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# Antecedents of tourism destination reputation: The mediating role of familiarity



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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to test whether cognitive perception and affective evaluation of a tourism destination are significant antecedents of its reputation; and whether this relationship is mediated by familiarity. The proposed model was tested among 750 participants and results revealed that 40% of a destination's reputation is explained by familiarity. Familiarity in turn, is explained by cognitive perception (43%) and affective evaluation (14%). Findings confirmed the mediating role of familiarity in the relationship between cognitive perception, affective evaluation, and destination reputation. Given the important mediating role of familiarity, the various stakeholders in the tourism industry should strengthen familiarity in order to develop and enhance their reputation.

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## 1. Introduction

Reputation is the result of the past actions of the firm and it represents the consistency between the firm's message and its actual performance and actions (Yoon et al., 1993). According to Wartick (1992), reputation is an aggregation of how well organizational responses meet the demands and expectations of many stakeholders over time. At an individual level, reputation denotes a person's perceptual representation of and generalized favorability towards a company's past actions and future prospects (Lange et al., 2011; Mariconda and Lurati, 2015). Importantly, reputation has been shown to play a critical role in consumer behavior and decision making. For example, a strong favorable reputation positively affects consumers' loyalty in service industries (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001) and store patronage intentions in the retail sector (Ou et al., 2006).

Reputation also plays an important role in the tourism industry. A destination with a favorable reputation will be perceived as more credible and reliable relative to a destination with a poor reputation (Chen and Dubinsky, 2003). A favorable reputation can positively influence the image of the destination (Leblanc and Nguyen, 1995; Marinao et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 1993), perception of value and the

tourists' loyalty towards the destination (Christou, 2007), ultimately affecting their satisfaction (Loureiro and Kastenholtz, 2011).

Although current research has established the relevance of reputation on consumers' judgments and decision making, little research has studied the antecedents of a tourism destination reputation, an issue of clear import to marketers. Moreover, several marketing concepts such as affective evaluations, cognitive perceptions and familiarity have been acknowledged to have a potential impact on reputation (Christou, 2003; Gefen, 2000); but the precise nature of the relationships among these concepts remain vaguely identified within the reputation literature.

In line with current conceptualizations of organizational reputation, this current study takes tourism destination reputation as the aggregation over time of the customers' perceptual representations and evaluative judgments of the tourist destination's past actions and performance. We propose that customers form cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination which in turn, increase perceptions of familiarity with the place. Herein, we advance and test a conceptual model in which familiarity mediates the effect of cognitive perceptions and affective evaluations on destination reputation.

## 2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

The current study aims to test whether cognitive perception and affective evaluation of a tourism destination are significant antecedents

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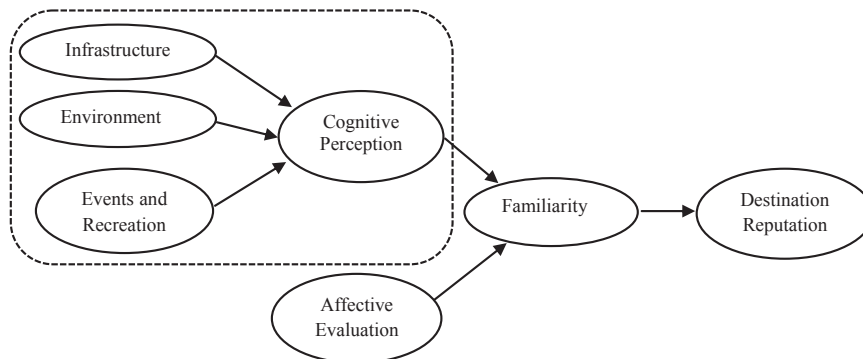


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

of its reputation; and whether this relationship is mediated by familiarity. The advanced model is presented in Fig. 1. The model's conceptual development and research hypotheses are presented herein.

