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Tourism for a Better World

BOOK OF FULL PAPERS

The 7th Conference on Managing Tourism Across Continents

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Foreword from the Conference Chairs

MTCON has grown into one of the leading international platforms for scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and industry leaders to share research, exchange ideas, and foster collaborations that shape the future of tourism, hospitality, and events. the conference brought together over 600 participants from 50 countries.

The Book of Full Papers you hold reflects the diversity, interdisciplinarity, and contemporary relevance of the research presented at MTCON 2026. The contributions address a broad spectrum of topics, with particular emphasis on artificial intelligence and digital transformation, sustainability and green tourism practices, destination management and marketing, cultural heritage and gastronomy, community-based and rural tourism, tourist behaviour, hospitality and workforce issues, tourism policy and governance, as well as emerging areas such as wellness, sports, and technology- enabled tourism experiences. Collectively, these studies illustrate how tourism research is responding to rapid technological, environmental, social, and economic change while continuing to explore more sustainable, inclusive, innovative, and resilient pathways for destinations, organisations, communities, and travellers across continents.

We would like to thank all contributors, reviewers, and members of the scientific and organising committees for their dedication and support. A special note of appreciation goes to our partners, sponsors, Doğuş University, and İzmir Konak Vocational School, whose collaboration has made this event possible.

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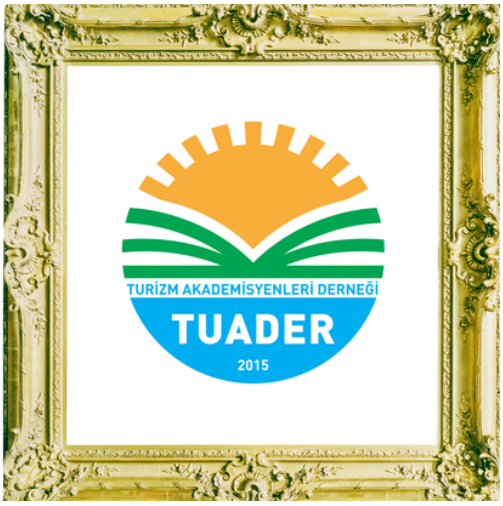
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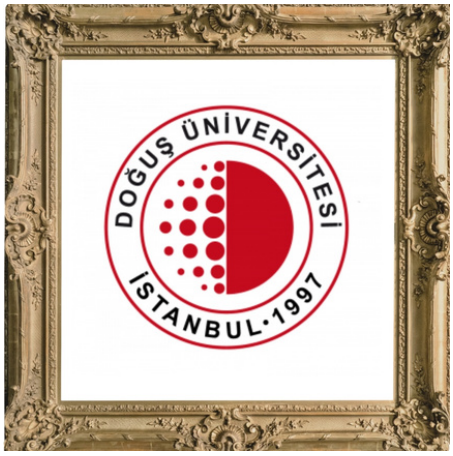
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Linking Tourist Lifetime Value to Destination Strategy: An Integration of Customer Lifetime Value in Bena Traditional Village, Ngada Regency, East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to identify tourists who provide the highest economic value and deserve additional marketing investment from attractions. In addition, this study aims to examine the attributes that influence the increase in the long-term value of tourist relationships, thereby providing a basis for formulating a more focused, value-based tourism development strategy.

Study design/methodology/approach: This study uses a descriptive, quantitative approach by combining Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) and Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) using tourist survey data and in-depth interviews with attraction managers and business actors.

Results: The analysis shows that tourists with a CLV of ≥ 3.1 million can be considered priority visitors to attractions, and retention is the main driver of CLV growth. The analysis continued with an IPA, which showed that attributes in quadrants A and B are most likely to increase CLV by boosting retention, tourist satisfaction, and loyalty when properly managed and maintained.

Originality/Value: The novelty of this research lies in integrating Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) and Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) simultaneously in the context of traditional villages, thereby connecting the long-term economic value of tourists with destination development priorities grounded in tourist perceptions.

Key Words: Customer Lifetime Value, Importance Performance Analysis, Retention Rate

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive modern tourism landscape, tourist attractions face fundamental challenges in optimizing profitability and long-term growth. The shift from transaction-based to relationship-based tourism marketing has changed how attractions view and manage their visitors (Hoekstra & Huizingh, 1999). Tourists are no longer just one-time buyers but strategic assets valuable to attractions over the long term (Furrer, 2002). This recognition has driven a fundamental transformation in tourism business decision-making methodologies, particularly in marketing resource allocation and retention programs (Kumar, 2007a).

With the growth of the digital era and the abundance of tourist data, attractions now have an unprecedented opportunity to understand tourist behavior and predict their long-term value in depth. Organizations across industries, such as banking, retail, telecommunications, and hospitality, have recognized that traditional metrics, such as Recency, Frequency, and Monetary (RFM) or *Customer Acquisition Cost* (CAC), are no longer sufficient to provide a holistic picture of customer value (Wong et al., 2025). This development has created an urgent need for a more sophisticated and integrated framework to measure and maximize the long-term value of customers or tourists. Against the backdrop of the need for a more comprehensive, long-

term, relationship-based marketing framework, this study focuses on the Traditional Bena Village in Ngada Regency as an example of a destination with significant tourism market potential that has not been fully utilized.

The Traditional Customary Village of Bena, located in Tiworiwu Village, Jerebuu Subdistrict, Ngada Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, is one of the most authentic megalithic cultural destinations with significant cultural value and tourism market potential (M. E. Jamu & Laga, 2021). The Bena Traditional Village is included in the Regional Strategic Tourism Area (KSPD) under the cultural tourism attraction category of the Jerebuu KSPD (Ngada's Government, 2024). This year's total visits were recorded at 17,702, comprising 8,664 foreign tourists (49%) and 9,038 domestic tourists (51%), according to information from the Bena Megalith Tourism Management Agency. The visit pattern shows strong quarterly fluctuations:

- The peak of visits occurred in the third quarter (July–September) with 6,766 tourists (38% of the total).
- The second quarter was also high (28%), while the first and fourth quarters tended to be low (around 17–18%).
- International tourists dominate in the third quarter (summer vacation), but their numbers are volatile throughout the year, while domestic tourists are more stable.

Therefore, domestic tourists still account for the majority of tourist visits to Bena Traditional Village. This pattern shows that tourism activities are seasonal (semi-annual).

In addition to the uniqueness of traditional architecture, traditional houses, and preserved religious rituals, Bena Traditional Village offers cultural experiences that can be positioned as "high-value" tourism products in the digital era, especially through social media platforms and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), which have been proven to increase tourist visitation decisions. However, despite the positive trend in visitor numbers, the village does not yet have a segmented and integrated marketing strategy. Many stakeholders still rely on conventional promotion and do not fully utilize tourist data or digital marketing tools (M. Jamu & Sari, 2020). As a result, Bena is not widely known in the domestic or international tourism market and is only used as a stopover for tourists who want to go to Labuan Bajo or Ende (Ngada's Government, 2024) so that the income opportunities that can be generated from the tourism sector, such as ticket sales, woven crafts, and guide services, are not yet optimal. By combining its strong cultural potential with a more sophisticated relationship-based marketing approach, Bena can transition from being merely a "limitedly famous" destination to a sustainable tourist attraction that generates long-term value for the local community.

The Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) in Berger & Nasr (1998) allows for measuring the total value of tourists throughout their relationship with the attraction. Customer Lifetime Value is defined as the present value of all future cash flows expected from a customer over the duration of their relationship (Čermák, 2015). In a strategic context, CLV serves as a compass guiding decisions on marketing investments, customer segmentation, and budget allocation between acquisition and retention (Firmansyah et al., 2024). In tourism, CLV can be used to estimate the profit from relationships with tourists and to map tourists' priority levels relative to attractions, especially at the Bena Traditional Village. By accurately understanding CLV, attractions can make more strategic, data-driven decisions, thereby increasing overall profitability.

Methodology

This study uses a descriptive, quantitative approach to objectively describe tourist behavior using expenditure data, promotion costs, and loyalty, thereby providing an overview of the lifetime value of tourists. This study uses the Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) analysis method to predict the profits from tourists during their relationship with the attraction and to identify the value of priority tourists that managers should consider. The importance of this analysis lies in its ability to identify which customers are the most profitable and deserve additional marketing investment, as well as which customers are less profitable in the long term (Kumar, 2007). The analysis will be conducted using the model proposed by Paul D. Berger and Nada I. Nasr (1998), assuming that purchases are made repeatedly (i.e., more than once a year). This model accounts for the annual transaction frequency (p) and the retention rate per transaction (r′), and discounts cash flows with intervals shorter than 1 year. In summary, the model to be used has two formulae: one for the expected gross contribution margin per customer per sales cycle and another for the promotional costs per tourist.

$$CLV = \{\mathrm{CG}' * \sum_{i=0}^{pn} \left(\frac{(r')^i}{(1+d)^{i/p}}\right) - \{M' * \sum_{i=1}^{pn} \left(\frac{(r')^i}{(1+d)^{i-0.5/p}}\right)$$

Figure 1. CLV Formula Assumption 2a (Berger & Nasr, 1998)

Explanation:

CG' = expected gross contribution margin per customer per sales cycle

M' = promotional costs for each tourist.

r' = retention rate per sales cycle

n = number of prediction years

d = annual interest rate

p = transaction cycle

After determining the CLV value, an Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) will be conducted to focus development on the right attributes to increase the CLV. The IPA will analyze tourists' experiences and perceptions of the destination's attractiveness. The IPA is carried out by collecting information through questionnaires. The distribution is carried out using a structured questionnaire consisting of three parts. The first part covers the demographics and psychographics of tourists, such as name, origin, age, frequency of visits, length of visit, and motivation for visiting; the second part contains 19 attribute statements (Table 1) designed to determine the level of importance or expectations of tourists regarding tourist attractions; and the third part contains 19 statements (Table 1) that will measure the management performance of Kampung Adat Bena according to the views of tourists. The questionnaire in this study uses a 5-point Likert scale (1–5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). The questionnaire was distributed to 84 respondents who had traveled to or visited Kampung Adat Bena. Respondents were focused on domestic and local tourists due to the number of visitors.

Table 1. List of Important Performance Analysis Attributes

No. Indicator	**Question Item**

		Importance	Performance
1	Functional Value	Good product quality is important to me when deciding to buy local products.	Product quality such as woven fabrics, woven bracelets, powdered ginger, earrings, and traditional bags is good.
		The ease of finding and purchasing local products is important to my travel experience.	The local products sold have a high level of uniqueness.
		Authenticity and designs that represent local culture are important to me.	Local products are easy to find and available in the Kampung Bena tourist area.
		The uniqueness of products found only in Bena is very important to me.	The design and colors of local products reflect the authenticity of Kampung Bena's culture.
		The durability and functionality of products are important to me in assessing their value.	Local products can be used and have durability and functionality that are appropriate for their intended use.
2.	Emotional Value	Emotional satisfaction (feeling happy/fulfilled) after purchasing local products is important to me.	I feel happy and satisfied after purchasing or seeing local products from Kampung Bena.
		Feeling proud to own local cultural products is important to me.	Local products give me a memorable emotional experience.
		A pleasant shopping experience is important to me.	I feel proud to own authentic products from Kampung Bena.
3.	Social Value	Supporting the local community through purchasing products is important to me.	Purchasing local products demonstrates my concern for the preservation of local culture.
		Being welcomed and served with kindness when purchasing products is important to me.	Local products from Kampung Bena give me a positive image in the eyes of my friends or family.
		Being able to share or tell others about my experience	I enjoy sharing stories or posting about my

		purchasing important cultural products is meaningful to me.	experiences purchasing local products on social media.
4.	Epistemic Value (Knowledge/Educational Value)	Knowing how local products are made is important to me.	I gain new knowledge about the meaning and production process of local products (such as woven fabrics or powdered ginger).
		Products that provide insight into culture are important to me.	Sellers or artisans explain well about the origin of the products they sell.
		Storytelling about the products being sold is important to me.	Local products from Kampung Bena enrich my knowledge about culture and local wisdom.
5.	Conditional Value (Situational/Contextual Value)	The opportunity to buy local products during my visit is important to me.	I buy local products because the opportunity to visit Kampung Bena is a special moment.
		The presence of cultural events when purchasing products is important to me.	I am interested in buying local products when there are cultural events such as Reba or traditional festivals.
6.	Monetary Value (Economic Value)	A price that matches the quality of the product is important to me.	The price of local products is commensurate with the quality and uniqueness they offer.
		Affordable products are important to me.	I feel that the prices of local products in Kampung Bena are still affordable.
		Authenticity is important even if the price is higher.	I am willing to pay more for products that are truly authentic and made by the people of Bena.

Source: Author's Analysis, 2025

With IPA, we can identify the level of performance and importance that may explain the low CLV. Where performance represents users' perceptions of the quality of services provided, attractiveness refers to users' assessment of the importance of these services. This can enable organizations to allocate resources efficiently and improve overall customer satisfaction. Of the 19 attributes provided to respondents, 6 main indicator dimensions are: functional value, emotional value, social value, epistemic value, conditional value, and monetary value. The data from the questionnaire will be mapped into 4 quadrants on the IPA diagram (Figure 1), which

illustrates the level of importance and performance of the attraction as perceived by tourists. The results of this visualization, presented as quadrants, can be used by attraction managers to identify attributes that are priorities for improvement and for enhancing service quality.

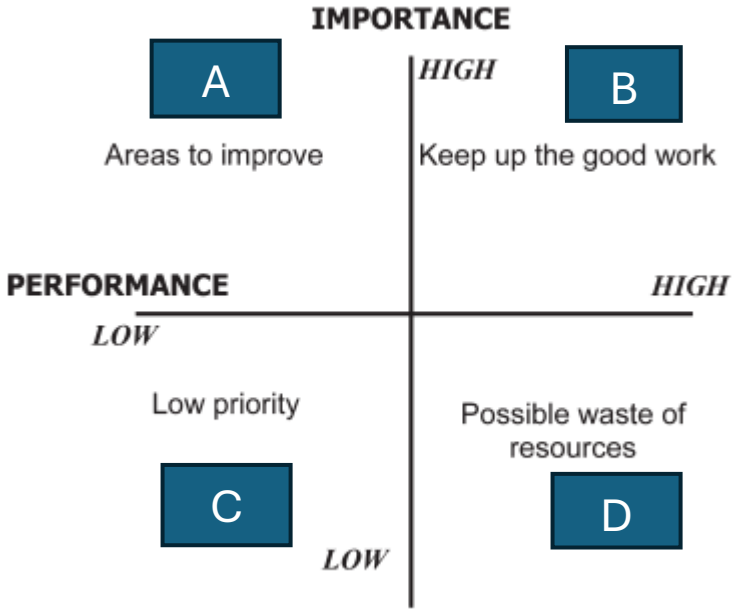


Figure 2. Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) Matrix (Wade Health Canada et al., 2003)

Martilla and James (1977) state that IPA is an effective technique for formulating management strategies and allocating resources by visualizing data on a two-dimensional chart. The IPA matrix divides product or service attributes into four quadrants, each providing distinct strategic insights (Kim et al., 2025). The standard IPA matrix is a two-dimensional plot with the X-axis representing Performance and the Y-axis representing Importance (Pramanick & Roy, 2025). The division of quadrants is generally based on the mean or median of the importance and performance scores, measured independently (from questionnaire results). The four quadrants in the traditional IPA matrix, along with their strategic interpretations, are as follows: Quadrant A is characterized by attributes that are considered important to tourists but whose performance or attention from attraction managers remains very low. This indicates that managers need to reevaluate the aspects that support tourist activities and prioritize the development of the attributes that appear in quadrant A. Quadrant B consists of attributes that show good results in line with visitor or tourist expectations, and the attributes that appear in this quadrant must continue to be maintained so that their performance quality is sustained. Furthermore, Quadrant C has attributes considered less important by tourists and low performance levels, so they are not a priority for attraction managers. This shows that the attributes in this quadrant receive little attention from either party, so attraction managers need to improve or reevaluate them to allocate resources. Finally, Quadrant D has low importance but high performance. In this quadrant, the attributes that appear have high performance but are not considered important by tourists, so continuing to focus on them would be a waste of resources. Attraction managers can therefore reconsider shifting resources to other attributes that are higher priorities.

The integration of these two analyses enables the formulation of efficient and value-based development strategies by mapping tourist needs in achieving satisfaction during their tourist activities, thereby increasing satisfaction, which results in increased tourist loyalty to attractions and ensures that resources are optimally allocated to improve attributes that have a high priority for the satisfaction of tourists with high *customer lifetime* value.

Results

Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)

Data analysis began by calculating customer lifetime value. Testing was performed by calculating the gross contribution margin or expected gross revenue per tourist per sales cycle and subtracting the promotional costs per tourist.

$$CLV = \{\mathrm{CG}' * \sum_{i=0}^{pn} \left(\frac{(r')^i}{(1+d)^{i/p}}\right) - \{M' * \sum_{i=1}^{pn} \left(\frac{(r')^i}{(1+d)^{i-0.5/p}}\right)$$

Source:(Berger & Nasr, 1998)

With:

GC’	**: Total revenue per customer** Rp 900,000 (assumed according to M. Jamu & Sari, (2020) and interviews with the manager of Kampung Adat Bena)
M’	**Promotional costs per tourist** Rp 25.643.288 (Ngada’s Government, 2024) / 17,702 (number of visits in 2024) = Rp 1.448/tourist
r’	**: Retention Rate** Since the retention data from the attraction is insufficient, three calculation scenarios were created using the values (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1991): • Low Retention (√0.30), • Base Retention (√0.55), and • High Retention (√0.80) *r' (per cycle) = √30(0.5477), √55(0.7416), √80(0.8944)*
n	**: Number of Prediction Years** 5 years (is the most common planning horizon when long-term historical data is not available. (Gupta & Lehmann, 2003))
d	**: Annual Interest Rate** 4.75% (Indonesian Bank Interest Rate)
p	**: Transaction Cycle** p=2 (half-yearly) commonly used to represent the two main tourist seasons (peak and off-peak season)
I(n*p)	**: Number of Transactions during the relationship period** n=5, p = 2 (i = 5*2=10) There are 10 total transactions

1. **Low Retention Results**

r' 30%= 0.5477

$$= 900 * \sum_{i=0}^{10} \left(\frac{(0{,}5477)^{10}}{(1 + 4{,}75\%)^{10/2}} \right) = 2.1489585018$$

$$= 1.448 * \sum_{i=1}^{10} \left(\frac{(0{,}5477)^{10}}{(1 + 4{,}75\%)^{(10-0{,}5)/2}} \right) = 2.12226744348$$

=2.12226744348

CLV = 900,000 × 2.1489585018 – 1.448 × 2.12226744348

CLV = Rp **1.930.989,61**

In a low-retention scenario (only **30%**), each tourist **will contribute around Rp 1.93 million** to Kampung Bena's local economy **over** the next **5 years** (present value). This indicates a low long-term value per visitor.

2. **Moderate Retention Results**

r' 55% = 0.7416

$$= 900 * \sum_{i=0}^{10} \left(\frac{(0{,}7416)^{10}}{(1 + 4{,}75\%)^{10/2}} \right) = 3.5259941839$$

$$= 1.448 * \sum_{i=1}^{10} \left(\frac{(0{,}7416)^{10}}{(1 + 4{,}75\%)^{(10-0{,}5)/2}} \right) = 3.4458878044$$

3.4458878044

CLV = 900.000 × 3.5259941839 –1.448 × 3.4458878044

CLV = Rp 3.168.405,12

With moderate retention, the lifetime value per tourist increases by nearly 64% compared to the Low scenario. This illustrates that the increase in retention from 30% → 55% (annual) has a significant impact on the total contribution.

3. **High Retention Results**

r' 80% = 0.8944

$$= 900 * \sum_{i=0}^{10} \left(\frac{(0.8944)^{10}}{(1 + 4{,}75\%)^{\frac{10}{2}}} \right) = 6.1294710262$$

$$= 1.448 * \sum_{i=1}^{10} \left(\frac{(0.8944)^{10}}{(1 + 4{,}75\%)^{(10-0{,}5)/2}} \right) = 5.8020210274$$

CLV = 900,000 × 6.1294710262 – 1,448 × 5.8020210274

CLV = Rp 5.508.122,60

The results of the high retention scenario (annual r 0.80 → r' 0.8944) double the CLV relative to the Low scenario, demonstrating that small, effective investments in improving loyalty/repeat visits will generate substantial long-term ROI.

The increase in annual retention effectively doubles CLV. With the same parameters, CLV increases from around Rp 1.93 million in the Low scenario to Rp 5.50 million in the High scenario, almost tripling. The main effect stems from the longer period of tourist engagement with the attraction and the tourists' activity during that period, resulting in a significantly higher CLV for customers with high retention rates. Therefore, tourists who generate higher CLV values and are assumed to bring significant long-term benefits to Kampung Adat Bena are those who generate actual or projected CLV values within the range of the Moderate (IDR 3.1 million) and High (IDR 5.5 million) scenarios. Conversely, tourists with CLV values in the Low scenario (1.9 million or below) can be considered less profitable relative to their attractiveness. From the CLV results described above, it is evident that a tourist's retention value has a highly significant effect on the results. To achieve maximum CLV, attractions need to increase tourist retention so they can continue to make transactions or return to visit Bena Traditional Village. Retention is a complex matter, not only concerning repeat purchases from tourists or return visits but also involving service quality, tourist satisfaction (Mukammi & Abbas Ali, 2025), and tourist involvement in tourism activities that strengthen emotional relationships (Yaduvanshi et al., 2025), thereby creating memorable experiences in the minds of tourists (Gao et al., 2023). To achieve maximum CLV, retention value must increase, asset retention is an important variable that directly determines relationship sustainability and the magnitude of customers' long-term economic contributions. The retention rate cannot be increased directly without understanding the factors that influence customers' decisions to stay, so the aspects described above become important prerequisites in building tourist retention. Therefore, an Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is conducted to identify the service attributes and experiences deemed important by tourists, as well as the performance of the attraction providers, enabling targeted, precise improvements.

Importance Performance Analysis (IPA)

Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) analysis quantitatively shows the long-term economic value generated by tourists and indicates that the main factor influencing this value is tourist retention. Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) was added as an analysis method to find attributes that are highly important to tourists and to assess how well Kampung Adat Bena meets tourists' needs for these attributes. The use of importance and performance analysis aims to address CLV's inability to identify the attributes that drive CLV growth. By linking the results of CLV and IPA, this study not only measures the economic value of tourists but also translates it into priority improvements in attributes that can increase tourist satisfaction, emotional relationships, and service quality in tourism interactions, as well as formulating more efficient destination development strategies that focus on higher tourist retention.

This analysis began with testing the validity and reliability of the questionnaire that had been distributed so that the research instrument could accurately measure the variables to be studied and to measure the consistency of the instrument being measured (Mulyati et al., 2024). 's criteria for an instrument given to experimental respondents with is considered valid if the total item correlation value r-count ≥ r-table 5% (0.214) at a significance level of 5% (Purwanto,

2018). Then, to assess the questionnaire's attribute reliability, we examine Cronbach's Alpha, which must be ≥ 0.70. After conducting the validity test, 18 attributes passed the validity test with a calculated R value ≥ 0.214, and the reliability test by showing a question attribute value ≥ 0.70 with a value of 0.96. In contrast, 1 attribute failed the test and was withdrawn, so it would not be included in subsequent research instruments. Based on the validity and reliability test results that met the requirements, the research questionnaire with 18 attributes was distributed online and offline, yielding a total of 84 returned questionnaires. Then, the importance of tourists and the performance of Kampung Adat Bena's attractions were analyzed using IPA.

a) The Importance Performance Analysis began by calculating the average of each attribute statement regarding importance and performance:

$$\bar{\bar{X}} = \frac{\Sigma^N Xi}{K} \quad \bar{\bar{Y}} = \frac{\Sigma^N Yi}{K}$$

Source: (Wardhana, 2021)

With

X_{ij}= performance score of attribute i from respondent j

Y_{ij}= importance score of attribute i for respondent j

n = number of respondents

Attribute	Average Performance	Average Importance
P1	4.46	4.43
P2	4.30	4.30
P3	4.38	4.36
P4	4.46	4.51
P5	4.33	4.40
P6	4.24	4.20
P7	4.30	4.29
P8	4.30	4.29
P9	4.43	4.36
P10	4.38	4.25
P11	4.26	4.25
P12	4.32	4.33
P13	4.32	4.40

P14	4.33	4.25
P15	4.20	4.25
P16	4.36	4.12
P17	4.48	4.26
P18	4.45	4.21

With P = statement

b) After finding the average value of each attribute, the next step is to find the intersection of the X-axis and the Y-axis, where X is Performance and Y is Importance, with:

X-axis intersection point = $\frac{Average\ X}{Number\ of\ Attributes\ measured\ X}$

Y-axis intersection point = $\frac{Average\ Y}{Number\ of\ Attributes\ measured\ Y}$

The intersection point of the X-axis (4.35) and the Y-axis (4.30). After obtaining the average performance value (X) and the average importance value (Y) as the intersection points of the X-axis and the Y-axis through the calculation of the average of all attributes, the next step in the analysis is to map each attribute into the Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) matrix.

c) The IPA matrix can visually show which attributes need improvement, which should be maintained, and which are at risk of excessive resource allocation by positioning each attribute based on its average performance and importance values.

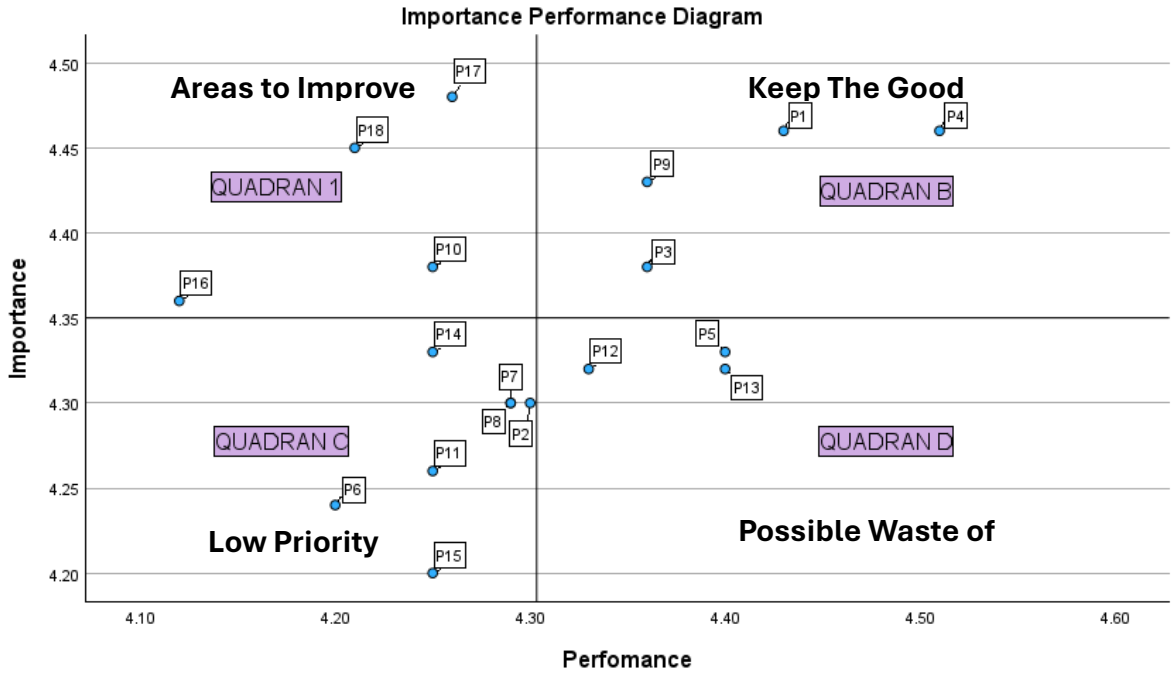


Figure 2. Importance Performance Analysis Results Matrix

Based on the results of the IPA analysis visualization, the attributes can be grouped into four quadrants with the following comprehensive descriptions:

Quadrant A (Areas to Improve)

Tourists highly value the attributes in this quadrant, but do not perform well under the manager's care. The attributes in this quadrant are components that need improvement in performance.

No. Attribute	Evaluation Item
P10	Being served courteously when making a purchase
P16	Purchasing because of a cultural event
P17	Price matches quality
P18	Affordable price

To improve performance, focus on the results in this quadrant, emphasizing service, event strengthening is needed (promotion, event quality, and integration with products) and product quality, as well as more affordable prices for tourists. Performance improvements are needed to increase tourist retention and thereby affect Customer Lifetime Value (CLV). The best assumption is that CLV will increase as quality in this quadrant improves.

Quadrant B (Keep The Good Work)

In this quadrant, the attributes that appear already show good performance and are considered important by tourists, so in this quadrant, the attributes that appear need to be maintained because they have met the expectations of tourists. This is the main driver of CLV, because tourist loyalty and satisfaction arise from or are shaped by factors that have satisfied them.

No. Attribute	Evaluation Item
P1	Product Quality
P3	Ease of finding products
P4	Product design
P9	Feeling that buying helps the community

In an effort to maintain and preserve the value of these attributes, managers need to focus on quality consistency, accessibility and product availability need to be maintained, strengthening product standards, and preserving cultural values, as these attributes have met tourist expectations and directly contribute to satisfaction and the potential to increase CLV.

Quadrant C (Low Priority)

Attributes in Quadrant C are those with low importance and performance levels, indicating that tourists and managers have jointly determined that the components in this quadrant do not need to be given too much attention or focus in terms of performance.

No. Attribute	Evaluation Item

P2	Product Uniqueness
P6	Post-purchase satisfaction
P7	A memorable experience
P8	Feeling proud after purchasing the product
P11	Sharing and posting on social media
P14	Purchasing during visits
P15	Cultural events

Attributes in Quadrant C can be managed with an efficiency and monitoring approach, without large resource allocations, because their contribution to tourist satisfaction and tourist CLV value is still relatively low under current conditions.

Quadrant D (Possible Waste of Resources)

In Quadrant D, the attributes that appear have high performance levels but are not important to tourists. Excessive resources here do not provide additional retention or CLV. The budget can be transferred to Quadrant A. Managers must be more careful in managing the components in this quadrant.

No. Attribute	**Evaluation Item**
P5	Product durability
P12	Educating tourists about the product
P13	Product manufacturing process

Managers need to control resource allocation and shift investment toward attributes that have a greater impact on retention to increase CLV. In this quadrant, excessive resource allocation is not the solution; rather, it is a rationalization of the power that can be generated by these attributes, which are not yet adequate for large resources.

Attributes in Quadrant A are very important but unsatisfactory aspects, so they have the most potential to increase CLV if improved. Meanwhile, attributes in Quadrant B are already strengths and must be maintained because they contribute directly to satisfaction and repeat visits. Attributes in quadrants C and D do not significantly affect CLV. Thus, integrating CLV and IPA provides a clear direction for service and product improvement strategies in Kampung Adat Bena.

Implications for Policy Strategy

In this study, the complementary results of CLV and IPA provide crucial implications for formulating more targeted policy directions. CLV results show that increased retention is the main driver in providing greater economic contributions to Kampung Adat Bena compared to low retention. Meanwhile, IPA results show which attributes most influence satisfaction, the

likelihood of repeat visits, and tourist loyalty, which underpin high retention. By integrating CLV and IPA analysis, tourism development policies are no longer focused solely on increasing the number of visits; they can be directed and optimized based on priority attributes to increase tourist retention, thereby simultaneously boosting CLV and generating sustainable economic benefits for the local community.

Quadrant A (Areas to Improve) has the potential to increase the Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) of Bena Traditional Village. Tourists consider these features important, but managers do not manage them well. The policy focus should be on increasing interaction and clarity about product value. To ensure that attribute P10 (Being served courteously when making a purchase) is fulfilled and to transform the transaction experience, which was initially considered lacking, into a value driver, communication training programs for local communities can be implemented to improve their capacity to interact effectively with tourists. Additionally, Bena Megalith Tourism Management Agency said that the issue of pricing must shift to a value-based pricing approach to address the problems of quality-appropriate pricing (P17) and affordability (P18). The prices set were neither agreed upon nor analyzed, which has led to these issues. However, it is also inaccurate to say that the quality of the products does not match the price, so an educational package on the process of making souvenirs will be very helpful for tourists to understand the value of the accessories or cultural products offered. Furthermore, attributes P16 (Buying because of cultural events) can be enhanced by regularly scheduling cultural events and by clearly labeling how funds are allocated to indigenous communities, thereby increasing tourists' sense of contribution and retention.

Quadrant B (Keep the good work), which underpins current visitor satisfaction and loyalty, should be the focus of sustainable policies and reinforcement. Tourists' expectations have been met with the attractions available at this location, which directly encourages them to return. Managers must implement sustainable Quality Standardization and Product Design Incubation policies to maintain excellence in P1 (Product Quality), P4 (Product Design). Accessibility and product availability P3 (Ease of finding products) can be improved and maintained by expanding distribution points, enhancing digital visibility, providing clear location information, and ensuring consistent stock management. The perception that purchasing contributes to the local community P9 (Feeling that buying helps the community) can be enhanced through transparent impact communication, local product storytelling, community-based branding, and direct interaction between tourists and local producers. High performance in this quadrant is crucial to maintaining a high CLV.

Quadrant C (Low Priority) requires a cautious management approach, emphasizing minimal resource allocation while maintaining continuous monitoring. The attributes within this quadrant namely P2 (Product Uniqueness), P6 (post-purchase satisfaction), P7 (Memorable experience), P8 (Feeling proud after purchasing the product), and P11 (Sharing and posting on social media) indicate that these factors are not yet significant determinants of increasing the retention rate. Similarly, P14 (Purchasing during visits) and P15 (Cultural events) are perceived as having relatively low importance and performance. This suggests that, although these attributes do not currently play a critical role, they should still be evaluated periodically, as tourist satisfaction standards are dynamic and subject to change. Therefore, management efforts

in this quadrant should prioritize ongoing monitoring and incremental adjustments rather than substantial resource investment, ensuring adaptability to evolving tourist preferences.

Quadrant D (Possible Waste of Source) requires a relocation budget policy because attributes in quadrant D indicate that performance is already high, while their level of importance is relatively low for tourists. Attributes such as P5 (Product durability), P12 (Educating tourists about the product) and P13 (Product manufacturing process) have a high performance, while their level of importance is relatively low for tourists. To optimize resource allocation, attributes in Quadrant D should be managed through efficiency-oriented strategies such as standardization of product quality, digitalization of information, and passive integration into the tourist experience. This approach allows performance to be maintained without excessive resource expenditure, while enabling a strategic shift of resources toward higher-priority attributes.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) analysis can explain how long-term relationships are formed between tourists and Bena Traditional Village. The results also show that high CLV tourists are priority tourists and should be considered by tourist attractions. This study also shows that tourist retention is crucial to increase a destination's long-term economic value. At the same time, Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) offers more practical guidance by identifying which attributes should be maintained and which should be improved to increase visit retention. The integration of these two approaches offers a more focused and measurable framework by linking tourist economic value with performance-based improvement priorities.

Conceptually, this study elaborates on the simultaneous use of Customer Lifetime Value and Importance-Performance Analysis within a single analytical framework, thereby establishing a connection between the long-term economic value of tourists and their perceptions of satisfaction and performance regarding the attributes of the attraction. From a methodological perspective, this research offers a different view of CLV, a concept commonly used in business marketing. It shows that it can be applied effectively in the context of the Bena Traditional Village's cultural appeal. This opens up opportunities for the use of CLV in the context of attractions, which has rarely been studied. In practical and policy terms, the results of this study provide a basis for local governments and attraction managers to formulate more targeted and appropriate development policies, grounded in analytical data, to improve the quality and sustainability of tourism development and to provide economic benefits to local communities.

However, the use of a limited number of respondents and the fact that it can only represent the study case population mean that this study cannot be generalized beyond the study case population. The characteristics of the respondents, who were predominantly domestic and local tourists, led them to overlook or fail to consider other perspectives from foreign tourists, thereby underrepresenting them in the analysis. The exploration of results still disregards attributes in the low-priority quadrant and fails to account for the dynamic, evolving changes in tourist behavior. Future research should incorporate larger samples, enrich the tourist segmentation, include foreign tourists, and examine changes in tourist behavior that affect the priority levels of attraction attributes.

Therefore, the development of Bena Traditional Village must be prioritized and based on data, focusing on high-value tourists and priority attributes to enhance retention and generate sustainable economic benefits for the local community.

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A Comparative Analysis of Tourists' Perceptions of Turkey Across Different Nationalities

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to investigate how tourists from different nationalities perceive Turkey as a travel destination and to analyse how these perceptions collectively shape the country's destination image.

Study design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative research design was employed, combining semi-structured interviews and metaphor analysis. Data were collected from 25 tourists representing five nationalities — Chinese, Japanese, Russian, German, and Australian — at the ancient city of Ephesus. Participants completed open-ended statements relating to their general associations with Turkey, its symbolic representations, social media impressions, and both positive and negative experiences. The collected data were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA software through thematic analysis.

Results*:* Findings reveal distinct perceptual patterns across nationalities. Chinese tourists strongly associate Turkey with hot air balloons and a romantic atmosphere; Japanese tourists emphasize historical heritage and tranquillity; Russian tourists prioritize sea, sun, and leisure; German tourists value cultural diversity and hospitality; while Australian tourists' perceptions are shaped by the historical significance of Gallipoli. Cappadocia emerged as a universally shared visual icon. Negative experiences commonly reported across groups included high prices and overcrowding.

Originality/Value: This study provides a novel cross-cultural and qualitative examination of Turkey's destination image through metaphor analysis — a methodology rarely applied in comparative tourism perception research. The findings contribute to both theory and practice by demonstrating the culture-bound nature of tourist perceptions and offering actionable insights for the development of nationality-specific destination marketing strategies.

Keywords: tourist perception; destination image; metaphor analysis; cultural tourism; destination marketing

Introduction

The concepts of tourist perception and destination image, which hold an important place in the tourism literature, directly influence the national and international success of a destination (Babalou et al., 2025). There is a close relationship between these two concepts. Tourist perception refers to individuals' personal opinions, feelings, and thoughts about a destination, whereas destination image reflects how these perceptions are shaped at the social and cultural levels. Destination image is not limited to the promotion of a place; it also plays a decisive role in shaping a country's reputation in the tourism market (Öter and Özdoğan, 2005). In this context, perceptions formed by individuals through various factors such as media content, personal experiences, and environmental influences emerge as key elements in shaping the

overall image of a destination (Durán-Román et al. 2023). Indeed, the experiences tourists have at a destination may lead to the formation of either positive or negative evaluations of that place (Moghavvemi et al., 2025).

The relationship established between tourist perception and destination image also forms the basis of tourism marketing strategies. Both tangible attributes, such as natural attractions and historical sites, and intangible values, such as hospitality and a sense of safety, constitute the fundamental components of these strategies. Research indicates that a strong and positive image encourages tourists to choose a destination and to revisit it, whereas a negative image adversely affects this process (Umur et al., 2016). On the other hand, many people often agree that an image represents an individual's perception of different aspects of a country, such as its cultural, physical, and social dimensions, and includes their own feelings about the destination through its image components (Gorji et al.2023).

The concept of tourist perception is critical for understanding how a destination is evaluated at the individual level (Rajesh, 2013). While destination image, as discussed in the previous section, has a more collective character, tourist perception is based on personal and subjective evaluations. This perception is influenced by a wide range of factors, including individuals' past travel experiences, expectations, media and social media content, and even comments and opinions shared by their close social circles (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Shin et al., 2023). At this point, tourist perception appears to have a highly dynamic nature. Two tourists visiting the same destination may develop entirely different perceptions depending on the events they experience, the people they encounter, and the quality of services they receive (Rajesh, 2013). This situation creates both challenges and opportunities for destinations. It is a challenge because addressing individuals with diverse expectations is difficult; it is an opportunity because, with appropriate strategies, it becomes possible to reach much broader audiences.

It is known that tourist perception has a direct effect on tourism behaviors. While positive perceptions increase visitor satisfaction, they also strengthen the intention to revisit the destination (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). In practice, it can be used to guide tourists by providing environmental information to increase destination loyalty and satisfaction, thereby encouraging their desire to revisit (Gong, et al., 2025). In contrast, negative perceptions may lead both to the destination not being preferred and to the sharing of these negative opinions with the social environment (Ceylan et al., 2021). For this reason, managing tourist perception is of great importance for the sustainability of destination image. Considering that tourist perception is shaped at the individual level, the general tourism image possessed by destinations is also another determining factor. Tourism image is a concept that both affects the success of marketing activities and expresses the general impression formed in tourists' minds (Cavalcante, et al. 2025). The more positive the image, the higher the competitiveness of a destination in the global tourism market will be. In this context, Turkey has the potential to present a strong destination image with its historical heritage, natural beauties, and cultural richness. However, the sustainability of this image is closely related not only to the resources possessed but also to how these resources are presented and managed.

Studies focusing on tourism image and tourist perception frequently refer to Turkey in a positive manner. Previous studies have examined Turkey's destination image, but few have employed a comparative qualitative approach to delve into the nuanced differences in perceptions among

key tourist nationalities. This research seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth, cross-cultural analysis of how tourists from five distinct countries perceive Turkey. Destinations such as Cappadocia, Pamukkale, and Istanbul stand out as some of the leading attraction elements of Turkey. It is stated that Turkey's geographical location at the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures is an important factor that diversifies and enriches tourist perceptions. However, factors such as security concerns, political developments, and negative representations in international media are also reported to cause periodic and temporary negative effects on tourist perceptions of Turkey. In this context, the literature emphasizes that destination management and crisis communication strategies play a critical role in managing such perceptual fluctuations. In recent years, Turkey has taken significant steps to improve this perception through safe tourism certifications, health measures, and digital promotional campaigns. In particular, visual content shared on social media increases interest in Turkey among young tourists and contributes positively to the country's tourism image (Çeti and Atay, 2020). For this reason, five different metaphor analyses were conducted with tourists, focusing on Turkey, first symbol, social media, happy moments, and sad moments. The collected data were first transferred into a Word document, tabulated, and then coded and analyzed using the MAXQDA software. The research findings reveal that tourists' perceptions of Turkey are largely shaped around attraction centers, touristic activities, and holiday experiences. While historical and natural attractions account for the highest share, activity-oriented experiences and holiday-related elements also occupy a prominent place in tourist perceptions. At the same time, negative experiences such as overcrowding, inconsiderate behavior by some tourists, and memories related to earthquakes are found to influence perceptions as well. Themes related to culture, symbolic elements, and food and beverage emerge as complementary factors supporting Turkey's destination image. Within this scope, the findings aim to contribute to tourism policies and marketing strategies by shedding light on both the strong aspects of Turkey's destination image and those that require further development.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research method in order to understand tourists' perceptions of Turkey and to examine perceptual differences among different nationalities. Qualitative research offers an approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of individuals' feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. In the study, a semi-structured interview technique was employed, and the participants consisted of individuals selected from different nationalities.

This study aims to understand and analyze tourists' perceptions of Turkey through a metaphorical approach. A qualitative approach was adopted, and tourists' views on Turkey were first examined through metaphor analysis. A metaphor (figurative expression) is a form of language based on using a concept or term in a different context by establishing a relationship of similarity. Essentially, a metaphor is a word that enables the transfer of meaning from one entity to another (Köroğlu et al., 2018). As a reflection of human creativity, food one of the most familiar objects can be used as a symbolic expression of emotions in this process (Widiatmika et al., 2023). Food metaphors carry cross-cultural shared symbolic meanings that are consistent with the universal characteristics of food (Arat, 2025). Attitudes conveyed through metaphors are generally rooted in cultural values adopted by a community and draw

on commonly or universally accepted forms of knowledge. Such attitudes stem from a society's shared traditional views and collective mindset (López-Rodríguez, 2014).

Rather than working with a large sample, conducting the study with a smaller sample group that is appropriate to the research purpose proves to be more effective. For this reason, purposive sampling is frequently preferred in qualitative research. The logic of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich participants who are suitable for in-depth analysis (Akıncı and Sönmez, 2015). Within the mixed group, metaphor analysis was conducted with tourists from China and Japan to represent the Far East, Russia to represent northern countries, and Germany and Australia to represent Europe. To ensure suitability for purposive sampling, tourists who participated in Turkey tours between 01.06.2025 and 30.06.2025 were informed prior to the start of each tour, and the first five volunteers from each country were selected, resulting in a total of 25 tourists.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with Chinese, Australian, and German tourists during the author's own tours. Participants from the remaining nationalities were included in the interviews by the author's colleagues. In determining the interview questions, the guide's (the author's) professional experience was taken into consideration. Knowing in advance which routes the tourists' nationalities would follow, the questions were interpreted and shaped accordingly.

The data were collected over a two-month period from August to October 2025. The study was conducted with only five participants from each nationality. Although this limits the possibility of broad generalization, it provided sufficient data for in-depth analysis. Since the research findings were obtained from a limited number of participants, they may be enriched and strengthened through future studies conducted with a larger sample.

This methodological approach provided an appropriate foundation for understanding tourists' perceptions of Turkey and for revealing differences in these perceptions within a cultural context. The semi-structured interview form used in the study increased the comparability of the data by ensuring that the same questions were posed to all participants. Owing to the open-ended nature of the questions, this approach allowed participants to express their views freely. For this reason, the open-ended statements presented below were asked to be completed by the participants.

1. When I think of Turkey, the first three things that come to my mind are …….
2. When I think of Turkey, the first symbol that comes to my mind is …….
3. When I think about how I perceive Turkey on social media, the first three things that come to my mind are …….
4. When I think of the happiest moments I experienced in Turkey, the first three things that come to my mind are …….
5. When I think of the saddest moments I experienced in Turkey, the first three things that come to my mind are …….

The data obtained from interviews conducted with tourists from China, Japan, Russia, Germany, and Australia within the scope of the study are analyzed. Based on participants' perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding Turkey, themes were identified, and similarities and

differences across nationalities were comparatively coded and analyzed using the MAXQDA software.

Table 1: Data Obtained from the Metaphor Analysis

Participant	When Thinking of Turkey	First Symbol	Turkey on Social Media	Happiest Moment in Turkey	Saddest Moment in Turkey
C1	Hot air balloon, kitten, capital of romance	Sultanahmet Mosque	Hot air balloons and cats	Watching hot air balloons	Inflated prices in some places
C2	Hot air balloon, romance, Cappadocia	Hot air balloon	Hot air balloon	Pleasant time spent with friends	Traffic accident on the first day
C3	Hot air balloon, fairy chimneys, Denizli	Hot air balloon and Cappadocia caves	Cappadocia	Experienced activities	Being bitten by an insect in the sea
C4	Hot air balloon, friendliness toward street animals, long history	Mosques and hot air balloons	Friendliness toward street animals	An incredible atmosphere	Sunburn due to insufficient sunscreen
C5	Cappadocia, hot air balloons, Ottoman history	Turkish flag	Historical buildings and Turkish coffee	Riding a hot air balloon in Cappadocia	Waiting due to tourist crowds
J1	History, Cappadocia, tranquility	Sultanahmet Mosque	Cappadocia and balloons	Balloon tour in Cappadocia	High prices
J2	Pamukkale, fairy chimneys, Hagia Sophia	Cappadocia hot air balloons	Historical sites, especially mosques	A peaceful walk in Sultanahmet	Sunburn
J3	Nature, hot air balloon, Ottoman	Hagia Sophia	Pamukkale and nature photos	Exploring the travertines in Pamukkale	Crowds more intense than expected
J4	History, romantic atmosphere, Turkish tea	Pamukkale travertines	Turkish coffee and tea presentations	Learning Turkish coffee	Language barrier

J5	Sultanahmet Mosque, culture, Cappadocia	Topkapi Palace	Ottoman architecture and cultural details	Visiting historical sites	Communication difficulties during shopping
R1	Sea, sun, hospitality	Turkish flag	Beaches and resorts	Relaxing on the beach	Overcrowding
R2	Antalya, Cappadocia, vacation	Cappadocia and hot air balloons	Cappadocia and fairy chimneys	Balloon tour in Cappadocia	Traffic congestion
R3	History, beaches, Sultanahmet	Sultanahmet Mosque	Turkish cuisine, especially desserts	Turkish bath experience	Higher prices than expected
R4	Pamukkale, Turkish coffee, fairy chimneys	Beaches in Antalya	Historical sites and mosques	Nature walk in Pamukkale	Poor-quality tour guide
R5	Beauty, nature, Grand Bazaar	Pamukkale travertines	Shopping opportunities and the Grand Bazaar	Exploring historical sites	Long waiting times at the airport
Av1	Gallipoli, Kurds of Turkey, intersection of East and West	Turkish flag, Turkish delight, carpet	Turkey holiday promotions	Istanbul architecture	Number of people smoking
Av2	Exotic, colorful, distant	Sultanahmet Mosque	Travel promotions in general	Spending time in Gallipoli	Earthquake memories
Av3	Gallipoli, Turkish delight, Ephesus	Sultanahmet Mosque	Hot air balloons and natural beauty	Visiting Ephesus	Tourist crowds
Av4	History, Cappadocia, culture	Hot air balloon	Historical sites and the Grand Bazaar	Balloon tour in Cappadocia	Higher prices than expected
Av5	Hospitality, nature, Istanbul	Cappadocia and Pamukkale	Sea and beach views	A peaceful walk in Pamukkale	Transportation difficulties
Al1	Hospitality, great diversity, culture	Ancient Roman structures and blue sea	Numerous holiday advertisements on German television	Positive interactions with Turkish people and natural beauty	Large number of street animals and careless behavior of some tourists

AI2	Vacation, good food, hospitality	Holiday advertisements and negative content about Turkey in the news	Roman architecture and natural landscapes	Valuable time spent with friends and pleasant weather	Population density in Istanbul and related damages
AI3	Sun, beach, history	Sultanahmet Mosque	Natural beauty and touristic activities	Balloon tour in Cappadocia	Inability to enjoy historical sites due to crowds
AI4	Cappadocia, nature, Roman ruins	Cappadocia and hot air balloons	Historical regions and beaches	Exploring the travertines in Pamukkale	High prices
AI5	Beautiful atmosphere, history, nature	Turkish tea and Turkish delight	Turkish culture, food, and travel recommendations	Enjoying the seaside on sunny days	Environmental pollution in touristic areas

Within the scope of the study, participants were asked the question “What concepts come to your mind when you think of Turkey?”, and the responses obtained were organized as shown in Table 1. The findings indicate that tourists’ perceptions of Turkey tend to concentrate around certain themes according to nationality. In the responses of Chinese tourists, Turkey is primarily associated with Cappadocia. Hot air balloons, fairy chimneys, and a romantic atmosphere emerge as dominant themes in this group’s perceptions. In addition, positive attitudes toward street animals—particularly references to kittens—contribute to the perception of Turkey as a humane and emotionally appealing destination. The emphasis on a long and deeply rooted history also occupies an important place in Chinese tourists’ perceptions of Turkey. From the perspective of Japanese tourists, perceptions of Turkey are shaped around themes of history, tranquility, and cultural depth. While Cappadocia and hot air balloons are also important attraction elements for this group, historical and symbolic sites such as Pamukkale, Hagia Sophia, and the Sultanahmet Mosque come to the forefront. Moreover, cultural elements such as a romantic atmosphere, aspects of traditional life, and Turkish tea can be considered influential in Japanese tourists’ perception of Turkey as a calm and meaningful destination. The perceptions of Russian tourists largely concentrate on themes of sea, sun, and vacation. Coastal destinations, particularly Antalya, position Turkey in this group’s minds as a holiday country. Nevertheless, historical sites (such as Sultanahmet and Pamukkale) and cultural elements (such as Turkish coffee and the Grand Bazaar) also appear as complementary components in Russian tourists’ perceptions. Emphases on hospitality and natural beauty indicate this group’s overall destination satisfaction.

For Australian tourists, Turkey is perceived through a strong historical and emotional connection, particularly associated with the Gallipoli Peninsula and the Battles of Çanakkale. In addition, Turkey is described as an exotic, colorful, and distant destination where Eastern and Western cultures converge. Historical centers such as Ephesus, Cappadocia, and Istanbul serve as spatial references that support this perception. Traditional products such as Turkish delight and emphases on hospitality also stand out as important components of the cultural experience. When the responses of German tourists are examined, it is evident that perceptions of Turkey are shaped around themes of diversity, culture, and hospitality. Cappadocia, natural landscapes, and remains from the Roman period point to this group’s preference for history- and nature-oriented destinations. Moreover, sun-and-beach tourism and gastronomic experiences (good food and a pleasant atmosphere) contribute to German tourists’ perception of Turkey as a multifaceted holiday destination.

Tourists from different nationalities were asked the question “What is the first symbol or representative element that comes to your mind when you think of Turkey?”, and the responses were analyzed on the basis of nationality. The findings reveal that Turkey’s touristic and cultural symbols vary according to nationality. For Chinese tourists, the foremost symbols associated with Turkey include the Sultanahmet Mosque, hot air balloons, and the Cappadocia caves. In addition, the Turkish flag was also mentioned by this group as a symbolic representative element. These findings indicate that Chinese tourists emphasize both historical–religious heritage and visually and experientially oriented attractions. Japanese tourists identified historical and cultural elements

such as the Sultanahmet Mosque, Cappadocia and hot air balloons, Hagia Sophia, the Pamukkale travertines, and Topkapi Palace as the primary symbols representing Turkey. This suggests that historical depth and cultural experience are prominent in Japanese tourists' perceptions of Turkey. Russian tourists highlighted symbols such as the Turkish flag, Cappadocia and hot air balloons, the Sultanahmet Mosque, the beaches of Antalya, and the Pamukkale travertines. The findings indicate that Russian tourists value both cultural/historical elements and vacation-oriented natural features. For Australian tourists, the first symbols vary and include the Turkish flag, Turkish delight, carpets, the Sultanahmet Mosque, hot air balloons, Cappadocia, and Pamukkale. This demonstrates that Australian tourists perceive Turkey through cultural heritage, symbolic objects, and natural attractions. For German tourists, the prominent symbols in perceptions of Turkey include Ancient Roman structures, the blue sea, the Sultanahmet Mosque, Cappadocia and hot air balloons, Turkish tea, and Turkish delight. These findings reveal that German tourists perceive Turkey holistically along the axes of history, culture, and gastronomy.

Tourists from different nationalities were asked the question "How is Turkey represented on social media?". The findings indicate that social media representations vary according to nationality. According to the findings, Chinese tourists primarily highlight hot air balloons in Cappadocia, street animals (especially cats), and historical structures in social media posts related to Turkey. In addition, Turkish coffee and cultural details are frequently emphasized by this group. This shows that visual experiences and cultural symbols are at the forefront of Chinese tourists' perceptions of Turkey. For Japanese tourists, social media representations of Turkey mainly concentrate on Cappadocia and hot air balloons, historical mosques, Pamukkale and natural landscapes, as well as Ottoman architecture and cultural details. Moreover, Turkish coffee and tea presentations symbolize the cultural and traditional aspects of Turkey in Japanese tourists' perceptions. Russian tourists tend to perceive Turkey on social media more through beaches, resorts, and the fairy chimneys of Cappadocia. Alongside these, Turkish cuisine, desserts, historical sites and mosques, and shopping opportunities (such as the Grand Bazaar) also stand out as notable elements in this group's perceptions. Australian tourists perceive representations of Turkey on social media through holiday promotions, hot air balloons in Cappadocia and natural attractions, historical sites and the Grand Bazaar, as well as sea and beach landscapes. This shows that both experiential and visual attractions are prominent in Australian tourists' perceptions of Turkey. German tourists focus on themes such as holiday advertisements, Roman architecture, natural beauty, historical regions and beaches, as well as Turkish culture and gastronomy in social media content related to Turkey. These findings reveal that German tourists experience Turkey on social media as both a cultural and a holiday-oriented destination.

Tourists from different nationalities were asked the question "What was the happiest moment you experienced in Turkey?". The findings reveal that happiness experiences are associated with different places and activities depending on nationality. Chinese tourists generally associated their happiest moments in Turkey with watching and riding hot air balloons in Cappadocia, spending time with friends, and the activities they experienced. In addition, the atmosphere and unique landscapes of Cappadocia play a central role in this group's happiness experiences. Japanese

tourists linked their happiest moments to both cultural and natural experiences such as a balloon tour in Cappadocia, a peaceful walk in Sultanahmet, exploring the travertines of Pamukkale, learning about Turkish coffee, and visiting historical sites. These findings indicate that Japanese tourists' happiness experiences are based on both visual aesthetics and cultural learning. Russian tourists expressed their happiest moments mainly through relaxing on the beach, taking a balloon tour in Cappadocia, experiencing a Turkish bath, going on nature walks in Pamukkale, and exploring historical sites. This shows that both relaxation and leisure, as well as cultural and natural experiences, are balanced components of Russian tourists' perceptions of happiness. Australian tourists associated their happiest moments with historical and cultural experiences such as Istanbul's architecture, spending time in Gallipoli, visiting Ephesus, taking a balloon tour in Cappadocia, and enjoying a peaceful walk in Pamukkale. These findings demonstrate that Australian tourists' happiness experiences in Turkey are shaped by historical context and natural beauty. German tourists associated their happiest moments with interactions with Turkish people, natural beauty, time spent with friends, a balloon tour in Cappadocia, exploring the Pamukkale travertines, and coastal activities. The findings reveal that social interaction, nature, and cultural experiences coexist in German tourists' happiness experiences.

The question "What was the saddest moment you experienced in Turkey?" was evaluated within the scope of the study. The findings indicate that negative experiences are associated with different places and situations depending on nationality. Chinese tourists generally linked their saddest moments in Turkey to high prices, traffic accidents, environmental conditions, and health-related risks. Examples include inflated prices in some places, traffic accidents experienced during the trip, being bitten by an insect while swimming in the sea, and sunburn caused by insufficient use of sunscreen. In addition, waiting times resulting from tourist overcrowding were also mentioned as negative experiences by this group. Japanese tourists associated their negative experiences with high prices, heavy crowds, sunburn, language barriers, and communication difficulties during shopping. These findings suggest that economic factors and social interaction issues are prominent in Japanese tourists' negative experiences in Turkey. Russian tourists expressed their negative experiences mainly in relation to overcrowding, traffic congestion, high prices, poor-quality tour guides, and long waiting times at airports. This indicates that factors such as service quality, transportation, and crowd management play a significant role in Russian tourists' saddest moments in Turkey. Australian tourists associated their negative experiences in Turkey with the number of people smoking, memories related to earthquakes, tourist crowds, high prices, and transportation difficulties. These findings show that Australian tourists' negative experiences stem from both social environment factors and issues related to transportation and safety. German tourists linked their negative experiences to the large number of street animals and careless tourist behavior, population density in Istanbul, overcrowding at historical sites, high prices, and environmental pollution in touristic areas. This indicates that both social and environmental factors are at the forefront of German tourists' negative experiences.



Figure 1. Word Cloud

The entire Word document was analyzed using the MAXQDA software. According to the analysis, the word *Cappadocia* was used 20 times, accounting for 4.41% of the total usage. The word *air* appeared 19 times, representing 4.19%. The word *hot* was used 18 times, corresponding to 3.96%. The word *Turkish* appeared 13 times, accounting for 2.86% of the total. The word *balloon* was used 11 times, with a share of 2.42%. The word *Pamukkale* appeared 10 times, representing 2.20%. The word *Sultanahmet* was used 9 times, accounting for 1.98%. The word *nature* appeared 8 times, with a share of 1.76%. The word *mosque* was used 7 times, corresponding to 1.54%. The words *history*, *historical*, and *holiday* each appeared 7 times, each representing 1.54%. The word *also* was used 6 times, accounting for 1.32%. The words *balloons*, *one*, *prices*, and *beautiful* each appeared 5 times, each representing 1.10% of the total usage.

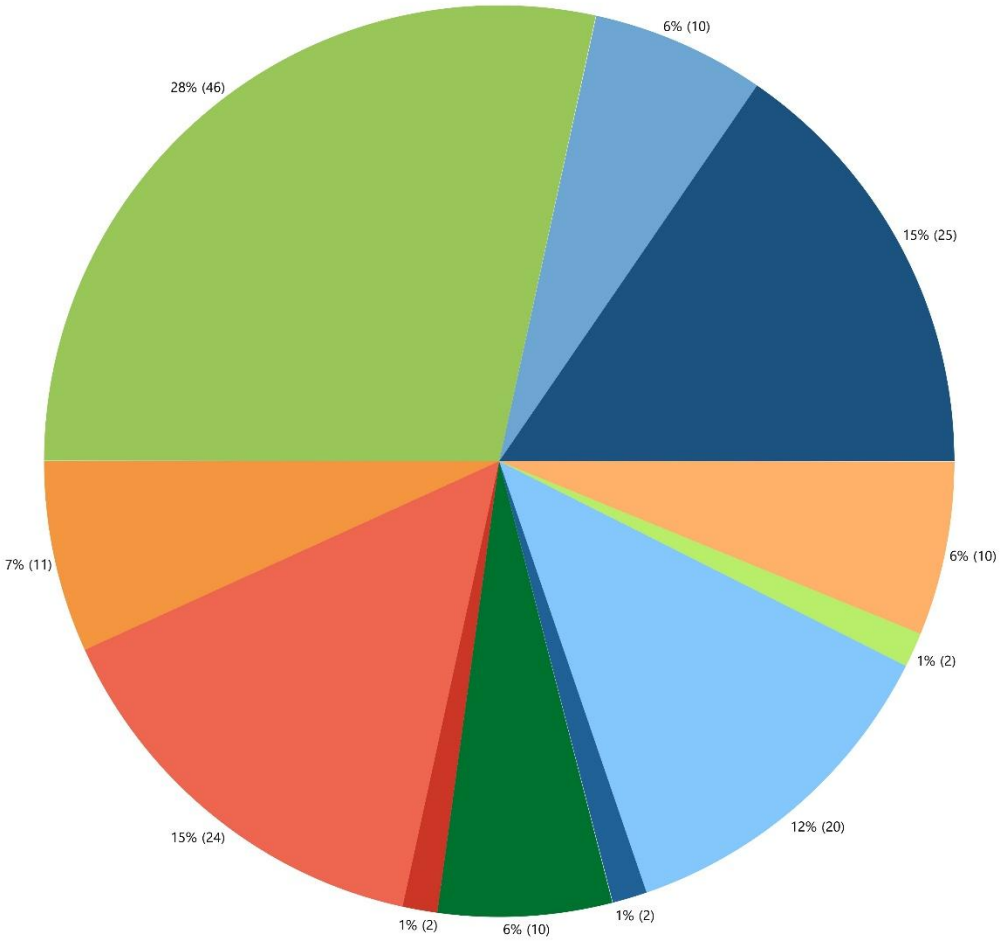


Figure 2. Code Structures

Similar expressions were structured under a single code in the MAXQDA software. Accordingly, when the chart presented in Figure 2 is examined, it is observed that the analysis largely focuses on touristic experiences and spatial elements. Attraction centers constitute the highest proportion (28%), indicating that historical and natural sites such as Ancient Roman remains, Pamukkale, and Cappadocia hold a decisive place in participants' perceptions. The categories of activities and negative comments (15%) rank second; negative comments are particularly focused on crowded environments, careless behavior by some tourists, and memories related to earthquakes. The holiday theme (12%) holds a significant share and is associated with elements such as sun, beach, and sea. The culture category (7%) stands out in the context of hospitality and cultural values, while symbols, food and beverage, and activities carried out at attraction centers are each represented at a rate of 6%. Categories with lower proportions, namely positive comments, street animals, and holiday + activity (1%), appear as limited yet noteworthy themes within participants' experiences.

Results

The findings confirm that Turkey's destination image is multidimensional and culturally filtered. The shared appeal of icons like Cappadocia and hot air balloons suggests a strong core brand element. However, the distinct perceptual frameworks of each nationality-ranging from historical

pilgrimage (Australians) to leisure vacation (Russians)-highlight the need for segmented marketing.

In general, when Turkey is considered, the findings reveal that it is perceived as a multidimensional destination by tourists from different nationalities. While Cappadocia and hot air balloons carry a shared symbolic value across almost all groups, themes such as history, nature, romance, hospitality, and cultural diversity come to the forefront with varying degrees of emphasis depending on nationality. This situation indicates that Turkey needs to develop targeted and thematic promotional strategies in the international tourism market.

In the second question, participants were asked about the first symbols that came to their minds. The Sultanahmet Mosque and hot air balloons in Cappadocia appear as shared cultural and visual symbols of Turkey across all tourist groups. Other symbols vary according to nationality-specific priorities, which highlights the importance of target market–oriented and thematic approaches in Turkey's promotional strategies.

Although representations of Turkey on social media differ by nationality, Cappadocia and hot air balloons stand out as a common visual attraction for Chinese, Japanese, and Australian tourists. Beach and holiday themes are perceived as dominant elements particularly for Russian and German tourists. Cultural symbols (such as mosques, Ottoman architecture, and Turkish coffee) are clearly recognized by all groups and constitute the core components of Turkey's image on social media.

Regarding the happiest moments in general, a balloon tour in Cappadocia stands out as a shared happiness experience across almost all tourist groups. In addition, cultural and historical experiences (such as Sultanahmet, Ephesus, and Turkish coffee), natural attractions (such as the Pamukkale travertines and coastal areas), social interaction, and time spent with friends emerge as sources of happiness with varying degrees of importance across groups. Overall, among the saddest experiences tourists encounter in Turkey, high prices and overcrowding stand out as common themes for all groups. Other negative factors vary by nationality; some groups focus on transportation and service quality, while others emphasize social environment and environmental issues.

In order to enhance Turkey's competitiveness in the international tourism market, it is necessary to develop targeted promotional strategies that align with the expectations and motivations of tourists from different countries and cultural backgrounds. In this context, promotional activities focusing on elements such as Cappadocia, Ottoman historical heritage, and hot air balloons should be prioritized for Chinese and Japanese tourists. The use of romantic and exotic themes is among the factors that can positively influence the destination preferences of these tourist groups.

In promotional strategies targeting Russian tourists, an emphasis on sea, sand, and sun tourism should be prioritized; in addition, Turkey's rich historical heritage and gastronomic diversity should be integrated into promotional content. For Australian tourists, the historical and cultural significance of Gallipoli and the Battles of Çanakkale can be emphasized more strongly. Presenting these historical connections through personal stories and narratives may contribute to this tourist group establishing an emotional bond with the destination. In promotional strategies aimed at

German tourists, a holistic approach that addresses culture, history, and natural beauty should be adopted. Furthermore, increasing the emphasis on gastronomic tourism and sustainable tourism practices aligns with this tourist group's environmentally conscious and responsible travel preferences.

Today, social media plays a decisive role in destination choices, especially among younger tourists. Strengthening digital promotion of Turkey's assets is therefore crucial. On visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok, content should highlight hot air balloons in Cappadocia, cave structures, and unique Turkish cuisine. Producing content tailored to each target market's cultural characteristics will increase its effectiveness. Adopting sustainable tourism is vital for protecting heritage and ensuring long-term revenue. In high-density areas, environmental regulations and awareness are needed. At sites like Cappadocia, Pamukkale, and Ephesus, appointment systems to manage visitor numbers can be an effective solution.

Moreover, cooperation with local authorities to improve the welfare of street animals may create a positive perception, particularly among tourists who embrace an animal-friendly tourism approach. In order to ensure that tourists perceive Turkey not only as a holiday destination but also as a space for cultural experience, interaction between local residents and tourists should be increased. Within this framework, tourists' participation in local festivals can be encouraged, and history-, art-, or gastronomy-themed tours can be organized with local guides. Such practices have the potential to strengthen cultural exchange and increase tourist satisfaction.

Conclusion

This research provided a nuanced, qualitative comparison of how tourists from five key markets perceive Turkey. The main conclusion is that while Turkey possesses universally appealing icons, successful marketing requires moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to embrace culturally nuanced storytelling. Theoretical implications include reinforcing the culture-bound nature of tourist perception and demonstrating the utility of qualitative methods for uncovering deep-seated associations.

Tourists from different cultural backgrounds display significant differences in their perceptions of Turkey in terms of both expectations and experiences. These differences reveal that Turkey's destination image is multidimensional and can vary according to tourist profiles. Although the elements that attract the attention of each tourist group differ, Turkey's historical and natural heritage, hospitality, and rich cuisine generally emerge as shared perceptual components. Based on the research findings, it is recommended that Turkey customize its tourism marketing strategies in line with the interests of different nationalities. The destination image can be strengthened more effectively through thematic campaigns, social media content, and the promotion of cultural products tailored to each country group. Moreover, reducing negative experiences encountered at destinations (such as overcrowding, high prices, and communication problems) and improving service quality will play an important role in increasing revisit intentions. In this context, adopting a sustainable destination management approach that continuously monitors and manages tourist perceptions is essential.

The findings demonstrate that Turkey offers diverse and rich attractions for tourist groups from different cultural backgrounds and that the distinctive expectations of these groups can largely be met. Nevertheless, it is evident that further steps are still required to expand sustainable tourism practices and to improve tourist experiences.

With its strong cultural heritage, natural beauty, and unique gastronomic diversity, Turkey has the potential to achieve a more competitive position in the international tourism market. In this respect, a holistic approach that prioritizes customized promotional strategies, sustainable practices, and local experiences will play a key role in enhancing tourist satisfaction.

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Examining tourists' awareness, knowledge and perceptions of Marine Protected Areas in South Africa and Mozambique

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Abstract

Purpose: Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) were established to conserve marine ecosystems and mitigate threats to ocean resources, but have evolved into shared socio-ecological systems supporting tourism and recreation. Their effectiveness depends on stakeholder acceptance and support, which are shaped by awareness, knowledge and perceptions. Tourists are a key stakeholder group due to their frequent use and economic contribution.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study used a questionnaire survey and convenience sampling of 504 tourists and recreationists at Maputo National Park (Mozambique) and the Table Mountain National Park Marine Protected Area (South Africa) in 2023 and 2024.

Results: Most participants were aware of MPAs and understood them as spatially designated marine areas governed by conservation-oriented rules and regulations. However, knowledge of socio-economic benefits was limited. Social media, word of mouth, and websites were the primary sources of information. Both samples supported MPAs and believed in the value and benefits of MPAs. While support for MPAs was high at both sites, South African respondents demonstrated greater understanding of MPA purposes and had better perceptions of national MPA effectiveness.

Originality/value: By comparing tourists' awareness and perceptions across two African contexts, this study informs communication, stakeholder engagement and the sustainable management of nature-based tourism and MPAs.

Keywords Tourists; Awareness; Knowledge; Perceptions; Marine Protected Areas

Introduction

The ocean covers approximately 71% of the planet's surface and encompasses various marine ecosystems that are essential for human survival (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2014). Marine ecosystems are dynamic systems composed of plants, animals, microorganisms, and their environment, providing services to humankind (Duraiappah et al., 2005). The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment defined marine ecosystem services as "*benefits that people obtain from coastal and marine ecosystems*" (Duraiappah et al., 2005; Liquete et al., 2013). These services are categorised into provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural services (Duraiappah et al., 2005; Liquete et al., 2013; Gupta & Kumar, 2014; Imgraben et al., 2019; Buonocore et al., 2021). For example, marine ecosystems provide food, regulate climate change, and support biodiversity by providing a habitat for marine species (Duraiappah et al., 2005; Gupta & Kumar, 2014; Imgraben et al., 2019; Buonocore et al., 2021). Cultural ecosystem services refer to the non-material benefits

derived from marine ecosystems, including tourism and recreational opportunities (Duraiappah et al., 2005; Liquete et al., 2013; Gupta & Kumar, 2014; Imgraben et al., 2019; Buonocore et al., 2021). Nature-based tourism in marine environments can contribute to the preservation of seascapes, maintenance of water quality, and conservation of marine resources through sustainable use (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2006; Liquete et al., 2013; Casimiro et al., 2023).

The sustainable use of the ocean's resources enhances economic growth and preserves the livelihoods of coastal communities (Evans et al., 2023). Hence, the ocean's ecosystem services have social, economic and ecological value (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). Despite their value, marine ecosystems face numerous threats (Philips et al., 2019), including climate change, pollution, overfishing, illegal fishing, invasive species, and population growth (Buonocore et al., 2021). Tourism can also have negative effects on coastal and marine ecosystems (Lucrezi, 2021; Casimiro et al., 2023) due to recreational activities (Toyoshima & Nadaoka, 2015; Philips et al., 2019), pollution (Carić & Mackelworth, 2014; Philips et al., 2019), boat anchoring (Philips et al., 2019), urbanisation (Lucrezi, 2021), and wildlife disturbance (Cánovas-Molina & García-Frapolli, 2020).

To address these threats and preserve marine ecosystems, governments have established MPAs, which are regarded as one of the most effective conservation tools when properly implemented (Lubchenco & Grorud-Colvert, 2015; Hargreaves-Allen et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018; Sala & Giakomi, 2018; Roberts et al., 2020; Derabi & Aksissiou, 2021; Mann-Lang et al., 2021; Tuohy et al., 2022; Francolini et al., 2023; Gonçalves, 2023; Intonti et al., 2024). MPAs are defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a "*clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated, and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values*" (Day et al., 2019:8). MPAs vary in protection level, ranging from fully protected no-take areas to lightly protected areas (Andradi-Brown et al., 2023).

However, the establishment of an MPA alone does not ensure their effectiveness (Pereira, 2021). MPAs are shared resources that depend on stakeholder participation to be successful (Giakoumi et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2020). Stakeholder support – often described as a 'social licence' – is essential for sustainable governance and long-term sustainable management of MPAs (Spalding & Biedenweg, 2017; Kelly et al., 2020), as it reflects their acceptance of how natural resources are used and MPAs are governed (Voyer et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2020). Stakeholder groups associated with MPAs include the local communities, fishers, management structures, the public, recreational users and tourists (Kaida & Dang, 2016). Due to their significant interactions with the marine environment through on-site activities (Kaida & Dang, 2016), tourists are key stakeholders whose support can influence the effective establishment and implementation of MPAs (D'Anna et al., 2016; Giakoumi et al., 2018).

MPAs support tourism by attracting visitors whose spending contributes to the conservation of marine environments (Shone et al., 2016). Thus, MPAs not only serve as conservation areas but also as tourism destinations, where tourists utilise and value them, generating positive social

impacts (McNeill et al., 2018). South Africa and Mozambique are prominent destinations for conservation and nature-based tourism (National Administration of Conservation Areas [ANAC], 2020; CapeNature, 2025; South African National Parks [SANParks], 2026), where tourism provides social, economic, and ecological benefits to MPAs (ANAC, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2021a). Harmful activities in MPAs are regulated through zonation, which contributes to conservation of seascapes (Gonçalves, 2023). MPAs can be restricted areas (no-take and no-access zones), controlled areas (permit required to participate in specified activities), or have both restricted and controlled areas (MPA Forum, 2026).

However, key stakeholders, such as tourists, may lack awareness of the zoning and regulations in MPAs or perceive them negatively due to restricted access (Voyer et al., 2015; Lucrezi, 2021). Limited awareness and support can lead to non-compliance, resulting in environmental degradation and increased management costs (Tuohy et al., 2022). Many tourists do not understand the value of MPAs and consequently perceive them as ineffective "paper parks" with no practical value (Di Cintio et al., 2023). Therefore, evaluating tourists' awareness and perceptions is critical for improving the effective management of MPAs and the recreational activities within them (Kotowicz et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2019; Manson et al., 2021).

MPAs can vary globally due to the national social, economic, and conservation contexts that shape their management approaches (Gonçalves, 2023). While MPAs in developed countries often integrate conservation, cultural, and economic objectives, developing countries face challenges in achieving these goals due to limited financial resources and competing socio-economic priorities. As a result, conservation and resource management are frequently deprioritised, reducing MPA effectiveness (Maestro et al., 2019). Consequently, many countries in Africa promote tourism as a strategy for economic diversification and sustainable development, using their natural resources to stimulate economic growth and expand national income sources (Seraj et al., 2025). Mozambique is a least developed country (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2026), and South Africa is a developing country (World Bank Group, 2026). Both rely on nature-based tourism to support sustainable economic development and conservation (World Bank Group, 2025).

Comparing tourists' awareness and perceptions of MPAs in Mozambique and South Africa can inform best-practice strategies for improved communication, management effectiveness, and stakeholder engagement with MPAs (Kaida & Dang, 2016; Tuohy et al., 2022; Di Cintio et al., 2023; Mann-Lang et al., 2023). Existing literature highlights tourists' knowledge and perceptions as important indicators of MPA effectiveness (Mann-Lang et al., 2021; Di Cintio et al., 2023; Francolini et al., 2023). Thus, this study aimed to analyse and compare tourists' perceptions of MPAs in Mozambique and South Africa to improve awareness, marketing strategies, management effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of MPAs in these countries.

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative, descriptive, non-experimental research design to examine tourists' awareness, knowledge, and perceptions of MPAs in South Africa and Mozambique. The selected case studies were the Table Mountain National Park Marine Protected Area (TMNPMPA)

in South Africa and the Maputo National Park (MNP) in Mozambique. These sites enabled the researcher to administer in-person questionnaires to a diverse sample of tourists representing a range of demographic and cultural backgrounds.

South Africa and Mozambique are both major nature-based tourism destinations (ANAC, 2020; Marine Protected Areas South Africa, 2026). According to Statistics South Africa (2023), 95.3% of tourists visit South Africa for holiday purposes. The tourism industry in South Africa is centred around PAs (Statistics South Africa, 2021b). The long-term socio-cultural, economic, and ecological sustainability of South Africa is also dependent on the establishment and management of PAs, including MPAs, in the country (Statistics South Africa, 2021a; Statistics South Africa, 2021b). The country has diverse coastal and marine environments protected through MPAs (Statistics South Africa, 2023; South African Government, 2026), which cover 15% of the total marine area (Marine Conservation Institute, 2025). In South Africa, 42 MPAs have been established by the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (NEM: PAA) (Mann-Lang et al., 2021; Kirkman et al., 2023; Mann-Lang et al., 2023; Marine Protected Areas South Africa, 2026). Of these, the TMNPMPA was selected as the case study site due to the number of tourists visiting the area, the size of the MPA, and the level of protection afforded. The large coastal area and its important landmarks attract a significant number of visitors annually (Lucrezi et al., 2025; Marine Protected Areas South Africa, 2026). The TMNPMPA supports and protects diverse marine habitats that contain overexploited and endangered species such as the African Penguin (Kock et al., 2022; Marine Protected Areas South Africa, 2026). The TMNPMPA is zoned into one controlled zone with 6 restricted (no-take zones) within (Kock et al., 2022), making it ideal for tourists to participate in recreational activities. In the TMNPMPA and Simons Town, tourists and recreationists can participate in nature-based activities such as penguin viewing, scuba diving, snorkelling, charter fishing, whale watching, yachting, kayaking, surfing, organised recreational events, swimming, walking on the beach, and scientific tourism (Kock et al., 2022; Marine Protected Areas South Africa, 2026).

Bordering South Africa, Mozambique lies on the eastern coast of Africa (Rocha et al., 2020). It is well-known for its long coastline and diverse landscapes, which support a rich array of ecosystems. The pristine landscape and seascape attract tourists, contributing to the country's GDP (ANAC 2020; Biofund, 2024). Nature-based tourism is a sustainable form of tourism that is a growing sector in Mozambique, driven by its natural and cultural attractions (ANAC, 2020). PAs, such as National Parks and Reserves and MPAs, are important for the conservation of essential habitats (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2025), while providing socio-cultural and economic benefits (ANAC, 2020; Biofund, 2024). Of the 58 PAs in Mozambique, only 7 are MPAs covering approximately 12,000 km^2 of the coastal and marine ecosystems (Nairobi Convention, 2026 United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre [UNEP-WCMC], 2026). The implementation of effective MPAs also contributes to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 14, "Life below water" targets (Pereira, 2021). The MPA selected for this study was the MNP, specifically the Ponta do Ouro Partial Marine Reserve (PPMR), which forms the marine part of it, due to its popularity as a tourism destination, its size,

and the level of protection it offers. The PPMR, covering 678 km^2, supports various recreational and tourism activities in the multiple-use zones (National Directorate of Conservation Areas [DNAC], 2012; Pereira, 2021; Peace Parks Foundation, 2025). These activities include swimming, surfing, kitesurfing, hiking, kayaking, snorkelling, scuba diving, guided marine safaris, and fishing. The MNP was declared a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage Site in 2025 (Carnie, 2025; UNESCO, 2026). Thus, the PPMR is an important destination for tourists and recreationists partaking in nature-based tourism in MPAs.

In conclusion, the study locations were ideal for comparison because their contrasting management maturity—one a high-volume urban MPA and the other an emerging MPA—allows for a robust analysis of how different tourism pressures and socio-economic contexts influence visitor awareness and support.

This study examined tourists' awareness, knowledge and perceptions of MPAs. MPA success relies on an interdependent hierarchy of constructs: awareness and knowledge are foundational, as visitors cannot support regulations they do not recognise or understand (Moritsch et al., 2019). These drive perceptions of value, which are often limited to visible aesthetics (Kaida & Dang, 2016). Ultimately, perceived effectiveness and support depend on this cognitive chain; without it, visitors view MPAs as restrictive or inefficient rather than beneficial (Cele et al., 2017; Le Corre et al., 2024). Uysal and Altin (2017) noted that studies frequently use a quantitative approach when analysing tourism-related phenomena such as tourist characteristics and perceptions. A structured questionnaire, developed through previous research on tourists' perceptions, was used to collect the data. The questionnaire included a consent letter and assessed tourists' and recreationists' demographic profiles and, using a 5-point Likert scale of agreement, items concerning knowledge of MPAs, awareness of MPAs, and their perceptions of MPA benefits, social support, and effectiveness in the respective countries. These items were selected from established literature examining these constructs (Cele et al., 2017; Intonti et al., 2024; Le Corre et al., 2024; Moritsch et al., 2019; Tuohy et al., 2022). Leung et al. (2018:2) defined a visitor to a PA, such as an MPA, as "*a person who visits the lands and waters of the PA for purposes mandated for the area. A visitor is not paid to be in the PA and does not live permanently in the PA. The purposes mandated for the area typically are recreational, educational or cultural.*" Whereas a tourist stays overnight at a PA (Leung et al., 2018:2). In the context of this study, tourists generally refer to individuals, including tourists and recreationists (such as residents visiting the MPA), who participate in activities like scuba diving, freediving, snorkelling, surfing, spearfishing, and dolphin-watching. Data sampling took place during a single field trip to the PPMR (Ponta do Ouro area) in Mozambique (10 days) and a single field trip to the eastern side of the TMNPMPA (outside Boulders Beach to Simons Town) in South Africa (5 days) from November 2023 to May 2024, and was conducted by skilled fieldworkers from North-West University's Tourism Research in Economics, Environs, and Society (NWU-TREES). The research employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, to acquire a large amount of data from the target population within a limited time frame. The ideal sample size for PPMR in Mozambique was 380, and for the TMNPMPA in South Africa was 384. A total of 241 questionnaires were collected at the PPMR, and 263 at

TMNPMPA. The data obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics, breakdown statistics, frequency tables, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), which was used to compare perceptions between the two case studies. Open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results

Socio-demographic profile

Across both case study sites, the samples were comparable in terms of gender composition and age. Mozambique (50% male, 50% female) and South Africa (54% male, 46% female) both had a similar proportion of male and female participants, with a mean age of 37 years. There were no statistically significant differences between the two samples ($X^2 = 0.46$, $p = 0.50$). However, notable differences emerged in other demographic and activity-related variables. In South Africa, most respondents were domestic tourists (59% South Africans), and in Mozambique, the sample was dominated by South Africans (47%), followed by Europeans (29%). The Mozambican respondents' level of education was evenly split between those with a school education (50%) and those with a tertiary education (50%), whereas the South African sample was dominated by respondents with a tertiary education (77%). In Mozambique, the respondents were primarily tourists (70%), while in South Africa, the sample was distributed between residents (56%) and tourists (44%). Differences were evident in the preferred ocean-based recreational activities. In South Africa, activities such as snorkelling, swimming, and other ocean sports (56%) were most frequently reported among participants. In contrast, scuba diving (48%) was the preferred ocean-based activity in Mozambique, followed by snorkelling, swimming and ocean sports (33%). Overall, the two case-study samples were distinguished by differences in educational background ($X^2 = 34.43$, $p<0.001$), residence status ($X^2 = 34.03$, $p<0.001$), and engagement in ocean-based recreational activities.

In South Africa, previous research on TMNPMPA visitors shows that they were generally in their late thirties, highly educated, and mostly South African (Lucrezi, 2024; Lucrezi & D'Agnessa, 2024). Gender distribution varied between studies, ranging from predominantly female (Lucrezi, 2024) to evenly balanced (Lucrezi & D'Agnessa, 2024). Visitors primarily participated in snorkelling and freediving, along with other ocean-based activities such as swimming and scuba diving (Lucrezi, 2024). The PPMR in Mozambique is a popular scuba diving destination primarily visited by overnight divers. Consistent with previous studies, divers are typically in their thirties, evenly distributed by gender, mainly from South Africa, and show equal representation of high school and tertiary education levels (Lucrezi et al., 2017; 2019). Therefore, the socio-demographic profile of the participants aligns with what has been represented in previous research at the study locations.

Tourists' awareness and engagement with MPAs

Tourists' awareness of MPAs was assessed as an indicator of their familiarity with conservation frameworks that underpin sustainable nature-based tourism. When asked to identify the approximate number of MPAs in their respective countries, 44% of the South African respondents correctly selected the highest category (30 or more MPAs), while 45% of the respondents in Mozambique correctly selected the lowest category (0–10 MPAs), indicating awareness of MPAs

in both countries. However, place-specific awareness was considerably lower as more than half of the respondents were unable to identify the MPA closest to their place of residence. Correct identification was reported by 27% of participants in South Africa and 38% in Mozambique, suggesting limited spatial knowledge of MPAs. Reported visitation frequency indicated differing levels of engagement frequency with MPAs. In South Africa, 38% of participants visited an MPA more than twice a year, and 30% visited once a year. In Mozambique, visitation was generally lower, with 35% of participants visiting an MPA once a year, followed by 34% visiting twice a year. The higher visitation frequency observed in South Africa may be attributed to the higher proportion of residents engaging in recreational activities. This pattern aligns with findings by Moritsch et al. (2019), who observed that residents in California visited marine reserves more frequently than tourists.

Tourists' awareness and engagement with MPA information were assessed by evaluating the media sources from which tourists received their information. Social media emerged as the most influential source of information in South Africa (49%) and Mozambique (54%), followed by word of mouth (38% for South Africa; 45% for Mozambique) and websites (34% for South Africa; 32% for Mozambique). Similar findings have been observed in previous studies, although the availability and accessibility of information vary across different countries. For example, visitors to MPAs in Vietnam primarily obtained information through social media and on-site sources, while international tourists faced language barriers due to limited English communication (Kaida & Dang, 2016). In California, beach visitors relied on signage, word of mouth, government sources, NGOs and broadcast media for MPA-related information (Moritsch et al., 2019), while visitors to Ningaloo in Australia expressed a preference for visitor centres, signage, and websites (Tuohy et al., 2022). The results highlight the role of online and peer-generated content in shaping tourists' understanding of conservation-oriented tourism settings across various contexts. These findings have implications for sustainable nature-based tourism governance, as mass media and digital platforms play a significant role in shaping public knowledge, behaviour and support for MPAs (Patrizzi et al., 2023).

Tourists' definition of an MPA

Tourists were asked to define an MPA, thereby assessing their knowledge and perceptions of MPAs. The definitions were largely consistent across both countries, reflecting a shared baseline understanding of MPAs. Most respondents in both study sites described MPAs as designated areas with defined boundaries and as areas intended for the protection, conservation and preservation of marine ecosystems and marine life, indicating that the core conservation objectives of MPAs are generally recognised by tourists engaging in nature-based tourism. Respondents in South Africa and Mozambique also associated MPAs with regulatory frameworks, emphasising the presence of rules, restrictions, and limitations on activities, which reflect tourists' awareness of the role MPAs play in managing their interactions with the marine environment.

These definitions align closely with the IUCN's definition of MPAs as clearly defined geographical spaces that are legally or otherwise managed to achieve long-term conservation outcomes (Day et al., 2019). However, while most respondents accurately identified the spatial and protective aspects

of MPAs, few explicitly acknowledged their long-term sustainability objectives, associated ecosystem services, or cultural values (Day et al., 2019). This finding indicates a knowledge gap in tourists' understanding of the broader socio-ecological role and sustainability benefits of MPAs. Similarly, in previous research, stakeholders prioritised environmental conservation as the primary objective of MPAs and emphasised their restrictions on activities, often overlooking their wider socio-cultural dimensions (Chuenpadgee et al., 2020; Mann-Lang et al., 2023).

Tourists' perceptions of MPAs

Table 1 presents a statistical comparison of the average scores for each item related to the participants' perceptions between the two case studies. Concerning the perceptions of the purpose of MPAs, these differed significantly between the case studies. Specifically, the South African sample had a better understanding of the purpose of MPAs compared to the Mozambican sample. In contrast, the Mozambican sample was more neutral about the purpose of MPAs. The difference in general knowledge and understanding of the purpose of MPAs may be due to the South African sample having more residents who are more likely to have ongoing exposure to MPAs and related information. Similar patterns were identified by Moritsch et al. (2019), who reported that residents had more knowledge of the State Marine Reserves than tourists in California. In contrast, the neutral perceptions displayed by the Mozambican sample may reflect broader gaps in tourists' understanding of MPAs, particularly concerning management structures, regulations, and zoning frameworks (Tuohy et al., 2022; Mann-Lang et al., 2023; Le Corre et al., 2024). As tourists generally engage with MPAs for a short period, their limited exposure may impact the development of informed knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions related to MPA objectives and management (Le Corre et al., 2024), which in turn has implications for sustainable tourism outcomes.

Regarding the perceptions of the benefits of MPAs among the samples, participants generally agreed that MPAs provide various benefits, including conservation, socio-cultural, and economic benefits. There were exceptions where slight differences were identified as significant. However, when considering the average scores, they can be considered negligible. These perceptions align with findings by Cele et al. (2017), who reported that stakeholders associated with the Aliwal Shoal MPA in South Africa perceived the MPA to have long-term value for conservation and socio-economic development. MPAs were viewed as contributing to tourism growth, supporting employment creation, and promoting regional economic development, while also safeguarding fisheries and marine biodiversity to enable the sustainable use of marine resources (Cele et al., 2017).

Concerning the support for MPAs, there were no statistically significant differences between the samples. Both samples supported MPAs through financial means, participated in activities provided by MPAs, shared information, and complied with regulations. They also agreed that MPAs add value to the surrounding areas through economic development and conservation. These findings align with previous studies demonstrating broad public support for MPAs, even in areas where access restrictions or limited knowledge exist (Hastings & Ryan, 2017; Kotowicz et al., 2017). Specifically, in Mozambique, support for MPAs appears to persist despite a limited understanding of their purpose, likely because respondents perceived MPAs as providing socio-

economic and conservation benefits and adding value to surrounding communities. However, social support remains dynamic and is shaped by ongoing stakeholder communication, engagement, education, governance, and perceptions of effectiveness (Voyer et al, 2015; Kelly et al., 2017; Cvitanovic et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020). Consequently, support for MPAs in Mozambique and South Africa may change over time.

Regarding the perceived effectiveness of MPAs in the case studies (thus with a focus on South Africa and Mozambique, respectively), perceptions differed significantly in the respective countries, with some notable exceptions. Respondents from both case studies agreed that MPAs contribute to job creation, protect cultural and historical sites, and enforce regulations. Additionally, both groups perceived the MPAs in their respective countries as sharing the same goals and mitigating threats to the ocean. However, respondents in both samples were neutral regarding the public involvement in MPA decision-making. Similar concerns were identified by Cele et al. (2017), who found that although stakeholders valued MPAs, they were dissatisfied with the limited consultation processes used for establishing the MPA. In contrast with the results, Lucrezi (2021) found that prior stakeholder involvement in Mozambique's PPMR fostered positive perceptions of engagement and trust in management, highlighting the role of participatory governance in shaping positive MPA perceptions. Statistically significant differences emerged between the countries, with the South African sample expressing more positive perceptions of MPA effectiveness across all dimensions, including conservation, education, tourism, socio-cultural, marketing, and management. In contrast, the Mozambican sample reported fewer positive views. However, despite these positive perceptions, governance challenges persist in South African MPAs. For example, Francolini et al. (2023) highlighted negative perceptions that respondents, including tourists and recreationists, had regarding the management effectiveness of the Aliwal Shoal MPA. The concerns included non-compliance, inadequate monitoring, corruption, and access restrictions, underscoring the importance of ongoing stakeholder engagement and improved management.

Table 1: Respondents' agreement level with statements regarding the purpose of MPAs in general, the benefits of MPAs, and the effectiveness of MPAs in Mozambique and South Africa.

ITEMS	MOZAMBIQUE (n = 241)				SOUTH AFRICA (n = 263)				Significance test
Purpose of MPAs in general	MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	
MPAs were established to protect and conserve the ocean's resources and species.	3.6	Agree	1.16	0.07	4.6	Strongly agree	0.84	0.05	ANOVA (1,494), F = 136.41, p <0.001
MPAs were established to protect areas with historical, cultural, and spiritual value.	2.5	Neutral	1.20	0.08	3.5	Agree	1.23	0.08	ANOVA (1,462), F = 77.85, p <0.001
MPAs were established for scientific research, environmental monitoring, and education.	3.3	Neutral	1.09	0.07	4.2	Agree	0.95	0.06	ANOVA (1,487), F = 102.97, p <0.001
MPAs were established to regulate fishing activities.	3.3	Neutral	1.22	0.08	4.2	Agree	1.10	0.07	ANOVA (1,487), F = 68.65, p <0.001
MPAs were established to minimise disturbances to the marine environment.	3.6	Agree	1.15	0.07	4.5	Strongly agree	0.93	0.06	ANOVA (1,491), F = 90.23, p <0.001
MPAs have zones to regulate/ban harmful activities.	3.4	Neutral	1.25	0.08	4.5	Strongly agree	1.02	0.07	ANOVA (1,487), F = 97.52, p <0.001
There are different regulations in each MPA.	2.8	Neutral	1.30	0.09	3.9	Agree	1.13	0.080	ANOVA (1,431), F = 95.35, p <0.001
MPAs have boundaries.	3.4	Neutral	1.22	0.08	4.4	Agree	0.97	0.06	ANOVA (1,474), F = 92.68, p <0.001
MPAs are only located in coastal areas.	2.6	Neutral	1.36	0.09	2.9	Neutral	1.43	0.10	ANOVA (1,453), F = 3.75, p = 0.05

ITEMS	MOZAMBIQUE (n = 241) MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	SOUTH AFRICA (n = 263) MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	Significance test
Purpose of MPAs in general									
There are different types of MPAs with different levels of use allowed.	3.0	Neutral	1.33	0.09	4.2	Agree	0.98	0.07	ANOVA (1,441), F = 119.08, p <0.001
Benefits of MPAs									
MPAs contribute to the conservation of marine ecosystems.	4.5	Strongly agree	0.96	0.06	4.6	Strongly agree	0.84	0.05	ANOVA (1,497), F = 2.13, p = 0.14
MPAs protect the cultures and traditions of coastal communities.	3.8	Agree	1.12	0.07	3.8	Agree	1.07	0.07	ANOVA (1,469), F = 0.12, p = 0.73
MPAs protect historical sites for future generations.	4.0	Agree	1.13	0.07	4.0	Agree	1.10	0.07	ANOVA (1,471), F = 0.20, p = 0.65
MPAs lessen pollution in marine and coastal areas.	4.1	Agree	1.08	0.07	4.1	Agree	1.10	0.07	ANOVA (1,490), F = 0.01, p = 0.93
MPAs contribute to the economic stability of a region.	3.8	Agree	1.08	0.07	3.8	Agree	1.15	0.08	ANOVA (1,465), F = 0.35, p = 0.56
MPAs contribute to the protection of endangered species.	4.4	Agree	0.94	0.06	4.6	Strongly agree	0.89	0.06	ANOVA (1,493), F = 4.75, p = 0.03
MPAs prevent overfishing in their borders.	4.3	Agree	1.02	0.07	4.3	Agree	1.09	0.07	ANOVA (1,489), F = 0.00, p = 0.98
MPAs educate people about the ocean through their facilities.	4.1	Agree	1.01	0.07	4.2	Agree	1.09	0.07	ANOVA (1,489), F = 0.87, p = 0.35
MPAs restrict harmful recreational or commercial activities.	4.1	Agree	1.05	0.07	4.3	Agree	0.99	0.06	ANOVA (1,490), F = 5.75, p = 0.02
MPAs support tourism and recreation activities.	3.9	Agree	1.07	0.07	4.1	Agree	1.05	0.07	ANOVA (1,487), F = 4.40, p = 0.04

ITEMS	MOZAMBIQUE (n = 241) MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	SOUTH AFRICA (n = 263) MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	Significance test
Purpose of MPAs in general									
MPAs prevent marine habitat degradation.	4.3	Agree	0.91	0.06	4.5	Strongly agree	0.92	0.06	ANOVA (1,492), F = 2.32, p = 0.13
MPAs regenerate the populations of marine species, including fish stocks.	4.2	Agree	0.97	0.06	4.4	Agree	0.95	0.06	ANOVA (1,482), F = 3.06, p = 0.08
MPAs cause spillover of fish populations that benefit the surrounding coastal and marine areas.	3.8	Agree	1.04	0.07	4.1	Agree	1.15	0.08	ANOVA (1,455), F = 5.60, p = 0.02
MPAs are beneficial and valuable.	4.5	Strongly agree	0.89	0.06	4.6	Strongly agree	0.85	0.05	ANOVA (1,492), F = 0.87, p = 0.35
Support of MPAs									
I financially support MPAs (e.g., paying entry tax, donations, etc.).	3.6	Agree	1.26	0.08	3.7	Agree	1.03	0.07	ANOVA (1,465), F = 0.91, p = 0.34
I share positive information about MPAs (e.g., social media, word of mouth).	3.8	Agree	1.11	0.07	3.9	Agree	1.06	0.07	ANOVA (1,474), F = 0.24, p = 0.62
MPAs should enforce regulations that restrict use.	4.2	Agree	0.90	0.06	4.2	Agree	0.95	0.06	ANOVA (1,482), F = 0.10, p = 0.76
MPAs boost the economy of surrounding regions.	3.9	Agree	0.95	0.06	3.9	Agree	0.98	0.07	ANOVA (1,462), F = 0.15, p = 0.70
I visit MPAs to enjoy the scenery, nature, and cleanliness.	4.4	Agree	0.88	0.06	4.5	Strongly agree	0.84	0.05	ANOVA (1,488), F = 1.48, p = 0.22

ITEMS	MOZAMBIQUE (n = 241) MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	SOUTH AFRICA (n = 263) MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	Significance test
Purpose of MPAs in general									
I participate in the conservation initiatives launched by MPAs (e.g., beach clean-ups).	3.7	Agree	1.17	0.08	3.7	Agree	1.15	0.07	ANOVA (1,474), F = 0.64, p = 0.42
MPAs preserve the value of the marine environment.	4.4	Agree	0.83	0.05	4.6	Strongly agree	0.79	0.05	ANOVA (1,494), F = 2.41, p = 0.12
MPAs add value to societies/communities of surrounding areas.	4.2	Agree	0.92	0.06	4.3	Agree	0.92	0.06	ANOVA (1,480), F = 0.35, p = 0.55
MPAs add value to the economy of surrounding areas.	4.1	Agree	0.96	0.06	4.1	Agree	0.96	0.06	ANOVA (1,471), F = 0.01, p = 0.90
I support the restrictions and regulations of MPAs.	4.4	Agree	0.87	0.06	4.5	Strongly agree	0.85	0.05	ANOVA (1,487), F = 0.74, p = 0.39
I take part in recreational activities in MPAs.	4.2	Agree	1.03	0.07	4.1	Agree	1.10	0.07	ANOVA (1,475), F = 0.91, p = 0.34
Effectiveness of MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa									
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa contribute to conserving coastal and marine ecosystems.	4.2	Agree	0.92	0.06	4.5	Strongly agree	0.84	0.05	ANOVA (1,465), F = 10.08, p <0.001
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa contribute to job creation in the community.	4.0	Agree	0.94	0.06	3.9	Agree	0.99	0.07	ANOVA (1,446), F = 0.09, p = 0.76
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa conserve sites with cultural, spiritual, and historical value.	3.8	Agree	0.93	0.06	3.8	Agree	1.03	0.07	ANOVA (1,432), F = 0.00, p = 0.98

ITEMS	MOZAMBIQUE (n = 241)				SOUTH AFRICA (n = 263)				Significance test
Purpose of MPAs in general	MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa enforce regulations in coastal and marine areas.	4.0	Agree	0.96	0.06	4.0	Agree	1.08	0.07	ANOVA (1,444), F = 0.01, p = 0.93
The residents and communities are involved in the decision-making of MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa.	3.3	Neutral	0.97	0.06	3.3	Neutral	1.03	0.08	ANOVA (1,392), F = 0.07, p = 0.79
Educational activities are regularly held at MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa.	3.2	Neutral	1.04	0.07	3.6	Agree	1.14	0.09	ANOVA (1,406), F = 10.92, p <0.001
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa help to repopulate fish stocks.	3.8	Agree	1.01	0.07	4.2	Agree	0.91	0.06	ANOVA (1,447), F = 16.28, p <0.001
I can easily access information about MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa.	3.1	Neutral	1.13	0.07	3.8	Agree	1.14	0.08	ANOVA (1,436), F = 39.43, p <0.001
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa are generally effective and well-managed.	3.3	Neutral	1.00	0.07	3.6	Agree	1.09	0.08	ANOVA (1,415), F = 4.69, p = 0.03
Some MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa are more effective than others.	3.6	Agree	0.86	0.06	4.1	Agree	0.99	0.07	ANOVA (1,396), F = 24.26, p <0.001
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa increase the demand for ecotourism.	3.9	Agree	0.87	0.06	4.1	Agree	0.95	0.06	ANOVA (1,449), F = 4.74, p = 0.03
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa increase participation in sustainable recreational activities.	3.8	Agree	0.96	0.06	4.1	Agree	0.97	0.07	ANOVA (1,440), F = 8.80, p <0.001

ITEMS	MOZAMBIQUE (n = 241)				SOUTH AFRICA (n = 263)				Significance test
Purpose of MPAs in general	MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	MEAN	LEVEL	SD	SE	
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa boost community pride.	3.7	Agree	0.97	0.06	4.1	Agree	0.93	0.07	ANOVA (1,430), F = 16.20, p <0.001
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa share the same goals.	3.6	Agree	0.94	0.06	3.6	Agree	1.07	0.08	ANOVA (1,402), F = 0.02, p = 0.89
MPAs in Mozambique/South Africa mitigate threats (pollution, climate change, overfishing, etc.)	3.9	Agree	0.97	0.06	4.1	Agree	0.97	0.07	ANOVA (1,451), F = 3.78, p = 0.05

Conclusion

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are widely recognised as effective tools for conserving marine ecosystems in the long term while providing ecosystem services and delivering socio-economic benefits to stakeholders. Nature-based tourism in MPAs contributes to the sustainability of these areas and the surrounding communities by attracting visitors who participate in activities within the MPAs. In developing countries, such as Mozambique and South Africa, tourism within MPAs is vital as a strategy for socio-economic development and conservation, positioning tourists as key stakeholders in MPAs. However, limited tourist awareness, mixed perceptions of MPA effectiveness, and concerns related to use restrictions may influence their support of MPAs. Addressing this gap, this study examined tourists' awareness, perceptions, and support for MPAs in Mozambique and South Africa using a quantitative approach to make best-practice recommendations for sustainable tourism, governance, and marketing in MPAs. There was a difference between the samples in terms of participants' education, residence status, and preferred marine recreational activities, which may have influenced further results regarding their awareness, knowledge and perceptions.

The findings indicate that while respondents in both countries generally recognise the existence of MPAs, this awareness does not consistently translate into place-specific knowledge or frequent engagement with individual MPAs. The limited number of tourists and recreationists who could identify MPAs in the respective countries shows a gap in the visibility of MPAs as a tourism destination. Enhancing place-based communication, including interpretive signage and on-site information, may improve visitor awareness (Mann-Lang et al., 2023). In addition, integrating MPAs more deliberately into destination marketing and tourism products could strengthen visitor engagement and position MPAs as central components of sustainable coastal tourism. The popularity of online and peer-based MPA information sources in this study further highlights the importance of using targeted digital marketing and social communication strategies to circulate MPA-related information.

Across both countries, tourists demonstrated a shared understanding of MPAs as designated areas intended to conserve marine ecosystems and regulate human activities, which reflects a general awareness of the conservation function of MPAs and knowledge of environmental protection and restrictions. However, the limited recognition of broader sustainability objectives, such as ecosystem services, socio-cultural values, and long-term benefits, shows a narrow view tourists have of MPAs. Thus, highlighting the necessity for tourism governance and marketing approaches that communicate the holistic role of MPAs within sustainable coastal destinations to improve visitors' perceptions of MPAs.

Differences in perceptions of the purpose of MPAs were evident between the two countries. The participants in South Africa displayed a clearer understanding of MPA purposes, likely reflecting greater exposure to MPAs and related information. In contrast, more neutral perceptions among participants in Mozambique suggest gaps in awareness of management objectives, zoning, and regulatory frameworks, likely due to limited exposure and short-term engagement, which could affect tourist knowledge (Moritsch et al., 2019), impacting compliance and sustainability

outcomes. Limited exposure could be addressed by tourism and recreational industries operating in MPAs, such as scuba dive centres, offering long-term stay discounts and sharing more MPA-related information with tourists.

Despite these differences, tourists in both contexts broadly recognised the conservation, socio-cultural, and economic benefits of MPAs and expressed strong support for them, highlighting MPAs as valued assets to tourists and recreationists. However, support remains dynamic and dependent on continued education, transparent governance, and meaningful engagement. To maintain the support of tourists, it is therefore necessary for governing authorities and MPA management to develop inclusive and transparent stakeholder engagement processes (Cele et al., 2017; Moritsch et al., 2019; Tuohy et al., 2022; Mann-Lang et al., 2023).

The perception findings highlight that while MPAs are widely recognised for supporting conservation, cultural preservation, job creation, and tourism development, perceptions of their effectiveness vary across countries. South African MPAs were generally viewed more positively than Mozambican ones, though governance challenges, including limited public participation, non-compliance, and management concerns, remain. Thus, strengthening engagement and communication with stakeholders could promote sustainable tourism that balances ecological protection with socio-economic benefits.

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening sustainable tourism outcomes in MPAs requires a more integrated approach to governance and marketing. From a governance perspective, enhancing stakeholder engagement, transparency, and communication could improve trust and perceived effectiveness. From a marketing perspective, MPAs should be promoted not only as conservation spaces but as attractive tourism destinations with sustainability benefits clearly communicated through popular media sources. Aligning governance practices with strategic marketing can transform existing tourist support into informed engagement, reinforcing the long-term resilience of MPAs in Mozambique, South Africa, and similar coastal destinations. Future research should investigate how destination marketing strategies can more effectively integrate MPAs and tourism activities into their offerings, thereby enhancing tourists' understanding of the broader value of MPAs for long-term sustainability. Future research could also determine the willingness of tourists to engage with MPAs and identify strategies to enhance their engagement with tourists visiting these areas.

This study has several limitations. Data collection was constrained by time and funding, restricting research to two short trips and a single MPA in each country, which limited the sample size. Permit restrictions in South Africa required data collection outside the Boulders Beach zone, influencing the tourist profile. Language barriers in Mozambique and among non-Portuguese-speaking tourists limited the distribution of questionnaires to some participants. Finally, some differences in demographic profiles may have influenced responses, calling for caution in interpreting the comparison between the samples. Despite these limitations, the findings and recommendations remain applicable for the management and marketing of similar MPAs in Mozambique and South Africa.

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From Crisis to Resilience: Risk and Safety Management in South African Trail Running Events during COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected trail-running events in South Africa, focusing on the risk and safety management strategies applied before, during and after the pandemic. As trail running represents a growing component of South Africa's sport tourism industry, the research aims to understand how event managers adapted to major disruptions and what operational lessons support future resilience.

Study design/methodology/approach: A qualitative research design was used, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 10 South African trail-running event managers. Participants were predominantly female, highly educated, and had an average of 5 years' experience in event management. Interviews explored organisational practices across three stages: pre-COVID, during COVID and post-COVID, to capture shifts in planning, decision-making and resource allocation.

Results: Findings show notable changes in management priorities. Before COVID-19, key elements included support staff, safety protocols, event coverage, community involvement and participant management. During the pandemic, managers strengthened risk planning, adjusted budgets and improved volunteer coordination. Post-COVID efforts focus on rebuilding event reputation, restoring participant confidence and managing finances more strategically. Recommendations include developing crisis management plans, expanding event reach, enhancing youth involvement, and securing additional sponsorships.

Originality/value: This study provides practical insights into crisis management in South African trail-running events and offers guidance to strengthen resilience and ensure sustainable sector growth.

Keywords: sport tourism; sport events; trail running; the COVID-19 pandemic; crisis and disaster management; resilience.

Introduction

In South Africa, sports events contribute approximately R60 billion annually (>€3 million)[1], accounting for a substantial share of the country's GDP (Global Africa Network, 2024). One of the sports events that has contributed to this economic impact is trail running. Trail running involves running on non-paved roads with various natural obstacles (Millar, 2019). This niche sport has experienced a remarkable rise in popularity, with numerous trail running events emerging across

[1] €1=R19,16 (21 January 2026)

South Africa in recent years (McKay et al., 2019). Scheer et al. (2020) are of the opinion that trail running is the most popular form of off-road running. This can be due to the unique experience that derives from the genuineness of the landscapes and the simplicity of enjoying nature while also challenging one's mind and body (Perić & Slavić, 2019). Despite fewer participants, trail running events can boost local tourism economies and attract foreign visitors, especially to small towns and areas near national parks (McEwan et al., 2020).

The first COVID-19 case in South Africa was reported in March 2020 in Durban (South African Tourism, 2020). The government declared a national state of emergency, cancelling all mass gatherings, including sports events (Nhamo et al., 2020). The cancellation of major sporting events such as the Two Ocean Marathon, ABSA Cape Epic, Athletics South Africa's Athletics Grand Prix Series, and SPAR Women's Challenge resulted in an estimated R1.2 billion (>€62 million) in economic losses (Perold *et al.*, 2020). As with other sports, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted trail running. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the postponement and, in some cases, the cancellation of trail running events worldwide (Sati et al., 2022). This was also true for trail running events in South Africa, which were postponed or cancelled from early 2020 until mid-June to mid-August 2022 (Visser, 2020; Collins & Bosch, 2023).

The importance of risk and safety plans in managing trail running events cannot be overstated. These plans are essential for ensuring the safety and security of participants, spectators, and the public. They typically include elements such as insurance, waivers, markings and signage, cut-off times, rules and penalties, and strategies for reducing risk (Buning & Gibson, 2016; Pasasen, 2018; Perić & Slavić, 2019; American Trail Running Association, 2021). Traditionally, these plans have emphasised environmental risks and measures to protect participants' physical well-being, reflecting a strong focus on mitigating on-course dangers and enforcing compliance (Perić & Slavić, 2019; American Trail Running Association [ATRA], 2021).

Unfortunately, these plans did not adequately address health emergencies or disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Scheer et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for trail running events to adapt their risk and safety plans to include health crises. This adaptation is crucial for building resilience and ensuring the sport's future growth (Scheer *et al.*, 2021; Snider-McGrath, 2020). Implementing resilience strategies can help events recover from crises more effectively and maintain a positive image, which is essential for attracting participants and ensuring the sustainability of the sport (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Prayag, 2018). Taking all the above into account, this study aims to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the management of South African trail running events.

The objectives of this study are to **analyse the socio-demographic profiles of trail-running managers in South Africa** and to **determine the current risk- and safety-management strategies they employ**. In addition, the study aims to **assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on trail running in South Africa**, and to **analyse the resilience strategies implemented in the context of trail running post-COVID-19**. Together, these objectives provide a comprehensive understanding of how managerial characteristics, operational practices and adaptive responses have evolved within the sector. This research can assist event managers in

developing recommendations to adapt their management approach to recovery and ensure their event is resilient to pandemics and other risks in the future.

Risk and safety management models in trail running events

Trail running event management involves a series of activities and responsibilities to plan, organise, and execute successful trail running races or events (ATRA, 2021). It requires attention to detail, coordination, and a focus on providing a safe, enjoyable, and well-organised experience for participants (ATRA, 2021). Pasanen (2018) identified 9 key aspects of sport event management, including trail running events. These 9 key aspects are: event goals and objectives, target audience, budgeting, event marketing, event logistics, event location, event evaluation, risk management, and event safety.

While event management encompasses all the previously mentioned aspects, this discussion focuses on risk management and safety, which are critical when managing an event during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Ashwin, 2021). Trail-running event managers rely on established frameworks for effective risk management. These include the 'Five Steps to Risk Assessment' (Collins & Collins, 2013), the 'Risk Assessment Model' (Swartbrooke et al., 2003), the 'Risk Management Process (RMP)' (Morgan & Dimmock, 2006), and an integrated approach. Together, these frameworks offer structured methods for identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks while ensuring the safety of participants, staff, and spectators.

The 'Five Steps to Risk Assessment' is a foundational method for risk management. It begins with identifying hazards on trails, such as rocks or steep drops, and then assessing who might be affected by them. Risks are then evaluated and addressed through safety precautions, such as safer trail routes or safety gear. Documenting findings ensures consistent implementation, while regular reviews keep the assessment relevant (Collins & Collins).

The 'Risk Assessment Model' provides additional strategies, including risk avoidance, reduction, transfer, and retention. Risk avoidance eliminates hazardous activities, such as cancelling events in severe weather. Risk reduction minimises risks by employing trained staff and providing medical personnel. Risk transfer shifts liability to third parties, such as insurers, whereas risk retention accepts manageable risks, including minor injuries (Wilks & Davis, 2000; Swarbrooke et al., 2003).

The 'Risk Management Process (RMP)' outlines a seven-step approach: establishing the context, identifying and analysing risks, evaluating and treating them, monitoring and reviewing, and engaging in stakeholder consultation. This process involves defining event goals and criteria, utilising tools such as risk evaluation matrices to assess likelihood and severity and implementing mitigation strategies. Regular stakeholder communication ensures inclusivity and effectiveness (Morgan & Dimmock, 2006).

An integrated approach combines these frameworks into a cohesive strategy. Risk identification follows the 'Five Steps', while the RMP and evaluation matrices analyse and treat risks. Strategies such as avoidance, reduction, transfer, and retention are employed, with regular reviews to refine these processes. Stakeholder engagement ensures transparency and collaboration (Miles &

Shipway, 2020). This holistic method enables event managers to anticipate potential concerns and minimise their impact.

Importance of resilience in event risk and safety management

Resilience is crucial in managing risks during trail running events. Defined as a system's ability to adapt and maintain core functions during disruptions (Holling, 1973, as cited by Jiang et al., 2019), resilience enables systems to respond to challenges and recover effectively. Key dimensions of resilience include human capital, which reflects staff adaptability, and lifestyle identity, which relates to managers' satisfaction and decision-making.

Strong stakeholder relationships, continuity insurance, and thorough staff induction also contribute to organisational resilience (Biggs, 2011; Chowdhury et al., 2018). Resilient event management involves adjusting structures and processes to anticipate and respond to turbulence (Borekci et al., 2014). Models of resilience emphasise three critical dimensions: individual (staff), system (processes), and supply chain (networks).

These dimensions allow organisations to adapt to challenges and maintain operations (Hall et al., 2017; Amore et al., 2018). The Dynamic Capability (DC) approach supports resilience by leveraging internal and external resources and modifying operational routines. This capability ensures that organisations maintain functionality despite disruptions (Jiang et al., 2019). Integrating resilience into event management thus strengthens preparedness and response capabilities.

Risk and safety management during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for flexible and innovative approaches to risk management in trail running events. Research during this period demonstrated how event managers adapted to ensure participant safety and event continuity. Trail runners, as Sati et al. (2022) observed, often relied on personal precautions and compliance with health guidelines to mitigate risks.

Event-specific interventions, such as non-pharmaceutical measures, were also crucial. Tomino and Perić (2022) emphasised strategies like limiting crowds, enforcing physical distancing, and implementing contactless payment systems. Adjustments in trail design and management practices also played a role. Schneider et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of trail density management and visitor behaviour monitoring to maintain safety during the pandemic.

These adaptations underscored the need for site-specific risk mitigation strategies. The pandemic also accelerated the digitisation of endurance events. Svensson and Radmann (2023) noted that Swedish event managers adopted digital technologies to sustain operations, revealing financial disparities between commercial and non-commercial sports entities. These shifts emphasised the importance of financial and technological flexibility in event management.

Overall, the pandemic underscored the value of adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and innovative risk management strategies. The lessons learned during this period underscore the importance of comprehensive risk and safety management in ensuring the long-term success of trail running events.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design within the interpretivism paradigm to understand the subjective experiences of trail running event managers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). Phenomenology was selected as the research approach since its goal is to develop a rich, detailed description of the participant's experience, with the aim of gaining insight into the underlying meanings and structures that shape it (Converse, 2012). The detailed description needed within this study was to determine what risk and safety management plans were implemented at the trail running event pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic.

Participants

The researcher identified trail running events in South Africa primarily through Facebook and supplemented missing contact details with internet searches. Event managers were contacted telephonically, informed about the study, and invited to participate. Upon consent, interviews were scheduled at mutually agreed-upon times. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between May and August 2022. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or telephone to accommodate participants' preferences and availability.

Online platforms enabled face-to-face interaction despite pandemic restrictions, while telephone interviews ensured participation from managers with limited internet access, which is common in more rural areas. The platform choice did not affect the depth of responses, as all interviews followed the same semi-structured guide.

A purposive non-probability sampling strategy was adopted to recruit trail running event managers who satisfied predefined inclusion criteria, namely their professional role as event managers, voluntary consent to participate, active engagement in events within South Africa, and possession of access to essential operational data such as registration records, budgetary allocations, marketing strategies, event objectives, and target audience profiles (Maxwell, 2008).

Data collection

Ten semi-structured interviews, ranging from 35 minutes to 1 hour, were conducted, achieving data saturation by interview seven, when no new themes or categories emerged from responses. Subsequent interviews confirmed repetition of information, indicating that additional data would not yield new insights.

The interview guide consisted of three sections. Section A gathered socio-demographic information, Section B collected trail run event profiles, and Section C explored the impact of the pandemic on event management. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word. The data analysis approach employed was manual thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017). An inductive approach was also used, in which the researchers moved from specific observations of trail running managers to broader generalisations and theory regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the management of South African trail running events.

Ethical adherence

The study was reviewed and approved by the relevant scientific and research ethics committees and categorised as a low-risk study, with the ethics approval number: NWU-00603-22-A4.

Results

This section provides an exploration of the research findings, offering a comprehensive understanding of the socio-demographic profiles of event managers and trail running events in South Africa as well as (1) the pre-pandemic safety and risk protocols, (2) the pandemic response and adaptations in risk and safety management and (3) post-pandemic risk and safety management plans trail running event managers implemented after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Socio-demographic profile of trail running event managers and trail running events in South Africa

Table 1 summarises the main findings regarding the socio-demographic profiles of the interview participants and the trail running events included in this study.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents and profile of the trail running events

Categories	***Results***
Socio-demographic profile of participants	
Gender	*Female (6 participants);* *Male (4 participants)*
Average age	*48 years*
Highest education	*Higher-education qualifications (7 participants);* *National Senior Certificates (3 participants)*
Designation/position	*Founder and/or owner of the event (5 participants);* *Manager (4 participants);* *Director (1 participant)*
Number of years in designation and/or position	*Average of 5 years*
Number of years involved with trail running events	*Average of 5 years*
Trail running event profile	
Province/s event is held in	*Western Cape (3 participants) /* *Eastern Cape (3 participants);* *KwaZulu-Natal (2 participants);* *Northern Cape (2 participants)*
Duration of the event	*Average of 1 day*
Distance categories at the event	*Three distance categories* *(5 km; 10-20 km; 40 km)*
The average number of years the event has been hosted (number of editions of the event)	*5 editions*
The average number of participants at the event	*320 participants*
Event target market	*Local and national trail runners*

Based on the results, Table 1 reveals a distinct socio-demographic profile of managers involved in trail running events. Most participants are female, with an average age of 48 years, and hold higher education qualifications. Several participants are founders or owners of the event, demonstrating a wealth of experience with an average of five years in their current roles. The trail running events are primarily concentrated in the coastal provinces of South Africa, with three events each in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape, and two in KwaZulu-Natal, making it eight of 10 events hosted in the coastal provinces. These events typically span one day, offering athletes three distance categories (5 km, 10-20 km, and 40 km) to cater to diverse preferences and capabilities. The events boast a relatively brief history; each has successfully hosted more than five editions. This

highlights the relative novelty of trail running events in South Africa and the potential for their growth as a prominent sport. In terms of scale, the events attract an average of over 320 participants. These events' target market spans local and national trail runners, suggesting broad appeal and reach within the trail running community.

Safety and risk management plans of trail running events in South Africa

To determine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on risk and safety management at trail running events, respondents were asked about the typical risk and safety management plans they had in place at their events before the pandemic, how they adapted these plans during the pandemic and how they are going to adapt in the future. Table 2 outlines the three themes: pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. This is followed by the sub-themes, which was identified using codes and keywords associated with the sub-theme, supported by a brief description of the sub-theme.

To construct this table, the participants' answers were analysed by identifying keywords, which were then coded. These codes were grouped into sub-themes for each main theme. When a sub-theme consisted of multiple codes, its label reflected the variety of codes used; if a sub-theme was represented by a single code, both shared the same label. Mentions of each code or sub-theme were systematically reported. Additionally, respondents provided insights on adapting event management practices to build resilience against future crises and on managing the impact of COVID-19 on trail running events in South Africa. Each participant was assigned a code to represent their answers. This code is the letter M (for Manager), followed by the specific number for the participant, for example, the first participant is M1, and so forth. The themes and sub-themes identified from the responses are discussed below.

Table 2. Risk and safety management plans of trail running events

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes / Keywords	Description / Participants Quote	Link with previous risk and safety management models
Theme 1: Pre-Pandemic	Support staff (9 mentions)	Medical teams, sweeper/sweepers, crew and mountain teams.	Medical teams should be deployed at regular intervals, such as every 10 km. Ensure that professional medical personnel are readily available to assist runners in the event of medical emergencies.	This sub-theme aligns with the *Five Steps to Risk Assessment, the Risk Assessment Model,* and *the Risk Management Process (RMP).* The presence of medical teams, sweepers, and mountain crews reflects systematic risk identification and the implementation of control measures. These practices reduce the likelihood and severity of injuries (risk reduction) and are formally planned, coordinated, and reviewed through structured safety and operational processes.
	Race Safety Protocols (9 mentions)	Extractions, trackers, and waterpoints.	These protocols are crucial for ensuring participants' safety, enabling evacuation in the event of major medical crises, and using trackers for long-distance runners to monitor their location.	Race safety protocols align with the *Five Steps to Risk Assessment* and an *integrated risk management approach*. Measures such as extraction plans, GPS tracking, and strategically placed water points demonstrate proactive risk identification, risk evaluation, and mitigation. The coordinated use of technological and logistical controls reflects the integration of multiple frameworks into a cohesive safety strategy.
	Event Cover (7 mentions)	Public liability insurance, risk	Event managers emphasised the importance of public liability insurance to	This sub-theme relates primarily to the *Risk Assessment Model* and the *RMP*.

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes / Keywords	Description / Participants Quote	Link with previous risk and safety management models
		categorisation, insurance, and waivers.	cover potential liabilities and of categorising events by risk level to comply with legal requirements.	Public liability insurance and waivers clearly illustrate risk transfer by shifting legal and financial responsibility to third parties, while risk categorisation and compliance requirements reflect contextual risk analysis and structured risk treatment within formal management processes.
	Local Community Support (4 mentions)	Police and municipality.	Event managers emphasised the importance of submitting event applications to local municipalities and obtaining risk categories from the South African Police Service (SAPS) to ensure community support and compliance with local regulations.	Local community support aligns most strongly with the *RMP* and an *integrated approach*. Engagement with municipalities and SAPS reflects stakeholder consultation, context establishment, and coordinated emergency planning, strengthening shared responsibility and collective risk governance beyond the event organisers alone.
	Participant Management (3 mentions)	Communication with participants, emergency number, compulsory list to run with, and entry information.	This code is linked to risk reduction, as most communication focuses on the security and well-being of athletes to reduce the impact of injuries during the event. Event managers informed athletes in advance of the specific protocols. They ensured that participants had essential items, such as a charged phone with an emergency number, to enhance their safety during the event.	Participant management aligns with the *Five Steps to Risk Assessment* and the *Risk Assessment Model*. Communication of safety information, compulsory equipment lists, and emergency contact requirements address identified participant risks and serve as control measures to reduce harm and enhance preparedness.

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes / Keywords	Description / Participants Quote	Link with previous risk and safety management models
Theme 2: During the pandemic	COVID protocols (7 mentions)	Fully vaccinated, negative PCR test, hand sanitiser, temperature checks, indemnity forms and extra staff.	Event managers implemented several COVID-19 protocols, as emphasised by Manager 4, who stated: *"Each runner just needs to be fully vaccinated or display a negative PCR test not older than 72 hours when arriving at our event".* Additional measures included hiring extra staff and regulating crowded event areas to ensure adherence to COVID-19 protocols, such as installing sanitation stations, conducting temperature checks, and requiring completion of indemnity forms.	COVID-19 protocols align predominantly with the *Risk Management Process* and the *Risk Assessment Model*. Measures such as vaccination requirements, PCR testing, sanitation stations, and crowd management demonstrate active risk identification, evaluation, and treatment, with ongoing monitoring and review. These interventions primarily serve as risk-reduction strategies targeting public health threats.
	Event alterations (4 mentions)	Participant limits, batch starts, and multiple smaller events on the same day.	This involved different ways of adapting the trail running events. This was outlined by manager 6, who stated: "*We make use of batch starts. The big reason for using it is that events was capped at 100 people per event, so if you made use of staggered starts you can basically say that you have 4 events on one day instead of one big event".*	Event alterations align with the *Risk Assessment Model* and the *RMP*. Participant caps, batch starts, and smaller event formats illustrate risk avoidance and risk reduction strategies aimed at minimising exposure and uncertainty. These actions reflect evaluative decision-making and adaptive risk treatment in response to external constraints.
	Event cancellations (3 mentions)	Cancelled, governmental regulations and travel bans.	This code can be linked to the risk retention risk assessment, seeing that the event managers retain the risk of cancelling the event if necessary. Three managers indicated that: *"We actually retain the risk of cancellation. Potentially*	Event cancellations align most closely with the *Risk Assessment Model*, particularly risk retention. By cancelling events due to travel bans or governmental restrictions, managers accepted unavoidable financial and

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes / Keywords	Description / Participants Quote	Link with previous risk and safety management models
			you [must] refund if something like that happened", as stated by M2. Another statement for M4 indicated that the event cancellation was due to an international travel ban, stating: *"In the second year (2021), things were made easier to host an event, but we still had a total international ban".*	operational losses. This sub-theme does not align well with the *Five Steps to Risk Assessment* because the risk is non-site-specific and externally imposed.
Theme 3: Post-Pandemic	Plans for future resilience (3 mentions)	Enhancing safety protocols, improving risk management strategies, and ensuring financial sustainability.	Manager M1 emphasised the importance of having comprehensive safety measures such as GPS tracking and radio protocols to ensure the safety of participants: *"We've got radio coverage over the entire course. All the hundred-mile runners have a GPS tracker. So, we've got live tracking on all of them as well."* Additionally, Manager M2 emphasised the importance of public liability insurance and the need to retain risks associated with event cancellations due to extreme weather or security threats. Financial sustainability is also a key focus, with managers such as M5 and M9 emphasising the importance of securing sponsorships and managing budgets effectively to ensure event continuity. Manager M5 noted, *"We are looking for a title sponsor. I don't think any event of this calibre can run on its own."*	Plans for future resilience align with the *RMP* and an *integrated risk management approach*. Enhanced safety planning, insurance considerations, and financial sustainability strategies reflect long-term risk treatment, continuous learning, and strategic context setting informed by monitoring and review processes.

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes / Keywords	Description / Participants Quote	Link with previous risk and safety management models
	Key resilience features (3 mentions)	Detailed contingency planning, effective communication strategies, and the use of technology.	Key resilience features align with the *Five Steps to Risk Assessment*, the *Risk Assessment Model*, and an *integrated approach*. Contingency planning, improved communication, and the use of technologies such as GPS tracking support improved risk identification, risk reduction, and continuous review, strengthening overall event resilience and adaptability.	Manager M3 discussed the implementation of contingency plans involving local municipalities, police, and disaster management teams to handle emergencies: *"We did have our contingency plans and safety plans in place, and we handed it over to the municipality as well as the police."* Effective communication with participants is also crucial, as Manager M1 highlighted the importance of clear and detailed planning to ensure smooth operations: *"My written information and my written planning has improved dramatically. So, my crew tasks, spreadsheets have got a lot more involved, a lot more detailed."* Technologies such as GPS tracking and radio networks further enhance the safety and efficiency of events. Manager M10 pointed out the importance of adaptability and continuous improvement in event management: "*You can't just presume next year is gonna happen. You've gotta put effort into it each year, and that will create a better element of sustainability."*

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes / Keywords	Description / Participants Quote	Link with previous risk and safety management models
				Key resilience features align with the *Five Steps to Risk Assessment*, the *Risk Assessment Model*, and an *integrated approach*. Contingency planning, improved communication, and the use of technologies such as GPS tracking support improved risk identification, risk reduction, and continuous review, strengthening overall event resilience and adaptability.

As can be seen in Table 2, trail running event managers do not rely on a single risk and safety management framework but rather apply multiple models selectively and adaptively, depending on contextual demands. Pre-pandemic practices largely reflect structured and operational applications of established models, particularly the Five Steps to Risk Assessment and risk reduction strategies within the Risk Assessment Model. During the pandemic, the emphasis shifted towards dynamic risk evaluation, avoidance, and retention, aligning more strongly with the Risk Management Process and crisis-oriented decision-making. Post-pandemic adaptations demonstrate a clear move toward an integrated approach, where continuous review, stakeholder engagement, technological support, and financial sustainability are collectively embedded into event planning. This progression suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for more reflective, holistic, and resilient risk governance in trail running events. By linking empirical themes to theory, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how risk and safety management models are operationalised in practice and adapted during periods of uncertainty.

Conclusion

This study examined risk and safety management practices in South African trail running events, drawing on established frameworks such as the Five Steps to Risk Assessment (Collins & Collins), the Risk Assessment Model (Swarbrooke et al., 2003; Wilks & Davis, 2000), and the Risk Management Process (Morgan & Dimmock, 2006). The findings confirm that event managers operationalise these models through measures like medical support teams, extraction protocols, public liability insurance, and participant communication strategies. These practices reflect the principles of risk avoidance, reduction, transfer, and retention outlined in the literature.

A key focus of this study was resilience within trail running events during crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate that resilience was achieved through contingency planning, stakeholder engagement, and technological integration, aligning with the Dynamic Capability approach (Teece et al., 1997, as cited by Jiang et al., 2019) and resilience models discussed by Biggs (2011) and Hall et al. (2017). Post-pandemic strategies included enhanced safety protocols, improved communication systems, and financial sustainability measures such as securing sponsorships. These actions reflect the adaptive capacity emphasised in resilience theory, enabling event managers to maintain core functions and recover effectively during disruptions (Holling, 1973; Borekci et al., 2014). The integration of GPS tracking, radio networks, and detailed contingency plans further illustrates how resilience principles were operationalised in practice.

The socio-demographic analysis revealed that most managers are female, highly educated, and experienced. Events are concentrated in coastal provinces, typically last one day, and attract an average of 320 participants. However, the theoretical background provides limited coverage on socio-demographic factors and event profiling in trail running contexts. Consequently, this research is among the few studies to offer empirical insights into these dimensions, thereby contributing to a growing body of knowledge on trail-running event management in South Africa. Pandemic-driven adaptations, such as participant limits, staggered starts, and enhanced safety protocols, underscore the critical role of resilience and innovation in sustaining events during

crises. These findings highlight the need for integrated risk management strategies that combine traditional frameworks with flexible, context-specific approaches to ensure the long-term viability and safety of trail running events.

Based on the theoretical background and this study's findings, several practical recommendations emerge for trail running event managers. First, risk management should be strengthened by formalising processes using established models, such as the Five Steps to Risk Assessment and the Risk Management Process, to ensure the systematic identification and mitigation of hazards. Managers should integrate strategies of risk avoidance, reduction, transfer, and retention to effectively address diverse event risks.

Second, resilience must be embedded in event planning through detailed contingency plans, robust communication systems, and technology such as GPS tracking and radio networks to enhance adaptability during crises. Financial and operational sustainability should be prioritised by securing sponsorships and diversifying revenue streams, including virtual or hybrid event formats. Health and safety protocols require continuous review and improvement, with professional medical teams positioned strategically and equipped for emergencies. Collaboration with stakeholders, including municipalities, law enforcement agencies, and local communities, is essential to ensure compliance and secure resource support during disruptions.

Finally, addressing knowledge gaps through further research on socio-demographic profiles and resilience strategies specific to endurance sports will help develop industry-wide best practices and strengthen preparedness for future crises.

Overall, this study highlights that the future sustainability of trail running events will depend not only on effective risk management, but also on the capacity of event managers to anticipate, adapt, and learn from crises. In this regard, future research should expand on this study's findings by examining resilience strategies across endurance sport contexts, exploring longitudinal changes in risk and safety practices post-COVID-19, and further investigating the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on managerial decision-making. Comparative studies across regions or countries would also strengthen theoretical and practical understanding, contributing to more resilient and adaptive event management frameworks for the trail running industry.

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GenAI vs. Human-Tour Guides: Competition or Complementarity?

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates whether generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has the potential to eliminate the profession of tourist guiding by using AI itself as a tool of analysis.

Study design/methodology/approach: A qualitative case study design was adopted. Google Gemini and ChatGPT were selected as the study sample. The resulting outputs were analyzed using descriptive analysis to derive the study's conclusions.

Results: GenAI appears to be more complementary than threatening to tourist guiding; however, in some contexts it can compete with human guides. As technology advances, AI is still unable to replace several core aspects of what a guide does.

Originality/value: The limited research on tourist guiding in Türkiye supports the need for this study. Prior work indicates that one of the profession's biggest fears is replacement by AI, but this concern has generally been assessed using interviews with human guides. By examining outputs from GenAI systems directly, this study contributes a distinctive perspective.

Keywords: Tourism, Tourist Guiding, Artificial Intelligence, Google Gemini, ChatGPT

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is a broad, interdisciplinary field of computer science that aims to simulate human intelligence in machines (Yang, 2022). It encompasses techniques that enable computers to sense, reason, learn, communicate, and act intelligently in real-world situations. Although difficult to define with a single statement, there is broad agreement on several key concepts that characterize AI and the term's implications (Liu, Shapira & Yue, 2021). AI has unprecedented implications across industries, and technology continues to evolve rapidly. It includes a wide range of programs and tools, such as neural networks, virtual reality, big data, the Internet of Things, robotics, and machine learning (Knani, Echchakoui & Ladhari, 2022). The concept of AI has evolved considerably since its inception and was first introduced by computer scientist John McCarthy in 1956 (Li et al., 2025).

The tourism sector has progressively embraced AI to optimize operations, enhance customer experiences, and foster innovation (López-Naranjo et al., 2025). This integration has been gradual but transformative, altering how companies operate and connect with travelers (Erdős et al., 2025). In travel and tourism, AI methods have changed how people plan trips, experience destinations, and remember their journeys. AI is therefore increasingly viewed as an engine of the technology economy for strengthening tourism ecosystems, including sustainability (Siddik et al., 2025).

Robot guides and augmented or virtual reality may damage service quality and tourist experiences if not managed carefully (Seyitoğlu, Atsız & Akyüz, 2025). Researchers in Türkiye are exploring the future of tourist guiding from an AI perspective, including the potential contributions of

systems such as ChatGPT and Gemini (Aktaş, 2024). This underlines the need for further in-depth research on how technological progress will shape the profession in the country (Nazlı, 2020).

Accordingly, this study examines, by using AI itself, whether AI could potentially eliminate the profession of tourist guiding, often described as serving as "cultural ambassadors" in tourism. Demir & Vatan (2024) found that while robot guide technology may eventually replace some functions of human guides, certain qualities and capabilities still require further development for robots to become effective substitutes. However, that finding is limited to interviews conducted solely with human tourist guides. For this reason, investigating what GenAI's themselves "think" they can do is a relevant next step. Türkiye provides a distinctive context due to its regulatory environment and rich cultural heritage. Tourist guiding was selected as the focal profession because it is the only occupation within Türkiye's tourism sector regulated by both Law No. 6326 (TUREB, 2026) and Regulation No. 32715 (Official Gazette, 2026). In addition, this focus is motivated by findings reported by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK, 2026) indicating that "*the rate of artificial intelligence usage increases as the level of education rises"* Tourist guiding is also the only profession in Türkiye's tourism sector that requires formal education under university or ministry supervision. A qualitative methodology was adopted, with a case study as the primary research method. The population comprises 15 companies that developed significant AI models (542 in total) between 2014 and 2024, as reported in the Stanford (2026) AI Index Report. The sample includes Google Gemini and ChatGPT. The outputs were analyzed using descriptive analysis to reach the study's conclusions. Within this framework, the study addresses two research questions:

RQ-1: How do you perceive the future of the tourist guiding profession in Türkiye?

RQ-2: In your opinion, does artificial intelligence function as a "competitor" or a "complementary" force to tourist guides in this context?

The Evolution and Utilization of AI Technologies in Tourism

AI has progressed from basic computation to systems that can make choices with increasing autonomy. In recent years, the term has shifted beyond "intelligence" toward the ability to act independently by leveraging extensive data, prior experiences, and stored representations (Knani, Echchakoui & Ladhari, 2022). Contemporary AI is driven by three foundational elements: sophisticated algorithms, abundant data, and increased processing power. These advances have enabled AI systems to perform tasks previously reserved for humans. More broadly, AI refers to the use of computation by machines to accomplish cognitive functions associated with the human mind (Ku & Chen, 2024), including pattern recognition, natural language understanding, visual perception, decision-making under uncertainty, and adaptive learning from experience.

Tourism is undergoing significant change as AI expands into many domains of work. This shift is not only about speed but also about personalization and sustainability in a post-pandemic context. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of new technologies (Lawler et al., 2021). AI's role in tourism is wide-ranging, affecting both service delivery and competitive dynamics. Through automation and robotics, AI is taking on additional functions across back-end operations and front-end service interactions (Knani, Echchakoui & Ladhari, 2022), contributing to an ecosystem of

intelligent tourism products and services. Looking ahead, organizations that effectively leverage AI technologies may gain a competitive advantage (Ku & Chen, 2024). Priority areas include developing useful AI, supporting implementation, assessing impacts, and advancing sustainability (Tussyadiah, 2020). Beyond recommendations, AI can enable dynamic pricing, adjusting rates in response to forecast demand, competitor monitoring, and capacity management. Implementing intelligent technologies in destination management is increasingly viewed as inevitable as technology-mediated interaction shapes visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Bingöl & Yang, 2025).

AI can investigate potential tourists' attitudes toward AI services and help segment markets (Khan, 2024). Chatbots have turned out to be one among the most used tools in tourism across the globe. Studies on how to use chatbots to assist tourists have pointed to how chatbots, based particularly on the use of AI Markup Language (AIML), are moving towards sophistication. In one study on how chatbots have assisted Sulaimani City, the researchers trained the chatbot on 352 specific questions and answers and noted that, based on user satisfaction, the AIML chatbot fared much better than traditional web guides as they provided information on where to stay and what to do, besides information on events happening around specific regions (Ali, Kaka-Khan & Al-Chalabi, 2023).

Theoretical Underpinnings of LLM and Utilization in Tourism

Large language models (LLMs) are a specialized class of AI systems designed to understand, generate, and manipulate human language at scale. They are typically pretrained by scaling model size, training data, and computation; as a result, they can perform well on many natural language processing tasks with little or no task-specific training. A defining feature of LLMs is their transformer-based architecture and scale, enabling them to model complex relationships between linguistic elements across large corpora and to capture cues and connections in language use (Kalyan, 2024).

LLMs are commonly used as generative AI tools: they can produce new content rather than merely retrieving existing text. In tourism, this can include generating travel itineraries or detailed explanations of cultural heritage sites (Lammert et al., 2025). However, LLMs generate output based on patterns in data and do not inherently verify factual accuracy, which increases the risk of hallucinations (Karlovic et al., 2025). This is particularly problematic in tourism contexts where operating times and dates require high precision. Additionally, the mathematical complexity of these models can make them “black boxes,” complicating explanations of why a specific recommendation is produced (Novozhilova et al., 2024).

AI and LLMs have a hierarchical relationship. LLMs can be understood as a subset of AI focused on language. In this view, AI provides a broader set of methods and applications, while LLMs often serve as a user-facing interface that makes interaction more natural (Zhuang et al., 2025).

In the tourism sector, this smart technology is shifting from being simply a gimmick to an absolute necessity, greatly impacting many fields and their operations (Sigala et al., 2024). Significant innovation in leveraging LLMs in the tourism industry involves the concept of “Retrieval-Augmented Generation” or RAG. It was previously noticed that LLMs were “hallucinating,” but RAG eliminates this problem by connecting an LLM to a reliable information source. For instance,

this might involve event information, brochures and even facts. According to one study that compared seven LLMs, like LLaMA, Qwen, and Phi, within a RAG-based tourism platform, it was noticed that access to domain-specific texts was quite significant in enhancing the accuracy and relevance of recommendations. Here, semantic searches were made to fetch appropriate information and then it was used to re-rank and address the exact vagaries of the queries of users. For instance, it might involve queries like "kid-friendly vegan restaurants near the museum" (Karlovic et al., 2025).

Planning tools can also integrate both text preferences and visual inspiration to generate itineraries, balancing user aspirations with constraints such as opening hours and travel times (Naimi et al., 2024). In addition, sentiment analysis and co-creation via LLMs can help providers process large volumes of consumer feedback to improve service delivery (Ayad & Elsayed, 2024). Nevertheless, a "trust gap" may persist and people may rate AI as capable in data processing but less benevolent or caring toward user wellbeing (Novozhilova et al., 2024).

Transformer-based models such as BERT and ChatGPT have become popular for text analysis due to their capacity to model document context (Kirilenko & Stepchenkova, 2025). In tourism marketing, LLM-generated campaign content can be fluent and persuasive, suggesting that LLMs may serve as co-creators for destination branding and promotional copy (Zhang & Prebensen, 2024). At the same time, limitations remain, including opacity and the possibility of generating false information (Wu et al., 2025).

Interrelation between AI and LLM

LLMs function based on sophisticated statistical learning. The GPT model is trained through a vast amount of text through unsupervised learning, which allows it to understand statistics in human language. With this, it is able to provide responses that are relevant in a conversation based on input from a user. LLMs are thus able to perform a range of functions in language, from generating texts, decoding, summarizing, answering questions and holding a conversation, based only on this understanding of human language statistics (Wong, Lian & Sun, 2023). ChatGPT is a LLM that is being pre-trained on a vast amount of data and can generate human-like textual responses to various queries (Li et al., 2025). The leap which ChatGPT and such programs embody really signifies a maturation of large language models. When it comes to travel choices, ChatGPT is distinct from traditional methods of consideration. Unlike the older methods of consideration discussed in the first part of the case study, the ChatGPT program empowers the traveler directly (Wong, Lian & Sun, 2023). ChatGPT attracted millions of users within just days. It gives an idea of the acceptance of advanced LLM interfaces by the masses (Li et al., 2025).

The Impact of AI and LLMs on the Tourist Guiding Profession

AI and LLMs are reshaping how tourist guiding is conceptualized and practiced. This shift raises questions about how AI can support travelers before and during trips, how it interacts with human guides, and what risks and opportunities are introduced for the profession (Li et al., 2025). Guides may be particularly exposed to technological shifts because many work without long-term employment contracts. Even so, AI-human relationships may be complementary rather than purely competitive. AI-based tour guide tools can provide scale advantages, multilingual support, and

24/7 availability. They can also improve tourist experiences by rapidly adapting plans in response to changing conditions (Niu, 2023). In Türkiye, a major tourism destination with a well-defined guiding system, these dynamics provide a useful case for examining broader global trends.

Concerns about competition and displacement: Concerns are frequently expressed that automated solutions and robot guides may reduce demand for human guides. For example, Nazlı (2020) reports that more than half of tourist guiding students expressed apprehension about job loss to robotic guides, while professionals were more optimistic. Related discussions frame this as a broader "robotization" of travel and tourism (Demir & Vatan, 2024). Surveys of Turkish guides also report fears that AI, AR/VR, and the metaverse may decrease demand for traditional guiding services (Uçgun, 2025). At the same time, guides may welcome technologies that improve personalization and logistics (e.g., ticketing and scheduling) while resisting tools that threaten perceived authenticity or service quality (Demir & Demir, 2025).

Educational Enhancement: AI can support tourist guiding education through personalized learning, interactive tools, feedback, data analysis, and up-to-date content (Aktaş, 2024). LLM-based digital tutors can also generate educational materials, evaluate written work, and provide guidance on language use and grammar (Ivanov & Soliman, 2023).

Professional Assistance: For practicing guides, AI can support route planning, interactive maps, navigation, real-time information, and translation (Aktaş, 2024), and may help manage challenging conditions (Nazlı, 2020). LLM-based narrative robots have also been proposed for remote place exploration and narrative guidance (Hu et al., 2025). Chatbots and virtual assistants increasingly handle routine inquiries (logistics, basic history, directions), reducing the need for human involvement in low-complexity tasks (Ali, Kaka-Khan & Al-Chalabi, 2023).

Content Creation and Engagement: Further, AI can assist in the preparation of educational materials and creative, interactive contents for presentations during tours (Aktaş, 2024).

Cultural Destination Interpretation: AI promises to be an important help for their background work. Guides make use of virtual museum applications and 3D reconstruction tools that provide access to information prior to their actual presentation to their audience. Thus, their stories can be complete and exact. So technologies consisting of augmented and virtual reality have some contribution as well (Seyitoğlu, Atsız & Akyüz, 2025). Moreover, guides can access information within an "instant," meaning they can answer even the "most obscure questions posed to them on the spot," thanks to the help of AI. Clearly, the change to digitization has been directed at museums and archaeological sites too because AI-based mobile applications can provide interpretation that is just "as detailed and thorough as on-site guides themselves," even elsewhere through an "audio guide" (Cansu & Tuna, 2024). Examples such as the "Ephesus Experience Museum" illustrate how Turkish tourism is integrating these kinds of technologies as part of its evolution. Here, the use of immersive technologies is used to bring the site's narrative to life, but they are seen as an additional element to the on-site experience facilitated by an individual, as opposed to an alternative to this experience (Uçgun, 2025). Virtual reality powered by AI ranks very high among marketing tools, as it allows customers to "test-drive" before buying and consequently, increases real-world flows. Simultaneously, it creates a risk of substitution in that, for specific groups of

consumers, the virtual experience may become so appealing that it replaces an actual visit (Uçgun, 2024).

The Human Touch: Social robots are designed to mimic human interaction and may encroach on some "host" functions (Formosa, 2021). Nevertheless, research often emphasizes an "empathy gap". AI systems still struggle to replicate empathy, manage complex group dynamics, and deliver the "human touch" central to hospitality. As a result, robots and AI cannot yet reproduce the warmth and adaptability expected of a human guide (Uçgun, 2025).

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was adopted as the research design. As the methodological approach, case analysis was preferred. This type of analysis can be applied to both qualitative and quantitative data. In qualitative case analyses, it enables the in-depth examination of a single case or a small number of cases (Kürüm, 2021). The primary rationale for choosing this method stems from the fact that, although GenAI can be regarded as an entity capable of thinking (with a digital identity), conducting interviews with it in the same manner as with humans has not yet been widely accepted by many stakeholders. As the population of the study, 15 companies that developed significant AI models (n = 542) between 2014 and 2024, as reported in the Stanford (2026) AI Index Report were selected. However, it is not possible to make a definitive judgment regarding the exactness of this number, as technological developments and the number of AI agents are increasing continuously. Due to the large population, two samples (Google Gemini and ChatGPT) were selected to be included in the study. The primary justification for selecting these agents is that, according to the Stanford (2026) AI Index Report, they are affiliated with two of the companies that developed and contributed the largest number of models in 2024. The case study method is used to investigate an individual, a group of people, an organization, or an event. The reason for using case studies is that the author seeks different answers to the same questions and to compare the different answers that can be obtained. Accordingly, to obtain the findings, the Gemini Pro (paid) version and the standard (free) version of ChatGPT were used on 13 January 2026. A large language model (LLM) is a type of AI that has been optimized for processing, understanding and generating human language (Han et al., 2024). Today, LLMs operate in conjunction with numerous AI applications. For this reason, the selection of two different AI agents prompt is justified by the aim of comparing their reasoning and interpretative capabilities across paid and free versions. To enable this comparison, 2 questions were posed to the AI algorithms:

RQ-1: How do you perceive the future of the tourist guiding profession in Türkiye?

RQ-2: In your opinion, does artificial intelligence function as a "competitor" or a "complementary" force to tourist guides in this context?

The decision to utilize two RQs stems from the inherent complexity of analyzing generative AI responses. Since interpreting these outputs requires nuanced human cognition, a dual-question framework was deemed most appropriate for a robust analysis. The relevance of these questions is further validated by the prevailing discourse in tourist guiding literature, which frequently identifies the competitive threat of artificial intelligence as the most significant challenge to the profession. Consequently, the study focuses on these two fundamental yet pivotal questions to

capture the essence of this technological shift. Furthermore, GenAI models possess the inherent capability to refine their outputs based on iterative feedback and previous context, which can inadvertently lead to biased or 'learned' responses. To mitigate this risk and capture the most objective data, a strategic approach was adopted by presenting the research questions within a single, unified prompt. This method was designed to bypass the AI's tendency for incremental adjustment, which occurs when questions are asked sequentially. Furthermore, by integrating the second research question into the initial prompt, the study aimed to assess the internal consistency of the GenAI's logic and identify any potential contradictions in its reasoning.

The questions were asked in the Turkish language. As cultural barriers also exist in language translation, this preference was considered appropriate. One of the strongest justifications for this choice is the adaptation of measurement scales into Turkish. In this regard, the use of Turkish is considered beneficial in enabling more accurate and precise interpretations of the legal regulations, developments and processes related to the tourist guiding profession in Türkiye. To ensure terminological precision, the translation process was subjected to collaborative validation by three professional tourist guides who has English language license card. As an additional trustworthy against linguistic discrepancies, a rigorous back-translation protocol was implemented. This systematic approach ensured that the translated data remained conceptually and contextually faithful to the original source material.

The data obtained was analyzed using the descriptive analysis method. This method refers to the in-depth examination and systematic organization of qualitative and quantitative studies conducted independently on a specific topic or field (Ültay, Akyurt, & Ültay, 2021). Given that the analytical framework did not rely on human-centric inquiries, conventional coding procedures were bypassed in favor of a more specialized approach. Instead, a rigorous three-stage thematic progression was implemented to ensure a streamlined and systematic evaluation. The process commenced with an investigation into the 'competitor' paradigm, followed by an assessment of 'complementary support' mechanisms. These preliminary findings culminated in a final stage of granular word and sentence-level analysis, ultimately evaluating the comparative dominance of AI vs. human tour guides. To further categorize the AI-generated responses, specific thematic headings were identified: *Information Capacity, Emotional Intelligence & Storytelling, Cost to Tourist, Trust and Leadership, Availability, Personalization & Flexibility and Visual Aid.* The themes and categories obtained have been reviewed by 2 expert academic/guide in the field to ensure impartiality and the comprehensiveness of the themes has been approved. The reason behind being both an academic and a guide is that it is desired to be evaluated from both perspectives.

Given the ongoing debates regarding reliability in qualitative research, the researcher's transparency is maintained as a core principle. To reinforce this reliability, the entire question-analysis process was meticulously logged with time stamps. Furthermore, the researcher's status as an active professional tour guide enhances the study's contribution to academic literature and its practical relevance, providing a scientifically grounded perspective from within the profession. Furthermore, researcher's professional experience provides an 'emic perspective' by ensuring that the data is filtered not only theoretically but also through a sectoral lens.

Results

The queries directed to the GenAI models, ChatGPT and Google Gemini, along with the corresponding outputs obtained from these models, are presented in the following parts. As the original language of the prompts utilized in the experimental setup was Turkish, the responses generated by the algorithms were also recorded in Turkish. Subsequently, these data were translated into English by the author to ensure compatibility with international literature during the analysis process. It is important to note that, with the exception of the translation process, no editorial interventions, abridgments or modifications were applied to the raw data. In the interest of accuracy and transparency, all AI-generated responses are presented as original quotes.

Data collection for RQ1 was conducted on January 13, utilizing Google Gemini 3 (Pro version) at 1:51 PM and ChatGPT (GPT-5.2) at 3:25 PM. During this process, Google Gemini 3 exhibited a transparent analytical sequence, categorized into five stages: *Defining the Scope, Framing the Inquiry, Evaluating the Landscape, Refining the Skills and Focusing the Response*, ultimately delivering its findings under four primary headings. In contrast, GPT-5.2 provided a direct output without disclosing its internal processing stages, organizing the response into eight distinct sections.

For RQ2, the inquiry was integrated into the initial prompt to maintain contextual continuity. On the same date, Google Gemini 3 at 1:52 PM processed this combined request through four cognitive stages: *Evaluating AI's Role, Framing AI's Dual Role, Assessing the Competitive Landscape, Analyzing the Human Element,* yielding a three-heading summary. Conversely, GPT-5.2 prompt maintained its direct output format on January 13 at 3:26 PM without an explicit thought process, categorizing the final response under five headings.

Table 1: Answer to RQ-1 “Gemini, how do you perceive the future of the tourist guiding profession in Türkiye?”

HEADING	STATEMENT
Transition from Knowledge to Experience Designing	In the past, the primary task of the guide was to “give information” (dates, names, architectural features). Today, any tourist can access this encyclopedic information in seconds with mobile phone applications.
	The Guide to the Future: No longer a “walking encyclopedia,” it must be a storyteller and cultural commentator.
	Expectation: Tourists are looking for not only when the ancient city of Ephesus was built, but also what the daily life of a person living there is like, the feeling of touching those stones and interacting with the local people. The guides will evolve into “experience curators” who can connect emotionally.
Technology: Non-Competitive, Complementary	Artificial intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies may be perceived as a threat to guides, but they are difficult to fully replace the human factor.
	Threat: Standard, audio-only “panoramic tours” can be beaten to digital guides.

	Opportunity: Qualified guides will integrate technology into their tours. For example, guides who show the original version of that structure on a tablet at an archaeological site with AR and add their own interpretation and story on it will make a difference.
	Human Touch: Managing moments of crisis, understanding the psychology of the group, making humor, and empathizing are things AI can't do yet. In the future, guidance will be built more on these "soft (human) skills".
Specialization in Niche Areas (Micro-Guidance)	The era of the "all-knowing general guide" is slowly closing. Türkiye's potential necessitates specialization in specific areas of interest. In the future, there will be a growing demand for guides who specialize in: ▪ Gastronomy Guidance: Not only providing food but also telling the story of the seed from field to table. ▪ Faith Tourism: Having in-depth theological and archaeological knowledge in areas such as Göbeklitepe, Seven Churches or Sufi routes. ▪ Nature and Adventure: With both guidance and survival/extreme sports competence on routes such as the Lycian Way. ▪ Health and Wellness: Combining culture with thermal springs or yoga retrievals.
Regulatory & Flexibility	The changes made or discussed from time to time in the guidance law in Türkiye (Law No. 6326 and related regulations) (foreign language requirement, status of art history graduates, etc.) affect the conditions of entry to the profession and competition.
	Competition: As the number of guides in the industry increases, simply "having a card" won't be enough. Guides who manage their personal branding well through social media and digital platforms will come to the fore.
	Independence: Rather than relying on agents, the "boutique guidance" model, which constitutes its own private client portfolio within the framework of legal limits, will be strengthened.

Table 2: Answer to RQ-2 "Gemini, in your opinion, does artificial intelligence function as a "competitor" or a "complementary" force to tourist guides in this context? What do you think?"

HEADING	**STATEMENT**
Where is AI Competing?	If a guide sees his or her profession as simply "passing down memorized information," artificial intelligence will definitely beat it.
	Encyclopedic Knowledge Transfer: "In what year was this mosque built?", "How tall is this column?" AI can answer such questions faster than human, more accurately and in 50 different languages. Only the information transferring guide is closing.

	Standard Audio Tours: The boring audio guides that used to be listened to on tape are now replaced by location-based AI applications that can narrate in humorous languages, adjusted to the user's pace. For budget-restricted travelers, this is a serious competitor to the live guide.
	Logistics Planning: "Which route is best?", "Which museum is open at what time?" AI assistants can handle operational details such as these in seconds. The need for guidance for this type of logistical support is diminishing.
Where is AI Complementary?	A smart guide might dress up AI as a "superpower" (think Iron Man armor).
	Visualization Tool (AR/VR Support): While standing in front of the Celsus Library in the ancient city of Ephesus, a guide can open an artificial intelligence-powered application on his tablet and show the tourists the state of that building 2,000 years ago, the sculptures and colors inside it "as if they were alive". This strengthens the narrative of the guide, not destroys it.
	Personalization Assistant: Everyone is interested in a group of 40 people. The guide can make instant updates on the route according to the group's profile (e.g. 30% vegan, 20% architecture enthusiast) before starting the tour using AI tools.
	Breaking the Language Barrier: With instant translation headsets and devices, the guide can establish basic communication even with a guest in a language they do not know very well, thus expanding the network of services.
Critical Separation: The Human Factor (What AI Can't Do)	Artificial intelligence produces "knowledge," but not "wisdom" and "emotion." Here's where the guide will protect his castle:
	Emotional Intelligence and Media Reading: Artificial intelligence cannot understand that the group is tired, bored, or in need of a joke in the moment. The guide is like a conductor who manages the group's energy.
	Storytelling: AI can tell a legend, but it cannot feel the pain or enthusiasm in that legend with its tone of voice and facial expressions. Tourists buy emotions, not information.
	Crisis Management: When the bus breaks down, a tourist gets sick or there is a problem in the ticket queue, it is the person who takes the initiative and solves the problem and calms the person.

Table 3: Answer to RQ-1 "ChatGPT, how do you perceive the future of the tourist guiding profession in Türkiye?"

HEADING	STATEMENT

Sectoral Growth & Demand	The increase in tourism demand and the rich diversity of Türkiye in terms of both cultural and nature tourism puts the guidance profession in a strategic position: The number of foreign tourists coming to Türkiye is expected to increase in the long term, which will continue the need for professional guidance. In domestic tourism, the search for experience-based tours by domestic travelers will strengthen the demand for guidance.
Impact of Technological Transformation	Technology is a factor that can transform the guidance profession from a threat to an opportunity. Artificial Intelligence and Digital Assistants ▪ AI-powered translation and information systems can automate basic informational tasks. ▪ However, visitors are not expected to replace human guides in responding to expectations of local context, storytelling, and cultural nuance. ▪ Virtual Reality / Augmented Reality ▪ Virtual/AR supported content can enrich the experience in the field. ▪ Guides can add value by integrating these technologies into the customer experience.
Qualification & Specialization	Competition in the tourism sector increases the need for standardization and specialization: ▪ The demand for guides specializing in areas such as cultural heritage, gastronomy, ecotourism, adventure tourism will increase. ▪ Language competencies, international certificates and marketing skills will provide a professional advantage.
Education, Professional Development & Standards	Programs that increase the quality of guidance training will encourage the professionalization of the profession. Continuous professional development (CPD) and up-to-date certifications will create a competitive advantage in the sector.
New Business Models	In addition to traditional group tours: ▪ Personalized and experience-driven tours ▪ Sustainable and engaging programs with the local community ▪ Models such as direct booking and directory matching will become widespread through digital platforms.
Points need to be considered	Misuse of technology (e.g. voice guidance apps only) can undermine the demand for human guidance. Inadequate vocational training and non-standard practices can reduce the quality of the industry.
General Evaluation	▪ The profession of Tourist Guiding in Türkiye: ▪ Instead of shrinking, it will transform;

	▪ Instead of difficulties, it will harbor opportunities; ▪ Instead of competing with technology, it will integrate it to become more valuable.
Strategic Recommendations (Short-to-Medium Term)	▪ Investing in technology integration: AR/VR, AI-powered guide applications. ▪ Focusing on areas of expertise: Gastronomy, history, nature, deeper knowledge demands. ▪ Developing language and communication skills: Making a difference for global customers. ▪ Creating your own brand and packages: Digital marketing and platform usage.

Table 4: Answer to RQ-2 "ChatGPT, in your opinion, does artificial intelligence function as a "competitor" or a "complementary" force to tourist guides in this context? What do you think?"

HEADING	STATEMENT
What can artificial intelligence substitute?	The areas where AI is strong are: Standard information transfer (Dates, names, route, check-in times, prices, etc.) ▪ Multilingual Translation Challenges ▪ Map, navigation ▪ Frequently Asked Questions ▪ Pre-configured narratives These are already the "low value-added" part of guidance. In other words, jobs that can also be done with brochures, headset guides or Google. AI in this area is clearly cheaper and faster. Therefore, the "information-only guide" model is really at risk in the long run.
So what is the essence of guidance?	Actual guidance includes: ▪ Storytelling ▪ Cultural mediation (meaning bridges between the guest's own culture and Anatolian culture) ▪ Group psychology management ▪ Reaction to unexpected situations (weather, crowd, security, crisis, conflict) ▪ Emotional connection These are the things that artificial intelligence cannot do, it can only produce text. Because these are interactions between people, not information transfer.
The real transformation: Guide →	The AI enables the guide to: ▪ Takes over the background information load ▪ Produces visual, AR/VR, audio narration

Experience architect	▪ Personalized content Thus: It ceases to be "talking Wikipedia" and becomes "curator designing experience". For example, in Cappadocia: ▪ AI shows formation of fairy chimneys in 3D ▪ The guide describes the relationship of this geology to Anatolian myths and human history. This combination is many times more valuable than AI alone.
Who loses, who wins?	Text memorizing, uniform narrative guide (Loses) Storytelling, specialized, tech-savvy guide (Winner) Guide who builds his own brand on digital platforms (Earns a lot) “Technology is going to kill me,” says the guide (It really does) In other words, artificial intelligence removes the unchanging guides from the game, not the guides.
Critical point for Türkiye	In countries with intense history, culture and symbolic meaning such as Türkiye, it is not possible for AI to substitute guidance alone. AI can describe a pillar in Rome. But AI cannot give the story, local memory, emotion and context behind a tombstone in Anatolia. Therefore, Türkiye will not be one of the countries where guidance is absent, but one of the countries where high-quality guidance is valued.

Conclusion

The potential impacts of AI techs on the profession of tourist guiding have been analyzed from the perspective of generative AI models. The guiding is not facing extinction but rather undergoing a profound paradigmatic transformation in response to technological advancements. The findings indicate that the traditional concept of guiding, largely based on the transmission of encyclopedic knowledge such as historical facts, names and chronological data, has become unsustainable based on AI’s advantages in speed, accuracy and multilingual accessibility. In this context, the conventional “information transmitter” model of the tour guide is being replaced by that of an “experience architect”. However, while AI systems excel at processing large volumes of data, optimizing routes and providing personalized recommendations based on individual preferences and real-time conditions. This situation points not to absolute competition but to a relationship of strategic complementarity for guides who position technology appropriately. Indeed, as AI alleviates the burden of logistical planning and standardized information delivery, it enables qualified guides to gain a form of “superpower” by integrating tools such as augmented and virtual reality into their narratives.

Nevertheless, the distinction between the “information” produced by technology and the “wisdom” offered by humans emerges as a key determinant of the profession’s future. Human capabilities such as emotional intelligence, managing group dynamics, humor, problem-solving, taking initiative in crisis situations and storytelling remain beyond the scope of AI’s text-based outputs and continue to constitute the protected domain of tourist guiding. Especially in destinations with

deep historical and cultural layers, such as Türkiye, describing a place requires the ability to convey not only its physical characteristics but also its local context and emotional resonance. This necessitates cultural mediation, which represents a value that AI cannot take over. In this sense, the results of the research reveal who can win this "war" in which areas, as explained in Table 5 below.

Table 5: GenAI vs. Human Guide Competitive

SPECIFICATIONS	GenAI	HUMAN GUIDE	WHO WINS?
Information Capacity	Instant access to global databases and limitless info.	Rely on memory/study, slower and high context	AI wins because it is superior in speed/volume.
Emotional Intelligence & Storytelling	Generative and it can mimic style but lacks "soul" or lived experience.	High empathy, humor, culturally nuanced, lyrical, intuition and other human emotions.	Human win because emotion is a characteristic of human creature.
Cost to Tourist	Low (often free/included in app).	Special price for each tour/guide (Private or group tour).	AI wins because of cost efficiency.
Trust and Leadership	It can provide data security but cannot provide physical security.	Leading the group, inspires a spirit of trust.	Human win. At present, AI cannot inspire human trust.
Availability	24/7/365 availability	Limited by fatigue/hours.	AI wins because it dominates convenient access.
Personalization & Flexibility	Algorithm-dependent And only data-driven personalization depends on user profiles.	High empathy, adapts to mood/social cues. Also based on the situation and tourist profile	Human win because they have the ability to empathize and understand human emotions
Visual Aid	It can bring the past to life with VR/AR.	Provides narrative explanations but physical pointing and limited stage equipment.	Complementary: Tech enhances human narrative.

Source: It was created by the author.

As a simple illustration, AI allow guides to "complete" missing parts of a ruin or fresco visually for their tour. Here, technology does not replace the guide. It becomes a prop in the guide's storytelling, enhancing the "persistence of knowledge" in the tourist's mind. Also, thanks to

technology, virtual tours may enable guides to sell their services to the elderly or disabled who cannot travel physically. So, AI-driven platforms allow guides to bypass traditional agencies and market directly to consumers, increasing their independence and potential revenue.

The existence of separate legislation for the guiding profession in Türkiye is an advantage. Professional training programs should be adapted to include artificial intelligence literacy and the use of digital tools, while protecting professional standards and tourist interests. The framework and legislation governing AI-supported guiding services should be regulated. And investments should be made in the technological infrastructure that supports smart tourism development. It is believed that if the Turkish tourism sector manages this transformation carefully, its ability to strike a balance between technological innovation, cultural authenticity and professional development will significantly impact its competitive position in the global tourism market.

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From Experience to a Sense of Belonging: Understanding Cultural Inclusion at a South African Arts Festival

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how experiential and perceived festival-related factors shape attendees' sense of cultural belonging and inclusion at an arts festival operating in a multilingual, pluralistic societal context.

Study design/methodology/approach: A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed. Data were collected via self-administered questionnaires from attendees at the 2025 Toyota Stellenbosch Woordfees in South Africa (n = 595). Exploratory factor analysis was used to validate measurement constructs, followed by a stepwise multiple regression analysis to identify the key predictors of cultural belonging and inclusion.

Results: The findings reveal that cultural belonging and inclusion constitute a strong, unidimensional construct. Arts appreciation and programme distinctiveness emerged as the strongest predictors of belonging, followed by perceived contributions to social and cultural development, festival and destination loyalty, cultural and linguistic affirmation, and escape and social enjoyment. Nostalgia and cultural identity showed only a marginal effect once experiential and contribution-related factors were considered, suggesting that a sense of belonging is shaped more by contemporary, lived experiences than by retrospective memory alone.

Originality/value: The study advances festival and cultural tourism research by explicitly modelling cultural belonging as a distinct outcome rather than an implicit by-product of attendance. It offers transferable insights for arts- and language-linked festivals globally, demonstrating how inclusive belonging is co-produced through high-quality artistic experiences, visible social and cultural contributions, and experience-led festival design.

Keywords Arts festivals, Cultural belonging, Festival experience, Multilingual societies, Cultural tourism

Introduction

Festivals have emerged as one of tourism's most dynamic and interdisciplinary fields of inquiry because they operate at the intersection of art, economy, community, and identity. They function simultaneously as cultural infrastructures and market-facing event products, generating economic value through visitor expenditure, employment, and creative entrepreneurship while producing symbolic value through heritage performance, cultural pride, and belonging (Quinn, 2019; Richards, 2018, 2021; Connell & Page, 2021). This duality is increasingly visible in the global "event economy", where festivalisation, the proliferation and commodification of cultural events,

creates tensions between authenticity, commercial pragmatism, and inclusivity (Cudny, 2016a, 2016b; Hague, 2021). In plural and multilingual societies, these tensions are especially pronounced because festivals also serve as contact zones where linguistic and cultural communities encounter difference, reaffirm identity, and negotiate inclusion through shared rituals, performances, and place-based meanings (Jepson & Clarke, 2017; Sharpley & Stone, 2020; Fincher *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, arts festivals are increasingly recognised not only as attractions, but as socially consequential spaces in which cultural citizenship, belonging, and recognition are enacted and contested (Quinn *et al.*, 2021; Richards, 2018).

Understanding belonging in festival settings requires attention to how identities are formed and performed in social space. Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposes that individuals derive a salient sense of self from membership in social groups and that group identification shapes attitudes, behaviours, and intergroup dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981; Brown, 2000). In event contexts, SIT is frequently used to explain how shared participation fosters solidarity, communitas-like experiences, and in-group attachment, sometimes alongside boundary-making and exclusion (Lockstone-Binney *et al.*, 2020; Essien *et al.*, 2020).

Complementing this, Cultural Identity Theory (CIT) conceptualises identity as dynamic and historically situated, constructed through cultural narratives, representation, language, and practices rather than fixed traits (Hall, 1997; Anthias, 2018). CIT is particularly useful for festival studies because events provide curated "festival/festivalscapes" where cultural stories and symbols are performed publicly, enabling both affirmation and reworking of heritage and identity in contemporary settings (Richards, 2018; Quinn, 2019). While SIT foregrounds group processes and intergroup relations, CIT emphasises meaning-making through culture and representation; contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises their interdependence, as cultural identities are enacted within social groups and social identities are sustained through cultural narratives (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012; Verkuyten, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Berry & Sabatier, 2019; Nash, 2020). Together, these perspectives suggest that cultural belonging at festivals is not simply a by-product of attendance, but a negotiated outcome shaped by experiential design, perceived recognition, and the social dynamics of the event environment.

South Africa provides a particularly instructive context for examining processes of cultural belonging and inclusion because language, identity, and culture are deeply entangled with the country's apartheid and post-apartheid histories. Under apartheid, Afrikaans was institutionally privileged and politically instrumentalised as a language of state power, education, and exclusion, most visibly symbolised by its enforced use in schools during the 1976 Soweto Uprising. In the democratic era, Afrikaans has undergone a complex reconfiguration: while still associated with historical dominance, it is also a demographically diverse, historically hybrid language spoken across racial, class, and regional boundaries (Giliomee, 2011; Steyn, 2016; Stats SA, 2022). This dual legacy renders Afrikaans-language cultural spaces particularly sensitive arenas in which questions of heritage, legitimacy, and inclusion are actively negotiated.

Within this multilingual and post-apartheid social landscape, arts festivals have emerged as important public platforms for cultural expression, reconciliation, and the re-articulation of identity

in everyday life. Afrikaans-language arts festivals developed in the democratic era amid intense debates about language status, cultural rights, and transformation, and have since evolved from defensive language-preservation initiatives into hybrid cultural markets that integrate arts programming, tourism demand, and local development objectives (Steyn, 2016; Stander *et al.*, 2021; Kruger, 2020). Rather than functioning as static repositories of cultural identity, these festivals increasingly operate as performative spaces where Afrikaans is mobilised as a cultural resource open to reinterpretation, hybridity, and dialogue with other linguistic and cultural traditions.

Within this landscape, the Toyota Stellenbosch Woordfees (literally translated as *Festival of Words*), hereafter referred to as Woordfees, occupies a distinctive position. Hosted in a university town and structured across multiple venues, Woordfees combines theatre, music, literature, visual arts, and public debate in ways that foreground language not only as a medium of expression but as a site of reflection and contestation. Its strong literary and intellectual orientation positions the festival as both a cultural and a touristic event, in which questions of language, identity, and belonging are debated alongside artistic performance (Kruger, 2019). Like comparable language-linked festivals internationally, such as Montréal en Lumière in Canada or Basque cultural festivals in Spain, Woordfees must balance cultural specificity with openness and accessibility, particularly as festivals face intensified competition in saturated event markets, affordability constraints, and shifts in cultural consumption accelerated by digitalisation and post-pandemic behavioural change (Richards, 2021; Throsby, 2021; Davies, 2021).

Crucially, in a society still marked by structural inequalities and uneven access to cultural capital, festivals such as Woordfees carry a heightened responsibility to foster inclusive attachment rather than symbolic exclusion. Language at festivals functions simultaneously as a boundary and a bridge: it can differentiate groups while also enabling shared meaning, emotional connection, and social cohesion (Hall, 1997; Alexander, 2000). Afrikaans festivals, therefore, represent valuable empirical sites for examining how belonging is cultivated through experience, perception, and participation rather than being assumed solely on the basis of identity. Understanding how festivals generate inclusive forms of cultural belonging is thus central not only to sustaining audience engagement over time, but also to legitimising the role of arts festivals within plural, post-apartheid cultural tourism markets.

Despite extensive scholarship on festival impacts, visitor motivation, and loyalty, comparatively less attention has been given to how experiential and perceived festival-related factors jointly shape cultural belonging and inclusion, particularly in contexts where language, heritage, and identity are salient (Richards, 2021; Getz & Page, 2024; Tkaczynski *et al.*, 2022). In much of the existing literature, belonging is either treated as an implicit by-product of participation or considered within broader constructs such as satisfaction, place attachment, or behavioural loyalty, rather than being explicitly modelled as a focal outcome with identifiable antecedents (Manthiou *et al.*, 2014; Semrad & Rivera, 2018; Rivera *et al.*, 2022; Viljoen & Kruger, 2025).

This represents an important gap, as belonging extends beyond individual affect to function as a social mechanism through which festivals cultivate durable communities, sustain cultural

ecosystems, and legitimise their societal value within increasingly competitive and festivalised cultural tourism markets (Quinn, 2019; Richards, 2021; UNCTAD, 2023). Moreover, recent research highlights that the design and governance of festivals can either enable inclusive identity expression or reinforce symbolic and social boundaries, particularly in multicultural and multilingual settings, positioning belonging as a critical lens for evaluating festival relevance and responsibility in plural societies (Mair & Duffy, 2020; Fincher *et al.*, 2014; Jarman *et al.*, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

Accordingly, this study examines how experiential and perceived festival-related factors shape attendees' sense of cultural belonging and inclusion at a South African arts festival operating in a multilingual, plural societal context characterised by diverse linguistic, cultural, and historical identities. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question: *What experiential and perceived festival-related factors predict attendees' sense of cultural belonging and inclusion at an arts festival?* Using Woordfees as a case, the study integrates motivational drivers (e.g., arts appreciation, nostalgia/identity, escape/social enjoyment), perceived festival contributions (e.g., cultural/linguistic affirmation and social-cultural development), and behavioural intentions to identify the strongest predictors of belonging. In doing so, the research contributes to international debates on festivals as sites of cultural value creation and inclusive identity negotiation, while offering practical insight into how arts festivals can foster belonging through programme design, cultural positioning, and socially meaningful contributions.

Methodology

Research design and data collection

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine visitor motivations, experiences, perceived contributions of the festival, cultural belonging, and behavioural intentions at the 2025 Woordfees, a nine-day arts festival held in Stellenbosch, South Africa (11–19 October 2025). Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire, distributed primarily on-site during the festival. Research permission was granted by the festival organisers, who acted as gatekeepers and facilitated both on-site and post-event online access to respondents. A team of eight trained volunteers administered the survey on-site. Prior to data collection, volunteers received standardised training to ensure consistency in the approach to respondents, the explanation of the study's purpose, and the handling of questionnaires. Fieldworkers operated according to a structured schedule, each completing seven three-hour shifts, and were strategically positioned across multiple venues and programme genres (including theatre, music, literature, visual arts, and comedy) to capture a broad cross-section of festivalgoers.

In total, 542 fully completed on-site questionnaires were collected. To supplement on-site responses, the organisers distributed a survey link (administered on QuestionPro) via the official post-festival newsletter, and QR codes linking to the questionnaire were displayed throughout the festival precinct. This yielded an additional 53 online responses, bringing the final sample to 595 completed questionnaires.

Sampling approach

A convenience sampling strategy was employed within a stratified, venue-based framework, with strata corresponding to the festival's diverse production venues. This approach enabled inclusion of different audience segments, including ticketed theatre attendees, casual visitors, and participants in non-ticketed programme components. The combination of on-site and online responses strengthened sample coverage by reaching both active festival participants and attendees engaging with the festival beyond the event period. The final sample exceeded the minimum recommended size of 384 respondents for large populations (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), supporting the dataset's adequacy for statistical analysis.

Measurement instrument

The questionnaire comprised multiple sections informed by established literature on festivals and cultural tourism. These included demographic and attendance characteristics, spending behaviour, and marketing and communication channels, drawing on prior arts-festival profiling and economic-impact studies (Kruger, 2019, 2020; Snowball & Antrobus, 2021). Attendance motivations were measured using multi-item scales reflecting push–pull factors and nostalgia-related drivers, grounded in Iso-Ahola's (1982) escape–seeking framework and cultural identity research (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Wildschut *et al.*, 2006). Perceived festival contributions and social and cultural identity were operationalised using Likert-scale items informed by Social and Cultural Identity Theory (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Verkuyten, 2018). Behavioural intentions were measured using established loyalty indicators derived from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). All attitudinal items used a five-point Likert scale for agreement.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant Scientific and Ethics Committee of the host institution, with reference number 00601-23-A4 (institutional information omitted for peer review), and the research was classified as minimal risk. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the research's purpose before completing the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by collecting no personally identifiable information. Respondents were free to withdraw at any point without penalty. Data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Data analysis

Completed questionnaires were captured in Microsoft Excel and analysed using IBM SPSS. Prior to analysis, data screening was conducted to assess the presence of missing values, normality, and outliers. No substantial deviations from normality were detected, and all variables met the assumptions required for multivariate analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to profile respondents and attendance behaviour.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA), using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation, was conducted to examine the underlying structure of the motivational, experiential, perceived contribution, behavioural intention, and cultural belonging constructs. Sampling adequacy was confirmed through Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measures ranging from 0.84 to 0.95 and significant Bartlett's tests of sphericity ($p < 0.001$). Items with factor loadings of 0.40 or higher

and minimal cross-loadings were retained. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all scales exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70.

Following the EFAs, composite scale scores were computed by calculating the mean of items loading significantly on each retained factor. These composite mean scores were subsequently used in the regression analyses. The dependent variable, *Cultural Belonging and Inclusion*, was operationalised as the mean of six items reflecting perceived acceptance, opportunities for cultural expression, identity alignment, and emotional connection within the festival community. Independent variables comprised the validated composite factor scores identified through EFA. This approach ensured conceptual coherence, reduced measurement error, and aligned the regression analysis with multidimensional constructs rather than individual items.

Given that data were collected via a single self-administered questionnaire at a single point in time, the potential risk of common method bias (CMB) was considered. Both procedural and statistical remedies were implemented. Procedurally, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was collected, and predictor and outcome variables were positioned in separate sections of the questionnaire to reduce response patterning. Clear instructions emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers.

Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted using an unrotated exploratory factor analysis of all attitudinal items. The first factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance, suggesting that common method variance was unlikely to pose a serious threat to the validity of the findings. In addition, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were examined during regression analysis and were below the recommended threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity and potential method bias were not problematic. While these procedures reduce the likelihood of CMB, future research could enhance methodological robustness by employing multi-source data collection or by temporally separating measurements.

To address the study's research question, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted to examine the factors predicting *Cultural Belonging and Inclusion*. Variables were entered in theoretically informed blocks to assess the incremental explanatory power of experiential and perceived contribution dimensions. Prior to interpretation, assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, independence of errors, and absence of multicollinearity were assessed. The Durbin–Watson statistic was approximately 2.0, indicating no autocorrelation in the residuals. Tolerance and VIF statistics were within acceptable limits.

Results

Profile of the respondents

The 2025 sample was predominantly female (68%) and had an average age of 49 years. Most respondents were Afrikaans-speaking (84%) and resided in the Western Cape (85%), indicating a strong regional and linguistic alignment with the festival. Attendees participated in small groups ($\bar{x}$ = 2.98), spent an average of 4.4 days at the festival and three nights in the area, and showed high repeat visitation ($\bar{x}$ = 4.53 previous visits). Average spending was R7,521.64 (≈ €395.08), with respondents purchasing nine tickets on average. Information was mainly obtained from the Woordfees website, the festival guide, and word of mouth.

Exploratory factor analysis results

Exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation were conducted for all study constructs. Sampling adequacy was confirmed, with KMO values ranging from 0.84 to 0.95 and Bartlett's test of sphericity significant ($p < 0.001$). Refer to Table 1 for a summary of the results. The cultural belonging construct yielded a single factor, *Cultural Belonging and Inclusion*, explaining 68.49% of the variance ($\alpha = 0.91$). The high mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.17$) indicates strong feelings of acceptance, cultural expression, and alignment with identity among attendees. The motives construct produced three factors explaining 64.40% of the variance (KMO = 0.91): *Arts Appreciation and Distinctiveness* ($\bar{x} = 4.14$; $\alpha = 0.86$), *Nostalgia and Cultural Identity* ($\bar{x} = 3.83$; $\alpha = 0.89$), and *Escape and Social Enjoyment* ($\bar{x} = 4.30$; $\alpha = 0.76$), indicating that both arts-related and leisure-oriented motives influenced attendance. For perceived festival contributions, three factors emerged, accounting for 67.94% of the variance (KMO = 0.95). These included *Cultural and Linguistic Affirmation* ($\bar{x} = 4.25$; $\alpha = 0.95$), *Destination and Economic Impact* ($\bar{x} = 4.32$; $\alpha = 0.84$), and *Social and Cultural Development* ($\bar{x} = 4.13$; $\alpha = 0.87$), highlighting the festival's perceived cultural, economic, and societal value. Behavioural intentions yielded a single factor, *Festival and Destination Loyalty*, explaining 64.90% of the variance ($\alpha = 0.88$). The high mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.49$) indicates strong intentions to revisit, recommend, and visit the destination.

Table 1. Summary of EFA results

Construct	Factor / Dimension	Brief Description	No. of Items	Mean (x̄)	KMO	Variance (%)	Cronbach's α
Cultural Belonging	*Cultural Belonging and Inclusion*	Acceptance, cultural expression, identity alignment, and emotional connection within the festival community	6	4.17	0.88	68.49	0.91
Motives					0.91	64.40	
	Arts Appreciation and Distinctiveness	Interest in artistic content, programme quality, renowned performers, and festival uniqueness	6	4.14			0.86
	Nostalgia and Cultural Identity	Emotional attachment, shared memories, and connection to cultural traditions	4	3.83			0.89
	Escape and Social Enjoyment	Relaxation, enjoyment, and socialisation with family and friends	3	4.30			0.76
Festival Contributions					0.95	67.94	
	Cultural and Linguistic Affirmation	Promotion of Afrikaans language vitality, pride, modern relevance, intergenerational transmission, and inclusivity	10	4.25			0.95
	Destination and Economic Impact	Tourism attraction, destination branding, local economic stimulation, and employment	4	4.32			0.84
	Social and Cultural Development	Inclusivity, education, community development, and cultural participation	4	4.13			0.87

Behavioural Intentions	*Festival and Destination Loyalty*	Revisit, recommendation, positive word of mouth, and destination exploration intentions	6	4.49	0.84	64.90	0.88

Stepwise linear regression results

A stepwise multiple regression analysis (Table 2) was conducted to examine the factors predicting *Cultural Belonging and Inclusion*. The final model explained 59.9% of the variance (*Adjusted* R^2 = 0.594; F = 111.44, $p < 0.001$), indicating a strong explanatory fit. The Durbin–Watson statistic (1.91) indicated no autocorrelation of residuals. *Arts Appreciation and Distinctiveness* emerged as the strongest predictor (β = 0.313, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that cultural belonging at the festival is primarily fostered through engagement with high-quality, distinctive artistic content that creates shared cultural meaning rather than through identity-based affiliation alone. *Festival and Destination Loyalty* (β = 0.152, $p < 0.001$) and *Social and Cultural Development* (β = 0.150, p = 0.002) also contributed significantly, indicating that ongoing participation and perceptions of the festival's broader social and community role reinforce attendees' sense of inclusion. *Cultural and Linguistic Affirmation* (β = 0.130, p = 0.006) further underscores the importance of language-related cultural sustainability, though its comparatively smaller effect suggests that linguistic affirmation is most influential when embedded in meaningful cultural experiences. In addition, *Escape and Social Enjoyment* (β = 0.110, p = 0.006) underscores the role of leisure and shared enjoyment in co-creating a sense of belonging. By contrast, *Nostalgia and Cultural Identity* showed only a marginal effect (β = 0.089, p = 0.052), suggesting that belonging at the festival is shaped more by contemporary experiential engagement than by retrospective or memory-based attachments.

Table 2. Stepwise linear regression results

Dependent variable: *Cultural Belonging and Inclusion*		**Unstandardised Coefficients**		**Standardised Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
		B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
6	(Constant)	-0.064	0.194		-0.332	0.740
	Art Appreciation and Distinctiveness	0.333	0.050	0.313	6.684	0.000*
	Social and Cultural Development	0.153	0.048	0.150	3.189	0.002*
	Festival and Destination Loyalty	0.203	0.055	0.152	3.730	0.000*
	Nostalgia and Cultural Identity	0.069	0.036	0.089	1.952	0.052*
	Cultural and Linguistic Affirmation	0.131	0.047	0.130	2.763	0.006*

Escape and Social Enjoyment	0.116	0.042	0.110	2.745	0.006*

*Statistical significance is indicated at $p < 0.05$.

Conclusion

This research examined how experiential and perceived festival-related factors shape cultural belonging and inclusion among attendees at a South African arts festival, using the 2025 Woordfees as a case. The findings demonstrate that belonging at a language-linked arts festival is not an assumed by-product of attendance, but an outcome that can be empirically explained through the interplay of motivations, perceived festival contributions, and behavioural orientations. Importantly, cultural belonging and inclusion emerged as a strong, unidimensional construct, reinforcing recent calls to conceptualise belonging as a distinct and measurable outcome rather than embedding it implicitly within satisfaction, attachment, or loyalty constructs (Quinn, 2019; Richards, 2021; Viljoen & Kruger, 2025).

The regression analysis provides the study's central contribution by showing that arts appreciation and programme distinctiveness are the strongest predictors of cultural belonging. This finding underscores that inclusive attachment is primarily fostered through engagement with high-quality, meaningful artistic content rather than through identity-based affiliation alone. In doing so, the results support experience economy scholarship, which emphasises that value at cultural events is co-created through emotionally and symbolically resonant encounters with performances and *eventscapes* (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Richards, 2018; Tkaczynski *et al.*, 2022).

At the same time, the findings nuance assumptions often made about language- and heritage-based festivals by demonstrating that belonging is not driven predominantly by nostalgia or heritage identity. Although nostalgia and cultural identity have been shown elsewhere to underpin attachment to cultural events (Duffy, 2018; Wood & Kinnunen, 2020, 2024), their influence in this study was marginal once experiential and contribution-related factors were taken into account. This suggests that belonging at contemporary arts festivals may be shaped more strongly by lived, present-oriented experiences than by retrospective memory alone, particularly in contexts characterised by changing cultural consumption patterns and post-pandemic audience dynamics (Throsby, 2021; Davies, 2021). While nostalgia may motivate initial attendance or reinforce loyalty, sustaining inclusive belonging appears to require a balance between respect for tradition and forward-looking programming that resonates with diverse and younger audiences. Hybrid formats, participatory experiences, and cross-genre collaborations may therefore be especially effective in fostering a sense of belonging without alienating core audiences.

Perceived contributions to the festival also played a meaningful role. *Social and Cultural Development* and *Cultural and Linguistic Affirmation* both significantly predicted cultural belonging, indicating that attendees are more likely to feel included when festivals are perceived as contributing to community development, education, inclusivity, and the ongoing relevance of language and culture. These findings support broader arguments that festivals derive legitimacy not only from economic impacts, but also from their social and cultural value, particularly in multilingual and plural societies where recognition and inclusion remain contested (Fincher *et al.*,

2014; Mair & Duffy, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023; Smith *et al.*, 2022). Notably, the comparatively smaller effect of linguistic affirmation relative to the quality of arts-based experiences suggests that language-related belonging may be most effectively cultivated when embedded in high-quality cultural programming and socially meaningful festival narratives, rather than through symbolic heritage positioning alone. For festival organisers, these points highlight the importance of making social and cultural contributions explicit and visible, for example, through community outreach programmes, educational initiatives, inclusive programming, and partnerships with local cultural institutions. By doing so, festivals can strengthen a sense of belonging by demonstrating how cultural expression translates into tangible social value within host communities.

While behavioural intentions were not the primary focus of the study, *Festival and Destination Loyalty* were positively associated with cultural belonging. Although causality cannot be inferred from the cross-sectional design, this relationship suggests that belonging and repeat engagement are closely intertwined and potentially mutually reinforcing (Yoon *et al.*, 2010; Kruger, 2019). From a strategic perspective, this highlights belonging as a long-term asset rather than a soft or secondary outcome. Festivals that successfully cultivate inclusive attachment may strengthen revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth, thereby supporting both cultural sustainability and destination competitiveness (Getz & Page, 2024; Richards, 2021). Festival managers can operationalise this insight by embedding a sense of belonging into experience design, audience engagement strategies, and communication narratives, positioning the festival as a space where visitors feel recognised, included, and emotionally connected.

The findings offer three broader implications for arts festivals operating in multilingual and plural societies. First, cultural belonging should be treated as a deliberate design objective rather than an assumed outcome of shared language or identity. Belonging is actively shaped through artistic programming, the organisation of festival spaces, and opportunities for social interaction that enable audiences to engage meaningfully with performances and with one another. This suggests that festivals foster inclusion not simply by who attends, but by how experiences are curated, and encounters are facilitated.

Second, artistic excellence should be aligned with visible and tangible social and cultural contributions. Festivals are more likely to cultivate inclusive attachment when audiences perceive them as contributing to community development, education, cultural participation, and social cohesion. Inclusivity, therefore, needs to be enacted through practice, such as outreach initiatives, educational programmes, and inclusive programming, rather than communicated solely through symbolic or rhetorical commitments.

Third, language and heritage can function as inclusive cultural resources when mobilised through open, dialogic, and experience-driven festival formats. Rather than positioning language or heritage as fixed or exclusionary markers, festivals can use them as flexible cultural mediums that invite participation, reinterpretation, and exchange. Balancing respect for tradition with innovation and accessibility allows festivals to remain culturally grounded while resonating with diverse and evolving audiences. Collectively, these insights offer guidance for other language-linked and arts-based festivals operating in multilingual and plural societies, illustrating how experience design,

cultural positioning, and perceived social contribution can be leveraged to foster inclusive belonging beyond the specifics of any single festival context.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on a convenience sample within a stratified venue-based framework and focused on a single festival context, which may limit generalisability. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and does not capture how belonging evolves over time or across repeated attendance sessions. In addition, the exploratory use of stepwise regression may be sensitive to sample-specific relationships. Future research should therefore replicate the model across diverse cultural and linguistic festival contexts, employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine causal pathways between belonging and loyalty, and examine how belonging is shaped by generational and socio-demographic dynamics in increasingly hybrid festival spaces.

This research contributes to international festival and cultural tourism research by demonstrating that cultural belonging and inclusion are co-produced through high-quality artistic experiences, perceptions of meaningful social and cultural contributions, and inclusive engagement strategies. For arts festivals globally, the findings suggest that fostering belonging does not require abandoning cultural heritage, but activating it beyond purely symbolic positioning through experience-led, socially grounded, and forward-looking festival models capable of sustaining inclusive cultural communities in increasingly competitive and diverse cultural tourism markets.

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Echoes Between Life and Art: Artist Perspectives from Afrikaans Arts Festivals

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores how Afrikaans arts festivals shape the creative identity, professional practices, and livelihood realities of Afrikaans-speaking artists, addressing a notable gap in South African festival research where artists' perspectives are often absent.

Design/methodology/approach: Artists who participated in the 2025 Aardklop and Woordfees festivals were invited to complete an online questionnaire. Owing to a small response rate (n = 12), the study applied qualitative, inductive content analysis of open-ended responses, supported by descriptive indicators and informed by Social Identity Theory and Cultural Identity Theory.

Findings: Afrikaans is experienced as a powerful expressive resource that enhances authenticity, emotional depth, and professional pride. Festivals function as critical career anchors, offering visibility, networks, and income opportunities. Artists also navigate linguistic flexibility, using both Afrikaans and English pragmatically. However, structural challenges such as limited funding and restricted access to mainstream performance spaces exist.

Originality/value: This study contributes to one of the few artist-centred analyses of Afrikaans arts festivals. It offers novel insight into how Afrikaans operates simultaneously as cultural identity, creative medium, and economic asset within a constrained and evolving festival environment.

Keywords: Afrikaans arts festivals, Creative identity, Creative economy, Artistic identity, South Africa

Introduction

Arts festivals are increasingly recognised as critical components of the global creative economy, operating at the intersection of cultural production, symbolic value creation, and economic exchange. Within the broader cultural industries, festivals function not only as sites of artistic presentation but also as labour markets, innovation spaces, and platforms for identity formation (Getz, 2010; Quinn, 2010; Bennett & Woodward, 2014). As such, festivals play a dual role: they generate cultural meaning while simultaneously sustaining creative livelihoods, making them particularly relevant to contemporary debates on cultural sustainability, creative labour, and the resilience of arts ecosystems.

In multilingual and postcolonial contexts, the role of festivals within the creative economy is further intensified by their engagement with language, heritage, and representation. South Africa, with its twelve officially recognised languages, offers a distinctive environment in which cultural industries are deeply entangled with linguistic politics and historical inequality (Alexander, 2000; Mekoa, 2020). Within this landscape, Afrikaans arts festivals occupy a complex yet influential

position, serving as key institutional platforms through which Afrikaans-language cultural production is curated, professionalised, and economically mobilised.

Afrikaans is spoken by approximately 10% of South Africa's population. It is used across racially and culturally diverse communities, predominantly Coloured South Africans (50.2%), followed by Whites (40%), Black Africans (9%), and Indians/Asians (1%) (Viljoen & Kruger, 2025). Developed from Dutch and shaped by Khoisan, Bantu, Malay, and Portuguese influences, Afrikaans embodies a layered cultural heritage that extends beyond narrow historical or political associations. However, due to its institutionalisation during apartheid, Afrikaans continues to occupy an ambivalent position within South Africa's post-1994 cultural economy. Contemporary Afrikaans cultural production, therefore, unfolds within processes of re-evaluation, reclamation, and creative re-imagination (Eriksen & Oppelt, 2025; van Dyk, 2025). The centenary of Afrikaans's formal recognition as an official language in 2025 further foregrounds its evolving role as both a heritage language and a dynamic medium within South Africa's cultural industries.

The emergence of Afrikaans arts festivals in the mid-1990s must be understood within this broader restructuring of the cultural economy. The establishment of the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK) in 1994 marked a strategic intervention to sustain Afrikaans cultural production during a period of political and institutional transition (Stander et al., 2021). Subsequent festivals, including Aardklop (1998), Woordfees (1999), Vrystaat Arts Festival (2001), Suidoosterfees (2003), and Innibos (2004), expanded this festival infrastructure, creating a national network of platforms that support Afrikaans theatre, music, literature, and visual arts (Viljoen, 2023). While early iterations were sometimes criticised for cultural protectionism, these festivals have since evolved into more inclusive cultural-industry spaces that reflect changing artistic practices, audiences, and market conditions.

