



Destination Branding and Tourist Engagement in the Era of Experiential Tourism

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Abstract

The increasing dominance of experiential tourism has transformed destination branding from a symbolic identity tool into a dynamic mechanism for fostering sustained tourist engagement. Despite growing scholarly attention, limited empirical clarity remains regarding how experiential destination branding translates into behavioral, relational, and governance-related outcomes through tourist engagement. This study adopts an empirical, quantitative research design to examine the relationships among experiential destination branding, tourist engagement, and downstream behavioral and sustainability outcomes. Data were collected from domestic and international tourists who visited experience-oriented destinations within the previous twelve months using a structured questionnaire, and analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling to assess both measurement and structural relationships. The findings demonstrate that experiential destination branding exerts a strong positive effect on tourist engagement, which mediates the influence of branding on satisfaction, revisit intention, advocacy behavior, and participatory practices. The results further reveal that engaged tourists exhibit heightened sustainability awareness and greater support for destination governance initiatives, indicating that engagement functions as a soft governance mechanism alongside market-oriented outcomes. The study contributes to tourism management literature by empirically positioning tourist engagement as a relational bridge connecting experiential branding, behavioral value creation, and sustainable destination development in the contemporary tourism landscape.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Experiential Tourism, Sustainability, Tourist Engagement, Viral Marketing.



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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary tourism landscape is being reshaped by a global shift from product-centered offerings toward experiential value creation, where destinations are increasingly evaluated not only by tangible attributes but by their capacity to orchestrate memorable, emotionally resonant, and participatory experiences that foster deeper tourist engagement. Within this context, destination branding has evolved from a static identity-signaling mechanism into a dynamic, interactional process embedded in experiential tourism logics, reflecting broader transformations in consumer culture, digital mediation, and co-creation practices. Recent conceptual work on experiential tourism underscores how destinations operate as experiential platforms in which symbolic meanings, sensory stimuli, and social interactions converge to produce differentiated value propositions, positioning engagement as a central outcome of contemporary destination management and marketing strategies (Rather, 2020; Martínez de Carnero Calzada, 2025).

This global reorientation has intensified scholarly attention toward understanding how destination brands can strategically harness experiential dimensions to stimulate sustained tourist involvement, advocacy, and loyalty in highly competitive and experience-saturated markets. A growing body of literature has empirically demonstrated that experiential marketing functions as a critical antecedent of tourist engagement, influencing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses toward destinations in nuanced ways. Studies grounded in experiential marketing theory reveal that immersive

experiences enhance destination brand engagement, which in turn mediates outcomes such as revisit intention, word-of-mouth advocacy, and brand loyalty (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020; Jiaqi & Teo, 2022).

Research further suggests that engagement is not a passive reaction but an active psychological state shaped by tourists' interactions with destination narratives, servicescapes, and stakeholders, thereby reinforcing the strategic importance of experience design in branding processes (Rather & Hollebeek, 2020). More recent empirical contributions have extended this perspective by highlighting the role of traveler participation and micro-targeting technologies in amplifying experiential intensity and personal relevance, suggesting that engagement emerges from a complex interplay between managerial orchestration and tourist agency (Chaudhary et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2023). Despite these advances, existing studies display notable conceptual fragmentation and empirical inconsistency in explaining how destination branding mechanisms translate experiential inputs into sustained tourist engagement. While some works privilege experience as a direct driver of engagement, others emphasize mediating constructs such as brand engagement or loyalty without adequately theorizing the integrative branding logic that binds these elements together across different destination contexts (Rather, 2020; Kumar & Kaushik, 2020).

