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Cultural Legacy Meets Scenic Splendour: Investigating Heritage Tourism Destination Selection in Kashmir

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Abstract

This investigation examines the impact of heritage tourism destination characteristics on the choice of Kashmir, particularly emphasizing the Srinagar district. The main goal was to identify and examine the essential characteristics influencing tourists' choices of destinations. A quantitative research approach was utilised to gather data from 384 respondents through a structured and reliable questionnaire. The study utilized convenience sampling, and advanced statistical methods such as Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modelling were applied for the analysis of the data. The results indicated that hospitality, heritage management, preservation efforts, and authenticity are the key factors affecting destination choice. Factors like local cuisine, cleanliness, security, and transportation significantly contribute to improving the overall experience for visitors. The study highlights the necessity for tourism stakeholders to find a balance between preserving cultural heritage and achieving high standards in infrastructure and services, thereby creating a seamless and memorable experience for visitors. The findings offer essential direction for decision-makers and industry professionals in establishing Kashmir as a premier heritage tourism destination.

Keywords: Heritage; destination selection; heritage management; Kashmir

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Introduction

Kashmir an all-season destination for tourists has a number of destination attributes to attract the tourists from all over the globe. The climate of different seasons of a year has its own peculiarities and uniqueness which act as a pull force for the tourists. The crucial elements of a destination encompass the attractions that entice tourists and cater to their needs upon arrival. Several scholars have provided definitions and categorizations for these aspects (Jansen-Verbeke, 1986; Mill & Morrison, 1992; Buhalis, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003;). According to Buhalis (2000), there are six essential elements that contribute to the overall composition of a destination: attractions, accessibility, facilities, available packages, activities, and supplemental services. A site that is deemed favourable possesses a limited number of fundamental characteristics, and its ability to attract tourists is contingent upon the calibre of these essential advantages it offers, namely accessibility, facilities, and attractions. The numerous facets of a destination exert significant influence on tourists at different stages of their travel experience. An individual's decision to choose a particular destination is significantly influenced by a positive perception of the destination, which is formed by various factors such as its natural beauty, shopping opportunities, cultural offerings, geographical characteristics, safety, and events (Chi & Qu, 2008; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Kim et al., 2012). The most crucial decisions made by tourism clients are selecting a destination, determining the feasibility of travel, planning activities, establishing the optimal time for travel, deciding on the duration of the trip, and setting a budget. Destination marketers are primarily concerned with understanding the decision-making process of tourism clients, with particular emphasis on the crucial decision of selecting a vacation destination. According to Nuraeni et al. (2015), individuals who are planning a vacation often begin by selecting a particular destination of interest. Subsequently, they engage in the process of identifying the type of experience they desire to have during their trip. Prior studies have highlighted the significance of the family unit in the decision-making process. Thornton et al. (1997) asserted that the planning of holidays and vacations is a collaborative endeavour involving the entire family, including the involvement and agreement of the children. According to the study, young adolescents exhibit greater cohesiveness in the process of making decisions within their families. Social media exerts a beneficial impact on the process of consumer decision making (Sema, 2013). Cem (2013) shared a similar perspective to Sema (2013) and proposed that internet reviews have an impact on the decision-making process of tourists.

A more comprehensive knowledge of the impact of marketing campaigns and destination characteristics on tourists' decision-making has emerged in the field of heritage and tourism research in the 2020s, marking a significant departure from previous decades' narrow emphasis on visitors' impressions and assessments of destinations. According to Ozer (2012) and Kamau et al. (2015), marketing strategies have a significant impact on tourist behavior. While scholars used to focus on perceptions and motivations, new research shows that a destination's marketing mix components are more important in determining which destinations people choose. In addition, recent research by Bronner & de Hoog (2020), Karl (2018), and Perpiña et al. (2020) supports the utilization of combined qualitative and quantitative methods, calling attention to their effectiveness in producing comprehensive and strong conclusions. Case studies of particular tourist destinations benefit greatly from such multi-dimensional approaches because they enable researchers to comprehend the interaction between different aspects of the destination and the corresponding perceptions of risk and attractiveness, thus overcoming fragmented or isolated

