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CONTENTS

SUSTAINABLE GLAMPING IN GREECE: EVALUATING VIABILITY AND
PROPOSING A STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN

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Abstract
Purpose: The purpose of this paper is: a. To evaluate the sustainability of glamping as a nature-based tourism option in Greece, which offers higher levels of comfort while promoting environmental stewardship, financial feasibility and societal accountability; b. To explore the potential of glamping to strengthen local economies, contribute positively to society and minimize the environmental impact, and c. To propose a sustainable business plan for glamping accommodation in Greece.

Methodology: The study is based on international bibliographic references and secondary data. Furthermore, the authors conduct a comprehensive case study to capture an ideal sustainable business plan for glamping accommodation in Greece. PESTLE and SWOT analyses are also implemented to evaluate the internal and external factors influencing the glamping sector in Greece.

Findings (results): The study reveals that glamping tourism uniquely combines luxurious accommodation such as upscale tents or yurts, with immersive natural experiences in remote locations like forests or coastal areas. This concept appeals particularly to the rising demand for sustainable and unconventional vacation options, especially among the Gen Z demographic, who seek eco-friendly and authentic travel experiences that go beyond traditional hotel stays.

Key findings emphasize the necessity for developing sustainable, long-lasting business models incorporating green practices, such as using renewable energy sources, minimizing plastic use, and implementing recycling systems. Moreover, fostering community engagement by employing residents and sourcing products from nearby suppliers is identified as a crucial factor for the success of these ventures. Effective business planning must align with initiatives that promote environmental preservation, such as conserving ecosystems and raising visitor awareness about eco challenges, which are essential for the long-term viability of the glamping sector.

Originality/value/suggestions: This study contributes an analysis and empirical assessment of glamping's viability. It identifies good practices for sustainable hospitality and offers insights for investors and operators on developing

successful glamping accommodations in Greece. By examining trends and incorporating sustainable business models, the survey provides a strategic outline for glamping that supports ecological sustainability, economic development, and cultural heritage preservation. Future research should focus on refining these strategies and exploring new sustainable tourism opportunities.

Keywords: Business Plan, Camping, Glamping, Greece, Sustainable Business Model, Viability

Introduction

Glamping tourism has grown from its core ideas to offer a blend of luxury in nature, aiming to meet the increasing demand for sustainable and unique vacation experiences. Wijaya (2021) stresses the importance of using local resources and promoting sustainability in developing tourist villages, while preserving local culture and community support. Similarly, Santos (2021) emphasizes the need for sustainable business models in tourism to tackle environmental issues and promote community involvement, highlighting the balance between economic growth, environmental protection and revitalizing local populations. Combining these perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of glamping tourism in Greece, allowing for the proposal of an environmentally sustainable business model aligned with responsible tourism principles.

Significance Of Sustainable Business Plans

In academia, integrating sustainability into business planning is vital for long-term success and competitiveness. With the tourism industry growing rapidly, a sustainable hospitality sector becomes essential (Kapiki, 2012). Sustainable business models, as discussed by Nosratabadi et al. (2019), enhance the value and social benefits of eco-friendly operations. Agustina et al. (2022) note a rising demand for environmentally responsible travel solutions, especially among Gen Z, who prefer sustainable lodgings and experiences. Gabler et al. (2017) argue that organizations can achieve sustainable business planning by aligning their vision, involving stakeholders, focusing on innovation and integrating environmentally sustainable practices.

Strategic imperatives are crucial action plans, while economic imperatives combine ethical and financial needs. Future glamping tourism trends include luxury camping, and Greece is aligning with global environmental goals to enhance its appeal and promote sustainable tourism.

Research Aim And Objectives

Given the increasing interest in sustainable tourism and the need for innovative business models in hospitality, this study aims to develop a strategic plan for

glamping in Greece that emphasizes environmental stewardship, financial viability, and social responsibility. The primary objective is to assess the current state of glamping in Greece, its potential ecological impacts, preservation of historic heritage, and opportunities for economic improvement.

This research aims to create a strategic framework incorporating ecological sustainability, community involvement, and experiential tourism, drawing on insights from Santos (2021) on sustainable rural development and Varmazyari et al. (2022) on eco-entrepreneurship. By combining scholarly research and practical knowledge, the study seeks to develop a comprehensive and actionable plan to enhance glamping while promoting long-term socio-economic prosperity and environmental conservation in Greece (Kapiki, 2012).

Scope Of The Study

This research examines sustainable business ideas for glamping in Greece, focusing on current tourism trends and the emerging concept of glamping as an eco-friendly accommodation option. The study explores the integration of glamping into the Greek tourism industry, drawing on findings from Santos (2021) on innovative tourism business strategies and Rodríguez (2020), who describes glamping as a unique, environmentally friendly accommodation that connects people with nature.

The analysis aims to evaluate the feasibility and benefits of establishing glamping sites in Greece as part of a sustainable tourism strategy, incorporating eco-friendly practices, technological advancements, and immersive travel experiences. This assessment will enhance academic understanding of sustainable tourism growth and provide valuable guidance for industry professionals to improve the glamping experience in Greece.

Methodology Overview

Developing a sustainable business plan for glamping in Greece requires a diverse approach to meet eco-friendly and immersive tourism needs. Leyva et al. (2024) highlight the importance of strategic attraction prioritization using data standardization to boost a destination's competitiveness, based on continuous tourism growth insights.

Additionally, incorporating eco-sustainable elements into business strategies emphasizes the need for agencies to align their vision, show leadership, and prioritize innovation to achieve ecological and financial goals (Gabler et al., 2017). Utilizing this methodological expertise, this study aims to create a comprehensive framework involving stakeholder relationships, innovative management strategies, and clear communication channels to support the development of a successful and sustainable glamping business plan for Greece.

Converting A Campsite Into Glamping

Feasibility Assessment For Campsite Conversion

Converting campsites into glamping sites in Greece requires careful consideration of the changing rural landscape and the contribution of new tourism concepts to rehabilitation. This involves three main factors: digital transformation, improving rural areas, and using unused historic places. Repurposing campsites into glamping aligns with this strategy.

Laroche (2023) highlights the importance of sustainable consumption patterns in reducing ecological harm, emphasizing solutions based on lifestyle choices. A feasibility assessment should consider environmental impact, community involvement, and financial sustainability to ensure that the conversion benefits both tourists and the local ecosystem and socio-economic fabric.

By adopting eco-friendly practices and involving multiple stakeholders, converting campsites into glampsites can provide a high-quality glamping experience in Greece, showcasing sustainable tourism development in charming rural areas.

Design, Marketing Strategies, And Infrastructure Upgrades For Glamping

Creating sustainable business strategies for glamping tourism in Greece requires focusing on infrastructural and design improvements to enhance the visitor experience and ensure efficient operations. Literature on sustainable tourism growth (Andersson, 2023) emphasizes the importance of location-specific attractions and sustainability-focused principles in attracting and retaining tourists.

Additionally, it is important to highlight continuous improvement and adaptability to consumer requests. Discussions on quality management in tourism and hospitality (Kapiki, 2012) support prioritizing design and infrastructure updates to meet visitor expectations, ensure high-quality service, and maintain competitiveness. By incorporating best practices from various disciplines, glamping companies in Greece can develop plans and implement design and infrastructure enhancements to create eco-friendly accommodations for contemporary travelers seeking meaningful and sustainable experiences.

To rebrand successfully as a glamping site, it's necessary to evaluate the value proposition, conduct a target market study, and establish competitive positioning. Innovative advertising methods should highlight the glamping experience, with a focus on customer-centric service quality, staff training, and continuous improvement to boost visitor satisfaction. Using sustainability-focused business models (Nosratabadi et al., 2019) and integrating

environmental considerations into the rebranding process can enhance differentiation in a competitive market.

Cutting-edge technology and strategic collaborations can help convey the unique selling points and value proposition of the glamping experience (Gabler et al., 2017), effectively reaching and engaging the target audience. By aligning marketing strategies with Greece's cultural and natural attractions, the rebranding effort can establish a unique position in the growing glamping tourism industry, contributing to the sustainability and profitability of the envisioned business strategy for Greece's glamping sector.

Financial Considerations For Conversion Costs
Analyzing the financial aspects of converting a campsite into a glamping destination involves understanding the relationship between initial investment costs and long-term profitability. Laroche (2023) emphasizes the importance of sustainable consumption habits, particularly in affluent cultures, as they impact the economic feasibility and market position of glamping businesses. Letunovska et al. (2023) highlight the importance of integrating sustainability principles into business strategies. A thorough examination of conversion costs should include initial investments and ongoing operational costs to ensure economic resilience and environmental stewardship. By incorporating these insights, stakeholders can effectively navigate financial planning to transform campsites into glampsites that are economically viable and environmentally sustainable, aligning with market demands and global sustainability goals.

Case Study: Successful Campsite To Glamping Transformation
Transforming a traditional nature campsite into a glamping destination involves a strategic shift towards innovation and environmental sustainability, incorporating elements from sustainable business models (Wijaya, 2021). This case study illustrates the essential components of a combined organizational vision, visible leadership, engaged stakeholders, emphasis on innovation, clear communication strategies, and effective execution. By applying principles of sustainable tourism development and operational best practices, the transformation aligns with sustainable business practices.

It highlights the importance of conserving natural resources, involving local communities and balancing economic growth with ecological protection. Incorporating these principles into the glamping transformation process enhances competitive advantage, meets consumer expectations and supports long-term sustainability goals, especially in promoting glamping tourism in Greece.

Developing A Sustainable Business Plan For An Ideal Glamping In Greece

The glamping tourism sector in Greece faces significant challenges, including environmental degradation and resource depletion due to a lack of sustainable regulation. To address these issues, a sustainable business model is essential to preserve Greece's natural beauty while offering unique and luxurious camping experiences for eco-conscious travelers. The three-year objectives for such a model include establishing the brand as a premier sustainable glamping destination, expanding accommodation options with eco-friendly and luxurious units, enhancing guest experiences through personalized services, increasing revenue by attracting more guests and offering premium packages, and building customer loyalty through exceptional hospitality and eco-conscious initiatives.

Key aspects of success in this endeavor involve providing a unique and sustainable glamping experience, implementing eco-friendly initiatives, collaborating with local businesses and communities, and offering exceptional customer service. Additionally, developing a strong brand identity, providing an online booking platform, engaging with the local community, and continuously improving services, amenities, and sustainability efforts to meet evolving guest expectations and industry standards are crucial. By focusing on these elements, Glamping in Greece aims to create a harmonious coexistence with the environment and attract eco-conscious travelers seeking memorable and environmentally friendly getaways.

Company Description

Every glamping company in Greece should aim to revolutionize the tourism industry by offering a unique and sustainable glamping experience in Greece's picturesque landscapes. The business model should leverage Greece's diverse natural beauty and rich cultural heritage to provide unforgettable stays. By adhering to sustainable practices, glamping in Greece can minimize environmental impact and attract eco-conscious travelers seeking responsible tourism options (Ahmad et al., 2020).

A key differentiator of glamping accommodations in Greece is incorporating local Greek traditions and cuisine, creating a memorable experience (Aeberhard et al., 2020). The company should offer luxury accommodations, sustainable tourism packages, local cuisine dining, wellness retreats, adventure activities, and workshops. These activities promote well-being, relaxation, and cultural immersion. Workshops can provide a deeper understanding of Greek culture, arts, and sustainable living through engaging educational experiences led by local experts. Glamping's vision is to integrate luxury camping with environmental conservation practices, supporting local communities while providing unforgettable and eco-conscious accommodations. The company must be founded on the values of environmental sustainability, cultural

preservation, and responsible tourism, ensuring a unique and eco-conscious experience that respects Greece's natural beauty.

Market Overview

Glamping accommodations in Greece are set to take advantage of the country's expanding market by offering luxurious and unique camping experiences. Customers looking for sustainable glamping tourism in Greece desire an alternative experience and cultural immersion. These needs include utilizing Greece's diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage to provide a glamping experience that stands out from traditional accommodations.

The key market trends for sustainable glamping tourism businesses in Greece include sustainable tourism, unique experiences, eco-tourism appeal, cultural immersion, and destination differentiation. Glamping in Greece targets environmentally conscious travelers, nature enthusiasts, and cultural explorers with higher disposable incomes who seek unique and sustainable travel experiences (Holmes, Dodds, & Frochot, 2021). These travelers value sustainability, eco-friendliness, and cultural immersion in their travel experiences. They prefer experiential travel and are willing to pay a premium for a unique and authentic glamping experience that aligns with their values of sustainability and cultural exploration. They prioritize environmental conservation (Matyakubov et al., 2021) and look for accommodations that contribute positively to local culture (Weaver, 2012).

Glamping in Greece adapts its offerings to meet the needs and preferences of these specific market segments, providing a distinctive and sustainable glamping experience that highlights Greece's natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. By aligning its services with the values and interests of its target market, each company aims to attract travelers seeking an authentic and eco-conscious travel experience.

Competitive Comparison

I. Vasilikia Mountain Farm & Retreat, located in Pavliani, Greece, offers a glamping experience focused on sustainability and immersion in nature. This serene environment incorporates local Greek traditions and cuisine, making it an integral part of the experience.

II. NISI Glamping, situated in Fthiotida, Greece, also provides a unique glamping experience with a clear focus on sustainability. However, it may not offer the same level of cultural immersion through local Greek traditions and cuisine as other competitors.

III. Odyssey Eco Glamping, located in Poros, Greece, prioritizes eco-friendly glamping. While they emphasize sustainability, they may lack the same

degree of cultural authenticity and local immersion provided by other glamping sites.

IV. Surf Club Keros, based in Limnos, Greece, focuses on outdoor activities within their glamping experience. Although they offer a unique adventure, they might not emphasize sustainability and cultural immersion to the same extent as their competitors.

Glamping in Greece's competitive advantage lies in its dedication to providing a sustainable glamping tourism experience that leverages the country's unique landscapes and cultural heritage. By adhering to sustainable practices, glamping promotes eco-tourism and attracts environmentally conscious travelers looking for a responsible way to travel. Moreover, glamping accommodations in Greece distinguish themselves by incorporating local Greek traditions and cuisine into the experience. This provides guests with authentic cultural immersion that goes beyond typical tourist activities. This focus on sustainability and cultural authenticity positions glamping as a distinctive player in the tourism industry, appealing to travelers seeking a meaningful and authentic vacation experience.

Strategy And Implementation Summary

The S.W.O.T. Analysis (Figure 1) highlights Greece's strengths in offering a unique glamping experience focused on sustainable practices and local traditions. Weaknesses include high setup costs, seasonal tourism patterns, and limited market penetration. Opportunities involve global demand for sustainable travel experiences, partnerships with local artisans, and expansion to other regions.

Figure 1: S.W.O.T. Analysis of Glamping in Greece
Source: Elaborated by the Authors

Threats include competition from eco-friendly accommodations, fluctuating regulations, and external factors.

The P.E.S.T.E.L. Analysis (Figure 2) shows that glamping accommodations in Greece can benefit from government efforts to promote sustainable tourism and protect natural and cultural heritage. Greece's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic can be leveraged to target both domestic and international

tourists. By incorporating local Greek traditions and cuisine, glamping can support local communities and businesses.

Technological advancements, like online booking platforms and solar panels, can enhance guest experiences. Environmentally, glamping can preserve diverse landscapes and adopt green initiatives. Legally, glamping must comply with health and safety regulations and environmental laws to ensure guest safety and minimize liability.

P
- The Greek government has been taking steps to promote sustainable tourism and protect the country's natural and cultural heritage. By aligning with these regulations and initiatives, Glamping in Greece can benefit from government support and contribute to the country's sustainability goals.
- Political stability and favorable tourism policies in Greece create a conducive environment for the growth of the glamping sector, providing opportunities for Glamping in Greece to thrive in the market.

E
- The Greek tourism industry has been recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with domestic tourism playing a significant role in the sector's revival. Glamping in Greece can capitalize on this trend by targeting both domestic and international tourists seeking unique and sustainable experiences.
- By incorporating local Greek traditions and cuisine into the glamping experience, Glamping can support local communities and businesses, contributing to the economic development of the regions where the glamping sites are located.

S
- Greece's tourism industry is a significant contributor to the country's economy, accounting for about 20% of the GDP and employing one in five Greeks. The glamping sector can tap into this existing infrastructure and market to attract tourists seeking unique and sustainable experiences.
- The trend towards sustainable travel is on the rise, with travelers increasingly prioritizing eco-friendly accommodations and experiences. This aligns well with Glamping in Greece's emphasis on sustainability and eco-tourism.

T
- The use of technology in the tourism industry, such as online booking platforms, virtual tours, and digital marketing, can help Glamping in Greece reach a wider audience and enhance the overall guest experience.
- Advancements in sustainable technologies, such as solar panels for energy generation and eco-friendly waste management systems, can be leveraged to ensure that the glamping site operates in an environmentally friendly manner.

E
- Greece's diverse landscapes, including its beautiful coastlines, mountains, and islands, provide a unique setting for a glamping experience. However, it is essential for Glamping in Greece to implement sustainable practices to preserve these natural environments for future generations.
- Climate change and overtourism are growing concerns globally, emphasizing the importance of responsible and sustainable tourism practices. By promoting eco-tourism and adopting green initiatives, Glamping in Greece can attract environmentally conscious travelers and differentiate itself in the market.

L
- Health and safety regulations are crucial for the hospitality industry, and Glamping in Greece must ensure that its operations meet all legal requirements to ensure guest safety and minimize liability.
- Environmental legislation, which may include permits and regulations regarding waste management, pollution control, and land use, are pertinent for the sustainability aspect of Glamping in Greece and its commitment to eco-tourism.

Figure 2: P.E.S.T.E.L. Analysis of Glamping in Greece
Source: Elaborated by the Authors

Note: The initial letters of the P.E.S.T.E.L. Analysis stand for: P: Political, E: Economic, S: Social, T: Technological, E: Environmental, L: Legal

Marketing Plan

Glamping in Greece plans to implement a comprehensive marketing strategy that focuses on social media, content marketing, email campaigns, and collaborations with local artisans and chefs. The aim is to create a strong brand presence and attract eco-conscious travelers from around the world.

Social Media

The company will leverage platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube to showcase its unique landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and commitment to sustainable practices. Instagram will be used to share stunning photos and stories that capture the beauty of the glamping sites and the surrounding nature. Pinterest will serve as a platform for sharing travel inspiration, eco-friendly tips, and itineraries. YouTube will feature engaging video content, including virtual tours, behind-the-scenes looks at sustainable initiatives, and interviews with local artisans and chefs.

Collaborations

The company will collaborate with travel influencers and eco-conscious bloggers to reach a broader audience interested in sustainable tourism. By partnering with influencers who share the company's values, Glamping in Greece can amplify its message and attract followers who are passionate about eco-friendly travel. Additionally, the company will work with local artisans and chefs to incorporate traditional Greek elements into the glamping experience. These collaborations will highlight the unique cultural aspects of the region and provide guests with authentic and enriching experiences.

Content Marketing

The company will create engaging content, including blog posts, videos, and virtual tours, to showcase its eco-friendly initiatives, local traditions, and culinary experiences. Blog posts will cover a range of topics such as sustainable travel tips, the history of glamping, and profiles of local artisans. Videos will provide visual storytelling, highlighting the beauty of the glamping sites and the surrounding area. Virtual tours will offer potential guests a preview of what they can expect, helping to build excitement and drive bookings.

Email Campaigns

Customized email marketing will target eco-conscious travelers by emphasizing sustainable accommodation, regional food, and cultural experiences. Email newsletters will include special offers, updates on new eco-friendly initiatives, and exclusive content such as interviews with local chefs or artisans. This

personalized approach will help build a loyal customer base and keep subscribers engaged with the brand.

Interactive Virtual Tours And Webinars

To engage potential guests and showcase the beauty of the glamping sites, the company will offer interactive virtual tours and webinars. Virtual tours will provide an immersive experience, allowing viewers to explore the glamping sites and surrounding nature from the comfort of their homes. Webinars will feature topics such as sustainable travel practices, the benefits of eco-tourism, and cooking classes with local chefs. These online events will help build a sense of community and connect with potential guests on a deeper level.

Local Engagement

Engaging with the local community is a crucial aspect of the marketing strategy. The company will host events and workshops that invite locals and tourists to learn about sustainable living, traditional crafts, and Greek cuisine. By fostering strong relationships with local communities, Glamping in Greece can create a supportive network and enhance the overall guest experience.

Analytics And Feedback

To continuously improve its marketing efforts, the company will track the performance of its campaigns using analytics tools. By analyzing data on website traffic, social media engagement, and email open rates, the company can identify what works best and make data-driven decisions. Additionally, gathering feedback from guests through surveys and reviews will provide valuable insights into their preferences and areas for improvement.

Discussion

When proposing a sustainable business plan for glamping tourism in Greece, it is crucial to recognize the importance of quality management in the tourism and hospitality industry. The success of glamping ventures hinges on delivering exceptional services that meet and exceed customer expectations. Additionally, sustainable tourism development emphasizes the need to preserve natural and cultural resources, which is essential for establishing sustainable glamping operations in Greece (Angelevska-Najdeska & Rakicevik, 2012).

By incorporating environmentally sustainable business practices and leveraging innovative strategies identified in sustainable business models, glamping businesses in Greece can enhance their competitiveness, align with sustainability goals, and ensure long-term success. The findings highlight the necessity of integrating quality management, sustainable development principles, and innovative business models to create a comprehensive and effective sustainable business plan for glamping tourism in Greece.

Exploring the implications for the glamping tourism sector in creating a sustainable business model for glamping tourism in Greece, it is essential to consider the evolving landscape of sustainable tourism methods. There is a growing awareness of the potential for sustainable business frameworks to improve environmental and social outcomes within the tourism sector. This aligns with research suggesting that innovative business models utilizing digital transformation, policy focus on rural areas, and the revitalization of neglected heritage sites can be highly beneficial (Santos, 2021).

By incorporating these ideas into the development of glamping in Greece, it is possible to not only promote environmental protection and community involvement but also drive economic growth through unique offerings that align with emerging consumer preferences for responsible and immersive travel. This strategic alignment with sustainability principles can position Greece as a leader in the glamping sector, attracting environmentally conscious travelers and contributing to the broader sustainability narrative in tourism.

Recommendations For Future Research
Research by Agustina et al. (2022) indicates that Gen Z travelers prioritize health and sustainability in their travel decisions, signaling a new trend shaping the future of the tourism industry. Additionally, Wijaya (2021) emphasizes the importance of creating sustainable tourism villages by leveraging local opportunities and adhering to sustainability standards, offering valuable insights for promoting eco-friendly practices in tourism development.
Future research on developing a sustainable business plan for glamping tourism in Greece could focus on tailoring glamping experiences to Gen Z travelers, emphasizing green practices and rich cultural experiences. Investigating architectural styles inspired by local traditions and sustainable resources could enhance the competitiveness of glamping in Greece. Further research should adopt a cross-disciplinary approach, integrating environmental, social, and economic aspects to promote comprehensive sustainability in glamping tourism, aligning with the growing demands of mindful tourists and Greek regulatory standards.

Practical Implications For Glamping Businesses
Considering the practical implications for glamping businesses, especially within the sustainable tourism development sphere in Greece, is vital for long-term success. By incorporating quality management principles such as training, benchmarking best practices, and pursuing quality accreditation (Kapiki, 2012), glamping businesses can enhance service delivery and guest satisfaction. Additionally, integrating sustainable business models can offer a competitive advantage by aligning economic, societal, and environmental goals (Nosratabadi et al., 2019).

Given the specific industry challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, mechanisms to overcome tourism disruptions and the importance of community-based tourism for rural development and poverty alleviation (Afanasiev et al., 2021) provide valuable insights for resilient and growing glamping businesses amidst uncertainty. These factors underscore the importance of strategic planning, innovative methods, and a commitment to sustainable practices (Kapiki, 2012) for the sustainable development of glamping ventures in Greece.

Final Thoughts And Closing Remarks

Developing a sustainable business plan for glamping tourism in Greece requires a nuanced approach that carefully balances environmental impact with economic feasibility. The unique combination of high-end lodging and natural environments necessitates a strategy that prioritizes both preservation and commercial potential (Edgell et al., 2008).

The proposed plan should underscore the intrinsic connection between protecting Greece's natural beauty and fostering a thriving tourism sector. This involves implementing legal structures that support sustainable practices, encouraging community involvement to ensure local benefits, and adopting innovative promotional methods to attract eco-conscious travellers.

Key Strategies Include:

- Legal Structures: Establishing regulations that mandate sustainable practices, such as the use of renewable energy and waste reduction measures, to ensure compliance and promote long-term environmental stewardship.
- Community Involvement: Engaging local communities by creating job opportunities, sourcing materials from local suppliers, and involving residents in decision-making processes. This not only supports the local economy but also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards sustainable tourism.
- Innovative Promotional Methods: Utilizing digital marketing and social media to highlight the unique, eco-friendly aspects of glamping experiences. This can attract a global audience of environmentally conscious travellers who value sustainability and authentic cultural experiences.

By integrating these strategies, glamping enterprises in Greece can achieve a harmonious balance between economic success and ecological conservation. The emphasis on sustainable practices will not only enhance the appeal of

glamping to modern travellers but also contribute to the broader goals of environmental preservation and community development.

In conclusion, the sustainable development of glamping tourism in Greece holds significant potential for economic growth, environmental protection, and cultural preservation. By adopting a comprehensive and strategic approach, glamping businesses can thrive while making a positive impact on society and the environment. Future research should continue to refine these strategies and explore new opportunities for sustainable tourism, ensuring that glamping remains a viable and attractive option for generations to come.

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TOURISM GRADUATE READINESS AND EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS OF EVENT MANAGEMENT GRADUATE COMPETENCIES

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Abstract
Higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa are under increasing pressure to improve graduate employability and ensure that the academic experience received by the students assists them in acquiring the competence, knowledge and skills required to function well in their selected industry. Employability for graduates is viewed as a combination of personal qualities, knowledge, techniques, and the capacity to reflect on experience constructively. This article aims to analyse research conducted at the University of Technology to investigate graduates' perceptions of how their university qualification contributed to work readiness in the event industry and the employer's perceptions of their competencies. The research is a mixed methods approach using a structured questionnaire administered among University of Technology students between 2021 and 2023. Of the 121 registered students, 110 completed. Most respondents indicated that the event management curriculum gave them a theoretical basis to apply their knowledge in the industry and that the delivery of curricula supported growth in intellectual and social competencies, which benefited them working in the industry. Fourteen interviews were conducted with event industry practitioners. Findings from the interviews facilitated an in-depth understanding of the skills and competencies expected in the event industry in South Africa and the challenges thereof.

Key Words: Competencies, Curriculum, Employer, Higher Education, Skills, Work Readiness

Introduction

Due to the rapidly changing global conditions and best practices to promote innovation in education, higher education curriculum developers are constantly under pressure to modify their curricula to create highly educated and skilled graduates who are prepared to contribute productively to the workplace's objectives (Grande & Estebanez, 2020; Khoo, Zegwaard & Adam, 2020; Kim, Serkova & Jonbekova, 2024). With that said, employers expect graduates to exhibit fundamental workplace skills, competencies and personal attributes that offer an effective transition into the workplace (McCartney & Kwok, 2022). Therefore, it is a crucial part of building a knowledge-based economy to consider collaboration between the tourism industry and higher education (McCartney & Kwok, 2022; Okolie, Nwajiuba, Eneje, Binuomote, Ehiobuche &

Hack-Polay, 2021; Kim et al., 2024). As indicated by Ruhanen (2005) and Walters and Ruhanen (2019), there is a constant struggle to strike a balance between theory and practice so that graduates can apply their knowledge in the workplace and that employers value a set of skills in addition to technical proficiency and subject knowledge (Hernadez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009; Uffindell, 2017). According to Kanesan and Abdullah (2013), employability skills are the knowledge and "soft skills," or non-technical abilities, needed to function well in the workplace. In addition, transferable skills such as attitude and social skills enable employees to make reasonable decisions and think critically. Based on the literature, these skills and competencies include *Professional/academic competencies* (theoretical knowledge), holding of knowledge relating to the latest industry standards and paradigms – the foundation for being able to work and solve problems and incorporating the knowledge base using the four"C's" – critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, and collaboration (Ahmed, 2022). Methodological competencies are the transfer of theoretical knowledge into application-based problems. Applied knowledge, reasoning, planning, decision-making and problem-solving skills, continuous improvement, and project management skills are often expected (Scodras, Alsbury-Nealy, Colquhoun, Yeung, Jaglal & Salbach, 2022). Social competencies, on the other hand, are being able to deal with people, communication, acceptance of responsibility, teamwork, conflict management and interdisciplinary communication are expected (Butterworth & Strauch, 1994; Mellard & Hazel, 1992). Interpersonal competencies are self-discipline, creativity, a positive work attitude as well as the ability to work as a team, self-esteem, and motivation (Yoel, Akiri & Dori, 2022).

One of the main goals of bridging or closing the gap between higher education (graduates) and industry is to establish initiatives where curriculum design links educators in higher education and industry, which demonstrates the necessary skill sets and knowledge for graduates to work in the industry (McCartney & Kwok, 2022) since higher education needs to ensure that students have the required skills to enter the world of employment as young graduates struggle to find work that matches their skills (Uffindel, 2017; Zeidan & Bishnoi, 2020). The focus, therefore, lies on aiming to close the gap by connecting curriculum design with academics and the industry to prepare the students adequately for the needs of the industry and workplace (Alhelalat, 2015; McCartney & Kwok, 2022; Uffindel, 2017). In South African higher education context, a disjuncture between graduates and the 'world of work' (the industry) exists. Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA) admits there has been a displacement between what is happening in Higher Education and what is happening in the industry (THENSA, 2022). Currently, many higher education institutions in South Africa offering tourism and event management qualifications require students to complete a three to six-month credit-bearing

Work Integrated Learning component (THENSA, 2022). This study aims to create an in-depth understanding of the skills and competencies expected in the event industry in South Africa, the challenges faced, and how there can be improved collaboration between industry and higher education for the benefit of graduates.

Literature Review

It has been discovered that cooperation and partnerships between higher education and the tourist and hospitality sectors are essential to creating a knowledge-based economy (Sobaih & Jones, 2015). However, there is an ongoing tension to balance theory with practice to have the skills and knowledge students require upon graduation to work in the tourism and hospitality field (Ruhanen, 2005; Uffindel, 2017). One principal aim of bridging or closing this gap is to create actions where curriculum design connects educators and industry, helping prepare students adequately with the skills and knowledge sets needed for a career in the hospitality industry (Alhelalat, 2015). The fundamental presumption held by policymakers is that Higher Education should significantly impact society and assist with job creation and growth (Suleman, 2016). As a result, Higher Education institutions should be conscious of the economy's demands and adapt their curricula accordingly (Suleman, 2016). However, Chi and Gursoy (2009) state that if there is *a relevant, up-to-date industry curriculum, graduates are likely to possess the knowledge and skill sets required for a successful career*". The capabilities that employers and recent graduates of higher education need have changed due to recent changes in the labour market. Employers, specifically in the tourism and event industry, require staff that are creative, innovative, able to problem solve, work in teams, manage their time and have good communication and presentation skills (Karaca-Atik, Meeuwisse, Gorgievski & Smeets, 2023; Cyphert, Holke-Farnam, Dodge, Lee & Rosol, 2019). These skills allow higher education graduates to integrate into a working environment successfully, and therefore, less pressure is placed on the employer to provide training programmes (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). York and Knight (2004) stated that learners learn the best when applying their theory and knowledge through experience. Therefore, higher education institutions must consider including more experience in the curriculum. However, a concern raised is that traditional higher education institutions focus on transmitting knowledge and very little on entry-level personal and social skills (York & Knight, 2004).

Higher Education In South Africa

In South Africa, three categories of public higher education institutions exist as a result of changes to the country's higher education system: Universities of Technology (vocational programs offering diplomas, higher education certificates and degree programs), Comprehensive Universities (academic and

vocational studies offering bachelor's degrees and technology qualifications), and Traditional Universities (academic offering bachelor's degree programmes). Higher Education in South Africa conforms to the National Qualifications Framework, a systematic method for recording the credits allocated to each level of learning attainment is the National Qualifications Framework, a systematic method for recording the credits allocated to each level of learning attainment is the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which makes sure that the knowledge and skills acquired are recognised across the country (Badat, 2010). The objectives of the NQF apply to an integrated framework for learning achievements, to facilitate access to education, training, and career paths, and to promote quality education. These objectives are developed to provide full personal development for each learner. The NQF levels are indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: NQF Qualification Framework
Source: Badat (2010)

Although higher education encourages graduates to have a more holistic thinking, the industry requires twenty-first-century skills to integrate and balance work and life after graduation (Doughty, Sinnema, McKillop & Dixon, 2019; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). These skills are developed to assist students with gaining employment in the industry, especially the events industry, which requires personal attribute skills such as innovation, creativity, problem-solving skills, etc (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). In addition, they are also required to possess social and cross-cultural skills to collaborate with people from different backgrounds (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Doughty et al., 2019). Broader literature has proved that possessing 21st-century skills is essential for maintaining a sustainable career (Habets, Stoffers, Heijden & Peters, 2020; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). However, studies conducted in many countries consistently indicate that there is a vast skills gap among higher education graduates (Tran, 2018; Hernadez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009) which initiates the call for higher education institutions to improve the quality of teaching and skills training to

better equip graduates for the industry. According to Tran (2018), a skills gap is a "significant gap between an organisation's current capabilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals". Furthermore, a skills gap exists when an employee deems a graduate incapable of carrying out their duties (Tran, 2018). Recent studies consistently report that higher education graduates cannot carry out the necessary work duties expected by the employer (Sin & Amaral, 2017; Tran, 2018; Hernadez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009). According to Suleman (2016), various methods have been adapted to define a set of skills employers deem important. Competencies, on the other hand, are the ability to accomplish a task and are divided into generic (soft) and subject-specific (hard) competencies. Generic (soft) competencies are related to skills and knowledge. Subject-specific (hard skills) competencies are obtained through curricula exclusive to a particular discipline and academically relevant to industry preparation (Kanesan & Abdullah, 2013).

There is a range of different conceptual frameworks to define these skills. Compared to technically focused, vocationally oriented, or hard skills, relational skills are frequently called generic or soft skills. The skills needed by employers, however, were compiled by Olivier, Freeman, Young, Yu and Verma (2014) into five broad clusters: employability skills, which include the capacity to meet demands, be flexible and adaptable, learn on one's own, develop new ideas, and innovate; teamwork and interpersonal skills; IT skills; and foundation skills, which include written and oral communication, problem-solving, and critical analysis (Olivier et al., 2014). Jackson and Chapman (2012) state that numerous potential causes exist for the persistence of skill gaps among graduates. Firstly, a model of the non-technical skill set required by the industry has not yet been determined. In addition, unclear terminology of competencies allows industry stakeholders to perceive competencies terms differently. Secondly, if higher education is not clear on the exact requirements of a non-technical skill set, it is highly unlikely the appropriate mix of embedded skills will be attended to, therefore rendering current employability frameworks misleading and subjective.

According to a study by Selvadurai, Choy and Maros (2012), many industry stakeholders indicate five main categories of generic skills (Figure 2). These are considered mandatory for graduates entering the industry. These include problem-solving and planning (a very important skill associated with event planning) and the ability to retrieve and handle information. In the event industry, research and data collection is considered important. Communication and presentation skills are imperative in the event industry, as is social interaction between attendees, guests, and delegates. Lastly, personal/individual attributes include self-confidence, commitment and passion for your work.

Figure 2: Generic skills identified by event industry stakeholders
Source: Selvadurai, Choy and Maros (2012)

Higher Education In Event Management
In South Africa, higher education in event management can provide an opportunity for various career choices in the events industry. Table 1 indicates the institutions that provide event management programs.

Table 1. NQF level 5 – 8 Event Management Qualifications in South Africa

NQF level	Name of qualification	Name of provider
5	Higher Certificate in Event Management	University of Mpumalanga
5	Higher Certificate in Events Management	MANCOSA Pty (Ltd)
6	Diploma in Event Management	Prestige Academy (Pty) Ltd
6	Diploma in Event Management	Tshwane University of Technology
6	Diploma in Event Management	Stadio (Pty) Ltd
6	Diploma in Event Management	Private Hotel School (Pty) Ltd
6	Diploma in Event Management	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
7	Advanced Diploma in Event Management	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
7	Bachelor of Commerce in Event Management	Stadio (Pty) Ltd

7	Bachelor of Commerce in Event Management	Prestige Academy (Pty) Ltd
8	Postgraduate Diploma in Hospitality, Tourism and Event Management	Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Graduate Readiness And Industry Employability

After graduating from University, the industry requires twenty-first-century skills to gain employment in the industry, specifically, the event industry, which requires innovative, creative and problem-solving skills (Doughty, Sinnema, McKillop & Dixon, 2019; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023). Additional research provides evidence that there is a vast skills gap in graduates, not only in South Africa but globally (Habets, Stoffers, Heijden & Peters, 2020; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023; Tran, 2018; Hernadez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009). This calls for Higher Education to raise the standard of instruction and promote skill development to better prepare graduates for the workforce (Tran, 2018). A "*significant gap between an organisation's current capabilities and the skills that it needs to achieve its goals*" is what Tran (2018) defines as a skills gap. Moreover, a skills gap occurs when an employer believes a recent graduate cannot perform their job obligations (Tran, 2018). According to numerous recent studies, higher education graduates are frequently unable to perform the essential job activities that an employer requires of them. (Sin & Amaral, 2017; Tran, 2018; Hernadez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009).

García-Aracil, Monteiro and Almeida (2021) have identified perceptions of generic and field-specific skills, like oral communication and critical thinking, as important factors that influence undergraduates' self-perceived employability in the context of higher education. In a study conducted in Australia, event managers were asked to identify pre-defined knowledge and attributes that they deemed important in the event industry. These included project management, budgeting, time management, business planning, human resource management, contingency management, marketing, sponsorship and network. The attributes included vision, leadership, adaptability, organisational skills, communication, marketing and people skills (Arcodia & Barker, 2003).

