

Drivers of Repeat Visits and Recommendations in a City Preparing for Cultural Prominence: Implications for Tourism and Destination Management

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Received: 20 June 2025. **Revision received:** 25 November 2025. **Accepted:** 2 December 2025

Abstract

Tourists are central to the vitality of any destination, as their behavior shapes its image and growth. Understanding the factors that drive repeat visits and recommendations informs strategic planning for sustainable destination development, strengthening the competitiveness of emerging destinations. This study examines the determinants of tourists' behavioral intentions in Timișoara, Romania, designated as the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2023. Using the cognitive-affective-conative framework, the research investigates the impact of travel motivations, perceived quality of destination attributes, and satisfaction on tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend the destination. Data were collected within one year of Timișoara's ECoC designation from 682 foreign tourists and analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling to assess the relationships among the key constructs. Findings indicate that perceived quality of destination attributes - particularly food and drink, the urban environment, and accommodation strongly drive tourists' behavioral intentions, while travel motivations related to the city's cultural heritage exert an indirect effect. These insights offer actionable recommendations for city planners and destination managers, highlighting the importance of strategic investments in tourism infrastructure and enhancing visitor experiences. This study contributes to event tourism research by providing a model for baseline assessment of emerging cultural destinations and by demonstrating how the cognitive-affective-conative lens can be applied to a city undergoing significant tourism transformation, offering an unexplored perspective for future research on event tourism and destination management.

Key Words: structural equation modeling (SEM), pull motivations, perceived quality of destination's attributes, overall satisfaction, behavioral intentions, European Capital of Culture (ECoC), Timisoara.

JEL Classification: C12, O2, Z32

Reference: Popescu, F., Dragan, A., Matichescu-Lupșa, M., Maricutoiu, L., Voiculescu, S., Popa, N., & Ancuta, C. (2026). Drivers of Repeat Visits and Recommendations in a City Preparing for Cultural

Prominence: Implications for Tourism and Destination Management. *Journal of Tourism and Services*, 17(32), 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.29036/np6xhx40>

1. Introduction

Measuring a destination's success has traditionally relied on objective indicators such as tourist revenues, visitor counts, and overnight stays. Over time, more complex quantitative evaluation techniques have been developed to enhance these metrics and maintain a competitive edge by integrating tourists' perceptions. One prominent framework is the cognitive-affective-conative paradigm from psychology and consumer behavior (Oliver, 1997), which has been extensively applied in tourism studies. Cognitive factors such as perceived quality and destination image influence affective responses such as satisfaction and attachment, which subsequently shape conative behaviors, including revisiting and recommending the destination (Ferreira et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2024; Tasci et al., 2022; Wu & Li, 2017; Yang et al., 2022; de Bruyn & Meyer, 2022). Existing research has investigated perceived service quality in hospitality, its impact on satisfaction, and loyalty (Abdul Gapor et al., 2024; Stefko et al., 2020; Tovmasyan, 2020; Uslu & Eren, 2020; Wu & Li, 2017) and satisfaction as a driver of loyalty (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Fytopoulou et al., 2021a; Guo et al., 2024; Pestana et al., 2020). Nonetheless, a critical challenge for both scholars and practitioners lies in understanding the drivers of tourists' behavioral intentions related to destination loyalty, typically measured by their likelihood to return or recommend the destination (Carvache-Franco, Alvarez-Risco et al., 2024; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Tasci et al., 2022; Uslu et al., 2020). Considering that retaining tourists is more cost-effective than recruiting new ones (Jones, 2024; Mura & Stehlíková, 2025) and that word-of-mouth remains the most reliable source of information, even in the age of e-marketing (Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Tung & My, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023), understanding these dynamics is essential.

In addition to perceived quality, other key antecedents that shape satisfaction and behavioral intentions have been researched: destination image (Ferreira et al., 2022; Guerreiro et al., 2024; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Tasci et al., 2022; Uslu et al., 2020; Wu & Li, 2017), travel motivation (Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Carvache-Franco, Alvarez-Risco, et al., 2024; Pestana et al., 2020; Zain et al., 2023) and experience quality (Guo et al., 2024; Lianopoulos et al., 2024; Uslu et al., 2024) across different destination types and different geographical locations. These studies confirm a positive relation between the cognitive antecedents, the affective dimension, which often serves as a mediating variable, and the tourists' future behavioral intentions. While extensive research within this framework has explored destination competitiveness in established destinations (Carvache-Franco et al., 2025; Carvache-Franco, Hassan, et al., 2024; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Pestana et al., 2020; Wu & Li, 2017), emerging destinations received less attention (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Reyner et al., 2017). Particularly, little is known about how major events as the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) influence tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions in the early pre-event phase. While some studies have examined residents' pre-event perceptions (Aquilino et al., 2019; Wise et al., 2021), the views of foreign tourists in the early planning stages have not been adequately addressed. This oversight presents a missed opportunity for destination managers and city planners to ground strategic decisions in baseline tourist evaluations several years ahead of the event.

Building on prior research, this study seeks to fill that gap by offering a novel perspective on how emerging destinations can understand and leverage early assessment of destination attributes, tourist satisfaction and tourist behavioral intentions in future development and management plans. Key attributes include accessibility, information availability, tourist attractions, amenities, accommodation, food and drink, urban environment and atmosphere, and human interaction. Understanding what triggers visitors' satisfaction or dissatisfaction and their likelihood to return or recommend the destination is crucial for informed planning and strategic development. Thus, this research aims to:

- to assess the significance of the ECoC title as a travel motivation several years before its occurrence
- to analyze the relationship among motivation, perceived quality of destination's attributes, satisfaction, and behavioral intention in an emerging, event-driven destination and
- to identify the most influential determinants of future tourist behavioral intentions in this context.

Accordingly, this research contributes to existing literature by providing an assessment tool for the early stages of event-driven, developing destinations based on previous motivation-perceived quality-satisfaction-behavioral intention models. The practical implications refer to the provision of valuable insights for destination managers, enabling them to develop data-driven strategies to enhance visitor experience, satisfaction, and loyalty, ultimately fostering long-term destination competitiveness.

2. Literature review

2.1 Travel motivation

Motivation studies have been conducted on different market segments, such as domestic tourists (Duong et al., 2023; Tasci et al., 2022), senior tourists (Pestana et al., 2020), as well as on niche markets, such as adventure tourism (Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Caber & Albayrak, 2016) or luxury tourism (Zain et al., 2023); or in altered circumstances, such as the Covid 19 Pandemic, when protection motivation intentions were studied in relation to destination choice (Abou-Shouk et al., 2023).

