



UNVEILING THE DYNAMICS OF WORD-OF-MOUTH PROPAGATION EXAMINING MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES, DESTINATION IMAGE, SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTIONS AND SATISFACTION.

Tressy Belly^{a*}, Quratul Ain Syahirah Awang Ali^b, Spencer Hedley Mogindol^c, Mohd Hafiz bin Hanafiah^d

^{a,d} Universiti Teknologi MARA/Faculty Hotel and Tourism/Campus Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

^b Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

^c Universiti Teknologi MARA/Faculty Hotel and Tourism/Campus Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

Abstract

This study explores the tourist experiences within Kinabalu Park, Sabah, with a particular focus on Word-of-Mouth Intentions (WOM). By examining various dimensions of tourist memorable experiences, encompassing destination image, social media interactions, and satisfaction, it unravels the intricate dynamics that underpin WOM. Employing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), the study elucidates the substantial influence of social media on destination image and WOM intentions. Furthermore, it identifies social media interactions as a moderator in the relationship between destination image and WOM, shedding light on the nuanced communication dynamics prevalent in the tourism landscape. This underscores the evolving role of social media in tourism communication, exerting a significant influence on perceptions and communication patterns among tourists. The findings of this study carry implications for both practical applications in tourism marketing and academic research. For practitioners, the insights gleaned from this research offer valuable guidance in leveraging social media platforms to cultivate positive destination images and foster word-of-mouth communication. By recognising the pivotal role of social media in shaping tourists' perceptions and communication behaviours, tourism marketers can develop targeted strategies to enhance destination image and stimulate positive word-of-mouth promotion. Moreover, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of social media interventions in influencing tourist behaviour, thus informing strategic decision-making processes within the tourism industry. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical insights into the complex interplay between social media, destination image, and word-of-mouth intentions in the tourism context. By employing advanced statistical techniques such as PLS-SEM, the study offers a rigorous analysis of the underlying relationships, thereby enriching our understanding of tourist behaviour and communication dynamics within tourism destinations. Furthermore, the study contributes to advancing theoretical knowledge in the field of tourism communication, underscoring the evolving role of social media in shaping tourist behaviour and communication patterns.

Keywords: Tourist Memorable Experiences ; Word-of-Mouth ; Destination Image ; Social Media Interactions ; Satisfaction

Corresponding author: Tressy Belly - tressybelly8888@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

In the last ten years, the significance of researching tourists' experiences has grown significantly due to the highly competitive business environment (Kim, 2014; Zeng et al., 2021). This trend aligns with the viewpoints of certain authors, like Pine and Gilmore (1999), who posited that "experiences" constitute the fourth economic category alongside commodities, goods, and services. They proposed that any businesses that capable of delivering memorable experiences, rather than merely high-quality products or services, would gain a lasting competitive edge. Thus, numerous service-oriented companies are prioritizing the customer experience as the focal point of their service provisions (Keiningham et al., 2020; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Voss et al., 2008). Even though there has been a significant shift towards emphasizing experiences, particularly when it comes to creating memorable tourism experiences (MTEs), research in the tourism field concerning the factors influencing behavioral intentions, such as repeat visits and word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations, still tends to adhere to traditional perspectives.

The concept of a tourist destinations' image has wielded considerable influence in the development and marketing of destinations since the 1970s (Crompton, 1979; Gunn, 1972). The term 'destination image' typically refers to the aggregate of knowledge, emotions, and overall impression that a tourist possesses regarding a destination (Karl et al., 2020). The role of destination image is significant in comprehending the intentions and decision-making of tourists (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Karl et al., 2020; Osti & Nava, 2020; Tan & Wu, 2016). The perceptions and appraisals formed by tourists following their previous visits can influence their future choices of destinations (Nazir et al., 2021). This study places its emphasis on cognitive destination image because it is readily observable, descriptive, and quantifiable (Li et al., 2021), thereby offering more tangible and explanatory insights into a destination's distinctiveness (Huete-Alcocer & Ruiz, 2019).

