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Motivations, Quality, and Loyalty: Keys to Sustainable Adventure Tourism in Natural Destinations

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Abstract

This study examines the key factors that influence tourists' perceptions of destination quality and loyalty in the context of adventure tourism in Santa Elena, Ecuador, an emerging destination in Latin America. A quantitative approach was used, with data collected through an online questionnaire completed by 318 participants. Structural equation modeling was conducted using SmartPLS 4 to examine the relationships between motivational constructs (intellectual curiosity, health assurance, stress relief, physical condition, and social connection), perceived destination quality, and loyalty. The findings reveal that health assurance ($\beta = 0.395, p < 0.001$), stress relief ($\beta = 0.417, p < 0.001$), and intellectual curiosity ($\beta = 0.143, p = 0.010$) significantly influence perceived destination quality, while social connection and physical condition did not show significant effects. Moreover, perceived destination quality strongly predicts tourist loyalty ($\beta = 0.634, p < 0.001$). The model explains 63.5% of the variance in destination quality and 48.1% of that in loyalty. These results highlight the importance of post-pandemic health concerns, emotional well-being, and intellectual engagement as drivers of satisfaction and loyalty in adventure tourism. While existing research has largely focused on motivations and quality perceptions in adventure tourism within developed regions, studies in post-pandemic settings across Latin America—especially using validated structural models—remain scarce. This study also contributes to filling a gap in the literature by analyzing post-pandemic tourist behavior in Latin America, an underexplored context in existing research on sustainable and adventure tourism. The findings offer theoretical contributions to the field of adventure tourism and practical recommendations for destination managers seeking to enhance their competitiveness and visitor retention in the post-pandemic context.

Keywords: adventure tourism; destination quality; tourist loyalty; motivation; health assurance; stress relief; Ecuador

1. Introduction

Adventure tourism has become a strategic segment within the global tourism industry, characterized by activities that combine direct interaction with nature, physical challenge, and the pursuit of emotionally intense experiences [1]. Unlike traditional leisure or cultural tourism, adventure tourism includes a component of controlled risk and a constant need to adapt to changing environments, resulting in high levels of personal involvement and hedonic satisfaction [2]. This type of tourism is divided into two categories: soft adventure, which includes hiking or cycling, and hard adventure, which involves higher-risk activities like climbing or diving. Both types are driven by personal motivations and attraction to unique natural environments [3].

From a sustainable development perspective, adventure tourism provides economic, sociocultural, and environmental value, especially in destinations with rich natural and cultural resources. It promotes respect for the environment and engagement with local communities [4]. This segment is particularly relevant in rural and coastal areas, where direct contact with nature and the authenticity of the experience are key differentiating factors [5]. The province of Santa Elena, Ecuador, stands out as an emerging adventure tourism destination, with key products such as surfing in Montañita and diving in Ayangué. These activities attract domestic and international tourists thanks to their accessibility and diverse landscapes [4]. Similarly, in emerging adventure tourism destinations, the natural environment plays a pivotal role. Giddy & Webb [6] found that adventure tourists are not only attracted by thrill-based activities but also by immersive interactions with nature, which shape both their motivations and their experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic radically transformed traveler behavior, generating a stronger preference for destinations that offer open spaces, outdoor activities, and high biosecurity standards [7]. This shift significantly impacted adventure destinations, which had to adapt their offerings to respond to tourists' increased sensitivity to health and safety [8]. In parallel with these behavioral shifts among tourists, recent research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated interest in technological and service innovations within the tourism industry, as companies sought to improve visitor experiences, ensure safety, and adapt to new operational demands. However, despite these efforts, the adoption of innovation has been uneven, especially in emerging destinations. Sousa et al. [9] identify several barriers that continue to hinder post-pandemic innovation in the tourism sector, including a lack of technical knowledge, limited prior experience, uncertainty about return on investment, and absence of institutional or competitive benchmarking. These findings underscore the complexity of integrating innovation into tourism business models, particularly in regions with resource constraints, and reinforce the need for studies that examine how destinations are responding to these challenges in the Latin American context.

In this context, perceived destination quality and tourist satisfaction have become key variables for explaining loyalty, as travelers, now more conscious of health and safety, seek experiences that combine adventure, safety, and authenticity [4].

Moreover, evidence from Latin America shows a distinctive post-pandemic tourism recovery compared to Europe and Asia-Pacific. Fernández Bedoya et al. [10] document how regional destinations adopted community-led biosecurity measures, prioritized domestic tourism, and accelerated digital transformation. Meanwhile, in Asia-Pacific, it

continued under prolonged travel restrictions, and its recovery remained highly dependent on international arrivals.

Additionally, the perception of quality in adventure destinations is related to infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and the professionalization of tourism services. These elements influence visitors' satisfaction and intention to return [11]. This connection between quality, satisfaction, and loyalty is especially relevant in emerging destinations, where building a differentiated and sustainable offer can drive tourism competitiveness [12]. Unlike previous studies, this research incorporates understudied motivational dimensions such as intellectual curiosity and stress relief, offering a more holistic view of post-pandemic tourist behavior in adventure contexts.

While adventure tourism has been widely studied in established destinations in Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific region, most research has focused on analyzing tourist motivations, perceived risk levels, and the factors determining satisfaction and segmentation [2]. These studies have identified a connection with nature, thrill-seeking, physical challenge, and personal development as keys to participation, particularly in soft activities like hiking and hard ones like mountaineering [3]. However, there is a substantial gap in the literature regarding how these dynamics operate in emerging destinations in Latin America, especially in the post-COVID-19 context, where traveler preferences have shifted toward open, safe, and sustainable destinations [7].

This study addresses an identified gap in the literature on adventure tourism in Latin America by providing empirical evidence on travelers' motivations, their perception of quality, and the factors that drive their satisfaction and loyalty in emerging destinations. In doing so, it contributes not only to theoretical advancement in the field of adventure tourism but also offers practical insights for strengthening local tourism management and designing sustainable strategies that enhance the competitiveness of Santa Elena as a tourist destination.