Dann (1977) was among the first researchers to capture travel motivation from a dichotomous perspective, developing the widely accepted 'push-pull' factor theory, which has since been extensively applied (Caber & Albayrak, 2016; Carvache-Franco, Alvarez-Risco, et al., 2024; Duong et al., 2023; Zain et al., 2023). Push factors, defined as 'tourist motivations per se' (Dann, 1981, p.190), relate to the emotional profiles of tourists regarding their desires to escape a mundane environment. Pull factors, which help explain the choice of destination (Dann, 1981), are linked to a destination's specific cultural or natural attractions and leisure infrastructure (Bayih & Singh, 2020; Uslu et al., 2020).

Early studies on the relationship between motivation and satisfaction (Engel et al., 1968) found no direct connection between these two variables. Conversely, Caber and Albayrak (2016) have demonstrated that travelers' overall satisfaction with a specific purpose is determined by their push and pull motivations. Other studies have found that motivation influences satisfaction through the mediating role of various variables. Huang et al. (2014) indicate that the performance evaluation variable mediates the positive relation between motivation and satisfaction. Also, in the case of wellness motivation, the direct positive relation is mediated through two engagement mediators: reflective and experiential (Ahn & Kim, 2024). In some studies, satisfaction was conceptualized as satisfaction with specific destination attributes—such as accessibility, attractions, amenities, and cultural heritage—and findings suggest that travel motivations directly influence these dimensions (Bayih & Singh, 2020). In other cases, these destination attributes are treated as independent variables, with mixed evidence: some studies report a direct influence of motivations (Xin & Chia, 2015), while others find no significant impact (Ban et al., 2025).

On the other hand, Pestana et al. (2020) discovered that the complex construct of satisfaction-destination-loyalty plays a partial mediating role between motivations and behavioral intentions. Also, Zain et al. (2023) demonstrate that push and pull variables among luxury travelers are antecedents of both satisfaction and willingness to return. Of the pull variables, destination uniqueness ranked the highest, as observed in the case of domestic tourists in Vietnam (Duong et al., 2023). The same results are found in the case of Ethiopia's domestic tourists, where push and pull motivations directly influenced satisfaction, and pull motivations explained a significant part of the willingness-to-recommend variable

(Bayih & Singh, 2020). Carvache-Franco, Alvarez-Risco, et al. (2024) have explored the influence of push and pull motivations on behavioral intention in the coastal areas of Peru, finding a direct influence of both dimensions on intentions to return and to recommend the destinations. In particular instances, health travel motivations or participation in events, as well as learning and entertainment motivations in rural areas, had a direct impact on behavioral intention (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Gan et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022).

Albayrak and Caber (2018) have demonstrated that post-experience evaluation is a better predictor of overall satisfaction, as it influences experience evaluation, an antecedent of overall satisfaction (Huang et al., 2014).

Accordingly, based on the above theoretical background, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

H1 – Travel motivations positively influence the perceived quality of destination attributes.

H2 – Travel motivations positively influence satisfaction.

H2a - Travel motivations positively influence satisfaction through the mediating effect of perceived quality.

H3 - Travel motivations positively influence behavioral intention.

H3a - Travel motivations positively influence behavioral intention through the mediating effect of satisfaction.

2.2 Perceived quality of destination attributes

The quality of tourism services or products is evaluated using standardized assessment methods, such as ISO certifications in Europe (<https://www.en-standard.eu/>), the ‘Q’ system in the hospitality industry (Collado Agudo et al., 2021), and tourist perception.

Measurement scales such as SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), assess customers' perceptions of service quality across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. This instrument has served as the basis for further developed and service-specific scales (Uslu & Eren, 2020). Alternatively, SERVPERF (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) evaluates service quality based on performance. HISTOQUAL, specifically designed by Frochot & Hughes (2000), assesses service quality in historic houses. However, these instruments do not address destination-specific amenities related to attractions, entertainment, cultural heritage, and overall experiences.

The ‘4As’ framework (attractions, access, amenities, and ancillary services) proposed by Cooper et al. (1993) was one of the first models to categorize components of tourism destination analysis. This was extended by Buhalis (2000) to the ‘6As’ framework: attractions, accessibility, amenities, available packages, activities, and ancillary services. These factors have been utilized in various studies to evaluate tourist destinations and their impact on tourist satisfaction, which has generally been found to be positive (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Chi & Qu, 2008; Hui et al., 2007; Meng & Han, 2018; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016). Consequently, the perceived quality of attributes acts as an antecedent of customer satisfaction, with service quality being largely determined by suppliers (Chen & Chen, 2010).

Destination attributes and positive service experiences also indirectly affect behavioral intentions, such as revisits or recommendations, through the mediating role of satisfaction (Chen & Chen, 2010; Meng & Han, 2018; Žabkar et al., 2010). Furthermore, Zabkar et al. (2010) found a direct relationship between quality perceptions of destination attributes and behavioral intentions in their analysis of Slovenian resorts. This relationship has been confirmed across various tourism sectors, including nature-based tourism (Guo et al., 2024), cultural heritage environments (Chen & Chen, 2010), working holiday destinations (Meng & Han, 2018), halal-friendly destinations (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019), and shopping destinations (Hui et al., 2007). These studies show that overall satisfaction only partially mediates the relationship between attribute satisfaction and destination loyalty.

Another way the perceived quality or value of destination attributes has been operationalized is through the concept of destination image. According to Gartner's (1994) three-component theory of image formation, the cognitive image - based on evaluations of destination features - precedes the affective and conative components. This supports the argument that perceived quality should be modeled as a formative component, as it is formed by distinct destination attributes rather than reflected by a single latent factor. Setting aside destination choice based on overt, covert, and autonomous sources of information, the most reliable destination image is the organic one, i.e., when assessed post-visit or at the moment of visit, based on tourists' direct experiences (Uslu et al., 2020). This type of assessment has also been examined in relation to satisfaction (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2020; Uslu et al., 2024), destination loyalty (Tasci et al., 2022; Uslu et al., 2020), and behavioral intention (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2022; Wu & Li, 2017), with studies consistently identifying a direct relationship.

Thus, the following hypotheses concerning the perceived quality of attributes in Timisoara in relation to the other constructs are:

H4 - The perceived quality of destination attributes positively influences satisfaction.

H5 - The perceived quality of destination attributes positively influences behavioral intention.

H5a - The perceived quality of destination attributes positively influences behavioral intention through the mediating effect of satisfaction.

2.4 Overall satisfaction

Tourists' satisfaction has been deemed a guarantee of a destination's success and has been researched as the main attainable goal (Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Carvache-Franco, Hassan, et al., 2024; Fytoulopoulou et al., 2021a; Pestana et al., 2020; Reyner et al., 2017; Schofield et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2022; Uslu & İnanir, 2020).

