Enhancing Tourist Experiences and Competitiveness through Country Image: A Study of Saudi Arabia's Influence on Memorable Tourism

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Dr. Abdullah Saleh Aloufi

Abstract:

The study investigates how the cognitive, affective, and conative characteristics of a country image affect tourists' perceptions and behaviors. This study analyzes the impact of affective and conative elements of the country image through the cognitive country image on tourists' memorable experiences and satisfaction, mediated by perceptions of destination competitiveness. Data were collected from 112 international tourists visiting specific cities in Saudi Arabia, particularly Taif city, using a survey methodology and evaluated using structural equation modeling (SEM). The findings indicate that a favorable country image substantially improves tourists' memorable experiences and satisfaction by enhancing the destination’s competitive advantage. The emotive and conative elements of the country image indirectly influence tourists’ impressions via the cognitive image, underscoring its mediating function in determining tourism outcomes. These results emphasize the necessity for emerging destinations to develop a favorable, multifaceted national image to enhance tourist competitiveness, satisfaction, and memorable experiences. The research provides significant insights for tourism policymakers and marketers aiming to increase the destination's attractiveness and foster sustainable tourism development in Saudi Arabia and similar markets. This research elucidates the strategic significance of a country's image in emerging tourist destinations and provides practical implications for improving tourist satisfaction.

Key words: Tourism, Country image, Tourism destination competitiveness, Memorable tourism experience, Tourism satisfaction.

Introduction:

Tourism is a pivotal component of the global economy, significantly contributing to job creation, revenue generation, and the enhancement of economic prosperity (Bazargani et al., 2021). The growth of tourist arrivals worldwide is projected to reach 1.8 billion by 2030, making it a crucial part of the social and economic activities of several countries (Kontogianni and Alepis, 2020). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) stated in 2021 that tourism generated over $9 billion in 2019, contributing 10.4% to the global GDP. Consequently, the substantial advantages of tourism create competition among global destinations to capture a larger share of these benefits (Ragab, Mahrous, and Ghoneim, 2020). Moreover, the recognition that the tourism industry can significantly benefit a country has created a pressing need to enhance the attractiveness of tourism locations, regardless of their popularity.

The image of a country is a crucial aspect that influences tourists' experiences, affecting their perceptions, attitudes, evaluations, and future behaviors (Zhang et al., 2018). It can be applied to a specific place and is seen as a primary determinant in the process of selecting a location to visit (de Castro Mendes and Jose Cavenaghi, 2020).

This study seeks to elucidate the influence of country image in the tourism sector and its implications for travelers' experiences by synthesizing pertinent marketing literature and various theoretical frameworks into a cohesive viewpoint. Additionally, it aims to examine the mediating influence of tourist destination competition within the tourism environment, as tourists' perceptions of their destination experiences significantly impact their future behaviors. This study aims to present important and thorough findings for practitioners and policymakers alike, positing contributions that are expected to be both theoretically and practically significant. The effectiveness of a country's image serves as a motivational tool that influences tourists' current and future decisions. This study uses country image as a framework to assess the selection and decision-making processes of tourists regarding their holiday destinations. Consequently, it may offer a distinctive viewpoint, providing marketers with enhanced insights.

There has been ongoing discussion regarding the connection between the effectiveness of a country's image and the competitiveness of tourism destinations, as well as the satisfaction derived from memorable experiences by tourists. Therefore, it is essential to identify and assess this connection, as it could provide advantages for both the local tourism authority and the end user. The primary objective of this study is to investigate how country image influences tourists' memorable experiences and satisfaction with destination competitiveness in Saudi Arabia.

In alignment with the primary aim outlined, this study focuses on the following objectives:

- To assess the relationship between country image and the competitive edge of tourism destinations.
- To evaluate how the image of a country influences the satisfaction levels of tourists.
- To evaluate the impact of a country's image on the memorable experiences of tourists.

Literature review and Hypothesis Development:

Country image:

Dedeoğlu (2019) posits that country image encompasses the entirety of descriptive, inferential, and informational views held about a specific nation. It embodies various historical, political, economic, cultural, traditional, and technological elements, culminating in the collective beliefs and perceptions individuals have toward locations (Chaulagain, Wiitala and Fu, 2019). It is a broad phrase that encompasses intricate interactions among images, projected destination image, and perceived destination image (Michael, James, and Michael, 2018). This construct is regarded as significant in shaping visitors' decision-making, location selection, post-trip assessment, and subsequent behaviors (Zhang, Wu, and Buhalis, 2018). Martín-Santana et al. (2017) contend that a country's image consists of interconnected elements, including cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions.

The cognitive country image comprises individuals' beliefs, ideas, and perceptions, characterized as an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, emotions, visualizations, and intentions for a location (Ferreira and Giraldi, 2019). The affective country image represents the value individuals assign to a location based on their personal motives (Almeida-García et al., 2020). The conative country image can be seen because of the cognitive and emotive

country image. Consequently, the country's total perceived image may significantly influence international tourists' decision-making process, particularly their intention to visit the place. Moreover, the country image as a stimulus component embodies the destination's characteristics and serves as a crucial determinant influencing tourist reaction (Loureiro et al., 2022).

