

Examining the Relationships of Destination Image, Memorable Tourism Experience and Tourists' Behavioral Intentions in Ancient Towns

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Abstract

The image of a destination plays a significant role in tourists' judgments and selections. The key latent variable must be identified by analyzing the relationships between a destination's image and the decisions made by visitors to optimize destination marketing strategies. Using the ancient towns of Chengdu, Sichuan, China, as the research object, this study establishes the causal relationship between destination image, memorable tourism experience, and visitors' behavioral intentions using the SOR model. The results indicate that destination image influences tourists' behavioral intention via the mediator effect of memorable tourism experience and that tourists' place attachment moderates the relationship between memorable tourism experience and behavioral intention. In addition, because Chengdu's ancient towns are popular destinations for local tourists on short excursions, this study selects local tourists as the sample collection object. It verifies the applicability of the memorable tourism experience scale in the context of ancient towns. In addition, based on the Two-factor theory, this study adopts an alternative classification of destination cognitive image. It verifies the varying degrees of influence of destination motivator and hygiene image factors on memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intention, with implications for future research and destination marketing and management in culturally similar regions.

Keywords: Memorable tourism experience; Destination image; Behavioral intention; Place attachment.

1. Introduction

Because [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#) underlined that the global economy is moving from a service economy to an experience economy, the information they presented led to a significant amount of attention being placed on the experience of consumers and the development of research about travel experiences. People have realized that their travel experiences have a complicated structure ([Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014](#)). This realization has ranged from early gratifying experiences and quality experiences to amazing experiences and unforgettable tourist experiences ([Zhang, Wu, & Buhalis, 2018](#)). People are becoming more interested in tourism experiences, in which visitors seek unforgettable experiences that combine feeling, participation, indulgence, and emotional feelings ([Hosany & Witham, 2010](#)). Even more so, memorable experiences are viewed as the ultimate consumer experience ([Tung & Ritchie, 2011](#)).

For this reason, during the past few years, the concept of memorable tourism experience (MTE) has garnered much interest from researchers and practitioners. According to the findings of several studies ([Chandralal, Rindfleisch, & Valenzuela, 2015](#); [Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012](#); [Neuhofer et al., 2014](#)), researchers feel that a memorable travel experience is the best predictor of future behavior and establishes a new benchmark. According to [Kim, Ritchie, and Tung \(2010\)](#) and [Pine and Gilmore \(1998\)](#), developing a unique and competitive advantage for a location typically requires establishing a destination's ability to provide visitors with memorable and useful travel experiences. In the Post COVID-19 Era, gaining repeat clients will be an essential priority for destination marketers ([Kock et al., 2020](#)). This is especially true given the increased market rivalry that would be present in this era. As a result, it is of considerable theoretical value and practical significance to investigate the relationship between destination image and tourist behavior and to intervene in memorable tourism experience as a key variable. This is because such an investigation is important in theory and practice.

Specifically, in the context of ancient town tourism, "looking for lost homes" has become a kind of tourism fashion, and the enormous value of China's existing ancient towns can continue to be reflected through the market, becoming an important tourism resource to drive economic development. This is all thanks to the

improvement in people's living standards, which has led to a general rise in the overall standard of living. Ancient towns are particularly prevalent in China because Chinese civilization has existed for over five thousand years. Ancient many cities were developed during this time for historical and geographical reasons (Wen, 1998). These towns can allow tourists to experience local culture, ancient architecture, history, and other cultural resources (McCartney & Chen, 2020). According to the China Domestic Tourism Development Report, 2020, the trend of daily cultural consumption among domestic residents has been remarkable in recent years.

Furthermore, the proportion of weekend cultural and leisure consumption is as high as 60.03%, and 59% of tourists choose to visit historical and cultural sites during holidays. In the context of the normalized prevention and management of COVID-19, local and peripheral tourists are gaining popularity, and tourism in historic towns has received new chances for growth. However, in recent years, the tourism of ancient cities in China has been confronted with common problems such as similar development modes, excessive commercialization, insufficient supporting facilities, non-prominent core culture, and excessive marketing (Gohary et al., 2020; Lu, Lu, & Xu, 2005; Song, 2010; Zhang et al., 2021), which has resulted in a poor experience effect for tourists, and feasible solutions need to be investigated. There has been comparatively little theoretical research on historic towns' tourism experience. According to Zhang and Walsh's (2021) study, tourism experience problems in China are rarely handled by looking at them from the standpoint of historical and cultural tourism.

This study investigates the link between a destination's image and a visitor's behavioral intention in the setting of an old town, and it analyzes the mediating influence that memorable tourism experiences have. Chengdu, a historic town, was selected for the research because the tourism sector in southwest China has risen fast in recent years, attracting many tourists by promoting the area's traditional culture. As a result of this, the town of Chengdu was selected as the location for the research. The old town of Chengdu is home to a rich collection of ethnic, wharf, and recreational cultures, all popular with visitors from the surrounding area. Chengdu Ancient town is an example of a typical "leisure and vacation" model of growth, in contrast to the

"cultural sightseeing" model utilized in creating Jiangnan ancient town in China. The planning and management of Chengdu's ancient town have been concentrated on the local lifestyle and leisure demands. This is because Chengdu's ancient town is a regional tourism destination. As a result, the choice of local tourists as the topic of this study's research is appropriate given the current state of affairs regarding the operation and growth of the old town.

This study's objectives are to (1) analyze the effect of destination image on memorable tourism experience and behavioral intention in the setting of an old town and (2) evaluate the mediating effect of memorable tourism experience; both of these objectives will be accomplished through the course of this research. In addition, a tourist's attachment to a particular location is a moderating variable in how a memorable tourism experience influences the visitors' intention to repeat the event. This study contributes to understanding the antecedents and repercussions of a memorable tourism experience. Additionally, it investigates the essential components of destination image to evaluate the competition's important role in destination marketing.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Destination Image

Because [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#) emphasized that the global economy is transitioning from a service economy to an experience economy, the information they presented led to a significant amount of attention being placed on the experience of consumers and the development of research on travel experiences. In addition, [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#) highlighted that the global economy is moving from a service economy to an experience economy. According to [Neuhofer et al. \(2014\)](#), people have recently learned that their travel experiences have a complex framework. This realization has ranged from early rewarding experiences and quality experiences to spectacular experiences and unforgettable tourist encounters ([Zhang et al., 2018](#)). People are increasingly interested in tourism experiences, in which visitors seek remarkable experiences that mix feeling, involvement, indulgence, and emotional feelings ([Hosany & Witham, 2010](#)). Specifically, people seek experiences combining

emotions, participation, and emotional feelings. Even more so, consumers place a premium on having memorable experiences ([Tung & Ritchie, 2011](#)).

