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The Effects of Host Sincerity on Tourists' Perceived Destination Image

Abstract

This study aims to explore the effects of host sincerity on tourists' perceived destination image as well as their satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Data was collected via an on-site survey in China and analyzed using a partial least square-structural equation modeling approach. The research findings suggest that host sincerity positively influences tourists' perceived destination image and has important effects on tourists' satisfaction and behavioral intention. The findings further suggest that local hosts should show their sincerity toward tourists in tourist-host interactions in order to create positive destination image and trigger positive behavioral intentions of tourists for sustainable development of the travel destination. Residents can be active partners and co-producers of destination branding. This current study highlights that the way of local residents interact with tourists are an important attribute of destinations as contacting with residents is a crucial part of visit experience.

Keywords: Host sincerity, Cognitive image, Affective image, Satisfaction, Behavioral intention

1. Introduction

Travel destination image is one of the most popular topics in tourism research, which plays a key role in determining visitors' decision-making process by triggering their choices and preferences (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). A better understanding of destination image can provide destination marketers valuable guidance on how to effectively promote the destination. Given its importance, travel destinations invest in the development of resources to enhance destination image. These resources can be differentiated between core resources (e.g., cultures, events, shopping, etc.) and supporting resources, which serve as the foundation to develop a destination's tourism industry and contain accessibility, quality of services and hospitality (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). The resource-based view is widely adopted in tourism research to examine how and what resources should be invested to enhance destination image and satisfy the needs of tourists (Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2018).

Being aware of the negative impacts made by mass tourism, today's tourists and hosts are seeking more responsible ways, which are known as alternative tourism or 'sustainable tourism'. Gonsalves (1987) observed the typically promoted models of alternative tourism as brief contacts with local people and longer visits with host families and the community, and an insight into local life. Among the resources, local residents' sincere displays and interactions are considered a pivotal component in the context of tourists' destination image formation (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Gallarza, Saura & Garcia, 2002; Kalandides, Braun & Kavaratzis, 2013), and have received considerable attention from researchers and practitioners (Rasoolimanesh, Ringle, Jaafar & Ramayah, 2017). Residents' attitudes and behavioral intent to support tourism are important given that interactions between visitors and residents have a significant effect on visitors' satisfaction with the destination (Pizam, Uriely, & Reichel, 2000). Tourists value the interactions with hosts who are sincere. Logically, perceived sincerity reinforces a positive service evaluation, which should be part of a holistic approach to satisfaction measurement (Gountas et al., 2011). However, if the display is fake, a negative impression of the service performer can be elicited (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005).

Local residents are critical in promoting travel destinations. They are important

destination ambassadors who serve as a credible testimony of the distinctive character of the place, and understanding of residents as place ambassadors is crucial in destination management. (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). A destination image framework that incorporates local residents' sincere displays can enhance a more holistic understanding of whether and why a travel destination is attractive to tourists. However, the local residents' perspective in destination image research is usually overlooked (Valle, Mendes and Guerreiro, 2012; Styliadis, Kokho Sit, & Biran, 2018). Few empirical studies have explored residents' key roles as advocates and marketers of their place to others (e.g., Hudson, Cárdenas, Meng, & Thal, 2017), with less focus on how these roles influence tourists' perceptions of destination image. Given the important role of local residents' sincere displays in the formation of destination image, this study aims to address this gap by exploring tourists' perception of local residents' host sincerity and testing its effects on destination image, tourist satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1 Destination image

Destination image is the total perception of the place that is formed by processing information from various sources over time (Assael, 1984). Destination images and the characteristics of a given destination are of the utmost importance for tourists when deciding on where to travel to (Echtner & Ritchie 1991; Elliot, Papadopoulos, & Kim 2011). A potential tourist's image of a destination and its attributes is likely to influence their behavior before, during, and after their trip (Chen, Chen, & Okumus 2013; Tasci & Gartner 2007). Residents are an important part of destination image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). The quality of tourists' contact with local residents and service providers will affect the formation of tourist destination image. For instance, Grosspietsch (2006) observed that the friendliness of local residents and tourists' encounters with local residents played an important role in the formation of tourists' destination image.

Tourists' perception of destination image can be divided into at least two stages: pre- and post-visitation (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Li, Lin, Tsai, & Wang, 2015; Liu & Tung, 2017). The latter stage is an experience-driven conformation process (Kim & Chen, 2016). It is argued that tourists' image of a destination can be affected and modified after a tourism experience or personal journey on the basis of actual first-hand information (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Tourists' experience in a destination is constituted by destination aspects such as attractions, facilities, services and perception of hosts (Tasci & Severt, 2017). Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez (2001) found that post visitation image will influence tourists' intention to return and willingness to recommend the destination both directly and indirectly. Perceptions, satisfactions and motivations can all be seen as meanings that tourists obtain through travel (Colton, 1987); symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1969, 1986) indicates that how tourists engage with the local people in a destination guides the meanings they make of it.

2.2 Host sincerity

Trilling (1972) defines 'sincerity' as being true to one's own self for the purpose of avoiding falsehood to others (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2019). Authenticity is a broadly discussed topic in tourism research, yet the research on 'sincerity' is relatively sparse. Noteworthy, sincerity and authenticity are two related concepts, which also have difference in tourism-related practice (Taylor, 2001). One difference is that while authenticity represents an internal quality of a thing, self or other in tourism destinations, sincerity focuses on the values that tourists and hosts co-created during their interaction (Taylor, 2001; Prince, 2017). The other difference is that authenticity usually refers to the past featured by

ritual and tradition, while sincerity strips away the historic symbol implied by the concept of authenticity and focuses on the present (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2019; Taylor, 2001).

