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The Influence of Country Image on Memorable Tourism Experiences, Tourist Destinations' Competitiveness, and Post-Visit Behaviors

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Abstract: *In recent years, tourism has been a major driver of global economic growth. By applying tourism as a tool, destinations can improve their position in a highly competitive global marketplace and improve their communities. Country image may be utilized as an external indicator and has significant effects on how tourists view the value of its destinations, leading to different consequences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how country image affects memorable travel experiences and how that affects the future behavior.*

The method of the study is grounded in a theoretical framework. The literature review and quantitative findings are used to develop, test, and disseminate a questionnaire to international visitors in Saudi Arabia. The results of the study confirmed that a country image has an impact on memorable tourism experiences and increases the competitiveness of tourist destinations, both of which have an impact on future behavior, including their desire to return. This study offers a distinctive perspective on how tourist experiences and future behavior are influenced by the effect of country image. Therefore, the results have theoretical and practical implications for the tourism and marketing industries.

Keywords: *Tourism, Country image, Memorable tourism experiences, Tourist destinations competitiveness, Post-visit behaviors.*

1. Introduction

Tourism has been steadily growing as a key sector of the world economy in recent years (Gato *et al.*, 2022a). As a result, the growth of the tourism industry is generally seen as a major factor contributing to both direct and indirect benefits to the economy and community well-being (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández and Pulido-Pavón, 2023). For instance, 9.9% of all employment globally, are provided by tourism, which contributes 10.4% of the world GDP (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023). As a social, cultural, economic, and environmental phenomenon, tourism has an impact on all facets of individuals life (Alamineh *et al.*, 2023). Hence, destinations use tourism as a tool to contribute by helping revitalize their communities and improve their position in a highly competitive global marketplace (Lai *et al.*, 2021).

In essence, tourism is a place-based phenomenon that involves promoting destinations, which may be thought of as a product as they have both tangible and intangible features (Wang and Xu, 2015). Country image can act as an external indicator, plays a significant role in how tourists perceive the value of its offerings (Dedeoğlu, 2019). Hence, country image as a stimulus component, is a major driver of tourist behaviors and reflects the characteristics of the place (Loureiro *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this study is intended to determine how the effect of country image affects tourists' memorable experiences and how it drives their future actions, including their tendency to return after a visit. The study will contribute to the body of existing literature in the tourism industry by combining country image, memorable experience, and post-visit behaviors, into an integrated conceptual model.

As well, tourist destinations' competitiveness remains to be important to the growth of local communities as well as national economies (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández and Pulido-Pavón, 2023). Reflecting the importance of tourist destination competitiveness and its impact on future behaviors, the study will also examine the structure of tourist destination competitiveness within the scope of country image. This study aims to provide several significant insights and recommendations for academics and decision-makers in the tourism and marketing fields.

Further, the memorable tourism experience has been seen as a crucial component in forecasting people's emotional states and future actions and can control moods and travel aspirations (Kim, Ribeiro and Li, 2022). This study is intended to assign memorable tourism experiences as an indicator on tourists' preferences and decision-making processes about their tourism destinations. This study aims in establishing a theoretical comprehension of how to obtain a memorable tourism experience and how that's impact tourists' behavior in the future. This study will add to the limited body of empirical research that is currently available on exploring how tourists' memorable experiences are impacted by the influence of country image.

Subsequently, the main purpose of this research is to investigate how country image contributes to the creation of memorable tourism experiences, the role of destination competitiveness and its influence on post-visit behaviors. In light of the aforementioned main aim, the study's objectives will be:

- To investigate the relationship between country image dimensions
- To evaluate the influence of country image on memorable tourism experience
- To examine the impact of country image on tourist destination competitiveness
- To determine the effect of country image on post-visit behaviors

2. Literature Review

2.1. Country Image

According to Dedeoğlu, (2019), country image, might be thought of as the sum of an individual's descriptive, inferential, and informational views about a specific nation. It is a broad concept that embodies a number of aspects from politics, economics, culture, history, customs, and technology to form the whole of people's perceptions and ideas about destinations. (Chaulagain, Wiitala and Fu, 2019). It is a broad term with complex associations between perceptions of the destination, projected destination image, and imagery. (Michael, James and Michael, 2018). It is generally regarded as a significant construct that affects travelers' choices of destinations, post-trip assessments, and future actions. (Zhang, Wu and Buhalis, 2018). Martín-Santana et al., (2017) argue that conative, affective, and cognitive aspects are among the interconnected elements that collectively form the country image.

