

U.S. travelers' perceived image of Latin America as a future travel destination

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Abstract | This study identified U.S. travelers' perceptions toward Latin America as a future place to visit based on their perceived destination attributes, activities, and overall affective image. Selecting nine attractive destinations in Latin America, this study aimed, first, to elucidate U.S. travelers' perceptual mapping of countries by using destination image attributes and activities; second, to determine comparative strengths and weaknesses; and third, to propose destination marketing strategies that will draw U.S. travelers' attention to Latin American countries. Overall, the findings of the study indicated that Americans have a favorable affective image toward the nine tourism destinations in Latin America. Costa Rica was respondents' most preferred country to visit, followed by Peru and Brazil.

Keywords | Latin America, destination image, U.S. travelers

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1. Introduction

The tourism industry is a key component of the national economy, generating employment and contributing to infrastructure development and population quality of life. According to prepandemic data from 2019, the tourism industry contributed 10.3% of the global gross domestic product (GDP), sustaining the lives of nearly 330 million people (Martins, 2022; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020). However, the COVID-19 outbreak has had severe impacts on the worldwide economy, particularly the tourism industry. The World Economic Forum estimated that the pandemic had cost the tourism industry \$4.5 trillion of the world's GDP and affected more than 62 million jobs in the tourism industry (CEPAL, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2022).

Prior to COVID-19, Latin America was a very popular tourism destination. In 2019, Latin America received 46.4 million foreign arrivals (UNWTO, 2020). According to the 2018 World Tourism Barometer by the World Trade Organization (Bizlatin Hub, 2019), Latin America was one of the most exciting regions as a touristic destination, with international tourist arrivals growing by 3% compared to that of the previous year, creating 10.6 million jobs in 2018. More than three-quarters of visitors to Latin America come from the United States, followed by Canada, European countries, and China (UNWTO, 2019; Voronkova, 2019). The devaluation of the local currency and the strength of the U.S. dollar have accelerated the influx of Americans to the region. The growth of tourism in Latin America has influenced the region's economies, social enhancement and people's well-being and livelihoods (Hernández-Maestro & González-Benito, 2014). Considering its rich natural, historical, and cultural resources, Latin America is one of the leading tourist destinations, offering outstanding biodiversity, beautiful landscapes, world heritage sites and a wide range of ecotourism activities, making it an attractive destination

for international travelers (Leonardi et al., 2022; Maldonado et al., 2018).

Despite the potential of Latin America as an upsurging tourism destination for international travelers, the region remains the fourth-ranked international tourism market, receiving just 5% of international tourist arrivals, compared to top leading markets such as the European Union, North East Asia, and North America (UNWTO, 2020). At the same time, Latin American countries still face various challenges in developing a leading tourism market, caused by the inconsistency of public policies and the lack of a clear destination image and strategies to develop the tourism industry. Latin America, in particular, is still perceived as one of the most corrupt areas in the world (Asmann, 2018), which discourages potential international travelers from visiting the region. The deeply rooted misperceptions of the region continue to undermine the potential and attractiveness of its tourism destinations, leaving it less competitive and more distant than other regions (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo, 2015).

Although Latin American countries have a variety of tourist attractions, few studies have analyzed whether these strengths can enhance and revitalize the region's tourism industry. Various studies have focused on the competitiveness and efficiency of Latin American countries as tourist destinations (Ciaschi et al., 2018; Gómez-Vega & Herrera, 2018; Martínez et al., 2021; Vásquez & Martínez, 2020) and on the sustainability of destinations (Acevedo-Duque et al., 2021; Dossou et al., 2021; Rosado-González et al., 2020). However, few studies have focused on the attributes, activities, affective image, and perceived risks in this region.

Recognizing the importance of tourism and its impact on the region's economy (Ferrari, 2021), Latin America has committed to strengthening tourism promotion and marketing efforts through social media, websites, and advanced digital technologies, resulting in a total contribution of more

than US\$348.7 billion to the region's GDP in 2018 (Bizlatin Hub A, 2019). The market's mixed perception of Latin America's potential as a future tourism destination has drawn considerable attention from researchers as well as industry practitioners. However, few studies have documented how international travelers, in particular, U.S. travelers, perceive Latin America as a future travel destination.

This study explored how potential U.S. travelers think of Latin America as a future travel destination. As an exploratory study, this study selected the top nine tourism destinations in Latin America (Euromonitor International, 2018) instead of examining the entire region of Latin America as a tourism destination. Focusing on U.S. travelers as a key international inbound market to Latin America, this study first aimed to identify U.S. travelers' perceptions toward the nine countries as places to visit in the future, including their perceived destination image attributes, activities they might take part in, and perceived affective image. Second, this study sought to clarify U.S. travelers' perceptual mapping of the nine countries by destination image and activities, reviewing their comparative strengths and weaknesses. Finally, by evaluating each country's unique characteristics and potential barriers as a tourism destination, this study proposed feasible tourism marketing strategies for countries to boost the number of U.S. inbound travelers.

