The Mediating Role of Tourist Satisfaction in the Relationship Between Destination Image and Word-of-Mouth Communication

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ABSTRACT

Satisfied tourists generate positive word-of-mouth, shaping destination image and influencing travel decisions. Positive WOM enhances reputation, attracts visitors, and promotes repeat travel, whereas negative WOM harms perceptions. The fact that destination image (DI), tourist satisfaction (TS), and word-of-mouth (WOM) all affect each other shows how important it is for tourism stakeholders to address these issues in a planned way to make destinations more competitive and long-lasting. This study examines the influence of DI and TS on PWOM communication within Nepal's tourism sector. Acknowledging PWOM's pivotal role in travel decision-making, the study investigates the direct and indirect relationship through which DI affects PWOM, with TS as a mediator. Using a structured questionnaire, the study collected data from 450 tourists visiting Shey Phoksundo Lake, Nepal, through purposive sampling. After excluding incomplete responses and multivariate outliers, 354 valid cases remained. Structural equation modelling with maximum likelihood estimation was applied to examine the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships. The results confirm that DI has a positive and significant direct influence on TS, and TS, in turn, has a positive and significant influence on PWOM communication. In addition, the results demonstrate that TS fully mediates the relationship between DI and PWOM, revealing no direct DI-PWOM relationship. These findings underscore the necessity of enhancing destination attractiveness and prioritizing tourist satisfaction to amplify PWOM and foster destination competitiveness. The study offers practical implications for Nepalese tourism stakeholders, emphasizing strategies to improve infrastructure, service quality, and emotional engagement to drive sustainable tourism growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a cornerstone of the global economy, driving economic growth and development in many countries, including Nepal (UNWTO, 2020). Within this dynamic industry, destination image and tourist satisfaction are critical factors that shape travel decisions and determine the overall success of a destination (Crompton, 1979; Rajesh, 2013). The destination image of tourists is based on their perceptions and beliefs about a place, which significantly influences their behaviour and expectations (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). A favourable destination image can enhance its appeal and attract visitors, whereas a negative image may discourage potential travellers (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2011). These elements underscore the importance of strategic destination management in fostering sustainable tourism growth.

Tourist satisfaction, defined as the congruence between a tourist's perceived experience and pre-visit expectations (Oliver, 1997), is a pivotal factor in shaping travel behaviour. Satisfied tourists are more likely to advocate for a destination through recommendations, thereby generating positive word-of-mouth (WOM) communication (Williams & Buttle, 2013). WOM, characterized by the informal dissemination of travel-related information and opinions among individuals, significantly influences destination choices and decision-making processes (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Positive WOM not only amplifies a destination's reputation but also drives visitor influx and encourages repeat visitation (Gartner, 1994). In contrast, negative WOMs can undermine a destination's image and deter prospective travellers (Chu et al., 2020). The fact that destination image, tourist satisfaction, and word-of-mouth (WOM) all affect each other shows how important it is for tourism stakeholders to deal with these issues in a planned way to make destinations more competitive and long-lasting (Gossling, 2021).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication is a pivotal and credible information source in tourism literature, significantly shaping the decisions of prospective travellers (Chi & Qu, 2008). WOM encompasses non-commercial interactions wherein travellers share first-hand experiences, ranging from destination attributes to service quality—directly influencing potential tourists' choices. This organic marketing mechanism has gained further traction in the digital age, with online WOM emerging as a critical tool for attracting and retaining tourists, particularly within e-commerce-driven platforms (Quintal & Polczynski, 2010). Empirical studies, such as Jayarathne (2018), revealed that nearly one-third of consumers rely on online forums, communities, or reviews to inform travel decisions, attributing high value to peer-generated content. Similarly, Reza and Samiei (2012) demonstrated that WOM profoundly shapes travel-related attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and behavioural intentions.

Furthermore, WOM is intrinsically linked to the destination image, tourist motivation, and satisfaction. Positive experiences generate favourable WOM, enhancing a destination's appeal and encouraging repeat visitation, whereas negative feedback can erode its reputation (Gartner, 1994; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2011; Oliver, 1997). Recent research shows that personal traits, travel experiences, and the popularity of social media all play a part in how word of mouth works. This illustration shows how digital platforms and tourist behaviour are changing over time (Chu et al., 2020). Collectively, these insights highlight WOM's dual function as both a driver of destination competitiveness and a barometer of tourist satisfaction in modern tourism ecosystems.

