

# A Study of the Image, Tourism Quality, Perceived Value, and Intention of Mazu Believers towards Religious Site

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**Abstract:** In the international tourism market, religious tourism has always been one of the favorite destinations for tourists, and therefore the quality of destination tourism is very important. The purpose of this study is to analyze the influence of believers who visit Mazu Temple in Lugang Town, Taiwan, on their image of religious site, perception of tourism quality, and perceived value, as well as their willingness to revisit. This study focuses on Mazu believers and conducts a non-random survey outside the Tianhou Temple (Mazu Temple), obtaining a total of 202 valid questionnaires. After collecting valid questionnaires and conducting descriptive statistics and partial least squares (PLS) statistical analysis, the research found that believers' image of religious site affects their perceived tourism quality and value, and affects their willingness to revisit through the above two variables. Based on the above findings, this study not only provides management suggestions for religious destinations, but also provides further research directions for future research.

**Keywords:** religious tourism, image, travel quality, perceived value, revisit willingness

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mazu is one of the important folk beliefs of the Taiwanese people, originating from Meizhou Island in Putian, Fujian Province, China. It is a fisherman who works at sea and a guardian of navigation vessels. Because early mainland Chinese immigrants had to cross the dangerous Taiwan Strait when they arrived in Taiwan, in an era of underdeveloped technology, they carried Mazu aboard ships to bless the safe crossing of the sea. After arriving in Taiwan, it became a spiritual support for the villagers and residents, and later developed into temples for the convenience of people's worship. At present, in several early developed areas in Taiwan, there are Mazu temples with high incense, and after a hundred years of development, they have all formed famous religious sites, such as Tianhou Temple in Lugang Town, Changhua County. As tourists visiting Lugang not only worship Mazu, but also engage in sightseeing activities, the quality of tourism at the destination is crucial. Although the main motivation of pilgrims is to visit the Holy Land itself and engage in religious activities such as prayer and meditation, non-religious/secular tourists may exhibit simple curiosity or gaze at specific architectural heritage styles. Regardless of their primary motivation, even those defined as "pure pilgrims" may participate in certain typical tourism activities, such as shopping, like their non-religious peers (Dimitrovski, Ioannides, & Nikolaau, 2021). So religious tourism refers to visiting religious destinations, mainly to meet the spiritual expectations of tourists, as well as the economic development goals of the destination (Iliev, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study is mainly to analyze the believers who went to the worshipping Mazu at the Tianhou Palace in Lugang. Their influence on local imagery, tourism quality, perceived value, and willingness to revisit. We hope the results of the analysis can provide a reference for planning tourism activities in religious areas.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Tourism destination image is a complex, relativistic, and dynamic structure (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). Destination image refers to the expectations of tourists towards the destination, representing the impression of the destination on the psychological level of tourists. This impression gives tourists preconceived expectations, prompting them to consider, choose, and decide on the destination to visit

(Birgit, 2001), and also affects decision-making patterns and behavioral intentions (Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007). The image of tourist destinations basically depends on two components: cognitive evaluation and emotional evaluation (Walmsley & Young, 1998). Although cognitive components refer to tourists' beliefs or knowledge about the destination, the scope of emotions reflects tourists' feelings about the destination. A favorable destination image can be directly added by two combinations of repeated visits from tourists and their intention to recommend destinations to others (Giles, Bosworth, & Willett, 2013; Marchiori, & Cantoni, 2015). Especially for religious places, positive image not only enhances personal beliefs, maintains mental health, but also promotes social harmony, ensuring safety and stability (Homeayouni, 2011). In Chen and Tsai's (2007) study of tourist behavior patterns, it was found that the more tourists appreciate destination image, the higher the quality of tourism they experience, and it indirectly affects the perceived value. Value is described as a unique, experiential, contextual, and meaningful concept (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), which can be defined as "the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product or service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1988, p.14), and the degree to which destination resources bring economic benefits to the local tourism industry is influenced by the perceived value of tourists (Croes & Kubikova, 2016).

