THE INFLUENCE OF POST-VISIT FACTORS ON MULTIFACETED DESTINATION IMAGE FORMATION

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my beloved grandparents, parents and fiancé

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ABSTRACT

Destination image, an important element for destination positioning and selection process, is a widely-studied topic in tourism for the last four decades. Despite the wide coverage given to this topic, there are still disputes related to the conceptualization of destination image construct and formation. First, there is a myriad of literature supporting the role of cognitive and affective images as the dual-components of destination image construct. But the literature pays little attention to conative image and seems silent on multisensory image. Responding to these limitations, this research attempted to incorporate the four image components and investigate their interrelationships. Second, studies on destination image formation tend to focus on the pre-visit phase while the factors in the post-visit phase are neglected. This research attempted to investigate the influence of previous experience, tourist experience and intensity of visit on post-visit destination image formation. Based on the setting of Phoenix ancient town in China, this research used a mixed-method approach to collect data from domestic tourists, and employed structural equation modeling and multi-group analysis to analyze the data. Finally, based on the data analysis, the research verified the interrelationships between cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory images and proved that previous experience, tourist experience and intensity of visit either positively or negatively influence different image components' formation. The contribution of this research has added to the limited knowledge on China's ancient town tourism. Practically, this research has managerial implications and would help destination marketers to identify, improve and promote the touristic destinations by creating a positive and unique destination image.

ABSTRAK

Imej destinasi ialah elemen penting bagi menentukan kedudukan destinasi dan proses pemilihan merupakan topik dalam bidang pelancongan yang dikaji secara meluas sejak empat dekad yang lalu. Walaupun topik tersebut dirangkum dengan meluas namun masih terdapat percanggahan berkaitan dengan penentuan pembinaan dan pembentukan konsep imej destinasi. Pertama, terdapat banyak literatur yang menyokong peranan imej kognitif dan afektif sebagai dwikomponen dalam pembinaan imej destinasi. Namun literatur tersebut kurang memberikan perhatian kepada imej konatif dan sepertinya tidak membicarakan imej pelbagai deria. Bertindak balas terhadap batasan-batasan tersebut, kajian ini menggabungkan empat komponen imej dan mengkaji saling hubungan antara komponennya. Kedua, kajian tentang pembentukan imej destinasi cenderung memberikan tumpuan kepada fasa pra lawatan manakala faktor fasa pasca lawatan diabaikan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti pengaruh pengalaman lalu, pengalaman pelancong dan intensiti lawatan dalam pembentukan imej destinasi pasca lawatan. Dengan berlatarkan bandar purba Phoenix di China, kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kaedah campuran untuk mengumpul data daripada pelancong domestik, dan menggunakan pemodelan persamaan struktur dan analisis pelbagai kumpulan bagi menganalisis data. Akhir sekali, berdasarkan analisis data, kajian ini mengesahkan bahawa terdapat saling hubungan antara imej kognitif, afektif, konatif dan pelbagai deria serta membuktikan bahawa pengalaman lalu, pengalaman pelancong dan intensiti lawatan sama ada positif mahupun negatif mempengaruhi pembentukan komponen imej yang berbeza. Kajian ini memberikan sumbangan tambahan kepada pengetahuan yang terhad dalam bidang pelancongan bandar purba China. Secara praktikal, kajian ini memberikan implikasi pengurusan dan dapat membantu pemasar destinasi bagi mengenal pasti, meningkatkan dan mempromosikan destinasi pelancongan dengan mewujudkan satu imej destinasi positif dan unik.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

This chapter presents the academic and applied perspectives of the research topic's background and opportunities. The chapter highlights the gaps in previous studies and potential contributions of this research, which lead into the research questions and objectives. The chapter closes with operational definitions of the key terms in this research.

1.2   Research Background

As big city life can be hectic, during every holiday thousands of people leave their cities and flock to small towns (Vela, 2009; Santos, Fernandez and Blanco, 2011; Zhang and Qiu, 2011). Ancient towns, a subset of tourism towns, start to receive increased attention from tourists in recent years (Zeng, 2010). Ancient towns have from hundreds to thousands of years of history, and these towns' basic characteristics - environment, patterns, architecture, historic relics, traditional atmosphere and folk customs - continue to be well kept till today (Ding, 2009). The antiquity, vitality, uniqueness and cultural connotations make ancient towns irreplaceable and non-renewable (Lv, 2009). Furthermore, the sharp differences between the fast-moving modern world's busy lifestyle and ancient towns' peaceful atmosphere make these towns remarkable tourist attractions (Ma, 2011).