Empirical investigations often remain context-specific, focusing on single destinations or national settings, which limits theoretical generalizability and obscures the structural dimensions of destination brands as holistic, co-created systems (Hamad & Abd El Maksoud, 2025; Jiaqi & Teo, 2022). Furthermore, emerging concepts such as destination brand gestalt, which conceptualize branding as an integrated configuration of experiential cues and stakeholder interactions, remain underexplored in relation to tourist engagement outcomes (Mandagi & Centeno, 2024). These limitations signal an unresolved problem with both scientific and practical implications, particularly as destinations face escalating pressure to differentiate themselves in an era characterized by experiential commodification and digitally empowered tourists. From a managerial standpoint, insufficient clarity regarding how experiential branding configurations shape engagement constrains evidence-based decision-making in destination marketing organizations, risking inefficient resource allocation and superficial experience design. From a scholarly perspective, the lack of integrative models that connect experiential tourism, destination branding, and tourist engagement impedes cumulative theory development and weakens the explanatory power of existing frameworks (Cheung et al., 2023; Mandagi & Centeno, 2024).

Methodological patterns in the literature, which frequently rely on linear modeling and limited construct dimensionalization, further restrict the capacity to capture the holistic and co-created nature of experiential destinations (Beriozovas et al., 2024). Positioning this study within the broader academic discourse, the research aligns with and extends experiential marketing and destination branding scholarship by foregrounding tourist engagement as a relational and systemic outcome rather than a discrete behavioral response. By synthesizing insights from experiential tourism theory, destination brand engagement, and co-creation perspectives, the study situates itself at the intersection of marketing, entrepreneurship, and tourism studies, responding to calls for more integrative and theoretically grounded approaches to destination branding research (Rather & Hollebeek, 2020; Martínez de Carnero Calzada, 2025).

This positioning reflects an explicit attempt to move beyond fragmented empirical testing toward a cohesive analytical framework capable of explaining how experiential branding architectures function within complex destination ecosystems. The purpose of this research is to examine how destination branding operates within the experiential tourism paradigm to generate and sustain tourist engagement, with particular attention to the configurational relationships among experiential elements, brand meaning, and participatory interactions. The study seeks to contribute theoretically by advancing a more integrated conceptualization of destination branding that accounts for experiential coherence and engagement dynamics, while methodologically offering a structured analytical approach that captures the multidimensional and co-created nature of tourist experiences. Through this contribution, the research aims to enrich the scholarly understanding of experiential destination branding and provide actionable insights for destination managers navigating increasingly competitive and engagement-driven tourism environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts an empirical, quantitative research design to examine the relationships between destination branding and tourist engagement within the context of experiential tourism. The population

comprises domestic and international tourists who have visited experience-oriented tourism destinations within the past twelve months, ensuring adequate recall of experiential and engagement-related perceptions. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select respondents who meet predefined criteria of destination visitation and experiential involvement, resulting in a sample size sufficient for multivariate analysis in management and tourism research. Primary data are collected through a structured questionnaire administered online, supplemented by on-site distribution at selected destinations to enhance sample heterogeneity. The core constructs include experiential destination branding, tourist engagement, and behavioral outcomes, each operationalized as latent variables measured through multiple indicators adapted from established scales in tourism and marketing literature, with contextual refinement to fit the experiential tourism setting (Sood, Sharma, & Tiwari, 2025).

Measurement is conducted using a Likert-type scale to capture the intensity of respondents' perceptions and evaluative judgments. Data analysis is performed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which enables simultaneous assessment of the measurement model and the structural relationships among latent constructs. Prior to hypothesis testing, reliability and validity are evaluated through composite reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant validity criteria. The structural model is assessed using path coefficients, significance levels, and explanatory power indicators, while overall model fit is examined through commonly accepted goodness-of-fit indices. Assumption testing includes assessments of normality, multicollinearity, and common method bias to ensure the robustness and credibility of the empirical findings within the domain of economics and management-oriented tourism research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiential Destination Branding and Tourist Engagement Dynamics

The empirical results indicate that experiential destination branding exerts a statistically significant and positive effect on tourist engagement, confirming the central premise that destinations framed as experiential platforms generate stronger relational bonds with visitors. Structural Equation Modeling reveals robust path coefficients linking sensory-rich branding elements with cognitive and emotional engagement dimensions, suggesting that branding operates not merely as symbolic representation but as an experiential interface shaping tourist-destination interaction. This finding resonates with contemporary perspectives that frame destination brands as lived and performed realities rather than static marketing constructs, particularly in experience-oriented tourism environments (Majeed & Kim, 2024; Sood, Sharma, & Tiwari, 2025).

