



How Do the Non-Visitors Evaluate the Van Destination?

Daha Önce Ziyaret Deneyimi Olmayanlar Van Destinasyonunu Nasıl Değerlendiriyor?

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Abstract

This study examines why non-visitors do not travel to Van as a tourist destination, analyses their tourist behaviour tendencies, and assesses their perceptions of the destination. Data were gathered from 426 participants through convenience sampling via online and face-to-face surveys and analysed in SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics and parametric tests were applied. Findings indicate that for non-visitors, the first associations with Van are Lake Van, Van breakfast, and Van cat. However, participants reported limited information about the destination, perceived transportation as inadequate, and found the city unappealing. Van was not seen as conferring social prestige, while safety concerns and negative accounts from their social circles led to broadly negative opinions of the destination. Consequently, participants expressed hesitation and anxiety about visiting Van in the future. Notably, significant gender differences emerged in tourist behaviour tendencies, with women displaying more favourable holiday attitudes than men. Additionally, those with postgraduate education held more positive perceptions of Van than those with associate or bachelor's degrees. The study presents recommendations for destination managers, tourism practitioners, and researchers to enhance Van's destination image and appeal.

Keywords: Van, Non-Visitors, Tourism Behaviour Tendencies, Destination Perception

Özet

Bu çalışma, daha önce Van'ı ziyaret etmemiş bireylerin, Van'ı turistik bir destinasyon olarak neden tercih etmediklerini incelemekte, turist davranış eğilimlerini analiz etmekte ve destinasyona ilişkin algılarını değerlendirmektedir. Veriler, kolayda örnekleme yöntemiyle çevrimiçi ve yüz yüze anketler aracılığıyla 426 katılımcıdan toplanmış ve SPSS 22.0 programı kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Analizlerde tanımlayıcı istatistikler ve parametrik testler uygulanmıştır. Bulgular, Van'ı ziyaret etmeyen bireyler için ilk çağrışımların Van Gölü, Van kahvaltısı ve Van kedisi olduğunu göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, katılımcılar destinasyon hakkında sınırlı bilgiye sahip olduklarını, ulaşım olanaklarını yetersiz bulduklarını ve kenti çekici görmediklerini ifade etmişlerdir. Van'ın sosyal prestij sağlamadığı düşünülürken, güvenlik endişeleri ve sosyal çevreden edinilen olumsuz deneyimlerin destinasyona yönelik genel algıyı olumsuz yönde etkilediği belirlenmiştir. Bu nedenle katılımcılar gelecekte Van'ı ziyaret etme konusunda

tereddüt ve kaygı yaşadıklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Ayrıca, turist davranış eğilimlerimde cinsiyete göre anlamlı farklılıklar tespit edilmiş; kadınların erkeklere kıyasla daha olumlu tatil tutumları sergilediği görülmüştür. Bunun yanı sıra, lisansüstü eğitim düzeyine sahip bireylerin ön lisans ve lisans mezunlarına göre Van'a yönelik daha olumlu algılara sahip oldukları belirlenmiştir. Çalışma, Van'ın destinasyon imajını ve çekiciliğini artırmaya yönelik olarak destinasyon yöneticileri, turizm uygulayıcıları ve araştırmacılar için çeşitli öneriler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Van, Ziyaret Etmeyen Bireyler, Turistik Davranış Eğilimleri, Destinasyon Algısı

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism drives regional economic growth; thus, attracting non-visitors is essential for boosting a destination's competitiveness and achieving sustainable development. Destination image strongly shapes individuals' holiday planning and decisions. Hunt (1975) defined this concept as a place's overall impression, while Crompton (1979) referred to it as the sum of beliefs and impressions. Jin, Lee, and Lee (2013) described the construct as the holistic perception of a destination's core traits. This image reflects individuals' information, thoughts, and emotions about a particular place (Ünal et al., 2006).

Destination image formation is a complex and dynamic process (Cheng and Quiang, 2018). Several models have been reviewed. Baloğlu and McCleary (1999) suggested that individual and stimulus factors shape perceptual, affective, and global images of destinations. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) proposed a holistic image-building process including qualitative elements, each with functional and psychological traits. Beerli and Martin (2004) identified primary sources, such as past experiences and visit frequency. They also pointed to secondary sources (induced, organic, and autonomous) and to personal factors such as motivations, vacation experience, and socio-demographics. They labelled these as cognitive, affective, and overall images. Fakeye and Crompton (1991) divided destination image into organic, induced, and complex. Organic and induced images form before visits; complex images form after visits. Gartner (1994) grouped information sources for image formation into eight categories, highlighting the complexity of the process.

