



A Review of Research on Tourist Motivation after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Tourist motivation is an important issue in tourism research. With the continuous changes in tourism contexts, related studies have continued to expand in terms of methods, theories, and research content, yet the field as a whole remains relatively fragmented. This study adopts a literature review method to provide a systematic review of tourist motivation research. The findings indicate that existing studies are still dominated by quantitative methods, while qualitative research and mixed-methods research are gradually increasing. The application of theory shows a parallel trend of single-theory use and multi-theory integration. Research content mainly focuses on motivational structure and its relationship with tourist behavior. Overall, tourist motivation research has produced relatively rich findings, but it still faces problems such as methodological path dependence, insufficient theoretical integration, and inadequate depth in contextualized research. Future studies should further strengthen interdisciplinary theoretical integration, promote methodological diversification, and deepen research on tourist motivation across different tourism contexts.

Keywords: tourist motivation; literature review; research methods; theoretical foundations; tourist behavior.

Received: 5/1/2026

Accepted: 7/1/2026

Published: 7/10/2026

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1. Introduction

Tourism is of great value in people's lives because individuals can derive satisfaction and enjoyment from such activities [1]. Tourist motivation is generally regarded as an important factor influencing tourists' pursuit of satisfaction and enjoyment, as motivation essentially refers to a tendency or state of need that drives individuals to engage in actions capable of fulfilling those needs [2]. With the continuous development of related studies, tourist motivation has gradually become an important research topic in the field of tourism and a fundamental component of tourist behavior [3]. From psychological and sociological perspectives, researchers have explored the drivers underlying tourists' needs and have used them to examine tourists' psychological states and behavioral patterns. Through a substantial body of theoretical and conceptual research, scholars have explained the internal and external factors that lead tourists to adopt particular forms of travel [4]. These motivational factors play a crucial role in tourist behaviors such as travel decision-making, benefit seeking, and attitudinal responses[5] . Tourists often attempt to escape the pressures of daily life and surroundings through travel in order to seek rest and relaxation and relieve mental fatigue. Therefore, understanding tourists' travel motivations can provide important implications for tourism marketers[6] .

In recent years, the outbreak of COVID-19 has severely affected the tourism industry, leading to continuous adjustments in the management policies and practices of tourist destinations. At the same time, under strict travel restriction policies, tourists were forced to change their modes of interaction, travel patterns, and behavioral practices [7], which in turn directly influenced their travel motivations and choices [8]. For example, some young people, feeling restricted in their freedom and unable to explore new places due to the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced an increasing desire to travel, which even contributed to post-pandemic travel behavior. Evidence has shown that individuals' perceptions of COVID-19 and their past experiences shape their post-pandemic travel decisions [9]. As the COVID-19 pandemic seriously hindered the development of the tourism industry, academia began to pay increasing attention to the survival, recovery, and development of tourism, and regarded tourists' travel intentions and the antecedents of their behavior, such as motivation and constraints, as important research topics [7], in an effort to stimulate travel behavior and support tourism recovery. Existing studies have confirmed that tourist motivation helps explain tourists' travel behavior and can account for the differences in travel behavior before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic [10]. Research conducted during the pandemic not only explored new factors influencing tourist motivation, but also placed greater emphasis on factors that might weaken travel intention, thereby highlighting basic concerns related to health and safety needs[11] .

In 2023, as the COVID-19 pandemic gradually stabilized, the World Health Organization declared the end of the global health emergency phase of COVID-19, and the social and economic conditions of countries and regions gradually improved. The tourism industry also entered a new stage of development [12]. Since the COVID-19 pandemic not only altered tourists' travel perceptions but also reshaped their tourism-related consumption behaviors [13], it is necessary to examine the new changes and emerging dimensions of tourist motivation from new perspectives. Accordingly, this study reviews the existing literature on tourist motivation, summarizes the themes, dimensions, applied research, and theoretical foundations of tourist motivation studies in recent years, and on this basis proposes future research directions, with the aim of providing a useful

reference for subsequent related studies.

2. Research Method

A systematic literature review is a rigorous method that evaluates existing evidence through a repeatable, scientific, and transparent process, with the aim of minimizing bias arising from the random inclusion or exclusion of studies during the review process [14]. The search strategy of a systematic literature review generally includes specifying the databases used for the literature search, defining the search terms and keywords employed to identify relevant studies, and providing a detailed description of the screening and exclusion criteria from both practical perspectives (e.g., language and accessibility) and methodological perspectives (e.g., time range and article type) [15]. This study adopts a literature review approach and conducts a systematic search of major tourism-related academic journals in the Web of Science database to review and analyze the academic literature on tourist motivation in the post-COVID-19 era (from 2023 onward). The search was conducted using the following specific keywords: “tourism motivation,” “travel motivation,” “post-COVID-19 pandemic era,” and “after the COVID-19 pandemic ends.”

Based on the initial search results, the retrieved studies were further screened to identify those that met the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) studies on tourist motivation; (2) published literature focusing on tourist motivation in the post-pandemic era or in the context of “after the COVID-19 pandemic ends”; (3) literature published after 2023; and (4) studies with data collected after 2023. Articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria, as well as book chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, and editorial materials, were excluded. After multiple rounds of screening and the removal of duplicate studies and articles that failed to meet the inclusion criteria, a set of relevant studies on tourist motivation was finally identified as the basis for analysis in this study. According to the needs of the study, some descriptive evidence may be drawn from literature published in other years, but this does not affect the findings and conclusions of the present study.