This study analyzes adventure tourism in Santa Elena, Ecuador, to understand how travelers' motivations influence their perception of destination quality and their decision to return. It seeks to answer the following questions: What factors influence the perceived quality of adventure tourism in Santa Elena? How do travelers' motivations affect their satisfaction and loyalty to the destination? The answers will help identify the key factors that determine tourist satisfaction and loyalty, providing strategic insights to strengthen Santa Elena's tourism offer and sustainable competitiveness.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Motivation in Tourism

Motivation in tourism is not limited solely to economic factors; it also encompasses the desire to help others, share knowledge, and positively impact society. At the community level, local connections and collective participation are essential, while authenticity and economic and political factors play a key role in social innovation within tourism [13]. Zhang et al. [14], based on the protection motivation theory, broadened the understanding of accessible tourism, showing that it should not only offer pleasant experiences but also promote a more active and inclusive form of tourism.

Dann's [15] push-and-pull theory identifies two main forces that motivate travel: internal factors that drive a person to want to travel (push) and the external characteristics of a destination that attract them (pull).

Push factors are intangible motivations, such as the desire for escape, personal development, excitement, or spiritual reconnection, that originate from within the traveler [16]. Pull factors consist of destination-specific attributes such as natural landscapes, infrastructure quality, service offerings, event availability, and perceived safety that tourists regard

as instrumental to fulfilling these personal aspirations [17]. Together, these factors form a dual motivational dynamic in which pull attributes are interpreted through the lens of push-driven goals, establishing pull factors as essential catalysts in the decision-making process regarding travel [18].

According to Shih-Shuo et al. [19], motivation in adventure tourism, such as mountaineering, is driven more by personal growth and self-acceptance than social connection. The theory of planned behavior explains how climbers turn difficulties into motivating challenges, highlighting the importance of personal rewards and self-confidence. These activities illustrate how push factors (such as the desire for learning and cultural connection) are complemented by pull factors (specific activities and destination features) in attracting tourists.

An example of applying these concepts is a study by Orden-Mejía et al. [20], conducted in Santa Elena, Ecuador. The research found that most young Chinese tourists visit the destination mainly for its natural scenery. They also value the authenticity of the local cuisine and the warmth of the community. Regarding loyalty behaviors, they strongly intended to recommend the place, leave positive reviews, and return in the future.

Integrating motivational theory with destination loyalty becomes particularly pertinent in the post-pandemic era. Studies applying the push–pull framework to adventure tourism, Giddy & Webb [6], confirm that push factors, such as novelty, challenge, and escape, initiate travel intention, while pull factors, including environmental features and safety infrastructure, directly influence satisfaction. Further, evidence from post-COVID research reveals that safety and authenticity, typically categorized as pull motivations, have become central drivers of both satisfaction and loyalty toward destinations [21].

2.2. Motivational Constructs in Adventure Tourism

Motivations in adventure tourism combine personal desires and external factors that influence the choice of destinations and activities, such as rafting or hiking [6]. These motivations are grouped into various constructs that explain the behavior and decisions of adventure tourists.

Intellectual curiosity drives travelers to seek learning and personal transformation beyond thrill or risk. Through serendipitous encounters, they discover new identities by combining knowledge of the service landscape and ethnic elements for self-transformation, contributing to the development of the tourism industry [22]. In this sense, adventure tourism serves as a setting for experiential learning, where direct interaction with challenging environments not only enhances the construction of practical knowledge but also promotes a critical assessment of one's capabilities, a comparison with others' experiences, and informed decision-making regarding participation levels and risk management [23]. Finally, the inclination to explore the unknown and immerse oneself in environments that require adaptation and personal growth is a key factor explaining the sustained appeal of adventure tourism across various traveler profiles [24]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. *Intellectual curiosity positively influences the perceived quality of a destination.*

Health safety has become a determining factor in adventure tourism, especially in the post-pandemic context, where the preference for outdoor activities and healthy environments has gained importance [6]. Destinations such as Santa Elena, which offer open spaces, strict sanitary protocols, and settings away from crowds, have strengthened visitors' perceptions of safety and well-being. In this regard, Janowski et al. [1] emphasize that although adventure tourism can improve well-being, it also exposes travelers to physical and emotional risks. Poor risk management can negatively impact tourists' health.

Therefore, safety is key to ensuring positive experiences. In response, the tourism industry has implemented advanced biosecurity protocols, allowing a broader audience, including those without prior adventure tourism experience, to feel motivated to participate [24]. Furthermore, aspects such as access to sanitized equipment and the need to maintain social distancing measures have influenced the intention to purchase tourism experiences in a context where financial constraints and the assurance of safe environments continue to play a crucial role in travelers' decision-making [23]. In line with previous studies, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. *Health safety positively influences the perceived quality of a destination.*

Social connection is an essential component of the adventure tourism experience, fostering emotional bonds and support networks among tourists and local communities [25]. Wang et al. [26] found that interpersonal engagement during travel, both with guides and fellow tourists, significantly increased visitors well-being and reinforced intentions to revisit, especially in recovery contexts. Additionally, Chen & Liu [27] demonstrated that meaningful group interactions during wellness travel contributed to stronger destination attachment and positive word-of-mouth, linking social bonds to loyalty behaviors.

