

## THE COMMON/UNIQUE AND COGNITIVE/CONATIVE MODEL OF DESTINATION IMAGE: THE CASE OF AZERBAIJAN

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### ABSTRACT

*Recent economic downturn, decrease in oil and gas prices in world markets, devaluation of national currency highlighted the urgent need of diversifying economy in Azerbaijan to strengthen the economic standing. Tourism is considered to be one of the major priority areas in the development of non-oil sector in Azerbaijan. To create a comprehensive marketing strategy for the tourism sector, it is of critical importance to determine a brand image of the destination. Studies show that destination brand image or the way people perceive a specific destination affects consumer destination choice. Shaping a positive brand image of the country is on the top agenda of the government of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Numerous measures, including hosting dozens of international competitions, international song contests, sponsorship of sports events, as well as designing different commercials about Azerbaijan are aimed at the creation of the positive brand image of the country. This empirical research paper will focus on determining common/unique components of perceived image of Azerbaijan as a tourist destination, followed by testing cognitive/conative model of this particular destination. Practical implication of this research is twofold: The proposed model will serve as a foundation for the creation of successful marketing strategy based on the determined destination image of the country and will create a basis for further researches in this direction.*

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, destination image, destination branding, cognitive model, conative model.

**Jel Code:** Z32

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In a highly competitive global environment, with enormous choices of tourist destinations, strong brand and appealing image play a crucial role in decision making process and forming satisfaction level about destination based on personal experience (Chon, 1990). Regarded as “more important than reality” (Gallarza et al., 2002:57), destination image is a decisive factor for decision making behavior of potential tourists (Jenkins, 1999; Chen and Hsu, 2000; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin, 2004a). Tourism destination image differentiates destination in question from other destinations and positions it in the minds of customers (Crompton, 1979; Gartner, 1993). Destination image can be perceived

as a unique attribute that distinguishes a destination from competing destinations. According to Cai (2002) and Anholt (2007), formation of destination image is part of the destination branding process which is “the process used to develop a unique identity and personality that is different from all competitive destinations” (Morrison and Anderson, 2002:17). Thus, measuring destination image plays a critical role in the process of destination branding. Understanding potential customer’s perception about the destination is of paramount importance in the process of formation of effective marketing strategy and planning.

Since tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of economy in the world and

Azerbaijan can easily capture tourists' attention for its natural beauty, cultural diversity and historical richness, it has recently become a priority field in the era of economic diversification. Adoption and implementation of the "2002-2005 State Programme on Tourism Development" and "2010-2015 State Programme for Developing Tourism" were tangible evidence of the state care and attention to this field and aimed at developing small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sphere. Along with these programs, developing infrastructure for tourism and attracting foreign investors to tourism sector, facilitating visa, customs and other regulations for incoming and outgoing tourists aim to turn tourism into one of the cornerstones of the country's economy. As a result of rising interest and support of government to tourism sector, volume of investments to tourism industry is rising from year to year. Currently this indicator is more than 400 million. AZN, which increased more than twofold during the last five years. Total contribution of tourism and travel sector to GDP also marks a consistent growth, which currently constitutes nearly 8.4% (5,223.5 million AZN of GDP. From the year 2012 onwards, the number of foreign tourists visiting Azerbaijan increased sharply. While around 1.200 million visited Azerbaijan in 2011, in the last four years this figure varied from 2.000 to 2.200 million tourists and is estimated to reach 3,167,000 tourists for the year 2025 (Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2015 Azerbaijan). Azerbaijani government strives to shape a positive image of the country through the participation in and sponsorship of various sports events and contests. Recently launched "Land of Fire" promotion campaign aimed to boost the country as a tourist destination.

The importance of empirical researches in developing appropriate marketing strategy for attracting tourists and raising the weight of this sector in the country should not be underestimated. With this rationale in mind, the primary target of this research is to

capture perceived image of Azerbaijan as a tourism destination through employing a model proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1991) and by further analysis of relationship between cognitive and conative image.

