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Perceptions of attractions, residents as "more knowledgeable others" and destination image: Evidence from two destinations

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Abstract

Drawing on work on the "more knowledgeable other" (MKO) and the mere exposure theory (MET), this study envisaged that visitors' engagement and interaction with key informants, along with their perceptions of the attractions visited, affect their image of and satisfaction with the destination. Findings drawn from two studies indicate that interaction with MKOs and perceptions of attractions determine cognitive, affective, and conative image along with overall satisfaction. Events held in local attractions that promote visitors' interaction with MKOs are proposed for tourists to gain better insights to the place and its locals.

KEYWORDS
affective image, cognitive image, conative image, mere exposure theory, overall satisfaction, zone of proximal development

1 | INTRODUCTION

The significance of understanding tourists' destination image has been universally acknowledged in the tourism literature (Tasci et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2014). Image is known to influence individuals' decision-making processes in choosing destinations (Gallarza et al., 2002; Tasci & Gartner, 2007), while it also affects visitors' on-site experience and satisfaction (Jeong & Kim, 2019; Prayag et al., 2017), along with their future re-visitation intentions (Loi et al., 2017; Lv et al., 2020). Destination image, as such, exhibits strong interlinks to destination competitiveness and sustainability (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018). Despite several notable contributions to understanding the various antecedents of destination image, including place attachment (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Stylos & Bellou, 2019) and emotional solidarity with residents (Woosnam et al., 2020), Smith et al. (2015) suggest that few studies have considered the role contextual factors and experience with the destination play in this process.

Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) work on the "more knowledgeable other" (MKO) it is envisaged that visitors' engagement and interaction with key informants, such as local residents, will affect their image of and satisfaction with the destination. In the tourism context, local residents are considered MKOs who possess more complex, detailed, and often differentiated images of their place, compared with tourists (Chan & Marafa, 2016; Stylidis et al., 2015; Valek & Williams, 2018), with researchers further providing evidence that locals are willing to transmit such images via word-of-mouth (WOM) or e-WOM to others (Arsal et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2017). Past research has underlined the host community's function (e.g., via the friendliness/receptiveness/hospitality of the locals, used in the measurement of destination image) as a core element of a destination to pull visitors, especially as tourism entails various levels of interaction with the local population (Eusébio et al., 2018). Although such interaction offers strong potential in tourism research, it has thus far only been used as an antecedent to explain place attachment (Aleshinloye et al., 2020), emotional solidarity with locals (Joo et al., 2018), and cross-cultural understanding (Kirillova et al., 2015), but not destination image and satisfaction with the destination per se.

Somewhat similarly, there is limited understanding of how visitors' perceptions of local attractions (as an extrinsic independent factor) drive their image of and overall satisfaction with the destination (Suhartanto et al., 2018). Cultural attractions offer opportunities to diversify the traditional tourism product (Ramkissoon et al., 2011),

and are thus considered pivotal in establishing destination attractiveness (Weidenfeld et al., 2016). In line with Dodds and Jolliffe (2016), successfully managed and marketed attractions are critical determinants of destination selection. Among the few studies available, Ramkissoon et al. (2011) explored the impact of destination image on intention to consume cultural attractions, but failed to consider the reverse relationship between visitors' perceptions of attractions and destination image. Recently, Suhartanto et al. (2018) established a positive link between satisfaction with attractions and destination image; despite its notable contribution, image was assessed in their study via three items only, neglecting its well-known tri-compositional cognitive, affective and conative nature (see Tasci et al., 2007). Conative image has been predominantly captured in the past as the intention to visit/revisit and to recommend the destination to others (Prayag & Ryan, 2012), failing to fully reflect the social media era, which allows visitors to leave comments and post photos on social media (e-WOM), a practice similar to traditional WOM (Edwards et al., 2017).

In response to the previously identified research gaps, this study seeks to explore how visitors' interactions with MKOs (local community), along with their perceptions of the destination attractions visited, formulate their destination image and overall satisfaction with their trip. The objectives of the study are fourfold: (a) to examine how visitors' interactions with local MKOs determine their cognitive, affective, and conative destination image, and overall satisfaction; (b) to explore the way visitors' perceptions of attractions visited shape the three aforementioned components of destination image, and overall satisfaction; (c) to test the relationship between cognitive and affective destination image with visitors' overall satisfaction; and (d) to test the effects that the two components of image, along with overall satisfaction, have on conative destination image. Conative image was conceptualized here as both intention to visit, WOM and e-WOM.

The theoretical underpinning of this study is based on the concept of the MKO (Vygotsky, 1978), and the mere exposure theory (MET) developed by Zajonc (1968), to suggest that increased exposure and interaction with MKOs, along with perceptions of the attractions visited, will facilitate more favorable images, increase overall satisfaction and enhance positive behavioral intentions. Hypothesized relationships are drawn from two studies completed during the summer of 2019; one in a destination offering cultural and heritage tourism ($n = 353$); and the other in a sea and sun tourist destination ($n = 397$), largely attracting mass tourists. The varying settings and their differentiated visitors offered opportunities to establish the proposed model beyond a single destination.

Overall, this study contributes to tourism theory by responding to recent calls for novel antecedents of destination image (Kislali et al., 2020; Lv et al., 2020; Tasci et al., 2021), including greater attention to those of a contextual nature (Smith et al., 2015), such as interaction with MKOs and experience with the attractions visited, as both have received limited attention in the past. This work also extends our knowledge by expanding existing destination image frameworks via the application of Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the MKO and the

interaction visitors have with such residents. To the best of our knowledge, no study has used this theoretical framework within the tourism literature. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic in which we find ourselves, such knowledge provides critical information to destination managers who seek to increase the attractiveness of a given destination, securing existing visitors while also appealing to potential ones. The latter will be especially applicable to destinations reeling from major declines in tourist numbers since the first quarter of 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this study sheds light on how destination managers can reinforce the importance of interactions with MKOs in helping to enhance experiences and promote destinations, especially in a time when residents may see the much-needed positive economic impacts of hosting visitors.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | "Zone of proximal development," the "MKO," and tourists' destination image

In his seminal work on the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), Vygotsky (1978) stressed the pivotal role social interactions play in the development of cognition, elevating the position of the wider community in the process of "making meaning" (Daniels, 2001). Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as

> the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p. 86).

