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Reconceptualizing Urban Tourism Decision Making: City Image as a Mediating Mechanism Linking Branding, e-WOM, and Tourism Entrepreneurship

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Abstract: This study aims to examine how city branding, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and tourism entrepreneurship influence tourists' visiting decisions, with city image positioned as a mediating mechanism in an emerging urban tourism destination. The research was conducted in Sungai Penuh City, Indonesia, using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 200 tourists who had previously visited the city through structured questionnaires measured on a five-point Likert scale. The analysis employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS software to test both direct and indirect relationships among constructs. The findings reveal that city branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship have significant positive effects on city image. City image, in turn, exerts a strong and significant influence on tourists' visiting decisions. However, the direct effects of city branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship on visiting decisions are not statistically significant. Mediation analysis confirms that city image fully mediates the relationships between all antecedent variables and tourists' visiting decisions. Tourists' visiting decisions in urban destinations are primarily driven by perception-based mechanisms. Branding strategies, digital narratives, and entrepreneurial signals influence behavior only through the formation of a favorable city image. This study is limited by its cross-sectional design and focus on a single emerging city, which may constrain generalizability. This study contributes to destination marketing and urban tourism literature by integrating tourism entrepreneurship into destination image theory and highlighting the central mediating role of city image in shaping tourist decision making, offering practical insights for destination managers and policymakers.

Keyword: City Branding, Electronic Word Of Mouth (E-WOM), Tourism Entrepreneurship, City Image, Visiting Decision.

INTRODUCTION

Urban tourism has become increasingly shaped by intangible factors such as symbolic identity, digitally mediated narratives, and the perceived image of destinations. In the

contemporary tourism landscape, cities are no longer evaluated solely based on physical attractions or infrastructure, but rather through the meanings, reputations, and experiential promises they project to potential visitors. As competition among urban destinations intensifies, city stakeholders must adopt strategic mechanisms to influence tourists' perceptions and behavioral decisions. City branding, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and entrepreneurial dynamism have therefore emerged as crucial determinants of urban tourism competitiveness.

A central construct that connects these mechanisms is city image, which represents the cognitive and affective impressions tourists hold regarding an urban destination. A favorable city image enhances tourists' confidence, reduces uncertainty, and strengthens the likelihood of visiting decisions. In the post-pandemic tourism era, the strategic role of city branding in rebuilding destination attractiveness has become even more salient. Indriani, (2024) emphasizes that tourism recovery in Indonesia has been supported by city branding strategies that integrate digital marketing communications and social media engagement, which significantly improve destination appeal and influence tourist decision-making processes. This suggests that branding effectiveness is closely tied to the ability of cities to cultivate strong perceptual evaluations rather than relying solely on promotional visibility.

Beyond official branding efforts, tourists increasingly rely on e-WOM as a credible source of information. Online reviews and user-generated content often provide stronger experiential validation than traditional marketing messages. Prior studies (Hoang et al., 2022) show that e-WOM plays a critical role in shaping trust and credibility, underscoring the importance of digital communication in strengthening city image and influencing tourism decisions. The mediating role of e-WOM in tourism branding has been widely recognized. Studies show that e-WOM generated through social media communities influences tourists' brand preferences, loyalty, and revisit intentions by strengthening brand image (Khan et al., 2020; Jemin & Pinjaman, 2022). These findings highlight that city branding interacts dynamically with digital narratives, reinforcing or reshaping how destinations are perceived.

Empirical evidence further supports the interconnectedness of branding, city image, and visiting behavior. Anggraeni et al., (2022) found that city branding enhances city image and directly affects tourists' visiting decisions, underscoring the pathways through which marketing stimuli are transformed into behavioral outcomes. However, despite such contributions, many studies still privilege direct-effect assumptions, offering limited insight into the perceptual mechanisms that mediate these relationships in emerging urban destinations.

The rise of social media has transformed urban tourism marketing and perception-building. Platforms such as TikTok disseminate destination imagery and tourist experiences, reshaping how visitors gather information and make travel decisions (Wang et al., 2022). Social media marketing also strengthens consumer brand identification and willingness to pay premium prices through effective e-WOM and destination positioning (Mudussar et al., 2022). These developments highlight that urban tourism competitiveness increasingly depends on digital engagement and image management strategies.

