

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLACE PERCEPTION, IMMERSION EXPERIENCE, AND TOURIST BEHAVIORAL INTENTION: A CASE STUDY OF YUNNAN CULTURAL TOURISM PRODUCTS*

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Abstract

This research article aims to: 1) examine the direct impact of place perception on tourists' behavioral intention toward Yunnan cultural tourism products; 2) assess how place perception influences tourists' immersion experience; 3) test the mediating role of immersion experience between place perception and behavioral intention; and 4) propose an optimization pathway of "enhancing place perception—amplifying immersion experience—boosting behavioral intention" for the innovation of Yunnan's cultural tourism products. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted with 508 tourists who experienced seven representative cultural tourism products in Yunnan Province. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire measuring place perception, immersion experience, and behavioral intention on a Likert scale,

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and were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), including mediation testing.

The results of the research were: 1) place perception has a significant positive effect on tourists' behavioral intention, especially in terms of revisit and recommendation intentions; 2) place perception significantly enhances tourists' immersion experience by strengthening their emotional connection and cultural identification with the destination; 3) immersion experience has a positive, albeit comparatively weaker, direct effect on behavioral intention; and 4) immersion experience plays a partial mediating role between place perception and behavioral intention, confirming that enhancing immersion experience is an effective pathway for transforming place perception into stronger tourist behavioral intentions. This study provides theoretical support and practical guidance for the high-quality and sustainable development of Yunnan's cultural tourism products.

Keywords: Place Perception, Immersion Experience, Behavioral Intention, Cultural Tourism

Introduction

The integration of culture and tourism has become a global trend, as well as a growing trend in China (Anle et al., 2020), with local culture gradually becoming a core element in attracting tourists. Yunnan Province, known for its rich multi-ethnic culture and natural landscapes, has gradually emerged as a popular tourist destination in both China and the world. However, Yunnan's cultural tourism products face challenges such as homogenization, insufficient exploration and presentation of local characteristics, and a lack of depth in the tourist experience. Therefore, optimizing the tourist experience is of significant importance.

This study systematically analyzes the relationship between place perception, immersion experience, and behavioral intention within the cognitive-emotional-volitional framework, enriching consumer behavior theory in cultural tourism. Specifically, the role of immersion experience as a mediator provides a new perspective for the development of experience economy and cultural tourism products. At the same time, it offers theoretical insights for enhancing the attractiveness of tourism products and improving tourist loyalty.

Objectives

This study aims to explore the relationship between place perception, immersion experience, and tourist behavioral intention, and to construct a corresponding mechanism model. The specific research objectives are as follows:

1. To analyze the direct impact of place perception on tourist behavioral intention, exploring how the distinctiveness and rootedness perception of local culture drive tourists' revisit, recommendation, and consumption intentions.
2. To validate the impact of place perception on immersion experience, analyzing how local characteristics enhance tourists' sensory, emotional, and cognitive immersion, thereby promoting emotional engagement.
3. To examine the mediating role of immersion experience between place perception and tourist behavioral intention, further investigating how immersion experience moderates the relationship between place perception and behavioral intention.
4. To propose a product optimization path of "enhancing place perception—amplifying immersion experience—boosting behavioral intention," providing empirical evidence for the innovation and high-quality sustainable development of Yunnan's cultural tourism products.

Literature Review

1. Cognitive-Emotional-Behavioral (CEB) Framework

Mischel and Walter was the first to propose that individual behavioral differences arise from the interaction between cognition and emotion (Mischel & Walter, 1973). Building on this, Mischel and Shoda further suggested that there are two processes—encoding and behavior generation—between external contexts and behavior (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). The Cognitive-Emotional-Volitional (CEB) theory posits that an individual's cognitive and emotional responses to external stimuli predict their behavioral reactions. Cognition refers to understanding things, emotion refers to personal feelings towards objects, and behavior refers to behavioral intention based on emotion (Ye et al., 2023). This theory has been widely applied in tourism research to explore the relationship between tourists' emotions and behaviors.

Based on this theory, this study explores the impact of place perception and immersion experience on tourists' behavioral intentions. Place perception represents the cognitive dimension, immersion experience represents the emotional dimension, and behavioral intention is the behavioral choice resulting from the interaction between cognition and emotion. Empirical analysis will be conducted to verify the causal relationships among these three factors, providing theoretical support for the sustainable development of cultural tourism products.