3. Main Contents of Tourist Motivation Research

This study focuses on the current state of tourist motivation research from the post-COVID-19 era to the present, and reviews and synthesizes the existing literature mainly from the perspectives of research methods, theoretical foundations, research themes, and formation mechanisms.

3.1 Research Methods in Tourist Motivation Studies

According to the findings of the existing literature review, tourist motivation research has developed a relatively clear methodological structure, in which quantitative methods occupy a dominant position, while qualitative and mixed-methods approaches serve as important supplements. Together, they constitute the current methodological system of tourist motivation research. Different research methods have their own characteristics in terms of research objectives, explanatory paths, and scope of application, and to some extent, they also reflect the developmental trend of tourist motivation research from single-variable testing toward comprehensive explanation and multidimensional analysis.

First, quantitative research methods remain the primary research approach in tourist motivation studies, involving a total of 34 related articles. Overall, such studies generally take statistical analysis and model testing as their core technical route. They first employ methods such as parallel mediation analyses [1], multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) [16], statistical analysis [17], Canonical Correlation Analysis [18], multigroup confirmatory factor analysis [19], principal component analysis [20], Harman's single-factor test [21], and factor analysis [22] to examine variable structure, dimensional classification, and measurement quality. On this basis, they further adopt structural equation modeling methods, such as partial least squares [23] and multigroup structural equation modeling [16], to analyze the path relationships among latent variables and their underlying mechanisms. In addition to structural equation modeling, methods such as Multiple regression model [24], analysis of variance [25], Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) [26], Ordinary Least Square (OLS) [27], Transformer model [28], fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) [29], and scale development [30] have also been widely applied in quantitative research on tourist motivation. This shows that current tourist motivation research has developed a methodological paradigm centered on statistical analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modeling, while gradually incorporating emerging analytical tools to enhance the explanatory power and practical value of research findings. Second, qualitative research methods account for a relatively small proportion in tourist motivation research, involving only three studies. However, they still possess irreplaceable research value in explaining complex tourism phenomena, revealing tourists' subjective experiences, and understanding individuals' meaning construction in the tourism process. Existing related studies mainly adopt methods such as in-depth interviews [31], Q-methodology [32], and factor analysis [33] to conduct in-depth analyses of the internal logic underlying the formation of tourist motivation from the perspectives of tourists' cognition, emotions, and value judgments. Compared with quantitative research, qualitative research pays greater attention to the subjective meanings, contextual settings, and experiential expressions behind tourism behavior. Therefore, it has unique advantages in exploring the deep psychological mechanisms, individual differences, and contextual characteristics of tourist motivation. Although the number of such studies is currently limited, they still have important methodological significance in compensating for the shortcomings of quantitative research in terms of explanatory depth.

Third, as the complexity of tourism research issues continues to increase, some scholars have begun to adopt mixed research methods that combine quantitative and qualitative approaches, with a total of 11 related studies identified. Overall, mixed-methods research usually employs multi-stage research designs that organically integrate qualitative exploration, variable refinement, scale construction, and quantitative testing, so as to achieve multiple forms of validation for both the research process and the research results. For example, [9] combined online surveys and in-depth interviews to collect data and used inductive content analysis to organize and analyze the materials. [34] employed open-ended essay questions to obtain qualitative data, used content analysis to extract key research content, and subsequently conducted empirical testing through partial least squares structural equation modeling. [35] collected data based on a cross-sectional design and, while using structural equation modeling to test the net effects of causal paths, further adopted Analysis of Necessary Conditions (NCA) to identify the antecedent conditions for the formation of tourists' behavioral intentions, and combined fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to examine the patterns of influence formed by multiple factor configurations. [36] first obtained data through in-depth interviews, refined key dimensions

through factor analysis, and ultimately used structural equation modeling to test the relationships among variables. [37] collected qualitative data through open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews, used content analysis to extract new motivational factors, developed a new motivation measurement tool by combining these findings with existing scales, and then conducted further quantitative research, with the empirical validation ultimately completed through structural equation modeling. [38], by contrast, first used grounded theory to identify the key factors influencing impulsive travel intention, and then applied fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis to examine the configurational effects of these factors. It can thus be seen that mixed-methods research effectively integrates the strengths of quantitative research in structural testing with the advantages of qualitative research in explanatory depth, demonstrating stronger comprehensive explanatory power in revealing the formation mechanisms of tourist motivation, the relationships among variables, and their complex configurational pathways.