Beyond branding and digital narratives, tourism entrepreneurship is an important yet underexplored dimension of city image formation. Entrepreneurial ecosystems foster service innovation, product diversity, and perceived economic vitality, thereby enhancing destination attractiveness. Research shows that positive city imagery supports tourism entrepreneurship and creates a conducive environment for business development and investment (Ahmadzadeh & Moghaddam, 2024). Cities that project favorable images are more likely to attract both tourists and entrepreneurial stakeholders, generating broader economic benefits.

Despite growing recognition of these dynamics, the literature remains fragmented across branding, e-WOM, entrepreneurship, and destination image research. Few studies have developed an integrated framework positioning city image as a mediating mechanism that links symbolic branding signals, digitally amplified narratives, and entrepreneurial perceptions to

tourists' visiting decisions. This gap is particularly evident in medium-sized emerging cities, where tourism development is closely tied to local economic opportunity and digital visibility.

Addressing these limitations, the present study proposes and empirically tests a model that integrates city branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship with city image as a central mediating construct. Unlike prior destination image studies that primarily emphasize branding or digital narratives, this research explicitly incorporates tourism entrepreneurship as a perceptual signal and confirms a full mediation structure. This novelty strengthens theoretical understanding of perception-driven tourism decision making in emerging urban contexts. In addition, the study offers practical insights for policymakers to enhance destination competitiveness through coherent branding strategies, digital engagement, and entrepreneurial ecosystem development.

METHOD

Research Design and Context

This study adopts a quantitative research design to empirically examine the structural relationships among city branding, electronic word of mouth, tourism entrepreneurship, city image, and tourists' visiting decisions. A cross-sectional survey approach is employed, as it is particularly suitable for testing theoretically grounded models that involve latent constructs and mediating mechanisms. The quantitative design enables systematic assessment of causal paths and effect magnitudes, thereby facilitating theory testing and extension within destination marketing and tourism entrepreneurship research.

The empirical context of the study is Sungai Penuh City, Indonesia, a medium-sized emerging urban tourism destination characterized by growing tourism activity, strong cultural identity, and increasing reliance on digital promotion channels. The selection of this context is theoretically motivated rather than driven by convenience. Medium-sized cities in developing economies remain underrepresented in destination marketing research, despite facing distinct challenges related to visibility, resource constraints, and market positioning. By situating the study in such a context, the research extends the applicability of established theories beyond metropolitan-centric settings and enhances contextual sensitivity.

Population, Sample, and Data Collection

The target population consists of tourists who have previously visited Sungai Penuh City. This population is considered appropriate because the constructs examined in the study require respondents to possess direct experiential knowledge of the destination, including perceptions of branding, exposure to electronic word of mouth, evaluations of city image, awareness of tourism-related entrepreneurial activity, and actual visiting decisions.

A purposive sampling technique is employed to ensure that respondents meet this criterion. This approach is consistent with prior tourism studies focusing on perceptual and behavioral constructs, where experiential validity is essential for reliable measurement. Data are collected through a structured questionnaire administered both online and face-to-face to enhance response diversity and reduce sampling bias associated with single-mode data collection.

A total of 200 valid responses are retained for analysis. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirements for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling, satisfying both the ten-times rule and contemporary power analysis recommendations for models of moderate complexity. Consequently, the sample provides adequate statistical power to estimate the proposed structural model and to test mediating effects with sufficient precision.

Measurement of Constructs

All constructs in the study are operationalized using multi-item reflective scales adapted from well-established tourism, destination marketing, and entrepreneurship literature to ensure

content validity and theoretical alignment. City branding is measured using items capturing perceptions of destination identity clarity, distinctiveness, and overall attractiveness. Electronic word of mouth is operationalized through items reflecting perceived credibility, usefulness, and influence of online reviews and digital travel narratives.

City image is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing both cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination. Measurement items capture tourists' beliefs regarding destination attributes as well as their emotional responses. Tourism entrepreneurship is assessed through items reflecting perceived market potential, business opportunity, economic attractiveness, growth expectations, and entrepreneurial climate within the destination. Tourists' visiting decisions are measured using items capturing confidence, preference, and intentional commitment related to visiting the destination.