Satisfaction has been conceptualized in many ways. Tian-Cole & Crompton (2003) advocate two main directions: needs-based (resulting from one's corresponding needs or motives being met) and appraisal-based (discriminating between one's expected and perceived experiences). The latter is better known as Oliver's disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980), whereby consumers form expectations about a product before purchase and later evaluate their experience in comparison, leading to either positive or negative disconfirmation. Emotional reactions arising from positive or negative disconfirmation contribute to tourist satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Guo et al., 2024; Nam, 2023; Wu & Li, 2017) and reflect the link between cognitive and emotional processes, in which cognitive processes precede satisfaction (Abdul Gapor et al., 2024; Gaetjens et al., 2023; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Uslu & Eren, 2020). These two constructs are also part of the cognitive-affective-conative framework (Cole & Illum, 2006; Yang et al., 2022; Žabkar et al., 2010) or three-layered image formation (Gartner, 1994), wherein satisfaction represents the affective image developed via the cognitive component.

Satisfaction is also influenced by variables outside the control of tourism suppliers, such as climate conditions (Vojtko et al., 2022), push travel motivations (Bayih & Singh, 2020; Caber & Albayrak, 2016; Carvache-Franco, Hassan, et al., 2024; Pestana et al., 2020), travelers' demographic and cultural characteristics (Uslu et al., 2020; Vojtko et al., 2022) or even their past experiences.

The relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions of tourists to revisit and recommend has been demonstrated to be positive and direct in most studies, and as a partial mediator for motivations (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Yoon & Uysal, 2005), for perceived quality of destination attributes (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Guo et al., 2024; Niemczyk & Seweryn, 2014; Žabkar et al., 2010), destination image (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Uslu et al., 2024), quality of experience (Chen & Chen, 2010; Elhosiny et al., 2023; Tovmasyan, 2020; Uslu & Eren, 2020). Yet in one study on domestic tourists in Ethiopia, no direct effect of satisfaction on willingness to recommend the destination was found (Bayih & Singh, 2020). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H6 - Satisfaction positively influences behavioral intention.

2.5 Behavioral intentions

The behavioral intentions of tourists can be divided into three phases: (a) pre-visit, (b) during the experience and (c) post-visit (Williams & Buswell, 2003). (a) Travel intention is driven by the destination's image, shaped by previous experiences, word-of-mouth, and media/marketing efforts. These are complemented by intrinsic push factors that initiate the decision-making process (Caber & Albayrak, 2016; Güzel et al., 2020). (b) During their experience, tourists perform consciously or unconsciously an evaluation of the destination's attributes, leading to their post-experience behavior mediated by their degree of satisfaction with their destination (Chen & Chen, 2010; Hui et al., 2007; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Meng & Han, 2018; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Wu & Li, 2017; Žabkar et al., 2010). Post-visit intentions, the final phase of the cognitive-affective-conative framework, are shaped by tourists' cognitive evaluation of destination attributes and their affective responses to their experiences (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Nam, 2023; Žabkar et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2025).

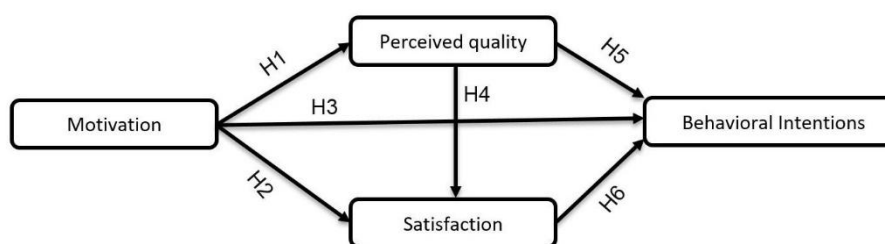
The two most straightforward variables of future behavioral intentions throughout the literature are: revisit and recommend (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Bayih & Singh, 2020; Gan et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2024; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Stumpf et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2022; Tasci et al., 2022; Uslu et al., 2024; Wu & Li, 2017; Žabkar et al., 2010). The materialization of these intentions is of the utmost importance for destination managers. Reichheld and Teal (2001) estimate that a 5% increase in customer retention can lead to a 25–95% rise in profits remains a benchmark in managerial strategy. This is exemplified by Trebicka et al. (2023), who show that strategic pricing significantly improves retention, further underscoring its commercial importance. Repurchasing the same products and services indicates a good attitude toward them. Given a positive attitude, one can expect positive word of mouth (WOM). The most reliable sources of information remain friends and relatives when planning a trip (Meng & Han, 2018; Tung & My, 2023). Travel sites (TripAdvisor, Hostelworld, etc.), where electronic WOM is employed, are responsible for 60% of booking decisions (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016).

As detailed in the previous sections, behavioral intentions are determined by various formative and reflective variables directly or through mediating variables. Therefore, based on prior research, we have formulated the H1 to H6 hypotheses.

2.6 Conceptual model

The conceptual research model (Graph 1) was designed using a multidimensional and hierarchical structure informed by the conceptual directions derived from the literature available at the time of data collection.

Graph 1. The (simplified) proposed model and the direct relationships among the variables



Source: the authors

This model builds on the frameworks employed in several earlier studies (Chen & Chen, 2010; Chi & Qu, 2008; Huang et al., 2014; Hui et al., 2007; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Xin & Chia, 2015; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Žabkar et al., 2010). When examined alongside more recent literature, the model continues to align with the findings of further developed studies (Ahn & Kim, 2024; Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Bayih & Singh, 2020; Carvache-Franco, Hassan, et al., 2024; Gan et al., 2023; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Meng & Han, 2018; Pestana et al., 2020; Schofield et al., 2020; Stumpf et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2022; Tung & My, 2023, 2023; Uslu et al., 2024; Uslu & İnanir, 2020).

3. Methods

This study employs a quantitative research approach, grounded in the positivist worldview, which focuses on measuring variables and testing hypotheses using statistical methods. It aims to explain, predict, and generalize findings from sample data to a broader population through objective and structured procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

3.1 Study site

In 2016, Timișoara, a city in western Romania, was awarded the title of European Capital of Culture for 2021. However, the title year was postponed to 2023 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This designation prompted significant investments in local and tourism infrastructure aimed at enhancing the city's attractiveness, as Timișoara had not yet established itself as a major tourist destination. According to the National Statistics Institute, the number of visitors to Timișoara has steadily increased, after the turn of the century, except during the COVID hiatus. Its proximity to the western border, the presence of an international airport, a highly educated workforce, and a favorable business environment have positioned the city as a hub for foreign investment (Corodescu-Roșca et al., 2023), strengthening its business travel segment. Additionally, significant post-socialist emigration (Matichescu et al., 2017) has generated a consistent flow of visitors travelling to see family and friends. The city's four major universities also attract international students enrolled in various degree and exchange programs. Furthermore, Timișoara functions as a shopping destination for visitors from Serbia, a non-EU neighbor with which it shares deep historical and cultural ties.