Increasing awareness of the necessity of continuing to train event management experts is emerging as the number of events rises and the discipline of event management develops (Arcodia & Reid, 2002; Arcodia & Barker, 2003). Hiring graduates with relevant training and experience can satisfy several objectives and will assist in sustaining the delivery and professionalism of high-quality events (Arcodia & Barker, 2003). Knowledge and skills can be theorised and learnt however personal attributes are synonymous to the personal characteristics of a graduate and represent the qualities such as traits, values

and attitudes of a person. These attributes are more difficult to develop however essential in the execution of an event. In a study conducted by Perry, Foley and Rumpf (1996), ten predefined knowledge attributes were highlighted as important for the event industry. These included legal/financial knowledge, management knowledge, public relations and marketing knowledge, economic knowledge, and contextual knowledge. The essential personal attributes of a good event manager were identified as vision, leadership, adaptability, high organisational skills, good communication skills, marketing skills and people management skills. To promote best practices in the event industry, the Events Industry Council (EIC) launched the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) program in 1985 to promote knowledge and performance in nine domains and twenty-eight skills. The qualification is based on professional experience and education (CMP, 2017). In South Africa, the Council of Event Professionals Africa (CEPA) provide designations to individuals based on a review of their education, work experience, work ethic and skills. The candidates are required to write an online assessment as well as provide a portfolio of evidence to qualify for the industry designation which is based on three levels: associate, practitioner and professional (CEPA, 2024).

According to Büth, Bhakar, Sihag, Posselt, Böhme and Sangwan (2017), statistics reflect that approximately 60 % of all graduates do not get employment in the industry directly after graduation which indicates that graduates are perceived by the industry not to be readily employable. This gap is identified as missing methodological and personal competencies which relate to critical thinking, problem-solving and thinking 'out of the box'. In recent years, to bridge this gap in the event industry Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programs (internships/placements/practicum/industry attachment/job shadowing/volunteering) have continued to gain recognition as a tool to advance students in hard and soft skills and provide the ability for graduates to become "work ready". However, a lack of collaboration between higher education and industry and, a lack of experience of graduates can hinder the purpose (Hernadez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009; Tran, 2015; Doughty et al., 2019; Okolie, Nwajijuba, Eneje, Binuomote, Ehiobuche & Hack-Polay, 2021). The framework for WIL involves three main stakeholders: graduates, employers and higher education providers. Based on the employability framework developed by Jackson and Chapman (2012), that suggests employability and work readiness skills are generic across disciplines and countries, consist of working effectively in a team, communicating effectively, self-awareness, analysing data and using technology, problem-solving, developing initiative and enterprise, self-management, social responsibility and developing professionalism.

Methodology

This study adopted a convergent mixed methods design in which the quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and analysed separately. A quantitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate to determine students' workplace readiness, and a qualitative methodology to understand the event industry's expected competencies and skills of event management graduates, the challenges experienced, and the recommendations to close the gap between industry needs and higher education institutions' offerings. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with industry stakeholders/practitioners.

Quantitative

The questionnaire for this section of the study was based on a self-administered online survey through Survey Monday, and the target respondents included undergraduate students in an event management program at the University of Technology. The total population of undergraduate event management registered for Work Integrated Learning between 2021 and 2023. There were 110 respondents of the 121 registered students. These students had completed work-integrated learning (WIL) for six months or had worked in the event industry at the University of Technology. The study covered all genders with an age range of 19 years and above. The list of students was obtained from the WIL office within the Department. Before data collection, consent was obtained from respondents. The online survey included four sections: a cover letter with the introduction and consent, demographic questions, qualification information and departmental support. Students were asked to indicate their level of preparedness (knowledge and skill) for the qualification (5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to disagree strongly) and, lastly, the support they received from the Department (5-point Likert scale from very poor to excellent).

The data obtained from the questionnaire were collected, tabulated, analysed, and interpreted. The statistical techniques were used to understand the study's data further, including frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and u-test. Frequency was used to get the number of respondents who answered the questions accordingly. Percentage was used to get the percentage of the respondents in terms of their demographic profile. Weighted mean was used to evaluate the respondents' readiness for the event management program regarding knowledge, skills, personality, and departmental support. The ranking was used to determine the positional importance of responses in the questionnaires regarding the answers of the graduates based on the scale used.

Table 1: Qualification Rating.

	Variable	Mean	Interpretation	Ranking
1	The qualification provides theoretical foundation	4.24	Strongly agree	5
2	Qualification prepared me to apply my knowledge	4.30	Strongly agree	1
3	Qualification is relevant to the program content	4.26	Agree	3.5
4	Course content is relevant to the industry	4.19	Agree	7
5	Course content is up to date	4.26	Agree	3.5
6	Qualification prepared me adequately for the industry	4.10	Agree	8.5
7	Qualification prepared me for advanced courses	4.08	Agree	9
8	Most subjects were relevant to my industry	4.10	Agree	8.5
9	Qualification contributed to personal development	4.21	Agree	6
10	Qualification provided competency for graduate level	3.98	Agree	11
11	Software programs were helpful in the industry	3.83	Agree	12
12	Qualification allowed me to further my studies	4.29	Agree	2
13	I was able to critically analyse new ideas/processes	4.25	Agree	4.5
14	Qualification supported me to develop skills	4.25	Agree	4.5
15	Assisted me in establishing working relationships	4.06	Agree	10

The results in Table 1 reflect that the students strongly agree that the Event Management qualification provided a theoretical foundation and knowledge and prepared them to apply it. Furthermore, there was confidence and agreement that the qualification content was up-to-date and relevant and prepared them for work in the industry. The graduate students were confident that the qualification assisted them in critically analysing new ideas and processes in the industry. Among the low result items, the graduate students indicated that software programs were helpful in the industry, establishing working relationships and the ability to be a team leader and prepare for advanced courses. This indicates a need to provide the industry with a more competent graduate. According to McCartney and Kwok (2022), employers expect graduates to have workplace skills, competencies and personal attributes that offer an effective transition into the workplace. Ruhanen (2005) and Walters and

Ruhanen (2019) further suggest that employers value a skill set in addition to technical proficiency and subject knowledge and that it is a constant struggle to find a balance between theory and practice so that graduates can apply their knowledge in the workplace (Hernadez-March, de Peso & Leguey, 2009; Uffindell, 2017).

Table 2: Departmental Support Rating

Variable	Mean	Interpretation	Ranking
The overall rating of the program	4.00	Good	2
Departmental teaching ability	3.97	Good	4
Overall quality of the curriculum	3.98	Good	3
Updated information provided	3.90	Good	5
Departmental use of innovation	3.68	Good	6
Departmental support for students	3.51	Good	7
Lecturer support for students	4.13	Excellent	1

The findings of Table 2 indicate that the student graduates hold departmental support in high regard, with an overall rating of satisfied. The graduates reflect that they are happy with the support received from the department, from teaching ability to lecturing support. The highest-ranked variable is the lecturer support for the graduate students, and the lowest is the use of innovation. Although the University constantly strives to stay updated with technology, this needs more attention. According to Jackson and Chapman's (2012) employability framework, teamwork, self-awareness, data analysis, technology use, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise development, self-management, social responsibility, and professional development are the employability and work readiness skills required across disciplines. The way events are planned and implemented has been completely transformed by event management software and innovation, allowing them to automate several tasks.

Table 3: Two-sample Wilcoxon rank-sum (Mann–Whitney) test

Factor	Number of observations	Rank sum	Z	P-value
Support Rating				
Satisfaction Category				
Satisfied	63	87	-3,175	0,0015
Dissatisfied	7	2398		
Quality Rating				
Satisfaction Category				
Satisfied	63	2391		
Dissatisfied	7	94	-3,029	0,0025

Mann Whitney was undertaken to study the difference in mean ranks among the study groups. Results showed that the mean rank for support rating perceptions by the students categorised according to their satisfaction group were statistically significantly different. A Mann-Whitney U-Test showed this difference was statistically significant, Z=-3.175, p=0.0015. Furthermore, the quality rating by students' satisfaction categories differed significantly at 5%level, Z=-3.029, p=0.0025. The findings indicated that the satisfied category's mean rank was higher than the dissatisfied category.

Qualitative

Several studies indicate that thematic saturation can be reached in qualitative research after 12 – 17 interviews (Francis et al., 2010). These recommendations were used as a benchmark; thus, this study reached saturation after 17 successful interviews. The study included semi-structured interviews of event industry professionals: Professional Conference Organisers (PCO) – O1-O13, academics A1- A4 and event associations EA1. The criteria for selection were those event industry professionals that had provided Work Integrated Learning to students between 2021 – 2023. The academics included those who had taught event management students for at least 3 to 5 years.

Interview Location And Guide

The interviews elicited the attitudes, opinions and experiences of event graduates they had mentored or supervised. The interviews were conducted using Teams and were recorded and transcribed with written and signed permission from the participants. Ethical clearance for this study was approved through the ethics committee (FCRE2023/FR/03/009-MS (2). The interviews were approximately 20 to 30 minutes in duration. They encouraged the participants to speak freely about their expectations and experiences; the data would be generated from the industry practitioners' own words. The three key questions answered by the participants included:

What are the main skills and competencies required for the event industry?
What challenges were encountered by the event management graduates?
How can these challenges be overcome and the gap between higher education and industry be closed?

A thematic framework was utilised to identify the key topics (themes 1 – 3).

Pretesting

Before the interviews, a pre-test was conducted among two academics from a University of Technology to ensure that the research questions met the study's objectives.

Interview Findings

The analysis revealed three key themes reflecting the event industry's perceptions. These included employability skills and competencies required by graduates to gain employability and work readiness in the event industry, challenges encountered by the industry overcoming the challenges and closing the gap.

To identify and determine if graduates are "work ready" for the events industry, it was important to investigate the skills and competencies the industry deems essential to enter the industry. The complexity surrounding the industry's needs was put forward, and there was consensus amongst the industry practitioners that there are a diverse set of skills required to enter the event industry of which many of these falls into the domain of personal attributes which are not usually included in the curriculum of Higher Education in South Africa.

Employability Skills And Competencies (Theme 1)

Participants' findings indicate that it is important for graduates to possess both professional and methodological, social and personal competencies. Professional competencies (theoretical knowledge) Holding of knowledge relating to the latest industry standards and paradigms – the foundation for working and solving problems in a company. Methodological competencies - transfer of theoretical knowledge into real application-based problems. Applied knowledge, social skills, problem-solving, planning skills, continuous improvement and project management skills are often expected. Social competencies – dealing with people, communication, teamwork, conflict management and interdisciplinary communication are expected. Personal competencies - Self-discipline and positive work attitude, as well as presentation skills and the ability to learn new things.

Key Employability Skills Indicated By Participants

Here are the employability skills identified, categorized into professional competencies and personal attributes.

Professional And Methodological Competencies

* Literacy And Mathematical Skills	* Written Skills	* Entrepreneurship Skills
* Communication Skills	* Research Skills	* Time Management
* Tech Savvy	* Project Management	* Problem-Solving Skills
* Application And Critical Thinking Skills	* Administration	

Personal And Social Attributes

* People Management Skills	* Passion For One's Job	* Adaptability To Different Environments
* Flexibility	* Creative Thinking	* Creativity
* Engaging With A Broad Spectrum Of People	* Marketing Oneself	* Independence
* Listening Skills	* Presentation Skills	* Punctuality
* Customer Service	* Trustworthiness	* Teamwork
* Empathy	* Responsibility	* Professional Presentation
* Confidence	* Motivation	* Determination
* Willingness	* Innovation	* Friendliness
* Discipline	* Leadership	* Patience
* Resilience	* Business etiquette	* Maturity
* Multi-tasking ('wear multiple hats')	* Communication etiquette	

From the above, it can be concluded that the industry's expectations are consistent with the findings of (Werner, Junek & Wang, 2022; Kanesan & Abdullah, 2013; Ahmed, 2022; Selvadurai et al., 2012; Buth, Bhakar, Sihag, Posselt, Bohme & Sangwan, 2017; Khoo, Zegwaard & Adams, 2020).

Challenges Experienced By Industry, Academia And Association Practitioners (Theme 2)

To better understand the challenges that the industry experiences with event management graduates, the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with higher education graduates. Issues relating to poor personal attributes were consistently identified in the literature and by the participants.

Participant EA1 indicated that *"many graduates feel entitled and once graduated feel that they know it all and should not be starting at lower levels but should be offered management positions"*, furthermore there is a huge mismatch between expectations of employees and employers".

Participant O9 indicated that many of the students struggle to adapt theory to practice, struggle with time management and adjust to the long hours demanded by the event industry. Participant A2 indicated that many graduates (students) lack responsibility and time management and often hand in

assignments late; their communication skills are poor (this could be due to their cultural backgrounds), and they cannot work as a team. Furthermore, it indicated that a lot of "babying" is going on. The students resist teamwork and do not want to participate. Participant O5 felt that "students struggle to balance work time and personal life due to the long hours expected by the events industry". Participant O6 raised concerns that *"the industry is moving at a very fast pace, and there is no time to spend hours training students to get them up to speed with what is happening in the industry"*.

There was consensus amongst some of the participants that we are also seeing the effects of COVID and the students that have come through the online system with minimal practical and application experience, which is extremely important in the events industry.

Participants O4, O6, 07, 08, A1, 02, and O1 indicate that the graduates struggle with customer service and take time to adjust to dealing directly with clients. Communication in both oral and written form is essential, as is communication etiquette. Although they have a communication subject (A1), this does not provide the customer service element they face in the industry. Participant O12 indicated that it is very time-consuming to train, mentor, motivate, and mentally prepare students with no industry experience and sees this as time-consuming; therefore, he prefers to employ people who have experience.

A1 indicated the students are *"not open to more advanced projects and lack entrepreneurship skills and knowledge on how to run their own businesses.... They do not see the potential of starting a business in the events industry. The students also lack the ability to problem solve, do not have the essential communication skills or critical skills, and often lack responsibility... this can be seen in time management, expecting lecturers to solve their problems. Students need to be more dedicated towards their studies, the institution should provide more practicals, and the assessment policies should be revised"*. In addition, the participant raised the issue that there should be more emphasis on personal skills and encouragement of practical application. As mentioned by the academics, providing personal and social skills can be challenging in traditional universities as the focus is more on transmitting knowledge and theory. In addition, the event industry is evolving and fast-paced; unfortunately, changing curricula takes time as these have to be implemented following procedures set in place. In addition, participant A3 indicated that many students admitted to event management were not their first choice of study. "There should be a more stringent recruitment process to ensure that the correct students are being recruited for the correct programmes and perhaps in some way aligned to the student's personality". Participant O13 indicated that the students were unprepared for an office environment and did not understand how an event's elements and the process fit together.

A study conducted by Tran (2108) indicated that graduates in the United States lacked soft skills more than technical skills, specifically communication, managerial and supervisory, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership and project management skills. These skills are seen as essential skills in the event environment.

Closing The Gap And Overcoming The Challenges (Theme 3)

There was a general understanding between industry and academia that closer collaboration should take place between higher education and industry. Participant EA1 said, "I would like to see closer collaboration with academia and working together on mentorship programs, guest lecturing, and skills workshops". Participants O6 and O8 shared the same view. Participant 05 indicated that graduates must be upskilled on personal attributes to be 'work ready'. In addition, most participants indicated that mentorship, leadership and time management programs were essential in the events industry. There was consensus amongst the participants that the event industry is very diverse, and each area has its own set of skills and students should be encouraged to work with the area that best suits their personal attributes where their strong skills can be recognised. Among the industry practitioners, there was a high regard for the Work Integrated Learning element, a six-month compulsory module in the event management qualification. Some participants highlighted the value of this module; however, one participant mentioned that they felt it was time-consuming to train the students and that they constantly needed supervision.

Participant 013 indicated that students should be encouraged to complete their WIL in more than one event environment to be exposed to all event elements. In addition, the participant indicated that Higher Education institutions should be more selective of their admissions as they admit students who have a keen interest in events and have the personal attributes that accompany being an event manager. Many of the graduates are best suited for other industries and not events.

Conclusion

The participants and event management practitioners considered the above skills important and relevant to the events industry. These results are consistent with many studies conducted worldwide, confirming and documenting a high regard for personal attributes in the event environment. This indicates that industry and higher education should collaborate and be involved in advisory forums and curriculum development. However, it is noted that the challenge to traditional higher education training is that the focus is on knowledge skills and not practical skills. Industry, however, mentioned that developing more effective

personal and social skills is by adding more actual experiences into the curriculum, including field visits, guest speakers and workshops. In addition, assessments should strive to include more case studies and practical applications to the event industry. Various tasks could be emphasised to promote personal attributes such as time management and project management by ensuring students hand in tasks on time, and if not, there are consequences. Objective assessments should be encouraged to promote social skills, and the curriculum should be aligned to provide a strong, relevant and experience-based learning environment conducive to developing personal and social skills by applying the knowledge based on cognitive and analytical skills. The findings of this study will assist higher education to consider personal skills when re-curriculating.

In terms of student readiness, the study indicates that graduate students are provided with a theoretical foundation in the event industry and a place to apply their knowledge. In addition, the student graduates were happy with the departmental support they received from their University of Technology. However, there is a concern that "assisted you in establishing good working relationships and the ability to be a team leader" and software programmes offered in the qualification assisted me in the industry". It is clear in the literature that the event management industry requires graduates with specialised capabilities and that they favour graduates with the necessary skills and qualifications. Graduates must have strong knowledge and personal attributes to strengthen their employability options. Consequently, higher education institutions must recognise the skills of employability demanded by the event industry. The current study's findings confirm that event management graduates generally believe they are work-ready and have the necessary skills; however, findings from the industry tell a different story. Moreover, in the current time of technological advancements, additional technological skills are required, specifically in the event industry.

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DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ADVENTURE TOURISTS VISITING HIMACHAL PRADESH: TRENDS, PREFERENCES, AND MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract
Adventure tourism is a growing component of the worldwide tourism business, with considerable economic and cultural benefits. This study examines the demographics of adventure tourists visiting Himachal Pradesh, India, a popular destination for sports such as trekking, paragliding, skiing, and mountain biking. To better understand the characteristics of adventure travellers, the study looks at key demographic data such as age, gender, income levels, and educational background. It also investigates the factors that drive their travel decisions, such as a desire for nature-based experiences, physical difficulties, cultural exploration, and possibilities for escapism. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining primary data obtained through structured questionnaires and by study secondary data from official tourism reports and previous research. Seasonal patterns, activity preferences, and average length of stay are studied to reveal trends that guide decision-making. The findings are designed to help local communities, tour operators, and policymakers develop targeted marketing tactics, improve infrastructure, and enhance the overall tourist experience. This study adds to the long-term growth of Himachal Pradesh's adventure tourism sector by better understanding the demographic and motivational elements that influence adventure travellers.

Keywords: Adventure Tourism, Demographic Analysis, Himachal Pradesh, Seasonal Trends, Sustainable Tourism Development, Tourist Preferences, Travel Motivation.

Introduction
Adventure tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments in the global travel market, owing to an increased desire for unique and demanding experiences. Himachal Pradesh, located in the gorgeous Indian Himalayas, has established itself as a prominent destination for adventure tourism due to its varied terrain and diverse range of activities, which include trekking, paragliding, skiing, and mountain biking. These activities not only benefit the local economy but also complement the region's natural beauty and cultural diversity.

In recent years, the state's tourism industry has seen a steady increase in both domestic and foreign adventure tourists, and it is on track to meet its ambitious goal of luring 50 million people per year. This expansion has been aided by large infrastructure initiatives, such as the construction of heliports in strategic

places such as Kangra, Kinnaur, and Chamba, which aim to improve accessibility and provide seamless travel experiences. Despite this growth, there is still a paucity of detailed research into the demographic characteristics and motivations of these tourists.

This study aims to close the gap by examining crucial demographic parameters such as age, gender, income levels, and educational backgrounds among adventure travellers visiting Himachal Pradesh. According to recent studies, the bulk of these visitors are young professionals between the ages of 25 and 40, with nearly equal gender distribution. Most adventure tourists come from urban areas in India and adjacent countries, driven by factors such as a desire for nature-based experiences, physical challenges, cultural exploration, and escapism.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining primary data obtained through structured questionnaires and interviews with secondary data derived from tourism reports and previous research. It looks at seasonal patterns, activity preferences, and average length of stay to deliver actionable insights. These studies aim to help local communities, tour operators, and policymakers develop targeted marketing strategies, improve tourism infrastructure, and promote sustainable tourism practices.

Furthermore, sustainable adventure tourism has been a top priority in the region, with activities such as trekking on over 270 paths and paragliding in Bir Billing strictly monitored to reduce environmental damage. Such efforts aim to preserve the sustainability of Himachal Pradesh's natural and cultural assets while maintaining its global image as a leading adventure tourism destination.

This study adds to the expanding discussion about sustainable tourism by offering a more in-depth understanding of adventure travellers' demographics and motives, helping stakeholders to properly balance economic growth and environmental preservation.

Literature Review
The comprehensive literature review expands on the key contributions of each study, providing detailed insights into the evolution of adventure tourism research. These findings offer valuable guidance for developing innovative and sustainable strategies to advance the adventure tourism sector.

Buckley (2007) The diverse effects of adventure tourism on the cultural, economic, and environmental domains were emphasised in Buckley's groundbreaking work. His research explored the role that conservation initiatives and natural resources have in influencing environmentally friendly

adventure travel strategies. Buckley underlined the significance of preserving natural balance while utilising tourism for financial gains by highlighting major issues including over-tourism and resource exploitation. Future conversations on sustainable tourism development, which centre on balancing growth with environmental care, have been framed by this groundbreaking study.

Weaver (2012) Weaver elaborated on the sustainability issues by examining how tourism regulations may encourage environmentally responsible adventure travel. His research looked at the tactics used by travel destinations to strike a balance between environmental preservation and economic development. Weaver's understanding of policy frameworks and how they are applied offered a guide for incorporating sustainability into travel planning. The necessity for sustainable tourism development was further supported by this study, which also highlighted the rising desire from travellers for environmentally conscious vacation experiences.

Bramwell and Pomfret (2014) The study by Pomfret and Bramwell provided a greater comprehension of adventure travellers' attitudes and actions. The thrill-seeking and risk-taking inclinations of these tourists were noted by the writers, and they have a big impact on the places and activities they choose. The psychological components of adventure tourism, such the need for personal development and self-discovery, were also underlined by their research. More focused marketing tactics in the adventure tourism industry were made possible by this study's contribution to a larger understanding of visitor behaviour.

UNWTO (2016) The growing role of adventure tourism in the world's tourist industry was highlighted in a 2016 report by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). Adventure tourism became an essential part of the tourism business with an annual growth rate of 65%. The paper demonstrated how adventure tourism serves as a catalyst for economic growth by highlighting the importance of infrastructure development in developing destinations. Additionally, it emphasised the ways in which adventure tourism may support local job growth and cultural exchange while also fostering community development.

Beedie (2017) The cultural aspects of adventure tourism were examined by Beedie's research, which demonstrated how it might promote respect and understanding between visitors and local populations. Adventure travellers can help preserve cultural heritage by interacting with indigenous cultures and customs. Additionally, Beedie highlighted the moral obligations of adventure travellers and tour companies, promoting culturally aware methods that foster tolerance and reverence for regional customs.

Sand and Gross (2018) A motivational framework for comprehending adventure tourism was presented by Gross and Sand's study, which divided activities into soft and hard adventures. Hard adventures, like mountaineering and extreme sports, require more skill and endurance, whereas soft adventures, like animal safaris and cultural trips, are less dangerous and physically demanding. The writers emphasised competence mastery and relaxation as key motivators, offering insightful advice to tour operators on how to create experiences that suit a wide range of traveller tastes.

In 2019, Buhalis et al. Buhalis and associates investigated how social media and digital technology influence travellers' preferences for adventure travel. Their research demonstrated how digital platforms let travel destinations more efficiently target particular demographic groups, which improves marketing tactics. Adventure tourism has undergone a revolution thanks to the use of technology, which has made it more accessible and enticing to tech-savvy tourists. Examples of this include virtual tours and online reservations. In order for destinations to stay competitive in the rapidly changing tourism market, this study underlined the necessity of implementing digital advances.

Sand and Gross (2019) Sand and Gross examined contemporary themes and advancements in adventure tourism in seminal research that was published in the Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism. Their study concentrated on patterns in the expectations and motives of travellers, spotting a move towards more individualized and immersive encounters. The report also noted how sustainability and biosecurity are becoming more and more important, which reflects travellers' rising consciousness of environmental and health issues. For legislators and travel agencies looking to match their products with new market trends, these findings have important ramifications.

Banerjee et al. (2020). Banerjee and colleagues focused on the Indian setting, looking at the economic impacts of adventure tourism, notably in Himachal Pradesh. Their findings underlined the importance of adventure sports, such as trekking and paragliding, in fostering regional economic development. The study emphasised infrastructure development and environmental sustainability as critical needs for the long-term success of adventure tourism. By addressing these issues, the authors offered stakeholders actionable ideas for improving the competitiveness and sustainability of India's adventure tourism industry.

Dodds and Butler (2021) Dodds and Butler's study examined the influence of climate change on adventure tourism, emphasising the importance of adaptable methods to sustain the quality of adventure experiences. Their findings underlined the susceptibility of adventure tourism areas to climate-related concerns such as shifting weather patterns and biodiversity loss. The authors

argued for proactive measures, such as environmental monitoring and sustainable resource management, to counteract the negative consequences of climate change on adventure tourism.

Mackenzie and Kerr (2022) Mackenzie and Kerr's study focused on shifts in traveller preferences following the epidemic. They saw a surge in demand for health, wellness, and immersive nature-based experiences among adventure visitors. The pandemic's emphasis on personal well-being and safety has altered the adventure tourism landscape, with visitors looking for experiences that provide both physical challenges and emotional renewal. This study emphasised the significance of adjusting to changing consumer tastes in order to sustain growth in the post-pandemic age.

Himachal Tourism Report (2022). The Himachal Tourism Department's 2022 study gave a detailed examination of the demographics of adventure travellers visiting the province. Age, gender, income levels, and urban origins were revealed as important predictors of tourist behaviour. The report also highlighted seasonal changes and activity preferences, which provide useful information for building focused marketing campaigns. Himachal Pradesh hopes to boost its appeal as a top adventure tourism destination by aligning its tourism offers with these insights.

Adventure Travel Trade Association (2023). The Adventure Travel Trade Association's 2023 research recognised growing trends in adventure tourism, including a preference for micro-adventures, sustainability-focused activities, and digital detox experiences. These developments reflect an increasing need for shorter, more meaningful excursions that increase environmental awareness and personal well-being. The report emphasised the importance of destinations innovating and diversifying their services to meet changing customer tastes.

Gross and Sand (2023). Building on their previous studies, Gross and Sand examined adventure travellers' motivations, indicating relaxation as the most important aspect driving tourist loyalty and recommendations. Their research emphasized the necessity of designing experiences that combine physical demands with opportunities for relaxation and rejuvenation. These findings highlight the need for a comprehensive strategy for adventure tourism that addresses physical, emotional, and psychological demands.

Passport Photo Online Report (2024) The most recent research from Passport Photo Online provides statistical insights into the demographics of adventure travellers, emphasizing the growing participation of young urban professionals and high-income groups. The survey also emphasized the growing importance of technology in driving adventure tourism trends, ranging from trip planning to

experience sharing. These findings provide significant information for stakeholders in developing focused initiatives that align with the interests of modern adventure travellers.

Kumar and Sharma (2024) conducted a comparative study on adventure tourism in Himachal Pradesh's prime adventure location Kullu and Bilaspur districts. In this study the authors investigate the effect of adventure tourism on geographical factors, local culture, and infrastructure. They discovered that Kullu, with its well-established adventure tourism activities, receives more visitors than Bilaspur, which has unexplored potential. The survey also shows that local people played an important role for the promotion of tourism, as well as the requirement for greater facilities and safety precautions to improve the tourist experience.

Objective Of Study

1. To examine the demographics of adventure tourists visiting Himachal Pradesh: This includes looking at crucial criteria like age, gender, income levels, educational backgrounds, and urban origins to learn more about adventure travellers' profiles and preferences.

2. To look into the reasons and preferences of adventure visitors in Himachal Pradesh:
The study's goal is to uncover characteristics that influence travel selections, such as a desire for nature-based experiences, physical difficulties, cultural enquiry, and escapism, as well as to investigate seasonal patterns and activity preferences in order to guide focused marketing and infrastructure development.

Methodology

This study takes a mixed-methods approach, using quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine the demographics, motives, and experiences of adventure tourists visiting Himachal Pradesh, with a particular emphasis on insights from Booking.com reviews. Structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data from a sample of 345 adventure travellers visiting significant sites such as Bir Billing, Manali, Spiti Valley, and Dharamshala. The questionnaire addressed demographics, travel reasons, and activity preferences, while interviews gave in-depth information about their experiences. A selective sample strategy guaranteed that a varied range of tourist profiles were represented.

In addition, Booking.com reviews were gathered from adventure visitors who stayed in these destinations. These reviews provided useful qualitative data on travellers' experiences, satisfaction levels, and perceptions of the region's

adventure tourism options. A total of 200 reviews were examined to discover common themes including satisfaction, obstacles, and motives. This information was used to improve understanding of the tourism experience from the perspective of the tourists themselves. To supplement the primary findings, secondary data were compiled from official tourism reports, industry publications, and university research. Quantitative data were analysed using statistical tools such as SPSS for descriptive statistics and factor analysis, and qualitative data, such as Booking.com reviews and interview transcripts, were submitted to thematic analysis to uncover common themes. Specific factors such as lodging satisfaction, location preferences, and service quality were investigated in relation to adventure activities. Priority was placed on ethical aspects such as informed permission, data protection, and correct attribution for Booking.com reviews. This methodology gives a complete insight into adventure travellers' patterns, preferences, motives, and overall satisfaction, hence promoting the long-term growth of tourism in Himachal Pradesh.

Findings And Discussion

Demographic Profile Of Adventure Tourists

Adventure tourism in Himachal Pradesh is predominantly geared towards young adults, with 45% of visitors aged 25 to 40. Male visitors (60%) outnumber females (40%), however female involvement is increasing. Approximately 52% of adventure visitors earn between ₹5,00,000 and ₹10,00,000 per year. Furthermore, the majority (65%) have higher education credentials, such as a Bachelor's or Master's degree, indicating a trend of well-educated people flocking towards adventure activities.

Residents of urban areas dominate the adventure tourism demographic, with 70% of visitors hailing from major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. This suggests that adventure tourism in Himachal Pradesh is mostly aimed at city dwellers looking for a thrill and an escape into nature. These data assist tourism operators in identifying key customer segments and tailoring experiences and marketing strategies to effectively attract more guests.
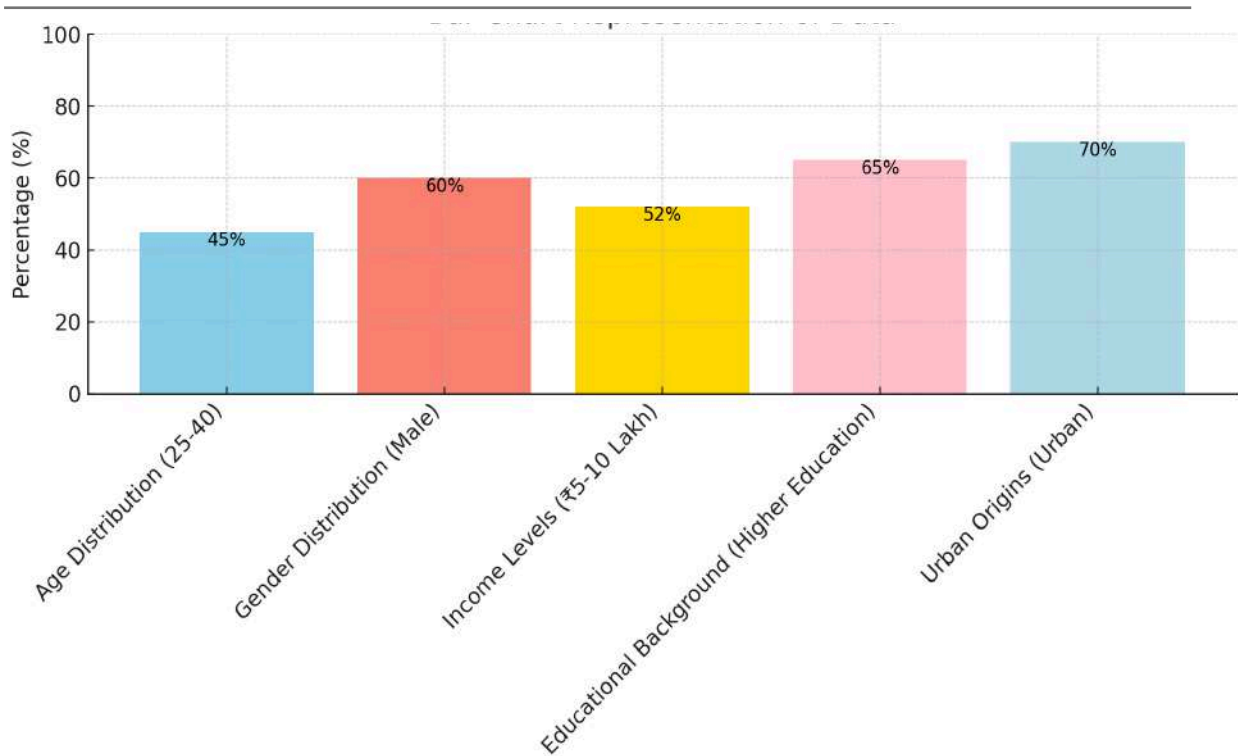
Figure 1

Motivations For Adventure Tourism

Adventure tourism in Himachal Pradesh is fueled by tourists' desire for adrenaline-pumping activities like paragliding in Bir Billing, trekking in Spiti Valley, skiing in Manali, and spiritual exploration in Dharamshala, as well as their admiration for the region's natural beauty and tranquillity. Popular destinations such as Manali and Spiti Valley stand out for their ease of access and diverse activities.
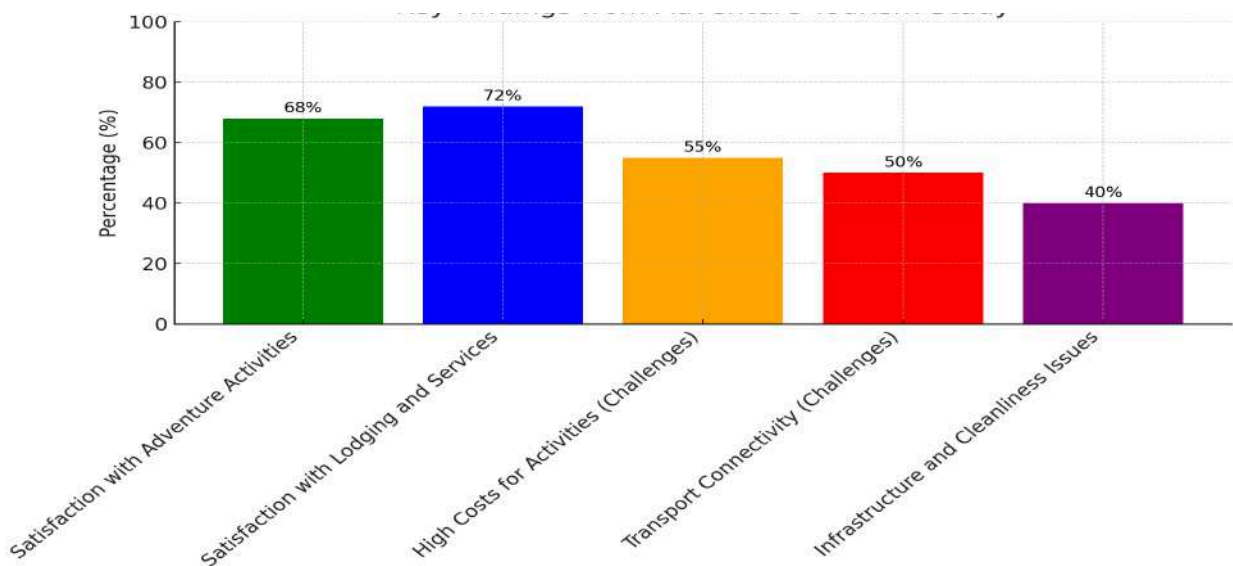

Figure 2

While 68% of tourists were pleased with adventurous activities and scenic beauty, issues such as restricted public transportation, expensive expenses, and insufficient safety precautions were identified. Booking.com reviewers praised the surroundings and hospitality but also noted infrastructure deficiencies and variable service quality. Statistical investigation found relationships between satisfaction and parameters such as accommodation quality and safety, while theme analysis highlighted the significance of immersive natural experiences. Recommendations include upgrading transportation, focusing on environmentally friendly practices, and using focused marketing techniques to attract urban tourists while assuring long-term development.

Category	Details
Popular Activities	• Paragliding (Bir Billing), Trekking (Spiti Valley), Skiing (Manali), Spiritual Exploration (Dharamshala)
Favoured Destinations	• Manali and Spiti Valley for activity diversity, accessibility, and developed infrastructure
Satisfaction Levels	• 68% were satisfied with adventure activities and natural beauty • 72% satisfied with lodging and service quality
Challenges Faced	• Limited public transportation • High costs for activities • Inadequate safety measures in remote areas
Positive Experiences	• Picturesque landscapes • Unique adventure opportunities • Warm hospitality at lodging facilities
Negative Feedback	• Infrastructure gaps • Cleanliness issues • Inconsistent service quality
Recommendations	• Improve transport connectivity to remote destinations • Focus on sustainable and eco-friendly tourism practices

Booking.com reviews revealed satisfaction with picturesque landscapes and warm hospitality but highlighted issues like infrastructure gaps, cleanliness, and inconsistent service quality. Recommendations include improving transport connectivity to remote destinations and adopting sustainable, eco-friendly tourism practices to enhance overall experience.

Implications

- The findings point to the necessity for specialised marketing techniques to attract adventure visitors, particularly from urban regions.
- Infrastructure upgrades, improved transportation, and increased safety measures are vital for sustaining and expanding adventure tourism.
- To maintain Himachal Pradesh's unique natural assets, stakeholders must strike a balance between adventure tourism expansion and sustainable and environmentally friendly methods.

Conclusion

According to the data, adventure tourism in the region is predominantly attracting young urban professionals, with a significant representation of individuals aged 25-40 who earn mid to high incomes and have higher education degrees. Tourists are drawn to nature-based experiences, physical challenges, cultural exploration, and escapism, with popular activities including paragliding in Bir Billing, trekking in Spiti Valley, and skiing in Manali. The report also identifies key areas for development, such as infrastructure shortages, limited transit alternatives, high activity prices, and insufficient safety measures in remote places. Positive tourist feedback highlights the region's natural beauty, numerous adventure activities, and welcoming welcome, whilst negative encounters highlight inconsistent service quality and hygiene concerns. These findings have important implications for tourism development. To attract and retain adventure visitors, particularly those from urban areas, stakeholders must execute focused marketing tactics, improve transit connectivity, build infrastructure, and prioritise safety. Furthermore, adopting sustainable and environmentally friendly techniques is critical to preserving Himachal Pradesh's natural and cultural assets while assuring long-term growth in the adventure tourism sector. By resolving these issues, Himachal Pradesh can strengthen its position as a major adventure tourism destination, balancing economic growth with environmental preservation while meeting the changing demands of modern adventure travellers.

