Comparison Between Projected and Perceived Destination Image of Terelj National Park in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the gap between projected and perceived destination images of Gorkhi-Terelj National Park in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, to help enhance the marketing and management strategies for the park. Destination marketers portray the park as a vibrant place of natural beauty and cultural richness, emphasizing natural elements, activities, and the overall positive experience. While tourists highly appreciate the natural scenery and activities, they also place significant importance on cultural experiences and environmental issues, which are underrepresented in promotional materials. The findings underscore the need for practitioners to highlight the promotion of cultural experiences, balance the overall projection, and include sustainability practices. These insights are important for fine-tuning marketing strategies and developing offerings that align more closely with visitor expectations, contributing to sustainable tourism development.

Keywords

Destination image, online travel reviews, content analysis, Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, Mongolia

1   Introduction

Tourism has evolved into one of the largest and most rapidly growing industries in the world, significantly contributing to the economic development of numerous countries, including Mongolia. Known for its rich nomadic culture and unspoiled wilderness, Mongolia remains a relatively underexplored destination. In today's era of social media and evolving tourist behaviors, this study examines the online destination image of one of Mongolia's most popular national parks: Gorkhi-Terelj National Park (Terelj hereinafter). This research aims to explore the gap between the projected and perceived images of Terelj, utilizing Gartner's classification and content analysis techniques. The study investigates the destination image based on three distinct information sources: induced (official DMO website and tour operators), autonomous (travel websites like Lonely Planet), and organic (over 760 TripAdvisor reviews).

Mongolia's tourism industry, despite its potential, remains underexplored. Historical and political factors, such as Mongolia's isolation until 1990, have influenced its tourism development. Natural landscapes and nomadic lifestyles are integral parts of Mongolian tourism, with activities including trekking, bird watching,

and cultural experiences. The economy, though projected to grow due to the mining boom in the early 2000s, still faces challenges in tourism competitiveness.

Fig. 1: International Annual Tourist Arrivals to Mongolia

Total Arrivals by Year
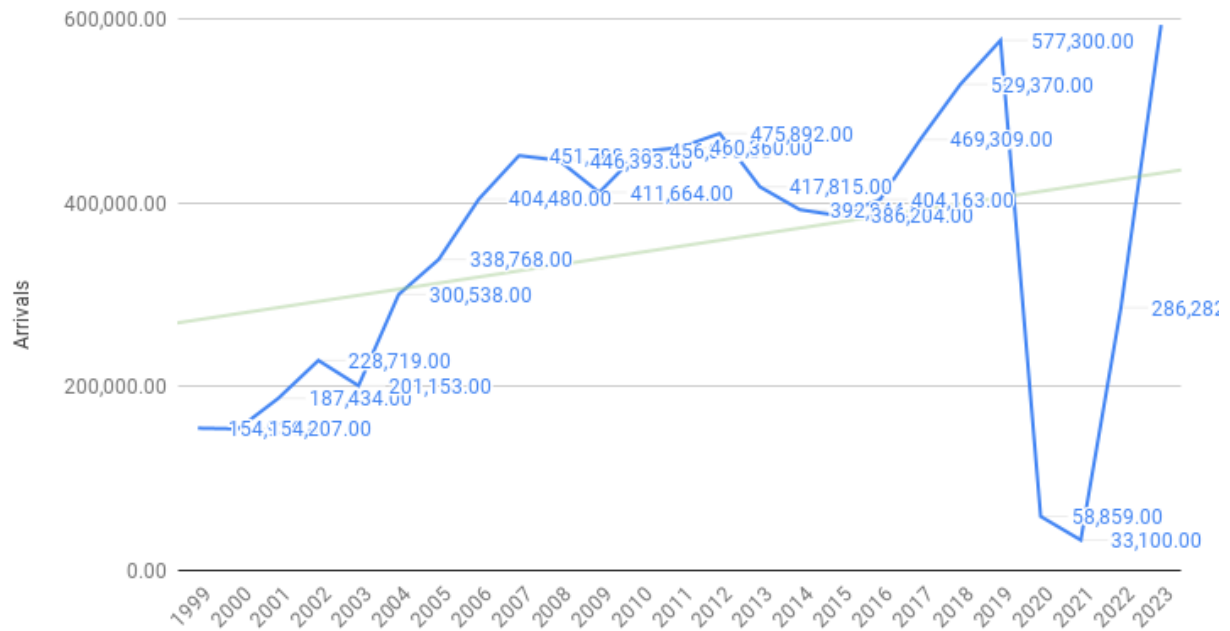
The development of Web 2.0 and social media has increased awareness of Mongolia as a destination. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted global tourism trends towards nature-based tourism, underscoring the importance of understanding the projected and perceived destination images of natural sites like Terelj National Park.

Terelj National Park, located near Ulaanbaatar, has been a significant destination since the 1950s. The park, rich in historical and natural attractions, attracts both domestic and international tourists. With unique geological features, cultural sites, and opportunities for various outdoor activities, Terelj serves as an ideal destination for nature and adventure tourism. It is estimated that 20,694 hectares are affected by tourism impacts. Sparse vegetation and bare land increased by 11% between 1991 and 2015 in Terelj, which are more concentrated near tourist camps (Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2020.) This proves the importance of effective marketing initiatives to increase revenue and fundraise the necessary capital to preserve and sustainably develop the park.