findings. Historical sites, traditional crafts, distinctive cultural practices, and beautiful landscapes are the main points of interest and actions taken by tourists in Kashmir, according to the existing literature on heritage tourism. The impact of historic tourism on regional socioeconomic development has been the subject of a great deal of prior research. Empirical studies conducted in developing regions such as Ethiopia also reveal that destination attractiveness, hospitality, and cost have a positive relationship with tourist satisfaction, while infrastructural quality, accessibility, and cleanliness negatively affect satisfaction levels (Haile, Abiew, & Abuhay, 2020). Despite the ever-changing dynamics of global tourism and the fierce competition in the industry, there is still a lack of consensus on which heritage destination features are most important for tourists when making decisions. Previous studies have paid little attention to the interaction between these characteristics, which include safety, cultural experiences, heritage site conservation, infrastructure quality, and accessibility. If Kashmir is serious about developing policies and strategies for historical tourism that are both effective and long-lasting, it must address this shortfall. In light of this, the current research intends to close this knowledge gap by cataloguing, analyzing, and rating the heritage destination attributes that have a significant impact on tourists' choices to visit Kashmir. This is to ensure that stakeholders, such as policymakers, heritage site managers, and tourism service providers, receive practical advice based on an evaluation of tourists' views of these heritage features and their impact on destination choice. This study hopes to provide practical insights for utilizing Kashmir's heritage assets to attract and keep a growing and diversified visitor base by taking an integrated and holistic approach. It also aspires to expand the theoretical understanding of heritage tourism destination dynamics. Thus, the study hopes to encourage the region's sustainable historical tourist growth while also making a substantial contribution to the literature.

Literature review

Conceptualizing heritage tourism

A crucial part of cultural tourism is heritage tourism, which is generally described as trips taken because of a place's artistic, scientific, historical, or cultural legacy (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). The scope includes both material (artifacts, monuments, and old towns) and immaterial (traditions, languages, and rituals). Culturally rich areas like Kashmir can greatly benefit from heritage tourism, according to Poria et al. (2003). This type of tourism goes beyond simply seeing historical monuments; it also involves experiencing a sense of identity and developing emotional connections. In terms of destination selection and tourist motivation, both internal motivators, or push factors, and external, or pull factors, such the characteristics of the destination, have a role in determining a traveller's final destination. Tourists seek out new experiences, new perspectives, and cultural enrichment, according to Crompton (1979). A destination's competitiveness—which encompasses its image, accessibility, and attractions—was highlighted by Buhalis (2000). Recent research emphasizes that tourists' perceptions of a destination's brand essence—encompassing both functional attributes and emotional experiences—significantly shape their overall satisfaction and loyalty toward that place (Ezeuduji & Mlambo, 2019).