Marketing literature indicates that personal relationships can influence customers' evaluation of goods and services (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Kaminakis et al., 2019). Genuine, sincere, or authentic expression of emotions and effort in service provision is widely considered an important element of consumer's service evaluation (Mohr & Bitner, 1995). In other words, the way in which a consumer is treated has an impact on his or her sense of place and belonging in society (Goffman, 1959). Hence, closer consideration of sincerity and its role in service provision should not be ignored in marketing research, as marketers need to understand the impact of both perceived sincerity and perceived insincerity (Gountas et al., 2011). Likewise, from tourist perspective, tourists are no longer satisfied with mere sightseeing, but also expect to gain more travel and life experiences through authentic and sincere encounters with locals. This makes the tourist-host interaction particularly salient in tourists' evaluation of travel destinations. Sincere displays are desirable and conducive to heightened tourist enjoyment (Arnould & Price, 1993).

The need for interpersonal authenticity demonstrates a deeper human need. This can be achieved through engagement in tourism activities, which can offer the consumer relief and escape from the pressures of social and status inauthenticity in everyday life (Wang, 1999). It is deemed that authentic and sincere encounters between tourists and the local residents can enhance tourists' satisfaction, yet inauthentic and insincere experience at destinations will damage their perceptions of destination image and result in dissatisfaction. Hence, for tourists, receiving a 'sincere' display from the hosts is preferred and more valued. This is because it is the exchange of values considered important by both the tourists and hosts. According to Taheri et al. (2018), host sincerity can be understood from two distinct yet symbiotic dimensions. One is from the host-tourist interaction, and the other is from the feelings elicited following this interaction. Based on the above discussion, this study aims to construct and test a more integrated model of tourist cognition process by including local residents' sincerity in the image-satisfaction-behavioral intention paradigm.

2.3 Host sincerity and tourists' destination image

Destination images and the characteristics of a given destination are of the utmost importance for tourists when deciding on where to travel to (Echtner & Ritchie 1991; Elliot, Papadopoulos, & Kim 2011). A potential tourist's image of a destination and its attributes is likely to influence their behavior before, during, and after their trip (Chen, Chen, & Okumus 2013; Tasci & Gartner 2007). Residents are an important part of tourist destination image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). The quality of tourists' contact with local people and service personnel of tourism industry will affect the formation of tourist destination image. Grosspietsch (2006) found that the friendliness of local residents and their communication with local people played an important role in the formation of tourists' destination image. The author further emphasized the attraction of local residents and their lifestyles to tourists.

Previous research studies argue that personal relationships can influence the evaluation of goods and services (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Kaminakis et al., 2019). This is also true in places, in particular to tourism destinations. From a tourism perspective, the complex and uncontrollable nature of tourism destinations makes the tourist-host interface particularly salient in tourists' evaluations of the tourism destinations. More than ever, cultural tourists are no longer satisfied with merely sightseeing, but more expect to be able to deeply experience the tourism destinations by their involvement and cultural contact (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Hung, Peng & Chen, 2019). Authenticity is a widely investigated topic in

tourism research, but the application of sincerity to tourism is relatively sparse. Researchers considered that sincerity and authenticity are related concepts but also have difference in tourism-related practice (Taylor, 2001). While authenticity represents an internal quality of a thing, self or other in tourism destinations, sincerity focuses on the values that tourists and hosts co-created during their interaction (Taylor, 2001; Prince2017). Another difference between sincerity and authenticity is that authenticity usually refers to the past featured by ritual and tradition, while sincerity strips away the historic symbol implied by the concept of authenticity and focuses on the present (Taylor, 2001; Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2018). Therefore, for tourists and various social roles who interact with tourists during tourism, like residents and service staffs, sincerity is more valuable. Because in the tourism context, it is the exchange of values considered important by the host and guests. Taheri et al. (2018) pointed out that host sincerity can be understood from two distinct yet symbiotic dimensions. The first stems from the host-tourist interface and the second one stems from the feelings elicited following this interaction. Tasci and Knutson (2004) argue that locals in the host community of destinations would have sincerity by keeping their authentic features.

2.3 Hypotheses development

2.3.1 Host sincerity and destination image

Destination image consists of two interrelated components: a cognitive component and an affective component (Alcañiz, Garcia & Blas, 2009). The cognitive image refers to the sum of beliefs and knowledge about the perceived attributes of the destination. The affective image is related to the emotional responses or appraisals the tourist has for the destination (Stylos et al., 2016). Although researchers have different opinions about dimensions of cognitive image (Alcañiz, Garcia & Blas, 2009; Stylos et al., 2016), many previous studies adopted Baloglu & McCleary's (1999) measurement that resident is one of the measurement items (Papadimitriou, Kaplanidou & Apostolopoulou, 2018). According to Baloglu & Brinberg (1997), tourist develop an affective quality of a place based on their interaction with the environment. Ross (1993) found the friendly residents was the most potent element related to enjoyable experience. Thus, assuming that destination image improves when the tourist perceives host sincerity during their travel experience. Based on the above discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Host sincerity will have a positive impact on tourists' cognitive image of the destination.