Due to the continuous process of tourism, tourists traveling to religious tourist destinations mainly need to meet the relevant needs of the experience. Therefore, the quality of the tourism experience provided by the destination is very important (Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2015). According to Cong (2016), the quality of tourist destinations is the quality of tourists' experience, feelings, and overall evaluation of the destination. The quality of tourist destinations can be divided into natural scenery, architecture, heritage sites, attraction, food and beverage, accommodation, shopping, entertainment facilities, service standards, residents' friendliness, experience, safety, health, and accessibility (Kusumawati et al., 2021). In the study of tourism behavior by Cheng and Lu (2013), it was also found that tourists' imagery of their destination significantly affects their perceived value. Perceived value refers to the sacrifices made by consumers to obtain products or services, including monetary and non-monetary sacrifices. In terms of money, it is a sacrifice of time for a product or service, or in terms of spiritual effort to obtain a product or service (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000). Moreover, in previous studies on tourism behavior, it has been found that tourists' image of the destination can affect their perception of the local service quality (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Prayag, 2009), as well as the value of perception (Kim, Holland & Han, 2013). Perceived value provides the most powerful emotional effect, second only to a single quality. The perceived value of the tourism industry can be improved through pleasure, enjoyment, and overall quality. As a result, a pleasant travel experience is formed, the perceived quality is improved, and the value of tourists' cognition is added. This can serve as a marketing tool to encourage tourists to revisit or add recommendation intentions. Kim, Duncan, & Chung (2015) found a correlation between perceived value and willingness to revisit, as well as a correlation between tourists' intention to revisit and recommend to others in the future (Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Park & Njite, 2010). Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following 5 hypotheses:

- H1: The image of tourists towards the religious tourism destination in Lugang has an effect on the quality of tourism.
- H2: The image of tourists towards the religious tourism destination in Lugang has an effect on their perceived value.
- H3: The tourism quality experienced by tourists in Lugang has an effect on their perceived value.
- H4: The tourism quality experienced by tourists in Lugang has an effect on their willingness to revisit.
- H5: The perceived value of tourists in Lugang has an effect on their willingness to revisit.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. Subjects and Sampling**

This study focuses on believers (non-Changhua County residents) who worship Mazu in Tianhou Temple (Mazu Temple), Lugang Town, Changhua County, Taiwan. A convenient sampling method was used to survey tourists outside the Tianhou Temple, and a total of 202 valid questionnaires were obtained. Out of 202 valid questionnaires collected in this study, 91 were males (45%) and 111 were

females (55%). There were 143 unmarried individuals (70.8%) and 59 married individuals (29.2%). The age group aged 21 to 30 has the highest number of people, accounting for 93 (46%), while the age group aged 51 and above has the lowest number, accounting for 11 (5.4%). The number of people with the highest education level is university level, accounting for 98 people (48.5%), and the lowest is junior high school (including below), accounting for 11 people (5.4%). The number of students in the occupation is the highest, accounting for 64 people (31.7%), with the lowest being homemakers and retirees, totaling 6 people (3%). Personal monthly income is calculated as income in NT\$. The highest number of people is between 20000 and 40000, accounting for 81 people (40.1%), while the lowest number is NT. \$100001, accounting for 1 person (12.9%).



**Figure1.** *Lugang Tianhou Temple (Photo:Hsiao-Ming, Chang)*



**Figure2.** *The statue of Mazu. (Photo:Hsiao-Ming, Chang)*

### **3.2. Measures**

This research questionnaire is divided into five parts, and the scale part is measured using the Likert 5-point scale with a 5-point scale. Scores of 1-5 are given for "strongly disagree", "disagree", "ordinary", "agree", and "strongly agree", respectively.

