JOURNAL OF EVENT, TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY STUDIES
https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jeth

How to cite this article:
Madden, K., & Thongnueakhaeng, P. (2022). Destination image and expectations of tourists in Satun Geopark, Thailand**.** *Journal of Event, Tourism and Hospitality Studies, 2*(1), 54-76. https://doi.org/10.32890/jeth2022.2.3

DESTINATION IMAGE AND EXPECTATIONS OF TOURISTS IN SATUN GEOPARK, THAILAND

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Received: 04/04/2022 Revised: 11/10/2022 Accepted: 08/12/2022 Published: 23/12/2022

ABSTRACT

Satun is the first geopark in Thailand, recognized by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for having the longest succession of fossils as well as an abundance and diversity of fossil species. It is also renowned for its rich nature, cultural diversity and harmony. Satun geopark has a high potential to be further developed for world tourism. However, the geopark green card is validated only for 4 years. Thailand must ensure a delicate balance between local community development and geopark tourism. The goal of this study is to review existing literature on Satun Geopark's destination image, visitor expectations, and intended travel dates. It also aims to develop a conceptual framework for evaluating the importance of Satun Geopark's destination image and visitor expectations. According to the literature, it is clear that tourist expectations and internal motivation have an

impact on affective destination image, while external motivation and word of mouth have an impact on cognitive destination image. Cognitive destination image also acts as a mediating factor between external motivation and word of mouth. The results of this study can be used to modify the tourism and information package to maximize tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. It will also guide the Satun geopark in terms of marketing and providing information to the tourists.

Keywords: Destination image, Expectations, Satun Geopark.

INTRODUCTION

Geopark is a region rich in geological heritage of international significance. The idea was considered in 2004 and on 17th November, 2015. There are currently 169 geoparks worldwide in 44 countries around the world (UNESCO, 2022). Understanding of the planet and sustainable local community development were the cornerstones of the geological heritage protection concept. As shown in Figure 1, Satun province, which includes four districts (Thungwa, La-Ngu, Manang, and Amphoe Mueang Satun), two national parks, and one wildlife sanctuary, were included in the list of new global geoparks on 17th April, 2018 that was released by the 204th session of the UNESCO Executive Committee.

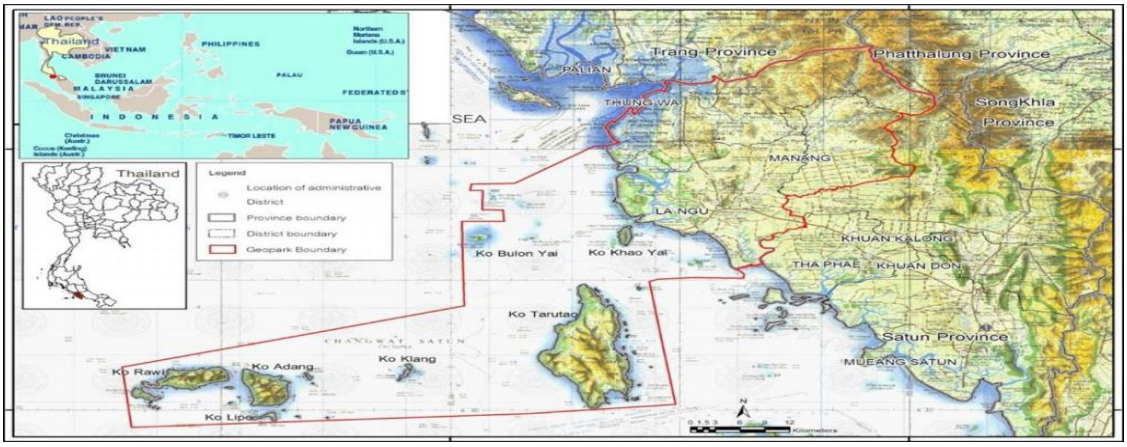

Figure 1. Satun Geopark boundary

(Source: Satun Geopark (n.d))

