

# The Impact of Experiential Marketing, Destination Image, and Viral Marketing on Visitor Satisfaction in the Post-Pandemic Tourism Industry of Central Sulawesi

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**Abstract** : The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a decrease in the number of visitors to tourist attractions in Central Sulawesi. The government and managers have made various innovations to increase the bargaining power of tourist destinations. In the competitive landscape of the tourism industry, these innovations are crucial for attracting visitors and maintaining a positive reputation. One of the improvements made to the facilities and maintenance equipment is to ensure that tourists feel satisfied when visiting. The manager carries out emotional experiences, destination images, and viral marketing strategies to provide a sense of satisfaction to visitors. These strategies are essential for enhancing customer engagement and loyalty, which are vital in a recovering market. This study analyses experiential marketing, destination image, and viral marketing on customer satisfaction. This research involved 100 tourist visitors in Central Sulawesi. The findings of this study indicate that simultaneously the three variables have a significant positive effect, but partially they do not. The EM and VM variables each positively affect visitor satisfaction, while the DI variable does not. This highlights the need for tourism managers to prioritize experiential and viral marketing techniques in their strategies. This research suggests to tourism managers that they continue to make efforts to improve the destination's image to increase visitor satisfaction and simultaneously increase the number of visitors and return visits of tourists. Ultimately, adopting a holistic approach that combines these elements can help strengthen the overall competitive position of Central Sulawesi's tourism industry.

**Keywords** : Experiential Marketing; Destination Image; Viral Marketing; Tourist satisfaction

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the tourism industry worldwide (Värzaru et al., 2021), one of which is in the Central Sulawesi region. Many tourism destinations in Central Sulawesi have seen a drastic drop in tourist arrivals due to travel restrictions, lockdowns and fears of spreading the virus. Tourism industry players like hotels, airlines, travel agents, and tourism destinations feel this impact. Tourist destinations previously crowded with tourists from various countries are now deserted and look like ghost towns. In this context, it is essential to understand the factors that can affect post-pandemic tourist satisfaction. In the post-pandemic era, visitors will look for unique and

memorable travel experiences (Kimunio et al., 2024). Experiential or experience-based marketing is essential in attracting tourists to a destination (Belhaj, 2022). Marketing focusing on immersive and interactive experiences can create an emotional bond between travellers and destinations, increasing their satisfaction (Shuang et al., 2024). Through experiential marketing, tourism destinations can create emotional bonds between tourists and these destinations (Silva et al., 2025). Immersive and memorable experiences increase traveller satisfaction and create long-term relationships with destinations. Travellers who feel emotionally connected to a destination are more likely to recommend that place to others and return to visit in the future.

Furthermore, this study integrates Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and the Trust Development in Virtual Teams framework (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999) to explain how communication quality and trust formation influence leadership effectiveness in digital environments. Media Richness Theory emphasizes that leaders must choose appropriate communication media to convey rich information effectively, while Trust Development Theory highlights the process through which trust emerges and sustains within teams that rely on digital interactions. Combining these perspectives provides a deeper understanding of how transformational leadership functions in virtual and technology-mediated contexts.

Additionally, destination image (DI) serves as a vital element in shaping tourists' decisions to visit a place, especially in competitive industrial tourism markets (Yua & Vui, 2023). A destination with a strong, appealing image can capture tourists' attention and drive interest. DI includes tourists' perceptions of natural beauty, cultural uniqueness, attractions, and service quality, all of which play a central role in tourism management and marketing strategies (Siregar et al., 2021). For example, DI is significantly influenced by scenic landscapes, cultural heritage, and well-maintained attractions like beaches, mountains, and national parks, which draw tourists through their unique offerings. Destinations must also consider the importance of a modern and consistent tourism image, as this can distinguish them from competitors and appeal to a global audience (Uner et al., 2023).

Social media and viral marketing have become essential tools within the tourism industry (Zhang & Huang, 2022). Viral marketing helps create interest, reach broader audiences, and stimulate curiosity about specific destinations, leveraging digital platforms to engage potential visitors (Gegung, 2025). Social media can amplify tourism campaigns, with travelers shared experiences whether through photos, videos, or reviews serving as powerful endorsements that reach a wide audience (Bhinder, 2025). Viral marketing also facilitates collaboration with social media influencers who have substantial followings, enabling tourism operators to expand their reach to new audiences and promote destinations through engaging content (Kilipiri et al., 2023). In industrial marketing strategy, influencers are critical, as they introduce and popularize destinations through authentic storytelling and immersive experiences, fostering a sense of desirability and drawing tourists back. In the digital era, leadership is characterized by asynchronous communication, algorithmic management, and remote coordination, which differentiate it from traditional face-to-face leadership. Digital leaders are expected to manage dispersed teams, interpret data-driven insights, and maintain trust and engagement despite limited physical interaction. These unique challenges require adaptive communication strategies and emotional intelligence to sustain team cohesion and performance.

