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Tel: +974 4408 0045 | Email: info@kataraph.com

Web: www.kataraph.com

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

IMJCT is an international scientific journal specialized in publishing research in tourism, culture, and marketing, including government administration and policies, as well as the development of new technologies, methodologies, and tools. It is published by Katara Publishing House in cooperation with Al Rayyan International University College-University of Derby, UK, Qatar. The Journal publishes two issues per year and aims to provide a scientific platform that allows researchers and specialists to submit and publish their scientific papers and research studies in the field of tourism, culture, and marketing, as well as to contribute to the spread of knowledge by making research and studies available to the beneficiaries worldwide.

VISION:

To be a leading global scientific publishing platform in the field of tourism, culture, and marketing.

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The journal has a broad scope and seeks to address an important gap in the field. It will help not only students, teachers, experts and researchers who are working in this area, but also cultural and tourism institutions, organizations, NGOs, companies, and the general public to update themselves about the latest research, developments, and trends in culture and tourism marketing. The main objective of the journal is to publish scientific research on the subject of culture and tourism marketing that includes management trends, government policies, and insights related to the development of new technologies, methodologies and tools.

Specifically, the journal is committed to:

- Providing Arab and international researchers with opportunities to arbitrate and publish their research in the field of tourism culture and marketing.
- Contributing to supporting and developing the cultural field and tourism marketing through rigorous and original research studies in accordance with international standards.
- Promoting internationally relevant research in culture and tourism in accordance with contemporary, with its professional standards and ethical principles.
- Creating a knowledge base for the journal that contributes to creating a scientific reference and a solid documentary record.

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- The journal is concerned with publishing original scientific papers that have not been previously published, in any form, and have not been submitted for publication in another journal. This shall be confirmed by the written declaration by the author.
- The researcher is not entitled to publish the research elsewhere after it has been accepted for publication in the journal except after obtaining written permission to do so from the editor-in-chief.
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• Commitment to objectivity and ethical values in scientific research, such as:

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2. Avoiding offensive or inappropriate references to individuals or institutions.
3. The research should deal theoretically and practically with contemporary issues relevant to society and human experience.

4. Taking into account objectivity and avoiding personalization or personal bias.
- **Ensuring the appropriate academic presentation of the research, through the following:**
 1. Ensuring linguistic errors.
 2. Observing punctuation and spelling rules.
 3. Accuracy in documenting texts and evidence.
 - **Technical & Format Requirements:**
 - The manuscript should not exceed 30 A4 pages of regular cut (A4), including references and appendices.
 - Font size and type: Font size is: (14), margin: (12), and font type: (Times New Roman).
 - Word limit: 5000-7000 words, including references, tables, and figures.
 - Abstract requirement: The manuscript should include an abstract, not exceeding (300) words, including: research topic, objectives, methodology, key findings, recommendations, and keywords.
 - Scientific methodology: The manuscript should follow an appropriate and coherent scientific research methodology.
 - Documentation: APA referencing style must be followed.

PROCEDURAL STEPS & INDEX

Procedural Steps for Publishing

Step 1: The papers are sent electronically, either by uploading them via the journal's website or by sending them to the editorial boards email address: editor@imjct.com.

Step 2: The editorial board of the journal conducts a preliminary examination of the research and then decides its eligibility for peer review or its rejection.

Step 3: The research and studies submitted for publication in the journal are peer reviewed by at least two reviewers.

Step 4: The manuscript is returned to the author(s) following peer review for revision, where required.

Step 5: If the research is accepted for publication, then all copyrights shall be transferred to the journal, and it may not be republished in print or electronic means of publication except with the written permission of the editor-in-chief.

Step 6: Upon publication, the author s will receive a letter of publication with an electronic copy of the journal in which his research was published.

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Editorial

Dear academic and industry colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I present to you the tenth issue of the International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism, a joint publication of Katara Publishing House and Al Rayan International University College in partnership with the University of Derby.

Since its inception, the journal has remained committed to publishing high-quality scientific research in the fields of culture and tourism marketing, focusing on emerging management trends, government policies, and industry insights that contribute to the advancement of the tourism sector. By providing a platform for academics, government officials, and industry professionals, we continue to foster knowledge exchange and dialogue within these critical domains.

As we move forward, the tourism sector worldwide continues to evolve, facing new challenges and opportunities. This issue reflects our ongoing dedication to addressing contemporary developments in tourism and cultural marketing through insightful research and expert analysis. Our commitment to rigorous academic standards remains unwavering, ensuring that all published articles undergo a comprehensive double-blind peer review process.

We strive to enhance the efficiency of our review and publication process while maintaining the highest academic standards. Additionally, we continue to explore thematic editions that address pressing issues in the industry, making our journal a valuable resource for researchers and professionals alike.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the editorial team, authors, and reviewers whose dedication and expertise have contributed to the growth and success of this journal.

I warmly invite scholars and industry experts to submit their research for consideration in future issues of the International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism.

Sincerely

Professor Khalid Al Sulaiti
Founder and Editor-in-Chief

INTERNATIONAL MARKETING JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND TOURISM

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Beyond Infrastructure: Mapping the Gap Between Digital Capability and Consumer Trust in Travel Intermediaries (2016-2025)

Doğuş Kılıçarslan

Adana Alparslan Türkeş Science and Technology University, Department of Tourism Management, Türkiye

Email: doguskilicarslan@gmail.com<https://doi.org/10.33001/18355/imjct1033>**Received Date :** 14/07/2026 **I Accepted Date:** 18/08/2026

Abstract

This study maps the thematic structure of the literature on digitalization in travel businesses and traces how that structure changed over a ten-year period. The aim is not only to summarize publication activity but to read the meaning patterns in study abstracts and to describe the field at the level of content. A corpus of 391 studies published between 2016 and 2025 was drawn from the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The corpus was examined with a mixed design that combines a descriptive performance analysis with a text-mining thematic analysis of abstracts. Term frequency and inverse document frequency weighting was applied to the abstracts, and the resulting matrix was decomposed into six components with nonnegative matrix factorization. The analysis shows that the field is organized around six themes: adoption of information and communication technologies,

acceptance and trust, destination image and tour operators, online reviews and online travel agency ratings, social media and digital marketing, and digital transformation and artificial intelligence. The adoption theme declined over time, while the artificial intelligence and consumer trust themes rose. A co-occurrence analysis shows that firm-centered transformation and consumer-centered trust remain largely separate at the level of abstract language, since only 4.3 percent of the abstracts address both at once. The study proposes an integrative agenda that connects firm digital capability with consumer trust, and argues that travel agencies and tour operators are the natural setting in which to test this connection. For practice, the findings indicate that investment in digital and artificial intelligence tools creates value only when it is positioned to strengthen consumer trust.

Keywords

Digitalization, Travel businesses, Consumer trust, Competitive advantage

1. Introduction

Travel services are among the areas most affected by digital technologies in recent years (Pencarelli, 2020). Travel agencies and tour operators have redefined how they present products, reach customers, and create value, largely through digital channels (Pencarelli et al., 2021). The spread of online platforms has weakened the position of traditional intermediaries and pushed these firms to build new capabilities (Raguseo et al., 2017). This rapid change has produced a broad but scattered body of knowledge (Gutierriz et al., 2025).

As digital technologies spread through the travel sector, the related literature grew quickly over the past decade. Early work focused on whether firms adopted the internet and information and communication technologies (Pencarelli et al., 2021). Over time the literature spread into many sub-streams, including consumer behavior (Nguyen, 2024), online reviews (Lai et al., 2021), social media marketing

(Chang et al., 2018), and, more recently, artificial intelligence (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020). This dispersion has made it hard to see the intellectual structure of the field as a whole. Most studies examine a single phenomenon, such as one technology acceptance model (Almunawar et al., 2022) or the online image of one destination (Li et al., 2023). The thematic structure of the field and the way it has evolved are rarely considered together.

Several recent reviews have begun to map parts of this literature. Gutierriz et al. (2025) reviewed digital transformation research in tourism at large and identified four broad thematic groups. Luu et al. (2025) traced digitalization themes in tourism supply chains with a bibliometric approach, and Çimen and Kutlu (2025) mapped the growth of artificial intelligence research in tourism. These reviews cover the tourism system as a whole and treat travel intermediaries as one element among many, and their thematic maps rest on author keywords, citation links, or researcher-defined categories rather than on the language of the abstracts themselves. The present study differs in three ways. First, it narrows the scope to travel agencies and tour operators, the commercial intermediaries whose market position online platforms have challenged most directly. Second, it models the abstract texts with nonnegative matrix factorization, so the themes reflect the wording of the studies rather than indexing choices. Third, it adds a co-occurrence analysis that measures how often firm-centered and consumer-centered language appear in the same abstract, which turns a suspected disconnect between two research streams into a measurable quantity. By integrating these three elements, the present study offers a distinct perspective on the evolving literature.

The aim of this study is to map the thematic structure of the digital transformation literature in travel businesses and its evolution over time, through a thematic analysis of study abstracts. The study does not aim only at a numerical account of

output. It reads the meaning patterns in abstracts and maps the field at the level of content. Although intermediaries such as travel agencies and tour operators are central to the topic, the literature treats them either as technology adopters or as platforms that generate reviews (Almunawar et al., 2022; Raguseo et al., 2017). How firm-level digital capability turns into competitive advantage through consumer trust has not been examined as a whole.

This gap becomes clearer at a time when artificial intelligence tools are entering the operations of travel firms (Seraj et al., 2025). On one side, firms are strengthening their digital skills and technological infrastructure (Carlisle et al., 2023). On the other, the success of these tools depends on the trust consumers place in them (Bhuiyan et al., 2024). These two processes are usually treated in separate studies, and the link between them is left unexamined.

This gap defines the contribution of the study. The analysis below shows that the firm-centered transformation stream and the consumer-centered acceptance and trust stream have developed largely in parallel and apart. A view that joins these two axes offers a productive research area, both conceptually and for practice. Within this frame, the study addresses four questions:

1. What is the descriptive profile of the digital transformation literature in travel businesses in terms of publication trend, journal distribution, and citation impact?
2. What thematic clusters emerge from study abstracts?
3. How does the weight of these themes change between 2016 and 2025?
4. Which link between themes points to the most productive area for future research?

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding digitalization in travel businesses requires a view that covers both the firm side and the consumer side (Gretzel et al., 2015). Digital transformation is defined as a process in which digital technologies change how a firm creates value (Verhoef et al., 2021). In a review of 282 studies, Vial (2019) framed digital transformation as the set of strategic responses that firms give to the disruptions caused by technology, and pointed to dynamic capabilities and ethics as priorities for future work. This definition treats digitalization not as the simple purchase of a tool but as a reshaping of how value is created. For intermediaries such as travel agencies and tour operators, this reshaping covers both organizational capability and the relationship with the consumer.

On the firm side, two established approaches explain the source of competitive advantage. The resource-based view holds that valuable, rare, hard-to-imitate, and non-substitutable resources provide sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The dynamic capabilities approach extends this view by focusing on the capacity of firms to reconfigure their competencies in fast-changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). In a digital context, this capacity covers technological infrastructure as well as digital skills and organizational culture. Carlisle et al. (2023) documented the digital skills gap in the European tourism sector and stressed the human-capital side of this capacity. Seraj et al. (2025) and Alhelal et al. (2025) examined how artificial intelligence and digital leadership turn into competitive advantage. These studies explain how digital capability, as a firm resource, becomes competitive advantage.

On the consumer side, models of technology adoption are central. The technology acceptance model holds that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the

main drivers of adoption (Davis, 1989). The unified theory of acceptance and use of technology extends this model and defines performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions as the main determinants, adding several moderators (Venkatesh et al., 2003). For artificial intelligence tools in particular, these models remain limited to functional factors (Alharbi et al., 2026). Trust becomes important at this point. Mayer et al. (1995) defined trust as the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of another. The concept was later placed at the center of the adoption of digital and artificial intelligence services (Cabiddu et al., 2022). Almunawar et al. (2022) and Pillai and Sivathanu (2020) showed the effect of trust and perceived usefulness on the intention to adopt.

A consumer's trust decision rests not only on the firm's message but also on the experiences of other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Filieri et al., 2015). Electronic word of mouth and user-generated content therefore play an important part in the formation of trust (Akdim, 2021). Lai et al. (2021) examined the relationship between customer sentiment and online hotel ratings. Raguseo et al. (2017) showed the opportunity and the pressure that user reviews create for small firms. These studies point to the effect of organic feedback on consumer trust. At the same time, despite the potential benefits of artificial intelligence in tourism, privacy, data security, and ethical concerns carry real risks for consumers (Avcı et al., 2025). Alharbi et al. (2026) noted that trust and emotional factors are often overlooked in the adoption of artificial intelligence tools and argued that this dimension should be added to adoption models.

Resource-based approaches that explain firm capability and acceptance and trust models that focus on consumer perception have long developed apart. The resource-based view and the dynamic capabilities approach focus on the internal

competencies of the firm. Acceptance and trust models place consumer perception at the center. Yet in the context of travel intermediaries the two axes are inseparable. A digital or artificial intelligence investment by an intermediary turns into competitive advantage only when the consumer trusts that investment and adopts it. This study therefore adopts an integrative frame in which firm-level digital capability becomes competitive advantage through consumer trust and acceptance. The travel intermediary is the natural unit of analysis where the two traditions meet. The analysis that follows examines, with data, how far the literature builds this intersection, and reads the link between the firm and consumer axes through this frame. The discussion returns to this frame and develops it into an integrative model, in which digital capability is the firm-side antecedent, consumer trust and acceptance are the mediating mechanism, and competitive advantage is the outcome.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The study uses a mixed design that combines a descriptive bibliometric analysis with an interpretive thematic analysis. Studies that use only bibliometric methods summarize publication and citation patterns in numerical terms but reflect the meaning content of texts only to a limited degree (Snyder, 2019). The research therefore uses a two-layer structure. The first layer is a descriptive performance analysis that shows the publication trend, journal distribution, and citation impact of the dataset (Donthu et al., 2021). The second layer is a text-mining thematic analysis that extracts theme clusters from abstract texts. Topic modeling has been shown to be a valid approach in the tourism literature (Guo et al., 2017). The resulting clusters were interpreted by following the naming and interpretation stages of the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3.2. Data Source, Search, and Cleaning

To examine the digitalization literature in travel businesses, the search used a two-axis strategy based on business type and technology. On the business axis, the searches were limited to travel agencies and tour operators in order to keep the scope on commercial intermediaries. On the technology axis, digitalization was treated in all its dimensions rather than only as infrastructure. To avoid data loss in the early automation and ticketing studies of the period, information and communication technologies were searched together with core digitalization terms, and smart tourism concepts were added to capture the integration of firms into data ecosystems. Because consumer interaction is central to the study, social media and electronic word of mouth were also added to the technology axis. This choice was made to include studies on the effect of user-generated content and organic customer feedback on firm performance, rather than studies on paid advertising campaigns or official corporate websites.

On this basis, the keywords on the business axis were "travel agenc*" and "tour operat*". On the technology and interaction axis, the terms were "digital*", "smart tourism", "ICT", "social media", "e-wom", and "electronic word of mouth". The full search string was ("travel agenc*" OR "tour operat*") AND ("digital*" OR "smart tourism" OR "ICT" OR "social media" OR "e-wom" OR "electronic word of mouth"). In the Web of Science Core Collection the string was run in the Topic field, which covers title, abstract, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. In Scopus it was run in the TITLE-ABS-KEY field. An asterisk (*) was utilized as a truncation symbol to capture all variations of the root words, such as plural forms. The OR operator joined synonymous and alternative concepts within an axis and widened the pool, while the AND operator required terms from both axes to appear

in the same study and sharpened the search (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Both search queries were executed on February 20, 2026.

Four inclusion criteria were established for the analysis. In the initial database filtering phase, documents were required to be: (i) published between 2016 and 2025, (ii) classified as articles, reviews, or early access articles, and (iii) written in English. In the subsequent screening phase, studies were included only if they (iv) provided substantive attention to digitalization within the specific context of travel agencies or tour operators. Conversely, conference papers, book chapters, editorials, notes, and retracted publications were excluded.

The search was run in two citation databases. The Web of Science Core Collection returned 288 records and Scopus returned 313 records, for a combined pool of 601 records. The two exports were merged in a single table, and duplicate detection ran in two passes. Records were first matched on the digital object identifier. Records without a matching identifier were then compared on a normalized title, produced by lowercasing, removing punctuation, and collapsing repeated spaces, and exact matches were treated as duplicates. This step removed 197 duplicate records and left 404 unique records; a source field recorded the database of each record. Screening then removed three retracted publications, one editorial item, and nine records published outside the 2016-2025 window. The final corpus comprised 391 unique studies, of which 197 were indexed in both Web of Science and Scopus, 114 in Scopus only, and 80 in Web of Science only.

3.3. Analysis Procedure

In the descriptive layer, the dataset was summarized by year, most productive journals, document types, and citation indicators. In the thematic layer, the abstracts were preprocessed before modeling. All text was lowercased, and punctuation, numbers, and publisher boilerplate were removed. Standard English

stop words were dropped together with a custom list of corpus-specific terms with no discriminating value, such as study, paper, research, findings, and results. No stemming or lemmatization was applied, so that domain terms kept their conventional surface forms. The cleaned texts were converted into a document-term matrix with term frequency and inverse document frequency weighting. One-word and two-word patterns were included, so that multiword concepts such as social media and artificial intelligence stayed intact. Terms that appeared in fewer than 5 abstracts or in more than 40 percent of them were removed, which left a vocabulary of 428 terms. The resulting matrix, covering 391 abstracts, was decomposed into six themes through nonnegative matrix factorization.

To determine the optimal number of themes, candidate solutions ranging from four to ten components were systematically compared by inspecting their top-weighted terms and thematic distinctiveness. Solutions with fewer than six components produced overly broad clusters, blurring distinct concepts such as digital marketing and artificial intelligence into a single theme. Conversely, solutions with seven or more components led to over-fragmentation, where overlapping terms appeared across multiple themes, reducing conceptual clarity, and solutions with nine or more components produced degenerate clusters of only a handful of abstracts. The six-component solution was retained because it yielded the most distinct and interpretable separation of the literature, particularly isolating firm-centered technological capabilities from consumer-centered trust, without redundancy.

