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The Impact of Destination Image on Tourist Behavior: A Case Study of Generation Y Tourists from Chengdu, China, Traveling to Thailand

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were 1) To explore the direct impact of Cognitive Image on tourists' Behavior and its indirect impact mediated by tourists' intentions, 2) To explore the direct impact of Affective Image on tourists 'tourists' behavior and its indirect impact mediated by tourists' intentions. 3) To explore the direct impact of Perceived Scarifice on tourists' behavior and its indirect impact mediated by tourists' intentions. This study collected data using the "Wenjuanxing" platform, obtaining feedback from 328 tourists aged 29-44 in Chengdu, China. The data were then analyzed for reliability and validity and subjected to structural equation modeling.

The research results were found as follows: 1) the indirect effect of Cognitive Image, mediated by Intention, was greater than its direct effect on behavior. 2) The indirect effect of Affective Image, mediated by Intention, was also greater than its direct effect on behavior. 3) The impact of Affective Image on tourist intention was greater than that of Cognitive Image. 4) Perceived Sacrifice had a significant effect on Intention, but its direct impact on tourist behavior was not significant. This research provides a new perspective on the mechanisms by which destination image impacts travel behavior and offers valuable insights for tourism management agencies and policymakers.

Suggestion: The current attractions for Chinese Generation Y tourists to travel to Thailand are shifting from objective factors, such as natural landscapes, to a greater emphasis on affective experiences. Therefore, product positioning and marketing should focus on the construction of Affectiva Image and the stimulation of emotion.

Keywords: Destination Image; Cognitive Image; Affective Image; Perceived Sacrifice; Generation Y

Introduction

Tourism has become a crucial driver of global economic growth. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, over the next decade, tourism is projected to contribute 11.5% to global GDP, with an annual growth rate of around 3.5%, surpassing the expected 2.5% growth rate of the overall economy. Within this context, Thailand stands out as one of the most popular destinations in Southeast Asia, renowned for its rich cultural heritage, historical attractions, and natural landscapes. However, Thailand's economic growth remains highly dependent on international tourists(Maulana et al., 2025). In 2019, foreign tourist spending contributed 11% to Thailand's GDP, yet by 2024 this proportion had declined to 8.99%. Moreover, Thailand's recovery rate of international tourist arrivals (88.97%) lags behind that of neighboring countries such as Indonesia (107.74%) and Malaysia (95.79%). These dynamics highlight both the importance of inbound tourism and the challenges Thailand faces in restoring its pre-pandemic tourism momentum.

Among Thailand's international markets, mainland China occupies a particularly significant position as the world's largest source of outbound tourists and Thailand's leading source of international visitors, accounting for 28% of arrivals in 2019. Although Chinese outbound tourism reached 146 million in 2024, recovering to 92.9% of the 2019 level, Chinese arrivals in Thailand only reached 6.73 million, accounting for 19% of total inbound tourists and recovering to just 60.41% of pre-pandemic levels. Between January and July 2025, arrivals further declined to 2.69 million, representing a 34.92% decrease compared to the same period in 2024. The demographic profile of Chinese outbound tourists is dominated by Generation Y (1981–1996) and Generation Z (1997–2012), with Generation Y serving as the leading force due to their stronger purchasing power (TaoDong, 2021). Understanding the travel behavior of this generation is therefore critical for explaining the slow recovery of Chinese tourism to Thailand and for developing targeted strategies to stimulate this market.

Existing literature on Chinese tourists visiting Thailand has examined both demand- and supply-side perspectives. On the demand side, studies focus on diverse tourist groups such as independent travelers, group tours, families, and Generation Y, with particular attention to satisfaction, revisit Intention, and loyalty (Meenui et al., 2025). On the supply side, research has investigated differences in destination image perceptions between Thai residents and tourists, as well as residents' attitudes toward foreign visitors, which influence both tourist experiences and destination sustainability (Stylidis et al., 2022). Additional research has explored safety, service quality, and comparative advantages with competing destinations. The role of social media, user-generated content, and augmented reality in shaping tourism experiences has also been noted (Praphruetmon & Wang, 2023). However, most studies adopt the dominant framework of "image → value → loyalty," while neglecting the alternative logic that 'tourists' expectations of travel value drive image perceptions" (Wang et al., 2023). In particular, few studies have investigated how Chinese Generation Y tourists' subjective value expectations and perceptions of Sacrifice affect their overall Image of Thailand and subsequent travel behaviors. This represents a significant gap in the existing scholarship.

