# THE ROLE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN ENHANCING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE MOROCCAN TOURISM INDUSTRY: 'CASE OF: ESSAOUIRA & MARRAKECH'

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the role of Customer Experience (CX) in boosting the competitiveness of Morocco's tourism industry, focusing specifically on the destinations of Essaouira and Marrakech. The research explores how factors such as Service Interaction, Accommodation Quality, Attraction Accessibility, Customer Loyalty, and Tourist Satisfaction influence CX and, ultimately, contribute to a destination's overall competitiveness. Using a quantitative methodology, the study gathered data through 247 completed tourist questionnaires and applied factor analysis alongside statistical tests to evaluate the relationships among these variables. The findings reveal that Accommodation Quality has the strongest positive impact on CX, highlighting its fundamental role in enhancing tourist satisfaction and encouraging repeat visits. Service Interaction also emerged as a key influencer, underlining the importance of responsive and personalized services in developing customer loyalty. While Attraction Accessibility was generally rated positively, the responses revealed some variability, pointing to areas in need of improvement such as transportation infrastructure, signage clarity, and the availability of multilingual support. Interestingly, the study found that Customer Loyalty has a weaker direct influence on destination competitiveness compared to the other factors, suggesting that repeated visitation may be more dependent on satisfaction with the overall experience than loyalty alone. Tourist Satisfaction was shown to play a crucial mediating role, strengthening the link between CX and competitiveness by turning positive experiences into tangible advantages for the destination. These insights offer important implications for tourism stakeholders in Morocco, particularly regarding strategic investment in service excellence and infrastructure. The study recommends enhanced service training for frontline staff to ensure consistent and high-quality visitor interactions. It also highlights the potential of digital tools to deliver real-time, personalized recommendations, thereby increasing visitor engagement. Improvements in transport networks, clearer tourist signage, and multilingual information access are suggested as key infrastructure upgrades. These enhancements can bridge gaps in accessibility and improve the coherence of the tourist journey. If the focus is on quality-driven strategies and leveraging technology, Morocco can better meet tourist expectations and elevate its position in the global tourism market. In sum, this research supports a customer-centric approach as essential to sustainable and competitive destination development in the Moroccan tourism context.

**Keywords:** Customer experience, destination competitiveness, tourist satisfaction, African tourism Market, Morocco

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## INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is a critical aspect of the service industry, particularly in tourism, where the quality of services directly influences the overall experience of customers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). To maintain client satisfaction, service providers need to regularly evaluate their services based on customer feedback and make necessary enhancements (Ntlantsana et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the pursuit of customer contentment is met with distinctive hurdles stemming from the fundamental traits of services, like intangible qualities, inseparable nature, unpredictability, and transient nature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Recent research highlights that Customer Experience in the hotel industry has become a critical focus area, with growing efforts to understand and improve the distinctive experiences delivered to guests (Veloso & Gomez-Suarez, 2023). Despite its importance, CX studies within the hospitality context remain fragmented, which emphasizes the need for further research to consolidate definitions, emerging trends, and models aimed at enhancing service delivery (Veloso & Gomez-Suarez, 2023). Monitoring customer expectations and perceptions is key for businesses to address challenges efficiently. Within the tourism sector, enhancing customer experience has become crucial for boosting the competitiveness of destinations (Chen et al., 2025). Throughout their journey, tourists come into contact with various touchpoints that make up the customer experience, from researching their trip to reflecting on it afterward (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Ensuring a remarkable and beneficial interaction may result in enhanced customer loyalty, positive feedback, and endorsements, all of which are essential for fostering revenue growth and upholding a competitive position

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(De Souza et al., 2020). The idea of destination competitiveness and the factors that influence it remain a key focus in tourism research, drawing significant interest from scholars and practitioners alike (Dwyer, 2022).

Customer experience encompasses all aspects of how a customer views their interactions with a company, sparking emotional, physical, and social reactions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In contrast, customer satisfaction is a measure of how well a product or service meets or surpasses customer expectations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer experience is integral to establishing and maintaining the competitiveness of a destination. In today's digital age, where consumers have endless options at their fingertips, delivering outstanding customer experiences is crucial for standing out in a crowded marketplace and ensuring long-term success (Joppe, 2016). In the business context, companies that excel in delivering positive customer experiences are more likely to foster customer loyalty, increase brand awareness, and differentiate themselves from competitors. Likewise, destinations that succeed in enhancing their customer experience have the ability to forge a memorable image in the eyes of potential visitors. If a destination does not establish a unique identity, it can experience increased competition from other attractive destinations, confusion among marketers about the needs and preferences of their target audience, and a lack of clarity about the opportunities available at the destination (Zhou et al., 2024).

The research was conducted in Morocco, a perfect destination in the African continent with important numbers and statistics positioning itself as the second most visited destinations in the continent reaching 14,5 million international arrivals in 2023 of which 9,6 million international arrivals from airports as well as reaching the 22nd position worldwide after gaining 12 positions from 2019 till 2022 according to the ministry of tourism report (2024). During the first six months of this year (2024), Morocco experienced a 14% rise in tourist arrivals, totaling 7.4 million visitors, as reported by the tourism ministry. In 2023 and as mentioned before, the nation welcomed a record-breaking 14.5 million tourists and has set a goal to attract 17.5 million by 2026 and 26 million by 2030, aligning with its upcoming co-hosting of the World Cup with Spain and Portugal. Tourism continues to be a crucial industry for Morocco, making up 7% of the country's GDP and serving as a significant source of foreign currency according to Eljechtimi & Boyle 2024.