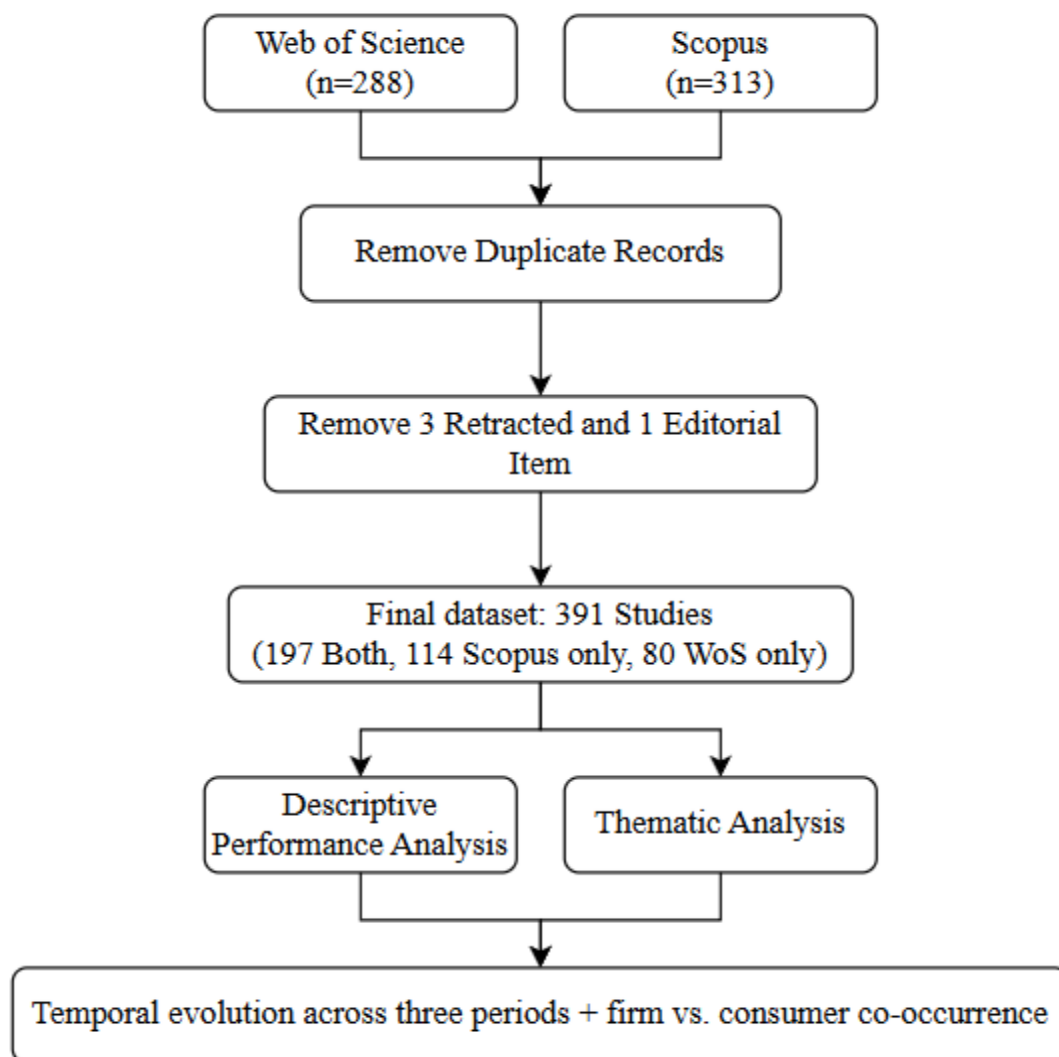


Figure 1. Research design and analysis flow.

Because the abstracts were written in English, the text analysis was conducted in English, and the themes are reported here with English labels. Each theme was named by reading its highest-weighted terms and a sample of its abstracts. To trace the change in theme weights over time, the dataset was split into three periods, and the within-period shares of each theme were compared. Finally, the extent to which firm-centered and consumer-centered language appears in the same abstract was examined by computing the co-occurrence of two term sets. The firm-centered set comprised the terms that load on the digital transformation and artificial

intelligence theme, such as artificial intelligence, digital transformation, innovation, competitive advantage, digital leadership, and digital skills. The consumer-centered set comprised the terms that load on the acceptance and trust theme, such as trust, acceptance, adoption intention, perceived usefulness, and behavioral intention. Figure 1 summarizes the full research design, from the database search to the analysis steps.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Profile of the Dataset

The final dataset comprises 391 studies. Of these, 197 are indexed in both Web of Science and Scopus, 114 in Scopus only, and 80 in Web of Science only. The studies appeared in 242 different journals (Table 1). Most document types are original articles. The dataset has 6,940 total citations, a mean of 17.7 citations per study, and a median of 5. The most cited study, with 720 citations, examines the adoption of artificial intelligence chatbots in hospitality and tourism (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020).

Table 1. Descriptive Profile of the Dataset

Indicator	Value
Total studies	391
Time span	2016-2025
Indexed in both databases	197
Scopus only	114
Web of Science only	80
Number of journals	242
Document types	Article 368, Early access 14, Review 9
Total citations	6,940
Mean citations per study	17.7
Median citations	5
Highest citation count	720

The annual number of publications rose from 21 in 2016 to 78 in 2024, and stood at 69 in 2025. About two-thirds of the publications appeared in the last five years (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of Publications by Year

Year	Publications	Share (%)
2016	21	5.4
2017	13	3.3
2018	19	4.9
2019	33	8.4
2020	36	9.2
2021	40	10.2
2022	35	9.0
2023	47	12.0
2024	78	19.9
2025	69	17.6

The journals show that the largest number of publications appeared in *Sustainability*, followed by *Current Issues in Tourism* and the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*. Table 3 presents the ten most productive journals.

Table 3. Ten Most Productive Journals

Journal	n
Sustainability	20
Current Issues in Tourism	11
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	11
Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites	10
Tourism Management	7
African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	7
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	5
RISTI Revista Iberica de Sistemas e Tecnologias de Informacao	5

Journal	n
Journal of Travel Research	4
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights	4

4.2. Thematic Structure

The analysis of abstract texts produced six themes. Table 4 presents these themes with their sizes, prominent terms, and mean citation values. The largest theme is the adoption of information and communication technologies, and the smallest is digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and competitive advantage. The theme with the highest mean citation count is acceptance, trust, and behavioral intention.

Table 4. Six Themes from the Abstracts

Theme	n	Prominent terms	Mean citations
Adoption of information and communication technologies	88	information and communication technologies (ICT), technology, internet, business, digitalization, transition from traditional	11.0
Destination image and tour operators	70	destination, image, tour operator, experience, cultural, emotion	16.4
Acceptance, trust, and behavioral intention	68	intention, trust, perceived, acceptance, online travel agency (OTA), adoption, eWOM	29.5
Online reviews and online travel agency ratings	65	review, online travel agency (OTA), rating, booking, sentiment analysis, website	20.8
Social media and digital marketing	61	social media, facebook, digital marketing, brand, strategy	14.3
Digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and competitive advantage	39	artificial intelligence, innovation, digital transformation, competitive advantage, skill, leadership	15.1

The adoption of information and communication technologies theme covers studies on how travel firms bring the internet and digital tools into their operations. This theme focuses mainly on measuring the sector's level of technology adoption

(Pencarelli et al., 2021; Barna et al., 2021). The acceptance, trust, and behavioral intention theme covers the factors that shape consumer decisions to use digital travel tools. Technology acceptance models, perceived usefulness, trust, and online travel agency use form the basis of this theme (Almunawar et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2024). The destination image and tour operators theme addresses how destinations are represented online and how that representation affects the tourist experience (Li et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019). The online reviews and online travel agency ratings theme focuses on user-generated reviews, hotel ratings, and the sentiment analysis of this content (Lai et al., 2021; Raguseo et al., 2017). The social media and digital marketing theme covers the use of social media platforms for marketing and its effect on brand and customer interaction (Chang et al., 2018; Matikiti et al., 2018). The digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and competitive advantage theme brings together studies that link artificial intelligence, digital leadership, innovation, and digital skills to competitive advantage (Seraj et al., 2025; Alhelal et al., 2025; Carlisle et al., 2023; Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020).

4.3. Evolution of Themes over Time

The adoption of information and communication technologies theme fell from 33.7 percent of the dataset in 2016-2019 to 14.9 percent in 2023-2025. The acceptance, trust, and behavioral intention theme rose from 9.3 percent to 20.6 percent. The digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and competitive advantage theme rose from 2.3 percent to 16.5 percent. Figure 2 shows these trends across the three periods.

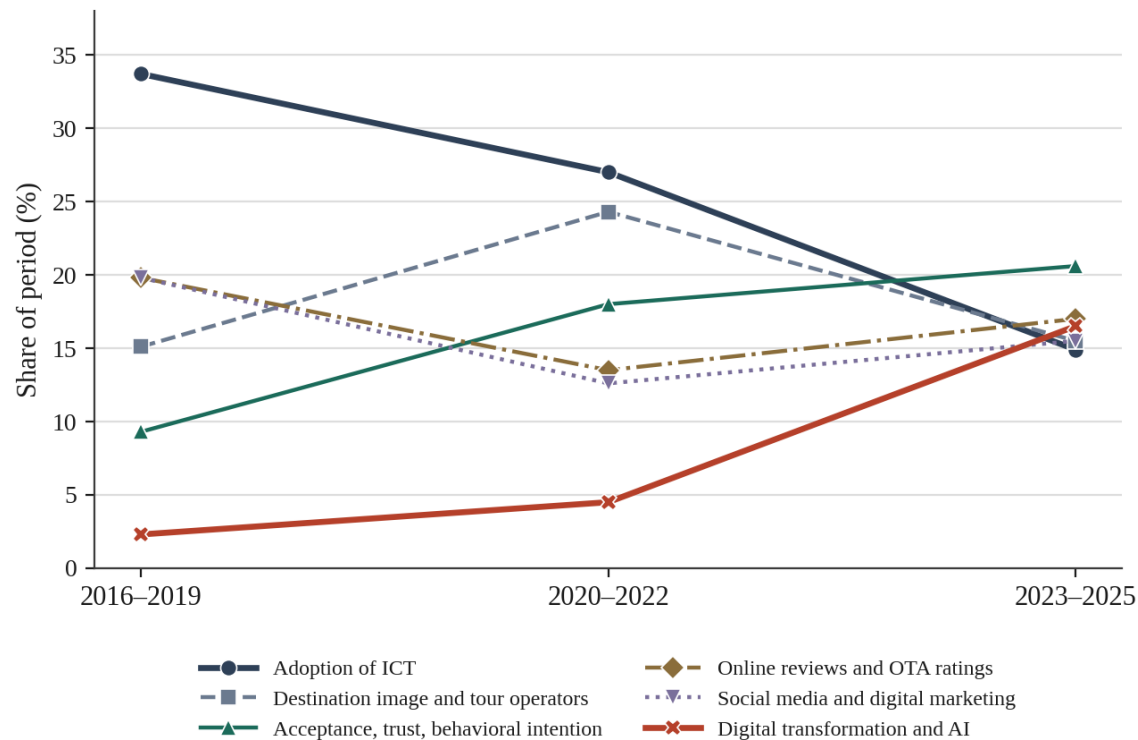
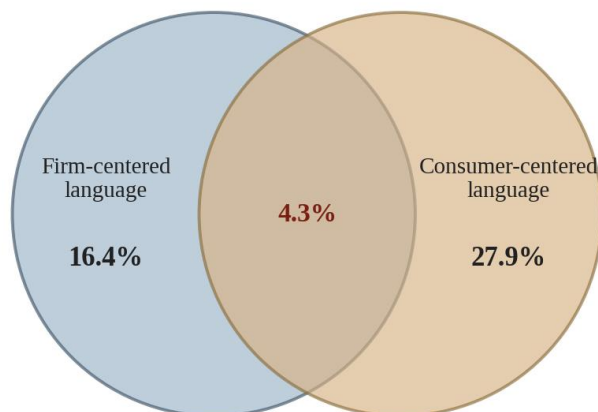


Figure 2. Evolution of the six themes across three periods (within-period share, %).

4.4. Co-occurrence of Firm-centered and Consumer-centered Language

The dataset was examined along two conceptual axes, firm-centered and consumer-centered. The first axis consists of studies that include firm-level artificial intelligence and digital transformation capability. The second axis consists of studies that include consumer-level trust, acceptance, and behavioral intention. To determine how far the two are addressed together, the co-occurrence of firm-centered and consumer-centered terms in the abstracts was computed. Firm-centered language appears in 16.4 percent of the abstracts and consumer-centered language in 27.9 percent. Both appear together in only 4.3 percent. Of the 64 abstracts with firm-centered language, 47 contain no consumer-side term. Figure 3 illustrates this limited overlap between the two axes. Because this measure reads the vocabulary of abstracts, it captures how studies present themselves rather than the full content of their texts. The overlap between the two axes may therefore be

somewhat wider in full texts, and the 4.3 percent figure is best read as a measure of separation in abstract language.



Overlap = abstracts that address both axes (4.3%)

Figure 3. Co-occurrence of firm-centered and consumer-centered language in the abstracts.

5. Discussion

This study mapped the digitalization literature in travel businesses around six themes and showed how the weight of these themes changed over a ten-year period. The rising annual publication trend indicates that digital transformation is not a passing interest in travel businesses but a continuing and widening research agenda. The shift of the literature from a descriptive core, such as the adoption of information and communication technologies, toward mechanism-focused questions, such as consumer acceptance and firm transformation, reflects the maturing of the field. In other words, the literature has moved away from the question of whether technology is used and toward the mechanisms through which these tools work. This picture is broadly in line with recent reviews. Gutierrez et al.

(2025), in a review covering 1997 to 2023, identified four thematic groups: digital marketing, digital economy, education and hospitality, and free digital. The six-theme structure found here shares common areas such as digital marketing and social media, but offers a finer classification, in that it separates consumer acceptance and firm transformation into distinct clusters. Read together, the six themes and their trajectories describe a field that has moved through a recognizable sequence. The early literature asked whether travel firms use digital tools, and the shrinking share of the adoption theme suggests that this question is close to exhausted. The middle layer of the field asks how consumers respond to these tools, which the acceptance and review themes cover. The most recent layer asks how firms convert these tools into position and advantage, which the transformation and artificial intelligence theme carries. What the sequence still lacks is a stage that connects the last two questions, and the co-occurrence finding shows that this stage has not yet formed.

The decline of the adoption theme over time and the rise of the digital transformation and artificial intelligence theme confirm the change in the field. Luu et al. (2025), in a study of digitalization in tourism supply chains, found that basic technologies dominated the early period and that competitive advantage emerged later as a niche theme. The findings here point the same way. The digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and competitive advantage theme rose from 2.3 percent in the first period to 16.5 percent in the last. Recent bibliometric work on the tourism literature also confirms this trend, showing that artificial intelligence research has gained pace in recent years and become a core area (Çimen & Kutlu, 2025). Recent studies such as Seraj et al. (2025) and Alhelal et al. (2025) provide empirical examples of this rise by linking artificial intelligence and digital leadership directly to competitive advantage.

The acceptance, trust, and behavioral intention theme carries the highest citation impact, which indicates that consumer-focused work is well established and visible in the field. Alharbi et al. (2026), in a review of artificial intelligence conversational agents in tourism and hospitality, stressed that trust, although often overlooked in adoption models, is a decisive factor. The findings here support this view by showing that trust is central not only in conceptual terms but also in bibliometric terms. Studies such as Almunawar et al. (2022) and Pillai and Sivathanu (2020) show the weight that trust and perceived usefulness carry in consumer adoption of digital tools.

The most distinctive contribution of the study is the quantitative evidence that firm-centered transformation and consumer-centered trust remain largely separate at the level of abstract language. Only 4.3 percent of the abstracts contain both term sets, which gives a concrete measure to this separation. Because abstracts compress a study into its most salient claims, this figure describes how the two streams present themselves rather than the full reach of their texts, and the separation in full texts may be less sharp. Even with this caution, the pattern is informative. Abstracts signal the conversation a study wants to join, so the near absence of joint language indicates that few studies frame the firm and consumer axes as one problem. Two features of the field help explain the pattern. The two streams draw on different theoretical homes, strategic management on one side and information systems and consumer behavior on the other, and they rely on different data, firm-level surveys and interviews on one side and consumer-level surveys and reviews on the other. Both features raise the cost of integrative work and keep the streams on separate tracks. This result matches the point raised by Alharbi et al. (2026) that studies concentrate on technical and functional dimensions while addressing consumer behavior only to a limited degree, and that an integrative frame is needed. The separation between studies that link firm digital capability to

competitive advantage and studies that examine consumer trust makes it hard to see the field as a whole. The study contributes by turning this gap from an interpretive claim into a measurable finding.

5.1 Theoretical Implications: An Integrative Framework

These findings have notable theoretical implications. The resource-based view and the dynamic capabilities approach, which focus on firm-level digital capability, developed apart from the technology acceptance and trust models, which focus on consumer-level acceptance. Travel intermediaries are the natural unit of analysis where the two traditions meet, because the value of an intermediary's digital investment is realized only when the consumer trusts and adopts it. Taken together, these arguments form an integrative framework. It links four elements in sequence: firm digital capability, the digital services and artificial intelligence tools that carry it to the consumer, consumer trust and acceptance, and competitive advantage. On the firm side, digital capability covers technological infrastructure, digital skills, and digital leadership, the resource base that the resource-based view and the dynamic capabilities approach treat as the source of advantage (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997; Carlisle et al., 2023). This capability becomes visible to the consumer through digital services and artificial intelligence tools such as booking platforms, recommendation systems, and conversational agents. On the consumer side, trust and acceptance operate as the mechanism that converts these services into use. Perceived usefulness and ease of use open the path (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003), trust in the firm and in the technology carries it (Mayer et al., 1995; Cabiddu et al., 2022), and organic signals such as online reviews and user-generated content feed trust from outside the firm (Filieri et al., 2015; Akdim, 2021). Privacy and data-security concerns work in the opposite direction and can block the conversion (Avcı et al., 2025). Human support offered alongside automated tools works in the same direction as organic signals and reinforces trust

in them. Competitive advantage forms at the end of this chain, when trusted services translate into booking behavior, loyalty, and price tolerance.

The framework yields propositions that future studies can test in travel intermediaries. First, the effect of firm digital capability on competitive advantage runs through consumer trust and acceptance rather than acting directly. Second, organic consumer signals, such as credible online reviews, strengthen the conversion of digital services into trust. Third, privacy and data-security concerns weaken this conversion, in particular for services supported by artificial intelligence. Fourth, human support offered alongside automated tools raises trust in those tools rather than substituting for them. These propositions restate the co-occurrence gap as a research design: each one requires firm-level and consumer-level constructs in the same study.

5.2 Practical Implications

For practice, the findings offer direction for travel agencies, tour operators, and online travel agencies. Investment in artificial intelligence tools does not provide competitive advantage on its own; these tools need to be positioned to strengthen consumer trust. This positioning can be made concrete in five areas.

The first area is transparency and privacy. Firms should state clearly when a customer is interacting with an automated agent rather than a person, explain in plain language what a recommendation system does with customer data, collect no more data than a service needs, and make consent and deletion options easy to find. Trust in artificial intelligence tools rests on the perception that the firm is open about the tool and careful with the data behind it (Cabiddu et al., 2022; Avcı et al., 2025). The second area is human support alongside automation. Chatbots and self-service tools should carry a visible and fast route to a human agent, in particular for complaints, changes, and high-value bookings, because automation that blocks access to people erodes rather than builds trust. The third area is the

credibility of online reviews. Firms should display verified reviews, respond to negative reviews in public, and avoid any practice that filters or manufactures feedback, since user-generated content works as a trust signal only while consumers believe it is organic (Filieri et al., 2015; Raguseo et al., 2017). The fourth area is platform design and personalization. Clear pricing without hidden fees, visible security indicators at payment, and personalization that customers can inspect and adjust turn the platform itself into a trust cue. The last area is trust-based customer relationship management. Intermediaries should treat trust as a managed asset, track it alongside sales indicators, and design recovery routines for the moments when automated tools fail, because the handling of failures is where consumers test whether the firm deserves their trust. As Raguseo et al. (2017) showed, even small intermediaries can create value through the right positioning in a setting shaped by platforms.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the digitalization literature in travel businesses over the 2016-2025 period, through 391 studies drawn from two citation databases. The mixed approach, which combines a descriptive performance analysis with a thematic analysis of abstracts, set out both the numerical profile and the content structure of the field. In line with the research questions, the literature grows steadily, is organized around six consistent themes, and shifts from a descriptive level of technology adoption toward mechanism-focused questions. At the level of abstract language, a clear link gap was also found between the firm and consumer axes.