Tourism research has highlighted these factors as significant in various contexts. Experiential marketing, although widely studied in retail sectors, is gaining attention in tourism for its impact on visitor satisfaction. For example, Mei Song's (2022) study on Qingyan Ancient Town found that experiential marketing directly increased tourist satisfaction. Santos (2022) also demonstrated how experiential marketing positively influences tourist experiences. Additionally, destination image has been analyzed from

multiple perspectives, with Hyoungeun Moon (2018) examining pricing's role in shaping tourism perceptions, while Shahida Kanwil et al. (2019) found that DI impacts tourist numbers in Pakistan. Viral marketing, although commonly used in the goods and services sector, is increasingly applied in tourism. Studies by Pamungkas (2020) and Mustafa (2020) show that viral marketing can successfully generate interest in tourism destinations.

Social media has played an essential role in generating interest in tourism destinations. When social media users share their experiences at specific tourist destinations, whether through photos, videos or travel stories, this can trigger curiosity and curiosity in other people who see the content. Interested social media users will start looking for more information about the destination, including the activities, attractions, and accommodations (Susanto et al., 2023). Viral marketing allows tourism destinations to attract mass attention, create positive buzz, and influence tourist interest to plan their visit. Viral marketing also allows tourism destinations to reach a wider audience. By partnering with social media influencers with large follower bases relevant to the tourism industry, promotional messages and content can reach a larger and more diverse audience. Influencers can be essential in introducing tourism destinations to their followers through organic content or customized marketing campaigns.

Tourism research has been carried out by many previous researchers with various concentrations. Studies on experiential marketing are usually carried out on visitors to economic centres, but some researchers use experiential marketing for use on tourists. Mei Song (2022) found that there was an influence from experiential marketing used for marketing strategies to increase visitors to Qingyan Ancient Town. Santos (2022) found that experiential marketing positively affects tourist experience and satisfaction. Second, the study of image destination has also been widely studied from various perspectives. Hyoungeun Moon (2018) examines the price aspect of tourism image. The price of a cheap tourist area can affect the interest and motivation of visitors. Shahida Kanwil et al. (2019) found that destination image determines the number and interest of visitors in Pakistan. Third, the trend of studies on viral marketing is also usually carried out in the goods and services sector. However, some researchers and tourism managers use viral marketing to market tourist attractions, such as studies from P. Pamungkas (2020) and Mustafa (2020).

Building upon these findings, this study aims to address gaps by examining how experiential marketing, destination image, and viral marketing collectively influence tourist satisfaction in Central Sulawesi's post-pandemic tourism landscape. Central Sulawesi's tourism industry must adapt by implementing robust marketing strategies and maintaining an appealing image to revive visitor numbers and enhance economic stability. This approach is vital to support local economies that rely heavily on tourism, especially in regions that were significantly impacted by the pandemic. From the studies above, no one has studied the three variables of visitor satisfaction at tourist destinations. The novelty of this research is to provide perspective and theoretical reinforcement of the importance of marketing and the image of the destination as one factor influencing visitor satisfaction. This research intend to analyze the influence of the three variables on visitor satisfaction with tourist destinations in Central Sulawesi after the Covid-19 pandemic; as is generally known that during a pandemic, one of the sectors affected was tourism destinations. The government and the management have made various efforts to increase tourist visitors. This effort is a strategic plan because the increasing number of visitors can affect the improvement of the local economy. However, few empirical studies have examined how transformational leadership operates effectively within digitally mediated work environments that rely on virtual communication and technology-based coordination. This study addresses that gap by exploring how leadership, communication richness, and trust interact to influence

employee outcomes in digital contexts, thereby extending leadership theory into the realm of virtual collaboration.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Experiential Marketing**

According to Schmitt (1999), experiential marketing (EM) is a step by producers who need to create unique, positive and memorable experiences for consumers to approach, acquire and retain loyal consumers. EM is a strategic approach aimed at anticipating, managing, and achieving customer satisfaction through a dynamic exchange process. It involves creating personalized and memorable experiences that respond to various stimuli. EM focuses on engaging customers in a way that leaves a lasting impact, making their interactions with a product, service, or brand more meaningful and enjoyable. This concept involves five primary elements (Chen & Lin, 2019), namely sense (senses: eyes, ears, nose, skin, tongue), feel (feeling), think (thought), act (action), and relate (bond), which aims to create a positive perception in the eyes of consumers. Memorable experiences can be realized through various experience providers. Some examples of such experience providers include communication (advertisements or activities below the line), products (packaging or content), product identity, co-branding, environment, websites (including impressive displays and high interactive dimensions), as well as the people in charge of offering products to consumers. All steps of these service providers can improve the customer experience so that he becomes loyal to the products offered.

