

Original Research Paper

## Strategies for Creating a Sense Of Belonging in a Rural Tourism Destination by Mediating Tourist Satisfaction (Case Study: Kandelous Village)

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### Abstract

Today, energy consumption in our country has become one of the serious concerns of politicians, especially in the domestic water consumption sector. And due to Iran being located in the dry and waterless part of the world and its dire need for drinking water, this concern has intensified. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the effect of lifestyle on the water consumption of families in Sari County. The method of this research is survey and descriptive studies and also includes correlational research. A questionnaire was used to collect data and information. The findings showed that despite water shortages, average water consumption is high. There is a significant positive relationship between a consumerist-hedonistic lifestyle and water consumption. The Pearson correlation coefficient for this relationship is 0.410 with a significant level of 0 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Additionally, income and education levels are positively correlated with this lifestyle and water consumption, while age is negatively correlated. The Pearson correlation coefficient for income and lifestyle is 0.276 ( $p < 0.05$ ), for age and lifestyle is -0.232 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and for age and water consumption is -0.127 ( $p = 0.011$ ). The Spearman correlation coefficient for education and water consumption is reported but its value is mentioned as 0.009, which seems to be an error in the text. This study shows a positive relationship between a consumerist-hedonistic lifestyle and water consumption. This lifestyle emphasizes consuming more and using expensive goods to display identity. Higher income and education levels also lead to increased water consumption. Younger couples are more inclined towards this lifestyle, resulting in higher water usage. Income plays a crucial role in increasing consumption, with education contributing to higher income and subsequently more consumption.

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, the tourism industry, as the most important industry in the world, has experienced rapid growth in the world's economic development, as a result of the increase in the annual growth rate in global gross national product, exports, global trade and services, the share of international tourists in global economic activity has also increased continuously. One of the important economic effects of this rapid growth is job creation, which has been effective in developing and expanding job opportunities for different segments of society.

Most governments are trying to secure a significant portion of their national income from this industry, because the revenue generation of this industry is very high compared to its capital. The development of the tourism industry requires the existence of multiple platforms, because tourism is a set of multiple elements and systems that deal with many interested businesses. This set can only function when all its elements are placed in a coordinated set. If there is a gap or deficiency in one of the sections and elements, the performance of the entire set will be disrupted and tourism will not develop optimally.

Tourism has been one of the main and at the same time most controversial concepts of rural development over the past few decades because, by utilizing the natural and cultural capacities available in rural areas, it can play an important role in revitalizing the village, creating employment and income for villagers, protecting natural, historical and cultural heritage, and ultimately, integrated and sustainable rural development. One of the types of tourism classified by Jings is rural tourism (Ruknuddin Eftekhari et al, 2017).

Although it can be said that tourism alone cannot lead to the development of the country, with the arrival of tourists, the need for change and creation of facilities for accommodation, transportation and other related activities gradually arises. Paying attention to tourism destinations and tourist satisfaction is one of the main factors of success in this industry. Therefore, the need to pay attention to tourism and use its countless economic and cultural benefits for countries has made it necessary to research on the satisfaction of tourists and

tourism destinations and strategies for increasing it.

One of the effective factors in the sustainability of any tourism destination, including rural tourism, is measuring tourists' satisfaction with those tourism destinations. In fact, one of the important concepts in evaluating tourism development is tourists' satisfaction with the quality of tourism services. Naturally, increasing tourists' satisfaction with the capacity and quality of accommodation and recreational facilities is directly related to tourism growth (Fazli et al, 2021).

Feeling satisfied with the destination on the one hand and encouraging and persuading friends and acquaintances on the other hand leads to frequent visits to tourist destinations (Rosta, 2021). Tourist satisfaction is a category that causes a tourist to feel a sense of belonging to continue traveling to the destination and encourage and persuade friends and acquaintances to visit the destination, thus contributing to the prosperity, continuity and sustainability of tourism in tourist destinations (Kiani et al, 2018).

