

Memorable Tourism Experience in Hot-Air Ballooning: Its Antecedents and Consequences

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Abstract: Hot-air ballooning is considered an activity conducted in rural areas that involves adventure and participants' interactions with the natural environment. A hot-air balloon ride is regarded as a memorable tourism experience. Memorable tourism experiences are argued to be the best predictors of future behaviours. If tourists have a positive perception of the destination country and the destination itself, they are more likely to feel that they will have a memorable tourism experience, which in turn leads to higher revisit and recommendation intentions. Empirical research investigating the antecedents and consequences of memorable tourism experiences remains insufficient. This study, leveraging the Theory of Planned Behaviour and focusing on hot-air ballooning, aims to fill this gap by proposing and testing a model that explores the relationships between country image, destination image, memorable tourism experience, revisit intention, and recommendation intention. The relationships were examined using PLS-SEM. Data were collected from foreign tourists participating in hot-air balloon tours in Cappadocia, Türkiye, one of the leading destinations for hot-air ballooning in the world (N=764). According to the regression analysis results, country image has a strong positive effect on destination image ($\beta = 0.86$, $t = 71.976$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the country image positively influences memorable tourism experience ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 7.018$, $p < 0.01$). Destination image also has a positive impact on memorable tourism experience ($\beta = 0.60$, $t = 12.951$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, destination image mediates the effect of country image on memorable tourism experience ($\beta = 0.52$, $t = 12.684$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, a memorable tourism experience has a strong positive effect on future behavioural intentions ($\beta = 0.89$, $t = 66.672$, $p < 0.01$). It is emphasized that in destinations recognized for hot-air ballooning, such as Cappadocia, creating a positive country and destination image can enhance the likelihood of tourists revisiting and recommending the destination to others. In this context, when developing marketing strategies, the impact of the country's image on destination image should be considered, and the focus should be on providing tourists with memorable experiences. Since convenience sampling method was used in the data collection process in this study, it is an exploratory study, and the generalizability of the results is limited.

Keywords: Hot-Air ballooning, Memorable tourism experience, Image, Future behaviours, Cappadocia, Türkiye

1. Introduction

Hot-air ballooning is regarded as a niche form of touristic activity, conducted in rural areas, that offers participants interaction with the natural environment, authentic experiences, and a strong sense of excitement. It can be categorized within nature-based tourism or adventure tourism (Robinson and Novelli, 2005; Bentley *et al.*, 2001; Novotna *et al.*, 2021; Cloke and Perkins, 2002; McKay, 2013). Hot-air ballooning, as an atypical, unique, and distinctive form of tourism activity, offers participants a memorable tourism experience (Novotna *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2012; Bertan, 2020).

In Türkiye, balloon flights for tourism began in 1991 (Nevsehir Investment Support Office, 2017). Balloon tourism is becoming increasingly popular in Türkiye, as it is worldwide, with Cappadocia and Pamukkale standing out as prime destinations for balloon tours. In Türkiye, there are a total of 57 balloon companies registered with the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, with the majority (67%) based in Cappadocia. In 2023, hot-air balloons transported 744 661 passengers, with the vast majority (86%) joining tours in the Cappadocia region (Directorate General of Civil Aviation, 2024). Especially in Cappadocia, it is well known that nearly all participants in hot-air balloon tours are foreign tourists due to the high prices.

A memorable tourism experience is simply defined as a tourism experience positively remembered after the event has occurred (Kim *et al.*, 2012). This type of experience arises when tourists visit a destination of interest and find something meaningful that connects them to a specific place (Quinlan and Carmichael, 2010). Researchers argue that a memorable tourism experience is the best predictor of future behaviours, such as revisit and recommendation intentions (Chandralal *et al.*, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2012; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, country image and destination image are recognized as important antecedents of a memorable tourism experience (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). This study aims to examine the relationships among country image, destination image, memorable tourism experience, revisit intention, and recommendation tendency in hot-air

ballooning, with a focus on Cappadocia. We hope that this study will contribute to the literature in multiple ways. Studies evaluating hot-air ballooning within the scope of memorable tourism experiences and focusing on the outcomes of such experiences are quite limited (Bertan, 2020). Moreover, empirical research investigating the antecedents and outcomes of memorable tourism experiences remains insufficient (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, research examining the effects of two significant constructs, such as country image and destination image, on memorable tourism experiences is scarce. For these reasons, the current study holds the potential to fill a significant gap in the literature.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1 Theoretical Basis

