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

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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. Stylidis (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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