This gap offers an open agenda for future research. Integrative models in which firm-level digital capability turns into competitive advantage through consumer trust can close the conceptual gap and guide practice. The framework and propositions developed in Section 5.1 offer a concrete starting point for such models. Testing these models on travel agencies, tour operators, and online travel

agencies would be consistent with the empirical core of the literature. Longitudinal studies that examine the conditions under which trust in artificial intelligence tools translates into firm performance also carry strong potential. The integrative frameworks proposed by Alharbi et al. (2026) offer a suitable starting point for steps in this direction.

The study has some limitations. The thematic analysis was run on abstracts rather than full texts. Abstracts compress each study into its most salient claims, so the analysis may miss finer distinctions, and the co-occurrence results in particular describe separation in abstract language rather than in the full content of the studies. Because the data were limited to Web of Science and Scopus, studies not indexed in these databases fell outside the scope. Because the search was built on travel agencies and tour operators, some studies on adjacent areas such as accommodation or transport may not have entered the pool. Finally, because the number of themes rests on an interpretability criterion, different analytical choices could produce different theme structures.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a holistic thematic map of the digitalization literature in travel businesses. It grounds the bridge between firm capability and consumer trust on a measurable basis and explains why this bridge is a productive research area. This basis provides a starting point for studies that will shape the future development of the field.

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Country Image Beyond External Audiences: Evidence from Qatar

Mohammed A. Ibrahim

Faculty of Economics and Management, Yerevan State University, Armenia

Email: ibrahim.saif@ysu.am**Vardan S. Aleksanyan**

Faculty of Economics and Management, Yerevan State University, Armenia

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Abstract

This study investigates how people who reside in Qatar (citizens and residents) perceive the country compared to international audiences the post-FIFA World Cup period. The analysis is informed by Simon Anholt's Nation Brand Index (NBI), which conceptualises national reputation through six dimensions: people, governance, tourism, culture and heritage, investment and immigration, and exports. In addition, the study explores how these perceptions differ across selected demographic characteristics. Data were collected from 174 respondents residing in Qatar and analysed quantitatively. The results highlight three main findings. First, internal stakeholders generally hold very favourable views of Qatar's nation brand, both overall and across all six dimensions, and these evaluations are consistently more positive than those reported by international audiences. The largest perception gaps were observed in the governance, people, and tourism dimensions. Second, despite these differences, a high degree of internal consensus was found, particularly regarding governance and people, suggesting substantial agreement among stakeholders in their

assessments of Qatar's national image. Third, perceptions of the nation brand differed significantly according to age and length of residence. Younger participants tended to evaluate Qatar less positively than older respondents, which may reflect differing expectations concerning economic opportunities and future development. Furthermore, Qatari nationals and individuals born in Qatar reported more favourable perceptions than long-term residents, underscoring the influence of place attachment and a stronger sense of belonging on nation brand evaluations.

Keywords

Nation branding, Qatar, Nation Brand Index, country image, public diplomacy, soft power.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, countries have sought to strengthen their appeal to a variety of reasons, such as tourism, investment, and attracting talent (Dinne, 2015). Nation branding efforts primarily aim to shape a country's image (Ibrahim and Aleksanyan, 2026). The idea of nation branding has been the subject of ongoing discussion and debate for many years, as there is no universally accepted definition. It is interconnected with various fields. Nation branding is the application of marketing communications and branding techniques to countries (Kaur, 2020; Rojas-Méndez, 2013). According to Fan (2010), nation branding refers to the process by which a country's image is created, managed, monitored, and evaluated to enhance its reputation among international audiences. Unlike traditional marketing, nation branding focuses on shaping and managing a nation's overall perception among foreign stakeholders.

The concept of nation branding is closely linked to soft power, which is, in a way, considered one of its tools. Soft power refers to the ability to influence and change perceptions by persuasion and attraction rather than force or coercion (i.e., military) (Nye, 1990). Another linked aspect is public policy, which involves governments, civil society, and institutions engaging directly with international audiences to shape global perceptions and influence foreign policies (Cull, 2008).

The State of Qatar has increasingly deployed soft power strategies, including the hosting of prominent international mega-events such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup,

as part of its broader efforts to enhance its global reputation (Ibrahim & Aleksanyan, 2026; Ibrahim, 2026; Mohib & Carroll, 2024). While this body of work has largely focused on outward-facing nation branding initiatives, the present study shifts attention inward by applying Anholt's Nation Brand Index which conceptualizes nation branding through six dimensions: people, governance, tourism, culture and heritage, exports, and investment and immigration (Anholt, 2007; Ibrahim & Aleksanyan, 2026).

Existing research on Qatar's nation brand has predominantly concentrated on international perceptions, often overlooking the views of internal stakeholders such as citizens and long-term residents. Limited attention has been given to how these internal evaluations may differ across generational cohorts and what such variation might reveal about domestic consensus or divergence in nation brand perceptions. This study addresses this gap by examining internal stakeholder perspectives and exploring the role of age-based differences in shaping evaluations of Qatar's nation brand.

Research Questions:

1. How is Qatar's nation brand evaluated by internal stakeholders across the six dimensions of the Nation Brand Index compared to international audiences?
2. To what extent is there consensus among internal stakeholders regarding Qatar's nation brand across the six dimensions?
3. To what extent do nation brand perceptions differ across demographic groups in Qatar, and what implications do these differences have for future nation-branding efforts?

In the following sections, you will find answers to all the research questions through this quantitative empirical study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nation Branding

The concept of nation branding originated from place branding, which involved the application of marketing principles to geographic locations and initially emerged from tourism promotion and destination marketing (Kotler et al., 1993). The term nation branding was introduced by Anholt in 1996 and has subsequently developed into a distinct academic field (Kaneva, 2011).

While there is no universally agreed definition of nation branding, it is generally understood as the strategic management of a country's image and reputation. Nations, similar to products and organisations, operate in a competitive global environment and can strengthen their position through deliberate branding, image construction, and coordinated communication strategies (Kotler et al., 1993; Fan, 2010). Anholt (2007) conceptualizes a nation brand as the overall reputation of a country, influenced by perceptions of its governance, culture, people, tourism, and exports. Likewise, Dinnie (2008) characterizes nation branding as a multidimensional concept encompassing functional, emotional, and symbolic attributes that differentiate a nation in the international arena.

Nation branding is widely understood as a strategic tool that contributes to a country's soft power by enhancing its attractiveness and influence through favourable perceptions rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). It is closely linked to public diplomacy, as both seek to engage international audiences, cultivate trust, and enhance a nation's reputation. However, whereas public diplomacy is generally understood as a government-driven communication effort designed to support foreign policy goals, nation branding represents a broader process of reputation formation influenced by a variety of stakeholders and national experiences (Szondi, 2008). As a result, maintaining alignment between branding and communication activities is essential for developing a consistent and positive nation brand.

Internal Perspectives in Nation Branding

Nation branding primarily involves managing a country's reputation among international audiences and has consequently been evaluated predominantly through external perceptions (Anholt, 2007). While the significance of internal stakeholders has been acknowledged (Dinnie, 2015), empirical research in nation branding remains focused on external evaluations. Nevertheless, internal stakeholders, especially residents and citizens, are instrumental in shaping and sustaining national brand narratives. Balmer and Greyser (2002) suggest that external reputation is rooted in internal identity and consistency, while Cull (2008) emphasizes that national narratives are unlikely to be perceived as credible without internal support.

Internal stakeholders play an important role in nation branding through their daily experiences, cultural activities, and interactions with public and private institutions. As noted by Andreja (2018), nation branding is a collective process that involves a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, businesses, cultural institutions, media organizations, and citizens. The Nation Brand Molecule framework suggests that these experiences influence brand associations across various dimensions of the nation brand (Rojas-Méndez, 2013). Perceptions of citizens and residents shape place identity, a core element of a nation's brand and overall reputation (Govers & Go, 2009).

Alignment between internal and external perceptions is critical for establishing a strong nation brand. Branding initiatives that disregard internal stakeholders risk generating narratives that lack legitimacy and authenticity (Aronczyk, 2013). In addition, research indicates that inconsistencies between internal beliefs and externally communicated messages can undermine trust and diminish brand effectiveness (Balmer, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Despite these findings, internal stakeholder perceptions remain insufficiently examined in nation branding research, especially in comparative studies of internal and external evaluations and in rapidly developing regions such as the GCC countries.

Assessing Nation Brand Perceptions

Simon Anholt's Nation Brand Index (NBI) provides a systematic framework for evaluating nation brand perceptions. This framework is just a way to illustrate the six key dimensions of multidimensional nation branding: exports, governance, tourism, investment and immigration, people, culture, and heritage (Anholt, 2007). By capturing multiple aspects of national reputation, this approach enables a more comprehensive assessment of a country's image and has contributed to the NBI's extensive use in nation-branding research.

In this study, the NBI is employed as a diagnostic tool rather than to test Anholt's theoretical assumptions. The framework facilitates comparison between internal stakeholders' perceptions and international audiences' evaluations, enabling identification of areas of convergence and divergence. Employing a standardized measurement tool further enhances the comparability and interpretability of the findings. Due to its widespread application, the NBI has been criticized for oversimplifying national identity and relying heavily on perception-based

measures (Kaneva, 2011; Aronczyk, 2013). Critics argue that it may overlook contextual, political, and experiential factors that shape national reputation, while placing greater emphasis on external audiences than internal stakeholders. Recent research, therefore, views nation branding as a dynamic, multi-stakeholder process shaped by identity, experience, and interaction over time (Kaneva, 2011; Kusraeva, 2024). These perspectives highlight the importance of complementing established frameworks, such as the nation brand index, with approaches that capture internal stakeholder perceptions and contextual variation.

Demographic Differences and Internal Nation Brand Perceptions

While nation branding research has traditionally emphasized aggregate perceptions of countries, evaluations of nation brands can differ across demographic groups. Age has been recognized as an important factor shaping attitudes, expectations, and assessments of social and economic environments. Recent studies indicate that Generation Z, defined as individuals born in the mid-1990s and later, differs from previous generations in online connectivity, access to global information, and awareness of international opportunities (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Consequently, younger individuals may assess countries from a more comparative and globally informed perspective, prioritizing factors such as career opportunities, economic prospects, quality of life, and future development. Studies of Generation Z suggest that this cohort is highly aware of social, environmental, and ethical issues and is strongly influenced by digital media and online information sources (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Such characteristics may contribute to the development of more demanding expectations and more critical evaluations of social and economic environments. Despite the increasing significance of younger generations, limited nation branding research has examined whether perceptions of a country's image vary across age groups.

Place attachment is another factor that may influence nation brand perceptions. Place attachment refers to the emotional, cognitive, and social bonds individuals develop with specific places through lived experience and personal connection (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Individuals with stronger attachment to a place often exhibit more favorable attitudes and a greater sense of identification with its achievements and characteristics (Lewicka, 2011). In the context of nation branding, citizens and individuals born or raised in a country may therefore

evaluate the nation more positively than residents with weaker emotional ties or shorter-term connections. Examining both demographic differences and residency-related attachment may provide a deeper understanding of how internal stakeholder perceptions of nation brands are formed and maintained.

Qatar as a Case Study

Qatar has increasingly utilized soft power strategies to enhance its global reputation, with major sporting events—particularly the FIFA World Cup—playing a key role in this process. Recent research identifies the tournament as a turning point in Qatar's nation-branding, with issues such as modernity, international engagement, national ambition, and political legitimacy becoming more prominent in its aftermath (Badran, 2025). Scholars have also examined the country's broader soft power instruments, including cultural diplomacy, international broadcasting, and strategic communication.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined how global media outlets contribute to the construction and dissemination of international perceptions of Qatar, particularly in the post-World Cup period (Brannagan & Reiche, 2023; Dubinsky, 2024). Many of these studies has concentrated on how Qatar is represented in international media and how foreign audiences respond, assessing whether perceptions have shifted following the World Cup and what long-term reputational effects may exist. At the same time, there has been growing interest in post-World Cup tourism development, particularly in relation to destination branding, infrastructure expansion, and Qatar National Vision 2030's role in supporting the country's sustained global positioning (Ibrahim, 2026; Mahboob & Faisal, 2025).

However, most studies continue to prioritize international perspectives. Limited attention has been given to internal viewpoints, particularly how individuals within Qatar perceive the nation's brand and how these perceptions compare with external assessments. This gap is addressed in the present study.

METHODOLOGY

Survey Instrument and Development

A standardized self-administered questionnaire was used to evaluate perceptions of Qatar across six dimensions of the nation brand: governance, culture, people,

tourism, exports, and investment and immigration (Anholt, 2007). Each dimension was assessed with three items, yielding a total of 18. Responses were collected on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In alignment with previous research, the findings were compared with contemporary perceptions of international audiences (Ibrahim & Aleksanyan, 2026).

Initially the survey was developed in English, then translated to Arabic by a professional translator and subsequently back translated to confirm accuracy and conceptual consistency between the two versions (Brislin, 1970). Before the main survey was carried out, the questionnaire was pretested with a small group of 10 individuals identifying potential issues related to item wording, comprehension, and overall usability. Feedback obtained during this process informed minor revisions to several questions, improving their clarity and reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation. Conducting a pilot test is an established practice in survey research and contributes to the development of more valid and reliable measurement instruments (Reynolds et al., 1993).

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between January and February 2026 using an online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Conducting the survey in the post-FIFA World Cup period allowed for the assessment of relatively stable perceptions following the event. For comparative purposes, the findings were aligned with international benchmark data reported by Ibrahim and Aleksanyan (2026). Although the datasets were collected at different times, both represent post-World Cup evaluations and thus offer a suitable basis for examining differences in internal and external audiences' perceptions.

In the beginning the questionnaire was shared through the researchers' networks and subsequently circulated through online communication channels to encourage wider participation. Participants were also encouraged to share the survey with others, thereby increasing its reach and facilitating the recruitment of additional respondents. This approach combined convenience and snowball sampling techniques, enabling the survey to be disseminated through respondents' social and professional networks.

To ensure respondent relevance, participants were required to confirm current residency in Qatar and to have resided in the country for at least five years. This criterion was adopted because longer-term residents are likely to possess greater familiarity with the place and develop more accurate and informed perceptions based on their lived experiences and attachment to the national environment (Stylidis et al., 2017).

Data Cleaning and Analysis

The online survey distributed via Google Forms generated a total of 193 responses. These were subjected to a screening process to ensure suitability for analysis. 19 responses were excluded at this stage due to eligibility and completion issues. Specifically, 14 respondents had resided in Qatar for less than five years, which did not meet the study's inclusion criteria, while a further 5 questionnaires were not fully completed. After removing these cases, the final dataset consisted of 174 valid responses, representing 90.2% of the original submissions. The final data set was further analyzed using SPSS version 27, an overview of the screening and exclusion procedure is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Screening and Final Valid Responses

Category	Frequency	Proportion
Number of responses received	193	100%
Ineligible: Residence < 5 years	14	7.3%
Ineligible: Do not reside in Qatar	5	2.6%
Ineligible responses	19	9.8%
Final analytical sample	174	90.2%

RESULTS

RQ1: How is Qatar's nation brand evaluated by internal stakeholders across the six dimensions of the Nation Brand Index compared to international audiences?

Generally, citizens and resident expressed positive evaluations on all dimensions, and the overall high composite as well ($M = 4.40$). Governance recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.68$), followed by People ($M = 4.62$) and Tourism ($M = 4.51$), while Culture and Heritage also received favourable ratings ($M = 4.36$). In

comparison, Exports ($M = 4.15$) and Investment and Immigration ($M = 4.11$) were rated relatively lower.

Table 2: Internal Stakeholder Perceptions of Qatar

Dimension	Internal Mean	SD
Exports	4.15	0.80
Governance	4.68	0.49
Culture & Heritage	4.36	0.54
Investment and Immigration	4.11	0.74
People	4.62	0.44
Tourism	4.51	0.57
Total	4.40	0.41

Or, in a slightly more academic style: To assess the degree of convergence between domestic and international evaluations of Qatar's nation brand, the mean scores reported by residents and citizens in the present study were compared with international Nation Brand Index assessments reported by Ibrahim and Aleksanyan (2026). The one-sample t-test results revealed significant differences across all six nation-brand dimensions, with internal stakeholders consistently assigning higher ratings than external audiences ($p < .001$). The largest gaps were found in the dimensions of Governance, Tourism, and People, indicating particularly strong domestic confidence in Qatar's performance and image in these areas relative to international perceptions. Significant, though comparatively smaller, differences were also observed for Culture & Heritage, Exports, and Investment & Immigration. Taken together, these findings suggest a clear divergence between internal and external evaluations of Qatar's nation brand, with residents expressing substantially more positive assessments across every dimension of the Nation Brand Index.

Table 3: Differences Between Internal and International Nation Brand Perceptions of Qatar

Dimension	Internal Mean	International Mean	Mean Difference	t	p
Exports	4.15	3.41	0.74	12.15	<.001
Governance	4.68	3.35	1.33	35.77	<.001
Culture and Heritage	4.36	3.66	0.70	16.95	<.001

Investment & Immigration	4.11	3.46	0.65	11.48	<.001
People	4.62	3.51	1.11	33.56	<.001
Tourism	4.51	3.37	1.14	26.33	<.001

RQ2: *To what extent is there consensus among internal stakeholders regarding Qatar's nation brand across the six dimensions?*

The degree of internal consensus was examined using measures of central tendency and dispersion (Table 4). Overall, respondents exhibited a strong level of agreement in their assessments of Qatar's nation brand. The highest levels of consensus were found for Governance (M = 4.68, SD = 0.49, IQR = 0.67) and People (M = 4.62, SD = 0.44, IQR = 0.67), reflecting consistently positive evaluations among respondents.

While respondents expressed positive views across all dimensions of the Nation Brand Index, the degree of consistency varied. Assessments of Tourism (M = 4.51, SD = 0.57) and Culture and Heritage (M = 4.36, SD = 0.54) were characterized by relatively limited dispersion, reflecting a high level of agreement among participants. Conversely, evaluations of Exports (M = 4.15, SD = 0.80) and Investment and Immigration (M = 4.11, SD = 0.74) were more varied, indicating less consensus regarding these aspects of Qatar's nation brand.

