

## **The Importance of Destination Image in Tourists’ Destination Choice: The Case of Kyrgyzstan**

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### **Abstract**

The destination image is one of the most important factors affecting the destination choice of tourists. Identifying which factors influence the tourist decision-making process is a complex task that requires an analytical approach. Decisions are taken according to objective or subjective methods. However, no matter which method is used, making decision with single criterion may negatively affect the success of the decision. Therefore, it would be more feasible to use multiple criteria on decision-making process. For this reason, many different methods are being developed for decision-making process day by day. The AHP is one of them. AHP allows choosing the best alternative with using multiple criteria. With its natural beauties and unspoiled nature, Kyrgyzstan has an important potential in the world tourism market. Tourism statistics about Kyrgyzstan shows that Kyrgyzstan cannot use its potential effectively. In this research the destination image of Kyrgyzstan has been examined with the data obtained from different stakeholders of tourism sector. “Super Decisions” software was used to analyze the data. Within the scope of the research, 6 regions of Kyrgyzstan and 7 criteria belonging to these regions were evaluated. As a result of the evaluation, it has been determined that natural beauties, historical values, and cultural riches become prominent on the image of the country.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Image, Destination, Decision Making, Kyrgyzstan

## **1. Introduction**

The advantages of tourism such as its dynamic structure, increasing the welfare level of the society, changing the environmental conditions, and the multiplier coefficient over other sectors have made the tourism industry a priority sector for the country's economy. Kyrgyzstan's history, cultural richness, natural beauties, and hospitality of the residents provide significant potential for the tourism sector. However, these factors alone are never enough. Destination image also has a significant impact on tourists' preferences.

Natural resources (Cheng and Lu, 2012) and price level (Echtner and Bitchie, 1993) are important factors in the formation of the destination image. According to Tinsley and Lynch (2001), perceptions about destinations are also shaped by services such as accommodation, transportation, and infrastructure. In addition, cultural activities such as museums, festivals, handicrafts, and artificial attractions such as theme parks increase the likelihood of destinations being remembered (Köroğlu and Güzel, 2013).

The aim of this study is to determine the factors that affect the destination preferences of tourists who visit Kyrgyzstan for different purposes. The AHP (Analytical Hierarchy Process) method, which is one of the multiple criteria decision-making techniques developed by Thomas L. Saaty, was used in the research. The AHP method helps to make the most effective decision through criteria among many alternatives to achieve a goal. AHP facilitates the solution of the most complex problems for decision makers (Saaty and Wind, 1980). The purpose of this study is not only to identify the most influential factors influencing visitors' decisions, but also to raise awareness through the findings and to draw more attention to these factors or areas in the tourism industry.

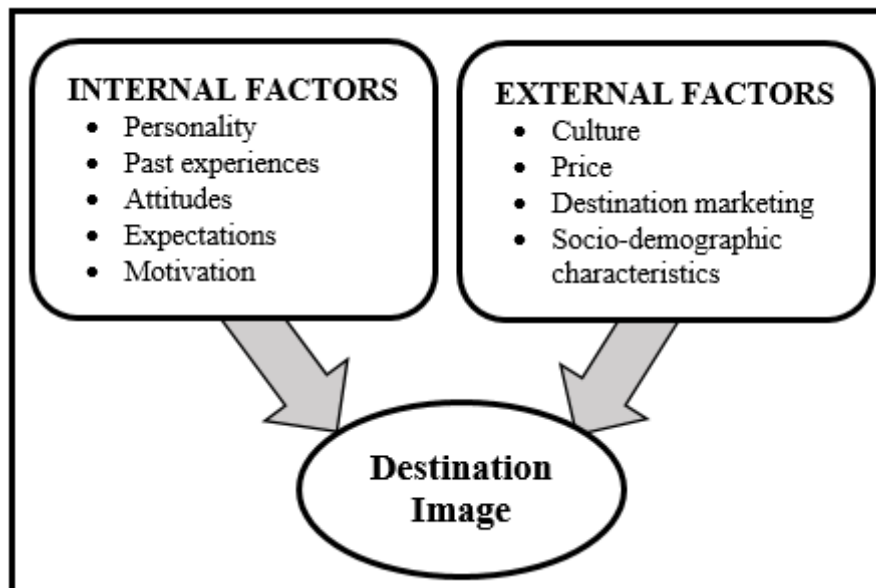
## **2. Destination and Destination Image**

According to Buhalis (2000: 97) the destination is; It is a combination of tourism products that offer consumers an integrated experience. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2007) defines the concept of destination as a physical place where a tourist spends at least one overnight stay. Destination image is the expression of all information, impressions, prejudices, and emotional thoughts that a person or group has about a particular place (Özdemir, 2008). Coltman (1989) defines the destination, as places with different natural attractions and features that will be considered attractive to tourists.