In line with Bodrova and Leong (2007), Vygotsky preferred the term "zone" to reflect development as a continuous process, whereby knowledge within the next zone can be achieved through social interactions. Vygotsky strongly believed in the sociogenesis of mental functions (e.g., perceptions) (Eun, 2019). Knowledge is developed, in his terms, in daily interactions without always systematic or formal instruction. His work has been applied in several disciplines, including education and developmental psychology, due to its value in decoding aspects of human functioning (Eun, 2019). For example, Hedegaard (2005) explored the ZPD in the class environment and empirically confirmed its application and value via class dialog, group work, and task solutions.

Vygotsky (1978) referred to the notion of the "MKO" as an integral element of the ZPD. The MKO—an experienced and well-informed individual who has more knowledge on a concept, process, or task than the learner—offers support through verbal interactions, thereby assisting the less competent person in developing his/her cognitive and affective domains (Daniels, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In recent times, MKOs do not necessarily have to be humans, as web-based learning applications can also serve such a role (Chandra & Briskey, 2012). In the context of pharmaceutical products,

several global expert mentors were available to guide learning and sharing experiences over a week-long event organized by the World Health Organisation; participants were reported to have acquired knowledge and skills through working with such experts (Vesper et al., 2010). MKOs, however, do not always provide support (Eun, 2019), and interactions are not always kind and beneficial (Gauvain, 2001).

This is often the case in destinations that experience over-tourism such as Barcelona, Venice or Santorini (Mihalic, 2020), whereby locals perceive the economic, sociocultural, and environmental impacts incurred by excessive volumes of visitors in localities, as disruptive, causing stimulus overload, arousal, and negative affect (Kim & Kang, 2020). Particularly in Europe, residents in several destinations believe that the volume of visitors poses a threat to the continent's cultural heritage (Adie et al., 2020). In such localities, residents feel that they have no control over the pace of tourist development, fostering anti-tourism sentiment, avoidance strategies, or forms of aggression in their interactions with tourists (Gossling et al., 2020).

Although Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the MKO has not been directly applied to tourism, the literature supports the notion that residents have complex and thorough perceptions of their place, which can serve as a communal or social space where they live, raise families, and work (Stylidis et al., 2015). Residents are thus considered local experts in the tourism destination context (Zhang et al., 2017), while their images are known to commonly differ from those of tourists (Stylidis et al., 2017; Valek & Williams, 2018). Stylidis et al. (2017), for instance, found that local residents' images of Eilat, Israel differed from those of tourists on 27 of the 30 destination attributes studied. Tourism research further suggests that, due to residents' increased familiarity with their place (Shani & Uriely, 2012), locals often suggest specific attractions and activities, particularly to their friends and relatives, acting as place marketers (Leisen, 2001). The same applies to tourism and hospitality employees, who also serve a critical role in cultivating visitors' images (Stylidis, 2020).

Such practices, in turn, were found to determine visitors' onsite experiences (Young et al., 2007). Visitors' interactions, relationships (and occasionally friendships) with locals (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015), who serve as MKOs, help tourists in gaining knowledge and developing feelings about a destination, including increased solidarity and reduced social bias (see Joo et al., 2018 and Kirillova et al., 2015, respectively). Host–guest interactions, for example, were reported to be a critical antecedent in cross-cultural understanding (Kirillova et al., 2015). Interactions are defined as "the personal encounters that take place between a tourist and a host" (Reisinger & Turner, 2003, p. 37) and are commonly short, superficial, and non-repetitive (Kastenholz et al., 2018). For Walker and Moscardo (2016), meaningful interactions—evolving into something less superficial and temporary—facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of local people and their habits, and are a central component of the tourist experience; thereby contributing to improved destination image, experience, and satisfaction (Kastenholz et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2015). Given residents' potential to enhance tourists' experience, several researchers advocate that they should be placed at the heart of destination branding and marketing strategy (Campelo et al., 2014). Residents, overall, not only have the capacity to act as MKOs but often voluntarily engage in interactions with tourists, informing them about the destination and its people, their local customs, and activities available in the area.

Despite the strong conceptual rationale laid on Vygotsky's notions of ZPD and MKO, empirical research is lacking on the role visitors' interactions with MKO—as a means to expand their ZPD by using residents' expertise—play in formulating overall satisfaction and destination image. Additionally, previous studies have largely focused on the frequency of interaction between visitors and locals (e.g., Aleshinloye et al., 2020), with researchers (e.g., Kirillova et al., 2015) calling for further investigation of such encounters between the two parties. To fill these gaps, the present study explores the effectiveness of visitors' perceived interactions with MKOs in positively shaping their destination image (i.e., cognitive, affective, and conative) and overall satisfaction, which are of importance for successful destination management. Following the aforementioned discussion, it can be hypothesized that:

> **H1.** Visitors' interactions with MKOs are related to their cognitive destination image.

> **H2.** Visitors' interactions with MKOs are related to their affective destination image.

> **H3.** Visitors' interactions with MKOs are related to their conative destination image.

> **H4.** Visitors' interactions with MKOs are related to their overall satisfaction with the destination.

2.2 | MET, perceived attractions, and destination image

The MET developed by Zajonc (1968) postulates that mere exposure to an increasing stimulus leads people to more favorably assess it; exposure as such is a condition for the improvement of our attitude toward it. The MET builds on the notion that exposure reduces uncertainty about a novel stimulus; a commonly observed instinctive fear response (Zajonc, 1968). Following this line of reasoning, repeat exposure makes the stimulus accessible to perception, thereby enhancing recognition and familiarity, which, in turn, increases favorability (Montoya et al., 2017). Overexposure, on the other hand, may have a reverse effect on the evaluation of the given stimulus (Miller, 1976). Meta-analyses examining whether liking decreases after a volume of exposures revealed that there is an inverted-U shaped relationship for the mere exposure effect (Bornstein, 1989; Montoya et al., 2017).

Past research offers ample empirical support for the application of the MET in various fields including marketing, education, and

psychology. For instance, Mrkva and Van Boven (2020) concluded that repeated exposure increased liking, making evaluations both stronger, and emotionally intense. Nuñez (2018) who explored MET's application in the context of education, found that college students who were exposed to increased volumes of fictional college media were more likely to develop positive attitudes toward partying and socializing in college. Similar results were produced in a tourism context (Iordanova & Stylidis, 2019; Kim et al., 2019). Kim et al. (2019) observed that mere exposure to agritourism led tourists to alter their agriproduct purchasing patterns following their experience. Similarly, Iordanova and Stylidis (2019) who studied visit intensity as the number of attractions visited and events attended, reported a positive impact on tourists' image of Linz, Austria. Despite its merits, this work ignored visitors' perceived level of favorability for the attractions visited.

