







Turyzm/Tourism 2025, 35(2)

MEMORABLE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCES (MSTE) A MIXED-METHOD STUDY

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How to cite (APA style): Bakar, N.A., Rahim, M.A., Nawi, N.M.M., Hashim, N.A.A.N., & Velayuthan, S.K. (2025). Memorable sustainable tourism experiences (MSTE): A mixed-method study. *Turyzm/Tourism*, 35(2), 155–170. <https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.2025.27>

ABSTRACT

This study investigates and validates the concept of memorable sustainable tourism experiences (MSTE) and examines their influence on tourists' revisit intentions through an exploratory sequential mixed-method design. In the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews with eight tourism operators in Langkawi Island, Malaysia, were conducted to identify key dimensions of MSTE, which include hedonism, local culture, refreshment, knowledge, meaningfulness, novelty, involvement, responsible practices, and the role of local guides. These components were subsequently tested in the quantitative phase through a survey of 233 tourists who had participated in sustainable tourism experiences on the island. Data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), which revealed significant positive relationships between hedonism, local culture, refreshment, responsible practices and revisit intention. The study advances the theoretical understanding of MSTE by introducing novel dimensions such as responsible practices and the involvement of local guides. By integrating the perspectives of both tourism operators and tourists as well as employing a mixed-methods approach, this research addresses existing methodological and conceptual gaps in the literature. It contributes meaningfully to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable tourism and tourism experience. Furthermore, the findings offer practical implications for destination managers and tourism stakeholders aiming to strengthen tourist loyalty through the design of meaningful, memorable and sustainability-oriented experiences.

KEYWORDS

exploratory sequential mixed-method study, memorable sustainable tourism experience, memorable tourism experience, sustainable tourism experience and revisit intention

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
27 November 2024
Accepted:
20 October 2025
Published:
30 December 2025



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Funding information: Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS), funded by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), Malaysia (FRGS/1/2020/WAB01/UMK/03/2). **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. **Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** The current study utilized ChatGPT and QuillBot for the following purposes: translating transcriptions from Malay to English, rewriting sentences, paraphrasing, grammar checking, and AI detection. However, the Authors conducted a thorough and critical review of the text and also sent it for professional proofreading before submitting it to the journal.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the travel industry has seen an increased interest in the desire for sustainable tourism experiences (Seeler et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2022). Tourists today prefer to participate in wildlife conservation activities, indulge in local produce, stay in eco-friendly accommodation, and support local indigenous artists. This shift is attributed to tourists becoming more discerning in the current era, desiring authentic interactions and profound insights rather than purchasing mere photos and souvenirs (Paulauskaite, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2022). Such a transformation offers a distinctive opportunity for the tourism sector to shift from traditional approaches and adopt sustainable tourism experiences. By providing tourists with memorable sustainable tourism experiences, stakeholders in the industry can collectively foster a positive impact by protecting the environment and culture, thus stimulating economic growth (Sofronov, 2017), promoting education and awareness about environmental and cultural conservation (Moscardo, 2015), enhancing perceived value and collectively contributing to the overall well-being of destinations (Breiby et al., 2020).

Despite this great potential, the tourism industry continues to face challenges in delivering memorable sustainable tourism experiences (MSTE). A substantial obstacle is the absence of a comprehensive and clear framework for understanding and executing MSTEs. Despite research recognising the importance of MSTEs in creating perceived value and promoting tourist's revisit intention (Breiby et al., 2020; Rahim et al., 2023), the concept remains poorly defined and inconsistently used. The lack of clarity hinders tourism stakeholders from effectively planning, promoting and assessing these experiences, resulting in missed opportunities for impactful and memorable offerings (Neuenburg et al., 2022). Numerous operators combine sustainability with fundamental eco-friendly practices, such as reducing plastic usage, while overlooking critical sociocultural elements, including the empowerment of local communities and the preservation of cultural traditions (Raveendran, 2024). Such superficial implementations of sustainability had caused difficulties for tourists to differentiate between genuinely sustainable experiences and those simply marketed with superficial "green" claims, thereby hindering the industry's efforts to promote authentic sustainable tourism experience (Alyahia et al., 2024).

Another challenge is the dominance of quantitative analysis usage in tourism experience study, with few studies utilising mixed-method approaches to explore the complexities of MSTEs (Hosany et al., 2022). Moreover, although tour operators significantly

influence tourism experiences, their viewpoints are frequently neglected in tourist experience research, resulting in a disparity between theoretical comprehension and practical application (Hosany et al., 2022). This scarcity highlights the need for more comprehensive research using mix method approaches that includes the viewpoints of industry players.

Hence, this work aims to explore elements of MSTEs and assess their influence on tourists' propensity to revisit a destination. The research employed an exploratory sequential methodology, beginning with a qualitative thematic analysis based on interviews with tour operators. Results from this phase were used to develop a structured questionnaire, which was sent to a broader group of tourists. The collected data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to investigate the relationships between the identified MSTE components and revisit intentions, as well as to evaluate the model's predictive power and theoretical validity.

This study seeks to provide both theoretical and practical advancements in sustainable tourism research. The findings aim to provide tourism stakeholders with clear directives for the design, management and promotion of MSTEs, ensuring that these experiences meet tourists' expectations while promoting the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. EXPERIENCES

Over the years, tourism experience has been the focus of tourism studies. Scholars began focusing on the experience concept in the 1960s (Uriely, 2005), and the topic was widely discussed in the social science fields in the 1970s (Quan & Wang, 2004). The pioneering works began with Csikszentmihalyi (1975), followed by Cohen (1979) and other scholars like Berry (1981), Turner and Bruner (1986), and Otto and Ritchie (1996). Among the widely known research papers are those by psychologists Thorne (1963) and Maslow (1964) who published their studies on so-called peak experiences, defined as the most exciting and rich experience a person can have as highlights in one's life although of rather short duration.

The experience concept proposed by Thorne (1963) and Maslow (1964) is consistent with the experience economy developed by Pine and Gilmore (1999), where the authors suggested four different experiential dimensions: education, entertainment, aesthetics and escapism. They further explained that when consumers perceive that they will learn something and be entertained, immersed, or do something active,

the experience will become meaningful. As supported by Chen et al. (2020), consumers nowadays are not ultimately seeking the elements of satisfaction and quality, but rather of unique and memorable experiences. As the concept of memorable tourism experience becomes widely known, tourism suppliers have begun to sell memorable experiences to their target market rather than focusing on their products and services (Kim, 2017).

