Year 19, No. 1, April 2026, issn 1855-3303, e-issn 2335-4194

Academica Turistica

Tourism & Innovation Journal
Revija za turizem in inovativnost

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Tourism & Innovation Journal – Revija za turizem in inovativnost
Year 19, No. 1, April 2026, ISSN 1855-3303, e-ISSN 2335-4194
https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.19_1

Università del Litorale – Univerza na Primorskem
Turistica – Facoltà di Studi per il Turismo – Fakulteta za turistične študije
UNIVERSITY OF PRIMORSKA PRESS

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Published by University of Primorska Press
University of Primorska
Titov trg 4, SI-6000 Koper
E-mail: zalozba@upr.si
Web: http://www.hippocampus.si

Editorial Office Academica Turistica
Faculty of Tourism Studies – Turistica
Obala 11a, SI-6320 Portorož, Slovenia
E-mail: academica@turistica.si
Web: http://academica.turistica.si

Subscriptions The journal is distributed free of charge. For information about postage and packaging prices, please contact us at academica@turistica.si.

Copy Editor Susan Cook
Cover Design Mateja Oblak
Cover Photo Alen Ježovnik (Šunik Water Grove, Slovenia)
Printed in Slovenia by Grafika 3000, Dob
Print Run 100 copies

Academica Turistica – Revija za turizem in inovativnost je znanstvena revija, namenjena mednarodni znanstveni in strokovni javnosti; izhaja v angleščini s povzetki v slovenščini. Izid publikacije je finančno podprla Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije iz sredstev državnega proračuna iz naslova razpisa za sofinanciranje domačih znanstvenih periodičnih publikacij.

ISSN 1855-3303 (printed)
ISSN 2335-4194 (online)

Original Scientific Article

Investigating the Ongoing Discussions on Ecotourists: A Two-Stage Sequential Review

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Considering the unending debates and varied interpretations regarding ecotourists, a structured analysis of the existing literature is essential. This study employs a two-stage sequential review process, integrating bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review using qualitative content analysis. Data were extracted from the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, analysed quantitatively using RStudio's bibliometrix package, and further reviewed qualitatively using the Theory, Context, and Methodology (TCM) framework. Findings indicate that the term 'ecotourist' gained prominence in academic discourse in the early 1990s, underscoring a conceptual gap in the initial ecotourism literature, which tended to focus on principles, impacts, and implementation of tourism rather than on the tourists engaging in it. Over time, research on ecotourists evolved from basic demographic profiling to in-depth investigations into psychographic and behavioural aspects. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) emerged as the predominant theoretical framework among the most influential publications, with four major themes having dominated the most-cited academic works: (1) the nature of ecotourists and their existence within the ecotourism context, (2) the impacts of ecotourist activities, (3) ecotourist segmentation, and (4) the cognitive-normative profiles of ecotourists. This study contributes to the existing literature by tracing the evolution of ecotourist research, identifying key conceptual frameworks, and synthesising central themes. Additionally, it offers researchers and practitioners a structured overview of ecotourist-related literature, providing direction for future research avenues and practical insights for marketing, policy, and management strategies in ecotourism.

Keywords: ecotourists, ecotourism, bibliometrics, systematic literature review

 https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.19.3-21

Introduction

Owing to market heterogeneity and differing perspectives on ecotourism, there is no ultimate consensus on the conceptualisation of 'ecotourist', reflecting the fact that ecotourists are not a homogeneous group or market segment (Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002; Nowaczek & Smale, 2010; Sheena et al., 2015; Wight, 2001). While extensive scholarly attention has focused on defining ecotourism, examinations of ecotourists frequently emerge as secondary considerations or derivative constructs within broader ecotourism contexts (see Björk, 2000; Blamey, 1997; Donohoe

& Needham, 2006; Fennell, 2001; Juric et al., 2002). These persistent definitional debates underscore the imperative for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to account for the inherent diversity among ecotourists and to recognise how varying conceptual boundaries may shape marketing approaches, conservation outcomes, and sustainable tourism development (Ashok et al., 2019; Beaumont, 2011; Massi & De Nisco, 2018). More rigorous delineation of ecotourist characteristics could optimise ecotourism programme efficacy while simultaneously advancing both ecological objectives and guest expectations (Dolnicar et al., 2013).

Scholars have traditionally identified ecotourists based on destinations, activities, or self-identification (Nowaczek & Smale, 2010), with studies using diverse methods such as demographic profiling, motivational analyses, and interactional-based criteria (Deng & Li, 2014; Lemelin et al., 2008). While some define ecotourists broadly – as those visiting natural areas with a concern for conservation and cultural understanding – others highlight the wide variation in motivations, from adventure to ideological commitment (Beaumont, 2011; Carrascosa-López et al., 2021; Dolnicar et al., 2013; Fennell, 2007; Sheena et al., 2015; Weaver & Lawton, 2007; Wight, 2001). This diversity complicates efforts to define a single, universal ecotourist profile, underscoring the complexity of this group (Hvenegaard, 2002).

In recent years, researchers have conducted numerous literature reviews on ecotourism and related topics, including debates on ecotourists, utilising bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review across various academic sources. A subset of these works plays a pivotal role in advancing the discipline by addressing pertinent fundamental issues, illustrating the historical evolution of the field, shaping current research directions, applying methodological rigour, and securing publication in leading journals that uphold a stringent peer-review process. For instance, Brandt and Buckley (2018) critically examined the role of ecotourism in forest conservation within biodiversity hotspots – regions where effective management is crucial due to high stakes for conservation. Their review revealed that ecotourism can either detrimentally affect or positively contribute to forest conservation, contingent upon management practices. Similarly, Hasana et al. (2022) analysed over 1,182 articles indexed in the Scopus database from 2002 to 2020 using quantitative bibliometric analysis and revealed dominant research themes in ecotourism, including conservation, visitor management, and social issues like gender and climate change. The analysis revealed that a significant proportion of ecotourism research is concentrated in specific countries, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, Canada, and China leading in publication output. These studies highlight both the opportunities and challenges within ecotourism and the growing international interest in its impacts.

Focusing on the ecotourism experience, Sana et al. (2023) provided a qualitative structured review using 88 selected articles, identifying three key phases in the ecotourism experience – pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit – while emphasising the shift toward multi-stakeholder approaches. The findings highlight how ecotourism research has evolved toward more inclusive and comprehensive models, prompting further exploration of effective methods to engage travellers and promote sustainable practices within the industry. By acknowledging the complexity of the ecotourism experience, stakeholders can better support both the preservation of natural environments and the facilitation of meaningful travel experiences for ecotourists.

Despite a substantial and growing body of research, there remains a lack of integrative reviews that systematically synthesise knowledge about ecotourists using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This article addresses this gap via a two-stage sequential review: a bibliometric analysis followed by a systematic review of selected literature. The initial stage entails a quantitative assessment of existing ecotourist literature using bibliometric analysis, employing data extracted from the Scopus and WoS databases. Subsequently, the systematic literature review phase examines qualitative dimensions in greater depth. Together, these methods yield a holistic understanding of ecotourists, elucidating key themes and delineating future research directions.

Materials and Methods

Mapping and analysing academic literature are essential for tracking research trends, understanding disciplinary evolution, and synthesising knowledge (Keathley-Herring et al., 2016; Linnenluecke et al., 2019). Systematic literature reviews and bibliometric analyses are commonly used methods for achieving this, offering both quantitative and qualitative insights into specific research domains (Keathley-Herring et al., 2016; Linnenluecke et al., 2019). Bibliometric analysis applies mathematical and statistical tools to examine research output, collaboration networks, and impact (Donthu et al., 2021; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Salouw et al., 2023; Vishwakarma & Mukherjee, 2019; Zupic & Čater, 2015), while systematic literature re-

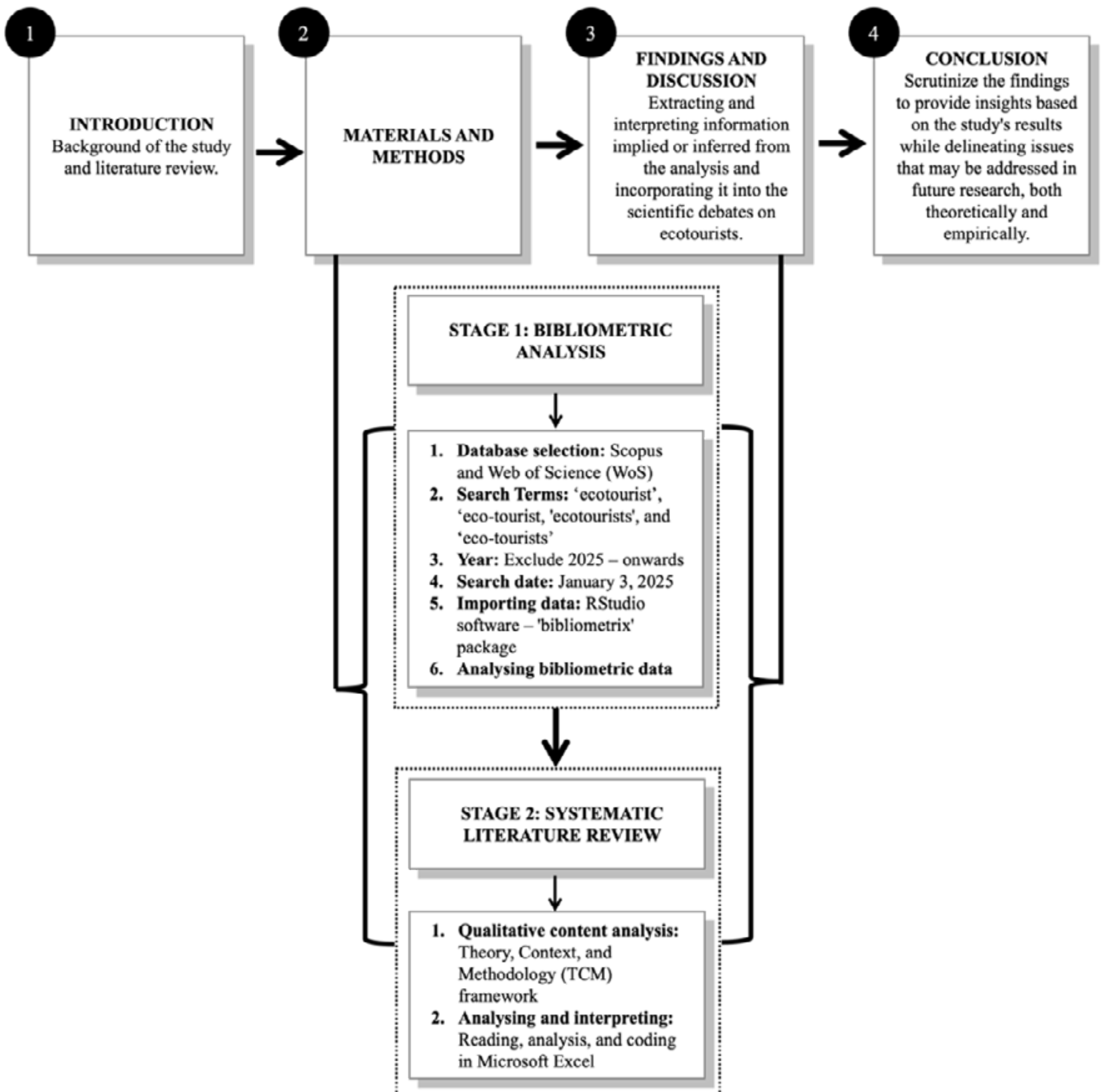

Figure 1 Research Design and Stages of Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Literature Review

views provide structured, comprehensive evaluations of existing studies with a strong emphasis on transparency and reproducibility (Fan et al., 2022; Polat et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021; White & Schmidt, 2005).

This study adopted a two-phase methodological framework, combining bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review employing qualitative content analysis. The bibliometric phase examined three main categories: quantity indicators (e.g. publication output), quality indicators (e.g. citations and impact), and structural indicators (e.g. collaboration networks) (Durieux & Gevenois, 2010; Hasana et al., 2022). The bibliometric analysis was conducted using RStudio, which incorporates the 'bibliometrix' package, a comprehensive tool developed in the R programming language that offers a variety of bibliometric and scientometric methodologies (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), allowing for network visualization and identifying influential authors, institutions, keywords, and geographical distributions of document production and output (Brida et al., 2023).

Scopus and WoS were selected as the primary databases for this study because of quality, retrieval efficiency, data cleanliness, and comprehensive disciplinary coverage (Baas et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021; Valderrama-Zurián et al., 2015; Zhu & Liu, 2020). The initial literature search was conducted on January 3, 2025, employing the following search protocol: the terms 'ecotourist', 'eco-tourist', 'ecotourists', and 'eco-tourists' were queried within the title, abstract, and keywords fields for each document on the official Scopus and WoS websites, filtered for documents published before 2025. The search returned 368 documents from Scopus and 245 from WoS, spanning journals, books, conference papers, and reviews. Subsequently, we exported metadata in BibTeX format and organised it using Mendeley Reference Manager to ensure standardization and maintain data integrity.

In the second phase, a systematic literature review was conducted using the Theory, Context, and Methodology (TCM) framework (Polat & Köseoglu, 2024). This framework categorises literature into key theoretical foundations, research settings, and methodological approaches (Polat et al., 2023). To perform the systematic literature review, we applied qualitative content analysis to the most influential scientific

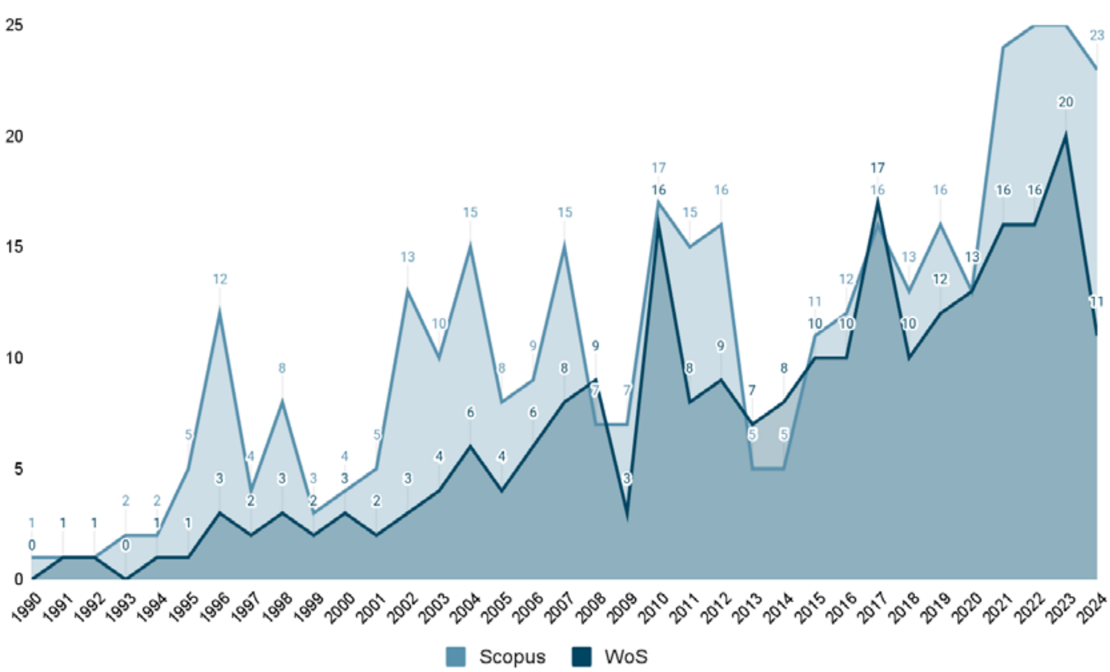

Figure 2 Publication Progress Related to 'Ecotourists' in the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) Databases

publications identified during the bibliometric phase. The analysis involved a rigorous process of reading, interpreting, and coding the selected articles using Microsoft Excel. This dual-method approach enabled a comprehensive synthesis of the literature, offering deeper insights into theoretical perspectives, research contexts, and methodological trends in ecotourist studies. The research design of this study delineates each phase of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Findings and Discussion

Stage 1: Bibliometric Analysis

Publication Progress, Outlets and Trends

An analysis of annual production data reveals a discrepancy in scientific publications between the Scopus and WoS databases. Researchers first recorded publications using the term 'ecotourist' in the Scopus database in 1990, followed by the WoS database in 1991. As of 2024, there are 368 documents in Scopus and 245 in WoS addressing the topic of ecotourists. Since the early 1990s, the number of publications in both Scopus and WoS has exhibited annual fluctuations. The years 2022 and 2023 demonstrated the highest number of publications discussing ecotourists, with a total of 25 documents in the Scopus database. In the WoS database, the peak number of publications on ecotourists occurred in 2023, totalling 20 documents (Figure 2).

Furthermore, academic journals serve as the primary channels for disseminating scientific publications on ecotourists, particularly those specializing in the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category. However, the Multidisciplinary journals category and those focusing on the Nature and Landscape Conservation category also play a significant role in publishing literature on this topic. Bibliometric analysis identifies several key journals as leading outlets for research on ecotourists, including the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Journal of Ecotourism*, *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Tourism Recreation Research*, *Environmental Conservation*, *Tourism Management, Journal of Environmental Pro-*

Table 1 Top Ten Publication Outlets on Ecotourists in the Scopus and WoS Databases

R	Scopus				Web of Science (WoS)			
	Sources	Total Documents	H-Index	SJR Rank	Sources	Total Documents	H-Index	SJR Rank
R1	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	27	140	Q1	Sustainability (Switzerland)	14	169	Q1
R2	Journal of Ecotourism	25	48	Q2	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	9	140	Q1
R3	Sustainability (Switzerland)	14	169	Q1	Environmental Conservation	7	99	Q1
R4	Journal of Travel Research	10	172	Q1	Journal of Ecotourism	6	48	Q2
R5	Tourism Recreation Research	9	63	Q1	Journal of Environmental Protection and Ecology	6	27	Q3
R6	Environmental Conservation	7	99	Q1	Tourism Management	6	255	Q1
R7	Tourism Management	7	255	Q1	Annals of Tourism Research	5	216	Q1
R8	Journal of Environmental Protection and Ecology	6	27	Q3	Biological Conservation	5	235	Q1
R9	Annals of Tourism Research	5	216	Q1	Animal Conservation	4	97	Q1
R10	Biological Conservation	5	235	Q1	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	3	62	Q1

tection and Ecology, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Biological Conservation*, and *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*. These journals are consistently featured in bibliometric databases such as Scopus and WoS, reflecting their centrality to the field (Table 1).

Since the first publications in the Scopus and WoS databases, early research on ecotourists (2002–2010) has primarily focused on identifying ecotourist demographic profiles and examining the impacts of human activity on nature, protected areas, and biodiversity, underscoring ecotourism's goal of balancing tourism development with environmental conservation. Over time, the scope expanded to include segmentation, motivation, satisfaction, perceived value, and loyalty (e.g. Carvache-Franco et al., 2021; Duong et al., 2022; Kim & Park, 2017; Kwan et al., 2008; Luo & Deng,

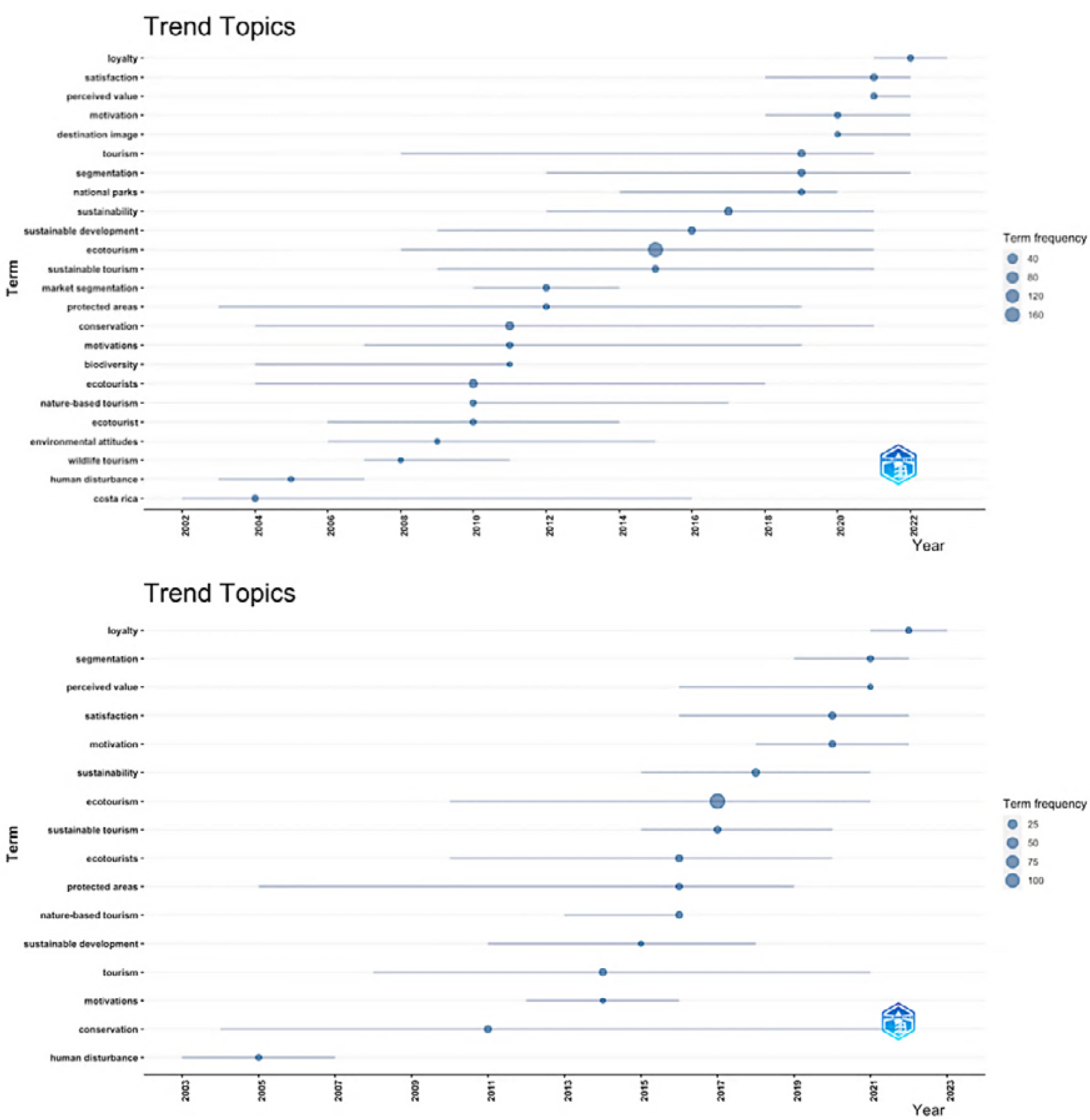

Figure 3. Trend Topics on Ecotourists in the Scopus (A) and Web of Science (B) Databases

2008; Oviedo-García et al., 2017; Perera et al., 2012), highlighting a shift toward understanding the human and experiential dimensions of ecotourism, such as understanding what drives individuals to participate, how they perceive their experiences, and their likelihood to engage in repeat visits or recommend destinations (e.g. Chan & Saikim, 2022; Hultman et al., 2015; Kirilenko & Stepchenkova, 2018; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2017; Ruhanen, 2019). The progression of topics highlights that while ecotourism remains strongly associated with nature-based tourism, sustainability, and conservation, the field has increasingly incorporated psychological and behavioural studies. These include examining the environmental attitudes of ecotourists and their emotional connections to destinations (e.g. Beaumont, 2011; Cheung & Fok, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Thi Khanh & Phong, 2020). The incorporation of psychographic criteria marks an interdisciplinary shift, blending tourism, psychology, and environmental science to offer a more holistic view of ecotourism.

Co-occurrence of keywords

As de la Hoz-Correa et al. (2018) explain, keyword co-occurrence in bibliometric analysis helps define a research field by highlighting its most significant terms. Analysing 804 keywords from Scopus and WoS publications on ecotourists reveals diverse thematic directions in the field. Core keywords like 'conservation', 'protected areas', and 'sustainability' reflect ecotourism's environmental focus, while terms like 'satisfaction' and 'motivation' emphasise psychographic aspects (Table 2). These patterns mirror the field's evolution from ecological concerns to include human experiences and behaviour.

Relevant authors

Relevant authors are researchers who exhibit a high volume of publications in a specific area or across interdisciplinary domains. The identification of highly productive authors within the domain of ecotourists is a crucial step in understanding the academic landscape and recognising key contributors shaping the field. As illustrated in Table 3, the most prolific authors of discussions pertaining to ecotourists remained relatively consistent. Mauricio Carvache-Franco ($n = 12$ Scopus; $n = 9$ WoS) emerged as a leading figure in this topic, demonstrating sustained contributions to ecotourist research, as evidenced by the Articles Fractionalized (AF) value derived from bibliometric analysis, which underscores the impact of an author's contributions. His work underlines psychographic segmentation, specifically focusing on motivation, which explores the factors that drive ecotourists to engage in nature-based activities; perceived value, which exam-

Table 2 Top Ten Publication Outlets on Ecotourists in the Scopus and WoS Databases

R	Scopus			Web of Science (WoS)		
	Keywords	*F*	*C* (%)	Keywords	*F*	*C* (%)
R1	Ecotourism	171	36.93	Ecotourism	124	36.36
R2	Ecotourists	21	4.54	Sustainability	12	3.52
R3	Conservation	18	3.89	Satisfaction	11	3.23
R4	Sustainability	15	3.24	Conservation	10	2.93
R5	Sustainable development	12	2.59	Ecotourists	10	2.93
R6	Tourism	12	2.59	Tourism	10	2.93
R7	Satisfaction	11	2.38	Sustainable tourism	9	2.64
R8	Segmentation	11	2.38	Motivation	8	2.35
R9	Sustainable tourism	9	1.94	Nature-based tourism	8	2.35
R10	Motivation	8	1.73	Protected areas	8	2.35

Note **R* = Rank; *F* = Frequency (number of occurrences of keywords); *C* = Coverage (percentage coverage of keywords in database).

Table 3 Most Relevant Authors

R	Scopus			Web of Science (WoS)		
	Authors	F	AF	Authors	F	AF
R1	Carvache-Franco, M.	12	3.35	Carvache-Franco, M.	9	2.48
R2	Carvache-Franco, W.	8	2.02	Carvache-Franco, W.	7	1.82
R3	Carrascosa-López, C.	6	2.00	van der Merwe, P.	6	2.25
R4	van der Merwe, P.	6	2.25	Burger, J.	5	2.58
R5	Burger, J.	5	2.58	Carrascosa-López, C.	5	1.67
R6	Carvache-Franco, O.	5	1.02	Cheung, L.T.O.	5	2.37
R7	Eagles, P.F.J.	5	2.00	Saayman, M.	5	1.75
R8	Weaver, D.	5	2.33	Carvache-Franco, O.	4	0.82
R9	Fennell, D.A.	4	2.50	Alsisto, S.	3	0.41
R10	Hausmann, A.	4	1.92	Ambu, L.	3	0.41

Note *R = Rank; F = Frequency (number of articles); AF = Articles Fractionalized (representation of authors' contributions in terms of scientific impact and productivity).

ines how ecotourists assess the benefits of their experiences; and loyalty, which investigates the factors that influence repeat visits and long-term engagement.

The Geographical Distribution of Documents Production and Output

The United States leads in author correspondence on ecotourists, with most publications classified as Single-Country Publications (SCP), indicating limited international collaboration (Figure 4). This contrasts slightly with Singh et al. (2021), who noted broad U.S. collaboration in ecotourism research more generally. The dominance of SCPs reflects a broader trend in developed countries like the U.S., U.K., and Germany, where strong national research funding supports domestic output. Similarly, countries such as China, Canada, and Australia also show high SCP activity in ecotourist research, reinforcing this global pattern.

As shown in Figure 4, the bibliometric analysis of international collaboration networks reveals that the most prominent research partnership regarding ecotourists within the Scopus database is between Spain and Ecuador (n = 7). This is followed by collaborations between the United States and the United Kingdom (n = 4) and between the United Kingdom and South Africa (n = 3). A similar pattern emerges in the WoS database, where Spain and Ecuador again lead in collaborative output (n = 7), followed by partnerships between South Africa and Finland (n = 4) and the United States with both the United Kingdom and Germany (n = 4). These findings highlight that international collaboration in ecotourist-related research occurred between developed and developing countries, represented by the most prominent research partnership between Spain and Ecuador, as recorded in both the Scopus and WoS databases.

Furthermore, this study also identified leading institutions in ecotourist research through a bibliometric analysis of Scopus and WoS databases. Universities in both developed and developing countries play key roles, with notable contributions from Ecuador's Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo and Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral. Southeast Asian universities like Universiti Putra Malaysia and Indonesia's Brawijaya University are also actively engaged in this field. In developed countries, major contributors include U.S. institutions such as Northwest University, Utah State University, the Rutgers University–New Brunswick, and the University of California; Canadian universities such as Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Waterloo, along with Griffith University in Australia,

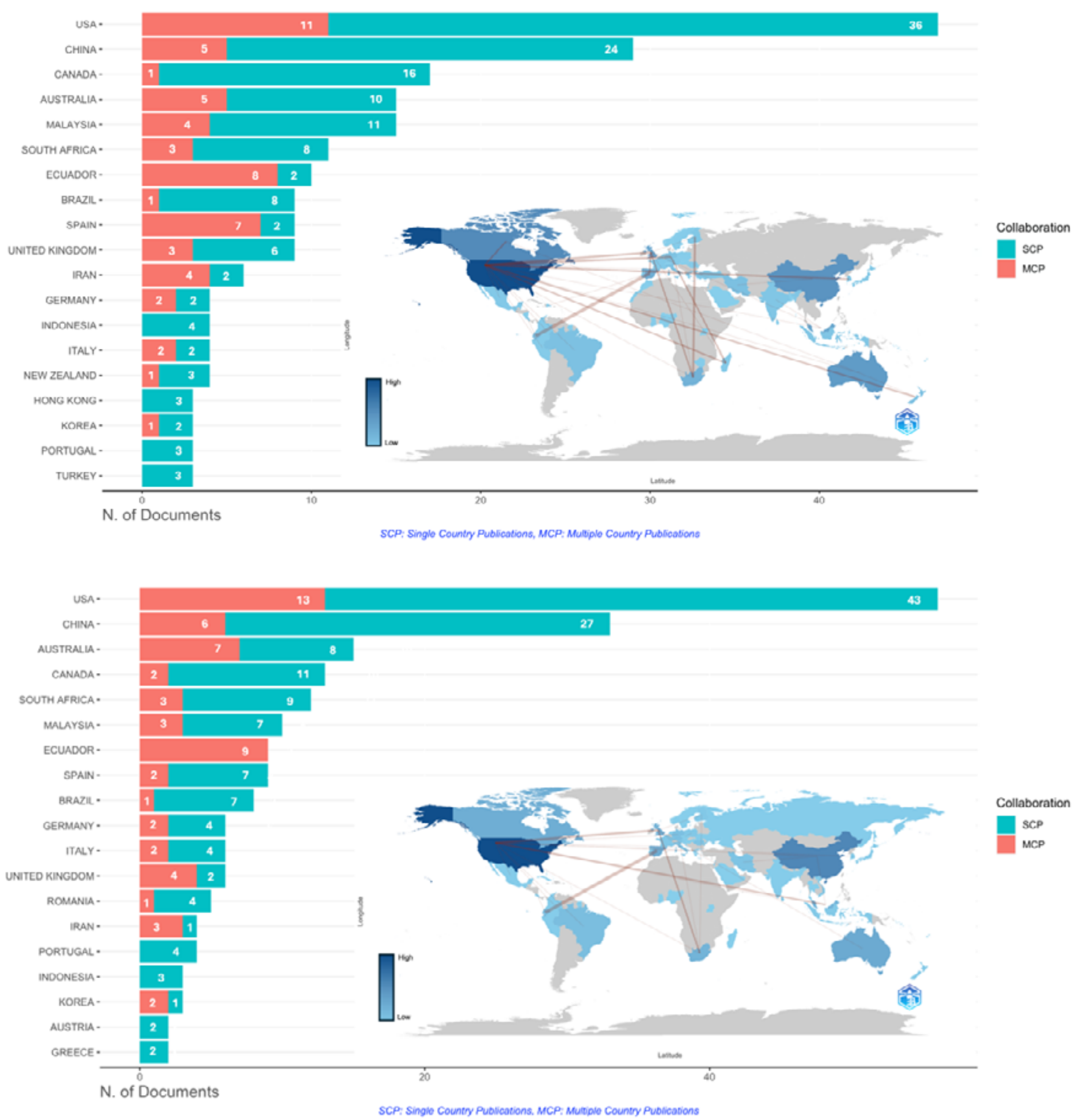

Figure 4 Corresponding Authors' Countries and Collaboration Network: Scopus Database (A) and Web of Science Database (B)

also contribute substantially to the literature on ecotourists.

Most influential publications

Identifying highly cited publications is key to assessing the most impactful contributions in a research field, as citation counts reflect a work's influence over time (Aji et al., 2024; Polat & Köseoglu, 2024). By focusing on these publications, scholars can trace the development and foundational themes within a domain. In this study, bibliometric analysis of Scopus and WoS reveals considerable overlap in the top ten

Table 4 Institutions with the Most Publications on Ecotourists

R	Scopus		Web of Science	
	Institutions	*F*	Institutions	*F*
R1	Northwest University	14	Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo	8
R2	Universiti Putra Malaysia	13	Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral	7
R3	Simon Fraser University	9	Rutgers University–New Brunswick	7
R4	Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo	9	Northwest University	7
R5	University of British Columbia	9	Griffith University	6
R6	Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral	8	Universitat Politecnica de Valencia	6
R7	Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University	8	Utah State University	5
R8	Brawijaya University	8	Rutgers University	5
R9	University of Waterloo	8	University of British Columbia	5
R10	Griffith University	7	University of California	5

Note * *R* = Rank; *F* = Frequency (number of total documents).

most-cited works on ecotourists, while also highlighting some unique contributions in each database. Scopus exclusively includes Wilk (2006), Orams (1996), and Weaver and Lawton (2002), whereas WoS features Kerstetter et al. (2004), Brightsmith et al. (2008), and Ryan et al. (2000). These differences reflect subtle variations in database scope and coverage, despite their general alignment in spotlighting influential research.

