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POLISH TOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF TUNISIA: TOWARDS A CULTURAL REINTERPRETATION OF THE DESTINATION

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Abstract

Introduction. In an era of fierce competition in the global tourism market, the perception of a destination plays a key role in shaping travellers' choices. Tunisia, promoted for decades mainly as a holiday destination, has gained a strong but stereotypical image as a "3S" country. Meanwhile, its historical heritage and multicultural identity create potential for the development of cultural and sustainable tourism. This article aimed to investigate whether the existing image of Tunisia as a "3S" destination is transforming towards a "4H" model and whether the actual experiences of tourists influence the structure of associations and emotional attitudes towards this country. **Material and methods.** The study was conducted among 438 respondents from Poland using a diagnostic survey method (CAWI) between April 2024 and April 2025. The questionnaire included open-ended questions relating to knowledge, perceptions and associations with Tunisia, as well as closed questions concerning attitudes and travel intentions. Descriptive statistics were used to compare the results of two groups of respondents: those who had been to Tunisia and those who had not. **Results.** Respondents who had not been to Tunisia most often associated the area with the sea, beaches and a warm climate. On the other hand, those who had visited the country pointed to elements of cultural heritage, the hospitality of the inhabitants and sensory stimuli (tastes, smells, colours). The differences were statistically significant and confirm that personal contact with a place strengthens the complex, emotional image of a destination. **Conclusions.** The results suggest that Tunisia has considerable potential for developing cultural tourism, including experiential tourism that supports sustainable development. The results also show that the image of this destination has undergone a change.

Keywords: destination image, sustainable tourism, cultural tourism, experiential tourism, Tunisia

Introduction

Since the 1980s, Tunisia has consistently developed mass coastal leisure tourism as a destination, with a strong focus on hotel infrastructure, particularly on the eastern Mediterranean coast. These investments aimed to stimulate the country's economic growth through tourism development [1, 2]. Currently, the absolute economic contribution of tourism in Tunisia was forecast to continuously increase between 2024 and 2029 by a total of 8.2 billion US dollars (+88.9 per cent) [3]. In 2024, the country welcomed 10.25 million foreign tourists, and the number of tourist accommodations (hotels and other facilities) exceeded 230,000. Over 400,000 people were employed in the tourism industry. This sector of the economy accounted for approximately 9% of GDP [4].

Nevertheless, the development of destinations based solely on mass coastal tourism has proven insufficient in the context of the country's long-term socio-economic development [5, 6]. The imbalance between the intensive exploitation of natural resources and their protection, as well as the marginalisation of the cultural component, may lead to the degradation of the natural component of the tourist area and the "burnout" of the place's potential [7]. Therefore, it is necessary to redefine the development strategy for the tourism sector by gradually moving away from the mass "3S" model (Sea-Sun-Sand) in favour of other, more responsible and sustainable forms of travel. In this

context, cultural tourism is becoming increasingly important, as it can offer a genuine alternative to leisure tourism by leveraging historical heritage, multicultural identity, and local traditions [8]. The desire to experience culture in its broadest sense (both high and popular), while respecting the material heritage of the area, can foster the development of "noble" and "intelligent" and, above all, responsible tourism [2]. The example of Tunisia is particularly relevant in this context. Its long history – from the Punic period, through the Roman, Byzantine and Arab periods, to Turkish and European influences – has created unique cultural layers visible in architecture (including Carthage, El-Djem, the medinas of Tunis and Kairouan), language, customs, cuisine, music and craftsmanship [9]. This complex cultural mosaic constitutes a valuable resource, the activation of which could significantly increase the value of the country's tourist offer [10].

It should be emphasised that the development of cultural tourism in a given area is not only determined by the attractiveness of its tourist assets, but also by properly conducted place marketing or destination marketing (the marketing of tourist areas), i.e. strategic management of a country's image on the international stage [11]. The image of a destination, as a combination of cognitive, emotional and value aspects, is fundamental in shaping tourist decisions – from the choice of destination, through the form of recreation, to subsequent loyalty. Both individuals and communities shape it, and its assessment is subjective and selective [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23].

