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The role of reference groups and destination image on visiting intentions for tourists in East Java

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Abstract

By raising new health concerns, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic changed attitudes, intentions, and behaviors related to tourism. This study focused on domestic tourists in East Java to analyze their *attitudes* and intentions to travel (*travel intentions*) and examine the influence of reference groups. Using purposive sampling, it involved 134 respondents in tourist destinations in Malang, Batu, and Pasuruan. The hypotheses were tested using structural equation model analysis and were found to be valid. Destination image and reference groups affected tourists' attitudes, which, in turn, mediated their travel intentions.

Keywords: destination image; covid-19; reference group; visiting intention; attitude

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, in Wuhan, China, a disease caused by the coronavirus emerged. In 2020, this infection, called *coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19)* by the World Health Organization, spread to almost every country and became a global pandemic. The pandemic has had a huge impact on many industries (Chen et al., 2020), one of which is tourism (Neuburger & Egger, 2021). In Indonesia, foreign and domestic tourism effectively disappeared despite the implementation of COVID-19 protocols in March 2020 when the first COVID-19 case in Indonesia occurred (Fitrizal et al., 2021). The number of tourists visiting the country is almost non-existent, which has negatively affected the economy due to the loss of foreign exchange. This decline occurred in all regions of Indonesia. For example, in East Java, foreign tourist arrivals fell by 100% and domestic tourist traffic fell by 79% (Caraka et al., 2020).

To prevent further damage to the economy, the tourism sector needs to be revitalized. Novitaningtyas et al., (2021) stated that to do this, the government and business owners must implement safety standards and protocols to build confidence in tourist products and services. Their study described ways to reduce the price of tourism products, promote cleanliness and disinfection procedures, apply social distancing among tourism employees and tourists, and implement other health-related standards and protocols.

Although vaccines are now available, COVID-19 is still highly transmissible. An in-depth study is needed to determine the attitudes and intentions of tourists to travel during the ongoing pandemic. The results of the analysis based on the theoretical model and the proposed hypothesis are expected to provide input that may help the tourism industry to recover from economic losses.

Consumer attitudes are an important factor in determining interest in visiting tourist destinations during the pandemic. Tourists usually like to visit new destinations. Even though they may have found the previous destination to be beautiful, they tend to seek new experiences (Cossio-Silva et al., 2019). However, although tourists may not always intend to revisit the same places, previous positive experiences will increase their interest in new destinations and their intention to return to old ones.

Several marketing experts have conducted studies related to visiting intentions, most of which take the destination's image as an exogenous variable (Chalip et al., 2003). Satyarini et al., (2017) found that a good destination image increased tourists' intention and decision to visit. Another study by Sánchez et al., (2018) examined the effect of destination image on the intention to visit tourist destinations. There is still relatively little research on the effect of reference groups on visiting intentions. This study of the antecedents of the intention to visit tourist destinations is important, particularly during the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that devastated the tourism industry in Indonesia, especially in East Java.

This research differs from previous studies in the object of investigation and the variables used. Another difference lies in the research conditions, namely, that the study was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has different distribution and transmission characteristics from other diseases e.g., Ebola, SARS, avian flu, etc. (Cahyanto et al., 2016). These characteristics, of course, can influence the decision of tourists to travel to areas affected by the pandemic.

This study analyzed the attitudes and intentions of tourists to travel (*travel intentions*) in East Java during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focused on domestic travelers because people are still worried about infection and tend to look for tourist destinations that are nearby and safe. Travel attitudes and intentions can be influenced by the opinions of a reference person or group that recommends a certain tourist destination. In addition, the image of the tourist destination during the COVID-19 pandemic (destination image) affects travel intentions. Consumer attitudes will also mediate interest in visiting tourist sites.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The decision of tourists to travel can be determined by the image of the destination (destination image). *Image* is a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person holds about an object (Crompton, 1979; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Everyone's image of a place is unique because it consists of his or her memories, associations, and ideas related to it (Jenkins, 1999). A *destination image* is defined as an individual's affective and cognitive associations related to a destination (Kock et al., 2016). The image of an object is not static and can change over time (Jenkins, 1999). The risks posed by COVID-19 and the efforts of the government and society to tackle the pandemic are among the factors that shape the image of tourism and particular destinations (Zenker & Kock, 2020). This is because once the image of the destination has been formed, even if the pandemic subsides, people will not quickly accept the evidence. New images must be made that contradict the existing judgments they have in mind (Chen et al., 2020).