Overall, the current methodological system of tourist motivation research exhibits a basic pattern characterized by the predominance of quantitative research, the supplementary role of qualitative research, and the gradual increase of mixed-methods research. The widespread application of quantitative methods has enhanced the standardization, testability, and model-building capacity of tourist motivation research, enabling researchers to reveal more systematically the dimensional structure of tourist motivation, its influencing mechanisms, and its relationships with related variables. Qualitative research, by contrast, plays an important role in uncovering individual experiences, subjective cognition, and meaning construction. The rise of mixed-methods research has further promoted tourist motivation research from a sole focus on testing variable relationships toward a more comprehensive research path that places greater emphasis on process explanation, contextual embeddedness, and multidimensional validation. However, viewed as a whole, current research still shows a certain degree of path dependence in methodological application, with considerable concentration on questionnaire surveys and statistical model analysis, while remaining insufficient in revealing the dynamic evolution of tourist motivation, contextual differences, and deep psychological mechanisms. Future research should, on the basis of consolidating the strengths of quantitative research, further strengthen the use of longitudinal research designs, mixed-methods research, and cross-context comparative studies, so as to promote the methodological development of tourist motivation research toward a more comprehensive and in-depth direction.

3.2 Theoretical Foundations of Tourist Motivation Research

According to the findings of the existing literature review, the theoretical foundations of tourist motivation research are characterized by broad sources and diverse types. Different theories not only differ in the ways they are introduced into research, but also play different roles in the construction of research frameworks, the explanation of relationships among variables, and market segmentation and measurement. Overall, the application of theory in current tourist motivation research is mainly manifested in two basic paths, namely the use of a single theory and the combined use of two or more theories. This characteristic indicates that tourist motivation research has gradually shifted from the early single-dimensional explanation based on classical theories toward a more diversified theoretical integration oriented to complex tourism contexts.

First, the use of a single theory remains an important theoretical approach in tourist motivation research, mainly

reflected in three aspects: the construction of theoretical frameworks, market segmentation and measurement, and the explanation of relationships among variables. In terms of theoretical framework construction, related studies usually take a specific theory as the overall analytical foundation to define core concepts, clarify the logical relationships among variables, and provide a theoretical basis for the formulation of research hypotheses and the testing of models. According to the results of the literature review, current scholarship mainly constructs research frameworks based on the Theory of Planned Behavior [1], the Travel Career Pattern model [39], the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) theory [40–43], the motivation-opportunity-ability (MOA) model [44], and Complexity theory [45]. These theories provide relatively solid theoretical support for tourist motivation research from different dimensions, including the formation of behavioral intention, the evolution of tourist motivation, the mechanisms of environmental stimuli, the conditions for behavioral realization, and system complexity. In terms of market segmentation and measurement analysis, existing studies mainly rely on Push–Pull Theory [18,20,46] and Self-Determination Theory [47] to identify, classify, and measure types of tourist motivation. Specifically, Push–Pull Theory emphasizes the internal driving forces and external attractions underlying tourism behavior, and therefore has been widely applied in tourism market segmentation and the identification of motivational dimensions. Self-Determination Theory, by contrast, pays greater attention to autonomy, psychological needs, and differences in motivation quality behind individual behavior, and thus also demonstrates strong applicability in the measurement and classification of tourist motivation. Such studies not only help reveal the motivational characteristics of different tourist groups, but also provide theoretical references for tourism product development and market positioning. In explaining relationships among variables, some classical theories have been further extended to interpret the relationships between tourist motivation and other behavioral, attitudinal, and psychological variables. For example, studies based on Push–Pull Theory have explored the relationships between tourist motivation and tourists' emotions [16], as well as the shaping of environmental attitudes [48].

Studies grounded in Self-Determination Theory have examined the associations between tourist motivation and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [23], autonomous travel motivation, ecologically responsible attitudes and subjective well-being [49], the psychological needs and motivations that drive individual action [50], as well as tourism participation and destination psychological ownership [51]. In addition, some scholars have introduced Schwartz's Theory of Human Values [19], Functional Attitude Theory [32], Complexity Theory [35], Generational Theory [52], stress and coping theory [53], and Leisure Constraints Theory [54], among others, to explore tourist motivation and its relationships with related variables from different perspectives. This indicates that the theoretical sources of tourist motivation research have gradually moved beyond the traditional scope of tourism studies and have begun to extensively incorporate theoretical resources from psychology, sociology, and behavioral science, thereby continuously expanding research perspectives and explanatory boundaries. It is worth noting that [55] systematically reviewed the evolutionary trajectory of Push–Pull Theory in the field of tourism and elaborated in detail on the value and status of this theory in tourist motivation research, further highlighting its foundational influence in this field.

Second, as the complexity of tourism research issues continues to increase, the combined application of two or more theories has gradually become another important trend in tourist motivation research, mainly reflected in the construction of theoretical frameworks, the explanation of relationships among variables, and market

segmentation and measurement. In terms of theoretical framework construction, some studies integrate multiple theoretical resources in order to enhance the explanatory power and applicability of research models. For example, [17] constructed a theoretical framework by combining the Travel Career Pattern model and the Push–Pull model, while [60] developed a research framework through the integrated use of Social Identity Theory, Contact Theory, and Norm Activation Theory. Through the synergy of multiple theories, such studies can not only explain the formation and evolution of tourist motivation from different dimensions, but also help expand the analytical depth and theoretical scope of research questions.