With more than 220 ancient towns, China has a sizeable opportunity to capitalize on ancient town tourism. Festivals, events, culture, nostalgia, food, and folk customs are among the ancient town tourism genres. China's government began expanding ancient town tourism in the late 1980s and witnessed an increasing trend of this particular type of tourism. The Council of China Tourism reported *Top 100 Destinations of China*, among which eight, 10, and 10 ancient towns were listed in 2010, 2011 and 2012, respectively (Council of China Tourism, 2013a). Statistics from the same report indicated that 29.26 million tourists visited ancient towns in 2010 and increased to 31.52 million in 2011, and to 35.90 million in 2012. People aged 18 to 44 make up the bulk of ancient town tourists, usually taking day trips and extending their visits during public or school holidays (Council of China Tourism, 2013b).

However, a review of previous studies and tourism reports published in China addresses five alarming issues in ancient town tourism. First, ancient town tourism falls into the bottleneck of product homogenization - few distinctive and recognizable characteristics among ancient towns. In one aspect, tourism resources are quite similar among ancient towns, especially those share the same regional backgrounds (Zheng, 2008). In another aspect, souvenirs are generally lack of the towns own cultural identity (Zheng, 2008). The same souvenirs are sold in different shops in an ancient town, and even in different ancient towns throughout China (Ma, 2011). As such, China's ancient towns are increasingly similar in appearance, as attractions and souvenirs are copies that seen everywhere. These ubiquities resemble Orbash's (2000) arguments pertaining to historic towns in Western countries.

Over-commercialization is the second issue in China's ancient town tourism. Under the driving force of economic benefits, local residents have become money-oriented and are willing to scarify the antiquity of ancient towns. For example, shops are located on every corner in ancient towns, and the crying of vendors and the bargaining of buyers never stop (Wang, 2010). The reputation and morality of ancient towns are disappearing, and this disappoints tourists (Gao, 2008; Yuan, 2010).

The third issue is related to the lacks of original cultural elements. For instance, ancient towns are now a mix of old-fashioned and modern building designs. The new construction materials and architectural features are inharmonious with those of traditional crafts (Ma, 2011). In addition, due to the increased cost of living and the invasion to their private lives, local residents are moving away from their homeland and being replaced by tourism practitioners (Orbash, 2000; Zheng, 2008). Since most ancient towns are beset by modern appearance and flooded by outsiders, ancient towns lose their traditional charm and vitality.

Fourth, the ancient towns' environment is seriously under siege nowadays. Multiple pollutions from commercial activities changed the original themes of China's ancient towns 'delicate bridges, flowing streams and local households' into 'modern bridges, dirty rivers and noisy stores' (Wei, 2009). Besides, during the peak tourist season, ancient towns are plagued by dense crowds and chaos. As such, the classicality and harmony of ancient towns become rare and this dissatisfies the tourists (Wang, 2010; Ma, 2011).

The last issue relates to the inadequate tourism-supporting facilities in China's ancient towns. For example, hotels and restaurants are easy to find but most of them are privately owned, small and even dirty (Tian, 2003). Phoenix, for example, only provides 333 beds in three-star and higher ranking hotels and cannot satisfy the needs of a high-level market (Gao, 2008). And sometimes, the interpretation systems for the heritage sites are incomplete and poorly arranged (Tian, 2003; Song, 2012). This makes tourists uncomfortable and inconvenient during their visits. As such, the abovementioned issues negatively influence China's ancient towns' reputation. And only few ancient towns received national and international attention (Zeng, 2010). The following paragraphs introduce Phoenix, an ancient town that serves as the subject of this research.

Among China's 220 ancient towns, Lijiang, Pingyao and Phoenix are the three major ancient towns. Lijiang and Pingyao are on the UNESCO's *World Heritage List*, and Phoenix is a UNESCO's World Heritage candidate since 2006.

Phoenix is located at the western edge of Hunan Province and is composed of three main ethnic groups — Miao, Han and Tujia. It was a political, military, economic and cultural center in past eras. Over 450 years old, Phoenix today still exhibits its magnificence, dignity and majesty.

Compared to other ancient towns, Phoenix stands apart due to its well-preserved tourism resources. Surrounded by mountains and rivers, Phoenix provides tourists a rich heritage, a mixed culture of three ethnic groups and stories of historical celebrities (Phoenix of China, 2010). An official statistic from Phoenix's tourism authority showed that in 2012, 6.6 million tourists visited Phoenix, an increase of 37.5% from 4.8 million visitors in 2009 (http://hnphoenix.com). The statistic from government of Phoenix showed that annual visits of Phoenix were 9.6 million in 2014 and 12.0 million in 2015 (http://fhzf.gov.com). From 2012 to 2014, domestic tourists voted Phoenix as the most popular ancient town in China (http://sozhen.com). However, although with good reputation within China's domestic tourism, Phoenix did not receive much attention from worldwide tourists. As such, providing a positive destination image is a necessity for Phoenix and other China's ancient towns.

