Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes

The perceived cultural distance of Kazakhstan and the impact of destination image on travel intention

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the effects of perceived cultural distance (CD) among potential tourists considering a visit to Kazakhstan on destination image (cognitive and affective dimensions) and travel intention (TI), while also exploring how tourism stakeholders perceive the destination's functional characteristics and cultural differences to contextualize the quantitative findings through a convergent mixed-methods approach.

Design/methodology/approach – In this study, a convergent mixed-methods approach, based on data triangulation, was adopted to enhance the reliability of the findings and address the subject holistically from both supply and demand perspectives. Accordingly, quantitative data collected through surveys of potential tourists (308 respondents) were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling, while qualitative data obtained from interviews with industry stakeholders (20 respondents) were subjected to content analysis.

Findings – The cognitive image has a strong and significant effect on TI. Furthermore, perceptions of the destination's functional characteristics indirectly influence TI through the cognitive image. Kazakhstan's untouched nature and nomadic culture stand out as the most important tourist attractions. The biggest obstacles are inadequate infrastructure, language differences and low international recognition. Stakeholders emphasize that cultural differences can be transformed into value-added assets through experience-focused projects such as digital marketing and ethno-villages.

Research limitations/implications – In Kazakhstan's tourism strategies, focusing on data-driven promotional activities (to strengthen tourists' cognitive image) and improving service quality are seen as critical steps to boost TI. It addresses infrastructure gaps, overcomes language barriers and markets cultural assets, such as through experiential projects like ethno-villages, on digital platforms.

Originality/value – This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine Kazakhstan's tourism potential through the perceptions of prospective tourists (external perspective) and local tourism stakeholders (internal perspective); it comprehensively explores the relationships among CD, image dimensions and TI.

Keywords Cultural distance, Destination image, Travel intention, Tourism in Kazakhstan, Travel barriers

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The tourist experience and perception are being reshaped by digitalization and cultural context (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2015). This experience is multidimensional, shaped by both

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individual preferences and cultural characteristics. Cultural similarities and differences directly influence travel decisions and destination choice (Stone, 2012). The literature refers to these differences as "cultural distance". This concept addresses geographical, historical and psychological distinctions between countries (Shenkar, 2001). The socio-cultural impact of tourism is shown to decisively shape travel intentions (Sharpley, 2014).

Cultural distance (CD) directly influences how tourists interact with a destination. Similarities between cultures facilitate interaction and differences complicate this process (Manev and Stevenson, 2001). This issue is pronounced in international travel. CD, in turn, becomes a psychological barrier for tourists (Bi and Lehto, 2018; Sousa and Bradley, 2006). Numerous studies show that CD increases uncertainty and risk perception. It creates communication and service difficulties (Ang *et al.*, 2018; Bi and Gu, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2016; Reisinger and Mavondo, 2006). The literature widely accepts CD as a significant factor shaping perceptions (Earley and Mosakowski, 2000; Lau and Murnighan, 1998; Lee and Jang, 1998; Swift, 1999).

This study examines the relationship between CD and destination image, the effect of functional destination perception on cognitive and affective image (AI) and whether these images influence TI. The study also explores how tourism stakeholders perceive the destination's functional characteristics and cultural differences in order to contextualize through a convergent mixed-methods approach. Previous research suggests that perceived CD plays a significant role in shaping tourists' destination evaluations and travel intentions. Greater CD may increase feelings of unfamiliarity, uncertainty and psychological discomfort toward a destination, thereby negatively influencing destination image and TI. In the tourism literature, destination image is generally conceptualized through cognitive and affective dimensions, both of which are considered important antecedents of tourists' travel intentions. Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study initially proposed a structural model in which perceived CD directly influences the cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image, as well as TI.

This study examines the structural, operational and perceptual barriers hindering Kazakhstan's tourism growth from both an empirical and a two-way perspective. By integrating potential tourists' functional perceptions with local stakeholders' insight, the article demonstrates that functional and cognitive perceptions are far more critical than cultural barriers in translating the country's tourism potential into TI, thereby offering a unique contribution to the field. However, during the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), several items originally conceptualized as perceived CD loaded onto a separate factor associated with tourists' evaluations of the destination's functional attributes, including accessibility, infrastructure, safety and practical convenience. This finding suggests that the participants distinguished sociocultural unfamiliarity from functional evaluations of the destination's practical characteristics. Accordingly, this emergent construct was conceptualized as Functional Destination Perception (FP) and was incorporated into the revised structural model as a distinct perceptual dimension influencing both cognitive and affective destination image. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings provides additional support for treating Functional Destination Perception as an independent perceptual construct, highlighting that practical evaluations of destination attributes are conceptually distinct from sociocultural unfamiliarity.