Careful review of the papers written about the state of tourism in Azerbaijan, as well as publications of the governmental agencies reveal that no thorough research has been done to measure destination brand image of Azerbaijan previously. Thus, the absence of comprehensive studies dedicated to this topic raises the importance of this research as well.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Along with being a geographical area, destination serves as a product (Smallman and Moore, 2010; Blasco et al., 2016) which needs to be appropriately positioned (Gartner, 1993). From this point of view, destination image is genuinely regarded as the decisive factor in destination marketing since it determines the attitude of the tourists toward the destination (Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993) given the fact that human behaviour is dependent upon image rather than objective reality (Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2007).

First research on how to measure destination image was conducted by Hunt (1995) where he measured the destination image of four US states using questionnaire with semantic differential scale (Gallarza, et al., 2002). Providing that destination image plays an undeniable role in the perception formation and decision making process (Chon 1990, 1992; Echtner and Ritchie 1991), researches dedicated to this topic surged during the last decades (Gallarza, et al., 2002), and from 1973 until 2000 roughly 142 published works on destination image have been produced (Pike, 2002).

Despite numerous researches devoted to the formation of unified method of destination image conceptualization and management, no consensus in this direction exists

(Konecnik and Gartner, 2007). Along with the absence of commonly accepted definition of destination image (Grosspietsch, 2006), there is no unanimity with regard to exact dimensions that make up the destination image (Bigné, Sánchez & Sanz, 2009). However, there is unanimous consensus about the multidimensional nature of the destination image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Driscoll et al., 1993; Lawson and Niven, 1994; Dann, 1996; MacKay and Fesenmaier, 1997).

Most commonly used conceptual framework for measuring destination image was designed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993). They suggest using combination of both methods. They argue that quantitative methods measure attribute side of the image, while qualitative methods measure holistic image of destination. Jenkins (1999) offers using qualitative measures in the first step to determine attribute constructs and afterwards to measure level of importance of each constructs by employing qualitative methods. Echtner and Ritchie argued that most researches in this direction fail to capture holistic components of the destination image, and mostly concentrate on the cognitive components by using only structured questionnaires. Destination image measurement developed by Echtner and Ritchie enables to create more realistic and holistic destination image. Three columns of the Echtner and Ritchie include three dimensions: attributes – holistic, functional – psychological, common – unique.

Functional dimension refers to the measurable characteristics, while psychological dimension refers to more intangible ones. Common-unique continuum includes characteristics of a destination on the one side and unique or differentiated characteristics of the destination on the other. Attributes-holistic dimensions are two major components that refer to the imagery or mental picture in the minds of the visitors about the place for holistic dimension and special attributes of the place for attribute dimension.

Another widely referred model was proposed by Gartner (1993). According to Gartner, “Destination images are formed by three distinctly different but hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective and conative” (Gartner, 1993:193). In this model, cognitive image is formed based on individuals knowledge about the destination and affective image relates to impressions or feelings related to destination. In turn, conative component is analogous to behavior because it is the action component” (Gartner, 1993:196). That is, conative component is interrelated with other two components and is determined upon the formation of other components. Conative components determine individual intention to revisit or recommend destination to others (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike & Ryan, 2004).

The complexity of capturing more holistic picture of destination image challenged by the fact that, in essence, potential tourists may hold different destination image before, during and after their visit (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

### 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Destination image formation is greatly affected by the perception of destination by a tourist. (Gallarza et al., 2001) and may not be accurate until personal visit (Gartner et. al, 2007; Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Rezende-Parker et al., 2003), and may be subject to change after the visit (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Milman and Pizam, 1995; O’Leary and Deegan, 2005). According to Gunn (1972), image of destination held by non-visitors and returned visitors is varying. The image held by a returned visitor is likely to be more holistic and realistic (Pearce, 1982, 1988; Chon, 1990, 1992). Bearing above mentioned facts in mind, for the purpose of capturing more relevant and realistic image of Azerbaijan as a tourism destination, prepared questionnaires were intended for the filling by tourists previously visited Azerbaijan.

