

# Assessment and Measurement of Destination Image: Mix of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Method

Jia Xiong\*, Noor Hazarina Hashim

Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, 81300, Malaysia

**Abstract** Due to its great significance to both destinations and tourists, the concept of destination image has been of great interests since 1970s. This paper reviews the assessment and measurement of destination image and later proposes a development of multifaceted destination image framework. In addition, this paper proposes a combination of qualitative and quantitative research method to measure destination image. Finally, by explaining how to apply the proposed research method on multifaceted destination image assessment, this paper provides insights in developing destination image research in a comprehensive and complete way.

**Keywords** Multifaceted Destination Image Assessment, Multisensory Image, Research Techniques, Mixed Method

## 1. Introduction

Due to the improved standard of life, raised disposable income and efficient transportation networks, more and more individuals enjoy traveling around the world. The increasing demand of tourism results in the emerging of new destinations, which expands the destination choices available to tourists. As a result, fierce competitions appear between destinations and force the destinations to win more tourists to survive and succeed. To achieve these goals, a destination must favorably differentiate itself from its competitors and positively position itself in tourists' minds. A key for destination success is to create and manage a recognizable and distinctive destination image[1],[2].

From destination providers' perspective, destination image provides the basis for effective and efficient planning and positioning strategy to attract tourists and to sustain in the global competition[3]. From tourists' perspectives, destination image influences pre-visit destination choice, destination evaluation and future travel intentions[4]. Thus, destination image is important in the process of developing marketing strategy and understanding tourist behavior.

However, various researchers criticize that destination image studies are lacking a conceptual framework[1],[2],[10],[15]. There is no consensus in multifaceted assessment of destination image among researchers and there is possible debate around the way of interaction between these components[9],[12]. Besides, although Echtner and Ritchie[2],[18] have made a revolution in destination image

research, some methodological issues still need to be emphasized. As such, complex and robust research methods are necessary to assess destination image in a reliable and comprehensive manner.

This paper attempts to address the limitation of previous destination image research by proposing a conceptual framework of multifaceted destination image assessment by incorporating four components: cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory to define destination image. Secondly, this paper proposes using mixed research method for a holistic measurement of destination image. This paper begins with the review of components of destination image construct followed by techniques used to measure destination image in previous research. The final section proposes research framework and research method of multifaceted destination image assessment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Multifaceted Destination Image Assessment

Destination image is widely defined as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination"[6, p18]. Although majority of researchers recognized that destination image is a multifaceted construct, but when determining the components under this construct, different opinions appeared. Perhaps the most popular and widely used construct of destination image is the dual components, cognitive image and affective image[7]. Later, Pike and Ryan[9] added the third component, conative image, to describe destination image. This addition, however, received less attention and remained debatable[10]. Latest literature suggested the inclusion of multisensory image in destination image construct[11]. However, it is still subject to empirical

\* Corresponding author:

xiongjia19880101@yahoo.com (Jia Xiong)

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studies to prove its relevance[12].

Cognitive image refers to individual's knowledge and beliefs toward a destination, representing the objective reality of the destination attributes, such as heritage wealth[1],[13]. Affective image is related to the emotions that a destination is able to evoke and how tourists subjectively feel about a destination, which always measured by "arousing-sleepy, pleasant-unpleasant, exciting-gloomy, relaxing-distressing"[1],[13]. Conative image, the action component, reflects a likelihood of selecting a destination and the tendency to visit in a certain period of time, both for first-time visit and repeat visit[9]. Multisensory image refers to the individual's insights of the destination based on vision, auditory, olfactory, taste and tactile[11].

These destination image components are related and interacted with each other complicatedly. Numerous studies have proved the casual relationship between cognitive and affective image, where there is no doubt that the former is positively related with the later[14],[15]. In another word, the generally favorable feelings toward destinations come from an adequate level of supposedly positive attributes; oppositely, unfavorable feelings toward destinations are due to perceived negative attributes[11].

