



Is the destination brand loyalty mechanism invariable? A comparative study from China

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Tourism area life cycle
Customer-based brand equity
Trust
Loyalty

ABSTRACT

Tourism area life cycle (TALC) theory has become a major topic in destination research; however, few scholars have used TALC theory to explain the dynamic relationship among customer-based brand equity (CBBE) elements. This study proposes and tests a model of CBBE to explain destination brand loyalty mechanisms at different TALC stages. The findings indicate that at the involvement stage, brand image and brand awareness are the keys to enhancing brand trust, and brand attachment partially mediates the relationship of brand trust on brand loyalty; at the consolidation stage, brand quality is the key to enhancing brand trust, and brand attachment completely mediates the effect of brand trust on brand loyalty. The findings could help deepen the understanding of the dynamic destination brand loyalty mechanism and help destination marketing organizations be more effective at improving tourist loyalty at different TALC stages.

1. Introduction

The brand is crucial when formulating a marketing strategy (Kasapi & Cela, 2017). The destination brand is described as a powerful tool with the ability to create emotional appeal (Leisen, 2001). In the contemporary tourism industry, destination branding management is an increasing trend (Rather & Hollebeek, 2020). Branding development and management of tourist destinations can strengthen the competitive edge of a region (Miličević, Mihalić, & Sever, 2017), promote brand value, and contribute to the sustainable development of a region (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). Therefore, building and managing a successful brand are essential for destinations (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009).

However, destination branding is also an extremely complex process (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005), and it is difficult to find a one-size-fits-all strategy. Destination brand management involves multiple elements such as brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality (Aaker, 1991; Grayson & Johnson, 2015; Kim, Choe, & Petrick, 2018; Lin, 2013; Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, 2015), which have different characteristics at each tourism area life cycle (TALC) stage. According to Butler's (1980) TALC theory, tourist areas are dynamic and change over time. The evolution is caused by a variety of factors, including changes in tourist preferences and needs, degradation and replacement of facilities, changes in the

original landscape, etc. At the exploration stage, no image has formed yet (Lundtorp & Wanhill, 2006), and there are few tourist facilities compared to the latter TALC stages (Berry, 2005). As the TALC evolves, destination image has become standardized (Johnston, 2006), local facilities and services have improved, and the number of tourists has increased (Butler, 1980). At the development stage, over-use and deterioration of facilities may lead to a decrease in the tourists' quality of the experience (Cooper & Jackson, 1989), and the rate of increase in tourist arrivals will decline (Butler, 1980). When entering the stagnation stage, the well-established destination image has divorced from the local environment and is no longer popular (Berry, 2005; Johnston, 2006). As a consequence, destination brand elements are dynamically changing with the evolution of TALC stages.

The mechanism of destination brand loyalty has been a popular theme within the tourism literature, and many existing studies have had contradictory results. For example, Im, Kim, Elliot, and Han (2012) focused on the destination brand of Korea and found that destination brand image significantly impacted destination brand loyalty. While another study took Mongolia as a research site and the result supported that tourists' perception of destination brand image has no significant impact on brand loyalty (Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2010). Kladou and Kehagias (2014) concluded that destination brand loyalty was mostly influenced by destination brand quality in Rome, the capital of Italy.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100658>

Received 2 February 2021; Received in revised form 13 August 2021; Accepted 14 August 2021

Available online 13 September 2021

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While some scholars showed that brand quality did not significantly affect brand loyalty in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile (Bianchi, Pike, & Lings, 2014). The development degree of destinations may be one of the reasons for the different relationships among brand equity elements. Therefore, the TALC theory can be introduced to examine the dynamics of destination brand loyalty mechanisms in different life cycle stages. Yet, so far the TALC theory has been rarely used in destination brand equity researches.

TALC theory model was systematically proposed by Butler in 1980. According to Butler's seminal work (1980), the tourism area life cycle includes six stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, or rejuvenation. A lot of discussions and applications have been carried out since the theory was put forward. Some case studies were carried out to test the validity of Butler's theory (Karplus & Krakover, 2005; Wilkinson, 1987; Zhong, Deng, & Xiang, 2008). Theoretical researches were conducted and concluded that the TALC theory provided a good theoretical framework that can help better understand the destination development process (Haywood, 1986; Xu, Zheng, & Bao, 2005). Recent research affirmed Butler's core proposition through empirical tests and pointed out that Butler's TALC model can best depict individual, discrete life cycle phases that can be used to reflect the economic revolution of destinations (McKercher & Wong, 2020). Although there are some controversies about TALC theory, it is undoubtedly of great value to formulate destination marketing strategies at each stage.

This study aims to determine if there are differences in the destination brand loyalty mechanism at different TALC stages. To answer this question, this study selected two research sites in China, Shandong and Southern Xinjiang, to explore the dynamic relationship among brand elements. Shandong is the first region in China to start tourism destination branding, while Southern Xinjiang is less developed, less accessible, and lags behind other regions in terms of tourism development. Based on Butler's (1980) TALC theory, statistical data and consulted relevant information were collected. Finally, Shandong Province was determined to be at the consolidation stage of TALC, while Southern Xinjiang is still at the involvement stage. A conceptual framework was set up to explain the antecedents of destination brand trust and its influence on destination brand loyalty at different TALC stages, to provide individualized suggestions for destination brand management.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Tourism area life cycle theory

TALC theory, a theoretical framework of destination evolution, is the standard approach related to the sustainable development of destinations (Xu et al., 2005; Zhang & Wen, 2008). Christaller (1963) first proposed the life cycle of tourist destinations when studying the development and evolution of tourist villages along the Mediterranean coast. Butler (1980) systematically proposed the TALC theory based on the concept of the product cycle, which was proposed by Vernon, Schulman, and Foley (1966) and economic geography research. He believed that tourist destinations evolve through six stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline or rejuvenation, forming a nearly S curve. Butler's six-stage TALC theory has attracted much attention from scholars who have carried out empirical studies to verify the theory. Among them, the results of the studies on Grand Island, Antigua, and Zhangjiajie as case sites are highly consistent with the Butler six-stage life cycle model (Meyer-Arendt, 1985; Weaver, 1988; Zhong et al., 2008). However, many scholars have drawn different conclusions. For example, Hovinen (1982) found that Lancaster County in the United States did not have obvious consolidation and stagnation stages. Therefore, he proposed a five-stage theory, comprised of exploration, involvement, development, maturity, and decline stages. Strapp (1988) found that Sauble Beach in Canada entered a stabilization stage after the stagnation stage and, based on this,

proposed a supplementary model of the TALC. Getz (1992) found that Niagara Falls evolved into a permanent state in which consolidation, stagnation, decline, and rejuvenation stages are interwoven and constant.

In the past 40 years, some scholars have raised questions about TALC theory, pointing out that there may be significant differences in the life cycles among different types of tourist destinations, and even the life cycle stages of some tourist destinations, such as Yellowstone Park, are ambiguous (Johnson & Snepenger, 1993). Some scholars pointed out that TALC is just a better tool for judging, and it is necessary to wait until after the fact to determine which stage a tourist destination is in (Choy, 1992; Cooper and Jackson, 1989). Oppermann (1995) considered Butler's TALC theory to be just a good descriptive tool, but still lacking in maneuverability as an application tool. Moore and Whitehall (2005) thought there was no common life cycle relationship that can be applied to all source markets. Garay and Cánoves (2011) proposed that many studies only analyze the evolution of destinations through a single life cycle, but many historical destinations seem to have different consecutive life cycles. Beritelli (2019) pointed out that life cycle theory was first used in the product cycle; when this concept was applied to the tourism field, however, what could be done in practice lacked critical appraisal. It is not advisable to apply the theory in a field that is not comparable to the product. However, McKercher and Wong (2020) broke away from a single destination life cycle paradigm, drawing instead the life cycle diagrams of more than 200 countries. Six different life cycle patterns have been identified, which supports Butler's core proposition that a destination is a dynamic entity that changes over time. He also pointed out that Butler's destination life cycle model describes individual discrete life cycle stages that can be aggregated to reflect the economic development of the destination. Although the debate on TALC theory has not reached a definitive conclusion, scholars have never fundamentally denied its value; indeed, the debates have objectively promoted the continuous improvement of the theory (Ma, Li, & Chen, 2020).

2.2. Customer-based brand equity (CBBE)

Branding as a concept is applied not only to commodities and companies but also to the tourism field (Bianchi et al., 2014; Boo et al., 2009; Cai, 2002; Kotsi, Pike, & Gottlieb, 2018). Creating and developing a 'brand' is one of the core strategies of tourist destination management (Aaker, 1991). The concept of brand equity was put forward based on the fact that a brand is regarded as core equity (Farquhar, 1989). Aaker (1996) believed that brand equity is a series of brand-related assets and liabilities, which can positively or negatively affect consumers' perception of specific products or services. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, Keller (1993) proposed that CBBE exists when consumers are familiar with the brand and have favorable and unique brand associations about the brand in their memory. Brand knowledge, which including multiple dimensions, such as brand image, brand awareness, is the key basis to establish CBBE during brand marketing (Keller, 1993).