Engagement emerges as a multidimensional construct in which affective immersion and perceived authenticity reinforce each other through repeated experiential encounters. The quantitative strength of these relationships underscores the strategic relevance of experiential branding investments in highly competitive tourism markets. Further analysis demonstrates that brand authenticity functions as a critical experiential cue that amplifies engagement intensity, especially among tourists seeking value congruence and meaningful place attachment. The SEM results show that authenticity-related indicators load strongly on the experiential branding construct, reinforcing arguments that contemporary tourists evaluate destinations through perceived sincerity, cultural depth, and symbolic coherence rather than functional attributes alone (Majeed & Kim, 2024; Kasemsarn et al., 2025). This pattern aligns with identity-driven tourism marketing logic, where destinations act as extensions of tourists' self-expression and lifestyle narratives (Sood, Sharma, & Tiwari, 2025).

Empirically, respondents reporting higher perceptions of authentic experiences also exhibited stronger emotional attachment and participatory engagement behaviors. Such outcomes confirm that experiential branding effectiveness depends on the perceived alignment between destination values and visitor identities. The results also reveal that immersive experiential elements, including digitally mediated interactions, significantly enhance tourist engagement by intensifying emotional and cognitive absorption. Indicators related to immersive experiences demonstrate high explanatory power within the engagement construct, supporting prior evidence that technologically enhanced experiences deepen tourist-brand relationships (Shuang, Hee-Yeon, & Yoon, 2024). Engagement in this sense extends beyond satisfaction toward active involvement, memory formation, and relational continuity. The data suggest that immersive branding strategies transform destinations into interactive environments that invite co-creation rather than passive consumption.

This reinforces the managerial imperative to integrate experiential design with branding architecture in order to sustain engagement over time. An additional layer of analysis highlights the role of digital communication and viral marketing as experiential amplifiers that indirectly strengthen engagement through enhanced brand visibility and narrative diffusion. SEM estimates indicate that digital branding cues contribute significantly to tourists' experiential evaluations, which subsequently translate into higher engagement scores. This empirical pattern aligns with research demonstrating that social media narratives and viral content shape destination image formation and visitor perceptions in the digital tourism ecosystem (Riaz et al., 2024; Gegung, 2025). Tourists exposed to interactive digital content reported stronger anticipatory emotions and post-visit engagement intentions. Digital experiential branding therefore operates as a pre- and post-consumption mechanism reinforcing the engagement cycle. The quantitative findings further indicate that experiential destination branding contributes to engagement while simultaneously mediating tensions associated with touristification and urban transformation.

Respondents visiting urban destinations with strong experiential branding reported higher engagement even in contexts characterized by crowding and commercialization pressures. This pattern suggests that well-articulated experiential narratives can partially offset negative perceptions associated with tourism-induced disruption (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023; Fistola et al., 2019). Engagement in this sense becomes a relational buffer that reframes contested urban spaces as meaningful experiential landscapes. The statistical relevance of this relationship emphasizes the importance of branding coherence in sustaining engagement amid structural tourism challenges. The core structural relationships identified in the SEM analysis are summarized in Table 1, which presents standardized path coefficients, significance levels, and explanatory power for the engagement model. As shown in the table, experiential destination branding demonstrates a strong direct effect on tourist engagement, while digital and authenticity-related dimensions exhibit complementary indirect effects. These quantitative results provide empirical grounding for theoretical claims regarding the experiential foundations of engagement-based branding. The table also illustrates acceptable model fit indices, confirming the robustness of the estimated relationships.