Literature review

Cultural distance and destination image

One of the most notable effects of CD appears in the destination image. This negative effect is mainly felt in the AI, but cognitive factors such as safety and service quality can counterbalance it (Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Destination image is shaped by both the physical characteristics and the social and cultural interactions (Farmaki, 2015). When CD is low, the destination appears more attractive and creates a positive image, especially for tourists seeking

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new experiences (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Crompton, 1979). In contrast, high CD can harm a destination's image by increasing perceptions of uncertainty and risk (Reisinger and Turner, 2003). This negative effect is mainly seen in the AI, influencing whether tourists feel "at ease" or "foreign" (Beerli and Martín, 2004). However, strong infrastructure and a sense of security can reduce these negative effects (Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Culturally similar destinations also seem warmer and more accessible, offering lower risk and easier communication (Ng *et al.*, 2007; Huang *et al.*, 2013). Based on the cited literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Perceived cultural distance (CD) as perceived by potential tourists has an effect on their cognitive destination image (CI).

H2. Perceived cultural distance (CD) affects potential tourists' affective destination image (AI).

Functional destination perception

Functional destination perception reflects tourists' assessments of a destination's utilitarian and operational attributes, such as transportation, accessibility, infrastructure, safety and service efficiency. Prior studies on destination image indicate that these functional evaluations substantially influence both cognitive and AI formation. In this context, tourists may perceive a destination's functional characteristics separately from the sociocultural unfamiliarity arising from CD. Therefore, functional destination perception can be regarded as a complementary perceptual construct that contributes to the development of destination image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Echtner and Ritchie, 1993). Drawing upon the existing literature, the following hypotheses were developed:

H3. Functional destination perception (FP) has a significant effect on Cognitive Image (CI).

H4. Functional destination perception (FP) has a significant effect on Affective Image (AI).

The destination image and travel intention

The destination image is a fundamental factor that shapes overall travel preferences, comprising the cognitive and affective evaluations formed in tourists' minds. The destination image is considered the most critical determinant in potential tourists' decisions to travel to a region (Baloğlu and McCleary, 1999). The TI, on the other hand, is an important outcome reflecting tourists' tendencies to visit a destination, revisit it and recommend it to others. Cognitive perceptions of the destination's physical characteristics, combined with the affective meanings the individual assigns to these characteristics, form the overall image, which directly triggers the individual's TI (Beerli and Martín, 2004).

Studies confirm that a positive destination image not only creates awareness but also leads to strong intentions to visit, revisit, recommend and purchase national products, driven by motivation and attitudes. Based on the literature, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H5. The cognitive destination image (CI) affects travel intention (TI).

H6. The affective destination image (AI) affects travel intention (TI).

The revised research model Figure 1 illustrating the relationships between perceived CD, destination image and TI. Within this cognitive-affective framework, CD acts as an initial psychological lens that shapes destination evaluation and ultimately drives travel intentions.

The perceived CD, destination image and TI function as interconnected components within a broader cognitive and affective evaluation process. CD serves as an initial psychological lens

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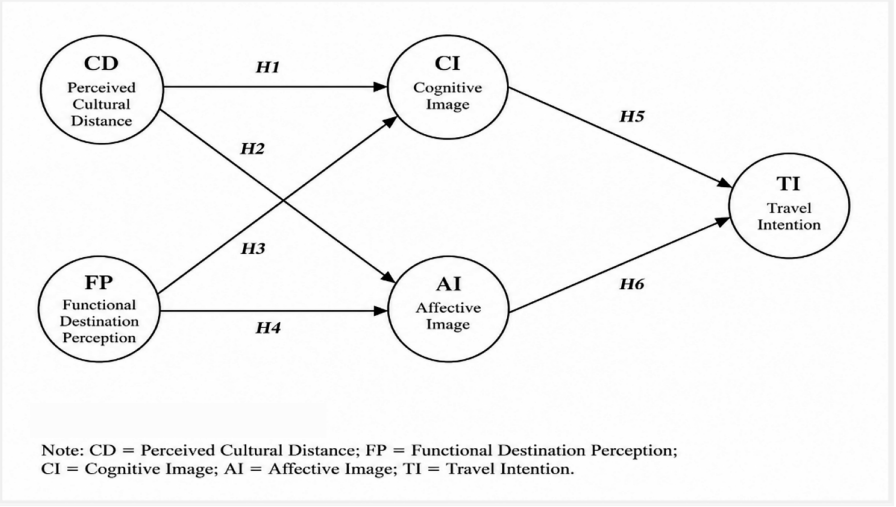


Figure 1. The revised research model. Source: Authors' own work

through which individuals interpret unfamiliarity and perceived differences, influencing both cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image. Through this mechanism, preliminary socio-cultural evaluations are translated into travel-related intentions, providing a distinctive perspective on destination choice behavior.

