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UNVEILING INDIAN TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE: A STRUCTURED APPROACH

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Abstract

With poising economic changes, sustainability issues, technology disruption driving tourists' behaviours, the global tourism industry was at the outset to manage and brand the destinations strategically. This needed careful evaluation of tourists' perception on the tourism destinations. While literature had numerous measurement frameworks, destination image assessment required more contemporary and comprehensive approach that aligned with the external changes in the business and economic environment. This research used RDS technique and identify the 430 tourists. With the finalized sample of 351, three-stage analysis was carried out on the selected destination image components. The findings revealed the structural relationship between the cognitive, affective, and conative components and uncovered the novel dimensions such as regeneration and responsibility elements that were previously overlooked. This comprehensive framework produced and validated in this research would facilitate the policy makers and destination marketers in designing destination branding strategies with an emphasis on integrating sustainability elements for destination future.

Keywords: *Destination, Cognitive Image, Affective Image, Conative Image, Sustainability, Destination Branding*

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Introduction

As global tourism expands, destination management faces increasing complexity (Chen & Phou, 2014). Evolving tourist motives—especially post-pandemic—have made destination choices more intricate (Ahmad et al., 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). New tourism forms such as virtual, food-based, sustainable, gender-focused, and spiritual tourism further challenge competitiveness and experience management (Sio et al., 2024). Tourists now seek to surpass previous memorable experiences, prompting destinations to offer multifaceted value (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2019; Castillo-Villar, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Munoz & Chen, 2020). Post-pandemic resilience, marked by readiness and agility, is crucial for branding and meeting preferences (Nadeau et al., 2022). Technological travel, lodging, and dining shifts create cross-competitive challenges, reshaping marketing strategies (Buhalis et al., 2019; Shankar, 2022). Additionally, unsustainable practices threaten tourism resources, pushing for circular economy approaches (Ravichandran, 2023). Despite strategic efforts, desired outcomes remain elusive, highlighting the need to influence tourists' perceptions. Evaluating destination image becomes essential for sustaining competitiveness and long-term viability.

The Rationale of the Research

Research on destination image dates back to the 1970s (Mayo, 1973; Stepchenkova & Li, 2014) and has since gained significant scholarly attention (Dolnicar & Grun, 2013; Shankar, 2020). Studies have examined destination image from various angles, including tourists' perceptions, stakeholder engagement, branding, and policymaking (Chen & Phou, 2013; Koshy et al., 2022; Stepchenkova & Li, 2014; Zhang et al., 2021), contributing meaningfully to destination governance and marketing (Shankar, 2019). Destination image plays a central role in tourism and hospitality marketing, shaping tourist behaviours and helping DMOs position their offerings competitively (Morgan & Pritchard, 2002; Stepchenkova & Li, 2014; Baloglu et al., 2014; Deng & Li, 2019; Heitmann, 2011; Kislali et al., 2015). However, most existing literature focuses on developed countries, with limited exploration in emerging economies like India (Shankar, 2019). Research measuring destination image in dynamic external environments is still evolving (Bui et al., 2022). As India's tourism market grows, which is projected to reach US$34.25 billion by 2028 (Statista, 2024), evaluating destination image becomes critical for formulating strategic branding initiatives. India must demonstrate resilience and responsible practices in the post-pandemic context of heightened health and sustainability concerns (Rodrigues et al., 2023). However, the literature inadequately addresses these evolving dynamics in the Indian context, prompting fresh research inquiries.

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RQ1: What attributes contribute to the destination image of Indian Tourism Destinations?

RQ2: How can these destination image attributes be thoroughly and comprehensively assessed?

RQ3: What actionable recommendations can be deduced for theory, practice, policy, and society based on the insights garnered from this research?

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background and derivation of the research gap. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, while Section 4 analyses the data and presents the findings. Finally, Section 5 concludes with theoretical, practical, policy and societal implications, limitations, and the research's scope.

Review of Literature

In this section, a comprehensive review analysis has been conducted on the perspectives of the destination image.