Furthermore, image influences the way tourist attractions are utilised, participation in events, and the choice of accommodation [11]. Destination managers are increasingly using strategies aimed not only at building an attractive brand, but also at changing entrenched stereotypes and influencing the seasonality of tourist traffic. Such activities are part of a broader foreign policy aimed at positioning the country as a megabrand [24].

In this context, the main research problem of this study is to attempt to answer the following questions: 1) Is the stereotypical image of Tunisia as a "3S" destination being transformed into a more complex "4H" model (Heritage–Handicraft–Habitat–History)?; 2) Do actual tourist experiences contribute to the identification of the country's cultural potential, which could become the basis for the development of other forms of tourism, including sustainable tourism?

Material and methods

Methodology

To verify the research problem, a study was conducted on the tourist image of Tunisia among Polish respondents. The study was conducted quantitatively and qualitatively, spanning from April 1, 2024, to April 1, 2025, utilising a diagnostic survey method and the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web-based Interview) technique. The use of this technique enabled us to quickly reach a broad audience, particularly social media users and members of online travel groups, and ensured a time-efficient data collection process.

The research adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (36/2025).

The survey questionnaire was based on a two-dimensional concept of "familiarity–friendliness" [19]. The first component, "familiarity," referred to knowledge, perceptions, and associations related to Tunisia, while the second, "friendliness," referred to emotional attitudes toward the destination and the declared intention to visit it in the next five years. This concept is an adaptation of classic place image models, which assume the existence of three main components: cognitive, affective and behavioural [13].

In the adopted approach, "familiarity" reflects the cognitive dimension of the destination image, while "friendliness" captures its emotional aspect and potential behavioural intentions. This approach is particularly justified in studies on the perception of places where emotions and perceptions have a direct impact on tourist decisions [19].

In the cognitive part ("familiarity"), open-ended questions were used, prepared in reference to the free association model proposed by Hsu et al. [25]. Respondents were asked to indicate up to three associations with Tunisia. As indicated in the literature [19], such questions enable us to capture not only the most deeply rooted beliefs and perceptions, but also the unique functional and symbolic features that do not appear in classic closed questions. This method is particularly useful for evaluating the effectiveness of promotional activities and identifying the distinctive features of a place.

The responses obtained were classified into six analytical categories, developed based on the typology of Inskeep, WTO [26] – Local resources for developing tourism: 1) natural resources; 2) archaeological, historic, cultural resources; 3) climate; 4) tourist facilities and services; 5) influencing factors on developing tourism, and supplemented with category 6) sensory stimuli – important from the point of view of the perception of authenticity and quality of the place experience.

In addition, the number of associations with Tunisia was analysed, which allowed the intensity of associative reactions related to the image of the studied area to be determined.

The second part of the questionnaire, relating to the "friendliness" component, focused on the emotional dimension of Tunisia's image. It contained closed questions aimed at examining the intention to visit the country in the next five years and the respondents' declared attitude towards the destination under study. This stage of the research aimed to capture the overall perception of the country as friendly or unfriendly to tourists and to compare the affective component of the image between people who had direct contact with the destination and those who knew it only from media reports or their imagination.

The results of this part of the analysis provided an important supplement to the data on cognitive associations ("knowledge"), enabling a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the destination under study.

It was assumed that two groups of respondents would be surveyed: group I – people who had no direct contact with the country; group II – people who had such an opportunity. This research approach enables us to capture the differences between the so-called primary image (people who have not visited the country and base their opinions on ideas, associations, and media reports) and the image based on experience (people who have been there and have formed their memories and emotions). The results of this research are crucial for effective place brand management and promotional planning. The relationship between visiting a place and its image has been highlighted by numerous researchers [19, 27, 28, 29]. They suggested that the image of a place after visiting it is more realistic, comprehensive, and different from the imagined image formed solely under the influence of information about the place, such as that found in guidebooks or magazines. Therefore, along with a better understanding of a place, its images become increasingly consistent with the actual offerings of the destination and its characteristics [30]. Echtner and Ritchie [31] argue that people with more experience of a place build a comprehensive image in their minds, dominated by the unique characteristics of that place.

