

How Information Sources Shape Destination Image and Visit Intention: A PLS-SEM Study of the Meneng Steppe, Mongolia

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Abstract

Understanding how destination image is formed and how it influences visit intention is critical for emerging tourism destinations. This study investigates how information sources shape cognitive, affective, and overall destination image, and how these dimensions influence visit intention in the context of the Meneng Steppe, Mongolia. A conceptual model based on destination image theory was tested using data collected from 303 non-visitors through an online survey. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The results indicate that information sources significantly affect cognitive, affective, and overall image. Cognitive image emerged as the strongest predictor of visit intention, followed by overall and affective image. Mediation analysis confirms that cognitive, affective, and overall image fully mediate the relationship between information sources and visit intention, as indicated by VAF values, meaning that information sources influence visit intention entirely through these destination image dimensions. This study contributes by validating a multi-dimensional destination image framework in an underexplored context and highlights the importance of digital information sources. Practically, the findings suggest prioritizing social media-driven strategies for effective destination branding.

Keywords: destination image, cognitive image, affective image, information sources, visit intention, mongolia

Introduction

The Meneng Steppe, located in the eastern region of Mongolia, represents one of the largest and most ecologically intact grassland ecosystems in Northeast Asia. This vast steppe landscape is characterized by its pristine natural environment, rich biodiversity, and well-preserved nomadic cultural heritage, making it a unique destination with significant potential for nature-based tourism. The region's ecological integrity and expansive open landscapes position it among the remaining examples of relatively undisturbed steppe ecosystems globally.

In recent decades, tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global economy and a major contributor to national income generation. Particularly, nature-based and sustainable tourism have gained increasing importance, as travelers increasingly seek authentic experiences, ecological diversity, and culturally distinctive destinations (Buckley, 2020; UNWTO,

2023). This global trend has created new opportunities for destinations with unique natural and cultural resources, such as the Meneng Steppe.

Mongolia has experienced a steady increase in both domestic and international tourist arrivals, with growing interest in adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and nature-based travel. This trend has enhanced the tourism development potential of eastern Mongolia, especially regions such as Khalkhgol, Buir Lake, and the Meneng Steppe. The strategic policy direction of regional development in Mongolia has also identified the eastern region as a priority area for tourism expansion, further reinforcing its significance.

A critical determinant of tourism development is tourists' intention to visit a destination, which is strongly influenced by their perception and overall image of that destination. The concept of "destination image" has been widely recognized as a key factor shaping tourists' decision-making processes, satisfaction levels, and behavioral intentions (Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Destination image is typically conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive (beliefs and knowledge), affective (emotions and feelings), and conative (behavioral intentions) components (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Woosnam et al., 2020). For emerging destinations, pre-visit destination image is particularly important because potential tourists commonly evaluate and select a destination before obtaining any direct experience of the place. Their initial beliefs, emotional responses, and behavioral intentions are therefore formed through available information rather than through previous visitation. Examining non-visitors makes it possible to capture this early image-formation process and determine whether externally communicated information can generate an intention to visit.

Recent studies emphasize that destination image is not only formed through direct experience but is increasingly shaped by multiple information sources, including digital media, social networks, and online content (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). These information channels play a crucial role in influencing tourists' perceptions, expectations, and ultimately their intention to visit a destination. This role is especially relevant for non-visitors, who lack firsthand knowledge and consequently depend on mediated information to assess a destination's attributes, imagine its emotional appeal, and decide whether it is worth visiting. Non-visitors are therefore appropriate respondents for investigating how information sources shape pre-visit cognitive, affective, and overall destination image.

Despite the growing importance of tourism in Mongolia, empirical research focusing on destination image and its determinants, particularly in the context of steppe ecosystems such as the Meneng Steppe, remains limited. Existing studies have largely concentrated on major tourist hubs, leaving a significant gap in understanding how information sources and image components influence visit intention in less developed yet high potential regions.

Research on destination image has established that information sources shape tourists' cognitive and affective evaluations of destinations (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2020; Liu et al., 2022), while cognitive and affective image serve as important predictors and mediators of tourists' behavioral intentions (Stylidis et al., 2017; Woosnam et al., 2020). However, much of this evidence comes from established destinations or broader tourism contexts, leaving limited understanding of how non-visitors form pre-visit images of remote and emerging nature-based destinations. The present study extends this literature by examining non-visitors' destination

image formation in the Meneng Steppe, where perceptions are primarily constructed through indirect information sources rather than direct travel experience. Therefore, this study aims to examine the destination image of the Meneng Steppe and analyze how information sources, cognitive image, affective image, and overall image influence tourists' visit intention. By applying Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among these constructs. The findings are expected to contribute to theoretical developments in tourism research and provide practical implications for developing effective marketing strategies and sustainable tourism policies in Mongolia.

Literature Review

Destination image is one of the most influential constructs in tourism research, shaping how potential tourists perceive, evaluate, and choose destinations. It refers to the set of beliefs, impressions, ideas, and emotional responses individuals hold about a place, forming a multidimensional mental representation that influences pre-visit evaluations, destination choice, and future behavioral intentions. Over time, this concept has evolved into a comprehensive framework integrating cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of decision making (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Its importance remains strong because tourism products are largely intangible, meaning destination choices rely heavily on mentally constructed images derived from media, prior knowledge, interpersonal communication, and digital platforms. This is especially critical for remote and less commercialized destinations, where familiarity is low and perceptions depend on secondary information sources. A favorable destination image can reduce uncertainty, enhance emotional appeal, and improve competitiveness (Gartner, 1993; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Styliadis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017).

Recent research highlights a shift toward dynamic and digital image formation processes, particularly relevant for nature-based and emerging destinations. In this context, destination image functions not only as a marketing outcome but also as a strategic mechanism linking communication, perception, and behavioral response.

A dominant perspective in the literature conceptualizes destination image as a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, affective, and conative components. Cognitive image refers to what tourists know or believe about a destination's attributes, such as scenery, infrastructure, safety, accessibility, local culture, and environmental quality. Affective image reflects the feelings or emotional responses the destination evokes, such as excitement, relaxation, pleasantness, or arousal. Conative image, often linked to behavioral intention, concerns action-oriented outcomes such as intention to visit, revisit, or recommend the destination. Many studies argue that tourists first develop beliefs about destination attributes, then experience emotional responses to those beliefs, and finally translate these evaluations into behavioral intentions (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Stylos et al., 2016).