All measurement items are assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire items are carefully reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, contextual relevance, and conceptual equivalence with the original scales. Minor wording adjustments are applied where necessary to reflect the specific destination context without altering the underlying construct meaning.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis is conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling implemented with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM is selected due to its suitability for predictive research, complex models with multiple constructs, and mediation analysis. Unlike covariance-based SEM, PLS-SEM does not impose strict normality assumptions and performs robustly with moderate sample sizes, making it appropriate for the present study.

The analysis follows a two-stage procedure. First, the measurement model is evaluated to assess internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity using established criteria. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha are used to evaluate internal consistency, while average variance extracted is employed to assess convergent validity. Discriminant validity is examined using both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio.

Second, the structural model is assessed to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs. Path coefficients, coefficients of determination, and effect sizes are examined to evaluate the explanatory power of the model. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples is applied to estimate standard errors, confidence intervals, and the statistical significance of direct and indirect effects. This procedure enables robust testing of mediation hypotheses and enhances the reliability of inferential conclusions.

Methodological Rigor and Bias Control

To enhance methodological rigor, several procedural steps are implemented. Questionnaire anonymity is ensured to reduce social desirability bias, and respondents are informed that there are no right or wrong answers. Common method bias is addressed through both procedural and statistical remedies, including careful item wording and post hoc assessment using established diagnostic techniques. To assess common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The results showed that a single factor accounted for only 32.4% of the variance, which is below the critical threshold of 50%. In addition, all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 3.3, indicating that common method bias was not a serious concern in this study.

The methodological approach is designed to ensure internal validity, statistical robustness, and theoretical coherence, thereby supporting reliable hypothesis testing and meaningful theoretical contribution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model evaluation demonstrates strong evidence of construct reliability and validity across all latent variables. All indicator loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that the observed variables adequately represent their respective constructs. The consistently high loading values suggest strong indicator reliability and confirm that each construct is empirically well-defined.

Internal consistency reliability is further supported by Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability values, all of which substantially exceed the minimum acceptable level of 0.70. Composite reliability values ranging from 0.953 to 0.980 indicate a high degree of measurement precision, reflecting stable and internally consistent constructs. Average variance extracted values for all constructs exceed the threshold of 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity and indicating that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators.

Collectively, these results confirm that the measurement model satisfies established psychometric criteria and provides a robust foundation for subsequent structural model analysis. The strength of the measurement properties also suggests that the constructs are conceptually coherent and empirically distinct, thereby minimizing concerns regarding measurement error or construct ambiguity.

Table 1. Construct reliability and convergent validity

Variable	Indicator	Loading Factor	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
City Branding	CB1;	0.915;	0.976	0.977	0.980	0.842
	CB2;	0.916;				
	CB3;	0.911;				
	CB4;	0.922;				
	CB5;	0.913;				
	CB6;	0.915;				
	CB7;	0.923;				
	CB8;	0.924;				
	CB9	0.917				
City Image	CI1;	0.918;	0.967	0.968	0.972	0.814
	CI2;	0.886;				
	CI3;	0.899;				
	CI4;	0.868;				
	CI5;	0.918;				
	CI6;	0.914;				
	CI 7;	0.893;				
	CI 8	0.919				
E-Wom	EW1;	0.922;	0.971	0.972	0.976	0.833
	EW2;	0.916;				
	EW3;	0.888;				
	EW4;	0.905;				
	EW5;	0.923;				
	EW6;	0.924;				
	EW7;	0.900;				
	EW8	0.922				
Entrepreneurship Opportunities	EO1;	0.882;	0.970	0.972	0.975	0.828
	EO2;	0.892;				
	EO3;	0.926;				
	EO4;	0.925;				
	EO5;	0.913;				
	EO6;	0.921;				
	EO7;	0.910;				
	EO8	0.910				

Variable	Indicator	Loading Factor	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Visiting Decision	VD1;	0.852;	0.944	0.944	0.953	0.717
	VD2;	0.833;				
	VD3;	0.833;				
	VD4;	0.856;				
	VD5;	0.856;				
	VD6;	0.840;				
	VD7;	0.846;				
	VD8	0.859				

Structural Model Results

The structural model assessment reveals substantial explanatory power for both endogenous constructs. City image exhibits an R² value of 0.664, indicating that city branding, electronic word of mouth, and tourism entrepreneurship jointly explain a significant proportion of variance in tourists' evaluative perceptions. Visiting decision demonstrates an R² value of 0.556, suggesting that more than half of the variance in tourists' behavioral decisions is accounted for by the proposed model. These values indicate moderate-to-strong explanatory capability, particularly for behavioral research in tourism contexts.

