

EXPLORING THE POWER OF DESTINATION BRAND EXPERIENCE: HOW TOURIST SATISFACTION DRIVES REVISIT INTENTIONS AT BUKIT LAWANG ECOTOURISM

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Abstract. *This study aims to examine the impact of destination brand experience on revisit intention through tourist satisfaction as an intervening variable. Using a quantitative associative approach, the study targeted tourists who had previously visited a specific destination. A sample of 180 respondents was selected through purposive sampling. Primary data was collected via a questionnaire, while secondary data was obtained through documentary research. Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the SmartPLS version 3.0 software. The findings reveal that destination brand experience positively and significantly influences tourist satisfaction, but has no significant effect on revisit intention. In contrast, tourist satisfaction was found to have a positive and significant effect on revisit intention. Furthermore, the study highlights that tourist satisfaction mediates the relationship between destination brand experience and revisit intention. These results offer practical implications for destination managers to focus on enhancing service quality and providing unique experiences that foster greater tourist satisfaction, which, in turn, increases the intention of repeat visits.*

Keywords: *Bukit Lawang Ecotourism, Destination Brand Experience, Revisit Intentions, Tourist Satisfaction.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, with its vast archipelago of over 17,000 islands, has become a prominent global tourism destination, drawing on its rich cultural and natural attractions. From Bali's pristine beaches to Java's historical landmarks and Sumatra's untouched jungles, the country provides a wide range of experiences that appeal to both international and local travelers. Aware of its enormous potential, the Indonesian government declared tourism a strategic sector for national growth in 2016, aiming to stimulate economic development and foster regional progress (BPS, 2023). This initiative involves improving tourism infrastructure, enhancing promotional efforts, and elevating the overall visitor experience.

Despite these efforts, the global Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the tourism sector, severely affecting Indonesia's economic and social landscape. Lockdowns and travel restrictions caused a dramatic decrease in tourist arrivals, including in North Sumatra, which boasts many eco-tourism sites. Data from the Central Statistics Agency indicates a staggering drop in foreign tourist visits to North Sumatra, with numbers falling by more than 80% from 2019 to 2020 (BPS, 2023). Although tourism activities have gradually resumed, challenges remain in returning the sector to pre-pandemic levels.

Langkat Regency in North Sumatra stands out as a center for eco-tourism, cultural heritage, and agricultural activities. One of its most notable attractions, Bukit Lawang, located in the Gunung Leuser National Park, is famous for its orangutan conservation efforts and lush tropical rainforest. Bukit Lawang offers an immersive eco-tourism experience, including jungle treks, wildlife observation, and tubing on the Bahorok River.

As a conservation area and eco-tourism destination, it plays a key role in promoting sustainable tourism in Indonesia.

However, Bukit Lawang is facing challenges in maintaining and growing its visitor numbers. Initial data shows a decline from 75,530 visitors in 2022 to 63,697 in 2023, a drop of 15.67% (Tabel 1). Monthly trends show consistent decreases, with certain months such as March and April experiencing reductions of more than 1,700 visitors compared to the previous year.

Table 1. Number of Visitors at Bukit Lawang Over the Last 2 Years

No	Month	2022	2023
1	January	2.891 visitors	3.420 Visitors
2	February	7.263 Visitors	7.213 Visitors
3	March	6.987 Visitors	5.233 Visitors
4	April	6.589 Visitors	4.256 Visitors
5	May	7.538 Visitors	5.320 Visitors
6	June	6.901 Visitors	6.252 Visitors
7	July	6.324 Visitors	6.325 Visitors
8	August	7.113 Visitors	6.088 Visitors
9	September	6.329 Visitors	5.820 Visitors
10	October	5.236 Visitors	6.023 Visitors
11	November	7.011 Visitors	4.720 Visitors
12	December	5.348 Visitors	3.027 Visitors
		75.530 Visitors	63.697 Visitors

(Source: Department of Tourism , processed by the researcher (2024))

The decline in visitor numbers at Bukit Lawang highlights critical issues in tourism management, including the need for better facilities, stronger environmental conservation efforts, and more effective promotional activities. Many visitors express dissatisfaction with the cleanliness, limited amenities, and lack of unique experiences, with survey results showing that 76.67% of respondents are not inclined to revisit Bukit Lawang (Table 2). These insights emphasize the urgent need for targeted improvements to increase visitor satisfaction and encourage repeat visits.

