



Role of Tourist Perceived Safety in Destination Choice: A Mediation-Moderation Analysis

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Abstract

The present study examines the link between tourist perceived safety (PS) and tourist destination choice. Particularly, the mediator effect of tourist trust and the moderation effect of psychological ownership between tourist trust and tourist's destination choice has been investigated. The cluster sampling technique has been used for data collection through a self-administered questionnaire. Overall (380) questionnaires were utilized to examine the dataset. Furthermore, this research uses PLS-SEM to examine the data. The results reveal that the direct effect of the safety of facility and equipment elements, PS of the social environment, psychological ownership, and tourist trust is positive and significant in tourist destination choice. However, the direct effects of the PS of human elements and the PS of natural environment elements are insignificant tourist destination choices. Notably, the indirect effect of tourist trust as mediator findings demonstrate that the PS of management elements, PS of the social environment, and PS of facility and equipment essentials with tourist destination choice are significant. Interestingly, the current research results confirm the moderating effect of psychological ownership in tourist destination choice.

Introduction

The tourism industry is an engine of economic development that creates employment and enhances export revenue. As per the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2018) statistics, the global tourism arrival across destinations worldwide had been 1.4 billion in 2018 which indicates a growth of 6.0 percent from 2017 the second-highest annual boost since 2010. Therefore, tourism destination choice is an essential means to develop the tourism sector. Accordingly, the complexity of visitor's behavior in making destination choices is affected by both psychological and non-psychological factors considered important (Xue & Zhang, 2020). Similarly, scholars are of the view that destination image, motivation, and visit experience also play a significant part in choosing a specific tourism destination (Battour et al., 2017). The present study uses tourist's perceived safety (PS) as an important factor in destination choices (Sarfratz et al., 2022).

Destination choice is a complex procedure that is affected by numerous determinants (Pan, Rasouli, & Timmermans, 2021). It is pertinent to mention here that a recent study shows that it is important to study the determinants of destination choice (Nikola, Desislava, & Alexander, 2024). Tourist destination choice mainly depends upon the tourists' PS. It is clear in the tourism literature that the safety needs of tourists are the most

significant factor for choosing a destination. Safety perception is indispensable along with safety climate which builds the destination image. Tourism safety is a lifeline for tourism development. Hence, travel is inherently associated with risk and tourist perception has a crucial role in selecting a destination. Similarly, numerous factors are playing their role in the decline of tourism activities in Pakistan because of the tourist perceptions regarding security issues, terrorism, and devastating infrastructure due to natural disasters. Notably, terrorism, religious-based issues, and frequent natural disasters depict the level of risk for tourists. Accordingly, natural disasters spread havoc in the country and damaged the tourism sector badly worldwide, including in Pakistan. It has increased the tourist anxiety level of perceived risk and countless mobility restrictions for travelers (Rastegar, Higgins-Desbiolles, & Ruhanen, 2021; Seyfi, Hall, & Rasoolimanesh, 2020).

Notably, when tourists visit some country and enter a new environment, they may be unfamiliar with the new situation and confront problems such as discomfort, sense of insecurity, and terror (Guan et al., 2022). Terrorism has become a global problem that affected 44 nations that may have incurred one dangerous terrorist incident in 2021. Usually, the target of terrorist attacks is tourists (Walters, Wallin, & Hartley, 2019). Hence, the threat to tourism is terrorism, which affects the tourist's sense of protection (Kubickova, 2019). As far as Pakistan

is concerned, a prior study reveals that the overall contribution of travel and tourism to the country's GDP has declined from 5.7% to 4.4% in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Similarly, the contribution of tourism to total employment in Pakistan has reduced due to COVID-19 from 5.5 % in 2019 to 4.8% in 2020. Besides COVID-19, other factors such as terrorism, crime, poor infrastructure, political instability, and corruption enhance the risk perception of visiting Pakistan's various tourism areas. This country has an unparalleled ability to develop into a significant tourist destination because of its pure countryside and distinct civilization. It is evident from the literature that a tourist's attributes and destination characteristics such as facilities which are offered by the destination when making a travel decision matter a lot. Tourists determine on which purpose to visit based on the selected criteria as a part of a complex decision-making process that is destination choice. Both national and international tourists are influenced by destination marketing.