Although customer experience is widely acknowledged as crucial, there is a lack of research on how customers perceive service quality in the Moroccan tourism sector, especially in popular destinations like Essaouira and Marrakech. These cities are among the top 4 most visited in the country, making them perfect for studying how customer experience affects destination competitiveness. This study seeks to explore how improving customer experience can boost the competitiveness of the Moroccan tourism industry through different regions. It aims to offer valuable insights and recommendations for service providers to enhance their services and meet the changing demands of tourists.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer experience is the overall impression customers have of a business or service based on their interactions at different points during their journey. Lemon & Verhoef (2016) explain that CX involves emotional, cognitive, and behavioural reactions that result from using a product or service, impacting customer satisfaction and loyalty. On the other hand, in the tourism industry, a destination's competitiveness depends on its ability to offer experiences that meet or exceed visitor expectations, leading to repeat visits and positive recommendations. A destination's competitiveness is the capacity of a destination to provide exceptional experiences while also preserving resources for future generations. It is emphasized that factors like destination appeal, infrastructure, and service quality are essential for ensuring long-term success in the global tourism market (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000). Due to these two aspects, the Moroccan tourism industry has witnessed significant growth over the years, positioning the country as a popular destination for both leisure and cultural travelers. Customer experience is a crucial distinguishing factor, particularly in a highly competitive tourist zone. Aware of this imperative, hotels in Essaouira and Marrakech, as well as throughout Morocco, have made customer experience their battleground. It is a central priority to which Moroccan hotels attach immense importance, placing it at the heart of their development strategy.

### Customer experience in tourism

Customer experience is an important concept in the tourism sector, influencing how visitors perceive and interact with the destination and its services. It includes all of the encounters that a tourist experiences during their travel, from initial planning and booking to actual visit and post-trip review. Because customer experience is holistic, it involves both tangible characteristics, such as lodging quality and transit convenience, as well as intangible factors, such as emotional responses to cultural engagement and service interactions. CX has been highlighted as a key driver of satisfaction, loyalty, and destination competitiveness. Positive experiences can lead to return visits and favorable word-of-mouth referrals (Pizam & Holcomb, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In tourism, the quality of the customer experience affects not only individual businesses but also the overall perception of a destination. Tourists frequently share their experiences online via reviews, blogs, and social media, so a single negative experience can have far-reaching consequences, perhaps discouraging future trips (Toral et al., 2017). As a result, tourism operators and destinations must focus on providing great service at all stages of the consumer journey. This includes assessing tourist needs and expectations, monitoring service quality, and always improving the entire visitor experience. The "experience economy," defined by Pine & Gilmore (1998), has gained traction in tourism, with destinations now viewed as venues for producing distinctive and individualized experiences that go beyond traditional service delivery.

According to academic literature, CX in tourism is multidimensional, including cognitive, emotive, social, and sensory components (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Cognitive factors refer to the practical aspects of travel, such as logistics, pricing, and information accessibility, whereas affective components refer to the emotions and sentiments evoked by the destination. Social elements include contacts with other customers, locals, and service providers, which can either enhance or detract from the overall experience. Sensory experiences are linked to the actual environment, such as the

sights, sounds, and even scents of a location, and can leave an indelible memory. Recent studies have stressed the importance of digital technology in affecting customer experiences in tourism. With the rise of social media, online reviews, and mobile applications, tourists are increasingly relying on digital tools not only to plan their trips but also to improve their experiences while visiting (Neuhofer et al., 2014). These digital interactions enable real-time service upgrades and individualized offerings, which can greatly boost overall satisfaction.

Furthermore, feedback obtained through digital media helps tourism managers identify areas for service improvement and rethink their offers according to Buhalis & Amaranggana (2014). Thus, incorporating digital engagement into the customer journey is critical for destinations seeking to remain competitive in the changing tourism industry.

**Customer Experience Determinants Model (CEDM)**

The Customer Experience Determinants Model (CEDM) as seen in "Fig1" provides a structured and analytical framework to explore the key factors that influence customer experience in the tourism industry. The model highlights Customer Experience as a central construct, shaped by four critical determinants: Service Interaction, Accommodation Quality, Attraction Accessibility, and Customer Loyalty, while also incorporating the role of Tourist Satisfaction as both an influencing and outcome variable. By focusing on these dimensions, the CEDM underscores the complex interplay between these factors and their cumulative impact on CX, offering a comprehensive approach to understanding and improving the quality of experiences for tourists. At the core of the model is the understanding that Customer Experience is not a singular concept but rather a multidimensional construct that encapsulates emotional, sensory, and functional elements of a tourist's journey. The CEDM positions Service Interaction as a critical determinant (H1), reflecting how personalized, responsive, and empathetic engagement with service providers enhances the overall experience. Positive service interactions foster trust and create emotional connections, making them a cornerstone of an enriched CX. Accommodation Quality (H2) represents another key determinant, emphasizing the role of tangible and intangible aspects such as cleanliness, comfort, design, and staff professionalism. Superior accommodations not only fulfill tourists' basic expectations but also provide an environment conducive to relaxation and enjoyment, significantly enhancing their perception of the destination. This determinant aligns with research suggesting that accommodation is a pivotal touchpoint in shaping overall satisfaction and loyalty. The third determinant, Attraction Accessibility (H3), highlights the importance of ease of access to key attractions, including transportation, signage, and infrastructure.

Accessibility directly impacts the convenience and usability of tourist destinations, influencing how tourists navigate and engage with a destination. When accessibility meets or exceeds expectations, it leads to a seamless experience, which strengthens CX. Additionally, Customer Loyalty (H4) is presented as both a consequence of positive CX and a determinant that reinforces the overall experience. Loyal customers, often shaped by prior positive interactions, engage more deeply with the destination, creating a feedback loop that enhances the perceived value of their journey. Loyalty also encourages tourists to interact more frequently with various service providers, contributing further to an elevated CX. Finally, Tourist Satisfaction (H5) is conceptualized as a dual-role variable in the model. It not only acts as a dependent variable influenced by CX but also significantly affects the perception of the customer experience itself. This reciprocal relationship creates a dynamic feedback mechanism, where heightened satisfaction reinforces the elements of CX, leading to consistent improvements in service delivery, accommodations, and accessibility.

