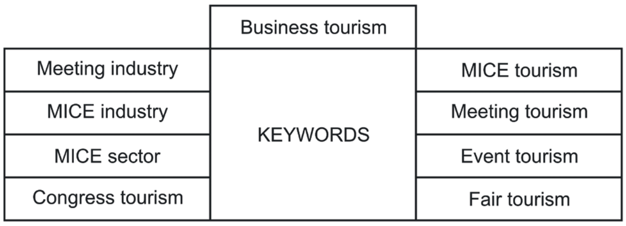

Figure 2. Keywords
Source: authors

Taking Figure 1 as the reference, it can clearly be seen how the different stages of the methodological process have been structured. In stage 1, a pre-selection was made of the key terms related to the business tourism sector. This distinction was made based on the existing literature drawing on those terms which are most often used in research focusing on business tourism – depending on the abstract and title. Figure 2 shows the nine keywords finally used. It should be remembered that the term "MICE tourism" is associated to multiple analogous keywords. It may, to some extent, be considered synonymous with other terms such as "business tourism", "meeting tourism", "MICE industry", etc. Hence the use of the different terms shown in Figure 2.

In stage 2, we then considered on which database to implement our bibliometric analysis. We initially had to opt between Scopus (Elsevier) or Web of Science (WoS – Clarivate Analytics) – the two "titans

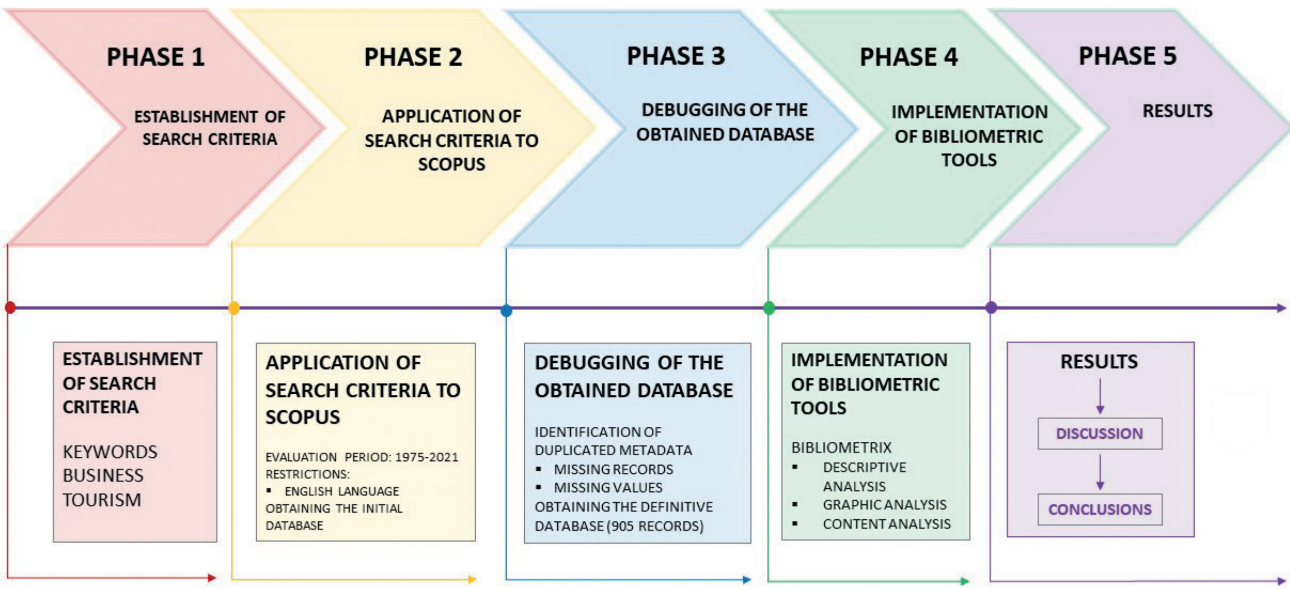

Figure 1. Methodological flow chart
Source: authors

of bibliographic information" as defined by Pranckutė (2021). We finally chose the first, which has been collecting bibliographic items from 1788 up to the present day. It also spans a greater number of knowledge domains than WoS (Schotten et al., 2017). In this regard, it should be highlighted that each bibliographic database presents a different structure and categorisation of its metadata (Chadegani et al., 2013) which prevents conducting a joint bibliographic analysis in this research of the WoS and Scopus databases based on Bibliometrix (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Employing Bibliometrix requires using a single specific academic database, given that – as pointed out – the structure of the metadata records is different. The previously selected key terms were then set out in the form of Boolean operators so as to establish a robust search in the Scopus database, as shown below: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("business tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("congress tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("fair tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("mice tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("mice sector") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("mice industry") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("meeting tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("event tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("meeting industry") AND (EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2022)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")).

By using this search criterion, we linked all the key terms, pre-establishing a selection of bibliographic items written exclusively in English while setting 2021 as the limit year. We thus obtained an initial bibliographic database spanning the period 1970–2021 which covers the first works to explore MICE tourism (Haines, 1970) up to the most recent (Yao et al., 2021; Yodsuwan et al., 2021). It should be noted that this period confirms certain sources such as Travel in the Seventies (1970), who point out that tourist activities began to expand worldwide after the 1970s, paradoxically coinciding with events such as the war in Vietnam and the energy crises of the 1970s.

In stage 3, the database initially obtained – and compiled using a BibTeX bibliography archive (Kopp et al., 2023) – was debugged, since academic databases tend to contain duplicate metadata (Beall, 2010), either *vis-à-vis* missing records or missing values (Nutt et al., 2012). As a result, any bibliographic record displaying such problems was deleted. We obtained a final database comprising 905 different bibliographic registers. The process used to create the database is shown in Figure 3, in which the various sub-stages are explained.

In stage 4, we then applied the bibliometric tools chosen for this research. The number of bibliometric applications available to the academic community has obviously increased over the years, particularly between 1990 and 2015 (Cobo et al., 2015), a period which saw the emergence of bibliometric applications such as Ucinet (Borgatti et al., 2002), CiteSpace (Chen, 2004), Pajek (Batagelj & Mrvar, 2004) and HistCite (Leydesdorff et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2020) to name but a few. Nevertheless, this study used Bibliometrix (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) which, in truth, more than a scientometric method or

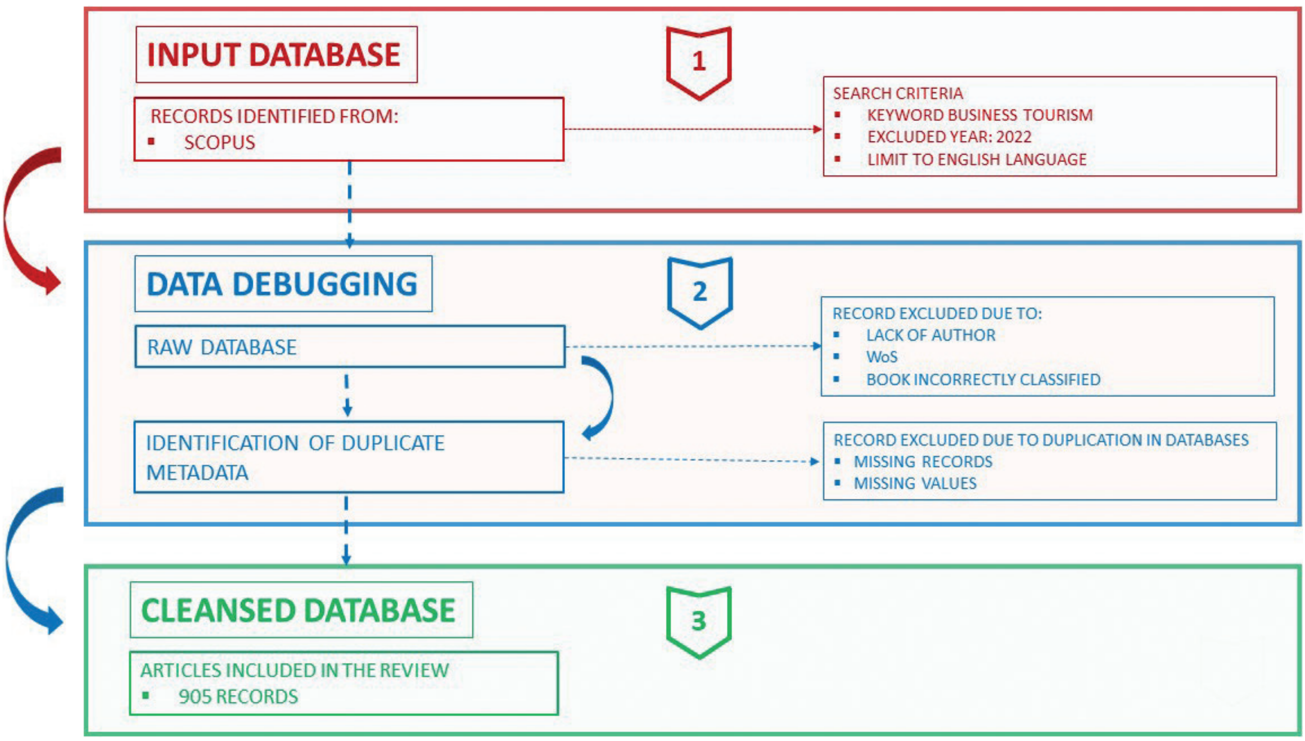

Figure 3. Flow diagram for systematic review
Source: authors

bibliometric tool is in itself a set of procedures that helps to analyse knowledge structures (K-structures) in three key dimensions: conceptual, intellectual, and social. Such characteristics significantly improve the previously described bibliographic tools and are in fact key to analysing any aspect of the tourist sector from a bibliometric perspective. It was therefore decided to use Bibliometrix in this study, given its versatility, as evidenced in other works in which it has previously been applied to the bibliometric analysis of the tourist industry and which attest to its flexibility when exploring and comparing different knowledge domains. Such bibliometric studies include Palácios et al. (2021) who examine the degree of final user confidence in tourist firms, and Singh et al. (2023) who study the tourist phenomenon from the perspective of disabled users' needs in tourist services. Mention should also be made of works that draw on Bibliometrix to reflect some of the concerns of modern-day society, such as the gradual decarbonisation of economies, a process in which the tourist sector must also become involved (Mishra et al., 2022).

