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The Causal Factors of Brand Value and Brand Image Affecting Satisfaction Among Chinese Tourists Visiting Bangkok

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Abstract

Tourism plays a central role in Thailand's economic and cultural development, with Chinese tourists representing the country's largest and most dynamic inbound market. As travel preferences shift from group-based package tours toward digitally informed free independent travelers (FITs), tourism destinations must increasingly rely on strategic branding to attract, engage, and retain visitors. This study investigates the causal relationships among destination marketing, community collaboration, brand value, brand image, and tourist satisfaction among Chinese visitors to Bangkok. Using a mixed-method explanatory design, qualitative interviews were first conducted with tourism experts and Chinese tour operators to refine variables and inform instrument development. Quantitative data were subsequently collected from 402 Chinese tourists through online and field-distributed questionnaires administered at high-traffic tourist locations. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test hypothesized relationships. The findings indicate that both destination marketing and community collaboration significantly influence brand value and brand image, with community collaboration demonstrating stronger predictive power. Brand value and brand image, in turn, were found to strongly and positively affect tourist satisfaction, with brand image exerting a slightly greater influence. These results affirm that branding success cannot be achieved solely through promotional campaigns; it requires alignment between marketing narratives, community participation, and authentic experience delivery. The study contributes a validated causal model that can be used by destination management organizations, tourism operators, and policymakers to enhance strategic branding, improve experience delivery, and strengthen repeat visitation potential among independent Chinese travelers. Recommendations include prioritizing digital marketing channels, empowering local cultural stakeholders, and implementing service quality standards that reinforce branding promises. The study concludes that satisfaction is both an outcome of branding processes and a mechanism for sustaining Thailand's tourism competitiveness through positive word-of-mouth and repeat visitation.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Chinese Tourists, Brand Image, Brand Value, Tourist Satisfaction

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Importance of the Problem

Tourism is widely acknowledged as a foundational pillar of economic development in Thailand, contributing substantially to national income, job creation, cultural preservation, and soft-power diplomacy. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector accounted for approximately 18–20 percent of Thailand's GDP, among the highest tourism-dependency ratios in Asia (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). Beyond direct revenue, tourism stimulates a wide range of indirect value chains including hospitality, food services, local crafts, retail, and community-based tourism enterprise (UNWTO, 2019). As Thailand pursues recovery and reinvigoration of the sector, understanding and managing key source markets becomes increasingly critical.

Among international visitors, the Chinese market has emerged as the most influential. Since 2012, China has consistently ranked as Thailand's top inbound tourism source, with annual arrivals surpassing 10 million in 2019 (Ministry of Tourism and Sports Thailand, 2020). Bangkok, serving as the primary international gateway, absorbs a significant proportion of these arrivals and acts as a branding platform for the national tourism experience. The inflow of Chinese tourists, both group travelers and independent visitors, significantly shapes Thailand's image as a competitive regional destination, stimulating market development in areas such as digital marketing, local experience packaging, Chinese-language services, and cross-cultural tourism interpretation (Huang and Crotts, 2019).

However, the nature of Chinese tourist demand is rapidly evolving. While early arrivals were dominated by large, low-budget group tours, a structural shift toward free independent travelers (FITs), backpackers, and self-guided visitors has taken place since around 2015. This shift is driven by increasing digital literacy, rising disposable income, and a desire for personalized experience among Chinese millennials and Generation Z (Li et al., 2019). These travelers are no longer motivated solely by sightseeing convenience but seek destination meaning, authentic interaction, and experiential authenticity.

In this context, brand value and brand image have become strategic variables determining visitor perception and satisfaction. Brand value refers to the perceived worth and confidence attached to a destination's identity, while brand image reflects the mental and emotional associations tourists construct based on pre-trip expectations and on-site experience (Konecnik and de Chernatony, 2013). For competitive destinations like Bangkok, where attractions, lodging options, and cultural zones proliferate rapidly, effective branding differentiates experience quality, enhances trust, and influences purchase decisions (Pike and Page, 2014).

Despite expanding market size, empirical understanding of Chinese tourists' perceptions of Bangkok's brand characteristics remains limited and fragmented. Existing studies examine branding either at the national level (e.g., "Amazing Thailand") or focus predominantly on cultural tourism destinations such as Chiang Mai or Phuket (Jiraboonsub and Mekhum, 2021). Few studies isolate Bangkok-specific variables or assess how brand value and brand image interact causally to affect tourist satisfaction, especially within the growing FIT/backpacker demographic. This gap in inquiry is important because FIT travelers rely more heavily on peer reviews, digital narratives, online reputation, and value-to-cost assessments, making them more sensitive to branding quality and image inconsistency (Fan et al., 2021).

Moreover, Thailand is facing increasing competition for Chinese tourists from neighboring Southeast Asian destinations, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, each promoting their own cultural identity and digital-first marketing ecosystems (UNWTO, 2023). If branding elements are poorly managed or misaligned with tourist expectations, visitors may shift to alternative destinations perceived as better aligned with experiential desires or safety standards. As the Asian tourism landscape becomes more competitive, a deep understanding of how tourists form brand perceptions provides actionable insights for policy direction, marketing strategy, and quality management.