Particularly, destination planners, businesses, and tourism organizations need to have an understanding of the mechanism of tourist destination selection. Hence, it is significantly important to examine the determinants of destination choice specifically for domestic destination selections (Nikola et al., 2024). More specifically, a tourist's destination choice has been considered as a complex decision-making process that is affected by psychological factors such as attitude, motivation, image, and belief—however, non-psychological determinants like cost of travel, destination attributes, and user characteristics. For instance, various studies pay attention to both psychological and non-psychological factors (Xue & Zhang, 2020). Indeed, the decline in global tourism is evidence of the poor safety risk, and security at the concerned destinations (UNWTO, 2018). Even in developed countries like China, many studies argued that unfamiliar environments may increase concerns of Chinese tourists regarding security and authentic information of tourist destinations (Zou & Mawby, 2021). Notably, various studies are conducted within different geographical destinations and future studies from the perspective of travelers can be conducted in developing nations like Pakistan. Hence, the present research enriches the literature by filling this contextual gap to study Pakistan as a desired tourist destination which is the scope of this study. Relatedly, existing literature discusses this variable as an independent variable while some studies used PS as a moderator in a study that analyzed the moderated mediation model (Patwardhan et al., 2020). Minor studies used various dimensions of tourist-PS while investigating the destination. The present study fills this gap of literature which will be helpful for the extension of literature.

Preceding literature has merely examined the mediating effect of destination psychological possession and stated the direct effect of destination psychological while there is a lack of research inspecting the profound psychological ownership instrument of precisely how it influences destination choices.

Few studies depict the use of psychological ownership as an independent variable (Xu et al., 2023). Therefore, it is argued that psychological ownership signifies a crucial psychological link among travelers and the concerned destinations. Hence, it is imperative to comprehend the moderating link of this variable to destination choice which is an unfilled gap. So, the present research investigates the psychological ownership of tourist destinations and choices. Interestingly, the present study associates the moderating link of psychological ownership between tourist trust and tourist destination choice to extend the existing literature.

Especially, psychological ownership is an important variable that affects destination choice and its moderating role in the literature has been ignored. In the extant theoretical literature, the psychological ownership role is missing as a moderator between tourist trust and destination choice the present study's objective is to fill this gap (Sarraz et al., 2022). Prior studies have recommended that destination choice has become the compulsory area for research for building the competitiveness of visitor's places. The worldwide tourism industry has experienced considerable growth in recent decades, noticeable by an important rise in the number of persons active in international tourism for leisure and recreational purposes (UNWTO, 2018). The tourism industry contributes not only national economy but also to the global economy. For instance, Prior literature shows that tourism influences economic development in the long run (Orhan et al., 2021). In general, the tourism industry faced immense challenges in 2019. Accordingly, this industry accounts for 6.1% of the Global GDP in the year 2021 but is still covered. In this context, despite consuming the possibility of tourism, the Pakistani tourism sector is devastated and not performing well. That is an indication of the fact that tourism destination choice needs to be made in accordance with the well-being of this sector.

More specifically, WTTC has divided the world into different regions including the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Asia Pacific region. In comparison, Pakistan is a South Asian country that is a part of the Asia Pacific region and has been observing similar slow growth patterns. Many factors influence the tourist destination choices. Unfortunately, tourists are not selecting Pakistan as a favorable destination due to many factors. Hence, it is important to comprehend the motivation behind the tourist selection mechanism. Health crises have changed the travel behavior of tourists (Fitri et al., 2023). Furthermore, health risk perception changes visitor's behavior as discussed on infectious diseases by researchers. Therefore, Covid-19 has affected the tourism sector badly and for its sustainable recovery tourist's sense of safety towards their destination is the most significant element (Zhang, Zhang, & Xue, 2023).