In explaining relationships among variables, the application of multiple theories is even more prominent. For example, studies based on Self-Determination Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior have explored the determinants of Generation Z's and Generation Y's participation in metaverse tourism [21], as well as the key factors influencing women's attitudes toward and intentions for solo travel [56]. Reference [34] examined the relationship between flow experience theory and Push–Pull Theory in order to reveal the interactive mechanism between tourist motivation and the tourism experience process. Reference [57], drawing on approach-and-avoidance theory and social identity theory, and incorporating the moderating roles of tourist motivation, emotions, and the intensity of social interaction with peers, revealed the food avoidance tendency among digital nomads. It can be seen that multi-theoretical integration enables researchers to take into account individual psychological mechanisms, social interaction factors, and behavioral outcomes within the same analytical framework, thereby providing a more comprehensive explanation of the complex relationships between tourist motivation and related variables.

In market segmentation and measurement analysis, some studies have also attempted to enhance the scientific rigor of motivation identification and measurement through multi-theoretical integration. For example, [36] derived seven dimensions of micro-vacation motivation based on Push–Pull Theory and Protection Motivation Theory; [58], on the basis of Push–Pull Theory, developed a motivation measurement scale and further constructed an overall analytical framework by incorporating Complexity Theory. Such studies indicate that multi-theoretical integration not only helps improve the dimensional classification and scale construction of tourist motivation, but also provides more layered theoretical support for subsequent model analysis.

Overall, the theoretical foundations of existing tourist motivation research show a developmental trend from the dominance of single-theory application toward the parallel development of single-theory use and multi-theoretical integration. The widespread application of single theories has provided tourist motivation research with relatively clear analytical frameworks and stable explanatory foundations, helping related studies become increasingly standardized in terms of concept definition, variable measurement, and relationship testing. Multi-theoretical integration, by contrast, has to some extent responded to the complexity of tourism phenomena and enhanced both the breadth and depth of explanation in research models. However, judging from the existing findings, both single-theory use and multi-theoretical integration still exhibit certain limitations. On the one hand, in some studies, the use of theory remains at the level of mere “introduction,” and the justification of theoretical applicability boundaries, contextual fit, and internal logic is still insufficient. On the other hand, studies involving multi-theoretical integration also show a tendency toward piecemeal combination, in which the logical linkage, division of functions, and complementary mechanisms among different theories have not yet

been fully clarified. Therefore, future research needs, on the basis of deepening the application of classical theories, to further strengthen the analysis of the fit between theory and specific tourism contexts, promote effective dialogue and systematic integration among different theories, and thereby enhance the explanatory depth and theoretical innovation capacity of tourist motivation research.

3.3 Main Contents of Tourist Motivation Research

3.3.1 Research on the Structure of Tourist Motivation

3.3.1.1 The Dichotomous Structure of Motivation

The dichotomous structure of tourist motivation mainly has two forms of classification. The first is based on the push-pull theory, a classic theory in tourism research. The push-pull theory is regarded as identifying two types of factors that shape travel decision-making. Among them, push factors refer to individuals' internal emotional or psychological needs, such as relaxation, appreciation of nature, and escape from routine, which constitute the internal driving forces that motivate people to travel. Pull factors, by contrast, refer to the external situations or destination attributes that attract individuals to a particular tourist destination, such as natural and cultural resources [48,59]. In the tourism industry, push and pull factors influence people's travel decisions and their specific choices of destination, which has become a widely recognized consensus in tourism research [16]. Therefore, applying the push-pull theory to classify motivational structure is of considerable importance in tourism research. Another way of classifying the dichotomous structure of tourist motivation is based on psychological categories. Scholars, drawing on Self-Determination Theory as the theoretical foundation, classify tourist motivation around the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence [21]. According to the perspective of SDT, human behavior is shaped by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as by individuals' internal and external self-regulation in relation to social integration, psychological growth, and well-being [50]. Tourists' behavioral intentions are influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation usually involves individuals' interests, values, and desires, such as self-improvement, self-display, pleasure and presentation, adventure, and escape. Extrinsic motivation is typically driven by external forces, such as social recognition, social obligation, social interaction, team building, altruism, and expectations of reciprocity [23][42].

3.3.1.2 Multidimensional Motivation Structure

Tourist motivation is complex, dynamic, and multidimensional, and it shows significant differences across different contexts. Generally speaking, it can be classified into ten domains: self, achievement, novelty, well-being, nostalgia, knowledge, escape, hedonism, rest and comfort, and social interaction [45]. Given the complexity of tourist motivation, its dimensional classification is not limited to the above ten domains. For example, Package adventure tourism involves motivations related to Predetermined price and safety [30]; Japanese tourists involve autonomy motivation [33]; senior tourism involves motivations related to convenience and availability [51]; and tourists with disabilities involve prosocial motivations [60].

3.3.1.3 Research on Motivation-Based Segmentation

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of consumers' psychology and behavior, a large market can be divided into smaller and more homogeneous segments, thereby allowing different marketing strategies to be applied in a targeted manner. Researchers may use a variety of methods to segment the market and identify the profiles of the resulting segments, and the results generated by this approach are valuable for managers [20]. Studies have found that different travel motivations are closely associated with differences in tourist characteristics, including age, gender, and travel experience.

Therefore, tourism marketers need to segment tourists according to their different characteristics so as to better understand the travel motivations of different groups [19]. Researchers have conducted segmentation studies on leisure tourists [18], medical tourists [20], geotourists [24], tourists at urban tourism destinations [26], pet tourists [29], solo travelers [32], and outbound tourists with mild dementia [62]. Some studies have further segmented tourists from the perspective of different generations [21,25,52].