The majority of influential documents indexed in both the Scopus and WoS databases are journal articles. These publications predominantly appear in esteemed

Table 5 Top Cited Documents in the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) Database

Scopus					
Rank	Authors (year)	Document Type	Source (SJR Rank)	Total Citations	Total Citations per Year
R1	Scheyvens (1999)	Journal Article	Tourism Management (Q1)	820	30.37
R2	Miller et al. (2015)	Journal Article	Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Q1)	272	24.73
R3	Müllner et al. (2004)	Journal Article	Biological Conservation (Q1)	259	11.77
R4	Dolnicar et al. (2008)	Journal Article	Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Q1)	245	13.61
R5	Weaver & Lawton (2002)	Journal Article	Journal of Travel Research (Q1)	226	9.42
R6	Sekercioglu (2002)	Journal Article	Environmental Conservation (Q1)	220	9.17
R7	Wilk (2006)	Book	Berg Publishers	211	10.55
R8	Orams (1996)	Journal Article	Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Q1)	209	6.97
R9	Lu & Stepchenkova (2012)	Journal Article	Tourism Management (Q1)	204	14.57
R10	Khan (2003)	Journal Article	Annals of Tourism Research (Q1)	182	7.91

Table 5 Continued

Web of Science (WoS)					
Rank	Authors (year)	Document Type	Source (SJR Rank)	Total Citations	Total Citations per Year
R1	Scheyvens (1999)	Journal Article	*Tourism Management* (Q1)	626	23.19
R2	Miller et al. (2015)	Journal Article	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (Q1)	244	22.18
R3	Müllner et al. (2004)	Journal Article	*Biological Conservation* (Q1)	235	10.68
R4	Dolnicar et al. (2008)	Journal Article	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (Q1)	199	11.06
R5	Lu & Stepchenkova (2012)	Journal Article	*Tourism Management* (Q1)	181	12.93
R6	Sekercioglu (2002)	Journal Article	*Environmental Conservation* (Q1)	174	7.25
R7	Khan (2003)	Journal Article	*Annals of Tourism Research* (Q1)	148	6.43
R8	Kerstetter et al. (2004)	Journal Article	*Tourism Management* (Q1)	123	5.59
R9	Brightsmith et al. (2008)	Journal Article	*Biological Conservation* (Q1)	114	6.33
R10	Ryan et al. (2000)	Journal Article	*Annals of Tourism Research* (Q1)	112	4.31

journals, particularly those focused on the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category, such as *Tourism Management*, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, the *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Annals of Tourism Research*. Among the ten most highly cited documents, both Scopus and WoS databases exhibit similar rankings for the top three. These top three publications comprise articles by Scheyvens (1999), Miller et al. (2015), and Müllner et al. (2004). Their recognition in both the Scopus and WoS databases signals their significant impact, likely due to their contribution to key theoretical frameworks, methodologies, or insights within tourism studies, particularly in discussing ecotourists. These rankings reflect the broader academic and practical relevance of their work, guiding both researchers and practitioners.

Stage 2: Systematic Literature Review

Given the significant overlap in top-cited documents across Scopus and WoS, this study analysed the most influential publications based on citation count using the TCM framework. The findings indicate that the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) emerged as the predominant theoretical framework underpinning the most significant research on ecotourists. Alongside Resource-Based Theory, TPB – along with Psychological Empowerment Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory – provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding ecotourist behaviour (Table 6). The prominence of TPB in the literature suggests that research on ecotourists primarily focuses on identification and psychographic profiling, examining their characteristics and motivations. This trend underscores the growing integration of psychological and behavioural theories in ecotourism studies. Overall, this evolving focus reflects the complexities of ecotourist behaviour and highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between psychological factors and decision-making processes in this specialised sector of alternative tourism.

In terms of *Methodology*, according to the TCM framework, the findings reveal a diverse landscape within the most-cited publications focused on ecotourists. While several of these documents are conceptual in nature, others employ empirical approaches to gather and analyse data. Notably, some of the empirical studies within these influential works specifically target protected areas in developing countries, which is consistent with the findings of Wardle et al. (2021), who noted that the majority of ecotourism-related research tends to be situated in developing regions, despite the fact that the concept of ecotourism itself is largely rooted in Western ideologies (Cater, 2006). These insights suggest a critical gap in the literature, prompting a reconsideration of how ecotourism is understood and practiced outside its Western origins, while highlighting the significance of contextual factors in shaping ecotourist experiences and behaviours in diverse geographical settings. The diversity of methodologies in influential publications reflects the multifaceted nature of research within the topic. The methodologies used in the publications span from qualitative approaches to mixed methods and more rigorous quantitative analyses, including conceptual articles featuring qualitative literature reviews and historical narratives, mixed-methods approaches (both sequential and convergent parallel), experimental quantitative assessments, quantitative research utilising clustering method analysis, descriptive bibliographic studies, and quantitative assessments employing the user-generated content (UGC) method (Table 6).

The most influential publications addressing ecotourists employed diverse theories, contexts, and methodologies, indicating that the discourse surrounding ecotourists centres on several key themes. These key themes do not significantly deviate from a series of findings and analyses presented in previous sections, particularly regarding research topic trends and co-occurrence keywords. The first key theme frequently referenced pertains to publications that examine the nature of ecotourists and their existence within the ecotourism context. This is explicitly reflected in the publications by Scheyvens (1999), Dolnicar et al. (2008), and Ryan et al. (2000). These three articles address the dilemma that a recurring theme in the literature is the paradox of ecotourists' intentions versus their actual impact. The aspiration to engage in environmentally responsible tourism can often conflict with the realities of their presence in remote and fragile ecosystems. This dilemma highlights the necessity for critical reflection on the motivations and outcomes associated with ecotourism, emphasising that positive intentions do not inherently lead to positive environmental outcomes because the interaction of ecotourists with perceived natural environments is complex and depends on the way individuals observe and interpret their surroundings, as well as how the 'ecotourist gaze' is influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors (Fletcher, 2015). The transformation of nature into a spectacle underscores a significant critique of ecotourism practices. As articulated by Fletcher (2015), the commodification of natural resources can lead to the packaging of nature as a consumable product, challenging the original ethos of ecotourism. This commodification process raises important ethical questions about the sustainability of such practices and the genuine preservation of ecological integrity.

The subsequent key theme addressed pertains to publications that examine the impact of ecotourists' presence and activities. This is evidenced in the works of Müllner et al. (2004), Wilk (2006), and Brightsmith et al. (2008). Each study illustrates specific ways in which ecotourist activities influence local ecosystems and community dynamics, highlighting both beneficial and adverse outcomes. This aligns with the findings of a comprehensive review of empirical studies on ecotourism spanning the past three decades, conducted by Stronza et al. (2019), which posited that impact studies related to ecotourism tend to focus on either ecological or sociocultural impacts. For instance, Müllner et al. (2004) provide a focused case study on the effects of ecotourism on the sustainability of the Hoatzin bird (*Opisthocomus hoazin*). This research aligns with ongoing debates in ecology and conservation biology, as noted by Geffroy et al. (2015), which suggest that while ecotourism aims to promote conservation, its activities can sometimes lead to negative consequences for wildlife. Such studies emphasise the necessity for careful management of ecotourism to mitigate potential harm to sensitive species and habitats. Concurrently, the study by Wilk (2006), which emphasises the impact generated by ecotourists seeking "authentic" experiences, suggests that this pursuit may inadvertently drive demand for standardised, Westernised meals, potentially marginalising traditional Belizean cuisine and ingredients. This phenomenon reflects the complex interplay between ecotourism, cultural preservation, and economic development in the social, cultural, and political domains, wherein ecotourism continues to demonstrate potential for enhancing local living conditions in ways that mitigate pressure on natural resources and biodiversity (Stronza et al., 2019). In summary, the examination of ecotourist impacts reinforces the idea that ecotourism is a multidimensional phenomenon with both positive and negative implications.

The key theme of segmentation in the study of ecotourists constitutes a critical area of research that elucidates the diversity of ecotourist characteris-

Table 6 Overview of the Systematic Literature Review Using the TCM Framework on the Most Influential Documents Related to Ecotourists

Authors (Year)	TCM Framework		
	Theory	Context	Methodology
First theme: The nature of ecotourists and their existence within the ecotourism context			
Scheyvens (1999)	Main theoretical framework: Psychological Empowerment Theory	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Qualitative literature review
Dolnicar et al. (2008)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Descriptive bibliography study
Ryan et al. (2000)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Fogg Dam Conservation Area in the Northern Territory, Australia	Mixed methods – Convergent parallel mixed methods
Second theme: The impacts of ecotourist activities			
Müllner et al. (2004)	Main theoretical framework: Resources-based Theory	Geographical focus: The Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, Ecuador	Experimental quantitative assessment
Wilk (2006)	Main theoretical framework: Social Exchange Theory	Geographical focus: Belize	Historical narrative, Qualitative literature review
Brightsmith et al. (2008)	Main theoretical framework: Stakeholder Theory	Geographical focus: Tambopata National Reserve and Bahuaja–Sonene National Park, Peru	Qualitative research with longitudinal data
Third theme: Ecotourist segmentation			
Weaver & Lawton (2002)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Gold Coast, Australia	Quantitative research with the clustering method analysis
Kerstetter et al. (2004)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Taiwan	Quantitative research with the clustering method analysis
Fourth theme: The cognitive-normative profiles of ecotourists			
Miller et al. (2015)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Melbourne, Australia	Mixed methods – Exploratory sequential mixed methods
Sekercioglu (2002)	Main theoretical framework: Agency Theory	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Qualitative literature review
Orams (1996)	Main theoretical framework: Cognitive Dissonance Theory	Geographical focus: Not specific	Conceptual article, Qualitative literature review
Lu and Stepchenkova (2012)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: Costa Rica	Quantitative assessment with the user-generated content (UGC) method
Khan (2003)	Main theoretical framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour	Geographical focus: United States of America	Quantitative research

tics among the most frequently cited documents, as demonstrated by studies from Weaver and Lawton (2002) and Kerstetter et al. (2004). The work of Weaver and Lawton (2002) is foundational in categorising ecotourists into distinct typologies: 'harder ecotourists', 'softer ecotourists', and 'structured ecotourists'. This classification illuminates the varying levels of engagement and commitment among ecotourists, indicating that individuals who identify as ecotourists exhibit heterogeneous motivations and behaviours. Furthermore, the study by Kerstetter et al. (2004) underscores the significance of understanding motivations and behaviours in tourism segmentation. Through an analysis of the Taiwanese ecotourism market, they identified various tourist typologies: experience tourists, learning tourists, and ecotourists. While segmentation provides valuable insights, it is imperative to acknowledge its limitations, such as those highlighted by Hvenegaard (2002). The tautological nature of segmentation and their often-localised characteristics can hinder the generalisability of findings across different contexts. This suggests that while typologies can be useful, they should be applied with caution and sensitivity to varying settings. Despite its fundamental limitations, segmentation remains a practical tool for planning, management, and marketing of ecotourism destinations or products. Dolnicar (2008) emphasises the role of effective market segmentation in enhancing tourist satisfaction and experiences. By catering to the diverse characteristics of ecotourists, ecotourism providers can create more personalised experiences that not only meet visitors' expectations but also promote responsible behaviours in natural environments.

Furthermore, the final key theme that has received considerable attention and is referenced based on the most influential academic works regarding ecotourists relates to the cognitive-normative profile (Hvenegaard, 2002), encompassing ecotourists' perceived value, attitudes, experiences, and behaviour. This is evidently demonstrated in several studies: Miller et al. (2015), which examines pro-environmental behaviours in urban ecotourism contexts, elucidating how urban environments can influence ecotourist actions; Sekercioglu (2002), which discusses the significance of birdwatchers in the ecotourism segment, emphasising their commitment to conservation and the economic benefits they provide; Orams (1996), which proposes that interpretation programmes can significantly influence ecotourist behaviour, illustrating the importance of educational strategies in promoting sustainable practices; Lu and Stepchenkova (2012), which analyses online reviews to identify the attributes that enhance ecotourist satisfaction, revealing how perception shapes their experiences; and Khan (2003), which employs the ECOSERV scale to assess service quality expectations among ecotourists, emphasising the role of service experiences in shaping their behaviours and satisfaction levels (Table 6). The prominence of cognitive-normative profiling as one of the key themes in ecotourism literature indicates its critical role in understanding current and emerging trends. It serves as a framework through which researchers can examine the complexities of ecotourist behaviour, shifting the focus from mere economic or ecological impacts to a more nuanced understanding of human behaviour and decision-making. As discourse on ecotourists continues to evolve, understanding cognitive-normative profiles will be essential for effective governance and management of ecotourism.

Conclusion

Academia began focusing research on ecotourists within scientific publications only in the early 1990s, as recorded in Scopus and WoS databases. This delayed introduction suggests that prior research on ecotourism primarily concentrated on its foundational principles, ecological impacts, and implementation strategies, rather than on the individuals driving the phenomenon. Scientific publications on ecotourists are predominantly found in academic journals, particularly in the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category. Over time, research expanded beyond initial concerns – such as demographic aspects related to human disturbance, protected areas, and biodiversity – to explore segmentation, motivation, satisfaction, perceived value, and loyalty. Co-occurrence keyword analysis highlights the strong interconnection between ecotourism and sustainability while emphasising the importance of psychographic dimensions in understanding ecotourists. This shift reflects an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from tourism studies, psychology, and environmental science.

The most influential authors in research on ecotourists are predominantly university-affiliated scholars who adopt a multidisciplinary approach, integrating economics, management, marketing, and business administration; environmental sciences; conservation biology; forestry; and protected area management, reflecting the complex and interconnected nature of the field. Among them, Mauricio Carvache-Franco stands out for his sustained contributions. In terms of geographical research output and publication networks, the United States leads in author correspondence on ecotourists. However, much of its research is produced without international collaboration. Bibliometric analysis also reveals a diverse range of institutions contributing to research on this topic, highlighting its growing internationalisation. The participation of institutions from both developed and developing nations enriches the academic discourse on the subject. Additionally, the most influential documents on ecotourists indexed in Scopus and WoS are predominantly journal articles. These publications primarily appear in leading journals within the Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Management category, such as *Tourism Management*, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, the *Journal of Travel Research*, and the *Annals of Tourism Research*.

A systematic literature review identifies the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as the predominant theoretical framework underpinning the most significant research on ecotourists. Alongside Resource-Based Theory, TPB, and several other theories – such as Psychological Empowerment Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory – form a comprehensive foundation for understanding ecotourist behaviour. Methodologically, findings based on the TCM framework reveal a diverse research landscape among the most-cited publications on ecotourists. While some studies are conceptual, others employ empirical approaches to data collection and analysis. Notably, several influential empirical studies focus on protected areas in developing countries. The methodologies used in the influential publications range from qualitative to mixed methods and rigorous quantitative analyses. These include conceptual articles featuring qualitative literature reviews and bibliographic studies, mixed-methods approaches, including both sequential and convergent parallel designs, experimental quantitative studies, quantitative clustering analyses, user-generated content (UGC) analysis, and historical narratives. The most frequently referenced scholarly studies on ecotourists address four key themes, including the conceptualisation and existence of ecotourists, the impact of ecotourist activities on destinations, ecotourist segmentation based on demographics and psychographics, and cognitive-normative profiles, examining ecotourists' perceived value, attitudes, experiences, and behaviours.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides comprehensive insights into research on ecotourists within the tourism literature, the authors acknowledge several limitations. First, the study relies solely on scientific publications from Scopus and WoS databases. As a result, relevant studies published in other journals or sources may have been overlooked. Future research could expand the range of databases to provide a more comprehensive review of the literature. Second, the bibliometric analysis was conducted exclusively using RStudio with the 'bibliometrix' package. This may lead to inconsistencies when comparing results with studies that utilise different bibliometric software. To enhance the robustness of bibliometric data processing, future research could integrate multiple software tools, such as VOSviewer, for a more holistic analysis. Third, this study did not pre-filter the dataset to ensure the removal of duplicate publications across Scopus and WoS. Consequently, some duplicate documents may have influenced the quantitative analysis. Future research following a similar approach should refine the literature search process by eliminating duplicate records to improve data accuracy.

Despite these limitations, a key strength of this study lies in its potential to serve as a foundational resource for future research. It demonstrates that recent studies on ecotourists primarily focus on psychographic and behavioural dimensions – often referred to as cognitive-normative profiles – with variables such as motivation, satisfaction, perceived value, loyalty, and experiences dominating the discourse. However, this emphasis has yet to address pressing contemporary issues that are increasingly relevant, such as greenwashing and green grabbing, which are frequently linked to ecotourism (Ghaderi et al., 2025; Ojeda, 2012; Rozzi et al., 2010). This gap is particularly noteworthy given that Swarbrooke and Horner (2006) identified a subset of ecotourists with extreme preferences, including those who actively avoid distant ecotourism destinations to minimise their environmental footprint. Investigating ecotourists' psychographic and behavioural traits in the context of critical contemporary issues – such as greenwashing and green grabbing – is essential for a more nuanced understanding of their characteristics. Since this area remains largely unexplored, future research examining ecotourists' perceptions and responses to these challenges could provide valuable new insights that enhance the broader discourse on ecotourism and sustainable tourism practices. In addition, as highlighted by Jin and Gao (2025), future research related to ecotourists should delve deeper into the dynamics of motivation and its influence on ecotourism loyalty, as well as assess the shifts in tourist behaviour in the post-COVID-19 era. Understanding how motivations drive loyalty and how the pandemic has reshaped tourist preferences and behaviours will provide valuable insights for adapting ecotourism strategies to meet evolving demands while ensuring sustainability and resilience in the sector.

Disclosure Statement

There are no conflicts of interest, and no financial benefits are expected to arise from this study.

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Original Scientific Article

The Effect of Destination Image Towards Memorable Tourism Experience and Revisit Intention in Sarawak, Malaysia

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The tourism sector has been a major contributor in many nations around the world, especially from the economic perspective. However, Sarawak has fallen behind in terms of development and political stability. This study attempts to ascertain how destination image affects tourists' memorable tourism experience and revisit intention based on their thoughts and opinions. Survey data was collected from 200 tourists who visited the top 5 attractions in Sarawak. WarpPLS 8.0 was utilised to analyse the proposed relationship among the present variables. The results revealed that culture, history and art, as well as political and economic factors of destination image, are positively related to memorable tourism experience. In addition, memorable tourism experience is positively related to revisit intention. The findings revealed that enhancing the destination image of Sarawak can improve memorable tourism experience for both domestic and international tourists and impact their revisit intention. The findings of this study provide an opportunity for authorities and tourism providers to concentrate on cultural preservation and the importance of political stability in Sarawak.

Keywords: destination image, memorable tourism experience, revisit intention, tourists, Sarawak

 https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.19.23-37

Introduction

Nowadays, the tourism sector is expanding at a quicker rate than ever and is widely acknowledged as one of the key pillars supporting the global economy (Cao et al., 2022). The travel and tourism industry has been a major contributor in many nations around the world (Sgroi, 2020). According to World Travel and Tourism Council (2024), the travel and tourism industry had accounted 9.8% of the world GDP, while 366 million job opportunities were created globally. Hence, tourism is necessary to increase job possibilities, national revenue, individual and household income, to generate foreign exchange, and to draw foreign direct investment (Aquino et al., 2020).

In the era of globalisation, competitiveness in the tourism sector is increasing day by day (Rebelo et al., 2022). Due to the intense competition among tourism destinations, destination image has played an important role in the tourism industry (Tse & Tung, 2021). Destination image has an impact on the overall tourist experience, which encompasses the pre-, during-, and post-trip experience (Lojo et al., 2020). This is because destination image may shape tourists' thoughts and feelings about a tourism destination (Chu et al., 2022). According to Baruca and Čivre (2022), a tourism destination with distinctive characteristics is additionally more probable to be seen to create a memorable tourism experience. Hence, a tourist attraction has to offer attractions to view, activities to engage in, products to purchase, enjoyable activities, and opportunities to create memories (Dalimunthe et al., 2020).

This study aims to investigate the effect of destination image towards memorable tourism experience and whether the memorable tourism experience affects revisit intention in Sarawak, Malaysia. Destination image is important in the tourism industry. Sarawak has been chosen as the destination in this study as the state possesses all the necessary qualities to make it a popular travel destination, including breathtaking scenery, history, culture, and festivals (see https://www.sarawaktourism.com). Also, the total arrival of tourists to Sarawak in 2024 was 4.83 million, with MYR12.45 billion of receipts (Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts Sarawak, 2025). By choosing Sarawak as the destination, the current study may increase the awareness of all parties, especially tourism providers in Sarawak, concerning the importance of destination image from different aspects in attracting tourists. However, Sarawak has fallen behind in terms of development (Bernama, 2023), such as uneven and insufficient infrastructural development. It is suggested that tourists' choices of destinations will also be influenced by political upheaval in a nation (Zeleke & Biwota, 2020). Political squabbling will bring many side effects to a country, including preventing the nation from concentrating its effort on economic development (Tawie, 2023). The Sarawak government implemented its Post COVID-19 Development Strategy through the formation of the Sarawak Economic Action Council in 2020 to help in the development of Sarawak, including tourism (Ten, 2020). They have enhanced the natural, cultural, and historical resources of the state to develop the tourist product offering, strengthened human capital, and bolstered Sarawak's connections and mobility, resulting in the growth of total tourist arrivals in Sarawak (Sarawak Government, 2021).

In addition, tourism experience has long been emphasised broadly in the tourism industry (Chen, 2023). Memorable tourism experiences offer advantages for destinations, including generating higher revenue, providing competitive advantages, and improving tourists' revisit intention (Bigne et al., 2020). When tourists interact more with their destination, they may encounter more memorable experiences and these experiences will be enhanced to a greater extent by their increased participation in the destination (Melón et al., 2021). Positive memorable experiences will increase tourists' likelihood of revisiting and bonding with the destination, as well as experiencing personal happiness (Hosany et al., 2022). Therefore, it has become imperative to provide tourists with satisfying and memorable experiences, especially in this highly competitive tourism sector, because tourists' experiences are the primary source of information when they decide to revisit a destination (Hosseini et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Destination Image

Destination image is often defined as perceptions or feelings towards a destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). According to Afshardoost and Eshagi (2020), destination image is seen as a multidimensional and complicated construct that combines cognitive, affective, and conative aspects. Destination image may evolve through three axes: (a) from personal characteristics to comprehensive perception; (b) from normal to distinctive image features, and (c) from operational to psychological features (Kislali et al., 2019). For example, destination image can be created and shaped by external variables such as being subjected to new details of the destination, or through internal factors such as prior visits and experiences in the destination (Wu & Shimizu, 2020). Destination image is believed to significantly influence tourists' decision to visit a destination as it may prompt their interests and decisions (Wang, 2020). Thus, tourism-related content such as destination image and traditional culture should be widely disseminated to tourists through online platforms to attract tourists (Khan et al., 2022).

Leisure and Recreation Tourism

Leisure and recreation tourism are activities that are devoid of duties and responsibility and are marked by a sense of relative freedom (Parker, 2021). Leisure and recreation tourism has offered services to assist tourists in learning and engaging in recreational activities, which include providing informational materials like newsletters, web pages, and brochures (Marriott et al., 2020). Leisure and recreation activities are important to the tourism sector and tourists are advised to participate in the activities as they may contribute to their experiences and memories (Camacho-Murillo et al., 2021). Tourists also can retain meaningful bonding and receive psychological encouragement by taking part in the leisure and recreation activities with their family and friends (Tsaur et al., 2020).

Culture, History and Art

Culture, history and art is characterised as the habits and practices of locals, which include how they dress, eat, behave and live (Slak Valek, 2021). Culture encompasses a broad variety of interrelated activities which are linked with other economic sectors that are critical to the growth of the tourism sector, such as anthropological research and preservation of heritage (Lan et al., 2021). Food is also thought to be a product of the culture as it can express one's identity, ethical beliefs, and various religious and traditional eating practices (Kapelari et al., 2020). Tourists travel to discover the art of a place by engaging in artistic endeavours or viewing the artwork on display there (Slak Valek, 2021). Thus, investments in the preservation and restoration of historical and artistic assets are necessary for a nation to raise their cultural value (Salinas Fernández et al., 2020).

Political and Economic Factors

Political and economic factors are defined as important determinants of the natural world that indicate how the society as data handling system representation functions (Aslaksen, 2020). Numerous investigations of tourism perceive politics as an implicit and hidden factor that affects tourism, as their impact on tourism goes beyond the purview of traditional legislative and structural procedures (Shehab & Som, 2020). It has been found that there are five hazards which have the ability to influence the visit intention of tourists, namely natural catastrophes, criminality, terrorist activity, political unrest, and health risks (Shahrabani et al., 2019). Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) also concluded that political unrest is among the factors making it harder to attract potential tourists. Price and exchange rate is another key factor in determining the competitiveness of a destination as it includes transportation fees, lodging fees, cost of vacation packages and attraction fees (Zeleke & Biwota, 2020). Tourists tend to visit a destination that offers products and services which have reasonable prices with appropriate quality (Giao et al., 2020). It can be concluded that governmental stability, consumer price index, and promotion investment are a few key variables that attract the arrival of tourists (Abdou et al., 2020).

Memorable Tourism Experience

Memorable tourism experience comprises good memories of a travel trip after the event has taken place (Hosany et al., 2022). The idea of memorable tourism experience (MTE) was first introduced by Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick in 2012, and is defined as a favourable memory and recollection of a travel experience that is selectively formed according to a person's evaluation of the experience (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). There are seven main components in MTE, namely hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty (Seyfi et al., 2019). According to Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021), tourism experience is among the most effective indicators of a tourists' behavioural purpose, and it also has a significant impact on memory formation, which is one of the main goals of the tourism industry (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Tourism experiences will grow into memorable experiences after post-travel interaction that leads to the social construction of acquainted recollections and meanings (Sterchele, 2020). Memorable tourism experience is fundamental to a sustainable tourism offering because it is the determinant for the happiness, loyalty, and revisit intention of tourists (Skavronskaya et al., 2020).

Revisit Intention

Revisit intention is known as the condition of mind of an individual that is reflective of a plan to carry out an activity in a specific time frame (Rahmawati et al., 2021). According to Khairi and Darmawan (2021), revisit intention is seen as loyalty or a genuine action that denotes a tourist's desire to return to a previously visited destination. Tourists' revisit intention can be influenced by the destination image, memorable tourism experience, and satisfaction of the tourist; if a destination offers tourists a satisfying and unforgettable experience, they will return on subsequent visits (Atmari & Putri, 2021). Tourists are more likely to have a greater desire to return to places that provide them with positive emotions (Nguyen Viet et al., 2020). Destination familiarity will also increase revisit intention because a familiar destination will provide a sense of safety and security to the tourists (Soliman, 2019).

Hypotheses Development

This paper examines the effect of destination image towards memorable tourism experience and revisit intention in Sarawak, Malaysia. In this study, destination image comprises leisure and recreation tourism, culture, history and art as well as political and economic factors. Destination image has been recognised as a potent management tool in the current rapidly changing and competing worldwide marketplace that can strengthen the tourist business (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). It is stressed that destination image may also influence the expectation of tourists, planning for the trip, level of satisfaction, actions in the trip and the entire experience (Lojo et al., 2020).

Past studies suggest that developing a distinctive destination image is increasingly crucial for attracting tourists (Huete Alcocer & López Ruiz, 2019), as destination image represents the essence of place marketing. It is generally defined as the creation of an integrated set of perceptions and associations intended to define and differentiate a destination through the construction of a favourable image in the minds of potential visitors (Woosnam et al., 2020). Hence, by analysing the concepts of destination image and memorable tourism experience, this suggests that these concepts are important in boosting the tourism industry, with the prospect of attracting revisit intention. Furthermore, it is proposed that destination image can significantly influence tourists' decision to visit a destination as it may prompt their interests and decisions (Wang, 2020). Tourists tend to revisit a place that leaves them with positive memorable tourism experiences, such as places that can assure the safety and security of the tourists (Kazmi et al., 2020).

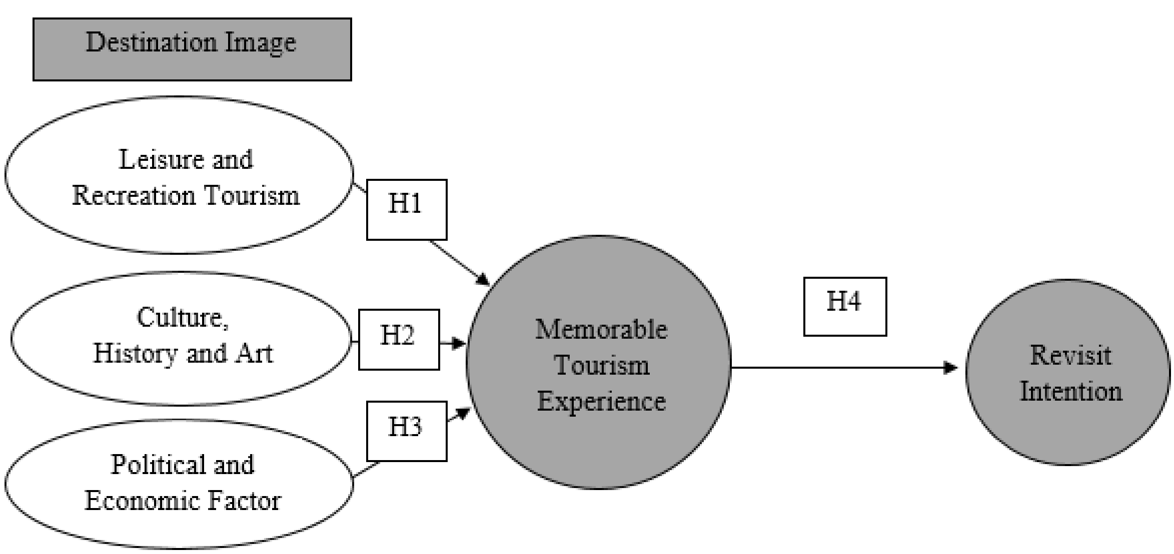

Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Torabi et al. (2020) stated that tourists are less inclined to revisit destinations when they are dissatisfied with their tourism experiences. This suggests that attracting tourists' revisit intentions depends largely on a destination's ability to project a positive image capable of generating favourable and memorable tourism experiences. Moreover, this underlines that destination image affects memorable tourism experience positively and memorable tourism experience affects revisit intention positively, which implies that the tourism industry should endeavour to create a positive destination image to ensure the creation of positive memorable tourism experience and attract revisit intention. This paper proposes that destination image will positively affect memorable tourism experience and lead to revisit intention. The better the destination image, the more positive the memorable tourism experience and the higher the revisit intention. Thereafter, it would be necessary to transform and implement the acquired knowledge across the tourism industry. A destination that can provide a memorable tourism experience will increase tourists' satisfaction and therefore attract their revisit intention (Melón et al., 2021). Therefore, the hypotheses of this study are: 'Destination image has a positive relationship with memorable tourism experience', and 'Memorable tourism experience has a positive relationship with revisit intention'. In accordance with the formulated hypotheses, this study will examine destination image from three perspectives, i.e. leisure and recreation tourism (H1), culture, history and art (H2) and political and economic factors (H3), in the relationships with memorable tourism experience. This study also examines the relationship between memorable tourism experience with revisit intention (H4).

Underlying Theories

The present study has integrated two underlying theories to examine the relationship between destination image, memorable tourism experience (MTE), and revisit intention, namely Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory (SOR Theory) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory was established by two environmental psychologists, Mehrabian and Russell, in 1974. SOR is a theory which defines consumer behaviour from the angle of external influence and it declares that once an individual is subjected to stimuli, they will create an internal organism and will further trigger the organism's reaction (Zhang & Xu, 2020). The current study adopts SOR theory as one of the underpinning theories to explain the contribution of destination image (i.e. leisure and recreation tourism, culture, history and art, and political and economic factors) to memorable tourism experience and revisit intention. It is used to investigate how destination image drives memorable tourism experience and further affects tourists' revisit intention. The rule of SOR theory further explains that good destination images may provide a memorable tourism experience, causing tourists to revisit a tourism destination.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is a psychological theory that was introduced by Icek Ajzen in 1985 with the goal of forecasting and modifying human behaviour. TPB states that the intention of an individual is the most significant indicator that results in behaviour (Lee & Kang, 2019). TPB also demonstrates a connection between behaviour and intention (Conradie et al., 2021). Recent studies have used TPB to explain how destination image and memorable tourism experience have an impact on the revisit intention. It can further clarify that if a destination provides positive destination images and a memorable tourism experience, tourists are most likely to have a revisit intention.

Methodology

The population of this study comprised both domestic and international tourists who had visited Sarawak's top five attractions, namely Semenggoh Nature Reserve, Bako National Park, Sarawak Cultural Village, Waterfront Esplanade Kuching, and Mulu World Heritage Area. These five attractions were selected as research sites because they are ranked as the top five attractions in Sarawak, Malaysia by TripAdvisor in 2024. The minimum number of respondents in the current study is calculated by using G*Power Analysis with a significant level which is usually 0.05, an ideal power level which is at least 0.8, and an assuming effect size of 0.15. According to G*Power Analysis, this survey requires a minimum of 109 respondents. Consequently, this survey aimed to reach 200 respondents. To ensure the respondents are tourists, they were required to fill in the questionnaire on the duration of their stay and the country of residence. The selection of the sample in this study uses the purposive sampling method as it is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that chooses particular types or categories of respondents who are required to be included in the final sample (Campbell et al., 2020).

To measure destination image, which is represented by leisure and recreation tourism, culture, history and art as well as political and economic factors, 19 items were used and adopted from different researchers, but mostly from Dwyer and Kim (2003) and Huete Alcocer and López Ruiz (2019). In measuring memorable tourism experience, this study adopted 24 items from Zhang et al. (2018) as well as Chen et al. (2020). For revisit intention, this study adopted 6 items from Artuğer (2015), Zhang et al. (2018), and Chen et al. (2020). All of the items were measured with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). All of the measurement items are adopted based on their suitableness in the context of Sarawak. A pretest was conducted after the draft questionnaire was developed and before the main survey to identify the issue areas and avoid mistakes in the questionnaire, to ensure that the inquiries can be understood by the respondents. Ten tourists underwent pre-testing of the questionnaire. After the pre-test, some items in the questionnaire were further refined and updated following the feedback from the respondents. In July 2024, the authors distributed 200 survey questionnaires to the intended respondents at the research sites by displaying a quick response (QR) code that connected to a Google Form. The respondents were approached in person and were given a brief explanation of the study before they completed the questionnaire. The respondents were further informed that the data gathered will be securely kept and used exclusively for the study. Four hypotheses were developed and tested in the field of study. WarpPLS version 8.0 software and the Statistical Package and Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.0 for Microsoft Windows users were used in this study to analyse the data gathered during various statistical procedures. Preliminary data and descriptive statistical analysis were conducted using SPSS version 29.0, and PLS-SEM assessment was conducted using WarpPLS 8.0 software to determine measurement accuracy, factor analysis, and reliability analysis.