Recent work continues to support this layered understanding of destination image and shows that cognitive and affective evaluations often jointly explain conative outcomes. Although this three-component framework is widely accepted, recent studies suggest that the relationships

among these dimensions are not always linear or uniform across contexts. In some destinations, cognitive image may dominate because visitors rely heavily on tangible attributes such as natural resources, service quality, safety, or accessibility. In other contexts, affective image may play a stronger role because emotional resonance, atmosphere, and symbolic meanings influence travel desire more strongly than functional considerations. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that affective and overall image often have stronger effects on tourist behavioral intentions than cognitive image alone, although the exact pattern varies by destination type, tourist segment, and stage of decision making (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). This is especially important for steppe and wilderness destinations, where emotional responses to openness, remoteness, freedom, and ecological purity may be particularly salient. Moreover, the multidimensionality of destination image is increasingly examined through digital and visual approaches. Recent studies have employed online reviews, user generated photographs, social media data, and machine learning methods to demonstrate that destination image is constructed across multiple modalities. These studies reveal that visual and textual representations do not always communicate identical images, and that online content can amplify some place meanings while suppressing others. This line of research is particularly relevant for destinations with limited traditional promotion, because their image may be shaped as much by digital circulation and user narratives as by official marketing campaigns.

The image of a destination does not emerge in isolation; rather, it is formed through exposure to multiple information sources. Gartner (1993) proposed that destination image formation is influenced by autonomous, induced, and organic sources, each possessing different levels of credibility and persuasive power. Organic sources include non-commercial or interpersonal communication, such as friends, family, news, and personal networks. Induced sources include destination promotion, advertising, brochures, official websites, and tourism campaigns. Autonomous sources include media reports, films, or independent representations beyond the direct control of destination marketers. This typology remains highly influential because it explains why image formation is both a communication process and a social process.

In contemporary tourism, however, information source effects have become far more complex. Tourists increasingly rely on social media, online reviews, video platforms, travel blogs, destination websites, online maps, and peer-generated content when forming perceptions of destinations. These digital information channels influence not only the informational content available to potential visitors but also the emotional tone through which destinations are imagined. Recent research shows that online platforms do more than provide factual information; they shape anticipation, authenticity perceptions, trust, and affective responses. As a result, destination image formation is increasingly mediated by algorithmic visibility, electronic word-of-mouth, and visual storytelling in online environments. Several studies have further shown that information sources influence different components of destination image in distinct ways. Functional and official information often contributes more strongly to cognitive image because it provides concrete knowledge about attractions, facilities, transportation, and safety. In contrast, social media content, peer recommendations, and visual narratives are more strongly associated with affective image because they evoke emotion, atmosphere, and symbolic value. For first time visitors, information sources are particularly important because they substitute for direct experience. This makes information source effects especially relevant in destinations such as the Meneng Steppe, where

many potential visitors have not previously visited the area and therefore rely on mediated representations. Recent scholarship also suggests that destination image is becoming more dynamic and interactive. Rather than receiving a single projected image from destination marketers, tourists now encounter multiple, sometimes competing images generated by destinations, residents, influencers, travelers, and digital communities. This multiplicity of sources can enrich a destination's appeal, but it can also create inconsistency between projected image and perceived image. For less established destinations, managing coherence across information sources may therefore be critical to strengthening visit intention.

Cognitive image refers to tourists' knowledge, beliefs, and evaluations regarding destination attributes. In tourism research, it commonly includes assessments of natural scenery, climate, safety, accessibility, infrastructure, price fairness, cleanliness, hospitality, cultural attractions, and environmental quality. For nature-based destinations, cognitive image is especially important because tourists often evaluate whether a site offers distinctive ecosystems, wildlife, scenic value, tranquility, and authenticity. In peripheral destinations, cognitive image may also include accessibility constraints, perceived remoteness, and the availability of tourism services. Research consistently shows that cognitive image has a significant positive relationship with behavioral outcomes, though often indirectly through affective or overall image. Tourists who perceive destination attributes as attractive, safe, and meaningful are more likely to generate favorable affective responses and stronger visit intentions. In some studies, cognitive image acts as the foundation upon which emotional evaluation is built; in others, it retains a direct effect on conative outcomes. This suggests that cognitive image remains indispensable, even in emotionally driven travel decisions (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Wang & Hsu, 2010; Stylos et al., 2017). Recent findings continue to support the importance of cognitive image in predicting destination-related behavior, including in nature-based, sports, and ecotourism settings. For destinations such as the Meneng Steppe, cognitive image may include evaluations of pristine grassland landscapes, biodiversity, wildlife visibility, cultural heritage, local lifestyle, ecological value, and environmental uniqueness. Such attributes are especially important when promoting steppe tourism because tourists must understand why the destination is distinctive compared with more familiar urban, lake, or mountain destinations. Without a strong cognitive image, the destination may remain vague or abstract in the minds of potential visitors. Therefore, identifying which attribute clusters most strongly shape cognitive image is crucial for destination development and promotion.

Affective image refers to the emotional meanings attached to a destination, such as whether it is exciting, pleasant, relaxing, inspiring, or memorable. Whereas cognitive image answers the question of what a destination is like, affective image addresses how the destination makes potential tourists feel. The literature increasingly suggests that affective image is not a secondary or decorative element; rather, it is often a decisive factor in travel intention, especially where tourism consumption is experience driven and symbolic. Emotional appeal can intensify desire, reduce psychological distance, and transform destination awareness into a genuine wish to visit. In tourism, affective image is particularly powerful for landscapes associated with freedom, escape, serenity, wonder, or inspiration. Nature-based destinations often trigger these emotional associations more strongly than urban destinations because they offer a symbolic contrast to

routine life, digital overload, and environmental stress. Studies in ecotourism and rural tourism contexts suggest that positive emotional responses can mediate the effect of cognitive beliefs on destination loyalty, revisit intention, and recommendation behavior. In other words, even when tourists acknowledge attractive destination attributes, they may not develop visit intention unless these attributes also generate emotional resonance. This insight is highly relevant for the Meneng Steppe. The emotional appeal of vast open landscapes, wild nature, silence, remoteness, and nomadic symbolism may be central to attracting visitors. Affective image may capture feelings such as awe, peace, excitement, and connection to untouched nature. These emotions may be particularly important in the case of potential visitors who have not experienced the destination directly and therefore rely on imagination and mediated affective cues when evaluating whether they wish to visit.