Hence, people's views, thoughts, and perceptions define the cognitive country image, which is a dynamic combination of thoughts, emotions, beliefs, imagery, and intentions toward a place. (Ferreira and Giraldi, 2019). This perceived image is constructed up of the visitor's subjective assessments and beliefs about a place (Michael, James and Michael, 2018). This makes it an effective instrument for forecasting visitor behavior while developing meaningful and customized services. It can be characterized as a holistic construct that refers to the mental image that a person has of a certain location (Marques, Vinhas da Silva and Antova, 2021).

On the other hand, the value that people place on a location according to their personal reasons is referred to the affective aspect of country image. (Almeida-García *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the affective dimension is the value that people assign to a place, according to their personal motives. Depending on whether that view meets their goals, people with different motivations assess a place differently (Almeida-García *et al.*, 2020). As well, the affective aspects of country image can be seen as a one-dimensional construct founded on particular emotional qualities like enjoyable, calming, and thrilling (Ragb, Mahrous and Ghoneim, 2020). It represents how prospective tourists view a place and comprises both psychological and functional factors, which relate to the more intangible elements and the beliefs about directly observable or quantifiable attributes, respectively (De Nisco *et al.*, 2015) .

It is possible to make sense of the conative country image as a result of the cognitive and affective elements of country image (Michael, James and Michael, 2018). The conative element is the emotional value which reflects the actual behavior that is shown as the respondent's preferred way of interacting with the place (Carneiro and Faria, 2016). Hence, since the conative factor influences people's views, familiarity, and willingness to a place, as well as how their image of it is developed, it considered to be an important factor in tourists' decision-making process (Chaulagain, Wiitala and Fu, 2019).

Thus, the overall impression of the country may be a major factor in the decision-making process of visitors, particularly with regard to their intention to travel. Besides, the stimulus component of the

country image reflects the characteristics of the location and is a major driver of visitor reactions. (Loureiro et al., 2022).

2.2. Memorable Tourism Experiences

Moliner-Tena et al., (2023) define memorable tourism experience as a personal mental trace that originated by a prior experience and was recovered in a new cognitive process with a certain degree of accessibility, emotional intensity, coherence, clarity, visual perspective, valence, and sharing. Memorable tourism experience MTE reflects the effectiveness of tourist destination and its influence on emotion and behavioral intentions such as the intention to return, since people's future behaviors can be predicted from their memories and emotional reactions (Kim, Ribeiro and Li, 2022). For tourists to have a memorable tourism experience, the entire tourist offering must maintain a balance between tangible and intangible elements (Ho, Ho and Huang, 2024). The memorable experiences are shaped by tourists' emotional responses, which leads to the creation of memories. These memories are vital as they give individuals a sense of excitement and fulfillment while recounting those experiences to others (Tiwari, Bajpai and Pandey, 2024). Tourists who have an unforgettable experience are more likely to return and establish attachment with the places they visited (Sthapit *et al.*, 2024). Place attachment is the term used to describe the emotional connection that develops between a person and a particular site as a result of their experiences, memories, activities, and feelings connected to that place. This connection results in a strong sense of positive association, preference, and continued involvement with that particular location (Lin, 2024).

The development of memorable travel experiences is of great importance since they are an essential component of the industry's production and consumption. Memorable tourism experiences emphasize on individual and represent significant moments that are embedded in a person's long-lasting recollections (Sthapit *et al.*, 2024). As well, in addition to generating pleasant feelings, tourists seek memorable experiences which make them feel natural and in line with their goals for personal growth (Medeiros *et al.*, 2023). It is associated with experiencing inspiration, enrichment, and being elevated to a higher degree of performing (Knobloch et al., 2017). Thus. it is one of the most influential predictors of a tourist's behavioral purpose and has an enormous effect on how memories are formed based on how each individual perceives their experience (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2021). As a result, Experience is a key component of the tourism sector, since tourists frequently develop unforgettable memories during their actual tourism journey and their interactions with the destination also influence their on-site experience (Sharma and Nayak, 2019).