2. Theoretical Framework

Latin America as a Region with Emerging Tourism Destinations

Latin America consists of the entire continent of South America along with Mexico, Central America, and the islands of the Caribbean (Vorontkova, 2019), whose inhabitants speak mainly Spanish,

French, and Portuguese (Euromonitor International, 2018). The entire region has 52 countries and more than 7,000 islands, extending from Mexico to Argentina, whose countries share geographic elements such as the Andes Mountains and the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, depending on their latitude (De Oliveira Santos, 2015). Some countries have similar flora, fauna, weather, and natural beauty, allowing tourists to find similar attractions and leisure activities in different destinations. Due to its rich natural resources and diverse cultural and ecotourism activities, Latin America has been considered a unique tourism destination, different from other continents (Maldonado et al., 2018). Although Latin America is blessed with rich cultural and natural diversity, tourism in the region is far from reaching its full potential. Costa and Bauer (2001) compared ancient civilizations in other regions to those in Latin America and found that Latin America was cleaner and less crowded than the Mediterranean and had ancient relics as old as those found in Europe, including pyramids and temples as massive as the pyramids of Egypt.

In recent years, Latin America has attracted the attention of scholars worldwide (Alonso-Dos Santos et al., 2019; Gómez-Vega & Herrero, 2018; Martínez et al., 2021). Tourism has increased significantly as well, with visitors seeking to experience the region's historic sites, beautiful landscapes, and unique cultures (Vásquez & Martínez, 2020). These tourist attractions have been a key driver for many countries in Latin America, attracting more travelers from the U.S. and China, and growing interest in Latin America could increase the number of travelers and investment funds in the region (Gómez-Vega & Herrero, 2018; World Travel Market, 2017). According to Euromonitor International (2018), more than 50 million people visited Latin America from the U.S. in 2017. Out of 52 Latin American countries, the main destinations of North Americans include Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Costa Rica, Colombia and Panama. According to

the UNWTO (2019), countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia have experienced a continuous increase in the number of arrivals from North America since 2013.

Destination Image and Positioning Research

Destination image is one of the key predictors of tourists' behavioral intentions and decision-making (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Dalimunthe et al., 2019; Karl et al., 2020). Destination image is composed of elements such as "national characteristics, political and economic condition, history and tradition, climate, people and culture" (Shankar, 2018). The most common terms used to define destination image are impression, perception, belief, idea, and representation (Lai and Li, 2016). Destination image refers to the sum of the beliefs, ideas and impressions a person has of a destination (Assaker, 2014; Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) recognized destination image as a subjective interpretation related to the thoughts, emotions and feelings of a country, city or tourist destination held by tourists, which influences tourists' behavior and intention (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021; Woosnam et al., 2020). Therefore, destination image is a key factor in tourism marketing that can predict the intention to travel to a destination in the future (Fjellidal et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019).

In this study, the definition of destination image is adopted from Assaker, (2014) Prayag and Ryan (2011) and Tasci and Gartner (2007). Travelers' perceptions of a destination image are subjective and are influenced by many factors, such as the characteristics and quality of the destination (Pike, 2017). Thus, researchers (i.e., Chi & Qu, 2008; Li et al., 2015; Pike, 2016) have asserted that the main focus of destination image studies was to examine travelers' perceptions toward the destination per se, and after the destination

image had been identified, the destination positioning study was followed by comparative analyses among competing destinations. The destination image study should come first because the positioning study will be heavily dependent upon the results of destination image analysis (Li et al., 2015).

Destination image consists of cognitive, affective, and conative components (Gartner, 1993; Mun et al., 2018; Stylos et al., 2017; Woosnam et al., 2020). Cognitive destination image refers to knowledge and beliefs about a destination that are explained through tangible attributes (Hallmann, Zehrer & Muller, 2015; San Martín & Del Bosque, 2008; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007), and this component includes evaluations of the perceived attributes of the destination regardless of whether the destination had been previously visited (Papadimitriou et al., 2018). The affective destination image is related to emotions and feelings about the destination (Kim et al., 2019b; Yüksel & Akgül, 2007; Styliadis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017). In addition, affective image is related to tourist destination resources (Styliadis et al., 2017), such as landscapes, the environment, accommodations, food, and heritage destinations (Ullah et al., 2022). The conative destination image represents travelers' active consideration as a potential destination to visit (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Prayag, 2009; Veasna, Wu & Huang, 2013; Styliadis, 2020). Woosnam et al. (2020) referred to conative destination image in relation to behavioral intention and outcomes such as revisiting and recommending the destination to others.

In this study, attribute-based cognitive destination images have been adopted to identify travelers' destination image, focusing on the destination's atmosphere, climate, landscape, safety and security, recreational activities, service quality, and cost (Chen & Uysal, 2002). It is important to emphasize that most studies have focused on the positive attributes that shape destination image. However, studies should not overlook negative attributes such as risks because they also shape des-

tainment image (Becken et al., 2017). Sharifpour et al. (2014) classified risks into a) terrorism, b) war and political instability, c) health concerns, d) crime and e) cultural differences. The most common travel-related risks are natural disasters, terrorism, disease, cultural and language difficulties, price gouging, hygiene, political instability, crime, accidents, environmental quality, and safety of drinking water (Caber et al., 2020; Floyd et al., 2004; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006; Richter, 2003).

Attribute-based destination images and risks as travel barriers perceived by tourists are believed to affect their choice of tourism destination (Chi & Qu, 2008). Correia et al. (2007) revealed that tourists' motivations to visit Latin American countries as future travel destinations include nightlife and gastronomy. De Oliveira Santos (2015) found that the motives for visiting Latin American destinations include health treatments, religious tourism, business, and visits to friends and relatives. Costa and Bauer (2001) studied destination images from the perspective of potential Australian travelers to Latin America and found that the most recognizable images were Rio de Janeiro, music, dance, archaeological sites, and nature. The results of their study were inconclusive with regard to Latin America's image as an unsafe, crime-ridden and politically unstable destination.