From a creative-economy perspective, arts festivals perform a crucial economic function by concentrating cultural production, facilitating artist–audience exchange, and generating income streams across the value chain, including performers, technical crews, venues, and local businesses (Getz, 2010; Salvador et al., 2022). For artists in particular, festivals represent one of the few structured and recurring opportunities for professional exposure, networking, and income generation within an otherwise precarious creative labour market. In language-based festival contexts, these economic functions are inseparable from symbolic production, as language itself operates as both cultural capital and market asset within the cultural industries.

Despite the centrality of artists to festival-based cultural production, empirical research in South Africa has largely overlooked artists as creative workers within the festival economy. Existing festival scholarship predominantly prioritises demand-side perspectives, focusing on visitor motivations, segmentation, spending behaviour, and experiential outcomes (Kruger & Saayman, 2019; Viljoen & Kruger, 2025), with growing attention to host community impacts (Masilela et al., 2024). Artists, however, remain under-represented, despite their dual role as producers of cultural meaning and participants in precarious creative labour systems. This gap limits understanding of how festivals function as cultural-industry infrastructures that shape artistic identity, professional practice, and livelihood sustainability.

National-level creative-economy research further underscores the centrality of arts festivals to artistic livelihoods in South Africa. The South African Cultural Observatory's (SACO) mapping of the Cultural and Creative Industries identifies festivals within the "Performance and Celebration" domain, which includes live performance, music, and festival activity (SACO, 2022). Although this domain contributes a relatively modest share to national GDP, it is recognised as culturally significant and structurally vulnerable, relying heavily on face-to-face interaction, project-based production, and freelance labour. Cultural workers in South Africa are disproportionately represented as own-account or informal workers, with careers strongly dependent on events, networking, and live platforms for income and professional visibility (SACO, 2022). These characteristics render artists particularly exposed to economic shocks, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, while simultaneously highlighting the importance of arts festivals as recurring sites of employment, exposure, and cultural production. However, while SACO provides critical macro-economic insight into creative labour conditions, it offers a limited understanding of how artists themselves experience festivals as spaces of identity formation, linguistic expression, and professional meaning-making, an omission this study seeks to address.

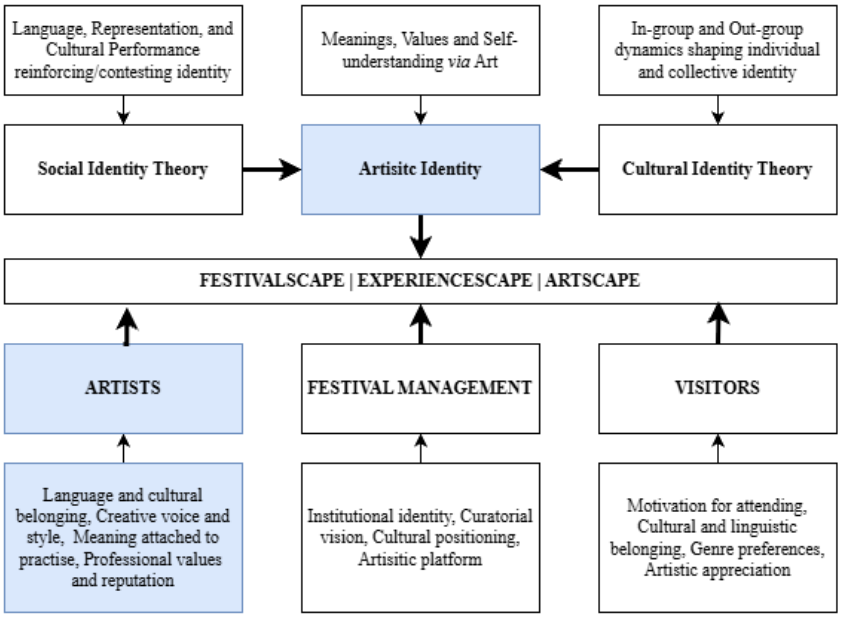
To address this omission, the present study foregrounds the perspectives of Afrikaans-speaking artists participating in the 2025 Aardklop (direct translation: Earth Beat) and Woordfees (direct translation: Festival of Words) festivals. The study is conceptually informed by Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Cultural Identity Theory (CIT), which together illuminate how creative identity is shaped within cultural-industry contexts. SIT emphasises that individuals derive a sense of self from group membership and in-group affiliation, influencing professional pride, collective belonging, and symbolic positioning (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Brown, 2000). Within Afrikaans arts festivals, artists form a linguistic and cultural in-group that reinforces shared identity and professional legitimacy within the creative economy. CIT complements this by conceptualising identity as fluid and performative, constructed through cultural representation, narrative, and artistic practice (Hall, 1997; Anthias, 2018). Afrikaans artistic production can therefore be understood as both cultural expression and economic practice within the cultural industries.

These identity processes unfold within what may be described as festivalscapes, experiencescapes, and artscapes, interconnected environments through which cultural, symbolic, and economic value is co-created (Kruger et al., 2010; Packer & Ballantyne, 2011; Richards, 2018). Artists contribute through language choice, creative voice, and professional practice; festival management shapes cultural positioning through curatorial vision and institutional identity; and audiences engage through cultural belonging, artistic appreciation, and consumption practices (Getz & Page, 2016; Quinn, 2019). Collectively, these interactions position arts festivals as dynamic cultural-industry ecosystems rather than merely cultural events.

To conceptualise how creative identity is shaped within Afrikaans arts festivals, this study draws on the interaction between SIT and CIT, as illustrated in Figure 1. SIT explains how individuals derive a sense of belonging, pride, and professional legitimacy through group affiliation and in-group identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Brown, 2000). Within Afrikaans arts festivals, artists

participate in a shared linguistic and cultural in-group that reinforces collective identity and creative confidence. Complementing this, CIT conceptualises identity as a dynamic and performative process, constructed through cultural representation, narrative, and ongoing meaning-making rather than fixed categories (Hall, 1997; Anthias, 2018). In festival contexts, these processes intersect as artists, festival management, and visitors negotiate identity through language choice, performance, and cultural symbolism (Quinn, 2019; Richards, 2018).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework



Source: Author's own contribution

The framework positions festivalscapes, experiencescapes, and artscapes as mediating environments through which these identity processes are translated into lived creative and professional experiences. These environments shape emotional engagement, social interaction, and cultural meaning, supporting the view that festivals function as identity-rich platforms within the cultural industries (Kruger et al., 2010; Packer & Ballantyne, 2011; Getz, 2010). At the stakeholder level, artists construct identity through language use, creative voice, cultural belonging, and professional practice (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Spolsky, 2009), while festival management influences identity formation through curatorial vision, institutional positioning, and artistic platforms (Getz & Page, 2016; Quinn, 2010). Visitors engage with these environments through motivations, linguistic or cultural affiliation, and artistic appreciation (Kruger & Saayman, 2018). Collectively, the framework demonstrates how Afrikaans arts festivals operate as cultural-industry ecosystems in which artistic identity, symbolic meaning, and creative labour converge.
Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study is to explore how Afrikaans arts festivals shape the creative identity, professional practices, and livelihood realities of Afrikaans-speaking artists within South Africa's evolving creative economy. By centring artists' voices, the study contributes

an artist-focused perspective to festival and creative-industry scholarship, offering insight into how Afrikaans operates simultaneously as cultural identity, creative medium, and economic resource within contemporary arts-festival ecosystems.

Methodology

The research initially adopted an exploratory quantitative design; however, it had to pivot to lived meanings rather than measurement. In comparison, the initial instrument included Likert-type items; the small sample rendered inferential statistics inappropriate. The authors therefore pivoted to inductive content analysis of open-ended responses, using descriptive indicators to contextualise the participant group.

Research context and participants

Data were collected in 2025 during two major Afrikaans festivals: Aardklop (Potchefstroom, North West) held 7–12 October, and Woordfees (Stellenbosch, Western Cape) held 11–19 October. Festival organisers acted as gatekeepers, distributing the survey link through artist mailing lists, newsletters and internal databases to comply with privacy legislation and protect contact details. Twelve artists completed the questionnaire (n = 12). This small sample mirrors the realities of festival-time labour where artists need to juggle rehearsal time, performances, travel, and administrative commitments, which could have depressed response rates.

Instrument design and development

The online questionnaire, hosted on QuestionPro, comprised four sections: (1) demographic information such as gender, year of birth, province residing in, and formal training; (2) role and involvement which included years active in the industry, type of artistic role, medium mainly used, and open-ended questions; (3) experiences of working in Afrikaans measured on a five point Likert scale of agreement; and (4) open ended prompts inviting reflections on opportunities, challenges and suggestions for support. Development followed an iterative process with festival organisers and sector bodies, including the National Afrikaans Theatre Initiative (Nati) and the South African Academy for Science and the Arts, to ensure face validity and sector relevance.

Multiple complementary theoretical perspectives informed item development. Cultural policy and language planning frameworks (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Spolsky, 2009) guided the positioning of Afrikaans as both a cultural resource and a carrier of community and economic value. Insights from the creative industries literature, particularly Throsby's (2001) model of cultural value, supported an approach that recognises artists as contributors to both intrinsic cultural meaning and extrinsic economic outcomes. SIT and related language-identity perspectives (Tajfel, 1981; Giles & Johnson, 1987) informed the inclusion of items and prompts exploring belonging, professional recognition, and in-group affiliation associated with Afrikaans artistic practice. Complementing this, CIT sensitised the instrument to identity as a dynamic and performative process, shaping open-ended questions that invited artists to reflect on how language, creative expression, and festival participation contribute to their evolving sense of self and professional identity. Additional insights from leisure learning and sustainable career development (Stebbins, 2007; Bridgstock, 2011) informed questions relating to long-term career sustainability, while festival and stakeholder

research (Getz, 2010; Quinn, 2010) supported the framing of arts festivals as key platforms for vocational activity, cultural expression, and income generation within the creative economy.

Ethical considerations

The consolidated measuring instrument was submitted to both scientific and research ethics committees and was deemed a low-risk study. The ethics number allocated was NWU-00601-23-A4. The study complied with the Protection of Personal Information Act (Act 4 of 2013). The researchers did not access personal contact details, as the festival organisers distributed the questionnaire link and acted as gatekeepers. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifying information was reported.

Analysis

Since pivoting towards inductive content analysis, immersion in the data through repeated readings, meaning identification, and preliminary coding were essential. Based on the original indicative text (see Table 2), codes were compared and clustered into sub-themes, with attention to recurrence, intensity, and salience across participants. These sub-themes were then synthesised into six overarching themes that captured patterned meanings while preserving nuance. To enhance the rigour of the qualitative component, the study followed established criteria for trustworthiness to ensure that the analysis was systematic, transparent, and grounded in participants' narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data. Both authors conducted repeated readings of all open-ended responses to ensure deep familiarity, and each developed an independent initial analysis of the codes. Differences were discussed and resolved through consensus. In the reporting, the use of verbatim text preserves the authenticity of the participants' responses. Transferability was supported by the detailed participant overview in Table 1 and by transparent reporting of themes, illustrated with multiple quotations, enabling readers to gauge the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining detailed documentation of the analytic process, including the raw data, independent coding outputs, and theme-development records, which were compiled in a research report for the festival organisers. The methodological shift from the initial design to qualitative content analysis was also made explicit and clearly justified. Input from festival organisers and cultural-sector representatives during questionnaire development further strengthened the instrument's validity. Regarding confirmability, the use of direct quotations, both verbatim and translated, ensures that the interpretations remain grounded in participants' accounts and reduces the potential influence of researcher bias.

Results

Profile indicators

The results focus mainly on the profile indicators (Table 1) for the 12 respondents, who were assigned pseudonyms (P1-P12).

Table 1. Profile indicators

Characteristics	**P1**	**P2**	**P3**	**P4**	**P5**	**P6**	**P7**	**P8**	**P9**	**P10**	**P11**	**P12**
Home language	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Gender	F	F	F	M	M	M	M	M	F	F	M	M
Age	57	54	54	46	40	42	42	54	54	39	45	41
Residing province	NW	WC	GP	BE	NW	GP	WC	WC	WC	WC	GP	WC
Years active	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	7-10	10+	10+
Formal artistic training	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Other working language	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Main working medium	TH	TV	TH	TH	TH	TV	TH	TH	TV	TV	TV	TH

A (Afrikaans); E (English); M (male), F(female), Y(yes); N(no); TH (theatre); TV (television), Western Cape (WC), Gauteng (GP), North West (NW), Belgium (BE).

Table 1 provides a descriptive overview of the 12 artists who completed the questionnaire. All respondents reported Afrikaans as their home language, while English was consistently listed as an additional working language. The gender distribution comprises five females and seven males, with ages ranging from 39 to 57 years (average age 48 years). In terms of residential distribution, the group is concentrated primarily in the Western Cape (six participants). Additional respondents reside in Gauteng (three) and North West (two), while one participant lives abroad in Belgium. Participants are highly experienced: eleven reported more than 10 years of professional involvement, and one reported 7–10 years of experience in the arts. Regarding formal training, eight artists held tertiary qualifications in the arts, while four reported none. The primary working medium is primarily theatre (eight participants), with four participants working mainly in television.

The analysis, as shown in Table 2, yielded six interconnected themes. Below, we elaborate on each theme with indicative quotations and interpretive commentary.

Theme 1: Lived Creative Identity

Artists consistently framed Afrikaans as a deeply embodied expressive medium. Respondents described how the language "rolls easier" on the tongue, allowing for more precise nuance, quicker access to emotion, and a sense of being "at home" on stage or set. Comments included: "*Afrikaans hits harder*" (P3); "*I can express myself better in Afrikaans*" (P4); and "*My mother tongue rolls easier… gives me more self-confidence"* (P12).

This identity work is simultaneously personal and professional. On the one hand, Afrikaans enables creative authenticity, as work resonates with one's inner voice (linguistically). On the other hand, it underwrites professional pride related to recognition and value by audiences who share linguistic

frames. These dynamics echo social identity processes in which in-group affiliation (linguistic) reinforces self-esteem and collective belonging. Importantly, participants did not romanticise Afrikaans as exclusive; instead, they emphasised that performing in their mother tongue sharpened expression, irrespective of audience composition.

Theme 2: Afrikaans as Livelihood

Beyond identity, Afrikaans was described as an economic asset. Respondents noted a consistent audience market for Afrikaans work across festivals, school circuits, small theatres and streaming platforms. Typical remarks included: "*There is a market, so it is beneficial*" (P5); "*My work in Afrikaans contributes to my personal income*" (P7); and "*I mostly work in Afrikaans because that is where I get the most opportunities*" (P1).

Several mechanisms were identified, such as festivals acting as concentrated showcases where producers, critics and audiences can encounter new work, which then tours to regional venues or evolves into television scripts and digital projects. Afrikaans also offers brand recognition in specific genres (e.g., comedy and theatre), easing promotion.

Table 2. Identified themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Original indicative text	Translated indicative text
Theme 1: Lived Creative Identity	Creative authenticity and expressive depth (n = 6) Mother-tongue comfort and confidence (n = 5) Professional pride linked to language (n = 7)	"Afrikaans slaan harder." (P3) "Ek kan myself beter uitdruk in Afrikaans." (P4) "My moedertaal rol makliker… gee my meer selfvertroue." (P12)	"Afrikaans hits harder." (P3) "I can express myself better in Afrikaans." (P4) "My mother tongue rolls easier… gives me more self-confidence." (P12)
Theme 2: Afrikaans as Livelihood	Income generation through Afrikaans work (n = 8) Market-driven language choice (n = 5) Career sustainability enabled by Afrikaans (n = 6)	"Daar is 'n mark, so dus voordelig." (P5) "My werk in Afrikaans dra by tot my persoonlike inkomste." (P7) "Ek werk meestal in Afrikaans omdat dit is waar ek die meeste geleenthede kry." (P1)	"There is a market, so it is beneficial." (P5) "My work in Afrikaans contributes to my personal income." (P7) "I mostly work in Afrikaans because that is where I get the most opportunities." (P1)
Theme 3: Arts Festivals as Career Anchors	Festivals as primary creative platforms (n = 10) Professional breakthrough at festivals (n = 7) Access to audiences and networks (n = 6)	"Kunstefeeste speel 'n belangrike rol om 'n platform te skep…" (P8) "Regisseur en skrywer van 'n teaterstuk by die Woordfees." (P1) "Teater by kunstefeeste!" (P12)	"Arts festivals play an important role in creating a platform…" (P8) "Director and writer of a theatre piece at the Woordfees." (P1) "Theatre at arts festivals!" (P12)
Theme 4: Bilingualism, Versatility, and Pragmatism	Comfortable bilingual practice (n = 7) Rejection of being 'better' in one language (n = 5) Language choice shaped by genre or market (n = 6)	Gemaklik in beide Afrikaans en Engels." (P6) "Baie gemaklik in beide Afrikaans en Engels. Ek het tweetalig grootgeword." (P7) "Geen onderskeid tussen tale in musiek nie." (P8)	Comfortable in both Afrikaans and English." (P6) "Very comfortable in both Afrikaans and English. I grew up bilingual." (P7) "No distinction between languages in music." (P8)

Theme 5: Afrikaans as Bridge-Building Language	Intercultural connection and dialogue (n = 4) Social commentary using Afrikaans (n = 3) Collaboration beyond linguistic boundaries (n = 4)	"Om te kan kommunikeer met mense wat Afrikaans magtig is, en sodoende kulture te oorbrug." (P2) "Afrikaanssprekendes ondersteun Afrikaans. Deur Afrikaans op die verhoog te gebruik help dit die taal aanhou groei." (P3) "Ek gebruik my taal om brûe te bou met ander kultuurgroepe." (P12)	"To be able to communicate with people who are fluent in Afrikaans, and thus bridge cultures." (P2) "Afrikaans speakers support Afrikaans. By using Afrikaans on stage, it helps the language continue to grow." (P3) "I use my language to build bridges with other cultural groups." (P12)
Theme 6: Structural Constraints and Precarity	Insufficient state funding (n = 6) Limited access to mainstream theatres (n = 5) Low remuneration and job insecurity (n = 5) Lack of transparency and feedback (n = 4)	"Staatsondersteuning!" (P12) "Hoër salarisse." (P10) "Die voortbestaan van die feeste." (P6) "Ek het geen idee of paneellede by my vertonings was nie." (P3)	"State support!" (P12) "Higher salaries." (P10) "The survival of the festivals." (P6) "I have no idea if panellists were at my shows." (P3)

Theme 3: Arts Festivals as Career Anchors

Participants consistently described festivals as essential career anchors, where creative work is developed, premiered, reviewed, and circulated. This ranges from broad claims about their importance as platforms, "Arts festivals play an important role in creating a platform…" (P8), to specific references to producing work at particular festivals, "*Director and writer of a theatre piece at the Woordfees*." (P1).

Artists emphasised three key anchoring functions, which include (a) platforming, where curated programmes, venues, and performance slots legitimise new work and signal quality; (b) networking, where informal encounters with peers, programmers, and media strengthen professional ties and spark future collaborations; and (c) visibility and validation, where critical attention, awards, and audience feedback confer symbolic capital. These functions are especially significant in South Africa, where limited year-round theatre infrastructure in many towns means festivals operate as the primary public stage for Afrikaans productions, accelerating development cycles while enabling discovery.

Theme 4: Bilingualism, Versatility, and Pragmatism

A striking pattern was linguistic pragmatism, where most participants were comfortable working in both Afrikaans and English, often within the same production environment. Representative comments included: "*Very comfortable in both Afrikaans and English. I grew up bilingual*" (P7) and "*No distinction between languages in music*" (P8). Crucially, participants rejected hierarchies that position one language as inherently superior; instead, they framed bilingualism as professional versatility that widens opportunity while keeping Afrikaans as a creative home language.

Theme 5: Afrikaans as a Bridge-Building Language

Contrary to discourses that cast Afrikaans as exclusionary, several artists described using Afrikaans to build bridges with other cultural groups: "*To be able to communicate with people who are fluent in Afrikaans, and thus bridge cultures*" (P2); "*By using Afrikaans on stage, it helps the language continue to grow*" (P3); "*I use my language to build bridges with other cultural groups*" (P12). This implies collaboration with non-Afrikaans-speaking artists in which Afrikaans is present alongside English or other languages, creating multivocal productions. The use of Afrikaans for social commentary invites audiences into conversations about contemporary South Africa that are anchored in specific, situated voices.

Theme 6: Structural Constraints and Precarity

Finally, artists underscored systemic constraints that shape their working lives: "*State support*!" (P12); "*Higher salaries*" (P10); "*The survival of the festivals*" (P6); and "*I have no idea if panellists were at my shows*" (P3). Here, four concerns recurred: insufficient public funding for production, touring, and artist development; low and uneven remuneration; limited access to mainstream theatres; and opaque selection and feedback processes. This limits risk-taking and compresses rehearsal time, impacting artists in early career stages or in smaller venues/festivals, and constraining run lengths and revenue. Artists who are worried about the long-term viability of festivals, given tightening budgets and rising production costs, still need to bear much of the cost

themselves. While festivals create pockets of opportunity, they also concentrate risk into short windows, intensifying workload and uncertainty.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Afrikaans arts festivals shape the creative identities, professional practices, and livelihood realities of Afrikaans-speaking artists within South Africa's evolving creative economy. Taken together, the findings depict a nuanced festival environment in which Afrikaans operates simultaneously as cultural identity, artistic medium, and economic resource. Artists consistently described Afrikaans as a source of belonging and professional pride, an expressive medium that enables emotional precision and creative authenticity, and a marketable asset that sustains demand and income. These findings support international scholarship that positions arts festivals as identity-rich cultural-industry ecosystems rather than merely sites of cultural consumption (Getz, 2010; Quinn, 2010), while extending this work by foregrounding artists' lived experiences within a minority-language festival context.

From a theoretical perspective, the results provide empirical support for the combined application of SIT and CIT in festival settings. In line with SIT, artists' narratives revealed how shared linguistic affiliation at Afrikaans festivals reinforces in-group belonging, professional legitimacy, and symbolic recognition. At the same time, the findings nuance CIT by demonstrating that Afrikaans identity is not fixed or exclusionary but is actively performed, negotiated, and reimagined through creative practice, bilingualism, and collaboration. Rather than positioning Afrikaans as a closed cultural enclave, artists articulated its use as flexible, pragmatic, and dialogic, enabling bridge-building across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This challenges residual perceptions of Afrikaans arts festivals as culturally insular and aligns with more recent literature emphasising fluid, relational identity formation in post-apartheid cultural spaces.

Empirically, the study contributes an artist-centred perspective that remains under-represented in South African festival research, which has largely prioritised visitor experiences, market segmentation, and economic impact assessments. The findings corroborate national-level creative-economy evidence indicating that cultural workers operate within structurally precarious labour conditions (SACO, 2022), while adding depth by revealing how artists themselves experience festivals as *de facto* career systems. Festivals function as critical career anchors by concentrating visibility, facilitating networking, brokering professional recognition, and enabling income generation in a context where year-round infrastructure for Afrikaans theatre and performance remains limited. However, this dependence also binds opportunities to short festival cycles, compressing labour into intense periods and concentrating financial and emotional risk.

The findings further complicate assumptions about linguistic hierarchy in creative labour. Artists' bilingualism emerged not as a compromise or loss of authenticity, but as professional capital that expands creative and economic opportunities. Practically, bilingualism increases access to commissioning and casting opportunities; creatively, it enables hybrid dramaturgies that reflect South Africa's sociolinguistic realities while retaining Afrikaans as an expressive centre. This insight extends creative-economy scholarship by illustrating how language functions as both symbolic and economic capital within festival-based labour markets.

At the same time, persistent structural constraints were evident. Artists highlighted underfunding, low and uneven remuneration, limited access to mainstream theatres, and opaque selection and feedback processes as ongoing barriers to sustainability. These challenges resonate with broader creative-labour literature on precarity and vulnerability, particularly in project-based, event-driven cultural industries. While individual festivals demonstrate resilience, the findings suggest that long-term solutions require coordinated institutional and policy responses beyond the capacity of single events.

From a practical standpoint, the study points to several implications for festival organisers, sector bodies, and policymakers. Recognising Afrikaans as a triadic resource, identity, artistry, and economy suggests programming approaches that balance heritage affirmation with aesthetic innovation. Greater collaboration across festivals could ease workload compression and enhance artist well-being through coordinated scheduling and touring pathways. Transparent fee structures, minimum remuneration guidelines co-developed with artists, and multi-year funding models that integrate development, production, and touring could reduce precarity and enable deeper creative processes. Investment in multilingual curation, subtitle infrastructure, and translation or adaptation pathways may further expand audiences without diluting Afrikaans's expressive value. Finally, capacity-building initiatives focused on budgeting, intellectual-property management, touring logistics, and funding applications could strengthen artists' long-term career sustainability.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample size (n = 12), while appropriate for exploratory qualitative analysis, limits generalisability. Participants were primarily experienced artists, concentrated mainly in theatre and television, which may under-represent early-career practitioners and other artistic disciplines. Data were collected at two Afrikaans-oriented festivals, which limit the transferability of the findings to multilingual or non-language-specific festival contexts.

Future research should build on these insights by extending artist-centred inquiry to multilingual and cross-cultural festivals, employing longitudinal or mixed-method designs to track career trajectories over time, and examining how different funding and governance models shape creative risk-taking, identity negotiation, and labour conditions. Such work would further strengthen understanding of festivals not only as cultural events but also as critical infrastructure within South Africa's creative economy.

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Exploring Aesthetic Labor in the Profession of Tourist Guiding: A Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Purpose: The present study aims to reveal the elements of aesthetic labor in the profession of tourist guiding and the effects of aesthetic labor on tourist guides.

Study design/methodology/approach: Within the scope of this study, data were obtained from 16 tourist guides. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview form and analyzed using thematic analysis, one of the qualitative research analysis methods.

Results: Research findings reveal that tourist guides' perceptions of aesthetic labor are fundamentally shaped under the main themes of "static appearance" and "performative mannerism." These two main themes are generally consistent with the aesthetic labor literature. However, due to the unique structure of the tourist guiding profession, it diverges from the findings in the field, particularly in terms of dress codes, challenges and effects. Furthermore, the findings show that tourist guides experience various psychological, physical, and financial effects related to aesthetic labor. In terms of psychological effects, it has been found that dressing well and personal care create a sense of happiness and increase self-confidence among guides. Physically, it has been revealed that maintaining a fit appearance requires time, effort, and physical challenges. Financially, it has been found that clothing expenses constitute a financial burden and that personal care is considered an additional cost factor for guides.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the aesthetic labor literature by focusing on professional tour guiding, a service profession that has received limited academic attention despite its intensive face-to-face nature. The study explores aesthetic labor within the theoretical framework of self-presentation and impression management, contextualizing the dimensions of static appearance and performative behavior in the tourist guiding profession and revealing the psychological, physical, and financial effects of aesthetic labor.

Keywords Aesthetic labor, tourist guiding, self-presentation, impression management, tematic analysis.

Introduction

Aesthetic labor has been receiving increasing attention in academic and managerial literature as an integral part of the service industry (Wu et al., 2020; Luoh & Tsaur, 2024). Today, employees are expected not only to demonstrate "soft" skills, but also to possess "look good" or "sound right" skills; in short, to use "aesthetic skills" (Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005). Because aesthetic

labor carries an emotional message aimed at the customer's senses. This can be considered a method of attracting customers (Quinn, 2008). Indeed, many job advertisements today specify requirements such as “well spoken and of smart appearance,” “well presented,” or “good looking” (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007, p. 104). Therefore, the impressions of service employees, their aesthetic understanding, and how these impressions are reflected to customers have become a subject of consideration for tourism businesses.

Aesthetic labor is a concept similar to “emotional labor,” which requires employees to display certain emotions in order to influence customers (Williams & Connell, 2010). Unlike emotional labor, aesthetic labor emphasizes employees' physical performance in the work process. In this sense, aesthetic labor refers to employees' “embodied competencies and skills.” (Warhurst et al., 2000, p. 4).

Aesthetic labor has been studied in various sectors. Studies focusing on aesthetic labor include academia (Lipton, 2020), the service sector encompassing hotels and airlines (Tsaur & Tang, 2013; Ren, 2017; Efthymiou, 2018), restaurants (Tsaur, Luoh, & Syue, 2015), retail (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007), fitness (Harvey, Vachhani, & Williams, 2014), and call centers (Nath, 2011). Research conducted on aesthetic labor has examined workers' body measurements (Harris & Small, 2013), cosmetic surgery tourism (Bell et al., 2011), “hard” technical skills and “soft” skills (Nickson et al., 2005), and aesthetic labor within the scope of racial diversity (Moss & Tilly, 1996; Oluyadi & Dai, 2023).

Those working on the front lines of the tourism industry are expected to project a good image within the scope of aesthetic labor by presenting an attractive appearance, a pleasant smile, and beautiful teeth, along with well-groomed hair and nails, appropriate clothing and accessories, and a upright and confident posture (Katircioglu & Akgun Tekin, 2021; Quinn, 2008). Therefore, it is known that aesthetic labor has visual and auditory components (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001). The concept of aesthetic labor which has become an important topic in tourism service encounters (Luoh & Tsaur, 2024), has not yet been sufficiently studied in relation to professional tourist guides.

In Goffman's (1959) study, which addresses impression management in individuals' social interaction processes, three fundamental concepts stand out: roles, settings, and performances. In line with this theoretical framework, a theater metaphor is constructed in which individuals take on different roles in social settings and interact with others through these roles (Zhu & Xu, 2021). According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, individuals behave like “actors” in social life and try to create the impression they want on the people they meet by performing certain roles. In this context, self-presentation refers to how individuals present themselves to others (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2017), while impression management involves controlling this presentation (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Individuals position themselves through interactions with situations and audiences to achieve desired outcomes (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). In summary, people's constant interest in how they are perceived by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) allows the concept of impression management to be examined in a wide range of contexts, from employee behavior in

an organizational setting to corporate and individual image studies and research addressing tourist–service provider interactions (Yan & Ho, 2017).

Within the framework of the increasingly important concept of aesthetic labor (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007), there is a need for studies examining the relationship between professional tourist guides and aesthetic labor in the context of controlling their impressions. Therefore, the present study aims to reveal the elements within the scope of aesthetic labor from the perspective of professional tourist guides and the effects of aesthetic labor on tourist guides. The in-depth examination of the aesthetic labor requirements of the professional tourist guide profession highlights the originality of the research. The following research questions have been identified in line with the objectives of the research.

Q1. What elements of the aesthetic labor displayed during the tour do professional tour guides emphasize?

Q2. What challenges does maintaining the aesthetic labor displayed during the tour pose for tour guides?

Q3. What are the psychological, physical, and financial effects of the aesthetic labor displayed during the tour on tour guides?

This research has several contributions. First, it examines the aesthetic labor elements exhibited by professional tourist guides and their effects on tourist guides within the context of the tourist guiding profession, thereby contributing to the relevant research gap in the field. Second, elements related to the dimensions of aesthetic labor, namely “static appearance” and “performative mannerisms,” are examined considering the nature of the professional tourist guiding profession. This is because it is taken into account that different job categories in the tourism sector may vary in terms of aesthetic labor depending on the nature of the job. By addressing aesthetic labor through the theoretical framework of self-presentation and impression management, this study contributes to understanding how aesthetic labor is produced and managed in the profession of tourist guiding.

Literature Review

Aesthetic Labor

Aesthetic labor highlights the aspect of a service provided that relates to the physical performance of employees. This concept considers “embodied competencies and skills” to be fundamental elements of the service economy (Warhurst et al., 2000, p. 4). Warhurst and Nickson (2001) introduced the term “aesthetic labor” as a concept that evaluates the physical appearance and performance of organizational employees as a whole and reflects the embodiment of an organization's values. The concept of aesthetic labor focuses on the concrete characteristics of workers (Williams & Connell, 2010). Characteristics encompassed by aesthetic labor refer to many qualities of the employee, such as posture, grace, elegance, performance, and beauty (Quinn, 2008).

According to Wu et al. (2020), aesthetic labor has two fundamental dimensions for employees: “static appearance” and “performative mannerisms”. In static appearance, clothing style and body characteristics are prominent; in performative mannerisms, verbal and nonverbal attitudes/behaviors are prominent (Wu et al., 2020). Indeed, both appearance and performative

behaviors, such as looking good and having a pleasant tone of voice, ensure that they become an integral part of the service provided during employee service encounters (Nickson et al., 2005).

Self-Presentation and Impression Management

An individual's identity as a social subject is shaped by the interaction of experiences, belief systems, values, behavioral norms, and symbolic elements (Schlenker, 1980). Self-presentation is defined as the process of manipulating information about the self by an actor. Impression management encompasses the behaviors exhibited by individuals to control or shape the perceptions developed about them by others (Schneider, 1981).

The foundations of academic interest in the concepts of self-presentation and impression management are based on Goffman (1959). In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) examines how individuals manage self-presentation in social interactions, shaping the course of encounters and highlighting the performative nature of everyday behavior. In this context, self-presentation enables individuals to construct a positive image of themselves and to be evaluated positively in general (Liden & Mitchell, 1988). In the literature, the underlying reasons for individuals' focus on impression management include assuming social roles, gaining reputation, maintaining self-esteem, achieving strategic goals, creating power and social influence, and forming associative impressions (Liden & Mitchell, 1988). In this respect, the use of aesthetic labor as an important tool in both individual and organizational image-building processes appears to be inevitable. In this study, individuals' efforts to manage their own impressions using aesthetic labor are examined from the perspective of professional tourist guides, and the perceptions of tourist guides regarding aesthetic labor are revealed.

According to Tsaur, Cheng and Hong (2019), a package tour is like an organization temporarily created by a tour leader and tour members. In this context, the tour environment is a process in which the professional tourist guide takes the position of an actor on stage, while tourists, as an audience, shape their perceptions of the guide's presentation and gain a tourist experience (Keskin Pulluk & Sop, 2024). Tour guides, acting as actors on stage during the tour, shape both their professional image and the tour group's experience. In this process, self-presentation allows guides to present themselves in a professional, reliable, and aesthetically attentive manner; impression management, on the other hand, serves the function of shaping tourists' perceptions of the guide.

Although the concepts of self-presentation and impression management are included in tourism research (Keskin Pulluk & Sop, 2024; Yan & Ho, 2017), they are addressed to a limited extent, particularly in the field of tourist guiding and in the context of aesthetic labor. This situation highlights the need for studies on tourist guides from the perspective of self-presentation and impression management. Aesthetic labor is an integral part of the processes of self-presentation and impression management in the context of tourist guides' appearance, tone of voice, body language, and performative attitudes, and has become an important determinant of professional success. In this regard, aesthetic labor in the profession of tourist guiding is considered not only an individual effort but also a strategic practice aimed at managing the perception of the tour group. The fact that this study addresses aesthetic labor in the context of the profession of tourist guiding

within the framework of self-presentation and impression management theory indicates the originality of the research.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research method. The sample of the study consisted of active professional tourist guides. In qualitative research, it is stated that working with participants who are suitable for the research purpose and can provide in-depth information is more appropriate than large samples (Coyne, 1997). In this regard, purposeful sampling was preferred for this study. Using purposive sampling, the participants in the study were selected from active professional tourist guides registered with the Association of Tourist Guides Chambers in Turkey (TUREB, 2026). Thus, the aim is to maximize the diversity and depth of the information that will be revealed in the study (Guba, 1981).

The qualitative data for the study were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire. During the data collection process, 23 professional tourist guides were invited to participate in the study, and 16 of them agreed to complete the questionnaire. Participants who agreed to participate in the study were first provided with information about aesthetic labor and were asked to evaluate and convey their responses from the perspective of their own profession. The data collection process was terminated when theoretical saturation was reached (Molina-Azorín et al., 2015). In this study, the research questions were formulated based on the objectives of the study and the theoretical framework considered.

Data Analysis

In this study, the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze qualitative data. The analysis followed six systematic stages: familiarization with the data, creation of initial codes, identification of potential categories and themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the final report. A data-driven coding strategy was adopted, and themes were developed inductively by carefully examining patterns and relationships among codes in line with the research questions.

In the first stage, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure a thorough understanding of the data. Subsequently, initial codes were created and refined. Next, meaningful relationships between these codes were examined to identify potential themes, and a thematic map was created to visually represent the resulting thematic structure. In the subsequent stage, the themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined with appropriate names that accurately reflected their content. In the final stage, representative excerpts were selected to illustrate the themes, and the findings were interpreted in relation to both the relevant literature and the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To enhance the rigor of the analysis, the first five stages were conducted independently by the authors. After identifying potential themes, a comparative analysis was conducted to reach consensus, thereby ensuring consistency in the findings and reducing the subjectivity inherent in qualitative interpretation (Çağlayan, Ayman, & Yaylı, 2025).

Results

The study involved 16 active professional tourist guides. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1. According to the table, 50% of the study sample consists of men (n=8) and 50% consists of women (n=8). The participants' ages are 35 years and above.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

#	Gender	Age	Professional experience	Language Proficiency	Scope of Authority
1	Male	47	18 years	Russian	National
2	Male	45	5 years	English	Regional
3	Male	35	11 years	English & Spanish	National
4	Female	46	5 years	English	Regional
5	Male	55	5 years	French	Regional
6	Female	53	10 years	Arabic	National
7	Female	39	17 years	English	National
8	Female	53	15 years	Greek	National
9	Male	54	15 years	English & Finnish	National
10	Male	45	6 years	English	Regional
11	Male	48	2 years	English & Spanish	Regional
12	Male	54	5 years	Georgian	National
13	Female	36	6 years	English	National
14	Female	42	2 years	English	Regional
15	Female	37	15 years	English	National
16	Female	42	5 years	English	Regional

Within the scope of this research, findings on aesthetic labor emerged in two dimensions in terms of employees' static appearance and performative mannerisms. This result is consistent with the literature. According to Wu et al. (2020), aesthetic labor has two basic dimensions for employees: “static appearance” and “performative mannerisms”. First, the elements of the aesthetic labor displayed by professional tourist guides during tours that they emphasize in terms of the “static appearance” dimension were analyzed. According to the findings, tour guides emphasize static appearance elements under two sub-themes: “dress code” and “personal care” (see Figure 1). Under the dress code sub-theme, an emphasis was placed on a comfortable, neat, understated, colorful, and easily recognizable style of dress. Findings indicate that clothing should be tailored by the tour guide according to the route taken, the concept of the tour, the places visited, whether the venue is indoor or outdoor, the tour's ability to reflect its spirit, and the characteristics of the tour group. Under the sub-theme of personal care, while emphasis is placed on the grooming routine of hair and beard in men, the necessity of appropriate makeup is highlighted for women. Additionally, due to the guide’s continuous narration, emphasis has been placed on oral and dental hygiene, as well as the necessity of using a pleasant-smelling perfume. Another finding was that tourist guides should have good posture and that their weight is also important in terms of

appearance. These findings are similar to those in the literature. Static appearance is a concept that encompasses clothing style and body characteristics (Wu et al., 2020).

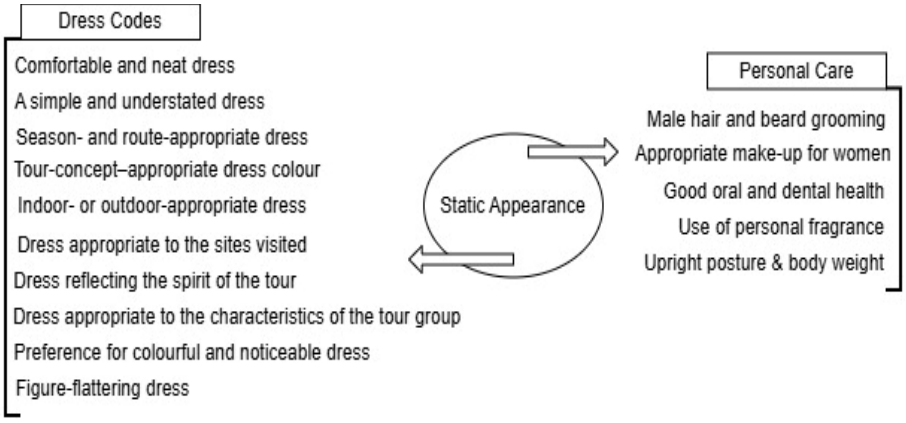


Figure 1: Analysis of aesthetic labor within the scope of static appearance

Table 2 includes findings showing the statements of some tour guides regarding dress codes and personal care, within the scope of the static appearance of aesthetic labor.

Table 2: Analysis of aesthetic labor within the scope of static appearance

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Category	Participant statements
Static Appearance	Dress Codes	Comfortable and neat dress	"Clothing should be comfortable and neat for the route, and it should be modest, not revealing or low-cut" (K4).
		Dress appropriate to the sites visited	"The guide should dress in accordance with the tour program (for example, wear a scarf or head covering if the itinerary includes a mosque) and avoid wearing short clothing" (K8).
		Season and route appropriate dress	"It should be appropriate for the season and type of tour (cultural tour, nature tour, city tour, etc.), the places visited, and the group's profile, with a look that is not excessive or distracting (K7).
		Preference for colorful and noticeable dress	"I prefer colorful and easily visible clothing on tours" (K15).
Static Appearance	Personal Care	Male hair and beard grooming	"Men should pay attention to hair and beard care" (K3).
		Good oral and dental health	We should take care of our oral and dental health" (K7).

	Use of personel fragrance	"A pleasant scent/perfume should be chosen" (K13).
	Appropriate make-up for women	"Appropriate makeup should be applied and one should be well-groomed" (K15).

Secondly, the study examined which elements of the aesthetic labor displayed during tours professional tourist guides emphasized under the main theme of performative mannerisms. According to the findings, the sub-themes of performative mannerisms emerged as "the guide's professional competence" and "body language." Under the sub-theme of the guide's professional competence, the tourist guide's knowledge and organizational skills, communication skills, and the vocabulary and sentence structure they use are highlighted. Under the "body language" sub-theme, elements such as the use of gestures and facial expressions, tone of voice, the guide's first impression on the group, eye contact, and being cheerful and polite come to the fore (see Figure 2). This is because performative attitudes include verbal and nonverbal attitudes/behaviors (Wu et al., 2020).

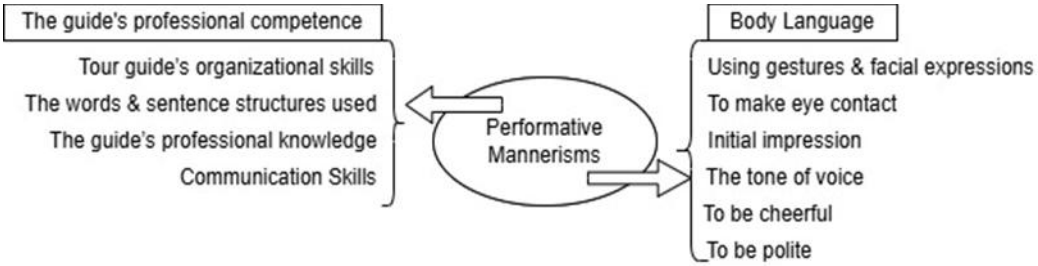


Figure 2: Analysis of aesthetic labor within the scope of performative mannerisms

Table 3 presents findings that include direct statements from some participants within the scope of performative mannerisms of aesthetic labor.

Table 3: Analysis of aesthetic labor within the scope of performative mannerisms

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Category	Participant statements
Performative Mannerisms	Guide's professional competence	The guide's organizational skills	"The knowledge and organizational skills that make a guide a guide" (K5).
		The words & sentence structures used	"The guide's communication skills, the words and sentence structures they use, and, in short, their ability to use the golden elements of communication correctly and appropriately have a significant impact on the guests participating in the tour" (K12).
		The guides professional knowledge	"Above all else comes the guide's knowledge" (K10).

	Body Language	The tone of voice	"In the first encounter, our tone of voice, our care for ourselves, our kindness, our smile, and our knowledge form our professional identity" (K6).
		Using gestures & Facial expressions	"For example, you may be a good storyteller, and conveying this to people through gestures, facial expressions, and hand movements reflects your identity. Performative behaviors expand your sphere of influence. They help people listen to you more attentively. The best example of this is making eye contact and using gestures and facial expressions" (K15);
		To be polite	"First impression, body language, cleanliness, and being polite directly reflect the professionalism of the guide" (K16).

Thirdly, data regarding the challenges of maintaining aesthetic labor during tours from the perspective of tour guides were analyzed. According to the findings, tour guides expressed the challenges they experienced in maintaining aesthetic labor under two sub-themes: "challenges related to clothing" and "challenges related to personal care." Challenges related to clothing include guides having to follow fashion trends, wearing different outfits every day on overnight tours, coordinating outfits, acquiring new clothes and shoes every season, carrying a variety of clothes and spares on overnight tours, the lack of laundry facilities for dirty clothes and consequently having to carry heavier luggage during the tour. Challenges related to personal care include long and tiring tours, summer season tours, different climatic conditions, and the difficulties of being constantly on your feet (see Figure 3).

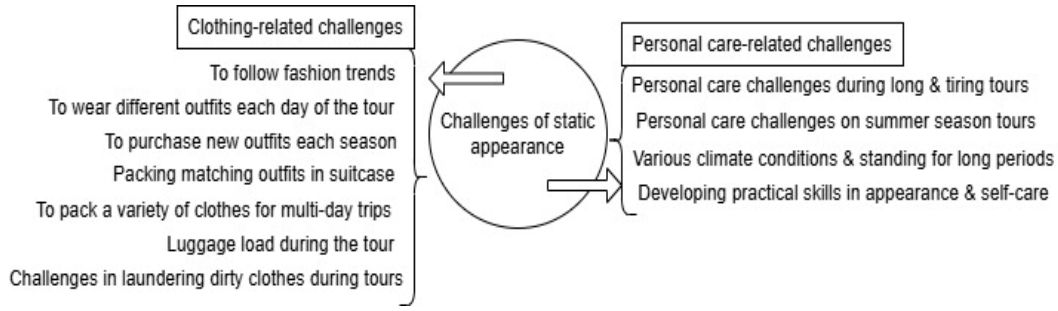


Figure 3: Challenges of maintaining aesthetic labor during the tour

Table 4 reveals the challenges involved in maintaining aesthetic labor during tours from the perspective of tour guides, based on the statements of some participants.

Table 4: Challenges in maintaining aesthetic labor from the perspective of tourist guides

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Category	Participant statements
Challenges	Clothing-related challenges	To follow fashion trends	"Efforts to conform to fashion trends, dress appropriately, and pay attention to outward appearance" (K3).
		To wear different outfits each day of the tour	"I choose different clothes every day" (K4).
		To purchase new outfits each season	"I buy new clothes and new shoes every season" (K12).
		Challenges in laundering dirty clothes during tours	"During back-to-back tours, we cannot always have our clothes laundered at hotels, so I try to wash them in my room, which is a troublesome situation." (K6)
	Personal care-related challenges	Personal care challenges during long & tiring hours	"Maintaining personal care is challenging on long and exhausting tours" (K2).
		Personal care challenges on summer season tours	"Personal care is very challenging during hot summer days" (K5).
		Various climate conditions & standing for long periods	"Long tours, varying climatic conditions, busy schedules, and constant standing make it difficult to maintain both clothing and personal care" (K7)

Fourth, findings were also obtained regarding the psychological, physical, and financial effects of the aesthetic labor displayed during tours on professional tour guides. Tour guides encounter certain psychological, physical, and financial effects of aesthetic labor. In terms of the psychological effects of aesthetic labor, tour guides have stated that dressing well, taking care of themselves, and developing their own unique style bring them happiness and boost their self-confidence. They also reported that maintaining a good appearance leads to positive feedback from the tour group. However, they also emphasized that, despite being tired from the tour, they feel the pressure to appear professional. In terms of physical effects, participants emphasized that maintaining a good appearance and looking fit was physically challenging. Financially, they stated that clothing is costly; that the financial burden increases, especially when brand-name clothing is preferred; and that personal care also constitutes an additional cost (see Figure 4).

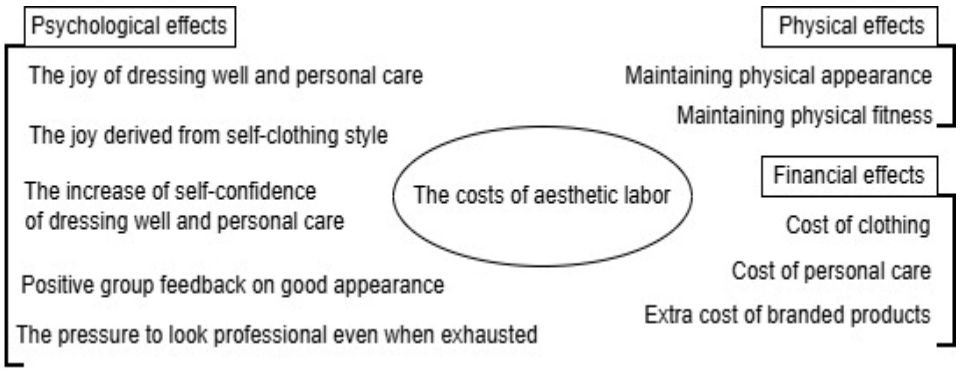


Figure 4: The psychological, physical, and financial effects of aesthetic labor on tourist guides

According to the findings, tourist guides have indicated that aesthetic labor has certain physical, psychological, and financial effects (see Table 5).

Table 5: Psychological, physical, and financial effects of aesthetic labor on tourist guides

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Category	Participant statements
Effects	Psychological effects	The joy of dressing well and personal care	"Clothing makes me feel good psychologically and makes me happy" (K1).
		The increase of self-confidence of dressing well and personal care	"Looking healthy and well-groomed boosts self-confidence" (K2).
		The pressure to look professional even when exhausted	"Being in the public eye creates stress due to the obligation to maintain a professional appearance despite fatigue or adverse conditions" (K7).
	Physical effects	Maintaining physical fitness	"We need to pay attention to both our physical health and our appearance, and for this we need to make some sacrifices" (K3).
		Maintaining physical appearance	"Physically, maintaining a well-groomed and tidy appearance can be challenging in hot weather or on tours involving strenuous walking" (K7).
	Financial effects	Cost of clothing	"The financial cost of clothing is high." (K8)

	Cost of personal care	"Appropriate clothing, footwear, and personal care products entail a certain financial cost" (K7).
	Extra cost of branded products	"When we buy branded products, it brings an extra financial burden" (K16).

Conclusion

This research aims to reveal the aesthetic labor elements of professional tourist guides and the effects of aesthetic labor on tourist guides. Within the scope of the research, the aesthetic labor elements exhibited by professional tourist guides during tours were first analyzed. According to the results obtained, it has been revealed that the two fundamental elements of aesthetic labor are "static appearance" and "performative mannerisms." Under the theme of "static appearance," "dress codes" and "personal care" emerged as prominent sub-themes. The results obtained in this study coincide with the literature in terms of aesthetic labor elements. According to Wu et al. (2020), aesthetic labor has two fundamental dimensions for workers: "static appearance" and "performative mannerisms."

The findings regarding the "dress codes" of professional tourist guides within the scope of "static appearance" show differences and uniqueness compared to the literature, due to the nature of the guiding profession. According to the findings, the dress codes of professional tourist guides are determined by the concept of the tour they are working on, whether the tour destinations are indoor or outdoor venues, the characteristics of the guests in the tour group, and the religious or cultural nature of the destinations. The main reason tour guides choose clothing that matches the tour concept and opt for easily distinguishable colors is that they want to be easily recognizable within the group. Furthermore, on certain routes (e.g., tours of medieval-themed historical cities or ancient sites), it has been observed that guides adopt a clothing style specific to the destination and complement this style with various accessories. In this context, it has become clear that tour guides strive to influence tour groups through their choice of clothing style, color, and accessories, which reflect the spirit of the destination and highlight the concept of the tour.

The results obtained regarding the "personal care" of professional tourist guides within the scope of "static appearance" show that guides attach importance to upright posture, body weight, physical appearance, and the use of pleasant fragrances. Due to their constant speaking, they emphasize oral and dental health; it has also been determined that male guides pay attention to hair and beard care, while female guides pay attention to appropriate makeup use. It is known that physical attractiveness affects social perceptions of individuals' personality traits and, consequently, their success and income (Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009).

Under the main theme of "performative mannerisms," various findings were obtained regarding the elements that tourist guides consider important for themselves. According to the findings, tourist guides' performative mannerisms are divided into two sub-themes: "the guide's professional competence" and "body language." It has been concluded that, within the scope of "the guide's professional competence," the knowledge and organizational skills of tourist guides broaden the

guide's sphere of influence and encourage individuals to listen to the guide more attentively. Under this theme, the tourist guide's communication skills, such as the vocabulary and sentence structure they use, also come to the fore. Under the “body language” theme, it was determined that tourist guides place importance on first impressions, tone of voice, the sentences and words used, supporting the narrative with body language, maintaining a friendly demeanor, making eye contact, and using a polite style. Furthermore, findings indicate that the use of a polite style reflects the guide's professionalism. These results are similar to some studies in the field. According to Wu et. (2020), the “performative mannerisms” dimension of aesthetic labor consists of the management of employees' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Verbal behaviors refer to the verbal communication established by consciously managing the words employees use during service and how they say these words (tone of voice, emphasis, etc.). Nonverbal behaviors, on the other hand, focus on employees expressing themselves using elements such as body language and interpersonal distance. Research has shown that employees making eye contact and smiling play an important role in service interactions (Sundaram & Webster, 2000).

Secondly, within the scope of the research, the challenges of maintaining aesthetic labor during the tour from the perspective of tourist guides were examined. According to the research results, these challenges for tourist guides emerged under the sub-themes of “clothing-related challenges” and “personal care-related challenges.” Under the sub-theme of “personal care-related challenges,” situations such as long and tiring tours, different climatic conditions, challenges in personal care due to standing for long periods, and developing practicality in personal care and appearance emerged. Under the sub-theme of “clothing-related challenges,” it was found that tour guides prepare different outfits and coordinated clothing combinations for each day of the tour, follow seasonal fashion trends, make an effort to go on tours with new clothes each season, and that these preparations, particularly on tours involving overnight stays, bring the challenge of carrying heavy luggage. These findings are original in that they reveal the challenges of aesthetic labor through the guides’ own experiences.

Thirdly, within the scope of the study, it was determined that aesthetic labor has psychological, physical, and financial effects on tour guides. According to the findings, dressing well, paying attention to personal care, and developing a unique style of dress provide tour guides with psychological benefits, such as happiness, a sense of well-being, increased self-confidence, and positive feedback from the tour group in response to their appearance. Moreover, it was concluded that, due to being constantly in the public eye, they experience pressure to maintain a professional appearance despite tour-related fatigue. In terms of physical effects, it was determined that maintaining an attractive and fit appearance requires physical challenges and sacrifices. Findings indicate that maintaining a neat appearance is particularly challenging on long tours with high walking intensity.

From a financial perspective, it was found that clothing is costly, that this cost increases when brand-name clothing is preferred, and that personal care also constitutes an additional financial burden. However, it was also noted that some guides stated it is possible to create a stylish appearance without excessive financial expenditure. Furthermore, the study revealed that during

back-to-back tours, guides sometimes encounter problems with laundry services at hotels, and when hotel facilities are limited, they address these challenges through personal efforts. Taken together, these findings are noteworthy as they illustrate how tour guides assess the psychological, physical, and financial effects of aesthetic labor within the professional context. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that aesthetic labor is shaped according to the nature of different occupations within the tourism sector; however, for tour guides, the concept of aesthetic labor retains similarities in the literature regarding its core dimensions, namely static appearance and performative mannerisms.

Theorical Contribution

This research makes several theoretical contributions. Firstly, by exploring aesthetic labor specifically in the context of tour guides, it addresses a significant gap in the existing literature. Secondly, it applies the theoretical framework of self-presentation and impression management to the study of aesthetic labor among tour guides. Through this lens, the study offers insights into how aesthetic labor is performed and managed within the tour guiding profession.

Self-presentation and impression management are fundamental concepts that describe individuals' behaviors aimed at shaping others' perceptions of themselves during social interactions. According to Goffman (1959), individuals behave like actors in social life, attempting to create the desired impression by performing specific roles. In occupational groups within the service sector, particularly in professions with intensive face-to-face interaction such as tour guides, the processes of self-presentation and impression management become more visible and are closely linked to aesthetic labor. This study, through the theoretical framework of self-presentation and impression management, holistically examines tour guides' efforts to present themselves and manage the impressions they create on tour groups during service encounters in the context of aesthetic labor.

Practical Implications

This research offers several practical benefits for the profession of tour guiding. First, it provides professional tour guides with concrete insights into the key elements and behaviors associated with aesthetic labor, including appearance, personal care, and performance-related attitudes during service encounters. By clarifying these elements, the study helps guides become more aware of how aesthetic labor is enacted in their everyday guiding practices.

Second, the findings provide valuable insights that enable guides to plan and manage their careers more effectively by taking into account the psychological, physical, and financial effects of aesthetic labor. Understanding these effects can help guides develop sustainable strategies to cope with appearance-related expectations and performance demands over time.

Third, the findings reveal that aesthetic labor in the tour guiding profession is not merely an innate personal trait but rather a professional competence that can be learned and managed. Accordingly, institutions responsible for education and professional development in the field of tour guiding (such as guiding departments, professional associations, and unions) should not limit their training content to knowledge transfer and technical skills alone. More explicitly, this study indicates that training programs should include courses and practical components that enable tour guides to develop awareness of issues such as appearance, body language, tone of voice, performative

behaviors, and impression management. Additionally, it is recommended that professional development and in-service training address the psychological, physical, and financial effects of aesthetic labor, and that content be developed to help guides manage these demands more sustainably. In short, the findings indicate that self-presentation, impression management, and aesthetic labor should be regarded as core professional competencies, rather than secondary' skills, in tour guiding education.

Finally, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of aesthetic labor in the tour guiding profession. In this regard, it is particularly beneficial for novice guides, as it provides guidance on navigating professional expectations and managing self-presentation and impression management practices more consciously.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has certain limitations. First, qualitative data were collected from 16 professional tour guides to examine the nature of aesthetic labor in the tour guiding profession in depth. While this approach provides a significant advantage in capturing guides' experiences and perceptions in detail, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Accordingly, it is recommended that future research employ quantitative methods to examine the antecedents and consequences of aesthetic labor in the tour guiding profession more comprehensively. Quantitative studies with larger samples would help test the qualitative findings of this study and contribute to obtaining statistically generalizable results. Finally, it is also recommended that studies be conducted to develop scales that measure aesthetic labor in the tourist guide profession. The foundations of the scale development process can be laid by utilizing the qualitative findings of this study.

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From Culinary Heritage to a Technology-Enabled Living Gastronomy Laboratory: Experimental Food Practices, Community Co-Creation, and Regenerative Gastronomic Tourism Systems in the Troy Region

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper presents a research project that conceptualizes a living gastronomy laboratory, as a regenerative tourism institute in the Troy region. The study explores how place based culinary and craft knowledge can be translated into community participation and experiential tourism within a regenerative rural development framework.

Study Design : The research adopts a conceptual case study . Drawing on living laboratory theory, regenerative tourism scholarship, and resident tourist value co-creation frameworks, the study outlines the structure and governance of a gastronomy centered living lab. And discusses possible its benefits through previous correlating examples.

Results: As an exploratory study, results are conceptual. The paper proposes an interactive gastronomy laboratory model that facilitates knowledge creation and exchange among local communities, researchers, and institutions, while allowing tourism to be integrated within ongoing processes of experimentation and production rather than positioning it as a stand-alone consumption activity. According to the research it is evident that a place based gastronomy living laboratory could also be beneficial to the overall tourism in regenerative concept.

Orginality / Value : The study extends regenerative tourism research by demonstrating how gastronomy and craft practices can function as central mechanisms for an alternative tourism development model

Keywords: Regenerative tourism; Living laboratories; Culinary heritage; Knowledge co-creation; Rural development

Introduction

Troy was selected by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1998 and is spread over a 13,350-hectare area characterized by ecological richness. Sebla Kabaş notes in her thesis that although Troy is a major tourist attraction, visitors spend less than three hours in the vicinity (Kabaş, 2007). This limited engagement reflects the underdevelopment of tourism and recreational activities in the surrounding landscape; infrastructure and visitor experiences remain minimal. Kabaş also highlights ecological degradation in the area due to unmonitored agricultural pressure (Kabaş, 2007). At the same time, the Troy Historical National Park encompasses extensive natural and cultural resources, offering significant potential for regenerative tourism development if managed through integrated planning and innovative governance approaches.

Although OPET financed a project in Tevfikiye, a village recreated in the architectural style of Trojan times, its gastronomic contribution to the overall tourist attraction remains questionable,

(OPET, n.d.) based on preliminary research on the food habits of Troy. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Türkiye declared 2018 as "The Year of Troy," and tourist numbers increased significantly between 2003 and 2017 (from 287,934 to 1,159,795) (Eşitti & Buluk, 2018). This paper discusses the regenerative potential of a living gastronomy laboratory in the vicinity of Troy and its possible benefits for tourism in the area.

As argued by Higgins-Desbiolles (2018), sustainable tourism depends on growth. This aligns with the targets of Strategy and Budget Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye's Türkiye's, the 12th Development Plan (2024–2028), (SBB, 2023) which aims to increase tourism revenue from 46.5 billion dollars to 100 billion dollars by 2028 and to raise visitor numbers from 51.4 million to 82.3 million. The regulatory practices and projections associated with this plan are outlined as optimistic and technologically driven. However, while such strategies are framed within sustainability discourse, scholars have questioned whether sustained growth can genuinely align with ecological and social limits. Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) argues that "if sustainability means anything, it is surely the opposite of sustained growth. Sustained growth on a finite planet is the essence of unsustainability." Framing a cautionary perspective on growth-oriented development.

The data collected by Eşitti & Buluk (2018) indicate that both stakeholders and local residents observed an increase in tourist numbers during specific events such as "The Year of Troy." They also note the rising popularity of heritage and cultural tourism. However, Eşitti & Buluk(2018) warn that without improved connectivity between Troy, Assos, and Gallipoli, as well as infrastructural development, such increases may not translate into long-term experiential quality or sustainability.

In her earlier work, Higgins-Desbiolles (2017) further argues that the time has come to recognize biophysical limits and to reorient society toward more achievable and meaningful goals than continuous economic expansion. Although the Ministry's 12th Development Plan includes environmentally oriented and technologically enhanced strategies,(SBB, 2023) the risks of overexpansion remain Butler (1999) cautions that, in the absence of accurate indicators and long-term monitoring, it is impossible to assess the sustainability of tourism enterprises until many years after their establishment. In *Sustainable Tourism: A State-of-the-Art Review*, Butler (1999) concludes that evaluating tourism growth requires a multisectoral approach and the active participation of stakeholders He emphasizes that local communities should experience the benefits of development rather than be subjected to it.

Therefore, approaching sustainability merely as a means to sustain growth may place destinations in an uncertain future. In contrast, the regenerative paradigm, as discussed by Bellato & Pollock (2023), repositions tourism within the life cycle of a place rather than as an activity imposed upon it. Regenerative tourism offers a different conceptual lens from sustainability, emphasizing systemic integration rather than technical mitigation.

Bellato & Pollock (2023) argue that achieving regeneration requires a transformation in mindset rather than incremental adjustments in techniques. When applied to tourism, the regenerative paradigm shifts the understanding of tourism toward a living system. They also discuss circular economic systems in which tourism is positioned at the center of economic capital. However, this

model remains fragile if it assumes that tourism can grow indefinitely within competitive markets. . Bellato & Pollock (2023) suggest redefining growth as a relational concept, where interconnected systems mutually benefit, co-evolve, and develop without relying on perpetual expansion.

In this context, creating a living laboratory whose livelihood relies solely on tourism within a circular economic system becomes problematic. Living labs, as defined by Leminen , Westerlund and Nyström (2012), are collaborative networks that integrate user-centered research and open innovation in real-world environments. They allow companies, researchers, public institutions, and communities to collaborate in research and development processes. . Leminen et al. (2012) also discuss the life cycles of living labs, shaped by their dominant actors and governance structures.

In response to these debates, this paper proposes a place-centered regenerative model. It conceptualizes a technology-enabled living gastronomy laboratory in the Troy region that integrates permaculture, seed preservation, experimental archaeoastronomy, artisanal production, and digital innovation within a participatory system. Rather than positioning tourism as the primary economic foundation, the model embeds tourism within ongoing processes of agricultural production, craft renewal, and knowledge exchange. This approach aligns with Lin et al. (2017), which redirects the dialogue from tourism service provision toward interaction between tourists and local residents.

By drawing on living laboratory theory and regenerative tourism scholarship, the study explores whether such a system can function as a regenerative habitat in which residents, researchers, and visitors collaboratively participate in production, experimentation, and learning. The aim is not to replace tourism but to reposition it as one layer within a broader place-based system oriented toward long-term ecological and socio-cultural resilience.

Methodology

The conceptual design of the proposed living gastronomy laboratory was developed through a multi-stage analytical process integrating contextual observations, policy review, and theoretical frameworks related to tourism development, regenerative systems, and innovation governance.

To establish the regional context, existing research on the Troy and Çanakkale tourism environment was examined. The study by Kabaş (2007), which investigates the recreational potential of Troy National Park and its surrounding heritage landscape, evaluates the recreational capacity of the vicinity and identifies environmental pressures within the landscape. The study provided insights into understanding ecological and tourism-related constraints in the region.

The quantitative stakeholder research conducted by Eşitti & Buluk (2018) on the Year of Troy was also analyzed. Their study documents both international and national activities associated with the program and provides data on visitor flows to the region.

According to their findings, the estimated number of tourists visiting the Troy area reached approximately 700,000. When considered together with visitation statistics and overnight stay data for the period between 2003 and 2017, the findings suggest a tourism pattern in which the average length of stay across the Çanakkale region remains approximately two nights.

Furthermore, of the 1,159,795 tourists visiting Çanakkale Province during this period, approximately 330,359 visited the Troy National Park and its surrounding area (Eşitti & Buluk,

2018). These figures were considered important in evaluating regional tourism dynamics and limitations and were also examined in relation to national tourism policy objectives.

The 12th Development Plan 2024–2028 (SBB, 2023) prioritizes tourism growth and increased visitor numbers as a central objective. The alignment between regional tourism patterns and this growth-oriented policy framework was therefore considered in the analytical evaluation of the site's development trajectory.

To support the development of policy-oriented strategies within the proposed model, the works of Everett & Aitchin (2010) and Hjalager (2010) were examined in relation to innovation approaches on tourism and food tourism in sustaining regional identity. These works provide insight into how gastronomic identity and innovation can contribute to regional development.

Tevfikiye village, located adjacent to the archaeological site of Troy, is also mentioned in Eşitti & Buluk's (2018) work as a location undergoing transformation into a tourism destination. Additional information regarding the restoration and tourism-oriented transformation of the village is accessible through online sources (OPET, n.d.).

To complement the secondary data sources, the OPET Historical Village Project in Tevfikiye was included in the contextual examination to better understand the development initiatives taking place in the area. In addition, personal site visits were conducted and field observations were undertaken in 2024 and 2025 in the Troy and Çanakkale area.

These visits aimed to support and cross-check the available dataset, as well as to identify key stakeholders, assess current tourism infrastructure, and evaluate the availability of local resources relevant to gastronomy, agriculture, and cultural production. This analysis was conducted through a qualitative comparative approach, in which empirical observations and secondary data were interpreted through theoretical frameworks to identify inconsistencies, gaps, and opportunities for alternative development models.

Promotional and culinary initiatives were critically compared with archaeological scholarship. Local food products claiming historical authenticity were cross-checked with Bronze Age practices and the availability of resources in the Troad to evaluate the historical plausibility of current heritage representations.

Within the goals of the 12th Development Plan (SBB, 2023), sustainability is frequently referenced as an important development principle. However, the concept of sustainability and sustainable growth also presents conceptual challenges and limitations. These issues are discussed in Butler's (1999) work, which highlights possibility of rising tensions between tourism growth and environmental limits.

Similar concerns are raised in the work of Higgins-Desbiolles (2018), who critiques the growth-oriented orientation of tourism development and examines the limitations of sustainability frameworks in addressing structural problems within the tourism system. These critiques were considered in the analysis, particularly in relation to the potential role of academic institutions and research structures within tourism development processes.

The work of Hjalager (2010) on tourism management progress was also considered in this context. Hjalager discusses the efficiency of innovation systems in her research providing insight from

existing works that bring academic institutions and private sector stakeholders in co-creation frameworks..

Tourism co-creation is discussed in Binkhorst (2006) paper, where shifts in the understanding of the tourist experience are examined. Binkhorst replacement of the concept of "the tourist" to "human being" and the approach towards being a tourist within the framework of ones life journey ,also shifts the mental concept of Tourism into an experience. The conceptual repositioning of the tourist as an active participant rather than a passive consumer was considered relevant to the proposed living lab framework.

Another stakeholder in the context of the region is the local resident population. The case study by Lin et al. (2017), which examines residents' life satisfaction in relation to tourism development, was considered as an exploratory reference within the limits of the paper. As highlighted by Butler (1999) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2018), regenerative tourism has been proposed as an alternative to sustainability-oriented frameworks. Due to the tendency of using the word sustainability in the development of one aspect of a whole within the conceptual framework, shifting the balance of the system towards an unsustainable one.

In this context, literature on regenerative tourism was reviewed, particularly the work of Bellato & Pollock (2023), which presents regenerative tourism as an alternative concept that moves beyond sustaining tourism growth toward restoring ecological and social systems. Bellato's later work (Bellato L. ,2024) was also considered to provide additional context for applying regenerative principles as the work examines successful examples of regenerative tourism.

These contextual, policy, and theoretical sources were comparatively analyzed to identify structural tensions between growth-oriented tourism development, reflected in national policy frameworks, and regenerative approaches to destination development, along with evolving tourist and resident perspectives.

Furthermore, in order to align with the regenerative framework, movements and alternative models were examined. The Slow Food movement, originating in Italy as a response to fast food culture (Jung et al., 2014), was identified as having similar goal orientations. As a result, Slow Food representatives, affiliated businesses, and academic institutions within the vicinity were identified through personal visits and research.

Within this analytical context, the potential introduction of a living lab model was explored as an alternative governance and innovation structure.

Living labs function as collaborative open innovation networks that bring together researchers, institutions, businesses, and citizens to experiment with new practices in real-world environments. Living lab governance models have been clearly explained by Leminen et al. (2012). In their study, 26 living labs from four countries were examined, resulting in the classification of governance models.

The structural formation of living labs often includes a dominant stakeholder, with other stakeholders benefiting from the purpose of the model. Although most models are innovation-centered, the relationships and communication between stakeholders, along with the goals of the

lab, define its governance structure and longevity. Leminen et al. (2012) discusses this within the limits of their research as some models may need a shift in their governance models.

Leminen et al. (2012)'s research define four types of living lab governance: utilizer-driven, enabler-driven, provider-driven, and user-driven. The governance type of the proposed living lab model is further discussed in the Results section.

As a secondary source on living labs, Schuurman and Tõnurist (2017) were also considered. The functionality of the labs are then cross-referenced with Hjalager (2010) and Everett & Aitchison (2010)'s research on the tourism management and food tourism in sustaining regional identity..

Furthermore, living lab examples that align with the goal or the living lab proposed were selected. The lab structures on technological innovation, and regenerative frameworks were studied to identify and further study their governance models , regional and goal oriented effectiveness. Within this context Bodrum living labs (Bodrumlivinglabs nd), Nordic Food Lab, (Nordicfoodlab, nd),Netherlands institute in Turkey (NIT nd) and Ruritage (Ruritage nd) were examined. The establishment and dissolution of these initiatives were considered to gain a broader perspective on the applicability of living lab models.

The applicability of The Tourist concept suggested by Binkhorst (2006), within a regional co creation process suggested by Lin et al. (2017) bringing together regional players to create regenerative value in the lens of the regenerative model proposed by Bellato & Pollock (2023) is further discussed in the conclusion chapter.

Based on this analytical process, the following results are presented.

Results

Based on the contextual analysis, policy review, and theoretical evaluation presented in the methodology, the Troy Living Gastronomy Laboratory Model is proposed as a regenerative solution to the identified gaps within the current tourism system in the region. The findings indicate that the region currently operates within a growth-oriented tourism framework, where the targeted increase in visitor numbers is achieved annually. (Eşitti & Buluk, 2018)

However, this growth is not supported by corresponding development in infrastructure, diversification of visitor experience, or alignment with the intellectual and historical depth represented by the Troy Museum. These observations are based on the works of Kabaş (2007), Eşitti & Buluk (2018), as well as personal site visits.

Two key issues become evident.

First, as highlighted by Kabaş (2007), uncontrolled agricultural practices in the region contribute to ecological degradation, including observable changes in biodiversity patterns. This includes impacts on bird migration routes and with also a possibility of chemicals degrading soil fertility, indicating that agricultural production in the area is not managed in a way that supports ecological balance.

Second, as identified by Eşitti & Buluk (2018), visitor stays are short and surrounding villages offer limited opportunities for post-visit engagement. This results in a tourism model that is largely one-dimensional, where visitors experience the archaeological site but have limited interaction with the local cultural and economic context. Binkhorst's (2006) work presents a different

perspective, emphasizing that experience-based tourism has gained increasing importance. In this context, the tourist is understood as a human being who temporarily displaces themselves from their everyday environment and enters a liminal space, constructing personal narratives through experience and self-expression in a contra structural phase absent of time and deadlines.Making the experience , the act of "tourism" part of an everyday reality.

In addition, field observations conducted in 2024 and 2025 confirm that existing tourism-related interventions, including culinary and promotional activities in the surrounding coastal and village areas, are not fully aligned with the archaeological, historical, or cultural context of the region. For example, in coastal areas such as Yeniköy and Papaz, dining options remain limited in both variety and quality. While seafood-based offerings are present, many establishments tend to reflect generic, non-local culinary styles rather than place-specific food traditions. Menus inspired by local geography and Slow Food-affiliated production systems do exist; however, they remain within a relatively closed market and are often perceived as expensive by local residents. This closed circuit also makes their visibility to everyday tourist rather more difficult.

Similarly, villages such as Tevfikiye and Kalafat consist largely of souvenir shops and small-scale food establishments offering standardized products such as gözleme, heirloom black mulberry juice and breakfast menus. The stated heirloom product being a product bought from supermarkets and repackaged for the purpose of an illusion. Causing distrust not only for the restaurant but also to the region. As indicated by Eşitti & Buluk (2018), these spaces frequently include mobile sellers offering low-quality items. The items mentioned in their work were also observed during personal field visits conducted in 2024 and 2025. Mobile vendors and souvenir shops with factory-produced Trojan figurines and simplified cultural representations.

OPET's website on Tevfikiye Archeo-Village mentions architectural infrastructural changes in restoring the social gathering place of the village (Kahve) within the archaeological context. Also mentions a certain gastronomic elements, such as the dessert "Gobli," (OPET, n.d.) this dessert is presented as ancient Trojan foods, yet do not fully correspond with archaeological understandings of Bronze Age food systems. While the use of honey as a sweetener is historically supported, the inclusion of ingredients such as cinnamon and sesame seeds is not clearly evidenced in archaeobotanical data (Dalby ;2003 , Riehl ; 1999).

The overall observation suggests a persistent disconnect between the heritage site, local enterprises, and tourism practices. Similar concerns are raised by Butler (1999) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2018), who argue that growth-oriented tourism models may lead to dependency and structural imbalance, potentially resulting in overtourism and limited local benefit.

As explained by Lin et al. (2017), much of the existing tourism literature treats residents' life satisfaction as an outcome variable rather than as an active component of value co-creation. This perspective overlooks the role of local communities in shaping the tourism experience. Negative attitudes toward tourists may reduce perceived value, while reliance on standardized products and services limits the depth of interaction between visitors and residents. Within this context the negativity of mobile sellers lack of control and a tendency to have accommodations in crowded areas are addressed resulting in low quality products to maximize local revenue, returning in bad

experiences if the venues are dishonest.(Eşitti & Buluk, 2018) Also mirroring Binkhorst's (2006) perspective, which emphasizes tourism as a co-creative experience shaped through interaction, narrative construction, and personal engagement.

Within this context, the tourism model should reflect cultural value and information exchange between residents and visitors. Residents with higher levels of life satisfaction may be more inclined to participate in co-creation processes, aligning with Lin et al.'s (2017) argument that the essence of tourism lies in the interaction between tourists and residents.

This shift toward experience-based and co-creative tourism models, as discussed by Binkhorst (2006), aligns with Lin et al.'s (2017) emphasis on relational value creation. Together, these perspectives suggest that tourism should move beyond passive consumption toward participatory engagement within local systems. Signaling the need for a medium to introduce the experience in a safer and controlled environment where the destinations history, culture, stories , myths and food could be parts of the overall experience.

From this perspective, the regenerative paradigm proposed by Bellato & Pollock (2023) becomes relevant in influencing systemic change in the region. Linear interventions such as modifying menus or introducing isolated tourism services are insufficient to address structural issues. Instead, tourism must be understood as part of a living system, where ecological, cultural, and economic elements co-evolve.

Bellato's (2024) work further highlights the importance of place-consciousness, achieved through engagement with local customs, biodiversity, and environmental context. This may be facilitated through educational and participatory activities that connect visitors with the surrounding landscape.

The establishment of a living lab requires the identification of stakeholders and governance structures. The models proposed by Leminen et al. (2012) were examined, alongside Schuurman and Tõnurist's (2017) work on living lab dynamics.

Leminen et al. (2012) identify four governance types: utilizer-driven, enabler-driven, provider-driven, and user-driven living labs.

Utilizer-driven living labs are initiated by private companies and focus on product development and innovation. While co-creation between consumer and the company is present, control over information remains with the funding entity, and these labs often have shorter lifespans due to them being dissolved when the companies goals are met making such governance models ideal for getting feedback on prototypes before release or farming instant consumer feedback on existing products.

Enabler-driven living labs involve multiple stakeholders, including public institutions, non government organizations (NGOs), municipalities, universities, and local actors. These labs aim to address societal challenges, foster regional development, and generate knowledge, often with longer operational durations. These labs often struggle to attract private businesses due to not having potential business benefits..

Provider-driven living labs are typically initiated by research organizations or universities. The aim of these living labs existence is to draw scientific knowledge and validate methodologies to standardize tools for innovation. They focus on improving users everyday lives.

User-driven living labs are initiated by communities and focus on solving everyday problems, with users playing a central role in decision-making.

For the proposed model, a hybrid structure combining enabler-driven and provider-driven governance is considered most appropriate. This allows for both institutional support and research-oriented development.

While Leminen et al. describes living lab models, Shuurman & Tõnurist mentions innovation labs as an existing short term goal oriented model designed for public sector as "think tank" islands that may act like start up's in pitching or testing ideas for private sector companies.

Following Leminen et al. (2012), the characterization of living lab governance is understood as fluid rather than rigid. Living labs function as adaptive systems, where stakeholder roles and structures evolve over time. The model proposed by Schuurman & Tõnurist where a interconnection between an innovation lab and a living lab is also considered to further draw private sector actors.

Examples such as Nordic Food Lab (University of Copenhagen, n.d.), Yazılıkaya Living Lab (Netherlands Institute in Turkey [NIT], 2025), Ruritage (2022), and Bodrum Living Lab (2024) were examined to understand the practical implications of these models. These cases demonstrate varying approaches to research, community engagement, and regional development.

The Nordic Food Lab, established in Copenhagen, functioned as a provider-driven research initiative exploring experimental gastronomy and food innovation (University of Copenhagen, n.d.). Although it was later integrated into academic institutions, it contributed significantly to the development of New Nordic Cuisine influencing gastronomic pilgrimages. This context also aligns with Everett & Aitchison's (2010) work where food creates a regional identity.

Similarly, the Yazılıkaya Living Lab focuses on interdisciplinary research addressing rural heritage challenges (NIT, 2025), while Ruritage (2022) and Bodrum Living Lab (2024) demonstrate enabler-driven approaches to regional development and innovation. These examples informed the conceptualization of the proposed living gastronomy laboratory, highlighting the importance of adaptability, stakeholder integration, and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

In this research, the regenerative potential of a living lab in the heritage site of Troy is explored. The tourism goals of the Turkish government are outlined in the Strategy and Budget Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye (SBB, 2023). The works of Kabaş (2017) and Eşitti & Buluk (2018) confirm that the heritage site has significant potential; however, agricultural and ecological and service degradation has affected the surrounding landscape over time. In addition, the Çanakkale region currently provides a fragmented tourism experience for visitors. Field observations conducted in villages such as Çıplak and Tevfikiye, along with the presence of Slow Food initiatives in local restaurants and markets, indicate potential for development.

When considered in relation to the works of Binkhorst (2006) and Lin et al. (2017), the regenerative potential of the proposed model becomes evident. The aim is to shift the perception of the "tourist" toward that of a human being participating and engaging in co-creation processes. Within this framework, visitors are positioned as active participants who engage with gastronomy, culture, and local production systems. Through workshops, shared activities, and interactions with local communities, visitors and residents co-exist within the same environment, contributing to a more meaningful and authentic tourism experience.

This approach aligns with a context-based tourism model that adds value to both the visitor and the visited, contributing to the uniqueness and authenticity of the destination (Binkhorst, 2006). Within the regenerative tourism framework, a technologically supported living lab is proposed. Based on the analysis of contemporary examples, the governance model of this lab is conceptualized as a hybrid of enabler-driven and provider-driven structures, integrating universities, public institutions, private sector actors, and potential funding mechanisms such as EU-supported initiatives.While giving opportunities like Slow Food Producers and private sector organisations to use the facilities for innovation production.

This perspective also aligns with Schuurman and Tõnurist (2017), who emphasize the adaptive nature hybridizing living labs with innovation labs and their capacity to evolve through stakeholder interaction. The proposed model is therefore considered as a foundation for future interconnected initiatives and spin-off projects within the region.

The limitations of the study lie in its conceptual and exploratory nature. The proposed living lab model has not yet been implemented; therefore, its practical outcomes and long-term impacts cannot be empirically evaluated within the scope of this research. While similar living lab structures have demonstrated success in other contexts, the proposed model remains hypothetical. Further studies may contribute to the development of the model by identifying stakeholders, refining governance structures, and testing implementation strategies within the regional context.

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Illuminating Antiquity: The Impact of Night Museology on Visitor Numbers in Ephesus

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the concept of night museology as an innovation in cultural heritage management. Its primary objective is to establish a theoretical framework for this emerging practice and to reveal the current state of its implementation in Türkiye through official data. Rather than testing a specific hypothesis, the research aims to make the impact of nighttime opening visible within the broader context of heritage tourism.

Study design/methodology/approach: Utilizing an exploratory and descriptive design, the methodology is twofold. First, a narrative literature review synthesizes national and international perspectives. Second, official visitor statistics for the Ephesus Archaeological Site (2023-2025) were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends, without applying inferential techniques.

Results: Results indicate that introducing night museology at Ephesus in 2024 created a distinct visitor segment. Rather than replacing daytime attendance, nighttime visits act as a complementary innovation. They expand the total visitor volume and distribute demand more effectively across different hours of the day.

Originality/Value: While night museology is a growing global trend, academic discourse regarding its application in Türkiye remains limited. This study addresses this gap by providing a foundational analysis of the Turkish experience, establishing a baseline for future policy discussions and further academic research in heritage management.

Keywords: Night museology; Ephesus; Visitor statistics; Descriptive analysis; Heritage innovation.

Introduction

Night time cultural tourism has gained increasing attention in recent years as cities and heritage destinations seek new ways to adapt to changing visitor behaviours, environmental pressures, and climate-related constraints. Extending visiting hours into the evening allows cultural heritage sites to remain accessible beyond daylight hours and creates alternative experiences shaped by lighting, atmosphere, and reduced crowd density. Previous studies show that night-time visits can enhance emotional engagement, offer a calmer environment, and reshape how visitors perceive heritage spaces (Evans, 2012; Çetinkaya, 2025). Despite this growing practical relevance, night museum practices remain underexplored in tourism and heritage studies, particularly in relation to innovation-driven heritage management.

The need to explore night-time museum practices has become more urgent in destinations exposed to extreme summer heat and intense seasonality. Climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of heatwaves in many Mediterranean destinations, including Türkiye, limiting the comfort and safety of daytime visits to open-air heritage sites (IPCC, 2023). In this context, night museum operations should not be seen merely as an experiential enhancement, but as an adaptive response to environmental and managerial challenges. However, existing tourism literature has largely focused on visitor experience or event-based night tourism, while offering limited theoretical discussion on night museums as a form of innovation in cultural heritage management (Pocock, 2019).

This study is grounded in the innovation in cultural heritage perspective, which conceptualises heritage sites not as static entities but as dynamic systems that require continuous adaptation to social, environmental, and economic change. Innovation in cultural heritage refers to the introduction of new practices, management models, and experiential formats that transform how heritage is accessed, interpreted, and sustained over time (Pocock, 2019; Ioannides et al., 2020). Within this framework, extending museum opening hours into the night can be understood as a managerial and experiential innovation that responds simultaneously to visitor demand, climate stress, and sustainability concerns. Although innovation theory has been widely applied to digitalisation and interpretation practices, its application to night-time heritage use remains limited in the literature.

Another important gap concerns methodology. Many studies on night tourism rely on qualitative data or visitor perception surveys, while secondary data analyses based on official visitor statistics remain scarce. Yet, secondary data offer a valuable opportunity to observe structural changes in visitation patterns and to evaluate the tangible effects of new heritage practices over time (Cappa et al., 2020). Using official visitor statistics allows researchers to move beyond perception-based insights and to assess whether night museum initiatives generate measurable impacts on demand and visitor distribution.

Against this background, this study addresses a clear gap in the literature by examining night museum practices through the lens of innovation in cultural heritage, using secondary visitor data as the primary empirical source. Focusing on the case of Ephesus, one of the most visited archaeological sites in Türkiye, the study explores how the introduction of night-time museum visits represents an innovative operational model and how this innovation is reflected in visitor numbers.

The aim of this study is to present a secondary data based perspective on night museum practices within the framework of innovation in cultural heritage. Specifically, the study seeks to highlight night time museum visitation as a form of heritage innovation, demonstrate its relevance in destinations facing climate and seasonality pressures, and contribute empirical evidence to a field where existing research remains limited. By doing so, the study provides an initial analytical foundation and suggests that future research should adopt more comprehensive, multi-method approaches to further examine the lon term impacts of night museum practices on heritage sustainability, visitor experience, and destination management.

Literature Review

Museums and Tourism

Museums have long been viewed as fundamental pillars for safeguarding, interpreting, and broadcasting cultural heritage. Moving beyond their conventional educational mandates, these institutions now operate as vital cogs in the tourism machine, boosting destination appeal, reinforcing cultural identity, and stimulating local economies (ICOM, 2019). With the global shift toward experience based consumption, museums have evolved. They no longer focus on passive observation but instead prioritize visitor engagement, immersive storytelling, and emotional resonance (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

In the realm of cultural tourism, museums frequently act as "anchor attractions" that dictate travel motivations and how itineraries are built. Evidence suggests that museum attendance significantly sharpens a destination's competitive edge by lengthening visitor stays and diversifying the available activities (Richards, 2018). This role is especially critical in locations with deep historical roots, where museums and archaeological sites stand as tangible symbols of authenticity (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Night Time Museum Practices in Tourism

The rise of night-time museum visits reflects a global trend responding to modern urban lifestyles and a hunger for flexible cultural experiences. A landmark moment in this shift was Berlin's Lange Nacht der Museen in 1997. By synchronizing evening access across various venues, it proved that after-hours programming could dramatically widen public participation (Berlin State Museums, 1997).

At a broader level, the European Night of Museums, launched in 2005, helped standardize evening access as a staple cultural event (European Commission, 2005). Reports indicate that such initiatives do more than just increase visibility; they draw in first-time visitors and redefine museums as vibrant, shared urban spaces (Bollo et al., 2012). Beyond one-off events, giants like the British Museum and the Louvre have woven late-night slots into their standard weekly schedules, marketing them as "quieter, more intimate" alternatives (British Museum, 2023; Louvre Museum, 2023). Crucially, research suggests that the night time atmosphere characterized by artificial lighting and reduced noise fundamentally alters how visitors emotionally connect with the exhibits (Baker & Cameron, 1996).

In tourism literature, night tourism is defined as the extension of visiting hours into the evening and the continued operation of cultural heritage sites after sunset. This concept covers a wide range of activities, including night lighting, special events, night museums, and night markets. Unlike traditional daytime visits, night tourism allows visitors to perceive places in an alternative way due to reduced noise levels, atmospheric lighting, and lower crowd density. These conditions enable visitors to engage with heritage spaces more slowly and thoughtfully, increasing both emotional depth and cognitive focus and allowing a more reflective interaction with historical narratives (Çetinkaya, 2025).

Night tourism and all-night events such as Nuit Blanche (White Night) play a critical role in transforming cities into 24b hour living spaces and revitalising the night time economy. Especially

in capital cities and major cultural centres, these events help city centres move beyond alcohol-oriented entertainment zones and become more inclusive and diverse cultural spaces. By spreading tourism activities spatially and temporally, night tourism reduces overtourism pressure and makes underused urban areas more discoverable. For example, night-time cultural events in cities such as Rome and Paris attract millions of visitors and generate significant economic benefits (Evans, 2012).

Research shows that night time museum visits differ significantly from daytime experiences. In a study conducted at the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, participants described night visits using expressions such as mystical,enchanting, and a journey through time. The way light and shadow highlight architectural details, combined with the quiet atmosphere, helps visitors form a deeper emotional connection with the exhibits. However, logistical issues such as insufficient lighting and inadequate wayfinding were identified as factors that can negatively affect visitor satisfaction (Çetinkaya, 2025).

Another study focusing on the Night of Museums event in Oradea, Romania, found that visitor quality, interaction quality, and physical environment quality directly influence tourists' perceptions of destination identity and overall satisfaction. Visitors who report higher satisfaction are also more likely to recommend the destination and express intentions to revisit (Elhosiny et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023).

The management of night-time museum openings varies across regions and institutions. A SWOT TOWS analysis of museums in China revealed that night openings in Shanghai are largely driven by government policies and focus on social benefits, whereas European examples tend to place greater emphasis on revenue generation. In the Chinese context, weaknesses and threats such as human resource limitations, insufficient funding, and the security of cultural artefacts were highlighted. Accordingly, the study recommends integrating internal management strategies with external strategies (Huang & Wei, 2024).

New media technologies are increasingly used to enhance night museum experiences. In the Museum Night project at the Tsinghua University Art Museum, for example, 3D projection mapping technology transformed the museum's exterior façade into a dynamic exhibition space, extending the exhibition beyond the museum walls. Based on the theory of re-contextualisation, this approach aims to create a holistic museum experience by linking academic content inside the museum with artistic performances outside. Such projections leave a strong visual impression on visitors and strengthen the museum's presence within the urban landscape (Shi et al., 2025).

A comprehensive study on museums in Greece revealed a clear gap between what institutions offer and what audiences expect. While museums tend to prefer traditional formats such as lectures and concerts, audiences show greater interest in socially interactive, atmospheric, and immersive experiences. The study categorised audiences into active participants, accidental participants (those present during the event without prior awareness), and non participants, and emphasised that weaknesses in branding and communication of Lates programmes significantly limit participation (Doxanaki & Pappa, 2025).

Events such as Night of Museums serve not only cultural institutions but also diplomatic missions as strategic platforms. In the case of the Swiss Embassy in Warsaw, participation in such events enabled direct engagement with the host country's public and provided opportunities to shape national image and nation branding. These activities function as tools of cultural diplomacy and soft power, moving beyond traditional diplomatic channels and communicating both historical and contemporary aspects of bilateral relations to wider audiences (Kobierecka & Kobierecki, 2024). Similarly, university museums have the potential to contribute to scientific and cultural diplomacy through these events, although studies indicate that their public visibility often remains limited (Arkannikova, 2024).

Ephesus and the Introduction of Night-Time Museum Visits

As a cornerstone of Mediterranean archaeology, Ephesus has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2015, celebrated for its architectural integrity and historical depth (UNESCO, 2015). It remains a flagship asset in Türkiye's tourism portfolio (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023). However, being an open-air site in the Aegean, Ephesus faces the harsh reality of seasonal overcrowding and extreme heat. With summer temperatures frequently topping 40°C, visitor comfort and site preservation have become increasingly difficult to manage (IPCC, 2023; MGM, 2023).

To tackle these environmental and operational hurdles, Ephesus introduced night-time visits in 2024 as a strategic innovation. Preliminary data from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2024) shows a significant surge in evening visitors during the first year, confirming a strong appetite for after dark access. Its continuation into 2025 marks a shift from a trial run to a permanent fixture of the site's management strategy. In academic terms, the Ephesus case epitomizes the "innovation in cultural heritage" discourse, where extending operational hours serves as both a managerial and experiential solution to modern constraints (Pocock, 2019; Ioannides et al., 2020).

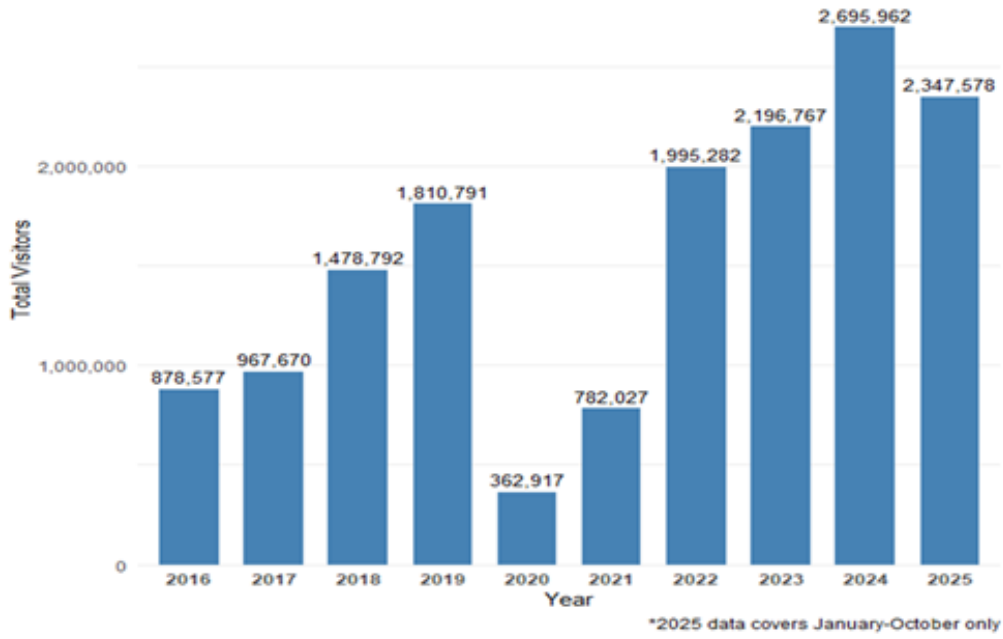
Table 1. Total Monthly Visitor Numbers to Ephesus Archaeological Site (2023–2025)

Year	Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	Total
2016	26,033	31,874	52,040	75,138	126,480	103,995	109,995	109,530	100,425	76,880	38,150	28,037	**878,577**
2017	24,145	28,568	46,281	91,236	103,806	79,124	129,045	144,826	115,482	87,596	62,173	55,388	**967,670**
2018	50,515	49,980	81,591	151,065	136,304	132,989	179,900	209,393	167,554	150,800	96,705	71,996	**1,478,792**
2019	53,505	64,684	103,451	179,876	183,050	196,304	225,383	231,189	193,184	189,381	113,048	77,736	**1,810,791**
2020	63,314	37,882	22,040	0	0	11,020	43,864	67,035	50,316	38,092	19,960	9,394	**362,917**
2021	8,702	11,748	21,183	21,645	24,738	79,295	173,305	138,627	95,574	101,456	67,339	38,415	**782,027**

Year	Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	Total
2022	34,749	35,783	65,545	105,416	232,351	203,452	272,938	315,195	245,861	261,762	134,282	87,948	**1,995,282**
2023	73,935	56,835	88,853	175,974	230,570	253,142	272,384	302,917	273,957	262,505	132,021	73,674	**2,196,767**
2024	62,917	75,223	111,342	248,044	299,183	321,744	326,046	409,727	334,761	298,527	139,245	69,203	**2,695,962**
2025*	86,548	72,889	115,133	230,398	300,512	274,710	315,394	354,647	311,840	285,507	—	—	**2,347,578**

Source: *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Central Directorate of Revolving Funds*

Figure 1. Total Annual Visitors (2016-2025)



Source: *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Central Directorate of Revolving Funds (2016–2025).*

Note: 2025 data cover January–October only.

The figure presents a clear picture of the long-term evolution of visitor numbers to the Ephesus Archaeological Site between 2016 and 2025 and highlights both structural breaks and periods of strong growth. From 2016 to 2019, visitor numbers show a steady and consistent increase, reflecting the growing popularity of Ephesus as an international cultural tourism destination. Annual visitation rose from 878,577 in 2016 to over 1.8 million in 2019, with particularly strong concentrations in the summer months. This seasonal pattern indicates that visitation is closely

linked to peak tourism periods, especially between June and September, when monthly figures regularly reach their highest levels.

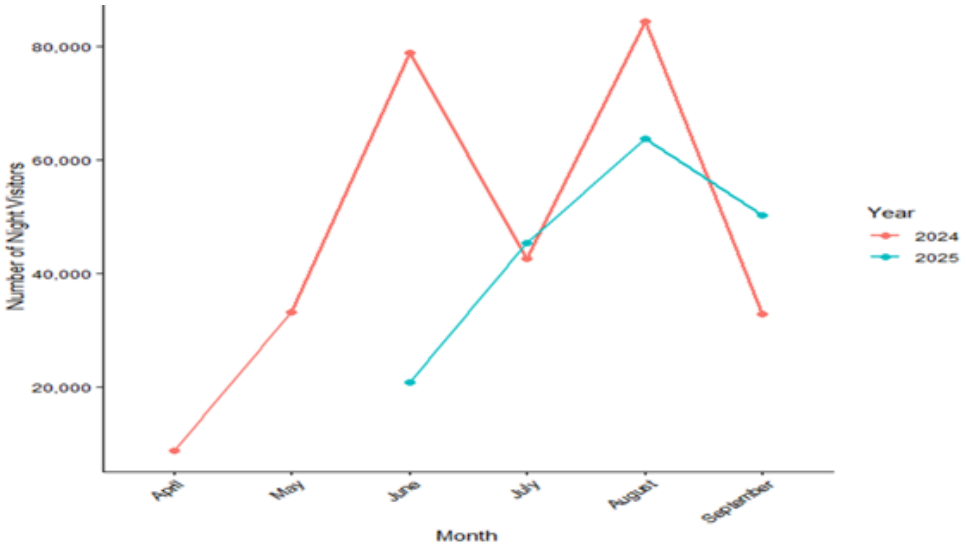
The sharp decline observed in 2020 represents a clear disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as reflected in several months with zero or very low visitor numbers. This decline is followed by a gradual recovery in 2021 and a strong rebound in 2022 and 2023, when total visitation exceeded pre-pandemic levels. The record figures reached in 2024, alongside sustained high numbers in 2025 (up to October), suggest that demand for Ephesus has not only recovered but expanded further. Overall, the table underscores the increasing pressure on the site during peak seasons and reinforces the importance of adaptive visitor management strategies, such as extended opening hours and night-time museum practices, to ensure sustainable use of the archaeological area.

Table 2. Night-Time Museum Visitor Numbers at Ephesus (2024–2025)

Year	Month	Night Visitors
2024	April	8,872
	May	33,233
	June	78,834
	July	42,551
	August	84,242
	September	32,943
	Total	**280,675**
2025	June	20,871
	July	45,370
	August	63,767
	September	50,243
	Total	**180,251**

Source: *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Central Directorate of Revolving Funds. (Night-time museum operations at Ephesus began in 2024; therefore, no data are available for 2023.)*

Figure 2. Night-Time Museum Visitors at Ephesus (2024-2025)

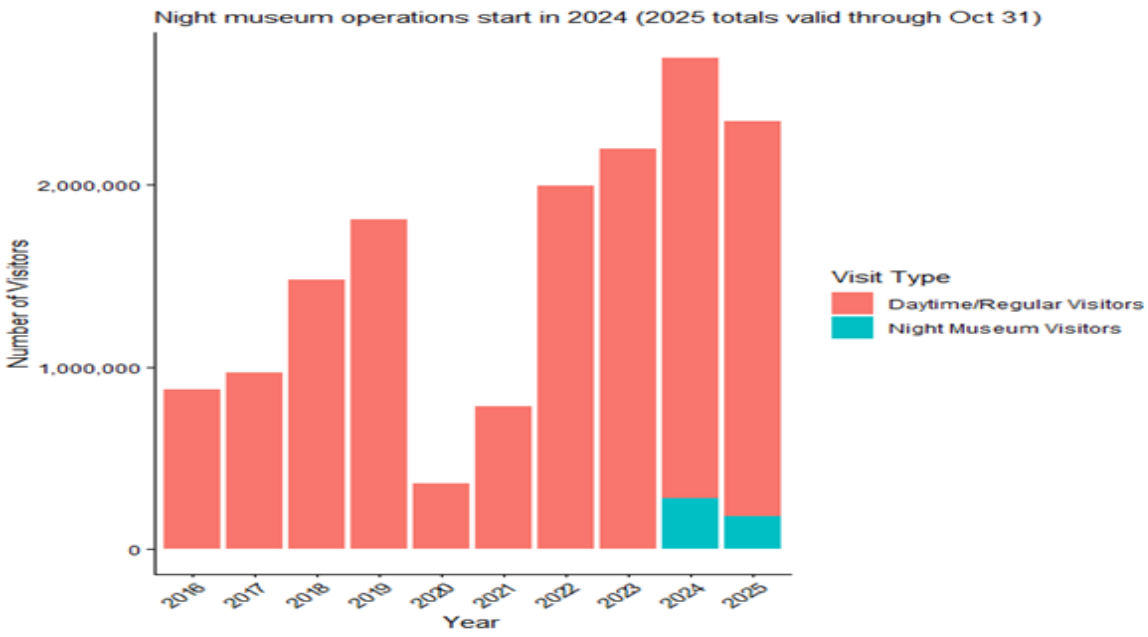


Source: *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Central Directorate of Revolving Funds*

The figure illustrates a clear seasonal pattern in night-time museum visitation at Ephesus, with demand strongly concentrated in the summer months. In 2024, visitor numbers rise steadily from April to June, reach a first peak in June, decline slightly in July, and then reach the highest level in August before dropping again in September. This pattern closely reflects climatic conditions and general tourism intensity in the region, suggesting that night-time visits are particularly attractive during the hottest months, when daytime visitation becomes less comfortable. The sharp increase in August 2024 indicates that night museum access functions as a complementary alternative rather than a substitute for daytime visits, responding directly to seasonal pressure.

The 2025 trend shows a more stabilised trajectory, even though data are available only from June onward. Compared to 2024, the lower starting point in June suggests that the initial novelty effect may have diminished; however, visitor numbers remain consistently high through July and August and continue at a strong level in September. This indicates that night-time museum visits have moved beyond a trial phase and begun to establish a regular visitor segment. Overall, the comparison between the two years suggests that night-time museum practices at Ephesus have generated sustained demand, particularly during peak season, and have become an embedded component of the sites visitor experience rather than a short term attraction.

Figure 3. Ephesus Visitors by Visit Type (2016-2025)

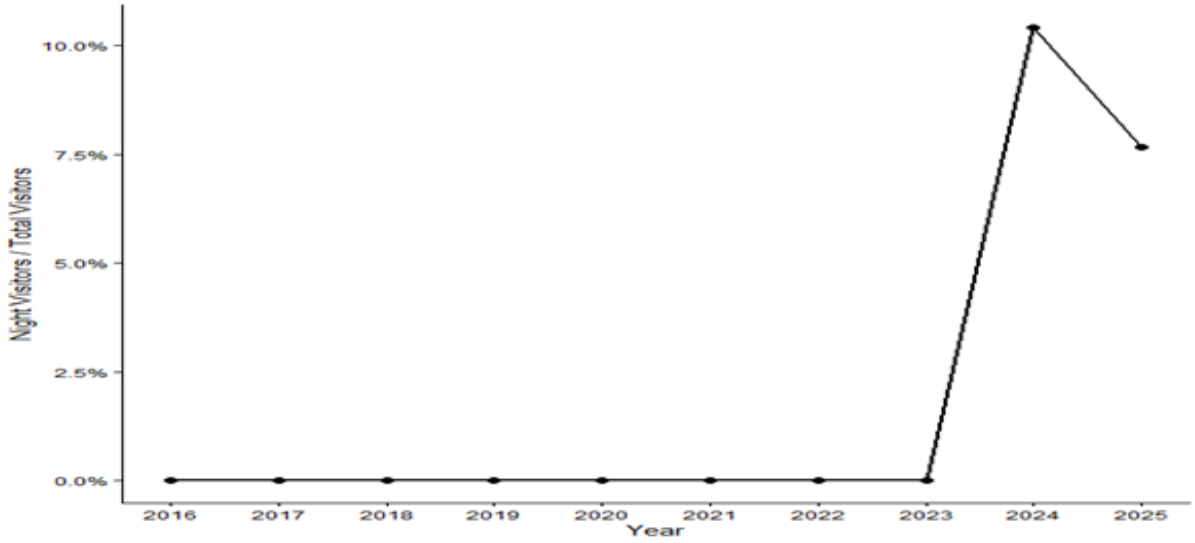


Source: *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Central Directorate of Revolving Funds*

The figure shows the long-term development of visitor numbers at Ephesus by separating daytime regular visits from night museum visits. From 2016 to 2019, total visitation increases steadily, reflecting the site's growing popularity before the pandemic. The sharp decline in 2020 is clearly visible and corresponds to COVID-19 restrictions, after which a gradual recovery begins in 2021 and accelerates strongly in 2022 and 2023. By 2024, total visitor numbers reach their highest level in the series, indicating not only a full recovery but also an expansion of demand beyond pre-pandemic levels. This overall trend highlights the persistent pressure on the site and the need for alternative management approaches to accommodate high visitor volumes.

A key feature of the figure is the emergence of night museum visitors starting in 2024. Although night visits represent a smaller share of total visitation compared to daytime visits, their introduction adds a new and clearly visible layer to the overall visitor structure. Rather than replacing daytime demand, night museum visits appear to complement it by expanding the total number of visitors and redistributing activity across different hours of the day. The continuation of night visitation in 2025, despite the data covering only up to October, suggests that this practice has become a stable component of visitor behaviour. Overall, the figure supports the interpretation that night museum operations function as an effective managerial innovation, contributing to demand diversification and helping to ease temporal concentration at one of Türkiye's most intensively visited heritage sites.

Figure 4. Night Museum Visitors as a Share of Total Visitation (2016-2025)



Source: Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Central Directorate of Revolving Funds

The figure clearly illustrates the structural change introduced by the start of night museum operations at Ephesus. From 2016 to 2023, the share of night-time visitors remains at zero, reflecting the absence of any formal night museum activity during this period. This long flat line highlights that night visitation is not an extension of an existing trend, but rather the result of a deliberate policy and management decision implemented in 2024. The sharp rise in 2024, when night museum visitors account for just over ten percent of total visitation, signals a significant shift in how the site is accessed and experienced.

In 2025, the share of night-time visitors decreases slightly compared to 2024 but remains at a clearly visible level, even though the data cover only the period up to the end of October. This suggests that the decline does not indicate reduced interest, but rather reflects the normalization of night museum visits after the initial introduction year. More importantly, the figure shows that night-time visitation has become a stable component of the overall visitor structure in a very short time. Instead of being a marginal or experimental addition, night museum operations appear to have quickly established themselves as a meaningful part of total demand, supporting the view that they represent a lasting innovation in the management of the Ephesus Archaeological Site.

The figure can be interpreted clearly through the lens of innovation in cultural heritage, which emphasises adaptive management practices that respond to changing environmental, social, and visitor-related conditions (Pocock, 2019; Ioannides et al., 2020). The flat line observed between 2016 and 2023 reflects a traditional heritage management model in which visitation was limited to daytime hours, with no diversification in temporal access. The sharp increase in 2024 marks a clear moment of innovation, as night museum operations were formally introduced and immediately accounted for more than ten percent of total visitation. From a theoretical perspective, this sudden shift supports the idea that heritage innovation often emerges through managerial and

experiential interventions, rather than gradual incremental change, especially when institutions respond to external pressures such as climate conditions and visitor congestion.

The slight decline in the share of night time visitors in 2025 should not be interpreted as a weakening of the innovation, but rather as a process of stabilisation. Innovation in cultural heritage does not necessarily aim to maximise numerical growth, but to create more balanced, sustainable, and diversified patterns of use (Pocock, 2019). In this sense, the persistence of a substantial night-visitor share in 2025 despite the data covering only part of the year indicates that night museum visits have moved beyond an experimental phase and become integrated into regular visitor behaviour. The figure therefore illustrates how night-time museum practices function as a successful heritage innovation: they expand access, redistribute demand across time, and reshape the overall visitor structure without displacing daytime use, aligning closely with the core principles of innovation in cultural heritage theory.

Methodology

This study is designed as an exploratory and descriptive research, aiming to shed light on the newly emerging night museology practice in Türkiye. Rather than testing a rigid hypothesis, the study seeks to map out the current situation and make the initial impacts of this innovation visible through official data. In social sciences, this secondary data based descriptive analysis is a valuable approach, especially when introducing new concepts or discussing policy changes.

Data Collection Process

For this study, used two different types of data. It conducted a narrative literature review to understand how night museology is handled globally and in Türkiye. This wasn't a rigid systematic search but a purposeful effort to build a solid theoretical ground for the study.

The core of the analysis relies on official visitor statistics for the Ephesus Archaeological Site, covering the years 2016-2025. These secondary data were obtained directly from the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Data Analysis and Visualization

The analysis focuses on identifying trends and patterns rather than complex inferential statistics.The study goal is to show what is happening on the ground. To ensure the findings are clear and professional, It processed all quantitative data using R Studio. Specifically, It utilized the ggplot2 library to create visualizations that compare visitor numbers before and after the introduction of night time openings. This approach allowed to highlight the shifts in visitor demand and the complementary nature of night visits through clean, easy to interpret charts.The reliability of the study is grounded in the use of official government records, which provide the most accurate representation of heritage site visitation in the country.

Conclusion

This study clearly demonstrates that the night museum practice introduced at the Ephesus Archaeological Site in 2024 is not a temporary trend, but a lasting and necessary innovation in visitor management. An examination of official visitor statistics shows that night-time visits do not reduce daytime demand; instead, they expand overall visitation by adding new capacity to the system. The strong concentration of night visits during the summer months indicates that this

practice has been quickly adopted by visitors and has become an established part of Ephesus's tourism structure.

The datas are also significant in showing that innovation in cultural heritage management is not limited to technological solutions, but is closely linked to adaptation to environmental conditions. In the Aegean Region, where summer temperatures frequently exceed 40°C, visiting open-air archaeological sites during the day can be physically demanding and, in some cases, pose health risks. In this context, night museum practices offer visitors a cooler and more comfortable alternative, functioning as a strategic response that helps reduce the pressure created by climate change. Beyond creating an attractive or magical atmosphere, night-time access should therefore be understood as a necessary climate adaptation measure that supports the long-term sustainability of heritage sites.

In conclusion, the Ephesus case provides a strong model for other open-air museums in Türkiye. Implementing similar night museum practices at heritage sites located in hot climate zones, such as Troy, Side, or Göbeklitepe, would help distribute visitor flows more evenly over time while also contributing to the local night-time economy. Expanding night museum practices within future tourism planning appears to be one of the most practical and effective steps for ensuring that cultural heritage remains both accessible and well protected under changing global conditions.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings extend the innovation in the cultural heritage framework by explicitly embedding climate change as a driver of innovation. Existing literature often conceptualises innovation in terms of experience design, technology adoption, or managerial restructuring (Pocock, 2019; Ioannides et al., 2020). The Ephesus case demonstrates that environmental pressures particularly extreme heat can actively shape when, how, and why innovation occurs at heritage sites. Night time museum practices thus represent not only experiential or managerial innovation, but also a form of climate adaptation innovation.

The results also contribute to experience based heritage theory by highlighting the role of environmental comfort in shaping cultural experiences. While experience economy and experiential heritage models emphasise emotional engagement and aesthetic immersion (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), the findings suggest that basic climatic conditions such as temperature and crowd density are equally decisive in determining experiential quality. This implies that future theoretical models of heritage experience should integrate environmental variables more explicitly.

In addition, the study reinforces the concept of temporal dispersal as a sustainability mechanism rather than merely a crowd control tool. By shifting visitor flows from daytime to nighttime, heritage managers can expand effective carrying capacity without physical expansion or infrastructural intervention. This supports recent arguments that time-based management strategies are central to sustainable heritage governance under conditions of mass tourism and climate stress (Niemelä, 2021; UNWTO, 2022).

Finally, the findings open new avenues for interdisciplinary research linking climate science, tourism studies, and heritage management. As global temperatures continue to rise, cultural heritage innovation will increasingly be shaped by environmental constraints. Night time visitation

provides a concrete example of how heritage institutions can respond proactively, offering a theoretical bridge between sustainability, innovation, and experiential consumption.

Türkiye faces significant exposure to rising summer temperatures, especially in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions, where many open air archaeological sites are located. Recent climate assessments show that summer maximum temperatures often exceed 40°C, with heatwaves becoming more intense and prolonged due to climate change (IPCC, 2023; Turkish State Meteorological Service, 2023). These conditions increasingly challenge visitor comfort, health, and safety during daytime visits. Findings from Ephesus show that nighttime museum operations address these challenges by shifting cultural activities to cooler hours, serving as a climate adaptive tourism practice rather than merely an experiential novelty.

Extreme heat also threatens archaeological materials. Research shows that high temperatures and strong daily temperature changes accelerate stone weathering. They also speed up micro-cracking and material fatigue in ancient structures (ICOMOS, 2019; Flyen et al., 2023). By shifting visitor activity to night hours, site managers can reduce both thermal and physical stress during peak daytime conditions. Night time visitation therefore supports both visitor protection and heritage conservation. This reinforces its value for sustainable site management.

The Ephesus example shows that night museum programs should not be a one off effort. Other major archaeological sites in Turkey, like Pergamon, Troy, Side, Syedra, Aspendos, and Göbeklitepe, face similar climate and crowding issues. Expanding night time access at these sites would help cultural tourism adapt to climate change and keep sites open during busy seasons. Recent studies have highlighted that adjusting schedules and spreading visits over time are among the most effective ways to manage climate-related tourism pressures (Niemelä, 2021; UNWTO, 2022).

Night-time museum operations also support local development. Evening visits encourage longer stays, boost evening transport, and help local businesses, while easing daytime crowds. With good lighting, security, and visitor monitoring, night time heritage tourism can bring economic benefits without harming the sites (Cappa et al., 2020).

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis is based solely on secondary data obtained from official visitor statistics. While these data provide a reliable overview of visitation patterns, they do not capture visitors' motivations, experiences, or perceptions of night-time museum visits. As a result, the study cannot directly assess how visitors evaluate night museum practices in terms of satisfaction, learning, or emotional engagement. In addition, the night museum data cover a relatively short time period, beginning in 2024, which limits the ability to observe long-term trends or to assess how visitor behaviour may evolve as the practice becomes more established.

Future research could address these limitations by adopting more comprehensive and mixed method approaches. Combining secondary visitor data with primary data, such as surveys, interviews, or on-site observations, would allow for a deeper understanding of how night museum practices influence visitor experience and decision-making. Longitudinal studies covering a longer time span would also help evaluate the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of night-time

museum operations. Moreover, comparative studies across different heritage sites both within Türkiye and internationally could provide valuable insights into how local climate conditions, management strategies, and cultural contexts shape the success of night museum initiatives.

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An Evaluatıon Of Tradıtıonal Food Products On The Verge Of Beıng Forgotten In Turkısh Cuısıne Through Academıc Lıterature

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines traditional food products in Turkish cuisine whose production and consumption have significantly declined or are on the verge of being forgotten, based on their representation in academic literature. The aim is to identify dominant research themes, cultural contexts, and scholarly tendencies related to these products and to contribute to discussions on the sustainability of gastronomic heritage.

Study design/methodology/approach: The research adopts a qualitative approach and employs document analysis. Academic articles, theses, and scientific publications focusing on Turkish culinary culture and traditional food products were systematically reviewed. The selected sources were analysed through analytical synthesis in terms of product definitions, cultural meanings, regional characteristics, and the contexts in which these foods are discussed.

Results: The findings indicate that traditional food products facing decline are predominantly addressed within the framework of cultural heritage and regional cuisine. However, academic studies focusing on sustainability, revitalization, and contemporary adaptation remain limited. Most products are discussed descriptively rather than being examined through systematic analytical frameworks.

Originality/Value: By synthesizing fragmented academic knowledge, this study provides a comprehensive overview of traditional food products at risk of being forgotten and offers a theoretical foundation for future research on the preservation and sustainability of Turkish culinary heritage.

Keywords: Turkish Cuisine; Traditional Foods; Cultural Heritage

Introductıon

Culture refers to the totality of fundamental elements that societies have created throughout history and that distinguish them from other communities. These elements play a decisive role in the formation and continuity of social identity. Local cuisine is among the most visible elements of culture reflected in daily life; it serves an important function in strengthening the bond that individuals have with the geography they live in. Knowledge, experience, and habits transmitted through food and drink traditions contribute to keeping social memory alive. However, the weakening of these traditions makes it difficult to transmit culinary culture, which is one of the carriers of local identity, and creates negative effects on cultural continuity (Beşirli, 2010).

Today, the easy accessibility of food products through markets, supermarkets, restaurants, and cafes is causing local cuisines to become increasingly distant from daily life, and this is considered a threat to the sustainability of regional culinary culture (Güney, 2025). The weakening of regional

culinary culture not only leads to the erosion of local identity but also directly affects its function in the context of tourism. At this point, the role of eating and drinking habits on individuals' perception of place and mobility becomes even more important. It is known that food and food cultures have a significant influence on individuals' desire to move, even for a short time. This influence stems from the fact that food cultures are a strong motivational factor shaping travel decisions. Accordingly, destinations position their unique culinary cultures as a tourist product and use them as a strategic tool in tourism marketing. Thus, food culture, in addition to being an income-generating element economically, contributes to the discovery, preservation, and development of socio-cultural values, becoming one of the fundamental components that increase the touristic attractiveness of destinations (Şahin Ören et al., 2021).

Beyond preserving local identity, culinary culture stands out as a fundamental cultural heritage area that ensures the transmission of historical accumulation and social memory from generation to generation. The methods, tools, traditions, and practices developed by the local people living in a region throughout history regarding food production and consumption constitute the basic components of local culture. Culinary culture reflects the unique identity of a society while also functioning as a tool for cultural interaction between different societies. Food plays an important role in transmitting the lifestyles and cultural values of societies, and regionally specific products create a distinctive element of attraction for destinations. Today, individuals prefer eating out not only to meet their nutritional needs but also to experience unique and different experiences (Apak et al., 2022). Similar discussions on the loss, preservation, and sustainability of traditional food products can also be observed in international literature, where food is examined as a carrier of cultural identity, social memory, and intangible cultural heritage (Montanari, 2006; Bessière, 1998; UNESCO, 2003).

This study aims to fill a significant gap in the sustainability of Turkish culinary culture by examining products that have fallen out of use or are on the verge of being forgotten in Turkish cuisine, based on academic literature. The current gastronomic literature often focuses on popular products and widespread cuisines, limiting the visibility of traditional products and leading to a fragmented body of knowledge in this area. Therefore, this study systematically brings together information from various sources to evaluate the cultural, historical, and gastronomic value of these products from a holistic perspective. In this way, it aims to both contribute uniquely to the academic literature and raise awareness about the preservation of the cultural heritage of Turkish cuisine. Through this approach, the study aims to reopen discussions on products on the verge of being forgotten, providing a theoretical foundation for sustainability-focused research in the field of gastronomy. Despite the growing body of research on gastronomy and culinary heritage, existing academic studies largely focus on well-known regional cuisines, iconic dishes, or geographically indicated products. Traditional food products that have gradually disappeared from daily consumption or are on the verge of being forgotten remain fragmented and descriptively addressed in the literature. Moreover, studies that systematically evaluate these products within the framework of sustainability, cultural transmission, and gastronomic heritage are limited. In this context, the present study aims to address this gap by examining traditional food products in

Turkish cuisine that have lost visibility over time, based on their representation in academic literature. By synthesizing dispersed academic findings, the study seeks to contribute to the literature by offering a holistic perspective on forgotten or underrepresented traditional foods and by providing a conceptual basis for future sustainability-oriented research in the field of gastronomy.

Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Traditional Products

Consumer trends that have emerged and rapidly developed from the past to the present are changing consumer behavior and creating a transformation for businesses (Westbrook & Angus, 2020). On a global scale, social, economic, and cultural changes are causing consumers to turn to local and traditional products. Increased living standards are increasing consumer demand for natural and authentic products, and accordingly, countries are forced to restructure traditional production methods and supply policies with a strategic approach (Kuşat, 2012). In this context, many brands, especially in the food and beverage sector, emphasize features such as fresh, regional, local, organic, natural, sustainable, handmade, and traditional in relation to their products (First-Komen & Grgurić-Čop, 2022). However, interest in the healthy lifestyle trend, questioning of industrialized food, food crises, and economic fluctuations have accelerated the trend towards the consumption of traditional products and, accordingly, the development of the traditional product market (Onurlubaş & Taşdan, 2016).

Traditional products are defined as products that reflect the history, lifestyle, and culture of societies, while also possessing a traditional character that differentiates them from similar products through their unique production methods and raw materials (Kuşat, 2012). The concepts of traditional product name and geographical indication are quite closely related. However, unlike geographical indications, a traditional product name does not specify a region where the product originated or belongs. Consequently, there is no requirement for a product to be produced within the borders of a specific region to be referred to as a traditional product name (Yıldız, 2018). The Turkish Patent and Trademark Office TURKPATEENT (2026) defines a traditional product name as "names that do not fall within the scope of origin name or geographical indication; that are proven to have been used traditionally for at least thirty years to identify a product in the relevant market; and that originate from a traditional production or processing method or traditional composition and are produced from traditional raw materials or materials." An examination of TURKPATEENT (2026) data reveals that there are a total of 22 traditional product names in the food and beverage sector, 7 of which are registered and 15 are in the application phase. The traditional product names identified in this context are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Traditional product names

Order	Traditional Product Name	Application	Registered
1	Adıyaman Köy Peyniri	√	
2	Akide Şekeri	√	
3	Begonvil Reçeli	√	
4	Geleneksel Baklava / Türk Baklavası	√	

5	Güllaç	√		
6	Karayemiş Kurusu	√		
7	Kürt Böreği	√		
8	Kız Papası	√		
9	Puşut Unu	√		
10	Türk Kahvesi	√		
11	Türk Lokumu	√		
12	Yer Fıstıklı Çiğköfte	√		
13	Yoğurt	√		
14	Çatalzeytin Kızılcık (Kiren) Tarhanası	√		
15	Çatalzeytin Kızılcık Marmelatı	√		
16	Ayvalık Tostu			√
17	Denizli Tandır Kebabı			√
18	Döner			√
19	Ezo Gelin Çorbası			√
20	Sirkencübin / Sirkengebin			√
21	Çakallı Menemeni			√
22	Şevketi Bostan / Şevket-i Bostan			√

Source: (TURKPATEENT, 2026).

Table 1 is presented to provide contextual background on officially recognized traditional product names and their role in ensuring product authenticity and consumer trust. The increasing number of food fraud cases worldwide, along with changes in food production systems, has led to a weakening of consumer confidence. Moreover, while some characteristics of food products are directly observable, many quality attributes for which consumers are willing to pay premium prices remain hidden (Wu et al., 2021). In this context, traditional foods gain particular importance, as they are commonly associated with the use of traditional raw materials, reliable production methods, and historically rooted recipes. Accordingly, a significant factor influencing the consumption of traditional products is the decrease in trust in industrially produced food. In addition, demographic factors (education level, income status, age, etc.), product characteristics and consumer perception of product benefits (health, nutritional value, freshness, taste, hygiene, safety, quality, etc.), social and cultural factors (regional belonging, etc.), environmental factors (sustainability), external factors (food crises, security, etc.), production in the textural characteristics of the region where it originated, proximity of the purchased product to the place of residence, familiarity with the seller, psychology, and production according to grandmother's/maternal grandmother's recipes are among the factors involved (Guerrero et al., 2009; Albayrak et al., 2014; Başaran, 2016; Onurlubaş & Taşdan, 2017; Duru & Seçer, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). In countries like Turkey, which have cultural diversity and different traditional production methods, the registration of traditional product names is of strategic importance

(Özden-Merhacı, 2023). In this context, preserving traditional products and passing them on to future generations without altering their original form is of great importance (Başaran, 2016).

Cultural Heritage and Gastronomy

A society's traditions, values, architectural works, beliefs, written and oral works, and way of life constitute its culture (Saruhan, 2012). Culture is the shared habits, traditions, and knowledge systems of society members, enriched by activities such as dance, ceremonies, and rituals. Furthermore, these characteristics increase the influence of culture on consumer behavior (Köybaşı, 2006).

In the field of tourism, the concepts of culture, heritage, and history are often used interchangeably. Based on current information, the objective recording and documentation of the past is defined as history. While some sometimes equate heritage and history, heritage encompasses a range of dimensions including culture, language, space, and identity, and is considered a part of the past (Bahçe, 2011). Accordingly, cultural heritage, reflecting the lifestyles, traditions, and customs of societies, possesses a history as rich as that of humanity itself. In the literature, this richness is generally examined in two categories: "tangible and intangible" cultural heritage (Saruhan, 2012). Tangible refers to physically perceptible things, that is, things that can be touched, seen, and have distinct characteristics; while abstract refers to values and phenomena that are perceived more through intuition and the mental world, or that are intangible and invisible (Ekici, 2004).

Individuals have economic, religious, and cultural needs in their social lives. Tangible cultural heritage consists of the structures and values that individuals create or build to meet these needs (Mavuş, 2021). Natural cultural structures, natural landscapes, tangible and visible structures, man-made buildings, historical sites, mosques and tombs, madrasas, inns and baths, historical fountains, monuments, or archaeological, architectural, technological, and scientific works are considered part of tangible cultural heritage and are expressed as works that need to be preserved or kept for future generations (Can, 2009; Uğur & Dönmez, 2021). Tangible cultural assets include sites such as the Çatalhöyük Neolithic Site (Konya), Göbekli Tepe (Şanlıurfa), the Diyarbakır Walls and Hevsel Gardens (Diyarbakır), and the ancient city of Ephesus (İzmir) (Uğur & Dönmez, 2021), as well as sculptures, tiles, pottery, paintings, glass, or metal objects (Mavuş, 2021). These tangible artifacts have survived from the past to the present and continue to exist. While some small, portable artifacts are preserved in museum settings, immovable artifacts are protected in their original locations. However, in the process of preserving artifacts integrated with the natural environment in situ, a sustainable maintenance strategy against human and environmental damage is necessary (Can, 2009).

Intangible cultural heritage is defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2003) as all living cultural assets passed down from generation to generation, such as oral traditions, social rituals, knowledge of nature, celebrations, handicrafts, language, ceremonies, festivals, and traditional craft skills. From this definition, it can be inferred that intangible cultural heritage generally encompasses areas such as oral traditions and narratives, performing arts, social practices, rituals and celebrations, knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe, and traditional handicrafts. Furthermore, it is stated that criteria such as being

traditional, contemporary, and at the same time living, inclusive, representative, and community-based are sought in determining intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2026).

The diversity of food and beverages belonging to a society's culinary culture, along with the ancient knowledge of the preparation and cooking techniques for these flavors, is considered within the scope of gastronomic heritage. This concept also encompasses all rituals such as presentation and serving methods and table etiquette passed down from generation to generation (Yönet-Eren, 2023). As stated in the UNESCO convention, cooking techniques, preservation methods, and traditional consumption habits, which are reproduced as a result of communities' interaction with their environment and passed down from generation to generation, constitute the basic components of intangible cultural heritage; while food and beverages, which are outputs of this intangible culture, can be considered within the scope of tangible cultural heritage as material assets reflecting cultural identity (Çapar & Yenipınar, 2016). In Turkey and many parts of the world, regional dishes, tools, and cooking methods have been part of cultural heritage from the past to the present and are considered among the elements that need to be protected within this scope (Yönet-Eren, 2023). Gastronomy, defined by the Turkish Language Association (TDK) (2026) as "all knowledge regarding both food and beverage preparation methods and cooking techniques," is an important force that revitalizes and sustains cultural heritage tourism. Besides offering a food experience, gastronomy also acts as a catalyst for increasing tourist satisfaction by providing opportunities to learn about different civilizations. Experience-oriented tourists, in particular, consider gastronomic elements as one of the most important sources of motivation for their vacation. Through food, tourists get to know the cultural identity of the region and have the opportunity to interact more with the local people (Van-Westering, 1999).

World cultural heritage is in need of protection against many threats such as wars, natural disasters, socio-economic investments, terrorist attacks, local conflicts, and individual acts of destruction (Öter & Ünal, 2011). In this context, given the belief that cultural elements will guide future generations, it is necessary for these values to be preserved and passed on to the next generation in a conscious manner, ensuring their continuity (Mavuş, 2021).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach and adopts document analysis as its primary research method. Document analysis is a systematic technique involving the examination and interpretation of written materials to identify patterns, themes, and meanings relevant to a specific research purpose (Bowen, 2009), and it is particularly suitable for studies focusing on cultural heritage, historical processes, and knowledge production within academic literature. The data set consists of academic journal articles, postgraduate theses, and scientific publications related to Turkish cuisine and traditional food products, selected based on their relevance to culinary culture, cultural heritage, and sustainability within Turkish gastronomy, while non-academic sources limited to recipe descriptions or popular content were excluded. The selected documents were analyzed using a descriptive analysis approach and coded according to predefined categories such as product definitions, cultural meanings, regional associations, production and consumption contexts, and sustainability-related themes, with recurring patterns grouped under thematic

headings to ensure systematic interpretation. By organizing and interpreting existing academic knowledge within a structured analytical framework, the study goes beyond a narrative literature review and provides a systematic evaluation of traditional food products that are on the verge of being forgotten. Online sources were used solely for visual illustration purposes and not as primary academic references.

Fındıngs

This section examines traditional products from Anatolian culinary culture that were once widely consumed but are now increasingly declining in production and consumption, based on research findings. Shaped by rural life, seasonality, the use of local raw materials, and a collective production approach, these dishes serve as essential elements fulfilling nutritional needs and represent significant cultural heritage. Changing lifestyles, increased consumption of ready-to-eat foods, transformations in culinary technologies, and weakening intergenerational knowledge transfer have reduced the visibility of these products in daily life. The findings indicate that dishes such as kavut, omaç, siron, höşmerim, kül bastı, tirit, papara, çullama, toyga aşı, pekmezli un helvası, kızılcık tarhanası, saç kavurması, and koruklu yemek are on the verge of being forgotten, both in terms of their production practices and consumption contexts. In this context, these products stand out as valuable elements that should be evaluated in terms of gastronomic diversity and in the context of local identity, sustainable nutrition, and cultural continuity. The findings regarding traditional products on the verge of being forgotten in Anatolian culinary culture have been compiled from printed sources, academic articles, and scientific papers. The image of each product was obtained from (Url-1). The transformation in the production and consumption habits of traditional foods, cultural transmission processes, and issues in the context of sustainability are frequently emphasized in the relevant literature (Işın, 2025; Sormaz et al., 2019; Apak et al., 2022; Sürücüoğlu and Özçelik, 2008; Coşkun, 2014).

Table 2. Traditional Food Products at Risk of Being Forgotten in Turkish Cuisine

Product Name	Traditional Consumption Area	Current Consumption Status	Factors Contributing to Decline	The State of Cultural Transmission
Kavut	Rural home kitchen, winter preparations	Very limited	Time-consuming production, availability of ready-made products	Limited
Omaç	Daily home-cooked meal	Rare	A shift towards practical meals	Limited
Siron	Special occasion and guest meals	Reduced	Limited familiarity among younger generations	Moderate
Höşmerim	Holidays and celebrations	Significantly reduced	The prevalence of industrial desserts	Moderate

Kül Bastı	Rural hearth culture	Nearly absent	Abandonment of traditional cooking techniques	Very limited
Tirit	Bread-based consumption practices	Reduced	Changes in consumption habits	Moderate
Papara	Economical home-cooked meals	Rare	Perception of social status	Limited
Çullama	Local specialty dish	Reduced	Restriction to regional boundaries	Moderate
Toyga Aşı	Seasonal and ceremonial food	Significantly reduced	Decline of seasonal food practices	Limited
Pekmezli Un Helvası	Daily homemade dessert	Reduced	A trend towards desserts with refined sugar	Moderate
Kızılcık Tarhanası	Winter soup base	Regional	Limited to regional production	Moderate
Saç Kavurması	Nomadic and rural cuisine	Reduced	Abandonment of traditional cooking equipment and techniques	Limited
Koruklu Yemekler	Seasonal home kitchen	Very limited	Loss of knowledge related to seasonal crops	Very limited

Source: This compilation was created by the authors after reviewing printed sources, academic articles, and scientific papers.

Kavut

Kavut is a traditional grain product widely known in the Eastern and Central Anatolian regions of Turkey's culinary culture, with origins dating back to Central Asian Turkic communities. It is widely consumed in rural kitchens, particularly in Eastern Anatolian provinces such as Erzurum, Kars, Ardahan, and Erzincan, and in Central Anatolian provinces like Sivas, Yozgat, and Kayseri, and is considered an important part of traditional food culture. It is traditionally produced through the roasting and grinding of grains such as wheat, barley, or corn, kavut is consumed with the addition of water, milk, or oil in various regional variations. Roasting the grains both extends the product's shelf life and gives it its unique taste and aroma (Karaman et al., 2021).

Historically, kavut is considered one of the staple foods that met the nutritional needs of nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic communities. This dietary practice, which took shape in Central Asia, was adapted with different regional products after the migration of Turks to Anatolia and became part of Anatolian culinary culture. Especially in rural areas, kavut stands out as a high-energy, easy-to-prepare food consumed during the winter months. In traditional consumption, kavut is

prepared as a porridge by cooking it with water or milk, and in some regions, it is sweetened with honey or molasses (Baysal, 2014). From a nutritional perspective, kavut is an important energy source thanks to its high carbohydrate content. Being made from whole grains, this product is rich in dietary fiber, supports the digestive system, and provides a feeling of fullness for a long time. In addition, it is stated in the literature that roasted grain products are compatible with low glycemic index diets and can contribute to blood sugar balance (Slavin, 2004; Baysal, 2014). With these characteristics, kavut has been an important food for nutrition in rural life where high energy requirements are a concern. Today, kavut has largely lost its place in daily eating habits with the increase in ready-made food consumption and the abandonment of traditional culinary practices. The time-consuming production process and the weakening of intergenerational transmission have been effective in the near-forgetfulness of this product (Apak et al., 2022).

Figure 1. Kavut



3.2. Omaç

Omaç is a traditional dish that has been produced in Anatolian folk cuisine since ancient times and has mostly survived through home consumption. Known and practiced in provinces located in the Central Anatolian and Central Black Sea transition zone, such as Yozgat, Çorum, Tokat, Amasya, and Sivas, this dish stands out in daily nutrition with its simple and functional structure. Its preparation with basic ingredients such as flour, water, and oil has made it accessible and sustainable, especially in rural living conditions. Depending on the region, the flour is used roasted or unroasted, and the dough pieces are cooked in hot water or broth. In some regions, omaç is enriched in terms of flavor and nutritional value by being served with yogurt or butter (Cam & Çelik, 2025).

The place of omaç in culinary culture is closely related to the dietary habits based on grain production in Anatolia. The fact that wheat and flour are among the basic foodstuffs has paved the way for the development of dishes similar to omaç. Especially in rural life, these types of dishes, which can be prepared quickly with readily available ingredients, have become an important part of daily nutrition. In this context, omaç reflects a practical and functional approach to food in Anatolian folk cuisine (T.C. Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025). In terms of nutritional value, omaç is a dish that provides energy primarily due to its carbohydrate content. The use of flour and oil together increases the satiety of the dish and creates a feeling of fullness for a long time.

Versions consumed with yogurt contribute to protein and mineral intake, resulting in a more balanced nutritional profile. With these characteristics, omaç has played an important role in meeting nutritional needs, especially in physically demanding lifestyles (Baysal, 2014).

Figure 2. Omaç



3.3. Siron

Siron is a traditional dough-based dish known in the Black Sea Region and some parts of Eastern Anatolia. It is primarily prepared and consumed in the regional cuisine of Western Black Sea provinces such as Karabük (Safranbolu), Bolu, Bartın, and Kastamonu, as well as in and around Erzurum. It is based on the principle of rolling thinly sliced dough, baking it, and then serving it with garlic yogurt and butter. The techniques used in its preparation are important examples of culinary knowledge based on homemade dough-based dishes. Siron is a dish that can show regional variations both in its presentation and in the ingredients added during serving (Apak et al., 2022; T.C. Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025).

Siron's place within culinary culture is linked to the Anatolian tradition of relying on flatbread (yufka). The long shelf life and versatility of yufka have facilitated the development of this type of dough-based dish. Its popularity, particularly at gatherings and communal meals, highlights its connection to social sharing and communal consumption. From a nutritional standpoint, siron is a balanced dish containing carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. The dough provides energy, while the yogurt enhances its nutritional value with its protein and calcium content. The addition of butter increases the dish's energy density and satiety. The use of yogurt, a fermented product, offers properties that may have positive effects on the digestive system (Tamime & Robinson, 1985). Considering its preparation method and ingredients, siron is seen as a tangible reflection of local cuisines and home-based production knowledge. Shaped independently of industrial food production, this dish is among the elements that ensure the continuity of traditional culinary culture (Coşan & Seçim, 2020).

Figure 3. Siron



3.4. Höşmerim

Höşmerim is a traditional dessert based on milk and dairy products, known in the Marmara, Aegean, and Central Anatolian regions. It is known to be prepared with different interpretations within the regional culinary practices of provinces in the Marmara Region, especially Balıkesir, as well as Bursa, Çanakkale, and Tekirdağ, and around Afyonkarahisar. Basically prepared by combining cheese, flour or semolina, and oil, höşmerim can exhibit different textures and flavor characteristics depending on regional preparations. The type of cheese used and the cooking technique are among the key elements that determine the texture and aroma of the dessert. In this respect, höşmerim constitutes a concrete example of local culinary knowledge based on dairy products (Ulu, 2019).

The position of höşmerim within culinary culture has been shaped by animal husbandry-based production methods. Developed in regions with abundant milk and cheese, this dessert has been prepared both for home consumption and in social contexts such as holidays, weddings, and communal celebrations. The slow cooking and continuous stirring method used in its preparation is considered a labor-intensive and experience-demanding process in traditional kitchens. This elevates höşmerim beyond being merely a dessert, making it a part of cultural sharing and collective production practices (Şahan et al., 2006). In terms of nutritional value, höşmerim is rich in protein and calcium thanks to its milk and cheese content. Providing high energy with its fat and carbohydrate components, this dessert has been considered a food that supports nutritional needs, especially in lifestyles requiring intense physical activity. The bioavailable components in dairy products increase the nutritional value of höşmerim and give it a satiating quality (Cokal et al., 2012).

Figure 4. Höşmerim



3.5. Kül Bastı

Kül bastı is a meat dish from Anatolian culinary culture that originated in rural life and is based on traditional cooking techniques. Taking its name from the cooking method involving ash and embers used in its preparation, kül bastı generally relies on cooking meat, cut into small pieces, with simple ingredients. It is stated that this dish is known and practiced in the culinary tradition that developed around open fires and earthen ovens in provinces such as Sivas, Erzincan, Erzurum, and Tunceli. Cooking the meat in its own fat and juices highlights the natural flavor of the dish and reduces the need for added ingredients. In this respect, kül bastı is among the traditional dishes with a simple yet strong flavor profile (Akçay, 2017).

The place of kül bastı in culinary culture is based on the traditional way of life shaped around open fires and earthen ovens. Developed in regions where animal husbandry is widespread, these types of dishes, aimed at utilizing meat, have become part of daily nutrition and are an integral part of collective production and sharing processes. Kül bastı is particularly noteworthy for being prepared in open areas, fields, or highlands; this characteristic reflects a culinary understanding that developed in close connection with nature (Güney, 2023). From a nutritional perspective, kül bastı is an important building block for the body thanks to its high protein content. The direct and prolonged cooking of the meat contributes to the preservation of nutrients and increases the satiety of the dish. Furthermore, its limited carbohydrate content positions this dish among the meat-based main meals in traditional dietary patterns. With these characteristics, kül bastı is described as a functional dish that supports nutritional needs in physically demanding lifestyles (McGee, 2007).

Figure 5. Kül Bastı



3.6. Tirit

Tirit is a traditional dish that falls under the category of bread-based meals and varies in different regions. It is known and prepared within the regional culinary practices of Konya, Kayseri, Sivas, Yozgat, and Afyonkarahisar provinces. Generally based on the principle of utilizing stale bread, tirit is prepared by soaking bread in liquids such as meat broth, bone broth, or yogurt, and then adding meat, butter, or yogurt. In this respect, tirit represents more than just a recipe; it represents a practical culinary approach to transforming available food. With variants prepared with beef, lamb, or chicken in different regions of Anatolia, tirit can serve as a main course or a satisfying snack depending on the ingredients used and the serving style (Akturfan & Sormaz, 2025).

Tirit, within culinary culture, reflects a traditional way of life that combines nutrition with the concept of saving resources. The reuse of a basic food like bread demonstrates a conscious approach to preventing waste. At the same time, tirit offers an example of an economical and functional dish where nutritional value is enhanced through the use of meat broth and bone broth. With these characteristics, tirit stands out not only for its satiety but also for its significance in culinary culture in terms of efficient resource use and nutritional balance. In traditional cuisines, such dishes, shaped by knowledge, are among the important cultural indicators that reflect the accumulation of social experience and daily life (Montanari, 2006; Yakıcı, 2021).

Figure 6. Tirit



3.7. Papara

Papara is a traditional bread and butter-based dish in Turkish culinary culture, particularly known for its simple ingredients in different regions of Anatolia. It is known and prepared in the kitchens of Central Anatolian provinces such as Kayseri, Sivas, Nevşehir, and Niğde. Generally prepared by breaking stale bread into small pieces and mixing it with butter or animal fat, papara can be diversified by adding yogurt, meat broth, or bone broth depending on the region. Examining its preparation method, it is evident that it is a dish made with basic ingredients found at home, without the need for complex ingredients sourced from the market or outside sources. In this respect, papara demonstrates a practical approach to cooking based on the efficient use of available ingredients in the kitchen. The methods used in the preparation process show that in Anatolian cuisine, bread is considered not only a basic food but also a versatile culinary component (Url-2, 2025; Işın, 2025).

When examined in a nutritional context, papara is a dish that provides high energy thanks to the combination of bread and butter. Versions enriched with broth or yogurt offer a more balanced meal by increasing protein and mineral content. However, papara is noteworthy for its nutritional value and social significance. Its presence in home-based consumption and everyday meals has made it an ordinary yet meaningful element. The fact that papara has gradually faded into the background in kitchens due to its unpretentious nature is also linked to the perception of traditional dishes. Nevertheless, papara holds an important place in Turkish cuisine in terms of bread culture, the concept of sharing, and home cooking tradition, and offers a remarkable example of preserving culinary memory (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Akturfan & Sormaz, 2025).

Figure 7. Papara



3.8. Çullama

Çullama is a traditional dish known in some regions of the Western Black Sea, Central Anatolia, and the Mediterranean, combining meat and dough. It is known to be prepared and consumed as part of regional culinary practices in settlements located in these regions, especially in Bolu, Karabük, Kastamonu, and the Akseki district of Antalya. Generally, it is based on the principle of cooking boiled meat in a mixture prepared with flour or dough, or combining it with meat broth. Although the ingredients and preparation method vary according to region, çullama stands out as a nutritious and filling main course. The simplicity of the ingredients and the reliance on home cooking methods make çullama a typical example of traditional folk cuisine (Ülgen, 2024).

The place of çullama in culinary culture has been shaped by the dietary habits that developed in regions where animal husbandry and grain production are carried out together. The utilization of meat for long-term consumption and the use of meat broth in dishes reflect a conscious approach to increasing nutritional value in traditional cuisines. In this context, çullama is one of the dishes prepared with a holistic understanding of using meat, its broth, and its aroma. At the same time, the preparation of the dish represents a social environment where family members come together, sharing, and consuming together are emphasized (Çelik et al., 2017). From a nutritional perspective, çullama is a balanced dish containing protein, carbohydrates, and fats. The proteins and minerals provided by the meat, combined with the dough or flour components, create a feeling of fullness for a long time. In this respect, çullama has been considered a functional dish that meets nutritional needs, especially in physically demanding lifestyles. In addition, çullama plays a cultural role as a carrier of regional culinary knowledge, cooking techniques, and ingredient usage from generation to generation. These types of dishes, shaped by experience in traditional kitchens,

offer important clues for understanding the multifaceted structure and regional diversity of Turkish cuisine (Montanari, 2006).

Figure 8. Çullama



3.9. Toyga Aşı

Toyga aş is a traditional soup that combines yogurt and grains, and is particularly known in different regions of Anatolia for its ceremonial and communal meal contexts. Its basic ingredients are cracked wheat, yogurt, and water, and it is enriched with additional ingredients such as mint, butter, and in some regions, chickpeas. The methods used to prevent the yogurt from curdling during preparation reveal the technical aspects of traditional culinary knowledge and reflect a cooking practice based on experience. In this respect, Toyga aş is not just a soup, but a dish requiring attention, timing, and skill in the kitchen (Url-3, 2025).

Beyond its nutritional properties, toyga aşı is a traditional dish that stands out due to its geographical distribution and regional uses. In the literature, toyga aşı is widely known and consumed in the Central Anatolia Region, primarily in Sivas, Tokat, Yozgat, Kayseri, and Çorum; and also in Eastern Anatolia provinces such as Erzurum, Erzincan, and Bayburt. Its preparation for weddings, religious ceremonies, and communal meals in some regions indicates its ceremonial and sharing-oriented nature. There are minor variations in its ingredients depending on the region; some areas add chickpeas, while others prefer only pounded wheat and yogurt (Sürücüoğlu and Özçelik, 2008).

The combination of the fiber and complex carbohydrate content of cracked wheat with the protein and mineral components of yogurt makes the dish a balanced nutritional element. At the same time, the lactic acid bacteria from the yogurt fermentation process have a supportive effect on the digestive system, and in this respect, toyga aşı is also examined within the scope of functional foods. Shaped by regional production processes and ingredient knowledge, this dish is considered a holistic reflection of local nutritional understanding, seasonality, and collective culinary culture in Anatolia (T.C. Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025).

Figure 9. Toyga Aşı



3.10. Pekmezli Un Helvası

In Turkish cuisine, halva holds a significant place both nutritionally and culturally. Throughout history, halva has been one of the staple desserts consumed at various stages of life, from birth to death. Introduced into Turkish culinary culture from the Middle East, halva was consumed as a part of daily nutrition in rural areas, while in palace kitchens it acquired the status of a celebratory and ceremonial dessert. The dedication of a special section for halva making in palace kitchens demonstrates its privileged position in culinary culture. Among nomadic Turkish communities, the belief that the aroma of well-cooked food would please the spirits of the dead paved the way for the widespread preparation and consumption of halva. Furthermore, halva has become an indispensable dessert for gatherings and special occasions in Turkish society, symbolizing social unity. In Turkey, halva is known by different names depending on the region, and the ingredients used vary according to regional differences (Yiğit and Yiğit Ay, 2023). Among this variety, molasses flour halva stands out as a traditional homemade dessert made by combining roasted flour with butter and binding it with molasses syrup, and eaten by the spoonful. Its quick preparation makes it a popular choice for tea time, entertaining guests, or whenever a dessert is needed.

In Anatolian cuisine, flour halva is a long-established dessert made with various interpretations over the years. The version prepared with molasses offers a more intense and characteristic flavor due to the use of a natural sweetener instead of refined sugar. In this respect, molasses flour halva is considered a unique example that both preserves traditional taste and reflects local dietary habits (Url-4). It can be stated that molasses flour halva is a traditional homemade dessert that was widely made in the past but is gradually being forgotten today. The proliferation of ready-made products and changes in culinary habits have weakened its place in daily consumption. Nevertheless, molasses flour halva continues to be an important part of Turkish culinary heritage with its ingredients, preparation technique, and cultural meaning. In this respect, the product is a noteworthy example in terms of preserving and keeping alive traditional culinary knowledge.

Figure 10. Pekmezli Un Helvası



3.11. Kızılcık Tarhanası

Tarhana stands out as a traditional food with a deep historical background, passed down from generation to generation. While its production methods vary according to regions and localities, its components and preparation techniques make tarhana a functional product with probiotic and prebiotic properties. Having held an important place in the nutritional culture of Turkish society for centuries, tarhana is widely preferred due to its high nutritional value, low glycemic index, and easy digestibility. In Turkey, tarhana is generally produced and consumed in powder form for soups or as a pressed paste, and its nutritional content varies depending on the production method. Nevertheless, tarhana, generally considered a healthy food, continues to be produced and consumed in different forms in parallel with the changing needs and consumption habits of society (Altundağ et al., 2020). One of these tarhanas is cranberry tarhana. It is a traditional product whose composition consists of flour or cracked wheat and cranberries, and which has different characteristics from other types of tarhana. This type of tarhana is prepared by mixing wheat flour or barley husks with cranberries, and due to its sour character, it is also known as "sour tarhana" among the people.

The production process of cranberry tarhana, which is mainly produced in Kastamonu, as well as in Kütahya, Bolu, Bursa, and Zonguldak provinces, varies according to region. In the Kütahya region, cranberries are washed and then cooked, then flour is added in a 1:1 ratio and kneaded, and the dough is left to ferment for 3-7 days. After the fermentation process, the dough is spread in pieces on a cloth, dried in the shade, and sifted. In Kastamonu and its surroundings, the cranberries are left with salt until they soften for 3-10 days, then flour or cracked wheat is added and kneaded, and after the dough partially dries, it is rubbed, sifted, and dried again. The resulting tarhana is cooked with onions, garlic, butter, and various spices and consumed as a soup (Coşkun, 2014).

Figure 11. Kızılcık Tarhanası



3.12. Sac Kavurması

Saç kavurma is a traditional dish that holds a significant place among meat-based meals. Particularly preferred in regions where red meat consumption is widespread, this dish stands out for its nutritious content and simple preparation technique. Traditionally cooked in a wide-bottomed saç tava (a type of Turkish pan), saç kavurma is based on the principle of sautéing the meat in its own juices; the addition of onions, peppers, tomatoes, and various spices enriches its flavor profile. The process of the meat releasing and then reabsorbing its juices is the fundamental stage that creates the characteristic texture and aroma of the dish. Usually served with rice, lavash bread, or regular bread, saç kavurma is a main course preferred both in daily meals and at dinner parties. In this respect, saç kavurma is considered an important example of gastronomic heritage reflecting the traditional cooking techniques and meat-centered nutritional understanding of Turkish cuisine (Url-5).

Saç kavurma is a traditional dish that was once widely prepared in home kitchens and rural settings, but is becoming increasingly rare today due to the rise of processed foods and fast food consumption. Its lengthy cooking process and the need for specialized cooking equipment have led to its decline in everyday culinary use. Despite this, saç kavurma remains a significant example of cultural heritage, reflecting traditional cooking techniques, a culture of sharing, and a meat-based culinary approach. Bringing this dish back into prominence would make a meaningful contribution to preserving and keeping alive dishes that are on the verge of being forgotten in Turkish culinary culture.

Figure 12. Sac Kavurması



3.13. Koruklu Yemekler

Unripe grapes, commonly known as "koruk," are traditionally used as a natural source of sourness in culinary culture. Koruk juice, obtained by crushing unripe grapes, offers an alternative flavor element in dishes and salads thanks to its acidic nature. This product, obtained through natural methods, can be bottled and stored without any further processing. Over time, the increasing use of wine and vinegar for sourness in European cuisines has reduced the visibility of koruk in kitchens. However, the use of koruk continues in Anatolian culinary tradition, particularly in Aegean cuisine, where it remains an important ingredient that adds a characteristic taste to dishes (Url-6).

It can be said that unripe grapes (koruk) have been a traditional ingredient used in many dishes in Anatolian culinary culture since ancient times, as a natural source of sourness. Especially in vegetable-based dishes, unripe grape juice, often preferred over lemon or vinegar, adds a lighter, seasonal sour taste to meals. The use of unripe grapes in dishes such as stuffed grape leaves, stuffed vegetables, okra, zucchini, and green beans is seen as a reflection of the understanding of naturalness and balance in the kitchen. Although its use has decreased today, dishes with unripe grapes are among the important examples of traditional culinary knowledge and a seasonal approach to nutrition.

Figure 13. Koruklu Yemekler



Conclusıon And Recommendatıons

This study examined traditional food products in Turkish cuisine whose production and consumption have significantly declined or are on the verge of being forgotten, based on their representation in academic literature. The findings indicate that although these products possess strong cultural, historical, and gastronomic value, they are predominantly addressed descriptively within the framework of cultural heritage and regional cuisine. Analytical studies focusing on sustainability, revitalization, and contemporary adaptation remain limited, which restricts the visibility and transmission of these products within both academic and practical contexts. The results demonstrate that changing consumption habits, the expansion of industrial food systems, and the weakening of intergenerational knowledge transfer are among the primary factors contributing to the decline of traditional food products. Despite their potential to support local identity, gastronomic diversity, and sustainable food practices, many of these products have lost their place in daily consumption and remain confined to regional or symbolic contexts. Based on

these findings, the implications of the study highlight the need for targeted actions to support the sustainability of traditional food products. First, traditional food products that are at risk of being forgotten should be documented more systematically through interdisciplinary academic research that integrates gastronomy, cultural heritage, and sustainability perspectives. Second, awareness-raising initiatives, educational programs, and community-based projects should be developed to support the transmission of traditional culinary knowledge to younger generations. Third, policies and incentives aimed at local producers could contribute to the continuation of traditional production practices and the adaptation of these products to contemporary consumption contexts. Finally, future research may focus on the economic, touristic, and nutritional potential of these products, as well as on comparative studies that examine similar processes in different culinary cultures. In line with these considerations, the following recommendations are proposed to support the preservation, transmission, and revitalization of traditional food products that are at risk of being forgotten. These recommendations aim to strengthen the relationship between academic knowledge, local production practices, and societal awareness, and to contribute to the sustainable continuity of culinary heritage.

- Educational programs, awareness campaigns, and community projects should be organized to protect and promote local products that are in danger of being forgotten.
- Financial support, grants, and technical consultancy should be provided to local producers so that they can continue producing these products.
- Effective distribution and promotion strategies should be developed to market and deliver local products to consumers.
- Traditional products should be scientifically documented, included in gastronomic literature, and incorporated into academic studies to increase the visibility of cultural heritage.

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Visa regimes and destination choice: Exploring the influence of the South African visa regime on Indian tourists

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Abstract

***Purpose**:* The study explored how South Africa's visa regime influences Indian tourists' perceptions of risk and destination choice, providing evidence-based insights for tourism and immigration policy improvements.

***Study design/methodology/approach**:* A quantitative causal research design was used, and an online survey for Indian tourists was developed. The survey was conducted via QuestionPro, and the data were generated from an online panel of 660 Indian tourists and were analysed using Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modelling in SmartPLS 4 to examine the relationships between visa regime, psychological risk perception, visa exemption expectation, behavioural predictors, and destination choice.

***Results**:* The results imply that the visa regime directly and indirectly influences destination choice through the Attitude-Norm-Control construct. An unexpected higher-order construct (ANC) emerged, providing a strong predictor of destination choice. Psychological risk perceptions showed a limited mediating impact, and visa exemption expectation does not moderate the relationship between visa regime and behavioural intentions.

***Originality/value**:* The study elucidates psychological mechanisms linking visa policies to tourist behaviour, which illustrates the influence of visa facilitation on tourism demand through integrated attitudinal-normative control systems rather than risk reduction alone.

Keywords Risk Perception, Visa Regime, Visa, Destination Choice, Visa Exemption

Introduction

Despite the recognition of visa facilitation as critical to tourism competitiveness, limited empirical evidence exists on how visa regimes specifically influence tourist risk perceptions and destination choice decisions (African Airlines Association, 2025; Bilbil, 2017; Glaesser & Kester, 2013). Tourism literature has established that destination choice is influenced by multiple factors, including perceived risks, while policy discussions acknowledge visa requirements as potential barriers to tourism demand (Czaika et al., 2018; Juma & Douglas, 2023; Karl, 2018; Rosselló & Santana-Gallego, 2024). However, the psychological mechanisms by which visa regimes shape tourist behaviour remain understudied (Juma, 2023). This knowledge gap undermines evidence-based policymaking, as tourism and immigration policymakers lack an adequate empirical

foundation for assessing the balance between restrictive visa regimes and tourism development objectives.

Therefore, this study explored how South Africa's visa regime influenced Indian tourists' risk perceptions and destination choice. Literature was synthesised on the relationship between visa regimes and tourist behaviour, and based on the empirical analysis, determined the impact of tourists' perceptions of the country's visa regime on travel decision making (Fazili et al., 2023; Karl & Schmude, 2017; Song et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2024). Specifically, the study sought to achieve several objectives.

- To synthesise the literature on visa regimes and their influence on tourist behaviour.
- To determine Indian tourists' perceptions of South Africa's current visa regime.
- To assess the influence of South Africa's visa regime on tourist behaviour.
- To examine the relationship between psychological risk and Indian tourists' destination choices associated with South Africa's visa policy.
- To explore the antecedents of destination choice in the context of visa regimes and tourist behaviour.
- To generate demand-oriented insights that enable tourism stakeholders to enhance their destination competitiveness and attractiveness through evidence-based recommendations.

By applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to the visa regime context, the research provided a theoretically grounded framework for understanding psychological processes related to policy environments to tourist behaviour. The results of the study contribute to both academic knowledge and practical policy development, creating a bridge between theoretical understanding and policy application. This paper contributes directly to the conference theme of Policy, knowledge exchange, and bridging theory with practice by providing empirical evidence linking tourism policy decisions to behavioural outcomes.

Literature Review

Visa regimes in tourism research have evolved from examining operational barriers to understanding their broader behavioural implications. Early work by Rizzi (2014) primarily focused on administrative dimensions such as procedural complexities, financial costs, application processing time, and treating visa requirements as low-complexity barriers to entry. However, recent research from Lawson and Roychoudhury (2016) and Juma and Douglas (2023) shifted toward psychological dimensions, revealing that visa policies, beyond their practical role, are symbolic mechanisms that influence how tourists view themselves and the credibility of destinations. This conceptual progression is crucial while studies confirm visa policies' impact on arrival numbers (Balli et al., 2013; Liu & Mckercher, 2016), the processes through which these effects operate remain inadequately conceptualised. Critically, most research has focused on the positive effects of visa liberalisation (Han et al., 2011; Rosselló & Santana-Gallego, 2024), leaving restrictive regimes such as South Africa's visa policy toward Indian tourists relatively understudied.

Despite India's status as the world's largest population and an increasingly important source of outbound tourists, South Africa continues to impose strict visa requirements on Indian tourists, including mandatory in person applications, biometric data submission, extensive financial documentation, supporting document (birth and marriage certificates where applicable), verified accommodation and travel itineraries, employer or institutional clearance letters and additional parental consent for minors, contrasting the visa exemption extended to travellers from Western countries such as Belgium (Department of Home Affairs, 2026; ITB Berlin, 2023; VFS, 2026a). With this asymmetrical policy environment being highlighted, a closer examination of the role visa regimes play in influencing tourist behaviour becomes important. Existing studies indicate that visa regimes were also found to influence tourist intentions, risk perceptions, and travel behaviour, leading to differentiated impacts depending on whether regimes are liberalised (Visa exemptions) or restrictive (Han et al., 2011; Rosselló & Santana-Gallego, 2024; Song et al., 2017).

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which explains how individual behaviour is influenced by intentions (attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control). Prior studies have applied the TPB to model the influence of predictive behaviour intention in destination choice behaviour (Abbasi et al., 2021; Lam & Hsu, 2009; Prugsamatz, 2009; Wang et al., 2021). In the context of this study, the "behaviour" refers to tourists selecting South Africa as their destination of choice despite the current visa regime. Each TPB component directly intersects with visa policy characteristics, highlighting the processes through which visa regimes influence travel intentions.

Attitude reflects an individual's ability to evaluate the positive or negative aspects of performing a behaviour, incorporating both cognitive beliefs and affective responses (Wolf et al., 2020). Beyond general destination evaluations, visa requirements introduce affective responses specific to bureaucratic encounters such as anxiety towards rejection, uncertainty towards visa approval process and unnecessary tension felt during the application process (Casidy & Wymer, 2016). For Indian tourists considering South Africa as their destination of choice, attitude formation becomes entangled with visa-induced emotions that may overshadow destination attributes (Juma, 2023). In the tourism context, several scholars have found that affective evaluations often exert a stronger influence on intentions than purely cognitive assessments, as emotions are important to destination image formation and travel motivation (Santana & Gosling, 2018; Shankar, 2020; Xu et al., 2018). This suggests that negative visa experiences could damage South Africa's appeal regardless of its attractions.

Park et al. (2017) explained that subjective norms are perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour. Studies show that subjective norms are influenced by interpersonal communication, shared experiences and perceived expectations of significant others, including friends, family and social networks (Choi & Chung, 2013; Igwe et al., 2020). Visa policies uniquely increase social influences through shared narratives of rejection or hassle. In collectivist societies such as India, subjective norms are strengthened by cultural values that emphasise group harmony and conformity (Verma, 2020). The influence of behavioural intentions on travel

decisions is strongly shaped by family and social approval, which play an important role (Wasaya et al., 2022). Negative perceptions of the visa process or the risk of rejection may reduce social endorsement of travelling to South Africa, discouraging destination choice.

Tourism research shows that an individual's belief in their ability to perform a behaviour encompasses both internal capabilities and external constraints (Fauzi et al., 2024). This TPB component (PBC) most directly captures visa regimes effects and could be portrayed as a construct directly influenced by visa regimes, through visa reforms that affect a tourist's sense of control over travel outcomes (Gamoing & Muna, 2023). When visa processes are perceived as difficult and unpredictable, tourists may feel less capable of navigating the requirements, which can reduce their intention to visit (Juma, 2023).

Psychological risk perceptions in tourism decision-making

Risk Perception Theory provides insight into how visa regimes influence tourist behaviour beyond structural barriers as it examines how tourists evaluate and respond to potential negative outcomes or uncertainties associated with travel intentions (Caber et al., 2020; Meng et al., 2021; Quintal et al., 2010). In the tourism context, risk perception is not limited to objective threats but also encompasses the psychological processes by which individuals make decisions about travelling to a destination of choice, which can trigger anxiety, stress, and emotional discomfort (Karl et al., 2020; Karl & Schmude, 2017). Visa requirements, including lengthy application procedures, high rejection rates, and processing delays, may amplify these emotional responses by heightening perceived uncertainty (Juma, 2023). For Indian nationals who may have already navigated through visa requirements for multiple destination, psychological burden becomes a decision factor, making destinations with easier entry requirements comparatively attractive (Juma & Douglas, 2023; Rizzi, 2014).

Tourists usually evaluate multiple interrelated risks that together influence destination choice (Karl, 2018). Risks such as financial risk emerges when the service costs associated with visa applications can increase risk perception if visa gets disapproved (Gorji et al., 2023). For Indian tourists, although South Africa’s short-term visa is free of charge, the mandatory service provider free, financial proof documents that may require additional bank charges and the risk of losing this investment if the application is rejected still represents a financial commitment (VFS, 2026b). Another risk to focus on is performance risk as concerns about border inspections or other complications may arise even after obtaining a visa (Hillberry et al., 2022). Research suggests that tourists decide to visit alternative destinations when faced with perceived high risks, making risk perception a critical factor in understanding destination choice under a restrictive visa regime (Chua et al., 2021).

Destination choice behaviour

Destination choice reflects tourists expressed intentions to visit South Africa within a defined period, serving as a critical factor in potential travel behaviour (Gürdoğan, 2022). Ryglová and Vajčnerová (2014) and Qiu et al. (2018) acknowledge that destination choice is a complex evaluation process that involves multiple cognitive and affective stages through which a tourist assesses and compares alternative destinations before making a final decision. During these stages

tourists filter destinations based on personal motivations, prior travel experience, the destination's attributes or even based on the context of the study, visa regimes (Babu & Murugesan, 2021; Bernaki & Marso, 2023). Situational factors such as visa requirements can significantly influence the consideration set by increasing perceived effort and risk (Juma, 2023). Choosing a destination is not a single act but a dynamic, multi-step decision-making process in which evaluations and subjective perceptions interact to influence final travel intentions (Babu & Murugesan, 2025).

Hypothesised model of the study

This hypothesised model, illustrated in Figure 1, depicts the relationship between the independent and dependent variables examined in this study and explains how visa regime characteristics influence tourists' decision-making process and psychological responses.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the direct hypotheses below were tested.

H_1: Visa regime directly influences destination choice.

H_2: Visa regime directly influences psychological risk perceptions.

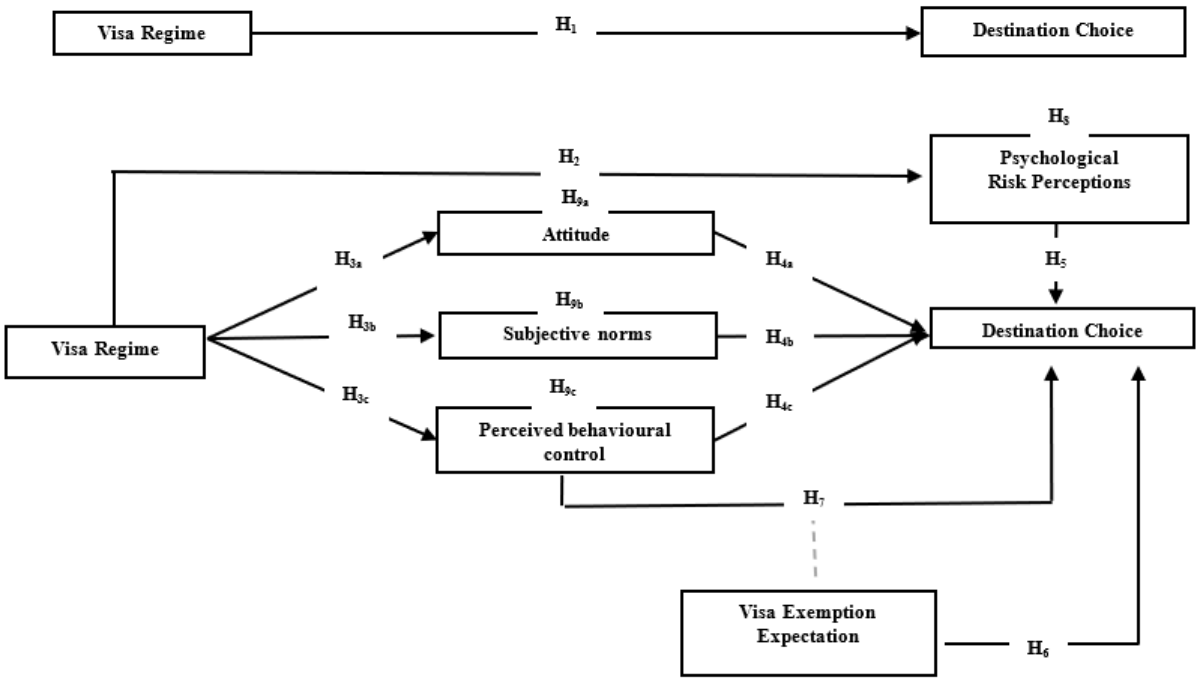
H_3: Visa regime influences [H_{3a}] attitude, [H_{3b}] subjective norms and [H_{3c}] perceived behavioural control.

H_4: Destination choice is directly influenced by [H_{4a}] attitude, [H_{4b}] subjective norms and [H_{4c}] perceived behavioural control.

H_5: Psychological risk perceptions influence destination choice.

H_6: Visa exemption expectation directly influences destination choice

Figure 1. Hypothesised model of the study



Source: Author's own compilation

As illustrated in Figure 1, the following indirect hypotheses were tested.

H_7: Visa exemption expectation moderates the relationship between attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.

H_8: Psychological risk perceptions mediate the relationship between visa regime and destination choice.

H_9: The relationship between the visa regime and destination choice is mediated by [H_{9a}] attitude, [H_{9b}] subjective norms, and [H_{9c}] perceived behavioural control.

The model illustrates *Visa regime* as the independent variable, *Psychological Risk Perceptions* variable as both a dependent variable, as it is influenced by *visa regime*, and a mediating variable influencing *destination choice*. The TPB components, *Attitude*, *Subjective Norms* and *PBC* function as a mediating variable, explaining the psychological process through which visa regime influences destination choice. *Destination Choice* represents the dependent variable and is measured by the behavioural intention of tourists to visit South Africa. *Visa Exemption Expectation* functions as a moderating variable, depending on expectations of tourists regarding future policy changes.

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Approach

This study employed a quantitative, causal research design approach situated with the post-positivist philosophical paradigm (Ali, 2024; Asenahabi, 2019; Burns et al., 2017; Ghanad, 2023; Patten, 2016). The causal design enabled the assessment of hypothesised relationships between visa regime, psychological risk perceptions, and predictive behavioural intentions, specifically testing whether and how visa policies influence destination choice through direct and mediated pathways (Burns et al., 2017). The quantitative approach was utilised because the research objectives required testing specific hypothesised relationships derived from the Theory of Planned Behaviour and statistical analysis of constructs and their interrelationships.

Participants and sampling

As the study focused on exploring Indian tourists' perceptions of risk and destination choice regarding the South African visa regime, Indian citizens were targeted as potential tourists to South Africa suitable for the study. The population represents an important source market for several reasons. Firstly, India is the fifth-largest global economy, with a growing middle class projected to become the fourth-largest spender by 2030. Secondly, the country has strong cultural and sport affiliations with South Africa, which presents opportunities to boost arrivals, especially with the 2027 ICC cricket World Cup hosted in South Africa (National Department of Tourism, 2024). Thirdly, Indian citizens have maintained a steady 7th place among the top ten source inbound tourism markets to South Africa from 2023 to 2024 (StatsSA, 2023; 2024). Lastly, historical connections exist between India and South Africa through substantial Indian communities in South Africa, creating familiarity, potential for visiting friends and relatives, and cultural bridges that may facilitate tourism development (Ndlovu & Ojong, 2018; Siqathule, 2025). The study used purposive sampling, drawing on a pre-established panel of Indian respondents who had indicated

interest in a professional online research panel provider. The data were generated from a sample of *n*=660 Indian tourists.

Measuring Instrument

Data were collected via a self-administered online survey conducted between the 23rd of May and the 26th of May 2025 and published on QuestionPro. The survey link was distributed to the pre-recruited panel on QuestionPro. The survey included screening questions to ensure that only respondents who had travelled to South Africa and been exposed to its visa regime participated in the study. The survey was published in English and consisted of eight sections measuring key constructs adapted from the literature, with the measuring instrument undergoing expert review by a tourism scientific committee and an ethics committee. *Visa regime perceptions* were the independent variable, measured according to the literature (Rizzi, 2014), with responses recorded on a five-point Likert scale to assess the level of influence, ranging from 1 – Extremely negative influence to 5 – Extremely positive influence. The *attitude* of tourists toward travelling to South Africa was measured as one of the dependent and mediating variables, based on 5 items adapted from the literature (Han et al., 2011; Song et al., 2017) to assess the level of agreement ranging from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree. The *subjective norms* of the Indian tourists regarding travelling to South Africa are measured as the one of one of the dependent and mediation variables based on statements adapted from the literature (Han et al., 2011; Song et al., 2017) and the responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale of agreement ranging from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree.

The *PBC* of Indian tourists regarding the influence of the South African visa policy is measured as one of the mediation and dependent variables and is adapted from literature (Han et al., 2011; Song et al., 2017). Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale, which was used to assess the extent of agreement, ranging from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree. An evaluation of *visa-exemption expectations* regarding the South African visa regime is measured as a dependent variable and a moderation variable, based on statements adapted from the literature (Song et al., 2017). These statements are used to assess the level of agreement with the perceived visa exemption expectations of the South African visa regime, ranging from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree, using a five-point Likert scale. The *psychological risk perceptions* of Indian tourists are measured as one of the dependent and mediating variables, based on statements adapted from the literature (Casidy & Wymer, 2016), with a five-point scale of agreement ranging from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree. *Destination choice* was measured as the outcome variable to assess whether Indian tourists would still prefer to visit South Africa based on statements that were adapted from the literature (Chen 2010). A five-point Likert scale of likelihood ranging from 1- Extremely unlikely to 5 – Extremely likely, was used to record the responses.

Data analysis

The study employed the partial-least squares – structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) applied in studies by Seyfi et al. (2024) and Genç and Zengin (2025). The software used to implement PLS-SEM was SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024), in which the analytical procedure followed two

stage approaches, including the Measurement model assessment evaluation, which determined the reliability and validity of the model by evaluating the indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability through composite reliability, and convergent validity through Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Then, the structural model was evaluated, which tested the direct and indirect hypotheses through examining path coefficients, their statistical significance through bootstrapping procedures, R^2 values, effect sizes, and predictive relevance (Q^2).

Ethical considerations

The study was deemed minimal/low risk study under the ethics number: NWU-00639-25-A4 in which the following ethical issues were taken into consideration: the respondents were provided with a consent letter outlining the purpose of the study in order to solicit voluntary consent; the research objectives were communicated and that the results may be shared with certain parties upon request; the respondents were over the age of 18 which was verified by the researcher and that their data is secure and stored in a protected OneDrive folder which will remain the property of North West University and accessible to the researcher.

Results

Respondents' socio-demographic profile

Fifty percent of the respondents were male and generally aged between 25 and 24 years (53%). At the time of the survey, thirty-seven percent of the respondents possessed a master's degree and were married (69%) and full-time employees (80%). Most respondents earned more than the average income in India (43%) and just fifty-one percent of the respondents indicated being influenced by social media to make decisions about engaging in international tourism in the near future. Majority of the respondents (43%) also stated that their primary purpose of travel to South Africa would be for leisure tourism.

Reflective measurement model

The measurement model evaluation displayed satisfactory psychometric properties across all constructs as Common method bias (CMB <50%) was not a concern, as Harman's single factor test reported CMB in PLS-SEM better assessed by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF <3.3) between 1.000 and 1.711 (Hair et al., 2019; Kock, 2015; 2020). Table 1 shows that the Outer Loadings (OL < 0.7) have exceeded the threshold ranging between 0.703 and 0.801, respectively (Fitri et al., 2025). The Excess Kurtosis (between -2 and +2) and Skewness (between -2 and +2) values in Table 1 conformed to the prescripts of normality (Field, 2009; Hair & Alamer, 2022; Wah, 2025). Further, multicollinearity was not a concern as it was assessed via VIF and shown in Table 1. The variables ranged from 1.150 and 2.479, which were below the threshold (VIF >5) (Hair et al., 2021). Table 1 further presents the validity and reliability statistics with the Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha > 0.70$), variables (visa regime, psychological risk perceptions, and ANC) met the threshold ranging from 0.736 to 0.876. Variables (visa exemption expectation and destination choice) values are below the threshold, but a study from Qu et al. (2024) deemed alpha values of 0.6 to be acceptable in exploratory research contexts. Composite Reliability (CR > 0.70) and Convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted: AVE>0.50) were above the acceptable threshold (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2021; Haji-Othman & Yusuff, 2022). The Fornell and Larcker criteria

and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) were utilised to assess the discriminate validity of the model. Based on Table 1, all the variables met the HTMT criteria ranging from 0.144 and 0.859, exceeding the 0.90 threshold, and each square root of each variable was greater with all other variables in the model, affirming discriminant validity (Ab Hamid et al., 2017; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2014; Kline, 2023; Rasoolimanesh, 2022).

Higher order construct (HoC)

Due to the strong and higher correlations above thresholds as the components of predictive behavioural intention: attitude (ATD: $\beta = 0.896$, $p < 0.001$), subjective norms (SBN: $\beta = 0.904$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived behavioural control (PBC: $\beta = 0.882$, $p < 0.001$). These constructs are not statistically different enough from each other and can create concerns in terms of discriminant validity. Therefore, they could not be measured individually and were reformulated into the Attitude-Norm-Control (ANC) construct.

Table 1. Measurement model results

Variable	Items	OL	VIF	Normality		(α)	CR	AVE
				Excess kurtosis	Skewness			
Visa Regime [VR]				0.804	-0.741	0.736	0.834	0.558
	VR1	0.787	1.442					
	VR5	0.727	1.380					
	VR7	0.727	1.336					
	VR9	0.745	1.397					
Psychological Risk Perception [PRP]				-0.409	-0.684	0.876	0.906	0.617
	PRP1	0.801	2.168					
	PRP2	0.798	2.107					
	PRP3	0.791	1.960					
	PRP4	0.752	1.653					
	PRP5	0.794	2.029					
	PRP6	0.776	1.978					
Visa Exemption [VEX]				0.524	-0.764	0.598	0.788	0.554
	VEX1	0.756	1.200					
	VEX2	0.738	1.194					
	VEX5	0.739	1.198					
Destination Choice [DC]				0.684	-0.700	0.698	0.814	0.523
	DC1	0.746	1.269					
	DC3	0.714	1.310					
	DC4	0.729	1.378					
	DC5	0.703	1.288					
***Attitude-Norm-Control**				0.169	-0.681	0.875	0.923	0.800

Variable	Items	OL	VIF	Normality		(α)	CR	AVE
				Excess kurtosis	Skewness			
Attitude **[ADT]**		0.896	2.428	3.400	-0.196			
	ATD1	0.705	1.259					
	ATD2	0.668	1.207					
	ATD3	0.618	1.176					
	ATD4	0.572	1.168					
	ATD5	0.650	1.190					
Subjective Norms **[SBN]**		0.904	2.479	3.704	-0.612			
	SBN1	0.735	1.413					
	SBN2	0.698	1.393					
	SBN3	0.532	1.152					
	SBN4	0.618	1.261					
	SBN5	0.691	1.383					
	SBN6	0.679	1.359					
Perceived Behavioural Control **[PBC]**		0.882	2.213	2.543	0.350			
	PBC1	0.707	1.339					
	PBC2	0.587	1.205					
	PBC3	0.644	1.272					
	PBC4	0.573	1.162					
	PBC5	0.672	1.257					
	PBC6	0.562	1.150					

Key: *Higher-order Construct Visa regime (VR); Psychological Risk Perception (PRP); Attitude-Norm-Control (ANC); Destination Choice (DC); Visa Exemption Expectation (VEX); Outer Loading = OL; Variance Inflation Factor = VIF; Cronbach Alpha = α; Composite Reliability = CR; Average Variance Extracted = AVE

Structural model

The structural model assessed the proposed hypotheses of the study based on bootstrapping, bias corrected with 10 000 resamples in SmartPLS 4. Table 2 provides a summary of the explanatory and predictive power of the variables. The R^2 value for the destination choice (outcome variable) was 0.499, accounting for 49.9% of variance by ANC and PRP variables. The predictive power (Q^2) statistics values are greater than 0, which indicates predictive relevance for the structural model (Q^2:0.290 – 0.405) (Hair et al., 2019). Table 3 shows the f^2 statistics, which shows that visa exemption expectations (VEX) have a small effect between ANC and DC (f^2 = 0.005) (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021).

Table 2. Summary of explanatory and predictive power

Variables	R^2	Q^2
ANC	0.409	0.405

DC	0.499	0.290
PRP	0.015	0.013

Notes: R^2: substantial ≥ 0.26, moderate ≥ 0.13 and weak ≥ 0.02; Q^2: > 0

Key: Attitude-Norm-Control (ANC); Destination Choice (DC); Psychological Risk Perception (PRP)

Table 3 represents a summary of the PLS – SEM results of the structural model, which shows that the direct relationships were statistically significant for all the direct and mediation hypotheses. Therefore, hypotheses H_1 – H_6 were supported at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Results of the PLS-SEM structural model.

Relationship	f^2	Beta Value (β)	T-value	Sig. (p)	Hypothesis	Outcome
Direct relationships						
VR -> DC	0.006	0.073	1.722	0.085*	H_1	**Supported**
VR-> PRP	0.017	0.128	3.375	0.001*	H_2	**Supported**
VR-> ANC	0.694	0.640	23.657	0.000***	H_3	**Supported**
ANC-> DC	0.210	0.491	9.627	0.000***	H_4	**Supported**
PRP-> DC	0.109	0.237	7.855	0.000***	H_5	**Supported**
VEX-> DC	0.029	0.157	3.762	0.000***	H_6	**Supported**
Mediating relationships						
VR-> PRP-> DC		0.030	3.101	0.002*	H_8	**Supported**
VR-> ANC-> DC		0.314	8.702	0.000**	H_9	**Supported**
Moderating relationships						
VEX x ANC-> DC	0.005	0.043	1.477	0.140	H_7	**Not Supported**

Key: Visa regime (VR); Psychological Risk Perception (PRP); Attitude-Norm-Control (ANC); Destination Choice (DC); Visa Exemption Expectation (VEX)

Relationships are significant at: *p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.001; β = Beta Coefficient; t-value = t – Statistics; p-value = Probability (P) value

The moderating effect of visa exemption expectation was tested; the hypothesis (H_7) was not supported because the p-value was not statistically significant ($p = 0.140$). Attitude-Norm-Control and psychological risk perceptions had a mediating effect between visa regime and destination choice; therefore, hypotheses (H_8 and H_9) were supported.

Discussion of the results

The results of the study indicate that South Africa's visa regime has a direct positive influence on destination choice, despite increasing psychological risk perceptions among Indian tourists. However, visa exemption expectations had a lack of moderating relationship between the ANC and destination choice. The results reinforce existing research, suggesting that visa regimes extend beyond administrative regulation to function as behavioural and perceptual influence within tourism decision making (Han et al., 2011). Visa-related perceptions were shown to affect ANC,

indicating their role in influencing destination choice and intention formation (Han et al., 2011; Park et al., 2017). The results further indicate cultural and market-specific characteristics influence how visa requirements are interpreted with Indian tourists potentially viewing visas as signs of destination credibility, safety and quality rather than barriers (Lawson & Roychoudhury, 2016; McCabe et al., 2016).

Regarding destination perceptions, the results indicate that Indian tourists perceive South Africa's visa system as increasingly efficient and professionally managed. This perception may reflect recent visa facilitation measures, including the introduction of electronic visa systems and specialised travel and work visa categories (Department of Home Affairs, 2023; 2025; National Department of Tourism, 2024; South African Tourism, 2025). These perceptions contrast with earlier research that described South Africa's visa regime as restrictive and comparatively less competitive than destinations with visa-on-arrival or visa-free policies (Dilimono & Dickinson, 2015). The data analysis also revealed that visa requirements significantly increase psychological risk perceptions as pre-travel uncertainties related to approval outcomes, documentation demands, and processing timelines contribute to the tourists' anxiety (Rizzi, 2014). While psychological risk was found to influence destination choice, it played only a limited mediating role between the visa regime and destination selection. This suggests that the favourable direct effects of the visa regime outweigh the negative influence of risk perceptions, particularly among tourists, indicating higher levels of resilience and prior travel experience (Karl et al., 2020; Sufi et al., 2024). Lastly, the partial mediation effect of the ANC construct confirms that visa regimes influence destination choice through direct effects and indirect psychological relationships. Although visa exemption expectation was positively associated with destination choice, their absence of a moderating effect implies that implemented visa policies, rather than anticipated policy changes, show greater influence on tourists' decision-making process.

Conclusion

This study empirically examined how South Africa's visa regime influences Indian tourists' risk perceptions and destination choice, employing the Theory of Planned Behaviour as a theoretical framework and PLS–SEM for empirical analysis. The research revealed several important findings with both theoretical and practical significance.

Study Contribution

The proposed study contributed in a theoretical, literature and practical sense to tourism and policy research as it extended the TPB by integrating visa regime factors, visa exemption expectation and psychological risk perceptions to provide a better understanding of tourist's destination choice, The results reaffirm the importance of TPB components while refining them into the ANC construct, highlighting the role of policy-related factors influencing predictive travel behaviour. A gap was addressed in the literature as the study showed that visa policies affect destination choice indirectly through psychological risk perception and introduced visa exemption expectation as an independent psychological influence that can generate travel interest without formal policy changes. Empirically, the study contributed to the understanding of the interaction between immigration policy, perceived risk, and tourist decision-making. From a practical view, this study

provided valuable insights for South Africa tourism authorities and policymakers to strategically engage with Indian tourists as a source of the inbound tourism market.

Practical Implications

The study offers tourism stakeholders and policymakers in South Africa some insights into improving the visa system for Indian tourists by the Department of Home Affairs and the National Department of Tourism working together to enforce policy on the current visa enhancements and consistently evaluating them, expanding visa application infrastructure, and transparent communication about the visa requirements and enhancements. Marketing should be prioritised, actual current policy benefits, and efficient implementation rather than emphasising future possibilities should be focused on. Furthermore, marketing inventions that build the tourist's behavioural intention can have substantial impacts. The campaigns could employ multi-faceted strategies showcasing positive destination attributes, leveraging testimonials from Indian tourists, and providing comprehensive travel planning resources.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the research focused exclusively on Indian tourists, which restricts the generalisability of the results to other source markets. As the data were drawn from respondents in a single country, perceptions of visa-related risk and destination choice may differ across cultural and national contexts. Secondly, the reliance on an online survey as the primary data collection method may have excluded individuals with limited digital access or lower engagement with online platforms potentially resulting in sample bias and underrepresentation of specific tourist segments. Thirdly, the application of PLS -SEM while suitable for exploratory analysis and complex models, presents methodological constraints. The limited capacity of PLS-SEM to assess overall model fit and potential sensitivity to sample size may affect the robustness of causal interpretations. Additionally, the use of purposive sampling further limits external validity, as participants were selected based on predefined criteria rather than random procedures, potentially introducing researcher bias and limiting representation of the diversity within the Indian outbound tourism market. The recommendations' feasibility is also contingent on the policymakers and related departments' coordination and capacity. Financial constraints, policy priorities, and administrative processes may delay implementation, although improvements in online information provision are considered achievable. Furthermore, the results reflect perceptions of South Africa's visa regime prior to policy enhancements introduced in September 2025, as data were collected earlier in May 2025, which may not capture the effects of recent visa enhancements. Future research could address these limitations by employing probability-based sampling, mixed-method approaches, and advanced analytical techniques, for instance, multi-group analysis. Longitudinal and comparative studies are also recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of visa improvements over time and across different national contexts (China) as well as to examine the operational implementation of visa policies within the tourism sector.

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Understanding Conservation Awareness Campaigns in South Africa: Insights from Campaign Role Players

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Abstract

Purpose: Conservation awareness campaigns are effective communication tools used to inform, motivate, and encourage tourists, stakeholders, and the public to consider their harmful behaviours and prioritise pro-environmental efforts. The study indicates a gap in the conceptual understanding of what constitutes a conservation awareness campaign. Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate how South African practitioners define and perceive the value of campaigns within the context of nature-based tourism.

Study design/methodology: The study employed a qualitative approach. It utilised purposive and snowball sampling. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2024 and September 2025, spanning seven provinces in South Africa to ensure geographical representation.

Results: The analysis indicated a shared understanding among role players of the value and purpose of conservation awareness campaigns; however, inconsistencies regarding their definition were noted.

Originality/value: This study provides valuable industry insights into the perceived understanding and importance of conservation awareness campaigns among campaign role players within the conservation sector in South Africa. The results indicate whether campaigns are understood and deemed a practical approach to sharing valuable conservation information with relevant stakeholders, tourists, and the public. A descriptive definition was developed from the literature, and empirical data were used to provide further insight.

Keywords: Awareness, Communication, Conservation, Conservation Awareness Campaign, Nature-Based Tourism.

Introduction

Tourism is a significant contributor to South Africa's economy (South African Yearbook, 2022). In 2024, it generated approximately R234 billion for the country's GDP, drove infrastructure development, and provided 1.7 million jobs (South Africa, 2024; Statistics South Africa, 2025). Moreover, these contributions extend into nature-based tourism as South Africa is recognised as one of the third most biologically diverse nations globally, boasting a total of 290 conservation parks and 528 protected areas, which have attracted a total of 6.3 million visitors during 2024/25 (South African Yearbook, 2022; South African National Parks, 2025). Tourist visitation within these pristine environments results in various positive outcomes, one of which is the collection of conservation fees that contribute to conservation efforts (Newsome et al., 2013; Cobbinah, 2015;

Wheaton et al., 2015; Mabibibi et al., 2021). However, they are prone to negative impacts caused by factors such as overpopulation, pollution, the depletion of natural resources, and species extinction (Newsome et al., 2013; Gascon et al., 2015; Baloch et al., 2022; He et al., 2023; Public Parks, 2024). These impacts are directly related to humanity's involvement and their lack of conservation awareness (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

One way to enhance awareness among these audiences is through the utilisation of conservation awareness campaigns that target various audience groups (Jacobson et al., 2015; Uddin, 2017). Thus, considering the large number of tourists attracted to natural areas in South Africa, there is an opportunity for practitioners to target these individuals and extend important conservation information to broader audiences to encourage and inspire pro-environmental behaviours. However, although utilised by some conservation organisations, the preliminary observations, literature, and input from stakeholders within this study revealed that campaign development partly fails due to practitioners' lack of shared definitions and strategic communication strategies. This lack of shared understanding could result in fragmented, conceptually weak campaign initiatives, indicating a need for consensus among academics and practitioners on theoretical integration. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining how practitioners conceptualise and value conservation awareness campaigns as a tool for effective conservation communication.

According to literature, effective communication is considered a powerful tool due to its potential to influence behaviours and encourage positive change among target audiences (Banerjee, 2022; Ma et al., 2022; He et al., 2023; Rotar, 2024). It is a process whereby individuals exchange messages that create meaning through interaction (He et al., 2023). Thus, communication focused on the environment facilitates the exchange of understanding about the environment and its environmental challenges, shaping individuals' perspectives and their relationship with the natural world (He et al., 2023). Conservation communication specifically aims to increase public and tourist knowledge and encourage community involvement (Merenlender et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018; Altman, 2023). Awareness campaigns are therefore considered as beneficial, effective tools used to disseminate information using various communication strategies to enhance awareness levels pertaining to important issues to large, diverse audiences with the goal of changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (Bada et al., 2015; Climate Adapt, 2015; Howe et al., 2012; Sayers, 2006). Primary motivators for raising awareness include governments, non-governmental organisations, environmental non-governmental organisations, and local leaders (Ervin et al., 2010). However, these individuals are urged to become more proactive, influential, and intentional with their awareness campaigns to encourage environmental support (Doley & Barman, 2023), as scientific information and conservation messages often require simplification (Qingyang, 2023; Doley & Barman, 2023; Gregg, 2022), indicating a gap between scientific knowledge and public understanding.

Awareness initiatives are conducted through education, outreach programmes, and conservation awareness campaigns aimed at bridging awareness gaps by informing, educating, and inspiring individuals to care for the environment (Jacobson et al., 2015; Kansi, 2022; Hassan, 2025). However, Hassan (2025) indicates that each of these initiatives has its own unique goals, namely:

- Environmental Education programme: increases ecological literacy to encourage individuals to make knowledgeable decisions about biodiversity conservation.
- Citizen Science project: involvement of individuals in scientific research, such as data gathering, environmental observations, and biodiversity monitoring.
- Conservation Awareness Campaign: communication strategy to inform, inspire and motivate individuals to support conservation efforts that will encourage behavioural change.

The development of these initiatives stems from evolving environmental challenges and the increased recognition of the need to raise awareness, which will foster a deeper understanding of environmental issues and promote pro-environmental behaviours (Hassan, 2025). South Africa, as well as many other countries, observes International Environmental Days to raise awareness of various conservation issues. These days include World Environmental Day, World Wildlife Day, World Oceans Day, and World Day to Combat Desertification (South African Yearbook, 2022). Celebrating these significant days is often done through clean-up campaigns, art exhibitions, tree-planting drives, social media campaigns, and contests focused on conserving the planet (South African Yearbook, 2022). Thus, awareness is significant, as individuals who are made aware of ecological challenges are recognised as more inclined to make informed decisions and to behave in a pro-environmental manner (Altman, 2023; Aman et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2023; He et al., 2023). However, awareness alone is insufficient (Bolderdijk, 2013; Green et al., 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2022; Kidd et al., 2023) and requires practitioners to consider utilising strategic approaches that shift audience awareness and perceptions that drive action (Wright et al., 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2022; Qingyang, 2023). Efforts include dedicating time to participate in conservation initiatives, influencing conservation policies, and donating or securing conservation funding (Jacobson et al., 2015; Banerjee, 2022; Baloch et al., 2022). A good example of a successful conservation awareness campaign is “The Sharks under attack,” known for producing science-based, edgy, and simplified content for audiences. The campaign has reached over 10 million people by releasing 56 media pieces across platforms such as web, print, radio, television, and social media (Wildtrust, 2025). Later, the campaign released a short film, “Caleb: Beyond the bite”, which was launched on World Oceans Day with the intention of shifting audience negative perceptions of sharks and instead spreading awareness of their diversity, vulnerability, and need for increased protection (Wildtrust, 2025). The campaign was deemed successful in reaching over 3.5 million people, stimulating knowledge improvement, increasing legal protections, offering support and training for the effective implementation of conservation measures, driving advocacy and awareness that encourages people to take action, as well as supporting decision-makers (Wildtrust, 2025; Sharks Under Attack, 2024).

The development of effective conservation awareness campaigns, however, relies on strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation (Jacobson et al., 2015; Cox et al., 2020). Strategic communication is informed by research (Kidd, 2023) and aims to inform, educate, and motivate individuals by translating complex scientific messages into accessible and simplified content (Jacobson et al., 2015). Campaign messages are shared in various forms, including print media,

television, radio, digital and social media, public events, art, and targeted educational programmes (Bolderdijk et al., 2013; Jacobson et al., 2015; Saikia, 2017; Uddin, 2017). However, although campaigns are widely used, communication often fails to reach or resonate with their intended audiences (Wright et al., 2015; Oirko, 2017; Wi & Chang, 2018; Glenn et al., 2019; Cox et al., 2020). For example, different conservation organisations in South Africa share either contradicting, confusing, or overly negative messages (Government of South Africa, 2015). Moreover, although conservation messages promote conservation behaviours and actions, there is a further gap in research regarding the appropriate selection of message strategies (Gregg, 2022). Furthermore, effective communication is considered complex, as it requires resources and expertise that are not readily available to conservation professionals (Gregg, 2022).