Researchers acknowledge that our understanding of how visitors' on-site experiences (e.g., attractions visited) shape their destination image remains limited (Smith et al., 2015; Vogt & Andereck, 2003). As Martín-Santana et al. (2017, p. 16) conclude, "there are no works that have tried to analyse how the intensity of the visit influences the image." Based on the MET, it is expected that a positive link exists between the perceived (favorability of) attractions tourists visit over the course of their trip and the destination image they develop (Andsager & Drzewiecka, 2002). Attractions are perceived as core resources in satisfying visitors' needs (Garrod et al., 2007), while a number of studies have documented how attractions are used by place marketers in destination image building (Weidenfeld et al., 2016). Michael et al.'s (2018) study, for example, reported that visitors' engagement in various activities and attractions (e.g., in favorite sports) leads to differentiated and more favorable destination images. Such experiences, stemming from visiting a destination's attractions, therefore contribute to higher levels of awareness, enhanced feelings, and more favorable destination image (Andsager & Drzewiecka, 2002; Suhartanto et al., 2018).

Despite these few notable contributions, there is still limited understanding of how visitors' perceptions of destination attractions determine their cognitive, affective, and conative image of the destination; and their overall levels of satisfaction (see Suhartanto et al., 2018). In line with Ramkissoon et al.'s (2011) research recommendation, visitors with favorable perceptions of the attractions they have visited would perceive their onsite experience more positively, leading to a more positive destination image and greater overall satisfaction. Therefore, in line with the MET and the above discussion, the following hypotheses are formulated:

> **H5.** *Visitors' perceptions of local attractions visited are related to their cognitive destination image.*

> **H6.** *Visitors' perceptions of local attractions visited are related to their affective destination image.*

> **H7.** *Visitors' perceptions of local attractions visited are related to their conative destination image.*

> **H8.** *Visitors' perceptions of local attractions visited are related to their overall satisfaction with the destination.*

2.3 | Cognitive, affective, and conative destination image

Destination image is one of the most studied research areas of tourism, dating back to the early 1970s (see Hunt, 1975). Following significant work on image in the domain of psychology (Boulding, 1956), tourism researchers concluded that destination image comprises three distinct components: cognitive, affective, and conative (Gartner, 1993). Tasci et al. (2007) reflected this three-dimensional approach in their definition of destination image. Cognitive image is what people know about a destination, formulated based on impressions of its attributes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999); affective image comprises their feelings and emotions toward it (Prayag & Ryan, 2012); while conative image is similar to behavior—that is, willingness to visit/revisit and to propose the destination to others (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Conative image often overlaps with destination loyalty, while the two concepts are used interchangeably in the literature (Li et al., 2010; Tasci et al., 2021).

In line with MacInnis and Price (1987), the notion of image pervades the entire tourism experience; at the pre-visitation stage, vicarious consumption may take place through imagery; during the actual visitation, image determines satisfaction; while postconsumption image can have a reconstructive role in which a person relives the experience via memories and souvenirs, with image further determining travel-related behavioral intentions. For Gartner (1993), conative image depends on the image developed over the cognitive and affective stage. The lion's share of destination image research confirms that the subjective interpretation of the destination and its people (Pearce & Stringer, 1991), along with the feelings evoked, determine a visitor's intention to visit/revisit and recommend (Chew & Jahari, 2014; Tasci et al., 2007). For example, Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2018) confirmed that both cognitive and affective exercised positive effects on conative image. This effect was also verified in a meta-analysis of 66 destination image studies conducted by Zhang et al. (2014). Following the aforementioned dominant line of reasoning, the next hypotheses are proposed:

> **H9.** *Cognitive destination image has a positive effect on conative destination image.*

> **H10.** *Affective destination image has a positive effect on conative destination image.*

2.4 | Overall satisfaction and destination image

Satisfaction in tourism is commonly viewed as consumers' fulfillment with their experiences related to a tourist product or destination; a post-purchase assessment of the destination (Del Bosque &

FIGURE 1 Proposed model
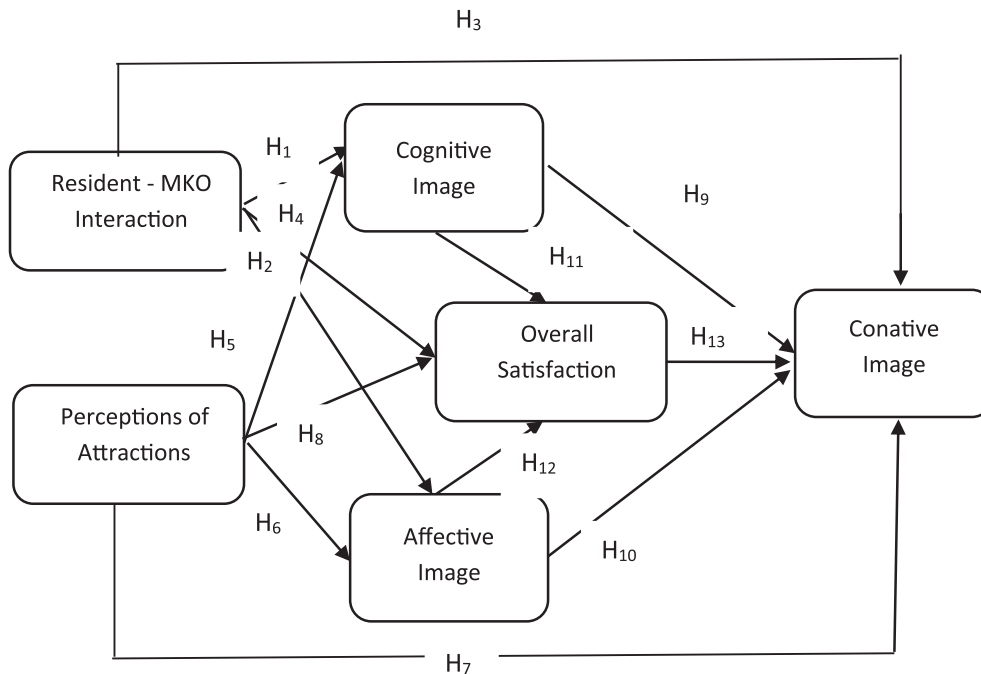
Martín, 2008). Researchers further suggest that a global measurement of satisfaction capturing consumers' overall fulfillment from a tourist destination, for instance, is more suitable than satisfaction with individual destination attributes (Assaker et al., 2011). In the tourism literature, a well-established relationship exists between overall satisfaction and destination image; more favorable cognitive and affective destination images result in greater levels of overall satisfaction (Bigne et al., 2005; Chi & Qu, 2008; Jeong & Kim, 2019; Loi et al., 2017), which, in turn, drives conative image in the form of behavioral intentions to revisit and to recommend a destination to others (Lv et al., 2020; Prayag et al., 2017). For example, Chen and Phou (2013) and Chi and Qu (2008) found that satisfied tourists are more likely to revisit the destination in the future, and are more willing to share their experiences with others. However, some variance is observed in previous studies in relation to which components of image are included in the aforementioned relationships; for instance, Loi et al. (2017) and Kim (2018) reported a direct impact of cognitive image on satisfaction, without considering the role of the affective image in this equation. This shortcoming was recently addressed in the study of Jeong and Kim (2019) who reported positive effects of both components (i.e., cognitive and affective) of image on satisfaction, and of the latter on conative image. The aforementioned discussion leads to the following set of hypotheses:

H11. *Cognitive destination image positively affects overall satisfaction.*

H12. *Affective destination image positively affects overall satisfaction.*

H13. *Overall satisfaction positively affects conative destination image.*

Overall, both theories (MKO and MET) can collectively be used to explain how tourist destination image is shaped as a result of exposure to MKOs and local attractions. As visitors experience the destination and its people (MKO), they become aware of, and are exposed (in line with MET) to locations and activities (Vogt & Andereck, 2003), thereby enhancing their knowledge of and feelings (ZPD) about the destination (Figure 1).

3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Research settings

The first study setting (the names of both research settings are covered only for the review process) is a coastal city with a population of around 70,000. The city offers various types of cultural, heritage, and religious attractions, including a designated UNESCO world heritage site. Overnight stays of international tourists nearly quadrupled between 2010 and 2018 (from 51,998 to 222,383). Although the city is served by an international airport, most visitors reach the destination by car, due to its close proximity to some key international tourist markets. The tourism supply side has also radically transformed, reflecting the large expansion of the sharing accommodation era (Yeager et al., 2020). In the Airbnb platform, for example, the volume of properties available was 744 in the third quarter of 2019, whereas 2 years ago the listed properties were 326, and in 2011 there were none.

The second study setting is a traditional sea and sun destination located in the same country as the first setting. It is an island with a population of around 14,000 inhabitants, well known for its natural environment (e.g., beaches, hillsides, and olive trees) and heritage attractions. It largely boasts all-inclusive accommodation and is served by charter flights to main tourist markets. International tourist overnight stays between 2010 and 2018 increased from 427,555 to 758,619. Hotel room capacity also increased by 12% over these years. The properties listed in the Airbnb platform were slightly over 300 in 2019.

Altogether, the two settings—located in a country that traditionally ranks in the top 20 most visited countries worldwide—feature dissimilar characteristics; the first one primarily attracting cultural tourists, and the second one predominantly focusing on mass tourists looking for a sun-and-sand tourism product. The increased tourist demand experienced over recent years in both destinations, along with the booming sharing accommodation sector, are expected to induce greater interaction and encounters between hosts and guests. The two settings were thus deemed appropriate for studying the application of the MKO and MET, along with the validity of the structural model proposed in this research.

3.2 | Research instrument

One survey questionnaire was distributed in both study sites for consistency and comparability of the results (see Ouyang et al., 2019). The questionnaire contained four sections; the first one captured the components of destination image. The in situ image was preferred as being more precise than the image captured upon return home (Iordanova & Stylidis, 2019). Following past research on cognitive image, a five-dimensional scale containing 14 items was applied to cover its diverse and complex nature (e.g., Chi & Qu, 2008; Stylidis et al., 2017; Wang & Hsu, 2010). The five dimensions established in past research included natural environment (e.g., scenery); amenities (e.g., accommodation); attractions (e.g., heritage); accessibility (e.g., transport); and social environment (e.g., friendly locals). The 14 items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale in which "1" denoted "strongly disagree" and "5" denoted "strongly agree." Following the well-established measurement of affective image, four items (e.g., distressing-relaxing) were used on a 5-point semantic differential scale (Chew & Jahari, 2014; Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2018). Lastly, conative image was captured via three items (e.g., intention to revisit the destination) borrowed from Prayag and Ryan (2012) and Moon and Han (2019), using a 5-point Likert-type scale from "1" (very unlikely) to "5" (very likely).

The next section explored visitors' perceptions of attractions and overall satisfaction. A list of the four top attractions (based on factors such as their popularity in visitation and ticket numbers, and position in TripAdvisor) per destination was provided and respondents were invited to assess their level of favorability from "1" "very negative" to "5" "very positive." A nonresponse option was also available for those who had not visited a specific attraction. Overall satisfaction was assessed through three items (e.g., very dissatisfied—very satisfied) on a 5-point semantic differential scale (Chi & Qu, 2008; Moon & Han, 2019). The third section explored the perceived interaction between visitors and MKOs via five items (e.g., friendships with locals) drawn from several studies (Joo et al., 2018; Kirillova et al., 2015; Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015), using a 5-point scale from "1" "strongly disagree" to "5" "strongly agree." The fourth section contained questions about respondents' demographic characteristics. A pilot test was conducted prior to the main data collection in spring 2019, with 40 visitors to the first study site and 30 visitors to the second study site confirming the face validity of the questionnaire.

3.3 | Data collection

Both samples were comprised of only adult visitors (18 years and older) who had stayed at least one night at the corresponding destination (study setting 1 or 2). Data were collected via self-administered questionnaires, on-site over the summer months of 2019, involving an experienced research team led by the first author, comprising four multilingual assistants (fluent in the native language, in English and three of the main tourists' languages). The close proximity between the two research settings (i.e., between 1.5 and 2 h) allowed the researchers to take shifts in data collection, rotating between different days and times. Similar to past research, intercept sampling was used due to the lack of a sampling frame (Stepchenkova & Li, 2013). Visitors were approached in the key tourist hot spots in both settings, where the vast proportion of accommodation establishments, catering units and shops are located, or at the international airport (mainly used by visitors in the second setting). The questionnaire was developed in four languages (including English) matching the key nationalities visiting both destinations. In the first setting, 550 tourists in total were approached, of whom 353 completed the survey, leading to a response rate of 64%. In the second setting, 500 tourists were approached overall, and 397 completed the survey, giving a response rate of 79%. A tenable explanation for the higher rate in the second study is the free time respondents had while awaiting their return to the mainland/airport.