Hence, psychological ownership plays its due role in destination selection and visit intention. The cognitive-affective state of psychological possession is associated with a sense of possession of the object, implying that the PO

appears to have feelings for the ownership. Various scholars believe that psychological ownership leads to positive motivations, attitudes, and behavioral outcomes toward the object, highlighting its importance for researchers and practitioners. The present study argues that the moderating link of psychological ownership is underexplored in the literature. Hence, theoretical literature needs to incorporate psychological ownership as a moderator between tourist trust and destination choice (Sarfranz et al., 2022). The current study extended the theoretical literature by including psychological ownership in the model as a moderator. The current study has the following objectives:

1. To inspect the association between tourists' PS and choice of tourist destination in Pakistan
2. To analyze the mediating effect of tourist trust between PS and tourist destination choice
3. To investigate the moderating link of psychological ownership between tourist trust and destination choice.

Prior literature shed light on the significance and importance of the tourism sector. Tourists perceive safety as an important factor in determining destination choices (Sarfranz et al., 2022; Xie, Zhang, & Morrison, 2021). The tourism sector of Pakistan is devastating and not performing well. It is due to many risk-related factors including terrorism, political uncertainty, and natural disasters such as floods and COVID-19. Interestingly, this study examines the tourist's PS and destination choice by utilizing tourist trust as a mediator and psychological ownership as a moderator in the Pakistani context. This will extend the theoretical literature on tourism by incorporating psychological ownership as a moderator. The present study will give policymakers the idea to devise policies that create a sense of ownership for the selection and development of tourism in this sector.

Literature Review

Tourist Perceived Safety

Tourist PS is all about the security and assessment of the destination. If the safety perception is positive, tourists develop trust that leads to enhance more tourist arrival and intention to revisit. Notably, tourist-PS is considered as a positive picture of a destination. Scholars believe that tourists develop safety judgments as on their experience including with residents or various sources such as natural or social environment, management, and facilities and equipment.

Perceived Safety of Social Environment, Tourist Trust and Destination Choice

Xie et al. (2021) believe that tourists' perception concerning the protection of the social environment also matters. These are the optimistic factors that enhance tourist trust. Similarly, when he perceives the social environment as safe, he develops trust, making him choose the desired tourist destination. However, Kubickova et al. (2023) analyzed the application of safety motivation theory by examining the impact of risk perception

and trust in destination on visitors' self-protective conduct. Notably, scholars explained and outlined the role of social support in mitigating perceived risk.

H1: *PS of the social environment is positively linked with tourist destination choice (TDC).*

H2: *There is a positive impact of PS of social environment on Tourist trust (TT).*

Perceived Safety of Facility and Equipment Elements, Tourist Trust and Destination Choice

Xie et al. (2021), the PSFE is the assessment of the facilities, safety evaluations, and tools at destinations. It is a tangible gathering of beneficial resources tools, and variables that support stable tourist operations. Likewise, Alkier, Okičić and Milojića (2022) examined the determinants of tourists' PS under the post-Covid-19 scenario. Furthermore, the authors opined that the awareness of risk among tourists is altering, which eventually has a crash on their forthcoming performance when selecting a festival purpose. However, Seger-Guttmann and Gilboa (2023) analyzed the outcome of an innocent facility atmosphere on tourist behavior and trust. This article analyzed how the PS and plan of a facility atmosphere can shape travelers' relational trust alleviate their self-justifying performances and improve their direct word of mouth. In this purview, studies examined the role of four qualities of an airport's physical setting on safety, travelers, travel intention, and satisfaction.

H3: *PS of the facility is positively associated with equipment elements on TDC.*

H4: *There is a positive effect of the PS of facility and equipment elements on TT.*

Perceived Safety of Human Element, Tourist Trust and Destination Choice

Considering the normal tourism setting, it denotes the perception of individual behavior and safety assessment. Hence, the positive human dimension is linked with normal tourism at the destination. Fourie, Rosselló-Nadal and Santana-Gallego (2020) also discuss the PS of human elements. Scholars viewed those human behaviors in the form of tour guides, peer travelers, residents, and visitors themselves. Tourists' PS is affected by the level of information, age, gender, and risk tolerance-related areas differently. However, it is determined that the major sources of the danger of tourism are the inseparability of facilities, high perishability, and low-quality services.