Many tourism scholars argue that overall image emerges from the interaction between cognitive and affective evaluations. From this perspective, tourists first process attribute-based knowledge and then integrate this with emotional meaning to form a holistic or overall image of the destination. This overall image may then directly influence conative outcomes such as visit intention and revisit intention. Although some models treat overall image as a distinct latent construct and others focus directly on cognitive and affective image, the core idea remains that behavioral intention is shaped by the combined force of what tourists think and how they feel about a destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Stylos et al., 2016). Recent empirical studies reinforce this integrative logic. Research on destination image congruence, emotional value, online review-based image, and place attachment shows that favorable destination beliefs are more effective when they align with positive affective associations. In practical terms, destinations need not only to communicate what they offer but also to shape how those offerings are emotionally experienced by potential tourists. This is especially relevant to destinations with subtle or non-iconic attractions, where image integration can transform diffuse awareness into a coherent and compelling destination identity. In the present study, this overall image logic is reflected in the modeling pathway that links information sources to cognitive and affective image and, ultimately, to visit intention. This reflects a theoretically grounded expectation that destination-related knowledge and emotions function as transmission mechanisms through which information exposure shapes behavioral response.

Visit intention represents a tourist's conscious plan or willingness to visit a destination in the future. In tourism research, it is often used as a proxy for conative image or behavioral readiness, especially in studies involving non visitors or potential tourists. Visit intention is strategically important because it is one of the clearest indicators of destination competitiveness in pre-visit contexts. It has been widely modeled as an outcome of destination image, perceived value, destination trust, place attachment, satisfaction, and travel motivation. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that destination image has a meaningful positive effect on behavioral intention, with affective and overall image often exerting particularly strong influence. More recent studies also show that visit intention is shaped by digitally mediated image, sustainability narratives, and emotionally rich destination communications. For emerging destinations, visit intention is especially valuable as a policy and marketing indicator because it helps identify whether a destination has successfully converted awareness into demand. For the Meneng Steppe, visit

intention is an appropriate dependent variable because many potential tourists may not yet have firsthand travel experience there. In such cases, modeling revisit intention would be less suitable, whereas visit intention captures the psychological endpoint of destination image formation among prospective visitors.

Demographic variables such as gender, age, education, travel experience, and nationality are frequently included in tourism models as controls because they may influence how tourists process information, perceive destinations, and express behavioral intention. However, the role of demographics is often inconsistent across studies. Some research shows meaningful group differences in destination evaluation, whereas other studies find that image effects remain robust even after controlling for demographic factors. In rural, ecotourism, and domestic tourism contexts, gender sometimes influences risk perception, destination preference, emotional response, and travel intention, but these effects are generally weaker than core attitudinal or image-based constructs. Including gender as a control variable in this study is therefore methodologically appropriate, but the main explanatory power is expected to come from information source exposure and destination image dimensions. This is consistent with contemporary tourism behavior research, where demographics are typically treated as background conditions rather than central theoretical drivers.

Although Mongolia possesses extraordinary potential for nature-based, cultural, and adventure tourism, empirical research on destination image remains comparatively limited, particularly outside the country's most visible destinations. Existing studies on Mongolia have examined tourism development, tourist satisfaction, and broad destination image patterns, and longitudinal evidence suggests that Mongolia's image can change meaningfully over time in relation to visitor experience and destination promotion. At the same time, the literature remains thin regarding remote steppe destinations and the mechanisms through which information sources, cognitive image, and affective image shape visit intention among non-visitors. This gap is significant for at least three reasons. First, eastern Mongolia remains underrepresented in destination image research despite its ecological and cultural uniqueness. Second, steppe tourism differs from urban or heritage tourism because its experiential value is often tied to landscape scale, silence, openness, biodiversity, and symbolic associations with nomadic identity. Third, as tourism communication becomes more digitalized, understanding how information sources affect image formation is essential for designing effective destination marketing strategies. These gaps justify an empirical examination of the Meneng Steppe using a structured model that links information sources, cognitive image, affective image, and visit intention.

Taken together, the literature supports a model in which information sources influence destination image formation, cognitive and affective images shape overall evaluations, and these evaluations translate into visit intention. The literature also suggests that the relative strength of these pathways may vary by destination type. In nature-based and emerging destinations, emotional response may be especially salient, but cognitive clarity remains necessary to reduce uncertainty and communicate destination distinctiveness. Therefore, a PLS-SEM framework is appropriate for examining the simultaneous relationships among these constructs in the Meneng Steppe context. The present study contributes to the literature by extending destination image research to an underexplored steppe ecosystem destination in Mongolia and by testing an

integrated model of image formation among individuals who have received information about the destination but have not necessarily visited it. In doing so, it responds to recent calls for more context sensitive, digitally informed, and theoretically integrated destination image research.

Research hypothesis development

Building on the theoretical foundations of destination image and information processing, the present study proposes a structured set of hypotheses linking information sources, cognitive image, affective image, and visit intention. Prior research consistently demonstrates that destination image formation is not spontaneous but is shaped through exposure to various information sources, including organic, induced, and autonomous channels (Gartner, 1993). In contemporary tourism contexts, these sources increasingly include digital platforms such as social media, online reviews, travel blogs, and user generated content, which significantly influence how destinations are perceived before visitation. Information sources provide both factual knowledge and symbolic representations, thereby shaping tourists' beliefs and expectations about a destination. Empirical studies have shown that exposure to reliable and rich information enhances tourists' understanding of destination attributes, leading to stronger and more favorable cognitive evaluations (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Styliadis et al., 2017). This effect is particularly pronounced for destinations that are less familiar or geographically remote, where potential tourists rely heavily on mediated information rather than personal experience. In such contexts, information sources function as the primary input in the image formation process, reducing uncertainty and structuring perceptions. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that exposure to diverse and credible information sources will positively influence the cognitive image of a destination. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Information sources have a positive effect on cognitive image.

