Article

World Heritage Site Tourism and Destination Loyalty along the Silk Road: A Study of U.S. Travelers in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the determinants of destination loyalty toward World Heritage Sites (WHSs) along Silk Road tourism in Uzbekistan. It could enable the profiling of inbound tourists visiting WHSs and identification of the important determinants of destination loyalty. The results of this study could present valuable empirical evidence of Silk Road tourism among inbound travelers in Uzbekistan. An online survey was conducted to collect data from U.S. residents who experienced Silk Road tourism in Uzbekistan. A total of 419 questionnaires were used for this study. The present study explored the determinants of destination loyalty among inbound travelers who had visited WHSs along Silk Road destinations in Uzbekistan. Regarding the effect of length of stay on destination loyalty, travelers who visit for 7–13 days are inclined to show higher destination loyalty than the other groups. Free independent travelers to cultural and heritage sites showed a higher level of destination loyalty than other traveler types. The results indicated that travelers who reported visiting the Historic Centre of Bukhara in the Province of Bukhara and Western Tien-Shan in the Province of Tashkent showed higher destination loyalty. The proposed model consists of travel characteristics, WHS destinations, and demographic characteristics. This study provides several important theoretical and managerial implications. Moreover, this study can contribute to knowledge regarding WHSs and increase sustainable destination management to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Keywords: travel characteristics; destination loyalty; World Heritage Sites; Silk Road tourism; tourist behavior; past experience; length of travel; travel type

1. Introduction

The number of travelers to Uzbekistan is continuously growing; it reached approximately 6.75 million in 2019 and, after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, decreased to 1.88 million [1]. The government of Uzbekistan aims to increase the accessibility of cultural and heritage sites and promote popular cultural and heritage tourism destinations in Uzbekistan [2]. The ancient cities along the Great Silk Road in Uzbekistan are its main travel attractions and have been declared World Heritage Sites (WHSs) by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [2–4].

WHSs are recognized cultural and heritage sites, and there is increasing demand from tourists who wish to visit them [5]. Many studies demonstrate that WHSs possess characteristics that are closely associated with tourists' motivation to visit. The increasing travel demand that occurs because of WHSs is known as the "tourism enhancing effect" or the "WHS effect" [6–9]. Previous research indicates that UNESCO WHSs have brand power and present positive images of their destinations [6,7,9–11]. It was found that tourists who had visited WHSs showed high and positive destination perceptions [12]. Furthermore, a previous study demonstrated the effects of travel characteristics on loyalty, including factors such as length of stay, travel-related factors, and socio-economic characteristics [13–15].

Tourists' loyalty toward WHSs is associated with affective values and past-experience, and leads to positive outcomes such as spreading positive recommendations, sharing important historical and educational information, and increasing appreciation toward WHSs [16]. Since individual preference is a critical factor that influences travel characteristics and destination loyalty [8], profiling tourists and understanding their preferences are important for understanding their demands and retaining destination loyalty [14].

Previous studies on cultural and heritage tourism and WHSs explored various aspects of destination image [17–24] and brand equity [25]. Many scholars demonstrated the antecedents and outcomes of authenticity at cultural and heritage sites [26–29], self-congruity [30], and destination attachment [31]. Furthermore, previous research highlighted the understanding of motivation [7,32], experience [23], traditional food [19], and behavioral intentions (e.g., loyalty, engagement) [33]. Previous research indicated that past experience and travel characteristics help us identify the segment profiles and understand their effects on destination loyalty [34,35]. Scholars call for research on cultural and heritage tourism in different destinations and various cultural contexts [36–38].

However, research is rarely conducted on the influence of travel characteristics on destination loyalty at WHSs along Silk Road destinations in Uzbekistan. In this regard, this study aims to examine the determinants of destination loyalty toward WHSs along Silk Road tourism in Uzbekistan. This study could enable the profiling of inbound tourists visiting WHSs and identification of the important determinants of destination loyalty. The results of this study could present valuable empirical evidence of Silk Road tourism among inbound travelers in Uzbekistan. Moreover, this study could contribute to knowledge regarding WHSs and increase sustainable destination management to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Silk Road Tourism

Previous research has been conducted on Silk Road tourism in different countries, including those in Europe, East Asia, and Central Asia [39–47]. This research sheds light on the importance of the ancient Silk Road, conservation, and sustainability, and cooperation to establish new Silk Road initiatives. Furthermore, several studies have pointed out the importance of Silk Road tourism. First, with the increase in the number of tourists along the Silk Road, countries can identify relevant tourism resources and improve attributes for domestic and international tourists [39,48].

Second, the travel destinations along the Silk Road are popular due to their rich natural, cultural, and heritage sites such as buildings traditional architecture, religious locations, museums, and traditional markets. Initiating monitoring programs and developing standardized evaluations should be discussed with relevant stakeholders at individual, regional, and country levels [12,41,49]. Third, countries have opportunities to build partnerships, enhance economic cooperation, and boost economic impacts. Silk Road tourism has been promoted by several initiatives and through a project for developing a new Silk Road [42,50–53].