Hypothesis 2. Host sincerity will have a positive impact on tourists' affective image of the destination.

Tourists' cognitive image and affective image are interrelated components. Most studies support the findings that affective image is a function of the cognitive image (Baloglu, 2000; Wang & Hsu, 2010; Agapito, Do Valle & Mendes, 2013). Therefore, we postulate that:

Hypothesis 3. Tourists' cognitive image will have a positive impact on tourists' affective image.

2.3.2 Host sincerity and tourists' overall satisfaction

While Macintosh's (2002) study found no relationship between travel counselor sincerity and client satisfaction, several recent studies found perceived sincerity can lead to customer satisfaction. For example, Gountas et al. (2011) examined the effect of perceived service provider sincerity on an Australian national airline consumers' satisfaction and

found the influence is positive and significant. Similarly, other studies also investigated customer perceptions of sincerity on customer satisfaction in different context (Lombart & Louis, 2012; Kashif et al., 2015). They found that the link between sincerity and satisfaction is robust. Ariffin (2013) suggests that hotel staff's sincere desire to please and care for guests instead of attempt to impress guests in return for payment influence the level of customer satisfaction. In sponsorship context, sincerity perceptions by consumers lead them to form positive attitudes toward sponsor (Demirel & Erdogmus, 2016). The inconsistent results may be due to different marketing scenarios. Therefore, we present the following hypotheses to:

Hypothesis 4. Host sincerity will have a positive impact on tourists' overall satisfaction.

2.3.3 Outcome variables of destination image : Tourists' overall satisfaction and behavioral intention

The current study utilized the concept of tourists' satisfaction as an outcome variable of tourists' destination image. Tourists' satisfaction represents the emotional reaction derived from their evaluations of whether their expectations of a destination were met or not (Sangpikul, 2018). Tourists' satisfaction is beneficial in increasing positive emotional response of a destination's image by having a favorable consumption experience (Prayag et. al., 2017; Sharma & Nayak, 2018). The relationship between destination image and tourists' satisfaction is highly correlated (Dmitrović et. al., 2009; Prayag, 2009), because tourists perceived image of a destination form their expectations (Truong & Foster, 2006). Previous studies in this area verified the relationship between tourists' destination image and their satisfaction (Chi & Qu, 2008; Assaker & Hallak, 2013). Thus, it is reliable to apply tourists' satisfaction as an outcome variable of tourists' destination image. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5. Tourists' cognitive image of the destination will have a positive impact on tourists' overall satisfaction.

Hypothesis 6. Tourists' affective image of the destination will have a positive impact on tourists' overall satisfaction.

Behavioral intention is often a consequent variable result in the structural model (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Jalilvand et. al., 2012; Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Kaplanidou, 2015). Whereas this concept has been primarily used to describe a tourist's willingness to revisit the tourist destination and to engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) communications (Wang & Hsu, 2010). Several empirical studies found that destination image positively influence tourist behavioral intention (Agapito, Do Valle & Mendes, 2013; Chew & Jahari, 2014; Hallmann, Zehrer & Müller, 2015). However, the type of relationship is no consensus in the literature. Destination image may both have direct and indirect effect through tourists' satisfaction (Wang & Hsu, 2010). Thus, we test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 7. Tourists' cognitive image of the destination will have a positive impact on tourists' behavioral intentions.

Hypothesis 8. Tourists' affective image of the destination will have a positive impact on tourists' behavioral intentions.

2.3.4 Host sincerity and tourists' behavioral intention

Previous studies on destination personality research suggest that the personality traits of

sincerity to the destination is critical in the formation of tourists' future behavioral intentions (Kim & Lee, 2015; Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Kaplanidou, 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). According to Ekinici & Hosany (2006), citizens of the country, hotel employees and other hosts can be the direct characteristics to form or influence the personality traits of a destination. Furthermore, Ekinici, Sirakaya-Turk & Baloglu (2007) conclude that perceived upbringing of the host and perceived lifestyle of the host positively influenced destination sincerity. This gives rise to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 9. Host sincerity will have a positive impact on tourists' behavioral intentions.

2.3.5 Tourists' overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions

In tourism context, the behavioral intention construct has often been suggested as including two components: an intention to revisit and intention to recommend. Sharma and Nayak (2018) confirmed the significant association of satisfaction with the intention to revisit. Prayag et al. (2017) found that a positive relationship between satisfaction and intention to recommend. Previous researchers have discussed various determinants of tourist behavioral intention, such as attitude toward destination (Jalilvand et al., 2012), perceived value (Chen & Tsai, 2007), cognitive and affective evaluations of destinations (Baloglu, 2000). Among these factors, satisfaction is arguably the most important (Žabkar et al., 2010; Seetanah, Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo, 2020). According to Chi & Qu (2008) and Kim (2018), tourists' overall satisfaction has more predicting power for behavioral intention than satisfaction with individual attributes. Therefore, it was postulated that:

Hypothesis 10. Tourists' overall satisfaction positively influenced tourists' behavioral intentions.

The relationships among the variables investigated in the model are depicted in Figure 1, which summarizes the ten hypotheses.

