

How MICE Experience Quality Shapes Destination Image through Dual Pathways

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how experience quality at a major MICE event shapes post trip destination image by testing the mediating role of satisfaction within the emerging tourism setting of Lake Toba, Indonesia. Using survey data from 413 attendees of the Aqua bike World Championship and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling, the analysis demonstrates that experience quality significantly enhances satisfaction and directly improves destination image. Satisfaction also exerts a strong positive influence on destination image and partially mediates the relationship between experience quality and image. These findings validate a dual pathway model in which affective processes operate through satisfaction, while cognitive processes allow objective event attributes to shape destination image independently. The study advances theoretical understanding of MICE experience formation by demonstrating concurrent emotional and rational mechanisms. Practical implications highlight the need for planners to strengthen both experiential and functional quality elements to enhance Indonesia's competitiveness as a growing MICE destination.

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INTRODUCTION

Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions tourism has become one of the fastest growing segments of the global tourism sector. It represents a strategic form of business travel that integrates professional activities with cultural and leisure experiences. The MICE industry contributes significantly to economic development through job creation, foreign investment attraction, and increased local revenue, while also facilitating essential non-economic benefits such as knowledge exchange, technology transfer, and innovation diffusion within host communities (Salem, 2015).

Indonesia has increasingly emerged as a competitive destination for large scale MICE events. Its success in hosting international gatherings, including the forty second ASEAN Summit and a series of G20 meetings, demonstrates improved national capacity and institutional maturity. Competitive advantages such as diverse tourist attractions, sufficient accommodation, international standard meeting venues, and enhanced accessibility further strengthen Indonesia's global positioning in the MICE sector (Prayag et al., 2024). This growth is supported by favorable economic conditions, rising domestic income, and substantial government investments in tourism infrastructure, including airport upgrades and the establishment of new convention facilities (Hall & Page, 2014). Simplified visa policies and improved administrative procedures further reinforce Indonesia's appeal as a regional MICE hub.

Despite this national progress, the development of MICE destinations within Indonesia remains uneven. North Sumatra, specifically the Lake Toba area designated as a Super Priority Tourism Destination, illustrates both potential and challenge. The region is undergoing rapid transformation and relies on high profile events, particularly sport tourism, to elevate international visibility and achieve ambitious foreign visitor targets. However, existing research provides limited insight into how MICE event quality in emerging destinations translates into attendee satisfaction and destination

image. This gap is important because satisfaction and image play central roles in shaping long term behavioral intentions and destination competitiveness (Chen, 2010; Oliver, 1980)

The novelty of this study lies in its application of a dual pathway perspective to understand how experience quality influences destination image in an emerging MICE destination. While previous research often emphasizes a single affective route through satisfaction, this study introduces and empirically tests a model that integrates both affective and cognitive mechanisms. This approach recognizes that MICE visitors form impressions not only through emotional evaluations but also through rational assessments of functional event attributes.

The purpose of this study is to examine the structural relationships among experience quality, satisfaction, and destination image in the context of a major international event held at Lake Toba. Specifically, the study investigates the mediating role of satisfaction to determine whether experience quality affects destination image through emotional processes alone or through a combination of emotional and cognitive routes.

The contributions of this research are threefold. First, it advances theoretical understanding by validating a dual pathway model that explains destination image formation in MICE contexts. Second, it provides empirical evidence from an under studied but strategically significant Indonesian region, contributing to the broader literature on MICE development in emerging economies. Third, it offers practical insights for policymakers and event organizers seeking to enhance the experiential and functional dimensions of MICE events to strengthen destination branding and competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations

The conceptual model of this study is grounded in the interplay between experience quality, satisfaction, and destination image, concepts that have been central to tourism and consumer behavior research. These constructs are theoretically connected through both affective and cognitive processes that shape post consumption evaluations.