To develop and interpret the results obtained, both descriptive statistical methods and non-parametric statistical tests were used to analyse differences between groups. As part of descriptive statistics, measures of central tendency (arithmetic mean and median), measures of dispersion (standard deviation) and the frequency of responses in the form of percentage distributions for individual response categories (0, 1, 2 or 3 associations) were calculated.

To assess the differences between individuals who had not visited Tunisia and those who had (group I vs. group II), the Pearson's chi-square (χ^2) test and the Mann-Whitney U test were employed. The chi-square test was necessary to determine the significance of differences in the response structure between the groups. This test made it possible to check whether the observed differences between the groups were greater than could be expected with a random distribution of responses. In the case of an ordinal variable, such as the number of associations indicated (ranging from 0 to 3), the Mann-Whitney U test was also used.

Characteristics of respondents as a source of data

A total of 438 respondents took part in the study, with group I – people who had not been to Tunisia ($n = 258$; 59% of the total) – predominating over group II – represented by people

who declared that they had been to that country ($n = 180$; 41%) (Tab. 1). Although the groups were not equally sized, this was a result of natural variation in participant engagement and reflects the actual composition of the online communities where the questionnaire was distributed. In particular, travel-themed Facebook groups tend to include more users planning future trips than those who have already visited a specific destination such as Tunisia. Since the primary objective of the study was to compare the perception of the destination between those with and without direct travel experience – not to balance the two groups numerically – the difference in group sizes does not compromise the validity of the analysis. Instead, it reinforces the real-world relevance of the findings.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Group			Statistical Significance Pearson's chi-square
	I – people who have not been to Tunisia n = 258 (59%)	II – people who have been to Tunisia n = 180 (41%)	I+II (total respondents) n = 438 (100%)	
	Percentage share [%]			
Gender				
F	69	79	73	$\chi^2 = 5.667$; p = 0.017
M	31	21	27	
Age				
up to 24 years	36	24	31	$\chi^2 = 6.354$; p = 0.042
25–34	38	46	41	
35 years and older	26	30	28	
Education Level				
primary	2	1	1	$\chi^2 = 7.734$; p = 0.171
secondary	3	3	3	
basic vocational	12	16	14	
secondary	33	23	29	
post-secondary	17	24	20	
higher	33	33	33	
Household size				
1 person	12	14	13	$\chi^2 = 14.221$; p = 0.007
2 people	2	34	27	
3 people	29	27	28	
4 people	25	18	22	
5 and more	13	7	10	

Among all respondents, women constituted the vast majority (73%), with a clear predominance in both groups: 69% in group I and 79% in group II. Men accounted for 27% of the sample, including 31% in group I and 21% in group II. The chi-square test showed that the differences in gender distribution between the groups were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.67$; $p = 0.017$). This notable gender imbalance, while not uncommon in online surveys – particularly those shared via social media – is consistent with broader trends in travel research. Women are often more engaged in travel-related discussions on platforms such as Facebook and demonstrate higher participation rates

in voluntary online studies. Although this disproportion may slightly limit the generalisability of the findings, it reflects the demographic reality of digital travel communities and the profile of users most actively involved in travel planning and experience sharing (Tab. 1).

The age structure of all respondents was dominated by individuals aged 25–34 (41% of the total), with a higher share in group II (46%) compared to group I (38%). People aged 24 and under (mainly pupils and students) accounted for 31% of the sample – 36% in group I and 24% in group II. Participants aged 35 and over accounted for 28% of the total (26% in group I and 30% in group II). The youngest respondents were 19 years old (in both groups I and II), and the oldest were 59 years old (in group II) and 60 years old (in group I). The average age of participants was 31 years in both groups (Tab. 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of the respondents

Respondents	Average	Median	Min	Max	Lower Quartile	Upper Quartile	Standard deviation
Group I*	30.45	2	19	60	22	35	10.07
Group II**	31.38	30	19	59	25	36	9.19
Total	30.83	29	19	60	23	35	9.72

Note: * – respondents who have not been to Tunisia; ** – respondents who have been to Tunisia.

