What **motivates** tourists to take **wildlife selfies**? Evidence from **wildlife tourist attractions** in India

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Abstract | The present research aims to explore the motivation behind taking selfies with animals at wildlife tourist attractions (WTAs) in India. This study adopted a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm; face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 respondents. The findings of the present study indicate several motivational and influencing factors (e.g., ethical and animal welfare concerns, conservation advocacy, cultural and heritage connections, thrill and novelty, affordability, adventure and excitement, safety and ethical standards, personal growth and exploration, creation of travel memories, societal trends, and peer influence, capture memories and souvenirs, environmental and conservation concerns, educational motivations, aesthetic value, and escape from everyday life) that affect tourists' decisions to take wildlife selfies. Theoretically, this research contributes by expanding the understanding of tourist motivations through the lens of Self-determination Theory (SDT), highlighting the complex interplay of personal, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Practically, the study provides information for developing responsible and sustainable wildlife tourism practices that align with ethical and conservation goals.

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1. Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of modern society's daily life. Many individuals choose social media over other conventional forms of media to observe, participate, and review what other people share (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the ease of access to the online lives of others also promotes engagement in risky behaviours. As individuals can now readily and cost-effectively emulate the actions of others, their role within the media ecosystem has transitioned from passive consumers to active producers (Islam et al., 2023). Social media post patterns that inspire users to copy or interact with a specific subject or concept are known as trends (Xue et al., 2023). While trending topics encourage experimentation, they can also inspire unsafe behaviours, such as theft, dangerous stunts, or the use of harmful substances. One such trend is taking selfies with wildlife, which has grown increasingly popular recently. The impact of this selfie culture on wildlife is multifaceted and complex. A positive aspect of the growing popularity of wildlife pictures is that they help raise awareness about the plight of endangered species worldwide (Shaw et al., 2024). The revenue generated through tourism to these wildlife tourist attractions (WTAs) can help manage them properly and be used for conservation efforts.

On the other hand, growing wildlife selfie posts have created a cultural shift in the society we are living in, which has influenced how one perceives and interacts with wild animals. Wildlife selfies portray animals as benign on social media as only photographic props rather than living creatures (Pagel et al., 2020). These selfies frequently support a narrative that frames interactions with wildlife primarily to provide personal satisfaction and validation through social media participation, which casts doubt on the significance of respecting the habitats and behaviours of wildlife. The rising attention influences viewers: these selfies get on the internet, and they also want to replicate the same behaviour. This behaviour has a negative impact on the environment. Several previous studies indicated that wildlife selfie tourism contributes to habitat destruction, animal suffering, and the commercialisation of nature (Belicia & Islam, 2018; Rizzolo, 2023). In addition to these broader ecological concerns, when people get too close to wild animals for the perfect shot, they can startle or provoke them, leading to aggression and violence. This disruption of natural behaviour is not merely anecdotal; Lenzi et al. (2020)

revealed that wildlife selfies could disrupt the natural behaviour of animals. When people with cameras constantly surround wild animals, they can become stressed and anxious, impacting their health and well-being. In some cases, animals abandon their young or avoid feeding to avoid human contact (Mutalib, 2018).

While these selfies can be fun and memorable, they pose several risks to humans. The wildlife selfie trend has been criticised for encouraging individuals to approach wild animals at unsafe distances. In some cases, people have been injured or even killed by wild animals while taking selfies (Weiler et al., 2021). Further, Rizzolo (2023) identified the negative impacts of wildlife selfie tourism on habitats, animal welfare, and the commercialisation of nature. Despite the inherent risks, wildlife selfies remain a popular trend in India, yet this phenomenon has received limited research attention. This is likely due to the country's rich biodiversity and the many opportunities for people to see wild animals in their natural habitats. The researchers have chosen India for this research as it is known as the country with the highest number of selfie-related deaths, following the USA and Russia in general (Bansal et al., 2018). The current study is an approach to investigate the reasons behind the dangerous trend of clicking wildlife selfies. Understanding this wildlife selfie motivation is crucial, as it will help comprehend human-wildlife interaction, develop strategies to mitigate negative impacts on humans and animals, and promote responsible tourism practices. It also aspires to inform individuals, policymakers, and wildlife advocates about balancing the need to protect and conserve the planet's biodiversity and the widespread trend of connecting with nature through wildlife selfies. This will help to foster a more sustainable and compassionate bond between people and the natural environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Wildlife and the Selfie Phenomenon

