

A Proposed Framework of the Impact of Tourist's Social Interactions on Destination Image

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Abstract

This proposed study aims to explore the impact of social interactions on the formulation of destination image within rural tourism in China. Despite acknowledging the importance of destination image in tourism competitiveness, key areas such as the influence of tourist-tourist interactions and a holistic examination of all interaction types remain under-researched. Furthermore, this research highlights the often-overlooked conative component, which reflects behavioral intentions, within the tri-dimensional destination image assessment. This conceptual paper plans to investigate the effects of various social interactions, including tourist-resident, tourist-tourism employee, tourist-companion, and tourist-other tourist interactions, on the cognitive, affective, and conative components of destination image. In this study, a comprehensive dataset will be compiled through both online and face-to-face surveys using judgment sampling. After the data collection, the Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) method will be used for analysis. The objective of this research is to elucidate the role of social interactions in shaping destination images, especially within the Chinese rural tourism context. Through these findings, the implications of the study will offer insights that advance the improvement of tourist experiences, elevate destination allure, and foster rural tourism progression in China.

Keywords: Social Interaction, Destination Image, Host-Guest Interaction, Tourist-Tourist Interaction

Introduction

Background of Study

The importance of tourists' destination image in tourism and its effects on decision-making, visitor experiences, satisfaction, and revisit intentions, thereby affecting destination competitiveness and sustainability, is well-acknowledged (Stylidis et al., 2022; Iordanova &

Stylidis, 2019; Jeong & Kim, 2019; Prayag et al., 2017; Loi et al., 2017;Lv et al., 2020). Accordingly, understanding these destination image antecedents is critical for enhancing destination competitiveness (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020).

Social interactions in tourism, comprising encounters with other tourists, locals, or service providers, play a crucial role in shaping destination images (Chen et al., 2020; Lin & Wong, 2021). These interactions, categorizable into residents-tourist and tourist-tourist, influence perceptions, and evoke cognitive, affective, and conative responses (Stylidis, 2022). Therefore, exploring social interaction as a precursor to destination image formation is both relevant and vital.

Social interactions in rural tourism contexts, characterized by intimate local contact and community engagement, are particularly amplified. They shape the emotional landscape of the experience, thereby impacting the destination image. In China, rural tourism has become a significant segment of the domestic tourism sector. According to the data released by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, rural tourism reached its peak in 2019, generating an impressive 9.74 trillion RMB (CEIC Data, 2023). However, due to the pandemic in 2020, there was a decline in the sector's performance. The economic contribution of rural tourism before the setback underscores its potential and importance, making a study of its impacts highly relevant and timely.

Therefore, this research, aiming to explore the influence of social interactions on destination image within Chinese rural tourism, is essential. It could enhance tourists' experiences and destination attractiveness, thus fostering rural tourism development in China.

Research Gaps

While the study of social interactions' impact on destination image is of paramount importance, there remain several unexplored avenues in this field as detailed below.

1) The Insufficiently Investigated Impact of Tourist-Tourist Interactions on Destination Image. Despite the vital role of social interactions on destination image, several research gaps persist, particularly in the study of tourist-tourist interactions. Existing literature mainly examines interactions between tourists and locals (Stylidis et al., 2022); Chu et al., 2022), overlooking interactions among tourists themselves (Joo & Woosnam, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). This negligence hinders our understanding of how these interactions can shape destination image, especially given the shared nature of tourism experiences (Sterchele, 2020). Among the few investigations into this topic (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020), Yang's (2016) research on the shaping of affective image through tourist-tourist interactions is noteworthy. Moreover, Tsai (2022) suggests broadening research to other tourism components, such as interactivity. Chu et al (2022) also pointed out in their review on destination image that the impact of interactions between tourists on the destination image is an under-researched area. The need to address this under-researched aspect is thus emphasized.

2) Insufficient Investigation into the Simultaneous Examination of Guest-Host and Tourist-Tourist Interactions Within the Tourism Process. Research must focus on the extensive interactions between tourism actors during the tourism process, including encounters with service staff, fellow tourists, travel companions, and local stakeholders (Lin & Wong, 2021). While there has been progress in studying guest-host and tourist-to-tourist interactions, a comprehensive examination incorporating all interaction types and their impacts on key outcomes, such as tourist experience and destination image, is yet to be thoroughly explored.