Experience quality refers to the visitor's holistic assessment of the experiential attributes of an event or destination, including emotional, functional, and memorable components (Chen, 2010). Within the MICE context, experience quality encompasses service performance, event organization, technological adequacy, and the overall atmosphere created by the event environment. High quality experiences strengthen positive evaluations because they reduce uncertainty and enhance the perceived value of participation. According to the Confirmation Disconfirmation Paradigm, satisfaction arises when perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations, thereby positioning experience quality as a primary antecedent of satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). This theoretical mechanism supports the expectation that experience quality exerts a positive influence on satisfaction.

Satisfaction represents the affective appraisal of an experience and has been widely recognized as a driver of post consumption attitudes. Emotional responses formed during an event are particularly influential in the MICE context since attendees integrate both professional and leisure related outcomes into their evaluations. Prior research in tourism consistently finds that satisfaction shapes cognitive and affective perceptions of a destination, thereby influencing destination image as well as future behavioral intentions (Chi & Qu, 2008). The affective pathway suggests that positive emotional experiences are transferred to the destination itself, reinforcing the view that satisfaction enhances destination image.

Destination image is theorized to emerge through both emotional and cognitive routes. The cognitive pathway emphasizes rational assessments of functional attributes, such as infrastructure, accessibility, and event quality. According to information processing theory, visitors form beliefs about

destination attributes based on observed performance, which contributes to image formation independently from emotional reactions (Gartner, 1993). In MICE settings, the quality of event facilities, efficiency of logistics, and the perceived professionalism of organizers can directly influence destination image even when overall satisfaction varies. This supports the premise that experience quality may have a direct cognitive impact on destination image that is not entirely mediated through satisfaction.

Integrating these perspectives yields a dual pathway understanding of how MICE experiences shape destination perceptions. The affective pathway suggests that experience quality enhances satisfaction, which then improves destination image. The cognitive pathway posits that experience quality can also influence destination image directly through rational evaluations of functional attributes. When considered together, these theoretical streams imply that satisfaction serves as a partial mediator, allowing both direct and indirect effects to operate in the formation of destination image.

Experience Quality and Satisfaction

Experience quality is widely recognized as a central antecedent of satisfaction in tourism and event management research. It reflects visitors' holistic judgments of the experiential elements provided by an event, including service performance, atmosphere, technical execution, and the memorability of the activities offered (Chen, 2010). In the context of MICE events, experience quality encompasses the professionalism of staff, the efficiency of logistical arrangements, the relevance and organization of program content, and the overall ambiance of the event environment. These elements collectively form the basis for attendees' evaluative and emotional responses.

According to the Confirmation Disconfirmation Paradigm, satisfaction arises when perceived performance meets or exceeds prior expectations (Oliver, 1980). MICE participants often attend events with predefined expectations regarding service quality and professional value, which means that their satisfaction is highly sensitive to the quality of experiential components. High quality experiences reduce uncertainty, enhance perceived value, and generate positive emotional responses that contribute directly to satisfaction. Empirical studies consistently support this relationship, demonstrating that event quality serves as a strong predictor of satisfaction across leisure, sport, and business tourism contexts.

Given this theoretical and empirical foundation, experience quality is expected to exert a significant positive influence on MICE attendee satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1. Experience quality positively impacts satisfaction.

Satisfaction and Destination Image

Satisfaction functions as an affective summary judgment that reflects the visitor's emotional evaluation of an experience relative to expectations. In tourism research, satisfaction is not merely a transactional reaction to service performance but a broader emotional state that visitors associate with the destination where the experience occurred. This process aligns with the affective image transfer mechanism, which posits that positive emotions formed during an experience are transferred to the cognitive representation of the destination itself (Chi & Qu, 2008). In other words, the emotional outcomes of an event become embedded in the visitor's mental schema of the place.

The MICE context provides a particularly salient environment for this affective transfer. Attendees evaluate both the professional success of the event and their personal enjoyment of the setting, which together create an emotional platform for image formation. High satisfaction creates a favorable affective climate that enhances perceptions of the destination's attractiveness, hospitality, and overall appeal. Tourism studies consistently show that satisfied visitors hold more positive destination images, report stronger emotional attachment, and demonstrate higher intention to revisit or recommend the location to others.