Based on social interaction theory, behavior is driven by social media interactions. According to Yin et al. (2019), in the context of social commerce, the most successful sellers are not necessarily those at the centre of network but rather those who can reach a larger user base. This is because tourists' characteristics and behaviors tend to cluster, leading their purchasing decisions by their social circles of family and friends (Li & Cao, 2022), as well as the retail platforms they use (Xiang et al., 2021). On the other hand, satisfaction has emerged as a subject of academic inquiry, attracting substantial research interest (Bosque & Martín, 2008; Uzir et al., 2021). It signifies how tourists perceive the quality of products or services they receive (Pizam & Ellis, 1999; Samudro et al., 2020). Bhuiyan et al. (2021) argued that tourist satisfaction depends on how well the tourists' expectations align with their actual experiences in the destination.

Tourists' contentment leads to repeat purchases, fostering a sense of intimacy and trust with the online business (Stratton, 2018). This intimacy and trust are built through past transactional experiences, ultimately reducing uncertainty and perceived risk for tourists (Tzavlopoulos et al., 2019). Ensuring tourists' satisfaction entails meeting their specific expectations (Ramyar & Halim, 2020). Hence, based on the aforementioned literature on tourists' experiences, the overarching concept of MTE has not received sufficient exploration in the context of Kinabalu Park, Sabah. There is a noticeable gap in the existing literature when it comes to addressing the MTE of tourists and their underlying structure such destination image, social media interaction and WOM intentions. This underscores the necessity for further investigation to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of tourists' experiences and to advance our comprehension of MTE within the realm of Kinabalu Park, Sabah.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Kinabalu Park as Ecotourism Destination in Borneo

Mount Kinabalu, situated within the boundaries of Kinabalu Park in Kundasang, serves as a prime destination for ecotourism enthusiasts (Tangit et al., 2014). Located in Sabah at coordinates 6° 9' 0" N and 116° 39' 0" E, Kinabalu Park covers an expansive area of 754 square kilometers (Musa et al., 2021; Phua et al., 2008). This park holds historical significance as it was the inaugural national park designated in Sabah back in 1964, and it holds

the distinction of being Malaysia's very first World Heritage Site, acknowledged by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2000 (UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 2022).

Kinabalu Park encompasses a range of criteria, incorporating diverse and naturally functioning ecosystems, featuring a plethora of predominantly unique plant species. These ecosystems exhibit varied functionality due to the region's diverse topographical elements, including distinct climates and geological variations found within its mountainous terrain. In addition, Mount Kinabalu stands as the tallest peak in Southeast Asia, soaring to an impressive altitude of 4,095 meters above sea level (Nor, 2001; Richardson, 2023), making it a prominent draw for both local and international tourists interested in ecotourism. Recognized as a Plant Diversity Center for Southeast Asia, Kinabalu Park boasts an array of flora and fauna (UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 2022). The park encompasses a vast habitat that encompasses the forest floor, understory, canopy layer, and emergent layer, housing a diverse range of tropical biodiversity Literature review section must analysed and addressed relevant previous and current studies related to the focus of the research.

2.2. Memorable Tourism Experiences

Kim (2017) observed that tourists play an active role in shaping their experiences at tourism destinations by interacting with the surroundings. Unlike on-site tourism experiences, which are fleeting and mainly offer temporary emotions, the memories of these experiences enable tourists to recall and frequently ponder over their past encounters. Moreover, marketing researchers have proposed that tourists' choices are significantly shaped by their previous experiences as stored in memory (Kim, 2017). MTEs can differ significantly among tourists due to their subjective nature, relying on personal preferences and interests (Bura, 2023; Loewentheil, 2022). Besides, the examination of Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) has arisen and gained growing significance.

In recent years, while the literature on tourist experience has been a prominent topic, there has been relatively little focus on Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) within the context of ecotourism. The experiences of tourists and the underlying framework have not received adequate attention in existing literature. Furthermore, as pointed out by Harvey (2021), our knowledge about the factors influencing MTE in the context of ecotourism remains limited. This underscores the necessity for additional research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of tourists and to advance our comprehension of MTE within the realm of ecotourism.