Today, one of the methods of measuring the efficiency of existing services in a region is to evaluate the opinions of the beneficiaries and users (tourists) of tourism services. In fact, given the direct connection of tourists with the services created and the needs existing in the destination areas, they play an effective role in measuring the efficiency or deficiencies of existing services (Ruknoeddin Eftekhari et al., 2017).

Satisfaction measurement can provide the necessary knowledge and insight for destination managers and planners to improve facilities and amenities. Therefore, understanding the satisfaction status is essential in the planning and development process of this activity (Akbarian-Ronezi & Rastegar, 2010). Therefore, in this study, strategies for increasing satisfaction and a sense of belonging to the rural tourism destination of Kandelous have been examined.

## Literature Review

Tourist satisfaction is a behavioral phenomenon that is created through the emotional and cognitive dimensions of tourism activities and the evaluation of various elements and forms of the destination. The

overall satisfaction of the tourist is formed through his evaluation of different characteristics of the destination, based on expectations, and one of the most important factors in tourists returning to a destination is their satisfaction with their previous stay there. Understanding the tourist's feelings about a place indirectly refers to the characteristics of the destination from the tourist's perspective at different levels (Alegre, 2010: 54).

Tourist satisfaction is known to be a key factor in success in tourism. Obviously, if a tourist is satisfied, he will be motivated to visit by staying longer at the destination or returning again and also recommending it to others. This issue is related to both the way tourism is offered and the essential characteristics of a destination. Since tourist satisfaction is considered one of the most important competitive factors and the best indicator for ensuring future profit growth, and the level of tourist satisfaction is considered an important criterion for measuring the quality of work, the more the tourist satisfaction and their normative expectations and criticisms are met, the greater the likelihood of its repetition in the future and the attraction of tourists for tourism development is achieved. (Hemmati and Zahrani, 2012).

Satisfied tourists tend to share their positive experiences with others and repeat their trips to the destination. The level of tourist satisfaction in a trip is the result of several factors that are generally evaluated in the process of comparing the tourist's perspective on the products and services received and his expectations before and during the trip. Tourist satisfaction plays an important role in the marketing position of a tourist destination. Because it affects the choice of destination, the consumption of tourism goods and services, and the decision to return to the destination (Yoon, & Uysal, 2005). Consumers with a higher level of satisfaction are more likely to intend to buy again and recommend to others (Farmani et al, 2021).

Dissatisfaction occurs when performance is not at the level of expectations. Undoubtedly, satisfaction plays an important role in planning products and services and influencing the decision to return to that destination. Therefore, destination managers should determine a higher level of tourist satisfaction to create positive post-purchase behavior in tourists so that they can maintain and enhance

the competitiveness of the destination (Le et.al, 2017).

Several studies have investigated the direct and indirect relationship between value, quality of satisfaction and post-purchase consequences such as customer loyalty, word-of-mouth advertising and repurchase intentions. Many of these studies have concluded that the relationships between structures are complex, diverse and dynamic. The better the quality of services provided to tourists, the greater the tourist's satisfaction and, consequently, the desire to visit again (Ghorbanzadeh et al, 2010).

In the field of tourism, most research has considered repeated visits and the desire to return as loyalty indicators (Nam et.al, 2012). In tourism texts, satisfaction with the travel experience plays a role in loyalty to the destination. The level of tourist loyalty to the destination is reflected in his willingness to revisit the destination and in his willingness to recommend it to others. A tourist's positive experience of the services, goods, and other resources provided in the tourist destination leads to repeat visits and also positive word-of-mouth effects to friends and other relatives (Mohammadi et al, 2019).