In sum, the use of Bibliometrix has enabled three kinds of analysis to be obtained. First, descriptive, through data and key parameter tabulation for bibliometric research into MICE tourism, e.g. the number of citations, type of academic production and the bibliographic impact of the main studies and researchers in accordance with the performance of the *h*-index (Hirsch, 2005) and other indices derived from this such as the *g*-index (Egghe, 2006) or the *m*-index (Guo et al., 2021). It was also possible to conduct a graphic analysis (Sajovic & Boh Podgornik, 2022) based on the visualisation of certain key magnitudes, such as the progress of academic production in this field over the period analysed. The final type of analysis carried out was content analysis (Bhandari, 2023). In other words, we performed a contextu-alised study of the prevalence of a given number of keywords so as to obtain relevant conclusions from a bibliometric standpoint. To achieve this – in addition to Bibliometrix – we also made occasional use of VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2007, 2010), an application derived from multidimensional scale techniques and which provided academic mapping of the various pre-existing relations and interactions between the keywords defined during the first stage of the research. Finally – and given that this study focused on examining the global trends of MICE tourism – we used a strategic diagram developed on the basis of the fuzzy sets theory (Cobo et al., 2011) which, drawing on Callon's co-word analysis (Callon et al., 1983, 1991) and, based on predetermined dimensions (centrality and density), allows for a full dissection of trends in MICE tourism in terms of the keywords observable in each quadrant.

4. Results

The main features of this study are listed in Table 1. As can be seen, for the established period (1970–2021), there are 905 documents from 476 different sources covering the contributions of 1,886 authors. It can be seen that the majority of works are single-author studies, compared to those by more than one author, and that the number of international contributions is relatively small as a percentage of the total (17.4%).

Table 1. Main information about data

Main information about data		
General data	Timespan	1970–2021
	Sources (journals, books, etc.)	476
	Documents	905
	Document average age	7.97
	Average citations per doc	15.73
	References	242
Document contents	Keywords plus (ID)	2,296
	Author's keywords (DE)	2,279
Document types	Articles	595
	Books	23
	Book chapters	97
	Conference papers	147
	Editorials	5
	Errata	1
	Letters	1
	Notes	6
	Retracted	1
	Reviews	26
	Short surveys	3
	Number of authors	1,886
Authors	Authors of single-authored docs	224
	Single-authored docs	256
	Co-authors per doc	2.41
	International co-authorships (%)	17.4
	Annual growth rate (%)	9.53

Source: authors.

Research has mainly been reflected through articles as well as book chapters and conference papers, in which the number of author's keywords (DE) and keyword plus (ID) is practically the same, although this is not fully representative, given that keyword plus (ID) corresponds to an *ad hoc* algorithm developed for terms from WoS (Garfield & Sher, 1993), and that this research was grounded on the Scopus database. It can be seen how studies focusing on MICE tourism stem from a relatively high number of citations (15.73). Nevertheless, this average number of citations also requires a high average age per document (almost eight years). That said, the growing annual academic production (9.53%) does point towards increased interest in this branch of knowledge, given that – should this rhythm continue – it would take a little over seven years for the total number of publications focused on MICE tourism to double.

Figure 4 shows how academic production over the period considered has evolved and reflects the relatively scant production during the three first decades. We can also split the time period into four distinct stages: 1971–2000 (A), in which a small number of studies began to define the particular characteristics and trends of an economic segment that has gradually acquired its own identity within the economy of tourism (Getz, 1989; Lawson, 1982; Owen, 1992). Academic production over this period was only between 0 and 6 documents per year; 2000–2005 (B), a period in which growing research interest in the area of MICE tourism can be seen, such that academic production increased substantially; 2005–2010 (C), saw an even greater increase in academic production, with studies addressing stakeholders becoming popular (Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005), as well as seminal works examining factors of success and the consolidation of the sector (Hankinson, 2005), and which serve as the theoretical-empirical foundation for subsequent inquiry.

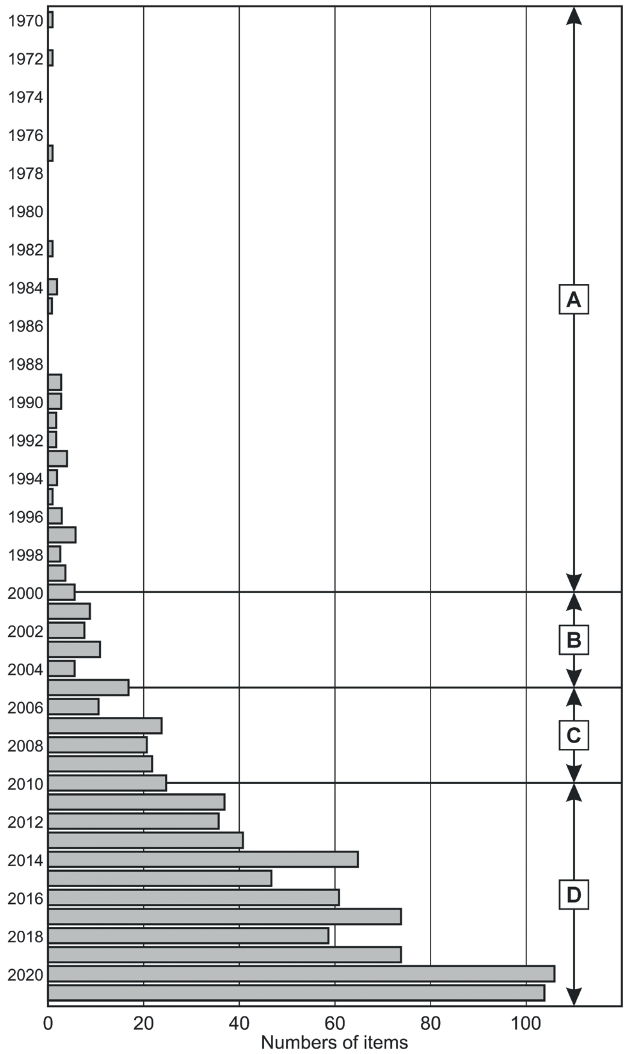

Figure 4. Annual academic production per year
Source: authors

The period 2010–2020 (D) saw the consolidation and final establishment of MICE tourism. Predominant here are studies focusing on modelling the sector (Fenich & Hashimoto, 2010; Mair & Jago, 2010). As can be seen in Figure 4, the years 2014, 2017 and 2020 represent the maximum values of the series analysed, and correspond to the development of research based on key issues in business tourism performance, such as economic impact studies and analysis of the stakeholder perspective (Nicholson & Pearce, 2000; Shin et al., 2017). The range of topics dealt with by business tourism is also seen to have expanded through the inclusion of innovative issues such as sustainability (Ahmad et al., 2016; Dauti et al., 2021; Mykletun et al., 2014; Ranacher & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014), new technologies (Ruoxin & Yujun, 2019; Unurlu, 2020) and the professionalisation of the sector (Lee et al., 2020; Sox & Strick, 2017). Inevitably, the last two years of the period studied have been dominated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global economies, and the negative effect this had (Aburumman, 2020; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021).

In order to compare performance, we evaluated the relevance of various groups of academic actors (countries, universities, researchers, etc.) and the impact of their academic production, based on the bibliographic data obtained (Cobo et al., 2011). Table 2 lists the ten most prolific researchers at an individual level and by nationality as well as the most cited articles over this period related to business tourism, the ten most cited articles in the study period, and the main journals, universities and countries related to this area of knowledge.

By using mainly quantitative data (total number of citations, the year in which publications commenced, *inter alia*), we conduct an analysis of productivity. We present the impact factor of the various researchers through the *h*-index, which crosses the number of citations received by a researcher and their published articles, previously ordered from highest to lowest

Table 2. Ranking of the top ten authors with the highest impact factor, country by author and the most cited papers

Panel (A): Top ten impact authors

Ranking	Author	PY_start	NP	TC	*m*-index	*g*-index	*h*-index
1.	Getz D.	1989	15	2,359	0.382	15	13
2.	Rogerson C.M.	2002	10	289	0.429	10	9
3.	Rogerson J.M.	2011	6	124	0.417	6	5
4.	Saayman M.	2012	5	57	0.455	5	5
5.	Anderson T.-D.	2014	4	68	0.444	4	4
6.	Forsyth P.	1997	4	285	0.154	4	4
7.	Henderson J.C.	2007	5	92	0.250	5	4
8.	Jago L.	2004	4	272	0.211	4	4
9.	Kim M.	2010	5	40	0.308	5	4
10.	Lee S.-S.	2012	4	38	0.364	4	4

Panel (B): Top ten countries by author

Ranking	Country by author	Articles	SCP	MCP	MCP ratio	Frequency
1.	USA	112	110	2	0.018	0.124
2.	Australia	91	60	31	0.341	0.101
3.	United Kingdom	70	67	3	0.043	0.077
4.	China	50	41	9	0.180	0.055
5.	South Africa	44	40	4	0.091	0.049
6.	Canada	21	13	8	0.381	0.023
7.	Malaysia	21	19	2	0.095	0.023
8.	Italy	20	15	5	0.250	0.022
9.	Korea	18	12	6	0.333	0.020
10.	Poland	18	15	3	0.167	0.020