Methods

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Bellotti, 2014). Within this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed independently and simultaneously. This separation during data collection avoided mutual bias, allowing for authentic insight from both potential tourists and local stakeholders. The findings were then evaluated and interpreted collectively. The research process was conducted in accordance with Ethics Committee approval No. 151028, dated 8 January 2026.

Population and sample

In line with the quantitative objective of examining the relationships among perceived CD, destination image and TI, the target population consisted of potential tourists who had not previously visited Kazakhstan. Participants were selected through online platforms and travel-themed social media using purposive sampling. Whilst the target was 400–500 participants, 308 valid questionnaires were collected.

In line with the qualitative objective of exploring tourism stakeholders' perceptions regarding Kazakhstan's functional destination characteristics and cultural differences, the study population consisted of tourism professionals operating in Kazakhstan. Using maximum diversity sampling, twenty tourism professionals were interviewed. The interviews were concluded once data saturation was reached.

The demographic characteristics and professional positions of the participants included in the qualitative data are diverse. By gender, the vast majority of the participants (90%) were female managers. While the participants' ages ranged from twenty-one to sixty years, the sample had a dynamic average age. When examining professional titles, the participants held high-level positions, such as "Travel Agency Manager", "Tour Operator" and "Company Director". This distribution demonstrates that the findings provide a valuable dataset for

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understanding the managerial processes and strategic decisions within the tourism destination stakeholders.

Measurement

The study used a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview form as two different data-collection tools. The scales used in the quantitative phase were adapted from studies recognized as valid in the international literature. CD measures participants' perceived CD; the studies by Babiker *et al.* (1980), Demes and Geeraert (2014), Shenkar (2001), Sousa and Bradley (2006) and Ward and Kennedy (1999) were utilized. Destination Image, a scale encompassing cognitive and affective dimensions, was compiled from the studies of Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Beerli and Martín (2004), Chen and Tsai (2007), Chi and Qu (2008), Echtner and Ritchie (1993), Stylos *et al.* (2016) and Wang and Hsu (2010). TI measures the intention to travel; statements from the studies by Rasoolimanesh *et al.* (2021) and Zenker *et al.* (2021) were utilized.

The second data tool (semi-structured interview questions) used in the qualitative research was adapted specifically for the Kazakhstan tourism market by drawing on Crouch and Ritchie's (1999) destination competitiveness model, Crawford *et al.*'s (1991) travel barriers theory, and the destination image literature (Gartner, 1994). When translating the scales from English to Turkish, the back-translation method was used and input was sought from language experts. In the qualitative data collection process, the principles outlined by Brookfield (1992), such as voluntariness, permission to record and informing participants about the process, were followed in order to obtain in-depth data.

During the EFA process, several items initially conceptualized under the perceived CD construct loaded onto a distinct factor associated with tourists' evaluations of the destination's functional characteristics, including accessibility, infrastructure, safety and practical convenience. This emergent factor demonstrated conceptual and statistical distinctiveness from perceptions of sociocultural distance. Accordingly, the construct was conceptualized as Functional Destination Perception (FP) and incorporated into the revised structural model as a separate perceptual dimension influencing both cognitive and affective destination image. FP emerged from items initially associated with perceived CD. Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were conducted to validate the revised measurement structure and to test the proposed relationships among the constructs.

Data collection

Quantitative data were collected using an online questionnaire administered through online platforms and travel-themed social media. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with tourism professionals. All data were gathered between 15 January and 2 February 2026. Consistent with the convergent parallel mixed-methods design, both datasets were collected independently and within overlapping time periods to avoid mutual bias and ensure that the perspectives of potential tourists and tourism stakeholders were captured simultaneously.

Data analysis

In the quantitative phase, EFA, CFA and SEM were employed to validate the measurement model and examine the direct, indirect and mediating relationships among the variables. To ensure the validity and reliability of the quantitative measurement instruments, Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability coefficients were calculated. The results of the reliability and convergent validity analyses are detailed in Table 1.

In the qualitative phase, to enhance inter-coder reliability, the data were coded independently by two researchers. To ensure the study's reliability, a 20% random sample (four participants) from the dataset was coded independently by a second researcher. The

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Table 1. The results of reliability and convergent validity analysis

Constructs	Number of items	Outer loadings	Cronbach's α	CR (rho_c)	AVE
Cognitive Image (CI)	13	0.726–0.854	0.954	0.957	0.644
Affective Image (AI)	4	0.871–0.957	0.941	0.947	0.849
Cultural Distance (CD)	6	0.729–0.879	0.906	0.927	0.679
Functional Destination Perception (FP)	2	0.923–0.926	0.831	0.922	0.855
Travel Intention (TI)	3	0.811–0.867	0.793	0.875	0.700

Source(s): Authors' own work

agreement between the two coders was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which yielded 0.86. According to the Landis and Koch (1977) classification, this value indicates excellent agreement between the coders.

