

From Visitor Growth to Destination Retention: A Satisfaction-Led Strategy for Post-Pandemic Heritage Tourism in Penang

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ABSTRACT

The post-pandemic recovery of global tourism has exposed structural weaknesses in destination strategies that prioritise visitor arrivals over retention and long-term competitiveness. While many destinations have rapidly regained pre-COVID visitation volumes, evidence increasingly demonstrates that arrival-driven growth alone is insufficient to ensure destination resilience, particularly for heritage destinations facing rising competition, experience commodification, and heightened visitor expectations. This study advances a satisfaction-led strategic perspective by examining revisit intention as a critical indicator of destination retention and post-pandemic sustainability. Drawing on the integration of Destination Image Theory and Expectation-Confirmation Theory, the article synthesises empirical evidence from a quantitative study of tourists in Penang, Malaysia, a UNESCO World Heritage destination, to demonstrate the central role of tourist satisfaction in translating destination experiences into revisit intention. The findings reveal that core experience attributes gastronomy, cultural heritage, service quality, and destination image exert their influence on revisit intention primarily through tourist satisfaction, with direct effects largely attenuated in the post-pandemic context. This indirect-only mediating role of satisfaction underscores the strategic necessity of managing destinations as integrated experience systems rather than as collections of isolated attributes. Building on these insights, the article proposes a Satisfaction-Led Destination Retention Strategy that reframes destination management priorities from promotional intensity to expectation alignment, experience integration, and satisfaction assurance. The study contributes to tourism strategy and policy literature by linking theory, empirical evidence, and governance implications, offering actionable guidance for destination management organisations and policymakers seeking to enhance resilience, loyalty, and long-term competitiveness in heritage tourism destinations.

Keywords: Tourist satisfaction; Revisit intention; Destination retention; post-pandemic tourism; Heritage tourism; Destination strategy; Penang

INTRODUCTION

The Post-Pandemic Strategic Shift in Tourism

Global Tourism Recovery and the Limits of Arrival-Driven Growth

The global tourism sector has gone through a complicated phase of recovery since the COVID-19 crisis has thrown the sector in an unprecedented turmoil. As international arrivals have mostly recovered to pre-pandemic levels by 2024, the pattern of tourism recovery has demonstrated structural weaknesses to long-established growth models, where visitor numbers are the main measure of success (UN Tourism, 2025; WTTC, 2024a). Before the pandemic, destination competitiveness was often determined based on arrival figures, occupancy figures, and tourism receipts, which supported a paradigm of volume-based competition that equated growth to sustainability. Nevertheless, the pandemic demonstrated how vulnerable this model is, as destinations that were largely reliant on large tourist flows suffered significant economic crises, labour loss, and excessive governance in cases where mobility suddenly became impossible (Statista, 2023; GlobalTourismForum, 2022). The post-pandemic recovery has thus rekindled scholarly and policy discussions around the viability of arrival-based

tourism expansion in an environment that is increasingly risk sensitive, ecological limited and experiencing growing inter-destination competition.

The recent world tourism statistics paint a contrary recovery picture. Although the demand of international travel has been booming because of the accumulated travel desire and the removal of travel restrictions, the recovery has not moved evenly to destination resilience (Genius, 2025; Revill, 2025). In Europe and Asia, destinations have recorded high visitor numbers with a mounting cost of operations, infrastructure overcrowding and dissatisfaction by locals, indicating that a numbers recovery would not be reflected by an equal numbers recovery in terms of standards and the stable environment (WTTC, 2024b). Furthermore, the introduction of the mass tourism revival has added to the issues associated with carbon emissions, overtourism, and ecological erosion, especially in the heritage and island destinations, the carrying capacity of which is predetermined (Kanwal et al., 2024; Herrero et al., 2022). These changes highlight the increasing incompatibility of the growth based on arrivals with the wider sustainability requirements that are defining the nature of governance of tourism in the post-pandemic era.

In this regard, tourism theorists have come to a greater consensus that the search of increased arrival goals in itself is a myopically oriented strategy, which fails to consider long-term destination sustainability (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). The growth based on arrivals is likely to increase marketing spending, strain more resources, and pressure on services without ensuring that there is commensurate increase in the tourist loyalty or economic retention. The empirical data indicates that destinations that depend on a continuous inflow of first-time visitors experience decreasing returns because the cost of acquisition increases whereas the repeat visitation as a more predictable and cost-effective source of demand is not developed (Nguyen Huu et al., 2024; Baker and Crompton, 2000). With the post-pandemic context where travellers are increasingly demanding better things in terms of safety, reliability of services and experiential value, the use of arrivals as a single indicator of performance is likely to conceal the more profound areas of experiential shortcomings that result in reduced competitiveness in the long term.

Arrival centric tourism growth is especially limited in the heritage destinations. The cultural symbolism, historical authenticity, or experience meaning of heritage tourism sites make them attractive tourist destinations, but they are very sensitive to overcrowding, commodification, or lack of service consistency (Bitušíková, 2021; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Increased numbers of visitors may also cause heritage authenticity to fade and lead to low satisfaction and reduced emotional connection of tourists (Zhou et al., 2022a; Bonacchi, 2022). Post-pandemic tourists, who are becoming more conscious of meaning, safe and value-aligned experiences, are less forgiving of crammed spaces and disjointed services delivery, and volume-based strategies are more dangerous to heritage destinations (Dorokhov et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023).

The policy responses to tourism recovery across the world have started to recognize these constraints though unevenly. Although the international organizations, like UN Tourism, propose the sustainability-related recovery, the national and sub-national tourism plans still insist on the arrival growth rates as the ultimate success indicators (Statista, 2024a; Bhutia, 2025). This incongruency is a reflection of a chronic dissonance between a rhetorical dedication to sustainable tourism and pragmatic metrics that put an emphasis on quantity rather than quality. It is stated that without re-setting performance metrics to prioritise experiential returns and behavioural loyalty, post-pandemic tourism recovery is likely to reinforce the pre-pandemic vulnerabilities based on new circumstances of uncertainty (Herrero et al., 2022; Gretzel, 2022).

This tension could be demonstrated through the Malaysian tourism sector. The policy frameworks of national tourism emphasize the impressive arrival goals as indicators of the recovery effectiveness, as tourism emerges as an important source of GDP and jobs (Tourism Malaysia, 2024; Statista, 2025). Although these targets are economically important, they provide little information regarding the sustainability of tourist demand or also the ability of the destination to keep the tourists. It has been empirically shown that the high volumes of arrivals do not necessarily lead to repeat visitation, especially when there is a disparity in the service quality, experiential coherence, and satisfaction outcomes between destinations (Yeong et al., 2022; Amissah et al., 2022). With the increasing competition in the Southeast Asian region, destinations that only depend on the inflow growth may lose their repeat tourists to other destinations that offer a steadier flow of experience and satisfaction.