Previous research on Silk Road tourism [54] emphasized the potential of cultural and heritage sites for increasing the prosperity in relatively rural areas and improving the infrastructure and quality of life in communities. Furthermore, Silk Road tourism can not only promote a positive destination image and create a destination brand, but can also encourage the sustainable management of cultural and heritage sites [43]. Figures 1–3 present Silk Road sites and WHS sites in Uzbekistan.
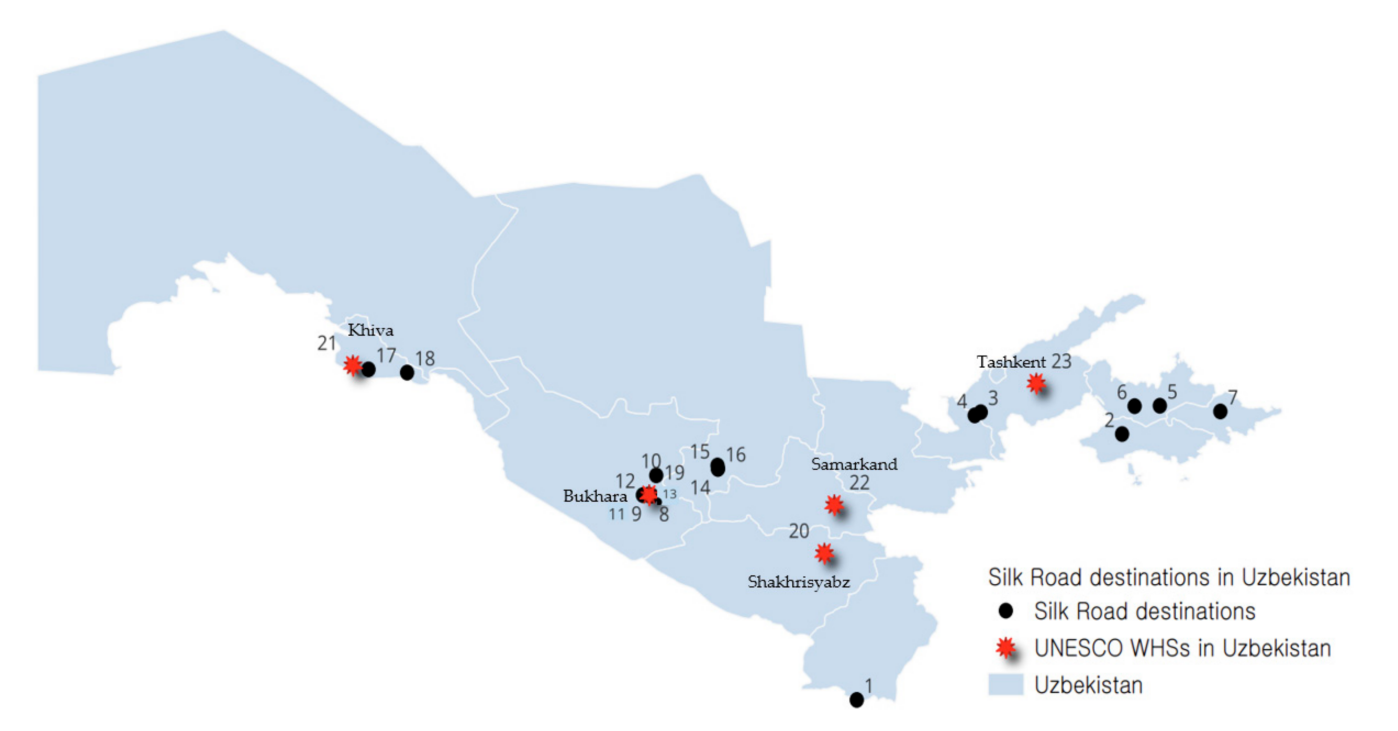
Note: Silk Road destinations in Uzbekistan (UNESCO)			
1–18: Silk Road destinations			
1. Ancient Termiz	6. Pap	11. Chashma-Ayub Mausoleum	16. Qosim Sheikh
2. Historic Center of Qoqon	7. Andijon	12. Chor-Bakr	17. Sheikh Mukhtor-Vali
3. Kanka	8. Poykent	13. Bahoutdin Complex	18. Khazarasp
4. Shahruhiya	9. Varakhsha	14. Raboti Malik	
5. Ahsiket	10. Vobkent Minaret	15. Mir-Sayid Bakhrom Mausoleum	
19–23: UNESCO WHSs			
19. Historic centre of Bukhara in Province of Bukhara		20. Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz	
21. Itchan Kala (Khiva) in Province of Khorezm		22. Samarkand Crossroads of cultures in Province of Samarkand	
23. Western Tien-Shan in Province of Tashkent			

Figure 1. Silk Road destinations in Uzbekistan (Map: Author) [3].

Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz

Figure 2. *Cont.*

Itchan Kala (Khiva) in Province of Khorezm

Historic centre of Bukhara in Province of Bukhara

Western Tien-Shan in Province of Tashkent

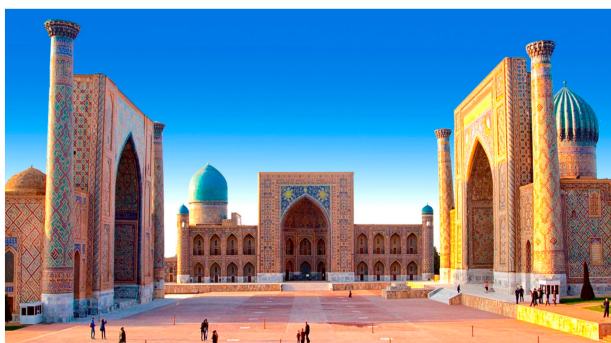**Figure 2.** WHSs in Shakhrisyabz, Khiva, Bukhara, and Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Figure 3. *Cont.*

Samarkand Crossroads of cultures in Province of Samarkand

Figure 3. WHSs in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

2.2. WHSs along the Silk Road in Uzbekistan

The significance of the Silk Road has increased due to its potential economic, sociocultural, political, and environmental impacts across the West and the East [47]. Moreover, the ancient Silk Road sites are located in ancient cities that have been declared WHSs in many countries [41,43,49]. WHSs ensure a globally standardized conservation system, and their UNESCO classification symbolizes their outstanding cultural and heritage assets [55,56].

The UNESCO WHS emblem has brand power, enabling sites to present positive destination images, and are positively associated with an increased number of tourists [6,7,10,11]. UNESCO [57] has declared five WHSs in Uzbekistan, namely, Itchan Kala in Khiva in 1990; the Historic Centre of Bukhara in 1993; the Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz in 2000; Samarkand, Crossroad of Cultures, in 2001; and Western Tien-Shan in 2016 [57].