In tourism, like other services, the consumption experience is complex due to its intangible, dynamic, and subjective nature. The tourism consumption experience includes a complex combination of tangible, objective, and practical components (i.e., travel, food, drink, and entertainment) as well as symbolic emotional and pleasure components (i.e., enjoyment, laughter, having good times, and sociability) (Jiang, 2018). The quality of a customer experience affects the effective success of organizations through positive satisfaction outcomes resulting from repeat visits and positive advertising, and may also be negative outcomes resulting from tourist dissatisfaction (Lv & McCabe, 2020). Providing high-quality services and ensuring customer satisfaction are recognized as one of the most important factors for the success of tourism industries. Quality services and tourist satisfaction and loyalty to a destination are closely related (Moon & Han, 2019).

Loyalty is measured by two indicators: "intention to return" and "intention to recommend to others." Although, due to economic costs and travel time constraints, satisfaction with the current travel experience

does not guarantee a return to the destination, satisfied tourists are more likely to recommend the destination to others. Therefore, destination tourism managers must be able to provide tourist satisfaction and create a memorable image of the destination in the

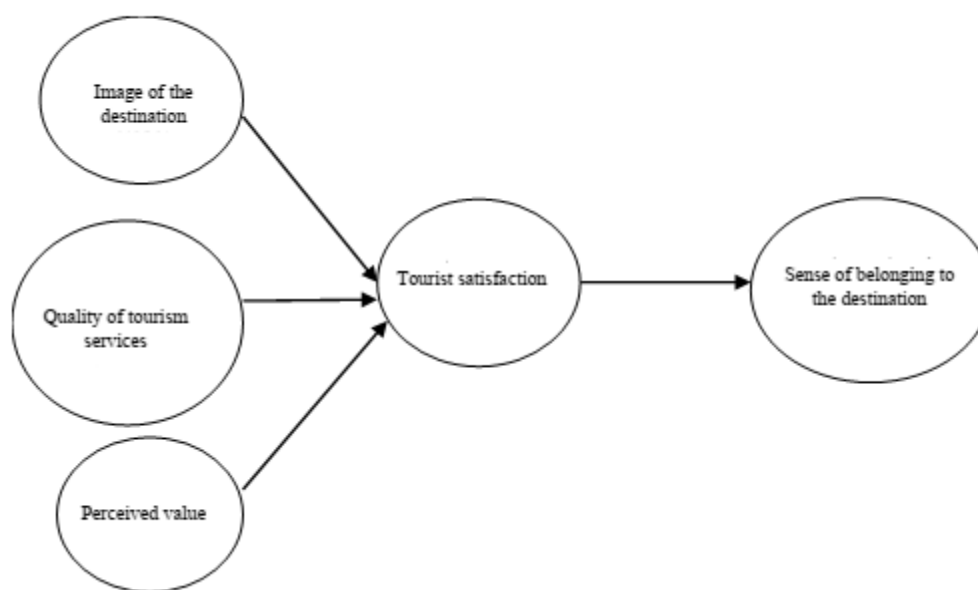
minds of tourists in order to keep the destination competitive with other tourism destinations.