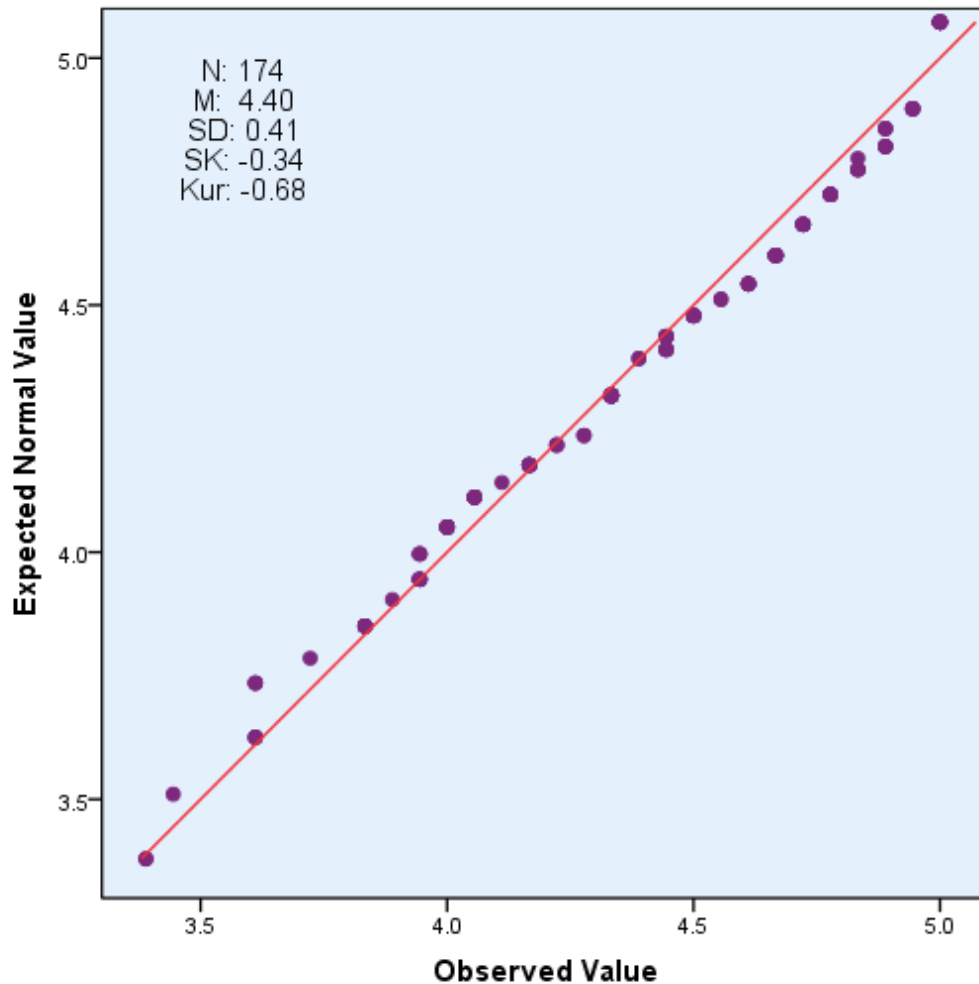
Overall, the composite nation brand score indicated strong agreement among respondents (M = 4.40, SD = 0.41, IQR = 0.67), reflecting a generally consistent internal evaluation of Qatar's nation brand. Before performing parametric group comparisons, the distributional properties of the six composite dimensions were assessed visually using Q–Q plots to evaluate normality assumptions (Figure 1).

Table 4: Level of Internal Consensus Across the Dimensions of Qatar's Nation Brand

Dimensions	Descriptive Statistics	Statistic	Std. Error
Exports	Mean	4.15	0.06
	Median	4.00	
	Std. Deviation	0.80	
	Interquartile Range	0.67	
Governance	Mean	4.68	0.04
	Median	5.00	

Culture	Std. Deviation	0.49	0.04
	Interquartile Range	0.67	
	Mean	4.36	
	Median	4.33	
	Std. Deviation	0.54	
People	Interquartile Range	1.00	0.03
	Mean	4.62	
	Median	4.67	
	Std. Deviation	0.44	
	Interquartile Range	0.67	
Tourism	Mean	4.52	0.05
	Median	4.67	
	Std. Deviation	0.57	
	Interquartile Range	1.00	
	Mean	4.11	
Investment	Median	4.00	0.06
	Std. Deviation	0.74	
	Interquartile Range	1.00	
	Mean	4.40	
	Median	4.44	
Overall Nation Brand Perception	Std. Deviation	0.41	0.03
	Interquartile Range	0.67	

Figure 1: Q-Q Plot of the Study



RQ3: *To what extent do nation brand perceptions differ across demographic groups in Qatar, and what implications do these differences have for future nation-branding efforts?*

To explore whether perceptions varied among different segments of the population, respondents were grouped according to their length of residence in Qatar, age, employment status, gender, and nationality. The results showed that nation brand evaluations differed significantly according to length of residence, age, occupation, and nationality. However, no statistically significant differences were found between male and female respondents, indicating broadly similar overall assessments of Qatar's nation brand across genders (Table 5). However, occupation and nationality were not examined further because several categories contained very small numbers of respondents, limiting the reliability of subgroup comparisons. Consequently, the analysis focused on age and length of residence,

which provided sufficiently large and balanced groups for meaningful interpretation.

Age emerged as the strongest source of variation ($F = 5.46$, $p < .001$), followed by length of residence ($F = 4.79$, $p < .001$). Younger respondents aged below the age of 25 reported the lowest overall nation brand evaluations with median 4.02. Whereas respondents aged 55 and above reported the highest ($M = 4.62$). Similarly, respondents born in Qatar reported more favourable perceptions than residents who had lived in Qatar for longer periods. These findings suggest that although internal perceptions of Qatar's nation brand are generally positive, meaningful differences exist across demographic groups, particularly with respect to age and length of residence. The results highlight the importance of considering generational and residency-related perspectives in future nation-branding and public diplomacy initiatives.

Table 5: Summary of Demographic Differences in Overall Nation Brand Perceptions

Demographic Variable	Test Statistic	p-value	Significant Difference?
Length of Residence	$F = 4.79$	$< .001$	Yes
Age	$F = 5.46$	$< .001$	Yes
Occupation*	$F = 2.21$	.04	Yes
Nationality*	$F = 2.00$	.02	Yes
Gender	$t = 0.02$	.89	No

Nation Brand Perceptions by Residency Status

Table 6 presents the results of the analysis across residency groups. Significant differences emerged for the overall nation brand score ($F = 4.79$, $p < .001$), indicating that evaluations of Qatar's nation brand varied according to respondents' residency background. Among the individual dimensions, the strongest differences were observed for Exports ($F = 9.63$, $p < .001$) and Investment and Immigration ($F = 6.57$, $p < .001$), while Governance, People, and Culture and Heritage also showed statistically significant variation between groups. By contrast, Tourism was the only dimension for which perceptions remained largely consistent across respondents, with no significant differences detected.

Table 6: Nation Brand Perceptions by Residency Status

Dimension	Duration of Residence	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Exports	Qatar Citizen	46	3.72	1.06	9.63	0.00
	Qatar-Born	55	4.50	0.45		
	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	4.35	0.38		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	4.07	0.75		
Governance	Qatari citizen	46	4.84	0.32	5.63	0.00
	Qatar-born	55	4.78	0.33		
	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	4.53	0.64		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	4.51	0.62		
Culture	Qatari citizen	46	4.37	0.56	3.60	0.01
	Qatar-Born	55	4.53	0.51		
	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	4.18	0.50		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	4.23	0.53		
People	Qatari citizen	46	4.82	0.43	4.95	0.00
	Qatar-Born	55	4.59	0.37		
	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	4.53	0.51		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	4.51	0.43		
Tourism	Qatari citizen	46	4.59	0.54	2.01	0.11
	Qatar-Born	55	4.61	0.58		
	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	4.37	0.63		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	4.40	0.55		
Investment	Qatari citizen	46	4.44	0.47	6.57	0.00
	Qatar-Born	55	4.16	0.87		
	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	3.93	0.53		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	3.83	0.75		
Overall	Qatari citizen	46	4.46	0.44	4.79	0.00
	Qatar-Born	55	4.53	0.41		
	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	4.31	0.36		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	4.26	0.36		

Differences in Nation Brand Perceptions by Age Group

As shown in Table 7, age was significantly associated with overall nation brand perceptions ($F = 5.46$, $p < .001$). Significant differences were also found across several dimensions, including Culture and Heritage, People, Tourism, and Investment and Immigration, whereas perceptions of Exports and Governance remained relatively consistent across age groups. Overall, younger respondents (18–24 years) reported the least favorable evaluations of Qatar’s nation brand ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.31$) especially with those economic dimensions like Immigration and

Investment and Tourism, while more positive assessments were generally observed among older participants.

Table 7: Differences in Nation Brand Perceptions by Age Group

Dimensions	Age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Exports	18-24	16	4.15	0.17	1.16	0.33
	25-34	80	4.21	0.84		
	35-44	68	4.08	0.85		
	45-54	3	3.33	0.00		
	55+	7	4.38	0.68		
Governance	18-24	16	4.54	0.51	1.79	0.13
	25-34	80	4.76	0.41		
	35-44	68	4.62	0.57		
	45-54	3	4.33	0.00		
	55+	7	4.86	0.38		
Culture	18-24	16	3.90	0.23	6.66	0.00
	25-34	80	4.42	0.58		
	35-44	68	4.37	0.48		
	45-54	3	3.67	0.00		
	55+	7	4.86	0.38		
People	18-24	16	4.23	0.38	5.00	0.00
	25-34	80	4.73	0.45		
	35-44	68	4.59	0.39		
	45-54	3	4.67	0.00		
	55+	7	4.57	0.50		
Tourism	18-24	16	3.96	0.62	4.85	0.00
	25-34	80	4.56	0.61		
	35-44	68	4.56	0.47		
	45-54	3	4.33	0.00		
	55+	7	4.76	0.37		
Investment & Immigration	18-24	16	3.38	0.91	4.83	0.00
	25-34	80	4.15	0.63		
	35-44	68	4.22	0.75		
	45-54	3	4.00	0.00		
	55+	7	4.29	0.80		
Overall	18-24	16	4.02	0.31	5.46	0.00
	25-34	80	4.47	0.43		
	35-44	68	4.41	0.35		
	45-54	3	4.06	0.00		
	55+	7	4.62	0.46		

Demographic Variations in Nation Brand Perceptions

To identify demographic sources of variation in internal nation brand perceptions, overall nation brand scores were compared across respondents' length of residence in Qatar, age, occupation, nationality, and gender (Table 8). Significant differences were observed for length of residence, age, occupation, and nationality, whereas gender was not associated with differences in overall nation brand evaluations. Because several occupation and nationality categories contained very small subgroup sizes, limiting the reliability and representativeness of comparisons, these outcomes are reported only as supplementary evidence. The discussion, therefore, focuses on age and length of residence, which represent the most robust and substantively meaningful sources of variation in the sample.

As presented in Table 8, age was associated with the greatest variation in overall nation brand perceptions ($F = 5.46, p < .001$), followed by length of residence in Qatar ($F = 4.79, p < .001$). The youngest age group (18–24 years) reported the lowest overall evaluation of Qatar's nation brand ($M = 4.02$), whereas respondents aged 55 years and above reported the highest evaluation ($M = 4.62$). In addition, individuals born in Qatar and Qatari nationals tended to provide more favorable assessments than long-term residents and non-Qatari respondents. These findings suggest that both generational and residency-related characteristics play an important role in shaping internal perceptions of Qatar's nation brand.

Table 8: Overall Differences in Nation Brand Perceptions Across Demographic Groups

Demographics		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	Sig.
Connection to Qatar	Qatari citizen	46	4.46	0.44	4.79	0.00
	Qatar-Born	55	4.53	0.41		
Based on Residence	5–9 Years of Residence in Qatar	19	4.31	0.36		
	10+ Years of Residence in Qatar	54	4.26	0.36		
Age	18-24	16	4.02	0.31	5.46	0.00
	25-34	80	4.47	0.43		
	35-44	68	4.41	0.35		
	45-54	3	4.06	0.00		
	55+	7	4.62	0.46		
Occupation	Academic	13	4.41	0.34	2.21	0.04
	Entrepreneur	5	4.78	0.12		
	Government Employee	47	4.32	0.40		
	Housewife	32	4.44	0.46		

	Private Sector Employee	45	4.41	0.34		
	Retired	3	5.00	0.00		
	Student	29	4.36	0.49		
	No country	8	4.35	0.41	2	0.02
	American	1	4.94			
	British	4	4.24	0.42		
	Egyptian	9	4.08	0.36		
	Indian	2	4.58	0.59		
	Iranian	4	4.78	-		
	Iraqi	2	4.83	-		
	Italian	2	4.44	-		
Nationality	Jordanian	17	4.35	0.35		
	Moroccan	1	4			
	Pakistani	3	4.44	-		
	Palestine	13	4.69	0.32		
	Qatari	50	4.45	0.41		
	Sudanese	10	4.13	0.34		
	Syrian	13	4.29	0.44		
	Yemeni	35	4.4	0.45		
Gender	Male	77	4.29	0.41	0.02	0.89
	Female	97	4.50	0.40		

DISCUSSION

RQ1: Internal Stakeholder Perceptions and the Internal–External Perception Gap

The primary aim of this study was to examine internal stakeholders' perceptions of Qatar's nation brand and compare these evaluations with those of international audiences. The findings indicate that internal stakeholders hold consistently positive views across all six dimensions of the Nation Brand Index. Governance, People, and Tourism received the highest evaluations, whereas Exports and Investment and Immigration received comparatively lower, yet still favorable, ratings. These results suggest that citizens and residents generally view Qatar's nation brand positively and perceive strong performance across both institutional and societal dimensions. The findings support existing literature emphasizing the importance of internal stakeholder experiences in nation branding, as a nation's reputation is shaped not only by external communication but also by internal validation and lived experiences (Anholt, 2007; Govers & Go, 2009).

A comparison between internal and international evaluations revealed significant differences across all six dimensions. Internal stakeholders consistently rated Qatar

more favorably than international audiences, with the largest disparities observed in Governance, Tourism, and People. These findings suggest that some of Qatar's strongest attributes, as experienced by citizens and residents, are not fully reflected in external perceptions. Rather than indicating overly positive domestic evaluations, the results point to a gap between internal experiences and external assessments of the country. Previous nation-branding research similarly argues that inconsistencies between internal identity and external image can present challenges for reputation management and international positioning efforts (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Dinnie, 2015).

One explanation for this divergence is that internal and external audiences rely on different sources when forming their evaluations. Internal stakeholders base their assessments on direct experiences with institutions, services, infrastructure, and daily social interactions. In contrast, international audiences are more likely to rely on media representations, public diplomacy, and other indirect sources of information. Prior research demonstrates that mediated narratives significantly influence international perceptions of countries (Cull, 2008; Szondi, 2008). Although the present study did not directly examine these mechanisms, the findings indicate that Qatar's nation branding challenge involves not only sustaining positive domestic perceptions but also effectively communicating and gaining international recognition for these experiences that are experienced inside the country.

RQ2: Agreement Among Internal Stakeholders in Evaluations of Qatar's Nation Brand

The second objective was to evaluate the extent of shared perceptions among internal stakeholders regarding Qatar's nation brand. The findings indicate a high degree of internal agreement, with respondents consistently providing positive evaluations across all six Nation Brand Index dimensions. This suggests that perceptions of Qatar's nation brand are broadly aligned among residents and citizens. Such alignment is significant, as internal stakeholder consensus is often considered essential for establishing a credible and sustainable nation brand (Dinnie, 2015). An external image is more likely to be regarded as authentic when it reflects experiences and perceptions widely shared by the population inside the country.

However, the degree of consensus varied across dimensions. Governance and People elicited the highest levels of agreement among respondents, indicating stable perceptions of institutional performance and the characteristics of Qatar's population. In contrast, the economic dimensions of Exports and Investment and Immigration exhibited greater variability. This is unsurprising, as perceptions of economic opportunities and performance are more likely to be shaped by individuals' personal experiences, employment situations, and future expectations, resulting in less uniform evaluations across respondents.

These findings add to the literature that conceptualizes nation brands as dynamic and multidimensional constructs rather than static reputational assets (Kaneva, 2011; Kusraeva, 2024). Although aggregate scores indicate a strong positive internal nation brand, variation across dimensions suggests that internal stakeholders may attribute different meanings or experiences to specific aspects of the country's image. Therefore, understanding internal consensus necessitates examining individual dimensions, as different facets of the nation brand may elicit varying degrees of agreement among stakeholder groups.

RQ3: Demographic Differences in Nation Brand Perceptions

The third research question investigated whether perceptions of the nation's brand differ across demographic groups and considered the implications of these differences for future nation-branding strategies. The results demonstrated significant variation by age and length of residence, whereas gender was not associated with differences in overall nation brand evaluations. Although statistically significant differences were also observed for occupation and nationality, the small sample sizes in several categories limited the reliability and representativeness of these subgroup comparisons. Therefore, the most robust and interpretable findings pertain to age and residency status.

Age represented the most significant source of variation in the study. Respondents aged 18–24 consistently provided lower evaluations across multiple dimensions of Qatar's nation brand, including culture and heritage, people, tourism, and investment and immigration. In contrast, respondents aged 55 and above reported the most favorable evaluations. These results indicate that internal stakeholder perceptions are heterogeneous and that generational differences substantially influence nation brand assessments. Younger respondents (18-24) belong to

Generation Z, a cohort characterized by extensive digital connectivity, high exposure to global media, and a propensity to compare national performance with international standards and opportunities (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Djafarova & Fouts, 2022). Consequently, younger stakeholders may apply more rigorous evaluation criteria and adopt more critical perspectives when assessing national performance.

General

The evaluations among younger respondents may also be attributed to their life stage. Unlike older cohorts, many young adults are entering a highly competitive economic environment and are particularly concerned with employment opportunities, affordable living, and future prospects. As a result, dimensions related to economic opportunity, investment, and future development are likely to be assessed through the lens of personal aspirations and expectations (especially in factors that touch on economic aspects). In contrast, older respondents, including those nearing or in retirement, may evaluate the country based on accumulated life experiences, long-term stability, and satisfaction with institutional performance rather than concerns about future economic uncertainty. The higher evaluations among older respondents may thus reflect both stronger place attachment and distinct priorities when assessing the nation.

Length of residence also affected perceptions of Qatar's nation brand. Respondents born in Qatar and Qatari nationals generally provided more favorable evaluations than other residents 5 years and above. This result aligns with theories of place attachment and identity, which propose that emotional connection, familiarity, and a sense of belonging positively influence perceptions of place (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Individuals with stronger personal ties to the country are more likely to identify with national achievements and to evaluate the nation more positively than those with primarily residential or professional ties.

Strategic Implications

These findings indicate that internal stakeholder perceptions are shaped by both demographic and experiential factors. Respondents reported highly favorable evaluations of Qatar's nation brand, important differences exist between generations and residency groups. For policymakers and nation-branding

practitioners, these results highlight the importance of recognizing that internal audiences are not a homogeneous population. Future nation-branding and public diplomacy initiatives should therefore pay particular attention to younger stakeholders, whose expectations regarding economic opportunity, career development, and future prospects may differ substantially from those of older generations. Addressing these concerns may not only strengthen internal alignment but also contribute to the long-term sustainability and credibility of Qatar's nation brand.

Another important point regarding the significant gap identified between internal and international perceptions suggests that nation-branding efforts should focus not only on strengthening domestic engagement but also on improving the translation of internal realities into internationally recognized narratives. Greater alignment between internal experiences and external perceptions can be achieved through more transparent communication, strategic international collaborations, cultural diplomacy initiatives, and engagement with global media and digital influencers who shape international opinion.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the use of convenience and snowball sampling restricts the representativeness of the sample and limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Qatar. In addition, the online distribution of the survey may have led to an overrepresentation of respondents with higher levels of digital connectivity.