In light of these gaps, this study proposes a new framework that emphasizes the role of 'tourists' expected value in shaping destination image. Drawing on the perspective that 'tourists' expectations of travel value drive image perceptions (Wang et al., 2023), the research incorporates both perceived expected value and Perceived Sacrifices associated with traveling to Thailand (Batra, 2023) into the destination image model. Specifically, it focuses on Chinese Generation Y tourists to examine how their experiential value expectations influence their perception of Thailand's destination image and, consequently, their travel intentions and behaviors. By doing so, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of destination image formation. It offers practical insights for Thailand to better attract and retain Chinese tourists in the post-pandemic era.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the direct impact of Cognitive Image on tourists' Behavior and its indirect impact mediated by tourists' intentions.
2. To explore the direct impact of Affective Image on tourists' Behavior and its indirect impact mediated by tourists' intentions
3. To explore the direct impact of Perceived Sacrifice on tourists' Behavior and its indirect impact mediated by tourists' intentions.

Literature Review

TDI has been recognized as a key factor in tourists' destination choices. TDI refers to "the overall perception and impression formed by tourists of a particular destination." Baloglu and McCleary (1999) further proposed the "Cognitive-Affective-Overall Image Model," which consists of three dimensions: Cognitive Image, Affective Image, and overall Image. Cognitive Image primarily refers to their perception of a destination's objective attributes, such as infrastructure, cultural resources, natural landscapes, and safety. Affective Image primarily refers to their subjective feelings about the destination, such as excitement, relaxation, pleasure, and stimulation. The Overall Image is a combination of Cognitive Image and Affective Image. While most researchers studying destination image use the three factors, Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) point out that using overall Image as a separate factor with Cognitive Image and Affective Image in parallel increases collinearity. Therefore, this study uses only Cognitive Image and Affective Image as two factors.

Customer Perceived Value Theory, also known as Perceived Value Theory, refers to the trade-off between the benefits and costs that the customer perceives from the product or service (Blut et al., 2023). Benefits are often referred to as value. Yum and Kim (2024) examined the positive impact of destination image, perceived value, and behavioral Intention across diverse contexts. Perceived Sacrifice includes factors such as time, monetary cost, search, and psychological costs, and perceived risk. With increasing refinement and deepening of research, the two theories have gradually transcended their boundaries, engaging in integrated studies (Cao, 2025).

Tourists' perceived value of a destination's objective conditions determines their Perceived Image of the destination, while their subjective emotional perception of the destination determines their emotional perception of the destination. Perceived Sacrifice, through value judgments, interacts with cognitive and emotional Image to influence tourists' attitudes and, in turn, their Behavior (Hailin Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, this study uses Cognitive Image, Emotional Image, and Perceived Sacrifice as independent variables.

1. Cognitive Image

Based on the travel process, Cognitive Image can be divided into the expected Cognitive Image before a visit and the experienced Cognitive Image after the visit.

The expected Cognitive Image is generally based on a self-assessment of a hypothetical scenario. It is divided into the organic Cognitive Image (the initial impression formed by tourists before they are exposed to destination marketing information) and the induced Cognitive Image (the projected Image shaped and promoted by tourism marketing organizations (DMOs) that is the Perceived Image of potential tourists) (Huang et al., 2021). The induced Cognitive Image primarily includes tourism management organization-generated content (MGC), user-generated content (UGC, primarily traveler-generated content, or TGC), and their co-creation. Because social media affordances (SMA) and their non-transactional nature can help tourists overcome information asymmetry, social media has become a crucial source of information for tourists and a key channel for tourism marketing organizations (DMOs) to disseminate information (Sano et al., 2024). The tourists' subjective norms are reinforced by key opinion leaders (KOLs) and word-of-mouth (WOM). This impacts tourists' destination image (Thuy et al., 2024) and travel decisions.

Experienced Cognitive Image refers to tourists' on-site perception of a destination's objective attributes after a visit. This perception typically differs from their Expected Cognitive Image, influencing their perceived value (Ayyıldız, 2021), which in turn influences their Affective Image of the destination and their Intention to revisit.