Although destination image has been extensively investigated concerning tourist behavior, how perceived image influences attitudes toward tourist destinations have rarely been examined. Some research indicates that, as expected, cognitive image influences effective image, but that cognitive image components do not directly influence tourist attitude. Instead, effective image has a

direct impact on tourist perceptions, with the effect of cognitive components being only indirect. It was noted that safety and hospitality were the most influential cognitive image components of tourist attitude (Phillips & Jang, 2008).

A *reference group* is a group of people who are considered to have a direct or indirect impact on the public's evaluations, aspirations, and even behavior toward others, and whose opinions inform general or specific values and attitudes or guidelines for behavior. According to Fernandes & Panda (2018), a *reference group* is defined as a person or group of people who significantly influence an individual's behavior. Reference groups provide standards (norms or values) that can help determine how a person thinks or behaves, and are therefore useful as a reference in making decisions.

Attitude is the tendency to like or dislike an object and is an important determinant of a person's purchasing decision (Ajzen, 2020). It can also be defined as an overall evaluation that expresses liking, disliking, or neutrality toward an object, phenomenon, problem, person, or action (Bohner & Wanke, 2014). In general, attitudes consist of affective, cognitive, and behavioral components (Chou et al., 2020; Grimm, 2005; Vincent & Thompson, 2002). *Affection* is an emotion or feeling consumers have toward an attitude object (e.g., an advertisement or product). *Cognition* is knowledge and perception obtained from a combination of direct experience with attitude objects and information from various sources. The *behavioral* or *conative* component is a person's tendency to act and behave toward an attitude object (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2014). *Tourist attitude* describes the psychological tendencies that underlie the positive or negative evaluations of tourists when engaged in certain behavior. It strongly affects their decisions regarding leisure and travel plans.

In a natural social experiment that randomized the relevant condition effects, the influence of both membership and reference groups on attitude change was assessed (Siegel & Siegel, 1957). Research by Kabeakan & Putra (2019) showed that a reference group had a positive and significant effect on the attitudes of consumers toward buying red rice.

Travel intention is the perceived likelihood of tourists to visit a place or a particular destination within a certain period (Jingyi & Furuoka, 2020). Meanwhile, Gosal et al., (2020) defined *travel intention* as an impulse in a person in the form of a desire to visit a place or area that attracts his or her attention. (Jalilvand et al., 2012) found that consumer attitudes have a positive effect on the intention to travel to Islamic destinations. They noted that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) positively influences destination image, tourist attitude, and travel intention, and that destination image and tourist attitude have a significant relationship with intention to travel. Socio-demographic characteristics also influence eWOM, destination image, tourist attitude, and travel intention. In light of this information, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Destination image has a positive impact on tourist attitudes.

H2: The reference group has a positive effect on tourist attitudes.

H3: Tourist attitudes have a positive effect on travel intentions.

