

Understanding Tourist Motivation in Emerging Campus Tourism: A Case Study of Universiti Malaysia Sabah

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i9/26523>

Published Date: 28 September 2025

Abstract

Universities are increasingly recognised not only as centres of learning but also as cultural, architectural, and environmental icons that inspire and shape societal identity, reflecting their evolving role as influential landmarks within the community. This study investigates the motivations and satisfaction levels of visitors to Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) as a tourist attraction. Using an exploratory cross-sectional design, data were collected from 150 respondents via an online survey. Findings reveal that visitors are primarily drawn to UMS by its scenic beauty and the novelty of exploring a new location. These insights suggest that genuine interest in the campus can foster a sense of discovery, positioning university tourism as a promising niche market. As such, universities are emerging as hybrid spaces that offer both academic and tourism experiences. The study emphasises the significance of urban development, effective information dissemination, and tourist motivation in reshaping the role of universities within cultural and educational tourism. While providing a descriptive overview of these interactions, further empirical research is necessary to validate and extend the findings across various institutions and regions. This research contributes to understanding the evolving status of universities as dynamic spaces for both learning and leisure.

Keywords: Campus Tourism, Tourist Destination, Push Motivation, Pull Motivation, Satisfaction

Introduction

The swift changes brought about by globalisation have intensified the movement from rural areas to urban and metropolitan regions (Liu & Peng, 2023; Salleh et al., 2013). This shift has led to substantial urban development, influencing various aspects of society, including the education sector. Institutions of higher learning are commonly situated in cities or their outskirts, where infrastructure and accessibility are more advanced (Brennan & Cochrane, 2019; Evers, 2019). These urban features play a significant role in shaping students' decisions

when selecting universities. Among the key considerations are the attractiveness of the location and the academic quality provided (Rahman et al., 2017). Urban environments often offer more supportive conditions for learning, with well-established facilities and infrastructure that cater to diverse student needs (Tomasi et al., 2020). These factors collectively enhance the overall educational experience, making urban areas a preferred setting for higher education institutions.

Beyond their primary function as centres of education, universities increasingly contribute to regional tourism development. The concept of visiting university campuses has given rise to campus tourism, a growing niche within the broader tourism industry. This trend began in the early 1980s when universities were encouraged to diversify their income sources (Connell, 1996, 2000). The potential of campus tourism has gained notable recognition, especially in China, where universities have become popular destinations for domestic travellers (Cheng et al., 2020; Zhou, 2017). As interest in this niche expands, researchers have examined its cultural relevance, noting how visitors engage with historical and cultural elements while also enhancing language proficiency (Almeida & Silveira, 2022; Connell, 1996; Mangi et al., 2019). Studies have also explored related themes such as urban planning, landscape design (Cheng et al., 2020; Hayllar & Griffin, 2009), campus management (Tong et al., 2020), and the social responsibilities of universities (Connell, 2000; Gumprecht, 2007). Despite extensive literature on campus tourism, limited research exists on the characteristics and motivations of university visitors. Gaining insight into these motivational factors can help researchers assess demand patterns and guide university administrators in incorporating push and pull factors into their promotional strategies (Almeida & Silveira, 2022).

Apart from serving as educational institutions, universities play an essential role in promoting regional tourism. The idea of visiting local universities has led to the emergence of campus tourism, a growing niche in the tourism sector. Campus-based tourism began developing in the early 1980s when universities were encouraged to diversify their revenue-generating activities (Connell, 1996, 2000).

The potential of campus tourism has been widely recognised, particularly in China, where universities have become popular tourist attractions among domestic visitors (Cheng et al., 2020; Zhou, 2017). Acknowledging its importance as a growing niche segment, researchers have increasingly explored its impact. Previous studies have examined the cultural significance of campus-based tourism, highlighting how tourists engage with historical and cultural experiences while also improving language skills (Almeida & Silveira, 2022; Connell, 1996; Mangi et al., 2019).