In the existing literature, trust is described as the credibility and reliability of the dangerous factors connected to the destination by travelers. The study of Sannasee and Seetanah (2015) examined trust as a major provider to repeat tourism and confirmed the theoretical link between trust and tourism. Hence, the researchers investigated the role of human-machine interactive technologies in sustainable tourism in the post-COVID-19.

H5: *There is a positive effect of the PS of human elements on TDC.*

H6: *There is a positive impact of the PS of human elements on TT.*

Perceived Safety of Management Elements, Tourist Trust and Destination Choice

Prior literature examined tourists' perceived management and evaluation of safety risks for visiting the attractions cities. For instance, this study has also discussed the risk perception structures which include social environment, natural environment, health risk, and time risk. Furthermore, the survey method was also used. The authors concluded organization of hotel security, the heavy skill of drivers; stage of traffic security organization are physically powerful rudiments. According to a study by Xie et al. (2021), PSM demonstrates the safety consideration and awareness of safety management strategies and measures in tourism along with connected aspects at the administrative level. However, good management develops the basis to augment and promote tourism activities and tourist trust. Other investigators contended that tourism is a main user of local substructure, for instance, roads, sewage systems, and airports. Disturbances to these facilities can have indirect penalties for tourism, both long and short-term. Interestingly, Gurtner (2016) discussed Government defense agendas, such as crisis anticipation, disaster response strategies, and alerts, to recover insights into the safety of travelers and help boost guest attention throughout or after a crisis.

H7: *There is a positive impact of PS of management elements on TDC.*

H8: *There is a positive effect of PS of management elements on TT.*

Perceived Safety of Natural Environment, Tourist Trust, and Destination choice

Notably, the natural environment is considered to be an important factor when considering the destination to visit. PSNE refers to a travel destination's safety rating and environmental awareness. Furthermore, it represents physical elements such as mountains, water, trees, and environmental quality (Xie et al., 2021). However, the situation of natural inheritance tourism in sub-Saharan Africa was illustrated by Mutanga and Gandiwa (2023). The writers came to the conclusion that soil use change, nature crime, climate change, and political instability are the primary threats to the sustainability of natural heritage. Similarly, Raihan (2024) investigated the interrelationships among carbon emissions, the economy, and tourism. People developed their first security assessments about these sites grounded on news intelligence and various indications obtainable, and their prospects of security are formed as a finding. Though, prior studies highlighted trustable word-of-mouth formation in the case of China.

H9: *There is a positive effect of PS of natural environment on TDC.*

H10: *There is a positive impact of PS of natural environment on TT.*

H11: *There is a positive impact of TT on tourist destination choice (TDC).*

H12: *There is an intervening impact of tourist trust between the link of PS of social environment and TDC.*

H13: *There is an intervening impact of tourist trust between the association of PS of facility and equipment elements and TDC.*

H14: *There is an intervening impact of tourist trust between the connection of PS of human elements and TDC.*

H15: *There is an intervening impact of tourist trust between the bond of PS of management elements and TDC.*

H16: *There is an intervening impact of tourist trust between the connection PS of the natural environment and TDC.*

H17: *There is an intervening impact of psychological ownership between the association of tourist trust and TDC.*

H18: *There is a positive and significant impact between psychological ownership and TDC.*

Methodology

Methodology deals with variables, sample size, and measurement scale used in the study. The current study used tourist destination choice as a dependent variable while tourists PS along its dimensions as the explanatory variable. Notably, tourist trust is used as a mediator and psychological ownership has been used as a moderator in the present study. This is a cross-sectional study, and the construct was measured using a preexisting scale. The scale to measure the tourist's PS was adopted from the study by Xie et al. (2021). For the tourist trust, three (3) items have been listed, and a scale was adopted. Additionally, tourist destination choice and the three (3) items listed on a scale have been utilized. Lastly, psychological ownership using three items derived from prior literature. Moreover, the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique has been utilized for the data examination.