In an industrial context, experiential marketing is increasingly seen as a strategic asset. Memorable experiences in this setting can be cultivated through diverse experience providers. For instance, targeted advertising campaigns and below-the-line activities reinforce brand messages while creating immersive experiences that resonate with consumers. Elements like product design and packaging also play a role in strengthening brand identity, while co-branding initiatives can expand market reach by associating with compatible brands. Furthermore, creating an impactful physical or digital environment—from visually engaging store layouts to interactive website features—helps capture consumer interest and engagement. Employees, as frontline representatives of the brand, contribute to personalized service, making customer interactions feel more meaningful and encouraging loyalty. Collectively, these industrial applications of experiential marketing work to establish a strong and lasting connection with consumers, reinforcing brand commitment through memorable and well-designed experiences.

### **2.2 Destination Image**

Destination image (DI) can be interpreted as a mental picture or perception tourists hold towards tourist objects. This can be influenced by tourists' prejudices, knowledge, imagination, and emotions (Maxim, 2019). According to Krishna et al. (2017), destination image also reflects tourists' beliefs that the tourist attraction can provide the best experience. Destination images are not only formed based on existing reality but are also influenced by motivations that exist within tourists (Maxim, 2019; Johnson et al., 2017; Carlisle et al., 2016). In addition, other factors can also affect the formation of a destination image (Baggio, 2017; Maxim, 2019; Jovicic, 2019), such as psychological conditions, previous experiences, information from various media, motivation, social and economic conditions, education, and marketing activities, and perception. Thus, a destination image can be formed through a combination of existing reality and experience and other factors that influence tourist perceptions (Fistola & La Rocca, 2017; Khrisna et al., 2017).

There are two leading indicators to measure destination image: cognitive and affective. Cognitive image mentions to the beliefs and information tourists hold about these

attractions. Meanwhile, a compelling image describes the emotional response felt by tourists towards the tourist object (Maxim, 2019). By measuring these two indicators, tourists' perceptions and emotions about the desired destination can be understood. In the tourism industry, the concept of destination image (DI) plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior and influencing travel decisions. By crafting a compelling destination image, tourism marketers can strategically position their offerings in a competitive landscape. For instance, utilizing targeted digital marketing campaigns can effectively enhance the cognitive and affective perceptions of potential tourists. Additionally, the use of social media platforms to showcase stunning visuals and share authentic experiences can significantly bolster a destination's image, as travelers increasingly rely on online content for inspiration and information. Moreover, collaborations with influencers can amplify brand messages, allowing destinations to tap into the emotional connections these figures have with their followers. By harnessing these industrial tools, destinations can cultivate a positive image that resonates with the target audience, ultimately driving interest and increasing visitor numbers. Through continuous monitoring of consumer perceptions and feedback, tourism organizations can adapt their marketing strategies to enhance the destination image further and foster loyalty among tourists, thereby ensuring long-term success in the industry.

### **2.3 Viral Marketing**

In 1996, Jeffrey Rayport introduced the term viral marketing through an article entitled "The Virus of Marketing", published in *Fast Company* magazine (Situmorang, 2010). Viral marketing (VM) is a digital marketing technique that stimulates individuals to share marketing content related to products or services with others.. With this approach, messages can spread quickly, and the message has the potential to have an immediate impact. (Devi, 2015). In another context, VM is also known as electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing and social networks (Fong & Yazdanifard, 2014).

Lekhanya explained that VM is a phenomenon in which consumers share and disseminate information related to marketing relevant products or services. The market started This phenomenon deliberately to stimulate and take advantage of Word of Mouth (WOM) behaviour or oral communication between individuals (Lekhanya, 2014). This concept hinges on consumers voluntarily spreading marketing messages within their networks, creating a ripple effect that strengthens brand awareness and reliability. In industrial applications, VM effectiveness is typically measured through product knowledge (awareness and understanding among consumers), clarity of information (ensuring accurate and appealing content), and product discussion (active dialogue about the product). Together, these indicators help reinforce consumer trust and expand reach, making VM a vital element of modern industrial marketing strategies.

### **2.4 Visitor Satisfaction**

According to Kotler and Keller (2018: 138), satisfaction refers to the emotional response of experiencing pleasure after comparing the performance or results of a product with the customer's initial expectations. When the actual performance of a product meets or exceeds the customer's expectations, it leads to a feeling of satisfaction. On the other hand, if the performance falls short of their expectations, it may result in dissatisfaction. Satisfaction is closely linked to the alignment between what customers anticipate and what they actually receive, influencing their overall perception of the product or service. In Wilkie's view (1990), satisfaction is an emotional response that arises from evaluating the

experience of consuming a product or service. Thus, consumer satisfaction is formed when the consumption experience matches or exceeds their expectations.