While existing literature, preliminary observations, and feedback from conservation managers suggest that these challenges may stem from a lack of strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation (Olmedo et al., 2018). Less attention has been placed on how conservation awareness campaigns are conceptualised and valued by practitioners responsible for designing and delivering these initiatives. Thus, focusing on practitioners' perceptions is crucial as they are the individuals accountable for campaign development. Moreover, campaign failures are often attributed to a lack of expertise and experience within campaign teams, leading to a need for mentorship or upskilling programmes (Kite et al., 2024).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how South African practitioners define, understand, and value campaigns within the context of nature-based tourism. The study was guided by the following research questions: How do South African practitioners define conservation awareness campaigns, and how do they perceive their value and effectiveness in nature-based tourism? By addressing these questions, the study provides evidence-based insights that inform strategic communication planning, a process considered essential for the effective development of future conservation awareness campaigns. This lays the foundation for further research on campaign planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Methodology

Research approach and epistemology

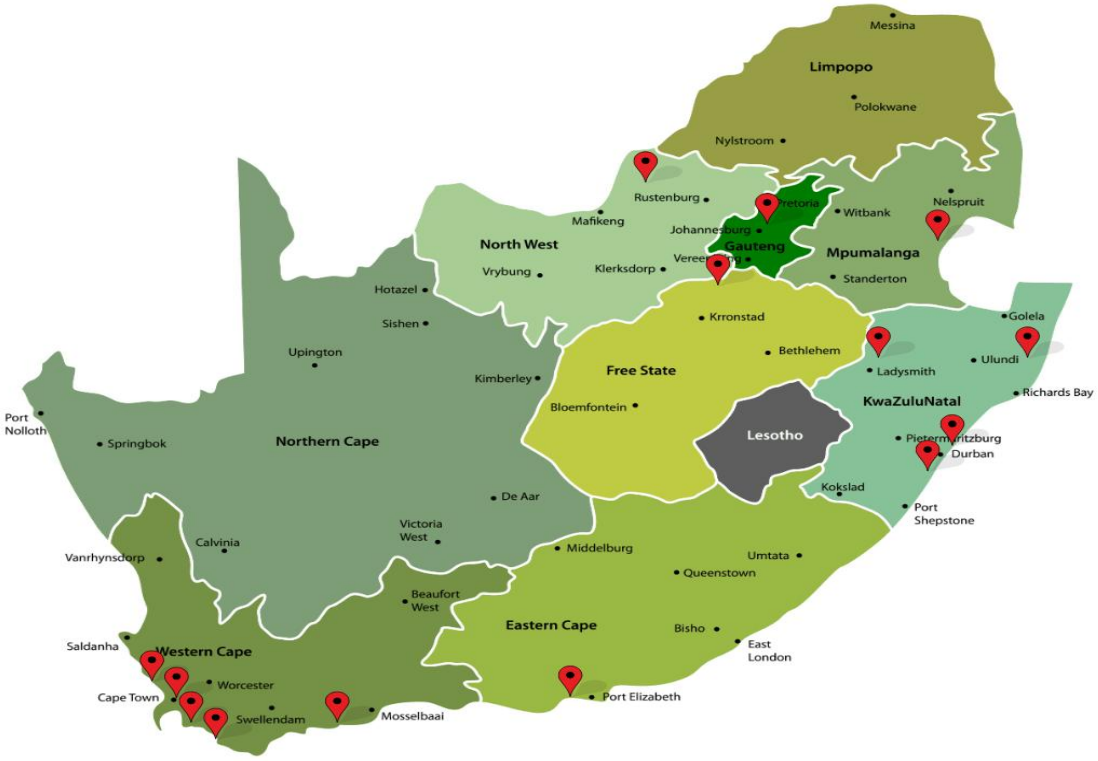
This research draws on qualitative data generated as part of a broader master's study that determined the core aspects of establishing a conservation awareness campaign. While the original research focused on campaign planning, implementation, evaluation, and related aspects, the article deliberately focuses on two significant themes emerging from the data: participants' definitions of conservation awareness campaigns and their perceptions of their value. By examining their perspectives, this study aims to capture the meaning-making processes that enable participants to explore and interpret their lived experiences and subjective understandings, thereby forming the foundation for conceptual clarity and practice-informed insight. Thus, the study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning through their lived experiences, including, in this case, professional experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). An inductive approach was employed, and the study was conducted in two phases: an exploratory phase and an explanatory phase. Furthermore, it followed a case study

approach, aiming to identify conservation organisations and initiatives for an in-depth examination of campaign practitioners' perceptions regarding the importance and understanding of real-world conservation awareness campaigns.

Sampling

A non-probability sampling method was used, specifically purposive and snowball sampling, in which the researcher identified various conservation role players within non-profit, private, and publicly owned conservation organisations or projects across South Africa. Once ethical clearance was obtained, the researcher contacted 74 conservation organisations and projects between October 2024 and September 2025. The study employed inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the relevant organisations were targeted. Thus, only organisations or projects prioritising conservation and conservation communication through conservation awareness campaigns were targeted (See Figure 1). Invitations, along with permission and consent letters, were sent, and a total of fourteen invitations were accepted and conducted across seven provinces. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, via online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet, and via email, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. They were recorded for transcription and analysis. Lastly, no new codes or themes emerged after interview 14, and thus data saturation was achieved after 14 interviews.

Figure 1. Targeted Conservation Organisations Across South Africa



As shown in Figure 1, each pin on the map represents the location of each organisation that participated in the interview process. These organisations were situated in provinces recognised for their prominent conservation presence and focus (Cathsseta, 2023), providing the data with broad representation that enabled in-depth insights into the perceived importance and definition of conservation awareness campaigns across South Africa.

Development of the measuring instrument

For this study, the researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews focused on the supply side to determine whether conservation role players regard conservation awareness campaigns as an essential tool for communicating significant conservation information. The interview guide consisted of three sections. Section A focused on the demographic data of conservation role players, as obtaining this information helps determine whether these individuals possess the necessary skills and practical experience to develop these initiatives (Wright, 2015; Marchini et al., 2023; Kite et al., 2024). Section B contained questions that gathered general information about the organisations' established conservation awareness campaigns, including whether practitioners considered them appropriate methods and their shared understanding of the concept. Section C focused on aspects of campaign planning, implementation, and evaluation, which will not be covered within the data set of this article.

Data analysis

The six steps of Creswell (2009) were employed, in which the researcher organised and prepared the data, manually read through all the data, and utilised software programmes such as Otter.ai and ATLAS.ti. The researcher used a coding process to identify, generate, and describe themes for interpretation. Once the themes were analysed, the data were used to make recommendations to conservation role players regarding the significance and purpose of conservation awareness campaigns.

Ethical considerations

An application for ethical approval was submitted to the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) at North-West University, and ethical consent was officially granted on 1 October 2024. The ethical clearance number was NWU-01801-24-A4, and the study was deemed minimal risk. The participants provided their informed consent, ensuring their voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and the assurance of confidentiality and data protection. Furthermore, they were informed about data access, storage, and reporting.

Results

This section presents the results from the data on participants' comprehension of campaigns, their perceived significance, focus, and impact.

Main results regarding practitioners' demographics

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic information for the participants in this study.

Table 1. A summary of the demographic information of participants involved in the study.

Participants	Highest qualification	Job title/position	Years in current position

Participant 1	PhD in environmental sciences	Ecologist	9 years
Participant 2	Not specified	Guide and professional hunter	11 years
Participant 3	Not specified	Administration, Human Resources and Marketing	6 years
Participant 4	Masters in Zoology	Communications and media manager	5 years
Participant 5	Not specified	Specialist in animal genetics	Not specified
Participant 6	Not specified	Owner	7 years
Participant 7	Not specified	General manager with the portfolio focused on communications, fundraising and public relations	Not specified
Participant 8	Master's in marketing and international business	Head of marketing and communications	3 months in current position
Participant 9	PhD in Biological Science (Ecologist)	Ecologist	9 years
Participant 10	BSc in Marine Biology	Executive of conservation education and communication	3 years
Participant 11	Not specified	Marine biologist, scientist and conservationist with a PADI master scuba diver instructor	8 years
Participant 12	Degree in media and communications	Director of campaigns and communications	13 years
Participant 13	Postgraduate diploma (pgDip) in Marketing	Marketing manager	2 years
Participant 14	Not specified	Acting chief conservation officer	8 years

Considering the participants' professional backgrounds, they contributed significantly to how they define and value conservation awareness campaigns in practice. The results indicated that participants' diverse expertise in campaign development was shaped by formal and informal

education and professional experience. Half (7/14) of participants held a higher education qualification, and the majority (9/14) reported more than 5 years of experience in their current role. This suggests that the development and implementation of campaigns are significantly influenced by knowledge gained through experience. Participants held diverse roles within the conservation and tourism sector and shared a common thread: the responsibility of communicating and marketing conservation messages to external audiences. However, those in roles solely focused on communication or marketing demonstrated more strategic understanding of campaigns and emphasised the importance of strategic campaign planning and evaluation. This aligns with literature, which suggests that professional communication skills are crucial for the successful execution of strategic campaigns (Wright et al., 2015; Marchini et al., 2023). Overall, this diversity in professional backgrounds provides a strong foundation for understanding the definition, perception, and value of conservation awareness campaigns.

Main results regarding identified themes

Theme 1: Ambiguity in practitioners' understanding of conservation awareness campaigns

The results indicated a lack of a shared understanding of what constitutes a conservation awareness campaign among participants. Interpretations were diverse, indicating organisational differences in campaign contexts, practices, and strategic goals. A shared understanding was noted among the majority (9/14) of participants, indicating that campaigns are communication tools used to disseminate crucial information, raise awareness, and educate target audiences about various conservation challenges. Moreover, it is used to bridge the knowledge gap between conservation practitioners and the public or tourists, serving as a means to translate scientific knowledge into accessible messages that encourage understanding and foster concern among these groups. However, participants 7 and 4 expressed their uncertainty and requested clarification. For example:

“Well, I’ve read through all of your questions, and one of the things we need to just iron out here is exactly what you mean by campaign … we do small campaigns to raise funds, but our conservation work and human work, we don’t call campaigns, they are annual programmes … we run them all the time, we seek funding so that there’s no interruption in our work, but all of these programmes are for short-term” (P7)

“Firstly, I’d like to just get your definition of an awareness campaign … because campaigning means different things to different people … it's almost about constant campaigning, it's literally raising awareness throughout with all of our messaging” (P4)

These responses indicated that one participant views campaigning as a short-term, often fundraising initiative, different from ongoing conservation programmes. Additionally, another participant viewed it as a continuous process incorporated into all their organisational communication. These differing understandings highlighted how the term 'campaign' is multifaceted and overlaps with conservation projects and programmes. This complexity is further seen from participant 12, who shared their understanding of campaigns as separate from projects and programmes, however, recognising them as interconnected:

“The campaign is not the project … We often have our campaigns. Often underwrite entire projects that are doing multiple things in this particular space … for example, we have a shark project, and

underwriting that is the … campaign with different objectives, so strategic placement, emails to decision makers, social media, video, film" (P12)

This perspective frames campaigns as strategic communication efforts that amplify conservation projects or programmes, rather than replacing them. Lastly, participant 13 provided a clear difference between traditional marketing campaigns and conservation campaigns, stating that campaigns are informed by the organisational set objective:

"While a typical campaign for a product, service, or experience is driven by sales, conservation campaigns are usually centred on education, impact, and in some cases, advocacy or calls to action" (P13)

Collectively, these results indicate ambiguity in the terminology, understanding, and implementation of conservation awareness campaigns. This is evident in how some practitioners set specific conceptual boundaries, while others use the term interchangeably. Although programmes, projects, and campaigns aim to raise awareness among individuals, the existing literature distinguishes among them conceptually. Therefore, programmes aim to foster understanding, knowledge, and positive attitudes, developing informed individuals who can contribute to environmental stewardship and policymaking (Hassan, 2025). For example, learning programmes include immersive, hands-on experiences designed to deepen ecological literacy and foster personalised connections with nature. Projects aim to empower non-professionals to contribute valuable data, thereby expanding the scale and scope of monitoring efforts (Hassan, 2025). For example, platforms such as iNaturalist and eBird enable individuals to contribute millions of data points from diverse locations, which in turn support research and conservation policies. Campaigns, on the other hand, are strategic communication efforts aimed at inspiring behavioural change that encourages public participation in programs and projects (Hassan, 2025). Noting this difference suggests a theoretical and practical gap in conservation communication understanding, which can be attributed to the importance of practitioners acquiring professional communication skills, as these skills are essential for the successful execution of strategic campaigns (Wright et al., 2015; Marchini et al., 2023). This may also affect the campaign's strategic alignment, as differing definitions can shape how campaigns are planned, informed, and evaluated. For example, one participant indicated that if the conservation awareness campaign's goals and objectives are not clearly defined, organisations could risk effectively communicating "the purpose of the campaign". This aligns with existing literature, which states that describing a campaign's purpose, goals, and objectives is a fundamental step in determining conservation success (Jacobson, 2010; Jacobson et al., 2015). Therefore, considering participants' understanding and consulting existing literature, conservation awareness campaigns can be defined as a strategic and planned communication effort with the goal of "informing, influencing and motivating individuals to adopt positive conservation attitudes and behaviours that will inspire action" (Seeger, 2018; Dean & Hinsley, 2020; WWF, 2023). With this understanding, awareness campaigns can be considered the first step in influencing, inspiring, and motivating tourists and the public to get involved in broader conservation projects or programmes.

Theme 2: The perceived importance and value of Conservation Awareness Campaigns

Regardless of definitional ambiguity, the results indicated that participants regard conservation awareness campaigns as an essential tool for communicating conservation issues, particularly in environments where audiences lack understanding of Earth's natural processes. For example, participants 3 and 14 stated:

"Yes, I think definitely. I think, especially being an NPO, it's essential to do a conservation awareness campaign" (P3)

"Conservation awareness aims to bring some sort of topic down to a specific audience … certain issues that we would like to convey to the public … but obviously, your audience is significant" (P14)

Campaigns reach diverse audiences; thus, participants emphasised their value in sharing vital information with those who have direct interactions with species and ecosystems, promoting coexistence and reducing harmful practices. Other target audiences include local communities, municipalities, governments, and tourists. However, tourists were recognised as a group that "play a huge role in conservation" (P14); they were also noted as a group that has not been "targeted enough" (P14), resulting in their lack of awareness. For example, participant 3 stated:

"Most of the tourists, especially international ones, don't even know what conservation struggles and efforts countries like South Africa go through" (P3)

This statement indicates that participants recognise the importance of developing conservation awareness campaigns to increase awareness among vital target audiences who can make a difference in conservation. For example, one participant stated that if "tourists experience nature and fall in love with it … there's an opportunity for them to see what the organisation does … they can make donations" (P8), thus directly contributing to conservation efforts. Furthermore, campaigning is also viewed as a tool for converting complex conservation science into an approach that is impactful, emotional, and relevant. For example, participants stated:

"If people know better, they do better … you need to help people understand" (P12)

"Conservation is about creating awareness among people and inspiring people to be connected, because when you're connected, you start caring" (P10)

"The problem is that people don't realise that 70% of the planet is ocean … they don't see what goes on below the big blue blanket" (P12)

"Conservation awareness campaigns are vital for sharing stories and highlighting the work being done on the ground" (P13)

These statements suggest that increased conservation awareness is essential for encouraging individuals to make informed decisions and adopt more responsible behaviours, as the emotional connections built can foster a sense of care and concern. Thus, participants view campaigning positively because of its effectiveness and alignment with the organisation's focus, mission, goals, and objectives. These views and impacts align with existing literature, indicating that campaigns are tools which could be used to increase visibility across various platforms, targeting diverse audiences who are unaware of multiple environmental threats, as without them, securing public support would be difficult (Bergman et al., 2022; Kugel et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023; Qingyang, 2023).

Beyond understanding and the importance of campaigns, participants shared insights regarding the impact and focus of their organisational conservation campaigns. Viewed positively, participants revealed both tangible and intangible outcomes. For example, measurable outcomes were observed, including improved species status following campaign initiatives and increased public engagement. Other changes included shifts in attitudes, more discussions focused on conservation issues, and enhanced awareness of conservation problems. These changes were evident in the diversified focus areas of the organisation's campaigns, which spanned marine and terrestrial ecosystems, biodiversity, genetics, and community involvement. This variety of contexts indicates that campaign design is based on organisational goals, audience needs, and urgent environmental topics, underscoring the need for a well-defined communication strategy to inform the campaign's vision, mission, goals, and objectives (Rotar, 2024).

These insights suggest that the role of campaigns is to enhance the credibility of conservation efforts through effective messaging, thereby gaining support and public trust, which aligns with existing literature (Jacobson et al., 2015; Qingyang, 2023; Kugel et al., 2022). Therefore, participants view conservation awareness campaigns as essential for promoting increased engagement, education, and connection. Consequently, they are valued and impactful not only for their communicative abilities but also for their strategic contribution to conservation success.

Conclusion

Forming part of a broader master's dissertation focused on determining the core aspects related to the establishment of a conservation awareness campaign, this study drew on two themes that explored how conservation practitioners define and value conservation awareness campaigns in the context of nature-based tourism in South Africa. The study employed an interpretivist qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of conservation campaign role players on campaigns used as a communication tool. The findings indicated that conservation awareness campaigns are essential initiatives for achieving conservation success, as they help bridge knowledge gaps, simplify complex conservation science messages, and foster connections between audiences and conservation issues. Tourists and the public were primarily viewed as audiences whose behaviours and support are sought after, as they directly influence conservation outcomes.

However, despite shared recognition of the value of conservation campaigns, the study found that participants lacked understanding of what constitutes a conservation awareness campaign. Campaigns were described as short-term initiatives, ongoing communication within organisational messages, or strategic initiatives supporting various conservation projects and programmes. This lack of a mutual conceptual understanding raises the question of whether different interpretations of conservation awareness campaigns may hinder the strategic development, alignment, and evaluation of campaign initiatives. Existing literature emphasises the importance of strategic campaign planning, implementation, and evaluation for success (Jacobson et al., 2015). Therefore, without a shared definition and understanding, conservation organisations risk "reinventing the wheel" in campaign design and implementation, further limiting opportunities for learning, evaluation, and strategic improvement among campaign stakeholders.

Furthermore, campaign value highlighted among participants within the study aligned with existing international literature that highlights the importance of communication in conservation success and its role in shaping audience awareness, attitudes, and engagement (Ervin et al., 2010; Green et al., 2019; Gregg, 2022; Fischer et al., 2022). Moreover, challenges regarding strategic planning and communication effectiveness have been identified in conservation contexts beyond South Africa, suggesting a need for a more well-defined strategic planning process to ensure effective communication in defining conservation problems, setting clear social and ecological objectives, and targeting the correct audience (Gregg, 2022). These findings suggest several practical implications for conservation organisations and practitioners involved in campaign development. Thus, based on the study's results, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Develop a sector-wide shared definition and campaigning blueprint for conservation awareness campaigns which could promote conceptual clarity, consistency, and shared learning across organisations.
- Strengthen campaign planning and evaluation among practitioners, particularly those without formal training in communication, for example, by providing training, mentorship, or practical guidelines for their learning.
- Establish clearer guidance for integrated conservation awareness campaigns with programmes or projects, so that practitioners can ensure campaigns function as a strategic initiative rather than a blurred general organisational communication tactic.

Moreover, this study consisted of several limitations. First and foremost, the results of the study formed part of a broader master's dissertation, focusing broadly on identifying aspects that contribute to the success of conservation awareness campaigns. Although the findings provided a wide-ranging perspective, they were limited in their ability to explore specific campaign types in depth, for example, a conservation awareness campaign placed explicitly on social media platforms. Thus, future research should recognise varied campaign approaches and examine the role players' understanding of campaign importance, definition, and success in different contexts. Additionally, this article focused on only two themes from the broader study, which limits the scope of the results; however, it allows for a more focused examination of practitioner perspectives rather than overall aspects of campaign success. Lastly, challenges with participation and availability may limit the depth and robustness of the collected data. Future research could benefit from employing a mixed-methods approach that incorporates the perspectives of both practitioners and campaign target audiences, as a larger sample size could facilitate further exploration of variations in campaign definitions and their perceived value.

In conclusion, conservation awareness campaigns remain a vital tool for effective conservation communication within nature-based tourism. This study indicated that while campaigns are highly valued, greater conceptual clarity is needed to maximise their strategic potential. Thus, by highlighting how campaigns are understood and valued by those responsible for developing them, the research provides a foundation for developing more intentional, coherent, and effective conservation communication in support of biodiversity conservation for a sustainable future.

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Territorial brand and tourism competitiveness: A Systematic Literature Review 2013-2025

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Abstract

***Purpose**:* The objective of this research was to analyze scientific production on territorial branding in the context of competitiveness among tourist destinations from 2013 to 2025.

***Study design/methodology/approach**:* This article presents a systematic review of the extant literature, which is a qualitative study of a descriptive-explanatory nature. The data were collected from the Scopus database from 2013 to 2025, and narrative analysis was used to analyze them.

***Results**:* A comprehensive analysis yielded the identification of five overarching thematic categories: immersive technologies, branding, sustainability, independent clusters, and destination competitiveness.

***Originality/value**:* The originality of this study lies in its systematic comparison of the territorial brand with the competitiveness of territories. It clarifies the mechanisms through which the territorial brand acts as a strategic asset in promoting competitiveness, sustainability, and territorial differentiation.

Keywords: Territorial brand; competitiveness; tourism; destination; clusters.

Introduction

Tourist destinations have become increasingly competitive over time (Buhalis et al., 2000; Azmi et al., 2023), leading to the use of territorial branding as a tool for this purpose (Almeida & Almeida, 2023). The primary objective of this strategy has been to attract an increased number of tourists to destinations (Azmi et al., 2023). However, an increase in this flow without a sustainable development plan for the destination can lead to long-term challenges (Almeida & Almeida, 2023). As Almeida (2018) asserts, the concept of a "territorial brand" encompasses a multifaceted array of functions, among which is the enhancement of a destination's competitiveness.

In this sense, the objective of this study is to analyze scientific production on territorial branding in the context of competitiveness among tourist destinations from 2013 to 2025.

It is noteworthy that the study by Almeida and Almeida (2023) advanced the existing literature review to understand how territorial branding has been used in the context of competitiveness between tourist destinations from 2007 to 2021. However, the authors of the study focused on two variables, "territorial brand*" and "destination image," with competitiveness serving as the result of their research. This study is predicated on the aforementioned gap and its subsequent implications for the relationship between "territorial brand" and "competitiveness."

Furthermore, the concept of territorial brand does not garner universal consensus, and its connotations diverge from those of place branding (Almeida, 2018). Anholt (2007) posits that place branding encompasses public diplomacy, while Kavaratzis (2005) delineates it as a distinct form of communication strategy. Lucarelli (2018) associates place branding with public policies, and Cleave et al. (2016) highlight its role in the economic development of business investments. According to Almeida (2018), the conceptualization of a territorial brand as a manifestation of specific management and place branding is predicated on the notion that the brand constitutes a cultural product of regional development. Consequently, the author underscores that the territorial brand encompasses not only the economic dimension but also addresses other dimensions, rendering the theme interdisciplinary and linked to the power relations of the territory.

As posited by Kubickova and Martin (2020) and Mazo et al. (2021), the competitiveness of tourist destinations is derived from the added value of the tourist product of a given location, from its creation to its distribution. This added value is achieved by providing a more satisfactory service in accordance with consumer needs, relative to other services offered by the competition. Consequently, this raises the competitive level of the destination, thereby increasing its economic power and market positioning.

Ahn and Bessiere (2023) present a model with three fundamental levels of competitiveness. Natural competitiveness refers to the natural elements of a destination, including its natural area as tourist potential. Cultural competitiveness involves a set of intangible tourist potential of the location or surrounding region. The concept of contextual competitiveness is predicated on the unique attributes that characterize the destination. In such a competitive environment, the tourism industry requires a revitalization strategy that encompasses the development of models capable of analyzing, organizing, planning, evaluating, measuring, and communicating competitive strategies, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of the designated tourist destination (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999).

In this sense, “the capabilities and competitive advantages of a region are strengthened through regional public policies and strategies that value cultural diversity, innovation, and cooperation between different local actors” Almeida and Almeida (2023, p.4) highlight that local government is also a strategic stakeholder in the political arena of the territory, given that it can significantly enhance and develop the competitiveness of a destination through effective public policies. However, the phenomenon of overtourism can occur when sustainable management is lacking. According to Almeida & Almeida (2024), when there is responsible and equitable management, with the implementation of relevant strategies, tourist destinations can achieve significant economic, environmental, cultural, and social development.

This study, which is still in progress, is organized into four sections, including the initial section, which presents the topic under investigation. In the following sections, the methodology is detailed, as well as the results and conclusion.

Methodology

The methodology employed is a systematic literature review (SLR) and narrative, adhering to the PRISMA protocol (Paul & Criado, 2020). This study employs a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive approach.

The data collection process was conducted within the Scopus database, encompassing the years 2013 to 2025, in accordance with the PRISMA protocol. This procedure yielded a total of 18 articles that were subjected to a comprehensive analysis. The following string was used: [TITLE-ABS-KEY (competitiveness AND "territorial brand")]. The concept of "competitiveness AND territorial brand" is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that merits further examination. The inclusion criteria encompassed publications that contained the keywords "competitiveness" and "territorial brand" in the title or abstract. A total of 18 articles were published on the subject; however, due to the unavailability of full access to the documents, they were excluded from the present analysis, as was also done by Almeida & Almeida (2024).

PRISMA protocol:

1. Identification
   - Database used: Scopus
   - Search period: 2013 a 2025
   - Search terms:
     - "competitiveness AND "territorial brand*" (26 documents)
2. Screening
   - Records excluded after reading titles and abstracts: 0
   - Records eligible for full review: 18
   - Open access documents: 18
   - Documents with restricted access (excluded*): 8
3. Eligibility
   - Articles read in full: 18
4. Inclusion
   - Studies included in the systematic review: 18
   - Studies analyzed in the narrative review: 18

*Excluded due to lack of access to the full document.

Subsequent to the analysis of the publications, an Excel table was formulated that encompassed the following categories: The author's name, the year of publication, the objective, the methodology, the results, the limitations, the implications, and the future lines of research are all to be included.

The categories under consideration were derived from the structure of the analyzed papers, following the same logic as Almeida & Almeida (2024). The coding was obtained through an *a posteriori* analysis in which the article was read in its entirety, resulting in a thematic classification of categories presented in Table 1 (Bardin, 2011).

Results and Discussions

The categories that emerged from the themes of the articles that were analyzed were initially grouped and subsequently regrouped. This process resulted in the identification of the five

categories that are presented here. Table 1 presents the various perspectives found in the Scopus database literature on the variables territorial brand and competitiveness.

Table 1. Systematic Literature Review

Author	Study objective	Study methodology	Key results	Limitations	Implications	Future lines of research	Categori
Almeida (2023)	Understanding how territorial branding is used in the metaverse city of Seoul.	Case study with bibliographic and documentary research (4 analytical categories).	The brand is used for city marketing, strengthening identity, and physical urban revitalization.	Investigation limited to just one metaverse city.	The metaverse serves as an interactive field laboratory for real-world transformations.	Comparison with other global and non-global metaverse cities.	Immersive Technologies
Feijó-de-Almeida (2023)	Understanding the strategies of Brazilian territorial brands in regional representation and reputation.	Applied and qualitative research with a multiple case study (Porto Alegre and Pelotas).	Identifying power relations within brands and creating a new symbolic-territorial market.	Limited quantity and uniqueness of the cities surveyed.	Brands influence regional dynamics and promote socio-territorial transformations.	Study on the formal registration of territorial trademarks.	Power relations
Sgroi & Modica (2022)	Evaluating strategies of agricultural companies to promote territorial resilience through brands (Pecorino Siciliano).	Qualitative method using interviews with four dairy companies holding PDO certification.	Sustainability is a strategic variable of value; certifications provide competitive advantage and security.	Not explicitly detailed, but focused on a small sample of producers.	Territorial markers encourage people to remain in rural areas.	Promoting greater territorial cohesion between producers and institutions.	Sustainability/certifications

Moura et al. (2022)	Understanding the motivations of entrepreneurs and the attributes valued in post-COVID-19 tourist destinations.	Exploratory cross-sectional study with research conducted among 138 entrepreneurs in the Central Region of Portugal.	"Resources" and "Territorial Brand" are determining factors for investment.	Non-probability convenience sampling, preventing generalizations.	The need for DMO strategies focused on resource valuation and sustainability.	Regional, national, and international comparison; identifying the types of support needed.	Sustainability/Resource Valuation
Annese et al. (2021)	To depict the transformation of an industrial area through a technology park (NOI Techpark).	Descriptive case study on the territorial restoration and marketing project in Bolzano.	Creating innovation through territorial branding; revitalizing surrounding private areas.	The results of knowledge transfer are not immediately quantifiable in economic terms.	Design acts as an interface between local development processes and physical interfaces.	Project completion and expansion to new hubs (e.g., Brunico).	Knowledge transfer
Escourido-Calvo et al.	To propose a repositioning of the city's brand in light of the energy transition (Las Pontes, Spain).	Case study with benchmarking and Delphi panels with professionals and organizations.	The need to adopt a sustainable economic model to restore pride of belonging.	Previous deterioration of the brand due to industrial decline and unemployment.	Repositioning must involve "internal clients" (residents) to be reliable.	Focus the strategy on the concept of "Las Pontes, naturally industrial" linked to renewable energies.	Economic pillar of
Ponomarev & Ivshin	To analyze territorial (re)branding as a factor for sustainable urban development.	Multidimensional design algorithm including architectural and planning solutions.	Branding stimulates citizens' social activity and improves the quality of urban spaces..	Monotony and lack of integrity in mass housing design decisions.	Architectural branding creates the visual backdrop for psychophysiological relaxation..	Reorganizing urban spaces with negative connotations through responsible design.	Sustainable urban space

Moroz et al. (2020)	To study the principles of territorial branding for rural development in Ukraine.	Study of unique experiences of individual rural communities and SWOT analysis.	Branding acts as an anti-crisis program; community self-organization is a success factor.	Rural economies remain "difficult" and mostly depressed.	Branding should be based on objective prerequisites such as institutional history or leisure potential.	Development of national branding programs for rural development.	Rural Branding
Demakova et al. (2020)	To study the factors that determine the perception of food quality as a basis for territorial branding.	Factor analysis of surveys with 283 consumers in Krasnoyarsk.	Four factors were identified: promised quality, subjective evaluation, visual evaluation, and reliability.	Consumption values are latent quantities that are difficult to measure directly.	Independent evaluation tools by local authorities increase brand loyalty.	Provision of objective evidence regarding the uniqueness of local raw materials.	Territorial Branding
Almeida (2025)	To analyze the role of territorial branding as a strategic element of public governance.	Comparative approach between 4 Brazilian and Portuguese cities using 7 variables.	Strategic planning increases competitiveness; culture acts as a power structure within the brand.	Narrow scope limited to a few cities.	The need to effectively integrate culture into management to promote regional development.	Analysis of how residents receive the strategies and the impacts of urban tensions (e.g., overtourism).	Public governance
Butova et al. (2019)	To discuss the territorial branding of agricultural products to improve competitiveness.	Desk research and adaptation of territory branding models to agribusiness.	The brand acts as a guarantee of quality; territory is a crucial factor in the price-quality ratio.	Insufficient methodology and scientific support in the structure of agribusiness brands.	To encourage regional participation in quality control, starting from the seed stage.	Stability of productivity and grain quality under extreme weather conditions.	Rural Branding

Eidelman et al. (2019)	Identify directions for territorial branding development in Russia through supply chain management.	Classification of Russian territorial marks based on population and settlement types.	Branding significantly increases the tourist and investment attractiveness of regions.	Adverse demographic situation with a large exodus of population from certain regions.	Branding creates a positive image for both potential guests and the local population.	Accelerating the rates of sustainable socioeconomic development.	Territorial Branding
Poço & Casais (2019)	To analyze how building a territorial brand increases place attachment.	Mixed methodology (interviews, focus group and survey with 285 respondents) in Viana do Castelo.	Emotional attachment (place identity) is more important than functional dependence in both residents and visitors.	Non-probability convenience sampling.	The need for more proactive and engaging communication strategies to monitor performance.	Implementation of similar studies in other geographical areas.	Territorial Identity
Nikitin et al. (2018)	To explain the essence of the concept of geobranding and its practical application in Russia.	General scientific methods (synthesis, induction), systems approach, and normative method.	The city's brand should be based on a prior strategy for territorial development.	Shortage of qualified specialists in the field.	Rebranding is a "smooth" planning process where the transition between stages depends on previous success.	Monitoring implemented projects from a spatiotemporal perspective.	Geobranding
Pasquinelli (2013)	Analyze the process of inter-territorial branding (crossing administrative borders).	Secondary research reviewing 12 experiments with inter-territorial networks in Europe and the USA.	Inter-territorial branding is driven by pragmatism (critical mass) and political forces.	Different scales of analysis (municipal vs. regional/national).	Sustainable brands require maintaining momentum in terms of visibility and credibility.	Primary research to explore viable ways of maintaining credibility.	Inter-territorial

Cristòfol et al. (2025)	To investigate innovation and competitiveness in the Algarve brand through digital communication.	Mixed approach (quantitative analysis of 689 posts and qualitative analysis of 38 documents/websites).	A coherent narrative centered on coastal identity; Instagram is the platform with the most engagement.	Low connection with the audience (only 6.4% of posts above 1% engagement).	The need for greater content diversification and stakeholder integration.	Exploring new platforms (e.g., TikTok) and the role of local products in authenticity.	Brand Communication
Paredes Castellanos et al. (2024)	To propose a model of determining variables in the representational capacity of a territorial brand.	Quantitative approach (survey with 475 people) and statistical correlation analysis (SEM) in Tunja.	Key factors: positive image, relationship with the surrounding area, territorial vision, and promotion of competitiveness.	Focus on intermediate cities (less than 250,000 inhabitants) and service economies.	A brand should be an intangible asset that drives economic development.	Expansion into larger territories and diverse economies.	Territorial Reputation
Almeida & Almeida (2023)	Understanding how territorial branding has been used in the competitiveness of tourist destinations.	Systematic literature review (SLR) with an exploratory-descriptive approach using Scopus.	Territorial branding and destination image are independent constructs that become interdependent.	Using only one scientific data platform (Scopus).	A territorial brand goes beyond a logo, assuming a multidisciplinary strategic position.	Aanalysis of territorial branding in the construction of a social and economic destination image.	of Competitiveness

Source: Authors

It is evident that the corpus analyzed is constrained in scope, which suggests the possibility that it was not feasible to develop it in a fully exhaustive manner. Upon the subsequent regrouping of the study's findings, five thematic groups were identified:

1) **Immersive Technologies** — This emerging technology has the potential to contribute to the creation of more competitive territorial brands within the immersive virtual

environment (Almeida, 2023). In this instance, the territorial brand also becomes virtual, interactive, experiential and immersive.

2) **Branding** – is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond a mere visual identity, serving as a sophisticated communication system that articulates identity, image, and strategic perception. Consequently, a variety of branding approaches can be identified in the context of territorial brand research, including rural branding (Moroz et al., 2020). In this paradigm, the territorial brand is conceptualized as an integral component within a rural development process, thereby playing a pivotal role in economic, political, and cultural initiatives, within the ambit of community self-organization. This issue has been explored by authors such as Butova et al. (2019), who have examined strategies for enhancing the market share of agricultural enterprises in both domestic and international markets. One type of branding identified in the research was geobranding (Nikitin et al., 2018), which involved an interconnection between the different territories existing in the Russian Federation to increase and develop their competitiveness. The concept of inter-territorial and territorial branding was identified within a line of inter-territorial collaboration between cities to increase competitiveness and the development and management of supply chains in different regions (Pasquinelli, 2013; Eidelman et al., 2019).
3) **Sustainability** – This category has emerged as a central and multidimensional pillar in the construction of the territorial brand, ceasing to be an accessory concept and becoming the basis for the competitiveness and resilience of territories. The following section will explore the types of sustainability in territorial brand research and some interesting findings, such as sustainable certifications (Sgroi & Modica, 2022). These findings address value creation through agri-food products and the territorial brand as an indicator to foster the resilience of territories. Another type mentioned addresses the valorization of resources within sustainability (Moura et al., 2022), in line with business development and territorial investments and their connection with the identity of the region. The authors (Escourido-Calvo et al., 2022) identify a type of socioeconomic sustainability, with the implementation of measures to reposition the territorial brand in Spain. The type of sustainability related to urban space mentioned by Ponomarev and Ivshin (2020) is defined by a territorial (re)branding of urban space through architectural and design solutions as a strategic development concept.
4) **Independent Clusters** – In this case, the territorial brand is regarded as an intangible and strategic asset that exceeds the scope of conventional marketing, serving as a central axis in governance, identity building, and power relations. A notable finding in the research on territorial brands is the prevalence of independent clusters, particularly those focused on knowledge transfer (Annese et al., 2021). This study highlights the establishment of a local initiative that revitalized a historic structure within a technology park, integrating educational and administrative functions in alignment with the advancement of the territorial brand. Another type of brand, as posited by Feijó-de-Almeida (2023), addresses power relations by establishing links between the territorial brand and the political agents

that govern the territory. Another type of independent cluster within the territorial brand that has been identified is territorial identity, as posited by the authors (Cristòfol et al., 2025), who mention innovation and competitiveness as a strategy for developing the territorial brand and its identity. The authors (Poço & Casais, 2019; Paredes Castellanos et al., 2024) have reinforced the link between the territorial brand, its perceived identity, and attachment to a particular place, which is referred to as emotional branding. Conversely, they underscore the significance of the brand as a distinctive territorial emblem that conveys a positive image to the surrounding environment. The combination of these factors identifies a type of cluster in territorial branding, which is referred to as "territorial branding."

5) **Competitiveness of Destinations** – The narrative of destinations plays a pivotal role in unveiling a paradigm shift in the management of tourist territories, marked by an evolution from a product-centered vision to a multidisciplinary strategy. The concept of competitiveness of the destination is identified as a distinct theme within the territorial brand, due to the interrelation between the brand and the destination image, which, at a certain stage, become dependent on each other, according to the authors of the study (Almeida & Almeida, 2023).

Consequently, despite the heterogeneity of the identified approaches, it is evident that the *corpus* remains constrained, signifying that research on territorial branding and competitiveness is still evolving and necessitates further theoretical and empirical investigation.

1. Conclusion

The objective of this study was achieved, allowing trends in territorial branding and competitiveness in the tourism sector to be mapped. RSL elucidated the conceptual developments addressed in scientific publications on tourism. Consequently, this study was an opportunity to complement the work of Almeida and Almeida (2023) regarding the role of competitiveness in territorial branding.

The results of the study were grouped into five primary categories: immersive technologies, branding, sustainability, independent clusters, and destination competitiveness. These groups underscore the mounting theoretical and practical intricacy of territorial branding, exemplifying the presence of strategic mechanisms that promote competitiveness, sustainability, and territorial differentiation.

A limitation of the study was the small number of studies analyzed and the use of a single Scopus database.

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Analysis of the Intellectual Structure of Tourism Policy and Planning Literature: Co-Word Analysis

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to outline the development of literature related to tourism policy and planning by revealing its intellectual evolution through a co-word analysis. Instead of aiming to be exhaustive, the objective is to discern the patterns and themes that facilitate an understanding of the state of the existing literature. This will facilitate the identification of trends, gaps, and potential bridges between the emerging themes.

Study design/methodology/approach: Bibliometric data were obtained from the WoS database. The Boolean operators was used to create a dataset encompassing different uses of tourism policy and planning. Subsequently, VosViewer was utilized for the co-word analysis of the bibliometric data.

Results: Based on the findings, a literature framework has emerged in tourism policy and planning studies, shaped by the principles of conservation, sustainability, development and monitoring of results, competitiveness, and planning.

Originality/value: There are studies in the literature that examine the literature related to tourism policy and planning using various bibliometric data. However, these studies have been conducted through co-word analysis for a single journal or concept. The present study is distinguished by its objective to provide a comprehensive overview of the intellectual development of literature.

Keywords: Tourism policy, tourism planning, intellectual structure, co-word analysis, bibliometric analysis.

Introduction

When examining the literature related to tourism policy and planning, some studies indicate that the literature framework points to a thematic development (Airey, 2015; Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Guo et al., 2019; Hall, 2011a; McLeod et al., 2018). There are various bibliometric studies aimed at investigating these thematic development patterns from different perspectives. These studies focus on topics such as the most cited researchers and studies related to tourism policy and planning, the most influential journals, and the countries where the most research is conducted (Airey, 2015; Ambrosie, 2010; Bashir et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2019; Kifworo & Dube, 2024; Prakoso et al., 2023). However, these bibliometric studies focusing on citation metrics or co-authorship networks do not offer insights into thematic development (Monroy-Rodríguez et al., 2025). Co-word analysis (CWA hereafter) can be used to examine the development of academic consensus in the literature and to investigate the structural changes that have occurred in the development of the concept of tourism policy and planning (Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin, 2012). In particular, the dynamism inherent in the tourism policy literature (Ritchie & Crouch,

2003), the continuous expansion of the knowledge base (Kifworo & Dube, 2024), the complex and interactive elements in the policy-making process (McLeod et al., 2018), the broad scope of tourism policy research, and its interaction with other policies (Guo et al., 2019) are interesting in terms of intellectual development. Understanding these diverse complex influences and the power relations that shape the social construction of knowledge, and the ways in which the resulting body of knowledge gains meaning, necessitates research into intellectual structures (Dredge & Jamal, 2015: 287). This provides insights into the historical development of tourism policy and planning. Although empirical and academic researchers are interested in tourism policy studies, the intellectual framework on tourism policy remains limited (Prakoso et al., 2023: 57). While there are studies that present research on the intellectual framework surrounding tourism policy, these studies have focused their analyses on a single journal (Bashir et al., 2022; Kifworo & Dube, 2024; Schweiggart, 2024). There are also other studies that work only with a limited CWA of tourism policy. By the CWA, Airey (2015) focused only on models related to tourism policy, Kumar et al. (2025) on tourism policy trends, and Shao et al. (2021) on the impact of Covid-19 on tourism policy.

The aim of this study is to outline the development of the literature related to tourism policy and planning by revealing its intellectual structure through CWA. Rather than being comprehensive, the goal is to identify some patterns and themes that can help understand where the literature has arrived, thus providing details about its conceptual development (Airey, 2015; Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Prakoso et al., 2023). This will reveal trends, gaps, and potential bridges between the emerging themes (Ambrosie, 2010).

Bibliometric data for the tourism policy and planning literature were obtained from the Web of Science (Wos hereafter) database. The Boolean operators (and, or, not) function of the Wos database search engine was utilized. In this study, co-occurring terms for tourism policy and planning were identified and they linked together using the “or” Boolean operator to perform the search. The search resulted in 3,073 studies published between 1982 and 2025. The open-source program VosViewer was used for CWA of the bibliometric data associated with these studies. This program was chosen, because it facilitates the creation of bibliometric maps and the visualization of data sets (Jan van Eck and Waltman, 2010). The findings obtained are consistent with the findings of similar studies in the literature and have been interpreted based on the characteristics of the tourism policy and planning literature and the clusters obtained. The study concludes with limitations and suggestions for future research.

Methodology

In this study, CWA was performed in relation to the research question, and software was used for this purpose. This is because CWA can be used to reveal conceptual development in a specific scientific field (Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012). Unlike co-citation analysis and co-author analysis, this analysis enables a dynamic visualization of conceptual evolution and is suitable for studies focusing on thematic development in the relevant field (Monroy-Rodríguez et al., 2025: 3). Therefore, CWA was conducted to identify the themes characterizing the current studies on the implementation of tourism policy. CWA is one of three general approaches used in information

science to show the evolution of socio-cognitive structures from the files of studies included in the data set (Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012: 170). For this purpose, it is based on co-occurrence patterns of pairs of objects and focuses on words that appear together in the same work (Kifworo & Dube, 2024). The key point to note here is that CWA assumes that keywords related to the research topics will be selected and that sufficiently good keywords will be chosen to link them together (Schweiggart, 2024). CWA is a content analysis method that determines the frequency with which concepts appear together using keywords, titles, and abstracts, and then provides information about the strategic aspects of themes by revealing qualitative (themes) and quantitative information (the weight of themes) (Courtial et al., 1993: 241; Shao et al., 2021: 900). Thus, it determines the relationship between concepts by using co-occurrence patterns (i.e., patterns of co-occurrence and non-co-occurrence) of object pairs (e.g., words, names) within the studies in a database (Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012).

Conducting bibliometric research on tourism policy depends on the completion of several steps. To create concurrency networks by importing bibliographic data from any database, a series of interconnected routines must be defined (Bashir et al., 2022). Explaining why these routines are performed is related to the reliability of the study results. Therefore, a systematic investigation should be conducted to ensure the reliability of the study results (Shao et al., 2021), and a four-stage process can be followed for this (Guo et al., 2019): defining the research question and selecting the appropriate analysis method, determining the criteria of the data set, extracting the relevant data, and performing the analysis and interpreting the findings (Guo et al., 2019).

A workflow was followed to explain the routines within which the results were handled to ensure the reliability of the study results. For this purpose, a five-step workflow designed to systematically perform a bibliometric analysis proposed by Zupic and Čarter (2015: 433) was used. This workflow can be used to create a framework for filtering data and acquiring findings (Zupic & Čarter, 2015). The workflow includes five stages: research design; compilation of bibliometric data; analysis; visualization; and interpretation of findings (Zupic & Čarter, 2015: 433).

In the first stage, a research question was formulated through a critical review of the literature. In the second stage, a bibliometric search was conducted using the Wos detailed analysis engine with predetermined keywords, and a dataset was obtained. For the third and fourth stages, analysis and data visualization were performed using VosViewer software. VosViewer is a software tool that facilitates the creation of bibliometric maps and the visualization of datasets (Jan van Eck & Waltman, 2010). It visualizes and creates bibliometric networks of various journals, authors and researchers (Kumar et al., 2025: 142). Data were visualized with network visualization, overlay visualization and density visualization In the final stage, the findings were interpreted based on similar studies in the literature, the characteristics of tourism policy and planning literature, and the obtained clusters.

To create the dataset, a search can be performed by linking the synonyms of a concept in an index database using Boolean operators (and, or, not) (Schweiggart, 2024). The Boolean operators (and, or, not) function of the Wos database search engine was utilized. In this study, synonyms for tourism policy and planning were identified and linked together using the OR Boolean operator to

perform the search. Wos data search tool allows for this. A search was performed using the Wos search engine with the OR Boolean operator and the keywords “tourism policy*” OR “tourism planning*” OR “tourism policy and planning*” OR “policy of tourism*” OR “policy in tourism*” OR “tourism politic*” OR “tourism planning and policy*”. The asterisk and parentheses have been added to cover different implementations of the concepts. The search was performed using the topic option with the keywords used. Considering the multidisciplinary nature of the concept of tourism policy, no filtering options were used for field or type of work. Only studies published in 2026 were included. In the end, a total of 3073 studies were accessed.

In CWA, it is recommended that all keywords (author and index) be utilised as a foundation, provided that a keyword appears a minimum of three times (Kifworo & Dube, 2024). In order to focus on the primary themes and clusters that were emerging from the findings, the minimum number of keyword occurrences was set at 10 and a limit above this minimum was utilized. This is due to the existence of various concepts related to tourism policy in each country and region, which has resulted in increased complexity and the difficulty of analyzing the relationships between the main clusters. Therefore, the process of simplification was executed by selecting the keywords that exhibited the highest total connection power. Furthermore, the minimum number of uses of the keyword was filtered to 10. Consequently, the analysis revealed that 120 of the 7,330 keywords met the threshold and were grouped into 9 clusters.

The analysis yielded network, overlay and density visualization images. Furthermore, clusters formed by keywords exceeding the minimum connection threshold were obtained. An attempt was made to reveal the development of tourism policy and planning-related literature by interpreting the findings formed by the connections between the concepts represented by these clusters and the keywords they contain. The overlay visualization technique was employed to analyze the evolution of literature over time, while the density visualization method was utilized to identify the predominant focus clusters within the literature.

Results

The findings indicate that the main clusters are tourism policy, tourism planning, tourism, sustainable tourism, sustainability, and sustainable development. Similar clusters formed by conducting a common keyword analysis related to tourism policy have been identified as sustainable tourism policies, tourism policy and planning, Covid-19, tourism policy, and tourism (Bashir et al., 2022; Kifworo & Dube, 2024; Kumar et al., 2025; Prakoso et al., 2023). Furthermore, the density visualization (see image-3) generated by the VosViewer analysis shows a high concentration of tourism and tourism planning, which aligns with the findings of other bibliometric studies in the literature. Additionally, it appears that the concepts shaping the clusters form sub-concentration regions.

Instead of a chronological evaluation of the literature through the overlay visualization, an evaluation has been made through historical breaks. This is because a linear progression in terms of historical periods has not been observed, and there are studies indicating that there is no linear progression in the literature related to tourism policy and planning (Airey, 2015; Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Guo et al., 2019; Hall, 2011a; McLeod et al., 2018). The factors that make it difficult to

follow a historical chronology stem from the complexity inherent in tourism policy (Dredge & Jamal, 2015).

Looking at the overlay visualization (see image-2), it can be seen that the concepts that currently form the backbone of the literature continue to be addressed in studies conducted after 2010. It can be noted that the tendency to address fundamental concepts such as government, planning, participation, heritage, collaboration, and stakeholders individually has decreased over the last 10-year period. It can be said that these concepts are evaluated through the concepts of spatial planning, conservation, and governance. Furthermore, a break is observed during the COVID-19 period and the concepts that stand out are adaptation, transformation, sustainable development goals, big data, resilience, SWOT, community, and tourism management. Kifworo and Dube (2024) found a fluctuating trend in the number of publications and citations over the last decade and observed a marked increase in the number of studies since 2021 (Kifworo & Dube, 2024). They noted that this increase indicates that sustainability is popular, particularly from an economic perspective. This study, however, found that the focus is on transformation. Therefore, while the common thread is a Covid-19-based break after 2020, the differing point is what sustainability is being addressed in relation to.

After a general overview of the findings, we moved on to the network visualization (see image-1) obtained from CWA in VosWiever. The analysis resulted in a total of 120 items in 9 clusters. From there, we began to interpret the connections and interactions formed by the concepts covered in each cluster.

1.cluster 22 items (sustainable tourism): sustainable tourism, sustainable development, local community, overtourism, regional development, seasonality, responsible tourism, tourism impact, carrying capacity, destination image, ecotourism, social tourism, public policy, spatial analysis, entrepreneurship, content analysis, turkey, cyprus, gis, argentina, australia, South africa.

An examination of the first cluster, which contains the highest number of concepts, reveals a pronounced emphasis on sustainability. It can be posited that tourism policy and planning are inextricably linked to the conservation aspect. It can be posited that endeavors are underway to ensure the sustainability of the tourism sector's impacts through the implementation of policy measures centered on sustainable tourism. The literature indicates that the convergence of tourism policy with sustainable tourism principles supports the existence of this cluster. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge the prevailing consensus in the extant literature that sustainable tourism endeavors to achieve a harmonized and balanced development of tourism activities (Guo et al., 2019).

2.cluster 21 items (tourism planning): tourism planning, tourism development, sustainable tourism development, tourism industry, tourism destination, destination management, destination planning, strategic planning, spatial planning, economic growth, environment, management, stakeholders, community participation, resident attitudes, quality of life, decision-making, cluster analysis, social network analysis, big data, croatia.

This cluster contains concepts related to planning. The large number of concepts in the planning cluster may stem from attempts to explain the connections between the development of tourism

planning and external factors (power, institutionalism, and social context, etc.) (Rahmafitria et al., 2020). It can be stated that the expected effects of tourism policy are detailed through planning. Indeed, it is planning that concretizes tourism policy for implementation. Furthermore, planning is also affected by the development of tourism, and the scope of planning has changed over time (Rahmafitria et al., 2020). Another salient point is that there is a situation that presents a planning approach that can focus on the possible positive and negative effects such as stakeholders and participation, community, environment, and quality of life in tourism planning. It is also noteworthy that this cluster includes types of analysis that can analyze the interactions between concepts in order to address tourism policy from multiple perspectives. In their study, where they performed CWA, Guo et al. (2019) stated that SWOT analysis, complex systems, structural equation models, grounded theory, and indexing systems are common methods for studies in the Web of Science index. It is evident that a number of these analyses are encompassed within the findings of this study. The observation that strategic planning, sustainable tourism development, and planning concepts are all in the same cluster may be indicative of their role as critical steps for sustainability (Edgell and Swanson, 2019).

3.cluster 18 items (sustainable): sustainable, climate change, sustainable development goals, tourism impact, covid-19, crisis management, adaptation, resilience, transformation, neoliberalism, economic development, coastal tourism, nature-based tourism, swot analysis, brazil, indonesia, malaysia, thailand.

The third cluster focuses on environmentally oriented sustainability. This does not imply an exclusive emphasis on environmental impacts, as it encompasses concepts such as crisis management, adaptation, resilience, and transformation, which are recognized as essential for sustainability in the face of sudden environmental changes (for example, those precipitated by the emergence of the novel Coronavirus). It is evident from the findings of other studies that the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on the field of tourism policy studies (Kifworo & Dube, 2024; Kumar et al., 2025). In the sustainability cluster, alongside climate change and nature-related concepts, Covid-19 and related concepts such as resilience, crisis management, adaptation, and transformation are increasingly seen as interconnected. This shift may stem from the fact that sustainability is defined with area-specific goals, and these goals can be interpreted as being adaptable to the institutionalized structure of tourism policy (Loehr and Becken, 2015). Within these concepts, the main emphasis may be on resilience, as the other concepts encompass the processes intended to be prepared through resilience. Furthermore, a key point to consider regarding resilience is that tourism policy should encourage flexibility to ensure resilience (Edgell and Swanson, 2019). Another point worth mentioning here is the concepts of neoliberalism and governance. Neoliberalism has a perspective that necessitates reducing direct state intervention, and it is quite natural to consider it together with governance. Airey (2015) states that neoliberalism and governance stand out among the policy themes recently addressed by researchers. In the findings of this study, neoliberalism is included within one of the main clusters, while governance exists as a separate cluster.

4.cluster 15 items (governance): governance, policy, community, community-based tourism, collaboration, participation, perceptions, residents, stakeholder theory, sustainable tourism planning, tourism destinations, impacts, cultural heritage, heritage tourism, ireland.

When the concepts in cluster 4 are considered together, it suggests that the concept of governance is evaluated within a community-based approach. Furthermore, the inclusion of concepts related to cultural heritage suggests that studies in tourism policy and planning literature focus on local participation in governance. This differs from the findings of a 2011 study on governance by M. Hall, a leading researcher in tourism policy. Hall (2011a) notes that from the late 1990s to 2010, there was a strong focus on various elements of network governance in tourism planning and policy studies, but other dimensions of policy networks, such as policy communities and sub-governments, did not receive the same level of attention. However, this study's findings indicate a focus on local participation in governance. This may be due to a general acceleration and differentiation in the volume of studies on tourism policy and planning after 2014. Furthermore, tourism policy studies may have addressed different issues over time in terms of governance, both regarding stakeholder complexity and coordination (Airey, 2015).

5.cluster 14 items (tourism): tourism, rural tourism, rural development, cultural tourism, culture, community development, heritage, experience, authenticity, hospitality, landscape, case study, portugali iran.

The fifth cluster, which is exclusively a tourism cluster, incorporates concepts that prioritize the local and authentic dimensions of tourism. This is because the scope of the sector is defined through authenticity in order to provide guidance and fundamental support to tourism policy, acting as a compass. Furthermore, the focus on authenticity and locality is not repeated here, as it was already discussed in the previous cluster.

6.cluster 14 items (tourism policy): tourism policy, planning, development, china, competitiveness, stakeholder engagement, tourism governance, tourist destination, government, urban planning, policy making, developing countries, implementation, power.

The tourism policy cluster shows the components of the policy. Here, the international aspect is more prominent than the local aspect. This is due to tourism policy being influenced and shaped by global trends. These global trends often involve economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability issues and trigger the creation of more effective policies to address tourism's role in global economic and social development (Edgell & Swanson, 2019). Kumar et al. (2025) examined trends in tourism policy through bibliometric analysis of studies in the Dimension database and found that tourism policy research is rapidly increasing globally. Furthermore, Dredge and Jamal (2015) mention globalization as one of the important factors in understanding tourism policy formulation. Prakoso et al. (2023) found that one of the two main variables affecting the future course of tourism policy research is international tourism. Another reason for the strong impact of international tourism may be that the WTTC (The World Travel & Tourism Council) and UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), two leading global institutions, are important reference sources in formulating tourism policy (Edgell and Swanson, 2019:117,125).

Another notable difference in this cluster is China's strong connections and its significant presence in the overall findings. Various bibliometric studies on tourism policy have included countries such as China, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy in their findings. However, these are typically the countries with the most cited and influential journals, or those that are powerhouses in terms of tourism (Kifworo & Dube, 2024; Prakoso et al., 2023; Rahmafitria et al., 2020). Therefore, comparing the findings from this perspective was not considered a sound comparison. China's strong presence in the findings of this study is attributed to its status as the largest tourism market.

7.cluster 6 items (competitiveness): spain, urban tourism, tourism policies, destination competitiveness, tourism competitiveness, destination development.

In cluster 7, destination and competitiveness stand out. Prakoso et al. (2023) emphasized that competitiveness is among the frequently discussed topics in tourism policy. Furthermore, the fact that a destination's competitiveness is not accidental and needs to be supported by tourism policy (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003: 151) may have influenced the frequent discussion of this concept. Additionally, attempts to explain the foundations of competitiveness based on changes in a destination's competitive position over time may also explain the weight of the competitiveness concept (Costa, 2020). An interesting finding regarding this cluster is that Spain has a higher number of connections compared to other concepts in this cluster. Also, it is observed that different countries are included in other clusters. The presence of different countries has also been noted in the findings of other bibliometric studies on tourism policy and planning (Guo et al., 2019). The reason for the visibility of different countries in the clusters is that the nature of tourism can vary from country to country and this is related to development (Mathews, 1975). The prominence of country's names can also be evaluated in terms of context. This is because each country has a different context in terms of the success of its tourism policy (Hudson et al., 2019). In other words, the fact that the success of tourism policy can vary from country to country may require further research. Although there are many studies in the literature that offer a standard recipe for success in tourism policy using normative models, recent studies may increasingly utilize reflexive models that focus on the internal environment, i.e., individual countries (Dredge & Jamal, 2015).

8.cluster 6 items (tourism management): tourism management, tourism development/impact, tourism planning and policy, tourism marketing, tourism geography, history of tourism.

This cluster demonstrates the intersection of the concept of management with tourism policy and planning. Furthermore, the presence of concepts such as tourism geography, history of tourism, and tourism development suggests that tourism management is considered in relation to its spatial and temporal development. Additionally, studies focusing on tourism policy and planning attempt to provide detailed information by examining geographical, sociological, political, and economic changes (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Since tourism policy and planning identify the appropriate management techniques and tools necessary to meet emerging trends (Edgell & Swanson, 2019), the relationship between them is frequently investigated. In particular, the success of tourism policies may be evaluated in terms of the competitiveness of tourism SMEs, and the necessity for SMEs to possess appropriate management skills may be investigated.

9.cluster 4 items (protected areas): protected areas, local development, public policies, conservation.

The last cluster includes conservation and conservation-related concepts. The existence of conservation areas can be considered together with sustainability and authenticity clusters. Here, the focus is on preserving the local rather than the cities. However, what is noteworthy is the formation of a conservation-focused cluster, unlike the findings of similar bibliometric studies in the literature. It is known that one of the most important challenges in terms of tourism policy is to ensure sustainability by preserving the current state of destinations (Edgell & Swanson, 2019). It would be expected that these conservation-related concepts would be included in sustainable tourism or sustainability clusters. The fact that they form a separate cluster can be interpreted as the links between sustainability and tourism policy and planning being addressed frequently enough to form a separate conservation-focused sub-cluster. In the literature, expectations regarding tourism's positive contribution to conservation areas remain current (Loehr & Becken, 2025).

After interpreting the clusters, another point to be evaluated in terms of the study's findings is the expectations regarding bibliometric findings related to tourism policy. First, no findings related to the multidisciplinary nature of tourism policy were encountered. Another expectation is that studies related to two different concepts, tourism policy outputs and outcomes, would be included in the literature (Airey, 2015). While concepts such as tourism policy and evaluation related to outputs were included in the clusters, concepts such as employment and expenditure related to outcomes were not included in a significant volume. The third expectation is that the concept of government would come to the fore, depending on the importance of the role of governments in terms of tourism policy. This is because most studies related to tourism policy are at the country level and address the perspective of governments (Guo et al., 2019). This situation may indicate a shift in focus from government to governance in tourism policy, which can be explained by the modernization of tourism (Dredge et al., 2011).

Image-1: Network Visualization

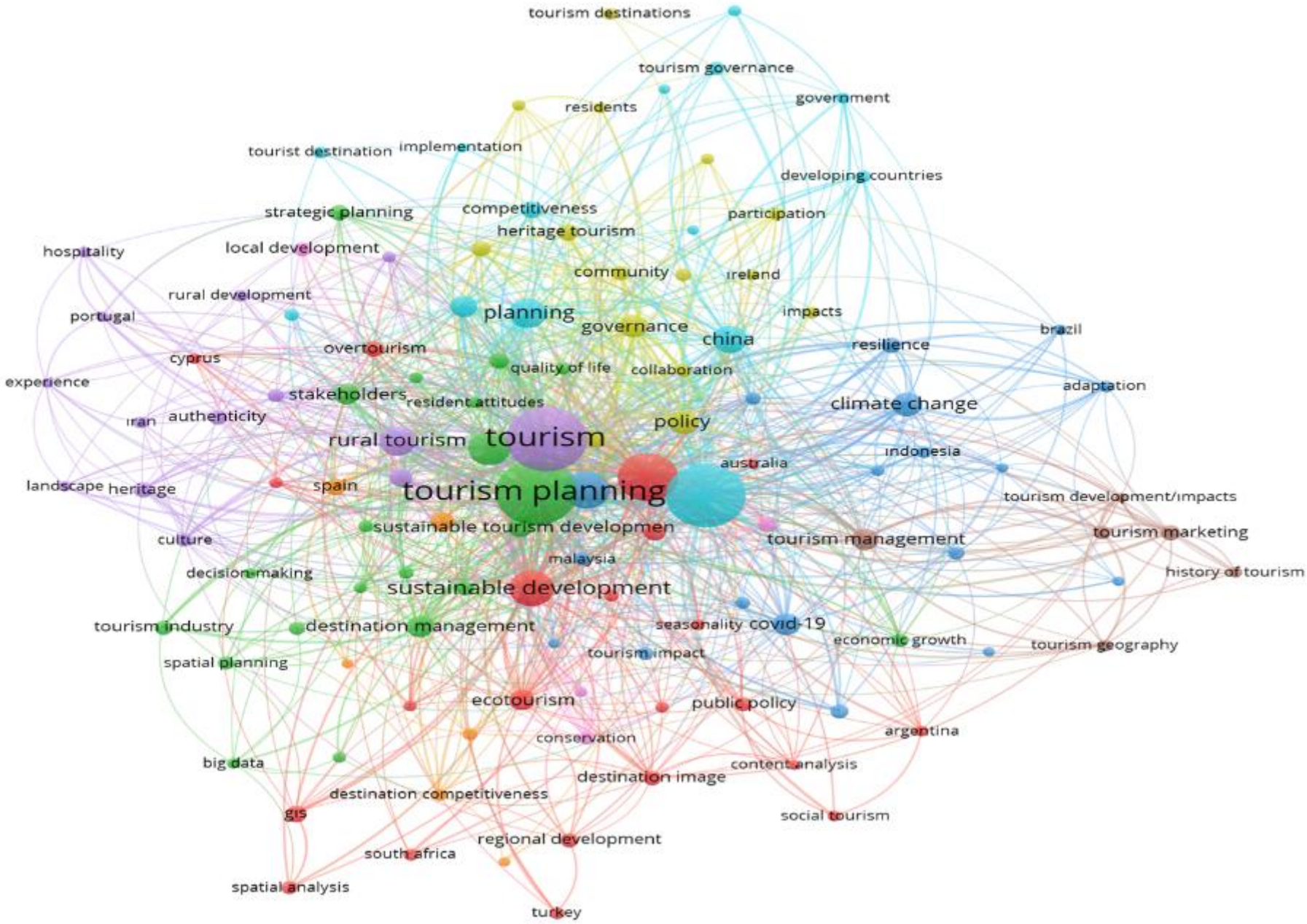


Image-2: Overlay Visualization

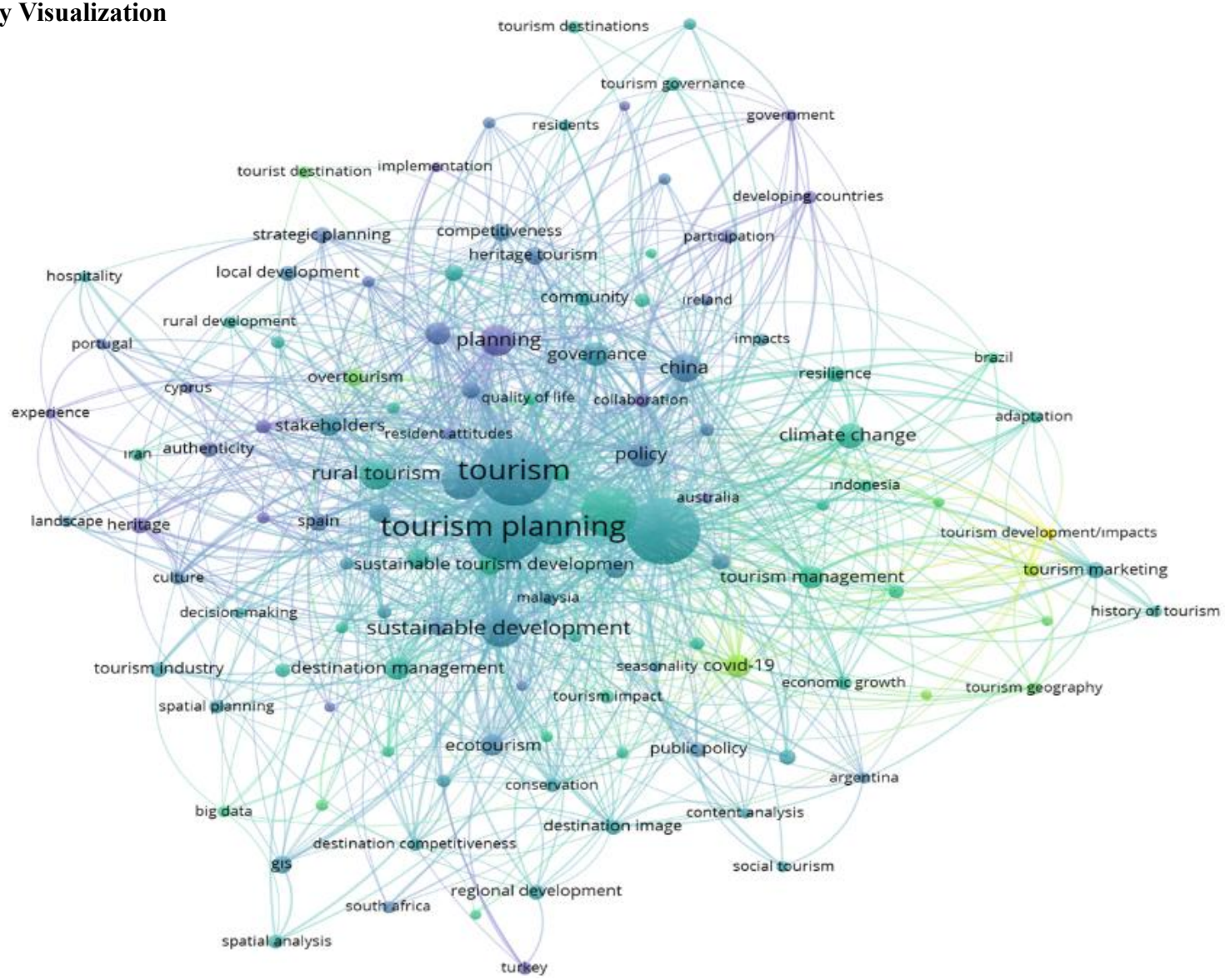
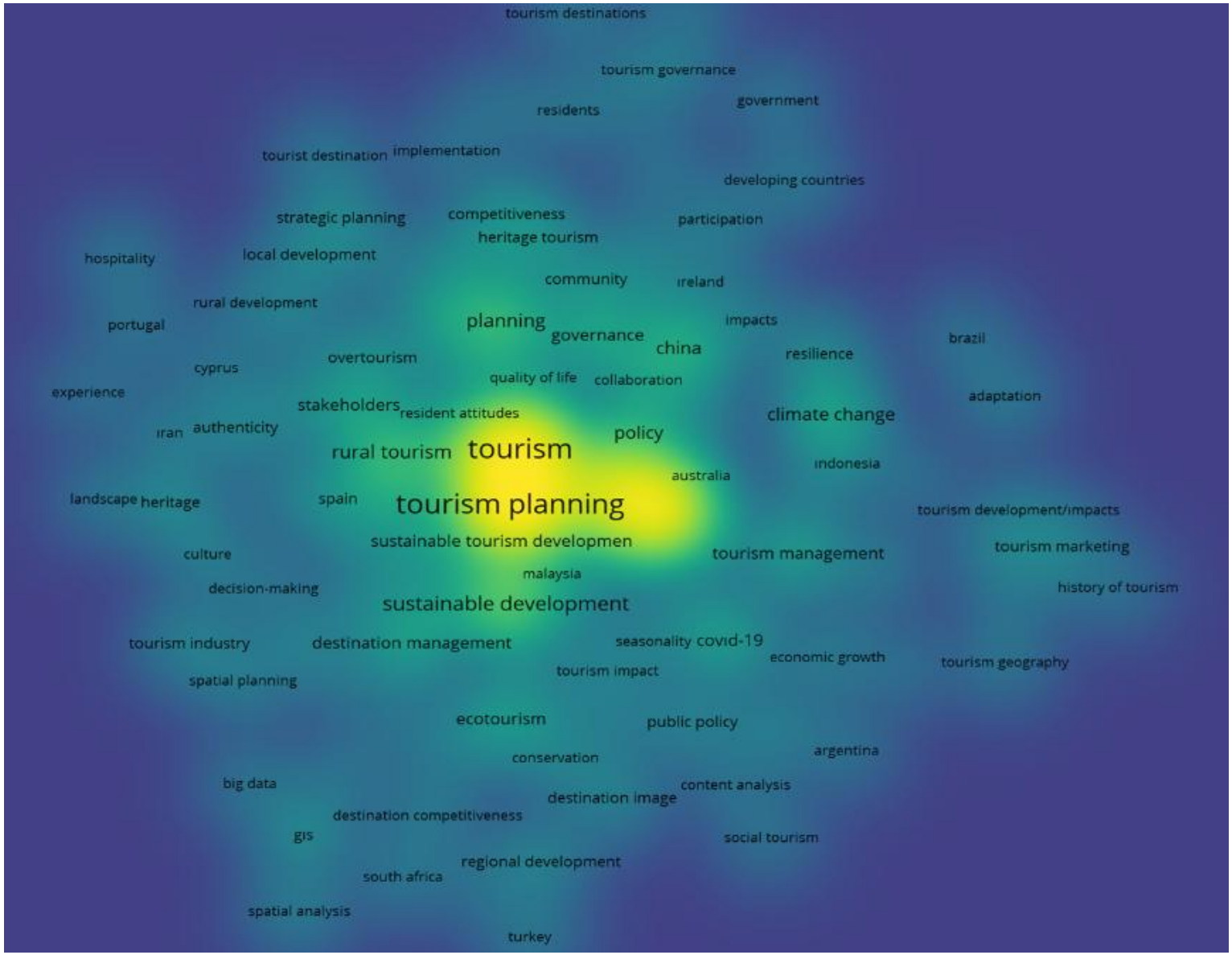


Image-3: Density Visualization



Conclusion

In the first studies on tourism policy, it was suggested that tourism policy should be approached as an examination of tourism's economic policy in order to guide concrete and abstract actions from a scientific perspective (Mathews, 1975; Sessa, 1976). Early research on tourism policy indicates that the progress targeted in the sector points to an economic-based analysis and a necessity independent of political objectives. This initial orientation forms the fundamental function of tourism policy. Therefore, tourism policy is seen as a necessary guide to achieve the desired goals in tourism (Edgell & Swanson, 2019). It can be argued that the development of tourism policy literature has been shaped by the separation of the function of guiding the progress of the tourism sector from political research and the establishment of an economic-based framework. The concepts that stand out in the study findings particularly point to this. Theories related to concepts such as neoliberalism, economic development, sustainability, corporate interests, etc., grouped under the heading of political modernization, have shaped macro perspectives on tourism and transformed the responsibilities and roles of public administration, which is considered responsible for tourism policy (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011).

The findings of the study reveal that sustainability and sustainable tourism constitute a key focus in tourism policy and planning efforts. While the sustainable tourism cluster encompasses concepts centered on the environment and community, the cluster associated with the concept of sustainability points to ideas aimed at ensuring the continuity of activities within the sector. This imperative related to sustainability has created common ground in tourism literature, with tourism policy and planning focusing on sustainability. Over time, tourism policy has converged with sustainability, and it can be stated that principles, impacts, and requirements related to sustainability continue to be the focus. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the number of connections related to Covid-19 is relatively prominent and that they are addressed in connection with sustainability. Another aspect related to Covid-19 is that concepts such as adaptation and resilience have also been seen to be linked to sustainability. Furthermore, the existence of clusters where local authenticity stands out suggests that tourism policy principles are not only supported by sustainability but also grounded in local culture.

The prominence of country names in the study findings and the fact that these countries are developing economies is to be expected. The reason for this is that tourism policy has an economic development dimension and that this economic contribution is a sector that supports rapid growth for developing economies. The presence of clusters related to competitiveness and management concepts indicates that tourism policy is linked to the business field from a macro perspective aimed at developing the sector. In addition to these, other issues highlighted in the literature are as follows:

The following attempt is made to explain the success of tourism policy through conceptual diversity.

- A comparison of the differences between countries.

- The following essay will explore the multidimensional nature of the tourism policy formulation and implementation process.
- The objective of this study is to provide an explanation for both the cases of tourism policy that have been met with success, as well as those that have not.
- From the outset of preliminary research, the preservation of the dynamic aspect of tourism policy was of paramount importance, as was the shift in focus towards dynamism.

Tourism policy and planning efforts can be expected to be based on increasing the sector's or destination's resilience to environmental changes, such as sustainability and flexibility, rather than standard prescriptions. There are two foundations for this expectation. First, the establishment of standard tourism policies based on sustainability may lead researchers to investigate contextual differences related to tourism policy. Second, the emphasis on dynamism in tourism policy is now related to flexibility and the dynamic nature of the sector's competitive environment. In this context, it is possible to begin discussing what the principles of tourism policy for a VUCA environment might be. Another prediction for the future is that tourism policy may need a talent pool to realize its potential in a competitive environment. This talent pool could consist of institutions, individuals, destinations, and businesses. The importance of this talent pool in terms of tourism policy is highlighted in the findings of this study, which emphasize the need to approach concepts such as learning, competitiveness, governance, cooperation, strategic planning, etc. in a talent-based manner.

In conclusion, when all the clusters included in the study findings are considered together, the framework of the tourism policy and planning literature can be outlined. In terms of the findings of this study, tourism policy and planning studies outline a literature framework shaped by conservation, sustainability, development and monitoring of results, competitiveness, and planning principles.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research. CWA can be performed on other indices related to tourism policy and planning using their databases. Secondly, research can be conducted to investigate why the expectations mentioned in the evaluation of the findings did not materialize. Thirdly, the topic of learning from tourism policy can be addressed. The increased likelihood of future failures in the tourism sector makes the concept of learning even more important. Therefore, examining the relationship between tourism policy and the concept of learning can fill an important gap. This is because how tourism policy deals with failure and wicked problems affects the quality and success of the policy. These two concepts are learning areas for tourism policy. This type of learning has the potential to increase the chances of success for future tourism policies. This potential can be explored. To this end, learning efforts related to tourism policy can be approached through concepts such as agility, flexibility, and resilience. This is because these concepts, when considered alongside the characteristics expected of tourism policy, have been included in the findings of the study. Another topic of study could be political learning in particular (see Hall, 2011b; Hudson et al., 2019). Finally, a suggestion related to sustainability can be mentioned. It can be suggested to investigate

whether there are paradigm shifts related to tourism policy and sustainability or possible changes. Tourism policies defined by terms such as integrated, hybrid, and agile could be examined.

It should be noted that this study has several limitations. These limitations stem from the subject matter, type of analysis, and data set. First, studies related to tourism policy may be predominantly books or book chapters. The data set for this study consists of bibliometric data on articles obtained through an index. Therefore, not all studies related to tourism policy and planning are covered. Thus, a scope limitation can be mentioned for this study. Second, although the studies on tourism policy covered are those specifically designed to directly affect tourism, there are warnings that they may not be the only factor affecting the success of the tourism sector (Airey, 2015). Therefore, no generalization has been made regarding the success of tourism policy. Thirdly, the tourism policy and planning literature is generally shaped by studies written in English. In addition to the limitations imposed by the fact that the tourism policy literature is shaped by studies in English (Airey, 2015; Dredge et al., 2011), tourism policy shaped around neoliberalism, which is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon world, can also create limitations (Rahmafitria et al., 2020).

Note: Artificial intelligence-assisted translation tools were used to prevent spelling errors and inverted sentences in the English version of this study.

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Burdur and Sports Tourism in the Media: A Study via the Google News Tab

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine how sports tourism activities in Burdur are represented in digital media and to determine how these representations contribute to the construction of the destination image. Specifically, the research focuses on online news content published under the Google News tab to explore the role of media discourse in shaping perceptions of an emerging sports tourism destination.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis. Data were collected from online news articles related to Burdur and sports tourism published under the Google News tab. Through purposeful sampling, 51 relevant news items were selected from an initial pool of 150 items. The data were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive analysis techniques. A total of 73 codes were generated and grouped into seven main themes: Concept, Structures, Branch, Organization, Region, Roles, and Supportive Elements. Intercoder reliability was ensured through independent coding and consensus-building between the researchers.

Findings (Results): The findings reveal that Burdur is predominantly represented positively in digital media as a sports tourism destination. The most frequently emphasized themes are Concept and Structures, highlighting the strategic importance of sports tourism and the role of infrastructure. The diversity of sports branches and the presence of national and international organizations further reinforce Burdur's image as a dynamic and multifunctional sports tourism destination. However, supportive elements such as wellness and recovery services receive limited attention in media representations. Overall, media discourse contributes significantly to constructing a favorable, infrastructure-oriented, and diversified destination image for Burdur.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the sports tourism and destination image literature by addressing a notable gap regarding media representations of emerging sports tourism destinations. Unlike previous research focusing on resource-based potential, this study highlights the role of digital media in shaping destination image through discourse analysis. The findings provide both theoretical insights into media-driven destination image formation and practical implications for managing media strategies in sports tourism development.

Keywords Burdur, Google News, Sport, Sport Tourism

Introduction

Sport has been defined in the literature through a variety of perspectives that emphasize its physical, social, and cultural dimensions. Common definitions frame sport as a set of voluntary activities undertaken to maintain health, experience enjoyment, and utilize leisure time (Akın, 2018). From a more structured perspective, sport is also conceptualized as a disciplined field through which individuals' determination, competitiveness, and desire to succeed are expressed in a regulated and fair manner (Erdem & Girgin, 2008). Koludar further defines sport as a biological, pedagogical, and social activity that aims to develop physical movement, motor skills, and mental, emotional, and social behaviors within a framework governed by specific rules (Şebin, 2018). Accordingly, sport can be understood as a rule-based, interactive, and culturally embedded phenomenon that contributes to physical and psychological well-being while supporting socialization processes (Başoğlu, 2017; Akın, 2018).

Historically, sport has functioned as a significant driver of human mobility. Across different historical periods -including Ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance- individuals traveled to participate in or observe sporting activities organized in stadiums, elite competitions, and professional events (Göker, 2024). As a result, sport has long served as a motivating force behind travel and has been recognized as one of the fundamental drivers of tourism movements (Hazar, 2007). Over time, sporting activities diversified in line with social, technological, and institutional developments, leading to the transformation of ancient sporting traditions into modern international events such as the Olympic Games and the Winter Olympics (Kara, 2020). In contemporary societies, advances in technology, education, and economic conditions have increased both the amount of leisure time available to individuals and their willingness to engage in sporting activities. These developments have further strengthened the relationship between sport and tourism, as individuals increasingly travel not only for relaxation and leisure purposes but also to participate in or observe sports events (Zauhar, 2004; Belber & Kül Avan, 2019). Today, sports tourism has become accessible to wider segments of society, supported by rising income levels, paid leave opportunities, and significant improvements in transportation and communication technologies. Consequently, the number of destinations hosting sports events and facilities has increased, and sport has emerged as an important strategic instrument for tourism development.

Within this broader context, Burdur has recently gained prominence as an emerging destination in sports tourism. The region's growing visibility is closely linked to investments in sports infrastructure and the organization of various national and international sports events. These developments have also been reflected in the media, where sports tourism activities in Burdur have received increasing coverage across digital news platforms. Media representations play a critical role in shaping public perceptions of destinations, particularly in relation to their tourism identity and attractiveness. Accordingly, the question of how sports tourism activities in Burdur are represented in the media, and how these representations contribute to the construction of a destination image, has become increasingly relevant. This study aims to examine how sports

tourism activities in Burdur are portrayed in written digital media and to analyze the ways in which these portrayals contribute to Burdur's destination image within the context of sports tourism. To achieve this aim, the study focuses on online news content related to Burdur and sports tourism published on platforms listed under the Google News tab. By systematically analyzing media representations, the study seeks to contribute to the literature on sports tourism and destination image by providing insights into the relationship between sports tourism development and media discourse.

The Concept of Sports Tourism

Sports tourism is widely recognized as a multidimensional field in which tourist mobility is primarily motivated by sport-related experiences. As such, it occupies an intersection between tourism studies and the sports management literature (Gibson, 1998; Weed & Bull, 2009). One of the most frequently adopted approaches in conceptualizing sports tourism differentiates between active participation and passive participation. Active sports tourism refers to travel undertaken to personally participate in sporting activities or events, whereas passive sports tourism involves travel motivated by spectatorship, such as attending competitions, tournaments, or major sporting events (Gammon & Robinson, 2003). In addition to participation-based typologies, sports tourism also encompasses a nostalgic and symbolic dimension. Visits to sports museums, stadium tours, and iconic sporting venues constitute a distinct form of tourism consumption that contributes to the formation of sports identity and the production of collective memory (Weed & Bull, 2009; Higham & Hinch, 2010). These experiences highlight the cultural and experiential dimensions of sports tourism beyond physical participation or event attendance.

Sports tourism extends beyond individual leisure preferences and is closely associated with destination competitiveness, marketing strategies, and brand positioning. Sports events, particularly planned and recurring events, are frequently instrumentalized as tools for destination image creation and demand generation (Ritchie, 1984; Getz, 2008). From an event tourism perspective, such events represent a visible and strategic component of destination marketing plans and provide a theoretical framework for understanding sports tourism development (Getz, 2008). Beyond short-term economic impacts, sports events are capable of producing broader social and cultural outcomes. These include strengthening local networks, enhancing destination narratives, fostering community pride, and creating spaces for social interaction among residents and visitors. Accordingly, sports tourism is increasingly conceptualized as a multi-stakeholder governance domain in which public institutions, private enterprises, local communities, and media actors interact (Chalip, 2004; Weed & Bull, 2009).

At the same time, the impacts of sports tourism require careful evaluation. Large-scale and high-prestige events possessing "hallmark" characteristics can significantly enhance destination visibility, particularly when combined with media attention and public agenda-setting processes (Ritchie, 1984; Hall, 1989). However, such events may also generate social, cultural, environmental, and political costs, indicating that impact assessments should not be limited to one-dimensional economic indicators. In contrast, small- and medium-scale sports events often provide

more sustainable alternatives by generating regular visitor flows with lower costs and contributing to local capacity development (Gibson et al., 2012). Within this framework, sports tourism is best understood through a holistic perspective that integrates participation and spectatorship typologies, event tourism approaches, discussions of scale and sustainability, and dynamics of identity and image. Media representations constitute a central component of this framework, as they shape public visibility and influence how destinations associated with sports tourism are perceived. Consequently, analyzing media portrayals of sports tourism destinations is essential for understanding how destination images are constructed and communicated.

Sports Tourism in Burdur

In recent years, Burdur has emerged as one of the prominent destinations in sports tourism, largely due to its natural assets and growing investment in sports-related infrastructure. The region's lake systems, mountainous topography, and protected wetland areas provide a diverse ecological setting that supports a wide range of nature-based sports activities. This environmental diversity enables the integration of both high-intensity sports, such as endurance and water sports, and low-intensity recreational practices, including hiking and birdwatching, into a comprehensive sports tourism ecosystem (Arslan, 2019; Burdur Governorship, 2025).

Within this context, sports tourism in Burdur combines destination attractiveness across several experiential axes. These include active participation in sports within natural environments, competition and event-based experiences, and recreation-oriented performances centered on nature observation. Such a multidimensional structure allows Burdur to appeal to different visitor segments, ranging from professional athletes and amateur sports participants to recreational tourists seeking nature-oriented experiences (Doğa Derneği, 2015). One of the core local areas of sports tourism in Burdur is Burdur Lake and its surrounding landscape. As a closed-basin lake, Burdur Lake functions as a significant recreational area and supports a variety of water-based sports activities, including canoeing, rowing, sailing, windsurfing, and boat tours. These activities contribute to the conceptual framing of lake-oriented water sports tourism in the region while simultaneously diversifying visitor experiences (GoTürkiye, 2026). In addition to its sporting functions, Burdur Lake also provides an important habitat for birdwatching, allowing sports tourism and nature-based recreation to coexist within the same spatial setting (Turkish Museums, 2024). Beyond lake-centered activities, Burdur's sports tourism product mix expands through nature-based routes that support outdoor sports such as hiking, running, and cycling. Academic studies focusing on alternative tourism routes in the region emphasize that Burdur's natural attractions can be structured through route planning and spatial network approaches. This perspective enables outdoor sports activities to be productized through trail and route-based designs, positioning sports tourism not as a single-event phenomenon but as a set of experiences distributed across different seasons and adaptable to diverse user profiles (Arslan, 2019). Such an approach also necessitates that sports tourism planning in Burdur be conducted in alignment with principles of carrying capacity, environmental sensitivity, and the balance between conservation and use.

Salda Lake represents another key spatial component of sports tourism in Burdur, particularly in terms of event-based and endurance sports. Owing to its high visual appeal and distinctive landscape, Salda Lake has become a setting where athlete motivation is shaped not only by competition but also by the subjective experience of performing within a natural environment. This experiential dimension reinforces the role of sports tourism as an experience-oriented tourism form rather than a purely competitive activity (Turkish Museums, 2024; GoTürkiye, 2026). Within this framework, the Salda Lake Triathlon has gained prominence as a signature sports tourism event. Organized at the Salda Lake Public Beach, the event is planned in both "Sprint" and "Olympic" distances and directly associates the destination with endurance sports through its swimming, cycling, and running components (Salda Lake Triathlon, 2025). While natural resources constitute a fundamental pillar of sports tourism in Burdur, the development of infrastructure and superstructure facilities plays an equally critical role. It is widely acknowledged that sustainable tourism development requires targeted investments in physical infrastructure, accommodation capacity, and institutional coordination. In Burdur, such investments have increasingly gained momentum, particularly through collaborations between universities, public institutions, and regional development agencies.

A significant milestone in this process was the Lakes District Sports Tourism Workshop held on 20-21 January 2021 in Burdur, organized through the collaboration of Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University (MAKU), Süleyman Demirel University (SDU), and the Western Mediterranean Development Agency (BAKA). During the workshop, an inventory of sports areas in the region was compiled, existing sports facilities were evaluated, and a SWOT analysis was conducted to assess the region's sports tourism potential. Based on these evaluations, a strategic action plan aimed at enhancing sports tourism development in the Lakes District was formulated (Western Mediterranean Development Agency, 2021). Within this strategic framework, MAKU has assumed a central role in advancing sports tourism in Burdur. The university has invested substantially in sports infrastructure, equipping its main campus with facilities capable of hosting training activities and competitive events across multiple sports disciplines. These facilities include an 8,115 m² outdoor athletics track with eight lanes and a tartan surface, indoor sports halls serving different branches, and specialized spaces within the Sports Sciences and Athlete Training Application and Research Center. Additional infrastructure includes two semi-olympic swimming pools, a natural grass stadium with a seating capacity of 14,500 that meets national and international standards, and training fields with both natural and synthetic turf (MAKU, 2026). This infrastructure enables the university to host educational, training, and competitive activities at both national and international levels.

Complementing the university's sports facilities, Lavanta Tepesi Hotel operates within the main campus under a sports tourism concept. The hotel provides athlete-oriented accommodation through 116 rooms designed to meet the needs of sports teams and delegations. Its integrated sports and wellness infrastructure includes semi-olympic swimming pools, a Turkish bath, sauna, steam and massage areas, a fitness center, squash courts, and aerobic and dance studios. Together, these

facilities support physical recovery, mental well-being, and performance optimization through a holistic approach to sports tourism (Lavanta Tepesi Hotel, 2026). In addition to accommodation services, the Athlete Training and Camp Center further enhance Burdur's capacity to host sports tourism activities. Covering approximately 18,000 m² of outdoor sports areas, the center includes three FIFA-standard natural grass training fields and a floodlit natural grass stadium measuring 68×105 meters, suitable for national and international competitions. Advanced measurement systems and recovery facilities allow for the monitoring of athletes' physical profiles and aim to reduce injury risks during training and competition processes. Through this combined infrastructure, both MAKU and Lavanta Tepesi Hotel host a wide range of national and international sports competitions as well as training camps for professional and amateur teams. Data obtained from a face-to-face interview conducted on 19 January 2026 with the Sales and Marketing Manager of Lavanta Tepesi Hotel indicate that, in 2025, a total of 35 sports events were organized, involving approximately 2,500 athletes across 16 sports disciplines. These events included participation from 1,675 athletes representing 60 universities and encompassed disciplines such as table tennis, swimming, football, basketball, volleyball, and arm wrestling. Among these events, the 13th European Universities Table Tennis Championship—organized by the European University Sports Association (EUSA) in coordination with the Turkish University Sports Federation (TUSF)—had a particularly significant impact, hosting 120 athletes from 13 different countries. In addition, the Kickboxing Tournament held at the beginning of 2026 attracted approximately 800 participants, including athletes, referees, and officials from 91 universities. Beyond competitive events, the facilities also host training camps for various sports branches, some of which are closed to the public, while others are open to spectators, thereby contributing to day-trip tourism. Publicly available occupancy data indicate that Lavanta Tepesi Hotel operates at full capacity during the June-September period and maintains an average occupancy rate of approximately 60% during the remainder of the year. Key factors influencing professional sports teams' preference for Burdur as a training destination include favorable climatic conditions, the hotel's moderate altitude of 1,150 meters, the adequacy of sports fields, and the availability of indoor sports halls (Cüce, 2026). Collectively, these factors suggest that hosting sports events and training camps has enhanced both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of sports tourism in Burdur, contributing to increased tourist arrivals, overnight stays, and tourism-related expenditures.

Relevant Literature

The existing literature includes a limited but growing body of research examining the sports tourism potential of Burdur. These studies primarily approach the subject from a nature-based sports tourism perspective and emphasize the region's natural resources, infrastructure capacity, and strategic location. One of the earliest comprehensive evaluations was conducted by Gök and Erdoğan (2022), who assessed Burdur's sports tourism potential and identified trekking, cycling, and water sports as the most suitable activities for the region. The authors highlighted Burdur's geographical proximity to well-developed tourism destinations such as Antalya and Muğla as a

strategic advantage, particularly in terms of accessibility and regional tourism networks. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of identifying sports areas and routes, improving accommodation infrastructure, and strengthening cooperation among stakeholders to ensure the sustainable development of sports tourism activities. A notable contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on environmentally sensitive planning, particularly for fragile natural areas such as Salda Lake. By foregrounding carrying capacity considerations and environmental protection principles, Gök and Erdoğan (2022) underscored the necessity of integrating sustainability concerns into sports tourism planning. Their findings also pointed to the need for coordinated governance structures involving local administrations, tourism enterprises, and educational institutions.

Another significant study by Önder and Akay (2022) evaluated Burdur's sports tourism potential from the perspective of stakeholder perceptions. Their findings demonstrated that the region's natural resources, climatic conditions, and geographical location offer substantial advantages for sports tourism development. The authors emphasized that lakes, mountainous areas, and open landscapes in Burdur support a wide range of nature-based sports tourism activities, including trekking, cycling, water sports, and paragliding. Beyond natural assets, Önder and Akay (2022) highlighted the role of sports facilities established in Burdur and the infrastructure developed within the university context in strengthening the economic and social contribution potential of sports tourism, particularly through training camps organized by professional and amateur sports teams.

Both studies converge in portraying Burdur as a destination whose sports tourism potential is closely linked to its natural environment and infrastructure investments. They also draw attention to the importance of accommodation capacity and sports facilities in enhancing the region's attractiveness. However, these studies largely focus on resource-based and supply-side evaluations and don't explicitly address how Burdur's sports tourism development is represented and communicated through media channels. In this respect, Ongun's (2022) study offers a complementary perspective by examining the role of media representations in shaping destination-related decision-making processes. Ongun critically analyzed the transformation of Salda Lake within the context of increasing tourism demand and the proposed "Millet Bahçesi" (Nation's Garden) project, using media coverage, news content, and official reports as primary data sources. The findings demonstrated that media narratives significantly influence public opinion and policy decisions concerning the future of tourism destinations. Although Ongun's study doesn't focus directly on sports tourism, it provides important insights into the agenda-setting power of media representations in the context of Burdur's tourism development.

Building on these studies, the present research addresses a gap in the literature by focusing specifically on how sports tourism activities in Burdur are represented in written digital media. By analyzing online news content, the study contributes to the sports tourism and destination image literature by highlighting the role of media discourse in shaping perceptions of emerging sports tourism destinations.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how sports tourism activities in Burdur are represented in digital media and how these representations contribute to the construction of a destination image. The research focuses on online news content addressing Burdur and sports tourism, published on platforms listed under the Google News tab. A qualitative approach has been considered appropriate due to its capacity to capture meanings, representations, and discursive patterns embedded in media texts. The data have been collected using the document analysis technique. Documents refer to materials that exist prior to the research process and include written, visual, and digital records produced by individuals or institutions (Merriam, 2013). In this study, online news texts have been used as primary documents due to their widespread accessibility and agenda-setting influence in contemporary media environments. The data collection process was conducted on 17 January 2026, and all relevant news items published up to that date were included in the initial dataset.

To ensure representativeness and relevance, purposeful sampling has been employed. Keyword searches have been conducted using the following terms in Turkish lanuage; "Burdur Spor Turizmi", "Burdur ve Spor Turizmi", "Burdur'da Spor Turizmi", "Makü Spor Turizmi", "Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi Spor Turizmi", "Burdur Masa Tenisi Şampiyonası", "Burdur Kick Boks Turnuvası" and "Burdur Spor Turnuvası". These searches initially has yielded 150 news items. In the subsequent screening stage, repetitive items, duplicated content, and news unrelated to the research focus have been excluded. As a result of this data reduction process, 51 news items have been retained as the final research dataset. The selected news items have been published on a variety of national, regional, and sector-specific news platforms, including AA, Hürriyet, Turizm Ajansı, Turizm Aktüel, and several local media outlets. The earliest news item in the dataset was published on 28 August 2024, while the most recent appeared on 17 January 2026, allowing the analysis to capture both the emergence and consolidation phases of sports tourism-related media coverage in Burdur.

Data analysis has combined content analysis and descriptive analysis techniques. Content analysis has involved systematically coding the news texts to identify recurring concepts and patterns, generating themes, and interpreting the data based on these codes and themes (Merriam, 2013; Elo et al., 2014). In the first stage, news texts have been organized chronologically and labeled (H1–H51). The texts have been then read multiple times to assess their relevance to the research aim. Statements aligned with the research objectives have been coded, resulting in 73 distinct codes. In the next stage, these codes have been grouped according to conceptual similarity, leading to the identification of seven main themes: Concept, Structures, Branch, Organization, Region, Roles, and Supportive Elements. Subsequently, descriptive analysis has been conducted to present the findings in an organized and transparent manner, supported by direct quotations from the news texts and focused on describing patterns rather than producing abstract interpretations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, both authors have independently coded the data at different times and locations. The coding results have been then compared to assess

intercoder agreement. Overlapping codes have been refined, repetitive codes have been eliminated, and consistent themes have been retained through consensus. This process has enhanced the internal consistency of the findings and ensured that the results were both reliable and methodologically sound.

Results

This section presents the research findings derived from the analysis of the 51 news texts examined within the scope of the study. In the first stage, findings obtained through content analysis are presented. In the second stage, the findings derived from descriptive analysis are interpreted. In this context, the results of the content analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Codes and Themes Generated Through Data Analysis

THEMES |	**CODES (73 codes)**	**f**	**%**
Concept	Sport (51), Tourism (39), Sports Tourism (26)	116	22,5
Structures	Facility (24), Hotel (17), Camp (16), Field (14), Sports Infrastructure (10), Sports Complex (9), Stadium (5), Sports Hall (5), Pool (4), Youth Center (2), Artificial Turf Field (2), Training Hall (1), Accommodation Facility (1), Route/Trail (1), Sports Area (1)	112	21,7
Branch (Sport Discipline)	Football (17), Table Tennis (13), Chess (5), Athletics (4), Basketball (4), Wrestling (4), Kickboxing (4), Volleyball (4), Running (3), Arm Wrestling (3), Karate (3), Muay Thai (3), Sports Drone (3), Taekwondo (3), Cycling (2), Pickleball (2), Rugby (2), Squash (2), Water Sports (2), Swimming (2), Off-road Motor Sports (1), Foot Tennis (1), Badminton (1), Handball (1), Jet Ski (1), Judo (1), Cross-country (1), Archery (1), Paragliding (1), Triathlon (1), Hiking (1)	96	18,6
Organization	Event (16), Tournament (12), Competition (11), Championship (11), Match (9), Contest (5), Club (3), Activity (1), FIFA (1), Cup (1), Medal (1)	71	13,7
Region	Burdur (51), Salda Lake (4), Burdur Lake (3)	58	11,2
Roles	Athlete (30), Coach (8), Referee (8), Sports Team (8), Trainer (1), National Team (1)	56	10,8
Supportive Elements	Fitness (2), Massage (2), Sauna (2), Turkish Bath (2)	8	1,5
TOTAL		**517**	**100**

Table 1 displays the findings obtained from the content analysis of 51 news items published on online news websites related to Burdur and sports tourism. The analysis revealed a total of 73 codes, which were grouped under seven themes: *Concept, Structures, Branch, Organization, Region, Roles,* and *Supportive Elements.* According to the table, the codes under these themes appeared a total of 517 times in the analyzed news texts. The themes are presented in the table according to their percentage weights and are ranked from the most frequently occurring to the least frequently occurring. Accordingly, the themes most frequently represented in the news texts were "Concept" with 116 codes (22.5%) and "Structures" with 112 codes (21.7%). These were followed, in terms of frequency, by the themes of "Branch" (18.6%), "Organization" (13.7%), "Region" (11.2%), and "Roles" (10.8%). The "Supportive Elements" theme (1.5%) was the least represented theme, appearing with only eight codes in the news texts.

Theme 1: Concept

As shown in Table 1, the *Concept* theme emerged as the most dominant theme, accounting for 22.5% of occurrences with a total frequency of 116. Among the three codes under this theme, the *Sport* code appeared 51 times, the *Tourism* code 39 times, and the *Sports Tourism* code 26 times. The analyzed news items emphasize the strategic importance of sports tourism for Burdur and underline that sports tourism is a form of tourism that extends throughout the year rather than being limited to seasonal patterns. This emphasis is evident in the following statements:

"We view university sports as a strategic field that supports youth, revitalizes the city economy, and spreads sports tourism throughout the entire year. The organizations included in the 2025–2026 calendar of the Turkish University Sports Federation and to be held at our university demonstrate Burdur's institutional capacity in this field." (H49)

"Not just a championship, but an organization considered a strategic step in terms of sports tourism, making a significant contribution to accommodation facilities and the city economy in Burdur… It shows that sports tourism has gained a structure that extends throughout the year rather than being seasonal." (H50)

These direct quotations indicate that the news coverage primarily frames Burdur's sports tourism within the concepts of "sport," "tourism," and "sports tourism," highlighting its economic contributions, its capacity to mitigate seasonality, and its role in encouraging youth participation.

Theme 2: Structures

Table 1 indicates that the *Structures* theme is the second most prominent theme, with a frequency of 112 and a percentage of 21.7%. This theme consists of 15 different codes, with the most frequently occurring being *Facility (24), Hotel (17), Camp (16), Field (14), Sports Infrastructure (10),* and *Sports Complex (9)*, followed by other codes with lower frequencies. An examination of the relevant news items shows that structures used in sports tourism play a central role in the development and expansion of this type of tourism. For example:

"I would like to express how pleased we are to be with you at our facility. Accommodation management is very important for the development of cities. Tourism is not only about the potential

you have; it is about your service infrastructure and capacity. Facility capacity and infrastructure are crucial in ensuring both promotion and higher added value for the city." (H3)

This statement suggests that sports halls, fields, and infrastructure in the city center of Burdur, as well as the sports facilities, halls, fields, and infrastructure within Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, indicate that the region possesses suitable conditions for sports tourism. Accordingly, Burdur is shown to have a significant advantage in sports tourism in terms of both sufficient infrastructure and well-developed facilities.

Theme 3: Branch

The *Branch* theme ranks as the third most prominent theme, with a frequency of 96 and a percentage of 18.6%. This theme includes 31 codes, among which *Football (17)* and *Table Tennis (13)* are the most frequently mentioned in the news texts. These findings are supported by the following quotation:

"It has been announced that two new grass fields will be built at Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, and the construction of grass fields measuring 80×120 meters is planned. With this project, the number of existing grass fields will be increased from four to six, aiming to make Burdur an attractive center for football training camps." (H26)

This statement indicates that both sports infrastructure projects in the city of Burdur and the existing facilities at Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University provide the necessary conditions for professional football teams to hold their training camps in the region. It can therefore be inferred that Burdur is being positioned as a strong option for football camps and championships.

In addition to football and table tennis, the news texts also include findings related to 29 other sports branches, such as "chess", "athletics", "basketball", "wrestling", "kickboxing", "volleyball", "running", "arm wrestling", "karate", "Muay Thai", "sports drone racing", "taekwondo", "cycling", "pickleball", "rugby", "squash", "water sports", "swimming", "off-road motor sports", "foot tennis", "badminton", "handball", "jet ski", "judo", "cross-country", "archery", "paragliding", "triathlon", and "hiking". For example:

"Paragliders taking off from Avşar Hill continue their flights over Burdur Lake for approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Professional paragliders perform acrobatic maneuvers that impress spectators on the ground. With Burdur Lake reconciling with local residents, an increase in such sports is expected. Recently, in addition to paragliding, there has been an increase in the use of jet skis, bicycles, and off-road motor vehicles in and around the lake." (H1)

This statement demonstrates that Burdur Lake and its surroundings have the potential to host extreme sports such as paragliding, cycling, and off-road motor sports.

"This hotel, which is the first five-star hotel in Burdur, was built as the Lavanta Tepesi Hotel. This infrastructure has already produced initial results, and in the past two years, a total of 78 teams, from wrestling, football, table tennis, basketball, volleyball, judo, badminton, and rugby, have held training camps here, both from within Turkey and abroad." (H9)

This quotation indicates that the Lavanta Tepesi Hotel, located within the campus of Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, hosts numerous sports tournaments and provides training camp opportunities for teams across various disciplines.

Theme 4: Organization

The *Organization* theme ranks fourth, with a frequency of 71 and a percentage of 13.7%. This theme consists of 11 codes, including "event", "tournament", "competition", "championship", "match", "race", "club", "activity", "FIFA", "cup", and "medal". Among these, the most frequently occurring codes are *Event (16), Tournament (12), Competition (11), Championship (11),* and *Match (9)*. Other codes appear less frequently. For example:

"The 13th European Universities Table Tennis Championship, organized by the European University Sports Association (EUSA) in coordination with the Turkish University Sports Federation (TUSF), has started under the hosting of Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University (MAKU)." (H37)

This quotation indicates that international tournaments held at Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University attract athletes from many countries, increasing Burdur's international visibility in sports tourism and strengthening its potential to host similar events in the future.

Theme 5: Region

The *Region* theme is the fifth most prominent, with a frequency of 58 and a percentage of 11.2%. This theme includes the codes "Burdur", "Salda Lake", and "Burdur Lake", with *Burdur* appearing most frequently (51 occurrences). The following quotation illustrates this theme:

"The 'Development of Salda Lake Tourism Infrastructure' project has been completed, and a modern touristic hotel has been built in Yeşilova… With the sports camp center project at MAKÜ, we implemented the Lavanta Tepesi Hotel. Now, we have opened a second hotel—Lavanta Tepe Hotel Salda—at Salda Lake, which represents an important tourism potential for Burdur." (H11)

This quotation indicates that media coverage geographically frames sports tourism primarily around Burdur, Salda Lake, and Burdur Lake, and highlights infrastructure investments, particularly those led by the university, aimed at integrating Salda Lake into sports tourism.

Theme 6: Roles

The *Roles* theme ranks sixth, with a frequency of 56 and a percentage of 10.8%. This theme includes six codes: "athlete", "coach", "referee", "sports team", "trainer", and "national team". Among these, *athlete* appears most frequently (30 occurrences). This finding is supported by the following quotation:

"The Ünilig Kickboxing Turkey Championship, hosted by Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University (MAKÜ), has started. The organization, in which approximately 700 athletes from 92 universities across Turkey compete, is being held at MAKÜ Sports Facilities." (H51)

This quotation demonstrates that a large number of athletes, technical staff, and referees participate in tournaments and championships held in Burdur, indicating that the region is preferred by both professional and amateur sports actors in the context of sports tourism.

Theme 7: Supportive Elements

The final theme, *Supportive Elements*, is the least represented theme, with a frequency of eight and a percentage of 1.5%. This theme consists of four codes: "fitness", "massage", "sauna", and "Turkish bath", each appearing twice in the news texts. The following quotation provides evidence for this theme:

"Designed with a five-star hotel concept and consisting of 116 rooms, the hotel includes indoor and semi-olympic swimming pools, a Turkish bath, sauna, massage rooms, a fitness center, as well as multipurpose seminar and meeting rooms." (H5)

This statement highlights the supportive facilities provided by the Lavanta Tepesi Hotel within the campus of Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University. Accordingly, it can be concluded that sports facilities and infrastructure in the city center, districts, and university campus provide the complementary and supportive amenities necessary for the development of sports tourism in Burdur.

Conclusion

This study has aimed to examine how sports tourism activities in Burdur are represented in digital media and how these representations contribute to the construction of Burdur's destination image within the context of sports tourism. For this purpose, 51 online news articles published under the Google News tab and focusing on Burdur and sports tourism have been analyzed using a qualitative research approach. Through content analysis, 73 codes haven been identified and subsequently grouped under seven main themes, and the findings have been further interpreted using descriptive analysis techniques.

The findings related to the *Concept* theme indicate that Burdur enjoys systematic, intensive, and largely positive media visibility in relation to sports tourism. Sports, tourism, and sports tourism concepts are frequently emphasized in news content and are predominantly associated with economic vitality, the reduction of seasonality, and the strengthening of institutional capacity in Burdur. These findings suggest that sports tourism is framed not merely as a tourism type but also as a strategic tool supporting local development. Such media emphasis points to the re-production of Burdur's destination image along a sports-oriented axis. Findings under the *Structures* theme demonstrate that the discourse surrounding sports tourism in Burdur is largely constructed through physical and institutional infrastructure elements. The frequent media emphasis on sports facilities, training camps, university-based sports areas, and accommodation infrastructure indicates that the sustainability of sports tourism is closely associated with infrastructure investments. This representation suggests that Burdur is portrayed not through sporadic or temporary events but through a more institutionalized and planned development process in the context of sports tourism.

With regard to the *Branch* theme, the findings reveal that Burdur is presented as a sports tourism destination hosting a wide variety of sports disciplines. In addition to organization- and camp-based sports such as football and table tennis, the inclusion of water sports, nature-based sports, and extreme sports in media content highlights the strong representation of sports tourism product diversity. This diversity suggests that Burdur possesses a flexible destination structure capable of appealing to different athlete profiles and visitor segments.

The *Organization* and *Roles* themes indicate that Burdur is made visible in the media as a center hosting national and international sports organizations. The frequent presence of actors such as athletes, coaches, and referees in news content demonstrates that sports tourism attracts not only visitors but also professional sports stakeholders to the region. This finding points to the multidimensional socio-economic contributions of sports tourism to the local context. Under the *Region* theme, the prominence of Burdur, Salda Lake, and Burdur Lake indicates that sports tourism discourse is concentrated around specific spatial focal points. In particular, the association of Salda Lake with both sports events and nature-based activities highlights its strategic role in destination image construction. In contrast, the limited representation of the *Supportive Elements* theme suggests that complementary dimensions of the sports tourism experience, such as wellness and recovery services, remain secondary within media discourse. Overall, the study concludes that Burdur is represented in digital media as a positive, infrastructure-rich, organizationally capable, and diversified sports tourism destination. This form of representation positions sports tourism as a key instrument in shaping Burdur's destination image.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed for both practitioners and future academic research. First, the media visibility of sports tourism in Burdur should be managed within a planned and sustainable communication strategy. Media coverage should extend beyond event, and success-oriented narratives to include dimensions such as environmental sustainability, local community participation, and long-term destination planning. Second, supportive elements of sports tourism, such as accommodation quality, wellness services, athlete health, and recovery facilities, should be made more visible in media narratives. Emphasizing these components would strengthen the perception of Burdur as a destination offering a holistic sports tourism experience. Third, it is recommended that sports tourism-related media content be diversified by ensuring more balanced representation across different sports branches, thereby preventing destination image formation from becoming limited to a small number of disciplines.

From an academic perspective, future studies may benefit from comparative analyses across different media types, including social media platforms, television broadcasts, and international sports media. Additionally, examining the relationship between media representations and visitor perceptions through quantitative or mixed-method approaches would contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of sports tourism on destination image. Furthermore, investigating Burdur's positioning within artificial intelligence–based recommendation systems, either through comparative analyses with other destinations or through theoretical models exploring the integration of Burdur's sports tourism opportunities into AI-driven systems, may offer valuable contributions to the literature. Finally, as this study is limited to content published under the Google News tab, expanding data sources in future research would allow for a more comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of media representations of sports tourism in Burdur.

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Visitor Engagement Under Differentiated Incentive Designs: Marketing Evidence from Monetary and Gamified Destination Campaigns

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this longitudinal case study is to examine the strategic shift in marketing campaign approaches from monetary-based discounts to gamification in the context of the museum marketing domain. The study seeks to understand the impact of this strategic shift in campaign approaches on the co-creation of consumer value through an analysis of the gamified campaign of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) Culture Co.

Study design/methodology/approach: The research is based on a qualitative research approach and relies on the Perceived Value theory. The 2024 monetary-based discount campaign and the 2025 gamified campaign were analyzed using netnography and observational analysis. The 2024 monetary-based discount campaign was analyzed using the Price Unfairness framework, while the 2025 gamified campaign was analyzed using the Self-Determination Theory framework to determine the level of psychological need satisfaction.

Results: The research results indicate that the 2024 monetary-based discount campaign resulted in price unfairness, while the 2025 gamified campaign resulted in the satisfaction of the psychological needs of consumers, where engagement levels increased fifty times compared to the previous campaign.

Originality/value: The research provides an innovative approach to understanding gamified incentives in the context of consumer engagement prediction and presents a novel value transformation model.

Keywords: Visitor Engagement, Incentive Design, Gamification, Museum Marketing, Destination Campaign.

Introduction

With the rise of the experience economy paradigm (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), museums and cultural heritage sites are restructuring their traditional strategies to ensure visitor loyalty. In contrast to conventional marketing practices, in the current tourism environment, value is not created through price discounts but through the co-creation of experiences in real time and in context (Buhalis & Karatay, 2022). Gamification techniques, based on conventional loyalty cards and stamp books (Seaborn & Fels, 2015), are now strategic tools for managing tourism flows and converting behavioral loyalty into attitudinal loyalty (Xu et al., 2017). From this perspective, the incentive techniques applied in the context of the public sector cultural management body IMM Culture Co.

during Museums Week in two consecutive years, 2024 and 2025, namely, Monetary Discount in 2024 and Gamification in 2025, are taken as an exemplary case to observe this evolutionary process. In the 2025 scenario, the ticket for the concert acts as an extrinsic gaming element, as described in Werbach and Hunter (2012), and functions as an important motivator for inducing short-term behavioral change.

In the current research, a holistic approach to Perceived Value Theory has been followed, as proposed by Zeithaml (1988). Perceived Value Theory states that customers obtain certain benefits from services, which are not only financial in nature but also involve some intangible benefits. In the current study, the psychological construct for intangible benefits has been examined according to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This framework has been used to test the viability of monetary incentives in an inflationary economy to tackle price resistance, as proposed by Perceived Price Unfairness (Balton et al., 2003). Although previous research has shown that monetary incentives have a detrimental effect on customer loyalty in the long term, it has also been argued that experiences related to competence, autonomy, and relatedness have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation for gamification (Deci & Rayn, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The current study aims to test the viability of an incentive system that transcends cost rationality for creating experiential values according to Self-Determination Theory.

Methodology

The research design of this study is based on the comparative qualitative research design (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine the psychological effects and behavioral outcomes of the transition from monetary-based discount marketing campaigns to gamification marketing campaigns in the context of cultural marketing. The conceptual model of perceived value (Zeithaml, 1988) serves as the foundation for the implementation of methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2017) through the netnography digital data (Kozinets, 2002) and the participant observation method (Ellis et al., 2011). The research of this study is focused on the psychological effects and behavioral outcomes of the transition from monetary-based discount marketing campaigns to gamification marketing campaigns in the context of the Instagram platform, based on its promising engagement results in the implementation of marketing campaigns for cultural destinations. The data collection of this study is proposed to be implemented on the 2nd of June 2025. The analysis of the behavioral data and textual discourse of the monetary-based discount marketing campaign implemented in 2024 and the gamification marketing campaign implemented in 2025 will be the subject of this research. To ensure the reliability of digital data, all findings will be reverified on the 16th of January 2026. The anonymization of data will be based on ethical guidelines by Sharf (1999) and King (1996). To address the divergent relationship between discourse and experiences of Instagram users, participant observation will be used as a methodological approach by Ellis et al. (2011) and Creswell & Poth (2016).

For the analysis of the data was used the Comparative Thematic Analysis with a deductive orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Price Unfairness Theory was used analyze the interactions that are associated with the monetary-based campaign framework of 2024 (Bolton et al. 2003).

Self-Determination Theory was used analyze the interactions that are associated with the gamification-based campaign of 2025 (Deci & Rayn, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Results

The findings of the research reveal that there are notable differences in the behavior of the visitors and the intensity of the interaction contingent upon the type of marketing evidence that is employed.

Table 1: Descriptive Data Inventory

Data Code	**Year**	**Content Type**	**Strategy**	**Interaction Data (N)**	**Data Code**	**Year**	**Content Type**	**Strategy**	**Interaction Data (N)**
V1	2024	Instagram Post	**Monetary-based discount campaign** A visual advertisement of the financial discount (%20) offered to visitors who purchase tickets to 5 museums during Museum Week.	Likes: 151 Comments: 3 Shared :39	V3	2025	Instagram Post	**Gamification- based campaign** Multiple visuals introducing the "Şehr-i Âlem" project, the Culture Passport, and the Concert Award.	Likes: 955 Comments: 7 Shared: 2026
V2	2024	Instagram Reels	**Monetary-based discount campaign** Video content highlightin	Like:s 225 Comments: 5 Shared: 101	V4	2025	Instagram Reels	**Gamification- based campaign** Instructive video content demonstrati	Likes: 205 Comments: 5 Shared: 200

			g the 20% discount applied to those who purchase "5x5 Museum Tickets".	Views: 53.000				ng the passport collection and stamping process	Views: 37400

The comparative analysis of the behavioral data shows that there is a considerable effect of the modification of the campaign on the viral propagation of the content. This is because, whereas the total number of shares of the content related to the monetary- based discount campaign as offered by the company in 2024, is restricted to 39 (V1), it increases considerably to 2,226 under the 2025 implementation of the new gamification-based campaign (V3). This is a 1,490% increase, or a factor of 16, showing that the gamification- based campaign is not only capable of evoking passive engagement of the users but also of encouraging them to promote the shared content. The total number of likes increases accordingly, showing the higher visibility of the content, from an average of 151 in 2024 (V1) to 955 in 2025 (V3).

Table 2: Transformation from Monetary Discount to Gamification

Analysis Unit	**2024 Monetary-based discount campaign**	**2025 Gamification- based campaign**
Cash Out	200 Turkısh Liras (TL)	395 TL
Nominal Profit/Loss	50 TL profit	145 TL loss, Museum-based
Additional Benefit	No	Concert Ticket Worth 400 TL
Net Economic Benefit	+50 TL	+255 TL Gross Profit
User Perception	Insufficient discount, Negative e-WOM)	Advantageous/Fun, Positive e-WOM)

Kaynak: IMM Culture Co., 2024

As can be seen in Table 2, the transition from the discount policy, which relied on the use of monetary discount campaign, to the gamification- based campaign creates the so-called Price Paradox."While the students benefited from a nominal economic profit amounting to 50 TL in 2024, they demonstrated significant price resistance and considered the discount policy to be insufficient. In 2025, despite the increased out-of-pocket cost, which was 395 TL compared to the previous 200 TL, the reward, which had significant market value, namely 400 TL, created a net economic benefit amounting to 255 TL, acting as a form of psychological profit and alleviating the effects of inflation on the consumer.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Museums Marketing Campaigns (2024 vs. 2025)

Comparison Criteria	2024 Monetary-based discount campaign	2025 Gamification-based campaign	Synthesis
Incentive Mechanism (Babin et al., 1994; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982)	**Utilitarian:** 20% Monetary- based discount	**Hedonic:** Concert Ticket + Culture Passport, Experience	Monetary rewards trigger rational comparison, while experiential rewards stimulate emotional engagement.
Price Perception and Sensitivity (Balton et al., 2003)	**High Resistance:** Users found the price of 220 TL expensive when compared to the previous reference price of 130 TL. (K2, K5 Data).	**Rationalization:** Users perceived a much higher cost, such as 1000 TL, as reasonable, advantageous through the "Concert + 5 Museums" package. (K19 Data).	Gamification and bundled presentation have broken the consumer's Price Resistance.
Viral Spread (WOM) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004)	**Low Spread:** Discount-focused content has only been shared 39 times. (V1).	**High Virality:** Content featuring game mechanics and rewards was shared 2,026 times. (V3).	The gamification strategy has increased the viral coefficient of content sharing by approximately 50 times.
User Motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	**Extrinsic:** Focused solely on economic gain.	**Internal and External:** Both the motivation to win a reward concert ticket and the motivation to achieve/complete Passport are active.	Gamification has transformed the user from a passive consumer to a prosumer.
Community Interaction (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004)	**Individual:** Users have only asked questions or complained to the institution..	**Collective:** Users shared information and excitement with each other. (K12).	A sustainable Virtual Community has formed around the brand.

Based on the analysis, it can be seen that the gamification-based campaign developed by the company for 2025 was more successful than the monetary-based discount campaign developed for

2024 in all aspects. From the Perceived Value Model developed by Zeithaml (1988), it can be seen that the discount offer in 2024 was not enough to cover the non-monetary costs, raising a doubt regarding the pricing strategy followed by the company (Monroe, 1990). This is due to the fact that customers feel that the company is attempting to increase its profit margin by increasing the price without a concomitant increase in quality, resulting in customer dissatisfaction (Bolton et al., 2003). On the contrary, the 2025 gamification campaign, based on the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), was able to shift the customer's mindset from a utilitarian transaction to a hedonic experience (Babin et al., 1994; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). The '*Culture Passport'* feature was used to measure competence, and the rewards provided a sense of belonging, resulting in psychological satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This, in turn, generated a positive e-WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), with the negative feedback changing to route suggestions, thus reducing the rational resistance to the price, resulting in a 50-fold increase in engagement. This shows that high user engagement was achieved through a holistic configuration of perceived pleasure and novelty (Terrah et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The study shows that the change in marketing incentive campaign from a rational, monetary-based discount campaign to an experiential approach is a significant factor that influences consumer engagement and loyalty in the social media. The study shows that the monetary discount campaign of 2024 resulted in price sensitivity, which decreased fairness, rather than increasing satisfaction. The fact that the percentage discount is relatively low compared to what it might have been in the past shows that, in an inflationary economy, a monetary discount does not provide any value. The comprehensive study by Xi and Hamari (2020) shows that gamification increases brand loyalty, not just through monetary rewards but also by fulfilling the psychological needs of consumers, providing a scientific basis upon which the projected large increase in consumer engagement is based, which is expected to be fifty times higher by 2025.

However, the gamification campaign used in 2025, although more costly, was considered a favorable change by the consumers. The study by Hofacker et al. (2016) shows that gamification in the digital environment changes the focus of the consumer from a rational, cost-related approach to a hedonic experience. This body of research explains the reasons why the student segment in the present study found the experience to be favorable, even though they had to pay 395 TL, compared to 200 TL in the previous year. The study by Aghdaie et al. (2022) shows that the use of gamification in the marketing strategy is more likely to produce high levels of positive electronic word-of-mouth compared to discount strategies. The change from negative e-WOM in 2024 to the sharing of content and suggestions in 2025 supports the extant research in the context of tourism destinations. Gamification mechanics met participants' needs for competence, autonomy, and relationship building within the framework of Self-Determination Theory by transforming the process from a simple purchase into a success process. Digital interaction data confirms that gamification transforms consumers from passive buyers to active brand advocates (Buhalis and Karatay, 2022). In conclusion, this study demonstrates with concrete data how cultural heritage

sites can be transformed into dynamic and high-value experience platforms using digital gamification tools, in line with the emphasis on smart tourism ecosystems by Buhalis et al. (2023). It is recommended that publicly funded cultural institutions adopt psychologically based strategies that offer a sense of status and achievement, instead of transactional methods such as ticket discounts (Okumuş, 2003). Furthermore, for the 2026 strategies, it is suggested that, in order to prevent reward dependency, a shift from purely tangible rewards to status-oriented leveling systems that trigger intrinsic motivation, such as the Cultural Ambassador program and variable-rate reinforcement structures, should be implemented.

Limitations

This study has certain methodological and scope limitations; firstly, the research universe is limited to five museums within the IMM Culture Co.'s campaigns. Digital interaction data was analyzed netnographi only through the Instagram platform; other social networks or field surveys were excluded from the scope of the study. Economic rationalization analysis was conducted through the student segment, where the data was most abundant, and the motivations of full-ticket visitors were not examined in depth. Finally, this cross-sectional analysis, covering May of 2024 and 2025, focuses on the immediate outcomes of strategic transformation rather than measuring the long-term loyalty effects of gamification.

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New Forms of Slavery? Living in Staff Accommodation as a Tourism Worker: A Metaphor Analysis

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine how tourism workers who are employed in the tourism sector and live in staff accommodation provided by their employers perceive the experience of living in staff accommodation.

***Study design/methodology/approach*:** This research adopted a phenomenological approach within the framework of qualitative research. Data were collected through an open-ended question in which participants were asked to complete the statement, *"Staying in staff accommodation while working in tourism... because..."*. The metaphorical expressions obtained were analyzed using metaphor analysis.

Results: The analysis grouped the 19 metaphors produced by participants into five main categories: enclosure, servitude, endurance, uncertainty and ambivalence. The findings show that tourism workers predominantly evaluate their experience of living in staff accommodation negatively. These experiences are closely related to their perceptions of restricted freedom, blurred boundaries between work and private life, and psychological and physical fatigue. Depending on the facilities and conditions provided, staff accommodation was also described in ambivalent and context-dependent ways.

Originality/value: This study offers a critical perspective on employees' housing conditions within the tourism sector in relation to internal stakeholder well-being and decent working conditions. Its originality lies in examining workers' housing conditions, often relegated to the background in the literature, beyond physical elements, through employees' lived experiences and everyday realities. The findings demonstrate that the spatial effects of living environments constitute a fundamental and significant dimension that must be considered in discussions of tourism labor. Within this framework, the study provides important insights into how employee housing opportunities can be reconsidered within tourism policies and human resources strategies.

Keywords Tourism labor, Staff accommodation, Metaphor analysis, Working and living conditions, Decent work

Introduction

The foundations of company housing for employees were laid in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Industrial Revolution and rapid industrialization led to the construction of staff

accommodation facilities near factory areas. These were based on a productivity-oriented perspective that focused on worker productivity (Göktaş, 2009: 5). One of the earliest examples of such accommodation was the Lowell complex, built in 1812, which aimed to secure the productivity and commitment of textile workers (Üstün, 2011: 41; Cengizkan, 2009: 16–17). Over time, staff accommodation became a distinct architectural form associated with industrial urbanization, consisting of small-scale dwellings (approximately 3–4 meters in width) designed to meet basic housing needs and developed through both public and private initiatives (Muthesius, 1992; Üstün, 2011: 44).

In the Ottoman context, similar forms of worker accommodation existed as early as the fifteenth century. Single-room lodging units known as *hücerat* were used by janissaries, unmarried men, and *suhte* (madrasah students), deliberately preventing their integration with family-based residential life (Tanyeli, 1996). These arrangements, often referred to as *amele yuvası* (labourers' nests) were typically built in isolation from public areas (Cengizkan, 2009). Following the republican reforms of the early 20th century, the state began to construct lodging facilities for skilled workers and personnel throughout the country (Bilgin, 1990). One of the main reasons for this is Türkiye's family structure. Housing complexes built as an integral part of factory areas fostered groupings and factions, as well as control and surveillance mechanisms arising from these group dynamics. In particular, the living spaces of single and married workers in housing complexes built in the second half of the 20th century were structurally separated. This separation was not the result of a planned approach, but rather a pragmatic one (Cengizkan, 2009; Göktaş, 2009: 35-36).

In Turkey, the institutionalization of staff accommodation initially developed within the public and industrial sectors. However, the emergence of staff accommodation in the tourism industry requires separate consideration due to the sector's distinct labor characteristics. Unlike industrial settings, tourism is marked by seasonality, long and irregular working hours, and the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. While staff accommodation in tourism is ostensibly designed to provide proximity to the workplace, studies indicate that such arrangements significantly shape workers' everyday lives, influencing their social relations, leisure practices, and sense of privacy (Göktaş, 2009: 30). As company-provided accommodation often functions as a closed system, it produces a sharp distinction between workers' "inside" and "outside" worlds, reinforcing continuous interaction with colleagues beyond working hours (Akçadoğan, 2014: 132). Over time, these spaces may transform workers' emotional and psychological attachment to the workplace, positioning them as extensions of the organization rather than merely sites of rest and recovery (Cengizkan, 2009).

Studies on workers' housing in the national literature have largely focused on staff accommodation constructed within the industrial and public sectors. These studies predominantly address workers' housing from architectural, urban, or social perspectives, examining the spatial characteristics, social impacts, and historical development of factory- and state-provided accommodation (Kaya, Gürbıyık & Kılıç, 2008; Göktaş, 2009; Üstün, 2011; Akçadoğan, 2014; Levent & Özel, 2015;

Dönmez, 2019). In contrast, studies in the tourism literature that directly examine workers' housing experiences are extremely limited. In the Turkish context, the first and only comprehensive study focusing on the experiences of tourism workers living in staff accommodation is Kıykaç's (2017) master's thesis, and the limited number of publications derived from this study draw attention to practices of surveillance, control, and domination experienced within staff accommodation (Kıykaç & Aslan, 2019).

Nevertheless, some findings related to the working environments of tourism workers indirectly contribute to this discussion. For example, Akoğlan and Kozak (1995) reveal sharp spatial divisions between staff and guest areas, while Aykaç (2009) emphasizes that the accommodation, food, and rest facilities provided to workers significantly restrict personal space and privacy. In the international tourism literature, however, there are no systematic empirical studies that address accommodation provided to tourism workers within the context of employee experience and labor relations. Within this framework, it can be argued that accommodation provided to workers in the tourism sector continues to exist as a problematic issue. Building on this gap in the literature, the present study aims to examine tourism workers' perceptions and experiences of staff accommodation through metaphor analysis.

Methodology

The current research adopts a qualitative research design based on a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology facilitates comprehension of the manner in which individuals experience and interpret a specific phenomenon in their daily lives. The phenomenon under examination in this study is the accommodation experiences of tourism workers in staff accommodations. The utilization of a phenomenological perspective has enabled an in-depth examination of how these living spaces are perceived, interpreted, and emotionally experienced by employees, extending beyond their physical characteristics.

The study was conducted with tourism workers employed in different departments of the tourism sector who reside in staff accommodation provided by their employer during their period of employment. Initially, a total of 34 participants took part in the research. Responses that did not contain metaphorical expressions were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a final sample of 33 participants. In accordance with the principles of qualitative research, the size of the participant group was not predetermined. Instead, data collection was continued until no further metaphors or conceptual categories were produced. The diversity of participants in terms of departmental roles and length of accommodation experience contributed to the richness and variability of the data.

The data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire designed to elicit metaphorical expressions of lived experiences. Participants were invited to provide their responses to the following statement: "Staying in staff accommodation while working in the tourism industry is like...because...". This format was designed to encourage participants to express their experiences through metaphors, thus facilitating the articulation of complex feelings, perceptions, and meanings that might not easily be expressed through direct questioning. It is imperative to note

that all responses were collected voluntarily, and participant identities were anonymized in accordance with ethical research principles.

The data obtained were analyzed using a qualitative metaphor analysis approach, consistent with the phenomenological orientation of the study. Metaphors were treated as interpretive tools through which participants articulated their lived experiences of residing in staff accommodation. In the analysis process, responses were first examined to identify metaphorical expressions and their accompanying justifications, while statements lacking a clear metaphor - meaning relationship were excluded. The identified metaphors were then compared in terms of the experiential meanings they conveyed rather than their linguistic similarity. Metaphors reflecting similar patterns of experience were grouped together and organized into broader conceptual categories. These categories were constructed inductively, grounded in participants' explanations, and interpreted in relation to the research context.

In order to ensure trustworthiness in the study, several strategies were employed in line with the criteria of trustworthiness (Arslan, 2022). Credibility was supported through the use of direct participant quotations, allowing the findings to be firmly grounded in the data. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by conducting the research process in a transparent and traceable manner, with analytic decisions clearly documented throughout the study. In addition, expert feedback was sought during the analysis process to strengthen interpretive rigor and reduce researcher bias. Together, these strategies contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the research.

Results and Discussion

The study sample comprised 33 participants who were employed in hotels and lived in staff accommodation. The participants' demographic information, including their department, sector, current accommodation status, and the duration of their stay in accommodation, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Education	Department	Position	Work experience	Stay in lodgment duration
P1	42	W	PhD	Food & Beverage	Waiter	12 years	2 seasons
P2	31	M	Undergraduate	Culinary	Order taker	5 years	5 years
P3	24	W	Undergraduate	Culinary	Demi chef	2 years	2 years
P4	21	W	High school	Culinary	Demi chef	3 years	4 months
P5	32	M	PhD	Operation	Operation agent	13 seasons	2 seasons

P6	19	W	High school	Food & Beverage	Barmaid	3 seasons	3 seasons
P7	21	W	Associate degree	Culinary	Demi chef	4 years	4 years
P8	35	W	Undergraduate	Culinary	Demi chef	4 years	19 months
P9	38	W	PhD	Front Office	Receptionist	3 years	3 months
P10	22	W	High school	Front Office and Animation	Receptionist and animator	3 seasons	8 months
P11	28	W	Master	Guest relation	Guest relation agent	5 years	2 years
P12	23	M	Undergraduate	Front Office	Receptionist	3 and half years	2 months
P13	21	W	High school	Food & Beverage	Bar waiter	3 seasons	8 months
P14	24	W	Associate degree	Front Office	Receptionist	1 season	5 months
P15	30	M	Undergraduate	Front Office	Receptionist	5 seasons	5 seasons
P16	26	W	Undergraduate	Front Office	Receptionist	2 months	2 months
P17	20	M	Undergraduate	Culinary	Intern	1 season	3 months
P18	33	M	Undergraduate	Food & Beverage	Bar Director	8 years	4 years
P19	32	W	Undergraduate	Front Office	Receptionist	3 years	30 months
P20	37	M	PhD	Front Office	Night Auditor	5 years	1 years
P21	23	W	Undergraduate	Guest Relation	Beach Welcoming Agent	2 months	2 months
P22	36	M	PhD	Food & Beverage	Waiter	6 seasons	18 months
P23	23	W	Undergraduate	Front Office	Receptionist	3 seasons	3 months

P24	25	W	Associate degree	Culinary	Demi chef	3 years	3 years
P25	21	W	Undergraduate	Culinary	Demi chef	2 years	6 months
P26	21	W	High school	Culinary	Demi chef	5 seasons	21 months
P27	29	W	Master	Front Office	Receptionist	6 years	4 years
P28	28	W	Undergraduate	Food & Beverage	Bar waiter	5 years 11 months	5 years 11 months
P29	43	W	PhD	Food & Beverage	Waiter	2 seasons	2 months
P30	19	M	High school	Culinary	Commis	1 year	3 months
P31	21	M	High school	Counting	Intern	2 months	2 months
P32	29	M	Master	Culinary	Assistant Chef	4 seasons	4 seasons
P33	22	W	Undergraduate	Culinary	Intern	3 seasons	4 months

It is noteworthy that half of the participants in the study have since ceased to be employed in the sector. A perusal of the departmental distribution reveals that the predominant group consists of food and beverage and kitchen workers, with front office workers constituting the second largest group. An analysis of the organizational structure reveals that the Chef de Cuisine represents the highest echelon of management personnel, with the remaining employees comprising lower-level roles that involve direct interaction with guests, such as waiters and receptionists. With regard to the duration of service, the range extends from a minimum of two months to a maximum of eight years. Only a small number of employees have periodically resided in staff accommodation during their period of employment.

Participants were invited to share their experiences of living in staff accommodation by means of the phrase *"Staying in staff accommodation while working in the tourism industry is like...because..."*. An analysis of the experiences shared revealed that 19 metaphors could be categorized into five groups. The metaphors and their respective groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Metaphors and Metaphor Groups

Metaphor Group	Metaphor	Meaning of the Metaphor	Illustrative Participant Quotation
Enclosure	Open prison / Prison	Restriction of freedom, constant surveillance	*"Living in staff housing feels like an open prison… management patrols like guards."*
	Military service / Soldiers' barracks	Strict rules, hierarchy, lack of personal space	*"Staying in staff housing is like living in a soldiers' barracks during military service."*
	Concentration camp	Dehumanization and enforced coexistence	*"It is like living in a concentration camp because sharing the same space with very different people is extremely difficult."*
	Never-ending shift	Blurring of work-life boundaries	*"Living in staff housing feels like being in a shift that never ends."*
Servitude	Slave	Expectation of constant availability for work	*"You become a convenient slave, always ready to be called in."*
	Slave market	Workers perceived as disposable and interchangeable	*"Working and living in staff housing feels like being in a slave market."*
	Cinderella who never becomes a princess	Unrewarded sacrifice and blocked upward mobility	*"It is like being a Cinderella who will never become a princess… the slave of slaves."*
	Obligation	Economic compulsion and lack of alternatives	*"It feels like an obligation because rent costs are too high."*
Endurance	War	Continuous struggle and conflict	*"It is like fighting a war… in short, it is a struggle for survival."*
	Survival	Life reduced to meeting basic needs	*"Living in staff housing is simply about surviving."*

	Torture	Physical and psychological exhaustion	*"It is like torture because staff housing creates more stress instead of rest."*
	Struggle for life	Everyday endurance under harsh conditions	*"In short, it is a struggle for life."*
Uncertainty	Gambling	Experience dependent on chance and unpredictability	*"It is like gambling; it can be very enjoyable or completely hellish."*
	Poisoned honey	Simultaneous benefits and hidden costs	*"Staff housing is like poisoned honey; it provides convenience but never feels like home."*
Ambivalence	Student staff accomodation/KYK[2] dorm	Temporary, regulated, yet familiar living space	*"It is like staying in a state student staff accomodation."*
	Home	Comfort, belonging, and motivation	*"Some staff housing facilities make you truly feel at home."*
	Shelter	Temporary, impersonal, and emotionally detached	*"Sometimes it feels like a home, sometimes just a shelter."*
	Room only for sleeping	Suspension of everyday life	*"Some staff accommodations are designed only for sleeping."*
	Source of motivation	Living conditions affecting work motivation	*"Staff housing is the greatest source of motivation after work."*

The objective of the data collected from participants was to illuminate the influence of their professional and personal experiences in the tourism sector, while residing in staff accommodation. Therefore, upon analysis of the data, it was observed that participants described their experience of residing in staff accommodation not only in terms of the physical conditions present, but also in relation to their perception of freedom, labor relations, sense of belonging, and psychological resilience. The subsequent analysis yielded the identification of five primary categories into which the metaphors that emerged could be grouped.

Enclosure

[2] Kredi Yurtlar Kurumu: Dormitories allocated by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Turkey for university students

The first group, termed “Enclosure” refers to experiences of imprisonment, discipline and confinement. Employees further elaborated on their experiences of residing in the staff accommodation by employing metaphorical language, drawing parallels with open prisons, military barracks, concentration camps, and unending shifts. When these expressions are examined, Goffman's (2023) theory of total institutions and Foucault's (2013) conceptualisation of disciplinary institutions become salient. The experiences of employees, as evidenced by statements, include the absence of personal space and the sharing of the same environment with multiple people. These experiences are indicative of those associated with collective confinement institutions.

Additionally, the fact that the staff accommodation is an institution linked to the workplace, and the employer's expectation that the employee must be ready for work and overtime at any time, triggers the experience of confinement among the participants. At the same time, the boundary between working life and daily life practices becomes indistinct, as evidenced by the experience of residing in staff accommodation. This finding suggests that the biopolitical production cycle is present in tourism work.

The concept of biopolitical production, as theorized by Lazzarato (1996) and Hardt and Negri (2023), pertains to a theoretical framework of labor processes wherein the conventional distinction between working life and daily life is rendered obsolete. In this paradigm, employee competencies assume an emotional and affectional dimension, underscoring the notion that labor and emotion are inextricably intertwined (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2023). A close examination of the metaphors employed in the context of working practices in tourism, whilst residing in staff accommodation, reveals that biopolitical production constitutes an integral component of tourism work. The concept of biopolitics, which has the capacity to reconfigure the relationship between space and the body (Lapointe and Coulter, 2020: 103-104), can be utilized to elucidate the antagonistic relationship between tourism workers and the spaces of their employment within the scope of this study.

Servitude

A further group is identified as the “Servitude” category. This category refers to experiences of exploitation, obligation, and enslavement. Employers’ expectations that workers work long hours, perform mandatory overtime, and remain constantly available for work, as seen in the confinement group, have given rise to metaphors such as “Slave”, “Slave market”, “Cinderella who never becomes a princess, and “Obligation”, which highlight this group in workers' statements.

This group, formed using these metaphors, highlights biopolitical production dynamics in a manner similar to that of the enclosure group. The worker's transformation into a component of the production mechanism as "bare life" (Agamben, 1998) and their characterization of this situation as "slavery" due to the deprivation of human standards, allude to biopolitical production processes. In the workplace, the dynamics of “bare life,” referred to as “naked labor,” trigger a process that alienates workers from their personal lives and the products and services they produce (Whyte, 2009: 57). Slavery is defined as a process sustained through violent domination

relationships (Androff, 2011: 211). The metaphorical depiction of this experience as slavery by tourism workers residing in staff accommodations serves to underscore the persistent domination dynamics that permeate both the professional and personal domains within the tourism sector.

Endurance

The study demonstrates that workers in the "Endurance" group formed by the metaphors of "War", "Survival", "Torture", and "Struggle for Life," find themselves in a work and life dynamic where they struggle even to meet their basic needs for survival. Issues pertaining to hygiene, the cohabitation of numerous workers within the same living quarters, irregular sleep patterns, and challenges associated with meeting fundamental needs have been likened to the metaphors of "war" and "torture" by the workers themselves.

Consequently, staff accommodation does not function as a space that provides workers with rest and the reproduction of labor under humane conditions, but rather facilities that have become a burden, resulting in physical and mental exhaustion. This outcome aligns with the findings of studies that have determined that tourism cannot be evaluated within the scope of "decent work." In view of these findings, it is evident that working conditions in tourism are amenable to enhancement within the framework of "decent work and economic growth" as outlined in the eighth Sustainable Development Goal (Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller, 2019: 1037).

Uncertainty

The concept of "uncertainty" is articulated through the metaphors of "gambling" and "poisoned honey". The terms "risk" and "uncertainty" are often used to describe the fact that the process of lodging can vary depending on the employer's attitude. Furthermore, they point to the social and cultural crises that may arise due to the fact that the person may not know the people with whom they will be staying. Consequently, the phenomenon of living in staff accommodation while engaging in tourism-related employment can be analyzed within the framework of precariousness theory. In order to evaluate work in tourism, it is necessary to consider the context of precariat labor processes due to its seasonal nature (Keith and Christian, 2016: 31; Robinson, Martins, Solnet and Baum, 2019: 1009). In this regard, the scope of the evaluation should be expanded to include living in staff accommodations. Furthermore, with regard to the issue of covering essential living expenses, such as rent, workers regard residing in staff accommodation as a disadvantageous arrangement.

Ambivalence

In conclusion, upon thorough examination of the metaphors of home-shelter and student staff accommodation, along with the workers' justifications, it becomes evident that these metaphors engender ambivalence. The concept of accommodation in staff accommodations, which combines two opposing experiences, has been described with contradictory metaphors such as "Student staff accommodation/KYK dorm", "Home", "Shelter", "Room only for sleeping", and "Source of motivation." Employees have indicated that the value they receive from the company is directly proportional to the opportunities it offers them. It has been determined that the opportunities offered to employees have a direct effect on their motivation, and it has been determined that the

staff accommodation experience has a vital impact on the work experience within the scope of decent work (Winchenbach, et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This study examines the experiences of individuals who live in staff accommodation while working in the tourism sector and demonstrates that these living spaces have become an integral component of the organization of work in tourism. The findings indicate that staff accommodation is experienced by tourism workers not merely as a place of shelter, but as a space in which work, control, emotion, and everyday life are deeply intertwined. Through the metaphors articulated by workers, staff accommodation emerges as a process that reshapes perceptions of enclosure, servitude, endurance, uncertainty, and ambivalence.

When the metaphor groups are considered collectively, one of the central patterns identified in the study is the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work life. Living in staff accommodation situates workers within a spatial and temporal continuum in which employers' professional expectations frequently extend into personal time and living space. This condition directly affects workers' psychological well-being, perceptions of autonomy, and their capacity for rest and recovery. The simultaneous emergence of metaphors related to enclosure, servitude, endurance, uncertainty, and ambivalence demonstrates that accommodation practices play a central role not only in shaping labor relations in tourism, but also in structuring workers' everyday lived experiences.

From an applied perspective, these findings suggest that understanding the labor regime in the tourism sector requires attention not only to workplaces, but also to the living spaces in which labor is reproduced. Staff accommodation plays a decisive role in shaping employees' quality of life, well-being, and overall work experience. For this reason, it is important for sector stakeholders to approach staff accommodation not as a secondary benefit that merely provides housing, but as a structural component that must be addressed within the framework of decent work principles. Accordingly, policy discussions and organizational strategies concerning working conditions in the tourism sector should be expanded beyond the workplace to include the living spaces provided to employees.

Finally, this study contributes to the tourism labor literature by rendering experiences of staff accommodation visible through metaphor analysis. Future research may build on these findings by employing in-depth interviews to gain a more detailed understanding of the background and contextual dynamics underlying the experiences revealed through metaphors. Such research could develop a more comprehensive understanding of how labor spaces and living spaces jointly shape work experiences, living conditions, employee well-being, and organizational practices in the tourism sector.

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Willing Hearts, Tied Hands: Constraints to Pro-Environmental Practices in South Africa's Accommodation Industry

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper critically examines the factors constraining the implementation of pro-environmental strategies in South African accommodation establishments, focusing on why willingness to act does not translate into sustained practice.

Study design/methodology/approach: Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, the study used a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 accommodation suppliers selected through purposive sampling. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The findings reveal a strong intention–action gap, although all participants expressed willingness to adopt pro-environmental practices, implementation remained limited, fragmented, and reactive. The key barriers are structural rather than motivational, including limited financial capacity, infrastructural constraints, weak institutional support and a lack of accessible incentives. Suppliers most often implement sustainability actions reactively in response to crises such as energy and water insecurity, rather than proactively. These findings indicate that capacity constraints, rather than attitudes or awareness, are the primary reason for poor implementation.

Originality/value: The study reframes the intention–action gap as a capacity-dependent and context-specific phenomenon. By foregrounding structural feasibility in a developing-country context, it challenges voluntarist sustainability models and calls for locally grounded, institutionally supported approaches to tourism sustainability.

Keywords: Pro-environmental behaviour, Accommodation establishments, Sustainability implementation, Perceived behavioural control, South Africa

Introduction

Tourism is widely recognised as a significant contributor to environmental degradation due to high levels of energy consumption, water use, waste generation, and carbon emissions, particularly within the accommodation sector (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024). As destinations increasingly depend on natural and environmental resources to maintain competitiveness, concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of tourism development have intensified (Đurić et al., 2025). Although sustainability is widely discussed in South African tourism policy, empirical evidence suggests that its structured adoption remains limited in practice. For example, research on environmental practices in South African accommodation establishments found that only about 27.5% of establishments had water-conservation measures, 22.5% reported energy-conservation activities,

and only around 10–15% had formal practices for wastewater, solid-waste or air-quality management (Caroline & Maeti, 2025).

Moreover, the uptake of formal sustainability certification has historically been low and declining; while around 500 establishments participated in recognised certification schemes in 2009, this number had dropped to fewer than 200 by 2019 (Caroline & Maeti, 2025). These figures suggest that structured, comprehensive sustainability efforts remain the exception rather than the norm in the sector. In response, pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) has emerged as a critical pathway for promoting environmental sustainability within tourism systems (MacInnes et al., 2022).

Accommodation establishments occupy a strategic position within the tourism value chain and are frequently identified as key actors in advancing environmentally responsible practices, given their intensive use of energy, water, and materials (Alreahi et al., 2023). Previous research indicates that many accommodation suppliers express positive attitudes towards environmental sustainability and demonstrate a willingness to adopt pro-environmental strategies (Chan, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2022). However, despite this stated willingness, the practical implementation of such strategies remains limited, particularly within developing-country contexts such as South Africa (Rogerson, 2019).

Existing studies on pro-environmental behaviour in tourism have predominantly focused on tourists' motivations, attitudes, and behavioural intentions (Han, 2021; Han & Kim, 2010; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2017) with comparatively less attention paid to the operational and structural realities faced by accommodation suppliers. Where suppliers have been examined, research often highlights their willingness to engage in environmentally responsible practices, while under-exploring the constraints that prevent these intentions from translating into action (Galati et al., 2023; Gandhi et al., 2025). Consequently, the factors hindering the implementation of pro-environmental strategies at accommodation establishments remain insufficiently understood.

Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), this study adopts perceived behavioural control as an interpretive lens to explain the gap between pro-environmental willingness and implementation (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). From this perspective, even when accommodation suppliers hold favourable attitudes towards environmental sustainability, their ability to act is shaped by resource availability, infrastructural capacity, institutional support, and organisational conditions (Hamza & Rego, 2025). In the South African accommodation sector, these constraints are often compounded by financial limitations, uneven institutional support, and contextual challenges associated with operating in a developing tourism economy (Litheko, 2021).

Accordingly, this paper focuses exclusively on the factors hindering the implementation of pro-environmental strategies at South African accommodation establishments, rather than on supplier attitudes, motivations, or behavioural intentions. The purpose of the paper is to critically assess why willingness to adopt pro-environmental strategies fails to translate into action within this context.

Environmental sustainability and the accommodation sector

Tourism's contribution to environmental degradation has been extensively documented, with the accommodation sector identified as one of the most resource-intensive components of the tourism system (Legrand et al., 2022). High levels of energy consumption, water use, waste generation, and land transformation associated with accommodation services position this sector as a critical site for sustainability intervention (Bux et al., 2022). As destinations increasingly confront resource scarcity and climate-related pressures, accommodation establishments are under growing scrutiny for their environmental performance.

Beyond their operational footprint, accommodation providers occupy a strategic position within the tourism value chain due to their sustained interaction with guests (NDT, 2022). This dual role as major resource users and primary points of contact with tourists creates both responsibilities and opportunities (Wu et al., 2021). Consequently, the accommodation sector has been repeatedly highlighted as a key leverage point for advancing environmentally sustainable tourism through both operational change and behavioural influence (Eschenbrenner et al., 2023).

Despite this recognised importance, sustainability integration within accommodation operations remains uneven and fragmented (Kalefa & Gado, 2024). At scale, incremental savings in energy, water, and waste management can become financially significant, reinforcing sustainability adoption as a strategic business decision rather than a values-driven one, while smaller and independently owned operators exhibit more limited and informal engagement (Polas et al., 2023). This pattern suggests that sustainability implementation cannot be adequately explained by environmental awareness alone and must be understood in relation to broader structural and contextual conditions.

Pro-environmental behaviour in tourism: from intentions to context

Pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) has emerged as a central concept in tourism sustainability research, reflecting efforts to understand how individual actions contribute to environmental outcomes (Greene et al., 2024; MacInnes et al., 2022). The dominant body of literature has focused on tourists' environmental attitudes, values, and intentions, often concluding that travellers express strong support for sustainability in principle.

However, a persistent intention–behaviour gap has been widely reported, particularly in leisure contexts where relaxation, indulgence, and perceived entitlement shape consumption patterns (Barr et al., 2011). Tourists frequently suspend everyday environmental norms while on holiday, justifying resource-intensive behaviours as part of the tourism experience (Dolnicar, 2020). These findings have raised questions about the effectiveness of attitude-based and voluntarist approaches to behavioural change in tourism

Critically, the prevailing focus on individual tourists has marginalised the role of tourism suppliers in shaping behavioural contexts (Musavengane, 2019). By prioritising psychological explanations, much of the literature has overlooked how infrastructural arrangements, service design, and institutional conditions enable or constrain pro-environmental action (Dolnicar, 2020). As a result, the behavioural environments created by tourism providers within which tourists make consumption decisions remain under-theorised and under-examined empirically.

Sustainability implementation in developing-country tourism contexts

In developing-country contexts, sustainability implementation is shaped by structural conditions that differ markedly from those assumed in much of the Global North-centric literature (Holden, 2019). While policy frameworks increasingly endorse responsible and sustainable tourism, implementation within the accommodation sector is often voluntary and weakly institutionalised. Consequently, uptake is uneven and heavily mediated by business capacity, access to resources, and perceived economic risk (Panda & Bimpli, 2025).

South Africa exemplifies these challenges. The accommodation sector is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises operating under financial constraints, infrastructural limitations, and limited technical support (Caroline & Maeti, 2025; Rasethuntsa & George, 2025; Rogerson, 2013; Spenceley, 2012). For many operators, sustainability investments compete directly with short-term survival imperatives, restricting the adoption of capital-intensive environmental technologies and formal management systems (Mbangeni, 2025; Schwartz et al., 2008; Spenceley, 2007). As a result, sustainability initiatives are frequently incremental, informal, or crisis-driven rather than strategically embedded (Panda & Bimpli, 2025).

At the same time, South African accommodation establishments are increasingly exposed to external sustainability expectations through international tourism markets (Matiza & Slabbert, 2025). Visitors from regions where environmental standards are more firmly institutionalised bring with them expectations shaped by prior experiences and global sustainability discourses (Lundén et al., 2025). This produces a critical tension between global sustainability norms and local operational realities. In this context, sustainability implementation cannot be framed as a simple matter of willingness or awareness; it must be understood as a capacity-dependent process that requires guidance, support, and contextual sensitivity.

Accommodation suppliers as behavioural intermediaries

Accommodation suppliers are uniquely positioned to influence tourist behaviour by shaping the material and social environments within which consumption occurs (Liu et al., 2022). Through operational practices, service encounters, and communication strategies, suppliers can embed sustainability cues into everyday tourism experiences (Sigala, 2020). Empirical studies demonstrate that interventions such as linen reuse programmes, energy- and water-conservation prompts, waste separation systems, and staff-led environmental communication can encourage more responsible tourist behaviour (Dolnicar et al., 2016, 2019; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020; McCarroll et al., 2024).

These findings position accommodation suppliers as behavioural intermediaries capable of translating sustainability objectives into observable practices. However, the extent to which suppliers can fulfil this role depends on their operational capacity and institutional context. Financial constraints, perceived risks to guest satisfaction, limited policy support, and uncertainty regarding return on investment frequently undermine sustained implementation (Elshaer et al., 2025).

As a result, while the accommodation sector is often rhetorically positioned as a driver of sustainability transitions, its practical ability to act as a change agent remains uneven (Grasso & Delatin Rodrigues, 2025). Understanding this disparity requires analytical frameworks that move beyond motivational explanations and engage more directly with the conditions under which sustainability is implemented or constrained in practice.

Theoretical perspectives on supplier-led sustainability

To interrogate the gap between sustainability intentions and implementation, this study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Social Learning Theory (SLT).

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour conceptualises behaviour as the outcome of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). While TPB-based studies in tourism frequently report positive environmental attitudes among both tourists and suppliers, perceived behavioural control consistently emerges as a limiting factor (Han, 2021). In the accommodation sector, this construct encompasses access to financial resources, infrastructural capacity, institutional support, and regulatory clarity. In situations characterised by structural constraints, perceived behavioural control may significantly weaken the translation of positive intentions into action (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021). TPB therefore provides a useful lens for understanding why willingness to adopt pro-environmental practices does not necessarily result in sustained implementation, particularly in developing-country settings.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory emphasises the role of observation, modelling, and reinforcement in shaping behaviour (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Applied to tourism, SLT highlights how tourists can acquire pro-environmental behaviours by observing sustainability practices modelled by suppliers and staff (Prawira et al., 2024). Visible and participatory sustainability initiatives create opportunities for observational learning, normalising environmentally responsible behaviour within the tourism experience (Chen et al., 2022). From this perspective, accommodation establishments function not only as service providers but also as social environments in which sustainability norms can be demonstrated and reinforced. The effectiveness of such processes, however, depends on the consistency and credibility of supplier-led practices.

Integrating TPB and SLT enables a more comprehensive understanding of supplier-led sustainability. While TPB explains the internal and structural conditions shaping suppliers' capacity to act, SLT elucidates the mechanisms through which supplier behaviour can influence tourists. Together, these frameworks support a shift from intention-centred explanations to a more contextualised analysis of sustainability implementation as a socially mediated, capacity-dependent process.

Despite extensive research on pro-environmental attitudes and intentions, limited attention has been paid to the practical realities of sustainability implementation within accommodation establishments, particularly in developing countries (Lange, 2022; Lin et al., 2022; Prawira et al.,

2024). Existing studies rarely interrogate how global sustainability expectations intersect with local constraints, or how these tensions shape suppliers' ability to act as behavioural change agents. This study addresses this gap by reorienting analytical attention away from willingness and towards the contextual, structural, and institutional factors that hinder the implementation of pro-environmental strategies at accommodation establishments. By foregrounding the South African context where sustainability readiness remains uneven but international pressure is intensifying, the study contributes a more grounded and policy-relevant understanding of supplier-led sustainability in tourism.

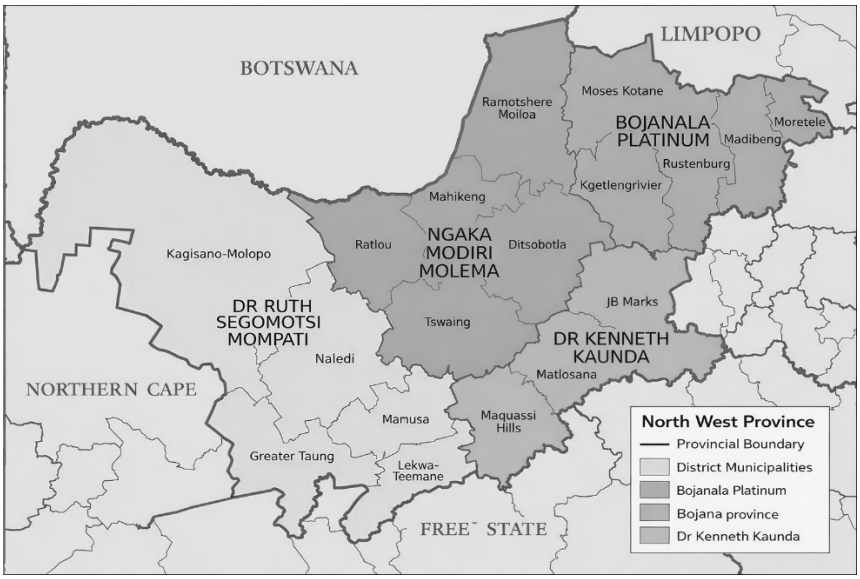
Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm, which is appropriate for exploring how social actors construct meaning around complex phenomena within specific contexts. The interpretivist stance enabled an in-depth examination of accommodation suppliers' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of pro-environmental strategies, recognising that sustainability practices are socially embedded and shaped by contextual conditions (Makoondlall-Chadee & Bokhoree, 2023).

A qualitative research design was employed to capture the nuanced, context-dependent nature of implementation constraints in accommodation establishments. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for investigating the intention–action gap, as they allow exploration of underlying mechanisms, perceptions, and organisational dynamics that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative measures alone (Roos & Botha, 2022). This design aligns with the study's objective of understanding why willingness to adopt pro-environmental strategies fails to translate into action.

The study was conducted within the North West province of South Africa, in the South African accommodation sector, providing a relevant perspective for examining the implementation of sustainability in a developing-country tourism economy. South Africa's accommodation sector comprises a diverse range of establishment types, including hotels, lodges, and guesthouses, operating across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings (Ramaano, 2024). While sustainability initiatives and policy frameworks promoting responsible tourism exist, accommodation suppliers often operate under conditions of financial pressure, infrastructural constraints, and uneven institutional support (Khater et al., 2025). These contextual characteristics make South Africa an appropriate setting for examining implementation barriers associated with the intention–action gap.

Figure 1. North West Province, South Africa



Source: North West Tourism Board

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who were directly involved in the management or operation of accommodation establishments and, therefore, able to provide informed insights into sustainability decision-making and implementation processes. Participants included owners, managers, and senior operational staff responsible for strategic or operational aspects of accommodation management. Demographic information indicates that participants were highly experienced, with most occupying managerial or executive roles and demonstrating substantial industry tenure, commonly ranging from approximately 5 to over 35 years and born between 1968 and 1996. Participants were employed across a range of establishment types, including hotels, lodges, guesthouses, resorts, and game reserves, and possessed relevant qualifications in tourism, hospitality, conservation, and environmental management. This profile supports the credibility of participants' insights into operational decision-making and sustainability implementation.

The sample was purposively designed to capture variation across accommodation types, establishment sizes, and geographical contexts. This diversity enabled the exploration of both shared patterns and context-specific differences in implementation experiences. Data collection proceeded until thematic saturation was reached at approximately fifteen (15) interviews, defined as the point at which no substantially new themes or insights emerged.

Table 1: Establishments

Location	Type of establishment	Star rated
Dr Ruth S Mompati Region	Lodge	No rated
Ngaka Modiri Molema Region	B&B	Not rated
Bojanala Platinum	Hotel	3 stars
Bojanala Platinum	Hotel	2 stars
Dr Kenneth Kaunda	Hotel	3 stars

Ngaka Modiri Molema Region	Lodge	Not rated
Bojanala Platinum	Guest House	Not rated
Dr Ruth S Mompati Region	Hotel	4 stars
Dr Kenneth Kaunda	B & B	Not rated
Bojanala Platinum	Hotel	3 stars
Ngaka Modiri Molema Region	Game reserve	Not rated
Bojanala Platinum	Game reserve	2 star
Dr Ruth S Mompati Region	Resort Centre	4 stars
Dr Kenneth Kaunda	Resort Centre	4 stars
Bojanala Platinum	Luxury resort and casino	5 stars

Source: Primary data

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between September and October 2023. Semi-structured interviews were used, allowing flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. The semi-structured format allowed participants to reflect on their willingness to adopt pro-environmental strategies and the practical challenges encountered during implementation.

The interview guide focused specifically on the factors hindering the implementation of pro-environmental strategies. Key areas of inquiry included financial and resource constraints, infrastructural and technological limitations, institutional and external support mechanisms, and organisational practices influencing sustainability implementation (Conedera et al., 2023; Yaja et al., 2023). Although the study draws conceptually on the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Learning Theory, theoretical constructs were used as sensitising concepts rather than as rigid analytical categories, allowing themes to emerge from the data.

Interviews were conducted at times convenient for participants and were audio-recorded with informed consent. The duration of interviews varied, reflecting participants' availability and depth of engagement, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, allowing for the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of recurring patterns within the data. The analysis proceeded through multiple stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarisation with the data. Initial coding combined inductive and deductive approaches: inductive coding was used to allow themes to emerge from participants' accounts, while deductive coding was guided by sensitising concepts derived from the study's conceptual focus on implementation constraints informed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Learning Theory. Importantly, these theoretical constructs were not applied as rigid analytical categories but served to orient the analysis, ensuring openness to unanticipated themes grounded in the data.

The coding process was supported by ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software, which facilitated the organisation of codes, development of categories, and identification of relationships between themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Analytical memos were used throughout the coding process to document reflections, emerging interpretations, and connections between themes. These memos supported reflexivity and enhanced analytical rigour.

Themes were refined through an iterative process of comparison and abstraction, ensuring that they accurately reflected participants' experiences while remaining aligned with the study's research objective. The final themes represent patterns of meaning related to the structural, institutional, and organisational factors constraining the implementation of pro-environmental strategies.

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data and careful attention to participants' narratives (Shufutinsky, 2020). The use of verbatim quotations in the results section further enhances transparency and enables readers to assess the alignment between the data and the interpretation (Loh, 2013).

Dependability was addressed through a clear documentation of the research process, including data collection procedures, coding decisions, and theme development. The use of qualitative analysis software and analytical memos helped create an audit trail (Carcary, 2020). Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining reflexive awareness throughout the research process, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than the researcher's assumptions (Janis, 2022).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee, with ethics number NWU-01862-23-A4. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. To protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants are referred to using pseudonyms or numerical identifiers in the reporting of findings.

Results

The results of the study are organised around four interrelated themes that explain the gap between willingness and implementation of pro-environmental strategies at South African accommodation establishments. These themes reflect financial, infrastructural, institutional, and organisational constraints and are interpreted considering the specific contextual conditions within which accommodation suppliers operate.

Financial constraints

The findings indicate that financial and resource constraints are a foundational barrier to implementing pro-environmental strategies in South African accommodation establishments. These constraints were raised by the majority of participants and were frequently positioned as the primary factor shaping decision-making regarding sustainability initiatives.

Participants consistently described the high upfront costs associated with pro-environmental strategies as prohibitive, particularly for energy-efficient technologies, water-saving infrastructure, and waste management systems. While suppliers recognised the environmental and potential long-term financial benefits of such investments, implementation decisions were largely guided by short-term financial viability. This tension was especially pronounced among small and independently owned establishments, where sustainability investments were perceived as competing directly with essential operational expenditures.

"We're compliant, but the lack of government support, like tax incentives for green investments, makes it hard for us to go beyond basic requirements." Another Interviewee mentioned*, "It's hard to justify the initial investment in sustainable technologies, especially when the financial returns aren't immediate."* **(Interviewee 5 & 12)**

Importantly, financial constraints did not operate in isolation but influenced how suppliers evaluated other implementation options. Participants indicated that limited financial capacity constrained their ability to retrofit existing infrastructure, access appropriate technologies, or invest in staff training in sustainability practices. In this sense, financial limitations functioned as an enabling or disabling condition that shaped the feasibility of other pro-environmental initiatives. In addition, uncertainty regarding the return on investment further constrained implementation. Although some suppliers recognised the reputational and efficiency benefits associated with pro-environmental strategies, these outcomes were often perceived as indirect, delayed, or contingent on market conditions. In an operating environment characterised by fluctuating demand and economic pressure, participants prioritised strategies perceived as essential to business continuity over those deemed discretionary.

Taken together, these findings suggest that financial and resource constraints substantially reduce suppliers perceived capacity to act on their pro-environmental intentions. Willingness to implement environmentally responsible practices was therefore conditional on financial feasibility, reinforcing the intention–action gap observed across accommodation establishments.

Infrastructure and technological limitations

The findings indicate that infrastructural and technological limitations pose a critical constraint on implementing pro-environmental strategies, particularly in contexts where physical conditions constrain the feasibility of change. While accommodation suppliers frequently expressed willingness to adopt environmentally responsible practices, this willingness was often conditional on the suitability of existing infrastructure and access to appropriate technologies.

Participants commonly described the physical design and age of accommodation facilities as key factors shaping the feasibility of implementation. Older buildings, which constitute a significant portion of South Africa's accommodation stock, were widely perceived as incompatible with contemporary pro-environmental technologies. Retrofitting such facilities to support energy efficiency, water conservation, or effective waste separation was described as technically complex, operationally disruptive, and financially burdensome.

The interviews were conducted with accommodation suppliers operating across diverse geographic contexts in South Africa, including urban, peri-urban, rural, and semi-rural locations. Infrastructural limitations were particularly pronounced in establishments located in rural and semi-rural areas, where access to reliable municipal services remained a persistent challenge. Participants reported inconsistent water supply, limited waste collection services, and inadequate energy infrastructure as factors that undermined the sustainability of pro-environmental initiatives. In these contexts, even basic environmental practices were described as difficult to maintain, underscoring how location-specific conditions affect the feasibility of implementation.

Technological constraints further compounded these challenges. While suppliers acknowledged the availability of environmentally friendly technologies in principle, many reported limited access to affordable, scalable, and suitable technologies for their operational context. Smaller establishments in particular expressed concerns about their capacity to operate and maintain green technologies without specialised technical support. The absence of local expertise and maintenance services contributed to the perception that technology adoption posed operational risks beyond the initial installation.

Importantly, infrastructural and technological limitations interacted closely with financial constraints identified in the previous section. Participants noted that even when technological solutions were known, limited financial resources restricted their ability to adapt infrastructure or invest in appropriate systems. In this sense, infrastructural barriers were not only physical but also economically mediated, reinforcing the cumulative nature of constraints shaping implementation decisions.

"*Switching to renewable energy is a goal, but in the meantime, we have to keep using traditional power sources just to keep operations running*." **(Interviewee 6)**.

Overall, these findings indicate that infrastructural and technological conditions play a decisive role in shaping suppliers' perceived capacity to act on pro-environmental intentions. Willingness to implement environmentally responsible strategies was therefore contingent on physical feasibility and technological accessibility, reinforcing the intention–action gap within accommodation establishments. In the absence of reliable basic services, including energy, water, and waste infrastructure, pro-environmental strategies cannot be meaningfully operationalised, suggesting that sustainability implementation in such contexts must be approached as a staged process that prioritises foundational service provision before higher-order environmental interventions.

Limited institutional and external support

The findings indicate that limited institutional and external support constitutes a systemic constraint on the implementation of pro-environmental strategies at South African accommodation establishments. Participants acknowledged the existence of government-led sustainability initiatives and sector-level commitments to promote environmentally responsible tourism. However, these initiatives were often perceived as difficult to access, insufficiently communicated, or poorly aligned with the operational realities of accommodation establishments. Limited

awareness of available programmes, complex administrative procedures, and uncertainty regarding eligibility criteria were identified as factors that discouraged engagement with formal support mechanisms.

In addition, existing financial incentives and support mechanisms were deemed inadequate to offset the costs of implementing pro-environmental strategies. Participants noted that while some incentives exist in principle, they do not meaningfully reduce the financial burden of infrastructure upgrades, technology adoption, or staff training. As a result, sustainability initiatives continued to be experienced as largely voluntary undertakings rather than supported practices embedded within broader tourism development frameworks.

Limited coordination and communication between accommodation establishments, government agencies, and industry bodies further constrained implementation efforts. Participants reported few opportunities for structured engagement, practical training, or collaborative learning related to sustainability implementation. In the absence of coordinated support platforms, suppliers often relied on individual initiative and informal networks, thereby increasing perceptions of risk and uncertainty when adopting pro-environmental strategies.

Importantly, limited institutional and external support amplified other implementation constraints. Financial and infrastructural challenges were described as more difficult to navigate in the absence of accessible guidance and targeted support. In this context, willingness to adopt pro-environmental strategies was insufficient to overcome systemic limitations, particularly where sustainability was perceived as an individual rather than a collectively supported responsibility.

"**Interviewee 2***: "Even when we want to invest in sustainable practices, we struggle with the basic infrastructure".* **Interviewee 9** *explained, "The infrastructure simply isn't there in many parts of the country to support large-scale adoption of sustainable practices," while* **Interviewee 7** *added, "Our reliance on non-renewable energy sources like generators during load-shedding makes it difficult to fully commit to being environmentally friendly." This was echoed by* **Interviewee 4.**

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while support mechanisms for sustainability exist within the South African tourism context, their limited accessibility, perceived inadequacy, and weak alignment with accommodation suppliers' needs significantly reduce perceived behavioural control. This contributes to the persistence of the intention–action gap in the implementation of pro-environmental strategies.

Entrenched organisational practices and resistance to change

The findings further reveal that entrenched organisational practices and resistance to change within accommodation establishments play a critical role in hindering the implementation of pro-environmental strategies. Even where suppliers demonstrated strong willingness at the managerial level, internal organisational dynamics frequently constrained the translation of intention into sustained action.

Participants described established routines and habitual ways of operating as significant barriers to change. Pro-environmental strategies often required modifications to daily operational practices, which were perceived as disruptive or difficult to integrate into existing workflows. In the absence

of formalised sustainability policies or internal enforcement mechanisms, environmentally responsible practices were inconsistently applied and easily deprioritised during periods of operational pressure.

Staff-related challenges emerged as a central dimension of organisational resistance. Participants reported limited staff awareness of environmental sustainability, inadequate training opportunities, and low levels of accountability as factors undermining implementation. High staff turnover in some establishments further weakened continuity and reduced the likelihood that pro-environmental practices would become embedded within organisational culture. As a result, management-level willingness was not consistently translated into collective action across the establishment.

Concerns regarding guest comfort and satisfaction also shaped organisational responses to pro-environmental initiatives. Suppliers expressed apprehension that certain environmental measures, such as reduced linen changes, water-saving interventions, or stricter waste management practices, might negatively affect guest experiences. These concerns often resulted in cautious or partial implementation, particularly in highly competitive market segments where guest satisfaction was prioritised.

Importantly, organisational resistance interacted with broader structural and institutional constraints. Participants indicated that limited external support and financial pressure reduced their capacity to invest in staff training or change management processes, reinforcing reliance on existing practices. In this context, organisational inertia was not simply a matter of unwillingness but reflected constrained capacity to manage change effectively.

"*Even when management supports sustainability, it's difficult to change daily routines. Staff fall back into old habits, especially when the place is busy*." **(Interviewee 6).**

Overall, these findings indicate that entrenched organisational practices and resistance to change significantly weaken accommodation establishments' perceived capacity to implement pro-environmental strategies. Willingness to adopt environmentally responsible practices was therefore mediated by internal organisational conditions, contributing to the persistence of the intention–action gap. Participants' narratives highlight the central role of accommodation managers and senior leaders in modelling environmental priorities, shaping organisational norms, and legitimising pro-environmental practices through everyday decision-making and behaviour.

Conclusion

This study challenges a central assumption underpinning much of the sustainability discourse in tourism: that willingness to act is sufficient for meaningful environmental change. In the South African accommodation sector, willingness is not the missing ingredient; capacity is. The findings reveal that the persistent intention–action gap is less a failure of motivation and more a reflection of structurally constrained feasibility shaped by financial pressure, infrastructural fragility, limited institutional support, and entrenched organisational practices.

The implications of this are unsettling. In contexts where access to reliable energy, water, and waste services remains uneven, expecting accommodation establishments to implement advanced

pro-environmental strategies risks becoming performative rather than transformative. Sustainability, in such settings, does not begin with innovation but with stability. The findings therefore suggest that environmental progress in developing-country tourism may require a deliberate return to *"back to basics",* securing foundational infrastructure before layering sophisticated sustainability interventions on top.

The use of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is particularly instructive in this regard. While TPB is often criticised for overemphasising attitudes and intentions, this study demonstrates that its true explanatory power in accommodation contexts lies in perceived behavioural control. Participants overwhelmingly expressed positive environmental attitudes, yet their ability to act was constrained by material and institutional realities beyond their immediate control. In this sense, TPB remains highly relevant, but only when applied as a framework for diagnosing capacity deficits rather than attributing responsibility to individual motivation. Without this reframing, TPB risks reinforcing the very intention–action gap it seeks to explain.

Similarly, Social Learning Theory (SLT) is frequently invoked to position accommodation establishments as sites where pro-environmental behaviour can be modelled and transmitted to tourists. However, the findings complicate this assumption. Social learning cannot occur where pro-environmental practices are sporadic, symbolic, or operationally fragile. When suppliers struggle to maintain basic environmental practices, their capacity to act as credible behavioural role models is undermined. SLT, therefore, does not fail in this context; it is rendered inoperative by structural constraints.

Perhaps most provocatively, the study exposes a structural contradiction embedded in global tourism sustainability agendas. South African accommodation establishments operate within international tourism value chains that increasingly demand visible environmental responsibility, yet in contexts where the institutional and infrastructural foundations for such responsibility remain underdeveloped. Transplanting Global North sustainability models into these settings without adaptation risks deepening inequality and entrenching symbolic compliance rather than enabling genuine change.

Ultimately, this study argues that sustainability transitions in tourism are not only behavioural challenges, but developmental ones. Pro-environmental strategies cannot be expected to succeed in the absence of enabling conditions, and accommodation suppliers cannot act as change agents without being structurally empowered to do so. By reframing the intention–action gap as a capacity-dependent and place-specific phenomenon, this research calls for sustainability frameworks that are locally grounded, institutionally supported, and globally informed, not aspirational blueprints detached from operational reality. Sustainability cannot be expected to flourish where its foundations are fragile. When willingness meets constraint, it is capacity that decides the outcome. Tourism for a better world must therefore be tourism supported by better systems.

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Exploring the key dimensions of internal brand management in hotels: an inductive approach

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Abstract

Purpose: Despite the growing importance of internal brand management in the service sector, it remains theoretically underdeveloped and conceptually ambiguous. This study aims to examine the key dimensions of internal brand management within the hotel sector.

Study design/methodology/approach: Adopting an interpretivist epistemological stance, the study employed a qualitative research design. Nine semi-structured interviews with hoteliers yielded rich empirical data, which informed the development of a measurement instrument.

Results: Results substantiated the widely recognised triad of brand-centred human resource, transformational leadership, and internal communication. Notably, the findings established organisational culture as a remarkably stable and foundational dimension of internal brand management. These findings offer a novel perspective by addressing conceptual complexity and delineating the key dimensions of internal brand management.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the literature by demarcating the specific sub-dimensions necessary for instilling brand values. By capturing these nuances, the study advances the development of a novel measurement instrument, offering a robust framework for both theoretical clarity and practical application.

Keywords: Internal Brand Management, Internal Branding, Organisational Culture, Transformational Leadership, Brand Co-creation

Introduction

Building a strong brand constitutes an organisation-wide responsibility (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). Internal branding scholars emphasise the collaborative role of multiple stakeholders in brand co-creation (Schmidt *et al.*, 2021). Among these stakeholders, employees play a particularly critical role, as they deliver the brand promise to customers, shape brand perceptions, and determine the brand performance (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). Employees are the direct point of contact, influencing perceptions, satisfaction, and overall word-of-mouth. It is thus critical to use these contact points to build the brand. Consequently, internal brand management (IBM) has gained significant prominence in the hospitality industry, especially within the hotel sector (Halim *et al.* 2023). Notably, internal marketing has evolved into IBM (Afshardoost *et al.*, 2021; Koo & Curtis, 2020), which encompasses three core dimensions: brand-centred human resource, brand leadership, and internal brand communication (Koo & Curtis, 2020). However, the conceptualisation of IBM

remains disjointed, stemming from the divergent dimensions postulated by various researchers, who then define the concept based on these differing perspectives (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

Despite the growing importance of IBM in the service sector, it is still in its infancy stage (Saini *et al.* 2022), and its conceptual clarity remains problematic. Practitioners possess extensive knowledge of external brand management, yet lack a comparable understanding of IBM (King, 2017). Although Afshardoost *et al.* (2021) demonstrate that IBM is both unidimensional and multidimensional, its conceptual complexity persists (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). Scholars frequently expand the commonly accepted three dimensions, brand-centred human resource, brand leadership, and internal brand communication, by introducing additional dimensions. For example, Dhiman and Arora (2020, p. 201) introduced 'Perceived Brand-Oriented Support' as the fourth dimension, while others argue that IBM begins with a brand culture co-creation between employees and the organisation (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). Furthermore, IBM activities thrive within supportive work cultures (Baca & Reshidi, 2023; Du Preez *et al.*, 2017; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Barros-Arrieta and Garcia-Call (2021) suggested further empirical validation before recognising these additional dimensions as principal constructs of IBM. This validation is particularly critical within the hotel sector, where service delivery relies heavily on employee-guest interactions, meaning that any conceptual ambiguity in IBM directly affects service consistency and brand performance.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the key dimensions of IBM in the hotel sector through a qualitative epistemological approach. This study seeks to generate rich insights from macro-level leaders (C-suite executives) to illuminate how brand leaders conceptualise and enact brand management practices internally. By examining insights at the strategic level, the study aims to identify brand management practices that shape internal branding and to determine which practices exert the strongest influence within the hotel sector. The findings of this study will make a significant contribution by identifying the key dimensions of IBM, thereby addressing the conceptual complexity and the scarcity of research on internal perspectives of brand management (Lee & Suh, 2023). The remainder of this research paper proceeds as follows: the existing literature on internal brand management, the methodology, the results, the discussion, and the conclusions.

Internal brand management

The concept of internal brand management (IBM) has been frequently conflated with related constructs such as employee branding (Dhiman & Arora, 2023) and internal marketing (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). Scholars contend that these terms describe the same underlying phenomenon, with differences being terminological (Saini *et al.*, 2022). Within the scope of this study, IBM defines organisational initiatives designed to instil brand values into employees (Halim *et al.*, 2023), enabling them to breathe the brand spirit in their daily delivery of the brand promise (Du Preez *et al.*, 2017). Despite growing interest, IBM remains conceptually fragmented, with divergent definitions and frameworks reflecting scholars' preferred dimensions (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Recent empirical work has further suggested that IBM is a tiered, co-creative process involving multiple internal stakeholders (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). This

conceptual incoherence provides a foundation for this study, which seeks to examine key dimensions of IBM within the hotel sector.

Across a plethora of internal branding studies, three antecedents have consistently emerged as IBM's core dimensions: brand-centred human resources, transformational leadership, and internal communication (Saini *et al.*, 2022; Agrawal & Paulus, 2022; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). However, recent studies emphasise organisational culture as a critical enabling mechanism, arguing that IBM activities thrive within supportive corporate cultures (Sousa & Ferreira, 2024; Leijerholt *et al.*, 2022; Baca & Reshidi, 2023; Du Preez *et al.*, 2017; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Earlier works framed this as translating brand ideologies into brand reality through meaningful employee brand experiences in co-creative environments (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), a view echoed by scholars advocating fluid, empowering corporate cultures that facilitate co-creation (Schmidt *et al.*, 2021).

This is critical as an intransigent culture suffocates growth (De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008). Accordingly, beyond the commonly accepted triad, this study incorporates and examines organisational culture as the fourth key dimension of IBM, consistent with claims that corporate culture is co-created between employees and the organisation (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022).

Brand-centred human resources

Drawing on human resource management (HRM) literature, brand-centred HR practices operationalise IBM by instilling brand values throughout the employee lifecycle, namely attracting, onboarding, maintaining, and developing (Dhiman & Arora, 2023; Saini *et al.*, 2022; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). In the attracting stage (recruitment and selection), achieving person-brand fit reduces socialisation costs (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016) and mitigates reputational risks (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). In the onboarding stage, a structured socialisation process seamlessly integrates new hires into the brand culture, fostering positive attitudes and behaviours towards the organisation (Baca & Reshidi, 2023).

The maintaining stage focuses on retaining and motivating existing employees to achieve sustained work engagement and productivity through empowerment, motivation, and management support (Baca & Reshidi, 2023); compensation, both by means of rewards and recognition (Saini *et al.*, 2022); and employee performance (Dhiman & Arora, 2023). Lastly, in the developing stage, training equips employees with the knowledge and skills they need to do their job well, while development enhances their potential for future roles in the organisation (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). While multiple HR practices can be leveraged to instil brand values, their effectiveness depends on contextual fluidity and flexible implementation rather than rigid deployment (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Therefore, this paper interrogates which HR practices strongly drive IBM in the hotel setting.

Brand leadership

Brand leadership is a strategic approach that encourages employees to "live the brand" and deliver on the brand promise consistently (Du Preez *et al.*, 2017). Social identity theory underpins this concept, emphasising that employees' identification with the brand is shaped by leadership actions

(Boukis & Christodoulides, 2018). Transformational brand leadership has emerged as a prominent theme in shaping employee attitudes and behaviours (Sousa & Ferreira, 2024:486; Halim *et al.*, 2023). This leadership style is rooted in role modelling, where leaders inspire through behaviours consistent with brand values (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). It balances profits and purpose while fostering positive transformative change (Schmidt *et al.*, 2021). Leaders motivate employees through emotional appeal, creating a sense of shared commitment and a positive work environment (Baca & Reshidi, 2023).

Leadership plays a critical role in internal branding initiatives by acting as a catalyst for inspiring employees' engagement (Saini *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, brand leadership promotes behavioural change among employees through inspiration (Koo & Curtis, 2020). When leaders participate and align with brand identity, they foster employee engagement and enhance the delivery of brand promises (Lee & Suh, 2023). In the hospitality industry, Xiong *et al.* (2019) argued that brand managers can leverage employee voices to acquire customer insights, drive service innovation, and achieve a competitive advantage. Moreover, leaders can empower employees to perceive themselves as integral contributors to the brand's legacy, thereby fostering brand-supporting behaviours (Kim *et al.*, 2020).

Brand leadership can be ascribed to both macro (executive/board) and micro (operational management) levels (Koo & Curtis, 2020). While the strategic direction often comes from macro-level leaders, the significance of micro-level leadership cannot be overstated. Employees' assimilation of corporate brand values largely depends on their supervisor's brand-modelling behaviour (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2018). Micro-level leaders, such as supervisors and line managers, are pivotal in translating brand values into everyday actions, ensuring that employees feel empowered and confident in their roles (Kim *et al.*, 2020). Transformational leadership at this level creates a positive work environment and supports the development of a brand-oriented corporate culture (Dhiman & Arora, 2023; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021).

Internal brand communication

Recent systematic literature reviews reveal internal brand communication as the most widely accepted dimension of IBM and a powerful predictor of employee attitudes (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Afshardoost *et al.*, 2021). Internal brand communication establishes the critical linkage between the externally promoted brand identity and the responsibilities of employees to deliver that identity through positive attitudes and behaviours (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008). Besides this linkage, internal brand communication increases person–brand fit, which is crucial for the success of IBM initiatives (Konecnik Ruzzier *et al.*, 2021). Value congruency within internal brand communication serves as a foundation for developing employees' affective attitudes towards the brand (Leijerholt *et al.*, 2022). This perspective aligns with Saleem & Iglesias (2016), who argue that internal brand communication is a critical tool for attaining both affective and cognitive employee buy-in.

To maximise its effectiveness, scholars advocate for a systematic bi-directional internal communication approach, where employees are encouraged to contribute ideas for advancing the

brand instead of relying solely on top-down communication (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). In addition, consistency in brand messaging between internal and external stakeholders is suggested to maintain brand integrity (Dhiman & Arora, 2023). In practice, a hotel brand can reinforce its values through regular communication touchpoints such as morning briefings, bulletin boards, corporate newsletters, and podcasts (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018), fostering employee engagement and alignment with the brand identity.

Organisational culture

Organisational culture has been acknowledged as a key dimension of IBM, with employees playing an instrumental role in the co-creation process (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). Leijerholt *et al.* (2022) argue that this construct is critical yet under-researched, calling for deeper academic enquiry. A supportive corporate culture is essential for driving successful internal branding activities (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). In fact, the absence of such a culture defeats the purpose of IBM, which fosters employees to breathe the brand spirit (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Organisations that prioritise supportive corporate cultures enable collaboration among employees in co-creating a unified brand identity (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). Accordingly, scholars contend that brand-centred HR practices drive the assimilation of brand culture and the entrenchment of brand identity (Afshardoost *et al.*, 2021).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that organisational culture is a key driver of brand success, significantly shaping employees' attitudes and behaviours (Saini *et al.*, 2022; De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008). Drawing on Schultz (2003), De Chernatony & Cottam (2008) assert that without a supportive brand culture, employees are unable to effectively enact the brand promise. Numerous constructs related to organisational culture have shown significant relationships with IBM outcomes; these include brand ideologies (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), brand orientation and internal market orientation (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021), organisational practices (Leijerholt *et al.*, 2022), perceived brand-oriented support (Dhiman & Arora, 2023), and culture (Sousa & Ferreira, 2024). Consequently, organisational culture emerges as a significant dimension of IBM, influencing employee attitudes and behaviours that support the brand.

In summary, the literature underscores that IBM is a multi-dimensional construct achieved through an intentional alignment of brand-centred HR practices, brand leadership, internal brand communication, and organisational culture. While brand-centred HR operationalises the brand throughout the employee lifecycle, brand leadership and bi-directional communication serve as the catalysts for inspiring employees' engagement (Saini *et al.*, 2022) and attaining person–brand fit (Konecnik Ruzzier *et al.*, 2021). Ultimately, these dimensions converge to create supportive corporate cultures where employees collaborate in co-creating a unified brand identity (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). However, because the effectiveness of these dimensions depends on contextual fluidity rather than a rigid deployment (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), there is a need to investigate the specific operational realities in the hotel sector. Consequently, this raises the primary question: Which IBM practices are fundamental to internal branding efforts within the hotel sector?

Methodology

Given the conceptual complexity of internal branding, particularly internal brand management (IBM), this study adopted the following methodology.

Research Design

An interpretivist epistemological stance was employed in a qualitative research design. This design enabled the collection of rich empirical data, capturing nuanced, context-specific brand management practices within the hotel sector. Specifically, the study utilised an inductive phenomenological inquiry to explore IBM from hoteliers' perspectives, thereby providing a holistic understanding of its dimensions (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it enabled the study to find out how C-suite executives interpret and implement brand management practices within their hotel brands.

Participants

The population frame for this research entailed five (5) hotel groups operating across South Africa, selected using inclusion criteria to ensure relevance to the research question. Eligible groups shared key characteristics: recent rebranding, diversified accommodation offerings, and several 4-star and 5-star establishments across different provinces. Access to participants was secured through head office permissions and LinkedIn invitations, targeting cross-functional, C-suite-level hoteliers. In line with a procedure used by Agrawal & Paulus (2022), participants were pragmatically chosen using purposive sampling to identify individuals with relevant brand management expertise, while maximum variation sampling ensured diverse perspectives across functional roles and hotel brands. Given the seniority of the roles involved, the participant pool was categorised as a 'hard-to-reach' group, prompting the use of snowball sampling to facilitate access to additional participants. Ultimately, the final sample comprised nine (9) C-suite-level hoteliers who provided sufficient depth to capture the phenomenon within the sector. The sample characteristics are illustrated in *Table 1* below.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Participant ID	Functional Role	Tenure	Hotel Brand
Hotelier 1	Group Human Resource Director	24 years	A, Intracontinental
Hotelier 2	PR & Communications Manager	03 years	A, Intracontinental
Hotelier 3	Group Talent Manager	10 years	A, Intracontinental
Hotelier 4	Group Training & Development Manager	42 years	B, International
Hotelier 5	Group Marketing Manager	11 years	E, National
Hotelier 6	Marketing Director	14 years	A, Intracontinental
Hotelier 7	Group Marketing Manager	03 years	A, Intracontinental
Hotelier 8	General Manager	20 years	D, International
Hotelier 9	Group Human Resource Director	08 years	C, International

Data collection

Data were collected through nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews with C-suite-level hoteliers. Using a funnel approach, the interview guide systematically addressed the research objectives through four phases:

- Phase I: Contextual profiling to establish the participants' tenure and role to validate their expertise.
- Phase II: Exploration of the primary research question is– W***hich practices constitute internal brand management at the ABC Hotel Brand***? –using open-ended responses without predefined themes.
- Phase III: Targeted questions focusing on specific antecedents of IBM.
- Phase IV: Probing questions informed by Boukis and Christodoulides (2020), Dechawatanapaisal (2018), Saleem and Iglesias (2016), and Chernatony and Cottam (2008) to elicit deeper insights.

Interviews were conducted virtually via MS Teams, recorded with consent, and automatically transcribed. In line with King and Grace (2008, p. 362), interviews continued until no new themes emerged; ultimately, data saturation was achieved by the eighth and ninth interviews.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach using NVivo software. Coding was performed manually within NVivo to enable iterative engagement with the data. Independent reviews of coding ensured consistency and strengthened data reliability. Commonalities and variations were identified through close reading and comparison across transcripts. As outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018, pp. 210-218), the analysis comprised six steps: preparation, exploration, analysis, representation, interpretation, and validation. NVivo also facilitated thematic mapping and traceability of insights to original data excerpts.

Ethical considerations

The ethics clearance for this study was granted under reference number 00734-20-A4. Adhering to strict ethical considerations, participants were subjected to a thorough explanation regarding data storage and dissemination procedures. Since the interviews were conducted in a virtual space, consent was sought and obtained before the commencement of the session. Data were disseminated using pseudonyms to abide by anonymity and confidentiality protocols. Furthermore, in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act 4 of 2013, which came into effect in South Africa on the 01st of July 2020, the names of the five (5) hotel groups that participated in this research cannot be disclosed.

Results

This study adopted a qualitative epistemological stance to identify dimensions of internal brand management (IBM) through qualitative themes. The primary interview question focused on internal brand management practices. The resulting themes, shown in *Table 2*, emerged from the participants (hoteliers). *Files* indicate how many participants mentioned a theme, showing the breadth of consensus across the sample, while *references* show the frequency with which a theme appeared across all transcripts, reflecting the depth and prominence of that specific construct.

Table 2: Overview of themes

Themes	*Files*	*References*
Brand-centred HR practices	9	51
Brand Leadership	8	41
Internal Brand Communication	9	78
Organisational Culture	9	66

Theme 1: Brand-centred HR

This theme reflects hoteliers' perspectives on the human resource practices their hotel brands apply to internalise brand values. It emerged from five codes: induction, performance appraisal, reward and recognition, team building, and training and development. Notably, the majority of hoteliers (16 references) underscored the importance of onboarding to integrate new hires into the brand culture. To emphasise the efficacy of induction in imparting brand values, Hotelier 8 stated that their brand conducts a comprehensive induction that takes 12 weeks to complete. Supporting this intensity, Hotelier 4 commented:

We do induction; brand values are obviously a huge part of it. New employees are taken through each value separately to explain what it means, how we live it, and so on.

Training and development received an overwhelming support (22 references). Hotelier 6 stated that brand values are reinforced in all their training modules, while Hotelier 3 underscored that:

Internally, there is a program called 'lodgeability' which essentially takes every single guest encounter that we've been able to identify: from when the person drives in through the gate, to when they drive out the gate at the end of the day. We have taken each one of those encounters and used our brand values to measure how well we structure those interactions.

Reward and recognition were cited as means to bolster internal branding efforts and incentivise behavioural change. Hoteliers noted that its effectiveness is contextual, citing programmes such as employee-of-the-month awards, annual winner based on guests' ratings, personalised cards from the general manager, and scholarships for employees or their children, or both. Hotelier 8 asserted these programmes served as a vital platform for reinforcing brand values and fundamentals. In addition, Hotelier 7 highlighted the importance of remuneration in the overall internal branding endeavours. While team building and performance appraisal emerged, they were least mentioned (2 & 3 references). Nonetheless, Hotelier 8 revealed that performance appraisal reports are used to formulate training plans, while Hotelier 9 stated that individual departments within the hotels are encouraged to undertake team building to foster oneness.

Theme 2: Brand Leadership

Brand leadership consisted of four codes: role modelling, supportiveness, attentiveness, and fairness and transparency. This theme received the fewest mentions (41 references). Role modelling, was supported by more than half of the hoteliers interviewed (14 references), with Hoteliers 1, 7, and 8 emphasising "*walking the talk*." Hotelier 4 stated that managers bear significant responsibility because employee experience is shaped by their interactions with

management. This sentiment resonates with Hotelier 8's assertion regarding how their hotel group increases accountability for its micro leaders and ultimately shapes employee experiences, stating: *We have decided in the group that everybody is a leader. Whether you are the leader of the kitchen apart from management. So, it just speaks to five leadership drivers, and people need to walk the talk, and they need to be committed to these leadership drivers. There is definitely a form of that walking the talk, and making sure I am leading by example, and what I do is what I expect my employees to do, and it will filter back to the guest.*

Supportive leadership, a key factor in instilling brand values, was characterised by involvement, engagement, and empowerment. Illustrating these factors, Hotelier 9 emphasised the importance of "*collaboration with staff*", while Hotelier 1 advocated for a culture that "*makes everyone on an equal playing field*". Furthermore, Hotelier 7 contended that leadership must "*innovate; move forward and take people along*" with the organisational vision. Complementing this perspective, Hotelier 3 described supportive leadership as "*seamless internal processes that enable employees to concentrate on delivering brand promises*."

Furthermore, fairness and transparency emerged as significant, with Hotelier 1 stating that they drive reciprocal affiliation and engender fairness, while Hotelier 2 exemplified that their CEO socialises with staff. Most importantly, Hotelier 9 argued that management should prioritise remedial training over "*blaming something on an employee and making him sign a warning*", which induces employees to improve their performance. Finally, attentiveness, a trait centred on listening and addressing employees' concerns at work, emerged as a crucial code (10 references). Hoteliers 6, 7, and 9 cited *open-door policy, various voicing platforms, and associate engagement surveys,* respectively, as primary tools for demonstrating attentiveness.

Theme 3: Internal Brand Communication

Internal brand communication emerged as the most widely accepted dimension of IBM, receiving unanimous mentions (78 references). Hoteliers cited brand message congruency, educational messages, brand activities, and channels of communication as initiatives central to reinforcement of brand values. Regarding brand message congruency, Hotelier 6 commented:

"Externally, I am communicating the same messages that are being communicated internally. So, I am quite secure in the brand promise that I make to my external stakeholders and guests because I know those values are well known and understood in practice."

Hoteliers use various educational activities to reinforce brand values, including refresher courses, webinars, cause-related campaigns, and engagement modules. Illustrating how these educational messages are disseminated, Hotelier 8 stated that "*We've got the WOW platform that has access links where you can read about things. There is a link to a video that shows the HR Director talking to the group*." Similarly, Hotelier 3 specifically highlighted pop-up messages designed to prompt "*ethical behaviour that we want you (employee) to live out*".

Furthermore, brand activities encompass a diverse range of initiatives, such as corporate social responsibility (Hotelier 2) and employee wellness programs (Hotelier 9), designed to articulate the brand's core values. Through these initiatives, hotel brands operationalise their values, translating

abstract principles such as business integrity and environmental sustainability into tangible actions. Hotelier 9 shared an example of adopting a "*smile through the mask*" principle during COVID-19 to reflect servitude values.

Finally, hoteliers underscored the necessity of diverse, accessible communication channels that encourage dialogue, with interactive social media platforms frequently mentioned as effective for two-way communication. All hoteliers emphasised the role of meetings as a platform for internal communication, with Hotelier 2 noting the transition toward digital platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams, and teleconferencing. Beyond social media and meetings, the hoteliers underscored the efficacy of print and ambient media in reinforcing brand values. For instance, Hotelier 5 noted that brand-related messages are "*displayed all over the office for visual incorporation*".

Supporting this view, Hotelier 4 stated that "*in the back of house, these values are on notice boards, painted on the walls, pasted on the lifts*". Furthermore, Hotelier 8 specified that print media publishes standard operating procedures and employee handbook, which are used to "*remind people of values and fundamentals; everything that they need to know in terms of giving that consistent service*".