Still, before the ECoC title designation, the tourism and travel industry had not been systematically assessed beyond the limited data provided by the National Institute for Statistics. Moreover, the city lacked an official tourism development strategy and a dedicated public, non-profit, or private organization responsible for managing this sector.

3.2 Development of measurement instrument

The survey instrument, the questionnaire, was developed by integrating insights from the literature to frame the study conceptually. To add practical dimensions and context specifically for this study, the survey instrument was discussed in consultation with leaders in the travel and hospitality industry in Timisoara. The survey was pre-tested through a pilot study involving 30 randomly selected foreign tourists in the departure lounge of Timisoara International Airport before the actual data collection. The pilot results led to adjustments in content and length, rendering a refined questionnaire suitable for the data collection phase.

The finalized questionnaire comprises five sections: (a) purpose and motivation for travel (Ahn & Kim, 2024; Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Bayih & Singh, 2020; Huang et al., 2014; Pestana et al., 2020; Yoon & Uysal, 2005); (b) spatial distribution and frequency of visited attractions; (c) quality assessment

of destination attributes based on Buhalis'6 A's (Buhalis, 2000; Chen & Chen, 2010; Tasci et al., 2022; Xin & Chia, 2015; Žabkar et al., 2010); (d) overall satisfaction assessment based on the disconfirmation theory (Nobar & Rostamzadeh, 2018; Oliver, 1980) and behavioral intention based on intentions to revisit and recommend (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2010; Hui et al., 2007; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Meng & Han, 2018; Nam, 2023; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Wu & Li, 2017); and (e) demographic information regarding gender, age, place of residence, education level, income, and travel party (Table 3).

A 10-point Likert scale was used for the assessment questions (Rokeman, 2024; Sangthong, 2020).

3.3 Measures

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research model (Graph 1) and proposed hypotheses, it is important to elaborate on the variables and their measurements beyond what is outlined in the literature review chapter.

Motivation: Recognizing that post-experience motivation is a better predictor of satisfaction (Albayrak & Caber, 2018), it was measured it accordingly. Given Timisoara's imminent preparation for the ECoC title year, the focus was on the destination's quality and image, exclusively considering the 'pull' factors from the push-pull theory (Dann, 1977). The motivation variable was divided into three categories for analysis (Table 1): (a) financial motivations, (b) motivations regarding tangible heritage and (c) motivations regarding intangible heritage. Within the intangible construct, one of our focuses was the nomination of Timisoara as the Cultural Capital of Europe (Popescu & Voiculescu, 2020) and the importance of this award in defining Timisoara as a travel destination.

Table 1. Measures of the motivation construct

Measure	Items
<i>Financial</i>	Inexpensive flights
	Financially accessible destination
<i>Tangible heritage</i>	Architecture, famous places, buildings, parks, bridges
	Natural attractions of the region
<i>Intangible heritage</i>	The newly appointed title of European Capital of Culture
	Cultural diversity, gastronomy
	Partying, clubbing and other events

Source: author's design

Perceived Quality: The variables measuring perceived destination attributes were derived from Buhalis' (2000) 6A's and expanded with Truong & Foster's (2006) concerns about destination-specific features, which we found to be assessed also under image destination attributes (Uslu et al., 2024). Therefore, the following measures were developed: *access and information*, *accommodations*, *amenities* connected with food and drink, *attractions*, the *urban environment*, *ancillary services*, and *human interactions*.

In this study, the human interactions construct refers strictly to unmediated interactions with the local population. The service-related interactions concern staff professionalism in tourism information offices, hotels and restaurants. Perceived quality was chosen over perceived value because the attributes contain value as subdimensions involving specific financial trade-offs, regarding the accommodation and

food and drink variables. A 10-point Likert scale (Rokeman, 2024; Sangthong, 2020) was used (Table 2) to determine the degree of contentment/discontentment with the destination’s attributes.

Table 2. Measures of the perceived quality construct

Measure	Items	Measure	Items
<i>Access & transportation</i>	Facility to reach the destination	<i>Urban area</i>	Architecture
	Airport services (signage, staff, efficiency)		Public squares
	Connection from the airport to the city		Pedestrian areas
	Public transportation		Parks and Bega banks
	Bike facilities (rental, lanes)		Street lighting
	Walking (pedestrian) area		Urban animation
	Taxis	<i>Environment</i>	Cleanliness
	Facilities for the disabled		Air quality
<i>Tourist information</i>	Tourist information is easy to find	<i>Ancillary services</i>	Noise
	The information materials are accurate		Public toilets
	Tourist information office is useful		ATMs and exchange offices
<i>Accommodation</i>	Cleanliness	<i>Ancillary services</i>	WIFI
	Comfort		Post office
	Facilities		Souvenir shops
	Staff professionalism		Shops that offer local products
	Level of foreign language used by staff		Rent a car
	Value for money		Tour guides
<i>Food & drink</i>	Variety of places	<i>Local people</i>	Locals are kind to foreigners
	Quality of produce		I feel safe in Timișoara
	Authenticity of produce		
	Staff professionalism		
	Level of foreign language used by staff		
	Clear information about the menu		
	Value for money		

Source: author’s design

Oliver's (Oliver, 1980) disconfirmation theory was used to determine tourists' degree of satisfaction with their destination and their overall experience in Timisoara. Thus, post-visit satisfaction was assessed using a single item (i.e., *Your visit lived up to your expectations*), and respondents indicated their level of agreement on a 4-point Likert scale (from 1 = *totally disagree* to 4 = *totally agree*). Before this question, respondents were asked to describe their best and worst experiences to mediate the strict evaluation of the 10-point Likert scale that determined the perceived quality of attributes, allowing respondents to address any factors beyond their suppliers' reach (social interaction, weather, and unfortunate/fortunate events) before deciding upon their degree of satisfaction.

The behavioral intention construct was operationalized in the present study, using the *revisit* and *recommendation* variables, which have shown the strongest results in the literature (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Bayih & Singh, 2020; Chen & Chen, 2010; Gan et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2024; Hui et al., 2007; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Uslu et al., 2020; Žabkar et al., 2010).