Panel (C): Top ten papers

Ranking	Paper	Normalized TC	TC per year	TC
1.	Event tourism: Definition, evolution, and research (Getz, 2008)	15.56	78.80	1,182
2.	Progress and prospects for event tourism research (Getz & Page, 2016)	22.80	53.67	483
3.	Host community reactions: A cluster analysis (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000)	4.12	18.04	415
4.	Creating an academic landscape of sustainability science: An analysis of the citation network (Kajikawa et al., 2007)	10.04	14.06	225
5.	Differentiation of rural development driven by industrialization and urbanization in eastern coastal China (Long et al., 2009)	7.92	15.36	215
6.	Blockchain for Industry 4.0: A comprehensive review (Bodkhe et al., 2020)	27.28	70.00	2,020
7.	Destination brand images: A business tourism perspective (Hankinson, 2005)	4.97	11.56	208
8.	Bundling sport events with the host destination (Chalip & McGuirty, 2004)	3.63	10.16	193
9.	Sport event tourism and the destination brand: Towards a general theory (Chalip & Costa, 2005)	4.56	10.61	191
10.	Special events. Defining the product (Getz, 1989)	2.97	5.38	183

Note: PY – year of start of publications, NP – number of publications, TC – total citations, SCP – single country publication, MCP – multiple country publication.

Source: authors.

(Hirsch, 2005), the *g*-index – a variant of the *h*-index – through the decreasing ranking of the number of citations – an index obtained through the largest (single) number of the group of articles studied (Egghe, 2006) – and the *m*-index, which is another variant of the *h*-index that assesses this index by year from the first day of publication and which provides a comparison between researchers who have very different careers (Guo et al., 2021). Amongst those showing the greatest impact *vis-à-vis* business tourism, Getz (2008) leads this ranking. His works can be found throughout this period – both as a single author (Getz, 1989) and as a joint author (Lundberg et al., 2017). The approach he adopts in his works established the foundation in the definition and analysis of trends in the sector in the early works and in the gradual diversification in the fields of study in recent years. The two most cited articles are his, and he also leads the ranking of the most cited. The first bibliographic item shown in the table serves as a reference for research into business tourism, describing and distinguishing between events concerned with business, sports, culture or other large-scale events (Henderson, 2014a). Also evident is the increasingly broader scope of topics addressed in academic analysis and which go beyond the conventional economic impact studies within this emerging sector. The second most cited work (Getz & Page, 2016) expands and deepens the new lines of research that were predominant at the time, concerning who is who in business tourism and their motivation (Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2016). He is therefore the author with the highest *h*-index in the whole table, reaching a score of 13. The next most prominent is Rogerson (2002), whose works are both single-author (Rogerson, 2014) and joint (Pandy & Rogerson, 2019). This researcher focuses on the impact of the business tourism sector for South Africa within the historical framework of apartheid (Rogerson, 2019). The author examines the perspective of various stakeholders, such as cross-border shoppers in Johannesburg (Rogerson, 2018) or looks at business mobility from the standpoint of the meetings industry (Rogerson, 2015b) – obtaining the second highest score. Most of the remaining academics' works are published after 2000, which is when research began to take off. The *h* and *g*-index impact values they achieve range between 4 and 5, and there is a wide array of topics addressed. Some authors focus their research in terms of geographic impact analysis – such as Marques and Santos (2017) in Portugal and Rogerson (2002) for South Africa – whereas others open up the spectrum towards methodological studies (Fenich & Hashimoto, 2010) or major sporting events (Henderson, 2014a). Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021) explore the impact of COVID-19 in the *African Journal of Hospitality*, a journal which also ranks high in terms of published works. The following papers in this ranking reflect some of the emerging future lines of research concerning stakeholders, such as sustainability or integration with new technologies, and the development of mechanisms aimed at boosting competitiveness. The third most cited deals with the use of major events within the marketing strategies of host cities as a way to attract tourism, and the impact

Table 3. Ranking of the top ten authors and sources with the most articles and the most relevant affiliations and countries

Panel (A): Top ten of the most cited authors and sources					
Top ten most cited authors				Top ten sources	
Ranking	Authors	Articles	Articles fractionalized	Sources	Articles
1.	Getz D.	15	9.58	*Journal of Convention and Event Tourism*	48
2.	Rogerson C.M.	10	8.00	*Event Management*	33
3.	Marques J.	7	3.50	*Tourism Management*	23
4.	Kim Y.	6	2.08	*Journal of Sport and Tourism*	22
5.	Rogerson J.M.	6	5.00	*Sustainability*	14
6.	Fenich G.	5	3.83	*African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*	13
7.	Henderson J.C.	5	4.25	*International Journal of Event and Festival Management*	10
8.	Kim M.	5	1.83	*Tourism Analysis*	10
9.	Saayman M.	5	1.75	*Accelerating Knowledge Sharing. Creativity and Innovation through Business Tourism*	9
10.	Tichaawa T.M.	5	3.00	*Current Issues in Tourism*	9

Panel (B): Top ten affiliations and countries					
Top affiliations			Top country		
Ranking	Affiliation	Articles	Country	Average article citations	TC
1.	University of Johannesburg	26	Australia	36.10	3,285
2.	Griffith University	13	USA	12.96	1,451
3.	Bournemouth University	12	United Kingdom	17.60	1,232
4.	University of Gothenburg	10	Canada	51.10	1,073
5.	University of North Texas	10	South Africa	12.18	536
6.	Southern Cross University	9	China	10.36	518
7.	Edith Cowan University	8	Hong Kong	32.90	329
8.	George Mason University	8	Italy	16.10	322
9.	North-west University	8	Germany	21.93	307
10.	University of Central Florida	8	Japan	42.67	256

Source: authors.

on residents (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000). The next is Long et al. (2009) who look at the effects on the rural economy of China stemming from the development of various types of industry including business tourism. The fifth article examines strategies used to create a brand image at the chosen destinations (Hankinson, 2005). Table 3 shows the ten most cited authors, the most prolific journals in the field as well as the universities and countries that have focused most attention on exploring this economic sector.

Amongst the ten most cited journals, one particularly noteworthy fact to emerge throughout the analysis period is that this group of publications is reduced to only ten monographs that are confined to four countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and South Africa, with the Americans and the British accounting for over 80% of the publications in the ranking. The two that head the list – *Journal of Convention and Event Tourism* and *Event Management* – both of which are American, specialise in business tourism. However, it is common to find publications related to the meetings industry in journals devoted to the tourism sector in general, such as *Tourism Analysis* and *Current Issues in Tourism*. In fact, it is the third publication in the ranking – *Tourism Management* – that boasts the two articles ranked first and second amongst the most cited (Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2016). The gradual incorporation of the concept of "sustainable development" in this economic sector has enabled journals specialising in sustainability – such as *Sustainability* – to join this list.

Worthy of note amongst the most prolific countries is the leadership of Australia *vis-à-vis* its immediate followers in the ranking, which are the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada (in that order). The number of citations for Australia is over twice that of these three countries, and is five times greater when compared to countries such as South Africa or China. Australia accounts for over 35% of citations, such that the four first countries absorb over 75% of all the citations in this list. Amongst the principal universities to have carried out research into business tourism, worthy of note is the research conducted by the University of Johannesburg and by Griffith University, located in South Africa and Australia, respectively. The University of Johannesburg has performed numerous studies compared to the rest, since it has twice as many as the second most highly ranked – Griffith University – with the two together accounting for 60% of this ranking. This reflects the growing interest in research from South Africa and is evidenced by its ranking fifth in terms of the most cited countries. Likewise, the interest of Griffith University reflects Australia's leadership in this regard, including recent sustainability studies in events tourism (Li et al., 2021). The remaining universities in this ranking display similar levels of research to one another, with a number of published articles ranging between 8 and 12. Prominent in this regard is the University of Bournemouth (United Kingdom) which ranks third in terms of defining terminology, the characteristics of the sector and the research challenges (Getz & Page, 2016; Ladkin, 2014). Figure 5 presents the concurrence of keywords found in the documents compiled. As can be seen, the importance of each term is directly proportional to the size of the bubble within the relational network in which it is included.