With a history spanning seven thousand years, Van features diverse attractions: natural, historical, cultural, artistic, recreational, and culinary. Its advantageous location provides convenient access for both domestic and international tourists. Still, although Turkish tourism has expanded, Van remains underdeveloped despite its rich offerings (Alaeddinoğlu, 2007).

Lake Van is the region's defining natural treasure and the world's largest soda lake. Evliya Çelebi likened Van Castle to a "collapsed camel." The castle was the Urartians' first capital and was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 2016. Akdamar Island is among Türkiye's prime religious centres and was added to the UNESCO Tentative List in 2015, raising the region's global profile. The Water Canal, Ayanis, Çavuştepe, and Hoşap Castles date back to the Urartians and are key assets that strengthen the area's historical identity. The Old City of Van, Van Museum, Edremit's Maiden's Castle Observation Terrace, and the Vanadokya fairy chimneys further enrich the region's tourism.

Revealing Van's tourism potential requires strengthening its image. Enhanced strategic marketing, advertising, and promotional efforts in international markets are essential. Partnerships with influential social media creators should be prioritised. Local governments and peripheral stakeholders must recognise this process and cultivate constructive attitudes and behaviours toward tourism, as destination image is key in guiding tourists' choices, shaping pre-visit perceptions, trip experiences, and intentions to revisit (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999).

A review of the literature shows that most destination image studies focus on evaluations by tourists who have visited the destination (Tatik, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023; Çavuşoğlu et al., 2023; Ayaz and Bakar, 2020). In contrast, research on non-visitors' perceptions is limited

(Stylish and Terzidou, 2024; Proyrungroj, 2022; Eryılmaz and Yüçetürk, 2017), leaving a gap in understanding how non-visitors view unvisited destinations. Non-visitors often rely on external information, resulting in simplistic images, whereas visitors' perceptions are more complex and realistic. Also, understanding of both groups' perspectives is crucial for effective destination marketing (Selby and Morgan, 1996; Hsu et al., 2004).

This study aims to fill this gap by identifying why non-visitors do not choose Van as a tourist destination, investigating their behavioural tendencies, and assessing their perceptions of the destination. Reinforcing positive image elements and improving negative ones will help stakeholders develop strategies to reduce potential risks.

2. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to analyse non-visitors' tourist behaviour tendencies and their perceptions of the Van destination. Quantitative analysis enables the systematic measurement of perceptions and allows statistical comparisons across demographic groups. Data were collected through both online and face-to-face surveys.

The target population consisted of individuals who had never visited Van. A convenience sampling method was adopted due to practical constraints and the exploratory nature of the study (Gürbüz and Şahin, 2018). Based on sample size guidelines for large populations (Güneş and Alagöz, 2018), a minimum of 384 respondents was deemed sufficient at a 95% confidence level. A total of 486 questionnaires were distributed, and 426 valid responses were included in the analysis. The measurement items were adapted from Eryılmaz and Yüçetürk (2017) and revised to fit the context of the present study.

The data were analysed using SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise the data. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis, with values falling within acceptable ranges. The internal consistency of the scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients were 0.638 for tourist behaviour tendencies and 0.754 for destination perception, indicating acceptable levels of internal consistency for exploratory research (Taber, 2018). Therefore, the reliability levels obtained in this study were considered sufficient for further statistical analysis.

To examine whether participants' tourist behaviour tendencies and their perceptions of the Van destination differed according to demographic variables, independent-samples t-tests were conducted for variables with two groups. In addition, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for variables with more than two groups. When statistically significant differences were identified, appropriate post hoc tests were applied to determine the specific group differences.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section included six items measuring demographic characteristics. The second section contained an open-ended question asking respondents to indicate the first three elements that came to mind when Van was mentioned. These responses were analysed using multiple-response frequency analysis. Each preference position (first, second, and third) was treated separately, and frequency and percentage distributions were calculated to determine the relative cognitive salience of each association. The third section examined the reasons why participants had not visited Van using six statements. The final section measured non-visitors' tendencies in tourist behaviour and their perceptions of Van, using 14 items. The third and fourth sections employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Prior to analysis, negatively worded items were reverse-coded to ensure that higher scores reflected more positive evaluations.

