

Beyond Metropolises: How Social Media Shapes Tourism Image Perception in Small and Medium-Sized Cities

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to address the strategic challenge faced by small and medium-sized cities in leveraging social media to enhance their market competitiveness. Moving beyond the predominant focus on metropolitan areas, this research examines how multi-platform social media environments shape audience perceptions and influence destination positioning. Grounded in media communication and perception difference theories, a comprehensive framework was developed to evaluate cognitive, affective, conative, communication, and tourism intention dimensions. Using Chizhou, China as the case site, data were collected through a structured questionnaire survey, yielding 182 valid responses. The empirical results reveal a critical managerial insight. While audience segments exhibit high consistency in emotional resonance, significant cognitive gaps persist based on geographic origin and occupation. This divergence suggests that managers must move away from homogeneous broadcasting and adopt a differentiated targeting strategy. By aligning communication tactics with specific consumer groups, destinations can optimize resource allocation and enhance marketing efficiency. These findings extend the discourse on destination management by providing an evidence-based roadmap for cities with limited promotion budgets to achieve precise market positioning in the digital era.

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Introduction:

In the contemporary digital economy, social media has fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of market competition, forcing tourism destinations to transition from traditional advertising to complex digital engagement strategies. While metropolitan areas benefit from established brand equity and abundant promotion budgets, small and medium-sized cities face the strategic challenge of achieving market visibility with limited resources[1]. However, despite the widespread adoption of platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu in China, there is a paucity of research examining how these multi-platform environments influence audience perception and strategic positioning for these smaller destinations[2].

Prior research on destination image has focused heavily on large metropolitan areas. Recent studies suggest global cities maintain their brands through professional official narratives and crisis management[3]. In contrast, small and medium-sized cities often build appeal through counter-mainstream culture, viral UGC, and frequent low-cost interactions. However, existing studies still treat social media as a single, uniform channel[2]. They overlook how different content formats and usage behaviors affect

destinations differently [4]. This study addresses these gaps. We use a multi-dimensional framework to examine the Chizhou case. Our approach provides practical guidance for smaller cities deciding between broad awareness campaigns and targeted niche marketing.

To address this gap, this study integrates media communication theory and perception difference theory to construct a comprehensive analytical framework. Unlike prior research that focuses solely on psychological constructs, this paper adopts a managerial lens to investigate how differences in audience segments, specifically geographic origin and occupation, affect the reception of tourism messages. Using Chizhou, China, as the case site, this research moves beyond simple descriptive analysis to examine the underlying mechanisms of perception formation.

The findings aim to provide a strategic roadmap for destination managers. By identifying the specific dimensions where audience perceptions diverge or converge, this study offers actionable insights into optimizing resource allocation and enhancing marketing efficiency. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on strategic management by

demonstrating how organizations in resource-constrained environments can leverage digital platforms to achieve precise market positioning.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations:

Theoretical Foundations:

Gartner proposed that destination image can be divided into three progressively related dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative[5]. Cognitive image refers to tourists' knowledge and judgment of the objective conditions of a destination, such as tourism resources, facilities, and services. Affective image reflects tourists' subjective psychological experiences, such as pleasure and comfort. Conative image is closer to behavior and is reflected in willingness to visit or recommend. Considering that communication effects themselves influence destination image perception in the social media environment, this study further refines Chizhou's tourism destination image into five dimensions. There are cognitive image, affective image, conative image, communication image, and tourism intention [5, 6].

Communication and Media theory constitutes a foundational framework for understanding how information is produced, disseminated, and received within societal structures, influencing cognition, attitudes, and collective behavior[7]. The field has evolved from early functionalist models focused on mass media effects to complex, integrative frameworks that account for digital interactivity, algorithmic curation, and heterogeneous audience susceptibility[7]. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that media effects are not uniform but are mediated by dispositional, developmental, and social factors, as articulated in the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM)[4]. This model posits that individuals process media messages through varying states of attention, emotional response, and cognitive engagement, challenging earlier assumptions of passive reception[6].