The entire sample was dominated by people with higher education (33%) and secondary education (29%). There were also many people with post-secondary education (20%). In the fourth place were those with basic vocational education – 14%. The smallest group consisted of people with lower secondary education – 3%, and primary education – 1%. Similar distributions were observed in the groups – the differences were not statistically significant ($p = 0.171$).

The survey involved people from households of various sizes. Respondents from two-person households predominated – 28% (21% in group I and 34% in group II), followed by three-person households – 28% (29% in group I and 27% in group II). Four-person families accounted for 22% of the sample (25% in group I and 18% in group II). Respondents representing single-person households accounted for 13% of all respondents, while those in groups comprised 12% and 14%, respectively. The smallest group of respondents declared that they came from households with five or more people – 10% (13% in group I and 7% in group II). These differences were statistically significant ($p = 0.0066$) (Tab. 1).

Results

Image of Tunisia based on “knowledge” responses

In response to the open-ended question “What particularly comes to mind when you think of Tunisia? Please give three words that you associate with Tunisia”, 1,265 associations were obtained from 438 respondents (both those who had never been to Tunisia and those who had visited it). The qualitative data obtained were organised into six categories according to the Inskeep, WTO [26] typology – Local resources for developing tourism: 1) natural resources; 2) archaeological, historic, cultural resources; 3) climate; 4) tourist facilities and services; 5) influencing factors on developing tourism, and expanded to include 6) sensory stimuli (Tab. 3).

Table 3. Categories of associations with Tunisia

Categories of associations	Group I*	Group II **	Statistical significance Pearson's Chi^2
	Percentage share [%]		
1. Natural resources	70.54	38.89	$\chi^2 = 43.481$; p = 0.000
Beach	31.78	14.44	$\chi^2 = 17.165$; p = 0.000
Sea	31.01	3.89	$\chi^2 = 48.991$; p = 0.000
Desert/Sahara	15.12	13.33	$\chi^2 = 0.273$; p = 0.601
Oasis	14.65	14.11	$\chi^2 = 0.212$; p = 0.648
Palms	6.20	6.67	$\chi^2 = 0.046$; p = 0.844
Camels	2.33	1.56	$\chi^2 = 1.136$; p = 0.286
Other (including coral reefs, olive trees, dolphins)	8.99	1.11	$\chi^2 = 10.136$; p = 0.001
2. Archaeological, historic, and cultural resources	36.05	33.89	$\chi^2 = 0.216$; p = 0.641
Religion (Islam, Muslims, Koran)	17.44	0.00	$\chi^2 = 34.990$; p = 0.000
Historical monuments (Amphitheatre, Carthage, Bardo Muse-um)	4.26	18.43	$\chi^2 = 14.862$; p = 0.000
Cities (including Tunis, Kairouan, Sousse, Hammamet)	2.33	7.78	$\chi^2 = 6.035$; p = 0.014
Other (including bazaar, souvenirs, belly dancing, shisha)	1.55	6.67	$\chi^2 = 6.499$; p = 0.010
3. Climate (heat, sun, hot weather)	39.92	23.89	$\chi^2 = 12.266$; p = 0.000
4. Tourist facilities and services	33.33	25.56	$\chi^2 = 3.046$; p = 0.080
Excursion	24.81	14.44	$\chi^2 = 6.972$; p = 0.008
Hotel (poor service quality, hotel names, entertainment)	9.30	3.89	$\chi^2 = 4.724$; p = 0.029
Hammam	6.20	7.78	$\chi^2 = 0.412$; p = 0.520
Other (including salespeople being pushy, traffic problems)	0.00	6.59	$\chi^2 = 10.636$; p = 0.001
5. Influencing factors on developing tourism	31.01	45.00	$\chi^2 = 8.929$; p = 0.002
Dangerous (theft, terrorism, attacks)	19.38	2.78	$\chi^2 = 26.615$; p = 0.000
Low price of the trip/products	1.55	5.56	$\chi^2 = 4.278$; p = 0.038
Attitude of the local community towards tourists (e.g. hospitality, politeness, openness, friendliness)	10.08	37.78	$\chi^2 = 48.266$; p = 0.844
6. Sensory stimuli	9.69	77.78	$\chi^2 = 209.343$; p = 0.000
Taste (spices, good/spicy cuisine, olive oil)	6.59	57.78	$\chi^2 = 138.953$; p =0.000
Smell (aroma: spices, jasmine, tobacco)	3.88	35.00	$\chi^2 = 73.950$; p = 0.000
Sight (blue sky, azure water, white and blue houses)	2.33	21.11	$\chi^2 = 41.406$; p = 0.000
Sound (including calls to prayer, street noises)	0.00	2.59	$\chi^2 = 6.836$; p = 0.008