3.4 Sample and data collection

The target population for this survey consisted of foreign tourists aged 18 years and older. The questionnaire was translated into English and six additional languages: French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Serbian, and Spanish. These nationalities were identified as the most frequent tourists in Timisoara based on statistical data, proximity to the border, branches of multinational companies, and direct flight destinations. Data collection was conducted in 2017, during the last two weeks of October, a period previously identified as the peak of tourist activity.

An exhaustive sampling method was employed, where all willing tourists were surveyed. Of the 1,200 questionnaires distributed, 266 were incomplete and excluded, leaving 934 valid responses (77.66% response rate). The analysis focused on 682 questionnaires, excluding those from business travelers, exceeding the recommended sample size of 345 (Hair et al., 2013) and the 385 to reach a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error in relation to the target population (317000 tourists visited Timisoara the year before data collection, according to the National Institute of Statistics). The questionnaires were self-completed to mitigate response bias (Nederhof, 1985). Data was collected at exit points, such as the airport departure lounge, Timisoara's main train station, the check-out desk at hotels, and tourist coach parking lots, at the end of the tourist's experience in Timisoara. The questionnaires were distributed and collected by students from the Geography Department, West University of Timisoara, while those completed at the hotels' check-out desks were provided by hotel staff.

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the underlying structure of our latent constructs (i.e., future behavioral intentions, perceived quality, and motivation to visit). Second, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the proposed model. This approach was particularly suited for our study as it involved a combination of formative and latent variables. The CFA validated the measurement model by confirming that our observed variables accurately represent the latent constructs. Subsequently, SEM allowed for the comprehensive testing of our model, accommodating the complex relationships between the constructs and providing detailed insights into how tourists' motivations and perceptions influence their future behavioral intentions. This two-stage process ensured the robustness of our findings and contributed to a thorough understanding of the behavioral intentions of tourists visiting Timisoara.

4. Results

4.1 Visitor profile, visit characteristics and importance of ECoC in destination choice

From a demographic perspective (Table 3), our study respondents were 58.1% men and 41% women. Their average age was 33.2 years, and over 68% were under 35. For almost 80% of our respondents, their level of education was a university degree or higher. More than 70% of the participants came from Western European countries, namely, Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, or the Netherlands, and 22.1% came from post-communist countries, mainly Serbia.

Table 3. Sample profile and travel characteristics of the tourists (n=682)

Variable	Options	Percent	Variable	Options	Percent	
Gender	Male	58,1%	No. of days spent in Timisoara	1 day	11,6%	
	Female	41,9%		2-3 days	40,7%	
Age	Less than 25	34,9%		4-7 days	32,5%	
	26-35	33,7%		8-30 days	8,6%	
	36-45	11%		More than 30 days	6,5%	
	46-55	11,3%		Type of travel	Alone	25,2%
	56-65	7%			With family	30%
	more than 66	2,1%	With friends		37,1%	
Level of education	High school	20,7%	With colleagues		5,1%	
	University education	63,3%	With an organized tour		2,6%	
	Postgraduate	16%	Budget per day	Less than 50 EUR	33,7%	
Country of residence	Post-Communist country	22,1%		50-99 EUR	32,1%	
	Western European country	70,1%		100-199 EUR	25,5%	
	Other countries	7,7%		200-299 EUR	3,8%	

Source: the authors

The respondents had the following holiday profile: 40.7% of our respondents spent 2–3 days in Timisoara, and 32.5% spent 4–7 days. The largest percentage of tourists traveled with friends (37.1%) and family (30%), while 25.2% traveled alone. More than 90% of the participants spent less than 200 Euro/day (Table 4).

One of our main objectives was to determine whether Timisoara's title as an ECoC served as a significant pull motivator (Table 5). 13% of respondents did not respond to this question, indicating they did not consider the ECoC title, either because of a lack of interest or lack of knowledge, and 16.3% considered this factor unimportant. More than 45% of the respondents granted marks halfway up the Likert scale and 10.5% of the tourists granted the highest mark for this variable, likely visiting primarily for this reason.

Table 5. Importance of the ECoC title in the choice of the destination

Variable: How important was the appointed title of ECoC in your decision to visit Timisoara?											
Range (marks)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Did not respond
Percentage (%)	16.30	6.00	4.70	5.20	9.50	7.70	10.90	9.90	6.00	10.50	13.40

Source: the authors

4.2 The measurement model and evaluation

Using the lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012), we assessed the measurement model's reliability and validity for the latent constructs. Given the non-normal distribution of most items, we applied the maximum likelihood method with robust standard error estimation. We assessed the model fitness using the following indices: (a) the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), where values below .08 indicate acceptable fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1992); (b) the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), where values below .08 indicate acceptable fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999); (c) the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), where values above .90 indicate acceptable fit; and (d) the comparative fit index (CFI), where values above .90 indicate acceptable fit (Byrne, 2001)

Our fit indices suggested that the measurement model had a good fit. The RMSEA and the SRMR indices had values smaller than the cutoff value of .08 (i.e., RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05). Additionally, our goodness-of-fit indices indicated that the model was acceptable (i.e., GFI = .99, AGFI = .98; CFI = .94).

We computed two reliability indices: the Cronbach's alpha index and a composite reliability index (i.e., McDonald's omega). The reliability indices had good values in the case of motivation (i.e., Cronbach's alpha = .73; McDonald's omega = .76) and excellent values in the case of perceived quality (Cronbach's alpha = .89; McDonald's omega = .89) and intention (Cronbach's alpha = .82; McDonald's omega = .82).

The criteria for assessing convergent validity are standardized factor loadings (values above .40 support convergent validity) and the average variance extracted (AVE) of each latent variable (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Regarding the standardized factor loadings presented in Table 6, all loadings are larger than the .40 threshold value. Furthermore, each latent variable explained more than 50% of the average variance among the items (AVE values between .51 and .71), indicating that the model fulfills the convergent validity requirements established by Anderson and Gerbing (1988).

We investigated discriminant validity by comparing the squared roots of the AVEs with the correlation coefficients between the latent variables. Chin, (1988) suggested that discriminant validity is supported when the values of the correlations are smaller than the squared roots of the AVEs. In the case of our model, the squared roots of the AVEs ranged between .71 and .84, whereas the correlations between the latent factors ranged between .34 (between motivations and intentions) and .67 (between intentions and perceived quality). Therefore, we conclude that the three latent variables assess different psychological constructs.