Thale Ban was declared as the first geopark on 27th October, 1980. It extends over 196 square kilometres and located in Muaeng district bordering Malaysia. It is known for Bueang Thale Ban; a beautiful lake, Leaem Tanyong Po; a fisherman's village, Wangpra Grassland; a wildlife sanctuary and Pha Chado viewpoint. The second geopark is Mu Ko Phetra National Park, declared on 31st December, 1984. It is situated on the Andaman sea coast in La Ngu district and also covers over 30 islands. The park extends over 495 square kilometers, of which 95% is open water. It is abundant with wildlife, mountains, forests and corals. The third geopark is Tarutao National park, declared on 19 April, 1974, which is the oldest in the area and is the most famous amongst all. It is Thailand's first marine life park. UNESCO declared it as an ASEAN Heritage Park in 1982, covering an area of 1490 square kilometers, spanning 51 islands among which are Koh Tarutao, Koh Adang, Koh Rawi, Koh Lipe and Koh Klang (Chauhan & Madden, 2020). There are 28 geosites and 16 tourism sites, divided in 3 categories: 1) Satun Karst 2) Shoreline and 3) Tarutao –Lipe Islands. However, the popular attractions for the tourist to visit are Tham Le Stegodon, Khao To Ngai Geological Time Boundary, Wang Sai Thong Waterfall, Khai Island, Prasat Hin Panyod and Panya Batik Handmade Center.

The first geopark in Thailand, Satun is noted for having the oldest succession of fossils as well as a wide variety and abundance of fossil species. The Satun Geopark's wealth in harmony and cultural diversity was also acknowledged by UNESCO. The goal is to advance not only geotourism but also the neighborhood's local economy and community. However, the geopark green card is only issued for a period of four years (in case of Satun, the validity is from 2018-2021). Therefore, Thailand must ensure a delicate balance between geotourism and local community development in order to demonstrate the best standards for geotourism and community development. The geopark tourism or geotourism is an emerging niche in the area

of tourism aimed to increase the understanding of the travelers about the earth's natural resources. It is a niche area which has not been fully understood. Even though the Grand Canyon and the Niagara Falls in USA have been considered as the most popular geotourism locations, it was just around the year 2005 that the importance of geoparks for tourism was recognized (McKeever, Zouros & Patzak, 2010). There is not enough research in the context of policy formulation, geoparks'marketing or the intentions and behaviors of tourists. Even though some qualitative surveys had been carried out e.g. Farsani, Coelho and Costa (2011), the survey of 25 geoparks (20 in Europe, 3 in Asia and 1 each in Australia and South America) was an exploration from the context of administration rather than being customer centric.

The best standards for geopark tourism synchronous with local community development can be ascertained only through a customer centric approach, to gain insights into tourist behaviors, intentions and the destination image toward Satun. Moreover, the destination image is a sum total of their expectations and the destination evaluation for visit based on the destination images (Zhang et al, 2016). Therefore, the research aims to investigate the cognitive destination image and affective destination image of Satun geopark and expectations of the international tourists and their visit intentions. Even from the theoretical standpoint, it will establish the relationship between destination image and expectations of the tourists.

Objectives

The main objective is based on the identified research problems. The specific research problem is to investigate the measurement of cognitive destination image, affective destination image and tourist expectation and to ascertain their relationships and determinants. Six objectives are developed as follows:

1. To measure the cognitive destination image of Satun geopark among the tourists.
2. To measure the affective destination image of Satun geopark among the tourists.
3. To measure the expectations of Satun geopark among the tourists.
4. To establish a causal relationship between cognitive destination image and expectations.
5. To establish a causal relationship between expectations and affective destination image.
6. To establish the antecedents of cognitive and affective destination images.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Geoparks