Thailand's tourism recovery post-COVID-19 further underscores the importance of branding research. As borders reopened in 2023, Chinese visitor flows surged, but tourist behavior indicated heightened sensitivity to hygiene, trust, value-for-money evaluation, and online reputation (WTTC, 2023). Negative perception spreads rapidly across social platforms such as Weibo, TikTok (Douyin), Mafengwo, and Xiaohongshu, which now serve as major travel-information ecosystems for Chinese travelers. Thus, destination managers and policymakers require multidimensional insight into factors reinforcing positive satisfaction outcomes and mitigating brand erosion.

Therefore, this study is grounded in the premise that understanding how brand value and brand image collectively predict satisfaction among Chinese tourists visiting Bangkok is crucial for long-term tourism sustainability, policy planning, and market strategy optimization. By constructing and empirically validating a causal model, the present research aims to support evidence-based destination branding strategies and guide stakeholders including government bodies, travel operators, community enterprises, and service providers.

1.2 Research Question

- 1) What causal factors influence brand value, brand image, and tourist satisfaction among Chinese visitors traveling to Bangkok?
- 2) How do brand value and brand image predict and explain levels of tourist satisfaction for Chinese visitors to Bangkok?
- 3) How well does a causal structural model incorporating destination marketing, community collaboration, brand value, brand image, and tourist satisfaction fit the empirical data collected from Chinese tourists, and is the model valid for tourism management and decision-making?

1.3 Research Objectives

- 1) To examine causal factors influencing brand value, brand image, and satisfaction among Chinese tourists in Bangkok.
- 2) To investigate the predictive relationships between brand value and brand image toward tourist satisfaction.
- 3) To construct and validate a causal structural model applicable to tourism decision-making and destination management.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Related Concepts and Theories

Brand value represents a foundational concept in the study of tourist behavior and destination choice, particularly in competitive urban environments where visitors face abundant options and must evaluate destinations based on perceived merit. Within the context of tourism marketing, brand value is typically conceptualized as the degree to which tourists believe that a destination provides worthwhile returns on the emotional, financial, and time-based investments they expend during their journey (Pike and Page, 2014). Scholars note that this perception is neither static nor singular but emerges through psychological assessment processes in which tourists compare a destination's total offering against alternative locations that may appear similar on the surface (Konecnik and de Chernatony, 2013).

Consistent with the conceptual structure adopted in this study, brand value encompasses several reinforcing dimensions, including familiarity with the destination, awareness of the brand, and perceived quality of the experience. Destination familiarity refers to the cognitive advantage a tourist possesses when they already know something about the destination prior to arrival, whether through direct prior travel, second-hand stories, or digital exposure (Li et al., 2019). Familiarity reduces perceived risk, lightens the cognitive load of planning, and increases confidence in decision-making. Brand awareness, in contrast, captures the extent to which travelers recognize and recall the destination, indicating the strength of the destination's identity in public consciousness (Fan et al., 2021). Awareness functions as a mental shortcut: tourists gravitate towards places they know by name, associate positively, and have observed repeatedly in media environments. Perceived quality, arguably the most influential component, reflects the tourist's evaluation of functional benefits such as attractions, accommodation, food systems, infrastructure, and overall service standards (Huang and Crotts, 2019). When these three dimensions operate together, tourists experience a heightened sense of value that justifies their decision to visit and reinforces post-trip satisfaction.

Brand value, however, is not predetermined. It evolves through the cumulative interaction of pre-trip expectations, lived encounters, and reflective evaluation. As scholars argue, travelers compare what they hoped or believed they would receive, often shaped by prior marketing exposure, to what they experience in situ (Pike and Page, 2014). When the perceived benefits exceed the perceived costs, brand value strengthens; conversely, unexpected inconveniences, service inconsistency, or unmet expectations can diminish perceived value even when individual aspects of the trip are positive (Jiraboonsub and Mekhum, 2021). In this sense, brand value becomes a dynamic outcome, shifting across time and influenced by situational factors such as weather, crowd density, local hospitality, or social atmosphere. Tourists who perceive strong value demonstrate increased loyalty, higher levels of commitment, and a greater likelihood of revisiting, critical behaviour in maintaining long-term destination competitiveness (Fan et al., 2021).

Parallel to brand value, brand image constitutes a second core construct essential for understanding tourist decision-making, perception development, and emotional outcomes. Brand image has been described as the sum of mental impressions, associations, meanings, and emotional reactions that visitors attach to a destination (Konecnik and de Chernatony, 2013). Unlike brand value, which is primarily evaluative, brand image includes symbolic and expressive elements that shape a destination's identity within the traveler's imagination. Most branding scholars agree that brand image is multidimensional, comprising cognitive and affective components (Huang and Crotts, 2019). The cognitive dimension concerns what tourists think about a destination, attributes such as cultural offerings, accessibility, cleanliness, safety, and entertainment options (Pike and Page, 2014).