At the first stage of this research, the model proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) was considered the most appropriate since along with determining the most appropriate attributes related to destination, this method helps to capture and visualize holistic and unique components through unstructured questions.

Nonetheless, numerous researches on this topic directed to the analyses of cognitive and affective constructs and determining the nature of relationship between them (Beerli & Martín, 2004a, 2004b; Li et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2007), there are fewer researches investigating the relationship between cognitive and conative image. In fact, according to Gartner (1993), cognitive and conative domains are interrelated and former one has a great impact on latter one. Within the context of this research, we hypothesized that, cognitive image has a strong and significant relationship upon conative image. Where cognitive image is dependent variable and conative image is independent variable.

*H1.* There is a positive and significant relationship between cognitive image and conative image.

Proposed hypothesis will be tested by running simple linear regression analysis for determining the direction and significance of the relationships. Conative image was regarded as an independent variable, whereas cognitive image was regarded as a dependent variable.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods were chosen as most appropriate, given the primary target of this research. The format of the

survey questionnaire consists of structured and unstructured questions to define all relevant attributes and create more holistic image of destination. Close-ended questions are used to measure common/attributes elements, while an open-ended questions are used to determine unique/holistic elements of destination image. Open ended questions were adopted from the survey instrument developed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) for empirical validation of the proposed model.

The questionnaire is composed of two parts. The first part included some general demographic questions: gender, age, country of residence. The second part of the questionnaire referred to more specific questions which are associated with the object of the research. The questionnaire included three types of questions: categorical type, ordinary type and open-ended questions. The categorical type of data uses specific names or labels as the possible set of answers. The categorical type of questions is analyzed on the basis of relative frequency statistics. Ordinal data or Likert-type data is used to identify categories of importance of each answer. For this type of questions, Likert's scale was used and the ranking was from 1 to 5, where 1 meant 'strongly disagree' and 5 was 'strongly agree'. The survey was designed and conducted online.

Exclusively-prepared scale includes attributes that can attract visitors attention regarding Azerbaijan. Provided attributes is designed based on literature review and analyzing attractions and touristic potential of Azerbaijan. Ultimately, 15 attributes were chosen as the most appropriate for this destination, which, in turn, helps to capture cognitive image (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Attribute list

<p>FUNCTIONAL (physical, measurable)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scenery/Natural attractions</li> <li>Cultural heritage</li> <li>Climate</li> <li>Historical sites</li> <li>Touristic sites/activities</li> <li>Nightlife and entertainment</li> <li>Architecture/Buildings</li> <li>Transportation</li> <li>Accommodation facilities</li> <li>Personal safety</li> <li>Hygiene and cleanliness</li> <li>Political stability</li> <li>Hospitality/Friendly local people</li> <li>National cuisine/Food and drink</li> <li>Quality of service</li> </ul> <p>PSYCHOLOGICAL (abstract)</p>
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In turn conative construct was captured through asking questions regarding re-visit, intention to recommend (Questions 11 and 12).

Since the eligibility criteria set of the participation in the survey is previously visiting Azerbaijan, Purposive Non-Probability Sampling was chosen as the most appropriate sampling method. The survey covers the periods spread from 01/10/2016 –10/03/2017. All in all, a sample of 350 respondents from 15 countries participated in the survey.

Data analysis consists of two parts. The first part is concerned with analyzing open-ended questions, while the second part includes analyzing structured questions using SPSS 16.

#### 4.1 Reliability

Internal consistency of the structured questions was measured by calculating Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The Cronbach's Alpha values for abovementioned items are above the point 0.70, which is an indicator of sufficient internal consistency levels.