The concept of national parks originated in 1872 when the US established Yellowstone National Park. However, formal laws were established only to force local community, the Red Indians, to leave their territory. This type of management was followed by many countries (Langton et al, 2005) despite the original concept of geopark was to put the importance on local community in accordance with the Agenda 21 of United Nations Organization (UN). The traditional knowledge and ways of life of the local communities play a vital role in the sustainability of the environment (UNESCO, 2009). Geoparks are intended to promote local economies through geotourism, education, and conservation, according to UNESCO's selection criteria. One of the geopark's main activities is geotourism. By drawing in foreign visitors, geopark encourages the growth of the local economy and sustainable development through geotourism. National parks and other protected sites are also categorized as geoparks. For instance, in 2006, UNESCO designated Spain's Cabo de Gata, a protected area since 1987, as a geopar (Farsani et al, 2011).

Geotourism

Geotourism often refers to a form of nature tourism that focuses primarily on the geologic systems or geoparks (Gray, 2011). A survey of 25 geoparks revealed that most of the respondents (68%) felt that the best approach to boost the local economy is through geotourism, which should also involve enlisting local businesses and community for marketing of geo-products and services (Farsani et al, 2011). An initial definition of geotourism was provided by Hose in 1995 (Hose, 2010) which focused on geology and landscape. Subsequently, visiting geological features using geographic routes and viewpoints, taking guided tours, participating in geographic activities and visiting geographic visitor centers are all considered to be part of geotourism, which promote geographic sites and the conservation of geographical diversity while also advancing knowledge of earth sciences (Newsome et al, 2012). Interest in geographic diversity, geographic conservation and geotourism being promoted through geopark is accepted in many countries around the world (Dowling, 2008).

The purpose of geotourism is to promote tourism development while also preserving and protecting geo-heritage. The people in local community become important because of their symbiotic relationship with the geo features, besides other stakeholders namely government, non-government organizations (NGO), investors, geopark staff, as well as tourists – national as well as international. The tourists who participate in the geo tours are also interested in local culture, food, ways of living and local people apart from viewing landforms, fossils and other geological features (Newsome et al, 2012). The local guides are highly appreciated because they enhance understanding of the surrounding environment (Mao et al, 2009). Tourists may have only cognitive or aesthetic objectives for seeking a unique experience and do not require specialized geology or geomorphology knowledge. Many geologically

appealing locals and many geological sites that are famous tourist attractions, such as Petra, Cappadocia, and the Grand Canyon, do not require tourists to have specific skills (Nita and Myga-Piatek, 2014).

Geotourism is growing rapidly and therefore site management is important because geotourism growth may also impact on landforms and degradation (Newsome et al, 2012). It has been mentioned in research that sustainable geotourism needs to address the complementary needs of geo-sites and geo-tourists (Hose & Vasiljevic, 2012). One of the issues that affects geotourism is the availability of information in a common and simple language that can be understood by the visitors e.g. explanations about Holocene, Pleistocene and Pliocene periods could be about age, events and processes. Too much technicality scares the visitors (Dong et al, 2014).

Intentions to visit and destination image

It is widely known that the primary focus of consumer behavior research is on product or service selection. When it comes to choosing a vacation, the image of the destination is crucial (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The intention to visit a destination should be based on the image of that destination. So, it is only natural that the image of a destination plays the most important role in the destination selection (Kim, Hallab & Kim, 2012). A positive destination image can increase the visitor's intention (Assaker & Hallak, 2013). In fact, even for revisiting intentions, the destination image is vital. According to some experts, a favorable perception of a place is produced when travelers have positive travel experiences (Carlos, Da Silva & Salgueiro, 2014).