Baloglu and McCleary proposed that destination image includes cognitive, affective, and conative levels and is shaped not only by external factors such as information sources and prior experience, but also by personal characteristics such as age, education, and occupation[8]. Therefore, different tourists may produce different cognitions and evaluations of the same destination[9]. Based on this theoretical logic, this study introduces the perspective of social media communication and uses t-tests and ANOVA to examine group differences across the five image perception dimensions.

Review of Tourism Destination Image Perception: Research:

The foundational definition of Tourism Destination Image (TDI) has been subject to extensive debate, with early research often lacking conceptual clarity. A rigorous analysis of forty-five representative definitions reveals that TDI is predominantly defined as the mental impressions or perceptions held by tourists regarding a destination[8]. To address this ambiguity, recent studies have proposed a refined definition based on logical definition theory, establishing TDI as a holistic construct that encompasses both the sum of beliefs and the overall evaluative impression[8]. This evolution marks a shift from viewing image as a static snapshot to understanding it as a dynamic

psychological representation that guides tourist behavior. Furthermore, the distinction between "destination imagery"—the totality of associations related to a destination, and "destination image"—a heuristic mental shortcut used for decision-making, provides a nuanced framework for analyzing how tourists process complex information[8].

Social Media and Tourism Destination Image:

The intersection of social media and TDI represents a paradigm shift in how destinations are perceived, constructed, and managed. Unlike traditional marketing channels where image formation was largely controlled by destination marketing organizations (DMOs), social media has democratized this process, enabling a dynamic, co-created image driven by user-generated content (UGC)[9]. This transformation necessitates a reevaluation of TDI frameworks to account for the volume, velocity, and variety of digital data. Recent research emphasizes that social media platforms are not merely distribution channels but active agents in shaping the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of destination image through complex algorithmic and social interactions[9, 11]. The holistic measurement of TDI in this context requires integrating structured and unstructured data to capture the multifaceted nature of online perceptions, including popularity, sentiment, and visual appeal[9].

Research Design:

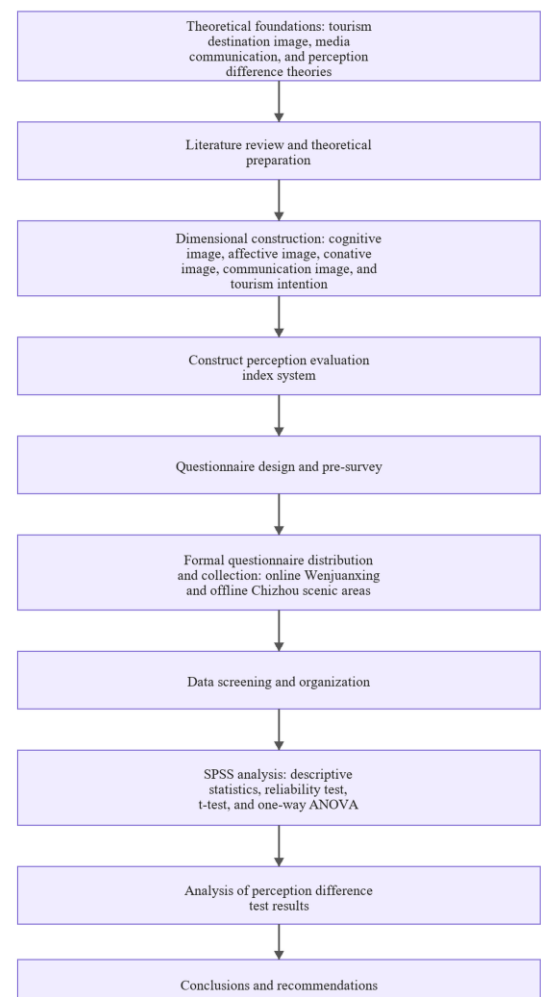


Figure 1 Research Framework

Destination image theory, uses and gratifications theory, and perception difference theory jointly suggest that different groups may differ in their perceptions of Chizhou's tourism image under social media communication [9]. However, decentralization, algorithmic recommendation, and content homogenization may weaken the explanatory power of traditional demographic divisions. Based on this reasoning, the study proposes the following hypotheses.

H1: Groups with different demographic characteristics differ significantly across dimensions of Chizhou tourism image perception.