Because satisfaction integrates the emotional and experiential elements of the visit, it serves as a key determinant of how attendees perceive the destination after the event. Therefore, a positive and meaningful event experience is expected to elevate the destination image through satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2. Satisfaction positively impacts destination image.

Experience Quality and Destination Image

While satisfaction represents an affective mechanism linking experience to image, destination image can also be shaped directly through cognitive evaluations of functional attributes. Information processing theory suggests that individuals construct destination beliefs through rational assessments of observable characteristics such as infrastructure quality, transport efficiency, event organization, and environmental conditions (Gartner, 1993). In the MICE context, attendees often evaluate the competence and reliability of a destination based on the tangible components of the event experience, including venue facilities, technological readiness, safety, and logistical coordination.

These functional assessments contribute to the cognitive dimension of destination image even before emotional responses are fully formed. High levels of experience quality therefore signal that the destination is capable, modern, and professional, which can independently reinforce a positive cognitive image. Empirical studies in tourism and event settings support this direct relationship, showing that experience quality enhances destination image through both emotional and rational channels.

Given this theoretical grounding, a positive direct link between experience quality and destination image is expected.

Hypothesis 3. Experience quality positively impacts destination image.

The Mediating Role of Satisfaction

The integration of affective and cognitive perspectives suggests that experience quality may influence destination image through two complementary mechanisms. The affective mechanism operates through satisfaction, where emotional responses formed during the event become associated with the destination. The cognitive mechanism operates directly through beliefs about functional attributes. When both mechanisms coexist, satisfaction is expected to act as a partial mediator rather than a full mediator.

Tourism research often identifies satisfaction as a key mediator that explains how experiential inputs transform into broader attitudinal outcomes (Chen, 2010; Chi & Qu, 2008). Satisfaction captures the emotional appraisal of the experience, which is essential for shaping affective components of destination image. However, because MICE events involve high exposure to functional performance attributes, the direct cognitive pathway remains influential. Therefore, mediation is anticipated to be partial, with both direct and indirect effects functioning simultaneously.

This dual pathway reasoning supports a mediating role for satisfaction in the relationship between experience quality and destination image.

Hypothesis 4. Satisfaction mediates the relationship between experience quality and destination image.

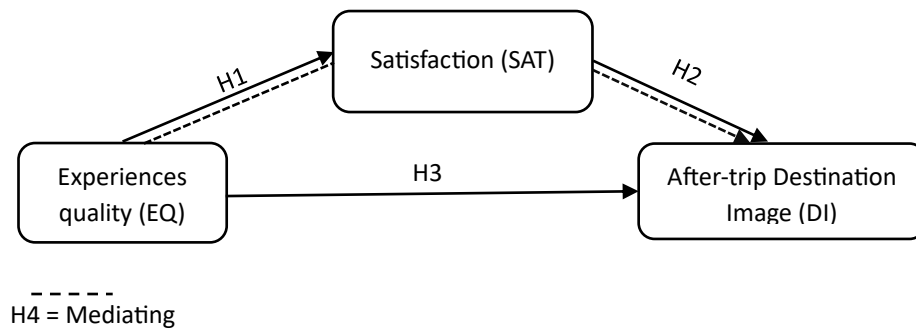


Figure 1. Research Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to investigate the structural relationships among experience quality, satisfaction, and destination image in the context of the Aqua bike World Championship held at Lake Toba, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The event provided an appropriate setting for examining MICE attendee perceptions because participants interact directly with both the experiential and functional elements that shape destination evaluation. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling was used as the analytical approach due to its suitability for prediction-oriented research, its ability to estimate complex models with multiple latent constructs, and its robustness under non normal data conditions. The sample size met the ten times rule and was further supported by power analysis, ensuring sufficient statistical power to detect medium effect sizes across the proposed structural paths.

Data collection was conducted both online and onsite during and immediately after the event. Participation was voluntary and preceded by informed consent, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality to encourage honest responses. A total of 413 valid responses were obtained, consisting of 329 domestic tourists and 84 international tourists. The questionnaire consisted of reflective measures for all latent constructs, each operationalized using established Likert scale items adapted from prior studies. The instrument was pretested to ensure clarity, conceptual consistency, and ease of comprehension. Table 1 presents the constructs, sample items, and the original sources from which the measurement indicators were adapted.