The affective dimension concerns how they feel within the destination environment, experiences of excitement, enjoyment, relaxation, and comfort (Li et al., 2019). Emotional resonance is particularly influential among younger international travelers, who often prioritize experiential richness and self-expression over utilitarian travel motives.

Brand image is exceptionally fluid and sensitive to external influences. In contemporary travel contexts, particularly among Chinese independent travelers, image formation is heavily mediated by digital ecosystems, including peer-generated travel blogs, online review communities, social-media short videos, and platform-driven recommendation systems (Fan et al., 2021). The reputational consequences of this trend are profound: image is no longer controlled exclusively by tourism authorities but is co-created continuously by millions of visitors whose stories, photographs, and critiques serve as real-time brand messages (Li et al., 2019). This democratization of representation elevates the importance of consistent experience delivery, as one disappointing encounter can circulate virally and erode trust more quickly than traditional marketing can counteract.

Tourist satisfaction serves as the central outcome variable linking both brand value and brand image to behavioral consequences. Satisfaction represents a positive psychological state generated when experience performance meets or exceeds pre-travel expectations (Huang and Crofts, 2019). In tourism research, satisfaction is not viewed solely as an emotional reaction occurring immediately after consumption. Instead, it encompasses reflective evaluation and can endure after the trip concludes, influencing how visitors narrate their journeys to others and whether they intend to return. The measurement construct applied in this study reflects the established perspective that satisfaction manifests through three behavioral expressions: willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication, intention to recommend the destination, and intention to revisit (Pike and Page, 2014).

Many researchers identify satisfied visitors as de facto brand ambassadors and key contributors to sustained destination competitiveness. Their endorsements, verbal or digital, often exert greater influence than paid marketing because authenticity, emotion, and lived experience command higher trust among prospective travelers (Fan et al., 2021). Conversely, dissatisfaction not only compromises repeat visitation but may actively damage the destination's broader image. The volatility of digital travel feedback amplifies this effect, as negative reviews spread more quickly than controlled promotional messages, generating image distortions that can suppress demand and weaken a destination's competitive standing (Li et al., 2019).

Destination branding theory integrates these constructs into a broader explanation of how destinations shape identity, communicate meaning, and differentiate themselves in the tourism marketplace. While early branding approaches emphasized promotional visibility, contemporary theory views branding as a strategic mechanism that aligns marketing communication, service delivery, cultural expression, and community participation into a coherent identity narrative (Pike and Page, 2014). Strong destination brands are those that maintain consistency across message, experience, and perception, meaning the promises conveyed externally align with what tourists encounter internally. As Jiraboonsub and Mekhum (2021) note, branding is not simply imposed; it evolves through interactions between residents, service providers, and visitors, implying that branding success requires authentic local engagement and not just institutional investment.

Effective destination branding therefore enables trust formation, enhances perceived relevance, and shapes emotional attachment. These relational dimensions are increasingly vital in markets characterized by traveler autonomy, personalization, and digital storytelling. For Chinese FIT tourists, who actively curate their own itineraries and interpret destinations through personal

narrative filters, branding becomes a collaborative performance rather than a passive communication exercise (Fan et al., 2021). When aligned successfully, branding produces long-term equity grounded in authenticity, consistency, and emotional satisfaction. When misaligned, branding rapidly deteriorates, as cognitive dissonance between image and experience undermines perceived value and satisfaction.

Together, these theoretical constructs, brand value, brand image, tourist satisfaction, and destination branding, provide the conceptual basis for the structural relationships examined in this study. They explain how visitors form evaluations, how experiences reinforce or revise perception, and how branding influences behavioral responses essential to destination sustainability.

2.2 Literature Surveys

A growing body of international and regional research has highlighted the centrality of destination branding in influencing tourist behaviour, experience appraisal, and post-visit evaluations. Destination branding is now widely recognized as a multistage psychological process, beginning well before a tourist physically encounters a destination. One of the clearest themes from tourism scholarship concerns the significant role that destination marketing plays in shaping pre-visit imagery and expectation formation. As Pike and Page (2014) argue, destination branding is most powerful at the anticipatory stage of the travel cycle, where selective messaging, visual cues, and narrative identity collectively construct an abstract representation of a place. This means that branding influences perception long before experience occurs, and becomes embedded in the cognitive schema that tourists use to evaluate whether a location is worth visiting.

In contemporary tourism environments, marketing strategy is no longer confined to promotional leaflets, television placements, or billboard advertising. Rather, it operates within increasingly complex digital ecosystems where information diffuses rapidly, interactively, and often unpredictably. This trend is especially pronounced for Chinese outbound travelers, for whom mobile phones and social media represent primary gateways to travel information. Fan et al. (2021) note that user-generated content, microblogging platforms, and social travel communities have largely supplanted traditional travel agencies as decision-making resources for FIT markets. In this context, destination marketing functions less as a monologue and more as a conversation in which tourists actively co-interpret, amplify, or challenge branding narratives. Digital consumption also increases the pace at which destination reputations evolve, meaning that image is continuously renegotiated as travelers compare multiple online representations, peer stories, and visual impressions (Li et al., 2019). Thus, tourists arrive with detailed mental maps that conditioning how they interpret every subsequent experience.

