Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes

Global tourism trends and the future of the tourism industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the development process of tourism from the past to the present and its future transformation trends in a multidimensional manner. The study comprehensively analyzes the fundamental turning points that shaped tourism in the past, the global trends and structural changes affecting the sector today, and the expected future directions. Accordingly, it aims to present forecasts of how the industry has evolved and will be restructured in the future, based on global tourism trends as a fundamental reference.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual study is based on a thematic review of the existing literature on global tourism trends. The data for the study were compiled from previous research addressing global tourism trends.

Findings – It has been concluded that COVID-19 represents a significant turning point for tourism and that tourism trends have been shaped in line with experience-based, niche tourism trends throughout this process. The study is structured under the themes of The Beginning of Modern Tourism, The COVID-19 Pandemic Period, Global Tourism Trends in the New Era and Future Tourism Trends.

Originality/value – This study brings together historical turning points, pandemic-induced structural transformation and future tourism trends, which are often addressed separately in the literature, within a comprehensive analytical framework. By evaluating the crises tourism has experienced in the past, the transformation it is undergoing today and its possible future directions, it moves beyond fragmented approaches and treats tourism as a constantly changing structure. In this respect, the study presents a clearer picture of how tourism is evolving, offering a more coherent and comprehensive perspective on the field's discussions.

Keywords The COVID-19 pandemic period, Post-pandemic tourism, Tourism transformation, Global tourism trends, Future tourism trends, Tourism industry

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Global dynamics such as economic crises, climate change, and technological transformations have paved the way for tourism to undergo continuous change, adding a new dimension to the phenomenon (Scott and Gösling, 2015). In this process, tourists' desires and needs have diversified, with more unique, experience-oriented demands emerging beyond standard products and services. Increased competition in tourism requires countries to adapt to change and closely monitor innovations. Political movements and cultural transformations shaped by economic crises also have decisive effects on tourism. These effects are not limited to the period in which they emerged, but continue to shape the structure and trends of tourism in subsequent periods (Türktarhan *et al.*, 2022).

Climate change is reshaping destination preferences and altering travel choices. As a result, traditional holiday routes are shifting, with tourists increasingly favoring cooler climates. However, the sector's most significant structural disruption occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic. This global crisis exposed the tourism sector's fragility and triggered a restructuring focused on security, health, flexibility, and sustainability, significantly affecting the industry (Kim and Yang, 2021). The post-pandemic period represents not only a recovery process in tourism but also a transition to a new "post-tourism" phase. During this process, traveler behavior has evolved into a structure focused on experience, meaning, and personal well-being. In parallel, the tourism industry has shifted toward developing niche tourism products and experiences based on specific interests, focusing on the expectations of certain markets (Huang *et al.*, 2010). This transformation signals fundamental shifts in tourist demand and has led to an acceleration in academic studies aimed at explaining and guiding these changes (Gössling *et al.*, 2021).



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Studies are being conducted to identify trends transforming travel and tourism, enabling managers and researchers to better understand them. For example, Bowen and Whalen (2017) state that four technology-based trends, robotics and artificial intelligence, big data, social media, and the sharing economy, are transforming the tourism and hospitality sector. Therefore, from the inception of modern tourism, and particularly in light of the transformations brought about by the pandemic, there is a need for a comprehensive assessment of how global tourism trends have shaped the sector and what the tourism industry can expect in the near future. The study comprehensively addresses the fundamental turning points that shaped tourism in the past, the global trends and structural changes affecting the sector today, and the expected future directions. Accordingly, it aims to present predictions on how the industry has evolved and will be restructured in the future, using global tourism trends as a basis.

Conceptual framework

The Beginning of Modern Tourism

The development of transportation, driven by the Industrial Revolution and other social and technological advances, paved the way for Thomas Cook's group travel, marking the beginning of mass tourism. This development facilitated the growth of the tourism industry, including hotels, restaurants, tour operations, attractions, and transportation services (Löschburg, 1979). In England, the Industrial Revolution brought about harsh working conditions and an unhealthy urban environment, creating serious problems and leading people to seek rest and escape. These developments paved the way for the emergence of modern mass tourism (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007). From the 1950s onwards, rapidly increasing tourism demand concentrated in coastal regions with suitable climatic conditions that met modern society's need for relaxation and escape. During this period, tourism became a mass sector characterized by high seasonality, offering standardized, low-cost services. The seasonal fluctuations and problems caused by concentration in the industry accelerated the search for alternative products and experiences that would spread tourism activities throughout the year and diversify demand (Akoğlan Kozak *et al.*, 2013).