Destination image, which is one of the most discussed issues in the tourism sector (Echtner and Bitchie, 1993), is considered as a combination of internal and external factors (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Internal factors are formed by being influenced by the personality, attitudes, expectations, and past experiences of tourists. External factors, on the other hand, are formed by the combination of socio-economic factors such as culture, price and marketing and consider

as incentive factors. Haarhoff (2018) explains the factors affecting the destination image with the figure below.

*Figure 1. Elements of Destination Image*



*Source: (Haarhoff, 2008; 3)*

The factors that determine the image of the destination may also arise from the destination and tourist origin. Destination based factors; cultural characteristics, price conditions, marketing activities and demographic structure of the local people. Tourist-based factors are; personality traits, experiences, expectations, and motivation.

Regardless of how or why individuals participating in tourism activities, there are some factors that they pay attention to when choosing a destination. Elements consisting of topics such as (1) Accommodation, (2) Accessibility, (3) Activities, (4) Amenities, (5) Attractions, which are also referred to as 5A in the tourism literature are accepted as the necessary conditions for the success of destinations (Ramesh & Muralidhar, 2019).

*1. Accommodation:* It is important that destinations offer different types of accommodation to traveling for various purposes. Accommodation service significantly affects both the attractiveness of destinations and the characteristics and quantity of visitors.

*2. Accessibility:* The suitability of any destination for tourists is related to accessible to the country, region and various attractions. Accessibility doesn't mean only first-class transport service or public transport service. Accessibility refers to infrastructure and transportation technologies related to accessibility to desired places. In addition, the hiking and cycling track in the destination can also be considered in this category.

3. *Activities*: Visitors do not only benefit from accommodation, food and beverage and health services at destinations. At the same time, they want to do shopping, benefit from sports facilities, visit places with historical and architectural features, participate in nature walks and yacht tours. Such activities also help tourists to enjoy the destination and increase their satisfaction.

4. *Amenities*: Tourists may choose certain destinations for the sake of things they can do or try, albeit rarely. Therefore, destinations are designed according to the needs and expectations of potential visitors. In destinations, services that will provide a good and comfortable time for tourists should be provided.

5. *Attractions*: Attractions in destinations; it consists of natural beauties, social and cultural activities, entertainment services, historical riches, adventure, sports, and health opportunities. Tourists participating in such attractions increase the enjoyment of the destination and the duration of their stay.

These components are necessary to attract visitors and encourage them to visit again. These elements, which are described as the 5A of tourism, also increase the loyalty of visitors to a touristic destination.

Because touristic experiences are complex and intangible, it is not easy to shape visitors' perceptions of quality or value. It is also very difficult to understand the role of the destination in providing such experiences. Therefore, it is important to try to understand the connections between a destination's product mix and visitors' perceptions of quality and value. Because understanding such connections helps destinations gain competitive advantage in a highly competitive environment and facilitates the determination of future visit patterns. (Murphy et al., 2000).

### **3. Kyrgyzstan's Tourism Potential**

A large part of Kyrgyzstan is covered with mountains and 40% of its geography has an altitude of more than 3000 meters. Due to this feature, 1923 lakes and 3500 rivers of various sizes are very suitable for alternative tourism activities such as rafting, mountain, hunting, skiing and adventure (Tayfun et al., 2020). In addition, its unspoiled nature, unique rock formations, desert formations in some areas, valleys and high plateaus offer important advantages for different activities. Not only with its mountainous structure, Kyrgyzstan, but also with its fertile valleys, high-flowing rivers, deep blue waters and approximately 320 km long sandy beach, Issyk Lake is an occasion for many tourists to come to the country for holiday purposes. In addition, due to its historical and geographical structure, being home to many civilizations, lifestyle, eating and drinking habits, handicrafts, music, dance etc. makes the country a separate center of attraction. World's longest epic poem and epic, the Epic of Manas, petroglyphs and various

artifacts that help to obtain important information about the history of Central Asia are considered as touristic products (Akgöz et al. 2018; Akgöz and Korkmaz, 2020).