Mestanza-Ramón et al. (2020) indicated that there are three types of attractions in Latin America, known as the 3 Ss: sun, sand and sea. In addition, the region is well known for exotic cultures and ecotourism (Mexico, Brazil and Costa Rica) and ancient and archaeological ruins (Peru, Guatemala and Mexico). The main tourist attractions in Latin America are divided into three categories: nature, cities and ancient cultures. Iguazu Falls, the Amazon River, the Galapagos Islands, Lake Titicaca, the Andes Mountains, Angel Falls and Chilean lakes are examples of the main natural attractions in Latin America, while Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and Cuzco are examples of the main cities. The main ancient sites include

Machu Picchu, the Nazca lines, Cuzco and Lake Titicaca (Costa & Bauer, 2001; De Oliveira Santos, 2015). Other attractions highlighted in Latin America are wildlife, especially in destinations such as Mexico, Brazil, Belize and Costa Rica (D'Cruze et al., 2018). Regarding the main activities, Pannosso Netto and Godoi Trigo (2015) found participation in carnivals or soccer games in Brazil, sunbathing and beach fun in Mexico, ecotourism in Costa Rica, visits to rural and coffee plantations in Colombia, and visits to wine vineyards in Chile and Argentina. Latin America is also recognized for activities such as visiting World Heritage sites (UNESCO, 2012), participating in traditional festivals, making crafts, and visiting pyramids and ancient ruins (De Oliveira Santos, 2015).

Researchers (e.g., Boo & Busser, 2005; Kim et al., 2019a; Li et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2011) have indicated that people's affective evaluation of a place depends primarily on their knowledge of that place (Boo & Busser, 2005; Kim et al., 2019a) and the relationship between the cognitive and affective components (Li et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2011). Phillips and Jang (2008) found that cognitive image influences affective image but not tourist attitude, while affective image has a direct impact on tourist attitude. Lin et al. (2011) asserted that tourists typically develop their feelings about a destination after cognitively evaluating it. Researchers have also discussed that each destination has its holistic image, capturing people's overall impression of the destination. Akama and Kieti (2003) suggested that each destination's efforts to attract tourists may rely more on its overall image than on any specific image characteristics, resulting in both cognitive and affective images. In addition, Kim et al. (2019b) suggested that tourists who have a greater intention to visit or revisit a tourist destination are those who have a favorable image and high evaluation of the destination, making an overall good impression. Assessment of destination-specific, tangible, and cognitive attributes would provide marketers with cle-

arer diagnostic and specific guidelines for promoting destinations in a competitive manner (Echtner & Richie, 1993; Papadimitriou et al., 2013; Tasci, 2011). Therefore, in this study, based on cognition-based destination image analysis, U.S. travelers' perceptions of nine Latin American countries were evaluated, and a perceptual map was developed according to their cognitive destination image attributes and activities.

Researchers (i.e., Kim et al., 2005; Li et al., 2015; Lin & Zins, 2016; Pezenka, 2017) have conducted a comprehensive review of destination image and positioning studies, summarizing various attributes, activities, and analytic techniques. Attributes and activities are the key attractions of a destination and tourists' main destination selection criteria for their future travel. As indicated in the study of Ritchie and Crouch (2003), the variety of attributes and activities available in the destination provide the destination with a competitive advantage over other destinations and are a major driver for future demand. Adopting the key destination image and positioning analysis mentioned above, this study created a perceptual map to visually capture tourists' mental configurations of the destinations under investigation. Multidimensional correspondence analysis (MCA), correspondence analysis (CA) (Chen & Uysal, 2002; Gursoy et al., 2005) and/or multidimensional scaling (MDS) (i.e., Uysal, Chen, & Williams, 2000) have been the most frequently used statistical methods to draw a perceptual map. In particular, CA and/or MCA techniques are prominent in the destination positioning literature since both techniques can develop a spatial map where the perceived relationships of individual destinations on multiple attributes (Kim, Chun, & Petrick, 2005; Pike, 2016) and sociodemographics (Kim et al., 2005) are illustrated. More importantly, using these techniques, this study can visualize how the nine destinations are similar to or different from one another on destination attributes and how they can be positioned in U.S. travelers' minds.

3. Methodology

Study Design and Sampling

As an exploratory study, this study chose potential travelers from the United States (U.S.) as they are considered the main international inbound travelers to Latin America (UNWTO, 2019; Voronkova, 2019). An online self-administered survey on Qualtrics was employed to examine U.S. travelers' perceived image of nine Latin American countries as their future leisure travel destination before the pandemic. Those who wanted to visit Latin America before and were at least 18 years old were selected as the study sample. To recruit potential respondents, a database marketing company, Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), was contacted to recruit potential Americans who wanted to visit Latin America in the near future for the pilot test as well as the main study. The pilot test was conducted to ensure the clarity of the wording and the content validity of the questions. After the survey instrument was modified and revised, the main study was conducted. According to Casler et al. (2013), Amazon MTurk panels are more diverse in terms of their sociodemographics and ethnicity compared to a traditional survey with the convenience sample. Furthermore, the results across the different samples (i.e., face-to-face, MTurk, and social media) were almost equivalent, indicating that the data quality using MTurk is valid.