As a flagship destination in terms of tourism in Malaysia, Penang is an example of the prospects and limitations of the arrival-based recovery. The statistics of tourist numbers, hotel occupancy, and meetings during post-pandemic periods show that the recovery has a strong momentum, according to the statistics (TheMalaysianReserve, 2023; Bernama, 2024; Mutiara, 2024). The George Town Festival and continued influx in the number of international visitors have entrenched the image of Penang as a heritage and food-themed center. But parallel accounts point to increased congestion, pressure on services, and disproportionate quality throughout tourism touchpoints, and the question arises of whether an increase in arrivals is being accompanied by an increase in visitor satisfaction and loyalty (PenangToday, 2024; Khalid and Kumarran, 2023). These tensions would imply that Penang continues to recover but not sustainably in case the strategic focus is still based largely on acquisition metrics.

It is against this background that the concept of a strategic turn toward retention-focused performance models based on the revisit intention as a fundamental marker of the destination resilience is increasingly supported by tourism scholars (Hamid et al., 2021; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). Revisit intention is more than just the evaluative judgments of the past experience by the tourists, but it also indicates whether or not they want to reinvest their time, resources, and trust in a destination. Repeat visitation in comparison with the first-time visitation is linked with reduced marketing expenditure, increased spending effectiveness and tolerance to contextual variation, which makes it a more predictable basis of post-pandemic tourism recovery (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Baker and Crompton, 2000). Arrival driven growth thus has led to an increasing rebalancing of focus on behavioural loyalty as a strategic focus in the planning and policy discussion of tourism.

Revisit Intention as a Strategic Indicator of Destination Resilience

Revisit intention has become a strategically better measure of destination resilience than conventional arrival-based measures in the post-pandemic tourism setting. In contrast to first-time visitation that is usually motivated by novelty, promotional exposure or price incentives, revisit intention represents a more evaluative process based on tourists' cumulative experiences, satisfaction assessments and emotional attachment to a destination (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Baker and Crompton, 2000). In this sense, revisit intention functions not only as a behavioural outcome but also as a marker of experiential success and governance effectiveness.

Economically, repeat visitors are more efficient in tourism market. Empirical studies have continually shown that it takes significantly less marketing resources to retain than it does to attract new tourists, and that repeat customers tend to spend more on each trip, stay longer, and show greater inclination to take part in destination-specific events (Nguyen Huu et al., 2024; Amissah et al., 2022). Besides, repeat tourists are less sensitive to prices and more immune to external shocks, including the economic change or even geopolitical risk, since their travel choices are based on their previous positive experience rather than a speculative one. Under the circumstances of post-pandemic, when tourism operators must confront the increased cost of its operations and the limited budgets of the population, the focus on repeat visitation will be a financially sound solution.

Other than economic efficiency, revisit intention is also used as an indicator of destination credibility and trust. By stating their intention to revisit, tourists implicitly state that the destination has fulfilled its promises, lived up to or surpassed its expectations, and offered a degree of experiential reliability warranting the commitment in the future (Expectation-Confirmation Theory; Shukla et al., 2024). This is especially relevant in the situation of post-pandemic traveling, where perceived risk in terms of health, safety, and service quality is still high. Research shows that tourists are starting to prefer places they see as reliable and controlled over other possible destinations that are more novel or less expensive (Dorokhov et al., 2023; Abdou et al., 2022). As a result, revisit intention embodies aspects of trust and certainty that the arrival statistics cannot bring out.

Visit intention in the context of heritage tourism has even more strategic importance. Heritage destinations are strongly dependent on experience, cultural authenticity, and emotional appeal of practicality (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Bitušikova, 2021). When the tourists decide to repeat the visit to a heritage destination, they not only indicate satisfaction with physical services, but also prolonged attachment to the cultural story and image of the destination. This loyalty of behaviour is critical to protecting heritage value, since destinations that rely on first-time visitors may wind up commodifying heritage assets to enable maintaining the novelty effect and, in the

process, lose authenticity as time goes by (Zhou et al., 2022a; Yabanci, 2022). Revisit-oriented strategies, in their turn, reward preservation, quality improvement, and continuity of experience.

The strategic importance of revisit intention is also supported by the fact that it meets the sustainability goals. The presence of large masses of first-time visitors is likely to increase the impact on the environment, congestion, and carbon emissions especially in destinations with limited carrying capacity (Kanwal et al., 2024; Herrero et al., 2022). Repeat visitors, in their turn, are more prone to sharing their activities both spatially and temporally, slower forms of tourism, and are more environmentally conscious because, through experience, they are more familiar with the local contexts (Aziz et al., 2022). In this regard, the promotion of revisit intention is indirectly related to environmental sustainability in that it helps moderate the intensity of demand and promotes responsible tourist behaviour.

As a destination management aspect, revisit intention has a diagnostic value. Although arrival numbers tell us how many tourists visit any destination, they can only tell us little about whether tourists will be satisfied or not and whether they will be coming back. Revisit intention, in turn, is closely related to experiential evaluations, and destination managers can determine the weaknesses in service provision, experience integration, and expectations management (Rosli et al., 2023; Phi et al., 2022). This diagnostics role is particularly useful when the rapid transformation of service systems was observed as a consequence of a lack of labour, digitalisation and modified visitor expectations in the post-pandemic background (Deputat et al., 2024; Gretzel, 2022).

The centrality of revisit intention as a measure of destination resilience in various tourism environments is supported by empirical evidence. Research in UNESCO World Heritage Sites, resort tourism and urban tourism settings always reveals that satisfaction-based revisit intention is a more reliable indicator of long-term destination loyalty than immediate behavioural reactions like word-of-mouth or social media interaction (Hamid et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). Notably, it is also noted in these studies that positive destination attributes do not result in revisit intention unless the attributes are transformed into holistic customer experiences. This supports the argument that revisit intention is not only about destination appeal, but destination performance.

Revisit intention has become an important distinguishing factor between similar destination products in Southeast Asia where competition in tourism has increased upon the introduction of international travel. While comparing destinations like Bali, Penang, and Phuket, it is revealed that these three destinations are competing on common market segments that pursue cultural, culinary, and leisure tourism and products (BYT, 2025). In this setting, maintaining competitiveness does not lie in the ability to attract first-time visitors, most of whom might be price or proximity motivated, but rather in the ability to retain those who are loyal by maintaining consistency in satisfaction and the coherence of the experience. The destinations which do not achieve repeat visitation stand to lose market share to other competitors who can provide more credible and more integrated experiences.

This is a strategic reality in the tourism direction of Penang. Although data about the post-pandemic growth in arrivals, overnight stays, and hotel occupancy are encouraging, they cannot be used to assess whether the visitors find Penang as a destination worth returning to (Mutiarra, 2024; PenangToday, 2024). Since Penang is a heritage city with good gastronomic attraction, revisit intention will be a more relevant measure of the destination promise of experience realization. The literature based on the Malaysian heritage and resort settings indicates that satisfaction-mediated revisit intention is a better predictor of destination sustainability compared to short-term growth in visitation (Yeong et al., 2022; Rosli et al., 2023).