### 2.1. Tourism destination reputation and familiarity

The specialized literature asserts that a destination reputation is a synthesis of the opinions, perceptions, knowledge and attitudes of the different stakeholders, including tourists, hosts and the community as a whole (Christou, 2003). Prior research posits that familiarity with an organization is a necessary antecedent of reputation (Brooks and Highhouse, 2006) and suggest that familiarity may positively (McCorkindale, 2008; Yang, 2007) or negatively (Brooks et al., 2003; Brooks and Highhouse, 2006) affect reputation. Importantly, researchers have suggested that familiarity plays a critical role on reputation change, as high levels of familiarity might influence the extent to which a reputation is immune to change (Lange et al., 2011; Mahon and Mitnick, 2010).

Familiarity can be defined as the knowledge of what, why, where, and when others do what they do (Gefen, 2000). In fact, familiarity can be taken as the knowledge and the affective evaluations of the organization (Luhmann, 2000; Monin, 2003). Therefore, familiarity is a broad construct where knowledge about the organization can be resourced from sources as varied as the individual's prior visits to the destination, the media, word of mouth or publicity (Johnson and Russo, 1984). From the point of view of tourism, it is very important that a place be considered more familiar than others. Familiarity plays a very important role in various tourists' decisions (Gefen and Straub, 2004). For example, it has been argued that familiarity strengthens the tourist's closeness to the place (Hammitt et al., 2009) and thus has a positive influence on both vacation choice (Andsager and Drzewiecka, 2002) and the image of the place (Prentice, 2004; Marinao et al., 2012). A familiar destination also increases long-term relationships and stimulates the visitor to return (Tsai, 2012).

Importantly, the literature shows a positive relation between familiarity and reputation (Yang, 2007). In fact, an institution's good reputation will be affected by the degree of familiarity it achieves with the customer (Lange et al., 2011; McCorkindale, 2008). In other words, familiarity can directly influence reputation (Brooks et al., 2003). Thus, a place that is considered to be more favorably familiar than another could have a better reputation, and therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in the context of tourism destinations:

**H1.** Familiarity will affect the reputation of the tourism destination.

### 2.2. Tourism destination reputation and cognitive perceptions

It is very important for the tourism destination to achieve

favorable cognitive perceptions. Cognitive perception is achieved by paying attention to the stimuli and events, understanding them, remembering past events, evaluating and making decisions (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Thus, cognitive perception is the way in which the person perceives the attributes of a tourism destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martín 2004). These attributes include the place's landscape, attractions, services and infrastructure. From the cognitive perspective, a place seduces people based on the beauty of the architectural and natural landscapes, the comfort provided by its facilities, and/or the particular quality of its attractions (Choi et al., 1999). Therefore, people tend to develop more positive attitudes towards the tourism destinations for which they have developed more favorable cognitive perceptions (Yüksel and Akgül, 2007). It has been argued that the cognitive perception of a tourist destination is composed of different attributes that include the landscape of the place, its attractions, and its built environment (Chen and Uysal, 2002).

From the marketing perspective, the consumer's cognitive perceptions of the product will have a direct effect on familiarity (Marks and Olson, 2001). Therefore, there is a positive relationship between cognitive perception and familiarity (Ochsner, 2000); such that the tourist's favorable cognitive perceptions may have a direct effect on familiarity of the place. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses in the area of tourism destinations:

**H2.** Cognitive perception will affect familiarity with the tourism destination.

**H3.** Cognitive perception of the tourism destination is affected by the perception of its infrastructure, environment, events and recreation.

### 2.3. Tourism destination reputation and affective evaluations

An affective evaluation of a destination is a set of positive, neutral, or negative emotional associations with a place (Woodside and Lysonsky, 1989). People have emotional responses to different places and transform these emotions into images and memories (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Milan et al., 2013). The literature posits that there is a relation between affective evaluations and degree of familiarity with the object of evaluation (Windmann and Kutas, 2001). For instance, a good or bad affective evaluation will influence the degree of familiarity that the individual assigns to his or her memories (Treese et al., 2011). Therefore, a tourist's feeling of familiarity is associated with the affective evaluation that he/she makes of the tourist destination (MacKay and Fesenmaier, 1997). The better this evaluation is, the more familiar the image of the place will be.

Moreover, the choice of a place will be determined by both the cognitive perception (Choi et al., 1999; Chen and Uysal, 2002) and by the affective evaluation the tourist has made of the place

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