Structural relationship of the natural environment, eco label and atmosphere of the region with destination choice: role of mediating destination image (case study: Eco-camp of Matin Abad)

Sakineh Jafari [1, *], Mahdieh Ghasemi [2], Sajjad Shalikar [3]

[1]Department of Management, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran
[2]Department of Tourism Marketing Management at Semnan University, Semnan, Iran
[3]Faculty of Computing, University Technology Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to test the structural relationship of the natural environment, eco label and the atmosphere with destination choice, considering the role of a mediator destination image in the perspective of tourists which was in Matin Abad eco-camp. Also, 150 participants, all tourists (55 females, 95 males) visiting Eco-camp of Matin Abad were selected randomly as sample of this study. All the scales of natural environment, eco label, atmosphere of the region, destination image and destination choice were completed by respondents. Data were analyzed with path analysis model using LISREL. The results show that the atmosphere of the region has direct structural impact on the destination choice. The natural environment through mediated destination image has indirect effect on destination choice. Furthermore, destination choice also got indirect impact from eco label using mediated destination image. Atmosphere of the region can directly affect the choice of destination. The natural environment and eco label indirectly and via mediated destination image can affect the choice of destination. Also, Practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Key words: Natural environment; Eco label; Atmosphere of the region; Destination image; Destination choice

1. Introduction

Traveling from one place to another is an issue that has been of interest to mankind through history and although influenced by factors such as safety, environment and natural resources of water, air, wildlife and landscapes, it has always been a function of human societies. However, after the industrial revolution and the mechanization of industry, mankind has gained more leisure time. Thus, with the emergence of means of transportation, cheaper and safer travelling, one of the main ways to spend leisure time was by travelling. With the passing of time, tourist trips have increased. At the present time, organizing trips is a growth industry and become a large source of income for those involved in it. On the other hand, travelling is always done with goals and incentives. In fact these incentives are the factors that travelers are influenced by, first to make the trip and second to choose their desired destination, in terms of time and cost. However, these choices at first seem to be due to personal preferences, but preferences and tastes are also a function of other factors such as natural environment, atmosphere of region and destination image (Xie and lee, 2013; Rodríguez-Santos et al., 2013).

Researchers believe that the choice of destination is affected by a person's image of the destination. However this image is not separated from the environment (Bigne et al., 2001) which is involved with natural environment, eco label and atmosphere of region (Mansouri et al., 2012). Destination image may deeply influence the mind of tourists. Tourists' perception of destination (type and quality of accommodation, prices, support of hotels and atmosphere of the region) effect the forming and changing of destination image in the visitor's mind. Researches has revealed that the atmosphere of the region (such as natural beauty, tourism infrastructure, etc.) affect the destination image. Destination image is a set of beliefs, ideas and feelings that people have toward a destination. In fact, it is the mental image of the destination (Pan and Li, 2011). Studies illustrate that the costumers' view of a product is affected by the images before purchase and the perception after purchase (Karoubi, 2010). At present, the fact that destination image play a significant role in destination choice is widely accepted (Hudson et al., 2011; Bigne et al., 2001). In today's competitive market environment, destination image is important for marketing of destinations (Gomez et al., 2010). As a matter of fact the tourism industry, which is highly image oriented, emphasizes the destination image for predicting the travel attitude (Lee et al., 2005; Elliot et al., 2010; Pan and Li, 2011). Factors such as natural environment, cultural heritage, tourism infrastructure have been evaluated as the

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* Corresponding Author.

dimensions of destination image (Gibson et al., 2008).

In addition, atmosphere of the region includes natural landscape (mixture of the human, physical and cultural environment), accommodation and services which are related to factors such as natural landscapes, design of hotels, historical attractions and tourism infrastructure. They provide the foundation of the tourists' travelling and may have a strong influence on the destination image and choice (Sirgy and Su, 2000; Chen and Phou, 2013).