Previous research explored the most attractive travel resources and several methods of promoting the conservation and development of WHSs in Uzbekistan [40,58–60]. Previous studies on Silk Road tourism and WHS tourism in Uzbekistan are summarized in Table 1. Specifically, Huerta [40] examined several silk museums in European, Central Asian, and East Asian countries. Their study described the history and distinguished features of local museums that displayed hand-crafted items, fabrics, fabric patterns, and designs, and provided education on the tangible and intangible heritage of sites recognized by UNESCO. Allaberganov and Preko [58] examined push and pull motivations among inbound travelers visiting Uzbekistan. Patterson and Tureav [60] discussed the potential markets for various types of tourism in Uzbekistan, such as niche tourism, cultural and heritage tourism, and gastronomy tourism.

Since innovative technologies are introduced, previous research explored the impact of technologies, digital devices, platforms, and VR/AR on travelers' experience and loyalty [61–65]. Advanced technologies and digital platforms provide e-learning tools and facilitating co-created values and social interactions [63]. Specifically, Hausmann and Schuhbaur [61] illustrated the perceptions of information and communication technologies (ICT) among travelers at WHSs and discussed the different levels of preferences of ICT at WHSs. Zhu and colleagues [65] demonstrated the positive relationship between virtual reality and travelers' intention to travel at WHSs. Miłosz and colleagues [66] illustrated the role of technology and 3D scanners to make 360-degree images of ancient museum artifacts and crafts.

Finally, Fayzullaev, Cassel, and Brandt [59] explored online destination images of Uzbekistan posted on destination marketing organization (DMO) websites and social media platforms. Their study found that the keywords used to promote the destination image of Uzbekistan included factors such as historical buildings, architecture style, and cultural and heritage attributes. Their results presented differences in the characteristics and keywords used to describe Uzbekistan before and after the Soviet period.

Table 1. Literature on Silk Road tourism and WHSs in Uzbekistan.

No.	Authors (Year)	Research Type and Data	Targeted WHS Destinations	Variables	Main Points
1.	Airey and Shackley (1997) [39]	Qualitative research using visitor information obtained from tourist information center and Uzbektourism	Samarkand and Bukhara (via Tashkent)	Tourism demand (visitor arrivals, seasonality, nationality, accommodation, etc.)	- Tourism development after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 - Tourism demand in main cities in Uzbekistan
2.	Allaberganov and Preko (2020) [58]	Qualitative research using information on international tourists visiting Uzbekistan	Uzbekistan	Push and pull motivations, demographic characteristics	- Identifying push and pull motivations - Different needs and preferences among international travelers visiting Uzbekistan
3.	Fayzullaev, Cassel, and Brandt (2021) [59]	Quantitative research using a total of 448 images from DMOs and 362 images from social media posts	Uzbekistan (Silk Road tourism)	Themes of destination images	- Three categories of destination images in pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet regime - Comparing destination images on two different platform types (DMO vs. SNS)
4.	Höftberger (2023) [49]	Qualitative research, policy implementations in Khiva	Khiva, Uzbekistan	The historical urban landscape	- Development of the old heritage city, Khiva - Conservation of historic sites - City regeneration
5.	Huerta (2021) [40]	Qualitative research	Silk Road destinations	Silk road museums	- Different silk museums along Silk Road destinations - Characteristics of silk museums
6.	Kilichov, Serrano, and Dolores (2021) [67]	Qualitative research	Bukhara, Uzbekistan	Tourism resources, historical buildings	- Attractive resources in Bukhara, Uzbekistan - Evaluation and development strategies for heritage site
7.	Patterson and Tureav (2020) [60]	Qualitative research	Uzbekistan	Types of tourism, tourism resources	- Different tourism types in Uzbekistan - Promotion of niche market and special interest tourism
8.	Raimkulov, Juraturgunov, and Ahn (2021) [12]	Quantitative research using information on U.S. travelers in Uzbekistan	Uzbekistan	Destination attractiveness, behavioral intention, memories	- Destination attractiveness of Silk Road tourism in Uzbekistan - The relationships between attractiveness, satisfaction, memories, and loyalty
9.	Safarov et al. (2022) [48]	Quantitative research using indicators of inbound tourism	Uzbekistan	Welfare, infrastructure, security level, environmental impact	- Evaluating the long- and short-term impacts on welfare, security, the environment, and infrastructure - Life expectancy, GPD per capita, and passenger transportation are critical factors that influence inbound tourism.
10.	Sergeyeva et al. (2022) [68]	Quantitative research	Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan		- Different characteristics of border areas in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - Travel attractions along border areas

2.3. Destination Loyalty

Loyalty is defined as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand set purchasing" [69], p. 392. Previous studies have explored important factors that

influence affective, cognitive, and conative loyalty behaviors among tourists [13,69,70]. Loyal behaviors that are not easily changed are essential for increasing profits, reducing managerial costs, and spreading positive recommendations to others [69,70]. Travelers' experiences affect their emotions and attitudes toward destinations, and shape their commitment to and involvement in those destinations [71]. The present study explores the determinants of destination loyalty toward WHSs in Uzbekistan.