The theoretical foundation of the current research is based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). TPB, developed by Ajzen (1991), is a model aimed at understanding individuals' behavioural intentions. TPB is particularly favoured in experience-oriented sectors such as tourism, as it uses core components like attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control to explain individuals' intentions and behaviours. In balloon tourism, factors such as country and destination image contribute to shaping visitors' intentions by fostering a positive attitude toward the destination (Bigné *et al.*, 2009). Research indicates that country and destination image lay the groundwork for memorable tourism experiences, which directly influence tourists' behaviours, such as revisit and recommendation intentions (Kim *et al.*, 2012). Within this theoretical framework, a unique and visually striking experience like hot-air ballooning allows visitors to create memorable moments, fostering their intention to revisit (Chen and Tsai, 2007). Moreover, memorable tourism experiences are known to evoke a strong emotional response, which enhances the intention to recommend the experience. When assessed within the TPB framework, such intentions are suggested to strengthen further based on tourists' perceived level of control and the support or norms from their social environment (Lam and Hsu, 2004).

2.2 Hypothesis Development

2.2.1 Country image and destination image

Country image refers to the overall perception of a country on both national and international levels, shaped by its cultural, political, economic, and social characteristics. Destination image, on the other hand, represents the overall image of a tourist destination as perceived by visitors or potential tourists. This includes the mental perceptions and impressions of the destination's natural beauty, cultural richness, service quality, and tourist appeal. Destination image is widely recognized as a critical construct that influences tourists' decision-making processes, destination choices, post-travel evaluations, and future behaviours (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Stylos *et al.*, 2016; Zhang *et al.*, 2016). Destinations can vary widely, ranging from a city or rural area to a region or even an entire country. When the destination encompasses an entire country, the country/national image can become a significant factor affecting the destination image perceived by international tourists, as well as their destination choice (Nadeau *et al.*, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2016). Within this scope, the following hypothesis can be proposed for the current research:

H1. There is a significant and positive relationship between country image and destination image.

2.2.2 Perceived image and memorable tourism experience

Tourist experiences form the core of the tourism and hospitality industry. With intensifying competition, it is increasingly recognized that destinations need to create and deliver memorable tourism experiences for their consumers to enhance their competitive strength (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2012; 2015). A memorable tourism experience is a unique and satisfying travel experience that exceeds a tourist's expectations, leaving emotional and cognitive impressions that are remembered for a long time. It is argued that country image and destination image are significant antecedents of memorable tourism experiences (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). When tourists have a more positively influenced perception of the destination and the country it belongs to (for example, friendly people, beautiful natural landscapes), they are more likely to feel that they will gain a memorable tourism experience, which in turn leads to higher intentions to revisit and recommend the destination. In this context, it can be proposed that there is a strong relationship between country image, destination image, and memorable tourism experiences. Furthermore, it can be argued that destination image mediates the relationship between country image and memorable tourism experiences. This would be a logical assertion. Considering the above discussions, the following hypotheses have been developed.

H2. There is a significant and positive relationship between country image and memorable tourism experience.

H3. There is a significant and positive relationship between destination image and memorable tourism experience.

H4. Destination image mediates the relationship between country image and memorable tourism experience.

2.2.3 Memorable tourism experience and future behaviours

Recent attention has been drawn to memorable tourism experiences by researchers and practitioners alike. Memorable tourism experiences are the best predictors of future behaviours (Kladou *et al.*, 2022). Past experiences can serve as a valuable source of information for future decisions (Kim, 2014). Past experiences significantly influence tourists' future behavioural intentions, such as revisiting a destination and recommending it to others (Ozen, 2017). Tourists who are happy and satisfied with their past tourism experiences are likely to recommend the product and region from which the experience was gained and show a willingness to revisit the area (Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Within this scope, the following hypothesis can be proposed for the current research:

H5: There is a significant and positive relationship between memorable tourism experience and future behavioural intentions.