The CBBE theory was applied to destination research and the results showed that due to the evaluation of brand dimensions, there are differences in brand equity among tourism markets (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Keller (2016) suggested that scholars should pay more attention to making different types of brand elements work together. Promoting trust and maintaining loyalty is how a successful brand differentiates itself (Aaker, 1991). Therefore, this study focuses on the antecedents of destination brand trust and its impact on destination brand loyalty.

2.3. Destination brand trust

Brand trust refers to the customers' trust in and dependence on the brand. This means that even in the face of risks, customers will still rely on the brand and believe that the brand can eventually produce good

results (Lau & Lee, 1999). Unlike interpersonal trust, brand trust is based on cognition, not on affective bonds (McAllister, 1995). Brand trust comes from the expectation of the expertise and reliability of the exchange partner (Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993). Trust is the cornerstone of establishing a long-term and stable relationship with customers (Spekman, 1988), which directly or indirectly affects the behavior of customers (Hwang, Baloglu, & Tanford, 2019). Brand trust is the foundation of brand loyalty (O'Shaughnessy, 1992), which will have a significant positive impact on brand loyalty, and stronger trust in a brand will lead to higher loyalty (Baloglu, Zhong, & Tanford, 2017). Brand trust will make customers feel safe when interacting with the brand (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2002).

2.4. Destination brand loyalty

Brand loyalty refers to a customer's preference for the brand and willingness to repeatedly consume that brand due to the satisfactory experience of previous purchase and use (Aaker, 1991). Brand loyalty is an important indicator to measure the success of a brand (Nyadzayo, Matanda, & Rajaguru, 2018), determining whether customers focus on the brand (Kim & Kim, 2004) and plays a significant role in market competition (Singh, Bakshi, & Mishra, 2015). Loyal customers are unlikely to turn to competitors just because of price, and they also buy products of the brand more frequently than other brands (Bowen & Shoemaker, 1998). Brand loyalty can reduce costs and transaction leverage, and attract customers. Customer brand loyalty helps enterprises occupy a favorable position against the competition. For tourism destinations, brand loyalty can enhance tourists' feelings towards particular places. Brands with loyal tourists can leverage their feelings towards the brand to improve perceptions of specific destinations and have a strong influence on the management of tourism destinations (Liu, Hultman, Eisingerich, & Wei, 2020).

2.5. Antecedents of destination brand trust

The establishment of brand trust is brand knowledge, including brand image and brand awareness (Keller, 1993). Consumers will not trust the brand unless they have brand awareness or representative brand image in their memories (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006). In addition, consumers are more likely to accept brand extensions when product quality variations are small rather than large (Dacin & Smith, 1994), which indicated that consumers do not trust brands with uneven quality (Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995). Therefore, brand quality is also one of the important antecedents of brand trust.

Brand image, as the key factor of CBBE, is consumers' rational or emotional perception of a specific brand and the basis for increasing brand value and influencing customers' decisions (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007). Brand image is a portal for customers to identify products, evaluate products' quality, consider procurement risks, and obtain certain consumption experiences and satisfaction (Nagar, 2015). A positive brand image will create trust between customers and enterprises (Lin & Ryan, 2016). Consumers' perceived corporate image can help decrease perceived risk, improve trust, and increase the likelihood of purchase (Flavián, Guinaliu, & Torres, 2005). Lehu and Ducher (2001) have confirmed that corporate image is the main reason for high consumer trust. Some recent studies have also indicated that brand image has a significant positive impact on brand trust (Alhaddad, 2015; Kim & Chao, 2019). For tourist destinations, Gomez, Lopez, and Molina (2015) showed that brand image also plays an important role in construction. Destinations with a good brand image are more likely to be visited by tourists and more easily obtain tourist trust and produce brand resonance (Boo et al., 2009; Lu et al., 2015). Hence, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H1. Destination brand image has a positive effect on destination brand trust.

Brand awareness refers to the influence of a brand in the minds of customers (Aaker, 1996), which plays a key role in the purchasing decision-making process of customers (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2015). Brand awareness is also regarded as an important element of brand equity (Aaker, 1996). Destination brand awareness is defined as the ability of tourists to recall a specific tourism destination among various locations and to distinguish it from others (Song, Su, & Li, 2013; Trembath, Romaniuk, & Lockshin, 2011). The relationship between brand awareness and brand trust cannot be ignored (Xue & Sun, 2016). Positive brand awareness can bring positive information and feelings to customers (Baldauf, Cravens, & Binder, 2003; Buil, De Chernatony, & Martínez, 2013), thereby increasing consumers' trust in the brand performance (Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). A recent study demonstrated that brand awareness can increase customer trust in the brand (Sürücü, Öztü). Consumers can distinguish brands that have been heard or seen before. Once a consumer recognizes a brand, he/she will give the brand special meaning and establish associations, thereby increasing customer trust in the product or service (Han, Nguyen, & Lee, 2015). Gartner and Ruzzier (2011) pointed out that brand awareness also plays a key role in tourists' intentions during travel. Well-known tourist destinations are more likely to gain the favor and trust of tourists and therefore be selected. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Destination brand awareness has a positive effect on destination brand trust.

Brand quality, as an important component of CBBE, refers to customers' overall perception of a brand's product quality (Aaker, 1996; Kim, Kim, & Heo, 2016). It is not only a customer's evaluation of a certain attribute of a product or service but also a customer's subjective judgment about the overall advantage of a certain product and the higher level of overall abstraction of the product (Kim et al., 2016). Brand quality can provide consumers with a reason to purchase by distinguishing the brand from other competitors (Allameh, Pool, Jaberi, Salehzadeh, & Asadi, 2015; Zeithaml, 1988). Brand quality is an important latent variable in the case of destinations (Kladou and Kehagias, 2014). Although there are few studies focus on the relationship between destination brand quality and destination brand trust, some studies in other fields have found the influence of brand quality on brand trust. For example, in the business market, it has been proved that the good brand quality of a company can further increase customer trust in the brand (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). In hospital brand equity research, perceived quality affects consumers' brand trust; the higher the perceived quality, the higher the consumer's brand trust (Kumar, Dash, & Purwar, 2013). Han et al. (2015) found that restaurants' food and service quality not only produces customers' trust in the brand through brand reputation but also has a direct and positive impact on customers' brand trust. Sürücü et al. (2019) pointed out that physical quality has an important influence on customer brand trust through a large number of empirical studies on hotels. Based on the discussion above, better brand quality will enhance customers' trust in the brand and maintain their loyalty to the brand (Cretu and Brodie, 2007). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Destination brand quality has a positive effect on destination brand trust.

2.6. The impact of destination brand trust on brand attachment

Brand attachment refers to the emotional relationship between consumers and brands (Thach & Olsen, 2006; Thomson, MacInnis, & Whan, 2005), which is a cognitive and emotional link between the consumer self and the brand (Japutra, Ekinici, & Simkin, 2014; Verma, Jahn, & Kunz, 2012). Trust can stimulate consumers' expectations for a high degree of interaction, which is the basis for attachment (Rose, Merchant, Orth, & Horstmann, 2016). A recent study found that brand trust narrows the distance between consumers and the brand, enabling

consumers to establish a psychological connection with the brand and promoting a strong attachment between them (Wen, Qin, & Liu, 2019). Previous studies have shown that a high degree of brand trust can cause brand attachment and ultimately affect brand commitment (Louis & Lombart, 2010; Rose et al., 2016). In the research of exhibition, Yi, Fu, Jin, and Okumus (2018) have concluded that the trust-attachment relationship can be established. In the research of tourism, Chen and Phou (2013) has confirmed that tourist trust affects tourists' emotional attachment to destinations, and some scholars have discussed Airbnb users' trust-attachment construction mechanism from the perspectives of cognitive-based trust and affective-based trust, further confirming the positive impact of trust on attachment (Yang, Lee, Lee, & Koo, 2019). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Destination brand trust has a positive effect on destination brand attachment.

2.7. The impact of destination brand trust on brand loyalty

Brand trust is a key determinant of brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and is also the most useful relationship marketing tool for increasing loyalty (Berry, 1995). Tourists' brand trust in a destination will improve the satisfaction of tourists with the brand and lead tourists to further generate brand loyalty to the destination (Dedeoğlu, Van, Weinland, & Celuch, 2019). The intangibility of services increases the customers' perception of risk, however, trust can reduce such risk by creating high-value exchange relationships, which helps to promote loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Rees & Gardner, 2003). Although few studies have focused on the relationship between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty, many studies have shown that customer trust has a significant impact on loyalty (Ranjbarian, Dabestani, Khajeh, & Noktehdan, 2011; Sürücü et al., 2019). Westwood, Morgan, Pritchard, and Ineson (1999) analyzed the trust involved in airport and hotel companies and found that trust has a direct and positive impact on building customer loyalty, which has also been established by many other studies (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Ranjbarian et al., 2011). Wei and Wu (2012) believe that brand trust is the basis for establishing a brand-consumer relationship, and a brand experience that solidifies consumer trust will more easily result in consumer loyalty. Sürücü et al. (2019) proved that brand trust has an important influence on brand loyalty. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Destination brand trust has a positive effect on destination brand loyalty.