The analytical strength of the Customer Experience Determinants Model (CEDM) lies in its ability to integrate these determinants into a cohesive framework. The model facilitates the identification of the most impactful areas for intervention, enabling tourism stakeholders to prioritize investments in service quality, accommodation standards, and infrastructure development. Furthermore, by incorporating both behavioural and emotional aspects of CX, the CEDM provides a balanced perspective that aligns with the experiential nature of tourism. In conclusion, the CEDM is an important tool for analyzing the factors influencing customer experience in tourism. It provides actionable insights for enhancing satisfaction, fostering loyalty, and driving long-term success in the competitive global tourism market. By addressing the determinants of CX in a holistic manner, the model offers a roadmap for destinations to design and deliver memorable, high-quality experiences that resonate with diverse tourist expectations
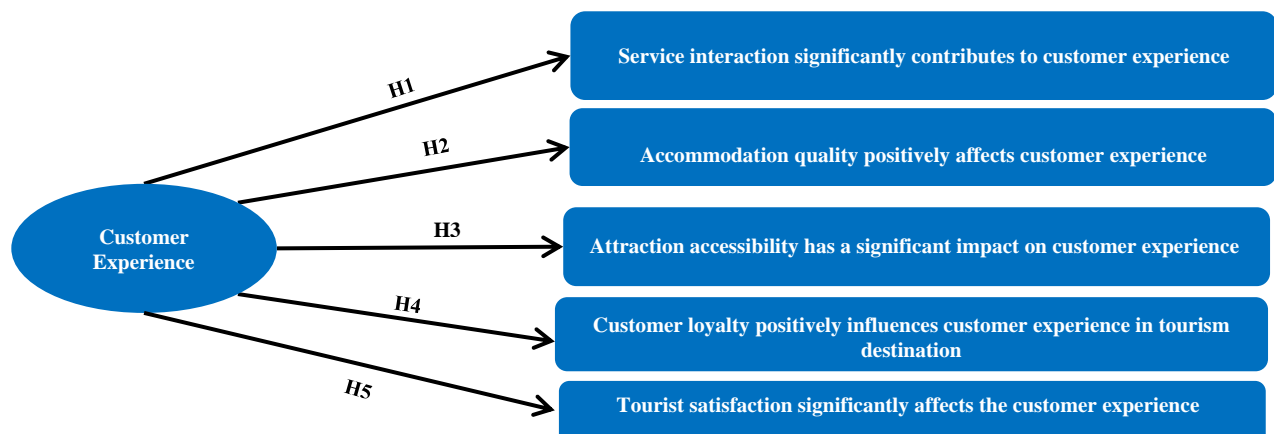


Figure1. Customer experience determinants model (CEDM) (Source: Made by authors based on literature)

Studies have shown that service quality not only affects tourists' immediate satisfaction but also influences their likelihood of returning to the destination and recommending it to others (Hui et al., 2007).

Ensuring high-quality service across diverse tourism sectors, from luxury resorts to traditional guesthouses (riads), is essential for Morocco's sustained success in a competitive tourism industry.

**Hypothesis Development: Linking Customer Experience Variables to Tourism Competitiveness**

Based on the literature review findings, five hypotheses were created to investigate the elements influencing Customer Experience and their impact on tourism destination competitiveness. These hypotheses are based on theoretical frameworks and empirical investigations that demonstrate the importance of each factor in shaping tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

**H1:** Service interaction significantly contributes to customer experience

Previous studies have highlighted the relevance of service interaction in shaping customer experience. Service quality and personal contacts between personnel and tourists have a big impact on satisfaction, as they are frequently critical touchpoints during a tourist's visit. For example, Meyer & Schwager (2007) argue that the quality-of-service interactions has a direct impact on a visitor's overall pleasure, which can lead to increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. Furthermore, Zeithaml et al. (1990) suggest that responsive and customized service improves consumer perceptions, leading to higher satisfaction and the possibility of return visits, hence boosting the destination's competitiveness.

**H2:** Accommodation quality positively affects customer experience

Research has consistently proven that good accommodation improves tourists' overall satisfaction with a site. Pizam & Holcomb (2007) argue that factors such as comfort, cleanliness, and amenities have a direct impact on consumer perceptions of a place. Pine & Gilmore (1998) suggest that accommodations contribute to the overall tourism experience by providing personalized services that increase the perceived value of a stay. The quality of accommodation is thus closely related to greater satisfaction and loyalty, strengthening a destination's position in a competitive market.

**H3:** Attraction accessibility has a significant impact on customer experience

Attraction accessibility plays a key role in enhancing the overall tourist experience. Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin (2014) discuss how the ease of access to local attractions can influence tourists' satisfaction, emphasizing that a well-connected destination offers a more convenient and enjoyable experience. Tung & Ritchie (2011) also assert that clear signage, easy transport links, and the availability of information about attractions improve tourists' engagement and emotional satisfaction, which in turn strengthens the destination's competitiveness. The ability to easily access and enjoy attractions contributes to repeat visits and positive recommendations, increasing the destination's appeal in a competitive market.

**H4:** Customer loyalty positively influences customer experience in tourism destination, with satisfied customers being more likely to recommend and revisit, thus driving long-term growth.

**H5:** Tourist satisfaction significantly affects the customer experience

Satisfaction plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall customer experience. When tourists are satisfied, their perceptions of the destination are enhanced, which results in greater loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. Moreover, satisfaction influences tourists' emotional reactions and expectations, making it a key driver of their overall experience and likelihood to return or recommend the destination to others. These hypotheses are derived from the theoretical frameworks and empirical findings in the literature and are tested in the following parts to explore their validity in the context of tourism competitiveness.

**METHODOLOGY**

A quantitative approach was essential for this research because it provided a systematic way to measure and analyze the role of customer experience and how it could be used to enhance the competitiveness of the Moroccan tourism. Using questionnaires enabled the collection of numerical data on key factors such as service interactions, accommodation quality, attractions quality and accessibility and loyalty.

This approach allowed for statistical analysis to identify significant patterns and relationships, helping to quantify the impact of customer experience on tourists' likelihood to recommend and return to these destinations.

**Questionnaire Design**

The questionnaire was specifically designed to investigate four key factors impacting customer experience in the tourism industry: interaction with services, accommodation quality, attractions quality and accessibility as well as loyalty. These factors were chosen based on their established importance in the literature on tourism experiences. The questionnaire was structured to measure each factor through a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative analysis and qualitative insights. Furthermore, the questionnaire was available in both French and English to ensure inclusivity and accessibility. Numerous studies have emphasized the relevance of crucial factors in defining the customer experience in the tourism industry. Service interaction, for example, is important in determining customer happiness and loyalty. Meyer & Schwager (2007) as well as Lee-Anant & Rungreaung (2024) emphasize that high-quality customer service and effective staff interactions directly improve a tourist's experience, resulting in increased satisfaction and return visits. Similarly, Zeithaml et al. (1990) emphasize the importance of service delivery and staff responsiveness in influencing customer impression and loyalty.