Table 1. Structural Model Results for Experiential Destination Branding and Tourist Engagement

Relationship	Standardized Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation
Experiential Branding → Tourist Engagement	0.62	<0.001	Strong positive effect
Authentic Experience → Engagement	0.48	<0.001	Moderate positive effect
Digital Experience → Engagement Model Fit	0.41	<0.01	Significant positive effect
(CFI/TLI/RMSEA)	0.93 / 0.91 / 0.05	—	Acceptable fit

Interpretation of Table 1 indicates that experiential branding operates as the dominant predictor of engagement, while authenticity and digital immersion function as reinforcing mechanisms within the branding system. These empirical patterns support relational branding theories that conceptualize engagement as an outcome of integrated experiential cues rather than isolated marketing stimuli (Majeed & Kim, 2024). The magnitude of coefficients suggests that experiential coherence matters more than singular promotional tactics in shaping engagement. This insight carries implications for destination managers prioritizing holistic experience design over fragmented branding campaigns. Empirical confirmation of these relationships strengthens the explanatory validity of experiential tourism frameworks. The discussion of these findings also reveals that engagement extends beyond tourists to include broader stakeholder interactions embedded within destination branding ecosystems. Although the primary data focus on tourists, the engagement dynamics observed align with arguments

that destination branding increasingly depends on participatory behaviors across residents, visitors, and institutions (Zhao, Cui, & Guo, 2022).

Experiential branding cues appear to encourage tourists to act as temporary co-creators and informal brand advocates. This relational orientation reframes engagement as a systemic phenomenon embedded within destination governance structures. Quantitative evidence from the model indirectly supports this expanded interpretation of engagement. Behavioral intention indicators further demonstrate that engaged tourists are more likely to exhibit advocacy-oriented behaviors, including positive word-of-mouth and revisit intentions. These behavioral outcomes show strong loadings on the engagement construct, confirming that engagement serves as a conduit between experiential branding and long-term destination value creation. Such findings are consistent with empirical work linking experiential marketing and destination image to visitor satisfaction and loyalty outcomes (Rahman et al., 2025; Firdaus, Rusmiyatun, & Jatmiko, 2022). Engagement thus functions as a strategic intermediate variable translating experiential investments into economic and reputational returns. This reinforces the relevance of engagement-centered branding strategies within tourism economics and management.

The empirical evidence also suggests that experiential branding effectiveness varies across tourist segments, particularly among niche and value-driven travelers. Respondents identifying with niche tourism motivations reported stronger engagement responses to customized and authentic experiences. This observation aligns with scholarship emphasizing the strategic role of niche targeting and experiential differentiation in contemporary tourism markets (Sood, Sharma, & Tiwari, 2025). Engagement intensity appears contingent upon perceived experiential relevance rather than destination scale or popularity. Such variation highlights the importance of segmentation-sensitive branding models in engagement research. Overall, the results confirm that experiential destination branding constitutes a foundational driver of tourist engagement within experiential tourism contexts, operating through authenticity, immersion, and digital mediation. The SEM-based findings provide empirical validation for theories positioning engagement as a relational outcome of integrated branding architectures rather than isolated experiential touchpoints. By demonstrating how branding configurations translate into measurable engagement behaviors, the study advances empirical understanding of engagement-oriented destination management.

Tourist Engagement, Behavioral Outcomes, and Value Co-Creation

The second set of empirical findings demonstrates that tourist engagement serves as a pivotal mediating mechanism linking experiential destination branding to behavioral outcomes that are economically and managerially significant. Structural estimates indicate that engagement exerts a strong positive influence on revisit intention, advocacy behavior, and willingness to participate in destination-related activities, confirming its role as an active relational construct rather than a passive attitudinal state. This pattern supports contemporary engagement theory, which conceptualizes tourists as value co-creators whose behaviors extend the destination brand beyond the point of consumption (Zhao, Cui, & Guo, 2022).

Engagement-related behaviors observed in the data reflect both transactional intentions and relational commitments that persist after the visit experience. Such outcomes underscore the importance of engagement as a strategic asset within experiential tourism systems. The analysis further reveals that emotional and cognitive engagement dimensions differentially influence behavioral outcomes, with emotional attachment exhibiting stronger effects on advocacy-oriented behaviors. Tourists who reported higher emotional resonance with destination narratives demonstrated greater propensity to share experiences digitally and recommend the destination to social networks. This finding aligns with research emphasizing that emotional bonds intensify brand love and deepen tourist–brand interaction, amplifying post-visit engagement behaviors (Majeed & Kim, 2024).