2.3. Tourist Destinations' Competitiveness

The competitiveness of tourist destinations continues to be important for local communities as well as the growth of national economies (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández and Pulido-Pavón, 2023). In order to create a competitive tourism destination, it is necessary to invest in strategic key planning and management (Gato *et al.*, 2022a). Destination management is an instrument and approach for successful locations that have the determination to band together for common growth, coordination, and effective promotion of their main competitive advantages (Coban and Yildiz, 2019).

According to Gato et al., (2022), the five prime rules of destination management are as follows: economic driver, which involves creating jobs; community marketer, which involves promoting the destination; industry coordinator, which aims to validating the industry; and builder of community pride, which involves improvement the quality of life for both residents and visitors. Hence, reaching destination competitiveness may also be facilitated by knowing how visitors feel about destination management and why it is required (Pearce and Schänzel, 2013).

Because of the complexity of the stakeholder context in tourism, destinations are therefore challenging to regulate. Therefore, balanced management of the resource at the place of attraction should be provided in order to optimize the experience for tourists (Gato *et al.*, 2022b). By doing so, this results in a competitive place of destination competitiveness at the national and international levels, either directly or indirectly (Altinay and Kozak, 2021).

As Reisinger, Michael and Hayes, (2019) suggested the primary factors that determine a destination's competitiveness are its core resources, which include its physiography and climate, a variety of events, and culture and history. As well, these natural attractions operate as a foundation for the growth of the

tourism industry and are frequently the main draw for prospective tourists (Mihalič, 2013). Therefore, efficient management of resources in the destination may enhance competitiveness and, eventually, performance and productivity (Kim, Liu and Williams, 2022).

2.4. Post-Visit Behaviors

The term " post-visit behaviors " refers to a tourist's desire to return to a place after engaging in the activities during their first visit (Seow, Foroughi and Choong, 2024). Hence, tourists' future or post-visit behavior is expressed in the manner of revisiting, recommending, and positive word of mouth (Bayih and Singh, 2020). It is a key indicator of the life cycle and economic benefits of tourism locations, which reflects the desire of the tourist to return to a particular place or destination and to promote it to others (Lin, 2024). Tourists assess their own tourism experiences and mindfully construct memorable experiences that are positively recalled and recollected after the event has taken place.

It subsequently shapes destination marketing and impacts tourists' actions, such their intention to return (Sustacha, Baños-Pino and Del Valle, 2023). Therefore, memory is the most important source of information when a person is making a behavioral decision, like intention to revisit (Tiwari, Bajpai and Pandey, 2024). Thus, it enhances tourists' positive emotions through a variety of approaches, including information stimulation and engaging activities. Information stimulation can encourage tourists to visit destinations and increase the likelihood that they will return in the future (Lin, 2024). Hence, a reliable source of information regarding the intention to return is the perceptions of the destination and the impression of travel experience. Positive emotions from a prior experience can influence a person's choices and actions in the future (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2021).

Revisit intention is often called the best predictor of destination loyalty since it is closely tied to the concept of repeat tourism. Which states that the sustainability and growth of a tourism destination depend upon tourists who repeat their visits rather than on first-time visitors only (Acharya, Mekker and De Vos, 2023). Hence, a comprehensive framework can be utilized for evaluating behavioral intentions, which are the probability of engaging in a specific behavior. These intents can be considered as an assortment of behaviors that predict the future actions including the intention to revisit (Wang and Butkouskaya, 2023).

3. Research Hypotheses and Proposed Model

3.1. Country Image Dimensions

In the context of tourism, country image refers to how tourists see the destination, which reflects the sum of one's descriptive, inferential, and informational ideas about a specific country (Dedeoğlu, 2019). It is a comprehensive expression with complex interactions between perceptions of the destination, predicted destination image, and imagery (Michael, James and Michael, 2018). According to Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio and Nazzareno, (2017), Throughout the trip, tourists' perceptions of a place are dynamic and ever-changing at multiple significant points, and different events may influence this perception, leading to different outcomes. Thus, tourists' perceptions on the image of the country affect their attitudes, assessments, and intentional behaviors (Zhang, Wu and Buhalis, 2018).