The online survey questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section asked the respondents' sociodemographic questions, including gender, age, income, education, marital status, ethnicity, and travel information search media. Additionally, respondents were asked to choose one out of the nine countries that they had never visited before but wanted to visit the most in the near future. The destination image attributes and activities were asked about in the second section to evaluate how important each variable was for a respondent to choose the destination country.

The last section asked questions related to the chosen destination's affective image and the participants' perceived risks regarding travel to the chosen country. All destination image attributes, activities, and overall affective image items were adopted from previous studies to ensure measurement validity and reliability as well as readability (Kim et al., 2005; Li et al., 2015; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003); the items were then modified after a preliminary survey with 20 potential American travelers to Latin America and reviews performed by five researchers whose expertise was in destination image and positioning were completed.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 28 destination image attributes, 12 activities, and 12 potential risks related to their chosen destination country for their leisure trip. These items were extracted and modified from previous research (Kim et al., 2005; Li et al., 2015; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) specialized in positioning studies for tourism destinations on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=not at all important to 5=extremely important (Chen & Uysal, 2002). This scale was selected because it was quicker and easier for respondents to understand (Dawes, 2008) and because the survey was long and had more than 80 questions. The overall affective image of the destination was asked with nine semantic differential scale items (see Figure 1).

Statistical Analysis Techniques

This study applied two statistical techniques by using IBM SPSS statistics 25. Multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was used to identify the interspatial distance among items of destination image attributes and activities of the nine Latin American countries, and correspondence analysis (CA) was used to identify the proximity between the nine destination countries and five demographic items (age, education level, marital status, income, and ethnicity). We developed a scatter-

plot that facilitates the interpretation of the results of MCA and CA. Data matrices were created for each construct by the respondents' ratings of destination image attributes and activities. Both MCA and CA were used to measure the expected performance of the nine countries on destination image attributes and activities.

MCA quantifies nominal data or categories through the assignment of numerical values, and these homogeneous groups allow us to find patterns and to classify segment objects with similar characteristics, which can also be seen as a generalization of principal component analysis when the variables to be analyzed are categorical instead of quantitative (Abdi & Valentin, 2007). CA transforms a data table into two sets of factor scores: one set for the rows and the other set for the columns. The factor scores give the best representation of the similarity structure of the rows and the columns of the original data table. The factor scores can be plotted as maps, displaying the key information of the original table. In CA, the factor scores of rows and columns have the same variance, and therefore, both rows and columns can be conveniently represented in a single map (Abdi & Williams, 2020).

4. Results

A total of 1,175 responses were collected, but 243 responses were eliminated because of incompleteness and incorrect responses to one of five attention check items. Therefore, this study had 932 responses for data analysis. Table 1 summarizes the respondents' sociodemographic profile. More than half (53.4%) of the respondents were female. More than two-thirds of the respondents (67.4%) were Millennials, followed by Generation X (19%). Three-quarters of respondents (75%) hold an associate's degree or higher. Travel blogs were the respondents' major source of travel information se-

arch (62%), followed by the country's official tourism website (55%) and online portal sites (47%). Among the 52 countries in Latin America, the nine most touristic countries in this region were included in the survey to examine which country the respondents wanted to visit most and what attributes were important for them in choosing the country for their leisure trip. The nine countries were Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, and Peru (Euromonitor International, 2018). Approximately 66% of the respondents had visited at least one of the nine countries before. Out of the nine countries, more than half of respondents had previously visited Mexico (53.6%), followed by Costa Rica (19%), the Dominican Republic (18%), Panama (11.4%), and Brazil (10%). Among these countries, 25% of the respondents wanted to visit Costa Rica the most, followed by Brazil (18%), Peru (12%), Argentina (9%), the Dominican Republic (6%), Mexico (6%), Chile (6%), Colombia (4%), and Panama (4%).

Out of the 28 destination image attributes, the five most important attributes for the respondents to choose a country were 'personal safety/security' (4.62 out of 5), 'good value for my travel money' (4.49), 'a variety of things to do and places to see' (4.43), 'hospitable and friendly people' (4.38), and 'restful and relaxing place to visit' (4.33). Attributes such as 'locals' understanding and speaking English' (3.30), 'traditional arts and crafts' (3.36), 'special festival events' (3.41), 'attractions that are close together' (3.47), and 'varied gastronomy' (3.48) were the least important attributes. Twelve perceived risks that respondents were concerned about regarding to traveling to Latin America included 'rip-off prices' (3.45 out of 5), 'crime' (3.42), 'unsafe and insecure places' (3.39), and 'safety of drinking water' (3.27). In general, the respondents had fun (4.58 out of 5), pleasant (4.52), good (4.48), exciting (4.45), and exotic (4.33) affective images toward Latin American countries as future tourism destinations.

Table 1 | Respondents' Sociodemographic Profile

Variables		%
Gender	Male	46,60
	Female	53,40
Age	Generation Z	7,80
	Generation Y	67,40
	Generation X	19,00
	Baby Boomers	5,80
Education Level	High School	20,50
	Associate degree	15,90
	Bachelor degree	41,60
	Master's degree	14,50
	Doctoral degree	3,30
Marital Status	Others	4,20
	Single	37,90
	Married with children	30,90
	Not married but living with partner	15,80
	Married with no children	10,40
	Divorced	4,60
Household Income	Others	0,40
	Less than US \$35,000	23,90
	US\$ 35,000 - US\$ 59,999	30,30
	US\$ 60,000 - US\$ 84,999	19,80
	US\$ 85,000 - US\$ 99,999	8,90
	US\$ 100,000 - US\$ 125,000	9,80
	More than US\$ 125,000	7,30
Ethnicity	White	75,90
	African American	10,10
	Asian	7,00
	Spanish	6,20
	American Indian or Alaska Native	1,00
Preferred country to visit	Costa Rica	24,79
	Brazil	17,70
	Peru	12,02
	Argentina	8,91
	Dominican Republic	7,51
	Mexico	5,90
	Chile	5,58
	Colombia	3,86
	Panama	3,54