In general, Cognitive Image reflects tourists' evaluation of an entity. Higher evaluations are associated with stronger travel intentions. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

H1: Cognitive Image positively impacts tourists' Intention

Differences in tourists' Cognitive Images will affect their pro-environmental behaviors, number of trips, accommodation choices, tool use, length of stay, and other behaviors during their travels. Differences in infrastructure construction, cultural resources of tourist attractions, and tourists' own culture also affect tourists' travel behavior (Chen et al., 2023). Therefore, we can make the following assumptions:

H2: Cognitive Image positively impacts tourists' Behavior

2. Affective Image

Affective Image can also be divided into the expected Affective Image before travel and the experienced Affective Image after travel.

The expected Affective Image refers to the emotional impression of a destination formed by tourists before travel, through indirect information such as original and induced Cognitive Images (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Culture and interpersonal interactions define it. The greater the cultural similarity, the more positive the destination image, thereby

promoting travel intention (Han Zhang et al., 2023). Gadhoumi et al. (2023) argue that different cultures are more likely to generate a more positive destination image. Interpersonal interaction can alter the cognitive structure of a destination's Image. For example, user-generated content (UGC) can reshape Thailand's online Image, thereby influencing potential tourists' travel decisions(Praphruetmon & Wang, 2023). This is stronger than official publicity. Affective Images affect tourists' travel intentions by confirming/reinforcing existing attitudes, creating new attitudes, or changing existing perceptions or attitudes. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

H3: Affective Image positively impacts tourists' Intention

The experienced Affective Image is highly subjective, easily forming satisfaction and memories, influencing tourists' perceptions of a destination and significantly influencing perceived value (Fakfare et al., 2021), prompting tourists to pay a premium for their preferences. Different simulation types, such as AR, VR, and digital services, on-site interactive experiences, and social media user-generated content (UGC), have a positive moderating effect on the travel experience. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H4: Affective Image positively impacts tourists' Behavior

3. Perceived Sacrifice

The theory of customer perceived value posits that customer behavior is a trade-off between value and Sacrifice. Cognitive and Affective Image can contribute to perceived value for tourists. Perceived Sacrifice refers to factors that hinder tourists' travel intentions and behaviors, including financial costs (Zeithaml, 1988), time costs, perceived risk (Habibi et al., 2018), and subjective norms. Situational factors such as safety, emergencies, and policy changes can significantly increase tourists' Perceived Sacrifices and reduce their perceived value of travel (Madinga et al., 2025).

Thanks to the activeness of social media, online information is prone to information explosion (he, 2024). Negative news, in particular, is more likely to resonate with the public and even become "labeled." People tend to label things (Money, 2023). Once negative information forms a "labeled" impression, it can reduce tourists' psychological safety and potentially affect their travel decisions. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

H5: Perceived Sacrifice hurts tourists' Intention

During tourism, Perceived Sacrifices of non-entertainment time and non-experience time (such as traveling), perceived shopping risks, and cultural or environmental uncertainty can lead tourists to avoid travel(Yang et al., 2021), thereby affecting consumer behavior. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

H6: Perceived Sacrifice hurts tourists' Behavior

The classic and widely used theory of planned Behavior (PBT) has extensively demonstrated that tourists' behavioral intentions positively behavior(Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, we can propose the following hypothesis:

H7: tourists' Intention positively impacts tourists' Behavior

Summary

Based on the literature reviewed above, existing research generally indicates that cognitive and emotional images play a key role in tourist attitudes and behaviors. However,

fewer studies have combined perceived value theory with the destination image system to assess its impact on tourist behavior and intentions. To expand this research, this paper, building on existing research, proposes a model that models the relationship between Cognitive Image, Emotional Image, and Perceived Sacrifice and Behavior, and based on this, proposes seven research hypotheses.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the above assumptions, we can construct the following hypothetical model:

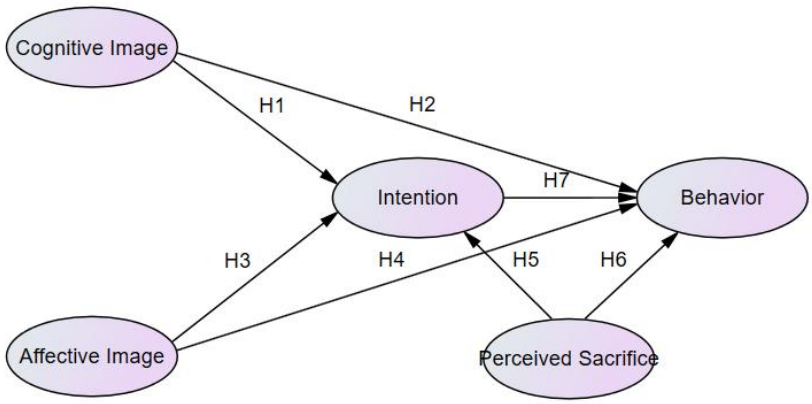

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

1. Sample, Questionnaire, and Data Collection

This study employed a convenience sampling approach, targeting Chinese Generation Y individuals (aged 29–44) residing in Chengdu, China. Convenience sampling was considered appropriate for this research due to its feasibility in accessing respondents who are active social media users and thus more likely to engage with online surveys. Although convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings, Chengdu was selected as the research location because it is a representative urban center in Western China with a high concentration of young professionals and frequent travelers, making it a suitable proxy for the target demographic group.

The research instrument consisted of a 40-item questionnaire that measured both demographic characteristics and five key constructs: Cognitive Image, Affective Image, Perceived Sacrifice, Intention, and Behavior. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The measurement items were adapted from prior studies that demonstrated strong psychometric properties, ensuring content validity and construct reliability. Adaptation from established scales also helped enhance comparability with prior research while tailoring the items to the specific cultural and contextual setting of Chinese outbound tourism.

The questionnaire was designed and distributed using the Chinese online platform Wenjuanxing. Distribution was carried out through social media platforms and QR codes, which enabled broad accessibility. To address ethical concerns, participants were provided with informed consent statements prior to completing the survey, clearly indicating the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Measures were taken to minimize potential sampling bias from online distribution, such as encouraging participants from diverse social and professional networks to take part in the survey. The data collection process was conducted over two months, from May 10 to July 10, 2025.

A total of 350 questionnaires were collected. Following the recommendations of Kline (2023), which suggest that 300–500 respondents are required for structural equation modeling (SEM), the obtained sample size was deemed appropriate for the intended analyses. After screening, 22 invalid responses were excluded due to factors such as excessively short response times or uniform response patterns, resulting in a final dataset of 328 valid questionnaires. This yielded a response rate of 93.71%, which not only meets but exceeds the recommended threshold for robust SEM analysis. Additionally, the retained sample size ensured sufficient statistical power to detect medium effect sizes, aligning with conventional guidelines in behavioral and tourism research.

To ensure the integrity of the dataset, a rigorous data screening procedure was applied. Questionnaires were classified as "invalid" if they met one or more of the following conditions: (1) completion time was significantly shorter than 90 seconds, suggesting careless answering; (2) identical responses were provided across all items, indicating lack of engagement; or (3) responses exhibited illogical or inconsistent patterns. This transparent screening process enhanced the reliability of the dataset and ensured that only high-quality responses were retained for subsequent analysis.

Description of sample characteristic distribution

2. Descriptive Statistics

Through the characteristic analysis of the research subject, this paper obtained Table 1.

Table 1 Description of sample characteristic distribution

Feature	Class	Requency	Percentage
Gender	Male	134	40.85%
	Female	194	59.15%
	Total	**328**	**100.00%**
Education level	High school and below	13	3.96%
	College and undergraduate	271	82.62%
	Master	41	12.50%
	Doctor	3	0.91%
	Total	**328**	**100.00%**
Income	Under 5000 yuan (excluding 5000)	35	10.67%
	5,000 yuan to 9,999 yuan	111	33.84%
	10,000 yuan-14,999 yuan	112	34.15%
	15,000 yuan to 19,999 yuan	51	15.55%

	More than 20,000 yuan	19	5.79%
	Total	**328**	**100.00%**
Experience in Thailand	Never been there, and no plans to go in two years	41	12.50%
	Never been there, but plan to go in 2 years	137	41.77%
	I have been there, and I am not going back for two years	35	10.67%
	I have been there, and I plan to go again in two years	115	35.06%
	Total	**328**	**100.00%**

As shown in Table 1, the following information is available from this survey:

In terms of gender composition, the male-to-female ratio of respondents was approximately 4:6, with females outnumbering males. In terms of educational background, the majority of respondents held associate and bachelor's degrees, followed by postgraduate degrees. In terms of income, the majority of respondents earned between 5,000 and 15,000 RMB per month. In terms of travel experience to Thailand, 76.83% of respondents said they had not been there but planned to go within the next two years, and 76.83% said they had been there and planned to return within the next two years.