2.2. MEMORABLE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCE

The tourism literature has only recently shifted its focus to link sustainability and tourism experiences, with scholars around the world researching both topics independently (Breiby et al., 2020). However, bringing together these two fields remains relatively new and, in many cases, underdeveloped, as underlined by Signori et al. (2019).

Understanding the concept of a sustainable experience has proven to be challenging, partly due to the limited research available and the absence of precise definitions (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). While several experts have sought to examine this subject, there is no consensus yet on what genuinely characterises a sustainable experience. One notable effort came from Breiby et al. (2020), who classified sustainable experience as “an experience that awakens deep, significant emotions and memories that can stimulate tourists’ commitment toward destination sustainability” (p. 346). This definition has laid some groundwork for understanding sustainable experiences, which have since been examined in various contexts, including national parks (Obradović et al., 2023), social tourism (Torres-Moraga, 2021), responsible tourism (Nowacki et al., 2023) and lake tourism (Breiby et al., 2020).

Previous studies have revealed numerous dimensions that contribute to the formation of memorable tourism experience (MTE). Kim (2017) identified seven experience domains that are likely to affect a memorable tourism experience, including engagement, hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge and novelty. Building upon this basis, Breiby et al. (2020) highlighted crucial components including interaction with nature, cultural immersion and emotional connections. In the context of sustainable tourism, Lu et al. (2017) and Hwang and Lee (2019) highlighted that the co-creation of experiences with local guides, as well as responsible practices, boosts the memorability and perceived authenticity of the experience.

Finally, scholars in sustainable tourism recommend tourism suppliers to prioritize the design of memorable, sustainable tourism experiences. Doing so not only helps tourism suppliers to preserve a competitive edge

but also promotes the destination’s sustainability and the value of the whole experience (Lu et al., 2017; Smit & Melissen, 2018). When tourists build a meaningful connection with a destination through sustainable experiences, they are more likely to consider returning in the future and spread good word of mouth (Breiby et al., 2020; Shien et al., 2022). For these reasons, sustainable and memorable tourism experiences serve as the core focus of the present study.

2.3. REVISIT INTENTION

Revisit intention refers to a tourist’s likelihood of returning to a destination based on their past experiences. Research has consistently shown that positive travel experiences increase the chances of tourists revisiting a destination (Breiby et al., 2020; Nik Hashim et al., 2019; Rahim et al., 2023). Additionally, incorporating sustainable tourism practices, helps to create a strong emotional connection with a destination, making tourists more inclined to return (Chen et al., 2020). When a destination aligns with a tourist’s personal values – such as environmental responsibility or cultural appreciation – it further reinforces their desire to revisit in the future (Patwary et al., 2023; Sofronov, 2017). Therefore, integrating sustainable practices and memorable experiences into tourism offerings is crucial in fostering lasting impressions and encouraging revisit intentions among tourists. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between MSTE and revisit intention.

3. METHODOLOGY

To bridge the potential gap between tour operators’ and tourists’ perceptions of what constitutes MSTE, and to address the limited use of mixed-method approaches in MTE studies highlighted by Hosany et al. (2022), this study employs an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design and aligns with Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2018) guidelines for exploratory sequential mixed-methods. The process of the study is depicted in Figure 1.

The research began with a qualitative phase to explore the main components of MSTE from the perspective of tourism operators, who are key tourism stakeholders. In this phase, the study sought to uncover operators’ professional insights and perceptions of their clients’ experiences as they participated in sustainable tourism experiences such as mangrove tours, hiking and birdwatching. The study employed a purposive sampling method focused on information-rich cases from key informants (Patton, 2015).

By embracing participant engagement, the qualitative research phase encouraged active contributions of narratives or experiences, fostering participants in the research process (Charmaz, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were performed over three days in July 2023 with eight local tourism operators on Langkawi Island. The interviews mostly focused on the MSTE model, with enquiries related to its fundamental attributes. The questions were modified and enhanced based on prior studies on MTE and sustainable tourism by Kim (2017) and Hwang and Lee (2019) to guarantee clarity and pertinence. An inductive methodology was employed to discern the elements of MSTE that surfaced from tourism operator narratives. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, and all were taped and completely transcribed. The data gathering persisted until the researchers noted that the respondents’ tales exhibited repetition, with no novel themes or patterns arising – indicating data saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). Thematic analysis was employed as the primary technique to identify, analyse and interpret the themes emerging from the interviews, in line with Braun and Clarke (2019). Through thematic analysis, nine key MSTE components were identified, which subsequently informed the design of the structured quantitative questionnaire.

(PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS to test the relationships between MSTE components and revisit intention. The final model showed strong predictive and discriminant validity, providing a comprehensive understanding of how memorable and sustainable tourism experiences influence tourists’ intention to revisit Langkawi Island.

4. RESULTS

4.1. QUALITATIVE RESULT

The data transcribed from eight semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed, being denoted as Respondent 1 (R1) to Respondent 8 (R8), respectively. These respondents consist of tour operators in Langkawi Island. Eight item dimensions for coding were used. An inductive analysis of the interview data resulted in the following themes: (a) hedonism, (b) local culture, (c) refreshment, (d) knowledge, (e) meaningfulness, (f) novelty, (g) involvement, (h) responsible practices, and (i) local guide.

4.1.1. HEDONISM

Hedonism surfaced as an important element from the interview data. All interviews began by asking the respondents about their memorable moments when engaging in sustainable tourism activities, and most of them claimed to have experienced hedonistic adventures. For instance, R1 highlighted,

The majority of the tourists felt a harmonious blend of indulgence and responsibility towards the environment; experiencing hedonistic pleasures while respecting the delicate balance of nature after partaking in eco-friendly adventures like snorkelling among vibrant coral reefs.

Naturally, as observed by the tour guides, the excitement of tourists was apparent when joining the activities offered. As stated by R2,

I could see that they were so excited because they don’t do this every day. Some of them were even first-timers. So, they felt the excitement.