Table 1. Measurement Items

Construct	Example Item	Source(s)
Experiences quality (EQ)	1. I felt emotionally excited during the event.	(Coelho et al., 2018)
	2. The event offered a very novel / unique experience.	
	3. The environment (venue, surroundings) of the event was very memorable.	
	4. I experienced a strong sense of refreshment (feeling revitalized) from the event.	
	5. My experience at the event was meaningful / personally significant.	
	6. I gained knowledge or insight from attending this event.	
	7. I had deep or vivid dream-like (imagery) memories from the event.	

Satisfaction (SAT)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I am very satisfied with attending the event. 2. The event met my expectations. 3. Attending this event was a wise decision. (Leon et al., 2025) 4. I would recommend this event to others. 5. I intend to participate in similar events in the future.
Destination Image (DI)	<p>Cognitive image</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The destination has attractive physical attributes. 2. The infrastructure (transport, accommodation) is good. (Byon & Zhang, 2010) <p>Affective image:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. The destination is pleasant / relaxing. 4. The destination is exciting.

To reduce potential common method variance, several procedural strategies were employed, including anonymity, confidentiality assurances, neutral phrasing of items, and randomized item ordering. Common method variance was assessed using the Harman single factor test, which confirmed that no single factor dominated the variance. Full collinearity variance inflation factor testing produced values below the threshold of 3.3, indicating that multicollinearity and common method bias were unlikely to compromise the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS. The measurement model was evaluated by examining indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator reliability was assessed using outer loadings, while Cronbach alpha and Composite Reliability were used to evaluate internal consistency. Convergent validity was established through Average Variance Extracted values exceeding the recommended cutoff. Discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait Monotrait ratio. After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated through bootstrapped path coefficients, coefficients of determination, effect sizes, and predictive relevance tests. Mediation was assessed using bootstrapped indirect effects, following contemporary mediation analysis guidelines. These analytical procedures collectively ensured a rigorous evaluation of the hypothesized relationships and provided empirical evidence for the proposed dual pathway model.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Analysis

Table 2 shows the data of demographic variables in this study. The data were collected from 413 respondents, In the demographic information indicates the sample characteristic, including country, age, gender, education level, occupation, monthly income (Table 2).

Table 2. Profile Respondent

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Country	Indonesia	329	79.6
	Foreigner	84	20.4
Age	<20	16	3.8
	21-30	318	77.1
	31-40	79	19.1
Gender	Female	176	42.7

	Male	237	57.3
Education level	High school	126	30.6
	Undergraduate	168	40.8
	Graduate	119	28.7
Occupation	Self-employed	111	26.8
	Employee	213	51.6
	Student	69	16.6
	Other	21	5.1

The demographic analysis reveals that the sample is primarily composed of Indonesian nationals (79.6%). The age distribution is highly concentrated in the 21-30 age group (77.1%), indicating a significantly young respondent base. The gender split is skewed toward Male (57.3%) participants. In terms of background, the largest educational attainment group is Undergraduate (40.8%), and the most common occupation is Employee (51.6%), representing over half of the respondents.

Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed to ensure that all reflective constructions in this study met the reliability and validity requirements for structural equation modelling. The evaluation involved three primary steps: (a) indicator reliability assessed through factor loadings, (b) internal consistency reliability evaluated via Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), and (c) convergent validity measured using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The initial evaluation focused on item reliability, where all individual measurement items demonstrated Outer Loadings well above the suggested threshold of 0.707, with item values up to 0.890 (DI3). Furthermore, the internal consistency of the constructs was confirmed by robust measures, as all constructs exhibited high Composite Reliability (CR) values (ranging from 0.901 to 0.922) and Cronbach's Alpha values (ranging from 0.871 to 0.886). Since both CR and Alpha values significantly exceed the common benchmark of 0.70, the measurement scale is established as highly reliable (Hair et al., 2017).