2. Place Perception Theory

Place attachment refers to the emotional connection between individuals and places, first proposed by Yi-Fu Tuan, who described it as the "fourth dimension" connecting humans with their environment, transcending the boundaries of time and space (Tuan, 1974). Subsequently, Relph and Smith further emphasized that place attachment is a deep attachment to a place, reflecting humans' spiritual attachment to specific locations (Relph & Smith,

1976). Place attachment has been widely applied in environmental psychology, human geography, and sociology, and is seen as a combination of emotions and behaviors that individuals experience in a specific environment (Low & Altman, 1992).

In summary, the role of place perception in cultural tourism products warrants further exploration, especially its impact on tourists' behavioral intentions.

3. Immersion Theory

Csikszentmihalyi proposed the theory of immersion, describing a state where individuals are fully engaged in an activity, ignoring external distractions. He defined immersion as "a holistic feeling of being completely absorbed" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, 1975b).

Immersion experience includes characteristics such as focused attention, clear goals, immediate feedback, a sense of control, and altered perceptions of time (Wilder et al., 1989).

Csikszentmihalyi and others further identified six dimensions of immersion: focused attention, integration of action and perception, loss of self-consciousness, and others (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Core dimensions of immersion, including enjoyment, concentration, control, and challenge, frequently appear in research. Immersion experience also increases individuals' tendency for re-engagement (O'Cass & Carlson, 2010).

Immersion is typically characterized by focus, a sense of time distortion, and a loss of self-awareness. In recent years, immersion theory has been widely applied in tourism studies, where immersion has been found to significantly enhance tourists' behavioral intentions, such as revisit and recommendation, providing theoretical support for understanding tourists' immersion experiences and their behavioral impacts.

Methodology

1. Literature Review Method

The literature review method involves systematically analyzing existing literature to reveal the progress, gaps, and potential directions in the current research field. In this study, the literature review was used to examine relevant theories and research findings in the areas of place perception, immersion experience, and tourist behavioral intention, thus constructing the research framework. This method helped define the research variables, their measurement contents, and the theoretical basis for the research hypotheses.

2. Quantitative Research Method

The quantitative research method involves collecting and analyzing numerical data to test hypotheses, commonly using survey questionnaires, experimental designs, and data analysis. This study employed a survey questionnaire to collect data. Measurement scales for place perception, immersion experience, and behavioral intention were designed, and seven representative cultural tourism products in Yunnan Province were selected as the study sites and sample locations. The selected products included static cultural heritage sites, museums, theme parks, and dynamic traditional festivals.

The study's target group consisted of tourists, and the questionnaire collection combined online and offline methods to ensure sample representativeness. The online survey was distributed through the "Wenjuanxing" platform on social media, while the offline survey was conducted by the research team using convenience sampling at the study sites. The questionnaire included tourists' background information and measurements for place perception, immersion experience, and behavioral intention. A total of 544 questionnaires were collected, with 508 valid responses retained after removing invalid ones.

This study used a 5-point Likert scale to measure place perception, immersion experience, and behavioral intention. The place perception (PP) scale

assessed tourists' perceptions of the destination's distinctiveness (e.g., natural landscape, cultural features, and lifestyle uniqueness) and rootedness perception (e.g., emotional attachment, exclusivity, and symbiosis). The immersion experience (IE) scale included three dimensions: sensory immersion, emotional immersion, and cognitive immersion, to evaluate tourists' immersion levels. The behavioral intention (BI) scale measured four dimensions: willingness to recommend, revisit intention, willingness to pay a premium, and willingness to substitute.

3. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is a quantitative research method that helps researchers explore direct and indirect effects among variables by constructing and testing complex causal relationship models. This study employs SEM to examine both the direct and indirect effects between place perception, immersion experience, and tourist behavioral intention.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS software. First, reliability and validity tests were performed to ensure the measurement model's effectiveness. Next, a structural model was built to explore the relationships between place perception, immersion experience, and behavioral intention, with maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) used for model fitting. In the structural model analysis, model fit was assessed using indices such as CFI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df . Path analysis was conducted using standardized coefficients to test the significance of each path. Bootstrap methods were used to test the significance of mediation effects.