Because of this, the idea of a memorable tourism experience, or MTE for short, has attracted much attention from tourism scholars and industry professionals over the last several years. According to the findings of several studies ([Chandralal et al., 2015](#); [Kim et al., 2012](#); [Neuhofer et al., 2014](#)), experts believe that a memorable travel experience is the best predictor of future behavior and establishes a new benchmark. According to [Kim et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Pine and Gilmore \(1998\)](#), generating a unique and competitive advantage for a location often requires establishing a destination's ability to provide visitors with memorable and beneficial travel experiences. This view is supported by the common belief that developing a unique and competitive advantage for a location requires establishing a destination's ability to attract visitors. According to [Kock et al.'s \(2020\)](#) research, one of the most important goals for destination marketers in the era that follows COVID-19 will be to increase the number of returning customers. This is especially true when considering the heightened market competition throughout this age.

Consequently, it is of substantial theoretical and practical significance to explore the relationship between destination image and tourist behavior and to intervene in memorable tourism experience as a crucial variable. This is because it is important both in theory and in practice. This is because such an investigation is significant in both theory and practice and is relevant for both reasons.

Specifically, "looking for lost homes" has become a form of tourism fashion in the framework of ancient town tourism, and the great worth of China's existing ancient towns can continue to be represented through the market, becoming an important tourism resource that drives economic development. This is all due to the rise in people's living standards, which has ultimately resulted in an increase in the standard of life for the population as a whole. Ancient towns are very common in China because Chinese culture has existed for over five thousand years. This is one reason why China has so many ancient towns. According to [Wen \(1998\)](#), many ancient towns were established at this time for historical and geographical reasons. According to [McCartney and Chen \(2020\)](#), tourists visiting these cities may have the opportunity to learn about

and experience local culture and ancient architecture, history, and other cultural elements. According to the China Domestic Tourism Development Report, 2020, there has been a noteworthy increase in the frequency with which people of China partake in daily cultural activities in recent years (Wu, 2020). In addition, the percentage of people who engage in leisure and cultural activities on the weekends is as high as 60.03 percent, and 59 percent of holiday travelers opt to travel to places of historical and cultural significance. Local and peripheral tourists are gaining popularity due to the standardized prevention and management of COVID-19, and tourism in historic towns has received new opportunities for expansion due to these developments.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the tourism industry of ancient towns in China has been confronted with common problems such as similar development modes, excessive commercialization, insufficient supporting facilities, unprominent core culture, and excessive marketing (Gohary et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2005; Song, 2010; Zhang et al., 2021). This has resulted in a poor experience effect for tourists, and it is necessary to investigate possible solutions. The tourism experience in historic towns has only received a relatively low degree of theoretical academic attention overall. According to the findings of a study conducted in 2020 by Zhang and Walsh, solutions to issues that arise with the tourist experience in China are seldom found by approaching the issues from a historical and cultural tourism perspective.

This study studies the link between a destination's image and a visitor's behavioral intention in the context of an ancient town. Additionally, it investigates the mediating role of memorable tourism experiences in this relationship. Chengdu, a town steeped in history, was chosen as the site for the study because the tourism industry in southwest China has experienced rapid growth in recent years. This has considerably increased the number of visitors to the region due to promoting its traditional culture. As a direct consequence, the city of Chengdu was chosen to serve as the setting for the investigation. Visitors from the surrounding area flock to the historic district of Chengdu because it is home to diverse cultures, including those associated with the city's wharves, ethnic groups, and recreational activities.

In contrast to the "cultural sightseeing" model that was used in the development of Jiangnan Ancient Town in China, which is an example of a typical

"leisure and vacation" model of growth, Chengdu Ancient Town is an example of a typical "leisure and vacation" model of development. The needs of the local way of life and recreational activities have been prioritized in the planning and management of the historic town of Chengdu. This is because Chengdu's historic town is a popular site for local tourists. Consequently, the selection of local visitors as the subject of this study's research is appropriate in light of the present circumstances regarding the operation of the old town and its further expansion.

This research aims to (1) examine the effect of destination image on memorable tourism experience and behavioral intention in the context of an old town and (2) assess the role that memorable tourism experience plays in mediating the relationship between the two. Both of these goals will be achieved as a result of this research. Additionally, a tourist's connection to a specific area is a moderating variable in how a memorable tourism experience impacts the visitors' intention to repeat the event. This is because of the process by which a memorable tourism experience influences visitors' intention to repeat the event. This study contributes to our understanding of the factors that contribute to a memorable tourism experience and the consequences of those factors. In addition, it researches the fundamental aspects of a destination's image to analyze the significant part that competition plays in marketing destinations.

2.2 Memorable tourism experience

A travel experience that is remembered and recalled after the event occurs is referred to as a memorable tourism experience (MTE) (Kim et al., 2010). This is the subjective evaluation of tourists on whether an incident is worth remembering and whether it can be recalled in the future (Sthapit et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zimmerman & Kelley, 2010). The researchers consider that not all experiences can influence visitors' behavior, but only recalled experiences can affect tourists' future decisions (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Kim et al., 2010; Wei et al., 2019). These findings were published in Kerstetter and Cho (2004), Kim et al. (2010), and Wei et al. (2019). According to Tung and Ritchie (2011), tourism service providers cannot directly give memorable tourism experiences; rather, they can only help create an environment that increases the potential for tourists to create memorable tourism experiences.

Currently, there have been a few quantitative research that has investigated the effect that travel has on one's memory (Ali, Hussain, & Ragavan, 2014; Ali, Ryu, & Hussain, 2016; Kim et al., 2010; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). These studies may be found here. According to the findings of Zhang et al. (2018), the experience dimensions of education, aesthetics, entertainment, escapism, involvement, hedonism, and local culture have a major impact on travelers' memories and can become life-changing adventures. The one-dimensional scale established by Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007) and the 7-dimensional 24-item scale developed by Kim et al. (2012) is the existing scales with mature applicability. Different research teams developed both scales. The scale developed by Oh et al. (2007) is considered a pioneer in testing the four domains of travel experience (i.e., entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics). The scale's goal is to measure the memorability of the experience, and it was found to be applicable due to its content validity and methodological fit (de Freitas Coelho, de Sevilha Gosling, & de Almeida, 2018). As a result, this study aimed to evaluate this scale's applicability within an old town's framework.