Even very limited studies have incorporated conative image, it has been proved that the result of likelihood of visiting a destination is reinforced by cognitive and affective image[7],[8],[15]. If the cognitive image and/or affective image are positive, conative image will be encouraging; in contrast, if the former two are neutral or negative, the later will not be encouraging[17].

Tourist experience is multisensory, thus imagery processing depends on storing multisensory information and embracing all the senses to form a holistic impression[2]. However, incorporating multisensory image is a relatively new area[12]. To date, only Son and Pearce[11] and Huang and Gross[12] focused their research on Australia's multisensory image by using qualitative research. The results of tourists' free description of multisensory features showed that, for instance, touching native Australia animals like kangaroos and koalas is the most memorable tactile image; and the sound of birds, sea waves, various foreign languages are the top three auditory images of Australia. Unfortunately, the research of multisensory image has stopped here. There is no further elaboration on this issue, such that testing the interrelationship between cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory image.

## 2.2. Techniques Used in Destination Image Measurement

As can be seen in Figure 1, Echtner and Ritchie[2],[18] divided destination image into six dimensions: attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, common-unique. Attribute-holistic dimensions indicate that destination image is not only based on individual traits or qualities, but also a gestalt, or a total impression a destination makes in tourists' mind. The application of functional-psychological dimensions shows that some images of a destination can be

directly observed or measured, such as attractions, accommodations or price level; while some images are more abstract or intangible, and difficult to observe or measure, such as friendliness, safety or atmosphere. The measurement of destination image should also capture individual functional attributes (price level), as well as individual psychological attributes (friendliness of local people). In addition, holistic functional image is regarded as a mental picture of a destination based on its physical or measurable characteristics, for example, Nepal represents a mountainous picture. Holistic psychological images concern the feelings about the overall atmosphere or mood of a destination, for instance, Nepal gives tourists a mystic impression.

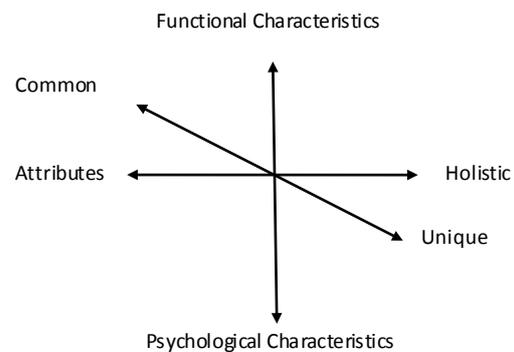


Figure 1. Dimensions of Destination Image

The common images are a core group of traits that can be commonly rated and compared by all destinations, while the unique images are special traits distinguishing a particular destination. The examples of common functional and common psychological images are transportation facilities and safety respectively. The unique functional attributes are the symbols, markers and must-see sights of a destination, such as the Great Wall of China, the Twin Towers of Malaysia. Lastly, the unique psychological characteristics are mainly distinguished by special auras or atmosphere, such that Paris is the city of romance, while Tokyo is surrounded by fashion.

The six dimensions are widely adopted by previous researchers to measure destination image and guide their determination of research techniques in this domain. A quantitative research via structured technique is to measure the common and attribute-based image of a destination along both functional and psychological dimensions, usually by Likert type scales or semantic differential scales. The respondents are required to rate a set of pre-determined image attributes that are specified and incorporated into a standardized instrument[2],[18],[19]. The advantages of structured technique are easy to administer, simple to code, easy to analyze and helpful in comparing different destinations. However, structured technique forces respondents to rate the pre-determined image attributes, in where some of them may not be salient to the respondents, and some relevant or important attributes may be missing[2],[20].

The alternate method for measuring destination image is

unstructured technique in a qualitative research or with an open-ended question. The unstructured technique allows the respondents more freely to describe their own impressions of a destination, thus, the danger of forcing respondents to react to a set of pre-determined questions that may not be an accurate representations of their images can be minimized or avoided. It is significant in capturing a holistic image of a destination, which determines how a particular destination is categorized; and in capturing its unique features and auras that differentiates the destination in the tourists' minds. Additionally, the unstructured technique will not only provide a more detailed and accurate representation of a destination image, but also can reveal the negative and fragmented image among respondents, which can effectively guide the destinations to create and improve realistic, positive and clear image[2],[17],[18].