3.4 | Data analysis

Prior to the main data analysis, it was confirmed via the Little's MCAR test that the missing values per variable were less than 5% and these were missing randomly (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Given the use of a common research instrument in data collection, the single latent method factor approach was used to check for potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Normality was explored through skewness and kurtosis, but no major issues were identified, as small and moderate departures from normality are the norm in social sciences and not an issue of concern when the sample size is large (Hair

et al., 2018). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the five-factor structure of the well-established cognitive image scale, and these factors were subsequently converted into five composite variables using each factor's mean scores. These composite variables, in turn, acted in further multivariate analysis as indicators for the cognitive image latent construct. This approach was used to reduce the complexity of the model, which is known to undermine its predictive validity (Bollen, 1989).

Based on Ouyang et al. (2019), the model was tested separately for each data set. Following Anderson and Gerbing (1988), a CFA (ML estimation) was initially conducted using AMOS v.25 to assess the measurement model, followed by structural equation modeling (SEM) to test for the hypothesized relationships in the proposed model. To empirically assess the model fit, the following fit indices and corresponding benchmarks were used according to Hair et al. (2018): for the CMIN/DF lower than 3 to 1; for the root-mean-square error of approximation and for standardized root mean square residual lower than 0.08; and for the comparative fit index and goodness of fit index, greater than 0.90.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Respondent profile

In the first study ($n = 353$), women (54%) slightly outnumbered men (46%). About 30% were between the ages of 18 and 30 years, while 28% were between the ages of 51 and 60. Over half were engaged in a formal relationship, and about four out of 10 (41%) had previously visited the destination. Visitors' nationalities corresponded to the destination's key tourist markets. For the second study ($n = 397$), women (56%), once again, slightly outnumbered men (44%). Roughly one-third of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 years, while another third were between the ages of 51 and 60 years. Over half of the respondents were in a formal relationship, and about a third of them had previously visited the destination. Similar to the first study setting, respondents' nationalities were aligned to its main tourist markets.

4.2 | Descriptive statistics

Visitors to the first destination rated it favorably in terms of the natural environment ($M = 4.38$), social context ($M = 4.12$), and amenities ($M = 4.04$). Affective image was described as pleasant ($M = 4.29$), relaxing ($M = 4.17$), and lively ($M = 4.01$). All the attractions were perceived very positively (scores in excess of 4.0), especially the old town. Most of them were very pleased ($M = 4.39$) and satisfied ($M = 4.34$) with their visit. Their conative image was also favorable, with participants expressing their intention to return ($M = 4.39$), to say positive things ($M = 4.52$) and encourage their friends to visit it ($M = 4.34$); while they were

likely to post photos ($M = 3.91$) and leave positive comments on social media ($M = 3.89$). Respondents also strongly agreed that interaction with MKOs facilitated their knowledge about which places to visit ($M = 4.08$) and where to taste traditional food ($M = 4.04$), while such interactions seemed to increase their sense of safety ($M = 3.93$) and provided a greater understanding of local customs ($M = 3.93$).

Visitors to the second destination seemed to appreciate its natural environment ($M = 4.31$), social context ($M = 4.33$), and amenities ($M = 3.91$). The affective image was perceived as relaxing ($M = 4.46$) and pleasant ($M = 4.44$). Similar to the first destination, three out of four attractions were perceived very positively (scores greater than 4.0), except for the local museum. Respondents appeared very pleased ($M = 4.42$) and satisfied ($M = 4.33$) with their visit and were keen to recommend ($M = 4.39$) and encourage their friends to visit it ($M = 4.21$), although they were not as inclined to post photos ($M = 3.76$) and leave comments online ($M = 3.73$). Further, they agreed less that they had received directions from local residents with regards to activities offered ($M = 3.77$) and places to eat ($M = 3.65$). They appeared almost neutral regarding friendship with locals ($M = 3.36$) and feeling that locals explained their way of life ($M = 3.40$).

4.3 | Measurement model

4.3.1 | Study 1

The results of the CFA indicated a good model fit, with a chi-square of 826.5 ($df = 282$, $p < 0.001$), and $CMIN/DF = 2.93$, which is below the suggested benchmark of 3.0. Most fit indices indicated a satisfactory model fit (CFI = 0.90, GFI = 0.85, SRMR = 0.064, RMSEA = 0.074), while *local museum* in attractions, *access* in cognitive image and *relaxing* in affective image had poor loadings and were eliminated from the analysis. After the elimination of these items, the revised indices suggested a good model fit: $\chi^2 = 576.6$ ($df = 213$, $p < 0.001$), CMIN/DF = 2.71, CFI = 0.88, GFI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.058, and RMSEA = 0.070. All composite reliability values were higher than the cut-off value of 0.70 (Table 1). Convergent validity was confirmed as item-loadings were over 0.50, while AVE exceeded the benchmark of 0.50. Discriminant validity was also established since the square roots of AVE values were higher than the correlations between the constructs in all cases (Table 2) (Hair et al., 2018).

4.3.2 | Study 2

The CFA conducted in the second data set also confirmed the measurement model fit: $\chi^2 = 675.8$ ($df = 282$, $p < 0.001$), CMIN/DF = 2.40, CFI = 0.92, GFI = 0.87, SRMR = 0.058, and RMSEA = 0.059. Given that *lively* in affective image, *access* in cognitive image and *local museum* in perceived attractions had poor loadings they were removed from the analysis. After their elimination, the

TABLE 1 CFA—Study 1

	Item loadings	t-values	CR	AVE
Resident-MKO interaction (RMI)			0.92	0.70
RMI1	0.77	16.86		
RMI2	0.86	19.76		
RMI3	0.89	20.84		
RMI4	0.82	18.38		
RMI5	0.84	19.25		
Cognitive image (CI)			0.80	0.50
CI1	0.74	14.75		
CI2	0.82	17.14		
CI3	0.60	11.46		
CI4	0.64	12.25		
Affective image (AI)			0.83	0.62
AI1	0.69	13.87		
AI2	0.87	19.10		
AI3	0.79	16.59		
Overall satisfaction (OS)			0.83	0.61
OS1	0.82	17.39		
OS2	0.75	15.20		
OS3	0.78	16.08		
Conative image (COI)			0.77	0.65
Conative image 1 (CI1)	0.96	-	0.86	0.67
CI1A	0.74	-		
CI1B	0.82	15.06		
CI1C	0.89	15.85		
Conative image 2 (CI2)	0.59	7.64	0.92	0.85
CI2A	0.89	-		
CI2B	0.94	15.60		
Perceived attractions (PA)			0.78	0.54
PA1	0.66	11.96		
PA2	0.72	13.72		
PA3	0.81	15.37		