Adventure experiences allow people to connect or strengthen bonds, thus fostering a deep sense of belonging that leads to shared values and beliefs [28]. This bonding process does not occur in isolation. However, it extends to the digital ecosystem, where other travelers' access to reviews, testimonials, and content enhances identification with a global community of adventurers, increasing trust and the intention to participate in new experiences [23]. Additionally, direct interaction with local guides and other participants adds value to the experience by offering local insights into the natural and cultural environment while enriching experiential learning through real-time knowledge and skill exchange [24]. Based on these considerations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. *Social connection positively influences the perceived quality of a destination.*

Stress relief is an effective mechanism, and adventure tourism offers to reduce stress and improve emotional well-being. Adventure tourism activities can reduce stress, improve self-esteem, and foster resilience [29]. Moreover, adventure tourism catalyzes profound change, helping travelers restore the balance between body and mind and reshape their conception of well-being [24]. Searching for and planning these experiences is an active psychological mechanism to cope with uncertainty and strengthen personal control over future well-being [23]. Although much of the empirical evidence on emotional well-being comes from nature-based tourism [30], its findings apply to adventure tourism, as both segments involve direct interaction with natural environments and the potential to relieve emotional tension. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. *Stress relief positively influences the perceived quality of a destination.*

Physical condition is a determining factor in choosing high-demand adventure tourism activities, such as mountaineering or diving, where physical effort enhances physical performance and strengthens participants' self-confidence and emotional well-being [31]. These activities, which vary in intensity and difficulty level, allow different tourist profiles to participate according to their abilities, promoting the development of physical fitness as part of the experience [1,24].

Gan et al. [32] demonstrated that motivations rooted in health and physical condition are strong, independent predictors of travel behavior in wellness tourism contexts, surpassing other motivational dimensions.

Additionally, the physical component is perceived as an added benefit, integrating health care with the enjoyment of immersive experiences in challenging natural environments [23]. Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is established:

H5. *Physical condition positively influences the perceived quality of a destination.*

In the context of adventure tourism, physical condition has traditionally been considered a relevant factor due to the physical demands associated with activities such as trekking, surfing, and diving. Prior studies suggest that tourists who feel physically prepared are more likely to positively assess their experience, associating it with achievement and well-being [3,33]. Similarly, social connection has been identified as a motivational factor, particularly in group-based experiences or those involving shared challenges, where emotional bonding enhances satisfaction and destination perception [34].

2.3. Quality Perceived of the Destiny

2.3.1. Definition and Relevance

The perceived quality of a destination is defined as a subjective and multidimensional evaluation encompassing factors such as infrastructure, services, safety, and overall convenience, all of which are key determinants of tourist satisfaction and trust [35]. Furthermore, the perception of a destination's sustainability influences visitors' satisfaction and intention to return. Five dimensions of sustainability have been identified: economic, environmental, sociocultural, political, and technological. Among these, the sociocultural and technological dimensions significantly impact tourist satisfaction and return intention. This highlights the importance of these factors in enhancing perceived destination quality and developing effective management strategies [36]. Aziz and Niazi [37] also emphasize that perceived quality plays a key role in promoting sustainability, with destination loyalty and perceived trust acting as mediating variables in this relationship, underscoring the importance of quality in the tourism experience.

2.3.2. Economic Context, Perceived Quality, and Tourist Loyalty

The economic environment plays a decisive role in shaping tourists' perceptions of destination quality and their loyalty intentions. Ríos Rodríguez et al. [38] highlight that regions with heightened economic vulnerability experienced more marked declines in tourist demand, underscoring the sensitivity of quality perceptions to local economic resilience. Chomać Pierzecka & Stasiak [39] demonstrate that inflation and reduced income led to shorter stays and increased price sensitivity, impacting both satisfaction and intentions to return in Poland. Amissah et al. [40] provide evidence from emerging economies showing that during economic shocks, perceived quality and loyalty are disproportionately influenced by cost fluctuations. Sato et al. [41] establish that perceived affordability significantly enhances revisit intentions in Latin American adventure tourism markets. Finally, Smith & Jones [42] and Dinh & Nguyen [43] confirm through meta-analytic and empirical studies that tourists adjust their quality expectations and value assessments in direct response to changes in economic conditions, mediating loyalty through perceived value and satisfaction.

2.3.3. Connection with Adventure Tourism

According to Farkic [44], the perceived quality of a destination in adventure tourism involves challenges, the tourist's experience, and the fluidity and flow of outdoor experi-

ences, acknowledging the complexity and non-linear nature of these journeys, including ethical and emotional aspects. On the other hand, González et al. [45] argue that perceived destination quality can be analyzed through the perceptions of both hosts and visitors, taking into account the opinions of the local community and tourists to assess the destination's tourism development considering its sustainability and the relationship between visitors' expectations and the characteristics of the environment.

Similarly, Cordova et al. [46] state that quality in adventure tourism can also be seen in the sector's gastronomy, as different types of tourists have varying characteristics and perceptions of local cuisine as a symbol of cultural identity. Furthermore, Carvache-Franco et al. [6] point out that tourists in places like Santa Elena are drawn to scuba diving and snorkeling, paragliding, water skiing, and canopy tours. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. *Perceived destination quality has a positive and significant effect on tourist loyalty in the context of adventure tourism.*

2.3.4. Theoretical Framework

Oliver's Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory [47] posits that when experiences exceed initial expectations, the perceived quality of the destination increases, leading to greater satisfaction and fostering loyalty. However, in adventure tourism, expectations are fluid and often formed during the experience shaped by environmental stimuli and emotional dynamics undermining the theory's capacity to predict loyalty accurately in this context [48].

The SERVQUAL model, created by Parasuraman et al. [49], suggests that service quality is measured by comparing what a person expects with what they receive. If there is a significant difference, the quality is considered low. This model includes five components: the physical aspects of the service, the trust it generates, the speed of service, the security it conveys, and personalized attention. In tourism, this model is used to assess the quality of service at a destination and identify areas for improvement to enhance the visitors' experience. However, this model fails to incorporate pivotal experiential attributes in adventure contexts, such as perceived risk, immersion, and adaptive expectations, resulting in unstable constructs and diminished validity [50].

2.4. Loyalty in Tourism

2.4.1. Conceptualization of Loyalty

Ecological practices and green marketing influence tourism loyalty. Through prominent programs of cooperative ecological activities, such as sustainable actions and digital interaction, destinations contribute to tourist loyalty and encourage repeat visits. In addition, emotional and cognitive aspects influence tourists' decisions to revisit or continue using tourism services [51].