Due to the development of new technologies and the increasing use of the internet and social media worldwide, it is crucial to consider its consequences on animal welfare and conservation. The entry of wildlife into human settlements or humans into wildlife settlements is not a new phenomenon. Familiarity with wildlife tourist attractions (WTAs) affects the likelihood of taking pictures of endangered wildlife. Wildlife selfies can be an excellent way to cherish memories of interaction with the animals (McIntosh & Wright, 2017) and can promote awareness about WTAs if managed responsibly. However, more than 40 percent of wildlife selfies feature an insensitive human touch on an animal (Wang et al., 2019). Noik (2017)

revealed that users exposed to information or campaign messages regarding the brutality perpetrated on animals in tourist entertainment are more inclined to share "good" nature selfies. Moreover, the study also revealed a plethora of 'bad' selfies on the internet. "Bad" selfies show extreme or unwarranted human interaction with animals, such as cuddling, painting, riding, or feeding them. Most people will go to great lengths to achieve such a click since these pictures seem attractive and gain tremendous traction on social media and fan following (Carvalho et al., 2023).

2.2. Wildlife Tourism and Social Media

With nearly half of the global population online, the internet provides valuable insights into people's perceptions of environmental issues (Clarke et al., 2019; Fuchs & Konar, 2025). Smartphones now offer tourists a platform to share their travel-related adventures through social media (Ali et al., 2014; Islam et al., 2025). Many tourists travel to capture and share pictures on social media (Mendes, 2019). In the context of WTAs, thousands of wildlife images are shared daily on social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram. This phenomenon was later termed as 'wildlife selfie.' Social media platforms influence the choices, attitudes, and behaviour of online users (Islam et al., 2022; Wang & Xie, 2023). World Animal Protection (2017) reported that the number of Instagram posts with wildlife as the subject has increased by 292 percent. Photos and videos of wild animals posted on social media get many likes and comments. This can increase one's popularity among other social media users, which motivates others to replicate the same behaviour (i.e., post wildlife selfies on their social media accounts) to get attention. Pagel and Lück (2024) suggested that many tourists capture selfies, which can later prove their close encounters with dangerous wild animals to their peers. Their study further emphasises the importance of effectively monitoring human-wildlife interactions within the dynamic social media landscape of the 21st century.

2.3. The Wildlife Selfie Phenomenon in Tourist Behaviour

Tourists take selfies and videos while travelling. Selfies shared on social media significantly shape tourists' perceptions and influence their travel decisions (Lyu, 2016). Tourists usually take selfies and post them on social media to create travel memories (Taylor, 2020). By sharing selfies on social media, tourists can attract and inspire interest in the destination among other travellers (Marder et al., 2021). When tourists visit WTAs, they often take selfies with animals.

It has been reported that the top ten most photographed animals worldwide are elephants, kangaroos, primates, lions, tigers, sloths, koalas, giraffes, dolphins, and turtles (Noik, 2017). While tourists often consider it great fun to have their pictures taken while holding an animal, the reality is far different for the animals themselves. Many wild animals are held captive for tourists' perfect selfies (Kredens & Vogt, 2023). Many people interested in taking these selfies are unaware that the animals involved often endure harsh conditions, including unsanitary confinement, illness, and injury (vonEssen et al., 2020). Blaer (2024) found that the commodification of human-wildlife interactions has led to many animals being captured from the wild, transported across vast distances under extreme confinement, and, in many cases, not surviving the journey. Those animals often suffer from dehydration, exhaustion, and signs of severe emotional and physical trauma, highlighting an urgent need for ethical practices such as animal rescue tourism (Ferguson & Litchfield, 2018; Fennell & Panah, 2020).

2.4. Risks Associated with Wildlife Selfies

Taking risky selfies and uploading them to social media are rising (Kamboj & Sharma, 2023). In pursuing likes and followers, many tourists are willing to jeopardise their safety to capture selfies with wild animals, believing such posts will attract significant attention on their social media accounts (Mendes, 2019). These selfies can lead to alarming incidents, resulting in injuries or even fatalities among tourists (Weiler et al., 2021), which are usually considered a tragic event before death (Du Preez, 2018). Research from the United States National Library of Medicine reports that, of the 259 selfie-related fatalities recorded between 2011 and 2017, approximately half occurred in India (Bansal et al., 2018). Lamba et al. (2016) mentioned India ranked among the top three countries in selfie deaths. Many people have been killed and injured while taking selfies with wild animals, specifically elephants, in many states (e.g., West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha) of India (Behera et al., 2020; Datta, 2022).

Some of the incidents were reported on online news portals, which show concern about risks related to wildlife selfies in India:

- In 2016, a man in the Rajasthan desert narrowly escaped being bitten by a python while attempting to take a photo with the reptile (India Today, 2016).