Due to the impact of mass tourism, tourists with limited travel experience in the 1980s preferred guided tours to make their trips more economical, efficient, and safe. Cost advantages, safety, and easy access to tourist attractions were effective factors in the preference for these tours. The primary expectation of tourist guides is to provide comfort and safety (Weiler and Black, 2014). Research shows that interest in mass tourism is declining, while interest in unique and individual experiences is increasing. The shift towards alternative types of tourism is growing stronger, with natural and historical sites and various artistic and cultural activities beginning to rank among the most important reasons for travel.

COVID-19 pandemic period

With globalization, the impact of crises transcends local boundaries and is felt worldwide, directly affecting the tourism sector, which is sensitive to crises (Duan *et al.*, 2022). Health crises such as SARS, avian influenza, and Ebola (Novelli *et al.*, 2018) have led to a decline in tourism demand. The COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted global travel between 2020 and 2022, caused structural and permanent changes in the supply and demand dynamics of the tourism sector and, due to its worldwide spread and long-term effects, had much deeper, more lasting consequences for the tourism system (Gössling *et al.*, 2021). According to World Tourism Organization data, international tourist arrivals decreased by 74% in 2020 due to COVID-19, and the sector suffered an economic loss of approximately $1.3 trillion (UN Tourism, 2025). The World Travel and Tourism Council reported that tourism's contribution to global GDP fell by 5.5% from 9.2 trillion dollars in 2019 to 4.7 trillion dollars, 62 million people lost their jobs, and travel and tourism spending contracted by 69.4% (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2026).

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During the pandemic, travel restrictions were imposed at the international, regional, and local levels; tourism activities rapidly declined due to border closures and flight cancellations (Corbisiero and Monaco, 2021). This situation led to serious economic vulnerabilities, business closures, and job losses throughout the value chain in all sub-sectors, including transportation, accommodation, and food and beverage (Gössling *et al*., 2021). The process has also triggered a reassessment of professional roles and necessitated that recovery be approached as a long-term transformation rather than a short-term one (Seyitoğlu *et al*., 2024). In this respect, the pandemic is considered a unique turning point in tourism literature in terms of scale and impact.

To overcome these challenges, the travel industry has accelerated its digital transformation process to create growth areas in new market conditions. Travel restrictions implemented during the pandemic led to the rapid proliferation of online guided virtual tours on global platforms such as Airbnb and through various local initiatives. Thus, a new form of practice has emerged within the guiding profession (Kavak *et al*., 2024). Digital transformation has been adopted in areas such as tourism planning, marketing, and service delivery, becoming a fundamental element that supported the survival and development of businesses during the pandemic (Bai *et al*., 2021). The pandemic has become not only a crisis for tourism businesses but also an opportunity to build a more sustainable and robust structure (Prayag *et al*., 2024). Research shows that businesses' resilience during the pandemic depended largely on social networks, internal resources, and external relationships, with innovation and transformation playing a key role in their adaptation (Price *et al*., 2022).

According to UNWTO data, 2024 marked a full post-pandemic recovery for the tourism sector, with 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals globally. While many destinations exceeded pre-pandemic levels, visitor spending also increased significantly. Tourism revenues reaching $1.6 trillion in 2024 demonstrate the economic impact of demand (UN Tourism, 2025). In 2025, international tourist arrivals increased by 4%, reaching approximately 1.52 billion (see Figure 1). This figure represents an increase of approximately 60 million from 2024 and marks a new record in the post-pandemic period (UN Tourism, 2025). The travel and tourism sector contributed approximately $11.7 trillion to the global economy, representing 10.3% of global GDP and a 6.7% annual growth rate (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2026).