2.8. The impact of destination brand attachment on brand loyalty

Building emotional bonds between buyers and brands is an important marketing challenge because strong brand-customer bonds are believed to generate brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Brand attachment, as an important driving factor that promotes consumers' loyalty (Hwang et al., 2019; Park et al., 2010), can have a positive impact on consumers' purchasing intention (Hwang et al., 2019), and affect consumers' sharing behavior after purchase (Park et al., 2010; Rossiter & Bellman, 2012). Destination brand attachment can differentiate a destination brand from its competitors by highlighting the uniqueness of the destination (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O'Leary, 2006). Destination brand attachment can result in tourists' positive responses to the destination brand, including the willingness to pay a premium price, to revisit, and to elicit positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Beckman, Kumar, & Kim, 2013). However, consumers are more tolerant of negative information about brands they are attached to and will show the motivation to stay connected and the willingness to invest (Japutra et al., 2014; Wu, Shi, Wang, & Zhang, 2017). Therefore, place attachment is very important in tourism marketing, as an attachment to a place will affect tourists' willingness to revisit (Vada, Prentice, & Hsiao, 2019)

and their sense of, destination loyalty (Jia & Lin, 2016). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. Destination brand attachment has a positive effect on destination brand loyalty.

2.9. The mediating role of destination brand attachment

This research proposes that when tourists establish destination brand trust, the brand attachment may be an important driving factor, which further leads to tourists' destination brand loyalty. Although studies reveal linkages between brand trust and brand loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Sürücü et al., 2019), the mediating role of brand attachment between brand trust and brand loyalty has been rarely tested. Previous studies have shown that trust directly or indirectly affects loyalty through emotional commitment (Baloglu et al., 2017; Bowen and shoemaker, 1998; Sui & Baloglu, 2003), and there is a close relationship between emotional commitment and brand attachment. They both contain elements such as personal relationships and emotional attachment. The mediating role of brand attachment has been discussed in many studies. Brand attachment mediates the positive impact of community commitment on brand commitment (Zhang, Zhou, Su, & Zhou, 2013). The effect of self-determination needs on brand attachment is mediated by celebrity attachment, depending on consumer age (Ilicic, Baxter, & Kulczynski, 2016). And it has been proven that emotional brand attachment mediates the relationship between ideal self-congruence and compulsive buying behavior (Japutra, Ekinci, Simkin, & Nguyen, 2018). Besides, studies have discussed the mediating role of brand attachment in the mechanism of brand loyalty. For example, social media research revealed that brand attachment mediates the impact of customer engagement on brand loyalty (Jahn & Kunz, 2014). Recent tourism research proves that local attachment has a significant mediating role in the relationship between tourist destination trust and loyalty (Liu & Lin, 2019). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7. Destination brand attachment mediates the relationship between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty.

2.10. The two research areas at different TALC stages

Many studies have focused on the mechanism of destination brand loyalty, and have reached different conclusions (Bianchi et al., 2014; Kladou and Kehagias, 2014). However, the TALC theory is rarely introduced into the research of destination brand equity to explain the dynamic changes in the mechanism of destination brand loyalty. When promoting and developing tourist destinations, we must pay attention to the establishment of brands (Kotler, 1999). Tourism destinations can be branded, but destination branding is a long period with a complex and arduous process. According to Butler's (1980) TALC theory, the conditions of each tourism destination at different stages are very distinct and the antecedents of brand trust, including brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality, are distinct among different TALC stages. Brand equity elements such as brand image are easily affected (Pike, 2009). The relationships among the elements of CBBE are complex and varied (Boo et al., 2009; Labrecque, 2014).

Shandong and Southern Xinjiang in China, are two destinations with significant differences in tourism development. Shandong has successfully built a well-known tourist destination brand of "Friendly Shandong" and formed a relatively mature tourist destination brand, while Southern Xinjiang has unique natural scenery and folk customs characteristics, but has not yet formed a mature destination brand. Through statistical data analysis and referring to Butler's TALC stage characteristics (see section 3.1), Shandong was confirmed to be at the consolidation stage, and Southern Xinjiang is at the involvement stage. Therefore, this study assumes that differences exist in the antecedents of destination brand trust and its influence on destination brand loyalty

between the two areas. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H8. All the relationships in the model are significantly different in the two research areas.

Based on the foregoing discussion, the proposed conceptual model is depicted in Fig. 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research site

This study has selected Shandong Province (at the consolidation stage) and the Southern Xinjiang area (involvement stage) in China as research sites because the level of tourism development and the maturity of the destination brands of these two places are different from each other.


The destination factors of the two places are shown in Table 1. Shandong Province, located on the east coast of China, is the first province in China to carry out tourism branding. In 2008, Shandong Province launched the tourist destination brand, “Friendly Shandong”, which quickly gained popularity in China through joint promotion and bundled marketing (Xu, Bai, & Li, 2020). After nearly ten years of continuous cultivation and growth, “Friendly Shandong” has become a mature and well-known destination brand.

Xinjiang, located on the northwestern border of China, is the provincial administrative region with the largest land area in China (Xu, Lin, Li, & Niu, 2018). However, Xinjiang is one of the less developed regions in China. The regional population and per capita GDP of Xinjiang are respectively one-tenth and three-fifths of Shandong’s. The Tianshan Mountains divide Xinjiang into two major regions: northern Xinjiang and southern Xinjiang. Southern Xinjiang is more backward than Northern Xinjiang in the development of tourism, and it has the independence and integrity of brand recognition. Until now, Southern Xinjiang does not have any well-known tourism brand.

It is a complicated process to determine the TALC stages of Shandong and Southern Xinjiang. Based on the theory of Butler (1980), statistical data and relevant information were collected to analyze the TALC stages of the two research sites.

First, the annual tourist arrivals data of China, Shandong Province, and Xinjiang, from 1995 to 2018 were collected and the growth rate of tourist arrivals was calculated. The data were provided by the Statistical Yearbook of China, Shandong, and Xinjiang. As shown in Fig. 2, the annual tourist arrivals in China, Shandong, and Xinjiang showed an increasing trend. However, the overall growth rate of tourist arrivals in China showed a downward trend after 2010, and the tourist arrival growth rate in Shandong Province gradually slowed after 2004, while that of Xinjiang has experienced a substantial increase after 2014. Butler (1980) pointed out that when a destination enters the consolidation stage, its tourist growth rate will decline. Shandong Province meets the characteristics of the consolidation stage in the TALC, while Xinjiang is more in line with the characteristics of the involvement stage or the

Table 1
Destination factors of Shandong & Southern Xinjiang.

Destination factors		Shandong	Southern Xinjiang
Area condition	Area (1000 km ²)	157.9	1063.4
	Population (million)	100.7	9.4
	2019 GDP per capita (thousand yuan)	70.65	42.09
Traffic condition	2019 Airport throughput (million)	62.70	7.94
	Number of high-speed rail lines	13	0
Tourism products	5A level scenic spot	12	5
	4A level scenic spot	223	30
Destination brand	Destination slogan	Friendly Shandong	none
	logo		none

development stage.

Next, the tourism product number of two places was analyzed. In China, the tourist attractions are divided into five levels, from highest to lowest as AAAAA, AAAA, AAA, AA, and A. 5A is the highest level and represents a world-class boutique tourist attraction. The study used ArcGIS 10.2 to depict the distribution of 5A and 4A scenic spots in Shandong and Southern Xinjiang (Fig. 3). It is demonstrated that although the area of Southern Xinjiang is approximately 6.8 times that of Shandong, the number of high-quality tourism products of Southern Xinjiang is much smaller than Shandong. In addition, various types of tourism festivals have been held in Shandong, such as Jining Peony Cultural Festival, Jinan Cultural Tourism Festival, Taishan International Mountaineering Festival, etc. Shandong has built a regional brand system, a festival activity brand system, to extend the local tourist season as much as possible. This is in line with the characteristics of the consolidation stage in Butler’s (1980) TALC theory. Conversely, in Southern Xinjiang, there are fewer mature tourist routes and a lower degree of control over local tourism resources by external capital; thus, tourists can interact more with locals. Our preliminary judgment was that Southern.

Xinjiang is still at the involvement stage based on Butler’s (1980) TALC theory.