- A private sector worker was chased and trampled by an elephant while posing for a selfie. Additionally, another individual was crushed to death by elephants at Bannerghatta Biological Park after breaking into the safari area (Mohanty, 2017).

- In December 2018, a tragic incident occurred when a man was fatally crushed by an elephant in a village after he joined a group of individuals taking pictures (BBCNews, 2018).

- In Chhattisgarh, a 21-year-old man was killed in February 2021 after an elephant crushed him while he tried to snap a photo with the animal (Bansal, 2021).

- In January 2023, an individual in Tamil Nadu was gored and trampled to death by an elephant while attempting to take a photo with two elephants (Abraham, 2023).

These incidents emphasise a concerning trend: individuals exhibit a heightened propensity to pursue wildlife selfies, often at the expense of jeopardising their own safety. This creates an urgent need for awareness campaigns, strict regulations, and increased patrols to stop the accidents caused by tourists' attempts to take wildlife selfies.

2.5. Selfie Culture and Conservation

Wildlife selfies are, in fact, an emerging trend with significant implications for wildlife conservation. While these pictures can spread knowledge and encourage global appreciation for natural ecosystems (Bergman et al., 2022; Harrington et al., 2023), they also raise serious conservation concerns (Schlottmann & Graefe, 2023). Wildlife selfies suggest that animals can be domesticated, potentially leading to increased illicit wildlife trade and overexploitation facilitated by social media's extensive reach (Fukushima et al., 2021; Macdonald et al., 2021). Geotagging presents significant risks by disclosing the exact locations of animals to poachers. In response, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have initiated campaigns urging photographers to use generic terms for geotagging wildlife images or to refrain from geotagging entirely. Social media platforms, recognising their role in wildlife exploitation, have joined the coalition to end wildlife trafficking online to reduce online trafficking by 80 percent (Bergman et al., 2022). However, regulation remains challenging due to ambiguous wording and difficulties linking online references to illicit activities (Clarke et al., 2019). Tourism can contribute to conservation by promoting outdoor experiences and generating funds (Konar et al., 2025). The rapid increase in visitor pressure on wildlife tourism areas (WTAs) poses threats such as environmental degradation and the introduction of infections and invasive species (Fennell et al., 2024).

Several strategies have been implemented in several countries to mitigate these risks. A report by IUCN (2022) reveals that responsible tourism policies are developed and enforced,

emphasising the importance of maintaining safe distances from wildlife and discouraging interactions that can stress or harm animals. Balancing wildlife glorification with the animals' rights and needs is crucial. Conservation must be prioritised in human-wildlife interactions to ensure future generations can experience nature without causing harm.

3. Methodology

This study aims to identify the motivating factors behind tourists taking selfies with animals at Wildlife Tourist Attractions (WTAs) in India. A qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm was deemed appropriate for this study. The researchers conducted in-depth, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with 16 respondents in the current study. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The inclusion criteria for the respondents have been noted as follows:

➢ *Individuals aged 18 and above.*

➢ *Individuals who have experienced taking selfies with animals at Wildlife Tourist Attractions in India within the past 12 months.*

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Respondent	Gender	Age	City
1	Female	32	Chennai
2	Male	29	Hyderabad
3	Female	34	Pune
4	Male	26	Jaipur
5	Female	24	Chandigarh
6	Male	25	Ahmedabad
7	Female	23	Jodhpur
8	Male	33	Udaipur
9	Female	29	Varanasi
10	Male	28	Agra
11	Female	22	Rohtak
12	Male	26	Chandigarh
13	Male	28	Bengaluru
14	Female	40	Kolkata
15	Male	38	Mumbai
16	Female	43	Delhi

Source: Own Elaboration

The respondents were selected using purposive sampling, which allows individuals who possess specific traits of interest to be selected, such as visitors to WTAs in India who have recently taken selfies with animals (Etikan, 2016). These interviews were conducted in an informal environment in October 2023, allowing respondents to share their perceptions and experiences without hesitation. Each interview lasted between 20 and 25 minutes, depending on the depth of the discussion. As Kaiser (2009) recommended, the researchers adhered to the dominant approach to maintain confidentiality, ensuring that all identifying information was meticulously omitted or altered during data cleaning. This process, guided by the principle of beneficence outlined in the Belmont Report, involved assurances through consent forms that all identifying characteristics would be changed, thus protecting respondents' privacy while preserving the richness of the qualitative data (Kaiser, 2009). The interview comprised a series of open-ended questions to elucidate the factors influencing tourists' preferences to engage in selfie-taking activities with animals at WTAs in India. The primary questions were as follows:

Q1: What motivated you to select Wildlife Tourist Attractions in India for taking selfies with animals?