Another factor influencing the choice of tourism destinations can be eco label. The main function of eco labels either on local or international level is marketing mechanism which affects the destination choice of the customer. There are environmental concerns about environmental destination and tourist sending countries in developed nations and even developing countries. Processes through which the tourists choose which products to buy are involved in the eco label (Buckley, 2002, 2013). In recent decades, due to development of responsible tourism and the growth of awareness about environmental issues among tourists, governments and companies, environmental management has become one of the fundamental issues in hotel industry. This has led to the green movement in hotels to create a new trend in the hospitality industry. As a new trend, the environmental management issues are widely followed. Eco certification programs and projects, local and international initiatives and eco label are rewards to encourage eco-friendly hotels and train clients there (Font, 2002; Kuuder, 2013). Eco label indicates that costumers are spending more money for organic foods, green energy, healthy drinks, thus paying more attention to different environmental and social perceptions such as waste disposal methods that do not damage the environment (Hamilton and Zilberman, 2006), which in turn can influence the selection of travel destinations by tourists. The structure of the paper is as follows: destination image and destination choice are describe in Section 2 and Section 3, respectively. Section 4, explains eco label and eco-camp is given in Section 5. Conceptual frame work of the paper is organized in Section 6 and Section 7 is presented the methodology research methods, measurement and data analysis. Section 8 is illustrated the results and discussions of paper and Section 9 remark conclusions.

2. Destination image

The literature review of the influences of destination image revealed three major determinants existing in the absence of actual visitation or previous experience: tourism motivation, socio demographics, and various information sources. In this regard, the latter represent stimulus variables whereas motivation and socio demographics stand for consumer characteristics in the proposed path model. Each component was selected based on the literature review and research of other models. The image concept has generally been considered as an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about an object or destination. Researchers in several disciplines and fields agree that the image construct has both perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations. The perceptual/ cognitive evaluations refer to the beliefs or knowledge about a destination's attributes whereas affective evaluation refers to feelings toward, or attachment to it. A common agreement is that this depends on a cognitive evaluation of objects and the affective responses are formed as a function of the cognitive responses. An overall image of a place is formed as a result of both perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations of that place (Baloglu and McLeay, 1999).
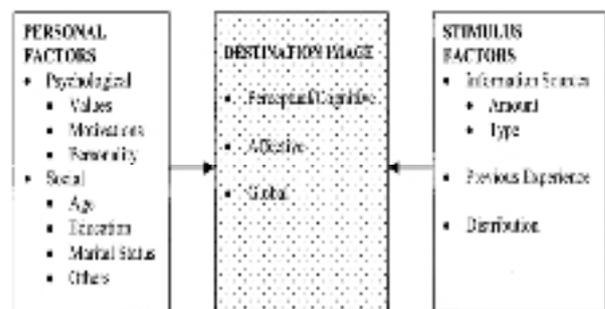

Fig. 1: *A General Framework of Destination Image Formation (Baloglu and McLeay, 1999).*

Fig. 1 shows a general framework of obtained image formation. Many researchers in various scientific fields are in agreement that two major factors effect image formation which is: a) Stimulus factors and b) Personal factors. Stimulus factors are rooted in external motives, objective and physical factors, and also past experiences. Personal factors mean social and psychological characteristics of the person.

3. Destination choice

Travel decision – making involves a complex and multifaceted decision process (Park and Lutz, 1982; Moutinho, 1987; Woodside and MacDonald, 1994; Tay et al., 1996; Dellaert et al., 1998a; Fesenmaier and Jeng, 2000; Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002). Among the many aspects of a trip that require the consideration, evaluation and elimination of alternatives, choosing a destination represents one of the core decisions to be made. Travel, by definition, represents a spatial movement from an original location to one or more destinations, and tourism products and services (attractions, accommodations, activities) are closely tied to those destinations. Also, this central role of destination choice implies that the selection of a travel destination is one of the first decisions made in the trip-planning process and influences all subsequent decisions (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002). Thus, travelers' destination choice forms an essential part

of their entire trip-planning process and has long been recognized as an important topic by researchers in tourism.

In its simplest form, destination choice can be defined as a process of choosing one destination among a number of alternatives for the purpose of fulfilling the travel-related needs at hand.