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FOOD TOURISM OVERVIEW OF NEPAL

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Abstract

Tourism is a significant service industry in Nepal which generates revenue for locals. Tourism has evolved from a focus on sight-seeing to a more holistic approach, incorporating taste, touch, sound, and smell. Food tourism is a new form of travel that values diverse experiences and appearances, transforming the way people travel and creating new identities. Researchers study the connection between tourism and food, examining topics like caterers' use of local foods, competition for land and workers, and tourists' food choices. Food tourism promotes cultural awareness and understanding of place and identity through the consumption of food, protecting natural resources, improving people's lives, and preserving traditional foods and methods. Food tourism strategies are crucial for regional growth, as they can work together to improve both sectors (Hall, 2004). Gastronomy tourism involves traveling to destinations primarily for the purpose of experiencing local cuisine and beverages. Gastronomy tourists can be classified into gourmet tourists, gastronomic and culinary tourists, and gastronomic tourists. Postmodern tourists increasingly prioritize food and cooking as a means of self-definition, with locally sourced cuisine allowing travellers to directly experience and immerse themselves in a particular area and its cultural heritage. Whatever may be the attraction, food remains the key factor in selecting a destination, as it reflects the culture and traditions of a community. Native cuisine attracts foreigners due to its native resources and presentation. Food serves not only as a source of revenue but also as a tool to safeguard tourism in certain countries. The presence of food as a tangible manifestation of cultural and traditional identity is a major draw for tourists worldwide.

Conceptualisation

According to the Business Dictionary, food, derived from animals or plants, contains vital components like carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, minerals, and vitamins, supporting overall well-being, energy, growth, and health once digested. Food is a universally understood and appreciated concept, influencing language, religious beliefs, and ceremonial practices, and serves as a metaphor for internal self-transactions.

Folklorists and food scholars are fascinated by exploratory eating, particularly in "ethnic" restaurants, international cookbooks, and folklife festivals, which offer new, different, or strange experiences (Updhyay & Sharma, 2013). The pleasure of food extends beyond taste, as sharing it with others fosters conversation about

kindness and the history of a place, people, or culture. The food industry, dominated by multinational corporations, provides the majority of the world's food energy, highlighting the importance of sharing and enjoying food.

According to Doshi (1995), individuals have fundamental needs that include physiological well-being, safety and security, social connections and belonging to self-esteem and recognition, and personal growth and self-actualization. So, the idea of food covers a lot of ground. Physiologically, the most important thing for all humans is to stay alive. Anything that people think might be good for them will be eaten. On a personal level, food and how people deal with each other in a society are connected to (a) meeting basic human needs and (b) how people think they should relate to their food, which can be summed up as a list of foods that are okay to eat in certain situations. Study has made the case that food's main purpose in a society is to keep people alive. He said that the simple fact that people need food has had a big impact on society through all the activities that involve making, distributing, and using food. When there is enough food to meet the body's nutritional needs and ensure survival, people start to think about safety and protection. So, someone is thinking about how to tell the difference between "food" and "poison" when it comes to health. So, the meaning of "food" is limited to things that are least likely to make you sick, or things that look like they would be least poisonous and reliably not poisonous. The meaning of "poison" is widened to include things that are new or unusual as well as things that are prescribed.

Food gives people a sense of who they are, which is at the heart of their freedom. Eating has a certain meaning and societal power because it fulfils our biological need for food and brings people together. A popular theme and main focus of many tourist destinations is food as a central part of traditional values and regional identity (Lin et al., 2011).

As has been said, every social act can be judged by its cultural background. In countries that are no longer industrialised, food is more than just food for survival, and pleasure is valued more than needed.

Different countries have different views on food consumption, with Japan and the UK valuing food more than Australians and Germans. Cultures with a high level of uncertainty tend to dislike pre-cooked food due to their focus on quality and purity. Eating habits also vary across cultures, with some people consuming snails while others eat locusts. Food transactions, such as exchange of food, result in an increase in the donor's status and a decrease in the recipient's status.

It has been looked at and compared caste hierarchies in "other communities and regions of South Asia" in order to find out how people are ranked by caste at the village level. In the setting of food ideology, food preferences, and food avoidance, what is most important to be learned is: how ethnic foods can help set a community apart (Zelinsky, 1985). Types of food and their position as food are useful ways to figure out how a caste or class society ranks. For example, in the study of tribalism, food production, food intake, and status food can be used to rank people within a group. As suggested by Doshi (1995), the interrelated social function of food in society are as follows:

1. Gastronomic function
2. Means of cultural identity
3. Religious and magic function
4. Means of communication
5. Expressions of economic wealth and status
6. Means of exercising influence and power"

Food taste is influenced by its organoleptic features, with pleasure varying based on smell, taste, temperature, appearance, structure, or texture. Food also reflects social psychology and culture, with different parts of the world having different tastes. Eating reflects national identity, religious and symbolic purposes, and social interactions. Food is also used for communal gatherings, such as feasts and celebrations, and can be influenced by an individual's economic situation (A Distant Feast, n.d.).

In general, eating not only makes you feel full, but it also makes you friendlier and warmer with other people. It can be used for ceremonies and to show hospitality (Kunwar, 2017). In addition, it helps the buyer get ahead. Some things are more important than others because they make a person or a group look better in society.

To consumers, food serves many purposes: it keeps us alive; it's an important part of events; it brings people together; it's fun; it's sensual and enjoyable; it lets us experience other cultures and countries. For many people, travelling with food makes it much more than just something to eat. It can become sensual and sensual, symbolic and ritualistic, and it can take on new meaning and importance. When eaten in the middle of beautiful scenery or at the end of a special day exploring a new city, even the simplest meal can stay in your mind forever.

People are starting to realise that food has been a way of communicating meaning for a long time. It can also be used as a theoretical starting point to do

work that takes into account the fact that landscapes are seen as personally experienced and culturally encoded.

Classification of Foods

With the help of secondary sources, Doshi (1995) put food into science groups in his book. There are "proximate principles" that describe most foods. "Proximate principles" are things like proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. They are burned or oxidised in the body to make energy for different tasks. Because of these eating habits, cereals, beans, nuts, oil seeds, fruits, veggies, milk, milk products, and meat are the main types of food found in India.

"According to Frederick J. Simoons, an expert on Chinese food habits, the Chinese eat the following: (1) cereals and pulses; (2) roots and tubers; (3) other cultivated vegetables; (4) seaweeds and other algae; (5) fruits; (6) edible nuts, nut-like fruits, and seeds; (7) meat and poultry; (8) fish, turtles, and tortoises; (9) eggs; (10) spices and flavourings; and (11); drinks, including dairy products".

Another way to group foods is based on what few researchers have noticed in the real world, not on scientific concepts. They put foods into the following groups: (a) cereals and grains; (b) starchy roots, tubers, and fruits; (c) pulses, nuts, and oilseeds; (d) vegetables; (e) fruits that aren't starchy; (f) foods that come from animals; (g) fats and oils; (h) sugars and syrups; (i) spices and other condiments; and (j) other foods that aren't in the other groups, like yeast, algae, and fermented goods. The authors note that the way people in the same country eat tends to make certain food groups a good place to start. Furthermore, it is said that food groups like the "basic seven" (US) or "eight" (Chinese society) don't really apply to these groups.

Passion and Bennett, who are said to have worked in southern Illinois, USA, came up with a broad way to group foods into three groups: (1) core foods, (2) secondary core foods, and (3) outlying foods. Core foods are the foods that everyone eats and that are important and always used. Secondary core foods are foods that a lot of people use but not everyone eats. They can be used and shaped in more ways, are less important emotionally, and include new things like packaged food bought at provision shops (Stockebrand et al., 2011). When it comes to foods, peripheral foods are the ones that don't happen very often. They are more often used by individuals than by groups.

In India, food intake is a good way to tell what caste or tribal group someone belongs to. A number of scientists have also looked into how people eat during Hindu rituals (Food, Ritual, and Society, n.d.). One example is the practice of giving food to gods and spirits and getting prasad in return, which has been

studied in depth. Few people notice that the fact that the followers accept prasad shows how low they are compared to the god.

The Vaisnavite culture in India categorizes food into three groups: sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic. The sattvic diet is lacto-vegetarian, excluding certain vegetables. The rajasic diet is suitable for strong individuals and royalty, allowing goat and chicken meat, eggs, and buffalo meat. The tamasic diet, on the other hand, includes buffalo meat, pickled foods, alcohol, garlic, onion, and other unapproved foods. The belief is that food affects men's moods and behaviours, with sattvic food transforming a person into holy, rajasic food transforming a person into a ruler or fighter, and tamasic food transforming a person into a demon or titan.

In the past, both academics and the travel business itself didn't give food enough credit for its role in tourism. However, food has always been an important part of travel. Even in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, which was written at the end of the 1400s, food was an important part of the characters' pilgrimages and, by extension, an important part of their experiences as tourists (The Tourist, n.d.).
Food tourism, a subfield of tourism, has been studied by researchers in various social sciences, but a universally accepted definition remains challenging. Despite its potential, culinary tourism research in Nepal remains unexplored (Harrison, 2010). Only a few authors have compiled a comprehensive collection of Nepalese culinary delights and techniques, making kitchen table tourism a viable alternative to armchair tourism. The Nepal Tourism Board and Silver Mountain School of Hotel Management have created a list of 100 traditional Nepalese recipes, known as the Nepal Culinary Book. This study is useful for tourism and hotel management professionals, restaurants, researchers, and those working in farm tourism, agri-tourism, and country tourism (Joys of Nepalese Cooking, n.d.)

The relationship and character of Traditional and Indigenous food of Nepal with Tourism
Nepal has a long history of good food. Food is a way to show your culture. NTIFs come in a lot of different forms and can be found in different areas. They also have different tastes, shelf lives, and uses (Sheringham & Daruwalla, 2007). Nepalese native foods and drinks are praised for their unique flavours, preparation methods, and level of difficulty. There are certain nutritional components, functions, and sensory qualities that make them special. Tibetan and Nepalese foods are high in fibre and not junk food. The tables below show some of Nepal's native and traditional foods that are made in different parts of the country (Table 1), foods that are grouped by how healthy they are (Table 2), types of snacks (Table 3) and foods that can be kept for a long time (Table 4). The best places to get snacks during hiking and sports are away from hotels and

restaurants. Foods that don't go bad quickly are useful for long treks and exploring on foot in very remote areas.

Table 1: Nepalese traditional and indigenous foods prepared in different geographical regions

East Mountain	Chyakhla, Jand, Khareng, Kinema, Lung-ghakcha, Manda, Mesu, Murcha, Papanda, Penagolya, Pena Sargyangma, Phando, Sejangwa, Singolya, Tongba, Womyuk, Yangben
East Terai	Adauri, Amat, Arikanchan, Bagiya, Bhakka, Bhusba, Bidia, Khajuri, Perukiya, Sattu, Thekuwa, Tilauri (Phulauri)
Central Mountain	Bara, Chatamari, Chakumari, Choyala, Furaula, Golphuki, Gundpak, Hyantho(n), Ju Ju Dhau, Kachila, Khamir Mana, Khatte, Kheuni, Laba, Lakhamari, Manapu, Pustakari, Silaura, Syabji, Yamar
Central Terai	Tha(e)kuwa
West and Far West Mountain	Galeue, Pina pani, Puri, Titaudo
West and Far West Terai	Anarasa, Bara, Dabbe, Dhik(u)ri, Kalipapro, Kaliroti, Malpuri, Phini roti, Sinkamari
Highland (Himalaya)	Momo, Tea momo, Gheu tea, Khapsa
Inter-regional traditional foods	Achar, Chiura, Chuk, Churpi, Dahi, Dhindo, Gheu, Gundruk, Kwati, Maseura, Mohi, Murai, Raksi, Sakhar, Sekuwa, Selroti, Sukuti

Table 2: List of foods based on their nutritional characteristics

Carbohydrate and energy rich food (cereal, fat and sugar based)	Anarasa, Bhakka, Bhusba, buote ko makai (puffed corn), Chakumar, Chaaku, Chatamari, Chyakhla, Chiura, Dabbe (Dabbiya), Dhido, Dhik(u)ri, Gheu, Golphuki, Gundpak, Hakuwa, Jhilinga (Khiuni), Kaliroti, Kasar, Khajuri, Khapsa, Khatte, Laba, Lunghakcha, Murai (Bhuja), Nauni-gheu, Perukiya, Phiniroti, Pustakari, Sakhar, Selroti, Silaura, Sinkamari, Sirimla, Syabji, Tilauri (Phulauri), Yomari
Protein rich foods (pulse, legume, milk, meat, fish based)	Adauri, Bara, Bari, Furaula, Kinema, Kwati, Maseura, Phando, Churpi, Dhaukho, Durkha, Galeue, Choyala, Kachila, Momo, Sargyangma, Sukuti, Womyuk
Fruit and vegetable based	Achar, Amat, Arikanchan (Aarkanchan, Aarkoch), Bid(r)ia, Chuk, Gundruk, Kalipapro, Khalpi, Kumbharauri, Lattepapro, Mada, Nimki, Sinamani, Sinki, Titaura

Probiotic and functional food	Dahi, Ju Ju Dhou, Mohi, pickle

List 1: Nepalese traditional snacks suitable for carrying during journey
Adauri, Anarasa, Arsa, Bagiya, Bara, Bari, Bhakka, Chaku, Chakumari, Chatamari, Chiura, Dabbe, Furaula, Galeue, Gundpak, Kaliroti, Khajuri, Khurma, Lakhamari, Malpuri, Murai, Nisoshya, Perukiya, Pustakari, Sakhar, Selroti, Sukuti, Tilauri, Yomari

List 2: Shelf stable traditional foods
Achar, Adauri, Amat, Arikanchan, buote ko makai, Bid(r)ia, Chaku, Chakumari, Chiura, Chuk, Churpi, Durkha, fish cake, Gundpak, Gundruk, Hakuwa, Jhilinga, Khajuri, Khurma, Kumbharauri, Lakhamari, Lattepapro, Mada, Maseura, Mesu, Murai, Pustakari, Sakhar, Sattu, Sidra, Sinki, Sukuti (meat, fish), Tilauri

Food Tourism
The visual sense is crucial for understanding the environment, and tourism activities can be analysed through visual-centred methodologies (Environment and Tourism, n.d.). However, techniques focusing solely on the visual sense are insufficient for addressing postmodern activities involving the entire body.

Tourism now encompasses more than just sight-seeing, with researchers recognizing the importance of taste, touch, sound, and smell in the holiday season. Food and beverages provided by attractions can impact operational efficiency, cultural heritage, and environmental protection.

Food tourism is a new form of travel that values diverse experiences and appearances, transforming the way people travel and create new identities (Eastham, 2003). Researchers study the connection between tourism and food, examining topics like caterers' use of local foods, competition for land and workers, and tourists' food choices.

Food has always been an important part of tourism, but until lately, not much was said about it. It is even strange that taste, and especially eating and drinking, haven't been studied much in the social and anthropological study of tourism, even though they are so important to the experience (Taste of Nepal, n.d.).

For tourists, food is an important part of the experience. Finally, people are realising how important food is to society and culture. One example is how important food is to tourists. Because of this, it is a key part of both selling tourism and figuring out how happy visitors are, as well as a key part of studying hospitality.

In the publication of Hall (2003), explore the concept of gastronomic tourism, which focuses on the exploration of different tastes and culinary experiences. Their summary highlights the significance of researching food tourism in the following manner:

1. Food itself can be a compelling reason to travel, whether it is for a particular occasion or to visit establishments such as wineries or breweries.
2. Certain destinations may have a renowned reputation for specific products, such as Tuscany's wine, which serves as an example of special interest tourism (Special Interest Tourism, 3rd Edition, n.d.).
3. Food has become a significant factor in the promotion of tourism and in influencing visitor satisfaction as it is an integral aspect of the tourist experience (RiMmiNgton & Yüksel, 1998).
In the past, both academics and the travel business itself didn't give food enough credit for its role in tourism. However, food has always been an important part of travel. Even in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, which was written at the end of the 1400s, food was an important part of the characters' pilgrimages and, by extension, an important part of their experiences as tourists.

Food tours are an embodied type of tourism that emphasizes the process of experiencing, making sense, and knowing through practice as a sensual human subject in the world. It involves visiting primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, and restaurants to taste food and experience specialized production areas (Kodas, 2023). Some people find food tourism to be a special interest for serious leisure. Gourmet or culinary tourists visit specific food and drink tourism sites.

Food tourism, also known as culinary tourism, is the deliberate participation in another's foodways, including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style (Kunwar, 2017). This can involve traveling to other countries to try their food and exploring the world of the strange. Cooking tourism is a profitable job that connects the everyday and the unusual.

The word "foodways" makes it sound like food is a web of physical, social (communicative), cultural, economic, spiritual, and aesthetic processes and activities (Waits, 2000). The word "culinary complex" was first used by anthropologist John J. Honigman in 1961 and was later used by folklorist Don Yodor in 1972. It means the whole set of cooking and eating habits in a society, including attitudes, taboos, and meal systems. In this way, food affects every part of our lives.

Long (2013) says that someone can be a culinary tourist if they go to an ethnic restaurant in their area, look through a cookbook, cook a meal from a different food culture, or walk through an ethnic grocery store in their area. "Culinary tourism is more than just trying new and strange foods," says Long.

As for foodie tourism, it is "travel or tourism that is at least partly driven by an interest in food and drink, eating and drinking." It also says that food tourism is about being a part of another culture that is connected to a certain place and people. These reasons for using food in tourism make it clear that food can improve the sustainability and authenticity of a destination, make the economy of a place stronger, and make an area more welcoming.

Food tourism involves visiting food makers to try and learn about the entire process, from raw materials to finished products. It distinguishes between tourists who eat as a normal part of their trip and those whose interests, behaviours, and location choices are shaped by their love of food (Cook & Crang, 1996).

Food tourism promotes cultural awareness and understanding of place and identity through the consumption of food. It protects natural resources, improves people's lives, and preserves traditional foods and methods. Examples of renowned food destinations include Napa Valley in California, France, Tuscany in Italy, Niagara in Ontario, and Yara Valley in Australia.

Wine tourism involves visiting wineries, attending festivals, and tasting wine. Food tourism and wine tourism are interconnected, with viticulture blending agriculture, tourism, and industrial activities (Ainley, 2011). Developing regional or local labels and brands can differentiate products and enhance rural areas. The fascination with unique food items can be analysed from multiple perspectives, including the relationship between food products and geographical features and agriculture's impact on visitors (Sidali et al., 2011).

Regional identity can be used to tell the difference between goods like wine, food, and tourism. For example, wine is often recognised by where it comes from, like Burgundy, Champagne, or Rioja. These regions have often been made official through a set of appellation controls that are based on certain geographical features of a place (Bell & Valentine, 2013). The place where a food, like cheese, comes from is also used to identify it. Similarly, the appeal of regional or local places also helps to boost tourism.

These people are called "food tourists," and the food in a place is a big part of why they choose to visit. For "interested purchasers," food is an important part of a vacation, and they try local food whenever they can. People who are

"un-reached tourists" think that food can make their vacation more fun, but they don't buy local foods very often. People who don't want to or don't plan to try local food groups are called "un-engaged" or "laggards." (Sims, 2009)

Different types of researchers have looked into the connections between food and tourism or between tourism and food. The effects on the economy, society, culture, and the environment can also be seen in food and tourist situations. These effects can be seen and felt on both the supply side and the demand side at the same time. Some food and tourism projects, for instance, aim to make things better for both the tourism and food production industries by boosting the economy and for tourists by making their trips more enjoyable (Bélisle, 1983).

Why is food becoming more and more important in travel studies? There are a few possible answers. Since the early 1970s, Europe's rural areas have become more industrialised, and societies have been greatly changed by many rounds of economic restructuring. Loss of services and established markets, as well as the removal of tariffs and regional support mechanisms, has caused rural areas to try to diversify their economies. Two examples are the development of new agricultural products and tourism (Novelli, 2007). Because of this, food tourism strategies are an important tool for regional growth, especially since products from the two sectors can work together to make each other better.

Food Tourism As A Form Of Consumption
As Western cultures have moved further along the path to capitalism, "consumption" has become an important part of everyday life. Going out and getting something to satisfy basic psychological needs, like when you're hungry and need bread, is not the same thing as consumption. Consumer behaviour studies look at things from the social and psychological points of view (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). They know that buying a certain good or service can meet a lot of needs that go beyond our most basic bodily needs.

Sociologists argue that consumption is a way to distinguish oneself and define one's personality. Thorstein Veblen, an American economist, coined the term "conspicuous consumption" to describe the wealthy middle class in America who used leisure and spending to set themselves apart from the average (The Nepal Cookbook, n.d.). Travel also played a role in this, as it allowed people from different social classes to stand out.

In western society, using travel as a way to set yourself apart from others has become more common. The French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu gave us the word "habitus," which people use to say that the different types of tourism we do have cultural meanings and symbols attached to them (The Encyclopedia of Ecotourism, n.d.). Habitus is the skill and desire of people from different social

classes to pick up things and habits that set them apart from others in society (Tourism and Social Identities, n.d.). There isn't as much social differentiation in modern society because of the ability to travel internationally as there was in Veblen's time, but where we can go and what we do on vacation does send culture messages and set us apart from others in society.

Gastronomical Understanding

"Eating is a form of agricultural action," stated Wendell Berry, an American poet and farmer born in 1934. As a result, the act of preparing food should be regarded as a "gastronomic act" (www.slowfood.com). Gastronomy tourism refers to the act of travelling to destinations primarily for the purpose of experiencing and indulging in the local cuisine and beverages.

The tourism school should explore food tourism, a concept that has been overlooked in existing studies on food, society, culture, and the economy. Gastronomy studies can enrich tourism discourses and provide novel perspectives. This study uses food tourism as an example of evolving tourist studies, focusing on cultural analysis and postmodern consumption patterns (Everett, 2008). Few social scientists consider food and drink as fundamental organizing elements.

Contemporary definitions of gastronomy mostly emphasise its scientific aspect, defining it as the art and/or science of refined and enjoyable eating (Tourism: The Key Concepts, n.d.). Art and science can be equated to talent and knowledge, aligning with the perception of these disciplines in the early 1800s. Nevertheless, contemporary interpretations of gastronomy are far more limited in scope compared to Brillat-Savarin's. He believed that gastronomy encompassed a broad array of topics including natural history, physics, chemistry, cuisine, commerce, and political economy (Tourism and Gastronomy, n.d.).

Brillat-Savarin's understanding of gastronomy's origins is rooted in ancient Greek terms gaster and nomos. Food studies examine principles guiding consumption, including what, where, when, why, how, and with whom. Brillat-Savarin's concepts align with Archestratus, who wrote a guide on Mediterranean food and beverage choices (Key Concepts in Tourist Studies, n.d.). Gastronomia could be a potential title for this book.

"Gastronomy" is a complex concept that encompasses high-quality dining, pleasure from food and drinks, and enjoyment in pleasant company (Scarpato, 2003). It is often compared to the French term "cuisine," which reflects its unique qualities like cost, quality, and attention to detail. However, elevating ordinary dishes to a distinguished status can evoke suspicions of culinary deception.

Gastronomy, a term referring to high-quality food and excellent wine, is crucial in the context of hospitality and management (Brotherton, 1999). It holds significant importance in the Western world due to economic and cultural factors. For over four centuries, chefs and the hospitality sector have been influenced by intricate cooking techniques.

Brillat-Savarin's gastronomy goes beyond food and drink, focusing on our eating and drinking habits, consumption patterns, and communal activities (Lashley et al., 2007). It encompasses the study and appreciation of food and beverages, with a particular emphasis on creation, preparation, categorization, and evaluation. Gastronomy is a cultural domain that encompasses activities, values, behaviour, rules, conventions, institutions, and concepts associated with food production and consumption within a social context (Key Concepts in Hospitality Management, n.d.). The French led three distinct periods of gastronomy: ancient regime, classical cuisine, and nouvelle cuisine. The French introduced the concept of transgression and acclimatisation, challenging established culinary norms and innovating new gastronomic creations. Nouvelle cuisine revolutionized culinary practices by introducing a contemporary and individualistic approach to cooking.

The fourth era of molecular gastronomy or avant-garde food is debated. Professor Nicholas Kurti and physical scientist Herve This established molecular and physical gastronomy in 1988, focusing on the chemical and physical processes involved in creating nourishing, visually appealing, and superior quality food. Kurti's death in 1998 led to the use of the term "molecular gastronomy" by This (Molecular Gastronomy, n.d.).

Regrettably, both the media and certain chefs began to employ the phrase "molecular gastronomy" in an inappropriate manner. The individuals were attempting to achieve the desired aesthetic appeal associated with the phrase "after effect." However, their culinary creations, such as strawberry risotto with salmon, were too innovative and prioritised visual presentation, particularly for photographic purposes, rather than emphasising flavour.

Gastronomy comprises the entire process of food production and the techniques used in food preparation. The field of study covers a range of topics, including the political economy of food, different aspects of food handling, storage, transportation, and processing, methods of food preparation and cooking, social aspects of meals and manners, scientific study of food chemistry, process of digestion, physiological impacts of food consumption, and factors influencing food choices, traditions, and customs.

Gillespie's focus on the physical properties of food and how it is prepared, usually in a restaurant, not only limits the field of gastronomy too much, but also ignores the important roles of the critic, guide, and advisor, which were originally performed by Grimod de la Reyniere and Brillat-Savarin in the 1800s.

The culinary offerings of a place serve as a captivating motivation for drawing tourists to a location. The cultivation of food in a particular area is shaped by various elements, including the environment, society, and historical context. Food tourism is often linked to cultural or historical tourism because of this aspect. The tourist industry has effectively used the connection between place and cuisine by promoting unique or "authentic" gastronomic experiences that are specific to a particular region or country. Food can also serve as a method of leading individuals around various locations and countries, typically in the form of trails. According to Hall and Mitchell (2004b), gastronomy tourists can be classified into the following categories:

- Gourmet tourists are individuals who specifically seek out and patronise upscale or highly acclaimed restaurants or vineyards.
- Gastronomic and culinary tourists are individuals who are specifically interested in the broader aspects of food and wine production, such as the culture and scenery associated with it.
- Gastronomic tourists - those who are specifically interested in the culinary traditions and dishes of a certain country or region.
- Gastronomic tourists, like other specialised travellers, generally have higher levels of affluence and education compared to the average childless traveller. These individuals are typically categorised within the AB (upper/middle) or CL (lower-middle-class) socioeconomic brackets.

Hall and Mitchell (2004b) state that just 3 percent of overseas tourists may be classified as culinary tourists. Nevertheless, Enteleca Research & Consultancy (2000) did an analysis of tourists which indicates that a significant proportion of tourists find cuisine to be a secondary source of enjoyment. This suggests that food producers or suppliers have the capacity to reach a wider range of consumers.

- Approximately 6-8% of tourists are specifically interested in food.
- Prospective buyers (30-33%)
- The population that has not been contacted or accessed, estimated to be between 15-17%.
- The un-engaged individuals make up approximately 22-24% of the population.
- Laggards (17-28%): Individuals or groups that are slow to adopt or embrace new ideas, technologies, or trends.

"Gastronomic tourists" are the most dedicated, and a crucial aspect of their decision-making process is the cuisine offered in a certain location. When "prospective buyers" travel on vacation, consuming food brings them greater happiness, and they make an effort to sample local cuisine whenever possible. "Untapped tourists" believe that incorporating native cuisine into their holiday can enhance their overall experience, although they typically refrain from purchasing indigenous culinary items. "Un-engaged" and "laggards" refer to individuals who have no intention of attempting local cuisine or only plan to do so infrequently.

In 2008, Erik Wolf, the president of the International Culinary Tourism Association, discussed the findings of World Travel Market Research, which indicated that consuming traditional cuisine was deemed a "very important" or "important" aspect of over 50% of tourists' holidays (International Tourism, n.d.). The International Culinary Tourism Association is a non-profit organisation that represents over 500 tourism enterprises in 19 countries (Lockwood, 2008). Among British individuals who travelled abroad, 86% expressed a favourable opinion towards the local cuisine and indicated a preference for dining at local establishments rather than eating meals provided by hotels or resorts. This indicates that the underlying inclination for food tourism may be greater than previously believed.

While some travellers relish the opportunity to sample unfamiliar cuisines as a significant aspect of their journey, others may find it exacerbates their sense of not belonging.

Postmodern tourists increasingly prioritise food and cooking as a means of self-definition. In regions where food holds significant cultural value, it derives its growth and characteristics from the "terroir," which refers to the specific combination of soil and climate in that area. Consuming locally sourced cuisine allows travellers to directly experience and immerse themselves in the essence of a particular area and its cultural heritage.

Authenticity in meals is influenced by three factors: "The Self" and cumulative impact, "The Thing" being experienced, and "The Others." Heritage food, such as historic British pubs and historic restaurants, plays a significant role in the relationship between food and travel, focusing on the lives of ordinary individuals (Hughes, 1995).

The growing number of tourist destinations globally has led to a growing competition for unique products, with food being a key tool for capturing and monetizing experiences. Food also plays a significant role in personal and

cultural identity, as dietary choices and eating habits are crucial to our cultural heritage.

Movement Of 'slow Food'

Slow food tourism, cookery, and culinary tourism are being explored by scholars. The term "fast" in fast food is often associated with modern Western culture, while slow food represents a counteracting trend (In Praise of Slow, n.d.). The Slow Food Movement, originating in Italy in 1989, was coined during a demonstration against McDonald's in Rome. The movement, launched in Paris in 1989, has grown to 100,000 members from 132 countries worldwide.

Slow Food, established in 1989, aims to combat fast food and promote local food traditions, promoting ethical consumption of uncontaminated, ethically sourced food that considers the well-being of all, including animals and the planet.

A French sociologist discusses "gastro-anomy," referring to the abundance of food and slow food. In 1989, globalization led to a need for identity and distinction, resulting in national and ethnic assertions. Tourism and food play a significant role in defining identity and economic position (Porter, 2024).

The Slow City movement, an urban social and governance paradigm, aims to extend the principles of the Slow Food movement to urban life, promoting local culture and enhancing environments (Hannerz, 1990). It has spread across various sectors, inspiring individuals to incorporate slowness into literature, education, finances, and daily routines. The movement's potential applications include the travel and tourist industry, overcoming time scarcity and establishing connections with individuals and experiences.

The "Slow Cities" movement promotes leisurely food, focusing on tradition, charm, and diversity. It opposes homogenization and promotes a slower pace of life. Food consumption, like tourism, balances spatial dimensions and contributes to a postmodern world. Rural capital plays a significant role in sustainable rural tourism, utilizing local resources to attract and provide an enjoyable experience for visitors. This movement challenges the constant 24-hour work culture and lifestyle (Santini et al., 2011).

Wine tourists can be categorized into general and specialist visitors. General tourists visit vineyards, wineries, and festivals for recreational purposes, while specialist wine tourists have a specific interest in grape wine. Food tourists, particularly those with fine cuisine and wine, make up 19.6% and 14.2% of American and Canadian tourists respectively.

Culinary tourism focuses on sampling distinctive cuisine or wines at specific restaurants or wineries, while rural tourism attracts tourists who prioritize

activities other than food. The plan explores the interrelation between rural tourism and gastronomy, and highlights the distinctions in culinary tourism. Terror products, a blend of physical, climatic, historical, and cultural characteristics, serve as cultural symbols and contribute to local welfare (Rural Tourism, n.d.).

It delineated three cognitive elements that describe terroir items in the customer's mind:

- Trade - a skill that encompasses knowledge of recipes and traditions
- Time and culture - encompasses the categories of history and rituals
- Origin - includes the categories of territory, region, and land

Cuisine shapes a place's identity, impacting land features. Distinguishing foodscapes from agricultural concerns is challenging. Geographical location, climate, and seasonal changes are crucial for food travel, with the stationary nature of products being a key aspect.

Travel involves encountering experiences that differ from one's familiar surroundings, and the geographical characteristics of a region contribute to its identity and attractiveness as a vacation destination. Geographical knowledge, rooted in cultural significance, is used to distinguish food commodities and differentiate them from generic products. Terroir, such as climate and scenery, is crucial for regional tourist branding. "Touristic terroir" refers to the unique appeal of a region due to its combination of physical, cultural, and natural elements. The quality of a travel experience depends on the expertise of various individuals and organizations.

Clusters are the concentration of several firms and industries in a specific geographic area, interconnected by clients, products, suppliers, trade associations, and educational institutions. These clusters are catalysts for economic growth and are essential for building companies. They also include enterprises that offer goods and services within and beyond the region, and those that supply them with resources. Facilitating the exchange of information and knowledge enhances collaboration and financial performance.

Cluster creation is crucial for generating favourable external economics for farms, especially in the wine industry. Tourism is also significant. Telfer (1996) highlights the importance of cluster development in Canada's Niagara area. Key factors contribute to cluster expansion and external economy. Contradicting himself, Hashimoto & Telfer, (1999) states fostering awareness about the preservation and sustainable use of regional environmental and cultural assets,

particularly in culinary tourism, is crucial for generating revenue, enhancing local quality of life, and preserving traditional foods.

Food tourism research focuses on food safety, cleanliness, participation in food and wine festivals, economic connections, and the influence of tourism on culinary traditions (MacLaurin, 2001). Consumer behaviour research is crucial for wine tourism industry participants, helping understand demographics and motivations of tourists (Wine Tourism Around the World, n.d.). It helps marketers identify and broaden target markets, and is essential for restaurant owners, culinary educators, food festival organizers, hotel administrators, and food manufacturers. Consumer behaviour studies the decision-making process and motivations behind purchases, examining internal and external factors. Various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, marketing, cultural anthropology, economics, media studies, and geography, are used to understand consumer behaviour (Companion Encyclopedia of Geography, n.d.).

Tourists are increasingly concerned about food quality and safety due to BSE crises, foot and mouth outbreaks, and bird flu. Environmentally conscious shoppers are drawn to natural and organic products, leading to increased demand for locally sourced food (Research Themes for Tourism, n.d.). Tourism and environmental preservation are crucial for sustaining local communities, generating employment opportunities, and allowing residents to serve as landscape stewards or environmental engineers. Local cuisine in a region contributes to tourism by offering authentic specialties and locally sourced produce. Italy's tourists seek authentic cuisine, while Nepal's 500,000 tourists annually enjoy Nepalese dishes like dal, bhat, tarkari, and achar (Canavari et al., 2011). However, catering to health-conscious guests and promoting natural, unprocessed cuisine is crucial for success. Recent academic discussions highlight the connection between food, landscape, and tourism. Traditional food conservation is crucial for sustainable tourism (Reynolds, 1993). Globalization and localization are important, and using locally sourced food can be a significant part of a region's marketing plan to attract tourists.

In 1978, Levi-Strauss argued that cooking and language are universal human endeavours. However, "kitchen table tourism" has replaced "armchair tourism" in engaging with diverse cultures through culinary traditions, dining at restaurants, cooking from cookbooks, and watching TV programs (The Origin of Table Manners, n.d.).

Tourism is driven by the desire to discover novel experiences, with individuals with allocentric dispositions seeking unfamiliar or novel locations, and psychocentric dispositions preferring familiar, less intimidating ones. This concept, particularly in food, is discussed in the literature. Neophilia, a

preference for new and innovative experiences, is a conflicting tendency with neophobia, a fear of new and unfamiliar things. Food neophilia has influenced the development of new cuisines and travel experiences, making it crucial to consider these concepts in culinary tourism experiences.

Food tourism experiences involve pre-trip dining, dining out, local cuisine, vacation experiences, and post-trip culinary experiences. The concept of "performance" has gained popularity, encompassing multimodal encounters like adventure and sex tourism. Examining taste-scapes, smell-scapes, sound-scapes, and touch-scapes can provide diverse sensory environments and non-representable knowledge. Addressing the ontological blind spot, which refers to the limited understanding of how metabolic processes and physical interactions between individuals and food influence their embodied knowledge, is crucial.

Economical Understanding Of Rural Business

The "experience economy" suggests that rural tourism firms should design exceptional experiences based on customer contact and environmental relationships (Pine & Gilmore, 2013). Passive participation and active participation are key aspects, while absorption and immersion are the extremes. Experiences can be categorized into four groups: entertainment, education, escapist, and aesthetic. Passive participation involves less active engagement, while active participation involves more involvement. The level of engagement varies depending on the level of interaction with the unfamiliar person. The authors provide a recipe consisting of five steps to create unforgettable experiences. (a) Establish a central theme for the experience, (b) Align the overall impressions with good signals, (c) Remove any negative signals, (d) Incorporate personal mementos, (e) Stimulate all five senses.

The chosen theme should guide the entire experience, creating a single story that grabs customers' attention and makes them feel involved. Negative cues should be avoided to strengthen the theme. Souvenirs can help bring back memories. Using all five senses is crucial for a powerful and memorable experience. Smells, tastes, and sounds should be carefully examined to align with the theme. Sensory research is essential for marketing and communication efforts in the food and wine business and tourism sector.

Knowledge Acquired

In 1999, Slow Food launched a project to protect and promote traditional foods in Italy, using the Ark of Taste and Presidia Projects to attract food tourists (Rombach et al., 2016). Ark of Taste aimed to preserve obsolete products, while Presidia targeted collectives to improve production and marketing methods,

leading to increased profitability. Both initiatives directly assist farmers in marketing and selling their products.

The presidia aim at four main objectives: economic, social, environmental, and cultural, focusing on increasing revenues, preserving biodiversity, enhancing social status, and promoting cultural identity.

The primary objectives of the Slow Food Association are as follows:
- To preserve the cultural and traditional heritage of food, as well as diverse local cultures
- To advocate for the preservation of food biodiversity
- To protect the environment and the land
- To promote education on taste, enabling individuals to make informed and responsible decisions regarding their daily food choices
- To support and promote environmentally-friendly farming practices • To safeguard the interests of small-scale farmers and their local communities
- To celebrate and preserve culinary customs from around the globe

Promoting local foods is crucial in the connection between food, tourism, and area growth. Utilizing local food production and branding menus can boost business and customer satisfaction, leading to continued consumption of regional foodstuffs. Food tourism is linked to sustainable tourism, aiming to minimize cultural and environmental disruptions, enhance tourist satisfaction, and foster long-term economic growth (Nummedal & Hall, 2006). Postmodern festivals and events allow communities to showcase cultural identities and values, while tourists can immerse themselves in local food culture, learn about produce origins, and contribute to the local economy through shopping, dining, and farm shopping (The Origins of Hospitality and Tourism, n.d.).

