



## PROPOSING A MODEL OF THE EFFECT OF WORD OF MOUTH ON DESTINATION IMAGE OF TOURISTS AND TRAVEL INTENTION

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### ABSTRACT

*The awareness of a tourism destination and establishment of a destination image are often the result of a long range of information resources on a place and its people in which the efforts of organizations related to destination management is a part of the resources. This paper aims to propose a conceptual model to understand the mechanism of affective information sources on formation of destination image in the mind of tourists and consequently, travel intention. This study is descriptive-analytical in terms of method which employed document studies. That is, it reviews theoretical background and related research conducted in various countries and then would propose a model to understand the dynamics of tourism industry.*

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**Keywords:** Information sources, Destination image, Travel decision, Information search.

### Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the effect of word of mouth on destination image and travel intention in a conceptual model based on the comprehensive literature review in the area of information resources and destination image. The previous works have not addressed the issue in the context of tourism industry.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Century 21 is a century of utilizing valuable trade opportunities in service sector, particularly tourism industry. It has been predicted that financial turnover of tourism of world tourism would go beyond from financial turnover of other industries and would be about 2 trillion dollars. In this

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process, the achievement of tourism destinations to one percent of the turnover would be lead to 20 billion dollars revenue per year. However, it needs to a comprehensive programs to achieve the revenues and logical investments should be made in software and hardware of the industry. Iran's economic is highly relied on oil revenues and its macro variables depending on world oil price have experienced strong variations. Hence, the developing and investing tourism industry is a key priority to diversifying the resources of economic growth, exchange revenues, and job opportunities of the country; as Iran is one of the top-ten destinations in the world and it has a high degree of potential for international tourism. Comparative analysis of inbound and outbound tourists revealed the importance of tourism industry in developing internal economic of countries. According to published report of World Tourism Organization, the ratio of inbound to outbound tourists is 0.1. hence, the direct effects of tourism industry, considering 6 percent's world GDP, indicate that one of 15 future jobs would be assigned to the industry. Considering indirect effects, about 10 percent's of world GDP and one of 9 future jobs would be produced (World Tourism Organization, 2014). Iran has tourism attractions (historical, religion, and natural), but the lack of effective policies for the industry have led to low achievement of right share in tourism market. Tourism destinations should be differentiated from others in the minds of tourists in order to be successful in the target market. The key component of positioning process is to manage perceptions and to establish an attractive and differentiated image of destination. Research has indicated that image is an influential factor on destination choice by tourists. The development of image has a multidimensional nature and its formations caused by several factors (Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). Therefore, destination image can be originated from exposure to information resources (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). Promotion of a tourism destination that is a part of image formation process, is depended on available information resources. The information resources often affect decision making (Govers *et al.*, 2007). Thus, tourists use media resources and informal resources such as word of mouth communications (face to face or in cyberspace). Hence, the influencing mechanism of information resources is an important issue for investigation. Being awareness of the mechanism is important for destination marketers to formulate effective promotional strategies in an attempt to develop suitable destination image which in turn they would be led to sale enhancement and high profit margin for the destination. Copared to retailing products, tourism products are intangible and high uncertainty because the products could not be evaluated before consumption. Moreover, the products have high degree of engagement as they are risky and expensive (Hanlan and Kelly, 2004). Informal resources such as word of mouth is more effective than other resources originated from the nature of tourism industry. Word of mouth is the communication between people who have not trade identity and they do not follow their own interests. Media is a communicational tool that sender transfers his/her meaning and concept to receiver. Media is a context for provision and distribution of information in the society for consumers. Media can be divided in two groups: audio media (such as radio, CD, telephone) and video media (TV and satellite, images, books, journals, guide books, charts, maps, posters, newspapers, movies, and internet). These groups provided people with information to achieve trade, political, and cultural objectives. Hence, information transferred by word of mouth (without trade objectives) and by tourism destinations (with trade objectives) can affect tourists' perceptions

about a certain destination. As a result, this study aims to formulate a model to understand the affecting mechanism of information resources on destination image. In fact, the main purpose is to indicate how various information resources can affect destination image, attitudes towards destination and finally, travel intention.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Tourists' Information Search