The primary objective of this research is to identify the gap between the projected and perceived destination images of Terelj National Park in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. To achieve this objective, the study seeks to:

- Analyze the projected destination image of Terelj National Park, as portrayed by the DMO, tourism providers and autonomous sources.

- Investigate the perceived destination image of Terelj National Park, as reflected in online reviews and travelers' experiences.

- Compare the projected and perceived destination images of Terelj National Park to identify the gaps and potential areas of improvement.

- Provide recommendations for destination marketing and management strategies to enhance the attractiveness of Terelj National Park based on the identified gaps.

This study fills a critical gap in the literature by applying existing theories and methods to a lesser researched destination and provides insights for enhancing the marketing and management of Terelj National Park. By identifying discrepancies between the projected and perceived destination images, the research offers recommendations for improving promotional strategies and visitor experiences.

2 Literature Review

Destination image theory is essential in understanding how tourists perceive destinations. It involves cognitive and affective components, shaped by personal experiences and information sources. Cognitive components refer to the knowledge and beliefs about a destination, such as its attractions and infrastructure, while affective components relate to the feelings and emotions associated with the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

2.1   Destination Image Theory

Destination image theory is a fundamental concept in tourism literature, focusing on the mental representation of a destination held by potential or actual visitors. This mental representation is influenced by personal experiences, information sources, and the individual's cultural background, affecting both the decision-making process and post-visit evaluation of the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Understanding these factors is crucial for destination marketers and managers to create effective marketing strategies and enhance visitor experiences (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

According to Chu, Bao, and Sun's (2022) review of decade's worth of research on destination image, a significant emphasis has been put on multidimensional nature of destination image. Their research outlined two distinct theoretical perspectives regarding the structure of destination image:

- a three-dimensional causal network structure, which categorizes the destination image into cognitive image, affective image, and overall image

- a core–edge structure pattern, where a few key elements of a destination are central to its image, while most peripheral details are less focused and fade over time.

Proponents of the first theory (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) divide the destination image into two components: cognitive and affective. The cognitive component refers to the knowledge and beliefs a person has about a destination, such as its attractions, infrastructure, and culture. These beliefs are formed based on the objective attributes of a destination and can be influenced by personal experiences or secondary information sources, such as travel brochures, online reviews, and word-of-mouth. The affective

component, on the other hand, refers to the feelings and emotions a person associates with a destination, such as excitement, relaxation, or disappointment.

The second perspective summarized by Chu et al. suggests a core-edge structure of a destination image where only a few elements are focal and most are peripheral and often forgotten over time, leaving only a few simple features. Furthermore, the researchers in this school of thought define this core-periphery structure as a mental construct co-created by tourists, with destination images being broken down and then reassembled into patterns where elements are ordered by distinguishable criteria.

Destination image is a dynamic and complex construct that evolves over time as individuals are exposed to new information and experiences (Gartner, 1993). Pre-visit destination image, also known as the induced image, is shaped by external factors such as marketing efforts, media coverage, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Upon visiting a destination, tourists develop a new image based on their actual experiences, which is referred to as the complex or experienced destination image. This experienced image may align with or deviate from the pre-visit image, depending on the extent to which the destination meets or exceeds visitor expectations. Projected destination images are created by destination marketing organizations (DMOs), local authorities, and tourism businesses through promotional materials, advertisements, and various marketing channels. Perceived destination image, on the other hand, is formed based on their personal experiences, information sources, and cultural background (Kotler, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Andreu, Bigné, & Cooper, 2000; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Bui, 2011; Farmaki, 2012). The gap between these images can impact visitor satisfaction and destination management (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Moreover, closing the gap between projected and perceived destination images can lead to increased visitor satisfaction, as visitors' expectations are more likely to be met or exceeded when they align with the destination's actual offerings (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010).

Destination Image of National Parks

National parks are crucial tourism assets, attracting visitors through their natural beauty and recreational opportunities. Managing their image is vital for sustainable tourism development. Positive destination images can lead to increased visitation and repeat visits, while negative images may deter potential visitors and undermine the perceived value of national parks (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2012).

National parks conserve natural and cultural resources while offering recreational opportunities, contributing significantly to local and national economies and promoting sustainable development (Eagles, McCool, & Haynes, 2002; Balmford et al., 2015). Their appeal lies in their natural beauty, biodiversity, and activities like hiking, wildlife viewing, and cultural experiences (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2012).

The destination image of national parks is influenced by natural attractions, accessibility, visitor facilities, and management practices (Priskin, 2001). Positive images enhance visitation and satisfaction, while negative images deter visitors (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Understanding these factors helps park managers and stakeholders develop effective marketing strategies and improve visitor experiences (Ramkissoon et al., 2013).

Online Destination Image

The concept of destination image (DI) has evolved with the internet, leading to "online DI," which includes collective online beliefs, knowledge, and impressions about a destination (Mak, 2017). The internet is crucial for travel information and Web 2.0 allows for user-generated content (UGC) on social media, co-constructing online DI between tourism organizations and tourists.

Online travel reviews (OTRs) significantly impact tourists' decision-making and reflect a destination's image post-visit (González-Rodríguez et al., 2016). Research shows tourists increasingly rely on peer reviews for travel information (Filieri, 2015; Assaker, 2020).

2.2   Previous Studies on Gap Analysis

The literature indicates significant gaps in how destinations are marketed by and how these images are perceived by tourists. The discrepancies often manifest across cognitive and affective components of destination images.

