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**TOURISM MARKETING PRACTICES AND
SUSTAINABILITY OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN
PROTECTED AREAS: PERSPECTIVE OF BALE
MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK, ETHIOPIA**

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DECLARATION ON IDENTITY

I, the undersigned **Eliyas Ebrahim Aman**, declare that **the printed and electronic versions** of the doctoral dissertation and thesis booklet **are identical in all respects**.

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1. Background of Research

Tourism marketing is one of the major areas of marketing (Elida, 2014) that plays a great role in poverty reduction and ensures the quality of life, employment, and decent work for the nation, as well as the sustainability of the natural and cultural environment (Shaalán, 2005; De Sausmarez, 2007; Reihanian et al., 2012). The potential contribution of tourism marketing to sustainable tourism development on national and global development agendas is also becoming a reality (Butler, 1999). In national parks, sustainable tourism is applied to protect the natural environment and biodiversity, improve the community's living standards by optimizing local economic benefits, and provide high-quality experiences and satisfaction for tourists (Plummer & Fennell, 2009).

Tourism offers a diverse array of experiences designed for various interests, objectives, and motives (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Particularly, tourism in protected areas is one of the many types of tourism that offers various recreational services (Bushell & Bricker, 2017; Bhammar et al., 2021). In addition to preservation and conservation, protected areas offer numerous recreational benefits through tourism (Winter et al., 2020), yielding profound economic and social benefits (Watson et al., 2014; Kc et al., 2024). Tourism in protected areas incorporates a variety of recreational possibilities within the realm of nature-based tourism (Winter et al., 2020; Donici & Dumitras, 2024), including ecotourism, wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, educational tourism, scientific tourism, birdwatching tourism, geotourism, forest tourism, and cultural tourism (Mandić, 2022).

The focus of this study is exploring tourism marketing practices and sustainability of tourism in the context of protected areas, particularly the Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia, a UNESCO-designated national park and home to extraordinary fauna and flora with an exceptional degree of endemism. In doing so, the research enhances the empirical and theoretical understanding of the tourism marketing practices along with sustainable tourism dimensions.

2. Statement of the Problem

There is a significant relationship between national parks and tourism marketing, which directly influences the development of sustainable tourism and the sustainability of national parks (Lei et al. 2014). National parks have great potential to hasten sustainable tourism development to maintain a sustainable combination of economic, social, and environmental conditions in our competitive world (Sriarkarin-Lee, 2018; Valdivieso et al., 2014). However, the prioritization of short-term economic gains at the expense of long-term economic, sociocultural, and environmental sustainability exposes national parks in developing countries to unsustainable tourism practices (Altinay et al., 2007; UNWTO, 2020). Moreover, shockingly, human economic activities are destroying biodiversity, primarily through land spread transformations, contamination, improbable abuse of common assets, the presentation of invasive species, and the effects of environmental change (Brüggemann et al., 2001). The tourism industry can tackle this effect by consolidating the tourism marketing concept and practices to create an economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable environment and sustainable tourism.

Besides, tourists desire a high-quality tourism product, reasonable pricing, accessibility, accurate information regarding the destinations, hospitality, service delivery, and an appealing tourism atmosphere (Foued & Sawsan, 2019). However, the national parks face major issues due to a lack of strong control and effective management of tourism marketing, such as tourism products, tourism pricing, distribution, and accessibility of tourism products, marketing and promotional activities, skilled human power, physically attached facilities, and processes (Sharpley & Pearce, 2007). Despite this, little research has been conducted on the matter.

In light of this, the researcher is deeply interested in exploring the topics of tourism marketing and sustainable tourism in protected areas. Thus, the study explored the link between tourism marketing and sustainable tourism through a detailed investigation. In addition, this research outlined how the concept and application of tourism marketing in national parks contribute to social, economic, and environmental protection, thereby strengthening and accelerating progress on sustainable tourism development. In this regard, the study clarified the essence of tourism marketing in enhancing national parks and sustainable tourism development and developed a suitable model that paves the way for expanding tourism investment opportunities in protected areas.

3. Objective of the Study

The overall aim of this research was to examine tourism marketing practices and the sustainability of tourism development in and around Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia. Specifically:

- 1) Examine tourism marketing's impact on long-term economic viability and socioeconomic benefits for all stakeholders.
- 2) Analyse how tourism marketing respects host communities' sociocultural authenticity and preserves their built and live cultural assets and traditional values in and around the national park.
- 3) Assess how tourism marketing optimizes environmental resources, sustains ecological processes, and protects natural heritage and biodiversity.
- 4) Find out the relationship and to what extent tourism marketing impacts sustainable tourism.