Besides, revisit intention is akin to new smart tourism and digital governance arrangements. Research and development in the field of data analytics, digital feedback platforms, and destination intelligence platforms make DMOs aware of satisfaction trends and revisit propensity in near real time (Gretzel, 2022; Alyasiri et al., 2024). This enables the destination managers to stop looking back at retrospective arrival statistics to look forward at experience management. In this respect, revisit intention is not only an outcome variable, but also a governance tool to inform adaptive policy reaction in changing tourism settings.

Policy and Management Blind Spots in Post-Pandemic Destinations

Although many people are now aware of the fact that due to the post-pandemic tourism environment, models of their growth should be more resilient and more sustainable, tourism policy and destination management practices are still embedded in the pre-pandemic logic according to which the volumes of arrival are more important than the results of the experience. A major blind spot has always been to continue to rely on tourist arrivals and hotel occupancy rates and headline visitor statistics as the leading indicators of recovery success. Although these indicators are politically attractive and easy to communicate, they provide a very little information on the evaluative judgement and satisfaction levels of tourists and intentions to change their behaviour in the future (Statista, 2024a; WTTC, 2024a). This means that destinations can seem flourishing numerically but at the same time they may be losing experiential quality, becoming increasingly strained service-wise, and losing visitor loyalty.

The main misuse of policy is the idea that the increase in arrivals is a natural process that leads to economic resilience and destination competitiveness. It is rapidly being proven in to be an incorrect assumption with empirical evidence showing that high visitor inflows are often accompanied by an increase in operational expenses, strain on infrastructure, and diminishing marginal returns, especially in mature and heritage-based destinations (Herrero et al., 2022; Kanwal et al., 2024). Arrival-driven growth can increase systemic vulnerabilities instead of alleviating them in post-pandemic conditions when labour unavailability, inflationary trends, and service disruptions are here to stay. However, the tourism plans often remain focused on the marketing campaigns and capacity building without similar attention given to the management of experiences, guaranteeing customer satisfaction, and retention measures (Poo, 2024; Tourism Malaysia, 2024).

The other major blind spot is the exaggeration on attribute-based destination promotion. The marketing towards destinations usually focuses on iconic attractions, food, festivals, and cultural landmarks as stand-alone selling points, with an implicit view that they will create loyalty due to their inherent appeal (Araoujo-Vila et al., 2024; Tham et al., 2024). Yet, the existing stock of tourism literature shows that the attributes of a destination affect the revisit intention not necessarily directly but because tourists evaluate their satisfaction (Hamid et al., 2021; Rosli et al., 2023; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). Targeting policymakers and destination managers should pay close attention to the attribute's promotion, but without creating a coherent experience and service reliability, there is a threat of the emergence of the expectation-experience gaps, which destroys the satisfaction and declines the revisit intention.

Such weaknesses are compounded by disjointed destination governance frameworks. This has seen tourism experience delivery spread widely among various actors in the destination, such as local governments, destination management organisations (DMOs), transport agencies, heritage authorities, hospitality operators, and small-sized service providers. As much as branding and promotion stories are frequently centrally coordinated, the practical provision of experiences is not evenly regulated and monitored, which leaves service standards inconsistent and quality unevenly distributed along tourism touchpoints (Moreno, 2023; Gretzel, 2022). To the tourist, this fragmentation manifests as gaps between images and experiences sold and experienced, which may damage trust and satisfaction especially to post-pandemic travellers who are more sensitive to service failures and perceived risks (Dorokhov et al., 2023; Abdou et al., 2022).

Another policy blindness is related to marginalisation of tourist satisfaction as a strategic governance variable. Even though satisfaction as a key antecedent of loyalty and revisit intention is well-established in scholarly literature, it is not often institutionalised as a core indicator of performance in tourism planning and evaluation models (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). Rather, satisfaction is frequently measured on an ad hoc basis, via surveys, or through online reviews, in a non-systematic way, that is not integrated into the policy decision-making or resource allocation. This restricts the ability of destination authorities to detect a structural pillar of experience delivery weaknesses as well as make specific intervention before dissatisfaction is converted to revisit intention and negative word-of-mouth.

These blind spots have very dramatic repercussions in the heritage tourism destinations. Policy reactions to heritage sites are often based on event tourism, infrastructure development, and economic benefits, which are not the core focus of heritage tourism in terms of authenticity, cultural integrity, or significant engagement

(Ferdhaus et al., 2023; Woo and Khoo, 2023). These methods have the risk of unintentionally increasing congestion, degrading the quality of interpretation and overloading communities, thus undermining the very qualities that the concept of heritage is built upon (Zhou et al., 2022a; Yabanci, 2022). In heritage situations, once satisfaction wanes, then tourists will not return irrespective of how well the destination is symbolically important and of its international status.

These policy and managerial blind spots come into practice as the example of Penang shows. The data about the post-pandemic shows that the arrival of tourists, accommodation in hotels, and the engagement in cultural events have risen significantly, which supports the position of Penang as one of the most prominent tourism locations in Malaysia (TheMalaysianReserve, 2023; Bernama, 2024; Mutiara, 2024). But there is also parallel evidence of increasing stress on the urban infrastructure, service quality, the preservation of heritage, and the quality of life of residents, especially in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of George Town (Woo & Khoo, 2023; Çakmak et al., 2024). Although strategic plans like Penang2030 are expressing the need to achieve sustainable and inclusive development, operational metrics and recovery stories are still focusing on volume growth instead of quality of experience and visitor retention (Penang2030, 2025).

Additionally, the competitive position of Penang in the local tourism market also adds to these challenges. With destinations like Bali and Phuket becoming more aggressive in their post-pandemic recovery policies, experience quality, the integration of services, and the reliability of satisfaction becomes the focus of competition instead of attending attractions diversity (BYT, 2025; Revill, 2025). In such kind of environment, the destinations that do not consider satisfaction and revisit intention may lose their repeat visitors to their competitors who are able to provide a more coherent and reliable experience. The continued existence of arrival-based policy frameworks therefore not only signifies the conceptual weakness but also a strategic weakness in the dynamic tourism environment.

All these policy and management blind spots demonstrate a very serious lack of connection between modern tourism studies and practice. Though academic sources emphasize the central role played by satisfaction-mediated revisit intention in the resilience of destination, policy frameworks still prioritize growth indicators that do not suit the post-pandemic context. To cope with this, disconnect, a strategic redefinition of the concept of tourism success is necessary whereby the focus is not on the number of tourists visiting the area, but the reasons why tourists will come back. It is against this backdrop that the current paper has framed its contribution where it attempts to fill the gap between empirical research and policy applicability by re-conceptualizing revisit intention as a strategic consequence of satisfaction-based destination management.

Purpose and Contribution of the Article

It is in the context of post-pandemic tourism recovery and the rising constraints of arrival-based growth models that the main aim of the article is to reimaginatively reconsider revisit intention as a strategic destination resilience indicator and not a by-product behaviour. Even though the current tourism recovery discourses still emphasise visitor numbers, spending, and room rate as performance indicators, this paper demonstrates that these indicators do not provide adequate insights into the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of destinations in the post-pandemic period (WTTC, 2024a; Statista, 2025). Rather, revisit intention has been placed as a prospective sign of behaviour that embodies the evaluative belief of tourists in destinations, experience coherence and satisfaction reliability in the long term.