Kyrgyzstan consists of seven different regions. Each region has its own touristic value. Kyrgyzstan has many tourist attractions for tourists with its historical richness, cultural diversity, and natural beauties. Issyk Lake in terms of holiday and rest; Sarı Çelek in terms of eco-tourism; Karakol in terms of winter and ski tourism; are important destinations. Which is among the largest walnut forests in the world and where the Arslanbap tomb is located, Celal-Abad, also has important thermal facilities for health tourism.

With the opening of important facilities and the development of trade in recent years, Bishkek has become the center of congress and business tourism. Kyrgyzstan, which has rivers, lakes, mountains and untouched natural areas, which causes it to be called the Switzerland of Central Asia, also embodies the riches of winter and ski tourism with its mountains covered with snow most of the year. In addition, authentic accommodation, horse safari, many local foods and beverages such as kumiss, eagle show and horse safari in Bozüy (Bristle Tent) away from technological tools offer tourists the best examples of nomadic culture (Palmer, 2007; Yeşiltaş, 2009; Erdem et al., 2015).

There are more than 5000 archaeological and historical structures in Kyrgyzstan, whose history dates back to ancient times. B.C. Pictorial stones known as Petroglyphs, which were carved into rocks in 2000-3000 BC, are also known as Saymaluu-Taş in Kyrgyzstan. Saymaluu-Taş, also called Kyrgyz patterned stone, is also the name of a canyon with thousands of hieroglyphs at an altitude of 3000-3200 meters in the Fergana valley (Akgöz et al., 2018). The most important monument in terms of historical and cultural tourism in Kyrgyzstan is the Burana Tower from the Karakhanid period. The area, where the city ruins of Balasagun are located, was organized as the "Burana Open Air Museum" (Törökän Uulu, 2015). In addition, the "Taş-Rabat Caravanserai", the only building in Central Asia that was made of cut stone at the beginning of the 11th century and has survived until today, is an important value of Kyrgyzstan tourism (Akgöz and Korkmaz, 2020). The Tomb of Süleyman Sheikh, located on Süleyman Hill in Osh (Osh), one of the oldest settlements in Asia and the second largest city of Kyrgyzstan, has helped the region to become an important religious tourism center.

Located in Karakol, one of the important settlements in the northeast of Kyrgyzstan, the Dungan Mosque, which was made of wood without the use of a single nail, and the Christian Church, which was built in 1871, are the touristic assets that can be seen at the foot of the Balballar, Issyk Lake, Talas, Bishkek and Tanrı Mountains, which are carved on stones and symbolize Turkish warriors. The historical and cultural riches found in the regions where the historical Silk Road passes create an important tourism potential for Kyrgyzstan. The Epic of Manas, which is read by "Manasçı" at special events in Kyrgyzstan, is one of the values that tourists show the most interest. In addition to this, the Nevruz holiday, which symbolizes the exit of the

Turks from Ergenekon; Üylönü Toy (Wedding) marriage ceremony, which was organized according to the pre-Islamic religious beliefs and customs of the Kyrgyz; Cradle Toy, which is a ceremony to put children in cradles; World Nomad Games where traditional sports games (archery, horse games, wrestling, hunting, etc.) are exhibited; Different types of tourism such as gliding, cycling, horse riding, trekking, rafting, skiing and mountaineering add a special value to Kyrgyzstan. Apart from these, Ala Archa National Park, located in the south of Bishkek, is also very suitable for activities such as mountain hiking, mountain biking, nature tourism and rafting. With their natural beauty such as caves and valleys in the Narın region in the southeast of Kyrgyzstan, the tectonic lakes in the region, Çatır-Lake and Son Lake, make the country a separate attraction center in terms of tourism. In addition, Aygül Rose flower, an endemic plant that grows only in Afghanistan and Batken, and the healing water and thermal riches in Batken add a special value to the region (Kulnazarova, 2010; Akgöz et al., 2018; Akgöz and Korkmaz, 2020).

#### 4. AHP Model

In every phase of life, we have to make many decisions, consciously or unconsciously, almost every day. In order to make effective decisions, it is necessary to have various information about the relevant people, objects and events. An intuitive evaluation of the information obtained may be insufficient. Effective decision is only possible by evaluating the many criteria and sub-criteria used to rank the alternatives of a decision. Thanks to the developing technologies, many applications have been developed that help to choose the right one among both alternatives and criteria. One of them, AHP (Analytic Hierarchy Process), helps decision makers to take the most appropriate decision in line with their purpose. AHP, which allows the use of quantitative and qualitative data in effective decision making, was first put forward by Myers and Alpet in 1968, and was developed and used by Saaty in 1977. Thomas Saaty, a mathematician, developed it in the US Department of Defense in order to plan the contingency and increase the welfare of the society (Saaty, 2008: 84).