A focus on any dimension of destination image at the exclusion of the other dimensions will result in an incomplete measurement[2]. Therefore, to achieve a complete and valid result, a combination of structured and unstructured technique is encouraged to measure destination image, to capture all of the attribute - holistic, functional - psychological and common - unique characteristics[2],[17-19]. A review of previous research revealed that in the early times, the majority of destination image studies have heavily relied on the structured techniques[2],[19],[21]. After the publication of Echtner & Ritchie's work[2],[18], studies started and increased to use qualitative method[12],[25],[26], and the combination of qualitative and quantitative method[27-29]. However, to date, the structured techniques within a quantitative research still possesses most significant position in destination image studies[14],[22-24].

### 3. Propositions

#### 3.1. Proposed Framework for Multifaceted Destination Image Assessment

As mentioned earlier, multisensory image is a new area in destination image studies and has been overlooked previously. Only Huang and Gross[12] suggested that to past visitors, multisensory image is the basis to generate cognitive image and then in turn can affect affective image, but it is still tentative and needs further investigation. Additionally, the more sensory an experience, the more memorable it will be, which in turn will increase the tendency to revisit a destination in the future[11]. Accordingly, therefore, this paper proposes a new conceptual framework of multifaceted destination image assessment by incorporating multisensory image (see Figure 2), assuming that (1) cognitive image relates positively with affective image; (2) both cognitive image and affective image have positive influence on conative image; (3) multisensory image is positively related with cognitive, affective and conative image respectively.

The addition of multisensory image certainly contributes

in understanding destination image in a more reliable, complete and robust way. However, it leaves two questions: What are the general attributes of multisensory image? What are the interrelationships between cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory image? Later sections will elaborate on how to solve these two questions.

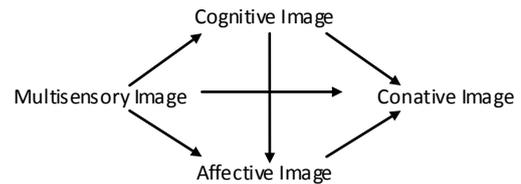


Figure 2. Framework for Multifaceted Destination Image Assessment

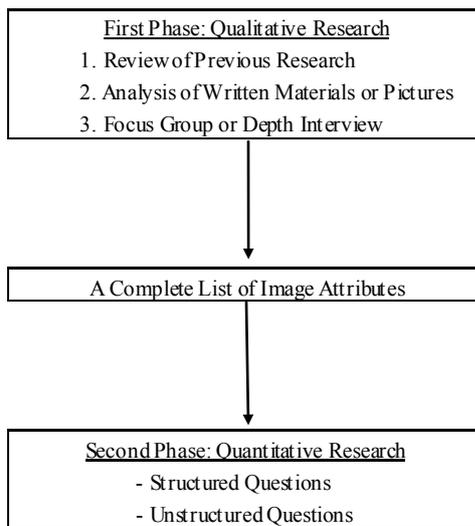
#### 3.2. Proposed Research Method for Destination Image Measurement

This paper proposes using mixed method to measure destination image. The proposed research process and general techniques used to conduct destination image studies are clearly presented in Figure 3. Destination image research is recommended here to be carried out in two phases. The first phase is a multistage qualitative research that starts with review of previous literature on destination image measurement and grouping these attributes into a master list. Then the review and analysis of communication messages in written materials or pictures will be followed, including guidebooks, brochures and advertisements. Lastly, focus group or depth interview with experts or tourists should be conducted to further develop additional image attributes of a particular destination. The multistage process will be able to provide a more complete list of image attributes that are relevant and salient to tourists[2],[19]. The final list of image attributes will be used in the second phase of the research.

