

Destination Image as a Mediator between Digital Marketing, Leadership, Marketing Mix, and Tourist Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of destination image as a mediator in the relationships among digital marketing, leadership, the marketing mix, and tourist satisfaction. A total of 420 respondents participated in the survey, which was distributed both online and offline to tourists who visited various destinations in West Sumatra, Indonesia. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling to ensure that respondents were relevant to the research context. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that digital marketing, leadership, and marketing mix exert significant positive effects on destination image. Furthermore, destination image significantly influences tourist satisfaction, confirming its pivotal role in shaping tourists' overall experiences. Mediation analysis indicates that destination image partially mediates the relationships between digital marketing, leadership, marketing mix, and tourist satisfaction. Interestingly, the direct effect of leadership on tourist satisfaction was not statistically significant, suggesting that leadership influences satisfaction primarily through enhancing destination image. This study contributes to the tourism marketing literature by providing empirical evidence of the mediating role of destination image in the digital era. The results highlight the importance of integrated marketing strategies and leadership in strengthening destination image to enhance tourist satisfaction. Practical implications suggest that tourism stakeholders should optimize digital marketing tools, adopt effective leadership practices, and improve the marketing mix to build a strong destination image that fosters sustainable tourist satisfaction.

Keywords: destination image, digital marketing, leadership, marketing mix, tourist satisfaction, PLS-SEM.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic sectors in the global economy, contributing significantly to employment, income generation, and cultural exchange. However, the industry is currently operating in a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) environment characterized by rapidly changing consumer behavior, technological disruption, geopolitical instability, and economic uncertainty. (Chaudhary & Islam, 2024; Hall et al., 2017; Uehara & Kamata, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this vulnerability, with the UNWTO reporting a 75% decline in international tourist arrivals in 2020, causing an estimated loss of USD 2.5 trillion in export revenues (UNWTO, 2021). While recovery has begun, the sector remains exposed to challenges such as inflation, fluctuating exchange rates, rising travel costs, and evolving tourist expectations (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Sigala, 2020).

In this context, adaptive and sustainable destination management has emerged as a crucial approach to ensure resilience, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability. (Buhalis, 2022; Streimikiene et al., 2021). Effective destination management requires strategic leadership, innovative marketing approaches, and the integration of digital technologies. Leadership plays a vital role in guiding destination stakeholders, promoting collaborative governance, and fostering innovation (Basha, 2023; Hall et al., 2017; Prayag et al., 2024). Digital marketing has transformed how destinations engage with potential visitors, enhancing visibility, interactivity, and personalization of tourist experiences (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021; Xiang et al., 2015). Likewise, an effective marketing mix strategy – beyond the traditional 4Ps to encompass the 7Ps – helps align tourism services with evolving customer needs, thus reinforcing destination image and stimulating loyalty (Kotler et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2019).

Destination image is widely recognized as a decisive factor in shaping tourist perceptions and behaviors. A favorable destination image influences not only the decision to visit but also satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth advocacy (Relifra & Wardi, 2022; Saini & Arasanmi, 2021; Stylidis, 2020). Tourist satisfaction, in turn, results from the alignment between expectations and actual experiences, playing a critical role in sustainable competitiveness (Alcocer et al., 2019; Bagheri et al., 2023). Despite extensive literature on these constructs, few studies have simultaneously examined the integrated effects of digital marketing, leadership, and marketing mix on tourist satisfaction mediated by destination image, particularly in the VUCA era.

