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A Model for Studying the Effect of Tourist Image on Satisfaction and Loyalty at World Heritage Sites: A Case Study of the City of Córdoba (Spain)

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Abstract

Córdoba, recognised as a cultural hub with four UNESCO World Heritage declarations, possesses a rich heritage that makes it an important subject for studying its image as a tourist destination based on tourists' perceptions. This research aims to enhance the scientific literature on the affective and cognitive images of World Heritage Sites (WHSs), and to this end, the relationship between visitors' previous experiences and their tourist motivations and their perceived image of their destination was analysed, as well as its influence on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. For this purpose, a structured questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of tourists who visited the city of Córdoba during the period between December 2023 and November 2024, with a total of 712 responses being received. Based on the theoretical foundations provided by the academic literature, a structural model is proposed and validated that identifies observable and latent variables involved in the formation of the destination image. The model fitted the data well, attending to both incremental and absolute fit measures ($\chi 2/df = 3.311$; CFI = 0.925; TLI= 0.916; GFI = 0.990; RMSEA = 0.057; and SRMR = 0.059) The findings show that both tourist motivations and previous visits to a destination have a significant impact on the construction of its tourist image, which in turn affects visitor satisfaction and loyalty levels. Bootstrapping analysis demonstrates the role of satisfaction as a mediating variable between destination image and loyalty. However, the mediation is partial, as there is a statistically significant direct effect between destination image and loyalty. These results have important implications for public and private tourism managers, as they suggest strategies aimed at strengthening the image of the city of Córdoba as a heritage tourist destination. The study is in line with the journal's editorial objectives in contributing to knowledge that can be applied to improving the competitiveness of heritage destinations, such as the city of Córdoba, and its findings can be extrapolated to similar tourist destinations.

Keywords: motivation, destination image, satisfaction, loyalty, WHS, heritage tourism

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1 Introduction

Destination image plays a key role in tourists' decision-making process, both before and after choosing their destination (Almeida-García et al., 2020). Thus, image is a fundamental tool not only for attracting the attention of potential tourists (Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2001), but also for fostering their satisfaction and loyalty (Campo-Martínez et al., 2010). Various stakeholders linked to the tourism sector – including specialised institutions, companies in the hotel and restaurant industry, and organisations dedicated to cultural and heritage management – use

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marketing strategies to ensure that the image of the destination projected is consistent with consumer expectations. These agents are also responsible for communicating and disseminating information about intangible assets and the tourist offer available, thus contributing to the overall enhancement of the destination (Beltrán-Bueno & Parra-Meroño, 2016). Therefore, effective management of a destination increases its attractiveness to potential tourists and, at the same time, its economic profitability (Almeida-García et al., 2020). Numerous academic studies highlight the importance of the image of a destination, which influences tourists' choices (He et al., 2022; Utari et al., 2024), their level of satisfaction (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2020; Li & Qiu, 2023; Uslu et al., 2024; Zouni et al., 2021) and their loyalty (Huang et al., 2024; Jeong et al., 2020; Li & Qiu, 2023). Although heritage tourism has gained prominence in academic literature in recent decades, especially with regard to the dynamics of conservation, interpretation and sustainability of World Heritage Sites (WHSs), there is a lack of empirical studies that specifically address how the image of a destination impacts tourist satisfaction and loyalty. In view of this, the present research aims to contribute to the academic literature on heritage tourism by providing empirical evidence of how previous visits, travellers' motivations, and the affective and cognitive perceptions linked to their tourist experience shape their image of a destination, and how this image conditions their satisfaction and loyalty towards it.

Effective management of the transmission of a destination's image should be a fundamental objective of any destination and efficient management of the communication of this image is a fundamental strategic objective for any territory that aspires to position itself competitively in the global market (Almeida-García et al., 2020). This objective not only facilitates the differentiation of a tourist destination from its competitors but also contributes to raising awareness of the place and projecting specific images through the segmentation of the target market (Gartner, 1994). However, due to the rise in recent years of new information technologies, tourists share a greater amount of information through the Internet and social networks and thus, information transmitted directly by companies is relegated to the background as more and more visitors rely on information provided by other tourists (Kakirala & Singh, 2020). As will be seen later, the concept of "co-creation of value" is particularly relevant. According to Kambil et al. (1999), co-creation "adds a new dynamic to the producer/customer relationship by involving customers directly in the production or distribution of value" (p. 38). In the field of tourism, information and communication technologies have fostered interactive dynamics among visitors, promoting the establishment of more fluid and participatory relationships. This interaction manifests itself when personal experiences, assessments of service quality and prices, or information about companies in the sector are disseminated through digital platforms. User-generated content is therefore a source of reference for other potential travellers and can directly influence their consumption decisions.

This research focuses on the analysis of destination image in the field of heritage tourism. Cultural tourism was defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) at the 22nd meeting of its General Committee (in Chengdu, China, in September 2017) as "a form of tourism activity in which the visitor's most important motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume both tangible and intangible products and attractions in a tourism destination" (UNWTO, 2020). However, the concept of heritage tourism is more restricted than that of cultural tourism, as it refers to visits to places designated as World Heritage Site (WHS). In recent years, there has been an exponential growth in heritage tourism, due first and foremost to the increase in the number of sites inscribed as WHSs (del Barrio et al., 2012). The increase in WHSs can be explained by the evolution of the concept of tangible heritage, which has

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gradually incorporated other cultural resources. Initially, it was limited to elements such as monuments, historic buildings, archaeological sites and certain components of natural heritage (UNESCO, 1972), but later this was broadened to include gardens, landscapes and rural environments (UNESCO, 1983), as well as cultural and subaquatic heritage (UNESCO, 2010b), reflecting a more holistic view of people's cultural legacy. In addition, a new typology was added, the so-called "intangible heritage", comprising legacies such as oral traditions, folklore, forms of production and customs (UNESCO, 2003). There has also been a social change that has led to an increase in heritage tourism, due to the fact that tourists are better educated and have more information at their disposal as a result of new technologies (Salleh & Bushroa, 2022). Therefore, tourism is not exclusively related to leisure and can be focused on learning and increasing the cultural level of individuals (Correia et al., 2013).

Despite advances in research on the image of tourist destinations, there is still a demand for more studies focused specifically on the field of heritage tourism. This is based on the need to analyse the economic and social value that these destinations represent and to formulate strategic recommendations aimed at both destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and public policymakers. Furthermore, recent research recommends including both local and international tourists in the study sample in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the construction of the image of a WHS destination (Seyfi et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024b). The present research incorporates this recommendation, and the analysis is based on a representative sample that includes local and international tourists. Finally, we find that a large part of the studies that analyse tourist destination image are framed within cultural tourism, without usually specifying a heritage destination (Acha-Anyi & Nomnga, 2024; Salem et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024).

This study has been carried out in the Heritage destination of Córdoba, the only city in the world with four World Heritage Declarations: the Mosque–Cathedral of Córdoba as tangible heritage (UNESCO, 1984), the Historic Centre of Córdoba as tangible heritage (UNESCO, 1994), the Patios of Córdoba as intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2012) and the Caliphate City of Medina Azahara as tangible heritage (UNESCO, 2018). In addition, the city traditionally has intangible heritage such as Flamenco and the Mediterranean diet, both inscribed as Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2010 and 2013, respectively (UNESCO, 2010a; UNESCO, 2013). These recognitions make Córdoba one of the most representative cities in cultural tourism, both in Spain and in Europe. Therefore, it constitutes a point of attraction for numerous international and national travellers who visit this city annually, attracted by its rich cultural heritage and historical importance (Santa-Cruz & López Guzmán, 2017).

The main objective of this research is to contribute to the academic literature on destination image formation, specifically in the context of heritage tourism, and how this image conditions satisfaction and loyalty towards a destination. To this end, the city of Córdoba is taken as a case study, which is internationally renowned for being the only urban enclave to hold four WHS designations awarded by UNESCO. The specific objectives that guide this analysis are the following:

O1) to study the impact of pre-visits on the image of a tourist destination;

O2) to examine how tourist motivation influences the perceived image of a destination;

O3) to investigate how perceived image influences tourist satisfaction;

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O4) to investigate how perceived image influences tourist loyalty, both directly and indirectly;

O5) to analyse the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1. Heritage Tourism

"Heritage tourism" is a complex term and there is no universally accepted definition of it in the literature (Fonseca & Ramos, 2012). Two approaches are used to describe the concept of heritage tourism. The first relates to heritage tourism supply and management. This approach argues that heritage tourism refers to the activity developed in WHSs, regardless of the motivations of tourists. The second approach relates to demand and argues that heritage tourism is a phenomenon based on tourists' motivations and perceptions. In this sense, heritage tourism is more closely related to the personal experiences that each tourist enjoys at WHSs. The distinction between the two approaches lies in the fact that, from the supply perspective, the mere presence of tourists at a WHS is sufficient to categorise the activity as heritage tourism. In contrast, the demand-based approach establishes that this categorisation requires travellers' main interest in the visit to be linked to historical or cultural reasons, thereby making it an essential criterion for it to be considered.