The first part is about the image of tourist destinations, totaling 17 questions, including the Mazu faith, religious culture, folk beliefs, snacks, old streets, and the image of temple celebrations in Lugang Town. We developed this scale based on Chang, Lin, and Huang's (2020) study of the Mazu religious tourism destination image Scale, as well as on-site visits to various scenic spots in Lugang Town.

The second part is about the tourism quality of Lugang Town, including the preservation of historical relics, personnel services, transportation conditions, scenic spot services, hospitality services, environmental cleanliness, transportation, and public facilities. We have developed this scale with a total of 22 questions, and the compilation of the scale mainly refers to Chang and Lin's (2020) research on the quality of tourist destinations, as well as the researcher's on-site inspection of various facilities and services in Lugang Town.

The third part is about whether the money, time, physical strength, and spirit invested by tourists in traveling to Lugang Town are worth it. There are a total of 3 questions, mainly cited from Chang, Lin, and Huang's (2020) research on the Mazu Religious Tourism Perceived Value Scale.

The fourth part is about tourists' willingness to come to Lugang Town for tourism activities in the future, as well as their willingness to recommend family and friends. There are a total of 5 questions, mainly referring to the Mazu Tourism Destination Revisiting Intention Scale developed by Chang, Huang, and Pan (2022).

The fifth part is demographic variables, including five items: gender, age, marital status, education level, occupation, and income.

**3.3. Data Analysis**

The effective questionnaires collected in this study were analyzed using the following statistical analysis steps: 1. SPSS for Windows 21.0 software was used to describe the frequency distribution and percentage of statistics, and to analyze the distribution of demographic variables among Mazu believers. 2. Used the Warp PLS 8.0 statistical software and the partial least squares (PLS) statistical method, analyze the reliability and validity of the destination image, tourism quality, perceived value, and revisit intention scale, as well as the relationship between the four variables.

**4. RESULTS**

**4.1. Reliability and Validity Measures**

From the analysis results in Table 1, it can be seen that the compositional reliability (CR) of all four potential variables in this study reached above .80, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  The value is also above .70, so the reliability of each scale in this study is good. In terms of validity, from the analysis results, it can be seen that the factors loading of each observation variable in this study is above .60. Except for the AVE of destination image and tourism quality, which is below .50, the AVE of the other two potential variables is above .50. Basically, the conversion validity of the scale in this study is still acceptable.

**Table1.** *Confirmatory factor analysis results*

Latent variables/Measure index	CR	$\alpha$	AVE
Destination image	.89	.87	.33
Travel quality	.93	.92	.39
Perceived value	.91	.84	.76
Revisit willingness	.87	.81	.57

**Table2.** *Discriminant validity analysis results*

Variables	Destination image	Travel quality	Perceived value	Revisit willingness
Destination image	.57			
Travel quality	.45	.62		
Perceived value	.43	.50	.87	
Revisit willingness	.48	.46	.61	.75

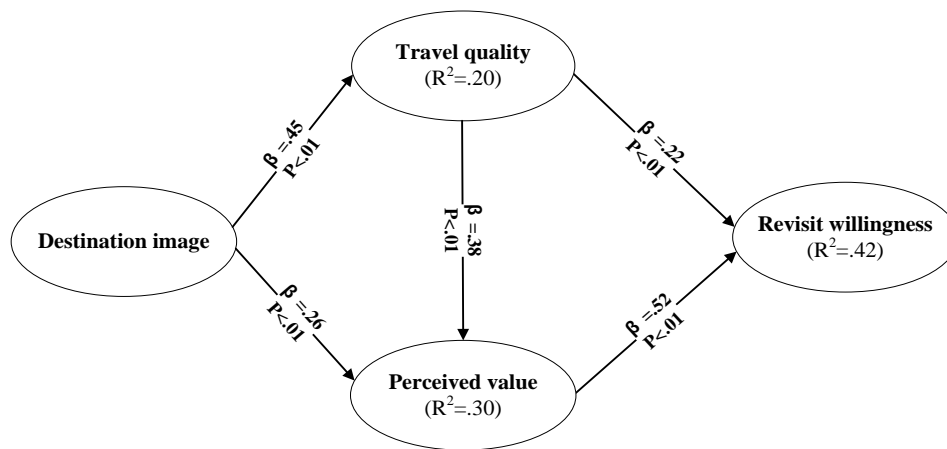
**Note:** *Square roots of the average variances extracted (AVEs) are shown on a diagonal.*