To further confirm the TALC stages of Shandong and Southern Xinjiang, more evidence was found. Statistics show that up to the end of 2019, Shandong has a permanent population of 1,007,021 million. In 2019, the tourist arrivals number of in Shandong was 930 million, and that number in 2020 was 540 million. The total number of tourists in Shandong exceeds the number of local residents. In terms of tourism advertising, Shandong uses a variety of methods to make the “Friendly Shandong” brand widespread, such as: broadcasting tourism promotional film on CCTV, cooperating with Shandong Airlines to launch “Friendly Shandong” flights, and cooperating with the vertical search engine, like Ctrip and Qunar, etc. In addition, the recreational business district (RBD) has taken shape in each city of Shandong. For example, Kuanhoubi and Fulong Street in Jinan, Zhongshan Road Commercial District in Qingdao, etc. Those points further prove that Shandong Province has entered the consolidation stage (Butler, 1980). However, Southern Xinjiang has not yet formed a unified tourism slogan and does not have a distinctive tourism logo. Major cities such as Kashgar and Aksu have filmed tourism promotional videos, but the broadcasting channels are limited and their influence in the tourist market is very weak. According to TALC theory (Butler, 1980), tourism destinations in the development stage usually form a clear tourism market area by placing a large number of advertisements. Therefore, Southern Xinjiang has not yet entered the development stage of the TALC. In recent years, the government has made great efforts to improve traffic conditions in Southern Xinjiang. In December 2018, the first civil airport in Southern

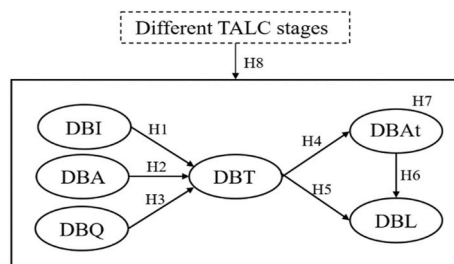


Fig. 1. The proposed research model. Note: DBI = Destination Brand Image; DBA = Destination Brand Awareness; DBQ = Destination Brand Quality; DBT = Destination Brand Trust; DBAt = Destination Brand Attachment; DBL = Destination Brand Loyalty.

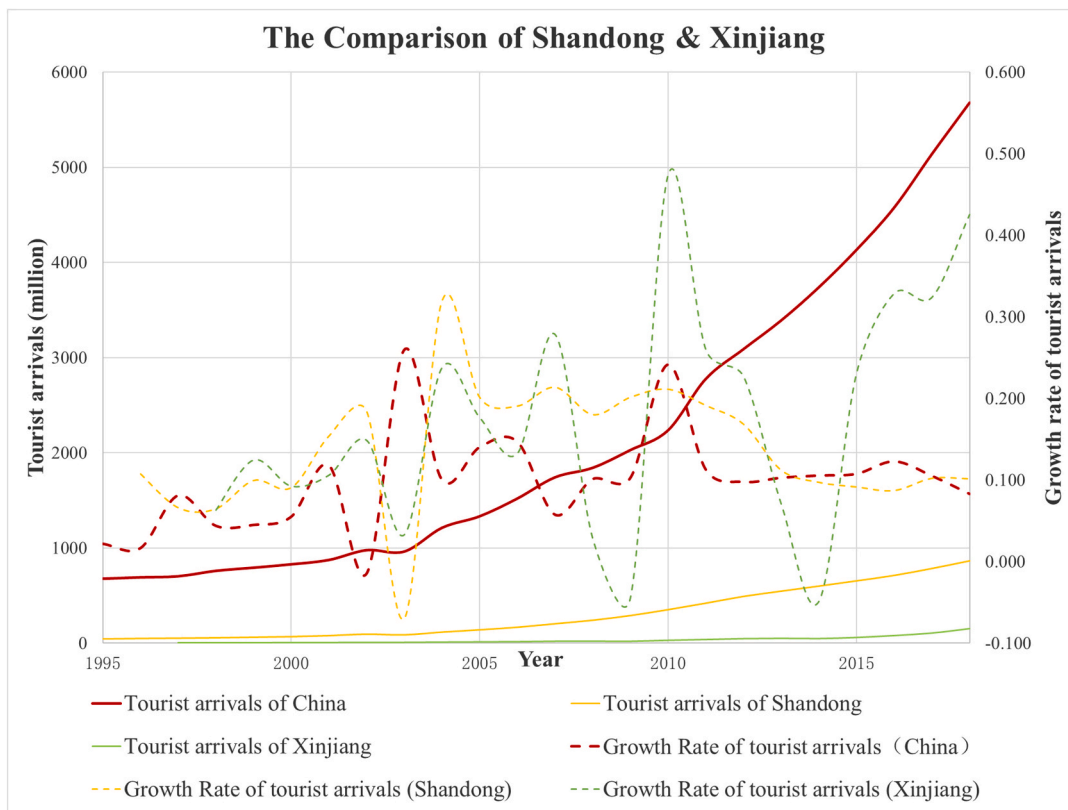


Fig. 2. The comparison of tourist arrivals and growth rate of tourist arrivals of Shandong & Xinjiang. Note: There is no separate statistical yearbook for Southern Xinjiang. The number of tourist arrivals in Southern Xinjiang is much smaller than that of Northern Xinjiang.

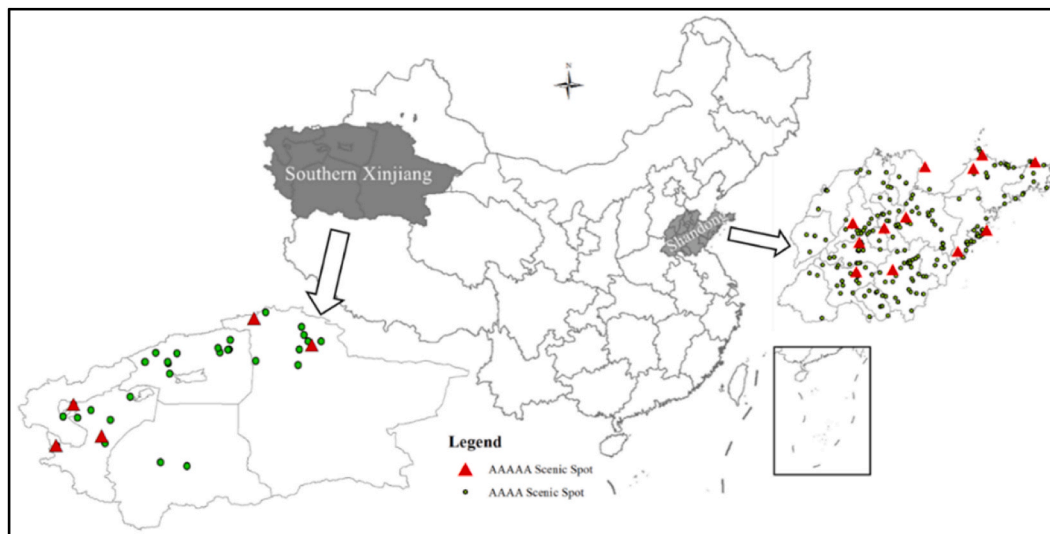


Fig. 3. Distribution of 5A & 4A scenic spots in Shandong and Southern Xinjiang.

Xinjiang was officially put into use. In February 2020, the speed of passenger trains on the Korla-Kashgar section in Southern Xinjiang has been increased, shortening the time distance between Korla, Aksu, Kashgar, and other cities and improving passenger travel conditions.

Consequently, Shandong meets the criterion of Butler's (1980) 'consolidation' stage, while Southern Xinjiang meets the criterion of the 'involvement' stage. The summary of Shandong and Southern Xinjiang compliance with Butler's (1980) TALC criteria is shown in Table 2. This study examines these two areas as the research sites to determine the mechanism of destination brand loyalty.

3.2. Measurements and questionnaire

The questionnaire included two sections: the first part consisted of questions about the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, including gender, age, monthly income, education, and frequency of destination visits; the second part comprised six dimensions with 20 items related to the studied constructs. Boo et al.'s (2009) scale was the basis of the destination brand image, brand awareness, brand quality, and brand loyalty items. Destination brand trust items were extracted from Han et al.'s (2015) scale, and destination brand

Table 2
Summary of Shandong and Southern Xinjiang compliance with [Butler's \(1980\)](#) TALC criteria.

Shandong		Southern Xinjiang	
Butler's (1980) 'consolidation' stage criteria	Compliance (yes/no)	Butler's (1980) 'involvement' stage criteria	Compliance (yes/no)
Growth rate of tourist arrivals declines	yes	Economy is less developed and geographical location is less accessible	yes
Local efforts are made to extend the tourist season	yes	The number of tourists increase	yes
The total number of tourists in the tourist season exceeds the number of residents	yes	High interaction between tourists and locals	yes
Advertising more wide ranging	yes	Some advertising to attract tourists	yes
The recreational business district (RBD) has taken shape	yes	Pressure on government to provide tourism infrastructure e.g. transport	yes

attachment items were derived from [Keller \(2001\)](#). All the items were adopted from previous studies. The measurement items and sources of the six variables in the questionnaire are shown in [Table 3](#). The variables were presented in the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into Chinese based on back-translation methods ([Soriano & Foxall, 2002](#)).