Findings

Preliminary Data Analysis

Preliminary data analysis was done as part of the data screening process in this research by using SPSS version 29.0 in order to find and fix errors in the data collected. First, there is no missing data in this study as the data was collected via Google Forms wherein all of the respondents are required to answer all the questions before submitting the questionnaire. However, suspicious data patterns were found during data collection. A straight-lining response was found among the 200 responses. The respondent had completed the questionnaire by filling up every measurement item with the same scale (4). According to Reuning and Plutzer (2020), data with a straight-lining response is a sign of low response quality and will cause measurement inaccuracy. Therefore, this case was eliminated, leaving 199 responses for further analysis. Next, common method bias was checked using full collinearity variance inflation factor (VIF). According to Al Issa

Table 1 Full Collinearity of Constructs

Construct	Full Collinearity VIF
Leisure and Recreation Tourism	2.286
Culture, History and Art	1.285
Political and Economic Factors	1.762
Memorable Tourism Experience	1.019
Revisit Intention	1.019

Note VIF = *Variance Inflation Factor*

Table 2 Results of the Measurement Model

Construct	Measurement Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Leisure and Recreation Tourism	LRT1: Sarawak has many activities (e.g. educational and leisure activities, sport events such as races, photography contests, and exhibitions).	0.534	0.380	0.752
	LRT2: Sarawak has exciting night life and entertainment (e.g. nice bars, restaurants, and shows).	0.728		
	LRT4: It is easy to get information about the resort and make arrangements for the activities in Sarawak.	0.603		
	LRT5: There are a variety of activities offered for tourists in Sarawak.	0.569		
	LRT6: The activities in Sarawak are attractive and enjoyable.	0.632		
Culture, History and Art	CHA1: Sarawak has much historical and cultural heritage.	0.696	0.405	0.771
	CHA2: Sarawak has unique cultural attractions.	0.567		
	CHA3: Sarawak has a unique lifestyle and customs.	0.575		
Political and Economic Factors	PEF1: Sarawak has stable politics.	0.585	0.390	0.791
	PEF2: Sarawak does not have strikes and social unrest.	0.526		
	PEF3: Sarawak has implemented policies towards environmental protection.	0.568		
	PEF4: Sarawak is an inexpensive destination.	0.613		
	PEF5: The accommodation prices in Sarawak are affordable.	0.719		
	PEF6: The ticket admission of attractions in Sarawak is value for money.	0.712		
Memorable Tourism Experience	MTE1: I am thrilled about having a new experience in Sarawak.	0.659	0.487	0.848
	MTE2: I am indulging in the activities in Sarawak.	0.760		
	MTE3: I really enjoyed this tourism experience.	0.724		
	MTE5: It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience in Sarawak.	0.640		
	MTE6: I gained a unique experience in Sarawak.	0.636		
	MTE7: It is different from previous experiences in Sarawak.	0.565		
	MTE8: I experienced something new in Sarawak.	0.719		
	MTE20: I enjoyed activities that I really wanted to do in Sarawak.	0.652		
	MTE21: I am interested in the activities of this tourism experience.	0.660		
	MTE22: There are plenty of things to discover in Sarawak.	0.669		
Revisit Intention	RI1: I tend to visit Sarawak again.	0.813	0.487	0.848
	RI2: I would love to come to Sarawak again.	0.819		
	RI3: I never regret visiting Sarawak.	0.622		
	RI4: I think I will come back to Sarawak soon.	0.626		
	RI5: I anticipated the sense of joy that made me come.	0.602		
	RI6: There is a high chance that I will return to Sarawak for a holiday.	0.669		

Note AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CR = Composite Reliability and Abdelsalam (2021), common method bias does not present when the value of VIF is below 5. The full collinearity VIF value of the present study is shown in Table 1. It shows that all of the factors have a VIF value less than 5. Thus, the present study does not have common method bias.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

There are 90 (45.2%) male respondents and 109 (54.8%) female respondents who participated in this research. Two (1%) respondents are below 20 years old, 86 (43.2%) respondents are aged between 21 to 30, 63 (31.7%) respondents are aged between 31 to 40, 19 (9.5%) respondents are between the ages of 41 to 50, 15 (7.5%) respondents are aged between 51 to 60 years old and 14 (7.0%) respondents are above 60 years old. In terms of marital status, 98 (49.2%) respondents are single while 101 (50.8%) respondents are married.

In addition, 127 (63.8%) respondents are employed, 7 (3.5%) respondents are unemployed, 33 (16.6%) respondents are self-employed, 19 (9.5%) respondents are students and 13 (6.5%) respondents are retired. There are 101 (50.8%) respondents who are domestic tourists, while 98 (49.2%) respondents are international tourists. Out of the 199 respondents, 124 (62.3%) respondents are on their first time visiting Sarawak, whereas 75 (37.7%) are not on their first time in Sarawak. In terms of attractions, 40 responses (20.1%) were collected regarding tourist attractions, namely the Semenggoh Nature Reserve, Bako National Park, Sarawak Cultural Village, and Gunung Mulu National Park. Also, 39 (19.6%) responses were collected from Waterfront Esplanade Kuching.

Assessment of the Measurement Model

In the present study, the reliability and validity of the measurements are assessed as part of the measurement model assessment process. Both reliability and validity of the measurements were evaluated using confirmatory of Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Initially, the internal consistency and reliability of the variables were measured by evaluating the items loading and composite reliability. Following that, the convergent validity of the variables was evaluated by testing the average variance extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 2, LRT3, LRT7, CHA6, MTE4, MTE9, MTE10, MTE11, MTE12, MTE13, MTE14, MTE15, MTE16, MTE17, MTE18, MTE19, MTE23 and MTE24 were eliminated due to loadings that are less than 0.5. The remaining items in this study have loadings that are larger than 0.5 or $p<0.01$. Furthermore, all of the composite reliability (CR) exceeds 0.7, while some of the average variance extracted (AVE) did not exceed 0.50. Nevertheless, the validity of the construct is acceptable if the AVE value is less than 0.50 but the CR value is higher than 0.60 (Shrestha, 2021; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This demonstrates that convergent validity has been achieved.

Table 3 presents the discriminant validity of the constructs. Discriminant validity was examined by comparing the square root of the AVE value with the correlations between constructs of the research model (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021). The results demonstrate that the square roots of AVE for each construct are greater than their correlations with each other.

Table 3 Discriminant Validity HTMT of Measurement Model

Construct	LRT	CHA	PEF	MTE	RI
LRT	-				
CHA	0.370	-			
PEF	0.528	0.258	-		
MTE	0.461	0.401	0.562	-	
RI	0.452	0.213	0.321	0.425	-

Note LRT = Leisure and Recreation Tourism, CHA = Culture, History and Art, PEF = Political and Economic Factors, MTE = Memorable Tourism Experience, RI = Revisit Intention.

Assessment of the Structural Model

A structural model was utilised in this study because it estimates different and related dependencies in a single analysis. The relationship between the variables in this study was examined using path coefficients, effect size (, coefficients of determinations (, and predictive relevance (. Path coefficients commonly fall between –1 to +1; are represented by values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, which indicate small, medium, and large effect sizes (Hair et al., 2021), while might be regarded as weak, moderate, and significant when the values of are 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75, respectively (Hair et al., 2022). According to Bayaga and Kyobe (2021), all of the values should be greater than zero in order to indicate that the proposed model may be used to forecast the relationship between independent variables and the dependent variable.

Results and Discussion

As indicated in Table 3, the results emphasised the important findings on the relationship in this study. This study is likely the first to investigate leisure and recreation tourism, culture, history and art as well as political and economic factors of destination image, memorable tourism experience and revisit intention in a framework, as most of the studies examined these variables independently.

In this study, the path coefficient between leisure and recreation tourism with memorable tourism experience is 0.04 ($p = 0.30$), culture, history and art with memorable tourism experience is 0.18 ($p<0.01$), political and economic factors with memorable tourism experience is 0.43 ($p<0.01$), and memorable tourism experience with revisit intention is 0.43 ($p<0.01$). The effect of leisure and recreation tourism (0.018) towards memorable tourism experience is weak, while the effect of culture, history and art (0.077) towards memorable tourism experience is small, and the effect of political and economic factors (0.250) on memorable tourism experience is medium. Also, the effect of memorable tourism experience (0.186) towards revisit intention was revealed to be medium. The of memorable tourism experience is 0.53 while the of revisit intention is 0.19. Meanwhile, the value of the endogenous constructs, namely memorable tourism experience and revisit intention, is 0.441 and 0.189, respectively. Specifically, it was discovered that memorable tourism experience has a medium predictive relevance while revisit intention has a weak predictive relevance under rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2020).

The results on H1 reveal that the relationship between leisure and recreation tourism is non-significant; thus, H1 is not supported. The results show that leisure and recreation tourism do not have any effect on memorable tourism experience. This result contradicts earlier research that claims there is an apparent relationship between leisure and recreation tourism and memorable tourism experience (Baruca & Čivre, 2022; Lončarić et al., 2021). It is also noted that tourists are deeply affected by a wide range of activities and outstanding festivities (Zhao & Li, 2023). However, the findings in the present study noted that leisure and recreation tourism did not influence memorable tourism experience. The disparities in the findings can be the result of other destination images such as culture, history and art, as well as political and economic factors. The possible explanation for this phenomenon is that there are limited promotional activities in Sarawak and the promotional activities' presence on social media seems to be insufficient (Adruce et al., 2021). Individual requirements may not be satisfied by leisure if tourists are restricted

Table 4 Summary of Path Coefficient and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-Values	p-Value	Effect Size (f^2)	Decision
H1	LRT → MTE	0.04	0.070	0.529	0.299	0.018	Not Supported
H2	CHA → MTE	0.18	0.069	2.565**	0.005	0.077	Supported
H3	PEF→ MTE	0.43	0.065	6.554**	<0.001	0.250	Supported
H4	MTE → RI	0.43	0.065	6.630**	<0.01	0.186	Supported

Note $p < 0.01$**, $p < 0.05$*

to engaging in limited leisure activities (Tsaur et al., 2020).

The findings reveal that culture, history and art has a significant and positive relationship with memorable tourism experience (H2). This corresponds with the study by Lee and Jan (2022), who stated that memorable tourism experience is impacted by philosophical and ethnic disparities. Indeed, the findings are consistent with a study conducted by Moliner-Tena et al. (2021), who stressed that engaging with local culture, especially locals, will contribute to the creation of distinctive and memorable tourism experiences. Slak Valek (2021) also stated that tourists are attracted to a destination because of its opera theatres, art galleries, museums and other artistic establishments. Subsequently, the cultural and historical heritage as well as distinctive architectural designs of a destination will leave tourists with an indelible memory (Zhao & Li, 2023).

The findings of this study confirmed that political and economic factors affect memorable tourism experience, thus supporting H3. This is in harmony with a study by Seyitoğlu (2020), who elucidates that safety is generally acknowledged to be one of the key factors that will influence experiences. Additionally, it is stated that the perception of tourists regarding safety and security has a positive correlation with memorable tourism experience (Ng et al., 2022). Also, Kim (2020) suggested that memorable tourism experience was greatly impacted by unjustified ticket costs, subpar visitor management and unscrupulous business practices such as tour guides and brokers defrauding tourists. This is because tourists' impressions of unjust costing will have an adverse effect, which includes an inferior level of memorable experiences as it is related to a feeling of justice (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020). An economical travel location, fair costs for the goods and services offered, high-quality offerings (Giao et al., 2020), and reasonable value for money are the main elements for altering tourism experience (Thong et al., 2020).

The results further demonstrate that memorable tourism experience will affect revisit intention, thus supporting H4. The findings correspond with a study by Seyfi et al. (2019), who advocated that tourism experience of a trip will influence several behavioural effects, including enhanced loyalty, revisit intention, and positive word-of-mouth (WOM). The results support the study by Wong et al. (2019), who imply that past memorable tourism experience is among the most important factors in determining tourists' revisit intention. Tourists tend to revisit a place that leaves them with positive memorable tourism experiences such as places that can assure the safety and security of the tourists (Kazmi et al., 2020). Additionally, numerous studies have shown that memorable tourism experience will influence tourists' revisit intention as if they are satisfied with the destination, they may be more inclined to revisit the destination in the future (Obradović et al., 2022; Atmari & Putri, 2021; Seetanah et al., 2020).

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of the present study contribute to the corpus of knowledge on destination image, memorable tourism experience and revisit intention. Firstly, this study aims to examine the relationship between destination image, memorable tourism experience and revisit intention with Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory and Theory of Planned Behaviour. The integration of various complimentary theories contributes to the development of the theoretical model, which includes destination image, memorable tourism experience and revisit intention. The findings of this study provide credence to the Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory by highlighting the importance of destination image as a major factor in determining memorable tourism experience and revisit intention. Tourists tend to respond to and revisit a destination which offers an attractive destination image that may increase memorable tourism experience. Furthermore, the present study supports Theory of Planned Behaviour by demonstrating that destination image and memorable tourism experience will have an impact on revisit intention. It can further clarify that tourists will have a revisit intention if a destination provides a positive destination image and memorable tourism experience.

The current study provides several suggestions for the authorities and tourism providers on the significance of providing a positive destination image in order to offer a memorable tourism experience and increase tourists' revisit intention. The authorities and tourism providers must understand the importance of destination image and its relationship with intended outcomes. It is important for both authorities and tourism providers to conduct strategic planning in preserving and maintaining culture, history and art. It is strongly recommended that all staff in these destinations receive ongoing training in order to preserve and enhance the culture, history and art in Sarawak. It is believed that a tourism destination with trained staff will provide better services to tourists. Tourism providers may also implement Smart Tourism in their businesses in order to maintain competitiveness, such as enhancing intelligent information systems that offer online access, facilitating mobile payments for cashless transactions, and self-check-in and -out kiosks, as well as developing smart attractions applications that provide real-time maps and routes for travel planning (Nadee et al., 2024). In addition, authorities should strengthen law enforcement in order to have a stable politics and economy in the destination. This is because a destination with stable politics and reasonable costing will offer a positive memorable tourism experience and improve revisit intention as tourists tend to visit destinations that can ensure their safety (Kazmi et al., 2020) as well as destinations that provide them with a sense of justice (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

Although the current study has some theoretical and practical implications, it also has several limitations that need to be addressed, and more evaluation is necessary. The first limitation faced by this study is that it has a limited research site. The research site in this study is limited to the top 5 attractions in Sarawak, namely Semenggoh Nature Reserve, Bako National Park, Sarawak Cultural Village, Waterfront Esplanade Kuching, and Mulu World Heritage Area. Limited research sites might cause the data collected to be inaccurate. Also, the data collected might not be useful or as inappropriate in other contexts. This is because tourists in other destination attractions may have different opinions on the destination image in Sarawak.

In addition, the data collection in the current study is from a single source. A common method bias may thus arise. Therefore, it is recommended to have data collection from several sources in order to improve the validity of the findings, although procedural remedies might reduce the likelihood of common method bias.

In addition, the sample size of this study is restricted to 199 tourists. In the current study, there are only 101 domestic tourists and 98 international tourists who participated in the survey. This does not accurately reflect the experiences of all of the domestic and international tourists in Sarawak. Consequently, the findings of this study do not represent a consistent experience of the tourists. Thus, more respondents should be considered in future studies to have a better finding that shows the effect of destination image towards memorable tourism experience and revisit intention.

Directions for Future Research

The limitations of this study provide some recommendations for future study to strengthen the relationship between destination image, memorable tourism experience and revisit intention. Firstly, this study has a limited research site, which is the top 5 attractions in Sarawak. Future studies might include more research sites in Sarawak, such as Kubah National Park, Mount Santubong, Fairy Caves and Niah Caves.

In addition, the sample size of this study is restricted to 199 tourists. This does not accurately reflect the experiences of all of the tourists in Sarawak. Consequently, the findings of this study do not represent a consistent experience of the tourists. Hence, more respondents may be included in future studies to get better findings that show the effect of destination image towards memorable tourism experience and revisit intention.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to respondents who have spent their valuable time and cooperation during data collection process. Their cooperation ensured a seamless data collecting process.

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Original Scientific Article

Major Sports Events Returning to Emerging Sports Tourism Nations: Willingness to Pay for the EuroBasket in Slovenia

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As Slovenia prepares to co-host the 2029 EuroBasket, or European Basketball Championship for men, this article examines the variables that influenced taxpayers' willingness to support public backing for a previous rendition of the tournament. The authors surveyed 374 Slovenian taxpayers when the country hosted the event in 2013, and determined that on average, they stated a willingness to pay (SWTP) of €18.7 per person. A Tobit model showed that belief in the societal impact of sports events and the nation-building potential of the tournament increased SWTP by €5.1. Wealthier respondents were less willing to contribute; to overcome this challenge, future promotional campaigns should target higher earners. Beyond money, respondents valued intangible benefits including national pride, international recognition, and skills gained in event organization and marketing. When Slovenia co-hosts the tournament again in 2029, the local organizing committee should spotlight both tangible and emotional benefits, amplify community narratives, and design curated promotional campaigns to secure the trust of a broad range of supporters and stakeholders.

Keywords: contingent valuation method, willingness to pay (WTP), European basketball championship, public goods, intangible effect, sport tourism, sport management

 https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.19.39-56

Introduction

Researchers, tourism and hospitality professionals, policymakers, and other specialized publics and stakeholders disagree on whether investing public funds in the hosting of sporting events is wise. However, one thing is indisputable: these public subsidies do not go unnoticed (Maennig & Zimbalist, 2012). Mass media, scholars, and the general public are less attentive and opinionated when 'major' rather than 'mega' competitions such as world or continental championships are organized (Ličen et al., 2016). Yet, the sheer number of major sporting events means they directly impact the lives of far more people than mega-events such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cups. The public subsidies customarily granted to such events render this impact both spiritual and material.

This paper analyses popular support for public funding of the European Basketball Championship for men, also known as EuroBasket, hosted by Slovenia in September 2013. Though still relatively small by international standards, the EuroBasket was, and remains to date, the largest non-recurring sports event hosted by this country. Organizers thus lacked experience in staging competitions of such magnitude.

Also lacking experience in evaluating and supporting such events were the civil service, tourism and hospitality professionals, and the local population. Studies on contingent valuation and willingness to pay for sports events are concentrated in North America and Western Europe (Andreff, 2024; Bakhsh et al., 2022; Porter & Chin, 2012). Yet, as emerging sports tourism and sport management nations, Slovenia and other countries with similar geopolitical, athletic, economic, and societal characteristics will host events of similar size and scope in the future (Andreff, 2024). Thus, it is imperative to conduct an impartial assessment of the value such events create, especially as they receive public subsidies. To assess the value and desirability of the European Basketball Championship for men for the local population, the willingness to pay (WTP) of Slovenian taxpayers was measured using a contingent valuation method (CVM).

Despite the considerable time that has elapsed since the tournament, this analysis is timely as it was compiled only weeks after Slovenia was announced as a co-host of the 2029 edition of the same competition (To. G., 2025). Requests, or even expectations, of public subsidies for the tournament will inevitably arise soon, so knowing what level of support (if any) citizens found reasonable for the 2013 tournament can help inform the request – and influence the decision – for the second go. More broadly, Eastern and Southeastern Europe have become popular destinations for major sporting events, but there are still very few independent academic studies of their value and implications for residents. This study aspires to fill a scholarship void in a region where many nations are trying to affirm themselves as veritable sport tourism destinations. Finally, information on WTP and contingent valuation will provide valuable guidance to local communities aspiring or planning to invest in major sporting events to boost their local sports tourism products.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Sports generate both tangible and intangible benefits. The former refers to increased income due to increased or generated consumption (e.g. by tourists attending an event), while the latter indicates the creation of public goods such as international prestige (Grix & Carmichael, 2012), local unity and civic pride – the 'feel good effect' (Maennig & Porsche, 2008). When hosting a major international event in a popular sport, public goods that are both non-excludable and non-rivalrous can include conversations about the event and a sense of pride deriving from perceived international visibility and recognition. However, these events contribute to national pride and identification only if they receive wide media coverage and include successful athletic performances, and even then, the boost in psychic income is largely limited to those who follow the competition with interest (Mutz & Gerke, 2024). Even unsuccessful bids for major sports events may leave positive intangible legacies, although these tend to be very limited (Tinaz & Ströbel, 2024).

Studies assessing tangible and intangible benefits are used for non-market purposes and are typically conducted before the event occurs. In contrast, market-based analyses (such as economic impact studies) only assess tangible benefits and are usually carried out after the event takes place. The former almost always estimate larger economic benefits than market-based studies later show (Solberg, 2017; Whitson & Horne, 2006). The most frequently used methods in non-market valuation studies are contingent valuation, hedonic pricing, and travel cost methods (Gergaud & Ginsburgh, 2013).

Contingent valuation is used to estimate the 'non-use' value of a good or service (or, in this case, an event) that is not subject to traditional market-based valuations (Arrow et al., 1993). A contingent valuation survey creates a hypothetical market by asking individuals how much they would be 'willing to pay' for the mere existence of the resource, allowing the assessment of a monetary value that is considered meaningful or reasonable.

Although this approach was originally developed for use in environmental economics, recent studies have used it in sport contexts. For example, studies conducted in North America have attempted to put a price tag on the benefits and costs associated with building or refurbishing venues to retain professional teams or events. Taxpayers were usually supportive of public subsidies to sports teams and facilities to enhance the quality of life (Santo, 2007) and city reputation (Schwester, 2007). Stadium attendance (actual spectatorship) was the most consistent determinant of willingness to support public spending; however, the amount they were willing to pay very rarely met the amount of the actual (and necessary) subsidy. In Europe, teams receive public funding to avoid relegation or folding. Contingent valuations of professional soccer again highlighted the importance of attendance and consumption (use versus non-use) in approving of public spending to benefit professional teams (Castellanos Garcia et al., 2014; Wicker et al., 2016). A recent transnational study conducted in Europe and Asia assessed citizens' WTP for a sports fund designed to accomplish competitive success in the Olympic Games. Respondents in countries with a greater history of Olympic success were willing to pay more, indicating that the number of medals won was linked with more utility among individuals (Funahashi et al., 2020).

One-time events differ from professional and Olympic teams, despite both receiving public funding for their facilities and operations. Teams typically use only one home venue, which they use many times over multiple competitive seasons. Thus, teams can spread infrastructural costs over a long time, and attendance is known and relatively constant. Olympic teams often use existing facilities, and their expenses are mainly limited to staffing, materials, and travel. In contrast, events such as continental championships typically use multiple venues, but each hosts only very few games over a very short period. Permanent tenants must then be found after the event, which often proves to be difficult (Alm et al., 2016). Finally, ex-ante attendance estimates are complex, difficult to calculate (Solberg & Preuss, 2007), and often exaggerated (Porter & Fletcher, 2008). Emerging research in contingent valuation of sport events integrates event management with ecological accounting principles, to further facilitate consideration for the sustainability of sport event planning and execution (Rinker et al., 2025).

The economic impact of (mega) sports events on host communities can be either positive or negative: Porter and Chin's (2012) comprehensive literature review examining events of various size staged over the preceding 15 years found 'no consistent positive impact from a sports event, often finding the event associated with a negative impact' (p. 248; see also Baade & Matheson, 2011). Elahi et al. (2021) detected similarly ambiguous outcomes in a more recent systematic review of studies on economic, as well as social, cultural, political, and environmental effects on local communities. Another comprehensive survey of the economic impact of professional sport teams, venues, and events in North America did not find tangible long-term economic effects on the host region regardless of estimation method, model specification or outcome variable, even when accounting for intangible benefits and residents' welfare (Bradbury et al., 2023). Any positive economic impacts are usually much more modest than those touted by sports promoters (e.g. Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011; Matheson, 2024; Zimbalist, 2015). This broad consensus among economists studying sport events has been challenged by some recent studies, but Feddersen and Maennig (2023) demonstrate that such work is often done by academic boosters who employ alternative data points or ranges and/or methods of analysis to demonstrate otherwise unlikely or dubious positive effects.

Duan et al. (2021) note that 'in sport and tourism literature, the impacts of sport events are often used interchangeably with event legacy' (p. 1746). They further note that residents compare the costs to the perceived social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits when developing an attitude towards the event. In their study of impact perception for a marathon race, Duan et al. (2021) found that perceived economic impact had no significant direct effect on event support; however, residents' overall quality of life played a mediating role in support and impact perception. Another literature review has also found no evidence that public funding of sport events substantially and sustainedly enhances the long-term subjective wellbeing of people living in host communities (Taks, 2023). When studying the social value of major sports events, scholars employ a multitude of definitions and methodologies yet seldom explain their findings through strong theoretical frameworks (Bakhsh et al., 2023).

Some European scholars have used contingent valuation to assess public support for the hosting of mega-events such as the Olympic Games (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2008; Preuss et al., 2020; Walton et al., 2008; Wicker & Coates, 2018; Wicker et al., 2017) and the FIFA World Cup (Süssmuth et al., 2010; see also Matheson, 2024). However, studies of major events such as continental championships are much rarer. The two types of events differ in terms of periodicity, domesticity, generated economic activity, media appeal, and/or focus on spectators or competitors (Gratton et al., 2000). While mega events undoubtedly cost more, major events are much more frequent and thus impact many more local and national budgets. Local, regional, and/or national governments often justify these subsidies (to what are usually private enterprises) by claiming the events will generate two types of large positive externalities: a direct, tangible return on investment that benefits the public (e.g. urban development, increased tourism, job creation), and the provision of intangible public goods such as local unity, fan loyalty, and civic pride (Andranovich et al., 2001).

Ex-ante studies of contingent valuation of major sports events in Europe are relatively rare, and pertinent literature must be sought quite widely in academic journal archives. In 1996, spectators of a Davis Cup tennis match in France were asked to identify the maximum annual amount they would accept to pay to support organizing sporting events in the host city of Limousin. Women were willing to pay, on average, €10.6, while men were willing to pay significantly more, €14.7 (Barget & Gouguet, 2007). In 1997, the citizens of Trondheim in Norway stated they were willing to pay an average of NOK965[1] in earmarked taxes to host the World Skiing Championship (Andersson et al., 2004). Vekeman et al. (2015) tested various models and influencing factors of contingent valuation for the one-day cycling Tour of Flanders in 2009. Prompted by the question of what amount of additional annual taxes they were willing to contribute to ensure the continued existence of the historic and culturally significant race, survey respondents expressed an average WTP of €10.3 and a median WTP of €4.2. Young women valued the event lower, while higher personal income and love for cycling (but not for other sports) clearly positively impacted valuation (Vekeman et al., 2015). Average WTP for the Grande Partenza (the first stage) of the cycling Giro d'Italia in the Gelderland region of the Netherlands among local adults was €3.58 before the event and €4.45 after the event; the share of respondents willing to pay anything at all rose from 29.7% ex ante to 39.3% ex post (De Boer et al., 2018). In another rare study of psychic income effects, both emotional reward and WTP for future international sports events remained higher even several years after Bergen hosted the World Road Cycling Championship in 2017, despite the financial failure of the original event (Solberg & Denstadli, 2025).

The only contingent valuation studies of sport events in Eastern Europe were conducted in Poland. There, Zawadski (2016) examined the intangible benefits and costs of the 2012 UEFA Euro. He asked adult participants in five major Polish cities to estimate the increased household property tax they would be willing to pay over five years to offset the costs associated with hosting the soccer tournament. The study reflected the complexity of hosting a major – perhaps even mega – sporting event in a country with a developing sport tourism and sport management industry, so no single average valuation was computed. Rather, the author determined that WTP increased among respondents with higher incomes, education, interest in football, and young or old age (but not the middle-aged) (Zawadski, 2016). The same author assessed WTP to host several non-mega events in a specific sports venue and determined that major events inspire significantly smaller amounts than the continental soccer championship. Still, WTP most obviously increases with personal income and interest in sport (Zawadski, 2020, 2022, 2024a). Zawadski also surmises that social benefits may become more apparent for smaller events because they may occur in the same city more than once (Zawadski, 2024a). We did not

1 Accounting for inflation, this sum would amount to NOK1898, or €159.9, in May 2025, per Inflation Calculator (https://www.ssb.no/en/kalkulatorer/priskalkulator).

find other more recent studies, or studies originating in Southeastern Europe.

Sport Event Management in Slovenia and Former Yugoslavia

Since 2000, countries that were formerly part of Yugoslavia have become increasingly frequent hosts of major sporting events. Slovenia hosted the European Men's Handball Championship in 2004 and the European Basketball Championship for Men in 2013. It co-hosted women's equivalents of both competitions in 2022 and 2023, respectively. It has also hosted World Championships in ski flying (2004, 2010, 2020), biathlon (2001, 2006, 2021), rowing (2011), and other sports, as well as recurring major events such as World Cup stops in Alpine skiing, ski jumping, cycling UCI ProSeries, tennis WTA Tour events, and more.

Croatia and Serbia have similarly lively sports events markets and often attract similar sports. These similarities are probably the result of a shared athletic history. Yugoslavia often hosted major and even mega sporting events such as the Winter Olympics in 1984, the UEFA Euro in 1976, the World Basketball Championship in 1970, and five continental basketball championships. However, the economic, social, and political situations of its successor nations differ considerably. This study presents the first comprehensive examination of willingness to pay for major sports events in a former Yugoslavian country attempting to establish a reputation as an emerging sport tourism and sport management (desti)nation (Slovenska turistična organizacija, n.d.).

The EuroBasket 2013

The men's European Basketball Championship 2013, or EuroBasket, was held between 4 and 22 September 2013 in four cities in Slovenia. The goals for the event were to generate a profit or at least avoid financial loss; facilitate a fresh start for Slovenian basketball; organize the best possible event; facilitate a medal/top placement for the Slovenian team; improve the superstructure and promote host cities; generate interest in basketball and sports; and generate interest in Slovenia as a sports and tourist destination (Eurobasket, 2013). These goals were used as the rationale to justify public subsidies provided to the event.

An early cost-benefit estimate prepared by the organizers anticipated a net effect of €39 million on the Slovenian economy; an amount based on what was described as a 'very conservative study' (Košarkarska zveza Slovenije, n.d., p. 2). The predicted effect included (non-specified) multiplier effects and an estimated €4 million 'not lost' because an estimated 3000–5000 Slovenian spectators would not travel abroad for the tournament (opportunity cost).

An ex-post cost-benefit analysis (CBA) commissioned by the organizers (Ivašković, 2014) determined that the event was well organized despite the then-persisting economic crisis. In the aftermath of the European debt crisis, Slovenia experienced a 24-month recession that spanned from 2011 until the end of 2013 (pm/kk, 2014). The project was conceived as a public-private partnership. The Slovenian central and local governments agreed to cover the organizing fee (initially set at €8.8 million and eventually reduced to €7.9 million; Ivašković, 2014, p. 38; Urad Vlade RS za komuniciranje, 2014, p. 17) and invest in the expansion and/or refurbishment of the five venues (Celje, Koper, Jesenice, and two in Ljubljana, the state capital) for a total investment of approximately €9.8 million (inclusive of €4.2 million funded by European Structural Funds) (Ivašković, 2014, pp. 37–38; Pavčnik, 2014). In turn, the limited liability company founded by the Basketball Federation of Slovenia (Košarkarska zveza Slovenije, hereinafter KZS) to organize the event assumed operational costs, which ultimately amounted to €13 million (Ivašković, 2014, pp. 10, 39–41). The treasury recovered an estimated €6.4 million in value added tax and income tax (p. 41).

The tournament reportedly attracted 31,480 international visitors who travelled to Slovenia specifically to attend the EuroBasket 2013 (KZS, 2013). A study assessing visitors' motivations to travel to one of the host cities determined that older, affluent males from non-neighbouring countries were more likely to visit the tourist destination (Lesjak & Podovšovnik Axelsson, 2015; Lesjak et al., 2017). Some residents of the same host city appreciated the positive cultural impacts derived from exposure and exchanges with tourists, leading to a better understanding of visitors from foreign countries. The negative social impacts included traffic congestion and parking issues, while concern over crime and vandalism was low (Lesjak et al., 2014). Media exposure to the tournament also fed patriotic attitudes among Slovenian nationals (Ličen, 2017). A time series survey showed that Slovenian residents perceived the event as providing worldwide recognition of the nation, the promotion of an active lifestyle, and economic improvements. The perceived downturns included the high cost of tickets and a modest tourist appeal (Ličen & Cole, 2017).

Purpose of This Study

Despite the popularity of spectator sports, taxpayers' willingness to pay to host them varies considerably. For the EuroBasket 2013, the organizers prepared an ex-ante estimate of the benefits deriving from hosting the event. This study informed the government's decision to financially support the tournament and influenced the public's perception of its value. However, such top-down impact studies should be complemented by a bottom-up approach when studying the economics of sports events (Swart & Bob, 2012). Our study examines the bottom-up public support for the event and the factors that influenced WTP. Such studies are most often conducted in North America and Western Europe (Bakhsh et al., 2022; Porter & Chin, 2012) even though emerging economies are taking on ever more major and mega sports events (Andreff, 2024). Our findings will help fill this void and hopefully inspire scholars in other understudied countries with similar geopolitical, athletic, economic, and societal traits. We were guided by two main research questions:

- *RQ1* *What monetary value were the surveyed taxpayers willing to pay to host the EuroBasket 2013?*
- *RQ2* *Which factors determined their willingness to pay?*

Methods

The contingent valuation method is the most appropriate approach for assessing public support for public funding of the EuroBasket because it directly measures residents' willingness to pay (WTP) for both tangible and intangible benefits associated with hosting the event. Unlike revealed preference methods such as hedonic pricing or travel cost, which are limited to market-based or use values (Funahashi et al., 2020), contingent valuation can capture non-market and non-use values such as happiness, national pride, and the prestige associated with hosting an event that are central to the justification of public spending on sporting events (Orlowski & Wicker, 2019).

