

The Influence of Place-Based Online Representation of Eco-Lodges on Tourists' Destination Image: A Qualitative Study of Iranian Eco-Lodges

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Detailed abstract

Introduction

The rapid development of cyberspace and digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the tourism industry. Online platforms, websites, social media, and travel applications have become primary sources of information for tourists before making travel decisions. Through these media, destinations are represented to potential visitors, influencing their perceptions, expectations, and destination choices. Consequently, cyberspace has become an influential environment in shaping tourists' mental images of destinations.

Destination image is commonly defined as the collection of beliefs, ideas, impressions, emotions, and perceptions that individuals hold about a particular place. Previous studies have demonstrated that destination image significantly affects tourists' destination selection, satisfaction, behavioral intentions, and revisit decisions. Researchers have also emphasized that destination image consists of both cognitive and affective dimensions. The cognitive component relates to knowledge and beliefs regarding destination attributes, whereas the affective component reflects emotional responses and feelings toward the destination.

Among the factors affecting destination image, information sources play a critical role. According to destination image formation theories, tourists construct mental images through various information channels before visiting a destination. In contemporary tourism, cyberspace serves as one of the most influential secondary information sources. Images, videos, narratives, reviews, and online descriptions contribute substantially to tourists' understanding of destinations.

Ecolodges have emerged as important tourism attractions in recent decades. Beyond their accommodation function, they represent local architecture, cultural heritage, traditional lifestyles, and environmental values. Iranian ecolodges are particularly significant because they are often located in traditional houses, historic settlements, and rural contexts that embody regional identity and vernacular architectural characteristics. Therefore, tourists frequently perceive these accommodations not merely as places to stay but also as cultural and architectural destinations.

Despite extensive research on destination image, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how the online representation of ecolodges influences tourists' mental images before their actual visits. Furthermore, most destination image studies have employed quantitative approaches, while qualitative investigations exploring tourists' perceptions and interpretations remain scarce. To address this gap, the present study examines how place-based representation of Iranian ecolodges in cyberspace contributes to the formation of tourists' mental images and identifies the major representational components involved in this process.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design using a conventional content analysis approach. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of tourists' experiences, interpretations, and perceptions regarding the online representation of ecolodges.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Twenty-one tourists who had discovered an Iranian ecolodge through cyberspace for the first time and subsequently selected it as their accommodation were recruited. The sample included both domestic and international tourists who had used various online platforms, booking websites, and social media channels to obtain information about the selected ecolodges.

Data collection was conducted between September 2021 and May 2023 through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Interviews began with broad questions concerning participants' impressions of the images, descriptions, and information they had encountered online before visiting the ecolodges. Participants were encouraged to describe which online representations influenced their decisions and how these representations shaped their expectations and perceptions of the destinations.

Interview duration ranged from approximately 50 to 80 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new concepts or categories emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data analysis followed the principles of qualitative content analysis. Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. Meaning units were identified, coded, and grouped according to conceptual similarities. Through a process of abstraction and comparison, codes were organized into subcategories and broader thematic categories. The analysis ultimately generated 45 concepts, 12 subcategories, and four major categories describing place-based representation and its influence on tourists' mental images.

To ensure trustworthiness, several validation strategies were employed, including prolonged engagement with the data, constant comparison, member checking, and expert review. Findings and interpretations were discussed with selected participants and qualitative research specialists to enhance credibility and confirmability.

Findings

Analysis of participants' experiences revealed that place-based representation in cyberspace significantly influences the formation of tourists' mental images of ecolodges. Four major categories emerged from the data: architectural representation, representation of semantic dimensions, representation of activities and events, and representation methods.

Architectural Representation

Architectural representation was identified as one of the strongest contributors to mental image formation. Participants emphasized the importance of visualizing physical and architectural characteristics of ecolodges before travel.

Several dimensions were identified within this category, including physical representation, vernacular architectural representation, aesthetic diversity, and representation of tangible heritage. Participants highlighted the importance of seeing building materials, spatial organization, decorative elements, proportions, and environmental settings through photographs and videos.