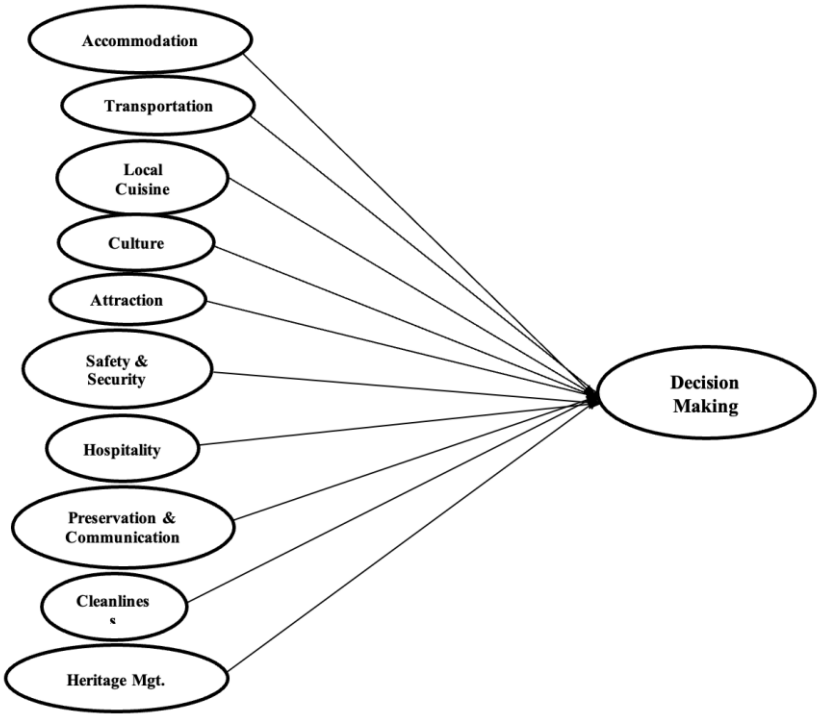

Figure 1: Conceptual model

According to McKercher & du Cros (2002), there should be a balance between being authentic and being accessible when it comes to heritage attractions. Tourists are drawn to these places because of its historical relevance as well as their entertainment value. Kashmir is a one-of-a-kind place where history and beauty meet notes that the area's cultural landscape is diverse and rich, featuring centuries-old customs, Mughal gardens, Buddhist and Islamic heritage sites, and local crafts like papier-mâché

art and Pashmina weaving. At the same time, it is a popular destination for picturesque tourists due to its beautiful natural scenery, which includes snow-capped mountains, meadows, and lakes. Research shows that Kashmir's reputation as a "paradise on earth" remains popular with local and international tourists, even if the region is politically unstable. Tourists' perceptions of accessibility and safety, however, have a substantial role in their destination decision. A growing number of people believe that heritage tourism may help towns regain pride and strength. Community participation in historical tourism planningguarantees authenticity and sustainability, as pointed out by Timothy & Nyaupane (2009). There has been some promising work in Kashmir towards more inclusive tourism development through programs like homestays and the promotion of indigenous crafts. Historical tourism in Kashmir has great potential, but there are obstacles including the changing seasons, a lack of infrastructure, and the misconception that the region is in conflict.Coordinated planning and marketing techniques are necessary for inner-city and heritage-based tourism, according to Jansen-Verbeke (1986). This necessitates training for local stakeholders, branding for heritage sites, and integrated heritage tourism planning in Kashmir.

Research methodology

This study employed a quantitative research methodology to investigate the heritage tourism destination characteristics that affect the choice of Kashmir, specifically concentrating on the Srinagar district as the area of analysis. A systematic research tool, created from insights gained from prior investigations, was employed for data gathering. The validity of the instrument was confirmed through rigorous reliability testing. The validity and consistency of the instrument were confirmed by rigorous reliability testing before the actual data gathering process began. In order to get a good cross-section of the region's tourists, we used convenience sampling to select 384 people to fill out our survey. The data was analysed using advanced statistical approaches to provide thorough and reliable insights. These techniques included Factor Analysis (FA) to determine the most important destination traits and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine the relationships among these variables. The rigorous methodology of this study aims to bolster Kashmir's allure as a heritage tourist destination while also contributing significantly to the literature on heritage tourism.