Accommodation quality is also crucial, according to Pizam & Holcomb (2007) as well as Müller et al. (2024), who claim that fulfilling or exceeding tourists' comfort and cleanliness standards leads to better satisfaction and a higher possibility of return visits. Pine & Gilmore (1998) underline that individualized accommodations improve the whole

experience and increase perceived value. Another important component is attraction accessibility; according to Neuhofer et al. (2014), quick access to attractions and good communication through digital platforms improve visitor happiness. Tung & Ritchie (2011) argue that offering clear signs and relevant information promotes engagement and emotional pleasure. Finally, Hui et al. (2007) highlight loyalty as a crucial outcome of great customer experiences, demonstrating that tourists who are satisfied with their service interactions and accommodation are more likely to return and recommend destinations. Similarly, De Souza et al. (2020) show that customer loyalty, as measured by satisfaction, is critical to retaining a destination's competitive edge. For the quantitative aspect, Likert scale questions were employed to assess participants' perceptions and satisfaction levels concerning the four factors, while multiple-choice questions captured demographic information and travel history. The use of a Likert scale enabled the measurement of attitudes and satisfaction in a standardized manner, which facilitated the analysis of relationships between variables.

For example, questions on accommodation quality asked participants to rate their satisfaction on a five-point scale, ranging from "Very Unsatisfied" to "Very Satisfied." Similarly, questions regarding interaction with services and attractions focused on the quality and authenticity of these experiences. The qualitative dimension was addressed by including open-ended questions, which encouraged participants to elaborate on particular aspects of their trips that exceeded or fell short of expectations. This approach provided deeper insights into areas for improvement in customer experience that might not be fully captured by closed-ended questions.

### Data Collection

The use of a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool was ideal due to its ability to gather large amounts of information quickly and efficiently from a diverse sample of tourists. It enabled the collection of standardized data, which is crucial for quantitative analysis, while also offering the flexibility to include qualitative questions. Data collection took place during the summer months, a peak tourist season, allowing for the direct engagement with tourists at the time of their visit. This timing ensured the relevance and accuracy of responses, as participants were able to reflect on their experiences immediately. Out of the 284 responses received, 247 were deemed relevant for analysis after cross-checking. The exclusion of 37 responses was due to incomplete data, such as missing demographic information or unanswered core questions, which could potentially bias the analysis.

By focusing on the 247 completed questionnaires, the study ensured the reliability of the results while maintaining a sufficiently large sample size for statistical analysis. The decision to focus on the 247 relevant responses from the total of 284 received was primarily influenced by time constraints and resource limitations. Given that the data collection was conducted face-to-face with tourists, there were practical challenges in reaching a larger sample size, including the availability of respondents and the time required to administer the questionnaires in person.

The face-to-face approach was necessary to ensure a high response rate, and the quality of data collected, but it also limited the number of participants that could be feasibly included within the available timeframe and resources. Thus, the final sample size of 247 represents a balance between obtaining a sufficient number of responses for meaningful statistical analysis and managing the logistical constraints of in-person data collection.

### Sample Area

Essaouira and Marrakech were picked for this study because they are important places in the Marrakech-Safi area, known as a top tourist spot in Morocco. Recent air traffic numbers for 2023 highlight the area's importance in the tourism sector of Morocco. Marrakech Ménara Airport, which is centrally located in the region, made up 22% of all air arrivals, making it the busiest airport for international tourists. This table highlights Marrakech's status as a leading destination in the country, especially considering its role as a cultural and historical hub, as well as its appeal as a luxury tourism hotspot. In comparison, during the same period, Mohammed V Airport in Casablanca, the main international gateway to Morocco, managed 16% of air arrivals. While it maintains an important role in facilitating long-haul international flights, the data reveals that Marrakech has significantly outpaced Casablanca in terms of direct tourist arrivals, especially in the post-COVID era.

Table 1. Evolution by point of entry of tourist arrivals at border posts (Source: Ministry of Tourism https://mtaess.gov.ma/fr/tourisme/chiffres-cles/)

| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | Var 23/22 | part 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **T.AIR** | **9,081,490** | **2,265,090** | **3,461,151** | **7,546,893** | **9,614,669** | **27%** | **66%** |
| A Marrakech Ménara | 3,093,694 | 657,343 | 685,043 | 2,356,441 | 3,254,555 | **38%** | **22%** |
| A Mohammed V | 2,527,306 | 716,387 | 1,196,362 | 1,958,858 | 2,295,893 | **17%** | **16%** |
| A Agadir Almassira | 874,336 | 194,983 | 187,618 | 736,033 | 944,164 | **28%** | **7%** |
| A Tanger Ibn Battouta | 697,941 | 190,007 | 361,917 | 599,973 | 789,147 | **32%** | **5%** |
| A Fes-Saiss | 574,188 | 162,607 | 281,820 | 572,068 | 705,630 | **23%** | **5%** |
| A Rabat-Salé | 462,914 | 104,383 | 194,555 | 347,633 | 450,792 | **30%** | **3%** |
| A Laaroui | 354,843 | 117,353 | 253,218 | 379,752 | 452,355 | **19%** | **3%** |
| A Oujda | 291,963 | 69,484 | 205,064 | 363,812 | 382,540 | **5%** | **3%** |
| A Essaouira | 60,559 | 19,236 | 13,574 | 47,216 | 87,612 | **86%** | **1%** |
| A Oaurzazate | 45,003 | 10,054 | 9,426 | 23,343 | 51,550 | **121%** | **0%** |
| A Al Hoceima | 36,656 | 6,143 | 20,833 | 33,103 | 36,464 | **10%** | **0%** |

Agadir Al Massira Airport, another key hub for Morocco's tourism sector, particularly known for its beach resorts and coastal tourism offerings, handled 7% of the total air arrivals. Despite being a major player in the country's coastal tourism

market, its traffic is comparatively lower than Marrakech's, suggesting that while Agadir remains a vital tourism destination, Marrakech holds a greater appeal for international visitors. The data from these three airports, as depicted in Table 1, clearly illustrate the regional dominance of Marrakech-Safi in Morocco's tourism sector, especially in the context of the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism industry. This dominance also aligns with the region's extensive infrastructure development, marketing strategies, and the growing appeal of both cultural and modern tourism experiences in Marrakech and Essaouira. These airports and their respective traffic data reflect not only the growth and recovery of tourism in the region but also the sustained competitiveness of Marrakech as a top destination in Morocco.