Understanding and bolstering the pleasant memories of visitors is regarded as the competitive advantage of the current tourism business (Kim et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2018). The significance of having a memorable experience while on vacation is growing increasingly important. However, it is still a fairly novel idea, and there is not nearly enough empirical research on the factors contributing to a memorable travel experience. According to Zhang et al. (2018), an integrated model does not examine the linkages between visitors' memorable tourism experiences and the images of the destinations they visit. Both are believed to be major antecedents of future behavior.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 The impact of destination image on memorable tourism experience

Chen and Tsai (2007) concluded that a place's image directly and positively influences the perceived value and experience quality of that location. According to Hu (2009), the cognitive image of a location has a direct impact on the value that visitors

assign to that destination. Subsequent studies have gradually been undertaken on the relationship between destination image and tourism experience, particularly regarding memorable tourism experiences (Lu et al., 2005; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). These studies have gradually been conducted on the relationship between destination image and tourism experience. According to Kim et al. (2010), a memorable tourism experience is constructed by visitors based on their evaluation of their own subjective experience. As a result, the role of the Destination Management Organization (DMO) is to promote the development of destinations, thereby improving the possibility that visitors will create a memorable tourism experience (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) because of the highly memorable tourism experience role in contributing to the formation of an emotional connection between the visitor and the destination (Christou, 2020). For instance, cultural tourism locations offer visitors a memorable experience through products and services featuring local cultural traits, enhancing visitors' cultural recollections (Wang et al., 2020).

Kim (2014) proposed that a destination attribute is an important antecedent of a memorable tourism experience. He also investigated the relationship between destination attributes and memorable tourism experiences. These destination attributes, which essentially refer to a cognitive image of the destination, include the ten dimensions listed below: local culture, activity diversity, hospitality, infrastructure, environmental management, accessibility, quality of service, landform, place attachment, and superstructure. Nevertheless, Kim did not conduct empirical research to determine how the above characteristics contribute to a memorable travel experience (Zhang et al., 2018). In their study, Zhang et al. (2018) measured destination images using three cognitive dimensions: natural attractions, cultural attractions, and tourist facilities. They concluded that destination image had a favorable impact on memorable travel experiences. Later on, Kim (2018) created a comprehensive MTE model, and one of the focuses of that model was the cognitive perspective of the destination image. The investigation of the connection between a person's mental image and a memorable travel experience can benefit from the specific and explanatory information that these can supply. In addition, past research suggests that a destination's image can be broken down into cleanliness image components and

motivational image factors, both of which are supported by the Two-factor theory (Hu, 2009). However, it is not entirely obvious whether or not these two variables can have the same impact on the memorable tourism experience. As a result, the researchers in this study postulated that:

H1a: *There is a relationship between hygiene destination image factors and the memorable tourism experience of ancient town local tourists.*

H1b: *There is a relationship between motivator destination image factors and the memorable tourism experience of ancient town local tourists.*

3.2 The impact of destination image on behavioral intention

In the existing literature, the destination image is widely regarded as an important structure that affects tourists' decision-making, destination choice, post-travel evaluation, and future behavior (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Stylos et al., 2016), and it is also considered to be the most important antecedents of post-travel consumption behavior (Tasci, Gartner, & Tamer Cavusgil, 2007). Briefly, the destination image significantly influences travelers' decision-making process and tourism consumer behavior. It is one of the primary endogenous driving forces of tourism-dependent regional economic development (Cakmak & Isaac, 2012).

In the study of tourism experience, intentions to return and disseminate favorable word-of-mouth are frequently viewed as indicators of tourists' behavioral intentions. De La Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva (2019) confirmed this conclusion through field research, whereas other studies have demonstrated that this effect is indirect (Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007; Stylos et al., 2016; Zeugner-Roth & Žabkar, 2015). Therefore, researchers believe that a direct or indirect positive correlation exists between destination image and intention to return (Carballo Fuentes, 2015). In addition, Tasci et al. (2007) and Zhang et al. (2018) found that a destination's image positively affects the quality of tourists' travel experiences and that satisfied tourists are apt to recommend the goal. In conclusion, tourists' choice decisions are typically influenced by the destination's image; their impression of the destination determines whether they will return, and their opinions influence the travel decisions of other potential tourists through word of mouth (Tian et al., 2021).

Although the effects of destination image on behavioral intention are well-documented, the magnitude and quality of these effects are ambiguous from many sources (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020), and their direct or indirect impact requires additional confirmation. From the perspective of the cognitive image, based on the Two-factor theory, destination image can be divided into hygiene factors and motivator factors (Hu, 2009). However, whether these two factors have an equal impact on the behavior intention of local visitors in tourism destinations is unknown. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: *There is a relationship between hygiene destination image factors and revisit intention of ancient town local tourists.*

H2b: *There is a relationship between hygiene destination image factors and recommended intention of ancient town local tourists.*

H3a: *There is a relationship between motivator destination image factors and revisit intention of ancient town local tourists.*

H3b: *There is a relationship between motivator destination image factors and recommended intention of ancient town local tourists.*

3.3 The Influence of memorable tourism experience on behavioral intention

According to the study, travelers base their decisions on past experiences and recollections (Lehto, O'leary, & Morrison, 2004; Wirtz et al., 2003). In addition, script theory suggests that visitors' future decisions will be influenced by memorable experiences (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Kim et al., 2010). At present, the memorable tourism experience is a relatively new concept (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2017) that pertains to tourists' behavioral intentions (Kim, 2014) and decision-making (Taheri, Jafari, & O'Gorman, 2014).

According to a previous study (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013), the memory of the past is considered the most valuable source of information for travelers deciding to revisit a specific destination. Yu, Chang, and Ramanpong (2019) discovered that visitors always intend to return to locations with positive memories. Other studies have shown that word-of-mouth is a significant indicator of tourist loyalty (Tanford, 2013; Wardi, Abror, & Trinanda, 2018). As a result of a positive reputation, tourism

destinations can be promoted externally and acquire greater visibility. Thus, in terms of the importance of memorable experiences to behavioral intention, they are the most valuable source of information for tourists when they decide to revisit a particular destination or provide word-of-mouth recommendations (Hoch & Deighton, 1989; Hung, Lee, & Huang, 2016; Lehto et al., 2004).

The most accurate predictor of future behavior is a memorable tourism experience (Chandralal et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2012; Neuhofer et al., 2014). However, whether memorable tourism experience has the same effect on revisit intention and recommend intention must be confirmed in additional contexts, and memorable tourism experience must be studied to comprehend better tourist behavioral intentions (Kim et al., 2012). Based on the preceding literature, this investigation tested the hypothesis that:

H4a: *Memorable tourism experience of local tourists in ancient towns positively impacts revisit intention.*

H4b: *Memorable tourism experience of local tourists in ancient towns positively impacts recommended intention.*

3.4 The mediating role of memorable tourism experience and the moderating role of place attachment.

According to Christou (2020), creating a highly memorable tourism experience can facilitate the development of emotional connections between tourists and the destinations they visit. According to Sthapit and Coudounaris (2017), the framework for creating a memorable tourism experience is contingent upon the context in which it occurs. Nonetheless, a limited number of empirical inquiries have been conducted to explore the precursors and outcomes of tourism experiences that are deemed memorable (Zhang et al., 2018). The S-O-R model, developed by Mehrabian and Russell in 1974, is a framework in environmental psychology that elucidates the interconnection between stimuli, human behavior, and organic components. The term "environmental stimulus" refers to an external factor that elicits a series of psychological reactions in the recipient, ultimately resulting in observable external behaviors (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003; Namkung & Jang, 2010). The S-O-R model

has found extensive use in marketing, which elucidates the underlying processes by which external factors impact consumers' behavioral inclinations. Thus, this model is a crucial foundation for bolstering the linkage mechanism between "Destination image-MTE-Behavioral intention." Additionally, it underscores the intermediary function of noteworthy tourism experiences.