Research on campus tourism has also extended to areas such as urban design and landscape architecture (Cheng et al., 2020; Hayllar & Griffin, 2009), campus planning and management (Tong, et al., 2020), and universities' role in social responsibility (Connell, 2000; Gumprecht, 2007). Despite extensive academic discussions on campus tourism, research on university visitors' characteristics and motivations remains limited. Understanding tourists' motivational factors would help researchers analyse demand characteristics and encourage university decision-makers to incorporate push and pull factors into their marketing strategies (Almeida & Silveira, 2022).

The Universiti Malaysia Sabah Kota Kinabalu Campus (UMSKK) was selected as the study site due to its proximity to the city centre and its role as a frequent stopover for tourists. This paper aims to identify the push and pull factors influencing tourists' decisions to visit UMSKK. The study findings are based on data collected shortly after the COVID-19 outbreak and are expected to serve as a valuable reference for campus tourism research.

Literature Review

Tourism has been a subject of academic inquiry for over seven decades, largely due to its interdisciplinary nature (Kozak, 2020). As its relevance continues to grow, research in this field has expanded in both scope and depth, offering scholars opportunities to align their studies with specific themes and publish in dedicated journals (Kozak, 2020; Ma & Law, 2009). Despite this progress, tourism remains a dynamic area that warrants further exploration. Bibliometric analysis is frequently used to measure patterns and trends in tourism literature, reinforcing the need for ongoing investigation (Guzeller & Nuri, 2019; Ma & Law, 2009). Although tourism intersects with many social, economic, and environmental domains, certain aspects—such as tourism within university campuses—are still underexplored (Almeida & Silveira, 2022; Connell, 1996, 2000).

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Campus tourism refers to visits where individuals experience an academic environment while engaging with its cultural and historical elements (Connell, 2000). McManus et al. (2021) describe it as occasional or one-time visits to educational institutions for aesthetic or educational purposes, excluding accommodation, employment, or business. While a formal definition is lacking, its historical roots trace back to the seventeenth-century “Grand Tour,” where European elites traveled to enhance learning and social skills (Brodsky-Porges, 1981; Connell, 1996; Sorabella, 2003; Stone & Petrick, 2013). Today, this concept has evolved into a global trend, especially among youth seeking personal development through international education (Sheng, 2020).

Campus tourism has long been established in Western countries, where prestigious universities such as Oxford, Stanford, Harvard, and Cambridge serve as major educational landmarks that attract millions of visitors annually. These institutions are renowned not only for academic excellence but also for their historical architecture, which contributes to the unique identity of their surrounding cities. For example, Oxford’s rich heritage and cultural significance make it a popular destination for both local and international tourists (Glasson, 1994; Visiting Oxford, n.d.).

In China, campus tourism has also gained popularity, with universities emerging as key attractions for domestic travellers (Mangi et al., 2019). The concept began in 1996 when the Haidian District Tourism Bureau in Beijing launched the 'Pursuit of Knowledge' tour program, allowing school students to visit Tsinghua University and experience campus life. This initiative enabled the public to engage with the university environment firsthand. Universities in China have since played a pivotal role in boosting urban tourism and contributing to the socioeconomic development of nearby areas (Cheng et al., 2020; Zhi-Gui, 2011).

Enrolling in a prestigious university for tertiary education has become increasingly common. Students often base their selection on two key factors: the appeal of the location and the institution's academic reputation (Rahman et al., 2017). This aligns with McManus et al. (2021), who found that universities with strong global rankings, historical architecture, and proximity to urban centres tend to attract more interest. Thus, the geographical setting of a university plays a crucial role in fostering a positive learning atmosphere.

Effective campus development requires strategic planning. Ideally, the location should be easily accessible via private or public transport and situated in an area where surrounding infrastructure complements the university's growth (Castaldi, 1977). Moreover, campuses should promote openness and interaction with the broader urban environment, rather than being isolated or restricted spaces (Christiaanse, 2017). When these elements are considered, the campus begins to resemble a small city, featuring natural landscapes, a human-centred atmosphere, and comprehensive facilities that support campus life (Gumprecht, 2007). These tangible and intangible attributes contribute to a rich visual and sensory experience, enhancing the campus's appeal to visitors (Cheng et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2013).