Cognitive country Image

The cognitive image dimension encompasses perceptions associated with features that include the tangible elements of a destination, such as local infrastructure, safety, cuisine, lodging, and tourist attraction services (Ferreira & Giraldi, 2019). It also pertains to tourists' perceptions of a country, encompassing aspects such as economic development, standard of living, industrialization, and technological progress (Li et al., 2014). It encapsulates the tourist's understanding, acknowledgment, beliefs, perceptions, and awareness of each characteristic of a tourism site (Michael, James, and Michael, 2018).

This dimension serves as a crucial element influencing tourist reactions through the comprehensive information and beliefs employed by tourists to assess the characteristics of a site (Loureiro et al., 2022). It affects processes such as attention, encoding, evaluation, and the application of information based on the characteristics of the place, which may persuade a tourist to visit and/or influence post-visit plans to return (Pezeshki et al., 2019). The cognitive image also plays a significant role in shaping engaging imagery, projected destination image, and perceived destination image, all of which greatly impact a destination's competitive position in the tourism market (Michael, James, and Michael, 2018).

The cognitive image is a critical factor in decision-making, distinguishing a location in consumers' perceptions of tourist satisfaction and influencing their inclinations to visit (Marques, Vinhas da Silva, and Antova, 2021). Thus, the perceived image of tourists is contingent upon the attractions a location provides as a tourist destination as well as the objectives of the perceived image assessment (Michael, James, & Michael, 2018). Pezeshki et al. (2019) assert that the cognitive image serves as a motivating force for visitors to evaluate and select a destination by influencing the attributes of the destination through the construction of a favorable image of its attractions. According to Martín-Santana et al. (2017), the perceived image prior to the visit is a crucial factor in shaping expectations, which then serve as a benchmark for comparison once the trip occurs.

Affective country Image:

The affective image pertains to the emotions elicited by a location, where individuals with varying motivations assess it differently based on whether their perceptions fulfill their requirements (Almeida-García et al., 2020). Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2018) assert that the affective image associated with a tourism site results from the experiences tourists have and the individual impressions they cultivate. Consequently, tourists' emotional assessments of a destination are influenced by their attitudes and the information they have regarding that destination (Ragb et al., 2020). The emotive component comprises the psychological feelings that tourists derive from a site, which are more intangible and include atmosphere, pleasantness, and mood (Rojas-Méndez and Davies, 2023).

Stylidis (2022) posits that the affective component encompasses the subjective interpretation of interactions and the resultant emotions directed toward the destination. Consequently, visitors utilize the perceived image of a site to establish expectations before their arrival and subsequently compare these expectations with the outcomes of their travel experience (De Nisco et al., 2015). Thus, this perceived image can be understood as a visitor's holistic vision or a fundamental component that shapes the feelings, ideas, and impressions a tourist has regarding a site (Gorji, Garcia, and Mercadé-Melé, 2023).

According to Nicoletta and Servidio (2012), the emotive image is fundamentally a force that influences tourists' behaviors, shaping their mental perceptions of destination qualities and impacting their decision-making processes. Consequently, it significantly affects the perception of products and destinations by shaping tourists' attitudes and beliefs about a specific location (De Nisco et al., 2015). The affective country image can be perceived as mental map structures associated with a destination, encompassing various elements of history, politics, economy, culture, traditions, and technology, which collectively form the beliefs and impressions individuals have about locations (Chaulagain, Wiitala, and Fu, 2019).

Conative country Image:

Stylos et al. (2016) assert that the conative image signifies tourists' active contemplation of a location as a prospective trip destination. Consequently, conative factors significantly affect visitors' intentions to revisit a site by influencing their views of the location as a viable travel option, thereby

defining the desirable future experiences they hope to achieve (Stylos et al., 2017). Moreover, a conative country image can be seen as a catalyst that reflects the actual behaviors of tourists, embodying the emotional significance attributed to a destination by these tourists (Carneiro and Faria, 2016).

The conative image influences not only the travel experience itself but also the post-travel phase, affecting tourist satisfaction and the propensity to recommend the place or return for subsequent visits (Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio, and Nazzareno, 2017). Additionally, travelers might utilize their perceptions of a location to encapsulate its attributes, thereby influencing their disposition toward the destination (Dedeoğlu, 2019).

The conative factor may significantly influence tourists' decision-making by affecting their beliefs, familiarity, and receptiveness toward a location, as well as the development of its image (Chaulagain, Wiitala, and Fu, 2019). Thus, this conative image seeks to establish a memorable destination experience that influences travel decisions and is crucial in the decision-making process (Lee, Rodriguez, and Sar, 2012). Interaction with the location significantly influences perceptions during and after the journey, primarily determined by the intensity of the visit or the level of engagement experienced (Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio, and Nazzareno, 2017). This image will affect perceptions of products and destinations, as well as interactions with the destination, which is regarded as a crucial predictor of human behavior influencing thoughts, emotions, and actions (Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016).

