

The Influence of Destination Image on Tourist Satisfaction and Word of Mouth Intention: A Literature Based Analysis

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Abstract

Destination image plays a critical role in shaping tourist satisfaction and behavioral intentions such as word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. This study conducts a qualitative content analysis of existing theoretical and empirical studies to explore how cognitive, affective, and tangible components of destination image influence tourist satisfaction and WOM intention. Using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theoretical framework, this analysis highlights the multidimensional structure of destination image and its direct and indirect effects on tourist behaviors. The study synthesizes key conceptual frameworks, identifies research gaps, and proposes a conceptual model for future research. Findings emphasize that a favorable cognitive, affective, and tangible image collectively strengthens tourist satisfaction, leading to enhanced WOM intention.

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Keywords: Conceptual Model; Destination Image; S-O-R Theory; Tourist Satisfaction; Word of Mouth Intention

Introduction

Tourism destinations are increasingly recognized not only for their attractions but also for the perceptions and emotions they evoke among visitors. Destination image plays a pivotal role in influencing tourists' decision-making processes, satisfaction levels and post-visit behaviours such as WOM communication. A favourable destination image strengthens tourist loyalty, stimulates revisit and encourages recommendations to others (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Despite a substantial body of research studies that comprehensively analyse the components of destination image such as cognitive, affective, and tangible and their specific influence on tourist satisfaction and WOM remain limited. Particularly in the context of cultural and heritage tourism (Agapito et al., 2013; Kim & Richardson, 2003). Most studies adopt a unidimensional or two-factor approach (e.g., cognitive and affective), often overlooking the tangible (e.g., built heritage) and intangible (e.g., cultural atmosphere) elements that are central to heritage experiences (Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Stylidis et al., 2017). Given increasing competition among culturally significant destinations, a more nuanced understanding of how these images components shape tourist satisfaction and post-visit behaviors such as WOM is essential for targeted marketing and sustainable destination development.

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Objective of the Study

To systematically review empirical and theoretical studies on the relationship between destination image, tourist satisfaction, and WOM intention.

Literature Review

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) suggests that environmental stimuli influence an individual's internal state, subsequently leading to specific behavioural responses. Within the context of tourism research, this model has been widely adopted to explain tourist behaviour. Destination image functions as the stimulus, shaping the initial perceptions and evaluations of the destination. These perceptions impact the organism, represented by the tourist's internal emotional and cognitive state, primarily measured through tourist satisfaction. Finally, the response refers to the resulting behaviour, such as word-of-mouth (WOM) intention, where satisfied tourists are more likely to recommend the destination to others (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). This framework provides a useful theoretical basis for examining how different dimensions of destination image ultimately influence tourist loyalty and advocacy behaviours.

Destination image is broadly defined as the sum of cognitive impressions, emotional evaluations, and tangible experiences that individuals associate with a travel destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). It is a multidimensional construct that significantly impacts tourist decision-making, satisfaction, and future behavioural intentions. The cognitive image dimension encompasses tourists' beliefs and knowledge about tangible and intangible attributes of the destination, such as cultural attractions, safety, hospitality, and service quality (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The affective image dimension reflects the emotional responses elicited by the destination, including feelings of excitement, pleasure, and nostalgia (Hosany et al., 2006). Additionally, the tangible image dimension pertains to the physical and environmental characteristics perceived during the visit, such as the cleanliness of the environment, maintenance of heritage sites, and the quality of infrastructure and public amenities (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Together, these three components form a comprehensive understanding of how tourists perceive and evaluate destinations, influencing their overall satisfaction and post-visit behaviours. Table 1 summarizes the destination image components and their attributes.

Table 01

Destination image components and attributes

Component	Attributes
Cognitive Image	Knowledge & beliefs on Cultural Attractions, Safety, Hospitality & Service Quality
Affective Image	Feelings, Excitement, pleasure & nostalgia
Tangible Image	Cleanliness of Environment, Maintenance of Heritage Site and Infrastructure Quality, Quality of Amenities

Source: Compiled by Author (2024)

Tourist satisfaction reflects emotional fulfilment resulting from the comparison between expectations and actual experiences (Oliver, 1980). Higher satisfaction encourages loyalty and positive WOM behaviour (Chi & Qu, 2008).

WOM intention involves tourists' likelihood to recommend destinations to others. Positive experiences lead to enhanced WOM, significantly impacting destination competitiveness (Brown et al., 2005).

Methods

A qualitative content analysis approach was adopted to systematically review the existing literature on destination image, tourist satisfaction, and word-of-mouth (WOM) intention. A total of **10 peer-reviewed journal articles** published in Google Scholar were selected as the data sources. The selection criteria focused on studies that specifically addressed the relationships among the cognitive, affective, and tangible components of destination image and their influence on tourist satisfaction and WOM behaviour. The analysis technique involved thematic categorization, where attributes were grouped under the three dimensions of destination image; cognitive, affective and tangible. This study was purely theoretical in nature, relying exclusively on secondary data.