Attractive destinations often feature a central point of interest, or "locus," which, according to Norberg-Schulz (1979, 2019), comprises elements such as form, texture, colour, and cultural significance that define the character of a place. In the context of university campuses, this locus includes the academic atmosphere, architectural style, natural surroundings, and cultural influences, all of which contribute to the campus's distinct identity and appeal as a tourist site. Mangi et al. (2019) noted that the variety of attractions found on campuses can spark interest among the wider community, with many feeling honoured to visit prestigious institutions, engage with academic environments, and inspire educational aspirations in their children. However, the specific motivations and traits that draw visitors to university campuses remain underexplored (Cheng et al., 2020; Connell, 1996, 2000).

Motivation, a key psychological concept, refers to the drive that arises when there is a gap between one's needs and desires. This principle also applies to consumer behaviour, where tension prompts action to resolve it (Kotler et al., 2014). Foundational studies by Crompton (1979) and Dann (1977) introduced the push and pull framework to explain travel decisions. Push factors are internal drivers, while pull factors are external attractions (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996). Information sharing also influences travel decisions (Lee et al., 2024), particularly in campus tourism, where visitors are drawn by the unique atmosphere or nostalgic connections to university life (Li et al., 2022; Woodward & Carnegie, 2020). Visiting elite institutions can foster a sense of belonging to the academic community (Mangi et al., 2019; McManus et al., 2021). These motivations make universities appealing destinations for those seeking new experiences and social connections. When campus attractions meet visitor expectations, they

contribute to positive experiences and influence future travel behaviour (Lee, 2009). Therefore, fulfilling internal desires and fostering favourable impressions of the destination can enhance visitor satisfaction and increase the likelihood of return visits (Khuong & Na, 2014).

Methodology

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) is recognised as one of Malaysia's reputable higher education institutions. Established on November 24, 1994, it holds the distinction of being the first university in East Malaysia and occupies a 999-acre site along the Sepanggar Gulf (Brief History, 2015). During its initial phase, UMS launched three academic schools: the School of Science and Technology, the School of Business and Technology, and the School of Social Sciences. Subsequently, the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language was introduced to support liberal education and research. The university welcomed its first cohort in mid-1995, comprising 205 students, supported by 24 academic staff, 13 administrative personnel, and 26 support staff (Brief History, 2015).

The main campus, Universiti Malaysia Sabah Kota Kinabalu Campus (UMSKK), is located approximately 12 kilometres from the city centre of Kota Kinabalu. UMS has since expanded to include two branch campuses, each with a specialised academic focus: the Sandakan campus emphasises agricultural studies, while the Labuan campus specialises in international business. As of the latest data, student enrolment has reached 17,990, including 351 international students, supported by 1,067 academic staff and 1,660 administrative personnel (Centre of Data and Information Management, 2022). These figures reflect the university's significant and ongoing growth.

At UMSKK, the EcoCampus Management Centre was established in February 2013 to promote tourism activities aligned with five core sustainability principles: (a) sustainable development, (b) ecological preservation, (c) environmental harmony, (d) stewardship of natural resources, and (e) resource conservation. These pillars are integrated into campus operations, positioning UMS as a living laboratory for societal engagement (Introduction to EcoCampus Management Centre, 2015).

To support this initiative, the campus offers educational tours priced at RM10 per visitor. These tours are categorised according to the five sustainability pillars and include gallery and museum visits, nature appreciation tours, sunset excursions, and environmental education camps. These activities not only reflect the university's commitment to sustainability but also serve as attractions that function as both push and pull factors for campus visitors. Figure 1 presents the overall layout of UMSKK and highlights the key attractions that contribute to its appeal as a campus tourism destination.

This study employed an exploratory cross-sectional design for two main reasons. First, data collection occurred only once during a specific timeframe, shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the survey was conducted online using tools available on the Google platform, aligning with the study's core objective. The survey link was distributed via various social media channels (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp), and participants were invited to respond voluntarily. Only individuals who had previously visited the campus were eligible to participate. A non-probability sampling technique was used, which, although limiting the

generalisability of the findings, is suitable for exploratory research focused on understanding specific phenomena—in this case, the motivations behind campus tourism.

