

## A CURRENT SNAPSHOT OF TOURIST ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS TOWARDS LAO PDR

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Received February 10, 2020 & Revise May 10, 2020 & Accepted June 24, 2020

### Abstract

Motivated by a desire to fill an empirical gap studying how the tourists form of their attitudes and behaviors towards Lao PDR, through representative cities Vientiane and Luang Prabang, this research thus is initiated. The research focuses particularly on the cognitive and affective aspects of the destination images, and studies how they influence tourist satisfaction and further onto response behaviors such as recommendation to others. The study incorporates many demographic variables but they show no significant differences. The study confirms the significant roles of both the cognitive and affective attributes of destination images on tourist satisfaction, which in turn predicts recommendation of the destination to others. Nevertheless, this study shows that tourist satisfaction is not able to make tourists form positive revisit intention, which also shares the tourism and travel competitiveness study by the Economic World Forum (2017), with Laos ranked 94 globally.

**Keywords :** Current Snapshot, Tourist Attitudes, Behaviors

### Introduction

This research is motivated by a significant lack of empirical research that aims to identify the nature of destination images inducing tourist satisfaction in Laos, and the research findings could suggest to the policy makers on destination branding. In other words, through identifying the nature of destination images that have significant predictive impacts on tourist satisfaction, an effective tourism strategy could be developed (Baker and Cameron, 2008). Most destination management organizations and national policy makers can not easily get their hands firmly gripped on the destination image branding because there is a lack of tourist perceptions as well as a lack of clear identity and vision of the destination, which complicates the process of destination branding (Ryan, 2010).

In this research study, only cognitive and affective attributes of the destinations are considered, as these two domains of images have been empirically validated by other researchers to best produce memorable experiences and satisfaction (cf. Wang and Hsu, 2010; Tan, 2017; 2018a; 2018b). Besides, many researches also confirm that image is an effective means to create and realize unique destination positioning (Park, Qu and Lee, 2011) in the minds of the tourists (known as mind share, Tan, 2018b). In sum, the research objective is stated as follows

### Research of Objective

The purpose of this study is to empirically verify the predictive powers of both destination's cognitive and affective images upon tourist satisfaction, which in turn influences tourist attitudes and behaviors in terms of recommending the destination to others and revisit intention. The next section would provide the theoretical basis to address this research objective as well as the empirical context so that the contents of both cognitive and affective destination images could be operationalized in more descriptive manner. Cognitively, cultural heritage,

place national identity and festival and events are considered. In affective attribute aspect of destination images, friendliness and relaxing mode of the experiences are emphasized.

### Literature Review

Laos as Tourist Destination: The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) is one of developing countries located in Southeast Asia. In 2017, the tourism-industry share of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for Laos stood at 13.7 percent of GDP (or 2 billion USD), significantly behind its neighboring countries such as Cambodia (28.3 percent of GDP, at USD 5.5 billion) and Thailand (82.5 billion, or 20.5 percent of GDP). Tourism industry is also a key national industry plan for Lao PDR (Engelhardt & Rattanaovong, 2004). Tourism resources, albeit remained weak when compared to other ASEAN counterparts (World Economic Forum, 2017), are considered abundant in Lao PDR, and are endowed with natural attraction sites, many interesting world heritage sites, and historical and cultural sites. To give more details, the cultural activities are commonly presented through the nation's traditions, practices, values, and ways of life including annual events and festivals.

In each year, Laos could seize the advantages of its geographical uniqueness and characteristics, natural resources, and cultural and historical tourism to draw the many thousands of visitors to their country. Laos comprises of a diversity of ethnic groups which can bring wide-ranges of different aspects of experiences and exposures to tourists. Another outstanding feature which is widely said about the locality among the travelers who visit the country is the hospitality and the friendliness of the local people. The sense of these excellent receptions as willingness to open their local cultures to the visitors is considered as another motive for touring Laos. Collectively, the friendliness and the many various cultural aspects of the country could lead to unique Laos national identity, which can attract not only domestic but also foreign tourists to go travel and sightsee places in the country in order to gain more understanding towards Laos context through memorable experiences. In general, the country allows the tourists to access not only the outstanding historical and cultural experiences but also the opportunities to associate oneself with the ecological preservation and interesting places in nature e.g. the Nam Ngum Reservoir and the Bolaven Plateau.