Note: * – respondents who have not been to Tunisia; ** – respondents who have been to Tunisia.

The image of Tunisia, mainly associated with natural resources (category 1), was significantly more often indicated by people who had not been to Tunisia – group I (70.54%) than those who had – group II (38.89%) ($\chi^2 = 43.481$; $p = 0.000$). Particularly significant differences were found in associations with the sea ($p < 0.001$) (31.01% in group I vs 3.89% in group II) and the beach (31.78% in group I vs 14.44% in group II). Other associations, e.g. desert (15.12% – group I vs 13.33% – group II), oasis (14.65% – group I vs 14.11% – group II), palms (6.20% – group I vs 6.67% – group II) and camels (2.33% – group I vs 1.56% – group II) were indicated with similar frequency in both groups ($p > 0.050$).

Image descriptors belonging to category 3 – climate (heat, sun, hot weather) – were very prominent in both groups. However, they appeared significantly more often in group I (39.9%) than in group II (23.89%).

Associations relating to category 2 – archaeological, historic, cultural resources – were relatively frequent. They appeared with similar frequency in both groups of respondents – 36.05%

among those who had not visited Tunisia and 33.89% among those who had. These differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.216$; $p = 0.641$). However, the dominant associations in group I (17.44%), related to religion (Islam, Muslims, the Koran) were completely absent in group II. Significantly more often, people who had visited Tunisia (group II) indicated freely chosen cultural heritage sites – 18.43% (including the Amphitheatre, Carthage, the Bardo Museum) than people who had not been to this country (group I) – 4.26% ($\chi^2 = 14.862$; $p = 0.000$). Respondents from group II also more often – 7.78% – indicated image descriptors related to cities (including Tunis, Kairouan, Sousse, Hammamet) than respondents from group I – 2.33% ($\chi^2 = 6.035$; $p = 0.014$).

One of the elements contributing to the image of this tourist destination is associations related to tourist facilities and services (category 4), which occurred equally often in both groups ($\chi^2 = 3.046$; $p = 0.080$), with 33.33% in group I and 25.56% in group II, respectively. Among respondents who had not been to Tunisia, terms related to the trip prevailed – 24.81% vs. 14.44%

– in group II and to the hotel – 9.30% vs. 3.89% in group II. Image descriptors related to hammams were indicated with similar frequency in both groups – 7.78% in group II vs. 6.20% in group I ($\chi^2 = 0.412$; $p = 0.520$). Particularly significant differences were found in associations related to pushy salespeople and traffic problems ($\chi^2 = 10.636$; $p = 0.001$). Among individuals who had visited Tunisia, these indications accounted for 6.59% of the sample, whereas among respondents from Group II, no such associations were noted (Tab. 3).

The image of Tunisia, based on freely indicated influencing factors on developing tourism in category 5, was significantly more common in the group of people who had visited the country (45.00%, group II) than among those who had not (31.01%, group I). Respondents from group I significantly more often associated Tunisia with danger (including theft, terrorism and attacks – 19.38%), while in group II this was only 2.78%. In turn, people from group II significantly more often associated Tunisia with a positive attitude of the population towards tourists (including hospitality, friendliness, openness) – as many as 37.78% compared to 10.08% in group I ($\chi^2 = 48.266$; $p = 0.000$). In addition, associations with low prices (for trips, souvenirs or shopping) appeared significantly more often in group II – 5.56% than in group I – 1.55% ($\chi^2 = 4.278$; $p = 0.038$).

