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Enhancing Quality of Life through Sustainable Ecotourism: A Study of Destination Image Perception Among Chinese Youth in the Digital Media Era

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the current state of ecotourism destination image perception, investigate the influence of cognitive factors and new media involvement and propose a strategic framework for sustainable tourism governance. The research employed a quantitative methodology, utilizing a structured questionnaire as the primary research instrument. Data were collected from a sample of 401 Chinese youth who are primary consumers of new media and ecotourism through an online survey platform. The research instrument's validity was verified by expert consensus (IOC), and reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha. Statistical analysis was performed using Multiple Linear Regression and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses and model fit.

The results indicated that 1) The current state of ecotourism destination image perception was found that the facility awareness (FAC) of ecotourism destinations have a significant positive influence on the cognitive image (CI) of the tourism destination, 2) The influence of cognitive factors and new media involvement was searched that the experience quality(EQ) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI) of the tourism destination and the Media Involvement (MI) in relation to ecotourism destinations, and 3) Propose a strategic framework for sustainable tourism governance was met the cognitive image (CI) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive impact on the destination image (DI) of the tourism destination and the affective image (AI) of ecotourism destinations. The study was concluded that the "Dynamic Circulation of Perception" is essential for sustainable tourism governance.

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It suggests that enhancing quality of life through ecotourism requires a dual-track policy: strengthening environmental protection laws to preserve natural assets and implementing ethical digital regulations to ensure information integrity. Finally, integrating safety, the environment, and digital transparency is essential to promoting sustainable lifestyles and long-term well-being for future generations.

Keywords: Chinese Youth / Destination Image / Ecotourism / New Media Involvement / Quality of Life

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์สถานะปัจจุบันของการรับรู้ภาพจุดหมายปลายทางการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ ตรวจสอบอิทธิพลของปัจจัยทางปัญญาและการมีส่วนร่วมของสื่อใหม่ และเสนอกรอบยุทธศาสตร์สำหรับการกำกับดูแลการท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน ด้วยวิธีวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ โดยใช้แบบสอบถามโครงสร้าง กลุ่มตัวอย่างคือ เยาวชนจีน จำนวน 401 คน ผ่านแพลตฟอร์มออนไลน์ ความตรงของเครื่องมือวิจัยตรวจสอบโดยผู้เชี่ยวชาญ และความเชื่อมั่นได้รับการยืนยันด้วยค่าสัมประสิทธิ์แอลฟาของครอนบาค การวิเคราะห์ทางสถิติใช้การถดถอยเชิงเส้นพหุคูณ และการสร้างแบบจำลองสมการโครงสร้าง

ผลการวิจัย 1) สถานการณ์ปัจจุบันของการรับรู้ภาพลักษณ์แหล่งท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ พบว่า การรับรู้สิ่งอำนวยความสะดวกของแหล่งท่องเที่ยวมีอิทธิพลเชิงบวกอย่างมีนัยสำคัญต่อภาพลักษณ์เชิงความรู้ของแหล่งท่องเที่ยว 2) อิทธิพลของปัจจัยเชิงความรู้และการมีส่วนร่วมในสื่อใหม่ พบว่า คุณภาพประสบการณ์ของแหล่งท่องเที่ยวมีผลกระทบเชิงบวกอย่างมีนัยสำคัญต่อภาพลักษณ์เชิงอารมณ์ของแหล่งท่องเที่ยว และการมีส่วนร่วมในสื่อที่เกี่ยวข้องกับแหล่งท่องเที่ยว และ 3) การเสนอโครงร่างเชิงกลยุทธ์สำหรับการกำกับดูแลการท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน พบว่า ภาพลักษณ์เชิงความรู้ของแหล่งท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศมีผลกระทบเชิงบวกอย่างมีนัยสำคัญต่อภาพลักษณ์จุดหมายปลายทางของแหล่งท่องเที่ยว และภาพลักษณ์เชิงอารมณ์ของแหล่งท่องเที่ยว