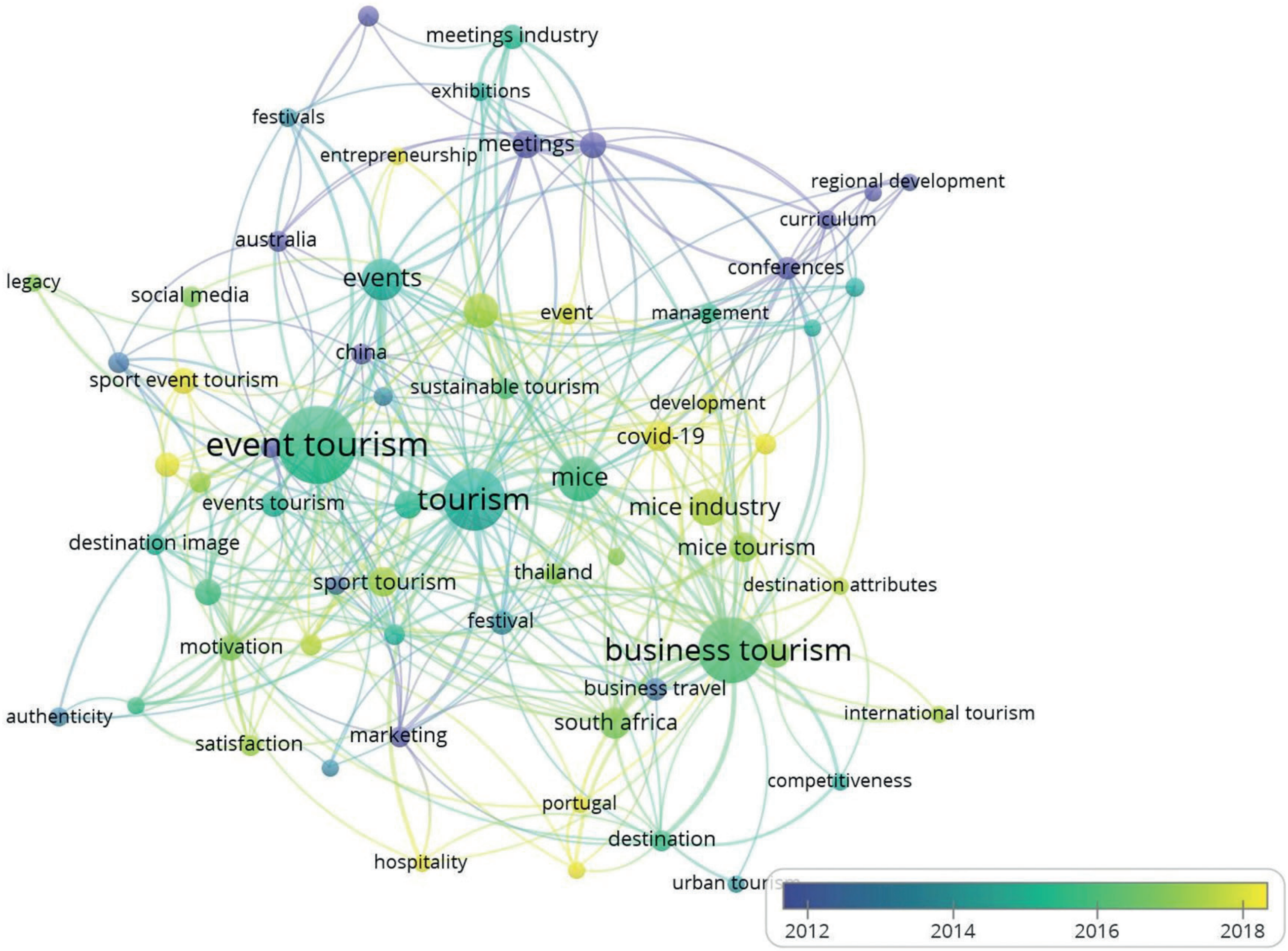

Figure 5. Most frequent words
Source: authors

Framed within the cluster linked to basic and transversal themes we find terms such as “management”, “development” and “MICE industry” which refer to traditional studies that describe the meetings industry and its economic potential for development. Within the cluster linked to *highly developed* and isolated topics of less relevance can be found terms such as “Delphi technique”, “business travel” and “motivation”, related to specific techniques or to profiling attendees (e.g. age, sex, etc.). Contained within the fourth cluster are terms such as education, curriculum, skills and technology, reflecting topics that display an increasing degree of relevance in the sector. The cluster associated to motor themes evidences the strong link between the meetings industry and the tourist sector, which is reflected in the most frequently used words in the documents. Terms such as business or events tourism – related to economic impact studies – are common here. Emphasis is often placed on the increasing competitiveness of the cities hosting the meetings, as well as the impact these events can have on local economies, such that we find terms associated to this cluster like competitiveness, marketing, destination attributes and destination image.

The gradual development over the last few years of activities linked to this segment of tourism is reflected in this relational diagram (see Figure 5) with the terms associated to its acronym MICE, such as MICE industry, MICE tourism, as well as terms such as meetings, exhibitions and festivals. The importance of geographic impact studies is reflected through the presence of terms such as Australia, China or South Africa, or terms like destination image or destination attributes. This research uses academic mapping to represent the cognitive structure in events tourism. The technique used is co-word analysis (Callon et al., 1983; Cobo et al., 2011) and seeks to delimit a field of study as well as to visualise and conceptualise the subfields found when comparing co-words or co-citations (Callon et al., 1991; Small, 1973).

Figure 6 presents the strategic diagram of key words. Each topic has been characterised through two dimensions: centrality and density. Centrality reflects the relevance of each topic by measuring one network’s degree of interaction with another’s, while density indicates the latter’s degree of development by measuring the internal strength of the network. Each

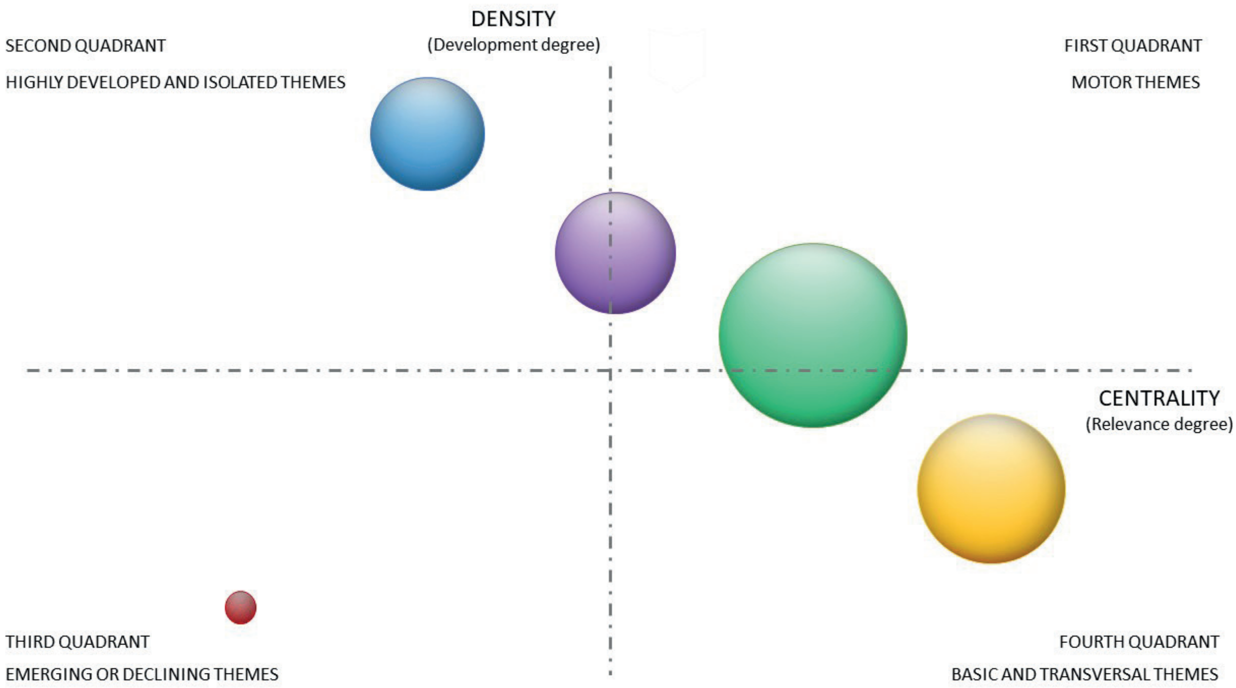

Figure 6. Strategic diagram of keywords
Source: authors

cluster is thus represented graphically on two axes that delimit four major thematic categories through four quadrants. The topics considered to be motor themes within business tourism are located in the upper right quadrant – and are amply developed and essential. The highly developed and isolated themes in the upper left quadrant are considered to be less relevant. The lower left quadrant contains emerging topics or declining topics that are also deemed to be of little relevance and underdeveloped. In the final quadrant – the lower right one – we find topics that have greater relevance, but which are less developed, and that might be considered general, transversal or basic topics related to the meetings industry.

The first cluster (yellow bubble) is located in the fourth quadrant of basic topics addressing issues such as the very industry of business tourism itself and the activities carried out, such as meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions. It also involves issues related to management, such as the social and economic effects of the MICE industry or the creation of surveys. Within the third quadrant, an area of topics that are emerging or declining, we find the second cluster (red bubble) where the only topic studied concerns “industry requirements”, which is currently the least relevant with regard to the rest of academic inquiry. The third cluster (blue bubble) is located in the second quadrant of isolated topics related to less pressing research topics within business tourism, such as methodological or organisational issues and aspects related to travel and attendee profiles. Between the first quadrant of issues concerning motors and the second quadrant of isolated topics is located the fourth cluster (purple bubble), which looks at questions such as the professionalisation of the sector, education and matters concerning society and institutions. These issues attract the attention of academic research to a notable degree. The fifth and final cluster (green bubble) is also located between two quadrants – the first quadrant of motors and the fourth of basic topics – and addresses issues that reach the core of business tourism. It is the most relevant of all, not due to its size but because it explores key issues in the meetings industry, prominent amongst which are economic analysis, management, sustainable development and marketing.

5. Discussion

Analysis of the above results reveals a significant increase in academic studies addressing the meetings industry, a rise that has been particularly evident over the last two decades. During the period 1970–2000 (A), research trends in business tourism focused on identifying activities carried out in the context of the meetings industry and on pinpointing its general characteristics (Getz, 1989; Lawson, 1982). Researcher interest in this stage increased as the number of events held also rose, with this expansion going hand in hand with the boom in mass tourism, as pointed out by Travel in the Seventies (1970), after the 1970s. This growth has been driven by the various social actors involved (enterprises, public entities, associations, etc.) as a result of their having realised the benefits to be derived from developing the sector (Getz & Page, 2016; Lawson, 1982; Mules & Faulkner, 1996; Tanford & Jung, 2017).

