

Conceptualizing the Relationships between Resident-Tourist Interaction, Emotional Solidarity and Destination Image

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the resident tourist interaction (RTI) and emotional solidarity (ES) on the destination image (DI) of Sri Lanka. Research objectives are to 1) understand the nature of the DI of Sri Lanka; 2) examine the impact of resident tourist interaction on the destination image of Sri Lanka, and 3) conceptualize the mediating impact of emotional solidarity on the relationship between resident tourist interaction and DI. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 151 international tourists selected using judgmental and convenience sampling. Findings revealed that tourists hold a favourable perception of Sri Lanka and that RTI have an impact on both the DI and ES. Further, ES was found to have an impact on DI. Importantly, the findings contributed to the theory by revealing that the ES mediates the relationship between RTI and DI.

Keywords: Destination Image (DI), Emotional Solidarity (ES), International Tourists, Resident Tourist Interaction (RTI).

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is widely recognized as an important contributor that fosters the social, cultural, and economic development of a country. It significantly drives economic growth and development in numerous economies worldwide (Bunghez, 2016) including Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's Tourism industry is the third largest source of foreign exchange (SLTDA, 2023). After enduring consecutive crises beginning with the Easter Sunday bombing in 2019, followed by the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020-2021, and then the economic crisis in 2022-2023, the Sri Lankan tourism industry began showing signs of recovery only by the end of 2023. Tourist arrivals surpassed the one-million mark for the first time in four years in 2023, reporting over 1.4 million international tourists (SLTDA, 2023). Tourism revenue reached USD 2.07 billion in 2023, reporting an increase of 106.58% from the previous year (SLTDA, 2023). However, Sri Lanka has not yet reached its full tourism potential or returned to pre-crisis standards. Following this recovery, destination marketing literature highlights the challenges of attracting and retaining tourists.

According to destination marketing literature, attracting and retaining customers is considered a difficult task. Unlike tangible goods or

intangible services, vacations are uncommon purchases that have no urgency or emergency (Sarma, 2007). With new tourist spots opening up all over the world and travellers having more options than ever before, destination marketers are required to focus on creating effective programs to promote their destinations (Wijethunga & Warnakulasooriya, 2014). The primary marketing objective of destinations is to attract visitors by influencing their travel preferences and choices (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Here, the destination image (DI) plays a critical role as it has a direct impact on the decision-making process, and it is closely related to a tourist's intention to visit (Bigne et al., 2001; Prayag, 2009). Travellers with a more positive image of a destination tend to revisit and spread positive word of mouth (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

Though DI can be evaluated by examining both functional (tangible) and psychological (intangible) attributes (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991), functional attributes such as beautiful scenery, golden beaches, or friendly places no longer help differentiate the destinations (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Rather, the intangible and emotional appeals associated with destinations have the potential to create unique and memorable images for tourists (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Gallarza et al., 2002). Here, the residents play a crucial role in shaping DI,

particularly through word-of-mouth recommendations (Stylidis et al., 2017). When residents have a positive perception of their destination, they are likely to recommend it to others and extend goodwill towards tourists they meet. So, the residents are referred to as destination ambassadors (Hudson & Hawkins, 2006). Such an active involvement also helps to solidify the DI and distinguishes a destination from other destinations (Valle et al., 2012). Hence, understanding DI of a country demands an understanding of the nature of resident-tourist interaction. The sense of togetherness and emotional solidarity are identified as two key components that shape tourists' DI (Woosnam et al., 2020). Further, the literature emphasises the importance of examining how tourists' perception and their interactions with residents vary across diverse contexts (e.g., Stylidis, 2022). Nevertheless, there are only a handful of studies examining the impact of resident-tourist interactions (RTI) and emotional solidarity (ES) on DI (Stylidis, 2022). Stylidis (2022) especially highlights the importance of examining the impact of SE on RTI and DI, which is not examined despite its importance (Stylidis, 2022).

Accordingly, this paper aims to examine, **“What is the impact of resident-tourist interaction and emotional solidarity on the destination image of Sri Lanka?”** Through achieving this aim, the

paper fills the identified gaps and contributes to destination marketing theory and practice by providing richer insights, especially into DI literature, by examining the impact of resident tourist interactions (RTI) and emotional solidarity (ES) on DI. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were set.