Understanding tourists' information search is essential for developing marketing strategy and service delivery. Like decisions about other consumption products, information search is necessary for a destination choice (Gursoy and Mcclery, 2004). Variety and diversity of tourism destinations enhances the importance of understanding tourists' information search behavior. Information search behavior is defined as "a stimulated activity of information search that has been saved in the mind (internal search) or information acquisition from the environment (external search)". Researchers considered a three stages process for information search: need for travel (problem identification), information search for a tourism destination and related options, and the evaluation of selective options. Problem identification as the first stage, navigates information search behaviours of tourists and it is based on gathered information of previous experiences. People who have not been satisfied with this level of knowledge (prior knowledge) seek external information. During information acquisition, tourists may recycle information in their mind and/or may seek multiple external resources. Third stage requires options evaluation by the tourists. Tourists may evaluate both objective (such as price, facilities, etc) and intangible (such as image, feeling, experience) attributes provided in the various resources (Kerstetter and Cho, 2004). In the process of external search, tourists would gather the necessary information through media or word of mouth (traditional or online). The main attribute of media is its presence everywhere. Media is one the most important outcome of human development and the most valuable tool of mass communication. It should be noted that in the light of its knowledge transmission, geographical, political, and cultural barriers would be removed, people would be connected each other, and they would achieve the required information from far distances. The most important media in social, cultural and political areas are as following (Schweiger, 2000):

- Audio media includes radio, CD, telephone, and audio carts. Radio plays a key role in shaping public mind and relationships among countries or political populations.
- Video media includes TV, satellite, images, books, journals, guidebooks, charts, maps, posters, newspapers, movies, internet, conferences and seminars.

People are exposed to TV advertisements, published advertising, radio in driving, advertising on bus, subway, road, or buildings, telemarketers, articles, sales personnel, internet banners, small balloons, and color tools on airplanes. However, they respond to trade advertising one time during two or three days. Their response is rarely led to final purchase. They search more information about a particular product or service through their friends and family. They usually adopt one of five advices proposed by them. In other words, the reaction to the suggestion of a friend or colleague is more than reaction to a trade advertising and the reaction is final purchase (Silverman, 1997). Word of mouth can affect the process of decision-making and reduces risks perceived by the

consumers (Stokes and Lomax, 2002). Prior research indicated that word of mouth has a significant impact on purchase behavior of consumers and their satisfaction with products or services. Furthermore, consumers tend to trust to information achieved from personal resources. According to the researchers, what others say about a brand is stronger than what a brand says about itself. It is the reason in which popularity is more effective than advertising (Bush Victoria *et al.*, 2005). Research showed the importance of word of mouth in forming attitudes, purchase decision, and reducing risks related to purchase decisions (Wangenheim and Bayon, 2004). Positive word of mouth is becoming a strong tool in sale promotion of products and/or services in which unknown products would put in popularity path. Marketers consider positive word of mouth as a traditional form of marketing communications. In some contexts, it may recognize as the most powerful type of communication with people who are familiar and trusted (Ennew Christine *et al.*, 2000). The majority of people believed that positive word of mouth about a product/service is a result of their luckiness; however, research indicated that positive word of mouth is originated from precise marketing programs. Managers should seek the ways that motivate positive word of mouth and should develop strategies that reduces negative word of mouth and its consequences (Stokes and Lomax, 2002).