3. Method

3.1 Sample and Procedure

Data was collected from foreign tourists participating in balloon tours in Cappadocia, Türkiye. In July and August 2024, questionnaires were distributed by a three-person research team to foreign tourists who agreed to participate in the study. The questionnaires filled out by 820 foreign tourists who consented to participate were meticulously examined, and those deemed unsuitable for analysis were removed from the dataset. As a result, 764 usable questionnaires were collected.

Most respondents are male, accounting for 58.9%. In terms of age distribution, 4.6% of respondents are in the 18-25 age range, 26.6% are aged 26-35, 25% are in the 36-45 age range, 21.1% are aged 46-55, and 22.8% are 56 years old and above. 62.4% of the respondents are married, while 37.6% are single. Most respondents have a university education (58.6%), while 22.9% have a high school education, 12.6% have completed elementary or middle school, and 5.9% hold a master's or doctoral degree. 44.8% of the respondents are salaried employees in an organization, while 28.4% are self-employed. Additionally, 9.8% hold employer positions. Among the participants, 17% are not currently working (including retirees, students, and the unemployed).

3.2 Measurements of Variables

The current study employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Country image was measured using a scale adapted from previous studies and utilized in the study by Zhang *et al.* (2018). The scale comprises two dimensions (country characteristics and country competence) and includes eight items. Destination image was measured using a scale adapted from previous studies and utilized in the study by Zhang *et al.* (2018). This scale consists of three dimensions (natural attractions, cultural attractions, and tourism facilities) and includes 11 items. Memorable tourism experience was measured with a scale adapted from previous studies and used in Bertan's (2020) study. This scale includes three dimensions (happiness, satisfaction, and spending) and comprises 11 items. Future behavioural intentions were measured using a scale adapted from previous studies and employed in the studies by Huang and Hsu (2009) and Al-Ansi *et al.* (2019). This scale consists of two dimensions (revisit intention and recommendation intention) and includes seven items. All variables included in the analysis (country image, destination image, memorable tourism experience, and future behavioural intentions) consist of reflective constructs (Dogan, 2019).

3.3 Data Analysis

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Usakli and Kucukergin, 2018; Dogan, 2019; Yıldız, 2020). PLS-SEM was preferred as it performs well with small sample sizes and can analyse data that does not follow a normal distribution (Dogan, 2019). Smart PLS 4 was used for the analyses.

3.4 Common Method Bias

Harman's single-factor test was used to detect common method bias. This test is one of the most used techniques for identifying common method bias (Fuller *et al.*, 2016; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Harman's test for exploratory factor analysis suggests that common method bias is present when the unrotated solution (including all measured items) produces a factor that explains more than 50% of the variance (Fuller *et al.*, 2016). In the current study, according to the result of Harman's exploratory factor analysis test, the variance explained by a single factor is 45.374%. This result indicates that there is no issue of common method bias in the study.

4. Results

4.1 Outer Model

In the PLS-SEM results, the outer model was evaluated first, using only reflective measurement in the model. This means that the outer model was assessed according to reflective model evaluation criteria. To determine indicator (item) reliability, outer loadings were examined (Kucukergin and Gurlek, 2020). In PLS-SEM-based analysis methods, factor loadings should ideally range between 0.700 and 0.900 (Chin, 1998). However, values above 0.600 can also be considered acceptable (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, Hair *et al.* (2017) recommend removing indicators with factor loadings between 0.400 and 0.700 only if their removal improves the composite reliability (CR) or average variance extracted (AVE) values. Accordingly, items with factor loadings below 0.400 were directly excluded from the scales, while those with loadings between 0.400 and 0.600 were examined individually. As a result, four items were removed from the scales due to factor loadings below 0.600, which caused the AVE, CR, and Cronbach's alpha values to fall below acceptable levels: one item from the country image scale and three items from the destination image scale. The remaining 33 items were found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) in the resampling analysis (PLS Bootstrapping). Following the adjustments, the Cronbach's alpha and CR values exceeded 0.70, indicating that the scales possessed adequate reliability (Dogan, 2019). This finding suggests acceptable internal consistency (Hair *et al.*, 2017). For convergent validity, AVE results were also examined, and all scales showed AVE values above 0.50 (Dogan, 2019). Consequently, convergent validity was also achieved. The results of all analyses are presented in Table 1. To evaluate the discriminant validity of the outer model, the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Hair *et al.*, 2017) and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations were used (Kucukergin and Gurlek, 2020). Discriminant validity was established, as the Fornell-Larcker values for each construct were higher than their inter-construct correlations, and the HTMT values remained below the threshold of 0.90 (Wong, 2013; Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