To make possible a continuing increase in the values of the tourism industry, the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (TMICT) is charged with the duty. TMICT is tasked to conduct and launch research strategic plans and public policies, including developing and promoting the public relations of the tourism industry in Laos through the share of the information and cultures with the aims to boost the growth in tourism industry (National Tourism Authority of Lao PDR, 2012). Nevertheless, according to the statistics report by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (2017), the tourist arrivals had in fact threaded on a downward direction, dropping a 20% in two years since 2015 to 2017, to about 3.8 million tourist arrivals. The revenue-earning trend shares similar downward trend, dropping from 725 million USD at peak to 648 million USD in 2017. On inferences, one would assume a lower level of peer reference influences by the tourists to potential tourists. Towards this end, a research objective that aims to study and suggest exploitation of the cognitive and affective images of two representative cities Luang Prabang and Vientiane is raised for evaluating their impacts on tourist satisfaction and tourist attitudes and behaviors in terms of recommending the destinations to others and revisit intentions.

Luang Prabang and Vientiane – Most Visited Destinations in Laos: There are many attractions in Lao PDR which can make the visitors or tourists entertained and delighted, and Luang Prabang and Vientiane are among the two most visited destinations. Vientiane is the capital city of Lao PDR, and it has a population around 200,000 among the 6 million of the

nation. Vientiane is the most developing part of the country (Yamauchi & Lee, 1999), comprising of many interesting inducements for those who would like to learn of ancient culture and perceive the cultural and historical understanding of Laos because the city is full of cultural sense, of which the visitors could find themselves in the Laotian's way of living, the unique accent of national language from the local citizens, the cultural clothing, furniture, and food. With all these great features together, it has made the city in the World Heritage in 1995, December 9 (Semone, 2012).

Similarly, Luang Prabang- the capital city of Laos – is also registered under the title of World Heritage, and is renowned for its well-abundant natural resources such as the natural waterfall. The must-see attractions include historical monuments and ancient monasteries (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2004), i.e. “Prabang” Buddha statue, Royal Palace (Department of Finance in Luang Prabang, 2006). This sense of Laotian's culture across this city has greatly attracted the great number of tourists since the past and makes them to revisit the places again. Apart from these interesting tourist attractions, one of the main reasons to travel in Luang Prabang and Vientiane is the identity in ceremony of Luang Prabang which also reflects the national identity and presents the cultural heritage of Laos. For instance, Laos' New Year Festival is regarded as the biggest festival of the country. In the festival events, many cultural shows including the folk music and dance would be on the shows.

Hypotheses Development and Conceptual Framework: Martinez and Alvarez (2010) studied about the influence of the destination image on investment opportunities. According to their results, a positive destination image can greatly improve the business and investment opportunities. Thus, cultivating destination images is strategically vital as income attractors. In addition, imagery could play the reconstructive roles in that the tourists formed of positive images will purchase souvenirs for memory, and say positive words of the destination experiences to others (Selby and Morgan, 1996).

Destination image is an important construct that is widely applied in both marketing and behavioral sciences (Kim, McKercher and Lee, 2009; Mayor, 1973) and branding discipline (Tan et al. 2018). A detailed study of destination image perceptions can be used to shed light on the nature of marketing and brand stimuli (Tan et al, 2018), forming the potential practical implication of this research. In similar counts, Crompton (1979) and other researchers reckon that the consideration of destination images i.e. “the set of impressions, ideas, expectations and emotional thoughts an individual has of a specific place” (Stylos, Vassiliadis, Bellou and Andronikidis, 2016, p. 41) should be important priority for policy makers and researchers.

The construct, “destination image”, is a multi-attribute concept (Gallarza, Saura and Garcia, 2002); for instances, MacInnis and Price (1987) state that the image of destination is associated with the whole consumption experience of a person. In another occasion, Australian Tourist Commission (ATC) found that the destination image which had been promoted to the tourists internationally by the Australian authorities do have significant impact on the very positive perspective of international tourists towards the image of Australia. The end result is it creates the travel desire of international tourists compared with other destinations which was not promoted, further reinforcing the role of destination images.