4. Eco label

The origins of certification are the manufacturing industry, with greater, direct and measurable environmental impacts, clearer operating systems and larger organizations (Tribe et al., 2000). Manufacturing standards were set by the European Commission and recognized through the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) in 1993. This is based on the implementation of EMSs, with clear benchmarks only specified for some industries.

LA EMAS was devised for local authorities, and is the only version for the service sector. In 1996, the International Standards Organization set ISO 14001, which awards whole organizations for any industry (Tribe et al., 2000), and it has been achieved by a handful of tourism organizations, such as Center Parcs UK (Collins, 2000). Because the original EMAS and ISO systems are only feasible for larger companies, the tourism industry has usually preferred to work with its own systems, usually a much softer approach (Synergy, 2000).

Eco labels were introduced as a more formalized method to focus on environmental efficiency. They require verification by an independent third party, they are linked to technical advice, the label can be regained through a cyclical review, and criteria evolve in stages. Criticisms of tourism eco labels are that they are expensive, they require time, they usually focus on hotels or ecotourism providers, the eco label organizer has limited marketing power, and the criteria focus on environmental management, not environmental performance (Synergy, 2000).

A label is simply a description of something associated with it in some way so that a potential purchaser or user can obtain information from it rather than the object itself. Labels may be spoken or written, text or image, brief or extensive, fixed or detachable, accurate or inaccurate, reliable or misleading, local or global, one-off or systematic. They may contain information only from owners or vendors, or from third parties such as independent certification agencies. In its broadest sense, an eco-label is simply one whose content refers principally to the environment (Buckley, 2002).

According to Middleton and Hawkins (1998), the tourism industry uses eco labels (from now on this term will be used interchangeably to mean eco seals or environmental awards) as "trademarks or logos" to communicate the environmental credentials of a company, with the hopes that customers develop positive attitudes toward their product or service. In the market place, this type of strategy can give companies a differential advantage over their competitors. The use of eco labels (e.g., Blue Flag, Seaside Award, Green Globe, Blue Angel, Green Leaf, Green Suitcase, etc.) issued by respected accreditation schemes are usually intended to (1) curb tourism's negative environmental impact on the natural resource base of destination areas by encouraging tourism enterprises to attain high environmental standards (UNEP, 1998), (2) educate tourists regarding the impact of their tourism-related actions and decisions, thereby prompting them to act in favor of 'environmentally benign' tourism enterprises through their purchasing decisions (UNEP, 1998), and (3) develop standards for environmentally friendly tourism products and services (Mihalic, 2000).

Certification programs within the tourism industry are all voluntary, market-driven initiatives, meaning that companies choose to be certified and consumers pick labeled products. The term certification, as it is used within the ecotourism industry, is defined as follows: "A procedure that audits and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process or service meets specific standards. It awards a logo or seal to those that meet or exceed baseline criteria or standards that are prescribed by the program." Certification programs in the ecotourism industry can be divided into two types: process-based and performance-based. The process-based approach is based on setting up environmental management systems (EMS) within businesses and using these internal systems for monitoring and improving procedures and practices. Process-based certifiers do not set performance standards, but rather award eco-labels for progress toward internal goals, such as reducing electricity and water consumption. While on the one hand proponents of the process-based approach contend that it is more collaborative and responsive to the needs of companies of all sizes, critics counter that process-based approaches are more costly to monitor and are difficult to measure and compare to general standards.

The majority of sustainable and ecotourism certifiers follow a performance-based approach, however, which utilizes externally determined criteria and benchmarks that are applied uniformly to all tourism venues seeking certification (Hansen, 2007).