Table 2. Preliminary Survey
Revisit Intention Bukit Lawang

No	Revisit Intentions	Yes	No
1	I am willing to revisit Bukit Lawang in the future.	7	23
2	Bukit Lawang becomes the primary destination for tourists.	12	18

(Source: Preliminary Research , processed by the researcher (2024))

A deeper investigation reveals that three essential factors—destination brand experience, tourist satisfaction, and revisit intentions—play a significant role in shaping whether tourists will return. Destination brand experience refers to the subjective reactions of tourists, encompassing sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions as a result of their interaction with the attributes of a destination's brand. According to Lin et al. (2023), destination brand experience plays a critical role in establishing competitive differentiation and effective brand positioning within the tourism market. Their study highlights that the sensory and affective dimensions of brand experience significantly influence tourists' intentions to visit a destination. This underscores the importance of designing unique tourism experiences that are not only visually appealing but also evoke positive emotions.

Furthermore, destination brand experience helps categorize destinations based on their performance across the four dimensions of brand experience. This approach

provides a comprehensive understanding of each destination's competitive strengths. Consequently, a brand experience-based strategy allows for a more holistic evaluation of tourist perceptions, enabling destination marketers to emphasize unique attributes and foster tourists' desire to revisit. A compelling brand experience, which includes unique and memorable interactions with the destination, fosters emotional engagement and loyalty (Sahin et al., 2011). Additionally, tourist satisfaction, which reflects how well the actual experience meets or surpasses expectations, acts as a crucial factor that connects the destination brand experience to the intention to revisit (Guntoro & Hui, 2013).

While some research highlights the positive effect of satisfaction on revisit intentions (Evren et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018), other factors, such as destination accessibility, pricing strategies, and market competition, also influence these decisions (Zhang et al., 2021). Brand experience, although generally associated with higher satisfaction, may vary in its impact based on the tourists' demographic, cultural, and psychological characteristics.

This study aims to explore how destination brand experience and tourist satisfaction impact the intention to revisit Bukit Lawang. By focusing on this ecotourism destination, the research contributes to the understanding of both the challenges and opportunities faced by niche eco-tourism sites, with an emphasis on sustainable tourism practices. Additionally, it examines consumer behavior theory within eco-tourism, where emotional and experiential factors often play a more significant role than traditional service metrics.

The findings will provide practical insights for stakeholders—such as destination managers, policymakers, and local communities—on how to enhance the visitor experience and ensure the long-term success of Bukit Lawang and similar destinations. By focusing on strengthening the destination's brand, improving satisfaction, and creating lasting positive experiences, this study seeks to transform Bukit Lawang into a leading model for eco-tourism that attracts repeat visitors and supports conservation efforts.

The goals of this research include analyzing the influence of destination brand experience on revisit intentions, assessing the role of tourist satisfaction as a mediator, and proposing actionable strategies for improving the tourism experience at Bukit Lawang. These objectives align with Indonesia's broader post-pandemic tourism revitalization efforts, promoting sustainable practices, and utilizing the country's unique ecological and cultural assets to compete in the global tourism market.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Tourism Concept*

Tourism refers to the act of traveling to and exploring places beyond one's usual environment, driven by motives such as leisure, learning, or professional commitments. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) describes tourism as a multidimensional phenomenon involving social, cultural, and economic interactions, where individuals journey to destinations outside their daily surroundings for personal or occupational reasons. In Indonesia, Tourism Law No. 10 of 2009 defines tourism as a series of travel-related activities facilitated by services and infrastructure provided by communities, businesses, and governmental entities.

2.2 *Tourism Marketing*

Tourism marketing is essential in increasing the attractiveness of destinations, drawing visitors, and cultivating a recognizable brand identity. At its core, effective tourism marketing involves promoting products, enhancing visitor satisfaction, and nurturing lasting relationships with tourists. One prominent approach is digital marketing, which utilizes online platforms and social media to engage broader audiences and create interactive campaigns (Sigala, 2020). Collaborating with influencers has also become a vital strategy, as their platforms allow destinations to access niche markets

and amplify visibility through personal endorsements. Additionally, emphasizing local identity—such as unique cultural traditions, natural beauty, and historical landmarks—creates a distinct image for destinations. By showcasing these elements, destinations differentiate themselves, attracting travelers in search of authentic and meaningful experiences (Rustamova et al., 2021).

2.3 Revisit Intention

Revisit intention describes a traveler's inclination to return to a destination they have previously visited. Rooted in the theory of repurchase intention (Kotler & Keller, 2016), this concept is shaped by prior experiences and satisfaction levels. Memorable and positive experiences are pivotal in fostering revisit intentions, ultimately strengthening customer loyalty while reducing marketing costs (Mahdzar, 2018). Additionally, consistent delivery of quality experiences helps destinations maintain long-term relationships with visitors (Zhang et al., 2018).