Convergent validity was established by examining the Average Extracted Variance (AVE). This metric measures the amount of variance a construct captures relative to measurement error, with a required threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results show that all constructs successfully achieve convergent validity, with the lowest AVE recorded for Satisfaction (SAT) at 0.565 and the highest for Experience Quality (EQ) at 0.746. Since every construct's AVE value is well above the required 0.50, it is confirmed that the constructs explain more variance in their corresponding items than is attributable to error, validating the integrity of the measurement scales.

Table 3. Reliability and average extracted variance

Construct	Item	Outer Loading	VIF	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Experience Quality (EQ)	EQ1	0.743	2.355	0.886	0.922	0.746
	EQ2	0.784	2.268			
	EQ3	0.798	2.442			
	EQ4	0.781	2.528			
	EQ5	0.707	1.823			
	EQ6	0.711	1.950			
	EQ7	0.733	1.873			
Satisfaction (SAT)	SAT1	0.879	2.775	0.871	0.901	0.565
	SAT 2	0.837	2.240			
	SAT 3	0.812	2.077			
	SAT 4	0.839	2.374			
	SAT 5	0.756	1.648			

Destination Image (DI)	DI1	0.871	2.435	0.882	0.914	0.681
	DI2	0.863	2.338			
	DI3	0.890	2.712			
	DI4	0.830	2.003			

In the assessment of the measurement model, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was examined to check for potential multicollinearity among the indicator items for each construct. The VIF values for all items across Experience Quality (EQ), Satisfaction (SAT), and Destination Image (DI) ranged from a low of 1.648 to a high of 2.775. As all VIF values are substantially below the commonly accepted conservative threshold of 5, it is concluded that multicollinearity is not a serious concern in the measurement model. This confirms the satisfactory discriminant validity of the individual items and ensures the reliability of the weights and loadings.

Table 3. report the discriminant validity using Fornell–Larcker Criterion, where the square root of each construct's AVE (bold value) is higher than its correlation with others construct. This demonstrates that each construct is empirically distinct from the others in the model.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Fornell–Larcker Criterion

Construct	DI	EQ	SAT
DI	0.864		
EQ	0.754	0.752	
SAT	0.788	0.732	0.825

The assessment of discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion in Table 4. showed that the measurement model is adequate, overcoming the minor violation observed in the Fornell-Larcker test. All HTMT values fell below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.90, which is appropriate for theoretically related constructs in social sciences (Henseler et al., 2015). Specifically, the relationships between the constructs yielded HTMT values of 0.854 (DI > EQ), 0.890 (DI > SAT), and 0.832 (EQ > SAT). Since the highest correlation (0.890) is still below 0.90, it is concluded that the three constructs are empirically distinct from one another, thereby establishing sufficient discriminant validity for the measurement model.

Table 4. Discriminant validity (HTMT0.85 criterion)

Construct	DI	EQ	SAT
DI			
EQ	0.854		
SAT	0.890	0.832	

The Coefficient of Determination (R^2) measures the combined explanatory power of the independent constructs on a specific endogenous (dependent) construct, indicating the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by the predictors (Hair et al., 2017).

Structural Assessment

As shown in Table 5, the model demonstrates strong predictive capability. Experience Quality and Satisfaction together explain 68.8 percent of the variance in Destination Image, which represents a substantial level of explanatory accuracy. Satisfaction is explained by Experience Quality at a level of 53.6 percent, which falls within the moderate to substantial range according to established guidelines (Cohen, 1988). These results confirm that the structural model captures the main determinants of Satisfaction and Destination Image with a high degree of precision.

Table 5. Coefficient Determination (R^2)

Construct	R-square
DI	0.688
SAT	0.536

The results presented in Table 6 demonstrate that all hypothesized relationships in the structural model are statistically significant, confirming the robustness of the proposed dual pathway framework. The effect of Experience Quality on Satisfaction is particularly strong, with a coefficient of $\beta = 0.732$ and a t-value of 27.929. This indicates that improvements in the quality of the event experience produce very substantial increases in attendee satisfaction. The magnitude of this coefficient suggests that Experience Quality is the most influential construct in the model, as even small enhancements in the experiential dimensions of the event generate meaningful changes in visitors' emotional evaluations. The exceptionally high t-value further confirms the stability and precision of this estimate.