Theme 4: Organisational Culture

Organisational culture ranked second most cited (66 references), with hoteliers characterising their brand cultures as predominantly people-oriented, inclusive, driven, and strong. Hotelier 8 exemplified deep internalisation of a people-oriented culture, stating that their "*staff are so kind that they will actually go and give that reward (employee of a month reward) to somebody that is suffering within their team*". In support, Hotelier 7, noted exceptional tenure of their staff as evidence of this culture, stating that "*everyone has been here for 20-30 years*". Furthermore, leadership was repeatedly cited as instrumental in shaping culture, with Hotelier 9 praising its caring philosophy, where leaders model the standard of treatment that employees are expected to extend to guests.

Beyond people-oriented, an inclusive culture emerged as a catalyst for deeper employee engagement. To illustrate the spirit of inclusivity, several hoteliers detailed mechanisms, such as a voting system, which allow employees to participate in developing brand values. Hotelier 8 stated that their teamwork ethos stimulates collaboration and encourages employees to take the initiative in satisfying guests. A collaborative spirit in service delivery nurtures the culture Hotelier 7 described as driven and result oriented. In the same vein, Hotelier 9 stated that "*We get things done, we are very driven. So, when we fall short, someone else picks up*."

Ultimately, the synergy of a driven and collaborative spirit underpins strong cultures. Illustrating a strong culture, hoteliers shared sentiments such as: "*Culture is strong. It just grabs your heart. Our Operations Director has been with us for over 20 years*" (Hotelier 4) and "*The reason I have stayed with our brand for so long is that it has an epic culture. From the very humble beginnings to what the organisation has achieved, I am super proud to be a 'their brand name'"* (Hotelier 6). These sentiments verify that a strong culture not only sustains employee retention but also reinforces the brand identity and values in practice.

Discussion

In the context of brand-centred human resources, recruitment and selection were not mentioned despite their established importance in achieving person-brand fit, reducing socialisation costs (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), and mitigating reputational risks (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). This omission may indicate these activities are still perceived as stand-alone HR functions rather than integral to brand strategy. Consistent with Baca & Reshidi (2023), onboarding was highlighted as a critical tool for integrating employees into the brand culture. Furthermore, in line with Saleem & Iglesias (2016), several reward and recognition initiatives were recognised as essential for sustaining employee engagement and productivity (Saini *et al.*, 2022). Finally, the results suggest that the significance of training and development lies in equipping employees with the knowledge and skills to perform effectively (Baca & Reshidi, 2023), thereby enhancing brand equity.

While brand leadership plays a foundational role in managing HR activities, shaping organisational culture, and driving internal brand communication (Afshardoost *et al.,* 2021), it is surprising that it received the least support among the themes in this study. Nonetheless, the findings supports transformational brand leadership, a style rooted in role modelling, where leaders inspire through behaviours consistent with brand values (Sousa & Ferreira, 2024; Halim *et al.,* 2023; Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). To retain employees, management must empower, motivate, and support their subordinates (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). Ultimately, a supportive leadership style is crucial, as it enables employees to perceive themselves as integral contributors to the brand's legacy (Kim *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the results suggest leadership could leverage employee voices to acquire customer insights, drive service innovation, and achieve a competitive advantage (Xiong *et al.*, 2019).

Consistent with Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali (2021) and Afshardoost *et al.* (2021), the results revealed internal brand communication as the most accepted dimension of IBM. These findings are particularly significant because, in the absence of brand-centred recruitment and selection, internal brand communication remains the primary, and potentially only, channel for hotels to foster person–brand fit (Konecnik Ruzzier *et al.,* 2021). Brand message congruency aligns external and internal messaging, linking a brand-promoted identity with the employee behaviours required to deliver it (Dhiman & Arora, 2023; Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). Finally, the results underscored the necessity of diverse, two-way communication tools, consistent with the bi-directional approach advocated by Kim *et al.* (2020) and Boukis & Christodoulides (2020).

A significant finding of this study is the emergence of organisational culture as a remarkably stable and foundational dimension of IBM. This finding aligns with empirical evidence suggesting that organisational culture is the fundamental driver of brand success, through its capacity to shape employee behaviours (Saini *et al.*, 2022; De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008). The findings stressed the relationship between people-oriented culture and employee retention, which is well-supported in literature (De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008). The results praised a caring philosophy, aligning with contemporary research on the role of leaders in creating a positive work environment (Dhiman & Arora, 2023; Schmidt *et al.,* 2021). Furthermore, the results indicated the importance of "living

hospitality daily", suggesting that brand-aligned behaviour must be a pervasive trait rather than a performative act triggered only by the presence of a guest. Finally, the results promoted inclusivity, resonating with a view that supportive cultures empower employees to co-create a unified brand identity (Baca & Reshidi, 2023). Ultimately, the synergy of a driven and collaborative spirit underpins strong cultures, which enable employees to effectively enact the brand promise (De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the key dimensions of internal brand management (IBM) within the hotel sector. This study not only substantiates the widely recognised triad of brand-centred human resource, transformational leadership, and internal communication (Saini *et al.*, 2022; Agrawal & Paulus, 2022; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021) but also establishes organisational culture as a remarkably stable and foundational dimension of IBM. By employing a qualitative approach, this study offers a nuanced perspective on conceptual complexity, successfully delineating the key dimensions of IBM (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022). Notably, the study's significant contribution lies in its comprehensiveness; by demarcating critical sub-dimensions for instilling brand values, it responds to calls for nuanced insights (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021) and contributes by devising sub-dimensions used in the development of a measurement instrument.

Implications

From a practical perspective, this study offers significant implications for brand management practitioners, particularly hoteliers. Given that practitioners often possess a limited understanding of IBM (King, 2017), these findings provide actionable guidance. Effective internal branding begins with person-brand fit (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016); thus, hoteliers should leverage employer branding to attract talent whose values align with the brand (Saini *et al.*, 2022). For existing employees, HR departments should use tailored training and internal communication to drive assimilation of brand culture and internalise the brand identity through consistent employee engagement (Afshardoost *et al.*, 2021). As employees increasingly seek meaning in their daily roles, managers must nurture supportive cultures that empower them to co-create brand meaning (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021).

Transformational leadership must also strike a balance between profitability and purpose, fostering a climate of positive change (Schmidt *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, line managers and supervisors must leverage their operational proximity to employees and "*walk the talk*" to model brand-aligned behaviours (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020). Furthermore, as experiential learning is highly effective, practitioners should encourage employees to participate in brand activities. For example, ABC Hotel Brand can invite employees to participate in tree-planting initiatives to reinforce its "environmentalism" credo. Finally, interdepartmental collaboration, particularly between HR and marketing, is of utmost importance for the success of IBM initiatives (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, this study reveals the sub-dimension of IBM necessary for brand internalisation. Most notably, the findings necessitate conceptualising organisational culture as a

key dimension of internal branding, rather than the contextual backdrop. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for a multi-level leadership perspective, moving beyond macro-level to recognise that employees' assimilation to brand values mainly depends on the behaviours of micro-level leaders (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2018; Kim *et al.,* 2020). Finally, the identification of brand activities, such as corporate social responsibility and employee wellness program, addresses a gap in theoretical understanding of how abstract principles are operationalised into lived experiences, providing a basis for a more experiential approach to internal brand theory.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study addresses the conceptual complexity of IBM, it is limited to insights derived exclusively from hoteliers. Therefore, future research should validate the role of organisational culture and the nuances of the dimensions across different contexts. Specifically, examining the influence of organisational culture on employee attitudes and behaviours would be valuable. While nuanced qualitative insights were collected, data were collected primarily at the macro-level. Therefore, future studies should investigate micro-level perspectives to capture insights of those tasked with modelling brand behaviours daily. Furthermore, these qualitative insights should be operationalised into a quantitative instrument to empirically capture employee perspectives across a broader population. Collectively, these practical implications and research considerations provide a robust foundation for advancing IBM theory and guiding practitioners in developing effective internal branding strategies.

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Barriers and Enablers to UK Market Entry for Colombian Service Providers: A Case Study of 'Green Trails' in the Luxury Tourism Sector

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines the key enablers and barriers affecting the entry of Colombian service providers into the UK luxury tourism sector, using 'Green Trails' as a case study.

Study design: Conducted as part of an Impact Consulting project where the author served as an International Business Consultant, the paper adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach using secondary data analysis. The analysis is theoretically grounded in, and triangulates, the OLI paradigm, the Uppsala model, and Born Global theory to assess how economic, political, technological, and cultural factors shape market entry strategies for Colombian firms targeting the UK luxury segment.

Results: Findings indicate that unfamiliar cultural contexts, complex regulatory frameworks, and low brand recognition significantly constrain market success. Conversely, sustainability-led positioning, digital storytelling, and the development of strategic partnerships emerge as key enablers. The study proposes a hybrid internationalization approach that combines incremental learning with sustainability branding and digital agility to enhance Green Trails' competitiveness.

Originality: The paper's originality lies in applying established internationalization theories simultaneously to an emerging-market destination management company entering a mature luxury market, specifically the understudied Colombian-UK tourism corridor. The key contribution is bridging the gap between internationalization theory and sustainability-led service firm strategy in luxury tourism sector.

Keywords Colombian service providers, UK luxury tourism sector, sustainability positioning, strategic partnership, digital strategy

Introduction

Background and Context

The global business environment has been transformed by Globalisation which has created new opportunities allowing service organisations to expand operations in international markets. The tourism industry has become an important cog of this process as it promotes exchange of cultures, helps in economic development and creates international cooperation. The process of Globalisation has allowed the service providers to expand into new markets by using innovations in technology, leveraging digital platforms and making use of strategic partnerships (Turcan, 2025). Integrating the global markets has also increased competition which requires organisation

to differentiate their offerings using innovation, sustainability and product/offerings quality (Majeed, 2023).

The Colombian tourism industry has been regarded as one of the key components of its economy which is supported by improvement in political stability, positive government stances and a general increased interest from international community in exploring its cultural and natural diversity. The sector is widely recognised for promotion of sustainable development and helping with generating employment while also playing part in contributing to the GDP of the country. According to Research Hub (2025), Colombia is experiencing consistently increased growth in its inbound tourism with many visitors being attracted through eco-friendly offerings and unique culture. The Colombian service providers specifically the destination management companies (DMCs) are taking advantage of this by providing sustainable travel services which are targeted at established international markets.

Amongst these, Green Trails is a travel agency working towards promoting Colombia's sustainable and luxury tourism to affluent customers. The company specialises in providing bespoke services for travel and promises travel experience that incorporates luxury with sustainability with the aim to promote Colombia's cultural authenticity and natural landscape. The company has already established partnerships with international hospitality brands which includes JW Marriott and Four Seasons which shows that the company can provide service required for operating at global level. However, the potential is not fully utilised as the presence of Colombian tourism operators in western markets is limited.

For Green Trails, the UK represents a lucrative market opportunity as it generates £50 billion yearly in total spending including domestic and outbound travel expense (Visit Britain, 2025b). The market also caters to affluent population who are interested in bespoke, sustainable and exclusive travel experiences (Bailey, 2023). The British travelers are interested in authentic, sustainable and culturally backed travel experiences which increase attractiveness of Colombia. The number of international visitors to Colombia in 2024 were 6.2 million which was forecasted to increase to 6.6 million in 2025 (Adams, 2025). However, the unfamiliar culture, low brand awareness and regulatory restrictions have limited the presence of Colombian travel service providers presence in UK market.

Problem Statement

Colombia's tourism potential is increasing but the service providers are hindered by barriers which limit their entries into markets such as UK. The barriers are related to culture differences, limited knowledge of preferences of local customers and non-existing strategic partnerships with established service providers from UK. Furthermore, the regulatory challenges arising from Brexit which have increased complications for visas, as well as laws associated with protection of consumers further create market entry barriers. According to Taylor et al. (2021) the service organizations looking to internationalize in established markets are hindered by complicated cultural and institutional environments caused due to high customer expectations.

The technological and economic factors also create problems. The entry in a mature market requires significant capital investment in marketing, technology and regulatory compliance which is not feasible for SMEs (small and medium enterprises) expanding from emerging economies (Feng, Derudder, Wang, & Shao, 2021). There are opportunities for firms which can leverage sustainability with storytelling to attract British consumers.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the enablers and barriers which affect the entry of Colombian service providers in UK tourism sector. The focus is on Green Trails company, nevertheless the analysis develops practical recommendations also valuable and transferable to organisations from emerging economies on how to successfully internationalise their operations in mature and culturally distinct markets.

Aim

The study aims to examine the enablers and barriers influencing the entry of Colombian service providers into the UK tourism market, using Green Trails as a case study.

Objectives

- To analyse the trends and structures of tourism market of UK.
- To identify and evaluate the enablers and barriers impacting Colombian service providers entry in UK market.
- To analyse Green Trails current position to understand its strategic fit in UK Tourism sector.
- To develop recommendations for Green Trails for successful market entry in UK.

Research Questions

- What is the structure of UK tourism market; how and where can the Colombian service providers add value?
- What are the enablers and barriers to market entry for Colombian service providers in UK market?
- How is the market entry for Green Trails impacted by cultural consumer behaviour difference between the countries?
- What strategic market entry and positioning approach should Green Trails utilise to stand out in UK market?

Literature Review

With increasing globalisation, both competition and opportunities in the tourism industry emerge, making the internationalisation of service firms increasingly important. Emerging- market service providers need a solid understanding of the unique challenges and barriers in mature economies. The literature on service globalisation and international market entry provides a theoretical and practical context for how developing nations can enter advanced economies such as the United Kingdom.

Recent literature on the tourism economy affirms that digital innovation, strategic alliances, and resource-based competencies are fundamental to overcoming barriers to entering new markets (Li & Cantwell, 2021). However, there are institutional and cultural limits (Abeer, 2023). These

dynamics are fundamental to the understanding of how Colombian service firms such as Green Trails can compete in the luxury tourism market in the United Kingdom.

The combination of OLI (Dunning, 2003), Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977) and Born Global theories (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004) allows to understand how destination management company from Colombia can make use of a hybrid strategy to expand in developed markets such as UK by leveraging the art of digital agility with incremental learning. Such an approach allows the organisations to develop strategically governed partnerships while creating and delivering experiences enhanced through technology to better meet the expectations of the luxury tourist sector of UK. Abrantes (2020) testifies to the benefits of establishing digital partnerships in the service industry.

There is substantial evidence within the literature indicating that Colombian tourism firms face a complex set of interconnected political, economic, social, and technological barriers when attempting to internationalise. Regulatory constraints, particularly in the post-Brexit UK context, create heightened compliance requirements and operational uncertainty (Findlay et al., 2021; Pereverzeva, Dugienko and Osaul, 2021), while high market entry costs and competitive saturation further restrict opportunities for SMEs (Visit Britain, 2025a; Grand View Research, 2025). Macroeconomic challenges, including exchange rate volatility and limited access to international finance, disproportionately affect firms from developing economies (Rahman, Uddin and Lodorfos, 2017). In addition, cultural and perceptual barriers, such as limited brand awareness, trust deficits, and negative destination perceptions, significantly hinder market penetration (Zhurylo, 2017; Williams and Baláž, 2020). Technological constraints, particularly gaps in digital capabilities and reluctance to invest in innovation, further exacerbate these challenges (Sousa et al., 2024).

Collectively, these factors suggest that Colombian firms operate within a highly constrained entrepreneurial environment in international markets, reinforcing the need for integrated strategies that combine institutional awareness, cultural adaptation, and digital transformation to achieve successful market entry.

Methodology

To explore how a Colombian Tourism provider may overcome the barriers and exploit the enablers to successfully enter the UK tourism market, a philosophical approach based on interpretivism is used. The use of interpretivism, widely found in research related to tourism and service industry, has been used in exploring issues associated with behaviours, culture, and sustainability in studies based on internationalisation.

The assumption is that the social reality is generated by individual experiences and meaning which makes it useful for analysing complex phenomena which are dependent on context that includes perceptions of culture, trust, and formation of partnerships in the tourism industry (Leitch et al., 2010).

The ontological stance describes reality as being subjective while an epistemological stance describes the knowledge coming from analysing the context and its meaning. Such an approach

allows for better understanding of the social and institutional factors that affect the market entry strategies of organisations (Risfandini, 2023).

The research adopts a qualitative approach which is exploratory in nature and descriptive by design to analyse the barriers and how and why they impact the market entry process. Further analysis of the enablers of market entry is carried out to help Colombian service provider Green Trails to successfully expand into UK's market. The study adopts a case study approach in which Green Trails is a destination management company (DMC) and its target market is UK's luxury tourism sector. The case study approach allows to carry out an in-depth analysis and develop better understanding of how the strategies of internationalisation can be implemented for market entry.
The case study approach is a common methodological process used in Tourism research as it helps in exploring emerging trends and establishing theories by using real world examples (Mason et al., 2010). This approach uses variety of theories which includes OLI framework, Uppsala model and Born Global theory. Furthermore, market analysis model such as SWOT and PESTLE is also used to provide a more detailed analysis. Data triangulation in which content from academic sources, industry reports and policy papers are used to establish credibility and validity of the results (Risfandini, 2023).
This study makes use of secondary data that include academic papers from peer-reviewed journals on internationalisation, tourism management, and SMEs from emerging markets. This is obtained from databases such as Scopus and Google scholar. Furthermore, industrial reports are taken from websites such as Visit Britain for 2025, Statista, UNWTO, and McKinsey to gather the latest information related to UK tourism industry. Policy papers from UK government are accessed from UK department for Business and Trade, DIT and FDCO to understand regulations and market entry conditions.
Additionally, company specific material provided by Green Trails was used to compare it with its main competitors. The inclusion criteria of research are based on studies being published from 2020 and later (for academic papers). The limitations of this research include restricted access to information such as company strategies and financial structures. However, this is mitigated using multiple data sources, which enhances the robustness of the analysis and supports the validity of the findings (Jordan et al., 2024)To ensure flexibility in interpretation of complex data and establishing insights from data (Fuchs, 2023), a qualitative thematic approach is adopted to find out similar patterns and establish relationships from collected secondary data.
The analysis is done using a manual coding process in which themes are identified and then the data is divided in two major categories which includes barriers such as political, economic, cultural, and technological factors and enablers which includes partnerships, authenticity of brand, sustainability alignment, and digital innovation. The framework of PESTLE is used to evaluate the macro-environmental factors that affect the market entry of Green Trails in UK tourism industry while the SWOT model is used for identifying the internal strengths and identify weakness to make better use of external opportunities. Link is established with theories such as OLI paradigm is used

for explaining motivation for market entry while the Uppsala model is used for understanding incremental learning and the Born Global theory helps in understanding digital agility.

Ensuring triangulation of data from variety of sources ensures strong credible analysis and establishes balance (Seyitoğlu *et al.*, 2025). Using this process, useful insights are gathered which would help Green Trails position themselves strategically for entering and succeeding in a competitive market of UK.

The study ensures reliability through data triangulation by using multiple data sources. The validity of construct is obtained by aligning the interpretations in line with theories and frameworks. Credibility and confirmability are achieved by ensuring efficient referencing process.

Results

The analysis of the data collected from secondary sources is carried out with the aim of identifying the key barriers and enablers affecting Green Trails' expansion into the UK tourism industry. In doing so, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the internationalisation process.

A thematic approach is employed to identify and examine the critical factors shaping market entry. This analysis is supported by the PESTLE and SWOT frameworks, which provide insights into external market conditions as well as the organisation's internal strengths and weaknesses. These frameworks enable a comprehensive evaluation of the challenges and opportunities associated with entering the UK tourism market.

In addition, the data is interpreted through key internationalisation theories, including the OLI paradigm, the Uppsala model, and the Born Global theory. The integration of these theoretical perspectives, alongside a triangulation of multiple data sources, enhances the validity and credibility of the findings. Overall, this approach supports the study's objectives by generating meaningful insights for Green Trails and other similar organisations seeking to enter the UK tourism industry.

Overview of the UK Tourism Market

The UK's Tourism industry continued its remarkable recovery post COVID-19 as it reported an estimated 42.6 million inbound visitors which generated £32.5 Billion for the country (Visit Britain, 2025b). in comparison to the 2023 numbers these numbers show growth in the tourism market as the industry approaches pre-COVID levels. It has been estimated that 43.4 million will choose UK as their tourist destination in 2025 which would contribute £33.7 billion towards the country's economy. This highlights the continued growth of the industry and its ability to maintain sustainable growth year-on-year (Chesshyre, 2025; Grand View Research, 2025; Visit Britain, 2025a). The luxury tourism sector of the country is dynamic and attracts wealthy travellers from across the globe that are interested in unfiltered authentic, sustainability focused and personalised experience with a strong demand for bespoke services. According to Chesshyre (2025) 84% of affluent travellers are interested in emerging markets which provide high-end accommodations and unique stay experiences which are grounded in sustainability and privacy.

The main players of the luxury tourism sector in UK includes Audley Travel (15%), Scott Dunn (20%), Journey Latin America (10%), Black Tomato (10%), Abercrombie & Kent (15%). All these

players have their own diverse and differentiated offerings which includes custom tailor-made inventories and immersion in local cultures. This shows a competitive market which is built by focusing on design, branding and a niche brand positioning to attract customers. For Green Trails, it is important to differentiate themselves by establishing focus on sustainability, ensuring cultural authenticity and providing bespoke services that are in alignment with the dynamic and changing expectations of luxury travellers to build better perception of customer for Colombian travel destinations.

In the industry there are trailblazers like Black Tomato, Journey Latin America, Audley in the UK who have a special focus on affluential customers in the eco-savvy niche market. There is, however, very little representation of Colombia and the greater Andean region in their portfolios, representing a niche opportunity for Green Trails. Competition is strong, but the market demand for genuine and responsible travel offers opportunities for differentiation in the storytelling interactive culture, sustainability and personalised soft luxury travel which is the essence of the Green Trails brand.

PESTEL Analysis of the UK Tourism Market

Political Factors

The political environment of the tourism sector of the UK has been majorly impacted by Brexit, which resulted in revised visa regulations, restrictions on mobility and changes in the taxation implemented on international service providers. These regulations have affected the movement of labour as well as establishment of logistics partnership in the tourism industry (Gupta *et al.*, 2023). The department for Business and Trade (DBT) along with Visit Britain have started initiatives to counter these challenges to attract FDI (Foreign direct investment) for sustainable tourism, which highlights a shift in policy to move towards a more responsible and inclusive growth tourism (Coles, 2021).

Economic Factors

In the past ten years, the UK tourism sector has shown resilience and has survived several economic shocks which included the structural disruptions caused by Brexit and the economic downturn brought about by COVID-19. Currently, in the post-COVID the sector has been navigating inflation and the rising cost-of living affecting the purchasing behaviour of consumers. The sector has emerged from these challenges and is on a path to speedy recovery as it managed to contribute £237 billion to the GDP of UK in 2024 while creating three million jobs (Visit Britain, 2025b). The recovery has not been consistent across domains. The destinations which are in the middle range have felt the effect of reduced customer spendings as the living costs have increased. However, the luxury tourism sector has been thriving. The financially well-off travellers are constantly looking for sustainable, high quality exclusive experiences which has offset some of the impact of economic volatility. This situation has both opportunities and challenges for Green Trails. The fluctuations in the exchange rates between GBP and Colombian peso can impact the pricing structures, however, by focusing on strategic branding embedded in authenticity,

diversification and sustainability the organisation can navigate the macroeconomic problems (Gounder 2020).

Social and Cultural Factors

The cultural expectations strongly impact the success of the market entry. The British travellers tend to seek experiences which are authentic, eco-friendly, and meaningful that must also align with their personal social values and environmental ethics (Morrone *et al.*, 2023).

There are several risks in the minds of travellers associated with travelling to Colombia which is partly because of FCDO advisory which plays a major role in influencing demand. There is a lack of trust and familiarity of Latin American brands, and this plays a key role in acting as a perception barrier. Customising marketing using Schwartz's Value Theory will also enable Green Trails to gain the attention of environmentally conscious travellers in Britain seeking personal development and authentic cultural interactions. Destinations competing with one another in the tourism market can attain and sustain customer loyalty through authentic storytelling (Bassano *et al.*, 2019). With the combination of cultural authenticity and luxury along with sustainability, Green Trails can offer a service modern conscious customers seek that provides emotionally gratifying engagement and pleasant mindfulness. It is important to address these concerns by using a story-based narrative that establishes safety, cultural authenticity and sustainability of Colombia in the minds of UK travellers. This can be achieved by forming strategic alliances with trusted operators from UK and leveraging digital branding to ensure enhanced credibility amongst the tourists which are risk averse.

Technological Factors

To be competitive in tourism industry it is essential to adopt digital transformation as it is an important enabler. The use of AI (artificial intelligence), personalisation backed by data, and the use of marketing tools which provides immersion (such as a virtual tour) is used for shaping consumer decision-making and the relations with suppliers. Work done by Pocinho et al. (2021) highlight that digital engagement and adoption of technology have become an important part of recovery of tourism sector and its ability to retain customers. Green Trails can leverage the art of storytelling, establish partnerships with influencers along with B2B networking platforms which will help in increasing brand visibility in the competitive UK market.

Environmental Factors

Focus on environmental sustainability has become the mainstay of the UK tourism policy. The government has been pushing to achieve the Net Zero strategy and has also initiated sustainable tourism campaigns through Visit Britain to promote eco-certifications for travel agencies, while promoting reduced carbon footprint and focusing on responsible travel approach (John, 2025). The travellers in UK favour travel operators that show tangible and measurable efforts for sustainability and environmental protection. The focus of Green Trails must be on community centred eco-tourism, conservation of partnerships, and alignment with local authenticity to ensure it is adhering to all the sustainability trends and creating a competitive advantage for itself in the luxury tourism sector.

Legal and Regulatory Factors

It is a mandatory requirement for tourism organisations operating in UK to ensure they follow GDPR data regulations, sustainability standards and the reporting standards as well as health and safety rules. These frameworks are in place to ensure the protection of the consumers however, put administrative pressures on the SMEs starting their operations in the country. The compliance is mandatory as non-compliance can lead to legal issues and impact the reputation. For Green Trails it is important that the company collaborates with a UK-based established agency which can help the company with all the legal documentation and certification for smooth compliance (Fasa *et al.*, 2023).

Factor	Key Impact	Implication for Green Trails
Political	Post-Brexit visa and tax changes; focus on sustainable tourism.	Partner with UK firms to ensure compliance and align with sustainability policies.
Economic	Inflation affects mid-range demand; luxury segment growing.	Target affluent travellers with authentic, high-value offerings.
Social	UK travellers value authenticity, ethics, and safety.	Use storytelling and partnerships to build trust and cultural appeal.
Technological	Digitalisation reshapes marketing and engagement.	Invest in AI-driven personalisation and online storytelling.
Environmental	Net Zero and eco-certification drive policy.	Highlight sustainability and eco-tourism credentials.
Legal	Strict GDPR and sustainability reporting.	Collaborate with UK agents to ensure full compliance.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

The greatest strength of Green Trails is that they can represent authentic Colombian culture which they can bring in alignment with the increasing demand amongst British crowd for a more meaningful and immersive experience. The company's portfolio consists of small group tours which are focused on nature and caters to high-end travellers who are interested in exclusivity, sustainability and personalisation. According to Rebuya & Gasga (2022) tourism organisations which have adopted similar approach have found success as they relied on authenticity for achieving recognition in the international market. According to Athwal et al. (2019) the principles of luxury tourism are embedded in sustainability. This is the same principle which Green Trails

works on which includes eco-friendly operations and engagement with community. The company also enjoys benefits from having a strong local network amongst the Colombian communities as well as national tourism authorities that allows for unique authentic experiences which are not easy for the competitors to replicate.

Weakness

Green Trails is also impacted by limited brand recognition in UK which can impact its ability to be competitive and compete with more established operators such as Audley Travel, Black Tomato, and Scott Dunn. The digital presence of the company is also not at par which lacks high-impact storytelling or the use of targeted SEO strategies which are extremely important to appeal to UK audience. Green Trails is a medium-sized DMC and has a small marketing budget as well as limited capacity for investing in large-scale promotion campaigns. Jaafar et al. (2014) state that operational challenges are like other SMEs operating in emerging markets as they also struggle with scaling in international markets because of limited financial and technological capacity.

Opportunities

The luxury tourism market in UK represents good growth potential which is promoted by a strong demand for sustainability, culturally rich and experiential. British travellers are showing a strong shift towards travel destinations that offer more authentic sustainability offerings rather than just prompting eco-labelling and not implementing it (Kunz et al., 2020). The stance of British government post-Brexit has shown its openness to allow non-European countries which opens the market for Colombian service providers to enter via collaborations or making bilateral agreements. Green Trails could also make use of the increased demand of B2B and B2C digital platforms for tourism which reduce the market entry barriers that allows the smaller firms to target rich customers. There is a growing interest of Latin America for UK as the choice destination. This combined with the sustainable travel campaigns promoted by Visit Britain places Colombia as a very promising alternative for sustainable tourism.

Threats

The major threats faced by Colombia are the perceptions around its safety that impacts the traveling behaviour and choice of destinations of British travellers. According to Gov.UK (2025) there are various regions within Colombia that are currently under non-travel advisory due to security concerns which affects the travel perception. Less than 0.5% of the outbound travel from UK was in Colombia in the past years, which highlights the traveller's unwillingness to travel to Colombia. In terms of Global peace index Colombia is ranked 144th out of 163 countries which further dampens the attractiveness. Additionally, the direct competitors in UK which includes Audley travel, Scott Dunn and Black Tomato combined to capture more than 60% of the market share of luxury travel which further decreases the market share available for Green Trails to succeed.

There are several regulatory demands such as GDPR compliance, reporting on sustainability, and requirements of insurance pose further challenges for SMEs that lack legal or administrative infrastructures (Effendi & Narti, 2020). The volatile market and the political instability in Latin

America are also a serious threat which can affect the economy and in turn pricing structures in Colombia and travellers' confidence.

TOWS Matrix

Strategy	**Application**
SO Strategies (Maxi–Maxi)	Use Green Trails' sustainable and cultural strengths to target UK travellers interested in eco-luxury travel. Collaborations with high-end players like Audley or Black Tomato can enhance brand visibility via co-branded itineraries and sustainability stories.
WO Strategies (Mini–Maxi)	To increase online visibility and awareness, leverage digital marketing and storytelling. Engaging with UK travel influencers and content creators can address the challenges of tight marketing budgets and help position Colombia as a safe, premium destination.
ST Strategies (Maxi–Mini)	Counter negative perceptions about safety and reliability via transparency and sustainability certifications. Emphasise Colombia's biodiversity and UNESCO World Heritage Sites, along with community initiatives, to build consumer trust.
WT Strategies (Mini–Mini)	Leverage partnerships with UK-based agencies to streamline administrative tasks and gain compliance credibility within UK business frameworks.

Internal / External Factors	**Opportunities (Maxi)**	**Threats (Mini)**
Strengths (Maxi)	SO: Use sustainability and cultural authenticity to attract UK eco-luxury travellers. Partner with premium brands (e.g., Audley, Black Tomato) to boost visibility.	ST: Counter safety concerns through transparency, certifications, and promotion of Colombia's biodiversity and heritage.
Weaknesses (Mini)	WO: Improve online visibility through digital storytelling and influencer collaborations to overcome limited marketing resources.	WT: Collaborate with UK agencies to ensure compliance and build credibility in a competitive, regulated market.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

The focus of this study was the identification of enablers and barriers that impact the entry of Colombian service providers particularly Green Trails in UK's luxury tourism sector. The results highlight that the UK's luxury tourism sector has high economic value, with a strong focus on sustainability. The industry is a significant contributor to UK's economy and is helped by a customer base that wants authentic, ethical and environmentally friendly experiences.

There are barriers to entry for Green Trails which ranges from cultural distance, poor brand awareness and complicated regulations post-Brexit which have resulted in strict compliance needs. The British consumers are less familiar with Colombian travel operators which results in lack of trust and poor perception associated with safety and political conditions of the country. Complying with the regulatory environment of UK along with requirements for sustainability and data protection creates further challenges for SMEs looking to expand operations in the country.

The enablers for expansion are hinged on choosing the right approach to market entry. It is identified that the use of strategic partnerships with pre-established travel operators from UK who have a vast network and strong customer trust can help lower the risk associated with non-familiarity with the brand while helping to build credibility. The sustainability position of Green Trails also acts as an enabler as the customers value this trait and increasingly demand ethical and responsible approach to tourism.

Leveraging digital story telling along with experiential marketing can help in bridging cultural gaps and increase brand engagement which can help Green Trails in communicating its value proposition in an effective manner.

Strategic Recommendations for Green Trails

The most appropriate approach for Green Trails for entering in the luxury tourism sector of UK is through strategic partnerships. Collaborations with already established travel companies from the UK market which includes Virtuoso or Black Tomato would provide access to the already available client base and help to increase market credibility while reducing the risk associated with market entry. The collaboration would also help Green Trails in acquiring knowledge which would help it in tailoring its offerings to British consumers taste. By participating in co-branded experiences, the company can portray Colombian authenticity with sustainable tourism which would help the company to have a strong grasp in the market.

Green Trails needs also to position Colombia as "The Next Sustainable Luxury Frontier" in global tourism market. To achieve this the focus should be on highlighting Colombia's diversified cultural heritage, and traditions which can attract British tourists who are interested in ethical and meaningful experience. Some experiences could include coffee estate visits, immersion tours for arts, along with nature-based adventures to help Green Trails differentiate the offerings from competitors. The core focus should be on sustainability which should be the at the centre of brand identity. There should be clear transparent communication related to eco-certifications and a genuine attempt at community engagement and local partnerships to support the claims.

Moreover, digital presence in today's tourism industry is essential to remain competitive. Green Trails needs to invest in improving its online visibility by using social media to run targeted campaigns for UK audience. Localisation of content to align with the target audience (British travellers) is essential. This can be achieved using the story telling approach using digital media in which testimonials from customers, images and stories are incorporated for enhancing authenticity and gaining trust. Furthermore, the organisation should explore partnerships with travel influencers for further increasing engagement with the brand. The use of AI to personalise and use data-driven insights for refining communication and get better conversion insights.

Finally, the perception of Colombia is that it is an unsafe destination. Thus, Green Trails must use a transparent and proactive approach to communication by highlighting the progress made by the country in improving its security, the stability of the tourism sector and certifications associated with sustainability to portray a positive image. Collaborating with established travel service providers from UK will increase reliability and enhance safety precautions. The communication should further include ethical practices, conservation of environment to create emotional trust for reassuring prospective travellers.

Hence, this study recommends that the market entry be done in phases to ensure it allows for sustainable growth. In the first phase, pilot collaborations with the established partners should be tried and the market response gauged. The second stage should be to establish a network of agents that help in promoting the brand and build relationship. After gaining familiarity with the market and gaining customer trust, the company should establish its office in UK for gaining direct control over operations, branding and partnerships. This approach allows the organisation to mitigate financial risks and build a brand presence steadily.

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A Bibliometric Analysis of Tourism-Related Gentrification Research: Intellectual Structure, Thematic Evolution, and Emerging Trends

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to systematically examine the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and conceptual shifts within the literature on gentrification in the context of tourism. While early scholarship focused on local manifestations of urban change, recent debates have increasingly centered on planetary gentrification, platform economies, and displacement. This research seeks to map these trajectories to understand how the field has transitioned from descriptive case studies to critical political economy frameworks.

Design/methodology/approach: A comprehensive bibliometric analysis was conducted using the Web of Science (WoS) database, covering 348 peer-reviewed articles published between 1979 and July 2025. The dataset was analyzed using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) and the Biblioshiny interface in R, focusing on co-authorship networks, citation impacts, and thematic evolution etc.

Findings: The results reveal a significant surge in scholarly output post-2015, driven by the proliferation of short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb) and overtourism protests in Southern Europe. The analysis identifies a paradigmatic shift in the literature: the conceptual focus has moved from "tourism development" and "urban regeneration" toward "touristification," "housing financialization," and "social justice." Key theoretical pillars are anchored in the works of Gotham (2005) and Smith (1996), while contemporary debates are shaped by scholars like Cocola-Gant and Jover, who frame tourism as a primary agent of displacement.

Originality/value: By providing a longitudinal mapping of the field, this study demonstrates that tourism gentrification research has evolved into a distinct sub-discipline of critical urban studies. It highlights the growing dominance of "housing" and "environmental justice" as central themes, suggesting a future research agenda that bridges tourism management with urban political economy. Beyond its theoretical contributions, the findings provide critical insights for urban policymakers and planners by highlighting how tourism-led development increasingly functions as a driver of housing displacement and socio-spatial inequality, underscoring the need for integrated tourism, housing, and urban governance strategies.

Keywords Gentrification, Tourism gentrification, Touristification, Bibliometric analysis, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

Gentrification, originally defined by Glass (1964) as the displacement of working-class residents by middle-class newcomers in London, has long been a central theme in urban sociology. However,

for decades, this process was primarily analyzed through residential lenses until a major theoretical shift occurred with Neil Smith's (1979) seminal work. By introducing the 'rent gap' hypothesis, Smith argued that gentrification is a 'back to the city' movement by capital, not people, shifting the focus toward production-side theories and the structural return of reinvestment to the urban core. This political-economic framework was later expanded in his further research on the revanchist city (Smith, 1996). While these foundational theories explained the return of capital, they initially overlooked the role of transient populations.

A critical turning point in the literature occurred when Gotham (2005) introduced the concept of "tourism gentrification," arguing that tourism is not merely a benign consumption activity but a powerful strategy of capital accumulation that restructures urban space. This conceptual expansion marked the beginning of a new intellectual trajectory, linking the global mobility of tourists directly to the local displacement of residents

In recent years, the intersection of tourism and urban change has become increasingly complex due to the rise of the platform economy and the phenomenon of "overtourism" (Díaz-Parra & Jover, 2021). The rapid proliferation of short-term rentals, such as Airbnb, has accelerated the transformation of neighborhoods into "landscapes of consumption," a process increasingly referred to in the literature as "touristification" (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Sequera & Nofre, 2020). Unlike classical gentrification, which implies a permanent change in resident demographics, touristification involves the replacement of residential life with transient visitors, thereby decoupling housing from its social function and turning it into a financial asset (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Cocola-Gant, 2023). Consequently, contemporary research has begun to shift its focus from the aesthetic aspects of urban renewal to the structural mechanisms of housing financialization and social exclusion (Aalbers, 2019; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020).

Despite the exponential growth of academic interest in this domain, particularly after the 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent tourism boom in Southern European cities like Barcelona, Lisbon, and Seville, the literature remains fragmented (Almeida-Garcia et al., 2021; Barrero-Rescalvo & Jover-Báez, 2021). While numerous case studies have documented local resistance and policy failures, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that map the *intellectual evolution* of the field globally. Understanding how the terminology has shifted—for example, from "urban tourism" to "displacement"—is crucial for grasping the broader political economy of contemporary urbanization.

This study employs a bibliometric analysis to systematically evaluate the development of research on gentrification within tourism contexts. As emphasized by Donthu et al. (2021), bibliometric methods allow for an objective assessment of large volumes of scientific data, revealing underlying theoretical structures and emerging trends that qualitative reviews may overlook. By analyzing 348 articles indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) from 1979 to 2025, this research aims to answer the following questions: How has the conceptual framework of the field evolved over the last four decades? Who are the influential authors and institutions shaping the theoretical debate? And most importantly, what are the emerging themes that signal the future direction of this research domain?

Through this analysis, the study seeks to demonstrate that tourism gentrification is no longer a niche topic but a central pillar of critical urban studies, increasingly intersected with debates on sustainability and spatial justice.

Methodology

Bibliometric analysis was adopted as the primary methodological approach of this study in order to systematically examine the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and research trends related to gentrification within the context of tourism. As emphasized by Donthu et al. (2021), bibliometric analysis enables a quantitative and objective assessment of large volumes of scientific publications, allowing scholars to identify influential works, collaboration patterns, and emerging research themes. This approach facilitates the exploration of key bibliographic attributes such as authorship, citations, co-authorship networks, journals, publication years, and keywords, thereby offering a comprehensive overview of knowledge development within a specific research domain (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

The Web of Science (WoS) database was selected as the sole data source for this study due to its rigorous indexing standards, extensive citation coverage, and widespread use in bibliometric research. WoS provides access to peer-reviewed, high-impact academic publications across multiple disciplines, ensuring both scientific reliability and methodological robustness (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). In addition, its full compatibility with bibliometric visualization tools such as VOSviewer enhances the consistency and accuracy of network-based analyses.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted in WoS using the keyword string “gentrification” AND “tourism” across all fields. The search covered publications from 1979 to 02 July 2025 and initially yielded 1153 records. To ensure thematic relevance and analytical coherence, a series of inclusion and exclusion criteria consistent with the SPAR-4-SLR and PRISMA protocols were applied.

First, only peer-reviewed journal articles were retained, while books, book chapters, conference proceedings, editorial materials, and other document types were excluded. Second, the language was restricted to English. Third, Early Access publications indexed in WoS were removed to ensure citation stability and comparability. Following these screening steps, a refined dataset of 348 articles was obtained and used for subsequent analyses. To enhance the reliability of network structures and minimize data inconsistencies, author name variations were standardized using the thesaurus file feature in VOSviewer. This process resolved discrepancies arising from alternative spellings or formatting of author names, thereby improving the accuracy of co-authorship, citation, and thematic analyses.

Bibliometric analyses were conducted using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) in conjunction with the Bibliometrix package and Biblioshiny interface in RStudio. These tools were employed to perform performance analyses, visualize collaboration networks, map keyword co-occurrence patterns, and identify major thematic clusters within the literature. Through this integrated analytical framework, the study systematically explored the evolution of research on gentrification in tourism

contexts, highlighting dominant research streams, emerging trends, and intellectual linkages across the field.

Table 1. Alignment between the PRISMA protocol and the SPAR-4-SLR protocol.

SPAR-4-SLR & PRISMA	Evaluation Item	Stage / Description
Data Collection – Identification	Search focus	Gentrification and tourism
	Search (keyword) string	"gentrification" OR "tourism gentrification" OR "touristification"AND "tourism"
	Search period	1979 – 02 July 2025
	Database	Web of Science (WoS)
	Search field	All fields
	Initial search results	1153 documents
Screening – Eligibility	Document type	Research articles were included
	Language	English
	Publication stage	"Early Access", "Book Chapters" records in Web of Science were excluded
	Source type	Journals
	Filtered results	357 articles
Merging and Cleaning	Data standardization	Author names,and synonyms were standardized using a thesaurus file. Two thesaurus files, were created, one for use in VoSviewer and one for use in Biblioshiny.
	Duplicate records	Removed
	Final dataset	348 articles
Analysis Stage	Analysis method	Bibliometric analysis
	Software	VOSviewer (v.1.6.20); RStudio (Bibliometrix, Biblioshiny)
	Units of analysis	Bibliometric analysis, performance analysis
	Research orientation	Trend analysis

Note: While the PRISMA statement was adopted to ensure transparency and standardization in reporting the screening process (Page et al., 2021), the SPAR-4-SLR protocol (Paul et al., 2021) was utilized to structure the methodological execution. Aligning these two protocols allows for a dual advantage: SPAR-4-SLR provides the necessary scientific rationales for decision-making

during the assembly, arrangement, and assessment phases, specifically tailored for social science reviews, while PRISMA ensures the study meets global reporting standards for systematic reviews.

Results

The bibliometric dataset analyzed in this study covers the period from 1979 to 2025 and consists of 348 scholarly articles published across 135 academic sources. The observed annual growth rate of 19.31% indicates a rapid and sustained expansion of research interest in tourism-related gentrification, reflecting the increasing academic attention to tourism-driven urban transformation processes in recent years. A total of 624 authors contributed to the literature, with 61 single-authored publications, suggesting that the field is largely characterized by collaborative research practices. This is further supported by an average of 2.53 co-authors per document and an international co-authorship rate of 24.83%, highlighting the growing transnational nature of scholarship on tourism-induced urban change. In terms of intellectual diversity, the dataset includes 990 author keywords, demonstrating a rich and evolving conceptual landscape. The 15,516 cited references indicate strong theoretical grounding and extensive engagement with broader urban studies, political economy, and tourism research traditions. The average age of documents (4.14 years) suggests that the field is relatively young and dynamically developing, while the average of 19.66 citations per article reflects a moderate to high scholarly impact, underscoring the relevance and visibility of tourism-related gentrification research within the academic community.

Overall, these indicators collectively reveal a rapidly expanding, increasingly collaborative, and theoretically robust research domain, positioning tourism-related gentrification as a central topic within contemporary urban and tourism studies.

Addionally, an examination of the distribution of publications between 1987 and 2025 reveals a substantial acceleration in scholarly output, particularly after 2020. During the years 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2024, the annual number of publications stabilized at approximately 36–37 articles, indicating both continuity and a sustained increase in academic interest in this field. This growth can be associated with the renewed global reassessment of tourism's spatial impacts, especially in the post-pandemic context. Prior to 2010, the relatively limited number of publications suggests that the topic had not yet emerged as a prominent academic focus, highlighting its comparatively recent consolidation within the scholarly literature.

Author Citation and Co-authorship Analysis

The bibliometric analysis conducted using VOSviewer reveals the most prominent authors in the field in terms of both productivity and academic impact. The analysis was limited to authors with at least one publication and a minimum of ten citations. In terms of productivity, Jover emerges as the most prolific author with four publications (Jover Baez, 2019; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2022; Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2024), followed by Kato, who contributed three publications (Kato & Takizawa, 2022; Tanaka, Kato, & Matsushita, 2023; Yoshida & Kato, 2024). Authors such as Cocola-Gant (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Cocola-Gant, 2023), Díaz-Parra (Díaz-Parra & Jover, 2021), Martínez-Hernández (Martínez-Hernández & Yubero, 2019; Martínez-Hernández et

al., 2021), Yubero (Martínez-Hernández & Yubero, 2019; Yubero et al., 2021), Wang (Wang et al., 2022), and Xu (Xu et al., 2022) follow with two publications each. These authors stand out not only in terms of publication output but also due to their relatively high citation counts.

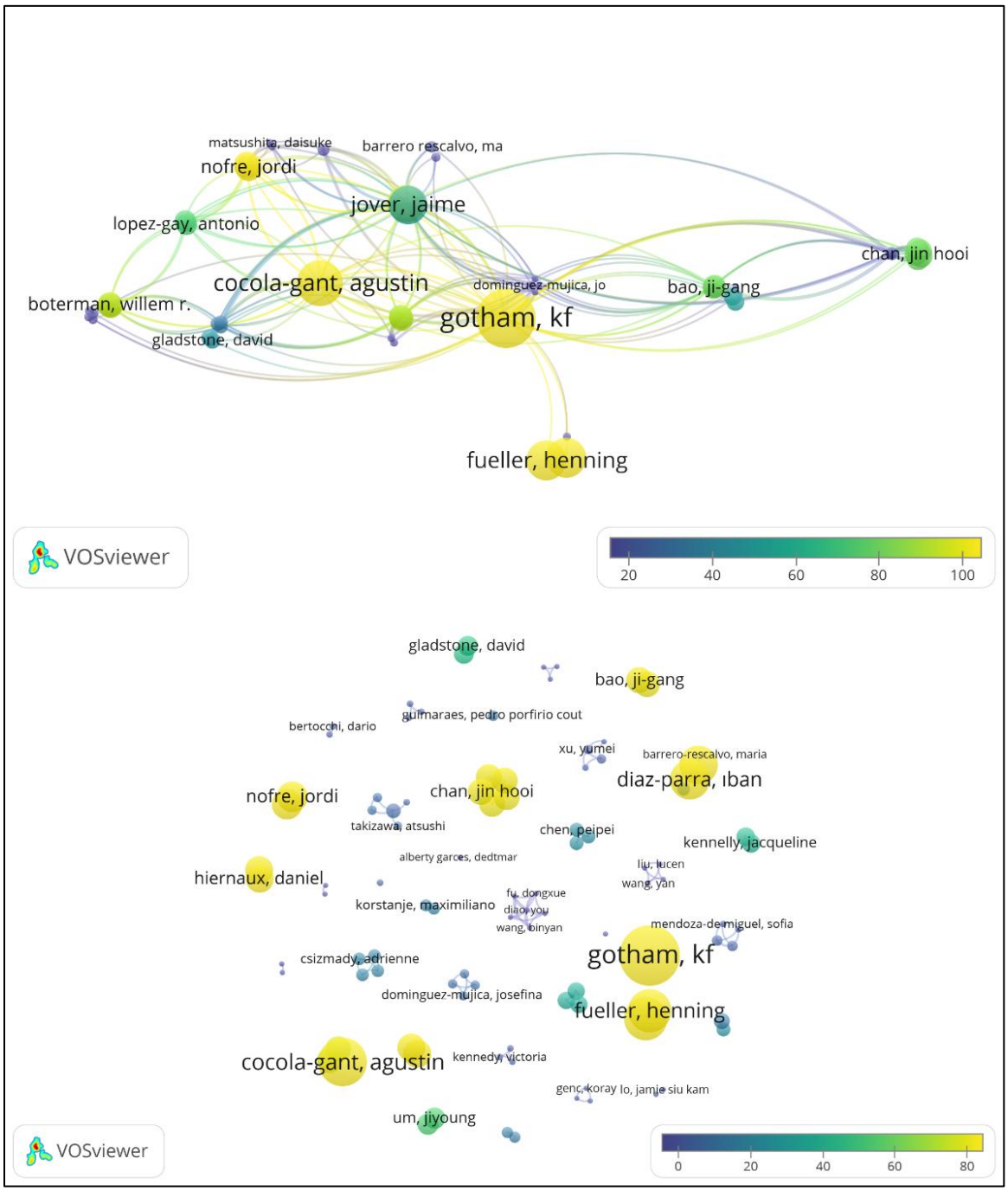
From a citation impact perspective, Gotham (2005) is the most highly cited author, with a single publication receiving 416 citations and exhibiting a total link strength of 75, indicating the highest level of influence within the network. Cocola-Gant ranks second, with two publications accumulating 268 citations and a total link strength of 45 (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Cocola-Gant, 2023). Fuller and Michel (Fuller & Michel, 2014) occupy the third and fourth positions, each receiving 211 citations from a single publication and reaching a total link strength of 21. Jover ranks fifth with 200 citations and a total link strength of 51, while Díaz-Parra ranks sixth with two publications that collectively received 184 citations and achieved a total link strength of 50 (Díaz-Parra & Jover, 2021; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2022). These findings indicate that the aforementioned authors have produced both highly productive and highly influential research addressing themes such as gentrification, tourism-led gentrification, touristification, urban transformation, and urban sociology. Furthermore, the combination of high citation counts and strong total link strength values suggests that these authors maintain robust thematic proximity and academic collaboration within the literature (Figure 1).

Within the scope of the co-authorship analysis, the collaborative network structure among authors who have published jointly was examined. Rather than restricting the visualization to only the largest connected component, all authors were included regardless of whether they were connected to the main cluster. Although this approach results in a more complex network structure, it ensures that no data are excluded from the analysis (Figure 1).

As illustrated in Figure 1, authors such as Gotham, Cocola-Gant, Fuller, and Díaz-Parra stand out due to both their high citation counts and their dense network connections. These authors occupy central positions within the collaboration network, reflecting their significant academic influence and strong collaborative engagement. An assessment based on color intensity further indicates that authors highlighted in yellow exhibit higher average citation scores, suggesting that they have contributed more prestigious and impactful publications. Such authors distinguish themselves not only through publication volume but also through academic impact and thematic centrality within the network.

At the same time, the presence of a considerable number of disconnected authors indicates that certain studies within the dataset are based on individual research efforts or distinct collaboration groups. The decision to display all authors in the visualization preserves the complete structure of the network, thereby providing a comprehensive representation of collaborative patterns within the field.

Figure 1. Analysis of the Most Cited Authors and Co-authorship Analysis



Keyword Analysis

The keyword analysis was conducted using VOSviewer by selecting the *co-occurrence* analysis type and the *author keywords* unit of analysis. Through this co-occurrence analysis based on keywords assigned by the authors, the study systematically reveals how the research topic is positioned within the literature, the conceptual frameworks around which it is structured, and the main thematic orientations of existing studies.

The results indicate that the most frequently used keyword is *"gentrification,"* which appears 24 times and attains a total link strength of 114, highlighting its central role within the literature. This is followed by *"tourism gentrification"* (14 occurrences, total link strength = 58) and *"tourism"* (8 occurrences, total link strength = 40). In addition, concepts such as *"touristification"* and *"urban tourism"* also stand out due to their relatively high frequency and strong link strength values. These findings demonstrate that the conceptual framework of the literature is largely shaped around urban transformation, tourism-related social impacts, and processes of spatial change.

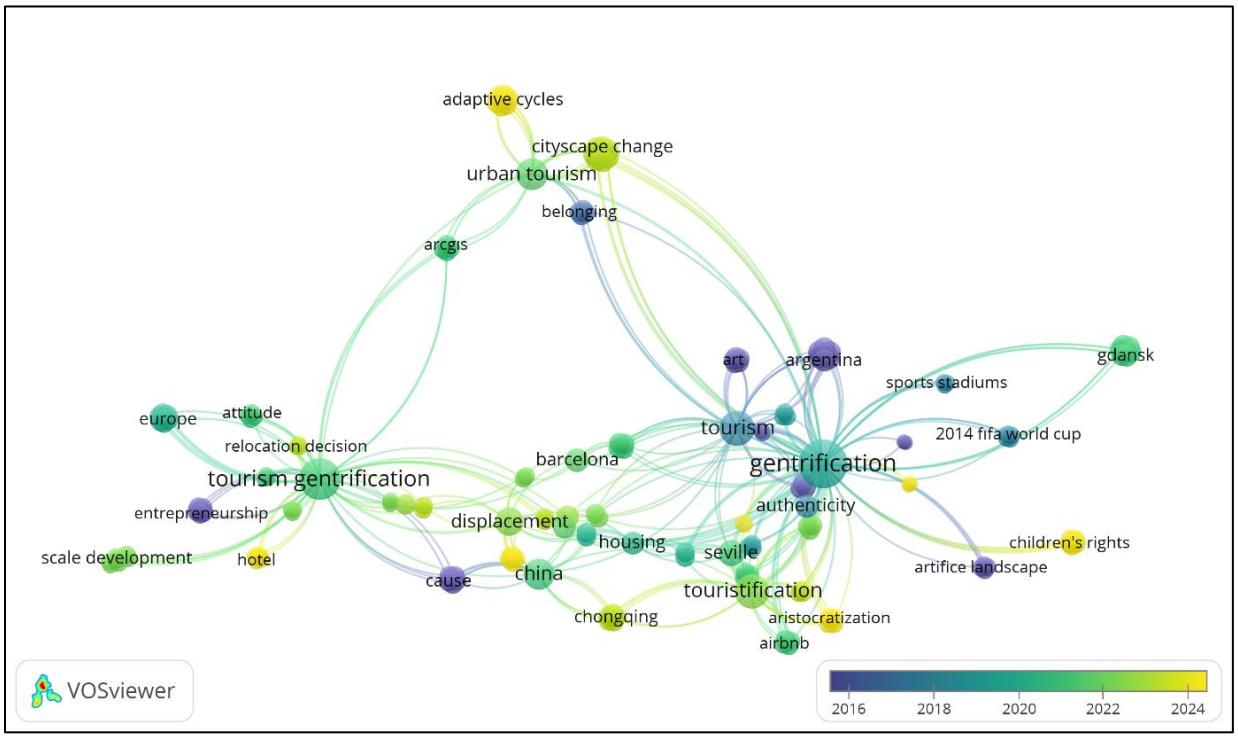
Figure 2 illustrates the total link strength of the identified keywords, indicating the extent to which these terms are connected to other concepts and their relative importance within the overall network structure of the literature. The presence of distinct color clusters reflects thematic diversity and the relational structure among concepts, suggesting that tourism-induced gentrification processes are addressed through a multidimensional analytical lens. Furthermore, Table 1 presents the top 20 keywords identified in the analysis, along with their frequency of occurrence and total link strength values.

Notably, the literature reveals a geographical concentration of gentrification-related studies in specific contexts, particularly in China, as well as in cities such as Seville, Barcelona, and Valletta, and more broadly across European urban settings

Table 2. Keywords, Number of Occurrences and Total Link Strengths

Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Total Link Strength	Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Total Link Strength
1	Gentrification	24	114	11	Accommodation	2	10
2	Tourism gentrification	14	58	12	Neighbourhood	2	9
3	Tourism	8	40	13	Transformation	2	9
4	Touristification	8	39	14	Population decline	2	7
5	Urban tourism	4	26	15	Scale development	2	7
6	China	4	22	16	Scale validity	1	9
7	Displacement	4	18	17	Aesthetics	1	9
8	Seville	4	18	18	Visual change in urban fabric	1	9
9	Authenticity	2	13	19	Google Street View	1	9
10	Barcelona	2	10	20	Malta	1	9

Figure 2. Author Keyword Co-occurrence Network



Within the scope of the author co-citation analysis, a total of 64 authors who received at least five co-citations were included in the evaluation. According to the findings presented in Table 2, Cocola-Gant emerges as the most frequently co-cited scholar in the literature. The author's works received a total of 50 co-citations and achieved a total link strength of 831, positioning Cocola-Gant at the center of the co-citation network. This is followed by Lees (32 co-citations, total link strength = 604), Smith (38 co-citations, total link strength = 585), and Gotham (38 co-citations, total link strength = 576). The high co-citation frequencies and strong link strength values associated with these four authors indicate that they constitute core theoretical reference points that are frequently cited together within the literature.

Other scholars appearing among the top 20 most co-cited authors—such as Zukin, Davidson, Jover, and Phillips—are also situated within prominent conceptual clusters through their influential contributions. Collectively, these researchers have played a significant role in shaping the theoretical frameworks surrounding tourism, gentrification, urban transformation, and spatial justice. The co-citation patterns identified through this analysis provide a robust basis for understanding the intellectual foundations of the field and for identifying its dominant theoretical pillars.

Figure 3, derived from the author co-citation analysis, visualizes clusters of authors who are theoretically associated within the literature, with the strength of their relationships mapped according to the intensity of their connections. The visualization reveals three major clusters, demonstrating that the literature is structured around distinct yet interrelated theoretical approaches. The red cluster, which includes authors such as Smith, Lees, Zukin, Phillips, and

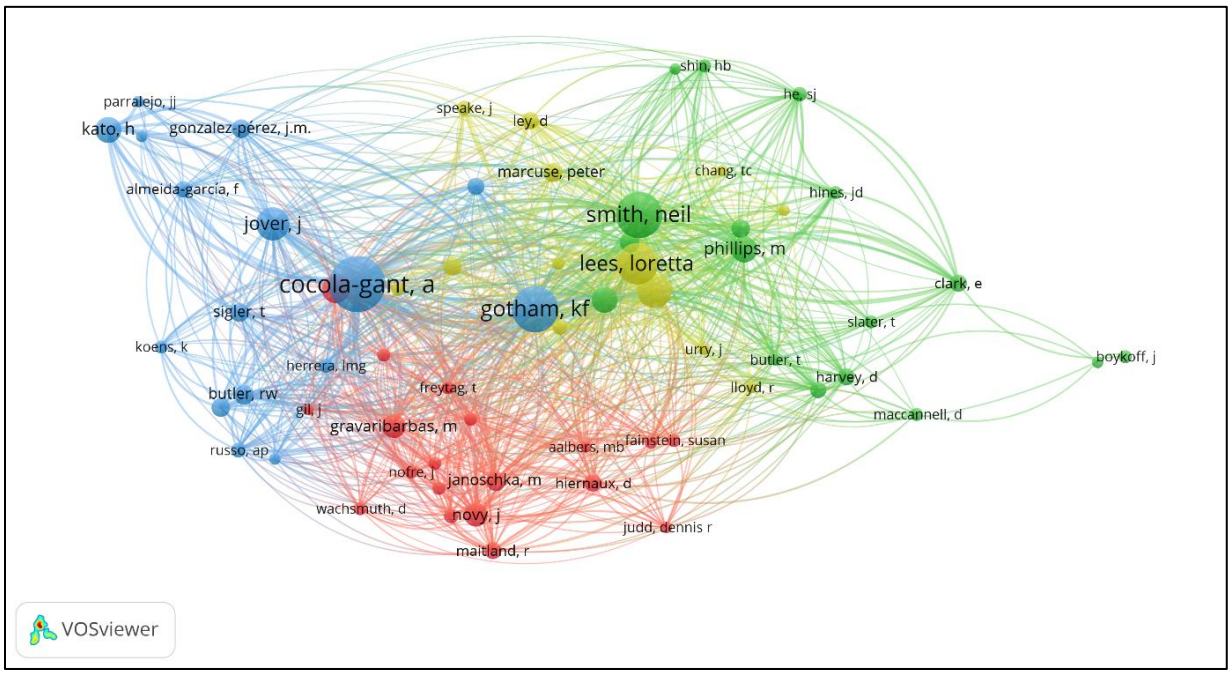
Atkinson, primarily represents foundational theoretical contributions to gentrification, urban policy, and urban restructuring. The blue cluster, featuring authors such as Cocola-Gant, Jover, Kato, and Sigler, is predominantly associated with studies on tourism-led gentrification, touristification, and urban identity. The green cluster, comprising scholars such as Novy, Gravari-Barbas, Butler, and Hiernaux, is more closely linked to discussions of urbanization, destination management, and cultural transformation. This clustering structure highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the research field and underscores the presence of academic collaborations and theoretical convergences around distinct conceptual perspectives. In the network visualization, node size represents the frequency of author co-citations, while the connecting lines indicate the intensity of relationships between authors.

Table 3. Author Co-Author Citation Analysis Results: Citation and Connection Strengths of the Top 20 Researchers

Rank	Author(s)	TC	TLS	Rank	Author(s)	TC	TLS
1	Cocola-Gant, A.	50	831	11	Gravaribarbas, M.	14	251
2	Lees, L.	32	604	12	Janoschka, M.	11	239
3	Smith, N.	38	585	13	Judd, D. R.	12	225
4	Gotham, K.F.	38	576	14	Hackworth, J.	10	207
5	Zukin, S.	12	413	15	Sigler, T.	10	197
6	Davidson, M.	16	374	16	Kato, H.	14	186
7	Jover, J.	23	355	17	Butler, R.W.	11	177
8	Phillips, M.	16	342	18	Clark, E.	9	177
9	Sequera, J.	11	308	19	Atkinson, R.	11	168
10	Novy, J.	14	277	20	Hiernaux, D.	9	163

Note: TC = Total Citations; TLS = Total Link Strength.

Figure 3. Co-citation Analysis of Authors



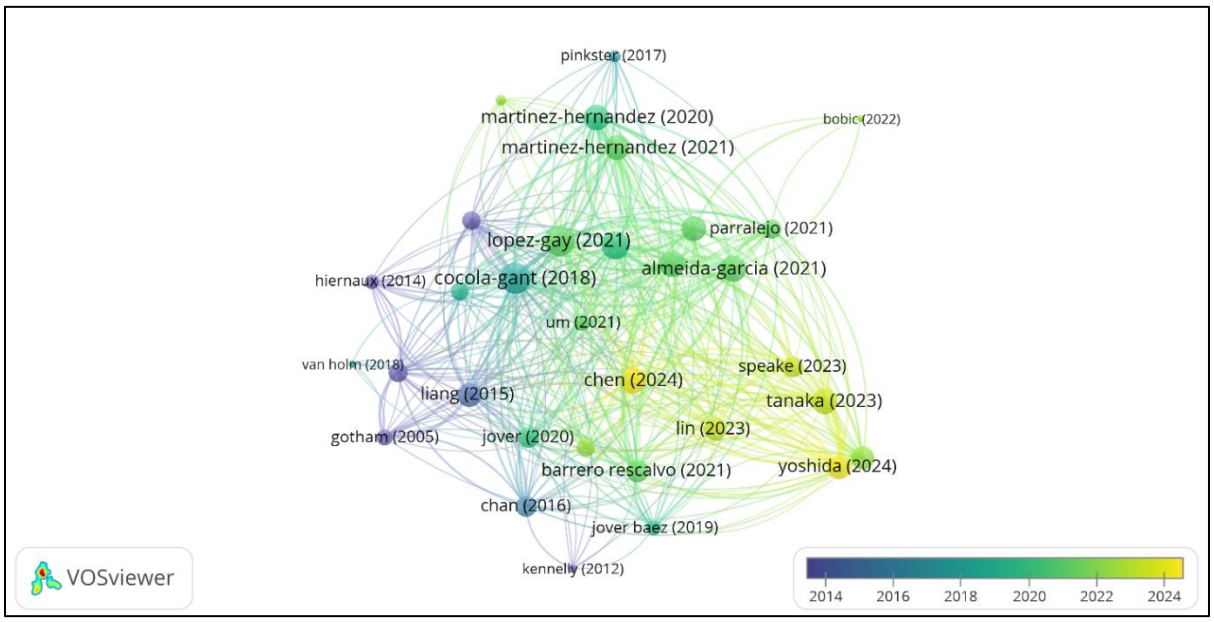
Bibliographic Coupling Analysis of Documents

Within the scope of the bibliographic coupling analysis, documents that had received at least five citations were included in the evaluation. This analysis identifies publications that are linked through shared references, thereby revealing groups of studies grounded in common theoretical and empirical foundations. The results indicate that Gotham (2005) is the most highly cited document, receiving 416 citations and exhibiting a total link strength of 37. This is followed by Fuller (2014) with 211 citations and a total link strength of 48, Cocola-Gant (2018) with 196 citations and a total link strength of 131, and Jover and Díaz-Parra (2020) with 166 citations and a total link strength of 61.

Notably, the study by Lopez-Gay et al. (2021) demonstrates a particularly strong bibliographic connectivity, achieving a total link strength of 125 despite receiving a comparatively lower number of citations (72). This indicates that the work shares a substantial number of references with many other publications in the dataset. Similarly, Sequera and Nofre (2020) display a high total link strength of 106, reflecting strong bibliographic relationships across the literature. These findings provide valuable insight into how clusters of research within the field are constructed around shared theoretical frameworks and common reference bases.

In Figure 4, node size represents total link strength, while the color scale reflects citation intensity. Prominent documents such as Cocola-Gant (2018), Lopez-Gay, Cocola-Gant, and Russo (2021), and Sequera and Nofre (2020) stand out due to both their high citation counts and their central positions within the bibliographic network. The dense clusters of connections observed in the visualization indicate that tourism-related gentrification research is strongly concentrated around specific thematic cores and shared bodies of literature.

Figure 4. Bibliographic Coupling Network Map of Documents by Publication Year



The results of the bibliographic coupling analysis further demonstrate that relationships among documents citing similar sources are clearly delineated within the literature. Based on total link strength, the ten most strongly connected publications are Cocola-Gant (2018), Lopez-Gay et al. (2021), Sequera and Nofre (2020), Almeida-García et al. (2021), Domínguez-Mujica et al. (2021), Martínez-Hernández and Yubero (2020), Tanaka et al. (2023), Chen (2024), Martínez-Hernández (2021), and Bertocchi and Ferri (2021). Among these, Cocola-Gant (2018) exhibits the highest total link strength (131), indicating the densest relational network and strong thematic connectivity with numerous other studies. Lopez-Gay et al. (2021) and Sequera and Nofre (2020) follow with total link strength values of 125 and 106, respectively, reflecting intensive bibliographic interactions.

These findings suggest that the top-ranked documents occupy central positions within the literature and are frequently embedded within similar reference clusters. In other words, they share extensive common citation bases with many other studies, thereby forming the bibliographic core of tourism- and gentrification-related research. Collectively, the top ten publications represent the intellectual nucleus around which the contemporary literature in this research field is structured.

Table 4. Ranking of texts based on citation count following bibliographic matching analysis

Author(s)	Source	Journal	TC	TLS
Gotham (2005)	Tourism Gentrification: The Case of New Orleans' Vieux Carre (French Quarter)	Urban Studies	416	37
Fuller & Michel (2014)	'Stop Being a Tourist!' New Dynamics of Urban Tourism in Berlin-Kreuzberg	International Journal of Urban and Regional Research	211	48
Cocola-Gant, A. (2018)	Tourism Gentrification	Handbook of Gentrification Studies	196	131

Jover & Díaz-Parra (2020)	Gentrification, Transnational Gentrification and Touristification in Seville, Spain	Urban Studies	166	61
Sequera & Nofre (2020)	Touristification, Transnational Gentrification and Urban Change in Lisbon: The Neighbourhood of Alfama	Urban Studies	106	106
Pinkster & Boterman (2017)	When The Spell Is Broken: Gentrification, Urban Tourism and Privileged Discontent in the Amsterdam Canal District	Cultural Geographies	90	20
Hiernaux & Imelda Gonzalez (2014)	Tourism And Gentrification: Theoretical Insights on Articulation	Revista De Geografia Norte Grande	88	29
Liang ve Bao (2015)	Tourism Gentrification in Shenzhen, China: Causes and Socio-Spatial Consequences	Tourism Geographies	78	80
Chan etc. (2016)	The Role of Self-Gentrification in Sustainable Tourism: Indigenous Entrepreneurship at Honghe Hani Rice Terraces World Heritage Site, China	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	78	58
Lopez-Gay etc. (2021)	Urban Tourism And Population Change: Gentrification in the Age Of Mobilities	Population, Space and Place	52	125
Um & Yoon, S., (2021)	Evaluating The Relationship Between Perceived Value Regarding Tourism Gentrification Experience, Attitude, and Responsible Tourism Intention	Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change	52	35
Gladstone & Préau (2008)	Gentrification in Tourist Cities: Evidence From New Orleans Before and After Hurricane Katrina	Housing Policy Debate	45	49
Kennelly & Watt (2012)	Seeing Olympic Effects Through the Eyes Of Marginally Housed Youth: Changing Places and The Gentrification of East London	Visual Studies	40	11
Almeida-Garcia etc. (2021)	Tourism Impacts, Tourism-Phobia and Gentrification in Historic Centers: The Cases of Malaga (Spain) and Gdansk (Poland)	Sustaınability	35	33
Barrero Rescalvo & Jover Báez (2021)	Landscapes of Touristification: A Methodological Approach Through the Case of Seville	Cuadernos Geograficos	23	71

Chen etc. (2024)	Beyond Displacement: The Co-Existence of Newcomers and Local Residents in the Process of Rural Tourism Gentrification in China	Journal Of Sustainable Tourism	22	90
Parralejo & Díaz-Parra (2021)	Gentrification and Touristification in the Central Urban Areas of Seville and Cadiz	Urban Science	18	50
Olt etc. (2019)	Gentrification, Tourism and The Night-Time Economy in Budapest's District VII - The Role Of Regulation in a Post-Socialist Context	Journal Of Policy Research In Tourism Leisure and Events	17	43
Skoll, G. R., & Korstanje, M. (2014).	Urban Heritage, Gentrification and Tourism in Riverwest and El Abasto.	Journal of Heritage Tourism	18	64
Bobic, S., & Akhavan, M. (2022).	Tourism Gentrification in Mediterranean Heritage Cities. The Necessity for Multidisciplinary Planning.	Cities	17	0

Source Citation Analysis

The source citation analysis was conducted using VOSviewer by selecting the citation analysis type and the sources unit of analysis. This approach enabled the identification of the most frequently cited academic journals and publication sources within the literature, as well as the evaluation of their total link strength with other sources in the network. The results are presented in Table 4.

According to the findings, Urban Studies emerges as the most influential source, receiving a total of 688 citations and exhibiting a total link strength of 50. It is followed by the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research with 211 citations, and the Handbook of Gentrification Studies, which accumulated 196 citations and a total link strength of 15. In addition, the journal Sustainability stands out as the most prolific source in terms of publication volume, contributing eight studies and establishing a strong relational network with a total link strength of 27.

Overall, this analysis highlights the core journals and reference sources that function as primary knowledge hubs within the research field and demonstrates how the literature is structured around specific publication outlets.

Table 5. Findings of Source Citation Analysis

Rank	Source	NP	TC	TLS
1	Urban Studies	3	688	50
2	International Journal of Urban and Regional Research	1	211	1
3	Handbook of Gentrification Studies	1	196	15

4	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	2	100	7
5	Cultural Geographies	2	90	4
6	Revista de Geografía Norte Grande	2	88	6
7	Tourism Geographies	2	83	14
8	Sustainability	8	77	27
9	Population Space and Place	1	72	5
10	Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change	2	66	4
11	Housing Policy Debate	1	44	2
12	Visual Studies	1	28	7
13	Urban Science	1	27	6
14	Cuadernos Geográficos	2	26	5
15	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events	1	18	0
16	Journal of Heritage Tourism	1	17	0
17	Cities	1	7	0
18	Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles	1	7	1
19	Investigaciones Geográficas – Spain	1	6	3
20	Tourism Rewiew	1	6	1

Country Citation Analysis

To explore the geographical structure of knowledge production in tourism-related gentrification research, a country-level citation analysis was conducted using VOSviewer. Only countries with a minimum of two publications were included to ensure analytical robustness. The results reveal a strong concentration of scholarly influence within a limited number of national research hubs (Table 5).

Spain emerges as the most productive country with twelve publications, accumulating 458 citations and exhibiting a high total link strength (49), indicating extensive international connectivity. Portugal ranks as the most influential country in terms of citation impact, receiving 554 citations across six publications, while the United States follows closely with 523 citations from nine publications and a strong network presence reflected by a total link strength of 48. China also demonstrates notable scholarly influence with 200 citations and substantial network integration.

Additional contributions from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Japan further highlight the increasingly international yet geographically clustered nature of the field. Overall, these patterns indicate that European and North American countries dominate the intellectual landscape of tourism-related gentrification research, both in terms of research productivity and network centrality.

Importantly, this geographical concentration reflects not only academic capacity but also the spatial distribution of intense tourism-driven urban transformation processes. Southern European countries such as Spain and Portugal have experienced rapid post-crisis tourism expansion, housing market financialization, and widespread short-term rental proliferation (Mendes, 2017; Sequera & Nofre, 2020). These dynamics are particularly acute in cities like Barcelona, Lisbon, and Seville, which have become critical empirical laboratories for examining displacement, housing commodification, and socio-spatial restructuring (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021; López-Gay et al., 2021).

The prominent role of the United States corresponds to its foundational contribution to gentrification theory and political economy approaches (Gotham, 2005; Smith, 1996), as well as its early exposure to platform-mediated housing markets (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Meanwhile, China's rising presence reflects emerging scholarly attention to state-led tourism urbanization (Qian et al., 2013) and rural gentrification processes in heritage regions (Su, 2019), extending the geographical scope of the field beyond its traditional Western focus.

Together, these findings suggest that scholarly influence within tourism-related gentrification research is closely aligned with regions experiencing the most acute tourism-induced housing pressures and urban restructuring dynamics, reinforcing the relationship between empirical transformation hotspots and academic knowledge production.

Tablo 6. Country Citation Analysis: Number of Citations and Total Link Strength

Rank	Country	NP	TC	TLS	Rank	Country	NP	TC	TLS
1	Spain	12	458	49	7	Netherlands	2	90	7
2	USA	9	523	48	8	Argentina	2	17	4
3	China	9	200	31	9	Italy	2	21	4
4	Portugal	6	554	50	10	Hungary	2	18	3
5	United Kingdom	5	145	19	11	Colombia	2	2	0
6	Japan	3	26	11	—	—	—	—	—

Note: NP = Number of Publications.

Institution Citation Analysis

To explore the institutional structure of knowledge production and identify leading academic centers shaping research on gentrification in tourism contexts, an institution-level citation analysis was conducted using VOSviewer. This approach enables the assessment of how scientific influence is distributed across universities and research organizations, revealing both productivity patterns and institutional centrality within the scholarly network (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Minimum threshold values of one publication and one citation were applied to ensure the inclusion of all contributing institutions while maintaining analytical transparency. The results demonstrate that the University of Lisbon emerges as the most influential institution, accumulating 448 citations across four publications, followed by Tulane University with 416 citations derived from a single highly cited study, and the University of Seville with 218 citations across five publications.

Notably, the University of Lisbon also exhibits the highest total link strength (70), indicating strong institutional interconnectedness and its central role in knowledge exchange across the citation network. The observed institutional network structure suggests that scholarly influence within the field is not solely determined by publication volume but is also shaped by the strategic positioning of research outputs within broader academic collaborations and thematic intersections. Accordingly, certain institutions function as intellectual hubs that facilitate knowledge diffusion and conceptual integration across the literature.

Table 7. Institution Citation Analysis: Number of Publications, Citations, and Total Link Strength

Rank	Institution	NP	TC	TLS	Rank	Institution	NP	TC	TLS
1	University of Lisbon	4	448	70	11	University of Cambridge	1	78	6
2	Tulane University	1	416	60	12	University of Greenwich	1	78	6
3	University of Seville	5	218	36	13	University of Hong Kong	1	78	6
4	University of Erlangen–Nuremberg	1	211	18	14	Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University	1	78	6
5	NOVA University Lisbon	1	106	12	15	Centre for Demographic Studies	1	72	6
6	University of Valladolid	1	106	12	16	Autonomous University of Barcelona	1	72	7
7	University of Amsterdam	1	90	10	17	Rovira i Virgili University	2	72	7
8	Autonomous University of Querétaro	1	80	11	18	The City University of New York (CUNY)	2	68	4
9	Sun Yat-sen University	1	78	17	19	Kyonggi University	1	52	4
10	Mizuho University (China)	1	78	6	20	Sahmyook University	1	52	4

Thematic Map Findings: Conceptual Structure of Gentrification Research in Tourism Contexts

The thematic map reveals a multidimensional conceptual structure in the literature addressing gentrification within tourism contexts, highlighting dominant research streams, specialized subfields, foundational topics, and emerging research directions.

Motor Themes: Core Drivers of the Field

The upper-right quadrant of the thematic map identifies touristification, studentification, and Lisbon as central and well-developed themes. These topics exhibit high levels of both centrality and density, indicating that they constitute the intellectual backbone of current research. The

prominence of touristification reflects a growing scholarly focus on tourism-driven urban transformation processes, whereby residential neighborhoods are increasingly reshaped to accommodate short-term visitors rather than local communities (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Cocola-Gant, 2016). The frequent association with studentification further demonstrates how tourism-related capital flows intersect with student housing markets, intensifying residential displacement and socio-spatial restructuring (Smith, 2005; Hubbard, 2009).

Lisbon's central role within this cluster aligns with its status as one of the most extensively studied cases of tourism-led gentrification, particularly in relation to short-term rentals, real estate speculation, and policy-driven urban regeneration (Aalbers, 2019; Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019). Collectively, these motor themes illustrate how contemporary research has shifted toward understanding the structural drivers of displacement and urban commodification under tourism expansion.

Basic Themes: Foundational Concepts Structuring the Literature

In the lower-right quadrant, the thematic map highlights urban tourism, overtourism, sustainability, tourism, Barcelona, and housing as highly central but comparatively less internally developed themes. These concepts function as the foundational pillars upon which more specialized research streams are constructed. The strong presence of overtourism underscores the increasing concern regarding excessive visitor pressure and its consequences for housing affordability, quality of life, and urban livability (Goodwin, 2017; Milano et al., 2019). Barcelona's visibility reflects its role as a paradigmatic case of tourism-induced housing displacement and resident resistance movements (Colomb & Novy, 2017; Cocola-Gant, 2018). Housing emerges as a critical mediating variable linking tourism growth to socio-spatial inequalities, reinforcing arguments that tourism development increasingly operates as a driver of real estate financialization and residential exclusion (Fields & Uffer, 2016; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Together, these basic themes demonstrate that sustainability and housing justice have become central normative and analytical frameworks in tourism–gentrification research.

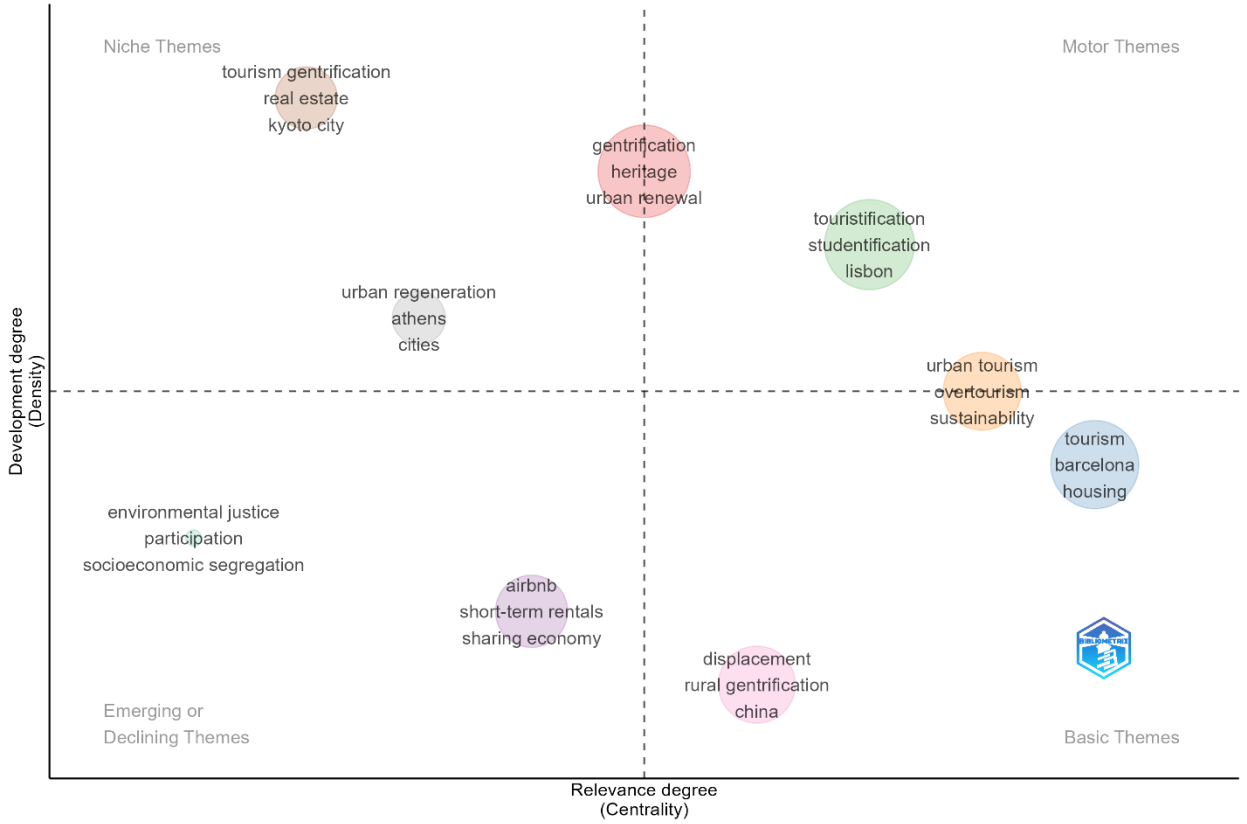
Niche Themes: Specialized and Context-Specific Research Areas

The upper-left quadrant reveals tourism gentrification, real estate, and Kyoto City as well-developed yet relatively isolated research themes. These niche topics indicate mature but context-specific scholarly debates that are not yet fully integrated into the broader conceptual core of the field. The emphasis on real estate dynamics reflects studies examining tourism as a catalyst for property speculation, investment flows, and land-use restructuring (Janoschka et al., 2014; Aalbers, 2015). Kyoto's emergence as a distinct case highlights growing attention to heritage cities in Asia, where tourism-driven redevelopment intersects with cultural preservation and housing displacement (Kato & Takizawa, 2022; Xu et al., 2025) These niche themes illustrate the diversification of empirical settings and analytical lenses, suggesting that while Western European cities dominate the literature, comparative urban contexts are gradually expanding.

Emerging or Declining Themes: Future Research Trajectories

The lower-left quadrant identifies Airbnb, short-term rentals, sharing economy, environmental justice, participation, and socioeconomic segregation as emerging or potentially declining themes. However, given their increasing relevance in recent policy and urban debates, these topics are more accurately interpreted as emerging research frontiers. The cluster centered on Airbnb and short-term rentals reflects growing scholarly recognition of platform economies as critical mechanisms accelerating housing displacement and tourism-driven gentrification (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021). Similarly, the integration of environmental justice and participatory governance signals an emerging normative shift toward examining who benefits from tourism-led urban transformation and who bears its social and ecological costs. The appearance of socioeconomic segregation further indicates an expanding analytical focus on long-term inequality patterns resulting from tourism-induced spatial restructuring.

Figure 5. Thematic Analysis



Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive bibliometric analysis aimed at revealing the development, structural patterns, and conceptual orientations of the academic literature on gentrification within the context of tourism. A systematic search conducted in the Web of Science database on 02 July 2025 identified 348 articles, which were subjected to multi-layered analyses using VOSviewer and Biblioshiny software. Co-authorship networks, citation relationships, keyword patterns, co-citation structures, bibliographic coupling, and institutional and country distributions were jointly examined to provide a holistic mapping of the intellectual architecture of the field.

The findings indicate that the literature on tourism-related gentrification is concentrated around distinct theoretical cores. Author-level analyses reveal that Jover stands out in terms of productivity, while Gotham has played a pivotal role in shaping the theoretical direction of the field through a single highly influential publication. Gotham's (2005) work established a conceptual foundation by demonstrating how tourism operates as a capital accumulation strategy within urban spaces. The central positions of scholars such as Cocola-Gant, Diaz-Parra, and Jover further suggest that tourism-driven transformations are increasingly examined through political economy and spatial justice perspectives.

Keyword analyses demonstrate that the literature has evolved beyond a narrow focus on tourism growth to increasingly address broader social consequences, including housing market transformation, displacement, loss of authenticity, and spatial inequality. The rising prominence of terms such as "housing," "displacement," and "overtourism" reflects a critical shift toward questioning the relationship between tourism development and neoliberal urban policies. This transformation indicates a paradigmatic move in tourism studies from growth-oriented approaches toward social impact and rights-based frameworks.

Co-citation and bibliographic coupling analyses reveal strong theoretical continuity between classical gentrification scholarship and contemporary tourism-oriented research. Neil Smith's rent gap theory and Lees's critical urban studies continue to form the theoretical backbone of tourism-related gentrification studies. At the same time, the works of Cocola-Gant, Jover, and Sequera reinterpret these foundational frameworks through the lenses of tourism economies, platform capitalism, and urban policy. These results suggest that the field is not merely transferring concepts but is actively expanding and refining theoretical perspectives.

Source analyses show that research on tourism gentrification is predominantly situated within urban studies journals. The centrality of outlets such as *Urban Studies* and the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* indicates that these debates are primarily framed within urban political economy rather than traditional tourism scholarship. However, the growing contribution of interdisciplinary journals such as *Sustainability* reflects an increasing integration of environmental sustainability and social justice concerns.

Country- and institution-level analyses highlight the geographical concentration of knowledge production. The prominence of countries such as Portugal, Spain, and the United States in tourism-related gentrification research reflects the spatial concentration of intense tourism-driven urban transformation processes within these regions. Southern European cities, particularly Lisbon and Barcelona, have experienced rapid expansion of short-term rental markets, real estate financialization, and policy-driven tourism redevelopment following the 2008 economic crisis, making them critical empirical laboratories for examining displacement and socio-spatial restructuring. The strong representation of the United States corresponds to its foundational role in the development of gentrification theory and political economy approaches, as well as its early exposure to platform-mediated housing markets. Meanwhile, the growing presence of China highlights an emerging research focus on state-led tourism urbanization and rural gentrification in

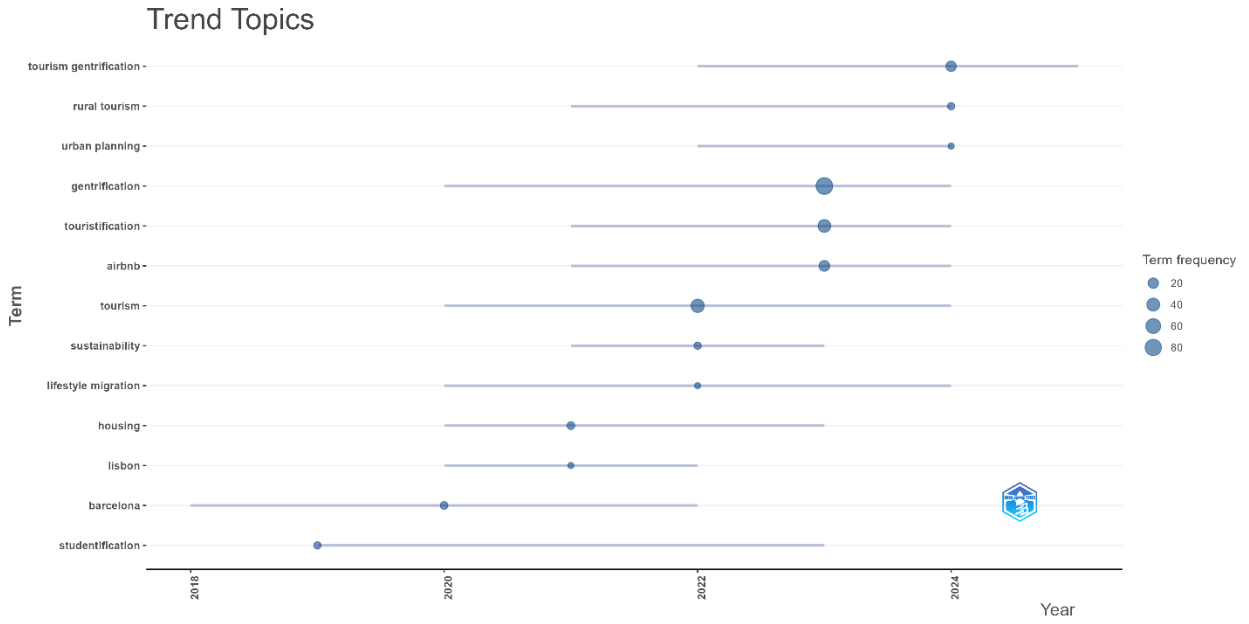
heritage and scenic regions, extending the geographical scope of the field beyond its traditional Western core. Together, these patterns indicate that scholarly attention is closely aligned with regions experiencing the most acute tourism-induced housing pressures and urban transformation dynamics.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that tourism-related gentrification research has shifted away from descriptive studies of tourism expansion toward a critical research agenda centered on displacement, housing crises, financialization, and social justice. Nevertheless, the strong focus on European and North American cities reveals a relative underrepresentation of Global South contexts, underscoring the need for more geographically diverse and comparative research in the future.

Future Research Agenda

The trend topics analysis provides further insight into the temporal evolution of key research themes within the literature (Figure 4). Earlier studies primarily focused on destination-specific cases such as Barcelona (e.g., Sans & Quaglieri, 2016; Nofre et al., 2018) and Lisbon (e.g., Barata-Salgueiro et al., 2017; Sequera & Nofre, 2018), reflecting initial scholarly efforts to document localized manifestations of tourism-driven urban transformation. Over time, broader conceptual themes including "gentrification" (Gotham, 2005; Smith, 2002), "touristification" (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Sequera & Nofre, 2020; Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020), and housing emerged with increasing frequency, indicating a shift from place-based descriptive studies toward more generalized theoretical and structural analyses." From approximately 2020 onward, the growing prominence of themes such as Airbnb, sustainability, and lifestyle migration highlights a diversification of research interests and the incorporation of platform economies and socio-environmental dimensions into the analytical framework. More recent years show intensified attention to tourism gentrification, rural tourism, and urban planning, suggesting an expansion of the field beyond urban cores to include peripheral and rural contexts, as well as stronger engagement with governance and planning perspectives. Collectively, these temporal patterns illustrate a clear conceptual progression within the literature: from early case-centered explorations of tourism impacts toward increasingly complex analyses of housing markets, digital platforms, sustainability challenges, and spatial justice. This evolution aligns with the broader shift identified in the thematic mapping results, confirming that tourism-related gentrification research is moving toward a more critical, interdisciplinary, and policy-relevant research agenda.

Figure 6. Findings of Trend Topics Analysis (2018-2025)



The thematic mapping analysis reveals several promising directions for future research on gentrification within tourism contexts. While the literature has substantially advanced in documenting tourism-driven urban transformation, displacement, and housing pressures, emerging clusters highlight the need for deeper, more integrative, and comparative investigations.

First, the growing prominence of platform-mediated accommodation markets, particularly Airbnb and short-term rentals, calls for longitudinal and policy-oriented studies. Future research should move beyond descriptive correlations and examine causal mechanisms linking digital platforms to housing displacement, rent inflation, and neighborhood restructuring. Comparative analyses across regulatory regimes and urban contexts would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how governance frameworks shape the socio-spatial impacts of tourism-driven real estate financialization.

Second, the emergence of environmental justice, participation, and socioeconomic segregation as developing themes suggests an important normative shift in the field. Future studies should increasingly incorporate justice-oriented frameworks to assess how tourism-led urban redevelopment redistributes environmental burdens and socio-economic benefits among different social groups. Participatory planning processes, community resistance movements, and grassroots governance initiatives remain underexplored and offer fertile ground for qualitative and mixed-methods research.

Third, while European heritage cities such as Lisbon and Barcelona continue to dominate empirical investigations, the appearance of cases such as Kyoto and China-related rural gentrification indicates the need for broader geographical diversification. Future research should prioritize comparative global perspectives, particularly in the Global South and rapidly urbanizing regions, to assess how tourism-driven gentrification manifests under different political, economic, and cultural conditions.

Fourth, although sustainability has become a central conceptual pillar, its operationalization within tourism–gentrification research remains fragmented. Future studies should integrate sustainability more explicitly with housing policy, social equity, and urban resilience frameworks. Developing measurable indicators that capture long-term community well-being, housing accessibility, and cultural continuity would strengthen the applied relevance of the field.

Finally, the continued centrality of displacement and housing underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches that bridge urban studies, tourism geography, political economy, and social policy. Future research agendas would benefit from mixed-method designs combining spatial analysis, ethnographic insights, policy evaluation, and bibliometric approaches to better capture the complex dynamics of tourism-induced urban transformation.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides a comprehensive mapping of tourism-related gentrification research, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies solely on the Web of Science database, which, despite its high academic rigor, does not offer exhaustive coverage of global scholarly output and may exclude relevant publications indexed in other databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar, particularly those from developing regions and interdisciplinary fields (Falagas et al., 2008; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Martín-Martín et al., 2018). Second, the restriction to English-language publications may have led to the omission of influential studies published in local languages, thereby introducing a potential language bias, especially in countries where tourism-related gentrification is most intensively studied, such as Spain and Portugal (van Leeuwen et al., 2001; Amano et al., 2016). Consequently, future research would benefit from incorporating multiple bibliographic databases and multilingual sources to achieve a more globally inclusive and comprehensive representation of the field.

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Constraints on Adoption of Green Marketing Strategy by Tour Operators in Eastern Circuit, Tanzania

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study was to assess the constraints that are faced by tour operators in the Eastern tourist circuit of Tanzania in adoption of green marketing strategies.

Methodology: Triple Bottom Line and Marketing Mix theories were used. Methods used in data collection were quantitative, using a descriptive survey in a cross- sectional research design. Questionnaires were used in collecting data from 150 respondents from registered tour companies and a review of secondary data was done to obtain tourists' preference in tour arrangement and participation in eco-tours.

Results: The results from analysis showed that Limited budget, high level of competition and lack of appropriate policies were the highest constraints. Correlation analysis using chi square test showed a significant relationship between years of operation and eco-tourists demand ($p= 0.013$) as well as limited budget ($p= 0.032$).

Value: The study implies the tour operators perceive green marketing positively. It concluded that tour operators in eastern tourist circuit of Tanzania are aware of green marketing and do face constraints in adapting green marketing strategies in different levels, and recommended policy implementations, tour operators setting aside budget for green marketing, as well as creating cost-effective green tour products among other recommendations.

Keywords: Green Marketing, Tourism, Constraints, Tour Operators, Tanzania

Introduction

Green marketing is the marketing of tour products that are environmentally friendly such as Eco-tours (Mishra and Sharma, 2014). According to the Tanzania Tourist Board (TTB), (n.d), tourism forms in the Eastern circuit of Tanzania have accounted for a natural, cultural, historical and urban mix. According to Ombeni et al., (2021), most of the regions in the eastern part of Tanzania are more developed and have more urbanization due to their geographical location. As they are along the Indian Ocean coast and have higher infrastructural development that allows high tourists flow and accessibility of tourism goods and services (Siddique and Ghosh, 2017). Urban tourism has mostly focused on practices described to be destructive to the environment of the particular city

and the world at large due to having non-conservative aspects in its implementations (Mgonja et al., 2017; Kyara, 2021). This makes it important for tourism practices to generate economic growth while considering environmental sustainability (Kyara et al., 2021) and green initiatives for greater performance in the long run (Suluo et al., 2020).

Although studies have been done on the areas of green marketing such as assessing Green marketing as an environmental practice, Green marketing orientation effects on environment, Approaches on sustainable tourism market and Determinants of Sustainable Urban Tourism (Gelderman et al., 2021: Ismail et al., 2023: Amoiradis, 2019: Nyerere, 2020) respectively. Little is known on the constraints facing tour operators on the adoption of green marketing strategies in the eastern tourist circuit of Tanzania. Hence, this study will assess the awareness and limitations to adoption of tour operators on green marketing strategies.

Information from this research aimed towards tour operators grasping the importance and benefits of attracting responsible tourists as their niche market, which will bring profit through product diversification and maintain sustainable development (Inversini et al., 2020). Further, it will help the tour companies and country at large attain the current Sustainable Development Goals number 8, 12, and 14, which highlights on inclusive and sustainable economic growth, ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, and sustainable use of oceans and marine reserves respectively (Martini and Buffa, 2020). These goals go alongside the UNWTO emphasis on Investments made towards greener forms.

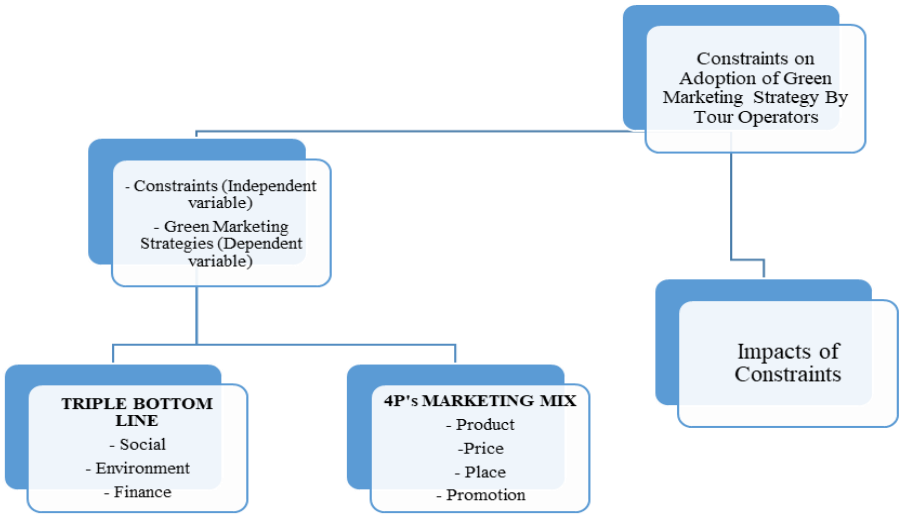
Nevertheless, possible findings on green marketing strategies will be used to further develop the sustainable tourism activities and development of the society through direct and indirect employment opportunities, environment protection and economic benefit of the eastern circuit and the country at large.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on constraints as the independent variable, and green marketing strategies as the dependent variable. Two theories were applied; both theories influence this particular research topic. Triple Bottom Line theory (TBL), The Social aspect may include shareholders and stakeholders' attitude towards green marketing, Environmental aspect may include availability and readiness to use eco-friendly products, financial aspect may include limited budget of the tour operators set for green marketing. Further, the 4P's Marketing Mix Theory influences the topic through, Product that can be challenges in making and selling green products, Price, which may involve high price sensitivity from tourists or high costs for making green products, Place, which can include limited eco-friendly suppliers and Promotion which may involve difficulty in advertising or marketing the green products.

Further solutions to these constraints such as staff training and receiving funds can act as a moderating variable that can limit or completely clear out the underlying impacts that the tour operators face because of the constraints.

Figure 1.1: Theoretical Foundation



Methodology

Description of the study area

Data for this research was based on tour operators who conduct their operations in the Eastern tourist circuit of Tanzania. According to the list of registered tour operators in the Eastern tourist circuit from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, there are a total of 368 tour companies with addresses registered in the eastern zone. Nonetheless, a large number of tour companies are registered in other tourist circuits but operate in the eastern circuit as well. The tour operators in the eastern circuit currently sell tourism products based on different forms of tourism, as in eco-tourism and sustainable tourism, cultural tourism, historical tourism, city tourism, adventure tourism and beach tourism as the eastern circuit is located along the Indian Ocean (Shalli, 2024).

The eastern tourist circuit includes regions along the eastern zone, which are; Dar Es Salaam, Tanga, Morogoro, Lindi, Mafia, Coastal region and Zanzibar. The regions are found along the coast part of Tanzania giving them access to tourists that arrive by cruise ships, airport (as the largest international airport is in Dar Es Salaam region) and by road or railway.

Research Design

The design used was cross-sectional; this is a research design that involves collection of data from the respondents at once or one given point in time, and it involved quantitative methods where descriptive data was collected. This design was used because data was collected from tour operators once, meaning no repetition of administering questionnaire was done in different periods to the same respondents.

It involved the use of primary data collection through questionnaires, as used by (Osman et al., 2016), that were filled out by 150 respondents, in order to get their perspective on green marketing and its underlying constraints. Moreover, a review of secondary data was done on tourists' preferred tour arrangements and number of eco-tourist arrivals to government green destinations against total visitors' arrivals in the country. The secondary data was published by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism that oversees seven departments related to tourism and natural resources management in Tanzania. Following the principles of green tourism, where several

stakeholders are involved, reviewing other stakeholders enhances the proper practices on green marketing for green tourism development.

Sampling Procedure

Tour companies found in the eastern tourist circuit, from which data was collected, were selected purposely by identifying the tour operators that have been registered under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism to be located in the eastern circuit. Further, random sampling by the use of an Excel list was done, where 150 tour companies were selected from the total population of 368 registered companies. This accounts for 40% of the total population, which was taken as it helps reduce the margin of error and increases the confidence level and statistical significance of the sample size from the finite population.

Data Analysis Tool

Descriptive analysis was used in summarizing and describing the data set, while inferential analysis was used in making predictions. Data was collected through questionnaires thereafter analyzed numerically using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, in finding relations and correlations between dependent and independent variables, chi- square test was used to determine the level of significance between variables. Data was presented in forms of tables, graphs and charts as tabulated using Microsoft Excel, 2016.

Results

Demographic Characteristic

A total of 150 responses were collected from different tour companies. Out of the total, the first age group was of 18- 28 years that was represented by 27 respondents (18%). The highest number of respondents (tour operators) were 84 in number (56%) and belonged to the age group of 29- 39 years. The age group of 40- 49 years had 28 respondents (18.7%), the age group of 50- 59 years had 10 respondents (6.7%) and only one respondent (0.7%) was above 60 years of age. This could imply that a large number of tour operators are between the ages of 29 to 49 years.

The results show the highest number of respondents were from the age group of 29- 39 years, which is in line with findings by Lesseri, (2022), who shows that there is a higher number of youths employed in the tourism sector of Tanzania due to factors like education level and experience in the industry. Titu et al., (2022), further supported this through findings that show the higher number of tour operators where between the ages of 30- 40 years. The fact that the age group above 60 years had the least representation shows that the tour companies abide to labor laws that stipulate the retirement age of 60 years hence above 60 years is usually part- time contracts due to their experience or the owner of the companies.

Out of the 150 tour companies, 23 companies, which accounted for 15.3% had been in operations for less than three years. 32 (21.3%) of the companies had been in operations between three to five years. The highest number of respondents were 49 respondents (32.7%) that had been in operations between five to ten years, followed by 46 respondents (30.7%) who had been in operations for more than ten years. According to the responses, it indicates that the companies with the least number of operations had lower performance on green marketing as compared to companies with

five years and above who had higher performances of green marketing practices as shown in Table 4.1 below. This may relate years of operation to more experience and ability to conducting green marketing.

In relation to Triple Bottom Line theory, on the aspects of finance and environment. The results show that the companies that have more maturity in terms of years could be in a better financial position (Kiwango, 2023) and have more experience in the tourism business making it easier or more likely to partake in sustainable activities such as marketing of green tourism that embraces the environmental aspect of the theory (Sung et al., 2021).

Further, in relation to the product aspect of the Four P's marketing mix theory, the main product of such companies are packages that are green or eco- friendly in nature. The number of years of operations may help the company in selecting its target market, which in turn affects the Four P's starting with the product.

Table 4.1 Performance on green marketing against years of operation

		Years of Operation				
		Less than three years	3-5 years	5-10 years	10 and above	**Total**
Tour Companies' Performance on green marketing	Slightly	1	0	3	0	4
	Neutral	1	1	7	4	13
	Somehow	7	16	17	18	58
	Highly	13	12	21	21	67
Total		22	29	48	43	142

Source: Research data, 2024

Awareness on Green marketing strategies

Green marketing familiarity

In terms of awareness on green marketing out of the 139 respondents that stated to have knowledge, six respondents (4%) had neutral level, 52 respondents (34.7%) were fairly-knowledgeable and the highest number was of 81 respondents (54%) were very knowledgeable.

In relation with the Marketing mix theory, the awareness of the product, which in this case is the green products, will affect in setting the appropriate price of the packages, in creating proper promotion strategies and the right place to sell the product or distribution channel. Borah et al., (2023), further support this by finding that having knowledge or awareness on green products can help moderate the effect of green market on green innovation, the more knowledgeable, the higher the chances for innovation of greater products.

Implementation of green marketing strategies

Implementation of sustainable practices

142 tour operators (94.7%) responded that they had been conducting sustainable practices in their tour operations, while only 8 of the respondents (5.3%) stated they had limited implementation of sustainable practices. Out of the 142 respondents, 4 respondents (2.7%) stated they slightly implemented, 13 respondents (8.7%) had neutral implementation, 58 respondents (38.7%)

somehow implemented and the highest were 67 respondents (44.7%) who highly implemented sustainable practices in their tour operations. This could imply that a large number of tour operators highly try to implement sustainable practices in their operations.

This can be in relation to the Triple Bottom Line theory, where the tour companies not only strive for financial gain but also for social and environmental responsibility. Findings by Elshaer et al., (2023), further support that implementation of green practices by companies can enhance their social, financial and environmental performance leading to higher positive returns in the long term which leads to more companies opting for green practices.

Impact of green marketing on tourists' purchase

In terms of the impact that green marketing had on their overall bookings, only nine respondents (6%) stated it did not affect their bookings, 20 respondents (13.3%) stated to be neutral, 57 respondents (38%) stated that it somehow helped increase bookings while the highest response was from 64 respondents (42.7%) who stated that it highly increased the overall bookings.

According to findings made by (Hamid et al., 2021; Majeed et al., 2022; Nguyen-Viet, 2022; Tan et al., 2022), approaches towards green marketing can help a company to enhance the intentions of customers to purchase products, this supports the results above that showed an increase in overall booking due to green marketing practices. Mboma, (2021), further highlighted on the importance of promotional efforts at large in attracting a larger tourist market to visit Tanzania.

Martínez, (2015), also elaborated on the importance of implementing green marketing in order to acquire tourists' trust, satisfaction and loyalty that leads to repeat business. While (Chin, et al., 2018: Kartika, et al., 2020), further supported the notion of implementation indicators such as increased overall booking and influence of green marketing in tourist purchase behavior and decision making.

Green practices conducted by tour operators

In terms of green practices that were conducted by the tour operators. 67 respondents (49.6%) stated eco-friendly accommodations, 65 respondents (48.1%) stated use of sustainable transport, 76 respondents (56.3%) stated taking tourists to conservative destinations, 68 respondents (50.4%) stated use of local and organic products, while only 50 respondents (37%) stated providing eco-friendly education experience to tour groups, as shown in table 4.2. This showed that the tour operators did not only opt for one practice but rather a combination.

These particular practices are the products or services that fall under the product aspect of the marketing mix theory, in which it is comprised of the quality of the product, the packaging and design. This can be associated with findings from, Pasape, (2022), that show that creation of the green products should focus on planning, developing, promoting and implementing the strategies for the product to make it in the market.

It also shows that the tour companies are in line with the environment and social aspects of the Triple Bottom Line theory, which focuses on the importance of eco-friendly products and considering stakeholders as well rather than shareholders alone (Suleiman, 2023). Doing this reduce negative environmental impacts such as minimizing carbon footprint and pollution at large

and increases chances of positively engaging with suppliers, employees, customers and community.

Table 4.2 Green practices promoted

		Responses		Percent of
		N	Percent	Cases
Green practices promoted	Eco-friendly accommodations	67	20.6	49.6
	Sustainable transport	65	19.9	48.1
	Conservative destinations	76	23.3	56.3
	Local and organic products	68	20.9	50.4
	Eco-friendly education experience	50	15.3	37.0
Total		326	100.0	241.5

Source: Research data, 2024

Constraining factors of green marketing practices

Factors constraining adoption of green marketing strategies

In terms of factors that were stated to constrain the tour operators in adoption of green marketing, 42.9% of the respondents stated limited budget to be an influential factor. Only 14.3% stated low eco-tourist demand, 35.7% stated lack of adequate information on green marketing, 50% stated lack of appropriate policies, 21.4% stated limited suppliers of eco-friendly products, 50% mentioned high level of competition and only 7% stated lack of training, as shown in table 4.3.

This would suggest that lack of training and low eco-tourist demand are not influential constraining factors meaning most tour operators might already have the general training in tourism as accounted for by findings from Rasethuntsa, (2022), which state Tanzania as one of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries that invests in tourism education. The results further show that there is a good potential of eco-tourist demand as more tourists are becoming environmentally responsible and opt for greener tours, this can be associated with findings made by Solberg and Smiley, (2022); Basendwah et al., (2024). The results further indicate that limited budget, which relates to the financial aspect from the Triple Bottom Line theory, lack of appropriate policies and high level of competition are highly influential constraints that limit most tour operators in fully adopting to green marketing practices. The above results are in line with findings made by Thomsen, (2022), on Zanzibar's eco-tourism challenges and Awadhi et al., (2024) on cultural tourism challenges in Tanzania. Mollel, (2024), supported the notion on policies through the findings that stipulated different sectors that are related to tourism have inadequate and contradicting policies, this may in turn hinder proper and smooth operations of tour companies. Ndossa, (2023), further argued that Tanzania does have policies in place that are designed to

support the development of tourism activities in the country, but lack of implementation of such policies is what hinders the proper development.

Table 4.3 Constraining factors on adoption of green marketing strategies

Variable		Frequency	Percent	Percent of Cases
Constraining factors for green practices influence	Limited Budget	6	19.4	42.9
	Low Eco-tourist demand	2	6.5	14.3
	Lack of adequate information on green marketing	5	16.1	35.7
	Lack of appropriate policies	7	22.6	50.0
	Lack of training	1	3.2	7.1
	Limited suppliers of eco-friendly products	3	9.7	21.4
	High level of competition in ecotourism	7	22.6	50.0
Total		**31**	**100.0**	**221.4**

Source: Research data, 2024

Inferential Analysis

Correlation between Years of operation and the constraints on green marketing

Correlation was done between the independent variable of years of operation of the tour company and the constraining factors selected by tour operators. The result of the analysis shows that maturity of the company in terms of years of operation is not significantly related to lack of adequate information on green marketing (p= 0.113), lack of adequate policies (p= 0.200), lack of training (p= 0.178) and high competition levels (p= 0.107). Nevertheless, it is significantly related to limited budget (p= 0.032), low eco-tourist demand (p= 0.013), and limited suppliers of eco-friendly products (p= 0.043). This could suggest that years of operations of a company have an impact on constraints that can be caused or solved by the company. For example, a company that has worked for many years is likely to handle limited budget matters compared to a startup. Further, it is likely to have a higher demand of eco-tourists due to its years of operation and link to customer base. The results further imply that the years of operation of a company cannot influence constraints from policies as the Government makes the policies, further it cannot influence training as staff are supposed to be trained from the beginning but will differ in experience.

Secondary Data Results

Green tourists in Tanzania

Results from this section is from data that was collected from published documentation of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT) in Tanzania.

The result show that 76.4% of the total visitors' arrivals in the year 2022, and 79.1% of visitors' arrivals in 2023 was of tourists who engaged in responsible tourism. The data shows that the percent of tourists engaging in responsible tourism in 2023 is almost the same as the 80% of tourist arrivals in 2019, which was before COVID-19 pandemic had fully had an impact in Tanzania's tourism. The impact is clearly seen in the percentage drop in 2020 and 2021 with 55.6% and 52.9% of tourist arrivals respectively, as shown in figure 4.1 below.

This data suggests the number of tourists participating in green tourism keeps increasing over the years post-pandemic. This is in line with findings from Wamboye, (2022), that show an increasing in tourists' interest in participating in responsible tourism while on travel. Further, a study by Kitole, and Sesabo, (2024), shows that more tourists are interested in connecting to nature and getting away from the busy cities. These data can further show that green tourism in Tanzania is highly managed under Government owned institutions.

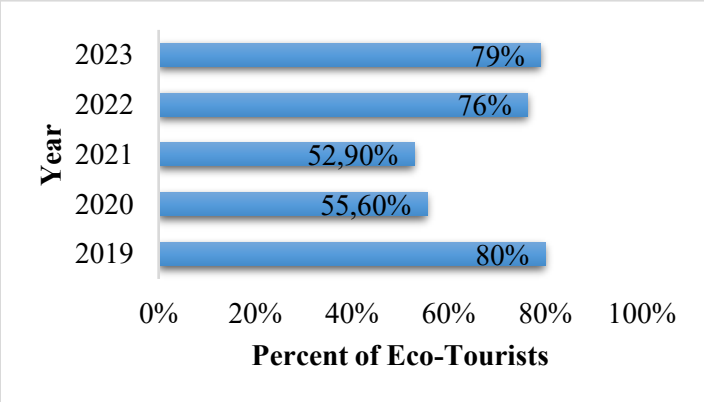


Figure 4.1: Bar chart showing percentage of Eco-tourists arrival in Tanzania from 2019 to 2023

Source: Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, Tanzania, 2023

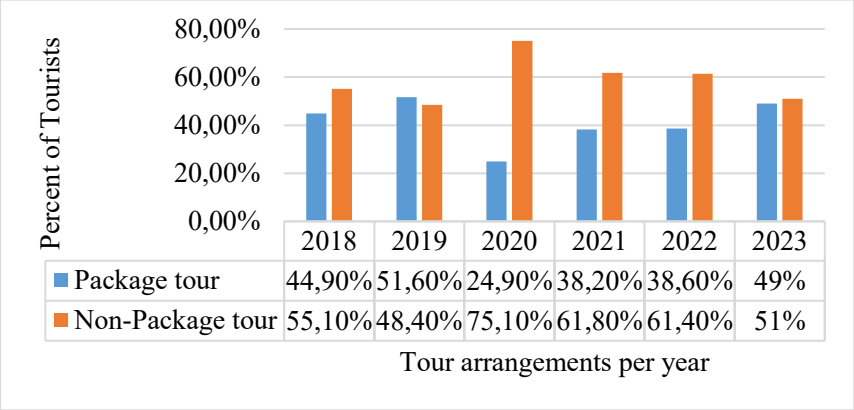
Tourists engagement in tour arrangements

Results from the international visitors' exit survey done by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism in Tanzania in 2019- 2023 show that, in the year 2019, 51.6% of tourists engaged in packaged tours through intermediaries such as tour operators, while 48.4% engaged in non- packaged tours. This abruptly changed due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that hit Tanzania's tourism industry harder from 2020, a decrease in packaged tours can be seen in figure 4.2 where from 2020 to 2022 most of the tourist that travelled to Tanzania engaged in non-packaged tours. Mwamwaja and Mlozi, (2020), who stated reduction of wages and closure of tourism businesses such as tour companies due to lack of customers (tourists) as a result of the pandemic, further supports the above data. In 2023, the number of tourists engaging in packaged tours rose to 49% while that of tourists with non- packaged tours fell to 51% as shown in Figure 4.2 below.

This data shows that the number of tourists participating in arranged tours in Tanzania is rising, which may suggest more opportunities for tour operators to acquire different tourist niches including that of green tourists as data has also shown them to increase in number. This can be supported by findings from Streimikiene et al., (2021), that show tour operators have more

opportunities to diversify tourism activities and acquire a larger tourist market. Yarcan and Çetin, (2021), present the notion that suggest tourists are more likely to gain reasonable prices in packaged tours as compared to individual purchases of the same products separately. Álvarez-Albelo and Martínez-González, (2024), links this idea with availability of discounts offered to tourists due to tour operators getting fair prices from the suppliers of tour products.

Figure 4.2: Percent of tourists that engaged in arranged tours in 2018- 2023



	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Package tour	44,90%	51,60%	24,90%	38,20%	38,60%	49%
Non-Package tour	55,10%	48,40%	75,10%	61,80%	61,40%	51%

Source: Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, Tanzania, 2023

Conclusion

In summary of the results, it is seen that due to wildlife and nature-based tourism being the highest form of tourism practiced in Tanzania, tour operators in the Eastern Tourist Circuit are aware and do practice green marketing but at varying extents and scopes.

Findings from this research imply that, tour operators can strive to better themselves in line with the ever-growing tourism industry, and keep up with the diverse competition and be able to serve the niche of green tourists and get financial gains while providing environmental protection and social commitment to both shareholders and stakeholders of the tourism industry. This can be done by identifying the green tourists market and creating green tourism products, pricing them effectively, promoting them aggressively and finding proper distribution channels to reach the target market.

This study suggests that tour operators set aside budgets for green marketing, for them to gain experience from other tour companies that have gone green and to opt for cost- effective eco-friendly initiatives. Further implementation of policies and stakeholder accountability should be enhanced. Future research should assess green marketing impacts on consumer decision making and further content analysis be done on current policies.

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Space Gastronomy in the Context of Space Tourism: A Literature Mapping

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to provide a holistic perspective to the literature by revealing the current state, development, and trends in the academic knowledge accumulation within the field of space gastronomy through bibliometric analysis.

Study methodology: In this study, 254 English-language articles on space gastronomy published in the Web of Science (WoS) database up to 2026 were examined. The data were collected using the keywords "space gastronomy," "space food," "space cuisine," and related terms, and analyzed with VOSviewer bibliometric mapping software.

Results: The analyses indicate that research on space gastronomy has increased in recent years, establishing an academically expanding field of influence with an average annual growth rate of 3.2% and a high level of citations. It was determined that China, the United States, and Australia occupy central positions in space gastronomy research, with China Agricultural University being identified as the most productive institution. The key concepts representing studies in the field were found to be "space food", "microgravity" and "food packaging".

Originality/value: This study demonstrates that the concept of space gastronomy is situated within a multidimensional, multidisciplinary research area and presents clear research trends for future studies.

Keywords: space gastronomy, space food, space tourism, bibliometric analysis

Introduction

As humanity's advancement beyond Earth's atmosphere accelerates, the notion of space tourism is undergoing a transformative shift from a futuristic aspiration to a tangible, viable reality. Whereas space travel was historically an endeavor reserved for astronauts and scientists requiring considerable expertise, it has, through the pioneering initiatives of companies such as SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic, become increasingly accessible to private individuals. These developments have not only paved the way for commercial space transportation but have also enabled non-professional astronauts to participate in both suborbital and orbital missions (Kumar & Thakur, 2025).

Within this context, the space tourism market is projected to gain substantial momentum and expand markedly in the coming decades, with millions of prospective participants seeking the

experience of weightlessness or the unique vantage point of observing Earth from space (Kumar & Thakur, 2025). The broadening of access to the cosmos is poised to recast space tourism as a strategic industry, particularly in nutrition and sustainable life-support systems, thereby presenting both formidable challenges and significant opportunities. As the sector evolves, expectations regarding food will be redefined, positioning space gastronomy as an increasingly central determinant of the overall travel experience.

It is anticipated that individuals willing to incur the considerable costs of space travel will demand not merely rudimentary, functional nutrition but also high-quality, distinctive, and memorable gastronomic experiences. Such expectations will catalyze innovation across space food technologies, encompassing a wide spectrum from gourmet meal options to systems for cultivating fresh produce during extended missions. Consequently, the evolution of space food will have far-reaching implications, not only for passenger health and satisfaction but also for the broader feasibility of sustaining life in space, making it a critical determinant of the sustainability of space tourism.

Within the context of space missions, food fulfills a multifaceted role: beyond satisfying basic nutritional requirements, it is integral to maintaining the physiological health, psychological resilience, and morale of crew members within the confined, isolated, and physically demanding environment of space. The progression of space food, from the consumption of pureed foods from tubes in early missions to today's advanced freeze-dried and thermostabilized options, reflects a significant development trajectory. This evolution has been driven by the imperatives of ensuring balanced nutrition, safeguarding food safety, and accommodating space-specific constraints such as microgravity and limited storage capacity. Initially, the design of space food prioritized efficiency and practicality, often at the expense of taste and variety. However, as mission durations have lengthened and operational complexity has increased, the value of diverse and sensorially rewarding meals has become more pronounced. At present, the ability to develop space foods that simultaneously meet criteria for taste, nutrition, and safety is expected to be of paramount importance for the industry's future trajectory and the field of space gastronomy (Kumar & Thakur, 2025).

To synthesize progress in space gastronomy research and to elucidate future directions, it is crucial to undertake a comprehensive review. To this end, the objective of the present study is to offer a holistic perspective on the culinary horizons of outer space by systematically examining the current state, historical development, trends, academic collaborations, and prevailing topics in space gastronomy through a bibliometric analysis.

Conceptual Framework

The Evolution of Space Gastronomy

Initially, the nutritional provisions available to astronauts were extremely limited and rudimentary; over time, however, these practices have evolved into highly engineered and nutritionally optimized meal systems designed to meet the physiological requirements of astronauts during long-duration missions (Koehle et al., 2023). This transformation reflects not only advances in

engineering and food technology but also a growing scientific recognition of the pivotal role that nutrition plays in sustaining both the physical endurance and psychological well-being of crew members.

The early era of space exploration posed considerable operational and biophysiological challenges for food provision and consumption (Oluwafemi et al., 2018; Kumar & Thakur, 2025). The first foods consumed in space during the 1960s were markedly deficient in both diversity and sensory quality compared to terrestrial cuisine. The limitations extended beyond taste; the microgravity environment fundamentally altered the behavior of food and fluids both within the cabin and in the human body, thereby influencing taste perception and complicating basic physiological processes such as swallowing (Pandith et al., 2023). Accordingly, early space foods were engineered not only to ensure adequate nutrient intake but also to mitigate choking hazards and minimize the risk of crumb formation, which could potentially damage sensitive spacecraft equipment. Packaging design was guided by criteria such as lightness, durability, and the ability to be preserved for extended periods within highly restricted storage volumes (Kumar & Thakur, 2025).

As mission durations lengthened and operational complexity increased, the demand for advanced food-processing and preservation technologies grew. The 1960s and 1970s marked a period of significant innovation, most notably the development of freeze-drying technology (Oyinloye & Yoon, 2020). Freeze-dried foods extended shelf life, reduced weight, and enabled greater variety and improved sensory attributes, thereby becoming a central component of astronaut nutrition.

Another critical milestone in the development of space food technology was the introduction of thermostabilized foods. This process entailed sealing foods in flexible packaging and applying controlled thermal treatment to eliminate pathogenic microorganisms, thereby ensuring their long-term safety and edibility. Thermostabilized meals enabled astronauts to have more familiar and appealing options, such as stews and pasta, that could be consumed with minimal preparation (Pandith et al., 2023). The psychological benefits of palatable and culturally resonant meals became increasingly evident during long-duration missions, underscoring that nutrition fulfills both emotional and physiological needs (Selim, 2020).

The Space Shuttle program, initiated in the 1980s, further broadened the scope of space cuisine. Astronauts could select from over 70 food and beverage items, including previously unavailable fresh produce. This expansion in menu variety alleviated dietary monotony and contributed to an enhanced sense of comfort and normalcy during missions.

A further turning point in space food production was the introduction of three-dimensional (3D) printing technology, which enables on-demand, individualized meal production tailored to crew members' specific needs. This innovation directly addresses the demand for personalized nutrition. Despite the considerable challenges encountered in early space food programs, these experiences have yielded a valuable repository of knowledge and expertise that now underpins contemporary practices and drives ongoing innovation in the field (Tsuboyama-Kasaoka et al., 2022).

The restricted variety of early space diets, exacerbated by the isolation and psychological stresses inherent in space travel, demonstrated that nutritional adequacy alone is insufficient. Such conditions have underscored the necessity for food to provide sensory satisfaction and psychological support. This recognition has engendered a fundamental paradigm shift, prompting the development of more diverse, palatable, and culturally meaningful meal options for long-duration missions and for the rapidly evolving domain of space tourism (Kumar & Thakur, 2025).

The Significance of Space Gastronomy

Beyond its biological function, food serves as a symbolic and emotional conduit to Earth, providing astronauts, who are separated from their homes and cultural contexts for extended durations, with comfort, familiarity, and a sense of identity. The psychological support afforded by culturally familiar foods, the influence of diet on morale and mental health, and the experiential potential of distinctive gastronomic offerings within the context of space tourism collectively underscore the multidimensional significance of food in space exploration (Semwal et al., 2024). For astronauts on missions spanning months or even years, access to foods that reflect their cultural heritage can be a vital source of psychological resilience.

In response, space agencies have increasingly acknowledged the importance of incorporating culturally diverse foods into crew menus, particularly as international collaboration in human spaceflight intensifies (Kua et al., 2021). It has been demonstrated that monotonous, sensorially inadequate meals may precipitate a decline in morale, whereas diverse, palatable options enrich the dining experience and enhance overall satisfaction. Empirical findings indicate that astronauts who report satisfaction with their food intake are more likely to consume sufficient calories and essential nutrients, prerequisites for maintaining physical health.

Furthermore, research and innovation directed toward sustainable space food production have significant implications for terrestrial food systems. Technologies developed for efficient water utilization, closed-loop recycling, and resource-efficient food production under space conditions hold considerable promise for addressing fundamental challenges in global food security and environmental sustainability. In this context, space food research not only meets the operational requirements of space missions but also supports terrestrial applications aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (Kumar & Thakur, 2025).

Innovations in space food technologies are therefore strategically significant, not only for supporting the physiological health and psychological well-being of astronauts, but also for fostering sustainable production and consumption models in both extraterrestrial and terrestrial contexts. With the institutionalization of space tourism and the proliferation of long-duration crewed missions, the continual advancement of space food technologies is emerging as a critical imperative: ensuring future space travelers' access to nutritious, safe, and sensorially satisfying meals while simultaneously minimizing environmental impact.

Challenges Confronting Space Gastronomy

Ensuring food safety and quality in the distinctive space environment is paramount, particularly as the sector transitions from serving exclusively professional astronauts to accommodating a broader population of space tourists.

Nutrition in space occurs under conditions that differ substantially from those on Earth, thereby presenting a range of technical, biological, and psychological challenges. Microgravity, closed-system living, limited resources, and the need for long-term food preservation collectively make maintaining astronaut health a formidable task (Kim et al., 2024; Evliyaoğlu & Bulut, 2025). Among the most salient nutritional challenges is the physiological impact of microgravity, which leads to reductions in bone mineral density and muscle mass, thereby necessitating diets enriched in calcium, vitamin D, and protein (Liu & Zhang, 2025). Additionally, the immune system may be compromised under microgravity conditions, thereby heightening susceptibility to foodborne infections (Zaccaria et al., 2024; Evliyaoğlu & Bulut, 2025).

Another major obstacle is the requirement for a prolonged shelf life. Space foods must remain unspoiled for months or even years, necessitating preservation technologies such as freeze-drying, irradiation sterilization, and vacuum packaging (Pluchon et al., 2024). Nevertheless, extended storage can lead to nutrient degradation and changes in flavor profiles (Brawley et al., 2025). The space environment also alters taste and sensory perception, potentially attenuating astronauts' appetites. Microgravity is known to affect taste sensitivity, with many astronauts reporting a preference for spicier foods than they typically consume on Earth (Mandal et al., 2024). Consequently, NASA and other space agencies are actively engaged in developing foods with more pronounced flavors. Microbiological safety is another critical concern; contamination within a closed environment can have severe health consequences. Accordingly, space foods undergo stringent microbiological testing and are produced under Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) protocols to inhibit bacterial proliferation (Chen, 2024; Evliyaoğlu & Bulut, 2025).

In the context of space tourism, maintaining rigorous safety and hygiene standards becomes even more challenging, given that the clientele may lack the training and discipline of professional astronauts. Tourists may be unfamiliar with strict contamination-prevention protocols, necessitating intuitive, user-friendly, and fail-safe food products and packaging designs.

A further consideration is the adaptation of space food and its enhancement to appeal to tourists. To meet the expectations of this demographic, space food must be more flavorful, more diverse, and more visually appealing. This entails creating novel food textures that are resilient to space conditions and designing meals that are both satiating and pleasurable to consume. The logistics and supply chain management of provisioning food for space tourists represent another significant challenge. While professional astronauts are accustomed to pre-packaged, shelf-stable meals, space tourists are likely to expect elevated culinary standards, including fresh and varied options. Satisfying these expectations demands a highly coordinated and efficient supply chain capable of

delivering premium-quality food to space in a timely and cost-effective manner (Kumar & Thakur, 2025).

The principal logistical challenge is transporting food to space, a process that is both costly and resource-intensive, with each kilogram of payload incurring substantial expense. This reality necessitates meticulous planning to optimize the weight, volume, and nutritional content of transported food. Moreover, the logistics of space tourism must accommodate diverse dietary preferences and restrictions; unlike astronauts, space tourists may have a wide range of dietary requirements, from vegetarianism to allergies, thereby complicating meal planning and preparation. Ensuring a flexible and responsive supply chain that adheres to stringent safety standards is thus imperative (Kumar & Thakur, 2025).

In sum, the challenges associated with space food production for space tourism are multifaceted, encompassing concerns related to safety, logistics, and adaptation to meet the expectations of an increasingly diverse clientele. As the space tourism sector continues to expand, addressing these challenges will be essential to delivering a high-quality, safe, and enjoyable culinary experience for space tourists. Innovations and solutions arising from this domain will not only enhance the experience of space travel but will also yield broader contributions to the advancement of food science and technology, with potential applications in both extraterrestrial and terrestrial contexts.

Methodology

Bibliometric analysis offers a comprehensive perspective on the intellectual architecture of a given field by systematically examining the interrelationships among authors, journals, keywords, and countries through publication and citation data derived from the scholarly literature. In this respect, the method facilitates systematic evaluation of the literature, identification of prevailing research trends, and elucidation of scientific collaboration networks (Akın, 2021; Gökbulut, 2025).

In alignment with the research objectives, this study conducted a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of publications indexed in the WoS database to map the intellectual landscape of space gastronomy research and elucidate its global dynamics. The dataset for this analysis was systematically compiled from articles published in WoS up to February 2026, using a targeted set of keywords: “space gastronomy,” “space food”, “space cuisine”, “space nutrition” and “interplanetary gastronomy”. The meticulous selection of these search terms is critical, as emphasized by Pickering and Byrne (2014), to ensure both inclusivity and precision in the literature review and thereby capture the full breadth of scholarly discourse on this emerging field. The initial query yielded 293 publications; however, this figure included all academic document categories. Given that the analysis of articles is considered a robust indicator for comparative and evaluative purposes in the literature, the present study is confined exclusively to bibliometric analysis of journal articles. Other publication types, such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings, reports, theses, and editorial notes, were excluded from the analysis.

Furthermore, to mitigate potential ambiguities in word cloud analyses or trending topics arising from multilingual publications, the study was restricted to English-language articles, the recognized lingua franca of scientific communication. After these filtering procedures, a secondary

screening was conducted, yielding a final sample of 254 articles for analysis. For the evaluation and visual mapping of the collected data, VOSviewer, a software specifically designed for bibliometric analysis, was employed.

Results

This section delineates the findings derived from the bibliometric analysis of the space gastronomy literature. The results have been systematically and comprehensively contextualized within the extant literature to illuminate the field's theoretical and empirical foundations. Furthermore, this analysis seeks to identify salient research themes and evolving trends over time, as well as to elucidate potential avenues for future inquiry that may advance the academic discourse in this domain.

Figure 1. A General Overview of Space Gastronomy Research

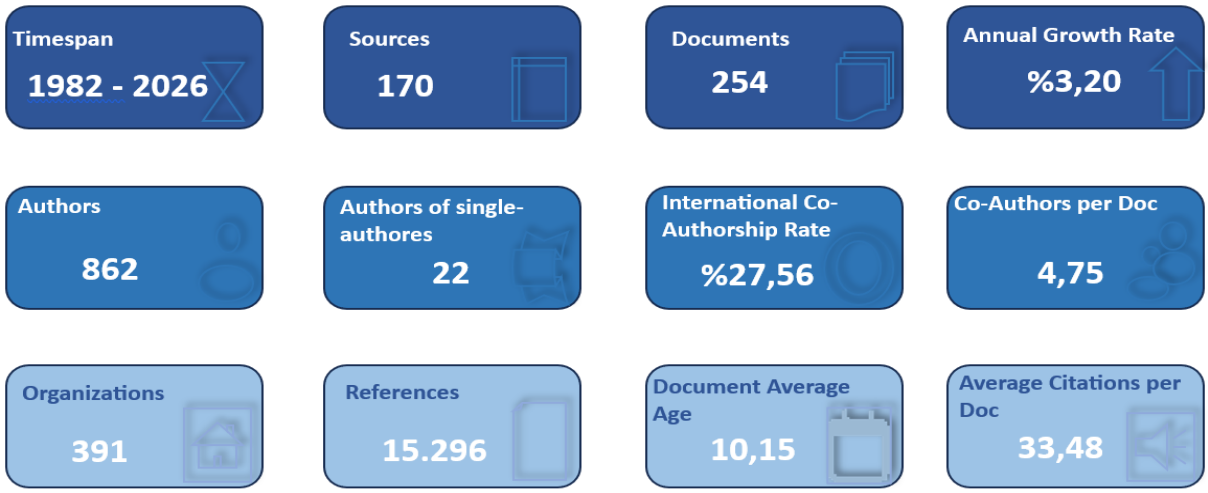


Figure 1 offers a bibliometric overview of the research output in the domain of space gastronomy to date. The analysis reveals that 254 articles have been published across 170 distinct sources. While the field has exhibited consistent growth, with an average annual growth rate of 3.2%, which remains modest relative to its potential, the mean citation count per article stands at 33.48. A total of 862 authors have contributed to this body of literature, of whom 22 have authored single-authored publications. The average number of co-authors per document is 4.75, and 27.56% of the publications involve international collaboration. The dataset further comprises 391 institutions and 15,296 references.

These findings underscore the academic maturation and increasing visibility of space gastronomy as a research field. The upward trajectory in growth rate, coupled with substantial citation metrics, attests to the domain's scholarly influence and relevance. The prevalence of co-authored publications and the moderate yet notable level of international collaboration suggest an environment conducive to expanding global research networks. The average document age of 10.15 years indicates that foundational studies remain relatively current and that ongoing research

is actively building on the extant knowledge base. Taken together, these results illustrate that space gastronomy constitutes a dynamic, emergent, and inherently multidisciplinary area of inquiry, offering considerable opportunities for further international collaboration.

Chart 1. Distribution of Articles by Year

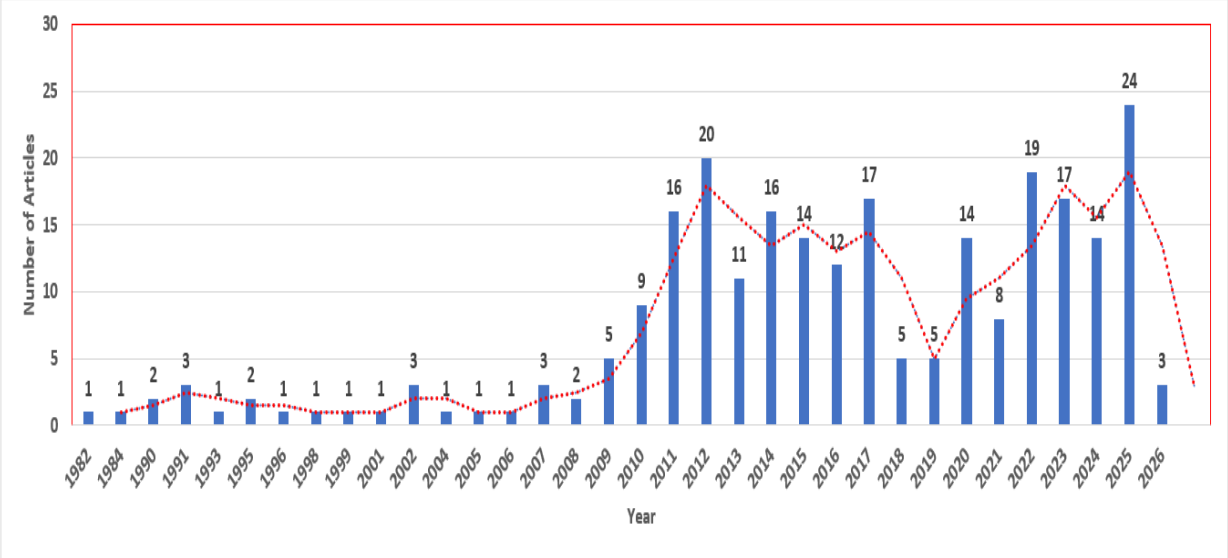


Chart 1 depicts the temporal distribution of scientific publications in the field of space gastronomy over the period 1982–2026. It is evident that from the initiation of scholarly inquiry in 1982 until 2009, the annual output of articles remained markedly limited, with publication counts fluctuating between zero and three per year, indicating the field's embryonic or formative stage.

A discernible upward trajectory in publication frequency emerges from 2009 onward. Although the number of articles published annually increased during the 2009–2024 interval, this growth remained relatively modest and was intermittently punctuated by short-term fluctuations. The most pronounced escalation is observed in 2025, with 24 articles, the highest annual output recorded throughout the period under review. Notably, three articles have already been published up to February 2026, suggesting that publication growth may be sustained in the long term.

Figure 2. Network Visualisation of Co-authorship Analysis of Countries and Top 10 Countries

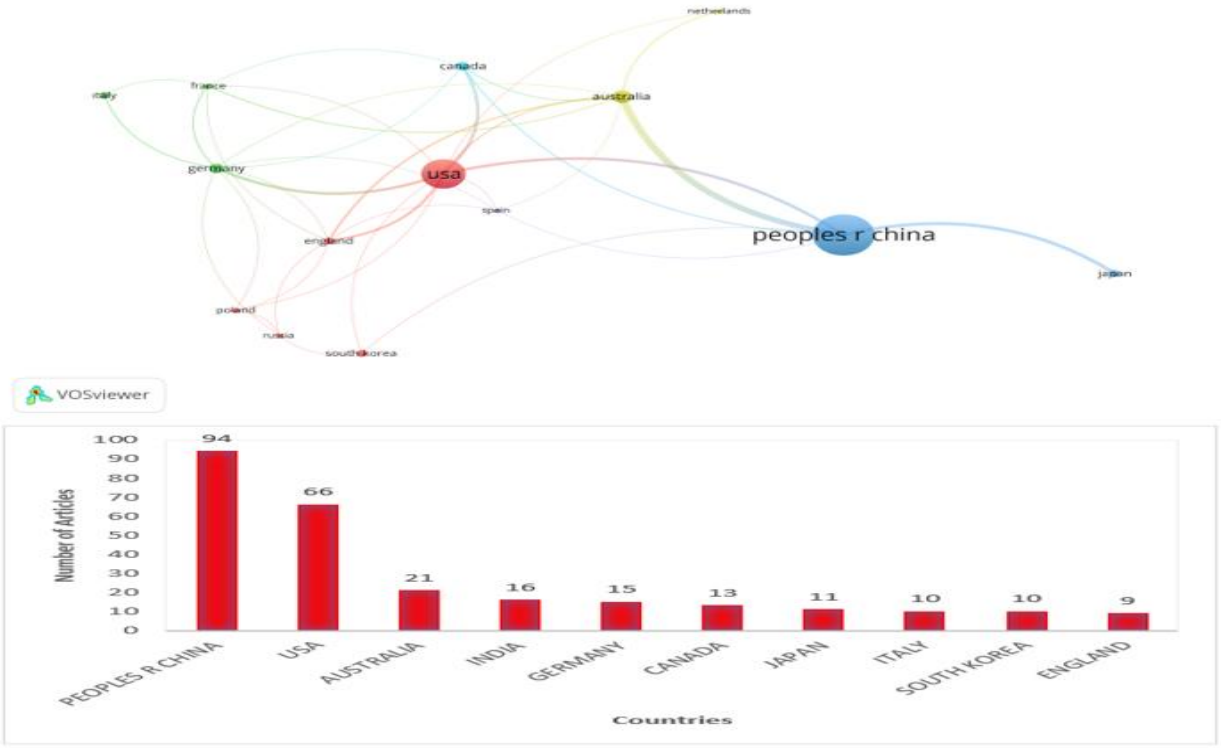
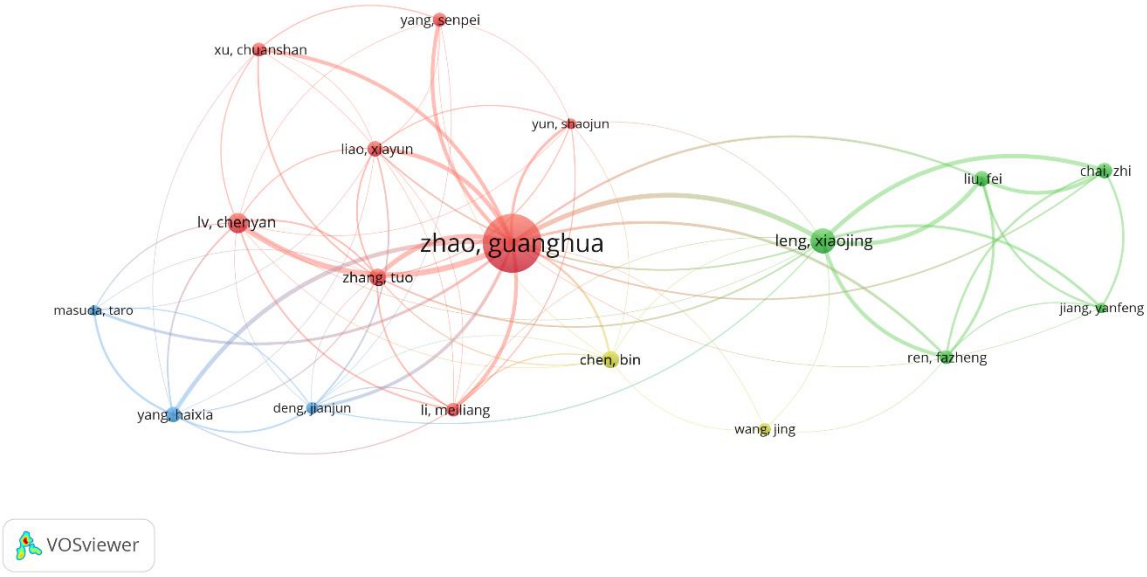


Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of global research collaborations within the domain of space gastronomy. On the map, blue, red, and yellow denote countries with the highest levels of international cooperation. In this regard, China, the United States, and Australia emerge as prominent hubs of collaborative research in space gastronomy. Furthermore, countries such as Germany, Canada, and Japan assume pivotal roles in shaping the global research landscape through extensive international partnerships. The United Kingdom, South Korea, and Italy are likewise notable for their substantial levels of collaboration, thereby demonstrating their active engagement and meaningful contributions to the international research community.

In addition, Figure 2 displays the distribution of publications by country, highlighting the top 10 countries by scholarly output and their respective publication counts. The analysis indicates that China is the leading contributor to the literature, with 94 publications, followed by the United States with 66 publications. Australia ranks third; however, the number of studies originating from countries other than China and the United States is considerably lower, underscoring a pronounced disparity in research activity. Beyond the data shown in the figure, further analysis reveals that Turkey, with 3 published articles, ranks 18th in scientific productivity in this field

Figure 3. Network Visualisation: Co-Authorship Analysis of Authors



The existing corpus of space gastronomy scholarship is characterized by a marked concentration of academic influence within a select cadre of scholars, while simultaneously evidencing a pronounced orientation toward collaborative knowledge production. In citation terms, Zhao emerges as the field's foremost contributor (44 publications; 1,676 citations), indicative of sustained scholarly productivity and significant intellectual visibility. Leng (15 publications; 991 citations) and Zhang (11 publications; 941 citations) similarly register robust performance across both quantitative and qualitative impact metrics, underscoring their centrality to the field's intellectual infrastructure and the consolidation of its foundational debates. Collectively, these citation profiles delineate a disciplinary milieu in which conceptual frameworks and methodological paradigms are anchored by a small number of highly visible authors whose work serves as recurrent reference points in subsequent research.

Concurrently, the data reveal that heightened citation impact is not necessarily predicated upon extensive publication output. Several researchers attain notable citation prominence despite comparatively modest scholarly output, suggesting that a select few seminal, potentially agenda-setting contributions have exerted outsized influence on the literature's evolution. Bhandari's 698 citations from six publications, and Jiang's 579 citations from five publications, exemplify the phenomenon wherein particular works achieve the status of widely-recognized intellectual touchstones. Further evidence of impactful scholarship is furnished by Ren (7 publications; 473 citations), Zhang (9 publications; 330 citations), and Xu (7 publications; 325 citations), collectively reinforcing the interpretation of a knowledge base that, while evolving, remains relatively concentrated in terms of authorship and citation dynamics.

This pattern of influence is further corroborated by co-authorship network analysis, as depicted in Figure 3, which demonstrates that scholarly production and the circulation of knowledge in space

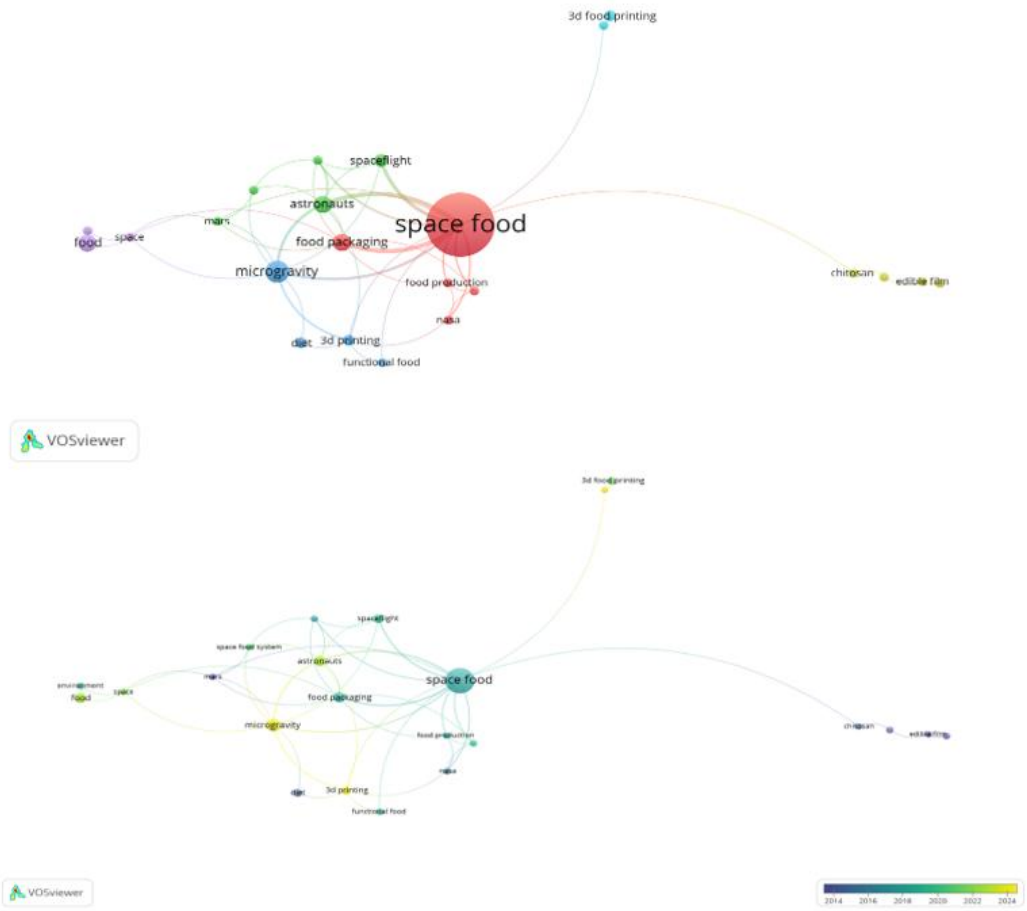
gastronomy are predominantly advanced through collaborative research teams rather than isolated individual contributions. The co-authorship topology reveals collaborative authorship as an intrinsic attribute of the field, with a central core of actors sustaining network connectivity. Notably, Zhao occupies not only a position of high citation prominence but also a key structural intermediary role, bridging multiple sub-networks and thereby facilitating intellectual exchange across the domain. This dual prominence, intellectual and structural, suggests that Zhao's influence is exercised through both citation impact and collaborative positioning, reinforcing major research trajectories and fostering the diffusion of ideas.

Moreover, the network structure shows distinct subgroups characterized by dense internal linkages that connect to the broader network through a limited set of bridging ties. The cluster centered on Leng exemplifies this configuration, with researchers such as Liu, Chai, and Ren forming particularly cohesive collaborative associations within the subgroup. This clustering phenomenon may be construed as evidence of thematic specialization and the progressive differentiation of the literature, wherein concentrated research communities coalesce around specific methodological orientations, application domains, or emergent research questions.

A salient dimension of the space gastronomy research landscape concerns the institutional provenance of scholarly influence. Analysis of the extant literature indicates that institutional impact is markedly concentrated within a select cadre of organizations, each exhibiting pronounced disparities in both research productivity and citation visibility. China Agricultural University stands as the preeminent institutional actor, generating 56 publications and accruing 2,370 citations, thus solidifying its role as a principal locus of knowledge production and a pivotal architect of the field's intellectual trajectory. Beyond this dominant entity, a subset of institutions demonstrates significant scholarly resonance despite publishing fewer publications. Jiangnan University, with 11 publications and 941 citations, exemplifies an institution whose research outputs attain substantial traction within the academic community. Similarly, the University of Queensland's 698 citations from merely six publications suggest the production of seminal works that have become integral reference points, highlighting the potential for disproportionate intellectual influence despite limited quantitative output.

A further array of institutions makes visible, if comparatively modest, contributions to the knowledge base, including Kyoto University (6 publications; 165 citations), Purdue University (4 publications; 150 citations) and Washington State University (4 publications; 116 citations). Collectively, these institutional indicators delineate a landscape shaped by both high-output academic centers and specialized organizations whose influence is amplified through select, widely cited scholarship. Ultimately, the institutional architecture of space gastronomy research is not reducible to publication volume alone; rather, it reflects strategic concentrations of expertise and the capacity of certain organizations to produce agenda-setting research that underpins both scholarly advancement and applied developments in the field.

Figure 4. Co-occurrence Analysis of Author Keywords and Overlay Visualization of Author Keywords



The first part of Figure 4 provides a frequency-based visualization of author keywords, thereby elucidating the conceptual concentrations within the space gastronomy literature. The mapping reveals that the literature is not organized around a singular thematic axis, but instead progresses along multiple, interrelated principal research trajectories.

Positioned at the core of the network, the "space food" node constitutes the central concept, exhibiting the highest degree of interconnectivity among clusters. This suggests that the conceptual framework of the space gastronomy literature is fundamentally anchored in the domain of "space food," with subsidiary themes predominantly articulated around this nucleus. The prominent connectivity of terms such as "food packaging" and "food production," which are situated near the network's core, highlights the substantial emphasis in the literature on production, preservation, packaging, and logistics in the context of space gastronomy.

Another salient concept is "microgravity," whose node occupies a bridging position across various clusters. This indicates that "microgravity" is integrally linked not only to production processes but also to consumption and nutrition within the literature. In sum, the analysis demonstrates that the space gastronomy literature constitutes a multidimensional and inherently multidisciplinary field, one that extends beyond the narrow confines of astronaut diet to encompass system

requirements, the human factor, and technological innovation as key axes of scholarly development.

The Second part of Figure 4 depicts the co-occurrence relationships among keywords within a network structure, with color gradations indicating the average year of publication. This visualization thus facilitates a nuanced interpretation of the conceptual core of the space gastronomy literature, the clustering of sub-themes, and the temporal evolution of these thematic clusters.

Centrally positioned within the network, the "space food" node emerges as both the most highly connected and the most heavily weighted term, underscoring its role as the conceptual backbone organizing the literature. The color gradient associated with this node indicates that "space food" functions as a bridging concept, linking sub-themes that have emerged across different temporal intervals and thereby sustaining the continuity of scholarly discourse.

Terms such as "edible film" and "chitosan," situated within the cooler color spectrum and corresponding to the earliest period represented on the map (2014–2016), suggest that the initial phase of space gastronomy research was predominantly concerned with preservation, stability, and packaging-related solutions. As the field has matured, terms including "food packaging," "space food system," "spaceflight," and "food production" have become increasingly concentrated around the network's core, reflecting a paradigmatic shift toward a systems-based perspective and the operational dimensions of space gastronomy.

In the most recent period (2021–2022), the heightened visibility of terms such as "microgravity" and "astronauts" indicates a growing scholarly focus on the unique environmental constraints of space and the user-centered dimensions of consumption practices in this context. Nodes such as "3D food printing," located within the warmest color gradations, signal the emergence of research interests related to in situ production, personalization, and innovative manufacturing approaches in contemporary space gastronomy literature.

Collectively, the layered map delineates a technology-driven trajectory of transformation within the literature. While early research emphasized preservation and material-based solutions, subsequent developments have foregrounded systems approaches and operational processes, followed by an increasing emphasis on the effects of microgravity and the human factor in shaping the field's future direction.

Conclusion

The advancement of space food technology has been shaped by the imperative to safeguard astronauts' health, well-being, and operational performance during missions ranging from several days to months or even years (Pandith et al., 2023). This necessity has spurred innovations that address the unique challenges of space travel, including nutrient optimization, food preservation, packaging, and personalized meal delivery through advanced technologies such as 3D printing. Furthermore, as humanity's ambitions for extended space habitation and exploration intensify, considerations of sustainability and resource efficiency have become increasingly important.

This study is grounded in a bibliometric analysis of data retrieved from the WoS to elucidate the overarching landscape, prevailing trends, and structural patterns within the space gastronomy literature, particularly in the context of space tourism. Following rigorous filtering criteria, a dataset comprising 254 articles was constructed and subsequently analyzed using VOSviewer, enabling the mapping and evaluation of accumulated knowledge, quantitative indicators, and network structures within the field. This methodological approach has enabled the articulation of a holistic perspective on the current state of the field, encompassing not only content-based developments but also the dynamics of key actors, collaborative networks, and conceptual clusters.

The aggregate bibliometric indicators underscore the academic maturation and increasing visibility of space gastronomy as a research field. The findings regarding the temporal distribution indicate that research on space gastronomy remained limited in the early years but experienced a marked increase in scientific output after 2009. This growth peaked in 2025, with 24 articles published. Up to February 2026, the publication of three articles suggests that the upward trend in research productivity may continue. This pattern is significant as it reflects the growing importance and visibility of space gastronomy within academic discourse and also mirrors broader developments in space tourism and the global space industry

Analyses of country-level productivity and collaboration patterns indicate a concentration of knowledge production within specific centers, alongside the gradual development of international research networks. China emerges as the most prolific contributor (94 publications), followed by the United States (66 publications). Turkey's position at eighteenth, with three articles, attests to the field's potential for expansion across diverse geographical contexts. The high prevalence of co-authorship and moderate international collaboration further indicates that space gastronomy, by its nature, fosters interdisciplinary research networks; yet, the evolution of deeper global partnerships may facilitate a more equitable distribution of knowledge production worldwide.

Intellectual leadership and institutional influence in the field are reflected in the prominence of core actors, as evidenced by citation and productivity metrics. Authors such as Zhao, Leng, and Zhang are particularly notable for their scholarly impact, suggesting that research in the field coalesces around certain focal trajectories. A similar pattern of concentration is observed institutionally, with China Agricultural University distinguishable for its exceptional productivity and influence. This dual structure implies that the field's knowledge base is advanced by central figures and diversified through contributions from a broader research ecosystem.

Conceptual mapping results indicate an evolution from preservation and packaging toward systems-based and human-factor concerns, culminating in recent attention to advanced, personalized production technologies (e.g., 3D food printing).

This trajectory of transformation demonstrates that space gastronomy is evolving from a narrow focus on food provisioning in extraterrestrial environments toward a more multidimensional research agenda that encompasses production, safe consumption, and the design of experiential dimensions in space. From the perspective of space tourism, these findings indicate that gastronomy will increasingly transition from a supplementary aspect of space travel to a strategic

element in shaping the meaning and quality of the experience itself. Unlike professional astronauts, space tourists are likely to expect not only nutritionally adequate rations for survival but also gourmet experiences that reflect the novelty and excitement of their journey. The principal challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling these experiential expectations with the stringent safety and nutritional standards inherent in space missions. In this regard, the technological orientation observed in the space gastronomy literature provides a foundation for simultaneously addressing both safety and experiential dimensions in space tourism scenarios. The innovations that emerge from this process will be pivotal in enabling humanity to flourish at the final frontier, shaping the future of human space exploration and habitation.

Limitations

This study is subject to several noteworthy limitations. Foremost, the dataset is confined to articles published in English and indexed exclusively in the WoS database. While this delimitation enhances comparability and ensures a degree of standardization, it concomitantly excludes pertinent research available in other databases such as Scopus or Google Scholar, as well as studies published in languages other than English. A further constraint lies in the study's exclusive focus on journal articles. Given the applied and technological orientation of space research, significant findings documented in grey literature, conference proceedings, or industry reports were omitted to preserve methodological consistency. Lastly, although the bibliometric approach, grounded in quantitative indicators, effectively elucidates structural trends, it is inherently limited in its ability to capture the theoretical depth and contextual richness of individual studies.

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The Role of the Tourism Sector in Employment of the Mediterranean Region

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyzes the structural characteristics, employment capacity, wage dynamics, and regional distribution of Türkiye's tourism sector using official data for 2020–2024. It evaluates the sector's recovery after recent global and economic shocks, its role in employment generation, and the structural challenges influencing sustainable and inclusive development.

Study design/methodology/approach: A quantitative and descriptive research design based on secondary data analysis is adopted. Official statistics were examined to identify trends in tourism enterprises, insured employment, firm size distribution, sub-sectors (accommodation, food and beverage, air transport), wage structures, employment types, gender-based wage gaps, and regional concentration.

Results: The findings indicate a general growth trend with a strong recovery after 2022. The number of enterprises and employees increased, strengthening employment capacity. The sector is dominated by micro and small enterprises, with employment concentrated in accommodation and food services. Air transport stands out with higher wages despite fewer firms. Wage inequalities persist across sub-sectors, employment types, and genders. Regionally, tourism is concentrated in the Mediterranean Region, especially Antalya.

Originality/value: The study offers an up-to-date, comprehensive assessment employment, wage, and regional dimensions. It contributes to tourism economics and regional development literature while providing policy-relevant insights for sustainable, inclusive, and balanced sectoral growth.

Keywords Tourism Employment, Tourism Businesses, Mediterranean Region, Labor Market

Introduction

Tourism, which has become an indispensable element of global economic development strategies, attracts attention with its multidimensional effects. Beyond merely generating foreign exchange revenue, its role in critical areas such as sustainable development, improving regional income distribution, preserving cultural heritage, and creating employment has placed the sector at the center of economic policies (Gwenhure & Odhiambo, 2017). Visitors' spending on accommodation, food and beverages, transportation, and entertainment triggers the production of goods and services, stimulating economic activity and creating new job opportunities. This cycle demonstrates that tourism creates a chain of effects on the economy (Balaguer & Cantavella-Jordá, 2002). The sector's contribution to economic growth occurs not only through direct employment and income generation but also through indirect channels that stimulate other sectors (Lee & Chang, 2008).

Tourism stimulates international trade, brings local resources into the economy, and serves as an important tool in the fight against unemployment. Indeed, the fact that approximately one-fifth of total employment worldwide in recent years has been tourism-related clearly demonstrates the sector's capacity to create jobs (Ahmad et al., 2019). Parallel to this global trend, tourism in Türkiye also has strategic importance in terms of economic growth, regional development, and job creation, offering labor-intensive employment opportunities across a wide range of sectors, including accommodation, food and beverage services, travel agencies, transportation, entertainment, and sports activities. In this respect, tourism is considered an effective policy tool in combating unemployment, beyond being an activity that generates foreign exchange.

The Turkish tourism sector has entered a strong recovery process, especially after 2020, following the contraction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 2022, the sector has achieved a significant increase in both the number of workplaces and insured employment, and its share in the overall economy and contribution to employment have gradually strengthened. However, the extent to which this growth is evenly distributed across regions, the sub-sectors in which it is concentrated, and the structural inequalities it brings with it remain critical questions for policymakers.

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the sector's employment structure across Türkiye and, in particular, in the Mediterranean Region, which is the driving force of tourism, based on current official statistics for the 2020-2024 period. In this context, changes in the number of tourism businesses and insured employees across Türkiye will first be presented, followed by an examination of structural elements such as establishment sizes, the distribution of employment by sub-sector, wage levels, and gender-based income disparities. In the second phase, the Mediterranean Region's position within Türkiye's tourism employment will be examined comparatively across the region's cities.

Literature Review

Economic Impacts of Tourism

With its rapid growth, expansion, and diversification, tourism has become a key source of income and employment for many regions, rising to become one of the most important socio-economic sectors (Pjanić, 2019; Tomaz et al., 2020). According to data from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism accounts for approximately 10% of global GDP and provides direct and indirect employment to over 300 million people. It is considered an important engine of economic progress, particularly for developing countries, as it provides much-needed foreign exchange earnings, encourages local entrepreneurship, and contributes to infrastructure development (UNWTO, 2021).

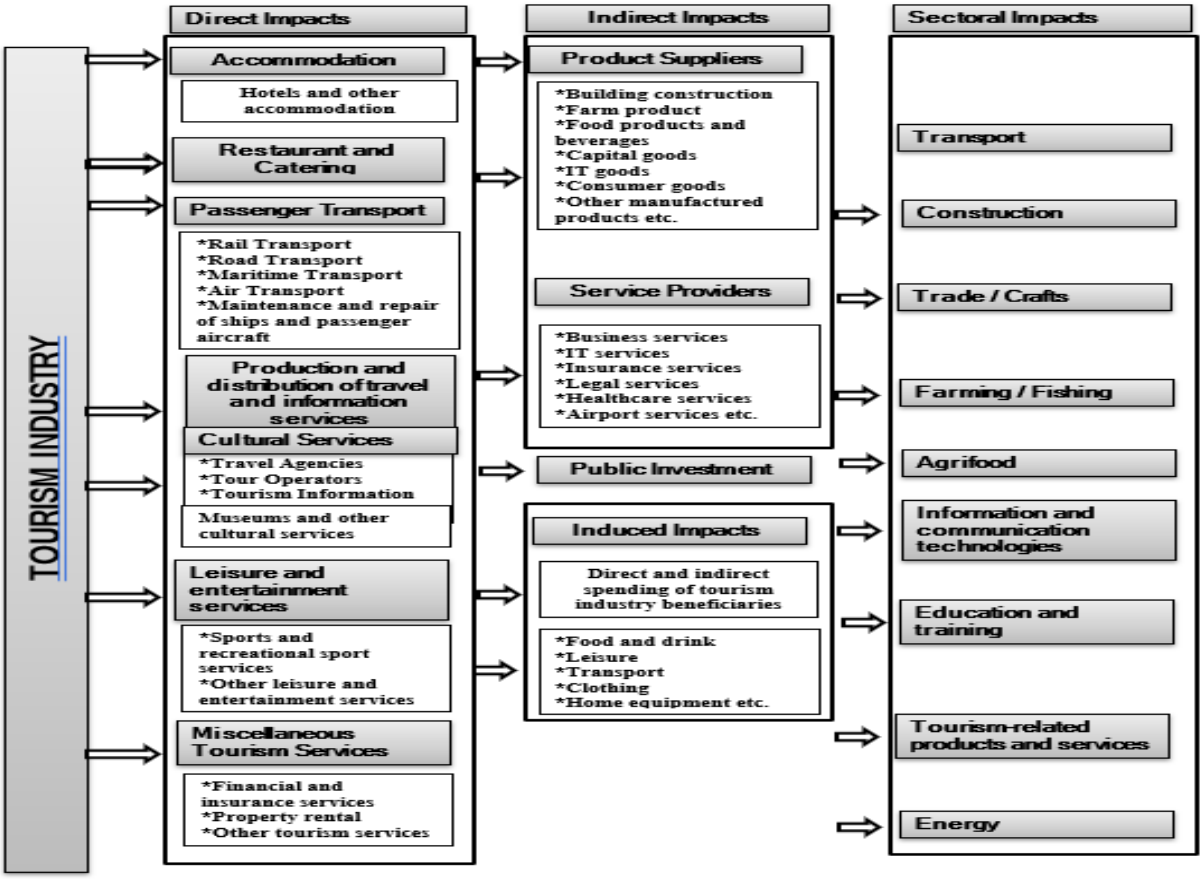
The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and long-lasting negative impact on the tourism sector, as it has on all economic activities. Travel restrictions and border closures have seriously affected the global travel and tourism industry and led to varying negative outcomes across countries (UNWTO, 2020). Due to tourism's direct and indirect links to other economic sectors, economies particularly dependent on tourism have been more severely affected (Scarlett, 2021).

Although the pandemic caused a heavy toll, with losses of US$4.5 trillion and 62 million jobs, the tourism industry was a strong sector before the pandemic, accounting for 10.4% of global GDP and 10.6% of all jobs, and showing a steady growth trend (UNWTO, 2018; WTTC, 2021). The multiplier effect created by the sector's close links with other economic areas is also noteworthy; it is estimated that for every direct job created in tourism, an additional 1.5 jobs are indirectly created in other sectors (UNWTO, 2020).

The relationship between tourism and economic growth has been extensively addressed in the literature in the context of developed and developing countries. According to Lemma (2014), tourism can drive economic growth through three main channels: direct, indirect, and induced effects. Direct effects refer to sales, employment, tax revenues, and immediate changes in income levels resulting from tourist spending; indirect effects encompass changes in prices, quality of goods and services, property and other taxes, and social and environmental factors. Induced effects, on the other hand, relate to the increase in household spending generated by the additional income earned from tourism (Li, Jin, & Shi, 2018). Gwenhure and Odhiambo (2017) emphasize that this relationship can be two-way, meaning that economic growth can also further develop the sector through investments in tourism infrastructure. Christopher Holloway (1998) presents four basic criteria for analyzing the economic effects of tourism on a region: income generated, employment provided, contribution to the region's balance of payments, and impact on investment and development.

When assessing the economic effects of tourism, it is clear that the analysis must be conducted at the regional and local levels as well as at the macroeconomic level. Infrastructure investments, particularly those within the scope of indirect effects, contribute to the growth of the sector and also produce social benefits by improving the quality of life of the local population. Vellas (2011) states that integrating tourism policies with general planning and development goals allows for the systematic identification of local gains and their use as a benchmark for sustainable development. This holistic approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the impacts of tourism. When all these impacts are taken together, tourism can be defined as a powerful economic force that generates employment, foreign exchange earnings, and tax revenue (İçöz & İçöz, 2019). This approach, which comprehensively addresses the direct, indirect, and sectoral impacts of tourism, is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Direct, indirect, and sectoral impacts of tourism



Kaynak: Vellas, 2011

The Impact of Tourism on Employment

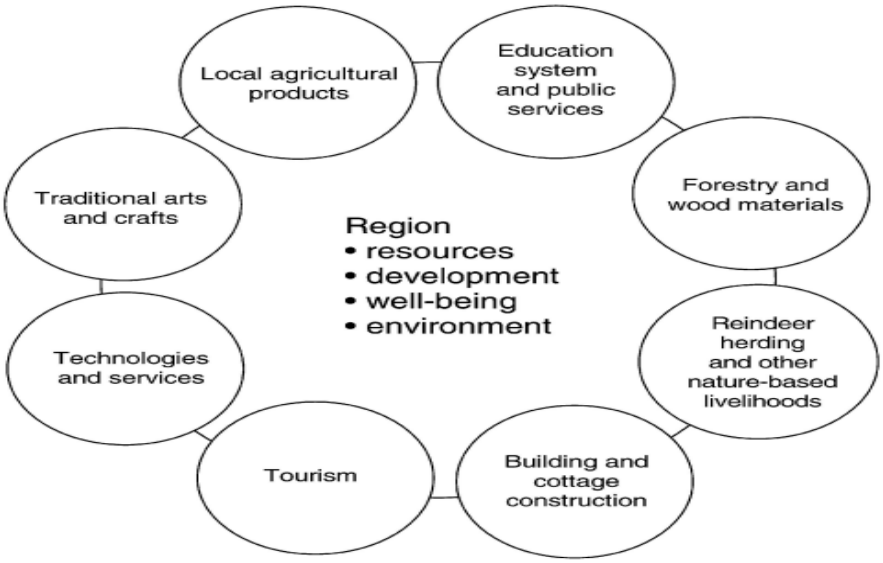
Tourism, which is one of the driving forces of economic growth in many regions of the world (Lut & Vlad, 2015; Sun et al., 2025), also stands out for its significant contribution to employment (Kumar & Rana, 2019; Özcan & Özcan, 2020; Garg, 2025). Tourism creates employment through various ventures such as hotels, restaurants, and tour guide services. It also offers opportunities to increase foreign exchange earnings, attract direct foreign investment, and generate income from idle natural resources. Elgin and Elveren (2024) also highlight tourism's potential to create positive economies of scale and scope in addition to these factors.

A distinctive feature of tourism is that it enables the consumption of non-tradable goods such as national heritage monuments, historical sites, and beaches. Since the consumption of such resources requires individuals to travel to the relevant region, tourism acts as a transformation process that makes non-tradable goods tradable (Zhang, 2016). In this respect, the sector plays a critical role in both developing and developed countries in terms of contributing to GDP, increasing employment, and closing current account deficits. Encompassing many sub-sectors such as accommodation, logistics, food and beverage, promotion, and marketing, tourism is one of the

fastest-growing sectors of the global economy, encouraging the mobility of capital and people (Pjanić, 2019).

The impact of tourism on employment is not limited to direct job opportunities. Saarinen (2003) points out that the sector also creates significant indirect employment by revitalizing local agriculture (food supply to hotels), the construction sector (construction of tourist facilities), and traditional livelihoods (handicrafts). Figure 1 provides a comprehensive framework for understanding this multi-sectoral and integrated employment structure of tourism.

Figure 1. The employment structure of tourism and its relationship with other sectors



Source: Saarinen, 2003.

As shown in Figure 1, the tourism sector has the potential to multiply its economic and employment effects through the connections it establishes with other productive livelihoods in the local economy. Thanks to this multifaceted network of relationships, tourism interacts with different sectors such as agriculture, forestry, construction, and services, contributing to regional development from a broader perspective. Furthermore, this integrated structure can mitigate the negative effects of seasonal fluctuations inherent in the sector. In this diversified economic structure, where the local population can earn income from different activities throughout the year, the fragility caused by seasonality is lower compared to destinations that are fully dependent on tourism.

In today's climate of increasing global uncertainty, some aspects of human resource management in the tourism sector appear resistant to change. According to Baum (2015), tourism's reputation as an employer is quite complex. While excellent human resource practices are observed on one hand, low wages, harsh working conditions, and limited career development opportunities, especially for women and minorities, persist on the other. Tourism, which plays critical roles in the economic development of developing countries, has shown steady growth on a global scale over the past decade. However, Garg (2025) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the sector's vulnerability to external shocks and led to an unprecedented contraction in 2020, reinforcing the

need for a more resilient tourism model. Although demand has rebounded post-pandemic, challenges such as overtourism, climate change, geopolitical risks, and economic fluctuations continue to affect tourism revenues and employment.

The Tourism Potential of the Mediterranean Region

Regions that are more dependent on tourism for their economies generally show a deeper trend toward commercialization. This process offers significant economic advantages such as an increase in local businesses, expansion of employment opportunities, and development of local infrastructure (Fang, Yong, & Hua, 2024). Tourism, with its strong network of inter-sectoral relationships, has a high multiplier effect due to its close links with local transportation, accommodation, and other related businesses. Fang (2025) highlights the external and comprehensive effects of tourism, such as increasing employment opportunities, improving infrastructure, promoting the development of related sectors, and supporting regional economic growth. In this context, Türkiye's Mediterranean Region is the driving force of the country's tourism, with its natural and cultural attractions, developed tourism infrastructure, and facilities with high bed capacity, especially for mass tourism.

The Mediterranean Basin, one of the world's oldest settlement areas and leading centers of civilization, is also a region where tourism movements originated, developed, and have now become the largest destination on a global scale. Covering an area of approximately 2.5 million km², the Mediterranean is an inland sea surrounded by the coasts of Asia to the east, Europe to the north, and Africa to the south. Connected to the Atlantic Ocean by the Strait of Gibraltar to the west, the basin includes 23 countries, among them Türkiye. Türkiye, with approximately 20% of the total 8,333 km coastline, accounts for about 12% of the Mediterranean Basin's coastline, making it an Eastern Mediterranean, or rather a Northeast Mediterranean country. The basin, which has been home to great civilizations such as Egypt, Phoenicia, Rome, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire, has been at the center of political, military, commercial, and socio-cultural developments throughout history. The Mediterranean, where the foundations of tourism history were laid and which has witnessed approximately five thousand years of tourism activity, has maintained its position as a focal region from the beginning of the first tourist movements to the present day. The natural and cultural attractions shaped by this long historical process, combined with a developed tourism infrastructure, have made the Mediterranean Basin the center of world tourism. As part of this basin, Türkiye's Mediterranean Region has significant potential not only for mass tourism based on its sea-sand-sun trio but also for alternative tourism types such as cultural, conference, health, and golf tourism (Zoğal & Baykal, 2020). This diversity increases the region's capacity to extend the tourism season and spread employment throughout the year, further strengthening its contribution to regional economic development and employment.

Method

Purpose and Scope of the Study

This study aims to analyze the employment structure of the tourism sector in Türkiye in general and in the Mediterranean Region in particular for the period 2020-2024, its distribution by sub-

sectors, workplace sizes, wage levels, and regional concentration. The research aims to contribute to policy development processes for the sector by revealing the post-pandemic recovery process, employment creation capacity, and structural characteristics of the tourism sector.

The scope of the study consists of data on tourism businesses across Türkiye and on the tourism sector in eight cities in the Mediterranean Region (Adana, Antalya, Burdur, Hatay, Isparta, Mersin, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye). The tourism sector was examined in five sub-sectors based on the NACE Rev. 2 classification: air transport, accommodation, food and beverage service activities, travel agency-tour operator and other reservation services, and sports activities-entertainment and recreation activities.

Data Collection Technique and Sources

The data used in the study were obtained from secondary data sources. The main data source for the study consists of statistics on insured employees and workplaces published by the Social Security Institution (SGK) between 2020 and 2024. The current data covered by SGK's 4/a (insured persons working under a service contract) includes the number of workplaces in the tourism sector, the number of insured employees, workplace sizes, average daily earnings, and the distribution of these indicators by province.

The data has been compiled from annual statistical bulletins and statistical tables available on the SGK's official website. In addition, national and international academic literature has been used in establishing the conceptual framework of the study and interpreting the findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Descriptive analysis involves the organization, classification, summarization, and interpretation of numerical data related to the tourism sector. In this context:

- Time series analysis: Changes in the number of tourism businesses and insured employees in Türkiye and the Mediterranean Region between 2020 and 2024 were examined on an annual basis. This analysis revealed the sector's post-pandemic recovery process and growth trend.
- Structural analysis: Businesses in the tourism sector were classified according to the number of insured employees they employed (micro, small, medium, and large scale), and the distribution of workplace sizes was analyzed. In addition, the number of workplaces and employees in tourism sub-sectors (air transport, accommodation, food and beverage, etc.) were evaluated comparatively.
- Wage analysis: The average daily earnings of employees in the tourism sector were analyzed according to the type of employment (permanent/temporary), sector (public/private), and gender variables. This analysis revealed wage differences and structural inequalities between sub-sectors.
- Regional analysis: The number of tourism workplaces and insured employees in eight cities in the Mediterranean Region were examined comparatively by sub-sector. In addition, the

share of the Mediterranean Region in the total number of tourism businesses and employment in Türkiye was calculated to determine the level of regional concentration.

The analysis results were presented visually through tables and graphs. The tables show absolute numbers and proportional distributions, while the graphs show trends in change over the years.

Limitations

This study has some limitations:

- Data source limitation: The study is based solely on data from employees insured under SGK's 4/a coverage. Therefore, the entire informal employment, seasonal workers, and part-time workers commonly seen in the tourism sector could not be included in the analysis.
- Time period limitation: The research covers the five-year period between 2020 and 2024. Studies covering different periods are needed to analyze longer-term trends.
- Scope limitation: The study focuses on the direct employment effects of tourism. The indirect and induced employment effects of tourism on other sectors were excluded from the scope of the analysis.
- Regional limitation: The regional analysis is limited to the Mediterranean Region. Other tourism regions of Türkiye (Aegean, Marmara, etc.) were not included in the comparative analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study makes important contributions in that it is based on current official statistics, examines the tourism sector in detail by sub-sector, and provides a comprehensive analysis specific to the Mediterranean Region.

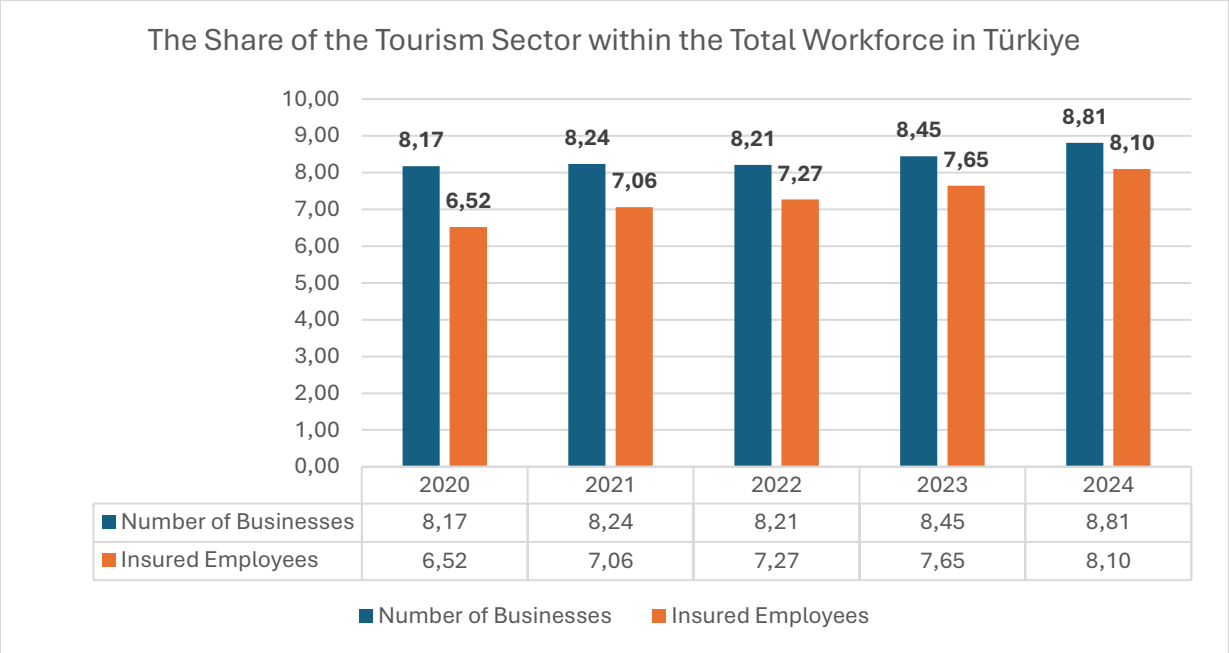
Findings

Table 2: The Number of Businesses and Employment in Türkiye (2020–2024)

	Total Number of Businesses and Insured Employees in Türkiye		**The Number of Tourism Businesses and Insured Employees in Türkiye**	
Years	**Number of Businesses**	**Insured Employees**	**Number of Businesses**	**Insured Employees**
2020	1.960.911	15.203.423	160.285	991.779
2021	2.087.692	16.169.679	171.927	1.142.071
2022	2.189.841	17.332.991	179.763	1.260.215
2023	2.179.123	16.406.420	184.118	1.254.481
2024	2.241.896	16.602.868	197.574	1.344.867

Table 2 shows both the total number of workplaces and insured employees covered under 4/a in Türkiye and the number of tourism workplaces and insured employees between 2020 and 2024. Looking at the data for the five-year period, it can be seen that the total number of workplaces in Türkiye increased from 1,960,911 to 2,241,896, and the number of insured employees increased from 15,203,423 to 16,602,868. The number of tourism businesses, which was 160,285 in 2020, increased to 197,575 in 2024, and the number of insured employees, which was 991,779, reached

1,344,867. Although there was an approximately 35% increase in employment over the five-year period, a decline was observed in 2023 compared to the previous year. It is thought that the earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş contributed to this situation. In 2024, tourism employment, which has once again entered an upward trend, is seen to have increased its share in total employment over the years. This situation reveals that the tourism sector is an important and strategic sector for the Turkish economy in terms of its capacity to create employment and entrepreneurship.



Graph 1: The Share of the Tourism Sector within Total Workplaces and Insured Employees in Türkiye

Graph 1 displays the tourism sector's share of the total number of workplaces and insured employees in Türkiye. The proportion of workplaces operating in the tourism sector within the total number of workplaces in Türkiye has been on a steady upward trend, except for 2022, while the total number of employees has been steadily increasing between 2020 and 2024. Looking at the graphical trend, it reveals that the tourism sector has gained momentum in terms of both investment and employment after 2022. The increase in the tourism sector's share within the total sectors can be considered an indicator of the sector's growing importance within the overall economy, thanks to its capacity to generate foreign exchange and its multiplier effect.

Table 3: The Number of workplaces in tourism businesses in Türkiye in 2024, by workplace size (based on the number of insured employees)

Activity groups according to NACE Rev. 2	**Workplace**	**Total**
	Workplace Size (Number of Compulsorily Insured Employees at the Establishment)	

classification	**1**	**2-3**	**4-6**	**7-9**	**10-19**	**20-29**	**30-49**	**50-99**	**100-249**	**250-499**	**500-749**	**750-999**	**1000+**	
Air Transport	86	98	74	42	53	18	21	20	16	7	2	2	4	**443**
Accomodation	6.898	6.350	4.850	2.053	2.206	749	721	597	400	134	30	9	3	**25.000**
Food and beverage service activities	48.369	41.921	24.294	11.544	14.740	3.969	2.384	976	228	43	12	1	3	**148.484**
Travel agency, tour operator, and other reservation services and related activities	3.752	3.453	1.880	782	897	266	148	86	35	9	1	0	0	**11.309**
Sports activities, entertainment and leisure activities	4.926	3.834	1.745	648	661	194	197	84	39	7	2	0	1	**12.338**
Total	**64.031**	**55.656**	**32.843**	**15.069**	**18.557**	**5.196**	**3.471**	**1.763**	**718**	**200**	**47**	**12**	**11**	**197.574**

Table 3 presents the distribution of tourism sector businesses by size, based on the number of insured persons employed. The data reveals that the majority of businesses are micro and small enterprises, with the largest number being those employing “1 person” and “2–3 persons.” It is seen that the workplaces with the most activity in the sector are businesses engaged in food and beverage services, and the vast majority of these businesses are small-scale enterprises. In 2024, the accommodation sector ranks second with 25,000 businesses, sports activities, entertainment, and recreation activities rank third with 12,338 businesses, travel agencies, tour operators, and other reservation services and related activities rank third with 11,309 businesses, and air transport ranks fifth and last with 443 businesses. The limited number of businesses with more than 1,000 employees indicates that tourism businesses in Türkiye are structurally dominated by SMEs. This

situation indicates that the tourism sector has a financially fragile structure. However, these SME-level businesses play an important role in increasing the flexibility of the sector and enable intense competition within the sector.

Table 4: The Number of Employees in Tourism Businesses in Türkiye in 2024 by Workplace Size (Based on the Number of Insured Employees)

Activity groups according to NACE Rev. 2 classification	**Compulsorily Insured Employees**													**Total**
	Workplace Size (Number of Compulsorily Insured Employees at the Establishment)													
	1	**2-3**	**4-6**	**7-9**	**10-19**	**20-29**	**30-49**	**50-99**	**100-249**	**250-499**	**500-749**	**750-999**	**1000+**	
Air Transport	86	240	361	338	717	426	801	1.618	2.309	2.755	1.333	1.612	29.221	**41.817**
Accomodation	6.898	15.227	23.422	16.074	29.579	17.857	27.306	41.359	60.231	44.898	18.216	8.141	3.301	**312.509**
Food and beverage service activities	48.369	99.703	116.604	90.869	196.184	93.791	88.316	64.006	32.761	14.038	6.546	910	6.440	**858.537**
Travel agency, tour operator, and other reservation services and related activities	3.752	8.183	9.040	6.137	11.907	6.326	5.519	5.819	5.142	3.459	563	0	0	**65.847**
Sports activities, entertainment and leisure activities	4.926	9.013	8.232	5.067	8.767	4.605	7.465	5.817	6.459	2.134	1.274	0	2.398	**66.157**
Total	**64.031**	**132.366**	**157.659**	**118.485**	**247.154**	**123.005**	**129.407**	**118.619**	**106.902**	**67.284**	**27.932**	**10.663**	**41.360**	**1.344.867**

Table 4 presents the distribution of employees in the tourism sector according to workplace size. A significant portion of the total 1,344,867 insured employees (858,537 people) are employed in food and beverage services. The accommodation sector ranks second, with 312,509 employees. These two sub-sectors play a particularly important role in tourism employment, accounting for approximately 87% of total tourism employment. Although there are many micro and small enterprises, medium and large enterprises account for a significant share of employment in terms of the number of employees. The accommodation sector has a particularly significant share of employment in the 100-249 and 250-499 categories. Furthermore, it is observed that airline companies, which have the lowest number of businesses, employ a high number of people. This situation reveals that employment intensity varies across sectors and that large capital investments are made in the sector.

Table 5: Average Daily Earnings (TL) of Individuals Working in Tourism Businesses in Türkiye in 2024

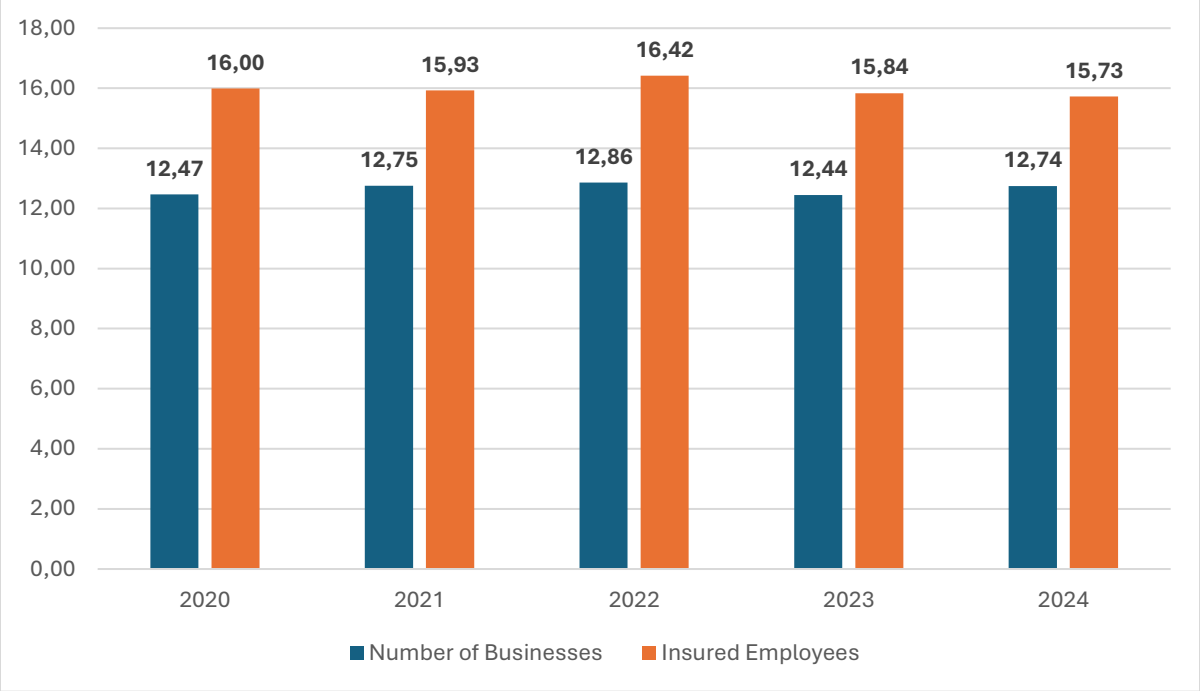
Activity groups according to NACE Rev. 2 classification	**Average daily earnings (TL)**						
	Permanent (I)	**Temporary (II)**	**Public (I)**	**Private (II)**	**Malee (I)**	**Female (II)**	**Total (I+II)**
Air Transport	3.977,51	2.191,14	4.304,90	3.972,98	3.988,90	3.961,46	**3.976,89**
Accommodation	1.245,82	1.201,47	1.600,95	1.191,22	1.298,76	1.167,64	**1.245,51**
Food and beverage service activities	890,41	879,93	1.594,88	869,25	921,88	841,46	**889,39**
Travel agency, tour operator, and other reservation services and related activities	1.199,21	946,58	1.792,14	1.181,67	1.179,43	1.214,08	**1.193,84**
Sports activities, entertainment and leisure activities	1.189,07	2.021,15	1.758,79	1.113,15	1.316,40	1.044,96	**1.208,62**
Total	**1.342,85**	**1.061,00**	**1.707,44**	**1.250,76**	**1.376,13**	**1.177,81**	**1.308,25**

Table 5 presents the average daily earnings in Türkiye's tourism sector according to activity type, employment type (permanent/temporary), sector (public/private), and gender variables. Within the tourism sector, the highest average daily earnings are observed in the air transport sub-sector (3,976.89 TL). The tourism sub-sector with the lowest average daily earnings is the food and beverage service activity (889.39 TL), where employed workers earn the least. Permanent employees have higher average daily earnings than temporary employees. Similarly, it is seen that employees in the public sector earn more than those in the private sector, and that male employees earn a higher average daily income than female employees, except for those employed in travel agencies, tour operators, and other reservation services and related activities. The distribution of wages by gender in the tourism sector and the average daily earnings structure, which varies significantly across sub-sectors, reveal structural inequalities in the sector's labor market.

Table 6: Total Tourism Businesses and Insured Employees in the Mediterranean Region

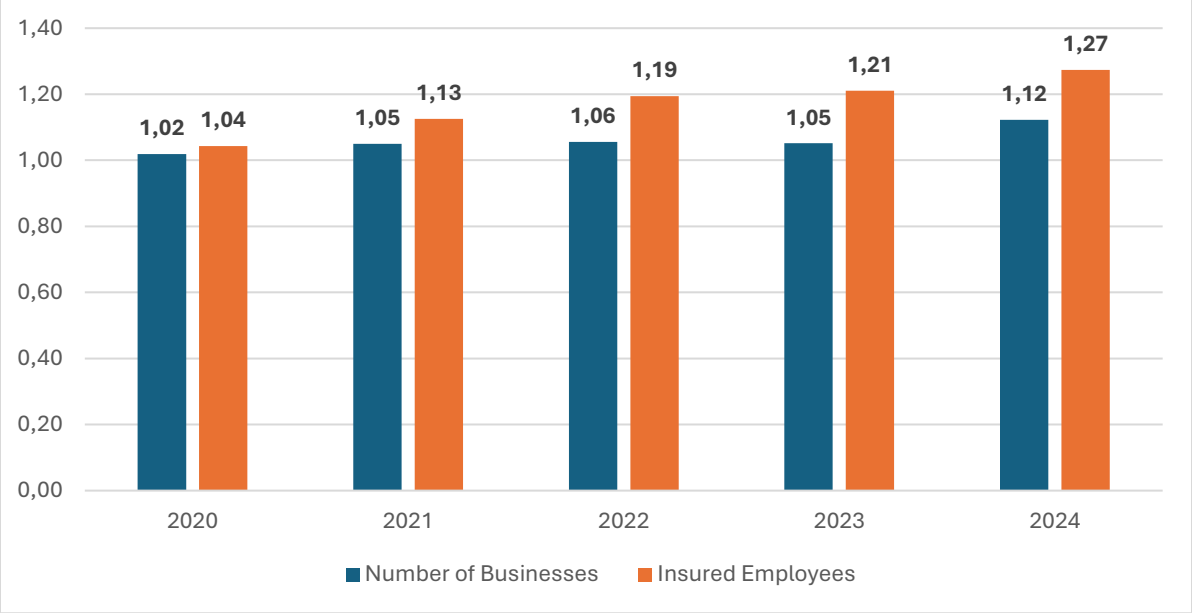
Years	**Number of Businesses**	**Insured Employees**
2020	19.981	158.649
2021	21.927	181.921
2022	23.123	206.983
2023	22.910	198.694
2024	25.172	211.522

Table 6 outlines the number of tourism businesses and insured employees in the Mediterranean Region between 2020 and 2024. The number of businesses rose from 19,981 to 25,172, while the number of insured employees increased from 158,649 to 211,522. Although a slight decline was observed in 2023, there was an increase again in 2024. This decline is assumed to be due to the location of the cities of Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye, and Adana, which were affected by the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes, in this region. However, the fact that both the number of businesses and employees exceeded their previous levels within a year shows that the tourism sector occupies a strategic position in the regional economy. The Mediterranean Region, as a result of high demand, especially for mass tourism (sea-sand-sun), also hosts significant supply facilities in terms of accommodation facilities with large bed capacities. This situation is proof that the tourism sector has significant potential for the sustainable growth and development of the Mediterranean region.



Graph 2: The Share of Tourism Businesses and Employees in the Mediterranean Region within the Total Number of Tourism Businesses and Employees in Türkiye (%)

Graph 2 displays the percentage of tourism businesses and employees in the Mediterranean Region within Türkiye's tourism sector. The region's high share within Türkiye is related to the important role of its coastal destinations, particularly Antalya. While it has a share of around 12% in terms of the number of businesses, it has a share of over 15% in terms of employment. The Mediterranean Region, which has maintained a balanced ratio of both businesses and employment over the years, demonstrates that tourism investments in Türkiye are concentrated in the Mediterranean Region. This indicates that the Mediterranean Region has specialized in the tourism sector and is the driving force of Turkish tourism.



Graph 3: The Share of Tourism Businesses and Employees in the Mediterranean Region within the Total Number of Businesses and Employees in Türkiye (%)

Graph 3 shows the percentage of tourism data in the Mediterranean Region relative to all businesses and employment in Türkiye. This graph reveals the relative size of regional tourism activities within the national economy. This proves that the Mediterranean Region has a significant share not only in the tourism sector but also in Türkiye's overall economic structure.

Table 7: Number of Tourism Businesses in the Mediterranean Region Cities

	Adana	**Antalya**	**Burdur**	**Hatay**	**Isparta**	**Mersin**	**Kahramanmaraş**	**Osmaniye**
	Number of Businesses							
Air Transport	5	25	1	1	2	2	2	0
Accommodation	203	3.213	98	168	135	469	110	27
Food and Beverage Service Activities	2.767	7.228	509	1.340	943	3.179	855	525
Travel Agency, Tour Operator, and Other Reservation Services and	94	1.389	12	77	20	106	26	10

Related Activities								
Sports Activities, Entertainment, and Recreation Activities	237	833	27	110	63	237	67	57
Total	**3306**	**12688**	**647**	**1696**	**1163**	**3993**	**1060**	**619**

Table 7 presents the number of businesses in the tourism sector in eight cities (Adana, Antalya, Burdur, Hatay, Mersin, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye) located in the Mediterranean Region. Within the region, Antalya is the clear leader with 12,688 businesses. Mersin (3,993) and Adana (3,306) are among the other important cities. Hatay has a medium size with 1,696 workplaces. The cities with the fewest workplaces are Osmaniye (619) and Burdur (647). By sub-sector, the number of businesses engaged in food and beverage services is the highest in all cities. Looking at the distribution of businesses engaged in accommodation activities within the region, it is seen that the majority of facilities are concentrated in the province of Antalya.