Studies have explored the variables that influence tourist loyalty. In this regard, Carvache et al. [52] mention that one of the key variables is recreational experiences in coastal and marine destinations, as tourists have shown greater satisfaction and loyalty toward these areas. Similarly, Nguyen and Mai [53] highlight that tourist loyalty is influenced by transformative experiences, especially for tourists open to new experiences. These experiences can encourage participation in activities at the destination; however, they note that their influence on the development of tourism loyalty is limited.

2.4.2. Theoretical Foundation

The Theory of Planned Behavior, proposed by Ajzen [54], suggests that behavioral intentions are determined by three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms,

and perceived behavioral control. However, there is still some uncertainty regarding the exact nature of the relationships between these components. In tourism, satisfaction is mediated between perceived quality and loyalty, reinforcing the need to create memorable experiences. Examples such as cultural routes in Manglaralto or surf classes in Montañita strengthen the emotional bond and visitor loyalty [55]. The relaxation dimension is also key for return visits and recommendations in adventure tourism [6].

2.4.3. Loyalty in Adventure Tourism

In the context of adventure tourism, tourist loyalty is closely linked to initial motivations and the level of satisfaction achieved during the experience, with personalized and authentic activities being key factors in the intention to return and recommend the destination [55]. In Santa Elena, the pandemic highlighted the value of relaxation and disconnection from urban stress as key elements in strengthening loyalty, emphasizing the importance of designing tourism products focused on the emotional well-being of visitors [6]. Additionally, tourism planning must align with the rural and ancestral characteristics of the region, actively integrating local communities into destination management to ensure sustainable development and strengthen the emotional bond between tourists and the territory [56].

3. Methodology

This research study is part of a project approved by the Research Dean's Office of ESPOL University and its Ethics Committee, identified under code FCSH-14-2021. Ethical standards were ensured through informed consent, which was included in the questionnaire and accepted in writing by the participants.

Data collection was conducted through computer-assisted web interviews (CAWIs) using Microsoft Forms, a methodology selected for its effectiveness in reaching the target population remotely and ensuring the quality of the data collected. This strategy allowed for an efficient and respectful gathering of responses, following the ethical principles of the study.

The data was collected between July and August 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This period of crisis altered demand patterns, focusing more on nature, biosecurity, and the environment, which adds further relevance to the study, as its findings will also contribute to post-pandemic understanding. The questionnaire was distributed in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and targeted individuals over 18 years old who had visited Santa Elena and intended to engage in adventure sports in the province. Participants completed the questionnaire independently; the questionnaire was shared through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The questionnaire was designed to ensure only one response per respondent. Additionally, data quality control was implemented, eliminating unconfirmed responses, outliers (in continuous variables), and incomplete or irrelevant questionnaires.

The sample size was calculated considering an infinite population and using convenience sampling. A total of 318 valid questionnaires were collected, resulting in a margin of error of $\pm 5.5\%$, a confidence level of 95%, and a variance of 50%. This approach ensured the acquisition of reliable results, relevant to both theory and practice.

3.1. Questionnaire Design

The design of the questionnaire was structured to measure the constructs of motivation, destination quality, and loyalty, using 5-point Likert scales to capture the perceptions and attitudes of respondents in the context of adventure tourism in Santa Elena, Ecuador.

The items related to motivations were adapted from previous studies by Jin et al. [57], recognized in the academic literature on tourism, ensuring their conceptual validity in

similar contexts. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 represented “Strongly Disagree” and 5 “Strongly Agree.”

The destination quality construct was developed based on the researchers’ criteria, selecting items that comprehensively reflected the key dimensions of this construct, such as infrastructure, services, environmental conditions, and destination safety. In this case, a 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 represented “Very dissatisfied” and 5 “Very satisfied,” focusing on tourists’ general satisfaction perception.

Finally, the statements corresponding to the loyalty construct were adapted from previous research on tourist loyalty by Kim and Park [58]. These items measured visitors’ intention to return to their destination and recommend it to others. A 5-point Likert scale was used for evaluation, where 1 meant “Strongly Disagree” and 5 meant “Strongly Agree”. The motivation and loyalty constructs were measured using agreement-based Likert scales because they reflect attitudinal intentions and personal predispositions. In contrast, the destination quality construct required an evaluative perspective, hence the use of a satisfaction-based Likert scale to better capture perceptions of infrastructure, services, and environmental conditions. This differentiation is aligned with common practices in tourism research, minimizing respondent fatigue while optimizing measurement precision.

The questionnaire’s structure was designed to facilitate understanding of the statements, minimize ambiguity, and optimize the quality of the responses. Finally, although no pilot test was conducted with participants, the questionnaire underwent a rigorous expert validation process before application. A panel of academic and professional experts in tourism research reviewed the instrument to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study context. Their input resulted in the refinement of several items, contributing to the overall quality and validity of the instrument used in the main data collection.

3.2. Data Analysis

For data analysis, the Smart PLS-4 v4.1.0.9 software was used, applying a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to evaluate the relationships between the study’s constructs in the context of adventure tourism in Santa Elena, Ecuador. A bootstrapping approach with 5000 resamples was implemented to estimate the model coefficients and assess their statistical significance. PLS-SEM was chosen for its suitability for exploration and predictive models, its robustness to non-normal distributions, and its ability to handle moderate sample sizes [59].

The model validation process included several key tests. First, the model’s reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, the average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). It was confirmed that all constructs met the minimum acceptable reliability thresholds, with $\alpha > 0.7$, $AVE > 0.5$, and $CR > 0.7$, ensuring that the indicators for each construct were internally consistent.

Regarding convergent validity, the factor loadings of the indicators were assessed, and these had to exceed the threshold of 0.7, indicating adequate convergence between the items and the latent constructs. The Fornell–Larcker method and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio were used to validate discriminant validity. These analyses confirmed that each construct was distinguishable from the others in the model, verifying that the correlations between constructs were lower than the AVE values and that the HTMT ratio did not exceed the recommended threshold of 0.9.