First, the difference is apparent in the cognitive and affective components. DMOs emphasize cognitive aspects in DI projections, while tourists integrate cognitive and affective elements, suggesting a need for emotionally engaging marketing (Iordanova & Stainton, 2019; Duan et al., 2020; Malvica et al., 2023). Specific cognitive discrepancies include tourists' perceptions of certain elements that do not match with the projections (Chan & Zhang, 2018; Meng et al., 2021; Díaz-Pacheco et al., 2024). Some valued cognitive attributes are under-represented, indicating a misalignment with tourist priorities (Bui, 2011; Mwaura et al., 2013; Sun, Tang, & Liu, 2021).

Second, the way destinations are marketed varies significantly based on the medium, platform and cultural context, influencing perception (Abodeeb, Wilson, & Moyle, 2015; Guo, Pesonen, & Komppula, 2021; Bassols-Gardella & Coromina, 2021).

Another pattern in the gap analysis is the perceptual stability. Certain stereotypical destinations, such as beach destinations have enduring images of "sand and sun," which are hard to alter (Andreu et al., 2000; Farmaki, 2012). Studies show that pre-travel information shapes initial perceptions, but actual experiences can significantly alter them, often highlighting a disconnect between expectations and reality (Bui, 2011; Mwaura et al., 2013; Martín-Santana et al., 2016). For instance, Mwaura, Acquaye, and Jargal (2013) found that while visitors to Mongolia were satisfied with landscapes and nomadic culture, they rated transportation and hygiene poorly but tolerated these for the authentic experience.

Finally, there is a significant gap when it comes to environmental concerns in destination marketing. There is often a gap in projecting images related to ecotourism and environmental impacts, misaligning with tourists' increasing environmental consciousness (Ryan & Aicken, 2010; Díaz-Pacheco et al., 2024).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs qualitative content analysis to compare the projected images from destination promoters' websites with the perceived images from TripAdvisor reviews. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the cognitive and affective components of the destination image.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected from 27 websites and 764 English-language TripAdvisor reviews. ProWebScraper was used to extract the reviews, and content from websites was manually copied. Since Google's PageRank algorithm ranks documents based on their popularity (Brin & Page, 1998), the most popular websites were identified by performing Google searches using the keyword "terelj."

3.3 Data Preparation

Data cleaning and organization were critical steps in preparing the data for analysis, ensuring efficiency and accuracy. This process involved several tasks:

- Removing Irrelevant Information: Any reviews or content that referenced other attractions or countries were excluded to maintain focus on Terelj National Park.

- Correcting Errors: Misspellings and typographical errors were corrected to ensure data integrity.

- Standardizing Data Format: Uniform spelling of Mongolian words for locations and traditional items was ensured to facilitate qualitative and quantitative analysis.

After cleaning, the data was imported into ATLAS.ti, with 763 reviews and 27 web contents ready for analysis.

3.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis in tourism research often involves a six-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, researchers familiarize themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the text. Second, they generate initial codes that capture meaningful aspects of the data. Third, researchers search for themes by grouping similar codes together. Fourth, they review the themes to ensure they accurately represent the coded data. Fifth, they define and name the themes in a manner that is coherent and meaningful. Finally, researchers analyze and interpret the themes in relation to the research question, drawing conclusions about the implications for tourism practice and theory (Li, Zhang, & Zhang, 2018).

Thematic analysis of destination images of national parks involves identifying and interpreting the common themes and patterns that emerge from various sources of data, such as promotional materials, surveys, or online reviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A number of researchers have conducted thematic analyses to understand the key elements that contribute to the destination image of national parks. For example, Ramkissoon, Uysal, and Brown (2011) conducted a study on the perceived destination image of South African national parks and identified six major themes: wildlife, scenery, culture and heritage, safety and

security, accessibility, and amenities. Similarly, Pan, Ryan, and Xu (2014) investigated the destination image of four Chinese national parks and found themes such as landscape, cultural attractions, ecological conservation, and visitor facilities to be central to the perceived image.

Thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti to identify themes in the data. This process involved coding the data and identifying key themes. The analysis focused on both the projected and perceived images of Terelj. ATLAS.ti is a robust tool designed to assist researchers in the systematic organization, analysis, and interpretation of complex datasets. ATLAS.ti has been extensively utilized in various research fields, particularly in tourism studies, where its capability to manage large volumes of qualitative data proves invaluable. For instance, in the study by Pan, Chon, and Song (2008), ATLAS.ti was used in conjunction with BiPlot to visualize tourism trends, enabling a detailed analysis of complex datasets and the identification of key patterns in tourist behavior and market changes. Another notable application was by Oliveira and Panyik (2015), who explored the digital challenges in destination branding. Their study highlights how ATLAS.ti facilitated the coding and analysis of extensive textual data from online tourist interactions, which was crucial for understanding the dynamics of destination branding in the context of Portugal.

4   Results and Discussion

4.1   Description of Collected Samples

For the purpose of assessing the projected destination image of Terelj, a diverse range of websites was selected, encompassing a variety of perspectives from both local and international sources. The selection process aimed to gather a broad spectrum of content that included government websites such as the local Terelj website and the Global Alliance of National Parks, which offer official views on the park's features and significance. Additionally, travel trade websites like Amicus Travel Mongolia and international websites such as Audley Travel were chosen to understand how local tour operators and global travel agencies portray the park to potential tourists.