## 2.2. Destination Image

Image is a set of believes, ideas, and perceptions about a subject or phenomenon (Kotler, 2003). As the focus is on the image of a tourism destination, the phenomenon is tourism destination. Gallarza *et al.* (2002) revealed that the images of intangible products have a more important than tangible products as customer' perceptions encourage them to purchase rather than their realities. It is believed that images and perceptions about a tourism destination have a considerable influence on tourists' decisions about tangible tourism resources. The reason is that tourists who have few personal experience with tourism destinations, make their decisions based on their images and perceptions on the destination. Tourists would likely select destinations with positive image. Despite variety of tourism destinations, a positive image is critical for a destination to be selected (Litvin and Ling, 2001). Researchers found that information resources used by tourists have a significant effect on destination image. For example, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) developed a conceptual model of destination image determinants and found that destination image is affected by individual and stimulus factors. Individual factors include social and psychological characteristics of tourist while stimulus factors depend on external stimulus, physical phenomenon, and previous experiences. Their results indicated that information resources, age, and education affect cognitive evaluations while socio-psychological stimulus affects feelings. However, the effects of cognitive evaluations on feelings were more than the effects of travel motivations. In addition, practitioners suggested that word of mouth recommendations of friends and family are the most important resource in the process of destination image formation. Beerli and Martín (2004a) agreed that word of mouth is the most believable and trustable communication channel and has a significant influence on cognitive destination image. According to intangible nature of tourism products, consumers prefer to seek credible information such as news and reports (autonomous factors) and/or information achieved from word of mouth (solicited factors).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, research method is descriptive-analytical. Research reviews recent findings and scientific results associated with the relationship between information resources and destination image in a schematic way. To do this, this study employs documentary method in order to clarifying the role of information resources in destination image formation. Furthermore, current study tries to identify the mechanism of how information resources affect destination image in a casual model.

### 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first research on image was conducted by [Boulding \(1967\)](#) and [Martineau \(1958\)](#). They asserted that a person behavior depends on his/her image not to objective realities. The results of the researchers and next research on image concept led to emerge "Image theory". According to this theory, environment is an interpretation of objective realities in mind. A conventional definition of image stated that "image is a set of believes, thoughts, and perceptions of people about a destination ([Baloglu and McCleary, 1999](#)). [Hunt \(1975\)](#) asserted that perceived image often is affected by destination distance as people would likely visit near places and achieve their information from journals, friends and family. He concluded that people have more real and strong perceptions about near destinations. [Narayana \(1976\)](#) found that perceived destination image can change over time particularly, when tourist is engaged in visiting other tourism destinations. [Chon \(1992\)](#) studied consistency or inconsistency of perceived image of a destination and tourists' expectations with their real experience. He found that positive image and positive travel experience led to a positive evaluation of destination. [Fakeye and Crompton \(1991\)](#) proposed a model of destination choice based on destination image. First stage was organic image. The image is affected by travel motivation and modification of tourist knowledge. Organic image is a result of information supplied by resources such as articles, newspapers, and TV reports in which it forms gradually during the tourist life. Organic image would be changed into induced image through advertising campaign of tourism organizations. When induced destination image was formed, tourist would find perceived image of destination in his/her mind. In this stage, potential tourist behavior is determined by destination choice based on his/her perceptions. Visiting a tourism destination is accompanied by new information and experiences. New findings of tourist would complete his/her perceptions and provides him/her with more details in a clear way. Therefore, tourist would have a comprehensive and complicated image about destination in which employs it in his/her future evaluations. In fact, a feedback is created in the process of destination choice.

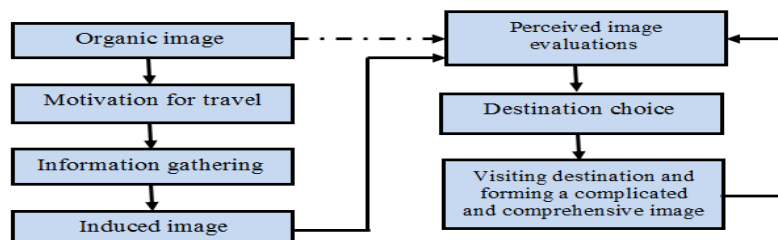


Figure-1. Multistage process of destination image formation ([Fakeye and Crompton, 1991](#))

In 1999, Baloglu & Mc Cleary indicated that destination image is affected by two factors: personal factors and stimulus factors. According to their proposed model, image consists of cognitive, affective and overall dimensions. Cognitive image is knowledge and information about tangible characteristics of a destination while affective image is internal feeling towards the destination. On the other hand, personal factors are characteristics of receiver which include psychological and social components. Stimulus factors are external factors that imposed resources, prior experiences, and distribution channels would be involved. Imposed resources are information resources that are based on conscious and active efforts to enhance, develop and promote a certain destination. According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999), cognitive and affective evaluations form the overall image of a destination.