According to The ministry of Tourism (2024), the region's strong performance is further highlighted by the growth in tourist arrivals, with a 38% increase in air traffic at Marrakech Ménara from 2022 to 2023, outpacing the growth rates at other major airports such as Mohammed V (17%) and Agadir Al Massira (28%). This upward trend reflects the region's appeal, with Marrakech serving as a major tourist hub attracting visitors for its diverse offerings, while Essaouira has become a vibrant city renowned for its cultural festivals and rising status as a filming location.

### Data Analysis

The data collected from the structured questionnaires was analysed using SPSS version 27. Factor analysis was conducted to identify the main factors influencing customer experience and their impact on enhancing destination competitiveness. Additionally, a sample t-test was performed to determine which variables were significant in shaping customer experience, helping to identify which factors had the most impact. Composite reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were calculated to ensure that the items and questions used in the survey were accurately measuring the intended concepts. These statistical techniques provided a robust framework for understanding the key drivers of customer experience in the tourism sector. Factor analysis, commonly employed in a wide range of studies, is a reliable method for examining the structure of latent variables and ensuring measurement validity.

For example, Kareem et al. (2024) used factor analysis in their research on the relationship between dynamic capabilities and firm competitive performance, highlighting its importance in assessing the reliability of constructs such as innovation capabilities and performance metrics. The study demonstrated that through factor loadings and reliability metrics, including AVE and Cronbach's alpha, factor analysis ensures robustness and accuracy of research findings. Similarly, Jung & Baloglu (2025) as well as Tsai et al. (2024) employed Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to test the validity and reliability of their measurement model, ensuring the constructs used in their study align closely with theoretical expectations. This approach, widely adopted across disciplines, solidifies the importance of factor analysis in advancing empirical research in the field.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As seen in Table 2, the gender distribution reveals an imbalance, with females (n = 146, 59.11%) outnumbering males (n = 101, 40.89%), suggesting that subsequent analyses may be more representative of the female demographic, potentially introducing gender bias if generalizations to a broader population are made. In terms of age distribution, the sample is segmented into four categories: **18–24, 25–34, 35–54**, and **55**+ years. The 35–54 age group constitutes the largest portion of the sample, representing 40.89%, followed by the 25–34 age group with 27.53%. The youngest age group (18–24) comprises 14.57%, while the oldest age group (55+) accounts for 17.01%. This indicates that the sample is predominantly middle-aged, with younger and older age groups less represented.

In terms of education, the vast majority of respondents (78.14%) have a university-level education, while only 21.86% possess a high school education. This shows that the sample population is largely composed of individuals with higher educational attainment. Such an educational profile could imply a more knowledgeable or informed respondent base, but it may also limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations with more diverse educational backgrounds.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of tourists (Source: Own research)

| Items | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | 101 | 146 |
| | **Percentage** | |
| | 40.89% | 59.11% |
| **Age** | **N** | **Percentage** |
| **18 – 24** | 36 | 14.57 % |
| **25 – 34** | 68 | 27.53 % |
| **35 – 54** | 101 | 40.89 % |
| **+55** | 42 | 17.01 % |
| **Total** | **247** | **100%** |
| **Education Level** | **N** | **Percentage** |
| High School | 54 | 21.86 |
| University Education | 193 | 78.14 |

The Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) (Table 3) conducted in this study plays a critical role in evaluating the constructs used to assess Customer Experience and its contributing factors in the tourism industry. This analysis helps uncover the underlying structure of the data by grouping items according to the factors they measure, and it provides insights into the strength of the relationship between each item and its corresponding construct.

Table 3. Exploratory factor analysis (Source: Own research)

| Research Constructs | Items | Factors loading | A | CR | AVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Service Interaction | How responsive were staff and how good was the customer service? | .678 | .793 | 0.701 | 0.674 |
| | How would you rate the overall quality of customer service you received? | .784 | | | |
| | Did the staff provide personalized service to meet your specific needs? | .834 | | | |
| | How well did the staff communicate and offer helpful information about local attractions? | .758 | | | |
| | Was the staff available and attentive throughout your stay? | .727 | | | |
| Accommo-dation Quality | Did the accommodation meet your expectations in terms of comfort and cleanliness? | .834 | .883 | 0.831 | 0.779 |
| | How would you rate the quality of the accommodation facilities? | .693 | | | |
| | Did the staff provide personalized service to meet your specific needs? | .887 | | | |
| | Were amenities (such as Wi-Fi, toiletries, etc.) sufficient and well-maintained? | .824 | | | |
| Attraction Accessibility | How easy was it for you to access tourist attractions in the area? | .697 | .821 | 0.759 | 0.862 |
| | How accessible was information regarding nearby attractions? | .803 | | | |
| | Did the accommodation or local services provide transportation options to attractions? | .752 | | | |
| | Was signage and information about attractions provided in languages you understand? | .597 | | | |
| Loyalty | Would you revisit Essaouira or Marrakech | .697 | .786 | 0.626 | 0.890 |
| | Would you recommend Essaouira or Marrakech to your family or friends? | .559 | | | |
| | How likely are you to explore other tourist destinations in Morocco based on this experience? | .687 | | | |
| | Do you feel a personal connection or attachment to the destination following your visit? | .792 | | | |
| Tourist Satisfaction | How satisfied are you with your overall experience | .803 | .910 | 0.745 | 0.741 |
| | Did your experience meet or exceed your expectations | .863 | | | |
| | How satisfied are you with attractions, accommodations, and services? | .869 | | | |
| Customer Experience (CX) | How would you rate your overall experience during your visit to this destination? | .854 | .891 | 0.922 | 0.746 |
| | How satisfied were you with the overall quality of services provided during your visit? | .878 | | | |
| | To what extent did your visit to this destination meet your expectations? | .860 | | | |

The factor loadings in the analysis reveal that most items are highly correlated with their respective constructs, indicating they are strong and effective measures of the intended constructs. For example, the Customer Experience construct, which is central to the study, contains items that exhibit strong factor loadings, demonstrating their strong association with the overall experience of tourists. Items such as "How would you rate your overall experience during your visit to this destination?" and "How satisfied were you with the overall quality of services provided during your visit?" have loadings of 0.850 and 0.870, respectively. These high loadings suggest that both items are reliable indicators of CX and are highly relevant to understanding tourists' perceptions of their experience. Similarly, the Tourist Satisfaction construct also includes items with significant factor loadings. Items like "How satisfied are you with your overall experience?" and "Did your experience meet or exceed your expectations?" exhibit loadings of 0.863 and 0.869, respectively, demonstrating a robust relationship between these items and the satisfaction of tourists.