Once the psychometric properties of the measurement model were validated, structural relationships between the constructs were analyzed. This approach allowed for the analysis of the influence of independent variables on destination quality and, in turn, the evaluation of their effect on tourist loyalty, adhering to the methodological criteria of rigor and validity in SEM analysis.

The R-squared values for the dependent constructs were also calculated, indicating the proportion of variance explained by the independent variables. This helped evaluate the structural model's explanatory power. Additionally, global model fit metrics, such as the SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual), were included to ensure the fit quality between the observed and estimated data.

The following descriptive information about the sample is provided to support its characterization and external validity. The final sample consisted of 318 valid respondents: 53.8% identified as female ($n = 171$) and 46.2% as male ($n = 147$). In terms of marital status, 84.0% reported being single, 11.9% were married, and 4.1% selected other options. Regarding age distribution, the majority were between 21 and 30 years old (58.2%), followed by 16.7% in both the under 20 group and the 31–40 group, and smaller percentages in older age brackets. Educational attainment was high: 68.9% had completed university-level studies, and 10.4% held postgraduate degrees. Employment status showed that 56.3% were students, 18.9% worked in the private sector, 11.9% were business owners, and the rest were employed in the public sector, unemployed, or involved in research activities. In terms of travel group composition, most participants reported traveling with family (46.5%) or friends (35.5%), followed by couples (13.8%) and solo travelers (4.1%). Average spending per visit also varied: 42.8% reported spending between USD 50 and USD 99, while 29.6% spent under USD 50 and 27.6% reported higher expenses.

4. Results

Model of Measurement

The measurement model's results confirm that the evaluated constructs meet the reliability and validity criteria, ensuring the quality of the measurements. Regarding internal reliability, all constructs present Cronbach's alpha (α) values above the recommended threshold of 0.7, with intellectual curiosity (IC) showing the highest value ($\alpha = 0.928$). Consistently, composite reliability (CR) also exceeds the minimum acceptable value of 0.7 in all cases, with loyalty (LOY) achieving the highest score (CR = 0.937).

Regarding convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) values are above the threshold of 0.5, confirming that the indicators adequately explain the variance of their respective constructs. For example, health assurance (HA) has an AVE of 0.646, while destination quality (DQ) reaches 0.650.

The factor loadings (λ) of individual indicators are all above 0.7, ensuring the reliability of each item. A notable case is the LOY2 item for loyalty, which shows the highest loading ($\lambda = 0.906$), while indicators such as HA1 ($\lambda = 0.720$) and SC1 ($\lambda = 0.730$) are close to the lower acceptable limit but still meet the standards. (See Table 1).

The discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criteria and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, confirming that the constructs are differentiated (Table 2). According to the Fornell–Larcker method, the square root of the AVE (on the bold diagonal) exceeds the correlations between constructs, indicating that each one explains its own indicators' variance better than the variance shared with others. Additionally, the HTMT results, located above the diagonal, show values below the threshold of 0.85, ensuring proper separation between constructs.

Together, these results validate the constructs' conceptual independence, providing strong evidence for the measurement model's quality and ensuring its usefulness for subsequent structural analysis.

Table 1. Measurement model.

Construct and Indicators	λ	Proportional α	CR	AVE
Health Assurance (HA)		0.908	0.912	0.646
HA1: To visit a destination with facilities for social distancing	0.720			
HA2: To be in a destination with security and protection	0.846			
HA3: To be in a destination with transportation with better capacity	0.750			
HA4: To be in a destination with health guarantees	0.857			
HA5: To stay in accommodations and restaurants that are continuously disinfected	0.841			
HA6: To be attended by service staff with safety equipment (mask, gloves)	0.859			
HA7: To be in a destination with enough outdoor space	0.740			
Intellectual Curiosity (IC)		0.928	0.937	0.668
IC1: To learn about the things around me	0.818			
IC2: To satisfy my curiosity	0.788			
IC3: To explore new ideas	0.844			
IC4: To learn about myself	0.754			
IC5: To expand my knowledge	0.856			
IC6: To discover new things	0.832			
IC7: To be creative	0.795			
IC8: To use my imagination	0.844			
Social Connection (SC)		0.895	0.901	0.613
SC1: To develop close friendships	0.730			
SC2: To reveal my thoughts, feelings, or physical abilities to others	0.788			
SC3: To be socially competent and skilled	0.850			
SC4: To gain a sense of belonging	0.811			
SC5: To earn the respect of others	0.770			
SC6: To improve my social skills	0.798			
SC7: To meet new friends	0.726			
Physical Fitness (PF)		0.911	0.915	0.736
PF1: To be active	0.813			
PF2: To develop physical skills and abilities	0.901			
PF3: To stay physically fit	0.846			
PF4: To use my physical abilities	0.873			
PF5: To develop physical fitness	0.855			
Stress Relief (SR)		0.885	0.888	0.686
SR1: To relax physically	0.788			
SR2: To relax mentally	0.851			
SR3: To avoid the hustle and bustle of daily activities	0.804			
SR4: To rest	0.842			
SR5: To relieve stress and tension	0.855			
Destination Quality (DQ)		0.891	0.895	0.650
DQ1: Reasonable price	0.745			
DQ2: Safety and protection	0.861			
DQ3: Good service	0.866			
DQ4: Good facilities	0.844			
DQ5: Reliable travel insurance	0.768			
DQ6: Recommendation	0.743			
Loyalty (LOY)		0.871	0.872	0.796
LOY1: I intend to revisit a coastal destination	0.870			
LOY2: I intend to recommend that my friends visit a coastal destination	0.906			
LOY3: When I talk about coastal destinations after the visit, I will say positive things	0.900			

Note: λ = Loading; proportional α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 2. Fornell–Larcker criteria and Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Factor	HA	IC	SC	PF	SR	DQ	LOY
Health Assurance (HA)	0.804	0.573	0.449	0.496	0.607	0.758	0.581
Intellectual Curiosity (IC)	0.531	0.817	0.749	0.734	0.616	0.612	0.555
Social Connection (SC)	0.406	0.683	0.783	0.756	0.461	0.424	0.407
Physical Fitness (PF)	0.454	0.677	0.689	0.858	0.670	0.568	0.569
Stress Relief (SR)	0.544	0.570	0.419	0.607	0.828	0.790	0.741
Destination Quality (DQ)	0.684	0.566	0.387	0.514	0.704	0.806	0.786
Loyalty (LOY)	0.515	0.509	0.369	0.512	0.653	0.694	0.892

Note: The square root of AVE is shown diagonally in bold, and other numbers are correlations between constructs.