Research Background – Destination Image

Defining destination image is inherently complex. Crompton (1979) offered one of the earliest and most cited definitions, describing it as *"the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination.*" This definition underpins numerous studies assessing tourist perceptions. Destination image consists of three core components: cognitive, affective, and conative (Kim & Chen, 2016). The cognitive image reflects tourists' beliefs, the affective relates to emotional responses during the visit, and the conative refers to behavioral intentions (Tasci et al., 2007). These are shaped by socio-demographic factors, motives, information sources, and travel companions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Deng & Liu, 2021; Kislali et al., 2016; Shankar, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Shankar et al., 2022). Destination image influences satisfaction, attitudes, loyalty, and experience sharing (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Deng & Li, 2021; Kim & Chen, 2016; Kock et al., 2016; Millman & Pizam, 1995). Baloglu and McCleary's (1999) model remains foundational, though later studies also explore conative and holistic images, especially with digital transformations and virtual tourism (Agapito et al., 2013; Hyun & O'Keefe, 2012; Kim & Chen, 2015; Liu et al., 2024; Shankar, 2022). Image evaluations employ structured Likert-scale methods or unstructured open-ended approaches (Baloglu & Love, 2005; Ceylan et al., 2020; Dolnicar & Grun, 2013; Pan & Li, 2011; Stepchenkova & Li, 2014). Table I enumerates the authors who used the structured approach to measure destination images.

Table 1: Literature Evidence on the Authors Who Used a Structured Approach to Measuring Cognitive Image

Author(s)	Components Focused and Items	Measurement Scale	Nature of the Study
Gartner (1989)	Cognitive image – resource-based, culturally-based, social interaction – in-group and out-group.	Five-point Likert scale	Primary study to measure the tourism image using multidimensional scaling techniques.
Echtner and Ritchie (1993)	Cognitive image – attributes, common characteristics, holistic imagery, unique characteristics.	Six-point Likert scale	This model-based study produces a measurement scale for evaluating the destination image. An emphasis is also given to the effective use of structured and unstructured scales.
Baloglu and McCleary (1999).	Overall image – positive and negative, Cognitive image -quality of experience, attractions, value and environment, Affective image – arousing -sleepy, pleasant-unpleasant, exciting- gloomy, and relaxing-distressing.	7-point anchor scale (Overall), 5-point Likert scale (Cognitive), and 7-point bipolar differential scale (Affective)	A model is being produced to understand the determinants of destination image formation.
Beerli and Martin (2004)	Cognitive image - natural and cultural resources, general, tourist and leisure infrastructures, atmosphere, social setting and environment, sun and sand Affective image - Pleasant/unpleasant place, Exciting/boring place.	7-point Likert type scale (Cognitive) 7-point Likert type scale (Affective; two emotional attributes)	This research intends to evaluate the factors influencing destination image formation.

Author(s)	Components Focused and Items	Measurement Scale	Nature of the Study
	Overall image - very positive/very negative.	7-point single-item Likert type scale (Overall)	
Hosany et al. (2007).	Affective image - unpleasant/pleasant, distressing/relaxing, pretty/ugly, gloomy/exciting, Physical atmosphere - quiet/noisy, innocent/sinful, sleepy/arousing, overcrowded/sparse and Accessibility - lively/stagnant, friendly/cold, easily accessible/isolated, interesting/boring.	7-point bipolar scale with anchors (−3) extremely poor and (+ 3) extremely good	This research study investigates the interrelationship between the destination image and destination personality.
Moon et al. (2011).	Cognitive Image - tourist sites/activities, nightlife and entertainment, ease of communication, hospitality/friendliness/receptiveness, and opportunity for adventure, Affective image – interesting/boring, pleasant/unpleasant, exciting/gloomy, relaxing/distressing, friendly/unfriendly, and arousing/sleepy Conative image - intention to receive new services, complaint behaviour, positive aspects of the region, weaknesses of the region, and intention to share positive and negative things with other people through word-of-mouth.	5-point Likert scale (Cognitive, Affective and Conative)	The primary purpose of this research work is to analyse the influence of consumers event quality perception on destination image.