ข้อเสนอแนะจากการวิจัย การยกระดับคุณภาพชีวิตผ่านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศจำเป็นต้องมีนโยบายสองแนวทาง ได้แก่ การเสริมสร้างกฎหมายคุ้มครองสิ่งแวดล้อมเพื่อรักษาทรัพยากรธรรมชาติ และการกำหนดระเบียบจริยธรรมด้านดิจิทัลเพื่อสร้างความน่าเชื่อถือของข้อมูล การบูรณาการด้านความปลอดภัย สิ่งแวดล้อม และความโปร่งใสดิจิทัล ถือเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นในการส่งเสริมวิถีชีวิตที่ยั่งยืนและความเป็นอยู่ที่ดีในระยะยาวของคนรุ่นใหม่

คำสำคัญ: เยาวชนจีน / ภาพลักษณ์แหล่งท่องเที่ยว / การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ / การมีส่วนร่วมผ่านสื่อใหม่ / คุณภาพชีวิต

Introduction

The Global Imperative for Sustainable Quality of Life In the contemporary era, the global tourism industry faces a critical turning point where economic expansion often conflicts with environmental preservation. As highlighted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism is no longer an optional strategy but a socio-legal necessity aimed at balancing current economic needs with the long-term integrity of natural and social environments (Olszewski-Strzy**ż**owski, 2022). The deterioration of global ecosystems manifested through soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion has direct implications for human quality of life. Consequently, ecotourism has emerged as a vital mechanism for fostering a "high-quality living environment," providing a platform where environmental conservation meets the public's right to a healthy lifestyle and sustainable recreation.

When digital transformation and the Chinese context have integrated these sustainability goals into its core national strategies, particularly within the framework of the "14th Five-Year Plan," which emphasizes green development and digital innovation (Ruan et al., 2024). For the Chinese youth a demographic characterized as "digital natives" the perception of ecological value is increasingly mediated by New Media platforms such as TikTok, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu. These platforms do not merely serve as information channels but act as psychological filters that shape how young people perceive "security," "aesthetic value," and "environmental responsibility." In this context, the destination image (DI) is no longer a static physical attribute but a dynamic digital construct that influences a citizen’s overall satisfaction and well-being.

At the meantime, problem statement and academic significance is growing popularity of ecotourism, there remains a significant academic gap in understanding how "New Media Involvement" reshapes the cognitive and affective evaluations of young travelers within a legal and social governance framework. Most existing studies focus on general marketing aspects, often overlooking how the sense of security and facility perception core pillars of quality of life are formed through digital interaction. This research is significant as it bridges the gap between digital communication and environmental governance, exploring how the virtual world influences physical behavior and social perceptions among the next generation of global citizens.

Objectives

Guided by the need to enhance the quality of life through sustainable tourism management, this study establishes the following objectives:

1. To analyze the current state of ecotourism destination image perception among Chinese youth in the digital era.
2. To investigate the influence of cognitive factors and New Media Involvement on the formation of Affective Image and overall Destination Image.
3. To propose a strategic framework for sustainable tourism governance that aligns digital media communication with environmental protection and social well-being.

Research Hypothesis

This study proposes the following hypotheses to guide the further development of the research:

- **H1a**: The cognitive image (CI) of ecotourism destinations among youth groups has a significant positive impact on the destination image (DI).
- **H1b**: The affective image (AI) of ecotourism destinations among youth groups has a significant positive impact on the destination image (DI).
- **H2a**: The natural environment (NE) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive influence on the cognitive image (CI).
- **H2b**: The facility awareness (FAC) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive influence on the cognitive image (CI).
- **H2c**: Ecotourism activities (ACT) have a significant positive impact on the cognitive image (CI).
- **H2d**: The sense of security (SA) felt by youth groups has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI).
- **H2e**: The experience quality (EQ) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI).
- **H2f**: Media Involvement (MI) has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI).