The proposed structural model's results clearly show the relationships between the constructs evaluated in the context of adventure tourism in Santa Elena, Ecuador. The

standardized regression coefficients (β), T-values, and significance “ p ” values allow for the empirical evaluation of each hypothesis.

Hypothesis H1, which posits that health assurance positively influences destination quality, obtained a $\beta = 0.395$, with a T-value = 7.401 and $p < 0.001$, confirming its statistical significance. This finding is particularly relevant in the post-COVID-19 context, as data collection occurred between July and August 2021, when health and safety concerns remained a priority for tourists. The importance of factors such as the availability of disinfected accommodations, staff equipped with safety gear (masks, gloves), and open spaces reflects how the pandemic has shaped perceptions of perceived safety. These factors contribute to the perception of destination quality and address new demands from tourists seeking to minimize risks during their travel experiences.

In H2, it was revealed that intellectual curiosity has a positive and significant relationship with destination quality ($\beta = 0.143$, $T = 2.589$, $p = 0.010$). That is, tourists who seek to satisfy their curiosity, expand their knowledge, and explore new ideas perceive the destination as ideal for motivations related to learning and discovery. Activities that promote creativity, considering the natural environment and the use of imagination, also strengthen this perception, highlighting the destination’s appeal to those who prioritize adventure-related, intellectually stimulating experiences.

On the other hand, H3, which proposed a positive effect of social connection on destination quality, was not supported ($\beta = -0.067$, $T = 1.530$, $p = 0.126$). This result could indicate that adventure tourists in Santa Elena prioritize individual or small group experiences over broad social interactions, possibly due to this type of tourism’s more introspective or personal nature. In other words, these tourists are more reserved and introverted and see such a destination as a place for reflection and self-discovery.

Similarly, H4, which explored the relationship between physical fitness and destination quality, did not show statistical significance ($\beta = 0.031$, $T = 0.616$, $p = 0.538$). This suggests that, while adventure tourism may involve physical activity, this factor is not necessarily decisive in the perception of destination quality in this context. Probably, these tourists engage in physical activity regularly, and thus, they are not as motivated to exercise at the destination to improve their physical condition.

Hypothesis H5, which links stress relief with destination quality, was highly significant ($\beta = 0.417$, $T = 6.206$, $p < 0.001$). This evidence shows that tourists value the destination as a space to disconnect from daily stress, highlighting the relevance of attributes such as tranquility and access to relaxing natural spaces.

Finally, H6 confirmed a positive and significant relationship between destination quality and loyalty ($\beta = 0.634$, $T = 14.132$, $p < 0.001$). This result underscores that an experience perceived as high-quality fosters tourists’ intention to return and recommend the destination, reinforcing the importance of ensuring high standards in services, infrastructure, and security.

Overall, the results highlight that perceptions of safety and the destination’s ability to relieve stress are fundamental in adventure tourism, while intellectual curiosity also plays a relevant role. These findings provide key implications for designing tourism strategies in Santa Elena that promote visitors’ satisfaction and loyalty. (See Table 3).

Table 3. Results of the structural model.

Hypotheses	(β)	T Statistics	p -Values	Remark
H1. Health Assurance $\rightarrow$ Destination Quality	0.395	7.401	0.000	Yes
H2. Intellectual Curiosity $\rightarrow$ Destination Quality	0.143	2.589	0.010	Yes
H3. Social Connection $\rightarrow$ Destination Quality	0.067	1.530	0.126	No
H4. Physical Fitness $\rightarrow$ Destination Quality	0.031	0.616	0.538	No
H5. Stress Relief $\rightarrow$ Destination Quality	0.417	6.206	0.000	Yes
H6. Destination Quality $\rightarrow$ Loyalty	0.634	14.132	0.000	Yes

Lastly, the R-squared values obtained in the structural model reflect an adequate level of explanatory capacity. For the destination quality construct, $R^2 = 0.635$ indicates that the model explains 63.5% of the variance, highlighting the joint influence of factors such as health assurance and stress relief on the perception of destination quality in Santa Elena. On the other hand, the loyalty construct obtained $R^2 = 0.481$, implying that 48.1% of the variance in loyalty towards the destination is explained by destination quality. These results confirm the relevance of the evaluated factors in the context of adventure tourism and suggest that, although there is a significant influence, other external factors may be contributing to visitors' loyalty and opening opportunities for future research. (See Figure 1).