Destination image refers to a tourist's holistic impression of a destination, encapsulating beliefs, perceptions, and emotional evaluations of its attributes (Assaker & Hallak, 2013; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). This concept has two parts that work together: (1) the cognitive part is about how knowledgeable you are about a destination's tangible and intangible features, like its infrastructure, culture, and natural attractions; and (2) the affective part is about how the destination makes you feel, like excitement or attachment (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Khadka & Malviya, 2023; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Together, these dimensions shape the overall image perceived by both prospective and returning tourists (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Notably, cognitive evaluations affect the overall image of the destination by mediating emotional responses. The studies further

show how they are interdependent in shaping perceptions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004). Research consistently demonstrates that destination image plays a critical role in shaping tourists' post-visit behaviors, including WOM and revisit intentions (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Hosany et al., 2007; Prayag, 2009). Accordingly, the first hypothesis of this study is proposed:

H1: There is a positive and direct effect of destination image on positive WOM communication.

Tourist satisfaction cultivates favorable attitudes and behavioral intentions that extend beyond individual experiences. Truong et al. (2018) underscored that satisfied tourists develop a pro-destination disposition, positioning them as informal ambassadors who advocate for sustainable tourism through positive narratives. Empirical studies further affirm that high-quality services and experiences elevate satisfaction, which correlates strongly with destination loyalty and sustainable outcomes (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Biswas et al. (2021) emphasized that destinations exceeding tourist expectations achieve elevated satisfaction, thereby securing competitive advantages through repeat visits, WOM dissemination, and sustained commitments. Hence, tourist satisfaction transcends immediate marketing outcomes, playing a vital role in the sustainable development of destinations. Satisfaction ensures economic viability and destination integrity, aligning tourism growth with long-term sustainability goals (Chi & Qu, 2008; Khadka & Malviya, 2024; Zabkar et al., 2010). Recognizing the established empirical links between destination image and satisfaction, this study formulates the following hypothesis:

*H2: There is a positive and direct effect of destination image on tourist satisfaction.*

The relationship between satisfaction and WOM is extensively documented in tourism literature. Tourist satisfaction reflects post-consumption assessments of destination performance relative to expectations (Ryan, 1995; Siregar et al., 2021), and it is instrumental in shaping subsequent behavioral intentions. As an outcome of fulfilling tourists' needs and desires (Battour et al., 2017), satisfaction significantly influences tourists' willingness to recommend destinations to others (Devesa et al., 2010). Chi and Qu (2008) highlight that satisfaction strengthens emotional attachment and fosters loyalty behaviors such as active advocacy and repeated visits. Oliver (1997) further explains that satisfaction generates positive psychological reinforcement, thereby motivating tourists to engage in WOM communication. Because WOM is a powerful indicator of destination loyalty and future behavioral commitment, satisfaction's direct effect on WOM is well-established (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). On this basis, the study posits the third hypothesis:

H3: There is a positive and direct effect of tourist satisfaction on positive WOM communication.

Tourist satisfaction is also theorized to mediate the relationship between destination image and WOM communication. Destination image shapes pre-visit expectations through its cognitive and affective components (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), and these expectations influence the interpretation of on-site experiences. A favorable destination image predisposes tourists to positively evaluate their experiences, thereby increasing the likelihood of satisfaction (Oliver, 1997). Satisfied tourists, in turn, are more inclined to share their experiences through WOM and promote the destination to others (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Empirical studies validate this mediating mechanism. Prayag (2009) found that destination image exerts both direct and indirect influences on WOM in Mauritius, while Baloglu (2000) demonstrated similar pathways in different tourism contexts. Studies on mega-events by Kaplanidou (2006) further establish that image perceptions influence behavioral intention through satisfaction. Additionally, del Bosque and Martín (2008) highlighted that cognitive and affective images jointly contribute to WOM via their impact on satisfaction. Chaipakdee and Wetprasit (2011) reinforced this mechanism by showing that service quality—an element of cognitive image—enhances satisfaction, which then increases recommendation intentions. Despite these insights, limited research has examined this mediating effect in underexplored tourism contexts such as Nepal, where cultural, geographic, and experiential factors may produce unique dynamics. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is proposed:

H4: There is an indirect effect of destination image on positive WOM communication through the mediation of tourist satisfaction.