5. Eco-camp

Eco-Camp is a place where participants are immersed in nature and attend to its rhythms. They feel deeply safe, alive, and inspired to effect change. It is going to be a livid experience and will immerse participants in a remote location for days at a time. The definitive statement of the purpose of the camp must bring to life the influence of immersion in nature. Primary objectives outline the ways in which the Eco-Camp is aiming to educate participants through understanding and appreciation of the local ecology. Eco-Camp will be a way for participants to escape the busyness of modern society: the cell

phone, the cars, the email, the constant interruption, of always multitasking. It will instead focus participants on the beauty of life at that moment. It will be a movement, a re-aligning focused on simplicity and appreciation in accordance with nature (La Mar, 2006)

Matin Abad Desert Camp is located 6Km away from the Tehran-Isfahan highway, about 60Km south-east of Kashan, one of the main attractions of Central Iran.

The Matin Abad region remains a site of unparalleled beauty. The desert plains constantly change colors from rich green to pale oceans of swaying grass and desert shrubs and trees. Silver in the rising sun and golden at dawn. The activities offered at the adventure camp of Matin Abad such as nature- and sunset - drives, bike excursions and camel rides are all absolute highlights of your Iran Journey.

The sandy roads leading to the camp and the adventure area are all in good condition. We park the vehicles in the village, 1.5 km from the camp and we stroll amongst the desert trees to the camp. Lorries are available for those who want to experience the traditional way of transportation in the region. Luggage will be carried to the camp by attendants. (http://www.matinabad.com/).

6. Conceptual framework

According to the above mentioned facts and evaluating the literature on importance of the role of natural environment, eco label and atmosphere of the region in the destination choice of tourists and also to establish desirability development in tourism operation, this study proposed a theoretical model of structural relationship between natural environment, eco label and atmosphere of the region. In the conceptual framework, natural environment, eco label and atmosphere of the region as exogenous variables have a direct effect on the destination choice. Furthermore, it has been assumed that destination image in the structural relationship of natural environment, eco label and atmosphere of the region plays an intermediary role in the choice of destination (Fig.2).
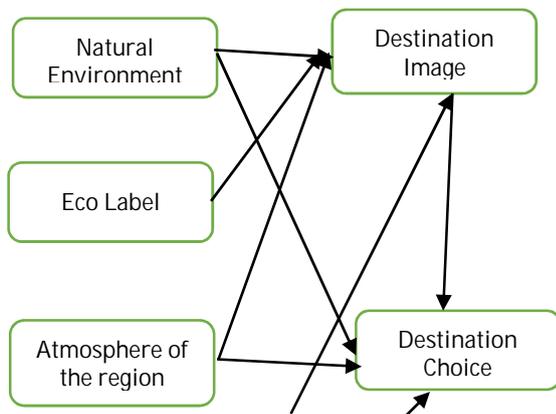

Fig. 2: Conceptual model

7. Material and methods

This study is a correlation. The population of this study consisted of all tourists visiting the Matin Abad eco-camp. Given the assumed paths 12 parameters (6 parameters in Gamma matrix, 1 parameter in Beta matrix, 3 parameters in Phi matrix and 2 parameters in Psi matrix) must be estimated. Hence, the sample size should be at least 5 to 50 times the desired parameters (Muller, 1996). Accordingly, a sample of 150 was assumed. The respondents were 150 tourists (55 female, 95 male) who visited the Matin Abad eco-camp which has been selected randomly.

7.1. Measurement

A) The scale of the natural environment: natural environment, is used in this study as the scale consists of 5 items and a five -point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to extremely agree (5) was determined. Reliability with Cronbach's alpha for this scale was (0.78) and the item correlation had a total score of (0.78- 0.53) respectively.

B) The scale of eco label: eco label is used to measure the scale of eco label that contains 6 items and a five -point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to extremely agree (5) was determined. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale with (0.90) green label is used. Items correlated with the total score was (0.85 -0.51).

C) The scale of atmosphere of the region: atmosphere of the region is used with respect to the purpose of the study. The scale consisting of seven items that form five -point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to extremely agree (5) was determined. In this study, Cronbach's Alpha scale atmosphere zone (0.91) is obtained. The range of correlations between items and a total score of the (0.82) to (0.51), respectively.

D) The scale of destination image: destination image is used for the purpose of the research. The scale consisting of seven items that form five -point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to extremely agree (5) was determined. In this study, Cronbach's Alpha of the destination image scale (0.71) is used. The range of correlations between destination image items and a total score of (0.68 - .40) respectively.