Second, certain demographic categories, particularly occupation and nationality, included very small subgroup sizes. Although significant differences were observed, these results were treated with caution and not explored in depth, as the imbalance in group sizes limits the robustness of comparisons. Future research should aim to use more balanced samples or larger datasets to enable more reliable subgroup analysis across a wider range of demographic categories.

Third, the study's cross-sectional design and dependence on self-reported survey data collected at a single point in time limit its ability to capture changes in perceptions over time and may be subject to response-related biases. Future research could employ longitudinal approaches to investigate how perceptions of

Qatar's nation brand develop and change in the years following the FIFA World Cup and throughout the implementation of broader nation-branding initiatives.

Future research could also further explore demographic differences in greater depth, particularly focusing on younger cohorts such as Generation Z, whose perceptions appear more critical and economically oriented. In addition, comparative studies across different stakeholder groups, including more systematic international samples, would help strengthen understanding of how internal and external perceptions diverge and how these gaps can be narrowed over time.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that internal stakeholders possess highly positive perceptions of Qatar's nation brand across all six Nation Brand Index dimensions. The findings indicate a significant gap between internal and external perceptions, with internal audiences consistently evaluating Qatar more favorably than international audiences. Although a strong internal consensus was identified, notable differences were observed across demographic groups, particularly in relation to age and length of residence. These results underscore the necessity of incorporating internal stakeholder perspectives into nation-branding research and practice. For Qatar, aligning domestic experiences with external narratives may strengthen the credibility, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of its nation-branding and public diplomacy initiatives.

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Fashioning Qatar's Destination Brand: Fashion Tourism, Cultural Representation and Luxury Lifestyle Experiences

Ali Abdallah

Al Rayyan International University College in partnership with the University of Derby, Doha, Qatar

Email: aabdallah@ariu.edu.qa**AlJouri Al-Ajmi**

Al Rayyan International University College in partnership with the University of Derby, Doha, Qatar

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Abstract

Fashion tourism is increasingly used to communicate lifestyle, identity and symbolic value, yet the literature remains dominated by established fashion capitals, retail-led shopping tourism and tourist-only destination image studies. Less is known about how fashion-related tourism touchpoints operate in emerging Gulf destinations, where luxury retail, modest fashion, cultural institutions, national identity and visually shareable urban experiences intersect. Addressing this gap matters because Qatar's destination brand is being shaped through culture, luxury, creative industries and curated visitor experiences, but the contribution of fashion tourism to this positioning remains underexplored. This exploratory

study examines how fashion tourism may contribute to Qatar's destination brand by shaping perceptions of cultural identity, luxury lifestyle, visual appeal, memorability and recommendation intention. A cross-sectional survey collected 114 valid responses from participants who had engaged with at least one fashion-related tourism space in Qatar. The sample was heavily weighted toward local citizens (79.8%), younger respondents (72.8% aged 18-24) and female respondents (74.6%). The findings should therefore be read as exploratory evidence of local, resident and limited visitor perceptions rather than representative tourist-market evidence. Descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation of open-ended responses were used to identify patterns in experience evaluation, destination image and behavioural intention. The findings suggest that fashion tourism can support Qatar's image as a modern, visually attractive and culturally diverse destination when luxury retail is connected to cultural storytelling, modest fashion, museums, exhibitions, design aesthetics and lifestyle spaces. Respondents associated luxury malls and designer retail spaces with sophistication, exclusivity and lifestyle quality, while museums, exhibitions and modest fashion spaces were associated with cultural authenticity and local identity. The study argues that Qatar's strongest fashion tourism proposition lies not in luxury retail alone, but in the strategic combination of global luxury, Qatari cultural expression, modest fashion, design aesthetics and curated visitor experiences. The study offers recommendations for tourism planners, cultural institutions and destination marketers seeking to use fashion tourism as a distinctive tool of cultural tourism marketing and destination differentiation.

Keywords

Fashion tourism; destination branding; Qatar; cultural tourism; luxury tourism; destination image; memorable tourism experiences.

1. Introduction

Destinations increasingly compete through experiences that communicate lifestyle, culture and symbolic identity. Destination brands are not formed only through official slogans, logos or advertising campaigns; they are also shaped through the spaces that visitors see, photograph, share, remember and recommend (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025; Borlido & Kastenholz, 2021; Hussain et al., 2024). In this

context, fashion tourism has moved beyond shopping trips and the consumption of luxury goods. It now includes museums, exhibitions, fashion events, designer retail environments, modest fashion spaces, lifestyle districts, digital aesthetics and cultural storytelling (Farsani & Jamshidi, 2021; Gravari-Barbas & Sabatini, 2023; Yildirim & Gulel, 2025). These touchpoints influence how visitors imagine, experience and remember a place. Fashion therefore operates as both a cultural language and a tourism marketing resource.

Qatar provides a strong context for examining this relationship. Over the last decade, the country has invested heavily in museums, heritage districts, luxury hospitality, lifestyle retail, public events, design-led urban spaces and international tourism promotion (Al-Muhannadi, 2025; Mahboob & Faisal, 2025; Theodoropoulou, 2025; Yap et al., 2022). Its tourism identity is not built only around sun, sea or conventional sightseeing. It increasingly draws on culture, architecture, lifestyle, luxury, sport, events, gastronomy and creative industries (Al-Muhannadi, 2025; Yap et al., 2022). Fashion-related tourism spaces sit within this wider transformation because they combine visible cultural identity with global forms of consumption and visual experience.

Secondary destination evidence further supports this context. Qatar Tourism reported 5.1 million international visitors in 2025, annual growth of 3.7%, more than 10.8 million room nights sold and average full-market occupancy of 71% (Qatar Tourism, 2026). At the same time, Visit Qatar's public event listings include lifestyle, shopping and exhibition experiences such as the Teeb AlHazm Oud & Perfumes Exhibition and the Doha Summer Trade Fair, while M7 is positioned as Qatar's epicentre for innovation and entrepreneurship in fashion and design in Msheireb Downtown Doha (M7, 2026; Visit Qatar, 2026). These secondary indicators support the argument that Qatar's destination offer is being developed around culture, lifestyle, luxury, design and curated visitor-facing creative experiences.

The relevance of fashion tourism in Qatar is particularly significant because the country does not resemble established fashion capitals such as Paris, Milan, London or New York. Its destination identity is shaped by a different combination of forces: Gulf modernity, modest fashion, Islamic aesthetics, luxury retail, curated museums, international brands, high-quality hospitality and a multicultural resident

population. This creates a distinctive setting in which fashion tourism cannot be reduced to commercial shopping. It must be understood as a set of experiences through which visitors and residents read Qatar as modern, luxurious, culturally rooted and visually distinctive (Gravari-Barbas & Sabatini, 2023; Kirillova, 2023; Yu et al., 2025).

Existing destination branding research often focuses on promotional campaigns, national image, mega-events and tourism infrastructure (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025; Borlido & Kastenholz, 2021). In the Qatari context, research has also given considerable attention to crisis, destination competitiveness, museum promotion, World Cup-related visibility and national image formation (Al-Muhannadi, 2025; Mahboob & Faisal, 2025; Theodoropoulou, 2025; Yap et al., 2022). Less attention has been given to the smaller but powerful visitor-facing experience spaces through which destination meanings are produced in everyday tourism and lifestyle encounters. Fashion-related tourism spaces are important in this regard because they are highly visible, digitally shareable and emotionally connected to identity, taste, aesthetics and lifestyle.

This study addresses this gap by examining how fashion-related tourism experiences shape perceptions of Qatar among local citizens, expatriate residents and tourists. It focuses on the relationship between fashion-related tourism experiences and destination image, with particular attention to modernity, luxury, cultural authenticity, memorability and recommendation intention. The central research question guiding the study is: How do fashion-related tourism experiences shape perceptions of Qatar as a culturally distinctive, luxury lifestyle destination?

The study has four objectives. First, it examines the main fashion-related tourism touchpoints through which respondents experience Qatar, including luxury malls, fashion exhibitions, museums, modest fashion spaces and design-led lifestyle environments. Second, it analyses how these touchpoints influence perceptions of Qatar's destination image, especially modernity, cultural diversity, fashionability and visual appeal. Third, it evaluates how authenticity and memorability appear to relate to recommendation intention. Fourth, it explores how tourists, expatriate residents and local citizens interpret fashion tourism differently. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to debates on tourism marketing, cultural representation and destination branding in the Gulf context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fashion tourism beyond shopping

Fashion tourism has traditionally been associated with shopping tourism, designer brands and travel to fashion capitals. This view remains useful, but it is too narrow for contemporary tourism research. Fashion tourism now includes experiences where clothing, design, retail, cultural display, aesthetics and urban lifestyle interact (Farsani & Jamshidi, 2021; Gravari-Barbas & Sabatini, 2023; Yildirim & Gulel, 2025). Gravari-Barbas and Sabatini (2023) describe fashion and tourism as connected systems of imagination, experience and symbolic consumption. This means that fashion tourism is not simply about purchasing objects. It is about encountering places through style, creativity, display, identity and aspiration.

A key debate in the literature concerns whether fashion tourism should be treated primarily as retail consumption or as cultural experience. Retail-led studies emphasise shopping, luxury brands and consumer expenditure, while cultural approaches emphasise design heritage, identity, creativity and symbolic meaning (Farsani & Jamshidi, 2021; Yu et al., 2025). The second view is particularly important for destinations such as Qatar, where fashion-related tourism spaces include museums, modest fashion, Gulf aesthetics and culturally curated lifestyle environments, not only luxury stores.

2.2 Destination branding, destination image and experience-based touchpoints

Destination branding is increasingly understood as an experience-based process. A destination brand is not created only through official campaigns. It is produced through what visitors encounter, evaluate, photograph, share, remember and recommend (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025; Borlido & Kastenholz, 2021; Hussain et al., 2024). AlShaalan and Durugbo (2025) argue that city and destination branding are increasingly connected to innovation and the management of symbolic urban experiences. From this perspective, fashion tourism spaces are not peripheral to destination branding. They are part of the material and emotional environment through which the destination brand becomes believable.

The relationship between fashion tourism and destination image can be understood through cognitive and affective dimensions. Cognitive image concerns what visitors believe or know about a destination, such as whether it is modern,

culturally diverse or high quality. Affective image concerns what visitors feel, including excitement, admiration, comfort, belonging or curiosity (Borlido & Kastenholz, 2021; Huddin et al., 2024; Su et al., 2022). Fashion tourism is particularly relevant because it activates both dimensions. A luxury mall may communicate modern infrastructure and international quality, while also generating feelings of pleasure, exclusivity and aspiration. A museum exhibition may communicate cultural knowledge, while also producing emotional attachment to heritage and identity.

However, destination branding literature also warns that strong visual and commercial branding can become generic if it is not anchored in place-specific meaning. This is particularly relevant to luxury tourism, where similar global brands and high-end retail environments may be reproduced across different cities (Morando & Platania, 2022). For Qatar, the branding challenge is therefore not simply to offer luxury, but to integrate luxury with cultural identity, modest fashion, heritage interpretation and local creative expression.

2.3 Aesthetics, authenticity and memorable tourism experiences

Aesthetics are central to fashion tourism. Kirillova (2023) argues that beauty and aesthetics have significant influence on tourism experience because visual environments shape emotional responses. Fashion tourism is one of the most visually intensive forms of cultural tourism. It involves colour, texture, design, architecture, display, lighting, atmosphere and bodily presentation. In Qatar, luxury malls, museums, heritage districts and lifestyle spaces are often designed to be visually memorable. This means they can influence destination perception not only through the services they provide, but through the images and emotions they produce.

Authenticity is another important concept. In many destinations, luxury branding can create a risk of standardisation because international brands and high-end retail spaces may look similar across cities. For Qatar, the challenge is to ensure that fashion tourism does not simply reproduce a generic global luxury image. Its stronger potential lies in connecting luxury with local cultural meaning. Modest fashion, Qatari dress, museum storytelling, heritage-inspired design and the visibility of Gulf aesthetics can help create a more distinctive destination identity (Mahboob & Faisal, 2025; Uslu et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025).

The literature also shows that memorable tourism experiences influence behavioural intentions, including recommendation and revisit intention (Sihombing et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). In fashion tourism, memorability may be produced through sensory appeal, cultural storytelling, novelty, social interaction, photographic value or the emotional contrast between global luxury and local tradition. A memorable fashion-related experience can therefore influence whether visitors recommend a destination or return to it.

2.4 Local citizens, expatriate residents and tourists as co-interpreters of destination image

Tourism studies often focus on international visitors, but destination image is also shaped by residents and other destination users. Styliadis (2017) argues that place attachment influences how residents perceive and support tourism development. In Qatar, this is especially important because expatriate residents form a substantial part of the everyday users of tourism and lifestyle spaces. They are not tourists in the strict sense, but they interact with malls, museums, events and design districts in ways that shape the destination atmosphere.

Including local citizens and expatriate residents is therefore academically useful, but their perceptions should not be treated as identical to tourist perceptions. Local citizens may interpret fashion tourism through cultural pride, national identity and everyday familiarity. Expatriate residents may interpret it through lifestyle adaptation, comparison and repeat use. Tourists may interpret it through novelty, visual appeal and destination evaluation. These groups provide different but connected perspectives on how fashion tourism contributes to Qatar's brand.

2.5 Research gap and conceptual direction

The literature points to three gaps that this study addresses. First, fashion tourism research remains concentrated on established fashion destinations and less attention has been given to Gulf tourism contexts. Second, destination branding research in Qatar has often focused on national strategy, mega-events or policy-level development rather than specific visitor-facing experience spaces (Al-Muhannadi, 2025; Theodoropoulou, 2025; Yap et al., 2022). Third, few studies examine fashion tourism through the combined perceptions of local citizens, expatriate residents and tourists. The present study responds to these gaps by

examining fashion tourism as a cultural and marketing mechanism through which Qatar's destination image is experienced, interpreted and remembered.

The review also suggests that fashion tourism should be studied through an integrated pathway. Fashion-related touchpoints may influence perceptions of luxury and modernity, cultural authenticity, visual memorability, destination image and recommendation intention. This pathway is not tested causally in the present exploratory study, but it provides the conceptual basis for analysing how respondents interpret fashion tourism within Qatar's destination brand.

3. Conceptual Focus

The study is guided by the idea that fashion tourism in Qatar operates through a brand assemblage. The term is used here in an applied destination branding sense to refer to the way multiple touchpoints, actors, images, spaces and meanings combine to shape destination perception. It draws on experience-based destination branding, symbolic consumption and the role of aesthetics in tourism experience (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025; Gravari-Barbas & Sabatini, 2023; Hussain et al., 2024; Kirillova, 2023). In this sense, Qatar's fashion tourism image is not produced by one element alone. It emerges from the interaction of luxury retail, cultural institutions, modest fashion, visual design, digital representation, lifestyle spaces and stakeholder interpretation.

Luxury retail spaces communicate international quality, exclusivity and modern urban lifestyle. Museums and exhibitions communicate cultural depth, national identity and storytelling. Modest fashion spaces communicate local values, Islamic aesthetics and cultural specificity. Design-led lifestyle districts communicate creativity, atmosphere and contemporary leisure. Digital media then amplifies these experiences by turning them into images, videos and social narratives that circulate beyond the physical destination (Hussain et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025).

This conceptual focus helps sharpen the research. The study is not about the fashion industry in Qatar as a production sector. It does not examine supply chains, manufacturing, retail profitability or designer entrepreneurship in isolation. It is concerned with tourism-facing fashion experiences and their effect on destination perception. The key issue is how respondents interpret fashion-related spaces as part of Qatar's tourism identity.

Four analytical dimensions are used. The first is luxury and modernity, which refers to the extent to which fashion tourism reinforces Qatar as a high-quality, contemporary and aspirational destination. The second is cultural authenticity, which refers to whether fashion tourism communicates Qatari identity, modest aesthetics, heritage and cultural meaning. The third is visual memorability, which refers to the role of design, architecture and sensory experience in making Qatar memorable. The fourth is behavioural intention, which refers to willingness to recommend Qatar and to associate it with fashion-related tourism experiences.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey supported by one open-ended question. This design was appropriate because the purpose was to identify current patterns in respondent perceptions of fashion-related tourism spaces in Qatar. Cross-sectional surveys are useful when research seeks to capture a snapshot of perceptions at a particular point in time, although they do not allow strong causal claims (Bryman, 2016; Maier et al., 2023; Zimmerman, 2024). The survey design therefore allowed the study to examine associations between fashion tourism experiences, destination image and recommendation intention without presenting these relationships as definitive causality.

The study is exploratory rather than explanatory. It does not claim to test causal effects or to represent all tourists visiting Qatar. Instead, it provides initial evidence on how different destination users interpret fashion-related tourism spaces and how these interpretations may contribute to Qatar's cultural-luxury destination image.

4.2 Target population, recruitment and screening

The target population consisted of adults in Qatar who had engaged with at least one fashion-related tourism space. These spaces included fashion exhibitions or museums, fashion events or pop-ups, luxury malls and designer stores, traditional or modest fashion spaces, and design-led lifestyle districts. Respondents were included if they were local citizens, expatriate residents or tourists. This inclusive approach was necessary because fashion tourism in Qatar is not consumed only by short-term tourists. Local citizens and expatriate residents also use and interpret

cultural, retail and lifestyle spaces, and their presence contributes to the destination atmosphere.

A screening question was used at the beginning of the questionnaire to confirm that respondents had direct experience of at least one fashion-related tourism space in Qatar. Respondents who did not meet this condition were excluded from the final dataset. Data were collected in Qatar during spring 2026 through an anonymous self-administered questionnaire. The survey link was circulated through accessible local networks and online channels to reach respondents with experience of fashion-related spaces in Qatar.

A non-probability sampling approach was used, combining purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive screening ensured that respondents had some direct experience of fashion-related tourism spaces. Convenience sampling was appropriate because there was no complete sampling frame of all people who had visited such spaces in Qatar (Ahmed, 2024; Saunders et al., 2019). Although this approach limits generalisability, it is common in exploratory tourism perception research where access to a clearly bounded population is difficult.

4.3 Questionnaire design and ethics

The questionnaire was informed by social research guidance and by the literature on fashion tourism, destination image, memorable tourism experiences, authenticity, aesthetics and behavioural intention (Altinay et al., 2024; Borlido & Kastenholz, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gravari-Barbas & Sabatini, 2023; Kirillova, 2023; Ranganathan & Caduff, 2023; Sihombing et al., 2024; Uslu et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). It included sections on demographic profile, residency status, exposure to fashion tourism touchpoints, experience ratings, perceptions of Qatar, destination branding outcomes, memorability and recommendation intention. Most attitudinal items used a five-point scale. The survey also included an open-ended question asking respondents to identify their most memorable fashion-related experience in Qatar. This question helped add interpretive depth to the numerical findings by identifying the types of spaces and meanings respondents associated with fashion tourism.