H1a: Groups with different places of residence differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H1b: Groups of different ages differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H1c: Groups with different educational attainment differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H1d: Groups with different occupations differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H1e: Groups with different monthly disposable income differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H2: Groups with different social media use behaviors differ significantly across dimensions of Chizhou tourism image perception.

H2a: Groups with different media use frequencies differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H2b: Groups using different common platforms differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H2c: Groups with different content preferences differ significantly in Chizhou tourism image perception.

H3: Groups with different annual travel frequencies differ significantly across dimensions of Chizhou tourism image perception.

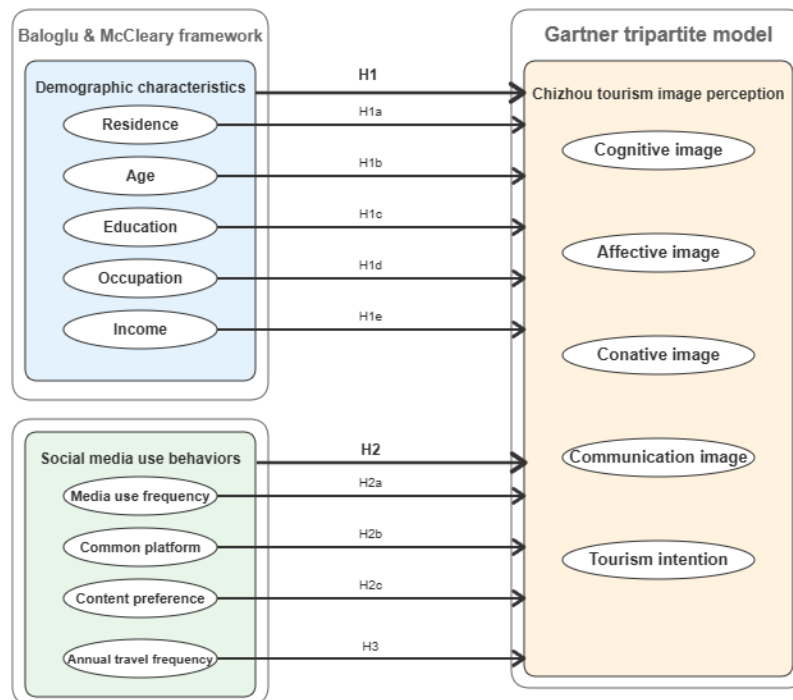


Figure 2 Conceptual Model

The research framework is shown as Figure 1. The conceptual model is shown as Figure 2.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part collected demographic information. The second part measured social media use habits, including content preference, major platforms, commonly used platform, and use frequency. The third part was the Chizhou tourism image perception scale, which measured cognitive, affective, conative, communication, and intention dimensions.

Based on a rigorous review of the literature regarding destination image[5,8], an initial pool of 43 items was generated to capture the five-dimensional framework. To ensure content validity, these items were reviewed and refined by three tourism scholars to align with the local context of Chizhou. Subsequently, a pilot test was

administered to 45 potential tourists. Items with low corrected item-total correlations (CITC<0.3) were removed, resulting in the final 40-item scale. The reliability of the scale was confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.82 to 0.91.

Official questionnaires were distributed both online and offline from 11th February to 15th March 2026. Online dissemination relied on Wenjuanxing and travel-interest groups. Offline collection was conducted at exits or rest areas of major scenic spots in Chizhou, such as Mount Jiuhua and Xinghua Village. A total of 333 questionnaires were collected. To ensure data validity, invalid responses were rigorously filtered based on three predefined criteria. First, regarding completion time, questionnaires completed in less than 60 seconds were excluded. Because it indicates insufficient reading or inattentive responding. Second, to eliminate patterned answering, questionnaires featuring

identical selections across 20 or more consecutive items were removed. Third, concerning geographic consistency, records exhibiting discrepancies between IP geolocation and self-reported residence were deleted unless participants provided a plausible justification in the designated comments section. Following these procedures, 182 valid

questionnaires were retained for analysis. Finally, 182 valid questionnaires were retained.