Satisfaction also exerts a significant influence on Destination Image, as shown by the coefficient of $\beta = 0.507$ and a t-value of 10.104. This result demonstrates that visitors who report higher levels of satisfaction tend to develop more favorable perceptions of Lake Toba as a destination. The strength of this relationship supports the theoretical premise that positive emotions formed during an event are transferred to the cognitive evaluation of the destination itself. The statistical significance of this effect confirms that Satisfaction serves as an important channel through which experiential value shapes broader destination perceptions.

Experience Quality also has a meaningful direct influence on Destination Image. The coefficient of $\beta = 0.383$, accompanied by a t-value of 7.674, indicates that attendees form positive impressions of the destination based not only on their emotional reactions but also on their rational assessments of functional attributes such as event organization, infrastructure, and professionalism. This direct effect provides empirical support for the cognitive pathway, showing that visitors develop destination impressions through observable performance cues even before emotional evaluations are fully formed.

The indirect effect of Experience Quality on Destination Image through Satisfaction adds further insight into the psychological process underlying destination evaluation. The mediated effect, $\beta = 0.372$ with a t-value of 8.708, confirms that Satisfaction significantly transmits part of the influence of Experience Quality to Destination Image. The nearly equal magnitude between the direct path ($\beta = 0.383$) and the indirect path ($\beta = 0.372$) highlights the balanced roles of cognitive and affective mechanisms in shaping destination perceptions. Because both paths are significant, Satisfaction functions as a partial mediator, showing that Experience Quality influences Destination Image in two simultaneous and complementary ways.

Table 6. Hypotheses testing

Path	B	t-value	p-value	Result
EQ→SAT	0.732	27.929	0.000	Supported
SAT→DI	0.507	10.104	0.000	Supported
EQ→DI	0.383	7.674	0.000	Supported
EQ → SAT→DI (Mediation)	0.372	8.708	0.000	Partial Mediation

Taken together, the results in Table 6 reveal that Experience Quality serves as the foundational driver of both Satisfaction and Destination Image. The large coefficient linking Experience Quality to Satisfaction confirms the centrality of experiential excellence in MICE event evaluations. The significant direct and indirect effects on Destination Image demonstrate that attendees construct impressions of the destination through both their emotional reactions and their cognitive assessments. These findings validate the dual pathway model and underscore the strategic importance of enhancing both the experiential and functional components of MICE events to improve how destinations are perceived.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide new insights into how experience quality shapes destination image within the MICE tourism context, particularly in an emerging destination such as Lake Toba. The strong and significant effect of experience quality on satisfaction aligns with a substantial body of research demonstrating that well delivered experiential elements drive positive emotional evaluations in tourism and event settings. Prior studies have consistently found that memorable experiences, service excellence, and event atmosphere serve as important predictors of satisfaction (Chen, 2010; Cronin et al., 2000). The large coefficient observed in this study reinforces these earlier observations, showing that MICE attendees are highly sensitive to the experiential and functional components of the event. However, the strength of the relationship identified here is notably higher than that reported in many leisure tourism studies, suggesting that the professional and service-oriented expectations of MICE participants amplify the influence of experience quality on satisfaction.

The positive relationship between satisfaction and destination image is also consistent with previous scholarship. Studies by Chi & Qu (2008), Prayag et al. (2024), and others have established that satisfaction acts as an affective filter through which visitors form more favorable impressions of destinations. The findings of the present study support this affective transfer mechanism and demonstrate its relevance in a MICE context where emotional evaluations arise not only from leisure experiences but also from perceptions of professionalism, safety, and organizational quality. This dual origin of emotional response may explain why satisfaction exerts a substantial influence on destination image among MICE attendees, potentially even stronger than in general tourism contexts.