Q2: Would you share your experiences and expectations with taking pictures with animals at these attractions?

Q3: What influenced your decision to engage in this practice at WTAs in India?

Data saturation was employed to determine the sample size, with interviews conducted until no new themes or insights emerged from the responses. Thematic analysis was utilised for data analysis in this study, as it is advantageous for conducting thorough and well-structured qualitative analysis. By summarising key features of the data and generating unexpected insights, thematic analysis assists in producing a rich and detailed account of the motivations behind taking selfies with animals (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In qualitative research, transcription is considered an interpretive act (Bailey, 2008), facilitating a deeper understanding of respondents' perceptions and experiences. The qualitative data transcription process requires the transcriber to make subjective decisions throughout, which is integral to capturing the nuances of the data. After completing the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed to document the verbal responses accurately. The researchers meticulously omitted extraneous information, rectified errors, and refined grammar and repetitive elements to ensure the transcriptions accurately reflected the respondents' intended meanings.

Following the transcription, the authors used manual coding to analyse the data. To ensure the correctness of interpretations, the codes and findings were shared with each participant for validation. By requesting the respondents' feedback, the researchers aimed to confirm the accurate portrayal of their responses. This iterative process enhances the reliability and validity of the qualitative analysis, ensuring that participants' perspectives are faithfully represented. An in-depth review compared the identified themes with existing literature on wildlife tourism and tourists behaviour. This process led to the creation of a comprehensive summary of the findings, which was subsequently translated into English.

To address potential biases, the researchers acknowledged that subjectivity is a common concern in qualitative research. Reflexivity was maintained through a reflexive journal documenting thoughts, feelings, and biases, allowing for critical examination of how these perspectives might influence data collection and analysis in this study (Berger, 2015). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to include diverse respondents, mitigating bias and ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. By incorporating these methodological protocols, the study aimed to provide a transparent and rigorous examination of the factors motivating visitors to take selfies with animals at wildlife tourist attractions in India.

4. Findings and Discussion

The present study's findings indicate the diverse range of motivational and influencing factors that shape tourists' decisions to take selfies with animals. Comprehending these motivations is essential for developing responsible and sustainable wildlife tourism practices. Ethical concerns and a focus on animal welfare are critical drivers for some tourists who take selfies with animals. They consider these as an opportunity to highlight issues and advocate for responsible and ethical wildlife tourism. Their actions can contribute to promoting such practices. As mentioned by respondent 1;

RP1: "I was drawn to these attractions' ethical and animal welfare aspects. I wanted to document and share the experiences to raise awareness about responsible tourism."

Therefore, tourists were driven by ethical considerations and a commitment to animal welfare, using selfies to raise awareness about these concerns. This indicates a strong ethical motivation for taking selfies with animals. Tourists' choice to document their experiences reflects a genuine concern for the well-being of animals. In addition, the findings suggest that some tourists

consider wildlife selfies as a personal experience and a means to fulfil a broader social and environmental responsibility. These tourists may actively advocate for conservation efforts by documenting their encounters and educating their social network about the significance of wildlife conservation. As respondent 2 mentioned;

RP2: "For me, taking selfies with animals was a way to connect with nature and showcase my love for wildlife on social media. I felt it could promote conservation efforts."

Tourists' motivation for taking wildlife selfies was deeply rooted in their desire to connect with nature and use social media to promote wildlife conservation. In this case, the motivation aligns with a strong conservation-oriented perspective. Tourists' choice to take selfies with animals is a deliberate effort to raise awareness and encourage responsible tourism through their online presence. Whereas, for some tourists, like participant 3, the connection to local culture and heritage is a compelling factor that drives their engagement with animals at these attractions. This can imply that preserving and representing cultural aspects in wildlife encounters can attract a particular segment of tourists. As mentioned by respondent 3;

RP3: "The cultural significance of these animals at the Wildlife Tourist Attractions played a huge role in my decision, and I wanted to be part of that."

Tourists emphasised the cultural significance of animals at WTAs as a primary motivator for taking selfies with them. This motivation highlights the role of cultural and heritage connections in influencing tourist choices. The animals' cultural significance adds a layer of cultural and historical appeal to the wildlife encounter. For tourists, the desire for thrill and novelty becomes a significant driver for taking wildlife selfies. Their engagement with animals is driven by the quest for exceptional and memorable experiences, making them a target audience for wildlife attractions that can provide such unique moments. As respondent 4 mentioned;

RP4: "I was primarily motivated by the thrill of capturing a unique and unforgettable moment with the wildlife at the Wildlife Tourist Attractions. It was an experience I could not resist."