This study applies the demand-side approach in considering the motivations and perceptions of tourists visiting WHSs. For example, Adie and Hall (2017) analysed the typology of tourists visiting three World Heritage Destinations: Independence Hall in the United States, the Studenica Monastery in Serbia and the archaeological site of Volubilis in Morocco. The findings show that there are two types of tourists: those who visit because of the recognition of the site as a WHS – usually those with a higher level of education; and those who are only visitors. Valverde-Roda et al. (2022) analysed the motivations of tourists visiting the city of Granada, which has several designated WHSs, and the findings show that tourists who visit Granada do so for various reasons, which can be grouped into two broad categories: on the one hand, there is the hedonic–cultural dimension, which includes travellers motivated by cultural reasons, while on the other hand, there is the circumstantial–convenience one, which includes travellers whose visit is not driven by cultural reasons. Baber et al. (2024) analysed international tourists visiting India, a country that has experienced an exponential increase in tourism demand in recent years due to government support and its cultural diversity, architecture and heritage. The results show that the main motivations of tourists are related to cuisine, spirituality, value seeking, serenity and cultural enrichment. In terms of the practical implications of the study, the authors argue that cultural and heritage motivations differ in European and exotic countries, like India, due to motivations such as spirituality or values related to sightseeing. In general terms, the studies mentioned highlight the importance of analysing the motivations of tourists visiting WHS destinations so that tourism managers can efficiently tailor their offerings. Given that heritage destinations tend to attract different segments of tourists, it is necessary to adapt the offer to the motivations of each group. Therefore, efficient destination management should not be limited to an exclusively cultural approach, but should rather incorporate other elements such as leisure, gastronomy and nightlife, promoting more diverse and inclusive tourist experiences.

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Furthermore, the inclusion of a site on the World Heritage List generates impacts that transcend tourist motivations, influencing its management and planning more broadly. World Heritage designation is an enhancement of tourism attractiveness that benefits different stakeholders (Zemanova et al., 2022). Therefore, UNESCO's objective in listing a location as a WHS is the recognition of a universal value of excellence (UNESCO, 1972) and the pursuit of preservation and conservation. This preservation and conservation are made evident by the creation, alongside the list of WHS, of the List of World Heritage in Danger (UNESCO, 1972). First, from the perspective of business management of the site, there are different effects – for example, improved sustainability, protection, and the prevention of site deterioration (Al-Tokhais & Thapa, 2020). Second, it improves the economic situation of the area, as there is an increase in government support for the area and a rise in the donations received. Finally, the number of visitors, both domestic and especially international, increases, although this is not supported by all of the literature (Cuccia et al., 2016; Ribaudo & Figini, 2017). However, other studies have analysed the negative effects of inscribing a location as a WHS. For example, it leads to a disproportionate increase in demand that causes structural problems at the destination, increased prices, spatial and temporal congestion that can result in conflicts with the local community and environmental damage. In summary, the inclusion of a site on the UNESCO World Heritage List increases its tourist appeal by conferring universal value of excellence, which directly influences visitors' perceptions of authenticity, prestige and cultural relevance. As a result, tourists' motivation is reinforced by the perception that they are visiting a site of high heritage value that is well managed; however, this recognition also generates adverse effects that can impact the tourist experience and the initial motivations of visitors.

2.2. Cognitive and Affective Image of a Tourist Destination

The academic literature conceptualises destination image as a mental construct of tourists in which tourists' knowledge, impressions and beliefs about a destination prevail, as it is viewed as a subjective concept. For example, Lai and Li (2016) see destination image as "a voluntary, multisensory, primarily picture-like, qualia-arousing, conscious, and quasi-perceptual mental experience held by tourists about a destination. This experience overlaps and/or parallels the other mental experiences of tourists, including their sensation, perception, mental representation, cognitive map, consciousness, memory, and their attitude toward the destination" (p. 1074). Thus, the image becomes a main function for destinations since, when tourists decide to visit a destination, they do so based on the evaluation of the information received from each of the elements that make up the image. Therefore, the images that are disseminated must effectively correspond to the elements or attributes of the offer. Image is used in the tourism sector to convey messages about a place or a tourism product, to enhance positive perceptions, to mitigate negative ones and to segment the target market according to different perceptions of the image.

Almeida-García et al. (2020) distinguish between the projected image of a destination and the image perceived by tourists during the tourist experience. The projected or objective image is considered a pull factor in tourists' choice of destination and is disseminated to the destination's target market through different communication channels. In contrast, perceived or subjective images are those created in the mind of the individual. Therefore, the image is a complex social

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construction resulting from the mutual influence between the projected and the perceived image. The closest match between the projected and the perceived image contributes to the success of communication, and to the marketing of destinations. The projected image of a tourism destination is fundamental in influencing tourists' decision-making process and future behaviour, i.e. their intention to revisit or recommend that destination (Garcia-Haro, 2018).

The evaluation and analysis of destination image is a major issue in the academic literature, contributing in a significant way to an enhanced understanding of tourist behaviour. The literature provides evidence that a destination is a phenomenon formed from two interdependent: a) perceptual and cognitive evaluations, made up of the sum of tourists' beliefs and evaluations of the destination's attributes; and b) affective evaluation, comprised of an individual's motivations and desires in choosing a tourist destination. The presence of the two dimensions implies that the image of a tourist destination is not only determined by its physical context, as perception also plays an essential role, arousing a set of emotional experiences such as excitement, liking or relaxation. Thus, many researchers believe that a destination image is a subjective, rather than an objective, reality of a tourist destination. Nevertheless, the academic literature on the city of Córdoba is based on a one-dimensional approach. This methodological omission limits the understanding of the attributes that shape tourists' perception and image formation of a destination. Similarly, the absence of a multidimensional approach increases the risk of formulating general tourism strategies, thereby compromising the effectiveness of interventions in terms of positioning and competitiveness. In view of this limitation, this study adopts a multidimensional approach in order to consider the heterogeneity of the components that make up the image of the city of Córdoba as a tourist destination.

Numerous studies relate affective to cognitive image in the context of heritage tourism. Zhou et al. (2024b) analysed the influence of the cognitive and affective image of local tourists visiting historical cities in Chengdu (China). These historical cities were chosen because they integrate historical heritage, traditional art and local cuisine. The findings show that those tourists who perceive a better cognitive and affective image of a tourist destination exhibit a higher intention to revisit in the future. In the same vein, Orgaz-Agüera and Dominguez-Valerio (2024) analysed the influence of affective and cognitive image on satisfaction and loyalty in the context of culinary tourism in the Dominican Republic. The visitors surveyed were immersed in the culinary experience of the island because they had participated in the planting of cocoa and its conversion into the final product. The results show that only the affective image has an influence on the formation of the overall destination image and, moreover, this overall image has positive effects on destination loyalty and the intention to revisit. In summary, studies agree that a positive perception of a destination's image significantly influences various stages of visitor behaviour: from pre-trip decision-making, through evaluation of the destination during the experience, to post-trip assessment and future intentions, such as recommending or repeating the visit.

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2.3. Variables Influencing the Formation of the Destination Image

Having defined destination image and its dimensions, this section examines the factors that influence its configuration. The existing literature analyses the factors that influence the formation of a destination image, such as tourists' motivations when selecting a trip, as well as previous experience at a tourist destination. Furthermore, we observe that an individual's perceived image has an influence on tourist satisfaction and future loyalty (such as the intention to revisit and to recommend in the future). This research follows the general framework of Baloglu and Macleary (1999), which shows how destination image is formed, in which the overall image is causally influenced by personal and stimulus factors. Added to this is the conceptual model proposed by Prayag (2008), which explains how a destination image, tourist satisfaction and loyalty to that place are related.

2.3.1. Pre-visit to a Tourist Destination

Tourists who have previously visited a destination are more familiar with it. As a result, they have a more holistic, psychological and unique image than when they only obtain information in advance from secondary sources, such as the media, family and friends or tourist guides, among others (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020). According to Frías-Jamilena et al. (2019), tourists who have previously visited a tourist destination have a significantly different image compared to tourists visiting for the first time because they draw on lived experience whereas first-time visitors must rely on external sources. Phelps (1986) was among the first to consider primary sources of information when studying destination image, and there are numerous studies that analyse tourists' previous experience at a destination (Almeida-García et al., 2020; Hervás-Cortina et al., 2024).