Results

The demographic analysis of the sample provides a rich portrait of the respondent profiles, shedding light on the characteristics of Kashmiri visitors and offering understanding into their preferences and habits when travelling. There are more men than women in the sample, with 59.6% of respondents falling into the male category and 40.4% into the female. It seems that more male tourists are interested in the region's history, judging by the gender discrepancy. By age group, the most numerous respondents are in the 44–56 age bracket (39.1% of the total), followed by the 31–43 age bracket (35% of the total), and finally, the 18–30 age bracket (25.2% of the total) is the youngest. The majority of visitors to Kashmir's historic sites are in their mid- to late-thirties and early-forties, as just 0.8% of respondents were 57 and up. While 24.9% of respondents were single, the marital status numbers show that 75.1% of respondents were married, which could mean that heritage tourism centered around families or couples is a big deal in the area. A large percentage of the tourists had advanced degrees; 54.8% had masters or doctoral degrees, 35.5% had bachelors, 9.3% had master's or doctorate, and only 0.5% had some other kind of degree. Higher education levels are associated with an interest in heritage tourism, as seen by this trend. A broad visitor profile is highlighted by the data in terms of occupation. Heritage tourism in Kashmir seems to draw a diverse crowd, including both working professionals and those looking for leisure or educational opportunities, since the largest group consists of private sector employees (44.2%) and the second largest, jobless people (24.4%). Of the whole sample, 19.3% work for the government, while 12.1% are self-employed. Tourists from all walks of life and all income brackets go to historic sites, according to these numbers. The bulk of respondents (66.3%) spent 7–14 days in Kashmir, suggesting that heritage tourists frequently choose reasonably long stays to see the region thoroughly. On the other hand, 10.5% chose for shorter stays of less than a week, and 23.1% remained for more than two weeks, indicating long-haul heritage travel. With 59.6% being first-time visitors, Kashmir's capacity to draw in new tourists is on full display. Another 34.7% had been twice, and 5.7% had been three times or more, indicating a growing number of dedicated heritage tourism aficionados. The significance of Kashmir's culture and history in making this place appealing is shown by the fact that 69.7 percent of respondents cited heritage as the most important element in assessing its attractiveness. This shows that the area is appealing for more than just its natural beauty; at 13.9%, it's the local people and culture; and at 4.6%, it's the food. Collectively, these demographic and behavioral statistics present a nuanced picture of heritage tourism in Kashmir, with significant consequences for future initiatives to better market the area, influence public policy, and guarantee the survival of its historical landmarks.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Researchers used Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to confirm the constructs and demonstrate the reliability and validity of the measurement properties after verifying the necessary assumptions of the Measurement Model (see Table 1). Not only was the Chi-square statistic used, but there were a number of other goodness-of-fit indices as well: the Incremental Fit Index (IFI), the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), the Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Dimensions such as X2 = 485.9, df = 417, CFI = 0.973, IFI = 0.973, GFI = 0.836, AGFI = 0.805, and RMSEA = 0.034 indicate that the data is consistent with the measurement model's fit for Destination Attributes. The validity and reliability of the Destination Attributes dimensions were also evaluated as part of the assessment process, following the guidelines laid out by Netemeyer et al. (2003). All of the developed model's measured constructs had Composite Reliability (CR) values more than 0.60, as recommended by Koufteros (1999), as shown in Table 1.

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Table 1: CFA results

Dimensions	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Accommodation	A5	.972	0.746	0.935
	A1	.967		
	A3	.841		
	A2	.785		
	A4	.726		
Transportation	T4	.922	0.734	0.932
	T2	.893		
	T5	.846		
	T3	.830		
	T1	.785		
Security and Safety	SS3	.901	0.746	0.921
	SS4	.887		
	SS2	.887		
	SS1	.774		
Local Cuisine	LC1	.872	0.720	0.911
	LC4	.874		
	LC3	.846		
	LC2	.800		
Cleanliness	C1	.888	0.707	0.906
	C2	.818		
	C3	.836		
	C4	.819		
Preservation Protection	PP2	.961	0.648	0.876
	PP4	.931		
	PP1	.677		
	PP3	.586		
Authenticity	AT2	.848	0.693	0.871
	AT3	.832		
	AT1	.817		
Preservation & Communication	PC2	.858	0.656	0.851
	PC1	.802		

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that according to Fornell & Larcker (1981), the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are always greater than the predetermined threshold of 0.50. The values derived from the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) indicate that the tested constructs exhibit favourable levels of reliability and convergent validity. Upon doing calculations for the square roots of AVE and correlations between constructs, it was observed that the AVE values surpassed the correlations between constructs, as indicated by Fornell & Larcker (1981). This outcome serves to validate the distinctiveness of the examined construct (Table 2). The measurement model is shown in Figure 1.

Table 2: Discriminant validity results

	CR	AVE	HM	A	T	SS	LC	C	PP	AT	PC	HP
HM	0.877	0.704	**0.839**									
A	0.935	0.746	0.107	**0.864**								
T	0.932	0.734	0.026	0.212	**0.857**							
SS	0.921	0.746	0.539	0.057	0.031	**0.864**						
LC	0.911	0.720	0.636	0.145	-0.030	0.466	**0.849**					
C	0.906	0.707	0.055	0.330	0.220	0.063	0.067	**0.841**				
PP	0.876	0.648	0.026	0.330	0.191	0.065	0.098	0.210	**0.805**			
AT	0.871	0.693	0.304	0.055	-0.011	0.377	0.294	0.044	0.038	**0.832**		
PC	0.851	0.656	0.297	0.120	0.002	0.393	0.250	0.031	0.065	0.182	**0.810**	
HP	0.857	0.668	0.268	0.160	-0.061	0.368	0.416	0.097	0.160	0.276	0.522	**0.817**