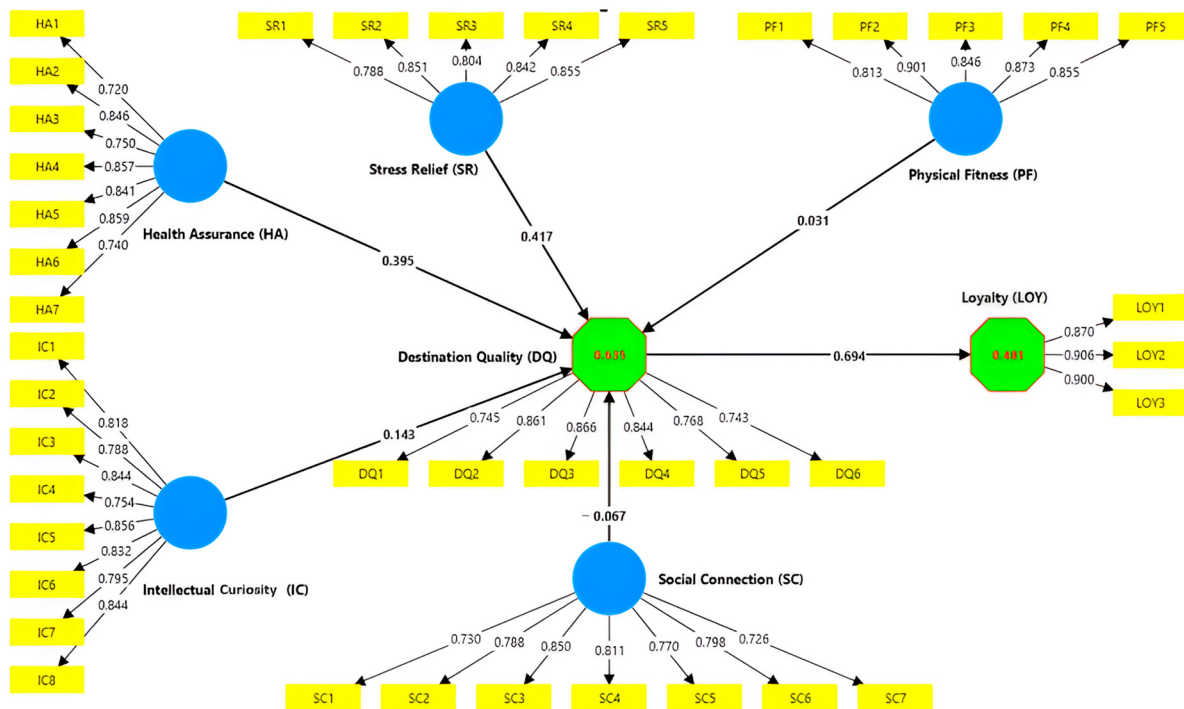


Figure 1. Proposed model.

5. Discussion

The results obtained in this study provide important insights into the dynamics that shape tourist motivations, destination quality perception, and loyalty in adventure tourism in Santa Elena, Ecuador. In line with the expected outcomes, health assurance (H1) and stress relief (H5) emerged as the most significant predictors of perceived destination quality, reflecting post-pandemic trends identified in the literature [6,24]. This finding confirms that tourists prioritize safe and healthy environments and particularly value those spaces that allow them to disconnect from daily stress and recharge, an aspect already highlighted by AVECILLAS-TORRES et al. [30] in previous studies on emotional well-being in nature-based tourism.

Intellectual curiosity (H2) also showed a significant positive effect, highlighting the appeal of learning and self-discovery experiences in adventure contexts. This reaffirms the theoretical contributions of Liu and Tung [23], who emphasize that destinations fostering intellectual exploration and creativity attract more reflective tourists motivated by knowledge, a key segment for emerging destinations seeking to differentiate themselves through cultural and natural authenticity.

Conversely, social connection (H3) and physical fitness (H4) were not significant in this study. This finding is particularly interesting, as it contrasts with some of the studies in the

literature [28,31], highlighting the role of social interactions and physical effort as driving forces behind participation in adventure activities. A possible explanation lies in the specific profile of tourists in Santa Elena, who may view adventure tourism as a more introspective experience, focused on personal well-being and deep connection with nature, rather than as an opportunity to build social ties or test their physical capabilities. Perhaps accelerated modernity led tourists to spend more time in nature to disconnect, engage in Vipassana meditation to cultivate equanimity, practice yoga, tai chi, Reiki, etc. This finding opens an interesting avenue for future research exploring motivational variations based on the psychographic profiles of tourists. These contrasts may also be influenced by regional and cultural differences, as previous studies in Europe and Asia have found social interaction and physical challenge to be more central motivations in adventure tourism [60], unlike the more introspective and wellness-oriented profile observed in this Latin American setting.

Finally, the positive relationship between perceived destination quality and loyalty (H6) confirms classical theoretical models such as Expectancy–Disconfirmation [47] and SERVQUAL [49], reinforcing the idea that a high perception of quality not only increases satisfaction but also fosters the intention to return and recommend the destination. This result has relevant practical implications, as it suggests that strengthening the destination's infrastructure, services, safety, and emotional aspects could be key to consolidating a loyal tourist base.

Together, the findings of this study not only enrich the theoretical understanding of the determinants of perceived quality and loyalty in adventure tourism but also offer practical guidelines for tourism managers, who can design strategies focused on health, relaxation, and learning dimensions, relegating those related to social interaction or physical effort to the background, at least in this specific context.

While these findings offer valuable insights for understanding adventure tourism dynamics, they must be interpreted within the limitations of the study's local and contextual framework. The data was collected in Santa Elena, Ecuador, through non-probabilistic sampling via social media, which limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations or other emerging destinations. Motivational factors such as health, relaxation, and learning were relevant in this context, but this does not imply that they are universally predominant. Tourist motivations may vary significantly depending on cultural background, age group, type of adventure activity, or even the pandemic stage. Therefore, the recommendations derived from this study should be understood as context-specific, offering guidance for similar coastal destinations but not as a one-size-fits-all solution.

Compared to prior research mostly focused on established destinations in Europe or Asia, the present findings reveal that adventure tourists in Latin America—particularly in coastal emerging areas—prioritize health, emotional well-being, and cognitive engagement over social interaction or physical challenges. This diverges from traditional assumptions in the adventure tourism literature and highlights a contextual reconfiguration of tourist behavior in post-pandemic settings. Therefore, this study contributes novel empirical evidence that broadens the global understanding of motivational and behavioral dynamics in adventure tourism.