2.4 Tourist Satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction emerges from the alignment between visitor expectations and their actual experiences at a destination. When experiences surpass expectations, tourists feel a heightened sense of satisfaction, which increases their likelihood of returning. Key factors influencing satisfaction include the quality of services provided, emotional resonance, price fairness, and the overall experience. High levels of satisfaction not only encourage repeat visits but also generate positive word-of-mouth, enhancing the destination's appeal and competitiveness in the tourism market (Sangadji & Sopiah, 2013). Moreover, satisfied tourists often act as informal promoters, sharing their positive experiences with others (Correia, 2013).

2.5 Destination Brand Experience

Destination brand experience refers to the subjective reactions of tourists triggered by their interaction with a destination's brand attributes. These reactions encompass sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions, shaping how tourists perceive and connect with the destination. In line with Brakus et al.'s (2009) conceptual framework, these dimensions include sensory elements like visual appeal and ambiance, affective aspects that elicit emotional responses, behavioral elements tied to activities, and intellectual stimulation from engaging and thought-provoking experiences.

Building on the study by Lin et al. (2023), destination brand experience plays a pivotal role in establishing competitive differentiation and effective brand positioning in the tourism market. Their findings highlight the significant influence of sensory and affective dimensions on tourists' intentions to visit, emphasizing the importance of designing unique and emotionally engaging experiences. For example, destinations that prioritize immersive visuals, captivating sounds, and emotional storytelling can leave lasting impressions on visitors, thereby enhancing satisfaction and loyalty.

Moreover, destinations can leverage brand experience insights to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses across the four dimensions. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of competitive advantages and facilitates targeted marketing strategies that emphasize unique attributes. By highlighting sensory appeal, emotional resonance, and engaging activities, destination marketers can foster stronger connections with tourists and encourage repeat visits. Ultimately, the integration of destination brand experience into tourism strategies ensures a more holistic evaluation of visitor perceptions, promoting the creation of distinctive and memorable offerings. Such an approach not only bolsters tourist satisfaction but also strengthens a destination's position in the competitive global tourism market.

Based on these considerations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Destination brand experience positively and significantly influences revisit intention.

H2: Destination brand experience positively and significantly influences tourist satisfaction.

H3: Tourist satisfaction positively and significantly influences revisit intention.

H4: Tourist satisfaction mediates the relationship between destination brand experience and revisit intention.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a quantitative survey approach, specifically utilizing an associative methodology. According to Sugiyono (2019), associative research aimed to examine the relationships between two or more variables. To measure the research variables, a Likert scale was used, where respondents rated statements or questions based on their attitudes, opinions, or perceptions. The Likert scale provided a structured way to gauge individual or group responses to various social phenomena.

The target population for this study consisted of tourists who had visited Bukit Lawang. A sample of 180 respondents was selected, all of whom had visited the location at least once. Primary data collection, gathered directly from participants, formed the basis of this research to address the formulated research questions. The primary data collection method utilized was questionnaires. To analyze the data, both descriptive analysis and path analysis through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) were employed. SmartPLS version 3 was used to process the data and conduct the necessary analyses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This Table 3 provides an overview of the measurement model results, including the loading factors, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct in the study. This comprehensive evaluation offers insights into the validity and reliability of the constructs related to, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Measurement Model Results

Constructs Items	Loading factors	CR	AVE
Destination Brand Experience		0.940	0,602
The destination leaves a strong sensory impression.	0,737		
The natural scenery is attractive.	0,865		
The sensory experience is enjoyable.	0,839		
The destination evokes positive feelings.	0,785		
The destination provides an emotional experience.	0,729		
Tourists engage in physical activities.	0,742		
There is direct interaction with nature.	0,716		
The destination motivates nature protection.	0,721		
The destination encourages environmental thinking.	0,738		
The destination sparks curiosity about wildlife.	0,785		
The destination promotes environmental awareness.	0,844		
The destination encourages analytical thinking about nature.	0,792		
Tourist Satisfaction		0.919	0,579
The natural beauty of the destination.	0,782		
The supporting facilities.	0,734		
The new experience provided by the destination.	0,766		
The quality of the guide services.	0,742		

The affordability of the price.	0,793		
The alignment with expectations.	0,720		
The local wisdom observed.	0,733		
The cleanliness of the environment.	0,786		
The safety of the visit.	0,729		
Revisit Intentions		0.874	0,614
The Intention to revisit the destination	0,827		
The Enthusiasm to return to the destination	0,789		
The destination as a primary choice.	0,836		
The likelihood of recommending the destination to others.	0,731		
The active search for updated information the destination.	0,775		
The interest in observing the beauty of the destination.	0,737		