2.3. Destination Image

In the realm of ecotourism, the term 'destination image' pertains to the mental or perceptual portrayal that tourists carry regarding a specific travel destination (Jebbouri et al., 2022). This encompasses the collection of beliefs, impressions, attitudes, and perceptions that individuals possess about a particular place they plan to explore or have already experienced (Kim, 2017). The destination image is a pivotal construct that wields significant influence over the decision-making processes and travel-related behaviors of tourists (Huete-Alcocer & Ruiz, 2019). Destination image represent the accumulation of a tourist's knowledge, belief, thoughts, and comprehensive insights concerning a specific destination (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

In destination image, it has three separate yet interconnected elements: the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Dann, 1996; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The cognitive aspect of destination image pertains to an tourists' held convictions regarding a tourist destination, whereas the affective element concerns their feelings and sentiments toward the destination (Lin et al., 2007; Martín & Del Bosque, 2008; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). The emotional aspect of the destination image relates to a traveler's perception and firsthand encounter with a location (Woosnam et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022). This emotional factor holds particular importance as it encompasses the sentiments and emotions that individuals connect with a specific destination, exerting a notable influence on their choice to visit (Cuffy et al., 2020; Quynh et al., 2021). In line with that, the behavioral dimension within the context of the destination image for tourists pertains to the conduct and activities undertaken by tourists because of their assessment and perception of a particular travel destination (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020).

2.4. Satisfaction

Scholars have observed that satisfaction reflects the perceived quality of products provided to tourists (Kim, 2017; Pizam & Ellis, 1999). The field of study surrounding satisfaction has garnered significant research interest over time (Bosque & Martín, 2008; Kim, 2017). In the literature on tourist behavior, satisfaction is defined as the response of tourists feeling fulfilled. Satisfaction in the tourism industry refers to how well a location or destination meets tourists' expectations (Prayag & Ryan, 2011). It is generally triggered when tourists compare their first expectations with their perception (Correia et al., 2008; Konuk, 2019). According to Hoe and Mansori (2018), satisfaction denotes fulfilment with goods and services offered that meet or exceed consumers' preferences.

Satisfaction is crucial to successful tourism activities where high level of travel satisfaction represents a major concern for all businesses (Javed et al., 2020; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012). For instance, Girish and Chen (2017) concluded that satisfaction considerably affects their willingness to review and recommend. Without any doubt, satisfaction has been playing an important role in planning marketable tourism products and services. It is also significant for the success of destination marketing because it affects the choice of destination (Abd Razaka et al., 2020; Ben Youssef et al., 2019).

2.5. Social Media Interaction

As outlined by social interaction theory (Yin et al., 2019), social interactions serve as a driving force behind human behavior. Contrary to this, Oladapo (2022) suggests that within the realm of social commerce, the most successful sellers are not necessarily those located at the center of a network, but rather those who can reach a broader user base. This is attributed to the clustering effect observed in community users' characteristics and behaviors, wherein their purchasing decisions are likely influenced not only by their immediate family members (Wu & Yu, 2020) and friends (Liao et al., 2021) but also by the various business platforms they engage with (Tabianan et al., 2022).

Social media interaction is of utmost importance in the realm of tourism (Aubagna, 2023). Thus, it serves as a platform where tourists can uncover valuable insights and find inspiration for their journeys. Moreover, for travel enterprises, harnessing social media interaction is essential in amplifying marketing initiatives, enticing fresh clientele, and delivering genuine and relatable content to prospective travelers (Nauman, 2019). Social media interaction also plays a significant role in propelling travel and tourism initiatives (Riff, 2021). Through social media interaction with tourists, tourism companies can entice fresh clientele and generate enthusiasm for their offerings. Additionally, social media enables tourism brands to cultivate natural advocates who share their experiences with a wider audience (Blumenfeld, 2022).

2.6. Words of Mouth Intention

The concept of tourist intention shaped by word-of-mouth (WOM) in tourism revolves around tourists' tendency to select a destination based on information obtained from external channels, encompassing e-WOM and digital platforms such as blogs, social media, and online reviews (Siang, 2020). This intention plays a substantial role in guiding tourists' decision-making processes when they are in the process of choosing a destination to explore (Xu et al., 2020).

Electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) exerts a substantial influence on tourists' perceptions and the overall impression of a city (Díaz et al., 2021; Doosti et al., 2016; Kim, 2017). E-WOM has the potential to positively shape aspects such as image, attitude, travel intentions, and travel choices (Pedro et al., 2020). In comparison to traditional advertising, WOM can be considered a more dependable source of information (Foroudi et al., 2020). Travelers are more inclined to place trust in recommendations from friends, family, and fellow travelers than they are in promotional content from tourism brands (Yousaf et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

This study employed the positivist research paradigm to evaluate the impact of Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs), Destination Image, and Satisfaction on Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Intention. Within the positivist paradigm, experimental methods were utilized, and hypotheses in the form of propositions or questions were formulated to explore causal relationships among phenomena, in line with the approach advocated by Wendt and Shapiro (2022). Additionally, adherents of the positivist perspective favored specific quantitative methodologies, including surveys, statistical analysis, and experiments (Khatib et al., 2022). Non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, was applied, with respondents selected based on specific inclusion criteria. The study focused on tourists aged 18 years and older, encompassing both international and domestic tourists who had visited Kinabalu Park in the past five years. Data collection took place between January and February 2023, covering both weekdays and weekends. Tourists were approached at Kinabalu Park's registration counter lobby, where screening questions were posed. The questionnaires underwent pretesting by tourism management experts, and feedback was sought for improvement, mainly focusing on grammatical errors and sentence arrangement from a tourism industry perspective. A pilot test involving 30 tourists from Sabah was conducted to enhance the questionnaire's reliability, revealing an acceptable level of dependability with a Cronbach Alpha value exceeding 0.90, as recommended by Sekaran and Bougie (2019).

The questionnaires were designed using a dual-language approach in English and Malay. Back translation was meticulously conducted by experts proficient in both languages. Data collection occurred online via the Google Survey platform, employing a five-point Likert scale for all variables (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) adapted from Sekaran and Bougie (2019). Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 24 and SmartPLS version 4.0 were employed for data analysis. SPSS facilitated task entry, coding, normality testing, and descriptive analysis, while SmartPLS was used to assess the Reflective Measurement Model and the Structural Measurement Model in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). G*Power was used to determine the sample size of the study. G*Power analysis, recommended for its versatility in determining sample sizes, allowed for calculations across varying effect sizes. The sample size determination followed a linear multiple regression with fixed mode, R2 deviation zero as the statistical test. Input parameters included a statistical power of 0.95, a significance level (α) of 0.05, and a medium effect size of 0.15, aligning with commonly recommended standards in social and business science research (Hair et al., 2021). The number of predictors in the model was determined by the study's hypothesis, resulting in a minimum sample size of 153, as indicated in Figure 1.

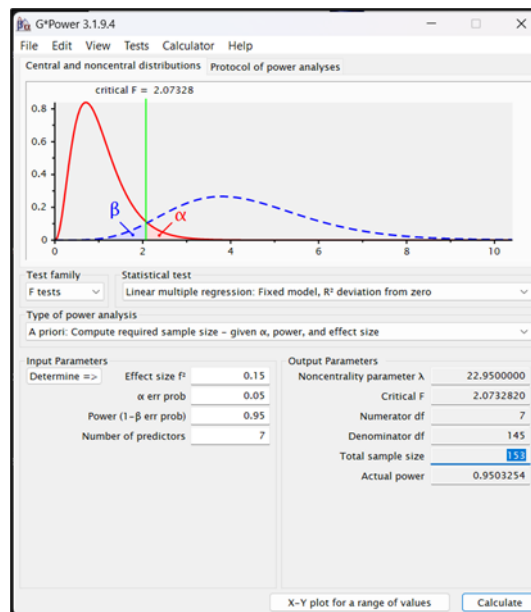


Figure 1: Power analysis for a framework model
Source: G*Power 3.1.9.

