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THE EFFECTS OF TOURIST EXPERIENCES ON TOURISTS' ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR

Tatjana Stanovčić¹; Đurđica Perović²; Mileva Manojlović³

Abstract

The rapid growth of global tourism has intensified its negative impacts on the natural environment, increasingly threatening the sustainability of destinations. Consequently, environmental conservation has become essential for the long-term viability of these areas. Tourists' behavior during their stay at destinations represents a key component of tourism activities and a critical factor shaping the landscape of host destinations. Therefore, developing strategies that foster environmentally responsible behavior has become a central concern in academic discourse. This study aims to analyze the effects of the tourist experience on tourists' intentions to behave responsibly toward the destination. Using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficient on a sample of 40 respondents, this study indicates that sensory, social, and emotional tourist experiences positively influence environmentally responsible behavior. The results provide empirical support for the theoretical framework linking destination experiences and pro-environmental actions, while offering practical guidelines for encouraging sustainable tourism practices.

Key Words: *tourist experience, responsible behavior, environment, sustainability, empirical analysis*

JEL classification: Z32

Introduction

¹ Tatjana Stanovčić, Associate professor, Faculty of tourism and hotel management, University of Montenegro, Old town 320, Kotor, 85330, Montenegro, stanja@ucg.ac.me

² Đurđica Perović, Full professor, Faculty of tourism and hotel management, University of Montenegro, Old town 320, Kotor, 85330, Montenegro, duda@ucg.ac.me

³ Mileva Manojlović, MSc, teaching assistant, Faculty of tourism and hotel management, University of Montenegro, Old town 320, Kotor, 85330, Montenegro, milevam@ucg.ac.me

The rapid growth of the tourism sector, together with improvements in overall economic standards, has led to a context in which tourism has become an integral part of modern lifestyles. However, the environmental degradation of tourist destinations caused by the expansion of tourist flows increasingly threatens the sustainability of destinations (Simo-Kengne, 2022). Tourists' behavior, as a core component of destination-based activities, is widely recognized as a key factor shaping the environmental context of destinations (Han, 2021). Inappropriate visitor behavior, in particular, can leave lasting negative impacts on the ecological integrity of tourist areas (Shien et al., 2022). Consequently, identifying mechanisms that encourage environmentally responsible tourist behavior has become a pressing challenge in both theoretical research and tourism practice.

Within academic discourse, research has mainly focused on eco-natural destinations, examining the drivers of tourists' responsible behavior (Lee et al., 2021), while considerably less attention has been devoted to emerging and transition economies characterized by rich cultural heritage. As an important aspect of the global tourist market, such destinations face growing concerns related to the conservation of their tourism assets (Cai & Cheng, 2024). Considering the shift in consumer demand from conventional products toward authentic and experience-based offerings (Mossberg, 2007), the experiential perceptions of tourists have emerged as a central determinant of destination evaluation and subsequent behavioral responses (Cheng & Chen, 2022). Nevertheless, previous studies in tourism have largely adopted an integrated perspective to assess the relationship between tourist experiences and environmentally responsible behavioral intentions, neglecting destination-specific characteristics (Wu et al., 2022). Only a limited number of studies have focused on transition economies and their distinctive features, particularly by analyzing the effects of individual experiential dimensions. Therefore, scholars emphasize the need for further research that examines how tourist experiences influence behavioral outcomes within specific destination contexts, especially those shaped by cultural heritage (Cheng & Chen, 2022).

Addressing this research gap, the present study focuses on the sensory, social, and emotional aspects of tourist experiences in cultural destinations and explores their relationship with tourists' environmentally responsible behavior. In the context of cultural tourism services, understanding whether immersive and unforgettable experiences

encourage environmentally responsible behavior represents a relevant research challenge. Accordingly, this study develops a conceptual framework that examines how sensory, social, and emotional experiential dimensions, as important aspects of the overall experience in tourism, influence environmentally responsible behavior, thereby contributing to the theoretical foundations of sustainability-oriented tourism research.