Table 2. Coefficient of Determination (R²)

Variable	R-square	R-square adjusted
City Image	0.664	0.659
Visiting Decision	0.556	0.547

The path analysis shows that city branding exerts a strong and statistically significant effect on city image, providing empirical support for the argument that branding functions as a symbolic signal shaping tourists' evaluative frameworks. However, the direct effect of city branding on visiting decision is not statistically significant, indicating that branding alone does not directly translate into behavioral commitment without perceptual mediation.

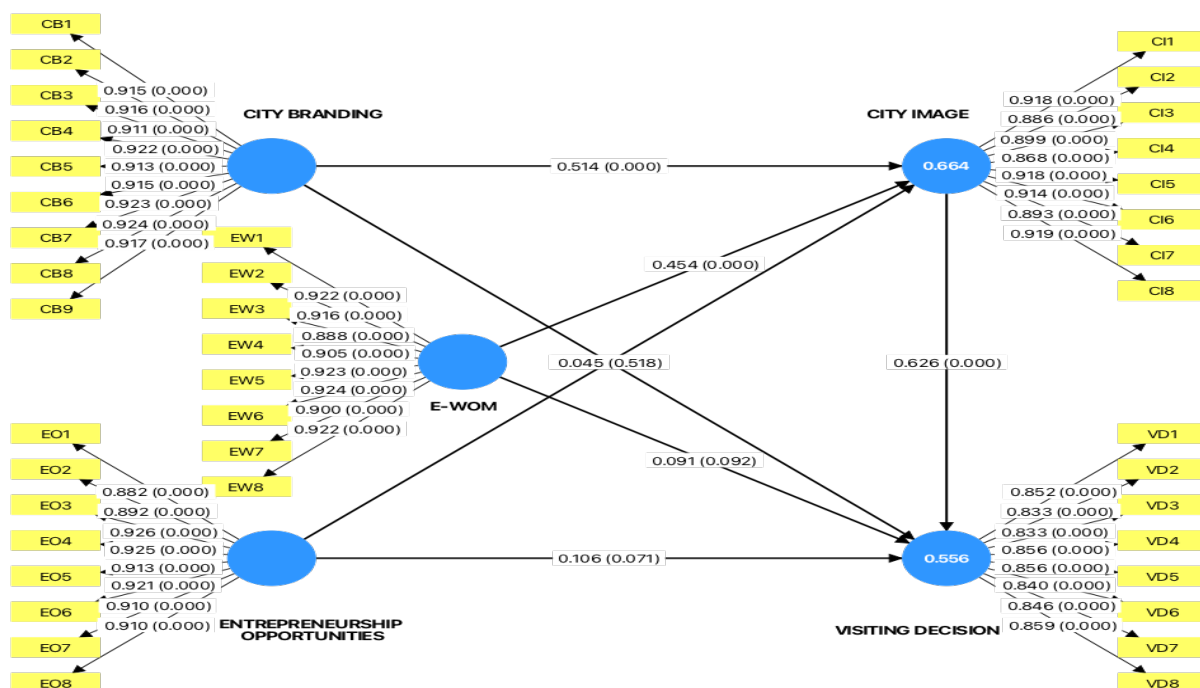


Figure 2. Structural model results (PLS-SEM)

City image emerges as a dominant predictor of visiting decision, exerting a strong positive effect. This finding reinforces the central role of evaluative perceptions in guiding tourist behavior and supports theoretical assertions that behavioral outcomes are driven by cognitive and affective representations rather than by marketing stimuli per se.

Electronic word of mouth significantly influences city image, highlighting the importance of digitally mediated narratives in shaping destination evaluations. Nevertheless, its direct effect on visiting decision is not statistically significant, suggesting that online reviews influence behavior primarily through perceptual transformation rather than immediate behavioral response.

Similarly, tourism entrepreneurship demonstrates a strong positive effect on city image but fails to exert a significant direct influence on visiting decision. This pattern indicates that perceptions of entrepreneurial opportunity and economic vitality enhance destination evaluations but do not independently trigger visiting behavior in the absence of favorable image formation.

Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis provides compelling evidence regarding the central role of city image in the proposed model. All indirect effects from city branding, electronic word of mouth, and tourism entrepreneurship to visiting decision through city image are positive and statistically significant. These findings confirm that city image fully mediates the relationships between the three antecedent constructs and tourists' visiting decisions.