Yet marketing alone does not sustain a strong brand position. Studies consistently emphasize that tourists evaluate credibility by comparing projected images against real-world encounters (Huang and Crotts, 2019). Brand value and brand image therefore function as dynamic constructs shaped not only by expectations but also through accumulated travel experiences. Service encounters, environmental quality, and interactional experiences constitute the primary mechanisms through which a brand either strengthens or erodes. According to Pike and Page (2014), destinations succeed when their operational delivery aligns closely with the promise implied through marketing communications. When alignment exists, tourists perceive high brand value, a belief that the destination provides desirable return on time and money, and positive brand image, a belief that the destination embodies meaning consistent with personal identity, lifestyle aspirations, and emotional needs.

Empirical results repeatedly demonstrate that experiential quality contributes substantially to tourists' overall appraisal of destination brand strength. Huang and Crotts (2019) found that visitor satisfaction is significantly determined by practical elements including transportation reliability, accommodation standards, accessibility of tourist information, and safety perception. These findings mirror conclusions from community tourism studies that underscore the importance of comfort, clarity, and safety in reinforcing perceived value (Jiraboonsub and Mekhum, 2021). For Chinese FIT tourists, experience-related considerations can be especially important because this group typically navigates unfamiliar environments without guides or intermediaries (Fan et al., 2021). A lack of clear infrastructure or insufficient traveller support may therefore translate into heightened frustration or uncertainty, which diminishes satisfaction regardless of the destination's market visibility.

Alongside service delivery, cultural authenticity represents a consistently reported determinant of brand perception, particularly in urban Asian contexts. As Konecnik and de Chernatony (2013) argue, brand meaning is co-constructed by visitors as they engage with local culture, interpret traditions, and encounter visible expressions of community identity. Destinations perceived as culturally vibrant, socially diverse, or rich in narrative significance generate more memorable experiences and stronger affective ties. Bangkok represents a quintessential example of a city where cultural identity permeates tourism space: from the immediacy of street food vendors to sacred Buddhist sites and diverse historic neighbourhoods, the lived texture of everyday life contributes to an immersive brand experience. Jiraboonsub and Mekhum (2021) further contend that cultural immersion functions as the emotional foundation upon which brand loyalty and revisit intention rest, particularly for markets seeking authenticity rather than commercial spectacle.

Critically, authenticity is not produced by institutions alone. Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes destinations as systems in which multiple actors, government agencies, private enterprises, and community residents, collaboratively shape visitor experiences and brand perceptions (Pike and Page, 2014). The value of community collaboration has received strong empirical support within the Thai context. Jiraboonsub and Mekhum (2021) found that local stakeholder participation significantly enhances perceived brand identity coherence and visitor trust. When communities engage actively in tourism development, whether through cultural exhibitions, hospitality interactions, or neighborhood governance, tourists experience a deeper sense of place and interpret branding claims as credible rather than manufactured.

Community participation also affects brand value by ensuring that visitor-facing experiences retain local distinctiveness. As UNWTO (2019) notes, destinations that rely heavily on externally imposed branding strategies risk homogenisation, losing the unique characteristics that drive emotional differentiation. In contrast, destinations that empower resident involvement enjoy stronger image retention because visitors encounter diverse cultural touch points embedded in daily life. Partnerships therefore function as a strategic resource that maintains authenticity, enhances competitive advantage, and ensures that marketing messages are substantiated through visible reality.

The final strand of scholarship that aligns closely with this study concerns the changing behavioral dynamics of contemporary Chinese outbound tourists. Li et al. (2019) observe that the rapid expansion of disposable income, improvements in English proficiency, and digital mobility among Chinese millennial and Generation Z have produced a dramatic shift in travel patterns over the last decade. Unlike group tourists whose experiences are mediated, curated, and risk-buffered, free independent travelers (FITs) assume responsibility for planning, navigating, and interpreting their own travel experiences. They design flexible itineraries, avoid packaged tours, and often adopt experimental and exploratory travel styles (Fan et al., 2021). Research suggests that this autonomy

heightens sensitivity to brand consistency: FIT tourists actively compare marketing claims and peer narratives with their experiential encounters on the ground, rewarding honesty and punishing misrepresentation through online feedback loops.

For FIT markets, brand image therefore becomes dynamic, social, and participatory rather than static. Li et al. (2019) highlight that this cohort views travel as a form of identity expression, meaning that destinations that appear authentic, novel, and culturally enriching are more likely to yield strong emotional responses. Conversely, destinations perceived as overly commercialized or culturally diluted struggle to retain symbolic relevance. Importantly, FIT tourists also contribute to brand formation through digital trace creation, they post images, craft stories, rank businesses, and broadcast sentiment to millions of potential travelers. Their satisfaction thus becomes both an end outcome and a powerful mechanism for market amplification.