Existing research underscores the substantial influence of destination image and tourist satisfaction on positive word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. However, a notable gap persists in the literature regarding the mediating role of tourist satisfaction in the relationship between destination image and positive WOM. Furthermore, despite Nepal's growing emphasis on tourism development, empirical studies examining these dynamics within unique tourist destinations remain limited. To address these gaps, this study investigates the impact of destination image and tourist satisfaction on PWOM communication, focusing specifically on the context of tourism in Shey Phoksundo Lake in Dolpa District, Nepal. Additionally, the study explores both the direct and indirect effects of destination image on positive WOM, with tourist satisfaction serving as a mediating variab
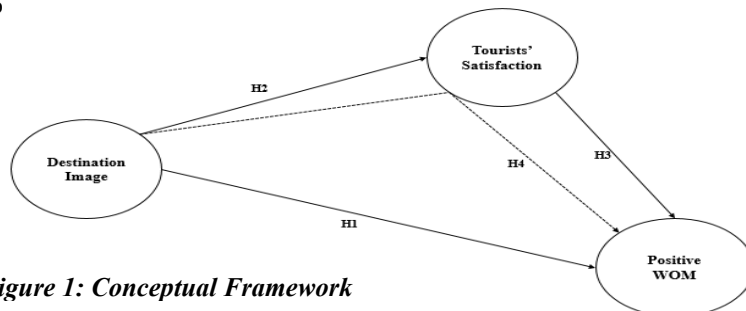
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

While prior studies affirm the direct linkages between destination image, satisfaction, and PWOM, the mediating role of satisfaction remains underexplored in unique settings like Nepal. Cultural narratives, geographical remoteness, and niche tourism offerings (e.g., adventure tourism in Dolpa District) may amplify or alter these relationships. By looking into this mediation, the study adds to our theoretical understanding of how destination images work together to promote positive word-of-mouth communication about a destination. It also gives useful information to people who want to use Nepal's unique tourism assets.

2. METHODS

A causal comparative design was used in this quantitative study to examine the connections between destination image, tourist satisfaction, and word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, which is the right way to find causal relationships in the social sciences (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 450 tourists visiting Shey Phoksundo Lake in the Dolpa District of Nepal between October 17 and 26, 2025. The study used a non-probability purposive sampling method to select respondents who had direct tourism experience at the study site. This method ensured the achievement of the research objectives (Hair et al., 2019).

The survey instrument, validated for content accuracy by a panel of two tourism academic experts, measured study variables using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The researcher administered questionnaires in person, providing clarifications as needed to minimize bias. Following data collection, responses underwent rigorous screening: incomplete entries and multivariate outliers were identified and excluded using Mahalanobis distance (D^2) analysis (critical χ^2 = 18.47, p < .001) (Hair et al., 2010). The final dataset comprised 354 valid responses, yielding an 82.88% valid response rate—exceeding the 60% threshold deemed exemplary for survey-based studies (Swartz et al., 1998). Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained before survey administration. Privacy and confidentiality were ensured by omitting personally identifiable information.

To test the direct and indirect relationships that were thought to exist, the study used structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation and AMOS version 22.0. The chi-square statistic (χ^2), the normed chi-square (χ^2/df), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI) were all used to see how well the model fit. These indices were selected for their robustness in assessing theoretical alignment and error variance (Hair et al., 2019). In addition, the study strictly adhered to ethical considerations. Specifically, participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Moreover, respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. Furthermore, data collection was conducted respectfully to ensure the dignity and comfort of all participants.