Furthermore, exploring mountainous terrain, mangrove tours, birdwatching and structured trip organisation significantly contribute to the overall memorability of the tourism experience by evoking hedonistic pleasure. These experiences not only offer novelty and adventure but also allow tourists to feel a deep sense of enjoyment, freedom and emotional uplift.

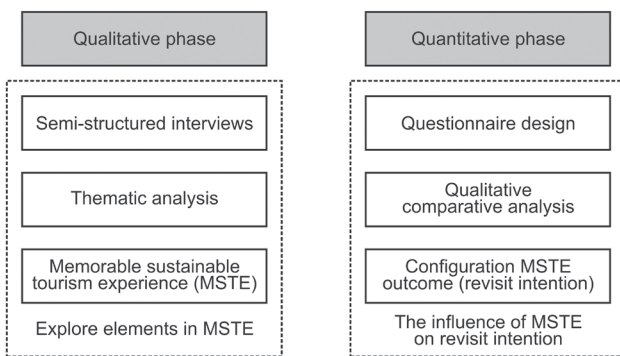


Figure 1. Exploratory sequential mixed methods process
Source: authors

For the quantitative phase, the nine identified themes were used to develop a questionnaire consisting of 45 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The instrument was pre-tested through expert evaluations and cognitive interviews with tourism academics, industry professionals and survey methodologists to ensure content clarity and validity. The questionnaire was then distributed to 250 tourists who had participated in sustainable tourism experience in Langkawi Island between July and September 2024, with 233 valid responses collected. The quantitative data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modelling

4.1.2. LOCAL CULTURE

Tourists have the chance to immerse themselves in local culture and traditions. According to one tour operator, most college or foreign students tend to engage in such a programme to connect with local individuals. Part of the programme includes placing participants with foster parents for a short while. According to R4,

One thing that tourists frequently note is how friendly and inviting the locals are. They feel like members of the family, not simply tourists. I recall a tourist saying, "I didn't feel like I was staying in a homestay; I felt like I was visiting relatives". They'd join the family for meals, assist out in the kitchen, and even participate in nightly conversations on the verandah. That genuine friendliness leaves a lasting impression.

In addition, tourists were able to learn about the island's local community creative economy. For example, R2 said,

Participants have the opportunity to learn the process of making *gamat* oil from sea cucumbers directly from producers.

Overall, the respondents believe that sustainable tourism, enriched with experiences, highlights the importance of social engagement at the site. This feature focuses on promoting continuous social interaction between residents and tourists to enhance their experience. As such, the key components involve promoting a favourable perception of the local culture, encouraging tourists to interact with the local population, and enjoying the hospitality of the destination's citizens.

4.1.3. REFRESHMENT

Refreshment is a crucial motivator for tourism engagement, as they offer an escape from the stress of daily life and its demanding environments. Langkawi Island provides a refreshing experience through various activities such as the mangrove tour, which offers a soothing experience and a sense of relaxation to tourists. As R3 said,

After spending the day partaking the mangrove tour, the tourists reportedly felt completely rejuvenated and refreshed, ready to take on whatever challenges ahead.

The concept of refreshment in tourism goes beyond mere relaxation; it encompasses a desire for mental and emotional rejuvenation. Regardless of exploring natural landscapes, indulging in leisurely activities, or disconnecting from technology and responsibilities, tourists seek experiences that uplift their spirits, spark

curiosity, and promote a sense of well-being. According to R1,

With the activities provided, tourists may be able to release their stress. This is a big part of why people travel – it gives them a much-needed break from the stress and expectations of modern life.

Thus, refreshment fulfils the fundamental human need for rejuvenation, exploration, and renewal, making tourism an appealing and rewarding pursuit.

4.1.4. KNOWLEDGE

Tourists gain knowledge during an eco-friendly tour or activity. For instance, R4 said,

Many tourists was surprise with how much they learn from the local people. Tourists gain fresh perspectives on nature. When tourists book our mangrove tour package, our guide will educate them about the importance of mangroves in the ecosystem and share details about specific animals seen, which will help them understand how important the environment is. Throughout the activity, guides also explain the medicinal benefits of certain trees.

Interestingly, the example above shows that tourists indeed appreciate knowledge on Langkawi's flora and fauna. Furthermore, R4 added,

The tourists expressed genuine appreciation for our forests upon visiting, particularly enjoying the hiking experience. When we educate them about our commitment to environmental awareness, emphasising practices such as litter prevention and refraining from feeding animals, they value it immensely.

R2 commented that:

One tourist stated, "This vacation felt like a living classroom". They not only explore nature, but also learn about customs, taboos and the significance of everyday actions.

This example indicates that tourists demonstrated a greater appreciation in acquiring new knowledge. Tourists' intellectual growth through explorations of the history, lifestyle, culture, language and natural surroundings of a destination can profoundly influence their memory. In fact, experiencing learning and education through storytelling is considered more desirable in tourism rather than merely focusing on tourism products.

This concept highlights that contemporary tourists are increasingly in search of travel experiences that provide unique learning opportunities, skills acquisition or insights. By utilizing educational storytelling and interpretation, ordinary sightseeing

transforms into extraordinary experiences. The integration of guided interpretation and factual explanations enhances the engagement of tours. These experiences not only satisfy intellectual curiosity but also enrich memory by presenting exploration as an educational journey.

4.1.5. MEANINGFULNESS

Meaningfulness is another predominant theme emerging from the interview data, as the activities offered provide valuable experiences to tourists. As stated by R5,

The tourists observed distinct differences between our forest and their own, noting variations in tree species. They discovered a profoundly meaningful and sustainable experience that not only nourished their souls but also played a positive role in preserving this beautiful island paradise for future generations.

Such reflections illustrate how engagement with nature can foster deeper appreciation and emotional connection.

Additionally, meaningful tourism experiences are often shaped by both the content of the activity and the quality of the interpretation provided. This is supported by R3, who mentioned,

Some of the tourists said that this was the best trip they have ever had as it was a meaningful trip and they learned a lot.

This indicates that travellers increasingly seek experiences that align with personal values, such as learning, self-growth and environmental conservation. These findings affirm that meaningful experiences are not only memorable but also transformative in nature.