The academic literature provides evidence that prior experience influences perceived image (Almeida-García et al., 2020; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Da Silva et al., 2024; Hosseini et al., 2022; Seyfi et al., 2024). Thus, Beerli and Martín (2004) analyse the effect of previous experience on the overall image of a sun and beach tourist destination (Canary Islands, Spain). Among their findings, the authors point out that there is a significant negative impact on the cognitive image perception among tourists who had already visited the destination. In turn, Almeida-García et al. (2020) analyse the moderating effect of previous experience on the relationships between motivations and secondary information sources on cognitive and affective image perception in another sun and beach destination (Costa del Sol, Spain), with the results showing that pre-visiting the destination improves both affective and cognitive perceptions of it. Da Silva et al. (2024), in a heritage tourism context (Aveiro, Portugal), segment tourists according to the number of times they have visited the destination. The findings of this study show that the level of experiential familiarity and the intensity of previous experiences have a positive effect on cognitive image and attitudinal loyalty. In summary, most studies agree that tourists who have visited a destination on more than one occasion tend to form a significantly different image compared to those visiting for the first time. To a large extent, these differences are founded on the fact that repeat visitors base their perceptions on personal experiences, while first-time tourists rely on information obtained through secondary sources, such as social media or

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recommendations. However, the academic literature does not offer a single position on whether previous visits contribute to improving the image of a destination. Thus, it is possible to find research that indicates that previous visits allow visitors to develop a more complete and in-depth image of a destination. In other words, previous visits play a positive moderating role, improving the affective and cognitive image of the destination. However, some studies on destinations with unique characteristics, such as WHSs, suggest that repeat visits can have a negative impact on the perceived image. The lack of novelty can diminish the unique or memorable character that a destination can offer its visitors. If the experience loses its exceptional character, the image can become more neutral or less attractive, which influences the intention to revisit and recommend the destination to others. Exceptional experiences tend to trigger more intense cognitive processes, such as attention, curiosity and reflection, and generate stronger emotional responses like admiration and enthusiasm. In the case of WHS destinations, where physical and cultural elements tend to be constant, maintaining exceptionality requires creative strategies such as offering new narratives, immersive experiences or temporary events aimed at renewing visitor interest. Based on this theoretical argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The pre-visit influences the image of the tourist destination.

2.3.2. Tourist Motivation

Motivation is a basic human behavioural thought and arises when there is an inconsistency between a desired condition and an existing one that implies that the person in question acts to achieve the desired condition. In tourism, motivation is the set of needs that predispose a person to engage in such activity to find the benefits that the tourism destination potentially possesses (Bayih & Singh, 2020). In this sense, tour operators must adapt their offer according to different motivations. Following Yolal et al. (2012), travel motivations have been analysed under the foundations of three theoretical frameworks: Iso-Ahola's escaping–seeking dichotomy (Iso-Ahola, 1982), the travel career ladder (Pearce & Lee, 2005) and the pull–push factors model (Crompton, 1979a, 1979b; Dann, 1977). The Iso-Ahola model (1982**)** focuses on the psychological tension between moving away from the everyday and moving closer to the desired. Although useful, this model approaches the motivational process from a psychological dimension, without explicitly incorporating destination attributes. Pearce and Lee's (2005) travel career approach introduces an evolutionary perspective, which considers how motivations change throughout a tourist's life; however, while valuable for longitudinal studies, its application is more complex and less straightforward in cross-sectional research. Unlike the previous approaches, the push–pull factors model allows the motivational process to be analysed from a two-dimensional perspective, integrating both personal desires and the external characteristics of the destination. Therefore, the pull–push factors theoretical framework is the one most analysed in the scientific literature and is recurrent in the classification of tourism motivations. Push factors relate to internal and emotional aspects, such as the desire to see new places, to rest and relax, to spend time with family and/or friends, etc., while pull factors, on the other hand, are linked to external, cognitive or situational aspects, such as gastronomy, cultural and/or natural settings, etc. According to Sato et al. (2018), push factors are precedents of pull factors. In summary, the push–pull model has become the most widely used in the

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analysis of tourist motivations due to its ability to integrate internal and external dimensions of tourist behaviour and its methodological flexibility. This greater theoretical robustness makes it an effective tool for understanding and predicting travel patterns in various tourist contexts.

The relationship between motivation and destination image is supported by Li et al. (2010) based on the cognitive–motivational theory of Lazarus (1991), who proposed that an individual's response to the environment is influenced by the goals to be achieved. Translated to the field of tourism, an individual's goal-seeking behaviour (motivation) can be seen as their need to seek out environments that are in line with their motivation, or as attempts to move away from harmful environments. Motivation not only plays a key role in choosing a destination, but it also contributes, consciously or unconsciously, to the formation of its tourist image. Consequently, it can be inferred that individuals who are more motivated to choose a particular tourist destination will have a better destination image. Thus, numerous authors have believed that motivation has an influence on both destination image formation and destination choice. Recently, Turan et al. (2024) highlighted the positive influence of the motivation to consume local products and maintain a favourable image of the destination among tourists visiting Gaziantep (Turkey), which has established itself as one of Turkey's leading gastronomic tourism destinations, largely due to its inclusion in the UNESCO Creative Cities network in the field of gastronomy. In the context of heritage tourism, similar findings are obtained in the study by Gómez-Casero et al. (2023), who analysed the motivations of tourists visiting the Córdoba Guitar Festival (Spain). The Guitar Festival as a cultural destination presents three segments: a rock audience, a classical audience, and a music and guitar-loving audience (the most representative segment). Finally, Almeida-García et al. (2020), when analysing the motivation of tourists visiting Málaga (Spain), show that motivation has a greater effect on the cognitive dimension of the image than on its affective dimension. Based on this theoretical argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Tourist motivation influences the image of the tourist destination.

2.3.3. Tourism Satisfaction and Loyalty

Satisfaction with a product or service is defined as the weighting of the exchange relationship with the product or service, as well as the overall evaluation of the aspects that make up this relationship (Esch et al., 2006). In this sense, satisfaction is a psychological process perceived as the outcome of all activities performed during the purchase and consumption process (Andrinos et al., 2021). Tourist satisfaction is a key aspect of successful destination marketing as it influences future destination choice, the intention to recommend and the decision to return (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Zhou et al., 2024a, 2024b).

In the literature we find two approaches to analysing customer satisfaction with a product or service: the expectation–confirmation model and the general satisfaction model. In the former, satisfaction increases when perceived performance equals or exceeds prior expectations (Huang et al., 2024). Thus, a consumer does not feel satisfaction when the perceived performance is lower than the expectations generated about the product or service (Oliver, 1980). However, some of the literature considers this model to be unreliable because low expectations rarely

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translate into satisfaction. Therefore, this study follows the second model, which measures tourism satisfaction based on a single, global indicator. In the tourism context, we find numerous papers applying the overall satisfaction model (Al-Halbusi et al., 2020; Evangelista, 2022; Lam-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Lanca et al., 2024). In tourism, tourist satisfaction is related to the image of the destination, and images that are favourable have a positive effect on satisfaction (Islam et al., 2024). Based on this theoretical argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3): The perceived image of the destination influences tourist satisfaction.

Consumer loyalty is defined as "a commitment to re-purchase a product or service, leading to repeat purchases of the same brand or set of brands, even if there are marketing efforts by other brands" (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). In a tourism context, it translates into tourists' intentions to revisit a destination, to repurchase a tourism product (Evangelista, 2022;) or to recommend it to other users (Asmelash & Kumar, 2020). Loyalty is key for any destination: loyal tourists are less price sensitive and are willing to pay more, which helps the destination to generate a stable source of revenue and significantly reduce marketing costs (Suhartanto et al., 2020).

In the field of value co-creation, loyalty contributes to value creation in the tourism industry based on service-dominant logic (SDL) (Sadyk & Islam, 2022), which is a theoretical foundation of value co-creation proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004) in the article entitled "Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing". The authors believe that companies are viable in the long term if they collaborate with, and learn from, customers and adapt to their individual and dynamic needs. In this new logic, the new marketplace constitutes a collective, collaborative and dynamic forum, which allows interaction among individuals, companies and customers (Martín-Martín et al., 2023; Sadyk & Islam, 2022). The SDL of Vargo and Lusch (2004) represents a paradigm shift within marketing by shifting the traditional product-centric approach to a service-centric one as the fundamental basis of exchange. In this conceptual framework, market actors, i.e. companies, consumers and other stakeholders, are considered dynamic and active resources – that is, actors who co-create value through dynamic interactions within a network. In the tourism context, SDL is applied to analyse how destinations, tourism companies and visitors jointly participate in the co-creation of valuable experiences. The tourism experience is not conceived as a finished product offered by the provider, but rather as an interactive process in which the tourist plays an active role. This approach enables the incorporation of variables such as visitor engagement, cultural contact, perceived authenticity and memorable experiences, which directly influence the tourist's attitudinal loyalty (intention to revisit and recommend). Furthermore, recent research has shown that this approach is applicable to various areas of tourism, including cultural tourism and halal tourism (Abror et al., 2023). These studies provide evidence that value co-creation not only improves visitor satisfaction but also strengthens the competitiveness of the destination by generating meaningful links among the actors involved.