Similarly, it has been discovered that there is a positive correlation between the perception of a destination and the intention to visit a destination, which contributes significantly to tourists' intention to visit tourism destinations (Chaulagain, Wiitala & Fu, 2019; Ponnapureddy, Wagenseil, Belozerova & Mirzoian, 2018; Satyarini, Rahmanita & Setarnawat, 2017). Foroudi, Akarsu, Ageeva, Foroudi, Dennis, and Melewar (2018) concluded that the intention of tourists to visit a tourism destination is based on their perceived image of the destination. Satyarini et al. (2017) encouraged the building of a positive brand, through improving communication skills and partnership between government officials, locals and the local government to enhance the natural environment and project a positive destination image to the tourists. The result from the study conducted in Switzerland by Ponnapureddy et al. (2018) suggested the inclusion of destination image into the message contents during marketing or awareness campaigns. As a result, the image of a product or service is a significant consideration when choosing a product, service, location, or person. Therefore, it is more critical to study the destination image rather than intentions. If the destination projects the right image, then intentions can be accurately predicted.

Destination image and expectations

It is increasingly common for the management of tourist destinations to plan and manage the destination images to get more tourists because destination image is regarded as a pre-existing concept corresponding to destination branding (Pike & Page, 2014). It consists of a set of mental associations that tourists have about a destination, which may be improved by stakeholders with expertise in the destination (Day et al, 2012). Several researchers have suggested that destinations obtain competitive advantages by effectively developing destination image. There has not been much research on what the destination image should emphasize (Kong et al, 2015).

Destination image has been researched for more than 40 years and the beginning can be traced to James Hunt, who attempted to investigate the image of four Rocky Mountain states - Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming - in which the Yellowstone geopark is located. His research showed that the image of a destination had a significant impact on tourist behavior. He concluded that a tourist destination's success greatly depends on its image (Hunt, 1975). The conclusion remains true as destination image has been found to have a strong mediation between service quality and destination loyalty (Akroush et al, 2016). However, destination image has not been studied in the context of geoparks. It was admitted that the lack of a destination image was found to be an issue in a recent study on Bakkara Caldera Toba geopark (Ginting et al, 2017). This geopark was studied in terms of the following: destination image, attractions and environment, facilities and services, accessibility and the price to the consumers and it was discovered that there was a problem with the lack of a destination image.

For the purpose of deciding whether to visit a particular destination, the tourists need to know what activities they can do in each destination (Ginting et al, 2017). The most used and accepted definition of destination image is that it includes impression, ideas and beliefs associated with a destination according to Crompton (1979), but later, Crompton refined it to "accumulated ideas, expectations, impressions, beliefs and feelings towards a destination" which means that the expectations are inbuilt into the destination image (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). It has been earlier argued that the image actually consists of three components: cognitive, affective and conative and there is a sequence of how these are formed (Madden et al, 2016). The destination image based on rational analysis is referred to as cognitive image. The cognitive image refers to the different features and attractions of the destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Tourists are motivated to visit a specific destination because of the cognitive

image (Gallarza, Saura & Garcia, 2002). In contrast, the affective image is based on the tourists' emotions, feelings and likings or disliking of a destination (Govers et al, 2007). The literature also suggests that these two images: cognitive and affective are linked (Ryan & Cove, 2007).

Therefore, the overall image of the destination is a combination of cognitive and affective components, whereas the actual experience of having been on vacation at a tourist destination refers to the conative aspect (Beerli & Martín, 2004). The third component, which is the intent or action, is the conative component (Pike &Ryan, 2004). Conation can be defined as the likelihood of visiting a destination within a specific time. This is equivalent to the intention to visit. It was found in the survey of destination image literature by Pike (2002) that only 6 out of 142 surveys showed explicit interest in affective images. Most others concentrated on cognitive images and hardly a few on conative images. Some studies showed that the cognitive component precedes the affective component (Ryan & Cove, 2007). Therefore, ultimately, affective image affects the intention to visit and cognitive image is a determinant of affective image. It has been admitted by Kim (2014) that the critical component of destination image is actually the affective image, which consists of mainly emotions and feelings. The affective image is formed on the basis of cognitive image of destination attributes.