Table 1: Measure of internal consistency

Items	Cronbach's Alpha
<b>Cognitive image:</b>	<i>0.725</i>
Accommodation Facilities	
Personal safety	
Hygiene and cleanliness	
Political stability	
Hospitality/Friendly local people	
National cuisine/Food and drink	
Quality of service	
Scenery/Natural Attractions	
Cultural heritage	
Climate	
Historical sites	
Tourist sites/Activities	
Nightlife and Entertainment	
Architecture/Buildings	
Transportation	
<b>Conative image:</b>	<i>0.753</i>
Willing to recommend	
Keen to return to Azerbaijan	

**5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

All in all, 350 respondents from 15 countries took part in this survey. According to the Table 2, 40% of the respondents were males and 60% were females, while approximately 42% of the respondents aged between 18-29 years old, 33% and 25% of the respondents fell

between the ages 30-44 and 45-60 respectively. Percentage distribution for purpose of the visit is 41.4% for leisure and recreation, 24.6% for education followed by 13% for other purposes and 13% for business visits.

Table 2:

Gender	Male (40%), Female (60%)
Age	18-29 years 42%, 30-44 years 33%, 45-60 years 25%
Visit purpose	Education 24.6%, Business 13.1%, Leisure 41.4%, Family visit 8%, Other 12.9% (in particular different contexts)

The main technique for analyzing next four open ended question (Table 3) was identifying repetition frequency of the descriptions and united similar or close descriptions under one category. Interestingly, majority of respondents associated Azerbaijan as a multicultural environment. In addition, tourists perceive Azerbaijan simultaneously as modern and

ancient. Those who associated Azerbaijan ancient also labeled her modern. Based on the analysis of the open ended questions, the overall image of Azerbaijan as a tourism destination is generally positive, regardless of some negative comments like chaotic, lack of human rights, bribery, which constitute even less than 7% of the overall responses.

Table 3:

<i>#5 What images or characteristics come to mind when you think of Azerbaijan as a tourist destination?</i>		
Multicultural environment	168	48%
Hospitable people	150	43.1%
Tasty cuisine	164	46.8%
Beautiful landscapes	159	45.4%
Historical sites	115	32.3%
Impressive architecture	86	24.6%
<i>#6 Description of atmosphere or mood expectation while visiting Azerbaijan (ex: relaxing, friendly-hospitable, ancient, modern and so on.)</i>		
Friendly	168	48%
Safe	177	50.6%
Cultural	185	52.9%
Exotic	148	42.3%
Combination of Ancient and Modern	134	38.9%
Mystic	110	31.4%
Windy	91	26%
<i>#7 What were unique features or tourists gatherings that attracted you most during your visit to Azerbaijan?</i>		
Old City and Maiden tower	179	51.1%
Flame Towers	165	47.1%
Historical sites	136	38.9%
Restaurants	105	30%
<i>#8 What kind of tourist activities you think Azerbaijan is good at offering (ex: resorts, historical attractions, traditional events etc)?</i>		
Cultural tourism	158	45%
Historical attraction	146	41.7%
Sea resorts	134	38.2%
Winter tourism	98	28%
Novruz celebration	84	24%

The importance of each predetermined cognitive attributes was captured by using Likert scale. Answers received through Likert chart were analysed using SPSS 16 program to reveal averages of each distinct attribute. Table 4 illustrates averages for each attribute. In 1-5 point scale, attributes with the average 4 or above are considered

to be important and to be incorporated to the model utilized. Thus, attributes such as Personal safety, National cuisine, Cultural heritage, Hospitality, Historical sites, Tourist sites, Hygiene and cleanliness, Natural attractions and Architecture are frequently referred in respondents decision-making.