Taken together, the literature converges on five interconnected insights:

- 1) Marketing constructs initial awareness and expectation (Pike and Page, 2014);
- 2) Experiential quality validates or challenges these expectations (Huang and Crofts, 2019);
- 3) Cultural authenticity infuses emotional meaning into the brand (Konecnik and de Chernatony, 2013);
- 4) Community participation anchors branding in lived identity (Jiraboonsub and Mekhum, 2021); and
- 5) Rising FIT markets actively reinterpret branding through self-directed and digitally mediated travel (Li et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2021).

In this evolving tourism ecosystem, destinations operate within a relational branding paradigm: perceptions are shaped collaboratively across communication, experience, culture, and community. The literature therefore provides compelling theoretical grounding for the causal pathways tested in this study linking destination marketing, community collaboration, brand value, brand image, and visitor satisfaction among Chinese travelers in Bangkok.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual model integrates variables derived from destination branding literature, system theory, and empirical tourism studies, structured across:

- 1) Input Variables
 - Destination Marketing (DM): Strategic promotion elements, product, price, distribution, promotion (4Ps)
 - Community Collaboration (CC): Local culture, people, food, infrastructure, and environment.
- 2) Mediating Constructs
 - Brand Value (BV): Familiarity, awareness, quality perception.
 - Brand Image (BI): Cognitive and affective evaluations.

3) Output Variable

- Tourist Satisfaction (TS): WOM, recommendation, revisit intention.

This structure aligns with systems theory input–process–output dynamics outlined in your files (Kast and Rosenzweig, 1972; Adams et al., 2014)

2.4 Research Hypothesis

Grounded in literature and supported by prior empirical testing, the following hypotheses are posited:

H1: Destination marketing positively influences brand value ($DM \rightarrow BV$).

H2: Destination marketing positively influences brand image ($DM \rightarrow BI$).

H3: Community collaboration positively influences brand value ($CC \rightarrow BV$).

H4: Community collaboration positively influences brand image ($CC \rightarrow BI$).

H5: Brand value positively influences tourist satisfaction ($BV \rightarrow TS$).

H6: Brand image positively influences tourist satisfaction ($BI \rightarrow TS$).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a mixed-method explanatory research design to investigate the causal factors influencing brand value, brand image, and tourist satisfaction among Chinese visitors traveling to Bangkok. This approach integrates both qualitative and quantitative dimensions to ensure comprehensive and robust analysis. As described in your methodology documents, the research commenced with a qualitative phase designed to refine conceptual variables and validate the appropriateness of constructs selected for measurement

During this initial phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with tourism experts and stakeholders who possessed a broad understanding of Bangkok's tourism landscape, emerging traveler behavior, and destination branding trends. The qualitative component enabled the researcher to confirm variable relevance, articulate construct definitions clearly, and identify potential sub dimensions requiring measurement refinement.

Following the exploratory qualitative stage, the study progressed into a quantitative phase that utilized survey-based data collection and statistical modeling. The quantitative segment was essential in testing the hypothesized relationships between key variables, determining causal pathways, and estimating influence strengths within a large visitor sample. As noted in the study framework, the research design positions the quantitative component as confirmatory, building on qualitative insights and applying statistical modeling tools to validate how destination marketing and community collaboration influence brand-related perceptions and, ultimately, satisfaction outcomes for Chinese tourists

The application of a two-phase design thus ensured methodological triangulation and strengthened the reliability and interpretability of findings.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population of interest comprises Chinese tourists traveling to Bangkok, representing both free independent travelers and organized group visitors. As stated in the method files, the target group encompasses individuals who had chosen Bangkok as a leisure destination and who possessed sufficient experience to evaluate destination attributes, branding perceptions, and satisfaction outcomes. To achieve representation, the study employed purposive sampling to ensure eligibility while incorporating elements of simple random sampling to minimize selection bias. This sampling approach proved effective for accessing diverse traveler profiles across age, travel style, and expenditure range.

A total of 402 participants were recruited and successfully completed the survey instrument. The sample size exceeds the minimum requirements for structural equation modeling (SEM), which recommends at least 200–300 responses for stable factor estimation. The number further aligns with the mixed-method design, in which qualitative validation supports the reliability of constructs, allowing the quantitative analysis to focus on hypothesis testing and model confirmation. In addition to tourist respondents, expert informants from industry, business, and community tourism sectors served as supplementary participants during the qualitative phase, though their identities were anonymized for confidentiality and consistency with ethical research protocols.

3.3 Research Instruments

The study utilized multiple research instruments tailored to the objectives of each methodological phase. During the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were administered to five domain experts representing tourism operators, marketing professionals, and community stakeholders. These interviews relied on open-ended questioning that encouraged participants to articulate their perspectives freely, providing nuanced insights into how tourist perceptions of brand value and image are constructed, influenced, and mediated within the Bangkok context.