2.4. Past Experience and WHSs in Uzbekistan

Past experience of and visit frequency to cultural and heritage sites are essential factors that influence differences in travel behaviors [26,72–75]. Past experience refers to whether tourists are visiting for the first time or visit repeatedly. The number of visits in this study refers to the number of WHS visits in Uzbekistan. Tourists tend to use information gained from their previous travel experiences [76]. Past experience can affect travelers' expectations before they travel and their decision making, which will be based on their prior knowledge [77,78]. The level of visit frequency helps researchers to identify different travel behaviors regarding destination choices, travel experience, and satisfaction [7,34,74]. Previous research indicated that the proportion of repeat visitors was greater than that of first-time visitors; thus, managing destination reputation and promoting a positive destination image for repeated, committed, and loyal visitors is important [26,33,79–81]. This study explores WHS visits and past experience among inbound travelers who visit WHSs in Uzbekistan. Therefore, the research question is as follows:

Q1. *Are there any differences in WHS tourist behaviors in Uzbekistan based on past experience and WHS visits?*

2.5. Previous Experience and Destination Loyalty

Past experience is an important factor considered by scholars when examining tourists' behavioral intentions [22,74,75]. When travelers show a higher number of visits to the same travel destination, they tend to have higher destination attachment and a favorable destination image, and are inclined to express positive feelings about their travel experiences to others [22]. Tourists who seek experiences at cultural and heritage sites are likely to want to increase their knowledge about traditions, customs, and rituals [82]. For example, previous research emphasized that it is critical to build strategies for retaining loyal, repeat visitors, as well as turning first-time travelers into repeat travelers [17,22]. Prados-Peña et al. [78] indicated that there are differences between tourists who have knowledge of destinations and those who do not. Their study revealed that more knowledgeable tourists showed higher levels of destination loyalty than tourists with lower levels of knowledge. Travelers enhance self-congruence as they repeatedly visit cultural and heritage sites and increase the total number of past-visit experiences [26,79]. Visit frequency at cultural heritage sites and WHSs is influenced by different travel patterns (e.g., membership status) [83] and higher positive recommendation [84]. Tourists who exhibit higher visit frequency show higher levels of destination loyalty [84]. However, there are few studies that explore differences based on past experience and visit frequency at WHSs in Uzbekistan. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. *Past experience is positively associated with destination loyalty.*

H2. *The frequency of WHS visits is positively associated with destination loyalty.*

2.6. Length of Travel

Length of travel is an important determinant of differences in behavioral intentions, travel expenditure, willingness to pay, and consequences of travel among tourists [73,85–87]. Moreover, it is useful for segmenting travel groups and identifying different travel behaviors

in the context of natural, cultural, and heritage sites [35,88,89]. Since the contexts of each cultural and heritage destination are different, researchers have examined different lengths of stay. Specifically, Masiero, Qiu, and Zoltan [90] examined travel behaviors among long-haul tourists, and the mean travel length was approximately 14 days. Moreover, in the study of Zare and Pearce [91], the length of travel ranged from one to two weeks. On the other hand, previous research reported travel lengths of one or two days at cultural and heritage sites [33,92]. Several studies have been conducted on the effect of length of travel on destination loyalty, and reveal that length of travel is positively or partially positively associated with behavioral intention [88] or partially and positively associated with behavioral intentions [27]. For instance, previous research demonstrated that length of travel was positively related to destination loyalty to religious tourism destinations [88]. The participants in this study were long-haul travelers, whose travel length was relatively longer than that of short-haul travelers. Therefore, this study examines the effect of travel length on destination loyalty to cultural and heritage sites in Uzbekistan. We propose the following hypothesis:

H3. *Length of travel is positively associated with destination loyalty.*

2.7. Travel Type (Independent Travel, Organized Travel, Air-Tel)

Travel type refers to different travel modes, such as free independent travel, organized travel, and air-tel [93]. Previous research examined heterogeneous travel patterns and their different effects based on travel type, and classified them into heterogeneous travel groups [26,94,95]. Travel type is a critical factor that helps us understand the dynamic complexes of travel patterns in terms of cultural, functional, and situational contexts [96–98]. Free independent travelers often have flexible travel schedules and freely choose their travel destinations [99]. On the other hand, group package travelers are often more comfortable with all-inclusive packages, and tour guides can help reduce language barriers and travelers' anxiety in uncertain environments [98]. Travel type is an important determinant of travel behaviors [15,35,73,93,94]. For example, Chen and Jang [94] investigated hotel guests' travel patterns and found that expectations among group travelers influenced complaints, the level of satisfaction, and loyalty. Therefore, this study tested the effect of travel type in WHS tourism on destination loyalty, with the following hypothesis:

H4. *Travel type is positively associated with destination loyalty.*

2.8. Demographic Characteristics as Control Variables

Demographic and socio-economic characteristics are important factors that can be classified into different groups [13,97,100]. Moreover, they are used as control variables for exploring the effects of socio-demographic characteristics on behavioral intentions [94]. Therefore, confounding effects are expected. Previous research has found that travel preferences and behavioral intentions are based on socio-demographic characteristics [94,97]. For example, Chen and Jiang [94] determined the effects of socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, income level, and education status) on behavioral intention. Recently, Talwar et al. [95] examined the effect of attitudes on intention for continuous use by controlling for age, gender, level of education, and number of family members. We posed the following research question:

Q2. *What are the determinants of the relationship between travel characteristics and travel loyalty among travelers who visit WHSs in Uzbekistan?*

2.9. Travel Destinations (WHS) in Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, there are substantial tangible and intangible heritage sites such as monuments, art, music, and dancing. Five UNESCO WHSs and their regions play important roles in hubs and are popular destinations among tourists because they are located in ancient historical cities that have developed since the establishment of the Great Silk Road.

Bukhara is the third most multicultural and touristic city and the fifth largest city of Uzbekistan. Bukhara is one of the most well-preserved ancient cities of the 10th–17th centuries. The Historic Centre of Bukhara includes Kalyan Minaret, Mir Arab madrassa, and Kalyan Mosque, and more than 70 religious buildings. Furthermore, more than 140 architectural monuments and 264 historical buildings have been preserved there [67].

The heritage site Ichan Kala is located in Khiva in the northwestern region of Uzbekistan. Khiva includes more than 50 monuments and old architectural buildings constructed between the 17th and 18th centuries. Höftberger [49] emphasized a balance of conservation and development in the historic city of Khiva, Uzbekistan. Khiva is one of the ancient cities created by the Astrakhans dynasty from the 10th century to the early 17th century. Khiva consists of two major parts: Dichan Kala and Itchan Kala. The inner city, Itchan kala, was declared a UNESCO World heritage Site in 1990, and Dishan Kala is used a buffer zone.