Tourists' motivation for taking selfies with animals primarily revolved around the thrill of capturing unique moments with wildlife. This motivation suggests a strong sense of adventure and excitement associated with these encounters. Tourists seek to engage with animals for the exhilaration of the experience, with the selfie serving as a tangible memory of their adventure. Moreover, budget-friendly options at wildlife tourist attractions can attract tourists looking for

economical wildlife encounters. Tourists with limited budgets may opt for these attractions, making affordability a critical factor in their decision-making. As stated by respondent 5;

RP5: Affordability was a significant factor. Selfies with animals at these attractions were more budget-friendly than other wildlife encounters."

Affordability played a significant role in visitors' decision to take selfies with animals at WTAs. Financial factors are practical motivators for tourists. In addition, the sense of adventure and thrill can be compelling for tourists, like participant 6, who engage in wildlife selfies.

RP6: "The sense of adventure and excitement in taking a selfie with a wild animal at the WTAs was the main driving force behind my decision."

Tourists perceive these factors as opportunities to experience close animal interactions, excitement, and adrenaline. The adventure and excitement of these encounters drove their motivation to take wildlife selfies. Adventure seekers are drawn to these experiences for the exhilaration they provide. Moreover, some tourists use selfies to assess and ensure safety and ethical standards for wildlife encounters. They document their experiences with a focus on responsible tourism and animal welfare. As mentioned by respondent 7;

RP7: "I was concerned about the safety of these encounters and wanted to document the experience to assess if these attractions ensured visitor safety and animal welfare."

Hence, safety concerns were a significant factor for the visitors, who wanted to document the experience to assess visitor safety and animal welfare. This highlights a responsible and cautious approach to wildlife encounters. In addition, the experience of taking selfies with animals contributes to tourists' narratives of exploration and self-discovery. These encounters hold significance in their personal journey. As mentioned by respondent 8;

RP8: "I was influenced by the sense of escapism and stress relief these encounters offered. Taking selfies with animals was a way to relax and unwind."

Hence, tourists wanted to document their journey of self-discovery and exploration, with wildlife selfies as a part of that narrative. This motivation highlights the role of wildlife encounters in personal growth and exploration. For some tourists, like respondent 9, taking wildlife selfies is a means to create distinct and personal travel memories. These pictures serve as tangible reminders of their experiences.

RP9: "I wanted to document my journey of self-discovery and exploration of new experiences, and taking selfies with animals was a part of that narrative."

Therefore, tourists were drawn to documenting their experiences with animals to create unique travel memories. This reflects a more personal motivation to capture and remember their encounters. Moreover, societal trends and peer influence can influence tourists' decisions to take wildlife selfies. Tourists' choices are driven by the desire to conform to popular trends and the influence of friends or social circles. As mentioned by respondent 10;

RP10: "I was intrigued by the educational aspect of these encounters. I saw it as a chance to learn more about animals and their conservation."

Social trends and peer pressure influenced tourists' motivation. This underscores the significance of societal and peer influences in shaping tourist behaviour. In addition, some tourists see wildlife selfies as a way to capture memories and souvenirs, enabling them to revisit their experiences at wildlife tourist attractions whenever they please. As stated by respondent 11;

RP11: "The social pressure and trend of taking selfies with animals at WTAs influenced my decision. It seemed like something everyone was doing."

Tourists' motivation for taking wildlife selfies was influenced by their desire to create lasting memories and souvenirs of their visits to these attractions. This motivation emphasises the role of these selfies as tangible reminders of their travel experiences. Moreover, environmental and conservation concerns can be powerful motivators for some tourists. Tourists' actions support places and practices prioritising wildlife preservation and ethical treatment. As mentioned by respondent 12;

RP12: "I was motivated by the idea of creating memories. These selfies reminded me of my visit to these Wildlife Tourist Attractions."

Therefore, tourists were primarily motivated by environmental and conservation concerns, indicating a strong commitment to wildlife preservation. These considerations drove their decision to take selfies with animals. Furthermore, educational motivations can drive tourists to document their interactions with animals. Tourists taking selfies with animals is a means of learning more about wildlife, experiencing its uniqueness, and expanding their knowledge. As mentioned by respondent 13;

RP13: "For me, the opportunity to interact with animals up close was irresistible. I wanted to document my interaction with them and share the beauty of these creatures."