The five-point Likert scale used in this study is thought to be suitable and optimal for the important data gathered using the survey instrument (Sarwar & Afaf, 2016). The five Likert scales are identified by the following arrangement: 1 indicates strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. Thus, the present study uses adopted questionnaires. The unit of analysis of this study is individual tourists. This paper has used a cluster sampling technique to collect data from tourists from various tourism areas of Pakistan. The present study utilized the pre-determined sample size from the table of a prior study. The population of the study is 40000 tourists who visit KPK, Gilgit, and Azad Kashmir. According to the prior literature, the best-suited sample size for such a population is 380. Hence, the current size of the population is 380. The author has used the cluster sampling method in a systematic and organized way.

Data Analysis

Table 1 exhibits that Cronbach's value (CA) is more than (90.8) for all variables. Likewise, this demonstrates that all the constructs have good quality consistency in the current study. Additionally, Table 1 denoted high reliability and AVE is superior than the threshold value of (0.50) confirming the reliability of the model. Finally, factor loading is higher than 0.5.

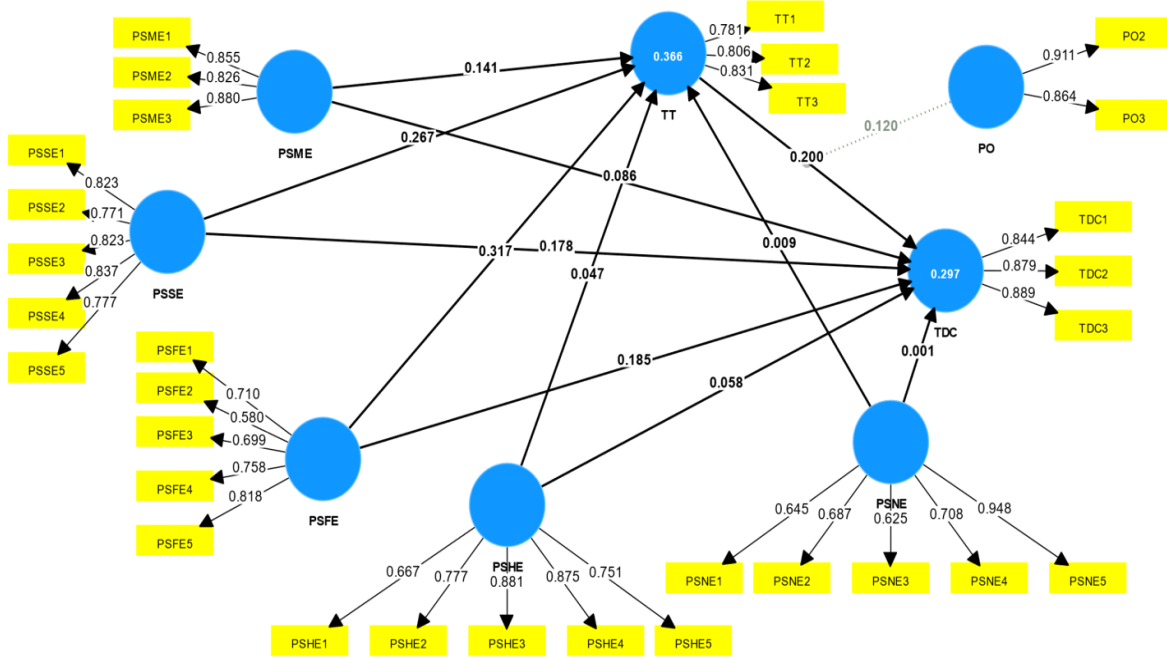


Figure 1: Measurement Model.

Table 1: Alpha, CR, AVE and Convergent Validity.