4.1.6. NOVELTY

Novelty was also highlighted in the interviews. According to R8,

Most international tourists would love fresh experiences like food hunting. They were able to sample local cuisine during their time here. They could also learn to cook local cuisine and serve it to their friends or anyone. They can even learn on how to make sea cucumber massage oil. You can't have this experience anywhere else; it's rare and unique, and many tourists cherish it.

In addition, as emphasised by R6,

Many of our guests consider this a once-in-a-lifetime trip especially among first-timers or don't come very often. Basically, when people join the normal boat tour,

they do not get any tour guide. But here, we have an experienced tour guide to accompany you during your trip and you will gain more new knowledge from joining this trip. Eventually, you will have new views on nature.

This novelty factor often emerges from the specific characteristics of the experiences delivered, frequently followed by unexpected delights and excitement to tourists.

Novelty enhances the vividness of experiences; people tend to remember new and unusual events more than those that are familiar. In practical terms, highlighting the unique aspects of a tour such as distinctive cuisine, rare sights and exceptional storytelling can ignite tourists' excitement and joy. Tour operators aim to ensure that trips are memorable and cherished by providing unexpected highlights and original activities.

4.1.7. INVOLVEMENT

Evidently, tourists participated in each phase of tourism consumption throughout their tour. For instance, R7 stated,

Tourists can take a mangrove forest boat excursion at Kilim Geoforest Park, which was not only gorgeous but also educational. Tourists can engage in activities that allow them to connect with nature while also giving back.

Thus, it is no doubt that tourists' involvement in such activities would benefit them. R7 also added:

When they join a mangrove tour and actually plant a seedling, they often say it's the most memorable part of their trip.

Furthermore, according to R2,

Tourist appreciate being involved and making a direct contribution to nature conservation.

From the above example, it can be deduced that such a deep involvement not only enriches the tourists' experience but also fosters their stronger connection with the destination. This aligns with their desires to engage in activities of their choice and explore the primary attractions of the tourism experience.

High involvement significantly enhances memory retention and loyalty, as tourists engage with their experiences more deeply. When travellers actively participate in co-creating their experiences by selecting activities or aiding in various tasks, they forge a stronger connection to the destination. This indicates that incorporating participatory elements, such as

guided trekking or craft-making, enriches the overall experience, allowing tourists to feel more integrated into the narrative of their journey.

4.1.8. RESPONSIBLE PRACTICES

Sustainable tourism practices on Langkawi Island encompass tour operators who prioritise ethical and eco-conscious excursions, endorsing activities that minimise environmental impact and uphold respect for the island's natural resources. For example, as mentioned by R8,

Throughout the trek, participants receive informative briefings on the local trees, plants and their medicinal benefits. They were also taught not to pluck leaves or leave trash in the bush. Which they did.

Moreover, R3 added within the same context,

Tourists are prohibited from bringing plastic mineral bottles to prevent monkeys from being attracted to them, which could pose harm to the tourists. Instead, the tour operator would provide beverages during the boat journey.

Local community engagement and economy contribution is a major part of responsible practices while travelling. For example, R8 emphasised,

Our tourists often tells us how meaningful it is to meet and connect with the local communities. They're learning, helping and connecting. For example, when tourists join our cooking lessons or handicraft sessions, they know their money goes directly to the families involved.

R7 commented that:

Normally, when tourists are asked by the tour operator to engage in this kind of responsible practices, they feel a sense of responsibility to care for the environment and people.

In this regard, such responsible tourism practices help shape memorable tourism experiences by encouraging authenticity, good impact, emotional connections and personal growth among tourists. Tourists who embrace responsible travel principles not only create great memories but also help make the world's destinations more sustainable and equitable.

4.1.9. LOCAL GUIDE

In addition to helping preserve the environment and local culture, local guides also play an essential role in providing tourists with an authentic experience of the destination. Beyond preserving the environment and local heritage, they act as key facilitators of meaningful

engagement between tourists and the destination. According to R5,

We chose to only hire locals, including boat drivers and tour guides. Besides that, we collaborate with local fishermen and communities. For example, during our mangrove tours, we take tourists to a floating fish farm operated by a local family. Tourists learn about traditional fishing techniques and the importance of sustainable practices.

These highlights how the integration of local guide knowledge and community participation contributes to both sustainability and tourist enrichment.

In addition, the expertise and hospitality of local guides significantly influence the overall tourist experience. R3 reported that:

Most tourists comment that our local guides possess extensive knowledge of the area and offer tourists comprehensive insights into the destination.

R3 further added that:

... most comments received about local guides are very helpful and friendly. They assist tourists in discovering top dining spots, shopping venues and attractions.

Overall, it can be deduced that local guides and the involvement of the local community play a crucial role in sustainable tourism, contributing to the creation of enjoyable and meaningful experiences for tourists. Thus, collaborating with local guides allows tourists to delve deeply into the destination while aiding in the preservation of the environment and local culture.

4.1.10. SUMMARY OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The thematic analysis process is depicted in Table 1, initially revealing nine themes accompanied by twenty codes at the subsequent layer. Ultimately, example quotes are incorporated into the table, facilitating the acquisition of insights into experience-rich sustainable tourism within the study area. Based on the data from interviews with tour operators, all themes (hedonism, local culture, refreshment, knowledge, meaningfulness, novelty, involvement, responsible practices and local guide) contribute to the formation of tourist revisit intentions. These themes collectively serve as the major factors influencing tourists' decision to return to Langkawi Island.