## Research Background

**Table 1:** Summary of Previous Research

Author (year)	Research title	Research results
Rousta (2022)	Explaining the effects of tourist experience and motivation in urban areas on tourist satisfaction and loyalty	The image of a city destination plays a role in the motivation, satisfaction, and experience of tourists in urban areas, and the impact of the motivation of urban tourists on the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists from tourist areas has been shown. The impact of urban tourist satisfaction on the loyalty of tourists from tourist areas was confirmed.
Talebi (2022)	Investigating factors affecting loyalty and satisfaction with urban tourism destinations	The feeling of security and peace of mind of tourists while exploring the city of Tabriz is of the greatest importance in creating a sense of satisfaction among tourists. There is a relationship between travel experience and their loyalty.
Fazli (2021)	Measuring tourists' satisfaction with the quality of rural tourism accommodations using the CSM index: a case study (rural tourism accommodations in Tehran province)	Six indicators of the quality of health and medical services infrastructure, the quality of welfare and hospitality services infrastructure, the quality of security, the quality of territorial resources, the quality of physical infrastructure, and the quality of environmental health services affect the satisfaction of rural tourists. The highest satisfaction was observed in the quality of territorial resources index and the lowest satisfaction was observed in the quality of security.
Hernández & Mogollón (2020)	Integrating transactional and relationship marketing: a new approach to understanding destination loyalty	Interactional marketing models should be enriched with relational variables such as trust and attachment. Attempting to improve destinations' image and perceived quality is at best a fragmented strategy if relational variables are not included, as these variables are critical to destination success.
Salaripour (2020)	Evaluation of factors affecting tourists' attachment and loyalty to tourism destinations	Quality of experience, perceived value, and destination image had a positive and significant effect on tourist satisfaction, and the perceived quality index and destination brand image had no significant relationship with tourist satisfaction as a result of tourist attachment and loyalty.
Shahbazi Shiran and Esmi (2019)	The impact of destination image and satisfaction on heritage tourist loyalty.	The most influential variables related to loyalty, destination image, and tourist satisfaction were, respectively, the variables of tourists' revisiting the complex, awareness and interest, and tourism spending.
Faridi Fashtami et al. (2019)	Explaining the factors affecting attachment and loyalty to tourism destinations	Quality of experience, perceived value, and destination image have a positive and significant effect on tourist satisfaction.
Akbarian Ronizi and Rastegar (2019)	Explanation and analysis of factors affecting tourist satisfaction with tourism destinations (Case study: Dargahan city)	The impact of the components of amenities and catering, entertainment, recreation and leisure activities and spending on tourist satisfaction. The relationship between tourist satisfaction and the variables of gender, occupation, length of stay and type of stay of tourists.
Baghaei and Dadkhah (2019)	Investigating the relationship between sustainable competitive advantage factors and tourist satisfaction and loyalty	Significant relationship between quality, value, image and satisfaction of tourists. Significant relationship between quality, value, image, satisfaction and overall satisfaction with loyalty.
Einali and Elahi Churan (2019)	Explaining the factors affecting tourists' satisfaction with rural tourism (Case study: Vanush village, Mazandaran province)	The impact of access to basic services, availability of facilities at attractions, affordability of costs, social and cultural character of the region's residents, security, access to health and livelihood, access to natural attractions, and cleanliness on tourist satisfaction.
Mansourkiaei (2019)	Investigating the mental image of a tourist destination on loyalty with the mediating role of tourism intention in Hamedan.	The effect of tourism intention as a mediating variable in the relationship between mental image of a tourism destination and loyalty to a tourism destination.
Chung et al (2018)	The impact of country and destination images on destination	Destination image is a very important factor in the tourist-destination relationship and has a direct and significant effect

Author (year)	Research title	Research results
	loyalty: a construallevel-theory perspective	on personality, attachment, and satisfaction with the destination. Attachment to the destination also has a significant effect on tourists' satisfaction with the destination.
Kayani Faiz-Abadi (2017)	Factors affecting loyalty to a tourism destination with the mediating role of tourist satisfaction (Case study: Kashan city)	The positive and significant impact of tourism destination image on destination personality, tourist satisfaction and their loyalty to the destination, positive and significant impact
Chiu Wu (2016)	The influence of destination image and tourist satisfaction on tourist loyalty: a case study of Chinese tourists in Korea	Destination image, travel experience, and high satisfaction levels have a great impact on the level of tourist loyalty to tourist destinations.
Hosseini (2015)	Investigating the relationship between tourism destination image, satisfaction with tourism destination characteristics, and tourist loyalty to the tourism region of West Azerbaijan Province	Positive relationship between destination image and satisfaction with tourism destination characteristics, destination image and overall tourist satisfaction, relationship between satisfaction with tourism destination characteristics and overall tourist satisfaction, and tourist loyalty to the tourism destination
Isan Zahra (2012)	Destination image and tourism: A case study of Bangladesh	Understanding the tourism image of a destination is achieved by obtaining information about the current place of residence and comparing it with the tourism image of the desired destination.
Hanzaee et al (2011)	A model of destination branding for Isfahan city: Integrating the concepts of the branding and destination image	Overall image is influenced by three types of brand associations, and overall image is an important mediator of the relationship between brand associations and future tourist behavior. Overall, unique image and cognitive evaluation have the greatest impact on overall image, respectively.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of research (Source: Taken from Theoretical Foundations,2023)