Competitiveness of Tourist Destinations:

Tourist destination competitiveness refers to the capacity to enhance tourist expenditure and draw visitors by delivering gratifying, memorable experiences while safeguarding the destination's natural resources for future generations (Salinas Fernández et al., 2020). Consequently, the competitiveness of tourism destinations is essential for achieving a favorable standing in the global tourism industry and fostering a competitive advantage (Cronjé and du Plessis, 2020). Rodríguez-Molina et al. (2019) assert that sustaining destination competitiveness is crucial for professionals responsible for managing tourism destinations, as it constitutes a significant source of competitive advantage.

Conversely, an alternative perspective has emerged, as evidenced by research conducted by Goffi et al. (2019) and Zadeh Bazargani and Kiliç (2021), which examines the significance of tourist destination competition through the lens of performance. They assert that tourists believe destination management offers superior and acceptable services through the utilization of destination resources. Consequently, destination management becomes a robust approach focused on the requirements of prospective visitors, crafting experiences that significantly influence future behaviors, which is a crucial aspect of destination management expertise (Pearce and Schänzel, 2013).Furthermore, destination management serves as a crucial framework that highlights the necessity for diversity in tourism destinations to enhance results for all stakeholders, including travelers, tourism providers, and local communities (Volgger et al., 2021). Altinay and Kozak (2021) also assert that enhancing destination competitiveness and the capacity to sustain market share relies on the utilization of tourism resources and the preservation of their distinctive characteristics as a fundamental element in maintaining competitive strength.

Pearce and Schänzel (2013) contend that destination management is a proactive, visitor-centric strategy for the economic and cultural advancement of a destination, harmonizing the interests of visitors, service providers, and the community. It encompasses several tasks, including the creation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of strategies and plans (Albrecht and Raymond, 2021). Thus, destination management emerges as a vital strategy that emphasizes cooperation among stakeholders engaged in local tourism services to enhance outcomes (Volgger, Erschbamer, and Pechlaner, 2021).

According to Zhang et al. (2021), destination resources are defined as the assets that destinations possess or are endowed with, shaped by various stakeholders, including destination managers, marketers, local governments, and private enterprises, each contributing uniquely to the value formation process. Furthermore, the influence of these resources can be interpreted as resource endowments (comparative advantage) and assessed through their ability to mobilize these resources (competitive advantage), which affects destination competitiveness, including the impacts of global and competitive environmental factors (Albayrak et al., 2018). Destination resources encompass all assets that a destination possesses and that are accessible to destination enterprises for use in specific economic activities (Vengesayi, 2018).

Memorable Experiences:

Zhang et al. (2018) define memorable tourist experiences as those selectively formed from tourism activities that can be remembered and recalled post-trip. These experiences are significant predictors of a tourist's behavioral intentions and greatly influence memory formation based on the individual's evaluation of the experience (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021a). Consequently, travelers' experiences at the site serve as a more significant predictor of future behavior because these experiences influence tourist satisfaction and create lasting memories (Kim, 2014).

The subjective mental state experienced by visitors during a service interaction can be described and measured using a scale designed based on behavioral factors, services marketing, leisure, and tourist activities (Loureiro, 2014). Consequently, the creation of memorable experiences is fundamental to the tourism and hospitality sector as marketing research transitions from a traditional paradigm to an experiential marketing paradigm (Li et al., 2021). Melón et al. (2021) assert that the creation of unforgettable experiences is essential for destination competitiveness, viability, and profitability, as it is deemed the most valued factor and information source for selecting a tourist destination and informing future decision-making. Coudounaris and Sthapit (2017) contend that memorable tourist experiences (MTE) are increasingly significant during holiday periods, enhancing value by positively affecting travelers and their propensity to revisit the same destination. Therefore, MTE must be incorporated when modeling the antecedents of visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Sharma and Nayak, 2019).

Satisfaction:

The service industry, including restaurants, hotels, and tourism, prioritizes and endeavors to ensure client happiness. Sumaedi et al. (2015) defined satisfaction as the emotional state of a client, originating from their assessment of the disparity between their expectations and the service provider's deliverables. Satisfaction, unlike the concrete quality of service, arises from a thorough and cumulative assessment of both the internal and external characteristics of the service (Yuda Bakti et al., 2020). The core premise guiding the formulation and implementation of a company's marketing strategy is primarily based on customer satisfaction. Howard and Sheth (1969) define satisfaction as the customer's subjective assessment of

the pleasure or unhappiness derived from their sacrifices. Tse and Wilton (1988) characterize satisfaction as an emotional state resulting from the assessment of discrepancies between anticipated expectations and the actual performance level of a product. Individuals derive satisfaction when their expectations are adequately fulfilled, and dissatisfaction occurs when they are not.