4. Research Questions

To achieve the purposes of the study, the following questions were addressed:

- 1) Does tourism marketing ensure viable, long-term economic operations and provide long-term socioeconomic benefits to all stakeholders?
- 2) Does tourism marketing impact the sociocultural authenticity of host communities and conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values in and around the national park?
- 3) Does tourism marketing make optimal use of environmental resources, maintain essential ecological processes, and help conserve natural heritage and biodiversity?
- 4) What is the relationship between tourism marketing and sustainable tourism, and to what extent does tourism marketing impact sustainable tourism?

5. Proposed research model

Conceptually, it is established that tourism marketing is essential for the sustainability of tourism and the sustainability of national parks, yet there is a dearth of empirical research to evaluate and validate this relationship. Therefore, by synthesizing the previous literature on tourism marketing and sustainable tourism, this study proposes a model that contributes to achieving sustainable tourism in the national park. Figure 1 presents a concise representation of the research concept and illustrates the proposed research model for the current study

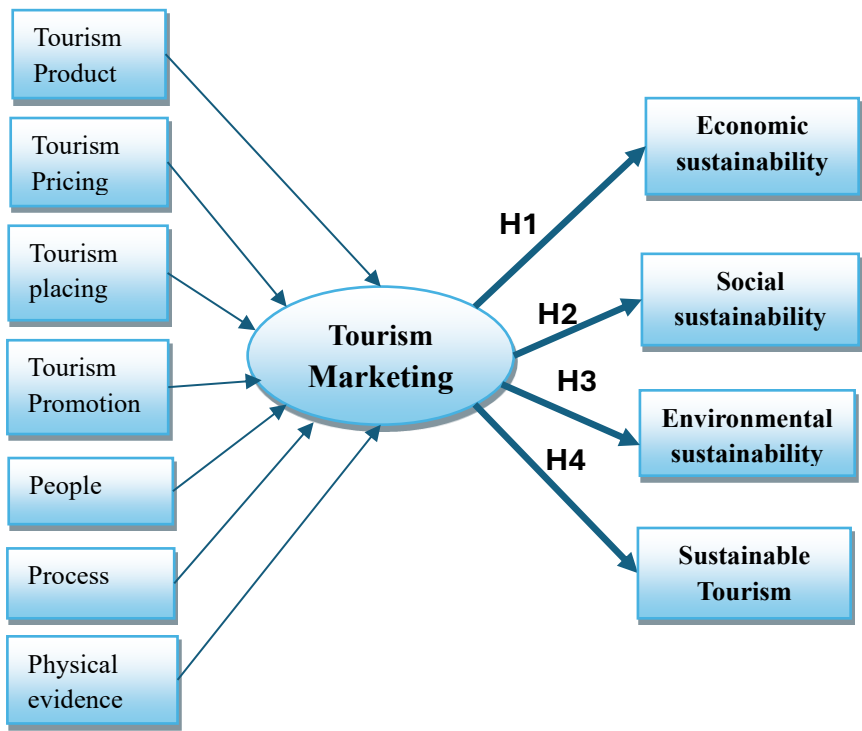


Figure 1. Proposed research model (source: researcher’s own construction)

6. Hypotheses and their rationale

At a significance level of 0.05, the following hypotheses were examined for the purpose of the study:

Hypothesis H1

Previous literature has shown that tourism marketing has a significant impact on the country's economic development, local community, and regional and federal governments (Mayer et al., 2010). This is due to the formation of the tourism industry from various sectors such as the travel sector, the hospitality sector, and tourist destination products, including its natural resources, cultural heritage, and cuisines and foods from various cultural backgrounds (Dasgupta, 2010; Rahmoun & Baeshen, 2021). Particularly, national park tourism enhances the country's tourist attractions, including its biodiversity, cultures, natural environments, and ancient history (An et al., 2019). It is a significant component of the growing footprint (Truong & Hall, 2017). Moreover, the literature exposes that tourism marketing presents a chance for countries plagued by poverty and unemployment to generate employment and income for regional and national socioeconomic development (Foued & Sawsan, 2019). In view of this, relevant tourism marketing practices have a positive impact on long-term economic sustainability, which leads to the designing of the following hypothesis:

- ***H1***: *Tourism marketing has statistically a positive significant impact on ensuring viable and long-term economic operations and benefits to all stakeholders in and around the national park.*

Hypothesis H2

It is widely assumed that tourism marketing activities have a significant impact on the community's eventual fate, as well as increased pride in the local area where residents are receptive and welcoming to visitors (Verbeek et al., 2011). It has many impacts on sociocultural life because multi-cultural societies are enriched with unique and different experiences, such as new traditions, new cultures, and new civilizations from all over the world (Liu et al., 2013). Moreover, it helps protect cultural heritage by generating money that is directly reinvested in the restoration of historically significant buildings, archaeological sites, and architectural landmarks (Eagles et al., 2002). Relying on this, the following hypothesis was developed:

- **H2:** *Tourism marketing has a statistically significant impact on respecting the sociocultural authenticity of host communities and preserving their cultural assets and traditional values in and around the national park.*

Hypothesis H3

Literature implies that tourism marketing within national parks has various positive environmental effects (Sharpley & Pearce, 2007). Primarily, it enhances environmental awareness and appreciation by providing environmental information and raising tourists' knowledge of the ecological effects of their actions (Yu et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Furthermore, the money brought in by tourists is an additional source of conservation funding (Goodwin, 2002). Therefore, it immediately contributes to the preservation of sensitive zones and living areas. For instance, park fees and other kinds of revenue can be dedicated to funding

environmentally beneficial projects. In view of the above previous literature, tourism marketing is a potentially useful approach for the tourism industry to promote environmental and ecological awareness (Sharpley & Pearce, 2007), which leads to the development of the following hypothesis:

- **H3:** *Tourism marketing has a statistically significant impact on making optimal use of environmental resources, maintaining essential ecological processes, and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.*

Hypothesis H4

Sustainable tourism and tourism marketing are closely related, as effective tourism marketing can encourage responsible tourism habits and provide long-term benefits for destinations. By emphasizing environmentally friendly accommodation, heritage preservation, and activities with minimal impact, tourism marketing significantly influences sustainable tourism. Moreover, tourism marketing boosts local business, helps conserve cultural legacy, and assists in safeguarding the natural environment, which contributes to sustainable tourism. Furthermore, tourism marketing can inform visitors on their social and environmental influences, encouraging them to be responsible travellers. When tourism marketing adheres to sustainable tourism principles, it not only attracts visitors but also guarantees socially and environmentally sustainable destinations that remain for future generations. In light of the above argument, the following hypotheses is hypothesized as follows:

- **H4:** *There is a statistically significant relationship between tourism marketing and sustainable tourism.*

7. Methodology

This research employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches to address the research questions. Combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches enhances the depth, breadth, and overall quality of research findings. Moreover, the mixed research approach allows the researchers to be more comprehensive and provide actionable recommendations for theoretical and practical implications. Specifically, this study employed a sequential exploratory research design, where qualitative research was first conducted before quantitative research to gain a profound understanding of the research context and the language used by participants. Also, this research design is advantageous to validate and conceptualize the quantitative research questions so that the study is grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

As seen in figure 2, qualitative research was carried out in phase 1 to explore tourism marketing practices and sustainability of tourism in Bale Mountains National Park. The findings from the qualitative research were utilized to make modifications and enhance quantitative research carried out in phase 2, which was designed based on the literature review. The integration of qualitative and quantitative research design is suitable for this research, considering the scarcity of research on this area, the necessity to generalize the exploratory findings and results, and crucially, to contextualize and broaden our understanding of experiences and perspectives on the study area.

Qualitative research

The main aim of the qualitative study in this research to draw out individual experiences, beliefs, and perceptions using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions regarding tourism marketing practices and the sustainability of tourism in the study area. The qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured expert interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). While semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 key managerial figures and experts from various organizations operating in and around the national park, focus group discussions were conducted with six groups (each consisting of 7-9 members) of local communities living in and around the national park. The data were collected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The sample was selected purposefully based on their know-how and the contact they have with tourism activities and national parks. Moreover, the researchers requested participants to suggest other qualified individuals for the interview.