Hotel websites, particularly the Terelj Hotel site, were included to examine how accommodations within the park market themselves and the surrounding natural attractions. Moreover, reputable travel guides like Lonely Planet provided insights into how international travel media represent the park to a global audience. These websites were systematically scanned for content related to the cognitive and affective components of the park's destination image. This involved analyzing textual descriptions to capture a comprehensive view of how Terelj is presented to potential visitors, forming the basis for a detailed analysis of the gaps between the projected and perceived images of the destination.

Table 1. Projected DI Samples

Origin	Type	Name	Website
International	Nonprofit	Global Alliance of National Parks	https://national-parks.org/

	Online travel magazine	Lonely Planet	https://www.lonelyplanet.com/
	Travel trade websites	Audley Travel	https://www.audleytravel.com/
		Wild Frontiers	https://www.wildfrontierstravel.com/
		Wild Women Expeditions	https://wildwomenexpeditions.com/
		Wildlife Worldwide	https://www.wildlifeworldwide.com/
		Wild Frontiers	https://www.wildfrontierstravel.com/
		Wild Women Expeditions	https://wildwomenexpeditions.com/
		Wildlife Worldwide	https://www.wildlifeworldwide.com/
Local organizations	Government / Official NTO	Gorkhi Terelj National Park	http://gorkhi-terelj.mpa.gov.mn/
	Hotels and resorts	Terelj Hotel	https://tereljhotel.com/
	Travel trade websites	Amicus Travel	https://www.amicusmongolia.com/
		Ayan Travel	https://www.toursmongolia.com/
		Discover Altai	https://www.discoveraltai.com/
		Discover Mongolia	https://www.discovermongolia.mn/
		Escape to Mongolia	https://www.escapetomongolia.com/
		Guru Travel Mongolia	https://www.tour2mongolia.com/
		Horseback Mongolia	https://www.mongolia-trips.com/
		Insight Mongolia	https://insightmongolia.com/
		Juulchin Tours	https://juulchin.com/
		Legend Tours	https://legendtour.mn/
		Mongolia Short Tours	https://www.mongoliashorttours.com/
		Mongolian Guide Tour LLC	http://www.touristinfocenter.mn/
		Nomadic Journeys	https://www.nomadicjourneys.com/
		Selena Travel	https://www.selenatravel.com/
		Stone Horse Mongolia	https://stonehorsemongolia.com/
		Sunpath Mongolia	https://tourinmongolia.com/
		Travel Buddies	https://www.travelbuddies.info/
		Tsolmon Travel	https://www.tsolmontravel.com/
		View Mongolia	https://www.viewmongolia.com/

The majority of reviews for Terelj National Park on TripAdvisor were highly positive, with 468 reviews being 5 stars, 228 rated as 4 stars, 54 as 3 stars, 13 as 2 stars, and a singular 1-star review. This suggests a high level of tourist satisfaction at Terelj, akin to major national parks worldwide. The travel type distribution for Terelj National Park, based on TripAdvisor reviews, spans various categories, with 'Friends' being the predominant category (231), followed by 'Couples' (161), 'Solo' (136), 'Family' (71), 'Business' (53), and 'Uncategorized' (112). Beginning with a single review in 2005, the park saw an exponential growth in reviews, peaking in 2016 with 137 reviews. A noticeable decline begins post-2016, with a particularly sharp drop in 2020 and beyond. This decline aligns with the global downturn in tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where international travel restrictions and health concerns led to a massive reduction in global tourism. The monthly visitation pattern of reviewers at Terelj National Park displayed noticeable seasonality. The data indicated a substantial increase in the number of reviewers during the summer months. Specifically, June (109 reviewers), July (131 reviewers), and August (144 reviewers) registered the highest counts. Conversely, winter months such as February (9 reviewers) and December (10 reviewers) witnessed the fewest reviewers. The influx during summer could be attributed to favorable weather conditions and the park's natural beauty being at its peak, while the decline in winter could be due to challenging weather conditions and limited accessibility. However, it is worth noting the moderate interest in the shoulder months like May (55 reviewers) and September (93 reviewers). These months might offer a balance between favorable weather and reduced crowd density, making them attractive for certain tourists. The top three countries from which reviews originated were the United States (165), United Kingdom (87), and Australia (80). The notable number of reviews from Singapore and neighboring countries like China can be ascribed to geographic proximity and increasing outbound tourism trends from these regions.

Word Frequency

The word frequency analysis of Terelj National Park reviews reveals interesting patterns and themes that provide a window into the experiences and sentiments of visitors. Recognizing the intricacies of the data, here's a breakdown:

- Natural Beauty and Landscape Importance: Dominant words such as "park" (639 times), "beautiful" (375 times), "rock" (272 times), "nature" (143 times), and "landscape" (71 times) emphasize the park's unparalleled scenic beauty. Specifically, the mention of "turtle" (193 times) alludes to the famous Turtle Rock formation, a testament to the park's geological wonders. Additionally, words like "scenery" (155 times) and "views" (88 times) further emphasize the visual appeal of the park.

- Cultural and Historical Significance: Mentions of "ger" (333 times) and "mongolian" (141 times) illuminate the park's rich cultural heritage. Additionally, references to "temple" (123 times) and "monastery" (96 times) possibly hint at Aryabal, a famous meditation center. The word "nomadic" (44 times) also offers insights into the region's traditional lifestyle.

- Activities and Experiences: Words like "visit" (231 times), "trip" (210 times), "experience" (143 times), "riding" (135 times), "hiking" (82 times), and "tour" (102 times) reflect the wide range of activities available. "Horse" (178 times) indicates the importance of horse-riding experiences, while mentions of "meditation" (53 times) could relate to the Aryabal meditation center.