In addition to shaping cognitive evaluations, information sources also play a critical role in influencing tourists' emotional responses toward a destination. While cognitive image is primarily based on attribute knowledge, affective image reflects emotional reactions such as excitement, pleasure, and relaxation. Digital and visual content, in particular, has been shown to evoke strong affective responses by presenting immersive and emotionally engaging representations of destinations. Social media imagery, storytelling, and peer generated content can create vivid emotional expectations even before a visit occurs. Research indicates that emotionally rich information sources can directly influence affective image, independently of cognitive evaluations, especially in experiential tourism contexts (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant for nature-based destinations, where emotional appeal—such as feelings of freedom, awe, and tranquility—plays a central role in attracting visitors. For destinations like the Meneng Steppe, visual and narrative representations of vast landscapes and untouched nature may directly stimulate positive emotional responses. Thus, information sources are expected not only to inform but also to emotionally engage potential tourists. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Information sources have a positive effect on affective image.

The relationship between cognitive image and affective image has been widely examined in tourism literature, with strong theoretical support for a causal sequence in which cognitive evaluations precede and influence emotional responses. According to the cognitive-affective framework, individuals first form beliefs about a destination's attributes and then develop affective reactions based on those beliefs (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Beerli & Martín, 2004). Empirical evidence consistently supports this relationship, demonstrating that favorable perceptions of destination attributes; such as natural beauty, safety, and cultural richness lead to positive emotional evaluations. In other words, tourists are more likely to feel excited, relaxed, or inspired by a destination when they perceive its attributes as attractive and valuable. This sequential relationship has been validated across various tourism contexts, including urban tourism, ecotourism, and rural destinations (Stylos et al., 2016; Woosnam et al., 2020). For nature-based destinations such as the Meneng Steppe, cognitive evaluations of environmental quality, landscape uniqueness, and ecological authenticity are likely to generate strong affective responses such as awe, peace, and fascination. Therefore, cognitive image is expected to significantly influence affective image. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Cognitive image has a positive effect on affective image.

Cognitive image has also been identified as an important predictor of behavioral intention, including visit intention. Tourists who perceive a destination as attractive, safe, and meaningful are more likely to develop a desire to visit. Although some studies suggest that the effect of cognitive image may be partially mediated by affective or overall image, direct effects have also been observed, particularly in contexts where functional attributes are critical to decision making (Wang & Hsu, 2010; Stylos et al., 2017). For example, perceptions of accessibility, infrastructure, and environmental quality can directly influence whether a tourist considers visiting a destination feasible and worthwhile. In emerging or less known destinations, cognitive clarity may be especially important because tourists need sufficient information to reduce uncertainty and justify travel decisions. In the case of the Meneng Steppe, cognitive evaluations related to natural resources, uniqueness, and tourism potential may directly contribute to visit intention, even before emotional attachment is fully developed. Therefore, it is expected that cognitive image will have a direct positive influence on visit intention. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Cognitive image has a positive effect on visit intention.

Affective image is widely recognized as one of the strongest determinants of tourist behavioral intention. Emotional responses toward a destination can significantly enhance desire, motivation, and willingness to travel. Unlike cognitive evaluations, which are often rational and attribute based, affective responses capture the experiential and symbolic dimensions of tourism. Studies have shown that destinations associated with positive emotions such as excitement, relaxation, and inspiration are more likely to attract visitors and generate strong behavioral intentions (Prayag, 2009; Stylos et al., 2016). In many cases, affective image has been found to exert a stronger influence on visit intention than cognitive image, particularly in leisure and nature-based tourism contexts. This is because travel decisions are often driven not only by what tourists know about a destination but also by how they expect to feel when they visit it. For destinations

like the Meneng Steppe, emotional appeal; such as the sense of vastness, freedom, and connection with nature, may play a decisive role in shaping travel intention. Therefore, it is expected that affective image will positively influence visit intention. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Affective image has a positive effect on visit intention.

Beyond direct relationships, the literature also supports the existence of indirect effects in destination image formation. Specifically, information sources may influence visit intention indirectly through cognitive and affective image. This aligns with the theoretical perspective that information exposure first shapes beliefs and emotions, which then translate into behavioral intentions. Several studies have demonstrated that cognitive and affective image act as mediators between information sources and behavioral outcomes (Stylidis et al., 2017; Woosnam et al., 2020). In this sense, information sources do not directly cause visit intention but operate through psychological mechanisms of perception and emotion. Therefore, the indirect pathway from information sources to visit intention via cognitive and affective image is expected to be significant. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Cognitive and affective image mediate the relationship between information sources and visit intention.

Finally, demographic variables such as gender are often included as control variables in tourism research to account for potential differences in perception and behavior. Although prior studies have reported mixed findings regarding gender differences in destination evaluation, some evidence suggests that males and females may differ in risk perception, emotional response, and travel motivation. However, these effects are generally weaker than the core relationships among image constructs (Che et al., 2021). In this study, gender is included as a control variable to ensure that the observed relationships among information sources, destination image, and visit intention are not confounded by demographic differences. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Gender has a significant effect on visit intention.

Taken together, these hypotheses form a comprehensive structural model in which information sources influence cognitive and affective image, cognitive image influences affective image and visit intention, affective image influences visit intention, and cognitive and affective image jointly mediate the relationship between information sources and visit intention. This framework is consistent with established destination image theory while also reflecting the increasing importance of digital information environments and emotional experience in contemporary tourism decision making.

Research model

Based on the theoretical foundations of destination image formation and tourist decision making, the conceptual model of this study was developed to explain how information exposure translates into visit intention through cognitive and affective evaluation mechanisms. Drawing

upon established frameworks in tourism research, particularly the cognitive-affective-conative paradigm (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004), the model integrates information sources as an antecedent construct and examines its indirect and direct effects on behavioral intention.

The model proposes that information sources (IS) serve as the primary external stimulus influencing tourists' perception of a destination. In line with destination image formation theory (Gartner, 1993), information sources include various channels such as social media, online reviews, promotional materials, and interpersonal communication, which collectively shape how potential tourists perceive and interpret a destination before actual visitation. These sources provide both factual knowledge and symbolic meaning, thereby initiating the image formation process.

The first stage of the model focuses on cognitive image (CI), which represents tourists' beliefs and knowledge about the destination's attributes. Cognitive image is formed through exposure to information and reflects evaluations of elements such as natural resources, environmental quality, attractiveness, and uniqueness. In the model, information sources are hypothesized to directly influence cognitive image, suggesting that greater exposure to reliable and rich information leads to more structured and favorable destination beliefs.