Cognitive engagement, while significant, appears more closely associated with informed revisit intentions and evaluative judgments. The differentiation between engagement dimensions highlights the need for nuanced branding strategies that address multiple psychological pathways. Quantitative results also indicate that experiential engagement enhances perceived destination value, which in turn reinforces satisfaction and loyalty-related outcomes. The SEM model shows significant indirect effects from experiential branding through engagement to satisfaction, supporting arguments that experiential

quality alone does not guarantee positive outcomes without active tourist involvement (Rahman et al., 2025).

Engagement acts as a value translation mechanism through which experiences are internalized and converted into favorable evaluations. This relationship becomes particularly salient in post-pandemic tourism contexts, where tourists demonstrate heightened sensitivity to meaningful and participatory experiences. Empirical confirmation of this mechanism strengthens the explanatory coherence of experiential tourism models. The role of digital and viral engagement emerges as a critical behavioral extension of experiential branding, with statistically significant paths linking engagement to online sharing and destination-related content creation. Tourists exhibiting higher engagement levels were more likely to engage in electronic word-of-mouth behaviors, amplifying destination visibility beyond traditional marketing channels. This finding corroborates empirical evidence that viral marketing and social media engagement function as endogenous outcomes of experiential branding rather than external promotional tools (Firdaus, Rusmiyatun, & Jatmiko, 2022; Gegung, 2025).

Digital engagement thus represents a behavioral manifestation of experiential attachment. The results reinforce the view that engagement-driven branding strategies yield multiplier effects through networked communication. Behavioral engagement is also shown to interact with destination image formation, reinforcing positive perceptions while mitigating experiential risks associated with overcrowding or commercialization. Respondents with higher engagement reported more favorable destination image evaluations, even in destinations facing tourism intensity pressures. This empirical pattern aligns with urban tourism research suggesting that meaningful engagement can reshape perceptions of contested or touristified spaces (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023).

Engagement functions as a perceptual filter that reinterprets environmental and social conditions through experiential meaning. Such findings extend destination image theory by embedding engagement as an interpretive mediator. The core mediation effects identified in this phase of analysis are summarized in Table 2, which presents the indirect relationships between experiential branding, tourist engagement, and behavioral outcomes. The table demonstrates that engagement significantly mediates the relationship between branding inputs and both loyalty-oriented and advocacy-oriented behaviors. These quantitative results confirm that engagement is not merely an outcome but a processual link within the destination branding system. The explanatory power of the mediation model further validates the robustness of the empirical framework.

Table 2. Mediation Effects of Tourist Engagement on Behavioral Outcomes

Pathway	Indirect Effect	p-value	Interpretation
Experiential Branding → Engagement → Revisit Intention	0.37	<0.001	Significant mediation
Experiential Branding → Engagement → Advocacy Behavior	0.42	<0.001	Strong mediation
Advocacy Behavior Engagement → Destination Satisfaction	0.51	<0.001	Positive effect
R ² Behavioral Outcomes	0.58	—	Substantial explanatory power

Interpretation of Table 2 indicates that tourist engagement carries a substantial proportion of the total effect of experiential branding on behavioral outcomes, confirming its central role in experiential tourism economics. The strength of mediation suggests that investments in experiential design yield optimal returns when translated into active engagement rather than isolated satisfaction metrics. This insight resonates with value co-creation theory, which emphasizes relational processes over linear consumption outcomes. Engagement-driven behaviors emerge as cumulative effects of experiential coherence and participatory opportunity structures. The model thus provides empirical support for engagement-centered destination management. The findings also reveal that engagement facilitates tourists' willingness to participate in destination governance-related activities, including feedback

provision and responsible behavior. Although measured indirectly, engagement indicators show significant associations with tourists' readiness to comply with sustainability guidelines and cultural norms. This observation aligns with studies highlighting the role of engagement in fostering responsible tourism behaviors and shared stewardship of destination resources (Fistola et al., 2019; Kasemsarn et al., 2025).

Engagement transforms tourists from consumers into situational stakeholders within destination systems. Such behavioral shifts carry implications for sustainable tourism management. Segment-level analysis further indicates that younger and digitally active tourists exhibit stronger engagement-behavior linkages, particularly in advocacy and co-creation behaviors. This pattern supports identity-driven and youth-oriented branding literature, which argues that younger tourists seek alignment between destination values, personal identity, and social expression (Sood, Sharma, & Tiwari, 2025).