3.3.2 Tourist Motivation and Tourist Behavior

Research on tourist motivation often has an impact on tourist behavior, because motivation is one of the most important driving forces of human behavior. It refers to the process that drives individuals to act in a particular way when consumers develop needs that they wish to satisfy. At the same time, motivation is also a key variable in explaining tourist behavior and is generally regarded as one of the most important influencing factors [52]. In tourism research, studies on tourist motivation mainly involve tourist behaviors such as satisfaction and loyalty, tourism experience, and behavioral intention.

3.3.2.1 Motivation—Satisfaction and Loyalty

Motivation and satisfaction are two key factors that determine individual behavior in the tourism field. Motivation can trigger tourism behavior and influence multiple aspects of tourism activities, including satisfaction [66]. Tourist motivation is closely related to satisfaction. When tourists' psychological needs associated with travel motivation are fulfilled, their overall tourism satisfaction increases, and numerous studies have confirmed the correlation between the two [37]. For example, food tourists' motivation to pursue the quality and uniqueness of food often affects their satisfaction [22]. In fact, tourist motivation can not only enhance tourist satisfaction, but also indirectly improve life satisfaction and further strengthen tourists' revisit intention [37].

Studies conducted in different tourism contexts have shown that tourists' motivation influences their loyalty, and tourist motivation is often regarded as an important antecedent of loyalty. For example, the motivation to travel with pets significantly affects loyalty [29]. In many cases, satisfaction influenced by motivation can further affect loyalty [67]. For instance, food tourists' motivation can lead them to achieve a high level of satisfaction during the travel process and further generate destination loyalty [22]; health motivation influences satisfaction through engagement, which in turn affects loyalty [40].

For tourist destinations, if managers wish to maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and loyalty, they must effectively manage tourists' expectations and motivations [68].

3.3.2.2 Motivation—Tourism Experience

Tourism experience is understood as a form of hedonic consumption, through which tourists satisfy their psychological needs and consequently gain a sense of well-being. With the continuous development of the experience economy, personal growth and self-realization have gradually received greater attention [64]. Tourism experience has increasingly become a type of experience that tourists seek in the process of exploring destinations—one that is authentic, fulfilling, meaningful, multisensory, and capable of bringing about profound transformation. Such an experience provides tourists with a holistic opportunity for self-exploration and self-reassessment. It can serve as a medium for personal transformation and may also lead to profound inner changes that result in life-changing decisions.

Certain travel experiences may trigger deep and lasting changes within an individual, and some of these elements are closely related to tourists' needs, desires, and motivations [46,65]. From multiple dimensions and perspectives, including tourists' perceived differences in destination competitiveness [26], attitudes [24,48], festival tourism [31], past travel experiences [33], subjective well-being [45,49], memorable experiences [46], and subjective vitality [51], scholars have examined the relationship between tourist motivation and tourism experience.

3.3.2.3 Motivation—Behavioral Intention

Behavioral intention refers to the extent to which an individual plans to perform or avoid performing a particular behavior. It is determined by tourists' subjective consciousness, while motivation is an important antecedent factor influencing such subjective consciousness [52].

Behavioral intention usually includes revisit, recommendation, and travel decision-making, and it is often jointly influenced by multiple factors such as destination image, perceived value, tourist satisfaction, social media influence, and personal lifestyle. Tourist motivation plays a highly important role in promoting tourists' travel decision-making [39]. Motivations and experiences that tourists perceive as beneficial to their psychological and emotional needs, as well as to the overall image of the service, often encourage them to revisit and actively recommend the service [34]. Through studies on tourists participating in metaverse tourism [21], heritage tourism [23,35,63], ecotourism [27], yoga tourism [34], impulsive tourism [38], forest health tourism [41], film tourism [43], alpine skiing tourism [44], family tourism [47], mountaineering adventure tourism [54], solo tourism [56], and Zen meditation tourism [58], scholars have found that motivational factors related to autonomy, social attributes, authenticity, emotion, culture, relaxation, novelty, escape, adventure, entertainment, competence, intellectual stimulation, and destination attributes can directly or indirectly influence tourists' behavioral intentions, such as recommendation [34], revisit [58], and intention[56] .

In addition, reference [42], based on tourists' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, examined the relationship between these motivations and tourists' check-in intention. Reference [50], by analyzing content generated by

tourists on social media platforms, explored the relationships between tourist motivation and destination visit intention as well as willingness to pay. The study in reference [57] found that interpersonal escape-oriented travel motivation can significantly influence digital nomads' negative emotions and food avoidance behavior at the destination.

4. Discussion

Based on a systematic literature review, this study integrates the research methods, theoretical foundations, and core issues of tourism motivation studies in the post-pandemic period. The overall findings indicate that current research has moved beyond the early identification of motivations and has gradually advanced toward the modelling of motivational structures and the explanation of their relationships with satisfaction, loyalty, tourist experience, and behavioral intention. However, this field also reveals a clear structural tension: on the one hand, research objects have become increasingly complex; on the other hand, research methods and theoretical frameworks still largely follow established paths. This suggests that the central concern of tourism motivation research is no longer merely “what motivations exist”, but should further shift toward “under what contexts these motivations are formed, how they operate, and under what conditions they may become ineffective”. This shift is particularly important for understanding the reconstruction of tourist behavior in the post-pandemic context.