3. Reliability Analysis and Validity Analysis

Inspecting data quality is crucial for ensuring the validity of subsequent analyses. Internal consistency of each dimension is analyzed primarily through Cronbach's alpha combined with composite reliability (CR) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). A Cronbach's alpha below 0.6 is considered unreliable, necessitating questionnaire redesign or re-collection and analysis of the data. An alpha between 0.6 and 0.7 is considered reliable, 0.7-0.8 is considered moderately reliable, 0.8-0.9 is considered very reliable, and alpha ≥ 0.9 indicates very reliable data. CR values greater than 0.7 are considered excellent, with those greater than 0.8 considered excellent(Hair et al., 2010). In this analysis, the reliability analysis results are shown in Table 2. Except for the Cronbach's α coefficient of Affective Image, which is in the very reliable range of 0.8-0.9, the coefficients of the other four facets are all greater than 0.9. Therefore, the CR values are all greater than 0.8, indicating that the scales used in this study have good internal consistency and good reliability.

Table 2 Statistical analysis of the reliability of questionnaire data

Project	Cronbach's alpha	CR	Number of terms
Cognitive Image	0.945	0.945	12
Affective Image	0.846	0.846	5
Perceived Sacrifice	0.92	0.921	8
Intention	0.914	0.914	5
Behavior	0.926	0.927	6

To assess the construct validity of the measurement model, this study examined convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity is measured using standardized loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). Standardized factor loadings >0.6 are acceptable, >0.7 are ideal, and a minimum AVE of 0.5 (Fornell &

Larcker, 1981) and a minimum CR of 0.7 are required to demonstrate good convergent and composite validity.

In this validity test, all item loadings, except for affe1←Affective Image, which was 0.698 and within the acceptable range, were >0.7 and within the ideal range. All AVE values were above 0.5, and all CR values were above 0.8. This indicates that each facet has good validity.

Discriminant validity is tested by comparing the square root of the AVE with the latent variable correlation coefficient. The square root of the AVE is required to be greater than the correlation coefficient between each facet and the other facets (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The analysis results in Table 3 show that in the discriminant validity test of this questionnaire, the standardized correlation coefficients between each facet are all less than the square root of the corresponding AVE value, indicating that the facets have good discriminant validity.

Table 3 Discriminant validity of facets

	AVE	Cognitive image	Affective image	Perceived scarifice	Intention	Behavior
Cognitive Image	0.588	0.767				
Affective Image	0.523	0.174	0.723			
Perceived Sacrifice	0.592	-0.123	-0.187	0.769		
Intention	0.681	0.426	0.555	-0.367	0.825	
Behavior	0.678	0.405	0.464	-0.330	0.682	0.823

Research Results

1. Model Fit Analysis

The model fit test results in Table 4 show that Cmin/df = 1.136, within the range of 1-3, and RMSEA = 0.02, within the excellent range of <0.05. Furthermore, GFI and CFI are both >0.9, indicating excellent levels, and AGFI >0.8, reaching a reasonable level. Therefore, the combined results of this analysis indicate that the CFA model for this scale has a good fit.

Table 4 CFA model fit

Metric	Reference standard(Kline, 2023)	Measured results
Cmin/df	1-3 is excellent, and 3-5 is good	1.136
RMSEA	<0.05 is excellent and <0.08 is good	0.02
GFI	> 0.9 is excellent,> 0.8 is good	0.903
CFI	> 0.9 is excellent,> 0.8 is good	0.989
AGFI	> 0.9 is excellent,> 0.8 is good	0.889

2. Path Analysis to Test Model Assumptions

To test the validity of the hypothesized paths, we examined the standardized path coefficient (β value), standard error (SE), and significance level (p-value). The required p-

values were < 0.05 and | CR | > 1.96 (Kline, 2023). The results of the model path analysis are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Path analysis of theoretical hypotheses

Label	Path			SE.	CR.	P	β	Result
H1	Intention	←	Cognitive Image	0.059	6.261	***	0.317	supported
H3	Intention	←	Affective Image	0.078	7.755	***	0.455	supported
H5	Intention	←	Perceived Sacrifice	0.057	-4.841	***	-0.243	supported
H4	Behavior	←	Affective Image	0.079	2.328	0.02	0.14	supported
H6	Behavior	←	Perceived Sacrifice	0.055	-2.045	0.041	-0.101	supported
H2	Behavior	←	Cognitive Image	0.059	3.045	0.002	0.155	supported
H7	Behavior	←	Intention	0.071	6.958	***	0.501	supported