Several scholars have proposed that tourists with noteworthy experiences in a particular location are inclined to spread favorable word-of-mouth regarding that destination (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Oh et al., 2007; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Leisure tourists are inclined towards exploring novel destinations to satiate their travel cravings. Creating memorable experiences is paramount in generating positive word-of-mouth, albeit its relatively limited influence on revisit intention (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013). The absence of a unified theoretical agreement among scholars regarding the constituents, precursors, and outcomes of the memorable tourism experience necessitates additional investigation to enhance comprehension in alternative settings (Chandralal et al., 2015; Kim, 2018). Given the prevalence of brief-distance tourism, it would be advantageous to conduct research in the domain of historical towns to authenticate the intervening impact of the memorable tourism experience. Simultaneously, given its diversification, there is significant merit in delving deeper into the impact mechanism of the cognitive image on prospective conduct. Castro et al. (2007) posits that such an investigation would be highly valuable. Additionally, exploring the influence mechanism of cognitive image factors of varying destinations on tourists' behavior is a promising avenue for future research, as Hu (2009) suggested. Thus, the present study posits:

H5a: *Memorable tourism experience mediates the relationship between hygiene destination image factors and revisits the intention of ancient town local tourists.*

H5b: *Memorable tourism experience mediates the relationship between hygiene destination image factors and recommends the intention of ancient town local tourists.*

H5c: *Memorable experience mediates the relationship between motivator destination image factors and revisits the intention of ancient town local tourists.*

H5d: *Memorable experience mediates the relationship between motivator destination image factors and recommended intention of ancient town local tourists.*

The initial conceptualization of place attachment pertains to the phenomenon wherein individuals tend to develop a robust emotional bond with their place of dwelling, thereby eliciting a sense of being "at home" or "in place" (Gross & Brown, 2006; Kyle et al., 2004; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). Page (2014) defines place attachment as the affective and cognitive bond between individuals and particular places, including tourist destinations, due to their interactions. This concept is relevant to the tourism industry. Subsequently, scholars have conducted further research on the impact of place attachment on individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Numerous scholarly investigations have examined the significance of place attachment in elucidating the variations in residents' perspectives towards tourism development and their inclination to endorse future tourism (Ouyang, Gursoy, & Sharma, 2017). In the context of the post-tour behavior of tourists, the primary emphasis is on their intention to revisit. Research conducted by Tsai (2012) has demonstrated that place attachment is crucial in influencing the revisit intention of international tourists to Singapore. Subsequent studies have also corroborated this finding, indicating that place attachment has a direct and substantial positive impact on the revisit intention of tourists to the destination (Brown, Smith, & Assaker, 2016; Jin et al., 2020). Hosany and Witham (2010) have confirmed that place attachment can enhance tourists' inclination to recommend a destination by influencing their emotional and affective states.

The study authors conducted by Jin et al. (2020) assert that place attachment is a valuable determinant in elucidating the impact of tourists' emotional connection with a destination on their attitudes and behaviors. Their research findings support this assertion. Ramkissoon (2015) surveyed tourists who visited African islands and discovered that individuals who frequently revisit these destinations exhibit stronger emotional connections to these locations. To clarify, local tourists can show differing degrees of place attachment to an ancient town. Individuals with a stronger sense of attachment may be more inclined to revisit or endorse the location based on positive recollections. This implies that the level of place attachment determines how memorable tourism experiences can elicit varying effects on behavioral intention. Therefore, the moderating hypotheses of the present study are posited as follows:

H6a: Place attachment moderates memorable tourism experiences and revisits the intention relationship. In high-place attachment conditions, the relationship is stronger.

H6b: Place attachment moderates memorable tourism experience and recommends intention relationship. In high-place attachment conditions, the relationship is stronger.

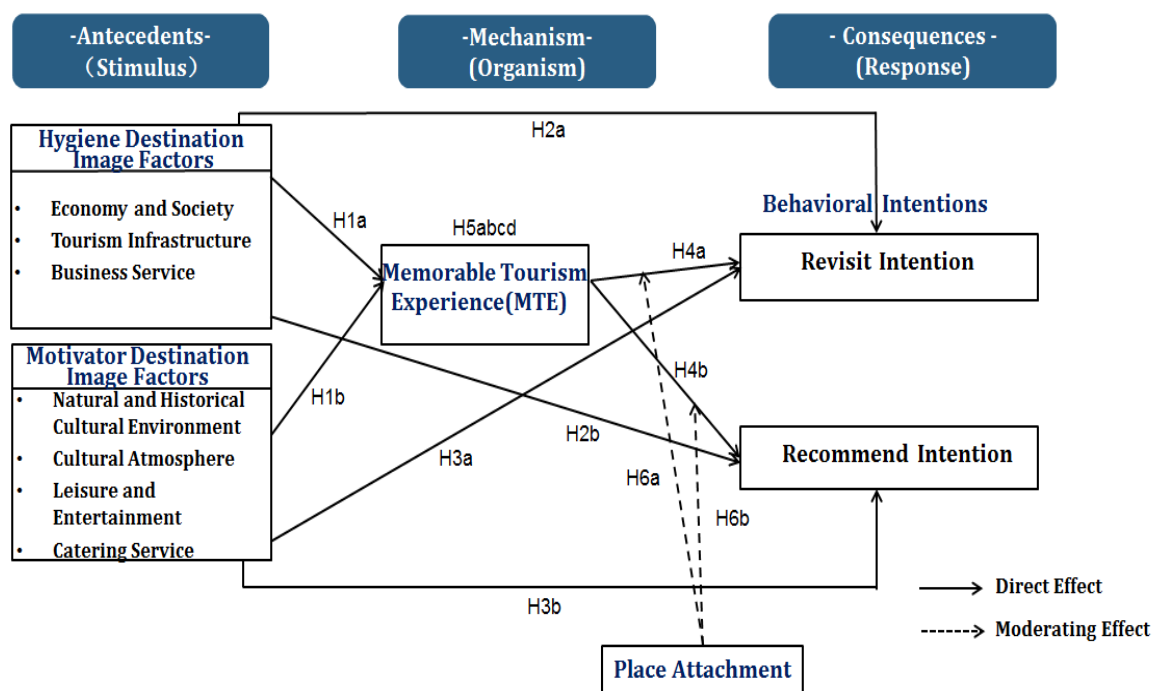


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

4. Research design

4.1 Research Sample

In July 2022, a questionnaire survey was conducted in Luodai ancient town, Huanglongxi ancient town, and Anren ancient town of Chengdu, utilizing the convenience sampling method. The sample was selected based on specific requirements from the local tourist population in Chengdu. The study involved the distribution of 420 questionnaires, out of which 385 were successfully returned. After excluding 32 invalid questionnaires, a total of 353 valid questionnaires were obtained. The questionnaire recovery rate was calculated to be 91.67%, while the effective rate was 84.05%.