It can be seen from the results in Table 2 that the square root of AVE of the four potential variables in this study is between .57 and .87, and the AVE of each potential variable is greater than all the relevant coefficient values in the same column and column, meeting the detection criteria. Therefore, the measurement model of this study has good differential validity.

**4.2. Structural Equation Modeling**

Figure 1 shows the standardized regression path coefficients ( $\beta$  value). Destination image has a positive effect on travel quality ( $\beta=.45, p<.01$ ) and perceived value ( $\beta=.26, p<.01$ ). Next, travel quality has a

positive effect on perceived value ( $\beta = .38, p < .01$ ) and revisit willingness ( $\beta = .22, p < .01$ ). Last perceived value ( $\beta = .52, p < .01$ ) has a positive effect on revisit willingness.



**Figure1. Structural model results**

Table 3 shows the results of the hypothesis tests. A high R2 of predictive power. As shown in Figure 1, destination image explained 20% of the variance in travel quality, and travel quality explained 30% of the variance in perceived value. Further, the four latent variables explained 42% of the variance in revisit willingness.

**Table3. The Results of the Hypothesis Tests**

Hypothesis	Path coefficients( $\beta$ )	Test result
H1: Destination image $\rightarrow$ Travel quality	.45**	Support
H2: Destination image $\rightarrow$ Perceived value	.26**	Support
H3: Travel quality $\rightarrow$ Perceived value	.38**	Support
H4: Travel quality $\rightarrow$ Revisit willingness	.22**	Support
H5: Perceived value $\rightarrow$ Revisit willingness	.52**	Support
Model fit indicators: APC = .365 ( $p < .001$ ), ARS = .309 ( $p < .001$ ), AVIF = 1.286 (acceptable if $\leq 5$ , ideally $\leq 3.3$ )		

\*\* $P < .01$

Model fit indicators are important in SEM since they offer comparable measurements (Berglund, Lytsy, Westerling, 2013). The WarpPLS calculates three fit indices which are meaningful in the context of variance-based SEM (Kock, 2011): average path coefficient (APC), average R-squared (ARS) and average variance inflation factor (AVIF). The main reason why WarpPLS includes APC and ARS is to enable an acceptable comparison between different models, which is why these measures are of lower importance in studies like this, where each path is independently important (Berglund, Lytsy, & Westerling, 2013). However, figures for APC and ARS should both be under 2 and should both be statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), while the value for AVIF is suggested to be below 5. The whole model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data for APC = .365 ( $p < .001$ ), ARS = .309 ( $p < .001$ ) and AVIF = 1.286, and Table 3 reports the results of the hypothesis tests.

**5. DISCUSSION**

**5.1. Theoretical Implications**

According to the analysis results, all five hypotheses proposed in this study have been validated. Firstly, the results of this study found that tourists' image of the Lugang religious tourism destination has a positive effect on travel quality. The results of the analysis support past research that tourists' image of tourist destinations can affect their perceived tourism quality of the destination (Chang & Lin, 2020; Chang, Lin, & Huang, 2020), and can also affect the perceived value (Cheng & Lu, 2013; Chen & Tsai, 2007). This also indicates that the worshippers of the Tianhou Temple later engaged in sightseeing activities and discovered that the original image of Lugang was a place full of Mazu faith, folk beliefs,