Table 1: Outer Model Findings

Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE
Country image		.905	.905	.579
<i>Country characteristics</i>		.890	.891	.672
Türkiye is politically stable	.859			
Türkiye is a democratic country	.810			
Türkiye plays an important role in world politics	.758			
Türkiye can affect the international affairs	.848			
<i>Country competence</i>		.889	.892	.734
Türkiye is a wealthy country	.948			
Türkiye has advanced economy	.830			
There is a high level of modernization in Türkiye	.783			
Destination image		.896	.895	.521
<i>Natural attractions</i>		.888	.890	.620
Cappadocia has a good natural environment	.840			
Cappadocia is clean	.818			
The environment is not polluted in Cappadocia	.774			
Cappadocia has beautiful natural landscape	.814			

Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE
Cappadocia has a variety of outdoor activities	.679			
<i>Cultural attractions</i>		.926	.927	.808
Cappadocia has many historical and cultural heritages	.910			
Cappadocia has unique lifestyle and custom	.840			
Cappadocia's historical culture is unique	.945			
<i>Memorable tourism experience</i>		.940	.941	.592
<i>Happiness</i>		.935	.935	.784
I am happy since balloon ride experience makes me feel better	.891			
Balloon ride experience which stimulated my senses within social interaction was fun	.852			
Time flew by in the balloon ride experience as a leisure time activity	.889			
I am happy to have participated in the balloon ride experience	.908			
<i>Satisfaction</i>		.854	.854	.594
My skills have developed thanks to the balloon ride experience	.799			
I am satisfied with my balloon ride experience since my expectations were met	.770			
Balloon ride experience enriched my life	.775			
Balloon ride experience increased my participation in tourism activities	.738			
<i>Spending</i>		.847	.850	.655
When I have extra money, I would spend it for balloon ride experience since it provides the opportunity to get to know the region	.843			
I would prefer to spend more money for more complicated/integrated air sports experience	.704			
I would seek more information to participate in balloon ride experience	.871			
<i>Future behavioural intentions</i>		.939	.939	.687
<i>Revisit intention</i>		.913	.914	.727
I intend to revisit this region for balloon ride in the next 2 years	.813			
I plan to revisit this region for balloon ride in the next 2 years	.847			
I desire to revisit this region for balloon ride in the next 2 years	.877			
I probably will revisit this region for balloon ride in the next 2 years	.873			
<i>Recommend intention</i>		.867	.867	.686
I will recommend others to join the balloon ride	.799			
I will say positive things to others about the balloon ride	.883			
I will encourage my friends and relatives to join the balloon ride	.801			

Note. SRMR: 0.093

4.2 Inner Model

Since all requirements for the outer model were met, the evaluation of the inner model can proceed. The assessment of the inner model followed the method recommended in the literature (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Usakli and Kucukergin, 2018; Dogan, 2019; Yıldız, 2020). First, a multicollinearity analysis (VIF) was conducted, and no issues related to multicollinearity were observed, as none of the values exceeded 5 (Hair *et al.*, 2017). In the evaluation of R^2 , values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 were interpreted as substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively (Hair *et al.*, 2011; Dogan, 2019). Accordingly, it was observed that the endogenous variables—destination image (0.758), memorable tourism experience (0.826), and future behavioural intentions (0.820)—demonstrated substantial R^2 levels (Table 2). The f^2 statistic was used to assess the effect of the independent variable on the R^2 value. f^2 is classified as small, medium, and large with values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35,

respectively (Cohen, 1992). The memorable tourism experience has an f^2 value of 4.312, which is considerably high. The destination image f^2 value is 0.502, indicating a large effect. The f^2 values for country image are 2.912 and 0.167, representing large and medium effects, respectively.