Author(s)	Components Focused and Items	Measurement Scale	Nature of the Study
Chen and Phou (2013)	Cognitive Image - destination brand, atmosphere, cultural environment, natural environment and entertainment.	5-point Likert-type scale	This study focuses on understanding the interrelationship between destination image, personality, and loyalty.
Baloglu et al. (2014)	Cognitive image - general characteristics, the atmosphere or mood, tourist attractions and popular tourist activities. Affective images - pleasant – unpleasant; arousing – sleepy; relaxing – distressing; and exciting – gloomy. Overall image - very negative - very positive.	5-point scale (Cognitive; poor to excellent), 7-point bipolar (Affective), and 10-point scale (Overall; very negative to very positive)	The authors attempted to produce a model that inculcates destination image and destination personality, focusing on tourists' behaviour.
Hallmann et al. (2015)	Cognitive image - service quality, physiography, sports and event facilities, visitor management, hospitality, and costs. Affective image - gloomy-cheerful, dull-exciting, unpleasant-pleasant, distressing-relaxing and conative–visiting intention.	5-point Likert scale (Cognitive and conative) and 7-point semantic differential scale (Affective)	The focus of this study is to develop a model of destination image about the winter sports destination and to see the influence on visiting intention perhaps.

Author(s)	Components Focused and Items	Measurement Scale	Nature of the Study
Souiden et al. (2017)	Overall image - beautiful place, good infrastructure, a place for businesses, well-developed industrial sector, safe place to invest, high standard of living, offers enjoyable entertainment activities, socially and culturally diverse.	5-point Likert-type scale	This research attempted to study how the destination personality and destination image influence tourists' attitudes and intentions.
Kim et al. (2017)	Overall image – accommodations (infrastructure), appealing food, diverse activities, clean place (atmosphere).	7-point Likert scale	This study analyses the interrelationship between destination personality, destination image and intention to recommend.
Woosnam et al. (2020)	Cognitive – natural characteristics, amenities, attractions, accessibility and social environment. Affective - distressing-relaxing, unpleasant-pleasant, boring-exciting, and sleepy-lively. Overall – Intention to visit and recommendation.	Cognitive – 7-point Likert scale Affective - 7-point semantic differential scale Overall - 7-point Likert scale	The focus of this study is to evaluate how emotional solidarity influences the conative image through the mediation of cognitive and affective image aspects.

Author(s)	Components Focused and Items	Measurement Scale	Nature of the Study
Kovaˇci´c et al. (2022)	Cognitive – Scales developed by Echtner and Richie (1993) and Gallarza et al. (2002) Affective – exciting – depressing, interesting–boring, pleasant–uncomfortable, practical– harmful, and favourable–unfavourable.	5-point Likert scale (Cognitive) and Bipolar semantic differential scale (Affective)	This research primarily proposes a concept and tests it. The model consists of tourists.' characteristics, destination image, destination personality, and activity preferences.
Zhang et al. (2022)	Cognitive – natural attractions, cultural and historical features, local food, golf activities, nightlife and Affective Image – pleasant, relaxing and arousing.	5-point Likert scale (Cognitive and Affective)	The study primarily intends to analyse the destination personality and behavioural intention with the destination image mediating role.

Table 1 Description: Table 1 represents the components focused on measuring destination image, and its scaling techniques and the primary purpose of the research works.

Table 1 lists authors who analyzed destination images using cognitive, affective, conative, or overall image components, mainly through structured questionnaires with 5- or 7-point Likert and semantic differential scales. However, some adopted unstructured methods, including Stepchenkova and Li (2014), Hunter (2016), Deng and Li (2018), Cardoso et al. (2019), He et al. (2021), Arefieva et al. (2021), and Bastiaansen et al. (2022). Others used qualitative approaches like structured interviews (Kislali et al., 2019). Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) conducted a meta-analysis to assess the destination image's role in predicting behavioural intentions (Tasci, 2006). Content analysis was used in Garay (2019).

Research Gap

Existing literature has evaluated destination image using cognitive, affective, and conative components (Baloglu et al., 2014; Beerli & Martin, 2014; Santana et al., 2018), examining factors like attractions, infrastructure, emotional perceptions, and overall image. However, many studies overlook evolving external factors influencing tourists' motives, attitudes, intentions, loyalty, and recommendations (Aksoy & Kiyci, 2011; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Bigne et al., 2001; Chen & Phou, 2013; Hallmann et al., 2015; Karri & Dogra, 2022; Shankar, 2020; Shankar et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Tourists' perceptions are also shaped by demographics, information sources, and crisis events (Ravichandran, 2023; Souiden et al., 2017; Shankar, 2019; 2020; Shankar et al., 2022). Most studies limit their scope to familiar destinations, neglecting the impact of digital tools and global travel that rapidly reshape perceptions (Kislali, 2016; Shankar, 2022). Health crises have added further complexity and ambiguity in destination image assessment (Ahmad et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023). Moreover, emerging tourism forms, like regenerative tourism, call for a rethinking of image formation (Dredge, 2022; Siow et al., 2022; Yılmaz & Anasori, 2022; Ravichandran, 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). These gaps underscore the need for enhanced destination image evaluation frameworks to support academic literature and practical policymaking.