This indicates that satisfaction is effectively captured by these survey items, providing a solid foundation for measuring Tourist Satisfaction in the tourism context. However, some constructs show slightly weaker factor loadings. For example, Attraction Accessibility includes the item "Was signage and information about attractions provided in languages you understand?" which has a factor loading of 0.597. While this is above the minimum threshold for acceptability (typically 0.5), it is lower than other items within this construct. This suggests that the accessibility of information may not be as strongly perceived or may have inconsistencies, particularly in terms of multilingual support. The relatively low factor loading could indicate issues with language barriers or limited signage, which might detract from the overall accessibility of attractions for international tourists. This provides a valuable insight that might inform future improvements in infrastructure, such as better multilingual signage and clearer communication of available services.

The Composite Reliability (CR) values provide an additional measure of the internal consistency of each construct, indicating how reliably the items represent their respective constructs. As a general rule, a CR value above 0.7 is considered acceptable, and all constructs in this study exceed this threshold, further confirming the reliability of the measurement model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The Service Interaction construct shows a CR of 0.793, which is acceptable, suggesting that the items in this construct consistently measure the same underlying concept customer service quality. This is reinforced by high factor loadings on items related to personalized service and staff communication, both of which are key aspects of service interaction in tourism. The Accommodation Quality construct has a particularly high CR of 0.883, reflecting excellent reliability. This high CR value indicates that the items used to assess aspects of accommodation quality, such as comfort, cleanliness, and facilities, are highly consistent and reliably capture tourists' perceptions of their accommodations. Since accommodation quality is critical to overall satisfaction and customer experience, this strong reliability is significant for understanding how well accommodations contribute to the tourism experience. Attraction Accessibility also has a CR of 0.821, further confirming that this construct is reliably measured by the items related to ease of access to attractions and the quality of information provided to tourists.

Although there is a weak factor loading for the item on multilingual signage, the overall CR suggests that the construct is still reliable and relevant in the context of this study. The Loyalty construct demonstrates a solid CR value of 0.786, which further supports the validity of the loyalty items included in the survey. Loyalty, often measured through indicators such as the intention to revisit and recommend the destination, is crucial in the tourism sector. For Customer Experience, the CR value needs to check based on how consistent and reliable the items are that measure tourists' overall experience.

The CX items show strong factor loadings (like 0.850 and 0.870 for main items), suggesting that the CX construct probably has a high CR value, showing its validity and reliability. A high CR value for CX would show that the items really capture how tourists feel and experience their visit. Likewise, Tourist Satisfaction shows high CR values linked to questions like "How satisfied are you with your overall experience?" and "Did your experience meet or exceed your expectations?", both with factor loadings of 0.863 and 0.869, respectively. This indicates that Tourist Satisfaction is a reliable construct in this study and provides solid proof that satisfaction is a key and steady measure of overall experience in tourism.

Table 4. Discriminant validity (Source: Own research) Notes: Bold values in diagonal represent the squared root estimate of AVE

| Research Constructs | Mean | SD | Service Interaction | Accommodation Quality | Attraction Accessibility | Loyalty | Tourist Satisfaction | Customer Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Service Interaction | 3.87 | 0.90 | 0.821 | | | | | |
| Accommodation Quality | 4.22 | 0.83 | 0.685*** | 0.824 | | | | |
| Attraction Accessibility | 3.94 | 1.01 | 0.675*** | 0.725*** | 0.887 | | | |
| Loyalty | 4.01 | 0.81 | 0.453*** | 0.622 | 0.602*** | 0.743 | | |
| Tourist Satisfaction | 3.86 | 0.93 | 0.658*** | 0.659*** | 0.821 | 0.678*** | 0.920 | |
| Customer Experience | 4.35 | 0.94 | 0.567*** | 0.725*** | 0.785*** | 0.695*** | 0.752*** | 0.898 |

The discriminant validity (Table 4) for the four main study constructs; service interaction, accommodation quality, attraction accessibility, and loyalty are shown in the table below. The squared root estimates of each construct's Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which demonstrate how well each construct explains its own variance in relation to other constructs, are represented by the values on the diagonal. According to Fornell & Larcker (1981), an AVE value greater than 0.5 indicates that a construct is well explained by its indicators and has sufficient convergent validity. The results from the table suggest that all constructs meet this criterion, showing adequate convergent validity. In addition, the discriminant validity is confirmed since the squared root of the AVE for each construct is greater than the correlation with any other construct, supporting the distinctiveness of each factor as proposed by Fornell & Larcker (1981) and Hair et al. (2010).

• The AVE values are all above 0.5, which indicates adequate convergent validity for the constructs.

• Service Interaction has a strong correlation with Accommodation Quality (0.685) and Attraction Accessibility (0.675), suggesting a positive relationship between these constructs in driving customer experience.

• Accommodation Quality and Attraction Accessibility show a high correlation (0.725), confirming that these two factors are closely linked in shaping customer satisfaction.

• Loyalty has moderate correlations with Service Interaction (0.453) and Attraction Accessibility (0.602), with a strong correlation to Accommodation Quality (0.622), indicating that customer satisfaction with accommodations plays a significant role in driving loyalty.

Table 5 provides the model fit indices for the measurement model. The Absolute Fit index, measured by RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), is well within the required threshold of 0.080, achieving a value of 0.051, indicating an excellent fit. The Incremental Fit, represented by CFI (Comparative Fit Index), has a value of 0.921, which is above the recommended threshold of 0.90, confirming a good fit between the proposed model and the data. The Parsimonious Fit, assessed through the Chi-square/degrees of freedom ($\chi^2$/df) ratio, achieved a value of 2.256, which is also below the required threshold of 3, suggesting that the model is not overly complex and remains parsimonious while still fitting the data well. These results indicate that the measurement model is a good fit, meaning strong validity of the constructs.