Results

1. The Direct Impact of Place Perception on Tourist Behavioral Intention

According to the research model, place perception significantly influences tourists' behavioral intention. Path analysis shows that the direct effect of place

perception on behavioral intention is significantly positive, with a standardized coefficient of 0.559 ($p < 0.001$). The results indicate that tourists' perceptions of the destination's distinctiveness and emotional rootedness significantly promote their intentions to revisit, recommend, consume, and substitute.

In this study, place perception enhanced tourists' emotional engagement through their recognition of local culture, landscapes, and lifestyle, thereby influencing their behavioral intentions. Specifically, tourists' emotional attachment to the destination and their recognition of its distinctiveness significantly increase their willingness to recommend and revisit.

The study confirms the significant positive impact of place perception on tourists' behavioral intention. The stronger the place perception, the higher the tourists' behavioral intentions toward the destination. This result supports Hypothesis H1, further confirming the driving force of local culture on tourist behavior.

2. The Impact of Place Perception on Immersion Experience

The study also reveals that place perception has a significant impact on immersion experience, with a standardized coefficient of 0.338 ($p < 0.001$). This suggests that when tourists have a stronger place perception of the destination, they experience a higher level of immersion during their trip.

Place perception enhances tourists' sensory, emotional, and cognitive immersion by fostering their emotional connection and cultural identification with the destination. Tourists, on the basis of perceiving the destination's distinctiveness and rootedness, become more focused on the details and interactions during their travels, thus enhancing their sense of immersion.

The study validates the significant positive impact of place perception on immersion experience. Tourists' emotional attachment and cultural identification with the destination significantly enhance their immersion experience. This result

supports Hypothesis H2, demonstrating the important role of place-related factors in enhancing tourists' immersion experiences.

3. The Impact of Immersion Experience on Tourist Behavioral Intention

Path analysis reveals that immersion experience also has a significant positive effect on tourist behavioral intention, with a standardized coefficient of 0.107 ($p = 0.014$). Although the direct effect of immersion experience on behavioral intention is weaker than that of place perception, it still plays an important role in enhancing tourists' behavioral intentions.

Immersion experience can further promote tourists' intentions to revisit, recommend, and pay a premium by enhancing their emotional engagement and goal-directed behaviors. Although its direct effect is weaker, immersion experience, as an important component of tourists' engagement perception, has a significant behavioral guiding effect.

The study confirms the positive impact of immersion experience on tourist behavioral intention. Despite its weaker effect compared to place perception, its influence on tourists' behavioral intentions should not be overlooked. This result supports Hypothesis H3, indicating the positive role of immersion experience in guiding tourist behavior.

4. The Mediating Role of Immersion Experience Between Place Perception and Behavioral Intention

Through mediation effect testing using the Bootstrap method, the results show that immersion experience partially mediates the relationship between place perception and behavioral intention, with a standardized mediation effect of 0.037 ($p < 0.05$), and a 95% confidence interval of [0.008, 0.071], indicating the significance of this effect.

As a mediator, immersion experience facilitates the formation of tourists' behavioral intention based on their place perception. Place perception enhances tourists' immersion experience, which in turn stimulates their intentions to revisit, recommend, and consume.

The study verifies the partial mediating effect of immersion experience between place perception and behavioral intention. Place perception indirectly influences tourists' behavioral intention by enhancing their immersion experience, supporting Hypothesis H4, and demonstrating the important bridging role of immersion experience in the formation of tourist behavioral intentions.

5. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Test

The gender distribution of the survey participants is balanced, with 48.62% male and 51.38% female. The majority of participants are between the ages of 20 and 30, comprising 52.95% of the sample. The education level is relatively high, with 50% of respondents holding a bachelor's degree. Tourists' cultural tourism consumption shows a strong trend toward younger age groups, with a larger proportion of tourists experiencing cultural tourism products in Dali, Lijiang, and Xishuangbanna, accounting for 60.04% of the total, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Sample Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	247	48.62%
	Female	261	51.38%
	Lijiang Old Town Scenic Area Cultural Experience Project	86	16.93%
Types of tourism products	Xishuangbanna Dai Park Scenic Spot Cultural Experience Project	121	23.82%
	Dali Ancient Town Scenic Area Cultural Experience Project	104	20.47%
	Cultural Experience Program at the Yunnan Provincial Museum	80	15.75%