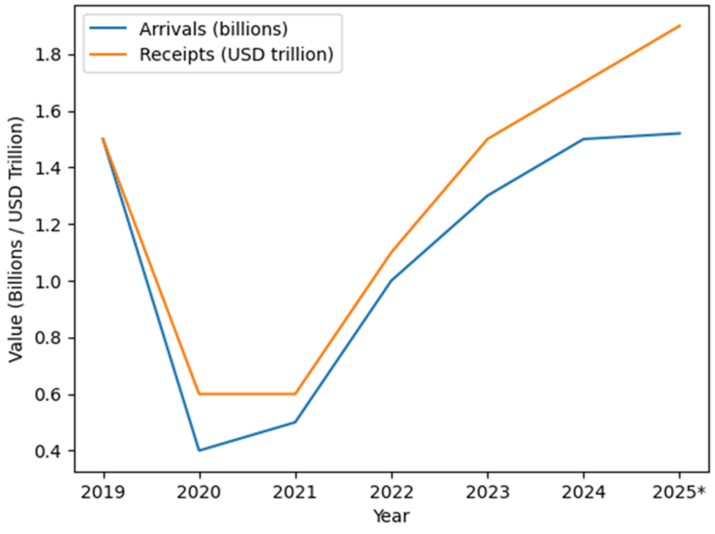

Figure 1. International tourist arrivals and tourism receipts source: UN tourism (January 2026)

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Global tourism trends in the New Era

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024) report, proactive and forward-looking policies are needed for a more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive tourism future. Although tourism's role in economic prosperity and well-being has been elevated to the top of the policy agenda in recent years, the sector risks being pushed back into the background as it returns to its pre-pandemic growth path. A strong recovery is supporting overall economic growth, particularly in countries with dynamic tourism, such as Greece, Portugal, Switzerland, and Turkey (OECD, 2024).

The pandemic has permanently transformed the demand structure in tourism. Safety and health concerns, along with flexible cancellation policies, are defining factors of this period. Travelers have become more cautious consumers, avoiding crowds, seeking contact with nature, and preferring reliable brands (Gössling *et al*., 2021). This shift in demand necessitates planning approaches that consider destinations' carrying capacity, manage visitor flow, and spatially distribute the experience. Tourists have begun to embrace experiential tourism approaches that advocate for more subjective, flexible experiences, in which they engage with the environments and cultures they encounter during their travels to gain meaningful experiences.

Travelers consciously moving away from the mass tourism mindset have begun to prefer an experience process based on active participation in tourist activities rather than passive consumption (Page *et al*., 2001). The tourist experience has already begun to provide an essential framework for explaining current tourism trends. Within the scope of this study, current approaches that stand out among experience-based tourism trends, such as spiritual tourism, digital nomadism, gastronomic tourism, wellness tourism, accessible tourism, solo travel, astro-tourism, and luxury train journeys, will be briefly discussed. These trends will be evaluated in light of the literature to develop strategic recommendations for industry stakeholders such as destination managers and tourism businesses.

The increasing pressures of modern life are directing individuals towards tourist activities that support mental well-being and the search for meaning, as well as physical relaxation. *Spiritual tourism* encompasses multidimensional experiential components such as inner transformation and healing. However, despite the growing interest in this type of tourism, academic studies on spiritual tourism are still in their infancy (Subramaniam *et al*., 2025). Dong *et al*. (2025) suggests that tourism products should be designed as holistic experiences that support spiritual well-being. It also states that cultural experiences should be structured to encourage active participation by visitors.

Digital nomads, who can work remotely using technological tools, live on the move and stay in destinations for extended periods, differ from traditional tourists in terms of their economic impact. The development of digital nomad visas and special living-working arrangements by many countries after the pandemic has reinforced the importance of this group in tourism policies. The literature also shows an increase in studies addressing this new tourist profile from different angles (Genceli *et al*., 2024; Arslan, 2024; Yıldırım and Kaya, 2024; Ay and Güzel, 2024). Strong internet infrastructure, affordability, safety, gastronomy, and the need for social spaces determine destination choices; social media sharing makes them both a source of information and visible tourism actors (Günay and Akgiş İlhan, 2024). The 2025 Global Digital Nomad Report compares the most favorable destinations for digital nomads by evaluating 64 countries. Findings show that digital nomad visas have increased rapidly since 2020, and that countries are competing to attract skilled mobile professionals based on visa ease, tax transparency, and strong digital infrastructure. The report addresses digital nomadism as a strategic policy tool for innovation and local development (Global Digital Nomad Report, 2025).