Conceptual Framework

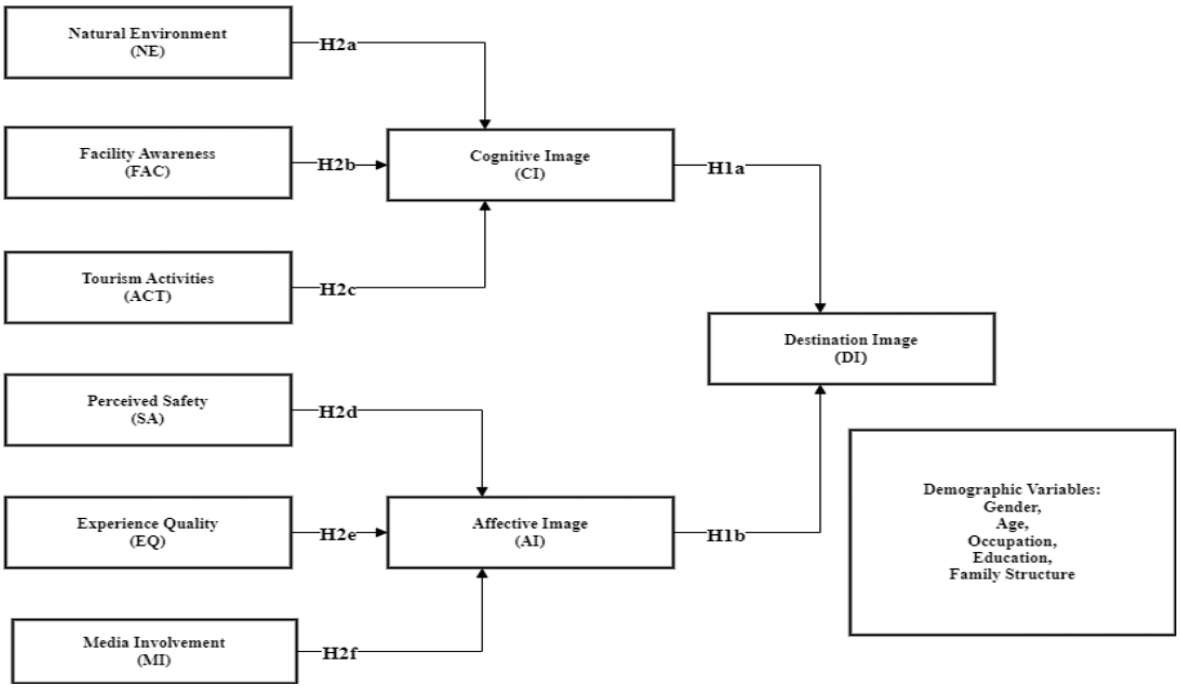


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Materials and Methods

This research employs a quantitative research design to investigate the factors influencing the ecotourism destination image among Chinese youth. The methodology is structured as follows:

1. Population and Sampling Design The target population for this study is Chinese youth, specifically those belonging to the post-90s and post-00s generations, who are primary consumers of new media and ecotourism resulting in 401 valid respondents by random sampling collection conducted through an online survey platform, ensuring a broad geographic representation across mainland China.

2. Research Instrument The research instrument was a structured questionnaire divided into three sections:

Section 1: Demographic profiles of the respondents.

Section 2: Measurement of independent variables, including Cognitive Image (Natural Environment, Facilities, Sense of Security) and New Media Involvement.

Section 3: Measurement of Affective Image and Overall Destination Image. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5).

3. Validity and Reliability Testing To ensure the academic rigor of the instrument, the following tests were performed:

Content Validity: The questionnaire was reviewed by five experts in the fields of tourism management and digital media. The Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) scores for all items were above 0.50, indicating acceptable content validity.

Reliability: A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for all constructs exceeded 0.70, confirming the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales.

4. Data Analysis and Statistical Procedures The collected data were analyzed using statistical software through a two-step approach:

Descriptive Statistics: Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to describe the demographic characteristics and the general perception levels of the respondents.