3. Bootstrap Test of The Mediating Effect of Intention

Academia generally uses the Sobel test and the Bootstrap test to test the effect of a mediating variable. However, the Bootstrap test is generally considered more robust than the Sobel test and more suitable for skewed and non-normal samples (MacKinnon et al., 2007). A Bootstrap test with a |Z-score| > 1.96 at a 95% confidence interval, where the confidence interval does not include 0, indicates a significant impact. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Reporting Table for Intention as a Mediating Variable

			Product of Coefficients		Bootstrapping			
					Bias-Corrected 95%CI		Percentile 95%CI	
Path	Estimated value		SE	Z	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
CogI→Beh	Total	0.361	0.07	5.16	0.232	0.509	0.233	0.509
	Indirect	0.183	0.042	4.36	0.113	0.277	0.111	0.275
	Direct	0.178	0.063	2.83	0.061	0.307	0.057	0.303
AffI→Beh	Total	0.483	0.085	5.68	0.324	0.658	0.323	0.656
	Indirect	0.299	0.061	4.90	0.19	0.427	0.19	0.428
	Direct	0.184	0.089	2.07	0.02	0.366	0.015	0.36
PerS→Beh	Total	-0.247	0.06	-4.12	-0.365	-0.128	-0.365	-0.129
	Indirect	-0.135	0.032	-4.22	-0.208	-0.08	-0.203	-0.076
	Direct	-0.112	0.058	-1.93	-0.225	0.002	-0.226	0.001

note:5000 bootstrap samples

4. Path Hypotheses and Mediation Analysis

(1) Cognitive Image and Travel Behavior

The direct effect of Cognitive Image on travel behavior was estimated to be 0.178, with a Z-score of 2.83, and a 95% confidence interval that did not contain 0, indicating a significant correlation, indicating a CogI→Beh path. The mediating effect of Cognitive Image on travel

behavior through Intention was estimated to be 0.183, with a Z-score of 4.36, and a 95% confidence interval that did not contain 0, indicating a significant correlation, indicating a CogI→Int→Beh path. This suggests that Intention does not completely mediate the effect of Cognitive Image on travel behavior. Further analysis of the standardized path coefficients revealed that Cognitive Image had a significant positive impact on travel behavior ($\beta = 0.155$, $P = 0.002$), confirming hypothesis H2. Furthermore, Cognitive Image also had a significant positive impact on travel intention ($\beta = 0.317$, $P < 0.001$), confirming hypothesis H1.

(2) Affective Image and Travel Behavior;

The direct effect of Affective Image on travel behavior was estimated to be 0.184, with a Z-score of 2.07, and a 95% confidence interval that did not contain 0, indicating significance, indicating a valid AffI→Beh path. The mediating effect of Affective Image on travel behavior through Intention was estimated to be 0.299, with a Z-score of 4.90, and a 95% confidence interval that did not contain 0, indicating significance, indicating a valid AffI→Int→Beh path. This indicates that Intention does not fully mediate the effect of Affective Image on travel behavior. Further analysis of the standardized path coefficients revealed that Cognitive Image had a significant positive impact on travel behavior ($\beta = 0.14$, $P = 0.02$), confirming hypothesis H4. Furthermore, Cognitive Image also had a significant positive impact on travel intention ($\beta = 0.455$, $P < 0.001$), confirming hypothesis H3.

(3) Perceived Sacrifice and Travel Behavior;

The direct impact of Perceived Sacrifice on travel behavior was estimated at -0.112, with a Z-score of -1.93. Its 95% confidence interval included 0, indicating no significance, and the PerS→Beh path was not established. The mediating effect of Perceived Sacrifice on travel behavior through Intention was estimated at -0.135, with a Z-score of -4.22. Its 95% confidence interval did not include 0, indicating significance, and the PerS→Int→Beh path was established. Therefore, Intention fully mediates the effect of Affective Image on travel behavior. Further analysis of the standardized path coefficients revealed that Cognitive Image had a significant positive impact on travel behavior ($\beta = -0.101$, $P = 0.041$), confirming Hypothesis H4. Furthermore, Cognitive Image also had a significant positive impact on travel intention ($\beta = -0.243$, $P < 0.001$), confirming Hypothesis H3.