General agreement can be found amongst authors when defining the activities and characteristics related to business tourism and which, to a certain degree, set it apart from conventional tourism and which has led to analysis revolving around the activities undertaken by event participants, such as meetings, incentive trips, conferences and exhibitions (Getz, 1989; Lawson, 1982; Owen, 1992; Tanford & Jung, 2017). Nevertheless, this consensus disappears when it comes to which term to use when referring to business tourism, and which depends to a large extent on the activities and events involved in the particular case study and even on authors' preferences.

At the end of this period – and moving into the period 2000–2005 (B) – we see a proliferation of economic impact studies exploring business events (Wootton & Stevens, 1995). The general consensus is that there is a positive impact (Burgan & Mules, 2001; Dwyer & Forsyth, 1997), although certain studies do warn of the possible negative effects for some stakeholders (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Jackson, 2008) or for the environment (Dauti et al., 2021; Moisescu et al., 2019; Mykletun et al., 2014). Indeed, the various stakeholders involved in the event tend to be the key issue in research (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000). Occasionally, the analysis focuses on the consequences for the particular stakeholder in question (Johnson & Vanetti, 2007), whereas other studies look at several different stakeholders at the same time. On many occasions, the research examines those affected in a specific geographic area (Bradley et al., 2002) which leads us to draw attention to another common focus of economic impact studies – analysis of a case study for a specific geographic region (Akin Aksu et al., 2004; Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008; Hanly, 2012). In the analysis by geographic blocks, the areas in which academic research has had the greatest presence and which set the global trend in the meetings industry are Europe, Asia-Pacific, and North America. In these areas, we can find all the relevant and pioneering trends surrounding business tourism, whether through impact studies at a geographic level (Jin et al., 2013; Stokes, 2006b), from the stakeholder perspective (McCabe, 2014), through sustainable development (Wilson & von der Heidt, 2013), the professionalisation of the sector (Fenich & Hashimoto, 2010) and when addressing integration with new technologies (Davidson, 2018). Worth highlighting in this regard are other regions such as South Africa, where the research efforts of authors such as Rogerson (2014) evidence a commitment to this segment of tourism as an economic driver in the region.

It is the combined effect of the whole array of transversal approaches together with the emergence of new research trends in the periods 2005–2010 (C) and 2010–2020 (D) that explains the substantial growth of academic production compared to the first stage. With authors such as Deery et al. (2004) considering events and sports tourism as sub-groups of tourism (Getz & Page, 2016), the development of the industry has given rise to the emergence of new needs – such as professionalisation of the sector – that have led to it being treated separately from traditional tourism. The period 2000–2005 (B) saw the first efforts in this sense (McCabe, 2008), although it was the period 2005–2010 (C) when specific training programmes were carried out in universities in countries where this economic activity is highly developed (Fenich & Hashimoto, 2010; Hsieh, 2013; Lee et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2017). Even though training formed a key part of the training framework of tourism (Getz & Page, 2016), this circumstance was consolidated as a natural trend in the sector in the following years.

Throughout these two stages, problems persisted concerning definitions and terminology, as well as with regard to the high degree of fragmentation in the industry, which led to difficulties in terms of processing data statistically (Ladkin, 2014; Pearlman, 2008). Academic literature continued with the already referred to approaches, including the geographic issue of the cities hosting the events (Del Chiappa, 2012; Getz & Page, 2016; Kerdpitak, 2019), a line of research which continued to increase in subsequent years (Millán et al., 2016; Sutton, 2016). New technologies and, in general, research related to the application of technical and social progress in the meetings industry, gained particular relevance in the period 2010–2020 (D). Stakeholders became aware of how to benefit from the competitive advantages afforded to them by websites (Davras, 2020; Koba, 2020) and by new communication and information systems (Ergen, 2020; Han et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Shi et al., 2013; Ziyadin et al., 2019) and which enabled them to generate synergies so as to successfully hold their business events. Sustainable development – which is also present throughout the period 2010–2020 (D) gradually came to form part of the growth of the meetings industry and its corresponding academic analysis through the use of sustainable practices when holding events (Bovenberg et al., 2017; Dauti et al., 2021; Kajikawa et al., 2007; Wee et al., 2017). The development of sustainable models (Chang & Chang, 2020; Mair & Jago, 2010) as well as others related to the concept of green MICE (Mykletun et al., 2014; Ranacher & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014) will likely continue in the future, given society's ever-increasing concern for the impact of human activities on the environment.

To the best of our knowledge, the academic literature has approached business tourism research in a partial and narrowly focused manner. The results of this study offer a new critical perspective on emerging trends in the sector. Previous research, such as that conducted by Getz (1989) at an early stage as well as its characterization almost a decade later in relation to the economic dynamics of the sector (Getz & Page, 2016), or that of Zeng et al. (2013) in relation to sustainability in the MICE sector confirms this limitation in terms of temporal and methodological scope. Our bibliometric analysis extends this body of knowledge by integrating modern tools and a systematic approach to identify key patterns, key players and thematic connections in business tourism.

This approach not only fills an important gap in the literature but also has important practical applications. Works such as Mair and Jago (2010) provide a guide to event organizers for the implementation of sustainable practices taking into account issues such as understanding the motivating factors of this type of policy, overcoming economic and social or cultural barriers as well as taking advantage from the point of view of communication and brand image. In this contemporary practical line, Sox and Strick (2017) examine both the integration of new technologies for the realization of hybrid meetings and the need for professionalization and training in the growing sector to meet the need to improve the skills of these professionals, as well as Lee et al. (2016) offering valuable technological tools to improve the planning, marketing and evaluation of meetings and events in the 21st century, such as social networks, mobile applications or virtual meetings. In this sense, he highlights the potential of incentive travel, which from an academic point of view has not been analyzed in-depth and yet has a remarkable potential for practical application for managers in the meetings industry who can take advantage of its effects on the productivity and motivation of their employees. Mair (2015) discusses this issue in depth and suggests in his conclusions how incentive travel is seen as an important and meaningful reward by organizations and their employees. These results highlight the reality of a sector that is consolidating year after year and becoming an attractive focus for investment in human capital, as well as in goods and services, which benefits society as a whole. These conclusions not only enrich academic knowledge but also offer practical tools to optimize and improve the competitiveness of destinations and promote the sustainable development of the sector, identifying the main actors, authors, journals and institutions and facilitating collaboration among them for the growth of the sector.

6. Conclusions

This study provides a bibliometric analysis of the academic articles published over the last fifty years on the topic of business tourism. The main findings reflect the current situation of the sector as well as the trends followed by research on the issue. It should first be pointed out that academic studies exploring business tourism are often related to its economic impact. In methodological terms, works can focus on a particular aspect of the economic activity in question, on the region hosting the events, or can examine cases by transversally looking at both the actors involved as well as the venues. It should also be highlighted that the increased research activity has been concentrated over the last twenty years.

Stemming from this economic interest – and seen from the academic perspective – there has been a diversification in approaches to the meetings industry over the last two decades. Prominent in this regard are the issues of sustainable development, the professionalisation of the sector and the use of so-called new technologies. As regards the first of these, growing social awareness *vis-à-vis* protecting the environment has triggered greater interest in issues related to corporate social responsibility and the circular economy. As for professionalisation, the consolidation of the sector as a profitable economic activity for a region and the increased demand for activities linked to MICE tourism have turned the demand for specialised professionals into a labour market need. Finally, use of so-called new technologies has boosted the quality of the services provided and has enhanced management efficiency, which has positively impacted performance and the anticipated synergies. The consolidation of business tourism as a relevant economic driver suggests that impact studies will continue to be a relevant issue motivating researchers, managers and organizers in the meetings industry. However, it is the conclusions drawn in this article in relation to the challenges of sustainability, professionalization and technology that will continue to contribute to academic research in the sector. The findings of this study have significant implications for key players in the MICE sector, including event organizers, destination policymakers and service providers. The trends identified, provide a solid basis for developing practical strategies, such as the alignment of industry players with ESG principles to minimize environmental impact and position themselves as responsible destinations, the progressive implementation of technological solutions to improve the user experience and optimize the productivity of business events, and the implementation of educational programs aimed at training industry professionals, thus strengthening the competitiveness of MICE destinations. Not all the implications are economic. The legacy of business tourism has proven to have an impact on the society that hosts such events. From a social and cultural point of view, the benefits it can bring to the destination cities are remarkable, and social, public and private agents should take advantage of these for the benefit of all. Together with these innovative study approaches, questions related to governance and the public sector as well as to new methodological proposals applicable to business tourism have served to complement and enrich potential lines of future research. Furthermore, given the impact which the COVID-19 pandemic had – paralysing business tourism for two years due to health restrictions and triggering a decline in academic production – comparative studies addressing academic production pre- and post- pandemic are more than justified, with such works likely to be confined to studies exploring the impact of the pandemic as well as to issues concerning preventive methods.