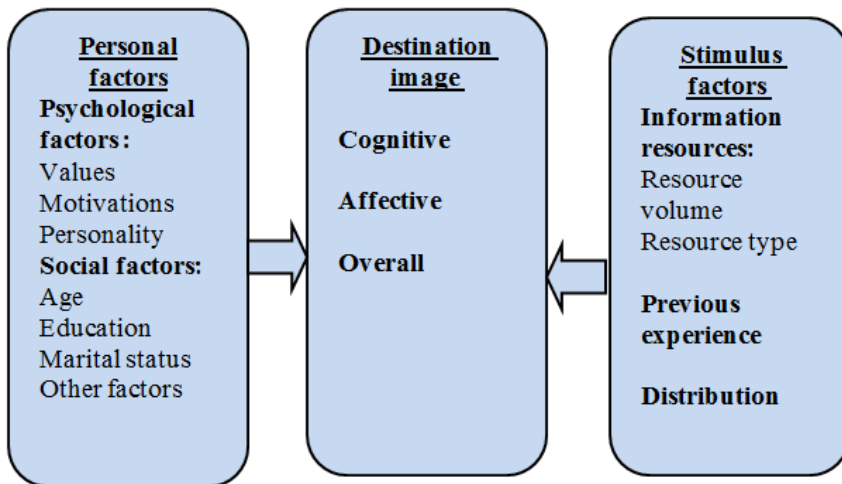


Figure-2. Model of influential factors on destination image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999)

Beerli and Martín (2004a) identified two major categories that affect perceived destination image in their proposed model: information resources and personal factors. They stated that the two categories can influence affective and cognitive image of a certain destination. Additionally, affective and cognitive images interact with each other and create overall destination image. In their study, information resources are divided into secondary information (organic, autonomous, induced) and primary information (such as visiting a destination). This classification differentiates information type and effects that are: 1) overt induced that are formed by traditional advertising. Information is delivered by tourism organizations in target destination, tour leaders, or retailers; 2) tacit induced: using destination popularity in promotional efforts of destinations and resorts or published articles; 3) autonomous including news, documents, films, TV programs, other media resources; 4) organic containing friends, colleagues, and family that they disseminate information about destination according to their knowledge or personal experiences. This type of information is gathered gradually during life time; 5) a visit to the destination includes the acquisition of information by direct experience of visiting target destination.

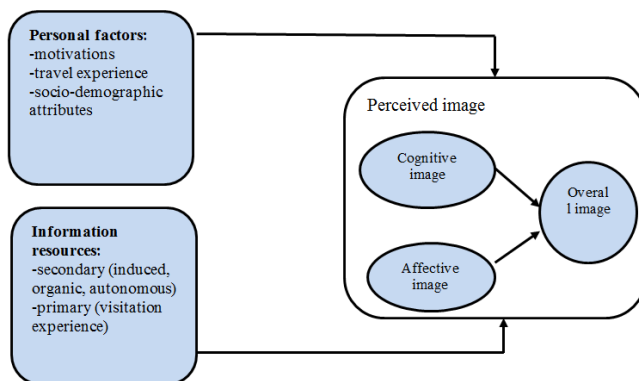


Figure-3. factors affecting image formation (Beerli and Martin, 2004a)

Kerstetter and Cho (2004) proposed a three stage process for information search including the need for a vocational travel (problem identification), searching information about a certain destination and related alternatives, and evaluating selected alternatives. Firstly, tourists seeks information about the destination in their mind in which are based on gathered information or prior experiences. Tourists who are not satisfied with the information (previous knowledge) would search externally for new information. Tourists tend to use four external resources in the process of travel planning: 1) friends, family, and colleagues, 2) destination literature, 3) media, and 4) tourism consultants.

Bronner and De Hoog (2013) in their study on tourists' information search stated that six areas have been concentrated by the previous research: 1) tourists' information resources, 2) factors affecting the selection of resources, 3) degree of information search before travel, 4) factors affecting the degree, 5) timing of information search in the process of travel planning, and 6) relationship between information search degree and travel planning. The researchers found that various information resources have different effects on travel decision. They surveyed 226 tourists and showed that the major information resources of tourists are word of mouth, electronic word of mouth, tourism destinations websites, brochurs, agencies, travel guides, and advertising, respectively. Dey and Sarma (2010) investigated usage of information resources by tourists. They employed a sample of 509 tourists who visited north-east of India. They found that the most frequent information resource was word of mouth disseminated by friends, colleagues and family. Travel agencies/tour guides, books, internet, and trade guide books were other main information resources used by tourists.