3. RESULTS

The study's respondents comprised tourists visiting Shey Phoksundo Lake in Nepal's Dolpa District, with a demographic profile indicating male predominance (59.8% male vs. 40.2% female). A majority (60.4%) held university-level education, followed by secondary (28%) and primary (11.6%) education. Domestic tourists constituted the largest nationality segment (78.3%), while 98.45% reported no prior visitation to the destination. The 25–34 age group represented the largest cohort (44.9%), and holiday trips were the primary travel purpose for 62.35% of participants.

Table 1: Scale Reliability and Validity Measures

	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	DI	PWOM	TS
DI	0.932	0.926	0.715	0.082	0.932	**0.846**		
PWOM	0.804	0.865	0.563	0.045	0.877	0.088	**0.751**	
TS	0.898	0.84	0.517	0.082	0.865	0.286***	0.211***	**0.719**

As illustrated in Table 1, the measurement model demonstrated robust reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994): destination image (α = 0.932), positive WOM (α = 0.804), and tourist satisfaction (α = 0.898). Composite reliability (CR) surpassed the 0.60 criterion (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) with scores of 0.926 (destination image), 0.865 (positive WOM), and 0.840 (tourist satisfaction). The convergent validity was proven by AVE values above 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010) for destination image (AVE = 0.715), positive word-of-mouth (AVE = 0.563), and tourist satisfaction (AVE = 0.517). Checking the discriminant validity using inter-factor correlations (Table 1) showed that each construct was indeed unique (Cheung et al., 2024). First, inter-factor correlations were statistically significant (p ≤ 0.001) and remained below the 0.85 threshold (Kline, 2005), confirming construct distinctiveness (Cheung et al., 2024). Second, the square roots of the AVE values (where the diagonal values are destination image = 0.846, positive PWOM communication = 0.751, and tourist satisfaction = 0.719) were all higher than the diagonal correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Finally, AVE values for each construct surpassed their maximum shared variance (MSV), further supporting discriminant validity. Collectively, these results substantiate the robustness of the measurement model.

Following the validation of the measurement model, the study proceeded to the structural model. It was found that the independent variable (DI) explained 83% of the variation in PWOM communication ($R1^2 = 0.83$) and 46% of the variation in tourists' satisfaction (TS) ($R2^2 = 0.46$). This percentage exceeded Falk and Miller's (1992) threshold of less than 0.10, indicating that the model effectively explains the structural relations. In addition, goodness-of-fit indices demonstrated robust alignment with recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2010). The model meets the fit indices (CMIN/DF = 1.868, RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR = 0.041, GFI = 0.940), parsimonious fit indices (AGFI = 0.917, PNFI = 0.781), and incremental fit indices (TLI = 0.959, CFI =

0.966, IFI = 0.966). All of these values met the established criteria. These results confirm the structural model's statistical validity, supporting its suitability for hypothesis testing.
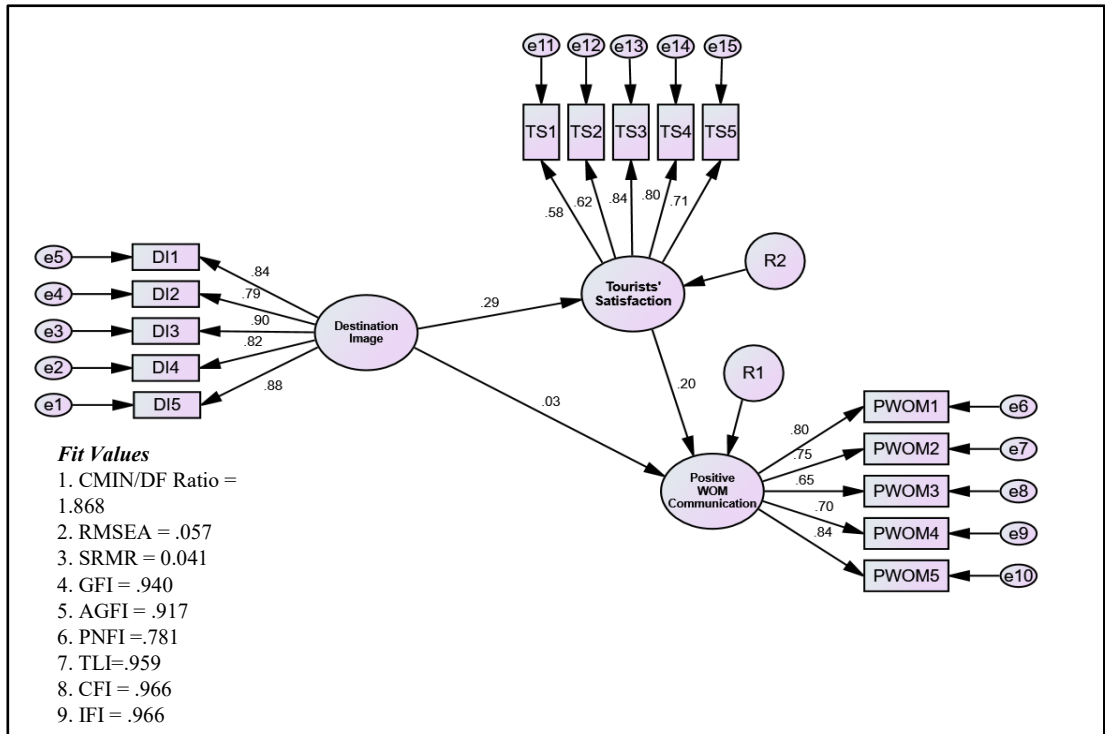
Figure 2: Final Structural Hypothesized Model