- I. What is the nature of the destination image of Sri Lanka?
- II. What is the impact of resident tourist interaction on the tourist destination image of Sri Lanka?
- III. Does emotional solidarity mediate the relationship between resident tourist interaction and destination image?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination Image

Early in the 1970s, Hunt (1975), Gunn (1972), and Mayo (1973) introduced the concept of DI into tourism studies. Since then, it has become one of the most extensively studied concepts in the field of tourism (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000); (Alcocer & López Ruiz, 2020). DI is defined as the overall perception and attitude that individuals hold toward a place based on their accumulated feelings, expectations and

experiences over time. (Kim & Richardson, 2003) As the perception of destinations is essential to their success in the market, DI management is considered an important aspect of destination marketing. While DI is a subjective concept, it depends on various factors, including prior knowledge of the destination, travel experiences, and cultural influences (such as nationality or religion) (Bruce & Crotts, 2003) DI is crucial in tourism (Crompton, 1979), where the primary goal of destination marketing is to attract tourists by influencing their travel decision-making and choice. DI is highlighted for its role in supply-side marketing-related factors such as positioning and promoting (Baloglu & McCleary, October 1999). Furthermore, understanding and effectively managing a tourist DI can greatly contribute to its viability and success in the tourism industry (Font, 1997; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Hence, it is important to identify the DI of a particular destination to identify its strengths and weaknesses (Chen & Uysal, 2002).

DI contains three hierarchically connected components, namely cognitive, affective, and conative. The cognitive component involves what people know and think about the location (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The affective means how people feel about it (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). And conative means how people respond to this

information (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Compared with the affective DI, the cognitive DI is more observable, descriptive, and measurable (Walmsley & Young, 1988). So, it provides concrete and explanatory details about a destination. Hence, a majority of empirical studies have specifically examined the cognitive aspect of DI using the multi-attribute approach (Chon, 1991; Court & Lupton, 1997). Cognitive DI is a valuable tool for researchers to systematically and comprehensively assess and understand the cognitive dimensions of a destination (Basaran, 2016). It represents the tourists' beliefs and perceptions of the destination (Xie & Lee, 2013) and helps to influence tourists' perceptions and attitudes toward a destination and hence, plays a crucial role in tourists' decision-making processes (Martín & Bosque, 2008). The cognitive DI consists of four main elements: natural environment, built environment, socially responsible environment and local people. (Xie & Lee, 2013) The natural environment includes aspects such as scenery, climate, and wildlife, which contribute to tourists' comfort and enjoyment (Xie & Lee, 2013). The built environment focuses on geographically specific attractions, including cultural heritage sites, environmental venues, and local infrastructure (Chi & Qu, 2008). The socially responsible environment relates to tourists' beliefs and trust in a destination's green management practices

and ethical standards (Tilikidou, 2006). Lastly, local people combine all these three aspects and form a composite cognitive DI (Tilikidou, 2006). The next section explores the literature about the resident-tourist interaction on destination image.

Impact of Resident-Tourist Interaction on Destination Image

A tourist is “A person who travels outside of his normal environment for a period of more than 24 hours” (Mathieson & Geoffrey, 1982:1). Visiting a destination is known to enhance one’s interactions with both the people and places there (Pearce & Stringer, 1991). When people travel to another destination, they interact with residents/locals. Residents play a crucial role in creating DI because it is hard to separate a place from its people (Beerli & Martín, 2004). The relationships between residents and tourists are complex, but they often encourage visitors to interact with locals and learn about customs and traditions (Babb, 2010). Tourists cannot have a true cultural experience without interacting with the locals (Valek & Williams, 2018). The interaction between tourists and locals not only enhances tourists’ understanding of local life but also contributes to sustainable tourism development (Walker & Moscardo, 2018). The opportunities

provided to engage with locals to discover more about their traditions, customs, heritage, and general culture are considered a key factor by most travellers when selecting a destination to visit (Babb, 2010; Wearing et al., 2009). Hence, many popular destinations worldwide feature locals in their tourism marketing as non-monetary advantages (i.e., social feelings), which is considered as important as highlighting monetary benefits (Stylidis, 2020; Woosnam, 2012).

On one hand, stronger connections between residents and tourists lead to a more positive perception of residents among tourists, thereby improving tourist attitudes toward locals (Abraham et al., 2000). The way individuals personally interpret these interactions and the feelings they develop towards the destination, and its hosts, ultimately form the image of the destination (Tasci et al., 2007; Veasna et al., 2013).

On the other hand, residents spread positive Word-of-mouth (Ramkissoon & Nunkoo, 2009) and play a crucial role in shaping how other people see places, through their engagement in social media (Chan & Marafa, 2016). Word-of-mouth engagement greatly influences DI formation (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Hence, the importance placed upon the home country's tourism by the residents has an impact on the potential visitors' perception of the destination (Schroeder, 1996).