Before distribution, the questionnaire was checked for clarity, wording and relevance to the Qatar context. The wording of the screening question and open-

ended question was refined to ensure that respondents understood that fashion tourism included cultural, retail, design, modest fashion and lifestyle spaces rather than shopping alone. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire, and completion of the survey indicated informed consent. No personally identifying data were collected, and ethical clearance was secured in line with the authors' institutional procedures for low-risk anonymous survey research.

4.4 Sample and data analysis

A total of 114 valid responses were retained for analysis after screening. The sample was strongly weighted toward younger respondents and local citizens. This profile is important because it indicates that the findings reflect the perceptions of a youthful and locally embedded respondent base more than a balanced tourist market sample. The analysis therefore treats subgroup comparisons as indicative rather than statistically representative.

The survey output retained for this article supports respondent profiling, percentage reporting, descriptive ranking of experience types and thematic interpretation of the open-ended response question. It does not support inferential comparison between subgroups, and therefore the findings are reported cautiously at a descriptive and exploratory level.

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation of open-ended responses. Descriptive analysis was used to summarise age, gender, residency status, experience patterns and perception trends. The open-ended responses were reviewed in two stages. First, responses were read to identify recurring meanings associated with memorable fashion-related tourism experiences. Second, these meanings were grouped around the study's analytical dimensions, including luxury and modernity, cultural authenticity, visual memorability and recommendation intention. This combination of descriptive and interpretive analysis allowed the study to identify how fashion tourism may contribute to Qatar's destination image while remaining within the limits of the available dataset.

5. Findings

This section presents the findings in four parts. First, it describes the respondent profile and clarifies the exploratory nature of the sample. Second, it identifies the main fashion tourism touchpoints reported by respondents. Third, it interprets how these touchpoints were associated with destination meanings such as luxury, modernity, cultural authenticity and visual appeal. Fourth, it considers the indicative differences between local citizens, expatriate residents and tourists.

The respondent profile shows that the sample was largely young, female and locally based. Of the 114 valid responses, 83 respondents were aged 18-24, 27 were aged 25-34, three were aged 35-44 and one was aged 45 or above. Expressed as percentages, 72.8% of respondents were aged 18-24 and 23.7% were aged 25-34. Female respondents represented 74.6% of the sample, while male respondents represented 23.7% and 1.8% preferred not to say. In relation to residency status, 79.8% were local citizens, 13.2% were expatriate residents and 7.0% were tourists.

Table 1

Respondent profile (n = 114)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-24	83	72.8%
Age	25-34	27	23.7%
Age	35-44	3	2.6%
Age	45+	1	0.9%
Gender	Female	85	74.6%
Gender	Male	27	23.7%
Gender	Prefer not to say	2	1.8%
Residency status	Local citizen	91	79.8%
Residency status	Expatriate resident	15	13.2%
Residency status	Tourist	8	7.0%

This profile has two implications. First, the sample provides useful insight into younger users of fashion-related tourism spaces in Qatar. This is important because younger audiences are often highly engaged with visual culture, lifestyle spaces and digital sharing. Second, the sample is not evenly distributed across local citizens, expatriates and tourists. The results should therefore be read as exploratory evidence of how fashion tourism is perceived by this respondent group, rather than as a statistically representative comparison between groups.

The most prominent fashion tourism touchpoints in the responses were luxury malls and designer retail spaces, followed by fashion exhibitions, museums, modest fashion spaces and design-led lifestyle districts. Respondents did not treat fashion tourism as shopping only. Open-ended responses referred to architecture, visual presentation, cultural narration, heritage, atmosphere and the emotional quality of the space. This finding supports the view that fashion tourism in Qatar is experienced as a wider cultural and lifestyle phenomenon.

Luxury retail spaces received the strongest positive interpretation within the available responses. Respondents associated them with modernity, global brands, comfort, exclusivity and a high-quality visitor environment. These spaces contributed to an image of Qatar as affluent, contemporary and internationally connected. However, the findings also indicate that luxury alone does not fully explain Qatar's fashion tourism appeal. Museums, exhibitions and modest fashion spaces played a different role by contributing cultural meaning, authenticity and local distinctiveness. Respondents linked these spaces to Qatari identity, heritage representation and the experience of learning about local culture through fashion and design.

Table 2

Fashion tourism touchpoints and destination meanings

Touchpoint	Main visitor interpretation	Destination branding role	Nature of evidence
Luxury malls and designer stores	Modern, exclusive, visually impressive and internationally competitive	Reinforces luxury lifestyle and global quality	Recurring open-ended references to luxury, design, comfort and visual appeal
Museums and fashion exhibitions	Educational, cultural and identity-based	Adds authenticity and cultural depth	Recurring references to cultural learning, heritage and storytelling
Modest traditional and fashion spaces	Connected to local values, modest aesthetics and Qatari identity	Differentiates Qatar from generic luxury destinations	References to cultural specificity, modest fashion and local identity
Design-led lifestyle districts	Creative, atmospheric and suitable for leisure and social	Supports contemporary lifestyle positioning	References to atmosphere, architecture, social

Touchpoint	Main visitor interpretation	Destination branding role	Nature of evidence
	interaction		experience and creativity
Fashion events and pop-ups	Social, interactive and memorable	Generates repeat engagement and digital visibility	References to novelty, participation and shareable experiences

The aggregate descriptive results also allowed the main fashion tourism experiences to be ranked by relative evaluation. Table 3 reports the available descriptive ranking and variation pattern. The ranking should be interpreted as exploratory rather than as evidence of statistically significant differences between experience types.

Table 3

Descriptive ranking of fashion tourism experience ratings

Rank	Experience type	Aggregate rating pattern	Variation pattern	Interpretation
1	Luxury malls and designer retail spaces	Highest rating	Low variation	Strongest positive evaluation; associated with modernity, exclusivity and lifestyle quality
2	Fashion exhibitions and museums	High positive rating	Moderate variation	Strong cultural and educational appeal; associated with heritage and storytelling
3	Fashion events and festivals	Positive rating	Moderate variation	Associated with social interaction, novelty and memorability
4	Modest and traditional fashion spaces	Positive rating	Moderate variation	Associated with local identity, authenticity and cultural specificity
5	Design-led	Positive rating	Moderate	Associated with

	lifestyle spaces		variation	atmosphere, architecture and contemporary urban lifestyle
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Perceptions of Qatar were strongly associated with modernity, cultural diversity, fashionability and visual appeal. Respondents described Qatar as a destination where luxury, culture and contemporary urban design are visible in everyday tourism spaces. Fashion tourism therefore appears to strengthen an image of Qatar as a lifestyle destination rather than only a business, transit or mega-event destination. This is significant because it shows how specific tourism touchpoints can contribute to wider destination repositioning.

Memorability emerged as a central theme. Respondents who identified fashion-related experiences as memorable also tended to express positive recommendation intention. The open-ended responses indicated that memorability was generated by four recurring qualities: visual impact, cultural storytelling, luxury atmosphere and the feeling of uniqueness. Luxury malls were memorable because of architecture, global brands and sensory appeal. Museums and exhibitions were memorable because they connected fashion to history, identity and cultural narration. Modest fashion spaces and smaller local stores were memorable because they communicated a more grounded sense of place.

The open-ended response question was also reviewed thematically. Table 4 summarises the recurring themes identified from the response summary and links each theme to its destination-branding meaning. The table is used as qualitative support for the interpretation of memorability and recommendation intention.

Table 4

Thematic summary of open-ended responses

Theme	Evidence from open-ended response summary	Indicative prominence	Destination-branding meaning
Luxury and designer retail	Luxury malls were described as memorable because of design, global brands and visual impact.	High / recurring	Reinforces sophistication, exclusivity and global lifestyle quality

Architecture and visual appeal	Respondents associated memorable experiences with beautiful spaces, atmosphere, design and emotional visual impact.	High / recurring	Supports visual memorability and shareable destination imagery
Cultural storytelling and heritage	Museums and exhibitions were valued for cultural narration, heritage presentation and learning.	Recurring	Adds cultural depth and strengthens authenticity
Modest fashion and local identity	Smaller, modest and traditional fashion spaces were linked to local culture, authenticity and sense of place.	Reported	Differentiates Qatar from generic luxury destinations
Social and lifestyle experience	Fashion events and festivals were linked to entertainment, innovation and interaction with people.	Reported	Supports repeat engagement, social atmosphere and recommendation potential

Differences between respondent groups were visible, although they should be treated cautiously due to the uneven subgroup sizes. Tourists tended to interpret fashion tourism through novelty, luxury and visual attractiveness. Their engagement was generally shorter and more impression-based. Local citizens tended to attach stronger cultural meaning to heritage-related and modest fashion spaces. For this group, fashion tourism was more closely connected to local identity and everyday familiarity. Expatriate residents occupied an intermediate position. They engaged with Qatar's tourism spaces as residents, but also interpreted them through comparison, discovery and lifestyle adaptation.

Overall, the findings suggest that Qatar's fashion tourism brand is strongest when luxury and culture are integrated. Luxury retail helps Qatar communicate global quality, while cultural and modest fashion spaces prevent the destination image from becoming generic. The most distinctive destination proposition is therefore

not fashion as shopping, but fashion as a cultural-luxury experience that combines visual sophistication with Qatari identity.

6. Discussion

The findings suggest that fashion tourism can function as a destination branding tool when it communicates more than commercial consumption. In Qatar, fashion-related tourism spaces appear to contribute to destination image through the interaction of luxury, culture, visual aesthetics and memorability. This supports the argument that destination brands are not only communicated through official marketing, but also produced through visitor experiences in symbolic spaces (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025; Borlido & Kastenholz, 2021).

The strongest contribution of fashion tourism to Qatar's brand appears to be its ability to join modernity and cultural representation. Luxury malls and designer retail environments communicate international sophistication and high-quality leisure. These spaces make Qatar appear contemporary, affluent and globally connected. However, if destination branding relies only on luxury, the image may become interchangeable with other Gulf and global cities. The findings therefore point to the strategic importance of museums, exhibitions, modest fashion and cultural storytelling. These elements give fashion tourism a more locally meaningful foundation.

This balance is central to Qatar's destination differentiation. Many destinations can offer luxury retail, international brands and visually impressive malls. Fewer can combine these with Qatari heritage, Islamic aesthetics, modest fashion, Gulf identity and curated cultural institutions. The findings indicate that respondents valued Qatar's ability to present modern luxury without completely separating it from cultural meaning. This is consistent with Yu et al. (2025), who argue that fashion and intangible cultural heritage can enhance destination image by producing symbolic value.

The study also supports the importance of aesthetics in tourism perception. Respondents often remembered spaces because of architecture, design, atmosphere and visual appeal. This aligns with Kirillova's (2023) argument that beauty and aesthetics influence tourist experience. In Qatar, fashion tourism spaces are particularly effective because they are visually curated. They are designed not only

for movement and consumption, but also for display, photography and digital sharing. In this sense, fashion tourism becomes part of the visual economy of the destination.

Digital media intensifies this effect. Although the survey focused on direct experience, the open-ended responses suggest that visual impressions are central to how respondents evaluate Qatar. Spaces that are photogenic, well-designed and culturally distinctive are more likely to circulate online and become part of the destination's external image. This is important for tourism marketing because fashion tourism experiences can act as content generators. Visitors and residents become informal brand communicators when they share images of museums, luxury malls, exhibitions, traditional clothing, design districts and lifestyle spaces (Hussain et al., 2024).

The findings also indicate that authenticity does not have one meaning. For some respondents, authenticity was connected to heritage, modest fashion and cultural institutions. For others, luxury itself was interpreted as authentic to contemporary Qatar because it reflected the country's modern lifestyle and development. This is an important insight. Authenticity in Gulf tourism should not be understood only as tradition preserved from the past. It can also involve the lived reality of a rapidly modernising society where luxury, global brands and contemporary architecture are part of everyday urban identity. The key issue is whether these forms of modernity are presented in a way that remains connected to place.

Memorability provides another important explanation of how fashion tourism may affect destination branding. Respondents remembered spaces that produced emotional response, visual impact or cultural meaning. These memories appeared to support recommendation intention. This is consistent with research showing that memorable tourism experiences influence behavioural intentions (Sihombing et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). For Qatar, this means that fashion tourism should be assessed not only by visitor numbers or retail performance, but also by its capacity to generate memorable narratives that visitors and residents can retell.

The inclusion of local citizens, expatriate residents and tourists adds a further contribution. Destination image is often studied through the eyes of tourists, but Qatar's tourism spaces are co-produced by the people who use them regularly.

Local citizens contribute cultural interpretation and legitimacy. Expatriate residents contribute everyday use, social atmosphere and word-of-mouth promotion. Tourists contribute external visibility and destination evaluation. These groups do not experience fashion tourism in the same way, but together they shape the wider destination brand.

The findings therefore suggest that fashion tourism in Qatar should be understood as a shared destination experience rather than a tourist-only activity. Malls, museums, fashion events and lifestyle districts are not isolated tourism products. They are social spaces where local, expatriate and international audiences interact. This interaction may help create the sense of Qatar as cosmopolitan, culturally layered and visually dynamic. From a marketing perspective, this is valuable because the destination brand becomes embedded in everyday cultural and leisure practices.

7. Implications

The study offers several theoretical implications. First, it extends fashion tourism research by situating it in a Gulf destination context. Much of the fashion tourism literature focuses on established fashion cities or retail-led travel. This study suggests that fashion tourism can also develop in destinations where fashion is connected to cultural representation, modest aesthetics, museums, luxury lifestyle and urban branding.

Second, the study contributes to destination branding theory by showing that fashion-related tourism spaces can act as symbolic brand touchpoints. They help respondents form cognitive perceptions of Qatar as modern and high quality, and affective perceptions of Qatar as visually appealing, memorable and culturally engaging. This supports a more experience-based approach to destination branding.

Third, the study contributes to debates on authenticity. The findings indicate that authenticity in Qatar's fashion tourism should be conceptualised as a negotiated relationship between heritage and modernity. Authenticity is not produced only by traditional dress or heritage displays. It also emerges when contemporary luxury and design are interpreted as part of Qatar's current cultural identity. This broader understanding is useful for analysing Gulf tourism destinations where rapid modernisation and cultural continuity coexist.

The practical implications should be understood as recommendations arising from exploratory findings rather than as proven causal outcomes. Tourism planners should avoid positioning fashion tourism only through luxury shopping. Luxury retail is important, but it should be integrated with cultural storytelling, modest fashion, local designers, museum programming and heritage-inspired experiences. Qatar's strongest opportunity lies in creating routes and events that connect malls, museums, design districts, cultural villages and local fashion entrepreneurs.

Cultural institutions can play a stronger role in this strategy. Museums and exhibitions should be used not only as display spaces, but as interpretive platforms that explain the relationship between fashion, identity, heritage, gender, modesty, craft and national image. Curated exhibitions on Qatari dress, Gulf fashion, textile heritage, pearl culture, modest fashion and contemporary designers could strengthen the cultural depth of fashion tourism.

Destination marketers should also develop segmented communication. Tourists may respond strongly to luxury, novelty and visual attraction, so campaigns targeting them should emphasise itineraries, iconic venues, event calendars and photographic experiences. Expatriate residents may respond to lifestyle integration and repeat engagement, so campaigns for them should focus on seasonal events, workshops, community fashion markets and cultural activities. Local citizens may respond to identity, pride and heritage, so engagement with them should emphasise local designers, national storytelling and meaningful representation.

Table 5

Suggested fashion tourism positioning by audience segment

Audience	Likely appeal	Recommended emphasis
Tourists	Novelty, luxury, iconic venues and visual experiences	Curated itineraries, event calendars and photogenic experiences
Expatriate residents	Lifestyle integration, repeat use and social engagement	Community events, workshops and seasonal cultural programming
Local citizens	Identity, pride, heritage and local representation	Local designers, modest fashion, national storytelling and cultural

Audience	Likely appeal	Recommended emphasis
		ownership

Digital storytelling should be used carefully. Social media campaigns should not present Qatar's fashion tourism only as luxury consumption. They should show the connection between design and culture. Strong content could include behind-the-scenes stories of Qatari designers, short videos on modest fashion, museum exhibition narratives, visual guides to fashion-related cultural spaces, and collaborations between tourism bodies, cultural institutions and local creative industries. This would help distinguish Qatar from destinations that rely on generic luxury imagery.

Finally, fashion tourism should be linked more explicitly to Qatar's wider tourism development strategy. It can support cultural tourism, luxury tourism, events tourism, shopping tourism and creative economy development at the same time. This makes it a useful bridge between tourism marketing and cultural policy. The goal should not be to make Qatar imitate established fashion capitals, but to define a Gulf model of fashion tourism that is grounded in cultural identity, luxury hospitality, modest fashion and curated visitor experience.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The study has limitations that should be clearly acknowledged. First, the sample size was suitable for exploratory analysis but was not representative of Qatar's tourist market. Local citizens were strongly represented, while tourists and expatriate residents formed smaller subgroups. The sample was also dominated by younger and female respondents. For this reason, subgroup comparisons should be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

Second, the study cannot make causal claims. It used a cross-sectional design and measured perceptions and intentions at one point in time. The findings suggest associations between fashion-related experiences, destination image, memorability and recommendation intention, but they do not prove that fashion tourism directly causes destination brand outcomes.

Third, the study relied mainly on descriptive statistics and interpretation of one open-ended question. This provided useful exploratory insight, but it limited the depth of qualitative interpretation. Future studies should use interviews, focus

groups or ethnographic observation to explore the meanings of modest fashion, luxury, cultural authenticity and visual identity in greater depth.

Fourth, the tourist subgroup was small. Future research should use a larger and more balanced sample, especially among international tourists, to allow more robust comparison between local citizens, expatriate residents and visitors. This would strengthen evidence of how tourists specifically interpret Qatar as a fashion tourism destination.

Future research could also apply inferential statistical analysis, including regression, mediation or structural equation modelling, to test the relationship between fashion tourism experience, authenticity, memorability, destination image and behavioural intention. Other useful approaches include interviews with local designers and tourism stakeholders, social media analysis of fashion-related destination imagery, and comparative studies with Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh or Oman. These directions would help clarify whether Qatar's fashion tourism identity is distinctive within the wider Gulf region.

9. Conclusion

This study examined how fashion tourism may shape perceptions of Qatar as a culturally distinctive and luxury lifestyle destination. The findings suggest that fashion tourism contributes to destination branding by combining visual appeal, luxury consumption, cultural representation, authenticity and memorability. Respondents associated fashion-related tourism spaces with Qatar's modernity, cultural diversity, fashionability and recommendation value.

The study's main argument is that Qatar's fashion tourism potential should not be reduced to shopping or luxury retail. Luxury malls and designer stores are important because they communicate quality, sophistication and global connectivity. However, the destination's stronger and more defensible brand proposition appears to lie in combining luxury with Qatari cultural identity, modest fashion, museums, exhibitions, design districts and curated storytelling.

Fashion tourism can therefore support Qatar's wider tourism strategy by positioning the country as a destination where culture and modern lifestyle are experienced together. It offers a way to communicate Qatar's identity through

spaces that are visual, memorable, shareable and emotionally engaging. For tourism planners and marketers, the priority should be to build an integrated fashion tourism ecosystem that connects local culture, luxury hospitality, creative industries and visitor experience. Such an approach may help Qatar develop a distinctive fashion tourism identity rooted in its own cultural and destination context.