Chen et al (2020) champion this inclusive approach, highlighting the potential of a broader scope in revealing how varied social interactions shape tourist experiences and perceptions.

3) Absence of Tri-Dimensional Destination Image Assessment in Rural Tourism Contexts.

Destination image, traditionally seen as a cognitive-affective construct Yagmur et al (2019), lacks attention to the conative dimension, reflecting behavioral intentions towards a destination (Stylos et al., 2016; Stylidis, 2022). Though recent studies acknowledged this dimension (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Lai et al., 2020), its application in rural tourism and its links with social interactions remain under-explored (Lin & Wong, 2021). Grasping the conative image's significance could shed light on how cognitive and affective images influence tourists' behaviors (Sharma et al., 2022). Hence, future research should extend tri-dimensional destination image to varied contexts like rural tourism and investigate the relationships between destination image dimensions and social interactions (Stylidis, 2022).

Research Questions & Objectives

RQ1: What are the differential effects of various social interactions (including tourist resident, tourist-tourism employee, tourist-companion, and tourist-other tourist interactions) on the formulation of the destination image?

RQ2: How do the influences of cognitive, affective, and conative components on this image formulation vary across different tourism settings such as rural tourism?

RO1: To assess the differential effects of various social interactions (including tourist resident, tourist-tourism employee, tourist-companion, and tourist-other tourist interactions) on the formulation of the destination image.

RO2: To investigate the influences of cognitive, affective, and conative components on this image formulation vary across different tourism settings such as rural tourism.

Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory

Underpinning this research, Social Exchange Theory (SET), initiated by Homans (1958), presents a framework to examine our primary variables: tourist-resident, tourist-tourism employee, tourist-companion, and tourist-other tourist interactions. Viewed as reciprocal exchanges, host-guest (covering tourist-resident and tourist-tourism employee) interactions shape tourists' value perceptions and subsequent behaviors (Stylidis & Terzidou, 2023). These relationships may foster trust and repeated engagement (Kanwal et al., 2020) and boost altruism (Çelik & Rasoolimanesh, 2021). In interactions among tourists, SET's principles apply, as participants assess benefits and costs, influencing their willingness for further interaction. This theoretical perspective aligns well with our research's objectives.

Destination Image

Destination image is typically perceived as the mental picture and understanding a potential visitor forms about a location (Crompton, 1979). It encapsulates an individual's beliefs, notions, and impressions of a destination (Wu & Shimizu, 2020). Recognizing its impact on travel choices, tourist satisfaction, and loyalty (Xiao et al., 2020), destination image has been established as a fundamental concept in tourism research. The pioneering work by Qian et al. (2021) underscored its significance in the tourism sector. Presently, it remains a key determinant in shaping a destination's competitive edge and appeal (Li et al., 2020).

Destination image research has traditionally focused on cognitive and affective dimensions, encompassing tourists' knowledge and emotional responses to a destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The introduction of the conative dimension, reflecting tourists' behavioral intentions or actions (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020), has provided a more comprehensive view of the tourist's decision-making process and enhanced the predictive power of destination image studies. However, this dimension remains relatively underexplored, representing a significant potential area for further research (Sharma et al., 2022).

Social Interaction

Tourism scholars and operators have acknowledged that social interactions dominate the majority of tourism service encounters (Wei et al., 2020). Within these encounters, opportunities for tourists to communicate extend beyond the serving staff as tourists themselves can act as ambassadors for specific tourism attractions, spreading information and promoting the destination to other tourists (Edwards et al., 2017; Liu & Tsaur, 2014). Social interaction serves as a powerful communication tool prevalent among tourists, communities, receptionists, tour guides, tourism enterprises, and other parties within the tourism context (Wu et al., 2013). In this research, we specifically focus on two categories of social interactions within the tourism context: Host-guest interaction and interactions among tourists.