Research Ethical Approval

This study received ethical approval from the Van Yüzüncü Yıl University Ethics Committee (decision number 35883, dated 31.12.2025).

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

3.1. Demographic Findings

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. Of the participants, 40.6% were male, and 59.4% were female. Marital status was evenly distributed across the groups. When examined by age group, the majority of participants were aged 18-30 (42.5%). Regarding education, the majority of participants held either an associate's or a bachelor's degree (54.5%). Regarding occupation, approximately half of the participants worked in the public sector (49.1%). In terms of income, 30.5% of participants earned less than 20,000 TL, while 24.9% earned between 40,001 and 60,000 TL.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=426)

Variables	Groups	f	%
Gender	Male	173	40.6
	Female	253	59.4
Marital status	Married	209	49.1
	Single	217	50.9
Age	18-30	181	42.5
	31-43	154	36.2
	44 and more	91	21.4
Education	Primary or High School	76	17.8
	Associate's or Bachelor's Degree	232	54.5
	Post-Graduate	118	27.7
Occupation	Public Sector	209	49.1
	Private Sector	83	19.5
	Not Employed	134	31.5
Monthly Income (Turkish Liras)	20 000 and less	130	30.5
	20 001-40 000	50	11.7
	40 001- 60 000	106	24.9
	60 001-80 000	83	19.5
	80 001 and more	57	13.4

3.2. Elements Identified with Van Destination

Table 2 shows the top three elements participants associate with Van. Lake Van is the first thing that comes to mind for most participants. This is followed by the Van breakfast (45.7%) and the Van cat (36.1%). However, Muradiye Waterfall and the Van Museum are least likely to come to mind when Van is mentioned.

Table 2. Findings Regarding the Elements Associated with Van

Elements	First Preference		Second Preference		Third Preference	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Lake Van	404	94,6	8	1,9	4	0,9
Van Cat	8	1,9	185	43,3	154	36,1
Van Breakfast	7	1,6	195	45,7	41	9,6
Herbed Cheese	3	0,7	10	2,3	85	19,9
Akdamar Island	1	0,7	9	2,1	49	11,5

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Freezing Cold in Winter	1	0,2	2	0,5	37	8,7
Terrorism	1	0,2	9	2,1	21	4,9
Muradiye Waterfall	0	0	3	0,7	27	6,3
Van Museum	1	0,2	5	1,2	8	1,9

3.3. Views Related to the Reasons for Not Visiting Van

Participants gave clear reasons for not visiting Van: most reported limited transportation options, insufficient information about Van, and a perception that Van is an unattractive tourist destination. In addition, many believed that travelling to Van would not bring them prestige. These responses reflect a markedly negative overall image of the destination among non-visitors.

Table 3. Findings on the Reasons for Not Visiting Van

Statements	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Transportation is not convenient	15	3.5	80	18.7	136	31.9	114	26.7	81	19.0
I do not perceive Van as a tourist destination.	13	3.0	54	12.6	86	20.1	158	37.0	115	26.9
I do not have sufficient information about Van.	38	8.9	179	41.9	97	22.7	75	17.6	37	8.7
It is not an attractive destination for me.	11	2.6	83	19.4	78	18.3	145	34.4	109	25.5
It is not a popular destination.	16	3.7	100	23.4	96	22.5	127	29.7	87	20.4
Travelling to Van does not confer prestige on me.	23	5.4	60	14.1	78	18.3	158	37.4	107	25.1

3.4. Participants' Tourist Behaviour Trends and Their Views Toward Van

The frequency and percentage of participants' responses regarding their touristic behaviour tendencies and their views toward Van, as well as the arithmetic mean and standard deviation of the statement averages, are shown in Table 4.

Building on these results, the findings indicate that participants do internet research before travelling to their planned destination. Moreover, social media comments and posts regarding the destination shape their perception and views. The majority of participants also consider visiting destinations they have never visited before and staying for short periods.

In addition to these behavioural tendencies, participants' overall image of Van is negative. Most participants do not see Van as a safe destination. Furthermore, the information and impressions their relatives receive about the destination are also unfavourable. Despite perceiving the destination as rich in history and culture, most people are hesitant to visit in the future.