Hence, understanding the image of a destination by ignoring its residents would be incomplete. However, there is limited evidence regarding how interactions with residents at the destination contribute to forming the image that tourists have of the place (Woosnam, et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study hypothesises that resident-tourist interaction has an impact on destination image (H2).

Emotional Solidarity

Emotional Solidarity (ES) serves as one indicator of the relationship between tourists and locals, which refers to the emotional closeness and the level of support experienced between individuals (Hammarström, 2005). Jacobs and Allen (2005) define ES as a sense of unity creating a feeling of “we” rather than “me versus you”. ES can be seen as a form of personal identification with another person, which strengthens the individual’s sense of belonging to a group.

The concept of ES sheds light on the host-guest relationship and how it can shape the overall tourist experience (Lan, et al., 2021). When locals and visitors share similar values, they behave and engage with one another, leading to the development of a certain level of ES (Woosnam, 2011). Literature argues that tourists’ ES with

residents, characterized by closeness and mutual understanding, is important for the effective planning, development and marketing of a destination (Joo & Woosnam, 2019). Moreover, ES draws on variations in values, providing more insight into travellers' perceptions of the place and their plans for future action (Ribeiro et al., 2017). Such perceptions of the destination directly impact the tourist decision-making process, influencing their choices of destination and their intention to revisit in the future (Hung et al., 2021). Hence, understanding the level of ES is crucial for effective tourist planning and destination marketing (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021).

Tourists who have a strong feeling of ES towards a destination and its residents have a positive attitude towards tourism in that community and are more likely to choose that destination for their travels (Joo & Woosnam, 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Such tourists who feel a strong connection with each other tend to build lasting and close relationships (Harrill, 2004). And such volunteer tourists' perceptions of emotional closeness and sympathetic understanding with residents directly affect their loyalty to the destination (Jiang et al., 2022).

Overall, ES influences destination choice, travel decisions, DI and the overall success of tourist destinations. However, the mediating impact

of ES on the relationship between RTI and DI is not well understood so far (Stylidis, 2022). Hence, this study hypothesises that Emotional solidarity mediates the relationship between resident-tourist interaction and destination image (H5).

RESEARCH METHODS

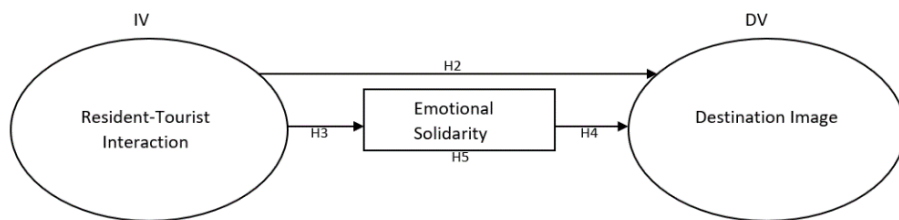
The purpose of this research is correlational, as it attempts to examine and explain the relationship between resident tourist interaction (RTI) and destination image (DI), as well as to examine the mediating impact of emotional solidarity (ES) on the above relationship. This research was approached from a quantitative perspective, and this survey research adopted a single cross-sectional design. The population of the study was international tourists to Sri Lanka who visited during December 2023- January 2024. Accordingly, a sample of 151 international tourists who had been to Sri Lanka during December 2023 and January 2024 was selected based on judgmental and convenience sampling. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. Though initially it was planned to have a larger sample size (384 based on Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), due to time constraints, accessibility and feasibility, only 151 responses were included in the final data set. This sample size was deemed appropriate as a simple

regression analysis needs at least 50 samples and generally 100 samples for most research situations (Hair Jr., et al., 2018). Further, normality tests and tests to validate the measurement properties were conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the data set before testing the hypotheses. The one-sample T-test, Bivariate Regression analysis, and the Sobel Test were used to test the hypothesis.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between the independent variable, RTI and the dependent variable DI, as well as the mediating variable, ES.

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework



(Source: Compiled by the authors)

Accordingly, the hypothesis was developed as

H1: Tourists have a favourable DI of Sri Lanka.

H2: Resident-tourist interaction has an impact on DI.

H3: Resident-tourist interaction has an impact on emotional solidarity.

H4: Emotional solidarity has an impact on DI.

H5: Emotional solidarity mediates the relationship between resident-tourist interaction and DI.