First, at the methodological level, this review finds that tourism motivation research in the post-pandemic period remains clearly dominated by quantitative methods and has developed a “standardized” research pathway centered on questionnaire surveys, factor analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modelling. In comparison, qualitative studies remain limited in number. Although mixed-methods research has increased to some extent, it still occupies a supplementary rather than a dominant position. This finding indicates that existing studies are more capable of answering the question of “whether significant relationships exist between variables”, but are less able to provide an in-depth explanation of “how motivations are generated, strengthened, suppressed, or transformed during the tourism process”. In other words, methodological maturity does not necessarily imply sufficient explanatory power. This is particularly relevant in motivation research. If research designs rely primarily on one-time cross-sectional self-reported data, then even when model fit is satisfactory and path coefficients are significant, the conclusions are still closer in essence to associational inference rather than causal identification in the strict sense. Causal explanation requires, at minimum, stronger information on temporal ordering, effective control of potential confounding factors, or longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs that are better suited to identifying the direction of effects. When important confounding variables are omitted, the direct, indirect, and total effects in SEM may all be subject to systematic bias. Therefore, statements frequently found in the existing literature, such as “motivation significantly influences nsatisfaction/loyalty/intention”, should be interpreted with greater caution. They should preferably be defined as “statistical associations” or “theory-supported directional inferences”, rather than being directly presented as strong causal relationships in the absence of a temporal dimension and counterfactual identification strategies.

Second, at the theoretical level, the review findings show that the Push–Pull framework remains the most common and dominant theoretical entry point in tourism motivation research, while the travel career pattern, the

theory of planned behavior, SOR, and self-determination theory serve as important supplements and extensions. The enduring vitality of the Push–Pull framework lies in its highly operational classification logic: internal push factors explain “why tourists travel”, whereas external pull factors explain “why they choose a particular destination”. This logic, from Dann’s [59] discussion of anomie and ego-enhancement to Crompton’s [70] classic interpretation of pleasure vacation motivations, and further to recent reflective reviews, has consistently constituted the basic grammar of tourism motivation research. However, precisely because of its considerable success, the Push–Pull framework can easily be treated as an “explanatory endpoint” rather than an “analytical starting point”. It is effective in classifying motivations, but may not be sufficient to explain how motivations are generated through the interaction of social norms, technological media, risk perception, and individual life trajectories. By contrast, self-determination theory introduces the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness into motivation research, thereby offering greater potential to reveal differences in motivational strength and motivational quality. It also reminds researchers that they should not only ask “whether a motivation exists”, but should further examine “how autonomous this motivation is, how it is internalized, and whether it is sustainable”. Therefore, this study argues that future tourism motivation research needs to move from “classificatory theoretical use” toward “generative theoretical explanation”; that is, it should shift from treating theory as an external framework for assembling variables to using theory to explain the formation mechanisms, hierarchical structures, and contextual triggering conditions of motivations.

Third, at the level of research content, the original manuscript identifies three relatively stable clusters of issues. The first concerns motivational structure, including dichotomous structures, multidimensional structures, scale development, and segmentation studies; the second focuses on the relationships between motivation and satisfaction and loyalty; and the third concerns the relationships between motivation, tourist experience, and behavioral intention. This classification is generally valid, but its theoretical implications require further clarification. The real value of research on motivational structure lies not merely in “listing how many dimensions there are”, but in revealing whether tourism motivation demonstrates stability across contexts. On the one hand, existing studies have continuously developed specialized scales for new contexts, new groups, and new products, such as package adventure tourism, micro-vacations, family tourism, anime tourism, and digital detox tourism. On the other hand, this “proliferation of scales” has also generated new problems: while the contextual adaptability of scales has improved, their comparability across studies has declined; although construct labels have become increasingly refined, their theoretical boundaries have not necessarily become clearer. As a result, researchers often repeatedly identify similar dimensions across different settings, such as novelty, escape, socialization, relaxation, meaning, and self-presentation, but rename them using different terms. Without measurement invariance tests across cultures, groups, and contexts, it is difficult for such studies to accumulate into more generalizable knowledge. Therefore, this study suggests that future scale development should shift from “reconstructing a new scale for each new setting” to a modular approach characterized by “stable core dimensions and extended contextual dimensions”. Specifically, a small number of comparable core motivational dimensions should be retained, while supplementary dimensions may be added according to specific tourism contexts, so as to balance theoretical accumulation with empirical sensitivity.

Regarding the relationship between motivation and tourist behavior, existing research has developed a relatively clear mainstream logic: motivation, as an antecedent variable, influences loyalty, revisit intention,

recommendation intention, and broader behavioral intention through satisfaction, involvement, perceived value, experience quality, or affective evaluation. This logic is broadly consistent with the classic explanatory pathway since Yoon and Uysal, and has also been widely extended in recent studies on nature-based tourism, health tourism, pet tourism, heritage tourism, and forest wellness tourism. However, two issues within this pathway still require further clarification. First, many studies assume that motivation is a stable input already determined “before travel”. In reality, however, the tourism process is often feedback-oriented: expectations influence experiences, experiences in turn modify initial motivations, and final behavioral intention becomes the outcome of this cyclical process. Second, behavioral outcomes are not simply a function of motivation; they are also jointly shaped by risk perception, social media exposure, destination image, opportunity structures, and constraints. If motivation is treated as the sole or primary antecedent, its explanatory power may be overstated. Particularly in the post-pandemic context, sense of safety, controllability, flexibility, and health awareness may not constitute “motivational dimensions” in the traditional sense, yet they exert a substantive filtering effect on travel intention. Therefore, a more appropriate theoretical expression would be that tourism motivation is an important precondition for behavior, but its effects are jointly shaped by contextual constraints and mediation–moderation mechanisms.