Simultaneously, the model incorporates affective image (AI) as an emotional evaluation of the destination. Affective image captures tourists' feelings and emotional responses, such as excitement, relaxation, and enjoyment, associated with the destination. Unlike cognitive image, which is knowledge based, affective image reflects experiential anticipation. The model posits that information sources can directly influence affective image by providing emotionally engaging content, particularly through visual and narrative forms. Furthermore, cognitive image is expected to positively influence affective image, reflecting the theoretical assumption that beliefs about a destination shape subsequent emotional responses.

The model further includes overall image (OI) as an integrative construct that reflects the combined evaluation of cognitive and affective perceptions. Although some studies treat overall image as an outcome of cognitive and affective dimensions, this model positions it as a complementary evaluative component that contributes to behavioral intention. Overall image captures the holistic impression of the destination and is expected to play a role in strengthening the link between perception and intention.

At the final stage, the model examines visit intention (VI) as the key dependent variable representing tourists' behavioral readiness to visit the destination. Visit intention is conceptualized as the likelihood or willingness of potential tourists to travel to the destination in the future. In the model, visit intention is influenced by both cognitive and affective image, as well as by overall image. This reflects the theoretical view that tourist behavior is shaped by both rational evaluation and emotional response.

Overall, the conceptual model assumes a sequential and partially mediated structure, in which information sources influence cognitive and affective image, cognitive image influences affective image, and both dimensions contribute to visit intention either directly or indirectly through overall image. This structure reflects a psychologically grounded process in which

external information is internalized into beliefs and emotions, which in turn guide behavioral intention.

The use of a PLS-SEM framework is appropriate for testing this model because it allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple dependent relationships, accommodates complex mediation effects, and is well suited for exploratory and prediction-oriented research (Hair et al., 2022). The model is particularly relevant for emerging and less explored destinations such as the Meneng Steppe, where tourists rely heavily on indirect information and where both cognitive clarity and emotional appeal are critical in shaping visit intention. The conceptual model of this study is presented in Figure 1.

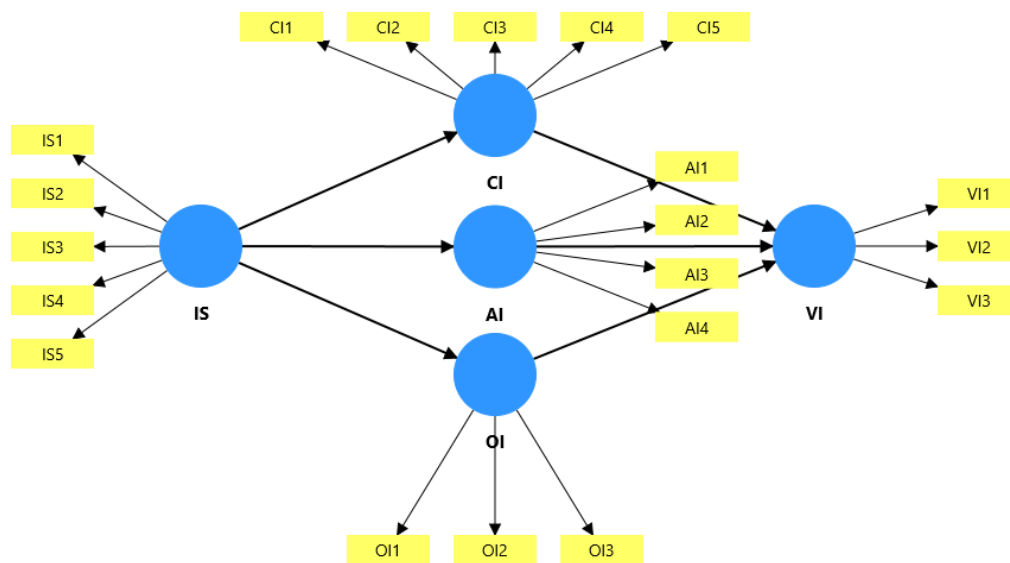


Figure 1. Research model

Method

This study adopts a quantitative research approach and collects primary data using a structured questionnaire survey. The main objective is to identify the factors influencing Mongolian citizens' perceptions, destination image, and visit intention toward the Meneng Steppe. A conceptual model was developed to examine the relationships among key variables. To minimize common method bias, respondent anonymity was ensured and questionnaire items were carefully designed to reduce evaluation apprehension (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Data were collected online using Google Forms. A purposive sampling technique was employed, with the survey distributed through online channels to reach Mongolian citizens who were aware of the Meneng Steppe but had not previously visited the destination. Respondents were eligible to participate if they were Mongolian citizens, had obtained information about the Meneng Steppe through indirect sources, and had no direct experience of visiting the destination. At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they had ever visited the Meneng Steppe. Responses from individuals who reported previous visitation were excluded from the analytical sample. Respondents were also asked to identify the information sources through which

they had learned about the destination, including social media, friends, websites or blogs, travel agencies, newspapers or magazines, and television. This screening procedure ensured that the selected respondents represented non-visitors whose cognitive, affective, and overall destination images were formed through indirect information rather than firsthand experience. The selection of non-visitors was consistent with the study's focus on pre-visit image formation, as potential tourists typically evaluate an emerging destination and develop visit intentions before obtaining direct travel experience. The questionnaire consisted of 26 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), and a total of 303 valid responses were obtained. The study includes five latent constructs: Information Sources (IS), Cognitive Image (CI), Affective Image (AI), Overall Image (OI), and Visit Intention (VI). Demographic variables (age, gender, education level, and travel companions) were included as control variables.

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The measurement model was evaluated in terms of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The structural model was assessed by examining path coefficients, statistical significance, and explanatory power (R^2). In addition, predictive relevance (Q^2) and mediation effects were evaluated. This analytical approach enables a comprehensive examination of both direct and indirect relationships among variables and provides empirical support for the proposed conceptual model.

Results

The demographic profile of the respondents provides important context for interpreting the findings. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 and 2. A total of 303 valid responses were analyzed, with no missing data. The sample is slightly female-dominated (60.4%) and largely consists of young and middle-aged individuals, with respondents aged 17-44 accounting for the majority.

Most participants are well-educated, with over half holding a bachelor's degree (50.2%), followed by high school (25.7%) and postgraduate qualifications (12.9%). In terms of travel behavior, respondents primarily travel with family (56.1%) or friends (27.7%), indicating that tourism decisions are socially oriented. Marital status is relatively balanced, with a slight majority of married individuals (52.5%).