Date Analysis and Discussion:

A total of 182 valid samples were collected. The demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n = 182)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Place of residence	Within Anhui Province in China	96	52.7
	Outside Anhui Province in China	86	47.3
Age	18-25	37	20.3
	26-35	69	37.9
	36-45	54	29.7
	46-55	12	6.6
	56 and above	10	5.5
Education	High school or below	28	15.4
	Junior college	48	26.4
	Bachelor's degree	73	40.1
	Master's degree or above	33	18.1
Occupation	Student	37	20.3
	Enterprise employee	75	41.2
	Public institution / civil servant	15	8.2
	Freelancer	40	22.0
	Retired	7	3.8
	Other	8	4.4
Monthly disposable income	CNY 2,000 or below	20	11.0
	CNY 2,001-5,000	58	31.9
	CNY 5,001-8,000	64	35.2
	CNY 8,001-12,000	29	15.9
	Above CNY 12,000	11	6.0
Annual travel frequency	Once or less	72	39.6
	2-3 times	72	39.6
	4-6 times	27	14.8
	7 times or more	11	6.0

Notes: 1 USD is roughly equivalent to 7 CNY.

The sample is relatively balanced in regional coverage. Respondents from outside Anhui account for nearly half of the total. In terms of age, the sample is mainly composed of young and middle-aged respondents, which is generally consistent with the main audience profile of tourism information on current social media platforms. Bachelor's degree holders form the largest

educational group, while enterprise employees and freelancers are also highly represented.

Social Media Use Behavior:

Regarding social media content preference, as shown in Table 2 video and short-video content dominates the sample. Among the platforms used to obtain Chizhou

tourism information, Douyin/Kuaishou and Ctrip/Meituan show relatively high proportions, followed by WeChat official accounts/Channels and Xiaohongshu. In terms of monthly frequency, 4-6 times

is the most common category, indicating a relatively high level of exposure to tourism information through social media.

Table 2 Social media Use Behavior of the Sample (n = 182)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Content preference	Text-and-image content	48	26.4
	Video / short-video content	115	63.2
	No clear preference	19	10.4
Most commonly used platform	Douyin / Kuaishou	61	33.5
	Weibo	23	12.6
	Xiaohongshu	35	19.2
	WeChat official account / Channels	37	20.3
	Ctrip / Meituan travel sections	26	14.3
Monthly use frequency	Less than once	9	4.9
	1-3 times	23	12.6
	4-6 times	94	51.6
	7 times or more	56	30.8

Current Perception of Chizhou's Tourism Image:

The study uses the five dimensions of cognitive image, affective image, conative image, communication image,

and tourism intention and communication tendency as comprehensive indicators of Chizhou tourism image perception. Dimensional scores were calculated by averaging the corresponding items.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of Chizhou Tourism Image Perception Dimensions (n = 182)

Perception dimension	Mean (M)	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Cognitive image perception	3.34	0.748	1.89	4.78
Affective image perception	3.31	0.893	1.43	4.86
Conative image perception	3.21	0.896	1.43	4.86
Communication image perception	3.24	0.916	1.43	5
Tourism intention and communication tendency	3.30	0.769	1.60	4.80

As shown in Table 3, the mean values show that Chizhou's natural tourism resources receive the highest recognition among respondents, followed by viewing and experiential value and the uniqueness of red tourism resources. In contrast, indicators related to supporting facilities, public services, and consumption pricing are relatively weaker. Overall, respondents hold a positive impression of Chizhou tourism. Natural landscape resources are its most prominent attraction, while facilities, public services, and pricing remain key weaknesses that lower the overall cognitive evaluation.

Reliability and Validity Tests:

Reliability Test:

Cronbach's alpha was used to test the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The alpha coefficient of the overall scale containing 40 items is 0.945. The coefficients of all five dimensions exceed 0.8, indicating very high internal consistency and reliable data quality. Details were available in Table 4.

Table 4 Questionnaire Reliability Test Results (n = 182)

Dimension	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Cognitive image perception	9	0.883
Affective image perception	7	0.826
Conative image perception	7	0.826
Communication image perception	7	0.875
Tourism intention and communication tendency	10	0.870
Overall scale	40	0.945

Discriminant Validity Test:

The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to test discriminant validity. In Table 5, the square root of the AVE for each dimension is greater than its correlations with other dimensions, indicating that the five perception dimensions are theoretically related but empirically distinguishable and can be treated as independent dependent variables in subsequent difference tests.