Within the scope of gastronomic tourism, dining experiences have evolved from a complementary element of travel to a key factor influencing destination selection and shaping tourists' overall travel satisfaction. *Gastronomic tourism* is a holistic process in which local culture and heritage are experienced through food; it is closely related to multidimensional

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elements such as identity, experience, motivation, and destination image (Yong *et al.*, 2022). In recent years, many studies have recognized gastronomic tourism as a multidimensional, experience-based tourism phenomenon (Moreno-Lobato *et al.*, 2025; Bütün and Önçel, 2025).

Today's fast-paced lifestyle has intensified the search for physical and mental well-being, positioning wellness tourism as a key response to stress and health concerns (Han *et al.*, 2020). Developed around practices such as meditation, spa, and yoga, it offers holistic experiences that integrate leisure, relaxation, and emotional well-being, making it a significant niche area. Particularly in the post-COVID-19 period, with increased awareness of physical and mental health, a marked increase has been observed in wellness- and healthy-living-focused tourism research; this trend is expected to influence consumer behavior in the medium term (Kotur, 2022). According to the Global Wellness Institute's Global Wellness Economy: Country Rankings (Data for 2019–2024) report, the three largest wellness markets as of 2024 are the US (USD 2.1 trillion), China (USD 950 billion), Germany (USD 281 billion). However, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, India have shown remarkable growth. The country with the highest per capita wellness spending is Iceland (Global Wellness Economy: Country Rankings, 2026).

Accessible tourism seeks to ensure that individuals with disabilities can travel independently and with dignity, free from physical and informational barriers, in line with universal design principles (Vila and Darcy, 2025). Framed within a human rights perspective, it relies on inclusive service design supported by digital technologies and accessible information (Lin *et al.*, 2022). However, gaps remain between policy and practice, particularly in digital accessibility, inclusive accommodation, and comparative research (Nigg *et al.*, 2025). According to the ENAT 2024 Annual Report, accessible tourism in Europe is shifting from scattered projects to a more institutionalized model aligned with EU transformation policies and monitoring standards (ENAT, 2024). The World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA) supports the adaptation of guide services to changing needs through its educational activities. The inclusion of content for individuals with special needs in the 2025 Training Brochure strengthens competencies in accessible tourism (World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, 2025).

Post-pandemic, expectations for freedom and personal space in travel have intensified, leading to a significant increase in solo travel. Solo travel stands out as an experience where individuals can be alone with themselves, experience mental renewal, and interact directly with different cultures. The spread of this trend across different age groups shows that solo travel has become an important expression of individuality and experience-oriented tourism. While the literature emphasizes that solo travel offers a transformative experience, especially for young women (Bennett and Wood, 2018), it also reveals that factors such as risk perception, safety, and cultural limitations are decisive (Kalyoncu Yolaçan, 2025). In line with increasing demand, some travel companies have reshaped their product structures by developing special tours and services for solo travelers. Thus, solo travel has evolved beyond being a growing preference into a travel culture. According to Solo Travel Statistics 2024–2025, solo travel is a rapidly growing and strategically important market segment. The 2024 survey indicates that a significant proportion of solo travelers take multiple trips per year, with many undertaking three or more journeys. Price, safety, and weather conditions are key determinants in the decision-making process. Furthermore, a considerable share of solo travelers prefer guided tours or package programs, highlighting the rising demand for organized solo travel. Industry projections suggest that the solo travel market will $1 trillion by 2030 (Solo Traveler, 2026).

Astrotourism is a specialized form of nature-based tourism focused on specific interests, including activities such as skywatching, astronomy-based events, and astrophotography (Cater, 2010). With the diversification of nature-based tourism, astro-tourism stands out as an experience-oriented form of travel that combines the unique physical characteristics of destinations with the universal appeal of the sky, targeting visitors with a certain level of knowledge and interest (Collison and Poe, 2013). Astrotourism integrates cultural landscape elements with the night sky, making destinations more visually and semantically appealing.