Samarkand, Crossroad of Cultures, is one of the main Silk Road destinations and was the capital of the Tamerlane Empire in the 14th–15th centuries. Samarkand consists of old towns and new towns. The new towns serve as a buffer zone to protect the core cultural and heritage sites, and include educational institutes and cultural and heritage centers. Representative heritage sites and events include the Bibi-Khanym Mosque, Registan Square, and the 'Sharq Taronalari' festival in Samarkand.

Shakhrisabz is near Samarkand and was the capital of Sogd. Amir Temur (Tamerlane) built the Ak-Saray palace in Shakhrisabz. The towns of Shakhrisabz district and Shakhrisabz include a total of 217 archaeological monuments, architectural monuments, and recreations and entertainment. Cultural and heritage sources such as Ak-Saray Palace, the Amir Temur monuments, old towns, and places of religious worship represent the main attractions and reasons for travel among tourists [101].

Tashkent is the capital city and includes old historical heritage and modern buildings. The Tien San natural heritage site in Tashkent is located near the border of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Tien San in Tashkent has been declared a natural heritage site and includes rich natural resources, as well as cultural heritage [68].

Five destinations in UNESCO's heritage list in Uzbekistan are ancient cities that contain important cultural and heritage sites such as mosques, minarets, madrasas, palaces, and archaeological monuments. These destinations are popular not only because of their cultural and heritage assets, but also due to their various activities, such as camel riding, hiking, and mountaineering. Moreover, the five destinations are considered religious pilgrimage destinations. The present study explores the relationships between five WHSs and destination loyalty among tourists. Therefore, we propose the following research question:

Q3. *What are the determinants of the relationship between WHS destinations and travel loyalty among travelers?*

3. Methods

3.1. Measures

The differences in traveler loyalty contribute to cultural and heritage tourism. The loyalty variability of WHS tourists is related to their special interests. In this study, it is expected that loyalty is related to travel-related characteristics and WHS sites, as well as demographic characteristics. The level of loyalty is assumed to differ between variables because of the differences in tourists' characteristics. This study was limited to travel-related characteristics and WHS visits in Uzbekistan. Information about travel characteristics, WHS visits, and demographics was analyzed to determine tourist loyalty.

Travel-related characteristics and WHS visits were hypothesized to affect travelers' behavioral intentions. Our measurements included five demographic characteristics that were categorically coded, and gender was dummy coded. The travel-related characteristics included three variables, namely, length of travel (i.e., 1–6 days, 7–13 days, 14–19 days, and 20 days or more), past experience (i.e., first visit vs. repeat visit), and travel type (i.e., free

independent travel, group package tour, and Air-tel). Travel length and travel type were categorically coded, and past experience was dummy coded.

WHS experience included two variables: WHS visits and WHS destinations in Uzbekistan. These variables were dummy coded. Regarding WHS visits, travelers were classified into two groups (those who had visited one or two WHS destinations during their Silk Road travels in Uzbekistan, and those who had visited three or more). In terms of specific WHS destinations in Uzbekistan, five WHS destinations were dummy coded to assess whether the respondents had traveled to WHS destinations in Uzbekistan. The five WHS destinations were: the Historic Centre of Bukhara in the Province of Bukhara; the Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz; Itchan Kala (Khiva) in the Province of Khorezm; Samarkand, Crossroad of Cultures, in the Province of Samarkand; and Western Tien-Shan in the Province of Tashkent.

This study attempted to reduce common method bias (CMB) [102]. The survey items were developed based on previous research, and the research team confirmed the content and confirmed the criterion validity. The draft of the measurements was revised based on comments obtained from a pilot test. Moreover, outliers and the distribution were checked, and the VIFs were less than 4.0 [103].

Regarding the analysis, this study performed several analyses, namely, descriptive analysis, multiple-response analysis, and ordinal logistic regression, to address the hypotheses. An ordered logistic regression model was used to test the hypotheses, and analysis was performed using STATA 17.0. Information regarding the coded variables is presented in Table 2. The categorical variables were age, education, and household income. The binary variables were gender and marital status. Travel characteristics, such as travel length and travel type, were coded as categorical variables. First visit, world heritage visit, and World Heritage Site destination visit in Uzbekistan were binary coded.

Table 2. Measures.

Variable	Variable	Operationalization
Age	Categorical	(1) 18–29 (2) 30–39 (3) 40–49 (4) 50 and over
Gender	Dummy	(1) Male, (0) Female
Marital status	Dummy	(1) Married, (0) Other
Education level	Categorical	(1) High school degree or lower (2) Associate's degree (3) Bachelor's degree (4) Graduate degree or higher
Annual household income	Categorical	(1) Less than USD 40,000 (2) USD 40,000–80,000 (3) USD 80,000–120,000 (4) More than USD 120,000
Travel length	Categorical	(1) 1–6 days (2) 7–13 days (3) 14–19 days (4) 20 days and more
First visit	Dummy	(1) First visit (0) Repeat visit
Travel type	Categorical	(1) Free independent travel (FIT) (2) Group package tour (3) Air-tel (air ticket + hotel)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Variable	Variable	Operationalization
WHS visit	Dummy	(0) Low (1–2 WHS visits) (1) High (3–5 WHS visits)
WHS	Dummy	(1) Historic Centre of Bukhara in Province of Bukhara (0) No visit
destination	Dummy	(1) Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz (0) No visit
	Dummy	(1) Itchan Kala (Khiva) in Province of Khorezm (0) No visit
	Dummy	(1) Samarkand Crossroad of Cultures in Province of Samarkand (0) No visit
	Dummy	(1) Western Tien-Shan in Province of Tashkent (0) No visit

3.2. Data Collection

An online survey was created via SurveyMonkey, and invitations were distributed to potential participants via a SurveyMonkey panel pool in the United States. Nonprobability sampling was used, and the participants were recruited using proportionate sampling based on demographic information (i.e., age, gender, income, and residence). The research team conducted a pilot test to check for typos and the flow of the survey questions. All items were evaluated for face and content validity. After the pilot test, all comments were reflected to revise the survey items. The link for the online survey was sent to the participants. The potential participants were screened to identify those who had visited Uzbekistan for Silk Road tourism and to visit the World Heritage Sites within the past five years. We focus on U.S. travelers because of the quality of data and availability. U.S. travelers in Uzbekistan are one of the important inbound tourism markets and the number of the travelers are increasing gradually. We found out that the inbound travelers who visited WHSs in Uzbekistan are hard to find. We tested and estimated that 10–19% of respondents in the panel qualify for the survey in this study after checking the screening questions.