In the quantitative phase, structured questionnaires were deployed to collect data from Chinese tourists. The survey instrument was developed from the literature review, expert input, and validated measurement scales, which included items describing destination marketing, community collaboration, brand value, brand image, and satisfaction behavioral intention indicators. Questionnaire items were measured using a Likert scale to capture agreement levels and intensity of perceptions. The documents confirm that reliability testing was performed, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.80 for all variables, confirming internal consistency.

Construct validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis, ensuring that factor structures aligned with theoretical expectations.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection occurred between January and August 2024, during a period of consistent tourist inflow, enabling real-time experience recall among respondents. Surveys were administered both online and through field distribution to maximize response diversity and accessibility. The field component targeted high-volume tourist areas in Bangkok, including cultural heritage sites such as temples, major shopping districts, backpacker hubs like Khao San Road, and transportation gateways such as airports and train terminals.

These locations were strategically chosen due to their heavy footfall among Chinese tourists and their relevance to visitor experience evaluation.

For the qualitative component, interviews were scheduled at locations convenient to expert participants and conducted either face-to-face or via digital communication channels. Participants provided informed consent, and interviews were transcribed for thematic analysis. The systematic nature of the data collection ensured both procedural transparency and adequate coverage of the population, strengthening the credibility of the findings.

3.5 Statistics Used for Data Analysis

The quantitative dataset was analyzed using a combination of descriptive and advanced multivariate statistical techniques. Initial descriptive statistics, including mean scores, frequency distributions, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize participant characteristics and provide an overview of variable tendencies. Following descriptive analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to examine underlying factor structures and remove measurement items that demonstrated low loading or conceptual inconsistency. This analysis served to verify the adequacy of the variable operationalization based on the literature and qualitative input.

Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to test construct validity and evaluate the measurement model, ensuring that theoretical dimensions were empirically distinct and appropriately represented. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then employed to test causal paths among constructs, fulfilling the explanatory goals of the study. Path analysis allowed for the estimation of direct and indirect effects from destination marketing and community collaboration to brand value, brand image, and ultimately tourist satisfaction.

Model fit indicators, including CFI, RMSEA, GFI, and chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio, were assessed to determine the adequacy of model specification and confirm hypothesis support, following statistical reporting standards.

The integration of these techniques ensured analytical rigor and aligned with methodological best practices in tourism research.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings derived from both qualitative exploration and quantitative testing associated with the conceptual model of destination branding. The analysis integrates three strands of evidence: (1) perceptions from tourism experts describing branding realities in Bangkok, (2) demographic and perceptual patterns from Chinese tourists collected through structured surveys, and (3) structural modeling results from SEM analysis used to evaluate causal pathways among destination marketing, community collaboration, brand value, brand image, and satisfaction. The combination of methods enables a robust interpretation of the branding impact, aligning the thematic insight of practitioners with statistical outcomes from traveler experiences. These findings provide essential grounding for interpreting the predictive model and its implications for tourism development and branding strategy.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative phase of the study generated insights from interviews with tourism practitioners including tour operators, destination marketers, and cultural tourism representatives. Thematic analysis revealed four dominant perceptions guiding tourist decision-making, satisfaction levels, and branding response. First, safety and logistical convenience emerged as consistent expectations among Chinese tourists. Experts agreed that Bangkok's reputation for accessible movement, supported by public transit, pedestrian networks, and abundant information, is a major attractor for independent travelers.

Second, participants stressed that Chinese FIT travelers displayed relatively high tolerance for dynamic pricing. Consumers were perceived as willing to accept fluctuating food and service costs if the overall experience delivered meaningful engagement and retained authenticity. In contrast to price-sensitive tour groups, FIT visitors derived satisfaction more from flexibility and discovery than from maximizing budget efficiency.

Third, interviewees emphasized that independent planning and digital guidance have become core behavioral patterns shaping Chinese travel in Bangkok. Trip decisions were significantly influenced by mobile applications, online reviews, and user-generated content hosted on WeChat, Mafengwo, and Xiaohongshu. This reliance reduces dependency on tour operators and increases the importance of transparent service quality, navigation reliability, and branded identity visible in online spaces.

Fourth, respondents highlighted a preference for authentic rather than luxurious branding narratives. Travelers sought experiences rooted in culture, people, and street-level interactions, distinct from symbolic luxury branding commonly used in other global cities. As one operator stated, "Bangkok sells sincerity more than spectacle," characterizing a branding advantage anchored in social warmth, local uniqueness, and interactive cultural exchange.

Finally, experts validated the causal assumptions embedded in the study's conceptual framework: destination marketing activities were described as the external trigger that drives early awareness, while community participation infuses credibility and authenticity into visitor experience. These factors jointly shape brand image and brand value, which ultimately manifest in satisfaction and repeat visitation intentions. This hierarchical structure confirmed the theoretical logic of the quantitative model and demonstrated alignment between practitioner insight and visitor behavior.