Source: Own elaboration

The results of MCA, identifying relationships between the nine countries and 28 destination image attributes and 12 destination activities, are shown in Figures 1 and 2. Approximately 71.1% of the total inertia of the destination image attributes was explained with two dimensions. It seems that the respondents have attribute-specific positions in the nine countries. For instance, as shown in Figure 1, countries such as Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico were closely plotted and shared similar destination image attributes (i.e., 19. Special festival events, 21. Favorable currency exchange rate, and 23. Good prices for shopping), while the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Costa Rica were close together, sharing similar attributes (i.e., 10. Ease of getting to the country, 26. Restful and

relaxing place to visit, and 27. Cleanliness and sanitation). The last cluster included countries such as Peru, Argentina, and Chile, which shared similar attributes (i.e., 7. Large number of nature reserves and wilderness areas, 17. Places of historical and cultural interest, and 28. Political stability). As Kim et al. (2005) indicated, countries in the same cluster enjoyed similar destination image attributes but were likely to be competitors in a marketplace. Thus, from the respondents' perspectives, the nine countries can be grouped into three

clusters by their perceived destination image attributes. If the U.S. travelers wanted to travel to a country in Latin America with the following destination attributes—'ease of getting to the country,' 'restful and relaxing place to visit,' 'good customer service,' or 'cleanliness and sanitation,' then they would visit one of three countries, including the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Costa Rica. Therefore, these three countries would be competitors to attract U.S. travelers who had the similar travel interests mentioned above.

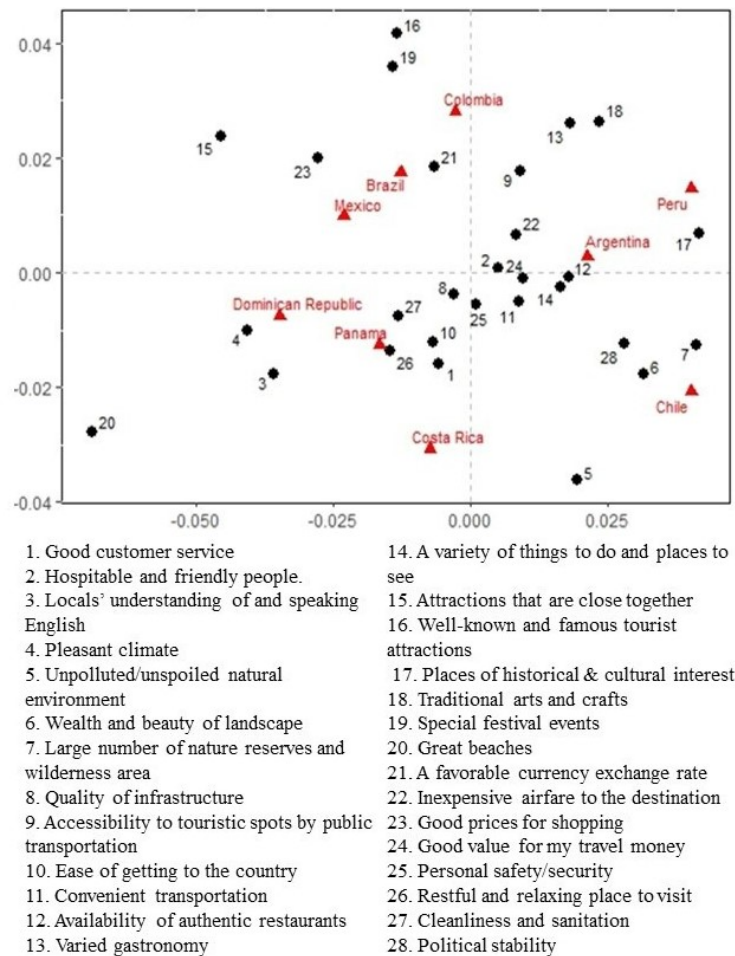


Figure 1 | CA-based joint plot of the nine countries' destination image perceptions

With regard to the relationships between 12 activities, approximately 84.16% of the inertia of destination activities was explained with two dimensions. The nine countries could be grouped by

three groups based on the activities that the respondents wanted to take part in when traveling to their select country. Five countries (Panama, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina) in Cluster

1 appeared to offer similar activities by the respondents, such as 'going to a concert/play/musical', 'going to special festival events', 'shopping', and 'visiting amusement/theme parks.' Cluster 2 included Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, where the respondents wanted to participate in 'going

to the beach & sunbathing', 'taking a cruise', and 'outdoor recreational activities.' Chile and Peru, in Cluster 3, shared similar activities, including 'visiting natural wonders', 'visiting historical/cultural heritage sites', and 'visiting small towns/countryside'.