A dual approach to loyalty is considered in the literature: behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. Behavioural loyalty refers to the systematic and repetitive purchasing of a product or service over a certain period of time (Suhartanto et al., 2020). In tourism, it is a key indicator of the

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attractiveness of a destination (Asmelash & Kumar, 2020) and is measured by the frequency of visits or use of a tourism product (Ab-Ghani et al., 2024; Chua et al., 2024; Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). However, the frequency of visitation or use is an indicator that does not measure the complexity and dynamism of tourist behaviour, as there are tourists who repeatedly travel to a destination because of its low prices or other convenience factors, and not because of the positive image of its attributes. Attitudinal loyalty, on the other hand, measures customers' intense devotion to repurchasing, even if prices increase, and the intention to recommend a product or service. In the tourism context, attitudinal loyalty is measured through the intention to repeat a visit to a destination or the purchase of a tourism service, and recommendations to other potential tourists (Asmelash & Kumar, 2020; Mursid & Wu, 2021; Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). For Suhartanto et al. (2020), attitudinal loyalty is related to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour, which states that attitude determines behavioural intention and future behaviour. According to this theory, loyalty can be measured based on future revisits, and the intention to promote and support an attraction through recommendations to other potential tourists. However, this way of measuring loyalty is the subject of academic debate, with some authors believing that consumer attitude does not always have to be transformed into actual behaviour (Suhartanto et al., 2020). Regardless of the existing debate, scientific literature agrees that a positive image of a destination significantly influences visitor behaviour. In particular, it has been shown that tourists who perceive a place favourably are more likely to recommend it and return in the future (Nurjanah et al., 2025; Tagmanov et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024b). Based on this theoretical argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4a): The perceived image of the destination has a direct effect on tourist loyalty.

On the other hand, numerous studies establish a relationship between destination image and destination satisfaction and loyalty. For example, Lam et al. (2024) analysed how cognitive and affective dimensions of image in Malacca, one of the first cities in Malaysia to be declared a WHS, influence revisit intention and positive word of mouth (attitudinal loyalty). The results show that the tangible cognitive image (buildings, monuments, museums, etc.) does not have a significant influence on the intention to revisit because tourists rarely return to the same tourist destination to see the same elements. However, the results obtained by Liu et al. (2024), who analysed the relationship between destination image, satisfaction and the loyalty of tourists visiting Changsha, a historical and cultural city in China, demonstrate the connection between these constructs. Based on this theoretical argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4b): The perceived image of a destination has an indirect effect on tourist loyalty through satisfaction.

Finally, empirical studies reveal that the more satisfying the tourist experience is, the greater the attitudinal loyalty towards the destination or tourist product (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Lam-González et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2024a). A satisfied tourist will share their positive experiences through various sources of information, which will encourage other tourists to visit the destination or purchase the tourism product. On the other hand, a dissatisfied tourist contributes to tourism managers and destinations improving the quality of their services

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and, therefore, their competitiveness (Giuseppe et al., 2023). Based on this theoretical argument, we propose:

H5): Tourist satisfaction influences destination loyalty.

3 Research Objective, Methodology and Data

The main objective of this research is to analyse the formation of the tourist image of a WHS destination such as the city of Córdoba, and to provide empirical evidence on the impact that this image has on visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Based on the theoretical foundations provided by the academic literature, a structural model is proposed and validated that identifies observable and latent variables involved in the formation of the destination image. This model allows us to analyse its direct impact on satisfaction with the experience, as well as its direct and indirect effect on tourist loyalty. The findings not only enrich the existing academic literature on WHS destinations but also offer valuable information for those responsible for tourism management in the city of Córdoba.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) has become one of the most widely used methods in the social sciences because of its ability to test and reject research hypotheses (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). This technique, which combines factor and regression analysis, provides a robust framework for the statistical validation of theoretical models (Savalei & Bentler, 2006). Unlike traditional regression analysis, SEM enables the treatment of complex relationships between observed and latent variables, the identification of direct and indirect effects, and the assessment of both measurement errors and relationships among errors in observed variables (Bayram, 2015).

The empirical literature emphasises the importance of sample size to ensure the reliability of SEM results. In this regard, Bentler and Chou (1987) recommend a minimum sample size of 150 observations, while Hair et al. (2009) suggest that the sample size should be at least ten times the number of parameters estimated by the model. Meanwhile, Civelek (2018) suggests a minimum threshold of 200 observations. In this study, the application of SEM is justified by the substantial sample size, which allows more reliable and robust results to be obtained. SEM is widely used in scientific research, especially in the social sciences, as it allows factor analysis to be integrated with multiple regression (Hair et al., 2017), which facilitates evaluation of the fit between the data and the specification of causal relationships between latent and observed variables (Dash & Paul, 2021). Within SEM, this study has opted for the CB-SEM (covariance-based structural equation modelling) approach, as it seeks to confirm relationships previously established in the academic literature (Astrachan et al., 2014). Compared to the PLS-SEM approach, CB-SEM offers greater statistical robustness, which implies greater precision in parameter estimation, a better ability to analyse causal relationships and a more rigorous evaluation of model fit using specific indices (Antonakis et al., 2010). In addition, bootstrapping tests were applied to determine the statistical significance of the model trajectories. As regards the design of the structural model, latent variables or first-order constructs (satisfaction and loyalty) and second-order constructs (motivation and destination image) have both been defined.

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3.1. Measurements

The designed questionnaire consisted of four well-organised and structured sections aimed at achieving the objectives of the study. The process of designing the questions was carried out while paying attention not only to the existing academic literature but also to the specific characteristics of the destination under analysis. The final design allowed all components of the proposed conceptual model to be addressed, thus facilitating the empirical analysis and the testing of the proposed hypotheses. This research is based on the conceptual model proposed by Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and expanded by Prayag (2008), which proposes that the overall image of a tourist destination is constructed from two components: the cognitive image (objective perceptions) and the affective image (emotional reactions). These two components are causally related and are influenced by personal factors, such as visitor motivations, and stimulus factors, such as previous travel experiences. In turn, this overall image has a direct impact on tourists' level of satisfaction and loyalty to the destination.

The constructs of the study were measured based on existing scales from a wide literature in order to ensure a comprehensive measurement of the components of the proposed conceptual model. Specifically, motivation to visit the city of Córdoba was measured using the pull–push factors theoretical framework of Dann (1977) and Crompton (1979b) as a reference, and under an approach that distinguishes three dimensions: knowledge (5 items), escapism (6 items) and social interaction (3 items). The final scale design draws on the work of Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Beatley (2017); Beerli and Martín (2004); Botha et al. (1999); Deb et al. (2024); Janowski et al. (2021); Kim and Lee (2002); Klenosky (2002); Qiu et al. (2024); Teichert et al. (2021) and Yoon and Uysal (2005)

Destination image was assessed using a multidimensional approach with 13 items capturing both cognitive and affective components. The cognitive components were divided into four dimensions: aesthetics (2 items), efficiency (3 items), fun (2 items) and service quality (4 items), based on the works of Almeida-García et al. (2020), Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Beerli and Martín (2004), Gallarza et al. (2002), Gallarza et al. (2015), Kim (2018), Mogollón et al. (2018) and Prayag and Ryan (2012). The affective component was assessed with two items taking as reference the works of Almeida-García et al. (2020), Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Beerli and Martín (2004) and Mogollón et al. (2018).

The survey also included three items to assess satisfaction with the tourism experience, which were adapted from the work of Almeida-García et al. (2020), Kim (2018) and Prebensen et al. (2016). In addition, three items were included to measure intentions to recommend and revisit the destination based on the work of Asmelash and Kumar (2020), Chung et al. (2017) and Prebensen et al. (2016).