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Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Questionnaire Items

Statements	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree		\bar{x}	SD
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Promotions related to my holiday destination through TV, newspapers, social media, etc., create a positive impression on me.	15	3.5	34	8.0	48	11.3	255	59.9	74	17.4	3.80	0.940
When choosing a holiday destination, I prioritise places I have not visited before.	6	1.4	27	6.3	38	8.9	236	55.4	119	27.9	4.02	0.886
When I go on holiday, I enjoy short stays in different places to explore more destinations.	7	1.6	28	6.6	34	8.8	247	58.0	110	25.8	4.00	0.886
I always research the place I am considering online before deciding on my holiday destination.	5	1.4	10	2.3	17	4.0	226	53.1	167	39.2	4.26	0.765
After returning from a holiday, I always buy souvenirs for myself and my relatives.	8	1.9	33	7.7	46	10.8	237	55.6	102	23.9	3.92	0.907
I share my holiday experiences on social media.	29	6.8	52	12.2	42	9.9	196	46.0	107	25.1	3.70	1.169
I have a negative image of Van.	12	2.8	24	5.6	67	15.7	168	39.3	155	36.3	4.00	1.001
I think Van is a safe destination.	28	6.6	42	9.9	113	26.5	186	43.7	57	13.4	3.47	1.054
I think Van has many mosques, shrines, and historical buildings and structures.	8	1.9	32	7.5	149	35.0	193	45.3	44	10.3	3.55	0.848
I think Van is a destination rich in history.	7	1.6	33	7.7	114	26.8	205	48.1	67	15.7	3.69	0.886
Even if I visit Van, I do not think I would stay long.	37	8.7	187	43.8	110	25.8	65	15.2	27	6.3	2.66	1.041
I do not plan to visit Van within the next three years.	54	12.6	142	33.3	106	24.8	78	18.3	46	10.8	2.81	1.193
I have acquaintances who visited Van, and the information they shared was generally negative.	8	1.9	20	4.7	43	10.1	206	48.2	149	34.9	4.09	0.894
Returning from Eastern Anatolia without visiting Van would not bother me	24	5.6	87	20.4	94	22.0	134	31.4	87	20.4	3.40	1.182

Note: SD=Standard Deviation

3.5. Comparison of Tourist Behaviour Tendencies and Destination Image Perception Levels Based on Demographic Variables

Table 5 shows independent-samples t-test results for tourist behaviour tendencies by gender and marital status. Women showed significantly more positive tourist behaviour tendencies than men ($t = -5.221, p < 0.05$). No significant difference was found by marital status ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5. T-Test Results of Participants' Tourist Behaviour Tendencies by Gender and Marital Status

Gender	n	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Male	173	3.78	0.56	424	-5.221	0.000
Female	253	4.06	0.51			
Marital Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Married	209	3.93	0.50	424	-0.487	0.626
Single	217	3.96	0.59			

Note: SD= Standard Deviation, df= Degrees of Freedom

Table 6 shows the ANOVA results for tourist behaviour tendencies by age, education level, occupation, and monthly income. The results indicate no significant differences by age ($F=1.855$, $p>0.05$), education level ($F=0.912$, $p>0.05$), occupation ($F=1.399$, $p>0.05$), or monthly income ($F=0.978$, $p>0.05$).

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA Results on Participants' Tourist Behaviour Tendencies by Age, Education Level, Occupation, and Monthly Income

Age Groups	n	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
18-30	181	3.97	0.621	1.855	0.158
31-43	154	3.98	0.494		
44 and more	91	3.85	0.492		
Education Level					
Primary or High School	76	3.87	0.661	0.912	0.402
Associate's or Bachelor's Degree	232	3.96	0.542		
Post-Graduate	118	3.96	0.494		
Occupation					
Public Sector	209	3.97	0.499	1.399	0.248
Private Sector	83	3.85	0.604		
Not Employed	134	3.96	0.596		
Income (Turkish Liras)					
20 000 and less	130	3.95	0.642	0.978	0.419
20 001-40 000	50	3.94	0.557		
40 001- 60 000	106	3.97	0.495		
60 001-80 000	83	3.85	0.464		
80 001 and more	57	4.03	0.547		

Note: SD= Standard Deviation

Table 7 presents the t-test results for views toward Van by participants' gender and marital status. According to the table, levels of tourist behavioural tendency do not differ significantly by gender ($t = -1.672$, $p > 0.05$) or marital status ($t = 0.290$, $p > 0.05$).