Table 4. Question#9 Please rate how important are these following attributes in your travel decision-making to Azerbaijan (1-not important, 5 – very important)

Attributes	Average	Attributes	Average
Scenery/Natural Attractions	4.00	Accommodation Facilities	3.80
Cultural heritage	4.20	Personal safety	4.47
Climate	3.13	Hygiene and cleanliness	4.07
Historical sites	4.13	Political stability	3.73
Tourist sites/Activities	4.09	Hospitality/Friendly local people	4.13
Nightlife and Entertainment	3.14	National cuisine/Food and Drink	4.33
Architecture/Buildings	4.00	Quality of service	3.87
Transportation	3.40		

Responses collected through the questions 5 to 9 were combined in the conceptual framework model created by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) to visualize different aspects of destination image. Due to the associated challenge to present the critical components of the image in three dimensional graphs, chosen components were illustrated in three different two dimensional graphs. Figure 3 summarizes the Attribute/Holistic and Functional/Psychological destination image of Azerbaijan. Most importantly, being multicultural and secure, combining the atmosphere of ancient and modern in one place as well as being rich with historical sites and natural landscapes strengthen the position of Azerbaijan as worthy tourism

destination. According to the Figure 4, foreign tourists perceive Azerbaijan as cultural, historic, multicultural, relaxing, hospitable, clean and hygienic. Old city and Maiden tower and recently constructed Flame Towers are amongst places that attract special attention of foreign tourists and support the image of being simultaneously ancient and modern. In turn, Table 5 illustrates common/unique and holistic/attribute characteristics of Azerbaijan as a tourism destination. The given graph visualizes the position of Azerbaijan as a tourism destination, characterizing it multicultural, safe, and outstanding with numerous modern and ancient sites.

Figure 3: The Attribute/Holistic and Functional/Psychological components of Azerbaijan’s destination image.

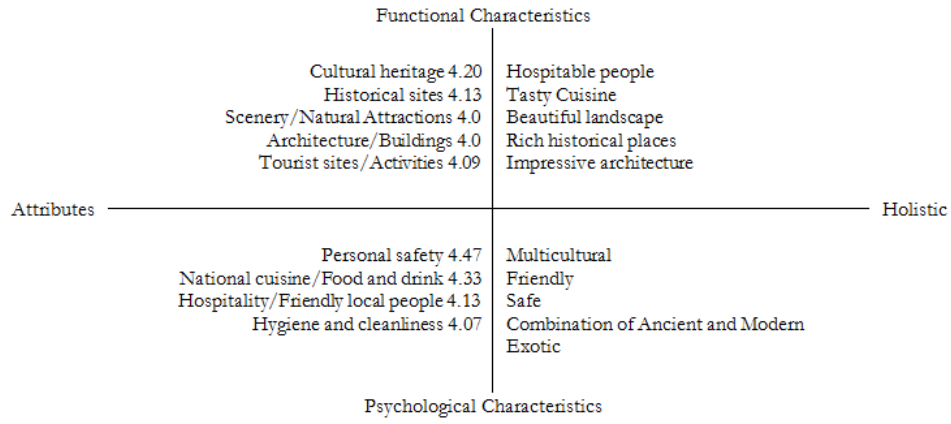


Figure 4: The Functional/Psychological and Common/Unique components of Azerbaijan’s destination image.