(4) Path Analysis and Bootstrap Methods to Analyze the Conflict Between the Direct Impact of Perceived Sacrifice on Tourist Behavior

While path analysis and bootstrap methods agree well in other path analyses, there is a discrepancy in the results of the PerS→Beh path analysis, which examines the direct impact of Perceived Sacrifice on tourist behavior. Bootstrap mediation analysis revealed that the PerS→Beh path was not significant (estimated value -0.112, Z-score -1.93, and its 95% confidence interval included 0, indicating non-significance). In contrast, path analysis confirmed that the PerS→Beh path was significant ($\beta = -0.101$, $P = 0.041$). This discrepancy arises from the assumption that path coefficient analysis assumes a normal distribution of variables, making it sensitive to sample distributions and prone to Type I errors. Bootstrap confidence interval tests, on the other hand, do not require a normal distribution and are more robust to the product term of the mediating effect. Currently, bootstrap is the most

recommended and reliable test method in academia. Therefore, this study concludes that the PerS→Beh path is not significant, and therefore, hypothesis H6 is not supported.

Discussions

1. The Direct Effect of Cognitive Image on Travel Behavior and Its Mediating Effect through Tourist Intention.

Existing literature shows that Cognitive Image has a significant (> 0.2) positive effect on both tourist attitudes and Behavior (Avloniti et al., 2025; Zheng & Rahman, 2025), with comparable impacts on attitudes and Behavior (Marques et al., 2021).

This study's data indicate that tourist intention partially mediates the effect of Cognitive Image on tourist behavior (Table 5), with a significantly more substantial effect on Intention (β=0.32) and a weaker direct effect on Behavior (β=0.16). This may be due to the development of social media, which allows tourists to easily access objective attributes of various destinations and conduct prospective comparisons and selections, thereby reducing the urge to travel directly, resulting in a more substantial impact of Cognitive Image on direct travel behavior.

2. The Direct Effect of Affective Image on Travel Behavior and Its Mediating Effect through Tourist Intention.

Affective Image can affect tourists' travel intentions both consciously and unconsciously. Existing literature indicates that Affective Image has a slightly greater impact on attitudes than Cognitive Image (Carvache-Franco et al., 2024; Duan & Wu, 2024; Zheng & Rahman, 2025). While natural scenery remains the primary factor (Zhang et al., 2022), a symbiotic attraction of culture and nature is emerging.

This study's data show that tourist intentions partially mediate the impact of Affective Imagery on tourist behavior (Table 5). However, the impact of Affective Imagery on tourist intentions (β=0.45) significantly exceeds that of Cognitive Imagery (β=0.32). This suggests that, in today's world of readily accessible and abundant information, the role of Cognitive Imagery on tourist intentions is gradually decreasing, while the role of Affective Imagery is further increasing.

Also, while Affective Imagery has a significant impact on tourist intentions (Table 5), its direct impact on tourist behavior is not significant (β=0.14). This may be due to the wide variety of destinations available and the use of social media, making it difficult for tourists to travel based solely on emotional attraction spontaneously. Ultimately, tourists must choose among a variety of travel intentions. In simple terms, Affective Imagery can facilitate "want to go" Behavior rather than directly achieve "will to go."

3. The Direct Impact of Perceived Sacrifice on Travel Behavior and Its Mediating Effect through Tourist Intention.

Perceived Sacrifice does significantly impact their travel intentions(Table 5). Setiawan et al. (2024) found that the negative coefficient of Perceived Sacrifices on tourist intentions was approximately (β = -0.22), consistent with the findings of this study (β = -0.24). Much existing literature shows that Perceived Sacrifice has a significant direct impact on tourist

behavior (Jieyao et al., 2025; Seegebarth et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). However, this study confirms that Perceived Sacrifices do not significantly directly impact tourist behavior, but are entirely mediated by tourist intentions. During the 2025 Chinese Spring Festival holiday, the Wang Xing incident led to a 12.71% decrease in the number of tourists traveling to Thailand (MOTS, 2025), which is also confirmed by the low cancellation rate.

There are two possible reasons for this. First, many people who have previously traveled to Thailand have a direct understanding of the country's safety environment and, therefore, have a relatively neutral view of such adverse events. The positive Affective Image they have formed from previous travel experiences in Thailand also serves to mitigate this negative impact. Second, it is possible that cancellations themselves contribute to this increased Perceived Sacrifice. In other words, if a trip is canceled, the loss of airfare and the additional time and effort required to change itinerary plans will increase. This increased Perceived Sacrifice can hinder tourists' Intention to cancel.