Happy Conclusion
Food is an exchange between the inner self and the outside world, providing energy and preserving identity. People link food to customs and heritage, with holy and secular food serving as cultural artifacts. Understanding how people eat, drink, and sit is crucial for understanding human society and culture.

Food tourism is a new type of tourism that aims to make travel more culturally aware by offering tourists the opportunity to try different food types, as many tourists seek realism and are tired of eating the same food repeatedly.

Food tourism encompasses culinary and dining tourism, with slow food, slow city, and slow food being linked. This movement is centred on social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Food is used for tourist marketing, but safety

and protection are crucial. The term "holy trinity" refers to foodscapes, drinkscapes, and restscapes in business and management.

According to The SAGE Handbook of Tourism Studies, (n.d.), food tourism studies in Europe are highly sought after, but Nepal, a costly destination with diverse ethnicities, has not yet explored this topic due to the lack of scientific development of food as a tourist product.

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VOLUNTEER TOURISM IN THE PHILIPPINES: A LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATIONAL TOURISM PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In response to the pandemic's impacts, the Philippine Department of Tourism has incorporated volunteer tourism into the nation's tourism offerings, blending traditional travel with service opportunities. This paper offers a fresh perspective on volunteer tourism in the Philippines and introduces a framework designed to maximize its potential as a catalyst for sustainable development and conservation. It specifically details the role of various organizations within this volunteer tourism framework while considering the local and regional dynamics of voluntourism that were present prior to the pandemic. The Department of Tourism offers valuable insights and identifies key focus areas for the advancement and effective management of volunteer tourism programs in the Philippines. This framework positions volunteer tourism as an intervention that enhances the value derived from tourism. The advantages generated by tourism can benefit not only the region that attracts tourists but also the destination area and the local community. Volunteer tourism transcends the typical travel experience by connecting tourists with the realities of the host community. Through their voluntary engagements, tourists develop a deeper understanding of the day-to-day lives of community members, experiences that are often overlooked. This understanding extends to the domestic and community aspects of households in the area, granting visitors insights into the residents' aspirations and communal life that may not be openly shared with outsiders. Volunteer tourism offers participants opportunities for self-reflection, fostering an exploration of their interpersonal relationships and facilitating meaningful personal growth and transformation. The framework seeks to improve volunteering outcomes and facilitate more effective management of volunteer tourism. As a means of personal development, volunteer tourism is beneficial for recent graduates. With proper management, these volunteering opportunities yield valuable experiences for participants, ensuring compliance with legal and ethical standards to benefit both volunteers and host organizations. Additionally, the framework aims to steer initiatives towards a more impactful form of tourism. Rather than merely serving as a tourism product, effective management of volunteer tourism can play a crucial role in promoting positive societal change.

Keywords: Conservation, Life-Long Experience, Philippines Volunteer Tourism, Sustainable Development, Volunteer Tourism and Volunteer Tourism Management.

Introduction

The global tourism industry is experiencing a strong rebound, indicating a solid resurgence despite ongoing economic and geopolitical hurdles. This revival is particularly significant in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, underscoring the resilience of global tourism demand (Pompurová et al., 2018). Key metrics, including tourist arrivals, revenue, airline activity, and hotel occupancy, demonstrate this steady recovery (Mena & Villamejor-Mendoza, 2024). While there is a prevailing sense of optimism, the tourism sector remains cautiously optimistic. It recognizes potential obstacles, including an expected slowdown in global growth, ongoing core inflation, geopolitical tensions, and the increasing impacts of climate change, all of which could undermine traveler confidence.

Tourism, closely tied to the movement of people across local and international borders, catalyzes intercultural exchange, facilitating social interactions and broadening personal perspectives (Giango et al., 2022). Furthermore, tourism is vital for community education and social advancement, as it encourages collaborative learning and knowledge exchange between visitors and local service providers, thereby enhancing the sustainability of tourism destinations (Bawagan et al., 2019).

Tourism's capacity to generate export revenues, create jobs and businesses, and boost infrastructure development underscores its importance as a key driver of socio-economic advancement (Mena & Villamejor-Mendoza, 2024). Many countries, particularly those with limited economic alternatives, find the pursuit of tourism as a development strategy particularly appealing due to its potential to positively influence local and national economies (Mena & Villamejor-Mendoza, 2024). The increasing impact of globalization and competition among destinations further underscores the importance of tourism as a vital strategy for economic development; nations that successfully enhance their tourism sectors experience growth in GDP, foreign direct investment, job opportunities, and foreign exchange earnings.

The expansion of tourism is intricately tied to a growing environmental awareness, a sign of a worldwide surge in concern for the natural world. As economic growth accelerates, the sector is poised to face numerous new challenges. While these trends could foster economic advancement, job creation, and enhanced living standards, it is vital to acknowledge the potential for adverse outcomes, such as environmental harm, social disparities, and cultural uniformity (Graciá & Cerviño, 2024). Tourism can yield both beneficial and detrimental impacts on the environment, underscoring the importance of careful management and sustainable approaches. Robust tourism governance, characterized by collaborative efforts among governments, civil society, and the private sector, is crucial for overseeing tourist destinations and ensuring that

tourism contributes to achieving sustainable development objectives (Mena & Villamejor-Mendoza, 2024).

Tourism is crucial to the Philippines' national economy. In 2023, it accounted for 8.6% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). This increase was the highest among all sectors that year. The sector generated PHP 5.3 trillion in economic activity, creating 11.2 million jobs. Domestic expenditure reached PHP 3.6 trillion, while international spending amounted to PHP 644.8 billion. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) anticipates a record PHP 5.9 trillion contribution to the GDP by 2025.

The tourism sector in the Philippines plays a crucial role in driving economic growth, preserving culture, and promoting environmental sustainability, in line with the nation's long-term development vision (Mena & Villamejor-Mendoza, 2024). The National Tourism Development Plan for 2023-2028 provides a strategic framework for sustainably advancing the tourism industry, outlining essential objectives, strategies, and initiatives designed to boost the sector's competitiveness, inclusivity, and resilience. The Philippines offers a rich variety of tourism assets in natural and cultural heritage, alongside a burgeoning selection of beach and urban leisure and entertainment options that are regionally competitive (Mena & Villamejor-Mendoza, 2024).

Acknowledging tourism's role in facilitating sustainable and inclusive growth, the Philippine government focuses on developing competitive products and destinations, implementing sustainable practices, and enhancing tourism governance and human resources (Mena & Villamejor-Mendoza, 2024). Local Government Units (LGUs) in the Philippines are tasked with promoting and developing tourism. The National Tourism Act of 2009 urges them to create and execute tourism development plans, enforce standards, and gather statistical data for tourism-related purposes (Prado et al., 2004).

Prior to 2020, volunteer tourism expanded into a multi-billion-dollar sector within the tourism industry (APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018, p. 1). Although the rise of volunteer tourism is often regarded favorably due to the altruistic motives of volunteers, it can hurt host destinations if not correctly managed. Various initiatives aim to establish guidelines for organizing volunteer tourism, taking into account its potential effects (Raymond, 2012; APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018). The temporary halt caused by the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to reflect on the sector's experiences with volunteer tourism. To create well-structured volunteer tourism programs, a thorough understanding of what volunteer tourism entails and its place within the larger tourism framework is essential (Wearing, 2001). This period also presents a unique

opportunity for significant institutional transformation (Brouder, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), fostering a more compassionate approach towards those reliant on tourism (Cheer, 2020; Haywood, 2020).

In response to the pandemic's impact, the Philippine Department of Tourism has incorporated volunteer tourism into the nation's tourism offerings. This form of volunteer tourism combines traditional travel with service, providing a distinctive way to support development and conservation, especially in biodiverse and culturally rich countries like the Philippines (Polus & Bidder, 2016). It involves participants engaging in organized volunteer efforts during their travels, aimed at aiding communities, restoring environments, or conducting research (Garrison, 2015). This approach shifts tourism from purely profit motives to initiatives that emphasize the social, cultural, and ecological health of local communities and environments (Pompurová et al., 2018). Furthermore, volunteer tourism enables local community empowerment, promotes cultural exchanges, and yields tangible benefits through active involvement in development projects, setting it apart from traditional tourism (Vrasti, 2012).

However, the rise of volunteer tourism has raised concerns about potential negative consequences, such as the displacement of local jobs, reinforcement of power disparities, and disruption of traditional ways of life (Guttentag, 2009). Additionally, the growing commercialization of volunteer tourism prompts doubts about the authenticity of these experiences and whether such initiatives truly prioritize altruistic goals over profit (Tomazos & Butler, 2009).

This paper discusses a reconceptualization of volunteer tourism in the Philippines. It presents the volunteer tourism framework for the Philippines, aiming to fully realize its potential as a catalyst for sustainable development and conservation. In particular, this paper defines a volunteer tourism framework for the Philippines to explain the involvement of various organizations, considering the local and regional dynamics of voluntourism prior to the pandemic.

The framework is expected to improve volunteering outcomes and the management of volunteer tourism. As an activity for personal growth, volunteer tourism is viewed as a way of gaining an advantage among graduates. Properly managed volunteering opportunities provide valuable experiences for volunteers while ensuring compliance with legal and ethical requirements and mutual benefit for both volunteers and hosts (Lithgow & Timbrell, 2014). The framework can also inform actions for a meaningful form of tourism. Effectively managed volunteer time can impact the frequency and satisfaction of volunteer services (Cheung & Ma, 2010). Beyond being a tourism product, managing volunteer tourism can be instrumental in promoting positive change. Due to the networks

involved, VT serves as a venue to promote social change, particularly when it fosters a community that provides consciousness-raising opportunities (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

The paper is organized in this manner: it starts with a concise overview of the literature on volunteer tourism products and their organization; then, it addresses the factors contributing to the growth of volunteer tourism; next, it presents a discussion on the framework of volunteer tourism in the Philippines; and ultimately, it analyzes the conclusion and implications of this framework.

What Is Voluntourism?
Volunteer tourism is an activity where people pay to volunteer (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Conran, 2011) and can be generally understood as the engagement of tourists in volunteer work (Alexander & Bakir, 2011). As an alternative form of tourism, volunteer tourism projects offer a structured way for tourists to undertake holidays that may also involve aiding or alleviating poverty, restoring the environment, or supporting relevant research on aspects of society and the environment (Wearing, 2001). Participants in a volunteer tourism program are involved in a set of activities that contribute to the local or broader community (Hammersley, 2014). Conceptually, it can be visualized as the intersection of tourists who travel for leisure and individuals involved in volunteer work (APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018).

Volunteer tourism activities are not recent developments. Volunteering and tourism have long-established histories, with roots dating back to the nineteenth century, when missionaries, doctors, and teachers traveled to aid others (Benson, 2011). Over the years, the development of voluntourism has led to various types of voluntourists, differing in terms of setting, contribution, and time commitments (Holmes & Smith, 2009). In the Asia Pacific region, the following VT activities have emerged (APEC Tourism Working Group 2018, 9):

● Teaching activities;
● Animal welfare;
● Building community facilities;
● Skills development and training;
● Environmental and conservation activities;
● Medical and healthcare;
● Volunteer work in childcare and orphanages;
● Agriculture;
● Sports;
● Research;
● Business development; and
● Events.

The volunteer tourism possibilities go beyond this if voluntourism is viewed as a form of alternative tourism. While volunteer tourism programs incorporate both leisure and volunteering components, they also encompass areas where tourists develop awareness and knowledge that enable them to become actively involved in issues (Wearing, 2001). The volunteer tourism phenomenon has an inherent learning process that exposes tourists to realities beyond the conventional leisure and recreational elements of mainstream tourism. This attribute makes volunteer tourism a venue for tourists to contribute to social change by completing a set of voluntourism activities (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

How Is Volunteer Tourism Organized?

Volunteer tourism is broadly defined as a combination of leisure tourism and the activities of individuals involved in volunteering (APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018). However, there is a need to nuance the "tourism" and "volunteering" components, as well as the interactions between these components, as starting points for understanding the phenomenon of volunteer tourism. According to Alexander and Bakir (2011), the properties of volunteer tourism can be explained by the presence of three key elements: tourist elements, volunteer work, and engagement.

Tourist elements are explained by the following factors: expectations, assumptions, issues, motivation, and the impact on participants (Alexander & Bakir, 2011). Tourism is a form of human mobility, and economies have established mechanisms to manage the movement of people within a specific zone. Understanding these attributes qualifies VT as a part of the tourism sector. It determines the areas that need attention to ensure the welfare of visitors involved in this form of tourism.

Volunteer work refers to the range, choice, purpose, time, and payment involved in the VT program (Alexander & Bakir, 2011). This element distinguished VT from other tourism products in the area. Engagements refer to activities and encounters within a volunteer tourism program. This element is associated with the following concepts: integration, penetration, immersion, involvement, interaction, action, and participation. (Alexander & Bakir, 2011). The nature of engagement articulates the core principles of volunteer tourism, ensuring it aligns with the expectations of target tourists and the destination hosting volunteers.

Volunteer tourism is a diverse component of the tourism industry that offers a range of activities for volunteers to participate in (APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018). Like other forms of tourism, volunteer tourism relies on stakeholders to support its development. The volunteer tourism network is a social network of individuals and organizations that share common ideas to

promote participation and support for voluntourism (McGehee & Santos, 2005). The APEC TWG on Voluntourism (2018, p. 12) identified three (3) significant routes for holiday-goers to be part of VT programs-

Route 1: A volunteer tourist engages a Sending Organization to arrange volunteer tourism programs. The Sending Organization then coordinates with a Host Organization that organizes the volunteer tourism program and links the tourist to the hosts or communities where the program will be implemented.

Route 2: Alternatively, a volunteer tourist approaches a Servicing Organization to obtain links with available Sending Organizations and Host Organizations. The tourist then deals with them and is sent to the Hosts and Communities where the volunteer tourism program will be implemented. Route 3: Volunteer tourists coordinate directly with their desired hosts and communities to participate in volunteer tourism programs. Because of its volunteer component, volunteer tourism can be approached through frameworks that guide the organization of volunteering programs. In the Philippines, the Philippine National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency (PNVSCA) is mandated to promote and coordinate volunteer programs and services. The PNVSCA prescribed a Volunteer Management Cycle (VMC) to guide organizations involved in volunteer activities (PNVSCA, 2020). The VMC has the following components (PNVSCA, 2020):

- Strategy development. This involves developing a strategic plan for engaging volunteers in community development projects or initiatives.
- Partnership development. This element covers partner identification, partnership building, and relationship management.
- Activity planning. This covers the development of activity or project plans for volunteer-related initiatives.
- Volunteer recruitment. This involves the processes and management practices necessary for recruiting volunteers.
- Volunteer mobilization. These outlines activities related to the mobilization of volunteers, including pre-deployment training and orientation for volunteers.
- Volunteer support. This covers the support and management of volunteers on assignment
- Volunteer monitoring. This covers the tracking of volunteers on assignments. It also includes the documentation of volunteer contributions or outputs.
- Assignment completion. This includes the processes related to volunteer assignment completion, conducting exit interviews and debriefings, and granting awards and recognition.

- Support activities. These are steps taken in all VMC components. This includes Communication, Risk Management, and Stakeholder Management.

Why Promote Volunteer Tourism?

The involvement of volunteer tourism participants in volunteering projects represents the apparent contribution of voluntourism. As a civil society initiative, volunteering is expected to fill the unmet gap between the public and private sectors. In the Philippines, the most prevalent volunteer tourism activities before the pandemic included building community facilities, teaching, medical and healthcare services, and environmental and conservation programs (APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018, p. 65).

One of the situations where volunteers have made a significant impact on addressing community needs is in disaster response efforts. The Philippines is one of the most disaster-prone countries, with one-third of its population living in poverty and being vulnerable to natural calamities (UN OCHA, 2013). During the tragedy caused by Typhoon Yolanda, the Philippine government launched the most extensive logistical operation, calling for many volunteers and donors (Gagalac, 2013). Weeks before this disaster, a magnitude 7.2 earthquake struck parts of the Central Philippines, prompting the mobilization of 1,036 volunteers to assist in repacking goods for relief (NDRRMC, 2013).

Aside from direct project contribution, volunteer work has been recognized as a contributor to economic and social gains in the Philippines. Volunteering in the Philippines has been valued at PHP 44.5 billion, up from PHP 20.1 billion in 2000. This constituted about 0.6% of the Philippine Gross Domestic Product from 2000 to 2009 (Virola, 2010).

Aside from the benefits of volunteering, there are opportunities where volunteer tourism can make a meaningful contribution. Because of the volunteer work element of this type of tourism, volunteer tourism can become a social force, enabling institutions to focus on specific societal concerns. Participation in volunteer tourism can drive social movements and support activism (McGehee & Santos, 2005). Volunteering can be instrumental in raising social awareness to address the concerns of vulnerable population sectors (Liu, Ching, & Wu, 2017). When managed effectively, VT can drive social change by creating a community that raises consciousness through tourism experiences (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

Volunteer tourism is claimed to be a transformative experience for volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourism serves as a venue to raise consciousness (McGehee & Santos, 2005). According to Coghlan and Weiler (2018), transformational change

is an individualized process that can lead to a critical awareness of the self, leading to a new self-definition. Personal transformation is brought about by new and unfamiliar settings (the voluntourism experience) that require radical self-examination, forcing the individual to reflect on and change what they know and how they relate to others (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018).

Apart from the tangible aspects and outcomes of voluntourism projects, volunteer tourism creates opportunities to build relationships and foster understanding among individuals from diverse settings (Hammersley, 2014). For households from other locales or those isolated due to various circumstances, the organizing of volunteer tourism provides a connection among people with shared interests (McGehee & Santos, 2005). With volunteer tourism, the potential for volunteering strengthens resources for social change. Volunteering is an indicator of civic engagement and social capital (Holmes & Smith, 2009, p. 7). Through volunteer tourism, a functioning democratic society is reinforced, where citizens can realize their aspirations as a community.

At the broader level, volunteer tourism provides an opportunity for institutional change. Tourism, as we know, has been associated with the negative notions of consumerism owing to destination mismanagement and irresponsible tourist behavior (Sharpley, 2012). Volunteer tourism can be viewed as an ethical form of consumerism, aiming to make positive differences in the communities (Butcher & Smith, 2015). More importantly, it allows tourists to explore the concept of self through activities where participants interrogate their experiences and shape their sense of identity (Wearing, 2001). This shaping of the understanding of the self is due to the assembly of organizational, community, and cultural contexts that characterize volunteering (Liu, Ching, & Wu, 2017). Furthermore, volunteer tourism raises the tourists' awareness of existing issues and inequalities (McGehee & Santos, 2005). Ultimately, it promotes a sense of 'moral rule' that other forms of politics cannot offer (Chaisinthop, 2017).

The Philippine Department Of Tourism Volunteer Tourism Framework
The Philippine Department of Tourism offers valuable perspectives and focus areas for the development and management of volunteer tourism programs in the Philippines. This framework views volunteer tourism as an intervention that enhances the value created by tourism. The benefits generated by tourism can extend to the region that attracts tourists, the destination region, and the local community. Volunteer tourism goes beyond the typical tourism experience by engaging tourists with the personal realities of the host community. When tourists participate in volunteer work, they gain intimate insights into the daily lives of the destination community, which they do not typically encounter. This exposure extends to the domestic and community aspects of households within the destination. Becoming familiar with these aspects offers glimpses into the aspirations and community life that residents usually do not share with those

they have no close affinity with. Volunteer tourism offers participants the opportunity for reflection on their knowledge and exploration of their relationships with others, creating a platform for meaningful personal growth and transformation.

The transformative power of voluntourism is driven by five key factors that contribute to voluntourism-induced value:

- Destination readiness: This encompasses the availability of venues for volunteering, the amenities to support volunteer tourists, and the logistics for transporting tourists from the destination region to the destination community.
- Tourist readiness: This refers to the willingness and competencies of tourists, as well as the mechanisms for preparing and matching volunteer tourists with suitable volunteer work.
- Host readiness: Refers to the willingness and capacity of hosts within the destination community to organize and support voluntourism programs.
- Nature of volunteer work: Encompasses aspects such as the range, choice, purpose, time commitment, and payment involved in the voluntourism program.
- Volunteer engagement: Pertains to the focus of activities that allow volunteer tourists to interact with program hosts and make sense of their experiences.

The volunteer tourism model aims to enhance the value of tourism through volunteer engagement. The model recognizes the significance of these five drivers of voluntourism-induced value, emphasizing their importance in program planning, addressing concerns related to volunteer tourism, and ensuring the realization of benefits while prioritizing the welfare of the destination community.

Conclusion

While planning is crucial for ensuring positive outcomes in voluntourism, it is also necessary to acknowledge the potential for addressing future issues that may arise from the relationship between tourists and destination communities. In response to this, Hammersley (2014) proposed enhancing the educational aspect of voluntourism. To mitigate the impact of volunteer tourism, programs should be structured as educational experiences that benefit both participants and the communities they serve. The structure of voluntourism programs and the involvement of organizations should be reexamined to incorporate a structured educational component into voluntourism (Hammersley, 2014). It is essential to consider the role of various organizations in shaping volunteers' attitudes and expectations (Raymond, 2012). This alignment can help manage undesirable outcomes by ensuring that volunteer tourists' expectations align

with their respective capacities (Palacios, 2010). Furthermore, establishing meaningful engagement and relationships between hosts and tourists can be an area where the impacts of voluntourism can be effectively managed. Achieving this will require steps to bridge gaps in understanding. As a good practice, Mostafanezhad and Kontogeorgopoulos (2014) recommend developing linguistic competence to facilitate cultural learning among volunteer tourists, as a means of delivering lifelong learning activities that foster the appreciation of new ideas and fresh perspectives, ultimately contributing to human flourishing. The concept of lifelong learning acknowledges that learning is not confined to a specific period or stage of life, but is a continuous endeavour that promotes personal growth, professional development, and social engagement (Eynon & Malmberg, 2020). Lifelong learning experiences encompass a wide range of learning activities for individuals of all ages, across various life contexts and through diverse modalities, meeting diverse learning needs and demands (UNESCO, 2023). Lifelong learning empowers individuals to acquire new knowledge, skills, and competencies throughout their lives, enabling them to adapt to changing circumstances and contribute to sustainable practices (Ilgaz & Eskici, 2018). Consequently, lifelong learning is a crucial aspect of both personal and professional development, fostering sustainability.

Voluntourism can be designed to provide opportunities for learning and development. Through various volunteer work and engagement activities, participants have the chance to acquire new knowledge, skills, and competencies, leading to personal growth and professional advancement. This approach is also essential for addressing the concerns associated with voluntourism. By integrating learning activities from diverse life contexts, including those derived from destination communities, a program can be developed that is valuable to the host community and promotes growth among volunteer tourists.

Implications

Although the positive impact of volunteer tourists suggests advantages to volunteer tourism, its unintended effects need to be addressed (Guttentag, 2012). Volunteer tourism raises concerns due to its adverse effects on host communities (APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018, 16; Fee and Mdee, 2011). Some issues associated with volunteer tourism are:

> • Volunteer tourism initiatives can create dependency, hindering the host community's ability to sustain itself;
> • The presence of volunteers can limit local job prospects because of free labor, and
> • Volunteers often lack the skills needed to fulfill their roles effectively (Guttentag, 2012).

Volunteer tourism is often criticized as exploitative when it occurs in developing regions (Dhruvarajan, 2000, as cited in McGehee & Santos, 2005). Critics have argued that the way volunteers make sense of their volunteer tourism experience reinforces stereotypes that perpetuate problematic perceptions about the tourist-host relationship (Hammersley, 2014). Moreover, volunteer tourism reframes the question of structural inequality as a question of individual morality and perpetuates apolitical cultural politics (Conran, 2011).

Despite criticisms, it can be argued that volunteer tourism offers opportunities to garner support for social justice agendas. Volunteer tourists are a group who are open to supporting political and economic plans to address local issues (Conran, 2011). When volunteer tourism is pursued to make a difference, the notion that it superimposes Western ideas of progress and modernity is mitigated, as it allows tourists to reject dominant development models (Butcher & Smith, 2015). However, this could be achieved only when the educational component of volunteer tourism is highlighted in tourism offerings. Hammersley (2014) recommends incorporating pedagogical and developmental perspectives into the pre-, during, and post-project phases to highlight the educational potential of volunteer tourism.

While volunteer tourism aims to nurture equal opportunities, achieving balance can be challenging. It is difficult to attain equality when a privileged group (the volunteer tourist) donates to an underprivileged sector (Guttentag, 2012). To address this, Hammersley (2014) suggests improving the educational potential of volunteer tourism by viewing participants as Facilitators and Knowledge conveners rather than privileged providers. Additionally, Volunteer Sending Organizations (VSOs) should be reexamined to add a structured educational component in VT (Hammersley, 2014). Volunteer tourism organizations can influence volunteers' attitudes and expectations (Raymond, 2012) to manage undesirable outcomes by aligning expectations with capacities (Palacios, 2010).

Establishing connections between hosts and tourists through meaningful engagement is a way to manage the effects of volunteer tourism. Actions can be implemented to address misunderstandings. Alongside the aforementioned suggestions, Mostafanezhad and Kontogeorgopoulos (2014) advocate for enhancing linguistic skills, promoting cultural education for volunteer tourists, mandating orientation sessions, and notifying hosts of the intentions and backgrounds of prospective visitors as effective practices to adopt.

While structures to manage voluntourism are crucial, incorporating genuine care improves volunteer tourism outcomes. Voluntourism has faced challenges for neglecting host community aspirations (Lee & Zhang, 2020). It benefits tourists through personal growth from volunteer programs (Wearing, 2001).

However, attention to host community concerns is essential, or personal transformation may harm host communities (Guttentag, 2012). Care is fostered through communication, dialogue, mutuality, and solidarity by co-creating relationships with locals (Lee & Zhang, 2020). Incorporating care ensures stakeholders address each other's needs and the long-term well-being of society and environment (Lee & Zhang, 2020).

Prioritizing community welfare and transforming tourists' impact are key concerns in managing volunteer tourism's adverse effects. Ideally, organizing volunteer tourism allows organizations to assess needs and find suitable tourists, though this isn't always feasible (Raymond, 2012). A top-down approach can still address impact effectively. An appropriate matching mechanism can identify communities that will benefit from tourists (Raymond, 2012). Proper matching also fosters educational initiatives and aligns personal and institutional expectations with actual volunteer capacities, reducing public criticism and negative outcomes (Palacios, 2010). Addressing competition between volunteers and job opportunities due to free labor availability is an issue in volunteer tourism (Guttentag, 2012). Assigning volunteers differs from paid labor due to various decision model attributes. The solution lies in recognizing the differences between the two labor types. A mathematical modeling approach can reframe the issue as a business case (Falasca & Zobel, 2012).

Policies may promote volunteer tourism as a key product. Reflecting on Thailand, Mostafanezhad and Kontogeorgopoulos (2014) suggest short-term volunteering can support learning for volunteers and hosts under the right conditions. However, involvement from conventional tourism firms and the State can turn longer-term VT into mass tourism, undermining its benefits (Mostafanezhad & Kontogeorgopoulos, 2014). They emphasize the need for responsible voluntourism organizations to sustain VT as an alternative to more complex voluntourism forms (Mostafanezhad & Kontogeorgopoulos, 2014). This underscores the importance of understanding VT to develop effective VT programs (Wearing, 2001).

Volunteer tourism serves as an effective educational tool, fostering community learning and social responsibility (Bawagan et al., 2019; Trunina et al., 2019). Integrating educational components, such as language training and workshops on environmental conservation, enhances volunteers' understanding of local contexts. Partnering with local schools and research institutions facilitates knowledge exchange and skill development within host communities. Involving volunteers in community-based research, environmental initiatives, and cultural preservation yields valuable data for policy-making. Sustainable tourism destinations benefit from collaborative learning between tourists and service providers (Bawagan et al., 2019). Volunteer tourism should promote social

responsibility by encouraging cooperation with international organizations and fostering volunteerism in society (Trunina et al., 2019).

To ensure the long-term viability of volunteer tourism and to have a positive impact on the growth and preservation of the Philippines, impact assessment frameworks must be implemented and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. These frameworks will enable the tracking, assessment, and reporting of the social, economic, and environmental impacts of volunteer tourism programs by utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. This entails gathering baseline data, establishing monitoring indicators, and conducting routine evaluations to identify areas for improvement, ensuring that initiatives align with community needs and preferences. Moreover, transparency and accountability in volunteer tourism operations can be enhanced by involving local communities in the impact assessment process, seeking input from stakeholders, and sharing the findings with all parties concerned.

Greater collaboration between researchers and businesses will create a sustainable industry to address challenges like transformative learning. Volunteer tourism organizations should work with academic institutions and industry experts to conduct rigorous research on its impacts, identify best practices, and develop innovative solutions. This approach ensures volunteer tourism programs are evidence-based, ethically sound, and align with sustainable development principles (McGehee, 2014). A comprehensive theoretical framework is also necessary to explain variations in altruistic intentions for volunteer tourism (Han et al., 2020). Additionally, commercialization is a crucial factor, and future research can help organizations engage with the sector pragmatically (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012).

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IMMERSION OR OVERWHELM? VR-ENHANCED SCUBA DIVING FOR NEURODIVERGENT TOURISTS

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Abstract
Tourism research and practice continue to prioritise neurotypical experiences, often excluding the needs of neurodivergent individuals despite growing awareness of neurodiversity. This study explores how virtual reality-enhanced (VR-enhanced) scuba diving can serve as a restorative and inclusive tourism approach that supports cognitive restoration and emotional well-being for neurodivergent users, drawing on Attention Restoration Theory and the constructs of presence and embodiment. While traditional scuba diving tourism research has emphasised risk, motivation, and skill, this study reframes scuba diving through the lens of sensory inclusivity and neurodiverse user experience. Our research demonstrates how customisable sensory features in VR support restorative engagement for neurodivergent users and contribute to inclusive tourism by positioning VR-enhanced scuba diving as a transformative and accessible alternative to conventional nature-based experiences.

Key words: Attention Restoration, Embodiment, Neurodiversity, Presence, Scuba Diving, Virtual Reality.

Introduction

Participation in engaging activities significantly contributes to one's quality of life. Activities like scuba diving have been recognised for providing confidence, social inclusion, and self-efficacy for neurodivergent individuals who have dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or autism spectrum condition (ASC) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). For example, aquatic activities help children with autism develop greater tolerance for touching and making eye contact with others while also acquiring new skills (Vonder Hulls et al., 2006). In a published PADI report, Denny (2018) shares her insights on autism in scuba diving and how scuba diving changes biases and improves inclusivity. However, accessibility challenges and cognitive constraints limit participation in tourism. Tourism research and practice remain largely centred on neurotypical experiences despite the growing recognition of neurodiversity, societal efforts towards inclusive design (e.g., autism certification system for hotels and destinations provided by IBBCES) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and underline "leaving no one behind". As a result, neurodivergent tourists continue to be overlooked as a niche group, leading to missed opportunities for inclusive, accessible, and transformative

tourism experiences (Jepson et al., 2024). Moreover, tourism research has traditionally emphasised hedonic motivations, memorable experiences, and the benefit of on water spaces (see Kim, 2014) for those who are neurotypical.

Scuba diving has received growing academic attention, primarily in relation to protection and sustainability (e.g., Lucrezi et al., 2017), system and tourism management (Bideci, 2021), risk perception (Dimmock, 2009), motivation (Todd et al., 2002), and ecological impact education (Giglio et al., 2018). Compared to common approaches, it has the potential to become an integral part of rehabilitation and therapeutic programs, encouraging individuals to explore new abilities and feel independent contributing to participants` well-being, positive self-image, social inclusion and improved mental health. As Yerxa et al. (1990) state that engaging in "just-right challenges" (activities that are both enjoyable and appropriately demanding) promotes wellbeing, where scuba diving represents more than just a recreational pursuit for neurodivergent individuals. However, its potential for offering emotional and cognitive benefits for neurodivergent individuals, remains underexplored. One widely applied framework in this context is Attention Restoration Theory, introduced by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) in environmental psychology, which posits that natural environments help cognitive restoration to reduce mental fatigue and support attentional recovery (Guo et al., 2025).

While attention restoration theory was initially applied to physical environments, recent tourism research has extended its relevance to digital and virtual spaces, including digital nature simulations (Browning et al., 2020) and virtual Airbnb experiences (Wong et al., 2023). These virtual environments have demonstrated potential for supporting psychological well-being through structured, predictable, and low-stimulus experiences, which are fundamental for neurodivergent visitors who may find traditional tourism overstimulating. VR-scuba experiences can offer a promising alternative compared to real-world intense sensory diving. Research shows that immersive virtual reality can simulate realistic underwater environments (Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016) while also allowing stimuli to be tailored to individual needs, making it accessible for users with varying sensory sensitivities (Parsons & Rizzo, 2008). However, the current literature on VR in tourism tends to prioritise technical accessibility such as device cost, weight, and user familiarity (Hagen et al., 2024), the risk of overdependence on technology and limited authenticity (Gao et al., 2022), and data privacy issues (Shukla et al., 2024) while paying limited attention to experiential accessibility, or how VR environments accommodate the sensory, cognitive, and emotional needs of these diverse users. This gap is particularly relevant in immersive, nature-based tourism contexts, where the needs of neurodivergent individuals remain largely unaddressed. Moreover, despite the promising application of attention restoration theory in both real and virtual

natural settings, its specific implications for neurodivergent users in VR environments have not been sufficiently examined.

To address this gap, this study investigates how immersive VR-enhanced scuba diving environments can support the cognitive and emotional well-being of neurodivergent individuals. Drawing on attention restoration theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) with presence (Slater, 2003) and embodiment (Kilteni et al., 2012), this research examines how features such as gaze-based navigation, adjustable stimuli, and controlled auditory input enhance immersive experiences while addressing over-stimulation or under-stimulation (Dunn, 1997). This research proposes a design approach that frames neurological differences not as deficits but as variations in cognition and perception that can shape meaningful, co-created tourism experiences.

Scuba Diving And The Neurodivergent Tourist Experience
The World Health Organisation (2025) estimates that there are around 1.3 billion people who experience serious disability, with many health inequities. In the UK alone, there are about 16.1 million people with a disability, representing 24% of the total population, according to the Department for Work and Pensions' Family Resources (House of Commons Library, 2024). Despite the interest in sports and leisure activities for individuals with disabilities has grown substantially, with research highlighting its benefits for physical health, mental well-being, and social inclusion, about 40% of adults and youths with a disability do not participate in adequate physical activity (<30 min) (Aitchison et al., 2022).

On that note, scuba diving offers a profound subaqueous experience (Bideci and Bideci, 2021) by creating an atmosphere that is serene, silent, and mysterious (Fisher, 2014), which serves as a gateway to another world (Nichols, 2024). It has been recognised as an exhilarating recreational activity, but recent studies (e.g., Morgan et al., 2019) indicate it also holds significant benefits for individuals with neurodivergent individuals (see Table 1). It is immersive in nature with minimum cognitive and accessibility barriers and therefore contributes to well-being (Mulligan et al. 2012; Santiago Perez et al. 2024). Being in this serene environment reduces the effects of gravity because of buoyancy and aids flexible movement, body awareness, improved motor skills, muscle strength, and relaxation that results in less tension and more mobility (Naumann et al., 2021a). Moreover, it contributes to overcoming aquaphobia, interacting with peers (Mehrholz et al., 2011), personal growth and learning (Stan, 2012), reduced social isolation (Taub et al, 1999), sense of competence (Carin-Levy & Jones, 2007) and achievement (Mortimer et al., 2014). Despite this optimistic picture and being labelled as an inclusive tourist activity for all ages, genders, and fitness levels (Gregory & Edney, 2019) and its potential for improving experiences, scuba

diving remains unexplored for neurodivergent individuals (Naumann et al., 2021b).

Neurodivergent individuals often face significant barriers to participation in scuba diving, including limited access to facilities, financial constraints, a lack of awareness and being marketed as adventure tourism (e.g., Giddy, 2018). Health inequities, stigma, and exclusion from education and employment further contribute to these challenges. However, compared to other adventure tourism activities like hiking or rafting, which offer unpredictable and sensory-overloaded environments, scuba diving offers a calmer atmosphere (e.g., aquatic therapy by Diveheart deep pool project).

Table 1. Scuba diving benefits for neurodivergent individuals

Physical Benefits	Cognitive and Emotional Benefits
Weightlessness and Reduced Gravity: The buoyancy of water can reduce the effects of gravity, making movement easier for people with limited mobility.	Sense of Freedom and Independence: Scuba diving can provide a sense of freedom and independence, allowing individuals to explore a new environment and challenge their perceived limitations.
Increased Range of Motion: The water's resistance can help improve flexibility and range of motion.	Stress Reduction: The calm and focused environment of scuba diving can help reduce stress and anxiety.
Muscle Strengthening: The effort required to move and manoeuvre in the water can help build muscle strength.	Increased Self-Confidence: Successfully overcoming challenges associated with scuba diving can boost self-confidence and self-esteem.
	Social Interaction: Scuba diving can provide opportunities for social interaction and connection.

Virtual Reality In Scuba Diving Tourism And Neurodiversity

Extended reality technologies, including VR, enhance tourist experiences by blending digital elements with physical environments to stimulate cognitive and emotional engagement (Flavián et al., 2019; Bideci & Bideci, 2023). In the marine world, these technologies have been used for several reasons, such as marine archaeology (Alexandrou et al., 2024), training (Scuba VR application by Hatsushiska et al., 2019), underwater cultural heritage (VISAS application by Bruno et al., 2016), and marine biology (McMillan et al., 2017). In all these fields of applications, the virtual environments are designed across three levels of realism (Hagen et al., 2024): (1) Hybrid environments are designed with 3D scenes of real underwater locations with marine life to enhance the presence. (2) Real environments consist of pre-recorded or live footage of actual marine

environments that create a sense of telepresence. (3) Simulated environments use a complete digital world.

While VR in scuba diving tourism has a very limited field of application and research, this technology presents a promising opportunity for emotional and cognitive well-being for neurodivergent tourists in recent years. Its applications in skill development and sensory processing with a controlled, predictable, and immersive environment help users. Especially for neurodivergent tourists, VR applications have been used to improve attention skills by offering interactive and engaging experiences with restorative environments and enhance visual attention capabilities (Patti et al., 2024). It is also an effective learning tool that provides hands-on practice (Franze et al., 2024), improves emotional regulation and sensory processing, and reduces anxiety (Mills et al., 2023).