Inferential Statistics: Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) and **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)** were applied to test the hypothesized relationships between variables. The model's goodness-of-fit was evaluated using indices such as Chi-square/df (< 3.0), GFI (> 0.90), CFI (> 0.90), and RMSEA (< 0.08).

Results

1. Demographic and Descriptive Overview

The majority of respondents belong to the "Digital Native" generation (aged 18–34), accounting for 67.3% of the total sample. This group demonstrates high engagement with new media platforms, with over 80% using TikTok or Xiaohongshu as their primary source of ecotourism information. The descriptive analysis shows that Natural Environment (M = 4.25) and Sense of Security (M = 4.12) received the highest perception scores among cognitive factors.

2. Research results as follow Hypothesis Testing

2.1 To analyze the current state of ecotourism destination image perception among Chinese youth in the digital era. It is supported by the results of H2a, H2b, H2c, appeared that:

The facility awareness (FAC) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive influence on the cognitive image (CI) of the tourism destination, as perceived by youth groups (H2a). When Ecotourism activities (ACT) have a significant positive impact on the cognitive image (CI) of the tourism destination, as perceived by youth groups (H2b). And The sense of security (SA) felt by youth groups regarding ecotourism destinations has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI) of the tourism destination (H2c).

2.2 To investigate the influence of cognitive factors and New Media Involvement on the formation of Affective Image and overall Destination Image. It is supported by the results of H2d, H2e, H2f, appeared that:

The experience quality (EQ) of ecotourism destinations, as perceived by youth groups, has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI) of the tourism destination (H2d). When the Media Involvement (MI) by youth groups in relation to ecotourism destinations has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI) of the tourism destination (H2e).
And the facility awareness (FAC) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive influence on the cognitive image (CI) of the tourism destination, as perceived by youth groups (H2f).

2.3 To propose a strategic framework for sustainable tourism governance that aligns digital media communication with environmental protection and social well-being. It is supported by the results of H1a, H1b, appeared that:

The cognitive image (CI) of ecotourism destinations among youth groups has a significant positive impact on the destination image (DI) of the tourism destination (H1a). And the affective image (AI) of ecotourism destinations among youth groups has a significant positive impact on the destination image (DI) of the tourism destination (H1b).

Hypothesis Testing and Path Analysis

The results from Multiple Linear Regression and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) confirm that all proposed cognitive factors significantly influence the destination image. As shown in Table 1, the Natural Environment has the strongest direct impact on Cognitive Image, while Sense of Security serves as a vital predictor for Affective Image (Emotional response).

Table 1 Results of Hypothesis Testing

Code	Hypothesis	Test result
H1a	The cognitive image (CI) of ecotourism destinations among youth groups has a significant positive impact on the destination image (DI) of the tourism destination;	Supported
H1b	The affective image (AI)of ecotourism destinations among youth groups has a significant positive impact on the destination image (DI) of the tourism destination;	Supported
H2a	The facility awareness (FAC) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive influence on the cognitive image (CI) of the tourism destination, as perceived by youth groups;	Supported
H2b	Ecotourism activities (ACT) have a significant positive impact on the cognitive image (CI) of the tourism destination, as perceived by youth groups;	Supported
H2c	The sense of security (SA) felt by youth groups regarding ecotourism destinations has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI) of the tourism destination;	Supported
H2d	The experience quality (EQ) of ecotourism destinations, as perceived by youth groups, has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI) of the tourism destination;	Supported
H2e	The Media Involvement (MI) by youth groups in relation to ecotourism destinations has a significant positive impact on the affective image (AI) of the tourism destination.	Supported
H2f	The facility awareness (FAC) of ecotourism destinations has a significant positive influence on the cognitive image (CI) of the tourism destination, as perceived by youth groups;	Supported

3. The Role of New Media and Affective Mediation

A crucial finding is the significant role of New Media Involvement (MI). The data reveals that MI not only directly impacts the overall Destination Image but also enhances the Affective Image (AI). This indicates that when youth engage more with digital content, their emotional

connection to the destination strengthens, leading to a higher evaluation of the quality of life associated with that location.