All measurements were evaluated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The fourth section of the questionnaire collected information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the tourists to be able to qualify the data. This included variables such as gender, age, educational level, employment status, household income and country of residence. In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the research questionnaire, pilot testing was carried out with 30 tourists through a personal interview, with the aim of assessing whether the questions in the questionnaire were appropriate and whether it was too long. The pilot testing

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enabled the analysis of possible causes of fatigue or rejection of the questionnaire by participants, which allowed errors and shortcomings to be identified and addressed through a systematic review of the survey design, ensuring comprehension and ease of use for participants.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

A total of four experienced researchers carried out the field study between December 2023 and November 2024. These researchers, who belong to the SEJ-670 research group at the University of Córdoba (Spain), have a minimum of five years' experience in conducting field studies and collecting data. In order to ensure that visitors had already been to the destination, and therefore their tourism experience could be assessed, screening questions were used. The questionnaires were completed in the most popular tourist sites in the city, such as the Mosque–Cathedral, the castle of the Christian Monarchs, the Jewish Quarter, Tendillas Square and Madinat Al-Zahra. Paper surveys offer methodological advantages in terms of participant perception and commitment, and their physical format can generate a greater sense of formality and relevance, which promotes concentration and reduces the dropout rate, especially in contexts where the emotional connection with the activity is decisive for the quality of the response. In addition, the interviewer can explain the questions in real time, thereby facilitating understanding, which contributes to improving the quality of the data collected (de Rada, 2012). A total of 716 questionnaires were collected based on convenience sampling, of which only four were excluded due to incompleteness. Non-probability convenience sampling is often used in research where participants are available to respond to surveys at a specific time and place (Finn et al., 2000).

From the data collected, the hypotheses established from the proposed theoretical framework were quantified using JASP software (v. 0.19.3) for the application of the SEM methodology. To verify the mediation result, the bootstrapping technique was used with 10,000 bootstrap samples (Efron & Tibshirani, 1979).

Table 1 presents the variables and measurement items valid for the analysis of the proposed model. This implied the elimination of 11 of the measurement items proposed to measure tourist motivation and another 11 to measure destination image, as they did not guarantee the reliability and internal consistency of the constructs considered.

Tab. 1: Variables and measurements items. Source: own research.

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item	Author
Motivation	Escapism	ESC1	To escape from the daily routine.	Botha et al. (1999); Deb et al., (2024); Yoon and Uysal (2005).
		ESC2	For entertainment.	Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Deb et al., (2024); Qiu et al. (2024).
		ESC3	To do different things.	Beerli and Martin (2004); Deb et al., (2024); Janowski et al. (2021); Qiu et al. (2024).

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	Knowledge	KNW1	To discover different cultures and lifestyles.	Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Beerli and Martin (2004); Deb et al., (2024); Janowski et al. (2021); Klenosky (2002); Teichert et al. (2021); Yoon and Uysal (2005).
		KNW2	To discover new places.	Botha et al. (1999); Janowski et al. (2021); Klenosky (2002); Teichert et al. (2021).
	Socialisation	SCL1	To go to places my friends have not been to.	Botha et al. (1999); Beerli and Martin (2004); Deb et al., (2024); Teichert et al. (2021); Yoon and Uysal (2005).
		SCL2	To be able to talk with friends about my trips.	Botha et al. (1999); Teichert et al. (2021); Yoon and Uysal (2005).
Destination Image	Aesthetics	AST1	The city's streets and buildings are beautiful.	Beerli and Martín (2004); Kim (2018); Mogollón et al. (2018); Almeida García et al. (2020).
		AST2	The city landscape is beautiful.	Almeida García et al. (2020); Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Kim (2018); Mogollón et al. (2018).
	Affective	AFI1	Unpleasant / Pleasant.	Almeida García et al. (2020); Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Mogollón et al. (2018).
		AFI2	Boring / Interesting.	Almeida García et al. (2020); Beerli and Martín (2004); Mogollón et al. (2018).
	Efficiency	EFF1	The local cuisine was good.	Almeida García et al. (2020); Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Gallarza et al. (2002); Kim (2018); Mogollón et al. (2018); Prayag and Ryan (2012).
		EFF2	The shops are good.	Beerli and Martín (2004); Gallarza et al. (2002.
		EFF3	The dining facilities (bars and restaurants) are good.	Almeida García et al. (2020); Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Beerli and Martín (2004); Mogollón et al. (2018).
	Fun	FUN1	I enjoyed my free time during the trip.	Beerli and Martín (2004).
		FUN2	I had fun during the trip.	
	Quality of Service	QOS1	The employees I met during the trip were approachable and easy to contact.	Gallarza et al. (2002); Gallarza et al. (2015).

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	QOS2	The employees I met during the trip were competent (that is to say, knowledgeable and skilled).	
	QOS3	The employees I met during this trip were friendly, polite and respectful.	
	QOS4	The employees I met during this trip were trustworthy, credible and honest.	
Satisfaction	STS1	I am content with my decision to visit the city of Córdoba.	Almeida Garcia et al. (2020); Kim (2018); Prebensen et al. (2016).
	STS2	It was the correct decision to visit Córdoba.	
	STS3	I am very happy that I visited the city of Córdoba.	
Loyalty	LOY1	I would recommend the city of Córdoba as a destination to visit if someone asked me for advice.	Asmelash and Kumar (2020); Chung et al. (2017); Prebensen et al. (2016).
	LOY2	I will encourage my friends and family to visit the city of Córdoba.	
Previous visit	PRV	Number of times you have visited the city of Córdoba.	Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Beerli and Martín (2004); Almeida García et al. (2020).

4 Results and Discussion

4.1. Common Method Bias Test

The analysis of the common method bias of the observed variables in the model was performed using Harman's single factor method and reveals that there is no significant common method bias, with one factor explaining only 32.6% of the variance in the data (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

4.2. Measurement Model

Table 2 presents the general characteristics of the respondents, while Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics, and the factor loadings corresponding to the indicators or observable

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variables linked to the first-order constructs included in the conceptual model and their respective internal consistency indices (α coefficient and ω coefficient) and convergent validity (AVE). Table 4 contains the factor loadings and internal consistency and convergent validity indices associated with the second-order constructs of the model to be estimated.

Tab. 2: Socio-demographic profile of tourists in the city of Cordoba. Source: own research

Variables	Category	Tourist typology		Total
		Local	International	
Gender (N = 712)	Men	38.6%	37.4%	37.9%
	Woman	61.4%	62.6%	62.1%
Age (N = 709)	Generation Z	30.1%	21.1%	24.8%
	Generation Y	43.5%	42.0%	42.6%
	Generation X	18.5%	21.1%	20.0%
	Baby Boomers	7.9%	15.8%	12.6%
Educational level (N = 712)	Primary education	4.4%	3.4%	3.8%
	Secondary education	31.9%	12.5%	20.6%
	University Graduate	33.9%	33.6%	33.6%
	Post-graduate	29.8%	50.5%	42.0%
Professional category (N = 712)	Employee	44.0%	39.1%	41.2%
	Student	19.0%	16.1%	17.3%
	Civil Servant	16.6%	13.4%	14.7%
	Independent professional/executive	4.7%	16.3%	11.5%
	Self-Employed	4.4%	5.8%	5.2%
	Pensioner	3.1%	6.0%	4.8%
	Entrepreneur	4.1%	3.1%	3.5%
	Unemployed	3.4%	0.2%	1.5%
	Homemaker	0.7%	-----	0.3%
Disposable family income (N = 697)	Less than 700 €	3.8%	4.2%	4.0%
	Between 701 € and 1.000 €	3.8%	7.6%	6.0%
	Between 1.001 € and 1.500 €	19.0%	7.6%	12.3%
	Between 1.501 € and 2.500 €	36.9%	16.0%	24.7%
	Between 2.501 € and 3.500 €	17.9%	19.4%	18.8%
	More than 3.500 €	18.6%	45.2%	34.2%

With regard to factor loadings, most of them are above 0.7 points, except for those linked to five indicators with values ranging between 0.609 and 0.691, and three first-order constructs with values spanning from 0.522 to 0.623. Factor loadings indicate how much each indicator or observable variable contributes to the construction of the latent variable. A high factor loading ($\lambda > 0.7$) indicates that the indicator is strongly related to the latent construct, while lower loadings ($\lambda < 0.5$) may suggest that the indicator does not represent the construct well (Hair et al., 2017; Raykov, 1997). Estimates of the omega (ω) coefficients of internal consistency range from 0.684 to 0.914 for first-order constructs and from 0.612 to 0.813 for second-order constructs. The internal consistency of the constructs shows how well the observed indicators that make up a latent construct are correlated with each other – that is, whether they are actually measuring the same underlying concept. This property is fundamental for assessing construct reliability. Internal consistency has been assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) and the omega coefficient (ω). Cronbach's alpha measures the average correlation between the indicators of the same construct, assuming that they all have equal factor loading,

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which is not always the case in SEM. The omega coefficient (ω), also known as "McDonald's omega", is a more robust alternative to Cronbach's alpha, especially in the context of structural equation models (SEMs) and factor analysis. In general, a coefficient ω ≥ 0.70 indicates good internal consistency (Ventura-León & Caycho-Rodríguez, 2017).