Table 6. Results of the measurement model and reliability of the latent variables

	Mean	SD	Standardized loading	McDonald's omega	AVE	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Intention</i>				.82	.71	.82
Intention to revisit	3.17	.74	.85			
Intention to recommend	3.32	.67	.82			

<i>Perceived quality</i>				.90	.51	.91
Accessibility and transportation	7.36	1.91	.66			
Tourist information	7.09	2.35	.65			
Food & Drinks	7.79	1.66	.80			
Accommodation	7.91	1.82	.77			
Auxiliary services	7.05	1.90	.66			
Natural environment	7.11	1.88	.72			
Urban environment	8.02	1.56	.82			
Interactions with locals	8.19	1.90	.69			
Value for money	8.28	1.77	.72			
<i>Motivation</i>				.76	.52	.73
Financial reasons	12.86	15.51	.49			
Tangible heritage	13.22	13.76	.81			
Intangible heritage	14.03	12.51	.82			
Notes: $\chi^2(62) = 253.06, p < .001$; GFI = .99, AGFI = .98; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .07 90% CI = [.06-.08]; SRMR = .05						

Source: the authors

4.3 The structural equation model

Given the robustness of our measurement model, we tested our model using a structural equation model (SEM). In the SEM, we used the latent variables from our measurement model, and we analyzed their relationships with satisfaction. The correlation matrix of the variables included in the model is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Correlation matrix of the variables included in the model

	Behavioral intentions	Perceived quality	Motivation	Satisfaction
Behavioral intentions	1			
Perceived quality	.49	1		
Motivation	.34	.67	1	
Satisfaction	.68	.45	.14	1

Source: the authors

We first tested the model as presented in Graph 1, examining the direct relationships among the variables. The results showed that the direct effects of motivation on behavioral intentions ($B < .01$, $SE = .04$, $z = .03$, $p = .98$, $\beta < .01$) and satisfaction on behavioral intentions ($B = .03$, $SE = .03$, $t = 1.04$, $p = .30$, $\beta = .07$) were not significant. Consequently, these paths were removed from the final model (Graph 2). All the exogenous formative (perceived quality) and endogenous reflective (motivation, satisfaction and behavioral intentions) constructs remained in the model, but not all hypothesized direct relationships were confirmed. Accordingly, H3 (motivation \rightarrow behavioral intention) and H6 (satisfaction \rightarrow behavioral intention) were not supported (Table 8). The absence of significant direct effects suggests that future behavioral intentions in this context emerge through mediated evaluative processes rather than as an immediate outcome of motivation or satisfaction, highlighting a more complex decision pathway than hypothesized in H3 and H6.

The final structural equation model had a good fit, the data supported our model: $\chi^2(73) = 278.19$, $p < .001$; GFI = .98, AGFI = .97; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .06 90% CI = [.05-.07]; SRMR = .05; and H1, H2, H4 and H5 were supported (table 8). We assessed the proportion of variance explained (R^2) for each endogenous variable in the model. Perceived quality accounted for 24.10% of the variance in behavioral intentions, indicating a moderate explanatory power. In addition, the model explained 41.90% of the variance in satisfaction and 44.40% in perceived quality, indicating a strong fit for these constructs.

4.4 Mediation effects

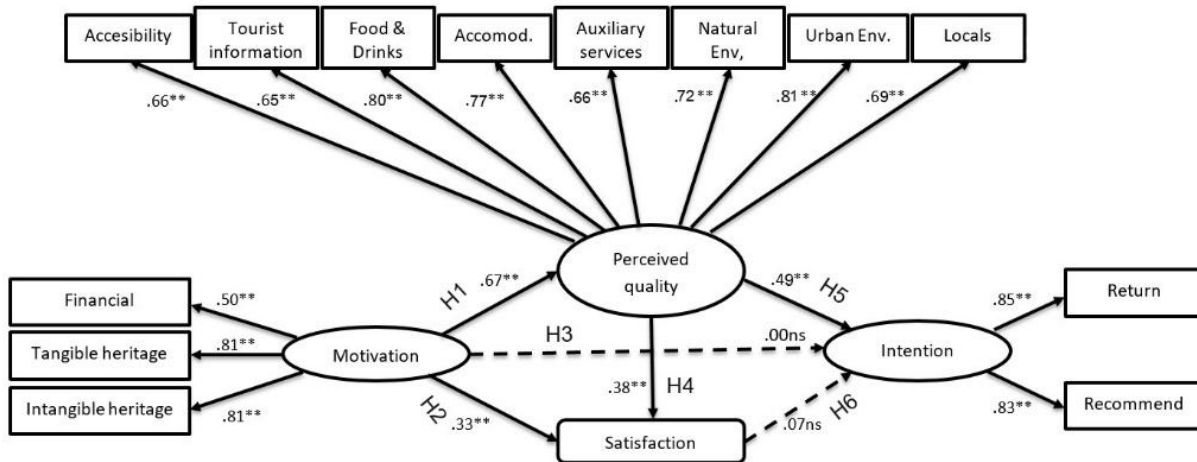
Since we found no significant direct relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions, our final model included two separate outcome variables (behavioral intentions and satisfaction). Therefore, we investigated the mediating role of perceived quality in the relationship between motivation and these two outcomes. The indirect effect of motivation on behavioral intent was statistically significant ($B = .18$, $SE = .03$, $z = 6.32$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .33$), thus supporting H2a. In the case of satisfaction, the indirect relationship was statistically significant ($B = .36$, $SE = .08$, $z = 4.62$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .25$) and accounted for 43.54% of the total relationship between motivation and satisfaction, thus supporting H3a (Table 8). H5a is not supported because the underlying direct relationship proposed in H6 was not significant.

Table 8. Structural model results and hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Paths	Coefficients		t values	Conclude
		B (SE)	β		
Direct effects					
H1	Motivation \rightarrow Perceived Quality	.737 (.083)	.668	8.885**	Supported
H2	Motivation \rightarrow Satisfaction	.481 (.119)	.335	4.034**	Supported
H3	Motivation \rightarrow Behavioral intentions	-.003 (.045)	-.005	-.063 ns	Not supported
H4	Perceived quality \rightarrow Satisfaction	.484 (.100)	.372	4.831**	Supported
H5	Perceived quality \rightarrow Behavioral intention	.223 (.042)	.449	5.291**	Supported
H6	Satisfaction \rightarrow Behavioral intention	.027 (.025)	.071	1.101 ns	Not supported
Indirect effects					
H2a	Motivation \rightarrow Perceived Quality \rightarrow Satisfaction	.180 (.030)	.330	6.320**	Supported
H3a	Motivation \rightarrow Satisfaction \rightarrow Behavioral intention	.012 (.011)	.022	1.142 ns	Not supported
H5a	Perceived Quality \rightarrow Satisfaction \rightarrow Behavioral intention	.013 (.011)	.025	1.120 ns	Not supported

Source: the authors

Graph 2. Standardized estimates of the tested model



Source: the authors

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of findings and theoretical implications

At the time of our study, Timisoara, a second-tier city in Romania, had recently been designated European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Significant investments in destination development were to follow, making this a critical moment to establish baseline evaluation of the city's attributes and, most importantly, the variables shaping tourists' satisfaction and future behavioral intentions. These outcomes are central to an event whose aims include increasing inbound tourism. Grounded in the cognitive-affective-conative (CAC) paradigm (Oliver, 1997) and integrated with push-pull motivation theory (Dann, 1977) and expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980), the proposed research model was designed to identify determinants of future tourism behaviors and to provide destination managers with a tool for destination management in the pre-event phase. Overall, the model demonstrated good reliability, validity, and fit. Several structural paths deviate from common findings in established destinations that suggest contextual contingencies typical of emerging, event-driven urban tourism.