E) The scale of Destination choice: this scale was used to measure the tourists' destination choice in the scope of the research. This scale consisting of 5 items that form a five -point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to extremely agree (5) was determined. Alpha coefficients calculated in this study are equal to (0.87). Range of item-total correlations were obtained (0.88 - 0.63).

7.2. Data analysis

For statistical analysis (SPSS V19) and (LISREL V8.54) was used. Descriptive parameters including

mean, standard deviation and correlation coefficients were calculated. The hypothesis of structural relationship was tested using path analysis model; and variables desirability of the final model were reported.

8. Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviation and correlation matrix between variables of the research were analyzed to determine the mean of variables of natural environment, eco label, atmosphere of the zone, destination image and destination choice (Table 1). The mean of eco label (4.01 = M) over a 5-degree increment indicates that that participants have assessed eco label in a higher level than average. Almost the same pattern is observed in the atmosphere. Destination choice has a meaningful and theoretical relationship with the natural environment, eco label, atmosphere of the zone and destination image. The intensity of the relationship between destination choice and atmosphere of the zone is above average and higher than other variables (r = 0.65, p <.001). Destination

image has the highest correlation with the atmosphere of the zone. The natural environment has more relationship with destination image rather than destination choice or eco label. To test the theoretical model of this study, the pattern of correlations between the variables were considered. Results show that the theoretical model of the research is over-identification model. To test the theoretical model of this study, the pattern of correlations between the variables were considered. Results show that the theoretical model of the research is Meta-identification model. This means that the number of estimable parameters of the model is more than the variance-covariance observed in the model (c p). Thus, to assess the suitability of the theoretical model, path coefficients and their meaningfulness were evaluated. The findings illustrate that the direct effect of the natural environment on destination choice $(\gamma_{21} = -1.40, p > .05)$ and also the direct effect of eco label on the destination choice $(\gamma_{2} = 1.57, p > .05)$, is not meaningful.

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation, correlation and reliability coefficients of the variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5
1.Natural Environment	3.59	.61	.78				
2.Eco Label	4.01	.70	**.55	.90			
3.Atmosphere of the Region	3.95	.64	* *.65	**.67	.91		
4.Destination Image	3.55	.57	**.670	**.65	**.78	.71	
5.Destination Choice	3.77	.73	**.49	**.44	**.65	**.61	.87

*.Reliability coefficients are on the lower diagonal of the triangular matrices
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed),
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed),

Table 2: Suitability indices of final modified model

Index	Accepted domain	Amount	Results
X2	.05> P	1.01	Verify
Df	-	2	-
X2/df	3-5	.505	Verify
RMSEA	.08 < RMSEA	.001	Verify
SRMR	SRMR< .09	.01	Verify
CI (90%) RMSEA	Up to .1	.000-.036	Verify
GFI	.90 > GFI	1	Verify
AGFI	.90 > GFI	.98	Verify
NNFI	.90> NFI	1	Verify
CFI	.90> CFI	1	Verify
IFI	.90> IFI	1	Verify

Finally, in order to modify the model, meaningless paths were removed and suitability of the data-model was investigated. The final revised model has been illustrated in Fig. 2. Investigating the model fit indices indicated that the final model fit the data reasonably well (Table 2). Direct, indirect and total impact is reported in Table 3. In the final model atmosphere of the region has a direct effect on