According to Kotler and Keller (2018: 140), customer satisfaction has several dimensions, which include remaining loyal, buying new products and updating products, recommending products, paying less attention to competing brands and being less sensitive to price. The first dimension is staying loyal, where satisfied visitors tend to become loyal visitors and will choose to make a repeat visit. The second dimension is buying new products and updating products. Satisfied visitors have the desire to make visits to new places that are offered. The third dimension is recommending products. Satisfied visitors tend to communicate positively about the company and its products to others. They will recommend these tourist destinations to other potential visitors through word-of-mouth communication. These three dimensions illustrate how visitor satisfaction can positively impact customer loyalty, repeat visits, positive word-of-mouth, and less attention to competing brands and prices.

In the tourism industry, customer satisfaction is a critical driver of business success and sustainability. Satisfied tourists are more likely to become repeat visitors, directly contributing to the revenue stream of hotels, attractions, and service providers. To enhance visitor satisfaction, tourism businesses must implement effective quality management systems that monitor and improve service delivery across all touchpoints. Utilizing customer feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and online reviews, allows organizations to gather insights on visitor experiences and expectations. This data-driven approach enables businesses to identify areas for improvement, tailor their offerings, and ensure alignment with customer desires. Furthermore, creating memorable experiences through personalized marketing strategies and innovative service design can lead to greater satisfaction levels. Engaging with tourists post-visit through follow-up communications can also strengthen emotional connections, fostering loyalty and encouraging positive word-of-mouth marketing. By prioritizing customer satisfaction, tourism enterprises can differentiate themselves in a competitive market, build strong brand reputations, and secure long-term customer loyalty, ultimately driving profitability and growth in the industry.

### **3. Method**

Our study model is shown in fig.1. This research purpose is to explore the effect of experiential marketing, destination image, and viral marketing on visitor satisfaction.

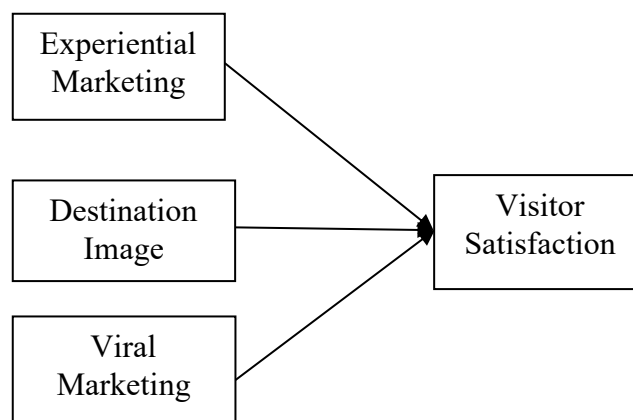
#### **Research Assumptions**

Agrawal et al. (2015). Experiential marketing refers to the process where customers individually experience specific stimuli. This experience occurs after observing or participating in an event and stimulates motivation while eliciting thoughts and behaviours related to consumer identity. Ultimately, the aim is to improve the product. Wu and Tseng (2015), emotional marketing is crucial in delivering value and fostering customer loyalty. Creswell (2015) highlights the importance of brand-focused experiential marketing as a departure from traditional marketing, aiming to create distinctive and memorable customer consumption experiences. These experiences contribute to customers' derived value from their interactions. Varshneya and Das (2017) further support these notions by establishing positive relationships between sensory experience, relational experience, cognitive experience, and behavioural experience within the context of experiential marketing and its impact on the value derived from the overall customer experience. Mike Tz-Yauw Lin (2019) also found the influence of EM on VS in ecotourism. Khaloud & Amor Ben Amor (2020) found the impact of sense experience on VS in Winter Wonderland Saudi Arabia.

Krishna et al. (2017), destination image also reflects tourists' beliefs that the tourist attraction can provide the best experience. Sheellyana Juanedi and Jason J (2020) found the impact of a DI on VS as evidenced by the activity of visiting tourists at Batu Secret Zoo. Shirley Kha-Sien et al. (2021) found the influence of technology as a medium to create a good image for tourism that has an impact on increasing the number of visitors. Abdulhamid Jebbouri et al. (2023) found a positive effect of DI on VS and increase in the tourist city of Guangzhou.

*Viral marketing* is a digital marketing strategy that push individuals to spread marketing messages about products or services to others. With this approach, messages can spread quickly, and the potential for exponential growth in message exposure and influence can occur (Devi, 2015). Ulfa Yuniati et al. (2021) found the influence of social media as a medium for virtualizing instagramable tourist attractions to tourist destinations in Bandung. Al Maula (2018) also construc the impact of a viral marketing strategy by utilizing social media to increase the satisfaction and number of visitors to restaurants in Jordan. Based on the information above, the hypothesis is:

1. H1: Experiential Marketing presents positive relations with visitor satisfaction
2. H2: There is a positive influence of destination image on visitor satisfaction.
3. H3: Viral marketing presents positive relations on visitor satisfaction
4. H4: EM, DI, and VM affect visitor satisfaction