The most striking difference between the groups was the associations related to sensory experiences – so-called sensory stimuli (category 6). These were present in 77.78% of respondents from group II, compared to only 9.69% from group I. Particularly significant differences ($p = 0.000$) were found in associations related to: taste – 57.78% in group II vs 6.59% in group I, smell – 35.00% in group II vs 3.88% in group I, and sight – 21.11% in group II vs 2.33% in group I (Tab. 3).

In order to examine the intensity of associative reactions related to the image of Tunisia, the total number of associations reported by respondents from both groups was analysed. It turned out that respondents from group I showed greater variability in the number of responses. However, the vast majority – 88% of them – gave three answers. There were also cases of limited engagement – a total of over 11% of respondents indicated only one or two associations, and 0.39% ($n=1$) of the sample did not provide any answers.

In contrast, almost all respondents from group II (97.78%) gave the maximum number of three responses. The responses were exceptionally consistent, with no non-responses or limited responses. The differences are statistically significant at the $p \leq 0.001$ level, indicating that individuals from group II were significantly more likely to provide a complete set of associations than those from group I (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Intensity of associative reactions related to the image of Tunisia

Total responses	Group			Statistical significance	
	I – people who have not been to Tunisia	II – people who have been to Tunisia	I+II (total respondents)	Pearson's chi-square	U Mann-Whitney
	Percentage share [%]				
None	0.39	0.00	0.22	$\chi^2 = 14.946$; $p = 0.001$	$Z = 3.753$ $p = 0.000$
One	4.65	0.00	2.73		
Two	6.98	2.22	5.02		
Three	87.98	97.78	92.01		

According to the data obtained, the average number of associations given was higher in group II (2.98) than in group I (2.83). The median in both cases was 3, indicating that most respondents provided the maximum possible number of associations. However, differences appeared in the variability of responses – the standard deviation in group II was 0.15, which was more than three times lower than in group I (0.51), indicating greater consistency and homogeneity of responses among people who had been to Tunisia (Tab. 5).

Table 5. Total number of associations related to Tunisia

Respondents	Number of valid responses	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Group I*	258	2.83	3	0.51
Group II**	180	2.98	3	0.15
Total	438	2.89	3	0.41

Note: * – respondents who have not been to Tunisia; ** – respondents who have been to Tunisia.

Image of Tunisia based on responses of a “friendly” nature

The answers to the question “Do you intend to visit Tunisia in the next five years?” reveal significant differences between people who have already visited Tunisia (group II) and those who have never been there (group I). In group I, as many as 53.88% of respondents declared their intention to visit the country in the coming years, while only 36.11% of affirmative responses were recorded in group II. On the other hand, the answer “I do not know” appeared more often in group I (16.28%) than in group II (7.22%). These differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 32.774$; $p = 0.000$) (Tab. 6).

Table 6. Intention to visit Tunisia

Intention to visit Tunisia	Group			Statistical significance
	I – people who have not been to Tunisia	II – people who have been to Tunisia	I+II (total respondents)	Pearson's chi-square
	Percentage share [%]			
Yes	53.88	36.11	46.58	$\chi^2 = 32.774$; p = 0.000
No	29.84	56.67	40.87	
I do not know	16.28	7.22	12.56	

Significant differences were also observed in the general attitude towards Tunisia, which is a key indicator of the emotional component of a destination's image. In the group of people who visited this country (group II), clearly positive attitudes prevailed. As many as 49.44% of respondents declared a “very positive” attitude, and another 36.67% declared a “rather positive” attitude. Ambivalent or extremely negative attitudes almost completely disappeared in this group – only 3.33% of respondents remained indifferent, and no “very negative” responses were recorded at all. A different picture emerged among those who had not visited Tunisia (group I). As many as 35.66% of respondents declared a “neutral” attitude, and 16.7% a “negative” attitude (including 4.26% “very negative” and 12.44% “rather negative”). These differences were also statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 87.925$; $p = 0.000$) (Tab. 7).