Notably, social media is the dominant source of information about the Meneng Steppe (52.5%), followed by friends (13.9%) and websites/blogs (11.2%), while traditional media plays a limited role. This underscores the importance of digital platforms in shaping destination awareness and image.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondents (N = 303)

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	120	39.6
	Female	183	60.4
Age	17-24	82	27.1
	25-34	83	27.4
	35-44	83	27.4
	45-54	41	13.5

	55+	14	4.6
Education	Secondary	2	0.7
	High school	78	25.7
	College	32	10.6
	Bachelor	152	50.2
	Graduate+	39	12.9
Travel Companion	Alone	6	2.0
	Family	170	56.1
	Friends	84	27.7
	Work/Business	24	7.9
	Tour group	13	4.3
	Other	6	2.0
Marital Status	Married	159	52.5
	Single	144	47.5
Information Source	Friends	42	13.9
	Social media	159	52.5
	Travel agency	18	5.9
	Website/blog	34	11.2
	Newspaper/magazine	33	10.9
	TV	17	5.6

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics (Mean, SD)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Gender	1.604	0.489	1	2
Age	2.413	1.156	1	5
Education	4.488	1.032	2	6
Travel companion	2.624	0.965	1	6
Marital status	1.475	0.500	1	2
Information source	3.558	1.624	1	7

The measurement model was first assessed by examining the indicator loadings to evaluate item reliability. As shown in Table 3, all outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022), indicating satisfactory indicator reliability. Specifically, the loadings for affective image ranged from 0.812 to 0.885, while cognitive image items ranged from 0.743 to 0.872. The information sources construct demonstrated strong loadings between 0.814 and 0.879. Similarly, overall image indicators ranged from 0.841 to 0.876, and visit intention exhibited particularly high loadings between 0.916 and 0.931. Although one item (CI4 = 0.743) is slightly lower than others, it still exceeds the acceptable threshold of 0.70 and was therefore retained. Overall, these results confirm that all measurement items have adequate reliability and contribute meaningfully to their respective latent constructs.

Table 3. Indicator Loadings

Construct	Item	Loading
Affective Image (AI)	AI1	0.877
	AI2	0.880
	AI3	0.885
	AI4	0.812
Cognitive Image (CI)	CI1	0.856
	CI2	0.858
	CI3	0.872
	CI4	0.743
	CI5	0.840
Information Sources (IS)	IS1	0.814
	IS2	0.853
	IS3	0.879
	IS4	0.870
	IS5	0.836
Overall Image (OI)	OI1	0.841
	OI2	0.866
	OI3	0.876
Visit Intention (VI)	VI1	0.916
	VI2	0.931
	VI3	0.919

The reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), rho_A, and average variance extracted (AVE), as presented in Table 4. All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.825 to 0.912, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022). Similarly, composite reliability values ranged from 0.896 to 0.945, indicating a high level of construct reliability. The rho_A values also exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, further confirming the robustness of the measurement model. In terms of convergent validity, all AVE values ranged from 0.697 to 0.850, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.50. This indicates that each construct explains more than 50% of the variance of its indicators. Overall, these results confirm that the measurement model exhibits satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 4. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho A	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
AI	0.887	0.895	0.922	0.747
CI	0.891	0.904	0.920	0.697
IS	0.906	0.923	0.929	0.724
OI	0.825	0.827	0.896	0.741

VI	0.912	0.916	0.945	0.850
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Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT), as recommended in recent PLS-SEM literature (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown in Table 5, all HTMT values are well below the conservative threshold of 0.85. The highest HTMT value observed is 0.690 (between cognitive image and overall image), which remains substantially below the threshold, indicating that all constructs are empirically distinct from one another. The remaining values range from 0.336 to 0.651, further supporting strong discriminant validity across the measurement model. These results confirm that each construct captures a unique conceptual domain and that there is no significant overlap among the latent variables. Therefore, discriminant validity is fully established.

Table 5. Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

Construct	AI	CI	IS	OI	VI
AI	-				
CI	0.426	-			
IS	0.375	0.336	-		
OI	0.632	0.690	0.390	-	
VI	0.542	0.618	0.537	0.651	-

The structural model was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to assess the significance of the hypothesized relationships. The results are presented in Table 6. As shown in Table 6, all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, providing strong support for the proposed model. Information sources have a significant positive effect on cognitive image ($\beta = 0.327$, $t = 4.682$, $p < 0.001$) and affective image ($\beta = 0.345$, $t = 5.115$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that exposure to information plays a critical role in shaping both cognitive and emotional perceptions of the destination.

Furthermore, information sources also significantly influence overall image ($\beta = 0.350$, $t = 5.512$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that external information contributes directly to tourists' holistic evaluation of the destination. In terms of behavioral outcomes, cognitive image has a significant positive effect on visit intention ($\beta = 0.326$, $t = 5.128$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that rational evaluations of destination attributes strongly influence travel decisions. Affective image also significantly influences visit intention ($\beta = 0.229$, $t = 3.986$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the importance of emotional responses in shaping behavioral intentions.

Additionally, overall image exerts a significant positive effect on visit intention ($\beta = 0.250$, $t = 3.998$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that a favorable overall perception enhances the likelihood of visiting the destination. Overall, the results demonstrate that both cognitive and affective evaluations, as well as overall image, play important roles in influencing visit intention, while information sources act as a key antecedent shaping these perceptions.

Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	IS $\rightarrow$ CI	0.327	4.682	< 0.001	Supported
H2	IS $\rightarrow$ AI	0.345	5.115	< 0.001	Supported
H3	CI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.326	5.128	< 0.001	Supported
H4	AI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.229	3.986	< 0.001	Supported
H5	OI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.250	3.998	< 0.001	Supported
H6	IS $\rightarrow$ OI	0.350	5.512	< 0.001	Supported

The explanatory power of the structural model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2), as presented in Table 7. The results indicate that the model explains 43.9% of the variance in visit intention ($R^2 = 0.439$), which can be considered moderate according to established guidelines (Hair et al., 2022). This suggests that the combination of cognitive image, affective image, and overall image provides substantial explanatory power in predicting tourists' intention to visit the Meneng Steppe.