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framwork**

## Research Methods

This type of research is explanatory research. This study will use 100 samples representing tourist visitors in Central Sulawesi. Methods of data collection in research using the questionnaire method. This study uses a probability sampling technique because each population has the same opportunity to be used as a respondent. The method used for this type of sampling was Accidental Simple Random Sampling, where individuals were selected purely based on chance or who happened to be present at the time of sampling. This approach aims to minimize bias and increase the sample's representativeness, allowing for more accurate and reliable results that can be generalized to the entire population. This research was conducted for five days, carried out every day from 08.00-16.00 WIB, by obtaining a random number of 20 respondents because the selected respondents were not planned.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Result

Based on the results of research conducted for five days in tourist attractions in Central Sulawesi, researchers met and asked 20 respondents every day. The final total of respondents is 100 people with the following details:

**Table 1. Number of Respondents**

Gender	Age	Total
Man	16-25	22
	26-35	11
	36-45	10
Total		43
Woman	16-25	25
	26-35	18
	36-45	14
Total		57
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>

Based on the table above, the number of respondents obtained was 100 people. The details are 43 men divided into three age variants, namely 16-25 totalling 22 people, 26-35 are 11 people, and 36-45 are ten people. As for women, there were 57 people, with a breakdown of 25 people aged 16-25, 18 people aged 26-35, and 14 people aged 36-45.

### Validity and Reability Test

The validity of a questionnaire or survey can be assessed by measuring the correlation between the scores obtained from the questionnaire and the overall scores of the respondents. In SPSS version 22, the output usually presents several statistical measures for each item in the questionnaire. These measures can provide valuable insights into the reliability and validity of the items. Respondents in this study amounted to 100 people (N = 100), so the r table value with a significance of 5% or level 0.05 is 0.163. So, the questionnaire results will be declared valid if the coefficient correlation value (r<sub>xy</sub>) is more than 0.163. Based on the validity test that has been carried out, all data shows an accurate description.

**Table 2. Validity Test**

Validity Test			
Variable	Loading	Variable	Loading
Experiential Marketing	0.473	Viral Marketing	0.760
	0.613		0.752
	0.629		0.800
	0.729		0.638
	0.758		0.701
	0.648		0.801
	0.624		0.742
	0.605		0.821
	0.658		0.739
	0.694		0.604
Destination Image	0.459	Visitor Satisfaction	0.472
	0.725		0.597
	0.604		0.645
	0.543		0.756
	0.519		0.662
	0.616		0.658
	0.530		

0.340	0.569
0.437	0.621
0.509	0.363
	0.274
	0.365
	0.253
	0.561

**Table 3. Reliability Test**

Reliability	
Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Experiential Marketing	0.843
Destination Image	0.710
Viral Marketing	0.904
Visitor Satisfaction	0.799

The reliability test is a statistical method for measuring the consistency of research data. This test uses Cronbach's Alpha method with the condition that the value is declared reliable or consistent if the value obtained from the measurement is more than 0.60. 0.60 is the minimum limit value of Cronbach's Alpha value to know that it is declared reliable. The results of the reliability, in this case, can be concluded that the statistical results of the reliability of each variable are 0.843 (experiential marketing), 0.710 (destination image), 0.904 (viral marketing), and 0.799 (visitor satisfaction).

### Normality Test

The simple statistical test used to test the normality assumption is the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test. The testing method for the normal distribution of the data is done by looking at the significance value of the variable. It indicates a normal data distribution if significantly more significant than 0.05 at the 5% alpha significance level. The data in the table shows that a significance value (Assymp. Sig/2-tailed) is obtained of 0.200 from 100 respondents, so each variable is normally distributed. Data that is otherwise customarily distributed means that the data has a standard or directional distribution pattern as a condition for carrying out further parametric tests.

### Hypothesis Test

**Table 4. Simultaneous and partial test (F-T test)**

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>			
Model		t	Sig.
1.	(Constant)	4.561	.000
	Experiential Marketing	5.193	.000
	Destination Image	-.874	.385
	Viral Marketing	2.275	.025

a. Dependent Variable: Visitor Satisfaction

**Table 5. ANOVA Test**

Model	F	Sig.
Regression	11.497	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual		
Total		

a. Dependent Variable: Visitor Satisfaction

b. Predictors: (Constant), Viral Marketing, Destination Image, Experiential Marketing

The t-test result for variable X1 is 5,193, more significant than the t-table (5,193 > 1,984) and has a sig value of 0.000, meaning it is smaller than 0.05. The variable X2 has a value of -874, which means it is smaller than the t-table (-874 > 1,979) and has a sig value of 0.000, meaning it is smaller than 0.05. While the value of the t-test variable X3 is 2,275, more significant than the t-table (2,275 > 1,984) and has a sig value of 0.000, meaning it is smaller than 0.05. Based on the t-test count, the variables X1 and X3 each partially affect Y, while X2 does not affect variable Y. In addition, based on the F test table, the results are 11.497 with a probability value (sig) of 0,000, so simultaneously (together), the three X variables affect employee performance. Summary of Hypothesis