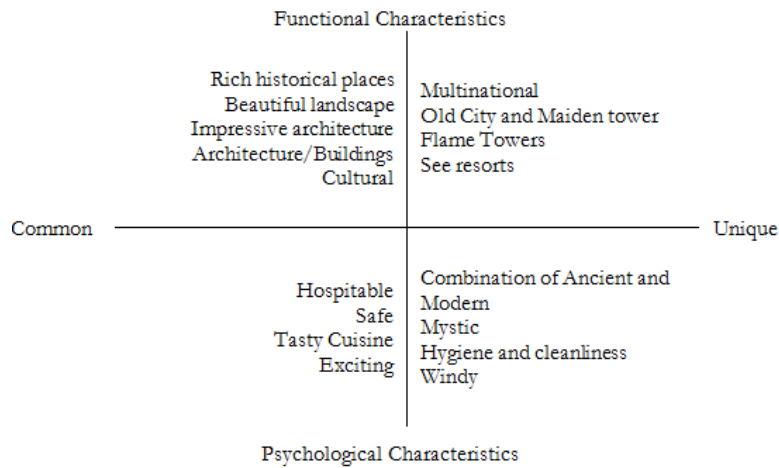
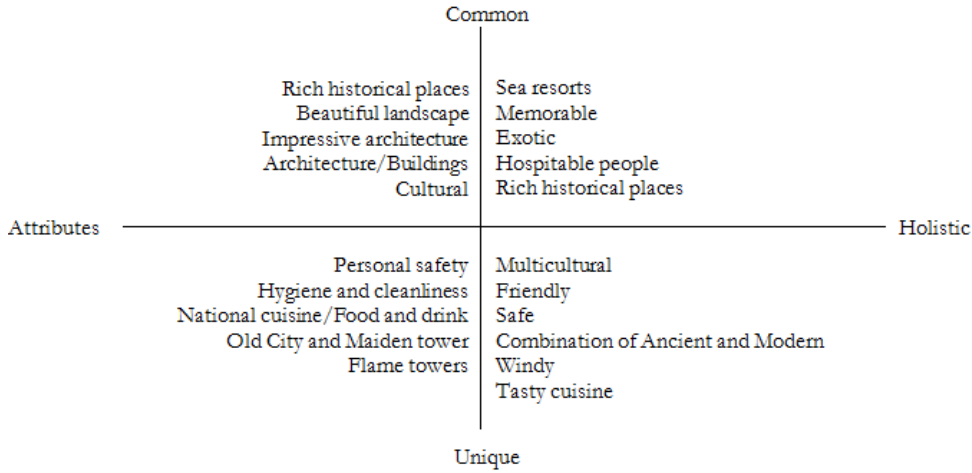




Figure 5: The Common/Unique and Attribute/Holistic components of Azerbaijan’s destination image.



The next questions were explicitly designed to reveal to what extent their trips to Azerbaijan live up to their expectation and the cognitive image they hold. According to the question 10 (Table 6), vast majority of the respondents found their trip more enjoyable than expected. Only merely 3% of the respondents described their

expectations as negative. From summarizing the responses given to the question 11 (Table 7), 85% of the respondents will recommend visiting Azerbaijan to their families and friends. In addition, nearly 78% are keen to revisit Azerbaijan in store (Table 8).

Table 5: Question #10 Did your visit to Azerbaijan live up to your expectation?

Answer Choices	Percent	Frequency
Very enjoyable	18.6%	65
More enjoyable than expected	41.5%	145
As enjoyable as expected	22.00%	77
Less enjoyable than expected	14.9%	52
Negative	3.1%	11
Total		350

Table 6: Question#11. To what extent are you willing to recommend Azerbaijan to families and friends as a tourist destination?

Answer Choices	Percent	Frequency
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Disagree	3.4%	12
Neither agree nor disagree	10.9%	38
Agree	55.4%	194
Strongly agree	30.2%	106
Total		350

Table 7: Question#12 To what extent are you keen to return to Azerbaijan as a tourist in the years to come?

Answer Choices–	Percent	Frequency
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Disagree	6.9%	24
Neither agree nor disagree	14.9%	52
Agree	56%	196
Strongly agree	22.3%	78
Total		350

## 6. HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Table 8: Pearson Correlation results for Cognitive image and Conative image

Variables	Willingness to recommend	Keen to return to Azerbaijan	Conative image:
<b>Cognitive image</b>	0.725*	0.659*	0,783*
Personal safety	0.703*	0.738*	0.665*
Hygiene and cleanliness	0.659*	0.607*	0.633*
Hospitality/Friendly local people	0.656*	0.704*	0.743*
Scenery/Natural Attractions	0.601*	0.573*	0.613*
National cuisine/Food and drink	0.653*	0.704*	0.793*
Historical sites	0.598*	0.543*	0.537*
Cultural heritage	0.627*	0.634*	0.698*
Tourist sites/Activities	0.624*	0.586*	0.649*
Architecture/Buildings	0.649*	0.496*	0.527*