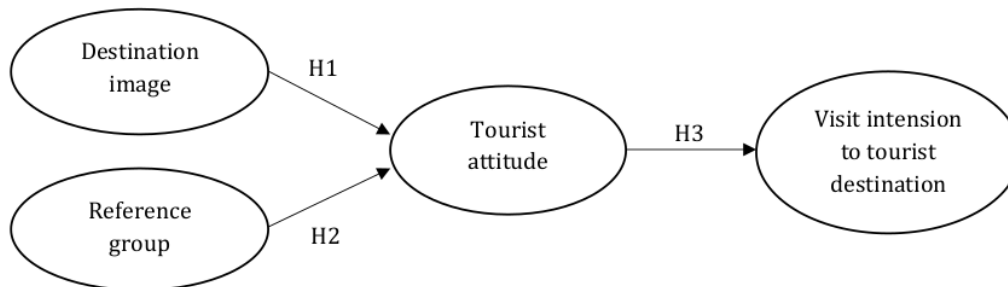


Figure 1
Conceptual framework

METHOD

Questionnaires, which were assessed as effective, were distributed to respondents. The researchers confirmed that these people had visited several recreational areas in the Malang Regency, Batu Administrative City, and Pasuruan Regency, East Java. These three areas were selected because they contain several tourist attractions frequented by locals. The study targeted people who are familiar with tourist sites in the Pasuruan, Batu, and Malang districts. Respondents between 20 and 40 years old were chosen because, at the age, people like to travel to tourist destinations. The questionnaires were distributed online to people living in East Java. The study used *the purposive sampling technique*. Of the 140 respondents who filled out the questionnaires, 134 were eligible for the study. The questionnaires were processed using WarpPLS 6.0 *software*.

Below is a list of the questions targeting each variable. These questions were based on the research discussed above, which was adapted to suit the COVID-19 context.

Destination Image

1. I feel comfortable traveling because the tourist sites I visit have implemented strict health protocols (such as masking, maintaining social distance, and preventing crowds).
2. Traveling to natural areas such as national parks or forests is not risky because they are outside.
3. Media reports about a tourist spot influence whether I will travel to it.

Reference Group

1. The people who influence me in evaluating tourist destinations have sufficient knowledge about their comfort and safety.
2. The people that I know have sufficient experience in visiting tourist sites, even during the pandemic.
3. These people are active in visiting tourist attractions in Malang, Batu, and Pasuruan, even during the pandemic.
4. The people I know communicate information about tourist destinations in the three areas in an interesting way.

Tourist Attitude

1. Traveling during the pandemic is fun.
2. Traveling during the pandemic is nothing to worry about.
3. Traveling during the pandemic will be less hassle than usual.
4. I'm not afraid to travel during a pandemic.

Visiting Intention

1. Currently, I plan to travel to tourist areas, even during the pandemic.
2. Currently, I will avoid international travel.
3. If I travel, I will only visit tourist areas that are close to my city.

The data was measured using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing complete disagreement and 5 representing complete agreement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1
Respondent Description Based on Age

Age	Percentage
20-25	35
26-30	28
31-35	23
36- 40	14
Total	100

The data in the table above indicates the relative youth of the respondents. Of the 134 participants, 35% were 20-25 years old, 28% were 26-30 years old, 23% were 21-35 years old, and 14% were 36-40 years old.

Table 2
Description of Respondents Based on Tourist Destinations Visited

Tourist Destination Area	Percentage
Pasuruan	27
Batu	55
Malang	18
Total	100

Table 2 indicates that Batu was the most popular tourist destination, with Pasuruan and Malang lagging.

Research instruments must be of standardized quality and meet the criteria of validity and reliability testing techniques. The validity test was used to ensure that the question items can be understood by the respondents. In testing indicators with data analysis techniques using *partial least squares* (PLS), the validity of an indicator is determined by the *outer loading* score. The *outer model* or *measurement model*, in principle, involves testing indicators against latent variables, or, in other words, measuring how well the indicator can explain the latent variables. To use the *partial least squares* (PLS) technique, the *convergent validity* and the *average variance extracted* (AVE) value must be measured.