3.3. Data collection

The research fieldwork was carried out by four professors and twelve graduate students in Shandong and Southern Xinjiang, and the target population was Chinese tourists of the two destinations. To avoid the interference of destination type and other factors, and make sure as much as possible that the only difference between the two research areas is the TALC stage, we selected major tourism cities of Shandong and Southern Xinjiang to distribute questionnaires. In Shandong the questionnaire was distributed in five cities from September 1 to November 15, 2015: Jinan, Tai'an, Qingdao, Jining, and Linyi. In Southern Xinjiang, the questionnaire was distributed in Kashgar, Aksu, Hotan, and other regions from September 27 to October 8, 2016. Trained interviewers conducted questionnaire surveys in the rest areas of local scenic spots such as the ancient city of Kashgar, the tomb of the fragrant concubine, Mount Tai, Baotu Spring, etc, as well as urban recreation areas such as Aitigar Square and Quancheng Square, etc. Here, most tourists have free time and are willing to cooperate in completing the survey. The systematic random sampling method was used for selecting research participants. The questionnaires were distributed to every fifth Chinese tourist who entered the rest area. Before filling the questionnaire, interviewers confirmed that the participant was a Chinese tourist who had visited the city. The process of the survey was explained to each participant. Interviewers promised that their personal information would be kept confidential. Finally, 665 valid questionnaires were collected in Shandong, with an effective rate of 85.40%, and 328 valid questionnaires were collected in Southern Xinjiang, with an effective rate of 86.77%. Generally, the number of samples should be at least 10 times the number of variables ([Bentler & Chou, 1987](#)). If a stable result is expected, the number of samples collected in each region should be greater than 200 ([Loehlin, 1992](#)). Thus, the sample size requirement was met for the research.

Table 3
Constructs and respective items.

Constructs	Items	Descriptions of items	Supporting literature
Destination Brand Image (DBI)	DBI1	This destination fits my personality	Boo et al., 2009 ; Grace & O'Cass, 2005 ; Lassar et al., 1995 ; Sirgy et al., 1997
	DBI2	My friends would think highly of me if I visited this destination	
	DBI3	The image of this destination is consistent with my own self-image	
Destination Brand Awareness (DBA)	DBA1	This destination has a good name & reputation	Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003 ; Boo et al., 2009 ; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003 ; Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998 ; Oh, 2000 ; Pappu & Quester, 2006 ; Yoo & Donthu, 2001
	DBA2	This destination is very famous	
	DBA3	The characteristics of this destination come to my mind quickly	
	DBA4	When I am thinking about traveling, this destination comes to my mind immediately	
Destination Brand Quality (DBQ)	DBQ1	This destination provides tourism offerings of consistent quality	Aaker, 1991 ; Boo et al., 2009 ; Lassar et al., 1995 ; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001
	DBQ2	This destination provides quality experiences	
	DBQ3	From this destination's offerings, I can expect superior performance	
Destination Brand Trust (DBT)	DBT1	I can rely on this destination to solve the service dissatisfaction	Delgado-Ballester, 2004 ; Han et al., 2015
	DBT2	This destination brand guarantees satisfaction	
	DBT3	I have confidence in this destination	
Destination Brand Attachment (DBAt)	DBAt1	I really love this destination	Keller (2001)
	DBAt2	I would really miss this destination if it went away	
	DBAt3	This destination is special to me	
	DBAt4	This destination is more than a product to me	
Destination Brand Loyalty (DBL)	DBL1	I enjoy visiting this destination	Back & Parks, 2003 ; Baloglu, 2002 ; Boo et al., 2009 ; Keller, 2003 ; Odin, Odin, & Valette, 2001 ; Yoo and Donthu, 2001
	DBL2	This destination would be my preferred choice for a vacation	
	DBL3	Overall, I am loyal to this destination	

3.4. Data analysis

SPSS 21.0 and AMOS 22.0 were used in the data analysis, which included three parts. First, after the data were collected, SPSS was used to generate descriptive statistics. Second, confirmatory factor analysis was performed with AMOS 22.0 to test how well the measured variables represented the constructs and to ensure the goodness-of-fit for the measurement model. Finally, the relationships among destination brand image, awareness, quality, trust, attachment, and loyalty and the mediating effect were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS 22.0.

4. Results

4.1. Sample descriptive statistics

The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 4. In the Shandong group, of 665 participants, 304 were male (45.71%) and 361 were female (54.29%). Most (43.31%) respondents were between 25 and 35 years of age; nearly half (49.47%) of the participants earned between ¥3000 and ¥5000 monthly; the majority (49.47%) had a junior college education; 21.20% of the participants were visiting the destination for the first time, while 27.67% of the participants had visited there two to three times, and 23.16% participants had even visited over 10 times. In the Southern Xinjiang group, of the 328 participants, 179 were male (54.57%), and 149 were female (45.43%). 31.71% of the respondents were between 25 and 35 years of age; most participants' monthly income were below ¥5000, 30.20% of the participants earned between ¥3000 and ¥5000 every month; the majority (54.57%) had a bachelor's education; and most (45.73%) of the participants were visiting the destination for the first time.

4.2. Measurement model

The measurement model comprises six latent variables: destination brand image (3 items), destination brand awareness (4 items), destination brand quality (3 items), destination brand trust (3 items), destination brand attachment (4 items), and destination brand loyalty (3 items). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and SEM were conducted to assess the model. The goodness of fit indices for the measurement model is shown in Table 5. Comparison of these fit indices with related acceptable ranges recommended by Wheaton, Muthen, Alwin, and Summers (1977), Hu and Bentler (1999), Cole (1987), Byrne (2001), Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (1998) revealed that the hypothesized measurement models fit the data well.

In this paper, Cronbach's α was used to test reliability. As shown in Table 6, the coefficient Cronbach's α of all latent variables in the Shandong group and Southern Xinjiang group ranged from 0.787 to 0.944, greater than 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978), indicating that the data have good reliability.

The convergent validity is verified by computing the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). As shown in Table 6, the AVE values of each construct are over the 0.5 threshold

(Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994). The CR values of each construct ranged from 0.791 to 0.944, greater than the suggested value of 0.7 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Accordingly, the convergent validity of the constructs was considered favorable.

When testing the discriminant validity of the model, it is only necessary to verify that the square root of the AVE value of the latent variable is greater than its correlation coefficient with other latent variables. The discriminant validity of the model is presented in Table 7. It is noted that the square root values of the AVE for all constructs were greater than their correlation coefficients with other constructs in both groups; thus, the discriminant validity was considered favorable (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Statistical analyses were performed to test whether there was common method variance (CMV). First, the Harman one-factor test (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986) was used in the theoretical model. The results demonstrated that in the Shandong group, the most covariance explained by one factor was 45.687% and that of the Southern Xinjiang group was 49.529%. CMV is not considered a threat if the Harman test results show that no more than 50% of the total variance was explained by one latent construct. (Teng, Lu, Huang, & Fang, 2020; Ylitalo, 2009). In addition, the method of the fit of a model in which all indicators loaded on one factor was examined (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). As shown in Table 8, the single factor models did not fit well in either group. Therefore, CMV is unlikely to be a contaminant in this study. However, some studies have pointed out that there are problems with one-factor tests (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Thus, the seventh latent variable, which was related to all the principal constructor's variances, was added to the confirmatory factorial analysis (CFA). After that, the model fit improved slightly. In the Shandong group, RMSEA = 0.040, SRMR = 0.0238, CFI = 0.985, and TLI = 0.979; and in the Southern Xinjiang group, RMSEA = 0.056, SRMR = 0.0327, CFI = 0.968, and TLI = 0.956. The results indicate that RMSEA and SRMR decrease by less than 0.05 and CFI and TLI increase by less than 0.1 (Wen, Huang, & Tang, 2018), which also eliminates the influence of CMV. These results should increase our confidence in the study.

4.3. Structural model and multigroup analysis

The structural model was evaluated after testing the measurement model. As shown in Table 5, the fit indices of the structural model indicated acceptable results.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics.

Characteristics	Shandong		Southern Xinjiang	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	304	179	54.57%
	Female	361	149	45.43%
Age	Under 18	26	18	5.49%
	19–24	213	76	23.17%
	25–35	288	104	31.71%
	36–45	86	61	18.60%
	46–60	38	51	15.55%
	Over 60	14	18	5.49%
Monthly income (RMB)	< ¥3000	208	82	25.00%
	¥3000–¥5000	329	99	30.20%
	¥5001–¥8000	86	65	19.80%
	¥8001–¥10,000	34	34	10.40%
	< ¥10,000	8	48	14.60%
Education	High school or below	208	41	12.50%
	Junior college	329	68	20.73%
	Bachelor	86	179	54.57%
	Master or doctoral	42	40	12.20%
Frequency of destination visit	1	141	150	45.73%
	2–3	184	79	24.09%
	4–7	114	33	10.06%
	8–10	72	11	3.35%
	Over 10	154	55	16.77%

Table 5
Fit indices and evaluation of research models' performance.

Fit Indices	Shandong		Southern Xinjiang		Admissible Values	Reference
	Measurement Model	Structural Model	Measurement Model	Structural Model		
χ^2/df	2.561	3.547	2.160	3.014	≤5	Wheaton et al. (1977)
RMSEA	0.048	0.062	0.060	0.078	≤0.08	Hu and Bentler, 1999
RMR	0.026	0.080	0.038	0.097	≤0.10	Cole (1987)
GFI	0.947	0.926	0.905	0.865	≥0.85	Cole (1987)
AGFI	0.928	0.903	0.872	0.824	≥0.80	
CFI	0.975	0.958	0.958	0.925	≥0.90	Byrne, 2001; Hair et al., 1998
TLI	0.969	0.950	0.949	0.911		

Table 6
CFA results for measurement models of constructs.