As (Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio and Nazzareno, 2017) state that the cognitive dimension of country image refers to people's beliefs about the characteristics that define a destination, while the affective aspect refers to the emotional reaction or feelings that people express about the place, and the conative refers to the general positive or negative impression of the location. Thus, there is a demand for a more thorough explanation of how the essential elements of a country image interact to form a single, cohesive framework (Michael, James and Michael, 2018). Therefore, this leads to generate the following hypotheses:

- **H1a** There is a positive relationship between cognitive and affective country image.
- **H1b** There is a positive relationship between cognitive and conative county image.

3.2. Country Image and Memorable Tourism Experience

Country image is widely recognized as an important concept that influences visitors' destination selections, perception, post-trip evaluations, and subsequent behaviors (Zhang, Wu and Buhalis, 2018). This perceived image has been created using the tourist's personal opinions and judgments about a

location (Michael, James and Michael, 2018). Thus, tourists' emotional reactions influence the memorable experiences, which in turn create memories. Therefore, based on these discussions, the proposed hypotheses would be as follow:

- **H2** Country image positively influences memorable tourism experience.

3.3 Country image and tourist destination competitiveness

The competitiveness of tourism sites continues to be essential to local communities and the development of national economies (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández and Pulido-Pavón, 2023). Hence, one of the main factors influencing tourist reactions is the stimulus component of the country image, which represents the distinctive characteristics of the destination (Loureiro *et al.*, 2022). Thus, Attractions provide a basis for the development of the tourism sector and are often the primary attraction for potential travelers (Mihalič, 2013). Therefore, it would be suggested that:

- **H3** Country image has a positive relationship with tourist destination competitiveness.

3.4 Country image and post-visit behaviors

According to Zhang, Wu and Buhalis, (2018), country image has a big impact on travelers' destination preferences, evaluations after their journey, and future behavior. As a result, it is an effective instrument for predicting visitor behavior and creating relevant, personalized offerings (Marques, Vinhas da Silva and Antova, 2021). Post-visit behaviors describe a visitor's willingness for getting back to a destination after enjoying the activities there on their initial visit (Seow, Foroughi and Choong, 2024). Hence, the general perception of the place may play a significant role in tourists' decision-making, especially when it comes to their intention to travel (Loureiro *et al.*, 2022). In light of the aforementioned, the following hypotheses are presented:

- **H4** Country image positively influences post-visit behaviors.

Recognizing all the hypotheses, the suggested research model for this study is shown in *Fig. 1.3*:

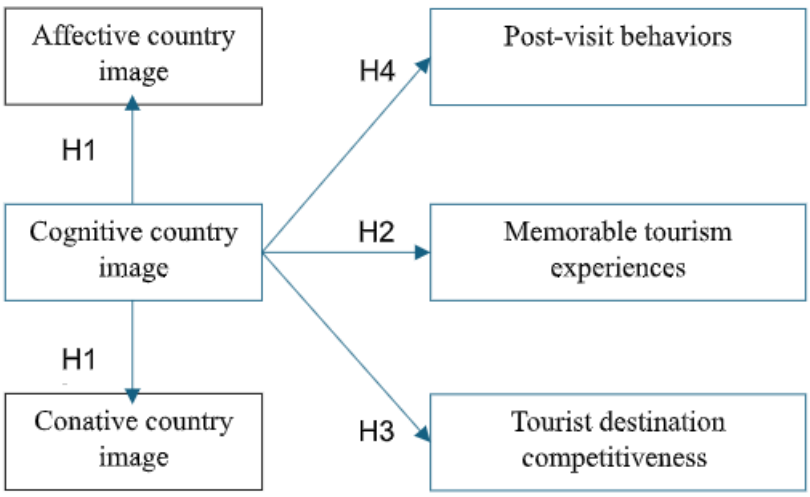

Fig1.3. *The Research model*

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study aims to investigate the influence of country image on memorable tourism experiences, the competitiveness of travel destinations, and the effects on post-visit behaviors. Utilizing tourism as means of promotion, destinations can improve their standing in a highly competitive global marketplace and improve their communities (Lai and Cole, 2022). For this reason, a well-established place attachment theory in social science functioned as the foundation for the study's theoretical framework. Place attachment theory reflects the emotional bond that forms between an individual and a certain location as a result of their experiences and emotions associated with that location (Lin, 2024). The

study constructs were measured using five-point Likert-type scales based on each participant's degree of agreement or disagreement. 5 means strongly disagree, and 1 means strongly agree.