Destination image can be derived from both the physical appearance and the intangible attributes offered or are associated with the destinations. The latter includes the ideas, beliefs, attitudes, practices, and values of such destination including cultures and heritages (Tan et al., 2018), which could create the impressions to the individuals and become their tourist destinations as a consequence (Cakmak & Isaac, 2012; Frochot & Kreziak, 2008). Kotler and Gerner (2010) state that the destination image could also include the location, and leadership, as well as economic situation or stability of the state. The intangible sources of impressions to

tourists indicates that the impressions towards destinations do not need to be real, which imply the role for imaginary. However, these impressions must have the potential enough to draw the tourists' attentions. The illustrated are just the different manifestations of the destination image.

Specifically, as the image which the tourists formed of the destination could be considered as the outcomes of the tourist experiences of the destination (Pearce, 1982), the destination image thus has evaluative (cognitive) and affective components. The interaction of the cognitive and affective aspects is creating the whole destination image via the comprehensive evaluation of individuals on the destination. The evaluations, on both cognitive and affective attribute domains, can be positive or negative (Beerli and Martin, 2004), which are operationalized in this research by means of Five-Likert Scale (1=strongly disagreed, to 5=strongly agreed).

San and Rodriguez (2008) claim that the summative destination image perception of tourists could be shaped through the cognitive process within the individuals' mind. Tan et al. (2018) call the cognitive process the stimuli – factors that stimulate the cognitive reasoning and perceptions development of tourists. Not only the contribution of cognitive mental representation of the destination on the overall impression (San and Rodriguez, 2008) is reckoned, but the associations which derive from cognitive sources can infer favorable judgments about the destinations (Oliver, 1997), known as tourist satisfaction.

Towards this end, the following hypothesis is assumed:

H1: Cognitive destination image is a significant predictor of tourist satisfaction

On the other hand, affective evaluation is also shown important by many researchers (Stylidis, Shani and Behlhassen, 2017). While cognitive is more of an objective knowledge in nature, affective is subjective knowledge of the tourists. The affective destination image perception has a predictive role to satisfy customers (Papadimitriou et al., 2013) which can influence choices and preferences of tourists over sets of destinations. Affective destination image is the set of feelings which the tourists express of the subjective knowledge and emotional thoughts of the destination visited (Stylidis, Shani and Belhassen, 2017), and marketers can exploit affective images to promote the destination intents of visitors as well as shape the positive feelings of tourists towards the destination (Basaran, 2016). As a result, the following hypothesis is assumed:

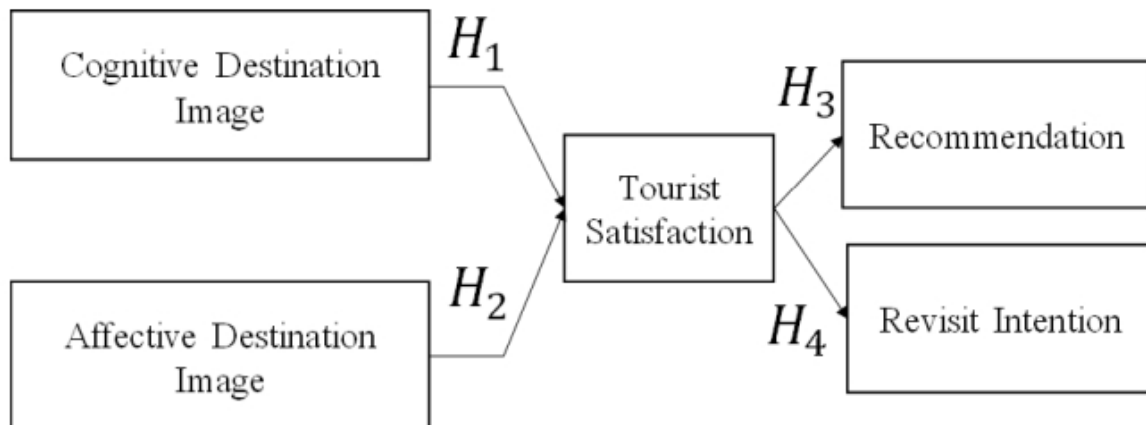
H2: Affective destination image is a significant predictor of tourist satisfaction In sum, both cognitive and affective attribute domains of destination image are relied upon to facilitate the careful examination of destination image. Briefly again, the cognitive component of the destination image refers to “a person's beliefs and knowledge about a destination and its attributes” (Stylidis et al., 2017, p. 185), and the affective component of the destination image denotes “a person's feelings toward and emotional responses to a destination” (p. 185). As tourists feel positive towards such destination, they tend to revisit the destination and recommend positively to others (Beerli and Martin, 2004), as they already experience the travel quality and expect the next visit to remain in the same quality of vacation, leading to recognize the following two hypotheses as closure of the theoretical framework that underpins a stimulus-organism-response (SOR) concept (referred to Tan, 2017; Tan, 2018a; Tan, 2018b):