The study first checked for reliability, validity, and a goodness of fit. Then it used AMOS software within the SEM framework to examine the hypothetical relationship in a structural model. As shown in Table 2, the direct hypotheses yielded mixed results. Hypothesis H1, proposing a direct effect of destination image (DI) on positive word-of-mouth (PWOM), was not supported ($\beta = 0.031$, $p = 0.597$). Conversely, Hypothesis H2, which posited a direct effect of Destination Image (DI) on Tourist Satisfaction (TS), was strongly supported ($\beta = 0.227$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, Hypothesis H3, hypothesizing a direct effect of tourist satisfaction (TS) on PWOM, was also supported ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that while DI does not directly influence PWOM, it significantly enhances TS, which in turn drives PWOM.

Table 2: Direct Hypotheses Results

Hypothesized Path				Estimate (β)	C.R	*p*-Value	Result
H1	PWOM	<−	DI	0.031	0.529	0.597	Not supported
H2	TS	<−	DI	0.227	5.035	***	Supported
H3	PWOM	<−	TS	0.266	3.362	***	Supported

*** Significant at $p < 0.001$

The study used bootstrapping with 2,000 resamples and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (Awang, 2015; Baron & Kenny, 1986) to examine the mediating role of tourist satisfaction (TS) between DI and

PWOM communication. As illustrated in Table 3, the indirect effect of DI on PWOM through TS was significant ($p = 0.002$), supporting Hypothesis H4. The absence of a positive direct effect ($\beta = 0.031$, $p = 0.597$) alongside a significant indirect effect confirms full mediation (Awang, 2015). The result implies that DI influences PWOM exclusively through TS, underscoring the necessity of prioritizing tourist satisfaction to amplify positive word-of-mouth.

Table 3: Indirect Hypothesis Results (Mediation Analysis)

Relationship	Indirect Effect	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	*p*-Value	Conclusion
H4: DI → TS → PWOM	0.058	0.025	0.105	0.002	Supported
Mediation Type	Full Mediation				

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer important empirical insights into the relationships among destination image, tourist satisfaction, and positive word-of-mouth (PWOM), contributing meaningfully to the broader tourism literature. Consistent with longstanding theoretical frameworks, destination image significantly influenced tourist satisfaction, reaffirming the cognitive–affective mechanisms proposed by Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Beerli and Martín (2004). A favorable image shaped tourists' expectations and positively colored their experiential evaluations, leading to heightened satisfaction. This aligns with previous studies that established destination image as a critical antecedent to satisfaction (Castro et al., 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008; Khadka et al., 2025). The present results also validate satisfaction as a strong predictor of PWOM, echoing research by Devesa et al. (2010), Kozak and Rimmington (2000), and Ryan (1995). Satisfied tourists, motivated by positive emotional reinforcement (Oliver, 1997), demonstrated increased willingness to recommend the destination, highlighting satisfaction's central role in tourists' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