First, the ECoC title itself was not a dominant pull motivator in the pre-event phase (16.3% of respondents considered it unimportant, and 13.4% did not provide an answer. 10.5% rated it highly important, while the remaining 60% were evenly distributed between the two extremes). This contrasts with evidence from more mature or event-year contexts, such as Pécs 2010, where the cultural program and new cultural infrastructure became central to repositioning the city as a tourist destination (Guerreiro & Mendes, 2014), or Matera 2019, where the ECoC status was strongly linked to significant growth in arrivals, overnights, and tourism supply (Ivona et al., 2019; Macri & Samà, 2022).

Second, the relationship among motivation, perceived quality of destination attributes, satisfaction, and behavioral intention proved to be a valid base for evaluation in this context. However, results showed some differences from established destinations, as follows:

The motivation-perceived quality path (H1) and the motivation-satisfaction path (H2) are both significant, indicating that pull motives - especially those linked to cultural heritage - shape how visitors appraise attributes and how they feel about the experience (Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Bayih & Singh, 2020; Zain et al., 2023). Importantly, motivation has a significant indirect effect on satisfaction through

perceived quality (H2a), echoing prior evidence that motivational forces partially influence performance evaluations or engagement processes (Ahn & Kim, 2024; Huang et al., 2014).

Contrary to the findings of other related research (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Carvache-Franco, Alvarez-Risco, et al., 2024; Gan et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022), no direct links were found between the elements of pull motivation and behavioral intention. Nevertheless, the indirect impact of motivation on behavioral intention, mediated through perceived quality, was statistically significant. Therefore, even if the declared interest in the ECoC title did not receive a high score, it indirectly impacts behavioral intent together with other variables within the motivation construct.

The perceived quality of attributes – satisfaction path (H4) was supported, akin to related studies following the adopted framework (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2010; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016; Wu & Li, 2017; Żabkar et al., 2010); as was H5: Perceived quality - Behavioral intention. This is consistent with findings in other studies across different types of destinations and tourism services (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2010; Guo et al., 2024; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Meng & Han, 2018; Wang, 2022; Żabkar et al., 2010; Zain et al., 2023). Among attribute categories, food and drink had the strongest influence, followed by the urban environment and accommodation, similar to findings in Mongolia, another emerging destination (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022). Interactions with local people also scored highly, though less prominently than in other contexts (Żabkar et al., 2010), reflecting variation in how social components shape evaluations depending on destination type.

Contrary to the dominant pattern in the literature (Abdul Gapor et al., 2024; Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2010; Guo et al., 2024; Lianopoulos et al., 2024; Niemczyk & Seweryn, 2014; Uslu & Eren, 2020; Wang, 2022; Żabkar et al., 2010) satisfaction did not directly predict behavioral intention. A comparable exception appears in a study on domestic tourism in Ethiopia, where satisfaction did not influence willingness to recommend (Bayih & Singh, 2020). Here, two explanations are plausible. First, satisfaction was conceptualized solely through Oliver's expectancy–disconfirmation theory. And second, our destination-attribute construct included human interaction and the natural environment, which are often treated as peripheral variables, forming the overall destination image, leading to overall satisfaction (Albayrak & Caber, 2018). Consequently, in this case, the calculated average of the destination attributes might approximate overall satisfaction more closely than anticipated in disconfirmation theory alone. While satisfaction did not directly predict behavioral intention, it remains a secondary but meaningful outcome, reflecting a goal achievable through effective destination management (Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Carvache-Franco, Hassan, et al., 2024; Pestana et al., 2020; Schofield et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2022; Uslu & İnanir, 2020). Furthermore, as satisfaction did not have any direct impact on behavioral intentions, it could not act as a mediator for perceived quality of attributes, as it did in other studies (Chen & Chen, 2010; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Meng & Han, 2018; Schofield et al., 2020; Tasci et al., 2022; Uslu et al., 2024).

Behavioral intention was composed of the classic recommendation and revisit dimensions. Usually, revisit scores are lower than recommendation scores, as tourists may enjoy a destination, yet opt to experience new places (Hui et al., 2007; Meng & Han, 2018; Ozturk & Gogtas, 2016), particularly in the case of cities rather than resorts. However, in our study, the two components were scored similarly, with the revisit intention slightly higher.

Finally, addressing our third research objective, the most influential determinant of behavioral intentions was the perceived quality of destination attributes, particularly food and drink, the urban environment, and accommodation. In addition, behavioral intention was also shaped through the mediating impact of motivation, as in the case of Ethiopia's domestic tourists, where the pull variables explained an important part of the willingness to recommend variable (Bayih & Singh, 2020). Stronger motivations are connected to cultural heritage rather than financial factors. Altogether, the model effectively incorporates both reflective and formative indicators for emerging destinations. Yet, relationships among variables differ from those observed in mature destinations, highlighting the need for contextual adaptation in pre-development phase destinations.

5.2 Managerial implications

Visitor satisfaction is determined by numerous experiences, provided by the many individuals and organizations (Buhalis, 2000; Žabkar et al., 2010) that jointly determine visitors' perceptions of their destination and foster their attitude toward it. The present study confirms that the perceived quality of a destination's attributes significantly influences visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions. This finding is highly relevant for destination managers, as the quality of attributes falls mainly within their responsibilities, as recent studies also suggest (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Nam, 2023; Uslu et al., 2024; Zain et al., 2023). Stakeholders' roles and actions can be coordinated within a destination management organization, providing the framework for a positive tourist experience and a coherent destination image (Gajdosik et al., 2015). Moreover, the early promotion of a destination through a well-established event brand has proven essential, as evidenced in recent research (Herget et al., 2015; Richards & Palmer, 2010). In Timisoara's case, tourists' awareness of the ECoC title was relatively low. However, the primary motivations indirectly influencing behavioral intention were related to cultural heritage, highlighting a key opportunity for branding managers. Public administration plays an important role in integrated destination management. It is responsible for many destination attributes and public policies (Popescu & Voiculescu, 2020), which can and should support the development of the tourism sector. Since food, drink, and accommodation variables were among the top three attributes influencing tourists' likelihood of revisiting and recommending, public policy should foster a favorable business environment with strong support for local businesses and entrepreneurs. This is especially relevant given foreign tourists' interest in intangible heritage, which, in turn, indirectly influences their satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Beyond basic quality control, business owners should regularly assess customer perceptions to stay aligned with evolving expectations and needs, as Luvsandavaajav et al. (2022) recommended.