The primary data collection tool was a closed-ended questionnaire, adapted and modified from Khuong and Na (2014). To ensure content validity, a panel of tourism scholars reviewed the questionnaire items following the approach by Mangi et al. (2019). The instrument was bilingual, available in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, and comprised three sections: socio-demographic details, push-pull motivational factors, and satisfaction levels. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “1 – Strongly Disagree” to “5 – Strongly Agree” for motivational items, and “1 – Highly Dissatisfied” to “5 – Highly Satisfied” for satisfaction-related items.

The structured Likert scale enabled the quantification of latent psychological constructs such as motivation, perception, and attitude, allowing for robust statistical analysis (Koo & Yang, 2025). High internal consistency across scale items contributed to the reliability of the instrument, ensuring stable measurement of motivational dimensions. Furthermore, aggregating individual item scores into composite means supported the use of advanced statistical techniques, even in cases where treating ordinal data as interval-level remains debated (Carifio et al., 2008; Kalkbrenner, 2021; García-Pérez, 2024).

A pilot study involving 30 participants was conducted to ensure clarity and comprehension of the survey items. Reliability testing was performed to assess the internal consistency of the constructs, with Cronbach’s alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). Specifically, the pull factor recorded an alpha of 0.858, the push factor 0.919, and satisfaction 0.966, confirming the reliability of the instrument. Following necessary adjustments, the full online survey was administered between November and December 2020, yielding responses from 150 participants. Although the response rate was modest, this may be attributed to time constraints and limitations associated with the early stages of the pandemic, which affected domestic tourism.

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise key patterns and characteristics related to push and pull factors in campus tourism. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, which captures data at a single point in time, descriptive analysis was essential for identifying trends and distributions within the dataset. This foundational approach provides a baseline understanding of campus tourism dynamics and supports the development of more advanced research methodologies in future studies.