Representation of vernacular architecture was particularly influential because it communicated authenticity and regional identity. Tourists valued information regarding restoration methods, historical continuity, preservation practices, and connections between contemporary use and traditional architectural heritage.

Participants also emphasized the importance of experiencing architectural diversity through representations of different seasons, daylight conditions, nighttime atmospheres, and climatic characteristics. Such representations enriched their understanding of the place and strengthened their expectations.

Representation of Semantic Dimensions

Beyond physical characteristics, participants frequently referred to meanings, emotions, and symbolic associations evoked by online representations.

Three primary dimensions emerged: place association, meaningful experiences, and narrative representation. Images and descriptions often reminded tourists of ancestral homes, traditional lifestyles, childhood memories, cultural stories, and familiar social environments.

Participants reported that representations frequently generated emotional connections with the destination before arrival. Architectural forms, courtyards, traditional spatial arrangements, and cultural symbols evoked feelings of nostalgia, comfort, authenticity, and belonging.

Narrative representation also played an essential role. Stories about former residents, local communities, family histories, and previous visitors contributed to richer mental images and increased

emotional engagement. Such narratives transformed the ecolodge from a physical structure into a meaningful place associated with human experiences and cultural continuity.

Representation of Activities and Events

The third category concerned representations of activities, events, and social interactions occurring within the ecolodge environment.

Participants emphasized the importance of intangible cultural heritage, including local customs, traditional ceremonies, handicrafts, food preparation, and regional cultural practices. These representations enabled tourists to anticipate authentic cultural experiences beyond mere accommodation.

The representation of social space was equally significant. Tourists expressed interest in observing interactions among hosts, local residents, visitors, and community members. Information regarding family management, community participation, social gatherings, and visitor experiences contributed substantially to positive destination images.

Nature-based activities and recreational experiences further enhanced the attractiveness of ecolodges by portraying opportunities for engagement with local landscapes and environmental resources.

Representation Methods

The final category concerned the methods through which place-based representations were communicated. Two primary methods were identified: visual representation and textual representation.

Visual representation, including photographs and videos, exerted the strongest influence on participants' perceptions. High-quality images enabled tourists to imagine the physical environment, architectural qualities, and experiential atmosphere of the destination.

Textual representation complemented visual materials by providing contextual information, narratives, operational details, and visitor reviews. Participants frequently reported consulting online comments and descriptions after viewing images in order to develop a more complete understanding of the ecolodge.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that place-based representation extends beyond the communication of physical attributes and encompasses multiple dimensions of human-environment interaction. Consistent with destination image theories, the study confirms that tourists' mental images are shaped through both cognitive and affective processes.

Architectural representation contributes primarily to the cognitive dimension of destination image by providing information about spatial characteristics, heritage value, and physical qualities. In contrast, semantic representations and narratives strengthen affective responses by creating emotional connections and symbolic meanings.

The results also support previous research emphasizing the importance of information sources in destination image formation. Cyberspace functions as a powerful secondary information source through which tourists develop expectations, interpretations, and preferences before visiting destinations.

Importantly, the findings reveal that successful online representation requires more than displaying attractive architectural photographs. Effective place-based representation should integrate architectural authenticity, cultural narratives, social experiences, and intangible heritage to create comprehensive and meaningful mental images.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of place-based representation of Iranian ecolodges in cyberspace on tourists' mental image formation. The findings identified four principal dimensions of representation: architectural representation, representation of semantic dimensions, representation of activities and events, and representation methods.

The results suggest that tourists construct mental images through an interaction between physical, social, cultural, and symbolic representations. Therefore, effective digital representation of ecolodges should move beyond purely visual depictions and incorporate narratives, cultural meanings, social experiences, and intangible heritage.

The study contributes to the fields of tourism marketing, destination image research, and architectural tourism by providing a qualitative framework for understanding how online representations influence tourists' perceptions. The findings may assist tourism managers, content creators, and architects in developing more effective strategies for presenting ecolodges in cyberspace and enhancing destination attractiveness.

Declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all interview data were collected and analyzed in accordance with ethical research principles. No external funding was received for this research.

Keywords: Place-Based Representation; Cyberspace; Information Sources; Ecolodge; Mental Image