destination choice, but natural environment and eco label has no direct effect on destination choice. The natural environment indirectly affects the destination choice mediated by destination image. Moreover, eco label has indirect impact on the destination choice which is mediated by destination image. The meaningfulness coefficients of model in Fig. 3 indicate that the model is meaningful.
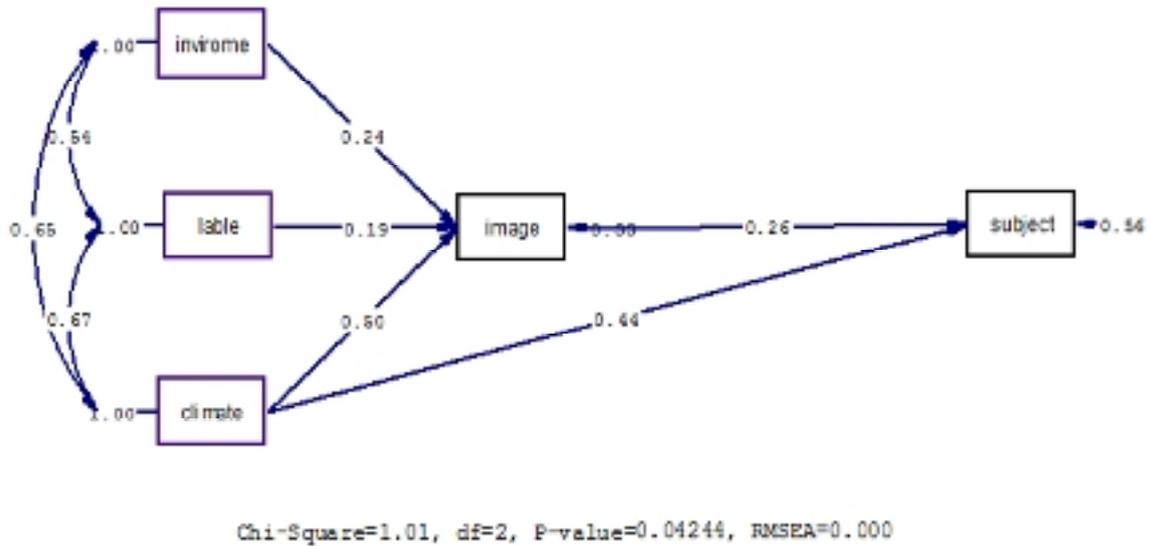
Chi-Square=1.01, df=2, P-value=0.04244, RMSEA=0.000

Fig. 3: Estimated model

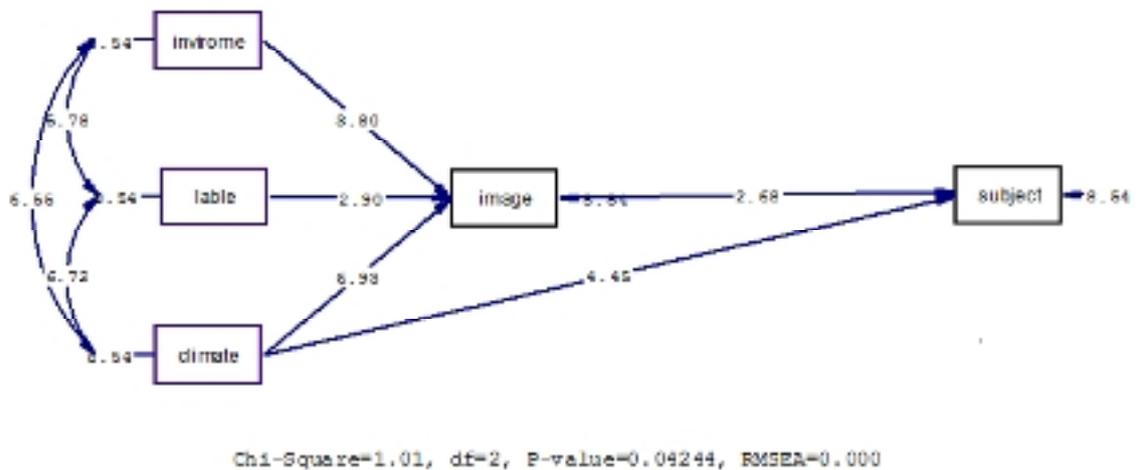Chi-Square=1.01, df=2, P-value=0.04244, RMSEA=0.000

Fig 4: Meaningful Model

Table 3: Direct, indirect and total effect of natural environment, eco label, atmosphere of the region and destination image on destination choice