Table 3 presents the measurement model results for the four constructs: Destination Brand Experience, Tourist Satisfaction, and Revisit Intention. These constructs are evaluated based on their respective indicators, with particular attention to the loading factors, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

The results indicate that all indicator loading factors exceed the minimum threshold of 0.5, as recommended by Ghazali & Latan (2020). This is essential for ensuring convergent validity. For instance, the Destination Brand Experience construct has loading factors ranging from 0.716 to 0.865, with indicators such as the destination leaving a strong sensory impression and sparking curiosity about wildlife showing high factor loadings. Tourist Satisfaction indicators range from 0.720 to 0.793, demonstrating adequate representation of satisfaction based on factors like the quality of guide services and affordability of prices. Revisit Intention indicators, such as intention to revisit and enthusiasm to return, exhibit loading factors between 0.731 and 0.836, further validating the reliability of the construct.

The composite reliability (CR) for all constructs exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.7, confirming their internal consistency. Destination Brand Experience achieved a CR of 0.940, Tourist Satisfaction scored 0.919, and Revisit Intention reached 0.874. These values affirm the reliability of the constructs, aligning with the guidelines set by Ghazali and Latan (2020). Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs is greater than the critical value of 0.5, as suggested by Ghazali & Latan (2020), indicating strong convergent validity. The AVE values are as follows: Destination Brand Experience (0.602), Tourist Satisfaction (0.579), and Revisit Intention (0.614), reflecting the constructs' ability to capture variance effectively. In conclusion, the results confirm that all constructs meet the necessary criteria for loading factors, composite reliability, and AVE. This demonstrates the robustness and reliability of the measurement model, laying a solid foundation for the structural analysis that follows.

The predictive power of the constructs examined in this study is illustrated through the R-square values for Tourists Satisfaction and Revisit Intentions. These values provide insights into the extent to which the independent variables explain the variance in each dependent variable. The R-square values are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Predictive power	
Construct	R-square
Tourists Satisfaction	0,689
Revisit Intentions	0,578

Table 4 presents the R-square values for Tourist Satisfaction and Revisit Intentions, indicating the proportion of variance in these constructs explained by the independent variables in the model. The R-square value for Tourist Satisfaction is 0.689, meaning that approximately 68.9% of the variance in this construct can be explained by the model, reflecting a strong predictive ability. According to Hair et al. (2010), an R-square value above 0.5 is considered good, and this value falls within that range, suggesting a solid level of explanatory power.

For Revisit Intentions, the R-square value is 0.578, signifying that 57.8% of the variance in this construct is explained by the independent variables. This value is also considered good, exceeding the threshold of 0.5 for adequate explanatory power. In conclusion, the R-square values indicate that the model possesses good predictive power, with the independent variables effectively accounting for the variations in both Tourist Satisfaction and Revisit Intentions.

Table 5. Path Coefficients (Direct and Indirect Effect)

Path	Effect Type	β	M	SD	t-stats	Sig	Decision
Destination Brand Experience -> Tourists Satisfaction	Direct	0,830	0,830	0,029	28,634	0,000	Accepted
Destination Brand Experience -> Revisit Intentions	Direct	0,027	0,021	0,115	0,231	0,817	Rejected
Tourists Satisfaction -> Revisit Intentions	Direct	0,738	0,744	0,105	6,996	0,000	Accepted
Destination Brand Experience → Tourists Satisfaction → Revisit Intentions	Indirect	0,612	0,619	0,097	6,312	0,000	Accepted

Table 5 outlines the path coefficients for both direct and indirect effects within the structural model, shedding light on the dynamics among destination brand experience, tourists, satisfaction, and revisit intentions.

The direct effect of destination brand experience on tourist's satisfaction is notably strong and significant, with a path coefficient (β) of 0.830, a t-statistic of 28.634, and a p-value of 0.000. These results underscore that a positive destination brand experience greatly enhances tourists' satisfaction. Conversely, the direct effect of Destination Brand Experience on Revisit Intentions is insignificant, as evidenced by a β of 0.027, a t-statistic of 0.231, and a p-value of 0.817, indicating that destination brand experience alone does not directly influence tourists' intentions to revisit. The direct relationship between Tourists' Satisfaction and Revisit Intentions is highly significant, with a path coefficient (β) of 0.738, a t-statistic of 6.996, and a p-value of 0.000. This demonstrates that higher levels of satisfaction among tourists significantly drive their intentions to revisit.