The front page of the online survey briefly introduced the purpose of this study. All questions were written in English. The participants received rewards if they filled out all the questions on the online survey. The data collection took place in May 2020. A total of 482 respondents completed the questionnaires and met the criteria. There is a confidence level of 95% and 80% of population proportion that the margin of error is 3.83%. We used the G*Power software 3.1 and calculated the actual power as 0.80 and z = 1.96. The total of 158 samples is necessary for this study. Even though the participants' reasons for traveling to the main cities were mainly related to Silk Road tourism, there were respondents who had not visited World Heritage Sites in Uzbekistan. Therefore, they were excluded from the final analysis. A total of 419 questionnaires were used for this study.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Characteristics

Descriptive information about the participants' demographic characteristics is presented in Table 3. The number of male respondents (n = 237, 56.6%) was higher than that of female respondents (n = 182, 43.4%). Regarding age, the average was 37 years old. Respondents aged between 18 and 29 represented the largest age group (n = 148, 35.3%), followed by those in their 30s (n = 105, 25.1%), 40s (n = 81, 19.3%), and 50s and over (n = 85, 20.3%). In terms of education level, approximately 39.1% of the respondents reported that they had a Bachelor's degree, followed by an associate's degree (n = 92, 22.0%), high school education or lower (n = 90, 21.5%), and a post-graduate degree (n = 73, 17.4%). Regarding marital status, approximately 49.9% of the respondents reported that they were married, and 45.6% were single. Regarding annual household income level, approximately 41.6% of the respondents (n = 174) earned an income between USD 40,000 and USD 80,000, followed by an income

between USD 80,000 and USD 120,000 (n = 93, 22.2%), an income of less than USD 40,000 (n = 89, 21.9%), and an income over USD 120,000 (n = 63, 15.1%).

Table 3. Demographic information and travel characteristics.

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	237	56.6
	Female	182	43.4
Age	18–29 years old	148	35.3
	30–39 years old	105	25.1
	40–49 years old	81	19.3
	50 years old and over	85	20.3
Education	High school	90	21.5
	Associate's degree	92	22.0
	Bachelor's degree	164	39.1
	Post-graduate degree	73	17.4
Marital status	Single	191	45.6
	Married	209	49.9
	Other	19	4.5
Annual household income	Under USD 40,000	89	21.9
	USD 40,000–80,000	174	41.6
	USD 80,000–120,000	93	22.2
	Over USD 120,000	63	15.1

4.2. Past Experience and WHS Visits

The results of the multiple-response analysis are presented in Table 4. A total of 363 individuals reported that they had visited the Silk Road for the first time, and a total of 56 individuals reported that they were repeat visitors. The respondents reported that they had visited UNESCO heritage sites along the Silk Road cities in Uzbekistan. Among first-time visitors, the Historic Centre of Bukhara in the Province of Bukhara was the most popular city. Moreover, the Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz and Samarkand, Crossroad of Cultures, in the Province of Samarkand were considered important UNESCO heritage sites. Itchan Kala in Khiva in the Province of Khorezm and Western Tien-Shan in Province of Tashkent showed lower frequency rates than the other three WHSs.

Table 4. Results of multiple-response analysis of five WHS destinations and past experience.

	WH Visit					
First visit	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Historic Centre of Bukhara in Province of Bukhara	50	55	32	13	14	164
	30.5%	33.5%	19.5%	7.9%	8.5%	100.0%
Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz	55	46	27	15	14	157
	35.0%	29.3%	17.2%	9.6%	8.9%	100.0%
Itchan Kala (Khiva) in Province of Khorezm	28	36	24	12	14	114
	24.6%	31.6%	21.1%	10.5%	12.3%	100.0%
Samarkand, Crossroad of Cultures, in Province of Samarkand	32	48	29	14	14	137
	23.4%	35.0%	21.2%	10.2%	10.2%	100.0%

Table 4. *Cont.*

	WH Visit					
Western Tien-Shan in Province of Tashkent	18	27	20	10	14	89
	20.2%	30.3%	22.5%	11.2%	15.7%	100.0%
Total	183	106	44	16	14	363
	50.4%	29.2%	12.1%	4.4%	3.9%	100.0%
Repeat visit						
Historic Centre of Bukhara in Province of Bukhara	9	4	0	4	6	23
	39.1%	17.4%	0.0%	17.4%	26.1%	
Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz	13	4	4	3	6	30
	43.3%	13.3%	13.3%	10.0%	20.0%	
Itchan Kala (Khiva) in Province of Khorezm	5	5	1	3	6	20
	25.0%	25.0%	5.0%	15.0%	30.0%	
Samarkand, Crossroad of Cultures, in Province of Samarkand	6	4	4	3	6	23
	26.1%	17.4%	17.4%	13.0%	26.1%	
Western Tien-Shan in Province of Tashkent	0	1	3	3	6	13
	0.0%	7.7%	23.1%	23.1%	46.2%	
Total	33	9	4	4	6	56
	58.9%	16.1%	7.1%	7.1%	10.7%	100.0%

Among the repeat visitors, the Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz was the most popular destination, followed by the Historic Centre of Bukhara in the Province of Bukhara and Samarkand, Crossroad of Cultures, in the Province of Samarkand and Itchan Kala in Khiva in the Province of Khorezm. Western Tien-Shan in the Province of Tashkent showed the lowest frequency rate among the five WHSs in Uzbekistan.