TABLE 2 Discriminant validity—Study 1

	RMI	CI	AI	OS	COI	PA
Resident-MKO interaction (RMI)	**0.84**	0.50	0.63	0.44	0.78	0.21
Cognitive image (CI)	0.50	**0.71**	0.60	0.59	0.61	0.37
Affective image (AI)	0.63	0.60	**0.79**	0.62	0.70	0.32
Overall satisfaction (OS)	0.44	0.59	0.62	**0.78**	0.63	0.45
Conative image (COI)	0.78	0.61	0.70	0.63	**0.81**	0.39
Perceived attractions (PA)	0.21	0.37	0.32	0.45	0.39	**0.73**

fit indices improved: $\chi^2 = 470.2$ (df = 213, $p < 0.001$), CMIN/DF = 2.21, CFI = 0.95, GFI = 0.90, SRMR = 0.051, RMSEA = 0.055. Composite reliability values surpassed the criterion of 0.70. Convergent validity was verified as all item loadings exceeded the 0.50 benchmark and were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), while all AVE estimates exceeded 0.50 (Table 3). Discriminant validity was confirmed as the square roots of AVE values were higher than the intercorrelations between all constructs (Table 4).

	Item loadings	t-values	CR	AVE
Resident–MKO interaction (RMI)			0.90	0.65
RMI1	0.74	16.63		
RMI2	0.80	18.58		
RMI3	0.87	21.32		
RMI4	0.83	19.64		
RMI5	0.79	18.42		
Cognitive image (CI)			0.80	0.51
CI1	0.78	17.19		
CI2	0.77	16.85		
CI3	0.62	12.82		
CI4	0.67	14.17		
Affective image (AI)			0.75	0.51
AI1	0.72	14.41		
AI2	0.81	16.32		
AI3	0.58	11.24		
Overall satisfaction (OS)			0.87	0.69
OS1	0.81	18.63		
OS2	0.80	18.26		
OS3	0.88	20.97		
Conative image (COI)			0.73	0.59
Conative image 1 (CI1)	0.96	11.09	0.83	0.63
CI1A	0.63	-		
CI1B	0.83	12.98		
CI1C	0.89	13.59		
Conative image 2 (CI2)	0.51	8.54	0.88	0.79
CI2A	0.87	-		
CI2B	0.91	12.99		
Perceived attractions (PA)			0.83	0.63
PA1	0.72	11.97		
PA2	0.81	15.71		
PA3	0.84	17.73		

TABLE 3 CFA – Study 2

4.4 | Structural relationships

4.4.1 | Study 1

The results of the SEM supported the model: $\chi^2 = 614.1$ ($df = 215$, $p < 0.001$), CMIN/DF = 2.85, CFI = 0.92, GFI = 0.87, SRMR = 0.079, and RMSEA = 0.073. The structural coefficients suggest that all hypothesized relationships, apart from H_4 (effect of resident–MKO interaction on overall satisfaction) and H_9 (effect of cognitive image on conative image) were confirmed (Table 5). Resident-MKO interaction positively affected cognitive (H_1), affective (H_2), and conative image (H_3). Similarly, perceived attractions exercised a positive effect on cognitive (H_5), affective (H_6), and conative image (H_7); and overall satisfaction (H_8). Affective image was found to shape conative image (H_{10}), while both cognitive and affective image positively influenced

overall satisfaction (H_{11} and H_{12}); which in turn affected conative image (H_{13}). Overall, interaction with MKOs, perceived attractions, cognitive and affective image, and overall satisfaction predicted 72% of the variance in conative image.

4.4.2 | Study 2

Similarly, the fit indices of the second study supported the model: $\chi^2 = 504.0$ ($df = 215$, $p < 0.001$), CMIN/DF = 2.34, CFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.90, SRMR = 0.069, and RMSEA = 0.058. Most of the predicted relationships were substantiated except for H_4 (effect of resident-MKO interaction on overall satisfaction); H_7 (effect of perceived attractions on conative image); and H_8 (effect of perceived attractions on overall satisfaction) (Table 6). Respondents' interactions

TABLE 4 Discriminant validity—Study 2

	RMI	CI	AI	OS	COI	PA
Resident-MKO interaction (RMI)	**0.81**	0.45	0.31	0.31	0.51	0.15
Cognitive image (CI)	0.45	**0.72**	0.48	0.60	0.70	0.47
Affective image (AI)	0.31	0.48	**0.72**	0.54	0.52	0.22
Overall satisfaction (OS)	0.31	0.60	0.54	**0.83**	0.61	0.28
Conative image (COI)	0.51	0.70	0.52	0.61	**0.77**	0.29
Perceived attractions (PA)	0.15	0.47	0.22	0.28	0.29	**0.79**

TABLE 5 SEM results—Study 1

	Structural relationships	Direct			Indirect	
		Effect	t-value	p-value	Effect	p-value
H_1	Resident-MKO interaction → Cognitive image	0.47	7.78	<0.001		
H_2	Resident-MKO interaction → Affective image	0.61	9.36	<0.001		
H_3	Resident-MKO interaction → Conative image	0.54	7.73	<0.001	0.22	<0.01
H_4	Resident-MKO interaction → Overall satisfaction	0.01	0.17	0.87	0.38	<0.01
H_5	Perceived attractions → Cognitive image	0.30	4.82	<0.001		
H_6	Perceived attractions → Affective image	0.23	3.96	<0.001		
H_7	Perceived attractions → Conative image	0.12	2.18	<0.05	0.15	<0.01
H_8	Perceived attractions → Overall satisfaction	0.22	3.49	<0.001	0.18	<0.01
H_9	Cognitive image → Conative image	0.10	1.63	0.10	0.06	<0.05
H_{10}	Affective image → Conative image	0.16	2.28	<0.05	0.07	<0.05
H_{11}	Cognitive image → Overall satisfaction	0.31	4.16	<0.001		
H_{12}	Affective image → Overall satisfaction	0.39	4.69	<0.001		
H_{13}	Overall satisfaction → Conative image	0.19	2.75	<0.01		

Note: Conative image R^2: 72%; cognitive image R^2: 32%; affective image R^2: 43%; satisfaction R^2: 46%.