Results and Discussion

The relationship between destination image components and tourist satisfaction has been well documented in the tourism literature. The relationship between destination image, tourist satisfaction and word-of-mouth (WOM) intention has also emerged as a critical area of research in tourism studies due to its direct influence on tourist behaviour and the long-term success of tourism destinations. According to Ho Dinh Phi et al. (2022), destination image is composed of three primary components such as cognitive, affective and tangible images. The cognitive image includes tourists' beliefs and knowledge about the destination such as perceptions of political stability, safety, cultural richness and shopping opportunities. Affective image pertains to the emotional responses and feelings tourists associate with a destination, how interesting, relaxing, or friendly the place feels. Tangible image refers to the physical and observable attributes of a destination, including infrastructure, cleanliness, accommodation, and entertainment facilities. These components significantly impact tourist satisfaction, which is defined as the degree to which the actual experience meets or exceeds tourists' expectations (Ho Dinh Phi et al., 2022). The previous studies show that all three image components positively influence satisfaction, with affective image having the strongest effect followed by cognitive and then tangible image. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that the emotional appeal of a destination can have a stronger impact on tourists' evaluations than factual or physical characteristics (Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993; Coban, 2012). Tourists who form a positive emotional connection with a destination are more likely to report high levels of satisfaction.

Cognitive image elements, such as cultural richness, infrastructure quality, and perceived safety, have been shown to significantly enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chen & Tsai, 2007). Tourists who perceive a destination as offering diverse attractions, convenient accessibility and safe environments are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction, which positively influences their intention to revisit and recommend the destination to others.

In addition to cognitive factors, the affective image reflecting tourists' emotional responses plays a crucial role in shaping satisfaction levels. Emotional experiences such as excitement, nostalgia and relaxation contribute to deepening the emotional attachment to a destination. According to Hosany et al. (2006), these affective responses can sometimes outweigh rational cognitive assessments in determining overall tourist satisfaction, highlighting the importance of emotional engagement strategies in destination marketing.

Moreover, the tangible image, encompassing physical attributes like environmental cleanliness, infrastructure quality, and site maintenance, significantly affects tourists' overall satisfaction. Tourists form immediate impressions based on these tangible elements and poor physical conditions can negatively influence both emotional and rational evaluations (Bigne et al., 2001). High standards of

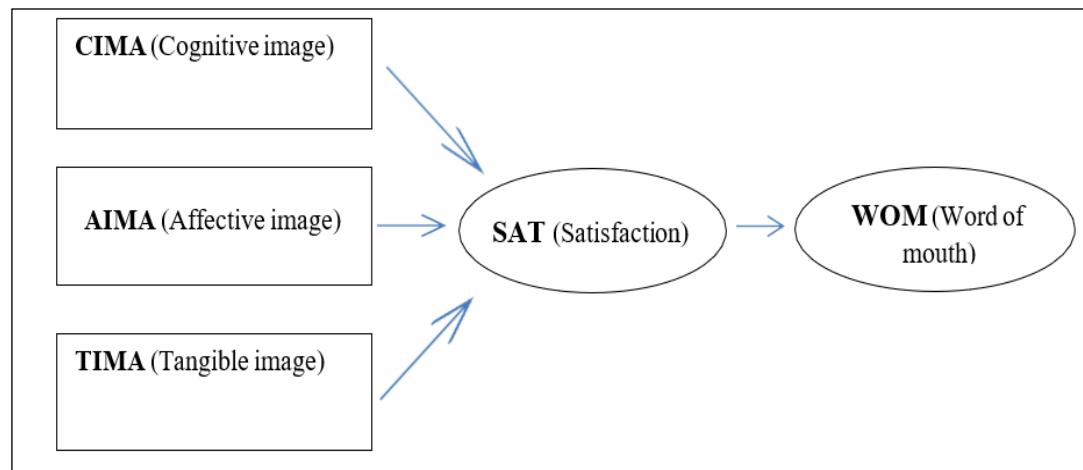
cleanliness, accessible transportation and well-maintained public spaces are therefore critical in sustaining positive destination images.

Satisfaction, in turn, strongly influences word-of-mouth intention. As defined by Harrison-Walker (2001), WOM is a form of informal communication in which tourists share their travel experiences and opinions with others, often influencing their decisions. The study by Ho Dinh Phi et al. (2022) confirms that satisfied tourists are significantly more likely to engage in positive WOM. This communication channel is especially powerful in the digital age, where travelers frequently rely on reviews and social media to make decisions. The study also notes that satisfaction serves as a mediating factor between destination image and WOM, indicating that improving image alone is insufficient if it does not lead to meaningful satisfaction.

Finally, the previous study confirms the mediating role of tourist satisfaction between destination image and WOM intention. As noted by Yoon and Uysal (2005), satisfied tourists are more likely to engage in positive WOM communication, sharing favourable experiences with others both through personal interactions and digital platforms. Tourist satisfaction thus acts as a key bridge that translates favourable cognitive, affective, and tangible destination images into strong behavioural intentions, underlining its central importance in destination management strategies.

Figure 01

Conceptual model linking destination image components to tourist satisfaction and WOM intention (Based on S-O-R framework)



Source: Compiled by Author (2024)

Conclusion

This literature-based analysis confirms that destination image comprising cognitive, affective, and tangible dimensions plays a fundamental role in shaping tourist satisfaction and word-of-mouth (WOM) intention. While cognitive and affective components of destination image have traditionally received the most scholarly attention, this review highlights the growing importance of tangible attributes, such as environmental cleanliness and infrastructure quality in sustaining tourist satisfaction and promoting advocacy behaviours. The findings emphasize that a holistic approach to destination image management, integrating emotional, functional and physical aspects is essential for enhancing tourist experiences and

encouraging positive WOM communication which are critical for destination competitiveness and sustainable tourism development.

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