H3: Tourist satisfaction is a significant predictor of recommendation to others.

H4: Tourist satisfaction is a significant predictor of tourist's re-visit intention

In conclusion, the conceptual model shown in Figure 1 is derived, with H1 and H2 represents the S-O (stimulus-organism) linkage, and H3-H4 represent the O-R (organism-

response) linkages.



**Figure 1** Theoretical Framework

### Research Methodology

The research is explanatory in nature which is based upon deductive steps taken to extract and organize important theoretical concepts from the extant literature as well as relevant factors that the author consider most fit to describe the image perceptions of Laos. Having realized the important role of destination images in positioning and drawing tourist interests (Kim et al. 2009), and with an obvious gap relating how the destination images played in the predictability role in explaining tourist satisfaction and responses, this study thus is initiated.

Based upon also a survey-based quantitative research method, a systematic procedure should be followed in operationalizing the variables or constructs involved. In the operationalization process, the extant literature (for instances, Kim et al. 2009; Kock et al. 2016; Styliadis et al. 2017) is exploited to the benefits. Nevertheless, the contents of the instrument items also incorporate the actual views of tourists prior to quantitative surveys. To maximize participants, the questionnaires were designed based on simplicity. In doing so, there do generate certain degree of weaknesses such as losing the detailed dimensions of each of the construct. The questionnaire items were pilot-tested with ten domestic tourists and ten foreign tourists, and the sentences were revised to make them fluency in understanding, while considering avoiding jargon, ambiguity, emotional language, leading questions or any questions that could be beyond the respondents' capabilities (Neuman, 2006, p. 279).

The simplicity of the contents design ensures fitting the definitions and thus establishes the measurement validity (Neuman, 2006, p. 192), and with proper design practices (Neuman, 2006), measurement reliability is also made possible. Key definitions are: destination's affective image represents a tourist's feelings towards a destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999), destination's cognitive image refers to the beliefs or knowledge a tourist forms of the destinations (Wang and Hsu, 2010, p. 831), and tourist satisfaction is the evaluative responses, for instance, in terms of meeting the expectations (Tan, 2017;2018a).

The reliability criterion (with Cronbach's Alpha exceeding 0.70) was met for all the constructs except cultural heritage, which is at 0.657. Thus, cultural heritage has not been able to reveal its significant impact on tourist satisfaction. The reliability test result is shown in Table 1.



**Table 1** Reliability Test Result

Construct and Measurement Items	Cronbach's Alpha
<b>Cultural Heritage</b> There are many exciting cultural activities present through the destination, practices, values and ways of life. There are many unique temples in the destination. There are many unique buildings of heritage value in the destination.	0.657
<b>Place national identity:</b> The destination has breathtaking scenery and landscape. The destination is well maintained of the ecological resources which cab be similarly seen across Laos. In the destination we can see and learn of the culture of Laos.	0.787
<b>Festival and events:</b> There are exciting cultural events organized which the visitors can join in the destination. There are many interesting seasonal activities which the visitors can participate in the destination. There are international film festivals which visitors can enjoy in the destination.	0.834
<b>Friendliness:</b> Service providers in the destination are friendly. Service providers in the destination are always willing to help. The locals are willing to open their local culture to the visitors.	0.810
<b>Relaxing atmosphere:</b> The destination trip is very relaxing. The destination trip is not stressing. The destination is a place that pleases the heart.	0.814
<b>Tourist satisfaction:</b> The experience in the destination was exactly what I expected. My choice of the destination was the wise one. I really enjoyed the trip. The destination experience was unforgettable one. The overall destination experience offered value for the money spent.	0.884
<b>Recommendation:</b> I will recommend the destination to others. I will encourage others to experience the destination.	0.709
<b>Revisit intention:</b> I will consider visiting the destination in the future. I will make an effort to return to the destination.	0.810