- Proximity and Accessibility: Mentions of "UB" (228 times) and "city" (108 times) denote Ulaanbaatar, indicating the park's proximity to Mongolia's capital.

- General Sentiments: Overarching positive sentiments emerge with words like "great" (229 times), "good" (152 times), "amazing" (121 times), "worth" (125 times), and "wonderful" (71 times).

- Potential Points of Concern: The term "crowded" (25 times) indicates potential overcrowding issues.

4.2   Themes and Descriptions

The total cognitive components were organized into five major themes, each containing a variety of sub-themes that capture the broad range of experiences available to visitors.

Table 2(a). Cognitive Themes

Cognitive Themes	Projected	Perceived
Activity (Archery, Biking-Cycling-ATV, Camping, Cave exploring, Climbing, Dairy making, Eagle handling, Geocaching, Golf, Hiking-Trekking, Hot air balloon, Milking goats, Photography, Picnic, Riding camels, Riding horses, Sports and competitions, Visit nomadic family, Watching birds, Water activities, Winter activities, Yak cart riding, Ziplining)	166	231
Environmental and Social Concerns (Alcoholism, Construction, Corruption, Ecotourism, Environmental concern, Lack of management, Local people, Local tourists, Overtourism, Pollution, Social interaction, Tourist trap)	19	114
Infrastructure (Accommodation, Attractions, Bathroom, Camps, Hotels and Resorts, Location, Restaurants, Roads, Transportation)	51	155
Mongolian exploration (Chinggis Khaan statue, Culture, Diary products, Food, Ger, Historical site and landmarks, History, Legends, Livestock, Monasteries, Naadam festival, Nomadic lifestyle, Religion, Turtle Rock)	227	613
Natural elements (Air, Birds, Flora, Forests, Geography, Geology, Grasslands, Hills and mountains, Insects, Landscape, River, Rock formations, Sky, Weather and Seasons, Wild life)	207	164
Total	670	1277

Additionally, the affective components associated with these themes have been divided into positive and negative components, highlighting the emotional impact of these experiences on visitors.

Table 2(b). Affective Themes

Affective Themes	Projected	Perceived
Negative (Boredom, Caution, Challenge and Discomfort, Crowded, Disappointed, Displeasure, Noisy, Unsafe)	6	110
Positive (Adventure, Authenticity, Beauty, Cleanliness, Comfort, Enjoyment, Escapism, Excitement, Exploration, Friendliness, Luxury, Peaceful, Remote wilderness, Romantic, Scenic view, Spirituality, Surprise)	105	832

Total			111	942

4.3   Projected DI

In the projected destination image of Terelj National Park, various cognitive and affective components illustrate the park's diverse appeal. Dominating the portrayal are the Mongolian exploration elements, accounting for 33.9% of the cognitive components. Natural elements follow closely, making up 30.9% of the content. Activities represent 24.8% of the content, with horse-riding and hiking-trekking being particularly emphasized (166 occurrences). The Infrastructure theme accounts for 7.6%, reflecting aspects such as accommodations and roads (51 occurrences). Environmental and Social Concerns are less prominent, constituting 2.8% of the image (19 occurrences), indicating potential areas for further enhancement in marketing efforts.

**Fig. 2. Projected Cognitive Components**
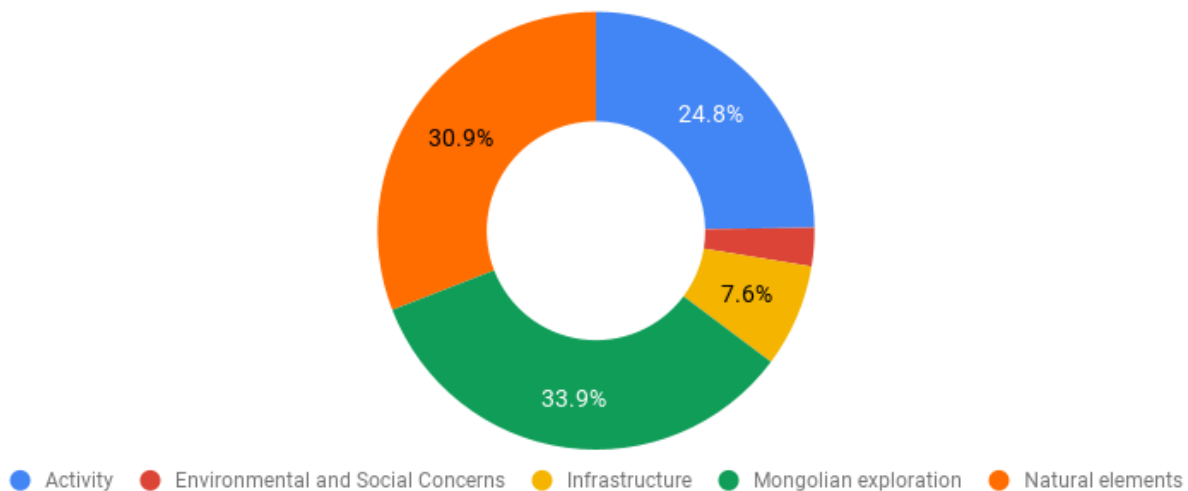
The affective components mainly emphasize (94.6%) positive experiences like scenic views (22 occurrences), adventure (20 occurrences) and remote wilderness (12 occurrences), suggesting a targeted approach to attract visitors seeking natural beauty and thrills.