Making the right decision using intangible factors may not be as effective as decisions made using tangible factors. Because the basis of science is mathematics, naturally numbers and measurements. What an individual has from minus infinity to plus infinity is evaluated using mathematical models. However, today, how the measurement is made has gained importance rather than the measured factors. Therefore, knowing how to evaluate the factors is of great importance for the effectiveness of the decisions to be taken. The AHP method helps to make the most effective decision among the alternatives with using both Ms. Excel and “*Super Decisions*” programs. In order to make the right decision, the following steps should be followed.

1. Defining the problem and determining the type of information required.
2. Constructing the main and sub-criteria to assist the decision hierarchy.
3. Creation of the comparative decision matrix.
4. Choosing the right one among the available alternatives according to the determined criteria (Saaty, 2008:85).

Compliance analysis is performed after the above-mentioned procedures. The AHP technique facilitates decision making on complex issues with multiple criteria. Evaluations are made with the data obtained through a questionnaire prepared according to the 1-9 scale developed by Saaty. The importance levels of the criteria used in the scale are given in the table below (Önder and Önder, 2016).

*Table 1: Importance Levels of Criteria*

<b>Importance Level</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
1	Equally important	Equal preference of two factors
3	Very little important	Slightly preferring one activity over another
5	Strongly important	Preference for one activity over the other
7	Very strongly important	Strong preference for one activity over another
9	Absolutely important	Highest preference for one activity over another
2,4,6,8	Intermediate values	1-3, 3-5, 5-7, 7-9 intermediate values

*Source: (Saaty, 2008; p.86)*

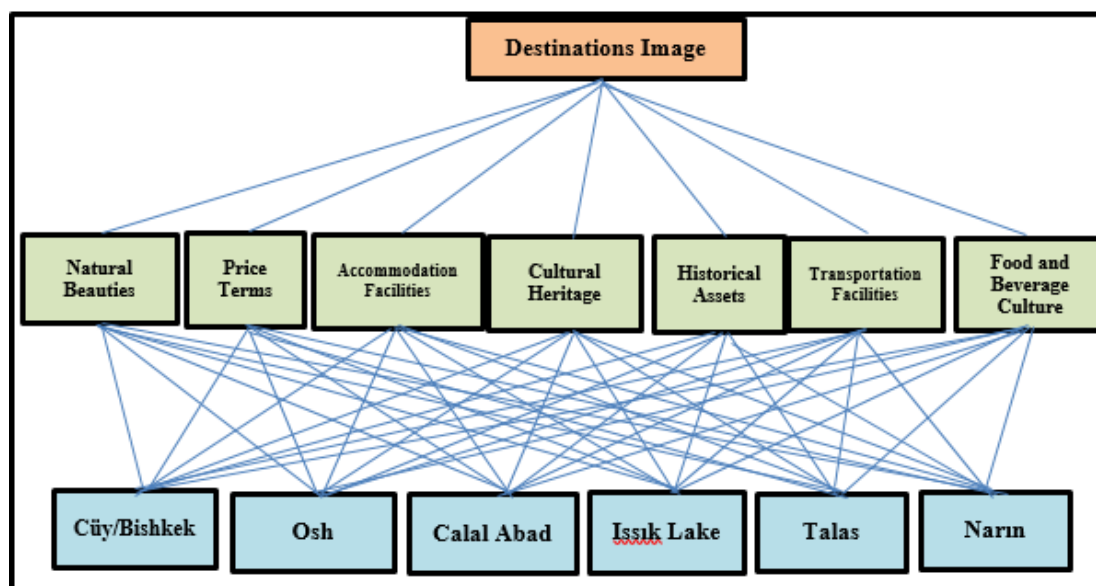
It should also be examined whether the matrices are consistent in comparisons with AHP. According to Saaty, the consistency ratio of the comparison matrices should be less than 0.1 (Önder and Önder, 2016). Therefore, the consistency ratios were also taken into account in the comparison matrices made with the Super Decisions program.