In contrast, the R^2 values for cognitive image ($R^2 = 0.107$), affective image ($R^2 = 0.119$), and overall image ($R^2 = 0.123$) are relatively low, indicating weak explanatory power. This implies that while information sources significantly influence these constructs, additional factors not included in the model may also contribute to shaping tourists' perceptions and evaluations. Overall, the model demonstrates stronger predictive capability for behavioral intention than for perceptual constructs, which is consistent with tourism research where destination image dimensions often serve as mediators rather than fully explained outcomes.

Table 7. R^2 Values

Construct	R^2	Interpretation
AI	0.119	Weak
CI	0.107	Weak
OI	0.123	Weak
VI	0.439	Moderate

The mediation effects were examined using bootstrapping to assess the significance of indirect relationships, and the results are presented in Table 8. The findings indicate that all indirect effects are statistically significant. Specifically, information sources have a significant indirect effect on visit intention through cognitive image ($\beta = 0.107$, $t = 3.129$, $p = 0.002$), affective image ($\beta = 0.079$, $t = 2.867$, $p = 0.004$), and overall image ($\beta = 0.088$, $t = 2.964$, $p = 0.003$).

To further assess the strength of mediation, the Variance Accounted For (VAF) was calculated. The results show that all VAF values equal 100%, indicating full mediation. This suggests that information sources do not directly influence visit intention, but rather exert their effects entirely through cognitive, affective, and overall image. Among the mediators, cognitive image demonstrates the strongest mediating effect, followed by overall image and affective image. This indicates that rational evaluation plays a more dominant role than emotional response in translating information exposure into behavioral intention.

Table 8. Indirect Effects

Path	Indirect Effect (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
IS $\rightarrow$ OI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.088	2.964	0.003	Significant
IS $\rightarrow$ CI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.107	3.129	0.002	Significant
IS $\rightarrow$ AI $\rightarrow$ VI	0.079	2.867	0.004	Significant

Table 9 presents the model fit indices. The model fit was assessed using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), as recommended in PLS-SEM literature. The SRMR value for the saturated model was 0.058, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.08, indicating a good model fit (Hair et al., 2022).

In contrast, the SRMR value for the estimated model was 0.166, which exceeds the recommended threshold. However, recent methodological literature suggests that the saturated model SRMR is more appropriate for evaluating model fit in PLS-SEM, as it reflects the discrepancy between the empirical correlation matrix and the model-implied correlations without structural constraints. Additionally, the normed fit index (NFI) values for both the saturated model (0.862) and the estimated model (0.821) exceed the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.80, further supporting an acceptable model fit.

Overall, these results indicate that the proposed model demonstrates an adequate level of goodness-of-fit. Although the SRMR value for the estimated model exceeds the recommended threshold, this is not uncommon in complex PLS-SEM models with multiple mediators. Recent methodological studies emphasize that the saturated model provides a more appropriate assessment of model fit in variance-based SEM (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 9. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model	Threshold	Interpretation
SRMR	0.058	0.166	< 0.08	Saturated model shows good fit; estimated model exceeds threshold
d_ ULS	0.718	5.763	Lower better	is Acceptable discrepancy for saturated model
d_ G	0.316	0.479	Lower better	is Acceptable discrepancy values
NFI	0.862	0.821	> 0.80	Both models indicate acceptable fit
Chi-square	585.861	758.949	-	Used for model comparison

Note: SRMR values below 0.08 indicate good model fit. The saturated model is considered more appropriate for evaluating model fit in PLS-SEM. NFI values above 0.80 indicate acceptable fit (Hair et al., 2022).

As shown in Table 10, the results of Harman's single-factor test indicate that common method bias is not a serious concern in this study. The results show that the first factor explains 41.746% of the total variance, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 50%, indicating

that common method bias is unlikely to be a serious concern in this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, multiple factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, suggesting that the variance is not dominated by a single latent factor. These findings provide evidence that common method bias is not a serious concern in this study, and the results can be considered robust and reliable.

Table 10. Common Method Bias (Harman's Single-Factor Test)

Component	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	8.349	41.746	41.746
2	2.711	13.553	55.299
3	1.994	9.971	65.270
4	1.075	5.377	70.647
5	0.937	4.686	75.334

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the mechanisms through which destination-related information shapes tourists' behavioral intentions in the context of an emerging and underexplored nature-based destination. Rather than merely confirming direct relationships, the results reveal a structured psychological process in which information is internalized, interpreted, and transformed into intention through multiple layers of perception. Building on these findings, this study extends destination image theory by empirically demonstrating a multi-path mediation mechanism, where information sources simultaneously shape cognitive, affective, and overall image dimensions, which in turn influence visit intention. This integrated pathway provides a more holistic explanation compared to prior studies that examined these constructs in isolation.

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that information sources do not exert a direct influence on visit intention, but instead operate entirely through cognitive, affective, and overall image. This finding reinforces and extends the cognitive-affective framework of destination image formation (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004), while offering stronger empirical support for a fully mediated structure. Unlike some prior studies that report partial mediation or direct effects of information exposure (Styliadis et al., 2017), the present results suggest that in the case of low-familiarity destinations, behavioral intention is not triggered by information alone, but by how that information is cognitively processed and emotionally interpreted. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between information exposure and perception formation, particularly in pre-visit contexts where tourists rely entirely on indirect experience.

Another notable finding is the relatively stronger role of cognitive image compared to affective image in shaping visit intention. While tourism research often emphasizes the dominance of emotional responses in travel decision making (Prayag, 2009; Stylos et al., 2016), the present study suggests that rational evaluation remains highly influential in the context of the Meneng Steppe. This may be explained by the nature of the destination itself. For unfamiliar, remote, or less commercialized destinations, tourists may prioritize functional understanding, such as accessibility, environmental value, and uniqueness before forming emotional attachment. In this

sense, cognitive clarity appears to serve as a prerequisite for emotional engagement. This finding contributes to the literature by suggesting that the relative importance of cognitive versus affective image may be context dependent, varying according to destination familiarity and type.

At the same time, the significant role of affective image confirms that emotional responses remain an essential component of destination evaluation. Although its effect is comparatively weaker than cognitive image, affective image still plays a meaningful role in translating perception into intention. This aligns with the broader tourism literature, which conceptualizes travel as both a rational and experiential decision (Prayag, 2009; Stylos et al., 2016). In the case of the Meneng Steppe, the emotional appeal of vast open landscapes, natural serenity, and symbolic meanings associated with nomadic culture likely contribute to this effect. Thus, while cognition may initiate interest, affective responses help reinforce and sustain it.