Research gaps

From the review of the latest literature, it was found that there is enough literature on the relation between the destination image and the intentions of the tourists to visit or even revisit. However, only a few studies investigated the context of geotourism and geoparks. The

concept of geopark and geotourism emerged in the first decade of this century. Therefore, it is not surprising that the research on geotourism is mostly dated in the current decade and consists of mostly the surveys e.g. the study of Farsani et al (2011) or a comparison of how geoparks are managed. It is clear that there is lack of a customer centric approach in geotourism research, where the tourists are asked about what they expect. The destination image of Satun from the opinions of the international tourists needs to be established for the future success and longevity of this geopark. Since it is a new geopark, therefore an experimental design incorporated visit intentions as the dependent variable in a destination image and destination visit model is not feasible. However, based on measured destination image and prior research, the destination image and expectations of the international tourists in the context of Satun Geopark could determine the likelihood of the intentions of the international tourists to visit (Satyarini, Rahmanita & Setarnawat, 2017).

Second, it has been determined that cognitive, affective, and conative images are the elements that make up destination image. It is also established that cognitive image and affective image are the most crucial and measurable (Gallarza, Saura & Garcia, 2002; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Ryan & Cove, 2007; Kim, 2014; Madden et al, 2016). However, the role of expectations and how cognitive image influences the affective image remains unclear. There might be a missing link or variable. This research hypothesizes that cognitive image and affective image is linked by expectation, which is formed by the interaction between cognitive image and the motivations as shown in Figure 2 below:

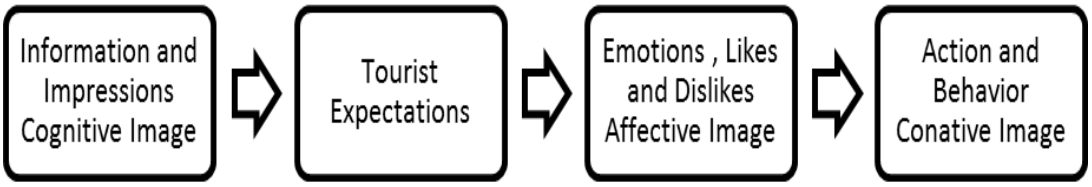

Figure 2. Destination image and expectations

(Source: Adapted from Pike & Ryan, 2004)

Expectations and image are both regarded as antecedents in the loyalty literature, particularly in the European Consumer Satisfaction Index (Chiu et al., 2011), but the relationship between image and expectations has not been thoroughly investigated. Therefore, research is required to assess the expectations of foreign tourists from a geopark like Satun as well as the cognitive and affective destination images.

Conceptual framework

A detailed literature review will be conducted in the first phase to fine tune the research questions, as well as the research objectives and come up with a robust research framework which would consist of a set of testable hypotheses. This is the most difficult part and can affect the outcomes if it is not done properly. Therefore, hypothesis framing requires a thorough attention to details. Prior to a very detailed literature review, it is difficult to establish a precise research framework. However, a tentative research framework, based on the six objectives in the previous section is presented in Figure 3 below:

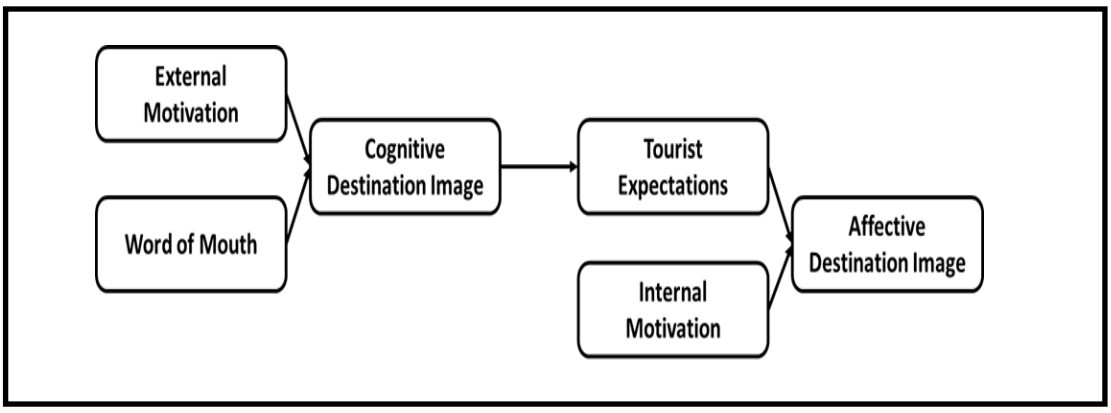

Figure 3. The research framework

H1: External Motivation and Word of Mouth individually and jointly have impact on Cognitive Destination Image.

H2: Cognitive Destination Image has a mediating impact on the joint impact of External Motivation and Word of Mouth on Tourist Expectations.

These two hypotheses serve the establishment of the relationship between cognitive destination image and tourist expectations. These hypotheses imply the following:

1. Cognitive destination image has a significant impact on tourist expectations.
2. Cognitive destination image is determined by external motivation namely marketing, advertising, media campaign, print campaigns, and word of mouth from social media, relatives, friends, colleagues and others.
3. Cognitive destination image has the greatest impact on tourist expectation compared to other variables, if any.

The only explanatory relevant model, especially in the context of services was proposed by Zeithaml et. Al., (1993). There is not much improvement on the model except adaptation on specific contexts. According to this model, the expectations are influenced by the advertising,

tangibles, price, word of mouth, service quality and satisfaction (Zeithaml et al, 1993). Satisfaction and service quality are post visit variables and therefore irrelevant. Therefore, the antecedent variables of interest, are marketing efforts comprising of advertising, pricing and information. These marketing efforts can be conceived as part of external motivation from the tourists' perspectives. Hence, the antecedents of expectations would be cognitive destination image, external motivation and word of mouth. However, only its influence on tourist expectations is investigated.

H3: Tourist expectations and internal motivation individually and jointly have impact on affective destination image.

The basic model was provided by Baloglu and Mcleary (1999), which in essence should not be altered as nothing is proven on the contrary. According to this model, the affective image is influenced by sources of information and the demographic factors influence the cognitive assessment of the destination. Subsequently, cognitive assessment and the internal motivation influence the affective image (Baloglu & Mcleary, 1999). The cognitive assessment can be understood as the tourist expectations, which are based on the cognitive destination image, which is based on external motivation (based on marketing initiatives) and word-of-mouth. The adopted model is thus not fundamentally different from the Baloglu and McLeary model.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is a critical component of a research project. As a matter of fact, the relevance of the theory and how well the data fits the hypotheses becomes apparent only after the data is collected and analyzed (Bryman & Bell, 2009). Therefore, a robust research design; a robust research instrument and a robust sampling plan are critical. The proposed

study uses quantitative research methodology and falls under the category of analytic explanatory research design which is a scientific method of enquiry appropriateness for the social research situations where an experimental design is not possible. The results can be predictive capacity and can be used for managerial or policy formation purposes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Reliability and validity of research instrument

The theory's underlying concepts must be measured in order to test the framework and the hypotheses. The concepts have to be operationalized in terms of measurable variables. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016, p 195), "Reduction of abstract concepts to render them measurable in a tangible way is called *operationalizing* the concepts". The definition and the measurement could be different in the case of abstract concepts like destination image and expectations, which need to be translated into observable behavior or characteristics. Because of the abstract nature of the concepts, multiple indicators are used. The single indicator may not correctly measure what is intended to be measured because the wording of a question may be understood differently by different people. The multiple-indicator concept would be used in the designing of the questionnaire.