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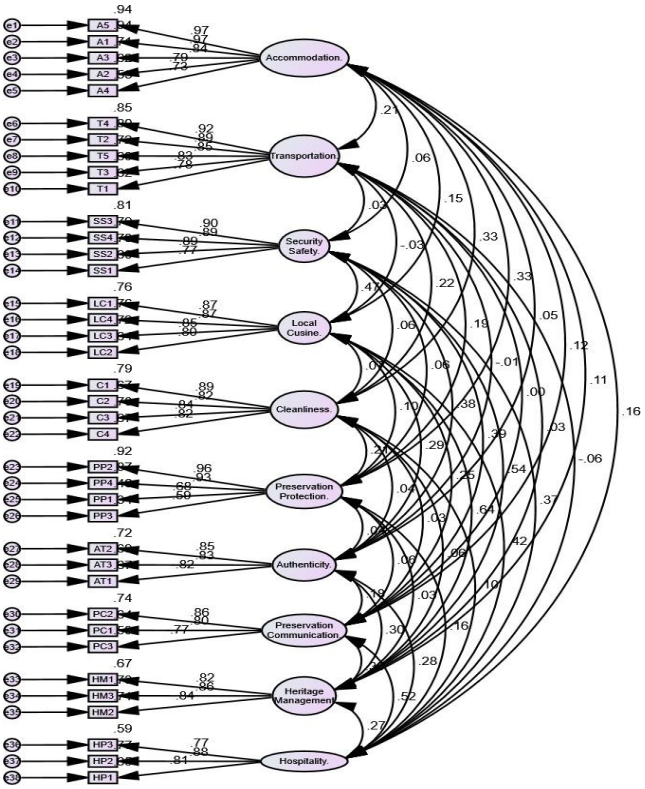

Figure 1: Measurement model

Hypotheses testing

The hypotheses testing results indicate strong support for the relationship between heritage destination attributes and destination selection, with an overall significant estimate of 0.785 (t = 18.56, p < 0.001). All sub-hypotheses were also supported, highlighting the specific attributes that significantly influence destination selection. Among these, hospitality had the highest impact (estimate = 0.473, t = 13.867, p < 0.001), emphasizing its critical role in shaping tourists' choices. Heritage management followed with a notable contribution (estimate = 0.437, t = 11.760, p < 0.001). Preservation and communication (estimate = 0.390, t = 9.965, p < 0.001), and preservation and protection (estimate = 0.384, t = 9.326, p < 0.001) were also significant, underscoring the importance of conserving and communicating the value of heritage sites. Authenticity (estimate = 0.341, t = 8.986, p < 0.001) and local cuisine (estimate = 0.330, t = 8.907, p < 0.001) emerged as key cultural factors influencing destination appeal. Security and safety (estimate = 0.312, t = 8.343, p < 0.001) and accommodation (estimate = 0.276, t = 7.652, p < 0.001) were highlighted as practical considerations, while cleanliness (estimate = 0.264, t = 6.043, p < 0.001) and transportation (estimate = 0.154, t = 2.065, p < 0.001) also contributed significantly. These findings provide a holistic understanding of the various heritage destination attributes and their pivotal roles in tourists' decision-making processes, offering valuable insights for stakeholders aiming to enhance Kashmir's appeal as a heritage tourism destination. The hypotheses results are summarized in Table 3, while the results of structural equation modelling and the path coefficient are shown in Figure 2 and 3.

Table 3: Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses			Estimate	t-value	P-Value	Results
H1	Heritage Destination Attributes	Destination Selection	0.785	18.56	***	Supported
H1a	Accommodation→	Destination Selection	0.276	7.652	***	Supported
H1b	Transportation→	Destination Selection	0.154	2.065	***	Supported
H1c	Security and Safety →	Destination Selection	0.312	8.343	***	Supported
H1d	Local Cuisine→	Destination Selection	0.330	8.907	***	Supported
H1e	Cleanliness→	Destination Selection	0.264	6.043	***	Supported
H1f	Preservation Protection→	Destination Selection	0.384	9.326	***	Supported
H1g	Authenticity→	Destination Selection	0.341	8.986	***	Supported
H1h	Preservation & Communication→	Destination Selection	0.390	9.965	***	Supported
H1i	Heritage Management→	Destination Selection	0.437	11.760	***	Supported
H1j	Hospitality→	Destination Selection	0.473	13.867	***	Supported