A careful design is necessary to ensure lived experiences are created, tailored, safe and accessible to neurodivergent users (Yi et al., 2024). Related research also supports the role of VR's therapeutic function. For example, Browning et al. (2020) suggest that brief exposure to calming virtual natural settings can reduce stress, improve mood, and foster physiological relaxation and over time, the repeated exposure can enhance connection to the natural environment that supports emotional recovery. That is, combining with a careful design and awareness of neurodiversity, VR can increase the impact of desired well-being and psychological relief (Navarro-Haro et al., 2019) in a self-guided alternative to the real world (Guo et al., 2025).

Presence And Embodiment In Vr-Enhanced Scuba Experiences
In scuba diving, VR provides a sense of presence and embodiment in a controlled environment where individuals experience underwater without barriers (Fels et al., 2005), which are crucial elements for an inclusive scuba diving experience (Slater, 2003; Kilteni et al., 2012). The concept of presence shows how immersive technologies, when it is designed effectively, can stimulate a sense of "being there" with the just-right challenges that are crucial for deriving the psychological benefits typically representing a real-world nature exposure. Embodiment, in turn, deepens this understanding by highlighting how spatial awareness within VR contribute to a user's sense of self. These are essential components for neurodivergent individuals who may experience sensitivity or anxiety in their daily life environments. Embodiment can be achieved as neurodivergent scuba divers can still feel present with their virtual versions leading to motor awareness in a low-risk environment. This is in line with the attention restoration theory, which promotes the restorative attention in such a way that VR-enhanced scuba diving may act not only as a simulation of underwater but also as a therapeutic space supporting well-being. Together, both frameworks offer an alternative mode of engagement with nature and an

inclusive layout for designing virtual experiences with attention restoration theory's principles, while also ensuring embodied presence through adjustable, flexible and sensory-aware features (e.g., adaptable audio).

An inclusive design is crucial that prioritises a safe, inclusive and immersive service by sensory control, eye tracking, volume, and adjusted interfaces (Shaker et al, 2020). For example, Glaser and Schmidt (2022) found in their systematic literature review that ASD users' exposure level to motion sickness can differ. Therefore, sensory sensitive elements should be included in the design of VR, e.g., larger elements compared to the real world for easy navigation and different time processing for different needs (Standen & Brown, 2006). In this sense, a VR-enhanced scuba diving programme featuring pool diving (controlled and safe area) can provide interactive tasks and adaptive controls tailored to different cognitive levels like physical movement and communication with others in a hand-gesture-based language while immersed underwater (D'Isanto et al., 2019; Stefania et al., 2019). Whereas the underwater (on the sea, ocean, river, lake) environment is dynamic and constantly moving, which makes it more challenging for divers. Moreover, compared to underwater in the outside world, pool diving offers a secure and controlled environment (reduced the risk of injuries, such as drowning, decompression sickness and oxygen toxicity - Balestra et al., 2019) where the least knowledge and limited communication are required.

Discussion And Future Research

VR-enhanced scuba diving is a promising inclusive tourism service. However, while the desired outcome of this service is providing a good level of immersion, engagement and presence (Skola et al., 2020), it is not without its limitations, like interactivity. Yet, these kinds of limitations can be opportunities, as in such virtual environments, neurodivergent users' abilities can be extended to therapeutic elements (Dudley et al., 2023) and more autonomy and flexibility, such as adjusting volume, which is not possible in the real world.

Future research should prioritise the empirical validation of VR-enhanced scuba interventions for neurodivergent profiles. Given the variability in sensory, emotional, and cognitive needs, studies should adopt user-centred and co-design methods to customise features such as gaze-based navigation (Dudley et al., 2023). Practical implications are varied; for instance, VR design should incorporate different sensory features, addressing visual or auditory sensitivity by reducing brightness, providing the option to disable background noise, using muted colours, implementing directional sound design, and adjusting the lighting in virtual underwater environments. This approach enables neurodivergent users to feel comfortable with issues such as photophobia, sensory overload, or visual processing difficulties. Moreover, focused tasks using

nature-based elements, such as following a fish, can help sustain engagement. One of the most important aspects is autonomy and flexibility; therefore, user-led navigation at their own pace alongside guided activities can help control anxiety related to uncertainty or sudden changes. To enhance embodiment and spatial awareness, aligning avatars with body representation and incorporating haptic feedback can be beneficial. A key challenge is social interaction for neurodivergent users. Consequently, social components ought to be optional, enabling users to match appropriately and maintain an unbiased attitude to promote low-pressure social interaction.

Within the aforementioned frameworks, this study presents a research suggestion aimed at providing a cognitively and emotionally enriching touristic experience for neurodivergent individuals through VR-enhanced scuba diving. This research evaluates possible cognitive and emotional effects of VR-enhanced scuba diving on neurodivergent individuals. It examines whether the VR-enhanced scuba diving simulation provides a sense of achievement, confidence, and self-efficacy. It is crucial to explore the potential of VR-enhanced scuba diving in raising awareness about neurodivergent individuals and encouraging active participation in touristic activities. Future research can demonstrate how neurodivergent individuals enhance their self-confidence through scuba diving skills that increase social engagement via shared VR-enhanced scuba diving experiences and community-building opportunities. The results can be used to develop new methods to reduce anxiety and stress levels. Besides, the results can explore the involvement of neurodivergent individuals in VR-enhanced scuba diving, scuba diving in the real world and adaptive touristic activities that create awareness among families and caregivers and increase the number of trained scuba divers qualified to assist neurodivergent individuals and the availability of VR-enhanced scuba diving service providers.

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MAHASU DEVTA, SHAMANISM, AND CULTURAL HERITAGE: ASSESSING THE SCOPE OF SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL TOURISM IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract
The cultural and spiritual identity of Himachal Pradesh has been shaped by Shamanistic traditions for centuries. One of the most visible and lived demonstrations of indigenous spirituality is the worship of Mahasu Devta. This research explores the possibilities for developing spiritual tourism in Himachal Pradesh through the Shamanistic practices of Mahasu Devta, paying careful attention to the spiritual dimension, as well as the cultural dimension, of those practices. What sets Mahasu Devta apart, in addition to being a living example of indigenous spirituality, is not only the richness of the cultural experiences which provide cultural participation, the rituals, festivals, oral traditions and folk-art, but also that it enriches visitor participation and contributes to the heritage preservation. This article demonstrates how embracing spiritual and cultural tourism together creates sustainable, community-based models that include relevant experiences for visitors and positively impact residents.

This paper critically examines the viability of developing spiritual tourism in Himachal Pradesh through an ethnographic and cultural study of the Shamanistic practices of Mahasu Devta. The worship of Mahasu devta is rooted in the indigenous spiritual system known as Dev Niti and is one of the few living expressions of pre-Vedic ritualism tied to governance, divine territoriality, and oral mythos of a community. The article demonstrates that Mahasu Devta's ritual ecology—a complex of divine trances (Dev Vani), symbolic acts of justice, and vibrant community festivals that has the potential to facilitate a type of spiritual tourism that is different than the pilgrimage, religious tourism or managed spiritual tourism.

Key words: Dev Niti, Himachal Pradesh, Indigenous Rituals, Mahasu Devta, Shamanism, Spiritual Tourism.

Introduction
Spiritual tourism, or travel undertaken primarily for personal spiritual growth and engagement with different/other cultures is on the rise across the globe. Himachal Pradesh is known for its relaxing landscapes, ancient knowledge and varied religious practices, making it a huge but neglected opportunity for tourism. Many readers may associate spiritual tourism in India with temple towns or yoga retreats; however, the indigenous spiritual systems of the

Himalayas, particularly its Shamanic traditions have not been explored through mainstream tourism.

Unlike organized institutional religion, the Shamanic traditions of the region are personal and experiential engagement with the Divine. Both sacred spaces and living cultural practices, the Shaman bridges the Divine and human realms through ritual making, divine trances, and community oracles. The Shaman, or Gur, becomes a living intermediary between the deity and devotee, and the Shaman mediates the cosmic wisdom into earthly solutions usually if not exclusively for social or community outcomes. Some of the experiences are not simply religious or spiritual, but extend to justice delivery, social reconciliation processes, and traditional healing practices.

In this context, Mahasu Devta is a cultural landscape where his worship structure is more of a civilizational ethos than a religious structure. This worship structure has had the opportunity to span several districts in Himachal Pradesh, and in neighbouring Uttarakhand, attracting thousands attending the Daud and during the festivals in as many as 1100 surrounding villages interacting in non-linear ritual or oracular ways each year. Mahasu Devta worship is immersive, and the worship happens through music, dance, offerings and community. As a living cultural practice, worshiping Mahasu Devta provides the conditions for developing responsible tourism based on such cultural authenticity and community, and can be the basis for responsible spiritual tourism businesses.

Historical Background Of Mahasu Devta

Mahasu Devta is recognized as the Kshetrapal (regional deity) of the Jaunsar-Bawar region in Uttarakhand and portions of Himachal Pradesh, including Rohru, Kotkhai, and Jubbal. The oral tradition and the Mahasu Puran tell us that he originally lived in Kashmir, and then was brought to Hanol (current Uttarakhand) by devotees who wanted divine assistance with demons and lawlessness. The four brothers, Botha, Pavasi, Chalda, and Bashik, symbolize the Mahasu spirit, each one sharing the same spirit but in their own temples.

Mahasu Deveta's temple at Hanol in the Tons Valley recognized the commencement of a more structured spirituality. As centuries passed, Mahasu Devta's influence emerged and spread into Himachal, where the temple became a place of not only worship but also a place of justice and moral order. His temples became centres of justice and worship where spiritual courtrooms organized society and many disputes were resolved under divine power, often seen by the community as final.

Dev Vani refers to the divine speech spoken by Gur or Shaman the community obediently speaks to invoke Mahasu Devta. Rituals are created through trance, drumming, and offerings by worshipers and communities. The rituals remain relevant and alive today which sustain the lives of devotees and families for generations. These traditions have influenced programs in the community that transform spiritual festivals and divine processions into visual performances for tourists to explore a spiritually alive, vibrant, and real world. The palanquin movement of Mahasu Devta ceremonially and physically creates a moving temple that contains music, devotees, and symbolic, coincidently, and pursuit of faith.

This paper seeks to evaluate the potential of Mahasu Devta's Shamanic traditions to facilitate and expand the potential of spiritual and cultural tourism in Himachal Pradesh. It argues that spiritual authenticity and cultural depth in travel experiences can create sustainable and meaningful tourism practice.

Literature Review

While Shamanism has been well described in the anthropological literature of the world, its connection with tourism in the Indian Himalayas is still under-investigated. Early scholars such as Verrier Elwin and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf have provided foundational ethnographies of Indian tribal and mountain communities that examined their spiritual and ritual lives as part of a larger ethnology inspired by the indigenous perspectives. For anthropological purposes, Elwin and Förer-Haimendorf's studies are useful examples of how Mahasu Devta's traditions operate within people's everyday cultural realities.

More recent research has examined social regulation and collective identity of folk deities, oracles, and local religions of the Western Himalayas, but less scholarship has assessed the consolidation of these traditions and the potential of spiritual or cultural tourism. William Sax's work, especially in regards to ritual authority and divine governance in Garhwal and Himachal, provides constructive ideas of the social systems conditioned by folk deities and how they might contribute to cultural tourism infrastructures.

The Mahasu Puran, being an oral epic with multiple authors and variations over the generations, also still serves as textual practice of mythic and ritual history attached to Mahasu Devta. The Mahasu Puran contains stories about Mahasu Devta's origin, miracles, and fighting demons, and becoming a divine judge and protector. Documentation by the local bards, temple priests, and keepers of oral memory has preserved practices of Mahasu Devta worship. Work by Rahul Sankrityayan has shown value in the continued oral epic, and the mythological history of Himalayan belief systems.

For the purposes of tourism, the Indian Ministry of Tourism policies have called for "Experiential and Spiritual Tourism" that positions indigenous cultures so the cultures are preserved. Too often "experiential and spiritual" policies neglect the non-standard, non-mainstream elements of local spiritual practices that cannot be explained then of 'non-standard' it falls short of reconfiguring moral and ethical dimensions of tourism discourse by disregarding non-standard spiritualities like Dev Niti, causing communities to be excluded from mainstream economy and services.

Tourism studies will increasingly enhance our understanding of immersive and 'community in community-based tourism experiences,' and argue for models of authenticity, sustainability, and responsibilities from hosts and travelers as shared experience. With Mahasu Puran and worship as established cosmological symbols of genuine tradition and moral order, with active community engagement, the community-led rituals and festivals and a series of participatory events offer visitors real-life engagement and spiritual lifeways. Nonetheless, little attention has yet gained a formal basis through recognition of the moral, academic, or policy level conception of local practices. This literature review demonstrates that the present study intends to close an explicit gap: the embedding of indigenous, spiritual systems like Mahasu Devta into spiritual cultural tourism. The purpose of this study will examine the embodied, performed, and ethical dimensions of Dev Niti as a way of contributing to an understanding of how heritage and spirituality can frame inclusive and sustainable community-cantered tourism paradigms in the Indian Himalayas.

Methodology
This study utilizes a qualitative and interdisciplinary research approach drawn from ethnography, cultural anthropology, and tourism studies. It examines Mahasu Devta's Shamanic dimensions in their spiritual, cultural, and touristic contexts, and the auspices of these dimensions for responsible tourism development in Himachal Pradesh.

Fieldwork And Participant Observation
Primary data was collected through immersive field visits to key Mahasu Devta shrines in Rohru, Hanol, Kotkhai, and Jubbal. We witnessed intriguing moments of the annual festivals, engaged in religious experiences of community involvement, and participated in a number of rituals marked by the mutuality of human participation and durable cultural activities which allowed for a creative as well as phenomenological experience of the living Shamanic ways. The attention was also drawn to Dev Vani sessions, where the deity speaks through a usually trance-travelling Shaman or Gur to provide divine rulings, predictions, and blessings. These engagements allowed for firsthand observation of the interaction between deities, shamans.

Observations of the Dev Vani ritual events made clear that the community commonly turns to the deity for more than worship as a form of social arbitration or moral authority. Generally, as a religious Shaman the Gur transferred divine gone effects through rites, emanating from the source of the god's way being storm of collective commonality with call-and-response drumming by participants, chanting, and felt transition the human to its medium for the phenomenal identification of the living voice of the deity. These events tended to resemble a spiritual courtroom where disputes were resolved and decisions were collectively consented to without question—emphasizing the sociocultural strength of Mahasu Devta.

In addition to this valuing of local participation in the research, the conversations and interactions with local villagers, elders, temple priests, and other participants during festivals together provided a rich participatory aspect to the research, which enhanced knowledge about the performative spirituality of the area where faith meant strong participation in everyday life instead of passive engagement. Whether it was elders respectful reverence or the youth parade through cultural expression to participate in traditional dance and folk songs, the devotion demonstrated by the community was present both in ritual and through actively passing on cultural knowledge. Such a strong immersion through observation also identified the opportunity for spiritual and cultural events as good experiences for tourist, in particular for tourists who have the desire to connect with the indigenous peoples, moral attractions, and local forms of knowledge.

In-Depth Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a breadth of four stakeholders in order to portray the religious, cultural, and development rationale that apply to the Mahasu Devta tradition. Included within this line of questioning were Gurs (Shamans), who provided excellent questioning about trance rituals, and a more nuanced understanding of spiritual mediation and the ethical codes governing the agency in these forms of Dev Niti, and other research participants who provided valuable understandings about the metaphysical dimension of the medium for the divine, and the social responsibility that it also expertise itself. Along with the interviews with temple priests and caretakers about ritual protocols, mythic story, and continuity in practices over many generations, as well as tangible additional layers of detail, adding important contextual layers. Community elders, who are often perceived as the custodians of oral history, provided lived memories of the historical role of Mahasu Devta's interventions in community governance, dispute resolution, and the emergence of community identity. Their memories depicted the

interconnectedness of spiritual authority, agency in practical decision-making, and customary law.

Furthermore, interviews with governing tourism officials and NGO representatives involved in heritage and rural development provided another contextual view of the current and potentially future impact that Mahasu Devta worship may have on spiritual tourism. These participants engaged in frank discourse with regard to infrastructure, cultural sensitivities, and sustainability while being aware of the uniqueness of such live traditions in the development of tourist engagements that would be attractive to travellers looking for meaning-making and experience. The interviews were conducted in the local dialect and in Hindi, and the audio-recorded with the consent of participants, transcribed, and qualitatively analysed by themes. That is, the qualitative way of working resulted in variation among themes such as sacred authenticity, community-based tourism, ritual continuity, and moral dimensions related to the commodification of spiritual experiences. The nuanced, layered responses that were produced and gathered from the interviews provided another significant piece of the analytical framework for the study, situating the role of Shamanic traditions across spiritual and socio-cultural space.

Textual And Oral Literature Document Review
Where possible, a critical textual analysis was undertaken on the Mahasu Puran, the important oral scripture central to the Mahasu Devta tradition, to examine mythological connections, ritual obligations, and moral imperatives that govern the worship of the deity. This indigenous puranic text, passed down for generations orally, contains numerous stories, including the birth of Mahasu Devta, his aids from the gods, his fights against evil, and the establishment of sacred rule in Jaunsar-Bawar and Himachal region. The review examined prominent topics such as divine justice, the support of dharma, ethical communal life, and the role of the deity in preserving social order.

Besides the text review, considerable documentation of local stories and folklore was accomplished by working with village bards (Bhatt) and hereditary custodians of temples, who are important transmitters of oral tradition in the Mahasu Devta canon. These tellers recounted region-related versions of the Mahasu stories, each with a particular local symbolism, moral, and sociocultural focus. The oral accounts were recorded, transcribed, and interpreted in their ritual and performative contexts, thus providing a textual layer of witness and ethnographic data to it as a mythic corpus.

Thereafter, a comparative analysis was conducted to position and compare the indigenous sources with academic literature that includes anthropology, religious studies and Himalayan folklore. Looking through this comparative lens

we outlined cultural continuities that reaffirm the authenticity and endurance of these traditions through time, despite outside interference and contemporary developments, as well as some striking gaps—especially by noting how mainstream academic dialogue has tended to either overlook or dilute the complexities of such traditions. By situating the Mahasu Puran and its oral literature in a wider scholarly and cultural landscape, the project updates understanding not only how myth and memory function as spiritual motivators, but also as dynamic and active catalysts of cultural identity, ritual performance, and the potential for tourism development.

Visual Ethnography

Photography and video were used extensively in the different Mahasu Devta traditions on ritual performance, deity processions, sacred architecture, iconography, community gatherings, and cultural fairs and festivals. This expansive visual collection and database can support the narrative deconstruction and reflection of these historical and cultural phenomena. Furthermore, the visual archive is also important for producing cultural maps of Mahasu Devta traditions, which contributes to their preservation and further promotion as a heritage tourism experience.

Tourism Impact And Swot Analysis

A systematic SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) framework was used to understand the potential for integrating Mahasu Devta worship traditions into the growing spiritual tourism potential already developing in Himachal Pradesh. This SWOT analysis encompassed a number of key factors, including, for example, the current state of tourism services and access to the area, especially within the remote highlands where the Mahasu Devta shrines are located. The assessment included evaluating community readiness, community willingness, and community reservations necessary for engagement in any sustainable or heritage tourism approaches; environmental and ethical sustainability/improvement was a serious concern to preserving the integrity of ritual spaces and minimizing negative ecological impacts in sensitive mountain regions. Contextual comparisons were also drawn from successful case studies, such as integrating tribal heritage into cultural tourism in the Ziro Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, or promoting Baul spiritual traditions in West Bengal, which offered instructive insights into managing authenticity, while building economic opportunity. The SWOT analysis therefore offered a preliminary framework to identify the idiosyncratic regional strengths, such as mythology and natural landscape, potential weaknesses and threats/challenges, while eventually illuminating a sustainable road-map for heritage based spiritual tourism surrounding the Mahasu Devta worship traditions.

Ethical Considerations

Community consent was acquired prior to data collection as well as agreement to fully respect private rituals and sacred practices; and in instances of engaging community members, identities have been anonymized when reasonably deemed necessary to support the preservation of privacy and uphold ethical research practice. Indeed, throughout the entire length of this research, every effort was made to ensure that the sacred traditions associated with Mahasu Devta would be approached with an appreciation for cultural sensitivity in that it did not promote exoticism or commodification of the community's sacred traditions. Quite the reverse actually; engagement and research were conducted to honour the community's spiritual perspectives and promote a respectful and accurate representation of their intangible heritage.

Shamanism And Spiritual Tourism In Himachal Pradesh

Shamanism in Himachal is expressed through oracular practices, rituals, and divine connection through human beings called Gurs. The Shaman undergoes initiation and training to become an object of divinity in the ceremony. Elements of performance are oracular drumming, chants, and trance states. The practice is an education in spirituality and plays a role in social cohesion and traditional justice in rural communities, in the complex and deeply rooted structure of spirituality that exists in Himachal.

In Himachal Pradesh, religious and adventure tourism is more developed than spiritual tourism. Spiritual tourism, based on inner peace, cultural participation, and indigenous knowledge, is still developing. Many temples, monasteries, and pilgrim paths attract many tourists seeking meaning and peace. Shamanic practices that have been a part of culture and spirituality throughout Himachal are appealing to spiritual tourism because of their mysterious elements, depth of culture, and their potential to engage tourism. For example, Mahasu Devta's shrine.

Tourist Interest in Forms of Spiritual Tourism in Himachal Pradesh
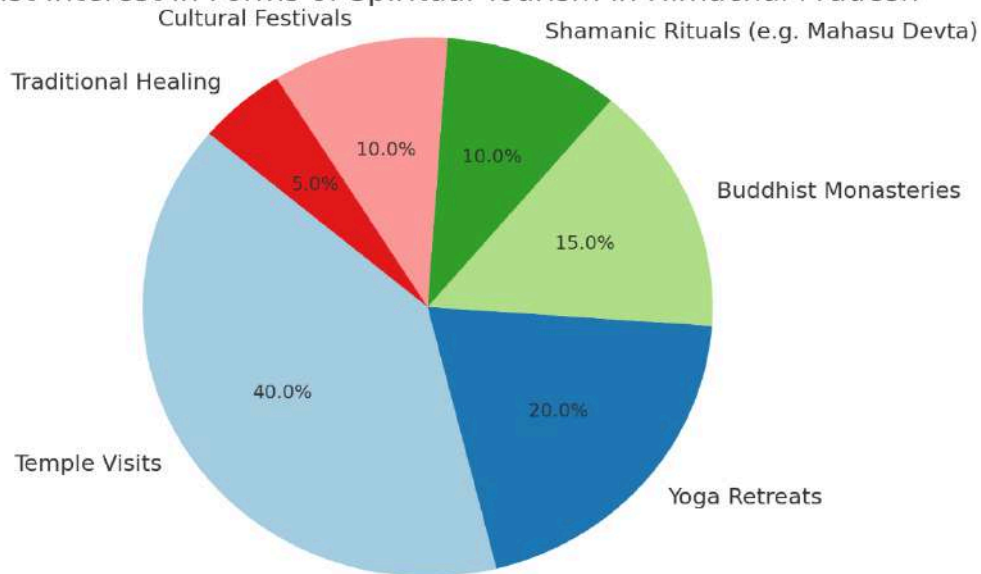
Dev Niti And Shamanism: Foundations For Spiritual Tourism

The practice of Dev Niti, a traditional system of divine law and spiritual governance, is inherently linked to the Shamanistic features of Mahasu Devta worship. The Devta is said to provide justice, advice, and blessings, through trance, performance by Gurs. Dev Niti and the activities surrounding Mahasu Devta embody the moral and spiritual order of the community. For spiritual tourists, this living tradition offers tourists a unique experience to observe ancient ethical -spiritual order, and observe the ability of human beings to act humanely in a ritual and economically isolated community. The tourists will experience the divine meaning of Dev Vani, witness the resolution of inter-village disputes in the court of the Devta, and participate in festivals expressing divine socially and cosmically aligning traditions. Using the idea of spirituality tourism, expands the potential stories and experiences associated with Dev Niti in respect to the ethical–spirituality living traditions that invites tourists to enact a complex interplay between understanding the meanings of human existence and relationship to human cultures and heritage.

Assessing The Potential: Mahasu Devta And The Potential For Spiritual Tourism

The present study, informed by primary data collected from 250 respondents who are part of a study of villages with direct associations to Mahasu Devta worship, indicates strong and growing potential for developing a formal model of tourism based on these traditions of Mahasu Devta. The temples of Mahasu Devta, and festivals associated for worship, especially the Mahasu Jatra, which is celebrated annually in July, continue to bring thousands of visitors to Mahasu Devta temples. This festival goes beyond a religious event; this is a considerable

amalgamation of ritual devotion, folk sports, theatrical re-enactments, and cultural showcases that resonates strongly with local communities and spiritual seekers external to the area.

The key primary data refers to the manner in which festivals and events in the region foster a sense of community participation and collective identity while also contributing to the rural economy. A number of local respondents highlighted the escalating benefits of homestay tourism, local cultural food offerings, handicrafts, and guiding, and perceive them as viable livelihood options. Furthermore, many residents conveyed their excitement if the opportunity were available to preserve and share their cultural identity and practices, as long as the new forms of tourism would respect their spiritual protocols and ecological sustainability.

Our research shows the potential to develop a full-blown spiritual heritage circuit linking Mahasu Devta alongside other local deities and sites of spiritual significance. A spiritual heritage circuit can provide visitors with an overarching experience drawing on mythology, contemporary local ritual practices, and indigenous worldviews, while also promoting sustainable tourism within local communities. The observations gathered through the surveys illustrate that with appropriate planning, public infrastructure support, and ethical frameworks, Mahasu Devta traditions have the potential to be the start of a responsible and enriching model for spiritual heritage tourism in Himachal Pradesh.

Visual Aids And Cultural Mapping

In the promotion of Mahasu Devta traditions in spiritual tourism, it is important to be creative and culturally appropriate with tools to facilitate understanding and engagement. Including impact statements and developing information-rich visual aids of infographics or ritual flow charts that present the sequence of a Shamanic ritual linked to Mahasu Devta, along with its symbolism. These visual aids can assist in unravelling the process of preparing and calling the deity, namely bhav aana, the Gur (the oracle), and purification sequence of the ritual, for tourists while maintaining its sacredness.

Digital maps that highlight the locations of Mahasu Devta temples, sites for major festivals, such as Hanol or Jaunsar-Bawar, date of major events like Mahasu Jatra, could be developed and presented as interactive maps. Finally, be able to include oral tradition and the local narrative, through audio clips, folk songs, or recordings of interviews with the temple custodians or bards (Bhatts), to provide depth for those doing virtual or actual travelling.

Importantly, curated photo exhibitions as well as short documentary videos that showcase live action from the festivals, such as Gur trance, traditional sports,

ritual dances, feasting, and offerings. This multimedia not only draws in culturally curious audiences, but expands their experience of Mahasu Devta tradition, respect the spirituality of indigenous peoples, including themselves in the conversations about protecting indigenous spiritual practice, while interjecting ancient ways of knowing to modern audiences, through immersion, respect, and a way into the sacred cultural landscape of Himachal Pradesh. These collective efforts can promote Mahasu Devta traditions as a framework for spiritual heritage tourism promoted vertically through state tourism and tourism for academic outreach, and horizontally through heritage tourism programs.

Policy Recommendations

To evolve Mahasu Devta traditions toward a model of respectful, inclusive and sustainable spiritual tourism, we need a framework, and bright ideas for policy recommendations. The framework should be guided by principles of cultural awareness for sustainability in the long term, employing a resource of community, and application of contemporary modes for engagement and experiences.

1. Create An Integrated Mahasu Devta Spiritual Tourism Circuit

To make a 'Mahasu Devta and allied deities' 'Heritage Circuit' that unites the sacred sites of Shimla, and the surrounding Uttarakhand regions under a distinct and common brand of Mahasu Deva and allied deities. The route will include Hanol, Kotkhai, Jubbal, Jaunsar-Bawar where Mahasu worship is practiced. The circuit can build an integrated experience, through common brand, signage and narrative strategy, to pilgrimage and spiritual tourist pilgrims' journeys across sites of socio-cultural connection of Mahasu's development. In addition, seasonal pilgrimage themes - i.e. Mahasu Jatra, Jagra, and Bishu themed pilgrimage experiences, can also be accommodated to enhance pilgrimage experiences.

2. Professionalize Cultural Interpretive Practice Through Local Guides And Shamans

The current local Gurs (shamans), temple priests and storytellers, needs preparation for additional training in cultural interpretation practice, language skills and hospitality of tourism through good capacity development programs to be financed by the state. The government can work with tourism authorities, universities, and regional cultural institutions to develop certification modules semi-autonomously, to promote that the experiences of spirituality and stories are to be correctly articulated without diminishing the sanctity of those experiences. Once educated, folks can be promoted as the "Cultural Ambassadors" of the region.

3. Support Eco-Spiritual Homestays And Themed Rural Retreats

Eco-appropriate spiritual homestays should be promoted in the major temple towns across the region to include local traditional architecture, traditional indigenous cuisine, and eco-friendly approaches. These may include curated retreat packages that will create opportunities for morning pujas, village walks and evening program storytelling. Overnight stays may also serve to benefit women's self-help groups (SHGs) by performing tasks of cooking, making crafts, and hospitality thus outlining standards of livelihood diversification.

4. Launch A Broader Digital Initiative In Cultural Mapping

A strong digitization and enhanced digital platform should exist that includes interactive multilingual content including Temple Historical, Ritual Glossary, Oral Histories, Festival Calendar and Community Interviews. This could entail partnering with academic institutions, local youth clubs and digital humanities initiatives. Virtual pilgrimages and augmented reality experiences can also be developed for educational institutions and a global diaspora.

5. Taking Care Of Ritual Completeness With Lay Advisory Boards

In order to protect sacred traditions from tourism, local advisory boards could be created for consultation. This board could include trustees/public dignitaries, respected village parents, active Gurs, and youth, to navigate tourism programming and decisions; the advisory board would serve as culture custodians with the responsibility of determining the ethical bounds of decision making, and giving permission for tourist access to experience rituals, film, and promote commercially.

6. Creativity In Cultural Immersion Interventions

Cultural short-term immersion residency programs could be designed for domestic and international tourists, students, and researchers. Examples might include participating in local musical forms, learning ritual dance traditions, understanding some ethnobotanical knowledge, and engaging in local devotional practices of art making. In the lean months, spiritual storytelling camps could be started, or themed folk performance festivals/representations of Mahasu Devta lore could be established to sustain year-round interest for tourists.

7. Establish Policy Incentives And Institutional Structures

Policy incentives like awareness to govt initiates for MSME programmes and skill development, microcredit assistance, or regional development support can be leveraged for local entrepreneurs working on spiritual tourism infrastructure, particularly eco-lodges, community museums, and cultural centres. The Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (HPTDC) with district administrations can also establish a Spiritual Tourism Cell to facilitate these initiatives. A state-level task force can be formed to track progress, facilitate

cooperation between departments (tourism, culture, forest, panchayati raj), and measure socio-cultural impacts.

Conclusion

Finally, there are lots of ways that the incredible opportunities for representing and comprehending Mahasu Devta's shamanistic picture of reality can be assimilated into spiritual tourism options in Himachal Pradesh. However, these recommendations, and a clear way forward, need to be understood. Firstly, because Mahasu Devta is a unique cultural property that has not been confused with other cultural properties like Vaishno Devi, it should be formalized with the "Mahasu Devta Heritage Circuit" allowing clients to move between all the places of cultural significance (Hanol, Kotkhai, Jubbal and Jaunsar-Bawar). This lane can be developed, and marketed as a single theme under the character of mythology, ceremony, and folk heritage that Mahasu Devta represents. Attention to combining cultural stories with sacred geographies can be confined with embodied experiences that stem from the local belief system.

In establishing "Spiritual Tourism Guidelines", it is essential to base them on cultural ethics. They should state what behaviour is expected from visitors, what the local community decides to allow visitors to photograph / film, the need to protect the sanctity of rituals being performed, and finally, what (eco-friendly) construction methods are appropriate in the vicinity of sacred sites. There is a need for these guidelines to be prepared through series discussions with local community groups using advisory bodies composed of Gurs, Temple trustees, members of women's self-help groups, and youth groups.

In relation to the economic mission situated within spiritual tourism, micro-finance opportunities designed to train local villagers as business entrepreneurs focus on setting up eco-spiritual homestays, craft stalls, and local food experiences. The eco-spiritual homestays should aim to be culturally immersive experiences for guests, allowing them to witness rituals (with permission), eating traditional food, completed by folk story and narrative experiences but also by eco-friendly processes. At the same time, local guides and Gurs need to improve the culture's interpretive experience through development training corresponding with language, hospitality, and an ethical awareness for tourism.

A dedicated Mahasu Devta Cultural Interpretation Centre should be developed at a central location in Rohru or Hanol, to provide community exhibits, archival research, educational workshops, and visitor orientation. The centre would seek to preserve and curate traditional cultural objects, ritual instruments, folklore, and memories of community, as well as establishing a knowledge exchange platform for scholars, guests, and local community.

To sustain cultural heritage, there also needs to be consideration placed on how to include indigenous knowledge within the formal education system. With some cultural integrity, university curriculum on tourism should incorporate local oral traditions, folk and/or mythic stories, and age-appropriate rituals, while tourism and hospitality institutes should deliver modules about spiritual and cultural interpretive approaches to Himachal's indigenous traditions, in the hope of developing a new generation of cultural guides, planners, and researchers who will be able to honour the continuing community legacy project of Mahasu Devta as culture bearers with a sensitivity and responsibility to the traditions.

In summary, the shamanistic and spiritual traditions representing Mahasu Devta provide a significant opportunity for Himachal Pradesh to reposition itself as an exclusive spiritual tourism destination of engagement in transformational ways. These traditions, developed through hundreds of years of oral transmission, community collaboration, and ecological awareness, offer a diverse way to recreate and redefine the tourist-experience not as observant spectatorship, but rather as a respectful engagement with living heritage. However, it will take more than an infrastructure or a promotional push to achieve this goal. It will take an understanding and respect for the integrity of culture, the importance of community decision-making, and a long-term vision for sustainability. The commitment of this research is that there is an urgency for designing inclusive, ethically conscious, and led by cultural guardians' tourism models. If Himachal Pradesh can attain this, the Mahasu Devta tradition can become a reference for reimagining culturally aware tourism, where respect meets renewal, tradition meets influence, and faith meets inclusion for all forms of growth.

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POTENCY OF INTEGRATING WELLNESS TOURISM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT - A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract
In recent years, the growing emphasis on health and self-care has fueled the rise of wellness tourism, with practices like yoga, Ayurveda and spa therapies gaining global prominence. This shift reflects changing consumer priorities, as travelers increasingly seek experiences that promote physical, mental and emotional well-being alongside relaxation and rejuvenation. This qualitative study examines the potential of integrating wellness tourism including yoga, meditation, Ayurveda and traditional healing into sustainable tourism and destination development.

Using purposive sampling, the research captures the perspectives of key stakeholders, such as local business owners, community members and tourism professionals, through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis of 82 interview transcripts identified five key dimensions linking wellness tourism to sustainability. Findings reveal that wellness tourism not only drives consistent tourist visits, income generation and local business growth but also fosters environmental awareness, cultural pride and community engagement. The study proposes a model positioning wellness tourism as a viable pathway for sustainable development, demonstrating its multifaceted impact on economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Community Participation, Environmental Awareness, Sustainable Development and Destination development, Wellness Tourism.

Introduction
Health and wellness tourism has entered a transformative phase, marked by the rise of innovative products, services and a global movement toward holistic well-being (Guerra et al., 2022). Modern travelers no longer view tourism solely as leisure; instead, they seek experiences that enhance physical, mental and spiritual wellness (Rai & Sreenivasan, 2023). Wellness tourism transcends traditional medical tourism by incorporating activities like spa therapies, yoga, meditation and immersive natural experiences (Suntararak & Boonyanmethaporn, 2024). Today, it is recognized as one of the fastest-growing

segments of global tourism (Andriani et al., 2024; Rajapakshe & Arachchi, 2024; Yuvono et al., 2021).

The concept of traveling for health is not new. Historically, people journeyed to destinations with natural healing resources, mineral springs, sacred sites or temperate climates to restore their well-being (Tuzunkan, 2018; Goodrich, 1993). In contemporary society, this practice has evolved into a pursuit of transcendence, with wellness travel becoming a cornerstone of the global spiritual and self-care marketplace (Rai et al., 2023; Cheer et al., 2017; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). According to the Global Wellness Institute (GWI), wellness tourism represents the intersection of two trillion-dollar industries: tourism and wellness. It is defined as travel aimed at maintaining or enhancing personal well-being, often tied to unique geographic features, cultural heritage and holistic health offerings like yoga retreats or Ayurvedic therapies (Tuzunkan, 2018; Wray et al., 2010).

Wellness tourism is a form of special interest tourism (Smith & Puczkó, 2015) with inherent ties to sustainability. It offers an alternative to mass tourism by leveraging local resources, traditions, and low-impact practices (Chrontsiou, 2023; Zaroucha, 2020; Farsari & Sotiriades, 2009). Post-pandemic, its resilience has become even more apparent, with non-medical practices like yoga addressing broader societal challenges (Chhabra, 2020). Destinations now blend wellness with cultural, culinary, and ecological attractions to create immersive experiences (Nair, 2019). Even urban areas are adapting, with cities like those in Europe rebranding as wellness hubs to attract tourists (Susanna, 2022). Research underscores the need to integrate wellness tourism with policy-making and care sectors to maximize its sustainable development potential (Zhong et al., 2021).

Originally focused on personal health, wellness tourism has emerged as a catalyst for sustainable growth. The Global Wellness Economy Monitor (2024) reports that the wellness economy reached $6.3 trillion in 2023 and is projected to grow to $9 trillion by 2028. Beyond direct revenue, it fosters employment, cultural preservation and environmental stewardship. By aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), wellness tourism supports holistic progress from economic equity (SDG 8) to environmental conservation (SDG 12).

Despite extensive research on wellness tourists' motivations and destination attributes (McCartney, 2024; Rai & Sreenivasan, 2023; Guerra et al., 2022; Cheer et al., 2017), few studies explore its role in sustainable destination development. This gap is particularly evident in India, a global leader in wellness tourism as the birthplace of yoga and Ayurveda. States like Kerala, Uttarakhand and Goa have capitalized on their natural and cultural assets to attract international visitors.

This study investigates how stakeholders perceive wellness tourism's impact on sustainability across key Indian destinations including Delhi, Varanasi, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Kovalam, South Goa and Mysore.

Objective Of The Study

This study explores how key stakeholders perceive the role of wellness tourism in promoting sustainable destination development. Specifically, it aims to:

- Understand stakeholder perspectives on how wellness tourism contributes to sustainable development.
- Examine the economic, social and environmental benefits of integrating wellness activities (e.g., yoga, Ayurveda) into tourism.
- Develop a conceptual model illustrating the relationship between wellness tourism and sustainable development.