The values of the average extracted variance (AVE) are greater than 0.5, except for the second-order construct Motivation (0.455). The AVE is a statistical indicator used to assess the convergent validity of a latent construct by measuring the proportion of the total variance of the indicators that is explained by the latent construct. In other words, it indicates how much of the information contained in the observed items is captured by the latent construct that is supposed to represent them. An AVE ≥ 0.50 indicates that more than 50% of the variance of the indicators is explained by the latent construct, while a lower value implies that the construct may not be well represented by its indicators, suggesting problems of convergent validity (Henseler et al., 2015). In the estimated model, one option to increase both the AVE and the ω coefficient of the second-order construct Motivation is to remove the first-order construct Socialisation, as it has the lowest λ. Although the internal consistency and convergent validity of the Motivation construct improved, it was decided to keep Socialisation in the model as the AVE of the second-order construct was close to 0.5.

Tab. 3: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Constructs First-order. Source: own research.

Constructs	Item	Mean	Std. Error	Factor Loading (λ)	Coefficient α	Coefficient ω	AVE
Escapism					0.752	0.764	0.513
	ESC1	5.689	1.795	0.661***			
	ESC2	4.932	2.033	0.691***			
	ESC3	5.454	1.709	0.800***			
Knowledge					0.682	0.684	0.519
	KNW1	5.820	1.494	0.683***			
	KNW2	6.300	1.271	0.768***			
Socialisation					0.700	0.711	0.550
	SCL1	2.933	2.313	0.655***			
	SCL2	3.207	2.117	0.831***			
Aesthetics					0.697	0.697	0.535
	AST1	6.420	0.940	0.749***			
	AST2	6.473	0.945	0.714***			
Affective					0.732	0.736	0.585
	AFI1	6.351	0.994	0.793***			
	AFI2	6.426	0.923	0.730***			
Efficiency					0.744	0.774	0.515
	EFF1	5.766	1.413	0.748***			
	EFF2	5.378	1.438	0.609***			
	EFF3	5.832	1.215	0.804***			
Fun							
	FUN1	5.976	1.315	0.781***	0.712	0.712	0.553
	FUN2	5.905	1.386	0.708***			
Quality of Service					0.912	0.914	0.727
	QOS1	5.863	1.266	0.860***			
	QOS2	5.920	1.219	0.863***			

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	QOS3	6.120	1.181	0.888***			
	QOS4	6.046	1.164	0.793***			
Satisfaction					0.896	0.901	0.749
	STS1	6.673	0.734	0.915***			
	STS2	6.662	0.835	0.855***			
	STS3	6.715	0.723	0.828***			
Loyalty					0.860	0.860	0.755
	LOY1	6.584	0.779	0.946***			
	LOY2	6.448	0.962	0.815***			

Note: **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Tab. 4: Reliability Constructs Second-order. Source: own research.

Constructs Second-order	Constructs First-order	Factor Loading (λ)	Coefficient ω	AVE
Motivation			0.625	0.455
	Escapism	0.838***		
	Knowledge	0.623***		
	Socialisation	0.522***		
Destination Image			0.813	0.627
	Aesthetics	0.909***		
	Affective	0.908***		
	Efficiency	0.731***		
	Fun	0.768***		
	Quality of Service	0.602***		

Note: **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Discriminant validity was calculated based on the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion. Discriminant validity implies that constructs should be more different than similar to each other. The ideal scenario is that the HTMT ratio is less than 1; otherwise, the constructs might not be sufficiently different and be measuring similar concepts. A threshold of 0.85 reliably distinguishes between those pairs of constructs that are valid for discrimination and those that are not (Henseler al., 2015). Table 5 shows that in all cases the HTMT ratio is lower than 0.90 and in only one case the value is higher than 0.85 (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Henseler et al., 2015; Rasouli et al. 2022).

Tab. 5: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio. Source: own research.

	KNW	ESC	SCL	AFI	FUN	AST	EFF	QOS	LOY	STS
KNW	1.000									
ESC	0.480	1.000								
SCL	0.246	0.481	1.000							
AFI	0.355	0.270	0.046	1.000						
FUN	0.333	0.542	0.305	0.617	1.000					
AST	0.260	0.283	0.207	0.868	0.683	1.000				
EFF	0.287	0.397	0.215	0.609	0.711	0.676	1.000			
QOS	0.269	0.211	0.116	0.503	0.449	0.497	0.672	1.000		

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LOY	0.203	0.217	0.046	0.679	0.448	0.638	0.444	0.324	1.000	
STS	0.255	0.225	0.036	0.753	0.519	0.705	0.443	0.433	0.781	1.000

4.3. Structural Model

The model fitted the data well, attending to both incremental and absolute fit measures: $\chi 2$ = 950.269 and df = 287; $\chi 2/df$ = 3.311; CFI = 0.925; TLI= 0.916; GFI = 0.990; RMSEA = 0.057; and SRMR = 0.059 (Bayram, 2015; Bollen, 1989; Byrne, 2013; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). In the SEM context, absolute fit indices are measures that evaluate how well the proposed model reproduces the observed data, without comparing it to a base or null model. These indices focus on the degree of discrepancy between the observed covariance matrix and the matrix estimated by the model. The indices considered in this category are the relative/normed chi-square ($\chi 2/df$), where values < 4 are considered acceptable for complex models; the goodness of fit index (GFI), where values ≥ 0.90 are considered acceptable; the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), where values < 0.06 are indicative of an acceptable fit; and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), where values ≤ 0.08 are indicative of a good fit. Incremental fit indices, on the other hand, are measures that report how well the statistical model performs compared to a very basic model that assumes there is no relationship between the variables. These indices help in determining whether the model actually improves the explanation of the data compared to having no model at all. The indices included in this category are the comparative fit index (CFI), where values ≥ 0.90 are considered acceptable; and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), where values ≥ 0.90 are also considered acceptable (Escobedo-Portillo et al., 2016; Morata-Ramírez et al., 2015; Taasoobshirazi & Wang, 2016).

The results in Table 6 show that making a pre-visit to the destination has a significant and positive impact on tourists' perceived destination image ($\beta = 0.129$, $p < 0.001$), which supports H1. Similarly, they also suggest that travel motivations have a positive and significant influence on perceived destination ($\beta = 0.487$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H2. On the other hand, tourist perceived image has a positive and significant impact on visit satisfaction ($\beta = 0.734$, $p < 0.001$) and intention to recommend visiting the destination ($\beta = 0.150$, $p < 0.004$), supporting hypotheses H3 and H4a. Finally, visit satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on the intention to recommend visiting the destination ($\beta = 0.667$, $p < 0.001$), supporting hypothesis H5.

Tab. 6: Structural analysis of hypothesis tests (direct hypothesis). Source: own research.

Hypothesis	Structural Relationship	Path coefficient (β)	t-Value	Supported?
H1	Previous visit → Destination Image	0.129	3.388***	Yes
H2	Motivation → Destination Image	0.487	10.200***	Yes
H3	Destination Image → Satisfaction	0.736	31.068***	Yes
H4a	Destination Image → Loyalty	0.150	2.893**	Yes
H5	Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.667	14.531***	Yes

Note: **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

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4.4. Mediation Effect

The results in Table 7 show that destination image positively affects the intention to recommend a visit through satisfaction, suggesting that a positive destination image can boost satisfaction and increase the intention to recommend. Bootstrapping analysis demonstrates the role of satisfaction as a mediating variable between destination image and loyalty (Destination Image → Satisfaction → Loyalty, β = 0.491 p <0.001); the lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence interval (CI) do not contain zero, thus confirming H4b. However, the mediation is partial, as there is a statistically significant direct effect between destination image and loyalty. Bootstrapping is a statistical method used to assess the significance of the indirect effect, i.e. the effect that passes through the mediating variable. This method is based on the fact that the product of two coefficients does not follow a normal distribution, which invalidates traditional significance testing methods. In the estimated model, the effect is the product of the coefficient of the effect of image on satisfaction and the coefficient of the effect of satisfaction on loyalty. Bootstrapping does not assume normality and is more robust, especially with small samples or biased distributions. This non-parametric resampling method consists of taking random samples with replacements from the original data set and calculating the indirect effect (Destination Image → Satisfaction → Loyalty) in each sample. The process was repeated 10,000 times, obtaining a confidence interval for the indirect effect. If the interval obtained does not include the value 0, it is concluded that the mediating effect is statistically significant (Hayes, 2017; Preacher & Hayes, 2018).

Tab. 7: The results of mediation effect test. Source: own research.