4.3. Model 1

As shown in Table 5, in model 1, the demographic characteristics that influenced the formation of tourist loyalty to WHSs in Uzbekistan included five variables: gender (male and female), age (20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s), marital status, educational level, and income level. Moreover, three travel characteristics were included, namely, travel length, past experience, and travel type. Regarding demographic characteristics, age, gender, educational level, and income were not statistically significant. Married travelers were likely to show intention to revisit. Their intention to revisit was 1.372 points higher than that of other travelers. In terms of travel-related characteristics, in model 1, travelers who stayed in Uzbekistan for 7–13 days showed 1.647 times higher intention to revisit than other travelers. Free independent travelers (FIT) showed a higher intention to revisit than travelers who used group packages and Air-tel packages.

Table 5. Travel characteristics and loyalty.

Variable		Coefficient	S.E.	Odds	S.E.
Age	18–29 (reference)				
	30–39	−0.113	0.237	0.893	0.212
	40–49	0.358	0.266	1.431	0.381
	50 and over	−0.262	0.253	0.769	0.194
Gender	Female (reference)				
	Male	−0.102	0.191	0.903	0.172

Table 5. *Cont.*

Variable		Coefficient	S.E.	Odds	S.E.
Marital status	Other (reference)				
	Married	0.316 *	0.190	1.372 *	0.261
Education	Education level	−0.013	0.100	0.987	0.099
Income	Income	0.011	0.106	1.011	0.108
Travel length	1–6 days				
	7–13 days	0.499 **	0.227	1.647 **	0.374
	14–19 days	0.178	0.280	1.195	0.334
	20 or more	−0.005	0.274	0.995	0.273
First visit	Repeat visitor				
	First visitor	0.785 ***	0.285	2.193 ***	0.626
Travel type	FIT				
	Group package	−0.935 ***	0.203	0.393 ***	0.080
	Air-tel	−0.898 ***	0.295	0.407 ***	0.120
Likelihood ratio index		LR chi^2 (12) = 42.52	Prob > chi^2 = 0.0000	Pseudo R^2 = 0.0424	
Cut-off	Coefficients				
M1	−2.280				
M2	−0.442				
M3	1.447				

Number of observations: 419. Log-likelihood at zero LL(0) LL(b): −502.309. * significance level = 10%; ** significance level = 5%; *** significance level = 1%.

4.4. Model 2

As presented in Table 6, in model 2, five WHSs in Uzbekistan were added compared to model 1. The results revealed that the demographic characteristics age, gender, marital status, education, and income, were not statistically significant. Regarding travel characteristics, travelers who stayed for 7–13 days were likely to show 1.76 times higher intention to revisit than other travelers. First visitors show a higher intention to revisit than those who had visited Uzbekistan WHSs before, with a result 2.06 times higher than repeat travelers. Tourists with FIT showed higher intention to revisit. However, travelers who purchased group packages or Air-tel (airport and hotel) were less likely to show intention to revisit. Travelers who had visited Bukhara and Tashkent showed higher intention to revisit. However, travelers who had visited Shakhrisyabz, Khiva, and Samarkand did not show any statistical significance.

Table 6. Travel characteristics, WHS destinations, and loyalty.

Variable		Coefficient	S.E.	Odds	S.E.
Age	18–29 (reference)				
	30–39	−0.055	0.239	0.946	0.226
	40–49	0.361	0.270	1.435	0.387
	50 and over	−0.200	0.254	0.819	0.208
Gender	Female (reference)				
	Male	−0.150	0.195	0.861	0.168
Marital status	Other (reference)				
	Married	0.273	0.194	1.314	0.255
Education	Education level	0.005	0.101	1.005	0.102
Income	Income	0.003	0.108	1.003	0.108
Travel length	1–6 days				
	7–13 days	0.534 **	0.230	1.706 **	0.393
	14–19 days	0.077	0.284	1.080	0.306
	20 or more	−0.154	0.284	0.857	0.244
First visit	Repeat visitor				
	First visitor	0.723 **	0.289	2.061 **	0.596

Table 6. *Cont.*

Variable		Coefficient	S.E.	Odds	S.E.
Travel type	FIT				
	Group package	−0.865 ***	0.207	0.421 ***	0.087
	Air-tel	−0.956 ***	0.296	0.384 ***	0.114
WHS destination	Bukhara	0.355 *	0.192	1.426 *	0.273
	Shakhrisyabz	0.019	0.192	1.019	0.195
	Khiva	−0.125	0.203	0.882	0.179
	Samarkand	0.082	0.196	1.085	0.213
	Tashkent	0.714 ***	0.231	2.043 ***	0.472
Likelihood ratio index		LR chi^2 (12) = 58.65	Prob > chi^2 = 0.000	Pseudo R^2 = 0.056	
Cut-off	Coefficients				
M1	−2.074				
M2	−0.205				
M3	1.740				

Number of observations: 419. Log-likelihood at zero LL(0) LL(b): −495.245. * significance level = 10%; ** significance level = 5%; *** significance level = 1%.

5. Discussion

5.1. Implications

The present study explored the determinants of destination loyalty among inbound travelers who had visited WHSs along Silk Road destinations in Uzbekistan. The proposed model consists of travel characteristics, WHS destinations, and demographic characteristics. This study provides several important theoretical implications. First, regarding past experience, most travelers reported that they had visited WHSs in Uzbekistan for the first time. Approximately 50.4% of the first-time visitors had stayed at one WHS destination, and the other half had visited two or more WHS destinations. On the other hand, approximately 58.9% of the repeat visitors reported that they had stayed at one WHS destination in Uzbekistan during their travels, and 10.7% of them had visited all of the destinations.