1. Hypothesis I: H1 is accepted because the t-value of the variable X1 is 4,446, which is greater than the t-table (5.193 > 1,984).
2. Hypothesis II: H2 is rejected. The value of the t-test variable X2 is -874, which means it is smaller than the t-table (-874 < 1.984).
3. Hypothesis III: H3 is accepted because the t-value of the variable X3 is 2.275, which is greater than the t-table (2.275 < 1.984).
4. Hypothesis IV: H4 is accepted. The three variables simultaneously affect visitor satisfaction

## 4.2 Discussion

### Experiential Marketing on Visitor Satisfaction

This study found that EM has a significant favourable effect on VS. The EM variable showed a significant partial positive effect among the three variables studied. This effect is based on the empirical experiences perceived and experienced by the visitors. The four categories tested in this research showed positive values. However, of the four categories, two indicators show significant values: emotional and sensory. In the context of tourist visitors, sensory experiences play a crucial role in creating unique and captivating experiences for customers. Tourists may have awe-inspiring visual experiences when encountering beautiful natural landscapes, intriguing architectural attractions, or mesmerizing visual performances. Choosing visually appealing elements by organizers or tourism owners can captivate the hearts of visitors. Emotional experiences also play a vital role in creating memorable and captivating visitor experiences. Tourists often experience a sense of awe when they are exposed to magnificent natural landscapes, breathtaking architectural attractions, or the beauty of a place's culture and history. These feelings of awe create strong and impressive impressions on visitors. Additionally, pleasant tourist experiences, such as relaxing on a beach, exploring beautiful places, or enjoying local cuisine, can bring visitors happiness and satisfaction. A cheerful atmosphere, friendly service, and a relaxed ambience can enhance visitors' happy experiences.

These research findings reinforce previous studies that found a positive impact of EM on visitor satisfaction. A study by Amin and Tarun (2019) indicated that all four EM indicators positively affected customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry in Bangladesh. Tsu-Ming Yeh et al. (2019) also stated that sensory and emotional experiences directly influence visitor satisfaction. Moreover, visitor satisfaction resulting from engaging experiences can potentially increase the desire for repeat visits (Adinda Sekar et al., 2019; Rouf Rather, 2019). However, the other two indicators, namely thinking experience and relating experience, received good scores but needed to be more significant. The study attributes these results to the fact that the visited tourism context in South Sulawesi is less related to these two indicators. The tourism destinations in South Sulawesi mainly offer

natural and culinary attractions, making sensory and emotional experiences more relevant in experiential marketing.

### **Destination Image on Visitor Satisfaction**

Destination image (DI) can be defined as the mental representation or perception tourists have about a tourism object. It can be influenced by the tourists' biases, knowledge, imagination, and emotions (Maxim, 2019). The research in this study found that DI does not influence VS. The value of the t-test variable  $X_2$  is -874, which means it is smaller than the t-table ( $-874 < 1.984$ ). Cognitive and affective images were used as benchmarks in this research, and they were found not significantly impact visitor satisfaction in tourism in Central Sulawesi. Cognitive image refers to the beliefs and information tourists have about the tourism object, while affective image describes the emotional responses that tourists experience towards the object (Maxim, 2019). Customer satisfaction is diverse and subjective, especially in service companies like tourist destinations. All these conditions depend on the tourism providers, tourist attractions, and destinations offered to visitors. Central Sulawesi's tourism offers natural attractions but needs attraction-based tourism like roller coasters. The conditions of these tourist destinations determine customer satisfaction from both cognitive and affective aspects. The results of this study are consistent with previous research conducted by Chen and Tsai (2007) and Del Bosque and San Martín (2008), which also found that the cognitive and affective image of destinations does not significantly influence VS.

However, some studies have found that the destination image does affect visitor satisfaction, and these findings contradict the results of this study. For instance, Al-Deweik (2020) found a positive impact of DI on VS. Sharma and Kumar (2019) mentioned that event image, directly and indirectly, influences VS. Satisfied visitors at events tend to be loyal, positively affecting VS (Bigne et al., 2001; Hallmann & Breuer, 2010). In their study on VS and behavioural intention towards a conference event, Severt, Wang, Chen, and Breiter (2007) discovered that satisfaction has a more significant effect on the attendees' intention to return than word of mouth. The study also revealed that the more conferences an attendee participates in, the more likely they are to make positive recommendations about the events they attend. As a result, the event image positively affects visitor satisfaction, as a satisfactory experience at the conference event leads to a higher likelihood of attendees expressing their satisfaction through positive word-of-mouth and increased intention to attend future conferences. Understanding how event image impacts visitor satisfaction is crucial in developing countries, as it can enhance overall satisfaction levels among visitors at festival events (Ramukumba, 2017; Viviers & Slabbert, 2014).