Destination image represents the overall impression of a destination with a set of attributes that define it in various dimensions (Beerli and Martin, 2004a). Destination image helps identify a destination's strengths and weaknesses, promote desirable images and mitigate negative images (Chen, 2001; Stepchenkova and Mills, 2010). It can provide the basis for effective and efficient planning and positioning strategies to increase tourist flows and to sustain the destination in the global competition (Choi, Chan and Wu, 1999; Marino, 2008). From the tourists' perspectives, destination image is used for destination selection and evaluation (Marino, 2008; Jalilvand, 2016).

In the last four decades, practitioners and academics have shown great interest in the concept of destination image and applied it in different types of destinations. A broad array of topics has been studied, including destination image

definitions, measurements, components, formation and factors influencing the formation. However, the literature appears and continues to be problematic, controversial and segmented. In addition, destination image studies seem to neglect small-scale and rural type of destinations (Vela, 2009) and have received little attention in China's ancient town tourism (Lv & Huang, 2012). These problems are the motivations that drive this research. Following section describes the problems and gaps in details.

1.3   Problem Statement

Since the 1970s, destination image has been widely studied in tourism. Yet due to its complex, multiple, relativistic and dynamic characteristics (Gallarza, Saura and Garcia, 2002), and despite numerous studies, issues remain or have been investigated superficially (Tasci, Gartner and Cavusgil, 2007). This section discusses the gaps from four academic perspectives: the destination image construct, the factors that influence image formation, the research domain and finally, the research methodology. This section ends with discussion related to one industry problem.

The first academic gap that this research attempts to address is related to the multifaceted construct of destination image. Perhaps the most popular and widely used destination image construct is the dual components of cognitive and affective images (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a). Scholars next added conative image as a third destination image component (Pike and Ryan, 2004), and the latest is to include multisensory image as the fourth component (Son and Pearce, 2005).

Gartner (1989) and Pike and Ryan (2004) were among the first authors that pay attention to conative image. Conative image is the action component and brings a better understanding of tourist behavior (Marino, 2008). It shows whether a destination is worth visiting or not (Vaughan, 2007) and how a tourist engages with a destination. However, the inclusion of conative image has received little attention (Stepchenkova and Mills, 2010; Huang and Gross, 2010). That is, studies did not

consider conative image as an action component in the destination image construct; instead, those studies investigated tourists' behavioral intentions in the topics like destination selection or destination loyalty (Son and Pearce, 2005). Except for Pike and Ryan (2004) and Agapito, Mendes and Valle (2013), no other empirical evidence includes the conative image and supports the hierarchical interrelationships among cognitive, affective and conative images. To fill this gap, this research includes conative image within the destination image framework.

The latest and least studied destination image component is the multisensory image, formed through tourists' storage and interpretation of multisensory offerings at the destination (Son and Pearce, 2005). Although yet to be empirically validated, multisensory image is supposed to lead to a more comprehensive understanding of a destination (cognitive image), affect tourists' inner feelings towards the destination (affective image) and, later, the associations of cognition and affect influence tourists' travel intentions (conative image) (Huang and Gross, 2010; Agapito et al., 2013). It means there is a lack of empirical studies to demonstrate multisensory image's relevance (Huang and Gross, 2010). To fill this gap, this research argues that multisensory image is inseparable from the construct of destination image and is important in generating an overall positive destination image.

As such, this research addresses two gaps in measuring the destination image construct: the incorporation of conative image and multisensory image and the investigation of the interrelationships among multisensory, cognitive, affective and conative images. Therefore, this research accounts for the four image components within one framework and aims to establish a more comprehensive and interactive destination image construct.

The second academic gap that this research attempts to address is related to factors influencing destination image formation. The formation of destination image comprises a set of pre-visit factors and an actual visit to the destination (Gunn, 1988). In the formation process, tourists' onsite experiences contribute to a complex and realistic destination image (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). However, most studies

are segmented (Gallarza et al., 2002; Ramkisson, Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2009; Tasci and Gartner, 2007), with focus on pre-visit and personal factors, such as information sources, travel motivations and socio-demographic characteristics (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; Gil and Ritchie, 2008; Li, Cai, Lehto and Huang, 2010). By contrast, studies of post-visit factors received less attention (Beerli and Martin, 2004b; Lee, Chang, Hou and Lin, 2008). However, it is clear that research including post-visit factors respect the image formation process and reflect a more realistic image formation.