As regards the limitations of the present study, mention should be made of the fact that we failed to use all the existing databases. The work is grounded on Scopus, considered the most all-encompassing database, given that it covers more years in its references and spans a larger number of disciplines than others. Nevertheless, our analysis may have overlooked works from authors included in other databases – such as the also well-known WoS – and which would possibly have helped to carry out a more thorough analysis. We are also aware that there a good number of approaches that can be adopted to examine the meetings industry – perhaps as many as there are researchers and fields of inquiry in which to apply them. We opted to present the principal trends and to group them in accordance with the points of view taken by the authors themselves, although we do recognise that – given the transversal nature of this economic activity – many other methodological (Martín et al., 2017a, 2017b; Rojas Bueno et al., 2020) or other approaches related to the public sector are feasible (Dredge & Whitford, 2011). In this sense, another of the limitations to highlight lies in the exclusively quantitative approach, based on bibliometric analysis. Although this methodology is robust and widely accepted by the academic community, qualitative methodological approaches would allow us to explore the perspectives of the actors involved, such as managers, organizers and participants in the MICE sector. Future research could integrate qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and case studies, to enrich knowledge on the practical application of emerging trends in the industry. This combined approach would allow us not only to confirm the dynamics identified in this analysis but also to better understand the specific needs and challenges faced by the sector in real contexts.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.06 e-ISSN 2080-6922, ISSN 0867-5856

COPE Member since 2019 JM14487

Turyzm/Tourism
2025, *35*(1)

AI-powered live chatbots and smart tour guide apps in tourism: A literature review and future research directions

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How to cite (APA style): Ghasemi, V., Yarahmadi, P., & Kuhzady, S. (2025). AI-powered live chatbots and smart tour guide apps in tourism: A literature review and future research directions. *Turyzm/Tourism, 35*(1), 217–227. https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.06

ABSTRACT

This study explores the critical intersection in the tourism sector combining artificial intelligence (AI) technologies with conventional methods. This research outlines three main goals: assessing the use of AI chatbots in the tourism industry, reviewing existing literature on intelligent tour guide apps, and pinpointing areas for further research. It focuses on incorporating AI into the tourism industry, highlighting the effectiveness of tools such as ChatGPT. The systematic literature review examines the use of ChatGPT in pre-trip, en route, and post-trip scenarios, analyzing its effects on customer engagement. Using technology acceptance model (TAM) and unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) frameworks, the adoption of automated intelligent tour guides is explored. The research follows a systematic review methodology, adhering to PRISMA guidelines for methodological rigor and has uncovered several factors that impact the adoption of AI-based intelligent tour guides, offering valuable insights for academic scholars and industry experts.

KEYWORDS

AI technology, smart tour guide apps, AI-powered live chatbots, ChatGPT, intelligent features

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
17 September 2024
Accepted:
9 December 2024
Published:
11 June 2025

1. Introduction

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has sparked a paradigm shift in the global tourism industry. These progressions have given rise to an unparalleled potential for reinventing traditional approaches in the field. Enhanced living standards and evolving consumption patterns among individuals have significantly driven tourism growth, which has, in turn, supported the hospitality industry (Rashkin et al., 2019).

An intriguing possibility in this scenario is the implementation of AI-driven live chat support systems as substitutes or enhancements of the traditional role

Funding information: This work is supported by national funds, through the FCT – Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology under the project UID/04011: CETRAD – Centre for Transdisciplinary Development Studies. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

of on-site tour guides. The typical tourism model heavily depends on human tour guides, essential in giving tourists invaluable information, historical perspective and a tailored adventure. Nonetheless, this long-standing model has limitations, including scale challenges, linguistic barriers and finding suitable guides. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the need for contactless and technologically advanced measures to guarantee the safety and health of travelers. Crises in public health have driven a more rapid implementation of technological solutions, particularly in artificial intelligence (Li et al., 2021). In response to this trend, business administrators in the hospitality and tourism sectors have begun to implement more AI-driven technologies in their service delivery, such as automated check-ins at hotels and contactless meal services (Chi et al., 2020; Li et al., 2019). The ongoing development of AI technologies is making it possible for generative AI applications, such as ChatGPT, to assist businesses in crafting novel experiences that blend digital and real environments (Mondal et al., 2023). By offering customized travel recommendations, thorough answers to questions and customized itineraries, ChatGPT, for example, serves as a "digital secretary or assistant" for travelers, enhancing productivity and decision-making (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2024; Stokel-Walker & Noorden, 2023).

These systems go beyond the constraints of conventional resources like travel blogs and give a personal touch to travel experiences by taking on roles like tour guides or local experts (Chatterjee & Dethlefs, 2023). Their potential is found outside pre-trip planning; ChatGPT improves cultural awareness while traveling by bridging language barriers and enhancing visitors' experiences with dynamic, self-guided tours (Wong et al., 2023). As a result, there has been a notable increase in the use of AI in the hospitality and tourism sectors over the past few years, owing to its capacity to reduce labor costs and improve service efficiency (Ruiz-Alba & Martín-Peña, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020).

This study aims to conduct an analysis of existing literature to explore the potential for AI-powered live chatbots and intelligent tour guide apps to aid travelers. While the tourism industry progressively embraces AI-based solutions, the extent to which these innovations can supplant or collaborate with travelers remains a subject of inquiry marked by a conspicuous void in scholarly exploration. When contextualized within the tourism domain, a visible gap exists in the literature concerning the efficacy, acceptability and constraints of AI-powered live chat support systems. Therefore, the current study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

- to study the feasibility of employing an AI-based chatbot in tourism and hospitality, with specific focus on travel plans; and
- to review the existing literature on intelligent tour guide apps in order to gain valuable insights for the prospective development of intelligent / AI-based chatbots tailored for travelers.

The goal is to recognize deficiencies in the literature and identify topics that demand additional exploration, with a particular emphasis on existing research and potential new directions.

As the investigation progresses, it becomes clear that integrating AI in the tourism sector is not just a technical upgrade but a complete paradigm shift. The utilization of AI-powered tools, specifically ChatGPT, profoundly influences customer engagement and loyalty, making it the center of attention. By closing the divide between traditional tourism practices and the ever-changing realm of AI-powered solutions, this study hopes to offer valuable knowledge for both academia and industry practitioners.

Current research focuses on AI integration in the tourism and hospitality industries, exploring the efficiency of AI-driven technologies. The primary concentration is on design elements, with a detailed exploration of ChatGPT and related materials, while systematically analyzing the pre-, during, and post-travel phases. A rigorous review of smart tour guide apps will be carried out as a follow-up to identify gaps that should be addressed in future studies, including incorporating AI-powered chatbots.

2. Literature review

2.1. AI integration in tourism and hospitality

In the last few years, there has been a substantial growth in AI utilization by the hospitality and tourism sectors (Ruiz-Alba & Martín-Penã, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). The rising focus on technology has made advanced hospitality more crucial, offering tourists a smart and refined experience that enhances their comfort and pleasure (Lai & Hung, 2017; Leung, 2019; Wu & Cheng, 2018). Additionally, AI helps to cut down on labor expenses and improve service efficiency (Ruiz-Alba & Martín-Penã, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). From the customer point of view, AI has revolutionized traditional service interactions by minimizing face-to-face interactions and focusing on technology-driven service encounters, leading to a notable influence on customer experiences and behavior (Ivanov & Webster, 2019). While from the business standpoint, AI has the potential to be utilized in various areas of management, particularly in promotion and productivity (Buhalis et al. 2019; Tussyadiah & Miller 2019), AI is forecast to promote sustainable travel by motivating customers to adopt a more social perspective (Tussyadiah & Miller, 2019).

Due to these developments, competition in the hospitality industry has grown fiercer, making service innovation essential for attracting customers (Lai & Hung, 2017). Simultaneously, the tourism field is exploring the fundamental components of intelligent technologies for personalized hospitality experiences and investigating how their fusion facilitates customized tourism (Neuhofer et al., 2015). Therefore, AI is crucial for the hospitality and tourism industry in a variety of ways.

2.2. AI-powered tool efficiency in tourism and hospitality

In the current era of a fiercely competitive environment, tourism and hospitality are constantly facing new challenges to attract a wider range of customers (Altinay & Kozak, 2021). With the introduction of generative artificial intelligence (GAI), there have been revolutionary developments (Elmohandes & Marghany, 2024; Iskender, 2023), enabling companies to develop innovative experiences that mix virtual and real spaces (Mondal et al., 2023). Generative artificial intelligence applications, such as ChatGPT, have the potential to enhance customer interaction and loyalty, personalize travel arrangements, streamline business administration and deliver various other benefits (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2024; Iskender, 2023; Mondal et al., 2023). Given the early stage of GAI technologies, it is wise to consider their potential to bring about significant changes in the tourism sector, especially considering the lack of extensive research on their effects (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2024).

The purpose of this commentary is to spark discussion on GAI and its possible impact on the tourism and hospitality industry. ChatGPT is showcased as a representative example while evaluating its impact on the hospitality and tourism sectors, how it plays the role of leader and illustrating how it can become a "digital secretary or assistant" for tourists at different points of their travel experience (Stokel-Walker & Noorden, 2023, p. 215).

In fact, when it comes to planning an optimal trip for tourists, the focus should be on efficiency, including searching for information, evaluating choices and making decisions (Wong et al., 2023; Xiang et al., 2015). By leveraging its advanced features, this application streamlines the process by providing detailed answers to complex questions, analyzing user preferences and offering cost-effective information on various travel destinations (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2024). It improves decision-making efficiency by eliminating unnecessary information and speeding up information gathering (Susnjak, 2022). ChatGPT excels in organizing trips effectively and providing tailored suggestions, going beyond the limitations of travel blogs and online reviews (Sun et al., 2021). By assuming different roles, such as a tour guide or a local resident, it adds a personal element to travel suggestions, elevating the genuineness of the overall travel experience (Chatterjee & Dethlefs, 2023; Chen & Rahman, 2018).

Moreover, continuous decision-making is essential during the en route phase of travel (Wong et al., 2023). In fact, ChatGPT enhances both cultural understanding and the travel experience by overcoming communication obstacles and bridging language gaps (McKercher & Darcy, 2018). With its wide array of resources and deep knowledge base, this AI application delivers a cutting-edge autonomous guided tour experience that exceeds the capabilities of human tour guides (Huang et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2023). Tourists can personalize their travel adventures using this customized tour guide model, finding accurate information on history, culture and popular attractions (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2024).