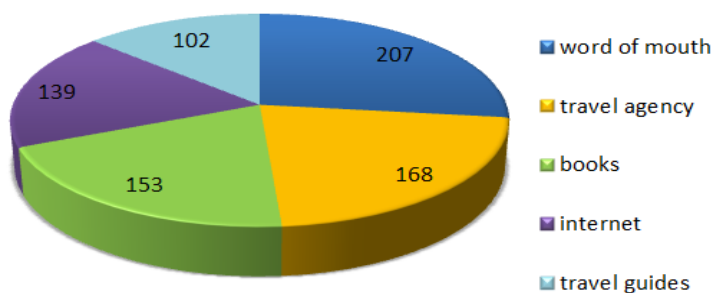


Figure-4. Tourists' information resources (Dey and Sarma, 2010)

Beerli and Martín (2004b) investigated the process of destination image formation using a sample of Lanzarote tourists and analyzed the impact of individual characteristics of tourists on destination image components. Their results indicated that 1) tourists' motivations influence affective image, 2) travel experience affects cognitive and affective images, 3) demographic characteristics affect cognitive and affective evaluations of image.

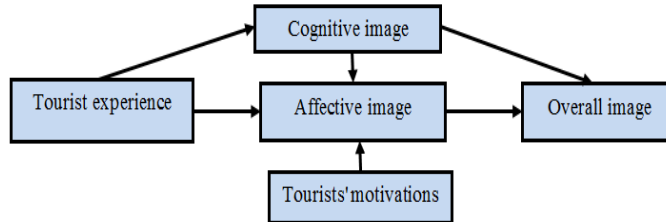


Figure-5. Model of factors affecting image (Beerli and Martín, 2004b)

Woomi and Soocheong (2008) conducted their study in New York city and showed that affective image and cognitive image have a significant influence on destination image. Moreover, they revealed that cognitive image can positively influence affective image.

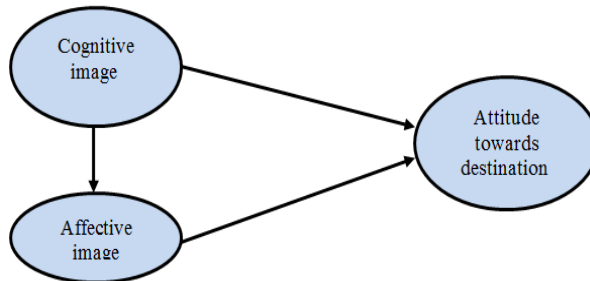


Figure-6. Model of image impact on attitude (Woomi and Soocheong, 2008)

Qu et al. (2011) in their study of destination branding, proposed a model to integrate branding and destination image concepts. The results of structural equation modeling found that overall destination image is affected by affective image, cognitive image, and unique image. Overall destination image, in turn, would affect travel intention and word of mouth intention.

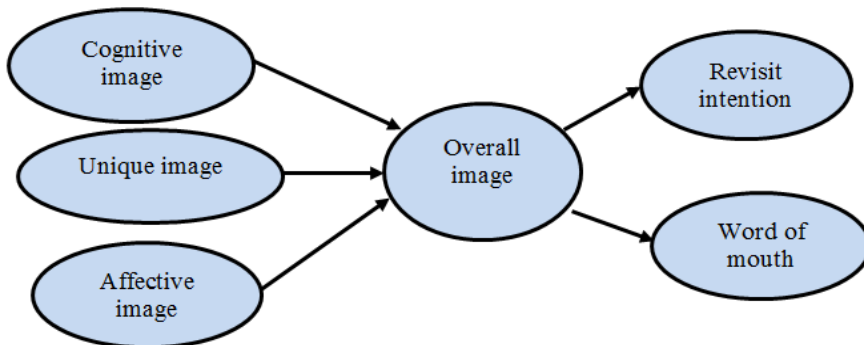


Figure-7. Destination branding model (Qu et al., 2011)



Ferns and Walls (2012) investigated the casual relationships among brand equity, involvement, and revisit intention and showed that tourist involvement not only affect destination image but also affect destination awareness, destination quality, and loyalty to a tourism destination. Furthermore, destination image, destination awareness, destination quality, and loyalty to destination have a significant influence on revisit intention.