Constructs	Items	Shandong				Southern Xinjiang			
		Standardized Loadings	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's α	Average Variance Extracted	Standardized Loadings	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's α	Average Variance Extracted
Destination brand image	DBI1	0.813	0.864	0.855	0.680	0.743	0.814	0.814	0.594
	DBI2	0.873				0.792			
	DBI3	0.766				0.774			
Destination brand awareness	DBA1	0.787	0.874	0.874	0.634	0.861	0.882	0.878	0.651
	DBA2	0.814				0.835			
	DBA3	0.817				0.737			
	DBA4	0.766				0.780			
Destination brand quality	DBQ1	0.929	0.944	0.944	0.850	0.825	0.791	0.787	0.561
	DBQ2	0.949				0.646			
	DBQ3	0.886				0.771			
Destination brand trust	DBT1	0.896	0.900	0.899	0.751	0.817	0.887	0.887	0.724
	DBT2	0.895				0.876			
	DBT3	0.805				0.861			
Destination brand attachment	DBAt1	0.852	0.906	0.897	0.707	0.861	0.896	0.897	0.684
	DBAt2	0.814				0.856			
	DBAt3	0.734				0.792			
	DBAt4	0.950				0.796			
Destination brand loyalty	DBL1	0.718	0.830	0.805	0.619	0.773	0.870	0.865	0.690
	DBL2	0.854				0.868			
	DBL3	0.721				0.847			

Table 7
Discriminant validity analysis.

		1	2	3	4	5	6
Shandong	DBI	0.818					
	DBA	0.611	0.796				
	DBQ	0.631	0.681	0.922			
	DBT	0.498	0.482	0.588	0.867		
	DBAt	0.529	0.547	0.530	0.456	0.841	
	DBL	0.186	0.392	0.232	0.240	0.462	0.767
Southern Xinjiang	DBI	0.771					
	DBA	0.678	0.807				
	DBQ	0.531	0.564	0.749			
	DBT	0.568	0.567	0.474	0.851		
	DBAt	0.569	0.557	0.628	0.540	0.827	
	DBL	0.613	0.627	0.597	0.528	0.689	0.830

Note: the numbers on the diagonal line represent the square root of the AVE value; the other numbers represent the correlation coefficient.

Table 8
The comparison of model fit between single factor and multifactor models.

Group	Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2$	Δdf	P
Shandong	Single factor	1266.63	170	931.87	15	0.000
	Multifactor	334.76	155			
Southern Xinjiang	Single factor	3836.88	170	3439.94	15	0.000
	Multifactor	396.94	155			

Then, path analysis was used to test the hypotheses. The results of the structural model are presented in Table 9.

In the Shandong group (see Fig. 4), the standardized coefficient of destination brand image on destination brand trust is 0.213 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that destination brand image has a significant positive impact on destination brand trust. Hence, the result supports H1. The standardized coefficient of destination brand awareness on destination brand trust is 0.106 ($p = 0.088$), indicating that destination brand awareness has no significant influence on destination brand trust. Therefore, the result does not support H2. The standardized coefficient of destination brand quality on destination brand trust is 0.422 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that destination brand quality has a significant positive impact on destination brand trust. Hence, the result supports H3. The standardized coefficient of destination brand trust on destination brand attachment is 0.525 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that destination brand trust has a significant positive impact on destination brand attachment. Hence, the result supports H4. The standardized coefficient of destination brand trust on destination brand loyalty is 0.044 ($p = 0.364$), which indicates that destination brand trust has no significant impact on destination brand loyalty. Hence, the result does not support H5. The standardized coefficient of destination brand attachment on destination brand loyalty is 0.470 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that destination brand attachment has a significant positive impact on destination brand loyalty. Hence, the result supports H6.

In the Southern Xinjiang group (see Fig. 5), the standardized coefficient of destination brand image on destination brand trust is 0.397 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that destination brand image has a significant positive impact on destination brand trust. Hence, the result supports

Table 9
Results of structural model and multigroup analysis.

Relationship	$\beta^{Shandong}$	P-value	$\beta^{Southern\ Xinjiang}$	P-value	$\beta^{Shandong} - \beta^{Southern\ Xinjiang}$	P-value
DBI→DBT	0.213	***	0.397	***	-0.184	0.275
DBA→DBT	0.106	0.088	0.244	0.015	-0.138	0.404
DBQ→DBT	0.422	***	0.185	0.015	0.237	0.004
DBT→DBAt	0.525	***	0.652	***	-0.127	0.001
DBT→DBL	0.044	0.364	0.271	***	-0.227	0.001
DBAt→DBL	0.470	***	0.595	***	-0.125	0.019

Note: * means $p < 0.05$; ** means $p < 0.01$; *** means $p < 0.001$.

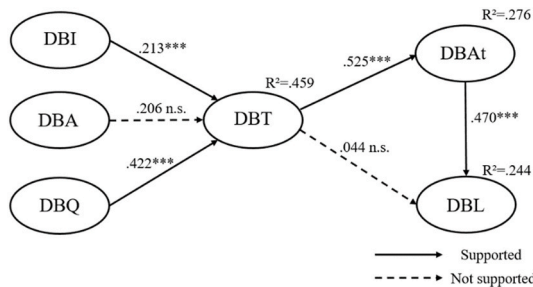


Fig. 4. Hypothesis test result (Shandong). Note: R^2 = squared multiple correlations; *** $P < 0.001$; n.s. represents not significant.

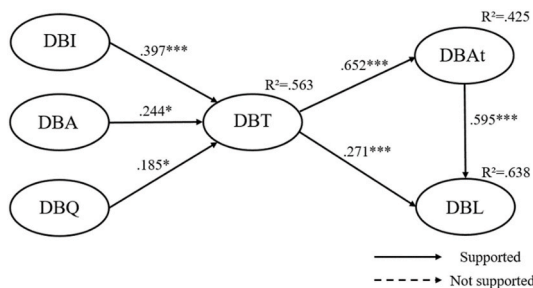


Fig. 5. Hypothesis test result (Southern Xinjiang). Note: R^2 = squared multiple correlations; * means $p < 0.05$; ** means $p < 0.01$; *** means $p < 0.001$; n.s. represents not significant.

H1. The standardized coefficient of destination brand awareness on destination brand trust is 0.244 ($p = 0.015$), which indicates that destination brand awareness has a significant positive impact on destination brand trust. Hence, the result supports **H2**. The standardized coefficient of destination brand quality on destination brand trust is 0.185 ($p = 0.015$), indicating that destination brand quality has a significant positive impact on destination brand trust. Hence, the result supports **H3**. The standardized coefficient of destination brand trust on destination brand attachment is 0.625 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that destination brand trust has a significant positive impact on destination brand attachment. Hence, the result supports **H4**. The standardized coefficient of destination brand trust on destination brand loyalty is 0.271 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that destination brand trust has a significant positive impact on destination brand loyalty. Hence, the result supports **H5**. The standardized coefficient of destination brand attachment on destination brand loyalty is 0.595 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that destination brand attachment has a significant positive impact on destination brand loyalty. Hence, the result supports **H6**.

Measurement invariance should be tested before multigroup analysis to ensure the validity of path comparison (Byrne, Shavelson, & Muthén, 1989; González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2021; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). Thus, the measurement invariance of composites (MICOM) method, which was suggested by Sinkovics, Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016), was adopted, to evaluate whether

the measures were invariant across the Shandong group and Southern Xinjiang group. SmartPLS 3 was used to conduct the three-step test. 5000 permutation runs were performed which was recommended by Sinkovics et al. (2016). The results (see Table 10) indicated that all the constructs meet configural invariance and compositional invariance. Thus, partial measurement invariance was established in each construct. Full measurement invariance was established in the construct of DBT as both the differences value of equal mean assessment and equal variance assessment are within the confidence intervals. According to Sinkovics et al. (2016), the multigroup comparison was permitted when partial measurement invariance was established. Therefore, the coefficients of the structural model can be compared between the two groups.

In the test of the coefficient difference between Shandong and Southern Xinjiang, the coefficient difference of brand image on brand trust is 0.184 ($p = 0.275$), which indicates that there is no significant difference in the influence of brand image on brand trust between the two groups. The coefficient difference of brand awareness on brand trust is 0.138 ($p = 0.404$), which indicates that there is no significant difference in the influence of brand awareness on brand trust between the two groups. The coefficient difference of brand quality on brand trust is 0.237 ($p < 0.01$), which indicates that brand quality does have a significant difference in brand trust between the two groups. The coefficient difference of brand trust on brand attachment is 0.127 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that brand trust has a significant difference in the influence of brand attachment between the two groups. The coefficient difference of brand trust on brand loyalty is 0.227 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that brand trust has a significant difference in the influence of brand loyalty between the two groups. The coefficient difference of brand attachment on brand loyalty is 0.125 ($p = 0.019$), which indicates that brand attachment has a significant difference in the influence of brand loyalty between the two groups. Therefore, the results partially support **H8**.

Finally, the mediating effect of destination brand attachment was tested. Following the procedure of Preacher and Hayes (2008), the bootstrapping method was used to test the mediating effect. Through repeated sampling 5000 times, the bias-corrected method and percentile method were used to test the significance of the mediating effect of brand attachment. The results are shown in Table 11.