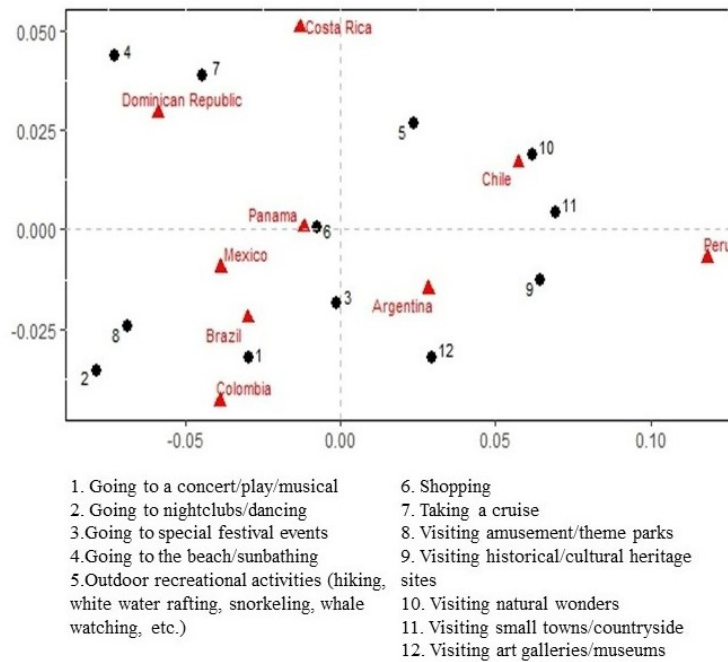


Figure 2 | CA-based joint plot of destination activities

The results of the MCA-based joint plots enabled the researchers to develop a list of strengths and weaknesses of the nine countries in regards to destination attributes and activities from the perspectives of respondents when selecting the country for their leisure trip to Latin America (see Table 2).

The results of the CA depict graphic information regarding the relationships between the nine countries and demographic variables in a two-dimensional solution. Five demographic variables

were used for CA, including age, education, marital status, income, and ethnicity. The nine destination countries were significantly associated with only three demographic variables: education ($\chi^2 = 47,436$, $df = 24$, $p < .001$; 94% of inertia), marital status ($\chi^2 = 38,917$, $df = 24$, $p < .05$; 91% of inertia), and ethnicity ($\chi^2 = 48,026$, $df = 32$, $p < .05$; 83% of inertia). The joint plots of three demographic variables and the nine destination countries are shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5.

Table 2 | Key strengths and weaknesses of each country by activities and attributes

Country	Attributes		Activities	
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Strengths	Weaknesses
Argentina	12. Availability of authentic restaurants	15. Attractions that are close together	3. Going to special festival events	4. Going to the beach & sunbathing
	14. A variety of things to do and places to see		12. Visiting art galleries & museum	
	24. Good value for my travel money			
Brazil	21. A favorable currency exchange rate	5. Unpolluted & unspoiled natural environment	1. Going to a concert, play, & musical	4. Going to the beach & sunbathing
	23. Good prices for shopping		3. Going to special festival events	
Chile	6. Wealth and beauty of landscape	15. Attractions that are close together	10. Visiting natural wonders	2. Going to nightclubs & dancing
	7. Large number of nature reserves and wilderness area		11. Visiting small towns & countryside	
Colombia	13. Varied gastronomy	5. Unpolluted & unspoiled natural environment	1. Going to a concert, play, & musical	10. Visiting natural wonders
	19. Special festival events			
	21. A favorable currency exchange rate			
Costa Rica	1. Good customer services	16. Well-known and famous tourist attractions	5. Outdoor recreational activities	1. Going to a concert, play, & musical
	5. Unpolluted & unspoiled natural environment		7. Taking a cruise	
Dominican Republic	3. Locals' understanding of and speaking English	16. Well-known and famous tourist attractions	4. Going to the beach & sunbathing	9. Visiting historical & cultural heritage sites
	4. Pleasant climate		7. Taking a cruise	
Mexico	21. A favorable currency exchange rate	5. Unpolluted & unspoiled natural environment	3. Going to special festival events	10. Visiting natural wonders
	23. Good prices for shopping		6. Shopping	
Panama	1. Good customer services	7. Large number of nature reserves and wilderness area	3. Going to special festival events	2. Going to nightclubs & dancing
	10. Ease of getting to the country		6. Shopping	
	26. Restful and relaxing place to visit			
	27. Cleanliness and sanitation			

Source: Own elaboration

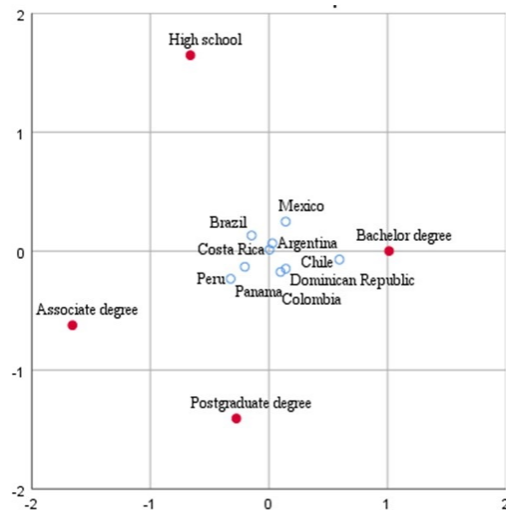


Figure 3 | CA-based joint plot of education level and the nine destination countries