Table 8: Number of Employees Working in Tourism Businesses in the Mediterranean Region Cities

	Adana	**Antalya**	**Burdur**	**Hatay**	**Isparta**	**Mersin**	**Kahramanmaraş**	**Osmaniye**	**Total**
Sub-sectors	**Insured Employees**								
Air Transport	192	4.984	1	1	20	28	69	0	**5.295**
Accommodation	2.379	85.462	537	1.784	1.723	3.782	910	429	**97.006**
Food and beverage service activities	13.949	40.055	2.278	5.857	5.302	15.720	4.413	1.893	**89.467**
Travel agency, tour operator, and other reservation services and related activities	358	10.352	53	262	98	568	93	21	**11.805**

Sports activities, entertainment, and leisure activities	1.172	4.431	324	429	259	928	260	146	**7.949**
Total	**18.050**	**145.284**	**3.193**	**8.333**	**7.402**	**21.026**	**5.745**	**2.489**	**211.522**

Table 8 provides the number of employees in the tourism sector in eight cities (Adana, Antalya, Burdur, Hatay, Mersin, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye) located in the Mediterranean Region. When examining the number of employees, Antalya has approximately 69% of regional tourism employment with 145,284 insured employees. Mersin (21,026) and Adana (18,050) are other important employment centers. There are 8,333 insured employees in Hatay. Osmaniye (2,489) and Burdur (3,193) are the cities with the least tourism employment. The tourism sub-sector with the highest employment is accommodation (97,006). However, businesses engaged in food and beverage services also employ 89,467 people. The sub-sector with the lowest employment is air transport, with 5,295 people. The high employment in Antalya is related to the presence of large-scale hotel businesses. This situation reveals that regional tourism employment shows spatial concentration and that destination-based differences are evident within the region.

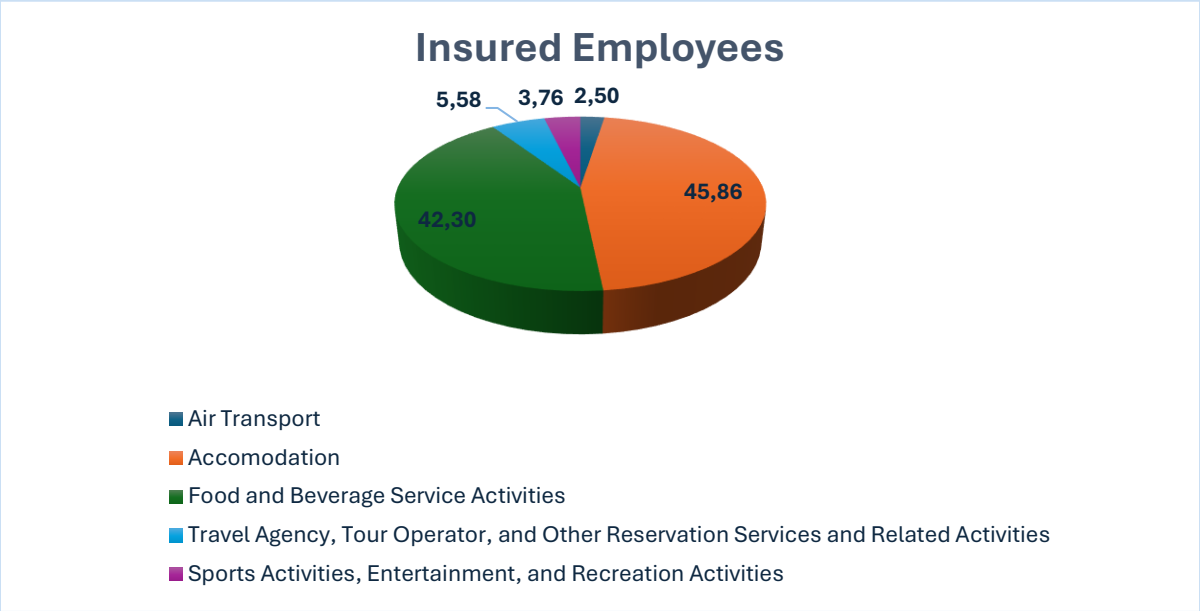


Figure 4: The Share of Tourism Sub-Businesses in the Mediterranean Region within the Total Tourism Businesses (%)

Graph 4 displays the employment rates of tourism sub-sectors within all tourism businesses in the Mediterranean Region. According to this, 88.16% of tourism employment in the Mediterranean Region is concentrated in the accommodation sub-sector and sub-sectors engaged in food and beverage service activities. Looking at Table 6, which shows the number of workplaces in the region, it can be seen that the largest number of tourism sub-sectors belong to businesses engaged

in food and beverage activities, but the fact that the largest number of employees are in the accommodation sector can be considered an indication of the large number of large-scale operations in the accommodation sector.

Conclusion And Discussion

This study comprehensively analyzes the employment structure of the Turkish tourism sector and the position of the Mediterranean Region within this structure during the 2020-2024 period in light of current official statistics. The findings reveal that the Turkish tourism sector has demonstrated remarkable recovery and growth performance following the sharp contraction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This growth, which gained momentum in 2022, manifested itself in an increase in both the number of workplaces and insured employment, significantly strengthening the sector's weight in the overall economy and its capacity to create employment. This situation reaffirms the strategic importance of the tourism sector for the Turkish economy.

A structural analysis of the sector exhibits that micro and small-scale enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of Turkish tourism. While this offers the sector advantages such as rapid adaptation to market conditions and flexibility, it also brings financial fragility. While the majority of employment is concentrated in accommodation and food and beverage services, air transport stands out as a capital-intensive sub-sector with high employment and wage levels despite having a small number of workplaces. This clearly highlights the structural differences between the sub-sectors.

Findings regarding the wage structure indicate that significant inequalities persist in the tourism labor market. Air transport has the highest average wage, while food and beverage services have the lowest. It was observed that permanent employees have an advantage over temporary employees, and wages in the public sector are higher than in the private sector. Gender-based wage disparities are also noteworthy; except for the travel agency sub-sector, the average daily earnings of male employees are higher than those of female employees, which can be considered a reflection of gender inequality in the sector.

Regional analyses have demonstrated that tourism activities are distinctly clustered in the Mediterranean Region. Antalya is the clear leader at both the regional and national levels in terms of both the number of businesses and employees. While this demonstrates the strong driving force of tourism on regional development, it also raises the risk of excessive concentration of tourism investments and employment in certain centers. In the Mediterranean Region, as in Türkiye as a whole, employment is concentrated in the accommodation and food and beverage sectors. However, although the food and beverage sector leads in terms of the number of businesses, the prominence of the accommodation sector in terms of employment points to the presence of large-scale hotel businesses in the region.

In conclusion, the Turkish tourism sector has a high employment potential, is predominantly composed of SMEs, and shows a tendency to cluster in certain regions. However, the wage disparities between sub-sectors, seasonal employment fluctuations, gender inequalities, and

regional imbalances revealed by the research clearly demonstrate that policymakers need to develop holistic and long-term strategies to ensure the sector becomes sustainable and inclusive. The ability of tourism to maintain its role as a driving force for economic development depends on smart policy choices and sound investment strategies. The sector's future can only be achieved through effective governance, environmentally friendly tourism investments, training programs that improve the quality of the workforce, and strategic steps to increase resilience to potential crises. In this context, broadening the base of tourism revenues and employment, extending the tourism season through the development of alternative tourism types, reducing regional disparities in development, and ensuring fair wages and working conditions for all employees, especially women, are fundamental steps that must be taken for a sustainable and inclusive tourism ecosystem. In the post-pandemic period, a joint effort by all stakeholders, including public institutions, the private sector, civil society, and tourists, is crucial for reshaping the understanding of tourism and transforming the sector into a flexible and sustainable structure that contributes to economic development while protecting natural and cultural heritage.

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Formulating Development Strategies for Community-Based Agritourism in Pujon Kidul Village, Malang Regency Using an AHP–SWOT Framework

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to formulate and prioritize development strategies for community-based agritourism in Pujon Kidul Village, Malang Regency, using an integrated AHP–SWOT framework to ensure sustainable and participatory rural tourism growth.

Study design/methodology/approach: A mixed qualitative–quantitative approach was applied. SWOT factors were identified through field observations, in-depth interviews with 61 informants, and a Focus Group Discussion involving key stakeholders. The Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) was employed to conduct pairwise comparisons, calculate local and global weights, and test consistency (CR < 0.1). Twelve alternative strategies were evaluated and ranked.

Results: Strength (0.485) and opportunity (0.297) emerged as the most influential groups. Key global factors include proximity to Batu City (0.140), village popularity (0.137), and social media growth (0.085). The highest-priority strategies are intensifying human resource capacity building (0.220), digitalization training for tourism actors (0.175), and empowering village MSMEs (0.127). Findings highlight the critical role of community participation and institutional strengthening in sustaining agritourism competitiveness.

Originality/value: This study demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating AHP and SWOT to generate objective, contextual, and actionable strategy priorities, offering a replicable model for sustainable community-based agritourism development in rural Indonesia.

Keywords Community-based tourism; Agritourism; SWOT-AHP Analysis; Development Strategies

Introduction

The development of agritourism has exhibited a significant global trend as an innovative strategy for promoting sustainable development in rural areas. Agritourism not only serves as a mechanism for economic diversification among farmers and rural communities but also contributes to increased local income through agriculture-based tourism activities. By integrating agricultural, educational, and recreational elements, agritourism has the potential to attract tourists while simultaneously strengthening local identity and supporting the preservation of agrarian culture. (Bannor et al., 2022). In addition to its contribution to the local economy, agritourism also plays a significant role in environmental conservation by promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices, preserving natural landscapes, and increasing public awareness of ecotourism and

sustainable resource management (Abadi & Khakzand, 2022). This model represents a sustainable development approach that synergistically integrates social, economic, and ecological dimensions, making it a promising strategy for addressing the challenges of globalization, urbanization, and the degradation of natural assets in rural landscapes.

In line with the importance of agritourism as a driver of long-term sustainable development in rural communities, the success of such initiatives largely depends on the extent of local community participation throughout the development process. Active community involvement at every stage of agritourism development is a critical factor in ensuring the sustainability and long-term success of agritourism programs, particularly those that are based on local potential and resources. (Limocon & Manlapaz, 2024). Community participation from the planning, implementation, to evaluation stages not only increases the effectiveness of implementation, but also fosters a high sense of ownership of the initiative (Ismail et al., 2024). When the community is directly involved, they tend to be more committed to maintaining service quality, environmental sustainability, and the sustainability of the agrotourism business. In addition, this participation strengthens local capacity, accelerates the empowerment process, and creates a more equitable distribution of economic benefits (Wikantiyoso et al., 2021). Therefore, involving local communities throughout the agritourism development process constitutes a crucial pillar for achieving sustainable development outcomes in rural areas.

Indonesia presents considerable opportunities for agritourism growth, with the existence of 30,466 plant species which makes it the country with the highest plant diversity in the world (Sun, 2022). Indonesia also has abundant human resources with 38.22 million people depend on farming for their livelihoods making agriculture is the sector that contributes the largest number of workers compared to other sectors (Ngadi et al., 2023). Farming life has historically been deeply rooted in the lives of Indonesian people where there are a number of traditional agricultural practices that have been preserved to this day as well as various traditions to commemorate their success or failure in farming such as the traditional agricultural practices in Java and also the tradition of Dewi Sri (Satya Dewi & Lutfi, 2025) .Thus, its biodiversity, abundant human resources, and strong cultural attachment to traditional agricultural practices make Indonesia have extraordinary potential in the development of sustainable agritourism rooted in local wisdom.

Pujon Kidul Village that located in Malang Regency, East Java Province is one of the villages that has successfully developed community-based agro-tourism Because in addition to bringing in a large number of visitors, it is also able to have a big impact on the village economy through the active participation of the local community. This success is also supported by BUMDes Sumber Sejahtera as a main village-owned enterprise that managed several tourism units as Café Sawah, homestays, tour packages that include agricultural educational program, and integrated waste management (Prasetyanto et al., 2023a). In addition, strong collaboration between stakeholders ranging from academics, village governments, business actors, communities, to the media within the framework of pentahelix makes the development of tourism villages run synergistically and sustainably (Prasetyanto et al., 2023b). The combination of community participation, solid

institutional support, and massive promotion makes Pujon Kidul Village is successful in carrying out community-based agro-tourism activities.

The success of Pujon Kidul Village in tourism development cannot be separated from various obstacles and challenges. Building human resources to be competent in the field of tourism services, limited access and infrastructure and how to maintain coordination with various stakeholders, both internal and external parties are challenges in themselves (Prasetyanto et al., 2023a). For this reason, alternative strategies are needed that are in accordance with the conditions that exist in Pujon Kidul Village, both in terms of potential or problems and challenges faced. Therefore, the sustainability of tourism development in Pujon Kidul Village is highly dependent on the ability to formulate adaptive and contextual alternative strategies in accordance with the potential and challenges that the village has.

This study aims to formulate priorities in development stretegies of community-based agritourism in Pujon Kidul Village using Anayltical Hiearchy Process – Strength Weakness Opportunity Threat (AHP-SWOT) method. The AHP–SWOT method allows researchers to transform qualitative SWOT analysis into a more structured and quantitative assessment, so that strategy priorities can be objectively determined (Oreški, 2012). The integration of these two methods also helps to map the level of importance of each internal and external factor, as well as assess the weight of their influence on the sustainability of community-based agrotourism. In addition, AHP provides the ability to compare alternative strategies in pairs to produce more rational and transparent decisions . Thus, AHP-SWOT is very effective in formulating strategies that are right on target and in accordance with the community's capabilities, priorities, and social–economic situation. The results of this research can produce an applicative and contextual strategy in the successful growth of community-centered agritourism in Pujon Kidul Village as an exemplary framework for sustainable agritourism initiatives in Indonesia

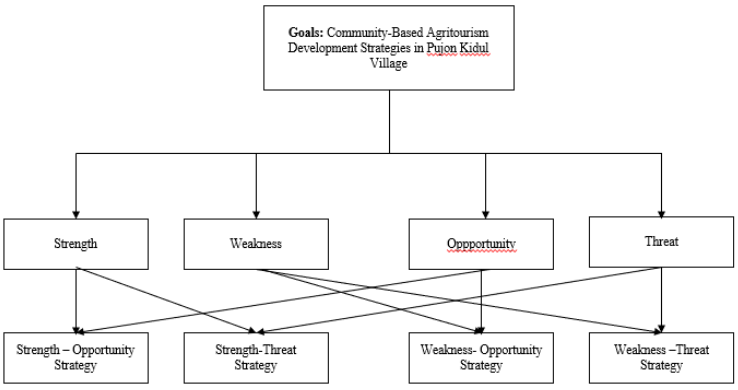
Methodology

There are six steps in conducting an AHP-SWOT analysis in this study. The first stage is the determination of the objectives based on the SWOT framework. After that, alternative strategies are created based on the existing SWOT framework. Then each criterion in the SWOT framework and the alternative strategies prepared were made a pair comparison using a scale from 1-9. In the third stage, the local weight is determined through the AHP method. Then in the fourth stage, the reliability of the results was verified using the consistency index (CI) and the consistency ratio (CR). Furthermore, in the fifth stage, if the CR value is below 0.1, the result is considered valid; If not, then steps are taken to reduce errors by repeating the pairs comparison. This repetition process is carried out until an adequate level of consistency is achieved. Finally, in the sixth stage, the global weights for each alternative factor were calculated in aggregation and then ranked.

The results of data and information collection in the field show that there are 9 strength factors, 9 weakness factors, 5 opportunity factors and 5 threat factors. These factors are then used as a reference for determining alternative strategies where there are 12 alternative strategies Pairwise

comparisons were carried out on each of the Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat factors as well as alternative strategies that have been formulated as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hierarchial Structure Model



The determination of factors regarding Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat was carried out by direct observation in the field, conducting in-depth interviews with 61 informants consisting of 17 tourists, 16 people working in Pujon Kidul Village-Owned Enterprises, 12 people from the surrounding community, 10 academics involved in research in Pujon Kidul Village, 4 government officials both at the village and sub-district levels and 2 people from neighboring village BUMDes but greatly influenced by tourism activities in Pujon Kidul Village. The pairwise comparison questionnaires used in the AHP analysis were completed by 16 stakeholders who participated in the Focus Group Discussion. These stakeholders represented different groups involved in agritourism development in Pujon Kidul Village, including four BUMDes managers, four village government officials, six community representatives, and two academics with research experience in rural tourism. Individual judgments obtained from the respondents were aggregated using the geometric mean method, which is commonly applied in group AHP decision-making to ensure consistency and balance among different stakeholder perspectives. The aggregated comparison matrix was then used to calculate the local weights, global weights, and consistency ratios.

Results

Relative Importance of SWOT Groups

Table 1 shows the results of the relative importance analysis between SWOT groups regarding the development of community-based agrotourism in Pujon Kidul Village as follows

Table 1. Relative Importance of SWOT Groups

SWOT Groups	Weight	Rank
Strength	0,485	1
Weakness	0,109	3
Opportunity	0,297	2
Threat	0,108	4
Consistency Ratio (CR) 0,00776 < 0,1		

Table 1 shows that the SWOT groups that were considered the most important when sorted were strength (0.485), opportunity (0.297), weaknesseness (0.109) and threat (0.108). The results obtained from calculating the Consistency Ratio (CR) show a value of 0.00776 or below 0.1 which suggests that the data meets the criteria for consistency.

Relative Importance of Strength Factors

Table 2 shows the results of the relative importance analysis between strength factors regarding the development of community-based agrotourism in Pujon Kidul Village as follows

Table 2. Relative Importance of Strength Factors

Strength Factors	**Local**	
	Weight	**Rank**
Beautiful nature sceneries (S1)	0,083	5
Affordable prices (S2)	0,055	6
The availability large number of toilets (S3)	0,023	9
Pujon Kidul village already widely known (S4)	0,281	1
Tourism sector contribute to village economy (S5)	0,163	3
The location of Pujon Kidul Village is easy to access. (S6)	0,044	7
The availability of disability-friendly facilities (S7)	0,024	8
The community is actively involved in tourism activities. (S8)	0,174	2
A professionally managed tourism institution (S9)	0,152	4
Consistency Ratio (CR) 0,06<0,1		

Table 2 shows that strength factor that was considered the most influential was that Pujon Kidul Village was widely known (0.281) followed by the people of Pujon Kidul Village actively involved in local tourism activities (0.174) and the existence of the tourism sector in Pujon Kidul Village contributed to the village economy (0.163). The results obtained from calculating the Consistency Ratio (CR) show a value of 0.06 or below 0.1 which suggests that the data meets the criteria for consistency.

Relative Importance of Weakness Factors

Table 3 shows the results of the relative importance analysis between strength factors regarding the development of community-based agrotourism in Pujon Kidul Village as follows

Table 3. Relative Importance of Weakness Factors

Weakness Factors	**Local**	
	Weight	**Rank**
The visitor entry flow is prone to leakage (W1)	0,03	9
Insufficient innovation by tourism stakeholders (W2)	0,15	3
The lack of human resources quality (W3)	0,327	1
The absence of adequate accommodation (W4)	0,032	8
The access is not suitable for large vehicles (W5)	0,041	7

A lack of digitalization in business process (W6)	0,218	2
Difficulty in accessing public and online transportation (W7)	0,046	6
Some people do not feel the positive impact of tourism activities (W8)	0,077	5
Lack of attractions that highlight local wisdom (W9)	0,078	4
Consistency Ratio (CR) 0,05<0,1		

Table 3 shows that the weakness factor that was considered the most influential was lack of human resouce quality (0,327), lack of digitalization in business process (0,218) and insufficient innocation by tourism stakeholders (0,150) . The results obtained from calculating the Consistency Ratio (CR) show a value of 0.05 or below 0.1 which suggests that the data meets the criteria for consistency.

Relative Importance of Opportunity Factors

Table 4 shows the results of the relative importance analysis between opportunity factors regarding the development of community-based agrotourism in Pujon Kidul Village as follows

Table 4. Relative Importance of Opportunity Factors

Opportunity Factors	**Local**	
	Weight	**Rank**
The declining of COVID-19 pandemic (O1)	0,096	4
The growth of social media for tourism promotion (O2)	0,286	2
Close proximity to Batu City as East Java main tourist destination (O3)	0,471	1
The development of alternative tourism markets (O4)	0,05	5
Support from external stakeholders (O5)	0,098	3
Consistency Ratio (CR) 0,07<0,1		

Table 4 shows that the opportunity factor that was considered the most influential was close proximity to Batu City as East Java main tourist destination (0,471), growth of social media for tourism promotion (0,286) and support from external stakeholders (0,098) . The results obtained from calculating the Consistency Ratio (CR) show a value of 0.07 or below 0.1 which indicates that the data is considered consistent.

Relative Importance of Threat Factors

Table 5 shows the results of the relative importance analysis between threat factors regarding the development of community-based agrotourism in Pujon Kidul Village as follows

Table 5. Relative Importance of Threat Factors

Threat Factors	**Local**

	Weight	Rank
Transformation from agricultural sector to tourism (T1)	0,035	4
Competition with other tourist destinations (T2)	0,544	2
Tourism visitation rate has not fully recovered after COVID-19 pandemic (T3)	0,225	1
Social conflicts with neighboring villages (T4)	0,068	5
Prohibition of large buses from entering Pujon Kidul Village (T5)	0,128	3
Consistency Ratio (CR) 0,08<0,1		

Table 5 shows that the threat factor that was considered the most influential was competition with other tourist destinations (0,544), tourism visitation rate has not fully recovered after COVID-19 pandemic(0,225) and prohibition of large buses from entering Pujon Kidul Village (0,128). The results obtained from calculating the Consistency Ratio (CR) show a value of 0.08 or below 0.1 which suggests that the data meets the criteria for consistency.

Relative Importance of Entire SWOT Factors

Table 6 shows the five most influential SWOT factors in the development of community-based agro-tourism in Pujon Kidul Village by looking at the factors with the highest global weight as follows

Table 6. Relative Importance of Entire SWOT Factors

Rank	SWOT Factors	Global Weight
1	Close proximity to Batu City as East Java main tourist destination (O3)	0,140
2	Pujon Kidul village already widely known (S4)	0,137
3	The growth of social media for tourism promotion (O2)	0,085
4	The community is actively involved in tourism activities. (S8)	0,084
5	Tourism sector contribute to village economy (S5)	0,079
Overall Consistency Ratio of All SWOT Factors 0,07<0,1		

Table 6 shows that the SWOT factor that was considered the most influential was close proximity to Batu City as East Java main tourist destination (0,140), Pujon Kidul village already widely known (0,137), grwoth of social media for tourism promotion (0,085), community that actively involved in tourism activities (0,084) and contribution of tourism sector to village economy (0,079). The results obtained from calculating the Consistency Ratio (CR) show a value of 0.07 or below 0.1 which suggests that the data meets the criteria for consistency

Relative Importance of Alternative Strategies

Table 7 shows the results of the relative importance analysis between alternative strategies regarding the development of community-based agrotourism in Pujon Kidul Village as follows

Table 7. Relative Importance of Alternative Strategies

Rank	Alternative Strategies	Weight
1	Intensifying human resource capacity building (WO2)	0,220
2	Implementation and training of digitalization for tourism business actors (WO1)	0,175
3	Empowerment of village MSMEs (SO2)	0,127
4	Collaboration with surrounding villages for parking and shuttle systems (WT1)	0,111
5	Establishing and enforcing legal regulations related to tourism sector in village area (ST3)	0,103
6	Expansion of parking areas and improvement of the visitor entry flow (WT3)	0,080
7	Development of natural tourism attractions (ST1)	0,058
8	Maintaining a low-price strategy (ST2)	0,035
9	Collaboration with travel agencies (SO3)	0,029
10	Optimization of social media roles for destination promotion (SO1)	0,026
11	Development of accommodation within the Pujon Kidul Village area (WT2)	0,021
12	Development of the Cultural Village attraction (WO3)	0,016
Overall Consistency Ratio of All Alternative Strategies 0,088<0,1		

Table 7 shows that alternative strategy that should be priroritized was intensifying human resource capacity building (0,220), implementation and training of digitalization for tourism business actors (0,175), empowerement of village MSMEs (0,127), collaboration with surrounding villages for parking and shuttle system (0,111) and establishing and enforcing legal regulations related to tourism sector in village area (0,0108). The results obtained from calculating the Consistency Ratio (CR) show a value of 0.088 or below 0.1 which suggests that the data meets the criteria for consistency

Discussion

Community-based agro-tourism destinations in Pujon Kidul Village can be said to developed really well. This is shown by a step-by-step analysis from SWOT to AHP which shows that "strength" is the most influential factor among other SWOT factors. The main factor that drives the strength of Pujon Kidul Village is massive promotion on social media. Social media helps tourists find information and share experiences, thus influencing the decision to visit rural tourist destinations. In addition, travel experience uploads strengthen the influence of social norms on the intention to visit, so that social media becomes a very effective means of promotion (Joo et al.,

2020). The next driving factor is community involvement to participate in the tourism sector. The people of Pujon Kidul, the majority of whom are farmers, are interested in working in the tourism sector because it allows for additional income and opens up opportunities to develop themselves through training in various new skills besides farming (Prasetyanto et al., 2023b). However, there are a number of weaknesses that need to be prioritized so that improvements can be made in the future. The lack of quality of human resources needs to be highlighted, moreover the majority of the people of Pujon Kidul Village do not pursue higher education and the majority work as farmers. This results in a limited number of trained human resources, including a lack of a workforce that has special expertise in tourism services and destination management, thus hindering the quality of services and optimal participation in tourism activities (Prasetyanto et al., 2023a).

A number of opportunities can be used in the development of community-based agro-tourism in Pujon Kidul Village. One of them is the proximity of the location to Batu City, which is the center of tourist destinations in East Java Province, is a great opportunity because tourists can visit Pujon Kidul Village while visiting other tourist destinations in Batu City. A strategic and attractive location is very important in determining the location of a tourist destination. A strategic and attractive location is very helpful to attract tourists and improve the business performance of a tourist attraction (Moutinho & Paton, 1991). There are a threat that also need to be considered by stakeholders in Pujon Kidul Village. Since reaching the peak of the number of visits in 2019 or before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors to Pujon Kidul Village has not returned to the same as before. This is because after the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism businesses in general are back in full so that many new tourist destinations are opened either in Batu City itself or especially around Pujon Kidul Village. This causes competition between tourist destinations to be fiercer and more or less tourists switch to visiting other destinations (Prasetyanto et al., 2023a) . Location is a factor that causes competition between tourist destinations Competition between tourist destinations can occur if there are several tourist attractions, infrastructure, equipment, services and institutions concentrated in one area (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999).

For this reason, based on strength, weakness, opportunity and threat factors. A number of strategies were formulated where the strategy that is considered the most important to be carried out is to develop the capacities of community members. This has been pursued by the manager by intensifying cooperation with external parties such as universities and NGOs to help empower the community there in the form of training and certification so that the village community, especially those who are in direct contact with tourists, can provide the best service standards (Prasetyanto et al., 2023b). Community empowerment is essential because the involvement of local citizens helps ensure that the economic, social, and cultural benefits of tourism are truly felt by the local community. In addition, active community participation strengthens the sense of ownership and supports the sustainability of destinations through more inclusive and local needs-based management (Tong et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This research shows that the the growth of community-based agritourism initiatives in Pujon Kidul Village is a real practice of sustainable tourism that is successful in Indonesia. Using the AHP-SWOT approach, this study successfully identified key strength factors such as high community participation, village popularity, the economic benefits generated by tourism for the local community. However, a number of weaknesses such as the low quality of human resources, lack of digitalization, and lack of innovation in tourism products are serious challenges that must be addressed immediately.

The resulting priority strategies include increasing the capacity of human resources, digitalization training, empowering village MSMEs, as well as cross-village collaboration and local regulations in the tourism sector. These findings confirm the importance of participatory and local potential-based strategies in supporting the sustainability of village agro-tourism. The AHP-SWOT approach has proven to be effective in assisting relevant and contextual strategic decision-making, and has the potential to become a blueprint for creating a sustainable rural community through the establishment of agritourism practices rooted in local community involvement.

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Examining the Differences in Chatbot Usage Among Tourism Employees Based on Demographic Variables

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines whether tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot usage differ according to demographic variables. The study is limited to tourism employees in Türkiye and relies on self-reported data collected through a cross-sectional survey design.

Study design/methodology/approach: A quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected from 282 employees working in accommodation, travel, and airline enterprises in Türkiye using the Chatbot Usage (CB) Scale. The data were analyzed through SPSS using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA.

Results: The results indicate that chatbot usage perceptions significantly differ by age, education level, income level, actual chatbot usage, and perceived need for chatbot usage. No significant differences were found in terms of gender, marital status ans job title. The findings suggest that tourism enterprises should consider demographic characteristics when managing digital transformation and implementing chatbot technologies.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the limited empirical literature on chatbot adoption in tourism by focusing on the employee perspective.

Keywords Chatbot, Demographic Variables, Tourism Employee

Introduction

The digital transformation process is significantly altering the methods of service production and delivery in the tourism sector; within this transformation, studies on customer interaction, operational processes, and service experience are becoming a crucial area of focus (Koo et al., 2025; Çalhan, 2025; Kumari and Thakur, 2025; Neuhofer, etc., 2015; Buhalis and Law, 2008). Chatbots offer significant advantages in the tourism and hospitality sector. In particular, the perceived benefit and increased usability of chatbots positively influence customer acceptance and intention to use them; this creates strategic opportunities for businesses, such as dynamic customer interaction and faster support processes (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020). In this context, chatbots can provide significant technological support in customer support processes (information provision, reservation management, etc.) for accommodation businesses, travel agencies, and airlines, offering significant advantages in terms of operational efficiency and service quality.

The effects of chatbots on customer experience, service quality, and purchase intention are examined in the tourism literature (Gümüş & Çark, 2021; Akdemir & Bulut, 2024). Due to research limitations, no studies on chatbot use among tourism sector employees have been found. However, the success of technological applications at the organizational level depends not only on customer

acceptance but also on employees' perceptions and attitudes towards technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Technology Acceptance and Use Theory (UTAUT) reveal that individuals' intentions to use technology can differ according to demographic variables (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Kim, 2016). Accordingly, examining tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use based on demographic characteristics is important from both theoretical and managerial perspectives. This study aims to fill a significant gap in the literature by analyzing the perceptions of chatbot use among employees in tourism businesses operating in Turkey in terms of demographic variables.

Literature review

The Use of Chatbots in Tourism and Demographic Variables

Chatbots are artificial intelligence applications that enable human-computer interaction through natural language processing technologies (Savoldi et al., 2025). Buhalis & Sinarta (2019) emphasize that in the tourism and hospitality sector, the concept of "knowness service" is a service philosophy that reshapes customer experience in an instant, personalized, and interactive way. Chatbots serve as the digital application tool for this philosophy. In the tourism sector, chatbots are becoming widespread, particularly due to their advantages of 24/7 service, cost reduction, and rapid response (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020; Khan & Azam, 2023). Chatbots and other AI-based service technologies are transforming customer interaction, improving service quality by quickly responding to information requests, and potentially reshaping business processes and employment structures in the sector. Their economic and operational impacts are highlighted in the relevant literature (Prasanna et al., 2025; Akdemir & Bulut, 2024; Gümüş & Çark, 2021; Tussyadiah and Park, 2018; Ivanov & Webster, 2017). These studies demonstrate the role of chatbots and AI-powered tools in tourism within the context of customer experience.

While there are studies examining employees' perceptions of chatbot use in different sectors (Lin, et al., 2022; Gkinko & Elbanna, 2022), no studies focusing on chatbot use by employees in the tourism sector, which plays a significant role, were found due to research limitations. The Unified Technology Acceptance and Use Theory (UTAUT), developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), provides a strong theoretical basis for explaining employee adoption of chatbots in the workplace. Indeed, Lin et al. (2022) showed that in the context of B2B marketing, employees evaluate chatbots in terms of both "affordances" that facilitate business processes (e.g., increased productivity, quick information access) and "disaffordances" that create potential limitations (e.g., loss of control or job role ambiguity). Similarly, Gkinko and Elbanna (2022), by classifying the forms of chatbot use in the workplace, revealed that these technologies can assume functions that support, complement, or partially transform employee roles. When these findings are considered together, it becomes clear that employees' perceptions of chatbot use depend not only on their assessment of technological benefits but also on their job role, perceived control, and supportive conditions within the organizational context. Accordingly, analyzing tourism employees' perspectives on chatbot usage tools and their relationship to demographic variables is becoming increasingly

important. This is because the success of such technological systems depends on employee adoption, and this adoption can vary according to demographic characteristics.

The technology adoption literature supports the view that individuals' intentions to use technology can be influenced by demographic factors (Venkatesh, et al., 2003). In the tourism sector, demographic characteristics such as different age groups and education levels can affect perceptions of digital technologies (Assaker, 2020; Tuomi et al., 2023; Savoldi et all., 2025). Age, in particular, is considered a decisive factor in the adaptation process to new technologies. Research shows that older adults experience more difficulties in adopting digital services and develop different perceptions of digital tools compared to younger generations (Tuomi et al., 2023). Another study (Morris & Venkatesh, 2000) indicates that young employees are more adept at using digital technologies. Latikka et all. (2025) found that the use of social chatbots was most consistently associated with younger age. This suggests that young individuals use chatbots as an additional source of social support. The adoption rate of artificial intelligence also varies according to gender. Research indicates that women use artificial intelligence less than men (Savoldi et al., 2025). This shows that the gender-based digital divide continues. Education level is also an important variable shaping perceptions of technology. According to Rogers (2003), early adopters of innovations are generally individuals with higher levels of education. We can state that individuals with low income levels may have limited access to the internet, smart devices, and new technologies (Van Deursen, et al., 2025). In line with the limitations of the research and the literature review explained above, it is seen that differences in perception of chatbot use according to some demographic variables have been examined. However, in Turkey specifically, no research has been encountered that collects data considering some demographic characteristics of employees using chatbot and AI technologies.

Methodology

Sampling, Data Collection Tool, and Analysis

The data used in this research were collected from employees of accommodation, travel, and airline companies in Turkey using a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling is a non-random sampling method where the sample segment to be selected from the main population is determined by the researcher's judgment. In convenience sampling, data is collected from the main population in the easiest, fastest, and most economical way (Aaker et al., 2008; Malhotra, 2020; Zikmund et al., 2000). A questionnaire was used as the data collection tool. Data were obtained from participants through online and face-to-face applications. 282 participants were reached for the research. All participants were clearly informed that this study was solely for academic research, that their participation was voluntary, and that their identities would be protected. Research data were collected between March 2024 and October 2025. 282 people were included in the scope of the research. In this study, the sample size was determined based on the statistical power analysis approach. The minimum sample size required for independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to be used in group comparisons was calculated under the assumption of moderate effect size. Effect size thresholds were based on Cohen's classification,

which is widely referenced in behavioral sciences. In this context, d = 0.50 for the t-test and f = 0.25 for ANOVA were used; the significance level was accepted as α = .05 and the test power (1−β) = .80. While the minimum sample size required for two-group comparisons was calculated to be approximately N = 128, it was determined that the minimum sample size required for ANOVA analyses to be performed for demographic variables consisting of five to six categories (e.g., education level) is approximately in the range of N = 200–216. Accordingly, the sample size reached in the study is sufficient to provide statistical power for both t-test and multi-group ANOVA analyses (Cohen, 1988). Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

The questionnaire developed for the study consists of two parts. The first part contains eight questions related to demographic variables, and the second part includes a chatbot usage scale. The chatbot usage scale is the 38-item scale used in the study by Melián-González et al. (2021). Participants were asked to respond to the statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Agree), 3 (Undecided), 4 (Agree), and 5 (Strongly Agree).

Since the obtained data showed a normal distribution (CB (Skewness=-0.482/Kurtosis=0.134)), parametric tests were preferred. According to Mallery and George (2010) and Kline (2011), if the skewness and kurtosis values are between -2 and +2, the data are considered to be normally distributed. The data obtained from the survey form were analyzed and interpreted using the SPSS statistical data analysis package program. In addition to descriptive statistics, parametric tests, t-test and ANOVA were applied in the data analysis.

Research Hypotheses;

A quantitative research method was chosen to reveal the use of chatbots by tourism employees. The research hypotheses were formulated as follows:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their gender.

H2: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their marital status.

H3: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their age.

H4: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their educational level.

H5: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their income level.

H6: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their job title. H7: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their overall use of chatbots. H8: There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their need for chatbot use.

Results

Sample characteristics

When the demographic characteristics of the participants were examined, it was determined that 41.1% of the participants were female and 58.9% were male employees, more than 30% were between 18-25 years old, 34% were associate degree graduates, 66% were single, more than 59% had a monthly income of $501 - $1500, more than 67% had been working in the current company for 1-5 years, more than 41% had a total of 1-5 years of work experience, more than 62% were untitled employees, more than 74% did not use chatbots, 23.4% used chatbots, more than 29% needed to use chatbots, more than 24% did not need to, and more than 37% were undecided (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants (n = 282).

Demographic characteristics	**Categories**	**n**	**%**
Gender	Female	116	41,1
	Male	166	58,9
Age	18 age and under	54	19,1
	18-25 age	85	30,1
	26-35 age	74	26,2
	36-45 age	51	18,1
	46-55 age	15	5,3
	56 age and above	3	1,1
Educational Status	Primary School	42	14,9
	High School	90	31,9
	Associate Degree	96	34
	Bachelor's Degree	50	17,7
	Postgraduate Degree	3	1,1
Marital Status	Single	186	66
	Married	93	33
Monthly income	500 $ and under	52	18,4
	501 $ - 1500 $	169	59,9
	1501 $ - 2500 $	40	14,2
	2501 $ - 3500 $	15	5,3
	3500 $ and above	4	1,4
Your title	General Manager/Deputy Manager	11	3,9
	Department Manager	42	14,9
	Chief/Deputy Manager	50	17,7
	Employee	177	62,8
Do you use chatbots?	I use it	66	23,4
	I don't use it	211	74,8

Do you feel the need to use chatbots?	Yes	82	29,1
	No	70	24,8
	I don't know	105	37,2

Validity and Reliability Findings

The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient was used in the reliability analysis of the scale used. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the overall validity and reliability analysis of the chatbot usage scale, used to determine tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use, was found to be 0.942. This Cronbach Alpha value indicates that the scale used in the research is reliable.

Findings Regarding Research Hypotheses

The average chatbot usage of the research participants was determined as (x=3.385). The findings regarding the research hypotheses are given below.

Table 2: Difference in Chatbot Usage According to Gender, Marital Status and Chatbot Usage (t-test)

		N	$\bar{x}$	Standard Deviation	t	p
Gender	Female	116	3,369	,64955	-,327	,744
	Male	166	3,397	,72504		
Marital Status	Single	186	3,408	,70250	,759	,449
	Married	93	3,341	,68300		
Use chatbots	Yes	66	3,634	,61213	3,386	**,001**
	No	211	3,313	,69159		

When the table is examined, it is seen that the average chatbot usage of tourism employee participants is between female (X= 3.369) and male (X= 3.397). According to the t-test conducted to determine the significance between the gender of the participants and their perception of chatbot usage, it is revealed that the participants' chatbot usage does not differ according to gender (t=-0.327, p>0.05). It is seen that the average chatbot usage of tourism employee participants is between single (x=3.408) and married (X= 3.341). It is revealed that the participants' chatbot usage does not differ according to their marital status (t=0.759, p>0.05). It is seen that the average chatbot usage of participants is between those who use chatbots (x=3.634) and those who do not use them (X= 3.313). It is revealed that the participants' chatbot usage differs according to their chatbot usage status (t=3.386, p<0.05). In this case, it was determined that those who use chatbots have a higher perception of chatbot usage. In this case, hypotheses H1: "There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their gender," and H2: "There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their marital status," are not supported, while hypothesis H7: "There is a statistically significant difference between the use of chatbots by tourism employees and their overall use of chatbots," is supported.

Table 3: Differences in Chatbot Use According to Age, Education Level, Income Level, Years of Service in the Company, Years of Service in the Sector, Title, and Need for Chatbot Use (ANOVA)

Demographic characteristics		**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**P**
Age	Between Groups	5,629	5	1,126	2,396	**,038**
	Intra-Groups	129,682	276	,470		
	Total	135,310	281			
Educational Status	Between Groups	7,848	3	2,616	5,691	**,001**
	Intra-Groups	127,320	277	,460		
	Total	135,167	280			
Monthly income	Between Groups	5,378	3	1,793	3,812	**,011**
	Intra-Groups	129,789	276	,470		
	Total	135,167	279			
	Intra-Groups	133,740	271	,494		
	Total	134,759	276			
Your title	Between Groups	1,264	3	,421	,868	,458
	Intra-Groups	133,875	276	,485		
	Total	135,139	279			
Feel the need to use chatbots	Between Groups	28,192	2	14,096	41,282	**,000**
	Intra-Groups	86,730	254	,341		
	Total	114,923	256			

Table 3 shows that tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use differ according to their age ($F(5;276)=2.396$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis H3: "There is a statistically significant difference between tourism employees' chatbot use and their age" is supported. According to the results of the ANOVA analysis, tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use differ according to their educational level ($F(3;277)=5.691$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis H4: "There is a statistically significant difference between tourism employees' chatbot use and their educational level" is supported.

Furthermore, tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use differ according to their income level ($F(3;276)=3.812$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis H5: "There is a statistically significant difference between tourism employees' chatbot use and their income level" is supported. Furthermore, it was found that tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use did not differ according to their titles ($F(3;276)= 0.868, p>0.05$). In this case, hypothesis H6: “There is a statistically significant difference between tourism employees' use of chatbots and their titles.” is not supported. Finally, it was found that tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use differed according to their need for chatbot use ($F(2;254)= 0.282, p<0.05$). In this case, hypothesis H8:

"There is a statistically significant difference between tourism employees' use of chatbots and their need for chatbot use." is supported.

Table 4: Distribution of Chatbot Usage Scores by Age

	N	**X**	**Standard Deviation**	**Standard Error**	**Min.**	**Max.**
18 age and under	54	3,576	,61072	,08311	1,18	4,45
18-25 age	85	3,260	,70787	,07678	1,29	4,92
26-35 age	74	3,368	,67602	,07859	1,68	4,92
36-45 age	51	3,471	,72533	,10157	1,95	5,00
46-55 age	15	3,366	,76169	,19667	1,68	4,26
56 age and above	3	2,585	,13112	,07570	2,47	2,73
Total	282	3,385	,69392	,04132	1,18	5,00

Table 4 shows that chatbot usage is higher among those aged 18 and under (interns) (x = 3.576) compared to those aged 56 and over (x = 3.209).

Table 5: Distribution of Chatbot Usage Scores by Educational Level

	N	**X**	**Standard Deviation**	**Standard Error**	**Min.**	**Max.**
Primary School	42	3,190	,85276	,13158	1,68	5,00
High School	90	3,230	,71701	,07558	1,18	4,92
Associate Degree	96	3,589	,57293	,05847	1,71	4,92
Bachelor's Degree	53	3,428	,62888	,08638	1,91	4,58
Total	281	3,384	,69480	,04145	1,18	5,00

Table 5 shows that chatbot usage is higher at the associate degree level (x = 3.589) than at the primary school level (x = 3.190).

Table 6: Distribution of Chatbot Usage Score by Income Level

	N	X	**Standard Deviation**	**Standard Error**	Min.	Max.
500 $ and under	52	3,173	,73384	,10177	1,18	4,55
501 $ - 1500 $	169	3,372	,72147	,05550	1,29	5,00
1501 $ - 2500 $	40	3,572	,54923	,08684	2,18	4,58
2501 $ - 3500 $	19	3,676	,41583	,09540	3,00	4,26
Total	280	3,3845	,69604	,04160	1,18	5,00

According to the findings in Table 6, chatbot usage is higher among those with an average income of $2501 and above (x = 3.676) compared to those with an average income of $500 and below (x = 3.173).

Table 7. Distribution of Chatbot Usage Score According to Chatbot Usage Need

	N	X	**Standard Deviation**	**Standard Error**	Min.	Max.
Yes	82	3,807	,47000	,05190	2,18	4,58
No	70	2,944	,78089	,09333	1,18	5,00
I don't know	105	3,439	,50727	,04950	2,37	4,92
Total	257	3,422	,67001	,04179	1,18	5,00

According to the data in Table 7, it is seen that the average score of those who feel the need to use chatbots according to their income level (x = 3.807) is higher than the average score of those who do not feel the need (x = 2.944).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the employee-focused chatbot literature by examining whether tourism employees' perceptions of chatbot use differ according to demographic variables. The findings revealed that perceptions of chatbot use differed significantly according to age, education level, income level, actual use, and perceived need for use; however, no significant difference was observed in terms of gender, marital status, and position. The age-related difference finding is consistent with the technology acceptance literature. Studies showing that younger employees are more adept at using digital technologies (Morris & Venkatesh, 2000) and findings indicating a correlation between social chatbot use and younger age (Latikka et al., 2025) support this result. Furthermore, it parallels studies indicating that older individuals may experience more difficulties in the adaptation process to digital cultural services in the tourism context (Tuomi et al., 2023). This suggests that digital competence and exposure to technology are fundamental mechanisms shaping chatbot perceptions.

Differences in educational level can be theoretically explained by the diffusion of innovation theory. Everett Rogers (2003) states that early adopters are generally individuals with higher levels of education. The findings support this assumption in the context of tourism employees. Similarly, the difference based on income level aligns with the digital inequality literature (Van Deursen et al., 2025). Income level can be an indirect determinant of access to technology and familiarity with digital tools. It is noteworthy that there is no significant difference in terms of gender. Considering studies indicating that gender-based differences persist in the adoption of artificial intelligence (Savoldi et al., 2025), it can be assessed that institutional digitalization in the tourism sector may play a role in reducing gender-based differences.

These findings demonstrate the need for a holistic understanding of digital transformation that goes beyond customer experience-focused chatbot studies (Tussyadiah & Park, 2018; Ivanov & Webster, 2017; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019) and centers the employee perspective. Digital

transformation encompasses not only customer experience but also employee perceptions and organizational adaptation.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Chatbot research in tourism has primarily focused on customer experience and operational efficiency. This study balances the one-sided perspective in the literature by centering on employee perception. While the moderating role of demographic variables is theoretically discussed within the framework of the Technology Acceptance Model and UTAUT, empirical evidence is limited specifically for tourism employees. The findings show that age, education, and income are significant determinants. The fact that income and education differences affect chatbot perception demonstrates that digital inequality exists not only in a societal but also in an organizational context. This provides a sector-based contribution to the digital divide discussion. The findings indicate that, due to the multifaceted nature of chatbot adoption, chatbot use is shaped not only by access to technology but also by perceived needs and actual usage experiences. Digital transformation strategies should be designed taking demographic differences into account. Differentiated training programs should be developed based on age and education level. Young employees can be positioned as "digital leaders" in the digital transformation process. Internal digital support mechanisms should be created to reduce income and access-based inequalities. Chatbot integration should be considered not only as a technological investment but also as a human resource management strategy.

Limitations and Future Research

The research is limited to tourism employees in Turkey. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The self-report method carries the risk of methodological bias. Analyses were limited to group comparisons; causal modeling was not performed. In future studies, cross-cultural comparisons could be conducted. The effects of chatbot use on job performance, burnout, and job satisfaction could be analyzed. It is recommended that future studies include qualitative studies that delve deeper into employees' chatbot experiences.

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Strategic Human Resource Management and Innovation Performance: Evidence from Food Manufacturing Firms

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the impact of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) on innovation performance in food manufacturing firms. This study grounded in the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory. The study proposes that strategically aligned HR systems enhance firms' innovation capabilities.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected through simple random sampling from employees working in 12 different large-scale food manufacturing firms. Following a pilot study and data cleaning procedures, 242 valid questionnaires were analyzed. SHRM was measured using Yıldırım's (2017) scale, and innovation performance was measured based on Henard and Szymanski (2001). All items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) path analyses was conducted to test the measurement and structural models. Reliability and validity were confirmed through Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted. Harman's single-factor test indicated no significant common method bias.

Findings: The model demonstrated excellent fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.045$; GFI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.014). SHRM has a positive and significant effect on innovation performance ($\beta = 0.69$, $p < .001$), explaining 47.6% of variance in innovation outcomes.

Originality/Value: The study extends SHRM–innovation research to the food manufacturing sector and empirically demonstrates that strategically integrated HR systems function as a key organizational capability driving innovation performance.

Keywords: Strategic Human Resource Management, Innovation Performance, Food Manufacturing, Hospitality Supply Chain

1.Introduction

Innovation has become a strategic necessity for firms operating in highly competitive and regulated markets. Particularly in manufacturing industries, innovation determines product differentiation, operational efficiency, and long-term survival (Farida & Setiawan, 2022). While traditional perspectives emphasize technological investments as primary drivers of innovation, recent research highlights the importance of organizational systems and human capital architecture (Farida & Setiawan, 2022; Guo et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024)

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) integrates HR policies and practices with organizational strategy. It transforms HR from an administrative function into a strategic capability (Prifti et al., 2025). According to the Resource-Based View, human resources are rare, inimitable, and valuable strategic assets (Barney & Arikan, 2005). In this context, the strategic alignment of human resource systems becomes a decisive factor in the formation of innovation capacity.

The food manufacturing sector plays a critical role in the tourism industry's supply chain, particularly as hospitality establishments (hotels and restaurants) serve as primary consumers of food products driven by tourist demand. In the Alanya case, tourism strengthens local and regional food supply networks, boosting agricultural production by 30-50%, with hotels forming a key customer base (Salihoğlu & Korten, 2016). In this context, SHRM-supported innovation (product development and process optimization) enhances food firms' sustainable supply capacity to hospitality markets, thereby reinforcing tourism's secondary economic impacts (Prifti et al., 2025). Although numerous studies link SHRM to firm performance, empirical research examining its direct impact on innovation, in traditional manufacturing sectors, such as food production, remains limited. Food manufacturing firms operate under strict quality regulations, cost pressures, and evolving consumer demands, requiring continuous innovation (Babayev & Balajayeva, 2023). Therefore, understanding how SHRM influences innovation performance in this sector represents both theoretical and practical importance.

This study aims to examine the structural relationship between SHRM and innovation performance in food manufacturing firms using SEM.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Strategic Human Resource Management as a Strategic Capability

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) refers to the systematic alignment of human resource policies and practices with organizational strategy to enhance firm performance (April Chang & Chun Huang, 2005). Unlike traditional personnel management approaches, SHRM positions the HR function as a strategic partner that actively contributes to long-term organizational objectives (Schuler et al., 2001).

From the perspective of the Resource-Based View (RBV), sustainable competitive advantage derives from valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (Barney & Arikan, 2005). Contemporary extensions of RBV emphasize that human capital systems constitute strategic assets when embedded in organizational routines and structures (Barney et al., 2012; Collins, 2022). Accordingly, SHRM practices such as strategic workforce planning, talent development, and performance-based reward systems enhance firms' ability to generate and deploy knowledge strategically (Aliyev, 2024).

Dynamic Capabilities Theory further explains how firms integrate and reconfigure competencies to respond to environmental changes (Teece, 2018). SHRM contributes to these dynamic capabilities by aligning recruitment, training, performance evaluation, and reward systems with strategic objectives.

Recent research demonstrates that firms integrating HR leaders into strategic planning processes show higher innovation outcomes (Minavand & Lorkojouri, 2013). The strategic role of HR becomes critical in fostering learning climates and innovation-oriented cultures in dynamic market pressures exposed manufacturing environments (Feng, 2025). Thus, SHRM can be conceptualized as an organizational-level capability that enables firms to mobilize human capital toward innovation outcomes.

2.2 Innovation Performance in Manufacturing Contexts

Innovation performance encompasses the successful implementation of new products, processes, organizational practices, and market approaches (Migdadi, 2022). In manufacturing industries, innovation extends beyond R&D intensity and includes process optimization, competitive responsiveness, and innovation process competence (Medda, 2020).

In food manufacturing firms, innovation plays a particularly strategic role due to regulatory requirements, consumer preference shifts, sustainability pressures, and supply chain complexity (Román et al., 2022). Firms operating in this sector must continuously adapt through incremental and exploratory innovation strategies (Bhaskaran, 2006).

Recent studies emphasize that organizational infrastructure and HR systems constitute a fundamental driver of innovation performance (Papa et al., 2020). Firms that cultivate exploration orientation, knowledge-sharing routines, and strategic responsiveness through HR mechanisms demonstrate higher innovation outcomes (Donate & Guadamillas, 2015). Therefore, innovation performance should be viewed not solely as a technological outcome but as a systemic organizational capability shaped by strategic human resource architecture.

2.3 The Relationship Between SHRM and Innovation

The relationship between SHRM and innovation can be theoretically explained through both the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Kero & Bogale, 2023). While RBV explains how strategically aligned human capital creates competitive advantage, Dynamic Capabilities Theory emphasizes the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure competencies in rapidly changing environments (Teece, 2018; Wibisono & Supoyo, 2023).

Strategically aligned HR systems enhance knowledge integration, cross-functional collaboration, and employee engagement. These are the key antecedents of innovation (Tobari et al., 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that firms adopting high-performance work systems (HPWS) and strategic HR alignment report significantly higher innovation outputs (Bhatti et al., 2021; Fu et al., 2015).

In manufacturing sectors, particularly in resource-sensitive industries such as food production, SHRM contributes to strengthening product innovation success, enhancing exploration, orientation, increasing competitive responsiveness, and improving innovation process competence (Minavand & Lorkojouri, 2013). These dimensions collectively represent innovation performance as a multidimensional construct. Based on this theoretical foundation and prior empirical findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Strategic Human Resource Management has a positive and significant effect on innovation performance in food manufacturing firms.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the effect of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) on innovation performance in food manufacturing firms. Quantitative approaches are particularly appropriate when testing theoretically grounded causal relationships using statistical modeling techniques (Hair et al., 2019). The research model proposes a unidirectional structural relationship between SHRM and innovation performance. The study focuses exclusively on food manufacturing firms, a sector characterized by highly competitive intensity, regulatory pressure, and the need for continuous product and process innovation.

The target population consists of employees working in large-scale food manufacturing firms. A simple random sampling method was employed to ensure that each member of the population had an equal probability of selection (Etikan, 2017). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire. Prior to the main study, a pilot study with 50 respondents was conducted to assess clarity, reliability, and construct validity of the measurement scales. Necessary revisions were made based on pilot feedback.

After data cleaning procedures (removal of blank, duplicate, and erroneous responses), 242 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. The overall response rate was 76%. The final sample characteristics are as follows: 61.6% male, 38.0% female; majority aged between 25–34 years (40.9%); 53.3% hold a bachelor's degree; 74.8% are workers/performers; 97.1% of firms have operated for more than 20 years; 81% of firms employ more than 2000 employees; and 97.5% have a formal HR department. The homogeneity of the sample in terms of industry enhances internal validity by controlling for sectoral variance (López-López et al., 2021).

SHRM was measured using the scale developed by Yıldırım (2017). The construct consists of two dimensions: Strategic Role of HR and Internal HR Alignment. The scale captures the degree to which HR practices are strategically integrated into organizational decision-making processes.

Innovation performance was measured based on the framework developed by Henard and Szymanski (2001). The construct includes four dimensions: Product Innovation Success, Exploration Orientation, Competitive Responsiveness, and Innovation Process Competence.

This multidimensional operationalization reflects both outcome and capability-based aspects of innovation (Gregersen & Johnson, 2005). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

3.1 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 27 and AMOS 24. The analysis proceeded in two stages: Measurement model assessment and Structural model testing. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is particularly suitable for simultaneously testing measurement and structural relationships between latent constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Model fit was evaluated using multiple fit indices, including χ^2/df, CFI, GFI, NFI, TLI, and RMSEA, following recommended thresholds.

3.1 Common Method Bias

Common Method Bias (CMB) is a significant concern because it can artificially inflate the relationships between variables, leading to "false positive" results. Harman's Single-Factor Test is the most common "post-hoc" statistical technique used to check if CMB is a serious threat to the study. Harman's single-factor test revealed that the first factor accounted for 35.20% of total variance (KMO = 0.919; Bartlett's Test $p < .001$) indicating no significant common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

3.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analyses (EFA) were separately conducted to examine the factorial structure of the SHRM scale and Innovation scale. Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation (Kaiser normalization) was employed, for the both scales, assuming potential correlations between factors. In the exploratory factor analysis, an oblique rotation method (Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization) was preferred instead of an orthogonal rotation (e.g., Varimax). The primary reason for this choice is the theoretical expectation that the latent dimensions of both Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and Innovation are conceptually interrelated rather than independent (Tabachnick et al., 2013).

The results for the SHRM scale revealed a two-factor structure consistent with the theoretical framework. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure indicated sampling adequacy (KMO = 0.919), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The first factor, labeled Strategic Role of HR, had an eigenvalue of 7.618 and explained 47.611% of the total variance. Factor loadings ranged between 0.457 and 0.871. The second factor, Internal HR Alignment, had an eigenvalue of 1.163 and explained 7.266% of the variance, with factor loadings ranging between 0.432 and 0.979 (absolute values considered due to oblimin rotation). The total explained variance was 54.877%, exceeding the commonly accepted 50% threshold in social sciences. Reliability analysis indicated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.871$ for Strategic Role of HR; $\alpha = 0.876$ for Internal HR Alignment). These findings confirm that the SHRM scale demonstrates a stable and theoretically coherent two-dimensional structure in the context of food manufacturing firms.

An Exploratory Factor Analysis was also conducted for the Innovation scale using Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation. The KMO value (0.919) and significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < .001$) confirmed the adequacy of the dataset for factor analysis. The results revealed a four-factor structure consistent with the conceptualization of innovation as a multidimensional construct: Product Innovation Success (Eigenvalue: 8.265; Explained variance: 41.326%; Factor loadings: 0.515 – 0.789; Cronbach's alpha: 0.850); Exploration Orientation (Eigenvalue: 1.330; Explained variance: 6.649%; Factor loadings: 0.440 – 0.573; Cronbach's alpha: 0.786); Competitive Responsiveness (Eigenvalue: 1.146; Explained variance: 5.729%; Factor loadings: 0.648 – 0.798; Cronbach's alpha: 0.771); and Innovation Process Competence (Eigenvalue: 1.057; Explained variance: 5.287%; Factor loadings: 0.450 – 0.902; Cronbach's alpha: 0.806). The total explained variance was 58.990%, indicating satisfactory explanatory power. All factor loadings exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.40, supporting

construct validity. Reliability coefficients ranged between 0.771 and 0.850, indicating acceptable to high internal consistency. The EFA results confirm that innovation performance in food manufacturing firms is best represented as a four-dimensional construct.

3.3 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Prior to structural model testing, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables and to assess potential multicollinearity issues.

The results indicate that all variables are positively and significantly correlated at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). Pearson correlation analysis revealed moderate to strong positive correlations between SHRM and innovation dimensions. Importantly, none of the correlation coefficients exceed the critical threshold of .90, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern (Hair et al., 2010). The correlation results provide preliminary empirical support for the proposed structural relationship between SHRM and innovation performance.

Collinearity diagnostics indicate that multicollinearity is not a serious concern in the regression model. Tolerance values range between 0.385 and 0.694, all well above the critical threshold of 0.10, while VIF values vary between 1.441 and 2.599, remaining substantially below the commonly accepted cut-off value of 5 (Hair et al., 2010; Kutner et al., 2005). These results suggest that the independent variables do not exhibit problematic levels of shared variance. Furthermore, the condition indices range from 1.000 to 25.685, staying below the critical value of 30 that typically signals severe multicollinearity (Belsley et al., 2005; Field, 2024). Although the highest condition index (25.685) is associated with relatively high variance proportions for Product Innovation Success (0.68) and Innovation Process Competence (0.64), the absence of extreme VIF values and low tolerance statistics indicates that this shared variance does not pose a substantial threat to parameter estimation. The findings confirm that the regression coefficients can be interpreted reliably and that multicollinearity does not undermine the stability or validity of the model estimates.

3.4 Structural Equation Modeling Path Analysis

The structural equation model was tested using Maximum Likelihood estimation. The overall model demonstrated excellent fit to the data. The chi-square value was non-significant ($\chi^2 = 8.362$, $df = 8$, $p = .399$), indicating that the model-implied covariance matrix did not significantly differ from the observed covariance matrix. Additionally, the χ^2/df ratio was 1.045, well below the recommended threshold of 3 (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2023). Other goodness-of-fit indices further confirmed model adequacy: GFI = 0.988, CFI = 1.000, IFI = 1.000, NFI = 0.990, and TLI = 0.999, all exceeding the recommended minimum value of 0.90 (Byrne, 2010; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The RMSEA value was 0.014 (PCLOSE = 0.757), which is substantially below the 0.08 threshold and even below the more stringent 0.05 criterion for close fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Byrne, 2010). Collectively, these indices indicate that the proposed structural model provides an excellent representation of the data.

Regarding the structural path, SHRM has a positive and statistically significant effect on Innovation ($\beta = 0.69$, C.R. = 9.938, $p < .001$). The squared multiple correlation (R^2) for Innovation

is 0.476, indicating that SHRM explains 47.6% of the variance in innovation performance, which can be considered a substantial explanatory power in behavioral research (Cohen, 1988; Hair et al., 2010). These findings provide strong empirical support for the hypothesized relationship and confirm that strategically integrated HR systems function as a key organizational driver of innovation capability.

The standardized factor loadings of the measurement model further demonstrate strong construct validity. SHRM is strongly reflected by Strategic Role of HR (β = 0.913) and Internal HR Alignment (β = 0.847). Similarly, Innovation is robustly represented by Product Innovation Success (β = 0.853), Innovation Process Competence (β = 0.831), Exploration Orientation (β = 0.749), and Competitive Responsiveness (β = 0.743). All factor loadings exceed the recommended minimum threshold of 0.50 and are statistically significant, supporting convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2023). Additionally, the standardized indirect effects indicate that SHRM exerts meaningful indirect influences on all innovation dimensions through the higher-order innovation construct, further reinforcing the structural coherence of the model.

The reliability and convergent validity of the constructs were assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results indicate that both constructs demonstrate strong internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values were 0.931 for SHRM and 0.936 for Innovation, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and indicating high reliability (Hair et al., 2010; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Similarly, Composite Reliability values were 0.874 for SHRM and 0.873 for Innovation, both above the 0.70 cut-off criterion, confirming construct reliability (Fornell & Larcke, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). Convergent validity was evaluated through AVE values, which were 0.776 for SHRM and 0.633 for Innovation. Since both values exceed the minimum recommended threshold of 0.50, the constructs explain more than half of the variance of their indicators, thereby supporting adequate convergent validity. Overall, these findings confirm that the measurement model satisfies established reliability and validity criteria in SEM research. The results of the structural equation modeling path analysis, clearly evidenced that the proposed hypothesis (H_1) is supported.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the argument that Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) functions as a strategic organizational capability that significantly enhances innovation performance. The structural equation modeling results demonstrate that SHRM has a positive and substantial effect on innovation (β = 0.69, $p < .001$), explaining 47.6% of the variance in innovation outcomes. This finding aligns with the Resource-Based View (Barney et al., 2012), which posits that valuable, rare, inimitable, and organizationally embedded resources constitute sources of sustained competitive advantage. In this context, SHRM appears to operate as an intangible strategic asset that strengthens firms' innovation capacity. Moreover, from a dynamic capabilities perspective (Teece et al., 1997), strategically aligned HR systems facilitate the development, integration, and reconfiguration of organizational competencies necessary for continuous innovation.

Our findings demonstrate that SHRM significantly enhances innovation performance, with strategic implications for tourism arising from food manufacturing's position in the hospitality supply chain (Salihoğlu & Korten, 2016). In gastronomy tourism contexts, innovation-focused HR systems promote local food sourcing, supporting sustainable tourism development. For instance, tourism revenues contribute approximately $10 billion in turnover to the food sector from a $50 billion total (Buzbaş, 2025). This study extends dynamic capabilities theory (Teece, 2018) to tourism literature by highlighting SHRM's mediation of innovation in food-hospitality integration (Figliolino, 2026).

The multidimensional structure of both SHRM and innovation was empirically validated through exploratory and confirmatory analyses. The strong factor loadings, satisfactory CR and AVE values, and high internal consistency coefficients confirm that the constructs exhibit sound reliability and convergent validity (Fornell & Larcke, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). Furthermore, Pearson correlation results revealed significant and theoretically coherent relationships among all dimensions, while multicollinearity diagnostics confirmed the statistical stability of the regression estimates. The strong loadings of Strategic Role of HR ($\beta = 0.913$) and Internal HR Alignment ($\beta = 0.847$) indicate that innovation is not driven merely by isolated HR practices but by an integrated and strategically embedded HR architecture. This finding supports prior research suggesting that internally consistent and strategically aligned HR systems generate synergistic effects on organizational outcomes (Delery & Doty, 1996).

Importantly, innovation was robustly represented by product innovation success, exploration orientation, competitive responsiveness, and innovation process competence. The substantial indirect effects of SHRM on these dimensions suggest that HR systems do not influence innovation only at the outcome level but also shape the underlying organizational processes that enable exploration and responsiveness. This reinforces the argument that innovation performance is socially and structurally embedded rather than purely technological (Laursen & Foss, 2003). Particularly in the food manufacturing sector, these findings demonstrate that managerial and human capital configurations play a decisive role in enhancing innovation capability. The results extend the SHRM–innovation literature by empirically confirming that strategically integrated HR systems function as a foundational mechanism through which firms build and sustain innovation performance.

5. Conclusion

This study provides robust empirical evidence that Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) constitutes a critical organizational capability that significantly enhances innovation performance in food manufacturing firms. By integrating the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the findings demonstrate that strategically aligned and internally coherent HR systems are not merely administrative functions but core drivers of innovation capacity. The structural model confirms that SHRM explains nearly half of the variance in innovation performance ($R^2 = 47.6\%$), underscoring its substantial strategic relevance.

Beyond confirming the positive SHRM–innovation relationship, this study advances the literature in three important ways. First, it empirically validates a multidimensional and second-order structural model in a sector that has been relatively underexplored in strategic management research. Second, it demonstrates that innovation in traditional manufacturing industries is strongly embedded in organizational systems and human capital configurations rather than being solely technology-driven. Third, by providing comprehensive reliability, validity, and model fit evidence, the study offers a methodologically rigorous framework that future research can replicate or extend.

From a managerial standpoint, the results highlight that firms seeking sustainable innovation performance should prioritize the strategic positioning of HR departments, ensure internal alignment of HR practices, and embed HR decision-making into corporate strategy formation processes. Innovation does not emerge spontaneously from R&D investments alone; rather, it is cultivated through strategically designed human resource systems.

Future research may extend this model by incorporating mediating or moderating variables (e.g., organizational culture, digital transformation capability, leadership style) or by conducting longitudinal analyses to capture causal dynamics over time. Overall, this study reinforces the argument that sustainable innovation performance is fundamentally a strategic management outcome rooted in human capital architecture.

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Understanding residents' perceptions of destination attractiveness for the longevity of local tourism sites

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to analyse residents' perceptions of destination attractiveness related to a local tourism site. Domestic tourism should carry local tourism attractions to ensure their longevity.

Study design/methodology/approach: The research focused on the case of Naval Hill, an urban nature reserve situated in the city of Bloemfontein (South Africa), the major city of the Free State (A province in this country). Quantitative data were collected via a structured questionnaire administered to residents of Bloemfontein, focusing on destination-attractiveness factors. Data are analysed using descriptive statistics (mean values and standard deviations) as an exploratory approach to inform future research.

Results: The results emphasise the importance of facilities, accessibility, ambience, destination environment and pricing as important factors influencing destination attractiveness. It is critical to optimise all these elements to ensure success for destinations.

Originality/value: Understanding destination attractiveness from a resident perspective contributes to the destination's growth by increasing awareness among other visitors.

Keywords Destination attractiveness, Destination appeal, Naval Hill, Residents

Introduction

Since the 1980s, researchers have studied destination attractiveness (Woyo, 2017). Mikulić, Krešić, Prebežac, Miličević and Šerić (2016) stated that destination attractiveness has a more intellectual attachment, as it is a "mental construct" found only in the minds of potential visitors. Lew (1987) found that tourism attractions are the individual components or elements of a destination that aim to attract tourists from their homes to visit them, whereas Gartner (1996) focused on them as the centre of tourist experience. Attractiveness is thus associated with a destination's features (Mikulić et al., 2016).

ee, Huang, and Huery-Ren (2010) reported that the concept of destination attractiveness and its measurement have received attention from both tourism researchers and policymakers, acknowledging the role it plays in attracting visitors. Mayo and Jarvis (1981) and Vengesayi (2003) refer to destination attractiveness as tourists' perceptions of a destination and its ability to satisfy their needs. The definitions provided by Lee, Huang, and Huery-Ren (2010) and Mayo and Jarvis (1981) are divided into two streams based either on the physical attributes of a destination, that is, an inventory of tourism resources, or on the tourists' image perception of a destination (Formica

& Uysal, 2006). Additionally, Hu and Ritchie (1993) define destination attractiveness as a reflection of an individual's feelings, beliefs, and opinions about the destination's perceived ability to satisfy their special vacation needs, while Kresic and Prebežac (2011) focus on the attributes that motivate tourists to visit a site.

Destination attractiveness is seen as the driving force that influences tourists' choices and is shaped by visitors' interests and preferences (Kresic & Prebežac, 2011). It is widely acknowledged that what makes a destination attractive is influenced by a diverse set of attributes, including climate, transportation, prices, the quality of products and services offered, and destination image (Assaf & Tsionas, 2015). The idea of destination attractiveness is 'a combination of the comparative importance of specific benefits and the apparent capability of the destination to distribute individual benefit'; this ability is improved by explicit features of a destination that make the destination; these traits or features include things such as attractions, infrastructure, or services and service providers. Destination attractiveness research is closely connected to the investigation of destination image, as the concepts are often intertwined and theoretically interrelated.

Woyo (2018) argues that it is challenging to universally define suitable attractiveness characteristics, and many scholars have attempted to develop measurement models rather than relying on a single general measurement approach. However, the limited perspectives on destination factors highlight the challenges in this research area (Pestana, Parreira & Moutinho, 2020). In many instances, case studies have been used to assess destination attractiveness (Gupta & Singh, 2015). Akgün, Senturk, Keskin, and Onal (2020) argue that tourists' true preferences may not always align with expert opinions, a point that has been a relatively recent focus in research. Liang (2020) further states that the concepts of destination attractiveness are intangible and interchangeable, which has made it difficult to develop acceptable indicators to quantitatively measure a destination's attractiveness or appeal to potential visitors. Destination attractiveness is therefore influenced by various factors, including facilities, accessibility, ambience, the destination environment, and pricing (Ketut et al., 2024). A further analysis revealed the following:

- **Destination facilities:** Destination facilities comprise the physical and service-oriented resources that enable tourists to stay, move, eat, and recreate at a destination. This can include accommodation, food and beverage, visitor services, and recreational infrastructure. In destination attractiveness research, these aspects may not be the most significant attractions, but they still contribute to a destination's overall appeal. Vengesayi, Mavondo and Reisinger's (2009) empirical model of destination attractiveness shows that support facilities and services add value if visitors perceive that their practical needs will also be met at the destination. Classic and widely cited researchers on attractiveness similarly position tourism services and infrastructure as integral components of the overall destination experience (Yangzhou Hu, J. Ritchie). This shows that destination attractiveness is broader than only the attractions; it is linked to the quality and availability of the systems that support the consumption of those experiences. Attractiveness emerges from the interaction between what is supplied (including tourism services) and what

visitors consider important. Facility provision, maintenance of facilities, and Wi-Fi services will therefore influence attractiveness (Formica, 2006; Anuar et al., 2017).

- **Accessibility:**
  For a destination to be accessible to visitors, there must be a variety of ways to reach the country, the region, and its attractions. Access is typically linked to transport, but it does not necessarily require luxury; even simple modes of transportation, such as walking or cycling, can be sufficient (Gössling & Cohen, 2023). Accessibility is crucial because it affects how easily visitors and tourists can reach the destination, influencing their decision to visit. According to Duval (2022), the availability of multiple access points, such as airports, railways, roads, or even pedestrian pathways, enhances a destination's competitiveness and its ability to attract a diverse range of tourists.
- **Ambience:**
  Ambience in tourism refers to the affective and perceptual qualities of a destination environment, the mood, atmosphere, aesthetic appeal, and emotional tone that visitors experience when interacting with a place. Academic research underscores that ambience is a psychological stimulus that shapes attractiveness. For instance, Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal (2007) highlight that affective image components include feelings of pleasantness, comfort, and atmospheric allure. Their empirical findings show that the *emotional responses* elicited by a destination's ambience can drive preferences and positive evaluations independently of functional attributes such as infrastructure or accessibility. Even atmospheric cues such as sounds and smells influence how tourists feel about a destination (Echtner & Ritchie's, 1991). This ambience, when added to, enhances quality and a sense of place, which contribute to the destination's competitiveness. Kim and Richardson (2003) stated that authentic ambience generates positive affective evaluations supporting re-visit intention. It is thus central to the holistic experience that can improve attractiveness.
- **Destination environment:**
  The environmental context of a destination, encompassing its climate, natural landscapes, biodiversity, and overall environmental quality, is widely recognised in academic research as a foundational determinant of destination attractiveness. uHu and Ritchie's (1993) seminal work on destination attractiveness emphasises environmental resources and climate as important motivational factors for visiting a destination. Becken (2010) highlighted the role of climate and weather patterns which influence visitor decisions. Visitors are also more aware of the importance of a sustainable tourism environment, as it reflects destination quality and responsible management behaviour (Rivera, 2002).
- **Pricing:**
  Given the realities of rising competition and economic uncertainty, pricing is a critical factor in destination attractiveness. If visitors believe they will receive value for money relative to the price they pay, they will more likely select such destinations. Yacoub et al. (2025) found that competitive pricing and value for money significantly enhance tourists' perceived value, which in turn increases the likelihood of repeat visitation. Pricing does not operate in isolation but interacts with

other attributes to shape tourists' destination decisions. Price sensitivity is an important moderating factor in how destination attributes are perceived. Competitive pricing can amplify the attractiveness of other positive attributes, such as image or amenities. Research on tourist intention and loyalty further shows that destinations perceived as offering strong value for money foster higher loyalty and positive behavioural intentions (Musa et al., 2025), which are closely linked to attractiveness.

Methodology

This study investigates the influence of destination attractiveness on tourist appeal, focusing on Naval Hill in Bloemfontein in the Free State province of South Africa. The Free State was the least visited province in the country with regard to day trips, 3.4% in 2023 and 5.4% in 2022 (STATS SA, 2023). The Free State province is, however, well situated for domestic and international tourism as it borders several other provinces, as well as the Kingdom of Lesotho, which is a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and is on the national road (N1) towards Cape Town at one end and Polokwane on the other end. Naval Hill is a distinctive destination offering both natural and man-made attractions, which have, however, experienced declining visitor numbers and low engagement from domestic tourists, raising concerns about its sustainability and longevity, serving as the motivating factor for this research. Residents can contribute significantly to the sustainability of local tourism destinations, which should be assessed.

This study employed a quantitative research method to analyse the factors contributing to destination attractiveness from the residents' perspective. It focused on the case of Naval Hill, an urban nature reserve situated in the city of Bloemfontein (South Africa), the major city of the Free State (A province in this country). Quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire administered to residents of Bloemfontein. The instrument captured perceptions of destination attractiveness related to facilities, accessibility, ambience, destination environment, and pricing. Convenience sampling (nonprobability method) was used due to limited access to municipal resident lists. While this limits generalizability, this method is commonly used in tourism studies and is appropriate for identifying perceptual patterns (Saayman & Saayman, 2019). Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection (01874-23-A4) from the University's ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, and all responses were anonymised. Data are analysed using descriptive statistics (mean values and standard deviations) as an exploratory approach to inform future research.

The profile of participating residents provides insights into their demographics. The data reveals that 70% of respondents identify as female, 29% as male, and 1% as non-binary. The sample demonstrates a predominantly young profile, with an average age of 24 years. This can be attributed to the large number of students living in residential areas near Naval Hill. The majority (96%) of respondents have never married. In terms of education, most respondents (75%) completed Grade 12, with smaller percentages holding a diploma (6%), an undergraduate degree (8%), or a postgraduate degree (6%). Regarding income, 58% of respondents earn less than

R10,000 per month, suggesting many are likely still in education or at early career stages. In terms of economic activity, 88% of respondents are students, with small percentages unemployed (2%), homemakers (1%), or employed in the private (3%) or public (6%) sectors. A substantial portion of respondents visited Naval Hill 2-3 times (39%) or more than 5 times (14%), while 39% are first-time visitors and 8% have visited 4-5 times.

Results

The following results were evident in measuring the destination attractiveness of Naval Hill as a local tourism destination visited by local residents.

Standard of Facilities

Table 1: Standard of tourism facilities in and around Naval Hill

Assessing facilities at Naval Hill	**Mean Std deviation**
The image of Naval Hill is visitor-friendly	**4.02 (±.949)**
The accommodation around the Naval Hill is excellent	3.73 (±1.10)
The activities offered at Naval Hill are excellent	3.63 (±1.04)
Naval Hill's infrastructure - roads, communication, is excellent	3.60 (±1.04)
Naval Hill's general services levels are excellent	3.58 (±.975)
The marketing of Naval Hill is excellent	3.54 (±1.09)
Naval Hill offers quality facilities	3.47 (±1.00)
The cuisine offered at Naval Hill is excellent	3.38 (±1.14)

The perception of Naval Hill as a visitor-friendly destination is supported by a mean score of 4.02 (±0.95), with 73% of respondents in agreement. This indicates a generally positive reception regarding its appeal and approachability for visitors, suggesting that the site's marketing and overall presentation align well with visitors' expectations. These findings imply that Naval Hill's visitor-friendliness and accessibility are significant strengths, warranting greater emphasis in future marketing campaigns to attract more visitors. The infrastructure, including roads and communication, is rated positively, with a mean score of 3.60 (±1.04) and 65% agreement. However, the relatively high proportion of neutral responses (30%) suggest mixed opinions on infrastructure quality, indicating areas that may require further development or attention.

The general service levels at Naval Hill are perceived as excellent, with a mean score of 3.58 (±0.98) and 53% agreement. While service quality is viewed positively, the relatively lower mean score suggests potential for improvement in quality and consistency. The marketing of Naval Hill is rated as excellent, with a mean score of 3.54 (±1.09) and 53% agreement. Although marketing efforts are perceived as somewhat effective, there is evident room for enhancement. This response suggests that while marketing strategies are in place, they may not fully capture potential visitors' attention or effectively showcase the site's full potential. Improvements in infrastructure and services, particularly in road quality, communication facilities, and overall service delivery, could enhance the visitor experience and encourage repeat visits. The cuisine offered at Naval Hill is

rated with a mean score of 3.38 (±1.14), with 47% agreement. This aspect received the lowest mean score, with a significant portion of respondents being neutral or dissatisfied. This suggests that the food offerings do not meet visitors' expectations, presenting an important opportunity for improvement. Enhancing the variety, quality, and authenticity of food options could significantly enhance the visitor experience, particularly for those seeking a more diverse culinary experience.

Accessibility of the destination

Assessing Naval Hill's attractiveness includes evaluating its accessibility and exploring factors that significantly impact the overall visitor experience. Table 2 evaluates Naval Hill's accessibility based on respondents' perceptions of transportation, pricing, connectivity, and availability of information.

Table 2: Analysing accessibility

Assessing accessibility	**Mean & Std**
Naval Hill is open to anyone who wants to visit	**4.42 (±.79)**
Naval Hill is easy to access by different types of transport	**3.90 (±1.07)**
Information related to Naval Hill is easily accessible	**3.85 (±1.06)**
Naval Hill is an innovative tourist destination	3.81 (±.932)
The staff at Naval Hill is approachable	3.74 (±1.02)
The prices asked for transport and tourism services are reasonable	3.69 (±.94)
The frequency of transportation to Naval Hill makes it very accessible	3.49 (±1.15)
The connectivity at Naval Hill is excellent (network, Wi-Fi connection)	3.47 (±1.11)
Naval Hill offers a variety of public transport options	3.23 (±1.14)

Naval Hill is open to anyone who wants to visit, with a mean score of 0.42, where 88% agreed, indicating that the destination is perceived as welcoming and accessible to all. Information about Naval Hill is easily accessible ($\bar{x}$ = 3.85), suggesting visitors can easily find relevant details about the site, which is crucial for enhancing the overall visitor experience. The frequency of transportation to Naval Hill makes it accessible ($\bar{x}$ = 3.49), where 51% agreed, suggesting some concerns about the availability and frequency of transport options to the site. Connectivity is good ($\bar{x}$ = 3.47), but with 51% agreement, there is room for improvement in digital accessibility. Furthermore, Naval Hill is considered easily accessible by various modes of transport, with a mean score of 3.90 and 67% agreement. Accessibility is a notable strength, as ease of transport is a critical factor in promoting tourism.

The pricing of transport and tourism services is reasonable ($\bar{x}$ = 3.69); 58% agreed, indicating that pricing is generally perceived as fair. The staff at Naval Hill is approachable ($\bar{x}$ = 3.74), with 62% agreeing, further highlighting the positive human interaction that contributes to accessibility. While the overall accessibility of Naval Hill is generally positive, there is a need to expand transportation options and improve connectivity to enhance visitor convenience. Ensuring

consistent digital access and additional transport options could further enhance the destination's accessibility.

Ambience of Naval Hill

Table 3 focuses on the site's ambience, which plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining visitors.

Table 3: Ambience of Naval Hill

Assessing ambience:	**Mean Std deviation**
Naval Hill is a nice place to visit repeatedly	**4.03 (±.965)**
Naval Hill offers a true African experience	**3.83 (±1.12)**
Naval Hill is vibrant	3.60 (±1.05)
Tourist services and amenities are delivered with courtesy	3.58 (±1.05)
The product offering at Naval Hill is interesting	3.55 (±.98)
Naval Hill offers high levels of service delivery	3.36 (±1.09)

Naval Hill is a nice place to visit again ($\bar{x}$ = 4.03), with 72% agreeing, indicating that many visitors find the location appealing for repeat visits. Naval Hill offers a true African experience ($\bar{x}$ = 3.83), with 64% agreeing, suggesting the destination is perceived as an authentic cultural experience but leaving room for improvement. Naval Hill is vibrant ($\bar{x}$ = 3.60) with 56% agreeing, pointing to a potential area for improvement in creating a more lively and engaging atmosphere. Levels of service delivery ($\bar{x}$ = 3.36) with 44% agreeing, suggesting that visitors expect higher quality and consistency in services, such as customer service and facilities maintenance. While Naval Hill is generally viewed as an attractive and culturally rich destination, there is room to enhance its vibrancy and service delivery. Ensuring a more dynamic atmosphere and improving service standards could significantly enhance the visitor experience.

The destination environment

In the context of analysing the destination environment of Naval Hill, perceptions related to safety, responsiveness to needs (see Table 4).

Table 4: Assessing the destination environment

Assessing the destination environment	**Mean Std deviation**
Naval Hill is a welcoming destination to visit	**4.00 (±.91)**
Naval Hill looks after its environment	**3.94 (±.94)**
Naval Hill is safe and secure for visitors/tourists	3.91 (±.97)
Naval Hill is committed to ensuring the safety of tourists	3.88 (±.98)
Naval Hill can respond to the needs of the visitors/tourists	3.72 (±.99)
The level of sanitation and hygiene at Naval Hill is excellent	3.67 (±1.09)

Naval Hill is safe and secure for visitors/tourists ($\bar{x}$ = 3.91), with 68% agreeing that safety is a key strength of the destination. Naval Hill looks after its environment ($\bar{x}$ = 3.94), with 71% agreeing and commitment to safety ($\bar{x}$ = 3.88) and 66% agreeing, reinforcing the site's focus on environmental sustainability and visitor safety. Naval Hill is a welcoming destination ($\bar{x}$ = 4.00) where 77% agreed. This destination can respond to visitors' needs ($\bar{x}$ = 3.72), as supported by 59%, indicating that visitors feel well-supported during their visits. The safe, secure environment and commitment to environmental care are key strengths of Naval Hill. However, there is an opportunity to create a more cohesive, streamlined visitor experience.

Destination pricing

In the context of analysing the attractiveness of Naval Hill based on destination prices, data related to the competitiveness of prices, the value-for-money experience, affordability, and any price advantages compared to other destinations.

Table 5: Assessing destination pricing

Assessing destination pricing	**Mean** **Std deviation**
Naval Hill is affordable to visit	**4.10 (±.93)**
Naval Hill has a price advantage when compared to other destinations I have visited	**3.97 (±.97)**
Naval Hill offers a value-for-money experience	3.34 (±1.01)
The prices of services offered at Naval Hill are competitive	3.29 (±.98)

Naval Hill is affordable to visit ($\bar{x}$ = 4.10), with 77% agreeing, and has a price advantage over other destinations ($\bar{x}$ = 3.97), with 70% agreeing. This showcases respondents' satisfaction with pricing. Naval Hill offers a value-for-money experience ($\bar{x}$ = 3.34) with only 44% agreeing, and its service prices are competitive ($\bar{x}$ = 3.29) with only 40% agreeing. This indicates that while the site is seen as affordable, there may be concerns about the overall perceived value of the services offered.

Conclusion

For residents, the destination's attractiveness lies in its accessibility, which has emerged as a key strength and is perceived as open and welcoming to visitors. The availability of information and the reasonable pricing of transport services further enhanced perceptions of accessibility. The destination environment served as a second strength, with the destination regarded as safe and secure. Affordability is also an advantage, as respondents perceived the destination as inexpensive and offered lower prices than similar destinations. The overall atmosphere and basic facility provision create a positive impression on visitors.

However, to improve this destination's attractiveness, future strategies should focus on perceived value, as infrastructure and activities do not reflect excellence or differentiation. A significant gap

for this destination is its cuisine, which lacks quality, variety, and authenticity. Additionally, for ambience, the destination will benefit from more dynamic and engaging visitor experiences. Importantly, although Naval Hill is viewed as affordable, perceptions of value-for-money and service competitiveness are weaker, revealing a disconnect between price and perceived quality. Addressing these operational and experiential shortcomings could significantly elevate the destination's overall attractiveness and strengthen its competitive positioning among local residents. Continuous support from local residents will increase the destination's appeal and raise awareness among visitors, ultimately contributing to its longevity.

It is evident that the standards of facilities, accessibility, ambience, destination environment, and pricing influence perceptions of destination attractiveness. To improve the attractiveness of destinations, it is important to optimise each factor and showcase it in marketing initiatives.

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Environmental Concern, Destination Sustainability Perception, Ecorecreational Attitude, and Destination Brand Equity as Predictors of Behavioral Intentions

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine the relationships among environmental concerns, visitors' destination sustainability perception, ecocreational attitude, and destination brand equity influencing visitors' behavioral intentions in outdoor recreation areas in Balikesir, Türkiye. In addition, we questioned how individual-level environmental concerns translate into behavioral intentions through brand-related mechanisms.

Study Design/Methodology/Approach: Across five outdoor recreation areas in Balikesir, Turkiye, 528 participants completed a structured questionnaire. To test our hypotheses, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is performed in SmartPLS software.

Results: Findings show that destination brand equity is the strongest predictor of tourists' behavioral intentions. In addition, all other factors have had a positive and significant direct effect on behavioral intentions. In the indirect effects section, destination sustainability perception and ecocreational attitude significantly mediated the relationship between environmental concern and behavioral intentions. Furthermore, destination brand equity significantly mediated the effect of destination sustainability perception and ecocreational attitude on behavioral intentions.

Originality/Value: The findings indicate that aligning destination sustainability performance with branding strategies can be an effective path to enhance visitors' intentions in outdoor (nature-based) destinations.

Keywords: *Ecorecreational attitude, destination perceived sustainability, destination brand equity, Environmental Concern, visitors' behavioral intentions*

Introduction

Outdoor recreation areas play a significant role in promoting sustainable tourism, such as national parks and natural resources. The more people learn about climate change, the more tourist destinations prioritize sustainability (Dedat & Rodrigues, 2025). These destinations ought to find ways to protect the environment while delivering a variety of activities to visitors (Dogan & Uysal, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). This way, tourism will not damage the natural resources that attract visitors. Protecting natural resources is not only the policy maker and destination managers' responsibility, but the visitors themselves play a crucial role in order to protect the long term of the environment.

How visitors view and feel about the environment has a significant impact on their perceptions of tourism destinations and their behavior in nature. Studies show that tourists who care about the environment are more likely to criticize activities in protected areas that have a big effect on the environment or aren't sustainable. They are also more likely to be aware of environmental management issues (Lee et al., 2020). These people are more likely to choose tourist spots and products that align with their values regarding social and environmental issues. Places that focus on sustainability are more likely to build goodwill, trust, and long-term loyalty among visitors who care about the environment (Dedat & Rodrigues, 2025).

This study aims to examine the relationships among visitors' environmental concerns, perceived destination sustainability, ecorecreational attitude, destination brand equity, and the impact of these relationships on tourists' behavioral intentions in outdoor recreation areas. This study was conducted in several protected areas in Balikesir Province, Turkey, and thereby enriches the literature on sustainable tourism destination branding and provides valuable empirical insights for researchers and destination managers.

Sustainability-Oriented Individual Dispositions

Two interconnected individual-level factors necessitate specific focus, environmental concern and ecorecreational attitude. People's environmental concern is how much they know about environmental issues and how much they think they should do something to protect them. One of the frameworks that people often use to measure this is the New Environmental Paradigm. In the tourism industry, increased environmental awareness correlates with a greater preference for eco-friendly services, enhanced acceptance of focusing on conservation management strategies, and more likely assessments of sustainable destination development (Lee et al., 2020). In this context, Su et al. (2021) suggest that visitors' environmental concern and their perception of destination sustainability can influence their intention to revisit, especially when travel experiences raise environmental awareness.

Ecorecreational attitude related to environmental sensitivity applies to people's feelings and preferences (Karakucuk and Durhan, 2021). Karakucuk and Durhan (2021) also indicate that this happens towards participating in activities that are aligned with ecological principles and beneficial to the environment, such as outdoor recreation areas. Moreover, studies define ecorecreational attitudes as a multidimensional construct that encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions related to nature-based and low-impact activities (Kill et al., 2024). Individuals who participate in nature-based activities are more likely to join in actions such as reducing waste, protecting wildlife, and supporting conservation programs. Furthermore, participation in outdoor recreational activities can support pro-environmental attitudes and behavioral intentions, creating a kind of reciprocal evaluation cycle between experience and attitude (Han, 2023).

Sustainability and Destination Brand Equity

In destinations, visitors' attitudes towards a place and how it is perceived and branded have crucial importance. Todays visitor destinations are considered brands that create understandable and

relatable meanings, functions, and experiences for their visitors. Özkan and Yildiz (2024) explain destination brand equity as the value which a destination creates for the visitors and usually includes brand awareness, brand associations or image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. A strong reputation for sustainability can impact on all these dimensions. For instance, destinations that are known for responsible environmental management are often identified with images such as "green," "authentic," or "responsibly managed." This increases the perception of the quality of the experience and strengthens tourists' emotional connection to the destination.

Recent research suggests that merging sustainability into destination branding is both ethically critical and a strategy to reinforce brand value. Visitors mostly intend to trust, value, and be loyal to places that protect the environment. These results are consistent with extensive evidence that tourists show greater loyalty and higher revisit intentions toward environmentally friendly destinations, especially when their experience is consistent with their personal sustainability values (Su et al., 2021). Consequently, sustainability is a key factor in differentiating a destination and strengthening its brand equity by increasing image credibility and strengthening emotional bonds with concerned tourists.

Recent research has also shed light on the direct and indirect effects of sustainability perceptions on tourists' behavioral intentions. Perception of destination sustainability is known to be an important factor in increasing tourist satisfaction, which ultimately leads to loyalty and intention to return (Yıldız et al., 2024). Similarly, perceived environmental quality also increases the intention to return and the willingness to recommend the destination; Because tourists experience a greater sense of responsibility, attachment, and moral satisfaction during their visit (Lee et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). These results indicate that the goals of sustainable destination management and branding are increasingly aligned. In other words, sustainability can be both a tool for fulfilling social responsibility and a strategy for increasing competitiveness and retaining customers (Dedat & Rodrigues, 2025). From a demand perspective, environmentally conscious tourists are a desirable target group for sustainability-based branding. For example, Solís-Radilla et al. (2019) showed that tourists with great environmental concerns show greater loyalty to green destinations, especially when their experience is consistent with their sustainability values.

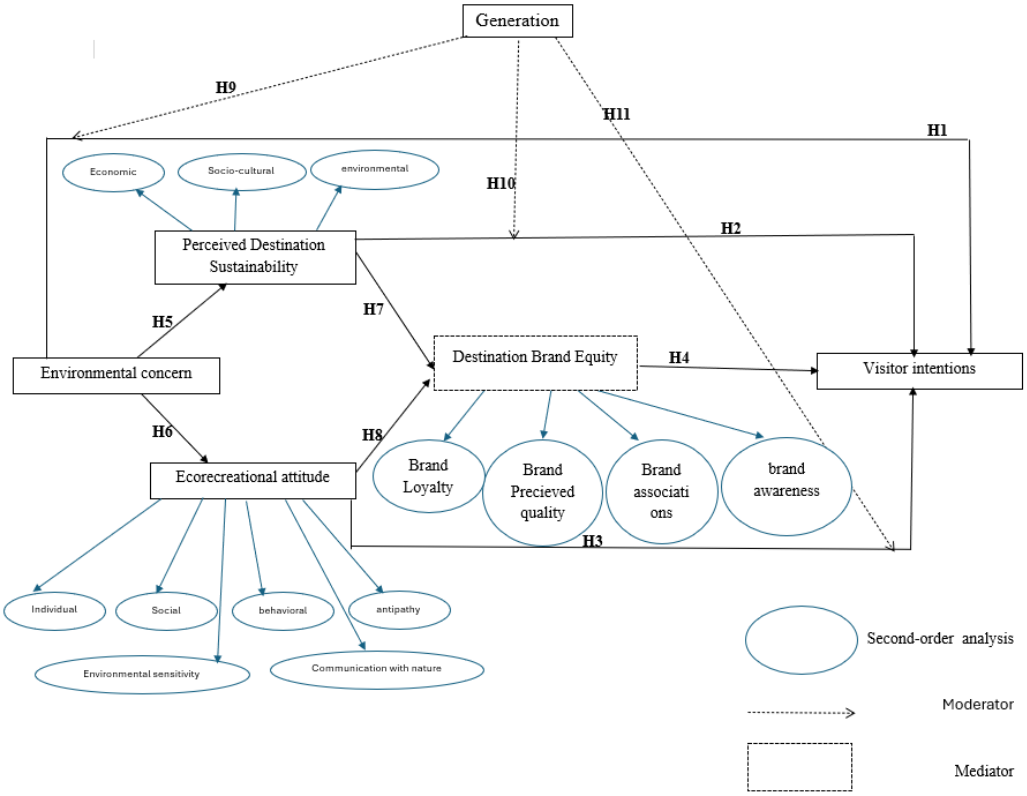
Filling this gap is essential both theoretically and practically. Integrating sustainability and branding perspectives helps us understand how values, attitudes, and perceptions translate into behavioral intentions in the tourism context. These insights can help destination managers and policymakers design management and branding strategies that appeal to concerned tourists. A brand that focuses on sustainability can differentiate itself in a competitive market, increase tourist returns, foster positive word-of-mouth, and promote participation in environmentally friendly activities, which ultimately contributes to the long-term sustainability of the destination (Özkan & Yildiz et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical discussions reviewed above, this study offers a conceptual model linking visitors' environmental concern, perceived destination sustainability, and ecorecreational attitude

to visitors' behavioral intentions, both directly and indirectly through destination brand equity. In addition, the generational cohort is incorporated as a moderating variable to account for potential heterogeneity among visitors. The hypothesized relationships are presented in Figure 1. Accordingly, the hypotheses are organized into three groups: direct effects, mediation effects, and moderation effects, which are presented below.

Figure 1. Research model



Direct Effect Hypotheses

Prior research (Wang et al., 2021; Hidayat et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023; Özkan & Yildiz et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2025; Shukla et al., 2025) indicates that sustainability-related perceptions and environmental attitudes significantly influence pro-environmental behavioral intentions. Environmental concern, sustainability perceptions, and recreational attitudes have each been identified as predictors of revisit intention and positive word-of-mouth behavior in tourism settings. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the following direct relationships are proposed.

H1: Visitors' environmental concern has a significant effect on their behavioral intentions.

H2: Visitors' perceived destination sustainability has a significant effect on their behavioral intentions.

H3: Visitors' ecorecreational attitude has a significant effect on their behavioral intentions.

H4: Destination brand equity has a significant effect on visitors' behavioral intentions.

Mediation Effect Hypotheses

Brand equity has been conceptualized as a psychological mechanism that translates cognitive evaluations and sustainability perceptions into loyalty outcomes (Lee et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021; Hidayat et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023; Yıldız et al., 2024; Dedat & Rodrigues, 2025). Accordingly, mediation effects are examined to determine whether destination brand equity functions as a transmission channel between sustainability-related constructs and behavioral intentions. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the following direct relationships are proposed.

H5: Perceived destination sustainability mediates the relationship between visitors' environmental concern and their behavioral intentions.

H6: Visitors' ecorecreational attitude mediates the relationship between visitors' environmental concern and their behavioral intentions.

H7: Destination brand equity mediates the relationship between perceived destination sustainability and visitors' behavioral intentions.

H8: Destination brand equity mediates the relationship between visitors' ecorecreational attitude and visitors' behavioral intentions.

Moderation Effect Hypotheses

Given that generational differences may shape environmental awareness and consumption values (Lee et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021; Hidayat et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023; Özkan & Yildiz et al., 2024; Dedat & Rodrigues, 2025), this study further investigates whether generational cohort moderates the relationships between sustainability-related constructs and visitors' behavioral intentions.

H9: Generational cohort moderates the relationship between visitors' environmental concern and their behavioral intentions.

H10: Generational cohort moderates the relationship between perceived destination sustainability and visitors' behavioral intentions.

H11: Generational cohort moderates the relationship between visitors' ecorecreational attitude and their behavioral intentions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach and adopts a cross-sectional survey design to test the proposed relationships among environmental concern, perceived destination sustainability, ecorecreational attitude, destination brand equity, and destination visitors' behavioral intentions in open-air recreation areas.

Study Area and Sampling

Visitors to outdoor recreation areas in the Turkish province of Balikesir comprised the research scope. Five well-known locations, Kazdagları National Park, Manyas Bird Sanctuary National

Park, Degirmenbogazı Nature Park, Ayvalik Adalari Nature Park, and the Kapidag Peninsula, representing the destination's portfolio of outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism were used to gather data. A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was used because it was not feasible to determine the entire population size or create a sampling frame. In field-based tourism studies, where researchers' access is contingent upon situational visitor flows, this sampling technique is frequently employed (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015; Tongco, 2007). Before collecting the data, participants were selected to make sure their reason to visit included outdoor activities and outdoor recreation recreation.

Data Collection Procedure

First, a pilot study was carried out before the main implementation in order to evaluate the measurement tool's clarity as well as the questionnaire's initial validity and reliability (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022; Hair et al., 2022). Pilot data was gathered through online access using a QR Code and in-person questionnaires. After removing incomplete or invalid items, 156 valid questionnaires were left out of the 200 returned questionnaires. Then, according to methodological guidelines for pilot studies, this sample size is appropriate (Hertzog, 2008; Ruel et al., 2015). The primary data collection was carried out in 2025 after the tool was modified in light of the pilot analyses. Following that, 528 valid items from the 540 questionnaires that were gathered were left for further examination. Both power analysis and SEM-related guidelines were used to assess sample adequacy. According to methodological sources, the sample size for SEM applications should be significantly greater than the number of observed indicators; this is typically stated as having at least 10–15 respondents per item or indicator (Hair et al., 2022; Kline, 2016; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Furthermore, a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (effect size $f^2 = 0.15$, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.95, maximum number of predictors = 4), indicating a minimum required sample size of N = 129. The final sample of 528 respondents substantially exceeds this threshold, confirming that the sample size is adequate for hypothesis testing.

Measurement Instrument

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of different sections. The first section included demographic and visit-related characteristics (age group, gender, education level, marital status, frequency of visits, visit motivations, and length of stay). The second section was dedicated to measuring environmental concern (Stern & Dietz, 1994; Schultz, 2001; Hong & Kim, 2019) and perception of destination sustainability (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2024). The third section measured the ecorecreational attitude (Durhan & Karaküçük, 2020), and the fourth section is about destination brand equity (Özoğul & Özel, 2015), as well as visitors' behavioral intentions. All constructs were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These scales are widely used to measure latent psychological constructs and perceptions in tourism and consumer behavior research (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022; Hair et al., 2022).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted based on a multi-step process and in accordance with valid methodological recommendations (Hair et al., 2022; Kline, 2016). First, the data set was checked for missing data, response errors, and outliers, and incomplete or inconsistent questionnaires were removed before analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, age, mean, and standard deviation, were then calculated to describe the sample characteristics and travel-related behavioral variables (Babbie, 2020; Kumar, 2018).

To examine construct validity, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted during the pilot stage. As advised by the factor analysis literature, factorability was assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Field, 2018). Given that parallel analysis is thought to be a more ecorecreational attitude method for determining the number of factors, scree plot inspection and parallel analysis were used in place of the eigenvalue rule when making decisions about factor retention (Hayton et al., 2004; Timmerman & Lorenzo-Seva, 2011). In accordance with standard procedures for enhancing factor clarity and measurement quality, items with low loadings (<.40) or troublesome cross-loadings were assessed and eliminated as needed (Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2022).

Hypothesis testing was conducted using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). SPSS was used for preliminary analyses (descriptive statistics, reliability, and EFA), while SmartPLS was used for measurement and structural model estimation (Hair et al., 2022).

To determine convergent validity, the measurement model was evaluated using indicator loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2022). Both the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) index and the Fornell–Larcker criterion were used to assess discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2022). Following the establishment of measurement quality, the structural model was evaluated by looking at explained variance (R2), effect sizes (f2), and path coefficients and their significance using bootstrapping (Hair et al., 2022; Kline, 2016). The Stone–Geisser Q^2 statistic was used to assess predictive relevance; values greater than zero indicate meaningful predictive capability (Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2021).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

A sample of 528 domestic visitors to five outdoor recreation areas in Balikesir was used to conduct descriptive data analysis to identify demographic and travel-behavioral characteristics. Of these participants, the gender distribution was relatively balanced: 51.5 % were women (272 people), and 48.5 % were men (256 people). This balance indicates that the research sample did not have noticeable gender bias and represented a balanced mix of male and female visitors.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis

Variable	**Category**	**Frequency**	**%**
Gender	Female	272	51.5

	Male	256	48.5
Age Group	1955–1964	84	15.9
	1965–1980	194	36.7
	1981–1996	165	31.3
	1997–2006	85	16.1
Education	Elementary School	41	7.8
	Secondary School	77	14.6
	High School	172	32.6
	Pre-Bachelor/Bachelor	153	29.0
	Post graduation	85	16.1
Monthly Income	0-22.100 TL	158	29.9
	22.101 - 52.101 TL	150	28.4
	52.102 - 82.102 TL	127	24.1
	82.103 TL and more	93	17.6
Marital Status	Married	295	55.9
	Single	233	44.1
Number of Visits	1st time	289	54.7
	2nd to 3rd	148	28.0
	4th and more	91	17.2
Visit Purpose	Adventure & Activity	20	3.8
	Cultural Experience	54	10.2
	Natural Attractions	84	15.9
	Relaxation	297	56.3
	Visit Family & Friends	73	13.8
Transportation	Bus	117	22.2
	Train	74	14.0
	Personal vehicle	337	63.8
Companions	Alone	88	16.7
	Tour Packages	43	8.1
	Family	177	33.5
	Friends	220	41.7
Activities	Nature Observation & Environmental Engagement	289	54.7%
	Active Outdoor Recreation	97	18.4%

	Social & Leisure Activities	82	15.5%
	Passive Coastal & Relaxation Activities	43	8.1%
	Cultural & Experiential Tourism	16	3.0%
Accommodation	No accommodation	78	14.8
	Pension	92	17.4
	Family / Relatives Home	72	13.6
	Camp/ Caravan Area	175	33.1
	Hotel	111	21.0
Info_Source	Internet and Social Media	208	39.4
	Brochure	99	18.8
	Television and Radio	105	19.9
	Family and Friends	116	22.0
Stay_Length	1 day	223	42.2
	2-4 days	171	32.4
	5 days and more	134	25.4

As Table 1 demonstrates, the largest share of the age group was observed among individuals born between 1965 and 1980, with 36.7 %, indicating the dominance of the middle-aged generation in the studied population Generation X. This was followed by the people born between 1981 and 1996, Generation Y, with 31.3 %. Furthermore, the other two age groups, those born between 1955 and 1964, which represent Baby Boomers (15.9 %), and those born between 1997 and 2006 (16.1 %), which represent Generation Z, have a roughly similar share. This distribution shows that most visitors are economically active individuals, which can affect their consumption patterns and tourism behavior.

In terms of education level, the highest proportion of respondents has completed high school, 32.6%, followed by pre-bachelor/bachelor's degree holders, 29.0%. Also, 16.1% have postgraduate education. Elementary and secondary school graduates represented 7.8% and 14.6% of the study sample, respectively. Generally, 45.1% of respondents hold a university degree (bachelor or postgraduate), suggesting a moderately educated visitor profile, while 54.9% possess pre-university education. This share indicates that the destination attracts diverse educational backgrounds rather than being dominated by highly educated individuals.

Considering monthly income status, the highest share belongs to the income group of less than 22,100 Turkish liras, 29.9% and the group of 22,101 to 52,101 liras (28.4 %). In other words, the majority of the sample is in the low to middle income range.

45.3% of participants had visited the location before, while 54.7% were visiting for the first time. This result suggests that the location can draw in new travelers while keeping some of its current clientele. At 56.3%, "relaxation" was the most frequently stated reason for travel. Further, "natural attractions" 15.9%, "visiting family and friends" 13.8%, and "cultural experiences" 10.2%. "Adventure and activity" motivation represented only 3.8% of the sample. These findings show

that the destination is primarily perceived as a mild and nature-oriented recreational area rather than an adventure-driven tourism site.

The preference for independent travel and convenient road access is demonstrated by the fact that 63.8% of people traveled by their own car, suggesting that road accessibility and transportation flexibility play an important role in visitors' travel decisions. Most visitors traveled with friends, 41.7%, or family members, 33.5%, indicating that the destination is predominantly group-oriented. Regarding on-site activities, "nature observation and environmental engagement" established the dominant activity category at 54.7%, highlighting the ecological orientation of the destination. "Active outdoor recreation activities" accounted for 18.4%, followed by "social and leisure activities," 15.5%. "Passive coastal and relaxation activities" represented 8.1%, while "cultural and experiential tourism" remained limited to 3.0%. These findings further emphasize the image of the destination as primarily nature-based and environmentally oriented.

Moreover, 42.2 % only stayed at the destination for one day, while about 57.8 % stayed for more than one day. In terms of information sources, the Internet and social media were the most influential channels 39.4%, followed by family and friends 22.0%, television and radio 19.9%, and brochures 18.8%. This distribution underscores the critical role of digital communication strategies in destination marketing.

Reliability and Validity

In this study, the measurement model was first examined in terms of reliability and validity. According to Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs were higher than 0.7, indicating adequate reliability of the measurement tool. Additionally, the AVE values for all constructs exceeded 0.5, indicating convergent validity.

Table 2. Measurement Model: Reliability, Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Construct	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**Composite Reliability (CR)**	**AVE**	**Loading Range**	**√AVE**	**DBE**	**ERA**	**EC**	**PDS**	**VBI**
Destination Brand Equity	0.865	0.909	0.716	0.425 – 0.839	0.846	0.846				
Perceived Destination Sustainability	0.925	0.947	0.816	0.419 – 0.827	0.902	0.838	0.902			
Ecorecreational Attitude	0.885	0.929	0.814	0.461 – 0.764	0.798	0.874	0.774	0.798		

Environmental Concern	0.856	0.897	0.636	0.638 – 0.742	0.903	0.863	0.681	0.537	0.903	
Visitor Intentions	0.934	0.945	0.598	0.767 – 0.901	0.773	0.869	0.672	0.630	0.643	0.773

The HTMT index was used to examine the divergent validity. According to Table 2, all values are less than 0.90, which indicates that the constructions are distinct from each other and the divergent validity is confirmed.

Table 3. Discriminant validity of the constructs – HTMT index

	DBE	**ERA**	**EC**	**PDS**
ERA	0.838			
EC	0.874	0.774		
PDS	0.863	0.681	0.537	
VBI	0.869	0.672	0.630	0.643

Hypothesis Testing

After confirming the measurement model, the structural model was examined. Figure 2 shows the path coefficients of the structural model. As can be seen, all main direct paths are significant, and positive coefficients are reported. As can be seen, destination brand equity has the strongest direct effect on visitors' behavioral intention (β = 0.450). This result indicates that the higher tourists' perception of destination brand equity, the more likely they are to revisit, recommend the destination to others, and form behavioral intentions. Visitors' environmental concern also has a positive and significant effect on behavioral intention (β = 0.118). Although the magnitude of this effect is lower compared to brand equity, it indicates that tourists' environmental sensitivity still plays an important role in shaping their future behavior. Destination sustainability perception also showed a direct and significant effect on behavioral intention (β = 0.118). This finding indicates that tourists' perception of the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the destination can strengthen their behavioral decisions. Eco-restrictive attitude also has a significant positive effect on behavioral intention (β = 0.134). This result indicates that people who have a more positive attitude towards outdoor recreation activities and environmental protection are more likely to show behavioral support for the destination. In addition, the relationships between the mediating constructions are also significant. Eco-restrictive attitude has a significant effect on destination brand equity (β = 0.355), which indicates that outdoor recreation experience and attitude can strengthen destination brand perception. Also, destination sustainability perception has a positive effect on brand equity (β = 0.191), which indicates the role of sustainability in strengthening the destination brand position. Overall, the model structure shows that destination brand equity plays

a central role in explaining behavioral intention and is identified as the most important predictor variable in the model.

Figure 2. Measurement model in standard coefficient estimation mode



The bootstrapping method was used to test the hypotheses. The results of the hypothesis tests are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Structural Model Results and Model Quality

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result	R^2 (VI)	Q^2 (VI)	SRMR	NFI
Environmental Concern → Visitor Intentions	0.118	2.478	0.013	Supported				
Perceived Destination Sustainability → Visitor Intentions	0.118	3.035	0.002	Supported				

Ecorecreational Attitude → Visitor Intentions	0.134	2.947	0.003	Supported				
Destination Brand Equity → Visitor Intentions	0.450	11.976	0.000	Supported	0.450	0.301	0.075	0.968
EC → PDS → VI	0.059	2.963	0.003	Supported				
EC → ERA → VI	0.081	2.887	0.004	Supported				
PDS → DBE → VI	0.086	4.467	0.000	Supported				
ERA → DBE → VI	0.160	7.473	0.000	Supported				
Age × ERA → VI	0.068	1.523	0.128	Not supported				
Age × EC → VI	-0.013	0.265	0.791	Not supported				
Age × PDS → VI	-0.066	1.818	0.069	Not supported				

The results show that environmental concern has a positive and significant effect on behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.05$). Destination sustainability perception also showed a positive and significant effect on behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.01$). Ecorecreational attitude also has a positive and significant effect on behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.134$, $p < 0.01$). Among the main variables, destination brand equity had the strongest effect on behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.450$, $p < 0.001$). In the mediation section, the results showed that destination sustainability and ecorecreational attitude mediate the relationship between environmental concern and behavioral intention. Also, destination brand equity significantly mediates the relationship between destination sustainability and affective attitude with behavioral intention. However, the moderating role of generations (age) was not reported in any significant relationships.

In order to evaluate the overall fit of the model, R^2, Q^2, SRMR, and NFI indices were examined. Table 4 also demonstrates model fit and predictive power.

The R^2 value for behavioral intention is 0.450, which indicates that the model is able to explain 45% of the variance of this variable. Also, the Q^2 value is 0.301, which indicates the strong predictive power of the model. The SRMR index is 0.075, which is less than the threshold of 0.08 and indicates a good fit of the model. Also, the NFI value is 0.968, which indicates a very good fit of the model.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that destination brand equity is the strongest predictor of visitors' behavioral intentions. This result is consistent with recent studies in the field of destination branding, which emphasize that destination branding plays a central role in the formation of loyalty, revisiting, and recommending to others (Muntean et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022). In other words, when tourists have a positive perception of perceived quality, brand awareness, brand

associations, and brand loyalty, the likelihood of leading this perception into supportive behavior increases.

The results also show that environmental concern has a positive and significant effect on behavioral intentions. This finding is consistent with recent research in the field of sustainable tourism that states that increasing tourists' environmental awareness strengthens their willingness to support responsible destinations (Han et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). This is especially important in outdoor recreation destinations, as environmental attitudes are directly related to the destination experience.

Destination sustainability also shows a positive and significant effect on behavioral intention. This result confirms that tourists' perception of the sustainable performance of the destination in economic, social, and environmental dimensions can lead to the formation of loyal behaviors (Loureiro et al., 2021; Conti et al., & 2023).

Ecorecreational attitudes also have a significant positive effect on behavioral intention. This finding indicates that people who have a more positive attitude towards outdoor recreation activities are more likely to conserve the destination. Moreover, Lee and Jan (2021) emphasize that outdoor recreation experiences and connections with the natural environment can strengthen the sense of belonging and commitment to the destination.

Regarding mediating analysis, the destination brand equity plays a crucial mediating role in transferring the effects of sustainability and ecological attitudes to behavioral intentions. This suggests that cognitive and value factors are transformed into behavior through destination branding mechanisms (Rather et al., 2022). Furthermore, the moderating effects of age were not confirmed. This finding indicates that in the sample studied, the relationships between the model variables operated independently of age groups. Some recent studies have also shown that generational differences in the field of sustainable behavior are not always significant and may depend on the cultural context and type of destination (Nguyen et al., 2024).

These findings show how outdoor and nature-based recreational destinations in specifically within scope of the study form visitors' behavioral intentions in different stages which all the study indicator such as environmental concern, destination sustainability perception, and ecorecreational attitude, play complementary and special roles. However, what truly helps accomplish these roles is destination brand equity. Also, the findings indicate how environmental concerns as a general orientation plays an indirect role in shaping visitors' behavioral intentions which shows having environmental sensitivity does not naturally contribute to supportive behavior towards a particular destination, unless this sensitivity is shaped in the form of a specific perception of the sustainable performance of that destination. In other words, environmental concern turns into intention when the visitor perceives the destination as sustainable in practice and experiences. Furthermore, outdoor recreation experiences and participation in environmentally friendly activities can strengthen a visitor's emotional and emotional attachment to a destination. In terms of this, the destination brand equity can establish this attachment. When visitors perceive sustainability not only as an operational feature but as part of the destination's brand identity and image, the

probability of return, recommendation, and behavioral support increases. In other words, findings show that the path of behavioral intention formation in outdoor recreation destinations can be explained first by individual environmental values that affect the cognitive evaluation of the destination's sustainability and the tendency towards outdoor recreation activities. Later, these evaluations are organized in the structure of the destination brand equity, and finally, it is the destination brand equity structure that activates the intentions.

Regarding managerial implications, findings suggest that implementing sustainable policies alone is not enough. Actions related to the protection of natural resources, waste management, environmental education, and support for local communities must be designed and communicated in such a way that they become a sustainable value of the destination that is perceived in brand equity in the minds of visitors. In other words, sustainability must be "visible," "understandable," and "narratable." Moreover, the unconfirmed moderating role of different generations demonstrates that the effects of all the factors studied on visitors' behavioral intentions work independently. This can indicate that paying attention to being environmentally sensitive toward outdoor recreation areas is not dependent on any age group or specific generation. To this, all the policies adopted by responsibles in this sector should be cover all the communities of visitors. Eventually, a destination that can transfer its sustainable performance to its audience in the form of a coherent and credible brand equity is likely to enjoy a sustainable competitive advantage in the long term.

Given the cross-sectional nature of the data and the geographical scope of the study in Balikesir province, Türkiye, it is recommended that future research should deepen and generalize the suggested model by using longitudinal designs, comparative studies in other outdoor recreation destinations, and examining actual behaviors, not just intentions.

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Forecasting Tourism Demand in Türkiye

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Abstract

Purpose*:* Tourism demand forecasts are crucial for tourism stakeholders, local community, and the policy makers in planning future tourism activities. This study aims to forecast tourism demand in Türkiye for the next 12 months to ensure realistic and reliable planning.

Study design/methodology/approach*:* This study adopts a quantitative approach by utilising monthly tourist arrivals to Türkiye as a proxy of tourism demand covering the period between 2012M1 to 2025M11. The secondary data of monthly Turkish tourist arrivals are analyzed by seasonal time series regression with Fourier terms. The regressions are tested with constant, additive trend with constant, and multiplicative trend with constant models. The models are computed by including at most s/2 harmonics into the equations until statistically insignificant trigonometric terms are obtained.

Results*:* The RMSE, MAE, MAPE, U1 and U2 values are compared for the appropriate models with constant, additive trend with constant, and multiplicative trend with constant. Therefore, the final best-fitting model for the observed time series are selected. The results indicate that the model estimated with the constant and trend additive method provides best-fitting for the monthly tourist arrival data. Accordingly, the forecasting is realized by implementing this model which is more appropriate. Thus, the forecasted values of the seasonal tourist arrivals series and the graph is provided.

Originality/value*:* The originality and value of this study is applying harmonic regression approach that captures seasonality by combining Fourier terms for forecasting the monthly tourist arrivals in Türkiye. Thus, the harmonic regression approach provides better forecasted values than traditional seasonal exponential smoothing approaches.

Keywords: Demand, demad modelling, outbound tourism demad, Türkiye.

Introduction

Equilibrium is a crucial issue for both national and global economies (Collignon, 2012). Until the Great Depression of 1929, the belief that "*every supply creates its own demand*" was generally accepted as the most important factor in investment, specifically in the production of any good (Eykens, 1972; Carvalho et. al, 2024). The Great Depression relegated John Baptist Say's prediction that every supply creates its own demand to the dusty shelves of history, while also invalidating Adam Smith's "invisible hand," the founder of Classical Economics (Sowell, 2015; Béraud and Numa, 2018). The Depression also created its own phenomenon, and the Keynesian economic theory emerged, in which John Maynard Keynes argued that the demand variable is at least as important (and sometimes more important) than supply for economic equilibrium

(Goswami, 2018; Brunsko, 1996). According to the story, Keynes said, "If you teach a parrot that the equilibrium of the economy depends on supply and demand, you will get an economist". The story, often attributed to John Maynard Keynes or frequently quoted by his contemporary Irving Fisher, highlights a critique of classical economics' over-reliance on simple, mechanical "*supply and demand*" equations. By stating that a parrot could be taught these terms, the story implies that true economic understanding requires more than just reciting formulas of equilibrium. This observation has been a fundamental motivation for this paper. Indeed, looking at human history, one can see that there has always been a search for equilibrium (Jordan, 2017).

From its creation to the present day, humankind has been striving to survive and reproduce itself (Erdoğan, 2009). Characterised by hunting and gathering activities in early times, these efforts gradually evolved into a limited diversity, encompassing the domestication of wild animals to utilise their products and strength, as well as simple agricultural production (Bharucha and Pretty, 2010). Throughout the ages, humanity's struggle for existence and self-reproduction has evolved, but the goal has always been survival (Mikailova and Zobova, 2018). This struggle underwent an extraordinary transformation across different civilisations until the 19th century. The use of steam power in production led to a radical change in the history of the world economy, and 1870 took its place on the historical stage as the "Industrial Revolution" (Klassen, 2013). Until the Industrial Revolution, the understanding of production, which was primarily based on self-consumption and meeting basic needs through exchange, fundamentally changed. While production became possible in quantities previously unimaginable, the balance between urban and rural areas began to shift in favour of the city (Stanzione, 2000). The phenomenon of migration from rural areas to cities, accelerated by industrialisation, brought with it the organised efforts of humankind to reproduce itself (Erdoğan, 2009).

The shift in humankind's struggle for existence from the physiological to the social and economic is not only the result of subjective and organised efforts. In all countries that meet the criteria for a state on Earth, governments primarily struggle with three fundamental problems. The first is combating inflation, the second is unemployment, and the third is economic growth (Moridian et. al, 2025). In addition to these three issues, the fair distribution of the output obtained from the growing economy is also a factor. It can be added. Interestingly, the third issue, which some economists frame as economic growth and distribution, is a goal that both the individual, the organised society formed by the individual, and the phenomenon called the state, formed by organised societies, strive to achieve.

From a more integrated perspective, all nation-states (governments) employ macroeconomic policy to combat inflation, reduce unemployment, and promote economic growth (Parasız, 2011). This policy tool has encompassed, and continues to encompass, many growth models from the past to the present (Seguino, 2019).

The young Republic of Turkey, established after the collapse of the defeated empire in World War I, adopted an economic model in its early years in which the state implemented exemplary investments as a role model. Turkey, like other European countries, was affected by the Great

Depression and had to grapple with the difficulties of World War II after a brief period of relief (Yavuz, 2021).

About five years after World War II, multi-party life began in Turkey. With Adnan Menderes's rise to power in 1950, Turkey's economic policies began to liberalise (Güneş and Akdağ, 2013). While liberal policies created a relatively prosperous economic environment in Turkey, a departure from budget discipline would lead to high inflation and balance-of-payments deficits (Canlı, 2020; Takım, 2012).

From the 1960 coup that removed the Democratic Party from power until the early 2000s, Turkey experienced high inflation and balance-of-payments deficits. This process continues to this day.

Between 1960 and 2023, all governments that came to power through parliamentary elections developed and implemented a wide variety of macroeconomic policies to curb inflation, finance balance-of-payments deficits, reduce unemployment, and achieve reasonable growth. In addition to these policies, some measures were also implemented. Among these are the January 24th Decrees. Turgut Özal, the Undersecretary of the Prime Ministry in the Süleyman Demirel Government, included provisions to increase foreign active tourism revenues in the package known as the January 24, 1980 Decrees, which aimed to transition from a closed to an open economy. A foreign active tourism policy was adopted that would utilise Turkey's natural heritage elements, primarily sea, sand, and sun, as free goods, as well as its tangible and intangible cultural heritage and geomorphological values as attractions. However, the goals were rendered obsolete and could not be implemented following the September 12, 1980 coup (Erkek, 2022). Furthermore, in 1982, the Tourism Promotion Law No. 2632 was enacted to implement the January 24th Decrees. However, this effort was also insufficient; for Turkish tourism to serve as a source of foreign exchange, Turgut Özal needed to come to power alone in the 1983 democratic elections.

With Özal's victory in the 1983 legislation elections, he quickly implemented the January 24th Decrees that he had been unable to put into practice (Bektaş and Ateş, 2022). As a result of Özal's efforts to truly implement the Tourism Promotion Law No. 2632, measures such as land allocations to the private sector for 49 years, VAT exemptions, customs duty exemptions, and incentive payments for foreign currency earned rapidly increased the supply of quality accommodation in Antalya (Şanlıoğlu and Özcan, 2017). From the second half of the 1980s onwards, there was an explosion in foreign active tourism revenues in parallel with the number of foreign tourists visiting Turkey. By the end of 2025, Turkey is among the top 10 most visited countries. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), Turkey earned nearly $65 billion in foreign currency from 63 million visitors (TÜİK, 2026). Table 1 reflects the number of facilities, rooms, and beds, the number of guests received, and the revenues obtained in Turkey in 1985.

The findings in Table 1 show that Turkey has very high numbers of active foreign tourists and foreign exchange earnings. On the other hand, approximately 24,000 rooms and 72,000 beds are currently under construction across 213 accommodation establishments in the four- and five-star categories; these facilities are expected to be operational in 2026-2027 (Tourism Gündem, 2026). This value will be maintained almost every year. Given that each hotel room costs 150,000 USD,

it is understood that a financial investment of 3,600,000,000 USD will be made. In an economic environment like Turkey's, where all factors of production, especially financial capital, are scarce, the fact that a considerable amount will be allocated to accommodation investment in terms of opportunity cost is significant. However, it is believed that demand for active foreign tourism should be measured scientifically, given Turkey's rising foreign exchange needs, daily inflation, and the slowdown in production and growth. In the context of what has been described, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

Table 1. Number of tourist accommodations, visitors, overnight stays, and revenues in Turkiye between 1985 and 2025.

	1985		**2025**		**Totals**	
	Tourism Investment Certificate	**Tourism Business Certificate**	**Tourism Investment Certificate**	**Tourism Business Certificate**	**1985**	**2025**
Number of Facilities	501	689	573	8.159	1.190	8.732
Available Number of Rooms	34.251	41.351	62.770	583.120	75.602	645.890
Available Number of Beds	71.371	85.995	140.065	1.225.633	157.366	1.365.698
Number of Visitors	2.190.217,00		63.941.000,00			734%
Outbound Tourism Receipts	1.500.000,00		65.200.000,00			854%
% Change						
Number of Visitors			2919%			
Outbound Tourism Receipts			4347%			

Source: Compiled by the authors.

- What is the direction of active foreign tourism demand for Turkey?
- Is there an irreversible opportunity cost for the accommodation investments currently being made?
- Is the economic sustainability of Turkish tourism at risk?

Methodology

It is believed that time series-based calculations are the method that will find valid and reliable answers to the research questions. Furthermore, considering that tourist arrivals to Türkiye are concentrated in the summer months, it is believed that the most accurate model is the one that will be created by adding Fourier terms (harmonics) to the seasonality phenomenon in time series and using sine and cosine waves (Hyndman and Athanasopoulos, 2014; Hyndman et al.). Because in time series seasonality can be modeled using sine and cosine waves by adding Fourier terms (harmonics) to the regression equation (Hyndman and Athanasopoulos, 2014; Hyndman et al. 2025). Seasonal and trend components can be described as additive or multiplicative. In both cases,

the harmonics added to the equations differ. If the series is assumed additive, the model to be estimated is as follows (Mert and Çağlar, 2023):

$$y_t = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^{m} \beta_i t^i + \sum_{j=1}^{[|s/2|]} \left[\varphi_j sin\left(\frac{2\pi jt}{s}\right) + \zeta_j cos\left(\frac{2\pi jt}{s}\right) \right] + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

If the series is considered multiplicative, the model to be estimated will be as follows:

$$y_t = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^{m} \beta_i t^i + \sum_{i=1}^{m} \sum_{j=1}^{[|s/2|]} \left[\varphi_j sin\left(\frac{2\pi jt}{s}\right) + \zeta_j cos\left(\frac{2\pi jt}{s}\right) \right] + \varepsilon_t \quad (2)$$

In Equations (1) and (2), *s* denotes the period of seasonality, while *m* represents the degree of the polynomial included in the model. For instance, if there is a linear trend in the series, *m* receives the value 1, and if there is a quadratic or cubic trend, *m* takes the values 2 or 3, respectively. *t* connotes the linear trend variable. *j* is the index indicating the harmonics added to the equation. When *j*=1, one harmonic (one sine and one cosine term) is added to the equation; if j=2, two harmonics (four terms) are added (Mert and Çağlar, 2023).

The basic principle is that all coefficients associated with trend and harmonic components in the equation should be statistically significant. Trigonometric terms are added to the model until insignificant harmonic components are obtained. If it is assumed that the series has only a seasonal component and no trend, the terms $\sum_{i=1}^{m} \beta_i t^i$ can be omitted from Equations (1) and (2). In fact, if there is no trend in the equation, the β_i coefficients will be statistically insignificant. Assuming that the series has no trend (*m*=0) and exhibits only seasonality, the distinction between additive and multiplicative forms disappears, eventuates in a single unified equation. This equation is presented below (Mert and Çağlar, 2023):

$$y_t = \alpha + \sum_{j=1}^{[|s/2|]} \left[\varphi_j sin\left(\frac{2\pi jt}{s}\right) + \zeta_j cos\left(\frac{2\pi jt}{s}\right) \right] + \varepsilon_t \quad (3)$$

In practice, a time series can be forecasted using multiple alternative models. In such cases, the best-fitting model can be determined based on certain statistics derived from the errors. The main statistics are the root mean squared error (RMSE), the absolute mean of error (MAE), the absolute percentage error (MAPE), and Theil's U1 and U2 coefficients. Smaller values of these statistics indicate better model performance. Specifically, a U1 statistic less than 0.55 implies that the model fits the data very well (Mert and Çağlar, 2023). These statistics are obtained as follows:

$$RMSE = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{t=1}^{T} e_t^2}{T}} \quad (4)$$

$$MAE = \frac{\sum_{t=1}^{T} |e_t|}{T} \quad (5)$$

$$MAPE = \frac{\sum_{t=1}^{T} \frac{|e_t|}{y_t}}{T} \quad (6)$$

$$U1 = \frac{\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{t=1}^{T} e_t^2}{T}}}{\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{t=1}^{T} y_t^2}{T}} + \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{t=1}^{T} \hat{y}_t^2}{T}}} \quad (7)$$

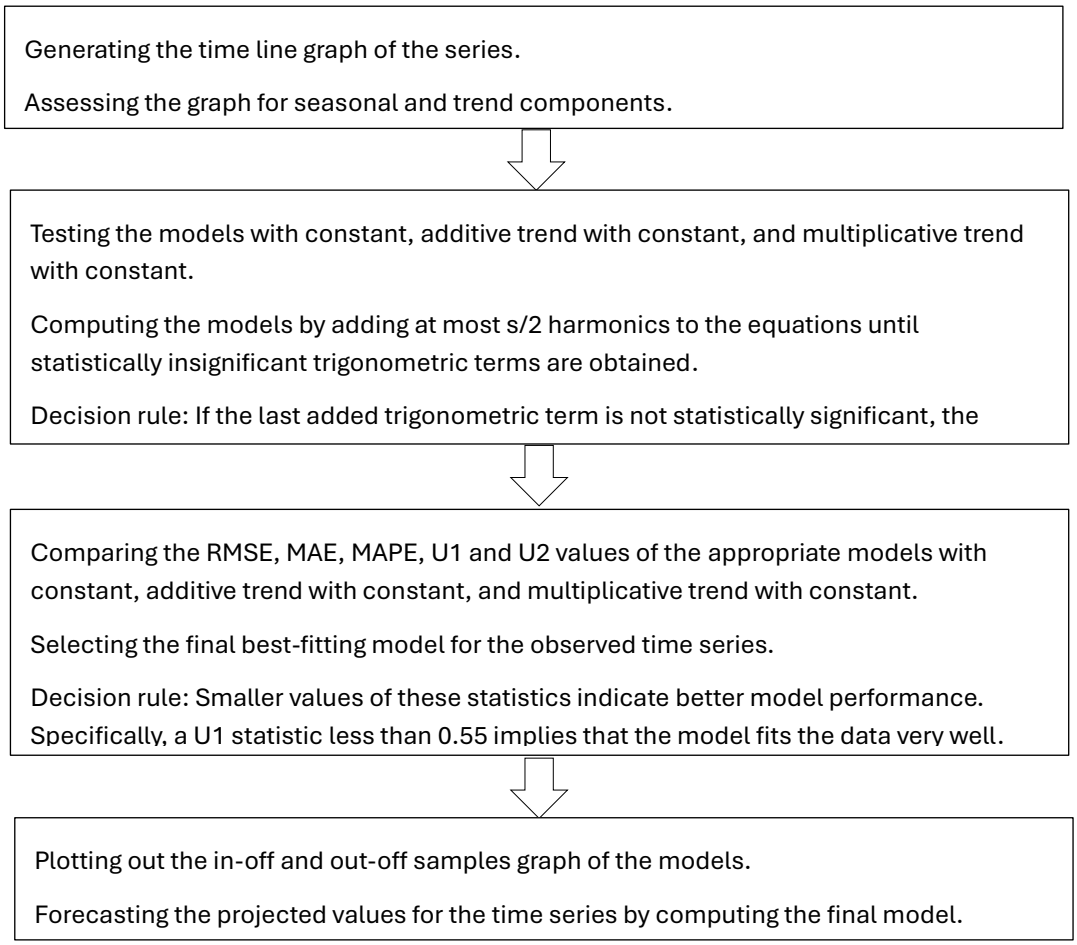
$$U2 = \frac{\sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^{T} e_t^2}}{\sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^{T} y_t^2}} \quad (8)$$

In equations (4)-(8), e_t represents the error component, y_t represents the original time series values, $\hat{y}_t$ represents the estimated values of the time series, and T represents the number of observations in the series.

Data and the Research Framework

The literature reveals that tourism demand has been proxied by tourist arrivals, overnight stays, tourism revenue, visitor spending, and hotel occupancy rates (Kuralbayev et al., 2017; Wu et. al., 2017; De Luca and Rosciano, 2020; Florido-Benítez, 2025; OECD, 2025). Tourist arrivals noticed to be the most frequently employed proxy among these indicators (Kuralbayev et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2017). Since tourist (visitor) arrivals represent the initial stage of tourism activity and form a basis for all other related indicators, this proxy preferred as the primary measure of tourism demand. In this sense, this study adopts a quantitative approach by utilizing monthly tourist arrivals to Türkiye as a proxy of tourism demand. The secondary data covering the period between 2012M1 to 2025M11 were obtained from the official website of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT, 2026) and Trading Economics (2026). Therefore, the dataset comprises monthly Turkish tourist arrivals including 167 consecutive months forming a time series. The stages involved in including Fourier terms into the regression equation, model selection, final model determination, and forecasting processes in time series analysis with seasonal components are presented in the research framework (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Research framework for seasonal time series with Fourier terms

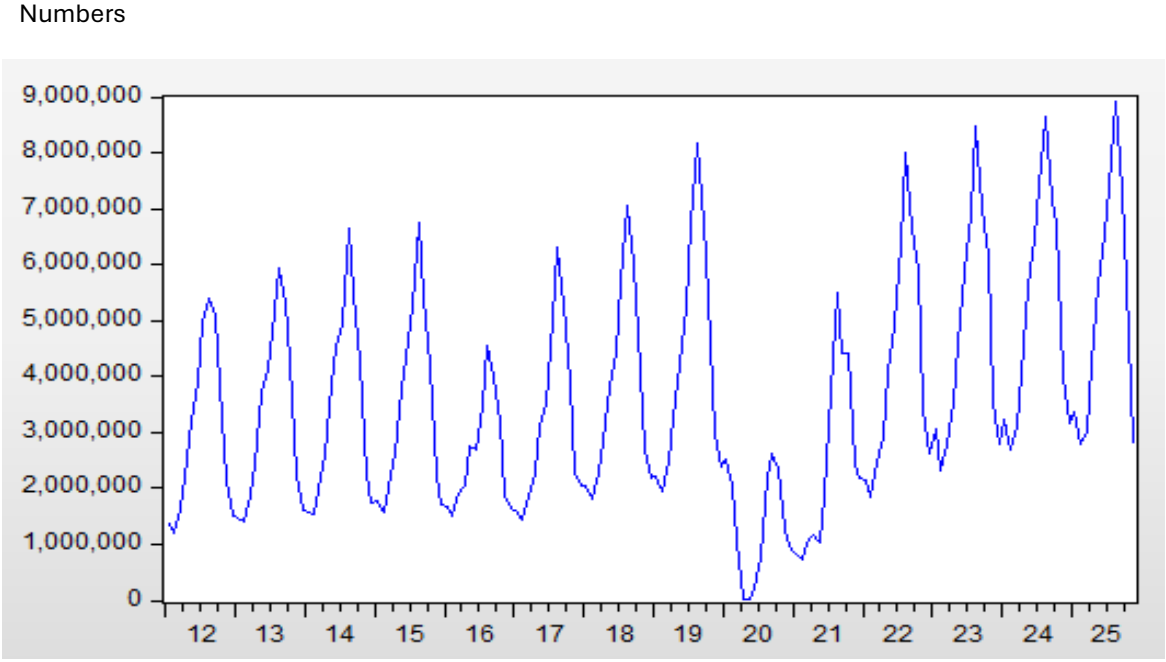


Source: Author/s' own elaboration

Empirical Results

In time series, regular cycles (cycling) occurring at specific time intervals (periods) are referred to as seasonal components. The time elapsed between the start and end of each cycle constitutes the period of seasonality. In addition to seasonality, trend may also be exhibited as an important component in the time series analysis. In general, seasonality is not observed in annual data, however the period is considered to 12 for monthly data and 4 for quarterly data. Given that this study aims on forecasting on monthly tourist arrivals to Türkiye between 2012M1 and 2025M11, the seasonal period is specified as 12. The time line graph of the data is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Time line graph of tourist arrivals to Türkiye between 2012M1 and 2025M11



As illustrated in Figure 1, the tourist arrivals series exhibits seasonality and an upward trend with the exception of COVID-19 pandemic periods. The trend models in both additive and multiplicative forms are computed. In addition, models without a trend are tested, and the best-fitting model will be determined based on model selection criteria such provided in Equations (4)-(8).

Primarily, the seasonal models with constant term are analyzed. Since the time series is monthly, the seasonality period will be 12 (s=12), and at most of 6 harmonics could be included in the equations (j=1,…,6). However, variable addition will continue until the added variable coefficient becomes statistically insignificant. The analysis initiates with the addition of the first trigonometric term. The results are demonstrated in Table 2.

The first trigonometric term included in the equation in Model 1 is statistically significant (p = 0.0000 < 0.01). Therefore, a second term should be added to the equation which is the first harmonic to the equation. In Model 2, the coefficients of all trigonometric variables are statistically significant (p = 0.0000 < 0.01). In this case, the second harmonic is added to the equation in which the coefficients of all trigonometric variables in Model 3 are statistically significant (p < 0.01).

Table 2. Seasonal models with constant

	Variable	**Coefficient**	**Std. Error**	**t-Statistic**	**Prob.**
Model 1	$\hat{\alpha}$	3595558*	144945.7	24.80624	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-952604.2*	204678	-4.654160	0.0000
Model 2	$\hat{\alpha}$	3585643*	100469.5	35.68885	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-942689*	141871.3	-6.644683	0.0000

	$\hat{\zeta}_1$	-1906166*	142299.2	-13.39548	0.0000
Model 3	$\hat{\alpha}$	3582794*	96206.05	37.27084	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-939840.6*	135849	-6.918276	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1$	-1911101*	136262.5	-14.02514	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_2$	542792.5*	136262.5	3.983432	0.0001
Model 4	$\hat{\alpha}$	3583029*	96408.58	37.16504	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-940075.7*	136134.3	-6.905501	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1$	-1910693*	136550	-13.99263	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_2$	542385.3*	136550	3.972064	0.0001
	$\hat{\zeta}_2$	76875.36	136134.3	0.564702	0.5731
Model 1	$y_t = \alpha + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 2	$y_t = \alpha + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 3	$y_t = \alpha + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varphi_2 sin\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 4	$y_t = \alpha + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varphi_2 sin\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_2 cos\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				

*: Significant at the .01 significance level.

The cosine term of the second harmonic should be included in the equation according to the decision rule. As depicted in the table, the variable added to the last model is not statistically significant (p = 0.5731 > 0.10). Therefore, Model 3 is the most appropriate model for the series testing with constant term.

The seasonal time series is further examined by conducting an additive trend model. Therefore, all models should be estimated until a statistically insignificant trigonometric variable is obtained. The analysis commences by adding the first trigonometric term.

It is observed that the trigonometric term added to the equation in Model 1 is statistically significant (p<0.01). Therefore, a second term should be included in the equation as the first harmonic. In Model 2, all coefficients of the trigonometric variables are statistically significant (p=0.000<0.01) therefore the second harmonic should be added to the equation. As reported in the table, all trigonometric variable coefficients in Model 3 are statistically significant (p=0.000<0.01). thus, the cosine component of the second harmonic should be included in the equation. However, the variable entered to the last model is not statistically significant (p=0.4548>0.10). Therefore, Model 3 is the most appropriate model for the seasonal series with additive trend.

Table 3. Seasonal models with additive trend

	Variable	**Coefficient**	**Std. Error**	**t-Statistic**	**Prob.**
Model 1	$\hat{\alpha}$	2656368*	277059.7	9.587709	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	11314.22*	2887.075	3.918920	0.0001
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-915926.3*	196537.7	-4.660308	0.0000

Model 2	$\hat{\alpha}$	2709373*	184540.4	14.68174	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	10557.47*	1923.322	5.489186	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-908567.3*	130882.2	-6.941871	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1$	-1886466*	131178	-14.38096	0.0000
Model 3	$\hat{\alpha}$	2697860*	174775	15.43619	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	10661.27*	1821.495	5.853033	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-905334*	123944.8	-7.304332	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1$	-1891291*	124227.5	-15.22442	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_2$	552110.1*	124191.6	4.445632	0.0000
Model 4	$\hat{\alpha}$	2695640*	175037.2	15.40039	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	10691.44*	1824.41	5.860217	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-905520.5*	124113.2	-7.295926	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1$	-1890743*	124398.2	-15.19912	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_2$	551644.4*	124361.6	4.435810	0.0001
	$\hat{\zeta}_2$	92912.52	12003.2	0.749275	0.4548
Model 1	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 2	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 3	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varphi_2 sin\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 4	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varphi_2 sin\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_2 cos\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				

*: Significant at the .01 significance level.

Finally, the seasonal time series is analyzed using a multiplicative trend model. Accordingly, all models are estimated until a trigonometric variable with a statistically insignificant is received. The analysis proceeds by introducing the first trigonometric term.

Table 4. Seasonal models with multiplicative trend

	Variable	**Coefficient**	**Std. Error**	**t-Statistic**	**Prob.**
Model 1	$\hat{\alpha}$	2625238*	279392.7	9.396230	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	11510.43*	2912.038	3.952707	0.0001
	$\hat{\varphi}_1 t$	-8786.997*	2050.406	-4.285491	0.0000
Model 2	$\hat{\alpha}$	2669908*	208003.5	12.83588	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	10676.15*	2168.798	4.922612	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1 t$	-8818.448*	1526.233	-5.777918	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1 t$	-17919.69*	1553.867	-11.53232	0.0000

Model 3	$\hat{\alpha}$	2669275*	201538.9	13.24447	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	10686.73*	2101.395	5.085541	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1 t$	-8743.223*	1478.963	-5.911726	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1 t$	-17835.41*	1505.777	-11.84466	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_2 t$	5084.067*	1491.149	3.409496	0.0008
Model 4	$\hat{\alpha}$	2667292*	201894	13.21135	0.0000
	$\hat{\beta}$	10722.97*	2105.551	5.092717	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_1 t$	-8776.318*	1482.211	-5.921099	0.0000
	$\hat{\zeta}_1 t$	-17800.05*	1509.166	-11.79462	0.0000
	$\hat{\varphi}_2 t$	5073.555*	1493.701	3.396634	0.0009
	$\hat{\zeta}_2 t$	1019.035	1495.720	0.681300	0.4967
Model 1	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 . t . sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 2	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 . t . sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 . t . cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 3	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 . t . sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 . t . cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varphi_2 . t . sin\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				
Model 4	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 . t . sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 . t . cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varphi_2 . t . sin\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_2 . t . cos\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$				

*: Significant at the .01 significance level.

It is evident that the trigonometric term introduced to the equation in Model 1 is statistically significant (p<0.01). Therefore, a second incorporated into the model as the first harmonic of the equation. In Model 2, the coefficients of all trigonometric variables are statistically significant (p=0.000<0.01) therefore, the second harmonic to the equation should be entered. As indicated in the table, all trigonometric variable coefficients in Model 3 remain statistically significant (p=<0.01). In this case, the cosine term of the second harmonic should be included into the equation. Nevertheless, the variable introduced in the last model is not statistically significant (p=0.4967>0.10). Hence, Model 3 provides the most appropriate model for the seasonal series with a multiplicative trend.

The in-off sample graphs of the seasonal series with constant model 3, constant and additive trend model 3, and constant and multiplicative trend model 3, which were determined as the most appropriate specifications as a result of the analyses, are depicted in Figures 3, 4, and 5, respectively.

Figure 3. In-off sample with constant and additive trend

Figure 4. In-off sample with constant

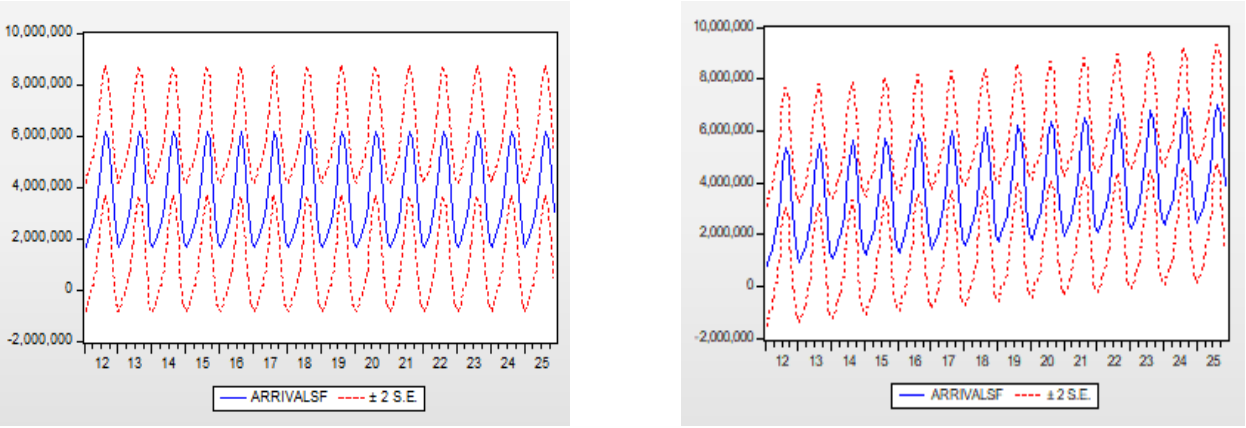
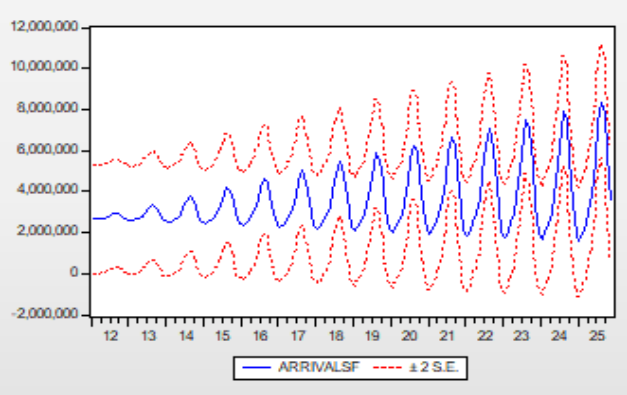


Figure 5. In-off sample with constant and multiplicative trend



As outlined in the stages of the research framework, to select the best-fitting model for the series from among seasonal series with constant model 3, constant and additive trend model 3, and constant and multiplicative trend model 3 RMSE, MAE, MAPE, U1, and U2 values are evaluated. These values are presented in the table below. In addition, the akaike information criteria for all models are also reported.

Table 5. Model selection for tourist arrivals series

Criteria	**Constant**	**Constant and additive trend**	**Constant and multiplicative trend**
RMSE	1228198	115867	1287850
MAE	897916.6	743484.2	983063
MAPE	172.0093	178.5803	187.6985
U1	0.153209	0.138617	0.161036
U2	24.38930	25.66064	25.42286
AIC	30.92790	30.74804	31.03473

Best-fitting model	$y_t = \alpha + \beta t + \varphi_1 sin\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \zeta_1 cos\left(\frac{2\pi t}{12}\right) + \varphi_2 sin\left(\frac{4\pi t}{12}\right) + \varepsilon_t$		
Variable	**Coefficient**	**Prob.**	
$\hat{\alpha}$	2697860*	0.0000	
βt	10661.27*	0.0000	
$\hat{\varphi}_1$	-905334*	0.0000	
$\hat{\zeta}_1$	-1891291*	0.0000	
$\hat{\varphi}_2$	552110.1*	0.0000	

*: Significant at the .01 significance level.

It is noticed in the table that most of the error statistics and the akaike information criterion are smaller in the model estimated with constant and trend additive. These results indicate that the model estimated with the constant and trend additive method provides best-fitting for the monthly tourist arrival data. Accordingly, the forecasting by implementing this model is more appropriate.

Table 6. Forecasted values for all Model 3s of the tourist arrivals series

Months	**Constant**	**Constant and additive trend**	**Constant and multiplicative trend**
2025M12	1927581	2814912	1869260
2026M01	1671694	2597662	1468297
2026M02	1927884	2887183	1870265
2026M03	2283390	3258730	2431292
2026M04	2642953	3615603	3001615
2026M05	3254346	4215060	3981575
2026M06	4297863	5249357	5672228
2026M07	5493895	6444212	7632128
2026M08	6177848	7132297	8778034
2026M09	5822342	6782073	8227218
2026M10	4522635	5490239	6108377
2026M11	2971098	3955821	3548230

The forecasted values of the tourist arrivals series for all model 3s are demonstrated in Table 6. The best-fitting seasonal model for the monthly tourist arrival data is the specification with constant and trend additive. The forecasting cover 12 periods, corresponding to the months from 2025M12 to 2026M11. In addition, the out-off sample graphs of the seasonal series with constant model 3, constant and additive trend model 3, and constant and multiplicative trend model 3 are illustrated in Figures 6, 7, and 8, respectively.

Figure 6. Out-off sample with constant and additive trend

Figure 7. Out-off sample with constant

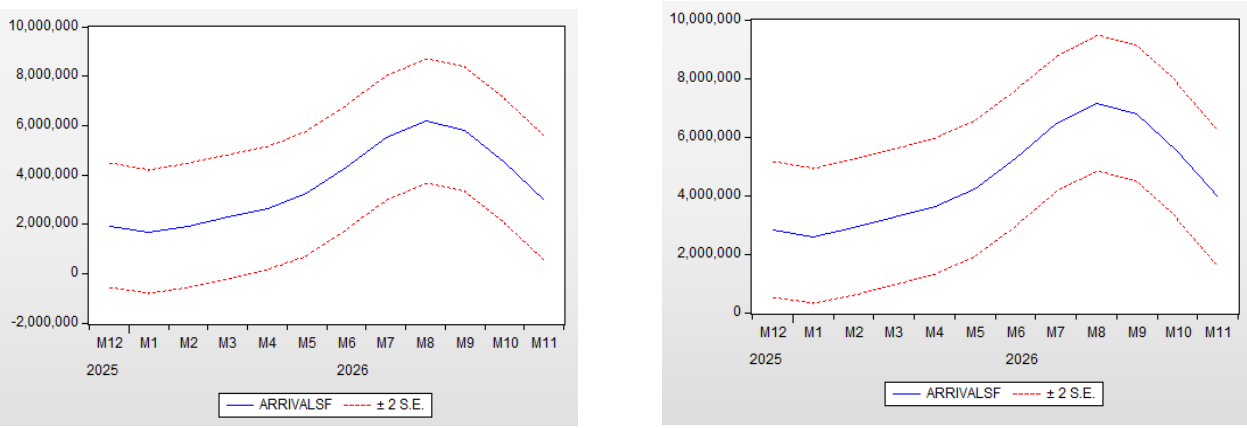
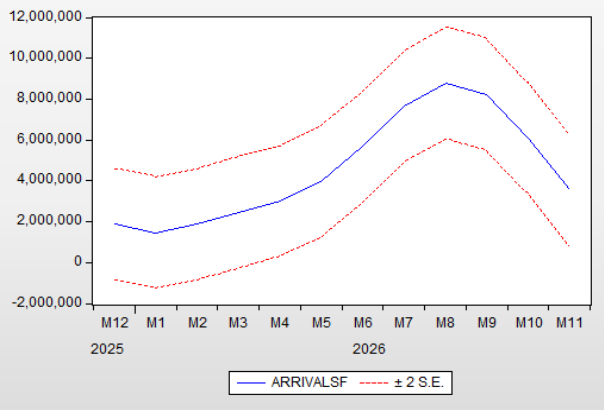


Figure 8. Out-off sample with constant and multiplicative trend



Discussion and Conclusion

Tourism demand forecasting is of vital importance for politicians and local administrators, as well as for tourism stakeholders. However, calculating tourism demand is quite difficult due to its rapid susceptibility to numerous factors and its significant seasonal volatility. Nevertheless, demand forecasts are considered the most reliable tools for making investment decisions that require large sums of money, both for infrastructure and superstructure investments.

In line with the assumption emphasised in the previous discussion, this research calculates the active foreign tourism demand for Turkey over 13 years using monthly data. The calculation is based on monthly data published by the Turkish Statistical Institute between 2012 and 2025. Given the significant seasonality in Turkey's active foreign tourism demand, the analysis used Fourier terms and seasonal time-series regression. Regressions were tested with constant, constant with additive trend, and constant with multiplicative trend models. The models were calculated by including up to s/2 harmonics in the equations until statistically insignificant trigonometric terms were obtained.

The research findings indicate that tourism demand for Turkey will continue steadily. This conclusion supports the study's findings that tourism demand for Turkey is positive; that there is

no irreversible opportunity cost associated with ongoing hotel investments; and that the economic sustainability of Turkish tourism is not at risk.

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From cultural assets to sustainable tourism: Using creative tourism as a development approach for rural tourism

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores creative tourism as a sustainable development approach through the lens of Alternative Development Theory. Creative tourism is particularly relevant for rural villages and townships in the post-COVID-19 context, as it prioritises sustainability, community participation, capacity building, and the preservation of local culture and heritage while addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Study design/methodology/approach: An exploratory quantitative research design was employed using a self-administered questionnaire to collect primary data. The study was conducted in the Capricorn District Municipality in Limpopo Province, South Africa, focusing on four local municipalities: Blouberg, Lepelle-Nkumpi, Molemole, and Polokwane. A stratified random sampling technique ensured representation across municipalities. A total of 386 respondents were included to enable generalisation of the findings.

Results: The findings indicate that local communities possess strong awareness of their cultural and heritage assets, alongside creative skills such as cooking, dancing, writing, and singing that are crucial for creative tourism development. High willingness to participate, particularly in sharing intangible cultural experiences, was evident. However, limited institutional support, socio-economic constraints, and infrastructure challenges may restrict full participation if left unaddressed.

Originality/value: This study contributes original empirical insights into the potential of creative tourism in Limpopo's villages and townships and offers practical guidance for policymakers and communities seeking sustainable, community-centred tourism strategies in the post-COVID era.

Keywords Creative tourism; Alternative Development Theory; tourism development; culture and heritage; sustainable tourism.

Introduction

Sustainable tourism plays an important role in developing policies and strategies to safeguard tourism resources for future generations (Go & Kang, 2022). Its importance is evident from the resources and support invested in it by scholars, policymakers, and leading global tourism organisations (Dwyer, 2023). Its rationale is based on the responsible use of natural resources, prevention and treatment, effective control of environmental degradation, and the deployment of resources, while also promoting social progress and equality (Tien et al., 2021). Unlike mainstream paradigms, sustainable development promotes strategies that tackle structural inequalities,

empower communities, and restore ecological balance (Nepal & Bhattaria, 2024). It adopts a people- and environment-centred approach, asserting that development starts not with goods, but with people (Sharpley, 2000). In other words, true development occurs only when individuals are mentally, physically, and socially fulfilled (Tefler, 2002). However, achieving the objectives of sustainable development requires non-traditional economic models, which place people at the centre of industry development. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global systems, particularly in the tourism industry, when it caused worldwide disruptions and restrictions, underscoring the need for alternative development approaches that are resilient, inclusive, and sustainable (Nepal & Bhattaria, 2024). Traditional recovery strategies often focus narrowly on economic growth, overlooking sustainability and community welfare (Chiawo et al., 2023; Nepal & Bhattaria, 2024). Consequently, the absence of a sustainable development framework can exacerbate vulnerabilities (Schonherr et al., 2023). In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the tourism industry, particularly in Limpopo Province, resulting in long-lasting effects, including increased unemployment (Dube & Nhamo, 2024). Tourism businesses that once cared for families and contributed to the well-being of many communities have been permanently closed due to COVID-19, underscoring the urgency of adopting alternative approaches to tourism recovery (Robina-Ramirez et al., 2021).

Alternative Development Theory is a transformative development framework that challenges traditional development models while prioritising people, sustainability, and public participation (Nepal & Bhattarai, 2024). Alternative Development Theory is a human-centred approach to development, whereby people's needs and challenges, such as poverty, inequity, and unemployment, are addressed (Nepal & Bhattarai, 2024). It further emphasises that, when development occurs, it is important to incorporate indigenous knowledge and ecological practices to avoid exacerbating negative impacts on marginalised communities. Additionally, it emphasises community-driven development while respecting local culture and knowledge systems (Olya, 2020). Most recently, Alternative Development Theory incorporates key themes such as resilience, adaptive co-management, decolonial perspectives, indigenous knowledge, digital innovation, and participatory governance (Nepal & Bhattaria, 2024). This position supports that Alternative Development Theory is a viable framework compared with traditional models, particularly for post-COVID recovery, where resilience and sustainability are critical (Dwyer, 2021).

Integrating Alternative Development Theory into tourism has given rise to various forms of alternative tourism (Sharpley, 2000). These include ecotourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, and heritage tourism, all intended to maximise positive impacts on local economies and communities (Lacher & Nepal, 2010; Vujadinovic et al., 2023). Importantly, because alternative development aligns with sustainability and drives tourism research to explore themes such as indigenous development tourism, local entrepreneurial responses, community empowerment in decision-making processes, and sustainable tourism development (Tefler, 2002). By leveraging cultural resources, Alternative Development Theory fosters inclusive tourism models that empower communities while preserving heritage.

Although cultural and heritage tourism is a key motivation for travel, tourists seek more interaction than passive observation (Hernandez-Rojas et al., 2021). This shift has been noted in academic work over the last two decades by scholars such as Ivanovic (2008), Akis (2011), Richards (2016), Guerreiro et al. (2019), and Al-Ababneh & Masadeh (2019). As a result of this, Pearce and Butler (1993) found there is a development of a new form of tourism namely creative tourism, and it stems from culture and heritage tourism offerings. Creative tourism offers a more authentic experience of local culture through informal, hands-on workshops and creative activities (Raymond, 2007). Workshops take place in small groups at local people's homes and workplaces; they allow visitors to explore their creativity while getting closer to them (Benhaida et al., 2024). Its main characteristics are co-creation, active participation, learning skills, and authentic experience (Dias et al., 2023; Rita et al., 2024).

Co-creation is a collaborative effort between consumers (tourists) and producers (host community), resulting in meaningful and engaging experiences (Rita et al., 2024). Tourists are directly involved in the development of the tourism product they consume, leading to a co-created experience based on both planned and adapted elements tailored to tourists' needs and expectations (Dias et al., 2023). For example, in gastronomic activities, tourists interested in culinary skills can learn to prepare traditional dishes from scratch (Richards & Duxbury, 2021). Active participation also fosters creativity and provides tourists with opportunities to develop their creative potential while immersing themselves in local culture (Douglas et al., 2023). This active engagement is crucial for tourists to fully satisfy their creative urges during the tourism experience (Jonker, 2019). Dias et al. (2021) assert that active participation and the presence of local people serve as markers of authenticity, contributing to authentic experiences, the development of creative potential, and skill enhancement. Authentic experiences through creative experiences also extend beyond typical tourist offerings and often involve tailored activities based on each tourist's needs (Richards & Duxbury, 2021).

To offer and deliver authentic creative tourism, community members must first be aware of the available tangible and intangible resources in their community; they must possess necessary skills, have a willingness to use the available skills and cultural and heritage resources for creative cultural and heritage offerings (Marujo et al., 2021; Carvalho et al., 2024; Morudu et al., 2025). Moreover, communities must also be aware of factors that could potentially restrict their participation in creative tourism offerings and future development (Matyile & Ramukumba, 2024). In light of this, this study aims to explore creative tourism as a sustainable recovery tool within the framework of alternative development theory. The study argues that creative tourism is a viable alternative development strategy for villages and townships post-COVID, as it prioritises sustainability and high community involvement, builds capacity by addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges, and preserves their culture and heritage. Therefore, tourism policymakers and developers must pay greater attention to development strategies that prioritise the overall well-being of the local community. This paper does so by first discussing the awareness of cultural and heritage resources available in communities, the skills available to offer valuable

creative tourism experiences, the local people's willingness to use these resources and skills for creative tourism development, and the challenges that could hinder their participation.

Methodology

This study followed an exploratory quantitative research method. Where a structured survey in the form of self-administered questionnaires **was** used to collect primary data. The study focused on the Capricorn District Municipality in Limpopo Province, South Africa, and surveyed all four local municipalities of the district: Blouberg, Lepelle-Nkumpi, Molelmole, and Polokwane. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to identify the sample size for each municipality. A total of 386 participated in the study, adequate according to the formula proposed by Krecjie and Morgan (1970). The sample was then stratified to represent the Capricorn district for the purposes of generalising the study results. The stratified samples per municipality were as follows: Molemole (37), Blouberg (52), Lepelle-Nkumpi (68), and Polokwane (229). The indicated strata sample sizes were calculated using proportionate stratified sampling across the four local municipalities.

A questionnaire was developed to examine various aspects of culture and heritage, drawing on the work of researchers such as Timothy (2011), Richards (2011; 2012), Jonker (2019), and Mohale (2020). The questionnaire consisted of multiple sections, including open-ended and closed-ended questions. Section A comprised demographic questions to characterise the profile of participants in the Capricorn District Municipality. This section assessed the following five characteristics: gender, age, level of education, employment status, and salary range. Section B evaluated the communities' awareness of cultural and heritage tourism practices within their community. Participants were presented with 30 aspects of culture and heritage to select from, using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = not at all aware and 5 = extremely aware. Section C assessed the communities' creativity in cultural and heritage. Where the willingness to share tangible and intangible cultural and heritage products was assessed. Using a five-point Likert scale where 1 is never willing and 5 is always willing. Participants were also asked in this section to indicate the skills they possessed as well as to rate the quality of those skills. A five-point Likert scale was used to rate the quality of the skills, with 1 indicating very poor and 5 indicating excellent. Section D employed a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) to evaluate the limitations faced in their communities in offering creative tourism experiences. Participants were provided with 13 challenges.

The collected data were entered into Excel and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 30. To interpret the data, descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis were done. The descriptive analysis provided trends, patterns, and characteristics to help interpret the collected data. While exploratory factor analyses identified the underlying structure of the set of variables. Research ethics for this study were approved by the NWU Economic and Management Sciences – Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC).

Results

Descriptive results

This section provides an overview of the results, findings and implications of the study

Participants' profile

Most participants in the study were female (52%), and males accounted for 46%. Non-binary individuals accounted for 2% of the study. In terms of participant age, seven age categories were used: 18-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, 71-80, and older than 81. From the results, 61% of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 years old, and the age categories 71-80 and older than 81 were both at 1%. Participants were also asked to indicate their home language. Sepedi was the most commonly spoken language among participants (93%), and IsiZulu the least (1%). Participants' level of education was as follows: 48% indicated that they have a grade 12 and only 3% had a postgraduate degree. Furthermore, participants were asked to indicate their employment status; most (43%) were unemployed, and 7% were employed part-time. Lastly, the results indicated that 50% of participants preferred not to disclose their income, and only 1% earned R15 000 or more.

Awareness of cultural and heritage in the communities

For this section, participants were asked to identify cultural and heritage activities they see in their surroundings using a five-point Likert scale. Participants indicated a lack of awareness of pottery centres at 33%, art galleries at 29%. Given the high level of lack of product awareness for art galleries, pottery centres, and art-related activities, these products may no longer be available in communities on a large scale. Despite limited awareness of pottery, Limpopo Province is home to a renowned potter, Sarah Munyai (Siaga, 2021). The findings underscore the need for greater visibility and education about the arts in the Capricorn District Municipality. Lack of awareness of initiation schools was 33%, and royal or chief's families or houses accounted for 31%. The low awareness of initiation schools and royal families suggests a decline in interest in these traditional practices. Perhaps the decreased interest in initiation schools could be due to safety issues and death risks associated with this traditional ritual in comparison to modern hospital solutions. Significantly, respondents indicated that they were not aware of initiation schools; however, villages such as Botlokwa and Moletjie still observe this practice annually, and community members also observe associated practices, such as refraining from playing loud music until the Koma (initiation schools) season is over. The lack of awareness of chief families may suggest a disconnect between traditional leaders and communities. Perhaps community leaders have left all the community development responsibilities to government officials. Additionally, the disconnect between community members and traditional leaders may indicate modernisation. According to Rozalska (2016), there is very often a clash between tradition and modernity; however, communities should ideally remain cognisant of traditional leadership.

Moreover, participants were extremely aware of cultural food (34%), cultural events (32%), language appreciation (31%), traditional healers (31%), cultural attire (30%), and traditional leaders (30%). Based on the results, it appears that respondents are highly aware of cultural products they use, experience, or are exposed to on a daily basis, such as food, music, and clothing. According to UNESCO (2025), traditional culinary practices, whether related to everyday life or

special occasions, such as rituals or festive events, constitute an important part of the heritage. This implies that these activities are well integrated into the cultural consciousness of the population at large. Gwerevende and Mthombeni (2023) observed that Africa has been experiencing an increase in the interest of preserving culture and heritage through food, fashion and native languages. This finding shows a difference between participants' daily, household-level awareness of cultural activities and their low awareness of traditional practices and art-related activities (e.g., initiation schools and art galleries).

Overall, these results show the high community awareness of the cultural and heritage resources available in their community. These offer greater potential for developing meaningful and authentic creative tourism activities. Greater awareness can lead to more opportunities for creative tourism offerings. This aligns with findings by Sarantou et al. (2021) that awareness of cultural and heritage tourism products is valuable for a creative, sustainable tourism experience for tourists

Creative cultural and heritage skills possessed by respondents

Respondents were asked to indicate the cultural and heritage skills they currently possess. It was observed that most respondents possessed cooking skills (69%), dancing skills (62%), writing skills (58%), and singing skills (51%). Consistent with findings on awareness of cultural and heritage products, respondents again demonstrate strong cultural skills in everyday life and cultural expression. This indicate cultural and heritage skills that are easily passed down from generation to generation, underscoring the significant role of food, dance, writing, and singing in the transmission of culture and heritage from one generation to the next. Equally, skills such as writing could be associated with the age factor as most respondents of the study were youths and a large number of them (48%) have matric certificates. Contrary to findings by Lebaka (2021) who indicates that Bapedi people use music as an alternative to writing and reading to teach and pass cultural knowledge. However, the results demonstrate that only a minority of the respondents possessed animal slaughtering skills (25%) and traditional hunting skills (24%). These results reflects the low percentage of male participants compared to females in this study, because culturally it is men who hunt and slaughter animals. According to Makgabo (2021), in Bapedi culture, men, as heads of families, are taught the value of becoming providers, a value demonstrated through hunting and farming. However, as people pursue studies, they no longer rely heavily on traditional methods to obtain food. Craft skills were rated low at (24%). Collectively, these results, also indicate the fading of traditions that were a significant part of the lives of people living in Limpopo Province.

In addition, respondents perceive the quality of traditional hunting skills (30%) and animal slaughtering skills (24%) as very poor. The findings shows that respondents are now accustomed to modern conveniences. However, these results deviate from Lebaka's (2019) claim that hunting is highly valued among the Bapedi people, with specific sites set aside for the practice. On the other hand, Ekka (2012) claims that modernisation is also a way of cultural preservation and community improvement. Furthermore, the following skills were perceived as excellent by respondents: cooking (47%), writing (44%), tailoring (43%), acting or drama (41%), and basic

technology (41%). Consistent with earlier findings, daily cultural activities and expressions are prevalent in these communities. The high prevalence of cooking and tailoring skills may be attributable to their frequent use, which leads to skill refinement over time. However, it is notable that despite reluctance to use technology (e.g., for creating videos), basic technology skills were still rated highly (41%). These results denote a lack of confidence in the respondents' ability to use technology. However, technology is a key tool for creating high-quality rural cultural tourism and, in turn, establish digital villages (Chengcai et al., 2014). The excellent quality of drama skills could be attributed to the love of storytelling among Bapedi people. Writing as a skill indicate the emergence of a learning culture among the Bapedi. Aligning with StatsSA (2022:36), which reports that 80.6 per cent of people from age 5-24 in Limpopo attend educational institutions. Skills are very important for transforming cultural and heritage resources into well-intentioned creative tourism products. As noted by Makandwa et al. (2023), the ability to transform cultural and creative tourism, and even the act of being aware of the cultural and heritage resources available in one's community, constitute a skill in their own right. From these skills, be it the cooking, dancing, writing or singing, local communities can derive intangible and tangible creative tourism products that form the backbone of an authentic tourist experience. At the same time, contributing to the meaningful value of tourism development by preserving their cultural and heritage, building a strong community, and advancing the economy and environmental sustainability. According to Sarantou et al. (2021), communities can proactively mobilise these skills, traditions and cultural knowledge, thereby generating sustainable and impactful creative tourism experiences.

Factor analysis results

The willingness to share the tangible and intangible cultural and heritage products

Two factors were identified based on the calculated CA value: tangible and intangible offerings. When analysing the mean value of each factor, intangible offerings, with a mean value of ($\bar{x}$ =3.41) rated higher than tangible offerings ($\bar{x}$=3.33). This finding indicates that respondents were more willing to share intangible cultural and heritage aspects than tangible cultural aspects. Intangible offerings included showcasing a way of life (0.907), engaging in dramatic performances (0.849), and permitting visits to one's home (0.844). The intangible results presented in Table 1 reflect a strong willingness among respondents to share aspects of their way of life, including drama performances, home visits, sleepovers, and the showcasing of traditional cooking methods. Perhaps respondents favour way of life and home visits because of the nature and values of the Bapedi culture. According to Lebaka (2019), Bapedi people are hospitable, helpful and polite.

Tangible offerings with lower factor loadings include showing tourists how to preserve food (0,463), showing tourists how to fetch firewood (0,440), and telling traditional stories (0,437). The strong willingness of respondents to share these tangible items, such as traditional clothing and food, may stem from their abundant availability in communities. This could be a way Bapedi people use to express themselves culturally, keeping the heritage of food and clothing alive. According to Dastjerdi and Shahpouri (2022), food and clothing are important components of cultural identity.

Community members' willingness is crucial because it not only serves as a source of inspiration for new experiences in creative tourism but also as a driving force shaping these experiences (Dias et al., 2023). Moreover, a strong willingness acts as a buffer against challenges, thereby enabling communities to remain involved in creative tourism development even when circumstances change. Willingness encourages communities to learn, adaptability and creativity. Moreover, as communities become increasingly aware of the benefits of tourism participation, their willingness to participate increases further (Dang et al., 2022).

Table 1: Tangible and intangible factor loadings

Factor label	**Factor 1 Intangible**	**Factor 2 Tangible**
Cronbach Alpha Value	0.966	0.953
Mean Value (x̄)	3.413	3.336
Inter-item Correlation	0.580	0.608

Factors necessitating creativity in cultural and heritage tourism

Three factors were identified and labelled as *Support and knowledge*, *Community circumstances*, and *Infrastructure*. Analysing the mean value of each factor revealed that Support and knowledge aspects, with a mean value (x̄) of 3.634 (CA 0.920), were deemed the most necessary for creativity in culture and heritage tourism, as seen in Table 2. This factor encompassed the following statements: a lack of support from community leaders (0.931), a lack of government support (0.879), and a lack of understanding of cultural and tourism products among communities (0.837). The lack of support from community leaders may stem from their focus on traditional issues, which could limit their engagement with tourism development. Additionally, there may be no strong relationship between government officials and community leaders, hindering community leaders' ability to navigate contemporary developments in the field. Additionally, a lack of understanding may indicate an educational gap in the community regarding available resources and how they can be harnessed for economic benefits.

Table 2: Factors necessitating creativity in cultural and heritage tourism in your community

Factor Label	**Factor 1 Support & Knowledge**	**Factor 2 Community circumstances**	**Factor 3 Infrastructure**
Cronbach Alpha Value	0.920	0.824	0.822
Mean Value (x̄)	3.634	3.177	3.314
Inter-item Correlation	0.699	0.482	0.481

The second factor, Community circumstances, had a mean value (x̄) of 3.177. This factor comprises dimensions such as poverty (0.885), lack of interest in tourism (0.864), and unemployment (0.753). The challenge of unemployment implies that respondents may be spending

their time seeking employment, making participation in tourism seem impossible. The high loading of poverty indicates that most community members struggle to maintain a minimum standard of living, which hinders their ability to participate in tourism. According to Sikwela, Tshuma and Tshabalala (2018), unemployment and poverty have been the most prevalent economic challenges in South Africa. In this regard, Struwig and Du Preez (2025) found that poverty and unemployment, in particular, hinder South Africa's youth from participating in tourism. The lack of interest in tourism reveal that respondents could not see how participation in tourism could improve their standard of living or the community's circumstances. It is also worth noting that crime received the lowest loading (0,351) under this community circumstance factor. The third factor is Infrastructure, with a mean value ($\bar{x}$) of 3.314. Poor internet connectivity (0,819), a lack of infrastructure (0,650), and a lack of internet (0.633) had the highest loadings under the infrastructure factor. These results show that, although the communities (Botlokwa, Lebowakgomo, Moletjie, Senwabarwana, Seshego, and Makgabeng) in which participants live may have functional infrastructure to some extent, some participants struggled with internet access, and some had no internet at all. As observed by the researcher during data collection, townships (Lebowakgomo and Seshego) had decent roads with streetlights and signs, whereas villages (Makgabeng, Senwabarwana, Botlokwa and Moletjie) had asphalt concrete in the main roads. Here, participants also struggled with cellular network connectivity. According to Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018), since 2008, roads and telecommunications facilities have been identified as major concerns in Limpopo Province. However, social isolation had a low loading of 0,339. This reveals that respondents are sufficiently close to towns or cities to easily access basic human services. Inadequate knowledge and skills in tourism are considered serious constraints to participation in tourism (Dang et al., 2024). For a successful development of creative tourism, communities must be empowered through knowledge, training, and reskilling. Empowering communities' competencies will affirm them in their role as service providers and co-creators of creative tourism products. Enhancing their confidence to deliver meaningful creative tourism experiences and transfer meaningful and valuable skills to tourists. Thus, resulting in the long-term sustainability of creative tourism development.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore creative tourism as a sustainable recovery tool by examining awareness, skills, willingness, and the challenges that hinder participation in creative tourism. The study's results revealed that local communities in the Capricorn District Municipality have strong awareness of cultural foods, cultural events, language appreciation, traditional healers, cultural attire, and traditional leaders. These elements are deeply integrated into the daily lives of the communities. The high community awareness of the availability of cultural and heritage resources presents the Capricorn District Municipality with a great opportunity to develop a variety of authentic creative tourism offerings. Regarding skills, the majority of Capricorn District Municipality residents have cooking, dancing, writing, and singing skills, skills that are frequently used and passed down across generations. These skills align well with available cultural and

heritage resources and are particularly important for creative tourism development. They are the basis of the intangible creative tourism experience. Through these skills, communities can develop intangible and tangible creative tourism products that underpin an authentic tourist experience. At the same time, contributing to a meaningful value of tourism development, preserving their cultural and heritage, building a strong community, while contributing to their economy and environmental sustainability.

Furthermore, the results revealed a high overall willingness among communities to participate in creative tourism. They are especially willing to share intangible creative tourism offerings, such as way of life. This willingness is a vital source of inspiration for the development of creative tourism and its sustainability. When communities are inspired, they can harness available resources and skills to be innovative. Willingness will also strengthen local communities by enabling them to address the challenges they face. Their willingness to continue participating will be strengthened by observing the sustained benefits of creative tourism. Despite strong awareness, skills, and willingness, several challenges must be addressed to ensure the successful development of creative tourism. These issues relate to support and knowledge, community circumstances, and infrastructure. If left unaddressed, these factors can hinder meaningful participation and, consequently, the successful development of creative tourism. Nevertheless, creative tourism has the potential to help alleviate some of the challenges over time. Particularly, unemployment and limited economic opportunities can be addressed by creating employment and reducing economic leakages.

Therefore, creative tourism offers an opportunity to rejuvenate tourism destinations post-COVID by packaging cultural and heritage resources creatively, thereby offering tourists memorable experiences with a special emphasis on intangible resources and the local community. By emphasising intangible resources, local people, co-creation, high local participation, and direct benefits for local communities, it constitutes a sustainable alternative form of development. This approach supports sustainable development for several reasons. Firstly, it brings communities together to lead development, thus building longevity. Secondly, focusing on intangible offerings helps protect the tangible cultural and heritage assets of the local community. Thirdly, it promotes sustainable practice by leveraging intangible resources over tangible resources. Lastly, by diversifying the cultural and heritage resources through creativity, the destination will have a continuous growth opportunity.

For future studies, it is recommended that, based on the findings of this study, an in-depth exploration be conducted to identify the unique cultural and heritage practices of each community. It is also suggested that the same study be conducted using a qualitative method to elicit the perspectives of the government and the private sector. Although this study identified factors that necessitate creativity in culture and heritage and explored hindrances to participation, a further study could investigate these factors in greater depth, as well as their possible impact on creative tourism development.

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Repeat or Not Repeat? Beyond the Algorithm: Decoding Guest Loyalty Signals with Explainable AI and Bayesian Networks

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to understand the behavioral loyalty of repeat hotel guests with the help of digital footprints. It proposes a new 4S-4SI (Social Noise, Pattern, Meaning, Decision) framework to address the "Black Box" problem of machine learning (ML) and structurally compares the loyalty mechanisms of city hotels and resort hotels.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study used a dataset of 75,166 Portuguese hotel reservations obtained from Kaggle. Using a methodological triangulation approach, the study employed XGBoost for effective pattern recognition, SHAP analysis to identify drivers based on signaling theory, and Bayesian networks to uncover probabilistic dependencies and formulate strategic "what if" scenarios.

Results: Findings revealed that "lead time" (booking window) was the primary determinant of loyalty in both segments. However, probabilistic dependencies differed significantly: In city hotels, loyalty was found to be more utilitarian, structurally linked to B2B corporate channels, single business trips, and non-refundable cancellation policies. In contrast, loyalty in resort hotels was understood to have a more hedonistic structure, related to family/couple stays, proximity to the local market, flexible policies, and special requests.

Originality/value: Our study plays a pioneering role in integrating the novel 4S-4SI framework into hospitality research, successfully transforming raw data into strategic wisdom.

Keywords Guest Loyalty, Explainable AI (XAI), Bayesian Networks, Signaling Theory, Behavioral Loyalty

Introduction

The hospitality sector has seen a dramatic transformation in the past 20 years due to growing global competition and digitization. Building on the loyalty of current guests and converting them into repeat business is more important for the long-term viability of the hotel industry in this setting than bringing in new ones. In contrast to new customers, loyal customers have a higher lifetime value (CLV) and incur substantially lower acquisition costs, according to the literature. Given the unstable state of the economy today, this theory is gaining traction (Kandampully et al., 2015; Vives & Ostrovskaya, 2024). Nonetheless, the processes that influence visitors' choices to stay at a hotel again are incredibly intricate. The complex patterns between multidimensional variables

such as price perception, booking behavior, geographic origin, and service experience reveal that loyalty cannot be reduced to a simple correlation equation.

In marketing literature, customer loyalty has traditionally been examined by distinguishing between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. These analyses primarily rely on survey-based structural equation modeling (SEM) or logistic regression (So et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2006). However, Kim et al. (2021) and Hu et al. (2019) have demonstrated through empirical research that the 'intention to return' measured by surveys often does not align with actual booking behavior, and the gap between stated intention and actual behavior is not always consistent. In this context, rather than using psychometric approaches to measure attitudinal intentions, the “behavioral loyalty” and “revealed preference” perspectives, based on guests' digital footprints, provide a much more robust empirical foundation for comprehending genuine repeat visit patterns.

Machine learning (ML) algorithms, which came to the forefront with the questioning of survey-based results, have demonstrated superior predictive success in modeling layered structures in hospitality research (Hu et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021). However, this superiority has brought with it the “Black Box” problem (Petch et al. 2022). While recent studies continue to prove the high predictive accuracy of ML methods in modeling repeat customer behavior (Dursun-Cengizci & Caber, 2025), the inherent opacity of these algorithms remains a challenge. Addressing this black box problem, Kim et al. (2021) documents that current discussions do not consider prediction accuracy alone a sufficient academic contribution; while Petch et al. (2022) argue that algorithmic transparency is an ethical and managerial requirement. For example; a model's ability to predict who will return to the hotel again only has the potential to offer tactical-level suggestions, which is insufficient for strategic decision-making.

This study is based on Signaling Theory, whose methodological and theoretical framework was established by Spence (1973) and adapted to management literature by Connelly et al. (2011). According to this theory, in information asymmetry environments, actors communicate with each other through observable quality signals. The hospitality sector, due to its character as an “experience good,” exhibits significant information asymmetry. In this context, pricing (ADR) and cancellation policies function as “quality signals” for a hotel business, while for the guest, booking window (lead time) and special requests can be considered “loyalty or risk signals.” The SHAP (SHapley Additive Explanations) methodology, developed by Lundberg and Lee (2017), has the potential to help decipher these seemingly complex patterns. It objectively measures the marginal contributions of signals to behavioral loyalty and deciphers guests' revealed preferences within the transparent framework of data science. Building on this theoretical alignment, Atabay et al. (2026) demonstrated that deciphering these signals through explainable models provides a higher level of granularity in distinguishing between transient service encounters and long-term loyalty manifestations.

Additionally, the factors shaping loyalty decisions are not the same for all hotel types. The signals in question are encoded differently in City and Resort hotels. In City hotels, utilitarian motivations focused on 'Frictionless Transactions,' characterized by short booking windows (lead time) and

prioritizing time cost, are dominant (Qiu et al., 2015); while in Resort hotels, hedonic consumption, represented by specific demands, is more strongly associated with loyalty (Wilkins et al., 2009). Although the literature has proven that modeling these two segments separately provides a much higher academic contribution than a general analysis (Williams et al., 2021); A significant portion of existing studies (Hasan, 2023; Dursun-Cengizci & Caber, 2025) mask structural differences by treating hotel type as a simple dummy variable. Furthermore, while traditional frequentist statistical methods are insufficient for capturing conditional dependencies between these segments, Bayesian Networks (BN) offer a radical advantage in modeling causal structures between variables (Pearl, 2000; Koller & Friedman, 2009).

Our study aims to fill three fundamental gaps in the literature, (i) the neglect of interpretability in big data studies, (ii) the inability of survey studies to capture behavioral loyalty, and (iii) the lack of simultaneous comparison of hotel types at the probabilistic dependencies level, with a meticulous methodological approach. We apply a uniquely designed 4S-4SI (Social Noise – Social Pattern – Social Meaning – Social Decision) framework, inspired by the DIKW (Data–Information–Meaning–Wisdom) hierarchy, to publicly available hotel reservation records (António et al., 2019). In this context, in noisy reservation data, the XGBoost algorithm patterns the information; SHAP values give meaning to this information based on Signaling Theory; and Bayesian Networks generate strategic wisdom (Decision) through probabilistic what-if scenarios.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a multi-layered quantitative approach aimed at identifying the factors influencing guest loyalty (tendency to rebook) based on hotel reservation data and interpreting these factors probabilistically. The methodological foundation of the research is based on integrating the 4S-4SI (Four S [Social Noise, Social Pattern, Social Meaning, Social Decision] for Social Insights) framework, originally developed by the authors, which conceptualizes the DIKW (Data, Information, Knowledge, Wisdom) hierarchy at the epistemological level (Rowley, 2007), transforming raw data into strategic wisdom (Figure 1).

The four successive evolutionary stages of the analytical process are listed below:

1. **Data → Social Noise (WHAT?):** Removing structural noise from raw data and defining operational variables.
2. **Information → Social Pattern (HOW?):** Discovering nonlinear latent dependencies and patterns in data using classification algorithms.
3. **Knowledge → Social Meaning (WHY?):** Making the marginal effects and directions (causes) of algorithmic decisions transparent using Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) tools.
4. **Wisdom → Social Decision (WHAT IF?):** Generating probabilistic "what-if" scenarios derived from conditional dependencies through Bayesian networks to facilitate strategic transformation decisions.

2.1.Sample and Analytic Approach

A publicly available data set, containing reservation records from a resort and a city hotel located in Portugal between 2015 and 2017 was used in our analysis (António, et al. 2019). The raw data set, consisting of a total of 119,390 observations and 32 variables, was first purged of cancelled reservations, as loyalty behavior can only be measured in completed stays. Then, the data set was divided into two by hotel type; after filtering, 28,938 observations for the resort hotel and 46,228 observations for the city hotel were included in the analysis. The dependent variable of the study, is_repeated_guest, is a binary (0/1) indicator showing whether the guest has previously preferred the same hotel.

2.2. Social Noise - Data Preprocessing (Data Layer)

Various preprocessing steps were applied to reduce "social noise" in the dataset and prepare a clean ground for machine learning algorithms. In the missing data analysis, the company variable, which had a missing data rate exceeding 94%, was removed; gaps in the agent and children variables were filled with 0, and the missing data in the country variable were filled with “Unknown” to minimize information loss. To add theoretical depth to the analytical framework, the Season variable, representing the four seasons, was derived from the arrival month (arrival_date_month); and the Guest_Type variable, including the Single, Couple, Family, and Group/Other categories, was derived from the number of adults and children. IQR (Interquartile Range) based winsorization was applied to prevent the distribution of extreme values in continuous variables from being distorted. The upper bound determination was performed with the following formula:

$$Upper = Q_3 + 1.5 \times IQR, \quad IQR = Q_3 - Q_1$$

Finally, the previous booking history variables (previous_bookings_not_cancelled and previous_cancellations), which create a direct derivative/causal loop with the dependent variable and have the potential to lead to data leakage, were removed from the analysis.

2.3. Social Pattern: Machine Learning Modelling (Information Layer)

The XGBoost algorithm was used to detect hidden patterns in the data and predict loyalty behavior. This algorithm, which minimizes error by sequentially adding decision trees, has the following objective function defined:

$$Obj(\Theta) = \sum_i l(y_i, \hat{y_i}) + \sum_k \Omega(f_k)$$

The fact that the rate of returning guests is only 3–4% in both hotel types in the dataset indicates a severe class imbalance. To overcome this problem and prevent the model from ignoring the minority class, the scale_pos_weight hyperparameter has been optimized and integrated into the model with the following equation:

$$scale_pos_weight = \frac{|y = 0|_{train}}{|y = 1|_{train}}$$

The models were trained with 80% training and 20% test data; in performance evaluation, in addition to the Accuracy metric, Precision, Recall, F1-Score, and AUC-ROC curve, which are more reliable in unbalanced datasets, were used.

2.4. Social Meaning: SHAP-Based Explainability (Knowledge Layer)

To decipher the decision-making mechanism behind the high prediction performance of the XGBoost model and to add "meaning" to the patterns, the SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) method was employed. Based on cooperative game theory, SHAP calculates the marginal contribution of a feature to the model output for the i-th observation using the following formula:

$$\phi_i = \sum_{S \subseteq F \setminus \{i\}} \frac{|S|!\,(|F| - |S| - 1)!}{|F|!} [f(S \cup \{i\}) - f(S)]$$

In this study, TreeExplainer was used to generate both summary plots showing the global impact of all features on the target variable and waterfall plots explaining individual guest decisions; thus, black box algorithms were brought to a transparent and theoretically interpretable level.

2.5. Social Decision: Bayesian Networks and Probabilistic Causality (Wisdom Layer)

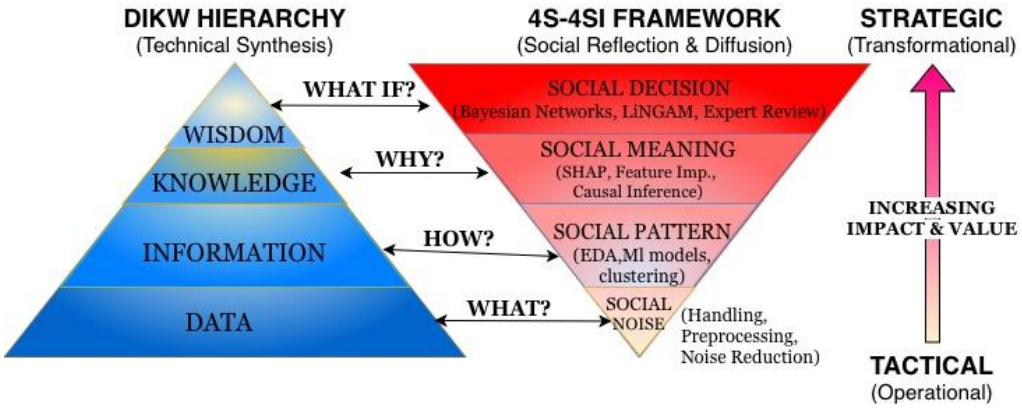
Bayesian Networks, which model the conditional dependencies between variables using Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs), were used in the transition phase from prediction to strategic decision-making. Unlike machine learning, Bayesian networks do not focus solely on prediction but offer a probabilistic structure showing under what conditions variables influence each other.

The HillClimbSearch algorithm from the pgmpy library was used for automatic learning of the network structure from the data. The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC-d) score, which penalizes the complexity of the model and prevents overfitting, was optimized with the following formula:

$$BIC = -2 \cdot ln(\hat{L}) + k \cdot ln(n)$$

Following structure learning, Conditional Probability Tables (CPT) were estimated using the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) method. The "VariableElimination" algorithm was run on the trained network to calculate the probability of a guest returning under various evidence scenarios; thus, "wisdom" was generated for "what-if" strategies for City and Resort hotels.

Figure 2. 4S-4SI Framework



3.Results

This section presents the analytical findings of the research, following the successive layers (Pattern, Meaning, Decision) of the 4S-4SI methodological framework. The analyses encompass identifying patterns in the dataset, interpreting the meanings of these patterns using Signaling

Theory, and ultimately transforming them into probabilistic scenarios for strategic decision-making processes.

Table 2. XGBoost Model Performance After Data Leakage Correction

	Resort Hotel		**City Hotel**	
is_repeated_guest	**n**	**%**	**n**	**(%)**
Repeated (1)	1,667	5.76%	1,591	3.44%
Not Repeated (0)	27,271	94.24%	44,637	96.56%
Metric	**Resort Train**	**Resort Test**	**City Train**	**City Test**
Accuracy	0.916	0.884	0.980	0.969
F1-Score	0.575	0.420	0.772	0.635
Precision	0.405	0.295	0.629	0.529
Recall	0.988	0.730	1.000	0.792

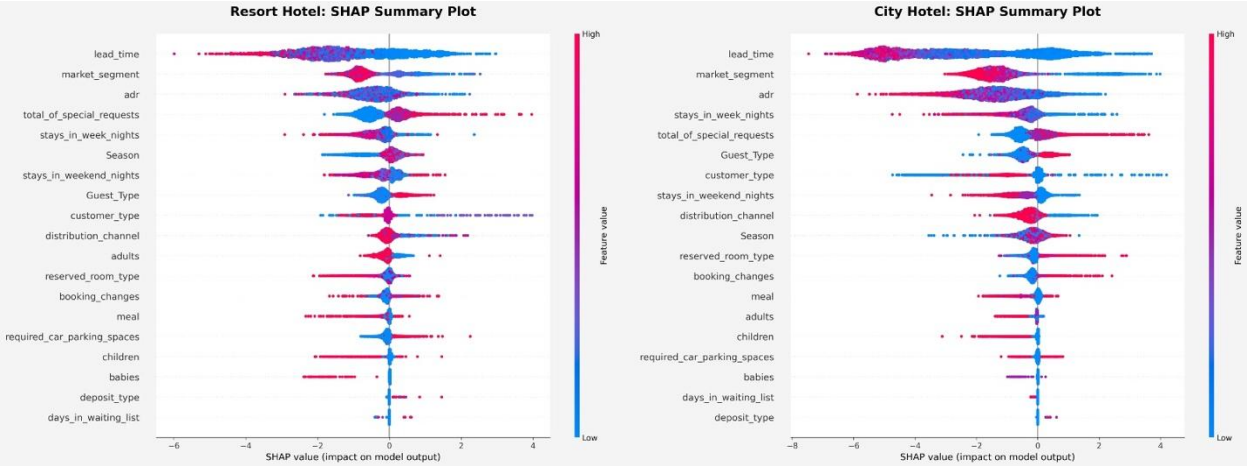
3.1. Social Pattern: Discovery of Behavioral Patterns and ML Performance (Information)

When the dataset was examined, it was determined that 61.4% (46,228) of the total 75,166 reservation records were City Hotel observations, and 38.6% (28,938) were Resort Hotel observations. Both hotel types exhibited a significant class imbalance. The repeat guest rate was found to be 3.44% in City Hotels and 5.76% in Resort Hotels. To increase the generalizability of the model and prevent data leakage, the previous booking variables were removed. The City Hotel model achieved an accuracy rate of 96.9% in the test set; the Resort model, on the other hand, exhibited an accuracy rate of 88.4% in the test set. Given that the cost of failing to identify a loyal guest outweighs the cost of misclassification, Recall was prioritized as the primary evaluation metric. The Recall metrics, which demonstrate the model's ability to accurately capture returning guests, were measured at 0.792 for the City Hotel and 0.730 for the Resort Hotel. This proves the model's strong performance in “not losing loyal guests.” The AUC-ROC analysis showed high values of 0.967 for the City Hotel model and 0.897 for the Resort model in the test set. The Confusion Matrix results revealed that the models exhibited very high specificity, particularly in classifying the core group of guests who are unlikely to return.

3.2. Social Meaning: Deciphering Behavioral Signals with SHAP (Knowledge)

To understand the behavioral motivations behind the patterns captured by the XGBoost model, SHAP values were examined and evaluated within the context of Signaling Theory.