According to the results, in the Shandong group, the indirect effect of destination brand trust on destination brand loyalty is significant, but the direct effect of destination brand trust on destination brand loyalty is not significant. Thus, in the Shandong group, destination brand attachment completely mediates the relationship between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty. However, in the Southern Xinjiang group, the indirect effect, as well as the direct effect of destination brand trust on destination brand loyalty, is significant. Therefore, in the Southern Xinjiang group, destination brand attachment partially mediates the relationship between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty. Therefore, the results support **H7**.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This paper collected the tourist data of two destinations in China (Shandong and Southern Xinjiang) and constructed a structural equation

Table 10
Results of measurement invariance test.

Constructs	Configural invariance (Same algorithms for two groups)	Compositional invariance (Correlation = 1)		Compositional invariance	Equal mean assessment		Equal variance assessment		Measurement invariance
		C = 1	Confidence Interval (CIs)		Differences	Confidence Intervals (CIs)	Differences	Confidence Intervals (CIs)	
DBA	Yes	1.000	[0.999, 1.000]	Yes	-0.150	[-0.116, 0.136]	-0.283	[-0.217, 0.228]	partial
DBQ	Yes	0.999	[0.999, 1.000]	Yes	-0.239	[-0.129, 0.133]	0.079	[-0.218, 0.242]	partial
DBT	Yes	1.000	[1.000, 1.000]	Yes	0.064	[-0.121, 0.121]	-0.050	[-0.202, 0.201]	full
DBAt	Yes	1.000	[0.999, 1.000]	Yes	-0.667	[-0.128, 0.127]	-0.104	[-0.195, 0.201]	partial
DBL	Yes	0.999	[0.998, 1.000]	Yes	0.014	[-0.129, 0.135]	-0.354	[-0.186, 0.204]	partial

Table 11
Results of mediating effect analysis.

Areas	Paths	Standardized Effects	Point Estimation	Bootstrapping 5000 times			
				Bias-corrected 95% CI		Percentile 95% CI	
				Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Shandong	DBT→DBAt→DBL	Total effects	0.278	0.173	0.383	0.172	0.382
		Indirect effects	0.231	0.170	0.300	0.164	0.294
		Direct effects	0.047	-0.067	0.163	-0.064	0.165
Southern Xinjiang	DBT→DBAt→DBL	Total effects	0.593	0.482	0.694	0.486	0.698
		Indirect effects	0.386	0.268	0.532	0.264	0.526
		Direct effects	0.207	0.036	0.366	0.038	0.370

model to explore the destination brand loyalty mechanism at different life cycle stages, contributing to CBBE and TALC theory. The results show that brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality are the antecedents of brand trust. The effects of the antecedents differ at different stages in the life cycle. In addition, brand attachment significantly mediates the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty, which varies at different stages of the life cycle. Further discussion of the results has yielded several interesting insights.

First, destination brand image, destination brand awareness, and destination brand quality are the antecedents that influence destination brand trust, and the effects differ between the cases of Shandong and Southern Xinjiang (two areas at different life cycle stages). Related studies have shown that brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality can positively affect brand trust (Bernarto, Berlianto, Meilani, Masman, & Suryawan, 2020; Grayson & Johnson, 2015; Marliawati & Cahyaningdyah, 2020). The results of this study show that in Shandong, a destination in the consolidation stage, its brand image, and brand quality can significantly positively affect brand trust. Brand quality has the most critical influence on brand trust, while brand awareness has no significant influence on brand trust. However, in Southern Xinjiang, a destination at the involvement stage, its brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality can significantly affect brand trust. Among them, the influence of brand image is the most critical factor, followed by brand awareness; brand quality has the weakest influence on brand trust. For destinations that have not yet entered the development stage, such as Southern Xinjiang, tourists are less familiar with them and rely more on external information to determine whether to travel there or not (Mawby, 2000; Murphy, Benckendorff, & Moscardo, 2007). Consumers perceive brand image through direct experience, advertising, promotion, or packaging (Gordon, 1996). Consumers' appreciation of the brand image is helpful to establish the brand's status (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986), thereby improving market performance (Shocker & Srinivasan, 1979). Brand awareness can influence consumers' decision-making. A known brand is more likely to be chosen by consumers than an unknown brand (Hoyer & Brown, 1990). A fMRI study indicated that activations in brain areas associated with information retrieval were higher for well-known brands (Esch et al., 2012). Therefore, brand image and brand awareness can provide tourists with

more intuitive destination information than brand quality. For destinations that have not yet entered the development stage, brand image and brand awareness are more critical factors in establishing brand trust. In the development stage, destinations advertise heavily with potential tourists (Butler, 1980), who can become familiar with the destination through mass media (Gursoy, 2011; Prentice & Andersen, 2003), with the expectation that the number of tourists gradually increases. Therefore, for destinations such as Shandong that have passed the development stage, the tourists are already familiar with the brand and the growth rate of the number of arrivals has begun to gradually slow. Currently, enhancing brand awareness of the destination is no longer the key method to build brand trust. The formation of service quality perception is based on the overall and long-term evaluation by customers of the performance of service providers (Bateson & Hoffman, 2002). Currently, the key measure to establish brand trust is to ensure brand quality and maintain a good brand image for tourists. This enhances their overall and long-term evaluation of the destination.

Second, destination brand attachment significantly mediates the relationship between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty but the effects of destination brand trust on brand loyalty are different between the two destinations. Trust is the link that maintains the long-term relationship between customers and suppliers (Alhaddad, 2015). To gain customer loyalty, it is necessary to first gain trust (Reichheld & Scheffer, 2000). Brand attachment plays a vital role in establishing brand loyalty. Attachment can evoke strong emotions and affect a person's behavior, including loyalty (Brocato, 2006). Southern Xinjiang is still at the involvement stage. Destination brand attachment partially mediates the relationship between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty. However, for Shandong, which is at the consolidation stage, destination brand attachment completely mediates the relationship between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty, which means that destination brand trust can only affect destination brand loyalty through the mediating effect of destination brand attachment. The findings reveal that with the evolution of the TALC, simply improving brand trust is insufficient to increase tourist loyalty. It is also necessary to let tourists form a sense of attachment. Destinations at the consolidation stage should pay more attention to emotional elements in the destination management and marketing

process, incorporate more elements that help the destination promote destination-tourist emotional interaction and adopt emotional marketing strategies in destination marketing.

Third, the two destinations at different life cycle stages, Shandong and Southern Xinjiang have significantly different brand loyalty mechanisms. The total effect of destination brand trust on destination brand loyalty in the Southern Xinjiang group is greater than that of the Shandong group. Similarly, the positive influence of brand attachment on brand loyalty is greater in the Southern Xinjiang group than in the Shandong group. For Southern Xinjiang, a destination at the involvement stage, tourists can have more access to tourism equipment and facilities with local characteristics and have more contact with residents, which is a major attraction for some tourists. The high level of interaction and emotional closeness between residents and tourists helps to increase the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists to places (Ribeiro, Woosnam, Pinto, & Silva, 2017). In essence, the more interaction between tourists and residents, the more intimate the tourists' feelings toward, and the greater their sense of attachment to, places (Woosnam et al., 2018). In addition, Southern Xinjiang is rich in tourism resources along the border of China and continues to retain primitive landscapes, such as Tuomuer Peak Glacier, Kashgar Stone Town, Tamuli Populus Forest, Karakul Lake, and Muztag Ata. Southern Xinjiang has a unique location and cultural atmosphere. It has the geographical advantage of developing transnational tourism integrating ecology, folklore, adventure, and cultural experience (Yang & Xu, 2016). Language and cultural differences will also affect the meaning of a destination for tourists (Kyle & Chick, 2007; Kyle & Johnson, 2008). Therefore, the tourism products in Southern Xinjiang are highly impressive because of a variety of traditional ethnic cultures (Zumureti, Zibibula, Pashagu, & Su, 2010). There are very few alternative products in China, and it is easier for tourists to develop brand attachment, which will increase their loyalty. However, in Shandong, at the consolidation stage, has replaced local facilities with larger, more sophisticated, and advanced facilities are provided by external agencies, specialized companies are responsible for the development and sales of natural and cultural attractions, and the appearance of the destination has undergone significant changes (Butler, 1980). Tourists mostly come into contact with the staff during the trip and have less contact with the locals. Local tourism resources include high levels of external capital. Tourist attractions have undergone significant standardization and commercialization. There are numerous alternative products of the same type in the market. Compared with Southern Xinjiang, it is more difficult for tourists in Shandong to form a sense of attachment. This is why the overall effect of destination brand loyalty in Shandong is lower than that of Southern Xinjiang.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The paper has several theoretical implications. First, previous destination brand equity studies mainly considered destination brand image (Alhaddad, 2015; Kim and Chao, 2019) and destination brand awareness (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011) are antecedents of destination brand trust. Although some studies proved that brand quality is one of the antecedents of brand trust (Han et al., 2015; Sürücü et al., 2019), it has been rarely tested in destination brand equity researches. This research takes destination brand quality as one of the antecedent variables of brand trust. The results have shown that destination brand quality has a different level of influence on destination brand trust when the destinations are at different TALC stages. This study further strengthens the importance of destination brand quality when establishing brand trust.