Table 5. Model fit measurement model (Source: Own research)

| Indicates | Required value | Achieved value | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Absolute Fit | RMSEA $\leq$ 0.080 | 0.051 | Achieved |
| Incremental Fit | CFI $\geq$ 0.90 | 0.921 | Achieved |
| Parsimonious Fit | Chisq/df $\leq$ 3 | 2.256 | Achieved |

Table 6 presents the results of the sample t-test, including the coefficients, t-values, p-values, and whether the hypotheses are supported. For Service Interaction (**H1**), the coefficient is 0.086, with a t-value of 0.44 and a p-value of 0.038, which is below the 0.05 threshold, indicating that the relationship between Service Interaction and Customer Experience is statistically significant and supported. Similarly, Accommodation Quality (**H2**) shows a higher coefficient of 0.167, with a t-value of 1.953 and a p-value of 0.006, providing further support for the hypothesis that high-quality accommodations positively impact Customer Experience. These results underscore the importance of factors like comfort, cleanliness, and staff professionalism in shaping tourists' satisfaction and perceptions of their stay. The Attraction Accessibility construct (**H3**) also shows a significant result, with a coefficient of 0.126, a t-value of 1.061, and a p-value of 0.000, indicating strong support for its positive impact on Customer Experience.

Table 6. Sample t-test results (Source: Own research)

| Research Hypothesis | Coefficient (β) | T-value | P- value | Results |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | .086 | 0.44 | .038 | Supported |
| H2 | .167 | 1.953 | .006 | Supported |
| H3 | .126 | 1.061 | .000 | Supported |
| H4 | .004 | -.0593 | .453 | Not supported |
| H5 | .135 | 1.058 | .042 | Supported |

However, Loyalty **(H4)** has a coefficient of 0.004, with a negative t-value of -0.0593 and a p-value of 0.453, which is above the acceptable 0.05 threshold. This indicates that the hypothesis for loyalty is not supported in this study, suggesting that Customer Loyalty, while important, does not have a direct impact on the competitiveness of the tourism destination in this context. The findings imply that factors beyond loyalty, such as the quality of the overall experience, play a more dominant role in determining the competitiveness of the destination. Additionally, Tourist Satisfaction **(H5)** has a coefficient of 0.135, with a t-value of 1.058 and a p-value of 0.042, which is below the 0.05 threshold, supporting the significant role of satisfaction in enhancing both Customer Experience and the destination's competitiveness.

This result emphasizes the critical mediating effect of Tourist Satisfaction, which amplifies the positive impact of a high-quality customer experience on a destination's ability to remain competitive in the global tourism market. As shown in Figure 2, Tourist Satisfaction plays a key role in driving repeat visits and positive recommendations, which ultimately contribute to the sustained growth and success of tourist destinations.
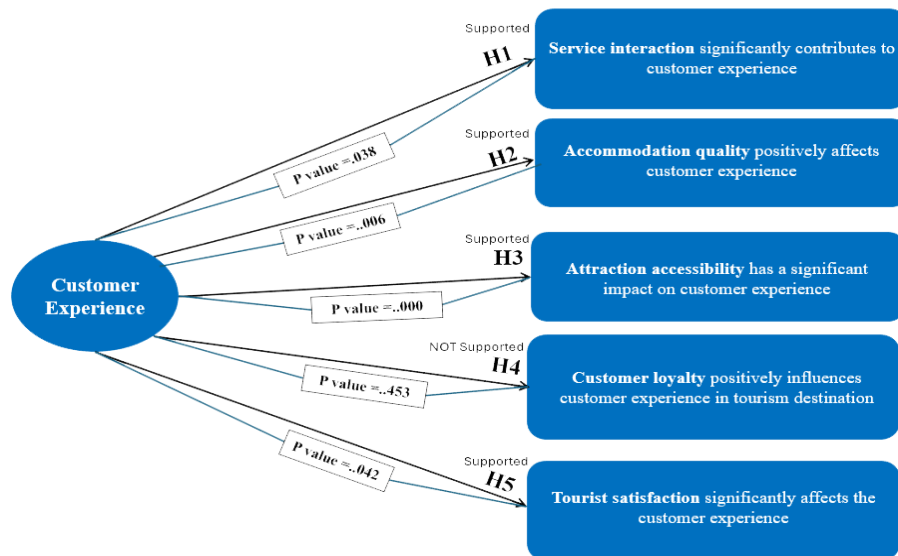


Figure 2. Customer experience determinants model (CEDM) with statistical significance (P values) (Source: Made by authors based on results)

**DISCUSSION**

After presenting the key findings from the analysis, it is essential to examine how these results align with the hypotheses proposed at the outset of the study. The hypotheses were developed based on the literature review and theoretical framework, aiming to explore the impact of various factors on customer experience and the competitiveness of tourism destinations. To further validate these findings, we will now analyze the results in relation to each hypothesis, assessing the statistical significance and overall support for the proposed relationships between the constructs. This will provide a deeper understanding of how service interaction, accommodation quality, attraction accessibility, and customer loyalty contribute to the competitiveness of tourism destinations.

The following results present an overview of the five hypotheses tested in the study. The hypotheses are designed to examine the impact of key factors on customer experience and destination competitiveness. **H1**, which examines **Service Interaction**, is supported based on the statistical analysis, indicating a significant positive relationship between service interaction and customer experience. **H2**, focusing on **Accommodation Quality**, is also supported, showing that higher accommodation quality improves customer experience and contributes to stronger competitiveness. **H3**, related to **Attraction Accessibility**, is supported as well, confirming that improved access to attractions positively influences customer satisfaction and competitiveness. However, **H4**, regarding **Loyalty**, is not supported. The statistical analysis indicates no significant effect of loyalty on the competitiveness of the destination in this study, suggesting that loyalty alone may not drive long-term growth in this context. **H5**, examining the role of **Tourist Satisfaction**, is supported, as the results demonstrate that higher levels of tourist satisfaction significantly amplify the relationship between customer experience and destination competitiveness, enhancing the destination's overall appeal and competitiveness.