\* $p < 0.001$

Two-tailed Pearson Correlation test was run for all the cognitive and conative attributes, however, as expected, cognitive attributes that have been included to the Echtner and Ritchie's model have shown stronger positive correlation with conative image. The test repeated after excluding attributes with weak correlation and the new results

presented in the Table 8. As can be seen from the correlation results, there is a strong and significant relationship between Cognitive image and Conative image. According to the proposed model, correlation is strong between Conative image and Personal safety as well as

Conative image and National cuisine/Food and Drink.

For the purpose of formation of more holistic picture with regard to the impact scale of Cognitive image (dependent variable) on Conative image (independent variable) in Azerbaijan as a tourism destination, simple linear regression analysis was carried out. Based on the results (Table 9), the regression model is

statistically significant and Cognitive image of Azerbaijan explains 61% changes in post-visit behaviour (conative image), as well as one unit change in Cognitive image results in 0.713 change in Conative image. Developed model can be illustrated as follows:

$$\text{Conative image} = 0.394 + 0.713 * \text{Cognitive image}$$

Table 9: Simple Liner Regression analysis

$R=0.78$ ;  $R^2=0,613$ ;  $F\text{-value}=42.76$

	Coefficient	Stand. error	t Stat.	P-value
Constant	0.394	0.067	18.439	0.001
Destination Image	0.713	0.043	6.539	0.000

$*p<0.001$

## 7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Since the role and contribution of tourism to countries' economy and budget is growing fast (Caldwell & Freire, 2004), governments attach special attention to the development of the tourism sector. It is also applicable to oil rich Azerbaijan, where diversification of the economy stands among the priority tasks for the government.

The existence of numerous tourism destinations competing for tourists highlight the importance of the destination marketing practices to differentiate destinations and their offerings in the eyes of the potential consumers.

Since accurate identification of the existing destination image strongly affects the process of branding and positioning of the destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999), this study of the destination brand image will have a great contribution to future steps in creating destination marketing strategy. The necessity of conducting such a study is also strengthened by the fact that no comprehensive research on identifying

perceived destination brand image of Azerbaijan was conducted previously. Thus, this study can be regarded as an important contribution to the creation of successful destination marketing strategy of the tourism sector and aimed to be used as primary information source for the next paper on effective branding strategy for promotion of Azerbaijan as a tourism destination.

Conducted research helped to shed light on what grounds tourists previously visited Azerbaijan and most importantly how they perceive Azerbaijan as a tourism destination. During the interpretation of the results, it became evident that along with delicious cuisine, hospitable people, historical heritage and modern sites, Azerbaijan is a safe haven for tourists recording lack of criminality and highlighting multicultural experience. In the modern world it is so difficult to find destinations that are equally secure and welcoming for people from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. Another frequently mentioned attribute of Azerbaijan was the combination and harmonic coexistence of the ancient and

modern. Combination of the ancient and modern not only embodied in the architectural buildings per se, but also in the entire atmosphere of the country and can be witnessed in all aspects of daily life ranged from cuisine, behaviour, mindset to the dressing style.

Finally, based on the findings of this study, it is feasible to brand Azerbaijan as a tolerant and multicultural destination with all needed credentials for the tourists with different expectations. Numerous sea resorts are favourable sites for those who

seek for sea and sand, newly built winter resorts such as Shahdag and Tufandag resort can be compared with the best winter resorts of Europe and offer all kind of attractions. A number of historical sites, included to the UNESCO and ISESCO heritage list, are ideal for those who want to be close to history. Picturesque places of the Caucasus Mountains, numerous rivers and lakes embody beauty and uniqueness. Cultural heritage along with national cuisine, national costumes and dances will exceed all expectations of those who seek exotics.

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