Research Focus

The Study Addresses The Following Guiding Questions:
- How do stakeholders perceive the role of wellness activities (e.g., yoga, meditation, Ayurveda) in advancing sustainable tourism at their destination?
- What economic benefits (e.g., employment, business growth) have emerged due to wellness tourism?
- In what ways does wellness tourism foster environmental consciousness in the region?
- How do wellness activities encourage community participation and local engagement?

Literature Review

The concept of wellness tourism has evolved significantly in recent decades, emerging from its roots in traditional health tourism to become a distinct sector blending travel with holistic wellbeing (Koncul, 2012; Müller & Kaufmann, 2001). While academic definitions vary, most scholars agree it encompasses travel primarily motivated by maintaining or enhancing personal wellness (Tuzunkan, 2018; Smith & Puczkó, 2009). Unlike static concepts of health or happiness, wellness represents an active process of making conscious choices toward optimal wellbeing (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). This dynamic nature makes wellness tourism particularly relevant in today's fast-paced world, where stress and lifestyle changes have created growing demand for rejuvenation experiences (Rai & Sreenivasan, 2023; Nair & Solanki, 2022).

Modern wellness tourism extends far beyond traditional spa treatments to include diverse offerings like yoga retreats, Ayurvedic therapies, meditation programs and nature-based healing experiences (Suntararak &

Boonyanmethaporn, 2024). The UNWTO defines it broadly as tourism activities improving multiple life dimensions: physical, mental, emotional, occupational, intellectual and spiritual. Research identifies several core benefits sought by wellness tourists, including transcendence, physical health improvement, relaxation, novelty, self-esteem enhancement and indulgence (Voigt et al., 2011). What makes these experiences particularly valuable is their grounding in authentic cultural traditions and natural environments (Meikassandra et al., 2020), with destinations worldwide developing unique offerings based on their heritage, from Japanese onsens to Indian Ayurveda.

The connection between wellness tourism and sustainability has become increasingly apparent. Environmentally, wellness activities often depend on and promote conservation of natural settings like forests, beaches, and hot springs (Khunnikom et al., 2025). Culturally, they help preserve traditional healing systems while fostering community pride and identity (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Koncul, 2012; Smith & Kelly, 2006). Economically, wellness tourism generates employment, supports local businesses, and reduces seasonal fluctuations in tourist arrivals (Mishra & Panda, 2021). These multidimensional benefits position wellness tourism as a strategic pathway for destinations to achieve sustainable development goals while meeting growing global demand for authentic wellbeing experiences.

Recent studies highlight wellness tourism's particular resilience post-pandemic, as travelers increasingly prioritize health and self-care (Chhabra, 2020). The sector's economic potential is substantial, with the global wellness economy reaching $6.3 trillion in 2023 and projected to grow to $9 trillion by 2028 (Global Wellness Economy Monitor, 2024). Importantly, this growth aligns with several UN Sustainable Development Goals, including good health (SDG 3), decent work (SDG 8), and sustainable communities (SDG 11). However, researchers note the need for more studies examining how wellness tourism specifically contributes to destination sustainability (Zhong et al., 2021) a gap this study aims to address through its focus on stakeholder perspectives in key Indian wellness destinations.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore stakeholder perspectives on wellness tourism's role in sustainable destination development across prominent Indian locations. The qualitative methodology was chosen to capture rich, in-depth insights from participants' lived experiences and professional observations (Dillette et al. 2019; Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Given the study's wide geographic scope covering Delhi, Haridwar-Rishikesh, Varanasi, Goa, Mysore, and Kerala, purposive sampling was used to identify key stakeholders directly involved in wellness tourism operations.

The research team compiled a comprehensive network of 100 potential participants including tour operators (16), hotel/wellness center managers (20), guides (15), yoga/Ayurveda practitioners (11) and local artisans/business owners (38). Due to logistical constraints, data collection utilized both online (video calls) and offline (in-person) methods. Of the initial sample, 82 participants ultimately completed interviews or focus group discussions, with 18 unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts (see Table 1 for complete participant demographics)

Table 1 : Participant Distribution Across Study Locations

S.N	Location	Invited	Participated	Participation Rate
1	Delhi	15	13	87%
2	Goa	17	14	82%
3	Haridwar & Rishikesh	24	21	88%
4	Kerala	16	12	75%
5	Mysore	11	8	73%
6	Varanasi	17	14	82%
7	Total	100	82	82%

Data AnalysisThis study employed thematic analysis using a deductive approach, guided by predefined research questions (Dillette et al. 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

Familiarization
Interview and group discussion transcripts were reviewed multiple times to immerse the researchers in the data. Initial notes highlighted patterns relevant to the research questions, while additional observations were documented for potential emergent themes.

Generating Initial Codes
Manual coding was conducted systematically across all transcripts. Responses were tagged with descriptive labels (e.g., "*employment generation*," "*cultural pride*") aligned with the study's objectives. For example: "*Wellness tourists come for long stays... creating jobs for young people in spas and yoga centers.*" → Coded as "Economic stability" and "Skill development."

Searching For Themes
Coded data were organized into a tabular matrix (see *Table 2*), grouping quotes under broader themes (e.g., *Economic Impact*, *Environmental Sustainability*). This visual mapping clarified relationships between codes and themes.

Reviewing Themes

The themes were refined by cross-checking coded extracts against the original data. A codebook was developed with operational definitions (e.g., "*Perceived Value of Wellness Tourism*" = stakeholder views on tourist motivations and authenticity). Discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussion.

Defining Themes

The themes were finalized by synthesizing narratives. A conceptual model (Figure 1) illustrated how wellness tourism interlinks with sustainability pillars (economic, social, environmental). For instance:

"*Wellness tourists' demand for nature-based activities fosters environmental consciousness.*" → Theme: Environmental Sustainability.

Reporting

Representative quotes were selected to substantiate findings (e.g., stakeholder testimonials on cultural revival). Results were contextualized within existing literature (e.g., Lim et al., 2016 on nature's role in wellness tourism).

Table 2: Example Data Extract from Codebook

S.N	Theme	Code	Stakeholder Response (Quote)	Interpretation
1	Perceived Value of Wellness Tourism	Physical and Mental Well-being	"*Wellness tourists come looking for personal wellbeing, healing, and peace... Many return yearly and recommend us.*" (Wellness resort owner)	Seeks authentic practices; loyalty drives business growth.
2	Economic Impact	Employment generation	"*Wellness tourists' long stays created jobs in spas and yoga centers... Locals gained skills.*" (Tour operator)	Stable income, reduced seasonality, skill development.
3	Social and Cultural Impact	Cultural Pride	"*Foreign visitors' respect for our traditions made youth value our heritage.*" (Local guide)	Revives traditions; empowers women/youth
4	Environmental Sustainability	Eco-Friendly Practices	"*Tourists meditate in forests, prompting us to conserve nature and reduce plastic.*" (Yoga instructor)	Promotes resource conservation.

5	Destination Development	Infrastructure Improvement	*"Wellness tourism improved roads and homestays... Govt and locals now collaborate."* (Tour operator)	Enhances regional branding and planning.

Findings And Discussion

The study explored the positive outcomes of wellness tourism through stakeholder perspectives, emphasizing its alignment with sustainability. The findings are categorized into key themes: perceived value, economic impact, social and cultural impact, environmental sustainability, and destination development. Each theme highlights how wellness tourism contributes to holistic and sustainable growth.

Perceived Value Of Wellness Tourism

Stakeholders observed that wellness tourism differs significantly from conventional tourism due to its focus on health, well-being, and authentic experiences. Unlike leisure tourists, wellness travelers seek healing practices, spiritual enhancement, and inner peace, often engaging in activities such as yoga, Ayurveda therapy, and traditional healing rituals. This shift in tourist behavior adds value not only to visitors but also to local communities. Many participants, including tour operators and wellness center owners, noted an increasing trend of repeat visits and referrals, reinforcing the long-term viability of wellness tourism.

One wellness resort owner stated, *"Wellness tourists are different—they come looking for personal well-being, healing, peace, and spiritual growth. Many return annually and refer others, helping my business grow, especially in the off-season."* A tour operator from Delhi shared an example of a Canadian tour leader who organizes annual yoga retreats in Kerala or Rishikesh, demonstrating loyalty and sustained demand. Additionally, wellness tourists often travel during off-seasons, extending tourism periods and reducing seasonal gaps in arrivals. Their preference for longer stays and authentic experiences foster emotional and cultural connections with destinations. Stakeholders view wellness tourism as a niche that promotes personal well-being, preserves cultural traditions, and ensures year-round economic stability.

Economic Impact

Wellness tourism significantly contributes to local economies through job creation and business growth. Stakeholders reported increased employment opportunities in wellness centers, Ayurvedic clinics, yoga retreats, and organic food services. A wellness entrepreneur in Kerala and Goa noted, *"The rise in wellness tourists has expanded our business, requiring more staff and boosting demand for organic products."*

Employment opportunities extend beyond skilled roles to support positions in transport, housekeeping, and kitchen services. Notably, women and youth are increasingly participating in wellness-related services, fostering inclusive growth. Small businesses, including herbal product makers and homestay owners, have flourished in response to tourist demand for authentic experiences.

Public-private collaborations in skill development and policy support have further enhanced infrastructure. Stakeholders emphasized that repeat clients and word-of-mouth referrals sustain small businesses, reinforcing long-term economic stability.

Social And Cultural Impact

Wellness tourism has revitalized traditional practices among younger generations, blending personal well-being with economic opportunities. A Varanasi-based masseur shared, "*My son once found my work embarrassing, but after studying tourism, he now values these skills and plans to open his own massage center.*"

The demand for authentic experiences has renewed community pride in indigenous traditions, extending beyond wellness to crafts, farming, and cuisine. A homestay owner noted, "*Wellness tourists love participating in traditional cooking with us.*" Cultural exchanges between tourists and locals have strengthened mutual respect and understanding.

Women and youth play a vital role in preserving cultural identity through wellness services. A local tour operator remarked, "*Seeing foreigners admire our traditions has made us value our heritage more.*" Overall, wellness tourism fosters knowledge transfer, cultural pride, and community empowerment.

Environmental Sustainability

Stakeholders observed a growing environmental consciousness among wellness tourists, who prefer natural settings and eco-friendly practices. Activities such as yoga and Ayurveda often take place in natural surroundings, reinforcing the connection between wellness and nature. A tour guide mentioned, "*I've learned to manage waste mindfully and passed this habit to my family.*"

Wellness tourists' preference for eco-friendly accommodations and organic food has influenced local businesses to adopt sustainable practices, such as waste segregation and herbal product usage. The demand for nature-based experiences has also encouraged collaborations to preserve natural landscapes.

Destination Development

Wellness tourism has enhanced destination development through improved infrastructure, cultural preservation, and public-private partnerships. Stakeholders reported better roads, sanitation, and wellness facilities in destinations like Rishikesh and Kerala. A local tour operator stated, "*Wellness tourism has given our state a new identity, boosting small businesses and involving locals in planning.*"

Integrating wellness activities into existing tourism infrastructure requires minimal investment while offering substantial returns. The study highlights wellness tourism as a catalyst for sustainable destination growth, aligning with economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Figure 1: Positive Outcomes of Wellness Tourism and Sustainable Development (*As visualized above*)
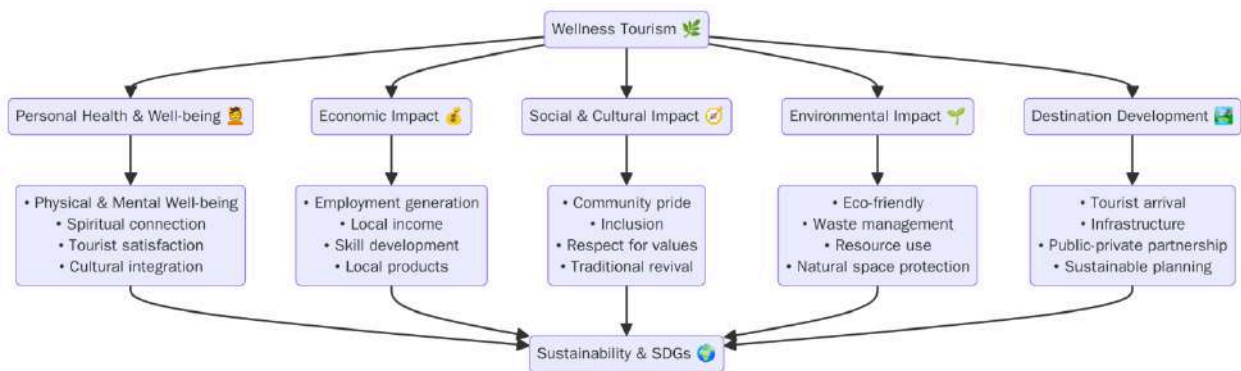
This figure depicts how wellness tourism intersects with and supports major pillars of sustainable development, including economic, social, environmental, and infrastructural components. Each outcome strengthens the overall sustainability framework, forming a mutually reinforcing cycle of development.

Conclusion

This study has revealed wellness tourism as a powerful vehicle for sustainable development, offering unique insights into its multifaceted impacts on destinations and communities. Through comprehensive stakeholder analysis across India's prominent wellness destinations, we have identified how this specialized form of tourism creates synergistic value across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions. The findings demonstrate that wellness tourism generates substantial economic benefits while simultaneously preserving cultural heritage and promoting environmental stewardship. Unlike conventional tourism models that often prioritize short-term gains, wellness tourism fosters long-term relationships between visitors and host communities through its emphasis on authentic experiences and personal transformation. The sector's resilience to seasonal fluctuations and its ability to create diverse

employment opportunities make it particularly valuable for sustainable economic development.

From a socio-cultural perspective, wellness tourism has emerged as an unexpected force for cultural revitalization. The study documents how traditional healing systems gain new relevance and economic value through tourism, facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer and community empowerment. These findings align with contemporary sustainable tourism paradigms that emphasize community participation and cultural preservation as essential components of responsible tourism development.

The environmental implications of wellness tourism present both opportunities and challenges. While wellness tourists generally demonstrate higher environmental consciousness than conventional tourists, the study highlights the need for systematic approaches to manage tourism's ecological footprint. The growing demand for nature-based wellness experiences creates natural incentives for environmental conservation, but requires careful management to ensure long-term sustainability.

Several Key Recommendations Emerge From These Findings:
- Destination planners should integrate wellness tourism into broader sustainable development strategies, recognizing its potential to contribute to multiple SDGs simultaneously.
- Policymakers should develop targeted support mechanisms for small-scale wellness enterprises, particularly those preserving traditional knowledge systems.
- Industry stakeholders should establish sustainability certification programs specific to wellness tourism operations.
- Future research should focus on developing standardized metrics to assess wellness tourism's comprehensive impacts.

This study contributes to the evolving conceptualization of wellness tourism as an integrative approach to sustainable destination development. The proposed conceptual framework provides a foundation for understanding how wellness tourism intersects with various sustainability dimensions, offering researchers and practitioners a holistic perspective on its potential.

As global interest in health and wellbeing continues to grow, wellness tourism presents destinations with an opportunity to pursue tourism development that is not only economically viable but also culturally enriching and environmentally responsible. The challenge moving forward will be to scale these benefits while maintaining the authenticity and sustainability principles that make wellness tourism uniquely valuable in the global tourism landscape.

Contributors

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USING NEUROSCIENCE TO DECODE TOURIST BEHAVIOR AND INTENTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CHOICES

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Abstract

Tourism is an inherently emotional experience. Yet, for decades, research has relied predominantly on rational-choice models and self-report surveys, assuming that tourists make deliberate and conscious decisions. Recent advances in neuroscience and consumer behavior studies challenge this assumption, revealing that up to 95% of our decisions are driven by unconscious processes and emotional responses. This paper introduces a neuroscientific framework for decoding tourist behavior. It is based on dual-system theory (System 1 and 2), predictive brain models, and physiological measurement techniques such as EEG, eye-tracking, GSR, facial coding, and implicit association testing. Through real-world case studies in food tourism, hospitality, and cultural heritage, we show how these tools uncover unspoken emotional responses that shape memory, satisfaction, and behavior. A dedicated section addresses sustainable tourism, illustrating how neuroscience-informed nudges can help align tourist behavior with ecological values without compromising enjoyment. Finally, we explore implications for tourism operators, marketers, and policymakers, emphasizing how emotion-driven design and communication can foster more engaging and sustainable tourism experiences.

Keywords: Consumer Neuroscience, Emotion Measurement, Predictive Processing, Sustainable Tourism, Tourist Behavior, Unconscious Decision-making.

Introduction

Tourism is not just about destinations—it is about the emotions they evoke. Previous research has shown the important link between positive emotions and tourist satisfaction as well as revisit intentions (Hosany & Gilbert, 2020). Yet, much of tourism research has approached the tourist as a rational planner, relying on post-trip surveys and interviews. This model overlooks what neuroscience has made increasingly clear: our brains are emotional prediction machines, and the majority of our decisions are fast, automatic, and unconscious.

Neuroscience, particularly when applied in consumer contexts, offers powerful tools for capturing what tourists feel in the moment—whether they can

articulate it or not. EEG (electroencephalography), eye-tracking, facial coding, galvanic skin response (GSR), heart rate monitoring, and implicit association tests (IAT) allow us to observe reactions in real time. These methods help uncover hidden emotional peaks, biases, and memory triggers that standard surveys often miss.

This paper presents a framework for integrating neuroscience into tourism research. We begin with core theories that explain the unconscious basis of decision-making. We then review methodologies and explore case studies demonstrating how these tools reveal the true emotional landscape of the tourist experience. Lastly, we examine how neuro-informed nudges can promote sustainable behavior and what this means for future tourism design.

Theoretical Foundations

Studies on destination image have shown the importance of positive emotions on brand loyalty. Furthermore, research demonstrated that both cognitive image (e.g., quality, infrastructure) and affective image (emotions associated with the place) shape loyalty, with affective image having a growing importance (Stylos, Vassiliadis, Bellou, & Andronikidis, 2016). As such, understanding tourists' emotional responses is vital for destination managers and can lead to place attachment and destination loyalty.

One of the earliest theories of destination choice was developed by Gunn, who argued that tourists go through seven stages when making travel decisions. Gunn's (1988) model highlights the role of mental image formation in guiding tourists' destination choices. While originally framed within a cognitive-behavioral perspective, the model shows the emotional dimension that underlies each stage. Tourists accumulate mental images of destinations over time, which are not purely factual but emotionally charged—shaped by media, stories, and symbolic associations that evoke feelings such as excitement, nostalgia, or curiosity. As the decision-making process progresses, these emotional impressions are refined and directly influence whether a destination is considered appealing or desirable. The model fails to acknowledge that while guided by emotions, tourists are often not aware of the deep underlying motives that shape their decisions.

In a world grappling with overtourism and the negative impacts of travel, there is an urgent need for sustainable destinations and brands that prioritize the local community well-being and safeguard vital cultural and natural resources for future generations. Despite widespread claims that travelers prefer eco-friendly options, research consistently shows a gap between intention and action, most tourists ultimately do not choose sustainable brands (Juvan & Dolnicar 2014). This paper hence argues that gaining deeper insight into tourists' emotional

responses to sustainable brands is essential for giving these brands a meaningful competitive advantage

System 1 And System 2 In Tourist Behavior

Tourist decisions are rarely fully deliberate. Dual-process theory, popularized by Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman, 2011), distinguishes between two modes of thinking: System 1 (fast, intuitive, emotional) and System 2 (slow, rational, deliberate). In leisure contexts, System 1 dominates. A tourist may choose a hotel because "it feels right," not because they analyzed all options.

Neuroscientific studies show that System 1 triggers are heavily influential in travel: visuals, music, scent, and even staff expressions can activate approach or avoidance responses long before conscious reasoning takes over. Eye-tracking can reveal that people fixate on certain images; EEG can show left-frontal activation associated with positive emotions. These physiological cues indicate real preferences, even if the tourist later rationalizes a different reason for their choice.

Neurobiological Mechanisms Behind System 1 And 2

At a brain level, System 1 relies primarily on subcortical and limbic structures such as the amygdala (emotional salience), ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC) (valuation and intuitive judgments), and insula (bodily awareness and gut feelings). These areas process information rapidly and with minimal cognitive effort.

In contrast, System 2 activates regions associated with conscious control, including the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC), involved in reasoning and planning, and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which monitors conflict and errors.

In tourism, where experiences are often novel, multisensory, and emotionally rich, the brain prioritizes fast, emotionally guided reactions over slow, analytical thought. This explains why visual impressions, scents, or even a smile from a receptionist can unconsciously steer decisions—long before any conscious evaluation takes place.

Predictive Processing And Expectation Management

Our brains are constantly predicting what will happen next. This predictive coding shapes perception and satisfaction. A tourist arrives at a site expecting peace and beauty (based on marketing photos); if reality aligns, the brain's reward system—particularly the ventral striatum and orbitofrontal cortex—triggers a positive emotional response. If the experience violates

expectations—say, the beach is crowded and noisy—the result is prediction error and disappointment.

One of the neural markers of surprise is the P300 wave, a component detectable via EEG that reflects the brain's reaction to unexpected stimuli. GSR can capture spikes in arousal when these predictions are violated. Understanding this mechanism helps tourism operators not just meet expectations but manage them strategically—sometimes even designing "delightful" prediction errors that create memorable moments.

The Unconscious Basis Of Decision-Making

We like to believe we are in control of our choices. But evidence suggests otherwise. Most decisions happen before we are aware of them. Tourists might say they chose a restaurant because of reviews, but their initial preference was shaped by lighting, music, or a host's smile—factors that bypass conscious deliberation.

EEG studies reveal that brainwave activity—especially in the anterior cingulate cortex and medial prefrontal cortex—can predict choices before participants declare them. GSR captures emotional arousal even when people report feeling neutral. IATs uncover associations tourists might not admit (e.g., linking a destination with danger or excitement). Facial coding adds another dimension by detecting micro-expressions that reveal emotional truth beneath social masks.

Methodology: Neuroscientific Tools In Tourism

Modern neuroscience offers a variety of non-invasive methods to capture tourists' emotional and cognitive responses in real time. Below are the most used tools in tourism research.

- Electroencephalography (EEG): Measures brainwave patterns to assess attention, engagement, and emotional response. Especially useful for analyzing reactions to stimuli such as videos, virtual tours, or in-person experiences.
- Eye-Tracking: Records visual attention by tracking fixations and saccades. Heatmaps generated by eye-tracking can show what captures a tourist's gaze—essential in UX design, signage optimization, and exhibit placement.
- Facial Expression Analysis (Facial Coding): Uses computer vision to analyze micro-expressions and classify emotions like joy, surprise, confusion, or disgust. Emotivae, for example, leverages this method to decode user engagement in real time.
- Galvanic Skin Response (GSR): Measures changes in skin conductance caused by emotional arousal. GSR helps identify emotionally charged moments during experiences such as museum visits or adventure tourism.

- Voice Emotion Analysis: Captures tone, pitch, and speech rate to determine emotional state. Ideal for analyzing call center interactions, guided tour narration, or video blogs.
- Heart Rate & Heart Rate Variability (HR/HRV): Higher heart rate and lower HRV often indicate stress or arousal. Combined with GSR and EEG, it helps differentiate between positive excitement and negative stress.
- Implicit Association Test (IAT): Assesses subconscious associations between concepts (e.g., a destination and emotions like fear, relaxation, or luxury) by measuring reaction times during categorization tasks.

These tools provide real-time, objective data. By combining multiple measures, researchers can triangulate emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions, yielding a more complete understanding of the tourist experience.

Case Studies: Neuroscience In Action

Singapore – Eeg-Based Personalized Itinerary Design

A landmark neuro-tourism project by the Singapore Tourism Board, conducted alongside UNSW and the University of Sydney, studied 5 Australian families (approx. 20 individuals, including parents and children). Participants wore Emotiv Insight EEG headsets and visited 20 distinct experiences across Singapore—ranging from theme parks to cultural markets. Findings:
The most joyful activation occurred in "postcard" attractions like Gardens by the Bay and Marina Bay Sands SkyDeck. Emotional peaks matched both high-cost and free experiences, suggesting unique, culturally rich, inexpensive activities are as emotionally rewarding as premium ones. Traditional food shopping triggered strong affective responses across ages. This data was used to design an Emotion-Driven Travel Guide, recommending attractions aligned with individual emotional profiles. EEG metrics included left-frontal alpha suppression (indicating positive engagement) and theta/alpha activity shifts.

Neural Insight

EEG markers: Left-frontal alpha suppression correlates with positive feelings; increased theta reflects cognitive engagement.
Brain areas: Medial Prefrontal Cortex (valuation), Amygdala (emotion), and Hippocampus (memory) were implicated.

Shanghai Disneyland – Geolocated Facial Coding

A recent empirical study published in Scientific Reports analyzed 42,988 geolocated social media posts from Sina Weibo, containing a total of 148,132 faces captured between January 2019 and December 2020 at the Shanghai Disney Resort. An automated facial analysis system was used to detect seven basic emotional expressions: happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, surprise, fear,

and neutral. Each detected face was also classified into one of six demographic groups: teen male (TM), teen female (TF), adult male (AM), adult female (AF), older male (OM), and older female (OF).

Key Findings

Teen females (TF) showed the highest positive emotional responses in adventure-themed areas, such as Adventure Isle. Teen males (TM) exhibited more heterogeneous emotional patterns, often clustered around low arousal and negative valence zones, particularly in calmer park areas. Adult and older males frequently expressed dissatisfaction with food pricing, as inferred from image captions (e.g., "Why so expensive? Next time, I'll bring my own!"). Older females (OF) displayed lower emotional responses in Gardens of Imagination compared to younger female cohorts, suggesting demographic-based experiential differences.

Methodology

Sample: 42,988 posts containing 148,132 usable facial images
Tool: Facial Coding software for emotion recognition, gender, and age classification
Analysis: Valence-arousal mapping combined with cluster analysis segmented by themed lands
Objective: Identify emotional patterns linked to both spatial location and demographic segment

Neural Interpretation

Although direct neural measurements (e.g., EEG or GSR) were not used, the emotional expressions captured are consistent with activity in key affective brain regions: the amygdala (emotional salience), the orbitofrontal cortex (valuation), and the superior temporal sulcus (facial emotion recognition). Patterns of high arousal and positive valence suggest activation of the brain's circuitry.

Implications

This large-scale emotional mapping provides insights into experience design, crowd management, and marketing. Identifying "emotional hotspots" helps operators understand which areas generate the most engagement and which may need redesign. Demographic-specific emotional profiles allow for more targeted communication and experience personalization. The findings highlight how emotional data—collected passively and anonymously—can support the alignment of park design with real visitor affective responses. This study demonstrated the feasibility and value of using large-scale facial coding to infer emotional experiences in tourism contexts, even without intrusive or wearable devices.

A peer-reviewed study by Hsu and Chen (2020) examined how subliminal emotional cues in hotel advertisements influence consumer decision-making and neurological responses. Sixteen university students participated in an experiment where they viewed hotel promotional videos, some of which contained a 33-millisecond subliminal image of a smiling emoji—below the threshold of conscious perception. The results showed that these subliminal cues significantly influenced hotel selection (χ^2 = 10.21, $p < .01$), with a Bayes factor of 18.2 indicating strong evidence for the effect. Neurophysiological data revealed increased theta wave activity ($t = -5.65$, $p < .001$), associated with positive emotion and memory encoding, and decreased beta wave activity ($t = 2.93$, $p < .01$), linked to reduced anxiety and increased comfort. Brain regions implicated included the anterior cingulate cortex and medial prefrontal cortex for emotional evaluation, the insula for affective awareness, and the orbitofrontal cortex for value assessment. GSR (galvanic skin response) also showed subtle increases, reflecting heightened autonomic engagement. These findings suggest that subliminal positive cues can unconsciously shape consumer preferences by enhancing emotional resonance and memory formation.

While the study provides evidence for the impact of subconscious stimuli in tourism marketing, its small sample size and limited physiological measures call for further research with larger and more diverse participant groups. Nonetheless, it highlights the powerful, albeit ethically sensitive, role of neuromarketing techniques in influencing traveler behavior at a subconscious level

Misaligned Attention in Italian Tourism Video – A Multimodal Neuromarketing Analysis
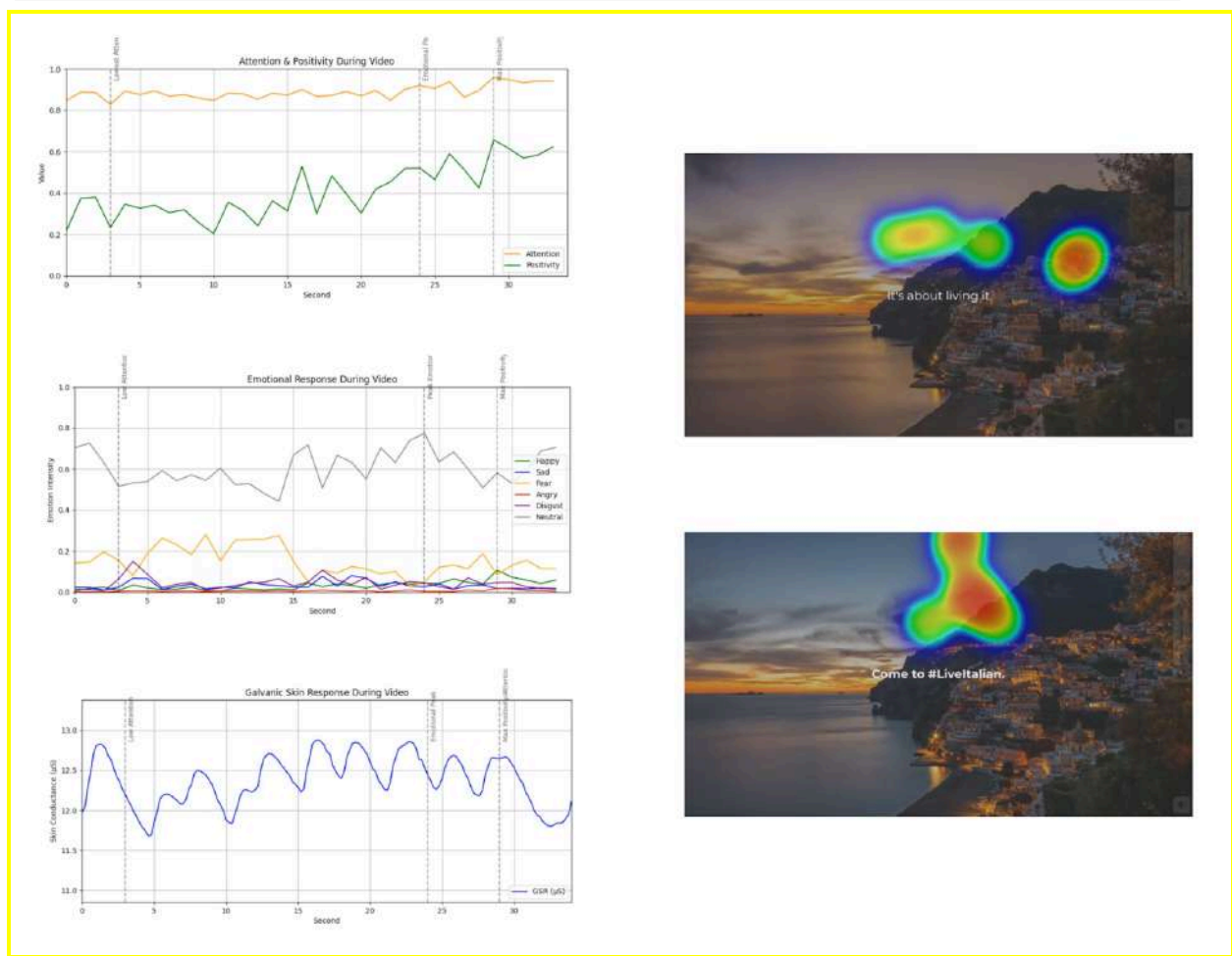
In a neuromarketing study conducted on a promotional video for an Italian tourism destination, a combination of neurophysiological tools was employed to evaluate the emotional and attentional impact of the narrative. The objective was to assess whether the emotional climax of the video effectively aligned with the placement of the call-to-action (CTA).

Methodology And Sample

Participants: 30 adults (aged 24–52), evenly distributed by gender, recruited through local travel interest panels.

Tools:

- Facial Coding: Emotivae Sense, a proprietary AI-driven software developed to decode micro-expressions and real-time emotional fluctuations via facial action units (FACS-based).
- Eye-Tracking: Desktop-mounted infrared eye-tracker recording fixations and saccades with 60 Hz resolution.
- GSR (Galvanic Skin Response): Measured via wrist-mounted sensors to assess autonomic arousal.

Protocol: Participants viewed the 90-second video in a controlled lab setting, followed by a free-recall task and a brief structured interview for declarative data comparison.

Results

- The narrative arc of the video built toward a strong emotional peak in the final 10 seconds, featuring slow orchestral music, panoramic sunset shots, and poetic voice-over. During this segment:
- Facial coding revealed a significant increase in AU12 (zygomaticus major activity) associated with smiling, along with AU1+2 (inner and outer brow raise), suggesting surprise and emotional uplift.
- GSR signals spiked in 83% of participants during this final scene, indicating heightened sympathetic arousal.
- Eye-tracking data, however, told a different story: while the CTA ("Book your journey now") was positioned in the lower right corner, gaze heatmaps showed a consistent shift of attention upward, toward a time-lapse of moving clouds in the sky.
- This divergence was traced to bottom-up visual salience mechanisms: the drifting clouds, a high-contrast, dynamic stimulus, triggered involuntary orienting responses, activating the superior colliculus, area MT/V5, and early visual cortex (V1–V3). These regions are known to redirect gaze toward motion, even when it is not task relevant.

Interpretation

While the video successfully generated an emotional climax—ideal for memory encoding and action readiness—it failed to channel that activation toward the desired behavioral output. In neurocognitive terms, the motivational system was primed, but the attentional system was misdirected.

This case exemplifies a core principle of neuro-UX and neuromarketing: emotion is necessary but not sufficient. Conversion requires that emotional peaks coincide with attentional focal points. If not, the "window of influence" closes before the message is seen.

Implications for Practice

In high-emotion moments, visual hierarchy and layout must be designed to guide gaze toward the target message using static contrast, motion framing, or visual anchors. The integration of gaze-contingent design—where motion or luminance guides attention—can help align the attentional and emotional systems. Tools like Emotivae Sense, in combination with biometric and gaze data, offer a powerful way to pre-test campaign effectiveness before deployment.

In an applied neuroscience project at the Tianyi Pavilion Museum, one of China's oldest private libraries turned cultural site, researchers sought to improve visitor experience by mapping emotional and cognitive engagement throughout the museum. The initiative was part of a broader digital transformation effort to modernize interpretation and optimize exhibit flow using affective neuroscience.

Methodology And Sample
Participants: 52 visitors (aged 18–65, M = 34.7; 55% female), sampled over two weeks to reflect typical footfall demographics.
Tools and Metrics: EEG headsets (mobile, dry-electrode, 14-channel): measured real-time brainwave activity with focus on theta (4–7 Hz), alpha (8–12 Hz), and beta (13–30 Hz) bands.
PAD emotional state model: EEG data was mapped onto Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance (PAD) dimensions to quantify emotional experience by room and exhibit.
Self-report follow-up: visitors completed post-visit questionnaires and recall tasks to correlate neural data with conscious impressions.

Findings
The emotional landscape of the museum varied significantly by exhibit type and environmental **d**esign:

High theta activity (↑4–7 Hz) was observed in immersive, story-driven rooms—particularly those featuring poetic calligraphy with ambient soundscapes and projected historical imagery. This pattern aligns with deep engagement and memory encoding, linked to activation in the hippocampus and medial temporal lobe.

High alpha waves (↑8–12 Hz) were recorded in quieter sections housing static textual archives. This suggests relaxation and low arousal, associated with reduced cortical stimulation and potential boredom if not balanced with higher-stimulation areas.

Beta desynchronization and left prefrontal asymmetry correlated with positive emotional valence and valuation processes in the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC).

Spikes in amygdala-related EEG signatures (notably right-hemisphere beta increases and reduced alpha power) occurred during emotionally themed exhibits, such as one highlighting banned books and political exile.

Interventions And Redesign

Based on this data, curators implemented several changes:

Redesigned visitor pathing to alternate emotionally intense areas with more neutral "restorative zones," reducing cognitive fatigue and enhancing pacing. Integrated AR and VR experiences in low-engagement rooms—particularly the archival zones—resulting in a 27% increase in post-visit recall and a 21% increase in reported satisfaction scores. Added ambient scent and subtle soundscapes to enhance immersion in historical zones where EEG suggested under-stimulation.

Neuroscientific Interpretation

Prefrontal cortex engagement reflected decision-making and attentional effort during interactive content. Amygdala activation indicated emotional salience, helping to predict what would be remembered. Hippocampal activation proxies (via high theta) aligned with rooms where long-term recall was highest in follow-up surveys.

Impact

The use of neuroscience tools provided granular, non-verbal insight into how different demographics respond to exhibit types. Unlike surveys alone, which often yield flat averages, the EEG-PAD model captured dynamic emotional microclimates within the space. The museum reported a 15% increase in repeat visit intent and stronger reviews on digital platforms within 3 months post-redesign.

This case illustrates how museums can move beyond "design by intuition" and toward emotionally optimized curation, aligning brain-based insights with cultural storytelling.

Sustainable Tourism And The "Green Gap"

Why Tourists Don't Naturally Act Green

Although most tourists express support for sustainability, they frequently neglect sustainable behaviors while on vacation. This gap between intention and action is partly explained by cognitive overload: during leisure travel, the brain shifts into a hedonic, automatic mode dominated by System 1 thinking, while the more deliberate, effortful System 2 processes are minimized (Kahneman, 2011). Additionally, prediction bias plays a role—travelers' mental models of vacations prioritize relaxation and pleasure, not tasks perceived as "work," such as recycling or minimizing energy use. If sustainability practices are not embedded into the environment as defaults, they are often overlooked. Neuroscience further explains this resistance: the anterior insula, which processes effort, signals discomfort when extra steps are required, while the nucleus accumbens drives the pursuit of instant rewards. As a result, eco-friendly actions are often

avoided unless they are perceived as easy and immediately gratifying. However, neuro-informed behavior design offers effective solutions. Nudges such as default eco-options, real-time feedback (e.g., "You saved five bottles"), emotionally evocative imagery (like a turtle entangled in plastic), social norm messaging ("90% of guests turn off their AC"), and gamified rewards can successfully shift behavior. Field studies in resorts and restaurants across Asia and Europe demonstrate that these strategies can double eco-friendly behaviors without compromising guest satisfaction.