Regarding discriminant validity, the AVE for Cognitive Image was 0.564. While this value approaches the

conventional threshold, the square root of the AVE (0.751) exceeds the correlations between Cognitive Image and all other constructs, particularly Tourism Intention ($r = 0.541$). This indicates that the constructs possess adequate discriminant validity despite their theoretical overlap. As noted in Gartner's hierarchical framework, cognitive perceptions often serve as precursors to behavioral intentions, which may naturally result in higher correlations between these dimensions. All other constructs demonstrated AVE values well above the 0.50 benchmark, confirming the overall robustness of the measurement model.

Table 5 Fornell-Larcker Discriminant Validity Test

Perception dimension	Cognitive image	Affective image	Conative image	Communication image	Tourism intention
Cognitive image perception	0.564				
Affective image perception	0.405	0.737			
Conative image perception	0.432	0.437	0.717		
Communication image perception	0.447	0.441	0.501	0.725	
Tourism intention	0.541	0.466	0.537	0.528	0.614

Note: Bold diagonal values in the original table are the square roots of AVE; off-diagonal values are inter-dimensional correlations.

Analysis of Differences in Image Perception:

As shown in Table 6, using place of residence as the grouping variable, the sample was divided into respondents within Anhui Province and respondents outside Anhui Province. The results show that only the cognitive image dimension presents a significant

difference ($t = 2.101$, $p < 0.05$). Respondents within Anhui have significantly higher cognitive evaluations than respondents outside the province. The effect size, Cohen's $d = 0.420$, indicates a moderate effect. No significant differences are found in affective image, conative image, communication image, or tourism intention.

Table 6 Independent-Samples t-test Results for Place of Residence

Perception dimension	Within Anhui (M)	Outside Anhui (M)	t	p	Conclusion
Cognitive image perception	3.40	3.09	2.101	0.037	Within Anhui > outside Anhui*
Affective image perception	3.35	3.10	1.375	0.171	No significant difference
Conative image perception	3.24	3.07	0.940	0.348	No significant difference
Communication image perception	3.24	3.24	0.024	0.981	No significant difference

Tourism intention and communication tendency	3.31	3.25	0.337	0.736	No significant difference
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Note: * $p < 0.05$.

This result suggests that differences caused by residence are mainly reflected in concrete cognition of tourism resources and facilities, rather than in deeper affective attitudes or travel intention. Respondents within Anhui are geographically closer to Chizhou and may obtain

more systematic information through relatives, friends, or short-distance travel. Respondents outside the province rely more on fragmented short videos and image-text posts on platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu.

Table 7 One-Way ANOVA Results for Age, Education, Occupation, and Monthly Income

Grouping variable	Cognitive image	Affective image	Conative image	Communication image	Tourism intention
Age	F=1.311 p=0.268 $\eta^2=0.036$	F=0.393 p=0.813 $\eta^2=0.011$	F=0.300 p=0.878 $\eta^2=0.008$	F=0.476 p=0.754 $\eta^2=0.013$	F=1.547 p=0.191 $\eta^2=0.042$
Education	F=1.386 p=0.249 $\eta^2=0.031$	F=0.209 p=0.890 $\eta^2=0.005$	F=0.027 p=0.994 $\eta^2=0.001$	F=1.371 p=0.253 $\eta^2=0.03$	F=1.261 p=0.289 $\eta^2=0.028$
Occupation	F=2.312 p=0.046* $\eta^2=0.074$	F=0.436 p=0.823 $\eta^2=0.015$	F=0.410 p=0.842 $\eta^2=0.014$	F=0.848 p=0.518 $\eta^2=0.028$	F=1.201 p=0.311 $\eta^2=0.04$
Monthly disposable income	F=2.334 p=0.057 $\eta^2=0.063$	F=0.494 p=0.740 $\eta^2=0.014$	F=0.753 p=0.557 $\eta^2=0.021$	F=0.326 p=0.860 $\eta^2=0.009$	F=1.161 p=0.330 $\eta^2=0.032$

Note: * $p < 0.05$; monthly disposable income is marginally significant in the cognitive image dimension ($p = 0.057$).