Table 7. T-Test Results of Participants' Views Toward Van by Gender and Marital Status

Gender	n	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Male	173	3.40	0.60	378	-1.672	0.095
Female	253	3.50	0.62			
Marital Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Married	209	3.47	0.59	423	0.290	0.071
Single	217	3.45	0.63			

Note: SD= Standard Deviation, df= Degrees of Freedom

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Table 8 presents the ANOVA results. According to the findings, there is no difference in participants' views toward Van across age groups, occupations, and monthly income levels. However, results further reveal that non-visitors with different levels of education perceived the image differently. The Games-Howell test identifies which education groups differ significantly. It can be observed that participants with postgraduate degrees have more positive views than those with associate or bachelor's degrees.

Table 8. One-Way ANOVA Results on Participants' Views Toward the Van Destination by Age, Education Level, Occupation, and Monthly Income

Age Groups	n	Mean	SD	F	Sig.	Games-Howell
18-30	181	3.46	0.644	1.323	0.267	-
31-43	154	3.40	0.607			
44 and more	91	3.51	0.577			
Education Level						
Primary or High School (1)	76	3.41	0.667	3.173	0.043	3>1
Associate or bachelor's Degree (2)	232	3.41	0.621			
Post-Graduate (3)	118	3.58	0.564			
Occupation						
Public Sector	209	3.47	0.607	1.702	0.184	-
Private Sector	83	3.35	0.575			
Not Employed	134	3.50	0.655			
Monthly Income (Turkish Liras)						
20 000 and less	130	3.53	0.635	1.608	0.171	-
20 001-40 000	50	3.33	0.614			
40 001- 60 000	106	3.38	0.645			
60 001-80 000	83	3.48	0.525			
80 001 and more	57	3.51	0.639			

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that, for non-visitors, Lake Van (94.6%) is the first association with the name "Van," followed by Van breakfast (45.7%) and Van cat (43.3%). These elements create a distinct and positive image. Despite Van's strong tourism potential, the dominance of a limited number of associations suggests that other key attractions lack sufficient visibility, underscoring the need for more holistic, integrated promotional strategies to strengthen the destination's image. In this context, clearly and practically presenting destination attractions through promotional activities significantly encourages non-visitors to consider visiting (Khan et al., 2022). A study found that destination advertising positively affects the intention to visit the destination (Gu et al., 2024). Similarly, it is emphasised that tourism advertising effectively boosts a destination's competitiveness (de Souza et al., 2020).

The research findings reveal that participants do not perceive Van as a tourist destination. This perception is based on insufficient information about the destination and a weak belief that visiting there will confer social prestige. This situation can be evaluated within the framework of the destination image concept. The destination image is shaped at different stages, depending on the information individuals acquire before or after direct experience of the destination. In this context, destination image is considered in three stages: organic image formed through general historical information, media and news sources; induced image developed as a result of the destination's promotional and marketing activities; and complex image that emerges from the direct experience of the destination (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Kavack et al., 2012). Insufficient, inaccurate, or harmful information at the organic or induced image stage creates a weak cognitive impression,

especially for non-visitors, thereby diminishing the intention to visit. Because a lack of information reduces the likelihood that the destination will be considered an attractive alternative (Üner et al., 2006), this finding is consistent with Eryılmaz's (2020) conclusions. In that study, participants cited a lack of knowledge as one reason they did not visit Amasya. Similarly, in another study conducted in Yozgat by Eryılmaz and Yüçetürk (2017), participants cited the city's lack of appeal as a reason for not visiting. Moreover, prestige motivation might be one of the leading forces behind consumption. Tourism is also a social need, driven mainly by prestige motives, which influence whether tourists decide to engage in tourism consumption (Correia and Kozak, 2012). Therefore, a destination perceived as having low tourist value can deter non-visitors who prioritise prestige. Another important finding relates to transportation. Participants were undecided about the ease of access to Van. Transportation is one of the most important factors for tourism mobility. In this regard, limited air travel, particularly to certain cities, reduces access to those destinations and significantly constrains tourist mobility. Therefore, relevant institutions should address planning and improvement efforts to enhance accessibility and increase the destination's competitiveness.