Table 3
Output Combined Loading and Cross Loading

	Reference	Image	Attitude	Interest	Type as defined	SE	P-value
Reference1	0.654	0.117	-0.211	0.043	Reflects	0.074	<0.001
Reference2	0.838	-0.059	0.113	0.015	Reflects	0.071	<0.001
Reference3	0.854	0.111	0.035	0.069	Reflects	0.071	<0.001
Reference4	0.855	-0.143	0.015	-0.117	Reflects	0.071	<0.001
Image1	-0.397	0.780	0.058	-0.154	Reflects	0.072	<0.001
Image2	0.187	0.783	-0.043	0.412	Reflects	0.072	<0.001
Image3	0.218	0.748	-0.016	-0.271	Reflects	0.072	<0.001

	Reference	Image	Attitude	Interest	Type as defined	SE	P-value
Attitude1	0.194	-0.026	0.839	0.045	Reflects	0.071	<0.001
Attitude2	0.116	-0.104	0.923	0.081	Reflects	0.070	<0.001
Attitude3	-0.116	0.049	0.851	0.075	Reflects	0.071	<0.001
Attitude4	-0.192	0.085	0.893	-0.198	Reflects	0.070	<0.001
Interest1	-0.330	0.275	0.814	0.056	Reflects	0.085	0.007
Interest2	0.196	-0.091	-0.030	0.791	Reflects	0.072	<0.001
Interest3	-0.173	0.071	-0.028	0.791	Reflects	0.072	<0.001

Source: Data processed (2021)

Based on Table 3, it can be seen that all indicators have met the requirements of convergent validity, namely, a *loading factor* above 0.50, and all indicators were significant with a p-value < 0.05. Hence, the indicators used to measure all research variables were valid and can be used for further analysis.

For a research indicator to be valid, the *average variance extracted* (AVE) value must be above 0.50. The following table displays the AVE values.

Table 4
Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Reference	Image	Attitude	Interest
0.648	0.593	0.769	0.518

Source: Data processed (2021)

Table 4 shows that the AVE values of the four constructs met the validity criteria (> 0.50), with the highest value being 0.769. This confirms that all indicators in this study were valid.

A reliability test assesses the consistency and stability of research instruments in measuring a concept or construct. Reliability testing always coincides with construct validity testing. A valid construct is always reliable, but a reliable construct is not necessarily valid. There are two tools to measure the reliability of research instruments, namely, *composite reliability* and *Cronbach's alpha* (Sholihin & Ratmono, 2013). A research instrument is said to be reliable if it has a composite with a value ≥ 0.70 (composite reliability), while *Cronbach's alpha* must be above 0.60 (Abdillah & Hartono, 2015). The following table shows the *composite reliability* and *Cronbach's alpha*.

Table 5
Output Latent Variable Coefficients for Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha

	Reference	Image	Attitude	Interest
Composite reliability	0.879	0.814	0.930	0.60
Cronbach's alpha	0.814	0.657	0.899	0.229
Avg. var. extract	0.648	0.593	0.769	0.418
Full Collin VIF	1,838	1.585	1.118	1.178
Q-squared			0.103	0.028

Source: Data processed (2021)

From the values obtained in Table 5, it can be seen that the four constructs had *composite reliability*, with the lowest score for interest at 0.60. Moreover, the four constructs had *Cronbach's*

values above 0.6. It can therefore be stated that all indicators of the constructs in this study were reliable.

The next step involved testing the goodness of the research model (*model fit*). The following table contains the test results for the *model fit* and *quality indices*.

Table 6
Model Fit and Quality Indices

Size	Score	Criteria
Average path coefficient (APC)	0.171, P=0.010	Accept if $p\text{-value} < 0.05$
Average R squared (ARS)	0.061, P=0.118	Accept if $p\text{ value} < 0.05$
Average adjusted R squared (AARS)	0.051, P=0.138	Accept if < 0.05
Average block VIF (AVIF)	1,249	Accept if $p\text{-value} < 5$
Average full collinearity VIF	1,430,	Accept if < 5
Tenenhaus GOF	0.193	Low > 0.1 , med > 0.25 , high > 0.36
Symson's paradox ratio (SPR)	1,000	Accept if > 0.7
R squared contribution ratio (RSSR)	1,000	Accept if > 0.9
Statistical suppression ratio (SSR)	1,000	Accept if > 0.7
Non-linear bivariate causality direction ratio	0.333	Accept if > 0.7

Source: Data processed (2021)

All criteria were met except for non-linear bivariate causality ($= 0.333$). However, the results were still close to the value of the acceptance criteria, so the model was still quite good. Thus, the test of the model built in this study met the *goodness-of-fit* requirements. This means that the model is good for predicting the actual conditions in the field.