In particular, the article aims at extrapolating the existing body of tourism literature by refocusing the analytical frame of studying the impact of attributes on the tourism industry at the micro-level to a strategic, systemic definition of destination performance. Unlike most empirical research that aims at establishing destination attributes that operate in satisfaction or loyalty, the article is a synthesis of the existing empirical evidence where revisit intention is significantly moderated by satisfaction-mediated processes as opposed to direct experiential impacts (Hamid et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). This mediation logic presupposes that by preempting it, the article redefines satisfaction as an attitudinal result but more importantly as a key variable of governance that connects destination experiences, tourist expectations, and long-run behavioural consequences.

Another purpose of the article is to fill a significant gap between scholarly knowledge and destination management practice. Although the available empirical evidence confirms the validity of satisfaction-driven loyalty models, post-pandemic tourism policies and management choices continue to be based on volume-oriented indicators and promotional logics inherited after the growth paradigms of the pre-pandemic period (Herrero et al., 2022; Poo, 2024). The article is helpful in that it directly translates the concept of satisfaction-revisit relationships into a strategic framework that can be comprehended by policy makers, destination management organisations, and tourism planners and acted on. By doing that, it will respond to the calls of tourism research that requires bridging theoretical rigor and practical relevance, especially in the context of recovery pressures and growing international competition (Gretzel, 2022; Tourism Malaysia, 2024).

Empirically, the article has used Penang as a case study of a post-pandemic heritage destination struggling with the twin issue of recovery speed and sustainability. The fact that Penang has been very successful in its recovery-focused plans regarding tourist inflow, hotel bookings, and attendance of various cultural events constitutes a positive example of how recovery-based strategies work, but it also reveals the new tensions of service capacity, heritage preservation, and consistency of experiences (Bernama, 2024; Mutiara, 2024; Woo and Khoo, 2023). Placing the discussion in this environment, the article provides some insights that are more or less locally based yet those that can be widely applied in other mature and heritage-based destinations to undergo the same post-pandemic dynamics.

This contribution of the article is thus threefold. First, conceptually, it develops the discourse of tourism resilience by repositioning revisit intention as a strategic outcome of satisfaction confirmation, as opposed to a by-product loyalty measure. This school of thought combines the findings of destination image studies and expectation-confirmation reasoning to understand why destinations with high promotional effectiveness may still fail to warrant repeat business in case the delivery of experience is worse than expected (Bui et al., 2022; Dorokhov et al., 2023). Second, at the level of empirical synthesis, the article consolidates evidence that tourist satisfaction operates as an indirect-only mediation mechanism through which destination characteristics influence revisit intention across multiple tourism contexts, reinforcing the strategic importance of satisfaction-focused destination management strategies (Abdou et al., 2022; Rosli et al., 2023; Sutiadiningsih et al., 2024). Third, on the policy and managerial level, the article opposes the existing narratives of recovery by promoting the change in the focus of arrival maximisation to experience integration, satisfaction assurance, and visitor retention as the strategic priorities.

Conceptual Foundations: Satisfaction as a Strategic Lever

Satisfaction in the context of post-pandemic tourism cannot be considered any longer as a secondary attitudinal variable, as an eventual result of the service delivery process. Instead, it should be rethought as a strategic advantage that will allow destinations to turn a short-term recovery benefit into long-term sustainability. The pandemic not only stopped the flow of travel, but also the frames of evaluation used by tourists, making them particularly sensitive to experience quality, trust, and fulfilment of expectations (Statista, 2023; UNTourism, 2025). In this regard, satisfaction is a crucial nexus that connects the formation of a destination image, on-site experience delivery, and continuation of behaviour. The section builds a conceptual framework, which puts the tourist satisfaction as the main mechanism by which heritage destinations may strategically manage experiences, coordinate policy interventions, and gain revisit intention in an ever-changing tourism environment.

Destination Image and Experience Management in Heritage Tourism

Destination image is a long-known construct in the tourism research domain, as it influences perception, decision making, and positive or negative reviews of tourists (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Wang et al., 2023). In the case of heritage tourism, destination image is more important since it constitutes not only functional qualities, but also symbolic meanings connected with authenticity, identity, and value (Kolar & Žabkar, 2010; Bitušíková, 2021). Heritage showcases like UNESCO cities are not just judged based on efficiency of their services or beauty, but on how they convey experiences that resonate with a profoundly ingrained narrative of the cultures and expectations of authenticity by visitors (Ferdhaus et al., 2023; Yabancı, 2022).

Recent research indicates that destination image is being created more so, using experiential experience and less so using promotional information before the visit. Cognitive and affective judgments are dynamically established in tourists during their interactions with gastronomy, heritage locations, service staff, and communities (Stylidis, 2022; Cherapanukorn and Sugunnasil, 2022). Gastronomy, cultural performances, historic buildings, and interpretive storytelling can be used as experience cues that enhance or diminish the destination image throughout the visit in heritage destinations (Sorato, 2024; Yuxin et al., 2024a). Consequently, destination image is not to be perceived as a fixed branding form but a dynamic experiential product in which experience design and delivery are used to actively manage.

This change, in the management aspect, means that marketing campaigns are not sufficient to maintain destination image. Experience indicates that when the so-called aggressive promotion is not accompanied by similar enhancements in the integration of the experience, one should anticipate the emergence of expectation-experience mismatches that will culminate into dissatisfaction and diminished chances of returning to the destination (Dorokhov et al., 2023; PenangToday, 2024). It is especially relevant in the context of heritage locations, where expectations regarding authenticity and coherence are the most significant, and negative experiences have reputation risks that go beyond the experiences of single visits (Bonacchi, 2022; Woo and Khoo, 2023). This results in experience management being a strategic aspect, which directly impacts on formation of satisfaction and credibility of destination image in the long term.

In this respect, the management of experience in heritage tourism should focus on unifying experience touchpoints. Fragmented experiences, i.e., the absence of consistency in the quality of gastronomy, the standards of service, and the interpretation of heritage are always found to undermine the overall level of satisfaction despite good performance in the aspects of individual attributes (Chen and Chen, 2010; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). Especially post-pandemic tourists are more intolerant to inconsistencies, because greater perceived risk increases negative disconfirmation effects (Wei et al., 2024). As such, destination image management in heritage tourism needs to shift away as near as possible to aesthetic representation to strategic orchestration of experiences that cumulatively engage satisfaction.

Expectation-Confirmation Theory as a Policy Tool

The Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) is a valuable explanatory concept in realizing how satisfaction is created as well as why it has such a superior effect on revisit intention. As a theory formulated in consumer behaviour studies, ECT presupposes satisfaction being caused by a contrast between pre-consumption anticipations and the post-consumption performance perceptions and using a confirmation or disconfirmation outcome (Shukla et al., 2024; Oh et al., 2022). This judgmental process in the tourism setting is especially complicated since the expectations are formed on the background of the destination image, social media storytelling, previous experience, and policy-based branding campaigns (Azhar et al., 2022; Armutcu et al., 2023).