4. Findings

4.1. Respondents

A total of 200 surveys were handed out, and 166 of them were filled out and returned, resulting in an overall response rate of 83%. The survey respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 64 years, with the majority (58.6%) falling between the ages of 18 and 35. The average age was 34.68, with a standard deviation of 7.87. In terms of marital status, most respondents were married (52.2%), followed closely by single individuals (47.8%). Concerning occupation, the largest group of respondents (38.3%) identified as professionals, followed by those employed in the government sector (35.2%), businessmen (20.8%), students (3.7%), housewives (1.0%), and retirees (1.0%). As indicated in Table 1, the primary reason for visiting Kinabalu Park was for leisure purposes (41.0%). Additionally, (29.0%) visited the park to relax, (22%) for socializing with friends and relatives, (4.0%) for volunteering, and another (4.0%) for business-related reasons.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis

Variable	Category	Distribution
Gender	Male	60.5
	Female	39.5
Age	Mean	34.68 (SD = 7.87)
	Median	33
Marital Status	Married	52.2
	Single	47.8
Occupation	Professional	38.3
	Government	35.2
	Businessman	20.8
	Student	3.7
	Housewife	1.0
	Retired	1.0
Purposes	Pleasure	41.0
	Relaxing	29.0
	Visiting friends & relatives	22.0
	Volunteer	4.0
	Business	4.0

4.2. Reflective Measurement Model

The assessment of the measurement model serves the purpose of confirming the validity and reliability of the items within the constructs. This involves determining four essential parameters: (i) the reliability of the indicators, (ii) the internal consistency reliability, (iii) the convergent validity, and (iv) the discriminant validity, all of which are crucial for evaluating a reflective measurement model. Figure 2 and Table 2 below provide a visual and tabular representation of the outer loading scores, composite reliability, convergent reliability, and Cronbach Alpha, which are used to assess the reflective measurement model.

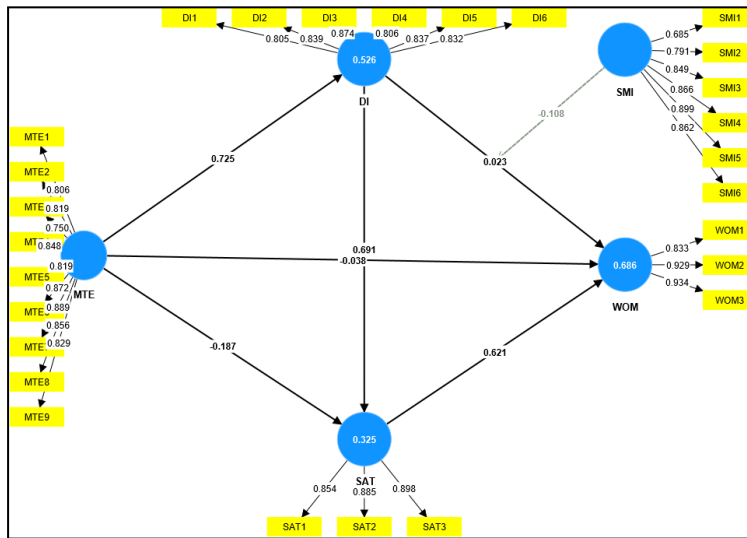


Figure 2: The Reflective Measurement Model

Table 2 demonstrates that the loading indicator scores fall within the range of 0.750 to 0.934, surpassing the recommended threshold. All loading indicators are deemed suitable and align with the desired level of reliability. The composite reliability values for the nine constructs in this study range from 0.854 to 0.986, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70. This signifies that the internal consistency of the items in each construct is adequate for this study. Additionally, the AVE values in this study are found to be between 0.686 and 0.810, which surpass the 0.5 threshold, indicating a satisfactory level of convergent validity.

Table 2: The Reflective Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Outer Loading	Composite reliability (rho_a)	AVE	Cronbach Alpha
Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE)	MTE 1	0.806	0.955	0.694	0.945
	MTE 2	0.819			
	MTE 3	0.750			
	MTE 4	0.848			
	MTE 5	0.819			
	MTE 6	0.872			
	MTE 7	0.889			
	MTE8	0.856			
	MTE 9	0.829			
Words of Mouth (WOM)	WOM 1	0.833	0.880	0.810	0.881
	WOM 2	0.929			