Operationalization

The constructions in this study were operationalised as follows: RTI was based on Stylidis (2022) and recognised as a multidimensional construction, and the measurement tool contained five indicators. The Cognitive DI (dependent variable) was operationalised based on Wijethunga & Warnakulasooriya (2014), which includes 14 indicators.

The mediating variable, ES, was operationalised using Joo & Woosnam (2020), which consists of four dimensions with a total of 15 indicators. All indicators of interest were measured through respondents' perceptual evaluation on a five-point Likert scale, with response categories anchored by 1- “strongly disagree” to 5 – “strongly agree”. The validity of the measurement properties was assured using content validity, unidimensionality, reliability and construct validity (Table 1).

Table 1 - Validation of Measurement Properties (Normality and Reliability)

	Mean	Median	Skewness	Kurtosis	KMO	Chi-square	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Experience with Locals (IV)	3.70	3.80	-0.540	0.274	0.801	354.269	0.865	5
Emotional Closeness	3.33	3.50	-0.437	-0.663	0.500	86.664	0.779	2
Systematic Understand	3.58	3.75	-0.635	0.277	0.790	190.320	0.803	4
Feel Welcomed	3.94	4.00	-0.690	0.563	0.749	198.031	0.796	4
Relationship with locals	3.82	3.83	-0.640	0.976	0.749	755.459	0.797	5
Features (DV)	3.60	3.57	0.004	-0.342	0.820	299.990	0.804	14

Table 1 shows that the data set is normally distributed. As reflected by the skewness and kurtosis values, which fall within acceptable ranges. The internal consistency of the constructs is confirmed by Cronbach's alpha values, all exceeding 0.7, indicating reliability (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The KMO values range from 0.5 to 0.820, indicating sampling adequacy and suitability for factor analysis (Malhotra, 2005). Additionally, the Chi-square tests for all variables are highly significant ($p < 0.001$), supporting the construct validity of the measurement model. Overall, these results confirm that the measurement instruments used in the study are both reliable and valid.

Results

The majority of respondents are from the UK, which is one of the key tourist sources to Sri Lanka. Most of the respondents represent the age group of 25-39, and the sample consists of 55% females and 45% males. The majority of the respondents were for leisure purposes (Table 2 presents the sample profile).

Table 2 - Sample Profile

Category		Number of respondents	Percentage
Home Country	The UK	46	30.5 %
	Other Countries (Australia, Asia, Latin America and Africa)	106	69.5 %
Age	18-24	13	9.9 %
	25-39	68	44.4 %
	40-59	43	27.2 %
	Above 60	17	11.3 %
	Not indicated	12	7.3 %
Gender	Female	83	55 %
	Male	68	45%
Purpose of travel	Leisure	142	92.81 %
	Business	3	1.96 %
	Visiting friends/family members	4	2.61 %
	Other	4	2.61 %

The Nature of Destination Image of Sri Lanka

The first objective of this study was to explore the nature of the DI of Sri Lanka. So, the first hypothesis, “Tourists have a favourable DI of Sri Lanka.” was tested using the sample t-test (Table 4) based on the decision criteria given in Table 3.

Table 3 - Decision criteria

Mean	Decision criteria
Between 1 and 2.29	Unfavorable
Between 2.3 and 3.59	Neutral
Between 3.6 and 5	Favourable

Table 4- One-Sample Statistics

One-Sample Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
EX	151	3.70	.797	.065

The one-sample t-test results (Table 4) indicated a sample mean of 3.70 (N = 151, SD = 0.797, SE = 0.065), which falls within the “Favourable” range. The significance level ($p < 0.001$) further suggests that there is strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis, confirming that tourists hold a positive DI of Sri Lanka.

The Impact of Resident Tourist Interaction on Destination Image of Sri Lanka.

The second objective of the dissertation is to examine the impact of RTI on the DI of Sri Lanka, and so the second hypothesis, “RTI has an impact on DI”, was tested using bivariate regression analysis, with RTI

as the independent variable (IV) and DI as the dependent variable (DV). The results are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Model Summary: RTI on DI

Item	DI		
	Beta	t-Value	Sig. t
RTI	.513	7.293	.000
Constant		16.890	.000
R	.513		
R ²	.263		
F test statistics/ Significance	F =53.185 p=.000		

The estimated equation is **DI (Y) = 2.528 + 0.288 (RTI)**. The results revealed a statistically significant relationship between RTI and DI ($\beta = 0.513$, $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 value of 0.263. This indicates that 26.3% of the variance in DI can be explained by RTI, while the remaining 73.7% is attributed to other factors. The F-value (53.185, $p < 0.001$) also supports the model's significance.