Results

The study's findings consist of two parts: quantitative and qualitative research.

Findings from the quantitative study

To test the research model proposed in this study, the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method was used. The analysis process consisted of two stages; in the first, the validity and reliability of the measurement model were assessed and in the second, the hypotheses were tested using the structural model.

Sample characteristics

A total of 308 valid questionnaires were included in the analysis. The demographic profile of the sample was examined with respect to gender, age, education level, residence status, destination awareness and online travel platform usage. Of the participants, 54.2% were female ($n = 167$) and 45.8% were male ($n = 141$). The sample was distributed across different age groups, with the highest participation observed in the forty-five to fifty-four years age group (24.7%), followed by the eighteen to twenty-four years age group (23.1%). In terms of education, the majority of the respondents held a bachelor's degree (58.8%), while smaller proportions reported postgraduate qualifications. Most of the participants resided in Turkey (98.1%). Regarding destination awareness, 64.0% reported having no prior knowledge of Kazakhstan. In addition, 88.6% reported not using online travel platforms. Overall, the sample reflects a relatively diverse demographic structure for evaluating perceptions toward Kazakhstan as a tourism destination.

Measurement model evaluation

The reflective measurement model was evaluated for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity, following established PLS-SEM guidelines (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Reliability and convergent validity

As shown in Table 1, all the constructs exceeded the recommended thresholds for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR > 0.70). In addition, the AVE values were above 0.50, confirming convergent validity. All the outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.708 (Hair *et al.*, 2017, 2019).

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The Discriminant validity

The Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). As presented in Table 2, all HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, confirming discriminant validity among the constructs (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). In particular, the low ratio of the cognitive to the AI dimensions indicates that these constructs are empirically distinct.

The structural model evaluation

Before assessing the predictive power of the structural model and the validity of the hypotheses, potential issues of multicollinearity among the variables and the model's overall fit to the data were examined.

The collinearity assessment

The Inner VIF values were examined to assess multicollinearity. As shown in Table 3, all the VIF values ranged between 1.001 and 1.167, remaining well below the recommended threshold of 3.3, indicating no multicollinearity issues in the structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Kock and Lynn, 2012).

The model fit

The model fit was assessed using the SRMR, d_ULS, d_G and NFI values. The SRMR value of the estimated model was 0.068, remaining below the recommended threshold of 0.08 and indicating an acceptable model fit (Henseler *et al.*, 2016; Hu and Bentler, 1999). The d_ULS and d_G values also supported the structural validity of the model. All the indicators related to the model fit are summarized in Table 4.

The structural relationships, path coefficients and explanatory power (R^2) within the research model are illustrated in Figure 2.

Hypothesis testing: path analysis

The hypotheses were tested using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The results show that the Cognitive Image (CI) has a statistically significant effect

Table 2. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) matrix

Constructs	AI	CD	CI	FP	TI
Affective Image (AI)					
Cultural Distance (CD)	0.063				
Cognitive Image (CI)	0.043	0.296			
Functional Destination Perception (FP)	0.111	0.435	0.557		
Travel Intention (TI)	0.056	0.107	0.582	0.304	

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3. The collinearity assessment (inner VIF)

Structural path	VIF value	Structural path	VIF value
CD → AI	1.167	*CI → TI*	1.001
CD → CI	1.167	*AI → TI*	1.001
FP → AI	1.167		
FP → CI	1.167		

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Table 4. The model fit indicators

Indicator	Saturated model	Estimated model	Threshold
SRMR	0.064	0.068	<0.08
d_ULS	1.647	1.855	–
d_G	0.851	0.854	–
Chi-square	1465.109	1468.845	–
NFI	0.796	0.795	>0.90*

Source(s): Authors' own work

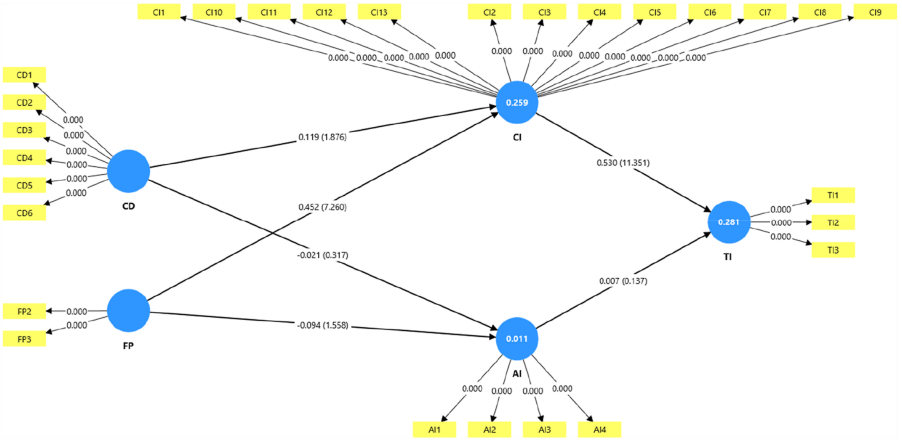


Figure 2. The structural model analysis: standardized path coefficients and explanatory power (R^2). Source: Authors' own work