Saudi Arabia, a nation rich in history and culture, is experiencing a notable transformation into a global tourist destination. The transformation is propelled by Vision 2030, a thorough economic and social reform initiative designed to diversify the economy and improve the quality of life for citizens. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has endeavored to enhance its global reputation. The government has eased visa regulations, significantly invested in tourism infrastructure, and advocated for the nation's many attractions. This has resulted in a substantial transformation in global perceptions of Saudi Arabia, transitioning from conventional preconceptions to a contemporary, vibrant, and hospitable society. Saudi Arabia is evolving and is set to emerge as a significant contender in the global tourism sector, providing visitors with a distinctive and memorable experience. The researcher noticed a gap in the literature regarding this topic. This prompted the researcher to investigate the question: how country image influences tourists' memorable experiences and satisfaction with destination competitiveness in Saudi Arabia.

The Hypothesis Development:

Country image and tourists' memorable experiences:

Country image has been extensively studied from various perspectives. For instance, Zang et al. (2018) state that a country's image, as an external cue, significantly influences tourists' perceptions of product and service quality within the tourism sector. This perceived image shapes tourists' expectations, which serves as a benchmark for evaluating their holiday experiences (Martín-Santana et al. 2017). Consequently, country image impacts destination image, which in turn influences tourists' intentions to visit or their evaluations of their destination experiences (Mody et al. 2017).

Therefore, based on the above reasoning, it is suggested that:

- **(H1)** Affective country image influences tourists' positive memorable experiences through the mediation of cognitive country image.
- **(H2)** Conative country image influences tourists' positive memorable experiences through the mediation of cognitive country image.

Country image and tourism destination competitiveness:

Dedeoğlu (2019) argues that country image is a crucial component of tourism that influences destination competitiveness. A positive country image can lead to positive tourist perceptions of the destination's components. Country image refers to the totality of impressions, beliefs, ideals, expectations, and feelings associated with a place over time, and it can significantly impact a destination's competitiveness (Michael et al., 2017).

Therefore, based on the above arguments, the proposed hypotheses are as follows:

- **(H3)** Affective country image influences tourists' positive tourism destination competitiveness through the mediation of cognitive country image.
- **(H4)** Conative country image influences tourists' positive tourism destination competitiveness through the mediation of cognitive country image.

Country image and tourism satisfaction:

The image of a country significantly impacts tourist satisfaction, thus affecting their whole experience about the place. The picture of a country comprises cognitive elements (knowledge and opinions regarding the destination) and affective components (emotional responses). When tourists possess a favorable opinion of a country's image—attributable to its attractions, culture, or general ambiance—they are more inclined to experience satisfaction during their stay. Yuda Bakti et al. (2020) and Sumaedi et al. (2015) indicate that the image projected by a site directly influences tourist satisfaction. An aesthetically pleasing and well-maintained environment fosters a positive perception among tourists, resulting in increased satisfaction levels.

- **(H5**) Affective country image influences tourists' positive tourism satisfaction through the mediation of cognitive country image.
- (**H6**) Conative country image influences tourists' positive tourism satisfaction through the mediation of cognitive country image.

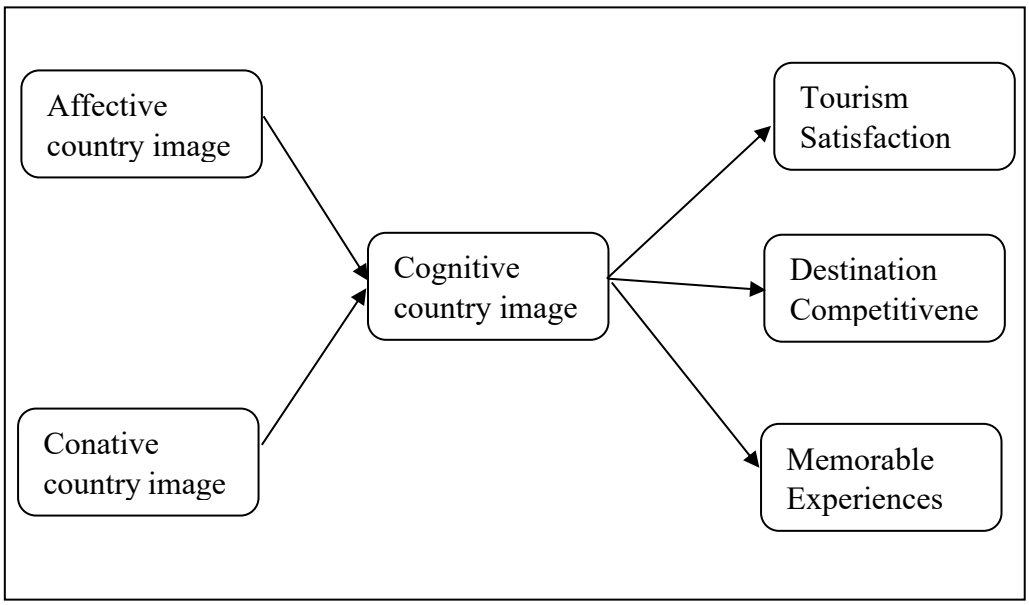

Figure1: The theoretical Framework

Methodology:

Instrument:

The elements in this study were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, with numerous items adapted from literature reviews (Ragb et al., 2020; Stylos, N. et al., 2016; Kim, 2018). The conative country image was evaluated using 8 elements, comprising 4 related to emotional country image and 14 pertaining to cognitive country image, with two items excluded.