Research Methods and Materials

This research adopts an empirical quantitative approach. Initially, an extensive literature review helped collate items for measuring destination

image. Given limitations in existing tools, a semi-structured survey with open-ended inputs was piloted among 50 respondents, resulting in the finalized questionnaire.

Sampling and Scope

The study focuses on tourists who visited Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu—a region rich in spiritual, religious, rural, and natural attractions and a gateway to Nilgiris, Kerala, and Karnataka. Tamil Nadu ranks as India's top tourist destination, with 2189.11 lakh arrivals in 2022. Coimbatore alone recorded 59,04,951 visitors in 2021.

Sampling Technique and Size

A respondent-driven sampling (RDS) technique was used, suitable for niche audience targeting (Hughes et al., 2020). The survey was distributed to 430 tourists through Facebook travel groups and referrals; 351 valid responses were used for analysis.

Data Collection and Measurement

Tourists who visited in 2022–2023 participated. The structured questionnaire included three sections: demographic details, cognitive image (19 items on a 5-point Likert scale), and affective image (14 items on a 7-point semantic differential scale), supported by established sources (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2014; Zhang et al., 2022). Conative image was measured using two items: revisit and recommend intentions, rated on a 5-point likelihood scale. The following Tables 2 and 3 show the list of items.

Table 2: Cognitive Image Items are Chosen for This Research

Cognitive Image	Items	Items Reference
C1	Hygienic environment	Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Beerli and Martin (2014)
C2	Well-developed infrastructure	Echtner and Ritchie (1993), Baloglu and McClearly (1999), Beerli and Martin (2014), Souiden et al. (2017), Zhang et al (2022)
C3	Safe destination	Baloglu and McCleary (1999). Beerli and Martin (2014)

Cognitive Image	Items	Items Reference
C4	A lot of entertainment and nightlife attributes	Echtner and Ritchie (1993), Baloglu and McClearly (1999), Beerli and Martin (2014), Zhang et al. (2022)
C5	Good accommodations	Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Beerli and Martin (2014), Souiden et al. (2017)
C6	Excellent food representing the destination	Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Zhang et al. (2022)
C7	Friendly residents and people ambience	Gartner (1989), Beerli and Martin (2014), Zhang et al. (2021)
C8	It has cultural and historical attractions	Gartner (1989), Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Zhang et al. (2022)
C9	Bestowed with natural attractions	Gartner (1989), Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Beerli and Martin (2014), Zhang et al. (2022)
C10	Responsible tourism environment	Mihalic (2016)
C11	Economical destination and the best shopping destination	Beerli and Martin (2014), Zhang et al. (2021)
C12	Sustainable environment	Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2019)
C13	Aspiring rural ambience	Souiden et al. (2017)
C14	It is filled with adventurous, fun and recreational activities.	Echtner and Ritchie (1993), Souiden et al. (2017)
C15	Spiritual destination	Shankar (2020)
C16	Religious destination	Shankar (2020)
C17	Regenerative destination	Dredge (2022)
C18	Very socially appealing businesses	Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Zhang et al. (2021)

Table 2 Description: Table 2 represents the list of cognitive image items chosen for this research, referencing established evidence.

Table 3: Affective Image Items are Chosen for This Research

Affective Image	Items	Items Reference
A1	Pleasant/Unpleasant	Baloglu and McClearly (1999), Hosany et al. (2006), Beerli and Martin (2014), Kovaˇci´c et al. (2022), Zhang et al. (2022)
A2	Relaxing/distressing	
A3	Pretty/untidy	
A4	Exciting/depressing	
A5	Quite/noisy	
A6	Arousing/sleepy	
A7	Sparse/crowded	
A8	Lively/gloomy	
A9	Friendly/unfriendly	
A10	Easily Accessible/isolated	
A11	Interesting/boring	
A12	Innocent/sinful	
A13	Polluted/green	
A14	Responsible/irresponsible	

Table 3 Description: Table 3 represents the list of affective image items chosen for this research, referencing established evidence.