4.4   Perceived DI

The perceived destination image of Terelj National Park is strongly shaped by the Mongolian Exploration theme, which dominates visitor perceptions with 48.0% of the cognitive content (613 occurrences). Visitors place significant emphasis on cultural and historical experiences, highlighting the park's rich heritage. Activities also play a crucial role, accounting for 18.1% of perceptions (231 occurrences), with visitors frequently engaging in various outdoor and cultural activities. Natural Elements are another important aspect, making up 12.8% of the cognitive content (164 occurrences), reflecting the park's scenic landscapes and natural beauty. Infrastructure and Environmental and Social Concerns are less prominent but still

Fig. 3. Perceived Cognitive Components
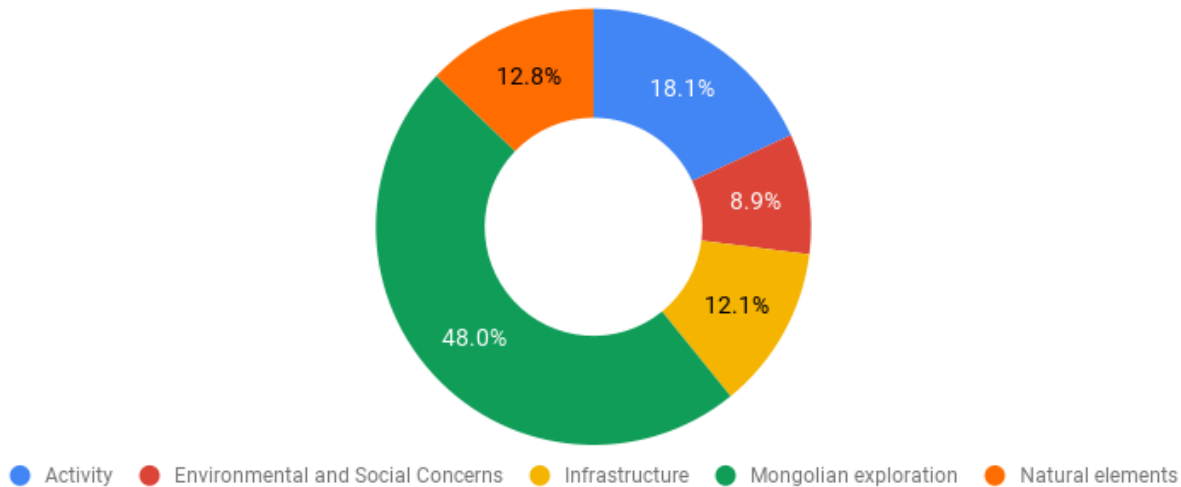
The overwhelmingly positive affective responses (88.32%), led by Enjoyment (376 mentions) and Adventure (169 mentions), underscore the emotional satisfaction of visitors, while also mentioning negative sentiments (11.68%), highlighting areas like Disappointment and Crowding as aspects needing management attention.

4.5 Identified Gaps

4.5.1 Perceived vs. Projected DI

Cognitive and Affective Gaps

The substantial over-representation of natural elements and activities in the marketing materials of Terelj National Park contrasts sharply with visitor perceptions. While natural elements are projected at 30.9%, they are only perceived to impact visitor experiences at 12.8%. This misalignment resonates with findings from Iordanova and Stainton (2019) and Duan et al. (2020), where DMOs were similarly found to emphasize cognitive components that did not fully align with the holistic experiences valued by tourists. This suggests a broader trend where the complexity and richness of visitor experiences are often simplified into marketable chunks that fail to capture their total experiential value.

Activities show a similar trend of over-representation (projected at 24.8%, perceived at 18.1%), indicating a potential saturation in marketing that may not resonate deeply with tourists. This finding parallels the research by Chan and Zhang (2018) and Meng et al. (2021), where discrepancies in the cognitive components of destination images often led to visitor disappointment, particularly when the experiences did not meet the heightened expectations set by marketing.

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The under-representation of the Mongolian Exploration theme in the marketing of Terelj National Park represents a significant missed opportunity. Despite visitor appreciation for this theme being 48%, it is only projected at 33.9% in promotional materials, revealing a substantial gap. This discrepancy aligns with broader trends observed by researchers such as Sun, Tang, and Liu (2021), who identified similar mismatches between projected and valued attributes in destination marketing. Within the Mongolian Exploration theme, subthemes like Culture, Turtle Rock, and Food show the most pronounced differences. The inclusion of Mongolia's rich cultural heritage, especially its unique culinary offerings, could greatly enhance Terelj's appeal. As illustrated by a visitor's experience: "My wife and another lady in our group who were a little worried about the food initially, especially the mutton, found themselves tucking in happily. It was the highlight of our visit" (Case 678). In addition, in a meta-analysis by Zhou et al. (2024), where the impact of cultural attributes on destination image is examined in the context of sustainable tourism, the authors argue that cultural elements significantly influence the perceived image of a destination and the tourist behavior. This finding is particularly relevant to Terelj National Park, where the unique cultural heritage and natural environment are central to its image. By better integrating these authentic cultural experiences into its marketing narrative, Terelj could attract tourists seeking unique and memorable experiences, thereby enriching the overall tourist experience and potentially boosting the destination's appeal and sustainability.