The mediating impact of ES on the relationship between RTI and DI

The third objective of this dissertation is to conceptualise the mediating impact of ES on the relationship between RTI and DI. Three hypotheses were developed to achieve this objective: H3: RTI has an impact on ES; H4: ES has an impact on DI, and H5: ES mediates the

relationship between RTI and DI. Bivariate regression analysis was performed to test both H3 and H4. Results are presented in Tables 6 and 7, respectively.

Impact of Resident-tourist Interaction on Emotional Solidarity

Table 6: Model Summary: RTI on ES

	ES		
Item	Beta	t-Value	Sig. t
RTI	.800	16.286	.000
Constant		9.927	.000
R	.800		
R ²	.640		
F test statistics/ Significance	F =265.238 p=.000		

The estimated equation is $ES (Y) = 1.436 + 0.623 (RTI)$. The results show a strong relationship between RTI and ES ($\beta = 0.800$, $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 value of 0.640, indicating that RTI explains 64% of the variance in ES. Hence, there is enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis and show that RTI has a significant impact on ES.

Impact of Emotional solidarity on destination image

Table 7: Model Summary: ES on DI

	ES		
Item	Beta	t-Value	Sig. t

RTI	.603	9.232	.000
Constant		10.975	.000
R	.603		
R ²	.364		
F test statistics/ Significance	F =85.233 p=.000		

The estimated equation is, **DI (Y) = 1.964 + 0.436 (ES)**. Results indicate that ES has a significant impact on DI ($\beta = 0.603$, $p < 0.001$), and 36.4% of the variability in DI is explained by ES.

Analyse the mediating impact of emotional solidarity on the relationship between resident-tourist interaction and destination image.

To achieve the third objective to measure the mediating impact of ES on the relationship between RTI and DI, the fifth hypothesis was developed as “ES mediates the relationship between RTI and DI”. To test this hypothesis, the Sobel test was performed.

Table 8: – Model Summary

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		

1	(Constant)	1.436	.145		9.927	<.001
	ES	.623	.038	.800	16.286	<.001

Table 9 - Coefficient Table

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.971	.179		10.984	<.001
	DI	.047	.061	.084	.769	.443
	ES	.387	.079	.536	4.914	<.001

Figure 2 – Sobel Test Results

CALCULATION FOR THE SOBEL TEST

An interactive calculation tool for mediation tests

to conduct the Sobel test

Details can be found in Baron and Kenny (1986), Sobel (1982), Goodman (1960), and MacKinnon, Warsi, and Dwyer (1995). Insert the a , b , s_a , and s_b into the cells below and this program will calculate the critical ratio as a test of whether the indirect effect of the IV on the DV via the mediator is significantly different from zero.

Input:	Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a 0.623	Sobel test: 4.69368476	0.05136711	0.00000268
b 0.387	Aroian test: 4.68568965	0.05145475	0.00000279
s_a 0.038	Goodman test: 4.70172093	0.05127931	0.00000258
s_b 0.079	Reset all	Calculate	

Alternatively, you can insert t_a and t_b into the cells below, where t_a and t_b are the t-test statistics for the difference between the a and b coefficients and zero. Results should be identical to the first test, except for error due to rounding.

According to the Sobel test p-value, the result is $p = 0.00000268$, which is a considerably small value and less than 0.05. If the value is less than 0.05, that suggests strong evidence against the null hypothesis, so here the p-value is less than 0.05. So, this reveals that ES mediates the relationship between RTI and DI. Also, the analysis revealed the full mediation, so the mediation model shows that the mediator variable fully accounts for the relationship between the independent variable (RTI) and dependent variable (DI), this suggests that the indirect effect through the mediator (ES) statistically significant, while the direct effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is no longer significant once the mediator is considered, highlighting the importance of mediator variable.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Firstly, the results revealed that tourists have a favourable DI of Sri Lanka. This finding contradicts a previous study conducted in 2014 by Wijethunga and Warnakulasooriya, which found that the image perception of Sri Lanka as a tourist destination was neutral. However, that study was conducted during a period soon after the war against terrorism ended and when the tourism industry in Sri Lanka was beginning to recover. This present study reveals that the DI of Sri

Lanka is positive, indicating that the DI of Sri Lanka has improved during the past decade. It shows that Sri Lanka, despite facing many other challenges during the past decade (e.g., the Easter attack and economic crisis), has been able to retain its favourable DI.