Literature review

Tourist experience

Experience reflects a multidimensional system that is becoming an increasingly prevalent concept in academic research (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). In tourism, where emotional connection and intense consumer engagement are widely assumed to be vital drivers for generating competitive advantages, designing memorable experiences is emerging as a key strategy for tourism businesses to offer superior value to tourists, ensure sustainable growth, and achieve a strong market position (Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

Different scholars conceptualize the tourism experience through various theoretical paradigms (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). Cohen (2013) defined the tourism experience as an authentic impulse that differs significantly from everyday experience. Ryan and Zhang (2024) interpreted the tourist experience from a psychological perspective, emphasizing that it is a complex mental process that includes intangible components and is based on an individual's subjective experience. Similarly, Pine and Gilmore (2011) defined experience as a subjective phenomenon that integrates affective, spiritual, intellectual, and physical responses. As the multidimensional nature of this phenomenon has become an essential component of experience research, the aforementioned authors further proposed that experience be divided into four dimensions: the aesthetic, educational, entertainment, and escapist aspects. Schmitt (1999) distinguishes experience into five dimensions related to sensory, social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects, emphasizing that the central idea of experience marketing is to generate experiential scenarios that remain in consumers' memory in order to ultimately achieve customer loyalty and brand support. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that the tourist experience represents a critical antecedent influencing travelers' attitudes and behaviors, particularly those associated with positive emotional responses and behavioral outcomes (Lin & Kuo, 2016).

Tourist environmentally responsible behavior

Environmentally responsible tourist behavior represents the behavior of individuals in a tourism context that supports the sustainability of the destination, minimizes negative effects on the environment, and avoids the degradation of the destination ecosystem (Samaddar et al., 2022; Sthapit et al., 2023). Consequently, such behavior leads to improvements in the overall quality of the destination offering and encourages destination sustainability and the conservation of the destination's ecological and cultural assets (Ren et al., 2021). However, the fact that visitors in tourism primarily seek hedonism and entertainment rather than practicing environmentally responsible behaviors makes research on environmentally responsible behavior in the travel domain more complex (Wu et al., 2022). Examining different concepts related to tourists' behavior in environmental protection, such as environmentally responsible behavior (Sthapit et al., 2023), environmentally friendly behavior (Ren et al., 2021), and pro-environmental behavior (Li et al., 2023), reveals that these concepts differ in their conceptual foundations, mainly due to the paradigmatic orientations of various disciplines. Nevertheless, all these concepts reflect a subjective inclination toward the active adoption of sustainable practices, and their theoretical interpretations are largely complementary.

Current studies on environmentally responsible behavior underline the importance of the drivers that influence such behavior, particularly subjective and objective determinants (Salinero et al., 2025). Among objective antecedents, destination social responsibility (Su & Swanson, 2017), the quality of the destination environment and destination image (Chiu et al., 2014) are frequently highlighted, whereas subjective factors include place attachment (Sthapit et al., 2023), commitment to environmental protection, environmental knowledge, and satisfaction (Cheng et al., 2018). Building on this perspective, Cheng and Chen (2022) suggested that the tourist experience is an essential predictor of tourist behavior, especially in the context of cultural destinations where the authenticity of impressions plays an important role. Therefore, this study focuses on a transition economy characterized by rich cultural heritage and examines the role of the tourist experience in shaping environmentally responsible tourist behavior.

As destination sustainability increasingly depends on tourists' environmentally responsible behavior, understanding the role of the tourist experience in shaping such behavior has become essential. Therefore, this paper investigates how distinct dimensions of experience

in tourism influence environmentally responsible behavior, suggesting the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Sensory tourist experience has a positive impact on tourists' environmentally responsible behavior.

Hypothesis 1b: Social tourist experience has a positive impact on tourists' environmentally responsible behavior.

Hypothesis 1c: Emotional tourist experience has a positive impact on tourists' environmentally responsible behavior.

Methodology

Data Collection

To test the proposed hypotheses, primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered between July and August 2025 at the Maritime Museum of Montenegro in Kotor. A convenience sampling method was utilized to intercept tourists following their tour of the museum, resulting in a final sample of 40 valid responses. The survey instrument was adapted from previously validated scales in tourism literature. To provide a detailed interpretation of the empirical results, a descriptive statistical analysis was employed. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (PPMCC) was then applied to analyze the degree to which individual experiential dimensions-namely sensory, social, and emotional-are associated with this sustainable behavior.