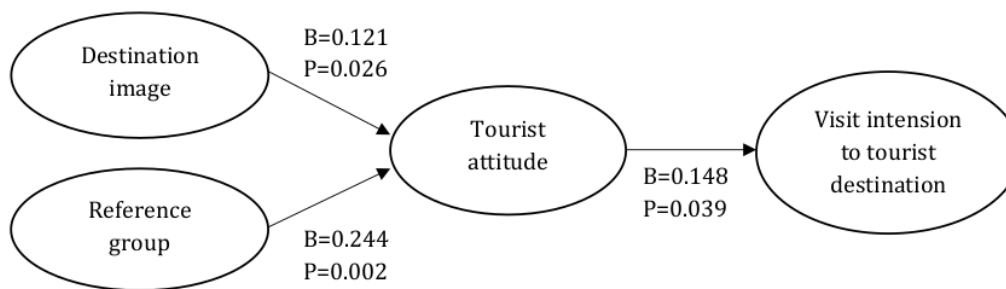


Figure 2
Estimated Output

To determine whether the hypotheses should be accepted or rejected, we looked at the magnitude of the $p\text{-value}$. If the $p\text{-value} \leq 0.05$, then H_0 , which states that the exogenous variables don't affect the endogenous variables, is rejected, and H_a , which states that there is an effect, is accepted. The following table shows the estimation results of the *path coefficients* to test the strength of the influence between variables and explain their relationship.

Table 7
Path Coefficients Estimation Results

23	Hypothesis	Path coefficients	p-value	Decision
	H1: Destination image has a positive impact on tourist attitudes.	0.121	0.026	Significant
	H2: The reference group has a positive effect on tourist attitudes.	0.244	0.002	Significant
	H3: Tourist attitudes have a positive effect on travel intentions.	0.148	0.039	Significant

Source: Data processed (2021)

The results indicated that the *p-value of the impact of destination image on consumer attitude* had a significance value of 0.026, or less than 0.05. Based on these results, it can be stated that tourist destination image significantly affected *consumer attitude* because *the path coefficient* was 0.121 and was positive. The first hypothesis, which proposed that the destination image positively influenced tourist attitude, was proven. These results explained that the more positively consumers perceived the image of a destination, the more positive their attitude about it would be.

The *p-value of the effect of the reference group on consumer attitude* had a significance value of 0.002, or less than 0.05. Based on these results, it could be stated that *the reference group* had a significant effect on *consumer attitudes toward tourist destinations*. The *path coefficient value* was 0.244 (positive), validating the second hypothesis that the reference group had a positive effect on *consumer attitude toward tourist destinations*. These results explained that when the strength of the reference group was higher, consumers would have a more favorable attitude toward the destination.

Finally, this study found that the *p-value for the relationship between attitudes and interest in visiting tourist destinations* had a significance value of 0.039, or less than 0.05. Based on these results, it could be stated that *consumer attitude toward tourist destinations* had a significant effect on their *interest in visiting them*. The *path coefficient value* was 0.148 (positive), so the third hypothesis that *consumer attitude toward tourist destinations* had a positive effect on *visiting interest* was accepted. That is, the better consumer attitudes were toward tourist destinations, the more interest they expressed in visiting these locations.