Tourists were motivated by the opportunity to interact with animals up close and capture the uniqueness of Indian wildlife. This motivation reflects the educational and exotic appeal of wildlife encounters. In addition, educational motivations play a pivotal role in driving tourists (such as respondent 14) to engage with animals at WTAs. This educational aspect provides them with a deeper understanding of wildlife and conservation. As mentioned by respondent 14;

RP14: "The exotic appeal of animals at these attractions was a key motivation. I wanted to capture the uniqueness of Indian wildlife."

Therefore, tourists were intrigued by the educational aspect and saw taking selfies with animals as an opportunity to learn more about wildlife and its conservation. This motivation suggests a strong interest in environmental education. Furthermore, for tourists like respondent 15, the aesthetic value of wildlife selfies is a driving factor. They see these pictures as an opportunity to create visually stunning and aesthetically pleasing travel memories.

RP15: "Environmental and conservation concerns were the primary motivators for me. I wanted to document and support places that contribute to wildlife preservation."

The aesthetic appeal of taking selfies with animals was a significant motivation for tourists. They viewed these selfies as adding an artistic and visually appealing element to their travel experiences. In addition, for some tourists, like respondent 16, the escape from everyday life and the therapeutic value of wildlife encounters are critical motivators for taking selfies with animals.

RP16: "The aesthetic appeal of taking selfies with animals was a significant motivation. These pictures added an artistic element to my travel experiences."

Therefore, tourists were motivated by the desire for escapism and stress relief. Taking selfies with animals served as a means to relax and unwind, reflecting the importance of these encounters in personal well-being. Several motivational factors behind taking selfies with animals at Wildlife Tourist Attractions in India illustrate the complex interplay of personal, social, cultural, and environmental factors. These motivations inform the tourists' choices and the potential impact on wildlife tourism practices and conservation efforts. Understanding these diverse motivations is vital for developing responsible and sustainable wildlife tourism experiences.

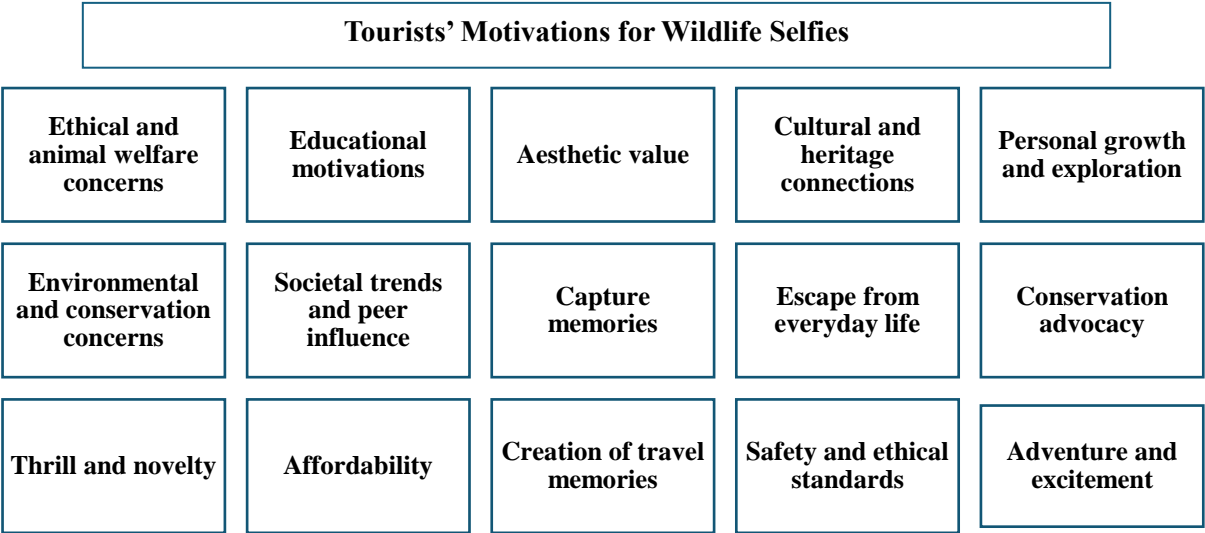| Tourists' Motivations for Wildlife Selfies				
Ethical and animal welfare concerns	Educational motivations	Aesthetic value	Cultural and heritage connections	Personal growth and exploration
Environmental and conservation concerns	Societal trends and peer influence	Capture memories	Escape from everyday life	Conservation advocacy
Thrill and novelty	Affordability	Creation of travel memories	Safety and ethical standards	Adventure and excitement