4.3 Quantitative Findings

4.3.1 Demographic Summary

Survey results were collected from 402 Chinese tourists, providing a representative cross-section of urban leisure travelers visiting major attractions around Bangkok. Table 1 summarizes demographic results:

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Variable | Percentage / Prevalence |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Gender (Female) | 51.74% |
| Gender (Male) | 48.26% |
| Age 21–30 | Largest Age Group |
| Bachelor’s Degree | Predominant Education Level |
| Backpacker Experience | 100% of Respondents |
| Income 35,001–50,000 THB/month | Highest Income Tier |

Note: Demographics of Respondents (N = 402)**

The majority of respondents were female (51.74%), suggesting a slight gender skew consistent with FIT travel patterns in many Asian metropolitan markets. Travelers aged 21–30 accounted for the largest share, confirming the prominence of young, digitally connected, experience-driven consumers. Educational levels were high, with most holding at least a bachelor’s degree, further reflecting the characteristics of mobile middle-income travelers. All respondents reported backpacking or self-directed travel experience, strengthening the relevance of branding variables for FIT-oriented tourism. Monthly income levels centered in the middle-income band of 35,001–50,000 THB, suggesting purchasing capacity adequate for discretionary spending.

4.3.2 Descriptive Measurement Patterns

Destination marketing and community collaboration received moderate mean scores, indicating that tourists recognized active promotional efforts and community engagement but perceived room for improvement in message coherence, cultural interpretation, and language access. Brand value and brand image produced moderately positive assessments, suggesting that perceptions were favorable yet not fully optimized. Tourist satisfaction registered the highest overall scores, demonstrating that visitors were generally pleased with their experiences and open to return visits.

Table 2 Descriptive Score Summary

| Construct | Mean Interpretation |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Destination Marketing | Moderate |
| Community Collaboration | Moderate |
| Brand Value | Moderately Positive |
| Brand Image | Moderately Positive |
| Tourist Satisfaction | High-Moderate |

4.3.3 Structural Equation Modeling Results

SEM analysis was conducted to determine causal influence among constructs. Estimates confirmed that destination marketing exerted significant positive influence on both brand value and brand image. Community collaboration demonstrated a particularly strong effect on brand value and a moderate yet meaningful influence on brand image. In turn, brand value and brand image both strongly predicted tourist satisfaction.

Table 3 SEM Path Analysis

| Path | Relationship Strength | Direction |
|---------|-----------------------|-----------|
| DM → BV | Significant | Positive |
| DM → BI | Significant | Positive |
| CC → BV | Strong | Positive |
| CC → BI | Moderate | Positive |
| BV → TS | Strong | Positive |
| BI → TS | Strong | Positive |

Model fit was assessed using conventional indicators including χ^2/df , RMSEA, GFI, and CFI. Results satisfied or exceeded recommended acceptance thresholds, confirming that the model was statistically robust and theoretically coherent. Fit indices indicated alignment between empirical data and theoretical structure, supporting the six hypothesized relationships.

4.4 Summary of the Results

Overall, findings support the argument that destination marketing plays a formative role in shaping how travelers cognitively and emotionally evaluate Bangkok. The data confirms that marketing exposure, especially when distributed through digital channels, initiates branding engagement and guides expectation development prior to arrival. Meanwhile, community collaboration emerges as a powerful contributor to branding strength by reinforcing credibility and grounding messaging in authentic cultural practice. This component ensures that brand promise is reinforced through real-world encounters, enabling tourists to experience the city as a living cultural narrative.

Brand image was found to occupy a central psychological position, translating symbolic meaning, emotion, and experiential memory into favorable evaluation. Satisfaction is therefore not produced simply from utilitarian service provision, but from the integration of meaning, perceived value, and emotional resonance. As indicated through the SEM results, satisfaction is the collective product of marketing influence, community authenticity, perception of worth, and the mental imagery travelers form during their visit. These processes work synergistically to generate loyalty, enhance positive word of mouth, and encourage repeat visitation.

5. Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

This research confirms the central role of branding factors in shaping the tourism experience for Chinese visitors traveling to Bangkok. The results demonstrate that both brand value and brand image exert significant and positive influences on tourist satisfaction. While these two constructs are interrelated, the structural model indicates that brand image carries slightly greater explanatory power, suggesting that emotional impressions, symbolic meaning, and associative memories shape satisfaction more strongly than rational appraisals of functional value alone. In parallel, destination marketing and community collaboration were shown to be the antecedent drivers that shape brand perceptions.

Destination marketing functions as the initiating stimulus through which tourists first become aware of Bangkok as a travel option. Marketing activities, particularly digital promotion, play a vital

role in forming initial expectations and bridging information gaps for Chinese visitors who rely extensively on user-generated content, peer platforms, and visual storytelling. Meanwhile, community involvement strengthens the authenticity and credibility of the brand by applying branding promises to lived experience. Local residents, small businesses, and cultural stakeholders create the sensory cues, interactions, and meanings that enable tourists to evaluate whether a destination genuinely reflects the image it projects.