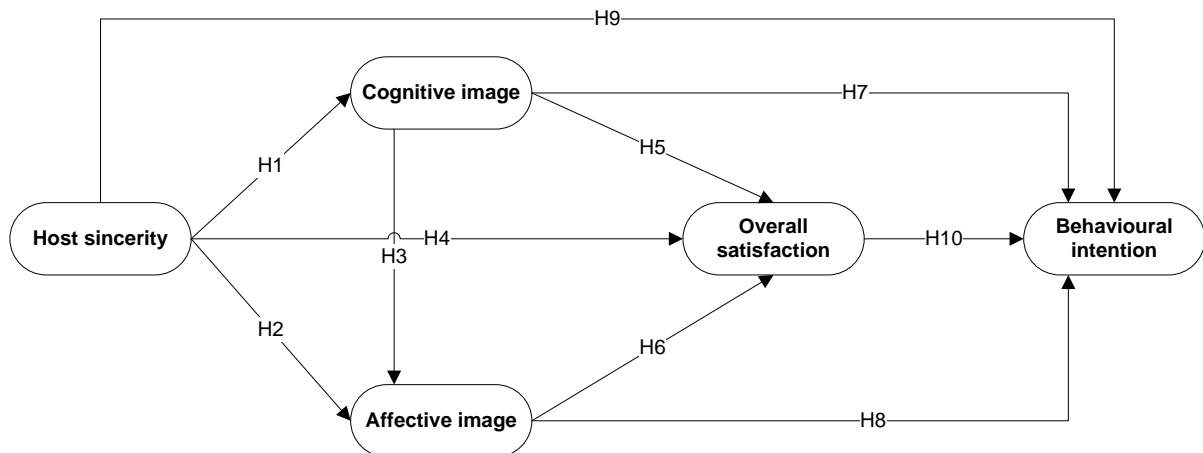


Fig. 1 Proposed Research Framework and hypotheses

3. Methods

3.1 Place of study

Data collection was conducted in Kulangsu (i.e., Gulang Island), which is a pedestrian-only island off the coast of Xiamen in southeastern China. A UNESCO World

Cultural Heritage Site, the island is about 2 km² in area, and is accessible by an 8-minute ferry ride from downtown Xiamen. Although only about 20,000 residents live in the island, Kulangsu is a major domestic tourist destination, attracting more than 10 million visitors per year, making it one of China's most visited tourist attractions. As a "Historic International Settlement", Kulangsu Administrative Commission encourages local residents to participate in the protection of the heritage area. To increase the attractiveness of this island, the government continues to make efforts to improve visitors' travel experience in the island as well as the local residents' quality of life. This study will help the island's tourism planners and marketers to better understand how tourists have perceived the local residents' sincere displays as well as the sincerity's effects on tourists' perceived destination image, their overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

3.2 Sample and data collection

Data were collected from tourists visiting Kulangsu in the weekend on May 2019. On-site surveys were administered among tourists at high traffic areas of Kulangsu. Such as ferries, public resting areas, gourmet streets, and exit areas of the well-known attractions. Only tourists who completed their trip were asked to participate in this study. This was achieved by asking respondents whether they were tourists, and whether they had finished sightseeing before handling out the survey. A total of 584 questionnaires were distributed and 572 responses were returned, among which, 480 were usable for data analysis and 92 were removed due to extensive missing values. According to Hair et al. (2010), the final sample size (480) is considered sufficient to generate stable solutions using structural equation modeling (SEM) approach for data analysis.

3.3 Measures

To ensure content validity, all the items and measures were adapted from the previous studies. For instance, 'host sincerity' was measured using an adapted version of the scales created by Taheri et al. (2018). It was operationalized in terms of both its sincere social interaction and sincere emotional response components. The measure of 'cognitive image' was adapted from Lu, Chi & Liu (2015)'s study - nine cognitive attributes were selected to represent the three components of the image of Kulangsu, i.e., 'tourism environment,' 'social environment and tourism infrastructure,' and 'value and accessibility'. Affective image: The items for measuring the affective image construct were adopted from the study by Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Kaplanidou (2015), which consisted of 4 bipolar adjectives on a 5-point scale. About measuring the construct of 'behavioural intention', the survey items from Žabkar et al. (2010) and Nadeau et al. (2008) were utilized. Three items from Kim (2018) were used to evaluate tourists' overall satisfaction with their travel experience. All these questions were answered based on a five-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). The original questionnaire was designed in English and was then translated into Chinese. The questionnaire was pretested before distributing it its final form, by contacting a total of 50 tourists (25 in Haixinsha island in Guangzhou city and 25 in Qingyan ancient town in Guiyan city) and consulting with four tourism researchers.

3.4 Common Method Variance (CMV)

As with self-report questionnaire data, CMV can affect systematic measurement error and biased estimations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To minimize this issue, several steps were undertaken. First, it was stressed to participants that they would not be identifiable to minimize the social desirability bias. Second, independent and dependent constructs located in distinct sections of questionnaire. Third, the Harman single-factor was used to test whether most of the variance can be described by a single factor. An unrotated exploratory

factor analysis on the questionnaire items exhibited the presence of five distinctive factors with an eigenvalue above 1, which composed account for 61.25% of the variance. The highest portion of variance described by a single factor was 30.23%, which is less than the 50% suggested threshold (Taheri et al., 2019). Therefore, CMV is not a concern for this study.