Figure 3.Global SHAP Analysis of Decision-Making Mechanisms (City vs. Resort)



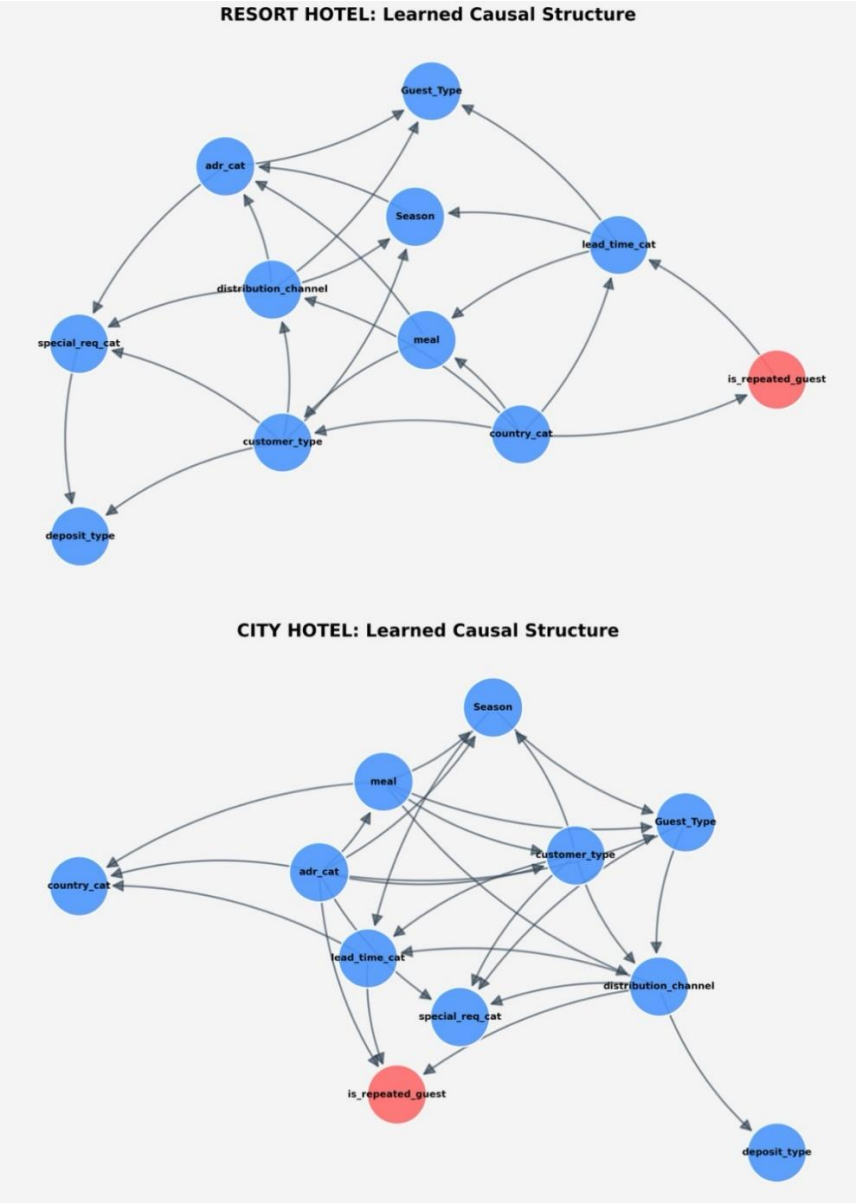
The global SHAP analysis (Figure 2) proved that the lead_time (booking window) variable was the signal with the highest marginal impact on model decisions in both segments. Shorter booking times were found to strongly increase the probability of loyalty in both models. In addition, the increase in the total_of_special_requests variable positively impacted the model outputs by up to +4 units, statistically demonstrating that the demand for service personalization acts as a "loyalty signal". Demographic details such as children and babies clustered near the zero axis in SHAP values, offering a statistically limited marginal contribution to loyalty prediction.

When individual guest decisions were examined at the local SHAP level; in a typical "loyal guest" (Target=1) example in the resort segment, customer type dominated the decision with a positive marginal effect of +1.85 units and short lead time with +1.16 units. In a loyal guest (Target=1) in a city hotel, the most dominant positive driving force was the market segment with a contribution of +2.48 units, followed by room type (reserved_room_type, +0.87) and special requests (+0.79). In a "new guest" profile (Target=0) who would not choose the city hotel again; high negative marginal pressures for the guest_type (-2.43) and customer_type (-2.15) variables were found to definitively pull the probability of loyalty below the threshold.

3.3. Social Decision: Bayesian Networks and Probabilistic Strategy Generation (Wisdom)

After determining the marginal contributions of the signals, Bayesian Networks (BN) were constructed to map probabilistic dependencies between variables and generate strategic "What-If" scenarios.

Figure 4. Learned Probabilistic Bayesian Network Structures (City vs. Resort)



When the learned probabilistic network structures (Figure 3) are examined, it is probabilistically determined that the target variable, loyalty (is_repeated_guest), in the Resort segment is directly affected by country_cat (country of origin) and lead_time_cat (booking time). The country variable acts as a central node in the network structure, shaping the loyalty mechanism. In the network structure of the City hotel segment, the structural dynamics differ; it is observed that the variables directly connected to the loyalty target node are lead_time_cat and special_req_cat (special requests). It has been empirically proven that market_segment and distribution channels establish a dense network of conditional associations through guest profile (Guest_Type, customer_type) in the city hotel.

Table 3. Factors Affecting Repeat Visit Probabilities by Hotel Type (Bayesian Inference)

Category	Factor (Evidence)	Resort Hotel (%)	City Hotel (%)	Difference (R-C)
ADR (Price)	High	4.47%	1.01%	+3.46
	Medium	5.59%	1.94%	+3.65
	Low	7.25%	7.02%	+0.23
Lead Time	Last Minute	14.27%	12.00%	+2.27
	Short Term	4.90%	3.48%	+1.42
	Medium Term	1.68%	0.59%	+1.09
	Long Term	1.33%	0.08%	+1.25
Special Requests	None	6.17%	4.60%	+1.57
	Some	5.32%	2.26%	+3.05
Season	Winter	8.48%	6.45%	+2.03
	Autumn	5.44%	3.52%	+1.92
	Spring	5.75%	2.97%	+2.79
	Summer	4.06%	1.90%	+2.16
Guest Type	Single	9.04%	8.95%	+0.09
	Couple	5.03%	1.93%	+3.10
	Family	4.77%	1.13%	+3.64
	Group/Other	4.11%	0.97%	+3.13
Deposit Type	No Deposit	5.77%	3.34%	+2.43
	Refundable	4.80%	16.53%	-11.73
	Non-Refund	4.51%	22.40%	-17.90
Distribution	Corporate	8.82%	31.32%	-22.50
	Direct	8.12%	5.62%	+2.50
	TA/TO	4.58%	0.98%	+3.61
Country	Portugal (PRT)	13.62%	6.95%	+6.67
	United Kingdom (GBR)	1.55%	1.49%	+0.07
	Spain (ESP)	1.16%	3.78%	-2.62
	France (FRA)	1.14%	2.35%	-1.21
	Germany (DEU)	0.57%	1.51%	-0.94
	Other	1.98%	2.36%	-0.38
Meal Plan	BB (Bed & Breakfast)	6.56%	3.96%	+2.60
	SC (Self Catering)	6.56%	1.68%	+4.89
	FB (Full Board)	4.53%	10.19%	-5.66
	HB (Half Board)	2.98%	0.64%	+2.34
Customer Type	Group	8.40%	5.30%	+3.10

Transient	6.43%	3.76%	+2.67
Transient-Party	4.34%	2.44%	+1.90
Contract	2.20%	1.48%	+0.72

The results of Bayesian Inference performed through network structures (Table 2) quantitatively reveal the loyalty probabilities under operational conditions:

First, when Price (ADR) and Lead Time Signals are evaluated, in line with Signaling theory, the low price level produces the highest repeat visit probability in both segments (Resort: 7.25%; City: 7.02%). "Last-minute" bookings are a dramatic indicator of loyalty in both types (Resort: 14.27%; City: 12.00%).

Secondly, when distribution channels and cancellation policies are examined, corporate bookings in City hotels achieve a high repeat visit rate (31.32%), confirming the B2B dynamics of the market. The high repeat visit rate of 22.40% for non-refundable bookings in City hotels suggests that this restrictive signal aligns with the corporate guest profile.

Thirdly, when country and demographic dynamics are examined, guests from Portugal (PRT) show a relatively high loyalty trend of 13.62% in Resort hotels, demonstrating the strength of the local market. Family and couple booking types strongly dominate loyalty in Resort hotels, while City hotels are more prominent in the single business travel segment (8.95%).

4. Conclusion

4.1. Discussions

This research examined guest loyalty in the hospitality industry through the lens of "Signaling Theory." Rather than relying on traditional statements of revisit intention, the research focused on actual booking data. Using the developed 4S-4SI framework, repeat visit patterns in City and Resort hotels were analyzed through the integration of machine learning (XGBoost), SHAP, and Bayesian Networks.

Our findings revealed that loyalty mechanisms differed significantly across hotel segments, supporting Williams et al. (2021)'s argument that merging different segments into a single model could affect the analysis results. According to the analysis, the booking window (lead time) emerged as the strongest predictor (signal) of loyalty in both hotel types. The high positive correlation between last-minute (short lead time) bookings and loyalty reflected guests' tendency to make quick decisions towards businesses they trust and are familiar with. This specific sensitivity to lead time and pricing signals also resonates with the highly contemporary discussions on strategic consumer behavior in hospitality. As recently conceptualized by Kmiecik and António (2026), modern guests increasingly exploit dynamic pricing and flexible policies by canceling and rebooking to capture rate drops. Our Bayesian Network findings expand this perspective by demonstrating that “lead time” and “deposit policies” are not merely operational parameters for revenue management; they act as probabilistic loyalty anchors that determine whether a guest engages in strategic rebooking or commits to genuine, long-term behavioral loyalty.

Loyalty in the city hotel was found to be shaped around corporate channels, single business trips, and non-refundable deposit policies. This structure empirically confirmed the utilitarian

motivations focused on time cost and frictionless transaction in city hotels, as highlighted by Qiu et al. (2015). The fact that strict deposit rules are seen as complementing, rather than undermining, loyalty in the city hotel suggests that commitment in this segment may be a structural outcome of B2B (corporate) agreements rather than individual preferences.

In contrast, according to the resort hotel results, loyalty was observed as a hedonic consumption network shaped by family and couple stays, geographical proximity (local/regional guests), and flexible payment terms. The positive contribution of special requests to the decision-making mechanism in the resort hotel was found to be consistent with Davras and Caber (2019), who highlight that specialized service elements function as critical determinants in resort guest expectations; a role we identify as a central node within our probabilistic model.

Last but not least, operational variables (price, cancellation policy, lead time, special requests) were not merely statistical inputs. Within the framework of Signaling Theory, they were found to tend to function as "quality, commitment, and risk signals" (Atabay et al., 2026). This finding is consistent with recent literature that goes beyond purely predictive "black box" models (Petch et al. 2022) to understand the roots of probabilistic dependencies in customer reservation behavior (Atabay et al., 2026).

4.2. Implications

We believe our research offers multifaceted and innovative contributions to the hospitality literature. Firstly, our most significant contribution at the theoretical and methodological level is the introduction of the 4S-4SI (Social Noise, Pattern, Meaning, Decision) framework to the literature by expanding the epistemological hierarchy of DIKW, which transforms data into wisdom. This serves to address the evolutionary stages of data with a methodological discipline, particularly in social science research based on big data. Secondly, while much of the existing research relies on machine learning algorithms that offer high predictive performance but provide tactical-level insights, this study proposes a "Methodological Triangulation" approach by combining SHAP (Explainable Artificial Intelligence - XAI) and Bayesian Networks (BN). Thirdly, our study suggests, within the framework of signaling theory, that behavioral patterns of loyalty in both city and resort hotel examples can be represented by different signals. This approach demonstrates that the concept of servicescape is applicable to different hotel types, and that utilitarian and hedonic consumption values as theorized by Babin et al. (1994) and empirically validated in the hospitality context by El-Adly and Abu ELSamen (2018) and Ozturk et al (2023) function as distinct loyalty signals across these segments, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of behavioral loyalty formation (Tanford, 2016).

At the managerial and practical level, the probabilistic "What-If" scenarios presented in the study offer hotel managers data-driven and segment-specific tactics instead of homogeneous and hypothetical marketing strategies. For example, strategic implications have been obtained for City Hotels. The loyalty architecture of city hotels is largely based on B2B (business-to-business) relationships and corporate channels. Managers of these hotels should deepen corporate agreements and optimize conference and event bookings. Non-refundable cancellation policies,

which generate high repeat visit rates, should continue to be consistently applied as a structural tool to secure the routines of corporate guests, rather than as a risk factor that reduces loyalty. The capacity for "seamless transactions" should be maximized to meet short lead-time expectations. Resort hotels, on the other hand, create an organic loyalty cycle among individual vacationers, families, and couples rather than corporate agreements. In this context, hotel management; Resorts should design loyalty programs that encourage direct booking channels and strengthen local/regional marketing efforts (Portugal market for our sample). Unlike city hotels, strict deposit rules clash with resort guests' expectations of flexibility and hedonic preferences, so refundable or flexible payment plans should be positioned as a signal to increase loyalty. Furthermore, meticulously fulfilling special requests should be viewed not as an operational cost, but as a long-term investment in loyalty, as it directly enhances the perception of experiential quality. Lastly, an understanding of the probabilistic dependencies of pricing and lead time signals enables revenue managers to proactively guard against strategic consumer behaviours. Rather than applying dynamic pricing blindly, which risks “revenue leakage” through opportunistic cancel-and-rebook behaviours, managers can use these Bayesian “what if” scenarios to set intelligent pricing guardrails. This may ensure that last-minute discounts or flexible policies attract new demand rather than undermining the profitability of existing reservations made by loyal customers.

4.3. Limitations

Although our study provides a comprehensive and innovative methodological framework for repeat guest dynamics in the hospitality industry, there are some limitations. Firstly, the dataset used for the analyses is limited to the reservation records of two relatively 'old' hotels (City and Resort), which are located only in Portugal and are publicly shared. This has the potential to limit the generalisability of our findings to different geographical regions, cultural contexts, or economic situations that change over time. Secondly, as the study was based on behavioural traces, the emotional processes of guests before, during and after their experience were excluded from the scope of the analysis.

The 4S-4SI framework is preliminary and open to development. While this study provides sample analysis methods that can be used at each stage, the framework also has the ability to combine different analyses and approaches. In this study, the Bayesian Network structures were learned using a purely data-driven approach without incorporating prior expert knowledge or structural constraints. Therefore, more nuanced and operationally precise results can be obtained by integrating domain expertise as prior beliefs via human-in-the-loop (HITL) at the 'social decision' stage. Similarly, incorporating guests' online comments and feedback (e.g. sentiment analysis or topic modelling) into the model as variables using Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques can enhance the model's predictive and explanatory capabilities. From a methodological point of view, causal discovery algorithms such as LiNGAM (Linear Non-Gaussian Acyclic Model) can be tested as an alternative to, or in addition to, Bayesian networks (BN) to discover causal structures.

Additionally, our research framework can easily be used in data-oriented social science studies. In the context of tourism, using it in different types of hotels or services will also contribute to the development of data-oriented literature.

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Building Soft Power Through Taste: An Analysis of Türkiye's Gastronomy Cities in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network from a Gastrodiplomacy Perspective

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[1,2,3]Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University, Turkey

Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to explore Türkiye's soft power potential by analyzing the geographically indicated gastronomic products of Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar-cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the field of gastronomy-from a gastrodiplomacy perspective.

Study design/methodology/approach: Using qualitative content analysis, 213 documents from official institutional websites were analyzed, generating 2024 codes grouped under six themes: cultural heritage, stakeholders, place in events, economic development, global branding, and gastronomic diversity.

Results: Findings reveal that gastronomic products are closely associated with local identity, historical continuity, traditional production, and authenticity. Their active presence in social rituals such as weddings, festivals, and religious celebrations demonstrates gastronomy's role in strengthening cultural continuity and social cohesion. The involvement of municipalities, chambers of commerce, universities, and other public institutions in certification and monitoring processes indicates that gastronomic heritage is maintained through a multi-stakeholder governance structure. However, the limited visibility of economic development and global branding themes suggests that this cultural potential has not yet been fully transformed into strategic international value.

Originality/value: The study contributes to the literature by positioning geographically indicated gastronomic products as city-based soft power resources within the framework of gastrodiplomacy.

Keywords UNESCO Creative Cities Network Gastrodiplomacy Soft Power

Introduction

Today, cultural diplomacy and creative industries stand out as strategic tools that enhance cities' international visibility and soft power capacity. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) was established in 2004 to promote cultural diversity, sustainable development, and international cooperation, with gastronomy added in 2005 (UNESCO, 2026). Within this network, gastronomy is positioned not only as the preservation of culinary culture but also as a strategic element in terms of economic development, tourism, and cultural diplomacy (Xiaomin, 2017). In this context, the concept of "gastrodiplomacy" provides a critical framework for understanding the role played by gastronomy cities in global interaction. Gastrodiplomacy is a soft power strategy used by states

and cities to promote their culinary cultures internationally and strengthen cultural interaction (Chang & Mak, 2018; Cabral et al., 2025). This concept has emerged prominently in cultural diplomacy literature, particularly in the 21st century, demonstrating that gastronomy can be used as a communication tool in international relations (Solleh, 2015; Gordin et al., 2016; Gulisova, 2022; Rinaldi et al., 2025). UNESCO Gastronomy Cities provide concrete examples of gastronomic diplomacy in this context. For example, the Chinese city of Chengdu strengthens its cultural identity and contributes to global gastronomic tourism by bringing Sichuan cuisine to the international gastronomic stage (Bütün & Önçel, 2019).

UNESCO's 2024 report reveals that gastronomy cities are directly linked to sustainable development goals. The report emphasizes that gastronomy cities make significant contributions in areas such as reducing food waste, supporting local producers, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices (UNESCO, 2024). This approach positions gastronomy not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a tool for economic and environmental sustainability. Gastronomic diplomacy makes this process visible at the international level and ensures the integration of gastronomy cities into global cooperation networks.

One of the aims of the study is to reveal the gastrodiplomatic potential of UCCN Turkey Gastronomy Cities and to enable this feature to be used more actively. The research is important in terms of the more active use of Turkey's gastronomy cities in gastrodiplomacy and making this field visible in the literature. In this context, there are three cities from Turkey in the UCCN gastronomy field. These are Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar. Within the scope of the research, the gastrodiplomacy potential of the geographically indicated gastronomic products of these three cities was examined. The research questions developed within this scope are as follows:

RQ1: Are UCCN Turkey gastronomy cities a tool for Turkey's gastrodiplomacy?

RQ2: Are UCCN Turkey gastronomy cities actively used as a tool for gastrodiplomacy?

Gastronomy in the Context of Soft Power Theory and Cultural Diplomacy

Power is the capacity to influence the behaviour of others (Nye, 2023). In this sense, the concept of power is associated with population, natural resources, economic size, land area, military capacity, and political stability (Ahmad, 2012; Strüver & Wegenast, 2018). In the international relations literature, hard power focuses on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions, which are the coercive tools a state uses to impose its will on other actors (Wilson, 2008; Peksen & Jeong, 2022). This strategy is based on coercion rather than persuasion. On the other hand, soft power, conceptualized by Joseph Nye (1990), is the ability to impress and persuade others through legitimate policies without military or economic coercion. Countries' soft power resources include culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2008). Public diplomacy is the process of transforming a state's soft power resources into strategic communication tools to build a positive image in the minds of foreign audiences (Cull, 2010; Buhmann, 2016; Hedling, 2025). The application areas of public diplomacy include cultural diplomacy, digital diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, educational diplomacy, health diplomacy, sports diplomacy, citizen diplomacy, and gastrodiplomacy.

Gastronomy plays a strategic role in understanding cultural identity (Chang & Mak, 2018; Cabral et al., 2025). In this sense, gastronomic diplomacy is a strategic public diplomacy application area that aims to build emotional bridges in other countries by utilizing the power of culinary culture (Rockower, 2012). This field reaches the hearts and minds of foreign societies through their stomachs, promotes national gastronomic heritage, creates interaction between cultures, fosters a positive country image in the international public sphere, encourages cultural appreciation, and increases country recognition and prestige (Schwarz et al., 2021; Dixit & Prayag, 2022; Felayati et al., 2025). States build bridges through their gastronomic heritage. This process paves the way for political friction to be replaced by economic and social cooperation, strengthening sustainable development practices (Cornago, 2018; Teughels, 2021; Krishna, 2022). From another perspective, culinary cultures can be used as a tool to strengthen the identity, image, and appeal of a city or country, while gastrodiplomacy can play a critical role in nation and city branding (Solleh, 2015; Gordin et al., 2016; Gulisova, 2022; Rinaldi et al., 2025). When all these strategic components are brought together, it can be said that gastrodiplomacy has become one of the most concrete, sensory, and interactive expressions of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is the process of sharing ideas, knowledge, art, and other cultural elements with the aim of developing mutual understanding (Rawnsley, 2020; Faucher & Zhu, 2025). In this context, cuisine represents a nation's values, layers of history, and way of life directly 'at the table' by offering a universal system of symbols independent of language and political borders. Consequently, this soft power gained through gastrodiplomacy can serve the fundamental goal of cultural diplomacy: building trust and sympathy among foreign populations. By using their culinary heritage as a diplomatic instrument, states can go beyond merely producing an economic commodity and create a deep cultural dialogue that makes their identity permanent on a global scale.

UNESCO Creative Cities Network and the Gastronomy Field

Following the publication of the Declaration on Cultural Diversity in 2001, which established 17 cultural standards, UNESCO established an international cooperation network in 2004 by incorporating the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) into its structure, placing culture and creativity at the center of sustainable urban development (Yaldız and Olcay, 2020; Çorman and Özdemir Yılmaz, 2023). The concept of creative cities has emerged as a new urban model that aims to revitalize creativity and identity in art and culture. This revitalization aims to create new economic areas. Thus, new opportunities have been created in the industry and employment market (Dağdelen and Pamukçu, 2021; Çekal, 2022). UCCN covers 408 cities in over 100 countries (UNESCO, 2026). The UCCN has been active in seven creative fields for many years, but with the inclusion of architecture in 2025, it has reached eight creative fields. This initiative aims to raise awareness of global and local socio-cultural values (Çorman and Özdemir Yılmaz, 2023).

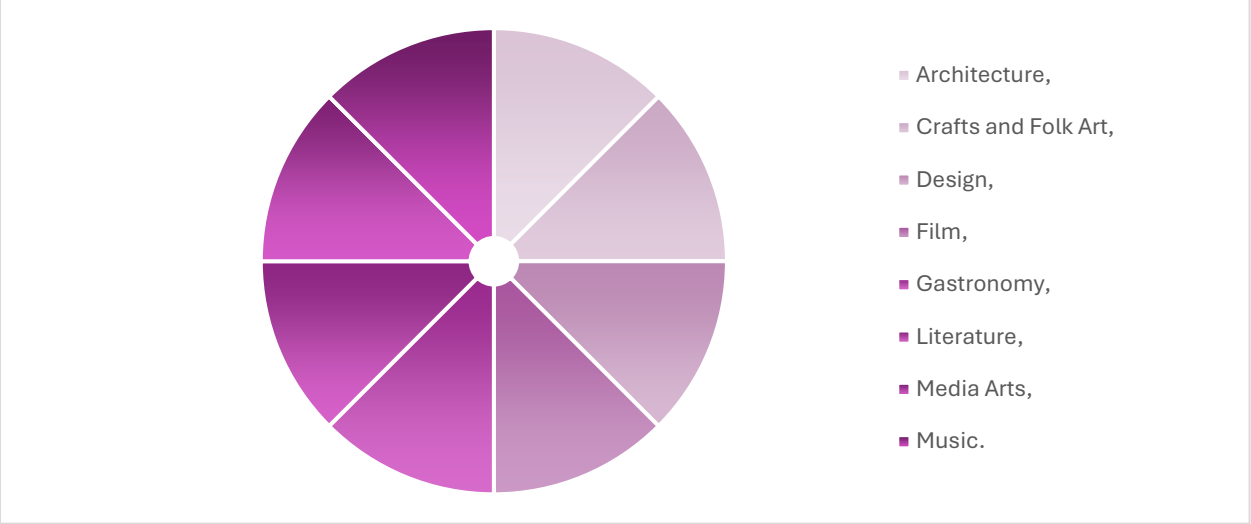


Figure1 UNESCO Creative Cities Network Fields
Resource: UNESCO Creative Cities Network

It demonstrates that UCCN's culture-focused development policies have become a globally accepted framework. Rosi (2014) has assessed the creative city label as a powerful branding tool that provides cities with international visibility, symbolic capital, and competitive advantage. Arcos-Pumarola and colleagues (2023) emphasize in their study that cities included in the UCCN provide international visibility and competitive advantage. The creative city identity is becoming a powerful brand element that supports the differentiation of cities in the global tourism market (Rosi, 2014; Acros-Pumarola et al., 2023). Furthermore, the UCCN contributes to sustainability through cultural protection policies and sustainable management approaches against the risk of excessive commodification of cultural heritage (Acros-Pumarola et al., 2023; Gathern et al., 2020). UCCN membership emerges as an important tool in city branding. However, the impact of this tool is directly proportional to local governance capacity and the level of strategic integration (Gathern et al., 2020). When used correctly, the Creative City title can be used as a strategic tool, particularly in the areas of tourism and cultural diplomacy (Acros-Pumarola et al., 2023; Gathern et al., 2020; Rosi, 2014). The founding philosophy of UCCN is based on promoting cooperation between cities through knowledge sharing, cultural exchange, and joint projects (Luerdi, 2023). Accordingly, the sustainability of UCCN is not limited to its capacity to generate brand value. UCCN also supports collective learning and solidarity between cities. At this point, UCCN has a structure that oscillates between competitive branding and cooperation-based governance (Rosi, 2014; Xiaomin, 2017). The labels given by UCCN make an important contribution to the development of cities. Cheraghi (2026) explains UCCN's contribution to cities as follows.

- Diversification of the local economy,
- Increased social participation,
- Strengthening of cultural identity,
- Contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage.

The contributions mentioned above also apply to the 8 UCCN areas. Gastronomy, one of these areas, plays a significant role in preserving, developing, and increasing the international visibility of local culinary cultures (Şimşek, 2025). Gastronomy is not merely a nutrition-focused phenomenon. It should be considered an important field that creates aesthetic production, cultural representation, and economic value (Şimşek, 2025; Xiaomin, 2017). The inclusion of the city of gastronomy label in the UCCN has led many countries to view gastronomy as a creative industry in the context of social, cultural, and economic interaction (Çorman and Özdemir Yılmaz, 2023). The network's approach to gastronomy as a separate theme from other classifications emphasizes the need to protect local cuisines as cultural heritage at both the national and international levels. In his study, Xiaomin (2017) emphasized that the title of gastronomy city is not merely a symbolic indicator of prestige. He argues that the title of gastronomy city awarded by the UCCN is a strategic tool in terms of cultural sustainability, economy, and urban transformation. The criteria established by the UNESCO Creative Cities Network for recognition as a gastronomy city are as follows: (Çekal, 2022; Mutlu and Sandıkçı, 2024; UNESCO, 2026).

- A well-developed gastronomy in the city center and/or region,
- A vibrant gastronomy community with numerous traditional restaurants and/or chefs,
- Local ingredients used in traditional cuisine,
- Local knowledge, traditional culinary practices, and methods that have survived industrial/technological developments,
- Traditional food markets and traditional food industry,
- A tradition of hosting festivals, competitions, and wide-ranging recognition activities in the field of gastronomy,
- Respect for nature and the promotion of sustainable local products,
- Working to gain public recognition and promoting nutrition in educational institutions.

Methodology

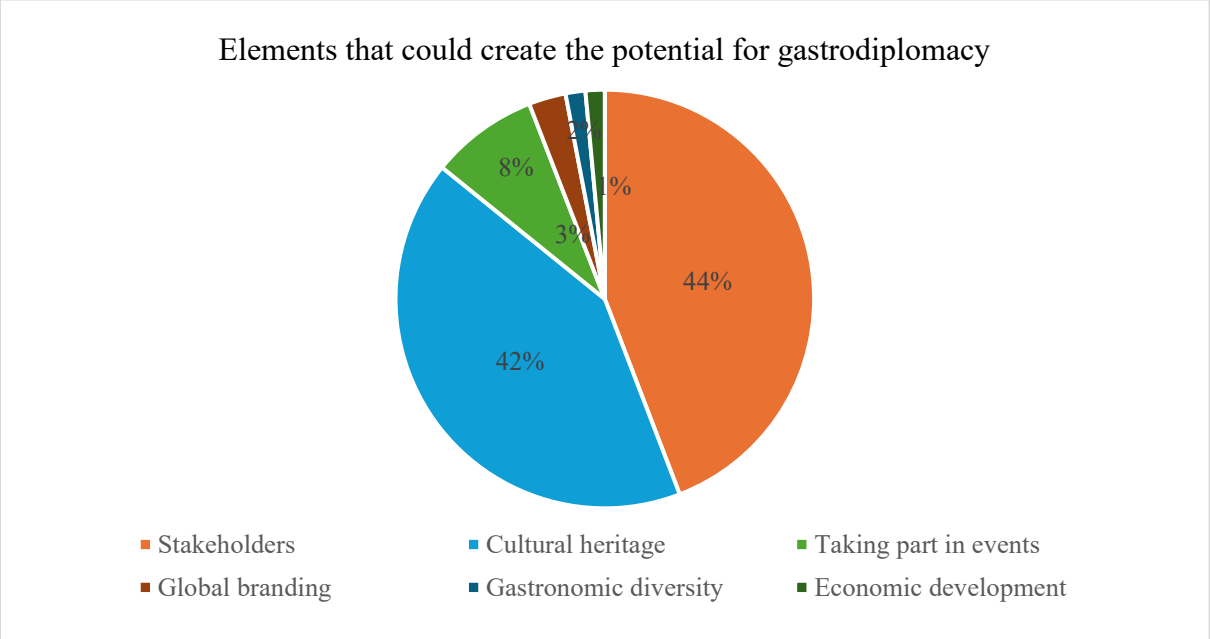
Turkey stands out as one of the leading countries within the UCCN Gastronomy Network due to its deep-rooted culinary tradition, unique regional flavors, and strong gastronomic heritage (Mutlu and Sandıkçı, 2024). Supporting this statement, Turkey has three gastronomy cities within the UCCN Gastronomy field: Gaziantep (2015), Hatay (2017), and Afyonkarahisar (2019). In this context, the study developed sought to reveal the gastrodiplomacy potential of the geographically indicated gastronomy products of the three cities included in the UCCN Gastronomy field.

The study adopted a qualitative research method. In qualitative research designs, the conceptual framework and themes are shaped through an inductive approach, along with an in-depth analysis of the data set (Çamlıca et al., 2022, p. 122; Kümbetoğlu, 2015, p. 52). Document analysis technique was used in the data collection process of the research. Document analysis includes electronic data obtained via the internet, in addition to written documents, photographs, and video recordings (Baş & Akturan, 2008, p. 77; Çoban et al., 2024, p. 1162). The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, websites related to Gaziantep cuisine's geographically indicated products were analyzed, including the Gaziantep Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism,

the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, Gaziantep Go Türkiye, the Gaziantep Development Foundation, and GastroAntepFest, as well as the Afyonkarahisar Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, Afyon Go Turkey, Afyonkarahisar Governorate websites, and the Hatay Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, Hatay Go Turkey, and the Development Library of the Ministry of Industry and Technology websites were analyzed using content analysis. A total of 213 documents suitable for analysis were subjected to document analysis. The data obtained from this were categorized by bringing them together based on specific concepts and themes (Güllü & Akçay, 2021, p. 1640; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, p. 162). In the second phase of the research, the data were first divided into subunits using the thematic analysis method in an electronic environment, and then these units were divided into subcategories. Finally, the data were quantified to reveal their frequency of occurrence (Karagöz, 2017, p. 72). In addition to all this, percentage distributions were provided, findings were ranked in order of importance, and the density and importance of the elements were visualized.

Results

This section of the study presents the findings in various forms and tables. The data subjected to content analysis were coded electronically, resulting in a total of 2024 codes. These codes were divided into subcategories by the researchers, summarized into various themes, and visualized. The findings presented here are grouped around six main themes. Graph 1 shows the elements of the geographically marked gastronomic items of Turkey's three gastronomy cities in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, namely Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar, which could constitute elements of gastronomic diplomacy potential.



Graph 1. Elements that could create potential for gastrodiplomacy

Graph 1 shows the main themes related to elements that could create potential for gastrodiplomacy for Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar's geographical indication-protected gastronomy products. The themes presented here reveal that the potential elements of gastrodiplomacy consist of six themes: 'Cultural heritage', 'Stakeholders', 'Role in events', 'Economic development', 'Global branding', and 'Gastronomic diversity'. These themes can serve as a tool for gastronomic diplomacy by strengthening the gastronomic appeal of these cities, and thus the country, through the culinary cultures that can be presented internationally via the gastronomic products of Turkey's cities in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (Gordin et al., 2016; Rinaldi et al., 2025). Findings related to the theme 'Role in events' obtained through content analysis are presented in Figure 2 below.

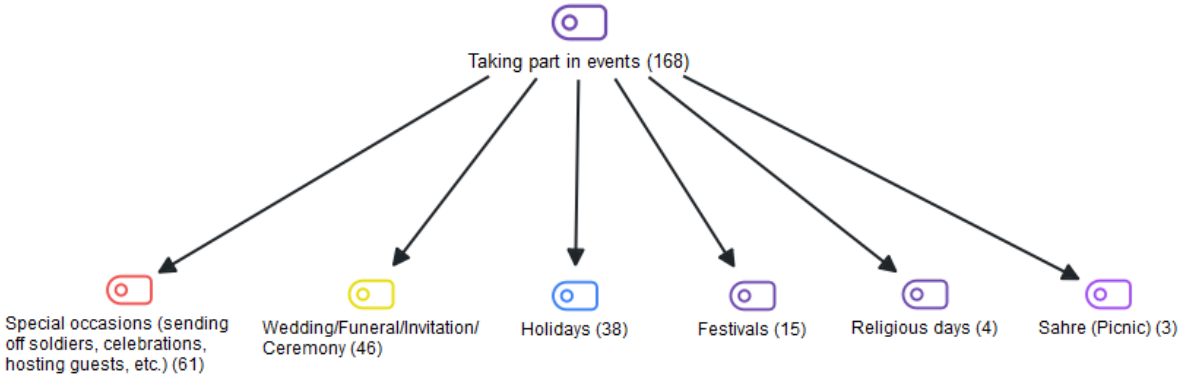


Figure 2. Subthemes related to the theme "Place in activities".

Table 1. Findings and sample codes for subthemes related to the theme "Place in activities"

Events	f	%	Sample codes
Special occasions (sending off soldiers, celebrations, hosting guests, etc.)	61	36	The district's traditional dish, keşkek, is consumed at special times such as births, military send-offs, weddings, celebrations, holidays, pilgrim send-offs, vows, charity events, and gatherings, and can be eaten at any meal of the day. (Afyon Governorate: 3)
Wedding/Funeral/Invitation/Ceremony	46	27	Additionally, the morning after the wedding, it is sent by the best man to the bride's home and also to the families of the bride and groom. (Antep Katmeri, P. 2)
Holidays	38	23	Antep Cookies are always made in Gaziantep during holidays. For this reason, plain Antep Cookies are also known as "holiday cookies" in Gaziantep.

			(Antep Cookies, P. 2)
Festivals	15	9	The Hatay Şeyh Mualla Dish, which holds an important place in the culinary culture of Hatay province, is consumed in daily meals as well as served on special occasions such as hosting guests, weddings, holidays, and festivals. (Şeyh Mualla, p. 2)
Religious holidays	4	2	It is also known as "Ramadan kebab" because it is produced especially during Ramadan (Kebab, p. 2).
Sahre (Picnic)	3	2	Antep Allı Yeşilli Dolması, produced especially in Gaziantep's picnic events known as sahre, has a geographical link to its fame. (Antep dolması (3), P. 2)
Hamam days	1	1	In regions with a strong hamam culture, broad beans are traditionally simmered slowly in the kilns of the hamams and in copper pots called carra. (Broad bean paste, P. 2)
Total	168	100	

When examining Figure 2 and Table 1, it is evident that the gastronomic products of Turkish cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network feature on tables during various special occasions, such as weddings, funerals, religious holidays like Ramadan, and picnics. Furthermore, their inclusion in events with international visibility, such as hosting guests, holidays, and festivals, can be an attraction for guests seeking a pleasant taste and a delicious journey. Findings related to the theme of 'Gastronomic diversity' obtained through content analysis are presented in Figure 3 and Table 2 below.

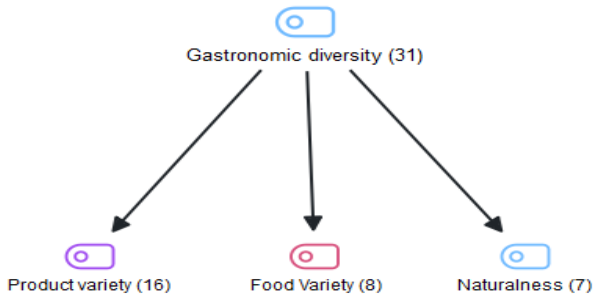


Figure 3. Subthemes related to the theme of "gastronomic diversity"

Table 2. Findings and sample coding related to the subthemes of the theme of "gastronomic diversity"

Gastronomic Diversity	f	%	Sample codes
Product variety	16	52	Şuhut keşkeği is traditionally made from bulgur wheat grown in the region and chickpeas grown in the region. (Afyon Governorate, 3)
Food variety	8	26	Nearly 20 different dishes made from eggplant, mouthwatering (Afyon Go Turkey: 5)
Naturalness	7	22	This way, the natural structure of the product is preserved and traditional production continues. (Potato bread, p. 2)
Total	31	100	

When examining Figure 3 and Table 2, it is evident that the culinary products of Turkish cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network exhibit diversity, with both regionally specific dishes and product variety being noteworthy. Furthermore, this diversity, which has been traditionally cultivated and has maintained its historical continuity from the past to the present, can be considered as gastrodiplomatic elements that can contribute to the international recognition of cities and create an appeal, in addition to their food culture. The findings related to the 'Stakeholders' theme, obtained as a result of content analysis, include institutions and organizations involved in the registration of geographically indicated products belonging to Turkish cities in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and in conducting audits that also cover compliance with registration conditions. The sub-themes associated with this theme consist of two sub-themes and sub-codes: "Institutions and organizations granting registration" and "Institutions and organizations conducting inspections." Findings related to institutions and organizations granting registration and stakeholders performing inspection duties are presented in Figure 4 and Tables 3 and 4

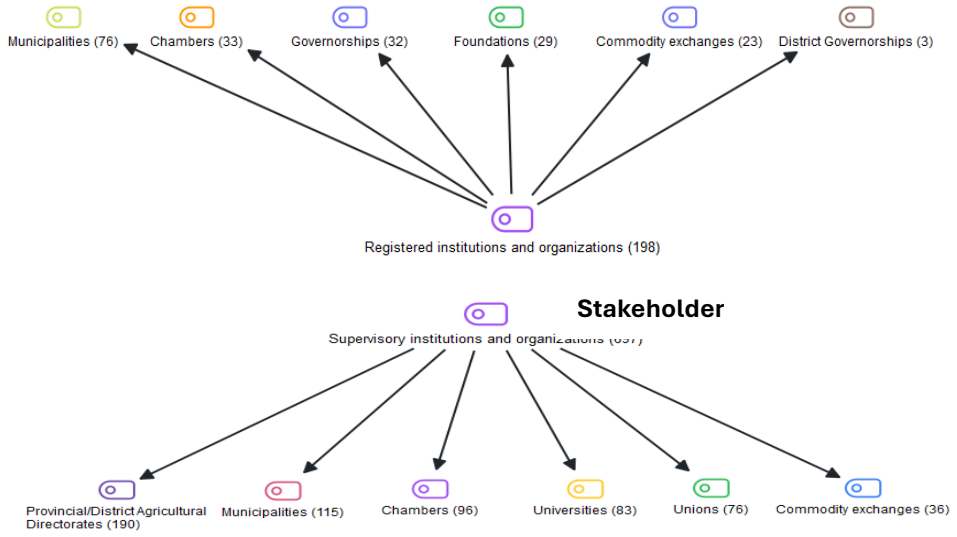


Figure 5. Subthemes related to the theme of "Stakeholders"

Table 3. Findings and sample coding related to the theme of "Regulatory bodies and institutions"

Institutions and Organizations	f	%	Sample codes
Provincial/District Agricultural Directorates	190	27	Antep Pistachio Research Institute (Antep Pistachio Paste, P. 3)
Municipalities	115	16	The inspection is carried out by a total of 5 inspectors, consisting of one expert each from Afyonkarahisar Municipality, Afyonkarahisar Municipal Police Department, Afyonkarahisar Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry, Afyonkarahisar Chamber of Tradesmen and Craftsmen, and Afyonkarahisar Professional Chefs Social Assistance and Solidarity Association. (Ağzıaçık, P. 3) Inspections are carried out by an inspection authority consisting of a total of 3 persons who are experts on the product, including one person from the Hatay Governor's Office, which acts as the coordinator, and two persons from the Hatay Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry. (Antakya simidi, P. 3).
Chambers	96	14	
Universities	83	11	
Units	76	10	
Commodity exchanges	36	7	
Governor's Offices	32	6	
Foundations	28	5	
Associations	18	4	Altınözü District Governor's Office, Altınözü District Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry, Hatay Mustafa Kemal University Food Engineering Department, Altınözü Chamber of Agriculture, S.S. Hatay Olive Oil Soap Pomace and By-Products Production and Marketing Cooperative, with the participation of at least three persons, including one expert on the subject, shall be carried out regularly once a year, whenever deemed necessary, and at any time upon complaint. (Altınözü olive oil, P. 4)
District Governors' Offices	8	3	
Provincial/District Health Directorates	7	2	
Cooperatives	4	1	
Research institutes	3	1	
Total	696	100	

Table 4. Findings and sample coding related to the theme of "Registering institutions and organizations"

Institutions and Organizations	f	%	Sample codes
Municipalities	76	38	Registrant: Sandıklı Municipality (Alacaşı, P. 2)

Chamber	33	17	Registrant: İskenderun Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Oruk, P. 2)
Governor's Offices	32	16	Registered by: Hatay Governor's Office (Assyrian meal, P. 2)
Foundations	29	15	Registrant: Gaziantep Development Foundation (Antep Alaca Soup, P. 2)
Commodity Exchanges	23	12	Registrant: Nizip Commodity Exchange (Nizip Nanesi, P. 2)
District Governors' Offices	3	2	Registrant: Sultandağı District Governor's Office (Gilli cherry, P. 2)
Units	2	1	Registrant: Dörtyol Citrus Growers Association (Dörtyol mandarin, P. 2)
Toplam	198	100	

When Tables 5 and 6 are examined, it is seen that the gastronomic products of Turkish cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network are certified by various stakeholders and monitored by many institutions and organizations. It is observed that the stakeholders involved in certification are mostly municipalities. In addition, many institutions and organizations such as chambers of industry and commerce, foundations, unions, stock exchanges, governorates, and universities have also contributed to the preservation of the authenticity of gastronomic products through these registrations. Table 6 shows that, in addition to the stakeholders involved in the registration of products, a larger number of institutions and organizations (associations, cooperatives, etc.) are involved in the supervision. This situation demonstrates the importance of ensuring the suitability, authenticity, and continuity of geographical indication products. Findings related to the theme of 'Economic development' obtained through content analysis are presented in Figure 6 and Table 5 below.

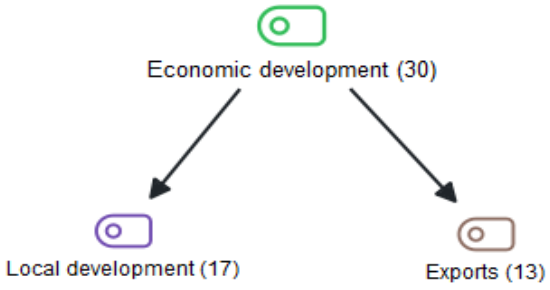


Figure 6. Subthemes related to the theme of "economic development"

Table 5. Findings and sample coding related to the theme of "economic development"

Economic development	f	%	Sample codes
Local development	17	57	For many years, sheep yogurt has become an important food and source of livelihood for the local people. (Emirdağ sheep yogurt, p. 2).
Exports	13	43	In particular, the product known as Napoleon cherry is exported to countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. (Afyon Go Turkey:19).
Total	30	100	

Figure 6 reveals findings related to the theme of "economic development." Although the role of Turkish cities' gastronomic products in local development within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network was not frequently encountered among the documents examined, it was included. Information regarding the export of products is limited. Findings related to the theme of "global branding," obtained through content analysis, are presented in Figure 7 and Table 6 below.



Figure 7. Subthemes related to the theme of "global branding"

Table 6. Findings and sample coding related to the theme of "global branding"

Global branding	f	%	Sample codes
Trust and quality	36	62	Harvest time is key to producing a high-quality product. Wheat to be harvested for Antep Firiği is harvested approximately one month earlier than normal harvest times. (Antep Firiği, p. 4)
Its place in scientific publications	11	19	The Afyon / Afyonkarahisar Çullama Köfte, which is mentioned in cookbooks and scientific articles published on Afyon cuisine, has a geographical connection to its fame. (Çullama köfte, P. 2)
International registrations	10	17	Antep Börek Soup is one of the soups featured in the culinary culture of Gaziantep province, which is included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. (Börek Soup, P. 2)

Visibility in international kitchens	1	2	It is known worldwide for the Sultandağı Cherry, famous for being served at the Queen of England's table. (Afyon Go Turkey: 4).
Toplam	58	100	

Figure 7 reveals findings related to the theme of "Global branding." It has been determined that efforts have been made to ensure product reliability by emphasizing various quality elements related to increasing the global awareness of the gastronomic products of Turkish cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Furthermore, limited information is provided among the total documents examined regarding international registrations and visibility in international cuisines. Findings related to the theme of "Cultural Heritage," obtained through content analysis, are presented in Figure 8 and Table 7 below.

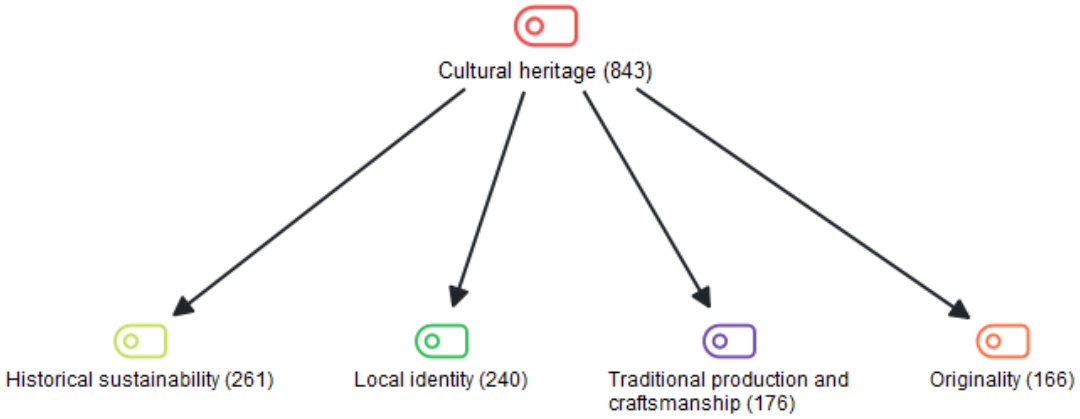


Figure 8. Sub-themes related to the theme of 'cultural heritage'

Table 7. Findings and sample codes related to the theme of 'cultural heritage'

Cultural heritage	f	%	Sample codes
Historical sustainability	261	31	Sucuk, a meat product that Turks have been consuming alongside pastrami and kavurma since Central Asia, is one of Afyonkarahisar's most famous delicacies. (Afyon Go Turkey: 11)
Local identity	240	28	Archaeological findings indicate that the Eastern Mediterranean Region surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers was one of the first places where bulgur was processed. (Antep Bulgur, p. 2)
Traditional production and craftsmanship	176	21	A person wearing clean, washed boots, known as a "fartçı," begins to tread the grapes. This must be done properly and carefully. (Antep Muskası, P. 3)
Originality	166	20	It is widely known throughout our country that it is a flavor unique to Afyonkarahisar. (Afyon Go Turkey: 7).

Total	843	100

Figure 8 shows the findings of the 'cultural heritage' theme obtained from the content analysis of the texts related to the geographical indication-protected gastronomic products examined. The relationship of these products with Turkish cities in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network emerged as the sub-themes "local identity", "historical continuity" in terms of continuous production from the past to the present, "traditional production and craftsmanship" emphasising the mastery skills required using traditional methods, and "originality" highlighting the unique characteristics of the region. Sample sentences used in the formation of sub-codes related to these themes are also presented in Table 7.

Conclusion

Gastronomic diplomacy can be regarded as a contemporary public diplomacy practice that aims to build a positive image, trust and cultural affinity in the international public sphere by using a nation's culinary culture as a strategic communication and interaction tool. When considered alongside the concept of gastronomic diplomacy, the UCCN and the field of gastronomy offer a multidimensional framework in terms of cultural heritage preservation, sustainable development, tourism, social inclusion and international cooperation. Gastronomy cities strengthen their local identities and contribute to global cultural interaction by promoting their culinary cultures at an international level. Gastrodplomacy stands out as an approach that increases the international visibility of this process and makes gastronomy a strategic tool for cultural diplomacy.

This study analyses the gastronomic potential of Gaziantep, Hatay and Afyonkarahisar, cities in Turkey's UNESCO Creative Cities Network, from a gastrodiplomacy perspective, revealing how culinary culture is constructed as an element of soft power. The six main themes identified through content analysis—cultural heritage, stakeholders, role in events, economic development, global branding, and gastronomic diversity—emphasise that gastronomy functions not only as a cultural value but also as a multi-layered diplomatic tool. Particularly through the dominance of the cultural heritage theme, it reveals that gastronomic products are strongly linked to city identity and historical continuity. Emphases on local identity, traditional production, and authenticity demonstrate that these products are not merely objects of consumption but also symbols carrying cultural narratives. This aligns with the literature's emphasis on the capacity of gastrodiplomacy to forge emotional bonds. The presentation of gastronomic elements alongside historical continuity and mastery practices contributes to cities building an authentic identity on the international stage, forming the basis of soft power production. The fact that products with geographical indications from Gaziantep, Hatay and Afyon are at the centre of social events such as weddings, holidays, festivals and religious days demonstrates that culinary culture strengthens the role of social bonding. In this context, gastronomy serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a carrier of social memory, creating an experiential attraction for international visitors. This supports the experience-based nature of gastrodiplomacy. Data collected under the theme of 'Its Place in Events' in particular demonstrates that local cuisine, combined with the culture of hospitality, has the potential to build sympathy and trust among the international public. This aligns perfectly with

the ability to persuade through cultural appeal, without military or economic coercion, as outlined in soft power theory. The emphasis on historical continuity, local identity and traditional production techniques reveals the capacity of Turkey's gastronomic cities to create global brand value through their uniqueness. The active involvement of numerous stakeholders, such as municipalities, provincial administrations, universities, and civil society organisations, in the registration and control processes of geographically indicated products demonstrates that gastronomic diplomacy requires a multi-stakeholder governance model extending from the local to the national level. However, the relatively limited visibility of the themes of economic development and global branding indicates that this rich potential has not yet been fully transformed into strategic economic value. Similarly, the low level of visibility in international cuisines and data on global certifications indicates that cities have room for improvement in their journey towards becoming global gastronomic brands.

Consequently, the gastronomic diversity and cultural depth of Gaziantep, Hatay and Afyonkarahisar are invaluable instruments for Turkey's public diplomacy objectives and represent significant soft power potential in terms of gastrodiplomacy. However, for this potential to create a sustainable international impact, the cultural narrative must be integrated with economic and brand strategies. Future strategies should support the success of local administrations with international marketing activities, increase the export potential of geographically indicated products, and use digital diplomacy channels to turn these flavour stories into global brands. In this way, Turkey can continue to build its soft power through flavour by transforming its culinary heritage into a strategic communication tool.

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Why Do We Consume Coffee? Is Coffee Drinking a Culture or a Form of Consumption?

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Abstract

Purpose: Although coffee functions as a tangible commodity, it possesses profound cultural significance globally. Coffee culture has developed distinct characteristics across diverse societies and epochs. Through variations in preparation, presentation, and consumption rituals, coffee has been an indispensable part of popular culture alongside the expansion of globalization. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to investigate the socio-cultural, psychological, experiential, and behavioural dimensions of coffee consumption practices. It aims to position coffee as a phenomenon of cultural consumption by interpreting the symbolic meanings ascribed to it by individuals.

Study design/Methodology/Approach: Utilizing a qualitative methodological framework, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 54 participants. The resulting data were subjected to content analysis using MAXQDA software. The analysis yielded a total of 1,015 codes, 12 themes, and 4 categories: perceptions of coffee culture, motivations for consumption, temporal preferences, and behavioural changes in practices. Consequently, this study assesses participants' attitudes and motivations; the temporal and spatial determinants of consumption; the socio-cultural function of coffee in interpersonal dynamics; and the interplay between global trends and local practices.

Results: The study suggests that coffee is far more than a simple consumable; rather, it serves as a cultural artifact deeply rooted in social interaction, heritage, personal identity, and sensory enjoyment. The findings indicate that coffee is an integral part of consumption habits for all participants, with a notable 72.22% favouring coffee chains. The study observed that consumption habits evolve over time; while the majority perceive coffee primarily as a culture, others conceptualize it as both a cultural value and a form of consumption.

Originality/Value: In conclusion, the study emphasizes the dual necessity of preserving and transmitting traditional Turkish coffee culture while ensuring that coffee chains, products of popular culture, operate with social responsibility. Consequently, the study offers various recommendations for consumers, policymakers, and practitioners.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Coffee Habits; Coffee Consumption Practices; Components of Coffee Culture

Introduction

In the context of modern life, coffee has secured a distinct and pivotal position among non-alcoholic beverages, characterized by a steady rise in consumption. It has evolved into a daily ritual, serving as a mechanism for stress management, relaxation, and social interaction. Particularly for university students and professionals, coffee consumption has been embraced as a prominent lifestyle symbol. Although coffee functions as a tangible market commodity, it has retained profound cultural and symbolic significance for humanity since its inception. Established across diverse societies during different eras, coffee has integrated into global culture through the process of globalization, distinguished by its unique preparation methods, serving rituals, and sensory variety. Historically, coffee consumption is believed to have originated in the 15th century. It proliferated throughout the Middle East in the 16th century, became central to colonial production and distribution strategies in the 17th century, and significantly influenced the global economy and international relations in the 18th and 19th centuries (Tucker, 2011). Particularly since the 1950s, coffee culture has emerged as a widespread symbol of popular culture, encompassing a variety of objects, practices, meanings, and contexts of mass consumption globally. Today, coffee has transcended its role as a mere beverage, transforming into a significant economic and social phenomenon. As a result, researchers have recognized the importance of studying how coffee has evolved in society, specifically looking at changes in consumption, behavior, and cultural perception. Within this scope, this research is anticipated to make significant contributions to the fields of tourism and gastronomy by examining the multidimensional structure of coffee culture. Adopting a qualitative research method, this study presents the current perceptions, consumption habits, and behaviors of participants in Türkiye. The paper is structured as follows: it first explores coffee within the context of popular culture and consumption; it then details the research methodology and findings; and finally, it concludes with a discussion of implications and recommendations

Popular Culture and Coffee Consumption

Globalization, which has given rise to concepts such as the ‘global village’ and ‘cyber homeland,’ refers to the process of international integration driven by social, economic, political, cultural, and technological developments where relative borders have effectively dissolved. Through globalization, the close interactions between societies, individuals, and their respective cultures are rapidly transforming into forms of popular culture. Lexically, popular culture is defined as ‘the entirety of cultural elements that are valid for a certain period, rapidly produced, and rapidly consumed’ (TDK, 2025). Conceptually, popular culture encompasses both the manufacturing of industrial cultural products (popular goods and services) and the shaping of individuals who pursue the consumption of this culture (popular cognitions) (Erdoğan, 2006: 342). In this context, popular culture can be described as a phenomenon imposed on the masses, offering instant gratification and directing them toward consumption (Sakallı, 2014: 309). Popular culture, sustained by constant change, is fundamentally a culture of usage and consumption. Across domains such as music, fashion, food, and beverages, consumers not only consume goods but also participate in

marketing them by sharing their awareness and experiences with others (Erdoğan & Alemdar, 2005: 35). While popular culture drives consumption on the one hand, it shapes consumption behaviors on the other. Together, consumption and popular culture play an active role in the increasing homogenization of societies. However, it is also a well-established fact that elements of popular culture are read and interpreted through the distinct cultural lenses of different societies.

Originating in North Africa, specifically Ethiopia, and introduced to Europe by the Turks (Karhan, 2021: 149), coffee is distinguished not only as a beverage but also by its profound social, cultural, political, historical, and economic dimensions. Economically, the coffee industry is characterized by a distinct value chain: production is concentrated in the 'South,' while trade and commercialization are dominated by the 'North' (Daviron & Ponte, 2005: 50). Often cited as the second most exported commodity after oil, coffee production is led by five key nations: Brazil (approx. 2.6 million tons, valued at 5.7 billion pounds), Vietnam (1 million tons, 3.6 billion pounds), Colombia (800,000 tons, 1.7 billion pounds), Indonesia (800,000 tons, 1.4 billion pounds), and Ethiopia (valued at 846 million pounds) (Wisniowski, 2024). Furthermore, the outlook for 2023/2024 suggests that coffee consumption will continue to expand, supported by a global economic growth rate exceeding 3% (October 2023 World Economic Outlook), and a significant decline in industry stocks is expected to positively impact apparent consumption figures (ICO, 2024). In line with this, the 2024 Coffee Market Report (ICO, 2024: 9) anticipates a 2.2% rise in global consumption, reaching 177.0 million bags, a surge primarily fueled by non-producing nations. Türkiye exemplifies this growing demand, with import figures hitting $437 million in 2023 (AA, 2024). Notably, per capita consumption in Türkiye increased fourfold between 2014 and 2023, reaching nearly 1.5 kilograms (Food & Ingredients International, 2023). Similar consumption patterns are evident in the United States. A study conducted in January 2024 with over 1,300 participants revealed that nearly three-quarters of Americans (73%) drink coffee daily, with 36% consuming between 3 to 5 cups per day. The study also highlighted consumer habits and preferences: 51% of respondents purchase coffee from a shop at least once a week, and 48% believe coffee offers health benefits. In terms of trends and brand loyalty, espresso martinis have seen a 79% surge in popularity compared to 2022, while Starbucks (48%) and Dunkin' (45%) remain the dominant preferred brands (Allen, 2024).

The positive effects of coffee's bioactive components on mental and cognitive functions, as well as their prophylactic role against various pathologies, are widely recognized by both health authorities and consumers. Documented benefits include enhanced mental alertness, increased energy levels, improved physical performance, and the stimulation of metabolic processes such as lipolysis. Furthermore, coffee possesses nutritional value, specifically containing vitamins B3, B5, and B12, and is associated with a reduced risk of neurodegenerative conditions (including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and dementia), certain cancers, and cardiovascular diseases (Medicalpark, 2025). Beyond its physiological impacts, coffee is a ubiquitous element of global social and cultural life (Altın, 2023: 8580). As a carrier of deep symbolic meaning, it functions as a 'glocal' commodity, consumed within specific local contexts yet intrinsically linked to global

networks. The beverage is highly adaptable, tailored to diverse cultural palates through distinct aromas and preparation techniques. Consequently, coffee culture is defined not only by consumption, but by the aggregate of ideas, practices, technologies, and meanings associated with the beverage (Tucker, 2011: 10).

A comparative overview of coffee varieties and brewing methods by country is presented below (Dēlonghi, 2025).

- Turkish Coffee (Türkiye): Prepared by boiling finely ground beans in a cezve, this method is characterized by its intense flavor, thick foam, and the presence of sediment in the cup.
- Espresso (Italy): A pressurized extraction method where hot water is forced through compacted grounds, resulting in a concentrated, aromatic coffee topped with crema.
- French Press (France): An immersion brewing technique where grounds are steeped and separated by a metal filter, yielding a full-bodied and oil-rich beverage.
- V60 (Japan): A pour-over method utilizing a specific V-shaped dripper to facilitate water flow, producing a cup known for its clarity and bright flavor profile.
- Kafez (Arab Countries): A brewing method preferred in the Middle East and North Africa. It involves boiling finely ground coffee beans together with water.
- Aeropress (USA): A modern device that combines immersion and air pressure to filter coffee, offering a quick extraction with reduced acidity.
- Cezve (Middle East & Balkans): Similar to the Turkish method, this involves boiling grounds in a long-handled pot, preserving the traditional, robust taste preferred in the region.
- Flat White (Australia/New Zealand): An espresso-based beverage incorporating micro-foamed milk to create a drink with a velvety texture and balanced coffee strength.
- Kopi Tubruk (Indonesia): A direct immersion method where hot water is poured over grounds in the cup, served unfiltered for a strong, authentic experience.
- Moka Pot (Italy): A classic stovetop brewing device that utilizes steam pressure. Water in the lower chamber is heated and forced upwards through a basket of ground coffee, collecting in the upper chamber as a strong, rich coffee.

Coffee consumption and the rapid expansion of the café industry are deeply embedded within global cultural frameworks and modern lifestyles (Anugrah & Pratama, 2022). The act of consuming these physical spaces, through the lens of coffee culture, reveals how local traditions are globalized, thereby driving the rise of popular culture (Adalı Aydın & Bakır, 2016: 59). This relationship is bidirectional: just as the consumption of popular trends alters lifestyles, the established lifestyles of a society influence consumption behavior. Consequently, this mutual interaction between lifestyle and habit acts as a catalyst, transforming both the broader society and the daily routines of its individuals.

In Turkish society, coffee holds a distinct and culturally significant status. Recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2013, Turkish coffee is differentiated by its decoction

brewing method, specific serving vessels, and the traditional accompaniment of water and Turkish delight (Akşit Aşık, 2017: 311). It functions as a pillar of social interaction, cementing hospitality norms and traditional rituals, including marital ceremonies (Bulduk & Süren, 2007: 301). Nevertheless, this 16th-century tradition has experienced a paradigm shift. The introduction of soluble (instant) coffee in the 1980s and the widespread adoption of Western consumption patterns since the 2000s have altered the cultural landscape (Akarçay, 2012: 194). The rising preference for meeting in cafés reflects a sociological transition from domestic hospitality to public, leisure-based consumption. Within this context, transnational coffee chains not only evidence the reach of the global economic system but also engage in 'glocalization', adapting to local tastes, thereby illustrating the fluid nature of tradition within a globalized world (Türkyılmaz, 2020: 63).

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to elucidate the current situation within its natural context. Qualitative methodology was selected over a quantitative approach as it facilitates a more detailed and in-depth interpretation of the subject matter. Data collection was conducted via face-to-face, in-depth interviews held between August 5 and August 28, 2025. The study utilized convenience sampling, a technique chosen for its operational efficiency and its ability to provide access to participants within proximity (Kılıç, 2013: 44).

In addition to collecting demographic data, the study utilized a structured interview form consisting of four key inquiries. First, participants were asked to describe their consumption habits, variety preferences, and motivations. Second, the study examined spatial and temporal consumption patterns, specifically inquiring whether participants frequent coffee chains, regarded as agents of popular culture, and what they consume in those settings. Third, participants were asked to reflect on the evolution of their consumption habits over time and the functional role of coffee in their daily lives. Finally, the interview sought to understand the participants' conceptualization of 'coffee culture' through their personal definitions and elaborations.

During the development of the interview questions, a systematic literature review was conducted to create a comprehensive pool of potential inquiries (Akarçay, 2012; Adalı Aydın & Bakır, 2016; Akşit Aşık, 2017; Karhan, 2021; Anugrah & Pratama, 2022; Allen, 2024). To ensure alignment with the research objectives, the draft was reviewed by five faculty experts. Following this consultation, the questions were revised to ensure content validity. In the final stage, the researchers reached a consensus that the instrument was suitable for exploring the phenomenon. Accordingly, it was concluded that the developed questions were sufficiently in-depth to reveal the 'what' and 'how' of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Before the interviews, participants were informed about the study's purpose, scope, and procedural methodology. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects, with specific written or verbal permission secured for audio recording. The sessions were conducted as individual, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 20 minutes. To ensure participant confidentiality, real identities were anonymized and replaced with alphanumeric codes (P1 through P54). All collected data were stored securely and processed in strict adherence to ethical research principles.

Upon the completion of the interviews, participants were invited to review their responses to prevent potential misunderstandings and data gaps. The collected data were transferred to a digital environment, ensuring the preservation of the content's originality and integrity. The analysis of the interview recordings was conducted using the MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis Software. Content analysis was employed to systematically uncover themes and meaningful categories within the data.

Content analysis, an inductive method, is defined as 'the process of classifying qualitative textual data under similar groups or conceptual categories to determine consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes' (Julien, 2008). In this study, the qualitative data obtained from the interviews were systematically examined using this method. Following the coding process, subcategories, categories, and themes were established to derive meaningful structures from the dataset (Toker, 2022).

In this study, the content analysis was performed through a structured sequence of stages: defining the research problem, establishing the content framework, sample selection, determining units of analysis, constructing the coding scheme, testing for validity and reliability, and final data analysis (Metin & Ünal, 2022).

To ensure validity, data collection was conducted in open, natural settings, enabling participants to express themselves comfortably and authentically. Regarding transferability, a substantial sample size was utilized to achieve comprehensive results. To support reliability, the analysis incorporated direct quotations from participant statements. Furthermore, the interview data were subjected to a rigorous evaluation process; three researchers examined the data separately before conducting a joint assessment. The findings underwent four rounds of review to guarantee consistency, and the data were tabulated and reported based on this researcher consensus (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016; Günaydın & Kozak, 2022)

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Balıkesir University Social and Humanities Research Ethics Committee (Date: 22.07.2025, Decision No: 2025/07-12).

Findings

Findings revealing the demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1 below. The demographic profile of the study participants reveals a predominantly female cohort (59.26%), with a significant concentration in the 33–52 age range (57.41%). This age distribution aligns with literature suggesting that coffee culture research often centers on middle-aged and older demographics (Smith & Riley, 2009). Regarding marital status, 57.41% of participants were single, while 42.59% were married, indicating that coffee consumption experiences may vary according to household dynamics. Occupational distribution shows that public sector employees constituted the largest group (44.44%), followed by private sector employees (24.07%) and students (14.82%); these variations suggest that occupational background is a relevant economic factor influencing access to coffee culture. In terms of educational attainment, the majority (59.26%) held associate or undergraduate degrees, suggesting a potential correlation between education level and cultural

perception (UNESCO, 2013). Regarding socio-economic status, the middle-income group was dominant (72.22%), indicating that coffee consumption is widely adopted by the middle class. Finally, the geographic distribution, 57.41% in districts and 42.59% in city centers, demonstrates that coffee culture is deeply entrenched in both metropolitan and provincial urban life.

Table 1. Findings Regarding the Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variables		**Frequency (f)**	**Percentage (%)**	**Variables**		**Frequency (f)**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender	Female	32	59,26	**Occupation**	Public Sector Employee	24	44,44
	Male	22	40,74		Private Sector Employee	13	24,07
Age	18-22 Age Range	5	9,26		Student	8	14,82
	23-32 Age Range	9	16,66		Retired	6	11,11
	33-42 Age Range	16	29,63		Homemaker	3	5,56
	43-52 Age Range	15	27,78	**Family Income Level**	Low Income	7	12,96
	53-62 Age Range	4	7,41		Middle Income	39	72,22
	63 and Over	5	9,26		High Income	8	14,82
Marital Status	Married	23	42,59	**Place of Residence**	City Center	23	42,59
	Single	31	57,41		District	31	57,41
Education Level	Secondary Education	10	18,52				
	Associate/Undergraduate	32	59,26				
	Postgraduate	12	22,22				

Table 2 below presents the participants' perceptions of coffee culture, consumption motivations, and behavioral preferences. As a result of the content analysis conducted, a total of 1015 codes were distributed under 12 themes and 4 categories.

Table 2. Participants' Perceptions of Coffee Culture, Consumption Motivations, and Behavioral Preferences

Category	Themes (Frequency [f])	Codes (Frequency [f])	Examples from Participant Statements
Coffee Culture Perceptions (f=569)	***Components of Coffee Culture (f=159)***	• Coffee varieties (32) • Local beverage (30) • A special beverage (23) • Global beverage (23) • Venues served (18) • Special preparation/brewing (12) • Presentation tools (11) •Accompaniments/Complementary items [Turkish delight, water, dessert, chocolate, cake] (10)	P1: "*I think of a pleasurable element that is established in a society or an individual member, belonging to the local or global food-beverage group. The coffee itself, the cup served, the accompaniments, conversation, friendship, sharing; if it is Turkish coffee, fortune telling, the venues where coffee is drunk, coffee on embers, the metal holders, the cups are placed in, and the Turkish delight and water alongside it..."*
	Socio-Cultural Aspect of Coffee (f=128)	• Having Commemorative value/Gratitude (32) • Conversation/Chat (25) • Socialization/Spending time together (21) • Hospitality (20) • Connection to tradition (12) • Fortune telling with grounds (10) • Heritage/Value (8)	P4: *"Coffee culture primarily brings to my mind spending pleasant time, the smell and taste of hot coffee, chatting with friends, and drinking 'fatigue coffee' when I am tired."*
	Relational Aspect of Coffee (f=93)	• Chats/Sharing troubles (29) • Friendships/Relations (27)	P9: "*When coffee culture is mentioned, it primarily comes to mind as an important tool for socializing, and secondly,*

		• Meetings/Gatherings (13) • Solidarity/Being together (13) • Sharing (11)	*the state of pleasure and stimulation provided by coffee. Coffee evokes meeting with friends, a state of wakefulness, and addiction."*
	Psychological Aspect of Coffee (f=90)	• Relief/Relaxation (19) • Pleasure (18) • Indispensability (13) • Happiness (8) • Creating value (7) • Making one feel special (6) • Time gifted to oneself (5) • Peace (5) • A beautiful moment dedicated to the soul (4) • Longing (3) • Extravagant pleasure/Ostentation (2)	P17: *"When coffee culture is mentioned, I think that coffee is special; it is not like every other drink. It brings longing, relief upon fatigue, and refreshment; it is my indispensable item. Coffee is special; it becomes even more valuable if drunk with those we value as much as ourselves."*
	Experiential Aspect of Coffee (f=37)	• Presentation (15) • Flavors/Different tastes (14) • Smell of coffee (8)	P15: *"I find coffees distilled with methods close to traditional ones and made with freshly ground beans delicious, and I drink them at home and at work."*
	Behavioral Aspect of Coffee (f=31)	• Addiction/Craving (12) • Consumption (9) • Traditional habit (6) • Leisure activity (4)	P31: *"For me, coffee means addiction, in a way, craving... Of course, peace and relaxation... A calmness, pleasure..."*
	Physiological Aspect of Coffee (f=31)	• Relieving fatigue (11) • Energy booster (7) • Stimulant (7) • Intimacy/Warm environment (6)	P38: *"I mostly consume coffee when I remain sleepless or get tired."*

Coffee Consumption Reasons (f=113)	***Coffee Drinking Motivations (f=113)***	• For conversation (29) • For pleasure (19) • Habit (17) • Keeping alert/vigorous (14) • Good for fatigue and stress (11) • Palate suitability (11) • Smell (8) • Entertainment (4)	P53: *"The reason I prefer Turkish coffee is that it keeps me vigorous and creates a feeling of deficiency in me when I do not drink it."*
Coffee Consumption Times and Preferences (f=219)	***Time of Day Consumed (f=118)***	• Morning (32) • Afternoon (30) • After meals (29) • Evening (27)	P40: *"I drink it 3 times a day. At least 1 hour after breakfast in the morning, in the afternoon, and 1-2 hours after dinner. I do not consume tea or coffee immediately after meals. If I am to drink on an empty stomach, I rarely drink in the morning."*
	Coffee Varieties Consumed (f=101)	• Turkish coffee (38) • World coffees [Latte, Chai Tea Latte, Cappuccino, Mocha, Espresso, Americano, etc.] (23) • Filter coffee (17) • Soluble/Granulated coffee (14) • Regional coffees [Mırra, Dibek, etc.] (9)	P45: *"Previously, I used to consume Turkish coffee very often, but currently, I consume filter coffee more."*
Coffee Consumption Practices and Behavioral Changes	***Changes in Coffee Consumption Behaviors (72)***	• Change in individual consumption behaviors (16) • Flavored/Different tasting coffees (11) • Coffee accompaniments (8)	P36: *"I now use a grinder and coffee machine at home, and a filter coffee machine at work. At home, I consume coffee prepared with an electric Turkish coffee machine, bean coffees; at*

(f=114)		• Increased coffee consumption/Craving (8) • No change, traditional understanding continues (7) • Tools/Equipment/Electric coffee machines, etc. (7) • Coffee presentation culture/Sharing on social media, emulation (6) • Addition to daily routines (5) • Accessibility (4)	*work, single-serving Turkish coffees and ground coffee."*
	Consumed in Coffee Chains (f=42)	• World coffees (16) • Turkish coffee (13) • Filter coffee (8) • Other hot/cold drinks (2) • Regional coffees (2) • Chocolate (1)	P34: *"Yes, I go from time to time. Especially to Starbucks and Kahve Dünyası. In these places, I usually consume filter coffee, salep in winter, lemonade in summer, and Turkish coffee, usually accompanied by chocolate and water."*

Discussion and Conclusions

More than just a beverage, coffee represents a multi-layered cultural phenomenon that encompasses identity, tradition, and social bonding. By examining the experiential and behavioral dimensions of consumption, this study positions coffee as a significant object of cultural consumption based on the meanings individuals attach to it. The results indicate that coffee culture is complex, characterized by the convergence of traditional heritage and modern consumption habits. Participants view coffee through two distinct lenses: as a 'local cultural heritage' (e.g., the tradition of offering coffee) and as a component of popular culture experienced through global chains. These findings align with Tucker (2011), who defines coffee culture as a mechanism that bridges local experiences with global connections.

Under the theme of ‘Components of Coffee Culture,’ the analysis highlighted the salience of varieties, brewing methods, and consumption rituals. The data demonstrates that coffee is not only a consumable but is embedded within the cultural heritage as a gastronomic asset. The meanings participants attribute to coffee confirm its role as a multifaceted symbol, representing socialization,

intimacy, serenity, and enjoyment, thereby extending its significance far beyond that of a simple beverage (Bulduk & Süren, 2007; Altın, 2023).

The consumption habits observed in the study demonstrate that coffee is an indispensable part of daily routines. Key drivers for consumption identified in the analysis include conversation, habit, enjoyment, vitality, relaxation, and taste. This confirms that coffee serves both physiological and psychological functions (Akarçay, 2012). Notably, the fact that 72.22% of participants favor coffee chains reveals the extent to which global coffee culture has permeated local lifestyles, shaping new forms of socialization. These findings are aligned with Türkyılmaz's (2020) concept of 'glocalization,' illustrating how global chains successfully reinterpret local culture.

The findings reveal that the Turkish coffee tradition has transformed alongside modern consumption patterns while successfully preserving its core elements. Although a large portion of participants uphold traditional practices, some have embraced innovative habits through new aromas, presentation forms, and spatial environments. This situation demonstrates that Turkish coffee culture possesses a dynamic nature involving both continuity and change (Adalı Aydın & Bakır, 2016).

Additionally, the study observed an increasing tendency toward individualization. While historically embedded in neighborly interaction and hospitality, the scope of coffee drinking has expanded to include private spheres, serving as a means for self-care and creating personal boundaries. This transformation can be attributed to the power of popular culture to shape individual lifestyles (Erdoğan & Alemdar, 2005).

An analysis of consumption behaviors within the framework of 'coffee waves' reveals that the vast majority of participants align with first and second-wave paradigms, while third-wave adoption remains marginal. As defined by Türkyılmaz (2020), the first wave represents utilitarian and instant consumption, the second wave focuses on the socialization inherent in branded chains, and the third wave embodies an 'experiential awareness of quality.' This distribution suggests that Turkish coffee culture is currently navigating a transitional modernization process, wherein the appreciation for specialized coffee, manifested through barista expertise and artisanal brewing, is still in its early developmental phases.

Consequently, coffee culture in Turkey has evolved into a dynamic practice that simultaneously preserves traditional heritage while undergoing transformation driven by modern consumption patterns. The inscription of Turkish coffee on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List (UNESCO, 2013) underscores the imperative of safeguarding this legacy. Furthermore, this study posits that coffee serves as a significant cultural commodity suitable for evaluation within the scope of gastronomic tourism (Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2013; Akşit Aşık, 2017). This alignment exists because the multi-layered perceptions inherent in coffee culture correspond directly with the core dynamics of the tourism sector: locality, cultural heritage, authenticity, and experiential orientation (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Ellis et al., 2018).

Based on the research findings, this study proposes a strategic framework for leveraging coffee culture within the domains of tourism, gastronomy, and cultural heritage management:

Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Given the inscription of Turkish coffee on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List, it is imperative to expand educational programs, festivals, and promotional initiatives to ensure the intergenerational transmission of associated rituals, presentation aesthetics, and symbolic meanings. Specifically, commemorative events such as 'World Turkish Coffee Day' should be institutionalized and promoted at the national level to reinforce cultural awareness.

Product Diversification in Gastronomic Tourism: To effectively integrate coffee culture into the gastronomic tourism portfolio, destinations should design thematic 'coffee experience routes' and 'local coffee workshops.' Furthermore, the tourism inventory should be diversified by promoting regional variations (e.g., mırra, dibek) alongside standard Turkish coffee. These indigenous products should be integrated into tourist menus accompanied by their specific cultural narratives.

The Socio-Cultural Function of Consumption Spaces: Coffee chains should be strategically positioned not only as global franchises but as venues that safeguard local identity and traditional elements. Adopting a 'glocalization' approach, these enterprises should be encouraged to design spaces that reflect local architectural aesthetics and facilitate traditional coffee experiences, thereby bridging the gap between global standardization and local authenticity.

Approaches for Sustainable Coffee Culture: To foster a sustainable coffee culture, it is essential to increase environmental awareness at every stage of the production and consumption chain. Key priorities should include improved waste management, the adoption of recyclable materials, and economic support for local producers.

Contributions to Further Research: Future studies should aim to compare coffee consumption habits among different age groups, regions, and social classes to provide a broader perspective. Additionally, conducting mixed-method studies that incorporate quantitative data is recommended to increase the generalizability of these qualitative findings.

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The Effect of Teamwork Practices on Workplace Relationships: Evidence from the Food Sector

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates how the frequency of distinct teamwork types influences interpersonal relationships among employees in the food sector. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, the research explores whether seven teamwork types differentially predict two dimensions of workplace relationships: Positive Affective Experience and Perceived Relationship Quality.

Method: A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 237 employees from food production companies in Konya, Turkey, selected via simple random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising the Workplace Friendship Scale and Teamwork Practices Scale. Exploratory factor analysis with Oblimin rotation confirmed the relational dimensions, and multiple regression was used to test the effects of teamwork frequencies on interpersonal relationship outcomes.

Results: Both measurement scales exhibited good reliability. EFA indicated a two-factor structure explaining 59.98% of the variance. Regression results showed that the overall model for Positive Affective Experience was not statistically significant, although work teams had a positive effect. In contrast, the model for Perceived Relationship Quality was significant, with virtual teams contributing positively. Overall, the findings indicate partial support for the proposed hypothesis. Effect sizes were modest, suggesting teamwork is one of several influences on workplace relationships.

Originality: This study contributes by empirically differentiating how specific teamwork configurations relate to affective and cognitive aspects of workplace relationships, offering nuanced insights for organizational behavior research and practical team design in industrial settings.

Keywords*:* Teamwork Types, Workplace Relationships, Workplace Friendship, Food Sector, Social Exchange Theory

Introduction

Contemporary organizations are increasingly structured around team-based work systems to enhance adaptability, coordination, and performance (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). In manufacturing-oriented sectors such as food production, teamwork is often embedded in daily operational processes, shaping not only productivity but also the social environment of employees. Teams function not merely as task units but as social contexts in which repeated interactions influence employees' perceptions, emotions, and relational evaluations.

Interpersonal relationships at work, which is often conceptualized as workplace friendship, have been associated with numerous positive organizational outcomes, including job satisfaction, commitment, psychological well-being, and reduced turnover intentions (Nielsen et al., 2000; Sias, 2005). These relationships typically involve both affective components (e.g., enjoyment, emotional closeness) and cognitive evaluations (e.g., trust, perceived relationship quality). However, despite extensive research on teamwork and workplace relationships as separate constructs, limited empirical attention has been given to how different structural forms of teamwork influence relational dynamics.

The existing literature frequently treats "teamwork" as a homogeneous organizational practice. Yet teams vary significantly in autonomy, temporal stability, task interdependence, and communication patterns (Mathieu et al., 2008). Work teams, cross-functional teams, self-managed teams, project teams, and virtual teams create distinct interaction patterns that may differentially shape social exchange processes among employees. According to Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017, pp. vii–xv), repeated interactions characterized by reciprocity and mutual dependence foster trust and relational attachment. Therefore, the structure and frequency of team-based interaction may play a critical role in shaping both the affective and cognitive dimensions of workplace relationships.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines whether the frequency of seven distinct teamwork types predicts employees' interpersonal relationship outcomes. Specifically, it investigates two relational dimensions: Positive Affective Experience and Perceived Relationship Quality. Focusing on food production companies in Konya, Turkey, this study provides context-specific insights from an industrial setting where structured teamwork is integral to operational continuity. By empirically differentiating the relational consequences of various teamwork configurations, the study contributes to organizational behavior literature in three ways. First, it moves beyond a generalized view of teamwork by disaggregating team types. Second, it distinguishes between affective and cognitive dimensions of workplace relationships. Third, it offers practical implications for team design in manufacturing environments.

Literature Review

Teamwork Types and Structural Differences

Team-based work systems have become a dominant organizational design in both service and manufacturing sectors. Rather than relying on rigid hierarchical coordination, organizations increasingly distribute responsibilities across teams to enhance flexibility, knowledge sharing, and responsiveness (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). However, the term teamwork encompasses a wide range of structurally different configurations.

Team types vary along several structural dimensions, including autonomy, task interdependence, temporal stability, leadership structure, and communication patterns (Mathieu et al., 2008). Robbins and Judge (2019) provide a comprehensive typology that includes several key forms. For instance, work teams are typically permanent units responsible for ongoing operational tasks. Their stability fosters repeated interaction and shared routines. Cross-functional teams, by contrast, bring together employees from different functional areas, increasing diversity but sometimes reducing

relational cohesion due to differing professional identities (Gutiérrez-Broncano et al., 2025). Self-managed teams operate with higher levels of autonomy and collective decision-making authority, potentially strengthening mutual accountability (Magpili & Pazos, 2018). Project teams are usually temporary and goal-oriented, dissolving after task completion. Virtual teams characterized by geographically dispersed members and technology-mediated communication, alter interaction frequency and social cues (Gilson et al., 2015).

These structural differences are not merely administrative distinctions; they shape the social interaction patterns embedded in daily work. Research suggests that interaction frequency, shared goals, and interdependence are central determinants of relational development within teams (Ilgen et al., 2005). Stable and interdependent team structures create opportunities for informal communication, emotional exchange, and trust building. In contrast, temporary or technology-mediated teams may constrain spontaneous relational development due to limited social presence. Empirical studies often treat teamwork as a unified construct, focusing primarily on performance outcomes rather than relational consequences. The relational implications of different teamwork types remain comparatively underexplored, particularly in industrial production contexts. This gap suggests the need to disaggregate teamwork structures when examining interpersonal dynamics.

Interpersonal Relationships in the Workplace

Beyond the formal structure of tasks and roles, every organization is a network of interpersonal relationships. The quality of these relationships is a critical determinant of employee attitudes, behaviors, and overall well-being (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). One key conceptualization of positive workplace relationships is workplace friendship. Nielsen et al. (2000, p. 628) define workplace friendship as the extent to which employees experience "opportunities for informal interaction and mutual trust and bonding" with their colleagues. It encompasses both the opportunity for social interaction and the existence of a genuine, personal connection.

Positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace yield a multitude of benefits. They serve as a source of social support, buffering against job stress and burnout (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022). They foster a sense of belonging and psychological safety, which encourages employees to speak up with ideas and concerns (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Furthermore, strong relational ties facilitate cooperation, knowledge sharing, and trust, which are essential for effective collaboration and organizational learning (Mayer et al., 2023). Consequently, a workplace characterized by positive employee relationships is not only more humane but also more productive and resilient.

Scholars frequently distinguish between affective and cognitive components of interpersonal relationships (McAllister, 1995; Sias, 2005). The affective dimension refers to emotional experiences such as enjoyment, closeness, mutual care, and positive feelings arising from interpersonal interaction. In contrast, the cognitive dimension involves evaluative judgments regarding a colleague’s trustworthiness, reliability, competence, and overall relationship quality (McAllister, 1995). While these dimensions are interrelated, they are conceptually distinct and may develop through different social mechanisms.

The Link Between Teamwork and Interpersonal Relationships

The structure and processes of teamwork are inherently social and have a profound impact on the interpersonal dynamics among employees. When employees work together in teams, they are provided with a formal context for interaction that can either facilitate or hinder the development of informal relationships. Social Exchange Theory provides a useful lens for understanding this link. Social Exchange Theory posits that social relationships develop through repeated interactions characterized by reciprocity, mutual dependence, and the expectation of future exchange. Over time, such exchanges generate trust, emotional attachment, and relational commitment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Research supports the notion that teamwork experiences shape relational outcomes. For instance, a study by Lee and Ok (2016) in the hospitality industry found that team cohesion significantly predicted workplace friendship, which in turn influenced employee engagement. Similarly, frequent interaction within a team, a core characteristic of most teamwork types, is a necessary precursor for friendships to develop (Sias, 2005). Different team types may foster these bonds in distinct ways. For example, a self-managed team with high interdependence and autonomy might create stronger bonds than a temporary problem-solving team with a narrow, short-term focus (Leppänen, 2024). However, even project-based cross-functional teams can build powerful relational bridges across departmental silos by creating shared goals and requiring frequent communication (Tasheva & Hillman, 2019).

Team structures determine the frequency, intensity, and nature of exchanges among employees, thereby shaping relational development processes (Blau, 2017, pp. vi–xv; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). In stable work teams characterized by high task interdependence, employees repeatedly rely on one another to accomplish shared goals. Contemporary research demonstrates that task interdependence enhances relational coordination, trust formation, and affective bonding through sustained mutual adjustment and shared accountability (Wiese et al., 2022). Such recurring exchanges align with social exchange mechanisms, reinforcing positive affective experiences among coworkers.

Teamwork types are expected to exert differentiated effects on the affective and cognitive dimensions of interpersonal relationships. Rather than assuming a uniform positive effect of teamwork, this study proposes that structural characteristics embedded in team configurations shape relational outcomes through distinct social exchange mechanisms (Breuer et al., 2020).

From a theoretical standpoint, Social Exchange Theory suggests that repeated and structured interactions embedded in teamwork practices facilitate reciprocity, trust, and relational development (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Given that interpersonal relationships comprise both affective and cognitive dimensions, the overall relational climate is expected to benefit from increased exposure to teamwork practices. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_1: The frequency of teamwork practices has a significant positive effect on the interpersonal relationships among employees.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational research design to investigate the relationship between teamwork practices and interpersonal relationships among employees. The population consists of employees working in food production companies in Konya, Turkey. Food sector is characterized by team-based operational structures and diverse employee profiles. Data were collected from 237 employees using a simple random sampling method. The sample includes a heterogeneous distribution in terms of age, gender, educational background, and tenure, allowing for broader generalizability within the sector. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of three parts: demographic questions, the Interpersonal Relationships Scale, and the Teamwork Practices Scale.

The independent variable, teamwork practices, was measured using a 7-item scale developed based on prior studies of team structures and work processes (Mathieu et al., 2008; Breuer et al., 2020). Respondents indicated the frequency of participation in different team types (e.g., work teams, self-managed teams, project teams, virtual teams) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = very frequently). This scale demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .820.

The dependent variable, interpersonal relationships, was measured using the 11-item Workplace Friendship Scale (Nielsen et al., 2000; Sias, 2005). This scale captures both Positive Affective Experience and Perceived Relationship Quality. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate stronger workplace relational quality. The scale was adapted into Turkish using a back-translation method to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence (Brislin, 1970). As reported in the findings section, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in this study, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .902.

Before the main data collection, a draft questionnaire was reviewed by six experts to assess content and face validity. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to improve clarity and relevance. Subsequently, a pilot study was conducted with 40 employees to test the comprehensibility of the items and the initial reliability of the scales.

Results

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using the SPSS 27 software. Hypothesis testing was performed using multiple linear regression analyses. Before regression analysis, assumptions for the normality, multicollinearity and independence of errors were checked.

The demographic characteristics of the 237 participants included in the analysis are presented in Table 1. The sample provides a comprehensive overview of the employee profile in the food sector companies surveyed. Regarding gender distribution, the majority of participants were male and at the age distribution of 25-34 years. This indicates that the workforce in the sampled organizations is predominantly composed of young and middle-aged adults. Regarding educational attainment, the majority of participants held a bachelor's degree and working in their current organization for 4-6 years. Regarding job position, the vast majority of participants were workers or regular employees.

The participating companies were predominantly limited companies and large organizations with more than 2,000 employees operating in the food production sector. Regarding departmental affiliation, almost all participants worked in the production department. This concentration in production is consistent with the focus on the food manufacturing sector. Finally, in terms of company age, the vast majority of participants worked in organizations that had been operating for more than 20 years, indicating a sample drawn from well-established firms.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 237)

		f	%			f	%
Gender	Male	146	61,60	Marital Status	Married	126	53,16
	Female	90	37,97		Single	92	38,82
	Missing	1	0,41		Missing	19	8,02
	Total	237	100		Total	237	100
Education	Secondary School	7	2,95	Age	18-24	52	21,94
	High School	32	13,50		25-34	99	41,77
	Vocational High School	7	2,95		35-49	68	28,69
	Associate Degree	53	22,36		50-65	15	6,33
	Bachelor Degree	126	53,16		Missing	3	1,27
	Master Degree	12	5,06				
	Total	237	100		Total	237	100
Experience in Current Job	Below 1 year	52	21,94	Position at work	CEO/General Manager	3	1,27
	1-3 years	55	23,21		Section/Unit Manager/Asst	9	3,80
	4-6 years	72	30,38		Supervisor/Foreman	45	18,99
	7-9 years	35	14,77		Worker/Performer	178	75,11
	10-15 years	17	7,17		Other	1	0,42
	16-20 years	4	1,69		Missing	1	0,42
	More than 20 years	1	0,42		Total	237	100

	Missing	1	0,42	Legal Status	Unlimited Company	2	0,84
	Total	237	100		Limited Company	233	98,31
Total Workforce	Less than 10	1	0,42		Corporate	1	0,42
	500 - 999	11	4,64		Other	1	0,42
	1000-1999	31	13,08		Missing		
	Above 2000	192	81,01		Total	237	100
	Missing	2	0,84	Department	Production	236	99,58
	Total	237	100		Human Resources	1	0,42
					Total	237	100
Industry	Food Production	237	100,00	Lifespan of the Firm	1-3 years	1	0,42
					4-6 years	1	0,42
					16-20 years	4	1,69
					More than 20 years	230	97,05
					Missing	1	0,42
					Total	237	100,00

Before proceeding with hypothesis testing, the internal consistency reliability of the measurement instruments used in this study was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The Teamwork Practices Scale exhibited good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .820$), and the Interpersonal Relationships Scale demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .902$). These results provide confidence that the measurement instruments are suitable for testing the research hypothesis.

In this study, normality was assessed using statistical tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) and examination of skewness and kurtosis values. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests compare the observed distribution of scores to a normally distributed theoretical distribution. The results of both tests for all items of the Interpersonal Relationships Scale and the Teamwork Practices Scale were significant ($p < .001$). The significant results of both normality tests indicate that the data for all items deviate significantly from a normal distribution. This finding is common in social science research, particularly with Likert-type scale data, which often produce non-normally distributed responses (Pallant, 2020).

While the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests are sensitive to deviations from normality, especially in larger samples, skewness and kurtosis values provide additional information about the shape of the distribution. The skewness and kurtosis values for the Interpersonal Relationships Scale and for the Teamwork Practices Scale were within the acceptable range. As a rule of thumb, skewness and kurtosis values between -2 and +2 are considered acceptable for demonstrating normal univariate distribution (George & Mallery, 2024; Hair et al., 2010).

Although the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated significant deviations from normality, which is common with Likert-type scale data and sample sizes above 200 (Field, 2024), the skewness and kurtosis values for all items fell within the acceptable range of -2 to +2. This suggests that the deviations from normality are not severe enough to violate the assumptions of parametric tests (Qu, 2007). Furthermore, multiple regression analysis is considered robust to moderate violations of normality, particularly with sample sizes exceeding 100 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2025). Therefore, parametric multiple regression analysis was deemed appropriate for testing the research hypothesis.

The descriptive statistics reveal that employees in the sampled food sector organizations generally perceive their interpersonal relationships with coworkers positively, with mean scores consistently above the midpoint of the scale. The highest-rated relationship items related to enjoyment of interaction and collaboration with coworkers, while the lowest-rated item concerned looking forward to work specifically to see coworkers.

Regarding teamwork practices, problem-solving teams, management teams, and development teams were reported as the most frequently used team types, while virtual teams and self-managed teams were relatively less common. The variability in responses, particularly for self-managed teams, suggests heterogeneity in organizational practices across the participating companies.

Before testing the main hypothesis, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the factor structure of the Interpersonal Relationships Scale (Nielsen et al., 2000) within the context of the Turkish food sector sample. Although the scale was originally developed and validated in a Western context, it is essential to verify its factor structure when applied in a different cultural and linguistic setting (Brislin, 1970). EFA helps determine whether the items cluster into meaningful dimensions that align with the theoretical underpinnings of the construct.

The suitability of the data for factor analysis was confirmed by a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value of .909, which indicates excellent sampling adequacy according to commonly accepted thresholds (KMO > .90), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(55) = 1172.751$, $p < .001$), demonstrating sufficient correlations among items for factor extraction (Hair et al., 2022). Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation was employed, as the dimensions were theoretically expected to correlate. The analysis yielded a two-factor solution with eigenvalues greater than 1 (Table 2). The first factor, labeled Positive Affective Experience, had an eigenvalue of 5.589 and explained 50.808% of the total variance. The second factor, labeled Perceived Relationship Quality, had an eigenvalue of 1.009 and explained an additional 9.168% of the variance. The cumulative explained variance reached 59.976%, exceeding the commonly

suggested 50% threshold for social sciences research (Hair, et al., 2019, p. 141; Tabachnick et al., 2021, pp. 243–253). These findings empirically support the conceptual distinction between affective and cognitive dimensions of workplace relationships, as suggested in prior relational communication research (Sias, 2005). The emergence of two correlated but distinct components further justify treating interpersonal relationships as a multidimensional construct in subsequent analyses.

Table 2 Interpersonal Relationships Scale Exploratory Factor Analysis

Item	Positive Affective Experience	Perceived Relationship Quality	
05. My coworkers have a positive effect on my mood.	0,898		
04. The more I interact with them, the more I enjoy my job.	0,811		
06. My coworkers and I have a positive relationship at work.	0,789		
03. My coworkers have a positive impact on my work life.	0,703		
07. I enjoy spending time with my coworkers.	0,673		
01. I enjoy spending time with my coworkers during work hours.	0,639		
02. I look forward to seeing my coworkers every day.	0,447		
11. I have good relationships with my coworkers.		0,847	
09. I feel lucky to have good relationships with them.		0,844	
10. We work well together.		0,781	
08. I feel lucky to work with the people I do.		0,547	
	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance	α
Positive Affective Experience	5,589	50,808	0,873
Perceived Relationship Quality	1,009	9,168	0,807
Total Explained Variance		59,976	

Pearson correlation analysis revealed (Table 3) that teamwork practices were positively and significantly associated with positive affective experience ($r = .165$, $p < .05$) and perceived relationship quality ($r = .250$, $p < .01$). Moreover, positive affective experience was strongly correlated with perceived relationship quality ($r = .691$, $p < .01$), suggesting a substantial overlap between the emotional and evaluative dimensions of interpersonal relationships. According to Cohen (1988), the correlation between teamwork practices and positive affective experience can be interpreted as small in magnitude, whereas the association between teamwork practices and perceived relationship quality reflects a small-to-moderate effect size. In contrast, the relationship between positive affective experience and perceived relationship quality represents a large effect size.

Table 3 Pearson Correlation Analysis

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	1	2	3
Teamwork Practices	3,542	0,947	237	(0, 82)		
Positive Affective Experience	3,685	0,792	236	,165*	(0,87)	
Perceived Relationship Quality	3,772	0,774	236	,250**	,691**	(0,81)

*. P < 0.05 level; **. P < 0.01

These findings provide preliminary support for H_1, indicating that the frequency of teamwork practices is positively associated with interpersonal relationship outcomes. However, the magnitude of the associations suggests that teamwork may influence relational outcomes differently across affective and cognitive dimensions, warranting further multivariate analysis.

To test Hypothesis 1, multiple regression analyses were performed with seven teamwork types as predictors and each interpersonal relationship dimension as a dependent variable (Table 4). For Positive Affective Experience, the overall regression model was not statistically significant, $F(7, 229) = 1.63$, $p = .13$, $R^2 = .047$, indicating that the frequency of teamwork types collectively did not explain a significant amount of variance in affective relational outcomes. Within this model, work teams significantly predicted Positive Affective Experience ($\beta = .27$, $t = 2.83$, $p = .005$), whereas other team types did not reach significance. These results suggest that employees who engage more frequently in traditional work teams report stronger positive emotional experiences with coworkers, even if the overall model was not significant.

In contrast, the regression model for Perceived Relationship Quality was statistically significant, $F(7, 229) = 2.37$, $p = .024$, $R^2 = .068$, indicating that teamwork practices explain approximately 6.8% of the variance in employees' cognitive evaluations of relationship quality. Within this model, virtual teams emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .23$, $t = 2.22$, $p = .027$), while other team types did not have significant effects. This finding implies that working in virtual teams, despite reduced face-to-face contact, may enhance employees' perceptions of trust, reliability, and structured cooperation among colleagues.

Table 4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Positive Affective Experience								
		R	**R^2**	**Düzl. R^2**	**Std. Hata**	**Durbin-Watson**	**F**	**p**
	Model	0,225	0,051	0,021	0,784	1,929	1,692	0,112
Variables		**B**	**Std. Hata**	**Std. Beta**	**t**	**p**	**Tolerans**	**VIF**
(Constant)		3,169	0,205		15,459	0,000		
1. Work team		0,122	0,051	0,202	2,397	0,017	0,603	1,657

2. Cross-functional team	0,017	0,045	0,030	0,384	0,701	0,697	1,436
3. Management team	0,000	0,056	0,000	0,005	0,996	0,546	1,833
4. Development team	0,023	0,057	0,037	0,402	0,688	0,498	2,008
5. Problem-solving team	-0,036	0,052	-0,059	-0,684	0,495	0,574	1,743
6. Virtual team	0,013	0,047	0,023	0,271	0,787	0,610	1,640
7. Self-managed team	0,005	0,042	0,010	0,126	0,900	0,623	1,605

Independent Variable:Perceived Relationship Quality

	R	**R^2**	**Düzl. R^2**	**Std. Hata**	**Durbin-Watson**	**F**	**p**
Model	0,303	0,092	0,063	0,745	2,048	3,205	0,003

Variables	**B**	**Std. Hata**	**Std. Beta**	**t**	**p**	**Tolerans**	**VIF**
(Constant)	3,058	0,195		15,701	0,000		
1. Work team	0,094	0,048	0,161	1,952	0,052	0,603	1,657
2. Cross-functional team	-0,054	0,043	-0,096	-1,254	0,211	0,697	1,436
3. Management team	0,022	0,053	0,036	0,419	0,676	0,546	1,833
4. Development team	0,050	0,054	0,084	0,928	0,354	0,498	2,008
5. Problem-solving team	-0,047	0,050	-0,080	-0,950	0,343	0,574	1,743
6. Virtual team	0,104	0,044	0,192	2,341	0,020	0,610	1,640
7. Self-managed team	0,035	0,040	0,071	0,878	0,381	0,623	1,605

Regression diagnostic tests indicated that assumptions for multiple regression were satisfactorily met. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged between 1.12 and 2.008 and tolerance values were comfortably above .50, suggesting that multicollinearity was not problematic. Durbin-Watson statistics of 1.929 and 2.048 for the affective and cognitive models, respectively, indicate independence of residuals (Field, 2024).

The research hypothesis (H_1) proposed that the frequency of teamwork practices would have a significant positive effect on interpersonal relationships among employees. The results provide partial support for this hypothesis, with the pattern of findings differing across the two dimensions of interpersonal relationships. For the Positive Affective Experience dimension, the overall model was not significant (p = .112). However, work teams emerged as a significant positive predictor, suggesting that this specific team type may enhance the emotional and experiential aspect of coworker relationships. For the Perceived Relationship Quality dimension,

the overall model was significant ($p = .003$). Both work teams ($p = .052$, approaching significance) and virtual teams ($p = .020$) emerged as positive predictors, indicating that these team types contribute to employees' cognitive evaluations of relationship quality. The remaining five teamwork types did not significantly predict either dimension of interpersonal relationships. These findings suggest that the relationship between teamwork practices and interpersonal relationships is more complex than initially hypothesized. While some team types (particularly work teams and virtual teams) appear to foster positive relational outcomes, others show no significant effect. The relatively low R^2 values indicate that factors other than teamwork frequency, such as organizational culture, leadership style, or individual personality characteristics, likely play important roles in shaping workplace relationships (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine whether the frequency of teamwork practices significantly influences employees' interpersonal relationships and to clarify whether this influence differs across affective and cognitive dimensions. The findings provide partial empirical support for H_1. While teamwork practices were found to significantly predict the cognitive dimension of interpersonal relationships (Perceived Relationship Quality), their effect on the affective dimension (Positive Affective Experience) was not statistically significant at the model level. This suggests that teamwork practices influence interpersonal relationships in a differentiated manner rather than uniformly across all dimensions. In other words, teamwork frequency alone does not reliably predict emotional closeness or enjoyment among coworkers.

This result is theoretically meaningful when viewed through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Work teams typically involve high levels of interdependence, frequent face-to-face interaction, and shared goals and outcomes. These conditions create opportunities for positive social exchanges, where cooperation and mutual support are reciprocated, gradually building trust, liking, and friendship among team members. The stable, ongoing nature of work teams allows relationships to develop and deepen over time, unlike temporary team structures where interactions may be brief and task-focused (Couture & Harvey, 2021) .

The results align with contemporary teamwork research emphasizing that interaction frequency and task interdependence foster relational development (Mathieu et al., 2008; Salas et al., 2018). Regular collaboration creates recurring interaction episodes, which, over time, contribute to both emotional bonding and evaluative trust formation. However, the weaker correlation between teamwork practices and Positive Affective Experience compared to the stronger association with Perceived Relationship Quality suggests that teamwork may more directly reinforce cognitive evaluations of reliability and cooperation than emotional closeness. This distinction supports relational communication theory, which differentiates affective and cognitive components of workplace relationships (Sias, 2005).

The strong correlation between Positive Affective Experience and Perceived Relationship Quality ($r = .691$, $p < .01$) indicates that although analytically distinct, these dimensions are closely

intertwined in practice. Employees who experience positive emotions in workplace interactions are also likely to evaluate their relationships as higher in quality. This finding is consistent with contemporary organizational behavior research suggesting that affective experiences often function as precursors to broader relational judgments (Hardin & Conley, 2013). Nevertheless, the EFA results confirmed a two-factor structure with satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .873$ and $\alpha = .807$), reinforcing the conceptual argument that collapsing workplace relationships into a single undifferentiated construct would obscure important nuances.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether the frequency of teamwork practices significantly influences employees' interpersonal relationships and to clarify how such effects unfold across affective and cognitive dimensions. The findings provide partial empirical support for H_1, indicating that the frequency of teamwork practices contributes to interpersonal relationships primarily through the cognitive dimension (Perceived Relationship Quality), while its effect on the affective dimension remains limited. Although the effect sizes were modest, the results consistently indicate that structured and repeated collaboration contributes to stronger relational outcomes in the workplace. By empirically validating a two-dimensional structure of interpersonal relationships through exploratory factor analysis, this research reinforces the theoretical distinction between affective and cognitive components of workplace relationships (Sias, 2005). The emergence of Positive Affective Experience and Perceived Relationship Quality as distinct yet strongly correlated constructs highlight the importance of treating interpersonal relationships as multidimensional rather than unitary phenomena. This differentiation offers a more precise analytical lens for understanding how organizational structures influence relational dynamics.

The findings also contribute to contemporary teamwork literature by showing that teamwork frequency is not merely a coordination mechanism but a relational driver. Consistent with recent team effectiveness research (Mathieu et al., 2008; Salas et al., 2018), the results suggest that recurring interaction embedded in teamwork practices fosters relational development. However, the relatively stronger association with cognitive evaluations of relationship quality compared to affective experience implies that teamwork structures may enhance perceptions of reliability and cooperation more readily than emotional attachment.

From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that implementing teamwork systems can strengthen relational quality among employees, but organizations should not assume that teamwork alone will automatically generate deep emotional bonds. To cultivate stronger affective connections, teamwork practices may need to be complemented by leadership behaviors that promote psychological safety, inclusive communication, and informal social interaction opportunities.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and self-reported measures may introduce common method bias. Future research may employ longitudinal or multi-source designs to examine causal pathways and explore potential mediators such as trust, psychological safety, or team identification. Additionally, examining

contextual moderators, such as virtual versus face-to-face teamwork or cultural dimensions, would further clarify boundary conditions of the proposed relationships.

This research advances understanding of how teamwork practices shape workplace interpersonal relationships by demonstrating that collaboration frequency exerts a measurable, differentiated influence on affective and cognitive relational dimensions. By integrating teamwork research with relational communication theory, the study offers a nuanced framework for both scholars and practitioners seeking to design organizational systems that enhance not only performance but also the quality of human relationships at work.

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The Effect of Food Neophobia and Food Involvement on Local Food Consumption Value: A Comparison of Domestic and Foreign Tourists

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine the effect of food-related personality traits on tourists' local food consumption value. The study also examines whether the food-related personality traits of domestic and foreign tourists differ in terms of their appreciation of local cuisine.

Study design/methodology/approach: Within a quantitative research design, data were collected through online and face-to-face surveys in field research conducted in Antalya with 606 domestic and foreign tourists.

Results: The findings indicate that food neophobia, one of the food-related personality traits, has a significant effect on tourists' local food consumption value. In contrast, no statistically significant effect of food involvement on local food consumption value was detected. Domestic tourists had significantly higher levels of food neophobia than foreign tourists, whereas foreign tourists had significantly higher levels of food involvement. Foreign tourists' perceptions of the value of local food consumption were also significantly higher than those of domestic tourists.

Originality/value: Revealing the negative effect of food neophobia on the value of local food consumption is noteworthy, showing that this personality trait is associated with lower perceived value in the tourist context.

Keywords: Food neophobia; Food involvement; Local food consumption value; Gastronomic tourism; Tourist behavior.

This study was derived from Müge ÇEVİK's Master's thesis titled "The Effect of Tourists' Food-Related Personality Traits on Local Food Consumption Value, Attitude, and Intention to Try."

Introduction

Individual food preferences are multidimensional, shaped not only by physiological needs but also by psychological, cultural, and cognitive processes. In this context, individual tendencies defined as food-related personality traits play a significant role in determining consumers' attitudes and evaluations toward new, different, or traditional foods. In particular, food neophobia and food involvement influence individuals' risk perceptions, expectations, and cognitive evaluation processes regarding food, thereby shaping consumption-related perceptual outcomes.

In the face of globalization, the spread of industrial production processes, and the increasing similarity of culinary cultures, the preservation and sustainable support of local and traditional

foods have become an important agenda item. Local foods are valued not only for their nutritional value or taste, but also as carriers of cultural identity, supporters of regional development, and fundamental components of sustainable food systems. In this context, understanding the perceived benefits of consuming local foods and the psychological factors that shape these benefits is important from both an academic and practical perspective.

In this regard, the main objective of the study is to analyze the effect of tourists' food-related personality traits on the consumption value of local foods in light of empirical data. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of consumer-oriented strategies aimed at supporting local food systems and to shed light on policies and practices for the sustainable preservation of local foods.

Food Neophobia

Food neophobia, one of the personality traits related to food, is defined as the reluctance and avoidance behavior individuals develop towards new and unfamiliar foods (Pliner & Hobden, 1992; Kim et al., 2010; Jang & Kim, 2015; Eertmans et al., 2005). Pliner and Hobden (1992) conceptualized food neophobia as a reluctance and/or avoidance tendency toward trying new foods or cuisines. In the literature, this concept is also expressed as individuals disliking, rejecting, and avoiding unfamiliar foods. Although food neophobia can manifest at different levels depending on individuals' lifestyles, it is considered a widespread phenomenon across societies (Hsu, 2021). People's historical perception of new foods as a potential danger points to the evolutionary origins of this tendency (Jang & Kim, 2015). In this respect, food neophobia is considered an important personality trait that influences individuals' food preferences, selection processes, and general eating habits (Lafraire et al., 2016; Hsu, 2021).

Studies on food neophobia show that individuals with high levels of neophobia are more closed (Knaapila et al., 2011) and more anxious (Dovey et al., 2008) towards new foods. Pliner and Hobden (1992) found that food neophobia is positively related to fear and anxiety and negatively related to thrill seeking. It has been determined that neophobic individuals generally prefer familiar tastes (McFarlane & Pliner, 1997; Jang & Kim, 2015) and, in experimental studies, tend to taste familiar foods rather than new options from different food categories (Eertmans et al., 2005). Tuorila et al. (1994) showed that high levels of food neophobia significantly affect individuals' evaluation of unfamiliar foods and their taste perceptions. In the tourism literature, numerous studies have reported that food neophobia negatively affects the consumption of local foods (Kim et al., 2009; Mak et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013; Akyüz, 2019).

Food Involvement

Another important food-related personality trait that influences food choice is food involvement (Bell & Marshall, 2003; Eertmans et al., 2005). Food involvement is defined as the level of importance an individual attributes to food in their life (Bell & Marshall, 2003). This concept refers to individuals' excitement about talking about food, the frequency with which they think about food, and their level of participation in food-related activities. Hsu (2021) defines local food

involvement as the extent to which individuals are interested in the preparation and consumption processes of local foods and the degree to which they participate in these processes.

Food involvement refers to the extent to which individuals interact with food throughout the five stages of the "food life cycle", procurement, preparation, cooking, eating, and disposal (cleaning), and the degree to which they enjoy these processes (Goody, 1982; Eertmans et al., 2005). The preparation stage includes processes such as washing, cleaning, cutting, and chopping food, while the cooking stage refers to the transformation of food through the application of heat to make its texture and taste more acceptable to the consumer. The eating stage encompasses not only consumption but also sharing and serving food with others; the disposal stage includes activities such as cleaning food leftovers and washing dishes (Goody, 1982). These stages reflect the sequential behaviors consumers engage in during their daily lives.

Local Food Consumption Value

Local food is the product of a multi-stage process extending from production to consumption (Scarpato, 2003) and is one of the fundamental elements shaping the tourism experience (Almeida & Garrod, 2017). For tourists, local food is sometimes merely a means of satisfying a need, and sometimes an experiential attraction based on discovering different flavors (Apak & Gürbüz, 2023) and is seen as one of the "unique resources" that contribute to the competitiveness of the destination (Apak & Gürbüz, 2023). There is no common definition of the concept of "local food"; approaches based on geographical boundaries/distance (Low et al., 2015; Onozaka et al., 2010; Shin et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020) and approaches focusing on foods that reflect cultural identity (Bessière, 1998; Nummedal & Hall, 2006). In the context of this study, local food is considered to be food that belongs to a specific region/country and is served in that region/country.

Values are defined as guiding principles that direct an individual's behavior and whose level of importance may vary depending on the context (Schwartz, 1994; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), and consumption decisions can be shaped by personal value orientations (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Kim & Choe, 2019). Consumption value, on the other hand, is based on a multidimensional assessment of the benefit a consumer expects from a product/service (Sheth et al., 1991a, 1991b; Zeithaml, 1988) and includes independent value dimensions that can be effective to varying degrees in different contexts (Awuni & Du, 2016). Multidimensional value approaches in tourism provide a functional framework for explaining tourist preferences and intentions (Gonçalves et al., 2016; Soltani et al., 2021; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020).

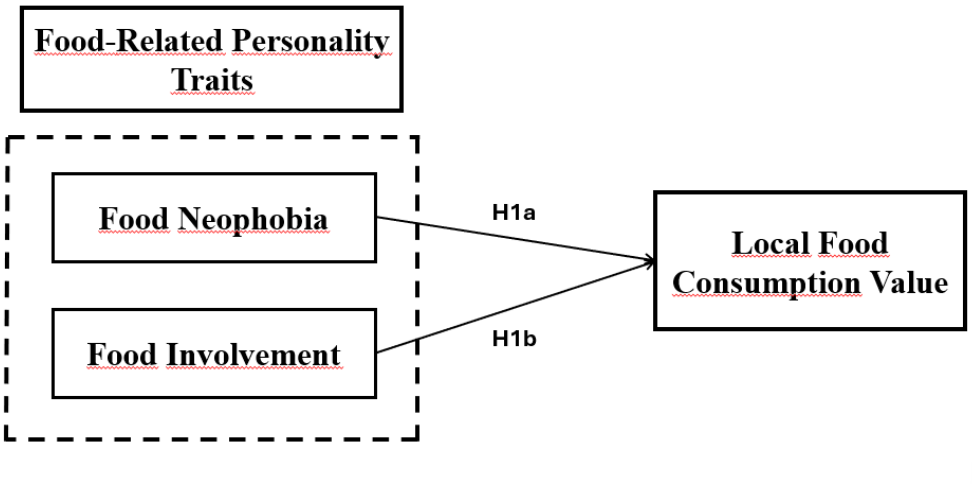
Local food consumption value is defined as the perceived value of local food choices and experiences during destination visits (Soltani et al., 2021) and refers to the sum of benefits attributed to local food (often involving abstract meanings) (Choe & Kim, 2018; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020; Badu-Baiden et al., 2022). In the context of gastronomy, this value goes beyond the concrete characteristics of food to encompass dimensions of experience, context, and meaning (Dagevos & Van Ophem, 2013; Thio et al., 2024). Choe and Kim (2018) adapted the consumption value theory (Sheth et al., 1991b) to the local food context and developed a multidimensional scale; subsequent studies have addressed local food consumption value in terms of epistemic, emotional,

health, price, prestige, interaction, and quality/taste dimensions (Choe & Kim, 2018, 2019; Hussain et al., 2023).

The dimensions of local food consumption value are: the local food experience generating positive emotions such as pleasure/excitement (emotional value) (Kim & Eves, 2012; Choe & Kim, 2019), and its function of understanding culture through curiosity and motivation to learn/discover (epistemic value) (Choe, 2017; Choe & Kim, 2018; Hussain et al., 2023), creating a perception of "safety/healthiness" by reducing hygiene and health risks (health value) (Kim & Eves, 2012; Hussain et al., 2023), shaping taste evaluation through content and sensory quality (taste value) (Namkung & Jang, 2010; Choe & Kim, 2018), relying on an appropriate/fair price perception (price value) (Ampountolas et al., 2019; Hussain et al., 2023), generating value through social connections and shared experiences (interaction value) (Williams & Soutar, 2009; Soltani et al., 2021; Thio et al., 2024), and contributing to status and social image through experiencing/sharing local food (prestige value) (Chang et al., 2010; Mak et al., 2012; Choe & Kim, 2018; Thio et al., 2024).

Methodology

Figure 1. Research Model



The hypotheses developed in line with the research model are as follows:

H1: Food-related personality traits influence tourists' local food consumption value.

H1a: Food neophobia affects tourists' local food consumption value.

H1b: Food involvement affects tourists' local food consumption value.

H2: There is a significant difference between the food-related personality traits of domestic and foreign tourists.

H2a: There is a significant difference between the levels of food neophobia among domestic and foreign tourists.

H2b: There is a significant difference between the levels of food involvement of domestic and foreign tourists.

H3: There is a significant difference between the local food consumption values of domestic and foreign tourists.

The research is quantitative and uses primary data to measure relationships between variables; the survey technique was chosen to test the hypotheses. The survey technique is defined as a method that allows data collection through pre-prepared questions regarding participants' opinions/attitudes/behaviors/characteristics and provides standardized information in a short time (Karasar, 2012; Büyüköztürk et al., 2019).

The questionnaire consists of six sections, and the scales used in the sub-model reported in this paper are as follows: Food Neophobia Scale (Pliner and Hobden, 1992; 10 items; 5 positive/reverse coded, 5 negative), Food Involvement Scale (Bell and Marshall, 2003; 12 items; 6 positive, 6 negative/reverse coded) and the Tourists' Local Food Consumption Value Scale (Choe and Kim, 2019; 29 items and 7 dimensions: emotional value (6), epistemic value (6), health value (4), taste value (5), prestige value (4), interaction value (2), price value (2)). To adapt the scales to Turkish, the original English questionnaires were sent to a language expert for translation into Turkish, and then four tourism faculty academics approved the questionnaires. All scales were arranged on a 5-point Likert scale, and participants were asked to respond on a scale ranging from "Strongly disagree = 1" to "Strongly agree = 5."

The study population consists of local and foreign tourists who have consumed a local dish from the region during their previous trips; all tourists who have consumed local food during any previous travel experience, regardless of age/education/income, are included as a reference. Primary data was collected both online via Google Forms and face-to-face during the period March–April–May 2025. Considering that the minimum sample size is generally accepted to be 384 when the population size is unknown (Saunders et al., 2019), data was collected from a total of 637 individuals to achieve a sufficient sample size. Of the total 637 participants, 447 were Turkish and 190 were foreign nationals. Purposeful sampling was preferred in order to reach individuals who had previously consumed local food; sample selection from the population was made using the screening question, "Have you consumed a local food from the place you visited during a previous tourist trip?" Additionally, due to the collection of data from easily accessible individuals, the convenience sampling technique, which is a non-random sampling method, was also used (Baştürk and Taştepe, 2013).

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 29. Data cleaning was performed prior to data entry; surveys with at least 5 consecutive blank questions and surveys filled out with patterns such as 1-1-1-1 / 5-5-5-5 or 1-2-3-4-5 were excluded from the analysis; 31 of the 637 surveys were excluded, leaving 606 surveys for analysis. Before analysis, demographic frequencies/percentages/standard deviations were examined, and no missing/erroneous/extreme values were found in the data set. Reversed-coded items (Neophobia: 1,4,6,9,10; Involvement: 1,2,4,8,9,11) were reversed within the framework of DeVellis (2017) and defined with the relevant variable names in SPSS. To ensure the validity of the scales in the cultural/linguistic context, exploratory factor analysis was applied;

KMO and Bartlett's Sphericity test were used to assess the suitability for factor analysis, and principal component analysis and Varimax rotation technique were preferred; factor loadings below 0.40 were disregarded, and in cases of convergence, a minimum loading difference of 0.30 was required (Alpar, 2011). Skewness/kurtosis coefficients were evaluated for normality; skewness-kurtosis was found to be within the range of ±1 and ±1.5, and it was concluded that the data were suitable for parametric tests in line with Büyüköztürk et al. (2011) and Tabachnick and Fidell (2013). Multiple linear regression analysis was used at a 95% confidence interval to test hypotheses H1a and H1b, and an independent samples t-test was used for hypotheses H2 and H3 (Karagöz, 2019).

Results

This section of the study analyzes the data from scales applied to domestic and foreign tourists to measure the effect of tourists' food-related personality traits on local food consumption values.

The survey included 606 participants, the majority of whom were female (343). In terms of age distribution, the largest group consisted of participants aged 18-27 (231). Looking at the marital status of the participants, it was seen that there were more single participants (375), and looking at their distribution according to their educational status, it was seen that the majority had a bachelor's degree (255). Looking at the distribution of participants' average monthly income levels, the first place was taken by 22,104.67 - 38,000 TL (233 people). Looking at the occupational groups of the participants, students (155) were the most numerous, followed by teachers (70) and the health sector (57). Of the total 606 participants, 414 were Turkish and 192 were foreign nationals.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was applied to evaluate the construct validity of the scales. The principal component method was preferred to determine the factor structure in the analyses, the Varimax orthogonal rotation technique was used to make the factors more interpretable, and items with factor loadings below 0.40 were not considered (Alpar, 2011). The suitability of the data set for factor analysis was examined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sample adequacy measure and Bartlett's Sphericity test; KMO=0.795 for neophobia, involvement KMO=0.745; consumption value KMO=0.943, and Bartlett p=0.001 for all. Thus, it was confirmed that the KMO values for all scales were at an acceptable level and that the Bartlett test yielded significant results, confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis (Durmuş et al., 2018).

The EFA for the Food Neophobia Scale has demonstrated that the scale has a two-factor structure. Two components with eigenvalues above 1 were obtained, and the factors were named "neophilia" and "neophobia." This structure is consistent with the two-dimensional structure reported in the original development study of the scale (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). The total variance explained by the two factors was 51.091%, which was considered to be within acceptable limits (Coşkun et al., 2015). The EFA conducted for the Food Involvement Scale yielded a four-factor structure with eigenvalues above 1. However, since the internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) of three factors remained below 0.60 (Taber, 2018), only the "food involvement" dimension, whose reliability was acceptable, was retained in the analysis; the other sub-dimensions were excluded. At this stage, the scale was subjected to further analysis based on the "food involvement"

dimension. EFA for the Local Food Consumption Value Scale was initially conducted with 29 items; two items showing collinearity (YYTD26 and YYTD12) were removed from the analysis, and factor analysis was repeated. In the final stage, a four-factor structure with eigenvalues above 1 was obtained. Furthermore, the total variance explained by the four factors (68.117%) was found to be at a strong level. The fact that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all sub-dimensions are above acceptable limits supports the internal consistency of the scales (Durmuş et al., 2018).

As a result of the reliability analysis, the Cronbach's alpha values of the scales used were 0.767 for food neophobia, 0.660 for food involvement, and 0.951 for local food consumption. The scales were considered reliable because Cronbach's Alpha values were 0.60 and above (Durmuş et al., 2018). In normality tests, skewness/kurtosis values were found to be within acceptable ranges for neophobia (0.099; -0.198), involvement (-0.134; -0.221), and consumption value (-0.338; 0.950), and it was concluded that the data were suitable for parametric tests (Büyüköztürk et al., 2011; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013).

To test the effect of food-related personality traits (food neophobia and food involvement) on tourists' local food consumption value, multiple linear regression analysis was applied at a 95% confidence level and a significance criterion of $p<0.05$. Within this scope, hypotheses H1a and H1b were tested.

H1 : Food-related personality traits affect tourists' local food consumption value.

H1a: Food neophobia affects tourists' local food consumption value.

H1b: Food involvement affects tourists' local food consumption value.

Table 1. Regression Coefficients Between Food-Related Personality Trait Variables and Tourists' Local Food Consumption Value

Model	**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standardized Coefficients**	***t***	**Significance Level**
	B	**Standard Error**	**Beta**		
1 (fixed)	4,258	,194	-	21,979	,001
Food Neophobia	-,335	,041	-,334	-8,150	**,001***
Food Involvement	,057	,036	,065	1,578	,115

The independent variables explain 13.1% of the variance in local food consumption value. When examining the regression coefficients, it was found that food neophobia has a statistically significant effect on local food consumption value. In contrast, the effect of food involvement on local food consumption value was not found to be statistically significant. In this case, under the

"H1 Main Hypothesis," the alternative hypothesis in the H1a sub-hypothesis was accepted, and the null hypothesis was rejected. In the H1b sub-hypothesis, the alternative hypothesis was rejected, and the null hypothesis was accepted.

To determine the differences between domestic and foreign tourists, the Independent Samples t-Test, one of the parametric analysis techniques, was applied since the normal distribution assumption was met (Karagöz, 2019). The analyses were conducted at a 95% confidence level and a significance criterion of $p<0.05$. Within this scope, hypotheses H2 (H2a and H2b) and H3 were tested.

H2: There is a significant difference between the food-related personality traits of domestic and foreign tourists.

H2a: There is a significant difference between the food neophobia levels of domestic and foreign tourists.

H2b: There is a significant difference between the levels of food involvement of domestic and foreign tourists.

H3: There is a significant difference between the local food consumption values of domestic and foreign tourists.

Table 2. Comparison of Variables with Participants' Nationality Using t-Test

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	INDEPENDENT VARIABLE (Nationality)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Food Neophobia	Domestic	414	2.7215	.58893	.02894	5.644	331,645	**.001***
	Foreign	192	2.4026	.67245	.04853			
Food Involvement	Domestic	411	3.4623	,76344	.03766	-2.348	601	**.019***
	Foreign	192	3,6125	,65861	.04753			
Tourists' Local Food Consumption Value	Domestic	400	3.5198	,66735	,03337	-3.562	461,483	**.001***
	Foreign	192	3,7012	.53303	.03847			

According to the findings, there are statistically significant differences between domestic and foreign tourists in terms of food neophobia and food involvement levels. In the food neophobia variable, the average value of domestic tourists was found to be higher than that of foreign tourists, whereas in the food involvement variable, the average value of foreign tourists was found to be higher than that of domestic tourists. Similarly, a significant difference was found between

domestic and foreign tourists in the variable of tourists' local food consumption value. It was determined that foreign tourists' local food consumption value was higher than that of domestic tourists. Based on this result, the alternative hypotheses under the "H2" Main Hypothesis" for the relevant variables, H2a and H2b sub-hypotheses, and H3 hypothesis were accepted, and the null hypotheses were rejected.

Conclusion

This study examined the effects of food-related personality traits, specifically food neophobia and food involvement, on tourists' perceived value of local food consumption and revealed differences between domestic and foreign tourists. The findings indicate that food neophobia has a significant negative effect on the perceived value of local food consumption. This result is consistent with previous studies (Kim et al., 2010; Mak et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013), which generally associate food neophobia with avoidance of foreign foods and lower food satisfaction. In the literature, food neophobia has been conceptualized as reluctance to try new foods (Pliner & Hobden, 1992) and has been associated with negative evaluations of foreign cuisines (Tuorila et al., 1994; Dovey et al., 2008). In this respect, the present finding suggests that as tourists' level of food neophobia increases, the value they attribute to local food consumption decreases.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, the lack of a statistically significant effect of food involvement on local food consumption value partially differs from previous studies (Bell & Marshall, 2003; Chen, 2007; Mak et al., 2017). The literature indicates that individuals with high food involvement are more deeply involved in culinary experiences, and this may increase the emotional and epistemic value derived from local cuisine (Choe & Kim, 2018). However, the current findings suggest that involvement may not always directly translate into perceived value assessments. This can be explained by the fact that involvement represents a general level of interest in food rather than a specific orientation toward local cuisine, and that food-related personality traits can operate in different ways depending on situational factors (Eertmans et al., 2005).

Comparisons between domestic and foreign tourists revealed that domestic tourists had significantly higher average scores for food neophobia, whereas foreign tourists had significantly higher average scores for food involvement and local food consumption value. This result is consistent with studies emphasizing that cultural distance shapes food evaluation (Chang et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2013). Foreign tourists' perception of local food as an integral part of destination exploration suggests that the symbolic and experiential value attributed to local cuisine may be stronger among foreign visitors.

In conclusion, the model was found to be generally meaningful; food neophobia significantly and negatively influenced the value of local food consumption, whereas food involvement was not a statistically significant predictor. These findings indicate that, from a destination marketing perspective, reducing the uncertainty associated with local food experiences may play an important role in enhancing value perception. In terms of application, it is recommended that informative and experiential content (menu narratives, storytelling, cultural context explanations, tasting

guidance) be designed in a way that reduces uncertainty and increases the perceived value when presenting local food experiences. Furthermore, emphasizing elements such as trust, hygiene, content transparency, and small tasting portion options for individuals with high levels of neophobia may support the perceived value of the experience.

Limitations of the study include the fact that data was collected between March and May 2025, the combined use of purposive and convenience sampling methods, and the self-report nature of the measurements. Future research should retest the model in different destinations and with different tourist profiles. It is also recommended to conduct more detailed modeling based on the sub-dimensions of local food consumption value to examine which value components are more decisive for personality traits.

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A Study on Iranian Consumers' Purchase Intention Toward Medical Tourism Services in Türkiye

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine the determinants influencing international consumers' purchase intention toward medical tourism services in Türkiye. Specifically, it investigates the effects of country awareness, country image, and price perception on purchase intention. In addition, the moderating roles of digital literacy and consumer ethnocentrism are evaluated to understand how individual characteristics shape decision-making in the context of international healthcare services.

Study Design/Methodology/Approach: The research adopts a quantitative explanatory design. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed to Iranian adults who reside outside Türkiye and have the intention or opportunity to travel abroad for medical services. A total of 254 valid responses were obtained using convenience sampling. The measurement scales were adapted from established instruments and analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS. Reliability and validity were assessed through measurement model evaluation, and the hypotheses were tested using regression and structural modeling techniques.

Results: The findings indicate that country awareness, country image and price perception all have significant positive effects on purchase intention of Iranian citizens toward medical tourism services in Türkiye. Among these predictors, price perception demonstrates particularly strong influence, highlighting the importance of affordability in shaping international patients' decisions. The moderating analysis reveals limited effects of digital literacy and consumer ethnocentrism, suggesting that pragmatic healthcare needs and economic considerations may outweigh cultural biases and digital competencies when evaluating medical tourism destinations.

Originality/Value: This study develops and empirically validates an integrated model explaining international patients' purchase intentions in medical tourism by combining branding, service evaluation, and socio-cultural factors. By focusing on foreign consumers' perceptions of Türkiye as a medical tourism destination, the research contributes to the literature on medical tourism marketing and provides practical insights for policymakers and healthcare providers seeking to strengthen Türkiye's global competitiveness in the health tourism sector.

Keywords: Medical tourism, purchase intention, country awareness, price perception

Introduction

Medical tourism, defined as traveling across national borders to obtain healthcare services, has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments within the broader health tourism industry (Connell, 2013; Ates & Sunar, 2024). This growth is largely driven by rising healthcare costs in

developed countries, long waiting times, and increasing consumer awareness of alternative treatment options abroad (Singh, 2013; Klijs et al., 2016).

In this context, Türkiye has established itself as a prominent destination in the global medical tourism market. The country benefits from a unique combination/compiler of advantages, including relatively low healthcare costs, a favorable climate, a developed transportation infrastructure, and a reputation for safety. Moreover, Türkiye's healthcare sector has undergone substantial transformation over the past decade, supported by government-backed incentive programs and investments in medical infrastructure (Aydın, 2012; Merdivenci & Karakaş, 2020). These developments have significantly enhanced service quality, particularly in major metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir.

Türkiye's strategic geopolitical location further strengthens its position as a medical tourism hub. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the country provides convenient access for patients from a wide geographical area. Consequently, Türkiye attracts a diverse patient base, including individuals from Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, and former Soviet Union countries (Zengingönül et al., 2011). This accessibility, combined with cost advantages and improving healthcare standards, has contributed to the country's growing competitiveness in international healthcare markets.

Despite this growth, medical tourism remains a complex service domain characterized by high perceived risk, information asymmetry, and significant consumer uncertainty (Agbabiaka et al., 2017; Connell, 2013).. Unlike traditional tourism products, medical services involve critical health outcomes, making the decision-making process more sensitive and cognitively demanding. Therefore hookup, consumers rely heavily on informational cues such as country reputation, perceived service quality, and price transparency when evaluating alternative destinations.

Within this framework, branding concepts have become increasingly relevant in explaining patient decision-making processes. Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) models, which traditionally focus on brand awareness and brand image, provide a useful lens through which to examine destination choice in medical tourism. However, existing models require adaptation to account for cross-cultural differences and the unique characteristics of healthcare services (Guha et al., 2018). In this study, the concept of country awareness is operationalized as an equivalent to brand awareness, while Türkiye is conceptualized as a destination brand for international medical tourists.

Country awareness refers to the extent to which potential medical tourists are familiar with a destination and its healthcare offerings. It plays a critical role in the initial stages of the decision-making process, influencing whether a destination is considered at all. Closely related to this construct is country image, which encompasses the overall perceptions, beliefs, and associations individuals hold regarding a country. A positive country image can enhance trust, reduce perceived risk, and increase the likelihood of selecting a destination for medical treatment.

In addition to these cognitive factors, perceived service quality and price perception are also key determinants of medical tourism demand. Given the intangible and high-stakes nature of healthcare

services, perceived quality becomes a crucial signal of reliability and competence. Similarly, price perception influences value assessments, particularly in a context where cost savings are a primary motivator for seeking treatment abroad. Together, these variables shape consumers' evaluations of destination attractiveness and ultimately affect their purchase intentions.

Furthermore, the increasing role of digital technologies in information acquisition has introduced new dynamics into the medical tourism decision-making process. Potential patients often rely on online platforms, social media, and digital content to gather information about treatment options, healthcare providers, and destination characteristics. In this regard, digital literacy—defined as an individual's ability to effectively access, evaluate, and use digital information—may significantly influence how consumers interpret and utilize available information. Individuals with higher digital literacy are more likely to engage in extensive information search and critical evaluation, potentially strengthening or weakening the effects of traditional decision drivers such as country image and perceived quality.

Another important factor that may influence medical tourism decisions is consumer ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism reflects the tendency of individuals to prefer domestic products and services over foreign alternatives due to cultural, moral, or nationalistic considerations. In the context of medical tourism, ethnocentric tendencies may act as a barrier to seeking treatment abroad, even when foreign options offer superior value or quality. Therefore, examining the moderating role of ethnocentrism provides a deeper understanding of how cultural attitudes shape healthcare choices.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate the determinants of medical tourism demand in Türkiye by integrating key constructs from branding and consumer behavior literature. Specifically, the study examines the effects of country awareness, country image, perceived service quality, and price perception on purchase intention. In addition, it explores the moderating roles of digital literacy and consumer ethnocentrism in shaping these relationships.

To achieve this objective, empirical data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to foreign participants, specifically Iranian citizens, who represent a significant segment of Türkiye's medical tourism market. Iran has been one of the leading source countries for medical tourists visiting Türkiye, making it a relevant context for examining cross-border healthcare decisions. The study focuses on understanding how these consumers evaluate Türkiye as a medical destination and which factors most strongly influence their intention to choose Turkish healthcare providers.

Based on this research focus, the central research question guiding the study is as follows: To what extent do country awareness, country image, perceived service quality, and price perception influence the purchase intentions of foreign consumers in the context of medical tourism, particularly among individuals who rely on digital sources of information? Additionally, the study investigates whether digital literacy and consumer ethnocentrism moderate these relationships, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of decision-making processes in medical tourism.

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it extends the application of CBBE theory to the context of medical tourism by conceptualizing countries as brands and integrating awareness and image constructs into destination choice models. Second, it incorporates digital literacy as a contemporary factor reflecting the evolving nature of consumer information behavior. Third, it examines the role of ethnocentrism in a service context where cross-border consumption is essential.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. The next chapter provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and introduces the conceptual framework underlying the research model. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the methodology, including research design, data collection, and analysis techniques. Subsequently, the findings of the empirical analysis are presented and discussed in relation to the proposed hypotheses. Finally, the study concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

The rise of medical tourism, in which individuals travel abroad to receive medical care and improve their general well-being, is a significant trend within the quickly developing healthcare sector (Ates & Sunar, 2024). The growing popularity of medical tourism is largely driven by the rising cost of healthcare in many developed countries. As medical expenses continue to increase, many patients find it difficult to afford necessary treatments in their home countries. As a result, they often look for more affordable options abroad, where similar—or sometimes even better—medical services can be obtained at significantly lower costs (Klijs et al., 2016). In addition to financial pressures, long waiting times for medical treatment in high-income countries also encourage patients to seek healthcare in other countries (Singh, 2013). Another key factor contributing to the expansion of medical tourism is the availability of specialized treatments in other countries that may not be accessible at home. In some cases, advanced procedures, experimental medications, or innovative medical techniques are unavailable in a patient's home country due to regulatory restrictions, limited expertise, or insufficient medical infrastructure (Agbabiaka et al., 2017). In this context, Türkiye holds a significant competitive advantage due to several factors, including its favorable climate, relatively low costs, safety, and well-developed transportation infrastructure. Together, these factors position the country as an attractive destination for health tourism for patients from Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, and former Soviet bloc countries (Zengingönül et al., 2011).

Drawing on the Theory of Reasoned Action developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), purchase intention in medical tourism can be understood as a function of individuals' attitudes toward the behavior and subjective norms shaping that behavior. Within this framework, key cognitive beliefs—such as country awareness, country image, perceived service quality, and price perception—serve as salient antecedents of attitude formation. Specifically, country awareness increases familiarity and reduces uncertainty, while a favorable country image enhances trust and perceived credibility of the destination. Similarly, perceived service quality signals expected performance outcomes, and price perception influences value evaluations, both of which are

critical in high-risk service contexts such as healthcare. According to the Theory of Reasoned Action, these belief-based evaluations collectively shape an individual's attitude toward choosing a medical tourism destination, which in turn influences behavioral intention (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Therefore, in the context of medical tourism, positive perceptions of these constructs are expected to strengthen favorable attitudes toward Türkiye as a destination, ultimately leading to higher purchase intention among potential international patients.

Country Brand Awareness in Medical Services in Türkiye

Brand awareness is the capacity of a consumer to recognize and recall a brand in a range of contexts (Aaker, 1996). It consists of two parts: brand recognition, which is the capacity to recognize a brand when given pertinent clues, and brand recall, which is the consumer's capacity to recover a brand name from memory. Consumer purchasing decisions are directly impacted by brand awareness, which is a basic requirement for every brand-related search (Kapferer, 2008, Evans, 2008; Zhou & Jiang, 2011).

Kotler and Gertner (2002) define country brand as the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about a country, which influences their behavioral responses toward it. *Country awareness is* conceptualized as the extent to which consumers are familiar with a country and can recall it as a potential destination, plays a critical role in the early stages of decision-making.. In tourism contexts, awareness serves as a prerequisite for image formation; individuals cannot develop perceptions about destinations they are not aware of. Higher levels of country awareness increase the likelihood that a destination will be included in the consumer's consideration set, thereby positively influencing visiting intention (Baloglu, 2001, Pike & Ryan, 2004; Stylos et al., 2016). Ahmed and d'Astous (2008) found that awareness of a country strongly influences international consumer decisions, while Han and Hyun (2015) demonstrated that knowledge of a country's healthcare capabilities increases confidence in choosing it as a medical tourism destination. Without sufficient awareness, even high-quality services or competitive pricing may have limited impact on demand.

In this study, *country awareness* is treated as a form of brand awareness, with Türkiye positioned as the destination brand for international medical tourists and the following hypothese wss proposed:

H1. Country Brand Awareness is positively related to purchase intention.

Country Brand Image

Brand image is "a set of perceptions about a brand, as reflected by brand associations in consumer memory" (Keller,1993). Brand image plays a critical role in consumer decision-making, as individuals tend to prefer services associated with strong and favorable brand images due to the greater trust and perceived reliability they convey (Enes et al., 2020)

Country brand image is broadly conceptualized as the set of cognitive and affective associations individuals hold about a country (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). It reflects perceptions related to a country's economic development, service quality, safety, and overall attractiveness. A positive country image reduces perceived risk and enhances trust, particularly in high-involvement

decisions such as international travel or medical tourism (Aghekyan-Simonian et al., 2012; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Empirical studies have consistently shown that country image significantly influences tourists' destination evaluations and behavioral intentions. For instance, Echtner and Ritchie (1993) argue that favorable destination images positively affect tourists' decision-making processes, while Chen and Tsai (2007) demonstrate that destination image directly and indirectly influences visiting intention through satisfaction and perceived value.

Although the literature frequently discusses medical tourism competitiveness, comprehensive frameworks for evaluating international competitiveness are scarce (Kılavuz, 2018). Destinations that combine attractive tourism features with quality healthcare services are more likely to succeed. Türkiye exemplifies this combination, providing both strong health services and appealing tourist attractions, offering a strategic advantage over other countries (Merdivenci & Karakaş, 2020). So, we hypothesed;

H2. Country image is positively related to purchase intention.

Price Perception

Price is a key element of the marketing mix (Helm & Gritsch, 2014). Its influence on customers' decision-making and selection of goods and services accounts for a substantial portion of its importance (Ryu & Han, 2010). Research shows that positive price perceptions increase purchase intentions (Rifai, 2015; Septiani & Chaerudin, 2020).

Complex service environments can result in pricing differences across institutions in the medical tourism sector. Because true prices might not be recognized or understood, buyers may find the objective price to be less significant (Zeithaml, 1988). Pricing perception, or how customers view and assess pricing fairness, becomes a more pertinent concept under certain situations. Purchase intention is favorably influenced by price perception, according to research; the more favorable the view, the more likely the buyer is to make a purchase (Rifai, 2015; Septiani & Chaerudin, 2020).

Based on the evidence discussed, it is, therefore, postulated that:

H3. Price perception has a significant direct effect on purchase intention.

Moderating Effects of Digital literacy and Consumer Etnocentrism

Digital literacy refers to an individual's ability to locate, evaluate, and effectively utilize information within digital environments. Within the Theory of Planned Behavior framework, that reflects individuals' perceptions of their ability to carry out a particular behavior recognizing that behavior is not always entirely under one's voluntary control. It is closely related to perceived behavioral control, as it reflects consumers' perceived capability to carry out online purchasing activities.

Consumers with higher levels of digital literacy typically feel more confident when navigating digital platforms, interpreting product information, and evaluating online cues such as user reviews or country-of-origin signals. As a result, their positive attitudes toward a product or service are more likely to translate into stronger purchase intentions. In contrast, consumers with limited digital literacy may experience greater uncertainty and perceived risk in online environments.

These individuals often rely on simpler decision strategies or heuristic cues, meaning that even when they hold favorable attitudes, those attitudes may not necessarily lead to equally strong purchase intentions.

For this reason, digital literacy is expected to function as a moderating factor that shapes the influence of TPB antecedents on purchase intention. Specifically, the relationships between attitudes, norms, and intentions are likely to be stronger among consumers with higher digital literacy and weaker among those with lower levels of digital competence (Ajzen, 1991).

H4a: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between country awareness and purchase intention.

H4b: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between country image and purchase intention..

H4c: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between price perception and purchase intention.

The idea of ethnocentrism, which is described as "an attitude or outlook in which values derived from one's own cultural background are applied to other cultural contexts where different values are operative," is the source of consumer ethnocentrism (CE) (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). By utilizing the ideals of their own nation as a standard for evaluation, ethnocentrism enables people to classify others according to national or ethnic stereotypes. People that are highly ethnocentric have a tendency to see their own group favorably while viewing other groups, their beliefs, and their customs as strange or subpar (Ray & Lovejoy, 1986).

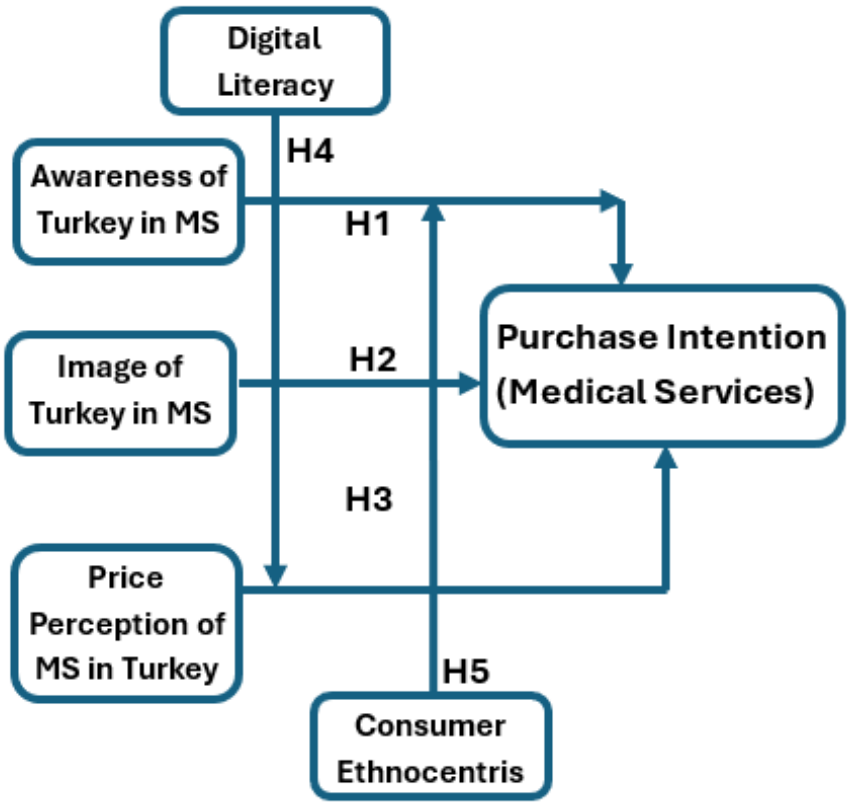
Ethnocentrism may serve as obstacles, a society's openness to other cultures might help it embrace imported goods and services (Kaynak & Kara, 2002).While non-ethnocentric customers assess imported goods more impartially, regardless of nation of origin, high ethnocentric consumers feel that purchasing imports damages home employment, has a negative economic impact, and is unpatriotic.

H5a: Consumer ethnocentrism moderates the relationship between country awareness and purchase intention.

H5b: Consumer ethnocentrism moderates the relationship between country image and purchase intention.

H5c: Consumer ethnocentrism moderates the relationship between price perception and purchase intention.

Figure 1. Research Model



Methodology

The main goal of this study is determining how demand for medical tourism in Turkey is impacted by country awareness, country image, perceived service quality, and pricing perception. Additionally, as moderating factors, the impact of digital literacy and customer ethnocentrism on purchase intention are examined.

To empirically test the proposed relationships, an online survey was employed. The questionnaire was administered online using convenience sampling techniques. Participants were reached through digital communication channels such as email and social media platforms, and the survey was distributed via Google Forms. Data were collected from 254 Iranian citizens. The choice of this sample is theoretically justified, as Iran is one of the key source countries for medical tourists traveling to Türkiye, and its consumers are increasingly exposed to cross-border healthcare alternatives.

The data collection instrument consisted of a pre-designed questionnaire including validated measurement scales adapted from prior studies. Country awareness was measured using items adapted from Santos et al. (2024), while country image, perceived service quality, and price perception were adapted from Cham et al. (2020). Digital literacy was measured based on Mahboob Kanafi (2019), and consumer ethnocentrism was operationalized using the scale developed by Sharma (2010). Purchase intention was measured using items adapted from Seow

and Choong (2022). All constructs were measured using five -point Likert-type scales, ensuring consistency with prior research and enhancing measurement reliability.

For data analysis, a variance-based structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was employed, using SmartPLS 4 software. This method is particularly suitable for exploratory models and complex relationships involving latent constructs and moderating effects. The analysis followed a two-step procedure. First, the measurement model was assessed to ensure reliability and validity through indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity (average variance extracted), and discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio). Second, the structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs and to assess the significance and strength of path coefficients.

Results

The sample demonstrates a relatively balanced gender distribution, suggesting that medical tourism interest is not strongly gender-specific. The majority of respondents are aged 25 or below, reflecting higher digital engagement and openness to international healthcare options among younger individuals. Additionally, the high proportion of university-educated participants indicates a well-informed sample, likely contributing to greater awareness and more rational evaluation of medical tourism services.

Table 1. Demographics characteristics of the sample

Variable	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	140	55.1
	Female	114	44.9
	Total	254	100
Age group	≤25 years	94	37.0
	26–35 years	53	20.9
	36–45 years	52	20.5
	46–65 years	50	19.7
	>65 years	4	1.6
Education level	High school	101	39.8
	Bachelor	75	29.5
	Master/PhD	77	30.3
	Elementary	1	0.4

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed using PLS-SEM procedures in SmartPLS 4. Indicator reliability was supported as most outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, with a few items slightly above 0.60 retained due to their acceptable contribution to construct validity. Internal consistency reliability was confirmed, as Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs were above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability. Convergent validity was established, with average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding the minimum criterion of

0.50, demonstrating that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. Furthermore, discriminant validity was verified using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT), with HTMT values remaining below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming that the constructs are empirically distinct. Overall, these results indicate that the measurement model demonstrates strong reliability and validity, supporting the robustness of the structural model analysis.

Table 2 Cronbach's Alpha & Composite Reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
CA	0.733	0.744	0.833	0.557
CI	0.776	0.777	0.870	0.691
DL	0.901	0.922	0.927	0.717
PI	0.897	0.902	0.924	0.708
PP	0.827	0.825	0.898	0.747
PS	0.800	0.837	0.863	0.611

In line with the research model and hypotheses developed in Chapters 1–3, six hypotheses were empirically tested. The direct effects hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, and H4) were analyzed using simple linear regression, while the moderating hypotheses (H5 and H6) were examined through moderated regression analysis incorporating interaction terms.

Table 3 Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	β	p-value	Result
H1	**Country Awareness → Purchase Intention**	**0,46**	**0**	**Supported**
H2	**Country Image → Purchase Intention**	**0,479**	**0**	**Supported**
H3	**Price Perception → Purchase Intention**	**0,547**	**0,00**	**Supported**
H4a	**Country Awareness → Purchase Intention (Moderating Effect of Digital Literacy)**	**-0,07**	**0,911**	**Not Supported**
H4b	**Country Image → Purchase Intention (Moderating Effect of Digital Literacy)**	**-0,03**	**0,557**	**Not Supported**
H4c	**Price Perception →Purchase Intention (Moderating Effect of Digital Literacy)**	**-0,07**	**0,173**	**Not Supported**

H5a	**Country Awareness → Purchase Intention (Moderating Effect of Consumer Ethnocentrism)**	**-0,01**	**0,111**	**Not Supported**
H5b	**Country Image → Purchase Intention (Moderating Effect of Ethnocentrism)**	**0,02**	**0,627**	**Not Supported**
H5c	**Price Perception →Purchase Intention (Moderating Effect of Ethnocentrism)**	**0,547**	**0,97**	**Not Supported**

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the determinants of purchase intention in the context of medical tourism in Türkiye by integrating branding, behavioral, and socio-cultural perspectives. The findings indicate that country awareness, country image, and price perception play significant roles in shaping international consumers' intentions to seek medical services abroad. Among these factors, price perception emerges as the strongest predictor, emphasizing the importance of perceived affordability and value in medical tourism decisions. This result is consistent with prior studies highlighting cost advantage as a primary driver of cross-border healthcare mobility (Connell, 2013) and aligns with value-based frameworks suggesting that price perceptions influence consumer evaluations through perceived benefits and sacrifices (Zeithaml, 1988) .

Country image was identified as the second most influential factor, reinforcing the importance of trust, reputation, and perceived credibility in high-risk service contexts such as healthcare. A favorable destination image reduces perceived risk and enhances consumer confidence, thereby increasing the likelihood of choosing a medical tourism destination (Aghekyan-Simonian et al., 2012). This finding is further supported by research suggesting that brand image contributes significantly to perceived value and overall customer experience (Mourad et al., 2011; Rizaldi and Suprayogi, 2024) . In addition, Türkiye's positioning as a competitive medical tourism destination, combining high-quality healthcare services with attractive tourism offerings, supports earlier findings in the literature (Merdivenci & Karakaş, 2020).

Country awareness also plays a crucial role as a foundational determinant in the decision-making process. Consistent with customer-based brand equity (CBBE) theory, awareness functions as a prerequisite for consideration, enabling consumers to include a destination in their evaluation set (Keller, 2013; Kapferer, 2008). This study confirms that awareness, together with image and perceived quality, remains a core dimension of brand equity influencing behavioral intentions (Abdul Majid et al., 2016; Singh & Pattanayak, 2016) .

The analysis of moderating effects revealed that neither digital literacy nor consumer ethnocentrism significantly influenced the relationships between the main predictors and purchase

intention. The absence of a significant moderating effect for digital literacy suggests that digital competence may function as a baseline capability rather than a differentiating factor in decision-making, particularly in samples with generally high digital literacy levels (Umut, 2024) . Similarly, the non-significant role of consumer ethnocentrism indicates that pragmatic considerations, such as cost and healthcare needs, may outweigh cultural biases when individuals evaluate medical tourism options. Although ethnocentrism shows some negative attitudinal tendencies, it does not significantly alter the effect of awareness or other core predictors on intention (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) .

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by extending branding theory into the domain of high-risk healthcare services. It demonstrates that branding constructs such as awareness and image are not only symbolic but also functional in reducing perceived risk and uncertainty. Furthermore, the integration of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) confirms that attitudes shaped by value, trust, and perceived benefits significantly influence behavioral intentions in cross-border service contexts.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that policymakers and healthcare providers in Türkiye should prioritize pricing strategies that communicate value and affordability while simultaneously strengthening the country's international image as a reliable and high-quality medical destination. Transparent communication of service quality, combined with trust-building initiatives, can further enhance competitiveness in the global medical tourism market. Additionally, marketing strategies should emphasize both economic and reputational advantages rather than relying solely on cost-based positioning.

Overall, this study offers a robust, empirically validated model that explains the decision-making processes of international medical tourists. By integrating branding, behavioral, and contextual factors, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and predicting medical tourism demand, particularly in emerging destinations such as Türkiye.

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Examining the Relationship Between Organizational Commitment and Job Satisfaction in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry Through Meta-Analysis

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Abstract

***Purpose*:** This study aims to determine the average effect size of the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction, as well as between affective commitment and job satisfaction, within the hospitality and tourism industry. Given the labor-intensive nature of the industry, understanding the relationship between commitment and satisfaction is critical for improving employee attitudes and organizational performance.

***Study design/methodology/approach*:** A meta-analysis was conducted according to PRISMA guidelines to synthesize findings from independent and individual empirical studies. A systematic search was conducted across the Scopus and Web of Science databases for relevant research published through December 2025, yielding an initial pool of 381 studies. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, the final analysis included 43 studies with a total sample size of N=16.649. Effect sizes were calculated using a random-effects model and Fisher's model. To facilitate statistical synthesis, Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (CMA) software was utilized.

***Results*:** The meta-analysis yielded an overall mean effect size of 0.789 for the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The study highlights that content overlaps in global measurement scales often artificially inflate the correlation between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, leading to a potential statistical illusion at the general level. In contrast, the analysis identified a robust effect size of 0.624 for the relationship involving affective commitment, which is considered a more reliable and theoretically precise measure due to its lack of conceptual redundancy.

***Originality/value*:** This research addresses a significant gap in the literature by focusing solely on the hospitality and tourism industry through a sector-specific meta-analysis. Unraveling the relationship between job satisfaction and different dimensions of commitment, it provides managers with a timely insight into predicting employee behavior and achieving goals in service environments where satisfaction is subject to immediate feedback.

Keywords: Organizational commitment, affective commitment, job satisfaction, hospitality and tourism, meta-analysis.

Introduction

Job satisfaction is a critical driver of success in the hospitality and tourism industry because of the inseparability of production and consumption. When staff members are satisfied, they are more likely to deliver high-quality service experiences that define guest satisfaction and customer loyalty, in return, increasing company performance (McPhail et al., 2015). Furthermore, job satisfaction plays a central role in managing the industry's notoriously high turnover rates. The

hospitality sector frequently struggles with labor shortages and the high costs associated with recruiting and training new personnel. Research indicates that employees who feel valued and satisfied with their work environment, compensation, and growth opportunities are significantly more likely to remain with their organization (O'Neill and Davis, 2011).

Additionally, extensive research has established that job performance is significantly enhanced when employees report high levels of job satisfaction (Wright et al., 2007). Scholars have explored the potential interdependence between satisfaction and performance through a variety of robust theoretical frameworks. For instance, the job characteristics model by Hackman and Oldham (1976) states that jobs enriched with core attributes such as skill variety, autonomy, and task significance will be more motivating and satisfying to the employees and will result in improved performance. However, studies of the relationship between job satisfaction and performance have not been fully supported by empirical evidence. The relationship between job satisfaction and job performance is investigated by the meta-analysis, which has a more profound estimate of the relationships between the two constructs, revealing a somewhat lower correlation coefficient of approximately 0.17 (Iaffaldano and Muchinsky, 1985) or moderate correlation of 0.30 (Judge et al., 2001). The relationship between job satisfaction and employee performance may be spurious or subject to confounding, suggesting that both constructs are influenced by one or more unmeasured variables. This complexity necessitates further empirical investigation into the specific moderators and mediators that govern this link (Judge et al., 2001).

Research into organizational commitment within the hospitality and tourism industry highlights its critical role in driving employee behaviors and organizational performance (Al-Romeedy and El-Sisi, 2024). Determining the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment is essential in hospitality and tourism because these factors collectively influence employee retention and performance. Job satisfaction is a multidimensional construct comprising factors such as pay, supervision, and promotion opportunities, and it serves as a significant antecedent to organizational commitment (Meyer et al., 2002). When employees are satisfied with these specific job dimensions, they are more likely to develop a psychological attachment to their firm, which is critical in an industry characterized by high-pressure environments and labor-intensive service. Furthermore, commitment acts as a primary buffer against the industry's chronically high turnover rates. Research indicates that both organizational and occupational commitment are negatively correlated with turnover intentions, meaning that committed employees are significantly less likely to leave their positions (Meyer et al., 1993).

Organizational commitment and job satisfaction are often studied together to predict employee outcomes and performance, as each construct offers a unique and distinct contribution to these results (Prentice et al. 2019; Tett and Meyer, 1993; Xu et al., 2023). Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are closely related but conceptually distinct job attitudes. Job satisfaction refers to an employee's evaluative and affective reaction to their job or job facets (e.g., pay, supervision, tasks). It is primarily job-focused and experiential, capturing how pleased or content individuals feel with what they do on a day-to-day basis (Judge et al, 2001). Organizational

commitment, in contrast, reflects the employee's psychological attachment to the organization itself, not just the job (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Organizational commitment is defined as a force binding an employee to a course of action relevant to the organization. Allen and Meyer identified three distinct dimensions of organizational commitment: affective commitment, which represents an individual's emotional bond, identification, and active involvement with the firm; continuance commitment, which centers on the perceived economic or social costs tied to resigning; and normative commitment, which stems from a felt moral obligation to stay with the employer.

The constructs are nevertheless related. In fact, meta-analyses investigating the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment consistently reveal a strong positive correlation, establishing these constructs as distinct yet highly interrelated. One of the foremost organizational commitment meta-analysis studies conducted by Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found that organizational commitment and (overall) job satisfaction shared a correlation of .488, but were associated at lower levels with facets of job satisfaction. Tett and Meyer (1993) found that job satisfaction has a moderate positive effect on organizational commitment (r=.586). In their meta-analysis, Meyer et al. (2002) demonstrated that job satisfaction is strongly associated with affective organizational commitment (r=.65) and moderately associated with normative commitment (r=.31). In contrast, the relationship between job satisfaction and continuance commitment was found to be weak and negative (r=.-07). Research indicates that the most significant relationship among commitment dimensions exists between affective commitment and overall job satisfaction. This strong correlation may stem from the nature of global satisfaction scales, which frequently incorporate items assessing an employee's contentment with the organization as a whole or its specific management practices (Meyer, 1997). Consequently, both job satisfaction and affective commitment are essential constructs for managers to monitor when attempting to influence and predict employee behavior in a hospitality and tourism setting (Tett and Meyer, 1993).

Ülbeği and Yalçın (2016), who aimed to reveal the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment in the Turkish context through a meta-analysis, determined the effect size between the two variables to be .604. In the same study, the relationships between job satisfaction and the other dimensions of organizational commitment were found as follows: affective commitment .604; continuance commitment .263; and normative commitment .521. Çınar et al. (2024), retrieved studies from WOS, Scopus, and Google Scholar in their meta-analysis conducted with healthcare workers, found a correlation of .544 between organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

Considering factors such as different conceptualizations and measurement approaches of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in the studies referenced above, their assessment at specific points in time, varying sample characteristics, different sectors, moderating effects, and potential publication bias, it is evident that there is a need for meta-analytic studies that can account for these differences. The absence of meta-analyses examining the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, specifically in the hospitality and tourism field, suggests that studying this issue on a sectoral basis—particularly among hospitality and tourism

employees, who play a decisive role in organizational performance—may yield interesting results. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment in the hospitality and tourism sector using the meta-analysis method.

Research Methodology

In this study, a meta-analytic approach was used to examine the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction in the context of hospitality and tourism. Meta-analysis is defined as the analysis of analyses; it involves combining the results obtained from individual studies to arrive at a statistically significant analysis (Glass, 1976). According to the research objective, the following steps were followed in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines, which are considered important in meta-analysis research: (1) defining the research question, (2) literature review, (3) selection of studies, (4) data collection, (5) data analysis, and (6) conclusion and evaluation. The analysis was performed using the CMA software package.

Literature Review Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across the Scopus and Web of Science databases for studies published through December 2025. As a result of this search, a total of 381 publications consisting of articles, book chapters, and theses that examined the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction in the context of hospitality and tourism were identified. The search was conducted using the keywords “organizational-commitment”, “job-satisfaction”, “tourism”, and “hospitality” in the databases.

Selection of Studies

Following the initial search, the retrieved publications were systematically screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine their suitability for the final analysis. To maintain the study's scope and ensure methodological feasibility, the following criteria were established:

Inclusion criteria:

- Studies must employ empirical research designs providing quantitative data.
- Publications must be retrieved from the Web of Science or Scopus databases.
- Works were selected regardless of their publication format, including journal articles, book chapters, and theses.
- The research must explicitly examine the statistical relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction.
- The sample population must consist of employees specifically within the hospitality and tourism industry.
- Studies were required to report correlation coefficients to facilitate the calculation of overall effect sizes.

Exclusion criteria:

- To prevent the artificial inflation of effect sizes, multiple publications derived from the same sample were identified, and only the most comprehensive version was retained.

- Research that failed to report correlation coefficients or the necessary data required for effect size estimation was excluded.
- Studies for which the complete text could not be retrieved through institutional databases or author contact were omitted to ensure thorough data extraction.
- Any work that did not align with the core variables or fell outside the specific scope of the hospitality and tourism industry was excluded.

Applying the above criteria to the initial pool of 381 publications resulted in a final sample of 43 eligible studies (k= 43). Consequently, the meta-analysis was conducted on a cumulative sample size of N= 16.649 individuals.

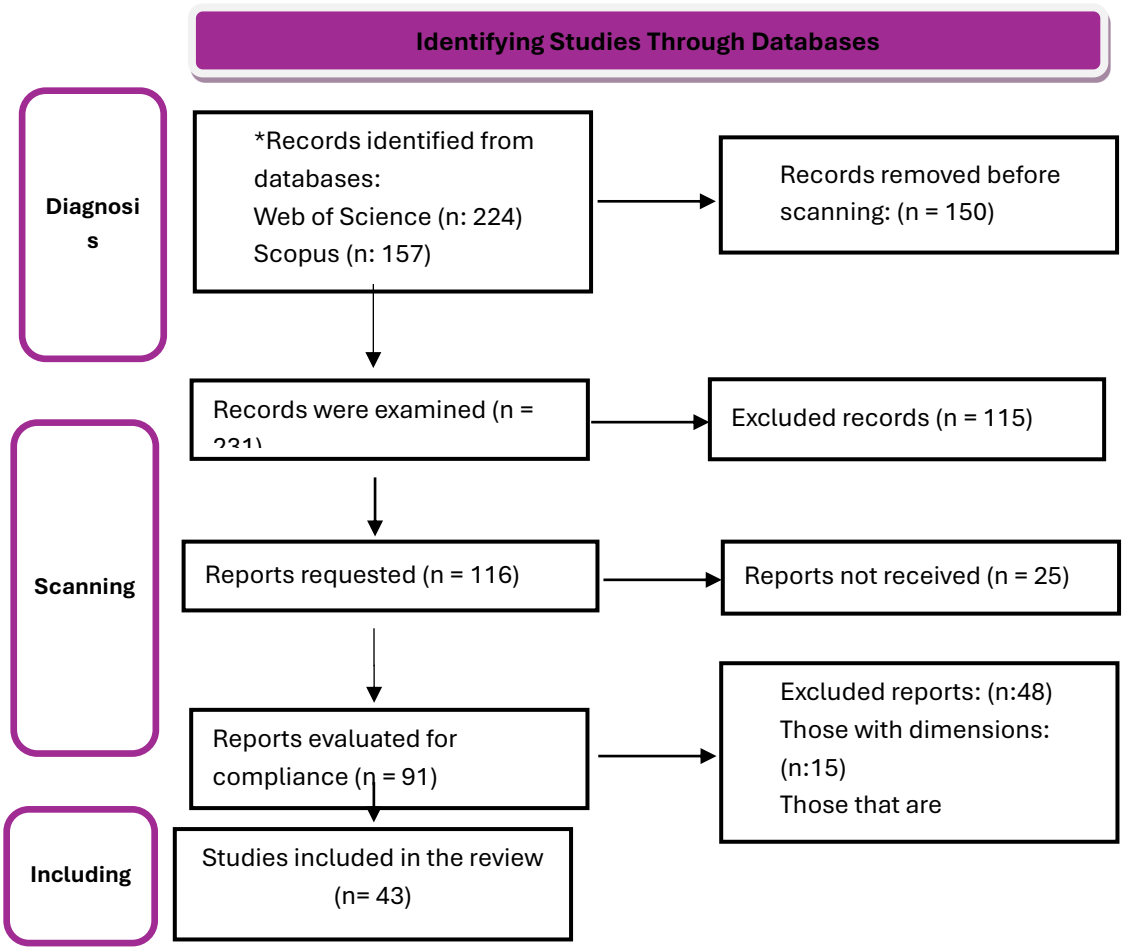


Figure 1. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) Flow Diagram (McDonald and Moher, 2021).

Findings

A meta-analysis was conducted to evaluate the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, focusing on both overall and affective dimensions. The study provides a comprehensive overview of publication characteristics, including frequency distributions of the included studies and assessments of publication bias via funnel plot analysis. Furthermore, effect

sizes are visualized through a forest plot, with a detailed reporting of the heterogeneity analysis to account for variations within the dataset.

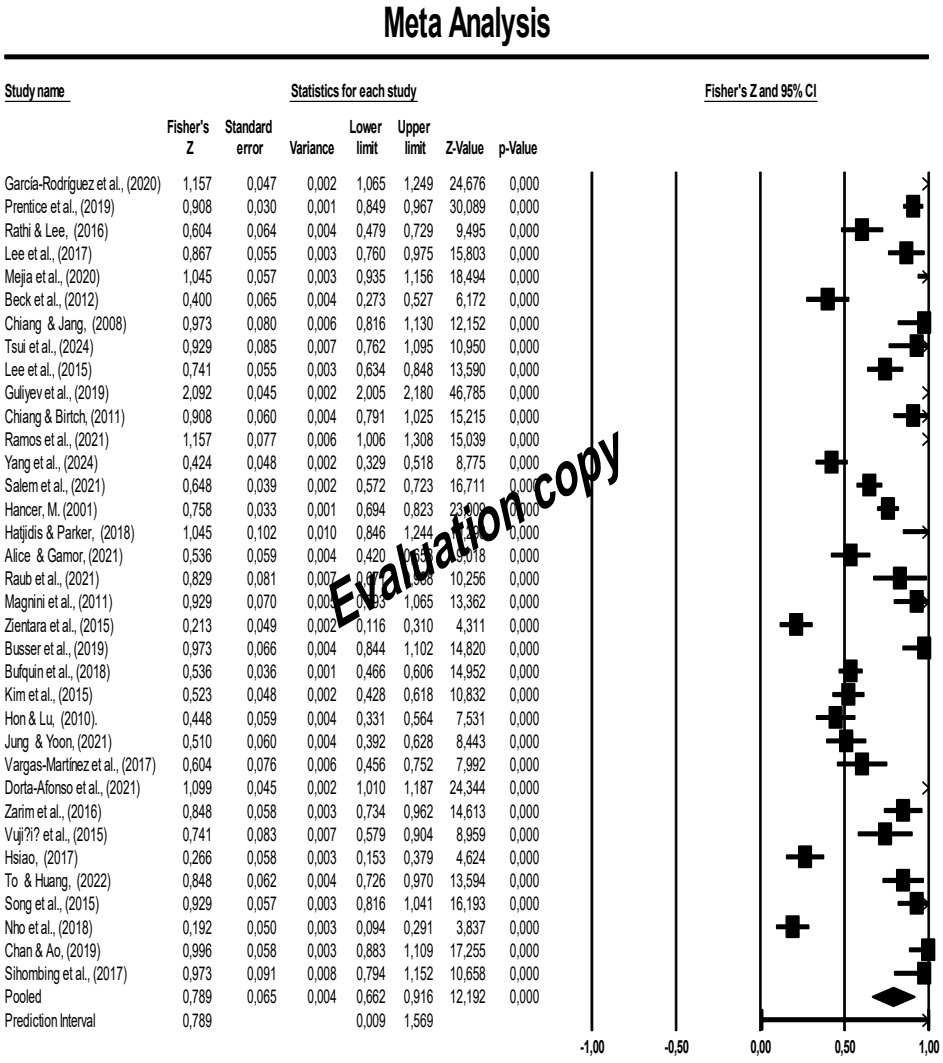
Table 1 summarizes the 35 studies included in the analysis, which include 33 articles, one thesis, and one book chapter. A geographical analysis of these studies indicates a clear predominance of research conducted within Asian countries. In terms of publication venues, the results were primarily disseminated through journals specializing in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Table 1. Details of the meta-analysis dataset on organizational commitment and job satisfaction

	Author and Year	**Sample Size**	**Country**	**Journal Name**
1	García-Rodríguez et al. (2020)	458	Canary Islands	IJHM
2	Prentice et al. (2019)	1102	China	JHMM
3	Rathi , N., & Lee, K. (2016)	250	India	Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism
4	Lee et al. (2017)	335	South Korea	International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration
5	Mejia et al. (2020)	316	China	International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration
6	Beck et al., (2012)	241	China	International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration
7	Chiang, C. F., & Jang, S. (2008)	159	Taiwan	JHTR
8	Tsui et al. (2024)	142	China	Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism
9	Lee et al. (2015)	339	Taiwan	Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism
10	Guliyev et al. (2019)	503	Azerbaijan	Journal of East European Management Studies
11	Chiang, F. F., & Birtch, T. A. (2011)	284	China	IJHM
12	Ramos et al. (2021)	172	Malaysia	Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism
13	Yang et al., (2024)	432	China	JHTM
14	Salem et al. (2021)	669	Egypt	TM
15	Hancer, M. (2001)	924	USA	Thesis

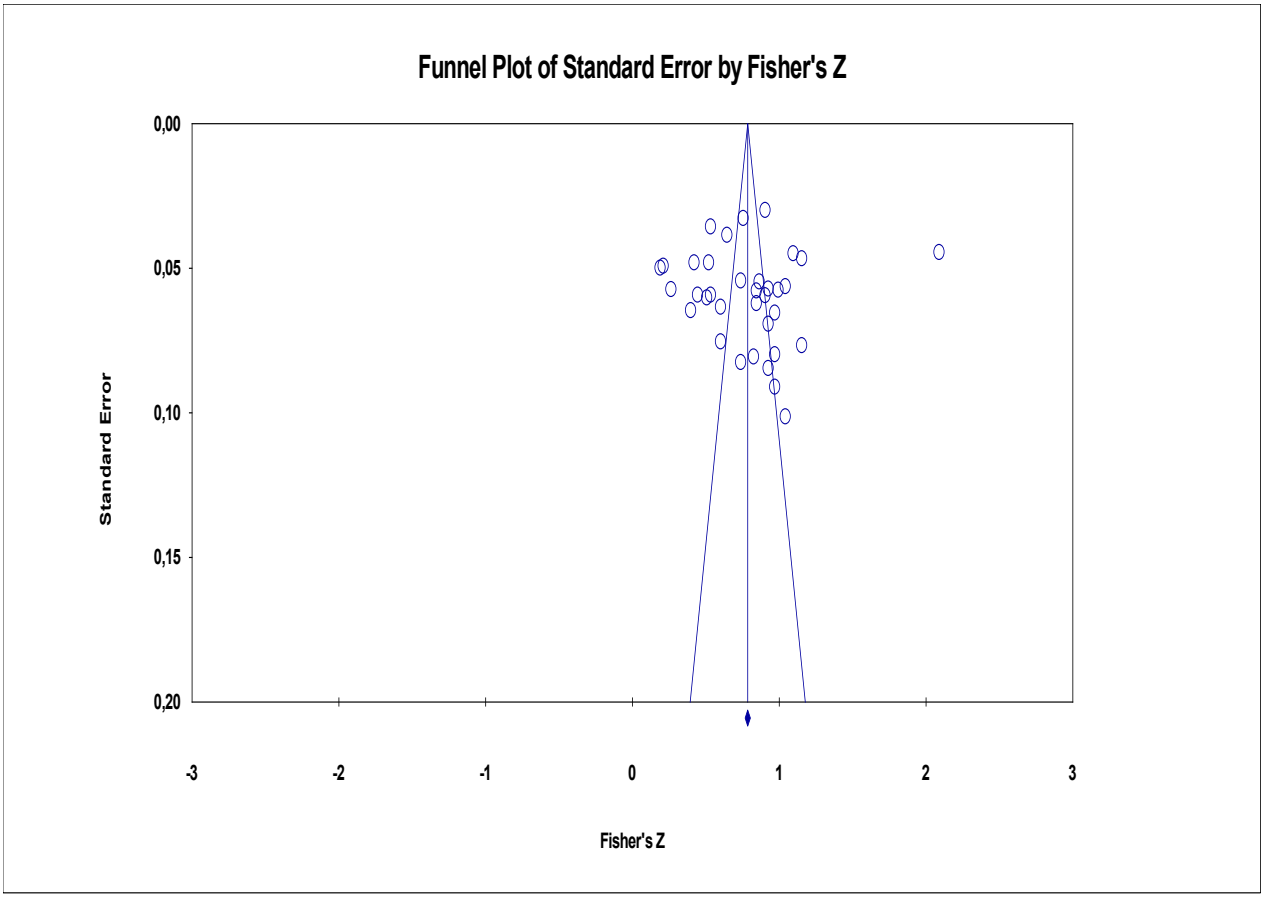
16	Hatjidis, D., & Parker, A. (2018)	100	Greece	Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism
17	Hon, A.H.Y., & Gamor, E. (2021)	286	China	IJHM
18	Raub et al. (2021)	156	EU	IJHM
19	Magnini et al. (2011)	210	South Korea	IJCHM
20	Zientara et al. (2015)	412	Poland	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
21	Busser et al. (2019)	235	USA	IJHM
22	Bufquin et al. (2018)	781	USA	IJCHM
23	Kim et al., (2015)	432	South Korea	IJHM
24	Hon, A. H., & Lu, L. (2010)	286	China	IJHM
25	Jung, H. S., & Yoon, H. H. (2021)	277	South Korea	Sustainability
26	Vargas-Martínez et al. (2017)	178	Mexico	Management and Environment
27	Dorta-Afonso et al. (2021)	494	Canary Islands	Sustainability
28	Zarim et al. (2016)	300	UAE and Malaysia	Book Chapter
29	Vujičić et al. (2015)	149	Serbia	Economic and Industrial Democracy
30	Hsiao, A. (2017)	305	Taiwan	International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research
31	To, W. M., & Huang, G. (2022)	260	China	Management Decision
32	Song et al. (2015)	307	South Korea	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research
33	Nho et al. (2018)	401	China and South Korea	Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science
34	Chan, S. H. J., & Ao, C. T. D. (2019)	303	China	Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism
35	Sihombing et al. (2017)	123	Bali	Global Business & Finance Review

Table 2. Summary of individual effect sizes for the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment: Random-effects model estimates



Following the application of Fisher's z-transformation to the correlation values, the random-effects model results presented in Table 2 identified a robust aggregate mean effect size of 0.789 for job satisfaction and organizational commitment relationship. In the social sciences literature, the random effects model is preferred because it offers a more comprehensive perspective that takes heterogeneity into account and allows the generalizability of the results to similar studies. In this context, the use of this model is widespread in most meta-analysis studies in the field of business and management (Paul and Barari, 2020). The relationship in question was found to be between the lower limit of 0.662 and the upper limit of 0.916 at a 95% confidence interval. The narrow confidence interval indicates that the findings obtained are statistically sensitive and reliable.

Table 3. Funnel diagram of individual studies examined the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction.



For the purpose of evaluating publication bias in meta-analysis studies, the funnel plot, a visual statistical technique proposed by Light and Pillemer (1984) was used (Şen and Yıldırım, 2023). Examination of the funnel plot reveals that the majority of studies are clustered near the apex, with only a single outlier deviating to the right. This pattern indicates a relatively asymmetrical distribution across the graph. The funnel plot provides a general inference; it alone does not offer sufficient evidence for detecting publication bias. Therefore, to interpret the findings on a more comprehensive and quantitative basis, the 5k + 10 formula (where k represents the number of studies included in the analysis) developed by Rosenthal (1979) was applied.

According to this formula, the critical value is:

5 * 35 + 10 = 185

This obtained value is compared with the Fail-Safe Number value determined in the meta-analysis. As a result of the analysis, the Fail-Safe N value was found to be 3196. According to Rosenthal's formula, the Fail-Safe N value is expected to be significantly higher than the calculated threshold value. In line with these findings, the fact that the calculated Fail-Safe N value (185 <3196) is considerably larger than the threshold value indicates that many more new studies are needed to

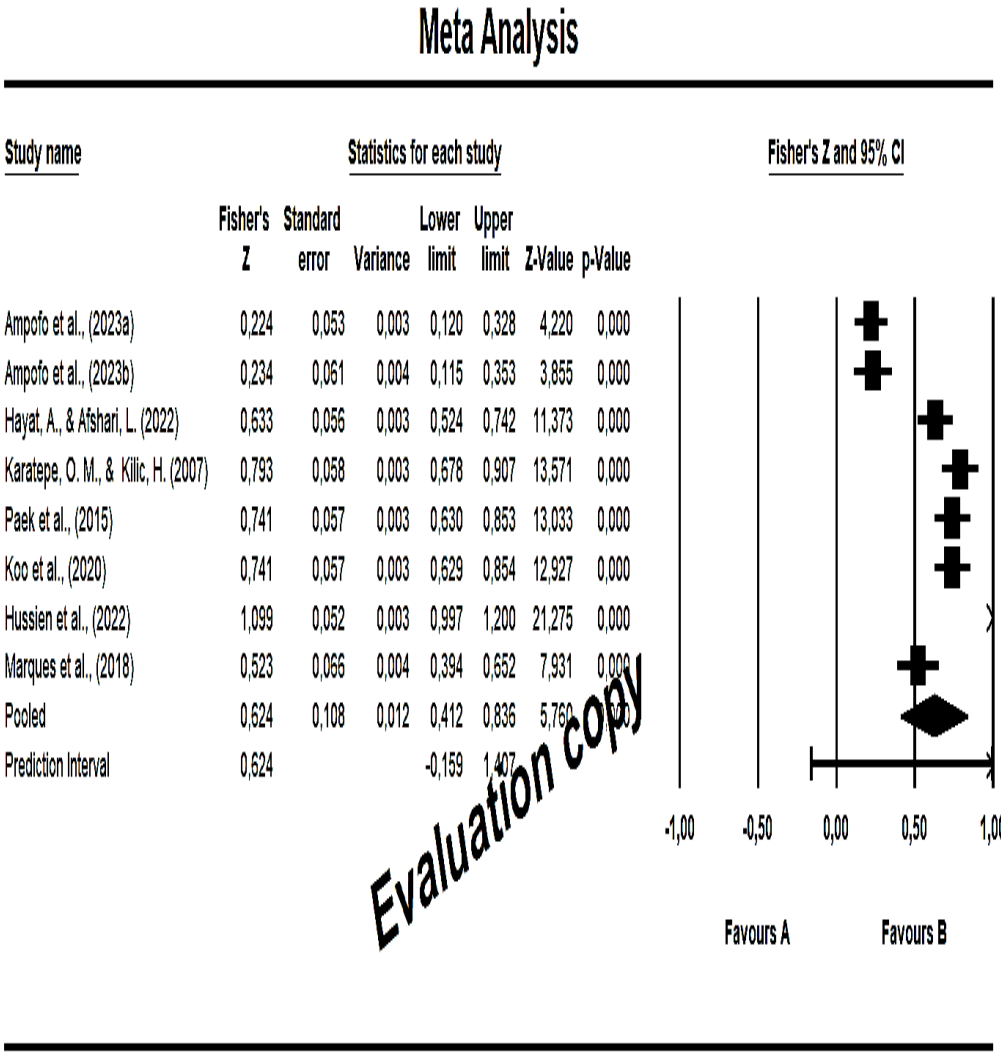
make the effect size in the current meta-analysis insignificant. Therefore, the results obtained statistically support the absence of publication bias in this study.

Table 4. Details of the meta-analysis dataset on affective commitment and job satisfaction.

	Author and Year	**Sample Size**	**Country**	**Journal Name**
1	Ampofo et al. (2023a)	359	Ghana	Anatolia
2	Ampofo et al. (2023b)	274	Ghana	Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism
3	Hayat, A., & Afshari, L. (2022)	326	Pakistan	JHTM
4	Karatepe, O. M., & Kilic, H. (2007)	296	Northern Cyprus, Türkiye	TM
5	Paek et al. (2015)	312	South Korea	IJHM
6	Koo et al. (2020)	307	South Korea	Journal of Quality Assurance İn Hospitality & Tourism
7	Hussien, F. M., Ibrahim, Y., & Naser, H. A. (2022)	378	Egypt	JHTI
8	Marques et al. (2018)	233	Portugal	European Journal of Tourism Research

A total of 8 articles addressing the relationship between affective commitment and job satisfaction were included in the analysis. An examination of the geographical distribution of these studies reveals that the research was conducted in countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

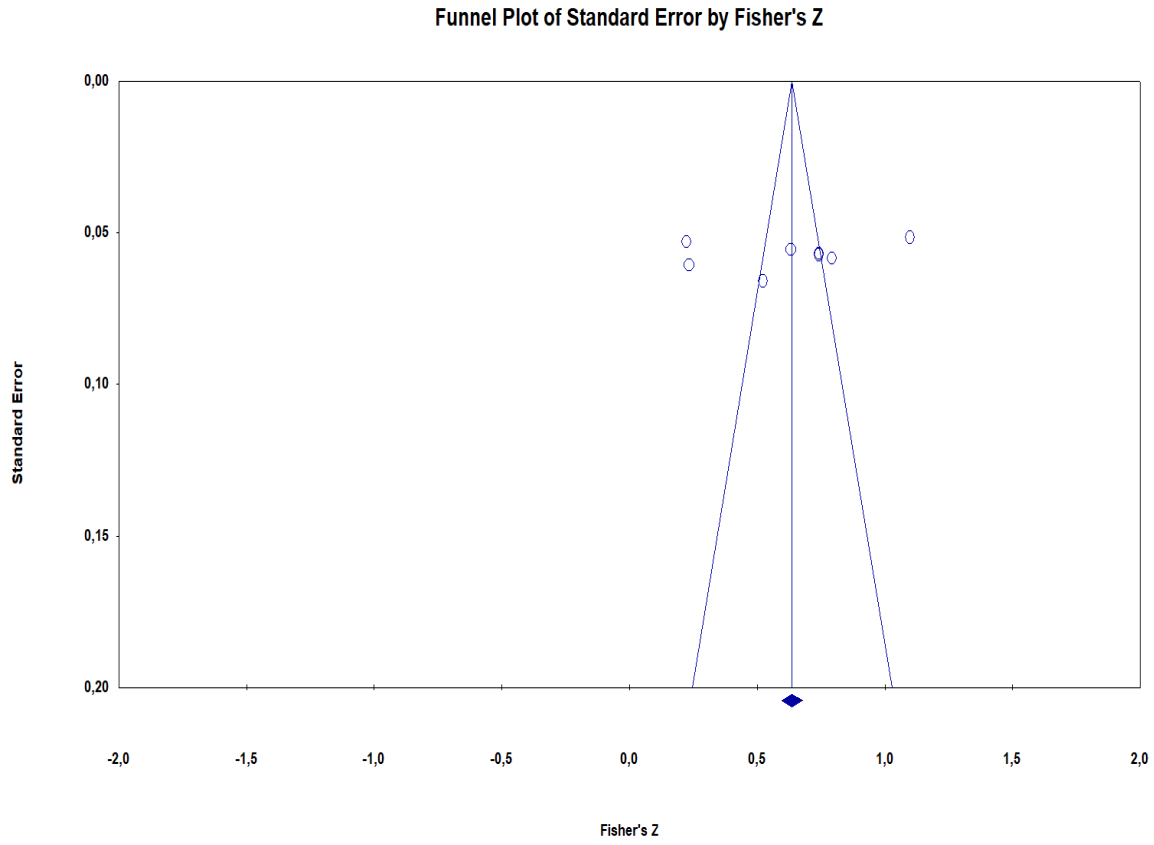
Table 5. Summary of individual effect sizes for the relationship between job satisfaction and affective commitment: Random-effects model estimates



The findings of the random effects model are presented in Table 5. The forest graph shows the relationship between emotional organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The effect size calculated according to the random effects model was determined to be 0.624. This value indicates a positive and quite strong relationship between the two variables. In addition, the lower limit of the confidence interval was determined to be 0.412, and the upper limit was determined to be 0.836.

Table 6. Funnel diagram of individual studies that examined the relationship between affective commitment and job satisfaction.

To evaluate the potential for publication bias, the funnel plot method, which is a visual statistical



technique developed by Light and Pillemer (1984) was utilized (Şen and Yıldırım, 2023). An examination of the plot in Table 6 reveals that the included studies are predominantly clustered near the apex and distributed symmetrically around the aggregate effect size line. This pattern serves as robust initial evidence that publication bias does not significantly influence the meta-analytic results. Since the funnel plot presents a subjective assessment, the 5k + 10 formula (k, number of studies) developed by Rosenthal (1979) was applied to verify the findings on an objective and numerical basis. According to this formula, the critical value is:

5 * 8 + 10 = 50

The Fail- Safe Number was calculated as 2017. According to Rosenthal's criterion, the Fail-Safe N value is expected to be significantly higher than the threshold value. In this context, the fact that the calculated value is considerably larger than the threshold value (2017 > 50) indicates that a large number of studies are needed to render the current meta-analysis findings statistically insignificant, thus showing that the results obtained are resistant to the risk of publication bias.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to determine the aggregate effect size of the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction within the hospitality and tourism industry. By employing a meta-analytic approach, the research synthesizes findings from multiple independent studies to provide

a robust sector-specific overview. A systematic search of the Web of Science and Scopus databases initially identified 381 publications. Following a rigorous screening process guided by a PRISMA flowchart, the final analysis was conducted on k= 43 studies, representing a cumulative sample size of N= 16.649.

As part of the assessment for publication bias, analysis of the funnel plots revealed no evidence of bias in the relationship between job satisfaction and overall organizational commitment or affective commitment. This conclusion was further validated by Rosenthal's (1979) fail-safe N values, which confirmed the absence of publication bias across both analyses. These results indicate that the meta-analytic findings are highly robust and resistant to publication bias, as an extensive number of additional studies with null results would be required to render the current effects statistically insignificant.

By converting general correlation values into Fisher's z-scores, the random-effects model yielded a mean effect size of 0.789 for the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Although previous meta-analysis results found the effect size between these two variables to be moderately high, such as .544 (Çınar et al., 2024), .586 (Tett and Meyer, 1993), and .604 (Ülbegi and Yalçın, 2016), the high effect size in this study can be interpreted as a noteworthy and unexpectedly high value. While existing literature has consistently confirmed that these two variables are distinct constructs (Xu et al., 2023), this strong correlation suggests that the two variables may have been conceptualized or operationalized similarly. At the conceptual level, organizational commitment is the psychological attachment and sense of loyalty an employee feels toward their organization, whereas job satisfaction is a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences.

When examining the measurement instruments in the studies included in this meta-analysis, it is observed that for organizational commitment, both three-dimensional composite scales (18 or 24 items) and global scales (4 or 6 items) were utilized. Regarding job satisfaction scales, 3 to 6-item overall (global) scales were predominantly used rather than dimensional ones. However, the inclusion of items in these global scales, such as *"Overall, I am satisfied with my job at this hotel"* or *"In general, I like working here"* (Chiang and Jang, 2008:50; Garcia-Rodriguez et al., 2020:6) prompts employees to include their thoughts and feelings about the organization within general job satisfaction measures. This, in turn, results in a high correlation with organizational commitment. In fact, Xu et al. (2023:1251) argue that traditional instruments, such as the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ), exhibit significant content overlaps with job satisfaction items, thereby artificially inflating the observed correlation. This methodological confounding may create a statistical illusion, suggesting an elevated relationship (0.789) at the general level.

The association between the affective dimension of organizational commitment and job satisfaction yielded an effect size of 0.624. This result is consistent with existing scholarship examining the satisfaction-affective commitment link, such as the values of 0.65 (Meyer et al., 2002) and 0.604 (Ülbeği and Yalçın, 2016). These findings represent a robust and statistically

significant positive relationship. While organizational commitment is often conceptualized as a broad, three-dimensional construct, this model has been criticized for the conceptual convergence of affective and normative commitment and the perceived irrelevance of continuance commitment compared to the affective dimension (Xu et al., 2023:1246). By contrast, affective commitment focuses exclusively on an individual's emotional attachment to the organization. As such, it likely represents a theoretically purer and more reliable estimate, as it remains largely insulated from the conceptual and operational redundancy often found in broader frameworks.

This study demonstrates that researchers investigating organizational commitment and job satisfaction must exercise greater care in conceptualizing and operationalizing these constructs. Since organizational commitment and job satisfaction are distinct variables (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Xu et al., 2023) that individually influence employee and organizational success, they must be accurately conceptualized and measured.

Future researchers may focus on defining and conceptualizing organizational commitment and job satisfaction in a way that avoids conceptual overlap, ensuring their operationalization through composite or overall scales, and investigating the impact of these variables on employees and organizational success. One could speculate whether the high effect size between these two variables in hospitality and tourism-focused studies stems from certain characteristics of the sector and what those might be. However, before doing so, it may be more appropriate to conduct meta-analyses by designating industry as a moderator to determine whether the effect size between these two variables is greater in tourism and hotel businesses compared to other sectors.

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Dark Gastronomy: Food in Times of Sadness and Famine

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to examine how people nourished themselves and what foods they consumed in order to survive during periods of famine that arose throughout history due to wars, migrations, epidemics, and scarcity.

Study design/methodology/approach: This study examines the recording of events during challenging times, such as war, migration and comprehensive records, using qualitative measurements and document analysis.

Results: With this study, it has been found that during extraordinary periods such as war, migration, famine, poverty, and epidemics, food transforms into a purely survival-oriented practice, and the types of food people consume to survive during these difficult times are highlighted.

Originality/value: This study is significant because it offers an alternative perspective to the dominant literature that addresses food solely through the lens of pleasure, aesthetics, and experience. While much of the existing research evaluates food within the framework of consumer culture and gastronomic appeal, negative contexts such as famine, war, forced migration, and poverty are often neglected. The unique value of this research lies in its exploration of the dark or melancholic aspect of food and in bringing a two-dimensional perspective to the one-dimensional approach in literature that focuses solely on the aesthetic dimension of food.

Key words: Dark gastronomy, Scarcity meals, Sad meals

Introduction

Food is not merely a simple mixture of a few ingredients. It is a multi-layered and comprehensive necessity with a historical background. Throughout the process leading up to the meal, emotions, thoughts, symbols, messages, and cause-and-effect relationships are established between the food and the individual consuming it. Beyond its apparent meaning, food is a symbol and a cultural system containing various layers. In this context, food and sociology are two closely related concepts. Culinary and table culture are used as important tools in understanding the structure, cultural characteristics, and socioeconomic transformations of a society; and also in explaining the role of eating and drinking practices in the formation of identity and social memory (Macit and Kıran, 2024; 98). A society's diet and culinary culture are influenced by wars, migrations, geographical conditions, famine, poverty, and epidemics. Human history, from its very beginnings to the present day, has been shaped by events such as wars, epidemics, migrations, and exiles; these events have played a decisive role in people's lives. These effects are most clearly seen in

human nutrition and culinary culture. During these periods, when access to food was difficult, people developed new methods of nutrition to survive. Sometimes they hunted and ate animals they had never eaten before, and sometimes they satisfied their hunger with wild plants. Abdürrezzak (2014) stated that eating is not only a physiological necessity but also has communicative, social, and cultural functions. This study focuses on how a society's eating habits change during times of survival and scarcity, with the aim of preventing hunger and satisfying hunger, and how people nourish themselves during difficult and trying times. Food is not always a symbol of status, aesthetics, entertainment, and socialization. During times of hardship such as war, epidemics, migration, and exile, people eat solely for the purpose of survival. Food also has a dark and melancholic aspect, which is defined as the gastronomy of deprivation and sorrow. Based on this definition, the gastronomy of sorrow refers to the foods and drinks consumed during times of hardship for humanity, such as war, exile, epidemics, natural disasters, and genocide. Food consumption is a multifaceted phenomenon that meets the psychological, social, and physiological needs of individuals. Therefore, food and beverage consumption should be considered not only as a physiological need but also as an individual and social practice. Celebrating events in social life in unity and solidarity, or sharing sorrow collectively, gains meaning through ceremonial meals. In these meals, emotions such as pain, grief, joy, sorrow, and deprivation are shared; and with the repetition of these practices, these meals gradually become traditional (Kuru and Akyurt, 2025). Concepts such as "gastronomy of sorrow" and "gastronomy of scarcity" are used in local literature to describe cuisines during difficult times, while in foreign literature they are referred to as "dark gastronomy." Genceli (2023) defines dark gastronomy as the cuisine of dark times, such as wars, battles, disasters, epidemics, genocides, famines, and extraordinary mass deaths. On the other hand, another concept related to the gastronomy of sorrow is sorrow tourism. Sorrow tourism encompasses tourist visits to areas where technological disasters occurred, places of torture and oppression, natural disaster zones, war zones, genocide sites, places where famous people lost their lives, and destinations that have witnessed tragic and painful events in the past (Kılıç and Akyurt, 2011). Early examples of grief tourism include visits to sacred sites, tours of natural disaster sites such as Roman gladiatorial games, public executions in the Middle Ages, morgue tours, battlefields, and Pompeii (Seaton, 2002).

Methodology

The aim of this study is to examine how people sustained themselves, which food sources they turned to, and what kinds of meals they prepared during periods of famine that arose in times of social upheaval in human history, such as war, exile, migration, epidemics, and scarcity. To this end, the research question is: “During periods of famine, scarcity, and war, what alternative foods did people consume to survive?” This study is qualitative research and uses the document analysis method. Qualitative research can be defined as a research process that utilizes qualitative data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and document analysis; it aims to address perceptions and events realistically and holistically within their natural context (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008: 39). According to Karasar (2025), document analysis, also defined as documentary

research, is a method that enables data acquisition through the examination of existing documents and records. This method involves the processes of identifying, reading, noting, and evaluating sources in line with the determined objective. Within the scope of the research, various academic sources revealing the nutrition of people during periods of war, exile, migration, epidemics, revolutions, and persecution camps in human history were examined. The sources used were history books, academic articles, newspapers, and news documents. Content analysis technique was used in the analysis of the data. Based on the data obtained from the documents, categories were created under the theme of "meals of sorrow," encompassing periods of war, migration and exile, epidemics, revolutions, persecution, and finally, poverty. The findings were then used to interpret dietary habits that emerged during difficult times.

Findings

This section examines the practices of food shortages during periods of war, migration and exile, repression camps, epidemics, and revolution through a literature review, and the findings are presented below under the relevant headings.

Nutrition During Wartime

In this study, the wartime period is limited to World War I, World War II, the War of Independence, the Syrian War, the Israeli Palestinian War and US-Syria War. The scarcity meals that emerged during these war periods are discussed below.

World War I (1914-1918):

- Featured in the Turkish Woman magazine İdare-i Beytiyye (Household ManagementArticles with the title "How to save money in the kitchen during World War I" contain information on this topic. According to these articles: "Dear housewife, do not forget and always know that we are in times of war.". "You should choose what is 'useful,' not what is 'beautiful.' It doesn't matter if the food isn't very delicious; the important thing is that it fills the stomach and nourishes the body."(Tükan, 1918; T24,2025).
- As this shows, during World War I, women focused not on preparing delicious meals, but on satisfying their hunger. In other words, food became a symbol of survival. Also during this period, low-fat and meatless meals were prepared with vegetables and foods (Canbolat and Çekiç, 2021), and bread was made from broomseed (T24, 2025). According to Ortaylı (2014), Sultan Reşat and the people living in the palace ate bulgur constantly during the First World War due to scarcity. In Anatolia, during the First World War, due to famine, reserve officers were forced to eat wild herbs such as beets, fodder plants, and sorrel (Tonguç, 1999).