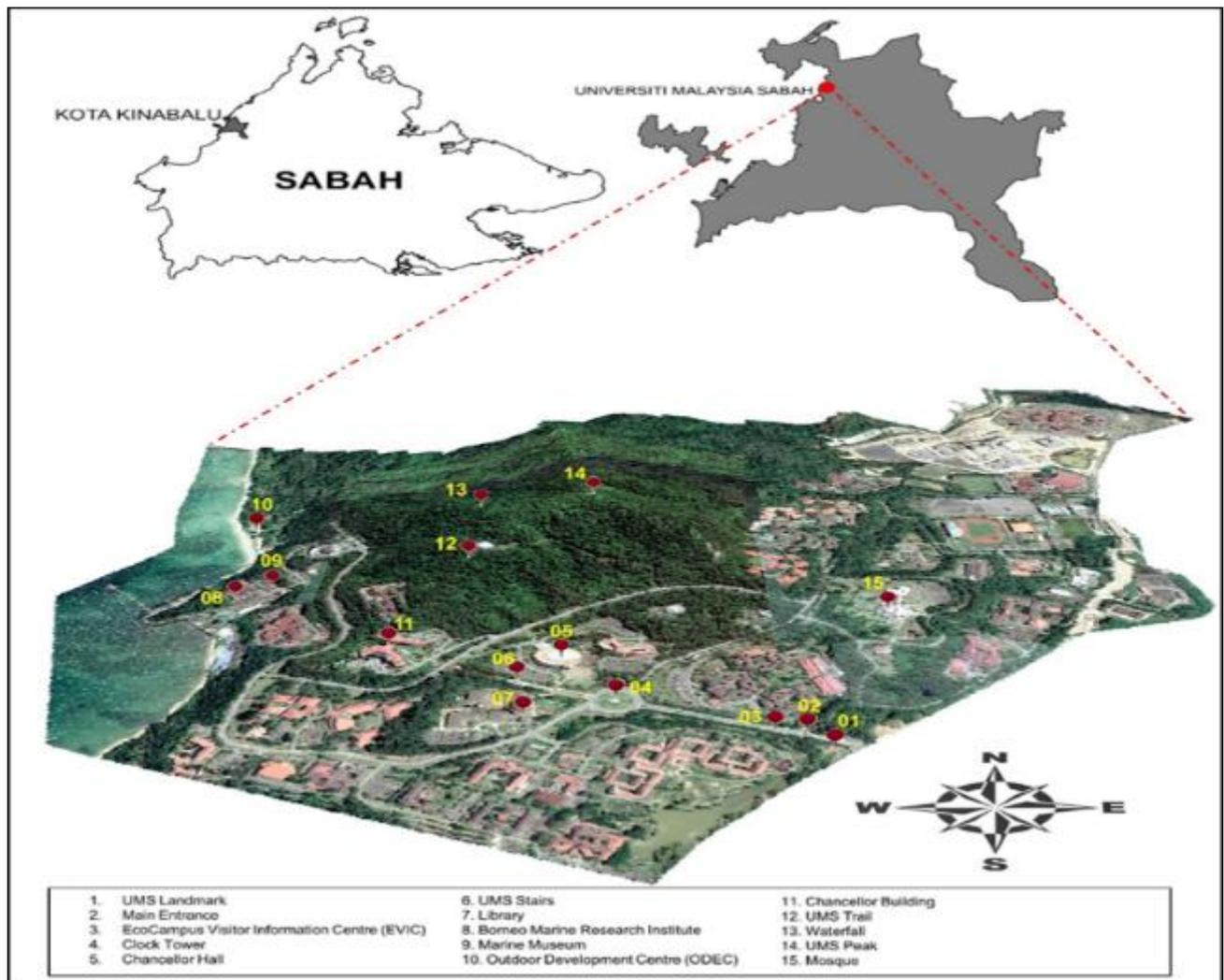


Figure 1. Map locating the study area

Source: Google Maps, 2020

Table 1

Respondent's profile

Profile	Description	Frequency (n=150)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	47	31.3
	Female	103	68.7
Age	21-30	87	58.0
	31-40	17	11.3
	41-50	31	20.7
	51 and above	15	10.0
Level of education	Primary	2	1.3
	Secondary	23	15.3
	Tertiary	125	83.3
State of origin	Peninsular	59	39.3
	Sabah	82	54.7
	Sarawak	8	5.3
	Labuan	1	0.7

Table 2

Travel Information

Variables	Description	Frequency (n=155)	Percentage (%)
How did you discover UMS?	Word of mouth	86	55.3
	Social media	53	35.3
	Events	11	7.3
To UMS, with whom did you travel?	Friends	80	53.3
	Families	53	35.3
	Solo	17	11.3
How did you travel to UMS?	Car	124	83.3
	Bus	18	12.0
	Motorcycle	8	5.3

Table 3

Mean score of satisfaction.

Satisfaction Item	Mean Value
Overall, I am satisfied with my decision to visit UMS	3.83
My decision to visit UMS was correct and coincided with the time and effort put in	3.71
I am satisfied with the natural scenery and environment at UMS	3.85
I am satisfied with UMS's culture, history, and art	3.65
The satisfaction of my visit to UMS was as expected	3.73
I am satisfied with the reasonable price at UMS	3.49
I am satisfied with the safety at UMS	3.57
Mean score	3.69

Note: 1=Strongly dissatisfied, 2=Dissatisfied, 3=Low Dissatisfied, 4=Satisfied, 5=Strongly Satisfied

Table 4

Mean value of pull-push factors

Factor	Mean Value
Pull	3.62
Because of the beautiful scenery	3.87
Because I want to enjoy beachside activities	3.67
Because of the good weather	3.62
Because there are numerous activities that can be done	3.61
Because the destination is safe and easy to access	3.61
Because the facilities provided are pleasant	3.35
Push	3.42
I want to go where I have never been	3.74
I want to find new experiences	3.63
I want to meet with new people	3.53
I want to get away from the hustle and bustle of work	3.15
I want to get away from my daily routine.	3.07

Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Low Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

The Discussion

This study identified key characteristics and motivational factors among visitors to UMSKK. The majority of local visitors were female, aged between 21 and 30, originating from Sabah, and had completed tertiary education. Most discovered UMSKK through word-of-mouth and travelled by car, often accompanied by friends. Given the growing importance of campus tourism, it is essential to better understand the unique traits and needs of this visitor segment (Almeida & Silveira, 2022; Gumprecht, 2007; McManus et al., 2021; Tomasi et al., 2020). This emerging trend has reshaped public perceptions of universities—not only as centres of knowledge but also as contributors to regional tourism. As highlighted by Almeida and Silveira (2022), incorporating motivational insights into demand analysis can support university administrators in crafting effective marketing strategies. Additionally, the dissemination of travel-related information plays a significant role in influencing tourist motivation (Lee et al., 2024).

