

## Article

# Destination Image Perception Mediated by Experience Quality: The Case of Qingzhou as an Emerging Destination in China

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the competition in the tourism market has become more and more fierce. Tourism destinations need to ensure they have sufficient sources of tourists, and thus, improving their market competitiveness, image, and reputation are particularly important. For this reason, tourism academia has always attached great importance to the study of tourism destination image. Many studies have shown that tourists' travel behavior is largely influenced by their perception of tourism destinations. Research on heritage tourism from the supply perspective is relatively abundant, whereas not much research has been conducted on the demand side, and the influence of heritage tourism on the perception of a destination's image has rarely been discussed. This study examines destination image perceptions through three components: cognition, affection, and quality of experience. We propose a conceptual model that clarifies how the quality of experience mediates the formation of cognition and affection with regard to emerging destinations in mainland China. This study employed the PLS-SEM discontinuous two-stage approach, which involved the examination of higher-order constructs (HOCs). The results from a sample of 475 visitors to the ancient city of Qingzhou in mainland China showed that cognition positively influences affection, and they both positively influence the overall image. Quality of experience was shown to be a mediating factor between cognition and affection. Moreover, the variables under quality of experience were confirmed to be consistent with those under cognition.

**Keywords:** experience quality mediation; image perception; conceptual model; PLS-SEM; dimensions



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## 1. Introduction

With the increased construction around ecological civilization in China, heritage tourism as a return to nature and history as an important form of cultural tourism has become a hot topic [1–3]. Heritage tourism is a tourism activity based on heritage attractions, which include architecture, artworks, natural scenery, and anything else associated with collective memory [4–6]. The main focus of the research on heritage tourism has been from the supply perspective, with studies on heritage value attributes, heritage tourism development, the heritage industry economy, and conservation management of heritage, whereas this topic has been less studied from the demand perspective in relation to tourist motivation and destination image [7–11].

Most of the studies on heritage tourism motivation follow two lines of thought: One is centered on heritage tourism sites, with a focus on motivation based on the attributes of the heritage site [12]. It is generally accepted that heritage tourism motivation includes pilgrimage, nostalgia, roots, black tourism, hunting and exploring, and study [13]. Heritage tourism motives also cover mass tourism motives such as leisure and recreation, learning and education, and social interaction [14–17]. The second is based on tourists' needs, and the degree of connection to heritage is used as a classification criterion for motivation [18–20]. Poria suggests that there is a “core-fringe” structure consisting of motives that are connected to history, motives to learn, motives that are emotionally connected

to heritage, and motives that are unrelated to heritage properties [21,22]. It is evident that a visitor's motivation for participating in heritage tourism is a key factor in understanding heritage tourism; however, heritage tourism is complex and diverse, and there is no consensus on how to evaluate heritage tourism motivation [23].

Destination image perception is defined as tourists' perceptions, impressions, and emotional expressions of things and phenomena with regard to a destination [24–26]. The research mainly includes the formation process, influencing factors, structural characteristics, and the influence of tourists' destination image perception on behavior and marketing management inspiration [27,28]. In terms of research methodology, the "cognitive-emotional" model proposed by Baloglu and McCleary, which classifies destination images into cognitive, emotional, and holistic images, is widely used in the academic field [29]. In terms of research objects, studies on destination image generally do not distinguish between types of tourist places, and studies on destination image perception mostly focus on general mass tourism; there is a lack of studies on the destination image perception as it pertains to heritage tourism [30–36].

Past research has shown that tourism motivation is an important psychological factor that drives tourists to engage in tourism behaviors, which in turn, leads to tourism experiences and perceptions of tourism [37–39]. Most existing studies have examined heritage tourism motivation and destination image separately, and few have explored the relationship between heritage tourism motivation and tourists' destination image perceptions; therefore, the question of how complex and diverse the effects of heritage tourism motivation are on tourists' image perceptions of heritage tourism sites remains to be revealed.

Qingzhou is an ancient city in Shandong Province, China, which has become an emerging destination through the unremitting efforts of local authorities. Recently, the tourist arrivals have increased rapidly. As Butler (1980) mentioned, in the early stages of tourism development, tourists do not have a clear image of the destination [40]. This study tapped into the tourists' image perception mediated by appraising the quality of the tourists' experiences in the early stage of destination development, and also added to the knowledge of empirical studies focusing on developed or matured destinations.

## 2. Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Conceptual Framework of Destination Image

It was proposed by Hunt (1975) that image is the potential tourists' perception of a certain destination. Crompton (1979) dictated that image is "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that an individual has of a destination" (p.18). It is a person's mental picture of a specific place [41]. Words frequently used to define destination image include impression, perception, belief, idea, representation, and feeling [42]. Most studies tend to consider destination image as being incorporated into two interrelated concepts: cognition and affection, with affection being greatly dependent on cognition [43–46]. Cognition is one's personal knowledge and belief about an object (an evaluation of the perceived attributes of the object), and affection is the overall emotional outcome of appraising an object [47–50]. It is the expression of positive or negative feelings with intensity [51]. Furthermore, the conative dimension is also a studied component; cognitive image, affective image, and conative image are interrelated, and together, comprise the overall image of a destination [52,53]. The conative dimension is how visitors act towards a destination based on the other two [54]. In other words, it is derived from the previous two factors involving acting, doing, or striving in response to both [55,56]. Finally, a meta-analysis [57] placed perceptions of destination under the cognitive dimension, affective dimension, conative dimension, and overall dimension, and found that the overall and affective dimensions, followed by the cognitive dimension, impose the greatest effect on behavior intention. Generally speaking, the conative dimension belongs to the field of externally oriented behavior research, and thus, does not belong to the field of this study, which focuses on the internally oriented cognitive and affective aspects. Thus, the affective dimension