Chengdu, a renowned historical city in western China, boasts a profound historical and cultural heritage spanning millennia. A distinctive regional culture and

abundant tourism resources characterize the city. The Chengdu ancient town is a significant undertaking within the tourism sector of Chengdu, which amalgamates conventional art, local customs, and distinctive products. Currently, there exist 27 historic towns located in the city of Chengdu. Huanglongxi ancient town represents the Wharf civilization and the South Silk Road civilization. Luodai ancient town represents the minority culture, while Anren ancient town represents the historical and cultural aspects of the Republic of China. The historical and cultural characteristics of Chengdu's ancient town are comprehensively explored, incorporating customary leisure and cultural components during modernization. Tourists have shown a marked preference for these locations, which have also emerged as the favored destinations for residents seeking to engage in leisure and entertainment activities near their homes. The data collected from ancient towns primarily reflects the general assessment of domestic tourists, and Chengdu's ancient towns serve as a highly credible case study for this research.

The questionnaire sample composition reveals that 55.2% of the respondents were male, while 44.8% were female. About age, 33.7% of the participants were between 21 and 30, 34.8% were between 31 and 40, and the remaining 31.5% were from other age groups. Regarding the educational attainment of the sample population, 21.8% possessed a high school diploma or lower, 28.7% held an associate degree, 37.7% obtained a bachelor's degree, and 10.8% earned a master's degree. Regarding the distribution of occupations, it can be observed that public institutions and civil servants constituted 31.1% of the sample, while employees of enterprises accounted for 24.6%. Students represented 18.4% of the population, and the remaining 25.9% were classified as belonging to other occupational categories.

Regarding other dimensions, the group of tourists earning a monthly income ranging from CNY5000 to CNY10000 constituted the largest percentage, amounting to 37.1%. The duration of a sojourn in the historic town primarily ranges from half a day to one day, with self-driven transportation being the predominant mode of travel. The lodging options primarily consist of budget-friendly hotels. The predominant budget range for tourism in ancient towns is between CNY 300 and CNY 500, with a secondary range between CNY 500 and CNY 1000.

4.2 Questionnaire Design and variable measurement

All variables in this study were measured using maturity scales developed by prominent scholars. The survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale and a 7-point Likert scale for measurement purposes. The items were adjusted to align with the conditions in Chengdu's ancient town. Following consultation with pertinent experts in the domain of tourism research, the questionnaire was subsequently modified to yield the ultimate version. Thus, it can be concluded that the questionnaire utilized in this research exhibits good content validity. [Table 1](#) displays the measurement items and citation sources for each variable.

Table 1. Measurement Items and Citation Sources

Dimensions	Measuring items	Citation sources
Economy and Society	The local economy is developing well in this ancient town.	San Martín and Del Bosque (2008)
	The social environment is safe in this ancient town.	
	The social environment is orderly in this ancient town.	
Tourism Infrastructure	Travel service information is easily obtained in this ancient town.	Beerli and Martin (2004)
	The tourist service facilities in this ancient town are complete.	
	The transportation in this ancient town is convenient.	
Business Service	The business environment in this ancient town is well-managed.	Rittichainuwat, Qu, and Brown (2001)
	It is convenient to buy tourist commodities in this ancient town.	
	The price of commodities purchased in this ancient town is reasonable.	
Natural and Historical Cultural Environment	The natural ecological environment in this ancient town is well maintained.	San Martín and Del Bosque (2008) Hu (2009)
	The cultural landscape in this ancient town is distinctive.	
	Precious historical sites are preserved in this ancient town.	
Cultural Atmosphere	This ancient town has a rich historical and cultural atmosphere.	Beerli and Martin (2004)
	This ancient town has a strong modern cultural atmosphere.	
	This ancient town has a strong artistic atmosphere.	

Leisure and Entertainment	<p>The folk festivals in this ancient town are very distinctive. Chen and Tsai (2007)</p> <p>This ancient town has a variety of evening entertainment activities.</p> <p>The leisure and entertainment projects in this ancient town are highly participatory.</p>
Catering Service	<p>The catering in this ancient town is rich and distinctive. Hui and Wan (2003)</p> <p>The catering in this ancient town is of high quality.</p> <p>The catering in this ancient town is reasonably priced.</p>
Memorable Tourism Experience	<p>I will have wonderful memories of this ancient town. Oh et al. (2007)</p> <p>I will remember many positive things about this ancient town.</p> <p>I will not forget my experience in this ancient town.</p>
Revisit intention	<p>I want to revisit this ancient town shortly. Bonn et al. (2007)</p> <p>If given the opportunity, I will return to this ancient town.</p> <p>I am willing to spend time and money to revisit this ancient town.</p>
Recommend Intention	<p>I will recommend this ancient town to my relatives and friends. Bonn et al. (2007)</p> <p>I would say positive things about this ancient town.</p> <p>I would encourage my friends and relatives to visit this ancient town.</p>
Place Attachment	<p>I enjoy visiting this ancient town more than any other destination. Lee, Kyle, and Scott (2012)</p> <p>For recreational activities, this ancient town is the best.</p> <p>Participating in leisure activities in this ancient town is more important than elsewhere.</p> <p>I identify strongly with this ancient town.</p> <p>I feel a strong sense of belonging to this ancient town.</p> <p>I feel that I can be myself when I visit this ancient town.</p>

Source: Collated in this paper

4.3 Analysis Methods

Before conducting exploratory factor analysis, the KMO and Bartlett sphericity test was administered to assess the appropriateness of the sample data for factor analysis. Subsequently, the factor analysis employed the principal component method and maximum variance rotation method to confirm the construct validity of the scales. The structural model's hypothesis, which aimed to establish the connections between destination image, memorable tourism experience, behavioral intention, and place attachment, was tested using AMOS23.0. The study employed the AMOS23.0 Bootstrap method to examine the mediating impact of memorable tourism experiences on destination image and behavioral intention. The study utilized the Process plug-in within the SPSS24.0 software to explore the potential moderating effect of place attachment on the relationship between memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intention.

5. Results and findings

5.1 Reliability and Validity Test

The scales were subjected to KMO and Bartlett's Sphericity tests. The study's findings indicate that the KMO coefficients were above 0.7, and the Bartlett Sphericity, test significance coefficient was 0.000, indicating that the validity standard was met. The sample data is deemed appropriate for factor analysis. The reliability test utilized Cronbach's α . Upon conducting an analysis, it was found that Cronbach's α coefficients for each variable scale exceeded 0.7, indicating a high level of reliability for all scales.