The contingent valuation method's ability to elicit individual-level valuations through hypothetical scenarios allows for a comprehensive aggregation of public support, providing policymakers with a clear monetary estimate of the event's perceived social value (Orlowski & Wicker, 2019). This is particularly important for non-mega sporting events like the EuroBasket, where many benefits are intangible and not reflected in market transactions (Zawadzki, 2020, 2024a). Furthermore, contingent valuation has been successfully applied in similar contexts to estimate the value of elite sport success and the social impacts of both mega and non-mega sporting events, demonstrating its validity and policy relevance (Zawadzki, 2024b).

Alternative approaches such as the opportunity cost method can offer macro-level insights but struggle to capture the nuanced, individual-level preferences and the full spectrum of social benefits that the contingent valuation method provides. Hybrid approaches are emerging but are less established and often still rely on contingent valuation as a core component (e.g. Bakhsh et al., 2022).

Survey Design

The survey was part of a larger research endeavour and consisted of four sets of questions. The first set identified the respondents' attitudes to major sports events. The second set examined the respondents' knowledge of the EuroBasket 2013 and studied their perceptions of benefits and problems related to the event. The fourth set of questions included respondents' social, economic, and demographic characteristics.

The third section of the survey is central to this study and assessed participants' contingent valuation. It started with a short description of the benefits expected from hosting the EuroBasket, including enhancing the global recognition and reputation of Slovenia as the host country, the promotion of the national brand (I Feel Slovenia), the opportunity for sports fans to watch the elite tournament live, the benefits for Slovenian businesses and service providers, and the tax revenues collected by the government.

The following paragraph explained that the tournament will be organized by EP 2013, a limited liability company owned by KZS. EP 2013 would cover the tournament's operational costs, while the national and local (municipal) governments in tournament host cities would cover the tournament application fee, bank guarantees, and operational and infrastructural costs associated with the four tournament venues. Survey participants were told that the national and local government funds allocated to the event could be used for other purposes, such as the funding of other sports events, sport clubs, youth or disability sport, recreation, or even other public goods such as education, pensions, social transfers, the environment, science, etc. Finally, participants were reminded that tax revenues are limited and can be spent in multiple ways, and the tournament would be held in a different country if Slovenia did not host it. We formulated the scenario to address budgetary limits, embedding effects, bias arising from the relation between the whole and its parts, bias arising from the symbolic value, and satisfaction arising from the 'warm-glow effect' (Nunes & Schokkaert, 2003).

After being introduced to this scenario, respondents were asked whether they approved of a one-time payment of €10 from their taxes towards the organizational costs of the 2013 European Basketball Championship for Men. The proposed sum is the median value of the amounts obtained in a pilot study and is close to the actual per-capita amount allocated by the government. The purpose of this question was twofold: first, to guide respondents who have no experience with the evaluation of non-market goods and might not be able to construct a reasonable value for such an unfamiliar good (i.e. provide a 'ballpark figure'). Second, the respondents could accept or reject this sum. If they rejected it, they were asked for the reason they rejected it; their response to this follow-up question allowed us to identify protest responses. This question was followed by one asking the respondents to indicate the maximum amount of tax income they were willing to pay to subsidize the project. This question was used to determine stated willingness to pay (SWTP), which is the focus of this research.

An online survey was created and distributed through 1ka.si, a web-based survey research tool. A link to the survey was included in a dedicated news item published on MMC RTVSLO, the online service of the Slovenian public broadcaster. At the time of the survey, this web portal was the third most popular Slovenian website according to Alexa, a web traffic analysis company. The survey and news item attracted responses from taxpayers browsing through the public service website. Web browser cookies prevented individuals from completing multiple surveys. The survey was conducted one month before the start of the EuroBasket and was accessible between 1 and 9 August 2013.

Data Management and Regression Model

The initial sample included 710 observations. After excluding single missing values, outliers, and respondents who reported not earning an income (and were thus not taxpayers), we reduced the sample to 374 observations. Non-valid responses in contingent valuation surveys are common due to a combination of hypothetical bias (Hausman, 2012), protest behaviour (Jorgensen et al., 1999), non-response (Wang, 1997), ambivalence (Ready et al., 1995), and insensitivity to scope (Hausman, 2012). The final sample includes respondents over the age of 18 (the age of majority in Slovenia) who reported earning an income. In 2013, 74% of Slovenia's population reported using the Internet (Zdešar, 2013), so although the sample is not representative of the national population, its composition makes the results indicative of the broader popular sentiment. Survey participants were considerably more likely to be younger, male, and sports enthusiasts than the average population, with 46% of men and 42% of women belonging to the 28–37 age group, which represented the largest cohort in the sample. Such overrepresentation introduces po-

Table 1 Stratification and Sampling Weights

How often do you watch sports live or on TV? Strata (1–3)	Share within sample	Share of population*	Weights
1. Regularly	*0.6203*	*0.09*	*0.000387081*
2. Sometimes	*0.3262*	*0.15*	*0.001153411*
3. Never	*0.0535*	*0.76*	*0.037897352*

Note *Audience data from AGB Nielsen Media Research for RTV Slovenija, target audience 4+. Live and 'fan zone' audience was estimated as 10% of the television audience.

tential bias, as attitudes toward sports consumption may differ systematically from those of older or less sports-minded individuals. To mitigate this, we relied on stratification by reported viewing status (regular viewing, occasional viewing, and non-viewing), which ensured that the weighted sample matched the population proportions across these key strata. Since the survey sample was large enough to conduct a contingent valuation survey, we followed Carson's (2000) recommendation and weighted responses of primary

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables

Variable	Proportion	Linearized Std. Err.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Age				
18–27 years	0.18136	0.06312	0.05724	0.30548
28–37 years	0.41861	0.86473	0.24857	0.58864
38–47 years	0.19041	0.07056	0.05167	0.32915
48–57 years	0.16661	0.07449	0.02808	0.30514
58–67 years	0.04302	0.03840	−0.03249	0.11852
Completed education				
No formal education or elementary school	0.00242	0.00135	−0.00031	0.00499
High school	0.34522	0.08417	0.17971	0.51073
Two- or three-year university degree	0.17118	0.06311	0.04709	0.29527
Four- or five-year university degree	0.30336	0.08088	0.14431	0.46241
Master's, Doctoral degree	0.17790	0.07052	0.03924	0.31656
Net monthly nonzero income (class)				
Less than 500 EUR	0.09892	0.05293	−0.00516	0.20300
500–799 EUR	0.11412	0.05303	0.00985	0.21840
800–1,099 EUR	0.22590	0.07067	0.08693	0.36487
1,100–1,399 EUR	0.36090	0.08640	0.19100	0.53079
1,400–1,699 EUR	0.06963	0.05292	−0.00710	0.20103
1,700 – 1,999 EUR	0.01248	0.00314	0.00631	0.01866
More than 2,000 EUR	0.09071	0.05289	−0.01328	0.19471

NOTE $n = 374$, no. of strata = 3, no. of PSUs = 374

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of Other Key Variables in the Model (n = 374, no. of strata = 3, no. of PSUs = 374)

	Proportion	Linearized Std. Err.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
SWTP	14.82126 (mean)	4.03815	6.88072	22.7618
		National awareness*		
1	0.12709	0.06290	0.00340	0.25079
2	0.13565	0.06297	0.01184	0.25947
3	0.42865	0.08813	0.25536	0.60195
4	0.22302	0.06321	0.09872	0.34733
5	0.08557	0.03872	0.00944	0.16171
		Opportunity to gain experience**		
0	0.76305	0.07637	0.61287	0.91323
1	0.23695	0.07637	0.08677	0.38713
		Protest***		
0	0.68062	0.08413	0.51518	0.84605
1	0.31938	0.08413	0.15395	0.48482

Notes * National awareness in connection to willingness to pay as self-reported by expressing agreement with the assertion, 'Hosting these events enhances national awareness of the population', on a five-point Likert scale anchored at 1 = Not at all and 5 = Completely agree.

** Respondents' agreement with the assertion that one of the greatest advantages associated with hosting the event is the earning of experience in the organization and marketing of major sports events. 0 = disagree, 1 = agree.

*** Respondents' protest attitude as inferred from responses to the question why they were not willing to contribute the proposed EUR10 per taxpayer towards organizing the event. 0 = no protest or complaint, 1 = expressed complaint.

sampling unit (PSU) variables with regard to the variable of frequency of attending live sport events or watching them on television to avoid sample bias (see Table 1). Sampling weights were calculated using ex-post information on EuroBasket 2013 live and TV audience. Individual weights were calculated to align the stratified survey sample with the known population distribution. For each viewing category, the weight was obtained as the ratio of the population share to the number of respondents in that category.

Table 2 presents summary statistics for the demographic variables, while Table 3 shows summary statistics for the key variables in the model.

Most participants reported being 28–37 years old (41.8%). In terms of education, most respondents (34.5%) had completed high (secondary) school. The most frequent non-zero net monthly income was between €1,100 and €1,399. Survey participants were thus slightly younger than the national average of 41 years, while reported earnings were close to the national average (the average net salary in August 2013 was €989.52; Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, 2014).3[2] As the respondent's income has a fairly strong positive correlation with their level of education (Baum et al., 2013), the latter variable was not included in the model.

Statistically significant factors influencing the respondents' stated willingness to pay included their perception of national awareness, their view of the event as an opportunity to acquire organizational and marketing experience, and a potential protest attitude towards public funding of the event (Table 3).

To incorporate sampling methodology in the analysis, we developed a regression model that accounts for the weighted structure of PSUs and sport strata. This method enables the calculation of robust standard errors in the regression model, which removes

2 Average salaries have since grown and amounted to €1,577.42 in July 2025 (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.-b). We discuss some implications of such change for our study in the conclusion.

the bias introduced to the model through the heteroscedastic data (Regression Analysis of Household Expenditure and Income, 2009, p. 74).

As our purpose is to estimate the average stated willingness to pay, which is a continuous, directly observed variable, we employed a multivariate linear regression model. The values of the regression coefficients are assessed with the OLS method. Thus, we can also test whether our expectations, which are set based on economic theory, are true. Furthermore, we designed a Tobit model, also known as a censored regression model, to estimate relationships between variables, as WTP involves censoring from below (it cannot be negative). The model takes the following form:

$$S_{WTP} = X^{'}\beta + e,$$

where S_{WTP} represents a vector of highest values of response variable, X' is a matrix of values of explanatory variables, β is a vector of regression coefficients, and e represents a vector of residuals.

The contingent valuation results proved reliable, as weighting corrected for sampling bias and both linear and Tobit models yielded consistent findings. Validity was ensured through careful scenario design, a pilot study to calibrate payment amounts, and the screening of protest responses to capture genuine willingness to pay (Carson, 2000).

Results

The marginal effect of each factor on SWTP is presented in Table 4. The greatest explanatory power is reached when the national awareness variable (*nat_aw*) is included in the model. Individuals who value and attend sports events, particularly in connection with a stronger national awareness, were on average willing to pay €5.15 more towards hosting the EuroBasket 2013 than other respondents. Table 5 in the appendix reports the estimation results from both the OLS and Tobit models, providing a comparison of coefficients and significance levels across the two approaches. As shown in Table 5, both the OLS and Tobit models produce consistent results for the key explanatory variables, reinforcing the robustness of the findings.

The socio-economic variable measuring participants' net monthly income (variable *income_class*) significantly impacted the respondents' willingness to pay. Every additional €300 of income reduced WTP by approximately €3.4 for an otherwise 'average' individual. This finding is a noteworthy contribution to an issue that has been yielding inconsistent conclusions.

Those who indicated that the project should not be financed with public sources but rather by someone else (a dummy variable *protest*) were, on average, willing to pay almost €25 less towards the project than other respondents. This is in line with economic theory: 'free riders' do not wish to pay for a good they may continue to access.

Individuals who saw the event more as 'a private initiative', i.e. those who saw the event as an opportunity for EP 2013 and KZS to gain organizational and marketing experience rather than prospective national benefits, stated lower willingness to pay (€11.5 less) than respondents who did not see the event in this light.

When these four explanatory variables are included in the model, the value of the constant is no longer statistically significantly different from 0 (see appendix). The value of the multiple regression coefficient of determination (R^2) and the value of the *F*-statistic are acceptable. Although the relatively small proportion of explained variance (31 percent) indicates that the regression model does not include all the variables that affect willingness to pay, it is undisputed that high income, 'protest financial attitude' and 'organizers gaining experience', without a change in all the other variables in the model, results in a lower willingness to pay. Lastly, the results demonstrate a direct and positive correlation between national awareness and willingness to pay.

The estimated value of willingness to pay at average values of explanatory variables was €18.69. Adjusted for inflation (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.-a), this would amount to €24.55 in August 2025. This average individual amount is used for aggregation purposes. The basis for aggregating WTP values is already defined with the selection of the form of payment for the accomplishment of the project. Since this was defined as a lump sum of paid tax, it covers all those liable to pay taxes, i.e. approximately 1.6 million Slovenian taxpayers (from a population of 2 million)

(Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.-c). The obtained value (approximately €30 million) provided a reasonably good reflection of the nation's perception of the use and non-use values of this major sports event and justifies the funds invested in the project by the national and local governments.

Discussion

The sum Slovenian respondents were willing to pay to host the 2013 EuroBasket was significantly lower (by as much as ten times) than SWTP in previous studies; however, the operating budgets of the 1997 World Skiing Championships, and especially the 2012 London Olympics and UEFA Euro, were significantly higher than the EuroBasket's (Andersson et al., 2004; Atkinson et al., 2008; Zawadski, 2016). Also, the GDP per capita of Slovenia in 2013 (€17,430) was significantly lower than that of Norway in 1997 (€40,039 in 2013 currency) or the United Kingdom's in 2012 (€32,598) – but was higher than Poland's in 2012 (€10,746).[3] As the events and the circumstances surrounding them are not directly comparable, it is only fair to say that Slovenians, being poorer than Western Europeans, were willing to pay less for a smaller event.

Still, the article offers insight into the economic valuation of the EuroBasket 2013, arguably the largest sports event held in Slovenia until then – and perhaps since. Results show that SWTP was positively affected by national awareness, aligning with seminal (Maennig & Porsche, 2008) and more recent reviews of this relationship (Mutz & Gerke, 2024). In a departure from previous studies (Mutz & Gerke, 2024), sport spectatorship could not be incorporated into the model to increase its explanatory ability. We speculate this influence was either absent – all nationally conscious people were willing to pay more, regardless of whether they also watched the event, perhaps to prove that Slovenia is able to take on such endeavours – or our survey sample was too homogeneous to establish this relationship. Sport participation could also not be integrated into the model as an explanatory variable. Variables lowering WTP included a protest financial attitude or tax aversion, and respondents' high income. While the former is expected, the latter is less common. Some studies have reported a decrease in WTP as income rises (Feehan, 2006; Schwester, 2007), but most found the opposite, ranging from analyses of WTP for the Olympic Games (Atkinson et al., 2008; Weimar & Rocha, 2017) to studies of sports events comparable to the EuroBasket in Poland (Zawadski, 2016, 2020, 2022, 2024). Slovenia and Poland both have progressive income taxation, but Poland's highest tax rate of 32% in the late 2010s (Ministerstwo Finansów, 2024), when the events studied by Zawadski studied were held, was lower than Slovenia's two highest income tax rates of 41% and 50% in 2013 (Pravilnik o določitvi olajšav in lestvice za odmero dohodnine za leto 2013, 2012). Perhaps Slovenia's higher earners felt they already pay enough (or too much) taxes and were unwilling to pay more. One final factor lowering WTP was the perception of the event as a private enterprise of the Basketball Federation of Slovenia

Table 4 Marginal Effects at Mean Value for Tobit Model

	Survey: Tobit regression		
	dy/dx	z	Sig.
income_class	−3.444556	−2.22	*
nat_aw	5.157737	2.27	*
Protest	−24.66587	−3.56	***
exp	−11.50254	−2.13	*

Note * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

3 GDP per capita as reported by the World Bank (http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD). Inflation calculated using the United States Department of Labor Consumer Price Index calculator (http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl).

rather than a public good. Still, the analysis suggests that the event produced important public goods, most notably national awareness. The estimated willingness to pay when taking the average values of the explanatory variables is significant and fully justifies the funds invested by the state: taxpayers were theoretically willing to support even twice this amount. This investment of public funds was sound.

Countries in post-socialist and post-colonial contexts have joined in the efforts of established liberal capitalist systems to host sports events and invest in elite sport to promote tourism, attract media interest, enhance international prestige, and build internal coherence (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Nauright, 2004). A previous study of the same EuroBasket showed that people who watched at least some of it live or in the media indeed expressed increased patriotic feelings despite the modest competitive outcome of the host nation (Ličen, 2017). Such enthusiasm might be a reason why nations in Eastern and Southeastern Europe more generally are increasingly eager to host or co-host continental championships and other major sporting competitions. Our study shows that taxpayers are willing to 'put their money where their mouths are'. Sport tourism and hospitality industry professionals should amplify their requests for public funding by arguing opportunities for both economic development and the strengthening of internal cohesion, national identification, and a 'feel good effect' for the local populations. To avoid the aversion of higher-income taxpayers experienced in 2013, the local organizing committee of the 2029 tournament should prepare a public relations campaign focused on persuading higher earners about both material and intangible benefits of hosting the tournament. This will be especially important since the tournament will only be held in the nation's capital and biggest city. The smaller cities that co-hosted the tournament in 2013 (Celje, Koper, and Jesenice) and their local tourist boards cannot expect to attract comparable masses of tourists and enjoy the associated benefits (Lesjak et al., 2017; Lesjak et al., 2014).

Our findings show that the relationship between income and WTP is context-dependent and varies across different events, settings, and economic and cultural contexts. These findings help fill the void in studies of economic impact and contingent valuation originating outside of Western Europe and North America (Bakhsh et al., 2022; Porter & Chin, 2012). Hopefully, they inspires similar studies in other former socialist countries and emerging economies more generally as these nations take on the honour and burden of (co-)hosting ever more sporting events (Andreff, 2024). Further research should incorporate broader theoretical and methodological frameworks (Bakhsh et al., 2023), as well as consideration for local economic and cultural specificities. Our findings also suggest that hosting a major sports event in a country with limited financial and organizational capacities might attract public support if public subsidies are invested wisely. Most important from the perspective of this study are the public goods generated by the event. Despite, or perhaps because of, the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, which persisted in Slovenia through the end of 2013 (pm/kk, 2014), it seems the EuroBasket 2013 brought joy, emotional release, and relief – albeit temporary – to the local population (Lesjak et al., 2014; Ličen, 2017). Similar 'feel good' effects on the local population were recorded after Germany hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2006 (Maennig & Porsche, 2008). Then, Germany invested a reported €293.3 million (over several years) from its federal budget towards activities directly related to the event, such as venue renovation and accompanying activities (Die Bundesregierung, 2006, p. 19). This investment amounted to approximately €7 per income-tax-payer, which is less than the Slovenian government's contribution (€10/taxpayer) towards the EuroBasket 2013.[4] Thus, per capita, direct public subsidy of the 2013 EuroBasket exceeded public subsidy of the 2006 FIFA World Cup. While the central and local governments funded the organizing fee for the 2013 EuroBasket (Urad Vlade Republike Slovenije za komuniciranje,

4 Figures include venue renovation. The figure for Slovenia, a net beneficiary of EU funding, includes money obtained through European Structural Funds (which could have been spent on other renovation projects). Neither figure includes major infrastructural investments: Germany reportedly spent a total of €3.7 billion in the years leading up to the event to upgrade the transportation network; this was 'not budgeted as World Cup expenditures, but benefited the 2006 World Cup' (Die Bundesregierung, 2006, p. 19).

2014), the German federal treasury did not contribute to bidding and organizational costs for the 2006 FIFA World Cup. This fundamental difference from the Slovenian bid (and perhaps all other bids to host major and mega events in new democracies in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe) likely pre-empted assertions of using public funds to finance a private and commercial endeavour. In our study, the perception of the 2013 EuroBasket as 'a private initiative' (perhaps further exacerbated by the delegation of the organization to a spin-off limited liability company owned by the national basketball federation) lowered WTP significantly. Sport tourism and event management professionals in the region should craft campaigns to demonstrate the public utility of such events ahead of a possible shift in public sentiment about such investments.

Limitations

Our approach has several limitations. Although we mitigated sample bias by weighting responses, the survey sample is not fully representative of the population as participants self-selected into the survey. These participants may be more engaged with sports than the general population, leading to the possibility of reporting higher valuations, which could lead to response bias in the study. The validity of contingent valuation survey responses may also be compromised, as non-valid responses are relatively common. This issue arises from several well-documented factors, including hypothetical bias, protest behaviour, non-response, ambivalence, and insensitivity to scope (Hausman, 2012; Jorgensen et al., 1999; Wang, 1997; Ready et al., 1995). While we mitigated these biases through response weighting, we acknowledge that residual biases may remain due to other unobserved differences between the survey participants and the national population. Some respondents may have behaved strategically as contingent valuation does not provide an adequate incentive to answer truthfully. People may over- or underestimate their actual WTP for the project, hoping to score the proverbial 'free lunch'. In this study, we reduced the possibility of a strategic bias by excluding people who declared no regular income, weighting answers to generate a structure of respondents that reflects more accurately the population in terms of interest for sports, bringing attention to the split in financing between KZS and the state, and including questions aimed at revealing the actual choice of value (Garrod & Willis, 1999). Finally, we assumed that the CBA commissioned by the organizers was an accurate source of information.

Contextual constraints such as the timing of the survey, the national economic situation, and the use of an online survey platform may have influenced responses in ways that limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could mitigate these limitations by employing probability-based sampling techniques and triangulating stated preference data with revealed preference methods or complementary qualitative approaches.

Proposing an initial value of WTP was appropriate in this study because respondents had no experience with the evaluation of such a non-market good and might not have been able to construct a reasonable value for it (Santo, 2007). The value initially offered in this study was similar to the actual per-capita public expenditure for the hosting of the event.

Conclusion

This study examined popular support for the public subsidy of a major sports event returning to an emerging economy and sports tourism nation in Southeast Europe: namely, Slovenia was recently awarded the co-hosting of the 2029 EuroBasket (with Estonia, Greece, and Spain) after hosting the 2018 Futsal Euro, the 2020 Ski Flying World Championships, the 2021 Biathlon World Championships, and co-hosting the 2019 Men's EuroVolley, the 2022 Men's Volleyball World Championship, the 2022 European Women's Handball Championship, and the 2023 EuroBasket Women. Prominent French sports economist Wladimir Andreff (2024) recently documented how many emerging economies in different global regions are hosting ever more such events, so describing them as 'emerging' sports tourism nations may not be accurate for much longer. Meanwhile, the increasingly popular tournament co-hosting model has important implications for the hospitality industry, as it allows them to concentrate their promotional efforts on a considerably smaller pool of target markets and potentially tailor their tourism products to best cater to specific visitors. This pertains to both national and local sports tourism and hospitality professionals. EuroBasket tournament co-hosts can nominate one national team (other than their own) to play in their country, thus influencing the potential for promotional synergies.

The €18.7 pro-capita subsidy that our survey participants were willing to allocate from taxes in 2013 is only a baseline rather than a guideline to assess a subsidy request ahead of the co-hosted 2029 tournament. Since 2013, the monthly average salary in Slovenia has increased by almost 60% to €1,577.42 (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.-b), while prices have increased (only) by 31.3% (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, n.d.-a). Economic indicators suggest that residents might be willing to approve a bigger subsidy this time: the average Slovenian is wealthier than in 2013. Yet, the intangible factors that propelled public backing then are less pronounced this time. The novelty of the event wore off: this will be a 'repeat' or 'return' rather than a first for the country. The 2029 tournament will be co-hosted by four countries rather than being an entirely homegrown enterprise, and Slovenia will not host any games in the more prestigious elimination stage. The media coverage, promotional potential, and impact of tourism will be correspondingly reduced. Within Slovenia, games will only be placed in the capital Ljubljana, thus reducing, if not eliminating, the tourist arrivals and other synergies that three peripheral cities experienced in 2013. Research on the 2013 tournament documented some positive effects on local tourism, but limited global media coverage. Ljubljana also has robust infrastructure in place, thus eliminating facility renovation as a budget request line. These circumstances suggest that the local organizing committee should develop a novel communication strategy to secure public support rather than relying on their past success.

Despite the substantial difference between 'major' and 'mega' events, the former can cost individual citizens just as much, or even more, than the latter. Scholars, decision-makers, and the public need to be aware of this, especially as the costs of hosting sporting events have been rising exponentially (Matheson, 2024; Zimbalist, 2015) and shifting to emerging economies (Andreff, 2024). And yet, despite all their limitations, public subsidies for major sport events *can* meet popular support.

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Appendix

Table 5 Estimation Results for the Models of Stated Willingness to Pay (SWTP)

	Survey: Linear regression				Survey: Tobit regression		
	Coefficient	t	Sig.		Coefficient	t	Sig.
income_class	−3.81386	−1.99	**		−6.090558	−2.39	*
nat_aw	8.071305	2.78	***		9.119751	2.01	*
protest	−16.99122	−3.91	***		−43.61343	−3.17	**
exp	−15.54142	−2.39	**		−20.33843	−2.18	*
_cons	7.138238	0.97			7.409225	0.48	
No. of strata	3			No. of strata	3		
Number of obs.	374			Number of obs.	374		
Design df	371			Population size	.98846598		
F(4,368)	7.14			Design df	371		
Prob >F	0.0000			F(4,368)	3.41		
R-squared	0.3155			Prob >F	0.0093		
				Sigma	25.14981	4.73	***
				Left-censored obs.	51		
				Uncensored obs.	323		
				Right-censored obs.	0		

Note * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

From Spectator to Stakeholder: How Tourists Perceive Their Agency in Sustainable Tourism Development in an Island Destination

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Amid growing awareness of environmental and social responsibility, many tourists seek travel experiences that reflect their values. Sustainable tourism promotes a balance between development and the need to address evolving environmental and societal challenges. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, this study explores how tourists perceive sustainable tourism and their role in supporting it. Forty-seven semi-structured interviews and observations with tourists in Phuket were thematically analysed. Five interrelated themes emerged: perceived limits of individual impact, sustainability as a trend, green destination branding and authenticity, situated ethics in tourism behaviour, and cultural variety in sustainability perspectives. While most participants endorsed sustainable tourism in principle, their engagement remained largely symbolic, shaped by uncertainty and context-dependent ethics. The findings reveal a gap between attitudes and meaningful action, emphasizing the need for clearer infrastructure, credible communication, and culturally sensitive engagement strategies. This study contributes to understanding tourists as stakeholders and informs efforts to enhance destination-level sustainability.

Keywords: environmental awareness, nature-based tourism, visitor perceptions, sustainability: sustainable tourism development, pro-environmental behaviour

 https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.19.57-70

Introduction

Around the world, popular tourist destinations are grappling with the consequences of their own success, and Phuket Island stands as a striking example of how rapid tourism development can outpace sustainable planning (Seyfi et al., 2024; Gössling & Scott, 2024). The rapid development of Phuket Island as a mass-tourism destination has led to several growth-related challenges, including the destruction of much of the island's original ecosystem (Jirapornvaree et al., 2023), a lack of affordable housing, infrastructure deficiencies (Božić et al., 2018), strain on social structures and local culture – such as increased crime and rising social inequality (Tuntipisitkul et al., 2021) – and weak institutional and policy support (Fuchs, 2023). These challenges illustrate the broader risk that, while strategies to increase tourism arrivals can generate revenue, they may also produce significant environmental and social costs if growth is not effectively managed over the long term (Adebayo et al., 2023).

A key step in addressing growth-related challenges is developing an understanding of how visitors perceive the quality of their destination experience, including the level of protection of the environment, visitor satisfaction, and intention to return (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2025). The way an individual perceives whether a tourist destination meets their needs results from a complex set of interactions. These interactions involve how the destination is organized, how it enables tourist participation in experiences, and how individuals evaluate the success – or failure – of those interactions (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2017). Cracolici and Nijkamp (2009) describe this process as the ability of a destination to generate a feeling of 'tourist well-being'. Essentially, visitor perceptions provide useful insights into how well a destination is achieving the destination experience desired by its visitors (Gorji et al., 2023). The importance of examining visitor perceptions has been highlighted by a number of scholars including Joo et al. (2019) and Streimikiene et al. (2021).

To situate these visitor perceptions within broader governance and responsibility structures, this study adopts Stakeholder Theory as its primary theoretical framework, with particular attention to tourists as destination stakeholders. A key element of efforts to enhance the sustainability of tourism is the need to refocus the attention of industry stakeholders toward balanced development, while continuously adapting to changing conditions (Hall, 2019; Moyle et al., 2020). Recognition of the importance of considering the views and concerns of all stakeholders – including tourists – supports the use of Stakeholder Theory (ST) as the underpinning theoretical framework for evaluating sustainable tourism development (Song et al., 2021). A tourism stakeholder is defined as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by' tourism development in an area (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Byrd (2007) further emphasized that stakeholder participation should not only address the needs of current stakeholders, but also 'take into consideration the needs, requirements, and perspectives of present and future visitors' (p. 8).

While definitions of tourism stakeholders vary across the literature (Byrd, 2007; Song et al., 2021; Fuchs & Konar, 2025), a consensus has emerged around five primary groups: the industry, residents, tourists, government, and non-governmental organizations (UNWTO, 2025). Although ST originated in the business and management fields, it has since been adopted by a number of tourism and leisure scholars, including Byrd (2007), Poudel et al. (2016), Song et al. (2021), and Fuchs and Konar (2025). The significance of including tourists as stakeholders has also been formally recognized by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (n.d.). Given the critical role stakeholder support plays in the success of sustainable tourism development (Wondirad et al., 2020), ST provides a valuable framework for shaping research questions, guiding data collection and analysis, and interpreting findings.

This theoretical framing is applied in a destination setting where sustainability has become both a strategic priority and a practical challenge. Destinations, such as Phuket Island, have expressed a strong commitment to sustainable development, seeking to position themselves as responsible and environmentally conscious tourism hubs (Tuntipisitkul et al., 2021). With the rise of environmentally aware travellers, destinations targeting this segment must be prepared to offer experiences that align with visitors' ecological values and ethical expectations (Ruhanen & Bowles, 2020; Fuchs & Konar, 2025).

In this context, understanding how tourists perceive sustainability at the destination level becomes crucial – not only for enhancing visitor satisfaction but also for advancing broader goals of sustainable tourism development (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Moreover, tourist perceptions can serve as early indicators of whether sustainability efforts are perceived as credible, performative, or insufficient (Song et al., 2021). As such, they are essential for informing adaptive management and effective policy responses. Therefore, including tourists in stakeholder analyses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both demand-side expectations and their alignment with supply-side strategies (Wondirad et al., 2020).

At present, the literature provides limited empirical insights into the views of tourists as stakeholders, despite their pivotal role in shaping sustainable tourism practices (Hall, 2019). Consequently, Phuket Island was selected as the study site due to its reputation as a nature-based destination with a growing focus on sustainability (Fuchs, 2023). It is Thailand's largest island, with a land area of 543 km² – somewhat smaller than Singapore (728.6 km²) and about half the size of Okinawa, Japan (1,199 km²). Located in the Andaman Sea, Phuket is often referred to as the 'Pearl of the Andaman' (Duerrast, 2011). Despite being Thailand's second-smallest province, it contributes substantially to the national gross domestic product (GDP). This dual identity – as both an economic engine and an ecologically sensitive area – makes Phuket a compelling case for examining the relationship between sustainable development and tourist perceptions through the lens of Stakeholder Theory.

Within this context, tourists play a central role in shaping sustainability outcomes, yet their perspectives remain insufficiently examined in empirical research. Despite the fact that tourists are primary consumers of tourism services – and their behaviours directly affect sustainability outcomes – most stakeholder-based analyses continue to overlook their perspectives. Moreover, while the environment is a major attraction, research on sustainable tourism development in nature-based island destinations remains very limited, highlighting both theoretical and practical gaps in the existing literature (Ruhanen & Bowles, 2020; Fuchs & Konar, 2025; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2025).

This study offers a novel lens by positioning tourists not merely as consumers or passive beneficiaries but as potential agents of change whose values, expectations, and situational ethics shape the operationalization of sustainability on the ground. Similar studies in different contexts have identified significant issues that are explored in the present study. For example, Wondirad et al. (2020) examined the status of ecotourism development in Southern Ethiopia using an exploratory research design based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a range of stakeholders. The results indicated that educating tourists by demonstrating sustainable practices is essential to developing sustainable tourism.

Moreover, the authors observed that understanding the relationship between stakeholder groups should be included as an essential element in the planning and management of tourist destinations. The study emphasized that stakeholder involvement must go beyond consultation and that collaboration is needed to effectively develop sustainable tourism practices (Wondirad et al., 2020). While much of the sustainability discourse in tourism emphasizes supply-side strategies, there is growing recognition that tourist perspectives are equally important (Li et al., 2024). Earlier research has long highlighted the challenges of translating pro-environmental attitudes into consistent tourist behaviour, with studies emphasizing issues such as the attitude–behaviour gap, situational constraints, and limited tourist agency well before sustainability became a mainstream policy concern (e.g. Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Yet, tourists' voices remain underrepresented in empirical studies (Chen & Zhao, 2025). To address this gap, the research reported in this paper first investigated tourists' perceptions of destination sustainability and associated practices in Phuket Island. It then explored their views on how they may contribute to enhancing destination sustainability.

In this study, a broad definition of destination sustainability was adopted based on the three pillars of preservation of environmental resources, support for the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, and the maintenance of economically feasible long-term operations. The outcome of the research provides insights into how perception studies can be used by destinations to identify gaps between visitor expectations of sustainability and their actual experiences. The study also highlights a gap between visitors' views on desirable actions and observed actions. To address these research aims and capture tourists' perspectives in depth, a qualitative research design was adopted, as outlined in the following section.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism and their behavioural responses within a destination setting. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the need to generate in-depth insights into participants' values, attitudes, and observed behaviours – elements not easily captured through quantitative methods alone (Wilson et al., 2020; Truong et al., 2020). Qualitative designs are especially valuable in tourism research when seeking to understand stakeholder perspectives on complex and context-dependent phenomena such as sustainability (Helgadóttir et al., 2019). To capture both what tourists reported and what they did, the study employed two complementary methods: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. Interviews enabled open-ended exploration of tourists' sustainability perceptions, while observations assessed how these translated into on-site behaviours (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Together, these methods provided a more holistic understanding of the alignment – or disconnect – between stated attitudes and actual practices, a central concern in sustainability behaviour research.