4.2. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

In this study, a total of 250 tourists who had engaged in sustainable experiences were approached to acquire their opinions; however, only 233 respondents

Table 1. Summary of thematic analysis

Theme	Code	Example quotes
Hedonism	Thrill	Most of the tourists felt a good balance between indulgence and responsibility towards the environment after doing eco-friendly activities like snorkelling and canoeing (R1)
	Excitement	I could see that they were so excited because they don't do this every day. Some of them were even first-timers. So, they felt the excitement (R2)
Local culture	Local friendliness	One thing that tourists frequently note is how friendly and inviting the locals are. They feel like members of the family, not simply tourists. I recall a tourist saying, "I didn't feel like I was staying in a homestay; I felt like I was visiting relatives". They'd join the family for meals, assist out in the kitchen, and even participate in nightly conversations on the verandah. That genuine friendliness leaves a lasting impression (R4)
	Local cultural customs	Participants have the opportunity to learn the process of making <i>gamat</i> oil from sea cucumbers directly from producers (R2)
Refreshment	Relieve stress	With the activities provided, tourists may be able to release their stress. This is a big part of why people travel – it gives them a much-needed break from the stress and expectations of modern life (R1)
	Refreshing	After spending the day partaking in the mangrove tour, the tourists reportedly felt completely rejuvenated and refreshed, ready to take on whatever challenges ahead (R3)
Knowledge	Information	Tourists gain fresh perspectives on nature. When tourists book our mangrove tour package, our guide will educate them about the importance of mangroves in the ecosystem and share details about specific animals seen, which will help them understand how important the environment is. Throughout the activity, guides also explain the medicinal benefits of certain trees (R4)
	Learn culture	One tourist stated, "This vacation felt like a living classroom". They not only explore nature, but also learn about customs, taboos, and the significance of everyday actions. It is learning by doing – very powerful (R2)
Meaningfulness	Meaningful	The tourists observed distinct differences between our forest and their own, pointing out variations in trees species. In this experience, they found something deeply important and long-lasting that not only fed their souls but also helped protect this beautiful island paradise for future generations (R5)
	Worthwhile	Some of the tourists said that this was the best trip they have ever had as it was a meaningful trip and they learned a lot (R3)
Novelty	Unique	Most international tourists would love fresh experiences like food hunting. They were able to sample local cuisine during their time here. They could also learn to cook local cuisine and serve it to their friends or anyone. They can even learn how to make sea cucumber massage oil. You can't have this experience anywhere else; it's rare and unique, and many tourists cherish it (R8)
	Once in a lifetime	Many of our guests consider this a once-in-a-lifetime trip especially among first-timers or don't come very often. Basically, when people join the normal boat tour, they do not get any tour guide. But here, we have an experienced tour guide to accompany you during your trip and you will gain more new knowledge from joining this trip. Eventually, you will have new views on nature (R6)
Involvement	Interacting with nature	Tourists can take a mangrove forest boat excursion at Kilim Geoforest Park, which was not only gorgeous but also educational. Tourists can engage in activities that allow them to connect with nature while also giving back (R7)
	Involvement in preserving the environment	Tourists appreciate being involved and making a direct contribution to nature conservation (R2) When they join a mangrove tour and actually plant a seedling, they often say it's the most memorable part of their trip (R7)
Responsible practices	Responsible practices	Normally, when tourists are alerted to this kind of responsible practices, they feel a sense of responsibility to care for the environment (R7)
	Socio-economy engagement	Our tourists often tell us how meaningful it is to meet and connect with the local communities. They're learning, helping, and connecting. For example, when tourists join our cooking lessons or handicraft sessions, they know their money goes directly to the families involved. One guest said, "It's the first time I felt like my trip spending really mattered to someone" (R8)

Responsible practices (cont.)	Environmental conservation	Throughout the trek, participants receive informative briefings on the local trees, plants, and their medicinal benefits. They were also taught not to pluck leaves or leave trash in the bush. Which they did (R8)
Local guide	Knowledgeable	Local guides possess extensive knowledge of the area and offer tourists comprehensive insights into the destination (R5)
	Helpful and friendly	Local guides are very helpful and friendly. They assist tourists in discovering top dining spots, shopping venues, and attractions (R5)
	Local Involvement	We chose to only hire locals, including boat drivers and nature guides. Besides that, we collaborate with local fishermen and communities. For example, during our mangrove tours, we take tourists to a floating fish farm operated by a local family. Tourists learn about traditional fishing techniques and the importance of sustainable practices (R3)
Revisit intention	Revisit intention	We've observed that the sustainable experiences that we offered to the tourists have somehow inspired them to return to Langkawi and purchase another package from us (R8)
		When tourists are satisfied with the sustainable experiences we provide, they not only revisit but also recommend us to their friends (R7)

Source: authors.

completed the questionnaire. Based on Table 2, nearly 58% of the respondents were females, while almost 43% of them were males. The majority of the respondents ($n = 83$; 35.6%) were 31–40 years old, married ($n = 122$; 52.4%), and had a degree ($n = 95$; 40.8%). In addition, most of them had indulged in sustainable experience at least once ($n = 178$; 76.4%).

Table 2. Demographic profiles

Respondent's profile	Classification	Frequency ($n = 233$)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	99	42.5
	Female	134	57.5
Age	<20	15	6.4
	21–30 years old	46	19.8
	31–40 years old	83	35.6
	41–50 years old	58	24.9
	51 years old and above	31	13.3
Marital status	Married	122	52.4
	Single	102	43.8
	Others	9	3.8
Education	Secondary school	34	14.6
	Form 6	11	4.7
	Diploma	72	30.9
	Bachelor's degree	95	40.8
	Master	17	7.3
	PhD	4	1.0
Frequency of purchasing sustainable experience	Once	178	76.4
	Twice	46	19.7
	More than twice	9	3.9

Source: authors.

4.2.1. MEASUREMENT MODEL AND STRUCTURAL MODEL

Table 3 shows the mean scores and reliability of each item and the measurement model. The mean scores ranged from 5.142 to 6.554, while the standard deviation ranged from 0.654 to 1.264. In the measurement model, the loadings, Cronbach's alpha (α), average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) were assessed. The loading values should be ≥ 0.5 , while the AVE should be ≥ 0.5 and the CR should be ≥ 0.7 . As shown in Table 3, all AVEs and CRs are higher than 0.5 and 0.7, respectively. The loadings were also acceptable since the values are more than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019), which indicates that convergent validity has been established.

Subsequently, discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion as suggested by Henseler et al. (2016) and updated by Franke and Sarstedt (2019). HTMT values should be ≤ 0.85 for the stricter criterion and the more lenient criterion should be ≤ 0.90 . As can be seen in Table 4, HTMT values are all lower than the stricter criterion of ≤ 0.85 ; therefore, it can be concluded that the respondents understood the distinctness of the eight constructs. Taken together, the validity tests have shown that the measurement items were both valid and reliable.