The inclusion of overall image as a parallel predictor of visit intention also provides valuable insight. The results indicate that tourists form a holistic evaluation that goes beyond isolated cognitive or emotional components. This supports the argument that overall image functions as an integrative construct reflecting the combined influence of beliefs and feelings (Stylos et al., 2016). Importantly, the significant effect of overall image suggests that tourists ultimately rely on a simplified, global impression when making travel decisions, even if that impression is built upon multiple underlying dimensions.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the destination image literature in several ways. First, it provides empirical evidence supporting a fully mediated model in which information sources influence behavioral intention exclusively through image constructs. This strengthens the theoretical argument that destination image serves as the central mechanism linking external stimuli and behavioral outcomes. Second, the study highlights the contextual nature of image formation by demonstrating that cognitive image may play a more dominant role in emerging destinations, particularly when non-visitors must evaluate the feasibility and value of a remote destination before developing strong emotional associations with it. Third, by incorporating overall image alongside cognitive and affective dimensions, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how different evaluative layers interact in shaping intention.

From a practical perspective, the findings have important implications for destination marketing and tourism development. Since information sources do not directly drive visit intention, marketing strategies should focus not only on increasing information exposure but also on shaping how that information is perceived. For the Meneng Steppe, this means that promotional efforts should clearly communicate distinctive attributes such as ecological uniqueness, landscape scale, and cultural significance to strengthen cognitive image. At the same time, emotionally engaging content, such as visual storytelling, immersive imagery, and experiential narratives—should be used to enhance affective responses.

Furthermore, the strong mediating role of image suggests that consistency across information sources is critical. Fragmented or inconsistent messaging may weaken the formation of a coherent destination image, thereby reducing its impact on intention. Therefore, integrated marketing communication strategies that align official promotion with user-generated content and digital platforms are essential. This is particularly relevant in the current digital environment, where destination image is co-created by multiple actors rather than controlled by a single source.

Finally, the relatively moderate explanatory power for visit intention indicates that while image plays a central role, additional factors may also influence travel decisions. Future research could extend the model by incorporating variables such as perceived risk, travel motivation, destination trust, or accessibility constraints to provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourist behavior in remote destinations. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that destination image is not merely an outcome of information exposure but a critical transformation mechanism through which perceptions are constructed and translated into behavioral intention. By revealing the layered and mediated nature of this process, the findings contribute to both theory and practice, particularly in the context of emerging destinations such as the Meneng Steppe.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how information sources shape destination image and, ultimately, visit intention in the context of the Meneng Steppe, an emerging and relatively underexplored destination. By applying a PLS-SEM approach, the study provides robust empirical evidence that the influence of information is not direct, but fully mediated through cognitive, affective, and overall image. This finding underscores a fundamental insight: tourists do not act on information itself, but on the meanings and impressions they construct from it. The results confirm that destination image functions as the central mechanism linking external stimuli to behavioral outcomes. In particular, cognitive image emerges as the most influential pathway, suggesting that rational evaluation plays a critical role in shaping travel intention in low-familiarity contexts. At the same time, affective and overall image contribute meaningfully, highlighting that destination choice is ultimately the result of both analytical assessment and emotional resonance. Together, these findings advance the understanding of destination image formation by demonstrating a fully mediated, multi-layered process that is especially relevant for emerging destinations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the tourism literature by validating a structured mediation model in which cognitive, affective, and overall image serve as the exclusive pathways linking information sources to visit intention. The findings further suggest that the relative salience of cognitive and affective components is contingent upon destination familiarity and stage of development. By integrating these dimensions within a unified framework, the study provides a more comprehensive and contextually nuanced account of tourist decision-making. From a policy and managerial standpoint, the findings underscore the need to move beyond strategies aimed solely at increasing destination visibility. Because information does not directly translate into visit intention, policymakers and destination managers should place greater emphasis on shaping how the Meneng Steppe is perceived. This requires a deliberate communication strategy that attends not only to the content being conveyed, but also to the manner in which that content is framed, interpreted, and internalized by prospective visitors.

The prominence of cognitive image highlights the importance of clear, credible, and systematically presented information. Policy initiatives should therefore prioritize the development of high-quality communication materials that articulate the Meneng Steppe's ecological significance, expansive landscape, biodiversity, cultural heritage, accessibility, infrastructure, and travel logistics. Accurate and comprehensive information can reduce

uncertainty, enhance perceived feasibility, and strengthen prospective tourists' confidence in considering the destination.

At the same time, the significance of affective image points to the value of emotionally compelling destination narratives. Marketing efforts should incorporate visual storytelling, immersive media, and experiential content capable of evoking awe, tranquility, authenticity, and connection with the steppe environment. Such communication may be delivered through digital campaigns, social media engagement, and collaboration with content creators who are able to convey the destination's experiential and symbolic appeal. The role of overall image further indicates that tourists rely on a holistic impression when evaluating a destination. Consistency across communication channels is therefore essential. Integrated marketing strategies should align official tourism promotion with user-generated content, travel platforms, and local stakeholder narratives in order to establish a coherent and distinctive destination identity. Such alignment can strengthen the clarity, credibility, and memorability of the Meneng Steppe in the minds of potential visitors. Because the study focuses on individuals who have not previously visited the destination, the findings also emphasize the strategic importance of pre-visit perception management. Awareness-building initiatives should target domestic tourists as a key market for the sustainable development of emerging regions, while educational and promotional programs can help increase familiarity with lesser-known destinations. More broadly, destination image should be regarded not merely as a promotional outcome, but as a strategic asset capable of enhancing competitiveness, attracting investment, and supporting long-term tourism development.

In particular, tourism authorities should prioritize social media-based storytelling, given that social media emerged as the dominant source of information shaping destination image. Overall, the study demonstrates that the pathway from information to intention is neither direct nor simplistic; rather, it is mediated through a complex process of cognitive, affective, and holistic evaluation. For emerging destinations, success depends not only on achieving visibility, but also on being clearly understood, positively interpreted, and emotionally valued. By aligning information strategies with the mechanisms of image formation, policymakers and practitioners can position the Meneng Steppe more effectively and foster sustainable tourism development.

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