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Sustainable Spiritual Tourism through Jain Ethics: Insights from Pilgrimage Site Management

Aarjav JainEmail: research.aarjav1051@gmail.com**Priya Singh**Email: psingh1@aud.ac.in**Nikhil Singh Charak**Email: nikhil@aud.ac.in

School of Vocational Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi, Delhi, India

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Abstract

The three core ethical principles of Jainism are Ahimsa (nonviolence), Aparigraha (non-possessiveness), and Anekantavada (pluralism). These values are also responsible for creating peace and sustainability in the tourism industry. This study was conducted to examine how Jain ethical principles can contribute to peaceful and sustainable tourism practices through pilgrimage site management. It is revealed in this study that there is a coexistence of environmental care, faith, and community service within Jain Pilgrimage

sites. Various studies have examined Jain ethics and spirituality but limited attention has been given to understanding how Jain ethical principles are operationalised through pilgrimage site management. The contribution of these principles to sustainable tourism governance is also underexplored. A qualitative document-based approach was used to address this gap. In this approach thematic analysis was employed. Three pilgrimage sites of Palitana/Shatrunjaya, Mangi-Tungi, and Kundalpur were examined. It was found that these sites promote vegetarianism, collective hospitality, environmental care, simplicity and also encourage ethical behaviour, environmental responsibility, and community-oriented tourism experiences. Through the findings practical insights for various tourism stakeholders are provided. Tourism planners, pilgrimage site managers, policymakers, and educators who want to integrate these values in sustainable tourism management can use these insights. It is indicated through analysis that religious ethical principles can provide useful guidance for sustainable tourism governance. It can provide guidance beyond Jain pilgrimage contexts. It is concluded in this study that Jain pilgrimage practices offer useful insights into how ethical principles may contribute to peaceful and sustainable forms of spiritual tourism.

Keywords

Jainism; Sustainable Tourism; Spiritual Tourism; Pilgrimage Sites; Environmental Responsibility; Community-led Hospitality.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent scholarly discourse spiritual tourism is seen as a medium for intercultural exchange, self-reflection and environmentally aware practices rather than just a form of religious travel. Issues related to sustainable development, ethical management and community involvement have gained importance in tourism research as pilgrimage destinations continue to attract large number of visitors. Despite this growth, limited research exists on how strong strategies based on ancient religious ethics can be created for managing pilgrimage sites in a sustainable way (Rana, 2024).

An ethical framework is provided by Jainism that explores this connection through its core principles like Ahimsa, Aparigraha and Anekantavada. These principles also guide personal and social behaviour while simultaneously suggesting ways through which moral values are integrated with responsible tourism practices (Reading, 2019). Recent discussions on Jain philosophy highlight its relevance to contemporary sustainability challenges, particularly in relation to ecological responsibility and peaceful coexistence (Rajan, 2025; Jain, 2024).

These principles are not limited to individuals only as they are reflected in the collective life of Jain communities. Historical and present records clearly show that environmental awareness and restraint are part of their daily activities (Reading, 2019). This includes Heritage preservation, vegetarianism, careful water usage and community-led hospitality. These are the practices which clearly show that faith and sustainability can coexist. Palitana, Mangi-Tungi, and Kundalpur are among the Jain pilgrimage sites that reflect key Jain ethical values. Their management emphasises regulated pilgrim behaviour, cleanliness, controlled commercial activities, and the preservation of sacred spaces (Choksi, 2021; Potdar, 2016).

Despite these observations, there remains a clear research gap in the tourism literature about how these ethical values can be systematically applied at spiritual tourism sites and influence visitor experiences (Jain, 2024). Most existing studies focus either on Jain philosophy and environmental ethics (Dundas, 2002; Mitra, 2019; Rajan, 2025; Jain, 2024) or on broader frameworks of sustainable tourism and tourism governance (Hall, 2008; Bramwell & Lane, 2011), without adequately linking religious ethics to practical site-level management strategies. To address this gap, the present study focuses on three major Jain pilgrimage destinations. These destinations are Shatrunjaya, Mangi-Tungi, and Kundalpur. This study also focuses on how Jain principles of Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha (non-

possessiveness), and Anekantavada (respect for multiple viewpoints) are reflected in practices like environmental protection, community involvement, visitor management, and hospitality services. By doing so, the study adds to the literature on sustainable spiritual tourism. It shows how religious ethical values can serve as practical mechanisms for pilgrimage site management and sustainability-oriented governance.

Against this background, it is examined in the present study how Jain ethical principles shape the functioning, management practices, and visitor experiences at selected Jain pilgrimage sites in India. The aim is to identify the ways in which Jain values are reflected in everyday practices at these destinations and to assess its relevance for sustainable pilgrimage management. To achieve this objective, the investigation is centred on the following research questions:

1. How are Jain ethical values reflected in the everyday practices and management of selected Jain pilgrimage sites?
2. What practical lessons from Jain pilgrimage sites can inform sustainable and peaceful spiritual tourism planning?

The analysis of selected Jain texts and pilgrimage sites provided insights into how spiritual values can guide tourism. This study does not claim broad applicability. Although, an interpretive framework is presented in this study. It is explained how sustainable pilgrimage management can be supported by Jain ethical principles. Moreover, useful insights for other spiritual tourism sites are also provided.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Spiritual Tourism and Religious Pilgrimage

Spiritual tourism is now a significant area of tourism research. It is far beyond religious travel as it also includes different cultural experiences and personal growth. There are religious, cultural and personal reasons that attract visitors at pilgrimage destinations (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). This is the reason that research on spiritual tourism has increased over the decades.

Scholars have explored the experiences of pilgrimages and motivation of the visitors. They have identified that there is a connection between religion and tourism (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). A need for careful management at pilgrimage sites have been identified as visitor needs with cultural preservation and environmental protection must be balanced (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Hall, 2008). These destinations bring people from different background together (Shinde, 2015). After reviewing the literature it has been identified that pilgrimage and destination management have received scholarly attention. However limited attention has been given to how religious ethical principles influence tourism management and sustainability practices.

2.2 Sustainable Tourism Governance and Community Participation

Sustainable tourism governance is the way tourism development is planned and managed through which environmental, social, cultural objectives and economic sustainability is achieved (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011). It does not depend on central decision making only. It encourages collaboration between governments, local communities, tourism organisations, and other stakeholders (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011).

Researchers consistently identify community participation as a key element of sustainable tourism. As stated by Goodwin and Santilli (2009), involving local communities improves tourism initiatives. Eddins and Cottrell (2013) reached a similar conclusion by emphasising local stewardship and sustainable livelihoods. Bramwell and Lane (2011) further argued that effective governance depends on cooperation among stakeholders and suitable institutional arrangements. Together, these studies suggest that both governance systems and active stakeholder participation are essential for sustainable tourism. However, the role of religious ethical systems as informal mechanisms of tourism governance has received comparatively little attention.

2.3 Faith Based Environmental Ethics

Religious traditions have become an inseparable part of discussions related to sustainability and environmental responsibility (Gottlieb, 2006). Behavioural change is encouraged by faith based ethical systems. This is done through moral values, self-discipline, and collective responsibility instead of formal regulation alone (Gottlieb, 2006). Attitudes towards nature, consumption, and social responsibility can be influenced because of frameworks like this.

Within this broader context, Jainism is recognised for its ethical conduct and respect for all forms of life. Dundas (2002) described Jainism as a religious tradition centred on non-violence and restraint, while Mitra (2019) examined the relationship between Jain philosophy and environmental ethics. These studies collectively suggest that Jain ethical teachings play an important role in encouraging environmentally responsible behaviour through the moral values. Therefore a useful framework is provided by Jain philosophy through which the relationship between spirituality and sustainability can be explored.

2.4 Jain Ethical Principles and Sustainability

Three core principles of Jainism are Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha (non-possessiveness), and Anekantavada (respect for multiple perspectives). These principles are relevant in the discussion of sustainability. Ahimsa is one of the central principles of Jain philosophy. It encourages that no living being is harmed. The importance of non-violence is evident in early Jain scriptures such as the Ācārāṅga Sūtra, which advocates careful conduct towards all forms of life (Jacobi, 1884; Chapple, 1993; Dundas, 2002).

Aparigraha promotes moderation in consumption (Jaini, 1979). The principle emphasises self-restraint and simplicity. These values are related to the responsible resource use and sustainable lifestyles (Reading, 2019). Anekantavada encourages respect for multiple point of view and mutual understanding (Umāsvāti, 1994). Together, these principles provide a value based framework. This framework promotes restraint, responsibility, and coexistence.

The relevance of Jain philosophy in handling sustainability challenges is also explored in the contemporary studies. Reading (2019) examined the Anuvrat Movement as an example of Jain inspired ethical living, while Jain (2024) discussed the relationship between Jain philosophy and sustainability. Overall, the literature suggests that Jain ethical principles can contribute to sustainability. However their application in tourism management and pilgrimage governance has not been widely studied.

2.5 Evidence from Jain Pilgrimage Sites

Several Jain pilgrimage destinations have been examined in the existing literature. Luithle-Hardenberg (2018) explored Jain group pilgrimages at Shatrunjaya and

their role in shaping religious community and sacred space. Choksi (2021) examined tourism development at Palitana, while Potdar (2016) discussed the economic significance of Mangi-Tungi as a Jain pilgrimage destination. Jain tirthas are understood as sacred places and pilgrimage sites, with different categories of tirthas associated with liberation, important religious events, historical figures, and centres of learning (Dundas, 2002; Jaini, 1979). Collectively, these studies show that Jain pilgrimage destinations function as complex religious and tourism spaces. Pilgrimage destinations where spiritual practices, visitor activities, and local development intersect. However, most existing studies focus on individual destinations and specific aspects of pilgrimage activity. As a result, limited comparative research has examined how Jain ethical principles are reflected in the management practices of different pilgrimage destinations.

2.6 Research Gap

The literature demonstrates growing interest in spiritual tourism, sustainable tourism governance, faith based environmental ethics, and Jain philosophy. However, limited research has examined how Jain ethical principles are translated into practical pilgrimage site management strategies. Existing studies have mainly focused on philosophical discussions of Jain ethics (Mitra, 2019; Jain, 2024) or individual pilgrimage destinations (Luithle-Hardenberg, 2018; Choksi, 2021; Potdar, 2016). To address this gap, the present study examines how the principles of Ahimsa, Aparigraha, and Anekantavada are reflected in the management and functioning of Shatrunjaya, Mangi-Tungi, and Kundalpur. This contributes to the understanding of sustainable spiritual tourism and pilgrimage governance.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework which is based on the three core Jain ethical principles is used in this study. These principles are Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha (non-possessiveness), and Anekantavada (respect for multiple perspectives). The ethical foundations of Jain philosophy are these principles and these principles also provide a lens through which the relationship between religious values and sustainable pilgrimage management can be examined (Chapple, 1993; Jaini, 1979; Umāsvāti, 1994).

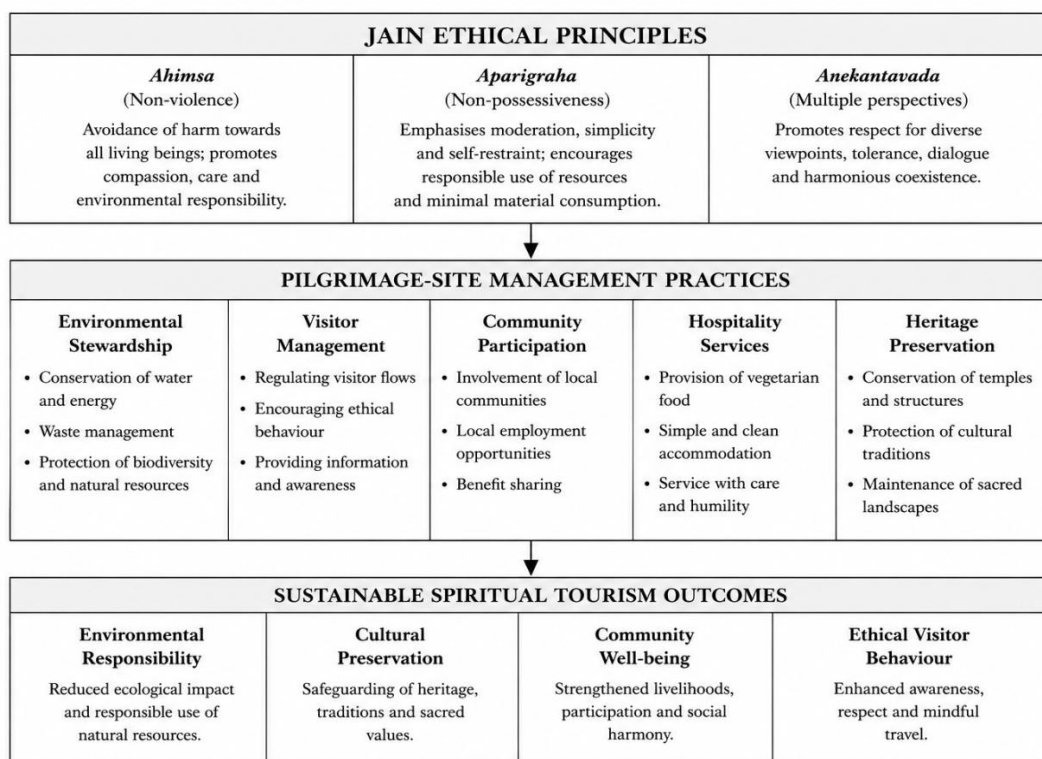
It is illustrated in Figure 1 that Pilgrimage sites are influenced in multiple ways because of the Jain ethical principles. The principle of Ahimsa encourages individuals to avoid harming any living being and promotes the conservation of natural resources (Chapple, 1993; Paul, 2019). Therefore it encourages environmental responsibility. Second principle is Aparigraha which promotes moderation and simplicity in everything (Jaini, 1979; Reading, 2019). The third principle is Anekantavada which says that there should be tolerance, dialogue, and harmonious coexistence (Umāsvāti, 1994). These principles are helpful in shaping practices which are related to environmental stewardship, visitor management, community participation, hospitality services, and heritage preservation.

Through these practices the outcomes of sustainable spiritual tourism are encouraged. For example, environmental responsibility, cultural preservation, community wellbeing, and ethical visitor behaviour. The relevance of Jain philosophy in relation to the environmental and sustainable living is discussed in the previous studies (Mitra, 2019; Rajan, 2025). On the basis of this Ahimsa, Aparigraha, and Anekantavada are used as analytical categories in the present study. It is examined how sustainability is operationalised at Shatrunjaya, Mangi-

Tungi, and Kundalpur. Religious ethics are also linked with pilgrimage governance and sustainable spiritual tourism through this.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework linking Jain ethical principles, pilgrimage-site management practices, and sustainable spiritual tourism outcomes



Source: Developed by the authors based on a synthesis of relevant literature.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses an exploratory qualitative research design to explore how Jain ethical principles are reflected in pilgrimage site practices and sustainable tourism management. A document-based approach is used because it helps in systematic analysis of doctrinal texts, institutional guidelines, and site related documents. This approach helps in understanding how ethical values shape tourism practices and management models (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2018).

4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Secondary sources for this study were collected from different categories. This helped in maintaining the relevance and depth of the analysis. Sources which were used included documents related to Jain philosophy, pilgrimage practices, sustainability, tourism management and governance. Duplicate records, non-relevant publications, and sources that lacked sufficient information on the study themes were excluded. Purposive sampling was used to maintain the clarity and focus of the analysis. Jain doctrinal texts, classical scriptures and their authoritative translations were examined to identify the ethical foundations of Jain philosophy. Various site based documents and institutional documents were obtained from different sources. This includes tourism portals, pilgrimage site management platforms, and government sources. Through this policy, visitor guidelines, and management practices at selected pilgrimage sites were understood.

Relevant literature and site related documents were identified through major academic databases. This includes search in Google Scholar, Web of Science, JSTOR, official tourism websites, pilgrimage management portals, and government sources. Keywords which were used are "Jain pilgrimage", "sustainable tourism", "religious tourism", and "pilgrimage governance".

Jain texts like *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (Jacobi, 1884) and *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (Umāsvāti, 1994) were used for guidance on ethical behaviour. These principles are reflected in pilgrimage sites such as Palitana/Shatrunjaya, Mangi-Tungi, and Kundalpur. It is documented in visitor guidelines, management plans, and tourism reports (Choksi, 2021; Nashik District Administration, n.d.; Jain Mandir, n.d.; Jain Tirth Tourism, n.d.; Gujarat Tourism, n.d.; Vardhman Vacations, n.d.). The majority of contemporary sources were published between 2013 and 2024. Although, Jain scriptures were included because of their foundational relevance. Research questions have been framed with the help of additional context provided by academic studies on spiritual tourism, heritage management and Jain ethics (Choksi & Kapadia, 2021; Potdar, 2016; Eddins & Cottrell, 2013). Insights are also provided into current sustainability practices at these sites with the help of information from NGO reports and brochures (Kalpavriksh, 2024; Vardhman Vacations, n.d.). All sources were gathered online and systematically organised to perform analysis.

In addition, peer reviewed journal articles, academic books and edited volumes were reviewed to examine Jain ethics in relation to existing scholarship on pilgrimage tourism, sustainability, and religious tourism. Together, these sources provided a triangulated body of data that enabled a systematic examination of how Jain ethical principles are reflected in pilgrimage practices and sustainable tourism management. Table 1 presents the document corpus analysed in the study.

Table 1. Document Corpus Used for Analysis

Document Category	Key Sources	Number of Documents
Jain Doctrinal Texts	Jacobi (1884); Umāsvāti (1994)	2
Academic Publications	Choksi & Kapadia (2021); Potdar (2016); Shinde (2015); Eddins & Cottrell (2013); Choksi (2021)	5
Government & Tourism Documents	Gujarat Tourism; Nashik District Administration; Madhya Pradesh Tourism	3
Site-Specific Documents	Jain Mandir; Jain Tirth Tourism; Vardhman Vacations	3
NGO Reports	Kalpavriksh (2024)	1
Total	14 Documents	14

Source: Compiled by the author(s) based on the selected document corpus.

4.2 Case Site Selection

Three sites were purposively selected for this study: Palitana/Shatrunjaya (Gujarat), Mangi-Tungi (Maharashtra), and Kundalpur (Madhya Pradesh). These sites were selected because they are among the most important Jain pilgrimage centres in India and offer well-documented examples of pilgrimage management and religious tourism (Luithle-Hardenberg, 2018; Choksi, 2021; Potdar, 2016). They were not chosen only because of their religious significance. Different geographical regions and pilgrimage traditions within Jainism are represented by these sites, while remaining rooted in shared Jain ethical principles. Each site prioritises different management practices. This includes environmental stewardship, visitor management, community participation, and preservation of religious values. Also, good range of documentary sources, including doctrinal texts, visitor guidelines, tourism publications, management reports, and scholarly literature, is available for all three sites. A comprehensive document-based analysis

was conducted because of this broad range of material. To summarise, these pilgrimage centres provide suitable illustrative cases for examining how Jain ethical principles are reflected in pilgrimage governance and sustainable tourism management.

4.3 Thematic Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used in this study. It helped in identifying repeating patterns and themes across the selected documents used in analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six phase framework provided by Braun and Clarke was followed. It includes familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. The data was theory driven collection of doctrinal texts, site documents, and scholarly sources. Therefore, qualitative coding was done manually instead of using any specialised software. To gain familiarity with the content, all documents were read multiple times. Each theme was connected to the original passages or documents. This provided transparency and allowed the verification of the process.