Discussion

Tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because tourists could no longer travel freely, they relied on information from the media and from other people they considered knowledgeable. There has been extensive discussion on how the government, tourism actors, and communities can tackle the pandemic to repair public perceptions of the image of tourist destinations. Developing and maintaining a positive image in the minds of tourists is crucial, as a positive or negative image can affect the attitude and interest of tourists in visiting an attraction.

The results of this study indicated that a favorable image of a destination has a significant positive effect on consumer attitudes. The better the image of the tourist destination, the better the consumer's attitude toward it will be. This is in line with research conducted by Phillips & Jang (2008). Managers can minimize people's worries about the risks associated with visiting tourist attractions during the pandemic by increasing the safety and comfort of these sites, reducing the likelihood of infection.

Reference groups with a high level of credibility, such as people who are considered to have expertise or direct experience with a tourist destination, are often a source of information for consumers, as are family members, friends, and colleagues. The greater the perceived risk, the higher

the influence of the reference group will be in the service consumption process, which is a premise that applies to the tourist industry during COVID-19. This study showed that reference groups have a significant positive effect on consumer attitudes. The more strongly the reference group recommends a particular place, the more favorable the consumer's attitude toward it will be. Humans are social creatures and are naturally influenced by the people around them. The results of this study are in line with research by (Kabeakan & Putra (2019) and Phillips & Jang (2008). To encourage positive consumer attitudes, tourism managers should support community groups that can help provide reviews or suggestions to the public about tourist attractions.

This study also suggested that good consumer attitudes have a positive effect on travel intentions. The better the attitude of consumers toward tourist destinations, the more willing they will be to visit. This is in line with research by Jalilvand et al., (2012). When consumers already have a positive attitude toward a tourist destination even though the pandemic has not fully subsided, they will be more likely to risk going there. Managers of tourist attractions must encourage the creation of a positive attitude toward their sites by fostering a good image and helping community members to influence consumers.

This research has theoretical implications for science and academia, as well as practical implications for industry, especially tourism in East Java. Theoretically, the study's development of a research model by including reference group and destination image variables complements the existing model regarding the formation of the attitudes of consumers, especially tourists. On a practical level, this research offers strategic advice for tourism managers in East Java. It recommends that to increase the interest of local and foreign tourists, it is necessary to form a positive consumer attitude toward tourist destinations in East Java by enhancing the image of these attractions. They can accomplish this by leveraging the media through the use of creative content that describes the tourist destinations favorably and outlines their efforts to implement COVID-19 health protocols. In addition, they can incentivize reference groups in the ecotourism and travel community to recommend East Java as a safe and beautiful destination.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the behavior of tourists, giving rise to new health concerns when deciding whether to travel. This data analysis revealed that all of the proposed variables were acceptable. It showed that tourist interest during the pandemic is influenced by the image of the destination, input from reference groups, and consumer attitudes toward the site. To survive during this pandemic, the owners and managers of tourist attractions should work to build a good destination image, manage the reference groups that influence visitors, and encourage a favorable consumer attitude toward the destination to increase visit intentions.

This study has some limitations. It focused only on the three destinations most frequently visited by tourists in East Java. Considering that East Java has many interesting tourist destinations, future studies can broaden the scope of their investigation. Future research can also add other variables not examined in this study such as trust and risk perception (Furouka & Lim, 2020).

Author Contribution:

Kristiningsih served as the first author and wrote correspondence. She did the formulation of research topic, instruments, and analytical tools for the interpretation of statistical results. The theory development and inclusion in the journal template is the responsibility of the first author

Santirianingrum Soebandi served as the second author. He was tasked with developing a theory on each variable and formulating hypotheses. The second author assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the research results

Ruswati Surayasaputra served as the third author. The third author helped to find the literature review and assist to build the model.

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Conflict of Interest:

This research guarantees that the data has obtained permission from the company. The use of data is used for research results and recommendations given to companies. This research guarantees that there will be no problems and conflicts of interest. All licensing processes have been carried out by the research team following applicable regulations.

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