Subsequently, ChatGPT enhances the post-travel experience by generating "authentic text" for sharing on posts, comments and travel journals (Chui et al., 2022; Nautiyal et al., 2023; Taecharungroj, 2023). Encouraging the sharing of travel content contributes to a heightened sense of well-being and a stronger passion for travel (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Xu & Zhang, 2021; Yao et al., 2021). As a result, it assists in prolonging satisfaction by empowering travelers to store and retrieve their travel memories, potentially resulting in the creation of AI-generated content like photos and videos (Cao et al., 2023; Du et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023).

2.3. AI-powered chatbot design conceptualizations

Recently, scholars in communication and marketing have increasingly focused on customer engagement (Eisingerich et al., 2019; Rutz et al., 2019) with AI technologies, exemplified by robots and chatbots, have facilitated nuanced, two-way interactions between organizations and their clientele (Fryer et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Shumanov & Johnson, 2021; Tsai et al., 2021). This interactive communication goes beyond basic transactions and include finding information, leaving feedback, engaging in online brand communities, and sharing thoughts on improving services through social media (Chang et al., 2018). Efficiently managing technologies that improve customer engagement brings opportunities and challenges for organizations seeking long-term success (Hollebeek & Belk, 2021).

The rise of technology has led to the widespread use of conversational agents, specifically chatbot agents, as crucial elements in organizational marketing communication strategies (Dale, 2016). Chatbots provide a smooth and organic conversation experience not requiring predetermined keywords or commands through text-based interfaces (Feine et al., 2019). Utilized on multiple digital channels, such as company websites, messaging apps, and social media platforms, chatbots effectively mimic human conversational patterns, promoting a sense of ease for users when initiating interactions and identifying commonalities between users and chatbots (Feine et al., 2019; Go & Sundar, 2019; Prasetya et al., 2018). Chatbots promote dialogic communication, giving customers instant information and valuable feedback, along with meeting their needs while they use a product or service (Reinartz et al., 2019). Customers prefer responsive chatbot service agents who use conversational language to provide value (Fadhil & Schiavo, 2019). The following discussion seeks to clarify fundamental ideas in this field.

2.4. Dialogic chatbot communication

The crucial importance of interactive communication in nurturing customer relationships through cutting-edge technologies, especially AI-driven chatbot services, has been widely recognized by business scholars. Examining the "dialogic loop" is essential for understanding how organizations interact with customers digitally (Jiang et al., 2022). This loop enables customers to pose queries, necessitating organizations to reply promptly, thereby demonstrating responsiveness (Hinson et al., 2020; Schamari & Schaefers, 2015). Chatbot services, as a core function, are designed to address these inquiries (Wang et al., 2016). Timely and appropriate responses keep entities communicative and enhance competitiveness in a competitive chat-app-centric business landscape. Extensive research in written academic documents related to chatbots has indicated that responsiveness plays a vital role in enhancing credibility and social presence while influencing customer attitudes and behaviors by imparting a sense of humanness to chatbot interactions (Go & Sundar, 2019; Schuetzler et al., 2019; Sundar et al., 2015; Vendemia, 2017). Beyond responsiveness, an essential aspect is evaluating how chatbot agents engage in natural language and conversational text-based interactions to measure service satisfaction (Feine et al., 2019). Previous studies on user-chatbot interactions have delved into examining conversational systems, particularly the personas adopted by conversational bot agents during customer interactions (Fadhil & Schiavo, 2019). Creating a seamless connection with customers in a personal, one-on-one environment is crucial, establishing a friendly tone and enabling customers to dictate the nature of the interaction (Lee & Choi, 2017). It is anticipated that conversational chatbot agents will possess amiability, proficiency and cooperation qualities to build a strong connection with customers by displaying empathetic, sympathetic, nurturing and even humorous characteristics (Jiang et al., 2022).

2.5. Responsiveness

Conventional rules, including subject matter, timing and the natural progression of dialogue, guide the dynamics of human-to-human communication. Within these norms, "relation" suggests the anticipation of dialogue giving participants customized responses that fit the current conversation (Schuetzler et al., 2019). Maintaining relevance in a conversation requires responsiveness and aligning responses within the conversation's context (Sundar et al., 2015). To maintain relevance, a chatbot must analyze customer messages, utilize contextual information from previous exchanges, and demonstrate a natural and fluent conversational style (Jiang et al., 2022). The importance of contingency in interpersonal communication, highlighting the fact that conversation responses depend on previous messages (Go & Sundar, 2019). A complete conversation relies on the reciprocal exchange of messages, also known as "message interactivity" (Jiang et al., 2022).

Regarding chatbots, adding interactivity to messages increases anthropomorphism by mimicking the responsiveness in human-to-human conversations (Go & Sundar, 2019). Research shows that having more interactive conversations in online chat can boost one's sense of social presence, as it closely resembles face-to-face communication (Sundar et al., 2015). In literature discussing significance, changeability and interaction in messages, examples of chatbot responsiveness include the quick responses of service agents to customer feedback, effectively and expeditiously handling complaints while consistently prioritizing customer needs during communication procedures (Go & Sundar, 2019; Schuetzler et al., 2019; Wang & Cheung, 2024).

2.6. Adopting a conversational approach

How we engage with a system is crucial to the flow of conversations, as the system acts as a dialogue partner (Jiang et al., 2022). Utilizing a colloquial style is crucial, as it allows users to feel a sense of familiarity and experience lifelike interactions while interacting with a machine or bot. As a result, chatbots use natural, conversational language to imitate human-to-human communication, creating the impression that users are engaging with a natural person (Ciechanowski et al., 2019). An essential aspect of chatbot conversations is the use of social cues, including informal language, empathy and a welcoming tone, as well as the ability to convey emotions, encourage users to perceive the interaction as lifelike, and mimicking cues typically found in natural human conversations (Feine et al., 2019). Two-way chatbot communication involves service agents using conversational language to establish a genuine customer partnership. This method encourages an environment in which customers feel that their perspectives and opinions are valued and respected. Customers are encouraged to participate in open conversation, as chatbot agents prioritize building a shared understanding instead of taking control of the conversation (Ciechanowski et al., 2019; Feine et al., 2019).

The evaluation of chatbots in terms of customer happiness or satisfaction deviates from conventional methods discussed in business literature which frequently assessed customer contentment by measuring the extent to which a company's offerings met or surpassed customer needs (Santini et al., 2018). Within the framework of this study, our attention is directed towards customers' appraisals of chatbot services. Positive evaluations following consumption correlate with heightened customer satisfaction. According to research precise, capable, individualized and reliable chatbot communication is crucial in minimising uncer-tainty and positively influencing customer satisfaction.

3. Research method

3.1. Research design

The methodology used in this study was a systematic review, which is a thorough investigation that follows a structured approach to gathering, evaluating and synthesizing information from various research sources. A systematic review addresses a research question and adheres to strict inclusion criteria. A comprehensive examination of all relevant literature seeks to uncover existing knowledge and identify areas that require further research. Next, it offers unambiguous guidelines for further research (Lin et al., 2022). As stated by Duan et al. (2022), systematic literature review (SLR) is a valuable technique for assessing and progressing knowledge in a particular field. This research has utilized the PRISMA framework, as seen in previous SLR studies in tourism and hospitality, to maintain methodological rigor (Booth et al., 2020; Calisto & Sarkar, 2024). PRISMA provides a comprehensive checklist to ensure an excellent review process. The associated protocol includes article identification, search strategy development, and data extraction and analysis procedures (Wang & Cheung, 2024).

3.2. Data collection

The Scopus database was utilized to gather information on intelligent tour guides. This database is known for its extensive collection of journal articles, books and conference proceedings, making it the largest of its kind (Walters et al., 2025). Keywords such as "app tour guide", "smart tour guide", "AI tour guide", "robot tour guide", "virtual reality tour guide", "augmented reality tour guide", "intelligent tourist guide", "mobile tourist guide", and "chatbot tour guide" were utilized in the initial search. This procedure was carried out on December 2, 2023, and 104 articles were discovered on the Scopus database. The initial search focused on article titles in order to identify any of the keywords mentioned. This strategy resulted in a smaller pool of extracted articles, dramatically improving their relevance and aligning them with the topic of interest. After careful consideration, articles that met the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria were selected. Works included in the review met the following criteria: peer-reviewed, written in English, related to specified keywords, and not restricted by a specific timeframe. On the other hand, any studies that did not meet these conditions were excluded, including book chapters, proceedings, editorials and editorial materials.

During this phase, we retrieved a total of 42 journal articles. We deliberately chose to focus on journal articles, a decision influenced by the belief that they undergo a rigorous peer review process, guaranteeing the reliability of the research results. Furthermore, journal articles are often more convenient for researchers to obtain, making them a fitting and trustworthy resource for SLR (Krajňák, 2021).

4. Findings

4.1. Influential factors in using smart tour guides

The reception of new technologies can differ significantly, with some being quickly adopted while others encounter setbacks and opposition from individuals. Researchers thoroughly examine the driving forces behind the acceptance of each new technology to gain insight into the influencing factors. These studies aim to shed light on the mechanisms that play a role in the smooth integration or possible reluctance and opposition towards emerging technologies (Çalişkan & Sevim, 2023).