Fig. 4. Comparison of Cognitive Components
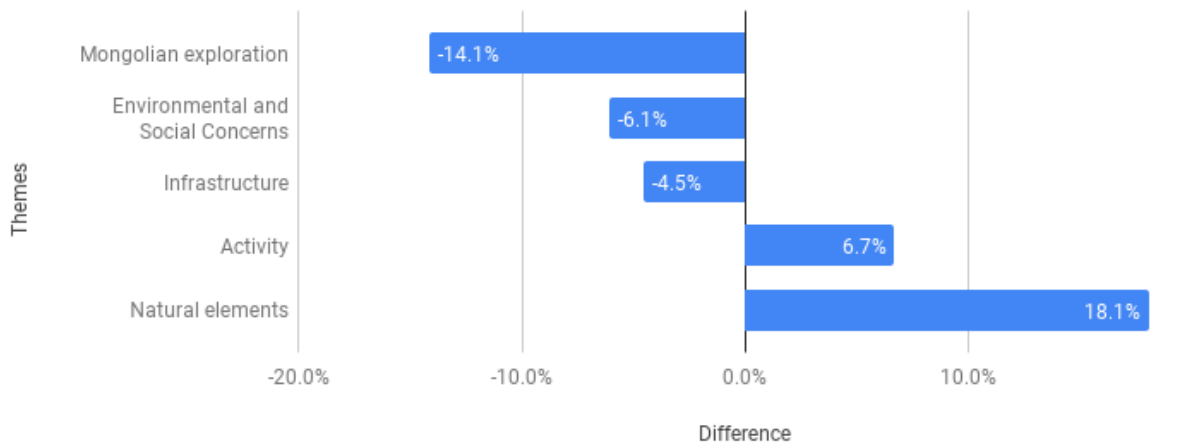
The analysis of affective components shows clear gaps between projected and perceived emotional responses at Terelj National Park. Enjoyment is perceived by visitors at 39.9% but projected at only 4.5%, likely due to destination promoters focusing more on itineraries than on the emotional appeal of the destination. Similarly, scenic views are overemphasized in marketing (19.8% projected vs. 4.0% perceived). Adventure aligns well between projection and perception, but the heavily projected sense of remote wilderness (10.8%) is minimally perceived (1.4%), possibly due to ongoing development in the park. Negative perceptions like disappointment (3.7%) and concerns about overcrowding (2.4%) and safety (1.2%) suggest a need for better management and communication to meet visitor expectations.

Ecological Concerns in Destination Marketing

The under-representation of environmental and social concerns in the marketing of Terelj National Park (projected at 2.8%, perceived at 8.9%) underscores a critical gap that has significant implications for sustainable tourism practices. This misalignment echoes the concerns raised by Díaz-Pacheco et al. (2024) and Ryan and Aicken (2010), who emphasize the importance of integrating ecological sustainability into destination marketing strategies. Moreover, the notable under-representation of environmental impacts and the observable degradation of natural settings in Terelj highlight the need for a substantial shift in how nature-based tourism destinations are promoted. Marketing efforts must not only celebrate the natural beauty of destinations like Terelj National Park but also responsibly address the sustainability challenges posed by increasing tourist numbers. This approach aligns with the broader discourse on sustainable tourism promoted by scholars such as Butler (1980), advocating for marketing strategies that genuinely reflect the ecological stakes and contribute to the preservation and appreciation of natural environments.

4.5.2   Comparison between Induced, Autonomous, and Organic Sources

The comparison of perceived and projected destination images across different sources reveals significant gaps. Among organic (TripAdvisor), induced (DMO, tour operators), and autonomous sources, autonomous sources align most closely with the perceived destination image, especially in themes like infrastructure and environmental concerns. However, discrepancies still exist, particularly in the underrepresentation of Mongolian exploration and environmental and social concerns, while natural elements are often overemphasized.

Fig. 5. Comparison between Cognitive Components, by Information Source
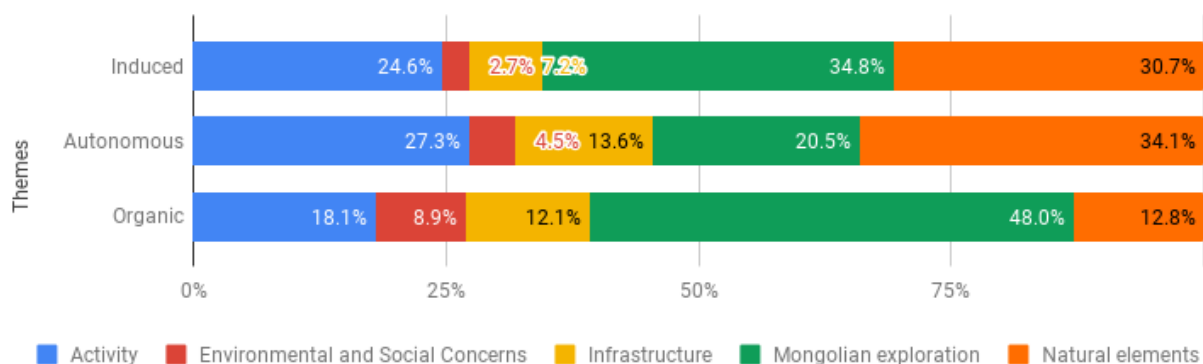

4.5.3   Comparison Between Projected DI Sources by Origin

The analysis also highlights differences in how Terelj National Park is portrayed across local and international sources. International sources tend to offer a more critical and realistic perspective, particularly on environmental concerns and infrastructure, which aligns more closely with visitor experiences. In contrast, local sources emphasize cultural elements and project more positive emotions. While this cultural focus may attract certain tourists, it risks disconnecting from visitors who prioritize