Jain doctrinal texts like *Tattvārtha Sūtra* and *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* had extensive philosophical discussions. So, the analysis focused on selected chapters, verses, and passages which addressed ethical conduct, non-violence, restraint, simplicity, hospitality, and human nature relationships. This maintained the focus of the analysis while also preserving the doctrinal integrity.

During the analysis, recurring references related to ethical behaviour, environmental care, simplicity, community participation, and ritual discipline appeared repeatedly across the sources and were noted. Based on these repeated patterns, initial open codes were developed. The codes were drawn from concepts, phrases, and discussions found in doctrinal texts, site documents, and academic literature. Similar codes were grouped together and developed into themes.

Multiple sources were used while reviewing themes. This ensured internal coherence and consistency. To support transparency and reduce researcher bias, coding notes and thematic summaries were maintained throughout the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2014). Coding was undertaken by the primary researcher. It was also reviewed against the original documents to ensure consistency between codes, categories, and themes.

As this study relies on secondary sources, the credibility in this study was enhanced by triangulation across doctrinal texts, site documents, and academic literature (Creswell, 2014).

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Qualitative thematic analysis has been used in this study to find out how sustainable spiritual tourism is influenced by Jain ethical principles. Various types of data are included like Jain scriptures (Jacobi, 1884; Umāsvāti, 1994), case studies of pilgrimage sites (Palitana, Mangi-Tungi, Kundalpur), infrastructure and visitor perception studies (Choksi & Kapadia, 2021; Choksi, 2021; Potdar, 2016), and tourism reports (Gujarat Tourism, n.d.; Nashik District Administration, n.d.; Jain Mandir, n.d.; Vardhman Vacations, n.d.).

Key concepts like non-violence, simplicity, ecological care, community involvement, and rituals have been identified by carefully reading the materials and line-by-line coding of the selected documents. Related codes were subsequently grouped into four overarching themes, each supported by evidence from multiple sources and pilgrimage sites. These findings are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis Linking Themes, Source Texts, and Synthesised Evidence

Theme	Source Texts Used	Synthesised Evidence and Interpretation
Environmental Care Inspired by Ahimsa	Jacobi (1884); Umāsvāti (1994); Choksi (2021); Gujarat Tourism (n.d.); Nashik District Administration (n.d.); Vardhman Vacations (n.d.); Eddins & Cottrell (2013); Kalpavriksh (2024)	The concept of ahimsa is not limited to interpersonal non-violence. It extends systematically to nature and all sentient life. Across the three pilgrimage sites, it is expressed through vegetarian regulations and cleanliness measures at Palitana, water conservation and low-impact accommodation practices at Mangi-Tungi, and ecological care integrated into rituals and site management at Kundalpur. These practices reflect the environmental dimension of Jain ethics in pilgrimage management.
Simplicity and Minimalism from Aparigraha	Umāsvāti (1994); Choksi & Kapadia (2021); Choksi (2021); Potdar (2016); Shinde (2015); Madhya Pradesh Tourism (n.d.); Jain Tirth Tourism (n.d.)	Aparigraha emphasises simplicity, restraint, and non-possessiveness. Across the selected pilgrimage sites, this principle is reflected in the preference for simple amenities, eco-friendly accommodation, modest facilities, limited commercial development, and minimalistic architectural designs. These practices indicate an emphasis on low-impact pilgrimage experiences and restrained resource use.
Pluralistic and	Jacobi (1884); Umāsvāti	Anekantavada encourages respect for

Community-Led Hospitality Guided by Anekantavada	(1994); Jain Mandir (n.d.); Vardhman Vacations (n.d.); Choksi & Kapadia (2021); Jain Tirth Tourism (n.d.)	multiple perspectives and inclusive social relations. This principle is reflected through community-led hospitality practices in which temple trusts and volunteers provide food, lodging, and visitor guidance. Local participation supports the retention of economic benefits within the community while encouraging cooperation and dialogue among visitors and stakeholders.
Rituals Supporting Sustainable Tourism	Jacobi (1884); Umāsvāti (1994); Choksi (2021); Nashik District Administration (n.d.); Eddins & Cottrell (2013); Kalpavriksh (2024)	Jain rituals reinforce ethical conduct, discipline, and responsibility toward others and the environment. Organised pilgrimage flows, cleaning activities, collective prayers, and practices promoting non harmful conduct encourage responsible visitor behaviour and environmental awareness. These rituals contribute to the social and environmental values associated with sustainable pilgrimage management.

Source: Compiled by the author(s) based on thematic analysis of the selected document corpus.

5.1 Environmental Care Inspired by Ahimsa

Non-violence is also extended to taking care of the environment. It is strictly taken care of by pilgrims and site managers actively that no living being and nature is

being harmed in any way. Vegetarian practices are followed, waste is managed carefully, insects are protected, and plants are preserved.

For example, vegetarian zones are enforced and strict cleanliness is also maintained in Palitana, Water conservation and low-impact accommodations are focused in Mangi-Tungi, Ecological care is integrated into rituals and site management in Kundalpur (Choksi, 2021; Gujarat Tourism, n.d.; Nashik District Administration, n.d.; Vardhman Vacations, n.d.). These practices reflect the teachings in Jain scriptures (Jacobi, 1884; Umāsvāti, 1994) and show that environmental care is consistent across sites.

These findings suggest that Ahimsa functions not only as a moral principle but also as a practical mechanism for environmental stewardship. Ecological responsibility is embedded within pilgrimage practices, encouraging sustainable behaviour through ethical commitment rather than formal regulatory enforcement.

5.2 Simplicity and Minimalism from Aparigraha

In the simplicity of these pilgrimage sites, Non-possessiveness (Aparigraha) is visible. There are modest facilities, limited commercial development and pilgrims are encouraged to follow low-impact behaviours.

Pilgrim's preference for simple amenities has been highlighted in the studies and reports. Eco-friendly and minimalistic designs that reduce environmental impact are maintained in Palitana, Mangi-Tungi, and Kundalpur (Choksi & Kapadia, 2021; Choksi, 2021; Madhya Pradesh Tourism, n.d.; Potdar, 2016). Scriptures also encourage simplicity (Umāsvāti, 1994) showing this principle is common across all sites.

The evidence indicates that Aparigraha contributes to sustainability by discouraging excessive consumption and commercialisation. By promoting modest infrastructure and restrained resource use, this principle supports a low-impact tourism model that aligns with sustainable development objectives.

5.3 Pluralistic Hospitality Guided by Anekantavada

Inclusive and community-led hospitality shows pluralism (Anekantavada). Food, lodges and guidance to visitors is provided by volunteers and temple trusts which also encourage dialogue and co-operation.

At Mangi- Tungi, Kundalpur, and Palitana, it is ensured that economic benefits remain local while spiritual values are preserved through community involvement (Vardhman Vacations, n.d.; Jain Mandir, n.d.; Choksi & Kapadia, 2021). This theme emerges across multiple sources and not just one location, also consistent with Jain teachings (Jacobi, 1884; Umāsvāti, 1994).

The findings demonstrate that Anekantavada extends beyond philosophical pluralism and influences tourism governance through community participation and inclusive hospitality. Such practices strengthen social sustainability by fostering cooperation, local ownership, and shared responsibility.

5.4 Rituals Supporting Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability and social responsibility are promoted by structured pilgrimage practices and rituals. Pilgrims participate in communal prayers, cleaning and organised yatra flows which reduce environmental stress and crowding (Choksi, 2021; Choksi & Kapadia, 2021).f

Rituals and structured pilgrimages incorporate ethical, ecological, and social care into visitor behaviour and these practices are visible at Palitana, Mangi-Tungi, and

Kundalpur (Choksi, 2021; Nashik District Administration, n.d.; Vardhman Vacations, n.d.). Mindful and non-harmful conduct is also promoted in Jain texts (Jacobi, 1884; Umāsvāti, 1994), which makes these rituals a recurring and consistent pattern.

A holistic approach to sustainable spiritual tourism is shown by Jain pilgrimage sites. Behaviour of visitor is guided by ethics, environment is protected by ecological care, community hospitality promotes inclusion, and sustainability is reinforced by rituals. These sites exemplify how religion, ecology, and society can work together to inform sustainable tourism practices (Mitra, 2019; Kalpavriksh, 2024).

These findings indicate that rituals operate as informal governance mechanisms that regulate visitor behaviour and reinforce sustainability values. Through repeated participation, pilgrims internalise norms related to environmental care, discipline, and collective responsibility.

5.5 Cross Case Comparison and Transferable Lessons

There are common patterns identified after the comparison of Palitana/Shatrunjaya, Mangi-Tungi, and Kundalpur. Environmental stewardship was demonstrated at all the three sites. This was inspired by the principle of Ahimsa. Simplicity was encouraged by Aparigraha whereas community participation and ritual practices that encourage responsible visitor behaviour reflected Anekantavada. These similarities suggest that Jain ethical principles can be applied to pilgrimage management practices.

All the three pilgrimage sites share common features. However, each site prioritises different aspects of management practices. At Palitana, attention is

given to vegetarian food practices and visitor behaviour. This creates a more structured system for maintaining ethical standards. In contrast, Mangi-Tungi focuses more on environmental conservation through measures such as water management and low-impact infrastructure. At Kundalpur, religious practices are closely connected with environmental care and community involvement. These differences suggest that the same Jain ethical principles can be put into practice in different ways depending on the needs and context of the pilgrimage site.

Several lessons for sustainable tourism management were identified after the cross comparison of the three sites. First, ethical principles can support formal tourism regulations. They encourage responsible visitor behaviour and reduce the need to depend only on enforcement measures. Second, active involvement of local communities can further support social sustainability. It will help in maintaining cultural traditions and heritage. Third, when responsible behaviour towards nature can be integrated into routine activities and management practices. This will help in the achievement of environmental sustainability. Overall, the findings demonstrate that religiously inspired ethical approaches can provide valuable guidance for sustainable tourism governance in both pilgrimage destinations and broader tourism settings.

5.6 Analytical Synthesis of Findings

It is indicated through the findings of this study that internalised ethical discipline rooted in Jain philosophy is significant as sustainability at Jain pilgrimage sites is achieved with the help of this discipline and not externally imposed tourism policies. Core principles such as Ahimsa, Aparigraha, and Anekantavada function as behavioural frameworks. Environmentally responsible and socially harmonious tourism practices are promoted at Jain pilgrimage sites as conventional regulatory

mechanisms are replaced by moral values which makes Jain pilgrimage sites ethics driven tourism systems.

Common patterns of environmental care, simple living, community-led hospitality, and ritual discipline are evident across selected pilgrimage sites which are Palitana, Mangi- Tungi and Kundalpur. These shared practices indicate that similar sustainability approaches are followed across different sites and they are not unique to a single destination. Together, they suggest a transferable framework for sustainable spiritual tourism based on Jain ethical principles. The findings also indicate that religious values can play an important role in supporting sustainable tourism practices.

The analysis suggests an alternative perspective on sustainability is provided by Jain pilgrimage sites. Ecological responsibility, social inclusion, and peace-building are integrated into everyday religious practices. It also indicates that ethical belief systems may support sustainable tourism management. However, further empirical research is needed to evaluate their long term effectiveness.

6. DISCUSSION

It is highlighted in this research that religious ethics are significant for shaping sustainable tourism. This also extends beyond their conventional understanding as only cultural and spiritual ideals (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). It is also revealed in the results of this study Jain ethical values are significant in shaping how spiritual tourism is experienced or managed. The findings reveal that when religious philosophy is embedded in site management and visitor behaviour, it can create sustainable patterns of travel and pilgrimage. The findings of this study also support the argument that faith traditions can contribute in the global sustainability. It can be done by encouraging moral responsibility and ecological care (Reading,

2019; Jain, 2024). An interpretive framework is also provided through the analysis. Through this framework, spiritual discipline can contribute to environmental and social sustainability in the pilgrimage settings.

A key interpretation from findings is that sustainability within Jain pilgrimage sites is not a new concept. It is already present deeply in the world's faith view (Dundas, 2002). Concepts such as Aparigraha, Ahimsa, and Anekantavada are not only philosophical ideas. They are practical principles also which influence behaviour, management, and community engagement (Umāsvāti, 1994). This finding supports the theoretical argument that religion can act as a framework for influencing how people connect to nature and one another and behavioural transformation. Previous researchers have also suggested that self-regulated and low-impact tourism practices can be led by ethical and spiritual awareness (Reading, 2019).

It is also revealed in the analysis that shared responsibility and community participation can support the long term success of these sites. Food, accommodation, and visitor management is actively managed by local trusts, volunteers and families. The documents suggest that economic benefits remain within the community, reducing external dependence and promoting social harmony through this participatory structure. There are clear similarities between community-based tourism and the management approach adopted at Jain pilgrimage sites (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). It shows that inclusive management can be naturally led by spiritual motivations, even without external enforcements.

Informal tools for governance can include rituals and discipline. A culture of care can be created through these informal tools like rhythm of prayers, the cleanliness drive, and the calm order of pilgrim movement. It will also reduce dependence on formal policies. These awareness and restraints are produced through everyday practices. These are also the key qualities of sustainability (Luithle-Hardenberg,

2018). Therefore, the analysis suggests that Jain tirthas show softer, value driven form of regulation. This can also help in inspiring other heritage destinations.

From a policy point of view, the findings suggest that when religious values are linked with sustainability rules at pilgrimage sites, it will make rules more effective. People are more likely to support and follow these practices when principles such as Ahimsa and Aparigraha are included in site management.

As this study relies solely on secondary sources, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The analysis shows how Jain ethical principles are reflected in pilgrimage management practices, but it does not empirically verify their sustainability outcomes. Instead, the reviewed documents point to potential environmental, social, and management benefits. Future research could build on these findings through field visits, visitor feedback, and sustainability indicators to assess their practical impact.

Overall it is revealed that a moral foundation and potentially useful framework is provided by Jain philosophy. This framework helps in understanding of the sustainable spiritual tourism. The outer responsibility and inner discipline are connected simultaneously. This suggests that spiritual tourism may be both socially responsible and environmentally conscious. Especially, when it is guided by ethical principles.

7. IMPLICATIONS

This study suggests sustainable ways of managing pilgrimage sites which may be shaped by practically using main Jain ethical values such as Ahimsa, Aparigraha, and Anekantavada. In reference to Ahimsa, various non-violent and environment-friendly practices like serving only vegetarian food, protecting local animals and maintaining proper waste segregation systems can be focused on by planners

(Chapple, 1993; Mitra, 2019). In this way the behaviour of the visitor is more aligned with the idea of peaceful coexistence with all living beings.

Aparigraha also guides how buildings and facilities are developed at holy sites. Waste and unnecessary expansion is avoided by encouraging eco-friendly and simple construction and using local materials. Through this type of planning both natural surroundings peaceful atmosphere of the pilgrimage is protected. The damage that often comes with too commercial or crowded places with large tourism projects is also controlled.

With the help of Anekantavada, temple trusts, community groups and local officials work together in tourism management as this principle supports the idea of respecting different point of views and cooperation. Residents and visitors both benefit equally as this teamwork make the decision making fair and open. A sense of trust and shared responsibility is also created.

Some useful policy ideas can be suggested through these findings. First, Jain based environmental and moral values can be included in the planning by tourism authorities. Second, tourism and hospitality training should include basic lessons on Jain ethics and sustainability because of which both workers and volunteers will understand how these values can be used in daily management.

Jain pilgrimage places will become living examples of how religion is able to support peace, social care, and environmental protection if these ideas are applied properly. These insights may also be useful for spiritual tourism destinations that want to promote sustainable development.

It is revealed in the findings that the emphasis should not be on enforcement of rules only. The sustainable policies at pilgrimage destinations are more effective

when they are aligned with local ethical traditions. Jain ethical principles can be used by tourism planners and heritage managers for designing visitor guidelines, participatory structures used for governance, and low-impact infrastructure models that can encourage cooperation.

At pilgrimage sites, these values can be applied in different ways. Visitor guidelines can reflect Ahimsa by promoting vegetarian food, protecting the wildlife, encourage waste segregation, and avoid activities which harm the environment. Modest construction can show Aparigraha. Low-impact infrastructures can be encouraged. There can be use of local materials, controlled commercial development, and efficient use of resources. Anekantavada can be reflected by involving various stakeholders in the decision making process. This can include temple trusts, local communities, volunteers, and public authorities. Jain ethical values can also be incorporated into staff and volunteer training to promote responsible visitor behaviour, respect for local culture, and environmental awareness.

These findings may also benefit tourism training providers and educational institutions. The reason is that they can develop ethics-based material. The material can include information about sustainable pilgrimage management, community participation, environmental care, and value based visitor engagement. Through this, ethical principles can be translated into practical management skills that are relevant to pilgrimage, heritage, and tourism settings.

8. CONCLUSION

This study suggests that Jain pilgrimage sites provide an interpretive example of how spiritual traditions and sustainability goals may align. Visitor behaviour and community participation are some of the factors which show a blend of cultural,

ethical and environmental values. The findings indicate that sustainability oriented practices may emerge when religious and moral values influence pilgrimage management and visitor behaviour. An inherent environmental ethic is shown through everyday rituals like waste control, resource conservation and community-based hospitality.

The findings suggest that India possesses considerable potential for peace-oriented and spiritual tourism initiatives informed by ethical values. If official tourism planning integrates these approaches, it may help in reducing environmental pressure, creating local employment and encouraging collective stewardship among residents and pilgrims. This model can also be adopted for better sustainable heritage management if temple trusts, local bodies and academic institutions work together.

It is suggested in this research that technological and policy innovation are not sole factors on which future of sustainable tourism in India depends but encouraging harmony with nature through the revival of ethical traditions is also important. The analysis suggests that faith and sustainability can be mutually reinforcing. Jain pilgrimage practices can offer useful insights into the relationship between ethical values and sustainable tourism management.

This study proposes an interpretive framework through which Jain pilgrimage sites can be understood as ethics-based governance systems. Systems where sustainability oriented practices are encouraged through internal moral discipline rather than external control. Core Jain principles such as Ahimsa, Aparigraha, and Anekantavada guide visitor behaviour, resource use, and community involvement. As a result, Jain tirthas can be understood not only as religious spaces but also as

potentially useful examples of sustainable spiritual tourism that promote peace, environmental responsibility, and social harmony.

8.1 Limitations of the Study

This study is based entirely on secondary sources which include Jain doctrinal texts, academic literature and institutional documents. As a result the findings should be interpreted as conceptual insights rather than empirical evidence. The study does not include field observations, interviews, surveys or other forms of primary data collection that could validate how Jain ethical principles are applied in practice. In addition, sustainability outcomes are interpreted qualitatively and are not evaluated using quantitative environmental, social, or economic indicators.

8.2 Future Scope of Research

Future research can strengthen this work by adopting field-based approaches such as interviews, surveys and participant observation to examine how Jain ethical principles influence pilgrimage management in practice. Comparative studies involving other religious pilgrimage traditions may also provide a broader understanding of the relationship between ethical values and sustainable tourism. Also quantitative assessment of environmental performance, visitor behaviour and community outcomes would help evaluate the practical effectiveness of ethics-based approaches to sustainable tourism management.

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