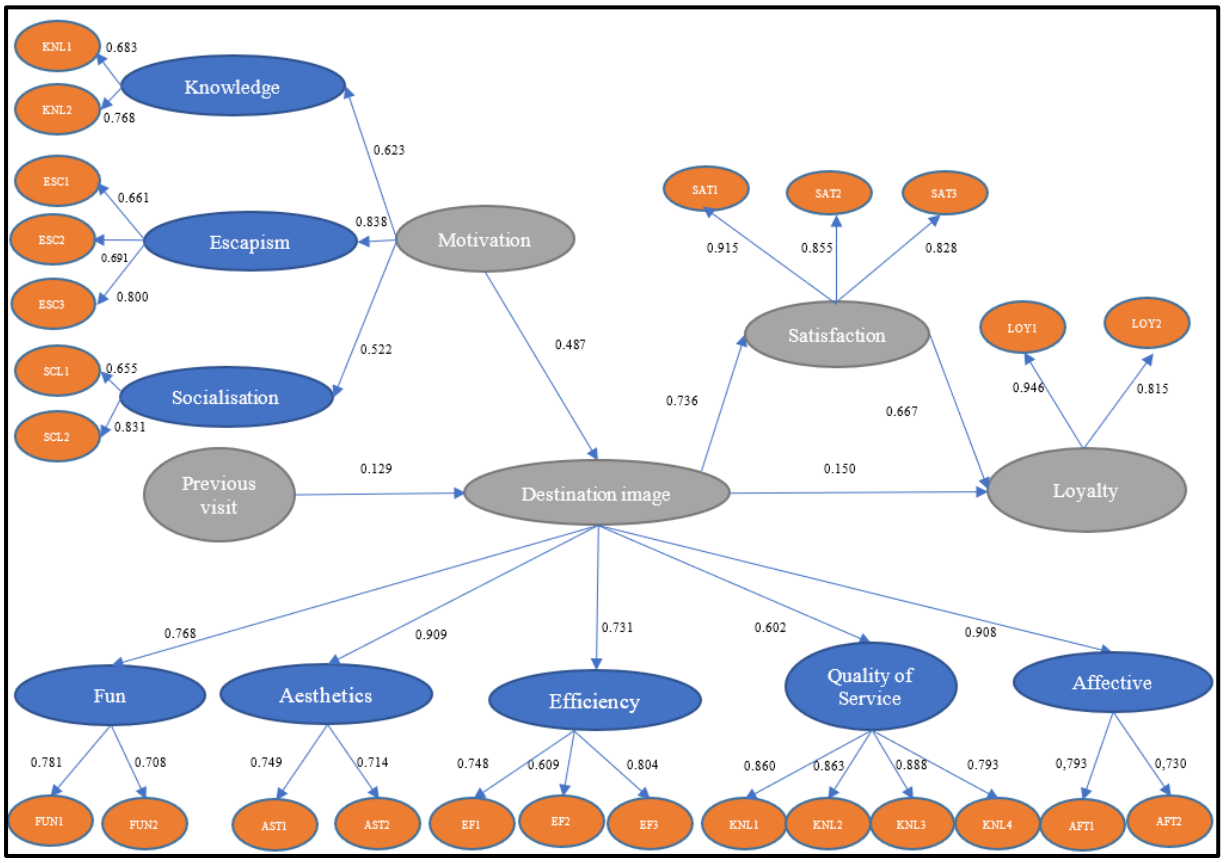
Effect	Structural Relationship	Path coefficient (β)	t-Value	Boot LICI	Boot UICI	Percentage (%)
Total	Destination Image → Loyalty	0.640	21.743***	0.583	0.698	
Direct	Destination Image → Loyalty	0.150	2.893**	0.048	0.251	23.4%
Indirect	Destination Image → Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.491	12.742***	0.415	0.566	76.6%
		Partially Supported H4b (Partially mediate effect)				

Note: **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Finally, Figure 1 shows the path coefficients between the dimensions of the constructs and the construct itself in the proposed structural model.

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Fig.1: Structural Model. Source: own research.



5 Discussion

This study examines the affective and cognitive image attributes of the heritage destination of Córdoba, along with the antecedents of pre-visits and motivation, and their effects on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. First, pre-visits influence destination image (H1), and several studies have supported the relationship between reduced uncertainty during travel and improved destination image. According to Beerli and Martín (2004) and Almeida-García et al. (2020), when travellers experience less uncertainty during their trip, they can obtain more accurate information about the destination, which in turn favours an enhanced destination image. In this sense, Almeida-García et al. (2020) and Hernández-Ortega et al. (2024) highlight the moderating effect of prior visits on destination perception, observing that familiarity with the place significantly influences both destination image and the frequency of visits. This influence can be understood from the fact that those who have previously visited the destination tend to construct a more holistic and integrated image of the place. Consequently, their perception is not limited solely to physical attributes but also incorporates psychological and distinctive elements that enrich their experience. Such familiarity, as suggested by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and Tan and Wu (2016), enhances the positive perception of the destination, as these intangible elements reinforce the emotional connection with, and overall appreciation of, the place.

Second, the motivation to visit the city of Córdoba is a multidimensional variable, encompassing knowledge, escape and social interaction. In this sense, tourists are interested in getting to know the historical and artistic heritage of the destination, with social and recreational

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factors being of less interest to them. These findings are consistent with those of Poria et al. (2003, 2006), Shakoori and Hosseinithat (2019) and Timothy (2011), all of whom point out that tourists visit heritage sites to acquire different cultural experiences, develop their personal emotional feeling with heritage or seek heritage legacy of the destination as part of their own personal heritage. Similarly, other studies point out that hedonic or social motivations have a lesser influence on the decision to visit a cultural destination (Chi et al., 2024; Pereira et al., 2022; Shakoori & Hosseinithat, 2019; Valverde-Roda et al., 2022).

Third, it has been found that the motivations for visiting a destination significantly influence the perceived image of that destination (H2), a hypothesis contrasted in several previous studies (Cakir & Zagrali-Cakir, 2024; Maghrifani et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2022). Moreover, in the context of heritage tourism, the cultural dimension is the factor with the greatest explanatory capacity in terms of the perception of a destination. Various works, such as those by Carreira et al. (2022), Li et al. (2024) and Pereira et al. (2022), indicate that the search for authentic experiences and the desire for knowledge are fundamental to the construction of the image of a tourist destination.

Fourth, destination image is a multidimensional construct, composed of the dimensions of fun, aesthetics, efficiency, service quality and affective image. The academic literature confirms that the cognitive image of a destination is a multidimensional construct composed of several physical attributes (Almeida-García et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024a). As in other studies, the affective dimension plays a much more significant role than cognitive components (Afroz & Ishtiaque, 2024; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Huete-Alcocer & Hernandez-Rojas, 2022). The image of a destination is a central element in shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviours (Islam et al., 2024; Nurjanah et al., 2025; Tagmanov et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024b). In this sense, the present study shows that a positive image of a destination not only increases the satisfaction experienced during the visit (H3) but also strengthens tourist loyalty (H4a). Furthermore, the results obtained show evidence of the indirect effect of destination image on loyalty, with satisfaction acting as a mediating variable (H4b). These findings corroborate the conclusions of recent studies that have addressed the relationship between these factors (Luong, 2024; Tagmanov et al., 2024). However, the effect of destination image on loyalty through satisfaction is partial as there is a significant direct effect between both variables. This relationship is confirmed by the works of Jeong and Kim (2020), Sharma and Nayak (2020), Chen and Huang (2021) and Luong (2023). However, other research shows evidence of total mediation of satisfaction, meaning that the destination image does not directly influence tourist loyalty (Afroz & Ishtiaque, 2024; Benitez-Marquez et al., 2021; Wang, 2025; Zulvianti et al., 2023). Finally, the results show that tourists who are more satisfied with their tourism experience tend to be more likely to recommend visiting that destination (H5), and this significant relationship is consistent with previous studies highlighting the positive connection between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty (Antón et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018; López-Guzmán et al., 2017; Tagmanov et al., 2024).

Finally, unlike previous research on tourist perception and satisfaction in the city of Córdoba (López-Guzmán et al., 2018; Pérez-Gálvez et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2022; Santa-Cruz & López-Guzmán, 2017, among others), this study provides a deeper understanding of the elements that shape the tourist image of this destination. In particular, this pioneering research shows empirical evidence of the diversity of factors that influence the tourist image of a WHS destination such as the city of Córdoba. The multidimensional approach applied reveals that the feelings and emotions experienced by visitors (affective component), the visual and sensory

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beauty of the destination (aesthetic component), and the entertainment activities available (fun component) are key factors in its tourist image. To these three factors must be added the operational and organisational capacity of hotels, restaurants and other tourist services (efficiency component) and, to a lesser extent, tourists' perception of the service received (service quality component). Furthermore, this study represents a pioneering contribution by demonstrating that tourist satisfaction plays a moderating role in the relationship between destination image and visitor loyalty. None of the existing tourism research on the city of Córdoba as a WHS destination has explored this interaction using structural equation modelling (SEM).