The second phase will be a questionnaire survey including both structured and unstructured questions. The structured questions are used to measure the common and attribute-based image of a destination by rating scales, which based on the list of image attributes incorporated from the first phase. Then the open-ended questions allow the respondents to freely describe their own impressions of a destination which can effectively capture the holistic and unique images and provide a more accurate destination image. Besides, it is able to measure whether the image of the destination is strong or weak, depending on whether the respondents can give some responses in a rapid reaction time or with valuable information[19].

The two-phase mixed research method will be very useful and reliable to measure destination image in a complete manner, for instance, to investigate the new conceptual framework of multifaceted destination image assessment proposed in this paper (see Figure 2). In this case, a qualitative research is necessary, not only for a complete list of image attributes, but also to answer the first question of the new added multisensory image - "what are the general attributes of multisensory image". Because the qualitative research is used to provide insights to the problems at hand,

to identify the problems more precisely, and to decide the variables to be investigated in the later quantitative research[30].



**Figure 3.** Research Method for Destination Image Measurement

The list of attributes recorded and grouped from previous literature represents the most complete and general destination image attributes that can be applied in any destination, but only cognitive image and affective image which are widely studied can be covered. Content analysis of written materials or pictures can provide a great deal of information on the images projected by the destinations. From this stage, some cues and key points of the unfamiliar multisensory image can be highlighted. Last stage of the qualitative research will be a focus group interview or depth interview to obtain the additional input of image attributes for a particular destination or a specific type of destination. Besides, this is significant in understanding and capturing the attributes of multisensory image. Based on previous studies[9],[11],[12],[18],[22], some questions are designed to explore destination image in terms of cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory image, which can be adopted by future research in their qualitative phase:

✧ Cognitive image: When we talk about (name of destination) as a tourist destination, what comes to your mind first? (This could be anything you know about this destination, attractions, facilities, people, etc). Please name some prominent features of the destination.

✧ Affective image: What is your feelings toward (name of destination) as a tourist destination, unpleasant - pleasant, sleepy - arousing, distressing - relaxing, gloomy - exciting? Besides this, how do you describe the atmosphere or mood you have experienced while visiting this destination?

✧ Conative image: Do you have any intentions to revisit (name of destination) as a tourist destination in the future?

✧ Multisensory image: When you think of (name of destination), do you have any sensory images in your mind, such as pleasant or unpleasant vision, sound, smell, taste, or touch? Please share your stories as detailed as possible.

The multistage of qualitative research results a complete list of constructs, parameters and attributes of a destination image. Then the research can move forward to the second quantitative phase. The researchers require the individuals to rate this list and gain some insights in the images held by the individuals. Additionally, the second question of the new conceptual framework "what are the interrelationships between cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory image" is going to be solved by the results of quantitative research via statistical techniques. Lastly, to capture a holistic and unique image of a destination, an open-ended question is necessary. The question might be:

✧ What distinctive or unique features come to your mind when you think of XXX as a tourist destination ?

## 4. Conclusions

This paper has endeavored to provide a more thorough understanding of the concept of destination image. The efforts are made in proposing a more comprehensive destination image assessment, and in proposing a reliable research method for future destination image studies. The application of the proposed research method to measure the new multifaceted destination image assessment is just being proceeded by the authors currently. The interesting results probably will be published once being completed.

The assessments of destination image and their interrelationships have been a central field of image studies for decades, but there is still no consensus among the researchers. By incorporating four components of destination image (cognitive, affective, conative and multisensory image) in an integrative way, academically, this paper adds to the limited discussion on multisensory image; practically, it reminds the destinations to reflect more multisensory cues to richen tourist experiences.

Even though that the combination of qualitative and quantitative method leads to high quality research is widely recognized in social sciences, it is still not stable in destination image studies. Because most of previous studies have overlooked the qualitative research and have favored structured technique. In order to capture a complete image of a destination, it is certain that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research via both structured and unstructured techniques is necessary when measuring destination image.

This paper hopes to draw attention to the need to measure destination image more comprehensively, both in future research and for practical standpoint. A more completed assessment and measurement of destination image will provide more useful information in positioning and promotional strategy. Therefore, this paper is significant for destination authorities and tourism operators to identify, develop, improve and promote their destinations by providing a complete, detailed and specific image.

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