The unique worth of ECT to a post-pandemic policy environment is its ability to provide explanations of why the destinations with a strong reputation can remain unable to draw repeat visits. An objectively good experience can also be a source of negative disconfirmation when it does not meet the already raised expectations that recovery campaigns and digital marketing efforts are causing (Deb et al., 2024; Dorokhov et al., 2023). This situation has been witnessed in several post-pandemic destinations, where the volume growth-based rapid recovery strategies inadvertently increased the expectation-performance discrepancies, undermining the satisfaction performance (Herrero et al., 2022; Poo, 2024).

The perception of ECT as policy device and not strictly as behaviour theory would enable the destination authorities to know and control these gaps beforehand. Rather than posing the question of how to bring more tourists, the policymakers can apply the ECT logic to pose the question of whether existing infrastructure, services capacity and quality of experience can be used to reliably affirm the expectations as promised. This re-framing coincides with the new demands of the satisfaction assurance systems in tourism governance where policy success is determined by experiential reliability as opposed to the number of arrivals in headlines (Gretzel, 2022; UNTourism, 2024).

Irrespective of methodological variations, empirical research has consistently demonstrated that tourist satisfaction functions as an indirect-only mediation mechanism through which destination attributes influence revisit intention, reinforcing the applicability of Expectation-Confirmation Theory within destination strategy (Hamid et al., 2021; Abdou et al., 2022; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). The disconfirmation effects are especially strong in heritage tourism environments, where experiential authenticity and emotional connection are the main focus, so the satisfaction is the final determinant when expanding on the loyalty formation (Zhou et al., 2022a; Gayeta and Ylagan, 2022). ECT can therefore be used to create a diagnostic shot between policymakers to determine the degree to which destination development initiatives add or deplete satisfaction in the long run.

Integrating DIT and ECT for Destination Strategy

Although Destination Image Theory (DIT) and Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) have been used separately, when integrated to a strategic framework, the two theories provide a more holistic approach to post-pandemic destination management. DIT, and ECT describes how destinations influence the expectation of tourists based on cognitive and affective imagery, and how they are compared with lived experiences to have a form of satisfaction and behavioural consequences (Beerli and Martino, 2004; Shukla et al., 2024). Together, these theories explain the evaluative process through which destination experiences are transformed into revisit intention via tourist satisfaction.

Destination image works as an expectation-setting mechanism in an integrated model that is affected by marketing discourse, heritage branding, and policy discourse. Experience delivery, which includes gastronomy, service quality, cultural experience and performance of infrastructure, is the confirmation stage. As the evaluative synthesis of the said process, tourist satisfaction results in the activation or inactivation of revisit intention (Jebbouri et al., 2022a; Rosli et al., 2023). It is in this integration that destinations that place inordinate emphasis on image-building without investing equally on experience integration are at risk of compromising long-term loyalty.

Strategically, the implications of merging DIT and ECT is that destination management moves away towards promotional effectiveness to experiential credibility. In the case of heritage destinations like Penang, it implies corresponding policies of cultural preservation, service quality, and tourism promotion through a single satisfaction-based approach (Woo and Khoo, 2023; Penang2030, 2025). Instead of marketing single features, like cuisine, festivals, architecture, the destination strategies should also make sure that these features are combined to affirm the destination image offered to the tourists.

Notably, the comprehensive framework assists in strategic shift of acquisition-based to retention-based tourism governance. Recognising satisfaction as the process that helps to convert the image and experience into the revisit intention, policymakers can create the interventions that focus on the reliability of experience, management of expectations, and visitor retention as the indicators of destination resilience (WTTC, 2024a; Statista, 2025). This method is in line with the wider strategic sustainability objectives, as it will lessen reliance on constant visitor increase and improve the quality and duration of tourist-destination interactions.

Empirical Evidence Base

The basis of this article is the empirical study, which is based on a systematic examination of the post-pandemic tourist behaviour in a developed heritage destination, Penang, Malaysia. The research question was the effect of the central destination experience attributes, such as gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality, and destination image, on the revisit intention of tourists, where the main mediating factor was tourist satisfaction. The analysis was carried out based on data that had been collected among tourists who had earlier visited Penang and therefore the intention to revisit was assessed as a behavioural inclination which was based on lived experience and not a hypothetical intention. It is also specifically applicable to the post-pandemic tourism strategy because Penang is an example of destinations that can quickly restore their arrivals and hotel occupancy rates but encounter a growing pressure to maintain competitiveness due to visitor retention and not volume growth (Bernama, 2024; Mutiara, 2024; TourismMalaysia, 2024).

This empirical model identified one trend that was clear and consistent, namely, destination experience attributes had a strong impact on tourist satisfaction, but their direct impact on revisit intention was weak or statistically insignificant. However, tourist satisfaction, in its turn, had a highly important and substantial impact on revisit intention, which proves its predominant influence in the post-visit decision-making behaviour. These results are consistent with an increasing body of tourism literature at post-pandemic, which shows that satisfaction serves as a hegemonic explanatory variable between the evaluation of experiences and behaviour continuation (Hamid et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). Notably, the mediation analysis revealed an indirect-only mediation pattern, whereby gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality, and destination image influenced revisit intention exclusively through tourist satisfaction, rather than via direct effects. It is an empirical framework, which gives a solid ground on reimagining destination success conceptualisation and measurement in the post-pandemic period.

Other than statistical significance, the ability of the model to explain also increases its strategic relevance. The model showed a moderate, but significant explanatory and predictive power of both tourist satisfaction and revisit intention, which demonstrates that satisfaction-based models explain a significant percentage of the behavioural variance in the outcomes of destination retention. These findings are reflected in empirical research in various cultural and geographic settings, including heritage tourism, wellness tourism, and gastronomy-centred tourism, where satisfaction has been found to be the most dependable predictor of revisit behaviour (Abdou et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Sutiadiningsih et al., 2024). Applying it to Penang, it means that although the attraction destination has a good cultural background and global awareness, the recurrent visiting does not always assure destination attractiveness, but rather the ability to satisfy tourists with experiences during and after the visit.

The empirical conclusions made on the basis of this research are especially relevant when viewed through the prism of strategy. First, the fact that the direct impacts of experience attributes on revisit intention are not strong contradicts traditional assumptions of destination marketing that marketing the personal aspects of the destination, including the world-class food, UNESCO heritage, or lively festivals, will directly lead to the loyalty. Rather, the results indicate that tourists go through an integrative process of evaluation whereby the differences of experiences are integrated into a global satisfaction verdict and this is used to dictate behavioural intention. This observation aligns with post-pandemic behavioural changes, that is, tourists are now more sensitive to experiential coherence, service reliability, and value confirmation after experiencing long interruptions in travel (Dorokhov et al., 2023; UNTourism, 2025).