Informed Consent

Anonymity and ethical standards were maintained, with no personally identifiable or sensitive questions included.

Common Method Bias

To address potential biases, Harman's single-factor test was applied (Gonçalves et al., 2016). Results confirmed no single factor dominance, and multiple factors with eigenvalues >1.0 accounted for 70% of total variance, confirming robustness and absence of common method bias. This strengthens the validity and credibility of the findings.

Analysis and Results

The analysis includes diverse gender representation: 40.4% male, 39.8% female, and 19.6% undisclosed. Most respondents (59.8%) were aged 20–40, while 27.9% were aged 40–60. Educationally, 51% were postgraduates, and 27.9% held professional qualifications. The majority (64.7%) earned INR 50,000–75,000 monthly, and 54% were married. About 43% lived in nuclear families, and 68% resided in urban areas, indicating broad demographic diversity. The analysis followed three stages: First, EFA was conducted to identify key factors and items. Second, CFA were performed separately for cognitive, affective, and conative images. Finally, SEM tested their structural relationships.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

EFA, a dimension reduction technique of SPSS, has been used with varimax rotation to measure the underlying dimensions. The following table shows the factor analysis results of cognitive and affective image components.

Table 4: Factor Loadings and Analysis Results of Cognitive and Affective Image

Cognitive and Affective Image	Factor Loadings	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Chi-Square)
C1	0.76	0.81	0.69	0.793	0.795	1554.016
C2	0.5					
C3	0.61					
C4	0.77					
C5	0.41					
C6	0.79					
C7	0.8					
C8	0.55					

Cognitive and Affective Image	Factor Loadings	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Chi-Square)
C9	0.82					
C10	0.6					
C11	0.78					
C12	0.48					
C13	0.76					
C14	0.6					
C15	0.81					
C16	0.83					
C17	0.75					
C18	0.78					
A1	0.89	0.83	0.79	0.806	0.801	1584.12
A2	0.73					
A3	0.6					
A4	0.54					
A5	0.82					
A6	0.56					
A7	0.66					
A8	0.68					
A9	0.77					
A10	0.64					
A11	0.51					
A12	0.83					
A13	0.49					
A14	0.8					

Table 4 presents the comprehensive EFA results for cognitive and affective image constructs. Cronbach's alpha values indicate high internal consistency: 0.793 for cognitive and 0.806 for affective images. Cognitive image items with factor loadings above 0.7—such as hygienic environment, appealing food, friendly residents, natural attractions, economic value, regenerative qualities, nightlife, spiritual and religious sites, adventure/recreation, shopping, and rural ambience—were retained. Similarly, affective items, including pleasant, relaxing, friendly, quiet, innocent, and responsible, met the threshold (>0.7) and were grouped for further analysis. Items below 0.7 were excluded. The KMO values (0.795 for cognitive, 0.801 for affective) and Bartlett's test results (χ^2 = 1554.016 and 1584.12) confirmed sampling adequacy and factorability. Additionally, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values met acceptable thresholds of 0.7 and 0.5, ensuring the reliability and validity of the measurement model. These findings validate the robustness of the constructs used for further analysis.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The CFA of AMOS has been used to confirm the model's existence and fitness in the cognitive and affective image. Therefore, the derived factors from the EFA have been loaded on the extended data from the respondents to test the existence of model fitness in each factor. The assessment of model fit can be done through the following indices represented in Table 5.

Table 5 represents the acceptable model fit values of CFA analysis and the results derived on CFA of cognitive and affective image.

From Table 5, it has been found that the cognitive image has adequate model fit as the CMIN/df = 2.533, which is less than the acceptable value of 5, RMSEA = 0.066 < 0.08, GFI = 0.988 > 0.90, TLI = 0.937 > 0.90 and CFI = 0.975 > 0.90. The cognitive image items such as appealing food image, friendly residents and people ambience, natural attractions, regenerative destination, and nightlife and entertainment have been iterated as the best contributors for the model fit. Similarly, the affective image does have adequate model fit as the values of CMIN/df, RMSEA, GFI, TLI, and CFI are 2.849, 0.070, 0.987, 0.947, and 0.982, respectively. Pleasant, friendly, quiet, responsible, arousing, and relaxing are the iterated affective image items that best contribute to the model fit.