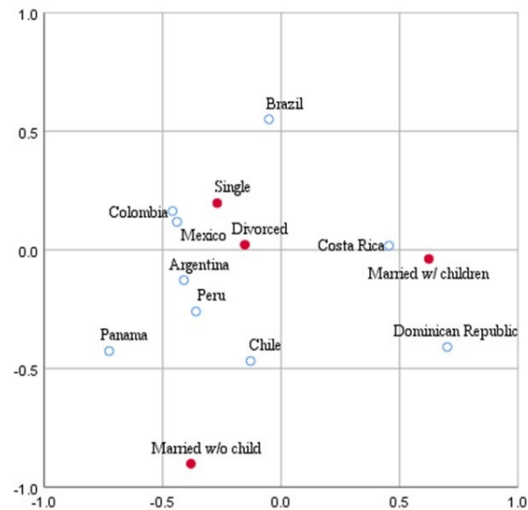


Figure 4 | CA-based joint plot of marital status and the nine destination countries

With regard to the explained proportion of inertia of CA between the nine destinations and education level, 94% of inertia was explained by two dimensions, with 67.2% of the variance accounted for by dimension 1 and 26.9% of the variance explained by dimension 2. The joint plot of the

nine destination countries and the education level (Figure 3) indicates that the respondents who wanted to visit all nine touristic countries held a bachelor's degree, which means that most college graduates in the U.S. wanted to visit key tourism destinations in Latin America. The two dimensi-

ons in the CA between the nine destinations and marital status accounted for 91%, with 66.4% of the variance accounted for by the first dimension and 24.6% of the variance accounted for by the second dimension. The joint plot of the nine destinations and marital status shows that the respondents who were married with children wanted to visit Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, while respondents who lived by themselves (i.e., single or divorced) preferred to visit Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Argentina, and Peru (see Figure 4). Figure 5 indicates the results of the CA between the nine destinations and respondents' ethnicity. The two-dimensional solution accounted for 82.7% of the variance, with 51.2% of the variance accounted for by the first dimension and 31.5% of the variance accounted for by the second dimension. In general, white respondents could be a key market for the nine countries. Additionally, respondents with Spanish ethnic backgrounds wanted to visit Panama, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Peru.

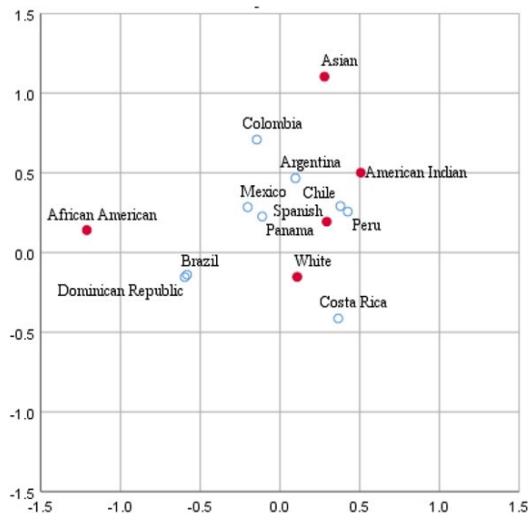


Figure 5 | CA-based joint plot of ethnicity and the nine destination countries

5. Conclusion

Exploring Latin America as a potential tourism destination for U.S. travelers, this study examined

their perceptions of nine selected countries with respect to destination attributes, activities, affective image, and perceived risks. In general, Latin America was perceived by U.S. travelers as a tourism destination was a fun, pleasant, exciting, and exotic place to visit. The respondents hoped that Latin America would be a safe and secure place, offer a good value for their travel money, provide a variety of things to do, be a place to meet hospitable and friendly people, and offer restful and relaxing places. On the other hand, Latin America continues to be perceived as a risky place to visit with regard to issues related to crime, security, and safety. The findings of the present study are somewhat comparable to those of Costa and Bauer (2001) on travelers' perceptions of Latin America. Due to the lack of studies on the assessment of perceived risks in Latin America, this study added travelers' perception of risk to Latin America as a potential barrier affecting destination selection.

The findings of this study provide the nine countries with potential tourism marketing strategies to attract more U.S. leisure travelers to each country. As mentioned above, the most important features that the U.S. travelers consider when thinking of Latin America as a future tourism destination include 'personal safety/security,' 'good value for my travel money,' 'a variety of things to do and places to see,' 'hospitable and friendly people,' and 'restful and relaxing place to visit.' Latin America should use these attributes for its promotional campaigns and strive to deliver these messages to the potential U.S. market. By examining U.S. travelers' perceived image of each country, each country's tourism bureau and tourism organizations can review their positioning strategies of the U.S. market.

The results of MCA reveal that the nine Latin American countries can be grouped into three clusters in relation to destination attributes and activities, although the composition of countries in each cluster are slightly different between destination attributes and activities. However, countries

in Cluster 1 (i.e., Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia), in Cluster 2 (i.e., Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic), and in Cluster 3 (i.e., Chile and Peru) fell into the same clusters in both destination attributes and activities, which implies that from the perspectives of U.S. travelers, these countries seem to be direct competitors because they offer similar destination attributes and activities to attract the U.S. outbound market (Kim et al., 2005).