Implications

This study contributes significantly to the adventure tourism literature by addressing a gap identified in previous research: the lack of empirical evidence from emerging destinations in Latin America, such as Santa Elena, Ecuador. While much of the existing research has focused on established regions in Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific [2,3], this research expands the geographic scope of knowledge by exploring the motivational, perceptual, and behavioral factors influencing adventure tourists in a post-pandemic Latin

American context. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the empirical contribution is based on a single case study using convenience sampling in an atypical recovery period. Therefore, generalizations should be made with caution and complemented by future research in other Latin American destinations using more robust sampling designs

Moreover, the work strengthens the theoretical framework of perceived quality and loyalty, validating the applicability of theories such as Expectancy–Disconfirmation [47] and SERVQUAL [49] in non-traditional settings and for specific segments like adventure tourism. By integrating less-explored motivational constructs, such as intellectual curiosity, the study broadens the theoretical categories considered in previous models, offering new insights into tourist satisfaction’s emotional and cognitive drivers. For example, experiential tourism products could include interpretive trails guided by local experts, citizen science workshops, or storytelling experiences that combine local heritage with interactive learning.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer clear recommendations for tourism managers in Santa Elena and similar destinations. First, they highlight the need to prioritize investments in health security and stress relief experiences, given their significant impact on the perceived quality of the destination. This involves maintaining robust biosafety protocols, ensuring spacious and natural areas, and designing tourism products that promote relaxation and emotional well-being. However, such initiatives must consider implementation challenges such as limited financial resources, lack of institutional coordination, and infrastructure deficiencies, factors that can constrain or delay strategic improvements.

Second, the results suggest that marketing and promotion strategies should focus on highlighting the destination’s opportunities for learning, discovery, and intellectual exploration, which could attract specific segments of tourists motivated by knowledge and curiosity. Destination managers could develop informational content, guided experiences, and interactive elements that emphasize local culture, biodiversity, or environmental education, aligning product design with these cognitive motivations.

Finally, the fact that social connection and physical condition were not determining factors in this context suggests that managers could reassess their efforts in intensive group activities or highly physical experiences, instead focusing on personalized, authentic, and emotionally meaningful experiences. Still, these findings reflect the preferences of a specific segment in a particular context and may not apply to all adventure tourism profiles; thus, it is essential to adopt a segmented approach when implementing these recommendations. These practical guidelines can serve as a foundation for designing more effective interventions, optimizing resources, and improving the destination’s competitiveness in national and international markets. Moreover, these insights could inform regional tourism planning efforts by aligning destination development strategies with visitor motivations, particularly by integrating well-being, sustainability, and knowledge-based experiences into local tourism policies. In the case of Ecuador, these insights could guide regional tourism planning efforts in coastal provinces like Santa Elena, encouraging the incorporation of policies that promote biosafety, emotional well-being, and educational tourism products.

6. Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive insight into the factors that determine the perception of quality and loyalty among adventure tourists in Santa Elena, Ecuador, an emerging destination within the Latin American context. The findings confirm that health assurance, stress relief, and intellectual curiosity are key drivers in positively evaluating the destination. At the same time, factors like social connection and physical condition have a lesser impact on this specific segment.

These results reinforce widely used theoretical models in tourism literature, such as Expectancy–Disconfirmation and SERVQUAL, and provide contextualized evidence for a better understanding of the motivations and perceptions of post-pandemic travelers. Specifically, the findings confirm the importance of emotional and cognitive elements, such as psychological well-being and curiosity, in shaping tourist satisfaction, thus extending the traditional dimensions emphasized by these models and suggesting the need to incorporate broader motivational categories in future theoretical applications.

From a practical standpoint, the conclusions guide tourism managers and local policy-makers toward designing more personalized, safe, and emotionally enriching experiences that enhance satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat visits. However, these strategies must be approached with consideration of local implementation barriers, such as limited funding or weak institutional coordination, which can affect execution.

This study also demonstrates that the research gap identified in the Introduction, limited evidence from emerging Latin American destinations, has been addressed through empirical analysis focused on post-pandemic tourist behavior in Santa Elena. The objectives of the study were achieved, providing valuable insights for both theory and practice.

Overall, this study contributes to the academic advancement of adventure tourism and the competitive development of emerging destinations while also encouraging future research to examine how motivational and perceptual dynamics differ across cultures, age groups, types of adventure activities, and stages of tourism recovery. Future studies could adopt comparative designs across multiple destinations or use probabilistic sampling to validate and refine the findings presented here.

Limitations and Future Lines of Investigation

While this study provides relevant findings, it presents some limitations that should be considered. First, convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the results, as the sample does not represent the entire population of adventure tourists in Ecuador or Latin America. Second, data were collected in a specific context, the post-pandemic period of 2021, which may have influenced respondents' perceptions of health, safety, and stress, limiting the applicability of the results to more stable periods. For instance, the heightened concern for biosecurity and emotional well-being during that phase may have amplified the relative importance of health-related motivations over others, such as social interaction or physical challenge.

Third, the study's cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of firm causal relationships between the constructs analyzed, restricting the findings to correlational interpretations. Additionally, although the questionnaire items were adapted from previously validated scales, no pilot test or qualitative validation was conducted with the specific target audience of Latin American adventure tourists. This lack of pre-testing may have affected the instrument's cultural sensitivity, construct clarity, or content relevance for the regional context, representing a methodological limitation.

Finally, although multiple motivational dimensions were included, other relevant factors, such as price, economic constraints, or access barriers, were not considered and could influence the results.

Based on these limitations, several opportunities for future research arise. It is recommended that this study be replicated using larger and more probabilistic samples in other adventure destinations, both within Ecuador and other Latin American countries, to validate the robustness of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable for analyzing changes in tourists' perceptions and behaviors over time, especially in response to disruptive events such as health crises, economic wars, or environmental challenges. Another promising avenue is comparing different tourist segments, such as

adventure tourism, ecotourism, and rural tourism, to identify differences and similarities in motivations and perceptions of quality. Finally, research incorporating qualitative analysis (such as in-depth interviews or focus groups) could enrich the understanding of the subjective meanings that tourists attribute to their experiences, complementing the quantitative results obtained here.

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