National Struggle – War of Independence:

In Gaziantep, Turkish women were tasked with sweetening apricot kernels by crushing them. These kernels were ground under a grinding stone and mixed with flour and bran to be used as a topping in bread making. However, because apricot kernels are bitter, a hiccup epidemic broke out in Gaziantep. The consumption of bread with bitter almonds and apricot kernels, which began on January 10, 1921, led to the deaths of forty to fifty people. The report from the Medical

Association, which served as a document of starvation, stated that apricot kernels caused death, and the Central Committee, taking this report into consideration, stated that bread made from bitter apricot kernels should not be eaten. However, those who preferred death by poisoning to death by starvation continued to eat this bread (Yakar and Yaprak Pusat, 2017:62).

- During these times of mobilization and famine, Turkey's biggest problem was access to bread. Despite all the measures taken by the government, bread became inaccessible in Giresun as well. To make do with the scarce amount of grain available and to feed people, tree bark, leaves, weeds, corn cobs, and hazelnuts were used as additives (Karakayalı & Genç, 2020).
- According to the meal list issued in Çanakkale on March 18, soldiers ate only grape compote for breakfast, no lunch, and oily wheat soup and bread for dinner (Çanakkale, 2025).

World War II (1939-1945)

- Turkey

During World War II, Turkey experienced a bread shortage and bread was rationed. In fact, during this period, wheat was mostly used to make bulgur, and bread was generally made by mixing corn, barley, and rye. Villagers even made bread from corn cobs during times of famine (Dokuyan, 2013).

- Norwegian

During the war, government agencies around the world found new ways to minimize the waste of food resources. For example, in Norway, a ration card system was introduced in 1942 to ensure social equality in access to food and prevent the waste of scarce food resources. If we look at how the ration card system worked in Norway during the war, we see that there were actually three types of ration cards. The first card was issued to consumers to purchase goods such as bread, sugar, potatoes, and coffee; the second card was for purchasing products such as meat, milk, and most vegetables; and the third was for purchasing canned and confectionery. The amount of food each individual could consume was limited by these cards. During this period, a home economics institute was also established to conduct research on the use of alternative foods in the kitchen. Dishes were prepared using unusual ingredients such as seafood and wild plants (such as nettle, wild grass, and dandelion), as well as wild seabirds (including seagulls) and algae. In addition, herring, even its roe, and potatoes formed the basis of the Norwegian crisis diet (Teheien, 2009).

- Hollanda:

During World War II, the Netherlands experienced a great famine. Here too, the population, unable to access their usual food sources, began searching for substitutes, many of which were wild plants. The most commonly consumed plant-based foods in the Netherlands at that time were sugar beets, tulip bulbs, and potato peels. These foods were usually consumed in soups or boiled forms (Vorstenbosch vd., 2017).

- ABD

Coffee was one of the most important beverages for American soldiers during World War II. During the coffee shortage at the time, various alternative mixtures were developed. Some of these included boiling chicories, soybeans, barley, and the roots of grains to obtain a drinkable, dark liquid. Some soldiers were forced to mix roasted grains (such as barley or acorns) with molasses, and if available, chicory and dried fruit, to drink instead of coffee (Rothfeld, 2022).

The Syrian War (2011-2025):

In Syria, where hundreds of thousands of people under siege are facing a deadly threat of starvation, religious scholars have issued fatwas allowing the consumption of "cat and dog meat." Furthermore, due to the siege and subsequent famine in the region, people have been forced to eat mulberry leaves (Anadolu Agency, 2023).

The rapidly rising food prices during the war forced the Syrian people to change their eating habits. Those living in coastal areas began eating shark, a food they had never consumed before, to meet their protein needs. Migratory birds also became prime targets for hunters. Even rabbit meat, never before common in Syrian cuisine, became frequently consumed due to its low cost (Sputnik, 2018).

İsrail- Filistin War (2023-…):

Currently, Gaza is experiencing food shortages due to the war. This situation has forced some local residents to resort to cooking sea turtle meat. After the hunted sea turtles are butchered and cleaned, their meat is cut into pieces. The meat is washed with flour and vinegar, then mixed with onions, peppers, tomatoes, and various spices, and prepared for boiling (Anadolu, 2025).

On the other hand, Haya Alhamss, just one of the Palestinian women, shared with Daily Ummah the recipes of the meals she prepares for her children and family in the tent with limited resources: the first war dish is called free tuna and potato dish; canned tuna from aid packages sent by countries that have not abandoned Gaza is spread on a tray, a fire is lit because Israel has cut off the electricity, and if available, a few potatoes are fried over the fire and placed on top of the tunaNext, onions grown in the gardens of the tents where people took refuge after fleeing bombed houses are roasted and crushed over a fire. Then, some tahini, water, and lemon are added. Finally, this prepared onion mixture is poured over tuna and potatoes, and the tray is placed back on the fire and cooked until the dish boils. The second dish of the war is the Resistance Mujaddara pilaf. For the pilaf, brown lentils and rice are simmered together in water and cooked until they reach a pilaf consistency. Although not always available during wartime, ingredients such as coriander, red chili flakes, and dried onions can be added and poured over the pilaf if available. The pilaf is ready and eaten when it has absorbed all the water (Dailyummah, 2024).

US- Iran War (2025-…)

Due to the Iran-US War, the Iranian government halted food exports. However, state-supported food ration cards were activated. These cards aimed to increase access to food, particularly for families with low socioeconomic status. Furthermore, a long-standing subsidy system has been used to ensure equitable food supply. During the war, the scope of these subsidy cards was expanded to include fish, shrimp, turkey, dates, oranges, potatoes, and onions. The goal of this decision was to increase protein access for low-income citizens during the war. Due to the war,

prices of some basic foodstuffs such as potatoes, pasta, and milk increased. For example, potato prices quadrupled in two months compared to pre-war levels, while milk and pasta prices doubled. Approximately one in three households in Iran struggle to meet their basic food needs (Gıda Bülteni, 2026).

Nutrition During Migration and Exile Periods

Under this heading, the literature on poverty-related meals that emerged during the Caucasian Migration, the Circassian Exile, and the Balkan-Bosnian Migration processes has been reviewed, and the findings are presented below.

- *The Caucasian Migration and the Circassian Exile:*

In 1864, Circassians, forced into exile in Anatolia by the Russian regime, settled in Samsun as a temporary settlement. Here, the population increased rapidly due to migration, leading to food shortages and scarcity. During this period, the British government sent biscuits to the starving Circassians (Çiçek, 2009).

- *Balkan-Bosnian Migration:*

In their study titled "A Research on Bosniaks Living in Turkey and Their Culinary Culture" (2021), Özer et al. found that the kaçamak dish, prepared by cooking flour and oil, was frequently made by Bosniak families who migrated to Turkey during the period of poverty in the first years of their migration. Furthermore, this study also found that flour and potato-based dishes stood out as the primary food source during times of scarcity.

Nutrition in Deprivation Camps

The nutritional practices implemented in Nazi camps were as follows:

Hitler created a three-meal food plan on paper for prisoners in Nazi camps. According to this plan, prisoners in the camp were to be given unsweetened coffee in the morning, about a liter of soup consisting of root vegetables and grains at lunchtime, 300 grams of bread in the morning, and a small portion of sausage, margarine, cheese, or jam in the evening. However, this plan was largely not implemented, and prisoners were forced to survive on only watery soup and very limited bread (Nobel, 2025).

Nutrition During Epidemic Periods

This section reviews the literature on nutritional practices during the Black Death, and the findings are presented below.

The Black Death, or Black Plague, was a plague epidemic that ravaged medieval Europe from 1347 to 1352 (Cartwright, 2021). During the Black Death's ravages of Europe in the 14th century, nutrition was less a matter of choice and more a matter of survival for people. During the plague, medieval doctors determined what the public should eat and what they should avoid. Fresh fruits and vegetables were considered harmful due to the belief that they carried disease, while meat, well-cooked foods, soups prepared with vinegar, and cooked fruits were considered healthy. Drinking fresh milk was forbidden; instead, sour milk, buttermilk, or whey were consumed. Wealthy people, however, opted for almond milk, which was considered to have medicinal properties. Villagers sustained themselves largely through grains, legumes, and inexpensive foods.

In some cases, they ate approximately three kilograms of grain per day. As for beverages, wine and beer were widely consumed both as safe drinks and to alleviate the stresses of daily life. Adding vinegar to water, wine, and food was seen as a preventative measure against illness, while consuming fresh fruit and drinking fresh milk directly was forbidden during the plague. Doctors have recommended that people make a syrup mixture of honey and vinegar to prevent the disease. Additionally, people have been advised to frequently wash their hands and faces with vinegar and rose water for disinfection purposes (Carlton, 2021).

The Revolutionary Period

This section reviews the literature on the impact of the French Revolution on culinary culture, and the relevant findings are presented below.

If the French Revolution were to be explained in a single sentence, it could be described as a gastronomy-based sociological and philosophical revolt of the French people, who couldn't even find bread and were wallowing in misery, against an elite class that drank hot chocolate and held tea parties (Genceli, 2023). In the 18th century, the average worker spent half of their daily wage on bread. However, when the grain harvest failed for two consecutive years in 1788 and 1789, the price of bread skyrocketed to 88% of wages. Many blamed the ruling class for the resulting famine and economic turmoil. Of course, the causes of the revolution were far more complex than the price of bread or the unfair taxes on salt, but both contributed to growing anger against the monarchy and led to internal revolt (Bramen, 2010). On the other hand, the French Revolution is a significant turning point that profoundly affected the development of the restaurant industry. The fact that renowned chefs who lost their jobs after the revolution emigrated to different countries and opened restaurants to continue their profession played a decisive role in the spread of restaurant culture worldwide (Maviş, 2003).

Food from Times of Scarcity

Some dishes associated with scarcity have been identified in the literature. However, sufficient data regarding the historical origins of these dishes, clearly outlining the historical conditions—such as war, migration, or famine that led to their emergence, has not been found in the literature. This study includes these dishes within the field of "gastronomy of sorrow," and they are presented below.

Eroğlu (2012) reported that the Uğut/Puğut dessert, made in the Sivas region, was traditionally made during times of scarcity and was considered a food eaten during times of hardship. While Uğut dessert is known as a dessert unique to the Sivas region, it is made in many parts of Anatolia under similar or different names such as uhut and azık. It is made using only wheatgrass, flour, and water, without any sweeteners.

Arman and Ören (2020) determined that Mamalinga dish made in Tekirdağ, karmaç dish made in Samsun, pirjona dish made in Kırklareli and haşıl dish made in Erzurum are dishes of scarcityThe ingredients for Mamalinga are cornmeal, water, butter, salt, molasses, and cottage cheese. The butter and cottage cheese are readily available as they are made from milk from their own animals. The ingredients for Karmaç (Garmaç) are cornmeal, warm water, salt, leeks, and vegetable oil.

Pirjona's ingredients include cornmeal, butter, potatoes, water, chili flakes, and red chili powder. Finally, the ingredients for Haşıl consist of cornmeal, corn grits, water, salt, and milk.

According to Deniz (2025), another dish associated with scarcity is kavut. The common method of making kavut is as follows: barley and wheat are roasted whole and then ground. Then, the flour obtained by these methods is roasted with oil. In a separate pot, it is mixed with sugar, water, or syrup boiled with water and milk, and turned into halva. However, the preparation of kavut varies according to some regions.

According to Özgen (2022), tirit, a dish widely made in different regions of Anatolia, is a symbol of scarcity and avoiding waste. Tirit generally originated from using stale bread at home. Although there are different ways of preparing it, it is usually made by chopping stale bread and softening it by pouring meat broth or hot water over it. Looking at the origin stories of the different types of tirit in Anatolian cuisine, it is seen that a significant portion of these dishes emerged during times of scarcity and famine. In this context, some types of tirit were developed to address economic difficulties, to utilize leftover ingredients, or to avoid wasting stale bread, and over time they have become indispensable in regional cuisines.

Another dish born out of scarcity is gırık, unique to Diyarbakır. Gırık is a traditional dish made by filling thinly rolled dough with a mixture of rice, chicken, and spices, cutting it into a bundle shape, and then boiling it in water. Due to its preparation with few ingredients and its unique nature, gırık is one of the dishes that emerged out of scarcity in the culinary history of Diyarbakır/Turkey (Güneydoğu,2026).

Result

This research has shown that famine conditions lead to a relative leveling of the playing field among social classes. As seen during the famines of World War I, a wide range of people, from the royal family to the common folk, faced similar food restrictions. Therefore, during famines, the function of food as a status symbol was deactivated; rich and poor alike satisfied their hunger with scarce resources and similar foods. In other words, famine conditions temporarily weakened the social hierarchy through dietary habits. While food normally reflects social status, economic power, and social class, it largely lost this function during famines.

During periods of mobilization and scarcity, access to bread became a fundamental social problem. Due to wheat shortages, various regions used weeds, tree bark, agricultural residues, various seeds, and even apricot kernels (despite the risk of death) as substitutes for wheat in bread production. In this context, it can be concluded that bread became a survival element during times of hardship. Furthermore, the use of substances known to be harmful to human health in bread making, and the continued consumption despite this, demonstrates that hunger outweighed concerns about food security and health. In conclusion, people used even deadly foods to satisfy their hunger during times of scarcity.

During wartime, to make efficient use of scarce food resources, states have directly intervened in the food consumption of the population, as exemplified by the Norwegian Ration Card. Food

consumption has been regulated through state intervention. Therefore, this finding reveals that during wartime, the state assumed a regulatory role in food consumption through food policies.

As findings from the Syrian war period show, during times when access to food was completely blocked, dietary habits transcended religious boundaries. People were forced to turn to unusual and previously taboo food sources to survive. Normally, strong distinctions between halal and haram, edible and inedible, lose their function in the face of the threat of starvation. The necessity of survival overrides these sensitivities.

Regional dishes from periods of scarcity demonstrate that practices developed with limited ingredients have become ingrained in cultural memory over time, and that times of crisis leave lasting marks on culinary culture.

In conclusion, the meaning attributed to food varies according to people's socio-economic conditions. In periods when food is easily accessible, eating is a symbol of pleasure, a means of socialization, a status symbol, and a part of culture and identity. However, during times of sorrow such as war, migration, scarcity, and epidemics, food becomes a symbol of survival, a sign of hope, and a demonstration of resilience against hardship. Unlike normal times, during times of scarcity, people no longer see food as merely a source of pleasure, but as the most fundamental element ensuring the continuity of life. Periods of epidemics, wars, migrations, revolutions, and scarcity are times when people develop adaptations with limited resources. This study, which examines the nutritional practices that emerge during these extraordinary periods within the framework of the concept of dark gastronomy, reveals that food is not only focused on pleasure, aesthetics, and consumption for people, but also reflects trauma, scarcity, and survival experiences.

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Impact of AI-Driven Marketing Tools on SME Growth and Competitive Advantage in Germany

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Abstract

Purpose: Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are considered a vital component in the German economy. Despite this, they are often faced with challenges in terms of resources and competition. This study aims to examine the influence of digital marketing through artificial intelligence (AI) adoption on the growth and competitive advantage of small and medium-sized enterprises. In particular, the study aims to examine personalization, automation, predictive analytics, and AI-driven customer engagement in terms of influence on the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Study design/Methodology/Approach: A structured questionnaire was used to obtain data from 300 small and medium-sized enterprises in the manufacturing sector, services sector, retail sector, and technology sector. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were conducted.

Results: The findings revealed that all dimensions of AI adoption influence the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises. In particular, personalization and predictive analytics are considered strong influences. SME growth, in turn, mediates the association between AI adoption and competitive advantage in terms of differentiation, customer retention, and positioning. The research also found that firm size, industry sector, and digital maturity are crucial moderating factors in AI adoption in SMEs. The research results emphasize the importance of AI marketing in helping SMEs overcome resource limitations while increasing competitiveness.

Originality/value: The research also contributes to the practical implications of AI adoption **in** promoting sustainable growth in Germany's digital economy.

Keywords: AI-driven marketing, SMEs, Germany, personalization, predictive analytics, competitive advantage

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the key pillars that contribute to the overall economic structure in Germany. SMEs in Germany are collectively known as the Mittelstand. SMEs are not just the majority in the economic structure; they are the embodiment of the German economic ideology that is based on the concept of diversified industrial power with specialized production strategies and integration with the global value chain. SMEs are the key pillars that contribute to the development of the regions in Germany in the field of advanced manufacturing, engineering, the automobile industry's value chain, and knowledge services. Despite the

significant contribution of SMEs to the overall economic structure in Germany, they are facing difficulties in terms of financial constraints, lean organizational structures, and the unavailability of advanced digital technologies that might affect the expansion of the SMEs in Germany (Nair & Gupta, 2021). The rapidly changing nature of digital transformation has significantly altered the nature of competition for businesses, which has forced SMEs to increasingly rely on digital marketing strategies as an approach to improve their market visibility, customer engagement, and value delivery. In such a competitive and technologically advanced economic environment like Germany, digital marketing has moved beyond being an optional promotional tool for businesses to becoming an important platform for customer engagement, brand management, and market intelligence for businesses. Through tools like search engine marketing, social media marketing, e-commerce integration, and customer relationship management tools, businesses can expand their reach in the market, improve the efficiency of communication, and achieve cost-effective marketing (Theodoridis & Gkikas, 2019; Gkikas & Theodoridis, 2019). These tools are particularly important in an economic environment where consumers and industrial buyers are increasingly expecting businesses to offer seamless digital engagement and personalized customer experience.

In this dynamic environment, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has come to the forefront as a game-changing facilitator of next-generation marketing capabilities. AI technologies help in the analysis of complex data, automate decision-making, and produce predictive results that improve the responsiveness of strategies (Zaman, 2022; Gündüzyeli, 2024). AI-based marketing solutions such as machine learning algorithms, predictive analytics platforms, automation software, generative AI applications, and chatbots help SMEs to develop highly targeted, personalized, and adaptive marketing strategies (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Soni, 2023; Bormane & Blaus, 2024). With the help of AI-based marketing solutions, SMEs can develop highly targeted and personalized marketing strategies that use customer data and behavioral information to deliver personalized content, predict customer needs, and optimize engagement across multiple touchpoints. For German SMEs, AI technology adoption provides an opportunity to break away from the limitations of resource constraints by providing marketing precision, efficiency, and responsiveness that is comparable to larger organizations (Alghizzawi et al., 2024; Hendrayati et al., 2024). This is because empirical literature indicates that AI incorporation in marketing improves personalization accuracy, predictive decision-making, and automation, which improves marketing efficiency and customer satisfaction (Reed et al., 2025; Joshi et al., 2025; Singh & Ahmed, 2024). These marketing activities are critical for SMEs, which must develop strategies to differentiate themselves from others, especially through customer-centric innovation and responsiveness. AI-powered personalization improves customer loyalty and lifetime value, predictive marketing improves demand forecasting, and automation improves marketing efficiency, thus lowering marketing costs and enhancing customer satisfaction. These marketing activities improve a firm's competitive position, market reach, and sustainable value creation (Islam et al., 2024; Boddu et al., 2022). AI-powered marketing activities contribute to marketing sustainability, which is critical in modern

marketing, as it improves resource allocation, reduces marketing waste, and improves marketing targeting and communication (Gündüzyeli, 2024). Despite all these benefits, the adoption of AI-based marketing technologies by SMEs in Germany is not uniform. The challenges in adopting AI-based marketing technologies by SMEs in Germany include the costs of investment in such technologies, the complexity of integrating such technologies with existing technologies and systems, the lack of technical expertise in artificial intelligence, and resistance to change in the organization. In addition, there is the issue of strict regulations in the EU on data privacy and the use of AI technologies in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The issues of data privacy and trust in such technologies pose a major challenge in the adoption of such technologies by SMEs in Germany (Nalbant & Aydın, 2023; Soni, 2023).

While there has been a surge in research on the adoption of AI and digital transformation in recent times, little research has been done on how AI-based marketing tools affect the growth path and competitive advantage of SMEs in the German context. Previous research has focused more on the technological capabilities of firms than the strategic mechanisms by which AI-based personalization, automation, predictive analytics, and customer interaction can enhance firm performance. Therefore, there is a need for a comprehensive investigation of the issue. Therefore, this research aims to explore the impact of AI-based marketing tools on SME growth and competitiveness in Germany, with special emphasis on personalization, automation, prediction, and customer engagement. By synthesizing the findings of the theories with the results of the empirical research, this study aims to build a strategic framework that can assist SMEs in leveraging the potential of AI. This research makes a contribution to the existing literature on digitalization, competitiveness of SMEs, and AI marketing by providing insights into how AI can facilitate the promotion of sustainable growth and competitiveness in the dynamic German digital market. Combining theoretical findings with empirical research, this study seeks to develop a strategic framework that helps SMEs harness the power of AI. The research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on digitalization, competitiveness of SMEs, and AI-based marketing by shedding light on the mechanisms by which AI helps promote sustainable growth and competitiveness in Germany’s ever-evolving digital economy.

2. Literature Review

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the key players in the economic structure of Germany. SMEs are very important in the economy of Germany. Previous research has highlighted the importance of SMEs in the industrial flexibility and technological progress of the country. It has also been highlighted that SMEs face resource constraints, which are not sufficient to invest in new technologies and digital transformation programs at a larger scale (Nair & Gupta, 2021).

2.1 Digital Transformation and SME Competiveness

It is believed that digital technologies help SMEs lower transaction costs, access markets, and improve efficiency. In a country like Germany, where technology is highly advanced, digital marketing has become a necessity for firms rather than a supporting tool for marketing. With digital marketing, it is now possible for firms to directly reach customers and establish brand awareness

through digital platforms, which is not restricted by geographical boundaries (Theodoridis & Gkikas, 2019; Gkikas & Theodoridis, 2019). It is found that digital marketing helps firms improve customer engagement, better decision-making, and marketing efficiency. In a country where resources are limited, digital marketing can be a powerful tool for SMEs. To become successful in digital marketing, it is not just important for firms to adopt digital technologies but also to become digitally ready. Research suggests that it is not easy for firms to become successful in digital marketing, but those who become successful in digital marketing can become successful in becoming competitive and overcoming market volatility.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence in Digital Marketing

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has come up as a revolutionary technology that can further enhance the capabilities of digital marketing from automation to predictive intelligence and personalization. AI technology allows the processing of a large amount of structured and unstructured data, which helps in making better decisions and generating customer insights (Zaman, 2022; Gündüzyeli, 2024). The applications of AI in marketing include machine learning algorithms, predictive analytics, recommendation engines, generative AI applications, and conversational chatbots for real-time engagement and personalization (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Soni, 2023; Bormane & Blaus, 2024). Based on the literature, the use of AI technology in marketing improves the accuracy of marketing through the segmentation of customers and the ability to predict the behavior of customers in relation to the purchase of goods. For SMEs, the use of AI technology in marketing reduces the need for mass marketing and improves the return on investment in marketing. Literature indicates that the use of AI technology in marketing can automate tasks such as email marketing, segmentation, and analysis, which improves the allocation of human resources.

2.3 Personalization and Customer Engagement

Personalization has been recognized as a significant influencer in the assessment of customer satisfaction and loyalty in the digital market environment. AI systems enable personalization in the digital market environment by examining the behavior, interests, and interaction patterns of users. Studies suggest that personalization in marketing campaigns has the potential to increase customer engagement, conversion rates, and trust between the brand and the customer (Reed et al., 2025; Singh & Ahmed, 2024). In the German marketplace, personalization has the potential to be a key factor in increasing the competitiveness of SMEs, as customers in the region expect reliability, quality, and personalization in the services they use. AI systems enable SMEs to provide customers with the personalization they expect while increasing the chances of long-term customer relationships. AI-powered chatbots also provide the potential to increase customer engagement with the company.

2.4 Predictive Analytics and Decision-Making Efficiency

Predictive analytics is one of the most valuable uses of AI in marketing. Predictive analytics uses historical data and patterns of behavior to predict future demand, optimize pricing strategies, and predict customer needs (Joshi et al., 2025). SMEs can benefit from the predictive insights that improve the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. Researchers highlight that predictive analytics

improves strategic agility by allowing SMEs to quickly react to market changes. In a competitive and innovation-driven economy like Germany, the capacity to predict customer demand and market trends is a key factor. Predictive intelligence is also important for effective inventory management, promotion, and customer retention.

2.5 Automation and Operational Efficiency

Marketing automation software based on AI helps SMEs to automate processes, manage multi-channel campaigns, and maintain consistency in customer interactions. This automation helps in saving time, eliminating human error, and increasing operational efficiency. Research has revealed that automation increases productivity while reducing operational costs. This is more relevant to SMEs since they have a low staffing capacity (Islam et al., 2024). Automation software also helps in real-time performance monitoring and optimization. This helps in increasing responsiveness through adaptability in operations. Another advantage is the ability to scale up marketing operations without a corresponding increase in operational costs.

2.6 AI Adoption, Competitive Advantage, and Sustainability

The resource-based view (RBV) and the theory of dynamic capabilities have offered theoretical support in explaining the contribution of AI-driven marketing capabilities to competitive advantage. AI applications have been found to augment the ability of firms to sense opportunities in the market, grasp them through appropriate strategies, and then modify resources to maintain competitive advantage. Research has revealed that small and medium-sized enterprises that adopt AI-driven marketing capabilities are able to gain a competitive advantage in terms of market coverage, customer retention, and operational efficiency (Boddu et al., 2022). Moreover, AI adoption has been found to contribute to sustainable business practices. AI has been found to minimize "marketing waste," thus enhancing "energy and resource efficiency." In addition, AI-driven customer behavior has been found to contribute to the development of "long-term customer relationships," thus aligning business performance with sustainability goals (Gündüzyeli, 2024).

2.7 Barriers to AI Adoption Among SMEs

However, it has also been seen that despite all the positive aspects of implementing AI in SMEs, it has not been able to achieve widespread adoption owing to various factors such as financial constraints, technology-related issues, and organizational problems. The high cost of implementing AI solutions has also proven to be a major challenge for organizations. In addition to these factors, SMEs in Germany also have to adhere to stringent European regulations related to data security, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Another major factor that has affected the widespread adoption of AI solutions in SMEs is organizational resistance to change and a lack of understanding of the strategic importance of technology. Various studies have highlighted that it is extremely important for organizations to have support for technology and institutional support mechanisms for the successful adoption of AI solutions in SMEs.

2.8 Research Gap and Conceptual Direction

However, the existing literature has extensively addressed the significant transformative potential of AI in marketing. Nevertheless, there is limited literature available on the growth and competitive

advantage of SMEs in the context of the German environment. The existing literature on the topic has generally addressed the adoption and application of AI in marketing from a technological point of view, with limited strategic ways in which personalization, prediction, automation, and engagement can be significant for the growth and competitive advantage of firms. The main objective of this study is to address the gap in the existing literature and explore the contribution of AI-based marketing to the growth and competitive advantage of SMEs in the German market environment. This study would aim to combine the existing literature on the topic with a comprehensive framework through which the contribution of AI-based marketing can be understood for the growth and competitive advantage of SMEs.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Conceptual Framework

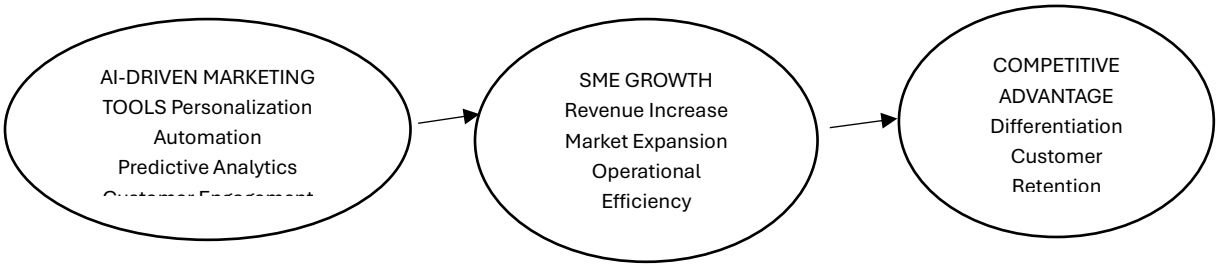
The conceptual framework of the research is developed on the basis of the premise that AI-based marketing tools are vital for the growth and competitive advantage of SMEs operating in Germany. The competitive environment of SMEs operating in the digitally advanced and innovative German economy is of a very challenging nature and is referred to as Mittelstand operating in the German economy. The adoption of AI has been considered on four dimensions of AI adoption: personalization, automation, predictive analytics, and customer engagement (Nair & Gupta, 2021; Singh & Ahmed, 2024; Chowdhury et al., 2024). Personalization tools help SMEs in tailoring the marketing messages, services, and products according to the specific needs of the customers. Personalization has become a very critical factor in the quality-conscious economy of Germany. Automation tools help SMEs in efficiently managing the routine tasks of the marketing campaigns of the organization. Automation can play a vital role in the cost-saving and productivity-driven economy of Germany. Predictive analytics tools provide insights to the SMEs regarding the consumer behavior in the marketplace. Predictive analytics can play a vital role in the dynamic economy of Germany. AI-driven customer engagement tools provide continuous support to customers.

The framework assumes that the adoption of these marketing tools enabled by AI will have a positive effect on SME growth, defined in terms of revenue increases, market share gains, enhanced business efficiencies, and increases in customer bases. The positive effects of SME growth in Germany's export-based and innovation-driven economy will enhance the relative competitive advantage of SMEs in terms of differentiation from other market players, customer loyalty, and market positioning (Hendrayati et al., 2024; Alghizzawi et al., 2024). Additionally, this framework considers various contextual factors that may affect the relationship between AI adoption and SME growth outcomes, such as firm size, sector, and market characteristics (Boddu et al., 2022; Soni, 2023). These factors are relevant in Germany's economy due to sectoral and business differences in various industries, such as manufacturing, engineering, services, and technology, and in terms of digital maturity and market characteristics. This framework is a useful model for conducting an empirical research that examines the effects of adopting AI-driven marketing tools on SME business outcomes in Germany's regulatory environment.

3.2 Conceptual Model

This is evident from the fact that the conceptual model explicitly portrays the relationship between AI-driven marketing tools and SME growth, as well as competitive advantages. From the model, personalization, automation, predictive analysis, and customer engagement are the independent variables of SME growth, which is the mediator between AI adoption and competitive advantages. Competitive advantages are considered the outcome variable and are further broken down to differentiation, improved customer retention, innovation capacity, and improved market positioning. In terms of practical applications, the model shows that SMEs adopting AI technologies are capable of surmounting the limitations of resource constraints and attaining efficiency in their marketing strategies like their larger competitors. By adopting AI technologies for digital marketing strategies, SMEs are better positioned to predict customer responses and personalize customer experiences to meet the high German quality and reliability standards. Although the diagrammatic representation of the model provides a clear picture of the relationships between AI adoption and SME growth and competitive advantages, it also shows the moderating variables of firm size, industry type, and digitalization readiness that may affect the strength of AI adoption on SME growth and competitive advantages (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Hendrayati et al., 2024).

Figure 1. This model emphasizes the mediating role of SME growth in translating AI adoption into long-term competitive gains and provides a clear framework for hypothesis testing within Germany's SME context.



3.3 Hypotheses Development

Based on the conceptual framework and existing literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Adoption of AI-driven personalization tools positively influences SME growth in Germany.

H2: Adoption of AI-driven automation tools positively influences SME growth in Germany.

H3: Adoption of AI-driven predictive analytics tools positively influences SME growth in Germany.

H4: Adoption of AI-driven customer engagement tools positively influences SME growth in Germany.

H5: SME growth positively influences competitive advantage among SMEs in Germany.

H6: SME growth mediates the relationship between AI-driven marketing tools and competitive advantage.

H7: Firm size, industry sector, digital maturity, and market characteristics moderate the relationship between AI adoption and SME growth.

This model links the adoption of AI technology with the performance of SMEs, which makes for a testable model for empirical analysis in the context of German SMEs. It also aligns well with the latest research on AI in the context of digital marketing for SMEs, considering the strategic role of digital marketing for sustaining competitiveness in the advanced industrial economy of Germany (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Hendrayati et al., 2024; Boddu et al., 2022).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

In this study, the quantitative method of research is employed to examine the impact of AI marketing tools on the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in Germany. A cross-sectional survey method is employed to collect data from various SMEs at one point in time. This quantitative method of research is deemed appropriate because it provides the opportunity for the measurement of the relationship between variables, testing of statistical hypotheses, and the ability to generalize the findings to the population of SMEs. This study is deemed explanatory because it aims at establishing the relationship between the adoption of AI marketing tools and the outcomes. Through the process of measuring the variables, the study aims at providing empirical insights into the impact of AI marketing tools on the growth and competitiveness of SMEs.

4.2 Research Population and Sampling

The target population will include small and medium-sized enterprises that operate in different industries. This is due to their importance in the economy and the fact that some of them are more digitalized and use more artificial intelligence compared to others. Small and medium-sized enterprises are defined as those that have fewer than 250 employees. This is in accordance with the criteria provided by the European Commission. The enterprises must also meet the specified turnover or balance sheet criteria. The sampling technique that will be used is a random sampling technique, which is a stratified sampling technique. This is due to its effectiveness in ensuring that the population is represented and that different industries and small and medium-sized enterprises, such as micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, are represented. The target population will include individuals such as business owners, managing directors, marketing managers, and experts in digital transformation. It is recommended that the target population include a minimum of 250 to 400 enterprises.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Primary data will be collected using a structured questionnaire in the form of emails. This method is appropriate because Germany has good digital infrastructure, and SMEs in Germany are known to adopt digital communication methods. The questionnaire will be designed with five parts to cover the information related to the firm, the adoption of AI-driven marketing in the firms, the factors that affect the growth of SMEs, the competitive advantage of the firms, and the impediments in adopting AI-driven marketing. The questionnaire will be designed by adopting the scales used in the previous research studies to measure the responses. Five points on the Likert

scale will be used to measure the responses related to the adoption of AI-driven marketing in the firms.

4.4 Measurement of Variables

The construct of AI-driven marketing tools was used as the independent variable with four dimensions: personalization, automation, predictive analytics, and customer engagement. Personalization was used as the ability to provide content that is tailored, provide recommendations, and communicate. Automation was used as the ability to automate campaigns, manage campaigns, and monitor campaigns. Predictive analytics was used as the ability to forecast, provide insights about customers, and optimize campaigns. SME growth was used as the mediating variable with the definition of the ability to grow sales, grow the market, grow efficiency, and grow the customer base. Competitive advantage was used as the dependent variable with the definition of the ability to differentiate, build loyalty, build brand strength, and position the market. Firm size, industry sector, digital maturity, market characteristics, and others were used as the moderating variables. Age and digital investment were used as the control variables.

4.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Moreover, the analysis would be carried out through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Initially, the analysis would be carried out through a process called data screening. Then the process would be followed by reliability analysis through Cronbach's alpha method. Next would be exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to confirm the structure of the research constructs. After this process, correlation analysis would be carried out to understand the strength and nature of relationships between the research variables. Multiple regression analysis would be carried out to understand the direct effects of different dimensions of AI-driven marketing on SME growth and competitive advantage. Hierarchical regression analysis would be carried out to understand the mediating effects through the sequential addition of research variables to understand the role of SME growth in creating a sense of competitive advantage. Various statistical tools would be employed to carry out the research analysis. This would enable the researcher to rigorously test the hypotheses while providing a deeper insight into the relationships between the variables through the research conceptual framework.

4.6 Validity and Reliability

To establish content validity, the items used for measurement are developed from existing literature and validated by experts in academia and practitioners in the field of digital marketing and SME management. A pilot test is carried out on around 30 SMEs to validate the questionnaire. Construct validity is established by factor loading values derived from exploratory factor analysis, and reliability is established by Cronbach's alpha values, which are above the suggested value of 0.70.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

In addition to this, the ethical guidelines are adhered to during the entire research process. The research participants are made aware of the purpose of the research and are given the freedom to withdraw their responses at any stage of the research. The research participants are kept anonymous by not collecting identifiable information and by making sure the research results are

reported in aggregate form. The research has adhered to the data protection regulations of the European Union and has followed the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which deals with the handling and processing of research respondents' data.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Sample Characteristics

The data was collected from SMEs operating in various industries such as manufacturing, services, retail, and technology. The sample of the population comprised small and medium-sized enterprises with the majority being small enterprises employing between 10 and 49 employees. The respondents of the research were mostly managers and executive members of the companies, ensuring their familiarity with digital marketing. The descriptive results revealed that the overall adoption of digital technology was moderate to high. This was expected given the country's advanced technology and emphasis on innovation.

In terms of AI-driven marketing technology adoption, the highest adoption was found for personalization and automation tools. This was followed by predictive analytics adoption, which was found to be moderate. AI-powered customer engagement tools such as chatbots and virtual assistants were found to be increasing but differed by industries. This finding was expected given the research by Nair and Gupta (2021), which found that SMEs adopt AI technology for applications that offer immediate efficiencies and improvements to customer interactions (Theodoridis & Gkikas, 2019).

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Firm Size			
Industry			
Respondent Role			

5.2 Reliability and Validity Testing

Reliability analysis with Cronbach's alpha revealed that the values were well above the recommended level of 0.70 for all the constructs. EFA results provided construct validity for the study as the values were well above the acceptable level for the constructs. This confirms that the scales used were reliable in measuring the AI-driven marketing adoption, SME growth, and competitive advantage. Similar reliability results have also been obtained in other studies that have used AI adoption in the context of digital marketing (Islam et al., 2024; Bormane & Blaus, 2024).

Table 5.2: Reliability Analysis

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Personalization	5	0.86
Automation	5	0.84
Predictive Analytics	5	0.88
Customer Engagement	5	0.83
SME Growth	6	0.89
Competitive Advantage	6	0.87

5.3 Correlation Analysis

The correlation results indicated significant and positive correlations between dimensions of AI-driven marketing and SME growth. Personalization was the dimension with the strongest correlation with SME growth, followed by predictive analytics, automation, and customer engagement. SME growth was also strongly and positively correlated with dimensions of competitive advantage, such as customer retention, differentiation, and positioning.

The study results indicate that SMEs using AI-driven marketing capabilities perform better in terms of growth. The study results support the findings of previous studies, which indicated that using AI-driven marketing capabilities, such as personalization and decision-making, improves marketing effectiveness and satisfaction (Singh & Ahmed, 2024; Chowdhury et al., 2024).

Table 5.3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Personalization	1					
2. Automation	.61**	1				
3. Predictive Analytics	.66**	.59**	1			
4. Customer Engagement	.58**	.63**	.60**	1		
5. SME Growth	.71**	.65**	.69**	.62**	1	
6. Competitive Advantage	.63**	.60**	.64**	.59**	.74**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

5.4 Regression Analysis Results

To analyze the impact of AI-based marketing tools on the growth of SMEs, multiple regression analysis was used. The results highlighted that personalization, predictive analytics, automation, and customer engagement tools have a significant positive impact on the growth of SMEs.

Personalization was found to have the highest impact on the growth of SMEs, which indicates that customer-centricity plays a vital role in the development of the market as well as the enhancement of revenue generation. Predictive analytics was also found to have a large impact on the growth of SMEs, emphasizing the importance of data-driven decision-making.

However, further regression analysis showed the significant predictive relationship between the growth of SMEs and competitive advantage. Firms that experienced growth in revenue, efficiency, and expansion in the market showed higher differentiation and loyalty. The hierarchical regression analysis showed that the mediating effect of the growth of SMEs in the relationship between the adoption of AI and competitive advantage is significant. Further, the results showed that the moderating effect of firm size, industry type, and digital maturity in the relationship between the adoption of AI and the growth of the firm is significant. The results show that the argument that AI helps SMEs overcome the challenge of resource constraints to compete with large corporations through the accuracy and efficiency in marketing provided by AI is correct (Boddu et al., 2022; Alghizzawi et al., 2024).

Table 5.4: Multiple Regression Results (Dependent Variable: SME Growth)

Predictor	**Beta (β)**	**t-value**	**Significance**
Personalization	0.34	6.82	.000
Predictive Analytics	0.29	5.94	.000
Automation	0.24	4.88	.001
Customer Engagement	0.21	4.31	.002
$R^2 = 0.62$			

Table 5.5: Regression Results (Dependent Variable: Competitive Advantage)

Predictor	**Beta (β)**	**t-value**	**Significance**
SME Growth	0.68	12.15	.000
$R^2 = 0.46$			

5.5 Discussion of Findings

The results reveal the significance of the role played by AI marketing tools in the development and competitiveness of SMEs in the digital economy of Germany. Personalization was the most significant factor in the results, which is in agreement with the significance of personalization in the economy where quality, reliability, and service excellence are given much importance. Personalization is in agreement with the findings of the results of previous research studies that

highlighted the importance of personalization in improving customer relationships, conversion rates, and brand trust (Singh & Ahmed, 2024).

Predictive analytics was also an important contributor, which enabled SMEs to forecast demand, optimize their pricing strategies, and anticipate their customers' needs. Such an ability is consistent with the results of previous studies, which highlighted the transformative role AI can play in marketing decision-making (Zaman, 2022). Finally, the results revealed the importance of automation in improving the operational efficiency of the SMEs, which is consistent with the results of previous studies, which highlighted the importance of AI in improving productivity (Islam et al., 2024).

The development of AI-based customer engagement tools has also helped in the improvement of responsiveness in service quality, thus increasing customer satisfaction. Continuous interaction through chatbots and other real-time interaction systems helps in the development of long-term relationships with customers. This is in line with the literature that suggests the development of AI helps in the improvement of digital marketing communication (Bormane & Blaus, 2024).

The mediating effect of SME growth indicates that the development of AI is linked to the development of competitive advantage through the improvement of organizational performance. Organizations that have experienced growth in terms of revenue, efficiency, and scope are in a better position to differentiate themselves in the market. This is in line with the literature that suggests the development of AI-based marketing capabilities is linked to the development of competitiveness (Hendrayati et al., 2024; Alghizzawi et al., 2024).

This is because the moderating effect implies that larger SMEs as well as those with higher digital maturity will benefit more from the adoption of AI. In addition to that, the results also pointed out that the type of industry was a factor in the adoption of AI in that the benefits of adopting AI in technology-intensive industries as well as service industries were higher than in traditional industries. This is in agreement with the findings that organizational readiness is one of the most significant factors in the success of the adoption of AI (Soni, 2023).

Although there were benefits associated with the adoption of AI in the respective firms, the challenges cited by the firms were the implementation cost, the technical complexities involved in the adoption of AI, as well as the data governance challenges. These challenges have been cited as some of the challenges facing the adoption of AI in that there are ethical challenges associated with the use of data (Reed et al., 2025; Nalbant & Aydın, 2023).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The results have depicted the significance of the role played by AI marketing tools in the development and competitiveness of SMEs in the digital economy of Germany. Personalization has emerged as the most important factor in this study. This is in line with the significance given to the delivery of a highly personalized customer experience in an economy that gives a high importance rating to quality, reliability, and service excellence (Singh & Ahmed, 2024).

Moreover, it is also evident that the most significant factor affecting consumer purchase intent is AI-based personalization and recommendation systems. It is evident that consumers have a higher tendency to respond well to such personalized ads, recommendations, and promotions, which can be achieved through such systems. Predictive analytics can also be used to make such systems more effective, which would enable businesses to predict the needs of consumers and act accordingly to gain brand loyalty (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Singh & Ahmed, 2024). Marketing automation can also be used to make the brand more responsive through all digital platforms to increase consumer satisfaction and trust.

However, it is also important to note that the research has raised considerable concerns about data privacy, transparency in algorithms, and ethical use of data. Though consumers like to be treated with a customized approach, they are also apprehensive about the collection, storage, and use of their personal information. This is in line with the latest research on the need to ensure ethical use of AI in digital marketing systems to avoid biases (Reed et al., 2025; Bormane & Blaus, 2024). It is thus clear that though AI has improved the efficiency of digital marketing systems, it is important to ensure the sustainability of the same.

Overall, this research adds to the existing literature that supports that AI-based digital marketing is not just an extension of marketing technologies, but rather a marketing capability that improves customer-centricity, marketing efficiencies, and organizational competitiveness in the digital world (Hendrayati et al., 2024; Spais & Chryssochoidis, 2025). Indeed, organizations that have a strategic approach to marketing and utilize AI in marketing activities are more likely to achieve organizational growth and long-term customers.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

It is recommended that regulatory bodies and industry players focus on developing an ethical framework of governance that will promote and regulate the use of AI in digital marketing. There is a need to have clear policies regarding the use of collected data and its storage and usage in order to promote transparency and ensure that consumers' privacy is respected and that informed consent is encouraged. This will help in developing standards that promote fairness and accountability in the use of AI, thus encouraging its use and promoting public trust (Reed et al., 2025).

There is a need for organizations to promote responsible personalization in order to balance marketing and consumer independence. Personalization is a practice that is aimed at improving customers' experience in a digital setting. However, some customers may find this practice uncomfortable and may even perceive it as a kind of digital surveillance. Therefore, organizations are encouraged to promote transparency and provide customers with control over their digital experience.

Thus, the investment in AI capacity building and workforce development is an important consideration in order to realize the full potential of AI marketing. For this to happen, different stakeholders such as governments and learning institutions will have to encourage different fields

of study in data analytics and machine learning, among other fields in AI, in order to ensure that marketing professionals have the required competencies in a data-driven economy.

Consumer awareness and digital literacy are other areas that are essential in order to ensure that consumers are empowered in a digital economy. This will require various stakeholders, including governments, to embark on various awareness campaigns aimed at educating consumers about various issues regarding AI marketing, including how it operates and how their personal information is used.

There is also a need to develop policy frameworks to support the adoption of AI technologies by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to ensure inclusivity in the digital economy. This would help SMEs to effectively leverage AI marketing technologies, thus improving their competitiveness in the market.

Last but not least, transparency in AI marketing algorithms should be encouraged to ensure accountability in the application of AI marketing technologies. This would help organizations to be transparent to consumers when they are interacting with AI marketing technologies such as chatbots, among others. Further, inclusivity in AI marketing should be encouraged to ensure sustainability in marketing approaches, which are sensitive to the environment and cultures, thus aligning the application of AI marketing technologies with sustainable development goals (Gündüzyeli, 2024).

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Questionnaire: AI-Driven Digital Marketing, SME Growth, and Competitive Advantage

Instructions:

Dear Respondent,

This questionnaire aims to collect data on the adoption of AI-driven marketing tools and their impact on SME growth and competitive advantage. All responses are confidential and will be used solely for academic purposes. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Section A: Firm Demographics and Characteristics

(1) Firm Size:

- Micro (<10 employees)
- Small (10–49 employees)
- Medium (50–249 employees)

(2) Industry Sector:

- Manufacturing & Engineering
- Services
- Retail & Trade
- Technology
- Others (Specify) _____

(3) Number of years the firm has been in operation:

- <5 years
- 5–10 years
- 11–20 years
- 20 years

(4) Respondent's Role in the Organization:

- Owner/CEO
- Marketing Manager
- Digital Marketing Specialist
- Others (Specify) _____

(5) Level of digital maturity in the firm:

- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Section B: Adoption of AI-Driven Marketing Tools

Personalization (Nair & Gupta, 2021; Singh & Ahmed, 2024)

(1) Our firm uses AI tools to deliver personalized product recommendations to customers.

(2) Marketing campaigns are tailored to individual customer preferences using AI.

(3) AI helps our firm provide personalized content across digital platforms.
(4) Customer data is analyzed to create individualized offers and promotions.
(5) Personalization through AI has improved customer engagement in our firm.

Automation (Islam et al., 2024; Chowdhury et al., 2024)

(6) Our firm uses AI to automate marketing campaigns and workflows.
(7) AI tools help in scheduling and managing marketing communications efficiently.
(8) Automation eliminates repetitive tasks in marketing campaigns.
(9) AI-assisted automation ensures uniformity in marketing campaigns across different platforms.
(10) Marketing automation has enhanced the operational efficiency of our firm.
(11) Predictive Analytics (Zaman, 2022; Hendrayati et al., 2024)
(12) Our firm utilizes AI in predicting customers' behavior and market trends.
(13) Predictive analytics aids in identifying potential customers' needs.
(14) AI analytics aid in decision-making regarding pricing, product development, and promotions.
(15) AI predictive analytics improves our marketing campaigns' results.
(16) Utilizing predictive analytics has enhanced our firm's strategic decision-making process.
(17) Customer Engagement (Bormane & Blaus, 2024; Singh & Ahmed, 2024)
(18) AI tools, such as chatbots and virtual assistants, are employed in offering real-time customer services.
(19) AI improves our firm's ability to respond to customers' queries and questions.
(20) AI platforms aid in sustaining a constant interaction with customers.
(21) Customer engagement utilizing AI has enhanced customers' satisfaction and loyalty towards our firm.
(22) AI-based customer engagement strengthens our firm's long-term relationship with customers.

Section C: SME Growth Indicators (Alghizzawi et al., 2024; Boddu et al., 2022)

(23) Our firm has experienced growth in terms of sales revenue over the last three years.
(24) Our firm has witnessed growth in its customer base due to the application of AI marketing.
(25) Our firm has witnessed growth in its market share due to the application of AI marketing.
(26) Our firm has witnessed growth in its operational efficiency due to the application of AI marketing.
(27) Our firm has witnessed the impact of AI marketing on its performance.
(28) Section D: Competitive Advantage Indicators (Hendrayati et al., 2024; Gündüzyeli, 2024)

(29) Our firm has witnessed the impact of AI marketing on its differentiation from the competition.
(30) Our firm has witnessed the impact of AI marketing on its customer loyalty.
(31) Our firm has witnessed the impact of AI marketing on its brand.
(32) Our firm has witnessed the impact of AI marketing on its sustainable competitive advantage.
(33) Our firm has witnessed the impact of AI marketing tools in maintaining its competitive edge over the competition in the market.

Section E: Adoption Barriers and Contextual Factors (Soni, 2023; Nalbant & Aydın, 2023)

(34) The cost of implementing AI acts as a barrier to the adoption of AI in our firm.
(35) The lack of expertise on the use of AI in marketing is also a barrier to the adoption of AI in marketing.
(36) The lack of digital infrastructure is also a barrier to the adoption of AI in our firm.
(37) The privacy and security concerns are also barriers to the adoption of AI in marketing.
(38) The ethical concerns are also barriers to the development of the AI marketing strategy.

End of Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation! Your responses are valuable for advancing research on AI-driven marketing and SME performance.

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Green Human Resource Management and Turnover Intention in Hospitality: A Preliminary Model Proposal

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to propose a conceptual model that links green human resource management practices with employees' tendency to leave work in hospitality organisations. The proposed model is examined at a preliminary level in order to evaluate its conceptual coherence and empirical feasibility.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study employs a quantitative research design, deriving from survey data collected from hospitality employees. The pilot dataset consists of responses obtained from 198 participants. The preliminary phase of the study was designed in two parts: First, the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments were assessed. Second, an initial empirical test of the proposed research model was conducted in order to evaluate the suitability of the theoretical framework prior to the full-scale study.

Results: Exploratory factor analysis results indicated adequate sampling and a clear factor structure for the green human resource management, green transformational leadership, and environmental organisational citizenship behaviour scales. The tendency to leave work scale, which consisted of three items, was validated using confirmatory factor analysis. All measurement instruments demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Following the measurement validation procedures, structural equation modelling was conducted to examine the relationships between the constructs included in the proposed model.

Originality/value: This study provides preliminary empirical evidence on how environmentally oriented human resource practices and green transformational leadership may influence employees' green behaviours and retention-related outcomes in hospitality organisations. The study contributes to the literature on green human resources management and sustainable organisational behaviour by integrating human resource practices, leadership processes, and employee behavioural outcomes within a single conceptual framework. Considering the relatively limited sample size, the analysis was conducted as a pilot study aimed at evaluating the feasibility of a more complex research model rather than testing definitive hypotheses. The findings are therefore intended to inform the development of an expanded model that incorporates mediation and moderation relationships to be examined in future research.

Keywords: Green human resource management, Green transformational leadership, Environmental organisational citizenship, Turnover intention, Hospitality management

Introduction

Environmental sustainability has become a strategic priority for hospitality organisations in response to increasing ecological pressures, regulatory requirements, and growing stakeholder expectations. Hotels and tourism enterprises are characterised by high levels of energy consumption, waste generation, and resource use, which makes environmental management a critical organisational concern. As a result, many hospitality organisations have begun to integrate sustainability principles into their managerial practices, including human resource management. In this context, green human resource management has emerged as an important managerial approach that embeds environmental values into core organisational functions such as recruitment, training, performance evaluation, and employee involvement. Green human resource management refers to the systematic alignment of human resource policies and practices with environmental sustainability objectives in order to encourage pro-environmental behaviour among employees and improve organisational environmental performance (Tang et al., 2018). Within the tourism and hospitality sector, green human resource management practices commonly include green recruitment and selection, environmentally oriented training programmes, sustainability-based performance evaluation, and employee participation in environmental initiatives. These practices enable hospitality organisations to foster environmentally responsible behaviour among employees while simultaneously strengthening their competitive advantage and enhancing organisational reputation in terms of sustainability (Paillé et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2018).

Despite the increasing attention given to green human resource management in organisational and tourism research, the mechanisms through which environmentally oriented management practices influence employee outcomes remain insufficiently understood. This issue is particularly important in labour-intensive industries such as hospitality, where employee attitudes and behaviours play a crucial role in organisational performance. One of the most critical challenges faced by hospitality organisations is the high level of employee turnover. High turnover rates increase operational costs, reduce service quality, and weaken organisational learning and continuity. In the literature, employees' tendency to leave work is generally conceptualised as turnover intention, which refers to an employee's conscious and deliberate intention to leave the organisation in the near future (Cammann et al., 1979; Griffeth et al., 2000). Due to the labour-intensive nature of hospitality operations, employees' turnover intention is widely used as a key indicator of workforce stability and organisational sustainability. Previous studies in tourism and hospitality have shown that organisational practices, leadership styles, and workplace conditions significantly influence employees' intention to leave their jobs. In particular, supportive managerial practices and sustainable organisational policies may reduce employees' intention to leave by strengthening organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Griffeth et al., 2000; Byrne et al., 2014).

A growing body of research suggest that environmentally oriented HR practices can encourage pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours among employees, which may in turn enhance organisational commitment and reduce withdrawal intentions. However, the psychological and leadership-related mechanisms underlying this relationship are not yet fully clarified. In this respect, green transformational leadership has been identified as an important organisational driver that translates environmental policies into meaningful employee behaviours. At the same time, environmental organisational citizenship behaviour may represent a behavioural mechanism through which employees internalise organisational sustainability values. Green transformational leadership refers to a leadership style in which leaders inspire, motivate, and guide employees to achieve environmental goals and to adopt environmentally responsible behaviours. This approach combines the core dimensions of transformational leadership, including vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and role modelling, with environmental sustainability objectives (Chen & Chang, 2013 In the tourism and hospitality context, green transformational leadership is reflected in leaders who promote environmentally friendly practices, support sustainability initiatives in daily operations, and encourage employees to participate actively in environmental management activities. Previous research indicates that leaders who demonstrate strong environmental commitment can significantly influence employees' pro-environmental behaviours and increase their engagement with organisational sustainability initiatives (Robertson & Barling, 2017). Consequently, green transformational leadership may play a crucial role in encouraging employees to go beyond their formal job requirements and engage in voluntary environmental behaviours that support organisational sustainability goals (Paillé et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study is therefore to propose and preliminarily examine a conceptual model that links green human resource management practices with employees' tendency to leave work in hospitality organisations. The present study investigates the relationships between green human resource management, green transformational leadership, environmental organisational citizenship behaviour, and turnover intention. The study has two main objectives: The first objective is to conduct a preliminary empirical evaluation of the proposed model using pilot data. The second objective is to identify possible directions for model refinement prior to the full-scale doctoral research. To this end, the study uses pilot survey data collected from hospitality employees. By integrating human resource practices, leadership processes, and employee behavioural outcomes within a single framework, the study contributes to the emerging literature on green organisational behaviour in tourism. In particular, the research responds to calls for further investigation into how environmentally oriented management practices influence employee attitudes and behaviours in hospitality organisations (Robertson & Barling, 2017; Tang et al., 2018). By examining the potential roles of green transformational leadership and environmental organisational citizenship behaviour, the study seeks to provide preliminary insights into the mechanisms through which sustainability-oriented management practices may affect employees' intention to leave their organisations (Chen & Chang, 20132).

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of indirect pathways linking green management practices to employee retention outcomes. Specifically, environmentally oriented human resource practices and leadership behaviours may influence turnover intention primarily through mediators such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and perceived psychological green climate (Paillé et al., 2014; Dumont et al., 2017). For example, employees who perceive strong organisational support for environmental initiatives are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward their workplace, which can reduce the likelihood of voluntary turnover. Moreover, research suggests that green transformational leaders not only inspire pro-environmental behaviours but also enhance employees' affective attachment to the organisation, thereby indirectly influencing their intention to stay (Luu, 2018; Robertson & Barling, 2013). By highlighting these mediating mechanisms, the present study underscores the need to consider both behavioural and attitudinal processes when examining the effects of sustainability-oriented HRM and leadership practices in hospitality settings.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design based on survey data collected from employees working in the hospitality sector. The pilot dataset consists of responses obtained from 198 participants employed in tourism and hospitality services. The primary purpose of the pilot phase was to assess the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments and to conduct an initial empirical examination of the proposed conceptual model. Pilot studies are widely recommended in quantitative research as they allow researchers to evaluate the clarity, structure, and consistency of survey instruments prior to the main data collection stage. Conducting a pilot test helps identify potential measurement problems, refine questionnaire items, and improve the overall reliability and validity of the research design (Hair et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019; Sekaran & Bougie, 2020).

The measurement instruments used in this study were adapted from previously developed scales in the literature. The green human resource management scale was adopted from Tang et al. (2018). The environmental organisational citizenship behavior scale was based on the measure developed by Robertson and Barling (2017). The green transformational leadership scale was derived from Chen and Chang (2013), and turnover intention was measured using the scale developed by Cammann et al. (1979). Although these scales have been validated in previous studies, several of them were originally developed in different sectoral contexts. Therefore, factor analysis using was conducted in order to verify the factor structure of the scales within the tourism and hospitality context.

In addition to assessing the validity and reliability of the instruments, the pilot study also enabled an evaluation of the preliminary relationships among the constructs. Pilot testing provides an opportunity to examine whether the conceptual model functions as expected in the specific context of hospitality organisations, allowing researchers to detect potential issues with scale interpretation or item relevance (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Leon et al., 2011). Furthermore, conducting a pilot analysis supports the estimation of internal consistency through Cronbach's alpha and composite

reliability, and allows for initial exploration of construct correlations, which can inform model refinement prior to the full-scale study (Preacher et al., 2007; Hayes, 2017). Overall, these steps ensure that the measurement instruments are contextually appropriate and methodologically robust, laying a solid foundation for subsequent empirical analyses.

Results

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)		Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)		Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	100	50.5		**Marital Status**	Married	119	60.1					
	Female	98	49.5			Single	79	39.9					
Age (years)	18 – 24	40	20,2		**Income Level**	Low	59	29,8		**Work Experience in Org.**	Less than 1 year	49	24,7
	25 – 34	90	45.5			Medium	109	55.1			1 – 3 years	69	34.8
	35 and Above	68	34,3			High	30	15,1			4 years or more	80	40.5
Education Level	Primary Education	6	3.0		**Work Experience in Sector**	Less than 1 year	20	10,1		**Job Position**	Senior Executive	30	15,2
	High School	50	25,3			1 – 5 years	59	29,8			Manager	40	20,2
	Associate Degree	30	15,2			5 – 15 years	99	50.0			Assistant Manager	50	25,3

	Bachelor's Degree and upper	112	56,6			More than 15 years	20	10,1			Personnel / Staff	78	39.4

The study's sample consisted of 198 employees working in various roles within the tourism and hospitality sector. The gender distribution was almost balanced, with 100 males (50.5%) and 98 females (49.5%), reflecting a diverse workforce in terms of gender representation.

Participants' age ranged from 17 to 68 years. The majority of the sample was between 25 and 34 years old (45.5%), followed by employees aged 35 and above (34.3%) and those aged 18–24 (20.2%), indicating a relatively young workforce typical of the hospitality sector.

In terms of educational background, the majority held a Bachelor's degree or higher (56.6%), while High School graduates represented 25.3% of the sample. Smaller proportions of employees had Associate degrees (15.2%) or Primary education (3.0%), reflecting a wide range of educational levels in the workforce.

Regarding marital status, 119 participants (60.1%) were married, while 79 participants (39.9%) were single. Income levels were predominantly in the medium range (55.1%), with 29.8% in the low-income group and 15.1% in the high-income group.

Work experience varied both within the organisation and in the sector. For organisational tenure, 24.7% of participants had less than one year of experience, 34.8% had 1–3 years, and 40.5% had four years or more. Regarding sector experience, 10.1% had less than one year, 29.8% had 1–5 years, 50% had 5–15 years, and 10.1% had more than 15 years of experience.

Participants held diverse job positions, including Senior Executives (15.2%), Managers (20.2%), Assistant Managers (25.3%), and Personnel/Staff (39.4%), ensuring that the sample captured a broad range of hierarchical levels and perspectives within hospitality organisations.

Overall, the sample reflects a heterogeneous workforce in terms of gender, age, education, marital status, income, experience, and organisational role. This diversity enhances the generalisability of the findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of employee attitudes and behaviours in the tourism and hospitality sector.

For the green transformational leadership scale, previous validation studies had been conducted in sectors such as manufacturing and emergency call centre services. Since the present study focuses on employees working in the tourism and hospitality sector, an exploratory factor analysis using Promax rotation was performed to confirm the factor structure in this new context (Field, 2018). Exploratory factor analysis is commonly used to examine the underlying factor structure of measurement instruments and to determine whether the observed variables load onto the expected latent constructs. This procedure is particularly appropriate when an existing scale is applied to a different sample or sector, as it allows the researcher to assess construct validity and dimensional

consistency. The use of an oblique rotation method such as Promax is recommended when the factors are theoretically expected to be correlated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

The results of the exploratory factor analysis indicated strong sampling adequacy and a clear factor structure. The Kaiser Meyer Olkin value for the green transformational leadership scale was 0.887 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1633.547$, $p < 0.001$). All six items loaded on a single factor explaining 85.30 percent of the variance. Reliability analysis showed very high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.965. These results indicate that the scale has strong construct validity and internal reliability within the present sample. According to commonly accepted criteria, KMO values above 0.80 indicate high sampling adequacy, while Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 indicate satisfactory internal consistency (Field, 2018).

A similar procedure was applied to the green human resource management scale. The KMO value for this scale was 0.944 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 4050.041$, $p < 0.001$). The exploratory factor analysis extracted a single factor explaining 75.41 percent of the total variance. All fifteen items demonstrated strong factor loadings, and the scale showed very high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.977. These results indicate that the green human resource management scale possesses strong construct validity and internal consistency in the current sample. High KMO values, significant Bartlett's tests, and strong factor loadings provide evidence for the suitability of the data for factor analysis and support the dimensional stability of the measurement scale (Field, 2018; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

For environmental organisational citizenship behaviour, exploratory factor analysis also revealed a clear single-factor structure. The KMO value was 0.906 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1785.037$, $p < 0.001$). The single factor explained 67.67 percent of the total variance, and the scale demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.946. These results suggest that the scale exhibits satisfactory construct validity and internal consistency within the study sample. In factor analysis, variance explained values above 60 percent and Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 are generally considered indicators of reliable and valid measurement instruments (Field, 2018).

The tendency to leave work scale consisted of three items and was validated using confirmatory factor analysis. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.809. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test whether the observed variables adequately represented the hypothesised latent construct and to evaluate the measurement model within the structural equation modelling framework. Reliability coefficients above the recommended threshold of 0.70 indicate that the items consistently measure the underlying construct (Hair et al., 2019).

Following the measurement validation procedures, structural equation modelling (SEM) was conducted in order to test the relationships between the constructs included in the proposed research model. Because the dataset represents a pilot study with a relatively limited sample size, the analysis was performed as a preliminary model evaluation rather than as a definitive hypothesis test. Structural equation modelling is widely used in behavioural and social science research to

examine complex relationships among latent variables and to evaluate the overall fit of theoretical models. In pilot studies, SEM can provide initial insights into the direction and strength of relationships and help determine whether the proposed model is suitable for further empirical testing (Byrne, 2016; Hair et al., 2019).

Model fit indices indicated moderate level of model fit. The chi-square statistic was significant (CMIN = 1702.715, df = 515, $p < 0.001$) with a CMIN/DF value of 3.306. Comparative fit indicators such as CFI (0.858), IFI (0.859), and TLI (0.845) suggested an acceptable but not optimal model fit. The RMSEA value was 0.108, indicating that the model requires further refinement. During the estimation process, several covariance modifications were applied in order to improve model fit (Kline, 2016). In structural equation modelling, model fit indices are commonly used to evaluate how well the theoretical model represents the observed data. Values of CFI and TLI close to 0.90 are generally considered acceptable, while RMSEA values below 0.08 indicate good fit. Therefore, the present results should be interpreted as preliminary findings, given the pilot nature of the dataset (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2019).

These analyses were conducted as a preliminary study to evaluate the viability of the proposed conceptual model before conducting the full-scale empirical research. Pilot testing and preliminary structural equation modelling allow researchers to identify potential weaknesses in the measurement and structural models, refine survey instruments, and ensure the feasibility of the proposed hypotheses. Such preliminary analyses are widely recommended in quantitative research to enhance the rigor and reliability of subsequent full-scale studies (Saunders et al., 2019).

The structural model results revealed several significant relationships among the variables. The analysis showed that green human resource management had a strong and statistically significant positive effect on green transformational leadership ($\beta = 0.710$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that environmentally oriented HR practices contribute to the development of leadership behaviours that promote sustainability values within the organisation. In turn, green transformational leadership positively influenced environmental organisational citizenship behaviour, indicating that leaders who model environmentally responsible behaviour can encourage employees to engage in discretionary pro-environmental actions (Dumont, Shen, & Deng, 2017). In addition, these pro-environmental behaviours were associated with a lower tendency to leave work, suggesting that a sustainability-oriented organisational climate may contribute to employee retention and organisational commitment (Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013).

Green human resource management also demonstrated a significant positive effect on environmental organisational citizenship behaviour ($\beta = 0.326$, $p < 0.001$). This result indicates that employees working in organisations with stronger green human resources practices are more likely to engage in voluntary pro-environmental behaviours that go beyond formal job requirements. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that green human resource initiatives can foster discretionary employee behaviours that support organisational sustainability goals (Dumont, Shen, & Deng, 2017).

The direct relationship between green human resource management and tendency to leave work was negative and statistically significant (β = −0.158, p = 0.040). This result provides preliminary evidence that environmentally responsible HR practices may reduce employees' intentions to leave their organisations. This result is consistent with earlier research suggesting that green human resources initiative and a sustainability-oriented organisational climate can enhance employee retention and strengthen organisational commitment (Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013).

However, the results showed that neither environmental organisational citizenship behaviour nor green transformational leadership had a statistically significant direct effect on tendency to leave work. The relationship between environmental organisational citizenship behaviour and tendency to leave work was not significant (β = 0.021, p = 0.778), and the relationship between green transformational leadership and tendency to leave work was also not significant (β = 0.050, p = 0.448). hese findings suggest that although environmentally oriented leadership and discretionary green behaviours support pro-environmental actions, their influence on turnover intention may occur indirectly. This interpretation is consistent with previous research indicating that green behaviours often affect retention outcomes through mediating mechanisms such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction, or psychological green climate. Prior research has suggested that employees' perceptions of organisational environmental responsibility can foster stronger emotional attachment and positive job attitudes, which are important predictors of lower turnover intention. In this sense, environmentally supportive organisational environments may influence employees' intention to stay primarily through improved psychological and attitudinal outcomes rather than through direct behavioural effects (Luu, 2018; Robertson & Barling, 2013).

Overall, the results indicate that the direct structural relationships proposed in the initial model may not fully explain how green management practices influence employees' intention to leave the organisation. While green human resource management appears to influence leadership and citizenship behaviours, these variables do not directly predict turnover intention within the current model. This pattern supports previous findings suggesting that the effects of green HRM and leadership on turnover outcomes may operate through indirect or mediated pathways. Previous research has also suggested that environmentally oriented management practices shape employees' work attitudes and perceptions of organisational support, which can ultimately influence their retention decisions. In particular, studies indicate that green organisational initiatives tend to enhance employees' engagement and commitment, which in turn contribute to lower turnover intentions rather than producing direct behavioural outcomes Previous studies have also suggested that environmentally oriented organisational practices contribute to the development of positive employee attitudes such as organisational commitment and work engagement. These attitudinal outcomes may subsequently influence employees' decisions to remain in the organisation, indicating that the relationship between green management practices and turnover intention is often indirect (Jabbour & Santos, 2008; Daily et al., 2012).

Given the relatively limited sample size and the exploratory nature of the pilot dataset, these results should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the results provide important guidance for further

model development and theoretical refinement. The pilot analysis enabled the identification of potential measurement issues and offered an initial assessment of the proposed structural relationships, thereby informing the design of the full-scale empirical study. Such preliminary testing is essential for ensuring both the reliability of measurement instruments and the overall validity of the conceptual framework (Presser et al., 2004; Van Aken, 2004).

These findings highlight the importance of considering mediating mechanisms when examining the impact of green management practices on turnover intention. Specifically, while direct effects of green transformational leadership and environmental organisational citizenship behaviour on turnover intention were not significant, prior research suggests that these relationships may operate indirectly through variables such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and perceived psychological green climate (Paillé et al., 2014; Dumont et al., 2017). In the hospitality context, where employee attitudes and discretionary behaviours are critical to service quality and operational continuity, understanding these indirect pathways is essential for both theory and practice. By identifying the potential mediating role of attitudinal and psychological factors, the current study provides preliminary evidence that sustainability-oriented human resource and leadership practices can foster retention through enhancing employees' engagement, affective attachment, and pro-environmental work behaviours, rather than through direct behavioural effects alone (Luu, 2018; Robertson & Barling, 2013).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on green organisational behaviour in hospitality in several ways. First, it integrates human resource management practices, leadership dynamics, and voluntary environmental behaviours within a single conceptual framework. While previous studies have examined these constructs separately, fewer studies have explored their combined influence on employee turnover intentions in tourism organisations. Previous research has shown that green human resource management practices can encourage employees' pro-environmental behaviours and strengthen organisational commitment. In addition, leadership styles that support environmental values may enhance employees' voluntary green behaviours and reduce their intention to leave the organisation (Renwick, Redman & Maguire, 2013; Kim, Kim, Choi & Phetvaroon, 2019). Therefore, examining these factors together provides a more comprehensive understanding of employee attitudes and behavioural outcomes in hospitality organisations.

Second, the study provides one of the early empirical examinations of green transformational leadership in the hospitality context. By re-validating the relevant measurement scales with employees working in tourism and hospitality, the research also offers a methodological contribution for future sector-specific studies on environmentally oriented leadership. This is important because the contextual validation of leadership and behavioural constructs strengthens both the reliability of measurement and the relevance of interpretation across organisational settings (Avolio et al., 2009; Robertson & Barling, 2013)

Third, the study adopts a pilot research design to assess the feasibility of a more complex conceptual model involving mediation and moderation. The structural model results suggest that

the direct effects initially proposed may not be sufficient to explain the relationship between green human resource management and turnover intention. On the basis of these preliminary findings, the study points towards a revised model in which indirect and conditional relationships are likely to play a more meaningful role. In this respect, the pilot phase serves not simply as a preliminary statistical exercise, but as an important stage in refining the theoretical structure of the doctoral research. Such pilot-based model development is particularly valuable when testing relatively complex relationships before a larger-scale empirical investigation (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Leon et al., 2011)

More specifically, environmental organisational citizenship behaviour is expected to operate as a mediating mechanism through which green human resource management influences employee outcomes, while green transformational leadership may function as a contextual factor that strengthens the effect of green HRM practices on pro-environmental behaviour. The full-scale study will examine this expanded framework using a larger sample and more robust modelling procedures. This direction is consistent with broader recommendations in organisational research, which emphasise the importance of examining mediation and moderation in order to better understand the mechanisms linking HR practices, leadership processes, and employee behaviour (Preacher et al., 2007; Hayes, 2017).

Finally, by presenting pilot findings alongside conceptual refinements, the study seeks to obtain scholarly feedback that can strengthen the research model before the main empirical stage. Overall, the findings provide preliminary evidence that environmentally oriented HR practices and green transformational leadership may play an important role in encouraging pro-environmental behaviour among hospitality employees, with possible implications for retention-related outcomes. Although some of the direct relationships with turnover intention were not statistically significant, the results point to the likely importance of mediated and moderated pathways and therefore highlight the complexity of green management processes in hospitality organisations. Taken together, these insights contribute to the literature by linking HRM, leadership, and organisational citizenship behaviour within a single framework, while also offering practical implications for hospitality organisations seeking to embed sustainability more effectively in their management practices.

Furthermore, the study highlights the strategic importance of integrating green human resource management and leadership practices to cultivate a sustainability-oriented organisational culture. Research suggests that employees who perceive strong organisational commitment to environmental initiatives demonstrate higher levels of job engagement and organisational attachment, which can reduce turnover intention and enhance overall organisational performance (Jackson et al., 2011; Boiral & Paillé, 2012). In the hospitality context, where employee behaviours directly influence service quality and guest experiences, fostering discretionary pro-environmental actions through supportive HR policies and environmentally conscious leadership can be particularly impactful. These findings imply that managers should consider not only formal HR procedures but also the leadership climate and role modelling behaviours that reinforce

environmental values, creating an integrated approach that aligns individual behaviours with organisational sustainability goals (Renwick et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2019). By combining HRM practices and leadership interventions, hospitality organisations can simultaneously advance environmental objectives and strengthen workforce stability.

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Exploring the social marketing and consumer behavioural attitude factors of tourism in nature-protected areas

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Abstract

Purpose: The study sought to explain how social marketing influences consumer behaviour by examining the impact of the 4Ps of social marketing on domestic tourists' affective and cognitive-behavioural attitudes towards visiting nature-protected areas. The study's primary objectives were to explore the four dimensions of social marketing (product, price, place, and promotion) and their roles in shaping behavioural attitudes towards South African nature-protected areas.

Study design/methodology/approach: A quantitative approach was applied. The final sample comprised 466 domestic tourists who had visited or considered visiting South African nature-protected areas. Exploratory Factor Analysis and Multiple Regression Analysis were used to analyse the data to determine the underlying social marketing and attitude factors, and to test the hypotheses presented by the study, respectively.

Results: Social marketing influenced the behavioural attitudes of domestic tourists. Specifically, the Product, Price, and Place Social Marketing dimensions positively influenced both the affective and cognitive behavioural attitudes of domestic tourists towards tourism in nature-protected areas. Promotion did not affect the affective behavioural attitude but only the cognitive behavioural attitude. The results imply that social marketing generally influences consumer behavioural attitudes, and that social re-engineering can augment tourist behaviour in nature-oriented tourism. The results have important implications for domestic tourism practitioners and conservation-oriented place managers in nature-protected areas.

Originality/value: This study is important because it contributes to the existing knowledge of the influence of social marketing on consumer behaviour change. The relationship between social marketing and tourist's behavioural attitudes of tourists towards tourism in nature-protected areas has not been widely explored. This means that this study is one of the first in Africa to examine the 4Ps of marketing within social marketing and to apply it to exploring consumer behaviour change in domestic tourists.

Key words: 4Ps of social marketing; behavioural attitudes; domestic tourism; nature-protected areas; social marketing

Introduction

Post-COVID tourism market was characterised by the pent-up desire for travel and tourism, with more people wanting to travel to and enjoy nature-based tourism and outdoor activities at destinations in Nature Protected Areas (NPAs) like parks, reserves, and similar conservation areas (Awad-Núñez et al., 2021). However, the influx of visitors to nature-protected areas created

management challenges for conservation areas, in part due to limited capacity to sustainably manage them (Smith et al., 2022). Given this unfolding scenario, Social Marketing becomes an innovative and relatively low-cost approach to managing adverse demand-related behaviours associated with over-tourism, including littering, general environmental degradation, and deforestation, which may result in catastrophic environmental degradation (Apollo et al., 2022). Social marketing is relatively new to conservation, unlike other sectors such as health and development (Smith et al., 2020). To this end, the dimensions of social marketing and the tourists' attitudes towards tourism in NPAs have not been widely explored (Grgić et al, 2021). As a marketing strategy that can be used to make people cautious in their tourism activity while influencing their attitude towards conservation, it is essential to research the influence of social marketing on the tourists' attitudes of tourists towards tourism in nature-protected areas.

Nature Protected Areas (NPAs) are defined as "geographical spaces, that are recognised, dedicated and managed through legal or other effective means to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values" (Alberts et al., 2021:290). Thus, tourism in NPAs is subject to the principles of sustainable biodiversity of resources, with some adherence to legal protections required. The intersection of NPAs between leisure and the environment suggests that human behaviour may be a critical sustainability concern (Sharmin et al., 2020). For instance, to overcome the conservation funding deficit induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, NPAs need to optimise tourist spending while conserving the environment (Buckley, 2019; Musavengane et al., 2020). As a result, NPs need to be more innovative in attracting more tourists to generate much-needed conservation funding while remaining sustainable by managing tourists' potentially "inappropriate" behaviour (Zhang et al., 2024). Micro-management in NPAs via stringent conservation policies may negatively impact tourist experiences; hence, 'soft' demand behaviour-oriented interventions may be most suitable for sustainable tourism in NPAs (Aryal, Ghimire & Niraula, 2019). Social marketing is one such 'soft' approach to tourism marketing that could influence human behaviour choices regarding environmental sustainability and domestic tourism (Eagle, Hay, & Farr, 2016). Although prior studies have examined the interaction of social marketing, consumer attitudes towards protected areas, and conservation strategies, only limited studies (Eagle, Hamann, & Low, 2016; Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele, & Truog, 2020) have investigated the impact of social marketing on influencing tourists who visit NPAs to consume sustainably.

Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore and identify the social marketing dimensions and the behavioural attitude factors of domestic tourists from a cognitive and affective perspective. By establishing this relationship, NPAs may be provided with critical insights that will enable practitioners to achieve a unique balance between attracting optimal income-generating tourists and conserving nature through social marketing to encourage environmentally responsible tourist behaviour. The primary contribution of the study was to establish which social marketing dimensions could play a major role in conserving protected areas (Lee, Rothschild & Smith, 2011),

by using identified marketing principles and techniques that may influence the target audience and benefit society.

Literature review

Theoretical underpinning

This study focuses on the downstream application of social marketing, adopting Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as an explanatory framework. The TBP theory is an extension of the Reasoned Action Theory (TRA) and addresses limitations related to the influence of factors beyond consumers' control (Bosnjak et al., 2020). TPB consists of three components that work together to influence a person's actual control over the behaviour, which these components are: (1) Attitudes – refers to feelings of an individual has, whether they dislike or like something, (2) Subjective norms -referred to as the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behaviour or it refers to whether most people approve or disapprove of the behaviour; and (3) Perceived behavioural control – refers to a person's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour of interest (Ajzen, 1991; Noor et al., 2020). When the attitude and subjective norm are favoured, there is a greater chance of perceived behavioural control to undertake the behaviour under consideration (Ajzen, 2005; Horne et al., 2020). Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behaviour assume that intentions differ across behaviours and situations (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; La-Barbera & Ajzen, 2020). The study's underlying framework (TPB) delineates the 4Ps of social marketing as independent variables. The Product refers to factors of tourism in NPAs as an aspect of Subjective Norms. Price, Place, and Promotion refer to the social marketing aspects within the control of the tourist and that marketers can manage as part of the tourist's Perceived Behavioural Control. The Attitude aspect of TPB supports the role of Affective Attitude and Cognitive Attitude as a tourist's response behaviour to tourism in NPAs. Therefore, TPB predicts consumer behaviour by establishing the effect of individuals' social norms, perceived behavioural control, and attitude (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; La-Barbera & Ajzen, 2020).

Tourism and conservation

The tourism industry has contributed to protecting and preserving natural resources, heritage sites, and other landscape features (Dimitrova, 2018). Therefore, tourism in conservation areas is viewed as providing financial incentives for local communities to protect wildlife, which eco-tourists are willing to pay to encounter (Müller et al., 2023)**.** Furthermore, the industry offers opportunities for securing funding for conservation activities to maintain the integrity of conserved ecosystems (Goodwin et al., 2020). According to Mathis and Rose (2016), tourism has been a key supporter of conservation in developing areas, with support from organisations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, and the World Tourism Organisation. Tourism as a conservation tool includes enhancing awareness, respect, and understanding of the importance of conserving natural resources, aids in sustaining tourism growth and ensuring the viability of environmental resources, and contributes to the conservation of the environment by providing both the incentive for conservation and the economic means by which it can be earned (Dimitrova, 2018). Through tourism, many

opportunities to raise awareness of biodiversity conservation are presented to local visitors (Cerveny & Miller, 2019; Ghaderi et al., 2022). Tourism focused on environmental conservation also contributes to local community economic development and preserves biodiversity. Hence, there are a lot of national parks and reserves, that aim to conserve fauna and flora (Kabra, 2019), including dolphins, gorillas, orang-utans, tigers, and whales, as well as some other ecosystems such as barrier reefs and glaciers, all of which form an important part of tourism attractions (Birenda, 2021; Sati, 2023). Similarly, Birenda (2021) also suggests that tourism can help NPAs to conserve the environment while offering recreational opportunities.

However, a study conducted by Thullah & Jalloh, (2021) found that tourism could disturb aquatic ecosystems by diverting natural water bodies to support tourism activities. This has a severe impact on the environment. According to (Nagora & Nagora, 2022) tourism development results in collecting animals from their native habitat and holding them in zoos, however the positive element could be that by catching the animals, they are safeguarded from hunters and other potentially harmful environmental circumstances. Some of the negative impacts of tourism on the environment include depletion of Natural Resources, Change in Climate, Health Impacts, traffic congestion, overcrowding in public areas, and noise as some of the negative social downside of tourism, etc (Nagora & Nagora, 2022; Thullah & Jalloh,2021). Solmaz, Roozbeh & Akeem (2019), in their study found that the biodiversity of coastal areas such as coral reefs and mountainous areas is damaged by the tourism sector. To help alleviate environmental pollution, countries' tourism policymakers should establish sustainable tourism infrastructures to reduce solid waste, sewage and noise, aesthetic and air pollution by exchanging ideas and experiences comprehensively (Solmaz, Roozbeh & Akeem, 2019),

The social marketing concept

According to Serrat (2020:1), social marketing is "the application of principles and techniques drawn from the commercial sector to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify, or abandon a behaviour for the benefit of individuals, groups, organisations, or society as a whole". Social marketing aims to create positive social change (Serrat, 2020). Social marketing it is the "design, implementation, and control of programs to influence the acceptability of social ideas. It involves product designing, pricing, communication, distribution, and marketing research considerations" (Khanagar & Samath, 2019:815). It intends to raise awareness, change mindsets, and promote innovation through marketing that can influence behavioural change. In social marketing, it is important to plan with the audience in mind rather than just the product (Maraña, Dacles & Capio, 2021). When marketing the offering, social marketers aim to change consumers' behavioural attitudes (Li, Larimo & Leonidou, 2020), which is ideal in a tourism context. Social marketing has influenced consumers to embrace socially and ethically satisfactory behaviour (Mwangi, 2017). Social marketing is also employed to influence socially responsible behaviour among tourists (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011). Social marketing comprises four factors: product, price, promotion, and place (4Ps). The present study intends to investigate the dimensions of social marketing based on these 4Ps from a domestic tourist perspective. Also, the research theme builds

on the 4Ps, which have been widely explored, and it is the norm in the literature to measure social marketing using the 4Ps (Costello et al., 2022).

In social marketing, a product is defined as "the benefits of behaviour change or service usage that a member of a target audience values" (Kumar, Pathak & Tripathi, 2021:2156). The product is a certain behaviour that one attempts to change. According to Rothschild (2010), people must admit they have a problem for change to occur. To change behaviour, social marketers need to influence behaviour, which is regarded as an actual product, by minimising the cost (Al-Kubaisi & Ibrahim,2021). In social marketing, price is the sum of the costs, whether monetary or nonmonetary (Bagdaisan, 2022). The essential element of price is the cost; it may be monetary and also involve a person's time, effort, or comfort (Spotswood, 2013). In social marketing, the price must reflect the benefits for behavioural change to occur. Price does not have to be money, but it must comprise benefits that stem from the price. The target market "pays" when adopting the desired behaviour that leads to benefits (Kumar, Pathak & Tripathi, 2021; Kotler et al., 2020). If the costs have no benefits for an individual, the value of the offering will be low, and the behaviour will not be adopted (AL-Kubaisi & Ibrahim, 2021).

In social marketing, place refers to where the targeted audience can engage in behaviour change (Costello et al., 2022). A place is where the behaviour of the targeted audience occurs or is expected to occur, considering factors such as convenience and accessibility (Johansson, 2012). The most important element of place is ensuring accessibility and the quality of the product delivery (Al-Kubaisi & Ibrahim, 2021; Costello, 2022). For a place to influence behaviour change, it must be accessible and ensure quality-of-service delivery (Johansson, 2012). In social marketing, promotion activities include public service announcements or paid advertisements (Costello et al., 2022). Incentives such as coupons, media events, editorials, or in-store displays are part of the promotional strategies. It is, and they are important to select the most effective incentive to reach out to the target audience (Samad, Director & Sabeerdeen, 2023). Promotion helps inform the target audience about the product's benefits, value, and availability (Green et al., 2019). With this discussion in mind, the following research questions are presented:

RQ1: Is the product a valid social marketing dimension for domestic tourist behaviour change?
RQ2: Is the price a valid social marketing dimension for domestic tourist behaviour change?
RQ3: Is the place a valid social marketing dimension for domestic tourist behaviour change?
RQ4: Is the promotion a valid social marketing dimension for domestic tourist behaviour change?

Behavioural Attitude

Affective Behavioural Attitude

Affective attitude is defined as the extent to which an individual develops affective feelings regarding concerned behaviours (Wang, Qin & Zhou, 2019). The system of affective attitude is more primary and intrinsic than that of cognitive attitude and is therefore considered a default

pattern of attitudinal influence (Farley & Stasson, 2003). Therefore, an affective attitude is associated with faster responses, as it is not subjected to as many verification tests as a cognitive attitude, which is slower and more controlled (Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). According to van den Berg, Manstead, van der Pligt, and Wigboldus (2006), an affective attitude is more accessible than a cognitive attitude. An affective attitude precedes a cognitive evaluation (Zajonc, 1984), exerting a more substantial effect on actions or decisions (Farley & Stasson, 2003; Crites, Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). The result of affective attitude formation is a reaction that influences the evaluation of the object of the attitude based on feelings and emotions and leads to expression in action (Bakanauskas, Kondrotienė & Puksas, 2020). With this discussion in mind, the following research question is presented:

RQ5: Is affective attitude a valid dimension for domestic tourist behaviour change?

Cognitive Behavioural Attitude

According to Abun et al. (2021), the Cognitive component refers to how an individual evaluates the outcomes of their behaviour, such as its benefits, functions, or consequences. Cognitive-behavioural attitudes influence an individual to perform an action, which is a rational outcome of precise calculations of costs and benefits. Cognitive attitude is influenced by the individual's internal evaluations, such as experience, the knowledge gained over time, and information received from the outside, based on factual evaluation. It expresses certain beliefs or understandings about the object of attitude on the part of the individual (Bakanauskas, Kondrotienė & Puksas, 2020). At the cognitive level, attitude formation is inseparable from the information, knowledge, and external stimuli the individual receives through external stimuli. Based on the cognitive aspects of attitude formation discussed, it is possible to distinguish the factors that influence attitude formation at the cognitive level (Bakanauskas, Kondrotienė & Puksas, 2020). At the cognitive level, the individual evaluates an object based on available information and facts about the object being assessed, considering its advantages and disadvantages (Bakanauskas, Kondrotienė & Puksas, 2020). The cognitive attitude concerns the role of cognition in a person's attitude towards a psychological object, such as beliefs and thoughts (Svenningsson, Höst & Hultén, 2022). With this discussion in mind, the following research question is presented:

RQ6: Is cognitive attitude a valid dimension for domestic tourist behaviour change?

The conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1, shows the underlying structure of the independent and dependent variables.

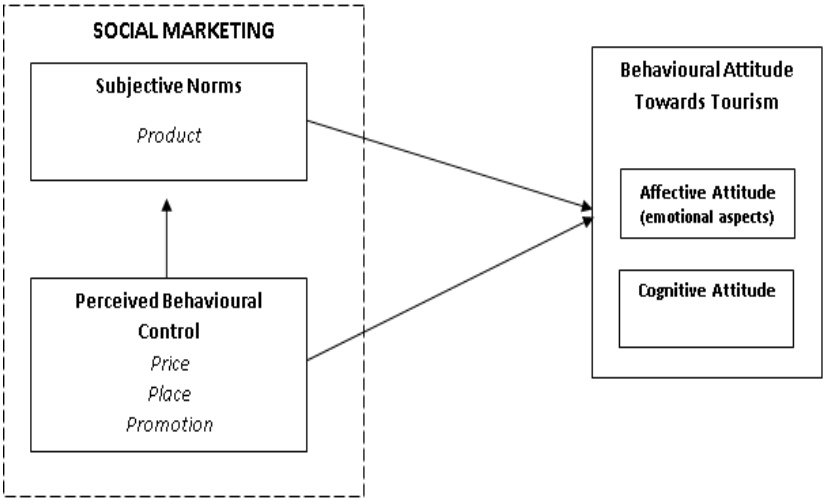


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

The following section presents the study methodology.

3. Methodology

Sample determining

The population for this study was domestic tourists who had visited or had considered visiting nature-protected areas in South Africa. For this study, non-probability sampling was adopted. Purposive-convenient sampling was applied as it allowed the researcher to select domestic tourists as the sample for the study since the study was concerned with South African NPAs. The criteria were that respondents had to be a: (1) a South African citizen or permanent resident, (2) who had travelled to or were considering travelling to NPAs for tourism. These criteria were used as screening questions in the questionnaire. Convenient sampling was employed, with a pre-recruited online panel used to collect the required data. A QuestionPro sample was utilised. Previous studies (Bender, Jimenez-Marroquin and Jadad, 2011; Eghdam et al., 2018; Franz et al., 2019) have used Facebook groups to collect data. The final sample for this study was n = 466 survey responses. According to the guidelines by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample of more than n = 384 respondents is suitable for generalising an unknown population or a population of more than 1 million people.

Research instrument and data collection

The selected research instrument for the present study was a questionnaire. The study questionnaire was self-completed and comprised a structured series of questions presented to respondents, accompanied by clear instructions detailing the sequence and selection criteria (Kuphanga, 2024). The questionnaire was published in English and accompanied by a consent letter explaining the purpose of the study, which was then administered to a panel on the QuestionPro Insights platform. The survey questionnaire consisted of the following sections:

- Section A collected socio-demographic information. The socio-demographic information was limited to the respondent's age range, gender identity, educational level, marital status, travel companions, and region of residence. Previous tourism studies have shown that

socio-demographic factors are essential for validating the findings and generalising the proposed research.

- Section B primarily measured the 4Ps of social marketing. Each of the 4Ps was measured using 5 items adapted from the literature. In line with previous studies, only product, price, promotion, and place were measured since social marketing is still evolving as a field of study, and most studies have focused on the 4Ps (Costello et al., 2022).
    - Product was measured by five items adapted from previous studies carried out by Alexandris (2018), Govender & Govender (2016), and Rukondo (2011). Therefore, the product measurement will have focused on social marketing based on environmentally conscious and conservation-led tourism in NPAs. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type agreement scale, where "1" is Strongly disagree and "5" is Strongly agree.
    - Price was measured by five items adapted from a scale from a study conducted by Haan et al., (2018). According to the literature (Govender & Govender, 2016), consumers who are environmentally conscious are willing to pay a little extra for environmentally friendly products and services. Therefore, the focus of price measurement in social marketing was on aspects of premium tourism pricing in NPAs. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type agreement scale, where "1" is Strongly disagree and "5" is Strongly agree.
    - Promotion was measured by five items adapted from the literature (Mwangi, 2017; Rukondo, 2011). In social marketing, promotion effectively enhances consumer knowledge of the product and its impact on consumption, motivating their decisions regarding tourism in NPAs (Ansar, 2013; Govender & Govender, 2016). Therefore, the focus of the promotion measurement was on social marketing aimed at influencing consumers' choice and decision-making regarding tourism in NPAs. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type agreement scale, where "1" is Strongly disagree and "5" is Strongly agree.
    - Place was measured by five items adapted from prior studies by Edgar, Huhman, and Miller (2015), Rukondo (2011), and Wischner (2014). Some previous studies show that the location and accessibility of conservation-oriented products and services affect consumers, with most unwilling to travel long distances to obtain them, opting instead for alternatives (Govender & Govender, 2016). Therefore, the place measurement focused on the location and accessibility of tourism-based NPAs. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type agreement scale, where "1" is Strongly disagree and "5" is Strongly agree.
- Section C measured consumers' behavioural attitudes towards tourism in NPAs. Behavioural attitudes were measured from two perspectives. The first to be measured was cognitive-behavioural attitude, assessed using five items adapted from a study by Alexandridis (2018). The second to be measured was the affective behavioural attitude,

assessed using five items adapted from surveys conducted by Alexandridis (2018) and Prasongthan (2023). Responses in this section were recorded on a five-point Likert scale of agreement, where 1 = 'Strongly disagree' and 5 = 'Strongly agree'.

Data analysis

The study used the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS v.28) to analyse data (Okagbue et al, 2021). Descriptive statistical techniques were used to summarise the data. The study used primary statistical analysis tools to establish the relevant dimensions of the study. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). EFA was used to determine the underlying social marketing and attitude factors. The EFA is a multivariate statistical method commonly used in quantitative research studies (Sürücü, Yikilmaz, and Maslakci, 2022). The factor loading coefficient cut-off coefficient for this study was >0.50, while reliability was determined by a Cronbach's Alpha statistic of >0.70 (Howard & O'Sullivan, 2024). Where cross-loading occurred, the researcher selected the highest loading coefficient and attributed it to the respective variable (Henseler et al., 2015).

Results

Socio-demographic profile

Table 1 presents the respondent profile and the sample used to collect data via a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed online. The reason for the selected variables was to ensure that the respondents are South Africans who have or might have considered taking trips around SA in this way, we wanted to ensure that our results focus on South African tourists only.

Table 1: socio-demographic status

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Domestic Travel		
Yes	466	99.8%
No	0	0
Missing 1	1	0.2
Respondent Citizenship		
South African citizen	433	92.7%
South African passport holder resident outside South Africa	5	1.1%
South African resident	25	5.4%
Expatriate residing in South Africa	3	0.6%
Missing	1	0.2%
Respondent Age		
18-24	96	20,6%
25-34	215	46,0%
35-44	100	21,4%
45-54	34	7,3%
55-64	8	1,7%
Above 64	12	2,6%

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Missing	2	0.04%
Respondent Gender		
Male	174	37,3%
Female	291	62,3%
Rather not say	1	0,2%
Missing	1	0,2%
Economic activity		
Employed in the private sector	254	54,4%
Student	53	11,3%
Unemployed	51	10,9%
Employed in the public sector	98	21,0%
Retired	10	2,1%
Missing	1	0,2%
Travel Companion		
Alone	36	7,7%
With my partner	139	29,8%
Family (Adults & children)	180	38,5%
With my children only	9	1,9%
With my friends	32	6,9%
Friends and family	70	15,0%
Missing	1	0.02%
Province of Origin		
North-west	14	3,0%
Gauteng	183	39,2%
Limpopo	19	4,1%
Mpumalanga	23	4,9%
Eastern Cape	33	7,1%
Western Cape	73	15,6%
KwaZulu Natal	106	22,7%
Free State	12	2,6%
Northern Cape	3	0,6%
Missing	1	0,2%

Source: Survey data

Most of the respondents, in terms of the type of travel, indicated that most of them (99.8%) were travelling domestically. The respondents' citizenship of the respondents showed that most were South African citizens (92.7%). Most respondents were female (62.3%). In terms of age group,

most respondents were aged 25-35 (46%) or 35-44 (21.4%). In terms of economic activity, most respondents were employed in the private sector (54.4%), with the remainder employed in the public sector (21.0%), students (11.3%), unemployed (10.9%), or retired (2.1%). The Respondent's travel companion variable indicated that most respondents normally travel with family (38.5%), their partner (29.8%), or friends and family (15.0%). Respondents' geographical setting showed that most were from Gauteng (39.2%) and KZN (22.7%). While some data were missing in the socio-demographic profile, none were missing in the subsequent analyses.

Dimension reduction: EFA Summary

Table 2 summarises the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Multicollinearity analysis results. The KMO was 0.865**.** The Bartlett spherical test value was 1221.269,p = <0.001. Suggesting that the data was suitable for factor analysis.

An EFA was performed on 29 items using Principal Axis Factoring with Varimax rotation. Items with a factor loading of 0.50 were retained. Only factors with an eigenvalue equal to or greater than 1 were then retained. The analysis yielded a six-factor model and explained 58.29% of the variance. Factor 1 (Product) comprised of five items (loading from 0.789 to 0.860) explained 68.82% of the total variance. Factor 2 (Promotion) comprised five items (loadings ranging from 0.526 to 0.783) and explained 53.24% of the total variance. Factor 3 (Price), comprising four items (loading from 0.648 to 0.840), explained 50.68% of the total variance. Factor 4 (Place) comprised of five items (loading from 0.567 to 0.788) explained 43.04% of the total variance, Factor 5 (Cognitive Behavioural Attitude) comprised of five items (loading from 0.789 to 0.860) explained 50.47 of the total variance and Factor 6 (Affective Behavioural Attitude) comprised of five items (loading from 0.789 to 0.860,) explained 58.29% of the total variance. The reliability of each factor was tested by utilising Cronbach's alpha; an alpha greater than 0.65 was considered adequately reliable (Taber, 2018). The results indicated that the alpha coefficient ranged from 0.654 to 0.886. These values indicated that all the scales are reliable.

Table 2: Summary of Exploratory Factor Analysis and Multicollinearity of Variables

	*Items	Factor loading		Mean		Std Dev.		Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cronbach's alpha	Tolerance value	VIF
		Min	Max	Min	Max	Min	Max					
Product	5	0.789	0.860	4.02	4.19	0.927	1.043	3.441	68.82	0.886	0.682	1.467
Promotion	5	0.526	0.783	3.47	4.02	0.853	1.202	2.662	53.24	0.760	0.499	2.005
Price	4	0.684	0.840	3.75	3.79	0.927	1.069	2.534	50.68	0.738	0.489	2.047
Place	5	0.567	0.788	3.45	4.02	0.872	1.087	2.152	43.04	0.654	0.593	1.685
Cognitive Behavioural Attitude	5	0.642	0.756	3.77	4.21	0.792	1.052	2.524	50.47	0.746	-	-
Affective Behavioural Attitude	5	0.568	0.828	3.70	4.30	0.798	1.059	2.915	58.29	0.805	-	-

Source: Survey data

Table 3: Multiple regression results of social marketing factors influencing cognitive behavioural attitudes

Dependent variable: Cognitive Behavioural Attitudes **Adjusted R^2 = 0.495**				**Hypothesis Number**	**Hypotheses**
Independent variables	***B***	**T-value**	**Sig. (p)**		
Product	0.142	4.477	0.001*	**H_{1a}**	Supported
Price	0.097	2.490	0.013**	**H_{2a}**	Supported
Place	0.423	8.703	0.001*	**H_{3a}**	Supported
Promotion	0.142	3.314	0.001*	**H_{4a}**	Supported

Source: Research Data

Key: Relationship significant at - * p<0.001 **p<0.05

As shown in Table 3 above, there are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) relationships between the independent variables Product ($\beta = 0.142$), Place ($\beta = 0.423$) and Promotion ($\beta = 0.142$), and the dependent variable Cognitive Behavioural Attitudes. The independent variable, Price ($\beta = 0.097$), also had a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship with the dependent variable, Cognitive Behavioural Attitudes. Therefore, all the social marketing factors (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) positively influenced the cognitive behavioural attitudes of domestic tourists. Hence, hypotheses H_{1a}, H_{1b}, H_{1c}, and H_{1d} were supported.

Table 4: Multiple regression results of Social Marketing factors influencing Affective Behavioural Attitudes

Dependent variable: Affective Behavioural Attitudes Adjusted $R^2 = 0.265$				**Hypothesis Number**	**Hypotheses**
Independent variables	***B***	**T-value**	**Sig. (p)**		
Product	0.142	3.521	0.001*	**H_{1b}**	Supported
Price	0.099	1.991	0.047**	**H_{2b}**	Supported
Place	0.294	4.743	0.001*	**H_{3b}**	Supported
Promotion	0.094	1.714	0.087	**H_{4b}**	Not supported

Source: Research Data

Key: Relationship significant at - * p<0.001 **p<0.05

Note: Full item list available from the researchers on request

As shown in Table 4 above, there are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) relationships between the independent variables Product ($\beta = 0.142$) and Place ($\beta = 0.294$) and the dependent variable Affective Behavioural Attitudes. There was also a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between the independent variable Price ($\beta = 0.099$) and the dependent variable Affective Behavioural Attitudes. No statistically significant relationship ($p = 0.087$) could be found between the independent variable Promotion ($\beta = 0.142$) and the dependent variable Affective Behavioural Attitudes. Therefore, Social Marketing Factors Product, Price, and Place influence the affective behavioural attitudes of domestic tourists. Hence, hypotheses H_{1b}, H_{2b}, and H_{3b} were supported. Promotion did not influence the affective behavioural attitudes of domestic tourists. Hence, hypothesis H_{4b} was not supported.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the 4Ps of social marketing (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) influence domestic tourists' cognitive and affective behavioural attitudes towards tourism in nature-protected areas (NPAs**)**. By grounding the analysis in social marketing principles and drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB**)** as an explanatory lens, the study provides empirical evidence on how marketing-oriented, demand-side interventions can support both tourism development and conservation objectives.

There's so much evidence from this study that demonstrates that all four social marketing dimensions are valid and influential antecedents of tourists' behavioural attitudes. Collectively, these results confirm that social marketing offers a viable "soft management" approach for encouraging environmentally responsible behaviour in NPAs without relying solely on restrictive regulatory measures. In line with social marketing theory, the *Product* dimension, conceptualised as the conservation-oriented behaviour and associated benefits, emerged as a critical driver of attitudinal change. This finding reinforces the notion that behavioural change is contingent on tourists perceiving meaningful personal and societal benefits in exchange for adopting pro-environmental practices. Similarly, *Price* was found to play a significant role in shaping behavioural attitudes, extending beyond monetary considerations to include non-monetary costs such as effort, time, and psychological sacrifice. This highlights the importance of value perceptions in conservation contexts, where tourists are more likely to support sustainable practices when costs are perceived as fair, justified, and aligned with the quality of the experience offered. The *Place* dimension further emphasised the role of accessibility and convenience in facilitating behavioural change, underscoring that conservation-oriented behaviour is more likely to be adopted when it is embedded seamlessly within the tourism experience. Meanwhile, *Promotion* proved essential in shaping awareness and understanding of conservation imperatives, confirming its role as a mechanism through which social marketing communicates desired behaviours and legitimises conservation norms.

Beyond the marketing mix, the study confirms the relevance of both affective and cognitive behavioural attitudes in the context of nature-based tourism. Affective attitudes, rooted in emotions and feelings towards nature and conservation, were found to be particularly salient, supporting existing literature highlighting the primacy of emotional engagement in pro-environmental behaviour. Cognitive attitudes, informed by knowledge, beliefs, and evaluative judgments, complemented these emotional responses by shaping tourists' rational assessments of conservation-related actions. Together, these attitudinal dimensions illustrate that effective social marketing in NPAs must address both emotional connection and informational understanding to foster meaningful behavioural change.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the application of TPB within a social marketing and conservation tourism context by illustrating how social marketing dimensions align with key TPB components. Product-related perceptions resonate with subjective norms, while price, place, and promotion reflect elements of perceived behavioural control. In doing so, the

study highlights how favourable social norms and a strong sense of control can enhance tourists' attitudinal readiness to engage in conservation-supportive behaviour, even in high-use protected environments.

Practically, the findings offer important implications for protected area managers, destination marketers, and conservation practitioners. Social marketing strategies should prioritise clearly articulated conservation benefits, transparent pricing structures that reflect value-for-money, accessible and visitor-friendly conservation environments, and targeted promotional messaging that combines emotional appeals with credible information. Such integrated strategies can strengthen tourists' attitudinal alignment with conservation goals while maintaining positive recreational experiences.

Despite meeting all the objectives of this study, some limitations must be taken into consideration. The employment of non-probability sampling resulted in sample limitations. The main concern when employing non-probability sampling would have been the representativeness of the sample. Also, this study only sampled only South Africans as potential domestic tourists to NPA's. This means that the results only apply to the context of South Africa. Additionally, only individuals with internet access were part of the study. This was due to the nature of the data generation instrument and data collection method, where data were collected via an online survey to mitigate costs and potential geographical dispersion challenges. The study presented opportunities to link social marketing with tourism in NPAs. Therefore, it is recommended that the research study be replicated in different countries to generate an explanatory framework for the influence of social marketing on consumer behavioural change in the context of domestic tourism. Such a study will assist tourism practitioners into better understanding how to influence tourists to behave in a conservation-minded manner as nature tourists

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social marketing is a powerful and underutilised tool for influencing the behavioural attitudes of domestic tourists in nature-protected areas. By strategically leveraging the 4Ps of social marketing and addressing both affective and cognitive dimensions of attitude formation, NPAs can promote sustainable tourism practices that support long-term conservation outcomes while enhancing visitor satisfaction.

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Analysing Safety and Security in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (NMBM)

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines safety and security conditions in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (NMBM) in South Africa as a tourism destination. While tourism contributes significantly to GDP and employment, destinations characterised by safety and security challenges risk reduced competitiveness and visitors' confidence. Using NMBM as a case study, the study aims to generate insights into the safety and security issues faced by emerging urban tourism destinations.

Study design/methodology/approach: A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative data from public- and private-sector stakeholders. Data was collected through 286 structured questionnaires administered to private-sector role players and eight semi-structured interviews with public-sector stakeholders. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, while qualitative data were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti.

Results: Findings indicate that safety and security in NMBM are perceived as average, with tourist scams identified as the most prevalent form of crime affecting visitors. These findings reflect broader safety challenges commonly reported in urban tourism destinations in emerging economies.

Originality/value: Beyond its local focus, this study contributes to tourism safety and security literature by providing empirical insights applicable to urban destinations facing similar socio-economic and crime-related challenges. The findings offer transferable lessons for destination managers and policymakers seeking to enhance tourist safety, destination image, and competitiveness in comparable contexts.

Keywords Safety and security; Nelson Mandela Bay Metro; Tourism; Tourist destinations

Introduction

The tourism industry has become one of the most economically significant sectors globally, contributing more than 10% to global GDP and continuing to expand despite ongoing economic uncertainty (Efthimiou, 2025). This sustained growth has intensified competition among tourism destinations as they seek to enhance market share, attract investment, and secure long-term economic benefits (Du Plessis et al., 2015). Within this increasingly competitive environment, destinations are required not only to develop attractive tourism products but also to manage contextual factors that influence tourist confidence, destination image, and competitiveness.

In South Africa, tourism plays a vital role in economic development and employment creation. The country recorded approximately 8.92 million tourist arrivals in 2024, representing a 5.1% increase from 2023 (National Department of Tourism, 2025). While this growth reflects renewed

demand, South African destinations operate within a complex socio-economic environment characterised by inequality, unemployment, political instability, and high crime levels. These conditions distinguish South Africa from many destinations typically examined in destination competitiveness research and place safety and security at the center of tourism development and management.

Destination competitiveness refers to a destination's ability to attract and satisfy visitors by offering superior value through its tourism products, services, and experiences relative to competing destinations (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2023). However, in urban destinations within emerging economies, competitiveness is increasingly shaped by safety and security conditions, which influence tourists' risk perceptions, destination image formation, and travel behaviour (George, 2003; Zou & Yu, 2022). According to Maslow's hierarchy, safety and security is a human need which determines the sense and capacity to feel protected from chaos, danger and uncertainty (Varol & Emiroglu, 2025).

Destinations perceived as unsafe are frequently avoided by tourists, regardless of their cultural or natural appeal, thereby constraining tourism growth and undermining competitiveness. It is evident that tourists prefer travelling to destinations that are perceived as safe, emphasising a direct correlation between safety, security and tourism. From a tourism perspective, Varol & Emiroglu, 2025; Vakhitova, Helps & Alston-Knox, 2023 affirm that tourists are usually more vulnerable to criminal activities compared to local communities as they are easily noticeable by clothing style and the places they visit.

The theory of tourism security (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006) provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding how safety and security incidents affect destinations. The theory argues that crime and security-related incidents negatively affect tourist behaviour, media narratives, and destination reputation, often resulting in reduced tourist demand and long-term challenges to competitiveness. Empirical applications of tourism security theory across international contexts consistently demonstrate that safety and security concerns influence tourists' risk perceptions, destination image, and behavioural intentions. As evidenced by Varol & Emiroglu (2025), tourists are unlikely to return and recommend unsafe destinations to others.

Studies conducted in urban destinations in Europe, Asia, and Africa have shown that crime, political instability, and safety incidents often lead to decreased tourist arrivals, shortened length of stay, and reduced expenditure (Kovari & Zimanyi, 2011; Korstanje, 2020; Tevdoradze et al., 2024). Research further indicates that negative media coverage amplifies the perceived severity of security incidents, reinforcing unfavourable destination images and accelerating demand decline, particularly in destinations already associated with risk (Muhoho-Minni & Lubbe, 2017). Importantly, recent studies emphasise that tourism security is not solely a policing issue but a multidimensional governance challenge involving public institutions, private sector stakeholders, and local communities (Mekinc et al., 2017; Niemisalo, 2014).

Despite these insights, most empirical research has focused on destinations operating within relatively stable political and economic environments, with limited attention given to urban

destinations in emerging economies where safety and security challenges are structurally embedded. As a result, the perspectives of both public- and private-sector stakeholders in such contexts remain underexplored, particularly in South African metropolitan tourism destinations. The Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (NMBM), located in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, represents an urban tourism destination striving to enhance its competitiveness under such conditions.

Despite its rich cultural heritage, historical significance, and natural attractions, NMBM has struggled to attract and retain tourists and to compete effectively with other destinations (Vermeulen-Miltz et al., 2022; Ferreira, 2020). Tourism contributes approximately R6.1 billion to the local economy and supports more than 42,000 direct and indirect jobs, highlighting the sector's importance to regional development (Economic Development Tourism and Agriculture, 2023). Empirical and policy-oriented research has long identified high crime levels, tourist-targeted offences, and governance-related safety challenges as persistent constraints in the metro, with implications for destination image and visitor confidence (Ellis, 2024; Masuku & Maepa, 2004; Phori & Henama, 2024; Ferreira, 2020).

Although Nelson Mandela Bay Tourism's destination marketing efforts aim to position the metro more competitively, limited empirical research has examined the state of safety and security in NMBM and its implications for destination competitiveness. In particular, little is known about how public- and private-sector stakeholders perceive safety and security challenges within the destination. Accordingly, this study aims to analyse safety and security in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro by examining public- and private-sector perceptions of the destination's safety conditions. Using NMBM as a case, the study seeks to generate insights that are applicable to urban tourism destinations in emerging economies facing similar safety and security challenges, thereby contributing to broader debates on destination competitiveness.

Methodology

Hafsa (2019) expresses mixed method design as an approach where both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. This study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding of safety and security as components of destination competitiveness.

Quantitative data were gathered from private-sector tourism businesses, while qualitative data were collected from public-sector tourism stakeholders. Data collection occurred over a three-month period from August to November 2023.

The study was conducted in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (NMBM), located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The metro was selected purposively due to its role as a key urban tourism destination and the presence of diverse tourism activities and stakeholders.

For the quantitative component, data were collected from tourism businesses located in suburban areas, central business districts, townships, and surrounding farming areas within NMBM. These included Summerstrand, Humewood, Walmer, Sea View, Central, the City Centre, New Brighton, North End, and Kariega.

For the qualitative component, interviews were conducted with public-sector tourism stakeholders situated primarily in the Gqeberha CBD, Walmer, and Sea View.

Two measuring instruments were used. A structured questionnaire was developed for the quantitative survey, while a semi-structured interview guide was used for the qualitative component. Both instruments were informed by destination competitiveness literature, with specific attention to safety and security dimensions.

The quantitative population consisted of 2,837 registered tourism establishments in NMBM, including accommodation providers, tourism services, attractions, transport services, cultural and nature-based tourism enterprises, and hospitality businesses. A combination of simple random sampling (using a tourism business listing) and convenience sampling was employed. A target sample of 384 establishments was set; 286 questionnaires were completed. Only 285 were used as one questionnaire was completed by an individual outside the targeted audience, resulting in a 74% response rate.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to identify public-sector stakeholders directly involved in tourism development and destination management. Four institutions were included: the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA), the Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Agriculture (EDTA), the Donkin Visitor Information Centre, and the Airport Visitor Information Centre. Convenience sampling was applied based on participant availability and willingness to participate. Eight interviews were conducted and recorded. Only seven interviews were usable due to one recording being corrupted. The interviews yielded approximately 50% response rate.

Quantitative data were collected through self-administered questionnaires. In most cases, the researcher visited tourism businesses in person and facilitated access to the online survey via a mobile device. In some instances, questionnaires were distributed via email, followed by reminders to improve response rates. Respondents completed the questionnaires independently, with completion times ranging from five to fifteen minutes.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 15–30 minutes. One interview was conducted online via Zoom, while the remaining interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded on a mobile device. Field notes were taken during all interviews to supplement the recordings.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics were used to profile respondents and tourism businesses and to identify perceived safety and security threats. Factor analysis was employed to examine the underlying structure of destination competitiveness factors, including safety and security.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, reviewed for accuracy, and supplemented with field notes. The transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti (version 23), where open coding was applied, followed by categorisation and pattern development to identify key themes related to safety, security, and destination competitiveness.

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection. The ethical clearance procedure was done to establish the guiding principles the researcher must follow during data collection (Arifin, 2018). Participation in both the survey and interviews was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and no identifying information was disclosed in the reporting of findings. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

Results

Profile of respondents and participating organisations

The quantitative survey was primarily completed by managerial staff within tourism establishments, most of whom had between one and five years of experience in their respective businesses. The majority of participating establishments were micro-businesses that had been in operation for three years or less and were predominantly located in suburban areas of the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (NMBM).

Respondents represented a wide range of tourism-related activities. While accommodation providers, entertainment venues, transport services, attractions, tourism services, and hospitality establishments (restaurants) were well represented, a substantial proportion of respondents fell within an "other" category. These included theatres, coffee shops, beachfront art traders, marine supply shops, beauty spas, souvenir stores, traditional dancers, conference venues, traditional clothing outlets, art galleries, cycling and surf centres, bead makers, farms, catering services, local crafters, shopping centres, yacht chandlers, wellness centres, swimming equipment retailers, breweries and distilleries, and travel accessory stores. This diversity reflects the heterogeneous nature of NMBM's tourism economy and provides a broad private-sector perspective on destination conditions.

The qualitative component included public-sector participants occupying both managerial and operational roles, with experience ranging from two to twenty-nine years. Participants were involved in destination management, destination marketing, tourism information provision, training, project coordination, and tourism development at local and provincial levels.

Perceptions of safety and security in Nelson Mandela Bay Metro

Private-sector respondents were asked to rate safety and security in NMBM on a five-point scale ranging from *very poor* to *very good*. Overall, perceptions were neutral to negative. Nearly one-third of respondents (29.5%) rated safety and security as *fair*, while 15.8% perceived conditions as *very poor*. Only a small proportion (5.3%) regarded safety and security as *very good*. These results suggest that tourism businesses are neither satisfied nor confident regarding the current safety and security environment in the metro.

In contrast, public-sector participants generally expressed more positive views. Most interviewees described NMBM as *generally safe*, particularly within established tourism precincts, although they acknowledged the occurrence of isolated incidents affecting tourists. This indicates a divergence in perceptions between stakeholder groups, with the public sector displaying greater confidence in prevailing safety and security conditions than the private sector.

Safety and security as a perceived threat

When asked to identify key threats facing NMBM as a tourism destination, private-sector respondents overwhelmingly emphasised crime-related issues. A high crime rate emerged as the most frequently cited threat (57%), followed by inadequate or insufficient policing (25%). Tourist-targeted crimes such as scams were mentioned less frequently (approximately 2%) but were still identified as a concern. These findings highlight safety and security as persistent challenges for tourism businesses and perceived risks to destination sustainability.

Qualitative findings provide further insight into the nature of these threats. Public-sector participants consistently identified tourist scams, particularly individuals posing as tour guides or charging tourists for illegitimate services, as a prominent safety and security issue. While broader crime was acknowledged, participants emphasised the reputational damage associated with such targeted incidents. In addition to safety-related challenges, political instability and governance-related constraints were identified as broader contextual threats affecting destination management and coordination.

Taken together, the results suggest that while both stakeholder groups recognise safety and security as problematic, the perceived severity and nature of threats differ. The private sector focuses primarily on high crime levels and policing capacity, whereas the public sector places stronger emphasis on tourist scams and reputational risks.

Destination competitiveness factors: Exploratory factor analysis results

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify the underlying dimensions of destination competitiveness in NMBM. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.919, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2(2485) = 11\,922.581$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Thirteen factors were extracted, collectively explaining approximately 66% of the total variance. All retained factors demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.60.

Among the extracted factors, *Destination appeal* emerged as the strongest contributor to NMBM's competitiveness (M = 4.00), followed by *The Five A's of tourism* (M = 3.71) and *Destination resources* (M = 3.69). These results indicate that NMBM's competitiveness is primarily anchored in its location, beaches, natural assets, accessibility, accommodation, attractions, and activities. Other moderately rated factors included *Destination experiences* (M = 3.67), *Natural attractiveness* (M = 3.65), and *Destination attractors* (M = 3.63), reinforcing the metro's positioning as a coastal, lifestyle-oriented destination offering appealing experiences.

In contrast, *Safety and security* ranked twelfth out of thirteen competitiveness factors, with a mean score of 2.85, making it the weakest contributor to destination competitiveness. This factor comprises general tourist safety, health facilities for tourists, destination hygiene, and crime management. The low mean score indicates dissatisfaction with current safety and security conditions and limited confidence in the destination's ability to manage safety-related risks effectively.

When considered alongside stakeholder perceptions, the EFA results provide important context. While NMBM performs strongly in terms of appeal, resources, and experiential attributes, its weak performance on safety and security aligns with private-sector concerns regarding crime and policing. This contrasts with the more positive assessments expressed by the public sector and points to a perception gap that may complicate coordinated responses to safety challenges. Notably, both stakeholder groups identified tourist scams as a recurring issue, highlighting a specific and addressable risk that undermines visitor confidence.

Conclusion

This study examined safety and security in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (NMBM) by analysing public- and private-sector perceptions within a destination competitiveness framework. Using a mixed-methods approach, the findings demonstrate that safety and security play a critical yet constraining role in shaping the competitiveness of urban tourism destinations operating in emerging economy contexts. Although NMBM performs relatively well across several dimensions of inherited and experiential competitiveness, weaknesses in safety and security undermine the destination's ability to translate these strengths into sustained competitive advantage.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces and extends the theory of tourism security by empirically positioning safety and security as a structural dimension of destination competitiveness, rather than merely a contextual risk or operational concern (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006). The exploratory factor analysis confirms that while NMBM's competitiveness is strongly anchored in destination appeal, natural resources, and the Five A's of tourism, safety and security emerge as one of the weakest competitiveness dimensions. This finding supports international evidence suggesting that strong destination attributes cannot fully compensate for perceived safety deficiencies (Kovari & Zimanyi, 2011; Korstanje, 2020).

Importantly, the integration of factor-analytic results with public- and private-sector perceptions highlights the multidimensional and governance-based nature of tourism security, echoing calls to conceptualise safety beyond policing alone and to recognise the role of coordination, communication, and stakeholder trust in shaping security outcomes (Niemisalo, 2014; Mekinc et al., 2017). The observed perception gap between institutional actors and tourism businesses further aligns with prior research emphasising the influence of safety perceptions on destination image and tourist behaviour (George, 2003; Zou & Yu, 2022).

By situating these findings within an urban South African context, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that critiques the dominance of research conducted in politically and economically stable destinations and calls for greater attention to tourism dynamics in the Global South (Korstanje, 2020).

The findings have important implications for destination managers and policymakers. First, the weak performance of safety and security relative to other competitiveness factors suggests that investments in marketing, branding, and product development may yield limited returns if safety concerns remain unaddressed. Enhancing safety and security should therefore be treated as a foundational competitiveness intervention, rather than a peripheral operational issue.

Second, the divergence between public- and private-sector perceptions highlights a perception gap that may hinder coordinated destination management. Bridging this gap requires improved communication, shared situational awareness, and collaborative safety strategies involving both sectors, consistent with governance-based approaches to tourism security (Niemisalo, 2014).

Third, the convergence of findings around tourist scams highlights a tangible and addressable safety risk. Targeted interventions, such as visible tourist assistance personnel, accreditation of legitimate guides, improved signage, and coordinated enforcement in high-traffic tourism zones, may enhance visitor confidence and protect destination image, particularly in urban destinations vulnerable to informal and opportunistic crime (Muhoho-Minni & Lubbe, 2017).

Based on the findings, destination authorities should prioritise visible and coordinated safety measures in tourism precincts, including increased policing presence, improved lighting, and surveillance in high-visitor areas. Formalising tourist support roles through identifiable uniforms and accreditation may reduce opportunistic scams and enhance visitor confidence.

Stronger public–private collaboration mechanisms should be established to facilitate information sharing, joint problem-solving, and coordinated crisis responses. In addition, destination marketing efforts should be aligned with on-the-ground safety improvements to ensure that promotional messaging is credible and supported by actual visitor experiences. Regular monitoring of safety perceptions among tourism businesses may further support adaptive destination management.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and does not account for seasonal or temporal fluctuations in safety conditions. The reliance on convenience sampling may limit generalisability, although the diversity of participating tourism subsectors mitigates this concern. In addition, the study focuses primarily on supply-side perceptions and does not directly incorporate tourist perspectives.

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to track changes in safety perceptions over time and assess the effectiveness of specific interventions. Comparative studies across multiple South African or African urban destinations would strengthen external validity, while integrating demand-side perspectives would provide a more holistic understanding of tourism security dynamics (Tevdoradze et al., 2024).

Beyond NMBM, the findings offer transferable insights for urban tourism destinations in emerging economies characterised by socio-economic inequality, governance constraints, and elevated crime risks. The study demonstrates that destinations may possess strong natural and experiential assets yet struggle to achieve sustained competitiveness when safety and security are perceived as weak. By empirically positioning safety and security within a destination competitiveness framework, the study contributes to broader debates on how tourism can be developed more sustainably and resiliently in complex urban environments (Kovari & Zimanyi, 2011; Korstanje, 2020).

Strengthening safety and security is not only a protective measure for tourists but a strategic imperative for destination competitiveness. Therefore, it is important to note that tourism safety and security is not limited to being a guarantee of normal tourism activities but remains a lifeline for the development of the tourism industry (Ding & Wu (2022). Addressing safety-related

weaknesses may enable destinations such as NMBM to unlock the full value of their inherited assets and enhance their long-term position in an increasingly competitive global tourism landscape.

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Designing Effective Gamified Onboarding: Why Trainer Involvement Matters More Than Game Type

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how game type (individual vs. team-based) and trainer involvement (active vs. passive) jointly influence employees' emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training within gamified orientation programs.

Study design/methodology/approach: Using a 2 × 2 between-subjects experimental design, data were collected from 633 participants through vignette-based scenarios simulating organizational onboarding experiences. The data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to assess both main and interaction effects.

Results: The results indicate that trainer involvement has a significant and consistent effect on both emotional commitment and willingness to participate, while game type shows a more limited and outcome-specific impact. Additionally, significant interaction effects suggest that the effectiveness of game type depends on the level of trainer involvement.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that gamified training effectiveness is shaped not only by game design but also by trainer facilitation, highlighting the importance of integrating structural and social elements in onboarding experiences.

Keywords gamification, training, orientation, experimental design, trainer involvement

Introduction

In recent years, gamification has gained increasing attention as an innovative approach to enhancing employee training, particularly within onboarding and orientation programs. Gamification, defined as the integration of game elements into non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011), has been widely used to improve motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes (Lampropoulos & Kinshuk, 2024; Li et al., 2024). In organizational settings, effective training plays a critical role in shaping employee satisfaction, performance, and retention (Bai et al., 2006; Wright & Bonett, 2002).

Within training environments, gamification is often implemented through specific design elements such as points, badges, competition, and collaboration structures (Landers et al., 2015). Prior studies have demonstrated that these elements can increase participation and engagement, particularly when aligned with meaningful learning objectives (Perryer et al., 2016). At the same time, research has also shown that gamification does not always lead to consistent improvements in learning outcomes or deeper engagement (Van Roy & Zaman, 2018; Zimmerling et al., 2019).

These mixed findings suggest that the effectiveness of gamified training may depend on factors beyond the design elements themselves.

One factor that has received comparatively less attention in gamification research is the role of the trainer. In organizational training contexts, trainers play a central role in guiding the learning experience, providing feedback, and shaping participant engagement (Armstrong & Landers, 2018). Trainer interactions may shape how participants interpret and engage with training activities, particularly in environments that rely on interaction and participation.

In addition to contextual factors such as trainer involvement, individual motivation also plays a critical role in shaping responses to gamified training. Achievement Goal Theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot & McGregor, 2001) suggests that individuals differ in how they approach learning situations, particularly in terms of mastery-oriented versus performance-oriented goals. Gamified training environments, which often incorporate elements of competition, collaboration, and feedback, may activate different motivational orientations depending on how tasks are structured and facilitated. As such, both the design of the training and the way it is facilitated may influence how participants engage with and respond to gamified experiences.

Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this study conceptualizes gamified training features as environmental stimuli that influence employees' internal psychological states and subsequent behavioral outcomes. Specifically, game type (individual versus team-based) and trainer involvement (active versus passive) are treated as key stimuli that shape emotional and motivational responses during orientation training. These internal responses, including emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training, are expected to influence longer-term employee aspirations (Bagozzi, 1986).

Although prior research has examined gamification in training contexts, limited research has explored how different gamification elements interact with trainer involvement to influence employee outcomes. In particular, the combined effects of game type and trainer involvement remain underexplored. This gap is especially important in onboarding settings, where early training experiences can influence employee engagement, organizational commitment, and retention (Cable et al., 2013; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

To address this gap, the present study investigates the interaction between game type and trainer involvement in shaping employee outcomes in gamified orientation training. Using an experimental design, this research examines how variations in training structure and trainer involvement influence emotional commitment, willingness to participate in future training, and employee aspirations. By integrating insights from gamification and organizational behavior literature, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of when and how gamified training is most effective.

The findings of this study offer both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research extends the S-O-R framework by incorporating trainer involvement as a contextual factor in gamified training environments. Practically, it provides insights for organizations seeking to

design more effective onboarding programs by aligning game structure and trainer involvement with employee needs and motivational profiles.

Hypotheses Development

Building on the theoretical arguments presented above, this study examines how variations in gamified training design influence employee outcomes in orientation settings. In particular, the roles of game type and trainer involvement are considered as key stimuli that shape participants' internal psychological responses.

Game type represents a fundamental structural element in gamified training. Team-based and individual-based activities differ in how they structure interaction, participation, and goal orientation within training environments. Team-based games emphasize collaboration and shared goals, which can enhance social interaction and group-based learning experiences (Xu et al., 2017). In contrast, individual-based activities emphasize autonomy and self-paced engagement, supporting individuals' sense of competence and independent achievement (Deci et al., 1985). These structural differences may influence participants' sense of belonging and emotional engagement during the training experience.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Team-based gamified training will lead to higher levels of (a) emotional commitment and (b) willingness to participate in future training compared to individual-based gamified training.

In addition to game structure, trainer involvement represents an important contextual element in shaping training experiences. In organizational training settings, trainers play a key role in guiding interactions and facilitating participant engagement, particularly in interactive learning environments. Active trainer involvement is characterized by real-time guidance and facilitation during the training process, whereas passive involvement reflects a more limited role, where participants navigate the training with minimal direct interaction and receive feedback primarily after the activity.

Differences in trainer involvement may influence how participants experience gamified training. Active facilitation can enhance engagement by providing immediate clarification, reinforcement, and structured interaction during the learning process (Armstrong & Landers, 2018). In contrast, lower levels of trainer involvement may reduce immediate support, requiring participants to rely more on their own interpretation of the training experience.

Within gamified orientation contexts, higher levels of trainer involvement may strengthen participants' emotional and motivational responses by increasing perceived support and interaction during the training experience. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Active trainer involvement will lead to higher levels of (a) emotional commitment and (b) willingness to participate in future training compared to passive trainer involvement.

Finally, drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, it is expected that the effects of game type may depend on the level of trainer involvement. Specifically, the effectiveness of different game formats may not be uniform across facilitation styles. For example, team-based games may be relatively more effective in environments with lower trainer involvement, as peer

interaction can provide an alternative source of engagement. Conversely, individual-based games may benefit more from active trainer involvement, where structured feedback and support enhance individual engagement.

This interaction reflects the idea that training design elements do not operate independently, but rather in combination to shape participants' psychological responses. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Trainer involvement will moderate the relationship between game type and employee outcomes, such that the effectiveness of game type on (a) emotional commitment and (b) willingness to participate will vary depending on whether trainer involvement is active or passive.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an experimental research design to examine how variations in gamified training influence employee outcomes in orientation settings. Experimental designs are particularly suitable for identifying causal relationships by allowing researchers to manipulate independent variables and control for extraneous factors (Field, 2024). In the context of gamified training, this approach enables a more precise examination of how specific design features influence participants' psychological responses.

A 2 (game type: individual vs. team-based) × 2 (trainer involvement: active vs. passive) between-subjects factorial design was used. Factorial designs are commonly used in behavioral research to examine both the independent and combined effects of multiple variables (Wickens & Keppel, 2004). This design allowed for the assessment of the main effects of game type and trainer involvement, as well as their interaction effect on emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: (1) individual game with active trainer involvement, (2) individual game with passive trainer involvement, (3) team-based game with active trainer involvement, and (4) team-based game with passive trainer involvement. Random assignment is essential in experimental research as it helps ensure internal validity and reduces the likelihood of systematic bias across conditions (Shadish et al., 2002).

Scenario Development

A vignette-based approach was used to simulate a realistic orientation training experience. Vignette methodology is widely used in organizational and behavioral research to examine individuals' responses to hypothetical yet realistic scenarios, particularly when direct observation of real-world behavior is not feasible (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). This approach allows researchers to systematically manipulate contextual variables while maintaining control over extraneous influences.

Participants were asked to imagine themselves as newly hired employees participating in an onboarding session within a service-oriented organization. The scenarios were designed to reflect common practices in orientation training and included detailed descriptions of the training

structure, game format, and trainer behavior. The use of contextually rich descriptions enhances the realism of the training scenario (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

The manipulations of game type and trainer involvement were embedded within vignette scenarios describing an orientation training experience. To enhance clarity, selected excerpts from the scenarios are presented below.

In the individual game condition, participants read: "While you will be a part of a cohort of new hires, each game is designed for you to complete on your own, allowing you to showcase your personal strengths and problem-solving approaches." In contrast, in the team-based condition, participants were told: "During each session, you will be collaborating with fellow new hires in a series of engaging workplace team games designed to challenge your ability to work together and achieve shared goals."

Trainer involvement was also embedded within the scenarios without explicitly labeling the conditions. In the active involvement condition, participants read: "Across all games, the trainer will be by your side, observing, offering suggestions, and giving feedback after each game so you can continue improving." In the passive involvement condition, participants were told: "The trainer will check in with participants only at the end of the training day to provide feedback on how to improve."

To ensure the validity of the trainer involvement manipulation, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate multiple scenario variations representing different levels of trainer engagement. Participants assessed these scenarios based on perceived level of involvement, and the selected conditions reflected consistently high and low involvement perceptions. This process helped ensure that the manipulation aligned with participants' expectations and enhanced the realism of the training scenarios.

Measures

The survey instrument was developed based on a comprehensive review of the literature on gamified training, motivation, and behavioral outcomes. To ensure content validity, all constructs were measured using previously validated scales that have demonstrated reliability in related contexts.

Emotional commitment was assessed as participants' affective attachment to the organization and its training processes. This construct was measured using five items adapted from Sui and Baloglu (2003). Sample items include: "I would feel a sense of belonging during this orientation training" and "I would expect to feel good about participating in this orientation training."

Willingness to participate in future training was measured as participants' intention to engage in additional organizational learning opportunities. This construct was assessed using three items adapted from Li et al. (2020). Sample items include: "I would plan to participate in future trainings of this company" and "I would expect to attend more trainings of this company in the future."

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scale items were adapted to reflect the hypothetical nature of the vignette scenario,

ensuring that participants evaluated their responses based on the described training experience rather than prior personal experiences.

Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey platform. Online data collection is commonly used in experimental research due to its efficiency and ability to reach diverse participant pools (Aguinis & Lawal, 2012). Participants were first presented with a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the study.

Following this introduction, participants were instructed to imagine themselves as newly hired employees participating in an orientation training program and to engage with the scenario as if they were experiencing the training in a real organizational setting. For example, participants were provided with the following instruction: "You will be asked to imagine that you are a new employee participating in a company's orientation and training program… you are required to imagine yourself in the situation and engage with the scenario as if it were real."

After reading this instruction, participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions representing a 2 × 2 factorial design varying game type (individual vs. team-based) and trainer involvement (active vs. passive).

After reviewing the assigned scenario, participants completed a questionnaire measuring emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training. To improve data quality, attention-check questions were embedded within the survey, and responses that failed these checks were excluded from the analysis.

A total of 633 valid responses were collected for the study. The sample size was considered sufficient based on prior recommendations suggesting that experimental studies should include at least 30 participants per condition (Lynn & Lynn, 2003). Given the 2 × 2 factorial design, this requirement was met across all experimental conditions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical techniques appropriate for a 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design. Given the presence of multiple related dependent variables—emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training—a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of game type (individual vs. team-based) and trainer involvement (active vs. passive). MANOVA is particularly suitable when multiple dependent variables are analyzed simultaneously, as it accounts for potential correlations among them and reduces the risk of Type I error (Field, 2024).

The multivariate effects of game type, trainer involvement, and their interaction were first examined to determine whether the independent variables had a significant combined effect on the dependent variables. Following significant multivariate results, univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for each dependent variable to further explore the specific effects on emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training.

When significant interaction effects were observed, simple effects analyses were conducted to examine differences across conditions and to better interpret the nature of the interaction between

game type and trainer involvement. This approach allows for a more detailed understanding of how the effect of one independent variable varies across levels of the other variable.

Descriptive statistics, including group means and standard deviations, were also examined to support the interpretation of the findings. This analytical approach enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the proposed hypotheses and provided insight into how gamified training design elements jointly influence employee responses in orientation settings.

Results

Manipulation Checks

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, participants' perceptions of game type and trainer involvement were measured using manipulation check items. Independent samples t-tests confirmed that both manipulations were successful. Participants in the individual game condition reported significantly lower scores on the perceived game structure compared to those in the team-based condition, $t(370.60) = -26.56$, $p < .001$. Similarly, participants in the passive trainer condition reported significantly lower perceived trainer involvement than those in the active condition, $t(355.49) = -13.93$, $p < .001$. These findings indicate that the experimental manipulations functioned as intended.

MANOVA Assumptions

Prior to conducting the MANOVA, key assumptions were assessed. Outliers were identified using both univariate (z-scores) and multivariate (Mahalanobis distance) methods and were removed prior to analysis, resulting in a final sample of 612 participants.

Although tests of normality were statistically significant ($p < .001$), this is expected given the large sample size. Examination of skewness and kurtosis values indicated no severe deviations from normality. The assumption of homogeneity of covariance matrices was satisfied, as indicated by a non-significant Box's M test ($p = .476$). Additionally, Levene's tests for all dependent variables were non-significant, supporting the assumption of homogeneity of variances. Overall, the assumptions required for MANOVA were met, supporting the validity of the subsequent analyses.

Multivariate Analysis

A two-way between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of game type (individual vs. team-based) and trainer involvement (active vs. passive) on the combined dependent variables of emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training.

At the multivariate level, as shown in Table 1, the results indicated a statistically significant main effect of trainer involvement on the combined dependent variables, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.986$, $F(2, 606) = 2.909$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .014$. This finding suggests that differences in trainer involvement (active versus passive) significantly influenced participants' overall responses across emotional commitment and willingness to participate.

In contrast, the multivariate main effect of game type was not statistically significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.989$, $F(2, 606) = 2.297$, $p = .077$, $\eta^2 = .011$. This indicates that, when considered jointly,

individual-based and team-based training formats did not produce significantly different effects across the dependent variables.

The interaction effect between game type and trainer involvement was also examined at the multivariate level. The results showed a marginally significant interaction effect, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.988$, $F(2, 606) = 2.365$, $p = .070$, $\eta^2 = .012$. Although this effect did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .05$), the pattern suggests that the effectiveness of game type may vary depending on the level of trainer involvement.

Taken together, the multivariate findings indicate that trainer involvement plays a more consistent and significant role in shaping participants' responses to gamified training compared to game type. The marginal interaction effect further suggests a potential conditional relationship between game structure and trainer facilitation, warranting closer examination at the univariate level.

Table 1. *Multivariate Test Results*

Effects	Wilks' Lambda	Significance	Effect Size
Type of game	0.989	p = 0.077	0.011
Trainer's involvement	0.986	p = 0.041	0.014
Type of game X Trainer's involvement	0.988	p = 0.031	0.012

Univariate Analysis

Following the multivariate analysis, univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine the effects of game type and trainer involvement on each dependent variable separately, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Between-Subjects Effects Results*

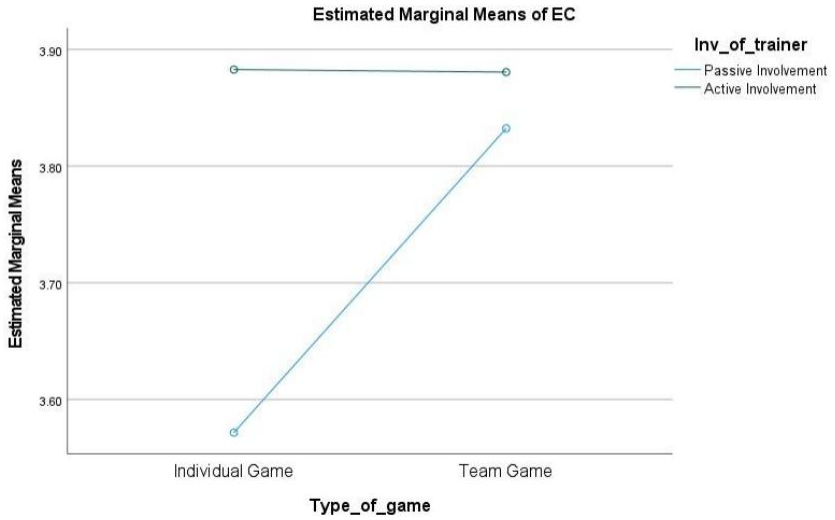
Effects	Constructs	Significance	Effect Size
Type of game	EC	p = 0.039	0.007
	WP	p = 0.672	0.001
Trainer's involvement	EC	p = 0.004	0.013
	WP	p = 0.031	0.008
Type of game X Trainer's involvement	EC	p = 0.036	0.007
	WP	p = 0.041	0.007

For emotional commitment, the results indicated a significant main effect of game type, $F(1, 606) = 4.269$, $p = .039$, with participants in the team-based condition reporting higher levels of emotional commitment compared to those in the individual condition (mean difference = 0.129). Trainer involvement also had a significant effect on emotional commitment, $F(1, 606) = 8.244$, $p = .004$, such that participants in the active trainer condition reported higher emotional commitment than those in the passive condition (mean difference = 0.180). In addition, a significant interaction

effect between game type and trainer involvement was observed, $F(1, 606) = 4.414$, $p = .036$, indicating that the effect of game type on emotional commitment varies depending on the level of trainer involvement. To further illustrate the interaction effect, estimated marginal means for emotional commitment are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Interaction effect of game type and trainer involvement on emotional commitment (estimated marginal means)

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For willingness to participate in future training, the main effect of game type was not statistically significant, $F(1, 606) = 0.180$, $p = .672$, indicating no meaningful difference between individual-based and team-based formats. However, trainer involvement had a significant effect, $F(1, 606) = 4.671$, $p = .031$, with participants in the active trainer condition reporting higher willingness to participate than those in the passive condition (mean difference = 0.139). A significant interaction effect was also found, $F(1, 606) = 4.205$, $p = .041$, suggesting that the relationship between game type and willingness to participate depends on the level of trainer involvement.

Overall, these findings provide partial support for H1, full support for H2, and support for H3, indicating that trainer involvement plays a more consistent and influential role than game type in shaping employee responses, whereas the effects of game type appear more limited and context-dependent.

Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the gamification and training literature by showing that the effectiveness of gamified orientation training depends not only on game structure, but also on the level of trainer involvement. While prior work has often emphasized game elements such as competition, collaboration, or reward structures, the present findings demonstrate that the social and facilitative

context of the training experience also plays a critical role in shaping employee responses. In particular, trainer involvement emerged as a more consistent predictor of emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training than game type alone.

The findings also extend the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework by illustrating how multiple stimuli within a training environment operate together rather than in isolation. In this study, game type and trainer involvement functioned as external stimuli, while emotional commitment and willingness to participate reflected employees' internal responses to the training experience. The significant interaction effects suggest that the influence of one training feature depends on the presence of another, reinforcing the value of a more contextualized understanding of gamified learning environments.

A second theoretical contribution lies in clarifying the limits of game structure by itself. Team-based activities enhanced emotional commitment, but game type did not independently predict willingness to participate in future training. This suggests that collaborative design may support affective attachment more readily than future-oriented participation intentions. In contrast, trainer involvement influenced both outcomes, indicating that active facilitation may be especially important when organizations seek not only immediate engagement, but also sustained openness toward continued development.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are especially important for organizations that use onboarding and orientation programs to shape early employee attitudes. The results suggest that organizations should avoid assuming that gamification alone will generate strong engagement outcomes. Adding team-based tasks or playful mechanics may help, but these features are likely to be most effective when paired with active trainer involvement.

For managers and human resource professionals, one key implication is that trainer presence should be treated as a strategic part of training design rather than a delivery detail. Active trainers do more than explain instructions. They help create psychological support, reinforce participation, respond to uncertainty, and strengthen the emotional tone of the training environment. In practical terms, this means that organizations investing in gamified onboarding should also invest in trainer preparation. Trainers should be equipped to guide discussion, provide timely feedback, maintain energy, and adapt to participant needs throughout the session.

A second implication concerns the design of individual versus team-based activities. Team-based formats appear to be particularly helpful for strengthening emotional commitment, which suggests that collaborative tasks may be useful when organizations want new hires to feel connected, included, and socially integrated. However, the interaction findings indicate that individual-based formats may require stronger trainer presence in order to be equally effective. When employees complete tasks independently, active facilitation may compensate for the absence of peer support and help sustain involvement. In contrast, team-based activities may generate some degree of engagement through peer dynamics even when trainer involvement is lower.

These findings also matter for organizations facing time or staffing constraints. In practice, many onboarding sessions are standardized, rushed, or lightly facilitated. The present study suggests that reducing trainer engagement may weaken important employee responses, especially in training structures that rely more heavily on individual task completion. For organizations seeking stronger emotional connection and greater participation in future development opportunities, active trainer involvement may represent a relatively high-impact intervention.

More broadly, this study highlights that the success of gamified onboarding depends on alignment between format and facilitation. The most effective training experiences are not created by game mechanics alone, but by the way those mechanics are embedded in a supportive social environment. For hospitality and other service-oriented settings, where employee attitudes and relational readiness matter from the first days on the job, this insight is particularly valuable. Organizations should therefore design onboarding not just as a content-delivery process, but as an experience that combines structure, interaction, and human support.

Future Studies

This paper focused on a reduced model centered on game type, trainer involvement, emotional commitment, and willingness to participate. However, the broader dissertation points to several promising directions for future research. First, future studies may extend this model by examining more distal outcomes such as employee aspirations. While the current paper emphasizes immediate emotional and attitudinal responses, later-stage outcomes could help clarify whether early gamified training experiences shape longer-term organizational or career intentions.

Second, future research should continue examining whether the effectiveness of gamified orientation varies across participant characteristics. The broader dissertation explored demographic patterns such as gender and generation, suggesting that employees may not respond uniformly to the same training design. Building on that direction, future studies could investigate whether particular combinations of game type and trainer involvement are more effective for different demographic or workforce segments. Such work would help organizations move beyond one-size-fits-all onboarding design and toward more tailored approaches.

Third, future studies may explore individual motivational differences more directly. The larger dissertation also examined motivation to learn as an important explanatory factor, suggesting that employees' internal readiness for learning may influence how they respond to gamified training. A valuable next step would be to test whether motivation to learn strengthens or weakens the impact of trainer involvement and game structure on emotional and behavioral outcomes. This would provide a more refined understanding of when gamified training is most effective and for whom.

Finally, future research should consider expanding beyond vignette-based designs to include field-based or longitudinal training studies. Although scenario methods are useful for isolating causal effects, real organizational settings would allow researchers to examine how these dynamics unfold over time, across actual onboarding sessions, and in relation to concrete retention,

performance, or continued training behavior. Such work would strengthen the external validity of this line of research and further connect gamification theory with organizational practice.

Final Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that gamified orientation training is shaped not only by what type of game employees experience, but also by how the training is facilitated. Trainer involvement emerged as a particularly important factor, influencing both emotional commitment and willingness to participate in future training. Although team-based games supported emotional commitment, the broader pattern of results indicates that active facilitation is central to creating stronger and more consistent employee responses. These findings reinforce the idea that effective gamified training is not simply a matter of adding game elements, but of designing a learning experience in which structure and human support work together.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study relied on a vignette-based experimental design, which, while useful for isolating causal relationships, may not fully capture the complexity of real-world organizational training environments. Participants' responses were based on imagined scenarios rather than actual experiences, which may limit the external validity of the findings. Second, the study focused on immediate attitudinal outcomes, including emotional commitment and willingness to participate, without examining longer-term behavioral outcomes such as actual training participation or employee retention. Third, the sample was drawn from an online participant pool, which may not fully represent employees across different industries or organizational contexts.

These limitations suggest opportunities for future research to extend this work by incorporating field-based designs, longitudinal approaches, and more diverse samples. Examining how these dynamics unfold in real organizational settings would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gamified training influences employee behavior over time.

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Ecotourism Awareness of Tourists Visiting Manavgat (Antalya, Türkiye)

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to determine the ecotourism awareness levels of domestic and international tourists visiting Manavgat (Antalya, Türkiye) and to examine the demographic and behavioral factors influencing this awareness.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted using a quantitative research approach and a descriptive survey model. Data were collected from 134 tourists staying in five-star hotels through a questionnaire adapted from Chandran and Bhattacharya (2024). The questionnaire was translated into four languages and validated through expert review. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, and ANOVA.

Results: The findings revealed that 53.7% of the tourists have a high level of ecotourism awareness. Female tourists, those who visit natural areas more frequently, and those who read environment-related magazines more often have significantly higher awareness levels ($p < 0.05$). The most disturbing issues reported by tourists were noise (30.6%) and environmental pollution (29.1%).

Originality/value: This study provides one of the first empirical findings on tourists' ecotourism awareness in Manavgat and contributes to the literature by linking awareness with behavioral factors. The findings offer practical implications for sustainable tourism planning in the region.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Ecotourism Awareness, Tourists, Manavgat, Sustainable Tourism

Introduction

Manavgat is one of the most important tourism districts of Antalya. The district stands out not only for its warm climate and coastline, but also for its rich natural and historical assets. Tourists visiting the region for sea, sand, and sun also encounter a variety of alternative activities such as ancient cities, hiking and cycling routes, caves, highlands, and rivers. This diversity makes Manavgat a multi-dimensional tourism destination for both domestic and international tourists and offers high potential for sustainable tourism types such as ecotourism alongside mass tourism.

Ecotourism is an alternative form of tourism that aims to protect natural areas, increase environmental awareness, and economically support local communities (Ataman & Keskin, 2020). The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) defines ecotourism as nature-based tourism that supports local businesses and minimizes environmental impacts (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2024). Similarly, the Global Ecotourism Network (GEN) describes it as responsible travel that conserves the environment, sustains local well-being, and enhances environmental awareness (Global Ecotourism Network, 2016).

In Türkiye, although the country has high ecotourism potential, the number of studies in this field remains limited (Bahtiyar Sarı, 2025). Existing research generally focuses on evaluating regional

potentials (Tutçu, 2021; Kaya & Yıldırım, 2020; Akış & Kaya, 2018; Akay & Zengin, 2012; Şahin, 2009) and is mostly conducted with local residents (Ercan İştin & Bakır, 2021; Cebeci & Kızılkan, 2024) or tourism employees (Erkol Bayram, 2019; Tetik, 2012). Studies involving tourists tend to examine service quality (Demirbulat, 2018), expectations (Kiper, Uzun, Özdemir & Üstün Topal, 2016), or guide performance (Gürsoy & Karaman, 2025), rather than ecotourism awareness itself. This gap has also been emphasized by Tüfekçi and Akbıyık (2025).

In the international literature, the study conducted by Chandran and Bhattacharya (2024) in the Munnar region of India provides an important reference point. Their findings indicate that although tourists are sensitive toward nature, insufficient knowledge about environmental protection and local regulations can negatively affect sustainability. This highlights the importance of measuring tourists' awareness levels in order to promote responsible behavior.

Despite its high ecotourism potential, the lack of studies directly examining tourists' ecotourism awareness in Manavgat (Kalıpçı & Toker, 2020) constitutes the main motivation of this study. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to determine the ecotourism awareness levels of tourists visiting Manavgat and to examine the demographic and behavioral factors influencing this awareness. In addition, the study seeks to reveal tourists' perspectives, identify possible shortcomings, and provide recommendations for the development of sustainable tourism practices that do not harm the natural environment.

In line with this objective, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of tourists visiting Manavgat (gender, age, country of origin, education level), their sources of information about Manavgat, their length of stay, and their reasons for choosing Manavgat as a holiday destination?
2. What are tourists' environmental identity perceptions; their frequency of reading environment, nature, or wildlife magazines; their membership status in any associations/organizations related to nature conservation, the environment, or outdoor activities; their frequency of visiting natural areas within a year; and the ecotourism areas/activities they visit or prefer in Manavgat?
3. What is the level of ecotourism awareness among tourists?
4. Is there a significant difference between tourists' ecotourism awareness levels and their demographic characteristics (gender, age, country of origin, education level); their sources of information about Manavgat; their length of stay; their environmental identity perceptions; their frequency of reading environment, nature, or wildlife magazines; their membership in environmental or nature-related organizations; and their frequency of visiting natural areas within a year?
5. What are the main environmental and tourism-related issues that tourists are most disturbed by during their stay in Manavgat?
6. What are tourists' expectations and suggestions regarding ecotourism activities in Manavgat?

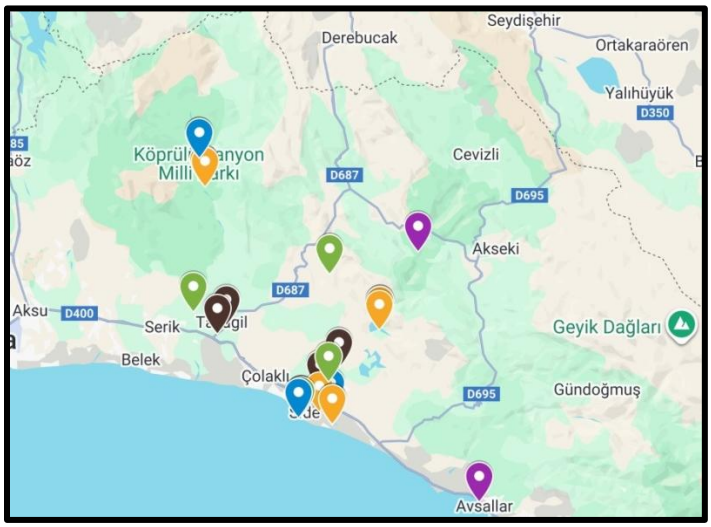
Study Area: Manavgat

Manavgat, the study area of this research, is a strategic destination located in the eastern part of Antalya (see Map 1), offering opportunities for multiple types of ecotourism simultaneously due to its spatial diversity (see Map 2). An examination of the data and activity listings presented on the map reveals that sites such as the Side Ancient City and Side Ancient Theatre along the coastal zone, as well as Etenna Ancient City, Naras Bridge, and Aspendos in the inland areas, provide a strong cultural heritage under the category of "Ancient Sites." This historical texture is integrated with sensitive ecosystems of critical importance for "Nature and Wildlife," including Köprülü Canyon National Park, Tazı Canyon, Sorgun Forest, and Titreyengöl.

Map 1: Districts of Antalya



Map 2: Ecotourism Areas in and around Manavgat



Altınbeşik Cave, representing the geological richness of the district, stands out as a site where nature is preserved while being opened to tourism. Meanwhile, boat tours conducted on the Oymapınar Dam Green Canyon and the Manavgat River offer a rich environment for water-based activities. In addition, citrus orchards as well as olive and sesame fields located in rural settlements surrounding these natural and historical focal points complete Manavgat's agro-tourism potential, enabling tourists to participate in local production processes and contributing to rural development in the region.

In conclusion, with its ancient sites, wildlife, water resources, geological heritage, and agricultural identity, Manavgat provides a multidimensional study area where ecotourism awareness—the main focus of this research—can be effectively examined.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a descriptive survey model within the scope of a quantitative research approach. The ecotourism awareness levels of tourists visiting Manavgat were measured through a questionnaire. Permission to use the questionnaire titled *"Tourists' Ecotourism Awareness and Attitudes in Munnar"* from the study by Chandran and Bhattacharya (2024) was obtained via email communication with the first author. Subsequently, all necessary agreements were completed in accordance with ethical standards (Appendix 1a, Appendix 1b).

The original questionnaire consists of three sections: (1) demographic information, (2) perceptions of ecotourism, and (3) ecotourism awareness. In this study, only the sections related to participants' demographic characteristics and ecotourism awareness were adapted and used, in line with the research objectives.

Adaptation of the Questionnaire

The relevant sections of the questionnaire developed by Chandran and Bhattacharya (2024) were first translated into Turkish and adapted to the context of Manavgat. The translation was conducted by the research advisor and subsequently reviewed by a PhD graduate English teacher. Expert opinions were then obtained from an assistant principal working at a tourism vocational high school and a doctoral student in geography. Based on these expert evaluations, the final version of the questionnaire was established.

For the German and Russian versions, AI-based translation tools were used. The German translation was reviewed and revised by an English teacher officially assigned to Germany by the Ministry of National Education, holding a C-level German language certificate. The Russian translation was reviewed and corrected by a native Russian speaker living in Manavgat, who holds a master's degree and has a strong command of Turkish. A pilot study was conducted for all four language versions of the questionnaire, and it was observed that the questionnaires were clear and no issues were encountered during implementation.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of domestic and international tourists visiting Manavgat. The sample includes voluntary tourists staying at four accommodation facilities, selected through convenience sampling. All four facilities are categorized as five-star hotels and are not listed in Balcı's (2025) study on ecological hotels in Türkiye. A total of 134 tourists were reached during the data collection process. The sample size was determined considering resource constraints such as the active tourism season, field accessibility, and voluntary participation. Lakens (2022) states that justifying sample size based on available resources is a scientifically valid approach.

Data Collection

After obtaining the necessary permissions from the management of the four accommodation facilities (Appendices 2, 3, 4, 5) and from the parents of the student researchers (Appendices 6, 7),

posters containing QR codes for each version of the questionnaire (Turkish, English, German, and Russian) were placed in easily visible areas such as reception desks and restaurants. On the first day of data collection, the student researchers directly approached tourists; in the following days, support was received from hotel staff. Tourists accessed the questionnaire by scanning the QR codes with their smartphones and voluntarily responded to the questions during the period starting on August 31 and continuing throughout September and October.

Data Analysis

The responses collected in four different languages were translated into Turkish using AI-based translation tools, and the translations were reviewed by the aforementioned experts. All data were compiled in Turkish and analyzed accordingly.

Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean) were used in the analysis. The relationships between demographic variables and ecotourism awareness were examined using independent samples t-test, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and correlation analysis. The analyses were conducted using Excel and SPSS statistical software.

The internal consistency of the Likert-type items measuring ecotourism awareness was evaluated using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. A coefficient of 0.70 or higher indicates acceptable internal consistency. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.904, indicating a high level of reliability.

Results

The findings obtained according to the research questions are presented below.

1. What are the demographic characteristics of tourists visiting Manavgat (gender, age, country of origin, education level), their sources of information about Manavgat, their length of stay, and their reasons for choosing Manavgat as a holiday destination?

Table 1 shows that the proportion of female tourists (52.2%) is slightly higher than that of male tourists (47.8%) among visitors to Manavgat, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution with a small predominance of female participants.

Table 1: Tourists' Gender

Gender	n	Percentage
Female	70	52.2
Male	64	47.8
Total	134	100.0

Table 2 shows that the largest age group among tourists is 15–30 (39.6%), followed by those aged 45–60 (29.9%) and 31–45 (25.4%), while individuals aged 60 and above constitute a smaller proportion of the sample.

Table 2: Tourists' Age

Age	n	Percentage
15–30	53	39.6
31–45	34	25.4

45–60	40	29.9
60 and above	7	5.2
Total	134	100.0

The data regarding the countries of origin of the tourists are presented in Table 3. The findings indicate that the majority of tourists come from Türkiye (35.8%), followed by Germany (17.9%) and Kazakhstan (9.7%), while tourists from other countries are represented at lower rates.

Table 3: Tourists' Country of Origin

Country of Origin	n	Percentage
Türkiye	48	35.8
Germany	24	17.9
United Kingdom	7	5.2
Switzerland	3	2.2
Bulgaria	2	1.5
Czechia	2	1.5
Netherlands	2	1.5
Sweden	2	1.5
Poland	2	1.5
Other	6	4.5
USA	2	1.5
Kazakhstan	13	9.7
Kyrgyzstan	11	8.2
Russia	10	7.5
Total	134	100.0

Table 4 shows that 35.1% of tourists hold a bachelor's degree, followed by high school graduates (26.9%), associate degree holders (25.4%), and those with postgraduate education (12.7%), indicating that most participants have at least a secondary or higher level of education.

Table 4: Tourists' Education Level

Education Level	n	Percentage
Bachelor's Degree	47	35.1
High School Graduate	36	26.9
Associate Degree	34	25.4
Postgraduate	17	12.7
Total	134	100.0

Table 5 shows that tourists primarily learned about Manavgat through friends or relatives (48.5%). This is followed by the internet (25.4%), tour operators (19.4%), and brochures or books (6.7%), suggesting that informal sources play a more prominent role than formal promotional materials.

Table 5: Tourists' Sources of Information about Manavgat

Sources of Information About Manavgat	n	Percentage
Friends / Relatives	65	48.5
Internet	34	25.4
Tour Operators	26	19.4
Brochures / Books	9	6.7
Total	134	100.0

Table 6 shows that most tourists stayed in Manavgat for 5–7 days (61.2%). Shorter stays of 3–4 days (13.4%) and 1–2 days (6.0%) were less common, while longer stays such as 8–10 days (6.7%), 11–15 days (6.0%), and 21 days or more (6.0%) were also reported at relatively low rates. Only 0.7% of tourists stayed for 16–20 days.

Table 6: Tourists' Length of Stay in Manavgat

Length of Stay in Manavgat	n	Percentage
1–2 days	8	6.0
3–4 days	18	13.4
5–7 days	82	61.2
8–10 days	9	6.7
11–15 days	8	6.0
16–20 days	1	0.7
21 days and above	8	6.0
Total	134	100.0

Table 7 shows that the main reasons for visiting Manavgat are relaxing, enjoying the climate, swimming, and sunbathing. In addition, visiting historical sites, appreciating scenic landscapes, and experiencing unpolluted natural environments are also reported as important motivations. In contrast, visiting for work or research purposes, simply seeing a place, interacting with the environment, or coming as part of a broader trip are expressed less frequently by tourists.

Table 7: Tourists' Reasons for Visiting Manavgat

Reasons for Visiting Manavgat	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Relaxation	87	19.6	64.9
Sunbathing	69	15.5	51.5
Swimming	62	13.9	46.3
Enjoying the pleasant climate	59	13.3	44.0
Visiting historical sites	44	9.9	32.8
Scenic beauty	30	6.7	22.4
Enjoying the unspoiled natural environment	24	5.4	17.9
Participating in adventure activities	18	4.0	13.4

Work / research purposes	15	3.4	11.2
Simply seeing a place	13	2.9	9.7
Interacting with the environment	13	2.9	9.7
As part of a broader trip	11	2.5	8.2
Total	445	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 445), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

2. What are tourists' environmental self-identity perceptions; their frequency of reading environment, nature, or wildlife magazines; their membership status in environmental, nature conservation, or outdoor organizations; and the frequency of such visits within a year; and the ecotourism areas/activities they visit or prefer in Manavgat?

Table 8 shows that the majority of tourists define themselves as "somewhat environmentally friendly" (67.2%), while 20.9% describe themselves as "strongly environmentally friendly," and a smaller proportion (11.9%) identify as not environmentally friendly.

Table 8: Tourists' Environmental Self-Identity Perceptions

Environmental Identity	n	Percentage
Not environmentally friendly	16	11.9
Somewhat environmentally friendly	90	67.2
Strongly environmentally friendly	28	20.9
Total	134	100.0

Table 9 shows that a large majority of tourists (88.8%) are not members of any environmental, nature conservation, or outdoor organization, whereas only 11.2% reported being members of such organizations.

Table 9: Tourists' Membership in Environmental, Nature Conservation, or Outdoor Organizations

Membership in Environmental, Nature Conservation, or Outdoor Organizations	n	Percentage
No	119	88.8
Yes	15	11.2
Total	134	100.0

Table 10 shows that most tourists read environment, nature, or wildlife magazines occasionally (68.7%). This is followed by those who never read such publications (16.4%) and those who reported reading them frequently (14.9%).

Table 10: Frequency of Reading Environment, Nature, or Wildlife Magazines

Frequency of Reading Magazines	n	Percentage
Never	22	16.4

Sometimes	92	68.7
Often	20	14.9
Total	134	100.0

The annual frequency of tourists' visits to natural areas is presented in Table 11. The findings indicate that the largest proportion of participants (55.2%) visit natural areas 2–5 times per year. This is followed by those who visit once per year (35.8%), while more frequent visitations—ranging from 6 to 10 times or more—are reported at significantly lower rates

Table 11: Frequency of Tourists' Visits to Natural Areas

Visit Frequency	n	Percentage
Once	48	35.8
2-5 times	74	55.2
6-10 times	5	3.7
10 times or more	7	5.2
Total	134	100.0

Table 12 shows that the most frequently visited ancient site is Side Ancient City, followed by Side Ancient Theatre and Aspendos Ancient City. In contrast, Etenna Ancient City is identified as the least visited site among tourists.

Table 12: Tourists' Visits to Ancient Sites

Visited Ancient Sites	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Side Ancient City	96	33.6	71.6
Side Ancient Theatre	66	23.1	49.3
Aspendos Ancient City	45	15.7	33.6
Seleukeia (Lyrbe) Ancient City	33	11.5	24.6
Historical ruins around Naras Bridge	32	11.2	23.9
Etenna Ancient City	14	4.9	10.4
Total	286	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 286), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

Table 13 shows that tourists most frequently visit Köprülü Canyon and the surroundings of Oymapınar Dam Lake. These areas are followed by Sorgun Forest, Titreyengöl birdwatching areas, and Tazı Canyon. Green Canyon and the surroundings of Altınbeşik Cave are also among the locations visited by tourists, though at lower rates. In contrast, Bozyaka Plateau and underwater observation or diving activities related to the B-24 wreck are identified as the least preferred options.

Table 13: Tourists' Visits to Nature and Wildlife Observation Areas

Nature and Wildlife Observation Areas and Activities	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Oymapınar Dam Lake surroundings	46	17.6	34.3
Köprülü Canyon	46	17.6	34.3
Sorgun Forest	44	16.8	32.8
Titreyengöl – birdwatching areas	33	12.6	24.6
Tazı Canyon	33	12.6	24.6
Green Canyon	24	9.2	17.9
Altınbeşik Cave surroundings	20	7.6	14.9
B-24 American warplane wreck (off the coast of Side – underwater observation/diving)	11	4.2	8.2
Bozyaka Plateau	5	1.9	3.7
Total	262	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 262), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

Table 14 presents the data on tourists' visits to Altınbeşik Cave in Manavgat. According to the findings, 40.3% of the tourists reported that they had visited Altınbeşik Cave, while the remaining participants had not visited the site.

Table 14: Tourists' Visits to Altınbeşik Cave

Altınbeşik Cave	n	Percentage
Visited	54	40.3
Not visited	80	59.7
Total	134	100.0

Note: It is important to clarify the numerical difference observed between Table 13 and Table 14 concerning Altınbeşik Cave. In Table 13, the data (n=20; 14.9%) specifically refers to tourists who visited the surroundings of Altınbeşik Cave within the context of nature and wildlife observation. In contrast, Table 14 (n=54; 40.3%) records tourists who visited the cave itself directly as a destination. This distinction suggests that while the cave is a popular primary attraction, only a smaller subset of those visitors explored the broader area specifically for the purpose of observing wildlife and the natural environment.

Table 15 presents tourists' preferences for visiting hiking areas in Manavgat. The findings show that the most preferred areas for nature walks are Sorgun Forest and the surroundings of Titreyengöl. These are followed by Köprülü Canyon National Park. In contrast, Bozyaka Plateau and the Naras Stream valley routes are identified as the least preferred hiking areas among tourists.

Table 15: Tourists' Visits to Hiking Areas

Nature Hiking Areas	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Sorgun Forest	49	27.7	36.6
Titreyengöl surroundings	46	26.0	34.3
Köprülü Canyon National Park	33	18.6	24.6
Taurus Mountains trails	19	10.7	14.2
Green Canyon surroundings	13	7.3	9.7
Naras Stream Valley routes	9	5.1	6.7
Bozyaka Plateau	8	4.5	6.0
Total	177	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 177), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

Table 16 presents tourists' visits to underwater tourism and water sports areas in Manavgat. According to the findings, the most preferred activities within this category are boat tours and canoeing on the Manavgat River. These are followed by activities in areas such as Titreyengöl, the Side coastline, Oymapınar Dam Lake, and rafting in Köprülü Canyon. In contrast, the least preferred activity is diving related to the B-24 American warplane wreck.

Table 16: Tourists' Visits to Underwater Tourism and Water Sports Areas

Underwater Tourism / Water Sports	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Manavgat River (boat tour & canoeing)	51	29.3	38.1
Titreyengöl surroundings	30	17.2	22.4
Side coastline (snorkeling and diving)	29	16.7	21.6
Oymapınar Dam Lake (boat & canoeing)	26	14.9	19.4
Köprülü Canyon (rafting)	23	13.2	17.2
B-24 American warplane wreck	15	8.6	11.2
Total	174	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 174), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

Table 17 presents tourists' interest in agrotourism areas in Manavgat. The findings indicate that tourists show the highest interest in greenhouses and organic farming areas located in the Oymapınar highlands. This is followed by olive groves and pomegranate orchards in the Sarılar region. Other agrotourism activities, such as citrus and sesame production areas, village life experiences, and local food-related activities, are mentioned at moderate levels. In contrast, pomegranate harvesting activities are identified as the least preferred agro-tourism activity among tourists.

Table 17: Tourists' Visits to Agrotourism Areas

Agrotourism Areas and Activities	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Oymapınar Highlands – greenhouses, organic farming	96	31.8	71.6
Sarılar – olive groves and pomegranate orchards	77	25.5	57.5
Taşağıl – citrus and sesame production	41	13.6	30.6
Bucakşeyhler – village life and local farming experience	30	9.9	22.4
Village houses offering traditional breakfast and local product tasting	24	8.0	17.9
Sorgun area – olive oil production and vineyard tours	24	8.0	17.9
Pomegranate harvest activities	10	3.3	7.5
Total	302	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 302), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

Table 18 presents findings on cycling routes in Manavgat. According to the results, the most preferred route is the Manavgat Waterfall–Naras Valley route. This is followed by the Side–Sorgun Forest cycling route and the cycling paths around Titreyengöl. Other routes, such as the Oymapınar Dam surroundings and the Taşağıl–Beşkonak forest road, are preferred at lower rates. In contrast, Bozyaka Plateau cycling trails and cycling tours around Green Canyon are identified as the least preferred options among tourists.

Table 18: Cycling Routes and Tours

Cycling Routes / Tours	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Manavgat Waterfall – Naras Valley route	42	24.7	31.3
Side – Sorgun Forest cycling route	40	23.5	29.9
Titreyengöl cycling paths	36	21.2	26.9
Oymapınar Dam surroundings natural route	20	11.8	14.9
Taşağıl – Beşkonak forest road	12	7.1	9.0
Köprülü Canyon mountain biking routes	8	4.7	6.0
Bozyaka Plateau cycling trails	6	3.5	4.5
Cycling tours around Green Canyon	6	3.5	4.5

Total	170	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 170), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

3. What is the level of ecotourism awareness among tourists?

Table 19 shows the distribution of tourists' ecotourism awareness levels. According to the findings, the majority of tourists (53.7%) have a high level of ecotourism awareness. This is followed by those with a moderate level of awareness (20.1%), while 26.1% of tourists are found to have a low level of awareness.

Table 19: Ecotourism Awareness Level

Ecotourism Awareness Level	n	Percentage
Low (below 37 points)	35	26.1
Moderate (37–40 points)	27	20.1
High (above 40 points)	72	53.7
Total	134	100.0

4. Is there a significant difference between tourists' ecotourism awareness levels and their demographic characteristics (gender, age, country of origin, education level); their sources of information about Manavgat; their length of stay; their environmental self-identity perceptions; their membership in environmental or outdoor organizations; their frequency of reading environment, nature, or wildlife magazines; and the frequency of such visits within a year?

Table 20 shows that there is a statistically significant difference in ecotourism awareness levels according to gender (t = −2.292; df = 132; p = 0.023), with female tourists demonstrating higher awareness levels than male tourists.

Table 20: Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Gender

t-Test for Equality of Means							
t value	Degrees of Freedom	Significance		Mean Difference	Standard Error of the Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		p (one-tailed)	p (two-tailed)			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
-2.292	132	0.012	0.023	-2.40580	1.04962	-4.48205	-0.32956
-2.269	120.433	0.013	0.025	-2.40580	1.06018	-4.50481	-0.30679

Table 21 shows that ecotourism awareness levels differ significantly across age groups (p = 0.001), indicating variation in awareness among different age categories.

Table 21: Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Age Groups

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	603.392	3	201.131	5.873	0.001
Within Groups	4452.041	130	34.246		
Total	5055.433	133			

Table 22 shows that ecotourism awareness levels differ significantly according to tourists' countries of origin ($F = 3.822$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that awareness varies between national groups.

Table 22: Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Country of Origin

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1480.159	13	113.858	3.822	<0.001
Within Groups	3575.274	120	29.794		
Total	5055.433	133			

As shown in Table 23, no statistically significant difference was found in ecotourism awareness levels according to education level ($p = 0.082$), indicating similar awareness levels across different educational backgrounds.

Table 23: Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Education Level

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	252.827	3	84.276	2.281	0.082
Within Groups	4802.606	130	36.943		
Total	5055.433	133			

Table 24 shows that there is no statistically significant relationship between tourists' sources of information about Manavgat and their ecotourism awareness levels ($p = 0.732$).

Table 24: Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Sources of Information about Manavgat

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	49.589	3	16.530	0.429	0.732
Within Groups	5005.843	130	38.506		
Total	5055.433	133			

Table 25 shows that ecotourism awareness levels do not differ significantly according to tourists' environmental self-identity perceptions ($F = 1.385$; $p = 0.254$).

Table 25: Comparison of Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Tourists' Environmental Self-Identity Perceptions

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.

Between Groups	104.673	2	52.337	1.385	0.254
Within Groups	4950.760	131	37.792		
Total	5055.433	133			

Table 26 shows that ecotourism awareness levels do not differ significantly according to tourists' membership in environmental or outdoor organizations (F = 1.253; p = 0.265).

Table 26: Comparison of Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Tourists' Membership in Environmental, Nature Conservation, or Outdoor Organizations

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	47.537	1	47.537	1.253	0.265
Within Groups	5007.896	132	37.939		
Total	5055.433	133			

Table 27 shows that ecotourism awareness levels differ significantly according to tourists' frequency of reading environment, nature, or wildlife magazines (F = 3.610; p = 0.030), indicating differences between reading frequency groups.

Table 27: Comparison of Ecotourism Awareness Levels by Frequency of Reading Environment, Nature, or Wildlife Magazines

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	264.072	2	132.036	3.610	0.030
Within Groups	4791.361	131	36.575		
Total	5055.433	133			

Table 28 shows that ecotourism awareness levels differ significantly according to tourists' frequency of visiting natural areas (F = 6.119; p = 0.001), indicating variation across different visit frequency groups.

Table 28: Ecotourism Awareness by Visit Frequency to Natural Areas

Ecotourism Awareness Level	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	625.576	3	208.525	6.119	0.001
Within Groups	4429.856	130	34.076		
Total	5055.433	133			

5. What are the environmental and tourism-related factors that tourists find most disturbing during their stay in Manavgat?

Table 29 presents the issues that tourists find disturbing in Manavgat. According to the findings, the most frequently reported sources of disturbance are noise (30.6%), littering in natural or historical areas (29.1%), and unfair pricing practices (23.1%). These are followed by uncollected waste in public areas (20.9%) and overcrowding at popular tourist sites (17.9%), such as beaches, waterfalls, and historical locations. Other issues reported by tourists include high entrance fees or

rental prices (10.4%), low safety levels in certain areas (6.7%), and insufficient tourist information or signage (5.2%). Additionally, a smaller proportion of tourists mentioned discomfort related to restrictions while taking photos (4.5%) and other issues such as the absence of an airport (0.7%).

Table 29: Issues That Tourists Find Disturbing

Issues That Tourists Find Disturbing	n	Response Percentage	Participant Percentage
Noise (e.g., from traffic or crowded tourist areas)	41	20.5	30.6
Littering in natural or historical sites	39	19.5	29.1
Unfair pricing or tourist exploitation (e.g., in hotels, shops, taxis)	31	15.5	23.1
Uncollected waste in public areas	28	14.0	20.9
Overcrowding at popular tourist spots (e.g., waterfalls, beaches, ancient sites)	24	12.0	17.9
High entrance fees / rental prices	14	7.0	10.4
Low safety levels in some areas	9	4.5	6.7
Lack of tourist information or signage	7	3.5	5.2
Restrictions or discomfort while taking photos	6	3.0	4.5
Other (absence of an airport)	1	0.5	0.7
Total	200	100.0	100.0

Note: This question allows multiple responses. The "response percentage" is calculated based on the total number of selections (n = 200), while the "participant percentage" is calculated based on the total number of tourists who participated in the survey (N = 134).

6. What are tourists' suggestions and expectations regarding ecotourism activities in Manavgat?

Table 30 presents tourists' suggestions and expectations regarding ecotourism activities in Manavgat. Within the scope of the study, 53 tourists did not provide any opinions. Among those who responded, statements unrelated to ecotourism—such as the absence of an airport or insufficient shopping centers—were excluded from the analysis, and only constructive suggestions aimed at improvement were included in the coding process. Since some tourists provided suggestions in multiple areas, the analysis was conducted based on a total of 79 coded responses.

An examination of the findings shows that the most frequently expressed suggestion by tourists is to increase information and awareness activities related to ecotourism. This is followed by suggestions to address deficiencies in transportation and to place greater emphasis on environmental protection. Additionally, increasing promotional activities, implementing regulations regarding plastic and glass bottles, and improving environmental arrangements are among the other suggestions expressed by tourists.

Table 30: Tourists' Suggestions and Expectations Regarding Ecotourism Activities in Manavgat

Recommendations (Codes)	n
Information and awareness activities on ecotourism should be increased (for tourists, local residents, and educational institutions)	13
Deficiencies in transportation should be addressed (insufficient bus stops, limited public transport, road and traffic issues)	12
Greater importance should be given to environmental protection	10
Promotional activities should be enhanced (advertising and informational campaigns)	9
Regulations should be implemented regarding plastic and glass bottles (deposit systems, reduction of usage, etc.)	8
Environmental planning should be improved (increasing green areas, expanding the number of parks)	5
Measures for the protection of Caretta caretta sea turtles should be strengthened	3
Sustainable ecotourism in Manavgat should be supported	3
Interaction between tourists and the local community should be increased	3
Cooperation among institutions and local stakeholders should be strengthened	2
The number of waste bins should be increased	2
Regional/local cuisine should be promoted and strengthened	1
Diving areas should be improved	1
Ecotourism practices in other countries should be monitored and adapted	1
The view that tourists are willing to pay more when they see that natural areas are protected	1
The number of rental bicycles should be increased	1
Regulations should be introduced to address disorder caused by the high number of Russian guides	1
Small tourism enterprises using sustainable energy should be supported	1
Tourist itineraries should be diversified and enriched	1
The number of tourists should be limited	1
Total	79

Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the ecotourism awareness levels of tourists visiting Manavgat and to identify the main factors influencing this awareness. The findings were evaluated in relation to the existing national and international literature.

The results indicate that 53.7% of tourists have a high level of ecotourism awareness. This is partly consistent with Chandran and Bhattacharya (2024), particularly regarding higher awareness among younger tourists. In line with previous studies, female tourists demonstrated significantly higher awareness than males ($p = 0.023$), supporting the view that women are more likely to adopt sustainable consumption patterns. However, unlike Ay et al. (2010), who reported that most

ecotourists in Antalya are over the age of 35, this study highlights the 15–30 age group (39.6%), which may be attributed to the broader and more diverse sample.

In contrast to previous research suggesting that higher education levels increase environmental awareness, no statistically significant relationship was found between education level and ecotourism awareness in this study ($p = 0.082$). This may indicate that tourists staying in five-star hotels share similar awareness levels regardless of educational background. Additionally, the socio-cultural diversity of participants may have reduced the direct influence of formal education on awareness.

Although a majority of tourists (67.2%) defined themselves as environmentally friendly, participation in environmentally responsible behaviors—such as membership in environmental organizations (11.2%)—remains limited. This suggests that awareness largely remains at an attitudinal level rather than being translated into behavior. The higher awareness observed among tourists who frequently visit natural areas highlights the importance of direct experience in developing environmental consciousness.

The findings also show that tourists are strongly interested in both natural and cultural attractions, particularly in areas such as Side Ancient City, Oymapınar Highlands, and Sorgun Forest. However, the concentration of visitors in these areas may create environmental pressure, especially when mass transportation methods are used, which contradicts ecotourism principles.

The main issues reported by tourists—noise, environmental pollution, and infrastructure deficiencies—indicate ongoing challenges in destination management. These problems, particularly related to transportation and environmental planning, suggest the need for more effective and sustainable local governance.

Overall, the findings highlight that while ecotourism awareness among tourists is relatively high, there is a gap between awareness and environmentally responsible behavior. Therefore, strengthening awareness-based practices, improving infrastructure, and supporting sustainable tourism policies are essential for preserving Manavgat's ecotourism potential. In this context, increasing educational and awareness activities, enhancing guiding services, and ensuring the active involvement of local communities will play a critical role in achieving long-term sustainability.

Implications and Recommendations

1. Recommendations for Researchers:

This study is limited to 134 tourists staying in four five-star hotels in Manavgat. Since these facilities are not included in the "ecological hotels" list prepared by Balcı (2025), the environmental awareness of the participants reflects the general tourist profile. However, studies conducted with tourists staying in boutique hotels or those directly camping in natural environments may yield different levels of awareness.

The data collection process began on August 31 and covered September and October. This period represents a time when the tourist profile in Manavgat (generally older individuals or families

without children) differs from the peak summer season. Future studies covering the entire year or focusing on the high season may reveal clearer differences in tourist profiles.

This study was conducted specifically in Manavgat. Comparative studies with other ecotourism destinations in the Mediterranean region could provide a broader perspective on regional awareness levels.

2. Recommendations for Local Authorities (Municipalities and Administrative Bodies):

Infrastructure and Transportation: Environmentally friendly infrastructure investments can be increased. In particular, to address transportation issues—identified as one of the main concerns of tourists—roads providing access to natural areas (such as Köprülü Canyon and Oymapınar) can be improved. Additionally, eco-friendly vehicles can be introduced for these routes and for urban public transportation.

Waste Management: In line with tourists' demands for deposit systems and increased waste bins, zero-waste management models can be implemented along ecotourism routes, and inspections can be strengthened. Furthermore, as suggested by Chandran and Bhattacharya (2024), destination-specific awareness campaigns can be organized.

3. Recommendations for Tourism Operators and Hotel Managers:

Eco-Information: Informational materials about Manavgat's flora and fauna can be provided in hotels. Additionally, informative posters presenting all ecotourism areas and activities in Manavgat can be made available to tourists.

Sustainable Management: Ecological hotel criteria emphasized by Balcı (2025) can be adopted, and transitions to systems that reduce plastic use and promote energy efficiency can be encouraged.

4. Recommendations for Tourism Employees and Guides:

Qualified Guiding: As stated by Güngör (2016), the environmental awareness and knowledge of guides working in ecotourism activities can be enhanced through training. Guides should not only lead tours but also inform tourists about the importance of protecting the visited areas.

5. Recommendations for Local Residents and Businesses:

Agrotourism Participation: Local residents can be supported in transforming agricultural production processes (such as pomegranate and olive harvesting) into touristic experiences, in line with tourists' interest in interacting with local life (Ataman & Keskin, 2020).

Economic Benefits: Regulations can be introduced to ensure that the economic benefits of ecotourism directly reach local communities, thereby strengthening their motivation to protect natural resources.

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Carrying Capacity and Sustainability in Tourism Destinations: A Study on the Case of Manavgat

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Abstract

Purpose: This research employs qualitative research methods and involves a comprehensive literature review. The study focuses on the concept of carrying capacity, frequently used in the tourism sector, examining its physical, environmental, social, and economic dimensions in detail. Accordingly, the impacts of tourism activities on a destination are evaluated, and the importance of carrying capacity for sustainable tourism planning is highlighted. The theoretical framework of the research was established by analyzing academic studies, reports, and relevant sources found in the literature.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study also utilized a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis method to holistically assess the current state of the destination and identify its potential and the risks it faces. This analysis method was used as an important tool because it provides guiding data for destination management and sustainable tourism planning.

Results: In addition, various comprehensive data were utilized to reveal the demographic structure, physical characteristics, tourism resources, and current offerings of the Manavgat district. Through these data, the population structure, infrastructure capacity, number of tourist facilities, and overall tourism potential of the region were analyzed, contributing to the identification of opportunities for improvement.

Originality/Value: By evaluating all the obtained data together, the current situation of the Manavgat destination in terms of tourism and the opportunities for improving its carrying capacity were comprehensively presented

Keywords: Tourism Carrying Capacity, Sustainable Tourism, Manavgat, Physical Carrying Capacity, SWOT Analysis

Introduction

In recent years, the tourism industry has developed rapidly on a global scale and increasingly plays an important role in terms of economic and social development in many parts of the world. One of the most obvious effects of this development is the increase in the standard of living in terms of income in local communities (Soylu, 2013). In this context, it is evident that tourism plays an important role in terms of employment and regional development processes in many parts of the world.

On the other hand, this development in the tourism industry also poses some problems in terms of environmental and resource systems and social structures in many parts of the world (Dağ & Mansuroğlu, 2013). This is because tourism investments are not sufficiently planned and regulated in many cases and may cause some negative effects on environmental and resource systems and social structures in many parts of the world. In this context, investors often tend to focus on short-

term benefits and make tourism investments without conducting any scientific analysis or feasibility studies on this issue (Yılmazer, 2022).
In particular, increased pressures on transportation infrastructure, water supplies, waste management, and energy demands. Moreover, tourism development strategies that focus on achieving the highest possible number of tourists solely based on financial considerations, rather than carrying capacity, may also cause imbalances in the social and economic structure of the tourist destinations. As the density of tourists increases in these destinations, the cost of living may also increase, and the quality of life may decrease. This may even result in the migration of the locals in the long run (Yılmazer, 2022).
This may cause locals to start developing negative perceptions regarding tourism and tourists. These perceptions may have direct impacts on the satisfaction of tourists and may even influence the image of the tourist destinations in the long run.
Carrying capacity, as emphasized in the research conducted by Dağ and Mansuroğlu (2008), was first used in the field of engineering and rangeland management in 1922. It then expanded to other fields. Since the 1960s, carrying capacity has become a vital issue in tourism planning, especially with regard to nature protection and national parks. Increasing numbers of tourists have caused a great deal of degradation in the environment and have reduced the quality of life for a particular destination, thus emphasizing the importance of carrying capacity in tourism management.
Carrying capacity, as emphasized in the report by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), is the maximum number of tourists that a tourist destination can satisfy and provide the best tourist experience to, without causing damage to the environment and cultural assets of the destinations. Exceeding this capacity may cause serious damage to the tourists and even to the environment and cultural assets of the destinations.
A number of studies have indicated that tourism activities carried out without taking into consideration carrying capacity may result in serious negative consequences (Dinç, 2022). For instance, a research conducted in Sapanca and Topkapı Palace indicated that uncontrolled increases in the number of tourists may result in reduced satisfaction levels among residents and tourists in the region (Tokmak, 2008; Yılmazer, 2022). Moreover, in the Fuka-Matrouh region of Egypt, uncontrolled development of tourism in the region has resulted in issues such as water scarcity and depletion of resources in the region (Sınmaz, 2016).
Although carrying capacity is discussed in the literature in different dimensions, including environmental, psychological, economic, social, physical, and political aspects, this study will focus on a more detailed approach. For the sake of clarity, the carrying capacity will be discussed in four different dimensions: physical carrying capacity, environmental carrying capacity, social carrying capacity, and economic carrying capacity (Demir and Çevirgen, 2006; Selçuk, 2024; Tan, 2023).
Physical carrying capacity is the capacity of a tourist region to hold a certain number of tourists without causing damage to the infrastructure in the region, including roads, water, electricity, sewage, and historical buildings in the region where tourism activities are carried out (Kalkan, 2024; Kılınç, 2025). Exceeding this capacity will result in issues such as damage to historical buildings, increased traffic congestion, and inadequate infrastructure in the region (Rızaoğlu and Tanrısevdi, 1997). According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, physical carrying capacity of a region may be calculated using the formula **FTK = A × Z/a × Rf,** where A represents the area, Z represents the area per tourist, a represents the area visited by tourists, and Rf represents the duration of the region's operation (Göktuğ, 2011).

Environmental (Ecological) Carrying Capacity is defined as the number of tourists that a particular location can support without causing any harm to the natural structure of the destination, including its ecosystem, and the quality of its air, water, and soil (Baranaydın, 2023; Günal, 2022). The unchecked growth of tourism can put a strain on the natural resources of a particular location. In fact, studies carried out along the Aegean and Mediterranean shores of Turkey showed that the infrastructure requirements are not met properly in 76% of the locations, and wastewater is discharged into the sea without any treatment in 11% of the locations (Özdemir, 2007).

Social Carrying Capacity can be defined as the threshold level of tourists that can be accommodated by the local population of a particular location without any negative impacts, or the threshold level of tourists that can be accommodated by a particular location without any discomfort (Rızaoğlu & Tanrısevdi, 1997; Tan, 2023). The local population density and the culture of the local people play a very important role in the determination of this capacity (Özgürel et al., 2020).

Economic Carrying Capacity can be defined as the capacity of tourism to maintain a balance between the economy. This is the capacity of tourism that provides the maximum benefits to the local economy without putting any pressure on other sectors of the local economy. In fact, the growth of tourism can result in a decline of other local economies, like agriculture. In the Caribbean region, for example, the growth of tourism investments led to a decline in the production of bananas (Mercan, 2010; Bahar, 2020).

The main concern of this research is to address the environmental and social crisis stemming from a lack of consideration of carrying capacity in Turkish tourism. With this concern in mind, this research aims to explore one of the most popular tourist areas in Antalya, namely the Manavgat district, and emphasize the current and future negative influences of a lack of calculation of carrying capacity based on a scientific approach. In addition, this research aims to fill a gap in existing literature and provide useful suggestions for local authorities and tourism investors.

Methodology

This research has been conducted as a conceptual and qualitative research to contribute to the development of the tourism industry, which has strategic importance for Turkish economic development, in accordance with environmental and social sustainability criteria. This research will focus on the importance of **carrying capacity in relation to tourism** development, and this will be in relation to the district of Manavgat.

During the process of data collection of this research, a comprehensive literature review has been conducted to examine the physical, environmental, social, and economic aspects of tourism carrying capacity and the impact of tourism on the environment, infrastructure, and society in a conceptual framework. In addition, various secondary data sources have been used to identify the current tourism potentials, infrastructure, and social structures of the Manavgat tourism destination. In this regard, various reports issued by the Antalya Water and Sewerage Administration General Directorate (ASAT), statistics presented by the Manavgat Tourist Hoteliers Association (MATOB), data collected by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (KTB), and reports issued by the Manavgat Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MATSO) have been examined.

The **SWOT** analysis method has been applied to assess the status of the destination from a strategic point of view and to analyze the factors affecting the carrying capacity. **SWOT** is one of the most important analytical methods in terms of providing a basis for strategic planning. This method helps to analyze the characteristics of a destination in terms of its strengths and weaknesses, and the external factors affecting the destination in terms of opportunities and threats (Çoban &

Karakaya, 2010). Accordingly, in line with the obtained data, the basic issues affecting the carrying capacity in the Manavgat destination were analyzed, and solution proposals that could be effective in the management of the destination were developed.

Results

Geographical and Demographic Characteristics of Manavgat and Tourism Potential

Manavgat is one of the largest districts in terms of surface area in Antalya, covering a vast area of 2,283 km², and is located 75 kilometers east of the city center of Antalya, along the Mediterranean coast (Akış & Aslan, 2007). The district borders the extensions of the Taurus Mountains to the north and the Mediterranean coastline to the south, covering a vast geographical area and featuring diverse topographies. A part of the administrative borders of Manavgat is composed of mountainous and forested areas, while the population lives in the coastal and plain areas, where agricultural, commercial, and touristic activities are conducted. Due to the fertile alluvial plains and the Mediterranean climate, agricultural activities play an important role in the economic life of Manavgat (Akış & Kaya, 2018).

It is a well-known fact that this district was a small settlement in the late 16th century and had a population of approximately 225 people in 1575. However, the construction of a bridge over the Manavgat River in 1931 strengthened the transportation infrastructure in the district, which consequently led to its development. Therefore, and due to other developments in the region, Manavgat District has over the years rapidly grown to become a major settlement center where agricultural and tourism activities thrive. In recent times, with the growth of the tourism industry, the district has managed to acquire the status of a city with a high level of migration from within and outside the country, thus becoming a focal point for tourism. It is therefore considered to be one of the most important tourism centers in Turkey (Dinç, 2020; Aksoy, 2024).

The district of Manavgat has a high level of tourism potential in terms of the presence of various tourism resources. The district's natural tourism resources are not limited to beach tourism but have the potential for the development of alternative tourism types. Therefore, the natural tourism resources in the district include the Manavgat Waterfall, Oymapınar Dam and Lake, Köprülü Canyon National Park, and Titreyengöl.

Manavgat Waterfall is one of the famous natural attractions in the region, located in the region where the Manavgat River is situated.**The Manavgat River**, which starts from Akdağ and covers a territory of 90 kilometers, branches out over a large area when it reaches the border of the district, creating a breathtaking landscape of waterfalls. The small waterfall 700 meters south of the main waterfall, which is referred to as "Şavlak," is another of the region's prominent natural landmarks. This region attracts hundreds of thousands of local and foreign tourists each year, and one of the main recreational activities carried out here is boat and canoe tours on the river (Küçük, 1997; Torun, 2023).

Other important natural tourist attractions in the region include the **Oymapınar Dam and Lake**, which are prominent in the region because of the natural beauty and biodiversity they offer. The region around the lake is covered by forests of various shades of green and is thus an ideal place for nature walks and other outdoor activities. With such natural and important tourist attractions, the Oymapınar Dam is deemed to have great potential for the development of nature tourism and ecotourism in the region (Marypalace, 2025).

Manavgat is home to one of the most famous natural tourism attractions in the world, the **Köprülü Canyon National Park**. Situated in the Taşağıl and Beşkonak regions of the district, the national park covers a vast territory of around 37,000 hectares. The national park is famous for the steep canyon formations that stretch for around 14 kilometers. Due to the rafting activities that take place

in the region along the Köprüçay River, the region has gained prominence all over the world, especially for adventure tourism. In addition, the region is deemed valuable for the development of nature tourism in the region because of the rich diversity of flora and fauna in the region.

Titreyengöl, one of the major tourist attractions in the region of Manavgat, is home to a natural lake system that covers around 300 hectares of the region. This natural landscape is unique because it comprises the sea, lake, and dune forests. Moreover, the Titreyengöl region is prominent in the region because of the large number of accommodation facilities available in the region, especially for international tourists (Derman & Keleş, 2017).

These natural and tourism resources are considered to be some of the key components that play an important role in supporting the development of tourism activities in the Manavgat region. Moreover, the sustainable planning of tourism activities is considered to be of great importance for the protection of the region's natural and cultural resources (Torun, 2023).

The Manavgat region, along with its surroundings, is considered to have significant cultural tourism potential due to its historical and cultural heritage. In addition, the region is home to numerous ancient cities and archaeological sites belonging to different civilizations (KTB, 2023). The ancient city of Side (Side Antik Kenti) and the Temple of Apollo (Apollo Tapınağı) located within it, which attract hundreds of thousands of tourists annually, can be considered to be significant cultural tourism resources. In addition, the ancient city of Seleukeia (Lyrbe Antik Kenti) with its ruins from the Hellenistic period, the ancient city of Selge (Selge Antik Kenti) located at an elevation of about 1,250 meters above sea level, and the ancient theater of Aspendos (Aspendos Antik Tiyatrosu) that is considered to be one of the best-preserved ancient theaters until today with an attendance capacity of about 15,000-20,000 people, can be considered to be significant historical tourism resources. In addition, the Ancient City of Perge (Perge Antik Kenti), which is considered to be an important center in the history of Christianity, is included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, is considered to be an important cultural tourism center that contributes to the cultural heritage of the region (KTB, 2023). With its cultural tourism resources, the Manavgat region is considered to have the potential to emerge as an important cultural tourism center.

Accommodation Infrastructure and Carrying Capacity Analysis

Manavgat is among the districts in Antalaya with the highest capacity in terms of accommodation. Antalya is among the most important tourist centers in Turkey. According to data from MATOB, in the district of Manavgat, there are 529 hotels with tourism operation licenses. The capacity of the hotels is 79,720 in total. The total number of overnight stays in surrounding tourist areas such as Manavgat, Kızılağaç, Sorgun, Side, Kumköy, Evrenseki, Çolaklı, and Gündoğdu accounts for 14.8% of all overnight stays in Turkey.The number of tourists visiting the district in a year is 7,112,462. The number of overnight stays in the region is over 30 million. Besides, the amount of money earned by tourists in the region amounts to 1,179 dollars on average.

This shows that the region has a high capacity in terms of tourism. The impacts of this high number of tourists on the carrying capacity of the region are multifaceted and have various dimensions. The impacts on physical infrastructure, nature, society, and economy come into focus as critical issues to be evaluated in terms of the sustainability of tourism in the region.