According to Sekaran & Bougie (2016) the scales' development can be imperfect, can cause errors to occur and the best way to ensure goodness of measurement is through item analysis of the responses and then conducting the validity and reliability analyses of the measures. A pilot study is conducted prior to validity and reliability analyses on the data collected. A sample of 50 respondents are chosen for the pilot study. Since, the t distribution can be reasonably approximated for sample sizes larger than 30, it is reasonable to take a sample size

of 50 which is a minimum requirement for factor analysis required to establish the validity (Hair et al, 2016). On the other hand, reliability is examined using Cronbach's Alpha (Sekaran & bougie, 2016). During this phase, the Satun Geopark administration and other stakeholders are contacted for the content validation of the questionnaire.

Sampling and data collection

The sampling design is as important as the research design and the research equipment. If the data is not collected in a proper scientific way and from the potential respondents who can provide correct responses, then the outcome of the research could be meaningless. The sampling frame would be the international tourists visiting popular destinations in Thailand and contacted at the popular entry points of Thailand. Since the number of international tourists entering Thailand is in millions, therefore, the sample size taken would be 384, according to Krenjcie & Morgan's table published in 1970 and reproduced by majority of research textbooks e.g. Sekaran & Bougie (2016). Based on the international tourist entry data, a stratified random sampling is used where proportionate data will be collected:

Total Sample Size = 384 = Σ (Stratum Samples)

Stratum Sample Size = 384(Number of tourists in the Stratum/ Total number of tourists in Thailand)*

The selected entry points include the popular tourist entry points, such as Phuket, Bangkok or Hatyai. The entry points receiving a meagre number of international tourists would be ignored based on the judgment of the experts. For data collection, the email ID of the international tourists are recorded. The softcopy of the questionnaire in English on Google Forms is sent to the email ID chosen by the random number generation process and the responses are collected

until the required number of respondents is reached.

Data analysis plan

The data analysis is done using statistical tools that are commonly used in quantitative research methods using the latest version of SPSS: SPSS V26. Two categories of analysis are used, which comprises of the following:

Descriptive Analysis: The descriptive analysis is used for understanding the characteristics of the sample demographics and variables of interest within a sample to assess the central tendency and distribution. The tools used are frequency analysis, mean and standard deviations, while cross tabulation is used for bivariate analysis. The descriptive statistics is reported using graphic plots and the study of destination image and expectations is done through descriptive analysis.

Inferential Analysis: The main purpose of the research is testing of hypotheses about the relationship between different variables. The statistical tools are t-test, correlation, regression and the variance analysis. The significance level is at least 5% giving a confidence interval of 95%. The inferential analysis is used to study and establish the causal relationship between the destination images and expectations of international tourists based on techniques suggested by Sekaran & Bougie (2016). If the research framework results in multiple equations, then AMOS will be used to conduct the structural equation modelling based on techniques suggested by Hair et al (2016).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it must be admitted that an extensive literature review is required and this is the main objective of this research proposal. Additionally, it is expected that the detailed literature

review might necessitate the change of the research framework and the hypotheses. From the reviewed pieces of literature, it was observed that destination image and tourists' expectation play a significant role in enhancing the intention of tourists in visiting tourist destinations. Further findings from the reviewed literature revealed that the relationship is non-linear. The evidence from the literary works, on the other hand, shows how tourist expectations and the perception of the destination create a cognitive perception that the tourists used to judge whether they were satisfied or not. In essence, it means whether the destination image met the tourists' expectations or not? If it does, it implies that they are satisfied and will be willing to revisit.

Besides, to create awareness about the destination image, or portray a positive destination image, earlier studies as reviewed, have concluded that positive branding about the destination should be included in the marketing image. So far, based on the arguments from the reviewed studies, the authors of this study thus conceptually argued that to create a positive destination image and enhance tourists expectations, the tourism industry must create a positive awareness about the geopark location in their marketing advertisement. In conclusion, the Thai government must collaborate and develop partnership with the Thailand's tourism stakeholders and the locals to create a positive and conducive tourism atmosphere for the tourists visting the Saturn geopark. This is to ensure that the tourists engage with words of mouth with their friends and colleagues and spread the good image of Satun geopark.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research work was financially supported by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) and Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) under Research Grant for New Scholar (MRG6280171).

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