Second, the empirical results emphasize the vulnerability of revisit intention of destinations which emphasise on quick recovery without the related investment on experience integration. The recent tourism boom in Penang presents this tension in a very vivid manner: as arrivals and hotel stays have regained their momentum, issues of service congestion, uneven experience and heritage commodification have become especially acute (Woo & Khoo, 2023; PenangToday, 2024). The findings of the study indicate that absence of systematic processes to monitor satisfaction confirmation, such recovery-based growth cannot lead to sustainable revisit behaviour, and as such expose's destinations to repetitive volatility and declining returns of frequent promotional programs.

Third, the mediation results provide strong evidence that repositioning satisfaction should be considered as one of the strategic performance indicators but not a descriptive outcome variable. Strategically speaking, satisfaction serves as a form of early-warning system that informs the alignment of destination experiences (with pre-established expectations that have been created through branding, policy narratives, and digital discourse). As the satisfaction levels depreciate, revisit intention gets reduced in the presence of both the destination image strength and the experiential diversity as has been evidenced in the context of various empirical settings (Jebbouri et al., 2022a; Rosli et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2024). This observation has a direct implication on destination governance, that is, satisfaction trend monitoring may be a more strategic tool than arrivals monitoring.

Lastly, these empirical results are strategically important in that they can be used to justify the shift in the paradigm of destination management after the pandemic, based on evidence. As opposed to considering revisit intention as a by-product of an effective tourism promotion, the data favors its promotion to a major strategic goal regulated by the assurance of satisfaction. This view is ditched by the newer resilience-focused tourism models that prioritize quality, continuity, and reliability in tourism experiences, rather than expansionary growth

(Herrero et al., 2022; WTTC, 2024a). The research makes the strategic arguments more effective as it is based on empirical evidence, which supports the need to shift policy to the path of retention-oriented tourism development balancing an economic recovery with long-term sustainability.

Strategic Interpretation: Rethinking Destination Management

The results that were synthesised in the present research require the reconsideration of the way destinations in the post-pandemic era should conceptualize their management priorities. Attraction-centric logic Destination management has been dominated over several decades by a logic that is attribute-centric where individual attractions, including cuisine, heritage sites, festivals, or accommodation facilities, are sold as selling points. Although this strategy has been considered effective in prompting initial visitation, the post-pandemic tourism environment has unveiled its weakness especially in the long-term competitiveness and maintaining revisit intention. Evidence provided in this article is that the tourists do not compare the destination as a set of distinct features, but they consider the destination in a holistic perspective, using an integrated experiential perspective in which satisfaction is the ultimate evaluative result. This observation means that destination managers must move beyond disjointed promotional tactics into systematized aspects of integration of experience throughout the tourism ecosystem.

Strategically, experience integration will mean coordinating gastronomy, cultural interpretation, service provision, infrastructure, and image of the destination within a cohesive experience promise. The lack of robust direct relationships between personal characteristics and revisit intention indicates that even high-performers components become less strategic in case they are not integrated into the overall visitor experience in a coherent manner. Risk-conscious and value-conscious tourists in the post-pandemic world are more demanding and pickier on their experiences, which increases inconsistency amongst the touchpoints of the experience and increases the risk of dissatisfaction. Places which keep on selling personal strengths but fail to integrate the systemically will still fail to generate expectation-experience discrepancies that weaken satisfaction and hence subsequent repeat visitation.

This does not only change the role of destination marketing organisations and tourism authorities due to this change of attribute promoting to experience integrating. Instead of acting as more of promotional agencies, DMOs will have to play an increasingly important role in organizing the destination experience by pulling together various stakeholders to make sure the experience is reliably and consistently provided. This is made up not only of marketing alignment but also service standards enforcement, heritage management coordination and visitor flow control. Experience integration In the heritage destinations like Penang where cultural resources are closely integrated into the living societies, there is a further need to balance the development of tourism on the one hand, and heritage conservation and local livelihood on the other. In the absence of this integration, the experiential qualities that keep satisfaction and revisit intention alive will be lost in the fast-growing recovery-driven growth, in the long term.

At the core of this strategic re-orientation is the acknowledgment of satisfaction as a destination-wide, but not firm-based or attraction-specific, measure. For a long time, satisfaction has been evaluated at the individual services level, that is, hotels, restaurants, or attractions, and this has very often been in isolation of the overall destination setting. Nonetheless, the mediation framework discovered in this research indicates that the tourists base their satisfaction judgements in a whole, synthesising their judgements of several encounters and actors. One bad experience, service failure, or a discrepancy between expectations and actual performance can have a disproportional effect on the overall level of satisfaction, no matter how well the other attributes are performed. This demonstrates the incompetencies of isolated performance evaluations and the necessity to have destination-wide governance of satisfaction.

The concept of satisfaction as a destination-wide outcome is a dramatic managerial responsibility. It indicates that there are no individual stakeholders who own the satisfaction of tourists but rather the satisfaction is a result of the overall performance of the destination system. To destination authorities, this implies that the focus of destination authorities should move away on monitoring of isolated key performance indicators to the development of integrated satisfaction monitoring frameworks that include cross sector performance. With this type of frameworks, destinations are able to detect systemic weaknesses and predict dissatisfaction risks and

prevent negative experiences by acting in advance before they turn into negative revisit intention. This systemic view of resilience is essential in post-pandemic tourism settings, which are highly volatile.

The strategic value of satisfaction is once again enhanced by the changing post-pandemic tourist behaviour and expectation sensitivity. The pandemic radically changed the process of cognitive and emotional evaluation of tourists, making them more concerned about reliability, cleanliness, safety, authenticity, and value alignment. Tourists are not anymore just after something new and high density of attractions, but they are after an assurance that destinations can do what they say, always and in a responsible way. Consequently, expectation sensitivity has grown bigger and satisfaction confirmation is more delicate, dissatisfaction more severe. Tourism destinations with unrealized promises during a recovery drive and poor performance in the implementation of the experience are at increased reputational risk, especially in digitally mediated setting whereby negative experience is quickly disseminated.

This increased level of expectation sensitivity supports the applicability of satisfaction-centred destination management. In post-pandemic tourism, the satisfaction is not about exceeding the expectations but about the realistic management of the expectations and their reliable delivery. The destinations that match the promotional accounts with the experience potential are in a better position to generate confirmation outcomes and not disconfirmation outcomes. This form of strategic restraint might seem counterintuitive in terms of competitive recovery situations, but it is this sort of alignment that forms the foundation of sustainable revisit behaviour. Destinations can decrease the volatility of dissatisfaction by focusing on expectation calibration and experience consistency and establish more enduring tourist destination relationships in the long run.

Policy Implications for Penang and Similar Heritage Destinations

The policy implications of the strategic reinterpretation of revisit intention and satisfaction as expressed in this article have important policy outcomes on heritage destinations, especially those that exist within formal national and state systems of tourism. In Penang, tourism development is also incorporated as a part of wider policy plans as Malaysia Twelfth and Thirteenth Malaysia Plans (RMK-12 and RMK-13) and Penang2030 vision, which focus on sustainable growth, inclusivity, and economic sustainability. Nevertheless, policy execution has in many cases focused on the quantitative performance measures of visitor arrivals, tourism receipts as well as the growth of infrastructure but not on the satisfaction-based retention as a strategic goal.