Nudges And Neuro-Informed Behavior Design
Effective behavioral nudges leverage how the brain processes effort, reward, and social cues. Default framing, such as making towel reuse the standard option, taps into the brain's energy-saving bias, reducing the need for active decision-making. Instant feedback, like messages stating, "You saved five bottles," activates dopamine pathways, offering immediate gratification for eco-friendly actions. Emotional imagery—for example, photos of turtles entangled in plastic—triggers the amygdala, evoking empathy more powerfully than abstract statistics. Social norm messaging, such as "90% of guests turn off their air conditioning," engages the medial prefrontal cortex, which processes social comparison, motivating people to align with perceived group behavior. Additionally, gamified tools like apps that track carbon savings stimulate reward centers and reinforce sustainable choices as part of a traveler's identity. Field experiments in resorts and buffets across Asia and Europe demonstrate that applying these neuro-informed strategies can double eco-friendly behavior without diminishing guest satisfaction.

Discussion: Practical Implications
Tourism is not just a service; it is an emotional journey composed of a sequence of experiences. To create meaningful and memorable encounters, operators must intentionally design for emotional peaks, focusing on key moments such as the arrival, unexpected surprises, and the farewell. Incorporating multi-sensory elements—like music, scent, and lighting—enhances emotional engagement, while training staff in emotional awareness, including tools like facial coding feedback, helps foster positive interactions. On the marketing side, campaigns should be pre-tested using eye-tracking and EEG technology to ensure they capture attention and evoke the intended feelings. Aligning promotional content with the actual on-site experience is crucial for building trust and avoiding disappointment, while emotionally resonant messaging strengthens memory and brand loyalty. Policymakers, too, can apply these insights by introducing emotional signage, deploying sensors to detect areas of crowd stress, and implementing neuro-informed nudges to guide public behavior ethically and effectively toward more sustainable and enjoyable tourism experiences.

Conclusion

This paper showed that tourism is not a rational choice. While tourists might not be aware, it is experiential, emotional, and often driven by subconscious processes. Traditional marketing and sustainability efforts frequently fall short because they rely on what tourists *say*, not what they *truly feel*. By integrating insights from neuroscience, the tourism industry can tap into the emotional drivers behind decision-making. This shift enables us to design experiences that resonate on a deeper level, build destination brands that feel authentic and meaningful, and promote sustainability in ways that inspire rather than repel. Ultimately, the brain doesn't lie. When we understand its signals, tourism can become not only more effective and competitive, but also more human, empathetic, and aligned with the values of both visitors and host communities.

Future Directions

Future research in tourism neuroscience is needed to better understand tourist decision making. Cross-cultural emotional comparisons can reveal how diverse cultural backgrounds shape emotional responses to destinations, while exploring host-guest relations through neural synchrony could deepen understanding of how shared emotional experiences foster connection and satisfaction. As virtual tourism and the metaverse grow, integrating emotional data into these digital experiences will be crucial for designing engaging and meaningful interactions. Additionally, tracking how emotions influence long-term memory formation and repeat visitation can offer valuable insights for destination loyalty and marketing strategies. Implementing real-time emotion dashboards could provide operators with live feedback, allowing them to adjust experiences dynamically to improve guest satisfaction. A key implication is the need to educate tourism professionals in neuro-literacy—not to replace creativity, culture, or human intuition, but to enhance them. Neuroscience offers the tools to better understand the universal language of emotion, enabling more authentic, meaningful, and sustainable tourism experiences. Lastly, educating tourism professionals in neuro-literacy is essential to create better experiences and emotional nudging.

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X-TOURISM REIMAGINED: SURVIVAL HORROR VIDEO GAMES AS NEW FRONTIERS OF RESPONSIBLE AND EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM

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Abstract
This expanded paper explores the intersection of X-tourism and survival horror video games as immersive, ethical, and environmentally conscious travel experiences. Building upon the original 2010 framework by Tosi and Ochoa, we investigate how games like Resident Evil Village, Silent Hill, Dead Space, and Amnesia: The Dark Descent offer digitally mediated journeys that align with ecotourism, responsible tourism, and sustainability principles. Through a literature review, empirical findings, and a design framework, we analyze how horror settings engage players emotionally while encouraging reflection on environmental degradation, cultural trauma, and historical responsibility. We propose the TREES framework to guide game designers in crafting horror experiences that entertain, educate, and promote awareness. Survival horror games emerge as a powerful medium for a new paradigm of virtual tourism rooted in conscience, place, and learning.

Keywords: Digital Tourism, Ecotourism, Experiential Learning, Responsible Tourism, Survival Horror, Virtual Experience, X-tourism.

Introduction
In contemporary tourism, alternative forms of experience are emerging, often referred to as X tourism. These incorporate principles of ecotourism, responsible travel, and sustainability. At the same time, video games—especially survival horror games—have evolved into powerful narrative and immersive tools capable of transporting players to virtual worlds rich in environmental and cultural detail. This article explores the intersection between X-tourism and survival horror games, examining how these games can serve as digital and educational tourism experiences. In other words, we ask: "How can survival horror games offer players a virtual journey that promotes environmental and social reflection?"

The following sections will examine:
- Additional case studies beyond The Last of Us, Days Gone, and Alan Wake, including titles such as Resident Evil, Silent Hill, Dead Space, Amnesia, Saturnalia and others with settings and narratives aligned with X-tourism themes (nature, local culture, sustainability).
- A review of current literature on digital tourism mediated by video games, and the horror genre as a vehicle for socio-environmental reflection.

- Available empirical data on how players interpret horror games as forms of virtual tourism or educational experiences.
- A potential design framework for integrating X-tourism principles into the development of future survival horror games or virtual reality experiences.

Digital Tourism And Video Games: Toward Game Tourism

In the last decade, the idea of using media products to promote real-world tourism has become established through the phenomenon of film-induced tourism (cineturismo). However, a similar concept applied to video games—sometimes referred to as game-induced tourism or video game tourism—remains relatively underexplored.

Existing studies, however, suggest that video games can influence the perception and touristic appeal of real-world locations. A well-known case is Assassin's Creed II: a survey conducted in Monteriggioni revealed that 11.4% of tourists had discovered the Tuscan town through the game. This data confirms that video games can lead players to discover and desire to visit real-world places shown on-screen.

In the literature, three forms of video game tourism are typically identified:
- Game-induced tourism: similar to film tourism, where players are motivated to visit real locations portrayed virtually in the game.
- In-game tourism: the act of freely exploring virtual environments during gameplay, treating the game world itself as a digital travel experience.
- Around-the-game tourism: tourism driven by cultural phenomena surrounding games (e.g., cosplay conventions, fan meetups, expos).

For this study, in-game tourism is of particular interest. In survival horror titles, immersion in richly detailed virtual worlds allows players to explore fictional places often inspired by real geographic or cultural settings. During these digital explorations, the player temporarily adopts the role of a virtual tourist, navigating spaces filled with environmental and narrative history.

For example, a recent study by Bowman et al. (2023) showed that in historical video games, a strong sense of place not only boosts player engagement but also increases the intention to visit the corresponding real-world locations. This suggests that realism and environmental care in games can foster touristic curiosity. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2025) explored the "authenticity of virtual tourism" in an open-world fantasy setting, demonstrating that players seek coherence and credibility even in imaginary worlds to experience them as satisfying tourist destinations. It's also important to note that video game tourism doesn't only concern real locations but also fantasy settings that take

on a life of their own in the collective imagination. Gaming communities often speak of virtual tourism as the joy of aimlessly wandering through game worlds like a curious traveler. This phenomenon can even appear in survival horror: some players have described wanting a "tourism mode" in horror games, to explore eerie environments at their own pace—enjoying the atmosphere without the stress of enemies. The industry is beginning to notice this trend. For instance, Dungeons of Hinterberg (2024)—while not a horror game—is designed as an interactive vacation, complete with a day-night cycle encouraging exploration of an imaginary Alpine village. The developers emphasize that games can function as "digital vacations", offering players a sense of a temporary home and daily routine in a virtual place waiting to be discovered. This vacation-style approach to game design could also inspire the horror genre to balance moments of tension with spaces of contemplation, enriching the experience and making it more akin to a journey of discovery.

Horror As A Genre Of Socio-Environmental Reflection
While the primary goal of horror games is to elicit fear and tension, the horror genre has historically conveyed metaphors of societal and environmental anxieties. Horror cinema theory and gothic literature teach us that monsters and apocalypses often embody the collective fears of an era. For instance, the wave of zombie films and games has been interpreted as a metaphor for mass consumerism or unchecked catastrophes. As early as Dawn of the Dead (1978) by George Romero, zombies were depicted in a shopping mall as mindless consumers—an image that, in recent years, some have linked to climate change anxiety. In this sense, horror acts as a distorted mirror of our real fears: nuclear wars are projected onto giant monsters (Godzilla was born from the trauma of atomic bombs), pandemics turn into zombie apocalypses, environmental exploitation appears as nature strikes back.

In survival horror games, this metaphorical layer is equally present. Many titles combine horror with reflections on the fragility of civilization, especially in the face of nature, or the consequences of irresponsible human behavior. A prime example is The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013), set twenty years after a fungal outbreak has devastated the world. The game depicts nature reclaiming urban ruins: cities like Boston and Pittsburgh are shown as picturesque ruins, with streets overrun by vegetation, crumbling buildings covered in vines, and wildlife roaming freely (in a memorable scene, giraffes graze among abandoned skyscrapers). This "lethal beauty" of post-apocalyptic nature is intentional. Developers created a world with no electricity, lit only by natural light, where "weeds thrive on once-busy roads" and "vegetation grows through cracked floors," offering the player glimpses of sublime decay. Narratively, The Last of Us is rich in ecological and moral themes: it serves as a (sci-fi) warning about the real fungus Cordyceps, which, aided by global warming, could theoretically

adapt to infect humans and it raises ethical dilemmas around individual sacrifice for collective good—a theme central to sustainability and intergenerational responsibility. A critical reading sees The Last of Us as a story "haunted by" a human-altered future: anthropogenic actions (environmental disasters, pandemics) are the ghost behind the game's portrayed anguish.

Likewise, horror frequently tackles social issues metaphorically. For example, the Silent Hill series (Konami, 1999–) uses its cursed, fog-shrouded town to explore guilt, abuse, and collective memory. Silent Hill, though fictional, is inspired by real places like Centralia, a ghost town in Pennsylvania abandoned due to a decades-long underground fire. Interestingly, Centralia has become a dark tourism destination, drawing curious visitors after being associated with Silent Hill through films and media. This shows that horror-inspired imagination can stimulate real world reflection and even direct people toward haunting yet emblematic sites.

In Silent Hill, players wander through decaying urban spaces—abandoned hospitals, derelict amusement parks—while confronting tangible representations of psychological trauma and social guilt. Horror here becomes a lens for processing difficult themes: domestic violence, religious fanaticism, the fragility of the human mind. These elements, while not directly ecological, align with the broader concept of responsible tourism: the game becomes an emotional journey into uncomfortable realities, encouraging the player to empathize with victims and confront distressing contexts—similar to what a mindful visitor might do at a memorial site.

Another compelling branch is sci-fi eco-horror, as exemplified by the Dead Space series (EA, 2008–2023). Set in space, the game's alien threat (the Necromorphs) veils a scathing critique of industrial exploitation and corporate greed. The narrative centers on the "planet-cracking" operations by mega-corporations like the Concordance Extraction Corporation, which literally break planets to extract resources. The result is a dystopia: "a giant hellscape of corporate avarice with Earth bled dry of all resources." The ecological and moral collapse is the backdrop for horror. The haunted spaceship USG Ishimura can be read as a karmic punishment for humanity's unrestrained pillaging of alien (and by analogy, Earth's) environments. The plot includes religious fanaticism via the Church of Unitology, unethical biogenetic technologies, all contributing to a critique of dehumanization via corporate exploitation. Dead Space and similar titles contribute to a body of eco-horror, where fear arises from human-induced disruption of natural order, whether terrestrial or cosmic. Though set in fantastical worlds, they push players to reflect analogically on real-world issues like resource depletion, genetic engineering risks and unregulated technological progress.

Even historical horror titles like Amnesia: The Dark Descent (Frictional Games, 2010) address ethical and historical responsibility. The game places the player in a 19th-century Prussian castle, haunted by the protagonist Daniel's guilt over atrocities committed during a colonial expedition in Algeria. Though a gothic-survival horror, Amnesia tackles colonial plundering of artifacts (Daniel awakens a curse by stealing a relic) and scientific abuse (inhuman experiments to quell the curse). Daniel's descent into madness becomes a journey of atonement: through exploring the castle, the player uncovers the consequences of Daniel's irresponsible actions via documents and flashbacks.

As such, the game functions educationally, as a cautionary tale on historical and moral responsibility. The colonial past resurfaces as ghosts and monsters. From an X-tourism lens, Amnesia offers a richly detailed historical setting (architecture, furnishings, period tech) that, though terrifying, enables a kind of "time tourism"—akin to virtually visiting a historical site with awareness of past wrongs, aligning with the principles of responsible tourism and difficult heritage.

Notably, scholar Florence Smith Nicholls has proposed interpreting some horror game experiences set in real or realistic locations as forms of virtual dark tourism—raising historical awareness and social justice through digital horror. Her key example is The Town of Light (LKA, 2016), an exploratory adventure set in an abandoned psychiatric hospital in Tuscany. Based on real facts and patient testimonies, the game invites players to explore the site of suffering (Volterra asylum) while empathizing with its former victims. Though not a traditional survival horror, this case shows how educational and socially critical dimensions can be deeply tied to the virtual exploration of dark places.

In general, then, horror in video games reveals itself as a multifaceted genre: not only does it entertain with thrills and adrenaline, but it can also convey ethical, environmental, and cultural messages, involving the player in narratives with real-world resonance.

Case Studies – Horror Environments As Virtual Destinations

This section analyzes how certain well-known survival horror games present environments and storyworlds that align with the dimensions of X-tourism—namely, experiences resembling virtual journeys with an ecological, responsible, or sustainable outlook. In addition to the previously discussed titles (The Last of Us, Days Gone, and Alan Wake), we examine other representative games such as Resident Evil (with a focus on Resident Evil Village), Silent Hill, Dead Space, and Amnesia, highlighting the environmental-touristic elements and implicit messages of sustainability in each.

Case Study 1: The Last Of Us & Days Gone – The Allure Of Natural Apocalypse

We've already examined The Last of Us as a model of a post-apocalyptic world "reclaimed by nature." Similarly, Days Gone (Bend Studio, 2019) emphasizes landscapes shaped by the end of civilization. Set in a post-pandemic Pacific Northwest, Days Gone allows players to traverse Oregon by motorcycle, passing through ancient forests, mountains, and dilapidated settlements. Despite facing hordes of infected ("Freakers"), many players appreciated the game's open-world exploration, which includes peaceful moments immersed in the wild—watching deer in misty clearings or camping under starlit skies free of light pollution. This experience closely resembles virtual ecotourism: the game encourages discovery of iconic locations (waterfalls, caves, alpine lakes), herbal foraging, and mental snapshots of a lush, indifferent nature. The narrative also incorporates themes of community sustainability: survivor enclaves must hunt, farm, and live in balance with their environment to persist, punishing short-sighted exploitation. In essence, both The Last of Us and Days Gone turn the apocalypse into an introspective journey through nature, showing both its beauty and danger—making clear to the player that survival hinges on environmental respect and cooperation: foundational messages in responsible tourism.

Case Study 2: Alan Wake & Silent Hill – Dark Tourism Between Fiction And Reality

Alan Wake (Remedy Entertainment, 2010) is an unusual survival horror set in the fictional town of Bright Falls, Washington. Inspired by the aesthetics of the Pacific Northwest (fir forests, crystal lakes, misty mountains), the game creates an evocative setting that feels like a real mountain tourist destination. The protagonist, a writer seeking inspiration, initially explores Bright Falls as a tourist enjoying local traditions like a deer festival and a small-town diner—before being plunged into a supernatural narrative of darkness and madness. This contrast deepens the sense of mystery within the everyday, making Bright Falls an appealing destination because of (not despite) its eerie happenings. The gameplay resembles a tour of a literary place: fans often compare Bright Falls to David Lynch's Twin Peaks, and some express a desire to visit similar landscapes in American national parks. In X-tourism terms, Alan Wake emphasizes territorial appreciation—landscape, local folklore—within a horror narrative. Despite malevolent forces, Bright Falls is portrayed with authenticity and respect, suggesting that even fictional destinations can promote cultural tourism if portrayed with detailed traditions and settings— aligning with responsible tourism's emphasis on genuine engagement with local communities.

On the other hand, Silent Hill exemplifies how an imaginary place can become synonymous with occult tourism. The town, inspired by real ghost towns like Centralia, Pennsylvania, has spurred curiosity toward abandoned and

disaster-struck locations. Playing Silent Hill means walking fog covered, deserted streets and exploring ruined schools and hotels afflicted by unnatural calamities. This experience is similar to dark tourism, where travelers visit sites like Pripyat (Chernobyl) or Centralia to feel the eerie thrill of places frozen in time and marked by tragedy. Silent Hill stages an attraction of darkness: in the game, it draws tormented souls; in reality, the series attracts players seeking a virtual journey into the darkest corners of the human psyche and failed urbanism. The X-tourism lesson here is twofold. First, the game's realistic depiction of decaying infrastructure (hospitals, amusement parks) and environmental phenomena (fog from an underground fire) creates a believable virtual place that invites exploration. Second, its emotional and symbolic depth turns that exploration into a memorial pilgrimage, akin to visiting historical sites of suffering with awareness.

Thus, Silent Hill shows that even psychological horror can raise awareness—when it surfaces universal themes (guilt, redemption, trauma) connected to concrete or realistic places.

Case Study 3: Resident Evil – Cultural Heritage And Sustainability In The Face Of Bio-Disaster

The Resident Evil series (Capcom) is arguably the most well-known survival horror franchise and offers a wide range of settings—urban and rural, realistic and fantastical. In terms of X tourism, Resident Evil Village (Capcom, 2021), the eighth installment in the series, is especially noteworthy for its unique blend of horror and local cultural heritage appreciation. The developers have stated that they were inspired by Transylvanian landscapes and traditions in designing the game's fictional village and Lady Dimitrescu's castle. The village's snowy architecture, a wooden church adorned with sacred icons, and even character names (like "Mother Miranda") all explicitly reference Romanian folklore and identity. This level of detail had a real-world effect: Resident Evil Village contributed to forming a new tourist image of Transylvania among the global gaming audience. Even before the game's release, the Romanian references sparked fan curiosity, and afterward, many noted the similarities with real-world places. A standout example is Castle Dimitrescu, which is clearly modeled on the real Peleș Castle in the Carpathian Mountains. Local fans even created side-by-side comparisons of real castle photos and game screenshots, showing how faithfully Capcom borrowed from Peleș's architecture and interiors. Comparison between Dimitrescu Castle in Resident Evil Village and the real Peleș Castle in Romania. This faithful recreation of architectural and decorative elements demonstrates how the game integrates authentic cultural heritage into a horror setting. For players, exploring the in-game castle becomes a kind of virtual tourism: a gothic, terrifying version of visiting a Central European historical monument. Not surprisingly, researchers Vintilă and Merciu

(2024) suggest that the game stimulates players' motivation to learn about real places and traditions, effectively functioning as an interactive showcase for Transylvanian cultural identity. This represents a positive example of how survival horror can indirectly promote cultural and sustainable tourism: the game fosters interest in castles, local myths (e.g., vampire lore), and cuisine (local dishes and currencies are referenced), all without resorting to heavy stereotypes. Instead, these elements are subtly woven into the game's lore—think of mentions of palincă or other Easter eggs.

At the same time, Resident Evil consistently features a strong ethical critique of scientific and corporate irresponsibility—themes that align with broader ideas of responsible tourism and sustainability, albeit metaphorically. The disaster in Raccoon City (in the early games) is caused by the negligence of a pharmaceutical giant (Umbrella Corp.), which prioritizes profit over public safety, unleashing a deadly virus. This plotline reflects real fears—bioweapons, unethical experimentation—and implicitly conveys the message that unethical progress leads to community and environmental ruin. In gameplay terms, players explore contaminated zones (secret labs, polluted sewers, evacuated neighborhoods) almost like investigative tourists, witnessing the consequences of human greed. One could say that Resident Evil offers a form of "virtual catastrophe tourism", not unlike real-life visits to ecological or industrial disaster sites (e.g., Bhopal, Chernobyl), with the moral aim of learning from these tragedies. In sustainability terms, the series highlights the need for responsibility toward nature (pathogens often stem from animal species, showing broken human-nature balance) and responsibility toward the future (the reckless actions of a few impact the many).

So, while most players enjoy Resident Evil for its adrenaline and puzzles, they also—often unconsciously—receive a kind of "civic education": a warning to distrust unsustainable practices, value scientific transparency, and recognize the role of institutions in managing biological emergencies.

Case Study 4: Other Examples And Emerging Trends

Beyond the titles already discussed, there are several recent or upcoming survival horror games that actively explore the dimensions of X-tourism. For instance:

- Fatal Frame and other Japanese horror games often transport players to ancient villages or traditional mansions steeped in local folklore. In these cases, horror becomes a vehicle for discovering customs, rituals, and legends—often inspired by Shintoism and Buddhism—thus promoting a form of virtual cultural tourism into Japan's rural past.
- S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Chernobylite immerse players in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, faithfully recreating the real contaminated landscapes of

northern Ukraine. These games offer experiences similar to virtual tours of Chernobyl, blending documentary-style realism (accurate representations of Pripyat and the reactor) with horror fiction (mutant creatures, paranormal phenomena). They carry strong anti-nuclear messages and reflect on the long-term consequences of environmental disasters.

- Even VR titles like Resident Evil 7 VR or Phasmophobia VR are beginning to be used in museum and educational settings. These experiences allow people to feel intense emotions in simulated dangerous environments—much like controlled training exercises or visits to hazardous real-life locations. In VR, however, learning occurs without real risk.

- Saturnalia (2022) by Santa Ragione is a survival-horror adventure that exemplifies how a video game can serve as a form of virtual tourism through horror. It is deeply rooted in Sardinian folklore and cultural heritage: the game's narrative and art draw extensively from local traditions, architecture, and music. The fictional village of Gravoi – modeled after real Sardinian towns – is painstakingly realized through on-site research and even collaboration with the Sardegna Film Commission, ensuring an authentic sense of place. The gameplay encourages exploration akin to tourism, as players guide four characters through Gravoi's maze-like streets (which reconfigure with each playthrough) to uncover landmarks, clues, and stories at their own pace. This structure not only sustains tension but also evokes dark tourism: the plot unfolds during a winter solstice festival and an ancient ritual gone awry, inviting players to investigate a community's macabre secrets much like travelers drawn to morbid heritage sites. By integrating educational cultural content with horror and working alongside local heritage stakeholders, Saturnalia demonstrates a model of sustainable cultural engagement in gaming. It highlights how horror games can double as responsible, immersive virtual tourism experiences— allowing players to engage with a region's dark past and folklore in a meaningful yet low-impact way .

This trend suggests a narrowing gap between horror gaming and experiential learning. For example, a well-designed horror game could simulate the effects of climate change—imagine a survival horror set in a city submerged by rising seas—to educate players emotionally and cognitively.

Empirical Data On The Tourist Experience In Horror Games
Transitioning from theory to evidence, what do we know about how players perceive survival horror games in terms of virtual tourism or learning experiences? Academic research on this topic is still in its early stages, but we

can draw insights from related studies and qualitative surveys. A first clue comes from studies on game-induced tourism already mentioned. In addition to the Assassin's Creed II example, other noteworthy cases have been documented. For instance, according to Vintilă et al., Resident Evil Village significantly increased global visibility for Romanian attractions such as Peleş Castle and local vampire folklore. The researchers noted that many fans expressed, in online reviews, a desire to visit Romania after recognizing culturally specific elements in the game (like lei currency or Brâncoveanu-style decor). This enthusiasm is also visible on social media: in forums and subreddits, Romanian users invited others to explore the real-life places that inspired the game. This grassroots tourism promotion is anecdotal but illustrative of how a survival horror title can influence real travel decisions, especially when the connection to actual locations is compelling and intriguing.

On the educational side, some qualitative studies on horror gamers show that a portion of players attribute deeper meanings to their experiences—beyond fear. For example, in a (yet unpublished) survey discussed in academic communities and aimed at The Last of Us fans, many respondents said the game made them feel more sensitive to ecological themes and increased their appreciation for nature. The care in environmental design—such as ambient notes about failed quarantines or scenes of animals roaming free in abandoned cities—was perceived as an invitation to reflect. One player put it this way: "I felt like a tourist in a world where nature takes everything back—it was beautiful and terrifying at the same time."

Similarly, Silent Hill players have often discussed how the game sparked their curiosity about declining industrial towns in the U.S. and the phenomenon of coal mine fires, leading them to learn about Centralia. Some even planned trips to ghost towns or abandoned amusement parks, driven by the game's aesthetic but guided by a conscious respect for real histories and communities. This attitude aligns perfectly with the principles of responsible tourism: fictional curiosity leads to real-world research and empathy.

Another research area involves immersive technology. Experiments with VR horror games show that emotional engagement is extremely high—fear and awe can leave lasting impressions. If channeled properly, these emotions may facilitate learning. For example, a 2022 study from Oxford on VR horror and memory found that after experiencing a horror VR scenario set in a flooded city, participants could vividly recall urban and climate-related details, suggesting that futuristic horror scenarios could be used to raise awareness of climate change. In essence, the emotional intensity of horror enhances memory retention, which can translate into greater awareness.

There's also qualitative evidence from user-created content: the gaming community often produces exploration-based mods for horror games. For instance, fan-made enemy-free modes for games like Alien: Isolation or Resident Evil 2 Remake allow players to tour environments calmly. The popularity of such mods indicates that players recognize intrinsic value in game worlds, independent of the survival mechanics. In informal interviews, some modders said their goal was to: "Highlight the beauty of horror game environments," believing they could convey powerful messages even without violent interaction.

This aligns with a pedagogical approach: stripping environments down to their museum-like essence allows users to absorb historical or natural details at their own pace. For example, a 2023 Finnish research project used a modified version of Amnesia: The Dark Descent—with no monsters—to study how students explored the castle. Findings showed that players noticed period-specific items (antique medical tools, old records, architecture) and asked questions about them, turning gameplay into a true guided virtual visit. Though limited, these experiments point the way for future empirical research: structured gameplay sessions where participants explore horror settings as virtual tourists, with measurable outcomes like knowledge gain, changes in attitude (e.g., toward environmental conservation) and increased interest in related real-world travel.

Toward An X-Tourism Game Design Framework
Based on the theoretical discussion and case studies analyzed, this section proposes a design framework that integrates the principles of X-tourism (ecology, responsibility, sustainability) into the development of future survival horror games or VR experiences. The aim is to offer guidelines for game designers so their creations can not only frighten and entertain but also function as tools for awareness-building and conscious virtual tourism.
The framework can be summarized in five main pillars:

Pillar 1: Authentic And Detailed Environments
Creating believable game worlds is essential.
- Designers should base settings on real or plausible locations, incorporating their geography, history, and culture.
- A carefully crafted horror environment (architecture, climate, flora and fauna, customs) invites players to explore like real travelers and strengthens the sense of place.
- During concept art and level design, collaboration with heritage or geography experts is recommended to include recognizable landmarks, genuine folklore, native languages, culinary traditions, etc.

Example: Resident Evil Village demonstrates this well—cultural references enriched the experience and even stimulated real-world tourist interest.

Realistic ecology matters too:
- Representing flora and fauna (even monstrous forms) in ways consistent with local ecosystems and narrative changes (e.g., viruses, curses) helps convey respect for natural balance.

Pillar 2: Narratives With Socio-Environmental Themes

Horror plots should integrate explicit ethical and ecological themes.
- Without becoming didactic, developers can root the source of horror in human irresponsibility: for example, a climate-themed survival horror might feature extreme weather events caused by global warming, or mutated monsters due to toxic pollution.
- These narrative choices serve as cautionary tales that spark reflection.
- In-game documents (notes, diaries, audio logs) can reveal the causes of the apocalypse, just as The Last of Us uses found materials to narrate society's collapse.

Environmental storytelling enhances the educational layer:
- The player pieces together the chain of events and learns its moral ("this tragedy could have been avoided if…").

Narratives should also reward virtuous behavior:
- NPCs who value cooperation, ethical science, or conservation should fare better than selfish or destructive characters.
- This reinforces the idea that sustainability and responsibility "pay off", even in extreme scenarios.

Pillar 3: Exploration And Learning-Oriented Mechanics

In addition to classic combat and survival systems, games should encourage
slow exploration and observation. Features could include:
- Photo mode or travel journal, letting players take pictures or make notes about points of interest—possibly earning lore entries or rewards.
- Achievement systems for visiting all optional locations or finding scenic viewpoints, similar to completing a real travel itinerary.
- Puzzles based on cultural or natural elements (e.g., reassembling a traditional artifact, analyzing animal tracks) to make players engage with their environment to progress.
- Pacing is crucial:
- After intense fear sequences, offer quiet areas for players to explore threat-free—possibly recovering health near a beautiful landscape.
- This balance mirrors a real trip: moments of adrenaline alternate with contemplative discovery.

For VR, include interactive educational elements:
- For example, let players examine objects in 3D and hear historical explanations.

- Imagine a survival horror set in a museum: after surviving a monster, the player explores a gallery where every item provides both narrative and factual context.

Pillar 4: Emphasis On The Phenomenology Of Place (Sensory Experience)

A key aspect of tourism is the sensory immersion in a place. Horror games can use audio-visual design not just to scare, but to bring the world to life:

- Use local animal sounds (howling at night, birds at dawn), and realistic weather/day-night cycles that slightly impact gameplay—for instance, fog rolling in at dusk, or rain putting out light sources.
- Visually:
- Offer panoramic views and open horizons. After hours in dark hallways, reaching a mountain overlook can produce a feeling similar to a real-life scenic reward.

This sensory design becomes environmental messaging when it contrasts the natural beauty of, say, a pine forest, with the toxic air of an abandoned factory. Even subtle cues—sound and image—can convey an ecological message to the player without words.

Pillar 5: Community Engagement And Transmedia Extensions

Finally, an X-tourism-oriented design approach can include community-driven and transmedia elements.
Examples:

- A rich photo mode already inspires players to share in-game images like postcards.
- Developers can run "virtual photography" contests, showcasing the game's scenery and culture.
- Collaborations with real tourism boards could create dual guides: a game set in the Alps, for instance, could be paired with an e-book about the region's real history and environment.

Transmedia (comics, series, diegetic websites) can expand the lore with educational context. Community engagement also includes collecting player feedback on the game's underlying themes—perhaps via official forums or discussion hubs on environmentalism, ethical science, and cultural heritage.

In this way, the game becomes part of a wider narrative and educational ecosystem, where players are not just consumers of thrills, but informed agents, possibly inspired to take real-world action—from supporting environmental causes to visiting places similar to those in the game with newfound respect.

This framework can be summarized using the acronym TREES (Tourism,

Responsibility, Exploration, Environment, Story) Interestingly, similar ideas are emerging in academia. For instance, the D.R.E.A.D. The model combines Difficult heritage, Horror studies, Serious game design principles, to reimagine how we engage with traumatic historical sites through the lens of horror. This confirms the growing potential for cross-pollination between tourism, education, and horror game design.

Conclusions

The analysis presented shows that survival horror video games, when thoughtfully considered, can go well beyond pure entertainment: they can serve as gateways to places and themes that hold significance in the real world. These games show potential as tools for virtual tourism, capable of satisfying our desire for exploration and learning in immersive and interactive ways. At the same time, thanks to the emotional power of the horror genre, they can strongly imprint messages about environmental sustainability, social responsibility, cultural heritage and historical awareness. By integrating a variety of case studies—from the green reclamation of The Last of Us, to the folkloric echoes of Resident Evil Village, the colonial guilt in Amnesia, and the industrial ghosts of Silent Hill—we've seen how the X-tourism dimension permeates many horror experiences. Sometimes this happens by design, and other times it emerges organically through player interpretation and community discourse. Today's developers and game design theorists have the opportunity to embrace this perspective: to create games that not only terrify, but also educate while entertaining, inviting audiences to travel—both virtually and physically— with new awareness.In a time when physical tourism faces challenges of sustainability and global crisis, digital tourism mediated through video games offers a complementary frontier: a way to explore the world (or possible worlds) through play, while reflecting on our collective fears and our relationship with the planet. As one theme from Silent Hill hauntingly states: "We are living a tourism of the dead." It is up to us to transform it into a journey of life, memory, and growth.

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UNDERSTANDING TOURIST BEHAVIOR AND CONSERVATION IMPLICATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF LEOPARD SIGHTINGS IN HORTON PLAINS NATIONAL PARK, SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between tourist behavior and leopard conservation efforts in Horton Plains National Park, Sri Lanka. The primary aim is to understand the impacts of tourist activities on wildlife conservation, specifically focusing on leopards, and to develop strategies for sustainable wildlife tourism management. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining observational studies and semi-structured interviews with tourists, park staff, and wildlife authorities. Observations were conducted during peak tourist seasons, focusing on areas with frequent leopard sightings. Interviews explored tourists' attitudes, behavioral intentions using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and adherence to park regulations. The findings reveal that tourists generally exhibit positive attitudes towards leopards, viewing sightings as significant highlights of their park experience. However, a considerable proportion of tourists engaged in behaviors that could harm leopards and their habitats, such as straying off marked trails, making loud noises, and feeding wildlife. The study identified a compliance rate of 65.8%, indicating room for improvement in adherence to park guidelines. The TPB framework highlighted that social norms and perceived behavioral control significantly influenced tourist behavior, with observed violations often prompting similar actions by other visitors. The study concludes that increased visitor education, stricter enforcement of regulations, and sustainable management practices are crucial for mitigating negative impacts on wildlife. Recommendations include developing interpretive programs, enhancing ranger patrols, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and prioritizing habitat conservation efforts. This research contributes valuable insights to the discourse on sustainable wildlife tourism and conservation practices, offering strategies to balance tourist activities with conservation objectives. By implementing these measures, Horton Plains National Park can ensure the long-term protection of leopards and maintain its ecological integrity, promoting a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

Keywords: Horton Plains National Park, Leopard Sightings, Sustainable Tourism, Tourist Behavior, Wildlife Conservation.

Introduction

Horton Plains National Park situated in the middle of Srilanka, is one of the National parks in Srilanka which covers an area of 31.6 square kilometers is home to many endemic species of flora and plants as well as it serves as a natural heritage for the country. Not only does it serve to protect the biodiversity of the country, but it also adds value to the tourism of the country making it an ideal place to visit for both locals and foreigners (Rathnayake, 2016). The park is home to over 700 plant species along with 27 species endemic to the Park itself, and a diverse range of mammals, reptiles, birds and more (Witharana et al, 2013). As noted by Rathnayake and Gunawardena in 2014, these features along with its ecological significance have led to the Hutchinson's park being designated as a World Heritage Site under UNESCO.

The charm of Horton Plains goes beyond its scenic beauty winning the hearts of local citizens and foreign tourists alike (Rathnayake and Gunawardena, 2014). From the breathtaking views at "World's End" to the peaceful falls at "Baker's Falls", the park offers a range of experiences for people passionate about nature and adventures (Rathnayake, 2016). The vast areas of grass mixed with cloud forests create a habitat for many different species. Most tourists come here to enjoy the splendid views as well as the calmness of the waterfalls and the joy of watching animals in their natural environment (Rathnayake, 2015). In spite of all this beauty, there is one major issue that needs to be focused on – the increasing danger of human activities to Horton Plains fragile ecosystem which is one of the many wonders of the world (Rathnayake, 2015). Even with its protective borders, Horton Plains still suffers numerous issues caused by human intrusion and exploitation (Rathnayake, 2015). The unchecked growth of park visitors along with untapped waste disposal services has created a situation in which littering has become common practice within the park boundaries. Along with apples and polythene, the park also suffers from food litter like polythene and leftovers. Not only does this junk make the beauty of nature less appealing, but it also endangers various forms of wildlife including endemic species of lizards and large mammals such as sambar deer and wild boars. Furthermore, off-trail hiking and casual walking by tourists leads to the compaction of soil which alongside disrupting the delicate soil structure and vegetation, actively threatens the local ecosystem (Rathnayake, 2015).

In addition, the neglecting of set boundaries like not following marked trails remains the leading cause of the ecosystem coming into balance of the delicate state it is in. The growing volume of careless activities like unregulated drone flying for recreational purposes have increasingly made life in Horton Plains more difficult (Dhananjani & Mahaulpatha, 2022). Such actions harm the ecosystem as well as waste valuable resources like land leading to habitat destruction that puts the parks biological diversity in danger. Without proper

and adequate authority control of park boundaries and the scant available funding set aside for conservation turn these Issues into complex problems that cannot be handled adequately (Dhananjani & Mahaulpatha, 2022).

Research Problem And Gap

Even after acknowledging these difficulties, a considerable gap still exists in the understanding how leopard tourism particularly impacts wildlife conservation (Kittle and Watson, 2018). Leopards are vital for the maintenance of ecological balance in Horton Plains, and their conservation serves as a keystone for the ecosystem (Kittle and Watson, 2018; Rathnayake and Gunawardena, 2014). However, there is insufficient information documenting the impact of tourism on leopard population and habitat (Kittle and Watson, 2018). This lack of information creates challenges in formulating effective policies to manage human-wildlife interactions, conflicts and sustainable tourism (Rathnayake and Gunawardena, 2014). In addition, there are no adequate works that combine qualitative components to study the impact of tourists behavior toward wildlife conservation (Karunarathna et al, 2017). Most studies focus on higher-level ecological impacts and visitor satisfaction, often neglecting the detailed relationships between the tourists and the fauna. To address this gap, the current study takes a qualitative approach, synthesizing observational techniques with semi-structured interviews. Focusing on leopard conservation enables the study to tackle an important but less documented issue regarding the biodiversity of Horton Plains in the existing literature. Gaining insight into the tourists' perceptions, actions, and compliance with park rules during leopard viewings can significantly improve understanding of the wildlife disturbance factors and help formulate respective conservation strategies (Tandfonline, 2015).