Table 5: Acceptable Model Fit Indices, Values and the Results of CFA

Indices	Chi-Square/df	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	Inferences
Acceptable fit values	< 5.0 (Kline, 2009 & Zhang et al, 2022)	< 0.08 (Coughlan, 2011 & Zhang et al, 2022)	> 0.90 (Hooper et al, 2008 & Zhang et al, 2022)	> 0.90 (Hair et al, 2011 & Zhang et al, 2022)	> 0.90 (Hair et al, 2011 & Zhang et al, 2022)	The model fit values should fall into the prescribed ranges
CFA (Cognitive)	2.533 < 5	0.066 < 0.08	0.988 > 0.90	0.937 > 0.90	0.975 > 0.90	Accepted
CFA (Affective)	2.849 < 5	0.070 < 0.08	0.987 > 0.90	0.947 > 0.90	0.982 > 0.90	Accepted

Discriminant validity analysis was also performed to assesses whether constructs that are theoretically unrelated demonstrate no significant relationship with each other. Discriminant Validity was tested where the AVE exceeded the squared correlation between the constructs. The values demonstrated low correlations between factors cognitive and affective destination image elements. The values were ranging between 0.062 and 0.135, confirming that these constructs are distinct and theoretically unrelated.

Structural Equation Model (SEM)

The SEM of AMOS was used to test the structural relationship between the cognitive, affective, and conative images. The indices that are used to evaluate the measurement model of CFA are indicators of structural model fit as well (refer to Table 4 for the model fit acceptable values and its corresponding cited references), that is, CMIN/df, RMSEA, GFI, TLI, and CFI and the SEM results reveal that CMIN/df = 3.161 < 5, RMSEA = 0.070 < 0.08, GFI = 0.958 > 0.090, TLI = 0.942 > 0.90 and CFI = 0.941 > 0.90. Thus, a structural model exists between cognitive, affective and conative destination images. The regression estimates results infer that the cognitive image has significant relationship with the affective image (C.R. = 6.979, S.E. 0.147 and the p-value = 0.000 < 0.05), cognitive image influence conative image (C.R. = 5.221, S. E. = 0.120 and the p-value = 0.000 < 0.05), and the compelling image has significant relationship with the conative image (C.R. = 4.945, S.E. = 0.110, and the p-value = 0.000 < 0.05).

Robustness Check

Two approaches ensured robustness. First, the Mann-Whitney U Test, widely applied in social sciences (Gonçalves et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2020), showed no significant demographic differences. Second, regression analysis revealed significant outcomes for age, gender, income, education, and occupation, affirming stability. EFA indicated high reliability for cognitive and affective image scales, with strong loadings for attributes like appealing food, natural attractions, and relaxing atmospheres. CFA confirmed model fit, while SEM validated significant interrelationships among cognitive, affective, and conative images. The study offers reliable insights into destination image dimensions and their impact on tourist perceptions, supporting strategic destination marketing.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

This study aligns with foundational works on destination image by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Gartner (1989), Echtner and Ritchie (1993), Kovačić et al. (2022), and Zhang et al. (2022), while offering several novel contributions. Like Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and Zhang et al. (2022), cognitive attributes—such as natural attractions, cultural elements, local food, and nightlife—are central to image perception. It also highlights affective dimensions like pleasantness and relaxation, consistent with Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Kovačić et al. (2022). However, the study advances existing literature by incorporating regenerative and responsible image dimensions, emphasizing sustainability as a growing influence on tourist perceptions (Baloglu et al., 2014; Beerli & Martin, 2014; Hallmann et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Souiden et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Utilizing EFA, CFA, and SEM, the study enhances methodological rigour and offers comprehensive insights into how cognitive and affective components influence the conative image. Unlike earlier research, it conducts robustness checks across demographic variables, reinforcing result stability. Although structured methods ensured validity, scholars such as Chu et al. (2022) and Lai et al. (2020) recommend integrating unstructured methods for deeper insights. This research also contextualizes destination image within shifting global realities, such as health crises, evolving tourist behaviour, and emerging tourism forms, which impact destination competitiveness. While destination personality, loyalty, and governance have been explored (Chen & Phou, 2013; Paunović et al., 2020; Lee & Xue, 2020; Shankar, 2020), destination image still warrants deeper scrutiny. By advancing the sustainability perspective (Shankar, 2022), this study reaffirms established theories and adds fresh dimensions, methodological depth, and contemporary relevance. It ultimately enriches the understanding of image formation and its role in fostering destination loyalty and attachment (Sun et al., 2015).