the cognitive destination images. Friendliness and relaxing atmosphere are the attributes of the affective destination images. The tourists can visit and experience, for instance, the Laos cultures from many of the unique and serene Buddhist monasteries spreading around the city, i.e. Wat Si Saket, built by the King Anou in 1818.

## Research Results

A total of 400 valid responses was collected, spreading equally between Luang Prabang and Vientiane of Lao PDR. The equal or near equal distributions were also found in gender, different age groups, and whether first-time or repeat visitor to Lao PRD, as shown in Table 2. Majority of the visitors responding to the questionnaires were undergraduates of 55.8%,

followed by post-graduates at 30%, and 14.2% at secondary high-school educational level.

**Table 3** The ANOVA and T-Test Results, and Descriptive Mean

		Constructs:		Culture Heritage	Place National Identity	Festival and Events	Friendliness	Relaxing Atmosphere	Overall image	Tourist Satisfaction	Recommendation	Revisit Intention
		Mean		4.26	4.28	4.18	4.29	4.27	4.56	4.25	4.11	3.92
		Standard Deviation		0.58	0.63	0.66	0.63	0.65	0.63	0.62	0.61	0.7
		Frequency	Percentage									
Gender	Male	200	50.00	4.23	4.24	4.14	4.25	4.22	4.56	4.21	4.08	3.96
	Female	200	50.00	4.29	4.32	4.21	4.33	4.32	4.57	4.29	4.13	3.88
Age	15 year old or younger											
	21-30 years old	103	25.80	4.26	4.32	4.23	4.31	4.28	4.49	4.29	4.09	3.88
	31-40 years old	105	26.30	4.24	4.24	4.15	4.26	4.23	4.59	4.23	4.10	3.92
	41-50 years old	104	26.00	4.32	4.33	4.21	4.35	4.31	4.63	4.29	4.09	3.95
	Above 50 years-old	88	22.00	4.21	4.22	4.09	4.23	4.25	4.53	4.18	4.14	3.93
Education	Secondary school	57	14.30	4.19	4.22	4.06	4.24	4.24	4.56	4.15	3.92	3.92
	Undergraduate	223	55.80	4.30	4.31	4.22	4.32	4.30	4.57	4.29	4.11	3.91
	Post-Graduate	120	30.00	4.21	4.25	4.15	4.26	4.23	4.54	4.22	4.18	3.94
Tourist Type	Domestic tourists	222	55.50	4.26	4.25	4.17	4.27	4.26	4.58	4.23	4.10	3.93
	Foreign tourists	178	44.50	4.25	4.32	4.18	4.31	4.28	4.53	4.27	4.11	3.90
Time Visited	First time visit to Laos	238	59.50	4.26	4.25	4.16	4.27	4.26	4.57	4.23	4.09	3.94
	Repeat Visitor to Laos	162	40.50	4.26	4.32	4.20	4.32	4.28	4.54	4.28	4.12	3.88
Destination	Luang Prabang	200	50.00	4.34	4.25	4.17	4.27	4.25	4.75	4.21	4.00	3.92
	Vientiane	200	50.00	4.18	4.31	4.18	4.31	4.29	4.37	4.29	4.21	3.92

Besides, Table 3 also shows the result of the ANOVA and t-tests of the comparative differences of the influence of different demographic variables etc. on the constructs, which shows no significant differences in any of them. Among the four hypotheses raised in the literature review sections, only H4 fails the supportability test based on regression analysis as shown in Table 3.