This study aims to fill this gap by developing and empirically testing a model that integrates leadership, digital marketing, and the marketing mix to shape destination image and enhance tourist satisfaction. Using data collected from 420 tourists visiting destinations in West Sumatra, Indonesia, the study applies Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine both direct and mediating effects. The findings are expected to make theoretical contributions to the tourism marketing literature and to provide practical insights for destination managers to strengthen resilience and competitiveness in a turbulent environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach to analyze the effects of digital marketing, leadership, and marketing mix on tourist satisfaction, with destination image as a mediating variable. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to tourists visiting various destinations in West Sumatra, Indonesia. The population of this research consisted of tourists visiting destinations in West Sumatra. A total of 420 respondents were selected through purposive sampling, based on the criterion of tourists who had visited a destination in West Sumatra within the past 2 years. The questionnaire was distributed via both online and offline methods to reach a broader, more diverse group of respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As presented in Table 1, the majority of respondents were female (68.8%), while male respondents accounted for 31.2%. In terms of age distribution, more than half of the respondents belonged to the 17–25 years group (53.8%), followed by those aged 26–35 years (36.7%), whereas the proportions of respondents aged 36–45 years (6.0%) and above 45 years (3.6%) were relatively smaller. This indicates that most of the tourists participating in this study came from the younger age cohort. Regarding educational background, respondents were predominantly high school graduates (51.9%), followed by bachelor's degree holders (24.3%), master's/doctoral degree holders (22.6%), and diploma holders (1.2%). Regarding occupation, the most significant proportion of respondents were students (61.9%), followed by employees (15.9%), others (14.3%), and entrepreneurs (7.9%). Most respondents were first-time visitors (58.3%), while 41.7% were repeat visitors. Concerning technology use, the majority of respondents (83.1%) utilized the internet to plan their trips. The length of stay was mainly less than 1 day (56.4%), followed by 1–3 days (34.7%) and more than 3 days (8.8%). Additionally, most respondents (78.1%) did not use travel services such as travel agents or tour guides, while 21.9% reported using them.

Table 1. Respondents Characteristics

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male	131	31.2
Female	289	68.8
Age (years)		
17–25	226	53.8
26–35	154	36.7
36–45	25	6.0
>45	15	3.6
Education		
High School	218	51.9
Bachelor (S1)	102	24.3
Master/Doctoral (S2/S3)	95	22.6
Diploma/D3	5	1.2
Occupation		
Student	260	61.9
Employee	67	15.9
Entrepreneur	33	7.9
Others	60	14.3
First Visit		
Yes	245	58.3
No (revisit)	175	41.7
Internet Use		
Yes	349	83.1
No	71	16.9
Length of Stay		
<1 day	237	56.4
1–3 days	146	34.7
>3 days	37	8.8
Use of Travel Services		
Yes	92	21.9
No	328	78.1

These findings suggest that the profile of tourists visiting West Sumatra is generally characterized by a younger age group with a medium to high level of education, who tend to organize their trips independently, relying on the internet rather than conventional travel services.

Table 2. Path Coefficients

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	STDEV	T Statistics	P Values
Destination Image → Tourist Satisfaction	0.257	0.249	0.061	4.197	0.000***
Digital Marketing → Destination Image	0.203	0.200	0.048	4.237	0.000***
Digital Marketing → Tourist Satisfaction	0.135	0.139	0.048	2.844	0.005**
Leadership → Destination Image	0.169	0.179	0.056	3.005	0.003**
Leadership → Tourist Satisfaction	0.091	0.096	0.060	1.520	0.129 (ns)
Marketing Mix → Destination Image	0.225	0.238	0.054	4.192	0.000***
Marketing Mix → Tourist Satisfaction	0.178	0.188	0.057	3.120	0.002**

Notes: ** $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant

The results indicate that destination image has a positive and significant effect on tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.257$; $t = 4.197$; $p < 0.05$). This suggests that the better the perceived destination image, the higher the level of tourist satisfaction. Theoretically, these findings align with mainstream tourism research that positions image as a cognitive-affective representation that encapsulates tourists' assessments of a destination's attributes and holistic impressions; better images are consistently associated with satisfaction and ultimately loyalty. Several empirical studies in various contexts of heritage destinations, emerging destinations, and ecotourism confirm that a better image increases satisfaction and loyalty (Alcocer et al., 2019; Chiu et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2021).