The structural model in Table 5 depicts the connections (paths) between the constructs in the suggested research model and Table 6 depicts the quality of the model. In general, the model's quality is measured by the strength of each structural path, which should be equal to or greater than 0.1 (Falk & Miller, 1992). Based on the results in Table 6, the R^2 value is more than 0.1. Hence, predictive capability has been established. Additionally, Q^2 confirms the predictive relevance of the endogenous construct. Accordingly, the Q^2 value of 0.334, which is greater than zero, indicates that the model has predictive relevance.

Table 3. Measurement model

Code	MTE dimension	Mean	SD	Loading	α	CR	AVE
HE01	I am thrilled to have a new sustainable experience/activity	6.305	0.710	0.872	0.797	0.881	0.715
HE02	I took part in sustainable experience/activity	6.399	0.747				
HE03	I really enjoyed my sustainable experience/activity	6.395	0.763				
IN01	I actively participated in sustainable experience/activity	6.043	0.939	0.895	0.863	0.916	0.785
IN02	I was interested in interacting with the natural and cultural surroundings	6.120	0.909				
IN03	I enjoyed the sustainable experience/activity offered to me	5.948	1.014				
KN01	I gained a lot of information from participating in sustainable experience/activity	5.884	0.980	0.934	0.926	0.944	0.772
KN02	I learned a new culture from participating in sustainable experience/activity	5.412	1.097				
KN03	I gained a new skill from participating in sustainable experience/activity	5.627	1.132				
KN04	The sustainable experience/activity was exploratory	5.867	1.000				
KN05	The sustainable experience/activity made me more knowledgeable	5.807	1.053				
LC01	I had a good impression of the local culture thanks to my sustainable experience/activity	5.674	1.026	0.881	0.865	0.908	0.713
LC02	I had the chance to experience the local culture in a sustainable way	5.562	1.071				
LC03	The local people were friendly to me	5.983	0.963				
LC04	I participated in local cultural customs and festivals	5.142	1.264				
ME01	I felt like I did something meaningful when engaging in a sustainable experience/activity	6.009	0.989	0.914	0.906	0.930	0.727
ME02	I felt like I did something important by engaging in a sustainable experience/activity	5.768	1.047				
ME03	I learned something about myself from this sustainable experience/activity	5.794	1.089				
ME04	I felt like I gained valuable experience from the Langkawi Island trip	5.403	1.089				
ME05	I felt inspired to continue participating in a sustainable experience/activity	6.112	0.853				
NO01	I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience	5.975	1.139	0.925	0.922	0.941	0.763
NO02	I had a unique experience	5.773	1.102				
NO03	Compared to my previous travel experiences elsewhere, this one was unique	5.451	1.145				
NO04	I experienced something new	5.674	1.072				
NO05	I felt like I was in a different world when participating in a sustainable experience/activity	5.391	1.134				

RE01	I relieved stress when participating in sustainable experience/ activity	6.180	0.855	0.910	0.910	0.932	0.732
RE02	I had a refreshing experience	6.232	0.853				
RE03	I had a peaceful soul from participating in sustainable experience/activity	6.300	0.853				
RE04	I felt revitalised from participating in sustainable experience/ activity	6.039	0.886				
RE05	I felt better after participating in a sustainable experience/ activity	6.197	0.946				
LG01	I experienced a knowledgeable local guide	6.236	0.741	0.820	0.774	0.866	0.683
LG02	I experienced a helpful local guide	6.554	0.654				
LG03	I experienced a friendly local guide	6.176	0.775				
RP01	I experienced a sustainable approach in how the tour was managed	5.931	0.861	0.776	0.775	0.869	0.690
RP02	I had the opportunity to participate in local communities experience in a meaningful way that facilitated socioeconomic advantages	5.639	0.828				
RP03	I experienced efforts to integrate environmental conservation into the sustainable experience	6.163	0.874				
RI01	I'm looking forward to revisit Langkawi Island	6.322	0.910	0.897	0.895	0.934	0.826
RI02	I will make a plan to revisit Langkawi Island	5.970	1.109				
RI03	I will make an effort to revisit Langkawi Island	5.940	1.181				

Note: MTE – memorable tourism experience, *SD* – standard deviation, *CR* – composite reliability, α – Cronbach's alpha, *AVE* – average variance extracted; *HE* – hedonism, *IN* – involvement, *KN* – knowledge, *LC* – local culture, *ME* – meaningfulness, *NO* – novelty, *RE* – refreshment, *LG* – local guide, *RP* – responsible practices, *RI* – revisit intention.

Source: authors.

Table 4. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

MTE dimension	HE	IN	KN	LC	LG	ME	NO	RE	RP
HE	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
IN	0.898	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
KN	0.714	0.657	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
LC	0.648	0.693	0.841	–	–	–	–	–	–
LG	0.371	0.251	0.237	0.214	–	–	–	–	–
ME	0.796	0.765	0.859	0.719	0.187	–	–	–	–
NO	0.646	0.601	0.836	0.767	0.281	0.808	–	–	–
RE	0.844	0.814	0.748	0.65	0.268	0.768	0.608	–	–
RP	0.356	0.236	0.315	0.225	0.622	0.275	0.238	0.254	–

Note: MTE – memorable tourism experience, *HE* – hedonism, *IN* – involvement, *KN* – knowledge, *LC* – local culture, *ME* – meaningfulness, *NO* – novelty, *RE* – refreshment, *LG* – local guide, *RP* – responsible practices, *RI* – revisit intention.

Source: authors.

Table 5. Structural model

Hypothesis	β values	t -statistics	p -values	Results
Hedonism \rightarrow revisit	0.268	3.149	0.002	Supported
Involvement \rightarrow revisit	-0.063	0.698	0.485	Not supported
Knowledge \rightarrow revisit	0.135	1.059	0.290	Not supported
Local culture \rightarrow revisit	0.233	2.351	0.019	Supported
Local guide \rightarrow revisit	-0.118	2.102	0.036	Supported
Meaningfulness \rightarrow revisit	-0.112	1.062	0.289	Not supported
Novelty \rightarrow revisit	0.071	0.816	0.415	Not supported
Refreshment \rightarrow revisit	0.276	2.703	0.007	Supported
Responsible \rightarrow revisit	0.149	2.593	0.010	Supported

Source: authors.