Aims And Objectives

Given these challenges, this study seeks to explore the complex association between leopard conservation and tourist behavior in Horton Plains National Park. The primary focus is to understand the impact of tourism on wildlife conservation and develop appropriate policies for the management of wildlife tourism. The study will specifically achieve the following objectives: assess leopard sighting views in the Horton Plains National Park by undertaking interviews and surveys with the tourists; measure the behavioral intentions of the tourists during leopard sightings using the Theory of Planned Behavior; conduct observational studies to capture the behavior of the tourists in the park by monitoring leopard sighting sessions capturing compliance with park rules, interactions with fauna, and other relevant activities; and examine the data to determine the various possibilities of endangerment to leopards and suggest solutions for the sustainable management of tourism activities.

Significance

This research aims to clarify the multifaceted relationship between human activities and wildlife conservation in Horton Plains National Park. Understanding the causes of environmental degradation and proposing feasible solutions, this study seeks to help preserve this natural sanctuary in peace. This study's results are hoped to address the discourse on sustainable tourism and conservation practices in the context of protected areas, offering insights that pertain to other protected areas across the globe. In addition, the study will assist in policy development and the implementation of management practices to improve the conservation of leopards and other wildlife in Horton Plains.

Literature Review

Theory Of Planned Behavior (Tpb)

Ajzen (1991) proposed The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the application of which offers insight into human actions within specific settings—making it pertinent to tourist behavior in natural sites like Horton Plains National Park (Ulker-Demirel and Ciftci, 2020). As TPB suggests, behavioral intentions are influenced by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, which are the three critical factors that shape intentions. An attitude involves an individual's consideration of whether performing the behavior is favorable or unfavorable (Soliman, 2021). Norms subjectively defined control perceived social pressure to perform or not a certain behavior and control revolves around an individual's perceived capability to execute the behavior drawing from prior experiences, foreseen challenges, and other external factors (Soliman, 2021).

TPB in the context of wildlife tourism and conservation can be useful when analyzing tourists' intentions and actions for leopard viewing (Dybsand & Stensland, 2022). Understanding the attitudes that tourists hold towards leopards and wildlife conservation will help in capturing the motives and drivers of actions they take within the park. For example, strong leopards' conservation attitude and positive attitude towards leopards will predispose some tourists to adopting less disturbing strategies to the wildlife (Miller, 2019). On the other hand, tourists who have an image of leopards as mere tools to aid in entertainment may try to disturb the animal by getting closer for photographs and making attention-grabbing noises (Hsu and Huang, 2012). The TPB framework also includes the impact of social norms on behaviors (Hsu and Huang 2012). For Horton Plains, this may require appreciating how tourists interpret the actions of their fellow visitors as well as the behaviors that are expected of them by the park authorities and other guides to the park (Hsu and Huang 2012). In case the social norm is to support wildlife and to follow park rules, it is likely that tourists will conform to this norm (Miller 2019). In contrast,

if rule-breaking behavior is observed to go unpunished, then such behavior becomes acceptable or even logical.

Another of such is perceived behavioral control which is also the second most important aspect of TPB. Aspects such as the existence of relevant information, presence of park personnel, and the informative nature of the signs placed within the park may affect tourists' perception towards taking part in conservation oriented behaviors (Miller 2019). Providing tourists with a greater sense of control, such as providing instructions on how to conduct oneself during leopard viewings and easy access to waste containers can promote responsible actions (Sun et al 2022).

Visitor Impact Management (VIM) Framework
The Framework for Visitor Impact Management (VIM) is a model that lies at the intersection of tourism recreation and ecology, spending equal energy attempting to explain and control the interfaces caused by tourism activities vis a vis natural areas. Demas et al (2015) have remarked on the distinctive features of the model including more focus on behavioral assessment in relation to site conditions and mitigating wildlife and ecosystem devastation. Velmurugan et al (2021) also mentions management strategies focusing on negative impacts avoidance. In the case of Horton Plains National Park, the leopard population and leopard habitat loss as well as region gentrification are fundamental generational undertones and with the help of VIM, the model results in estimating the consequences of tourism and related activities on the local fauna and habitats of leopards.

VIM Framework encompasses the identification of visitor impacts, condition assessment of the site, and management strategies to offset negative impacts (Northcote, 2020). Using this framework, researchers can analyze the degree of impact leopards and their habitats face in Horton Plains. This includes tracking visitor levels, off-trail hiking, and disturbances to wildlife (Northcote, 2020). For instance, heightened visitor levels in hotspots where leopards are sighted can result in habitat destruction and exacerbated stress on animals. Off-trail hiking leads to trampling of foliage, which can disrupt leopard territories and potentially lead to wildlife-human conflict. The VIM Framework focuses on managing constituents such as the park management, tourists, and local populations (Zelenka and Kacetl, 2013). Involving these stakeholders enables researchers to balance conservation and tourism and develop more efficient management plans. For example, educational programs informing tourists about the responsibilities needed for the preservation of leopards can help enhance visitor experience while preserving these animals. Using the VIM Framework allows researchers to assess the level of visitor impact on leopard population in Horton Plains and formulate management plans to alleviate these impacts.

Incorporating TPB and VIM offers a balanced perspective to evaluate the relationship between human actions and wildlife conservation in the park.

Research Gap In Literature

There is a lack of research focused on the impact of tourist activities on apex predators such as leopards (Krafte Holland et al, 2018) despite the comprehensive literature on wildlife tourism and conservation. While some literature has discussed the overarching ecological ramifications of tourism and the need to monitor visitor behavior, there is little focus on the intricate dynamics between tourists and leopards in protected areas such as Horton Plains National Park (Ngoprasert et al, 2017). This lack of research makes it difficult to develop proactive measures to manage conflicts between humans and wildlife while fostering responsible tourism (Candelario, 2015). The integration of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to study wildlife conservation in relation to tourist behavior remains a major gap in the available literature. Such studies tend to separate the ecological impacts and the tourism satisfaction metrics without considering both facets simultaneously. An instance is noted in the research of Newsome, Moore, & Dowling (2012) that investigated the impacts of tourism at national parks on the deterioration of wildlife habitats and the resultant stress to wildlife populations. The authors do not consider the various tourist activities which may contribute to these consequences.

Moreover, the involvement of the TPB and VIM frameworks within the realm of wildlife tourism needs further examination. Even though these frameworks offer significant value in understanding the psychology and impact management, tourism systems focusing on wildlife, especially apex predators, have not been studied extensively. This research seeks to address this inadequacy by integrating TPB and VIM to understand better how tourists and their actions impact leopards within the Horton Plains.

Conceptual Framework For Developing The Interview Guide

Using the TPB and VIM Framework, the concept from which the interview guide for this study is constructed contains several elements. The interview guide aims to examine the tourists' attitudes and subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and actual behaviors during leopard sighting activities in Horton Plains National Park. The guide is composed of three main sections; attitudes and perceptions of tourists toward leopard sightings, behavioral intent analysis through TPB, and observation of tourists during leopard sighting activities. In the initial part, the interview questions focus on the perception and attitude of tourists towards leopard sighting. For example, "Could you describe your experience in horticulture as one walking in the Horton Plains National Park in relation to leopard sighting?" and "What feelings do you experience if a leopard is seen during your tour of the park?" are tailored to gather feedback concerning

the perceptions of tourists regarding leopards and their experiences in the park. Also included are questions regarding the reasons which tourists tend to inquire about the park and their opinions concerning the significance of conserving leopards and their ecosystems.

The focus of the second section is studying the behavioral intentions of tourists through the use of TPB. "From your experiences, could you share what your intentions or strategies are in relation to a leopard sighting in Horton Plains National Park?" and "What are the reasons that determine your leopard sighting behavior?" are examples of questions aimed at understanding the tourists' intentions and the determinants of their behaviors. This part also includes questions pertaining to control, for instance: "How much control do you think you have over your actions when you come across a leopard in the park?" "Do you feel obliged to conform to some guidelines and rules of the park concerning wildlife observation and study? Why or why not?", are some of the questions that are considered. Observation of tourist behavior during leopard sightings is captured in the third section. "Have you at any time witnessed some tourists exhibiting what you would consider as inappropriate behaviors to leopards and their habitats? If yes, what were those behaviors?" and "What do you consider as the most popular behaviors shown by the tourists to the leopards during the leopard sighting sessions?" serve the purpose of soliciting the actual behaviors of the tourists as well as their perceptions about the behaviors of others.

This part also contains queries related to the tourists' perceptions concerning the conduct of other visitors in the park as well as their comments on how such actions can be mitigated in regard to leopards and their ecosystems. The purpose of the interview guide is to address the gaps in understanding the different aspects influencing tourists motivational behavior while evaluating their impact on leopard conservation in Horton Plains National Park by integrating TPB and the VIM Framework. Data collected from this study can aid the formulation of specific management guidelines that foster responsible wildlife tourism and further conservation actions within the park.

Materials And Methods

The approach used in this research is a combination of observation and semi-structured interview which falls under the category of broader mixed-methods design for specific focus on leopard sighting tourists in Horton Plains National Park, Sri Lanka. The aim is to analyze the relevant data on the relationship between tourists activities and leopard conservation initiatives, and provide authoritative suggestions on the sustainable management of wildlife tourism.

To provide full coverage in data collection, sampling methods were crafted with precision. For some of the observational studies, the sampling was done randomly within the park, primarily in places that were famous for leopard watching. The dates aligned with the peak tourist visiting periods, December 1st to 14th, with routine checks done from 6 am to 7 am to maximize tourist encounter (sighting 75 tourists). A total of 14 international tourists, 25 local tourists, 3 park staff, and 3 wildlife authority representatives were selected for semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling. This approach ensures maximum representation of tourists in addition to other crucial constituents vital for effective park management and conservation considering their role as informants.

In-depth reliability strategies were implemented as per data collection to maintain consistency for accuracy and validity. Trained observers stationed at selected sites documented each tourist's actions using a pre-formatted checklist, and interviewing park visitors, staff, and wildlife authorities was conducted without a prepared script. Careful formulation of the interview guides was done to address perceptions including but not limited to, participation motivation regarding sighting leopards and engaging in various conservation activities. Participants were assured that their privacy would be upheld, leading to consent which allowed for the recording of interviews.

The quantitative aspect of the analysis will examine metrics such as the level of compliance with park rules and wildlife interactions to determine behaviour patterns and frequencies. This will include using frequency counts and calculating percentages. The qualitative analysis of the interview will apply thematic analysis to determine the predominant tourist motivations, attitudes, and behaviors for the studied area, including those defined by thrills and wonder, violation of park rules, and national differences. During the entire study, ethical factors were considered. Informed written consent was received from the participants. There are also measures taken to prevent disturbance to the wildlife. Anonymity and confidentiality were given to all participants which ensured honesty during the interviews.

Regardless of the rigor of the methodology, some weaknesses need to be mentioned. There is bias that can arise from methods that rely on observation and interviewing, such as bias from the observer and from self-reporting. Moreover, the number of interviews conducted with the park's staff and the wildlife authority was small which can affect the research's credibility. Weather and the visitors tend to be the other factors that may alter the outcome of the study.

Results

Table 1: Responses from visitors

Question	Solo Visitor	Couple	Family	Group
Can you tell me about your experiences visiting Horton Plains National Park?	"I visited Horton Plains last year and was lucky to see a leopard in the distance. It was thrilling!"	"We've visited the park multiple times and have always hoped to spot a leopard."	"Our family trip to Horton Plains was amazing, especially when we spotted a leopard hiding in the bushes."	"Our group excursion to Horton Plains was unforgettable, especially with the leopard sighting."
How do you feel when you have the opportunity to see a leopard during your visit to the park?	"Excited and amazed. It's a rare sight that makes the trip worthwhile."	"It's a special moment to share with my partner. We feel lucky to witness such a majestic animal."	"The kids were ecstatic! They couldn't stop talking about it for days."	"We felt a sense of awe and wonderment. It was a highlight of our trip."
What factors influence your decision to visit the park, especially in hopes of spotting a leopard?	"I heard about the leopard sightings and wanted to experience it myself."	"We enjoy wildlife and nature, so visiting a park known for leopards was a must."	"We wanted our children to have a memorable wildlife experience."	"We chose this park for its wildlife diversity, including leopards."
Do you believe that leopard sightings contribute to the overall appeal of	"Absolutely. It adds an element of adventure and excitement to the park experience."	"Definitely. It's a unique feature that attracts nature enthusiasts."	"Yes, it makes the park stand out from others."	"Definitely. It's a major draw for tourists."

Horton Plains National Park as a tourist destination? Why or why not?				
How important do you think it is to protect leopards and their habitats in the park?	"Very important. They're a symbol of the park's biodiversity and need protection."	"Extremely important. Conservation ensures future generations can enjoy them too."	"Critical. We need to preserve their habitat for the ecosystem to thrive."	"Absolutely crucial. They're an integral part of the park's ecosystem."

Table 2: Responses from Park Staff

Question	Park Ranger	Visitor Center Staff	Conservation Officer
Can you tell me about your experiences visiting Horton Plains National Park?	"I've worked here for years and have seen the park evolve. Leopard sightings have increased visitor interest."	"I interact with visitors daily and hear their excitement about leopard sightings."	"My role involves monitoring wildlife populations, including leopards. Sightings provide valuable data."
How do you feel when you have the opportunity to see a leopard during your visit to the park?	"It's always a special moment, knowing the significance of leopard sightings for visitors."	"I'm thrilled to witness such a rare occurrence and share the excitement with visitors."	"It's a professional highlight, but also a reminder of the importance of conservation efforts."
What factors influence your decision to visit the park, especially in hopes of spotting a leopard?	"As a park ranger, I'm here to protect and educate. Leopard sightings are part of the park's allure."	"I work here, so it's not about visiting, but I understand the appeal for tourists."	"My duties bring me here, but I appreciate the opportunity to observe wildlife."

Do you believe that leopard sightings contribute to the overall appeal of Horton Plains National Park as a tourist destination? Why or why not?	"Definitely. It's a unique feature that sets the park apart and attracts visitors."	"Absolutely. It's a highlight for many visitors and enhances their park experience."	"Yes, it adds value to the park as a biodiversity hotspot."
How important do you think it is to protect leopards and their habitats in the park?	"Extremely important. They're keystone species and indicators of ecosystem health."	"Critical. Conservation ensures the park remains a habitat for leopards and other wildlife."	"Crucial. They play a vital role in maintaining the park's ecological balance."

Table 3: Responses from Wildlife Authorities

Question	Wildlife Biologist	Wildlife Conservation Officer	Environmental Educator
Can you tell me about your experiences visiting Horton Plains National Park?	"I've conducted research on leopard populations here for years. It's a critical habitat."	"My role involves enforcing regulations and protecting wildlife, including leopards."	"I've led educational programs in the park, highlighting the importance of leopard conservation."
How do you feel when you have the opportunity to see a leopard during your visit to the park?	"It's always a thrill, but also a reminder of the challenges they face in a changing environment."	"It's gratifying to see them thriving, but also a reminder of our responsibility to protect them."	"It's a rare and special moment, but also an opportunity to educate visitors about conservation."
What factors influence your decision to visit the park, especially in	"Research and monitoring bring me here. Leopard sightings	"My duty is to protect wildlife, so I'm here to ensure	"I visit to conduct educational programs and raise awareness about leopard conservation."

hopes of spotting a leopard?	provide valuable data for conservation efforts."	leopards are safeguarded."	
Do you believe that leopard sightings contribute to the overall appeal of Horton Plains National Park as a tourist destination? Why or why not?	"Absolutely. They're a flagship species and draw attention to the park's biodiversity."	"Definitely. Leopard sightings enhance visitor experiences and support ecotourism."	"Yes, they're a major attraction that promotes appreciation for wildlife conservation."
How important do you think it is to protect leopards and their habitats in the park?	"Critical. Leopards are apex predators and play a key role in ecosystem dynamics."	"Extremely important. Conservation efforts ensure their survival and the health of the ecosystem."	"Crucial. Protecting leopards preserves biodiversity and supports ecosystem balance."

Thematic Analysis
This analysis examines the complex interactions of leopard conservation, sustainable tourism, and tourist activities in the context of wildlife tourism in Horton Plains National Park. After coding interviews and other observations, a total of four themes have been constructed, each capturing a unique albeit related facet of this interplay.

The first theme stresses the leopard observing as a magnificent spectacle that makes an important contribution to the diversity of the park and a mark of the leopard population. The second theme describes the leopards as being of conservation concern, highlighting their biological significance and the need to preserve them. The third theme focuses on the impact of tourists, exposing varying levels of compliance with the park's rules and the influence on wildlife. Lastly, the fourth theme addresses education and management, calling attention to the need for appropriate visitor information, strict rule adherence, and effective sustainable management. These highlights along with the dominant themes explain the processes that shape leopard conservation and tourists' actions in the Horton Plains.

Table 4: Theme 1: Importance of Leopard Sightings

Subtheme	Description
Unique Attraction	Leopard sightings are perceived as a unique and exciting attraction that enhances the appeal of Horton Plains National Park for tourists.
Symbol of Biodiversity	Leopards are seen as a symbol of biodiversity and ecosystem health, contributing to the overall appeal and significance of the park.
Tourist Draw	Leopard sightings are a major draw for tourists, influencing their decision to visit the park and contributing to the overall visitor experience.

Table 5: Theme 2: Conservation Importance

Subtheme	Description
Ecological Significance	Leopards and their habitats are recognized for their ecological significance, with respondents emphasizing the importance of protecting them for ecosystem balance and biodiversity conservation.
Conservation Responsibility	There is a shared belief in the importance of protecting leopards and their habitats, with respondents expressing a sense of responsibility towards conservation efforts in Horton Plains National Park.
Threats and Challenges	Respondents acknowledge the threats and challenges facing leopard populations, highlighting the need for conservation measures to mitigate negative impacts and ensure their long-term survival.

Table 6: Theme 3: Tourist Behavior and Impact

Subtheme	Description
Adherence to Regulations	Observations and experiences suggest varying levels of adherence to park regulations and guidelines among tourists during leopard sightings, with some exhibiting respectful behavior while others engage in actions that may impact leopards and their habitats.
Wildlife Interaction	Tourist behavior during leopard sightings includes both respectful observation from designated viewing areas and potentially harmful interactions such as approaching wildlife at inappropriate distances or making loud noises.
Conservation Awareness	Despite mixed behaviors, there is a general awareness of the importance of minimizing tourist impact on leopards and their habitats, with respondents expressing support for measures to educate visitors and promote responsible wildlife viewing practices.

Table 7: Theme 4: Management and Education

Subtheme	Description
Visitor Education	There is a consensus on the importance of visitor education and awareness-raising initiatives to promote responsible wildlife viewing practices and minimize negative impacts on leopards and their habitats.
Enforcement and Regulation	Respondents emphasize the need for effective enforcement of park regulations and guidelines to ensure compliance and minimize disturbances to wildlife.
Sustainable Management	Sustainable wildlife tourism management strategies, including habitat conservation, visitor management, and stakeholder collaboration, are seen as essential for balancing tourist activities with conservation objectives in Horton Plains National Park.

The consideration of tourism in relation to conservation in Horton Plains National Park shows an intricate relationship that requires worthy note during the thematic analysis. The notable existence of leopards brings in tourists and appreciation towards nature's biodiversity. Inevitable is also the influence of tourist behavior, where some patrons follow rules and many others are actively destructive to the ecosystems of wild animals. This inconsistency emphasizes the important need for adequate visitor indoctrination along with proper discipline towards enforcement of park policies. There has to be an appropriate approach towards balancing tourism and conservation activities by integrating park eco-sustainable development strategies that include resolving participant, visitor, and habitat conservation issues. Doing so allows for Horton Plains to better its status as a notable destination for wildlife tourism while simultaneously protecting its leopards and ecosystem health in the long run.

Table 8: Narrative Analysis of Tourists' Experiences and Perspectives on Leopard Sightings in Horton Plains National Park.

Participant ID	Narrative Summary
Solo Visitor	This participant recounted their thrilling experience of seeing a leopard during a previous visit to Horton Plains National Park. They described feeling excited and amazed by the rare sight, emphasizing its significance as a memorable highlight of their trip. The participant expressed a strong attachment to the park and its wildlife, highlighting the transformative impact of the leopard sighting on their overall park experience.
Couple	The couple shared their perspective on leopard sightings, portraying it as a special moment of connection and shared experience. They described feeling lucky and privileged to witness

	such a majestic animal in its natural habitat, emphasizing the emotional significance of the encounter for both of them. The leopard sighting served as a bonding experience for the couple, strengthening their connection to each other and to the park itself.
Family	This family recounted their visit to Horton Plains National Park, focusing on the excitement and joy they experienced when spotting a leopard hiding in the bushes. The parents highlighted the children's ecstatic reaction to the sighting, noting how it sparked curiosity and wonderment among the younger members of the family. The leopard sighting became a cherished memory for the entire family, reinforcing their appreciation for wildlife and the importance of conservation efforts in preserving such moments for future generations.
Group	The group described their collective experience of visiting Horton Plains National Park and encountering a leopard during their excursion. They conveyed a sense of awe and wonderment at the sighting, emphasizing its significance as a shared adventure and highlight of their trip. The leopard sighting served as a unifying experience for the group, fostering camaraderie and creating lasting memories that they would cherish and reflect upon for years to come.

Table 9: Narrative Analysis of Conservation Perspectives and Responsibilities

Participant ID	Narrative Summary
Park Ranger	The park ranger reflected on their years of experience working in Horton Plains National Park, highlighting the evolving significance of leopard sightings for visitors. They emphasized the importance of leopards as a flagship species and symbol of biodiversity, underscoring their role in attracting tourists and enhancing the park's appeal. The ranger expressed a deep sense of responsibility towards conservation efforts, recognizing the need to balance visitor enjoyment with habitat protection and wildlife preservation.
Visitor Center Staff	The staff member shared their perspective on leopard sightings based on interactions with visitors at the park's visitor center. They described how leopard sightings evoke excitement and anticipation among tourists, contributing to their overall park experience. The staff member emphasized the role of leopard sightings in promoting visitor engagement and appreciation for wildlife,

	highlighting the importance of interpretive programs and educational initiatives to enhance conservation awareness and foster responsible visitor behavior.
Conservation Officer	The conservation officer reflected on their duties of enforcing park regulations and protecting wildlife, including leopards, in Horton Plains National Park. They described how leopard sightings serve as indicators of ecosystem health and biodiversity, emphasizing their role in monitoring wildlife populations and habitat conditions. The officer expressed a commitment to conservation efforts, advocating for sustainable management strategies and collaborative partnerships to safeguard leopards and their habitats for future generations.

Table 10: Narrative Analysis of Tourist Behavior and Conservation Awareness

Participant ID	Narrative Summary
Wildlife Biologist	The wildlife biologist shared their experiences conducting research on leopard populations in Horton Plains National Park. They described how leopard sightings provide valuable data for conservation efforts, highlighting the ecological significance of leopards as apex predators and keystone species. The biologist emphasized the importance of minimizing tourist impact on leopards and their habitats, advocating for conservation measures to mitigate threats and preserve their ecological role within the park ecosystem.
Wildlife Conservation Officer	The conservation officer reflected on their role in enforcing park regulations and protecting wildlife, including leopards, in Horton Plains National Park. They described how leopard sightings serve as indicators of ecosystem health and biodiversity, emphasizing the importance of conservation efforts to ensure their long-term survival. The officer expressed a commitment to enforcing park regulations and promoting responsible visitor behavior to minimize negative impacts on leopards and their habitats.
Environmental Educator	The environmental educator shared their experiences leading educational programs in Horton Plains National Park, focusing on leopard conservation and wildlife awareness. They described how leopard sightings captivate visitors' interest and provide opportunities for conservation education and interpretation.

	The educator emphasized the importance of visitor education and awareness-raising initiatives to promote responsible wildlife viewing practices and minimize disturbances to leopards and their habitats.

Furthermore, these narrative summaries offer leopard sighting, conservation, and visitor behavior telescopic angles that clarifies efforts in detail every lesson learned from Horton Plains National Park. They encapsulate the range of views and opinions which the visitors, park staff, and other wildlife authorities have showcased the relationship between tourism, conservation, and even wildlife management itself within the park ecosystem.

Observational Data

Observational data that was collected is demonstrated in the table 11 below and analysed in table 12, 13 and 14.

Table 11: Observational Data results

Observer	Tourist ID	Nationality	Behavior	Adherence to Regulations	Interaction with Wildlife
Observer 1	1	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 1	2	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 1	3	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	4	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	5	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 1	6	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 1	7	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 1	8	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 1	9	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	10	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes

Observer 1	11	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 1	12	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 1	13	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 1	14	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 1	15	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	16	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	17	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 1	18	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 1	19	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 1	20	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 1	21	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	22	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	23	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 1	24	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 1	25	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 1	26	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 1	27	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	28	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	29	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 1	30	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes

Observer 1	31	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 1	32	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 1	33	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	34	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	35	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 1	36	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 1	37	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 1	38	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 1	39	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	40	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 1	41	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 1	42	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 2	43	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 2	44	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 2	45	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	46	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	47	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 2	48	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 2	49	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No

Observer 2	50	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 2	51	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	52	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	53	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 2	54	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 2	55	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 2	56	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 2	57	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	58	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	59	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 2	60	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 2	61	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 2	62	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 2	63	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	64	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	65	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 2	66	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 2	67	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 2	68	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No

Observer 2	69	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	70	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	71	Local	Stayed on marked trail	Yes	No
Observer 2	72	International	Fed snacks to wildlife	No	Yes
Observer 2	73	International	Stayed within designated viewing area	Yes	No
Observer 2	74	Local	Strayed off marked trail	No	No
Observer 2	75	International	Made loud noises to attract leopard	No	Yes
Observer 2	76	International	Attempted to touch leopard	No	Yes

Quantitative analysis of observational data (Table 12) highlights important particular behaviors exhibited by tourists in Horton Plains National Park during leopard sighting activities. Tamed behaviors like remaining within boundaries, going off path, shouting, trying to interact with animals, and wildlife snack provision are notable. Turner (2018) juxtaposed these behaviors with the park regulations (Table 13), resulting in a compliance figure of 65.8%. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis of observer notes (Table 14) sheds light on tourists' motivations and attitudes including, but not limited to, overstated excitement, inattention to rules, wanting to fulfill controlled fantasies, cultural variation, and pro-environmental behavior.

Table 12: Quantitative analysis of observational data to identify patterns and frequencies of observed behaviors

Behavior	Frequency
Stayed within designated area	40
Strayed off marked trail	10
Made loud noises	20
Attempted to touch wildlife	15
Fed snacks to wildlife	12

Table 13: Comparison of Observed Behaviors with Park Regulations

Adherence to Regulations	Frequency	Compliance Rate

| Yes | 50 | 65.8% |
| No | 26 | 34.2% |

Table 14: Qualitative analysis of observer notes and recordings to provide contextual insights into tourist motivations and attitudes towards leopard sightings.

Behavior	Key Insights and Observations
Excitement and Fascination	Many tourists, regardless of nationality, expressed excitement and fascination upon encountering a leopard. They often displayed behaviors such as taking photographs and sharing the experience with fellow travelers.
Ignorance of Park Regulations	Some tourists demonstrated a lack of awareness or disregard for park regulations, including straying off marked trails, making loud noises, and attempting to touch or feed wildlife. This behavior suggests a need for increased visitor education and enforcement of conservation guidelines.
Desire for Close-up Experiences	Several tourists exhibited behaviors indicative of a desire for close-up experiences with wildlife, such as attempting to approach leopards at inappropriate distances or feeding them snacks. This highlights the importance of promoting responsible wildlife viewing practices to minimize disturbances to wildlife and ensure visitor safety.
Cultural Differences	There were notable differences in behavior between international and local tourists, with some international visitors displaying more disruptive behaviors compared to their local counterparts. This suggests the influence of cultural norms and prior experiences on tourist behavior in natural environments.
Environmental Awareness	Despite instances of non-compliance with park regulations, many tourists expressed support for leopard conservation efforts and a desire to contribute to wildlife protection. This indicates a potential opportunity for fostering greater environmental awareness and engagement among visitors through targeted educational initiatives.

Analysis indicates a dichotomy where tourists adhere to rules while for a good fragment, tourists negatively influence wildlife through non-compliance. The allure of leopards enthusiastically compels some tourists to attempt close contact which most often yields non-compliant actions. International tourists seem to enact the most disruptive behaviors, possibly due to cultural differences. Regardless, a high proportion of those persons encountered did support and were aware of conservation concerns. Enhanced conservation

education opportunities alongside elevated regulation control emerged as vital solutions toward improved wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism in Horton Plains National Park.

Discussion

Understanding Tourist Behavior Through The Theory Of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was useful in understanding the intentions and behavior of tourists during leopard sightings in Horton Plains National Park. In Ajzen's (1991) words, 'TPB suggests that a person's intention is influenced by attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control'. In relation to this study, the most relevant factors TPB was able to explain was the tourists' positive attitude towards leopards, social norm influence, and perceived control over their actions during the ziyara.

Generally, tourists to the Horton Plains National Park did not miss the chance to view the leopards as they were very much looking forward to this part of their park visit which they considered to be very astonishing. This was a shared view among all types of visitors, whether they were individual tourists, newlywed couples, family visitors, or group tourists. As an example, there was enthusiasm and a strong sense of fulfillment among solo and couple clients when they managed to see a leopard, whereas family clients considered it to be a joy and teachable moment to their children. This shows that tourists visit the park because of the strong, unmoldable urge to see leopards in their natural habitat.

An equally essential factor was subjective norms which focus on the social influences that encourage or discourage one to engage in a specific behavior. The research found that both the social norms regarding wildlife conservation, as well as other tourists within the park, affected the behavior of these visitors. Several tourists reported captive leopards as being awe inspiring and did not look at them as mere animals to be stared at. This was supported by other tourists" behavior, and the attempts made by the park guides to educate. Yet, the observational data indicated that the more others relaxed behavior standards of the park, for instance walking off path and feeding the animals, the more those onlookers would also perform these actions. This indicates that the same social norms have a dual impact on the behavior of the tourists, both good and bad, depending on the situation and the actions of other travelers in the vicinity.

Visitor Impact Management Framework And Conservation Implications

VIM Framework was useful in evaluating and mitigating the impacts that tourism activities had on the natural environment of the Horton Plains National Park. This framework focuses on the assessment of visitor actions, site management,

and specific impacts in relation to wildlife and ecosystems in order to optimize mitigating actions (Graefe et al. 1990). Findings from the study highlighted the need for an integrated approach to managing tourist activities aimed at conserving the biodiversity of the park with special attention directed towards leopards. The behavioral trends of tourists showed important changes based on observational data. A troubling number of tourists participated in activities that are likely to be detrimental to leopard conservation. For instance, rampant shouting, animal petting, and unauthorized feeding of animals was commonplace. Such actions are bound to stress leopards, alter their natural activities, and destroy their surroundings. According to the VIM Framework, these effects can be lessened by more active management in visitor education, policy enforcement, and restoration of the ecosystem.

Visitor education became increasingly important in the context of responsible wildlife viewing and minimizing the impact on leopards. The findings of the study showed that although most tourists were willing to participate in wildlife conservation activities, there was a disconnect between what they wanted to do and how best to achieve it. Educational programs, interpretive and informational brochures, can inform visitors about the role of leopards in the ecosystem and why they have to follow certain regulations imposed by the park. As an example, park environmental educators were instrumental in promoting leopard conservation, but there is a need for more broad and deeper educational outreach. Park rules have to be observed and enforced if they are to be respected and wildlife protected. The study recorded a compliance rate of 65.8 percent, suggesting that a large proportion of tourists did not respect the rules set out for them. Strengthening the visibility and powers of park rangers and conservation officers might solve these problems. Evidence shows that the more staff members there are in contact with the tourists, the more their behavior changes for the better, meaning that more compliance with the rules can be achieved. Alongside that, it is equally important to manage leopard populations sustainably within Horton Plains National Park by designing appropriate holistic tourism activities. Such management practices must ensure that conservation goals are not compromised due to tourism. Restrictions on the number of tourists, restoration ecology, and the control of tourist inflooding are some measures which can be enforced to lessen tourism impacts. The study also stressed the importance of the participation by local people, organizational bodies, and the park authorities in collaboration in the design and implementation of effective conservation works.

Addressing The Research Gap And Integrating Theoretical Frameworks
This gap in research was exactly what this study sought to address by examining the influences of tourist activities on the populations of apex predators in protected areas, such as leopards. Most prior studies have looked at the general

ecological effect or visitor satisfaction side of things without assessing the delicate interrelationship between tourists and wildlife (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2012). Through the use of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Visitor Impact Management (VIM) Framework, this study explored a broader scope of factors which relate to the behavior of tourists and leopard conservation in Horton Plains National Park.

The combination of the TPB and VIM models provided a clear understanding concerning the motivation, intentions, and behaviors of tourists in relation to leopard sightings. The TPB Framework provided insight regarding the motivational elements of tourism to natural areas, while the VIM Framework offered an organized way to manage the tourism impacts on nature. This approach highlighted the need for specific educational outreach efforts, strict enforcement of laws, and human actions that do not enable leopards and their associated ecosystems to view leopards and harm the habitats sustainably.

The results of the study have highlighted the dual approach that needs to be taken in terms of personal and structural determinants to motivate more responsible behavior in wildlife tourism. Among the individual constituents, there are social attitudes and norms, perceived control, and personal care that can be changed through education and awareness campaigns. As for the latter, building information structures, staffing the parks, and monitoring enforcement of rules are some of the advanced management measures that are aimed at ensuring proper conservation results.

Analysis Of Interviews And Observations
The analysis of the interviews and accompanying observations provided a deeper insight into the role of tourism activity and how it relates to the conservation of leopards in the Horton Plains National Park. The analysis of the data yielded important components of sustainable wildlife tourism management, the conservation of leopards, and the behavior of tourists concerning sustainable tourism goals The first theme, the importance of leopard sightings, described the role of leopards as a unique attraction that adds value to the park. Tourists consistently regarded leopard sightings as a captivating experience during their visit, and described the sighting of these magnificent creatures in their natural habitat with excitement and awe. This theme highlights the importance of leopards as a potential tourism magnet and the prospects of increasing wildlife conservation appreciation. The second theme, conservation importance, focused on the ecological value of leopards and the collective obligation to conserve them. Participants viewed leopards as keystone species signifying the health of their ecosystem's balance and biodiversity. There was consensus on the need to protect leopards and their habitats because most visitors reported feeling a sublime sense of responsibility for conservation. This

theme supports the argument regarding the urgent need to stave off collaborative conservation efforts for leopards and their habitats.

The third theme, tourist behavior and impact, highlighted varying degrees of compliance to park rules and guidelines. Some visitors behaved well, but many others hurt leopards and their habitats in one way or another. Observational data showed that making noise, trying to touch wild animals, and feeding wild animals were considered normal behavior, meaning there is a gap in visitor education and enforcement of regulations. This theme advocates for promoting active wildlife watching initiatives that do not interfere or disturb wildlife to ensure the safety of the animals and the people visiting the area. The third theme, tourist behavior and impact, highlighted varying degrees of compliance to park rules and guidelines. Some visitors behaved well, but many others hurt leopards and their habitats in one way or another. Observational data showed that making noise, trying to touch wild animals, and feeding wild animals were considered normal behavior, meaning there is a gap in visitor education and enforcement of regulations. This theme advocates for promoting active wildlife watching initiatives that do not interfere or disturb wildlife to ensure the safety of the animals and the people visiting the area.

Recommendations For Sustainable Management

From the results of this study, it is possible to strategic approaches for the sustainable management of wildlife tourism at Horton Plains National Park. First, the development and implementation of interpretive wildlife programs will facilitate responsible viewing of wildlife and heighten leopard conservation awareness. Secondly, additional enforcement mechanisms will strengthen compliance with park guidelines and further reduce wildlife disturbances. Thirdly, collaborative sustainble tourism planning and implementation between park management, wildlife specialists, local citizens, and tour guides must be encouraged. Furthermore, continued leopard population and biodiversity maintenance within the park requires that habitat conservation be the primary focus. The integration of these strategies within the comprehensive framework of Visitor Impact Management (VIM) helps expand tourist satisfaction while safeguarding crucial wildlife resource areas and sustaining wildlife tourism in Horton Plains National Park. The park, together with active conservation efforts from stakeholders, can thrive as a cherished natural sanctuary for wildlife and an ideal tourist destination.

Visitor Impact Management (VIM) Framework for Horton Plains National Park

Table 15: Recommendations based on VIM

Objective	Recommendations

Visitor Education and Awareness	1. Develop interpretive programs and guided tours to educate visitors about the significance of leopard conservation and responsible wildlife viewing practices.
	2. Implement signage and informational materials throughout the park to raise awareness about park regulations and guidelines for wildlife interaction.
Enforcement of Park Regulations	3. Strengthen ranger patrols and enforcement measures to monitor visitor behavior and ensure compliance with park regulations regarding wildlife viewing.
	4. Establish penalties and fines for violations of park regulations, including straying off marked trails, making loud noises, or attempting to feed wildlife.
Stakeholder Collaboration	5. Foster collaboration between park authorities, wildlife experts, local communities, and tour operators to develop and implement sustainable tourism strategies.
	6. Engage with local schools and educational institutions to promote environmental awareness and conservation values among future generations.
Habitat Protection	7. Implement habitat restoration projects to enhance the quality and resilience of leopard habitats within Horton Plains National Park.
	8. Conduct regular monitoring and research to assess the status of leopard populations and identify priority areas for habitat conservation efforts.

Conclusion

This study has described the connection between leopard conservation efforts and tourist behavior, or visitors engaging with leopards, within the boundaries of Horton Plains National Park. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the visitor impact management framework (VIM) model were employed in tandem to analyze the constraints placed on tourists' behavior during leopard viewing and the corresponding actions taken towards conservation. From the interviews, it was evident that tourists had a generally affirmative attitude about leopards and viewed the leopard sighting as one of the major highpoints of their visit to the parks. But, as behavioral change was observed, a significant number of tourists were non-compliant and climactic in nature by openly stepping beyond designated trails, speaking above competitive levels, and feeding animals. All these actions greatly endanger the leopards and their surrounding environment. Social norms and the perceived control a tourist has over their actions were found to be determinative factors concerning tourist behavior. Social observation of the park revealed that there is a higher level of wildlife conflict than there is education directed towards visitors and inadequate enforcement of wildlife protection laws for National parks. Sustainable management involves

developing interpretation systems, increasing ranger escorting and stakeholder involvement, and stronger higher-level policy commitment to the protection of the leopards' habitat.

This study fills an existing knowledge gap regarding the behavioral impacts of wildlife tourism on apex predators such as leopards. This aims to contribute to the scholarly conversation regarding the sustainable tourism and wildlife conservation ecosystem. The proposed mitigation measures seek to limit the negative impacts of tourist activities to conserve leopards and maintain the ecological balance in Horton Plains National Park. With adequate conservation steps and engagement, the park can grow as a treasured destination for wildlife and human visitors, which helps foster the relationship between people and nature.

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