To match the policy of tourism with the empirical and conceptual learning of the current study, a reframe of revisit intention should be viewed as a fundamental policy impact and not a by-product of growth. In the national level, the focus of RMK-13 on the importance of high-value tourism and sustainable economic contribution can offer the favorable policy environment to the shift. The achievement of these objectives, however, requires the inclusion of the satisfaction-based indicators in the tourism performance evaluation frameworks. Policymakers should find ways to ensure that indicators used to measure success focus on experiential quality, satisfaction stability and potential repeat visits rather than arrival growth as the main approach of success measurement. That recalibration would be more in line with the post-pandemic reality of tourist behaviour (as well as global competitiveness) pressures.

The vision of Penang2030 of becoming a family-centred, green and smart state is an opportunity to institute a satisfaction-based tourism regulation at the state level. This involves the introduction of the principles of experience integration in the city planning, heritage preservation, transport policy and tourism regulation. As an example, visitor traffic control in heritage destinations, services quality requirements, and promotion of authentic cultural experience programs can all have a positive net effect on visitor satisfaction, as well as reduce the risks of overtourism. Through direct association of tourism policy and satisfaction assurance, Penang can distinguish itself as a destination with a high demand, but also, a destination with reliability in experience and consistency of the heritage tourism destination.

The implication of governance also goes beyond policy alignment to the organisation and coordination of tourism institutions. This research indicates that a fragmented governance structure involving an independent marketing, heritage conservation, infrastructure development, and service regulation agencies is a structure that fails to have coherence in its satisfaction. In the near future following the pandemic, to maintain proper destination

governance, there is need to have integrated system of decision making capable of promoting cross-agency coordination and collective responsibility in the satisfaction of tourists. This can be through the formation of destination experience councils, satisfaction monitoring units or cross-sector task forces that would coordinate the stakeholder activities to consistent experiential goals.

Besides, the governance centred on satisfaction implies the stakeholder involvement and capacity building. Small tourism operators, heritage custodians and service providers are very significant in determining the level of satisfaction outcomes, but they might not have the resources or policy adoption to work in tandem with the destination-wide strategies. The aim of the policy interventions should further be directed at the regulation as well as empowering the capabilities to develop, spreading knowledge, and providing quality assurance frameworks that provide the delivery of consistent experience. Through this, destinations can enhance the overall ability of their tourism systems to sustain high post-pandemic demands.

Lastly, the move towards satisfaction-based destination management promotes a wider sustainability and long-term competitiveness agenda. Destinations can lessen the pressure on the environment through decreased dependence on constant arrival increases, protect cultural integrity and increase resident tolerance of tourism. Repeat customers usually develop responsible behaviour, stronger sense of place attachment and respect of local culture which leads to more balanced outcomes in tourism development. Satisfaction-based retention approaches, in this regard, enable the balancing of economic sustainability with social and environmental sustainability, which supports tourism as a pillar of long-term development instead of a short-term recovery instrument.

Conceptual Strategic Framework

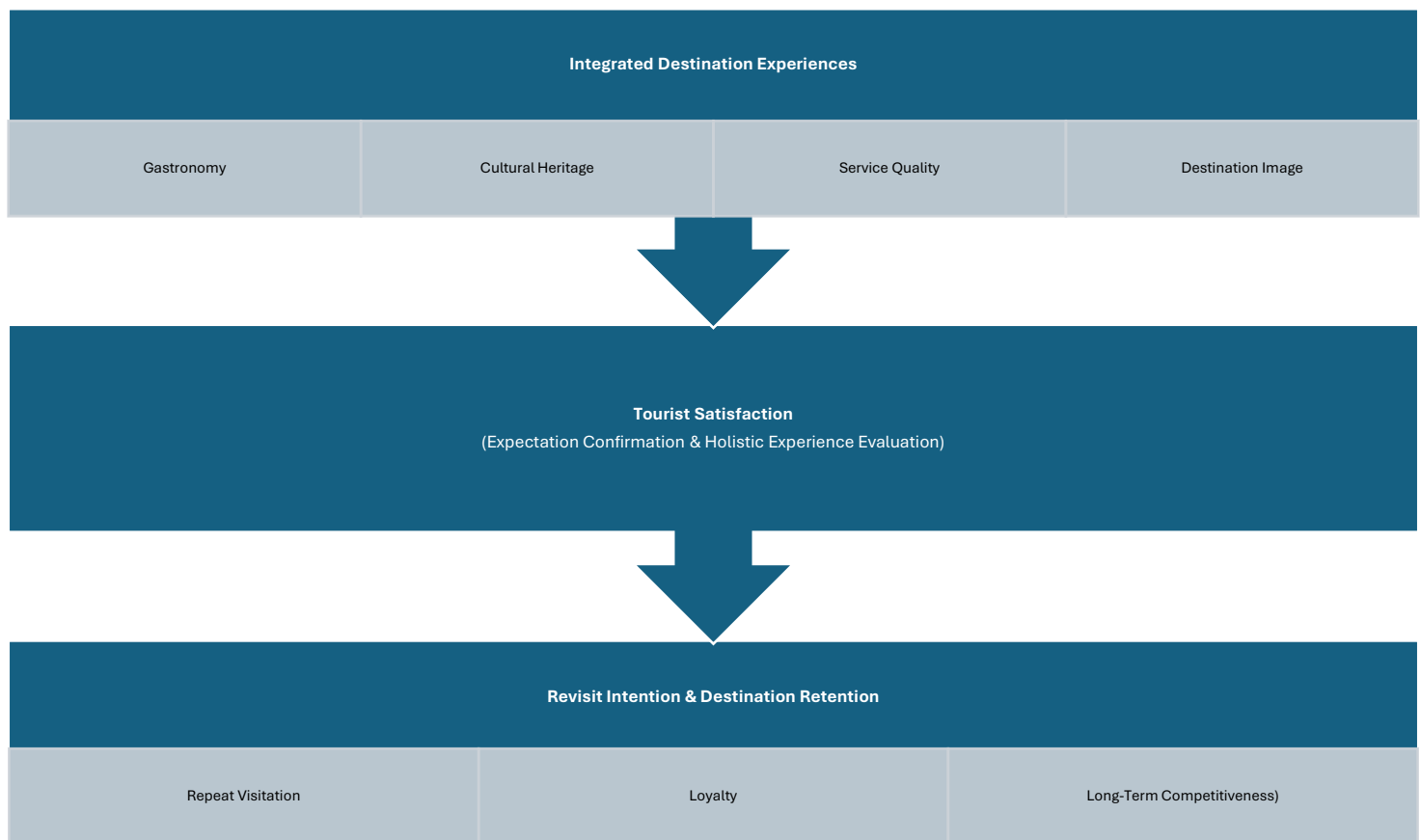


Figure 1: Satisfaction-Led Destination Retention Strategy

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual strategic model that combines both the empirical evidence of the current study with the existing theory related to tourism in explaining how heritage destinations can be strategically used as a source to elicit revisit intention in the post-pandemic environment. The upper section of the framework, the Integrated Destination Experiences (comprising gastronomy, cultural heritage, service quality and destination

image) reflect the main experiential inputs that the tourists experience as they visit the destination. In line with Destination Image Theory, these qualities form the cognitive and affective assessment of destination by tourists which has an influence on how the destination is perceived, recalled, and emotionally rated (Beerli and Martinez, 2004; Bui et al., 2022; Styliadis, 2022). These experience attributes are not independent in heritage destinations like Penang but are closely intertwined because food culture, heritage authenticity, service encounter, and symbolic image are all combined to create a holistic narrative of the destination (Ferdhaus et al., 2023; Sorato, 2024).