Convergence and discriminant validity were assessed as part of the validity testing process. [Table 2](#) presents the analysis results on the standardized factor load, combined reliability (CR value), and average variance extraction (AVE value). All latent variables are represented as the factor loads were observed to be greater than 0.6. All CR values exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.6, indicating good internal consistency for each facet. The AVE values of all potential variables exceeded 0.5, which aligns with the universally recognized test standard. According to [Fornell and](#)

Larcker (1981), AVE values between 0.36 and 0.5 are acceptable, while those greater than 0.5 are considered ideal. This suggests that the selected dimensions in this study effectively explain the variables' variance. The convergence validity of the questionnaire data is satisfactory.

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Dimensions	Indicators	Normalized Factor Load	CR Value	Cronbach's α	AVE Values
Economy and Society	ES1	0.827	0.876	0.875	0.702
	ES2	0.857			
	ES3	0.829			
Tourism Infrastructure	TI1	0.785	0.875	0.874	0.701
	TI2	0.887			
	TI3	0.836			
Business Service	BS1	0.866	0.917	0.915	0.787
	BS2	0.933			
	BS3	0.861			
Natural and Historical Cultural Environment	NHCE1	0.795	0.973	0.872	0.696
	NHCE2	0.883			
	NHCE3	0.823			
Cultural Atmosphere	CA1	0.761	0.845	0.844	0.645
	CA2	0.816			
	CA3	0.830			
Leisure and Entertainment	LE1	0.867	0.885	0.884	0.719
	LE2	0.854			
	LE3	0.822			
Catering Service	CS1	0.860	0.882	0.882	0.714
	CS2	0.842			
	CS3	0.832			
Memorable Tourism Experience	MTE1	0.960	0.953	0.942	0.846
	MTE2	0.932			
	MTE3	0.865			
Revisit Intention	RI1	0.783	0.872	0.871	0.695
	RI2	0.865			
	RI3	0.850			
Recommend Intention	IR1	0.744	0.856	0.852	0.665
	IR2	0.803			
	IR3	0.893			
Place Attachment	PA1	0.828	0.925	0.922	0.672
	PA2	0.803			
	PA3	0.891			
	PA4	0.778			
	PA5	0.797			
	PA6	0.817			

Source: Collated in this paper

Regarding discriminative validity, if the root mean square root of the average variance extraction amount (AVE) of each facet is greater than the correlation coefficient between it and other facets, it indicates that the data has good discriminative validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 3, all facets' root mean square AVE values were greater than their correlation coefficients with other facets. This indicates that the data used in all facets have good discriminative validity.

Table 3. Discriminative Validity

Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Natural and Historical Cultural Environment	0.834										
Cultural Atmosphere	0.351 **	0.803									
Leisure and Entertainment	0.191 **	0.423 **	0.848								
Catering Service	0.344 **	0.365 **	0.289 **	0.845							
Economy and Society	0.203 **	0.150 **	0.150 **	0.138 **	0.838						
Tourism Infrastructure	0.216 **	0.200 **	0.200 **	0.132 **	0.208 **	0.837					
Business Service	0.082 *	0.122 **	0.118 **	0.151 **	0.155 **	0.270 **	0.887				
Memorable Tourism Experiences	0.187 **	0.293 **	0.250 **	0.273 **	0.149 **	0.259 **	0.226 **	0.92			
Revisit Intention	0.330 **	0.297 **	0.304 **	0.335 **	0.301 **	0.445 **	0.144 **	0.470 **	0.834		
Recommend Intention	0.218 **	0.37 **	0.38 **	0.388 **	0.260 **	0.458 **	0.163 **	0.460 **	0.498 **	0.815	
Place Attachment	0.091 *	0.449 **	0.107 **	0.172 **	0.08 *	0.264 **	0.166 **	0.324 **	0.182 **	0.175 *	0.82

Note: ** represents $P < 0.01$. * represents $P < 0.05$. The value on the diagonal represents the mean root square of the mean-variance extraction amount (AVE), and below the diagonal is the correlation coefficient between the dimensions.

Source: Collated in this paper.

5.2 Model test

5.2.1 Relevance

According to the findings presented in Table 4, a statistically significant positive correlation exists between motivator destination image factors, hygiene destination image factors, memorable tourism experience, and revisit intention. The correlation coefficients for these variables were 0.403, 0.372, and 0.434, respectively.

The study found a significant positive correlation between motivator destination image factors, hygiene destination image factors, and memorable tourism experiences with recommended intention. The correlation coefficients for these factors were 0.437, 0.379, and 0.436, respectively. The study found that both motivator destination and hygiene destination image factors exhibited a statistically significant positive correlation with the formation of memorable tourism experiences. The correlation coefficients for motivator and hygiene destination image factors were 0.328 and 0.294, respectively. The study's findings indicate that motivator image factors correlate more strongly with MTE and behavior intention than hygiene image factors. Additionally, the influence of destination image and MTE on recommend intention is greater than that of revisit intention. These results provide ample evidence to support establishing the "Destination Image-MTE-Behavioral Intention" relationship model proposed in this study.

Table 4. Relevance

	MDIF	HDIF	MTE	PA	RI	IR
MDIF	1					
HDIF	0.291 **	1				
MTE	0.328 **	0.294 **	1			
PA	0.258 **	0.227 **	0.306 **	1		
RI	0.403 **	0.372 **	0.434 **	0.161 **	1	
IR	0.437 **	0.379 **	0.436 **	0.179 **	0.434 **	1

Note: ** represents $P < 0.01$. * represents $P < 0.05$

MDIF=Motivator Destination Image Factors; HDIF=Hygiene Destination Image Factors; MTE=Memorable Tourism Experience; RI = Revisit Intention; IR = Intention to Recommend.

Source: Collated in this paper.

5.2.2 Path Test

From the analysis (see [Table 5](#)), the value of χ^2/DF was 1.684, less than 3, which indicates the perfect adaptation; the RMSEA value was 0.044, less than 0.08, indicating the ideal adaptation; The value of GFI was 0.891, greater than 0.8, indicating the ideal adaptation; The value of IFI was 0.961, greater than 0.9, the result fits well; The value

of CFI was 0.961, greater than 0.9, the result fits well; The value of NFI was 0.909, greater than 0.9, indicating reasonable adaptation. TLI value of 0.956 was greater than 0.9. The result fits well. In summary, all relevant values are within the acceptable range; the overall model includes reasonable.