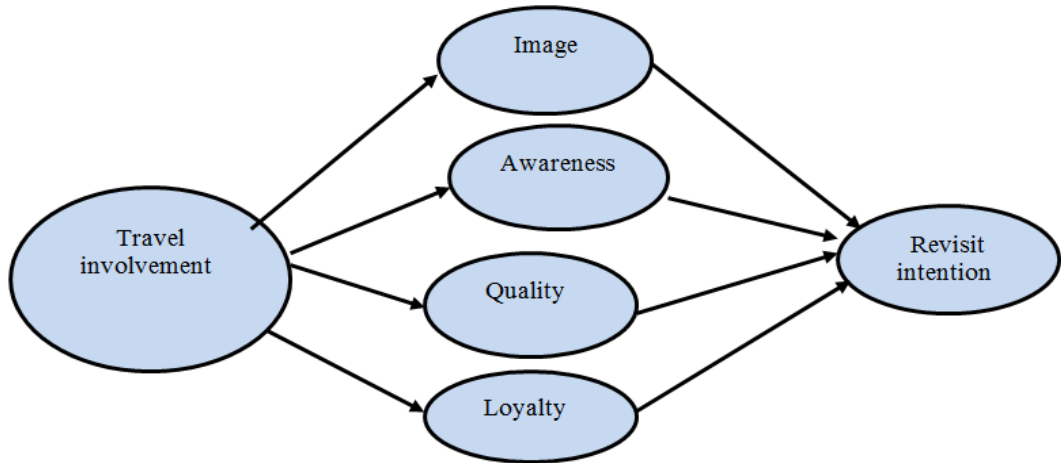


Figure-8. Causal model of relationships among brand equity, involvement, and revisit intention (Ferns and Walls, 2012)

Jalilvand and Samiei (2012a) investigated tourists' behavior in the process of a destination choice and showed that word of mouth among tourists in social networks has a significant influence on subjective norms and their attitudes towards a particular destination and consequently, destination choice.

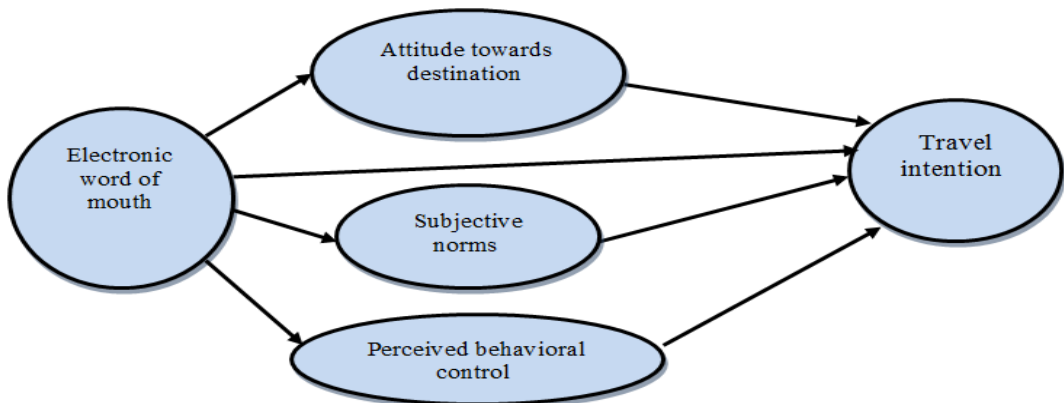


Figure-9. Model of the effects of word of mouth on travel decision (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012a)

Jalilvand and Samiei (2012b) studied the effect of word of mouth on attraction of inbound tourists and found that word of mouth among tourists is one of the most important information resources to achieve information about a tourism destination and has a significant influence on their travel intention. Hamidzadeh and Nazari (2011) investigated the impact of perceived image on destination choice and showed that perceived destination image would influence on their final decision for travelling a tourism destination.