Second, the proposed model tested the relationship between travel characteristics, including past visit experiences, length of travel, travel type, and destination loyalty. Consistent with previous literature [74], past visit experience was identified as an important determinant of destination loyalty. As noted by previous research [90], most travelers who visit WHSs in Uzbekistan stay for one to two weeks. Regarding the effect of length of stay on destination loyalty, travelers who visit for 7–13 days are inclined to show higher destination loyalty than the other groups.

Long-haul travelers tend to spend one or two weeks at WHS destinations in Uzbekistan, as noted in a previous study [91]. This study used the categorical variable of travel length, and found that travelers who traveled for one or two weeks tend to have an intention to visit in the future and spread more positive information. However, the other categories of travel length did not show statistically significant effects on destination loyalty. In our study, similarly to Chen [96], free independent travelers to cultural and heritage sites showed a higher level of destination loyalty than other traveler types, such as group package travelers and those who purchased air tickets and accommodation from travel agencies.

Finally, regarding demographic characteristics, model 1 shows that travelers who are married present a higher level of destination loyalty than those who are not married. However, in model 2, the demographic characteristics did not show any statistically significant relationship with destination loyalty. In the proposed model, the demographic characteristics were included as control variables. Model 2 included five WHS destinations. The results indicated that travelers who reported visiting the Historic Centre of Bukhara in the Province of Bukhara and Western Tien-Shan in the Province of Tashkent showed higher destination loyalty.

These results provided various practical implications. First, they indicate that inbound travelers who were interested in WHSs visited one WHS destination, and also preferred to visit other WHS destinations. Repeat visitors seemed to visit multiple WHS destinations during their travels. The results reveal meaningful information regarding past experience at cultural and heritage sites [73]. Practitioners and marketers need to develop travel products and services for special interest travelers (SIT) and provide important information about cultural and heritage sites, useful tips, and transportation. For travelers with limited travel length who plan to visit multiple destinations, smooth transportation connections between WHS cities, measures to avoid getting lost, and easy access to WHS information can facilitate their experience. Since inbound travelers may plan to visit expected and unexpected destinations within the limited duration of their stay, the provision of sufficient information about each cultural and heritage site is necessary. DMOs should provide storytelling and interesting sources of information about destinations in multiple languages for inbound tourists. Moreover, adopting innovative technologies, such as map and guidance applications and a metaverse of museums, can maximize destination attractiveness and provide memorable pre- and post-travel experiences.

Second, past experience is one of the most important determinants of destination loyalty. Repeat visitors reported higher intention to visit again and higher willingness to speak positively of their experiences to others. Since repeat visitors tend to visit WHSs and want to experience rich cultural and heritage sites, practitioners and government sectors need to create various types of travel content related to ancient cities along the Silk Road and should make efforts to collaborate with neighboring countries to develop cross-border tourism along Silk Road destinations.

Finally, relationships between travel characteristics and destination loyalty were observable. Travelers whose travel lengths are one to two weeks were identified as the high-loyalty group. Since their travel lengths are short or limited, they may not visit all cultural and heritage sites during their stay at the travel destination. Practitioners and government sectors should make efforts to minimize travel barriers such as transportation connections between WHSs along the Silk Road, reservations, and ticket purchases.

Increasing travel experiences before, during, and after traveling through the application of cultural and heritage information for innovative technology is recommended [66]. Moreover, as noted by previous research [61–65], ICT and technologies facilitate travelers' experiences and enhance the educational components and social interactions in both online and offline contexts. Information about transportation times and the digitalization of reservations can increase tourists' flexibility of travel and maximize their time efficiency. Moreover, communication is also important for reducing language barriers. Brochures written in multiple languages and travel storytelling guide services with multiple languages can create a more positive travel experience.

The target respondents are those who are interested in cultural and heritage tourism at WHSs. This study found a correlation between free independent travelers visiting cultural and heritage sites and higher intention to visit, as noted in previous research [96]. Travelers appear to need their own travel itineraries to thoroughly explore their destinations. Because there are rich cultural and heritage resources, travelers need to choose the most important sites to visit. As a result, free independent travelers show higher destination loyalty. Practitioners and travel agents should make sure that travelers have free time in their schedules and provide them with more personalized services.

5.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are some limitations to this study. First, the results should be not considered generalized outcomes. Since this study uses the data collected from U.S. travelers visiting WHSs in Uzbekistan, the results may not represent all inbound travelers in Uzbekistan. Further research should use other inbound travelers from different countries and be conducted to validate our results, using other samples of tourists who have visited WHSs in Uzbekistan. Second, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and relied

on tourists' previous experience of WHSs along Silk Road cities in Uzbekistan. After the COVID-19 pandemic, experts expect that the number of tourists traveling to these destinations will increase rapidly due to pent-up demand. Further research needs to explore tourists' behavior during the pandemic. Third, this study focused on tourists visiting WHSs in Uzbekistan. Since Silk Road destinations are located in different countries, more studies should be conducted on tourists who visit multiple cities and countries at WHSs along the Silk Road, and cross-border tourism.

6. Conclusions

The legacy of the Great Silk Road, which played a vital role in the connection between the West and the East, is represented by four main cities in Uzbekistan. The results of this study could contribute to providing empirical evidence regarding WHSs and Silk Road destinations in Uzbekistan. The proposed model demonstrates positive relationships between several determinants of travel characteristics and destination loyalty. Moreover, this study suggests differences in segmented travel groups based on their past experiences. Our results could be used to suggest tailored products and services that fit with travelers' needs and wants. Finally, this study highlights the importance of research on WHSs for developing sustainable tourism development and destination management strategies. It also provides useful information regarding travelers whose main reasons for travel are cultural and heritage tourism and visiting WHSs and provides important resources for rebranding the new Silk Road in Uzbekistan to make these destinations the tourism hub of the nation. Generally, WHSs are located in rural areas; thus, travelers' interests and conservation support could be helpful for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) and prosperity in WHS destinations.

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