and traditional culture. So the main motivation for going there is not only to worship Mazu, but also to travel by the way, so the quality of tourism provided by the destination is very important. In this study, the quality of travel includes: preservation of historical relics, services for scenic spots, transportation conditions, scenic spot services, hospitality services, environmental cleanliness, transportation, snacks, public facilities, etc. Due to the fact that tourists' imagery of the destination includes both cognitive and emotional assessments (Walmsley & Young, 1998), it can be found from this study that Mazu believers have high beliefs or knowledge about the local area of Lugang, and have positive feelings towards the destination. Therefore, they have high expectations for the quality of local tourism. Secondly, this study found that believers have a positive effect on the perceived value of travel quality in Lugang. This indicates that the travel quality in Lugang is good, and believers perceive that the investment of time, money, and energy is valuable. The above results support previous research that tourism is a continuous process, so tourists traveling to religious tourism destinations mainly need to meet the relevant needs of the experience. Therefore, the quality of the travel experience provided by the destination is crucial (Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2015). Tourists' image of the destination can affect their perception of the local service quality (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Prayag, 2009), as well as the perceived value (Kim, Holland, & Han, 2013). Finally, due to the perceived quality of tourism that matches the original image and the high perceived value of tourism, believers have a high willingness to visit and travel to Lugang in the future. Finally, due to the perceived quality of travel that matches the original image and the high perceived value of tourism, believers have a high willingness to visit and travel to Lugang in the future.

So after the above discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn: (1) The image of believers towards the Lugang religious tourism destination will affect their perception of the quality of local tourism, and then affect their perception of the value of religious tourism. (2) When believers feel that the quality of tourism in Lugang is high and positive, they perceive the value of religious tourism to be higher and more positive, and their intention to visit religious destinations in the future will also be higher.

## **5.2. Practical Implications**

Due to the international reputation of the Tianhou Temple in Lugang, the crowded front of the temple is caused by the large number of tourists during holidays due to the catering vendors at the entrance. In addition, the guidance of volunteers is also important. As there are often groups of tourists visiting the temple to worship, but the number is too large and crowded, which affects the quality of visitors' worship. Therefore, volunteers should provide clear guidance before entering the temple. After worshipping Mazu, believers may then visit local old streets or visit two other Mazu temples that have been around for over a century. So the cleanliness of the old streets and streets, timely cleaning of garbage, and necessary crowd control measures should be implemented when there are many tourists, in order to avoid accidents such as dirtiness and overcrowding. Due to the fact that tourists or worshippers' understanding of religious tourism destinations is based on associations stored in their memories, these memories may be influenced by different sources of information, such as mass media, travel websites, blogs, social introductions by internet celebrities on websites, and recommendations from family and friends. So before they leave, it is very important to give a good impression and memory of Lugang, especially when going to the local area, and more importantly, to maintain the quality of tourism. So for the government departments and tourism industry in Lugang Town, through various mass media and tourism websites, it is advocated that tourists do not enter the urban area when traveling to Lugang, and park in the dedicated parking lot outside the town. They can walk or ride rental bicycles, or take human bicycles (the drivers are professional tour guides) to reduce pollution caused by holiday crowds in the area. In addition, the prices of various products, snacks, souvenirs, and catering are reasonable, allowing tourists and believers to feel that the money, time, and physical strength spent in Lugang Town are worth it, and the willingness to revisit in the future will only increase.

## **5.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Due to some older tourists answering questions about vision and education, they are unable to fill out the questionnaire, resulting in fewer questions for subjects aged 61 and above. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers conduct surveys with older believers through interviews or manual explanations, in order to gain a better understanding of their faith behavior. In addition, although this study conducted a study on the tourism behavior of Mazu believers from the perspective of religious

tourism, during the investigation process, it was found that tourists' reactions were limited by the scale items developed by the researchers. In fact, the main reasons for them to come to religious tourism were "faith" and "pray for Mazu's blessings", but the researchers did not list many items in this regard. Therefore, it is suggested that in future research, when conducting surveys similar to this study, additional questions on religious tourism motivation can be added.

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