In Table 7, occupation shows a significant difference only in the cognitive image dimension. LSD post hoc comparisons indicate that students ($M = 3.58$) and respondents from public institutions or civil-service positions ($M = 3.67$) score significantly higher than the 'other' occupation group ($M = 2.99$). No significant differences are found for the remaining variables across the five dimensions.

Differences Based on social media Use Behavior:

In Table 8, One-way ANOVA was conducted using social media use frequency, commonly used platform, and content preference as grouping variables. No social media use behavior variable produces significant differences across the five perception dimensions.

Table 8 One-Way ANOVA Results for social media Use Behavior Variables

Grouping variable	Cognitive image	Affective image	Conative image	Communication image	Tourism intention
Use frequency	F=1.163 p=0.325 $\eta^2=0.026$	F=0.263 p=0.852 $\eta^2=0.006$	F=0.199 p=0.897 $\eta^2=0.005$	F=1.008 p=0.391 $\eta^2=0.022$	F=0.065 p=0.978 $\eta^2=0.001$
Common platform	F=0.361 p=0.836 $\eta^2=0.01$	F=0.505 p=0.732 $\eta^2=0.014$	F=0.482 p=0.749 $\eta^2=0.014$	F=0.371 p=0.829 $\eta^2=0.01$	F=0.500 p=0.736 $\eta^2=0.014$
Content preference	F=0.583 p=0.559 $\eta^2=0.01$	F=0.194 p=0.824 $\eta^2=0.003$	F=0.049 p=0.952 $\eta^2=0.001$	F=0.831 p=0.437 $\eta^2=0.014$	F=0.043 p=0.958 $\eta^2=0.001$

The p-values for content preference in the conative image and tourism intention dimensions are 0.952 and 0.958 respectively, suggesting that respondents' aspiration toward and willingness to recommend Chizhou are nearly identical regardless of whether they prefer short videos or text-and-image content.

Annual travel frequency was used as the grouping variable for one-way ANOVA. As shown in Table 9, no significant difference is found in any of the five dimensions. Although descriptive statistics show that frequent travelers score slightly higher on communication image and tourism intention, the small sample size of this group prevents the difference from reaching statistical significance.

Table 9 One-Way ANOVA Results for Annual Travel Frequency

Perception dimension	F	p	η^2
Cognitive image perception	0.789	0.502	0.018
Affective image perception	0.804	0.493	0.018
Conative image perception	1.770	0.154	0.039
Communication image perception	1.718	0.165	0.038
Tourism intention and communication tendency	1.223	0.303	0.027

Table 10 Summary of Difference Test Results for Chizhou Tourism Image Perception

Variable category	Variable	Method	Significant dimension	Non-significant dimensions
Demographic	Place of residence	t-test	Cognitive image*	Affective, conative, communication, intention
Demographic	Age	ANOVA	-	All five dimensions
Demographic	Education	ANOVA	-	All five dimensions
Demographic	Occupation	ANOVA	Cognitive image*	Affective, conative, communication, intention
Demographic	Monthly disposable income	ANOVA	-(cognitive image marginal)	Affective, conative, communication, intention
Media behavior	Use frequency	ANOVA	-	All five dimensions
Media behavior	Common platform	ANOVA	-	All five dimensions
Media behavior	Content preference	ANOVA	-	All five dimensions
Tourism experience	Annual travel frequency	ANOVA	-	All five dimensions

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

In Table 10, the distribution of perception differences is uneven and concentrated in a small number of variables and in a single dimension. Among the nine grouping variables, only place of residence and occupation produce significant differences in cognitive image perception. The remaining seven variables show no

significant differentiation across all five dimensions. In particular, affective image perception is non-significant in all nine tests, indicating that emotional experience of Chizhou tourism does not substantively differ across identity backgrounds or media habits.