## **5. Research Method and Findings**

The main purpose of the research is to determine the most influential factors affecting the visitors' decision to visit Kyrgyzstan. The data required for the research were obtained with the help of a questionnaire prepared by making use of the relevant literature. While preparing the questionnaire, the touristic values in different regions of Kyrgyzstan and the regions where they are located were taken into account. The survey was applied to the experts in the touristic destinations of the country, professional tourist guides, public officials, tourism business managers and tourists who visited the country in the last 2 years. The sample of the study was created by using the quota sampling method, which is one of the non-random sampling methods. The data obtained were recorded in the SPSS package program and evaluated by taking their averages. The data were evaluated by establishing a model suitable for multiple

criteria. In the research model, first of all, the criteria that are effective in the tourists visiting the destinations and the alternatives that can be visited were determined. The criteria that are effective for the visit are determined as natural beauties, price, accommodation facilities, cultural heritage, historical assets, transportation facilities and food and beverage culture. Alternatives were evaluated by considering seven (7) regions in Kyrgyzstan. In the research model, the Chuy/Bishkek regions were combined and Kyrgyzstan, consisting of seven (7) regions, was considered as six (6) regions. After the model was established, the data were transferred to the Super Decisions program and evaluated. The hierarchical model developed in this context is given in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The hierarchical structure created for the destination image of Kyrgyzstan



Destinations were ranked by using the *Super Decisions* program to determine the most suitable alternative according to the determined criteria. As a result of the evaluations, the following tables have been prepared.

Table 2: Factors that are effective in the image of regions according to the criteria

Criteria	Çüy/ Bishkek	Issık Lake	Osh	Calal Abad	Talas	Narin
Natural beauties	0,084	0,408*	0,055	0,330*	0,230	0,407*
Price terms	0,066	0,030	0,030	0,032	0,028	0,025
Accommodation facilities	0,035	0,223	0,058	0,055	0,087	0,062
Cultural heritage	0,372*	0,046	0,304	0,161	0,181	0,139
Historical assets	0,258	0,087	0,380*	0,300	0,328*	0,091



Transportation facilities	0,050	0,172	0,128	0,085	0,100	0,225
Food and beverage culture	0,134	0,034	0,046	0,039	0,047	0,051
Inconsistency	0,097	0,093	0,084	0,095	0,090	0,097

When Table 2 is examined, it is understood that the most important criterion in the image of the Çüy/Bishkek region is cultural richness (0.372), and the least important criterion is accommodation opportunities (0.035). The fact that science, art and cultural activities in Kyrgyzstan generally take place in Bishkek and most of the qualified accommodation facilities of Kyrgyzstan are located in Bishkek supports this result. One of the most important potentials for Kyrgyzstan tourism is Issyk Lake. According to the results, Issyk Lake comes to the fore with its natural beauties (0.408) and accommodation opportunities (0.146). According to the participants within the scope of the research, historical and cultural riches are the most effective elements in the image of the Osh region. The image of Calal-Abad, where the world's largest walnut forests are located, is formed by natural beauties (0.330) and historical assets (0.300), according to the participants. Historical values (0.328), natural beauties (0.230) and cultural riches (0.181) are effective in the formation of the image of the Talas region, where the tomb of Manas Ata, who is the folk hero not only of the Kyrgyz but also of the entire Turkestan geography, is located. When the opinions of the participants about Narin are examined, its altitude is 3000 m. It is considered as a normal result that natural beauties such as Son Lake (0.407) and transportation opportunities (0.225) come to the fore.

When Table 2, which was prepared as a result of the evaluation of the data obtained from the participants, is examined, the consistency rate of all regions in the comparative matrices is below 0.1. Therefore, this value shows that the comparison matrices related to the evaluation are consistent.

*Table 3: Factors affecting the destination image*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Natural beauties	0,302	2
Price terms	0,023	6
Accommodation facilities	0,122	4
Cultural heritage	0,320	1
Historical assets	0,074	4
Transportation facilities	0,125	3
Food and beverage culture	0,033	5
<b>Inconsistency</b>	<b>0,097</b>	

Using the data obtained from the participants within the scope of the research, the factors affecting the destination image of Kyrgyzstan were examined and presented in Table 3. Cultural

richness (0.320) and natural beauties (0.302) take the first place in the general image of the country. The element with the least effect on image formation is prices (0.023).