When participants' responses regarding tourist behaviour tendencies were examined, the highest average was observed for the statement, *"I always research the place I am considering online before deciding on my holiday destination."* This finding indicates that destination advertising and promotional activities, particularly through online channels and various social media platforms, have the potential to increase demand for the region. In this context, the first three elements that come to mind when Van is mentioned are Lake Van, the Van breakfast, and the Van cat, all of which are frequently featured in the media and on digital platforms. To strengthen Van's image as a tourist destination, it is also important to increase visibility of its other major attractions on social media and other digital platforms. This will promote a broader recognition of Van's tourism offerings. These findings are consistent with those of Eryılmaz (2020), Eryılmaz and Yüçetürk (2017), and Amunidin et al. (2017). Furthermore, the average responses of participants regarding their views of Van were examined; the highest averages were found for the following items: *"I have acquaintances who visited Van, and the information I received from them is generally negative,"* and *"I have a negative image of Van."* When choosing a destination, tourists can obtain information not only from their own past experiences but also from individuals and groups who have visited the destination or know it. These sources of information can include members of social groups within the individual's immediate circle, or individuals within reference groups such as newspapers, magazines, novel writers, television presenters, or admired actors. The information these individuals share about the destination can directly influence their decision to visit, especially for non-visitors (Ateşoğlu and Bayraktar, 2011). Accordingly, these statements show that non-visitors' negative images of the destination might form through information from their social circles.

A statistically significant difference in levels of tourist behavioural tendencies was found among participants by gender ($t = 5.221, p < 0.05$). The analysis shows that women conduct more research than men during the holiday decision-making process and are more influenced by information from online and social media. Furthermore, women are more active than men in sharing their holiday experiences on social media and in purchasing gifts for their loved ones upon their return. Conversely, no statistically significant differences in participants' views of the Van destination were observed by gender or marital status ($p > 0.05$).

Finally, the analysis showed no statistically significant differences in participants' levels of tourist behaviour tendencies and their views of the destination across age, marital status, occupation, and monthly income ($p > 0.05$). Regarding the education level variable, although no significant difference was found in participants' levels of tourist behaviour tendencies ($p > 0.05$), a statistically significant difference was observed in their views of the destination ($F = 3.173, p < 0.05$).

Accordingly, participants with postgraduate education had a more positive perception of the destination's image than those with associate or bachelor's degrees. These findings indicate that participants' tendencies in tourist behaviour and views of the destination might be shaped primarily by a broader, shared perception framework rather than solely by demographic characteristics.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that the internet and social media play a decisive role in shaping participants' destination choices. Accordingly, increasing the visibility of Van's key tourist attractions on digital platforms is essential. Promotion should go beyond the currently dominant Lake Van, Van cat, and Van breakfast in individuals' minds, highlighting other historical, cultural, and natural attractions. Highlighting lesser-known aspects will deepen their understanding of the destination.

To mitigate Van's negative image, decision-makers should systematically monitor and evaluate destination perceptions and incorporate these insights into policy and planning processes. Improvements in accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, and overall service quality are crucial to reduce negative visitor experiences. Better service quality is expected to increase satisfaction, encourage positive word-of-mouth, and reinforce a positive image. Holistic, coordinated policies developed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders will help achieve a long-term and positive transformation of Van's destination image.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The sample consists exclusively of individuals who have never visited Van. Future research comparing both visitors and non-visitors (Hughes and Allen, 2008; Philips and Jang, 2010; Styliadis and Cherifi, 2018; Magrifani, Lin, and Sneddon, 2022) or jointly examining first-time and repeat visitors may yield broader insights (Lau and McKercher, 2004; Jani and Hwang, 2011; Gorji et al., 2023). A quantitative approach was employed, with data gathered via surveys, limiting in-depth exploration of perceptions. Future studies using qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, or content analysis, could yield multidimensional results (Hughes and Allen, 2008). Tourism perceptions are shaped by factors such as seasonality, security, the economy, and media coverage. Studies conducted at different times may therefore yield varying outcomes. This research considered only demographic factors. Incorporating variables such as destination familiarity (Cheng, 2012), risk and safety perception, cultural predisposition, price perception, place attachment (Cheng and Quiang, 2018), and behavioural intention (Amunudin et al., 2017) in future models could provide a more comprehensive understanding of perceptions toward Van.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Usage Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author utilised ChatGPT and Grammarly for language editing and improving the clarity of expression. All outputs were critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the final content of the article.

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