Variables

To evaluate the impacts of various experiential dimensions within cultural tourism on this behavioral outcome, three distinct independent variables were constructed based on previously validated scales adopted from Pekovic and Rolland (2020). Each constituent element of these experiential dimensions was assessed using an identical 5-point Likert agreement scale, where 1 signified "I completely agree" and 5 indicated "I do not agree at all".

Sensory Tourist Experience. This dimension was operationalized as a composite index aggregating five specific attributes: interior, lighting, temperature, cleanliness, and colors.

Social Tourist Experience. This variable was computed by combining the scores of five service-related components: staff kindness, competence, professionalism, information, and the encouragement of employee-visitor interaction.

Emotional Tourist Experience. This construct aggregates a broader spectrum of affective responses, namely satisfaction, happiness, frustration, perceived confinement, serenity, anger, and fulfillment. Notably, anger and frustration were incorporated into this experiential dimension as critical indicators of a negative service encounter (Tronvoll, 2011). This inclusion is justified by the fact that visitors frequently experience anger or frustration when the delivered service quality falls short of their initial expectations, while the item measuring perceived confinement addresses the psychological feeling of being trapped or physically constrained during the museum tour (Stanovčić et al., 2021).

Environmentally responsible behavior. This construct represents the dependent variable and was evaluated using a single-item metric adapted from Ren et al. (2021), utilizing a 5-point scale: 5 = “not”, 4 = “probably not”, 3 = “neutral”, 2 = “probably yes”, and 1 = “yes”.

Results and discussion

The findings obtained from the descriptive statistics indicate that the overall experience with the tourism offering in Montenegro is evaluated very positively, with 95% of respondents rating it as excellent. Within the sensory dimension, temperature emerged as the highest-rated attribute (95%), followed by cleanliness and colours, each receiving favourable evaluations from 90% of respondents.. Furthermore, tourists reported predominantly positive perceptions of their social experiences, particularly in relation to the kindness, competence, and professionalism of destination employees. Emotional responses during the stay were largely positive, with 90% of respondents indicating that their expectations were fully or partially met. Additionally, 70% of tourists stated their intentions to behave in an environmentally responsible manner toward the destination, suggesting a strong orientation toward sustainable tourism practices. A summary of the descriptive statistics for all examined variables is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Definition of variables and descriptive statistics (N=40)*

Variables	Definition	Min	Max	AS*	SD**
Interior	Did the interior of the Museum make you want to leave the building?	1	5	3.05	1.7
Lighting	Is the lighting in the Museum pleasant?	1	5	1.80	0.99
Temperature	Is the temperature in the rooms adequate?	1	5	1.65	0.92

Cleanliness	Are the rooms clean?	1	5	1.55	0.99
Colors	Are the colors of the rooms pleasant?	1	4	1.65	0.80
Information	Are employees providing accurate information?	1	4	1.50	0.93
Kindness	Are the employees kind?	1	4	1.40	0.81
Competence	Are the employees competent?	1	4	1.50	0.82
Professionalism	Are the employees professional?	1	4	1.75	0.84
Interaction	Do employees encourage interaction?	1	4	2.00	0.96
Satisfaction	Did you feel great satisfaction during the tour of the Museum?	1	5	2.40	1.68
Happiness	Did the visit to the Museum make you happy?	1	5	2.25	1.15
Frustration	Did the visit to the Museum make you frustrated?	1	5	3.40	1.52
Perceived confinement	Did you feel like you were locked in during the tour of the Museum?	1	5	3.55	1.48
Serenity	Did you feel serene in the Museum?	1	5	2.45	1.04
Anger	Did the visit to the Museum make you feel angry?	1	5	3.50	1.65
Fulfillment	Were your expectations met?	1	3	1.60	0.67
Environmentally responsible behavior	I behaved in an environmentally responsible manner at the destination	1	5	1.93	1.10