3.5 Data analysis

Partial least-squares - structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to evaluate the conceptual model as it offers vigorous findings for data with both normal and non-normal distributional properties (Hair, et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2016). In doing so, skewness and kurtosis were calculated for each item (acceptable values, between -3 and $+3$) (Wells et al., 2016). Results indicated that the assumption of normality was violated; therefore PLS-SEM is the suitable statistical procedure (see also **Table 2**) (Hair et al., 2017). In addition, PLS-SEM can be used for reflective, formative, and higher-order modes (Hair et al., 2017). In practice, host sincerity and cognitive image were tested in higher-order mode. SmartPLS 3.2.4 software (5,000 times resampling) was applied to test the measurement and structural model (Ringle, Wende & Becker, 2014).

4. Results

4.1 Demographic profiles and descriptive statistics

The survey respondents' demographic profiles are presented in **Table 1**. Among the 480 respondents, nearly 60% are female and 40% are male. The majority of the respondents are young tourists (70.2%), with ages ranging from 19-35 years old, with a relatively small percentage (3.5%) older than 50 years old. About education, 75% of the respondents have reportedly received higher education, at an undergraduate or graduate level. In terms of travel modes, almost 80% are traveling with their families or friends, which is a major travel pattern in the island as compared with the other types of travel.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic variable	Frequency	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	195	40.6
Female	285	59.4
<i>Age</i>		
16 to 18 years old	19	4.0
19 to 35 years old	361	75.2
36 to 50 years old	83	17.3
Older than 50 years old	17	3.5
<i>Education</i>		
Primary school	3	0.6
Junior high school	29	6.0
High school	88	18.3
College or undergraduate	314	65.4
Postgraduate and PhD	46	9.6
<i>Travel companion</i>		
Alone	21	4.4
With family	168	35.0
With friends	208	43.3
With colleagues	61	12.7
Travel agency	32	4.6

The descriptive statistics of all the attitudinal measures are presented in **Table 2**. Overall, all the mean ratings of the attitudinal measures are bigger than the mid-point 3 on the 5-pointing scale, indicating the respondents' positive perceptions of the items. The most positively rated items are related to the island's tourism environment or its core tourism resources – 'scenery' (4.43), 'architecture' (4.36), and 'gastronomy' (4.24). The next highly rated item is an affective image item 'gloomy/exciting' (4.22) indicating that tourists feel excited in visiting the island; followed by a satisfaction measure 'I feel that this travel experience is pleasant' (4.18). In contrast, the less favorable items include 'price' (3.38), 'local hosts are happy to involve me in their real lives' (3.55), 'local hosts are eager to educate me with regards to their culture' (3.57), 'I talk and interact with local hosts about their real and true culture' (3.61), and 'crowdedness' (3.64).

It is noted that these less favorable items are related to the two constructs, respectively – 'sincere social interaction' and 'value and accessibility'. Determined by the mean ratings of the measures, the constructs with the lowest summated means are 'value and accessibility' (3.60), 'sincere social interaction' (3.72) and 'sincere emotional response' (3.84), the latter two embodying the second-order construct 'host sincerity'; the constructs with the highest summated means are 'tourism environment' (4.34) and tourists' 'overall satisfaction' (4.12). The results may indicate that tourists mostly fancied the island's architecture, scenery and gastronomy, and are satisfied with their trips in the island. Relatively, their perceptions of 'host sincerity' and 'value and accessibility' (i.e., price, information and crowdedness) may not be as favorable as the other constructs.

Table 2. Measurement model and descriptive statistics.

Construct and underlying items	t-value	Standard loading	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Step 1: Results of the assessment of measurement model for first-order constructs						
<i>Sincere social interaction</i> (CR=0.82; ρ_A =0.81; α =0.8; AVE ^a =0.55)						
SSI1: My interactions with local hosts help to reinforce my understanding of the place	10.59	0.69	4.09	0.826	-0.703	0.240
SSI2: Local hosts are eager to educate me with regards to their culture	20.17	0.83	3.57	0.899	-0.027	-0.465
SSI3: I talk and interact with local hosts about their real and true culture	9.77	0.70	3.61	0.957	-0.320	-0.106
SSI4: Local hosts are happy to involve me in their real lives	12.78	0.73	3.55	0.924	-0.111	-.474
SSI5: Local hosts are comfortable showing me their culture	7.74	0.73	3.81	0.926	-0.638	0.278
<i>Sincere emotional response</i> (CR=0.82; ρ_A =0.83; α =0.79; AVE ^a =0.56)						
SER1: It is important that I see the real lives of local hosts	4.76	0.66	4.16	1.557	13.189	14.044
SER2: When I see local hosts, I am conscious of their role within the place	6.89	0.76	3.86	0.902	-0.527	-0.034
SER3: Local hosts present themselves to tourists/guests accurately and honestly	23.23	0.89	3.67	0.932	-0.311	-0.200
SER4: There are similarities between what I see and my expectations of local hosts	15.78	0.78	3.78	0.872	-0.295	-0.414
SER5: Local hosts represent themselves truthfully and passionately to tourists/guests	31.07	0.84	3.73	0.914	-0.348	-0.215
<i>Tourism environment</i> (CR=0.83; ρ_A =0.93; α =0.86; AVE ^a =0.70)						
TE1: Architecture	5.13	0.73	4.36	0.712	-0.790	-0.122
TE2: Scenery	35.02	0.76	4.43	0.683	-0.913	0.105
TE3: Gastronomy	26.00	0.88	4.24	0.740	-0.686	0.032
<i>Social environment & tourism infrastructure</i> (CR=0.81; ρ_A =0.82; α =0.83; AVE ^a =0.53)						
SE1: Residents' friendliness	7.05	0.76	3.99	0.889	-0.517	-0.046
SE2: Transportation	9.07	0.73	3.86	0.827	-0.633	0.070
SE3: Service quality	7.09	0.79	3.81	0.944	-0.501	-0.028
<i>Value & accessibility</i> (CR=0.82; ρ_A =0.83; α =0.84; AVE ^a =0.62)						
VA1: Price	12.44	0.77	3.38	0.899	-0.362	0.230
VA2: Information	10.61	0.75	3.78	0.885	-0.447	0.011
VA3: Crowdedness	8.18	0.81	3.64	1.020	-0.404	0.234
<i>Affective image</i> (CR=0.81; ρ_A =0.84; α =0.82; AVE ^a =0.63)						
AI1: Unpleasant/pleasant	7.62	0.73	3.67	0.801	0.378	0.389
AI2: Distressing/relaxing	11.36	0.77	3.77	0.785	0.489	0.289
AI3: Ugly/pretty	10.23	0.79	4.01	0.807	-0.390	5.765
AI4: Gloomy/exciting	9.35	0.73	4.22	1.233	-0.810	0.930
<i>Behavioural intention</i> (CR=0.82; ρ_A =0.81; α =0.83; AVE ^a =0.63)						
BI1 : If had to decide again I would choose the destination again	7.65	7.23	3.85	1.035	-0.824	0.845
BI2 : Will recommend the destination to friends and relatives	9.28	8.20	3.97	0.929	-0.890	0.601
BI3 : Encourage others to visit	8.20	8.10	3.93	0.922	-0.772	0.672