The framework positions tourist satisfaction as the central strategic driver that converts experiential inputs into behavioural outputs. This central role is grounded in Expectation-Confirmation Theory, which conceptualises satisfaction as an evaluative outcome arising from the comparison between pre-visit expectations and actual on-site experiences (Shukla et al., 2024; Oh et al., 2022). Studies in heritage and post-pandemic tourism contexts have consistently identified satisfaction as the strongest predictor of revisit intention, often operating as an indirect-only mediation mechanism between experiential attributes, destination image, and behavioural outcomes (Hamid et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). The framework further highlights that tourists evaluate destinations holistically rather than as isolated attributes, reinforcing satisfaction as the integrative evaluative pathway linking experience to loyalty.

The reversal of satisfaction to Revisit Intention and Destination Retention indicate the importance of satisfaction in the creation of repetition of visitation, loyalty and long-term competitiveness. Repeat intention is considered a highly effective strategic measure of destination resilience because repeat tourists were less price sensitive, more loyal, and more prone to positive word of mouth (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Zulfiqar et al., 2024). A destination that only counts on the number of visitors entering the region runs the risk of overexposure, overcrowding, and deteriorating the overall experience quality, and retention-based approaches that are based on satisfaction are a more sustainable growth trajectory in post-pandemic tourism recovery (WTTC, 2024a; UNTourism, 2025). The framework also redefines revisit intention as not just an outcome of a behaviour of an individual, but an indicator of the performance of a destination system as a whole.

Notably, the framework also has certain policy and management implications as it explains the role of satisfaction as a destination wide result and not the role of one stakeholder. Gastronomy, heritage management, service provision, and image construction need to be co-governed, assure quality, and synchronize expectations between both the public and the private actors (Gretzel, 2022; Penang2030, 2025). In the case of heritage destinations, it implies that marketing efforts should be backed up by real cultural experiences, standard service delivery, and infrastructure that would be able to deliver what is advertised to tourists (Woo and Khoo, 2023; Çakmak et al., 2024). Figure 1 provides a visual association between experiential inputs, satisfaction mediation, and retention outcomes, which illustrates how theoretical understanding of DIT and ECT may be translated into a consistent strategic model that has a direct implication on destination management practice and tourism policy.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Strategic Contribution

The research offers a strategic addition to the body of literature because it redefines tourist satisfaction as a strategic tool of the destination instead of a downstream effect of encountering services at the individual level. Based on the concurrent usage of the Destination Image Theory (DIT) and the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT), the results show that experience attributes such as gastronomy, cultural heritage, service quality, and destination image do not significantly, nor consistently, influence the revisit intention. Rather, their strategic value is realised in the first place, in their effectiveness in gathering as one to affirm or surpass the expectations of the tourists thus creating a sense of satisfaction, which in effect translates to revisit intention. This logic of satisfaction alters the paradigm of strategic focus in tourism that had largely been based on arrival-driven growth to one based on retention-oriented destination competitiveness, according to the recent demands of prioritising loyalty, resiliency, and optimisation of experience to the post-pandemic tourism systems (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Zulfiqar et al., 2024). Theoretically, the research offers an empirical confirmation of repositioning revisit intention as one of the central performance indicators of destination success, especially

in the context of mature and heritage destinations where marginal gains of new arrivals are increasingly limited because of carrying capacity and sustainability issues (WTTC, 2024a; UNTourism, 2025).

Policy Contribution

Policymaking wise, the results presented in this study have evidence-based information that directly informs the national and state-level tourism policies which are focused on quality, sustainable and long-term value generation. The satisfaction-led framework is also close to the larger tourism transformation objectives of RMK-13 and Penang2030 which supports improvement of the experience, heritage conservation and inclusive destination management aspects rather than growth driven by volume alone (Penang2030, 2025; Tourism Malaysia, 2024). By demonstrating an indirect-only mediation pattern, this study highlights the limitations of policy strategies that rely heavily on promotional campaigns without parallel investment in service consistency, heritage authenticity, and integrated experience management. These findings can be applied by policymakers to justify integrated policy interventions to coordinate the development of infrastructures, heritage protection, service quality control, and destination branding through a single satisfaction assurance framework (Gretzel, 2022; Woo and Khoo, 2023). In this context, the research fills the gaps between the scholarly and the populace by converting the behavioural theory to practical governance agenda of heritage destinations.

Managerial Contribution

On the managerial level, the research demonstrates an easy way to go to destination management organisations (DMOs), operators in the tourism industry and local stakeholders, as it shows the demonstration that experience integration is more effective as compared to the attribute excellence of individual products. Managers should also shift beyond performance measures that are siloed, that is, food quality ratings or service ratings, and rather assess the effectiveness of various components of the experience in forming tourist satisfaction throughout the visit experience (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Chen and Chen, 2010). The high mediating position of satisfaction indicates that investments that are made in the fields of gastronomy, heritage interpretation, and training of service providers should be coordinated and be mindful of the expectations, and what is sold should be provided on the ground. As a managerial practice, this means that in the post-pandemic environment where tourists are more sensitive to their expectations and more aware of risks, this will shift to cross-sector collaboration, persistent feedback systems, and satisfaction monitoring (Oh et al., 2022; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). Finally, the research will provide managers with a conceptually based but operationally feasible model of improving repeat visitation and destination loyalty.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, this research contributes to the knowledge on the research topic by illustrating that the revisit intention in heritage destinations is essentially a satisfaction-related phenomenon influenced by the holistic affirmation of tourist expectations instead of solitary attributes of the experience. The integrated use of the Destination Image Theory and Expectation-Confirmation Theory shows that the level of tourist satisfaction is the key process making the destination experiences and long-term retention connected, thus redefining the revisit intention as the strategic indicator of destination resilience and competitiveness. Through empirical validation of this satisfaction-mediated pathway and its translation into strategic, policy, and managerial implications, the study offers a coherent framework that integrates theory, evidence, and practice, thereby providing clear direction for heritage destinations such as Penang in pursuing sustainable, experience-based tourism development.

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Author Contributions

Norazah Mohd Suki and Ziffa Binti Zubir jointly contributed to the development of the conceptual framework, literature review, and manuscript preparation. All authors were involved in refining the arguments, reviewing the

content, and approving the final version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Materials supporting the review, including search protocols and synthesis notes, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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