Where this study diverges most clearly from prior research is in the direct effect of experience quality on destination image. While earlier studies have acknowledged that functional attributes contribute to cognitive evaluations of destinations, few have empirically examined this relationship within a MICE setting. The significant direct effect found here demonstrates that attendees form impressions of the destination based on observable elements such as infrastructure, event efficiency, and service capability. This finding expands the understanding of destination image formation by showing that emotional and cognitive processes operate simultaneously rather than sequentially. It also confirms the dual pathway model proposed in this study, wherein destination image emerges from both affective (mediated through satisfaction) and cognitive (direct from experience quality) mechanisms. This dual mechanism has received limited empirical attention in the literature, making it a distinctive contribution of this work.

The partial mediation result further reinforces the uniqueness of the findings. Much of the prior tourism research has emphasized satisfaction as a dominant mediator in the relationship between quality and image. However, the present study shows that satisfaction does not fully absorb the influence of experience quality. Instead, both pathways contribute nearly equally to destination image. This suggests that MICE visitors, unlike typical leisure tourists, rely heavily on functional evaluations of service performance when forming their impressions of a destination. Thus, the study adds nuance to existing theoretical models by demonstrating that the importance of the cognitive pathway increases in professional or event-oriented tourism contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to tourism and event management literature in several important ways. First, it validates a dual pathway model of destination image formation, offering empirical support for an integrated affective and cognitive framework. Second, it extends the application of image formation theory to the MICE domain, an area where psychological mechanisms have been understudied. Third, it demonstrates that the strength of the cognitive pathway may vary across tourism contexts, suggesting that future theoretical models should account for situational and experiential conditions that influence how visitors interpret quality signals.

The practical implications of the findings are equally significant. For event organizers, the results underscore the importance of ensuring high levels of experiential quality, particularly in areas such as event flow, venue ambiance, technological readiness, and staff professionalism. Improvements in these elements generate strong emotional responses that enhance visitor satisfaction and, in turn, bolster destination image. For destination managers, the strong direct influence of experience quality on destination image highlights the need to prioritize visible, functional attributes such as infrastructure, transport, safety, and signage. These elements contribute directly to cognitive evaluations, even among visitors who may not report extremely high satisfaction. This suggests that MICE destination branding strategies must adopt a dual approach that enhances both experiential richness and functional credibility.

For policymakers, the evidence that MICE events can simultaneously elevate emotional and cognitive perceptions of a destination supports continued investment in event infrastructure and strategic event hosting. By understanding how different aspects of event quality contribute to destination identity, authorities can design more targeted interventions to improve international competitiveness. Ultimately, the findings reinforce the strategic value of MICE tourism as a tool for destination development and offer a framework for strengthening the tourism appeal of emerging locations like Lake Toba

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that perceived authenticity plays a central role in shaping brand related perceptions and behaviours within South Sulawesi's culinary tourism. By adopting a simplified conceptual model that emphasises the cognitive and affective mechanisms connecting authenticity to behavioural intention, the analysis provides a clearer and more theoretically coherent understanding of tourist decision making. The results confirm that authentic culinary experiences significantly enhance brand equity, suggesting that visitors rely on cultural credibility, traditional preparation, and symbolic meaning to form positive cognitive evaluations of the regional brand. These evaluations serve as the foundation for emotional attachment, reinforcing the idea that affective bonds arise when visitors perceive a destination as trustworthy, culturally meaningful, and personally resonant.

Emotional attachment emerges as the strongest predictor of brand loyalty, indicating that the feelings of closeness and nostalgic connection associated with South Sulawesi cuisine are decisive in shaping long term commitment. Loyal visitors, in turn, exhibit a higher likelihood of choosing the regional cuisine in future travel decisions, highlighting the behavioural importance of sustained emotional engagement. The study also finds that authenticity exerts direct effects on both attachment and loyalty, suggesting that genuine culinary experiences can evoke immediate emotional and behavioural responses independent of cognitive pathways.

These findings underscore the strategic value of authenticity for regional tourism development. Efforts to preserve traditional culinary practices, communicate cultural narratives, and enhance experiential depth are likely to strengthen both brand equity and emotional resonance. Overall, the study contributes to a refined understanding of authenticity driven brand formation and offers a solid theoretical basis for future research in cultural and culinary tourism.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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