Furthermore, digital marketing significantly influences destination image ($\beta = 0.203$; $p < 0.05$) and directly affects tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.135$; $p < 0.05$). This finding highlights that digital marketing strategies not only shape a favorable destination image but also directly enhance tourist satisfaction. The theoretical explanation is consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) paradigm, where exposure to digital stimuli (content quality, information reliability, social proof/UGC, and real-time interactions) enriches perceptions (organisms) that manifest as images, and in turn influence evaluative responses in the form of satisfaction. Recent empirical evidence suggests that digital marketing activities, including social media marketing, can strengthen destination image and increase tourists' evaluative outcomes (visit intention/satisfaction) (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021; Keni et al., 2024; Sharafuddin et al., 2024).

Leadership significantly affects destination image ($\beta = 0.169$; $p < 0.05$) but does not have a significant direct impact on tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.091$; $p = 0.129$). This implies that leadership plays a more substantial role in building destination image rather than directly influencing tourist satisfaction. Conceptually, many dimensions of destination leadership/governance are backstage (multi-stakeholder coordination, crisis mitigation, cleanliness/safety standardization), and therefore not directly observable by tourists when evaluating experiences—their impacts are first manifested in visible outputs (service regularity, cleanliness, safety), and then internalized as image; only then does a positive image drive satisfaction (Amani & Chao, 2023; Laesser et al., 2025).

Marketing mix has significant effects on both destination image ($\beta = 0.225$; $p < 0.05$) and tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.178$; $p < 0.05$). This result emphasizes that an effective marketing mix strategy enhances the perceived destination image and, in turn, directly improves tourist satisfaction. Theoretically, the coherence of the 7Ps elements – product/experience, fair price,

access/convenience (place), promotion, people, process, and physical evidence – increases perceptions of service quality and convenience, thereby directly increasing satisfaction and strengthening the image when all elements convey a consistent narrative. Empirical evidence across contexts indicates that the marketing mix is positively related to tourist satisfaction, and recent research even confirms its simultaneous contribution to image formation and evaluative outcomes (Esmaili et al., 2017; Relifra & Wardi, 2022; Teviana et al., 2017)

Overall, these findings underscore the critical role of destination image as a mediating construct linking marketing-related factors (digital marketing, leadership, marketing mix) to tourist satisfaction.

Table 3. Mediation Analysis Results

Path	β (Original Sample)	STDEV	t-statistic	p-value
Digital Marketing → Destination Image → Tourist Satisfaction	0.052	0.019	2.809	0.005
Leadership → Destination Image → Tourist Satisfaction	0.043	0.018	2.457	0.014
Marketing Mix → Destination Image → Tourist Satisfaction	0.058	0.022	2.648	0.008

The mediation analysis revealed that Digital Marketing, Leadership, and Marketing Mix significantly influence Tourist Satisfaction through Destination Image. The path *Digital Marketing → Destination Image → Tourist Satisfaction* yielded an *Original Sample* of 0.052, a *t-statistic* of 2.809, and a significance level of 0.005 ($p < 0.01$). This result indicates that Destination Image significantly mediates the relationship between Digital Marketing and Tourist Satisfaction. These findings are consistent with recent research, which confirms that the quality of digital content, the credibility of information, and the interactivity of social media play an essential role in forming a positive destination image, which in turn increases tourist satisfaction (Casali et al., 2021; Chiu et al., 2016; Saini & Arasanmi, 2021).

These findings are further supported by studies over the past decade showing that digital marketing strategies – including social media marketing, e-WOM, and user-generated content – significantly shape destination image and influence tourists' travel evaluations (Sharafuddin et al., 2024; Wilopo & Nuralam, 2025). Thus, this significant mediation confirms that the effectiveness of digital marketing is not solely a direct function but also highly dependent on the destination's ability to create a positive impression in tourists' minds.