However, it is essential to note that other factors unrelated to the destination image can also influence visitor satisfaction. Factors such as service quality, available facilities, price, satisfaction with the tourism experience obtained, and interactions with residents can be more dominant in determining visitor satisfaction. Furthermore, visitor satisfaction can be affected by individual factors, such as personal preferences, travel motivations, and expectations that may vary between individuals. Therefore, it is essential to consider various factors in research and destination management to comprehensively understand and improve visitor satisfaction. In addition to enhancing service quality and diversifying offerings, tourism providers should leverage digital marketing strategies to effectively shape destination image and improve visitor satisfaction. By utilizing social media platforms, websites, and online review sites, tourism businesses can engage potential visitors and create a compelling narrative around their attractions. This digital engagement not only helps in curating a positive destination image but also allows for real-time

feedback, enabling operators to address visitor concerns promptly and improve their services. Furthermore, incorporating customer-generated content, such as testimonials and travel blogs, can enhance credibility and foster a sense of community among travelers. This strategic approach to digital marketing can create a more immersive and interactive experience for tourists, thereby reinforcing their emotional and cognitive connections to the destination and ultimately increasing their satisfaction and likelihood of return visits.

### **Viral Marketing on Visitor Satisfaction**

This research found that VM has a significant effect on VS. The hypothesis was accepted as the t-value of the variable X3 is 2.275, which is greater than the t-table ( $2.275 > 1.984$ ). Viral marketing, also known as electronic WOM Marketing and social networking, is a digital marketing strategy that encourages individuals to spread marketing messages about products or services to others. This approach allows messages to spread quickly, potentially leading to exponential growth in exposure and influence (Devi, 2015). The most influential indicators of visitor satisfaction are message forwarding and content consumption. Word of Mouth Marketing and social media strategies have proven effective in disseminating information about tourist destinations in Central Sulawesi. Word of Mouth is conducted verbally to convince others, while social media disseminates information about tourist destinations online. By doing so, tourist destinations in Central Sulawesi become more known to the public, and the information shared by previous visitors helps to attract more tourists. In turn, it generates curiosity among people to visit the places recommended by previous visitors.

Viral marketing strategies, whether through Word of Mouth or social media, are relatively new in tourism marketing. Commonly, viral marketing is used to introduce products or goods to the public (Ali Tavasoli, 2021; Pescher et al., 2014; van Kevin Le, 2022). However, the tourism management in Central Sulawesi has utilized these strategies to increase visitor satisfaction, which can lead to increased visitors. The Head of the Togean Islands Tourism Office (BTNKT) noted that the number of tourists in the Togean Islands increased by 264 visitors at the beginning of 2023 compared to the same month in 2022, which recorded 1,331 visitors. There are various factors contributing to this increase, including the lifting of PPKM regulations. After removing these regulations, tourism management conducted various improvements and more massive marketing using viral marketing strategies to boost visitor numbers. One of the methods used was inviting public figures or tourism ambassadors to help promote tourist destinations in the Togean Islands.

This study strengthens previous research findings that viral marketing can enhance visitor satisfaction. Xia Hong et al. (2022) found that viral marketing through social media influences visitor satisfaction. Viral marketing on social media can help promote tourist destinations to a broader audience. Alkharabsheh et al. (2011) stated that viral marketing makes it easier for visitors to obtain information quickly and easily, positively impacting visitor satisfaction. Miyoung Jeong et al. (2019) found that viral marketing through social media can increase visitor satisfaction and lead to repeat visits. In the context of the tourism industry, the application of viral marketing strategies signifies a paradigm shift in how destinations engage with potential visitors. The industry's emphasis on digital transformation has necessitated a deeper integration of technology in marketing practices, facilitating real-time interactions and feedback loops between tourists and service providers. For instance, leveraging social media platforms not only enhances brand visibility but also fosters community building among travelers, creating a sense of belonging and shared experience. Additionally, the strategic involvement of influencers and tourism ambassadors in promotional campaigns underscores the industry's recognition of

the power of personal branding and trust in driving visitor engagement. This approach aligns with the growing trend of experiential marketing, where emotional connections and memorable experiences are prioritized. Consequently, as the industry continues to evolve, the adoption of innovative marketing techniques like viral marketing will be crucial in sustaining competitive advantage and enhancing visitor satisfaction in a dynamic market landscape.

### **EM, DI, and VM Impact on Visitor Satisfaction**

This research found that the three variables, experiential marketing (EM), destination image (DI), and viral marketing (VM), have a positive simultaneous impact on visitor satisfaction. This evidence is indicated by the F-table value, which demonstrates a positive simultaneous effect on the Y variable. While the partial analysis suggests that the X2 variable does not influence the Y variable, the simultaneous analysis shows that all three variables impact Y. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is accepted. Experiential marketing plays a crucial role in creating satisfying experiences for visitors. Experiential marketing can influence visitors' perceptions and experiences of a destination through sensory, emotional, and cognitive stimuli. Positive and satisfying experiences obtained through experiential marketing can increase visitor satisfaction. Destination image also plays an essential role in influencing visitor satisfaction. A positive destination image leads to visitors having positive perceptions about the quality and attractiveness of the destination. Attractive and unique destination images can increase visitor interest, trigger curiosity, and enrich their experiences, ultimately contributing to higher levels of satisfaction (Nghoi Quynh, 2021).