BI4 : Intention to visit again	4.29	0.69	3.96	1.028	-0179	4.831
<i>Overall Satisfaction (CR=0.80; ρ_A=0.81; α=0.82; AVE^a=0.58)</i>						
OS1 : I am satisfied with this travel experience.	5.48	0.72	4.06	0.809	-0.788	0.698
OS2 : I feel that this tourism experience is enjoyable	6.69	0.75	4.14	0.768	-0.747	0.826
OS3 : I feel that this travel experience is pleasant.	9.29	0.73	4.18	0.741	-0.693	0.672
Step 2: Results of the assessment of measurement model after generating second-order construct						
<i>Host sincerity (CR=0.82; ρ_A=0.83; α=0.83; AVE^b=0.62; VIF=1.64)</i>						
Sincere social interaction (CW=0.94)	7.02	0.72				
Sincere emotional response (CW=0.95)	9.13	0.74				
<i>Cognitive image (CR=0.83; ρ_A=0.83; α=0.82; AVE^b=0.61; VIF=1.78)</i>						
Tourism environment (CW=0.90)	7.57	0.77				
Social environment & tourism infrastructure (CW=0.92)	13.11	0.79				
Value & accessibility (CW=0.91)	14.39	0.70				

Note: Significant at t -value>1.96 at p -value<0.05; t -value>2.57 at p -value<0.01; t -value>3.29 at p -value<0.001. α =Cronbach's alpha; CR=composite reliability; ρ_A =Dijkstra-Henseler's rho; AVE^a=average variance extracted; AVE^b= percentage of variance of indicator explained by the latent variable; CW=correlational weights of first-order construct on second-order construct; VIF= the variance inflation factor.

4.2 Measurement model

Following a two-stage approach (Becker, Klein & Wetzels, 2012), host sincerity and cognitive image were established as a second-order composite construct. Thus, reflective exogenous constructs and two composite endogenous construct were measured. For the evaluation of the measurement model in PLS-SEM, several assessments were applied. To test indicator reliability, construct reliability, and the convergent validity of the measurement model, outer loadings of associated items for each reflective construct, weights on the second-order construct, the composite reliability (CR), Dijkstra-Henseler's rho (ρ_A), Cronbach's Alpha (α) and AVEa=average variance extracted; AVEb=percentage of variance of indicator explained by the latent variable (Hair et al., 2017) were assessed for each reflective first-order and second-order construct. The loading and weights should be >0.6 , CR >0.7 , $\alpha >0.6$, $\rho_A >0.7$, and the AVEa or AVEb >0.5 to establish reliability and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). Loadings and weights >0.5 and <0.7 are still satisfactory if the CR and the AVE values meet the threshold (Hair et al., 2017). **Table 2** indicates that the indicator reliability, construct reliability, and convergent validity can be established for data collected from the participants.

Discriminant validity was established via two approaches. *First*, as per Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion, the square root of the AVE for each first-order and second-order construct was higher than the complete value of their respective correlations (**Table 3**). The correlations among all first-order constructs were smaller than the 0.70 cut-off value; therefore they were appropriately distinct. *Second*, Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt (2015) discriminant validity approach based on the multitrait-multimethod matrix, to examine discriminant validity applying the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, was employed. Hence, using HTMT, discriminant validity was also established as all results of the HTMT 0.85 criterion (ranging between 0.41 and 0.62) were lesser than the recommended threshold (0.85). As a result, discriminant validity was established.