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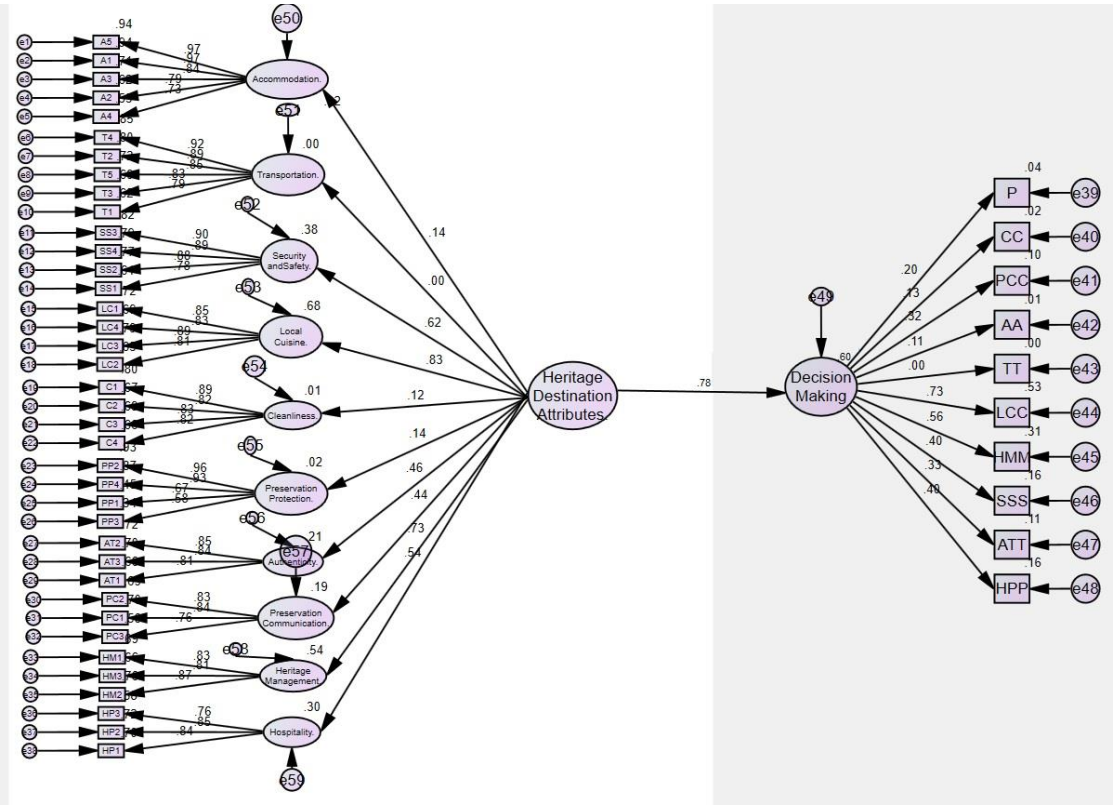