Secondly, results revealed that the RTI has an impact on DI. This finding is in line with previous research conducted by Stylidis (2022), in which he found that RTI has a positive effect on the DI. Moreover, the finding showed that ES significantly has an impact on DI. This finding is in line with the previous studies that have discovered the relationship between ES and place attachment and revealed that there is a positive relationship between them (e.g., Tasci et al., 2021). Furthermore, the findings of this research align with those of Stylidis (2020), who confirmed that DI is influenced by the emotional relationship tourists develop with the residents of the destination.

Finally, the findings of this study confirm that ES mediates the relationship between RTI and DI, which has not been adequately examined in the literature. For example, Stylidis (2022), who has examined the tourist ES with residents and its impact on DI and loyalty, has highlighted the importance of examining the mediating impact of ES on RTI and DI. Hence by conceptualising the mediating

impact of ES on the relationship between RTI and DI, this research contributes to the theory.

Accordingly, this research contributes to the theory by establishing the relationships between ES, RTI and DI, and conceptualising the mediating impact of ES on the relationship between RTI and DI. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence that tourists have a positive DI in Sri Lanka. This showed an improvement in the DI of Sri Lanka over the past decade, since a study conducted in 2014 (Wijethunga & Warnakulasooriya, 2014) found Sri Lanka has a neutral DI among international travellers. The shift of DI from neutral to favourable indicated a positive change for Sri Lanka as a tourist destination. This finding indicates the possibility of improving the DIs of destinations by exerting adequate efforts by the destination management organisations (DMO). Further, this study offers valuable insights for tourism practitioners and DMOs, where the mediating role of ES suggests the importance of fostering positive interaction between residents and tourists to enhance the DI. Understanding the residents' perception of tourism is crucial for mitigating potential negative impacts and promoting community involvement in tourism development, as suggested by (Eusébio, et al., 2018). The outcome of the present study made a significant theoretical contribution to tourism

literature. According to Stylidis (2022), there is a theoretical gap in measuring the impact of resident tourist interaction and emotional solidarity on destination image, which is largely ignored (Stylidis, 2022). According to Allport's (1954) contact theory, meaningful contacts can result in better relationships between various parties and goals. Positive interactions between various groups under favourable circumstances are said to impact a positive change in attitudes towards one another (Aleshinloye, et al., 2019). Therefore, this theory is helpful in comprehending resident-tourist relations in the context of tourism. Accordingly, (Woosnam, et al., 2020) discovered that tourists feel a strong connection with residents through onsite interactions. Additionally, the perceived gap between residents and tourists is found to become smaller when they interact during visits, connect with local service providers, and develop close friendships (Woosnam & Norman, 2009). Also Emotional connections between residents and tourists are less explored in the Sri Lankan context. Existing studies, such as (Wijethunga & Warnakulasooriya, 2015) which examined how psychological motives affect DI, focused mainly on cognitive aspects. Findings of this dissertation extend the knowledge on the relationships between emotional solidarity, tourist interaction and destination

image, by revealing that emotional solidarity mediates the relationship between resident tourist interaction and destination image.

Further, this study revealed tourists have a positive destination image of Sri Lanka, which shows an uplift of the destination image during a period of a decade, compared to the neutral destination image found in (Wijethunga & Warnakulasooriya B N F, 2014). So, this study also extends the knowledge of destination image by showing that destination image can be changed in lapse of time.

Moreover, by establishing that there is an impact of resident tourist interaction and emotional solidarity destination image study offers empirical support to previous work conducted by Stylidis (2020). Additionally, the study used Woosnam's (2011) ESS scale of developed variables for emotional solidarity and highlighted the multidimensionality of Emotional solidarity (emotional closeness, sympathetic understanding, feeling welcomed). This study validated Woosnam's (2011) model in a new context and shows that the results may not be similar in different cultural settings.

Future researchers are encouraged to test the mediating impacts, such as tourist satisfaction, and consider other factors influencing tourist perception. Expanding data collection beyond peak tourist months will

provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourist behaviours and perceptions throughout the year. Additionally, segmenting tourists based on their interests and behaviours, such as adventure seekers or cultural enthusiasts, can help marketers develop targeted strategies. Understanding the occasions or activities that foster residents' interactions can also confirm policy and marketing strategies to enhance residents' participation and overall tourist experience. Lastly, distinguishing between first-time and repeat visitors can help policymakers and marketers tailor unique strategies to meet diverse story needs and references, ultimately boosting Sri Lanka's tourism appeal.

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