A notable contribution of this study is the identification of tourist satisfaction as a full mediator between destination image and PWOM. While some studies have reported significant direct associations between image and WOM (Prayag, 2009; Baloglu, 2000), the current analysis found no significant direct effect of destination image on PWOM. Instead, the indirect effect through satisfaction was both significant and substantial. This finding resonates with Jayarathne (2018) and Chaipakdee and Wetprasit (2011), who argued that image alone does not guarantee positive travel advocacy unless tourists' experiential expectations are met or exceeded. The full mediation observed suggests that even when tourists perceive destination attributes positively, these perceptions translate into PWOM only if reinforced by satisfactory on-site experiences. This highlights the psychological mechanism wherein cognitive evaluations transition into behavioral intentions primarily through the evaluative filter of satisfaction. Such evidence strengthens the argument that tourist satisfaction is not merely an outcome variable but a behavioral catalyst that channels perceptions into advocacy behaviors.

The contextual specificity of this study further enhances its academic and practical relevance. Conducted in Shey Phoksundo Lake—an underexplored rural and natural destination in Nepal—the study extends the applicability of theoretical models to settings characterized by cultural richness, geographical remoteness, and unique experiential attributes. The findings contrast with advocacy-driven conclusions by Greaves and Skinner (2010), suggesting that in destinations like Shey Phoksundo, scenic beauty or perceived attractiveness alone does not automatically lead to tourist recommendations. Instead, operational factors such as service quality, accessibility, safety, facilities, and interaction quality may determine whether destination perceptions convert into satisfaction and subsequent WOM.

This study contributes to the tourism literature by empirically examining the mediating role of tourist satisfaction in the relationship between destination image and positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) communication. Addressing a notable research gap, the study demonstrates that destination image influences PWOM entirely through tourist satisfaction, thereby establishing a complete mediating effect—a finding that extends prior studies that reported only partial mediation (e.g., Li et al., 2021). Moreover, this study represents the first empirical investigation of these relationships within the context of Nepalese tourism, with specific reference to Shey Phoksundo Lake. By situating the analysis in a unique geographical and cultural setting, the study offers novel insights into how destination image and tourist satisfaction interact to shape PWOM communication. The findings suggest practical implications for destination managers, tourism entrepreneurs, and policymakers, highlighting the need to enhance both the physical and emotional dimensions of the tourist experience through improved facilities, ancillary services, eco-conscious practices, quality accommodation, and better accessibility to foster satisfaction, loyalty, and positive communication.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The focus on a single destination limits the generalizability of the findings, while the short data collection period (October 17–26, 2025) may affect the representativeness and robustness of the results. Additionally, reliance on quantitative, self-administered questionnaires may not fully capture deeper perceptions or contextual nuances of tourist behavior. The study also considers only tourist satisfaction as a mediating variable, excluding other potentially influential mechanisms. Future research is therefore encouraged to employ qualitative or mixed-method approaches to enrich and triangulate the findings and to examine additional mediators—such as place attachment, loyalty, service quality, destination facilities, and employee behavior—to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers of PWOM communication.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that tourist satisfaction is a key mediator in the relationship between destination image and positive word-of-mouth communication. Specifically, whereas destination image greatly improves visitor satisfaction, it has no direct influence on good word-of-mouth communication; rather, its effect is entirely mediated through tourist satisfaction. As a result, the study indicates that an excellent destination image alone is insufficient to promote positive communication unless it is translated into pleasant tourist experiences, notably in the case of Shey Phoksundo Lake in Nepal. Furthermore, the study contributes to the tourism literature by empirically validating the complete mediating effect of tourist satisfaction, thereby expanding existing theoretical frameworks to a previously unexplored Nepalese site. The study highlights the significance of satisfaction in producing positive word-of-mouth communication and the need for personalized destination management. From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of tourism stakeholders prioritizing strategies that enhance tourist satisfaction through the augmentation of services, infrastructure, and emotional engagement. Hence, improving satisfaction-driven experiences can promote positive word-of-mouth communication and help destinations remain competitive in the long term.

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