Figure 2: SEM results

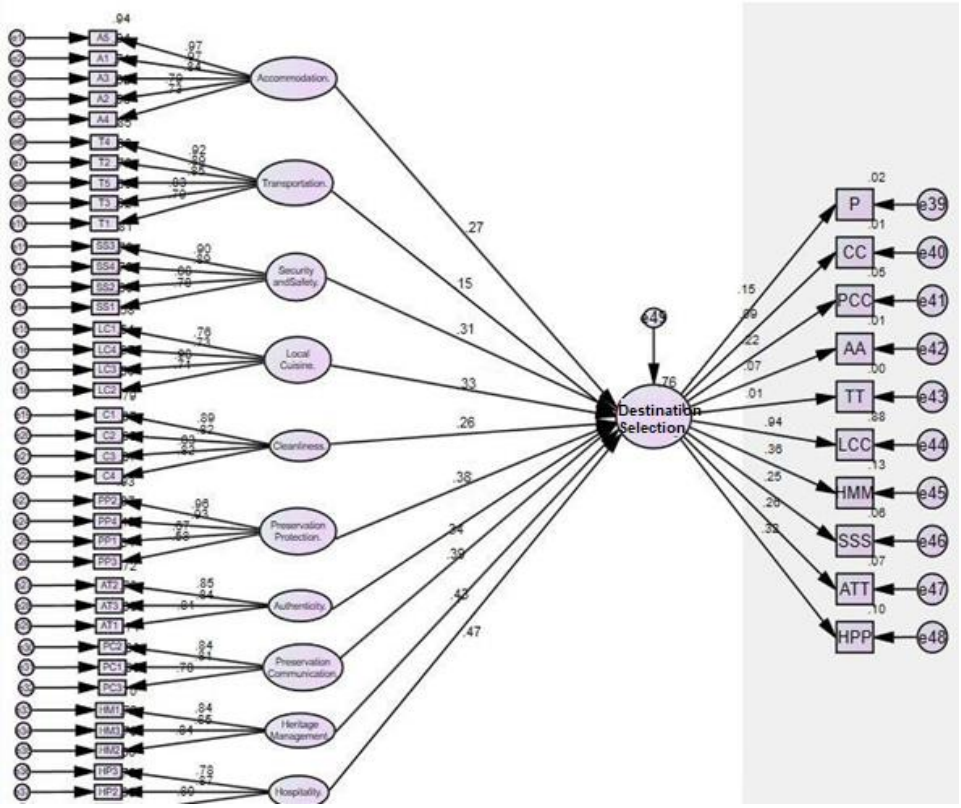

Figure 3: SEM results

Discussion and implications

This study's findings highlight the significance of historical tourism destination characteristics in determining which parts of Kashmir, particularly the Srinagar area, tourists choose to visit. The decision-making process of tourists is strongly and positively impacted by heritage-related attributes, as confirmed by the overall significant estimate (0.785, t = 18.56, p < 0.001).

These results highlight the fundamental principle of heritage tourism, which is that the heritage offerings of a place can greatly influence its attractiveness when they are well-managed, protected, and communicated. Out of all the criteria that were researched, hospitality stood out as the most important one (estimate = 0.473, t = 13.867, $p < 0.001$). This proves that the most important factor in tourists' decision-making process is the level of service they receive, as well as the friendliness and warmth they feel. Tourists are increasingly expecting cultural sites to be well-kept and managed in a way that protects heritage and allows for meaningful visitor experiences. This highlights the importance of heritage management (estimate = 0.437, t = 11.760, $p < 0.001$).Tourists appreciate heritage settings where conservation efforts are clearly visible and the importance of heritage is effectively communicated, as confirmed by the dimensions of preservation and communication (estimate = 0.390, t = 9.965, $p < 0.001$) and preservation and protection (estimate = 0.384, t = 9.326, $p < 0.001$). Interpretation and heritage education play a crucial role in influencing how visitors see and choose to engage with a site. Visitors are seeking authentic cultural experiences, such as traditional gastronomy, that strengthen their bond with the heritage site, and the results show that authenticity and local cuisine are vital attributes (estimate = 0.341, t = 8.986, $p < 0.001$ and estimate = 0.330, t = 8.907, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Accommodation (estimate = 0.276, t = 7.652, $p < 0.001$) and security and safety (estimate = 0.312, t = 8.343, $p < 0.001$) are practical issues that are crucial in creating the historical tourist experience as a whole. These findings suggest that a destination's allure can be greatly reduced if the infrastructure and safety needs of visitors are disregarded, regardless of how captivating the legacy or culture may be. Cleanliness (estimate = 0.264, t = 6.043, $p < 0.001$) and transportation (estimate = 0.154, t = 2.065, $p < 0.001$), two other aspects of the service, also played a significant but smaller role. It is clear that the destination's capacity to attract legacy visitors hinges on the smooth integration of heritage offers, service quality, and supporting infrastructure, as these results together indicate a multi-dimensional interaction between these factors.