To accomplish the objectives of this study, the measures utilized in the analysis were modified from scales that had been verified in previous research. Items included were adapted from previous studies as follows: (1) country image (Dedeoğlu, 2019), (2) memorable tourism experience (Zhang, Wu and Buhalis, 2018), (3) tourist destination competitiveness (Gato *et al.*, 2022c), (4) post-visit behaviors (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2021).

4.2. Research Sampling and Data Collection

The study used a convenience sample of international visitors who were above the age of 18 to administer a self-administered questionnaire to the study target group whose visited Saudi Arabia that represents a cross-sectional cultural subgroup. This method, which is widely used in social studies such as (Medeiros *et al.*, 2023) and (deMatos, Duarte and Sá, 2024), is among the most effective ways to gather data and produces a high response rate. Four constructs were measured: country image, memorable tourism experiences, tourist destination competitiveness, and post-visit behaviors.

4.3. Research Data Analysis

The survey data was analyzed using EQS (EQS 6.3 for Windows) for a confirmatory analysis, SPSS (SPSS Statistics 22) for an exploratory study, and EQS for a structural analysis. The CFA and SEM techniques were used to assess the measurement model. The fit indices of x2/df and RMR for absolute fit, PCFI and PNFI for parsimony fit, and CFI, TLI, IFI, and NFI for incremental fit were used to evaluate how well the proposed model fit the data. The results were then compared to suggested values. After the measurement model's validity and reliability were confirmed, the structural equation approach was used to analyze the hypothesized regression paths.

5. Findings and Results

Exploratory factor analysis, or EFA, aims to establish a framework for the sub-factors of country image, memorable tourism experience, tourist destination competitiveness, and post-visit behaviors by organizing the variables into a set of factors to achieve a significant level of correlation. The Bartlett's test of sphericity provided a significant value of 2598.8 (α=0.001), while the Kaiser Meyer-Olkin test, which evaluates the measure of sample adequacy (MSA), surpassed the minimum accepted threshold of 0.5 (MSA=0.90). The findings indicate that the research sample was appropriate for conducting factor analysis. In order to analyze the data, items with factor loadings of 0.5 or higher were kept. Additionally, components with eigenvalues of one or greater were deemed significant and kept. Almost half of the respondents (42%) had only been to Saudi Arabia once, and 71% of them said they had stayed there for more than 20 days.

5.1. Demographic Results

The survey's participants were mostly male (82%), with females making the remaining (18%). Age group between (20-29) of responders comprise most of the sample (80%). Nearly half of the sample (42%) had visited Saudi Arabia alone, while about two out of eight respondents (28%) had visited the country with a family. Most of the respondents (80%) had annual income just under 100000 US$, and (71%) of them said they had stayed there for more than 20 days.

5.2. Measurement Model Analysis

Table1.5. *The results of the confirmatory factor analysis*

Fit index	Indices	Obtained Fit Indices	Suggested Fit Indices
Absolute Fit Indices	chi-square x2/df RMR	2598.8 406 p=.000 0.025	≤5; p>.05 ≤.08, fit well. ≤.05, fit very well
Incremental Fit Indices	CFI TLI IFI NFI	0.73 0.71 0.73 0.62	≥.90 ≥.90 ≥.90 ≥.90
Parsimony Fit Indices	PCFI PNFI	0.69 0.58	>.50 >.50

According to the above *table 1.5,* incremental fit was assessed using CFI, TLI, IFI, and NFI; parsimony fit was tested using PCFI and PNFI; and absolute fit was examined using the fit indices of x2/df and RMR. The validity evaluation process in this study satisfies the recommended values from the literature such as (Hoyle, 2011) and Haier et al. (2009). The following fit statistics were identified in the confirmatory factor analysis results: chi-square = 2598.80, df = 406 and it is within the recommended range for the criteria ≤5; p>.05. The RMR, or root mean square residual, was 0.025. The incremental fit indices, which are as follows: CFI =.073, TLI = 0.71, IFI =.0.73, NFI = 0.62, and PNFI = 0.58, all fall within the recommended range of ≥.90. These statistics show how well the model fits the data, considering the complexity of the model. The measurement scales' reliability was investigated using composite reliability (CR). The CR values for each dimension fell between the suggested limits of 0.8 and 0.5, respectively, which indicating reliability.