Figure 1: Tourists' Motivations for Wildlife Selfies

Source: Own Elaboration

The identified themes are illustrated in figure 1. They range from thrill-seeking and escapism to ethical considerations and conservation advocacy, highlighting the diverse motivations that drive tourists to engage in this activity. The presence of themes like safety and ethical standards, as well as environmental and conservation concerns, suggests that visitors are not only driven by personal desires but also by a sense of responsibility and awareness of the broader implications of their actions. The various motivations influencing tourists to take selfies with animals in wildlife tourism attractions in India reveal opportunities and challenges. Firstly, tourists guided by ethical concerns and a commitment to animal welfare utilise selfies to promote responsible tourism, suggesting a positive trend towards fostering ethical wildlife encounters. McIntosh and Wright (2017) asserted that responsibly managed wildlife selfies can raise awareness about WTAs. However, findings by Wang et al. (2019) indicated that a significant segment of wildlife selfies involve insensitive human-animal interactions, potentially normalising unethical behaviour among less informed tourists. Therefore, there is a pressing need for tourism operators to establish clear guidelines and educational initiatives to mitigate inadvertent harm to wildlife.

In addition, some tourists emphasise integrating authentic cultural elements into wildlife tourism experiences, driven by a desire to preserve and celebrate cultural heritage through wildlife encounters. As noted by Mendes (2019), tourists often travel with the intent to capture and share experiences on social media, inadvertently promoting both the location and its

cultural richness. This emphasizes the importance of incorporating genuine cultural representations in wildlife tourism that respect both wildlife and cultural heritage. Moreover, tourists seeking unique and thrilling experiences often perceive wildlife selfies as adventurous opportunities, which can lead to an increased demand for close animal encounters. Kamboj and Sharma (2023) highlighted the growing prevalence of risky wildlife selfies, underscoring the critical necessity for safety protocols and ethical guidelines to protect tourists and animals. Incidents such as the 2016 case in Rajasthan (India Today, 2016), where a tourist narrowly escaped a python bite, underscore the urgency of stringent regulations in wildlife tourism.

Furthermore, the popularity of budget-friendly wildlife encounters suggests a need for accessible options for tourists. However, Blaer's (2024) research indicated that commercialising human-wildlife interactions in budget-friendly settings often compromises animal welfare, emphasising the need for ethical considerations across all tiers of wildlife tourism. Additionally, tourists driven by educational opportunities contribute significantly to wildlife conservation efforts by engaging in informative and educational wildlife experiences. Taylor (2020) and Lyu (2016) emphasised that wildlife selfies can enhance educational efforts about wildlife conservation, fostering a deeper connection and commitment to conservation among tourists. Meanwhile, societal trends and peer influence, primarily influenced by social media, are pivotal in shaping tourist behaviour toward wildlife encounters. Wang and Xie (2023) highlighted social media's potential to promote positive conservation behaviours among tourists while cautioning against superficial engagement that prioritises photo capture over conservation understanding. Effective strategies are needed to harness social media platforms to promote responsible wildlife tourism practices.

The findings of the present study align with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasises that human behaviour is driven by the satisfaction of three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Manninen et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In wildlife selfies, autonomy is reflected in motivations such as adventure, thrill, and personal growth, where tourists seek self-directed, exciting experiences. Competence is evident in educational motivations and conservation advocacy, as tourists aim to increase their knowledge and feel effective in contributing to wildlife protection. Relatedness is demonstrated through ethical concerns, cultural connections, and societal influence, where tourists strive to connect with wildlife, respect cultural heritage, and align with social trends. By fulfilling these needs, tourists are more likely to engage meaningfully in wildlife tourism,

balancing personal desires with ethical and social responsibilities, and promoting psychological well-being and responsible tourism behaviour.

This study provides valuable insights into the complexities of wildlife tourism in India, elucidating diverse tourist motivations and integrating findings from the literature review. By addressing these motivations and conducting a nuanced analysis, strategies can be formulated to promote responsible and sustainable wildlife tourism practices, thereby contributing to the conservation and welfare of wildlife in India.

4.1. Theoretical Implications of the Study

This study contributes significantly to the theoretical understanding of tourist behaviour in the context of wildlife tourism. By applying Self-Determination Theory, this research provides a nuanced perspective on how tourists' intrinsic motivations, such as thrill-seeking and personal growth, intersect with extrinsic factors like ethical concerns, cultural connections, and societal influence. Identifying diverse motivational factors ranging from autonomy-driven adventure and competence-related conservation efforts to relatedness through cultural and ethical engagement enriches the existing literature. It demonstrates the complex interplay of personal, social, cultural, and environmental influences in driving tourists' actions. This multidimensional approach not only underscores the varied motivations that lead to wildlife selfies but also contributes to future theoretical frameworks that seek to more holistically comprehend tourist behaviour in the wildlife context. Moreover, the study's findings highlight the growing importance of ethical and conservation-oriented motivations, aligning with emerging trends in responsible tourism literature. This suggests a shift towards more conscious and sustainable tourist behaviours, where personal satisfaction is increasingly linked with environmental responsibility and ethical decision-making.