Table 3. Correlation matrix

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) Sincere social interaction	0.74									
(2) Cognitive image	0.41	n/a								
(3) Behavioral intention	0.44	0.40	0.79							
(4) Overall Satisfaction	0.51	0.33	0.21	0.76						
(5) Social environment & tourism infrastructure	0.52	0.12	0.35	0.31	0.72					
(6) Affective image	0.23	0.27	0.20	0.45	0.40	0.79				
(7) Value & accessibility	0.17	0.24	0.43	0.37	0.42	0.37	0.78			
(8) Sincere emotional response	0.25	0.34	0.27	0.28	0.28	0.11	0.17	0.74		
(9) Host sincerity	0.33	0.30	0.32	0.36	0.42	0.43	0.23	0.17	n/a	
(10) Tourism environment	0.45	0.28	0.29	0.25	0.37	0.31	0.24	0.35	0.32	0.78

Note: Square root of AVE is on the diagonal; Square root of AVE value for serious leisure construct are absent as this construct was operationalized as a higher-order model, with AVEs only relevant to its dimensions.

4.3 Structural model and key results

Variance inflation factor (VIF) values were acknowledged in order to establish collinearity. As shown in Table 2, all VIF values were under the threshold of 5 (Hair, et al., 2017), signifying that collinearity in the structural model was not an issue. Effect sizes (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residuals (SRMR) were also calculated (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015; Hair et al., 2017). Following Khalilzadeh and Tasci (2017) suggestion, Cohen's effect sizes (f^2) indicates 0.01 for small, 0.06 for medium, and 0.14 for large effects within structural equation modelling. **Table 4** shows f^2 effect sizes for the significant direct paths in the inner model. The finding indicates that the majority of direct paths have a medium and large effect size for direct relationships. Following the blindfolding procedure, Q^2 indicates how well data can be reconstructed empirically employing the model and the PLS-SEM parameters. All Q^2 values are greater than 0. Thus, the Q^2 values for endogenous variables show acceptable predictive relevance. The SRMR value for the model was 0.068, which is lesser than the suggested value of 0.08 (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015). The model explains 37% of cognitive image, 44% of affective image, 35% of overall satisfaction, and 54% of behavioral intention.

Table 4. Effect size of direct paths

Hypotheses	Path coefficient	<i>P</i> value	f^2	Effect size
H1: Host sincerity → Cognitive image	0.52	$p < 0.001$	0.22	Large
H2: Host sincerity → Affective image	0.36	$p < 0.001$	0.18	Large
H3: Cognitive image → Affective image	0.33	$p < 0.001$	0.11	Medium
H4: Host sincerity → Overall satisfaction	0.31	$p < 0.001$	0.05	Small
H5: Cognitive image → Overall satisfaction	0.24	$p < 0.001$	0.08	Medium
H6: Affective image → Overall satisfaction	0.42	$p < 0.001$	0.11	Medium
H7: Cognitive image → Behavioral intention	0.51	$p < 0.001$	0.13	Medium
H8: Affective image → Behavioral intention	0.62	$p < 0.001$	0.21	Large
H9: Host sincerity → Behavioral intention	0.48	$p < 0.001$	0.27	Large
H10: Overall satisfaction → Behavioral intention	0.37	$p < 0.001$	0.23	Large

4.4 Post-hoc analysis of indirect effects

Following Williams and MacKinnon's (2008) and Taheri et al. (2020b) mediation analysis with the bootstrapping method was used. 95% confidence interval (CI) of the parameter estimates based on 5,000 times resampling was used. The study results indicate that host sincerity indirectly influence overall satisfaction through cognitive image [Indirect path: 0.23; t -value: 7.11; 95% CI = [0.201: 0.250]. As the direct impact was significant, the results reveal that cognitive image mediates the influence of host sincerity on overall satisfaction. The findings indicate that host sincerity indirectly influences overall satisfaction through affective image [Indirect path: 0.31; t -value: 9.23; 95% CI = [0.23: 0.34]. As the direct impact is significant, the results reveal that affective image mediates the impact of host sincerity on overall satisfaction. In addition, the research findings show that cognitive image indirectly influences behavioral intention through overall satisfaction [Indirect path: 0.27; t -value: 6.03; 95% CI = [0.20: 0.33]. As the direct