TABLE 6 SEM—Study 2

	Structural relationships	Direct			Indirect	
		Effect	t-value	p-value	Effect	p-value
H_1	Resident-MKO interaction → Cognitive image	0.41	7.67	<0.001		
H_2	Resident-MKO interaction → Affective image	0.29	4.49	<0.001		
H_3	Resident-MKO interaction → Conative image	0.20	3.56	<0.001	0.18	<0.01
H_4	Resident-MKO interaction → Overall satisfaction	0.00	−0.10	0.92	0.18	<0.01
H_5	Perceived attractions → Cognitive image	0.44	7.20	<0.001		
H_6	Perceived attractions → Affective image	0.20	3.25	<0.001		
H_7	Perceived attractions → Conative image	−0.05	−0.95	0.34	0.20	<0.01
H_8	Perceived attractions → Overall satisfaction	−0.02	−0.32	0.75	0.19	<0.01
H_9	Cognitive image → Conative image	0.43	5.29	<0.001	0.15	<0.01
H_{10}	Affective image → Conative image	0.18	3.00	<0.001	0.11	<0.01
H_{11}	Cognitive image → Overall satisfaction	0.47	6.26	<0.001		
H_{12}	Affective image → Overall satisfaction	0.36	5.58	<0.001		
H_{13}	Overall satisfaction → Conative image	0.26	3.70	<0.001		

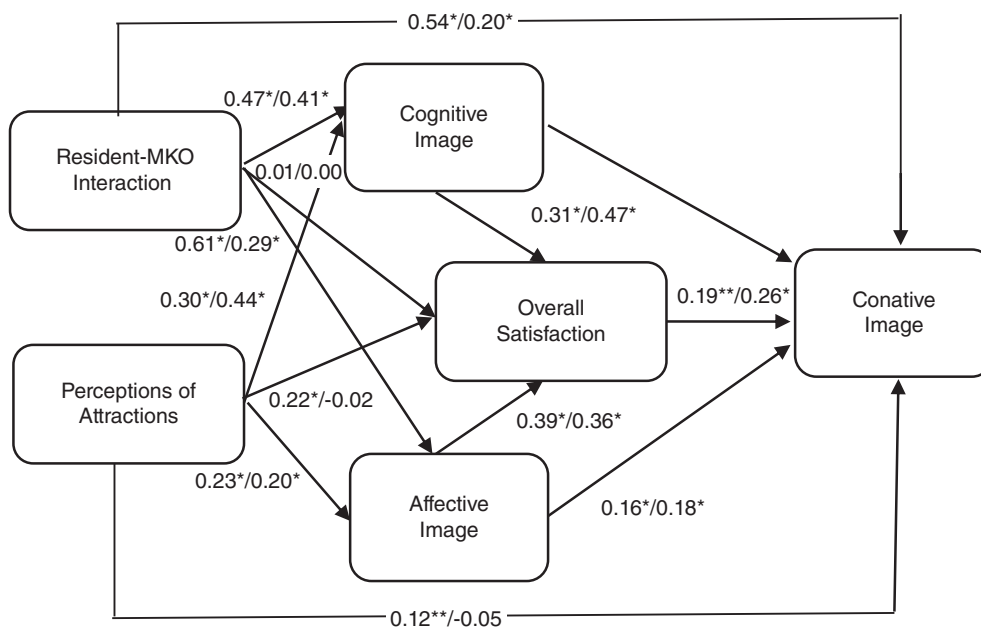*Note*: Conative image R^2: 61%; cognitive image R^2: 36%; affective image R^2: 13%; satisfaction R^2: 41%.

with MKOs positively affected cognitive (H_1), affective (H_2), and conative image (H_3). Perceived attractions had a positive impact on cognitive (H_5) and affective image (H_6). Cognitive and affective image were found to shape conative image (H_9 and H_{10}); and overall satisfaction (H_{11} and H_{12}), which in turn affected conative image (H_{13}). Overall, the model explained 61% of conative image in the Study 2 (Figure 2).

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Building on MKO and the MET, this research aimed to understand how visitors' interaction with MKOs, along with their direct experience with local attractions, shaped their knowledge (cognition), feelings (affection), overall satisfaction, and future behavioral intentions (conation) in relation to the destination. Data collected in two different research settings supported the vast majority of the 13 hypotheses tested, except for two in Study 1 and three in Study 2.

Results in both studies confirmed the critical role visitors' interactions with MKOs play in positively shaping cognitive (H_1), affective (H_2), and conative destination image (H3). Residents, due to their "local knowledge" (Campelo et al., 2014), were found to determine visitors' own image formulation, providing ample empirical support for previous theoretical postulations on the role locals play in shaping outsiders' image (Chan & Marafa, 2016; Gallarza et al., 2002). When residents share with visitors their own perceptions and experiences with the destination, in the form of stories/narratives, local customs, attractions to visit, or places to dine, they help them expand their own ZPD (Walker & Moscardo, 2016). Such support was found here to shape not only the cognitive and affective domains (Daniels, 2001), but also the conative one. The results thus extend previous research, which paid less attention to the effects that interactions with MKOs have on future behavioral intentions. The importance of such

interactions appeared to be greater in the first research context, in which visitors had more opportunities to engage with locals, as compared with the second research setting, which was predominantly a mass tourist destination. Interactions, therefore, apart from promoting cross-cultural understanding (Kirillova et al., 2015), assist in the formation of a positive destination image and a memorable tourist experience with notable implication for visitors' future behavioral intentions.

Further, the perceived attractions visited were positively linked to cognitive (H_5), affective (H_6), and conative image (H_7), along with overall satisfaction (H_8) in Study 1; and cognitive (H_5) and affective image (H_6) in Study 2. These findings indicate that those who visit local attractions and obtain positive perceptions of them are likely to develop more favorable images of the destination, along with stronger intentions not only to revisit and to recommend it to others, but also to post photos and leave comments on social media. Suhartanto et al. (2018) also established a positive link between overall satisfaction with cultural attractions and destination image. However, in the second research setting of this study, perceived attractions did not demonstrate any link to satisfaction or future behavioral intentions; visitors' engagement with the attractions seemed to be very limited, and/or current attractions were perceived of secondary importance (i.e., not the main reason for visiting the destination). Overall, attractions visited assist in formulating positive experiences (Garrod et al., 2007), which are sometimes converted into positive travel-related behavioral intentions (Kim, 2018). This finding contributes to the literature as few previous studies have explored the links between perceived attractions and destination image (Suhartanto et al., 2018).

In both destinations, affective image was found to be a significant determinant of conative image (H_{10}), while cognitive image had a significant positive effect on conative (H_9) only in the second destination; its effect in the first study was positive but not significant. Past research has also been inconclusive, with a stream of studies

highlighting that both cognitive and affective image determine conative image (Chew & Jahari, 2014), while others have underlined the role of the cognitive image (McDowall & Ma, 2010), or of the affective image (Chew & Jahari, 2014; Li et al., 2010). Relationships between the three image components may depend on the study context, including the type of visitors. Domestic or repeat visitors may rely more on their affective image, while first-time tourists may place more emphasis on their cognitive image (Stylidis et al., 2017). These findings expand ongoing discussions around the role and supremacy of the two image components in explaining conative-image.