Quantitative research

Once the qualitative study was finalized, the next phase was the validation and confirmation of variables and links among factors by using a quantitative study. This study employed a structured and closed-ended questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale to gather data, which was comprised of “1= strongly disagree,” “2= disagree,” “3= neutral,” “4= agree,” and “5= strongly agree.” The initially developed questionnaire was pre-tested by distributing it to 55 participants using a google form. After the pre-test a pilot study was carried out in order to check the validity and reliability of the questionnaire as well as identify any difficulties that might have arisen from the findings.

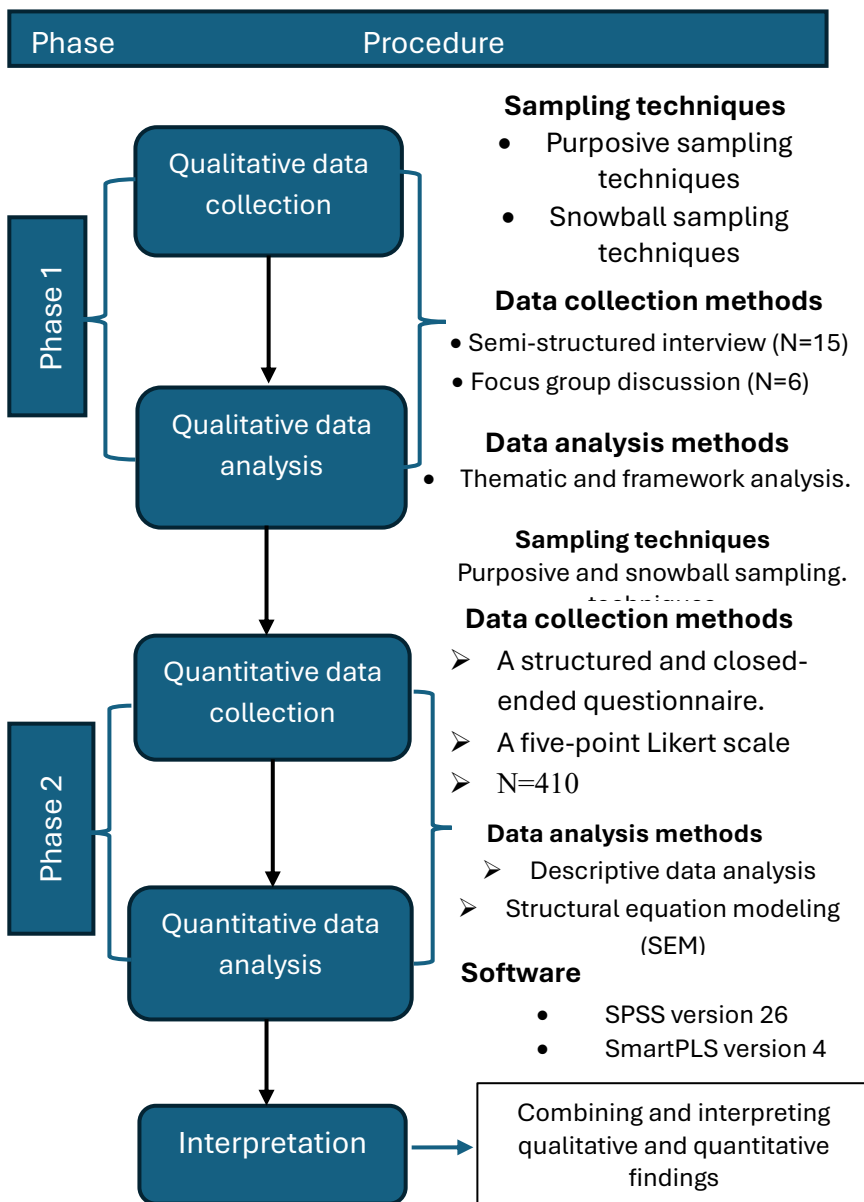


Figure 2. Sequential exploratory research approach (created by author).

The sample for the quantitative research consisted of tourists (both domestic and international tourists). The other stakeholders were not included as a sample in the quantitative part of the study due to the fact that the opinions of other stakeholders were covered using the interview and focus group discussion in the qualitative part of the study. Regarding sampling techniques, purposive sampling techniques was employed. After data collection, appropriate methods were implemented to analyze and interpret the primary data. Primarily, data was recorded, edited, and coded. Thereafter, descriptive analysis such as frequencies, mean percentage, and standard deviation was employed. Moreover, a partial least square (PLS)- based structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was adopted to test hypotheses and measure various dimensions in the proposed model.