One of the post-visit factors is intensity of visit, which shows the extent of tourists' interactions with the destination. Intensity of visit was first measured by the number of places of interest visited (Beerli and Martin, 2004b; Santos et al., 2011). However, with only two studies, it is weak in verifying this relationship (Santos et al., 2011). Furthermore, measuring intensity of visit solely by number of places of interest visited seems insufficient. This is because tourists' interaction with a destination are obtained from different perspectives, such as duration of the stay, relationship with the locals, participation in the local activities, and consumption of tourist souvenirs. Thus, there is a need to extend the measurements of intensity of visit and further investigate the effect on different destination image components.

Another post-visit factor is tourist experience. Tourist experience provides 'sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and rational values' to the tourists (Schmitt, 1999a, p12). As such, scholars in the fields of tourist experience and destination image have agreed that the impression of a destination relates to tourist experience; dissimilar destination images arise from different on-site experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Lee et al., 2008). However, early researchers seem to overlook the 'experience-image' relationship (Beerli and Martin, 2004b; Lee et al., 2008). Hence, there is a call to measure tourist experience technically and further explore the experience-image relationship.

The abovementioned points present two gaps in post-visit factors that influence destination image formation. First, the effect of intensity of visit needs

deeper exploration from the perspective of number of places of interest visited and wider exploration of other ways to interact with a destination. Second, additional theoretical measurements of tourist experience should be employed in the experience-image relationship. Therefore, this research attempts to supplement the literature on destination image formation in the post-visit phase.

The third academic issue pertains to research domains in destination image studies. Regarding destination types, although tourist preferences are changing away from big cities and towards vacations in small towns (Zeng, 2010; Santos et al., 2011), the most popularly studied types of destinations are complicated large-scale destinations - countries, states and cities (Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002). The small-scale destinations, such as medium-sized cities and small towns, have weak images and are overlooked by previous researchers (Santos et al., 2011). Furthermore, regarding destination regions, most image studies were conducted in developed European and American areas, and ignored the situation in Asia and third-world countries (Awaritefe, 2004). This geographical gap justifies the need for destination image research in small-scale destinations in Asia and developing countries.

Fourthly, this research also systematically considers research methodology. Most studies employed quantitative research that requires the respondents to rate a set of pre-determined image attributes, while few studies used qualitative research that allows respondents to speak freely about their impressions of a destination, or a mixed method research (Elliot and Papadopoulou, 2016; Lai and Li, 2016). However, researchers suggested to use a mix of qualitative and quantitative research to determine a salient and relevant image list for a valid research result (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; 2003; Jenkins, 1999). The methodological gap encourages this research to use a mixed-method approach to obtain the data.

In addition to the four academic problems that brought possible opportunities for this research to achieve, this research also tries to solve one industrial problem in China's ancient town tourism. A major factor restricting China's ancient town

tourism development is the lack of unique and recognizable destination image (Zeng, 2010). To improve the ancient towns' reputation and for sustainable development, destination image should be the priority of concern by destination marketers (Wang, 2010; Yuan, 2010). Thus, this research, among the pioneers in China's ancient town studies, attempts to provide some insights on creating and repairing destination image for ancient town practitioners. Based on the problem statements, next section presents the significance of this research.

1.4   Significance of the Research

This research contributes to two areas: theoretical knowledge and industry applications. It generates a framework to study the interrelationships among different image components and the post-visit factors that influence image formation. It is applied to China's ancient towns and highlights this specific type of destination. The following paragraphs discuss the five contributions of this research.

The first two contributions of this research relate to destination image construct and research method. This research proposes a more integrative construct of destination image by incorporating cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory images using a mixed-method approach. In the first phase, this research consists of qualitative interviews that explore the multisensory image of Phoenix ancient town. By doing so, it will validate the existence and importance of multisensory image in the tourists' minds. In the second phase, this research includes conative image, which has previously been overlooked, and multisensory image, which is quite a new concept, to investigate the interrelationships along with the cognitive and affective images.

The third contribution of this research relates to the factors that influence destination image formation in the post-visit phase. This research attempts to verify the effect of the number of places of interest visited on destination image formation and expands the measurements of intensity of visit through length of stay and

interaction with local residents. Additionally, this research attempts to measure tourist experience technically and systematically, and highlight the experience-image relationship. Furthermore, this research is the pioneer to study a moderating effect, frequency of visit, within a destination image framework.