**Table 4** The Hypothesis Testing Result

Hypothesis	Dependent Variable	$R^2$	Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t-value	Sig.	Result
H1,H2	Tourist Satisfaction	0.970	Place National Identity	0.335	8.560	0.000	H1 Supported
			Festival and Events	0.399	23.243	0.000	H1 Supported
			Friendliness	0.224	5.447	0.000	H2 Supported
			Relaxing Atmosphere	0.078	3.197	0.002	H2 Supported
H3	Recommendation	0.307	Tourist Satisfaction	0.554	13.276	0.000	Supported
H4	Revisit Intention	0.004	Tourist Satisfaction	0.065	1.309	0.191	Failed

In essence, the tourism industry should continue to strengthen both the cognitive and affective attributes of the destinations offered, with particular emphasis on place national identity, festival and events, and friendliness and relaxing atmosphere. These four attributes contribute significantly to predict 97% variance of tourist satisfaction. Nevertheless, much have to be created and emphasized in order to cause tourists who have had visited to revisit again and to significantly improve their responses in terms of recommending others to visit the country. Further research should use in-depth interviews method to help identify the factors that can cause revisit intentions.

## Discussion of Research Results

Three hypotheses (H1 to H3) passed the regression tests except the revisit intention which fails to be predicted by tourist satisfaction. Thus, the empirical structure provides at least three implications which narrates the current states of play of the tourist attitudes and behaviors relating to their experiences in Luang Prabang and Vientiane in Laos. First of all, the stimulus-

organism-response (SOR) theory of tourist behaviors (Tan, 2018) is well-suited in understanding how tourist satisfaction is being caused, and furthermore, how tourist satisfaction can induce positive attitude of tourists to provide recommendations to potential tourists to visit Laos. Second, the revisit intention scores the lowest mean of the informed tourist perceptions, at 3.9250 (of five Likert Scale, with 3 as neutral and 4 as agreeable with the statement), and standard deviation is also the widest at 0.71. Although recommendation by the visiting tourists to others is possible, they themselves show no interest to revisit. Besides, the recommendation variance can only be explained 30.7% as a result of tourist satisfaction. Unless tourism weaknesses are addressed in Laos, the country would lose to gain the interests of both the existing and potential tourists. According to the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report published by the World Economic Forum (2017), Laos ranked 94 globally in terms of tourism and travel competitiveness, falling behind all the members of South-East Asia, with obvious weaknesses in exploiting the nation's cultural resources and business travels (see Table 4, Figure 2).

**Table 5** Lao PDR performance in tourism and travel competitiveness as compared against other members of South-East Asia (Source: World Economic Forum, 2017).

SOUTH-EAST ASIA									
Singapore	6.0	5.2	4.7	4.3	5.3	6.3	5.4	2.4	3.1
Malaysia	4.7	4.1	6.1	3.5	4.5	4.4	4.7	4.1	2.9
Thailand	5.0	3.8	5.6	3.6	4.6	3.1	5.8	4.9	2.8
Indonesia	5.6	4.3	6.0	3.2	3.8	3.2	3.1	4.7	3.3
Sri Lanka	5.2	3.1	5.6	3.9	2.6	3.9	3.2	4.1	1.6
Vietnam	4.0	3.0	5.3	3.4	2.8	3.1	2.6	4.0	3.0
Philippines	4.8	3.4	5.5	3.6	2.7	2.5	3.4	4.0	1.9
Lao PDR	4.7	3.0	5.7	3.8	2.1	2.4	3.5	3.0	1.3
Cambodia	5.1	3.5	5.1	3.3	2.1	2.4	2.9	3.2	1.6
South-East Asia Average	5.0	3.7	5.5	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.9	3.8	2.4



**Figure 2** Competitiveness Elements of Lao PDR's tourism and travels (Source: World Economic Forum, 2017, p. 212).

Third, although many researchers identify a strong positive linkage between tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions (Tan, 2017), this research provides empirical evidence that it may not be so, unless there are other compelling reasons for taking this cognitive tendency.



Further research should use in-depth interviews method to help identify the factors that can cause revisit intentions.

### Suggestions

In essence, the tourism industry should continue to strengthen both the cognitive and affective attributes of the destinations offered, with particular emphasis on place national identity, festival and events, in which the relevant sectors will need their findings to be improved and set up a roadmap, and policy For sustainable tourism development

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