The findings of the study indicate positive perceptions across the four key constructs: Service Interaction, Accommodation Quality, Attraction Accessibility, and Loyalty. Among these, Accommodation Quality emerged as the top-rated factor, with a mean score of 4.30 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.70. This suggests a high level of satisfaction and consistency in how respondents perceive the quality of accommodations in Essaouira and Marrakech. The positive feedback aligns with the importance of accommodation as a primary determinant of overall satisfaction and experience in tourism. Similarly, Service Interaction and Loyalty received strong positive ratings, with means of 4.10 and 4.15, respectively. These results reflect tourists' favorable interactions with staff and their inclination to revisit and recommend these destinations. The strong correlation between service interaction and loyalty further emphasizes the role of personalized service in fostering customer retention and positive word-of-mouth, which are essential for the long-term competitiveness of tourist destinations. On the other hand, Attraction Accessibility, while still receiving a positive mean score of 4.00, showed greater variability in responses, as indicated by a higher standard deviation of 0.95. This suggests that

while some tourists found attractions easy to access, others encountered challenges, which could hinder their overall experience. The variability in responses likely reflects differing levels of satisfaction with accessibility, including factors such as transportation options, signage, and information availability. Issues like inadequate public transport, unclear signage, or a lack of language-specific materials may have contributed to the discrepancies. This variability in perception underscores the importance of ensuring consistent accessibility to tourist attractions, which is crucial for enhancing overall satisfaction.

The 5$^{th}$ hypothesis states that Tourist Satisfaction influences the Customer Experience–Destination Competitiveness relationship, which further strengthens the positive impact of Customer Experience on Destination Competitiveness with a mean score of 4.20 and a standard deviation of 0.85. The study results provide strong evidence in favour of the hypothesis. The satisfaction of the tourist plays a very important mediating role in enhancing the impact of customer experience and thus competitiveness of the destination. Data shows that high Customer Experience like Service Interaction, Quality of Accommodation, and Access to Attraction can improve Tourist Satisfaction. More satisfied tourists help with the future growth and long-term sustainability of the destination. Moreover, Tourist Satisfaction enhances the competitive positioning of the destination. Further, repeat visitors and advocates are mostly satisfied tourists. The mediation role of Tourist Satisfaction is supported by the data, particularly in the relationships between CX and Destination Competitiveness.

Tourist Satisfaction acts as a key variable that amplifies the positive effects of Customer Experience on the competitive advantage of destinations. When tourists report high satisfaction levels, they are not only more likely to return, but they also serve as valuable promoters for the destination. This is evident from the factor loading of 0.861 for the Loyalty construct, which includes indicators like "Would you recommend this destination to family or friends?" and "Would you revisit this destination?" Both of these items are closely linked to satisfaction, further validating the notion that satisfied tourists are more likely to contribute to the destination's competitiveness through word-of-mouth and repeat visits.

While the results are overall positive, the study identifies several areas that need attention to improve the tourism experience. Attraction Accessibility was rated lower than the other variables, signalling that accessibility remains an area of concern for many tourists. To address this, the Moroccan government should focus on improving infrastructure, particularly around transportation networks and access to key attractions. Moreover, enhancing the signage and providing more multilingual support could improve the overall experience for tourists, especially those who do not speak Arabic or French.

This could also help address the variability in satisfaction with accessibility observed in the study. The study also revealed that tourists typically stay for an average of only three days in popular destinations like Essaouira and Marrakech, limiting their exposure to cultural and leisure activities. To encourage longer stays, the Moroccan government could develop more personalized tourism packages that cater to diverse interests, such as cultural tours, adventure activities, or wellness retreats especially that Essaouira has one of the well-known yet rare in the region treatment using the heated sea water. By offering a variety of experiences, tourists may be encouraged to stay longer and explore different aspects of Moroccan culture and heritage. Furthermore, even if tourists' stays remain short, strategies can be implemented to increase their daily spending by offering exclusive high-end experiences, such as luxury desert tours or spa treatments, which could also benefit local businesses. Additionally, Infrastructure improvements are also essential, particularly for destinations like Essaouira, where the airport currently only handles seven international flights.

This limitation on air travel accessibility could be addressed by upgrading the airport to accommodate more international flights, providing tourists with additional entry points to the destination. Improving air travel infrastructure would not only reduce congestion at Marrakech's airport but also offer greater flexibility for tourists visiting Essaouira. Enhanced access to the region could significantly contribute to its growth as a popular tourism hub.

Lastly, the use of AI-driven digital platforms presents an opportunity to improve visitor engagement and enhance the overall tourism experience. Interactive mobile apps, for instance, could provide real-time information on local attractions, historical sites, and events, making it easier for tourists to navigate the destination and plan their visits. Since many tourists already rely on digital platforms like social media to discover destinations, integrating these technologies into the tourism experience could help align with tourist behavior. The Moroccan government and tourism stakeholders should leverage platforms like Instagram and TikTok to engage with potential visitors, offering them personalized recommendations and promotions that could boost destination visibility and appeal.

## CONCLUSION

This study proves the importance of Customer Experience as a tool for increasing the competitiveness of Morocco's tourism in popular cities Essaouira and Marrakech. The findings show that the quality of accommodation has the greatest effect, and the more positive the perception of this factor, the more satisfied the person will be, as well as the more likely they will be to recommend and/or revisit the destination. Moroccan tourism sector competitiveness is also reinforced through Service Interaction and Loyalty. Tourist Satisfaction was a significant mediator of positive Customer Experience effect on destination competitiveness. When tourists are satisfied, they are more likely to return, recommend and engage with the tourist destination for longer. Attraction Accessibility received a favorable rating though the variation in responses indicate that the area has a way to go in terms of accessibility and infrastructure. The results of the study provide stakeholders and policy makers in Morocco with insight into improving tourism packages and infrastructure as well as an avenue through AI-powered platforms designed to engage tourists. By improving areas of concern, including accessibility and infrastructure, and improving Tourist Satisfaction, Morocco can reinforce its position as a tourism mainstay further.

Future research could focus on the impact of AI-driven personalization on customer experience in tourism. Exploring how AI and machine learning can tailor recommendations for accommodations, activities, and attractions based on individual preferences could help destinations better meet customer expectations, enhancing satisfaction and competitiveness.

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