### Research hypotheses

- Destination image has a positive effect on rural tourist satisfaction.
- Quality of tourism services has a positive effect on rural tourist satisfaction.
- Perceived value has a positive effect on rural tourist satisfaction.
- Tourist satisfaction has a positive effect on the sense of belonging to the destination.

### The Area under Study

This research was conducted in the tourist village of Kandelous. Kandelous village is one of the most beautiful villages in Iran in Mazandaran province, which today is one of the most well-equipped tourist villages in the province with facilities such as accommodation centers, cafes, restaurants, museums, and pristine nature. Currently,



Kandelous village is known domestically and internationally in the field of tourism, and every year many domestic and foreign tourists from all over Iran and the world travel to this area to visit this village and other villages in Kojur.

Kandelous is located 75 kilometers from Nowshahr, 15 kilometers from Pol (the center of Kojur), and 5 kilometers from the summer village of Largan. This village is located in a mountainous area and in one of the beautiful valleys of the Alboraz mountain range, and its altitude is 1650 meters above sea level. Kandelous is a village in the Kojur district of Noshahr city in Mazandaran province, Iran, with a four-thousand-year history in the heart of the Alborz mountains. It is considered one of the most beautiful and cleanest villages in Iran, shining like a jewel in the heart of the beautiful nature of the northern Alborz.

This village is located along the Zanous Valley, and the lush and beautiful Kojur region, one of the first and oldest human settlements in Mazandaran province.

### Methodology

The present study is considered an applied study in terms of the planned objectives, because its ultimate goal is to investigate the effect of tourist satisfaction indicators on the sense of belonging to the rural tourism destination, which has been implemented as a case study in the village of Kandelous, and will ultimately provide solutions and suggestions for the development of tourism in this region. The research method in this study is descriptive, field-finding. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS statistical software and using multivariate regression statistical tests.

### Results and Discussion

#### - Descriptive Findings

- 56.3 percent of respondents were male and 43.7 percent were female.

- 18.9 percent of respondents were under 20 years old, 21.3 percent were 21 to 30 years old, 17.5 percent were 31 to 40 years old, 21.3 percent were 41 to 50 years old, and 21 percent were over 51 years old.

- 42.3 percent of respondents were single and 57.8 percent were married.

- 19.2 percent of respondents had a bachelor's degree, 36.4 percent had a bachelor's degree, and 44.4 percent had a university degree.

- 8.8 percent of respondents had a monthly income of less than 10 million, 34 percent had a monthly income of 11 to 20 million, 38 percent had a monthly income of 21 to 30 million, and 19.2 percent had a monthly income of more than 31 million.

- The average satisfaction of tourists among respondents was average. The average indicators of destination image, quality of tourism services, perceived value and sense of belonging to the destination were also average. The study by Shahbazi Shiran and Esmi (2019) showed that the satisfaction of tourists was desirable. The results of the study by Akbarian Ronizi and Rastegar (2019) also show that the level of satisfaction of tourists in the city of Dargahan is above average.

- The average sense of belonging of tourists to the rural tourism destination of Kandelous was above average.

- Inferential findings

To determine the appropriate test, first the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) normality test was performed to check the normality of the distribution. The results of the study showed that the distribution of the sample population is normal and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is not significant for matching the sample distribution with the theoretical distribution. For this reason, parametric tests were used to test the research hypotheses (Tab2).