Data Collection

Study participants were recruited using purposeful sampling, described as 'a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their study' (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 172). Recruitment commenced with an informal discussion with potential participants, during which initial probing questions were used to determine the person's willingness to share information, level of articulation (and basic competency with the English language), and prior knowledge of sustainable tourism. The interviews were guided by questions not limited to but including 'What is your understanding of sustainable tourism?', 'How can sustainable tourism impact tourists in Phuket?', 'What is your opinion about environmental sustainability in Phuket?', and 'How can tourists be responsible for environmentally sustainable behaviour in Phuket?'. Written consent was obtained prior to the interviews, which were audio recorded with the participants' permission.

Participants were informed of their voluntary participation and that they could withdraw at any time. Moreover, data collection was carried out in multiple phases between late 2024 and early 2025 to account for potential seasonal variation in tourist behaviour and perceptions. A total of 62 semi-structured interviews were conducted, yielding approximately 28 hours of recorded audio. Of these, 47 interviews were retained for analysis; the remaining interviews were excluded due to insufficient data quality or lack of relevance to the research questions. The principle of thematic saturation was applied to determine the adequacy of the sample size, in line with established qualitative research standards (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To complement the interview data, covert non-participant observations were conducted in the same locations where participants were recruited, including beaches, accommodation areas, transport hubs, and tourism activity sites.

The purpose of the observations was not to quantify behaviour, but to document observable sustainability-related actions and contextual conditions that could support or contradict participants' stated attitudes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Becker, 2017; Reinharz, 2017). Observational attention focused on behaviours such as waste disposal practices, use of reusable versus single-use items, engagement with environmentally framed signage or infrastructure (e.g. recycling bins), and participation in tourism activities with explicit sustainability claims. Field notes were recorded immediately after observation periods to capture behavioural patterns, situational constraints, and contextual cues influencing action. In total, approximately 22 hours of non-participant observation were conducted across multiple sites during the data collection period.

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim under the principle of confidentially. The transcribed interviews were analysed thematically using an inductive open-coding approach based on good practice (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data and then generated keywords and codes. Manual coding was employed instead of software to enable the researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the data. Transcripts were re-read and organized into potential subthemes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Another check was undertaken to ensure consistency among codes before the formation of a thematic map. A thematic map was used as a visualization guide in the presentation of the results (Braun et al., 2022) and compared with the field notes collected during the observations.

Table 1 Excerpt from the Data Analysis Showing the Emergence of Several Subthemes from the Verbatim Report, Which Collectively Formed the First Theme of the Research

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim report
Perceived limits of individual impact	Symbolic participation	'I recycle and carry my own water bottle, but beyond that, I'm not sure what difference I can make here.'
		'I always bring my reusable bag or refuse to take a plastic straw.'
	Short-term tourist mindset	'Honestly, I think it's the government or the hotels who should do more. I'm just here for two weeks.'
	Doubt about impact	'Even if I try, I don't think it changes much. There's too much going wrong already.'
		'I want to help but I don't know how. It's not obvious what I can do as a tourist.'
	Lack of clarity	'I'd probably do more if I knew what the rules were here. Like, where's the recycling?'
	Moral disengagement	'It's not really my job to fix things here. I'm a guest, not a manager.'

In the final step, the main themes were identified and labelled, resulting in the themes presented in the paper (Table 1).

All coding and thematic analysis were conducted by the author, with support from graduate research assistants who assisted with data preparation and organizational tasks. To ensure analytical rigour and consistency, the coding process followed an iterative and reflexive approach, involving repeated engagement with the data, continuous comparison across transcripts, and systematic refinement of codes and themes. Analytical decisions were documented throughout the process, and emerging interpretations were continually checked against the full dataset to ensure coherence and credibility.

Observational data were analysed alongside interview transcripts to support methodological triangulation. Specifically, observations were used to assess the alignment between tourists' expressed sustainability values and their on-site behaviours, allowing for the identification of consistencies and discrepancies between stated intentions and observed actions. These comparisons informed the interpretation of themes related to symbolic participation, situational ethics, and perceived limits of individual impact, strengthening the credibility of the findings by grounding self-reported accounts in observed practice.

Results and Analysis

The analysis of 47 in-depth interviews and accompanying non-participant observations revealed a nuanced landscape of tourist perceptions and behaviours related to sustainability. This section presents five core themes that emerged from the data: (1) perceived limits of individual impact, (2) sustainability as a trend, (3) green destination branding and authenticity, (4) situated ethics in tourism behaviour, and (5) cultural variety in sustainable tourism perspectives. Together, these themes offer insight into the complex interplay between attitudes, expectations, and actions among tourists visiting Phuket Island, and illustrate both the opportunities and constraints of treating tourists as active stakeholders in destination sustainability. The relationships between these themes and their underlying subthemes are visually summarized in Figure 1.

Characteristics of the Sample

The final sample (n=47) comprised approximately two-thirds of respondents (30 participants, 64%) from European countries, including but not limited to German-speaking tourists (13 participants, 28%), followed by those from the United Kingdom (7 participants, 15%), Scandinavia (5 participants, 11%), and Russia (2 participants, 4%). The remaining 17 participants were from North America (6 participants, 13%), Oceania (5 participants, 11%), East Asia (2 participants, 4%), Central America (2 participants, 4%), and the Middle East (2 participants, 4%). The gender distribution was slightly skewed, with 26 female participants (55%) and 21 male participants (45%). The majority of participants had visited Thailand previously (64%), while the remaining 36% were on their first visit. Approximately two-thirds of the participants held at least a bachelor's degree. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64 years, with a mean age of 27.3 years.

Theme 1: Perceived Limits of Individual Impact

Many participants expressed support for sustainable tourism but felt their individual actions had little real impact. Common behaviours – like using reusable bottles or avoiding plastic straws – were framed as symbolic gestures rather than meaningful contributions. These behaviours were commonly described as 'small steps' or 'the least I can do', and were accompanied by a sense of resignation or uncertainty about what else could be done.

> I recycle and carry my own water bottle, but beyond that, I'm not sure what difference I can make here. [Female, 34, United Kingdom]

> Honestly, I think it's the government or the hotels who should do more. I'm just here for two weeks – what can I really change? [Male, 29, Germany]

Some participants expressed frustration over the lack of visible systems or guidance, which contributed to a feeling of helplessness. The absence of clear information – such as recycling bins, eco-labels, or signage – led several interviewees to disengage entirely, despite their interest in supporting sustainable practices.

> I'd probably do more if I knew what the rules were here. Like, where's the recycling? Are these tours actually eco-friendly or just saying that? Back home I try to be really conscious, but here I just go with the flow. I don't even know if it would make a difference. [Female, 40, Australia]

A smaller number of participants emphasized personal limitations such as lack of time, knowledge, or confidence in identifying legitimate sustainable options. Even when aware of sustainable alternatives, some expressed uncertainty about their credibility or effectiveness, further weakening their motivation to act. Across interviews, the overarching sentiment was that individual responsibility was acknowledged, but rarely extended beyond low-effort behaviours.

Theme 2: Sustainability as a Trend

For many participants, sustainability was expressed more as a lifestyle identity than a deeply informed commitment. While interviewees frequently claimed to 'care about the environment' or 'do their part', their descriptions of sustainable behaviour often focused on externally visible actions, for example, staying at eco-certified hotels or choosing organic food when available, rather than long-term engagement. Observing these behaviours appeared to serve a performative or image-driven function, offering a sense of social alignment with current norms.

> I chose the eco-friendly resort because it had a badge on the website. It just feels good to support that kind of thing. It's kind of what many of my friends do now. [Male, 42, France]

> I always bring my reusable bag or refuse to take a plastic straw. Back home, all my friends try to be eco-conscious, so it becomes part of your routine. I just continued that here. [Female, 28, Sweden]

While not insincere, these statements often lacked depth in terms of understanding local sustainability challenges or practices. For many, being 'sustainable' was about expressing personal values rather than engaging critically with destination-specific issues. Sustainability was framed as a trend or virtue signal, bundled with wellness, ethical consumption, and a sense of 'being a good tourist'. Several participants also admitted that these practices were habitual or even fashionable, shaped more by what others around them were doing than by internal motivation. The theme reveals a subtle tension: while the mainstreaming of sustainability has made certain behaviours more common, it may also have diluted their meaning.

Theme 3: Green Destination Branding and Authenticity

A strong theme emerging from the interviews was the disconnect between destination branding and on-the-ground reality. While many participants were initially drawn to Phuket due to its marketed image as a tropical, eco-friendly island, their actual experiences often led to doubts about the authenticity of its sustainability claims. Participants repeatedly referred to websites, brochures, or booking platforms that used terms such as 'green', 'eco', or 'sustainable', yet expressed scepticism once they arrived.

> The hotel I booked had a green label, but there were plastic bottles everywhere and no recycling bins. It felt like a gimmick. It's hard to know what's real. Everyone wants to look green now, but who checks these things? [Female, 38, Netherlands]

> If the island wants to be green, that's great – but don't put it on me to figure out who's lying and who's real. [Male, 52, United States]

This perceived greenwashing created a sense of disillusionment, especially among tourists who had actively tried to make more responsible choices. Several noted that eco-certifications or 'green badges' on booking platforms lacked transparency or credibility, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine efforts and performative branding. This inconsistency between messaging and experience led some tourists to feel misled, while others became more passive in their sustainability efforts. A few even expressed frustration, stating that the burden of navigating these inconsistencies was 'not their responsibility' as guests. In contrast, some participants were more forgiving, viewing the branding as aspirational rather than deceptive. These tourists acknowledged gaps between rhetoric and reality but interpreted them as part of an ongoing process of improvement.

Theme 4: Situated Ethics in Tourism Behaviour

Many participants described a noticeable shift in their sustainability-related behaviours while on holiday, often lowering their usual standards with a sense of justification. This theme captures how ethical considerations are relaxed in the context of vacation, framed as temporary exceptions to everyday values. Several tourists openly admitted that they would act differently at home, but viewed travel as a circumstance to take a break from responsibility.

> At home, I'm more strict – like, I sort my waste properly and all that. But here I'm on holiday, and I don't want to think about it too much. It's not the same as being at home. You can't expect tourists to behave the same way when they're trying to relax and have fun. [Male, 30, Austria]

> I try to be green when I can, but it's not always possible when travelling. You just have to do your best and not stress about it. [Female, 27, Germany]

The 'I'm on holiday' rationale was used to justify a range of behaviours, from choosing less eco-friendly transportation to ignoring recycling opportunities or visiting animal attractions they might avoid at home. Interestingly, some participants appeared to experience mild discomfort about this inconsistency, acknowledging a gap between values and actions, yet often brushing it off as unavoidable. For others, there was no perceived contradiction at all – holiday settings were viewed as fundamentally different moral spaces. This theme also revealed a tendency to shift responsibility away from the individual and toward the context. The absence of clear environmental options was frequently used as a reason for disengagement. While sustainability was rarely dismissed outright, it was often deprioritized in favour of personal convenience, enjoyment, or perceived limitations within the destination setting.

Theme 5: Cultural Variety in Sustainable Tourism Perspectives

Tourists' perceptions of sustainability and their willingness to act on it were shaped not only by personal values but also by broader cultural and sociodemographic backgrounds. Participants from different countries and regions often emphasized varying aspects of sustainability – some focused more on environmental protection, while others prioritized social

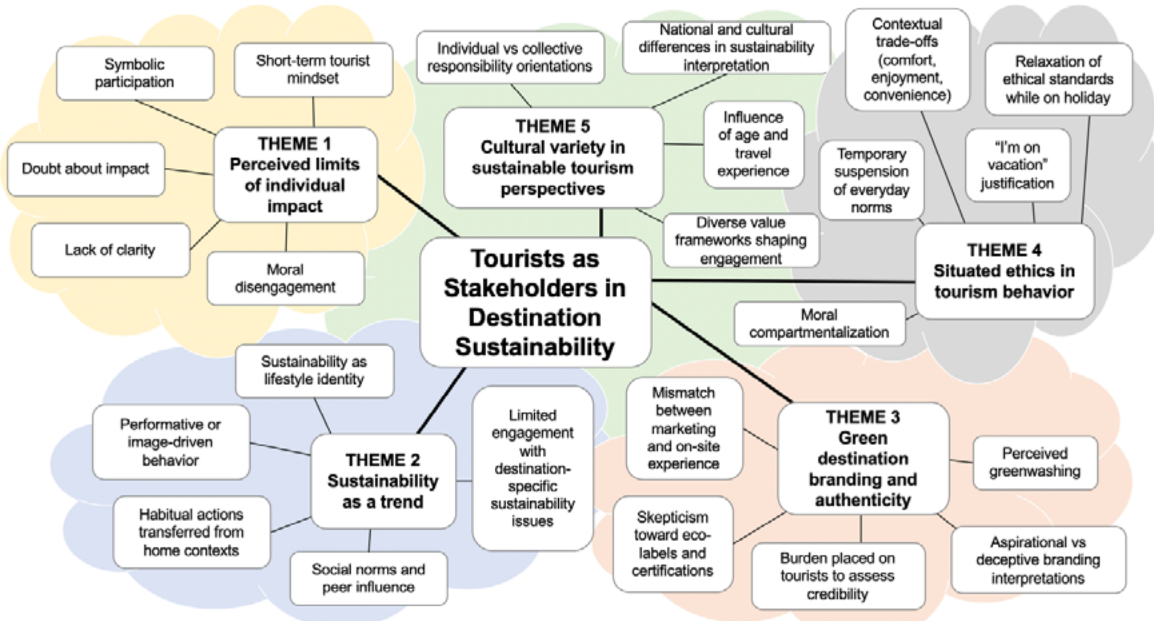

Figure 1 Thematic Map Illustrating the Five Interrelated Themes Shaping Tourists' Perceptions of Sustainability and Their Agency as Stakeholders in Phuket Island

justice, ethical consumption, or local community support.

> In Germany, we're raised to think about waste and climate from a young age. So when I travel, I naturally look for green options. I care about animals and nature, but I also think helping local people is a big part of sustainability. Like, buying from street vendors instead of big chains. [Female, 38, Germany]

In some cases, cultural background influenced not just what participants considered sustainable, but how much they felt responsible for. Western tourists, particularly from Europe, tended to emphasize individual responsibility. Meanwhile, several participants from North America or Oceania described sustainability as something more collective, often dependent on government, industry, or community action rather than personal behaviour alone.

> In the US, the government and companies take the lead. As a tourist, I follow what's provided. If there are no clear options, I assume it's not expected. [Male, 42, United States]

Interestingly, age and travel experience also played a role. Younger participants, especially those identifying as digital nomads or long-term travellers, often expressed stronger views on ethical tourism and sustainability – though not always matched by action. Older travellers, while sometimes less familiar with sustainability terminology, often drew on values of respect, moderation, and low-impact living. Overall, this theme emphasizes that sustainability is not a universal concept with a single meaning or mode of practice. Instead, it is interpreted through the lens of cultural identity and life experience.

Discussion and implications

This study set out to explore how tourists perceive and negotiate their role in sustainable tourism on Phuket Island, revealing important tensions between values, behaviours, and the broader structural context of tourism consumption. Tourists in this study consistently expressed broad support for sustainability, yet their engagement remained superficial or situational. While almost all participants were aware of the benefits stemming from sustainable tourism practices, it was apparent that not all observed or stated behaviours were governed by a desire to adhere to the principles of sustainable actions. While most respondents emphasized the importance of sustainable tourism, less than ten reported actively seeking opportunities that support the sustainable development of tourism during their vacation. This discrepancy between awareness and action identified a need to further explore the factors that hinder or motivate tourists to actively engage in sustainable behaviours.

Moreover, these findings highlight what several scholars have identified as the persistent and well-documented 'attitude–behaviour gap' in sustainable tourism (Tölkes, 2020; Wut et al., 2023; Viglia & Acuti, 2023; Fuchs & Konar, 2025), where pro-environmental values fail to translate into consistent actions. It also highlights the hidden role that social desirability bias may have played in the findings reported by previous research into actual behaviours versus self-reported behaviours (McNamara & Prideaux, 2010). In an era where there is increasing recognition of the importance of protecting the environment and promoting community well-being, developing effective policies and regulations has become an important driver in supporting sustainable tourism (Maxim, 2016). The results of this study are consistent with the findings from other studies (Maxim, 2016; Paunović & Jovanović, 2017; Graci & Van Vliet, 2020; Buijtendijk & Eijgelaar, 2022) which emphasize that although policymakers acknowledge the need for sustainable tourism, implementation is often limited in practice.

Vellecco and Mancino (2010) reason that sustainable tourism policies are difficult to implement due to the lack of shared responsibility. Graci and Van Vliet (2020) add that stakeholder education and participation are critical for the successful implementation of practices that support sustainable tourism development. While previous findings report from diverse contexts, their implications resonate with the challenges observed and faced by Phuket. They also provide insights that apply to the implementation of policies and affirm three key issues: the need for effective policy-making, the provision of opportunities to act sustainably, and the need for a deeper understanding of the potential role to be played by the supply side in promoting sustainable tourism. Several participants advocated a demand-driven approach, where tourists play an active role in shaping sustainable tourism practices.

The existing body of literature supports the idea that sustainable practices at destinations significantly impact the decision-making process of travellers (Bonzanigo et al., 2016; Seyfi et al., 2021; Seyedabolghasemi et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023), indicating the need to have a detailed understanding of the views of tourists in relation to their expectations. Another critical insight that emerged is the role of uncertainty and ambiguity in shaping tourists' limited engagement. The absence of visible infrastructure (e.g. recycling bins), credible eco-labels, or clear behavioural cues appeared to diminish tourists' willingness to act. This highlights the role of destination management organizations in shaping sustainable behaviour not only through education but through environmental design and signalling (Line et al., 2018; Su et al., 2023). Echoing findings from Rasoolimanesh et al. (2025), the results point to a lack of functional systems that allow tourists to enact their values.

In this context, Stakeholder Theory proves especially useful. While ST has traditionally emphasized the role of residents, governments, and businesses, this study reinforces calls to recognize tourists as dynamic stakeholders – capable of influencing, and being influenced by, the sustainability trajectory of destinations (Wilkinson & Coles, 2024). Yet, many participants distanced themselves from this responsibility, invoking short-termism ('I'm only here for two weeks') or moral disengagement ('It's not my job to fix things'). Such deflections suggest that while tourists are formally stakeholders, they may not perceive themselves as such in practice – particularly in the absence of clear governance or participatory mechanisms. This perceived marginality within the stakeholder system reflects what Wondirad et al. (2020) described as the 'passive tourist paradigm', in which travellers view sustainability as an institutional obligation rather than a shared endeavour.

Adding further complexity, the findings revealed that tourism operates as a space of ethical exception for many. Participants openly admitted that their sustainability standards were relaxed while travelling – a phenomenon that has been theorized as 'situated ethics' (Jamal & Lee, 2020), where moral reasoning is adapted to fit the vacation context. In contrast to everyday life, where environmental responsibilities are internalized and habitual, tourism settings often foster a temporary moral release, justified by the pursuit of leisure, novelty, and escape. This temporal recalibration of values challenges assumptions embedded in many behavioural models that presume consistency across contexts. It also cautions against overly optimistic views of voluntarism in sustainability, calling for stronger institutional scaffolding to support pro-environmental behaviour even in transient leisure settings (Tsaur & Yen, 2023).

Importantly, this research also identified meaningful cultural variability in how sustainability is interpreted and enacted. Tourists from different socio-cultural backgrounds emphasized distinct dimensions of sustainability – ranging from environmental stewardship to ethical consumption and local economic justice. These findings support previous claims that sustainability is not a universally understood concept, but a construct filtered through national norms, education systems, and social values (Van Niekerk, 2020). They also imply that destination strategies must be culturally responsive, offering plural pathways for engagement rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model. For instance, some visitors responded more to environmental cues, while others valued visible local benefit, suggesting that multi-pronged interventions may be more effective than standardized messaging.

The relatively high level of awareness of practices that support sustainable tourism, but inaction by many participants, suggests there is a need for education that emphasizes the importance of adopting sustainable tourism practices (Ehret et al., 2017; Niezgoda & Markiewicz, 2021). For both education and opportunities for visitors to engage in sustainable activities to be effective, tourists must have access to opportunities to participate in sustainable behaviours. For example, establishing partnerships with local businesses and tour operators that promote and offer sustainable activities, such as eco-friendly tours or volunteering opportunities, can provide accessible avenues for tourists to actively participate in sustainable behaviours while on vacation (Kapera, 2018; Font et al., 2021). It may also be useful to develop strategies to incentivize and encourage tourists to continue their sustainable practices. This could include implementing recognition systems for tourists who actively engage in sustainable behaviours. Offering discounts to those who choose eco-friendly options or demonstrating responsible tourism practices is one option (Rawashdeh & Al-Ababneh, 2021; Rafiq et al., 2022).

Finally, the pervasive scepticism expressed toward green destination branding signals a growing awareness of greenwashing and the erosion of trust in sustainability communication. While participants appreciated the availability of eco-certified options, many doubted their authenticity, particularly when on-site experiences failed to align with marketed claims. This tension between aspirational branding and lived reality echoes broader debates on performative sustainability in tourism (Yang, 2025). The lack of transparency and third-party accountability mechanisms undermined tourists' confidence, reinforcing passivity and even disillusionment. Yet, a minority of participants interpreted the inconsistencies as indicative of a transition process rather than deception – suggesting that some tourists are open to incremental change if communicated transparently.

Taken together, these findings suggest that unlocking tourists' potential as sustainability stakeholders requires more than awareness campaigns or isolated behavioural nudges. It calls for integrative destination governance that recognizes tourists not only as consumers but as participants in a negotiated sustainability experience. This involves designing intuitive systems, cultivating trust through credible labelling and infrastructure, addressing context-specific ethical reasoning, and acknowledging cultural diversity in sustainability orientations. As destinations like Phuket continue to grapple with growth-related challenges, embracing the complexity of tourist perceptions – and their limitations – will be essential in moving toward genuinely sustainable tourism futures.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate tourists' perception towards sustainability and associated practices in Phuket and, secondly, to investigate tourists' views on how they can contribute to enhancing the destination's environmental sustainability. By foregrounding tourists as active, though ambivalent, stakeholders, this study extends Stakeholder Theory beyond its traditional supply-side orientation. Furthermore, the results support the need for ongoing analysis of tourists' perception of destination sustainability and their views on the key drivers for enhancing sustainability. The results indicate that tourists are likely to continue compromising their environmental standards and values if the destination fails to meet the standards of sustainability that visitors accept as the norm in their home countries. The findings from this study complement the literature by providing empirical evidence and practical examples of the challenges faced in implementing and monitoring sustainable tourism activities. Moreover, responding positively to this challenge is important if Phuket is to retain its status as a nature-based destination that is concerned about its environment. Achieving this will require industry stakeholders in the private and public sectors to adopt sustainable practices, collaborate with relevant authorities, prioritize the preservation of the destination's natural and cultural resources, and not be afraid of encouraging and responding to visitor feedback. It will also challenge destinations to view the demand side as a stakeholder who should not be ignored.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study adds to the literature related to tourists' perception towards sustainable tourism and their role as tourism stakeholders, it should be seen in context. Although the results are valid for the surveyed population, they might not be generalizable to an entire population, another industry, or a different geographical context. Moreover, the sample consisted of mostly international tourists from Western countries. The cultural beliefs and values of Asian cultures might differ and correspondingly lead to different results. Hence, the term 'tourists' should be interpreted in the context of Western tourists. To overcome some of the limitations, research should be conducted in other locations, allowing for multinational comparison and identification of similarities and dissimilarities in perception and behaviour. Future research using quantitative methods will facilitate hypothesis testing of some of the findings that emerged from this research, including visitor willingness and the extent to which they will pay a premium price, beliefs versus actions, and the role of education in stated and observed behaviours. Future research and destination planning must move beyond awareness-building and toward structural facilitation – designing environments where sustainable behaviour becomes the intuitive, not exceptional, choice.

Acknowledgments

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used generative AI-assisted technologies to refine language and clarity of the manuscript, ensuring it adhered to academic conventions. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Funding

The Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism, Prince of Songkla University, financially supported the research through the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Research Fund.

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Original Scientific Article

Fintech and E-Payment Methods in Tourism and Hospitality: Examining Customers' E-Satisfaction, E-Loyalty, and E-Trust During the Travel Experience

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This study aims to examine the impact of electronic payment methods (EPMs) usage on customers' e-satisfaction and how their e-satisfaction influences their e-loyalty. Additionally, it investigates the moderating role of customers' e-trust in the relationship between EPMs usage and customers' e-satisfaction. The population under study is travellers who have prior experience using e-payment methods within tourism and hospitality transactions in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). Data were gathered online from 211 e-payment users using a convenience-based purposive sampling technique. The findings reveal that EPMs usage has a positive and significant impact on customers' e- satisfaction. Additionally, customers' e-satisfaction with EPMs has a positive impact on their e-loyalty. Furthermore, the moderating role of e-trust is significant but has a weak effect in the direction of the relationship between EPMs usage and customers' e-satisfaction. This study provides valuable insights to enrich the existing literature on fintech services and e-payment methods, particularly in the tourism and hospitality industry. It also suggests how finance, tourism, and hospitality businesses can improve customers' EPM experiences to boost e-satisfaction, e-loyalty, and e-trust.

Keywords: fintech, electronic payment methods (EPMs), e-satisfaction, e-loyalty, e-trust

 https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.19.71-89

Introduction

Nowadays, the technological advancements of the internet and e-commerce have created new financial solutions, enabling enterprises to effectively market their services and products and engage directly with customers (Srivastava et al., 2024; Semenda et al., 2024). This shift has intensified competition and highlighted the necessity for the tourism and hospitality industry to take advantage of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to thrive in a digital environment, enhance customer satisfaction, and improve service delivery, thereby generating value-added experiences for different market segments (Dharmawan et al., 2024).

With this revolution, financial technology, known as *fintech,* has become one of the main forces behind the digital transformation in the business environment (Sanyaolu et al., 2024). Fintech is a combination of financial services and information technology to facilitate the monetary processes across various business contexts through innovative methods (Ediagbonya & Tioluwani, 2023). It ensures secure transactions in just one click, where information technology is the main engine, reducing the conventional methods of handling finances, and making financial transactions easier (Sanyaolu et al., 2024).

The economic growth of several countries has been boosted by fintech services (Anifa et al., 2022). For example, India and China are among the leading economies that have increasingly adopted fintech services, with a high usage rate of 87% (Kandpal & Mehrotra, 2019). With 64% of individuals worldwide utilising digital payment methods, Singh and Sinha (2020) project that fintech payment solutions could contribute an additional US$3.7 trillion to the GDP of emerging economies by 2025.

Fintech has contributed to national economic growth in many countries, while also exerting a profound influence on specific industries, including tourism and hospitality. In recent years, tourism and hospitality enterprises have gained increasingly easy access to a wide range of fintech solutions (Mhlanga & Sethi, 2024). Electronic payment methods, referred to as EPMs, are among the most prominent fintech services, playing a key role in facilitating financial transactions and meeting customers' needs (Sanyaolu et al., 2024). The integration of EPMs in the tourism and hospitality sector has garnered significant attention in recent years, indicating ongoing advancements in the industry in light of technological innovations (Shaikh et al., 2024).

According to Pencarelli (2020), customers are experiencing a significant shift in payment methods in the age of digitised travel and tourism. EPMs have contributed to improving the experiences of customers by facilitating their financial transactions at the local and international levels, reducing transaction time and costs, and empowering customers to track and manage their finances simply (Özkan et al., 2010). Numerous EPMs such as e-wallets, online banking and mobile payment applications, exist and have become increasingly popular in the travel markets (Hu et al., 2019). Such EPMs are transforming the way payments are conducted during the travel experience by providing operations that are quicker, more resilient, convenient, efficient, reliable and safe (Putrevu & Mertzanis, 2024). This corresponds with the increasing trend of employing technology, the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence and smartphone applications to customise services and enhance operational efficiency, which is essential in an industry marked by elevated customer expectations (Sanyaolu et al., 2024). Thus, several tourism and hospitality enterprises seek to adopt EPMs to increase their customer base, and improve their travel experiences by providing fast, secure and diverse payment options.

Earlier studies have shown that electronic payment methods (EPMs) can optimise financial transactions, reduce costs, and enhance data security, while also providing convenient access to financial resources, thereby increasing customer e-satisfaction and e-loyalty towards such digital payment methods (Hameed et al., 2023; Florido-Benítez, 2024; Ratna et al., 2024). However, one of the main concerns regarding the usage of EPMs is the security and transparency in financial transactions (Van Le & Tran, 2024). In the context of digital payments, people's money and private information are exchanged over digital networks without any direct interaction between the parties involved (Singh & Sinha, 2020). Thus, customers' e-trust is an important factor that could affect their satisfaction with EPMs (Alqahtani & Albahar, 2022).

Even though EPM technology has been widely adopted over the years due to its increased convenience and ability to launch seamless services, little research attention has been given to such technology-oriented payment methods in the tourism and hospitality industry (Karim et al., 2022). To explain, previous studies have discussed the revolution of fintech such as EPMs across various non-tourism sectors, especially in banking (Alkhazaleh & Haddad, 2021; Ogbonna et al., 2024). Other studies have examined the benefits and challenges of different fintech app-based payment tools such as e-wallets, mobile banking, credit and debit cards, and peer-to-peer payment apps (Savitha et al., 2022). In addition, some scholars have covered aspects such as the technological and social antecedents affecting the usage of fintech payment solutions (Singh & Sinha, 2020; Florensia & Hamid, 2024).

Furthermore, to the authors' knowledge, the dynamic attributes that make EPMs more efficient, influence customers' adoption and enhance their satisfaction, such as ease of use, perceived security, and usefulness, have not been fully addressed as antecedents of customers' e-satisfaction, especially in the tourism and hospitality industry. Additionally, loyal consumers are crucial to the longevity of a business since they spread the word about the company and provide positive recommendations (Cetin, 2020). However, few studies have discussed fintech and cashless payment methods in relation to consumer satisfaction and loyalty intentions (Alkhazaleh & Haddad, 2021). That is to say, little research attention has been given to explore how customers' e-satisfaction with EPMS influences their e-loyalty (Alnsour, 2022; Karim et al., 2022). As well, customers' e-trust is a crucial element, especially for travellers who often need to make electronic payments to book airline tickets, hotels, or purchase services. If travellers fear fraud or loss of money when using EPMS, they may hesitate to adopt them. Nevertheless, the understanding of how e-trust moderates the connection between EPMS usage and customer e-satisfaction is still limited in the research field.

As a result, there is an urgent need to address the abovementioned gaps in the literature. To address this gap, the authors developed a model that integrates the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1985) and the Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) (Bhattacherjee, 2010) to achieve several objectives: first, to examine the influence of EPMS usage including ease of use, perceived security, and usefulness on customers' e satisfaction; second, to provide a more holistic understanding of how customers' e-loyalty could be affected by their e-satisfaction with EPMS; third, to explore the role of e-trust as a moderating variable in the correlation between EPMS usage and customers' e-satisfaction.

Accordingly, the study provides a threefold contribution. First, it advances theoretical understanding by bridging gaps in the existing body of research on fintech and EPMS in the context of the tourism and hospitality industry, emphasising the interconnected roles of e- satisfaction, e- loyalty, and e-trust. Second, it provides practical implications that may benefit fintech companies by improving the quality of their products and services and developing more personalised customer services. Third, the study's findings will encourage tourism and hospitality enterprises to benefit from the widespread implementation of EPMS to improve the traveller experience, build customers' trust, and foster long-term customer relationships in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

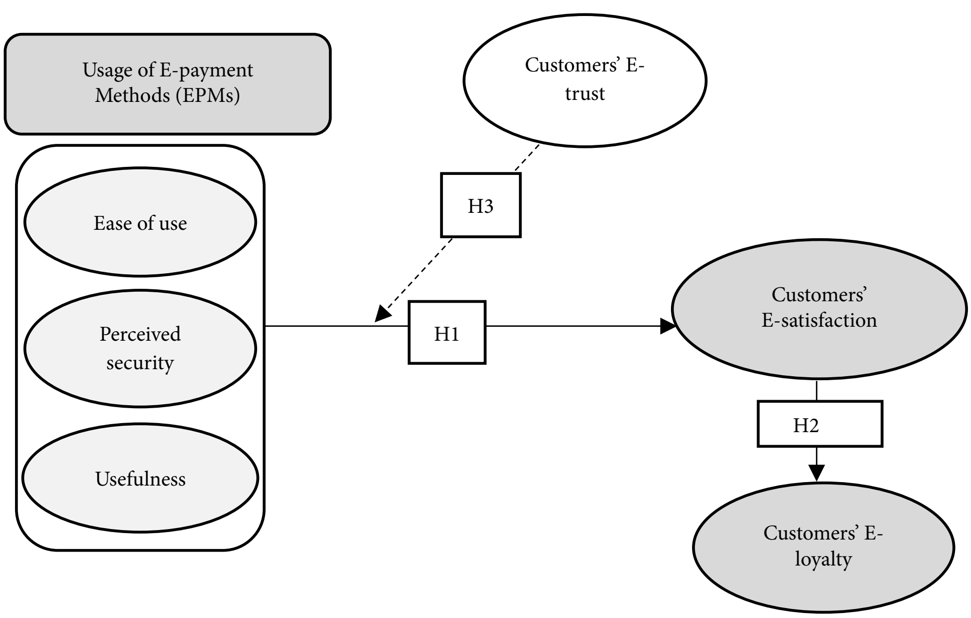

Figure 1 The Conceptual Model of the Study

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

We merged two theories to develop the study's research model. First is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), introduced by Davis in 1985. The purpose of TAM is to determine the degree to which customers understand and accept a new technology system (Davis, 1985). In TAM, individuals tend to adopt new technologies and services if they perceive impressive and tangible benefits (Sciarelli et al., 2021). The second theory is the Expectations Confirmation Theory (ECT), which is an essential framework for measuring the degree of customers' satisfaction with the actual purchase or use of a particular product or service (Oliver, 1980). To illustrate, customers put certain expectations around the use of a new technology or service. Then, when they accept this new technology and start using it, and their expectations are confirmed and met, they will be satisfied. The confirmation of these expectations is a strong predictor of overall satisfaction (Tzeng et al., 2021).