## 5. MODEL OF INFORMATION RESOURCES ON IMAGE

Our proposed model to understand the mechanism of information resources effect on destination image, links information resources (word of mouth and media), affective image, unique image, cognitive image, psychological image, overall image, travel intention, and attitude towards destination (see Figure 10). As can be seen in the model, destination choice is affected by various factors in which destination image is the most important factor. The image is highly depended on information resources used by tourists. In the marketing literature, destination image components are cognitive, affective, unique, and psychological image. Cognitive image includes believes and knowledge about perceived characteristics of a certain destination. Affective image contains tourists' feeling about a tourism destination (Qu *et al.*, 2011). Psychological image includes abstract and intangible attributes of a destination such destination atmosphere and friendly environments (Alcaniz *et al.*, 2009). Unique image provides the reasons of preferring a tourism destination to others (Qu *et al.*, 2011). Based on literature review and theoretical background, the following propositions are presented:

**Proposition 1.** Information resources (word of mouth and media) have different effects on destination image (unique, cognitive, affective, and psychological).

**Proposition 2.** Various information resources (word of mouth and media) have different effects on attitudes towards a tourism destinations.

**Proposition 3.** Destination image (unique, cognitive, affective, and psychological) affects tourists' attitudes towards destination and travel intention.

**Proposition 4.** Various information resources (word of mouth and media) have different effects on travel intention.

It should be noted that this model is more comprehensive than other proposed model about the effect of information resources on destination image formation.

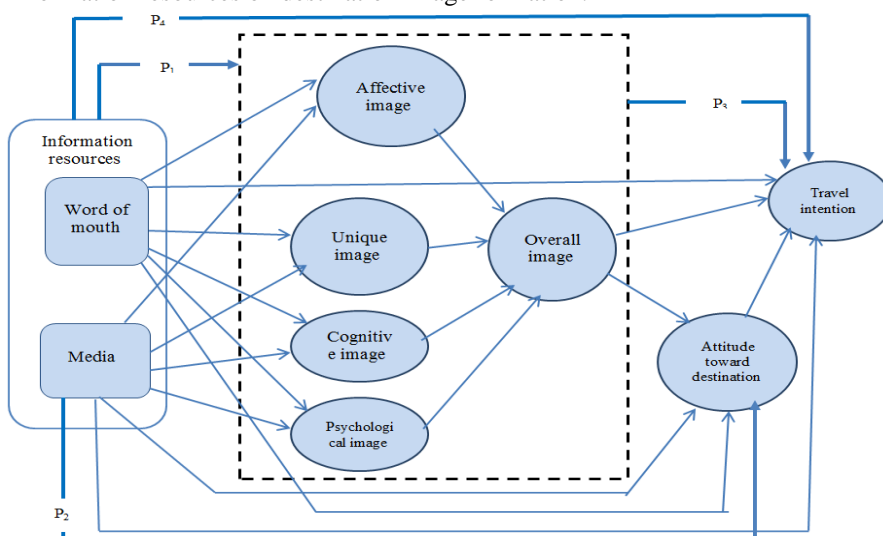


Figure-10. Conceptual model

## 6. CONCLUSION

Tourism industry is highly competitive and countries try to attract more and more inbound tourists to achieve higher level of income. Iran with a 6000 years history can be pioneer in

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attraction of tourists. The results of this study not only contributes to existing literature on destination image but also the results of study provides several managerial implications for tourism destinations and its subsections such as hoteling, vacational-tourism centers, and tourism products. Tourism industry is important as it is known as second income resource in more than 49 developing countries and it helps to increase revenues and to reduce poverty. Iran has attractive historical, natural and cultural attractions that have provided tourists with suitable setting for travel (WTO, 2014). It should be mentioned that this study is the first one that considers various dimensions of destination image and has proposed a conceptual model to understand the mechanism of affecting information resources (word of mouth and media) on destination image and travel intention. This research can provide some directions for futures research.

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