**Table2:** Regression Analysis Results Examining the Impact of Predictor Variables on Tourist Satisfaction and Sense of Belonging to the Destination

Predictor variable	Criterion variable	F	R2	$\beta$	T	Sig	Result
Image of the destination	Tourists satisfaction	44.14	.21	.28	6.35	.000	Confirm
Quality of tourism services	Tourists satisfaction	37.12	.18	.40	8.54	.000	Confirm
Perceived value	Tourists satisfaction	13.4	.15	.25	5.06	.000	Confirm
Tourists satisfaction	Sense of belonging to destination	13.91	.17	.26	5.21	.000	Confirm

Source: Finding Research, 2025

Hypothesis 1: Destination image has a positive effect on rural tourist satisfaction.

The results of the study show that destination image has a direct and significant effect on tourist satisfaction, meaning that as satisfaction with destination image increases, tourist satisfaction is likely to increase.

The results of the study are consistent with the research of Roustaei (2022), Salaripour (2021), Shahbazi Shiran and Esmi (2010), Faridi Fashtami et al. (2010), Baghaei and Dadkhah (2019), Mansour Kiaei (2019), Kiani Feizabadi (2018), Hosseini (2015), Hernández & Mogollón et al (2020), Chung et al (2018), Chiu Wu (2016), Isan Zahra (2012) and Hanzaei et al (2011).

Hypothesis 2: The quality of tourism services has a positive effect on rural tourist satisfaction.

The results showed that the quality of tourism services has a positive and significant effect on tourist satisfaction. This means that with increasing the quality of tourism services, it can be expected that the level of satisfaction of tourists with rural tourism destinations will increase.

Similar results have been observed in the research of Talebi (2022), Fazli et al. (2021), Salaripour (2021), Faridi Fashtami et al. (2010), Akbarian Ronizi and Rastegar (2010), Baghaei and Dadkhah (2019), Einali and Elahi Chourn (2019), Hosseini (2015), and Hernández & Mogollón et al (2020).

In competitive tourism markets, trying to attract tourists by different destinations is considered a strategic goal. One of the methods of attracting tourists to a destination is to pay attention to improving the quality of the environment. Because, given the nature of tourism, tourists are looking for fun and spending their leisure time with pleasure. For this purpose, they mainly seek to find destinations that have the highest level of environmental quality.

In tourism, it is always believed that high service quality and the satisfaction it brings leads to behavioral responses such as positive word-of-mouth advertising and repeat visitors (Karubi et al., 2017).

Hypothesis Three: Perceived value has a positive effect on rural tourist satisfaction.

The results of the study indicate a direct and significant effect of perceived value on rural tourist satisfaction.

This result is consistent with the research of Salaripour (2021), Faridi Fashtami et al. (2010),

Baghaei and Dadkhah (2019), Hernández & Mogollón et al (2020).

Hypothesis Four: Tourist satisfaction has a positive effect on the sense of belonging to the destination.

The findings of the study showed that tourist satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on the sense of belonging to the rural tourism destination. That is, with an increase in tourist satisfaction, it is likely that an increase in the sense of belonging to the tourism destination can be observed. Therefore, the research hypothesis has been confirmed.

A similar result has been observed in the research of Roustaei (2022), Talebi (2022), Salaripour (2021), Faridi Fashtami et al. (2010), Baghaei and Dadkhah (2019), Kiani Feizabadi (2018), Hosseini (2015), Hernández & Mogollón et al (2020), Chung et al (2018), and Chiu Wu (2016).

Tourist satisfaction, which is one of the necessary conditions for the success of the tourism industry, creates long-term benefits if it creates the basis for tourist loyalty. Tourist loyalty to a destination, in short, is the tourist's intention to revisit the destination and also recommend it to others to travel to the destination.

Tourist satisfaction is a category that causes tourist loyalty to continue traveling to the destination and encourage friends and acquaintances to visit the destination, thus providing prosperity, continuity, and sustainability of tourism in tourist destinations.