Table 3. Direct effects of the structural model

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	City Branding -> City Image	0,514	13,112	0,000	Accepted
H2	City Branding -> Visiting Decision	0,045	0,647	0,518	Rejected
H3	City Image -> Visiting Decision	0,626	8,425	0,000	Accepted
H4	E-Wom -> City Image	0,454	10,486	0,000	Accepted
H5	E-Wom -> Visiting Decision	0,091	1,685	0,092	Rejected
H6	Entrepreneurship_Opportunities -> City Image	0,404	10,043	0,000	Accepted
H7	Entrepreneurship_Opportunities -> Visiting Decision	0,106	1,809	0,071	Rejected
H8	City Branding -> City Image -> Visiting Decision	0,322	7,214	0,000	Accepted
H9	E-Wom -> City Image -> Visiting Decision	0,284	6,799	0,000	Accepted
H10	Entrepreneurship_Opportunities -> City Image -> Visiting Decision	0,253	6,565	0,000	Accepted

The absence of significant direct effects, combined with strong indirect effects, suggests a full mediation structure. This result provides robust empirical support for the theoretical proposition that symbolic, digital, and entrepreneurial signals must be cognitively and affectively internalized through city image before influencing behavioral outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the perception-driven nature of urban tourism decision making. Specifically, the results demonstrate that city branding, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and tourism entrepreneurship significantly enhance city image, while city image emerges as the dominant predictor of tourists' visiting decisions. In contrast, the direct effects of city branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship on visiting decisions are not statistically significant. This pattern confirms that tourists' behavioral decisions are shaped primarily through evaluative perceptions rather than through direct exposure to marketing or economic signals.

First, the significant positive relationship between city branding and city image confirms that branding functions as a symbolic mechanism shaping tourists' evaluative perceptions rather than directly influencing behavior. This finding aligns with Indriani, (2024), who emphasizes that integrated city branding supported by digital marketing plays a critical role in strengthening destination perceptions, as well as Ristianti & Dewi, (2018), who highlight the importance of cultural identity in reinforcing destination image. However, the present study extends these insights by demonstrating that branding does not directly translate into visiting decisions, but operates entirely through the formation of a favorable city image, reinforcing the indirect and perception-based nature of tourism decision making.

Second, the significant influence of e-WOM on city image highlights the critical role of digitally mediated narratives in shaping destination evaluations. This finding is consistent with Mutaqin & Trinanda, (2019) who show that positive e-WOM enhances destination trust and travel intention, as well as Hoang et al., (2022) and Nanggong & Mohammad, (2020) who emphasize the role of authentic experiences in generating favorable e-WOM and strengthening destination image. However, this study further demonstrates that e-WOM does not directly influence visiting decisions, but instead operates through perceptual transformation. This indicates that online information functions as an interpretive mechanism that shapes tourists' evaluations, which subsequently drive behavioral decisions.

Third, tourism entrepreneurship demonstrates a significant positive effect on city image, indicating that perceptions of economic vitality and business opportunities contribute to destination attractiveness. This finding is in line with Ahmadzadeh & Moghaddam, (2024), who argue that destination image and branding play an important role in fostering tourism-related economic development, as well as Chrismardani & Arief, (2022), who highlight the role of perception in supporting tourism business growth. However, this study extends prior research by showing that tourism entrepreneurship does not directly influence visiting decisions, but instead operates as a perceptual signal that enhances city image. This reinforces the argument that entrepreneurial dynamics influence tourist behavior only when they are translated into favorable destination perceptions.

Most importantly, city image emerges as the strongest determinant of visiting decisions, confirming its central role as a cognitive-affective mechanism guiding tourist behavior. This finding is consistent with Hussain et al., (2023) and Mariani & Borghi, (2021), who emphasize that a strong destination image enhances tourist trust, loyalty, and behavioral commitment. However, the present study goes further by demonstrating that city image is not only influential but also indispensable, as it fully mediates the effects of branding, e-WOM, and entrepreneurship. This indicates that tourists' decisions are primarily shaped by integrated evaluative impressions, rather than by direct exposure to marketing or economic signals.