Similarly, the path *Leadership → Destination Image → Tourist Satisfaction* showed a coefficient of 0.043, with a *t-statistic* of 2.457 and a p-value of 0.014 ($p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that leadership plays an essential role in enhancing tourist satisfaction by strengthening the destination image. The literature on destination governance supports this: effective leadership – through multi-stakeholder coordination, policy consistency, security and cleanliness governance, and public service strategies – contributes to the formation of positive perceptions of a destination (Beritelli et al., 2014; Ibrahim & Wildan, 2022; Laesser et al., 2025; Morrison, 2013; Vukadin & Islam, 2024).

Because most leadership dimensions are backstage, tourists do not perceive their impact directly, but rather through tangible outcomes, such as facility management, well-organized infrastructure, a safe and clean tourist environment, and consistent service. These factors are internalized as destination image, which then increases tourist satisfaction (Nunkoo et al., 2012; Sartori et al., 2012). These mediation results strengthen the argument that destination leadership plays a strategic role in building an attractive destination image before having an evaluative impact on tourist satisfaction.

Furthermore, the path *Marketing Mix* → *Destination Image* → *Tourist Satisfaction* was also significant, with a coefficient of 0.058, a *t*-statistic of 2.648, and a *p*-value of 0.008 ($p < 0.01$). These results highlight that the effective implementation of a Marketing Mix strategy contributes to building a positive destination image, thereby enhancing tourist satisfaction. The elements of the Marketing Mix—product/experience, price, accessibility, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence—have been shown to build positive perceptions and enhance the quality of the tourist experience, which in turn creates a strong destination image (Hossain et al., 2021; Magatef, 2015; Muluneh et al., 2022; Teviana et al., 2017).

Previous research has shown that consistent 7Ps in destination service delivery not only enhances perceived quality but also strengthens the destination's image as a friendly, competitive, and accessible destination (Esmaili et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2019; Relifra & Wardi, 2022). With a more positive image, tourists tend to provide better evaluations and feel more satisfied. Therefore, this mediation finding underscores the importance of holistic and integrated service design within the overall destination marketing strategy.

Taken together, these findings emphasize that Destination Image serves as a crucial mediating variable in explaining how marketing strategies, leadership, and the marketing mix impact tourist satisfaction. Thus, the results of this study enrich the tourism literature by showing that digital marketing strategies, marketing mixes, and destination leadership have a greater impact when they can create a strong, positive, and consistent destination image (FAUR & BAN, 2022; Hall et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that Destination Image (DI) plays a vital role in increasing Tourist Satisfaction (TS). DI has been shown to have a direct and significant effect on TS, such that the more positive the image perceived by tourists, the higher the level of satisfaction. This finding aligns with the tourism literature, which views image as a cognitive-affective representation that consistently influences post-visit evaluation.

Furthermore, this study shows that Digital Marketing (DM) and the Marketing Mix (MM) have a significant direct influence on tourist satisfaction, whereas Destination Leadership (LD) does not. However, these three variables—DM, LD, and MM—consistently have an indirect effect on TS through DI. These mediation results confirm that destination image functions as a psychological mechanism that bridges the influence of marketing strategies and destination management on tourist satisfaction.

These findings also provide empirical support for the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, in which destination marketing and leadership strategies (stimulus) shape tourist perceptions through destination image (organism), which, in turn, generates evaluative responses in the form of satisfaction (response). Thus, destination image should be the primary focus in formulating destination management strategies.

In practical terms, this study recommends that destination managers strengthen the quality of digital marketing communications, optimize the coherence of marketing mix elements (product/experience, price, access, promotion, human resources, process, and physical evidence), and ensure effective leadership in producing governance outcomes that are visible to tourists. These efforts can strengthen the destination's image and, ultimately, increase satisfaction and long-term competitiveness.

Further research should include behavioral indicators such as revisit intention and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), test tourist characteristics as moderating variables, and apply the model across various types of destinations to strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

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