Hardesty and Bearden (2004) assert that corrected measurements should provide adequate evidence of face validity. Consequently, three tourism specialists evaluated the face validity of the surveys. The specialists determined that the expressions were clear and unambiguous, thus validating face validity. Furthermore, the questionnaires were constructed in English to cater to travelers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. A pilot study involving 10 participants was conducted. The initial evaluation revealed that the questionnaire items were clear and straightforward, and no changes were made to the surveys.

Sampling:

Data collection and empirical testing were conducted with a survey created with the web tool Google Forms. The chosen data gathering method was convenient sampling. The target research population consisted of adult international visitors who visited Saudi Arabia, particularly Taif city. Sampling was carried out in Taif city during the summer months of June and

July 2024. However, due to the seasonal nature of tourism in the region and the exclusion of local, Gulf, and religious tourists, the sample size was significantly impacted by a low response rate. The overall number of participants was 112, with 12 respondents excluded due to incomplete data.

Data analysis:

To assess the proposed model illustrated in Figure 1, this study employed the two-step approach defined by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The measurement model was first examined, followed by the evaluation of the structural model. The measuring model was assessed for composite reliability and construct validity by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The last step was the assessment of the proposed structural model and the examination of hypotheses by structural equation modeling (SEM). Data analysis was performed utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software and structural equation modeling (AMOS). Prior to executing model studies, the data were scrutinized to ascertain whether any assumptions were compromised. The mean-substitution method was initially utilized to replace missing data.

Results:

The study's demographics provide an overview of international tourists who visited Saudi Arabia and completed the survey (Table 1). The majority of participants (80%) were aged 20–29, with smaller numbers in 30-39 (9%) and 40–49 (10%). Only 1% were beyond 60. Most participants (81%) earned less than 100,000 units (currency not specified), while 9% (100,000–199,999), 7% (200,000–299,999), and 1% and 2% (300,000–399,999 and above 400,000) earned more. The sample consisted of 82% male and 18% female. 50% had graduate or university degrees, 25% had high school diplomas, 13% had postgraduate degrees, 7% had doctoral degrees, and 5% had other degrees. Most travelers (71%) remained in Saudi Arabia for over 20 days. Some visited for 6–10 days (9%), under 5 days (11%), 11–15 days (7%) or 16–20 days (2%). Travel Partners: 42% traveled alone, 28% with family, 24% with friends, and 6% with a spouse. Number of Saudi visits: The study included first-time and returning visitors. 34% were first-timers, 47% repeaters. Only 2% had never visited, and 17% were returning. The findings are contextualized by the fact that most respondents were younger male travelers with various educational and income backgrounds, and many were return Saudi Arabia visitors.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Age		
20-29	80	80.0
30-39	9	9.0
40-49	10	10.0
Above 60	1	1.0
Income Annually		
100000 – 199999	9	9.0
200000 – 299999	7	7.0
300000 – 399999	1	1.0
Above 400000	2	2.0
Less Than 100000	81	81.0
Gender		
Female	18	18.0
Male	82	82.0
Education		
Graduate/University Degree	50	50.0
High School	25	25.0
Other	5	5.0
Phd/Doctoral	7	7.0
Postgraduate Degree	13	13.0
Length Of Stay		
11 To 15 Days	7	7.0
16 To 20 Days	2	2.0
6 To 10 Days	9	9.0
More Than 20 Days	71	71.0
Under 5 Days	11	11.0
Travel With		
Alone	42	42.0
Family	28	28.0
Spouse	6	6.0
Travel With Friends	24	24.0
Number Of Visit Saudi Arabia		
First Time	34	34.0
Multiple Time	47	47.0
Never	2	2.0
The Second Time	17	17.0

Analysis of the measurement model:

Items exhibiting a factor loading of 0.5 or above were incorporated into the data analysis. Additionally, variables with eigenvalues of one or above were evaluated as significant and kept (Kaiser, 1960). The exploratory component analysis yielded a six-factor model that explains 73% of the variance. Cronbach's alpha was utilized to evaluate the reliability of the measurement scales. The alpha coefficient values of the scales ranged from 0.917 to 0.966. The scales are considered credible based on the recommended benchmark value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1959).

A set of fit indices was computed to assess the entire first-order measurement model. The results demonstrated an acceptable model fit, as indicated by a substantial chi-square statistic (chi-square=1751.749, df=735, P= significant**) and other advantageous fit indices like RMSEA (0.54), GFI (0.94), CFI (0.96), NFI (0.89), RFI (0.90), and IFI (0.91) (Hair, Anderson, & Tatham, 1998). The dependability of the measurement scales was evaluated by composite reliability (CR). The CR values in all dimensions surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.8, signifying a high degree of reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Nunnally, 1970). An evaluation of average variance extracted (AVE) values was performed to determine convergent validity. Table 2 indicates that the AVE values for all six components surpassed the required threshold of 0.5, hence evidencing robust convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The study entailed comparing the square roots of AVEs with the correlations between variables to evaluate discriminant validity. The results demonstrated that the square roots of AVE values surpassed the correlations between components, thereby confirming an adequate level of discriminant validity.