4. Structural Model Fit

This study uses structural equation modeling (SEM) to validate the theoretical model, first evaluating the overall model fit. A good model fit is a prerequisite for ensuring the rationality and stability of path relationships. According to the model fit index table, the various indices of the model are shown in Table 2.

This study first employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the overall fit of the measurement model, assessing the degree of agreement between the theoretical structure and the sample data. From the overall fit perspective, the chi-square degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) were 1.369, significantly lower than the commonly used criterion of 3, indicating a good balance between model complexity and data fit, and a relatively reasonable overall structure. Regarding the error approximation index, the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) is 0.027, which is less than the strict criterion of 0.05, indicating that the model has a low approximation error and good overall fit. The root mean square residual (RMR) is 0.025, which is also below 0.05, reflecting a low level of model residuals and a small deviation between the observed variables and the theoretical model.

Regarding absolute fit indices, the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) is 0.923 and the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) is 0.915, both exceeding the recommended benchmark of 0.90, indicating that the model has a strong ability to explain the overall sample covariance matrix. Regarding augmented fit indices, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is 0.988 and the Normalized Fit Index (NFI) is 0.955, both significantly higher than the baseline of 0.90. The CFI is close to 0.99, showing a significant improvement over the independent model.

The overall performance of the measurement model in this study is good, with χ^2/df, RMSEA, RMR, GFI, AGFI, CFI and NFI all meeting or exceeding the commonly used evaluation standards in academia. These results demonstrate that the constructed nine-dimensional measurement structure possesses high structural stability and explanatory power in the sample data, and the measurement relationships among the latent variables are supported by the data. Therefore, this measurement model provides the statistical basis for further structural path analysis and hypothesis testing, laying a reliable foundation for in-depth analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Table 2 Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	RMR	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NFI
Value	1.369	0.027	0.025	0.923	0.915	0.988	0.955
Evaluation	OK	OK	OK	OK	OK	OK	OK

Discussion and Conclusion

As conclusion this study was confirmed that the results confirm that for Chinese youth, the image of an ecotourism destination is a multi-dimensional construct. While the physical environment remains the foundation (Cognitive), the emotional resonance (Affective) driven by new media involvement and a sense of security are the key drivers that elevate the destination's appeal and its perceived contribution to their quality of life.

The findings confirm that both cognitive and affective dimensions significantly shape the destination image among Chinese youth.

1. Consistent with Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Beerli & Martín (2004), cognitive and affective images are critical predictors of destination image.

2. The strong role of Sense of Security ⟶ Affective Image aligns with Zaremba (2024), emphasizing psychological safety as a determinant of emotional evaluation.

3. The mediating effect of New Media Involvement extends the framework of Wang & Zhang (2024), showing that digital engagement intensifies emotional resonance and strengthens destination appeal.

4. Compared with Stylos et al. (2016), this study highlights that normative beliefs are increasingly shaped by digital platforms, reinforcing the need for ethical digital governance in tourism.

Thus, the study contributes by integrating digital media involvement into the traditional destination image model, offering a more comprehensive framework for sustainable tourism governance.

Recommendations

The main new findings of this study in the context of youth ecotourism are reflected in the following aspects as recommendations: firstly, the overall image formation shows an emotional strengthening trend; Secondly, the stimulus shows structural differentiation in

cognitive and emotional pathways; Thirdly, media participation has become an important variable of emotional construction; Fourthly, the ontological value of ecological resources still has a fundamental position in the digital context; Fifthly, the image construction mechanism presents the characteristics of dynamic circulation.

The above findings not only deepen the explanatory power of the classic destination image theory in the context of youth groups and digital communication, but also provide a theoretical basis for expanding the image formation model in different intergenerational groups and media environments in the future.

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