	WOM 3	0.934			
Destination Image (DI)	DI 1	0.805	0.919	0.693	0.912
	DI 2	0.839			
	DI 3	0.874			
	DI 4	0.806			
	DI 5	0.837			
	DI 6	0.832			
Satisfaction (SAT)	SAT 1	0.854	0.854	0.773	0.853
	SAT 2	0.885			
	SAT 3	0.898			
Social Media Interaction (SMI)	SMI1	0.785	0.986	0.686	0.914
	SMI2	0.791			
	SMI3	0.849			
	SMI4	0.866			
	SMI5	0.899			
	SMI6	0.862			

In Table 3, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) is utilized to verify the discriminant validity of the model. It is suggested that the threshold value should be set at a lower level, around 0.85 or 0.90, especially when constructs are conceptually distinct, to be more conservative (Henseler et al., 2014). Since the HTMT values in this study are below 0.90, there are no issues with collinearity among the latent constructs.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	DI	MTE	SAT	SMI	WOM	SMI x DI
DI	-					
MTE	0.751	-				
SAT	0.612	0.338	-			
SMI	0.285	0.487	0.413	-		
WOM	0.478	0.356	0.89	0.55	-	
SMI x DI	0.151	0.236	0.248	0.272	0.367	-

4.2. Structural Model

After establishing a consistent and precise measurement model, the analysis proceeded to assess the linear connections, both causal and covariance, between the exogenous (independent) and endogenous (dependent) latent variables. This phase aimed to empirically test all hypotheses presented in this thesis to address the research questions. As outlined by Hair et al. (2022) and Götz et al. (2010), evaluation of the Partial Least Squares Structural

Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Q2) involved criteria such as the coefficient of determination (R²), path coefficient estimation (β), effect size (f^2), and prediction relevance.

The SmartPLS algorithm output was employed to investigate the relationships between independent and dependent variables. The examination of the path link described in the framework was conducted through the assessment of the regression coefficient (β) value to ascertain its significance level. The pertinence of the regression coefficient (β) was established by considering t-values obtained via the PLS Bootstrapping procedure. The significance of each association was appraised using the t-statistics output. The resulting Table 4 presents the path coefficients, observed t-statistics, and significance levels for each hypothesized path.

Table 4: Path Coefficient

	Path Analysis	β	T-Statistics	P-Values	f^2	R ²	Q ²	Results
H ₁ H ₂ H ₃	MTE -> WOM	0.056	0.455	0.325	0.002	0.587	0.497	Insignificant
	DI -> WOM	0.063***	0.261	0.397	0.001			
	SAT -> WOM	0.046***	9.303	0.000	0.669			
H ₄	MTE -> DI	0.045***	13.73	0.000	1.109	0.656	0.449	Significant
H ₅ H ₆	MTE -> SAT	0.055*	1.286	0.099	0.024	0.538	0.348	Insignificant
	DI -> SAT	0.068***	6.384	0.000	0.335			Significant
H ₇	SMI x DI -> WOM	0.070***	1.936	0.026	0.045			Significant

5. Discussions

In previous research, MTEs were identified as key drivers of WOM recommendations and influencers of the behavioral intentions of heritage tourists (Mohammad, 2020). WOM marketing stands out as a potent tool in the tourism realm, given its heightened reliability and persuasiveness compared to unsolicited advertising (Insight, 2020). Nevertheless, this current study posits that the limited awareness surrounding tourist attractions and experiences in Kinabalu Park may stem from inadequate marketing endeavors or a lack of exposure in tourism promotions by stakeholders in Sabah. This, in turn, diminishes the insignificant results of WOM in the Sabah tourism industry.

In certain locations, a robust culture of WOM promotion may be lacking (Chen et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2020). Elements like cultural norms, social dynamics, or the general attitude toward sharing travel experiences can impact tourists' inclination to disseminate positive word of mouth (Mohammad, 2020). Consequently, acknowledging that the effectiveness of WOM can fluctuate based on the destination image, it is appropriate to assert that, in the case of Kinabalu Sabah Park, such promotion is deemed insignificant. As mentioned previously, Kinabalu Sabah Park has encountered challenges related to service quality, casting a shadow on positive experiences, and leading to diminished satisfaction levels (Bonn, 2008; Harun et al., 2018). Therefore, the limited significance in the connection between tourists' memorable tourism experiences and overall satisfaction at Kinabalu Sabah Park necessitates comprehensive improvements in management, communication, and infrastructure development.