Analysis of structural models:

The research hypotheses were evaluated using SEM analysis. The results exhibited a robust correspondence with the proposed model. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio was documented at 2.01, which is beneath the recommended level of 3. Additionally, other fit indices exhibited acceptable values: RMSEA (0.54), GFI (0.94), CFI (0.96), NFI (0.89), RFI (0.90), and IFI (0.91) (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 2: items statistics

	Item Statistics			
	Mean	S. D	AVE values	Cronbach 's Alpha
Affective image				0.919
Pleasant destination	1.85	.957	.858	
Relaxing destination	1.99	1.030	.894	
Arousing destination	2.23	.993	.884	
Exciting destination	1.92	.929	.804	

	Mean	S. D	AVE values	Cronbach' s Alpha
Conative image				0.954
Was always a dream-destination to visit sometime during my lifetime	1.74	1.088	.856	
Expresses myself as a suitable vacation choice	2.01	1.068	.805	
Helps me put in use knowledge that I have (i.e. history, geography, philosophy)	1.93	1.047	.835	
Was always/constitutes a personal goal for vacations	2.09	1.065	.899	
As a choice, it stems from a personal need of mine that had to be fulfilled.	2.10	1.020	.832	
Has evoked a persistent wish to visit it	1.89	.973	.875	
Encapsulates positive attributes that help in the growth of my personality	1.96	.994	.833	
Makes me believe that my vacations there may be the best reward/gift I can offer myself	1.96	1.118	.868	
Cognitive image				0.917
Reasonable prices for foods and accommodation	2.62	1.187	.875	
Reasonable prices for tourist attractions	2.61	1.118	.783	
In general, visiting Saudi Arabia is not expensive to me	3.05	1.184	.783	
Quality infrastructure (airports, ports, utilities	1.80	.964	.781	
Good health service	2.17	1.155	.775	
Advanced telecommunications	2.04	1.100	.735	
Politically and socially stability	1.96	1.154	.734	

A safe and secure destination to visit	1.54	.958	.705	
Hospitable, friendly, and helpful people	1.86	1.054	.697	
Plenty of high-quality hotels and resorts	1.89	1.004	.614	
Plenty of high-quality restaurants	2.00	.953	.605	
Plenty of historical and cultural sites	1.83	1.025	.505	
Satisfaction				0.966
I am satisfied with this travel experience	1.78	.905	.963	
I feel enjoyable about this travel experience	1.76	.889	.972	
I feel pleasant about this travel experience	1.85	.978	.971	

	Mean	S. D	AVE values	Cronbach's Alpha
Tourists' memorable experiences				0.911
I really enjoyed this tourism experience	1.92	.907	.843	
I revitalized through this tourism experience	2.07	.967	.826	
I learned something about myself from this tourism experience	1.90	1.010	.824	
I had a chance to closely experience the local culture of a destination area	2.10	1.096	.815	
I experienced something new (e.g., food, activity, etc) during this tourism experience	1.76	.922	.793	
Destination competitiveness				0.902
Saudi Arabia has a strong destination image	1.90	1.030	.900	
Positive relationships with international tour operators	2.12	.998	.808	
Ability to attract international tourists	1.93	1.057	.794	
Availability of information about the destination	1.98	.985	.747	
Positive reputation for the safety and security of visitors	1.62	.862	.739	
Uniqueness of the major attractions	1.89	.952	.680	

Table3: Hypotheses test:

Hypotheses	**T**	**B**	**P**	**Accept/ Reject**
(**H1**) Affective country image influences tourists' positive memorable experiences through the mediation of cognitive country image.	.667	5.1	***	**Accept**
(**H2**) Conative country image influences tourists' positive memorable experiences through the mediation of cognitive country image.	.412	4.2	***	**Accept**
(**H3**) Affective country image influences tourists' positive tourism destination competitiveness through the mediation of cognitive country image.	.627	5.9	***	**Accept**
(**H4**) Conative country image influences tourists' positive tourism destination competitiveness through the mediation of cognitive country image.	.387	6.2	***	**Accept**
(**H5**) Affective country image influences tourists' positive tourism satisfaction through the mediation of cognitive country image.	.639	5.4	***	**Accept**
(**H6**) Conative country image influences tourists' positive tourism satisfaction through the mediation of cognitive country image.	.394	5.2	***	**Accept**

This study highlights the significance of Saudi Arabia's country image in improving tourists' memorable experiences, satisfaction, and the competitiveness of the destination. This is a summary of the results derived from the tested hypotheses (Table 3):

The Influence of Affective and Conative Country Image on Memorable Tourism Experiences:

The research revealed that both affective (emotional) and conative (intentional) aspects of Saudi Arabia's country image favorably impact tourists' unforgettable experiences. This influence transpires within the cognitive component, which includes impressions of pragmatic elements such as infrastructure and safety. Consequently, a favorable emotional and aspirational image influences travelers to have memorable experiences by changing their impressions of the destination's attributes.