The fourth contribution of this research relates to research domain. In spite of the rising popularity of visiting historical small towns and the increasing interests to destination image studies, few empirical studies have investigated ancient towns' destination image (Vela, 2009; Santos et al., 2011). Especially, ancient towns in China have garnered little attention in English tourism literature, and very little is known about their images and the factors that influence their images (Lv and Huang, 2012). Hence, this research intends to fill the gap of small-scale destinations in Asia and developing countries by studying China's ancient towns.

The last contribution of this research relates to the practical value to China's ancient towns. This research is intended for ancient towns' practitioners who are interested in identifying and improving their destination images and for whom are eager to more effectively and efficiently promote the destinations to potential tourists. This research will help Phoenix ancient town to address the strengths and weaknesses in tourism development. In particular, the qualitative interviews on multisensory image will provide very distinctive, specific and unique image cues to Phoenix's tourism authorities and help them to correct their negative images and enhance their positive images. Therefore, this research is significant in providing academic and industry insights on destination image and China's ancient towns.

1.5   Research Objectives

Based on previous literature and research gaps in the area of destination image, this research attempts to achieve six research objectives:

i. To explore the existence and importance of multisensory image based on the setting of Phoenix ancient town.

ii. To investigate the interrelationships of (a) multisensory image, (b) cognitive image, (c) affective image and (d) conative image under destination image construct among visitors to Phoenix ancient town.

iii. To investigate the influence of previous experience on post-visit destination image formation among visitors to Phoenix ancient town.

iv. To investigate the influence of tourist experience on post-visit destination image formation among visitors to Phoenix ancient town.

v. To investigate the influence of intensity of visit on post-visit destination image formation among visitors to Phoenix ancient town.

vi. To exam the moderating effect of frequency of visit on the proposed framework for post-visit destination image formation among visitors at Phoenix ancient town.

1.6 Research Questions

To achieve the research objectives, this research has to answer the six research questions accordingly in below:

i. What are the multisensory images of Phoenix in tourists' minds?

ii. What are the interrelationships of (a) multisensory, (b) cognitive, (c) affective and (d) conative images under destination image construct among visitors to Phoenix?

iii. How does previous experience influence post-visit destination image formation among visitors to Phoenix?

iv.   How does tourist experience influence post-visit destination image formation among visitors to Phoenix?

v.   How does intensity of visit influence post-visit destination image formation among visitors to Phoenix?

vi.   Will frequency of visit moderate any of the relationships within the proposed framework for post-visit destination image formation among visitors to Phoenix?

1.7   Scope of the Research

This research investigates post-visit factors that influence a multifaceted destination image formation in China's ancient town tourism and is conducted in Phoenix ancient town in Hunan Province. The respondents are any domestic adult tourists who have completed their trips to Phoenix.

1.8   Operational Definition of Terms

The definitions of dependent and independent variables used in this research are presented in this section:

a)   **Destination image**: Destination image is defined as 'the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination' (Crompton, 1979, p. 19). In this research, destination image refers to tourists' mental impressions of Phoenix, consisting of multisensory representations, factual knowledge, inner feelings and behavioral intentions after their visit.

b)   **Cognitive image**: Cognitive image refers to individuals' knowledge and beliefs regarding a destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a). In this research, cognitive image is individuals' objective knowledge and beliefs regarding Phoenix's physical attributes.

c) **Affective image**: Affective image is the emotions that a destination is able to evoke (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a). In this research, affective image is tourists' subjective feelings about Phoenix.

d) **Conative image**: Conative image is the tendency to visit a destination in a certain period of time (Pike and Ryan, 2004). In this research, conative image is tourists' intention to revisit, recommend and speak positively about Phoenix.

e) **Multisensory image**: Multisensory image is individuals' insight into the destination based on the representations of vision, sound, smell, taste and touch (Son and Pearce, 2005). In this research, multisensory image is tourists' insights based on what they have seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched in Phoenix.

f) **Previous experience** refers to how many times the tourists have visited a destination (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). This research divides Phoenix's tourists into first-timers/less-frequent visitors and repeaters/more-frequent visitors based on previous experience.

g) **Tourist experience** refers to tourists physically, emotionally and spiritually encounter with a destination (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). This research measures tourist experience with education, esthetics, entertainment and escapist experience in Phoenix.

h) **Intensity of visit** refers to the extent of the tourists' interaction with a destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004b). This research measures intensity of visit by the length of stay, the number of places of interest visited and interaction with local residents.

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