on the TI (β = 0.530; $p < 0.001$) and the Functional Destination Perception (FP) has a statistically significant effect on the Cognitive Image (CI) (β = 0.452; $p < 0.001$) (Hair *et al.*, 2022). The detailed path coefficients are presented in Table 5.

The assessment of direct effects

The results indicate that only two of the six proposed direct hypotheses (H3 and H5) are supported. The Cognitive Image (CI) has a positive and significant effect on the TI (β = 0.530; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that rational and knowledge-based evaluations play an important role in shaping TI. Similarly, the Functional Destination Perception (FP) positively affects the Cognitive Image (CI) (β = 0.452; $p < 0.001$), indicating that the functional destination attributes such as transportation, infrastructure and organization contribute to the formation of the cognitive image. In contrast, the AI does not significantly affect the TI ($p = 0.891$), and the CD has no significant effect on either the cognitive or AI. Although the CD → CI relationship approaches significance ($p = 0.061$), it does not meet the recommended threshold. These findings indicate that cognitive processes play a more dominant role in the formation of TI compared to affective processes.

Explanatory and predictive power

The explanatory and predictive capabilities of the structural model were assessed using R^2, f^2 and Q^2 values.

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Table 5. The structural model direct path coefficients and the hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient (β)	*T*-statistic	*p*-value	Decision
H1	CD → CI	0.119	1.876	0.061	Not Supported
H2	CD → AI	−0.021	0.317	0.751	Not Supported
H3	*FP → CI*	*0.452*	*7.260*	*0.000**	*Supported*
H4	FP → AI	−0.094	1.558	0.119	Not Supported
H5	*CI → TI*	*0.530*	*11.351*	*0.000**	*Supported*
H6	AI → TI	0.007	0.137	0.891	Not Supported

Note(s): *Significant at $p < 0.001$ level
Source(s): Authors' own work

Coefficient of determination (R^2)

In the social sciences literature, values of 0.25 and above indicate a "weak/moderate" level of explanatory power (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The model explains 28.1% of the variance in TI ($R^2 = 0.281$) and 25.9% of the variance in Cognitive Image (CI) ($R^2 = 0.259$), indicating acceptable explanatory power. In contrast, the explanatory power for AI remains limited ($R^2 = 0.011$). Table 6 presents the results of the coefficient of determination (R^2), indicating the proportion of variance explained by the model's predictor variables.

The effect size (f^2)

The effect size (f^2) measures the "practical" importance of a particular independent variable's effect on the dependent variable. Values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 are interpreted as small, moderate and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988). As presented in Table 7, the Cognitive Image (CI) has a large effect on the TI ($f^2 = 0.390$), whereas the Functional Destination Perception (FP) has a moderate effect on the Cognitive Image (CI) ($f^2 = 0.236$). The remaining effects are below the recommended threshold and can be considered negligible.

Table 6. The results of the coefficient of determination (R^2)

Dependent variable	R^2	R^2 adjusted	Explanatory power
Travel Intention (TI)	0.281	0.276	Acceptable (Weak/Moderate)
Cognitive Image (CI)	0.259	0.254	Acceptable (Weak/Moderate)
Affective İmage (AI)	0.011	0.004	Negligible

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 7. The results of the effect size (f^2) analysis

Structural path	f^2	Effect size
CI → TI	0.390	Large
FP → CI	0.236	Medium-Large
CD → CI	0.016	No Effect
AI → TI	0.000	No Effect
CD → AI	0.000	No Effect
FP → AI	0.008	No Effect

Source(s): Authors' own work

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The predictive relevance (Q-predict)

The predictive power of the model was examined using the Q^2 values obtained by way of the PLS-Predict procedure. A positive Q^2 value indicates that the model possesses data-driven predictive power (Shmueli *et al.*, 2019). The analysis yielded positive values for the Cognitive Image ($Q^2 = 0.239$) and the TI ($Q^2 = 0.054$) variables. In particular, the Cognitive Image value indicates that the model has moderate predictive accuracy. However, the negative value obtained for the AI confirms that this construct does not play a predictive role in the model.