Last but not least, in both models cognitive and affective image were reported to positively affect overall satisfaction (H_{11} and H_{12}), which was subsequently found to determine conative image (H_{13}). Such findings add to the extant literature on the pivotal role a positive image plays in shaping satisfaction (Jeong & Kim, 2019; Loi et al., 2017). In simple terms, the more favorable the image, the more satisfied the visitor, and the more likely that visitor will be to return or to recommend the destination to others (Assaker et al., 2011; Kim, 2018; Prayag et al., 2017). What differentiates the current findings from previous research is that conative image was conceptualized here not only as the intention to return and to spread positive WOM, but also as the intention to leave positive feedback and post photos of the destination on social media. Overall, this research expands the well-known destination image-satisfaction-future behavioral intentions chain by highlighting the antecedent role played by tourist interactions with MKOs and perceptions of attractions, which have received limited attention in the past. For increased levels of satisfaction, an active involvement with the place's offerings (attractions) and its host community is much needed (Chang et al., 2014).

5.1 | Implications to theory

The theoretical implications of this study are threefold: First, the study responds to calls (e.g., Martın-Santana et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2015) for additional research on how (a) contextual factors and experiences; and (b) intensity of the visit, determine destination image. Addressing these research directions, the study explored how two contextual factors, one human (visitors' interactions with MKOs) and one nonhuman (perceived attractions) help in formulating destination image and satisfaction with the destination. Visitors' interactions with locals who serve as MKOs provide unique opportunities for tourists to understand the destination and its people, including local culture, customs, and food (Kirillova et al., 2015; Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). Given that locals' participation—like other MKOs—in such interaction is voluntary in nature Eun, 2019, this finding has critical implications for the sustainable planning, development, and marketing of tourism destinations in directions that residents consider appropriate, otherwise their participation as MKOs is placed in question (Gauvain, 2001). In a similar vein, knowledge developed as a result of direct visitation to key destination attractions further contributes to shaping visitors' cognitive and affective images of the destination. This finding is among the very few that sheds light on

the relationship between local attractions' effect on destination image, a discussion recently initiated by Suhartanto et al. (2018).

Second, this study was perhaps the first to apply Vygotsky's concepts of ZPD and MKO in a tourism context. The results empirically confirmed the critical function of daily social interactions tourists have with hosts in the expansion of the former's ZPD (Eun, 2019), illuminating the process through which visitors acquire knowledge of and feelings toward the destination and its people. While visitors immerse themselves in the destination through visits to local attractions and interactions with MKOs, they expand their ZPD in the context of destination image. Therefore, MET and MKO are jointly deemed suitable to explain destination image formation resulting from increased exposure to and interactions with the host community and its offerings. The study thus addresses previous calls for theory-guided approaches to interaction between hosts and guests (Kirillova et al., 2015).

Third, previous research has approached conative image or destination loyalty via residents' intention to revisit and through their willingness to recommend it to others. Although valid, this approach somewhat neglects the central position of social media in destination-related peer-to-peer communication nowadays (Arsal et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2017). As the results suggest, an active engagement with the destination and its community cultivates favorable images and satisfaction, which in turn shape future behavioral intentions, including the willingness to post photos and leave comments on social media (e.g., TripAdvisor) about the destination, creating a new loop of information transfer between prospective tourists and MKOs. When both residents and tourists engage with social media, offering tips, comments, or photos and answering destination-related questions, they participate in value co-creation (Edwards et al., 2017), helping tourists to move in their ZPDs.

5.2 | Implications to practice

As the results of the study indicate, visitors' interactions with MKOs and visits to local attractions lead to improved cognitive and affective image (expansion of ZPD), satisfaction, and conative image. Such findings enable destination marketers to actively engage locals as key informants and destination ambassadors in online and offline interactions, as this tactic will provide visitors with better insights about the place, contributing to an enhanced image and satisfaction (Arsal et al., 2010; Stylidis et al., 2015). Involvement of visitors in such interactions will foster their conative image, including intention to return, recommend it to others and post feedback and photos on social media. To reinforce locals' role as MKOs and facilitate this type of interaction between visitors and residents, extensive social and cultural events can be organized using local heritage attractions as venues, with themes tailored to local history and customs. In that way, visitors' exposure to such attractions will increase helping to usher tourists closer to their personal ZPD, which in turn will accrue additional benefits for the destination and its image. Indicative activities could be practicing local dances or cooking local cuisine at a cultural site. The COVID-19 pandemic with its tremendous impact on the tourism industry is offering a great opportunity, especially for

destinations that have suffered from over-tourism in the past, to follow a planned degrowth strategy (Andriotis, 2018), with the active participation of the host community, whereby emphasis on quality rather than quantity interactions will be fostered between the two parties. For visitors in all-inclusive resorts where opportunities to contact locals are generally limited, interactions with MKOs can take the form of site visits and participation in local events. Such social events enhance the role of locals as MKOs, helping visitors to expand their ZPD. These experiences facilitate the development of knowledge and feelings that are pivotal for tourists as they consider returning to a place, especially in the post-COVID-19 era.

5.3 | Limitations and recommendations for future research

This research is subject to a number of limitations. The data were collected based on visitors in two destinations located in the same country; interaction with MKOs, perceptions of attractions, and image might vary in other geographical contexts. Future research should confirm the model in other settings. Next, although interactions with local MKOs have proved useful in predicting destination image, interactions with other types of MKOs such as other experienced tourists or travel guides were not considered; studies in the future could address this oversight by examining such interactions and their impact on destination image and satisfaction. Additionally, ZPD can be further applied in future research to understand the level of destination image a tourist can achieve independently, as compared with that achieved via interaction with local residents, other experienced tourists, or local guides. Furthermore, different research design approaches might be necessary to assist in better grasping these novel concepts. Finally, the data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; our findings should be considered with this in mind. The question remains; if this study were repeated now, would similar results be found? As many destinations have experienced a prolonged period of reduced visitor numbers (due to travel restrictions and tourists' perceived fear of traveling), many potential travelers anxiously await the day when they can freely travel again. At that time, will pent-up desires to travel materialize, especially considering the role that MKOs were demonstrated to play in our findings? Only time will tell as we continue to live in unprecedented times and wait for the "dust to settle" from the wreckage that COVID-19 has inflicted.

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