The trust and credibility of satisfied tourists as trustworthy sources of information is supported by research (Bidder et al., 2016). When tourists' express satisfaction with their experiences at Kinabalu Sabah Park, they are perceived as trustworthy sources of information (Talib et al., 2014). This perception boosts the likelihood that potential tourists will trust and act on these recommendations, given that they originate from firsthand positive encounters. This underscores the substantial influence of WOM promotion and the role of visitor satisfaction in shaping both the destination's image and visitor behavior. Consequently, harnessing the positive experiences of satisfied tourists can elevate the park's reputation, draw in more tourists, and contribute to the sustained growth of tourism.

Positive associations with the destination image are counterfeited through MTEs (Shafiee et al., 2021). When tourists have distinctive and positive encounters at Kinabalu Sabah Park, it fosters a favorable perception of the

destination image in their minds. This is because MTEs, whether positive or negative, tend to evoke emotions, such as joy or frustration, influencing tourists' perceptions and potential recommendations (Shafiee et al., 2021; Utheim, 2021). Through the delivery of exceptional experiences, Kinabalu Sabah Park destination image can elevate its reputation, draw in a greater number of tourists, and play a role in sustaining the growth of tourism. Study underscores the utmost importance of destination image in relation to satisfaction in tourism at Kinabalu Sabah Park. A positive destination image not only promotes repeat visits but also increases the likelihood of satisfied tourists returning, thereby contributing to the establishment of a loyal visitor base (Simon et al., 2020; Talib et al., 2023). The pivotal role of destination image in shaping tourists' perceptions and satisfaction levels significantly influences their decision to revisit the park. Accordingly, maintaining a positive destination image is crucial for sustaining tourist satisfaction and fostering repeat visitation, representing a fundamental factor for the long-term success of Kinabalu Sabah Park as a tourism destination.

Other studies, such as the one conducted by Alsaahfi et al. (2023), have demonstrated that social media interaction plays a moderating role in the relationship between destination image and word-of-mouth. Consistent with these findings, this study also indicates that social media interaction has a moderation effect on the connection between destination image and word-of-mouth in tourism at Kinabalu Sabah Park. This effect is characterized by the amplification of positive experiences, as social media platforms offer tourists a robust channel for sharing their favorable encounters at Kinabalu Sabah Park. Tourists with a positive perception of the destination are inclined to showcase their memorable moments, capturing attention, and fostering word-of-mouth recommendations.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations and Future Research

In exploring the facets of memorable experiences, destination image, social media interactions, and satisfaction, the study encountered several notable limitations. Firstly, the findings may lack universal applicability beyond the specific context of Kinabalu Park. The distinct characteristics of the park and its visitors could constrain the study's generalizability to other destinations. To overcome this limitation, it is imperative to broaden the research scope by encompassing a diverse range of tourism destinations with varying attributes. This could entail conducting analogous studies in different geographical locations or types of parks with dissimilar visitor demographics.

Additionally, the study faced limitations concerning the size of its sample, potentially affecting the representativeness of the results. If the sample lacks diversity and fails to accurately reflect the demographic composition of park visitors, the external validity of the study could be compromised. For forthcoming research endeavours, researchers are advised to contemplate augmenting the sample size. Expanding the sample size, where feasible, can fortify the study's capacity to offer a more comprehensive and diverse representation of the visitor populace at the park, thereby enhancing the reliability and applicability of the findings.

Furthermore, external elements such as economic conditions, global events, or travel trends may exert influence on visitor experiences and word-of-mouth intentions. The study may encounter challenges in fully controlling or accounting for these external factors. To mitigate the potential impact of these external influences on visitor experiences and word-of-mouth intentions, it is suggested to consider adopting a longitudinal study design. This approach enables the capture of changes over time, providing an assessment of how external factors might shape visitor experiences and word-of-mouth intentions. Longitudinal data can yield valuable insights into fluctuations during distinct phases, such as economic shifts or significant global events, thus enhancing the study's comprehensiveness and robustness.