Following the suggestion of Bhattacherjee (2010), TAM and ECT were integrated to develop the Expectation Confirmation Model (ECM) to measure customers' willingness to continue using EPMS (post-usage behaviour). In the integrated model, TAM represents a 'pre-usage' phase in which customers form expectations regarding the functional factors of EPMS that influence their decisions to accept or reject them, such as ease of use, usefulness, and perceived security. After adopting EPMS, customers enter the 'post-usage' phase, which is represented by the ECT. In this phase customers compare their expectations with the actual performance of the EPMS. If the actual performance of EPMS exceeds their expectations, they will be satisfied. Continued satisfaction with EPMS increases customers' willingness to reuse them, reflecting the 'post-usage behaviour' described in the ECM. Moreover, this study integrated customer trust into the theoretical model, as trust plays a crucial role in fostering customers' satisfaction and loyalty towards EPMS (Cahyanti & Dhewi, 2022).

The proposed conceptual model suggests that the usage of EPMS positively influences customers' e-satisfaction, which in turn influences their e-loyalty. Additionally, it is predicted that customers' e-trust plays a moderating role in the relationship between the usage of EPMS and customers' e-satisfaction. The conceptual model for the current study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Hypotheses Development

Fintech and E-Payment Methods in Tourism and Hospitality Industries

Fintech has immensely enhanced digital financial systems globally, facilitating data accumulation and enabling more efficient and innovative service delivery in both developed and developing nations (Srivastava et al., 2024). Fintech refers to the innovative use of technology to make financial transactions smarter, faster, and safer (Rahim et al., 2022). It integrates mobile-centric technological advancements with financial services to improve system efficiency (Ediagbonya & Tioluwani, 2023). Also, it utilises internet technology and automated information processing to provide accessible financial solutions across many platforms (Ngo & Nguyen, 2024). This transition has revolutionised financial processes and enhanced client interactions, especially in tourism and hospitality industries, by enabling convenient, safe, and efficient financial transactions (Hameed et al., 2023).

A key component of fintech is EPMS, which represent a significant fintech innovation that provide considerable benefits for travellers. EPMS improve the travel experience by streamlining booking processes, minimising cash usage, and ensuring secure and smooth payments (Qadri, 2023). Additionally, EPMS provide diverse solutions specifically designed to address the distinct requirements of the tourism and hospitality industry, including international transactions, currency exchange, and the management of unanticipated expenses (Ratna et al., 2024).

The electronic payment landscape encompasses various methods, each addressing distinct customer preferences and facilitating seamless transactions and bookings regardless of travellers' location (Hameed et al., 2023). The following are examples of EPMS used in the tourism and hospitality industry: (1) Credit and debit cards are universally accepted and extensively utilised for transactions at airports, hotels, resorts, restaurants, travel agencies, and tourist attractions

(Florido-Benítez, 2024); (2) E-Wallets, such as PayPal and Google Pay, facilitate rapid and convenient transactions, which are especially advantageous for tourists; (3) Mobile banking applications enable users to manage their finances and conduct transactions remotely (Koh et al., 2024); (4) QR Code Payments are contactless, efficient and simple payments in which users utilise scanned QR codes for quick transaction completion (Maharjan et al., 2024); and (5) Peer-to-Peer Payments facilitate direct monetary transfers between individuals, characterised by low effort and cost (Savitha et al., 2022). It is worth noting that the mechanism through which EPMs are processed is called an online payment gateway. Online payment gateways act as third-party platforms that securely enable e-commerce transactions by linking merchants and customers (Albshaier et al., 2024). Digital gateways offer value-added services like loyalty rewards, real-time currency conversion, and easy-to-use interfaces that make transactions faster and better (Ivanov, 2019).

The incorporation of EPMs into the tourism and hospitality industry presents various advantages (Dharmawan et al., 2024). EPMs minimise reliance on physical currency and eliminate the need for manual transactions, thereby enhancing the travel experience (Susanto et al., 2022). Moreover, EPMs have improved security by employing advanced encryption and authentication technologies to protect financial information and reduce the likelihood of fraud (Khanra et al., 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of automated processes considerably reduces transaction costs for both tourism service providers and travellers (Ngo & Nguyen, 2024). Additionally, EPMs can provide visitors with individualised services, thus improving their entire travel experience (Shang & Chiu, 2022).

When it comes to EPM usage, it is crucial to consider the functional factors regarding its use which affect customers' satisfaction, like ease of use, perceived security and usefulness. To explain, a key antecedent of customer satisfaction with EPMs is their ease of use (Abed & Alkadi, 2024; Dharmawan et al., 2024). Ease of use refers to how the user-friendly and intuitive design of these methods reduces the effort required to complete financial transactions (Setiawan et al., 2021). Payment methods that involve less cognitive effort are more likely to be accepted and appreciated by consumers. Furthermore, user-friendliness enables easy interactions in different situations and enhances the travel experience, thereby improving customer satisfaction (Althinayyan & Alojail, 2024).

Furthermore, perceived security is a critical concern, particularly for those transacting in unfamiliar environments, such as travellers (Nguyen et al., 2021). Hwang et al. (2021) define perceived technology security as customers' belief regarding the level of security of their personal information when engaging in electronic transactions. With respect to electronic payments, consumers may suffer significant losses due to data breaches, fraudulent transactions, and unwarranted debits (Van Le & Tran, 2024). Therefore, security is a critical attribute of EPMs that greatly influences satisfaction (Alkadi & Abed, 2023).

In addition, usefulness is an important component of EPM usage. It indicates the actual benefits of e-payment technology in enhancing travel efficiency (Karim et al., 2022). EPMs are especially desirable due to features such as currency conversion, loyalty points, rapid transactions, global acceptability, and integration with numerous travel apps (Hameed et al., 2023). Such benefits improve customer e-satisfaction and make the overall experience more enjoyable (Ivanov, 2019; Savitha et al., 2022; Ngo & Nguyen, 2024). Building on the preceding discussion, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1 *The usage of EPMs positively affects customers' e-satisfaction.*

The Relationship Between Customers' E-satisfaction and Their E-loyalty

E-satisfaction with EPMs can be defined as customers' feelings of pleasure regarding their experience with online financial transactions (Ranjbarian et al., 2012). E-satisfaction can be assessed by determining the extent to which customers' expectations of this online technology align with their actual experience (Tjiptono, 2012). Customers' e- loyalty can be measured by customers' intention to continue using the online service or technology, positive word of mouth and positive recommendations to others (Suharyanto & Damayanti, 2022).

Previous research confirmed that there is a significant positive correlation between customers' e-satisfaction and their e-loyalty (Rodríguez et al., 2020). In the context of online transactions, Syahidah and Fikry Aransyah (2023) conducted a study on DANA Digital Wallet users in Indonesia and found that the higher the customers' e-satisfaction, the greater their e-loyalty toward the DANA e-wallet. Furthermore, prior studies by Nasimi et al. (2018), Lin et al. (2016), and Alhider and Hassan (2018) revealed that customers' e-satisfaction is the main driver of their e-loyalty. This is because satisfied customers are more loyal and less convinced by competitors' offers, whereas dissatisfied customers are more likely to seek alternative options and accept competitors' offers. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2 *Customers' e- satisfaction with EPMs positively affects their e-loyalty.*

The Moderating Role of Customers' E-trust in the Relationship Between the Usage of E-payment Methods and Customers' E-satisfaction

In the context of online technology specifically designed for financial transactions, e-trust can be defined as 'the degree to which customers perceive their service providers to be credible, the technology to be secure, and the service to be reliable' (Alwabel & Zeng, 2021). Customers' e-trust plays a crucial role in achieving success in any online business. It reflects the extent to which a customer is willing to make potentially risky decisions due to confident and positive perceptions of their service providers (Pan & Chiou, 2011).

Previous studies examined the relationship between customers' e-trust and their e-satisfaction and found that customers' e-trust plays a vital role in shaping customers' e-satisfaction with online technology (Singh & Sinha, 2020). In other words, e-trust has a positive and significant effect on e-satisfaction (Rahmawati & Ramli, 2024). For example, by using a sample of 200 respondents in Indonesia, Cahyanti and Dhewi (2022) found that the greater the level of e-trust users have in ShopeePay (e-wallet), the higher their level of e-satisfaction. Similarly, Ghane et al. (2011) surveyed a sample of 121 students in Tehran universities in Iran regarding e-banking and they confirmed that customers' e-trust significantly affected their e-satisfaction.

Regarding the usage of e-payment methods, previous studies have investigated the correlation between perceived security and customers' e-trust and found that lower levels of perceived security can decrease customers' e-trust in smartphone banking (Susanto et al., 2016). For example, Daragmeh et al. (2022) found that perceived security is one of the strongest drivers of post-adoption of e-wallets among academics in Palestine. Moreover, Saoula et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between ease of use and customers' e-trust in online shopping and found significant correlation. Specifically, the ease of shopping on a Web-based store can enhance customers' e-trust regarding their future purchase transactions (Silitonga et al., 2020). Additionally, other studies, for instance, Daud et al. (2018), found that ease of use and usefulness positively and significantly affect customers' e-trust regarding e-commerce industry. Similarly, Mulyaningsih (2022) noted that high levels of ease of use and usefulness of a system or technology can lead to customers' e-trust in this technology.

To the authors' knowledge, no studies have examined customers' e-trust as a moderator between the usage of e-payment methods and customers' e-satisfaction. We propose that customers' e-trust is not a direct predictor of their e- satisfaction but rather has a moderating effect on the relationship between the usage of e-payment methods and customers' e-satisfaction. That means, when customers' e-trust in e-payment methods increases or decreases, the relationship between the usage of e-payment methods and customers' e-satisfaction will change. Following the previous arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3 *Customers' e-trust moderates the correlation between the usage of e-payment methods and customers' e- satisfaction.*

Methodology

Study Approach

This study can be classified as a descriptive explanatory study in which the researchers employed a quantitative approach to test the study's hypotheses and achieve its objectives. The study hypothesises that there is a positive impact of the usage of EPMS on customers' e-satisfaction. Moreover, it proposes that customers' e-satisfaction positively affects their e-loyalty. Additionally, this study examines the moderating role of customers' e-trust in the correlation between usage of EPMS and customers' e-satisfaction.

Study Population and Sample

The target population of the study is travellers who have prior experience using e-payment methods within tourism and hospitality transactions in the MENA region (e.g. Egypt, Oman, Tunisia). The MENA region was selected due to the relative homogeneity of social, cultural, and institutional contexts across many of its countries, which provides a coherent setting for investigating the adoption and use of e-payment methods within tourism and hospitality transactions (Mahajan, 2012).

Given the large and geographically dispersed nature of the target population and consequently the difficulty of applying probability sampling techniques, the researchers employed non-probability sampling. Hence, convenience-based purposive sampling was used for data collection. Firstly, the researchers employed convenience sampling, a method that allows data to be collected from easily accessible respondents, to form a readily available pool of participants (Karim et al., 2022). Secondly, the researchers applied purposive sampling, through using a screening question in the questionnaire, to select participants from this pool who meet specific study criteria. Nikolopoulou (2023) confirmed that using purposive sampling allows the researchers to focus on participants who could provide meaningful insights into the research questions. To extend the sample, the researchers also incorporated snowball sampling, in which participants refer other travellers in their networks (Ting et al., 2025).

Questionnaire Development

To test the theoretical model proposed in the study, an online questionnaire consisting of two main sections was developed to collect the required data. First, the questionnaire started with an introduction that explained the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the data collected. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of a number of questions regarding the demographic and behavioural characteristics of the respondents. Demographic questions (such as *gender, age, marital status, and educational level*) were included to gain an accurate understanding of the respondents' profiles. Behavioural questions were included to focus on the actions, behaviours and patterns of respondents regarding their use of EPMS during their travel.

Before asking the behavioural questions, the researchers used a screening question: 'Have you used EPMS previously during travel?' This question was designed to ensure that only respondents with previous experience using EPMS in the travel context would complete the questionnaire. Respondents who answered 'yes' were directed to the behavioural questions and allowed to complete the questionnaire. Conversely, those who answered 'no' were excluded from the valid responses.

Section two included questions to measure the study variables related to the usage of EPMS (ease of use, usefulness and perceived security), customers' e-satisfaction, e-trust and e-loyalty. A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 'Strongly Agree,' was used to assess all variables. The usage of EPMS was measured using nine statements (three for ease of use, three for usefulness, and three for perceived security), adapted from Karim et al. (2022). Customers' e-satisfaction was measured using three statements adapted from Abed and Alkadi (2024). Additionally, three statements adapted from Karim et al. (2022) were used to measure customers' e-loyalty. Finally, five statements were adapted from Geebren et al. (2021) to measure customers' e-trust. Finally, the questionnaire concluded with open-ended questions about the types of challenges respondents faced during their e-payment experience and their suggestions for addressing these challenges. These questions were added to gain insights which could enhance the implications of the study.

Data Collection

The data was collected through an online questionnaire, which was created using Google Forms. The data collection process was conducted in several stages. First, due to the respondents' different levels of understanding of the English language, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic to enhance the response rate. Secondly, as recommended by Olson (2010), the questionnaire was sent to 10 academic experts at a pilot stage to review its structure, wording, translation and alignment with the study's main objectives. Based on the experts' valuable comments, slight adjustments were made. For instance, the experts recommended adding open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by e-payment users and their suggestions for resolving those challenges. Furthermore, to ensure the validity of the responses, one of the experts recommended being more specific in framing the question regarding the frequency of using EPMs during travel. As a result, the researchers revised the answer options for this question (*How often do you use e-payment methods during your travel experience*) from (*frequently, often, and rarely*) to (*very frequently 'several times a day', often 'once or twice a day', occasionally 'few times during the trip', and rarely 'only when necessary'*).

Thirdly, to obtain a representative sample of the target population, the researchers distributed the questionnaire online to members of social media groups (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) focused on travel experiences in the MENA region. The researchers sent messages containing greetings, a brief description of the study topic, and the questionnaire link (in both Arabic and English). To expand the sample, the researchers also shared the survey link with colleagues working in the tourism and hospitality sectors and academic colleagues and asked them to share it with other travellers in their networks, incorporating a snowball sampling approach.

After a series of follow-up messages, a total of 337 questionnaire responses were received. The researchers then reviewed the answers to the screening question and excluded all responses with no prior experience using electronic payment methods in tourism and hospitality transactions (126 responses), in line with the study's purposive sampling criteria. Therefore, 211 questionnaires, representing a response rate of 63%, were valid for final analysis. The questionnaire was distributed from October 2024 to December 2024.

Valid responses were coded and entered into SPSS 25 statistical software. The data were then analysed using SMART-PLS 4.1.0.2 software, applying Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) techniques.

Results

Sample profile

Respondents' demographic characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Sample Profile

Item	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	74	35.1
Female	137	64.9
Age		
20–30	70	33.2
31–40	73	34.6
41–50	56	26.5
50 and older	12	5.7
Educational background		
High School or less	7	3.3
University student	16	7.6
Bachelor's degree	127	60.2
Master/ PhD Degree	57	27.0
Other	4	1.9
Marital status		
Single	69	32.7
Married	136	64.5
Other	6	2.8

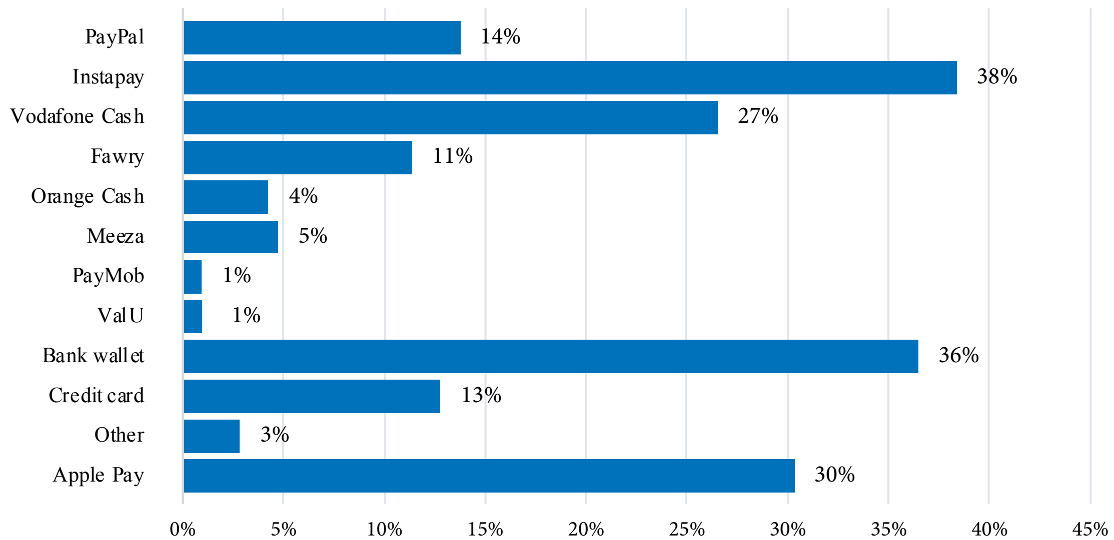

Figure 2 The Most Popular E-payment Methods Customers Use During Their Travel Experience

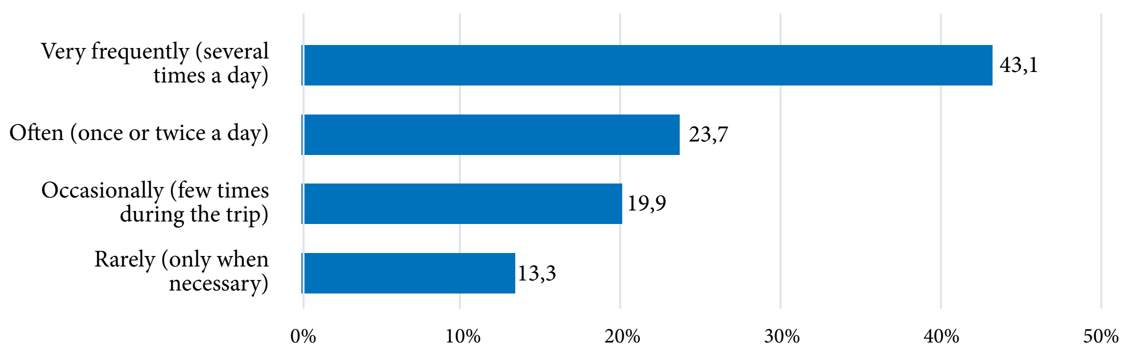

Figure 3 EPMS Frequency of Usage During Travel Experience

Analysing of Behavioural Questions

Respondents were asked regarding the most popular EPMS they use during the travel experience. Data in Figure 2 show that InstaPay (38%), followed by bank wallets (36%), Apple pay (30%), and Vodafone cash (27%) are the most frequently used methods among customers. Close usage rates were observed for PayPal (14%), credit card (13%), and Fawry (11%). The range of EPMS usage reflects customers' preferences. Each method's ease of use, security, usefulness, or promotions may explain this. Such a difference also implies that EPMS have become a popular choice among travellers, indicating a general acceptance of digital payment technology, while some EPMS are used at a low rate, such as Meeza (5%) and Orange Cash (4%), reflecting the need to improve such methods to enhance the user experience, security, or provide new features to attract more customers. Moreover, the findings in Figure 3 show that 43% of respondents use EPMS very frequently, followed by 24% who use them once or twice a day during the trip. This indicates that customers depend on EPMS but use them at varying frequencies based on their needs and circumstances.

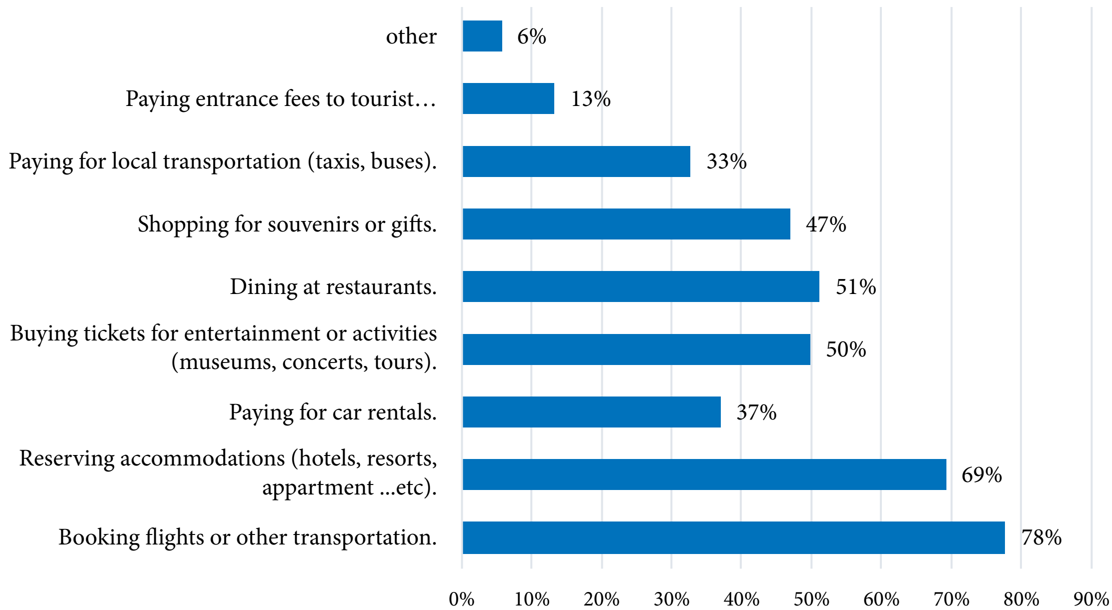

Figure 4 E-Payment Usage Across Travel Stages

Participants were also asked about the most common purposes for which they used EPMS during the travel experience. Results in Figure 4 show that 87% of customers use EPMS to book flights and other transportation, followed by 69% who use them for reserving accommodation.

Measurement Model

Testing convergent and discriminant validity using the guidelines set by Hair et al. (2019), Nguyen et al. (2023), and Cheung et al. (2024) helped confirm the confidence of the suggested model. First, each element in the suggested model should have an outer loading

Table 2 Constructs' Validity and Reliability

Constructs	Items codes	Statement	Loadings	Alpha	Rho_A	CR	AVE
EPMS usage	EOU1	It is easy to use E-payment methods	0.902	0.941	0.952	0.952	0.690
	EOU2	I believe the interface of E-payment methods is friendly and easy to understand	0.880				
	EOU3	It is easy for me to have a device that allows me to use E-payment methods services	0.834				
	P.Sec1	I feel E-payment methods are secure	0.898				
	P.Sec2	I feel secure when E-payment methods provide me with clear instructions during usage	0.873				
	P.Sec3	I am not worried about the data/information security while using E-payment methods	0.836				
	USE1	E-payment methods meet my needs	0.787				
	USE2	I save a lot of time using E-payment methods	0.863				
	USE3	E-payment methods increase my efficiency	0.541				

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Table 2 Continued from previous page

Constructs	Items codes	Statement	Loadings	Alpha	Rho_A	CR	AVE
E-satisfaction	E.sat1	I am satisfied with the way that E-payment methods have carried out my transactions	0.951	0.947	0.947	0.966	0.904
	E.sat.2	My choice to use E- payment methods was a wise one	0.945				
	E.sat3	Overall, I am satisfied with E-payment methods	0.956				
E-loyalty	E.loy1	I would share positive experiences regarding E-payment methods with others	0.922	0.913	0.916	0.945	0.851
	E.loy2	I would recommend E-payment methods to others	0.934				
	E.loy3	I will continue using E-payment methods	0.911				
E-trust	E.trust1	E-payment methods keep their promises	0.897	0.945	0.946	0.958	0.820
	E.trust2	E-payment methods facilitate my financial transactions	0.899				
	E.trust3	E-payment methods are trustworthy	0.919				
	E.trust4	I think E-payment methods are concerned with the interests of users	0.896				
	E.trust5	Overall, I trust E-payment methods	0.917				

Source Authors' own compilation. Notation(s): TP = total publications, TC = total citations.

greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019). Table 2 demonstrates that the item loadings for all constructs ranged from 0.541 to 0.956, indicating a suitable level of item reliability. Cheung et al. (2024) and Mohd Dzin and Lay (2021) indicated that the values for Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha (α) must exceed 0.7. The data shown in Table 2 indicates that both the CR and α values ranged from 0.952 to 0.966 and from 0.913 to 0.947, respectively, confirming the internal consistency of the hypothesised model. In addition, regarding the collinearity statistics, the VIF value of all items varied between 1 and 5.2, verifying that the study's variables exhibit no problematic multicollinearity (Nguyen et al., 2023). As well, the scores of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) as displayed in Table 2 met the statistical criterion of 0.50, as recommended by Cheung et al. (2024), representing a sufficient convergent validity.

In terms of the model's discriminant validity, the Fornell–Larcker and cross-loading criteria were utilised to verify the degree to which a specific construct is distinct and different from others in the proposed model (Benitez et al., 2020). As shown in Table 3, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was met as the

Table 3 Discriminant Validity

	Fornell-Larcker criterion			
	E.loy	E.sat	E.trust	EPMS Usage
E.loy	0.922			
E.sat	0.916	0.951		
E.trust	0.873	0.912	0.906	
EPMS Usage	0.909	0.912	0.911	0.830

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Table 3 *Continued from previous page*

Cross loadings				
	E.loy	E.sat	E.trust	EPMS Usage
E.loy1	0.922	0.797	0.761	0.802
E.loy2	0.934	0.821	0.806	0.810
E.loy3	0.911	0.909	0.843	0.896
E.sat.2	0.864	0.945	0.863	0.871
E.sat1	0.887	0.951	0.861	0.858
E.sat3	0.862	0.956	0.876	0.872
E.trust1	0.828	0.839	0.897	0.833
E.trust2	0.843	0.865	0.899	0.869
E.trust3	0.764	0.820	0.919	0.795
E.trust4	0.719	0.779	0.896	0.798
E.trust5	0.794	0.820	0.**917**	0.824
EOU1	0.831	0.822	0.757	0.902
EOU2	0.800	0.821	0.780	0.880
EOU3	0.757	0.757	0.715	0.834
P.Sec1	0.842	0.849	0.838	0.898
P.Sec2	0.827	0.829	0.797	0.873
P.Sec3	0.746	0.741	0.748	0.836
USE1	0.691	0.705	0.802	0.787
USE2	0.758	0.766	0.807	0.863
USE3	0.471	0.432	0.535	0.541

Table 4 Model Fit

Q^2 cross-validated redundancy			
	Q^2predict	RMSE	MAE
E.loy	0.830	0.420	0.304
E.sat	0.868	0.371	0.248
R^2 coefficient of determination			
	R-square		R-square adjusted
E.loy	0.840		0.839
E.sat	0.872		0.870
Standardised root mean square residual			
Indicators		Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR		0.050	0.061
Chi-square		793.240	765.763
NFI		0.852	0.858

Source Authors' own compilation. Notation(s): TP = total publications, TC = total citations.

squared roots of AVEs for each construct are greater than their highest squared correlation with all other constructs (Nguyen et al., 2023; Kamel, 2025). Similarly, the cross-loading criterion was also met as shown in Table 3, as the outer loading of items on a specific construct exceeds their cross-loadings on other constructs, as recommended by Hair et al. (2019).

Based on the foregoing, the structural model demonstrates satisfactory discriminant validity. Prior studies have suggested that the model's fit and predictive power can be assessed through various metrics, as shown in Table 4 (Benitez et al., 2020). First, R2 values measure the extent to which predictor variables explain dependent variable variance (Hair et al., 2019). In this study, the R^2 values reflect the cumulative explanatory power of all independent variables included in the structural model. Table 4 reveals that the predictor variable explained a significant amount of variation in e-satisfaction and e-loyalty, with values of 0.870 and 0.839, respectively. In addition, the test conducted for Q2 (=1 – SSE/SSO) revealed values greater than zero, thereby suggesting that the proposed model has sufficient predictive capability, as the Q2 score exceeds zero (Nguyen et al., 2023). Further, previous research conducted by Hair et al. (2019) has shown that SRMR values below 0.080 suggest a good model fit. As shown in Table 4, the SRMR is 0.050, indicating a sufficient data fit to the hypothesised model.

Hypothesis Testing

The findings in Table 5 reveal that customers' e-satisfaction is significantly influenced by their usage of EPMs (β = 0.416; P < .001), supporting H1. This indicates that facilitating the e-payment process along with providing convenient and secure electronic payment options could increase customers' satisfaction with the e-payment services provided. In addition, customers' e-satisfaction shows a significant positive influence on their e-loyalty (β = 0.916; P < .001), confirming H2. This finding suggests that customers who feel comfortable and satisfied while using EPMs are more likely to continue using them in the future. Additionally, customers' e-trust had a weak but statistically significant moderating effect on the relationship between EPMs usage and e-satisfaction (β = −0.035; P < .001). Figure 5 displays the simple slope analysis to clarify how the nature of the interaction between

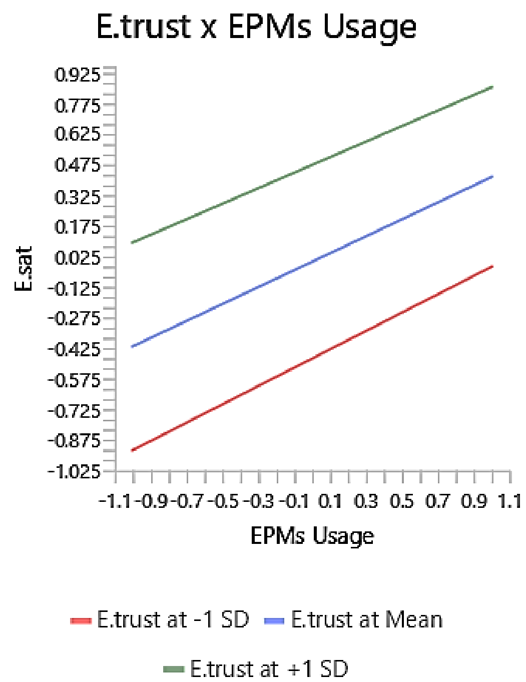

Figure 5 Simple Slope AnalysisSustainability Research Articles

Table 5 Path Coefficients

	Standardised coefficients	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	Confidence intervals 2.5%	97.5%	P values
E.sat -> E.loy	0.916	0.019	47.720	0.872	0.947	0.000
EPMs Usage -> E.sat	0.416	0.088	4.723	0.267	0.611	0.000
E.trust x EPMs Usage -> E.sat	−0.035	0.017	1.976	−0.068	0.002	0.048

Source Authors' own compilation. Notation(s): TP = total publications, TC = total citations.

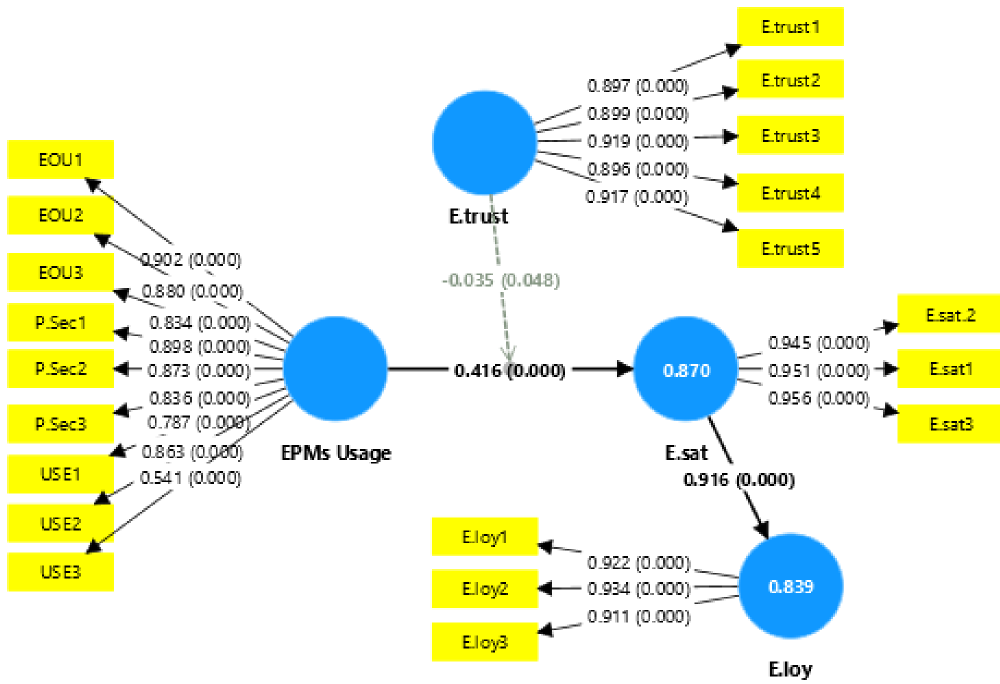

Figure 6 The Structural Model11

usage of EPMs and customers' e-satisfaction is affected by their e-trust levels. Results of the structural model are summarised in Figure 6.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate a positive and significant impact of EPMs usage on customers' e- satisfaction (*estimate* = *0.416; P < 0.001*), supporting Hypothesis 1. This indicates that the high level of practical features of EPMs, such as ease of use, usefulness and perceived security, leads to a high level of customers' e-satisfaction. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that ease of use is one of the key antecedents of customer satisfaction with EPMs (Abed & Alkadi, 2024; Dharmawan et al., 2024). Abed and Alkadi (2024) examined fintech users in Saudi Arabia and highlighted that user-friendly applications increase satisfaction and continued use. User friendly interfaces and minimum technical complexity make e-payment solutions more appealing by making them easy to use, leading to increased adoption rates and enhanced customer satisfaction.

Moreover, the results align with previous research confirming that perceived security is a critical attribute of EPMs that greatly influences satisfaction (Karim et al., 2022; Alkadi & Abed, 2023). For instance, Karim et al. (2022) studied hospitality customers in Bangladesh using fintech payment services and found that enhanced security promotes customer loyalty through improved experience and attitude. To explain, Alqahtani and Albahar (2022) highlighted that implementing effective encryption, fraud protection, and transparent data protection standards fosters user trust and increases satisfaction among Saudi marketplace consumers. Furthermore, usefulness is a crucial determinant of EPMs usage that increases customers' e-satisfaction (Ngo & Nguyen, 2024). Abed and Alkadi (2023) confirmed that the increased efficiency and creative benefits of EPMs, such as time-saving transactions and loyalty points, can stimulate customer adoption and enhance e-satisfaction.