The mediation analysis: specific indirect effects

The mediation analysis, one of the most critical stages of the research model, was conducted to determine whether the effects of the independent variables (FP and CD) on TI occur through the cognitive (CI) and affective (AI) image dimensions. In the PLS-SEM literature, the presence of a mediating effect is assessed based on the statistical significance of specific indirect effects (Preacher and Hayes, 2008; Hair *et al.*, 2022). The results, including indirect path coefficients, t-statistics and *p*-values, are presented in Table 8.

Assessment of mediation effects

The mediating effects proposed in the research model were examined to determine the potential mediating roles of cognitive (CI) and affective (AI) image dimensions in the relationships between Functional Destination Perception (FP) and CD and TI. In the PLS-SEM approach, the mediating effects are evaluated based on the statistical significance of specific indirect paths (Preacher and Hayes, 2008; Hair *et al.*, 2022).

The findings indicate that only one of the four tested indirect effects (H9) is statistically significant. Accordingly, the indirect effect of Functional Destination Perception (FP) on TI is positive and significant through the Cognitive Image (CI) ($\beta = 0.239$; $p < 0.001$). When considered alongside the lack of a significant direct effect, this finding suggests that the Functional Destination Perception's effect on TI is largely mediated by cognitive image. In other words, perceptions of a destination's functional characteristics influence TI not directly but primarily through the cognitive image formed in individuals' minds, suggesting a mediation structure in which the indirect effect is dominant in the model (Zhao *et al.*, 2010). In contrast, the other indirect effects in the model (CD → CI → TI, CD → AI → TI and FP → AI → TI) were not found to be statistically significant. The indirect effect of the CD on the TI by way of the cognitive image ($p = 0.063$) was borderline and not supported at the 5% significance level (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, the AI did not play a significant mediating role in any of the model's relationships. Overall, the findings indicate that the cognitive image plays a more pronounced mediating role in the model, whereas the effect of the AI remains limited. This suggests that, within the sample, cognitive evaluations may be more influential than affective factors in shaping travel intentions toward Kazakhstan.

Table 8. The results of the specific indirect effects (mediation analysis)

Hypothesis	Indirect path	Coefficient (β)	*T*-statistic	*p*-value	Decision
H7	CD → CI → TI	0.063	1.860	0.063	Not Supported
H8	CD → AI → TI	0.000	0.069	0.945	Not Supported
H9	*FP → CI → TI*	*0.239*	*5.853*	*0.000**	*Supported*
H10	FP → AI → TI	−0.001	0.276	0.783	Not Supported

Note(s): *Significant at $p < 0.001$ level

Source(s): Authors' own work

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The findings from the qualitative research

The qualitative phase of the study was conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the statistical relationships identified in the quantitative analysis and to enrich the findings through data triangulation. Specifically, it aimed to explore how tourism stakeholders perceive Kazakhstan's tourism potential, functional characteristics and cultural differences and to reveal how these perceptions are reflected in practical and operational contexts. Through thematic analysis, the qualitative findings offered contextual insights into the factors underlying destination evaluations and helped explain the mechanisms through which functional and cultural attributes shape destination image and TI. The themes, categories, codes and representative quotations derived from the interviews are presented in Table 9.

Kazakhstan's tourism vision is shaped by its pristine natural areas, rich tourism resources and the legacy of the Silk Road. The views of tourism professionals were evaluated under three themes.

Destination identity and tourism potential: It was emphasized that the country's greatest strength lies in its natural landscape. The participants described Kazakhstan not merely as a travel route, but as an experiential destination that offers "peace and freedom" away from the crowds. By combining its natural environment, nomadic culture and historical heritage, it appeals to experience-driven niche markets rather than mass tourism. In the post-pandemic era especially, the country's image as a "safe and natural destination" that integrates nature and culture has come to the fore.

Current challenges and barriers: Infrastructure and transportation issues stemming from the country's vast geography were identified as the most significant constraints. Difficult access in a number of regions limits tourism mobility. Additionally, language barriers and the destination's insufficient recognition on the international stage have been assessed as "soft barriers" that complicate marketing. In contrast, culinary culture and social behavioral differences are not insurmountable challenges; they can be managed with proper information and effective communication.

The theme of strategic planning and recommendations: it is observed that digital and interactive marketing tools are replacing traditional methods. The participants noted that social media and visual storytelling play a critical role in strengthening the country's image. Furthermore, it was emphasized that physical investment alone is insufficient; training tourism staff and guides to international standards is a fundamental element for success. Initiatives such as ethno-villages and experiential workshops are viewed as strategies that transform cultural differences from potential challenges into value-added experiences. Overall, Kazakhstan's tourism sector is striving to redefine its "undiscovered" destination identity through digital promotion, sustainable experiences and a human-centered service philosophy. The relationships confirmed through the quantitative model indicate a clear structural pattern; TI toward an emerging destination is predominantly shaped by cognitive and rational assessments rather than affective considerations. To better understand the practical meaning of these functional evaluations and how they are reflected in real-world settings, the study proceeds to the qualitative stage. The thematic analysis of tourism professionals offers valuable contextual insight, transforming the statistical findings into tangible operational experiences and illustrating how these constructs are perceived and enacted in practice.