Practical Implications

The research findings provide several actionable insights for practitioners in the tourism industry, especially destination marketers. First, it is recommended that destination marketers adopt a holistic approach to destination branding, considering cognitive, affective, and conative image components. Incorporating novel aspects like regenerative and responsible images into branding strategies can enhance destination attractiveness and resonate with environmentally conscious tourists (Ravichandran, 2023).

The marketers can, therefore, use the opportunity presented by the global health crisis to encourage hygienic, healthy, and sustainable behaviors among tourists. Regenerative destination images can, for instance, encourage active participation in the recovery of destinations, fostering a sense of contribution and leaving destinations better off than before (Hussain, 2021; Yılmaz & Anasori, 2022). Third, leveraging technology-driven marketing tools like social media and virtual reality could increase destination messaging and reach across diverse demographics. Virtual tourism efforts matched to the destination's attributes become a good opportunity for building resilience post-pandemic with sustainable and responsible consumption (Chu et al., 2022; Tessitore et al., 2014). Destination marketers should apply proper communication that focuses on multiple socio-demographic groups to further reach the destination brand. International standardized advertising strategies reinforcing destination image and sustainability themes can further enhance destination competitiveness and attract environmentally conscious tourists (Jana et al., 2025; Srivastava et al., 2024).

Policy and Societal Implications

The research findings have broad implications on tourism policy development and societal welfare. Firstly, policymakers should coordinate destination marketing efforts with policy objectives in order to shape tourists' perceptions and behaviors. Policies promoting sustainability, health consciousness, and crowd management would influence tourists' cognitive image perception and help the tourism sector recover its economic gains and revenue generation. Policies and policymakers are necessary for promoting residents and stakeholders in sustainable and health-conscious behaviors (Shoukat et al., 2023). Policies such as responsible consumption, environmental protection, and community engagement can strengthen destination competitiveness to attract environmentally conscious tourists, who will benefit not only the tourism industry but society at large. Third, social factors such as friendliness by residents and ambience by people should be accorded priority as they greatly impact tourists' perception and behavior. Sustainable destination atmospheres contribute to destination brand power and attract diverse tourists, promoting societal well-being and economic growth. Fourth, this research informs tourism policymakers to integrate regenerative and responsible image components, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) 2030. Emphasizing social factors like friendliness and community engagement in destination management strategies can enhance competitiveness and contribute to social inclusion.

Conclusion

This study finds that multiple cognitive and affective dimensions shape the destination image of Indian tourism destinations. Cognitive attributes include appealing food, friendly ambience, natural attractions, and regenerative environments, while affective attributes include pleasant and relaxing atmospheres. These collectively highlight the multidimensional nature of destination image, addressing RQ1: What attributes contribute to the destination image of Indian Tourism Destinations? EFA revealed high-reliability factors, and CFA confirmed model fit. SEM further validated strong structural relationships among cognitive, affective, and conative images. Robustness checks, including the Mann-Whitney U Test and regression analysis, demonstrated stability across demographic groups. These methodological layers ensure the robustness and credibility of findings. To comprehensively evaluate destination image attributes, RQ2 is addressed: How can these attributes be evaluated?—by integrating quantitative and qualitative methods with robustness checks. The following sections address RQ3: What actionable recommendations can be derived for theory, practice, policy, and society? Based on these insights.

Limitations and Scope of the Research

Although this study offers valuable insights into destination image, its scope is limited to a single destination, reducing generalizability. The sample may not fully reflect diverse tourist views, and the chosen approach may miss certain dimensions. Future research should expand contexts, apply advanced methods, and explore sustainability implications.

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