8. Summary of results

The outcomes of the hypothesis testing, illustrated in Table 4.5, indicate that all hypotheses are supported, as the T-values and P-values associated with the hypotheses are above the critical value. The structural relationship analysis indicated a significant positive influence of tourism marketing on the economic dimension ($\beta = 0.790$, $t\text{-value} = 43.612$, $P = 0.000$). Accordingly, the study reveals that tourism marketing strongly influences the economic sustainability of Bale Mountains National Park. Therefore, H1 was accepted. Moreover, tourism marketing is significantly associated with the socio-cultural dimension ($\beta = 0.758$, $t\text{-value} = 36.703$, $P = 0.000$), implying that it is a significant contributor to the sociocultural sustainability of Bale Mountains National Park.

Hence, H2 was supported. Furthermore, the structural relationships analysis showed the impact of tourism marketing on the environmental dimension ($\beta = 0.732$, $t\text{-value} = 30.395$, $P = 0.000$) indicating that tourism marketing is a significant influencer of the environmental sustainability of Bale Mountains National Park. Thus, H3 was accepted. In addition, tourism marketing has a significant positive relationship with sustainable tourism ($\beta = 0.528$, $t\text{-value} = 16.970$, $P = 0.000$). This finding directs acceptance for H4. Hence, H4 is accepted.

Table 1. Summary of Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Structural relationship	Path coefficients	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	TMP -> Eco	0.790	43.612	0.000	Accepted
H2	TMP -> So	0.758	36.703	0.000	Accepted
H3	TMP -> Env	0.732	30.395	0.000	Accepted
H4	TMP -> ST	0.528	16.970	0.000	Accepted

9. New scientific results

1. This study introduced novel measuring scales to measure tourism marketing practices and sustainable tourism constructs, which is crucial for theoretical advancements. The study evaluated the psychometric features of tourism marketing and sustainability scales specifically for protected areas, using Bale Mountains National Park as a case study.
2. This study implemented a sequential mixed research approach to investigate variables, establish instruments, and test hypotheses within the context of tourism marketing and sustainable tourism research. The

implementation of mixed research methods in tourism marketing and sustainable tourism literature is inadequately advanced. This study, on the other hand, utilized the qualitative and quantitative research approach to address research questions through structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis, thus adding novel methodological approaches in the field.

3. A measurement of higher-order construct of the tourism marketing variable has not yet been developed in protected areas, and this study statistically validates and develops the measurement of higher-order constructs for tourism marketing practices by applying the standard approach of instrument development in a new context, ultimately providing a new methodological contribution.

4. The study revealed a positive relationship between tourism marketing and sustainable tourism in the context of protected areas, specifically Bale Mountains National Park, through hypothesis testing utilizing structural equation modelling. These findings were empirically validated through rigorous scientific procedures and approaches to ensure the quality, transparency, and robustness of the research findings.

5. This study combined two fundamental theories (the stakeholder theory and the resource-based view theory) to validate the hypothesis and describe the structural relationship, as a single theory was inadequate to thoroughly address the research questions. This integration was necessary to identify the relevant variables and establish the relationship between tourism marketing and sustainable tourism. As a result, this study broadens the perspective of the resource-based view in the context

of protected areas and makes a substantial contribution to the current literature. This is distinctive in the literature.

6. Literature can be found on diverse topics, such as customer satisfaction (Al Muala, 2012; Ismail et al., 2015; Magatef, 2015; Potjanajaruwit, 2015; Alipour et al., 2018; Azhar et al., 2019; Hasan & Islam, 2020; Othman et al., 2020; Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2023; Hossain et al., 2024), and strategic marketing (Gilmore & Simmons, 2007; Ferrari & Pratesi, 2012) that focus on marketing mix. However, this study uncovered contextual distinctiveness by examining the structural relationship between tourism marketing and sustainable tourism dimensions within the context of protected areas, specifically Bale Mountains National Park.

10. Implication, Limitation, And Future Research Direction

In this study, the researcher have established a research model that provides significant insights by combining tourism marketing and sustainable tourism to improve the sustainability of tourism in protected areas. The structural model estimation revealed that the construct: tourism marketing practices (TMP) can explain 62.4% of the variance of the economic dimension, 57.5% of the variance of the social dimension, 53.6% of the variance of the environmental dimension, and 27.9% of the variance of sustainable tourism. The result of the hypotheses testing indicated that all hypotheses were found to be statistically significant. This findings were empirically validated through a rigor scientific

procedures and approach to ensure the quality, transparency, and robustness of the research findings.