- **Physical Carrying Capacity;** With the increase in domestic and foreign investments in the region, the number of tourists and employment in the region has also increased. However, the infrastructure in the region has faced great strain due to the rapid increase in population. The movement of the workforce in the tourism industry to rural areas has highlighted the lack of water and wastewater infrastructure in the region (Dinç, 2020). To overcome these issues, the Antalya

Metropolitan Municipality and ASAT invested around 3 billion TL in the region from 2019 to 2025. Around 500,000 meters of drinking water and 110,000 meters of sewer lines were constructed in 110 neighborhoods. With the construction of new facilities in the Kumköy and Çolaklı regions, the wastewater treatment capacity has been increased to 165,000 cubic meters daily. However, the lack of development in electrical infrastructure in tandem with the rapid increase in population has led to power failures in the region. This has especially become a problem in the summer months when tourists flock to the region. This is an indication that Manavgat's physical transportation capacity is managed through crisis management principles and not through scientific principles. However, the Antalya-Alanya highway project undertaken by the Ministry of Transportation is viewed as a major step in increasing the transportation capacity in the region. However, despite all these advances, the failure to scientifically calculate Manavgat's physical transportation capacity is viewed as a major failure in terms of sustainable tourism planning in the region (Acir, 2023).

- **Environmental Carrying Capacity**; Activities related to nature tourism, apart from marine and cultural tourism, have rapidly increased in Manavgat in recent years (Kaya, Yıldırım. 2020). However, there is no specific daily maximum visitor capacity or usage quota for the natural areas in the region. For example, the uncontrolled increase in rafting activities in the Köprüçay River can be harmful to the flora and fauna in the region due to excessive visitor traffic. Similarly, the dust and soil erosion resulting from jeep safari activities in the forest roads to Yeşil Canyon can be harmful to the natural environment in the region (Turalanya, 2025).

Yet, the lack of capacity controls, "capacity reached" messages, or ticket limits in many tourist destinations indicates that the carrying capacity of the region is not being planned or managed. This is a major threat in the management of natural resources and the sustainability of tourism in the region.

- **Social Carrying Capacity:** The social impacts of the increased number of tourists in Manavgat are affecting the quality of life and the attitudes of the local population toward tourism in the region. The ever-increasing number of tourists and the traffic jams in the region, particularly in the summer months, are affecting the lives of the local population in the region. Moreover, the unregulated development and noise pollution are affecting the lives of the local population in the region (Kaya, 2023). In the last few years, the preference for home rental services by foreign tourists, rather than hotels, has led to an increase in the demand for homes in the region (Airbnb, Vrbo etc.). This has pushed up the home rental rates in the region to unprecedented levels. This has forced the local population in the region, including the poor and the minimum wage earners in the tourism sector, to move out of the city centers, thereby affecting the social carrying capacity of the region and the tolerance levels of the population toward the tourists in the region.
- **Economic Carrying Capacity**; In fact, the economic carrying capacity of Manavgat is quite strong and helps to support the regional economy. The foreign exchange income obtained from the approximately 7 million tourists coming to the region every year helps to develop regional businesses, especially in the hotel industry, restaurants, touristic facilities, and shops. In addition, the opportunity for farmers in rural areas to sell their products, valued at 12.5 billion TL, to hotel and touristic facilities helps to create a strong integration between the tourism industry and the agricultural industry. The fact that tourism acts as a supportive rather than a suppressive factor for other business and commercial activities in the region indicates that the economic carrying capacity of the region has not reached a breaking point. Nevertheless, in order for this sustainability to be achieved, the social and environmental impacts need to be managed in a balanced way.

Summary of SWOT Analysis for Manavgat

The results obtained from the SWOT analysis conducted to strategically examine the current condition of the Manavgat destination in terms of carrying capacity and sustainability are as follows (Çoban & Karakaya, 2010).

Strengths

- Proximity to Antalya Airport and easy accessibility
- Variety of tourism opportunities, rafting, nature, golf
- Unique cultural attractions of Side, Selge, Aspendos, Perge
- Abundance of water due to Oymapinar Dam and waterfalls
- Diverse food products due to vast agricultural lands
- Popularity of the destination

Weaknesses

- Lack of calculation of carrying capacity of tourism areas
- Strong smells in some coastal areas due to lack of infrastructure
- Communication gap between local governments, investors, and people / lack of a coordinating body
- Standardization of transportation services / lack of taximeter use in taxis
- Lack of a bypass road between airport and the region

Opportunities

- Yacht tourism development on the Manavgat River (Manavgat Irmağı)
- Promotion of the ancient city of Seleukeia with the aim of creating it as a new tourism attraction
- Development of paragliding tourism in the Oymapınar Dam
- Expanding the tourism period to 12 months with sports tourism investments (tennis courts, soccer fields)

Threats

- Distortion/unplanned urbanization due to excessive migration, infrastructure shortages
- The region's dependency on tourism, exchange rate risks
- Summer fires, potential water shortages due to climate change
- Migration of tourism labor force to other sectors due to the housing crisis

Conclusion

The tourism sector, which has rapidly developed over the past few years, has had a positive effect on the economic conditions and lifestyle of the people in the region. However, it is unfortunate that it developed without conducting carrying capacity studies or preparing strategic feasibility studies. In particular, the fact that local governments and relevant public institutions have approved large investments without scientifically evaluating the infrastructure and superstructure capacities of the region has resulted in chronic problems with basic infrastructure, sewage, water, electricity, etc.

The fact that the physical, environmental, social, and economic carrying capacities of significant historical and cultural heritage sites, such as the ancient city of Side, or nature tourism sites have not been determined prior to their opening to tourism has resulted in damage to these places due to congestion. The tourism approach adopted today, without a control system such as "capacity reached," will result in significant economic gains, while it will cause irreparable damage to the natural environment, biodiversity, and cultural heritage.

In this regard, it is necessary to manage the destination in terms of a sustainable approach not only in relation to financial returns but also to highlight the importance of nature and cultural values and their transfer to future generations. According to the research findings and SWOT analysis, it is of great importance to implement the strategic action plans mentioned below in order to guarantee the sustainability of the Manavgat destination:

1- Without delay, it is essential to establish a Manavgat Tourism Consortium via which the Ministry of Tourism, Manavgat District Governor's Office, Manavgat Municipality, and tourism investors will coordinate to conduct capacity analysis and improvement report studies.

2- In terms of environmental sustainability, it is essential to implement biogas plants that produce energy from waste in hotels and offer incentives in terms of waste tax reductions to those businesses that implement the zero waste approach and reduce waste volume to a minimum.

3- In terms of facilitating tourists' mobility in Manavgat and reducing traffic jams in the region, it is essential to establish rail transit systems that connect the eastern part of Manavgat (Sorgun) and the western part (Gündoğdu) via coastal routes and rail routes passing through the interior of the region. Moreover, it is essential to make plans to extend EXPO tram lines to Gazipaşa Airport.

4- In terms of preventing tourism employees in Manavgat from leaving their jobs due to housing problems caused by increasing rent costs in the region, it is essential to establish social housing projects specifically targeting tourism employees in cooperation with municipalities and TOKİ.

5. For the protection of water resources, the reuse of pool backwash water from hotels under the supervision of ASAT, after treatment, should be made mandatory. Moreover, to cater to the increasing demand for energy, solar energy systems (GES), which should be able to generate 1.5 times the energy requirements, should be installed in the tourism facilities.

6. In accordance with the objective of promoting tourism all over the year, health and wellness tourism concepts targeting European tourists aged 70 and above should be developed in the winter season. Moreover, ecotourism hiking trails and sports facilities like tennis and soccer courts should be constructed in the surroundings of Oymapınar Dam (Oymapınar Barajı).

7. For increasing the brand value of Manavgat as a "Green Destination," eco-friendly initiatives should be implemented to plant one tree for one visitor staying in a hotel. Moreover, awareness among the sectors should be enhanced through the initiation of programs like "Sustainable Destination Management and Carrying Capacity" in Manavgat Vocational School.

The stakeholders in tourism in the region must focus their efforts on the preservation of the region's natural resources, the sustainability of cultural heritage, and the improvement of the quality of life in the region, rather than focusing on the economic benefits of tourism in the region. Otherwise, the growth and development of the tourism sector in the region will lead to the loss of the core values of the region in the future and will also weaken the competitive power of the region in the future.

To sum up, the implementation of the sustainable tourism model in the region must be ensured by developing a strategy that will promote the sustainability of the region's natural environment, cultural heritage, and social and economic stability in the region.

It must not be forgotten that every move taken in accordance with the principle of "working together for a better future and a sustainable world" is the most important guarantee for the region of Manavgat to continue to exist as a tourist attraction in the future and to retain its appeal in the eyes of tourists.

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Navigating The Sustainable Tourism Paradoxes for SMEs in Turkiye: Mediation of Micro-Level Survival and Macro -Level Environmental Protection

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to examine the sustainability paradoxes faced by SMEs in Turkish tourism, to highlight the tension between micro-level economic survival and cumulative macro- level environmental degradation, and to offer strategies to solve these paradoxes.

Methodology of the study: Adopting a paradoxical perspective, this conceptual study synthesizes Institutional Theory and Resource-Based View, critically assessing the tensions of the system in small Turkish hotels navigating mandatory national sustainability transitions, such as the GSTC-approved certification program.

Results: The analysis discovers the 'SME impact paradox', reflecting the massive role of small businesses in cumulative environmental degradation. Severe resource constraints forces SMEs to focus on prioritizing short-term economic survival, which worsens sociocultural inconsistencies and undermining environmental strategies. To solve these structural obstacles, the findings suggest that to successfully navigate the paradoxes of sustainable tourism, SMEs, Institutional Actors and Government authorities need to take simultaneous action. At the micro level, SME leaders need to develop a holistic approach by having paradoxical lens. Currently SMEs in Türkiye faces a dual challenge; while they need to balance leveraging existing efficiencies for immediate financial survival, they also have to explore eco-innovations for long-term sustainability. Despite the insignificance of a SMEs' individual operation, their cumulative impact on the global ecosystem is usually underestimated. Because, as Gössling and Reinhold (2024) shared SMEs are 90% of all businesses worldwide that contributes approximately %50 of total global GDP. Overcoming the ''Challenges of Being Small'' in Turkish tourism requires more than regulatory mandates at macro-level; it demands targeted financial supports and capacity building programs which recognize financial fragility and inflationary pressure currently squeezing the SMEs.

Originality/Value: This paper clarifies the micro-macro sustainability disconnect and provides a context-specific theoretical framework for Turkish tourism SMEs to transition from short-term financial survival to long-term sustainable competitiveness. In the specific context of Türkiye's volatile economy, this research discovers that sustainability is no longer a choice but a survival strategy that requires an interdependent relationship between visionary, paradox-embracing SME leadership and resource providing public policies to prevent mass closure of SMEs in resource-constrained environments. This dual framework approach offers a new way to turn rigid regulatory compliance into a strategic sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: Sustainability paradox, Turkish tourism SMEs, resource-based perspective, corporate theory, cumulative environmental impact.

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent the foundational architecture of the global economic landscape, playing a critical role in enabling jobs, enhancing economic resilience, and sustaining regional development. Current estimates indicate that across all economic sectors worldwide, SMEs account for 90% of businesses and provide 60% to 70% of total employment, consequently contributing to approximately 50% of the global Gross Domestic Product (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024). In the tourism sector, the predominant structural influence is even more evident. Tourism SMEs, which include small family-run businesses and lodging establishments, are viewed as essential cultural intermediaries that enhance connections with local communities and significantly contribute to the advancement of regional supply chains (Maziliauske, 2024). Although SMEs are present in all sectors and provide vital economic benefits, the global sustainability conversation has largely overlooked them; current regulatory policies and academic research mainly emphasize multinational corporations and major sources of emissions (Schulte & Paris, 2024). Nonetheless, the vast number of SMEs calls for a crucial shift in how academic inquiry and public policy address global sustainability and environmental management challenges. Ultimately this persistent historical neglect has resulted in what scholars describe as the 'SME impact paradox'. As individual facilities, a single SME offers a relatively small and seemingly insignificant ecological, social and economic footprint; yet when all SME activities are combined, their cumulative impact on the global environment is staggeringly destructive (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024). As a result, the transition to a green and sustainable economy is fundamentally impossible without the active and systemic participation of the SME sector. Integrating sustainable development goals into the day-to-day operations of SMEs presents a complex web of conflicting demands, as these firms constantly grapple with severe resource constraints, lack of specialized expertise, and limited financial capital (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024).

Traditional, linear management paradigms are unable to fully comprehend or address the complex interplay of these economic, environmental, and sociocultural demands. In this context, sustainability is intrinsically marked by paradoxes; it is a collection of opposing but connected components that coexist and endure over time (Schulte and Paris, 2024). A strong theoretical framework for examining the moral and practical ambiguity encountered by tourism professionals as they negotiate these extraordinary shifts is provided by paradox theory (Power et al. 2022). The various types of conflicts that Turkish tourism SMEs have to deal with are revealed by applying the Paradox Theory. When SMEs are forced to put long-term ecological investments ahead of short-term financial solvency and growth, economic paradoxes become evident (Langewitz & Wigman, 2024). Furthermore, the tourism industry harbors an environmental paradox at its core. The industry primarily depends on the pristine quality of natural landscapes to attract guests; but, infrastructure development efforts are required to maintain mass

tourism actively contribute to the degradation of these natural beauties through increased carbon footprint, habitat demolition, and overusing up the resources (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024).

The socio-cultural paradoxes caused by sustainable tourism initiatives are just as critical as the economic ones. Sustainability-driven change management often misses the elements of integration and social equity within host communities (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). Destinations unintentionally run the danger of influencing local cultures or worsening the financial gap between wealthy foreign guests and the local workforce as they attempt to adopt "green" tourism strategies. Small tourism businesses, which are at the center of these social conflicts, are under pressure to adapt to the standards and requirements of international eco-labels, which are imposed from top to bottom, while trying to offer authentic, culturally respectful experiences.

SMEs, which form the economic backbone of the tourism sector, are highly vulnerable to mandatory environmental-game pressures, especially in markets like Turkey, where state-mandated eco-certification frameworks are rapidly transforming sustainability from a voluntary initiative into a strict legal prerequisite for market survival. Rather than framing sustainability decisions as simple trade-offs such as 'sacrificing environmental sustainability for economic survival,' the current study advocates for an integrative cognitive approach using Paradox Theory (Schulte & Paris, 2024). Accordingly, the main purpose of the article is to illuminate these multifaceted sustainable tourism paradoxes and position these contradictions as strategic solution points, not as obstacles. This study, which critically filters Turkish tourism in terms of economic, socio-cultural and environmental paradoxes, especially with a focus on SMEs; it aims to create a framework to overcome the risk of SMEs stopping their activities in the near future in an increasingly regulated global market.

Literature Review: Navigating the Paradoxes of Sustainable Tourism in SMEs

Global Importance and Cumulative Impact of SMEs

While the environmental and social footprint of a single SME may seem insignificant, the 'SME impact paradox' reveals itself in striking statistics at the Macro level; globally, SMEs are responsible for about 65% of industrial pollution, generate over 60% of commercial waste, and account for about 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024; Schulte & Paris, 2024). Managing this huge cumulative impact creates structural tensions that are difficult to overcome for SMEs, far beyond simple operational obstacles. Therefore, resolving sustainability paradoxes within SMEs is not a marginal issue; it is an essential prerequisite for global ecological survival. However, sustainability inherently forces these smaller firms to manage ever-competing targets simultaneously. In environments where resources are extremely limited, such as the tourism sector, this management process leaves companies with existential contradictions in 3 basic dimensions: economic, social, cultural and environmental paradoxes.

Economic, Socio-Cultural and Environmental Paradoxes in SMEs

By its very nature, sustainability forces organizations to navigate competitive goals that constantly create paradoxes in three dimensions (Schulte & Paris, 2024; Westover, 2025):

Economic Paradoxes: SMEs face a severe tension between short-term financial survival and long-term sustainable growth (Schulte & Paris, 2024). Burdened by the "liability of being smallness" to a chronic lack of financial capital and expertise, SMEs often clash with urgent profitability imperatives (Langewitz & Wigman, 2024).

Socio-Cultural Paradoxes: Tourism SMEs act as "cultural brokers" in rural and local destinations (Maziliauske, 2024). They must balance the preservation of local traditions and authentic community well-being while simultaneously satisfying the commercial demands of international tourists (Maziliauske, 2024).

Environmental Paradoxes: The tourism industry is fundamentally dependent on the pristine quality of natural landscapes, but the extreme mobility and infrastructure development required to sustain the industry are actively disrupting these ecological assets (Fennell & Butler, 2025).

Introduction to Paradox Theory in Sustainability

Integration of sustainable development principles into the daily operational processes of SMEs poses a highly complex, multidimensional challenge that profoundly defies traditional and linear management paradigms (Schulte & Paris, 2024). Current academic debate uses Smith and Lewis's (2011) ‘Paradox Theory’ instead of linear trade-offs to examine the structural conflicts conceptually described in the introduction (Schulte & Paris, 2024). It is clear that establishing a sustainable tourism industry requires a significant mental shift toward paradoxical cognition, a cognitive framework of ‘both/and’ that acknowledges complexity rather than linear oversimplifications, when we examine the sustainability discourse through this theoretical lens (Schulte & Paris, 2024). In the specific context of tourism SMEs, these established tensions can be critically classified into four different typologies: the paradoxes of Performance, Organization, Belonging, and Learning (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schulte & Paris, 2024).

Performance Paradoxes: These tensions arise directly from the friction of driving multiple, divergent goals, particularly the fundamental conflict between economic profitability and socio-ecological responsibility (as cited in Hahn et al., 2014, Langewitz & Wigman, 2024).

Organizational Paradoxes: It manifests itself through structural and procedural contradictions within the business; in tourism SMEs, this is evident in the tension between the imperative to implement strict, top-down imposed international eco-certifications and the decentralized, resource-constrained, and informal organizational structures typical of small businesses (Schulte & Paris, 2024).

Belonging Paradoxes: this highlights conflicts of identity, values, and integration among stakeholders, as tourism SMEs are at the crossroads of local and global tensions. Businesses struggle to align the authentic socio-cultural values of their host communities with the highly commercialized demands of international tourists (Langewitz & Wigman, 2024).

Learning Paradoxes: Encompassing the temporal and epistemological tensions of sustainable adaptation, reflecting the struggle SMEs face between using established, profitable routines from the past and exploring the radical green innovations needed to secure future ecological resilience (Schulte & Paris, 2024).

The Economic Paradox: Profitability or Planet? 'Challenges of Being Small'

At its core, the economic paradox represents the most pressing existential hurdle for tourism SMEs, as it forces a difficult negotiation between securing financial profit and ensuring ecological preservation (Langewitz & Wigman, 2024). While the general logic of classical economics typically dictates let an organisation fundamental obligation is profit maximisation, this narrow approach systemically overlooks socio-ecological frictions. Therefore, sustainability is frequently undermined to a mere secondary, burdensome cost rather than strategic necessity (as cited in Ahluwalia, 2022, Schulte & Paris, 2024). This macroeconomic conflict underscores the inherent contradiction off pursing perpetual economic progress at the expense of finite natural assets, a systematic struggle widely identified in the literature as the 'growth paradox' (Edwards, 2021; Langewitz & Wigman, 2024).

The macroeconomic friction described above is intrinsically linked to the 'Challenges of Being Small' (Djupdal & Westhead, 2015, Langewitz & Wigman, 2024; Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). While multinational hotel chains utilised their vast resource pools and economies of scale to absorb the capital intensive costs of green innovation, small scale facilities are consistently struggling by chronic resource limitations, acute financial vulnerability, and the deficit in specialised expertise (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024). Under such persistent resource limitations, the front end capital pivot towards sustainable operations whether through extensive infrastructural retrofitting, pursuit of rigorous eco certifications, to restructuring off entire supply chains, routinely eclipses any immediate financial gain. This chronic imbalance between heavy initial investment and delayed profitability creates a significant barrier for Turkish tourism SMEs as the economic show reality of going green often clashes with the urgent required daily survival (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024). The acute lack of resources compels SMEs interest shifting state of cognitive and operational struggle, as they fluctuate between the ideals of aspirational sustainability and the demands of performance oriented action. According to Langewitz & Wigman (2024), Aspirational sustainability is characterised by a sincere, value driven commitment to profound ecological integration which directly mirrors the paradoxical framework discussed earlier (Langewitz & Wigman, 2024). However, facing high price sensitivity, inadequate external financial incentives, and short-term budgetary pressures, SME managers constantly find themselves compelled to prioritize immediate financial survival over ecological integrity (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024). This external pressure diminishes the capacity of enterprises for integrative solutions, leading to defensive mechanization (trade-offs) where financial considerations always "win" and certain practices are not strictly mandated by law (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024). Consequently, the Economic Paradox traps SMEs in a cycle where environmental responsibility is systematically subordinated to financial solvency, and sustainable participation is limited to superficial or compliance-driven performance actions (Langewitz & Wigman, 2024).

The Social-Environmental Strategy Paradox: The U-Curve Relationship

While The Economic Paradox captures the macro-level conflict between financial solvency and sustainability goals, within the sustainability agenda itself, there is a highly nuanced paradox of

performance and organization: the Paradox of Social-Environmental Strategy (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). In the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, it is widely accepted theoretical assumption that social and environmental strategies are inherently complementing each other and synergistic (Purvis et al., 2018; Langewitz & Wigman, 2024). However, recent empirical analyses focusing on hybrid SMEs and B Corp (Social Benefit Company) certified enterprises challenge this assumption, revealing a highly complex, non-linear relationship between the two dimensions (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). SMEs that voluntarily adopt a Triple Balance Sheet (TBL) approach face severe limitations in organizational flexibility; this severely restricts their capacity to pursue multiple high-impact sustainability strategies simultaneously (Adomako & Nguyen, 2020; Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). Research using objective performance data shows that the relationship between the intensity of social strategies and the adoption of environmental strategies forms a distinct "U-Curve" (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). At low and medium densities, implementing both proactive social strategies (focusing on worker welfare, training, and fair labor practices) and leadership social strategies (focusing on community development) actually diminishes the likelihood that an SME will adopt strong environmental practices (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025).

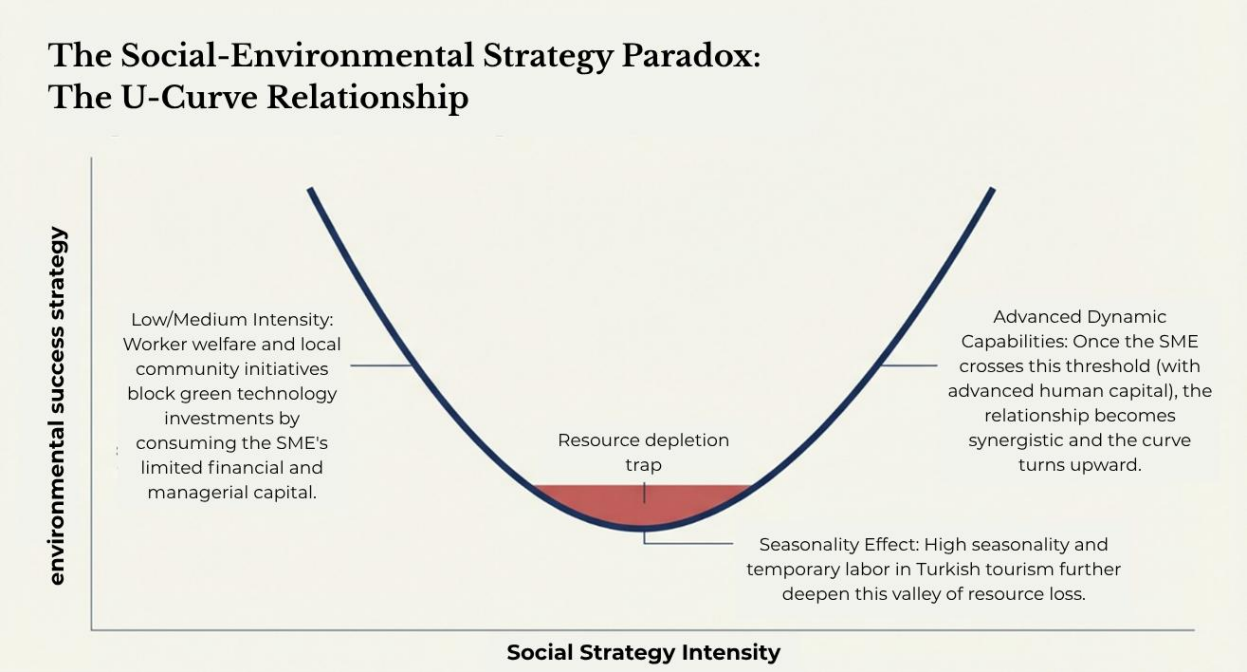


Figure 1: Nonlinear U-Curve Relationship Between Socio-Environmental Strategy Paradox

This initial negative correlation is due to the fact that intensive social enterprises are highly resource-intensive activities; such endeavors heavily dominate a large portion of limited management time, financial capital, and organizational focus (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). When SMEs Prioritise social objectives too intensely, they can in advertently drain the financial reserves required for parallel investments in green technology renewable energy, or circular economy

initiatives. This dynamic as Martín-Rocañín et al. (2025), point out, often forces social and environmental goals into a 0 sum competition for limited capital (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025) Within the specific context of tourism SMEs, this resources depletion is severely magnified by an intrinsic socio-economic paradox, largely driven by tourism seasonality and chronic economic instability. As Maziliauske (2024) obnserves, tourism demand fluctuates drastically between peak and off-seasons, destinations face intense infrastructure pressure during high seasons and severe economic contraction during low seasons (Maziliauske, 2024). However, the stark gap between high and low seasons in Turkey prevents SMEs from providing stable employment, making them dependent on a permanent temporary low-wage and unskilled seasonal workforce. Herein lies a profound socio-economic paradox: the successful implementation and continuity of long-term environmental sustainability initiatives fundamentally depend on the proactive participation, positive attitudes, and dedicated training of a firm's employees (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). Yet the economic instability caused by seasonality actively undermines SMEs' ability to cultivate and retain this dedicated workforce to overcome the U-Curve, hindering social sustainability efforts while simultaneously paralyzing environmental progress (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024; Maziliauske, 2024).

The U-curve framework predicts that a rebound occurs when an SME overcomes these socio-economic barriers (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). Crossing this threshold enables the firm to accumulate advanced, cross-domain dynamic capabilities, such as strategic proactivity, enhanced human capital, and robust stakeholder management (Teece, 2007; Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). Once these deep organizational capabilities are established, the relationship evolves to become synergistic; the organizational strength generated by deep social integration compensates for the initial loss of resources, facilitating the successful integration of environmental improvements (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025). This paradoxical U-curve implies that SMEs may need to follow a sequential and deliberately unbalanced trajectory, prioritizing intrinsic social stability and workforce capabilities first, followed by fully addressing environmental metrics, to avoid falling into an intermediate trap where none of the sustainable goals can be successfully achieved due to seasonal and economic vulnerability (Martín-Rocañín et al., 2025).

Environmental Paradox and the Rebound Effect

The lastest aspect of this literature review focuses on the Environmental Paradox, which fundamentally inquires the effectiveness of modern sustainable tourism paradigms (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). The tourism sector is built on an ironic structural paradox; on one hand it is highly dependent on the untouched quality of natural landscapes, biodiversity, and ecological health to attract guests, on the other hand the infrastructure development; non-stop construction, worldwide travelling thus perpetuating carbon footprint increase, and intense resource consumption such as water, required to persist the industry, are actively destroying these natural assets (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). Considering a single SME owners or management may see their individual ecological footprint is unimportant, their effect on this aspect of environmental paradox more than they expect. According to the study Gössling & Reinhold (2024) conducted, SMEs are the mutual

driver for approximately 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions in the tourism sector (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024). In this situation SMEs bear with an interesting fact and dilemma which they are the one that must protect the environment, both for tourism and from the destructive impacts created by tourism itself (Fennell & Butler, 2025; Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024).

Explaining this situation with the Jevons Paradox is adding another layer. It highlights a frustrating an economic irony of which explaining that technological advancements are seen as providing the resource use efficiency, yet the total consumption of that resource is increased rather than a net decrease (Giampietro & Mayumi, 2018; Fennell & Butler, 2025). According to Fennell & Butler (2025), this is named as 'rebound affect' that is experienced during SMEs daily operations (Fennell & Butler, 2025). For instance, management make an investment for eco-friendly structure and set the showerheads with aerator, dual-stage flushing, efficient irrigation systems, or energy-efficient lighting, to decrease the environmental impact of property, but this often triggers unexpected behavioral changes (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). Tourists exhibit rebound behaviors such as taking significantly longer showers or using water sources more frequently, believing that technology reduces their environmental impact; this completely eliminates the expected ecological savings (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). Especially in the context of Turkey, this rebound effect reaches a far more destructive dimension when combined with mass tourism and 'all-inclusive' models that cause high economic leakage (Leotaud et al., 2024; Power et al., 2022). As highlighted in Table 1, the 24/7 non-stop working nature of the hospitality industry place massive pressure on water resources, with the current tourism demand already exceeds the water supply (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). Although the literature shows that eco-efficient systems have the potential to reduce water consumption by 25% (Pappas, 2024), the 'perception of unlimited rights to consume' embedded by the all-inclusive concept in tourist psychology directly triggers the Jevons paradox, rapidly nullifying these technological efficiency gains (Fennel & Butler, 2025). Moreover, when SMEs attempt to actively intervene and implement environmental protocols to counter these reactive behaviors, such as actively restricting the use of air conditioning for periods when they are not in the room or removing disposable amenities, they are often triggering a harmful phenomenon referred to as 'value co-destruction'. In the highly competitive, customer-centric hospitality industry, SME guests often perceive these eco-friendly restrictions as an unacceptable sacrifice of their personal comfort, luxury, or convenience, inevitably leading to customer dissatisfaction. While the implementation of environmental controls with an aggressive strategy triggers the risk of 'value destruction' and customer loss, adopting a passive attitude criticizes the cumulative ecological footprints of SMEs; this situation leads managers to a strategic dilemma that is difficult to overcome (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024; Sadia et al., 2025).

Another factor that is complicating this operational dilemma more is guests usually have doubts on the facilities' environmental efforts and perceive them as marketing strategy that undermines facilities' well-intentioned sustainability efforts . This distrust is explained by activist Jay Westerveld in 1896 as the 'green washing' (Pearson, 2010; Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). According to Westerveld's classic towel use example, practices that act as serving ecological purposes such

as water conservation, are actually targeting for minimizing operational costs, which appear the profit-oriented motivations are tried to hide under the mask of environmental responsibility. Today this phenomenon is accompanied by the risk of 'strategic decoupling' which refers to a disconnection between words and action. As efficiency gains consistently trigger rebound effects that increase ecological footprints, so the current path of sustainable tourism risks being a myth, characterized by 'perisseuo', as per Fennel & Butler (2025) that is excess of abundance the planet cannot sustain (Fennel & Butler, 2025).

Contextual Analysis: Addressing the Paradox of Sustainable Tourism in the Turkish SME Landscape

The Turkish SMEs which form the backbone of the economy in terms of manufacturing, industry and tourism, increasingly adopt environmental friendly competitive strategies in order to remain relevant in the market (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024). Nevertheless, the necessity often conflicts with real world operations. In order to analyze Turkish SMEs environment, it is necessary to critically examine the structural financial weaknesses that they experience, the evolving regulatory frameworks from voluntary to mandatory, the basic financial cost of environmental certification and strategic ambidexterity between proactive environmental leadership and reactive compliance.

Financial Limitations and Resource Scarcity: Green Barrier

Turkish tourism SMEs having difficulties in finance and operational aspects when adopting their operations into sustainable approach, that is described as 'Green Barrier'. Implementation of end to end sustainability strategies requires additional skills like specialised expertise, technology advancements that are essential to develop an adopt these systems, but these are lacking in SMEs natural environment. And yet, SME management should allocate investment in new technologies, employee learning, and other improvements without any assurance of economic gain in short or medium term (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024).

The existing research indicates that particular macroeconomic pressures including elevated interest rates and currency devaluation, have worsened financial capacity and fragility of SMEs. These facilities continually face challenges due to their restricted financial resources including loan opportunities; limited green technology access such as energy and limited partnerships in supply chains. Deveciyan & Bataklar (2024) mentioned in their research, there is a case study of a Turksih textile SME demonstrated where the management team clearly stated under current market conditions the survival is the priority thus there is no capacity to make any urgent investments in green technology without any external support (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024). This real life example emphasizes the importance of 'green barrier' also for tourism SMEs. Many Turkish firms are unable to secure the start-up capital required for green innovation, so they cannot escape the environmental degradation trap.

Transition to Mandatory Frameworks in Turkey:

Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism has launched the comprehensive Turkish Sustainable Tourism Program with Global Sustainable Tourism Council partnership in response to the global initiatives and direction. Thanks to this national level mandatory program, Türkiye became the

first country in the world where all tourism accommodations in its 81 provinces, will have GSTC recognized certificate by 2030 (Sustainable Tourism Partnership, 2024). This is a pioneering achievement on global scale.

Türkiye also legally integrated this sustainability scheme with national business licensing, which expedite businesses adoption to GSTC certification process from a voluntary marketing approach to a fundamental prerequisite for competitive presence in Turkish tourism sector (Sustainable Tourism Partnership, 2024). This compulsory legislative pressure obligates Turkish tourism SMEs bear with environmental costs to comply with the struct sustainability scheme, making it impossible to disregard the ecological responsibilities.

Since this regulation aimed to ensure macro-level environmental protection in Turkey, it has been applied on the floor with 'top-down' and 'one size fits all' approach that creates 'green barrier' and economic paradox for Turkish tourism SMEs when squeezed in resource scarcity at the micro-level. This is also observed by GSTC and confirmed by their internal report called Roundtable on Micro and Small Enterprise Certification (R4MSEC) 2026 report. This report acknowledges that the current certification standards are more suitable for medium and large-scale facilities and creating overwhelming documentation burden for SMEs. Although the SMEs informally operate with sustainability practices in their daily operation, they are having limitations to formally demonstrate their sustainability efforts due to lack of financial and human resources constraints (GSTC, 2026). When considered Türkiye's case this structural mismatch undermines the potential improvements gained by sustainability and removes it being a tool that is used for development opportunity, it pushes SMEs contrarily towards 'strategic decoupling' and superficial minimal temporary compliance for just getting certification.

The Economics of Certification for Small Businesses: From Financial Burden to Strategic Decoupling

The financial burden of accomplishing environmental certifications poses a considerable challenge for small businesses by requiring significant investment in equipment upgrades i.e. water saving or energy saving systems (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024). It is not wrong to say that financial investment requirements of these certifications present a paradox for small businesses. As per Deveciyan and Bataklar (2024), on one hand certification is essential to validate the gren efforts of stakeholders, accessing international markets and overcoming the challenges of being small. But on the other hand, high audit and compliance costs are not easily reflected to customers, as many of them are price sensitive and unwilling to pay more for eco friendly products and services. In this situation SMEs should bear the costs of certification even though they operate on very low profit margins. Therefore, additional supports like the government fundings and/ or tax incentives are vital to neutralize the economic disadvantages of small facilities (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024) Once the acute economic pressure is combined with an ongoing technical expertise lacking withing the company itself, SMEs often must rely on heavily on external consultant to navigate the complex certification frameworks (Gössling & Reinhold, 2024). At this point it is not wrong to say a critical ethical dilemma has been identified which has the potential to compromise the

credibility of certification and causes an ‘Organizational Paradox. Field observations representing the researcher's own practitioner insights beyond the provided literature suggest that an often-conciliatory dynamic development between audit firms and sustainability consultants. In practice, audit firms often recommend specific consultants to SMEs. If an SME chooses to work with an independent consultant, auditors may adopt a non-standard, ambiguous, or overly punitive approach during the assessment. Conversely, using the proposed consultant often results in lenient, accommodating audits driven by a pre-existing symbiotic relationship between the auditor and the consultant. This dynamic leads to arbitrary stretching of legal requirements based on auditors’ different educational and commercial interests, completely annihilating the audit credibility.

The researcher’s observations of this 'conflict of interest' and 'subjective evaluation' in the field indirectly align with the official self-criticism of the GSTC, which is the architect of the system. The GSTC (2026) R4MSEC report explicitly acknowledges that ensuring audits to be fair and consistent, it is imperative that auditors undergo 'targeted calibration training' to understand the operational reality of micro-enterprises and that assessments must focus on actual performance on the floor rather than mere formality (GSTC, 2026). However, this symbiotic consultant-auditor network in the Turkish field, combined with the lack of auditor calibration; it may lead to arbitrary stretching of legal requirements, the transformation of the certification process into a commercial formality that has lost its credibility, and ultimately the systematization of greenwashing by ignoring the cumulative environmental destruction of SMEs in the world.

This on the floor reality reflects the concept of ‘strategic decoupling’ where policies become detached from actual business. A shift in the primary motivation for certification evolves from genuine ecological responsibility to evading the regulation art any cost, the sustainability becomes just a display. Empirical interviews in the SME hospitality sector confirm this managerial deterioration, with executives explicitly stating that many certification bodies do not implement rigorous audits (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2025). As a result, the certification process is reduced to a superficial ‘tick-box’ exercise; It is limited to verifying the existence of a document rather than implementing a sustainable system. According to Çakmakçı & Bahar (2024), iinstead of ensuring the implementation of systemic environmental protections intended by legal frameworks, the current compromising audit process actively encourages ‘greenwashing’ (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). This discrepancy completely results in a trap for Turkish tourism SMEs which is a strategic dead end as they bear the heavy financial costs of superficial compliance without benefits of genuine green innovation.

A Comparison of Proactive Green Cost Leadership with Reactive Minimum Legal Compliance:

Turkish tourism SMEs typically choose one of 2 strategic approaches; proactive green cost leadership or reactive minimal legal compliance because of the financial barriers, strict certification rules and strategic decoupling discussed earlier (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024). Reactive environmental strategies are defensive and directly support performative sustainability which is just a showcase. Usually, the SMEs adopting this approach are the ones that perceive the

environmental regulations i.e. GSTC framework as cost burdens not a chance for strategic opportunity. As per Deveciyan& Bataklar (2024), these facilities implement only basics to undergo superficial audits and their 'last minute' adjustments solely designed to meet minimum legal requirement imposed by government authorities (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024).

This compliance-focused mindset is quite widespread within the tourism sector that is characterized by fragility and low margin tiers, where managers are forced to prioritize short-term financial survival over authentic, long-term ecological innovation. These facilities are indeed trapped in a perpetual cycle of greenwashing.

When it comes to proactive sustainability strategies, they voluntarily go beyond the basic legal requirements through investing in environmental capabilities for instance; pollution control at its source and implementing circular economy models. Thanks to 'Proactive Green Cost Leadership' strategy, tourism SMEs can resolve their economic paradox by creating a sustainable competitive advantage that boosts operational efficiency, reduce the input costs and recycle raw materials and minimize the waste production along with water resource consumption. As stated by Deveciyan & Bataklar (2024), the empirical researches indicate that the green cost leadership is especially effective for broader tourism supply chain including but not limited to the food, beverage and catering sectors of which businesses are subject to high operational costs and produce significant organic products (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024).

In conclusion, this study suggests that the tourism SMEs should not address the environmental risks completely through reactive compliance by just complying with the mandatory regulations since this is fundamentally faulty strategic approach. Although the implementation of minimal amendments and the pursuit of strategic decoupling may offer a temporary short-term solution but won't resolve the economic paradox which is the root cause. Instead, Turkish tourism SMEs must restructure their operations in a way that proactively engages with green cost leadership in order to meet with anticipated future trends. By embedding sustainability as a key driver of long-term resource optimization and not seeing it as a regulatory burden, SMEs can effectively overcome the 'Challenges of Being Small'. This proactive transition strategy is the most suitable approach for resolving economic paradox, providing that SMEs not only survive but also secure a competitive advantage in the global tourism landscape.

Table 1: Macro Pressures on the Tourism Sector and GSTC Directives

Macro Pressure Factor	GSTC Directive or Sustainability Principle	Key Findings and Implications
National Legislation and Legal Mandates	GSTC Industry Criteria and Destination Management	In 2022, Turkey emerged as the first country in the world to mandate GSTC criteria at the government level, aiming to certify all accommodation facilities by 2030. As of July 2025, 1,918 facilities have received certification, and 17,626 facilities have completed the

		verification process, encompassing a capacity of 1.7 million beds (Gössling & Reinhold, 2025; Sustainable Tourism Partnership, 2025; TGA, 2025).
Climate Change and Environmental Pressures	Climate Change Adaptation, Resilience and Resource Efficiency	Climate change severely threatens both winter and coastal tourism; by 2050, the summer season is expected to shrink by 20-30 days. Severe drought restricts the agricultural workforce, which encourages the transition to models such as agrotourism (Cholakova & Dogramadjieva, 2022; Pappas, 2024; Sangnak, 2025; Turner et al., 2022).
Overtourism and Socio-Cultural Impacts Destination Management	Cultural Heritage Conservation and Community Benefit	Overtourism leads to loss of local identity and massive pressure on infrastructure. The industry projected to generate 6.5 gigatons of greenhouse gases by 2025, resolving this crisis necessitates implementing digital flow management, enforcing visitor limitations, and protecting intangible heritage (Colombo & Villanueva, 2022; Horgan, 2022; Pappas, 2024; Sustainability, 2020).
Economic Constraints and SME Transformation	Sustainable Management and Financial Transparency	While SMEs are the backbone of tourism, they suffer from a chronic resource scarcity (specifically access to financing, credit) required for certification. Sustainability investments are often perceived as additional costs rather than strategic priorities, driving the need for incentives by managers (Langewitz & Wigman, 2024; Pappas, 2024; Thomas et al., 2025; Westover, 2025).
Legislative and Reporting Pressure (TSRS/Green Deal)	Corporate Sustainability Reporting and Carbon Footprint Measurement	As of 2024, Scope 1, 2, and 3 emission reporting has become mandatory within the scope of TSRS. The carbon tax risk within the scope of the EU Green Deal has made green transformation a necessity and a structural reform necessity for Turkish SMEs (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024; Green Earth, 2025).

Water Scarcity and Resource Consumption	Resource Efficiency (Energy, Water and Waste Management)	Current tourism demand already exceeds water supply; however, eco-efficient systems can reduce consumption by 25%. The hospitality industry creates high pressure due to 24/7 operation; 8.1% of greenhouse gas emissions originate from tourism (Pappas, 2024; Sönmez Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024).
Economic Leakage and Local Development	Strengthening Ties with the Local Economy	Mass tourism and 'all-inclusive' models trigger high economic leakage and exclude local small businesses. Community-based tourism (CBT) is presented as a solution that keeps revenue local (Leotaud et al., 2024; Power et al., 2022).
Sustainability Governance and Stakeholder Engagement	Participatory Governance and Local Community Engagement	Transitioning from centralized to public-private partnership (PPP) models significantly enhances resilience. However, in regions such as Thrace, barriers to stakeholder engagement make it difficult to implement GSTC principles at the local level (Hatipoglu et al., 2016; Đurić et al., 2025; Saveriades & Farmaki, 2022; Tartera et al., 2022).
Environmental Degradation and Land Use	Natural Environment Protection and Resource Management	The intense pressure of mass tourism makes green service innovations absolutely essential. However, the legally opening of forest areas to tourism development (Article 8 of the Incentive Law) triggers an ecological "green paradox" that sustainability actions cannot compensate for (Elizabeth et al., 2025; Sönmez Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024).
Social and Employment Conditions	Decent Work and Local Employment	Chronic reliance on low-wage, seasonal and informal work in tourism creates a severe paradox in the social dimension of sustainability. Furthermore, the stress of enforcing green rules can negatively impact employee job satisfaction (Sadia et al., 2025; Sönmez Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024).
Technological Transformation and Digitalization	Integration of Innovation and Smart Tourism	Artificial intelligence and smart technologies create "smart & green" models. Digitalization is a strategic tool for promoting sustainable

		behaviors and increasing market reach (Tan & Wright, 2022; Gorman & Stewart, 2022).
Supply Chain and Global Standards	Balance of Ethical Sourcing and Local Identity	Heavy dependence on global supply chains hugely contradicts with local sustainability goals. SMEs experience a "paradox of belonging" when it comes to maintaining their local identity while complying with global standards (GSTC) (Amanollahnejad et al., 2025; Langewitz & Wigman, 2024).
Lack of Information and Accessibility	Information and Transparency (Accessibility Directives)	39% of tourists struggle obtaining information on accessibility for the disabled guests while 46% face difficulty to verify the sustainability certificates of the facilities; this contradicts directly the principle of transparency (Sönmez Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024).
Corporate Capacity and Training	Corporate Sustainability Practices	It is essential to develop sustainability competencies (systems thinking) through training. More than half of the World Heritage sites do not yet have management plans integrated into their business plans (Ateskan & Lane, 2018; Schulte & Paris, 2024; Sustainability, 2020).
Coastal Erosion and Sea Level	Coastal Area Conservation and Biodiversity	Between 50% and 60% of Mediterranean beaches face the imminent risk of disappearing by 2100; this drastic erosion creates the threat of billions of euros in economic losses in coastal tourism assets (Pappas, 2024).

Resolution and Discussion: A Strategic Framework for Turkish Tourism SMEs

The profound economic, socio-cultural, and environmental paradoxes that characterize sustainable tourism pose an existential threat to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) when managed through traditional, linear business paradigms. As noted in the literature Turkish tourism SMEs often operate with limited resources, that forces them to make ‘either/or’ decisions where short term economic survival is the primary focus over long-term ecological management (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024) As per field experience of this article’s researcher, some of the Turkish tourism SMEs had threat to business closure due to regulatory pressures (such as mandatory GSTC sustainable tourism certification scheme) and this research aims to propose multifaceted resolution framework. When Paradoxical Thinking, Ambidextrous Leadership and the Triple Helix Model

are combined with Green Service Innovation presents a strategic roadmap to develop sustainability from an operational burden into a sustainable competitive advantage for them.

Moving Beyond Compromises: A Critical Analyses on Challenges and Potential Solutions

The sustainable tourism tensions' resolution begins with mindset shift among the senior management. It is essential that SME leaders should go beyond the conventional 'either /or' dilemmas to turn paradoxes thinking into operational best practices. For Turkish hoteliers and tourism SMEs, this means perceiving environmental certification not as secondary cost burden for their business profit margins, but as a key to protect their local ecosystem and guarantee of their compliance. According to Schulte & Paris (2024), SMEs will develop and improve their ability to cope with uncertainty, unlock new strategic pathways and nurture creativity and organizational learning by working on paradoxical thinking holistically both for environmental and financial concerns (Schulte & Paris, 2024).

Ambidextrous, Dual Focus Leadership: Strking the Balance Between Management (Exploitation) and Discovery (Exploration):

Modern leadership in sustainability is no longer about choosing between today and tomorrow; it is about mastering both. While paradoxical lens serves as the necessary mental blueprint, ambidextrous leadership provides the actual operational muscle to execute it. In this specific for real of sustainability, this green ambidexterity is defined by an organisation dynamic capacity to align the pursuit of new environmental opportunities (exploration) with optimization of current green practises (exploitation) (Alsheref et al., 2024). In practise, exploitation focus on optimising existing processes to achieve imminent operational excellence like minimising energy consumption, reducing food waste and improving sustainable supply chain to deliver immediate cost savings. Exploration involves actively seeking extreme Hey court innovations, experimenting with alternative renewable energy sources, and researching completely new sustainable business models to anticipate future regulatory trends (Alsheref et. al., 2024).

When it comes to Turkish tourism SMEs, balancing these dual forces is essential. An exploration only approach risks depleting their finances and purely exploitative approach leaves them vulnerable to evolve the international supply chain requirements and strict national legislation. According to Alsheref et al. (2024), using green ambidexterity approach support SMEs to resolve the economic paradoxes by optimizing the resource use (exploitation) and reduce the imminent operational costs during innovating (exploration) to attract the eco-conscious tourist (Alsheref et al., 2024).

The Collaborative Helix, Overcoming the 'Challenges of Being Small':

Even with SMEs strategic agility and cognitive strengths, SMEs are frequently bottlenecked by their scale. The 'Challenges of Being Small' in other words the reality of being smaller player means these firms naturally lack the deep financial reserves and specialised, departmentalized expertise that give multinational large organizations. (Maziliauske, 2024). In conclusion, to truly resolve the tensions within sustainability, moving beyond organizational boundaries is no longer optional, it requires collaborative partnership. The Triple Helix model is the backbone for this

framework where we can align solutions suggested from researchers, private sector and government bodies (as cited in Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000, Source 1).

In Turkey, government-led initiatives don't just influence the environment they define it, playing a central role that us arguably more pivotal than almost any other systemic factor. While historically, regulations such as the "Tourism Incentive Law" have triggered severe environmental paradoxes by opening up pristine forest areas to tourism development under the guise of public interest (Çakmakçı & Bahar, 2024). Nevertheless, proactive government intervention remains an absolute prerequisite to support SMEs. The implementation of the helix model mandates public sector entities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and academic intermediaries actively co-create sustainability solutions with SMEs (Maziliauske, 2024). Turkish SMEs are in direct need of external support mechanisms, such as targeted tax incentives, green financing grants, and accessible technical guidance, to survive the capital-intensive transition towards international eco-certifications (Deveciyan & Bataklar, 2024). Through multi-stakeholder co-creation, SMEs can successfully pool their resources, distribute the financial risks of green R&D, and overcome structural market barriers, transforming isolated, underfunded enterprises into resilient, region-wide sustainable networks (Maziliauske, 2024).

Beyond these macro-level public-private partnerships, there is an urgent need for structural reform in the certification mechanism itself. Curically, this reform must certainly never equate to diluting the integrity of established standards or ignoring the massive cumulative impact of SMEs which collectively drive 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions and 65% of industrial pollution. On the contrary, the primary objective is to prevent this gigantic cumulative effect from being lost under a bureaucratic camouflage. Instead of enforcing 'one-size-fit-all' audit mechanism and strict control mechanisms; as recommended in the GSTC (2026) roundtable report, certification pathways for SMEs with simplified templates and reliance on proportionality should be urgently adopted. In order for the system to truly control the destructive ecological impact of SMEs, audit processes should be recalibrated to focus on flexible, alternative evidence such as photographs, invoices, visual inspections, and verbal statements, not just the heavy documentation and formality that paralyzes businesses (GSTC, 2026). Without forgetting the fact that SMEs are one of the main actors of environmental destruction in the world, this proportional audit approach, in which bureaucratic obstacles are eliminated, and the focus is on 'on the floor real performance', this proportional auditing approach will liberate the businesses in the Turkish tourism sector out of the superficial cycle of 'box ticking' exercises and 'strategic decoupling'. This new system has been developed to empower SMEs to internalize their cumulative environmental impact in a transparent and manageable manner, has potential to foster genuine and lasting sustainability in Turkish tourism by preventing the ' greenwashing'.

Strategic Mediation with Green Service Innovation Practices

Green service innovation is the key to transform the paradoxical perception and collaborative resources into actual market success. It involves developing and implementing new environmental friendly and socially responsible services that minimise ecological impact while meeting evolving

customer needs. Recent empirical studies show traditional marketing mix strategies about product price place and promotion are no longer enough on their own to improve tourism businesses' environmental and financial performance (Elizabeth et al., 2025). Instead GSI functions as a vital strategic mediator and fundamental resource which enhances the business performance (Elizabeth et al., 2025). It is evident that Turkish tourism SMEs gain economic benefits by transitioning from conventional marketing strategies to distinctive green service innovation (GSI) Such as carbon natural tour packages, digitalising operations to decrease the paper waste, and partnering with local suppliers (Elizabeth et al., 2025). These innovations directly improve the operational efficiency, decreasing the long-term cost and fosters the brand loyalty especially among the eco-conscious tourist. For this reason, GSI supports Turkish SMEs balance between economic profit and environmental responsibility considering that green innovation is not just an external cost, it can also be a catalyst for an internal change leading to enhanced efficiency and cost savings. (Alsheref et al., 2024; Elizabeth et al., 2025)

Conclusion: Synthesizing Theory for Turkish Tourism

The only way to resolve the paradoxes of sustainable tourism is to pursue the root causes of the paradoxes instead of avoiding or ignoring them. It is not about being ' complaint' it is about contributing for better world. It demands voluntarily effort to embed the sustainability principles and overcome its paradoxes. Knowing that the tourism sector is a vital pillar of Turkey's national economy, the action required is nothing short of a systemic transformation. SMEs must actively develop paradoxical thinking and demonstrate green ambidexterity to adopt duality on the complexity of Triple Bottom Line and balance immediate financial survival with long-term ecological exploration. Besides, these enterprises must strategically leverage Triple Helix public-private partnerships to close severe resource gaps. As a final point, by embedding Green Service Innovation at the core of their operations, Turkish SMEs can overcome the challenges of being small and their limitations. This strategic combination empowers them to resolve the threat of market exclusion, and secure a resilient, sustainable future in the global tourism landscape.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study suggests A detailed and comprehensive strategic framework on how to resolve the SMS products in Turkish tourism sector it has some limitations that fundamentally requires further studies. First of all, the study analyses specifically macroeconomic pressures and mandatory regulatory structure based on GSTC criteria that is unique to Türkiye. Because the research is unique to Türkiye its findings restricted to be generalised find different market context. Even though valuable practise insights and field observations has been shared further Empirical research is required on these findings. Specifically, detailed studies are required to observe ongoing operational frictions that SMEs experience throughout their sustainability journey.

It is also suggested that scholars to focus on evaluation of the cumulative impact along with macro level strategic shifts impact on the internal dynamics and competitive resilience of SMEs. Illuminating these interconnected dynamics will ultimately forge more refined strategies for authentic ecological integration.

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From Message Framing to Communication Strategy: A Conceptual Framework Based on Communication Model for Effective Sustainability Communication in Tourism

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Abstract

Purpose: This study conducts an integrative systematic review of how message framing has been applied in tourism sustainability communication and develops an integrative, theory-driven conceptual framework that uses McGuire's communication model, integrated with marketing communications, as an organizing template for message framing in tourism.

Design/methodology/approach*:* This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical studies that use message-framing interventions as promotional tools for sustainability in tourism and related domains, following the PRISMA guidelines. Studies are organized using McGuire's communication model as a conceptual framework, focusing on the source, message, channel, receiver, and effects.

Results*:* The review identifies profound theoretical fragmentation, a limited behavioral focus (e.g., towel reuse), and a predominant emphasis on isolated message elements (e.g., gain/loss frames), while neglecting the integration of source, structure, format, and channel characteristics. Single frames show inconsistent effects, whereas combinations with other variables (e.g., source credibility) are more reliable. The proposed framework maps message-framing strategies across McGuire's communication model to specify where existing studies cluster and where critical gaps remain in the literature.

Originality/value*:* This study moves beyond a theoretical, message-level diagnostic approaches by offering a process-oriented, multi-theoretical framework that explains how and why message framing can more effectively influence sustainable decision-making in tourism and provides actionable guidance for campaign design and evaluation.

Keywords*:* Message framing; Tourism sustainability communication; Marketing communications; McGuire's communication model; Systematic literature review

Introduction

Carbonflation (rising emissions) from carbon-intensive growth has intensified calls for effective sustainability communication, particularly to understand how persuasive framing can support behavior change in tourism(Dolnicar & Greene, 2025; Peeters et al., 2024; Tölkes, 2018).

Current reviews show that message framing shapes how people interpret choices by presenting outcomes as gains or losses or by highlighting different attributes or goals The effects of framing on environmental decisions(Florence et al., 2022; Ropret Homar & Knežević Cvelbar, 2021). Yet

these reviews also reveal a surface-level treatment of message design: few tourism sustainability studies apply theoretical frameworks or framing strategies, and message factors are only preliminarily categorized (Tölkes, 2018). The prevailing assumption that "sustainability messages work" rests on weakly specified evidence and rarely examines how messages are constructed.

Within this landscape, message framing has become a popular strategy for promoting pro-environmental behaviors, such as towel reuse and recycling, in hospitality settings(Blose et al., 2014; Goldstein et al., 2008; Gössling et al., 2019). However, experimental tourism studies labelled as "message framing" typically treat the message as a simple gain/loss or abstract/concrete tweak layered onto a generic environmental benefit, while the message content, structural frame, and motivational appeal remain implicit or ambiguously reported(Joyal-Desmarais et al., 2022; Updegraff & Rothman, 2013). This mismatch between the precision claimed by framing theory and the actual specification of interventions helps explain why framing effects in tourism remain mixed and inconclusive(Florence et al., 2022; Ropret Homar & Knežević Cvelbar, 2021).

This limited operationalization reflects a deeper gap in the theorization of the communication process. McGuire-based coding application of ourism message-framing experiments shows that source credibility is usually fixed as a hotel brand or omitted entirely(Kim & Kim, 2013), the channel is invariant (print-based in-room materials), and audience characteristics are treated as background rather than moderators(Rathee & Milfeld, 2024; Tölkes, 2018). Where studies cross communication inputs (aligning source with frame or appeal with audience) effects tend to be more consistent and behaviorally sustained(Florence et al., 2022); however, no review has systematically organized this logic for tourism sustainability message framing. Broader persuasive appeals research similarly shows that single-factor manipulations produce small, mixed effects and that motivational appeals form a distinct design dimension with their own effects and boundary conditions(Florence et al., 2022; Joyal-Desmarais et al., 2022; Keller & Lehmann, 2008).

Prior reviews have advanced the understanding of framing effects, intervention mechanisms, and sustainability communication scope (see Table 1); however, they remain partial solutions Certain ones map sustainability communication broadly without a message-design framework(Demeter et al., 2023; He et al., 2023; Tölkes, 2018). Others document mixed gain/loss effects through single-theory lenses(Ropret Homar & Knežević Cvelbar, 2021), and still others build multi-theory taxonomies or examine green advertising effectiveness without tourism-specific operationalization or explicit communication inputs(Florence et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2023; Rathee & Milfeld, 2024). Even when McGuire's model is cited, it is often applied to information-processing outputs rather than communication inputs, leaving the input side underdiagnosed(Lima et al., 2023; McGuire, 2013).

Therefore, the unresolved issue is not whether framing works but how tourism sustainability messages should be strategically designed as complete communication configurations, specifying who communicates, what theme, frame, and appeal are used, through which channel, to which audience, and toward which behavior, rather than testing single framing variables in isolation.

Methodology

Guided by McGuire's communication–persuasion model (Lasswell, 1948; McGuire, 1985) and refined by marketing communications work on message strategy, we treat the "message" input as internally structured rather than undifferentiated. This involves distinguishing three distinguishing message-design dimensions: Message theme (what is promised or warned), structural frame (how outcomes are organized, e.g., gain vs. loss, abstract vs. concrete), and motivational appeal (why the message should matter, e.g., normative, guilt)(Joyal-Desmarais et al., 2022; Kotler & Keller, 2015). This three-part decomposition, grounded in distinctions between marketing communications message strategies, informed our coding of primary studies and directly underpins the deficiencies we identify.

This study employs a systematic literature review following PRISMA guidelines(Page et al., 2021), combined with a reshaping review approach (Krlev et al., 2025) and an integrative synthesis (Cronin & George, 2023) across related practice. We searched major tourism, marketing, and interdisciplinary databases (Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ScienceDirect) for studies published between 2005 and 2025 using keywords for message framing and sustainability communication. Studies were eligible for message-framing interventions in in-stay hospitality accommodation communication that targeted behaviors within guest rooms or on-site restaurant/buffet settings. Studies were excluded if the behavioral target involved pre-trip purchase decisions (e.g., carbon-offset products, green hotel bookings) or if the stimulus context was an online booking interface rather than an accommodation setting communication material, as these differ structurally in channel format, audience, and behavioral immediacy from the in-stay contexts the McGuire-based coding is designed to diagnose. Due to heterogeneity in theories, framing appeals, and methods, as well as a limited number of studies and frequent lack of effect sizes, a meta-analysis was not feasible; therefore, a systematic synthesis was adopted.

For each included study, we coded source features (e.g., brand, third-party endorsement), message theme, frame type, motivational appeal, message integration, communication material, channel, audience, and target behavior. Mapping these codes onto McGuire's model allowed us to identify which communication inputs have been systematically varied and which have been neglected, producing a transparent diagnostic basis for conclusions about the current state and future needs of tourism framing research. (See Figure 1)

Results

McGuire-based extraction identified 11 experimental and quasi-experimental studies on tourism-related sustainability communication in hotel accommodation settings. Mapped onto McGuire’s communication model, the evidence clusters unevenly across inputs and reveals three substantive patterns.

Across all 11 studies (see Table 2), the message layer was dominated by single structural frame manipulations, mainly gain–loss and normative variants(Blose et al., 2014; Cozzio et al., 2020; Goldstein et al., 2008; Gössling et al., 2019; Grazzini et al., 2018), while the message theme and motivational appeal remained implicit or unspecified. Multi-theoretical approaches applied to similar low-impact behaviors have yielded small, inconsistent effects(Florence et al., 2022). Only

one study explicitly manipulated source credibility, and none systematically varied the channel (Kim & Kim, 2013). Overall, tourism framing research remains operationally content-centric: it manipulates structural valence while treating source, channel, and audience as background rather than designable communication inputs, underscoring the need for studies that systematically vary inputs in combination.

Behavioral focus is concentrated on low-impact accommodation behaviors—towel reuse, in-room recycling, turning off lights, and eco-friendly food choices (Baca-Motes et al., 2013; Cozzio et al., 2020; Grazzini et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2017) with only two studies examining broader intentions, such as willingness to pay for green hotels(Baek & Yoon, 2017; Su & Li, 2022). High-impact decisions, such as transport choice, daily trips, or reducing carbon-intensive activities, are entirely absent and constitute an urgent priority for future framing research. All studies use non-personal, print-based materials (door hangers, note cards, written forms, and buffet displays), and the channel is invariant across the sample.

Findings are more consistent and theoretically informative when studies cross message layers. Source credibility combined with positive framing yields the most favorable recycling attitudes(Kim & Kim, 2013); concrete loss-framed messages increase recycling via self-efficacy(Grazzini et al., 2018); guilt paired with gain framing and shame paired with loss framing generate distinct recycling responses(Grazzini et al., 2018); and mindset moderates gain–loss framing effects on willingness to pay(Su & Li, 2022). The clearest appeal-layer evidence comes from the sole advertising-field study, where guilt-primed participants respond more favorably to gain-framed recycling messages and shame-primed participants to loss-framed messages—an interaction replicated across samples and strengthened by effort investment(Baek & Yoon, 2017). No tourism-specific study tested this guilt/shame × gain–loss configuration, confirming that the motivational appeal remains the most underdeveloped dimension of tourism framing research and a promising target for systematic investigation.

These rare cross-layer findings directly support the McGuire-based view that framing effectiveness emerges from configurations of communication inputs rather than single-variable manipulations. Future field experiments should therefore vary inputs—particularly source, channel, and audience—in combination. Taken together, the three patterns show that tourism message-framing research is theoretically fragmented, behaviorally narrow, and predominantly message-content-centric, highlighting the need for a process-oriented, communication-input framework to organize, evaluate, and guide future work.

Conclusion

This systematic review shows that although message framing is widely used in tourism sustainability communication, it remains conceptually and methodologically underdeveloped. Theoretical fragmentation, narrow behavioral scope, and reliance on single, content-centric frame manipulations produce small, inconsistent, and hard-to-generalize effects. Current approaches are therefore unlikely to resolve these inconsistencies or guide robust message design—not because

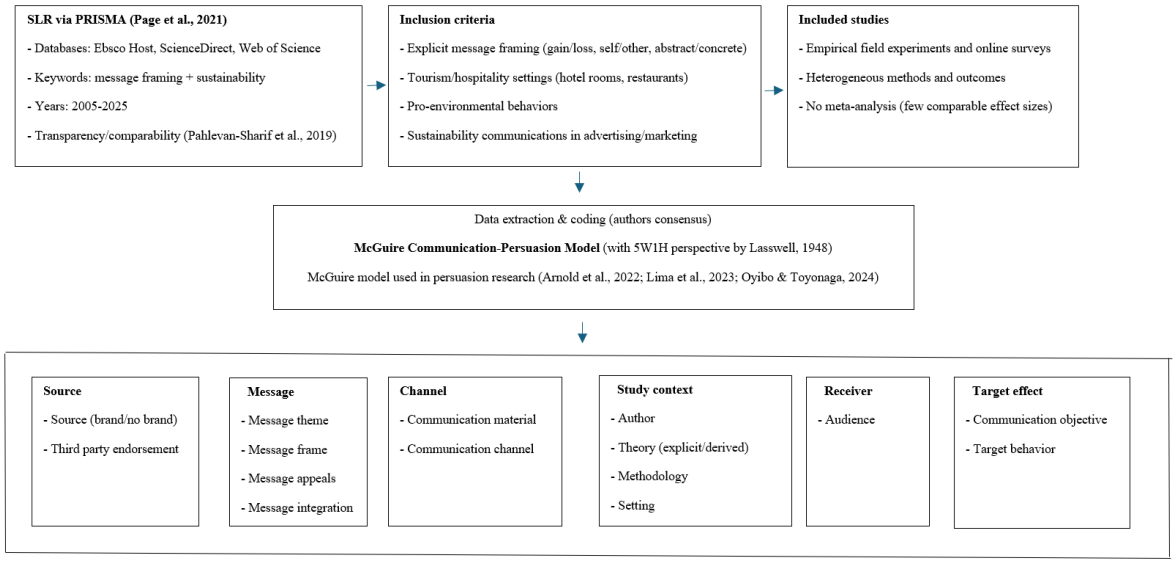
framing itself fails, but because it is applied without a coherent communication-strategy framework.

These experimental patterns are not mere laboratory artifacts; they mirror systemic conditions in industrial practice. Content analyses of sustainability messages study reports passive, constrained communication and limited use of source credibility(Villarino & Font, 2015), whereas rhetorical studies of green communications show a heavy reliance on a single storyline and channel without aligning the source, message, audience, and timing into a coherent strategy(Jameson & Brownell, 2012). Together, this evidence confirms that the content-centric, source-invisible pattern identified in our experimental sample is both widespread and persistent.

This review addresses this gap by operationalizing McGuire's communication model, integrated with marketing communications message-design distinctions, as a systematic coding and design framework. The framework maps message-framing strategies across McGuire's communication inputs—source, message (theme, frame, appeal), channel, audience, and targeted effect—to show where tourism studies currently cluster and where critical gaps remain. Rather than asking "does loss framing work?", it enables the more productive question: for whom, through which channel, combined with which source and appeal, and toward which behavior does a given frame configuration work best?

The proposed framework responds to both levels of failure identified here: the theoretical fragmentation across prior reviews and the operational narrowness across experimental studies, both rooted in the absence of a process-oriented communication-input perspective. For practitioners, this implies designing sustainability messages as integrated campaigns that explicitly align source credibility, frame type, motivational appeal, channel format, and audience segment within a McGuire-style 5W1H structure, rather than relying on isolated gain–loss tweaks or passive descriptions(Kotler et al., 2017; Kotler & Keller, 2015). Future research should test such configurations in real campaigns, extend the behavioral scope to high-impact decisions, and use longitudinal and multi-method designs to assess the predictive and practical value of process-oriented message-strategy design in tourism sustainability communication.

Figure1: Methodology and McGuire communication Model



References from figure 1: (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019), (Arnold et al., 2022), (Lima et al., 2023), (Oyibo & Toyonaga, 2024)

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A Bibliometric Study on the Role of Sustainability in Destination Management Literature

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the current state of sustainability in the literature, along with its environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions, as it is an important concept in terms of destination development and management.

Study design/methodology/approach: Within the scope of this study, bibliometric analysis was used to identify key trends, knowledge gaps, and research deficiencies. During the analysis process, a total of 786 research articles published in the Web of Science database between 1999 and 2025 were examined. Data analysis was performed using VOSviewer and the Biblioshiny extension of R Studio, with the evaluations conducted under eight headings.

Results: The findings reveal that the concept of "sustainability" has been addressed only at the title level in many studies. It has been determined that the topics of "destination management" and "sustainability" have become crucial since 2021. The fact that the number of studies addressing destination management and sustainability sub-dimensions together is limited to only 108 indicates that there is a significant research gap in the field.

Originality/value: The fact that the number of studies examining the environmental dimensions of destination management and sustainability is higher than that of other dimensions reveals a need for research on other dimensions of sustainability and destination management.

Keywords Destination Management 1 Sustainability 2 Environmental Sustainability 3 Social Sustainability 4 Economic Sustainability 5

Introduction

One of the most influential factors on destinations is sustainability. Along with the concept of sustainability, the key factors driving change include: changes in visitor behavior leading to increased demand and expectations, increased competition, changing government policies, the growth of the tourism sector, the negative impacts of tourism, and new capacity-related issues requiring cooperation among different stakeholders (Peeters et al., 2018). Rapid developments in information and communication technologies also emerge as another factor affecting the future of destinations (Jovicic, 2019; Kumar, 2020). A competitive geographical location, the history of the global tourism industry, inherited natural and cultural resources, and non-economic competitive factors also shape the changing pressures on destinations (Paunović et al., 2020). These conditions encourage intense competition among tourism destinations, resulting in a more complex phenomenon involving various intertwined elements. It is important to note that destination management is a continuous process. Long-term sustainability approaches in destinations can be achieved by preserving the integrity of all local assets, indigenous cultures, natural processes, biological diversity, and life support systems. At this point, it is crucial for all stakeholders in

destinations to play an active role in the destination management phase in order to manage destinations in a sustainable manner (Mihalic, 2020). The concept of sustainability refers to the balanced implementation of destination management not only in terms of its environmental dimension but also its economic and social dimensions. Sustainability will determine the future direction of destination management and ensure that management practices are integrated into a broader system, taking into account environmental forces such as climate change, resilience, and technological adoption (Fyall & Garrod, 2020). Sustainable destination management requires respect for destinations and their natural and cultural values, as well as the planning and implementation of tourism activities without harming the environment. Environmental responsibilities such as waste management, recycling practices, efficient use of water and energy resources, care for the environment and natural resources, and reduction of carbon footprint are among the fundamental elements of sustainability. In addition, ensuring that local communities benefit fairly from tourism, supporting local products and services, preserving cultural heritage, and enhancing social welfare constitute the social dimension of sustainability. The economic dimension of sustainability encompasses destinations' ability to maintain their long-term economic vitality, tourism revenues contributing to the local economy, increased employment opportunities, and ensuring fairness in income distribution. This dimension aims to transform tourism from an activity focused solely on short-term gains into a process that supports local development and continuously adds value to the regional economy (Byrd, 2007). The destination is the focal point of tourism activities involving various stakeholders engaged in complex social interactions. According to Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and Mikulić (2020), they have argued that the overtourism system has both macro and micro deep environmental impacts on destinations. The environmental impacts that DMO should consider from a macro perspective on destinations include economic restructuring, demographic changes, politics, technology, visitor management, and tourism for all. In contrast, environmental impacts from a micro perspective encompass all elements that directly shape a destination, encouraging it to adapt and compete. From a macro and micro environmental perspective, DMOs need to have a solution-oriented structure in the face of dynamics and complexity to ensure the development and management of destinations (Idisondjaja et al., 2023). It is crucial for DMOs to have the collective ability to integrate and restructure the resources and characteristics of destinations (Haugland et al., 2011). A thorough analysis of resources and a good understanding of characteristics are very important for managing destinations and increasing their competitiveness (Fyall & Garrod 2020). In the process of creating sustainable destinations, orchestration ability develops with resource structuring and appropriate positioning ability (Murray et al., 2022). Successful destination management depends on a sustainable perspective and the performance of DYO's in achieving common goals (Rehman et al., 2019; Asiaei et al., 2021). The successful management of destinations depends on sustainable performance encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the sustainability dimension in destination management on the destination management literature and to determine the current situation using

bibliometric analysis methods, as discussed above. In line with this objective, the study aims to analyze and reveal the main trends and knowledge gaps in the literature.

Methodology

This research examines the impact of sustainability as a primary dimension and its three sub-dimensions—environmental, socio-cultural, and economic—on destination management literature and aims to analyse scientific studies conducted in this context using bibliometric analysis methods. Within this scope, 786 scientific articles in the Web of Science (WoS) database were analyzed. The aim is to analyze the existing literature addressing the impact of the main dimension of sustainability on destination management and, in this context, to identify general trends and relevant knowledge gaps.

The concept of "bibliometrics" was first introduced by Alan Pritchard in 1969. Pritchard (1969) defines bibliometrics as analyzing written communication, using the processes obtained as a result of the analysis and statistical tools to contribute to the reality and development of a scientific field, thereby providing guidance for future research. Bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive framework combining objective criteria with subjective assessments informed by the researcher's theoretical and methodological orientation (Aria & Cuccurollo, 2017; Donthu, 2021). In other words, bibliometric analysis is useful for deciphering and mapping the cumulative scientific knowledge and evolutionary points of established fields by meticulously interpreting large volumes of unstructured data. Therefore, well-conducted bibliometric studies can shed new and meaningful light on a field. Various software tools are used to analyze the results obtained in studies conducted with bibliometric analysis. In this study, the bibliometric analysis software VOSviewer and the Biblioshiny extension of the R Studio program were preferred. The main reason for choosing these programs is that they offer powerful capabilities for revealing the dynamics and new trends in the relationships between the variables addressed in the study. The VOSviewer program is preferred by researchers because it is software developed specifically for the network-based visualization of large-scale bibliographic data. It offers the ability to effectively map various metrics such as citation analyses, co-author analyses, and keyword co-occurrences (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Similarly, R Studio's Biblioshiny extension is based on Bibliometrix, an open-source package. It provides researchers with the ability to perform advanced bibliometric analyses through a user-friendly interface and offers the opportunity to present data analyses in a rich visual format (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Therefore, both software programs are used as effective tools to comprehensively reveal prominent publication trends, thematic developments, and intellectual structures in the social sciences. The data collected for the research was obtained on October 4, 2025, using keywords via WoS. The following keywords were used in the WoS database: "Destination Management" AND "Destination Planning" OR "Destination Governance" OR "Sustainable Destination" OR "Tourism Destination Management" AND "Sustainability" OR "Sustainable Tourism" OR "Sustainable Development" OR "Environmental Sustainability" OR "Economic Sustainability" OR "Social Sustainability" OR "Cultural Sustainability" were used to search all fields, resulting in 786 studies being found and analyzed. A search using the keywords

identified in the WoS database revealed that the earliest studies on the subject date back to 1999. No time restrictions were imposed during the data collection phase to ensure better understanding of the studies. The years of the first published article to the last published article (1999-2025) were taken into account. All studies included in the research consist of scientific articles. No language restrictions were imposed during the data collection process. Of the articles identified, 761 were in English and 25 were in other languages. To obtain general information about research conducted on destination management and sustainability issues, the analysis continued with the aim of identifying studies on the effects of sustainability on destination management, the development of its dimensions, and sustainable destination planning. Keywords were limited to ("Sustainable Destination" AND "Destination Planning") OR ("Environmental Sustainability" OR "Social Sustainability" OR "Cultural Sustainability") AND ("Destination Management" AND "Destination Governance") were used, and the search was performed again with the all fields tab selected. The search resulted in 108 studies. Within the scope of the research, the analyses related to collaboration between authors and collaboration between researchers across countries were first performed using Vosviewer software. Subsequently, using the Biblioshiny extension of the R Studio program, a bubble chart showing the annual scientific publication output, a collaboration map between authors, a collaboration network map between countries related to co-authors, a bubble chart showing the number of articles published over the years in the top 10 journals most frequently publishing on the subject, a bubble chart showing the most cited publications, a word cloud showing keywords, a bubble chart showing trending topics, a thematic map, and a factor analysis graph showing the conceptual structure were created.

Results

Within the scope of the research, a total of 786 studies were identified from 273 sources published between 1999 and 2025. General information about the studies is presented in detail in Table 1 while Figure 1 shows the annual number of scientific publications supporting this information. Table 1 shows that the annual growth rate of the 786 studies related to the keywords is 19.28%, the average age of the documents is 5.37, and the average number of citations per document is 19.95. The total number of references for all studies obtained is 37,367. In addition, a total of 2,062 authors participated in these studies, including 93 single-author articles. When the content of the studies is examined, the author keywords are 2,425, the average number of co-authors per study is 3.13, and the international co-author rate is 29.77%. Figure 1 shows 3 publications for 2001. The year 2016 marks a significant increase in the number of publications, with 39 publications. Following a decline after 2016, the graph shows that the year with the highest number of publications is 2024, with 101 publications.

Table 1. General information regarding the studies

Time period	**Sources**	**Documents**
1995-2025	273	786
Annual Growth Rate	**Authors**	**Single-Author Documents**
%19,28	2062	93

International Co-authorship	Number of Co-authors per Document	Author Keywords (DE)
%29,77	3,13	2425
Citations	**Average Age of Document**	**Average Citations per Document**
37367	5,37	19,95

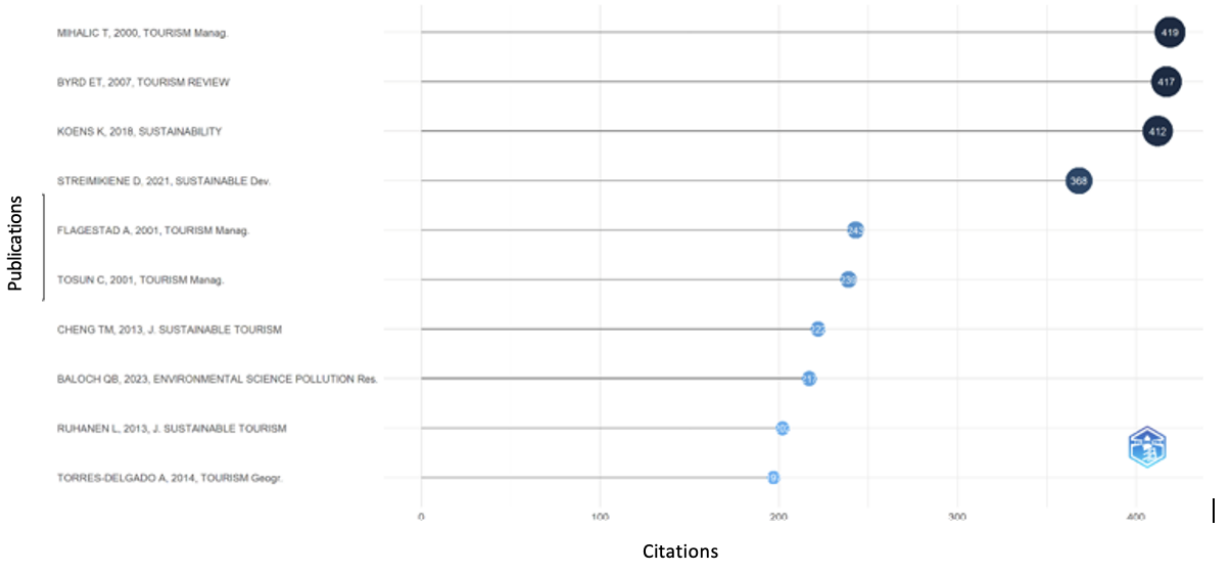


Figure 1. Bubble chart of most cited publications

According to Figure 1, the journal with the highest number of publications on the subject is "Sustainability" with 194 articles. The journal has shown a rapid increase in the number of publications over time, reaching the highest cumulative production number compared to other sources. The Journal of Sustainable Tourism ranks second with 32 publications, while the Journal of Destination Marketing and Management ranks third with 28 publications.

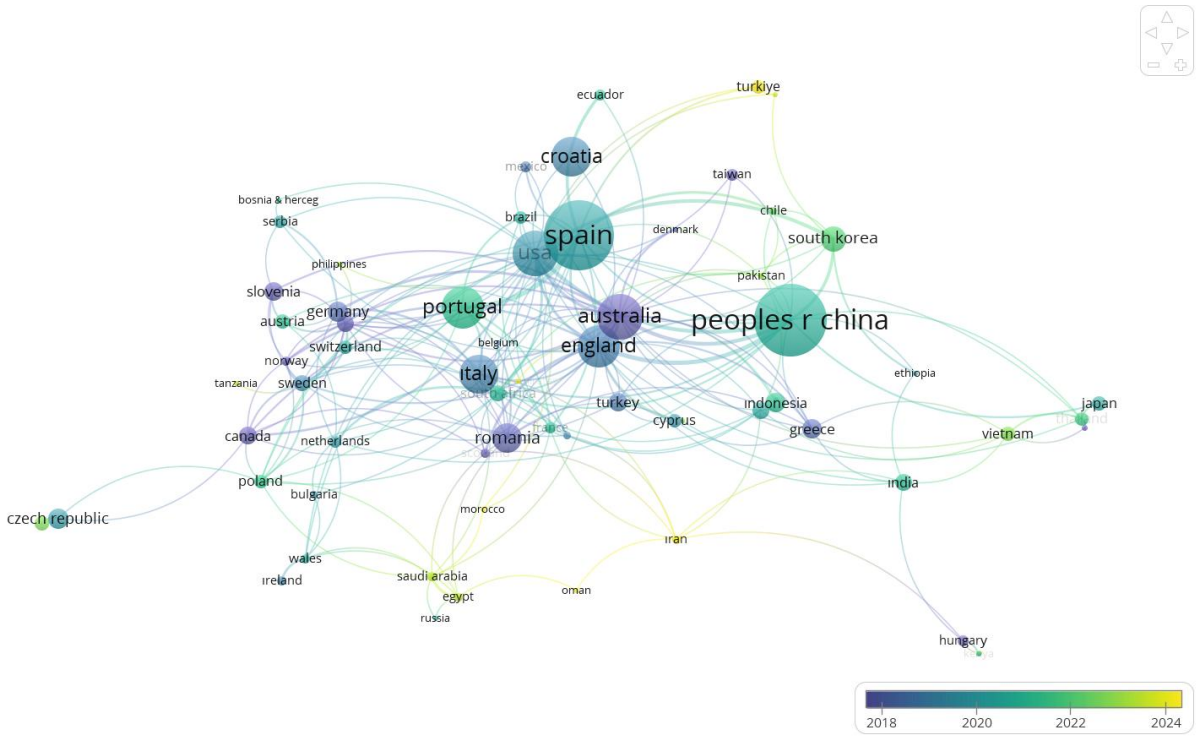


Figure 2. International collaboration map for co-authors

Figure 2 shows the co-authorship analysis conducted to demonstrate collaboration among authors. A network map was created using the criteria of at least 1 publication and 1 citation to identify the most connected and collaborative authors. As can be seen in Figure 2, according to the analysis of the names with the highest connections among them, there are 29 names that merge into a single cluster and a total of 67 connections. According to Figure 2, countries in central locations such as Austria, the United Kingdom, Spain, the People's Republic of China, Italy, and Romania are in collaboration with many countries. Austria collaborates with 23 countries, the United Kingdom with 22, Spain with 20, the People's Republic of China with 18, Italy with 14, and Romania with 12 countries to produce publications, while countries such as Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Japan, Russia, Kenya, and the Czech Republic remain outside the main network and have very few connections.

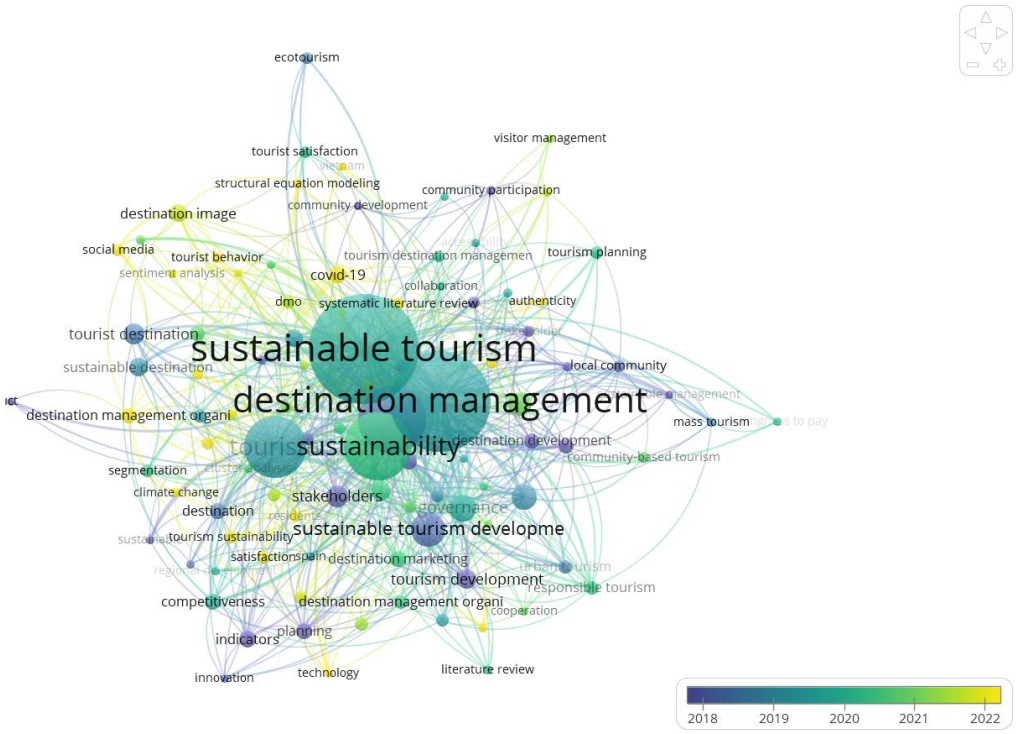


Figure 3. Word cloud related to keywords

According to the word cloud created based on the frequency of keywords in Figure 3, the most frequently used terms are “sustainable tourism” (238), “tourism” (194), "destination management” 148, “management,” “sustainability” (108), and “sustainable development” (80). The keyword “destination,” which forms the basis of the research, appears 77 times while the keyword “sustainable destination development” appears 32 times.

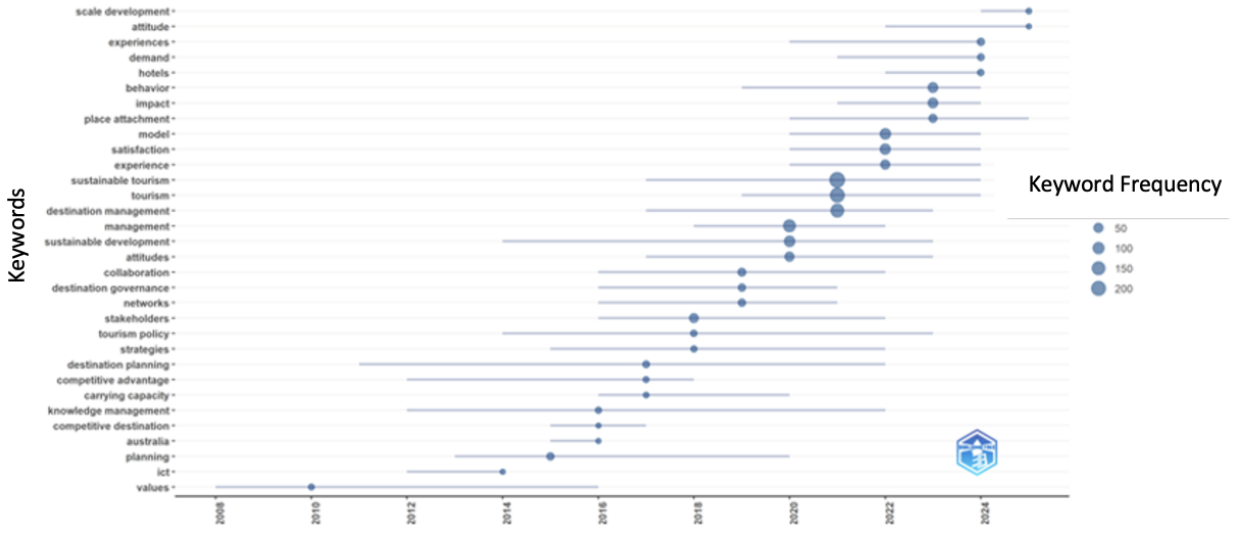


Figure 4. Bubble chart related to trending topics

According to the data in Figure 4, the X-axis represents the year in which the themes first began to emerge, while the words listed along the Y-axis represent the keywords that emerged in the

studies. According to Figure 4, although studies directly related to the topic were not very common before 2010, the keyword "values" was most frequently used in studies after that year, with a frequency of 10 in 2010. Similarly, another keyword that was heavily used in 2015 is "planning." Another important point to note in Figure 6 is that the keyword "place attachment" came to the fore in 2023. The keywords "destination management" and "sustainable destination," which came to the fore after 2021, were most intensively researched in 2022. The keywords that came to the fore in 2023 were determined to be "impact" and "behavior" while in 2024, the keywords "hotels," "demand," and "experiences" were used intensively. Among all these keywords, the term with the highest frequency of use was "sustainable tourism."

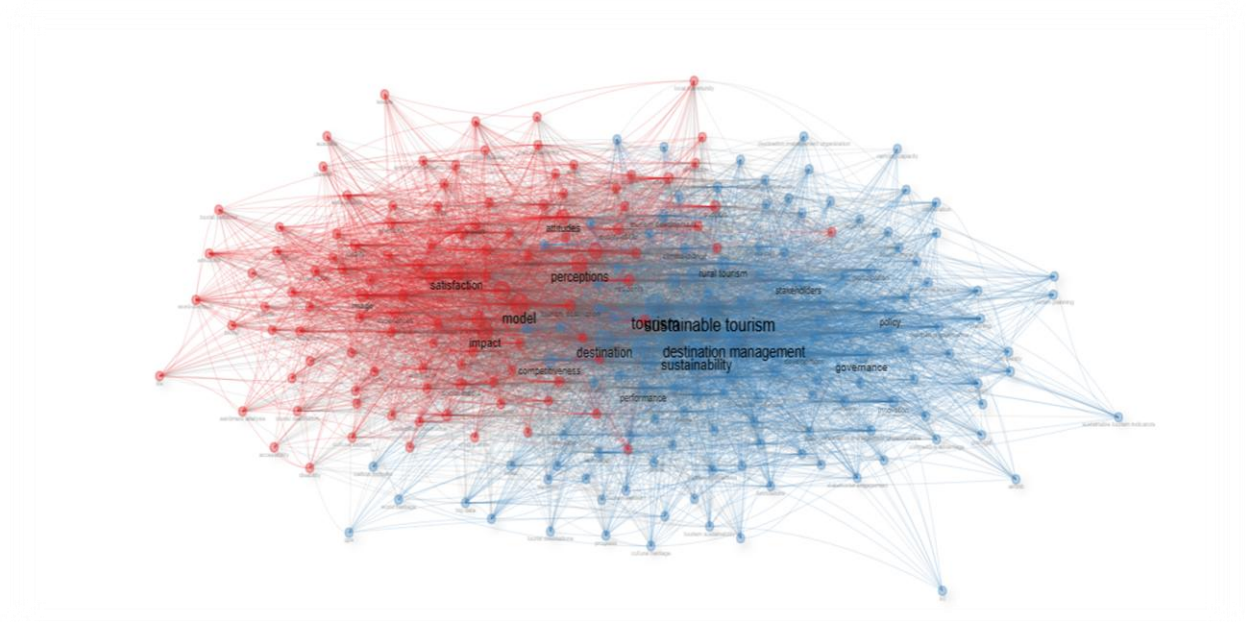


Figure 5. Thematic map

The thematic map in Figure 5 uses keyword co-occurrence network analysis to visualize the relationships between concepts that stand out in the academic literature on sustainable tourism. The thematic map shows that the most frequently encountered themes in the literature are concentrated around the concepts of sustainable tourism, tourism, destination management, management, destination, sustainability, and sustainable development. The clusters represented by different colors in the network reveal that the literature in this field is shaped around specific sub-themes. The red area, which includes terms such as model, satisfaction, behavior, impact, perceptions, experience, and destination image, points to research focused on tourist behavior and experience while the blue area, which includes terms such as governance, stakeholders, policy, and management reflects governance and strategic planning issues. In this context, it is evident that the sustainable tourism literature has a multidimensional structure, covering a wide range from theoretical models to management practices and tourist satisfaction.

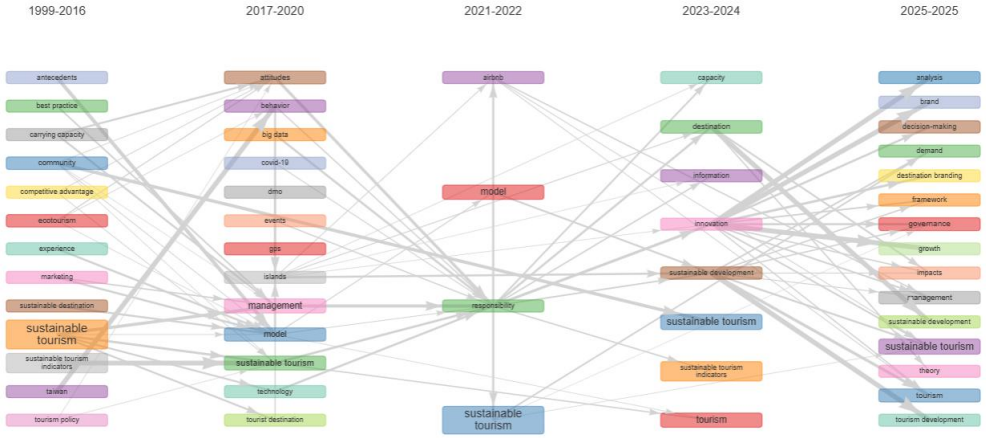


Figure 6. Evolution of themes over time

Figure 6 shows the changes in themes over time and their combined use. The thematic evolution analysis conducted within this scope shows that the concept of sustainable tourism has been at the center of studies since 1999. It has led the studies in every period. Between 1999 and 2016, studies in the field of sustainable tourism focused more on defining basic concepts and understanding the practices shaped around these concepts. Prominent concepts during this period included sustainable tourism, ecotourism, carrying capacity, community, and experience. These concepts prioritized the environmental dimensions of sustainable tourism, its interaction with the community, and tourist experiences. Furthermore, themes such as marketing and competitive advantage point to the integration of sustainability principles with the economic dimension. This period stands out as a pioneering phase in which the theoretical and practical foundations of sustainable tourism were laid.

The period from 2017 to 2020 was a time when the impact of digitalization in sustainable tourism was felt, and a more data-driven, behavior-focused approach was adopted. During this period, concepts such as big data, GPS, and technology indicate an increase in studies on how tourism can be optimized using digital tools. Furthermore, concepts such as attitudes, behavior, and events reveal that tourists' attitudes and behaviors were analyzed in greater detail. A key differentiating factor of this period was the emergence of COVID-19. The period known as the Covid-19 Pandemic has prompted a rethinking of the relationships among crisis management, health, and sustainability in the tourism sector. The frequent use of the concept of management also indicates an increased emphasis on strategic planning during this process.

The years 2021–2022 can be considered a transitional period with fewer concepts coming to the fore, but one that is quite profound and strategic in terms of content. The concepts that stood out during this period include responsibility, model, and Airbnb. Responsibility emerged as a concept that questioned ethical responsibilities for both tourism businesses and tourists. In addition, the concept of model demonstrates academic interest in how applicable and replicable structures for sustainable tourism can be created. The evaluation of digital accommodation platforms such as Airbnb in this context reveals an analysis of the relationship between the sharing economy and

sustainability. This period is a time frame of conceptual simplification but with increased depth of meaning.

In 2023–2024, the concepts of capacity (infrastructure planning-capacity) and information (information management) came to the fore in the sustainable tourism literature. Furthermore, the concept of destination has increased the importance of sustainable destination management while the concept of sustainable development has regained its central position in the literature. This period can be seen as a transition phase aimed at building a structure that integrates sustainability goals with knowledge and innovation.

The period from 2025 onwards is anticipated to be a time when managerial and strategic themes such as governance, decision-making, impact analysis, destination branding, and branding come to the fore in sustainable tourism. These concepts reveal that sustainability is not only an environmental or social issue, but also a political and institutional one. Furthermore, abstract structures such as framework and theory emphasize the need for systematic modeling and evaluation of sustainability. During this period, the concepts such as growth and tourism development reveal more clearly the relationship between sustainable tourism and development while the concept of management brings the importance of coordinating this entire process back to the agenda. Thus, sustainable tourism has become a multidimensional, governance-focused, and strategic field.

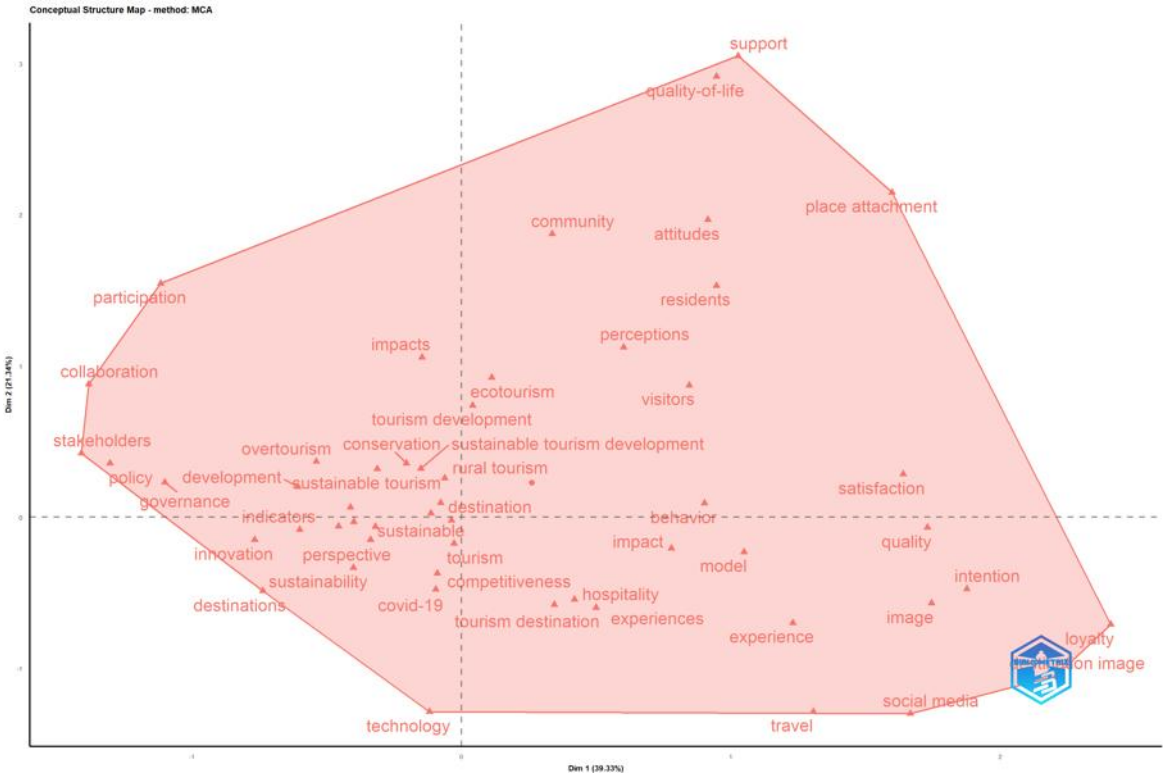


Figure 7. Factor analysis related to the conceptual structure

Figure 7 shows the factor analysis conducted to reveal the relationship between the concepts and the general structure of research areas. According to it, the X-axis shows central themes and

general trends while the Y-axis shows the level of development of concepts and their relationships in the literature. Dim 1 and Dim 2 represent multidimensional scaling or multiple correspondence analysis, one of the multivariate statistical analysis methods. These values indicate how much of the total variability in the data is explained by the two dimensions (Dim 1: 39.33% and Dim 2: 21.34%).

According to Figure 7, the concepts such as social media, travel, experience, image, intention, loyalty are located in the lower right corner. The concepts in this group represent marketing and communication-focused topics such as individual experiences in tourism, the impact of social media, brand image, and customer loyalty. The upper right corner contains concepts such as place attachment, support, visitors, and satisfaction. According to Figure 9, the upper left corner contains concepts such as participation, collaboration, stakeholders, policy, governance. This area focuses on policy-making, stakeholder participation, and governance processes in sustainable tourism.

The bottom left corner of Figure 7 contains concepts such as technology, innovation, COVID-19, sustainability, indicators, governance, and development, and this area is related to the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability. This group focuses particularly on digital transformation, innovative approaches, sustainability indicators, and development policies in post-pandemic tourism. Therefore, this section emphasizes economic and environmental sustainability, particularly, the three dimensions of sustainable tourism (economic, environmental, and social).

Conclusion

Within the scope of this research, destination management and sustainability concepts were taken as the focal point, and the analyses were conducted on the direction in which these topics have evolved. Since 1999, the concept of sustainability has been at the center of studies. Between 1999 and 2013, the studies in the field of sustainable tourism focused more on defining basic concepts and understanding the practices shaped around these concepts. Prominent concepts between 1999 and 2013 included sustainable tourism, ecotourism, carrying capacity, community, and experience. These concepts have prioritized the environmental dimensions of sustainable tourism, its interaction with society, and tourist experiences. Furthermore, themes such as marketing and competitive advantage point to the integration of sustainability principles with the economic dimension. With the emergence of concepts such as sustainable tourism development and stakeholders in 2016, the efforts have shifted towards sustainable development principles. Since 2017, the concept of sustainability has become very important and the studies began to focus on the concept of sustainable development. From 2017 onwards, the concept of sustainability took center stage, and the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions of tourism began to be addressed in a holistic manner. In 2018, the research related to concepts such as impacts, policy, and management began to increase, strengthening the foundations of sustainability in terms of implementation, policy, and management. In 2019, the concept of quality gained prominence within the scope of sustainability, highlighting the importance of service quality and tourist experience-focused studies. In 2021, with the concept of attitudes coming to the fore, the attitudes of individuals, especially the local community and tourists, towards sustainability were examined.

In 2022, with the concepts of community and indicators coming to the fore, the focus was on community-based tourism and sustainability indicators. Finally, the prominence of the concept of destination management in 2024 shows that this entire conceptual development process has come together and that planning, competitiveness, stakeholder participation, and community-based approaches have begun to form a holistic understanding of sustainable destination management in the sustainable tourism literature. As of 2017, the concepts of carrying capacity, destination planning, and competitive advantage, which are particularly important for destinations, especially under the heading of the environmental dimension of destinations, were used at the rates of 9; 0.2%, 12; 0.3%, and 7; 0.1%, respectively, indicates that this topic and concept represent a research gap in the existing literature. The concepts of carrying capacity, destination planning, and competitive advantages have become increasingly important in recent years, particularly in tourism destination development models, in relation to certain city destinations and sustainability issues Molinillo et al., 2016; Goodwin, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2018).

It has been concluded that there is a significant gap in research areas related to the three dimensions of sustainability, such as climate change, evolution, conservation of areas, quality of life, and environmental sustainability. In destination management, although the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions of the concept of sustainability are indispensable, a literature review conducted by Bramwell and Line (2011) found that only 108 studies directly address this relationship in a holistic manner. The first study to address this issue holistically was conducted in 2001. The increase in studies on this topic between 2001 and 2025 was 9.05%. This result, as emphasized by Abdul-Rahman et al. (2021), shows that sustainable tourism policy, destination management, and destination social responsibility significantly affect sustainable tourism development and that there is a need for research on this topic in the literature.

The findings obtained from the thematic analysis of 108 studies show that the themes of sustainable tourism, tourism, management are central while the themes of satisfaction, experience and destination image have a lower level of development intensity. Although this finding is included in the criteria presented by the UNWTO (2019) for DMO's, it shows that this concept is not sufficiently addressed in the current literature.

As shown in Figure 6, it has been concluded that themes have changed over the years. The concepts that were prominent in the literature during the 2001–2018 period underwent a significant transformation in terms of meaning and focus between 2019 and 2025. Early concepts such as collaboration, community participation, governance, and innovation focused more on managerial cooperation, community participation, and innovative approaches within the framework of sustainable tourism. However, after 2019, these concepts gradually evolved into application- and measurability-based concepts. The prominence of concepts such as destination management, certification, and stakeholder demonstrates that sustainability has evolved from a purely theoretical discussion into an operational management approach. This situation indicates that sustainability in tourism literature is no longer treated as an abstract ideal but rather as a measurable, manageable, and assessable process. The direct and strong transition of the concept of sustainability from the

2001–2018 period to 2019–2025 shows that this concept has become a central topic in the literature. In other words, all other concepts such as stakeholder, destination management, or certification have actually taken shape as sub-components of the sustainability theme. This trend indicates that the sustainability paradigm has become established in tourism research and that approaches from different disciplines have converged within this framework. Furthermore, the continued existence of the concept of attitudes in the post-2019 period demonstrates that the human factor (i.e., the behavior of local people, tourists, and stakeholders) remains decisive in sustainable tourism. This reveals that sustainability continues to be addressed not only as an administrative or environmental issue but also as a behavioral and social phenomenon. The conceptual structure map in Figure 6 reveals the relationships between concepts in the sustainable tourism literature and their thematic clusters. The analysis shows that the concepts generally cluster around four main axes: participation and governance, community and quality of life, experience and satisfaction, and innovation and technology. The clustering of concepts such as participation, collaboration, stakeholders and governance in the upper left region points to the managerial dimensions of sustainable tourism and the necessity of stakeholder collaboration. This indicates that stakeholder participation and governance play a decisive role in the success of sustainable tourism policies.

The positioning of the concepts of community, attitudes, residents, support, and quality-of-life together at the top of the graph emphasizes the socio-cultural dimension of sustainability. This clustering shows that community-based approaches have gained strength in the literature and that the attitudes of the local population and quality of life have become one of the key indicators in tourism planning. This finding is also consistent with the increasing number of studies on community-based tourism and resident attitudes in recent years. The close positioning of the concepts of place attachment, satisfaction, quality, intention, loyalty and destination image on the right side of the graph reveals that experience, image, and loyalty-focused studies have gained significant ground in the literature on tourism. This conceptual proximity indicates that sustainable destination management is now being evaluated not only in terms of environmental and social aspects but also through the lens of tourist experience and destination image. Overall, the analysis shows that sustainable tourism research has expanded beyond environmental sustainability to encompass managerial, social, experiential, and technological dimensions. The distribution in Figure 10 highlights the multidimensional relationships between concepts, and supports the evolution of the literature towards a holistic sustainable destination management paradigm. According to the factor analysis conducted to reveal the general structure of the relationships between concepts and research areas, the focus on topics such as “destination sustainability, rural tourism, sustainability” shows that sustainability research has become a central topic in destination management.

In the lower right section, topics such as trust, visit, attention, loyalty, experience occupy a central position while in the lower left section, topics such as destination management, tourism destination, innovation, cooperation, policy occupy a central position. This situation reveals a lack of studies focusing on the sustainability dimension that will affect destination management

(environmental, socio-cultural, economic, overtourism, planning, etc.). However, in the sustainable destination management process, the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions, which are the most important components of the sustainability dimension, have a significant impact. In conclusion, the findings obtained from the bibliometric analysis show that the studies on the sustainability dimension in destination management exist but there are gaps in addressing it holistically.

The research findings show that the concepts of sustainability, sustainable destination management, and sustainable destination planning are frequently used in titles and keywords in the studies, but these concepts are not sufficiently detailed in terms of content and are often addressed superficially. Based on the findings obtained, the first study on the subject was conducted in 1999, and one study was found that year. The study conducted in that year took into account the environmental dimension of sustainability. Subsequently, three studies were conducted in 2000, one study each in 2001 and 2002, and two studies in 2003. No research was conducted on the subject in 2005. Although one or two studies were conducted until 2009, this number rose to 14 in 2009. This number continued to increase year by year, reaching 60 studies in 2019. The most research on this subject was conducted between 2020 and 2025.

When searching within the scope of destination management and the sub-dimensions of sustainability, namely the environmental, social, and economic dimensions, 108 studies are found. The first study related to these keywords was conducted in 2001. Starting with one study in 2001, this number remained the same until 2004, and it was concluded that no research was conducted on the subject in 2005. It was concluded that research on topics that became increasingly popular over time has been conducted continuously since 2009. Examining it on a yearly basis, the highest number of studies was in 2015, with 10 studies. Among the most researched concepts, sustainability ranked first with 35 instances (9%), followed by tourism with 30 instances (8%), sustainable tourism with 25 instances (6%), and finally management with 21 instances (5%).

The concepts that are important in the Destination Management process and have gained popularity in recent years include innovation, conservation, challenges, identity, loyalty, and responsibilities. Based on these findings, it has been concluded that there is insufficient research on destination management and sustainability as a main topic and its sub-dimensions, and that there is a significant gap in the literature in this area. However, as the existing literature shows, it should be noted that the focus on social and economic sustainability is less pronounced than the focus on environmental sustainability (Thabrew et al., 2009).

The recommendations regarding the findings of the study are outlined below.

- The studies that address the concepts of destination management and sustainability together generally focus on the environmental dimension. It is recommended that more research be conducted on the other two dimensions of sustainability (social and economic dimensions), and that this gap be filled.
- It has been observed that transportation capacities and the problem of overtourism, which are part of the scope of destination planning required when developing a sustainable destination,

have been addressed very little. It is recommended that researchers focus on these issues and conduct more studies.

- Destination Management, sustainability, sustainable destination criteria, and responsible tourism require greater interdisciplinary and international academic collaboration.
- The thematic evolution analysis in Figure 10 shows that the concepts in the field of sustainable tourism have evolved over the years from an environmentally and socially focused structure to an approach based on governance, knowledge management, and strategic planning. In this regard, it is important that future research focuses on developing multi-stakeholder models by concentrating on management, decision-making, and governance processes in sustainable tourism as well as examining the impact of stakeholder interaction on sustainability performance.
- The concepts of destination branding and brand that will come to the fore by 2025 indicate that sustainable destination identity, image, and brand value should be given more attention in research. The concepts of information and technology, which have gained importance in recent years, offer a noteworthy orientation in terms of the integration of information management, digital transformation, and smart destination applications into sustainability strategies.
- With the impact of COVID-19, crisis management, health, and resilience themes have come to the fore in tourism.
- The concept of responsibility, which came to the fore in the 2021–2022 period, indicates that there should be an increase in studies focusing on the ethical responsibilities of both tourists and businesses.
- Research examining the relationship between the sharing economy and sustainability can provide new perspectives on understanding the environmental and social impacts of digital accommodation platforms such as Airbnb.
- The renewed importance of the concepts of carrying capacity and capacity indicates a need for more data-driven models in destination carrying capacity, infrastructure planning, and visitor management.
- The concepts of attitudes, behavior, and experience, which came to the fore in the 2017–2020 period, indicate that tourist behavior should be addressed within the framework of sustainability awareness and experience management. It is recommended that these topics be supported by behavioral models and experiential analysis.
- The concepts of framework and theory that emerged in the literature in 2025 and beyond indicate that sustainable tourism needs to be addressed in a more integrated and systematic manner. In this regard, interdisciplinary research focused on theoretical framework and model development will make significant contributions to the literature on sustainable destination management.

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A New Paradigm in Higher Tourism Education: Analyzing the Integrated Tourism and Gastronomy Management Model in Türkiye

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Abstract

Purpose: The tourism and hospitality sector is experiencing rapid transformation, increasing the need for graduates who possess both theoretical knowledge and practical competencies. Conventional education models have been widely criticized for their limited ability to respond to industry expectations. Similarly, in Türkiye, long-established traditional tourism education has increasingly been recognized as requiring transformation in order to respond to contemporary industry dynamics and emerging global standards. In this context, the Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs in Türkiye, first officially introduced in December 2024, represents an emerging initiative aimed at addressing these challenges. The program has been launched as a pilot initiative across nine universities in Türkiye. The program began admitting its first cohort of students in the Fall semester of the 2025-2026 academic year and includes a compulsory English preparatory year. This study aims to examine this program as an innovative, industry-integrated higher education model.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative case study approach is adopted, relying on document analysis of curriculum structures, policy frameworks, and program implementations across nine pilot universities in Türkiye.

Findings:The analysis demonstrates that the program introduces a structurally integrated model in which industry experience is embedded within the curriculum. The model is supported by multilingual education, extended vocational training, and state coordination.

Originality/Value: This study presents a state-supported education model that directly aligns academic structures with industry needs, offering a scalable framework for tourism education reform.

Keywords:
Tourism Education, Industry Integration, Gastronomy Management, Higher Education, Türkiye

1. Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry has undergone significant transformation in recent years due to globalization, technological developments, and evolving consumer expectations. These changes have created new demands for a workforce that is not only knowledgeable but also capable of adapting to dynamic and complex service environments. Despite these developments, higher education systems in tourism have struggled to keep pace. A frequently highlighted issue is the disconnect between what is taught in academic programs and what is required in professional

settings. Graduates often enter the workforce without sufficient practical experience or the necessary skill sets to perform effectively in real-world contexts.

This challenge reflects a broader structural imbalance. Universities traditionally emphasize theoretical knowledge and academic performance, whereas industry stakeholders prioritize practical skills, adaptability, and hands-on experience. Consequently, a misalignment emerges between educational outcomes and labor market expectations. Although university-industry collaboration has been proposed as a potential solution, its implementation often remains limited in scope. In many cases, such collaboration is confined to short-term internships or training placements, which may lack the depth, continuity, and integration required to effectively bridge this gap.

In this context, a new educational approach has been introduced in Türkiye through a collaboration between the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. This program represents a shift toward a model in which industry engagement is not an additional component but a central element of the educational structure. This structural integration is also reflected in the curriculum design, which combines foundational courses such as Tourism Management, Sustainability, Front Office Automation Systems, and Food Safety with applied components including Basic Culinary Techniques and progressive industry training modules.

The Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs, initiated through a comprehensive cooperation protocol between the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and implemented across nine universities in Türkiye, namely Akdeniz University, Dokuz Eylül University, İzmir Katip Çelebi University, İstanbul University, Marmara University, Afyon Kocatepe University, Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Gaziantep University, and Mardin Artuklu University, aims to redefine tourism education by integrating high-level academic theory with extensive on-the-job training. The study explores how this model serves as a benchmark for producing "sector-ready" managers and entrepreneurs who can compete in the international arena. Specifically, the research evaluates the program's unique "3 semester common core" and "3 semester vocational training" structure, its 100% English medium of instruction, its compulsory English preparatory year, and its collaborative financial framework for students.

This study aims to evaluate this model and explore its implications for the future of tourism education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Skills Mismatch and Structural Challenges

A growing body of research indicates that tourism education systems are not fully aligned with industry requirements. Educational programs often develop independently from sectoral needs, resulting in a discrepancy between acquired competencies and professional expectations (Mungai et al., 2021). From an industry perspective, graduates are frequently described as lacking both technical capabilities and essential interpersonal skills. This situation reflects a deeper structural misalignment between academic institutions and labor market demands (Giousmpasoglou &

Pantelidis, 2025). Furthermore, the rapid evolution of the tourism sector has intensified the need for continuous competence development. Traditional education systems, which tend to follow relatively fixed structures, often struggle to respond effectively to these changes (Eriksson et al., 2021).

2.2 Limitations of Internship-Based Learning

Internships have traditionally been regarded as a key mechanism for facilitating students' transition from academic learning to professional practice. They are widely used in tourism and hospitality education to provide exposure to real-world working environments. However, a growing body of research suggests that the effectiveness of internships is highly variable and often limited in achieving their intended learning outcomes.

One of the main concerns relates to the lack of structured learning design within internship programs. Studies indicate that many internships are not supported by clearly defined learning objectives, systematic supervision, or effective feedback mechanisms. Consequently, students are frequently assigned routine operational tasks that offer limited opportunities for skill development or critical reflection (Dhore & Sapra, 2025; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013). In such cases, the experiential component of internships becomes superficial, reducing their educational value.

Furthermore, the absence of strong coordination between academic institutions and industry partners can weaken the pedagogical impact of internships. Without continuous communication and shared responsibility, internships tend to function as isolated training experiences rather than integrated learning processes (Busby, 2003). This lack of alignment limits the ability of students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications.

Another critical issue concerns the quality and consistency of internship experiences. Research conducted by Airey & Tribe (2005) has shown that student learning outcomes can vary significantly depending on the organization, mentoring quality, and working conditions. In some cases, students report high levels of dissatisfaction due to excessive workload, lack of guidance, and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement in professional tasks.

In the context of tourism education in Türkiye, similar patterns can be observed. Empirical findings indicate that university-industry collaboration remains largely concentrated on internship practices and workforce-related activities, with limited involvement of industry stakeholders in curriculum design or knowledge co-production (Yayla & Çatır, 2023). This suggests that internships, while necessary, are insufficient as standalone mechanisms for achieving effective industry integration.

Taken together, these findings highlight that traditional internship-based models, when not properly structured and integrated, may fail to fully support the development of industry-relevant competencies. This underscores the need for more comprehensive educational approaches in which practical experience is systematically embedded within the curriculum rather than treated as an external component.

2.3 Emerging Approaches in Industry-Integrated Education

Recent research increasingly emphasizes the importance of experiential and practice-oriented learning approaches in tourism and hospitality education. Models that engage students in real-life

problem-solving environments enable a more effective connection between academic knowledge and professional application, allowing learners to develop context-specific competencies (Pang et al., 2013). Such approaches move beyond passive knowledge acquisition and encourage active participation in complex, real-world scenarios.

In parallel, collaborative learning environments have been associated with the development of higher-order skills, including communication, leadership, critical thinking, and teamwork (Molintas et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of these approaches largely depends on how they are structured. Without clear pedagogical design and guidance, collaborative and experiential learning may fail to achieve intended learning outcomes.

More recent perspectives in the literature highlight the concept of co-creation in education, where academic institutions and industry stakeholders jointly participate in the design and delivery of learning processes (Guerra & Gonçalves, 2024). This underscores the importance of designing tourism education models that move beyond classroom-based instruction and actively integrate students into collaborative industry environments (Ekstrom, 2023). In such models, learning is not confined to classroom settings but is extended into real operational environments, enabling students to engage directly with industry challenges.

Despite these advancements, many existing approaches still treat industry engagement as a complementary component rather than a structurally embedded element of the curriculum. In this regard, emerging models that integrate industry participation across multiple stages of education represent a more advanced form of collaboration. The Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs pilot program in Türkiye can be considered within this emerging category, as it incorporates extended and structured industry immersion into the core of the curriculum, rather than limiting it to isolated experiential activities. In this respect, the curriculum structure of the Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs in Türkiye demonstrates a more systematic integration, where applied courses and industry-based training are embedded alongside theoretical modules throughout multiple semesters.

This shift reflects a broader transition in tourism education from fragmented and practice-supplemented models toward more integrated and system-oriented approaches, where learning, practice, and industry engagement are continuously interconnected.

2.4 International Models and Their Limitations

Different countries have developed various models to integrate education with industry, especially in tourism and hospitality. While these models offer useful insights, they are shaped by their own institutional and economic contexts. Therefore, applying them directly to Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs in Türkiye is not always appropriate. The key issue is not copying these models, but understanding how they can be adapted to local needs.

The Swiss hospitality education system, particularly as represented by leading institutions such as EHL and Les Roches, is often seen as a successful example because of its strong focus on practical training and close links with the industry. Students gain extensive hands-on experience, which improves their employability. However, this strong vocational focus may limit the system's

contribution to academic research and theoretical knowledge (Chen et al., 2019). In Türkiye, Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs is expected not only to train skilled professionals but also to contribute to research areas such as sustainability, innovation, and cultural heritage. Therefore, the Swiss model alone may not fully meet these broader academic expectations.

The German dual system also combines education with workplace training in a structured way. It is highly effective in vocational education and supports smooth transitions into employment. However, its relatively rigid structure which may make it less adaptable to higher education contexts that require flexibility and interdisciplinary learning (Deissinger, 2015). Tourism and gastronomy education in Türkiye includes multiple dimensions such as management, culture, and creativity. This makes a more flexible and adaptable system necessary. In countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, education models include internships and strong industry partnerships. For example, "sandwich programs" allow students to spend a full year working in the industry (Busby & Gibson, 2010). These experiences are valuable, but they are often positioned as distinct components rather than fully embedded within the curriculum. As a result, the connection between theory and practice remains limited. For Türkiye, this suggests that practical experience should not be an external addition, but an integrated part of the curriculum.

The Chinese model offers an important comparative perspective, particularly due to the rapid institutionalization of tourism education within higher education. Since the 1990s, tourism has been recognized as a strategic sector in China, leading to the expansion of tourism-related undergraduate programs such as Tourism Management and Hotel Management within universities (Airey & Tribe, 2005; Xiao, 2006). Unlike purely vocational systems, these programs are typically structured as four-year academic degrees that combine theoretical instruction with elements of applied training. This indicates that China has positioned tourism education firmly within the higher education system rather than limiting it to vocational pathways.

However, despite this institutional growth, several structural challenges have been identified. Studies point to a mismatch between industry expectations and graduate competencies, as well as relatively weak professional identity among students (Yu et al., 2021). In addition, earlier research highlights that tourism curricula in China have sometimes struggled to balance academic rigor with industry relevance (Xiao, 2006). This suggests that expanding program numbers alone does not ensure effective education-industry integration. In other words, scale without alignment may reduce overall effectiveness.

From a comparative perspective, the Chinese model occupies a middle ground between academic and vocational approaches. While it successfully embeds tourism education within universities, it does not always achieve a consistently strong, practice-oriented integration with the industry. For Türkiye, this is a particularly relevant lesson. It shows that positioning tourism and gastronomy programs within higher education is not sufficient by itself; maintaining quality, relevance, and student engagement is equally critical.

Asian models more broadly, including Singapore, emphasize strong coordination between government, universities, and industry. Singapore's approach focuses on innovation and aligning education with national economic goals (Hsu, 2018). However, this model depends on strong institutional coordination and financial resources, which may not be fully available in all Turkish universities.

Overall, international models reveal a common issue: most tend to prioritize either practical training or academic development, but rarely achieve a balanced integration of both. The Chinese case further demonstrates that even when higher education structures are in place, problems of quality, relevance, and student motivation can still emerge.

From the perspective of Türkiye, this suggests that Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs should aim for a balanced and context-sensitive model. Rather than copying a single system, Türkiye can combine useful elements from different models while addressing its own needs. Integrating practical training into the curriculum, strengthening academic research, and ensuring alignment with industry expectations are key priorities. In this way, a more sustainable and effective education model can be developed.

While these models present certain limitations, each also reflects context-specific strengths that should be considered when evaluating their applicability to different educational systems.

2.5 Toward Integrated Educational Ecosystems

More recent perspectives emphasize the need for a holistic approach involving multiple stakeholders. This approach views tourism education as part of a broader system that includes government institutions, industry actors, and academic organizations (Yang & Ren, 2021). Such models aim to move beyond fragmented collaboration toward more cohesive and sustainable structures.

The evolution of tourism curricula has long been shaped by a strong vocational orientation, often prioritizing industry-specific skills and employability outcomes. However, this emphasis has gradually expanded to include broader considerations such as sustainability, social impacts, and interdisciplinary knowledge, reflecting a shift toward more comprehensive educational frameworks (Busby & Huang, 2012). The development of integrated ecosystems is closely linked to the incorporation of experiential and active learning strategies. Approaches such as problem-based learning, fieldwork, and collaborative projects enable students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. These methods contribute to a more dynamic learning process and enhance the relevance of education to professional contexts (Marques, 2025).

Contemporary tourism education increasingly calls for integrated and system-oriented approaches that better reflect the complexity of the industry. Within this shift, sustainability, digital transformation, and social responsibility are no longer treated as supplementary topics but are positioned as central components of curriculum design. This transformation is also reflected in a move away from content-driven structures toward competence-based models that combine knowledge, skills, and attitudes, aiming to equip students with the capacity to manage uncertainty, address socio-environmental challenges, and engage in strategic decision-making (Fernández-

Villarán et al., 2024). In line with these developments, the tourism and gastronomy management programs examined in this study across the selected nine pilot universities similarly reflect an orientation toward these priorities within their educational missions.

An important component of educational integration lies in the alignment between learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment methods. When these elements are not coherently structured, the intended development of competencies such as critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and problem-solving remains limited. Therefore, integrated educational ecosystems require a more deliberate and coordinated pedagogical design (Marques, 2025).

Finally, the findings underline that effective tourism education must function as a dynamic and continuously evolving system. By integrating experiential learning, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainability-oriented competencies, educational ecosystems can better prepare graduates to address the interconnected economic, environmental, and social dimensions of tourism development (Fernández-Villarán et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design focusing on the Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs implemented in nine universities in Türkiye.

The analysis is based on document review, including curriculum structures, official program descriptions, and policy documents. These documents were systematically examined to identify how educational design aligns with industry expectations.

The evaluation focuses on four key areas :

- Curriculum organization (structure, course distribution, and progression)
- Industry linkage mechanisms (extent and structure of vocational training and practical components)
- Language policy (medium of instruction and multilingual components)
- Institutional framework (governance, stakeholder collaboration, and policy support)

4. Findings

The program introduces a shared foundational phase covering both tourism and gastronomy. This approach allows students to develop a broad understanding before selecting a specialization. This phase is supported by a diverse set of courses, including Tourism Management, Front Office Automation Systems, Sustainability, Introduction to Economics, and Food Safety and Hygiene, which provide students with a comprehensive understanding of both sectors. In addition, applied courses such as Basic Culinary Techniques and Kitchen Management ensure the early development of practical competencies.

A distinctive aspect of the model is the inclusion of three full semesters of industry-based training. These experiences are structured progressively and include both operational and managerial exposure. These training periods are complemented by a rotation-based system, allowing students to gain experience across different departments such as kitchen operations, service management,

and administrative functions. This structure enhances both operational awareness and managerial perspective.

The program is delivered entirely in English, supported by a preparatory year. Additionally, a second foreign language is incorporated based on regional requirements. Additionally, students receive financial compensation during their training periods, which contributes to their professional development and reduces economic constraints. Moreover, students choose their specialization after gaining initial industry experience, allowing for more informed decision-making.

To highlight the key structural differences, Table 1 presents a comparison between traditional tourism education models and the Turkish pilot program.

Table 1. Comparison Between Traditional Tourism Education and the Turkish Pilot Program

Feature	**Traditional Model**	**Pilot Program**
Language	Mostly Turkish	100% English
Industry Role	Limited (internship-based)	Embedded in curriculum
Internship	Short-term	Long-term structured
Curriculum Design	Academic-driven	Industry-aligned
Skill Development	Theory-heavy	Practice-oriented
Foreign Language	Optional	Mandatory + second language

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that this model represents a shift from traditional education approaches toward a more integrated system. Rather than treating industry experience as an additional component, it is embedded within the educational structure. This approach responds directly to the challenges identified in the literature, including skills mismatch, insufficient practical training, and limited collaboration between academia and industry.

Compared to existing international models, the Turkish approach demonstrates a higher level of structural linkage. It combines elements of vocational training, academic education, and policy coordination within a unified framework. Unlike many international models, the curriculum not only incorporates industry experience but also aligns it with a wide range of specialized courses such as gastrodiplomacy, digital marketing, cultural heritage management, and sustainability-oriented modules. This diversity reflects a more holistic approach to tourism education.

To provide a clearer comparison, Table 2 presents a structured overview of selected international tourism education models alongside the Turkish pilot program.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of International Tourism Education Models and the Turkish Pilot Program

Dimension	**Swiss Hospitality School**	**German Dual System (VET-based)**	**UK/Australia Placement-Based University Models**	**Turkish Pilot Program**

	Model (e.g., EHL, Les Roches)			
Education Type	Higher education	Dual vocational education and training (VET-based)	Higher education (academic + applied)	Higher education
Industry Experience	Structured internships (often around 1 year total)	Continuous workplace training (dual system)	Placement/internship-based (institution-specific)	3 full semesters of structured industry training
Integration Level	Partially integrated	Highly integrated (within VET context)	Moderately integrated / placement-based	Fully embedded
Timing	Mostly mid-to-late stage	Continuous	Often late-stage	Early and repeated
Payment	Often paid internships	Paid apprenticeship/training	Varies	State-supported
Curriculum Role	Integrated but not dominant	Core (VET structure)	Variable; often placement-based	Core curriculum
Coordination	Institution-led	Employer-school coordinated	Institution-specific	State-university-industry coordinated
Language Policy	Often English (in international programs)	Primarily local language	English	English + region-specific second language
Learning Outcome Focus	Practice-oriented	Skill-based	Mixed	Integrated (theory + practice + management)

Source: Author's compilation based on Dredge et al. (2012), Zopiatis & Theocharous (2013), Euler (2013), and King et al. (2003).

6. Conclusion

In the context of tourism education in Türkiye, traditional higher education models, encompassing both faculties and vocational schools, have long been characterized by several structural limitations, including the absence of compulsory English preparatory education in many institutions, the restriction of internship periods to short-term placements, and the limited integration of curricula with industry needs. Against this backdrop, the pilot program examined in this study represents a transformative and forward-looking initiative that seeks to overcome these long-standing challenges through a structurally integrated and industry-oriented educational model. In this regard, the program can be considered not merely an incremental reform, but a paradigm-shifting initiative that redefines the relationship between higher education and the tourism industry in Türkiye.

The Department of Tourism and Gastronomy Management Programs represents a significant step toward redefining tourism education. By aligning academic structures with industry needs, the model provides a comprehensive approach to addressing long-standing challenges.

The findings indicate that this model may serve as a reference point for future educational reforms in tourism.

When considered alongside established international models, including the Swiss hospitality system, the German dual system, and placement-based university models in the United Kingdom and Australia, the Turkish pilot program demonstrates a comparatively higher degree of structural integration between academic learning and industry engagement. While each of these models reflects context-specific strengths, the approach examined in this study offers a more continuous and embedded form of industry participation within the curriculum. In this regard, the program enhances the international competitiveness of tourism education in Türkiye and positions itself as a potentially relevant reference for systems seeking to achieve a more balanced integration of theory and practice.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on document-based analysis and the early stage of program implementation. Future research may focus on empirical data, including graduate outcomes and industry evaluations. In addition, further studies conducted during and after students' specialization selection processes may provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the pilot program, particularly in assessing whether the model successfully meets its intended educational and industry-oriented objectives.

Another critical dimension highlighted in recent studies is the dynamic nature of educational demand. Student choices are not solely shaped by current conditions but are also influenced by accumulated experiences and perceptions formed over time. In this regard, previous student experiences and word-of-mouth effects play a significant role in shaping future demand patterns (Hussein, Kusairi & Ismail, 2022).

Building on these considerations, future research may also explore the long-term institutional and sectoral impacts of such integrated educational models, particularly in terms of sustainability, adaptability, and their capacity to respond to evolving industry dynamics. Such investigations

would contribute to a deeper understanding of how structurally embedded industry-education collaboration can shape the future of tourism education.

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From Event to Ecosystem: Leveraging Birmingham Tech Week as a Catalyst for Knowledge Exchange and Business Tourism

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines how business tourism events can act as intentional infrastructure for knowledge exchange, international collaboration, and regional economic development. Birmingham Tech Week (BTW) and its Global Growth Agenda (GGA) are used as a case study to explore how curated event design supports knowledge flows and longer-term relational value, while highlighting limitations in impact measurement, inclusion, and sustainability practices.

Study design/methodology/approach: A qualitative case study approach was used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with organisers, policymakers, and delegates; informal participant conversations; document analysis; participant observation; and attendee data. Thematic analysis focused on knowledge exchange, network formation, international engagement, and evidence of longer-term impact.

Results: BTW's Global Growth Day operated as a structured platform for knowledge exchange and international network-building. Outcomes included memoranda of understanding with Ulsan and Beijing, two trade missions, and the planned Beijing–Birmingham Tech Week. International attendees comprised 26% of participants. However, evidence of long-term impact remains limited due to short follow-up periods and reliance on self-reported outcomes. These constraints are recognised by organisers, who aim to strengthen longitudinal tracking and develop more robust evaluation approaches, including improved data on sustainability, accessibility, and inclusion.

Originality/value: The paper reframes business events as ecosystem infrastructure rather than isolated visitor activity, arguing that their relational and policy value requires stronger, more inclusive evaluation frameworks addressing sustainability and equity.

Keywords Business tourism; knowledge exchange; innovation ecosystems; business events; regional development; inclusion; sustainability

Introduction

Business tourism, including meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE), has traditionally been assessed through measures such as visitor spend, delegate numbers, and short-term economic contribution (Jones, 2017; UNWTO, 2019). While these indicators remain important, they capture only part of the value created through business events. They often overlook the extent to which events can facilitate knowledge exchange, relationship formation, innovation activity, and regional positioning.

This issue is particularly relevant to the theme of MTCON'26, which emphasises policy, knowledge exchange, and the bridging of theory and practice. Business events sit at the intersection of these domains. They are sites where universities, firms, policymakers, investors, and civic actors can meet, exchange knowledge, and test ideas in real time. Existing research has described events as "temporary clusters" that concentrate expertise, capital, and interaction in short timeframes (Maskell et al., 2006; Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008). Other scholarship has highlighted their role in city branding, innovation promotion, and cross-sector collaboration (Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2016).

However, important gaps remain. First, empirical work on regional business events tends to lag behind research on major global or capital-city events. Second, many accounts of event value remain descriptive or promotional, with limited attention to how event design shapes longer-term knowledge exchange and institutional outcomes. Third, business tourism research has not consistently addressed the critical questions now central to contemporary tourism debates: who benefits, who is excluded, and how sustainability is measured.

This paper addresses these gaps through a case study of Birmingham Tech Week (BTW), with a particular focus on its Global Growth Agenda (GGA). It asks how a regional business event can operate as an intentional infrastructure for knowledge exchange and international collaboration, while also reflecting critically on the limits of current impact claims and the insufficient integration of inclusion and sustainability into evaluation frameworks.

Aim:

To investigate how business tourism events can function as intentional infrastructures for knowledge exchange, international collaboration, and regional economic development, using Birmingham Tech Week as a case study, while critically examining the challenges of measuring long-term, inclusive, and sustainable impact.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Business tourism and regional development

Business tourism has increasingly been recognised as part of regional development strategy rather than simply a revenue-generating visitor segment (Davidson & Rogers, 2016). In addition to direct expenditure, business events can contribute to destination visibility, talent attraction, investment promotion, and institutional relationship-building (UNWTO, 2019). This broader perspective is especially important for cities seeking to position themselves within innovation-led economies.

Within tourism and event studies, events have been conceptualised as spatial and temporal concentrations of interaction that bring together otherwise dispersed actors. Maskell et al. (2006) describe such sites as "temporary clusters," while Bathelt and Schuldt (2008) emphasise their role in creating face-to-face contact, "buzz," and knowledge circulation. For regional cities, these dynamics may be especially important where events are used to compensate for weaker global visibility or to strengthen local ecosystem connectivity.

2.2 Knowledge exchange and innovation frameworks

The Triple Helix model provides a useful starting point for analysing such events. Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) argue that innovation emerges through interaction between universities, industry, and government, while Ranga and Etzkowitz (2013) further develop this as a practical framework for understanding innovation policy and institutional collaboration. Business events can provide a temporary but structured setting in which such interactions are intensified.

Prior research has suggested that conferences and business events can serve as knowledge hotspots, supporting learning, collaboration, and network extension (Weber et al., 2002; Yeoman et al., 2014). However, these effects are not automatic. Arcodia and Whitford (2007) argue that interactional outcomes depend on event design, especially where organisers seek to produce social capital, structured exchange, and repeat engagement.

At the same time, the Triple Helix has limitations. The Quadruple and Quintuple Helix frameworks widen the lens by incorporating civil society and environmental concerns into innovation systems (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012). These expanded models are useful for assessing whether event-led development benefits broader groups and whether environmental considerations are embedded rather than assumed.

2.3 Events as ecosystem infrastructure

Recent event scholarship has begun to treat events not simply as episodes, but as recurring institutional mechanisms that can anchor communities, shape narratives, and support cumulative development (Getz & Page, 2016). In this view, events may operate as forms of ecosystem infrastructure: repeatable platforms that connect actors, facilitate brokerage, and support downstream outcomes such as partnership formation, investment, internationalisation, or policy alignment.

This framing is especially relevant to business events linked to sector development. Jones et al. (2017) suggest that business events can contribute to innovation and destination management, while Griffin et al. (2019) argue for a wider understanding of value in business events beyond immediate spend. Yet empirical evidence remains limited, especially for regional events outside dominant global circuits.

2.4 Inclusion, sustainability, and event legacy

One weakness of both business tourism and innovation-event literatures is that success is often defined in economic or reputational terms while social and environmental dimensions remain secondary. Event Legacy frameworks highlight the need to assess both intended and unintended outcomes over time, including negative externalities and distributive effects (Preuss, 2015). In tourism contexts, this is increasingly important given growing expectations around decarbonisation, accessibility, diversity, and socially inclusive growth.

In business event settings, inclusion may relate to who gets access to stages, networks, investors, and international delegations; sustainability may relate not only to operational impacts such as travel and waste, but also to whether events support resilient and equitable forms of development. Yet there is limited empirical work examining how such considerations are embedded or measured in regional business event strategy.

2.5 Research gap

Overall, the literature suggests three gaps. First, there is limited empirical analysis of regional business events as infrastructures for knowledge exchange and internationalisation. Second, the mechanisms through which curated event design produces longer-term relational value remain underexplored. Third, critical dimensions of inclusion and sustainability are often insufficiently integrated into event evaluation. This paper addresses these gaps through the Birmingham Tech Week case.

Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study uses a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018). This design was selected because it allows close examination of a complex, context-dependent phenomenon involving multiple actors, forms of interaction, and types of evidence. Birmingham Tech Week was chosen as an information-rich case because it is a recurring regional business event with an explicit international and ecosystem-building ambition through its Global Growth Agenda.

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected from five sources:

1. Semi-structured interviews
   Nine formal interviews were conducted with stakeholders including event organisers, policymakers, business delegates, academic partners, and international participants.
2. Informal participant conversations
   Eight informal research conversations took place during the event. Notes and reflective memos were written immediately afterwards. These were treated as contextual qualitative material rather than as equivalent to formal interviews.
3. Document analysis
   Documents included Birmingham Tech Week programmes (2024 and 2025), Global Growth Agenda materials, media coverage, press releases, and memoranda of understanding associated with post-event collaboration.
4. Participant observation
   Observational notes were taken during sessions, networking events, receptions, and associated activities in October 2025. These notes focused on interaction design, cross-sector participation, and the structure of formal and informal exchange.
5. Attendee and follow-up data
   Event registration data and post-event follow-up data were used to identify patterns relating to participation, international representation, and reported collaboration outcomes. Not all registered attendees responded to follow-up activity, and this is recognised as a limitation.

3.3 Sample

The sample was purposively constructed to reflect the event's cross-sector orientation. It included participants from:

- start-ups, scale-ups, and larger firms

- universities and research institutions
- public bodies and economic development actors
- international delegations and partner organisations

The case therefore reflects a multi-actor event environment consistent with innovation ecosystem and knowledge exchange frameworks.

3.4 Ethics

Participants in formal interviews received study information and provided consent. Informal conversations took place in event settings where the researcher was present in an overt research capacity; verbal agreement to participate in discussion was obtained where appropriate. No direct quotations are attributed in this paper. Because the study includes observational and conversational data in a live event context, findings should be interpreted as context-sensitive rather than as fully standardised interview evidence.

3.5 Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding focused on four analytical dimensions:

- knowledge exchange
- network formation
- international engagement
- evidence of impact beyond the event itself

Themes were developed iteratively across data sources. Triangulation between interviews, documents, observation, and attendee data was used to strengthen interpretive credibility. Coding was reviewed by a second member of the research team.

3.6 Limitations

The study has several limitations. It is based on a single case and therefore does not claim broad generalisability. The follow-up period is relatively short, limiting conclusions about legacy or long-term economic outcomes. Some evidence relies on self-reported outcomes and internal event data, without third-party verification. Informal participant conversations provided useful contextual material but are methodologically weaker than formal interviews. Finally, no systematic demographic or environmental data were collected, which constrains analysis of inclusion and sustainability.

Results

4.1 Structured knowledge exchange

The case suggests that Birmingham Tech Week was intentionally designed to support knowledge exchange rather than relying solely on incidental networking. Programme elements included sector showcases, keynote sessions, expert panels, thematic visits, and curated networking opportunities. Notable sessions included a Department for Business and Trade talent masterclass, a Science Park Directors networking lunch, and university-based visits focused on digital health, transport innovation, and AI.

Across the data, participants consistently indicated that structured and thematic formats were more valuable than generic networking. Reported attendee feedback suggested that 82% gained new insights or applicable knowledge, while 56% engaged across sectors, indicating interdisciplinary interaction rather than purely within-sector exchange.

These findings support the argument that event design matters. Knowledge exchange was not simply a by-product of co-presence; it was facilitated through curation, sequencing, and actor matching.

4.2 Network formation and collaboration

A second theme was the importance of event architecture in enabling relationship formation. Investor breakfasts, international receptions, and sector dinners created repeated opportunities for interaction across organisational boundaries. The combination of formal and informal settings appeared significant: formal sessions established shared context, while social and semi-structured spaces enabled trust-building and follow-up.

Reported outcomes suggest that 77% of attendees made at least one new business connection and 35% reported progressing at least one new partnership or collaboration within three months. In addition, 14 organisations participated in follow-on visits, trade missions, or investment-related pitches linked to event-generated introductions.

While these outcomes are partly self-reported and should be interpreted cautiously, they indicate that the event functioned as a relational platform rather than a purely informational one.

4.3 International engagement and place positioning

The event also operated as an instrument of international engagement and place positioning. Approximately 26% of attendees (90 of 350) were based outside the UK, with particularly strong participation from Poland, Canada, and South Korea. Additional international representation included delegates from Slovakia, Malaysia, Ireland, Ghana, Hungary, Nigeria, the USA, Germany, India, and China.

This international participation mattered not only numerically, but symbolically and strategically. Interviews and supporting documents suggested that Birmingham Tech Week contributed to projecting Birmingham as a credible innovation centre and as a city open to cross-border collaboration. Media coverage and social media activity amplified this effect, although such reach metrics should be treated as visibility indicators rather than direct evidence of substantive impact.

4.4 Business tourism as a relational and international asset

The strongest evidence for the paper's central argument lies in the downstream outcomes associated with the event. These included memoranda of understanding with Ulsan and Beijing, two post-event trade missions involving Birmingham and Ulsan, investment visits involving 19 organisations, and the subsequent Beijing–Birmingham Tech Week in June 2024 involving public agencies and Birmingham firms.

Taken together, these outcomes suggest that the event contributed to a chain of activity extending beyond the original event moment: participation enabled engagement; engagement supported negotiations; negotiations supported formalisation; and formalisation supported international

replication. The importance of this finding is not that every event will produce such outcomes, but that a business event can, under certain conditions, function as a platform for cumulative international relationship-building.

4.5 Missing dimensions: inclusion and sustainability

A critical finding of the study is what could not be evaluated. No systematic data were collected on environmental sustainability, accessibility, or the demographic diversity of attendees and speakers. There was also limited evidence of formal strategies aimed at widening access for underrepresented groups or smaller organisations with fewer resources.

This absence matters. If business events are to be framed as development infrastructure, then their value cannot be judged solely by visibility, partnerships, or investment potential. Questions of who benefits, who is able to participate, and what environmental costs are generated are central to any contemporary assessment of tourism for a better world.

5. Discussion

5.1 From event to infrastructure

The Birmingham Tech Week case supports the argument that business events can be understood as ecosystem infrastructure rather than merely as temporary gatherings. Its value lay not only in convening participants, but in structuring repeated interaction among actors from business, government, academia, and international partner systems. In this sense, the case extends work on temporary clusters by showing how curated event formats may support more persistent forms of relational continuity.

5.2 Bridging theory and practice

The case also speaks directly to the MTCON'26 emphasis on bridging theory and practice. The event provides an applied example of Triple Helix interaction, with universities, firms, and public actors participating in a shared platform for exchange. However, the case also highlights the limits of the Triple Helix when viewed through a contemporary tourism lens. Civil society, accessibility, and environmental stewardship were not strongly visible in either the event's design or its evaluation. As a result, the case is better understood as a partial rather than complete innovation ecosystem model.

5.3 Relational value and measurement challenges

A key contribution of the paper is the concept of relational value: value that accumulates through trust, repeated contact, and formalised collaboration over time. This form of value is especially relevant in business tourism, where the most important outcomes may emerge after the event rather than during it. Yet it is also difficult to measure. The Birmingham case demonstrates the potential importance of such value while also revealing the methodological weaknesses of current measurement practice. Short follow-up windows, self-reported outcomes, and limited independent verification all constrain claims of lasting impact.

5.4 Inclusion and sustainability as evaluative gaps

The absence of robust data on accessibility, diversity, and environmental impact is not a minor omission; it is a substantive finding. It suggests that even where regional business events are

sophisticated in their ecosystem and international ambitions, they may remain underdeveloped in relation to inclusive and sustainable tourism governance. This disconnect is particularly significant given the growing expectation that tourism research and practice should address not only growth, but fairness, resilience, and responsibility.

5.5 Comparative relevance

The Birmingham case indicates that regional cities can use business events strategically to strengthen global visibility and partnership networks, even without the scale or brand recognition of larger flagship events. However, replicability depends on conditions such as institutional coordination, follow-up capacity, political support, and resourcing. Regional events may be agile and locally embedded, but they also face constraints in media reach, data capacity, and international draw.

6. Policy and Practice Implications

The findings suggest several implications for policymakers, destination managers, and event organisers.

First, recurring business events should be considered as potential components of regional innovation and tourism strategy, particularly where they support sustained cross-sector and international engagement rather than one-off attendance.

Second, event design matters. Curated formats, brokerage mechanisms, thematic clustering, and formal follow-up processes appear more likely to generate durable outcomes than generic networking alone.

Third, evaluation frameworks should move beyond delegate numbers and media reach. They should include measures of partnership development, repeat collaboration, knowledge transfer, accessibility, diversity, and environmental impact.

Fourth, policymakers seeking to support such events should recognise that longer-term value depends on post-event capacity: brokerage, relationship management, partner follow-up, and institutional continuity are all critical.

Finally, if business tourism is to contribute to “a better world,” then inclusion and sustainability cannot remain peripheral. Regional business events should collect demographic and accessibility data, widen participation routes, and begin to measure and publicly report environmental impacts.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that business tourism events can function as intentional infrastructures for knowledge exchange, international collaboration, and regional development. Using Birmingham Tech Week as a case study, it shows how curated event design can support cross-sector interaction, partnership formation, and international engagement beyond the event itself. In this respect, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of business tourism as relational and policy-relevant rather than merely transactional.

At the same time, the study highlights the limits of current impact claims. Evidence of long-term value remains constrained by short tracking periods, self-reported outcomes, and limited

independent verification. More importantly, inclusion, accessibility, and environmental sustainability were not systematically embedded in the event's evaluation. For business tourism scholarship and practice, this points to a clear challenge: if events are to be treated as development infrastructure, they must be assessed not only by what they generate, but also by how equitably and responsibly they do so.

The Birmingham case therefore offers both a promising model and a caution. It shows how regional business events can bridge policy, knowledge exchange, and practice, but also why more critical and comprehensive evaluation is needed if such models are to align with contemporary tourism priorities. The recommendations for better data collection on inclusion and sustainability, and for more robust evaluation frameworks, are considered as learning points by the organisers of Birmingham Tech Week who are keen to improve the conference and its ability to serve global audiences.

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Policymaking As Part of Place Identity Dialogue: the Case of Mazandaran Province in Iran

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Abstract

Purpose: Current study theorizes how place identity formation interactions proposed by Kavaratzis and hatch (2013) alter the meaning of the place, transform the policy-making process, and consequently shape the place. The current study takes up a social constructivist perspective and relies on Prerace et al.'s (2014) eight premises on social construction and policy design to explain the consequences of the place identity formation dialogue for the socially constructed tourism policymaking.

Study design/methodology/approach: A historical case study design is used for the study, with Mazandaran Province in Iran as the case. Historical documents and observational data were used for the purpose of the study. Given its distinct tourism regulations that showcase the shifting nature of policy structures and subsystems during the ongoing creation of regional identity, the Mazandaran example is well-suited for investigating the research problem.

Results: The study shows that, first, individual patterns of decision-making suggested by Pierce et al. (2014) have changed in the province. Second, the change in the belief system and the interpretation of policymakers and subsequently the policies changed the power constellation. Third, alterations also limited the expression of urban identity among citizens, which subsequently not only reduced the opportunities for urban tourism development but also acted as constraints on the multifaceted development of the community as an urban society.

Originality/value: By integrating identity-centered place branding into the analysis of how tourism policies are socially constructed, this paper offers a new perspective to the field.

Keywords Identity-based place brand, social construction of tourism policy, Mazandaran Province

Place Identity Formation: A Social Construction of Reality

The phenomenon of the social construction of reality refers to the understanding of a social world that is centred on meaning-making. The idea of social constructivism has its roots in the sociology of knowledge and assumes that the social world is a manifestation of the interpretation of events that have occurred around us and is formed intersubjectively. Once formed, it takes an objective form. Members of a society construct patterns of meaning separate from their activities in the world through interpretation, and then assume that the patterns they have established exist separately from the interpretations they have produced (Berger and Luckman, 1966). In this way, shared perceptions among individuals are translated into laws, norms, identities, concepts, and institutions (Rochefort and Cobb, 2007).

Form this standpoint, Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) consider place identity as a constant dialogue between the internal and the external, and portray the true nature of place branding as one of

interaction and dialogue between stakeholders. They propose that the interplay among the three elements of culture, identity, and image lies at the heart of place identity, with culture as 'the context of internal definitions of identity', image is supposed to be the site of external definitions of identity and 'how these two definitions influence each other is the process of identity' (p. 77). Place culture is defined as a way of life as experienced and created by the people that live in a place, therefore providing the context for internal definitions of place identity (p. 78). Also, in line with the conceptualization of place image offered by Aitken and Campelo (2011: 915), the term place image is defined as 'a shared reality, dynamically constructed through social interaction'.

Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) argue that place identity is an unending dialog between culture and image that involves an interplay between four parallel sub-processes: expressing, impressing, mirroring and reflecting. Expressing refers to the process by which identity expresses cultural understandings or 'the process by which culture makes itself known through identity claims' (p. 991). Over the process of impressing, the 'expressed identity leaves impressions on others', and through the third process, 'identity mirrors the images of others'; meaning that, as the internally formed and expressed identity leaves impressions on external stakeholders (images), it also informs the internally formed aspects of identity by 'holding a mirror' to them (p. 991). Finally, the fourth subprocess is defined as a reflecting process through which, 'identity is embedded in cultural understandings' (p. 991). Specifically, as the dialogue continues, identity is enriched and the enriched identity is internalized (absorbed back) into the culture through reflection. The four subprocesses change the culture, and the altered culture will be the basis for the next round of expression from within the place, which in turn reshapes and again informs the identity. The process is nonlinear and repetitive, hence a complete understanding of what an identity is can never be achieved.

Placemaking policies: the interplay of ideas, subsystems, and issues

Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) maintain that place managers and policymakers are only actors, among many, who are involved in the ongoing conversation between the production and reproduction of the place identity (Gustafson, 2001). Hence, placemaking policies, including place branding initiatives, should be considered as expressive actions rooted in the existing culture of the place which *per se* is the outcome of the identity dialogue in the previous rounds, and is informed through the previous rounds of impressing-mirroring-reflecting subprocesses. This conceptualization of the destination policy, is in line with the vast body of literature on social construction perspectives in policymaking that consider social construction (images of reality, and stereotypes used by people to make sense of the realities), logical rationales used to implicitly or explicitly justify the policy and gain legitimacy for it, and underlaying assumptions (explicit or implicit assumptions about the casual logic or capacity of individuals and organizations) as essential dimensions of any policy design (Schneider and Ingram, 2007).

As defined by Brooks (1989), public policy is a broad framework of ideas and values within which decisions are made and actions or reactions are taken and pursued by governments. Therefore, policymaking is considered to be a process through which actors interact to set problems, define

the range of solutions and, choose the actionable choice (Jenkins, 1989). Public issues are not neutral but rather interpretations of conditions that are subjectively defined as problems and require action to improve them, meaning that labelling a phenomenon as a problem is largely value-based (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994). Considered solutions are not exhaustive and final decisions are not made logically. Instead, the suggestion of possible solutions and their evaluation, as well as the final options, are based on the interpretation of the solutions as they appear through the interaction of policy subsystems (Sabatie and Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

Moreover, social meanings are always subject to reconstruction and change. The social world of individuals or communities is constantly expanding with new experiences and new thoughts. This world is continually reconstructed through reactions, activities, and connection with others (Fischer, 2003). Previous ways of thinking about various issues may also change as current circumstances change. Many social constructs are subject to revision, so that a perspective that was dominant at one time may be overridden at another. Changes in the beliefs and values of policy subsystems and, consequently, changes in the social construction of events can accelerate policy change, and, conversely, changes in public policy, can change subsystems' interpretations of reality. External events can provide opportunities for new interpretations that subsequently lead to policy change.

Therefore, while produced by a society's institutional culture, power relations, and social structures, the old and current policies are able to influence new culture and institutions. On the one hand, this can happen through tools such as new laws and new organizations, and on the other hand, through symbolic and linguistic effects (Dryzek, 1996). They also could shape the social context and scope of their intended action in society, affect the beliefs of elites and ordinary people, the social structure of target groups, the distribution of political power resources, and even the legitimacy of various knowledge systems. For instance, Dredge (2014) observed that the legislation, embedded practice and encultured knowledge that define roles and responsibilities, shape boundaries of planning and tourism networks. What tasks and activities must be undertaken in both planning and tourism sectors are defined by these institutional frameworks. They also determine the primary type of professional knowledge existing in the network, therefore value some types of knowledge above others; and as Amin & Roberts (2008) suggest, they give rise to very specific forms of 'knowing in action' or situated forms of social practice (p. 19).

Prerace et al. (2014) consider eight hypotheses for social construction and policy design and place these assumptions in three main categories: individual patterns, power, and political environment. Assumptions related to individual patters include: 1) actors cannot process all relevant information for decision-making and therefore rely on mental initiatives in selecting information relevant to decisions; 2) mental innovators filter information in a biased way. As a result, this bias causes people to confirm a certain category of information that is more consistent with their beliefs and ignore the rest of the information; 3) people use social constructs in a subjective and evaluative way; 4) the boundary of social reality is relative, such that individuals perceive generalizable patterns of social constructs within objective conditions. Power-related assumption is that power

is not distributed equally among individuals in political environments. Finally, the assumptions related to the political environment are that: 1) politics creates future policy; 2) politicians send messages to citizens that in turn influences their attitudes and participation patterns.

By investigating the case of tourism policies of Mazandaran province in Iran, current study explains how some tourism development policies in the destination contribute to the changes of social interaction and consequently place identity as a socially constructed reality; and how these changes have changed tourism policy design in the destination subsequently.

Case study: Development of Tourism in Two Providences in North of Iran

The region between the southern coast of Caspian Sea and the northern side of the Alborz mountains in Iran is characterized with moderate temperature and rather high level of humidity. Mazandaran province (hereafter MP) located in this area is geographically close to Tehran, the capital of the country. However, Alborz Mountain has historically been a high barrier for accessing this region. In 1930s Mazandaran was connected to the central regions of the country through the construction of a picturesque road, named Chaloos. The construction of this road can be considered the first governmental initiative in improving the accessibility to the region.

The road was considered as the fourth picturesque road in the world, and soon attracted tourists, mostly elites from Tehran. Filmmakers were ostensibly among the major segments of these tourists, as their experiences of the road were reflected in many of the popular bestselling films as an imaginary background. As the period between 1930s and 1940s in Iran was concomitant with the growth of the Iranian cinema, the Iranian urban society was experiencing a transformation by adopting cultural and political elements and ideas mostly from the west, and was the major audiences of this cinema.

No clear evidence is found as to whether filmmakers' visiting the road and the MP had been planned as a part of a toursmification policy (Tzanelli and Kutoulas, 2021), or if it was an organic move which brought about an uncontaminated artistic expression of the region. Nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously, their perceived and expressed image of the region was perhaps the first and the only exposure to the place for most of the audiences at that time. In those films, 1) the place was envisioned as a 'scenic natural background with no human elements'; 2) the locals (if any) were shown in the films as rurales passing by or serving films' characters, in both cases having no voice; and 3) the place was called '*Shomal*' (i.e., the *north*) and portrayed as a cohesively green-blue plain geographical area containing forests and beaches, in which there is no city of recognizable urban identity.

Based on the historical records of industries and trade in various cities in the region, the film-based portrayal of the province stood in contradiction to the physical reality, as there were some cities with recognized industrial and business reputation and interactions in the province at the time, as one of them (*Sari*) had the history of being the capital of Iran at the beginning of the Qajar reign (around 1770s). Thus, the film-constructed 'de-identified identity' of the cities in the region was adopted by the audiences and formed their first mental touch with the place. They perceived the place as Tehran's northern backyard where celebrities spent their holidays next to its beautiful

beaches. Films as cultural expressions of the places contribute to the place making process. This has been reported by Tzanelli and Kutoulas's (2021) study of the effect of 'Zurba the Greek' on the placemaking process in Greece. Alderman, Benjamin and Schnider (2012) also discuss that films not only act as place marketing tools to form place images, but also as factors that have material, social, and symbolic effects, and can transform place identity and contribute to the placemaking process through changing ideologies, power relations and inequalities.

1950s and 1960s was also associated with two events that set the ground for transformation of the region into a mass tourism destination. First, the establishment of the first car manufacturing company in Iran with aggressive marketing efforts for selling cars to the public. Second, the introduction and popularity of national television, which broadcasted Iranian movies, at the first stage in big cities like Theran, and somewhat later, in the whole country. A form of sun and sand mass tourism flooded the region, with tourists following their way down to the coastal areas and ignoring the presence of locals or treating them simply as those offering food and B&B accommodations. The de-identified identity of the cities in the region was manifested in tourists' 1) calling of the locals (both rurales and urban people) as '*shomali*' (northerner), which is defining the locals via their relative location to the centre rather than identifying them with the name of their own cities, if they were even considered to be urban; 2) not considering cities in the region as places of distinct identity deserving to be visited and explored. Tourists would travel through the middle of the of cities or along ring roads, reaching beaches and forests without spending time in the city.

The MP was not ready for serving the incoming tourists and, superstructures such as café, restaurants and accommodations were gradually built in the region by locals. Over the 60s, Locals' interested in the economic benefits of the newcomers presence, eagerly served the tourists, meanwhile adopting and practicing tourists' image of them as '*shomalies*'. In other words, through the processes of mirroring of the place identity, tourists transfer the adopted image through interaction with the locals; and, the locals via a process of reflecting, internalize this identification, and identified themselves as being *shomali*. This has been manifested in how locals express themselves and their place and also in the change in various physical aspects of the place culture. For instance, local community (either rural or urban) uses only natural elements to express the identity of the place, which is exactly what tourists expect. And, the local cuisine has moved away from an authentic vegetable-based diet toward meat-based dishes that are desirable and in demand by the tourists.

The internalization of the constructed identity of place is not limited to ordinary people, as policymakers are also involved in this altered belief system. Hatch (2006) proposes that an organization is constructed from activities that collect and analyse information about the environment and is adopted based on an analysis that leads to various activities from other environmental constructs. Although, the environment is assumed to create the analysis, it is actually the analysis that shapes the environment in such a way that the organization responds to it. In other words, this environment is established and then shapes both the analysis and the

decisions (Hatch, 2006). Therefore, the socially constructed identity internalized by policymakers influenced their decisions and affected the region's tourism policies in several ways.

First, individual patterns of decision making suggested by Pierce et la. (2014) have changed. The change in the belief system of policymakers led to a change in the body of knowledge that was accepted by them and acted as the frame of reference for their decision-making process. This also changed and limited the knowledge network they used and, consequently, the interpretations considered in the process of defining the problem and its solutions. This ultimately led to a change in the definition of destination tourism development and its limitation to rural tourism development. Cities were largely neglected in tourism policies. These policies included destination marketing activities to promote the place as a destination with natural attractions and rural community attractions. These marketing activities further reinforced the constructed identity underlying the policies among both citizens and tourists.

Second, the change in the belief system and the interpretation of policymakers and subsequently the policies, changed the power constellation, giving more power to actors related to rural tourism businesses. This in turn led to a change in the willingness of the community to enter to this category of economic activities in the tourism sector. This can be considered as evidence for the assumptions related to political environment suggested by Pierce et la. (2014). For instance, the government provided numerous loans for the construction of ecolodge in rural areas, while there were little financial or non-financial incentives from the government for the development of large hotels in the region. These policies have led to the mushrooming of ecolodges in rural areas, while there are very few hotels in the entire province. Of course, these ecolodges are actually small lodges that have expanded into the most remote and pristine natural places. The customers of these ecolodges are not tourists with sustainable behaviour, but mass tourists who go to these loges looking for cheaper accommodations and whose behaviour involves significant damage to the natural environment and the local community.

All of these alterations also limited the expression of urban identity among citizens, which subsequently not only reduced the opportunities for urban tourism development but also acted as constraints on the multifaceted development of the community as an urban society.

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Service Ecosystem in the Age of Twin Transition: on Wellness Tourism from the Perspective of Artificial Intelligence Ethics and Sustainability

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the "twin transition" processes—comprising the green and digital transitions—that are fundamentally transforming the tourism and service industries. The approach is holistic, emphasizing artificial intelligence (AI) ethics, algorithmic discrimination, sustainability (with a focus on the risk of greenwashing), and wellness tourism. The study interrogates the ethical blind spots engendered by technology, even as it enhances operational efficiency and the credibility of sustainability claims. This research constitutes a comprehensive qualitative case study, drawing on sector reports (Global Wellness Institute, Precedence Research) from 2020 to 2026, academic literature, national strategy documents (T.R. 12th Development Plan), and case analyses. Data were synthesized under the themes of "algorithmic justice," "regenerative tourism," and "digital wellness" using content analysis. It was found that the global wellness economy reached $6.8 trillion in 2024, with tourism playing a pivotal role in this expansion. However, the findings indicate that digitalization (AI, biometric data, algorithms) introduces new ethical challenges, such as "algorithmic discrimination" and "privacy violations," while on the sustainability front, the risk of "greenwashing" undermines consumer trust. The study concludes that Türkiye possesses significant potential in this transformation due to its thermal resources and health infrastructure, yet ethical and legal frameworks (KVKK, AI Act compliance) require development. The future of tourism is envisioned as a hybrid model where technology is employed in a human-centric (high-touch) and inclusive manner, and environmental resources are managed with a "regenerative" approach, rather than focusing solely on economic growth. This chapter is distinctive in integrating the concepts of "digitalization" and "sustainability"—typically addressed separately in tourism literature—within the framework of the "Twin Transition." It offers a holistic examination of this transformation through the lens of artificial intelligence ethics and wellness tourism.

Keywords: *Twin Transition, Artificial Intelligence Ethics, Algorithmic Discrimination, Wellness Tourism, Sustainability*

Introduction

As we progress into the second quarter of the 21st century, the global tourism and service sector is undergoing one of the most significant structural transformations in its history. This phenomenon, referred to as the "Twin Transition" in the literature, denotes the concurrent and interactive reshaping of the sector through digitalisation and sustainability (T.R. Presidency Strategy and

Budget Office, 2023). Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), and service robots are optimising operational processes and providing personalised experiences. Concurrently, climate change, resource scarcity, and evolving consumer awareness compel the sector to adopt environmentally and socially responsible practices (Buhalis et al., 2024; Chauhan et al., 2026; Rahimi et al., 2026). Central to this transformation is the concept of "wellness," which has experienced substantial growth in the post-pandemic era. Defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, rather than merely the absence of disease, wellness has emerged as a primary motivation for tourism mobility (Global Wellness Institute [GWI], 2025). Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of the sector also introduces significant ethical and structural challenges. Issues such as "algorithmic discrimination" arising from AI-supported recruitment and service algorithms (Bozkurt Gümrükçüoğlu & Yakacak, 2023), "greenwashing" tactics employed by hotels to project an environmentally friendly image (Bovsh & Rasulova, 2025), and concerns about personal data protection (Yılmaz & Karamustafa, 2025) are prominent threats to the sector's sustainability. This study seeks to provide a comprehensive perspective on the future of the tourism ecosystem by examining the aforementioned threats and opportunities across four main axes: Artificial Intelligence Ethics, Sustainability, Wellness Economy, and Türkiye's Position.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Dynamics of the Twin Transition The tourism industry faces significant pressure to achieve environmental sustainability due to its intensive resource consumption and substantial carbon footprint. Concurrently, the increasing consumer demand for instant, personalised, and contactless services in a digitalising world necessitates a technological revolution within the sector. As highlighted in the 12th Development Plan, it is crucial for Türkiye to formulate "industrial and service policies" that integrate green and digital transformations to sustain its competitiveness (T.R. Presidency, 2023). Artificial Intelligence and Algorithmic Ethics Artificial intelligence is employed across various domains within tourism, including reservation systems, customer service (e.g., chatbots), dynamic pricing, and personalised recommendation systems (Al-Romeedy, 2024). However, the transparency of these technologies is compromised by the "black box" problem. Historical biases present in the datasets used for algorithm training can result in the systematic exclusion of specific demographic groups, such as women, minorities, and disabled individuals, in recruitment processes or service delivery (Chen, 2023; Köchling & Wehner, 2020). A notable example is the discovery that Amazon's recruitment algorithm exhibited bias against female candidates, illustrating this risk (Bozkurt Gümrükçüoğlu & Yakacak, 2023). Sustainability and Greenwashing As consumer interest in environmentally friendly businesses grows, there is a corresponding increase in businesses' claims of being "green." However, these assertions often constitute "greenwashing," which undermines consumer trust and results in unfair competition (Alyahia et al., 2024). Bovsh and Rasulova (2025) argue that greenwashing poses a reputational risk in the hotel industry and should be examined through the 7P marketing mix. In this regard,

third-party certifications, such as those from the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and Green Key, are essential for ensuring transparency (Velaoras et al., 2025).

Rise and Transformation of Wellness Tourism

Market Size and Economic Impact

In 2024, the global wellness economy reached a volume of $6.8 trillion, accounting for 6.12% of the global GDP (GWI, 2025). Within this sector, wellness tourism attained a market size of $893.9 billion in 2024 and is projected to grow to $1.38 trillion by 2029, with an average annual growth rate of 9.1% (GWI, 2025; ResearchAndMarkets, 2025). According to Precedence Research (2026), North America holds the largest market share at 34%, while the Asia-Pacific region is experiencing the most rapid growth. Wellness tourists spend 53% more on international travel and 178% more on domestic travel compared to average tourists, making them a "high-value" target demographic for destinations (GWI, 2018).

Distinction between Medical Tourism and Wellness Tourism

These two concepts, often conflated in the literature, differ in intention and methodology. Medical tourism is characterized as a "reactive" journey undertaken for the treatment of a diagnosed illness. In contrast, wellness tourism is a "proactive" journey pursued by healthy individuals aiming to maintain and enhance their well-being (GWI, 2025; Sustainability Directory, 2025). However, the emergence of "Medical Wellness" is increasingly blurring these distinctions. For example, luxury wellness clinics offer practices such as DNA analysis and stem cell treatments under "longevity" packages (Resident Magazine, 2025).

Future Trends: Sleep, Technology, and Biometrics

Key wellness trends anticipated for 2025 and beyond include:

- Sleep Tourism: In response to the global epidemic of sleep deprivation, hotels are transforming into "sleep sanctuaries" equipped with AI-supported beds, circadian lighting, and sound insulation (GWI, 2025).
- Hyper-Personalization and Biometrics: Artificial intelligence and wearable technologies are employed to analyze tourists' biometric data, such as pulse and stress levels, to personalize aspects ranging from hotel room temperature to food menus (Resident Magazine, 2025).
- Touchless Wellness: Post-pandemic hygiene concerns have led to the widespread adoption of therapies delivered through technology without human contact, including cryotherapy and infrared saunas (GWI, 2025).

Ethical Dimension of Digitalization: Algorithmic Discrimination and Trust

Discrimination in Recruitment and Human Resources

The tourism sector, being labour-intensive, employs artificial intelligence tools such as CV screening and video interview analysis to enhance recruitment efficiency. Nevertheless, the datasets used to train these algorithms often contain historical human biases, such as gender or ethnic preferences, leading to the perpetuation and automation of such discrimination (Chen, 2023; Bozkurt Gümrükçüoğlu & Yakacak, 2023). This phenomenon, known as "algorithmic bias,"

undermines the principle of equality (Akıncılar Köseoğlu & Çetin, 2024). Algorithmic Manipulation Targeted at Consumers Recommendation systems and dynamic pricing algorithms utilize consumers' digital footprints to offer personalized pricing. This practice poses a risk of "price discrimination," potentially limiting access to certain services for low-income groups (Borgesius, 2020; Yılmaz & Karamustafa, 2025). Additionally, the use of "dark patterns" to coerce consumers into making unwanted reservations or purchasing more expensive products constitutes an ethical issue within the sector (Baldick & Jang, 2025). Multistakeholder Fairness in Recommendation Systems Tourism recommendation systems predominantly prioritize tourist satisfaction, often neglecting the interests of local communities and businesses. This focus contributes to overtourism in popular destinations and diminishes the visibility of lesser-known local enterprises. Müllner et al. (2025) advocate for training algorithms not solely on "popularity" criteria but also on "fair distribution" and "sustainability" criteria.

Sustainability and Regenerative Tourism

Green certifications and greenwashing significantly influence environmental sustainability within wellness tourism. Consumers demonstrate a willingness to pay a premium for eco-friendly accommodations (Velaoras et al., 2025; Ezeh & Dube, 2024). Nonetheless, uncertified "green" claims, known as greenwashing, exploit this consumer trust. International certifications, such as ISO 14001, Green Key, and GSTC, are increasingly required for businesses to transparently demonstrate their environmental performance (Dias et al., 2024). Türkiye has pioneered in this domain by instituting a mandatory national sustainable tourism program in collaboration with GSTC through TGA (GSTC, 2022). Circular Economy and Waste Management Tourism enterprises are shifting from a "throwaway" culture to a "circular economy" model. Efforts to reduce food waste, recover water, and enhance energy efficiency are not only cost-effective but also environmentally imperative (Ak, 2025; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Notably, "zero waste" policies have become integral to the operational processes of hotels. Regenerative Tourism While sustainability focuses on "preserving the current situation" by minimizing harm, "regenerative tourism" seeks to "enhance" the destination and local community by promoting positive impacts (Akgül, 2025; Bellato & Pollock, 2023). This approach envisions tourists not merely as consumers but as active participants who contribute to the ecosystems they visit.

Türkiye's Potential and Strategic Goals

12th Development Plan and Health Tourism Vision

Türkiye's 12th Development Plan (2024-2028) seeks to enhance the diversity of tourism products and extend tourism activities throughout the entire year. As part of this plan, strategic priorities include the development of health tourism under the "Health Türkiye" brand, the integration of thermal resources with wellness initiatives, and the expansion of digitalisation (T.R. Presidency, 2023).

Thermal Resources and Wellness Integration

Türkiye possesses significant potential, being ranked first in Europe and seventh globally regarding the abundance of thermal resources, with over 1,500 identified resources (Cayra Travel, 2025). Locations such as Afyon, Bursa, and Pamukkale integrate traditional spa culture with contemporary spa and wellness practices, thereby emerging as centers of attraction for the aging European demographic and the Middle Eastern market.

Digital Infrastructure and Data Security

In Türkiye, the integration of digitalisation measures such as e-Nabız and telemedicine within health tourism enhances service quality. Nonetheless, achieving full compliance of the KVKK with the AB GDPR standards, alongside establishing ethical frameworks for the use of artificial intelligence, is crucial for fostering international trust (Tosun, Arık & Güner, 2025).

Methodology

This study conducts a conceptual and qualitative situational analysis of the "twin transition" processes, encompassing green and digital transitions, within the tourism and service ecosystem. This analysis is framed by the axes of AI ethics, sustainability, and wellness tourism. The research employs a descriptive and exploratory design to comprehend and synthesize current phenomena, threats, and opportunities in this rapidly evolving sector from a holistic perspective.

Data Collection Process and Scope

The dataset for this research comprises secondary data derived from comprehensive document analysis. Given the dynamic nature of digital transformation and sustainability issues, as well as the rapidly updated data, the research timeframe is set between 2020 and 2026, including future projections. This period is crucial for encompassing new tourism paradigms emerging post-pandemic and the acceleration of digitalization processes. A "purposive sampling" strategy was employed in line with the research objectives, focusing on four primary data source groups. Searches were conducted in databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and DergiPark using keywords like "twin transition," "AI ethics tourism," "algorithmic discrimination," "greenwashing," "wellness tourism trends," and "regenerative tourism." Current articles and books directly related to the topic were examined. Global reports from international organizations such as the Global Wellness Institute (GWI), Precedence Research, and ResearchAndMarkets provided data on the size, trends, and future of the wellness economy. To ascertain Türkiye's position and objectives, the 12th Development Plan (2024-2028) published by the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye's Strategy and Budget, along with relevant tourism strategy documents, were analyzed. To concretize theoretical discussions in the literature, reliable media analyses and case studies on "algorithmic bias" (e.g., in recruitment processes) and "greenwashing" (e.g., in the hotel sector) within the sector were incorporated into the dataset.

Data Analysis

The content analysis method was employed to examine the collected qualitative data. Data from various sources were systematically categorized according to the primary research questions. An inductive approach was utilized during the analysis to identify relationships and patterns within the data.

The findings were synthesized and interpreted within three principal themes, which form the study's conceptual framework. Digital Ethics Theme: Issues of algorithmic discrimination, data privacy, and transparency. Sustainability Theme: Risks of greenwashing, reliability of certifications, and approaches to regenerative tourism. Wellness Transformation Theme: Market size, emerging trends such as sleep tourism and biometrics, and the balance between human interaction and technology.

Results

Research findings show that wellness tourism has gone beyond being a mere economic activity and has become a field of technological and ethical transformation. Technology and Human Balance: Although service robots and AI increase efficiency, they cannot substitute the "human touch" and empathy at the core of tourism. Especially in a field with high emotional and physical sensitivity, such as wellness, technology needs to play an "augmenting" role (Yılmaz & Karamustafa, 2025; Ivanov & Umbrello, 2021).

Ethical Blindness and Discrimination: The uncontrolled use of algorithms carries the risk of reproducing social inequalities. AI systems used in recruitment or customer service must be subject to regular "bias audits " (Bozkurt Gümrükçüoğlu & Yakacak, 2023).

Trust and Transparency: Greenwashing and data privacy violations are the biggest threats to consumer trust. Transparent certification processes and open data policies are essential for brand sustainability (Bovsh & Rasulova, 2025; Alyahia et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study reveals that the future of the tourism ecosystem depends on the synthesis of digital innovation with ethical values and environmental responsibility. The " twin transition " is not only a process of technological adaptation but also a mentality revolution in which human and ecological values are centred.

Recommendations for Sector Stakeholders:

1. Algorithmic Transparency: Tourism businesses should make the decision-making mechanisms of the AI systems they use (pricing, recommendation, etc.) transparent and establish ethical committees to prevent algorithmic discrimination.

2. 2. Holistic Sustainability: Sustainability should not be limited to changing towels; it should become a holistic and certified (GSTC) strategy, including energy efficiency, waste management, and local development.

3. 3. Regenerative Approach: In destination management, instead of the number of tourists, regenerative models should focus on per capita income and "net positive benefit" provided to the local community.

4. 4. Education and Competence: Digital literacy of tourism employees should be increased, but at the same time, emotional intelligence and hospitality skills should also be strengthened. Türkiye has the potential to become a leading "Wellness Destination" in this new era with its rich cultural heritage, natural resources, and young workforce. However, realising this potential depends on the determination to implement ethical, sustainable, and technologically rational policies.

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Integration of Renewable Energy Sources into Sustainable Tourism Policies: International Models and Strategic Insights

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how the integration of renewable energy sources (RES) advances sustainable tourism policies by combining international models, empirical evidence, and governance frameworks. The aim is to clarify RES's role in transforming tourism destinations toward net-zero and carbon-neutral futures, while addressing both technological and social dimensions of the transition.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed-methods research design is employed, combining qualitative multiple case study analysis with quantitative panel data evidence. Qualitative data are drawn from island economies (Maldives, Seychelles, Grenada, Costa Rica), urban sustainable destinations (Copenhagen, Vienna), and nature-based tourism regions. Quantitative evidence is derived from panel data analyses (Banga et al., 2022; Djalilov et al., 2025) covering ten emerging economies. Data sources include national energy strategies, tourism master plans, and international institutional reports (UNWTO, IRENA, OECD, EU). The analysis is structured around three pillars: (1) financial and institutional incentives, (2) technological integration and energy independence, and (3) multi-level governance and participatory planning.

Findings – Panel data analysis confirms that a 1% increase in solar energy consumption correlates with a 0.35% rise in tourist arrivals (Banga et al., 2022), and a 1% increase in renewable energy use is associated with approximately a 1.1% reduction in CO_2 emissions in tourism-intensive countries (Djalilov et al., 2025). ASEAN economies demonstrate an Environmental Kuznets Curve effect consistent with earlier cross-national evidence (Grossman and Krueger, 1995; Katircioglu et al., 2018). Case studies identify Green Energy Zones (Seychelles), participatory climate action plans (OECS, 2024), and international cooperation frameworks (Zero-Carbon Island Initiative, COP29 2024) as scalable models. Social impacts include local employment creation, skill development, and community resilience strengthening. Grenada and Seychelles exemplify technology leapfrogging enabled by climate-smart finance. A key outcome of COP29 was the launch of the International Zero-Carbon Island Cooperation Initiative in the China Pavilion on November 13, 2024. Co-hosted by China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment and the Shandong Provincial Government, the initiative calls for global collaboration on building clean

energy systems and promoting low-carbon tourism in island nations (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of China, 2024).

Practical implications – Five consolidated policy pathways are recommended: (1) integrated cross-ministerial governance with participatory planning; (2) Green Energy Zone designation coupled with international cooperation; (3) climate-smart finance mobilisation through green bonds and feed-in tariffs; (4) workforce development programmes aligned with just transition principles (ILO, 2015); and (5) circular energy–tourism nexus approaches integrating energy, water, and waste systems. These are particularly actionable for small island developing states and emerging economies with high renewable energy potential.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature in three ways: (1) expanding geographical scope to include both the Global North and Global South, addressing epistemological imbalances; (2) introducing methodological innovation through mixed-methods design that confirms the EKC hypothesis and quantifies the solar energy–tourism arrivals relationship; and (3) advancing the social policy dimension of tourism–energy integration by foregrounding just transition principles, local labour markets, and participatory governance. The synthesis offers a holistic framework for understanding pathways to net-zero destinations that is environmentally, economically, and socially transformative.

Keywords: Renewable Energy, Sustainable Tourism, Net-Zero Destinations, Mixed-Methods, Technology Leapfrogging, Climate-Smart Finance, Environmental Kuznets Curve, Just Transition, Governance

1. Introduction

Tourism represents one of the most significant drivers of global economic development, yet its contribution to climate change through energy-intensive operations poses substantial sustainability challenges. Accommodation facilities, transportation systems, and recreational infrastructure collectively consume vast amounts of energy: at the destination scale, accommodation and transport account for approximately 75% of tourism-related greenhouse gas emissions (UNWTO, 2019), with global hotel energy consumption averaging between 200 and 400 kWh per occupied room per year depending on destination climate and building vintage (IEA, 2021). With fossil fuel dependency threatening the environmental viability of tourism destinations worldwide, the imperative for transformation is clear: sustainable tourism must transcend traditional environmental conservation approaches to encompass fundamental restructuring of energy systems (OECD and UNEP, 2011).

This study aims to examine the pathways for integrating RES into tourism policies and practices, with a particular focus on emerging economies. By synthesising international models, empirical evidence, and governance frameworks through a mixed-methods approach, the research bridges

the gap between technology-driven energy transitions and socially inclusive tourism development. Unlike existing studies that predominantly emphasise global North experiences, this paper foregrounds comparative insights from both North and South, highlighting the roles of participatory governance, local labour markets, climate-smart finance, and technology leapfrogging in advancing net-zero tourism destinations.

2. Literature Framework

The literature recommends integrating renewable energy into tourism infrastructure — transport, hotels, museums, and protected areas — through solar, wind, biomass, and other clean technologies (Guo and Chai, 2025; Calderón-Vargas et al., 2019). The integration of renewable energy into tourism policies is not only an environmental necessity but also a driver of local development. For instance, a study in the La Florida community in Huaral, Peru demonstrated that incorporating solar and wind energy into tourism ventures improved residents' quality of life and created new entrepreneurial opportunities (Riojas-Díaz et al., 2022). Within the framework of China's international communication strategy, ecological civilisation discourse — including Green Development and Low-Carbon Development — reflects the global rise of sustainable development as a recognised standard (Zhiling, et al., 2025).

The practical policy literature points in the same direction. UN Tourism's (2024) guidance emphasises that national tourism administrations should develop policies supporting the sector's low-carbon transition. Becken et al.'s (2020) cross-country review found that only 37 of 101 policy documents substantially addressed the tourism–climate nexus, highlighting limited integration of climate concerns into tourism governance. Empirically, Banga et al. (2022) show that renewable energy consumption significantly decreases greenhouse gas emissions in OECD tourism contexts, while Djalilov et al. (2025) find that a 1% increase in renewable energy use is associated with approximately a 1.1% reduction in CO_2 emissions in tourism-intensive countries.

As the tourism sector contributes an estimated 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Lenzen et al., 2018), renewable energy adoption is increasingly recognised as a strategic pathway to mitigate environmental impacts while enhancing destination resilience. Global trends highlight a growing commitment to energy transition in tourism, involving not only technological upgrades but also systemic changes in governance and consumer behaviour (IRENA, 2021; Gössling et al., 2021). The UNWTO underscores the role of renewable energy in achieving the 2030 Agenda, particularly SDGs 7 and 13 (UNWTO, 2019). International models — including the EU's Clean Energy for All Europeans package (European Commission, 2019), the Maldives' ASPIRE solar micro-grid programme (IRENA, 2022; Ministry of Tourism, Maldives, 2021), and Iceland's near-total reliance on geothermal and hydropower (Orkustofnun, 2023) — illustrate practical pathways for integration. Governance insights emphasise the importance of multi-level coordination (Hall, 2019) and stakeholder collaboration, with eco-certification schemes providing market-based incentives that complement direct public financial support (López-Sánchez and Pulido-Fernández,

2016). Investment barriers and regulatory hurdles remain significant, particularly in developing countries (Gössling and Scott, 2018).

Sustainable tourism scholarship has historically emphasised environmental carrying capacity, ecotourism principles, and community participation, with energy dimensions receiving comparatively limited attention. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of concepts such as "net-zero tourism," "carbon-neutral destinations," and "energy-efficient accommodation," reflecting growing awareness of energy's centrality to tourism sustainability. Existing research identifies three primary contributions of renewable energy adoption in tourism: (1) emissions reduction and climate change mitigation, (2) long-term cost advantages and energy security, and (3) enhanced destination image and marketing power. Comprehensive policy-level integration models, however, remain underexplored in comparative tourism studies, and the social dimensions of energy transition — including just transition principles and technology leapfrogging — merit greater attention.

2.1 Contribution to the Literature

This study contributes to the literature in three distinct ways. First, it expands the geographical scope of renewable energy–tourism scholarship by systematically integrating insights from both the Global North and Global South, thereby addressing epistemological imbalances in existing research. Second, it introduces methodological innovation through a mixed-methods design that combines comparative panel data analysis — confirming the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) hypothesis (Grossman and Krueger, 1995) and quantifying the solar energy–tourism arrivals relationship (Banga et al., 2022) — with qualitative case study analysis. Third, it advances the social policy dimension of tourism–energy integration by incorporating just transition principles (ILO, 2015), local labour market dynamics, and participatory governance frameworks. Together, these contributions position the paper at the intersection of environmental economics, tourism studies, and social policy.

3. Mixed-Methods Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative multiple case study analysis with secondary quantitative panel data evidence. This approach allows triangulation across methodological traditions: the panel data component provides statistical grounding for causal inferences regarding RES adoption and tourism outcomes, while the case study component illuminates the institutional, political, and social mechanisms through which these relationships operate. Case selection criteria included: (1) demonstrated renewable energy utilisation in tourism operations, (2) presence of institutional policy frameworks, and (3) evidence of destination-scale transformation.

3.1 Quantitative Component: Panel Data Evidence

The quantitative dimension draws on two published panel data analyses. Banga et al. (2022) employ a fixed-effects panel model across ten OECD economies, estimating the elasticity of tourist arrivals with respect to solar energy consumption. Their central finding — a 0.35% increase in

tourist arrivals per 1% increase in solar energy consumption — provides econometric grounding for the study's claim that RES adoption enhances destination attractiveness. Djalilov et al. (2025) complement this by examining CO_2 emission intensity in a panel of the world's most tourism-intensive countries, finding a 1.1% reduction in emissions per 1% increase in renewable energy use. Both studies apply panel unit root tests and cointegration analysis to address potential spuriousness, lending robustness to the reported coefficients. ASEAN economies in the sample further exhibit an EKC inflection consistent with Grossman and Krueger's (1995) cross-national evidence and Katircioglu et al.'s (2018) tourism-specific confirmation.

3.2 Qualitative Component: Case Selection

Selected cases comprise island economies (Iceland, Maldives, Costa Rica, Seychelles, Grenada, Bhutan), urban sustainable destinations (Copenhagen, Denmark; Vienna, Austria), and nature-based tourism areas (Alpine mountain resorts, African solar-powered safari camps, Mediterranean island clusters). This configuration enables systematic comparison across economic development levels, climate zones, and governance structures.

3.3 Data Sources

Document analysis encompassed national energy strategy documents, tourism master plans, and sustainability reports, complemented by international institutional reports and policy frameworks. Key sources included:

- UNWTO Glasgow Declaration (2021) and Tourism and SDGs framework (2022) for global governance commitments.
- IRENA World Energy Transitions Outlook (2023) for renewable energy pathways relevant to tourism.
- OECS Climate Action Plan (2024–2025) as a participatory governance model for small island developing states.
- European Commission RED III Directive (2022) and Fit for 55 package (2021) for EU-level regulatory integration.
- I (COP29, 2024) linking Grenada and China in renewable tourism infrastructure.
- ILO Just Transition Guidelines (2015) for social policy and workforce development dimensions.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured around three dimensions: (1) demand-side integration (tourism operators, facilities, consumer behaviour); (2) supply-side integration (energy infrastructure, grid-level renewables, storage systems); and (3) destination-level governance (cross-ministerial mandates, participatory planning, international cooperation). By combining statistical evidence with institutional and destination-specific case analysis, the methodology situates renewable energy integration within both global governance frameworks and local implementation contexts.

4. Findings and Discussion

Comparative analysis reveals that successful renewable energy integration in tourism rests upon three interconnected pillars, each critical to achieving destination-scale transformation.

4.1 Financial and Institutional Incentive Mechanisms

Costa Rica and Denmark exemplify how tax incentives, green investment grants, and carbon reduction subsidies accelerate renewable energy adoption among tourism enterprises. Costa Rica generated 99.7% of its national electricity from renewable sources in 2022 (ICT, 2022), establishing a benchmark for RES-led tourism branding. Tourism businesses enrolled in the national Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) scheme have reported average energy cost reductions of approximately 42% over a five-year period, demonstrating the long-term financial viability of RES adoption (ICT, 2022). These financial instruments lower investment barriers while signalling policy commitment to sustainable development.

Certification systems such as Green Key, LEED, and EarthCheck embed energy performance within sustainability criteria, creating market-based drivers for renewable energy adoption. Research on pro-sustainable tourist segments confirms that environmental certification is a significant factor in destination selection among higher-spending traveller cohorts (López-Sánchez and Pulido-Fernández, 2016). This dual approach — combining public incentives with market mechanisms — proves particularly effective in motivating diverse stakeholder participation. Panel data confirms the outcome: a 1% increase in solar energy consumption correlates with a 0.35% rise in tourist arrivals (Banga et al., 2022), underscoring the economic attractiveness of renewable energy investment in tourism.

4.2 Technological Integration and Energy Independence

Island resorts in the Maldives, Alpine hotels, and safari camps demonstrate how micro-grids, solar panels, and hybrid systems enable reduced dependence on centralised power infrastructure. Under the ASPIRE programme (Accelerating Sustainable Private Investments in Renewable Energy), more than 70 resort islands in the Maldives have installed solar-diesel hybrid micro-grids, achieving diesel consumption reductions of 30–40% per installation (IRENA, 2022; Ministry of Tourism, Maldives, 2021). Iceland's near-complete reliance on geothermal and hydropower — renewable sources supplying approximately 99.8% of national electricity and 90% of space heating (Orkustofnun, 2023) — showcases how resource-specific energy endowments can become both sustainability solutions and unique destination attributes that directly attract visitors.

Solar PV cost reductions of approximately 89% between 2010 and 2022 (IRENA, 2023) have substantially improved the investment case for renewable energy across all tourism sub-sectors, including accommodation facilities with previously marginal return profiles. Beyond emissions reduction, technological integration enhances energy supply security, ensuring operational

continuity — a critical consideration for remote or island destinations vulnerable to supply disruptions.

4.3 Policy Coherence and Multi-Level Governance

Copenhagen and Vienna illustrate the criticality of institutional coordination between energy and tourism policies. Copenhagen achieved 62% renewable electricity penetration by 2023 and remains on track for its 2025 carbon-neutrality target (City of Copenhagen, 2023), demonstrating that urban destinations can embed decarbonisation into spatial planning and tourism infrastructure simultaneously. When building codes, energy performance standards, and urban transportation policies align with tourism infrastructure development, destination-scale carbon reduction becomes achievable.

International case studies reinforce this point. The OECS Climate Action Plan (2024–2025) demonstrates how cross-ministerial mandates and participatory governance can target halving tourism-related emissions by 2030. Similarly, Seychelles' Green Energy Zones and Grenada's Zero-Carbon Island Initiative highlight how regulatory streamlining and international cooperation frameworks de-risk investment and build local technical capacity. The ASEAN experience provides further empirical grounding: consistent with the EKC hypothesis (Grossman and Krueger, 1995; Katircioglu et al., 2018), tourism-intensive economies in the region exhibit declining emissions intensity beyond certain income thresholds, particularly where governance frameworks actively channel tourism revenues into clean energy infrastructure.

4.4 Technology Leapfrogging and Climate-Smart Finance: Lessons from Grenada and Seychelles

The cases of Grenada and Seychelles illustrate the potential for technology leapfrogging in small island developing states (SIDS). Rather than replicating the fossil fuel-dependent development trajectory of advanced economies, both destinations have leveraged climate-smart finance mechanisms — including concessional loans under the Green Climate Fund and bilateral renewable energy agreements under the Zero-Carbon Island Initiative — to install distributed renewable energy systems that bypass the conventional centralised-grid stage entirely.

In Grenada, the Zero-Carbon Island Initiative has catalysed a community-scale photovoltaic network integrated with tourism hospitality infrastructure, including solar-powered desalination for resort water supply and vehicle charging corridors connecting key tourism zones (OECS, 2024). Local success factors include a pre-existing tradition of community cooperatives, bilateral technical assistance from China for photovoltaic maintenance training, and a government mandate embedding energy targets within tourism licensing conditions. In Seychelles, Green Energy Zone designation on Mahé and Praslin has aggregated demand from tourism operators, reducing per-installation transaction costs while creating domestic supply chains for renewable energy components. International investors, attracted by streamlined permitting and concessional finance

availability, have contributed to a renewable energy ecosystem that simultaneously serves resort energy needs and local grid stability.

These two cases suggest a transferable model: technology leapfrogging in SIDS tourism requires not only capital and technology transfer, but also (1) governance frameworks that coordinate across tourism, energy, and finance ministries; (2) finance structures that reduce first-mover risk for local operators; and (3) workforce development that creates local ownership of renewable energy maintenance — consistent with the just transition framework articulated by ILO (2015). Together, these elements transform renewable energy from an imported technological solution into an embedded component of local economic development.

4.5 Economic and Social Impacts

Renewable energy integration generates co-benefits extending beyond environmental outcomes. Long-term operational cost reductions enhance business profitability while insulating enterprises from energy price volatility. Marketing benefits are substantial, with renewable energy credentials increasingly influencing destination choice among environmentally conscious travellers (Gössling and Scott, 2018).

Social impacts include local employment creation through renewable energy infrastructure development and maintenance, technology transfer fostering local capacity building, and strengthened community resilience through distributed energy systems. Case evidence highlights the importance of addressing skill mismatches in local labour markets, requiring targeted training programmes aligned with just transition principles (ILO, 2015). Grenada's photovoltaic maintenance training programme, developed under the Zero-Carbon Island Initiative, exemplifies how workforce development and energy transition can be co-designed to maximise community benefit. These multidimensional benefits position renewable energy integration as a development strategy that aligns sustainability with economic and social progress.

5. Conclusion

The integration of renewable energy into tourism is no longer a peripheral "green initiative" but a systemic necessity for achieving net-zero destinations. Comparative evidence from island economies, urban sustainable cities, and nature-based tourism areas demonstrates that renewable energy adoption simultaneously advances environmental resilience, economic competitiveness, and social inclusion. As global climate commitments accelerate under the Paris Agreement and the UNWTO Glasgow Declaration (2021), the imperative for tourism destinations to lead — rather than merely respond to — the energy transition has never been greater.

Three overarching conclusions emerge. First, successful transitions require systemic integration across demand-side operations, supply-side infrastructure, and destination-level governance: case studies from Seychelles, Grenada, Costa Rica, and the OECS illustrate how multi-level governance and participatory planning translate global commitments into local outcomes. Second, economic and social co-benefits are empirically confirmed: renewable energy investment stimulates tourism

arrivals (Banga et al., 2022) while reducing ecological footprint (Djalilov et al., 2025); beyond environmental gains, integration generates cost savings, enhanced destination branding, and local employment, positioning renewable energy as a development strategy rather than merely environmental policy. Third, the cases of Grenada and Seychelles demonstrate that technology leapfrogging enabled by climate-smart finance and just transition governance (ILO, 2015) allows SIDS to transcend the incremental decarbonisation pathway and establish themselves as global models for renewable energy–tourism integration.

Ultimately, renewable energy integration in tourism is technically feasible, economically attractive, and socially transformative. Achieving net-zero tourism destinations requires technological innovation, financial incentives, and inclusive governance frameworks that empower communities and align with global climate commitments. This holistic perspective positions tourism as a sector capable of leading the broader sustainability transition, offering lessons transferable across diverse geographical and institutional contexts (Dogan & Seker, 2016).

Closing Reflection *Just as the cultural longing to remain "forever young" reflects humanity's desire for timeless vitality, the integration of renewable energy into tourism policies embodies a pathway to sustain destinations for future generations, keeping them vibrant, resilient, and ever young. Likewise, just as love lifts us "up where we belong," renewable energy integration can elevate tourism systems toward resilience, sustainability, and a future that truly belongs to all generations. And just as LP's voice in Lost On You* resonates with both fragility and strength, tourism's renewable transition must balance vulnerability to climate risks with the resilience of sustainable systems. Together, these cultural echoes remind us that sustainability is not only technical and economic, but also deeply human—anchored in memory, aspiration, and the pursuit of harmony across time.

6. Policy Implications

The findings of this study yield five consolidated policy pathways for policymakers, destination managers, and international organisations:

- Integrated Governance and Participatory Planning: Tourism, environment, and energy ministries should jointly mandate cross-ministerial climate action plans — following the OECS (2024) model — with community leadership and participatory processes embedded throughout to ensure adaptation measures reflect local realities and build democratic legitimacy.
- Green Energy Zones and International Cooperation: Designating specific tourism hubs as Green Energy Zones — as demonstrated in Seychelles — can streamline regulations, aggregate demand, and attract climate finance; these zones gain additional leverage when coupled with international cooperation frameworks such as the Zero-Carbon Island Initiative, which de-risk investment through bilateral technical and financial support.

- Climate-Smart Finance Mobilisation: Governments and international institutions should expand access to green bonds, feed-in tariffs, concessional Green Climate Fund lending, and public–private power purchase agreements. These mechanisms are particularly critical for SIDS and emerging economies where private capital faces high perceived risk from renewable energy projects in tourism contexts.
- Workforce Development and Just Transition: Renewable energy transitions must be accompanied by workforce development programmes aligned with ILO (2015) just transition principles, addressing skill mismatches through targeted training initiatives — such as Grenada's photovoltaic maintenance programme — that create local technical ownership and prevent community displacement from energy transition processes.
- Circular Energy–Tourism Nexus: Tourism policy should integrate energy, water, food, and waste management systems, following circular economy principles, to reduce seasonal demand stress and enhance destination resilience. Solar-powered desalination, biogas recovery from food waste, and EV charging corridors collectively reduce both energy costs and ecological pressure at destination scale.

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