Engagement for this segment operates as both experiential fulfillment and symbolic signaling. The empirical results suggest that destination branding strategies targeting these groups should prioritize participatory and narrative-rich experiences. Engagement intensity becomes a differentiating factor in behavioral outcomes. Overall, the second phase of findings confirms that tourist engagement functions as a central behavioral engine translating experiential destination branding into tangible economic and reputational value. The empirical evidence demonstrates that engagement mediates satisfaction, loyalty, advocacy, and participatory behaviors within experiential tourism contexts. These results reinforce theoretical perspectives that reposition engagement as a core construct in tourism management and marketing research. The integration of behavioral outcomes into the engagement framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how experiential branding yields sustained destination competitiveness.

Tourist Engagement, Sustainability, and Destination Governance in Experiential Tourism

The third set of findings demonstrates that tourist engagement extends beyond individual behavioral outcomes and increasingly shapes sustainability-oriented practices and destination governance dynamics. Empirical results indicate that higher levels of engagement are significantly associated with tourists' awareness of environmental, cultural, and social impacts, suggesting that engagement functions as a cognitive-normative mechanism within experiential tourism systems. Tourists who reported strong engagement exhibited greater sensitivity to destination carrying capacity, local authenticity, and responsible consumption practices. This pattern aligns with sustainability-oriented tourism research emphasizing the integration of experiential value creation with long-term destination resilience (Fistola et al., 2019; Kasemsarn et al., 2025).

Engagement thus emerges as a strategic lever linking branding objectives with sustainable destination management. Quantitative analysis further reveals that experiential branding indirectly contributes to sustainability perceptions through engagement-mediated pathways. SEM results show that experiential branding variables significantly predict engagement, which in turn influences tourists' support for sustainable tourism initiatives and regulatory compliance behaviors. This finding reinforces arguments that experiential narratives can embed sustainability meanings into destination brands, transforming abstract policy goals into lived visitor experiences (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023). Engagement-driven sustainability perceptions appear particularly salient in urban destinations facing tourism pressure and spatial transformation.

The data indicate that branding coherence moderates tourists' interpretation of sustainability challenges. The findings also suggest that engagement enhances tourists' willingness to participate in co-creation practices that support destination sustainability, including community-based activities and feedback mechanisms. Respondents with high engagement scores expressed stronger intentions to interact with local residents and respect cultural norms, indicating a relational shift from consumption to participation. This aligns with studies emphasizing that engagement fosters shared value creation between tourists and host communities (Zhao, Cui, & Guo, 2022). Engagement operates as a social bridge that reduces symbolic distance between visitors and destinations. Such relational dynamics are critical for sustainable experiential tourism development. Digital engagement channels emerge as influential in shaping sustainability-related awareness and governance perceptions. Empirical evidence shows that tourists engaged through digital storytelling and social media platforms report higher recognition of sustainability messages embedded in destination branding. This supports research

highlighting the role of digital media in diffusing responsible tourism narratives and shaping visitor expectations (Riaz et al., 2024; Gegung, 2025).

Digital engagement thus functions as an experiential extension that reinforces sustainability-oriented brand meanings. The findings indicate that governance communication benefits from integration with experiential branding strategies. The analysis also reveals that experiential engagement mitigates some negative externalities associated with touristification by reframing destination spaces through participatory meaning-making. Tourists with strong engagement perceived crowded or commodified areas as culturally vibrant rather than disruptive, reflecting a reinterpretation of urban tourism landscapes. This observation resonates with critical tourism scholarship that examines how experiential framing influences perceptions of spatial transformation (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023).

Engagement mediates the relationship between tourism intensity and perceived destination quality. Such mediation underscores the governance relevance of experiential branding. The sustainability-related structural relationships identified in the SEM analysis are summarized in Table 3,

which presents standardized effects linking tourist engagement to sustainability perceptions and governance-related behavioral intentions. As illustrated in the table, engagement exhibits a significant positive influence on responsible behavior intention and support for destination management policies. These empirical results confirm that engagement contributes to governance outcomes beyond market-based performance indicators. The table also reports satisfactory explanatory power for sustainability-related constructs.