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Areas with clear skies, free from artificial light, are a key attraction for astro-tourism; for large groups unable to observe stars due to light pollution, low-impact, rural areas are emerging as new attractions (Jacobs *et al.*, 2020). As a niche alternative tourism type, astro-tourism has the potential to increase product diversity in destinations with its small-scale, community-based structure.

Luxury train travel is not merely a mode of transportation; it reflects social status, consumer culture, and the modern concept of travel (Pring, 2019). Luxury trains are designed to be an attraction focused on experience, nostalgia, and entertainment, beyond their daily transportation function. With their historic carriages, special routes, slow-paced journeys, and high level of comfort, these trains transform travel into an experience in itself. They are positioned as destinations rather than means of transportation. Luxury trains challenge the culture of speed by turning slow rail travel into an attraction, making the journey itself the experience.

Future tourism trends. The future of tourism depends on the balance between technology and human values. Artificial intelligence has become a decisive factor, particularly in the design of personalized experiences. Generative artificial intelligence applications provide digital support at many stages, from travel planning to experience management, making decision-making processes more autonomous and simultaneous (Düz, 2025; Wong *et al.*, 2023). It is also predicted that the proliferation of robotic guides may affect the role and employment of human guides, and that the shift towards humanoid robots will accelerate this process (Christou *et al.*, 2020). RoBoHoN, developed in Japan by Sharp Corporation, is an example of a digital guide application in the tourism sector. These human-like interactive robotic devices have the potential to provide visitors with information and personalize their experience (Sharp Blog, 2018). With the proliferation of augmented reality, big data, and automation, businesses are increasingly turning to artificial intelligence for demand forecasting, marketing, and operations management.

Metaverse technology stands out as an area that could impact tourism sustainability in multiple ways. It has the potential to reduce carbon emissions by replacing part of physical travel and to protect sensitive heritage sites. However, this transformation could become problematic if risks such as digital dependency, security, and e-waste are overlooked. Therefore, the positive contribution of the Metaverse to tourism depends on its support by ethical and regulatory frameworks (Zahrani *et al.*, 2025). The metaverse is considered a critical tool for sustainability in tourism and has the potential to drive transformation aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Promoting virtual experiences and limiting physical visits to sensitive destinations offers strategic opportunities for both conservation and alternative revenue generation (Zainal Abidin *et al.*, 2025). While digital tools make daily life easier, they also bring problems such as addiction and digital fatigue. Emerging digital detox tourism is based on accommodation and experience models in which technology use is limited or completely abandoned. Going beyond accommodation, this field diversifies through nature-based activities and experience-focused programs, necessitating planned destination development to meet increasing demand. Space tourism stands out as a niche area that will continue to be discussed. It is predicted that the sector will be driven primarily by young, high-income groups with high risk tolerance, while perceptions of price and safety will determine the growth rate (Pham *et al.*, 2026). According to a research report published by Spherical Insights & Consulting, the global space tourism market size is projected to reach $7.01 billion by 2035, up from $1.14 billion in 2024. Space tourism is positioned as an emerging market segment with high growth potential (Spherical Insights, 2025).

Conclusion and implications

This study examines the historical development of modern tourism, identifying the COVID-19 pandemic as a fundamental turning point and revealing that the sector underwent a structural transformation in the post-pandemic period. This study approaches the transformation in

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tourism not merely as a recovery process, but as a restructuring process shaped by global crises, changing tourist expectations, and technological developments. Rather than listing trends individually, it explains how they have transformed the structure of tourism within a holistic framework. In this respect, the study evaluates tourism not only as a growing sector but as a system that is reinventing itself by adapting to changing conditions. The findings show that international tourist numbers have quantitatively returned to pre-pandemic levels; however, the real change has occurred in the structure of demand. The shift from mass tourism to experience-based, niche, and meaning-focused tourism types has gained momentum. Spiritual and wellness tourism, digital nomadism, accessible tourism, solo travel, astro-tourism, and regenerative approaches are concrete indicators of this transformation. Tourism is evolving into a new structure that is not only a growing sector but also one that balances technology with human values and is inclusive and transformation-oriented.