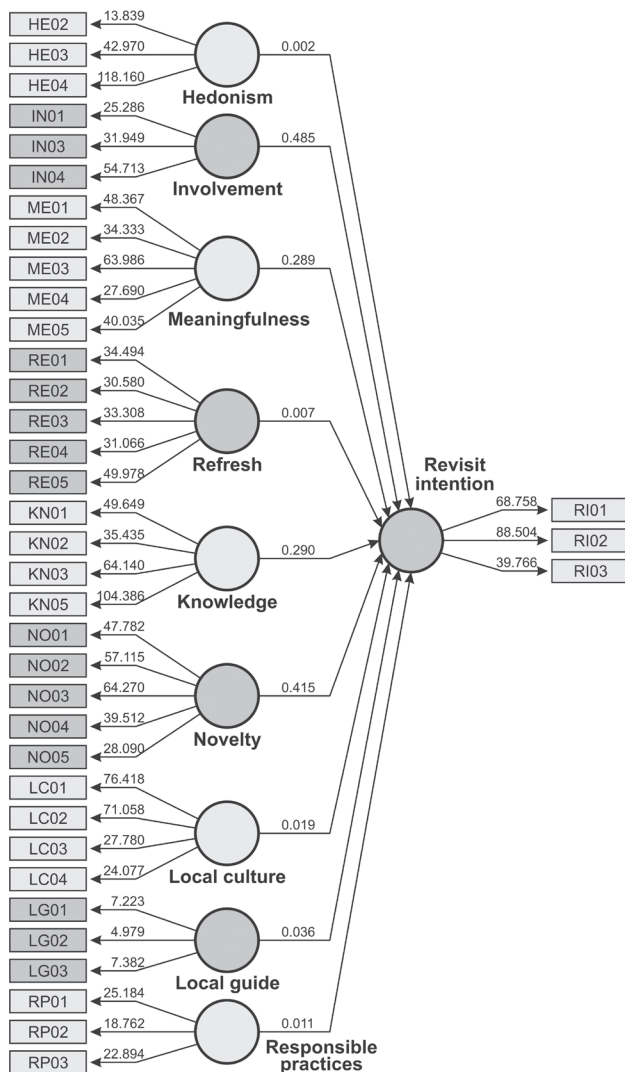


Figure 2. The model

Note: MTE – memorable tourism experience, HE – hedonism, IN – involvement, KN – knowledge, LC – local culture, ME – meaningfulness, NO – novelty, RE – refreshment, LG – local guide, RP – responsible practices, RI – revisit intention
Source: authors

Table 6. Quality of the model

Variables	Coefficient of determination (R^2)	Predictive relevance (Q^2)
Memorable sustainable tourism experience (MSTE)	0.517	0.334

Source: authors.

Hypotheses were also verified to determine the significance of relationships between variables, as depicted in Table 5. Out of the nine hypotheses tested, five were supported. Hedonism ($\beta = 0.268$; $p < 0.01$), local culture ($\beta = 0.233$; $p < 0.05$), refreshment ($\beta = 0.276$; $p < 0.01$) and responsible practices ($\beta = 0.149$; $p < 0.05$) had significant and positive effects on revisit intention. However, local guide had a significant but negative effect ($\beta = -0.118$; $p < 0.05$). The remaining variables: knowledge ($\beta = 0.135$; $t = 1.059$; p -value = 0.290), meaningfulness ($\beta = -0.112$; $t = 1.062$; p -value = 0.289), involvement ($\beta = -0.063$; $t = 0.698$; p -value = 0.485) and novelty ($\beta = 0.071$; $t = 0.816$; p -value = 0.415) did not show significant relationships with revisit intention. The negative effect of local guide on revisit intention may be attributed to over-dependence on guides, which can reduce tourists' sense of autonomy and personal discovery (Kuo et al., 2016). This finding suggests that while guides are essential for providing information, excessive reliance on them may detract from the tourists' ability to create their own memorable experiences. Figure 2 depicts the measurement model assessment.

5. DISCUSSION

This study offers a novel contribution by validating the memorable sustainable tourism experience (MSTE) concept through a comprehensive mixed-methods

approach, incorporating the viewpoints of both tourism operators and tourists, a perspective seldom integrated in prior research (Hosany et al., 2022). This study notably incorporates responsible practices and the role of local guides as expanded aspects of MSTE, thereby enhancing the theoretical understanding of sustainable tourist experiences beyond the conventional frameworks suggested by Kim (2017) or Breiby et al. (2020). This dual-perspective methodology facilitates the reconciliation of theoretical structures with practical applications in sustainable tourism experiences.

From the qualitative thematic analysis, nine essential elements that enhance MSTE were identified, namely hedonism, local culture, refreshment, knowledge, meaningfulness, novelty, involvement, responsible practices and local guide. These interconnected themes collectively shape tourists' intentions for future visits, reinforcing earlier findings that emotionally engaging, novel and personally involving experiences significantly contribute to destination loyalty and repeat visitation (Kim et al., 2012; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). The findings are also consistent with the view that tourism experiences are stored as vivid memories associated with strong emotions, which can influence future behaviour and life perspectives (Duerden et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2012). Notably, "responsible practices" and "local guide" emerged strongly from operators' perspectives, reflecting a clear emphasis on local empowerment and responsible practices within Langkawi's sustainability discourse that are often overlooked. The study conceptualises sustainable tourism as the co-creation of emotionally rich, culturally immersive and environmentally responsible experiences that foster meaningful bonds between tourists, hosts and nature consistent with recent definitions highlighting sustainability as a holistic commitment to social, economic and ecological well-being (Breiby et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2017). Ultimately, the results affirm that authentic sustainable practices, such as engaging local communities and protecting natural resources, can significantly enhance both the memorability of tourism experiences and tourists' intentions to revisit (Mercadé Melé et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the quantitative analysis in this study validated the beneficial correlations between hedonism, local culture, refreshment and responsible practices with revisit intention. These results suggest that tourists are more likely to return when they experience enjoyment, local culture immersion, excellent local guiding, relaxation and sustainable engagement (Baruca & Cívire, 2022; Solís-Radilla et al., 2019). This suggests that tourists are inclined to return to a destination if they have pleasant and memorable sustainable experiences that involve hedonism, cultural immersion, excellent local guiding, refreshment and responsible actions (Solís-Radilla et al., 2019). According