Impact on Destination Competitiveness:

The findings indicated that the emotive and conative aspects of country image also augment destination competitiveness via the cognitive dimension. The favorable impressions of tourists about the practical and emotional dimensions of Saudi Arabia considerably enhance its competitiveness as a destination. This suggests that when tourists regard Saudi Arabia positively—both emotionally and regarding its characteristics—they consider it a competitive destination, enhancing its attractiveness in the global tourism industry.

Impact on Tourist Satisfaction:

Tourist pleasure was positively influenced by both emotive and conative country pictures, mediated by cognitive perception. A good perception of Saudi Arabia, characterized by affirmative thoughts and feelings, enhances tourist pleasure. This discovery corresponds with other research demonstrating that both emotional and practical impressions substantially influence total tourist satisfaction.

Model Fit and Hypothesis Validation:

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to evaluate the hypotheses, and the model demonstrated a robust fit with indices that validated all six assumptions. The findings indicate that the affective and conative dimensions of Saudi Arabia's country image indirectly influence tourists' memorable experiences, satisfaction, and perceptions of destination competitiveness via cognitive mediation. The findings indicate that fostering a favorable country image can improve tourist satisfaction, enhance destination competitiveness, and increase the probability of memorable tourism experiences, thereby rendering Saudi Arabia a more appealing destination in a progressively competitive global tourism landscape.

The discussion:

The research highlights the significant impact of country image on tourists' memorable experiences, destination competitiveness, and overall satisfaction. Existing literature indicates that a country's cognitive and affective images play a crucial role in influencing tourists' perceptions, subsequently affecting their behaviors and levels of satisfaction. This study's findings are aligned with Dedeoğlu (2019), who posited that a country's image, which includes cognitive (beliefs and knowledge) and affective (emotional) components,

directly affects tourism satisfaction and destination competitiveness. The relationship is particularly significant in competitive tourism contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where the attraction of international tourists is essential. This interplay suggests that when a destination like Saudi Arabia invests in creating a multifaceted and positive national image, it can better attract international tourists and encourage repeat visits (Cronjé and du Plessis, 2020). Further supporting this notion, Pezeshki et al. (2019) indicate that cognitive aspects of destination image enhance perceptions of value, ultimately influencing tourists' inclination to revisit and recommend the location. In this context, the findings hold special significance. The study illustrates that cognitive dimension—covering tangible factors like infrastructure, safety, cultural experiences, and hospitality—play a pivotal role in enhancing the emotional and behavioural aspects of tourists' experiences. Specifically, tourists are more likely to find their experiences memorable and satisfying when they perceive Saudi Arabia as safe, welcoming, and rich in attractions. This conclusion is consistent with research suggesting that positive cognitive perceptions foster emotional connections, which are crucial to generating tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Loureiro et al., 2022; Stylos et al., 2016). By focusing on developing these cognitive aspects, Saudi Arabia can build a solid foundation for its tourism market, establishing a reputation that resonates with both first-time and repeat visitors.

This study demonstrates that cognitive image mediates the relationship between tourists' initial evaluations of a destination, such as its infrastructure and safety, and their subsequent emotional connections to it. This process aligns with the findings of prior research, including that of Stylos et al. (2016), which illustrated the impact of destination image on tourists' attachment and intentions to revisit. The findings of the study reinforce the significance of cultivating a favorable cognitive country image to promote emotional engagement, thereby improving satisfaction and competitive advantage. The conative dimension, tied to the aspirations and desires of tourists, influences not only the initial decision to visit but also post-visit behaviors, such as the likelihood of recommending the destination to others (Stylos et al., 2017). As Saudi Arabia strengthens its tourism offerings under Vision 2030, a strategically designed conative image—highlighting the country's unique experiences and attractions—could become a powerful driver in the increasingly competitive tourism market.

The conative dimension, which reflects tourists' behavioural intentions and likelihood of revisiting or recommending a destination, also plays an essential role. A positive conative image, shaped by both cognitive and affective experiences, can drive post-visit behaviours, which are crucial for maintaining a steady influx of tourists. Research has shown that when tourists develop strong behavioural intentions, such as the desire to return or promote the destination to others, a self-sustaining cycle of tourism growth is established, bolstering the destination's competitiveness over time (Stylos et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). For Saudi Arabia, investing in memorable and positive tourist experiences will not only boost immediate satisfaction but also foster long-term growth through repeat visitation and word-of-mouth marketing.

The study emphasizes that destination competitiveness is enhanced when tourists hold positive perceptions of the country in both cognitive and affective dimensions. This aligns with the findings of González-Rodríguez et al. (2023), who highlighted that improving destination image and tourist satisfaction can enhance destination loyalty and competitiveness.