Gastronomic tourism enhances destination appeal by deepening tourists' sensory engagement while supporting local economies and cultural heritage. As a strategic field for sustainable tourism planning, it contributes to employment and promotes regional products, particularly in the food, beverage, and handicraft sectors (Soonsan *et al*., 2023). Although research has largely focused on motivations, experiential value, and destination marketing, issues such as sustainability, local communities, and stakeholder relations remain less explored (Yong *et al*., 2022). The identification of distinct tourist profiles further indicates that gastronomic tourism is shaped by diverse expectations, enabling more targeted strategies and supporting diversification and sustainable management (Barzallo-Neira and Pulido-Fernández, 2025).

Accessible tourism is a strategic growth area in the global tourism market. This segment is no longer marginal but economically strong and expanding. Accessibility should be viewed not only as a social responsibility, but as a core element of competitive destination strategy. Integrating universal design into tourism products and services positions accessibility as a long-term investment and a quality standard rather than a cost (Lin *et al*., 2022). This approach will provide sustainable growth and competitive advantage by reducing seasonality and increasing service quality and customer loyalty.

As the solo travel market expands, tourism businesses are adapting their offerings to meet the needs of solo travelers, including tailored tours and packages. What was once a niche trend has become a global travel culture, requiring careful attention to travelers' motivations, safety, and especially the experiences of women. Developing safe and inclusive products for diverse solo profiles will also strengthen the social sustainability of destinations. Destinations are encouraged to redesign their images by preserving dark-sky areas and developing experience-based astro-tourism products. Astro-tourism can turn the fight against light pollution into a strategic advantage beyond sustainability (Collison and Poe, 2013), but its long-term value depends on integrating scientific and cultural content through learning and storytelling. "Celestial ecotourism" offers a more accessible and environmentally grounded alternative to the limited appeal of media-driven space tourism (Weaver, 2011). In countries that provide tour guide training and wish to specialize in astro-tourism, guided night tours should be systematically structured. Astronomy knowledge should be integrated with local mythology; story-based, modular, and learning-focused experience packages should be developed. In this way, astro-tourism can become not just an observation-based activity, but a qualified field of expertise supported by professional guiding skills.

According to Buhalis *et al*. (2023), tourism stakeholders should prioritize poverty reduction as a strategic objective and integrate local employment into CSR policies rather than focusing solely on economic growth. Future tourism management is expected to advance "Smart Destinations" that reduce environmental impacts through technologies such as artificial intelligence, IoT, and robotics. Practical measures such as reducing food waste and promoting agritourism can both strengthen local prosperity and contribute to the zero hunger goal. In addition, tourism facilities must upgrade their infrastructure to provide inclusive and accessible services for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, older adults, and children.

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Tourism has strong linkages with sectors such as agriculture, food production, and transportation, generating significant indirect value that accounts for over one-third of domestic value added (OECD, 2024). To adapt to changing market dynamics, stakeholders must develop coordinated and forward-looking strategies, while educational institutions should align curricula with emerging trends and sectoral needs. Specialization in niche areas and investment in qualified human resources will strengthen competitiveness.

Tourism development must balance economic growth with the protection of natural and cultural heritage through effective public-private collaboration. The growing demand for wellness and spiritual tourism suggests that policies should move beyond purely economic goals and adopt a holistic framework integrating health, well-being, and sustainability. Diversified, personalized, and experience-based products can reduce seasonality and enhance competitiveness, especially when sustainability and technological innovation are embedded in service design (Martins *et al*., 2025). Measuring spiritual experiences focused on mental health and well-being can improve product quality and create a sustainable competitive advantage (Şahin and Güzel, 2024). Supported by public-private partnerships and clear quality standards, spiritual tourism can become a strategic and competitive segment that fosters employment, cultural preservation, and destination diversity.

It is anticipated that metaverse-based tourism will offer an innovative and salvific alternative, particularly during crisis periods such as the pandemic. In this regard, the public and private sectors, civil society organizations, and educational institutions must collaborate to establish a legal framework for this field and develop innovative models grounded in long-term sustainability. Regenerative tourism is a new form of tourism that aims to replenish destination resources and support the long-term development of destination stakeholders, unlike sustainable tourism (Ateljevic and Sheldon, 2022). Fundamental aspects such as community-based approaches and the protection of local people's rights are essential to the regenerative tourism concept. In the future, developing special-interest tourism with more sustainable, inclusive, and creative approaches will pave the way for a qualitative transformation of the tourism sector.

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