6 Conclusion

Heritage tourism has experienced exponential growth in recent years, driven by the increase in the number of sites inscribed as WHSs and social changes resulting from a higher educational and cultural level in the population. In this context, the city of Córdoba is presented as a destination of academic interest for analysing the image perceived by tourists who visit it. This destination has four UNESCO inscriptions, positioning it as one of the WHS destinations in Spain with the highest demand from international tourists. Knowing the attributes most valued by tourists is fundamental to guarantee the competitiveness of any destination, and this need is even greater if we consider the relevant role played by new technologies today in the co-creation of value in the tourism sector.

The academic literature points out that studying cognitive and affective image is an effective tool for researching tourism destinations. In this sense, the findings of this research enrich the academic literature on WHS destinations by estimating a structural model that believes that the formation of destination image is the result of the integration and interaction of heterogeneous components. In line with Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Prayag (2008), the model exhibits evidence of how the tourist image of the city of Córdoba is shaped by the interrelationships between the cognitive and the affective image. Both are causally linked and are influenced by both the individual motivations of the tourist and previous travel experiences. The results show that the tourist image is a multidimensional construct, in which the cognitive and affective components intertwine to shape an overall perception that guides tourist behaviour. Among the cognitive components, aesthetics and fun stand out for their greater explanatory power, with efficiency and quality of service having a lesser impact. The interaction of all these components is essential to understanding how tourists perceive and value a WHS destination and must be taken into account in tourism development and promotion strategies.

With regard to previous travel experiences, the results show evidence of how a previous visit to the city of Córdoba influences, albeit slightly, the positive tourist image perceived (H1). Thus, tourists' previous personal experience at a WHS destination is a source of direct information that influences their tourist perception, both cognitively and emotionally. In relation to tourist motivation, the model reveals that motivation contributes positively to the formation of tourist image (H2). In the case of the city of Córdoba, such motivation is mainly associated with the desire to learn, explore and understand aspects of the tangible or intangible cultural heritage of the place (knowledge component), and the desire to get away from the daily routine, stress, responsibilities or the usual environment (escapism component). All of these are key to understanding how tourists choose a WHS destination and interpret its tourist image, and how the projected image can reinforce or weaken this motivation. Similarly, the estimated model shows significant evidence of how the destination image directly influences visitor

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satisfaction (H3), and both directly (H4a) and indirectly (H4b) influences their willingness to maintain a loyal relationship with the place. As is the case in almost all destinations, the perceived image of a WHS destination acts as a significant antecedent of visitor satisfaction. This satisfaction, in turn, is a relevant predictor of recommendation intention (H5), which has direct implications for future demand. Thus, a positive image not only produces immediate effects, such as a satisfactory experience during the visit, but also contributes to the long-term sustainability of tourism through tourism co-creation by travellers. On the other hand, the finding of the partial moderating role of tourist satisfaction in the relationship between destination image and visitor loyalty (H4b) suggests that visitors' perceptions can encourage loyal behaviour towards WHS destinations, even in cases where the tourist experience has not reached optimal levels of satisfaction. Although visitor satisfaction amplifies this effect, it does not absorb it completely, which shows that the image of the destination has an autonomous and significant impact on loyalty.

The estimated model contributes to improving the efficiency of tourism strategies, particularly in terms of providing a more complete and in-depth image of a destination. In the case of WHS destinations, where physical and cultural elements tend to remain largely unchanged over time, a more complete and in-depth image requires exceptional tourist experiences. This necessitates the development of creative strategies that allow visitors to engage emotionally and sensorially with the culture and history of the destination and renew their ongoing interest in it, as is the case with temporary events or festivals.

The study also has practical implications, the first of which is a greater commitment by the city's tourism sector to technology and innovation as a fundamental tool for improving the efficiency of the promotion of its offer. The implementation of new technologies is a priority for tourists to co-create the brand of Córdoba as a tourist destination, and for companies to be able to make offers personalised to the needs and preferences of tourists. In an increasingly digitalised global environment, tourism managers of WHS destinations must adopt efficient technological strategies to maximise the value of their designation and promote sustainable and competitive tourism development. The first step in improving sustainable tourism development is to assess its digital presence, including evaluating the quality of information, interactivity, navigability and security of the official websites of the main tourist resources, as well as activity on social media. Managers must ensure that the information available online is accurate, multilingual and up to date. In addition, it is essential that the content reflects the universal values of the WHS, such as its authenticity and historical or heritage relevance. A second digital step would be to invest in the creation of multimedia content that conveys the uniqueness and universality of the destination in order to connect emotionally with potential visitors. A third step would be to incorporate emerging technologies in order to offer exceptional experiences to visitors and collect useful data for strategic decision-making. For example, augmented reality (AR) mobile apps can offer interactive tours, and artificial intelligence (AI) can help personalise activity recommendations based on user profiles. A final, but not the least important, digital step is to actively monitor reviews on platforms such as Airbnb, Booking, TripAdvisor and social media, and respond to comments in an empathetic and professional manner.

A second recommendation derived from the findings of this research is the implementation of measures complementary to technological ones that strengthen the image of WHS destinations. In the case of the city of Córdoba, the estimated model shows the importance of affective, aesthetic and entertaining components in the formation of its tourist image. In view of this, and in relation to the affective component, it is important to implement strategies that stimulate the

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emotions, the senses and the visitor's deep connection with the WHS destination. Among the actions that contribute to strengthening the emotional bond, it is worth mentioning the creation of themed routes that involve the five senses, the development of evocative atmospheres and the promotion of local art in public spaces. The presence of local artists, such as painters and musicians, in the streets not only stimulates the senses but also allows visitors to interact directly with the local culture. With regard to the aesthetic component, urban beautification and heritage conservation are key strategies. Thus, the active conservation of historical elements, the renovation of infrastructure in tourist areas and the enhancement of the night-time atmosphere are actions that contribute to ensuring the authenticity and beauty of WHS destinations. In terms of entertainment, regular cultural activities can contribute both to visitors' enjoyment and to renewing their interest in the destination. These activities include festivals (music or theatre) and events (food and wine or religious) that offer themed experiences connecting tourists with the living history of the place. In the case of the city of Córdoba, the Guitar Festival, the Cruces de Mayo, the Montilla–Moriles Wine Tasting, the Noche Blanca del Flamenco and Holy Week are examples of regular festivals and events that, in addition to enlivening the city, contribute to the enjoyment and continued interest of its tourists.

Although the estimated model shows that efficiency and service quality are less relevant as components of the tourist image of the city of Córdoba, it is also important to develop strategies that contribute to an easier and more enjoyable tourist experience. The historic centre of the city of Córdoba has a complex urban structure and a high level of tourist traffic. In this regard, it is important to reduce visitor disorientation in its labyrinthine surroundings and to decongest certain tourist spots without reducing their appeal. Overcrowding in spaces such as the Mosque-Cathedral, the Jewish Quarter or the San Basilio Quarter has a negative impact on the perception of the destination. In order to improve tourist orientation, it is recommended that "orientation points" be implemented in the main tourist access areas with clear information on routes, times and levels of difficulty; and that digital tools (official apps) be developed that incorporate geolocation services, interactive maps and real-time alerts. With regard to tourist saturation, it is recommended to encourage visits during "off-peak hours" through price differentiation and the development of digital panels and tools that display real-time information on visitor numbers, waiting times and recommendations for alternative itineraries.

With regard to service quality, it should be borne in mind that the image of a destination depends not only on the intrinsic value of its heritage resources, but also on the attitude, competence and performance of the professionals who interact with it. Thus, the tourist's experience and satisfaction also depends on how the tourism staff accompany, assist, guide and inform them. One of the keys to improving service quality is staff training. It is therefore recommended that ongoing training programmes be implemented which, together with technical knowledge, contribute to improving staff performance in terms of effective communication, intercultural empathy, emotional management and conflict resolution. A more empathetic, decisive and prepared workforce, capable of managing cultural diversity and complex situations, contributes to the city of Córdoba being remembered not only for its beauty and rich heritage, but also for the professionalism and hospitality of those who represent it.

Finally, in terms of the limitations of the research, it should be borne in mind that the database does not cover the whole year and therefore does not capture the effects of the month of December on demand. Second, the method used to obtain the data was convenience sampling, so there is no guarantee that the data used are free of bias. Third, the analysis of the results did not consider the possible existence of moderating variables in the conceptual framework of the

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model applied, such as gender, age, academic background or place of origin. A final limitation of the study is the use of only two indicators to measure affective image. While this does not invalidate the estimated model (Bollen, 1989), it is advisable to expand the number of observable variables to measure this construct. The greater the number of indicators, the more robust the statistical measurement of tourist feelings and emotions will be.

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