The urban area was the second most important attribute explaining tourists' behavioral intentions. As this is primarily managed by public administration, it presents a significant opportunity: authorities can prioritize investment in urban development through budget allocation and by applying for non-refundable national and European grants.

Finally, destination managers must address the unusually high percentage of tourists willing to return to Timisoara, which is atypical for a city-break destination. Many visitors understood Timisoara as an emerging destination preparing for its ECoC title in 2021 (postponed to 2023), which raised expectations. Managers should, therefore, prepare carefully for these repeat visits. Coordinated efforts between the public and private sectors, particularly involving small local producers and service providers, will be essential to meet the expectations of returning visitors and cultivate a lasting, positive image of the city.

5.3 Limitations and further research

This study is a cross-sectional study and captures a specific pre-event moment. Consequently, the relationships between the variables may not persist over time. Sequential longitudinal applications (during the event and post-event) would help validate the model's applicability over time and capture evolving market dynamics, including shifts in visitor expectations and behaviors. The uncommon absence of a direct statistical connection between satisfaction and behavioral intention warrants deeper exploration. Future applications of the model should integrate more complex satisfaction variables and evaluate alternative conceptualizations of overall satisfaction. When extending the model to other destinations, it is essential to adapt the analysis to local characteristics, ensuring that the assessed attributes reflect the context and expectations of target visitors.

Future studies may also explore additional factors affecting behavioral intention in emerging city destinations, such as digital engagement, event-specific experiences, and the broader urban tourism ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the motivations, perceived quality of destination attributes, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions of tourists visiting Timișoara shortly after it was designated European Capital of Culture (ECoC). The goal was to develop an assessment instrument suitable for the early stages of event-driven, developing destinations, by building on previous motivation-perceived quality-satisfaction-behavioral intention models and to identify the key determinants of future behavioral intentions.

The findings indicate that, at this preliminary stage, the ECoC did not operate as a decisive travel motivator. Because the research was conducted well before the event year, comparisons with prior research are limited; most ECoC-related studies were undertaken during the event year, post-event, or in the immediate lead-up to it, and thus report a more pronounced attraction effect (Farmaki et al., 2019; Guerreiro & Mendes, 2014; Macri & Samà, 2022). This discrepancy reinforces previous arguments that flagship cultural brands require sustained pre-event communication to translate symbolic value into concrete travel decisions (Aquilino et al., 2019; Herget et al., 2015; Richards & Palmer, 2010; Wise et al., 2021). Nevertheless, cultural-heritage related motivations significantly influenced satisfaction and behavioral intention, aligning with research conducted in other emerging, event-focused destinations (Akgunduz & Coşar, 2018; Fytopoulou et al., 2021). This suggests that when communicated effectively, the ECoC designation can become a meaningful travel motivator and a substantial driver of satisfaction and future behavioral intentions.

Perceived quality of destination attributes emerged as the strongest predictor of behavioral intentions. Attributes such as food and drink, accommodation, and the urban environment were particularly influential. Distinct from other studies, the uncurated urban environment encountered at the time of this research seemed to enhance the sense of authenticity valued by visitors - an effect observed in other less developed destinations (Fytopoulou et al., 2021). Although Timișoara was not yet a tourist destination, basic hospitality amenities still shaped behavioral intentions, largely because visitors perceived good value for money and an authentic atmosphere - patterns also observed in other emerging destinations (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022). Similar effects occur in more mature destinations as well (Carvache-Franco, Hassan, et al., 2024; Niemczyk & Seweryn, 2014), nevertheless, in those cases, they are primarily driven by service performance and high-quality offerings.

Although influenced by both motivation and perceived quality, satisfaction did not translate into behavioral intentions—a finding partially observed in other emerging contexts, such as Ethiopia (Bayih & Singh, 2020). This points to a more complex and context-dependent relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intention in developing destinations than generally observed in mature tourism environments. In the present model, satisfaction primarily serves as a secondary outcome rather than a direct driver of future behavior.

Collectively, these insights highlight the importance for emerging destinations of prioritizing both tangible and intangible components of the visitor experience. By investing in infrastructure, hospitality services, and cultural offerings while strategically promoting heritage assets, destination managers can foster repeat visitation and positive recommendations. The adapted model applied here offers a valuable framework for understanding tourist behavior in event-driven contexts, while also highlighting notable differences from patterns typically observed in established destinations.

More broadly, the study demonstrates the strategic value of early evaluations in cities preparing for hallmark events such as the ECoC. Understanding tourists' motivations and quality perceptions in advance offers a critical baseline for informing development strategies (Jangjoo et al., 2025) that enhance

competitiveness, improve visitor satisfaction, and lay the foundation for sustainable growth through heritage preservation and promotion, urban development, and positive socio-economic impacts (Popescu & Megan, 2026).

In sum, this study contributes to the event-driven tourism literature by presenting an empirically grounded model for understanding tourists' behavioral intentions in an emerging urban context, and by offering actionable guidance for sustainable destination development and competitiveness.

Acknowledgment

This study was written within the framework of the project *Measuring the level of satisfaction of foreign tourists in Timișoara* developed in the CDR Start Research Centre – Department of Geography, West University of Timișoara, cofinanced by the Public Utility Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Timiș County, Romania.

Disclosure Statement: Participant Consent and Confidentiality

All participants in this study willingly participated on a voluntary basis. Prior to their involvement, they were fully informed about the study's objectives, potential outcomes, intended use of the data, and plans for dissemination of the findings.

Participants were assured that their contributions would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. No personal or identifying data were collected, ensuring that individual identities remain anonymous. The information provided by participants was used solely for the purposes outlined and in accordance with ethical research standards. All measures have been taken to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants throughout the study process.

Contribution statement

All the authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the research that led to the results presented in this paper. FP and AD managed the project administration, investigation and supervision of the data acquisition and data management. FP wrote the original draft of the article. The research methodology was developed by AD, CA, NP, MM and LM. AD and MM worked on the data curation, formal data analysis and validation. LM developed the SEM. NP and CA were in charge of funding acquisition for a research project, and SV was in charge of the review and editing of the article.

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