"Host-guest interaction", as it relates to this study, refers to the dynamic between tourists and their hosts, which influences the tourists' perception of a destination (Pu et al., 2022). While existing research focuses on interactions between locals and tourists, our study emphasizes the need to differentiate ordinary residents from tourism industry employees (Stylidis, 2022). This differentiation is crucial as these employees often serve as tourists' first point of contact, significantly shaping their experience and propensity to recommend the destination (Pizam et al., 2000). Accordingly, our research follows Stylidis' method, segregating Host-guest Interaction into two dimensions: tourist-resident and tourist-employee interactions, and evaluates their interaction quality.

"Interactions among tourists" is emerging as a crucial aspect of tourism research, with its significant role in influencing tourist experiences and intentions. Defined by Pearce (2005), it includes interactions within and between tourist groups, expanding the research focus beyond just host-guest relations. Adopting Loker-Murphy & Pearce (1995) widely accepted typology, our study differentiates 'tourist-to-tourist interaction' (interaction among unfamiliar tourists) and 'tourist-to-companion interaction'. This categorization allows us to scrutinize the multifaceted dynamics of these interactions, and their quality, deepening our understanding of their impact on destination image.

Research Methodology

Adopting a quantitative approach, this study sets out to investigate the impact of social interactions and the formulation of destination image within a rural tourism context. The quantitative nature of this research will enable us to gather numerical data and generalize results from the sample to the population of interest. Data collection will be carried out through online and face-to-face surveys to compile a comprehensive dataset. Potential confounding variables such as age, gender, income level, and past tourism experiences will be controlled for accuracy. The target population will consist of tourists aged 18 or older who are not traveling alone and are participating in rural tourism. We will utilize judgment sampling to identify respondents who meet these criteria. The collected data will be analyzed

using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). A sample size of at least 118 respondents is required, as determined by power analysis.

A Proposed Conceptual Framework

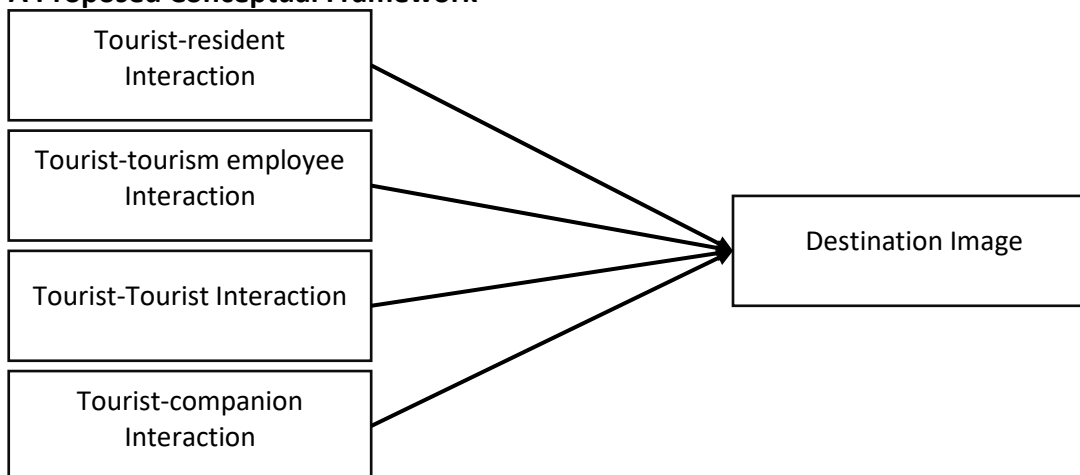


Figure 1. Proposed Research Framework

Conclusion

Motivated by the pressing need to understand the dynamics of social interactions in shaping destination images, this proposed research endeavors to delve into the relatively uncharted territory of Chinese rural tourism. Aiming to potentially enrich tourism scholarship, this study aspires to offer a fresh perspective in academic discourse. On a practical front, the expected insights could prove invaluable for tourism management and marketing, potentially guiding the formulation of strategies that capitalize on social interactions to craft a compelling destination image. Ultimately, the anticipated contribution of this research extends beyond the academic realm, targeting a holistic enhancement of China's rural tourism landscape, with potential global reverberations.

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