5.3. Structural Model Analysis

The four constructs under investigation; country image, memorable tourism experience, tourist destination competitiveness, memorable tourism experience, and post-visit behaviors were used to develop and evaluate the structural model. The structural model's findings showed that each path had a positive correlation and was statistically significant (p<0.01). The resulting coefficients in a standardized format are shown in *table 5.2* below, together with the significance level that serves as the foundation for accepting or rejecting the suggested hypotheses.

For instance, findings confirmed the influence of cognitive country image on affective country image (β= + 0.53; p < 0.01), conative country image (β= +.26; p < 0.01). This refers to the support of **H1a** and **H1b**. As well, the findings confirmed that country image is positively correlated with the memorable tourism experience (β= +0.17; p < 0.01). It means that **H2** was also supported. The results show that the competitiveness of tourism destinations is positively correlated with country image (β = +0.99; p < 0.01). Consequently, **H3** is supported. Additionally, post-visit behavior is positively impacted by country image (β = +0.18; p < 0.01). Consequently, **H4** is supported.

Table5.2. *Summary of hypothesis testing results*

Summary of hypothesis testing results			
Hypothesis path description	**Estimate**	**p**	**Results**
H1a There is a positive relationship between cognitive and affective country image	0.53	***	Supported
H1b There is a positive relationship between cognitive and conative county image	0.26	***	Supported
H2 Country image positively influences memorable tourism experience	0.17	0.04	Supported
H3 Country image has a positive relationship with tourist destination competitiveness	0.99	***	Supported
H4 Country image positively influences post-visit behaviors	0.18	***	Supported

The data also shows that the strongest correlation (β=+0.99 with p<.01) was found between the competitiveness of tourism destinations and the impact of country image. The effect of a country's image on a memorable travel experience, however, had the lowest significant correlation (β=+.17with p<.01).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationships among country image memorable, tourism experiences, tourist destination competitiveness, and post-visit behaviors including the willingness to return. This study's analysis of Saudi Arabia's tourism industry provides a unique perspective on a region that hasn't been thoroughly investigated yet. The study established and validated a structural model to illustrate the significance of country image and its impact on future actions. This study, for instance, supported the findings of prior research such as (Zhang, Wu and Buhalis, 2018) and (Michael, James and Michael, 2018), that showed the essential part provided by country image to promote tourists with a memorable experience. Furthermore, the results are consistent with earlier studies that have demonstrated how country image affects the competitiveness of travel destinations (Mihalič, 2013) and future behavior (Seow, Foroughi and Choong, 2024).

This study provides a unique insight of how country image affects tourists' experiences and their behavior in the future. Thus, the findings have both theoretical and practical implications for marketing and tourism sector. For instance, the current study attempted to fill the gap in the literature by integrating and linking together several literature and theories. It has created a coherent perspective by analyzing the impact of country image on memorable tourism experiences and evaluating the essential function of tourism destination competitiveness. Furthermore, the research results have provided valuable recommendations for professionals and scholars on how to effectively convey the positive aspects of a destination to convince and increase tourists' desire to travel. The research's objectives have been accomplished through confirming the manner in which country image affects memorable tourism experiences, tourism destination competitiveness, and post-visit behaviors. As well, the findings demonstrated how the affective and conative images were influenced by the cognitive country image and how closely they were related.

However, the study examined post-visit behaviors as a solo outcome to determine the importance of country image and its relation to memorable tourism experience. Additional results must therefore be taken into account since they may support future studies and advance the theory. For instance, as Moliner-Tena et al., (2023) state that visitors frequently apply word-of-mouth (WOM) to share their experiences, clarify their preferences, and obtain views, so it is important to emphasize WOM while discussing the tourism experience.

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