Discussion and conclusion

The most striking finding of this study is that cognitive imagery (logical, knowledge-based assessments) has a much stronger and more decisive influence on the formation of TI than affective imagery. The analysis results indicate that the effect of cognitive image on TI is highly significant, whereas the effect of AI is not statistically significant. The "Functional Destination Perception" (FP), defined in this study as a new dimension encompassing a destination's functional characteristics (such as transport, infrastructure and organization), does not directly trigger TI; it creates a strong indirect effect by way of cognitive imagery. This

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Table 9. A thematic analysis of the views of Kazakhstan's tourism stakeholders

Themes	Categories	Codes	Quotes
Destination Identity and Tourism Potential	Tourism Attractions	natural diversity and scenery (20) historical and cultural heritage (14) the Silk Road and nomadic culture (11) Turkestan and Hoca Ahmet Yesevi (11); Burabay (Borovoe) National Park (10); Tsar's Canyon (10); Almaty Mountains and Surroundings (9); Kolsai and Kaindy Lakes (8); Mangistau and Caspian Region (7); East Kazakhstan and the Altai Mountains (5)	"Kazakhstan is a country of vast, almost untouched landscapes where one can truly feel peace and freedom. Unlike popular destinations, we have no crowds . . ." (P5) "We have a unique nomadic culture that . . . allows [visitors] to combine active recreation with a deep understanding of the history of the Silk Road." (P3) "Sometimes even I'm amazed by how many different landscapes exist within one country . . . if you want mountains . . . if you prefer a calm lakeside . . . deserts and canyons . . . " (P2) "We have a unique combination of natural, cultural, and historical heritage. On one side there is the majestic Tien Shan mountains, on the other we have vast steppes, deserts, canyons, and crystal–clear lakes." (P1)
	Tourism Market	integrated tourism (culture + nature + adventure) (15) eco-tourism focus (12) regional tourism specialization (3)	
	Tourism Demand	growing popularity (16) revival of domestic tourism (9) search for natural environments and safety (8)	
Current Challenges and Barriers	Structural and Infrastructure Issues	Inadequate physical infrastructure and roads (12) Transportation and logistics challenges (9) Facilities and accommodation options (5)	"Even in our Aktobe region, locals themselves cannot easily travel beyond the Martuk or Khabdy regions, because there simply are no roads, no well-developed highways." (P4) "Limited transportation accessibility and high flight costs, underdeveloped infrastructure in certain regions." (P3) "Accommodation conditions are one of the issues. For example, we don't have welcoming or reception services like some other countries." (P6) "The language barrier is the biggest barrier. The lack of English proficiency and weak infrastructure make travel more difficult." (P12) "Many people in other countries do not know much about Kazakhstan." (P10) "In the cities around it, such information signs are not sufficiently developed. If they want to go somewhere, they may not understand." (P9) "Sometimes they are surprised by service features, a slower pace of life, local cuisine, or the lack of familiar European standards in rural areas." (P5) "In other cities, especially rural areas, difficulties may arise, and misunderstandings can occur." (P9)
	Communication Barriers	Lack of foreign language skills (11) Low international recognition (10) Lack of information and signage (8)	
	Socio-cultural differences	Different culinary culture and eating habits (8) customs and traditions (7) adaptation issues in rural areas (2)	

(*continued*)

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Table 9. Continued

Themes	Categories	Codes	Quotes
Strategic Planning and Recommendations	Marketing and Promotion Strategies	social media and digital marketing (16) collaborations with influencers and bloggers (10) visual content production (9) international trade fairs (9)	"A comprehensive strategy works best today: social media, professional online platforms, high-quality photo and video content." (P1) "Short, beautiful videos, engaging content, and collaboration with bloggers attract attention to Kazakhstan." (P18)
	Harmonization of Education and Culture	training for tourism staff and tour guides (15) informational meetings (11) preparation of multilingual materials (10) Establishment of experiential areas (ethno-villages) (6)	"We also participate in international exhibitions and collaborate with foreign travel companies." (P2) "We introduce our customs to our guests in advance, provide them with professional guides, and include ethnic events, master classes, and live interactions." (P3)
	Reducing Travel Barriers	Improvement of service quality (13) Transportation investments (12) Digitalization (online reservations/ maps) (10)	"We offer visits to ethno-villages, tastings of national cuisine, cultural events, and audio guides." (P8) "First and foremost, we must improve service quality and raise the qualifications of tourism professionals." (P14) "Increasing digital tools; online booking, maps, audio guides." (P1)

Source(s): Authors' own work

indicates that potential tourists first establish a trust mechanism based on functional data in their minds when making travel decisions.