The absence of significant direct effects from city branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship on visiting decisions, combined with the strong and significant indirect effects through city image, provides clear evidence of a full mediation structure. This finding reinforces prior studies emphasizing the mediating role of destination image in shaping tourist behavior (C. Setiawan et al., 2021; P. Y. Setiawan et al., 2021 and Jamu & Sari, 2022), but offers a stronger contribution by demonstrating that such mediation is complete rather than partial. In this context, marketing signals, digital narratives, and entrepreneurial perceptions do not directly influence behavior, but must first be cognitively and affectively internalized into a favorable city image. This highlights the centrality of perception as the primary mechanism driving tourist decision making, particularly in emerging urban destinations.

Overall, these findings offer a more theoretically grounded understanding of urban tourism decision making by demonstrating that destination competitiveness is fundamentally perception-based. City branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship contribute indirectly to tourist demand through their collective ability to construct a coherent and favorable city image. For medium-sized emerging destinations such as Sungai Penuh City, this suggests that

strategic tourism development should prioritize image-building initiatives that align branding narratives, digital engagement, and entrepreneurial ecosystem support, rather than relying solely on promotional intensity or isolated interventions.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine how city branding, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and tourism entrepreneurship influence tourists' visiting decisions, with city image positioned as a mediating mechanism in an emerging urban tourism context. Using survey data from 200 tourists who had visited Sungai Penuh City and applying Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study successfully achieved its research objectives.

The findings reveal that city branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship each exert significant positive effects on city image. This indicates that symbolic branding strategies, digitally mediated narratives, and perceptions of entrepreneurial vitality play an important role in shaping tourists' cognitive and affective evaluations of urban destinations. City image, in turn, was found to have a strong and significant influence on tourists' visiting decisions, confirming its central role as the key determinant of behavioral outcomes.

Importantly, the direct effects of city branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship on visiting decisions were not statistically significant. Mediation analysis demonstrates that city image fully mediates the relationships between these antecedent variables and tourists' visiting decisions. This suggests that marketing and economic signals influence tourist behavior only after being cognitively internalized through a favorable city image.

Overall, the study contributes to urban tourism and destination marketing literature by reinforcing the primacy of perception-based mechanisms in tourist decision making and by extending destination image theory through the integration of tourism entrepreneurship as a perceptual signal in emerging urban contexts.

Theoretically, this study contributes by advancing destination image theory through the identification of a full mediation mechanism, demonstrating that city image fully transmits the effects of branding, e-WOM, and tourism entrepreneurship on tourists' behavioral decisions in emerging urban contexts. Practically, these findings suggest that policymakers should prioritize integrated strategies that simultaneously strengthen city branding, manage digital narratives, and support tourism entrepreneurship, with a primary focus on building a consistent and favorable city image to effectively influence tourist behavior.

Research Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which restricts the ability to capture changes in tourists' perceptions over time. City image and visiting decisions may evolve dynamically through repeated exposure to branding messages, digital narratives, or actual travel experiences. Therefore, causal interpretations should be made cautiously.

Second, the empirical setting was limited to a single emerging urban destination, namely Sungai Penuh City. While this provides contextual depth, the generalizability of the findings may be constrained when applied to larger metropolitan cities or rural tourism destinations with different characteristics.

Third, the study relied primarily on tourists' subjective perceptions measured through self-reported questionnaires. Although this approach is common in destination image research, future studies could incorporate objective indicators of branding performance, online review analytics, or entrepreneurial intensity to strengthen methodological robustness. These limitations highlight the need for broader methodological and contextual extensions in future research.

Suggestions and Directions for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are recommended. First, future studies should replicate the proposed model across different destination types, such as metropolitan cities, heritage tourism sites, or rural ecotourism areas, to assess whether the full mediation role of city image remains consistent across contexts.

Second, longitudinal research designs are encouraged to better understand how city image formation develops over time and how tourists' visiting decisions are influenced by continuous interactions with branding campaigns and digital narratives.

Third, future research may expand the model by incorporating additional psychological and relational constructs, such as destination attachment, perceived authenticity, tourist satisfaction, or loyalty intentions, which may provide deeper explanatory power for behavioral outcomes.

Finally, scholars may explore alternative methodological approaches, such as mixed-method designs or social media big-data analysis, to capture real-time e-WOM dynamics and entrepreneurial ecosystem signals more comprehensively. Through these extensions, future research can deepen theoretical understanding and enhance practical insights into sustainable urban tourism development.

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