4.2. Practical Implications of the Study

From the practical perspective, wildlife tourism operators, policymakers, and conservation organisations can utilise the current study's findings to develop and promote more responsible and sustainable tourism practices. For wildlife tourism operators, understanding that tourists are motivated by ethical concerns and a desire to advocate for conservation can create experiences that prioritise animal welfare and environmental education. Tourism operators should prioritise non-invasive interactions and minimise stress to wildlife, reinforcing the

ethical treatment of animals as a core value. Educating tourists about the potential harm of exploitative practices, such as wildlife handling or unnatural feeding, can help foster more responsible behaviour. Additionally, ethical guidelines should emphasise transparency, ensuring tourists know how their activities contribute to conservation efforts.

Policymakers can leverage these insights to implement regulations that ensure ethical treatment of animals and promote sustainable tourism practices. Moreover, wildlife tourism guidelines should be tailored to address diverse motivations, such as thrill-seeking, cultural connections, and affordability. Conservation organisations can use the findings to craft educational campaigns highlighting the importance of wildlife preservation and responsible tourism. Those campaigns could be designed with culturally relevant messaging or targeted by demographic groups to resonate with the values and interests of different tourist profiles. Promoting indigenous knowledge about wildlife and conservation can enhance tourists' appreciation of local heritage while empowering host communities to participate in tourism development. Encouraging authentic cultural exchange, such as guided tours by local experts, can create deeper connections between tourists and destinations, enhancing the perceived value of wildlife encounters. This approach not only supports cultural preservation but also strengthens the socio-economic resilience of local communities.

From a marketing perspective, recognising the role of cultural significance, thrill-seeking, and affordability in tourist motivations can help tailor strategies that emphasise both the heritage value and adventurous aspects of wildlife tourism while also addressing budget-friendly options and safety concerns. By aligning their offerings with these diverse motivations, stakeholders can attract a broader audience and foster a tourism industry that benefits tourists and wildlife. By balancing ethical responsibility with cultural authenticity, stakeholders can ensure that wildlife tourism contributes to both environmental sustainability and the preservation of cultural heritage, fostering a more holistic and inclusive tourism experience.

5. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

The current study explored the motivations behind tourists' decisions to take selfies with animals at wildlife tourist attractions (WTAs) in India. Several factors include ethical concerns, conservation advocacy, thrill-seeking, cultural connections, and the desire for social validation. Tourists motivated by ethical considerations use selfies to promote responsible tourism, highlighting animal welfare. Conservation-focused individuals perceive these experiences as

ways to advocate for wildlife preservation, using social media to raise awareness. Adventure-seekers pursue wildlife selfies for the thrill, while others are drawn by cultural ties, aiming to connect with local heritage.

Additionally, budget-friendly attractions appeal to tourists seeking affordable wildlife interactions. These motivations align with the Self-Determination Theory, fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study highlights the need for guidelines and educational initiatives to foster responsible wildlife tourism, ensuring these interactions positively impact tourists and the animals involved. This nuanced understanding is essential for promoting sustainable wildlife tourism practices in India.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Due to the limited accessibility of the researchers towards demographic respondents, this study was conducted within that limited demographic context. While the demographic profile varied in age and city, it might not represent all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, while providing in-depth insights, the study's qualitative methodology is inherently subjective and may be influenced by respondents' memory and social desirability bias. Focusing on WTAs in India also means that the findings are context-specific and may not apply to other countries. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a single time frame (October 2023), and motivations for wildlife selfies may change over time due to evolving societal norms and increased awareness of ethical concerns.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample size and including a more diverse range of respondents, encompassing different socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels, and international tourists. Comparative studies across different contexts would provide insights into how motivations for wildlife selfies vary globally. Longitudinal studies are necessary to track motivation changes, especially in response to awareness campaigns and shifts in societal norms. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of public awareness campaigns, the psychological and behavioural drivers behind wildlife selfies, and the influence of social media and digital technologies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourist behaviour. These future research directions can contribute to developing sustainable and responsible wildlife tourism practices that balance tourist interests with ethical and conservation concerns.

Acknowledgments

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