Because of the strong correlation between tourism, communication and information technologies, the rise and progress of technology has significantly shaped the tourism and hospitality sector, prompting researchers in this field to extensively analyze and explore its various facets (Shin et al., 2022). Researchers across multiple fields have placed great emphasis on the embrace of new technologies. For example, academics have studied the implementation of chatbots powered by AI (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020), the metaverse and blockchain (Corne et al., 2023), machine learning (Go et al., 2020),

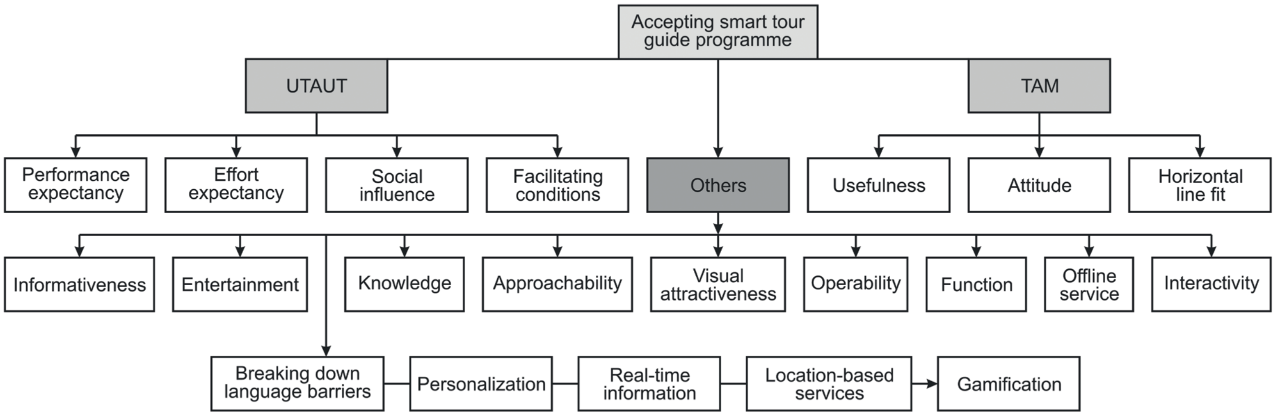

Figure 1. Factors identified as reasons for the adoption of intelligent guides
Note: UTAUT – unified theory of acceptance and use of technology, TAM – technology acceptance model
Source: authors

mobile applications (Huang et al., 2019) and biometric systems in hotels (Morosan, 2012).

Scientists have thoroughly investigated the adoption of technology through the lens of different theoretical frameworks, including the theory of planned behavior, diffusion of innovations theory, unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT), and the technology acceptance model (TAM) as commonly employed theories (Guo et al., 2023). The mobile tour guide field, which serves as the primary focus of this research, has piqued the curiosity of scholars as well. Despite the limited research on adopting mobile tour guides, TAM (Peres et al., 2011) and UTAUT (Lai, 2015) often capture the interest. The Figure 1 highlights the factors that contribute to the acceptance of intelligent guides in mobile tour guides.

4.2. Categorizing the existing literature

The application of title analysis was utilized to categorize and identify the subject areas of conducted studies. This method involves grouping or clustering works according to their similarities, as Chrastina (2020) has described. By examining titles, researchers can pinpoint key subjects and fields of study, providing a comprehensive understanding of the main themes and simplifying organizing and grouping them. Four fundamental categories were discovered through

Table 1. Categorizing the existing literature

Category	Category description	Studied variables	Authors
Acceptance	Investigating factors influencing user acceptance and use of intelligent tour guide technologies	Knowledge, usefulness, and attitude	Peres et al. (2011)
		Informativeness, entertainment, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, facilitating conditions	Lai (2015)
		Approachability, visual attractiveness, operability, function, offline service, interactivity	Gao and Pan (2022)
Design	Exploring principles that need to be considered in designing user interfaces	Location-based services	Curran and Smith (2006)
		Personalization	Tarantino et al. (2019)
		Kano-IPA integration model	Li and Xiao (2020)
		Gamification	Aluri (2017)
Impact	Examine the impacts of intelligent tour guides	Destination travel intention	Kim et al. (2019)
		Enhancing the tourism experience	Kounavis et al. (2012)
		User satisfaction	Liu et al. (2016)
		Service quality	Niu (2023)
Evaluation and case studies	Comparing and evaluating mobile tour guide applications	Comparing 36 apps related to intelligent tour guides	Sia et al. (2022)
		Insights from Pokémon GO for tour guide apps	Aluri (2017)
		A mobile GIS app for tour guides in Dar-es-salaam	Buberwa and Msusa (2019)

Source: authors.

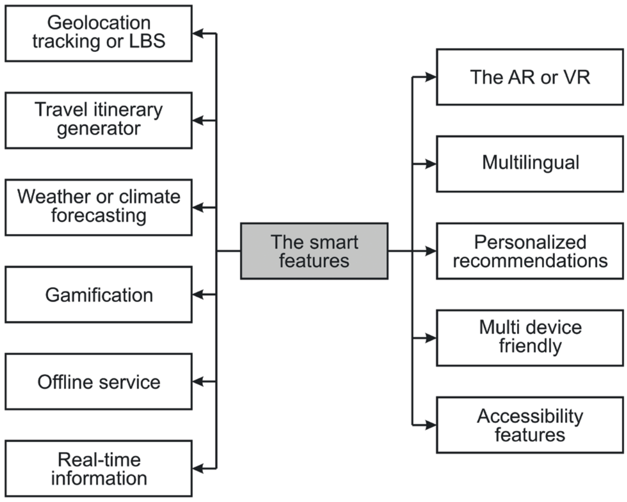

Figure 2. The innovative features of an intelligent tour guide app
Note: LBS – laser beam scanning, AR – augmented reality, VR – virtual reality
Source: authors

the title analysis: acceptance, design, impacts and evaluation (Table 1).

4.3. The innovative features of a mobile tour guide application

Smart tour guide apps can elevate the overall user experience by incorporating intelligent features. After thoroughly analyzing the articles, we identified 11 critical, innovative features developers need to consider while developing smart tour guide apps (Figure 2).

5. Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the implementation and effectiveness of AI-driven live chatbots and smart tour guide applications within the tourism and hospitality sectors. This research has delved into the integration of AI technology in these industries, assessing its role as an intelligent tour guide across different phases of the travel experience – before, during and after the trip. The findings highlight how AI-driven technology can enhance customer engagement, streamline operations and offer personalized assistance to travelers, thus adding value across the entire customer journey.

One key contribution of this study is the in-depth examination of AI-powered chatbot design, focusing on elements such as dialogue flow, responsiveness, and conversational ability. These features are essential for creating engaging digital tour guides that offer user-friendly, human-like interactions. The study also identifies critical factors and existing gaps within the literature, providing insights that contribute to the advancement of digital tour guides in tourism. By offering a comprehensive review of current research on smart tour guide apps, the study illuminates the state of knowledge in this field and underscores the significance of design principles, intelligent features and user acceptance in developing successful AI-based tour guides.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes several areas for future exploration, such as refining the design and accessibility of digital tour guides, enhancing cultural adaptability and expanding the evaluation of AI-driven technology's impact on tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty and the traditional tour guiding sector. Additionally, the research highlights the potential of emerging technologies, including augmented reality and machine learning, to further optimize the capabilities of intelligent tour guides. By addressing these identified gaps and research opportunities, future studies can better understand the implications of AI-driven tools in the tourism industry, contributing to the development of innovative, responsive and impactful digital tour guides that meet evolving traveler expectations.

5.1. Gaps and future studies

A thorough examination of relevant studies has identified several gaps in the current research on intelligent tour guide apps. These gaps cover a variety of elements, such as adaptation, utilized design principles, impact analysis in previous research, intelligent and AI-driven features and evaluation methods. A summary table (Table 2) has been provided to outline the identified gaps and propose future research questions. These research gaps emphasize the need for further exploration and study to enhance our comprehension of smart tour guide apps and their consequences.

Table 2. Gaps and research questions for future studies

Theme	Gaps	Research questions for future studies	
Adaptation	Existing studies about user acceptance behavior focus on initial adoption and must adequately address the post-adoption	RQ_1	What factors influence the sustained acceptance and use of AI-powered and mobile tour guides over time?
	Studies on user acceptance behavior of mobile tour guide apps need to give more attention to the impact of cultural values on acceptance and usage	RQ_2	How do cultural values influence user acceptance and utilization of mobile tour guide applications?

Table 2 (cont.)

Theme	Gaps		Research questions for future studies
Design	Although numerous researchers have developed various methods and systems for intelligent tour guide apps, there is still room for improvement in accuracy and practicality	RQ_3	How can the accuracy and practicality of smart tour guide apps be improved to enhance user experience and satisfaction using AI?
	The accessibility of smart tour guides has received limited attention in discussions	RQ_4	To what extent are smart tour guides accessible?
		RQ_5	How might the application of emerging technologies like AI, augmented reality and machine learning be utilized to optimize the efficiency and performance of intelligent tour guides?
Impact	Past studies have given limited attention to the consequences of adopting AI tour guides on destination selection, loyalty and overall tourist satisfaction	RQ_6	How do intelligent and AI tour guide systems impact destination selection, loyalty and overall tourist satisfaction?
		RQ_7	In what ways could the introduction of AI tour guides impact the traditional tour guiding sector?
Smart features	More attention should be directed towards investigating the essential intelligent features that mobile tour guide applications should offer users	RQ_8	What are the essential intelligent features that mobile tour guide applications must provide for users by considering the conceptualization of AI-powered chatbots?
Evaluation and case studies	Existing research has yet to thoroughly explore the upcoming trends and new focuses expected in the field of intelligent tour guides	RQ_9	What future trends and emerging focal points are anticipated in the field of intelligent tour guides?
	Exploring user comments in existing apps needs to be more adequately addressed	RQ_{10}	What valuable insights can we gather from user comments in AI-powered tour guides to improve smart tour guide applications and better meet user needs?

Source: authors.

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Published by Lodz University Press

First Edition. W.11745.25.0.C
Printing sheets 28.5

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