Regarding indirect effects, the mediating role of Tourists' Satisfaction is evident in the relationship between Destination Brand Experience and Revisit Intentions. The indirect effect shows a path coefficient (β) of 0.612, a t-statistic of 6.312, and a p-value of 0.000, confirming that tourists' satisfaction serves as a critical pathway through which destination brand experience influences revisit intentions.

In summary, these findings highlight the pivotal role of tourists' satisfaction as both a direct influencer of revisit intentions and a mediator between destination brand experience and revisit intentions. While destination brand experience strongly impacts tourists' satisfaction, its effect on revisit intentions is fully mediated by the latter, emphasizing the importance of creating satisfying brand experiences to foster long-term loyalty among tourists. The study reveals that destination brand experience plays a pivotal role in influencing tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions, consistent with the findings of Lin et al. (2023). Bukit Lawang's unique attributes, such as its lush tropical rainforest, orangutan conservation efforts, and interactive nature-based activities, provide an opportunity to foster meaningful and memorable experiences. The sensory, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of brand experience have been highlighted as particularly significant in creating lasting impressions on tourists, as supported by Brakus et al. (2009) and Sahin et al. (2011). For instance, the visual appeal of the natural scenery and the emotional connection formed through direct interactions with wildlife contribute positively to visitor perceptions and loyalty.

However, despite the richness of its eco-tourism offerings, Bukit Lawang is struggling with a declining number of visitors, as evidenced by the 15.67% drop in tourist arrivals from 2022 to 2023. Monthly trends show consistent decreases, with significant declines in key months such as March and April. This suggests an urgent need to address gaps in service delivery, infrastructure, and promotional efforts. Sigala (2020) highlights that digital marketing and the integration of influencers can significantly boost destination visibility and engagement, yet Bukit Lawang appears to underutilize these tools. The study also confirms the mediating role of tourist satisfaction in the relationship between destination brand experience and revisit intentions. Satisfaction stems from the alignment of visitor expectations with the actual experience (Sangadji & Sopiah, 2013), making it a crucial determinant of loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. Factors such as the destination's cleanliness, affordability, and safety were found to significantly influence satisfaction levels. However, preliminary survey results show that 76.67% of visitors are unlikely to return, citing dissatisfaction with limited facilities, inadequate cleanliness, and the lack of distinct experiences. These findings align with Mahdzar (2018) and Correia (2013), who emphasize that dissatisfaction reduces repeat visits and undermines long-term loyalty.

The study's R-square values further support the importance of satisfaction and brand experience. Tourist satisfaction explains 68.9% of the variance, while revisit intentions account for 57.8%. These findings underscore the significance of enhancing satisfaction to ensure higher revisit rates. Research by Zhang et al. (2018) highlights that high levels of satisfaction encourage repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth, which is essential for destinations like Bukit Lawang that rely heavily on eco-tourism's experiential appeal. Moreover, the study highlights the role of environmental awareness and sustainability as integral components of the destination brand experience. Promoting responsible tourism and educating visitors on conservation efforts can add a unique dimension to the experience, fostering emotional engagement and loyalty. As suggested by Rustamova et al. (2021), incorporating local identity and cultural heritage into the destination's offerings enhances its distinctiveness, which is particularly important in a competitive global market.

Finally, the challenges faced by Bukit Lawang reflect broader issues in the eco-tourism sector, especially in regions recovering from the pandemic's impact. Zhang et al. (2021) note that accessibility, pricing strategies, and infrastructure are critical factors in post-pandemic tourism recovery. Bukit Lawang must address these aspects to attract

and retain visitors while promoting sustainable practices. For example, improving waste management systems and ensuring eco-friendly accommodations can resonate with environmentally conscious travelers, as noted by Evren et al. (2020).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrate that destination brand experience significantly influences tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions at Bukit Lawang, emphasizing the critical role of sensory, emotional, and intellectual engagement in shaping visitor perceptions. Tourist satisfaction acts as a key mediating factor, indicating that aligning visitor expectations with the actual experience enhances loyalty and encourages repeat visits. Despite its potential as a premier eco-tourism destination, Bukit Lawang faces challenges such as declining visitor numbers, inadequate facilities, and dissatisfaction with cleanliness and amenities. Addressing these issues requires a strategic focus on improving service quality, infrastructure, and promotional efforts while emphasizing sustainability and conservation. By leveraging its unique attributes and fostering meaningful tourist experiences, Bukit Lawang has the potential to establish itself as a leading eco-tourism destination, contributing to both local economic growth and environmental preservation.

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