Contribution:

This study provides theoretical and practical contributions. This study builds upon the existing literature that links country image to tourism satisfaction, competitiveness, and memorable experiences. This study integrates established frameworks of country image with tourism competitiveness theory, emphasizing the mediating role of cognitive image in connecting emotional responses and destination perceptions. This approach offers a deeper insight into the influence of cognitive evaluations and emotional connections on tourists' decision-making processes regarding a destination.

The study provides significant insights for tourism marketers and policymakers in Saudi Arabia and comparable emerging destinations. This research highlights the importance of a robust and favorable national image, indicating that enhancements in both cognitive (e.g., infrastructure, safety) and affective (e.g., excitement, relaxation) dimensions of a destination can result in increased satisfaction and competitiveness. This finding is essential for formulating effective marketing strategies aimed at attracting international tourists and maintaining the destination's competitive advantage. The research elucidates the relationship between country image and tourist experiences, providing insights that can assist destinations in attracting and retaining tourists by enhancing satisfaction and creating memorable experiences.

Conclusion:

This study aimed to investigate how the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of Saudi Arabia's country image influence tourist satisfaction, memorable experiences, and the nation's competitiveness as a tourism destination. Using a survey-based method with data from 112 international tourists, structural equation modeling (SEM) revealed that a positive country image significantly enhances tourists' experiences and satisfaction by strengthening the destination's competitive appeal. Specifically, affective and conative components of country image impact tourist satisfaction and competitiveness indirectly through cognitive perceptions, such as safety, hospitality, and cultural richness.

The findings contribute to tourism and marketing literature by demonstrating the role of a multidimensional country image in shaping positive tourism outcomes. For policymakers and marketers, this research emphasizes the importance of cultivating a well-rounded national image that combines emotional, cognitive, and aspirational qualities. As Saudi Arabia continues to promote itself as a desirable destination under Vision 2030, enhancing these image dimensions can help the country attract and retain international tourists, thus bolstering sustainable tourism growth. This study provides actionable insights, supporting strategies that leverage a country's image to improve tourist experiences and strengthen destination competitiveness.

Limitations and Future research:

While this study provides significant insights, it is constrained by specific limitations. The generalizability of the results to other locations or demographic groups was limited due to the relatively small sample size, which consisted of a convenience sample of international travelers to Saudi Arabia. Future study could use larger and more diversified sample sizes, together with the exploration of objective indicators or longitudinal methods, to understand the long-term effects of country image on tourist perceptions. Future research may investigate the specific elements that most significantly influence the cognitive and emotive dimensions of a country's image regarding their effects on tourist satisfaction and competitiveness. Furthermore, the model may be augmented to juxtapose Saudi Arabia with other rising tourist destinations, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of destination competition. Furthermore, an examination of the effects of digital and social media on a country's image and the quality of memorable tourist experiences would yield significant insights into the influence of modern communication channels on perceptions and satisfaction.

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تعزيز التجارب السياحية والقدرة التنافسية من خلال صورة الدولة: دراسة حول تأثير المملكة العربية السعودية على التجارب السياحة التي لا تنسى

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الملخص:

تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تأثير الخصائص المعرفية والعاطفية والسلوكية لصورة الدولة على تصورات وسلوكيات السائحين. تحلل هذه الدراسة تأثير العناصر العاطفية والسلوكية لصورة الدولة من خلال صورة الدولة المعرفية على تجارب السائحين التي لا تنسى ورضاهم، بوساطة تصورات القدرة التنافسية للوجهة. تم جمع البيانات من ١١٢ سائحًا دوليًا إلى مدن المملكة العربية السعودية وتحديداً مدينة الطائف باستخدام منهجية الاستبانات وتم تحليلها من خلال نمذجة المعادلات البنائية / الهيكلية (SEM) . تشير النتائج إلى أن صورة الدولة الملائمة تعمل على تحسين تجارب السائحين التي لا تنسى ورضاهم بشكل كبير من خلال تعزيز الميزة التنافسية للوجهة. تؤثر العناصر العاطفية والسلوكية لصورة الدولة بشكل غير مباشر على انطباعات السائحين من خلال الصورة المعرفية، مما يؤكد وظيفتها الوسيطة في تحديد نتائج السياحة. تؤكد هذه النتائج على ضرورة تطوير الوجهات المتنامية لصورة دولة ملائمة ومتعددة الأوجه لتعزيز القدرة التنافسية للسائحين ورضاهم وتجاربهم التي لا تنسى. يوفر البحث رؤى مهمة لصناع السياسات السياحية والمسوقين بهدف زيادة قابلية الوجهة وتعزيز التنمية السياحية المستدامة في المملكة العربية السعودية والأسواق المماثلة. يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على الأهمية الاستراتيجية لصورة الدولة في الوجهات السياحية الصاعدة ويقدم تأثيرات عملية لتحسين رضا السياح.

الكلمات الاستفتاحية: السياحة، صورة الدولة، القدرة التنافسية للوجهة السياحية، تجربة سياحية لا تنسى، الرضا السياحي.