According to the findings, country image has a strong positive effect on destination image ($\beta=0.86$, $t=71.976$, $p<0.01$, $f^2=2.912$). Additionally, country image positively influences memorable tourism experience ($\beta=0.34$, $t=7.018$, $p<0.01$, $f^2=0.167$). Destination image also has a positive effect on memorable tourism experience ($\beta=0.60$, $t=12.951$, $p<0.01$, $f^2=0.502$). Furthermore, destination image mediates the effect of country image on memorable tourism experience ($\beta=0.52$, $t=12.684$, $p<0.01$). Finally, memorable tourism experience has a strong positive effect on future behavioural intentions ($\beta=0.89$, $t=66.672$, $p<0.01$, $f^2=4.312$). Consequently, all hypotheses were supported.

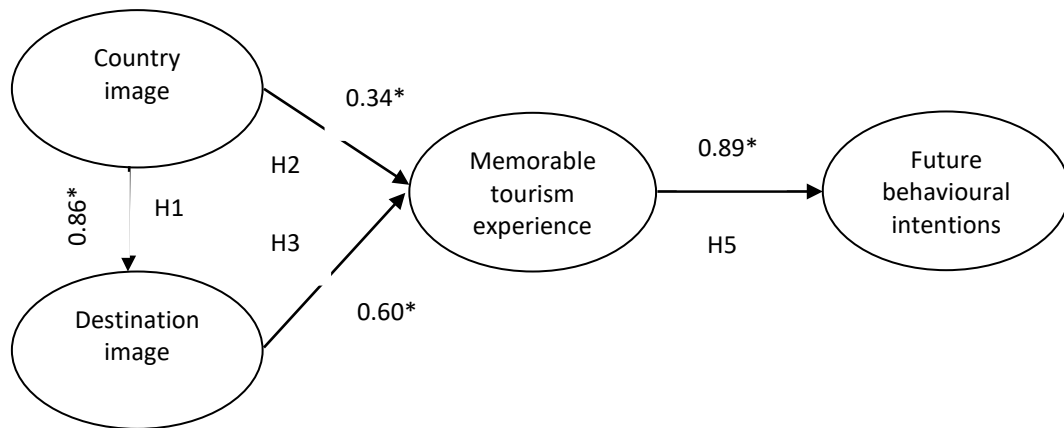
Table 2: Inner Model Findings

Hypotheses	Effects	Path Coefficients	Results	VIF	f^2
H1	CI-DI	0.86 [0.84; 0.88]	Supported	1.073	2.912
H2	CI-MTE	0.34 [0.24; 0.44]	Supported	4.199	0.167
H3	DI-MTE	0.60 [0.51;0.69]	Supported	4.164	0.502
H4	CI>DI>MTE	0.52 [0.44;0.60]	Supported		
H5	MTE-FBI	0.89 [0.86;0.91]	Supported	1.039	4.312

Note. CI: country image, DI: destination image, MTE: memorable tourism experience, FBI: future behavioural intentions, DI adjusted R^2 : 0.758, MTE adjusted R^2 : 0.826, FBI adjusted R^2 : 0.820, SRMR: 0.093