Considering both destination attributes and activities, U.S. travelers wanted to visit Mexico, Brazil, or Colombia because they have 'special festival events,' 'a favorable currency exchange rate,' and 'good prices for shopping', and they also offer opportunities to participate in 'going to a concert/play/musical' and 'going to special festival events.' Previous research (Mestanza-Ramón et al., 2020) showed that Mexico and Brazil share common attributes, which reinforces the finding of the current investigation because U.S. potential travelers in this study perceived similar attributes in these countries. On the other hand, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic are tourism destinations that the U.S. travelers want to visit to enjoy a 'pleasant climate,' 'restful and relaxing places,' and 'clean and sanitary places.' U.S. travelers also wanted to visit these two countries because they expected to 'go to the beach/sunbathing,' to 'participate in outdoor recreational activities,' and to 'take a cruise'. Previous research (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo, 2015) found that Costa Rica is recognized as an ecotourism destination that can provide travelers with a clean environment for relaxation. The countries in the last cluster, Peru and Chile, are feasible tourism destinations because they have 'large number of nature reserves and wilderness areas,' 'places of historical & cultural interest,' and 'wealth and beauty of landscape,' and at the same time, U.S. travelers can have opportunities to 'visit historical cultural heritage sites,' 'natural wonders,' and 'small towns/countryside.' In the studies by Costa and Bauer (2001) and De Oliveira Santos (2015), Peru is well recognized as

a place for ancient and archaeological ruins and sites such as Machu Picchu, the Nazca lines, Cuzco, and Lake Titicaca.

The results of CA indicate the key demographic profile of U.S. travelers who were interested in visiting the nine Latin American countries. In general, the nine tourism destination markets are differentiated by U.S. travelers with regard to their education level, marital status, and ethnicity. U.S. travelers holding a bachelor's degree preferred to visit the nine countries to a greater extent than respondents in the other educational categories. However, U.S. travelers' marital status can affect their choice of countries for their leisure trip. Those who are single or divorced wanted to visit Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Panama, and Chile, while those who are married with children wanted to visit both Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. White, Spanish, and American Indians preferred to visit all nine countries compared to other ethnic groups, such as Asians and African Americans. In summary, the overall characteristics of U.S. outbound market to the nine countries in Latin America would be those who hold bachelor's degree, are single and/or divorced, and white and/or Spanish.

Adopting key statistical techniques (MCA and CA) used in destination image and positioning by focusing on destination attributes and activities (i.e., Kim et al., 2005; Li et al., 2015), this study, for the first time, comparatively analyzed U.S. travelers' perceived destination image toward nine tourism destinations in Latin America. To visualize perceptual mappings of destination attributes and activities with the nine countries, MCA was used to cluster countries and identify their similarities and differences. As Kim et al. (2005) did in their study, CA was employed to identify U.S. travelers' preferred country by their demographic characteristics. Identifying the top three countries preferred by U.S. travelers, this study determined each country's key competitive advantages in this highly competitive tourism market to

draw the U.S. outbound market. This study considered Latin America as a tourism destination, but not all countries in this region are ready to cater to international travelers due to their economic, social, political, and/or other issues. The nine popular but somewhat adjacent countries were selected and evaluated to identify their image as perceived by U.S. travelers, who are the leading inbound market to Latin America. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to attempt to identify U.S. travelers' perceptions toward Latin America as a future tourism destination.

The findings of this study offer practical insights for destination tourism organizations in Latin America, more specifically, the nine countries investigated in this study. First, clustering the nine countries into three groups reveals that countries in each cluster can be direct competitors in seeking to attract the U.S. outbound market, so that each country should develop and refine customer-focused destination attributes and activities to differentiate it from its competitors. Reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of each country, as listed in Table 2, shows that each country's tourism marketing organizations must revisit their U.S. marketing strategies for further enhancement and determine whether there are any untapped opportunities. Since Costa Rica is the most preferred country by the respondents, its competitors can take a careful look at its strengths and weaknesses for their comparable marketing efforts for the U.S. market. The results of CA can offer each country the opportunity to develop its own target U.S. market as well.

Given that the results of this study show that U.S. travelers perceived some Latin American destinations as unsafe and dangerous, the authors suggest that each country should use a persuasive marketing strategy through social media to change or improve travelers' perceptions of the destination (i.e., Correia et al., 2007). Additionally, destination governments and marketing managers should adopt communication and marke-

ting strategies that help mitigate negative perceptions from travelers. These strategies can motivate travelers to visit Latin America and change their perceptions of the destination so that they can enjoy their trip to Latin America (Sousa et al., 2021). In addition, the nine Latin American countries that share similar characteristics and are mapped into the same cluster can use five types of events as a mechanism to attract international tourists: nature, gastronomy, religion, theater, and music (Folgado-Fernandez, 2021; De Oliveira Santos, 2015).

COVID-19 has negatively affected the tourism industry due to forced quarantines and border closures, and when borders and airports reopen, people start traveling again to find tourism activities focused on nature and ecotourism. For this reason, this study is relevant in that Latin America offers this type of tourist attraction and thus represents an attractive destination for travelers from the United States and other nationalities.

Although this study attempted to identify U.S. travelers' perceptions of countries in Latin America as their future tourism destinations before the pandemic, the findings of this study cannot be generalized due to the use of a convenience sample, which was confined to the U.S. outbound market. Future studies should include more diverse groups of international travelers to Latin America, such as Europeans and Asians, to understand each market's perceptions toward this region, which can be used for developing relevant marketing strategies. Other studies can be conducted to understand the changing needs and requirements of international tourists in the postpandemic era. To capture the overall perceptions of U.S. travelers toward Latin America as their tourism destination, future research should compare the perceptions of visitors and nonvisitors so that each country can develop more overarching marketing concepts as well as strategies to cater to these markets. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to identify how the perceptions of the U.S. outbound market toward Latin

America as a tourism destination can be changed, informing destination attributes and activities. Future research should extend its scope to include technological attributes of the destination to capture more extensive destination images.

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