Source: *Authors' elaboration*

Interior design significantly influences tourists' environmentally responsible behavior. Lighting and temperature have moderate, positive, and statistically significant associations with such behavior, while cleanliness has the strongest association. Colors show a weaker but significant positive association. Additionally, employee characteristics play an important role: information, kindness, competence, and professionalism have moderate to strong positive and significant associations with responsible tourist behavior. On the other hand, interaction did not show a significant association. Finally, satisfaction and happiness have moderate positive, and significant associations with

responsible tourist behavior. Frustration and anger have moderate negative associations, confirming that emotional distress hinders sustainable actions. Further, perceived confinement displays a weak negative correlation; because this item reflects spatial discomfort, its negative direction mathematically demonstrates that minimizing confinement enhances positive outcomes. Serenity has no significant effect, while the feeling of fulfillment is moderately and positively associated with responsible tourist behavior.

Table 2: *Pearson correlation coefficient and p-value (N=40)*

Measurement path	Pearson coefficient, r	T-statistic	p-value
Sensory exp. > Responsible behavior			
- Interior	-0.32909	-2.14833	0.038125*
- Lighting	0.457751	3.173803	0.002978**
- Temperature	0.481602	3.387526	0.001653**
- Cleanliness	0.656702	5.36788	4.19E-06***
- Colors	0.348758	2.293917	0.027415*
Social exp. > Responsible behavior			
- Information	0.564204	4.212497	0.00015***
- Kindness	0.583747	4.431947	7.69E-05***
- Competence	0.587842	4.479365	6.65E-05***
- Professionalism	0.592496	4.533906	5.63E-05***
- Interaction	0.268062	1.715216	0.094451
Emotional exp. > Responsible behavior			
- Satisfaction	0.57542	4.337095	0.000103***
- Happiness	0.504272	3.599743	0.000907***
- Frustration	-0.58389	-4.4336	7.65E-05***
- Perceived confinement	-0.33682	-2.20513	0.033569*
- Serenity	0.256379	1.635075	0.110292
- Anger	-0.40991	-2.77031	0.008618**
- Fulfillment	0.446115	3.07275	0.003911**

$p < 0,05^*$; $p < 0,01^{**}$; $p < 0,001^{***}$

Source: *Authors' elaboration*

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that sensory, social, and emotional experiences have significant positive effects on tourists' environmentally responsible behavior. The results indicate that variables

related to the interior, frustration, perceived confinement, and anger are negatively correlated with tourists' intentions to behave in an environmentally responsible manner at the destination. In other words, while higher levels of frustration, perceived confinement, and anger decrease the likelihood of behaving environmentally responsibly, a lower desire to leave the building due to its interior layout actually enhances sustainable tourist actions.

Conclusion

The continuous growth of tourism activities has increased pressure on natural and cultural assets, making environmentally responsible behavior a fundamental prerequisite for destination sustainability (Cai & Cheng, 2024). Tourist experience, as an integral component of tourism consumption, plays a vital role in shaping tourists' attitudes and behavioral intentions at destinations, particularly within culturally sensitive environments (Cheng & Chen, 2022).

This study aimed to examine the effects of tourists' sensory, social, and emotional experiences on their environmentally responsible behavior, focusing on the cultural destinations of Montenegro. The findings indicate that tourist experience represents a significant predictor of environmentally responsible behavior. Specifically, the results reveal that sensory, social, and emotional dimensions are positively and significantly associated with tourists' intentions to behave responsibly toward the destination, suggesting the strongest influence of social experience.

These results contribute to the existing tourism literature by providing empirical evidence on the role of experiential factors in fostering environmentally responsible behavior, particularly within transition economies characterized by rich cultural heritage. The findings highlight the importance of managing tourist experiences as a means of fostering sustainable behavior and supporting the long-term sustainability of cultural destinations.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides valuable preliminary insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small, which prevents the generalization of the findings to the broader tourist population in Montenegro. This small sample is due to the exploratory nature of the study and strict filtering for cultural tourists at a

single destination. Second, the use of convenience sampling may introduce selection bias. Future research may extend this analysis by incorporating larger samples, additional experiential dimensions, or advanced analytical methods to further explore the complex relationships between tourist experience and sustainable behavioral outcomes.

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