Constructs	Alpha	rho a	CR	AVE
PO	0.734	0.755	0.882	0.788
PSFE	0.769	0.79	0.84	0.515
PSHE	0.857	0.919	0.894	0.631
PSME	0.815	0.827	0.89	0.73
PSNE	0.892	1.578	0.849	0.536
PSSE	0.866	0.872	0.903	0.65
TSC	0.842	0.849	0.904	0.759
TT	0.735	0.74	0.848	0.65

The concept of discriminant validity refers to a specific latent concept distinguishing from other variables in the framework. Similarly, researchers also have recommended parameters to assess discriminant validity whereby, they have suggested investigation of AVE of the latent constructs. Furthermore, previously mentioned authors recommend that the AVE score

must also be greater than (0.50), proceeding for the square root; the AVE values were first trusted to be significantly adequate. Hence, Table 2 demonstrates that the square root values of AVE scores of each of the latent variables have resulted between 0.717 and 0.888 thus, sufficient discriminant validity exists.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity through Fornell-Larcker Criterion Approach.

Constructs	PO	PSFE	PSHE	PSME	PSNE	PSSE	TDC	TT
PO	0.888							
PSFE	-0.026	0.717						
PSHE	0.007	-0.058	0.794					
PSME	0.117	0.441	0.088	0.854				
PSNE	0.211	0.092	0.261	0.135	0.732			
PSSE	0.005	0.428	0.047	0.781	0.038	0.806		
TDC	0.12	0.387	0.076	0.424	0.096	0.421	0.871	
TT	-0.052	0.491	0.056	0.494	0.08	0.515	0.419	0.806

Note: Bold scores show the square root of AVE of every latent construct.

The process of determining whether a certain link between two or more constructs is likely to occur by chance or not is called structural model examination, or significance testing. The β -value, t-values, p-values, and the conclusions drawn from the outcomes of exogenous and endogenous factors are displayed in the above table. The findings of the direct hypotheses are

displayed in Table 3, and there are noteworthy correlations between the PS of tourists and their destination, as well as the moderating influence of psychological ownership. Notably, PSHE and TT, PSHE and TDC, PSNE with TDC and TT are insignificant.

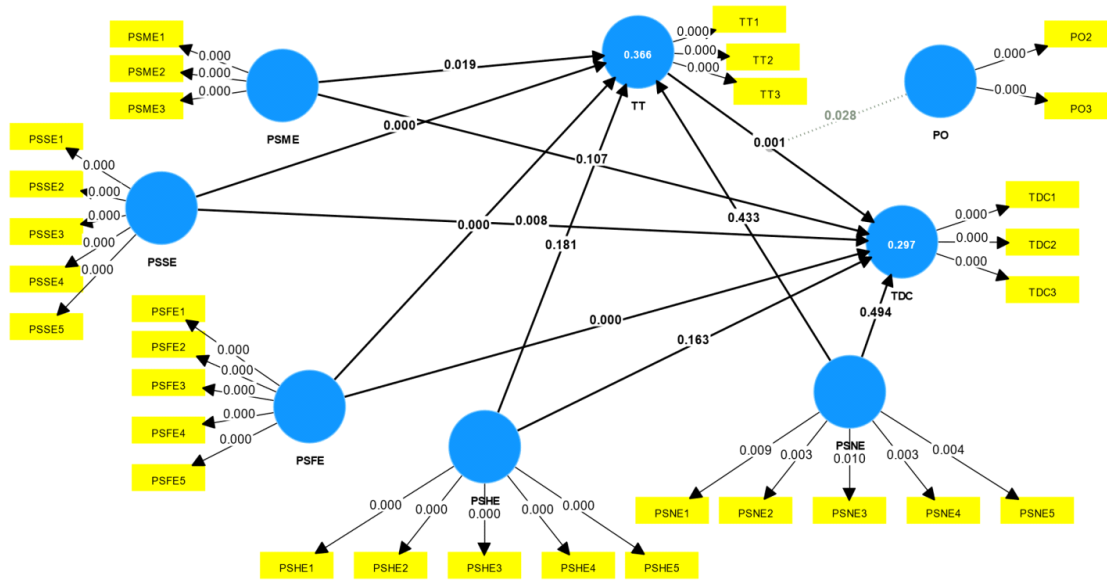


Figure 2: Structural Mode.

Table 3: Direct Relationship Path.