Table 5. Overall Fitting Coefficients of the Model

Fitting Index	Acceptable Range	Measured Value
CMIN/DF	< 3	1.684
GFI	> 0.8	0.891
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.044
IFI	> 0.9	0.961
NFI	> 0.9	0.909
TLI(NNFI)	> 0.9	0.956
CFI	> 0.9	0.961

Source: Collated in this paper

Table 6 displays the standardized theoretical paths linking hygiene destination image factors, motivator destination image factors, memorable tourism experience, and behavioral intentions. The standardized path coefficient value between hygiene destination image factors and memorable tourism experience was 0.253 ($p < 0.05$), showing that hygiene destination image factors positively influence memorable tourism experience. Similarly, motivator destination image factors significantly influence memorable tourism experiences with a standardized path coefficient value of 0.308 ($p < 0.05$), supporting H1a and H1b in this study. Moreover, the positive effects of hygiene destination image factors on both revisit intentions and intention to recommend, as hypothesized by H2a and H2b, are supported ($\beta = 0.451, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.423, p < 0.05$), the positive and significant effects of motivator destination image factors on both revisit intention and intention to recommend as hypothesized by H3a and H3b are also supported ($\beta = 0.220, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.308, p < 0.05$). In addition, the analysis shows that memorable tourism experience has a significant positive impact on behavioral intentions ($\beta = 0.185, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.149, p < 0.05$), indicating that the higher the level of MTE, the higher the willingness of tourists to revisit and recommend the destination to others, therefore H4a and H4b are supported.

Table 6. Path Test

Path	Standardized Estimate	T	P	Results
HDIF→MTE	0.253	2.275	0.023	Supported
MDIF→ MTE	0.308	3.125	0.002	Supported
MDIF→RI	0.220	2.241	0.025	Supported
MDIF→IR	0.308	3.042	0.002	Supported
HDIF→RI	0.451	3.331	0.000	Supported
HDIF→IR	0.423	3.259	0.001	Supported
MTE→IR	0.149	2.329	0.020	Supported
MTE→RI	0.185	2.894	0.004	Supported

Source: Collated in this paper

5.3 Mediating Effect Test

This study applied AMOS 23.0 for the Bootstrap method of mediating effects testing, where Random samples were repeated 1000 times in the original data, and 95% confidence intervals were calculated. The standardized mediating effect values and confidence intervals are shown in [Table 7](#):

Table 7. Bootstrap Test Results of Mediating Effects

Path to the relationship between	Estimate	Bias-corrected 95%CI		
		Lower	Upper	P
HDIF →MTE →RI	0.047	0.008	0.12	0.02
HDIF→MTE →IR	0.038	0.002	0.101	0.036
MDIF→MTE →RI	0.057	0.009	0.131	0.017
MDIF→MTE →IR	0.046	0.004	0.109	0.029

Source: Collated in this paper

The study found that memorable tourism experience (MTE) is a mediator between hygiene destination image factors and behavioral intentions, specifically revisit and recommend intentions. The mediating effect values for MTE were 0.047 and 0.038, respectively, and the confidence intervals did not include 0, indicating a significant mediating role. As posited in the present investigation, the above deduction provides corroboration for hypotheses H5a and H5b. The study found that memorable tourism experience (MTE) mediates the relationship between motivator destination image factors and behavioral intentions, specifically revisiting and

recommending intentions. The mediating effect values for MTE were 0.057 and 0.046, respectively, and the confidence interval did not include 0, indicating a significant mediation effect. The support for H5c and H5d has been established.

5.4 Moderating Effect Test

The moderating effect was tested using the Process plug-in in SPSS 24.0. This tool offers mean-centered interaction item settings that can be completed automatically, resulting in improved accuracy and efficiency. Table 8 demonstrates that the interaction term between MTE and place attachment yields a statistically significant impact on revisit intention (0.182, $P < 0.001$). This finding indicates that place attachment is a significant and positive moderator of the association between MTE and revisit intention. Specifically, the results suggest that the strength of the relationship between MTE and revisit intention increases as the level of place attachment intensifies. Therefore, hypothesis H6a is corroborated.

Table 8. Moderating Effect (Revisit Intention)

	coeff	se	t	p
Constant	3.778	0.047	80.951	0.000
Memorable Tourism Experience	0.305	0.038	8.051	0.000
Place Attachment	0.094	0.056	1.695	0.091
Memorable Tourism Experience *Place Attachment	0.182	0.041	4.452	0.000

Source: Collated in this paper

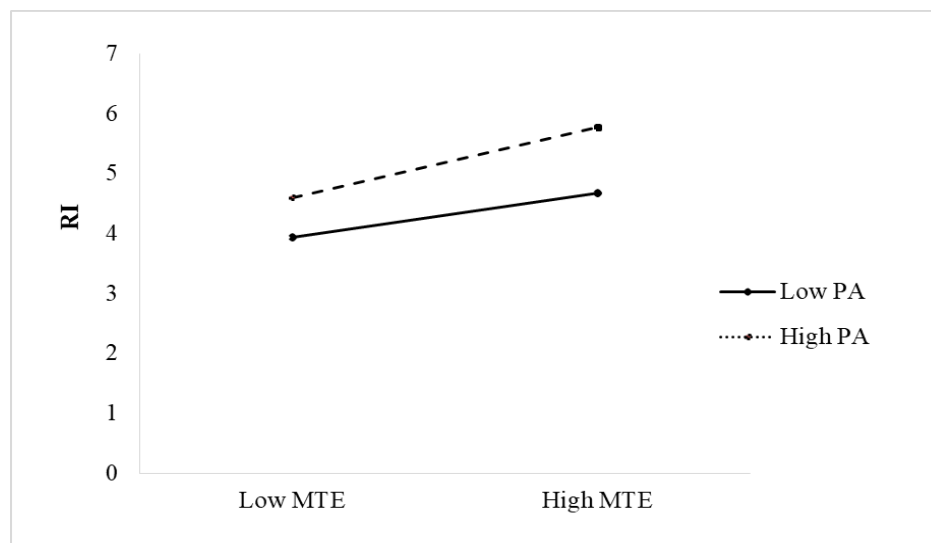


Figure 2. Interaction Effect Diagram (Revisit Intention)

As shown in Table 9, the interaction term between MTE and place attachment significantly affects recommended intention (0.102, $P < 0.01$), reflecting that place attachment positively moderates the relationship between MTE and recommended intention. As such, H6b is supported.