5. Discussion

Memorable tourism experience, destination image, and country image are considered significant antecedents of future behaviours. However, an integrated model is lacking to examine their relationships and reveal the mechanisms through which these constructs influence future behaviours. Researchers have called for further studies to validate the memorable tourism experience scale in new contexts. Empirical research examining the antecedents and outcomes of memorable tourism experiences remains insufficient (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, studies exploring the impact of key constructs, such as country image and destination image, on memorable tourism experiences are limited. The present research helps fill this gap by proposing an integrated model to explore the relationships among country image, destination image, memorable tourism experience, revisit intention, and recommendation intention. This study has developed and aimed to validate a theoretical model focused on the antecedents and outcomes of memorable tourism experience to better define its nature. Moreover, it has demonstrated the role of memorable tourism experience, influenced by image, in explaining future behavioural intentions. The research findings support all hypotheses, thus validating the theoretical model. The results of the theoretical model can be summarized as shown in Figure 1. The validation of the developed theoretical model using data collected from tourists participating in hot-air balloon tours further enhances the significance of the present research. Indeed, studies addressing memorable tourism experiences specifically within balloon tourism are quite limited.



H4: Country image>destination image>memorable tourism experience

Indirect effect: 0.52*

Total effect:0.86*

*p<0.01

Figure 1: Theoretical Model

6. Conclusions

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study, grounded in the TPB, makes a notable theoretical contribution by expanding the application of this framework to understand the determinants of future behavioural intentions, specifically in the context of hot-air balloon tourism. By examining the influence of country image on destination image and memorable tourism experiences, this research highlights how perceptions of a broader national context shape both specific destination evaluations and the quality of unique tourism experiences. Additionally, the study provides evidence for the mediating role of destination image in the relationship between country image and memorable tourism experience, underscoring the importance of integrated perceptions within the tourist decision-making process. The impact of memorable tourism experience on future behavioural intentions, such as revisit and recommendation intentions, aligns with the TPB's premise that favourable attitudes and meaningful past experiences significantly influence individuals' planned actions. This research enriches the theoretical understanding of how image perceptions and experiential quality jointly foster behavioural intentions in tourism, suggesting that cultivating positive images at both national and destination levels may be instrumental in enhancing memorable experiences and encouraging sustainable, repeat visitation behaviours.

6.2 Practical Implications

This study offers valuable practical insights for tourism practitioners, particularly those involved in hot-air balloon tourism, by underscoring the strategic importance of enhancing country and destination image to foster memorable tourism experiences and influence future behavioural intentions. The findings suggest that tourism managers and destination marketers should invest in building a strong, positive country image, as it indirectly affects tourists' experiences and perceptions at the destination level. By enhancing the destination's unique appeal and aligning it with the broader positive attributes of the country, practitioners can create a cohesive image that resonates with tourists, leading to more impactful, memorable experiences. Furthermore, recognizing the role of destination image as a mediator highlights the need for destinations to promote authentic, culturally rich, and unique aspects that distinguish them and reinforce the national brand. For hot-air balloon tourism specifically, operators and tourism boards might prioritize elements that heighten tourists' sensory and emotional engagement, as these are critical for memorable experiences. Given the strong influence of memorable tourism experiences on revisit and recommendation intentions, designing tour packages and experiences that exceed expectations can directly boost return visits and word-of-mouth

referrals. Implementing these strategic approaches can enhance customer loyalty, elevate the destination's profile, and contribute to the sustainable growth of the hot-air balloon tourism sector.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's limitations and suggestions for future research can contribute to a broader contextual assessment of the findings. Firstly, conducting the research solely on foreign tourists participating in balloon tours in Cappadocia may limit the generalizability of the findings to other tourist regions or cultural contexts. Replicating similar studies in different destinations or among local tourist groups could strengthen the robustness of the findings.

In addition to the variables used in the model (country image, destination image, memorable tourism experience, and future behavioural intentions), future research could incorporate other variables to provide a more comprehensive perspective. For example, variables such as tourist motivations, perceived value, service quality, and tourist satisfaction could serve as important factors influencing the memorable tourism experience. Moreover, elements like social influence, cultural proximity, or perceptions of sustainability might also be considered as variables that could specifically affect tourists' behavioural intentions.

Finally, conducting longitudinal studies to examine how tourists' behavioural intentions evolve over time would provide a deeper understanding of the study's results. Such studies would be valuable for tracking the long-term impacts of memorable tourism experiences on revisit intentions and recommendation intentions. These limitations and suggestions provide a valuable foundation for broadening the scope of future research and enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

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