It is particularly important to emphasize that the post-pandemic context has not simply generated an entirely new set of tourism motivations. Rather, it has reshaped the relative importance of existing motivations and brought some previously peripheral factors to the center of research attention. For example, the pandemic has increased the importance of safety, hygiene, healing, proximity to nature, and controllability, while also bringing new phenomena such as metaverse tourism, virtual tourism, digital nomadism, check-in behavior, and platform-based content generation into the field of motivation research. This indicates that the key concern of post-pandemic research should not be to mechanically add “safety” to the traditional list of motivations, but to further distinguish which changes represent stress responses to short-term shocks and which have become embedded as medium- to long-term consumption logics and lifestyles. Without such differentiation, so-called “post-pandemic motivations” may easily become a set of time-specific descriptive labels rather than theoretical concepts with genuine explanatory power. For theoretical research, this requires tourism motivation to be understood as a contextualized, relational, and temporalized process variable. For practical management, it means that destination managers can no longer rely on static segmentation, but should instead develop dynamic stratification strategies based on risk perception, social needs, health-related demands, and technological preferences.

Based on the above findings, this study proposes two theoretical advances. First, tourism motivation should be elevated from an “attribute-based variable” to a “process-oriented mechanism”. Motivation does not simply reside within individuals; rather, it is activated, adjusted, and reconstructed through the interaction of personal needs, external environments, social relations, technological media, and specific tourism processes. Second, “context” should be elevated from a background condition to a core explanatory variable. Different types of tourism, travel stages, generational groups, and technological environments are not merely supplementary explanations after the interpretation of results; instead, they are key conditions that determine when motivations are triggered, how they are expressed, and whether they can be transformed into behavior. Accordingly, a more suitable analytical framework for future research should be a chain model of “needs–context–motivational

quality–experience transformation–behavioral consequences”, rather than a simple linear model of “motivation–outcome”.

At the practical level, the revised discussion also has clear implications. For destination managers, motivation research should not merely serve market segmentation, but should also inform product design and experience governance. If the target group places healing, safety, and autonomy at the center of its needs, product development should not remain limited to landscape packaging, but should instead make corresponding arrangements in rhythm design, crowding management, digital touchpoints, social boundaries, and service flexibility. If the target group is primarily driven by meaning-seeking or self-presentational expression, then content curation, storytelling, and shareability-oriented design become more critical than traditional promotion. For marketers, what truly needs to be managed is not the “average motivation of average tourists”, but the combinations of motivations activated in different contexts. For researchers, the most important task is not to continue proving that “motivation matters”, but to identify which motivations matter under which conditions, and how long such “importance” can be sustained.

5. Research Limitations

This study still has several limitations, and the boundaries of its conclusions should therefore be defined with caution. First, the literature search mainly relied on Web of Science and focused primarily on English-language journal articles. Although this approach enhanced the standardization and comparability of the sampled literature, it may have overlooked regionally representative studies indexed in Scopus, Google Scholar, and Chinese databases, thereby making the conclusions somewhat more inclined toward the mainstream English-language knowledge production system. Future research may adopt a multi-database search strategy and include multilingual literature for cross-validation.

Second, this study focuses on research conducted after 2023 in the “post-pandemic period”, while allowing a small number of earlier studies to serve as descriptive references. This design helps highlight the temporal context of the research, but it may also blur the boundary between “post-pandemic research” and “research continuing from the pandemic period”, thereby affecting the assessment of long-term trends. Future research may conduct stratified comparisons across three stages: “pre-pandemic, during-pandemic, and post-pandemic”, in order to improve explanatory precision in the temporal dimension.

Third, this study adopts a narrative–thematic synthesis rather than a meta-analytic approach. Therefore, it is able to reveal the knowledge structure and major points of debate in existing research, but it cannot integrate the effect sizes of relationships among different variables. In other words, the conclusions of this study regarding the relationships between motivation and satisfaction, experience, and behavioral intention are primarily directional summaries rather than estimates of effect magnitude. Future research may conduct meta-analyses when the sample size permits, in order to compare differences in the strength of variable relationships across different contexts.

Fourth, a large number of the original studies reviewed in this paper rely on cross-sectional surveys, single-

source self-reported data, and structural equation modelling. This means that the present study inevitably inherits the limitations of the original studies in terms of temporal ordering, common method bias, and control of omitted variables. Therefore, the mechanisms proposed in this study should be understood as “synthesized judgments with strong theoretical support”, rather than causal conclusions in the strict sense. Future research should further integrate longitudinal studies, experimental research, and tracking designs in order to enhance the rigor of mechanism explanation and causal identification.