Fig. 6. Comparison of Information Sources by Origin
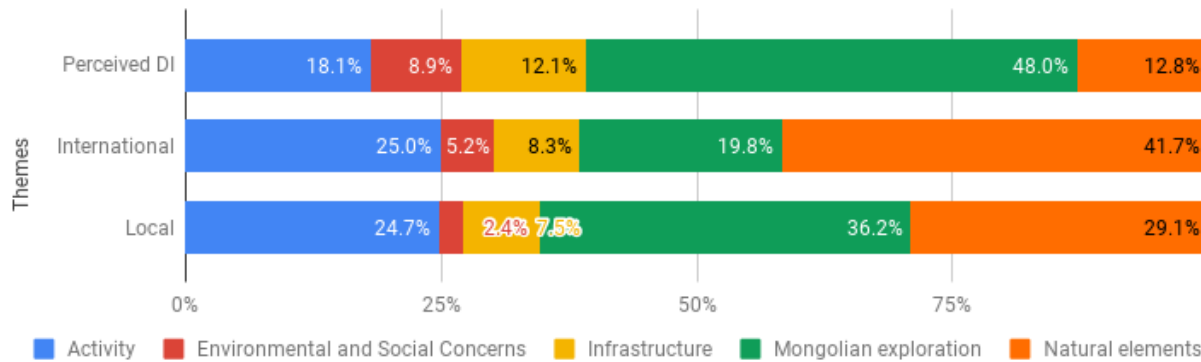
5 Conclusion

The analysis of Terelj National Park's destination image reveals significant gaps between projected and perceived experiences, particularly in the cognitive and affective components. Marketing materials overemphasize natural elements and activities, which are perceived at much lower levels by visitors, while the Mongolian Exploration theme, highly valued by tourists, is underrepresented. Additionally, affective aspects like enjoyment and scenic views are not effectively communicated, and issues like overcrowding and safety concerns are not adequately addressed. Ecological and social concerns are also significantly underrepresented, highlighting a need for more sustainable marketing strategies. When comparing information sources, autonomous sources align most closely with visitor perceptions, especially regarding infrastructure and environmental concerns. Furthermore, when comparing information sources by origin, international sources provide a more realistic view compared to the more culturally focused and positive local sources. Overall, Terelj's marketing strategy would benefit from aligning more closely with visitor experiences by emphasizing cultural and environmental themes while tempering the focus on natural elements to ensure a more accurate and satisfying visitor experience. These findings align with previous research, which has shown discrepancies between marketed and experienced destination images, emphasizing the need for destination marketers to better align their promotional efforts with visitor perceptions to enhance satisfaction and loyalty. To address these discrepancies, several recommendations emerge from the study, focusing on destination offerings and the communication approach of projected destination images.

5.1 Recommendations

To improve the destination marketing of Terelj National Park, a diversified content strategy should be implemented, including a balanced mix of natural, cultural, and culinary experiences. This can be achieved

by enhancing the focus on Mongolian cultural exploration, incorporating affective components that resonate emotionally with visitors, addressing environmental and social concerns in the marketing narrative, and adjusting the emphasis on natural elements to provide a more holistic view of the park. Additionally, an enhanced digital presence through traveler-generated content and updated, interactive websites can help align the projected image with visitor expectations.

In terms of destination management strategies, sustainable tourism practices must be more visibly implemented and communicated. This includes addressing overcrowding and safety concerns, reducing the environmental impact of tourism, and ensuring that tourism benefits are equitably shared with local communities. Regular integration of visitor feedback will help refine these strategies, while developing cultural and culinary tours and launching seasonal campaigns can attract a broader range of visitors and encourage repeat visits.

However, implementing these strategies presents significant challenges. Frequent changes in government officials due to elections disrupt long-term plans, and resource constraints hinder the expansion of marketing efforts. Coordinating diverse stakeholders and ensuring cultural sensitivity in representing local traditions require careful, time-consuming collaboration. Additionally, the lack of established infrastructure for ongoing evaluation makes it difficult to measure the effectiveness of these strategies. Addressing these challenges is essential for the successful enhancement of Terelj National Park's marketing and management strategies.

5.2   Contributions to the Body of Knowledge

This research expands the theoretical framework of a gap analysis by applying it to the context of Mongolia, a lesser-researched destination. It highlights the unique DI components that shape visitors' perceptions specific to Mongolian attractions like Terelj National Park. This expansion provides a more comprehensive framework applicable to lesser-known destinations. Empirically, the study confirms the validity of previous research on the DI gap by providing new data that aligns with existing findings and fills in the gap in the literature with fresh insights, particularly in the context of Mongolia. Methodologically, this research demonstrates the applicability of thematic analysis by conducting it with user-generated content from TripAdvisor.

5.3   Limitations and Future Research

This study provides valuable insights into the destination image of Terelj National Park but is limited by its reliance on promotional materials and TripAdvisor reviews, which may not fully represent global perceptions due to linguistic and cultural differences. Future research should incorporate a broader range of data sources, including multiple review platforms, social media, and interviews with local stakeholders, to gain a more holistic view. Addressing the seasonal bias in reviews by capturing the full seasonal cycle and conducting longitudinal studies can further clarify evolving perceptions. Integrating quantitative methods with qualitative approaches and employing advanced data analytics can uncover deeper patterns and trends, enhancing destination marketing and management strategies for better alignment with visitor expectations and sustainable tourism development.

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