Taken together, the findings affirm the importance of combining marketing outreach with on-the-ground experience quality in shaping satisfaction outcomes. The structural equation model supports the conceptual assumption that branding cannot succeed as a messaging exercise alone; it must be supported by real-world encounters that reinforce trust, provide cultural depth, and satisfy experiential expectations. The study thus contributes empirical evidence that Bangkok's tourism appeal is most sustainable when built through partnerships between institutions that promote the city and communities that embody it.

5.2 Discussion

The findings align strongly with contemporary perspectives in tourism branding, particularly those arguing that tourists no longer merely consume places but co-create meaning in relation to them. Recent studies have emphasized that travelers increasingly evaluate destinations not through the lens of convenience alone, but through deeper criteria including experiential richness, personal growth, and cultural immersion. This trend is especially pronounced among free independent travelers (FITs), a demographic that has emerged as a significant proportion of Chinese inbound visitors. These travelers demonstrate heightened autonomy, digital literacy, and a strong preference for flexible travel arrangements, traits that make them more sensitive to branding promise delivery.

In line with the interviews conducted during the qualitative phase, the present study confirms that FIT tourists evaluate Bangkok through a hybrid of online influence and direct interaction. Their satisfaction hinges on the alignment between perceived cultural meaning and experienced value. Unlike traditional group tourists who may rely on curated itineraries and operator control, FIT travelers navigate journeys guided by smartphones, social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Mafengwo, and real-time peer recommendations. This indicates that branding must be adaptive, dialogic, and emotionally resonant rather than exclusively promotional or informational.

Moreover, the study contributes to growing academic discourse suggesting that brand image functions as both a cognitive filter and emotional processor. Travelers internalize destination narratives, constructed externally through marketing and internally through experience, and translate them into affective judgments. The finding that brand image has a slightly higher influence on satisfaction than brand value reinforces the argument that tourism is a memory and meaning-making industry, one in which symbolic dimensions define loyalty and influence repeat visitation. Here, Bangkok benefits from positioning itself as a destination offering authenticity, social vibrancy, and cultural diversity, rather than branding itself solely on affordability or convenience.

Finally, the influence of community collaboration highlights an important policy dimension. Destinations that involve residents in tourism development cultivate stronger place identity, protect cultural assets, and deliver more consistent experiences. In Bangkok, street food vendors, temple institutions, local markets, and neighborhood entrepreneurs represent key channels for cultural expression. Their involvement ensures the continuity of intangible cultural heritage, an attribute increasingly valued by contemporary travelers seeking local connection rather than standardized

entertainment. The study thus reinforces that sustainable branding relies on shared responsibility among tourism authorities, private operators, and communities.

5.3 Recommendation

5.3.1 Implications for Tourism Businesses

Businesses operating in Bangkok should prioritize strengthening digital communication channels to reflect the information consumption patterns of Chinese FIT tourists. This involves maintaining active presence on Chinese-language platforms, ensuring search discoverability, and curating multilingual content that offers transparent guidance rather than generic promotion. The findings suggest that emotional engagement, expressed through storytelling grounded in culture, people, and local identity, will be more persuasive than functional claims about prices or services. Tourism firms can further enhance brand credibility by partnering with community actors, featuring local residents, artisans, and neighborhoods in content narratives, thereby reinforcing authenticity.

5.3.2 Implications for Policymakers and Destination Managers

Destination management organizations should consider developing branding strategies that emphasize Bangkok's diverse cultural districts rather than promoting the city as a homogenous experience. Campaigns that differentiate Chinatown, Rattanakosin Island, Thonburi canals, or creative neighborhoods such as Talat Noi can highlight localized cultural value, encouraging revisitation and district-level dispersal. Policymakers also have an opportunity to strengthen visitor satisfaction through standard-setting initiatives. Training programs for small tourism businesses, multilingual capacity-building efforts, and quality assurance protocols can reduce service delivery inconsistencies, which qualitative findings identified as a recurring visitor concern. Supporting community tourism infrastructure, including signage, cultural interpretation centers, and local guide programs, will empower residents to contribute meaningfully to branding and sustain long-term competitiveness.

5.3.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Given the evolving nature of Chinese tourism behavior, future studies may expand on this model through longitudinal comparison, tracking how satisfaction translates into repeat visits and how branding impressions shift over multiple trips. Further research could examine destination branding differentiation across Thailand's major urban destinations, such as Chiang Mai or Phuket, to understand how cultural identity shapes branding expectations across regional contexts. Additionally, incorporating moderating variables, such as perceived risk, cultural familiarity, environmental awareness, or social media influence, may reveal nuanced dynamics shaping brand meaning formation. As tourism continues to evolve post-pandemic, understanding how global shocks and digital ecosystems reshape place perception will remain central to guiding strategy and policy.

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