Table 7. Respondents' attitudes towards Tunisia

Attitude	Group			Statistical significance
	I – people who have not been to Tunisia	II – people who have been to Tunisia	I+II (total respondents)	Pearson's chi-square
	Percentage share [%]			
Very positive	20.54	49.44	32.42	$\chi^2 = 87.925$; $p = 0.000$
Rather positive	27.13	36.67	31.05	
Neutral	35.66	3.33	22.37	
Rather negative	12.44	10.56	11.64	
Very negative	4.26	0.00	2.51	

Discussion

The study's results reveal a clear difference in the image of Tunisia, depending on the respondents' tourist experiences. Those who have visited the country (group II) present a more complex and in-depth image of the destination. In contrast, those without such experience (group I) more often use a simplified, stereotypical image of Tunisia as a "3S" holiday destination. Quantitative data showed that the most common associations in group I were "beach" (31.78%), "sea" (31.01%) and "climate/sun" (39.9%), which confirms the dominance of leisure elements in the image, characteristic of Arab and Mediterranean destinations [19, 32, 33]. This also points to a superficial, media- and advertising-driven image of the country, typical of the early stages of a tourist destination's life cycle [34,35].

In contrast, among respondents who had visited Tunisia, the image of the country proved to be much more complex and diverse. Elements related to cultural heritage, such as "Amphitheatre, Carthage, Bardo Museum" (18.43%) and "Bazaar, shisha" (6.67%), were chosen significantly more often, which corresponds to the perception of Tunisia as a "4H" destination.

Also worth noting are the discrepancies in the category "Influencing factors on developing tourism". Group I more often indicated Tunisia as an "unsafe" country, associated with terrorism and attacks (19.38% vs 2.78%). Group II, on the other hand, pointed to the population's positive attitude much more frequently – specifically, hospitality, friendliness, and openness (37.78% vs 10.08%). These differences suggest that the image of a country's safety can be significantly distorted by media reports and stereotypes, and that the actual image of a destination, shaped by personal travel experiences, can be much more positive.

These results are consistent with observations from other holiday destinations with a similar tourist profile, such as Egypt and Turkey, where stereotypes related to safety (e.g. terrorist threats, crime) and religion (e.g. concerns about religious intolerance, cultural restrictions) change after a tourist's visit [8, 36, 37].

Sensory stimuli – included in the study as a separate category – proved to be the strongest differentiating factor in the image of Tunisia. Among the group of people who had visited the country, as many as 77.8% of respondents reported associations related to taste, the smell of spices, cuisine, or the intense colours of the architecture. In group I, these responses accounted for only 9.69%. These results suggest that the country's cultural potential is recognised and appreciated, but only after personal contact with the place. Such sensory engagement is crucial for

creating emotional memories and authentic connections with a place, about the concept of experiential tourism [21, 38]. This concept includes elements of so-called supporting consumer experiences (food, smells, ambient sounds, atmosphere of local spaces), as emphasised by Quan and Wang [39]. These components influence the perception of a destination in a more lasting and emotional way. Therefore, people who have visited Tunisia are less likely to identify it solely with beaches and climate, and more often perceive it as a country with a rich cultural heritage, including culinary traditions and authentic everyday life, as also emphasised by Abdmouleh [10]. This suggests the existence of a significant dichotomy between perception and the tourist experience, a phenomenon also observed in studies on Egypt [40, 41]. People who had not been to the country mainly associated it with pyramids and sunshine, while tourists more often emphasised its cultural and religious complexity. The situation is similar in Turkey. The stereotypical image of an "oriental paradise" is being transformed into a more cultural one thanks to experiential tourism [42].

The results of the analysis of associative responses related to the image of Tunisia among Polish tourists showed that people who had visited Tunisia (group II) were much more likely to provide a full set of three associations (97.78% of cases). However, even in the group of people who had not visited this destination (group I), the percentage of responses was high, at 87.98%. It can therefore be assumed that the recognition of Tunisia's image among all respondents is very high.