impact is significant, the results show that overall satisfaction mediates the impact of cognitive image on behavioral intention. Finally, the results show that affective image indirectly influences behavioral intention through overall satisfaction [Indirect path: 0.22; *t*-value: 6.47; 95% CI = [0.17; 0.29]. As the direct impact is significant, the results show that overall satisfaction mediates the impact of affective image on behavioral intention.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study investigated the interaction between tourists and local residents, which will help better understand how to enhance tourists' travel experiences and sustain the attractiveness of travel destinations. Sincerity is desired by people when they think about their relationships with other people and it will bring about positive or favorable consequences (An, 2004). Research suggests sincere behavior elicit a more heuristic processing of information than serious expressions and induce trust and acceptance (Krull & Dil, 1998). Local residents as hosts have representational power over their own cultural practices, attractions and the spaces they call home. Sincere displays of local residents can help boost tourists' satisfaction with their visits to the destinations. This study has provided empirical evidence as to whether and how tourists perceived 'host sincerity' influences their perceptions of tourism destination image, including cognitive image and affective image, tourists' overall satisfaction and their behavioral intentions.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. The research findings establish the significant influence of host sincerity on cognitive image (H1) and affective image (H2). Thus, this current study provides evidence that host sincerity can influence how tourists perceive tourism destination image. These findings are not only build on previous studies (Freire, 2009; Agapito, Do Valle & Mendes, 2012; Stylidis, Shani & Belhassen, 2017; Taheri, et al., 2020) but also offer new insights in this area. The research finding reveal that host sincerity is positively related to tourists' overall satisfaction (H4). This finding is in line with extant discourse (Bigné et al., 2001; Do Valle et al., 2012). Moreover, our research supports prior destination image studies (Stylidis, Shani & Belhassen, 2017; Papadimitrio, Kaplanidou & Apostolopoulou, 2018; Woosnam et al., 2020) that destination cognitive image affects destination affective image (H3). This current study offers new insights on the critical role of host sincerity in formulating tourists' overall satisfaction on tourism destination (H4) as identified in previous studies (Ariffin, 2013; Gountas, Mavondo, Ewing and Gountas, 2011). Therefore, tourists are more likely to be satisfied with tourism destinations where they have sincere encounter with local residents. Similarly, both cognitive image and affective image has a significant influence on tourists' overall satisfaction, thus supporting H5 and H6. These results further support the studies by Guzman-Parra, Vila-Oblitas & Maqueda-Lafuente (2016) but contradicts the study by del Bosque and San Martin (2008). In addition, the study results build on prior studies' research findings (Stylidis, Shani & Belhassen, 2017; Papadimitrio, Kaplanidou & Apostolopoulou, 2018; Tosun, Dedeoğlu & Fyall, 2015), which identified the positive relationships between two components of destination image and behavioral intentions (H7, H8). The research findings suggest that host sincerity is a significant predictor of tourists' behavioral intentions (H9). This current study clearly illustrates the significant relationship between tourists' overall satisfaction and their behavioral intentions (H10).

Finally, the post-hoc analysis of the indirect effects was used to further investigate conceptual model. As a result, affective and cognitive images can be conceived as an evaluative judgment of host sincerity that is dependent upon tourist experience.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This current study offers several specific theoretical implications. Since sincerity has ‘a public end in view’ according to Trilling (1972), host sincerity describes the residents’ honesty, commitment and being sociable when they interact with cultural tourists in tourism destination. This study assessed the influence of the two dimensions of host sincerity as the destination attributes (Eid, EI-Kassrawy & Agag, 2019; Taheri et al., 2018). Compared with authenticity, sincerity associates with Confucian ethics that is widely practiced and serves as a model in East Asia (e.g. China, Japan, Korea) whether in early or in present days (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, 2019), which is also be expectations of tourists to local residents in Chinese cultural heritage. The present study provides new insights into the interaction between local residents and tourists in tourism research. It is one of the few studies about host sincerity in China, which is an emerging market and one of the most important travel destinations in the world. By incorporating the host sincerity, this study extends the existing model of Image-Satisfaction-Intention (Loi et al., 2017; Wang & Hsu, 2010). Furthermore, the study shows the predictive power of host sincerity on destination image, tourists’ satisfaction and tourist behavioral intention in the context of cultural tourism.

5.2 Practical implications

A practical implication of this study is its result that attempts to associate local residents and host sincerity are important for enhancing destination image, tourist satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. Destination marketers should engage local residents in tourism development efforts since local residents are significant image formation agents and destination ambassadors. Tourists' travel experience can be negatively affected by an unhappy contact with local residents and result in dissatisfaction, lowering their intention to return (Loi et al., 2017). As a result, destination marketers should encourage local residents to keep simple and honest instead of pursuing commercial interests excessively. Site managers should design their marketing activities in a way that establishes the social and honest value of their offerings by evolving strategies aimed at ensuring sincerity, building tourist trust in the process.

Kulangsu is the first world heritage site in China and even in the world that explicitly regards community as its core value, which indicates that community world heritage has begun to step onto the historical stage independently. The continuous refinement of heritage types indicate that China's world heritage research and protection have entered a new stage. For those tourism communities, the involvement of local residents is regarded as part of tourism product. The basic of host-tourist interaction is more than market and economic-based values but also include social values and beliefs. Therefore, Kulangsu residents should be highly encouraged to develop the notion of an exchange of sincerity passing between the participants involved in a given touristic encounter in order to help tourists form a favorable destination image.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Building on existing conceptualizations of destination image, the study explored host sincerity scale in Chinese cultural tourism setting, linking it with affective and cognitive image, tourist satisfaction, and behavioral intention. The results of the study are not free from limitations. First, the study focused on domestic tourists visiting Kulangsu. Future research can replicate this study on international tourists as they may have different image perceptions (Tasci and Gartner, 2007; Prayag et al., 2017). Second, the model could be improved. Future research could include some other components, such as investigate the predictors of the host sincerity (Demirel & Erdogmus, 2016). Finally, scholars can add individual differences, for example, by their type of travel arrangement as free independent tourists and group inclusive tourists (Lin & Kuo, 2018), to the tested model that open avenues for future research. Thirdly, the results are contextually restricted as all data was collected from one Chinese city. Thus, future research studies can explore the relationships between variables in the model in alternate contexts, comparing their findings consequently. Finally, future research may employ qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations to collect more in-depth qualitative data. This can help explore ethnographic features of the behavioral relationships and update the proposed conceptual model.

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