Table 3. Effects of Tourist Engagement on Sustainability and Governance Outcomes

Relationship	Standardized Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation
Tourist Engagement → Sustainability Awareness	0.46	<0.001	Significant positive effect
Tourist Engagement → Responsible Behavior Intention	0.52	<0.001	Strong positive effect
Engagement → Support for Destination Policies	0.39	<0.01	Moderate positive effect
R ² Sustainability Outcomes	0.54	—	Substantial explanatory power

Interpretation of Table 3 indicates that tourist engagement plays a meaningful role in translating experiential branding into sustainability-oriented behaviors and governance support. The strength of these coefficients suggests that engagement-based strategies can complement regulatory approaches by fostering voluntary compliance and normative alignment. This insight aligns with sustainable tourism frameworks that emphasize soft governance mechanisms rooted in stakeholder participation (Fistola et al., 2019). Engagement-driven governance emerges as a relational alternative to purely instrumental policy tools. The empirical evidence strengthens the argument for engagement-centered sustainability models. Further discussion highlights that engagement-driven sustainability effects are particularly pronounced among culturally motivated and experiential-seeking tourists. Segment-level analysis shows that tourists motivated by learning, creativity, and authenticity exhibit stronger engagement-sustainability linkages. This finding supports literature emphasizing the role of experiential and cultural tourism in advancing sustainable urban development (Kasemsarn et al., 2025).

Engagement intensity appears contingent upon experiential depth rather than destination scale. Such variation reinforces the importance of targeted experiential branding strategies. The results also indicate that experiential engagement contributes to long-term destination resilience by reinforcing adaptive branding and governance capacities. Tourists who felt engaged demonstrated greater tolerance toward destination regulations and adaptive management measures, particularly in post-pandemic tourism contexts. This observation aligns with studies linking experiential marketing and destination image to adaptive visitor satisfaction and resilience outcomes (Rahman et al., 2025).

Engagement thus supports governance flexibility by aligning visitor expectations with destination constraints. The findings highlight engagement as a stabilizing factor in volatile tourism environments. The third phase of analysis confirms that tourist engagement functions as a connective mechanism linking experiential destination branding with sustainability and governance outcomes. Empirical evidence demonstrates that engagement shapes tourists' perceptions, behaviors, and normative orientations toward destination management. These findings extend engagement theory into the domain of sustainable tourism governance, highlighting its relevance beyond market performance. By empirically validating engagement as a governance-relevant construct, the study contributes to integrated models of experiential tourism, branding, and sustainable destination development.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that experiential destination branding constitutes a central strategic mechanism for fostering tourist engagement in contemporary tourism contexts characterized by heightened competition and experience orientation. Empirical evidence confirms that branding grounded in authenticity, immersion, and digitally mediated experiences significantly strengthens cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, which in turn functions as a critical mediator linking experiential inputs to satisfaction, loyalty, advocacy, and revisit intentions. Engagement emerges not as a secondary outcome but as a relational process through which tourists internalize destination meanings and translate experiential value into sustained behavioral commitments. The results further indicate that engagement-driven branding mitigates perceptual challenges associated with tourism intensity by reframing destinations as meaningful experiential spaces. Collectively, these insights advance the understanding of destination branding as an experiential system rather than a static identity construct.

Beyond market-oriented outcomes, the study also establishes tourist engagement as a governance-relevant construct with implications for sustainability and destination resilience. The empirical analysis reveals that engaged tourists exhibit stronger awareness of environmental and cultural impacts, greater support for destination policies, and higher willingness to engage in responsible and participatory behaviors. Engagement thus operates as a soft governance mechanism that complements formal regulatory approaches by fostering normative alignment between tourists and destination management objectives. These findings extend experiential tourism and engagement theories into the domains of sustainability and destination governance, offering an integrated perspective that connects branding, behavior, and long-term destination development. The study therefore contributes both theoretically and empirically to tourism management scholarship by positioning engagement at the intersection of experiential value creation, behavioral outcomes, and sustainable destination governance.

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