Table 9. Moderating Effect (Recommend Intention)

	coeff	se	t	p
Constant	3.831	0.045	86.164	0.000
Memorable Tourism Experience	0.291	0.036	8.058	0.000
Place Attachment	0.085	0.053	1.608	0.109
Memorable Tourism Experience *Place Attachment	0.102	0.039	2.611	0.009

Source: Collated in this paper

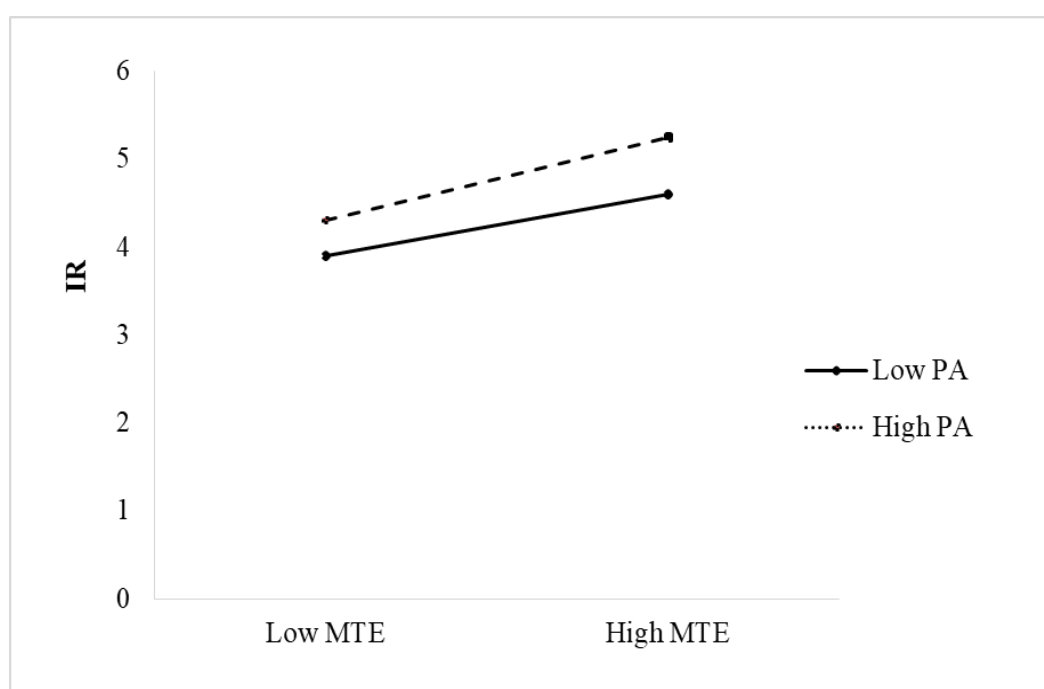


Figure 3. Interaction Effect Diagram (Recommend Intention)

6. Conclusion and Discussion

6.1. Conclusions and Theoretical Implications

The present research examined the relationship model between "Destination image-MTE-Behavioral intention" within the context of an ancient town and confirmed the mediating function of memorable tourism experience. The findings indicate that the perception of the destination influences the recollection of a tourism

encounter and has a favorable impact on the tourists' intention to revisit and recommend the destination. The study revealed that indigenous visitors exhibit a robust sense of assimilation and autonomy within historic settlements, resulting in a greater likelihood of complete immersion and a favorable and enduring encounter. The present research has confirmed the suitability of the MTE measurement scale for implementation in the context of an ancient town.

The previous study conducted by [Hu \(2009\)](#) validated the "Two-factor" categorization of destination cognitive image. The study revealed that distinct categories of destination cognitive image exert varying degrees of impact on the formation of memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intention. The findings of the correlation coefficient analysis indicate that the effects of motivator image factors on memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intention are greater than that of hygiene image factors. The results of the specific surveys reveal that natural and historical cultural environment, cultural atmosphere, leisure and entertainment, and catering experience exert a more pronounced influence on memorable tourism experience and behavioral intention. The tourism experience and behavioral intention of tourists are directly influenced by factors such as economy and society, as well as tourism facilities and business services. However, the impact of these factors is comparatively weaker and lacks a strong motivational effect on tourists. Thus, the conclusion mentioned above furnishes an empirical foundation for categorizing cognitive factors of destination image into "Two-factor," thereby presenting a novel framework for developing and promoting destination image while also broadening the scope of the Two-factor theory.

The present research has also confirmed the moderating influence of place attachment on the association between memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intentions. The local tourists tend to perceive the ancient town as a site for daily leisure activities, leading to a sustained reliance on and association with the ancient town. This, in turn, significantly enhances their inclination to revisit the location and recommend it to others. Thus, this research provides novel insights into the association between memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intentions.

6.2. Management Implications

This research provides valuable insights for destination managers seeking to comprehend how tourism experiences are transformed into memorable experiences. Additionally, it identifies the antecedents that influence the development of such memorable experiences, thereby aiding in identifying crucial factors in destination competition. In practical settings, managers must integrate the motivator destination image factors to enhance the development of the natural, historical, and cultural milieu. Anren ancient town, recognized as a Museum Town, has the potential to enhance its existing historical museums by implementing digital navigation technology. This would enable tourists to engage in an immersive experience of the Republic of China's history. The re-planning and integration of historical buildings and the living environment of local inhabitants in Luodai ancient town are necessary to establish a cohesive cultural atmosphere. Furthermore, it is recommended that Chengdu's historic towns be augmented with recreational activities for parents and children to meet visitors' prevailing desire for weekend excursions. Regarding catering services, each historical town can develop and present a distinctive Chengdu cuisine to establish a competitive edge in the market.

The ancient Chengdu town is a destination that heavily relies on recurring markets, where tourists engage in daily consumption activities such as visiting tea houses, mahjong halls, and other leisure establishments. However, due to the phenomenon of travel burnout, it is imperative for the managers of the ancient town to effectively manage the various stages of the tourists' experience and ensure that their memorable experiences are consistently generated. Hence, devising distinctive cultural tourism offerings and augmenting tourist engagement is a notion meriting contemplation. Furthermore, owing to comparable ways of life, domestic visitors are inclined to embrace and assimilate into the cultural ambiance of the historic town, thereby fostering affective bonds. Hence, it is recommended that managers incorporate cultural components favored by domestic tourists, such as Sichuan opera presentations, frequent traditional flower-viewing festivals, lantern festivals, and dragon boat festivals, to evoke a sense of shared recollection among tourists and augment their eagerness to engage and assimilate.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study exhibits limitations that may offer potential directions for future research. Initially, the survey was administered to tourists in person during this investigation. However, to procure a more impartial assessment of the tourism encounter, the questionnaire distribution was postponed until the late afternoon, following the conclusion of most tourists' visits. This approach has been shown to enhance the recollection accuracy of respondents and promote a more vivid and detailed memory of their experience. However, prior research (Chandralal et al., 2015; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Tung & Ritchie, 2011) has been conducted retrospectively, with participants being prompted to recall their most memorable tourism experience after a certain period has elapsed since their visit. By contrast, the integration of both techniques will yield data that is more dependable. Subsequently, given that cultural tourists possess greater cultural inclinations towards a destination than tourists solely interested in sightseeing, the factors that trigger a noteworthy experience may vary.

Further research could examine the suitability of the scale in diverse settings. Thirdly, it is noteworthy that the survey was conducted during the prevention and control period of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the number of local tourists who participated in the survey was relatively small compared to previous periods. Consequently, the data about tourists' willingness to visit may be distorted compared to data collected during normal periods. Subsequent research endeavors may gather information during a non-pandemic period, thereby enhancing the impartiality of the data collection process.

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