Relationships	β	M	SD	T Value	P values
PO -> TDC	0.119	0.118	0.045	2.632	0.004
PSFE -> TDC	0.185	0.181	0.053	3.512	0
PSFE -> TT	0.317	0.317	0.049	6.483	0
PSHE -> TDC	0.058	0.066	0.059	0.983	0.163
PSHE -> TT	0.047	0.051	0.052	0.911	0.181
PSME -> TDC	0.086	0.091	0.069	1.244	0.107
PSME -> TT	0.141	0.143	0.068	2.068	0.019
PSNE -> TDC	0.001	-0.019	0.077	0.014	0.494
PSNE -> TT	0.009	0.004	0.053	0.168	0.433
PSSE -> TDC	0.178	0.175	0.074	2.393	0.008
PSSE -> TT	0.267	0.263	0.07	3.818	0
TT -> TDC	0.2	0.196	0.063	3.16	0.001
PO x TT -> TDC	0.12	0.119	0.063	1.91	0.028

Table 4 shows the coefficient of 5 indirect hypotheses and their respective t-value and p-values for deciding whether the studied or hypothesized relations are statistically significant or not. Except PSNE-> TT -> TDC all are significant. The findings imply that tourist trust has insignificant mediation between the

PS of human elements and tourist destination choice. This finding is in contrast with the study of Sarfraz et al. (2022) which has a positive and significant relation between these variables.

Table 4: Indirect Relationship Path (Mediation).

Relationships	β	M	SD	T Value	P values
PSHE -> TT -> TDC	0.009	0.01	0.011	0.84	0.2
PSME -> TT -> TDC	0.028	0.028	0.017	1.694	0.045
PSNE -> TT -> TDC	0.002	0.001	0.011	0.166	0.434
PSSE -> TT -> TDC	0.053	0.051	0.02	2.623	0.004
PSFE -> TT -> TDC	0.063	0.062	0.024	2.695	0.004

Conclusion

The principal purpose of the study is to investigate the consequence of tourist’s PS and tourist destination and moderating effect of psychological ownership between tourists’ PS and tourist destination choice. Findings show tourist PS affects the tourists in the selection of destination. The tourist trust has been found as mediating variable. Importantly, psychological ownership has moderating link with tourist trust and destination

choice which is a novel contribution of the present study. Interestingly, psychological ownership is an important factor in destination choice because it creates the emotions of possessiveness regarding the destination. For instance, Zhang and Xu (2019) experiential that persons with more important crusade uneasiness were certain to select natural oppositions or ones understood as endangered and satisfactory. Psychological ownership has been a neglected construct while estimating moderation paths within tourism settings.

Implications

Several studies focusing on tourist destination choice have been carried out. Particularly, previous studies have generally focused on analyzing the competitiveness or destination image of a location and have not meaningfully explored the destination choices of tourists. Theoretically, psychological ownership develops an understanding of visitor behavior by looking at the tourist's psychological state mechanism, which affects their attitude, perception, and behavior. Prior literature indicates that tourists' attitudes and behavior could trigger a sense of engagement, encourage a sense of responsibility, and satisfy them. In the extant of literature, on tourist destinations, the moderating role of psychological ownership has not been tested or overlooked empirically. For the selection of tourism destinations through the lens of tourists' PS as a predictor, this study extends the tourist destination choice theoretical literature by incorporating the psychological ownership moderating role between tourist trust and destination and no empirical research has investigated. Therefore, the present study is an endeavor to contribute to literature.

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CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Muhammad Kamran Rasheed: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition. Ghazanfar Ali: Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software. Ghazanfar Ali: Supervision, Validation, Visualization. Writing – original draft. Muhammad Kamran Rasheed: Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Fundings

The authors declared that no funding from external sources received.

Ethical Statement

This study complied with ethical standards, and ethical approval was not required as no human tissue or biological samples were involved.

Data Availability Statement

Upon reasonable request from correspondence, the datasets generated and analyzed during this study can be obtained.

Artificial Intelligence/ Language Module Statement

The authors affirm that no artificial intelligence or large language models (LLMs) were used in the writing, analysis, or editing of this research, and they collectively take full responsibility for its content.

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