The research model established for this study holds relevance in multiple theoretical areas. This research significantly enhances the understanding of tourism marketing and sustainable tourism through the testing and validation of measurement features. It also illustrates the relationship between tourism marketing and other constructs within the model: economic and social as well as environmental constructs. Building upon prior literature and addressing gaps in the existing literature by proposing a new research model that provides significant insights. The study model developed addresses the tourism marketing strategy required to ensure the sustainability of tourism in and around Bale Mountains National Park.

From a managerial perspective, it is crucial to understand the factors that ensure and maintain sustainable tourism by minimizing the negative effects of tourism marketing. For destinations that are enriched with huge tourism potential, particularly destinations like Bale Mountains National Park, this research presents a better understanding of tourism marketing and sustainability of tourism. The Bale Mountains National Bale leaders will also gain an indication that they will equip themselves with the relevant model needed for developing appropriate tourism marketing practices, including tourism product development, tourism product pricing, tourism product placing, tourism product promotion, skilled people, process, and physical evidence.

More specifically, the tourism marketing decision-makers can also make use of the model to refine their thinking about tourism marketing and sustainable tourism. Furthermore, the decision-makers will gain valuable insights from the model about enabling factors for improving sustainable tourism. Moreover, the government authorities and other organizations might gain significant insights from the findings of this study to formulate their strategies and policies aimed at enhancing the tourism marketing practices of Bale Mountains National Park. Additionally, this research has significant contributions for the government and concerned bodies in terms of sustainability to promote long-term economic benefits while minimizing negative social and environmental impacts.

11. Conclusions and recommendations

This study explored tourism marketing practices and sustainability of tourism in the context of protected areas, particularly the Bale Mountains National Park, a UNESCO-designated national park and home to extraordinary fauna and flora with an exceptional degree of endemism. The study finds that to enhance the sustainability of tourism, relevant tourism marketing practices are very important. Overall, the study enhances the existing body of knowledge, as there is no prior research model that combines tourism marketing and sustainable tourism to improve the sustainability of tourism in the context of national parks, particularly Bale Mountains National Park.

The study found that there is inadequate availability of accommodation and infrastructure in and around the park; a low and

unsatisfactory capacity for generating income; insufficient provision of directional signs and supporting facilities within the national park; ineffective use of promotional tools; a lack of skills necessary to create tourist satisfaction and memorable experiences; a lack of prompt responsiveness to customer complaints; and poor physical evidence, particularly concerning the working environment. These shortcomings hinder the potential for tourism growth and diminish the overall tourist experiences in and around the national park. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing the Bale Mountains National Park attractiveness and ensuring sustainable tourism in the region.

Based on these findings, the researcher recommended the concerned body take the initiative to address the inadequate availability of accommodation and infrastructures, including roads, transportation systems, and availability of poor accommodation. Such initiatives for infrastructure development will support Bale Mountains National Park to attract more visitors and boost tourism numbers, improve overall experiences, encourage long stays, and stimulate the local economy. Moreover, the management of the park should segment tourism products and adopt a value-based pricing strategy that will assist the national park in generating a satisfactory income. Similarly, as the park is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site, it should be updated on Google search, improve the provision of directions and supporting facilities within the national park, use all means of promotional tools to promote the park, provide training to enhance employee skills to create tourist satisfaction and memorable experiences, create an easy way to handle customer complaints, and improve the working environment. Furthermore, the government and all concerned bodies should work in

collaboration to promote long-term economic sustainability, to improve the sociocultural sustainability of local communities, and to ensure conservation efforts, wildlife protection, and ecological value while ensuring valuable resources for future generations.

This study was conducted within specific domains and one national park. Although tourism marketing is inherently context-specific, its application in different contexts would enhance trust in the research model. Finally, the data were collected from a single national park, Bale Mountains National Park; therefore, the findings of this research can only be directly applied to BMNP. Due to social peculiarities, the extent to which data and models can be applied to other national parks is unknown. Thus, future researchers should supplement their findings with data from other national parks or destinations.

12. Author's scientific publications

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