Second, in the context of CBBE, many studies have proved the direct impact of brand trust on brand loyalty (Chaudhuri et al., 2001; Dedeoğlu, Van Niekerk, Weinland, & Celuch, 2019). Past studies confirmed that emotional commitment mediates the effect of brand trust on brand loyalty (Baloglu et al., 2017; Bowen et al., 1998; Sui and

Baloglu, 2003). However, this study introduced brand attachment into the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty and established an alternative model of mediation. The results demonstrate that brand attachment fully mediates the effect of brand trust on brand loyalty at the consolidation stage, and it partially mediates the effect at the involvement stage. The findings extend the knowledge of CBBE.

Third, according to the results of this study, a theoretical framework of the destination brand loyalty mechanism is proposed. Past studies have confirmed the positive effects of brand trust (Sürücü et al., 2019; Thakur & Singh, 2012) and brand attachment (Kaushal & Ali, 2019; Pedeliento, Andreini, Bergamaschi, & Salo, 2016) on brand loyalty. However, this study finds out that the mechanism of destination brand loyalty is dynamic. The findings further deepen the degree of the relationship between brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. A framework diagram was drawn based on the results (see Fig. 6). For tourist destinations at the involvement stage, destination brand loyalty is positively affected by both brand trust and brand attachment. After a destination has developed for some time, the direct influence of brand trust on brand loyalty tends to be insignificant. At this time, the brand attachment must be established. In addition, the total effect of destination brand trust on destination brand loyalty at the involvement stage is greater than that at the consolidation stage. Furthermore, when a public opinion crisis occurs, the brand loyalty of destinations at earlier life cycle stages will experience a greater decline than that at more mature life cycle stages. For destinations that have undergone a period of development, tourists have developed a certain degree of brand attachment that can minimize the impact of negative information or unethical behavior (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Therefore, tourists are tolerant of negative public opinion and the decline in destination brand loyalty is even smaller.

Fourth, this study is an attempt to understand the dynamic mechanism of destination brand loyalty from the perspective of TALC. Previous studies showed different relationships among destination brand equity elements (Boo et al., 2009; Kim, Im, & King, 2015). This research takes several brand elements as starting points to examine destination brand loyalty mechanisms in different TALC stages, extending the understanding of CBBE. The finding strongly supports Butler's theory. The results demonstrated that the relationship among destination brand elements is changing, which is consistent with the viewpoint that destinations are not static but dynamic (Butler, 1980). This study extends the appliance of TALC theory to CBBE research, which has enriched the research context of TALC and further confirms that Butler's work can provide clear conceptual guidance on how a destination develops (McKercher and Wong, 2020). Through this research, it can be explained why the antecedent variables of destination brand trust and the mechanism between destination brand trust and destination brand loyalty show different conclusions in different studies.

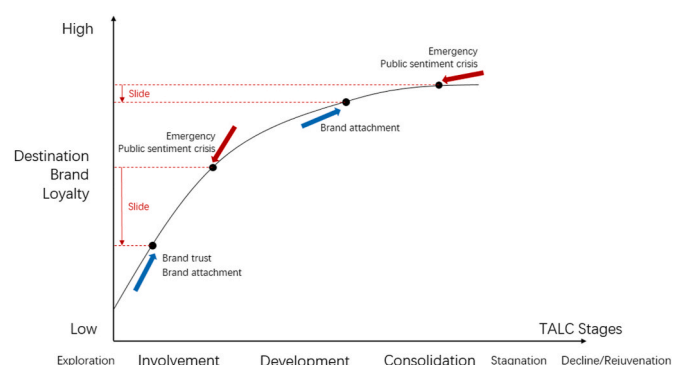


Fig. 6. The destination brand loyalty mechanism.

5.2. Practical implications

The practical implications that can be drawn from these findings are as follows. First, destination managers should dynamically carry out brand marketing activities according to the TALC stage. For destinations that have not yet reached the development stage and have low brand maturity, creating a distinctive brand image and enhancing brand awareness through multiple channels are effective ways to enhance tourist trust. Recently, Ding Zhen, a young Tibetan man in Litang County in China, has become popular very quickly on the Internet because of his wild, innocent appearance and unique personal charm. The local government and media took this opportunity to promote and market the tourism industry, which quickly drew the attention of tourists to Litang County. Therefore, for destinations before the development stage, it is necessary to focus on diversified and networked marketing channels. Make full use of new media such as live broadcasts, short videos, and virtual reality to create public hotspots and increase the popularity of the destination. Once destination-related hot topics appear, destination managers should use self-media, news reports, events, and other channels to promote destination brands. Impress potential tourists by establishing a distinctive destination brand image. In contrast, for mature destinations that have passed the development stage, tourists are already familiar with such destinations, raising brand awareness will no longer be the key point of destination marketing and management. At this stage, to enhance tourist trust, it is necessary to strictly control the product as well as service quality to avoid public opinion incidents. In December 2020, the Xuexiang scenic spot in Heilongjiang Province in China caused a public scandal due to the high price being charged for grilled sausage; 15 yuan were charged when the price is usually approximately 5 yuan. To counter the negative impact of this incident, Xuexiang used the Taishan Scenic Area in Shandong Province as a shield, pointing out that the price of mineral water in the Taishan Scenic Area is 5 yuan, which is also higher than the usual market price. In response to the public opinion crisis, the Taishan Scenic Area Department of Shandong Province responded quickly, interpreting prices from the perspectives of merchant operating costs, labor costs, and transportation costs (i.e. all the mineral water is carried from the bottom to the top of the mountain by the mountain couriers in half a day), ensuring the smoothing of complaints channels in the scenic area and justifying the pricing of local tourism products. The smooth complaint channels successfully resolved the crisis, further demonstrating the brand quality of Shandong and helping to enhance destination brand trust. Therefore, the solution of crisis public relations is particularly important for destinations after the development stage. Destination managers not only need to guarantee products and services quality but also need to have crisis prevention awareness, understand tourists' concerns. Destination managers should continuously improve their cognition of public opinion so that the destination can maintain a good brand image.

Second, this study found that there are significant differences in the destination brand loyalty mechanism at different life cycle stages. Therefore, for destinations that are still at the involvement stage, it is important to find the opportunities to carry out event marketing through organizing events with newsworthiness, social influence, and celebrity events to attract the attention of the media, social groups, and consumers. Improving the reputation of destinations and establishing a good brand image can effectively enhance brand trust, thereby enhancing tourist loyalty. However, for mature destinations, destination managers must consider the importance of enhancing tourists' sense of attachment towards these places. However, mobility can weaken the emotional association between tourists and the destination. It is not easy for the migrant population to develop a strong emotional attachment to tourism destinations. Destination managers should develop more personalized and emotional tourism products to increase the emotional value of the destination. For example, destinations could occasionally hold theme events and develop niche new tourism products to enhance the novelty of mature destinations. The destinations could also create

local genes and spirits that are in line with the local culture to enhance tourists' local identity and sense of belonging. Additionally, destinations can enhance the emotional association between tourists and destinations by giving special treatment to revisiting tourists. For example, formulate preferential policies for revisiting tourists, encourage the scenic area to give revisited tourists special gifts, such as membership cards. Destinations can also build tourist communities to organize activities on different themes for frequent visitors. Tourists will become more loyal because of their increased emotional attachment to the destination.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future studies

The present study has several limitations. First, both studies are located in China, and whether the results can be applied to tourist destinations in other countries requires further discussion. Second, the research data was collected around 2016, which has been 5 years since then. Although the evolution of TALC is a long process, and we have enough evidence to support the present TALC stages of Shandong and Southern Xinjiang, a follow-up study is necessary to test the robustness of the destination brand loyalty mechanism. Therefore, we will in-depth study the dynamic changes of the relationship among the elements of destination brand equity during the evolution of the TALC in Shandong and Southern Xinjiang. Third, this study explored the destination brand loyalty mechanism at the involvement stage and consolidation stage. Thus, the analysis was limited to the two TALC stages. More researches are needed on other TALC stages. Fourth, this research only measured tourists' attitudinal loyalty. Bianchi et al. (2014) suggested that even the most loyal tourists may not be willing to repeat long-distance trips. Southern Xinjiang is a long-distance tourist destination for most Chinese tourists while Shandong is not. Considering the difference in travel distance between the two research sites, we did not include behavioral loyalty in the destination brand loyalty construct. A more comprehensive measurement of destination brand loyalty is suggested for future study. In addition, the study explored the mediating role of destination brand attachment on the influence of brand trust on brand loyalty, but there may be other mediating variables in the process. Future researchers are advised to take other mediators into account.

Acknowledgement

This study is funded by Shandong University Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation Team of Young Scholars, grant number 2020QNQT019.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100658>.

Author statement

Feng Xu: Conceptualization, Supervision, **Cuijing Zhan:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Visualization, **Lijun Lu:** Writing – original draft, **Juan Tan:** Writing – original draft, **Shuashuai Li:** Validation, Software, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Supervision, **Jie Li:** Data curation, Investigation.

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