This disincentive to trip cancellation is also confirmed by research on group tours and independent travelers. Chen et al. (2015) confirmed that group tours often have strict non-refundable policies, minimum group member requirements, complex bundling structures, complicated cancellation communications, and opaque fees. The cancellation losses incurred by group tour tourists are significantly higher than those incurred by independent travelers, resulting in lower cancellation rates for group tours.

New Knowledge

This study advances the understanding of how destination image and Perceived Sacrifice shape tourist behavior by clarifying the evolving mediating role of tourist intention. The findings can be synthesized into three main knowledge contributions:

Cognitive Image increasingly affects Behavior indirectly through Intention rather than exerting a strong direct influence. This shift reflects the abundance of objective destination information available via social media, which facilitates rational comparisons and reduces impulsive decision-making.

Affective Image has gained prominence in driving Intention, suggesting that emotional resonance now outweighs purely cognitive assessments in stimulating travel desire. However, its direct influence on Behavior remains limited, as actual travel choices are filtered through competing intentions and contextual evaluations.

Perceived Sacrifice, particularly perceived risk, influences Behavior only through Intention. This indirect pathway is moderated by prior positive experiences and by considerations such as potential cancellation costs, which buffer against adverse events.

Taken together, these results refine destination image–behavior models by demonstrating (a) the diminishing direct effect of cognitive evaluations, (b) the rising significance of affective drivers, and (c) the fully mediated role of Perceived Sacrifice. Conceptually, the relationships can be illustrated as a mediation framework, in which cognitive and Affective Images, alongside Perceived Sacrifice, converge on Intention, which serves as the central mechanism translating perceptions into actual Behavior.

Conclusions

Theoretical Contributions

This study introduces the dimension of Perceived Sacrifice, expanding the scope of destination image research. This addresses the current academic call for research on the relatively insufficient negative dimensions of destination image and enriches the theoretical implications of the image construct. Incorporating travel intention as a mediating variable into the model confirms the key mediating role of travel intention between destination image and tourist behavior. However, the newly discovered direct impact of Perceived Sacrifice on tourist behavior did not reach statistical significance.

This study further found that Affective Image significantly outperformed Cognitive Image in influencing travel intention. This breaks with the assumption that cognitive and Affective images are equally important in traditional destination image models and emphasizes the central role of affective factors in driving travel intention. This study provides new theoretical perspectives and empirical support for destination image research.

Practical Contributions

This study focuses on the perceptions of destination image among current Chinese Generation Y tourists traveling to Thailand. By comparing relevant research literature, it examines the changing impact of destination image, providing a reference for tourism policy development. This study recommends that Thailand's tourism authorities further segment tourism resources, prioritize cultural and emotional engagement and experience, and select appropriate market positioning and promotional methods to reshape the destination's Image. This study also suggests that relevant Thai tourism authorities proactively increase social media and public opinion, reduce Perceived Sacrifice among Chinese tourists, and prioritize group tours.

Suggestions

This study also has several limitations. First, the sample size is limited to Generation Y tourists in Chengdu, China. It may not be representative of Generation Y tourists in other regions, or even other generations. Second, the data was collected using convenience sampling, with questionnaires collected online and via social media. This may not conform to the distribution of random sampling and may be subject to bias. Third, tourists' perceptions and behaviors change over time. The short time span of this study may not fully reflect tourists' perceptions and experiences over the entire travel period.

Future research requires further investigation in various areas. Horizontally, the sample size and scope could be increased to obtain statistical data that is more consistent with random sampling, thereby achieving more accurate conclusions. The sample size and scope could be increased to obtain a more detailed analysis of the similarities and differences between tourist groups in terms of Cognitive Image, Affective Image, and Perceived Sacrifices. Furthermore, a more extended sample period could be used to obtain statistical data on these aspects over a longer period of time, thereby providing a more comprehensive analysis of tourists'

considerations in preparing for travel to Thailand and further analyzing the patterns of change in these aspects. In terms of research theories and methods, more diverse research theories and methods can be adopted to obtain more and more accurate research variables, to more comprehensively and accurately study the relationship between tourist destination image, Perceived Sacrifices, and tourist behavior, and thus more accurately judge and predict tourists' intentions and behaviors.

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