Additionally, the current study demonstrates a positive and significant effect of customers' e-satisfaction with EPMs on their e-loyalty (*estimate = 0.916;*

P < *0.001*), supporting Hypothesis 2. This means that a high level of customers' e-satisfaction leads to a high level of their e-loyalty. When customers feel satisfied with seamless service from EPMs, they become loyal and less influenced by competitors' offers. This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g. Syahidah & Fikry Aransyah, 2023; Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Moreover, the results of testing Hypothesis 3 revealed that the moderating role of customers' e-trust in the correlation between usage of EPMs and customers' e-satisfaction is statistically significant (*estimate* = −*0.035; P* < *0.05*). To explain, the negative coefficient of e-trust means that when customers have a high level of e-trust in EPMs, the relationship between the usage of EPMs and customers' e-satisfaction will be weaker. This implies that when customers feel confident regarding EPMs, they may overlook other functional factors like usefulness, usability and security. This result aligns with previous studies that highlighted the critical role of e-trust in the success of online businesses and services, as it serves as the foundation for establishing and maintaining strong relationships between customers and online service providers (Pan & Chiou, 2011). Sahadewa et al. (2023) studied customers of Grab company in Denpasar, Indonesia, showing that e-trust significantly affects their e-loyalty. On the other hand, when customers have low levels of e-trust in EPMs, the relationship between the usage of EPMs and customers' e-satisfaction becomes stronger. This implies that when trust is low, customers focus more on the usefulness, usability and security of EPMs as these factors play an essential role in shaping their e-satisfaction (Ngo & Nguyen, 2024).

Implications, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the current study enriches the existing literature on fintech services by focusing on the usage of EPMs in the context of tourism and hospitality industries in the MENA region. First, the study's findings demonstrate the direct impact of EPMs usage on customers' e-satisfaction and how this influences their e-loyalty, specifically during their travel experiences. The findings revealed significant positive correlations between these variables, which contributes to the understanding of how functional factors related to the usage of EPMs such as ease of use, usefulness, and perceived security affect customers' e-satisfaction. Also, the study highlights the importance of customers' e-satisfaction in fostering their e-loyalty. Second, this study examines the moderating role of customers' e-trust in the relationship between EPMs usage and customers' e-satisfaction to introduce a unique contribution in comparison to previous studies. The results of the moderating role of customers' e-trust clarified that this is an important factor for shaping their e-satisfaction. However, other factors related to EPMs usage (ease of use, usefulness, perceived security) should be considered for enhancing customers' e-satisfaction.

Finally, the study findings support the integration of TAM and ECM, which were used to develop the conceptual model for testing the study hypotheses. Moreover, introducing e-trust as a moderator in the relationship between EPMs usage and customers' e-satisfaction represents a significant extension. This extension expands the ECM by exploring the role of e-trust in the direction of the relation between EPMs usage and customers' satisfaction instead of investigating the direct effect of e-trust on e-satisfaction, as seen in previous studies.

Practical Implications

Managerially, the study findings offer actionable implications for fintech companies collaborating with tourism and hospitality enterprises to enhance customers' experiences with EPMs in the MENA region, leading to enhancing customers' e-satisfaction, e-loyalty and e-trust. First, fintech companies in the MENA region should focus on enhancing the usefulness of EPMs through offering customers a variety of electronic payment methods, like credit cards, electronic wallets, and mobile payments. This flexibility enables customers to select EPMs that meet their different needs. Additionally, fintech companies can consider customers' preferences and spending behaviours by offering tailored services for them such as targeted promotions and discounts. Other features that could enhance the usefulness of EPMs include implementing a reward system linked to EPMS usage which offers tangible benefits for customers, such as early check-in, late check-out, free room upgrade, bonus loyalty points, a complimentary dinner, discounts for spa treatments, cashback on financial transactions, free tickets to tourist destinations, and discounts on subsequent trips. Second, designing user-friendly interfaces of EPMS along with providing clear instructions is essential to streamline financial transactions. Additionally, ensuring that the e-payment procedures are straightforward and uncomplicated throughout all phases, from selecting services to completing payments, is critical for enhancing users' experience. Third, the perceived security of EPMS can be enhanced through the implementation of security measures such as encryption, data-protection protocols, and fraud-prevention mechanisms to minimise potential risks and identity theft associated with the use of EPMS. Finally, fintech companies in the MENA region should focus on enhancing the trust of users by offering continuing customer support and effective solutions for any technical issues in the payment process. These implications are grounded in the study context and sample, while their relevance in other settings may vary depending on contextual conditions.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study has a set of limitations that provide new opportunities for future research within the fintech literature. This study investigates the moderating influence of e-trust on EPMS usage and customers' e-satisfaction. Further research could extend this by exploring other moderating or mediating variables such as the quality of electronic services, technological convenience, perceived security, or financial incentives such as discounts and promotions. Moreover, this study focused on three main elements of EPMS: ease of use, usefulness, and perceived security. Hence, future scholars could broaden their studies to investigate other dimensions of EPMS usage such as privacy, technical support, social influence, perceived value, competitiveness and perceived risks. Future studies could also examine whether customers' personality traits or cultural differences influence the usage of EPMS, and how these differences impact their satisfaction and loyalty. Further, the current study employs non-probability sampling techniques, which may limit the representativeness of the sample and the generalisability of results. Thus, future research should incorporate representative probability-based sampling techniques to enhance the generalisability of results. Finally, the current study employed cross-sectional survey data to test the hypotheses. Future research should adopt alternative methodological approaches, such as longitudinal designs and experimental studies with control groups, to allow for stronger causal inferences and improved generalisability of the findings.

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Original Scientific Article

Game of Thrones and Destination Authenticity: A Comparative Analysis of DMO Social Media Practices

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Instagram is a key visual social media platform that enables tourism organisations to showcase destinations. Understanding how destination image is constructed on social media and how the destination's identity and authenticity are promoted is crucial for effective destination marketing strategies. However, promotional practices might vary among tourism organisations, i.e. local, regional, and national, potentially creating different identities and authenticity. With Dubrovnik gaining worldwide attention through the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*, the study examines the strategies employed by national and local tourism organisations in the city's social media promotion. Using a summative approach, we conducted a content analysis of 1,034 photographs posted between 2016 and 2020 on the official Instagram profiles of national and local tourism organisations. Findings reveal that Dubrovnik's relationship with *Game of Thrones* is highly leveraged at the national level, constructing a fabricated sense of authenticity. However, the social media communication by the local tourism organisation emphasises heritage and nature, thereby safeguarding its authenticity. This discrepancy underscores distinct communication strategies and highlights the importance of understanding these differences for effective destination marketing.

Keywords: film tourism, social media, destination image, authenticity, Dubrovnik, *Game of Thrones*

 https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.19.91-111

Introduction

Film tourism has emerged as a significant global phenomenon, attracting increasing scholarly attention despite being a relatively recent topic in tourism studies (Bolan & Williams, 2008; Hua et al., 2021; Vila et al., 2021). Films and television series can shape destination image, create a sense of place, and influence travel decisions, making film-induced tourism an important driver of visitor flows (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Di Cesare et al., 2009). However, the relationship between film and tourism is complex, involving both positive and negative impacts, and requires closer collaboration between the film and tourism industries to ensure sustainable destination management (Kim & Richards, 2003; Hudson, 2011).

Historically, film-induced tourism gained prominence with iconic examples such as Disneyland and the global success of The *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, which significantly boosted tourism in New Zealand (Connell, 2012). Television series have also played a pivotal role in promoting destinations, as seen in Hawaii's popularity during the era of *Hawaiian Eye*, *Hawaii 5–0,* and *Magnum* (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Destination management organisations (DMOs) leverage films and social media to create a favourable destination image, recognising the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on consumer perceptions and behaviour (Hays et al., 2013; Egger et al., 2022). Hence, social media channels like Instagram, with its high visual nature and extensive reach, have become essential tools for co-creating content with tourists and enhancing destination authenticity (Conti & Lexhagen, 2020). On the other hand, authenticity plays a critical role in film-induced tourism, as destinations must balance real and fictional identities to maintain credibility and appeal (Buchmann et al. 2010; Larson et al., 2013). Despite growing interest in this topic, there is limited research examining how DMOs promote authenticity through social media in the context of film tourism.

In this paper, we investigate how the authenticity of a well-known European tourism destination is communicated and how local and national tourism organisations use user-generated content on social media. The study focuses on the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and filming location for the TV series *Game of Thrones.* Due to its appearance in the TV series, tourism arrivals in Dubrovnik increased by nearly 40% (Tkalec et al., 2017), and the national tourism organisation of Croatia actively capitalised on this opportunity through social media campaigns (Šegota, 2018b). However, it remains unclear whether the local and national tourism organisations adopted different strategies and what identity and authenticity of Dubrovnik they communicated on social media.

To address this gap, we conducted a visual content analysis of images posted on the official Instagram profiles of Croatia's national tourism organisation and Dubrovnik's local tourism organisation between 2016 and 2020. With this approach, we gained insights into DMO practices and strategies for promoting film-induced tourism and destination authenticity.

Destination branding and destination image

Like product marketing, destination branding extends beyond creating brand names, logos, or symbols that help identify and distinguish a place, and encompasses a multi-phase process (Kavaratzis & Hatch 2003; Kavaratzis 2017). Eliciting the local authentic essence is the first phase of this process (Kavaratzis, 2017) and is integral to the construction and communication of place identity. Place identity, understood here as a location's core identity, is central to branding because it encapsulates a place's core characteristics and meanings (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). When done effectively, branding makes it easy for travellers to link these symbols with the destination (Blain et al., 2005). The characteristics of destination branding differ from those of product branding, as destination brands are intangible, perishable, and variable (Gürsoy, 2003; Gürsoy & Gavcar, 2003). As highlighted by Qu et al. (2011) and Hsu et al. (2009), destination branding primarily aims to cultivate a positive image of a destination. Forming an image can be exceedingly demanding (Bolan & Williams, 2008), since it involves the creation of a mental picture and comprises several ongoing dimensions that significantly influence the perception of a destination, i.e. diverse sources and channels through which tourists gather information and shape their views regarding a destination (Gartner, 1994).

The growing accessibility and credibility of visual media, particularly film and television, profoundly shape perceptions of destinations by vividly conveying their culture, landscapes, and attractions. Ren and Blichfeldt (2011) emphasise that destinations possess multiple, coexisting identities rather than a singular, fixed one. Such identities – encompassing product, construction, identification, representation, and sense of belonging (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Clavé, 2010) – may coexist harmoniously or in tension. They emerge from the interplay between material and affective dimensions, shaped by internal and external stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Conceptualised as 'hot' (Cohen & Cohen, 2012), destination identity is socially constructed and remains in flux through ongoing representations, practices, and interactions between agents and visitors.

When making destination decisions, travellers are primarily influenced by a place's image (Baloğlu & Brinberg, 1997; Lin et al., 2007), which significantly shapes behavioural intentions and actions (Chi & Qu, 2008). An individual's fascination with a specific destination, its impressions, visual appeal, and the availability of easily accessible information are all potential indicators of whether to visit it (Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002). As a result, efforts to enhance a destination's image encourage devoted travellers to return or exhibit certain behaviours, making them essential to the continued growth of destination tourism (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

The Role of Film in Destination Image Formation

Destination marketers utilise visual promotional materials, including brochures, guidebooks, commercials, and social media, to attract tourists and foster a positive perception of their destination. It is crucial to note that other information sources do not share this goal; among these are television shows and films, which also significantly shape travellers' perceptions and travel decision-making (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Vila et al., 2021).

Films, along with other associated media, can use images, sounds, and characters to emphasise the appealing attributes of the destination, such as cultural heritage sites and locations where the film was recorded, thereby attracting potential tourists (Cardoso et al., 2017). For this reason, film tourism is often referred to as film-induced tourism (Connell, 2012).

Films can effectively promote tourist destinations by increasing awareness and familiarity with the destination and encouraging first visits (Iwashita, 2008). Awareness or familiarity with a destination is often crucial before a visit (Isa & Ramli, 2014). In addition, film as a popular culture element can increase the destination's allure; popular culture reaches audiences that travel agencies cannot pay to contact (Tooke & Baker, 1996), making it an effective promotional tool for DMOs (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005).

DMOs were initially slow to recognise films as a powerful promotional tool, but this has shifted as marketers acknowledged their influence on destinations and travellers' preferences. For instance, following the 1995 release of the film *Braveheart,* which significantly boosted perceptions of Scotland, the Scottish Tourist Board capitalised on film tourism (Bolan & Williams, 2008). While marketing campaigns cannot rival a film's popularity, travel industry stakeholders should engage earlier and align their strategies with the film's underlying themes.

Film-induced Tourism and Destination Authenticity

As film-induced tourism seeks to attract tourists, a key approach is to showcase the destination's essence or the authentic filming location (Hall, 2003). Authenticity in tourism products is associated with higher economic worth and more frequent purchases (Yi et al., 2017). Authenticity, often associated with cultural uniqueness and real experiences, is not absolute; it is framed as negotiable (Cohen, 1988) and subjective (Timothy & Ron, 2013). Wang (1999) identifies three forms of authenticity. Objective authenticity refers to the inherent genuineness of destinations and objects, assessed by objective standards (Kolar & Žabkar, 2010). Constructive authenticity is socially constructed or recognised as authentic, echoing Cohen's (1988) earlier work. Existential authenticity concerns being true to oneself (Wang, 1999). Building on Wang's (1999) conceptualisation and subsequent research (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), authenticity can be understood as a multidimensional construct that manifests in several forms, thereby requiring destination management organisations (DMOs) to engage with authenticity across multiple levels (Lorentzen, 2009). This complexity challenges travellers' ability to discern genuineness, influencing their decision-making. Thus, truth, reality, genuineness, and meaning – as well as their dialectical opposites, untruth, unreality, counterfeit, and meaninglessness – become intrinsically interpretable and dynamic, making authenticity an essential process of negotiation. Being able to negotiate these intricate, constantly evolving notions underscores the significance of authenticity (Lovell & Hitchmough, 2019). Authenticity in the context of film-induced tourism is somewhat subjective, as every individual has a different experience with a film and the location it features. Social media and user-generated content have intensified this fluidity. Moreover, tourists motivated by a movie often have conflicting feelings about how accurately the destination is portrayed in the movie (Frost, 2009).

Larson et al. (2013) conducted a study on the *Twilight* film series to investigate its impact on filming locations and the authenticity strategies. In their study, they examined how the *Twilight* vampire franchise affected destination identity and authenticity across four filming locations. It was shown that Forks, Washington, relied on a constructed, fictional reality to shape its destination's authenticity (Frost, 2010; Larson et al., 2013). They fabricated their authenticity using this strategy to modify their destination's perception and gain recognition as a mythological world (Peterson, 2005; Larson et al., 2013). To increase visitor numbers, they developed a miniature version of Twilight Disneyland, featuring various services, including *Twilight* tours, themed hotels, and memorabilia (Larson et al., 2013). Comparable findings were obtained in a study by Jones and Smith (2005) on New Zealand and *The Lord of the Rings*. The 'guarding the authenticity' strategy was used by the Italian towns Volterra and Montepulciano (Larson et al., 2013). Recognising that film-induced tourism may alter destination image (Dredge, 2010), they chose to preserve existing attributes and maintain destinations' original authenticity (Larson et al., 2013). Lastly, the case of Vancouver in British Columbia illustrates the final film-induced tourism strategy: adopting no strategy at all. This approach assumes that filmmakers would have access to the destination for filming, but that destination managers would not actively link the destination's promotion to its being featured in a film (Larson et al., 2013). This contrasts with the guarded authenticity approach, as DMOs adopt no measure to manage the destination's authenticity, leaving fans to associate it with the film organically.

Larson et al. (2013) note the complexity of managing film-induced tourism as it introduces new visitor segments and can radically reshape destination image. Hence, they suggested that marketing strategies must consider how films portray destination authenticity, with social media helping craft and communicate the desired destination image (Shuqair & Cragg, 2017).

Linking Social Media to Film-induced Tourism

Social media has accelerated the creation of user-generated content (UGC), a dynamic and often unconscious interaction among consumers and others (Payne et al., 2008) that functions as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOW), reaching global audiences without direct contact. UGC has grown significantly (Amaral et al., 2014) and plays a crucial role across industries, with tourism being particularly dependent on it (Šegota et al., 2022). It appears in various forms and strongly influences consumer decisions at all stages (Schröder et al., 2025). Travellers frequently share images, comments, and experiences on social media, offering insight and documenting their travels (Sotiriadis, 2017). Consequently, travel-generated content (TGC) has at times replaced UGC in tourism (Gkritzali et al., 2017).

Compared to DMOs' advertising activities, eWOW exerts a stronger influence (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Šegota et al., 2022) and significantly shapes online destination images (Kim et al., 2017; Aboalganam et al, 2025). Since UGC can change people's perceptions of the destination's image, this is observed and utilised as a significant marketing tool for DMOs (Hays et al., 2013; Aboalganam et al., 2025). Reposting UGC on the DMO's social media sites can make its posts more credible, thereby strengthening tourists' trust (Pagel & Aebli, 2014; Yamagishi et al., 2024). According to Lim et al. (2012), DMOs utilise specific hashtags for these particular post types. Research suggests that consumers consider UGC a more valuable and reliable source when selecting a possible destination for their next trip (Hays et al., 2013; Wijaya et al., 2024; Yamagishi et al., 2024). However, given the power social media has to shape tourists' perceptions, DMOs should carefully consider their self-promotion strategies and tactics to project the desired image of a destination (Pahor Žvanut & Zabukovec Baruca, 2025). Instagram is increasingly popular with tourists and marketers who use it to create effective marketing campaigns (Yu et al., 2020; Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). This social media channel bridges imagined and actual destination representations (Egger et al., 2022), creating an information network of posts that inspire travel and offer recommendations. Users actively seek others' reviews and experiences, shaping demand and altering perceptions of destinations (Nixon et al., 2017; Yamagishi et al., 2024). However, Bernkopf and Nixon (2019) highlight the difficulty DMOs face in finding the right balance between aesthetically pleasing and authentic photographs to promote their destinations.

Conceptual Framework Based on the Case of Dubrovnik

The city of Dubrovnik in Croatia traces its origins back to the twelfth century. Using a range of structures, such as Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque churches, monasteries, and palaces, UNESCO (n.d.) describes Dubrovnik as the Pearl of the Adriatic and an influential city in the Mediterranean. Its inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site enhanced destination branding and highlighted the city's aesthetic appeal. As a result, by the middle of the 1960s, there were more than a million overnight stays; two decades later, that figure had risen to nearly five million (Kobašić, 1993).

Dubrovnik served as a filming site for the immensely popular TV series *Game of Thrones.* The TV series highlights the violent conflicts of wealthy families during a turbulent time when threats are arising simultaneously from the north and the east (Šegota, 2018a, 2018b). According to HBO (2016), *Game of Thrones* is among the most successful television series, having received 39 Emmy awards and averaging 20 million viewers per episode. In addition to all the awards, the final episode of the *Game of Thrones* TV series was broadcast simultaneously in 171 countries, setting a Guinness World record (Contu & Pau, 2022).

In her study, Šegota (2018b) draws attention to the strategy implemented by the Croatian national tourism organisation (hereinafter, NTO), noting its deliberate choice to fabricate authenticity. This strategic approach involved promoting Dubrovnik as a *Game of Thrones* destination, leveraging the show's immense popularity to enhance the city's appeal to tourists. Indisputably, the social media activities of the Croatian NTO have contributed to more than a million tickets sold for entry to the city walls in Dubrovnik, and to three million overnight stays in 2015 – a year during which Dubrovnik experienced a surge in tourism due to the filming of *Game of Thrones.* Moreover, research has shown that Dubrovnik's tourism arrivals increased by almost 40% following its appearance in the TV series (Tkalec et al., 2017).

Croatia's administrative structure comprises multiple tiers of tourism organisations, including national, regional, and local entities (Ćorluka, 2019). Occasionally, differences may arise between the actions of the national and local tourism organisations. However, our primary focus is to understand which authenticity strategy was used to promote Dubrovnik on Instagram from both national and local DMO perspectives. Therefore, this research is initiated by the following research question:

RQ1: *What destination branding practices have been used by the national and local tourism organisations in promoting Dubrovnik as a filming location for* Game of Thrones?

Social media platforms enable users to share diverse content – text, images, videos, and audio – to disseminate information and opinions (Safko & Brake, 2009). Instagram was chosen for this study due to its photo-sharing capability (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). As a visually driven social media channel, it allows users to capture, edit, share and engage with photos and videos, while hashtags enhance content visibility (Šegota, 2018b). Šegota's research (2018b) showed that the Croatian national tourism organisation leveraged UGC in promoting Dubrovnik on Instagram. However, little remains known about how tourism organisations at the national and local level leveraged Dubrovnik's *Game of Thrones* association after 2016, prompting us to raise the following research question:

RQ2: *What was the role of visual user-generated content in co-creating Dubrovnik's destination image?*

Our focus now turns to Dubrovnik's identity and authenticity, examining how it is promoted as a *Game of Thrones* filming site, a cultural landmark, and a seaside destination. We also aim to identify the prevailing visual representations and define the induced identity presented by the national and local tourism organisations through the following research question:

RQ3: *Which strategies of promoting destination identity and authenticity have been applied to Dubrovnik's portrayal on Instagram?*

Methods

In this research, we adopted the interpretive paradigm advocated by Cohen et al. (2007), which prioritises understanding social occurrences through participants' perspectives rather than solely from researchers' viewpoints. This approach was applied in our investigation of photo use on the Instagram profiles of the Croatian national tourism organisation and the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation, particularly of the incorporation of UGC. Interpretive researchers examine data collected over a long period, allowing the identification of themes and patterns and the creation of theories based on findings, in contrast to the deductive method, which creates theories before collecting data (Grix, 2004). We aimed to examine how the destination's authenticity, tied to film-induced tourism, is being promoted to a broader audience within the tourism industry. Hence, we used the qualitative content analysis method to analyse the collected data. Based on Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) recommendations, we find the summative approach the most suited to our objectives.

After gathering the data, we focused on three specific hashtags: *#gameofthrones*, *#dubrovnik*, and *#kingslanding*. At least one of these hashtags must have been present in a photograph to be eligible for analysis. Furthermore, our analysis included pictures geotagged to Dubrovnik but without explicit hashtags. Additionally, we carefully analysed each photograph to determine whether it was UGC, specifically by verifying whether the person taking the photo was tagged in the description.

The creation of codes was focused on the data, i.e. the photographs, enabling the analysis of visual elements that shaped Dubrovnik's representation on Instagram. We examined the presence of historic architecture, natural landscapes and activities, including film-related imagery such as *Game of Thrones.*

Our primary data sources were the Instagram profiles of the Croatian national tourism organisation and the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation. We found that Instagram is the most widely used visual social media platform and thus provides valuable research data (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). We collected a total of 1,034 photographs, covering four years, from the 1st of August 2016 to the 31st of August 2020. However, as the first post on the official Instagram profile of the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation was made on the 27th of September 2017, the analysis began on that date and ended on the 31st of August 2020, covering slightly less than three years. In the findings, we present results as percentages to balance for differences in the number of research units. The adjustment was made because we examined 679 of the 727 photographs the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation posted on Instagram during the period, and 355 of the 5,264 photos posted by the Croatian national tourism organisation on Instagram.

We formed 50 codes, organised into eight categories: geotag, hashtag, UGC, heritage and landmarks, natural wonders, offerings and activities, the *Game of Thrones* influence, and people. The first category, *geotag,* provided valuable information about where the photo was captured and is often used in photo-sharing social media platforms such as Instagram (Kim et al., 2024). Since *hashtags* provide us with information about posts and could be interpreted as keywords (Turancı, 2019), they made up our second category, which consisted of eight codes: None, #Dubrovnik, #Kingslanding, #Gameofthrones, #Dubrovnik and #Kingslanding, #Dubrovnik and Gameofthrones, #Kingslanding and #Gameofthrones, and all three – #Dubrovnik, #Kingslanding and #Gameofthrones. To be considered in the analysis, photos must include at least one listed hashtag, unless they are geotagged, which can be analysed even without hashtags. *UGC* falls into the third category, and the codes are 'yes' and 'no'. The photo, including UGC, is where the Dubrovnik LTO and the Croatian NTO tagged or credited the photographers in the caption.

The following categories were linked to the visual contents. The fourth category, *heritage and landmarks*, included iconic historical sites, architectural marvels, and cultural landmarks within the city of Dubrovnik. There were 17 distinct codes, each representing a specific heritage site or landmark. By categorising con-

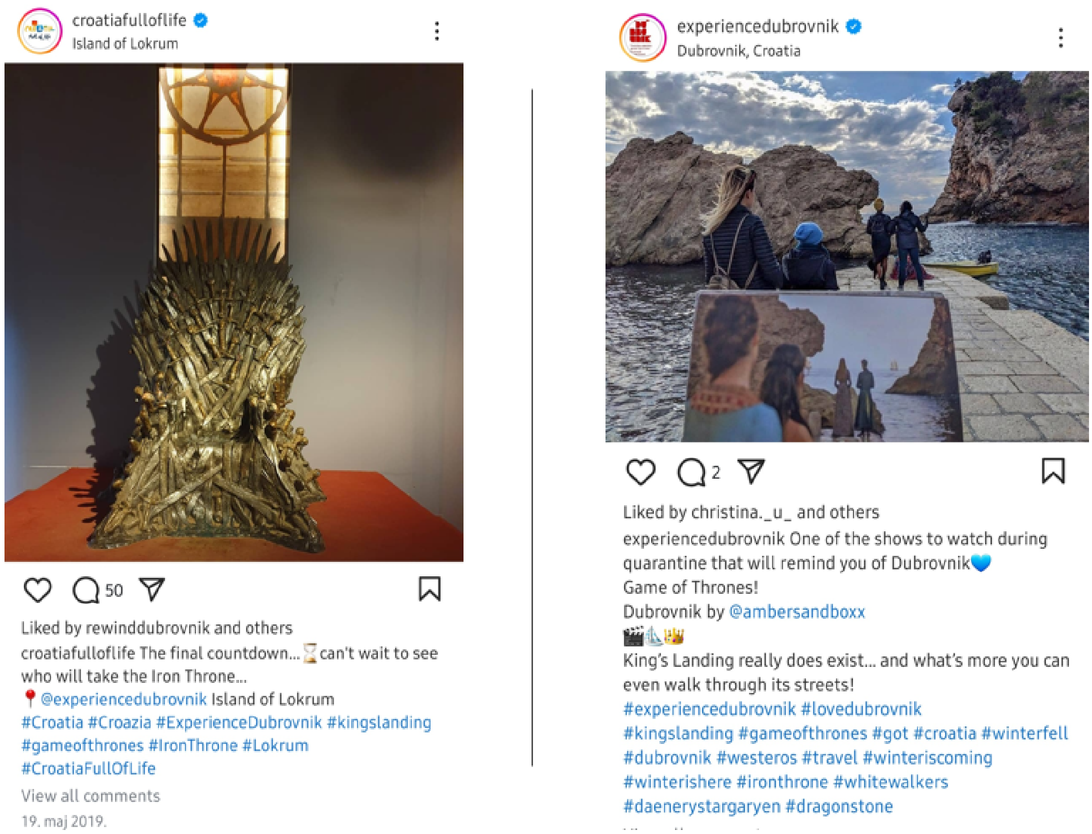

Figure 1 Example of *Game of Thrones Influence* Code Category

Source Instagram profiles of Croatian NTO (2019) and LTO of Dubrovnik (2020).

tent under these codes, we aim to systematically analyse and interpret the portrayal of Dubrovnik's rich cultural heritage and architectural landmarks across both Instagram profiles. However, some of these landmarks were featured in *Game of Thrones,* which is why the website King's Landing Dubrovnik (n.d.) helped us to create codes.

The fifth category was *natural wonders*, capturing the natural landscapes, coastal vistas, and beaches within and around Dubrovnik. The sixth category, *offerings and activities,* captured the diverse range of experiences and attractions available to visitors in Dubrovnik. The *Game of Thrones influence* was the seventh category, capturing the significant impact of the acclaimed television series on Dubrovnik's tourism. By systematically analysing these codes, we aimed to explore how the *Game of Thrones* phenomenon is portrayed and experienced within the context of Dubrovnik's tourism industry, providing valuable insights into the intersection of popular culture and destination marketing. Lastly, the eighth category was dedicated to *people*, focusing on the presence and portrayal of individuals in Dubrovnik.

Findings and Discussion

Dubrovnik and Destination Branding Practices of the NTO

Based on the thematic analysis and corresponding codes, we derived results for the Croatian NTO. Detailed information is presented in Appendix 1. All percentages in Appendix 1 refer to the average over the four years from 2016 to 2020.

Within the first category, the most common geotag was Dubrovnik, accounting for 90.42% of the posts.

Table 1 Branding Dubrovnik by Croatian NTO on Instagram (2016–2020)

Year	Heritage and landmarks	Natural wonders	Offerings and activities	Game of Thrones influence	People
2016	St. John's Fortress (16.29%)	Sea, nature and beach (37.14%)	Festivals/ Celebrations (16.29%)	—	Small group (13.33%)
2017	Dubrovnik Panorama (20.00%)	Sea, nature and beach (59.38%)	Beachcombing (8.75%)	—	One person (14.38%)
2018	Dubrovnik Panorama (29.41%)	Sea, nature and beach (64.71%)	Beachcombing (7.84%)	Filming process, scene's recreation, peacock (1.96%)	One person (25.49%)
2019	St. John's Fortress (28.00%)	Sea, nature and beach (76.00%)	Festivals, spots, beachcombing (4.00%)	Scene's recreation, peacock (4.00%)	One person (16.00%)
2020	Dubrovnik Panorama (35.71%)	Sea, nature and beach (71.43%)	Tours, beachcombing (7.14%)	Scene's recreation, peacock (4.00%)	One person (28.57%)

Furthermore, hashtags indicate a more varied approach, as the three leading hashtags – #Dubrovnik, #Kingslanding, and #Gameofthrones – appear in around 60% of posts. Notably, nearly 90% of the photographs constitute UGC.

The branding strategy of the Croatian National Tourist Board (NTO), as reflected in the promotion of Dubrovnik on its official Instagram profile, places considerable emphasis on the city's natural beauty, both independently and in combination with other destination attributes (Table 1), a pattern that was particularly evident in 2019 and 2020.

Besides natural beauty, Dubrovnik's architecture was portrayed in 86.19% of the photos from 2016 to 2020. Most photos did not showcase any activities or offerings. Approximately 25% of the photos featured festivals and celebrations, such as New Year's, Christmas, Carnival, and other food or religious festivals. Even fewer photos were posted on the Croatian NTO's Instagram account with *Game of Thrones* references (filming process, scene recreation, etc.). Interestingly, most *Game of Thrones*-related images were taken in 2018 and 2019, during the airing of the final two seasons of the TV series. The majority of the posts (63.38%) did not feature people. However, when they were included in the photo, they were usually solitary individuals or small groups.

The findings indicated that the branding strategy employed by the Croatian NTO prioritised promoting Dubrovnik's natural beauty, heritage, and attractions over images featuring people, festivals, and film-related content. The study of Šegota (2018b) showed that the Croatian NTO relied heavily on *Game of Thrones*-related content; however, the author was comparing the Instagram accounts of national tourism organisations where the filming of the TV series took place. Therefore, the content of the two studies may not be comparable, as their focuses differ.

On the other hand, Battour et al.(2017) suggested that promoting external attributes, such as nature and heritage, is crucial for developing a competitive destination and for incorporating effective branding practices. Similarly, Dai et al. (2022) found that a destination's designation as a cultural heritage site and an area of natural beauty improves its reputation and strengthens its branding, encouraging more tourists to visit and return. Our findings showed that the Croatian national tourism organisation mostly portrayed

Table 2 Branding Dubrovnik by LTO on Instagram (2017–2020)

Year	Heritage and landmarks	Natural wonders	Offerings and activities	Game of Thrones influence	People
2017	Stradun Street (22.00%)	Sea, nature and beach (32.00%)	Festivals/ Celebrations (24.00%)	—	Small group (16.00%)
2018	Random street/buildings (12.69%)	Sea, nature and beach (51.15%)	Festivals/ Celebrations (6.54%)	Peacock (0.38%)	Large group (13.08%)
2019	St. John's Fortress (14.29%)	Sea, nature and beach (50.22%)	Festival/ Celebrations, Promotion (6.49%)	The Iron Throne (1.30%)	Large group (16.02%)
2020	Random street/ Buildings (16.67%)	Sea, nature and beach (60.14%)	Sports (4.35%)	Scene's recreation (0.72)	One person (7.25%)

Dubrovnik's landmarks and natural attractions, coinciding with the ceasing airing of the TV show.

Dubrovnik and Destination Branding Practices of the LTO

As Table 2 illustrates, the branding strategies implemented by the Dubrovnik LTO on Instagram highlight architectural elements, which accounted for around 78.50% of the photos from 2017 to 2020.

The posts of the local tourism organisation most frequently displayed Stradun Street, St. John's Fortress, and various other streets and buildings. The natural attractions, such as Dubrovnik's nature, sea, and beaches, were shown slightly less prominently than on the Croatian NTO's Instagram profile. Nevertheless, the Dubrovnik LTO's branding practices continued to prioritise preserving and promoting the city's natural beauty. Offerings and activities played a relatively minor role in the Dubrovnik LTO's branding practices, with only 25% of photos featuring them. Among the minority that showcased offerings and activities, festivals and celebrations emerged as the most prominent, followed by local gastronomy.

Of all the photos taken between 2017 and 2020 (see Appendix 2), very few (about 1%) include elements associated with the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*. During the *Game of Thrones* season finale in 2019, the most significant concentration of these photos was the famous peacock, the Iron Throne, and the recreations of scenes. Looking at the photos posted by the LTO of Dubrovnik, more than 50% did not feature people. If people were featured in the photos, it was larger groups that were typically depicted, followed by fewer portrayals of small groups and individuals.

The Dubrovnik LTO's Instagram account strategically used branding techniques to highlight the city's rich architectural heritage and natural beauty. It aimed to offer tourists an authentic experience of living like a local by deliberately portraying the historic streets, buildings and scenic landscapes. This branding approach helped strengthen tourists' attachment to the destination and enhanced their satisfaction and connection to it (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). The Dubrovnik LTO's Instagram promotion was therefore in line with these findings, effectively using social media to highlight the city's authentic and immersive experiences.