## **Conclusion**

Tourism has been considered one of the main and at the same time most controversial concepts of rural development over the past few decades because, by using the natural and cultural capacities available in rural areas, it can play an important role in revitalizing the village, creating employment and income for villagers, protecting natural, historical and cultural heritage, and ultimately integrated and sustainable rural development.

Today, for many regions, tourism is considered one of the opportunities to achieve economic, cultural and social development. In fact, the existence of natural and cultural attractions is part of the important capital of regions that have many advantages for them and significantly affect their economic development. Therefore, it can be said that among the activities that can have a significant impact on improving the

economic, social and cultural situation of a region is tourism development. This is while tourism development may face problems and obstacles despite the existence of tourist attractions in a region. In fact, it cannot be expected that just because of the existence of conditions for tourism development in a destination, there will be no obstacles to development and that everything will be ready for the desired development of tourism and its desired effects. Therefore, special attention should be paid to providing the necessary conditions for tourists.

Today, visitors are considered the most important asset of tourist areas; so that maintaining visitors and their satisfaction is considered a guarantee of the survival, development and growth of tourist areas and is considered a great competitive advantage.

However, due to the increasing competition in tourism markets, it seems that efforts to create satisfaction in tourists are not enough and it is better to seek to identify ways to make tourists feel a sense of belonging to tourism destinations. The feeling of belonging, attachment and loyalty of tourists to tourism destinations are important issues that can explain the success or failure of destinations in attracting tourists.

Therefore, the present study sought to investigate the effect of tourist satisfaction on the feeling of belonging to the tourism destination, which was carried out as a case study in the rural tourism area of Kandelous.

Accordingly, in the present study, according to theoretical foundations, the image of the destination, the quality of tourism services and the perceived value were identified as factors affecting satisfaction and a sense of belonging to the tourism destination of Kandelous, and tourist satisfaction plays a role as a mediating variable between the image of the destination, the quality of tourism services and the perceived value on the feeling of belonging to the tourism destination.

### **Research Suggestions**

According to the research topic and the results obtained, the following are suggested in relation to the components studied in this research:

-Developing and establishing accommodation centers for accommodating tourists with desirable quality.

-Implementing projects related to the development of infrastructure and services, especially in areas lacking appropriate facilities and equipment through conducting detailed studies on specific scales.

-Developing and equipping new recreational centers and renovating and beautifying existing recreational centers.

-Trying to organize educational tours or tours with special interests in this village that will lead to greater interaction and trust between the host community and tourists and lead to their greater participation in tourism development.

-Providing banking facilities to the host community so that they can develop tourism-related businesses and play an effective role in tourism development in the region.

-Educating residents about the effects of tourism development and its desirable effects (especially economic effects) so that the host community is encouraged to participate in tourism activities.

-Cooperation between the public and private sectors by bearing a large part of the cost and providing facilities and tax exemptions and assisting and accelerating the issuance of the necessary permits for the construction of hotels and residences.

-Allocation of development budgets for the implementation of tourism projects based on historical and ancient attractions in the region in order to create employment and earn income for residents through tourism.

-Allocation of budgets by the government to create media advertisements.

-Support and welcome private sector investors.

-Holding training courses in the regions in order to increase awareness and information and motivate their residents to participate in implementing tourism activities and improve their knowledge and information about the desirable effects of tourism development.

-Distribution of catalogs and brochures about images of the province's historical and natural attractions and the various benefits of tourism development among residents.

-Development of tourism services and infrastructure such as the transportation system at the destination in a way that facilitates access to attractions at the destination.

-Investigating the condition of communication roads and trying to repair them and develop access routes to attractions



-Establishing sufficient security on communication roads and access routes to attractions so that the lives and property of tourists are not at risk.

-Deploying tourist guides in tourist places to introduce and advertise tourist attractions and provide accurate information to tourists.

-Using local traditions and customs to diversify tourism activities

- Establishing tourism information centers to provide information about attractions.

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