Managerial implications

The findings have significant implications for destination planners, heritage site managers, and tourism stakeholders in Kashmir:

1. Prioritize Service Excellence: The essential nature of hospitality indicates that educating personnel and cultivating a service-oriented culture in hotels, restaurants, and heritage sites may significantly enhance tourist satisfaction and the overall appeal of Srinagar as a heritage destination.
2. Investment in Heritage Management: The significant role of heritage management, preservation, and protection necessitates a comprehensive policy for managing heritage sites. Government authorities and heritage conservation agencies must collaborate to preserve heritage assets, execute restoration initiatives, and protect their integrity, positioning heritage as a fundamental aspect of Srinagar's tourist attraction.
3. Enhance Preservation and Communication Initiatives: The crucial function of heritage interpretation suggests that efficient communication strategies—such as guided tours, multilingual interpretive resources, digital platforms, and visitor centers—can enrich tourist comprehension and involvement, rendering heritage more accessible and significant.
4. Emphasize Authenticity and Gastronomy: The allure of true heritage and regional food indicates that tourism planners ought to partner with local craftspeople, culinary specialists, and historical communities. Developing heritage walks, traditional festivals, and culinary trails can foster profound ties between visitors and the cultural heritage of the location.
5. Ensure Safety and Infrastructure: The results highlight the imperative for stringent safety protocols and high-quality lodging. Investing in tourist-oriented lodging, guaranteeing safety in popular destinations, and offering efficient transportation services can foster an atmosphere that promotes extended stays and return visits.
6. Integrate Environmental Management: The critical importance of cleanliness underscores the necessity for efficient waste management and environmental conservation strategies. Upholding a pristine and well-regulated urban and heritage site environment might enhance tourist satisfaction and cultivate a more favorable perception of Srinagar.
7. Formulate Sustainable Destination Strategies: The study indicates that the complex nature of historic destination selection necessitates an integrated approach by stakeholders. Policymakers must formulate plans that harmonize cultural protection with infrastructure and service enhancements to guarantee long-term viability and the expansion of heritage tourism in the region.

Conclusion

This study delves into the characteristics of heritage tourist spots that influence the selection of Kashmir as a vacation spot. The findings highlight the importance of a combination of cultural, experiential, and practical factors in shaping tourists' decision-making. There needs to be a unified approach to tourism planning that balances preservation with modern innovations because heritage management, hospitality, authenticity, and local cuisine all play a role in shaping visitor preferences. Those in charge and experts in the field who want to make Kashmir a top heritage tourist destination should pay close attention to these findings. This study's results have important theoretical ramifications for the fields of destination choice theory and heritage tourism. This study lends credence to and expands upon previous theoretical frameworks, such as the Push-Pull theory of tourist behaviour and the Destination Attribute Model, by demonstrating the strong and complex influence of historic destination qualities on visitors' decisions. Heritage tourism is supported as multi-dimensional phenomena by the results, which show that destination choice is not dominated by a single factor but rather comes from an interaction of cultural, infrastructural, and service-related characteristics. The importance of heritage interpretation theories is supported by the prominent role of heritage

management, preservation, and communication. Tourists need meaning and context, which aligns with theories of interpretative and experiential heritage tourism. Heritage tourism literature emphasizes the importance of hospitality, lodging, and safety, which supports theories of service quality and consumer behaviour. It suggests that a site's cultural essence and supporting infrastructure both influence tourist happiness. This study's findings, along with theories of heritage conservation and models of destination image and choice, provide an integrative picture that deepens our theoretical understanding of heritage tourism. Heritage significance, tourist perceptions, and service excellence are the three pillars upon which this sort of tourism is built, according to this theory. Future research on heritage tourism can build on this study's theoretical foundations by considering the intangible and tangible components of heritage simultaneously.

Although this study offers valuable insights, it is crucial to acknowledge that it has certain limitations. The results may not be applicable to a broader population because the study used a convenience sample method. In order to obtain a more accurate representation, future research may want to think about using a probabilistic sampling technique. Also, other parts of Kashmir may have had their features overlooked because this survey only included people from the Srinagar district. A more complete picture might emerge if the geographic scope was expanded to include more districts. Interviews with stakeholders or visitors are one example of a qualitative method that could supplement quantitative research on legacy tourism by shedding light on its dynamics. In the end, longitudinal research can study how external factors, such as socio-political stability, and changing visitor preferences impact the perceived importance of destination qualities over time.

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