Natural features surrounding UMSKK serve as strong pull factors, attracting visitors with scenic landscapes, beachside activities, and favourable weather. These elements create a rich visual landscape and sensory experience, which leaves lasting impressions (Cheng et al., 2020). Enhancing on-site activities could further enrich the post-visit experience (McManus et al., 2021). Moreover, safety and accessibility are vital considerations in campus design, as universities increasingly resemble small cities that integrate humanistic, tangible, and intangible elements (Gumprecht, 2007; Lu et al., 2013).

In addition to pull factors, push factors also play a crucial role in campus tourism and should be emphasised through the co-creation of on-site activities that support personal development. Visitors are motivated to explore UMSKK in search of new experiences, opportunities to visit unfamiliar places, and meaningful social interactions. Mangi et al. (2019) found that many visitors are curious about campus life, eager to engage with academic communities, and drawn to the natural beauty of the environment. The scholarly atmosphere itself serves as a major attraction. As centres of learning, universities host a range of academic programmes, outreach initiatives, training sessions, conferences, and scholarly events that promote knowledge exchange and individual growth (Connell, 1996; Tomasi et al., 2020).

Although most universities are located in urban or suburban areas, the desire to escape daily routines may not be the primary motivator. Nonetheless, visitors to UMSKK express satisfaction with their experience and appreciation for the campus environment. To support the growth of campus tourism, adequate infrastructure and well-organised tour packages are essential (Mangi et al., 2019). As interest in campus tourism increases, visitors' strong intrinsic motivations and positive perceptions of the destination contribute to overall satisfaction and the likelihood of return visits (Khuong & Na, 2014). While UMSKK's natural and cultural features meet visitor expectations, improvements in safety and pricing should be prioritised within the university's policy and administrative planning.

Conclusion

Campus tourism has gained attention in the international market, while its development in the domestic market is still emerging. Universities are gradually being acknowledged as emerging hubs for regional tourism through campus-based attractions. Although this form of tourism presents opportunities for revenue generation and financial support for universities,

several unresolved issues remain—particularly in balancing the interests of academic staff, university administrators, and external communities, including tourists. A viable solution may lie in establishing a framework tailored to the institution’s capacity, integrating campus tourism into its financial strategy. Aligning the university’s multifaceted role with its social responsibility could foster greater openness, allowing the public to engage with and appreciate campus life.

This exploratory research aimed to identify common socio-demographic traits and motivational factors—both push and pull—among visitors to UMSKK. Conducted shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings offer valuable insights for future campus tourism studies. Despite a modest response rate, the study successfully highlighted visitor profiles and their reasons for choosing UMSKK. Notably, curiosity about university life and the campus’s natural beauty were key motivators. These elements enhanced visitor satisfaction and affirmed their decision to participate in campus tourism. For future research, a more robust framework with a larger sample size and advanced analytical methods is recommended to better understand visitor behaviour in the context of campus tourism.

The conclusion of this study underscores its significance to existing knowledge by highlighting the emerging nature of campus tourism in Malaysia, particularly at UMSKK, and situating it within the broader international discourse where such tourism is already gaining momentum. By identifying socio-demographic traits and motivational factors—especially in a post-pandemic context—the research adds depth to the understanding of visitor behaviour, which has been underexplored in Southeast Asian settings. This contributes to the literature by offering empirical evidence from a unique regional case, enriching global perspectives with localised insights. Furthermore, the study plays a critical role in context by addressing practical challenges faced by universities, such as balancing internal stakeholder interests with external tourism demands. It proposes a strategic framework that integrates campus tourism into institutional financial planning while aligning with the university’s social responsibility. This dual focus—academic and operational—positions the research as both theoretically relevant and practically applicable, offering a foundation for future studies and policy development in campus tourism.

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