Figure 3: Matrix view of the factors affecting the destination image of Kyrgyzstan

Comparisons wrt "Destination Image" node in "Criteria" cluster  
1Natural is 7 times more important than 2Price

Inconsistency	2Price ~	3Accommoda~	4Cultural ~	5Historica~	6Transport~	7Food and ~
1Natural ~	← 7	← 6	← 1	← 4	← 3	← 5
2Price ~		↑ 5.9999	↑ 8	↑ 4	↑ 5.9999	↑ 2
3Accommoda~			↑ 4	← 4	← 1	← 4
4Cultural ~				← 5	← 5	← 6
5Historica~					↑ 3.0000	← 6
6Transport~						← 6

Inconsistency: 0.09713	
1Natural	0.30238
2Price	0.02349
3Accommod~	0.12168
4Cultural	0.32005
5Historic~	0.07428
6Transpor~	0.12505
7Food and~	0.03307

The comparison results of the criteria in the analyzes made with AHP are also evaluated with the matrix image. The direction of the arrows in the matrix image indicates the dominant criteria (Önder and Önder, 2016). The image obtained with the help of Super Decisions is shown in Figure 3. Accordingly, natural beauties are more dominant than all criteria. Food and beverage culture, has less impact than all criteria, except for the price conditions that affect the destination image.

Table 4: Criteria effective in the image of regions

Criteria	Natural beauties	Price terms	Accommodation facilities	Cultural heritage	Historical assets	Transportation facilities	Food-beverage culture
Çüy/Bishkek	0,023	0,364	0,329	0,039	0,198	0,074	0,065
Issık Lake	0,230	0,313	0,380	0,034	0,124	0,044	0,036
Osh	0,056	0,169	0,144	0,189	0,456	0,202	0,435
Calal Abad	0,117	0,076	0,075	0,079	0,045	0,052	0,135
Talas	0,090	0,036	0,035	0,168	0,138	0,221	0,112
Narın	0,486	0,042	0,037	0,491	0,039	0,407	0,218
<b>Inconsistency</b>	<b>0,097</b>	<b>0,077</b>	<b>0,073</b>	<b>0,094</b>	<b>0,094</b>	<b>0,092</b>	<b>0,096</b>

Table 4 has been prepared in order to determine the factors that are effective in the image of the regions and their priority. Accordingly, in natural beauties and cultural riches, Narın; Çüy/Bishkek at price terms; Issyk Lake in accommodation opportunities; In terms of historical assets/values and food and beverage culture, it has been determined that the Osh region is in

the first place. In terms of natural beauties and cultural riches, Narın; in terms of price, Çüy/Bishkek; in terms of accommodation, Issyk Kul; in terms of historical values and food and beverage, Osh region; is in the first place. When the table above is examined, it is seen that Calal Abad and Talas regions did not take the first place in any of the criteria.

*Table 5: General results regarding the destination image of Kyrgyzstan*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Natural beauties	0,263	1
Cultural heritage	0,196	3
Historical assets	0,221	2
Food-beverage culture	0,055	6
Transportation facilities	0,148	4
Price terms	0,032	7
Accommodation facilities	0,084	5

Table 5 has been prepared in order to determine the most influential factors in the preferences of tourists visiting the country. Accordingly, the first reason why tourists visit the country is Kyrgyzstan's natural beauties (0.263), second historical assets (0.221) and third cultural riches (0.196). The least effective factor that attract tourists to the country is the price conditions (0.032). The other factors that affect the destination image are given in the table above.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Natural resources, price level, accommodation facilities, transportation systems, social and cultural factors are effective in the formation of the touristic destination image. Kyrgyzstan's historical background, cultural structure, natural resources, local culture have significant potential for tourism. Failure to create a positive tourism image may cause the existing tourism capacity to remain idle. Because destination image has an important role in directing tourism movements. Therefore, carrying out image studies with objective methods will positively affect the effectiveness of destinations.

Tourists visit destinations for different purposes. More than one factor is effective in their preferences. Identifying the factors that affect their preferences helps to increase both the quantity and quality of visitors to the destination. Methods such as AHP (Analytical Hierarchy Process) make it easier to take the most effective decision by evaluating different alternatives according to many criteria. Building a positive destination image is possible not only by

identifying the factors that affect the decisions of the visitors, but also by raising awareness about the destination with the data obtained.

Thanks to this study, the factors that affect the preferences of those who visit Kyrgyzstan for different purposes have been determined. Each region of Kyrgyzstan has its own touristic values such as historical richness, cultural diversity and natural beauties. When the data obtained from the participants within the scope of the research were examined, it was determined that the most effective factor in visiting the country was the natural beauties. In addition, it is understood that historical assets and cultural richness are important factors for destination attractiveness.

As a result, the formation of the destination image is shaped by the combination of more than one element. A positive image provides destinations with both economic, social and cultural advantages. Therefore, it requires the use of objective methods to create a professional destination image. Although this study has many shortcomings, it can be a reference for studies on other destinations with the elimination of deficiencies.

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