The results obtained indicate a positive attitude of Polish respondents towards Tunisia – over 63% of the total. However, it is in group II that a positive attitude towards the area significantly prevails (86.11%) compared to group I (47.67%). The results confirm that travel experience has a transformative function – it not only leads to broader knowledge and deeper associations, but also to an emotional change in attitude towards the destination. Tunisia, as a destination often perceived stereotypically, gains in the eyes of those who have got to know it – it becomes an authentic, hospitable and positively remembered place. The image of a place therefore plays a key role in building tourist loyalty to a destination and their willingness to revisit it. The results obtained confirm the findings of other studies [11, 13, 16, 17, 20] that a positive attitude towards a destination significantly increases the likelihood of choosing it again in the future.

On the other hand, although almost half of the respondents (46.58%) expressed a willingness to visit Tunisia in the next 5 years, it is worth noting that despite a more positive image of the area in group II, it was in this group that a significantly lower percentage of people planning to revisit the destination was recorded. This may indicate that their curiosity has been satisfied, but also that there are certain shortcomings in terms of infrastructure or service quality. Respondents highlighted, among other things, the poor quality of hotels, pushy salespeople and poor transport links, which may explain the relatively high percentage of "no" answers to the question about plans to return.

Conclusions

For decades, Tunisia's tourist image has been closely tied to seaside resorts offering all-inclusive packages along the Mediterranean coast. This type of message, promoted by travel agencies and the media, has shaped the country's image as a typical holiday destination – the "3S" destination. These activities have significantly limited the development of alternative forms of tourism related to the country's cultural heritage.

The results obtained clearly demonstrate significant differences in the perception of Tunisia as a tourist destination between individuals who have visited it and those who have never been there. People who have never visited Tunisia perceive it mainly as a "3S" destination (e.g. seaside holidays, sunny climate). This image, reinforced by media and promotional messages, turns out to be shallow and undiversified.

Respondents who visited Tunisia, on the other hand, present a much richer and more complex image of the destination – "4H" (cultural heritage, historical sites, local community, sensory experiences). References to taste, smell, colours and the atmosphere of the local space testify to a more profound, more personal rootedness of the destination's image. Therefore, the actual experiences of tourists influence their attitudes and the structure of their associations with the destination. Personal experience of a place plays a transformative role in shaping both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of its image. Travel not only leads to broader knowledge and deeper associations, but also to a change in attitude towards the country visited.

The results show that Tunisia, despite its dominant image as a holiday destination, already has another image – cultural – that is distinct and recognisable among Polish tourists. This could serve as a starting point for further diversification of the offer, particularly in terms of cultural authenticity and emotional appeal.

However, it should be noted that a positive image of the country does not always translate into a high level of tourist loyalty. People who have visited Tunisia, although they more often express enthusiasm and a positive attitude, do not necessarily declare that they will return. This may be due to a feeling of "sufficient experience", but also to dissatisfaction with the infrastructure, services or organisation of their stay.

In light of the above observations, Tunisia appears to be a country with great, but still untapped potential for the development of cultural tourism, which could become a key factor in supporting the sustainable development of the destination. Tourism based on local heritage, crafts, social relations and respect for the natural environment promotes diversification of the offer, strengthens cultural identity and enables the building of lasting relationships between visitors and the visited. Moreover, it enables the tourism sector to develop independently of seasonality and changing trends in mass leisure tourism. Sustainable forms of travel promote a balance between economic interests, the needs of residents and heritage protection.

However, it should be emphasised that an image change requires an appropriate promotional narrative and communication strategy. Tour operators can play a significant role in its implementation, as they have a real opportunity to influence the way a country is perceived by creating offers based on experience, contact with the local community, art and cuisine. On the one hand, such activities challenge the traditional recreational model of leisure in this country; on the other hand, they open up new opportunities to position Tunisia as a cultural destination that fosters emotions and experiences.

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