Viral marketing is critical in influencing visitors' perceptions and interest in a destination. By spreading marketing messages through online channels and social networks, viral marketing can build awareness, interest, and engagement among visitors toward a destination. If viral marketing successfully creates positive buzz and enhances visitor interest, it can positively impact visitor satisfaction (Firdaus, 2022). In the tourism industry, integrating EM and VM strategies can significantly enhance a destination's competitive advantage. Destinations can differentiate themselves in a crowded market by creating memorable experiences that resonate with visitors emotionally and sensorially. This differentiation can lead to increased visitor loyalty, as satisfied visitors are more likely to return and recommend the destination to others. Moreover, the use of viral marketing amplifies the impact of these experiences by leveraging social proof and community engagement, which can be particularly effective in attracting new visitors. For tourism operators and marketers, understanding the interplay between these elements allows for more targeted campaigns that can optimize marketing budgets and enhance overall effectiveness. By harnessing the power of experiential and viral marketing, destinations can not only improve visitor satisfaction but also create a sustainable model for long-term growth and development in the tourism sector.

Therefore, destination managers and marketers must consider integrating experiential and viral marketing strategies to enhance visitor satisfaction and strengthen a positive destination image. Through satisfying experiences, managers can create attractive and unique destination images, while viral marketing can expand the reach of marketing messages and strengthen visitor interest. By leveraging the correlation of these three factors, destinations can achieve higher levels of visitor satisfaction and build a positive reputation among potential visitors.

These findings not only confirm the positive impact of experiential marketing, destination image, and viral marketing on visitor satisfaction but also enrich modern

leadership and communication theories in the digital era. Drawing on the concept of *digital trust* and *cross-distance collaboration*, the results highlight that trust and effective coordination can be established even in virtual contexts, where communication and interaction occur through digital platforms. This reinforces the idea that technology-mediated environments require leaders and organizations to build credibility, consistency, and responsiveness as the foundation of engagement.

From a practical standpoint, the results emphasize the need for virtual leaders and destination managers to maintain team motivation and coordination through adaptive digital communication. Leaders can enhance engagement by fostering emotional connection, encouraging participation, and providing constructive feedback in online interactions. These practices align with transformational leadership principles that encourage empowerment, trust, and shared vision across geographically dispersed teams. Furthermore, the ethical and well-being dimensions of virtual collaboration must not be overlooked. In digital work and communication environments, leaders must balance efficiency and technological control with empathy and psychological safety. Overreliance on algorithmic monitoring or data-driven evaluation may reduce individual autonomy and trust. Therefore, a humane approach that integrates empathy into digital leadership is essential to sustaining well-being and long-term engagement.

This study is not without limitations. The respondents were drawn from a single type of occupation and geographical setting, without distinguishing among industry sectors or regions. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings to other forms of digital work. In addition, the use of self-reported data may involve perception bias. Future studies are encouraged to examine moderating factors such as team diversity, communication platform type, and leader digital competency to expand the application of digital leadership and trust-based collaboration frameworks in various contexts.

This research has practical implications for tourism managers in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, and beyond. Currently, the trend to improve visitor satisfaction and increase the number of tourists can be achieved using three marketing strategies: experiential marketing, destination image, and viral marketing. Collaborating these three variables can lead to increased visitor satisfaction and tourist numbers. Tourism managers can provide visitors with compelling and emotional experiences. In this way, using social media, visitors will share their experiences, either through word of mouth or electronic EWOM. The positive impact of these variables can contribute to forming a positive destination image in Central Sulawesi.

The first limitation of this study is that it only focuses on visitor satisfaction. The findings may be relevant for similar studies, but the results may differ for destinations with many attractions or activities. The quality of services tourism providers provide is also a crucial factor in enhancing visitor satisfaction. Additionally, the timing of the study can also influence the results. Researching on weekdays versus weekends or holidays can lead to different results. We recommend using a longitudinal approach is recommended to compare two periods. Another limitation lies in the dependent variable, which may benefit from adding information about repeat visits or increased frequency. Doing so can strengthen the correlation between the variables, providing valuable insights for tourism operators.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the explanations above, this study concludes that the three variables simultaneously impact visitor satisfaction. However, in partial analysis, the X1 and X3

variables positively influence, while the X2 variable does not. The X1 and X3 variables are correlated and related to marketing strategies. The X1 variable is associated with the experiences of visitors who have previously visited Central Sulawesi and their emotional responses to the tourist destinations. Subsequently, they share this information with others through WOM or EWOM as part of VM. The positive influence of these variables contributes to forming a positive destination image in Central Sulawesi.

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