The Role of UGC in Co-creating Dubrovnik's Image

UGC accounted for almost 90% of the content shared on the Croatian NTO's official Instagram page between 2016 and 2020. Interestingly, the year with the highest UGC consumption was 2018, suggesting a deliberate reliance on real, organic content produced by users and fans. On the other hand, the lowest utilisation was observed in 2016, suggesting a possible improvement or modification to the content approach over time. The Croatian NTO's dedication to utilising users' genuine experiences and viewpoints to highlight Dubrovnik's varied attractions and to co-create its image for a worldwide audience is demonstrated by its consistent emphasis on UGC.

On the other hand, the Dubrovnik LTO's Instagram profile shows a notable difference in its UGC approach compared to the Croatian NTO. In particular, almost 80% of the photos posted in 2017 were not UGC. In the whole observed period, from 2017 to 2020, more than half of the shared photos were not UGC. However, in 2020, there was a noticeable change, with the distribution of user-generated and non-user-generated information almost evenly balanced. Given the growing recognition of the importance of incorporating real tourist experiences in co-creating the image of Dubrovnik, this shift points to a possible revision of the Dubrovnik LTO's content strategy.

However, UGC poses challenges for DMOs. Wipperfürth (2005) termed this brand hijacking, where consumers' brand direction is overtaken by users, i.e. visitors. Xingyang et al. (2014) note this occurs when UGC's impact exceeds that of DMOs, and when their desired destination images diverge. Additionally, the credibility of UGC can be questioned, as it is generated by strangers rather than trusted sources (Park et al., 2007). Moreover, negative portrayals may distort brand perception (Lee et al., 2008). Smith (2018) warns that incorporating UGC into a destination's marketing plan can commodify destination imagery, while Fernández-Cavia et al. (2020) stress that DMOs must choose between control and adaptation. Dubrovnik's LTO prioritised the destination's authenticity more than the NTO by limiting UGC and *Game of Thrones*-related posts, which we believe was done to remain competitive and in line with trends on social media (Egger et al., 2022).

Hashtags and Geotags in Building Destination Identity

The Croatian NTO consistently used hashtags on Instagram in 96.06% of photos posted between 2016 and 2020 (see Figure 2).

All three hashtags – #dubrovnik, #kingslanding, and #gameofthrones – were consistently employed, collectively appearing in approximately 63.38% of the photos. The analysis showed that the Croatian NTO actively promoted Dubrovnik's identity as a top desti-

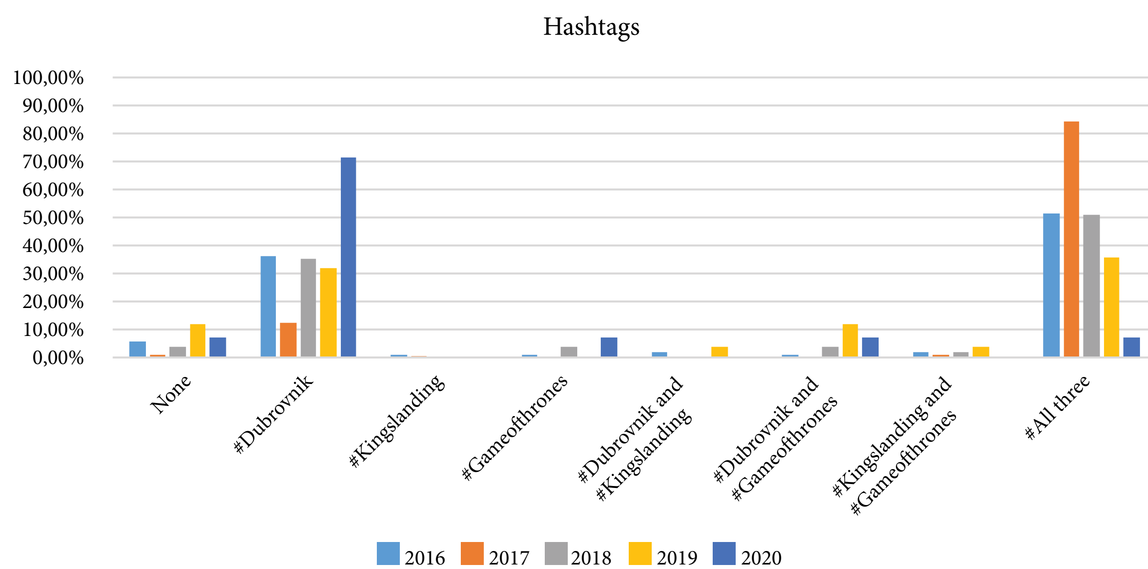

Figure 2 Hashtags Used by Croatian NTO (2016–2020)

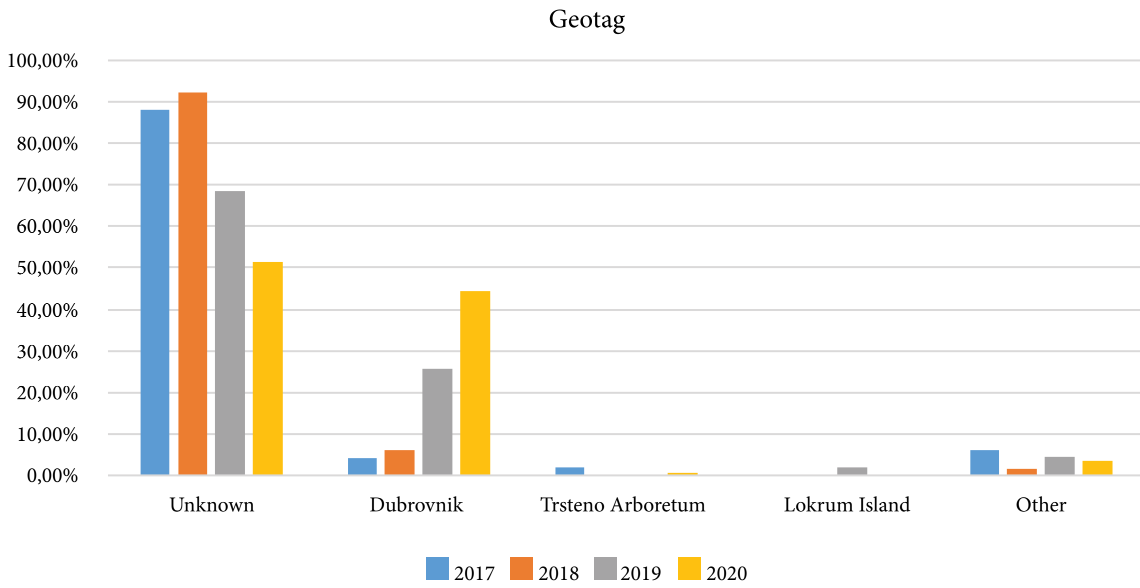

Figure 3 Geotag Sed by Dubrovnik LTO (2017–2020)

nation for film tourism from 2016 to 2019. In 2020, we noticed the dominant use of the hashtag #dubrovnik (71.43% of the photos posted that year) as opposed to the other two hashtags with apparent links to the TV series. The latter indicated an apparent shift in hashtag usage, intended to draw attention to Dubrovnik's distinctive features and attractions beyond its association with *Game of Thrones.*

Between 2016 and 2020, the Croatian NTO used the geotag 'Dubrovnik' in 90.42% of its Instagram posts. This deliberate geotagging strategy significantly shaped Dubrovnik's destination identity by ensuring its presence in location-based feeds and search results, enhancing online visibility and reinforcing its status as a major tourist location. Geotagging promoted a strong, recognisable brand that showcased the city's natural, historical, and cultural appeal globally. While other geotags, such as Trsteno Arboretum and Lokrum Island, were rarely used, limiting the portrayal of Dubrovnik's diversity, the dominant Dubrovnik tag emphasised its core attributes. In the case of the Dubrovnik LTO, a review of data from 2017 to 2020 indicated a noticeable focus on a single hashtag, #dubrovnik, which was present in 86.76% of photographs with hashtags (98.53%). On the other hand, only 4.12% of the photos used all three hashtags (#dubrovnik, #kingslanding, and #gameofthrones), with each hashtag used only occasionally. Prioritising the #dubrovnik hashtag marks a shift away from *Game of Thrones* branding, focusing instead on the city's unique attributes. This strategy strengthened Dubrovnik's identity and enhanced its appeal as an independent, attractive destination.

As presented in Figure 3, the Dubrovnik LTO did not geotag 75.55% of its Instagram photos between 2017 and 2020.

Though it was used occasionally, the geotag 'Dubrovnik' was far less common in posts by the LTO than the Croatian NTO. For this reason, it is possible that the Dubrovnik LTO missed opportunities to increase the city's visibility in location-based Instagram feeds and searches by failing to geotag its photos regularly (Salem & Twining Ward, 2018). The Dubrovnik geotag was undoubtedly used primarily to draw attention to posts featuring important landmarks or natural beauty, thereby boosting the city's online visibility. Although it did not maximise the potential benefits of geotagging as effectively as the NTO, this technique helped progressively develop Dubrovnik's identity.

Strategies for Building Destination Identity

By utilising the authenticity strategy defined by Larson et al. (2013), our findings indicated that fabricated authenticity, or authenticity created for economic gain from the film-induced tourism (Jones & Smith, 2005), became a crucial element of promoting the city and its identity on social media by the Croatian NTO. This prime example has been demonstrated through the NTO's strategic use of the TV series *Game of Thrones* to enhance Dubrovnik's appeal on Instagram, through hashtags and the effective incorporation of fabricated authenticity through film-induced posts.

In contrast, the Dubrovnik LTO adopted a strategy aimed at preserving authenticity by emphasising the city's cultural heritage, natural environment, and historical identity rather than popular cultural references (Larson et al., 2013). While DMOs seek to build a strong reputation and a favourable image (Moreno et al., 2015), social media tools such as UGC, hashtags, geotags, etc., play a key role in shaping destination branding (Huertas & Mariné-Roig, 2015). Analysis of the Croatian NTO and Dubrovnik LTO Instagram accounts reveals two distinct approaches: the Croatian NTO uses hashtags and *Game of Thrones* allusions to create a commercialised image of the city while fabricating authenticity. The Dubrovnik LTO, on the other hand, is committed to protecting tangible cultural assets and authentic local experiences. This dual strategy produces an induced image of Dubrovnik that blends fabricated and guarded authenticity. Figure 4 illustrates the framework developed from these findings, rooted in the film-induced authenticity strategies by Larson et al. (2013).

Conclusion

Destination branding is a complex yet essential process for DMOs, relying on a distinctive, consistent image and effective marketing communication strategies (Blain et al., 2005; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). This study examined the Instagram branding strategies of the Croatian national tourism organisation and the local tourism organisation of the city of Dubrovnik, focusing on how they use social media tools to promote Dubrovnik. Particular attention was given to practices linked to the destination's role as a *Game of Thrones* filming location and to the contribution of visual user-generated content to co-creating Dubrovnik's destination image.

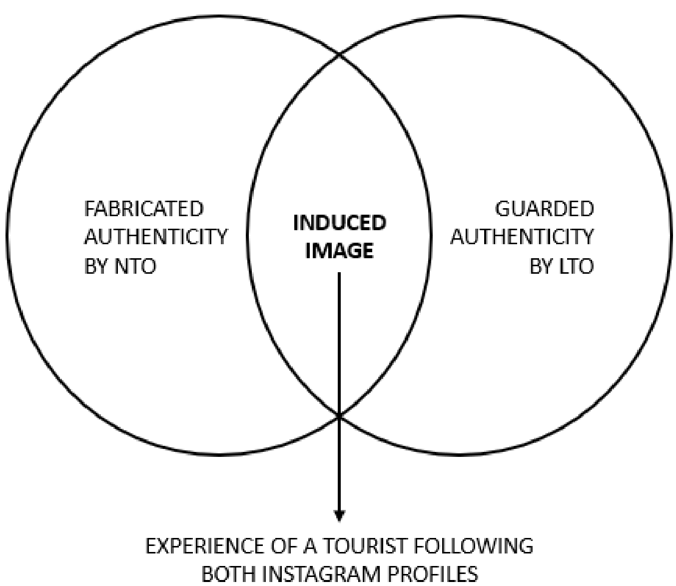

Figure 4 The Authenticity of Dubrovnik on Social Media, with Links to Game of Thrones

Our findings revealed that the NTO and LTO predominantly showcased Dubrovnik's landscapes and heritage, with limited explicit reference to *Game of Thrones*. However, the Croatian NTO strategically used *Game of Thrones*-related hashtags even in posts about nature and heritage, indicating an intent to leverage the show's global popularity to attract a wider audience. In terms of visual user-generated content in co-creating Dubrovnik's destination image, the Croatian NTO relied heavily on UGC, making it a key component in shaping the city's image. This strategy enriched Dubrovnik's portrayal by incorporating diverse tourist perspectives, enhancing its appeal and relatability. Conversely, the Dubrovnik LTO used UGC far less, favouring professionally curated content while occasionally integrating user perceptions to convey authenticity on Instagram. Lastly, regarding strategies of building destination identity and authenticity, our analysis showed that the Croatian NTO most frequently fabricated authenticity by presenting Dubrovnik as a popular destination for film tourists. The NTO consistently utilised the geotag 'Dubrovnik' and hashtags related to the TV series, strengthening the link between the city's real identity and its *Game of Thrones* depiction. In contrast, the Dubrovnik LTO primarily used the hashtag #Dubrovnik and occasionally included geotags, signalling a stronger emphasis on protecting the city's authenticity.

The above findings indicate that local and national DMOs differ in their branding approaches for Dubrovnik. The NTO is utilising the city's links with the popular TV series, while the LTO is more reserved. As other studies have shown, the city's visitations and overnight stays have increased substantially due to film-induced tourism (Tkalec et al., 2017), yet it is the local organisation that has direct insight into the impact of these increases, rather than the national organisation. Therefore, we can only speculate that the LTO decided to safeguard place authenticity amid the imbalances in the city over the past 15 years (Šegota, 2024). Additionally, differences in destination branding strategies suggest a lack of communication between the organisations. There must be a unified city image, and its communication to (potential) visitors should be unanimous.

This study is not without limitations. Since the data is derived only from Instagram posts, it may not fully capture the broader marketing strategies employed by the tourism organisations. Additionally, the findings focused exclusively on one city – Dubrovnik, challenging their application to other destinations. Furthermore, the findings were based on analysing Instagram photos posted between 2016 and 2020, thereby excluding discussion of trends and strategy changes, which would have been possible if a longer period of social media marketing communication had been observed.

Despite these limitations, this study advances understanding of destination branding and social media marketing communication by revealing how popular culture, such as film tourism, can be integrated into Instagram strategies and UGC in ways that either preserve or compromise destination authenticity. These findings offer a foundation for future research on the interplay between film tourism and destination branding.

Our research highlights the need to balance authenticity and popular culture in destination branding. While national tourist organisations often leverage film tourism to attract a broader audience, local tourist organisations tend to prioritise preserving the destination's authenticity and identity. These divergent goals can create tension in complementarity within branding strategies. Recognising and managing these differences enables DMOs to craft narratives that remain authentic, yet compelling, ensuring destinations stay competitive and resonate with diverse audiences.

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Appendix 1

Table 1 Results of the Content Analysis: Croatian NTO (@croatiafulloflife)

Category	Level	Code name	2016 (%)	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
1		Geotag					
1	0	Unknown	2.86	0.63	3.92	—	—
1	1	Dubrovnik	88.57	91.25	90.20	92.00	92.86
1	2	Trsteno Arboretum	3.81	1.25	—	4.00	7.14
1	3	Lokrum Island	0.95	3.13	3.92	4.00	—
1	4	Other	3.81	3.75	1.96	—	—
2		Hashtag					
2	0	None	5.71	1.25	3.92	12.00	7.14
2	1	#Dubrovnik	36.19	12.50	35.29	32.00	71.43
2	2	#Kingslanding	0.95	0.63	—	—	—
2	3	#Gameofthrones	0.95	—	3.92	—	7.14
2	4	#Dubrovnik and #Kingslanding	1.90	—	—	4.00	—
2	5	#Dubrovnik and #Gameofthrones	0.95	—	3.92	12.00	7.14
2	6	#Kingslanding and #Gameofthrones	1.90	1.25	1.96	4.00	—
2	7	All three	51.43	84.38	50.98	36.00	7.14
3	UGC						
3	0	No	16.19	10.00	7.84	16.00	14.29
3	1	Yes	83.81	90.00	92.16	84.00	85.71
4		Heritage and landmarks					
4	0	Not shown	15.24	14.38	11.38	8.00	14.29
4	1	St. John's Fortress	16.19	18.75	11.76	28.00	21.43
4	2	St. Lawrence Fortress	—	4.38	7.84	4.00	—
4	3	Bokar Fortress	2.86	1.88	1.96	—	—
4	4	Fortress Interior	—	0.63	—	—	—
4	5	Walls of Dubrovnik	3.81	3.75	—	4.00	—
4	6	Walls of Dubrovnik and Fortresses	10.48	6.88	5.88	4.00	—
4	7	Rector's Palace	—	—	—	—	—
4	8	Stradun Street	14.29	3.75	3.92	8.00	—
4	9	Pile Gate	—	4.38	7.84	8.00	7.14
4	10	Porporela	—	1.25	1.96	4.00	—
4	11	Churches/Monasteries	9.52	8.75	—	—	—
4	12	Museums	—	—	—	4.00	—
4	13	Random street/buildings	7.62	5.63	3.92	4.00	14.29
4	14	Dubrovnik Panorama	9.52	20.00	29.41	20.00	35.71

Category	Level	Code name	2016 (%)	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
4	15	Red Rooftops	7.62	4.38	5.88	—	7.14
4	16	Other	2.86	1.28	7.84	4.00	—
5		Natural wonders					
5	0	Not shown	26.67	10.63	13.73	16.00	7.14
5	1	Nature	5.71	6.25	3.92	—	7.14
5	2	Sea	29.52	23.75	15.69	8.00	14.29
5	3	Beach	0.95	—	1.96	—	—
5	4	All three	37.14	59.38	64.71	76.00	71.43
6		Offerings and activities					
6	0	Not shown	64.76	77.50	75.43	88.00	85.71
6	1	Festivals/ Celebrations	16.19	4.38	5.88	4.00	—
6	2	Cuisine	2.86	1.25	—	—	—
6	3	Proposals/ Weddings	—	—	—	—	—
6	4	Promotion	1.90	1.25	—	—	—
6	5	Sports	9.52	6.25	3.92	4.00	—
6	6	Tours	—	0.63	3.92	—	7.14
6	7	Beachcombing	4.76	8.75	7.84	4.00	7.14
7		Game of Thrones Influence					
7	1	Not shown	100	100	94.12	92.00	92.86
7	2	Filming process	—	—	1.96	—	—
7	3	Scene's recreation	—	—	1.96	4.00	—
7	4	The Iron Throne	—	—	—	4.00	—
7	5	Peacock	—	—	1.96	—	7.14
8		People					
8	1	Not shown	63.81	66.25	56.86	64.00	50.00
8	2	One person	8.57	14.38	25.49	16.00	28.57
8	3	Couple	3.81	2.50	1.96	4.00	—
8	4	Small group	13.33	10.00	5.88	4.00	14.29
8	4	Large group	10.48	6.25	9.80	8.00	7.14
8	5	Celebrities	—	0.63	—	4.00	—

Appendix 2

Table 2 The results of Content Analysis: LTO of Dubrovnik (@experiencedubrovnik)

Category	Level	Code name	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
1		Geotag				
1	0	Unknown	88.00	92.31	68.40	51.45
1	1	Dubrovnik	4.00	6.15	25.54	44.20
1	2	Trsteno Arboretum	2.00	—	—	0.72
1	3	Lokrum Island	—	—	1.73	—
1	4	Other	6.00	1.54	4.33	3.62
2		Hashtag				
2	0	None	4.00	0.38	1.30	2.90
2	1	#Dubrovnik	96.00	92.31	79.65	84.78
2	2	#Kingslanding	—	0.38	—	—
2	3	#Gameofthrones	—	—	—	—
2	4	#Dubrovnik and #Kingslanding	—	1.54	4.33	3.62
2	5	#Dubrovnik and #Gameofthrones	—	2.69	6.93	1.45
2	6	#Kingslanding and #Gameofthrones	—	—	1.30	2.90
2	7	All three	—	2.69	6.49	4.35
3	UGC					
3	0	No	80	57.69	68.83	51.45
3	1	Yes	20	42.31	31.17	48.55
	4					Heritage and landmarks
4	0	Not shown	14	20.38	26.41	18.12
4	1	St. John's Fortress	14	12.31	14.29	11.59
4	2	St. Lawrence Fortress	4	4.23	4.76	3.62
4	3	Bokar Fortress	2	1.54	—	0.72
4	4	Fortress Interior	2	0.77	—	0.72
4	5	Walls of Dubrovnik	—	2.69	1.30	0.72
4	6	Walls of Dubrovnik and Fortresses	6	5	3.46	9.42
4	7	Rector's Palace	6	1.15	2.16	—
4	8	Stradun Street	22	12.31	13.85	9.42
4	9	Pile Gate	4	2.69	1.73	1.45
4	10	Porporela	2	1.54	1.30	1.45
4	11	Churches/Monasteries	8	3.46	2.60	6.52
4	12	Museums	—	—	1.30	—
4	13	Random street/buildings	10	12.69	10.82	16.67
4	14	Dubrovnik Panorama	2	11.54	8.66	15.94

Category	Level	Code name	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
4	15	Red Rooftops	2	5	4.76	3.62
4	16	Other	2	2.69	2.60	0.72
5		Natural wonders				
5	0	Not shown	44	34.62	35.50	25.36
5	1	Nature	24	8.46	8.23	6.52
5	2	Sea	—	5	5.63	7.97
5	3	Beach	—	0.77	0.43	—
5	4	All three	32	51.15	50.22	60.14
6		Offerings and activities				
6	0	Not shown	60	75	71.86	84.06
6	1	Festivals/ Celebrations	24	6.54	6.49	2.17
6	2	Cuisine	6	6.15	6.06	2.90
6	3	Proposals/ Weddings	—	0.38	0.87	—
6	4	Promotion	6	5.38	6.49	2.17
6	5	Sports	—	3.08	2.60	4.35
6	6	Tours	4	0.38	0.87	0.72
6	7	Beachcombing	—	3.08	4.76	3.62
7						Game of Thrones Influence
7	1	Not shown	100	99.62	97.40	99.28
7	2	Filming process	—	—	—	—
7	3	Scene's recreation	—	—	0.87	0.72
7	4	The Iron Throne	—	—	1.30	—
7	5	Peacock	—	0.38	0.43	—
8		People				
8	1	Not shown	68	66.15	59.74	76.81
8	2	One person	4	8.08	8.23	9.42
8	3	Couple	—	1.92	5.19	1.45
8	4	Small group	16	8.85	8.66	5.07
8	4	Large group	12	13.08	16.02	7.25
8	5	Celebrities	—	1.92	2.16	—

Raziskovanje tekočih razprav o ekoturistih: dvostopenjski zaporedni pregled

Khusnul Bayu Aji, Catur Sugiyanto, Wiwik Sushartami, Khusnul Bayu Aji in Catur Sugiyanto

Ob nenehnih razpravah in raznolikih interpretacijah pojma ekoturist je strukturirana analiza obstoječe literature nujna. Naša raziskava uporablja dvostopenjski zaporedni pregled literature, ki združuje bibliometrično analizo in sistematični pregled literature s kvalitativno vsebinsko analizo. Podatki so bili pridobljeni iz podatkovnih baz Scopus in Web of Science (WoS), kvantitativno analizirani z uporabo paketa bibliometrix v okolju RStudio ter nadalje kvalitativno pregledani z uporabo okvira teorija – kontekst – metodologija (Theory, Context, and Methodology – TCM). Ugotovitve kažejo, da je izraz »ekoturist« pridobil večjo prepoznavnost v akademskem diskurzu v začetku 90. let prejšnjega stoletja, kar razkriva konceptualno vrzel v zgodnji literaturi o ekoturizmu, ki se je osredotočala predvsem na načela, učinke in izvajanje ekoturizma, manj pa na same turiste. Sčasoma so se raziskave ekoturistov razvile od osnovnega demografskega profiliranja k poglobljenim preučevanjem psihografskih in vedenjskih značilnosti. Teorija načrtovanega vedenja (Theory of Planned Behaviour – TPB) se je izkazala kot prevladujoči teoretični okvir v najvplivnejših publikacijah, pri čemer so v najbolj citiranih delih prevladovale štiri glavne tematske usmeritve: (1) narava ekoturistov in njihov obstoj v kontekstu ekoturizma, (2) vplivi dejavnosti ekoturistov, (3) segmentacija ekoturistov in (4) kognitivno-normativni profili ekoturistov. Raziskava prispeva k obstoječi literaturi z analizo razvoja raziskav o ekoturistih, identifikacijo ključnih konceptualnih okvirov ter s sintezo osrednjih tem. Poleg tega raziskovalcem in praktikom ponuja strukturiran pregled literature o ekoturistih ter usmeritve za prihodnje raziskovalne smeri in praktične vpoglede za trženje, oblikovanje politik ter upravljavske strategije v ekoturizmu.

Ključne besede: ekoturisti, ekoturizem, bibliometrija, sistematični pregled literature
Academica Turistica, 19(1), 3–21

Vpliv podobe destinacije na nepozabno turistično izkušnjo in namen ponovnega obiska v Sarawaku v Maleziji

Kathy Kueh Yung Sing in Abang Azlan Mohamad

Turistični sektor je v številnih državah po svetu pomemben dejavnik, zlasti z gospodarskega vidika. Sarawak je zaostajal v razvoju ter se soočal s politično nestabilnostjo. Namen te raziskave je ugotoviti, kako podoba destinacije vpliva na nepozabno turistično izkušnjo in namero ponovnega obiska na podlagi mnenj ter zaznav turistov. Podatki so bili zbrani z anketiranjem 200 turistov, ki so obiskali pet najpomembnejših turističnih znamenitosti v Sarawaku. Za analizo predlaganih odnosov med preučevanimi spremenljivkami je bil uporabljen program WarpPLS 8.0. Rezultati so pokazali, da so kultura, zgodovina in umetnost ter politični in gospodarski dejavniki podobe destinacije pozitivno povezani z nepozabno turistično izkušnjo. Poleg tega je bila ugotovljena tudi pozitivna povezava med nepozabno turistično izkušnjo in namero ponovnega obiska. Ugotovitve kažejo, da lahko izboljšanje podobe destinacije Sarawak prispeva k nepozabnejši turistični izkušnji domačih in tujih turistov ter vpliva na njihovo namero ponovnega obiska. Rezultati raziskave ponujajo priložnost pristojnim organom in ponudnikom turizma, da se osredotočijo na ohranjanje kulture in pomen politične stabilnosti v Sarawaku.

Ključne besede: podoba destinacije, nepozabna turistična izkušnja, namera ponovnega obiska, turisti, Sarawak
Academica Turistica, 19(1), 23–37

Velike *športne* prireditve se vračajo v države *športnega* turizma v vzponu: pripravljenost plačati za Evropsko prvenstvo v košarki v Sloveniji

Simon Ličen in Renata Slabe-Erker

Slovenija bo leta 2029 gostila eno od predtekmovalnih skupin Evropskega prvenstva v košarki za moške oz. EuroBasketa, zato članek ugotavlja dejavnike, ki so vplivali na podporo davkoplačevalcev javnemu sofinanciranju prejšnje izvedbe tega tekmovanja. Med 374 slovenskimi davkoplačevalci je bila opravljena anketa o pogojnem vrednotenju in izraženi pripravljenosti plačati (angl. *stated willingness to pay* – SWTP) za podporo prvenstvu leta 2013. Ugotovili smo, da so bili sodelujoči v povprečju pripravljeni plačati 18,7 € po osebi. Model Tobit je pokazal, da sta vera v družbeni vpliv tekmovanja in prepričanje v državotvorni potencial EuroBasketa SWTP povečala za 5,1 €. Premožnejši anketiranci so bili pripravljeni plačati manj, zato se bodo morale prihodnje promocijske akcije posebej osredotočiti na večje zaslužkarje. Drugi dejavniki, ki vplivajo na pripravljenost podpreti javnofinančni izdatek, so nematerialne koristi, kot so nacionalni ponos, mednarodna prepoznavnost ter organizacijske in marketinške izkušnje, pridobljene z izvedbo prireditve. Ko bo Slovenija vnovič gostila tekmovanje leta 2029, bo organizacijski odbor moral poudariti materialne in nematerialne koristi, javne dobrine, koristi za lokalne skupnosti ter pripraviti oglaševalske kampanje, ki nagovarjajo širok krog deležnikov in podpornikov prireditve.

Ključne besede: metoda pogojnega vrednotenja, pripravljenost plačati, Evropsko prvenstvo v košarki, javne dobrine, nematerialni učinki, *športni* turizem, *športni* management
Academica Turistica, 19(1), 39–56

Od gledalca do deležnika: kako turisti dojemajo svojo vlogo pri trajnostnem razvoju turizma na otoški destinaciji

Kevin Fuchs

Ob vse večjem zavedanju okoljske in družbene odgovornosti številni turisti iščejo potovalne izkušnje, ki odražajo njihove vrednote. Trajnostni turizem spodbuja ravnovesje med razvojem ter potrebo po soočanju z vse bolj spreminjajočimi se okoljskimi in družbenimi izzivi. Na podlagi teorije deležnikov pričujoča raziskava ugotavlja, kako turisti dojemajo trajnostni turizem in svojo vlogo pri njegovi podpori. Z uporabo tematske analize je bilo analiziranih 47 polstrukturiranih intervju-

jev in opazovanj turistov na Phuketu. Izoblikovalo se je pet medsebojno povezanih tem: zaznane omejitve individualnega vpliva, trajnost kot trend, zeleno blagovno znamčenje destinacij in avtentičnost, situacijska etika v turističnem vedenju ter kulturna raznolikost pogledov na trajnost. Čeprav je večina udeležencev načeloma podpirala trajnostni turizem, je njihovo vključevanje ostajalo pretežno simbolno, zaznamovano z negotovostjo in etiko, odvisno od konteksta. Ugotovitve razkrivajo razkorak med stališči in smiselno prakso ter poudarjajo potrebo po jasnejši infrastrukturi, verodostojni komunikaciji in kulturno občutljivih strategijah vključevanja. Raziskava prispeva k razumevanju turistov kot deležnikov ter ponuja izhodišča za krepitev trajnostnosti na ravni destinacij.

Ključne besede: okoljska ozaveščenost, turizem v naravi, zaznave obiskovalcev, trajnost, trajnostni razvoj turizma, okolju prijazno vedenje
Academica Turistica, 19(1), 57–70

Fintech in metode e-plačevanja v turizmu in gostinstvu: preučevanje e-zadovoljstva, e-zvestobe in e-zaupanja med potovalno izkušnjo

Noha Ahmed Kamel and Marwa Youssi

Pričujoča preiskava preučuje vpliv uporabe elektronskih plačilnih metod (EPM) na e-zadovoljstvo strank ter kako e-zadovoljstvo vpliva na njihovo e-zvestobo. Poleg tega raziskuje moderacijsko vlogo e-zaupanja strank v odnosu med uporabo EPM in e-zadovoljstvom strank. Preučevana populacija so popotniki, ki imajo predhodne izkušnje z uporabo elektronskih plačilnih metod pri transakcijah v turizmu in gostinstvu v regiji MENA (iz angl. Middle East and North Africa; Bližnji vzhod in Severna Afrika). Podatki so bili zbrani preko spleta od 211 uporabnikov e-plačil z uporabo namensko izbranega priložnostnega vzorčenja. Rezultati kažejo, da ima uporaba EPM pozitiven in statistično značilen vpliv na e-zadovoljstvo strank. Poleg tega e-zadovoljstvo strank z EPM pozitivno vpliva na njihovo e-zvestobo. Nadalje je ugotovljeno, da je moderacijska vloga e-zaupanja statistično značilna, vendar šibka glede na smer odnosa med uporabo EPM in e-zadovoljstvom strank. Raziskava ponuja dragocene vpoglede za dopolnitev obstoječe literature o storitvah fintech in elektronskih plačilnih metodah, zlasti v turistični in gostinski industriji. Prav tako podaja priporočila, kako lahko podjetja s področij financ, turizma in gostinstva izboljšajo izkušnje strank z EPM, da bi povečala e-zadovoljstvo, e-zvestobo in e-zaupanje.

Ključne besede: fintech, elektronske plačilne metode (EPM), e-zadovoljstvo, e-zvestoba, e-zaupanje
Academica Turistica, 19(1), 71–89

***Igra prestolov* in avtentičnost destinacije: primerjalna analiza praks družbenih medijev DMO**

Hava Hodžić, Marjetka Rangus in Tina Šegota

Instagram je ključna vizualna družbena medijska platforma, ki turističnim organizacijam omogoča predstavljanje turističnih destinacij. Razumevanje, kako se na družbenih omrežjih oblikuje podoba destinacije ter kako se promovirata identiteta in avtentičnost destinacije, je ključno za učinkovite strategije destinacijskega marketinga. Promocijske prakse se lahko razlikujejo med turističnimi organizacijami na lokalni, regionalni in nacionalni ravni, kar lahko vodi v oblikovanje različnih identitet in zaznav avtentičnosti. Ker je Dubrovnik pridobil svetovno prepoznavnost zaradi priljubljene televizijske serije *Igra prestolov,* raziskava preučuje strategije, ki jih v promociji mesta na družbenih omrežjih uporabljajo nacionalne in lokalne turistične organizacije. Z uporabo sumativnega pristopa smo izvedli analizo vsebine 1.034 fotografij, objavljenih med letoma 2016 in 2020 na uradnih Instagramovih profilih nacionalnih ter lokalnih turističnih organizacij. Ugotovitve razkrivajo, da se na nacionalni ravni močno izkorišča povezava Dubrovnika s serijo *Igra prestolov,* s čimer se gradi konstruiran občutek avtentičnosti. Nasprotno pa komunikacija lokalne turistične organizacije na družbenih omrežjih poudarja kulturno dediščino in naravo ter s tem ohranja avtentičnost destinacije. Ta razlika izpostavlja različne komunikacijske strategije ter poudarja pomen razumevanja teh razlik za učinkovito destinacijsko trženje.

Ključne besede: filmski turizem, družbeni mediji, podoba turistične destinacije, avtentičnost, Dubrovnik, *Igra prestolov*
Academica Turistica, 19(1), 91–111

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