Effect	Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Exogenous to endogenous	Natural environment on the destination image	**.24	-	**.24
	Eco label on destination image	**.19	-	**.19
	Atmosphere of the region on destination image	**.50	-	**.50
	Destination image on destination choice	**.26	-	**.26
	Natural environment on destination choice	-	*.08	*.08
	Eco label on destination choice	-	*.05	*.05
	Atmosphere of the region on destination choice	**.44	**.15	**.59
Endogenous to exogenous	Destination image on destination choice	**.24	-	**.24

*Metric coefficients have been reported
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed),
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed),

A tourist has drawn an image of destination in his mind which can be related to its specific features (a unique attraction in the area which can be found nowhere else in the world) or to the general features of the area such as the weather, the transportation and so on (Obenour et al., 2005). Today, there are concerns about the limited natural resources of the earth. The effort of leading communities in

environmental issues led to the beginning of widespread attention to environment (Schweinsberg, 2009). Increasing degradation of the environment must be considered by stakeholders in tourism industry and hotel management to improve destination image and also to help tourists to choose a destination. In this study, according to the concerns about environment and the role of eco label, natural environment and atmosphere of the region, a theoretical model of their structural relationships with destination choice was developed in which the intermediary role of destination image has been highlighted.

Other findings of this study suggest that atmosphere of the region has a direct effect on the destination choice which is consistent with some previous findings (Martin and Del Bosque, 2008; Chen and Phou, 2013; Beerli and Martın, 2004; Royo-Vela, 2009).Given that destination choice as a tourist attitude is affected by atmosphere of the region, it can be concluded that existence of an atmosphere of tranquility away from the stress associated with a variety of entertainments that are suitable for families, may be considered a tool to encourage destination choice of tourists.

The first limitation of the study is its design. The structural relationships between the natural environment and atmosphere of the region with destination choice are not causality relationships; at best, these relationships are kind of synchronicity. Second limitation of this study is to sample participants. The results of this study can be generalized to the population of tourists and visitors from eco-camp of Matin Abad. Another limitation of this study is related to the measurement tools. Measuring questionnaire has a number of inherent limitations (measurement errors, lack of self-review, unacceptable social responses, etc.).

The natural environment affects the destination choice indirectly with intermediary of destination image which is not consistent with some previous findings (Huybersand Bennett, 2000). Thus, the natural environment, including water, air, wildlife and landscapes can have a positive impact on destination image and lead to the destination choice.

9. Conclusions

The first finding of this study reveals that from the tourists' perspective, destination choice has meaningful and theoretical relationship with natural environment, eco label, atmosphere of the region and destination image. These findings are consistent with some previous studies (Klenosky et al., 2006; Huybers et al., 2000). Marketing researchers believe that eco label leads to better marketing of a tourist destination which can be a good motivator to promote local and international destination choices. Furthermore, by improving destination image, selecting the destination by tourists is likely to increase. In addition, it is also the responsibility of the hoteliers and other tourism industry stakeholders to protect the environment and prevent its degradation for achieving sustainable development goals.

One of the factors which this research has endorsed is that destination choice is influenced by the eco label with mediate of destination image. Thus, according to the results obtained, using clean energy, proper sewage disposal, and serving organic food can affect the destination choice among tourists by improving destination image, thereby making that destination attract more tourists. Hence, according to the findings and also given the fact that eco label is more available to managers and practitioners of residential centers compared with natural environment and atmosphere of the region, by obtaining environmental certifications individuals are encouraged to travel. In addition, environmental degradation is reduced by tourists.

In this study, measurement tools in the destination image do not have high credibility. Thus, part of observed path loss coefficients and correlation loss coefficients may be related to the loss of validity of the instrument. Accordingly, it is suggested to researchers for causal inferences to repeat the obtained relationships with recurring pilot projects to develop evidence of synchronization of the relationships obtained. In addition, it is recommended that researchers conduct future research on other communities to replicate the present study which will provide evidence of the expansion of relationships observed in the country. It is also suggested that in addition to the use of valid instruments to measure constructs, they use other measurement methods to obtain evidence of developing the relationships from one method to the other methods.

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