7. Conclusions

To summarise, this study presents a thorough investigation into the intricate web of factors influencing tourist behaviour amidst the unique natural landscape of Kinabalu Park. The findings shed light on the significance of various elements such as memorable experiences, destination image, social media interactions, and overall satisfaction in shaping tourists' inclination towards positive word-of-mouth promotion. By identifying these key determinants, the study not only enriches our comprehension of visitor behaviour within Kinabalu Park but also offers valuable insights applicable to analogous ecotourism destinations globally.

Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this study. While the findings offer valuable insights into the specific context of Kinabalu Park, the generalizability of the results may be curtailed by the destination's unique characteristics and the demographics of the sampled population. Additionally, the influence of external factors, such as socio-political events or economic fluctuations, on tourist behaviour warrants consideration. Recognising these limitations underscores the need for a cautious interpretation of the findings and encourages future research efforts to explore a broader range of contexts and variables.

Future research endeavours in this field stand to gain from several avenues of exploration. Expanding sample sizes beyond the current study's scope could enhance the representativeness and validity of the findings, enabling more robust conclusions. Furthermore, employing diverse methodological approaches, such as qualitative interviews or observational studies, alongside quantitative surveys, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourist behaviour dynamics within ecotourism settings. Longitudinal studies tracking tourists' experiences and behaviours over time could also yield valuable insights into the temporal aspects of visitor engagement and satisfaction within natural environments.

The outcomes of this study transcend the confines of Kinabalu Park, offering implications for destination management practices in ecotourism contexts worldwide. By acknowledging the significance of memorable experiences, destination image, and social interactions in shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviours, destination managers can devise informed strategies aimed at enhancing visitor experiences and fostering positive word-of-mouth intentions. Furthermore, the emphasis on satisfaction as a crucial determinant underscores the importance of quality service delivery and visitor engagement initiatives in promoting sustainable tourism practices.

In summary, while this study furnishes valuable insights into the specific dynamics of tourist behaviour within Kinabalu Park, it also underscores the necessity for continued research and exploration in the field of ecotourism. Addressing the identified limitations and embracing innovative methodologies in future research endeavours can further enrich our understanding of visitor behaviour in natural settings and inform evidence-based strategies for destination management and sustainable tourism development.

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Authors' Biographies



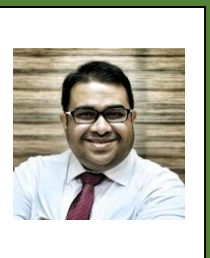
Tressy Belly is a PhD candidate and researcher specialising in tourism management, with a strong focus on sustainable and responsible tourism practices. She holds a Bachelor of Science (Hons.) in Tourism Management, and a Master's in Tourism Management, both from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia. Tressy's doctoral research explores ecotourism participation intentions, specifically in the context of the Tunku Abdul Rahman Park (TARP) islands in Sabah. She is currently working as a research assistant at UiTM Malaysia.



Dr. Quratul'ain Syahirah Binti Awang Ali is a distinguished academic and expert in Business Continuity Management, Tourism Resilience, and the operations of tour operator companies. She is currently a faculty member at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), where she shares her expertise in the field of tourism management. With a deep understanding of the complex dynamics between tourism resilience and business continuity, Dr. Quratul'ain has contributed significantly to research that helps tour operator companies develop strategies to manage risks and ensure the sustainability of their operations in times of crisis.



Dr. Spencer Hedley Mogindol is a highly respected academic specializing in tourism management. He currently serves as a senior lecturer at UiTM Sabah, Malaysia, where he contributes significantly to the advancement of research and education in the fields of tourism and management. Dr. Spencer expertise lies in exploring the intersection of ecotourism and sustainable management practices. His research focuses on the environmental and social aspects of tourism, with an emphasis on how tourism can contribute to the preservation of natural resources while fostering sustainable development in local communities.



Professor Dr Mohd Hafiz bin Hanafiah is a renowned academic in the field of tourism economics, currently serving at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). His expertise lies in tourism economics, destination competitiveness, and the application of advanced methodologies such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to explore and enhance the dynamics of the tourism and hospitality industry. Professor Hafiz's dedication to advancing knowledge in tourism economics has positioned him as a thought leader in the field. His research provides invaluable insights into fostering sustainable growth and innovation within the tourism sector, both nationally and globally.