Fifth, tourism motivation is highly context-dependent. Although this study has summarized relevant research across different types of tourism, different groups, and digitalized settings, it is still difficult to cover all emerging contexts. Therefore, the integrative framework proposed in this study is more appropriately understood as a middle-range theory rather than a universal law. Future research may employ cross-context comparative studies and measurement invariance tests to further examine the stability of different motivational dimensions across diverse sociocultural backgrounds.

Sixth, this study is organized around the main thread of “methods–theories–content”, which enhances the structural clarity of the review. However, this approach may also, to some extent, limit the depth of discussion on certain specific topics, such as generational differences, virtual tourism, digital nomadism, and tourism among special groups. Future research may further conduct topic-specific reviews on this basis in order to generate more fine-grained knowledge accumulation.

6. Conclusion

The important contribution of previous studies to the field of tourism motivation lies in providing a stable conceptual entry point for understanding “why people travel”. Starting from anomie and ego-enhancement, Dann[59]revealed that tourism is not merely a form of spatial movement, but rather a temporary way of regulating socio-psychological tensions. Crompton’s[70] classic study and its subsequent half-century review further established “socio-psychological push factors–destination pull factors” as one of the most influential analytical traditions in tourism motivation research. The strength of this approach lies in its clear classification and ease of measurement, and it has greatly promoted the empirical accumulation of tourism motivation research. However, its internal limitations are also evident: early studies often regarded motivation as a relatively stable antecedent cause and paid less attention to how motivations transform across different stages and contexts. Therefore, the strength of this theoretical tradition lies primarily in “identification” rather than “generation”.

Around this tradition, a first major debate in the literature concerns whether tourism motivation should be understood as a general construct that is comparable across contexts, or as a highly context-dependent local construct that needs to be redefined in specific settings. Studies supporting the former tend to maintain relatively stable frameworks, such as Push–Pull, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, or the travel career pattern, in order to facilitate market segmentation and cross-sample comparison. Studies supporting the latter, by contrast, continuously develop specialized scales for emerging phenomena such as micro-vacations, pet tourism, anime tourism, family tourism, digital detox tourism, and metaverse tourism. The problem is that excessive pursuit of

contextual segmentation may weaken knowledge accumulation; however, adherence to a single universal framework may also overlook new triggering mechanisms in the post-pandemic era, such as risk, platform-based self-presentation, virtual immersion, and health-related healing. In other words, previous research has not yet fully resolved the tension between “theoretical commensurability” and “contextual sensitivity”.

The second debate concerns theoretical explanatory power. The Push–Pull framework has been highly successful in empirical research, but its role is reflected more as a classificatory tool than as a mechanism-based theory. It can answer the question of “what push and pull factors tourists have”, but it has greater difficulty explaining why the same push factor may vary in strength across different individuals, cultures, and platform environments. It also offers limited explanation of how external incentives are internalized into more autonomous and stable behavioral drivers. For this reason, Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (SDT) has been increasingly introduced into tourism motivation research in recent years, as it enables researchers to move beyond the question of “whether motivation exists” toward issues of “differences in motivational quality” and “the satisfaction of basic psychological needs”. However, the current use of SDT remains insufficient. Many studies treat it merely as a set of labels for distinguishing “intrinsic/extrinsic motivation”, without fully examining how the three needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, frustrated, or shaped by platform mechanisms in tourism contexts. In other words, the main theoretical limitation of previous research does not lie in a shortage of theories, but in insufficient theoretical dialogue and inadequate application of theory to specific tourism contexts.

The third debate centers on methods and inference. Since the classic pathway proposed by Yoon and Uysal, the “motivation–satisfaction–loyalty” model has almost become the default model in tourism behavior research. Subsequent studies have further extended this pathway to outcome variables such as experience, perceived value, involvement, subjective well-being, and behavioral intention. The problem is not that this model is invalid in itself, but that it is often over-linearized and over-determined. A large number of studies, based on cross-sectional survey data, have drawn conclusions that “motivation influences behavioral outcomes” through SEM, PLS-SEM, or mediation effect tests, while paying insufficient attention to issues such as reverse relationships, common causes, sample self-selection, and temporal ordering. In recent years, fsQCA, necessary condition analysis, and mixed-methods research have, to some extent, moved beyond the assumption of a single causal pathway. Overall, however, tourism motivation research has not yet fully overcome the methodological inertia of equating “significant paths” with valid explanations. As a result, the literature has accumulated a large number of “supportive associations”, but still lacks high-strength evidence capable of identifying boundary conditions and causal directions.

The fourth issue worth noting is that the “novelty narrative” in post-pandemic literature is sometimes overstated. Admittedly, recent studies have emphasized the influence of safety, health, healing, virtual experiences, social media self-presentation, digital nomadism, and platform-generated content on tourism motivation. However, this does not mean that tourism motivation theory has undergone a fundamental rupture. More precisely, post-pandemic research reveals the reordering of existing motivational systems and their re-expression under new media conditions, rather than the complete invalidation of established theories. If all new phenomena are regarded as entirely new motivations, research may fall into conceptual inflation; yet if these changes are

ignored, opportunities for theoretical renewal may be missed. Therefore, what previous research truly needs is not more fragmented cases, but a middle-range explanatory framework capable of connecting classical theories with new contexts.

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