to Park and Muk Kim (2021), cultural immersion, which involves forming strong links with local traditions, is also an important factor in encouraging people to visit a place again. The presence of opportunities for rest and refreshment enhances the overall good experience, hence increasing the likelihood of repeat visits (Yu et al., 2020). In addition, when tourists engage in responsible and sustainable acts, it helps create a favourable image of the place, which in turn promotes the likelihood of their returning for future visits (Mercadé Melé et al., 2020). The presence of exceptional local guides significantly improves satisfaction levels and increases the likelihood of repeat visits (Nandika et al., 2023). However, the negative significant correlation with "local guide" indicates that excessive dependence on guides may diminish tourists' sense of autonomy, along with Lin and Kuo (2016), who warn that excessive mediation might inhibit self-directed exploration, an essential element of memorability. Collectively, these components form a thorough and gratifying tourist encounter, hence enhancing the probability of tourists revisiting the destination.

While the above aspects were proven influential to revisit intention, interestingly, knowledge, meaningfulness, involvement and novelty, despite being esteemed by tourists and tourism operators in qualitative interviews, did not exhibit significant quantitative correlations with revisit intention. A plausible explanation is that these elements, while enriching the current experience, also encourage tourists to explore new places rather than return to the same destination, especially for novelty seekers (Da Cruz Andrade & Ricci-Cagnacci, 2023; Jang & Feng, 2007). Another possible explanation is that their impact varies depending on the context and tourist motivations (Hosany et al., 2022). For example, knowledge and meaningfulness may be prized for personal progress but not be strong enough motivators for returning. This is proven as some researchers have also discovered that knowledge-based experiences, have little direct effect on revisit behaviour (Amir et al., 2022). These findings suggest that while these aspects enrich the overall experience, their influence on revisit intention may be indirect or shaped by factors like satisfaction or emotional connection, reflecting the complex nature of sustainable tourism where not all memorable elements directly drive return visits (Da Cruz Andrade & Ricci-Cagnacci, 2023).

In conclusion, this study enhances the MSTE model by empirically establishing that pleasure (hedonism), local cultural immersion, psychological refreshment and responsible practices are the most significant determinants of return visitation. It underscores the importance of incorporating sustainability via significant local guide involvement and responsible sustainable

activities (Rahim et al., 2023). These findings correspond with the sustainable tourism literature that emphasises authentic and memorable experiences as pivotal to enduring destination competitiveness and resilience (Breiby et al., 2020; Islamiyati & Chairy, 2021; Sofronov, 2017).

6. CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of sustainable tourism and MTE by developing and validating the MSTE model through a mixed-methods approach combining tourism operator insights and tourist perceptions. The qualitative finding revealed that there are nine essential elements that enhance MSTE namely hedonism, local culture, refreshment, knowledge, meaningfulness, novelty, involvement, responsible practices and local guide. While quantitative findings reveal that five key components, hedonism, local culture, refreshment, responsible practices and local guide engagement, significantly influence revisit intention, affirming the importance of emotionally engaging and ethically grounded experiences in promoting destination loyalty. However, elements such as knowledge, meaningfulness, involvement and novelty, while highlighted in qualitative interviews, did not show significant effects in the quantitative phase, indicating that their influence may be indirect or context-specific.

The present study's result makes significant contributions to the theoretical and practical aspects of sustainable tourism and experiential studies through a thorough framework, the MSTE model. The research enhances the academic comprehension of MSTE by utilising exploratory sequential mixed-method design to uncover and validate crucial elements such as hedonism, local culture, refreshment, responsible practices and their favourable relationship with revisit intention. Moreover, these findings enhance the scholarly discussion on sustainable tourism by explaining how these factors contribute to memorable and repeatable tourism experiences. Essentially, the study provides practical insights for destination managers and tourism producers, emphasising the significance of incorporating these essential elements into a tourism strategy to improve tourist satisfaction and promote revisiting. This twofold contribution not only enhances theoretical knowledge but also offers specific recommendations for enhancing sustainable tourism practices on Langkawi Island and, potentially, other destinations.

Nonetheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in a single location, Langkawi Island in Malaysia, which may limit the findings' applicability to other contexts. Future research should try duplicating this study in a variety

of geographical and cultural tourist settings to test the MSTE model's relevance and robustness across several destinations. Second, while the qualitative phase involved local tour operators, it excluded a broader variety of stakeholders such as the community, tourism authorities, policymakers and academics. These groups play important roles in shaping sustainable tourism experience, and their viewpoints may provide more insight into the co-creation of sustainable and enjoyable experiences. Thus, extending the stakeholder sample in future study would improve both theoretical and practical understanding. Third, the study focuses entirely on travellers' self-reported opinions of responsible behaviour. While such data can provide useful insights on tourist experience, they may not accurately reflect the success or implementation of sustainable policies at the destination level. Relying on perceived sustainability can lead to overlooking important contextual factors such as the environmental imprint, community engagement and economic rewards. Future studies should provide a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of sustainability within the MSTE model (Akhshik et al., 2022; Moliner-Tena et al., 2021). Fourth, more than one-third of the 233 respondents in the quantitative phase were first-time participants, thereby limiting the ability to identify complex trends in revisit behaviour. First-time visitors may rate their experiences differently than regular visitors, who are more likely to have built loyalty or deeper links to the location. Future research could investigate these disparities using segmented analysis or comparing first-time and repeat visitors to further understand how experience components influence different revisit intentions. Lastly, the quantitative model did not account for critical mediators such as visitor happiness, destination image or emotional attachment, which have been proven to influence revisit intention (Kim, 2017; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Future study could use serial mediation or moderated mediation models to investigate how memorable sustaining experiences promote revisit behaviour via psychological or emotional mediators. Incorporating these constructs would most likely increase the explanatory depth of the MSTE model.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for providing FRGS grant (FRGS/1/2020/WAB01/UMK/03/2) and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan for supporting this work.

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