Table 11 Summary of Research Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Content	Method	Result	Judgment
H1	Demographic groups differ in perception	-	-	Partially supported
H1a	Residence groups differ in perception	t-test	Cognitive image significant	Supported
H1b	Age groups differ in perception	ANOVA	No significance in all five dimensions	Not supported
H1c	Education groups differ in perception	ANOVA	No significance in all five dimensions	Not supported
H1d	Occupation groups differ in perception	ANOVA	Cognitive image significant	Supported
H1e	Monthly disposable income groups differ in perception	ANOVA	No significance in all five dimensions;	Not supported

			cognitive image marginally significant, $p=0.057$	
H2a	Media use frequency groups differ in perception	ANOVA	No significance in all five dimensions	Not supported
H2b	Common platform groups differ in perception	ANOVA	No significance in all five dimensions	Not supported
H2c	Content preference groups differ in perception	ANOVA	No significance in all five dimensions	Not supported
H3	Annual travel frequency groups differ in perception	ANOVA	No significance in all five dimensions	Not supported

Note: The judgment is based on the five perception dimensions. A hypothesis is considered supported when at least one dimension is significant at $p < 0.05$.

A basic pattern can therefore be summarized: in the social media era, perceptual differences regarding the tourism image of small and medium-sized cities mainly occur at the cognitive level, that is, at the level of what audiences know and how much they know. Such differences are often related to geographic distance and occupational information environments. At deeper levels of affective response, aesthetic evaluation, and behavioral intention, perceptions among different groups tend to converge. social media has helped form a cross-group perceptual consensus.

The final hypothesis testing results are shown in Table 11.

Additionally, the differential impact of demographic variables can be attributed to varying information environments. Specifically, place of residence and occupation significantly shape cognitive image because they determine the accessibility and relevance of information regarding destination attributes [8]. Conversely, the affective image remained stable across all groups. This aligns with the notion that while cognitive judgments are malleable, emotional responses to natural aesthetics are universal and physiologically rooted [8]. Furthermore, the non-significant effects of media use behaviors suggest a homogenizing effect of social media algorithms. Platforms like Douyin prioritize high-engagement content, exposing diverse users to similar viral materials, thereby diminishing the potential for media usage to create perceptual gaps [7].

Conclusion:

This study addresses the strategic dilemma faced by small and medium-sized cities in leveraging social media for competitive positioning amid resource constraints. Departing from the predominant focus on metropolitan areas, we employed a multi-dimensional framework to investigate how social media environments shape destination perception. Our findings reveal a distinct cognitive-affective divergence: while cognitive evaluations are susceptible to demographic segmentation (specifically residence and occupation), affective responses remain remarkably stable across diverse audience groups. Crucially, we demonstrate that social media exerts a homogenizing effect, as variations in usage behavior do not trigger perceptual divergence,

thereby challenging the assumption that platform choice inherently alters destination image.

Theoretically, this research extends destination image scholarship in three key ways. First, it advances a nuanced understanding of image formation by delineating the differential susceptibility of cognitive versus affective dimensions to external filters. Second, it shifts the analytical lens to resource-constrained prefecture-level cities, providing a theoretical basis for strategic positioning in smaller markets where broad awareness campaigns may be inefficient. Third, it refines media effects theory by highlighting that content resonance, rather than mere usage frequency or platform preference, drives perceptual variance in the digital era.

For practitioners, these findings offer an evidence-based roadmap for optimizing resource allocation. Immediate priorities center on transparently communicating progress on infrastructural and service gaps identified in cognitive assessments, directly tackling the most pressing barriers to visitor conversion. Medium-term strategies target out-of-province audiences to resolve persistent information asymmetries, deploying tailored messaging for specific occupational groups such as red tourism promotions for public sector employees and youth-oriented user-generated content campaigns for students. Long-term initiatives reinforce the universal emotional consensus surrounding Chizhou's natural and cultural assets, while maintaining a consistent core narrative across high-impact visual platforms to solidify brand identity without over-reliance on fragmented platform adjustments.

Despite these contributions, this study has limitations that warrant future inquiry. The sample skews toward younger cohorts, a bias that may mask age-linked variations in affective and cognitive image perceptions given that older tourist groups often hold distinct emotional attachments and travel decision logics toward cultural and ecological destinations. Data collection during the off-season further constrains generalizability. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and qualitative analyses of user-generated content to capture the dynamic evolution of destination image, and disaggregate current pooled analyses across Douyin, Xiaohongshu, WeChat and Ctrip to reflect platform-specific content formats and user demographics. Additionally, expanding sample

diversity to include more senior tourists and out-of-province visitors would provide a more holistic understanding of perception dynamics in the context of regional tourism development.

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