Unlike studies highlighting the strong effect of AI on TI (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Chi and Qu, 2008), this study found no significant relationship between AI and TI. It is thought that this is because Kazakhstan is still perceived as a relatively unfamiliar and developing destination among potential tourists. In such contexts, tourists may rely more on cognitive and functional assessments, such as safety, accessibility, infrastructure and practical travel conditions, rather than emotional connections or symbolic meanings. Accordingly, TI may be shaped primarily through rational assessments rather than affective responses. The finding that perceived CD has no significant effect on either the cognitive or the AI contrasts with previous studies (Le Hong and Hsu, 2024; Ng *et al.*, 2007). A possible explanation may relate to the increasing role of digital communication technologies and global tourism content in reducing the perception of alienation.

Through social media, online travel platforms and user-generated content, potential tourists can develop prior knowledge and symbolic familiarity with destinations before the actual trip. In this context, particularly for destinations increasingly represented through digital tourism narratives, cultural differences may no longer be perceived as direct barriers. Although the effect of CD on the cognitive image did not reach the traditional significance threshold ($p = 0.061$), the result may still indicate a weak trend suggesting that CD partially shapes tourists' cognitive evaluations of Kazakhstan. Compared to the AI, the cognitive image appears to be more sensitive to perceived unfamiliarity regarding the destination's practical and informational aspects. Therefore, this relationship may become more pronounced in studies using larger or more culturally diverse samples.

The study's qualitative findings support the quantitative results. Tourism stakeholders emphasize that Kazakhstan possesses unique attractions such as its "unspoiled nature and

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nomadic culture", whilst identifying inadequate physical infrastructure, language barriers and logistical constraints as the greatest obstacles. Stakeholders view cultural differences not as a risk, but as a value-added tourism product when managed correctly (for example, ethno-villages, experiential workshops and such like). Local stakeholders identify infrastructure deficiencies and language barriers as critical constraints. This situation directly reflects the functional characteristics that potential tourists rationally assess when forming their cognitive images and travel intentions. This supply/demand alignment demonstrates that the operational bottlenecks highlighted by industry professionals are structural factors that shape international tourists' trust and behavioral intentions. Consequently, eliminating these practical constraints is vital to enhancing Kazakhstan's cognitive clarity in the global market.

Overall, the findings suggest that developing destinations such as Kazakhstan can be evaluated primarily through cognitive and functional factors rather than affective attachment. In destinations with relatively low international recognition, tourists prioritize practical travel information, perceived safety, infrastructure and accessibility before forming an affective bond with the destination. In this respect, the study contributes to the destination image literature by demonstrating that the relative influence of the cognitive, affective and CD dimensions may vary with destination maturity and international visibility.

Theoretical implication

This study demonstrates that the concept of Functional Destination Perception (FP) suggests that factors such as accessibility, infrastructure, safety and practical convenience may constitute a distinct perceptual dimension, rather than merely components of CD. Moreover, the integration of SEM and thematic content analysis strengthens the study's theoretical contribution by overcoming the limitations of a single-method approach and providing a more holistic understanding of the mechanisms through which cultural and functional perceptions influence destination image, TI and tourism barriers.

Practical implication

The findings provide important implications for destination managers and policymakers. For relatively unfamiliar destinations such as Kazakhstan, strengthening TI depends less on affective appeals and more on enhancing tourists' cognitive evaluations. Therefore, destination marketing efforts should emphasize safety, accessibility, infrastructure quality and practical travel information to reduce uncertainty and build trust. Investments in functional destination attributes and their effective communication may significantly improve destination image and increase TI.

Author contributions

Conceptualization Gökçe Yüksek; Data curation; Gökçe Yüksek, Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan, Gulnash Askarova; Formal analysis; Serkan Olgac; Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan; Funding acquisition; Gökçe Yüksek, Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan Investigation Gökçe Yüksek, Gulnash Askarova Methodology Gökçe Yüksek; Project administration Gökçe Yüksek, Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan; Resources Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan; Software Gökçe Yüksek, Serkan Olgac; Validation Serkan Olgac, Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan; Visualization Gökçe Yüksek; Writing-original draft Gökçe Yüksek, Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan, Serkan Olgac, Gulnash Askarova; Writing-review and editing Gökçe Yüksek, Merve Kalyoncu Yolaçan, Serkan Olgac, Gulnash Askarova.

AI generative

Grammarly was used solely for grammar checking and proofreading to improve the manuscript's linguistic clarity.

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