Cultural experience program at the Yunnan Ethnic Village Scenic Area	37	7.28%
Xishuangbanna Water-Splashing Festival	61	12.01%
“Impressions of Yunnan” performance	19	3.74%

Note. n=508

The basic statistical analysis of the sample shows that all measurement items meet the assumption of normal distribution. The Cronbach's α coefficient for the overall questionnaire scale is 0.932, exceeding the threshold of 0.7, which indicates good reliability of the questionnaire. According to the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), the CR values for all variables exceed 0.7, and the AVE values are greater than 0.5, meeting the recommended thresholds. This confirms the validity of the measurement model, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Reliability and Validity of the Measurement Model

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR
Sense of Place (PP)	8	0.918	0.583	0.918
Immersive Experience (IE)	14	0.937	0.515	0.858
Behavior Intention (BI)	7	0.906	0.581	0.906
Total		0.932		

Note. n=58

6. Model Fit Results

The fit results of the structural model show that all fit indices meet the required standards: $\chi^2/df = 1.115$, CFI = 0.995, RMSEA = 0.015, GFI = 0.948, and AGFI = 0.940. All indices have reached optimal levels, indicating a good fit between the model and the data, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3 Structural Equation Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	GFI	AGFI	TLI	NFI
Recommended Value	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
This Model	1.115	0.015	0.995	0.948	0.940	0.994	0.951

Note. n=58

7. Path Analysis Results

The path analysis results show that place perception has a significant positive impact on tourist behavioral intention, and that immersion experience plays a partial mediating role between place perception and behavioral intention. All hypotheses were supported through testing.

Table 4 Path Analysis Results

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Coefficient	p Value	Conclusion
H1	Place perception → Behavioral intention	0.559	< 0.001	Significant positive effect
H2	Place perception → Immersion experience	0.338	< 0.001	Significant positive effect
H3	Immersion experience → Behavioral intention	0.107	< 0.05	Significant positive effect

H4	Place perception→	0.037	< 0.05	Mediation
	Immersion experience			effect
→Behavioral intention				

Discussion

The results of research objective 1 found that place perception has a significant positive influence on tourists' behavioral intention toward Yunnan's cultural tourism products, especially in terms of revisit and recommendation intentions. This is because tourists' recognition of the destination's distinctiveness and their emotional attachment to local culture jointly shape their cognition and affect, which then translate into loyalty-like behavioral tendencies. This is consistent with the Cognitive–Emotional–Behavioral perspective that cognitive and affective responses jointly drive behavior (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), and echoes destination image research showing that positive evaluations of a place can enhance tourists' behavioral intentions (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

The results of research objective 2 found that place perception significantly enhances tourists' immersion experience. This is because when tourists perceive a destination as unique, authentic, and culturally rooted, they are more willing to focus their attention, engage emotionally, and invest cognitive resources in activities on site, which leads to deeper sensory, emotional, and cognitive immersion. This is consistent with flow and immersion theory, which emphasize focused attention, enjoyment, and altered time perception as core characteristics of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). In the context of Yunnan, clear place-based narratives and cultural symbols help tourists feel that they are temporarily “inside” a meaningful cultural environment rather than merely observing it from the outside.

The results of research objective 3 found that immersion experience not only has a positive direct effect on behavioral intention, but also plays a partial mediating role between place perception and behavioral intention. This is because immersion experience acts as an affective bridge: place perception first activates tourists' engagement with the destination, and immersive experiences then consolidate enjoyment, satisfaction, and a sense of meaning, which finally encourage revisit, recommendation, and premium-paying intentions. This is in line with prior work showing that immersive, flow-like states can enhance engagement and subsequent behavioral responses in experiential settings (O'Cass & Carlson, 2010). At the same time, the mediating role of immersion experience empirically supports the optimization pathway of "enhancing place perception—amplifying immersion experience—boosting behavioral intention," providing a clear direction for the innovation and high-quality development of Yunnan's cultural tourism products.

Recommendations

This study employs a cross-sectional design and does not investigate the temporal effects or the stability of the causal relationships over time. The research sample is primarily drawn from Yunnan, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research could adopt longitudinal studies or experimental designs to enhance causal inference. Future studies could also expand to regions such as Southeast Asia for comparative research. The theoretical model can be further expanded to incorporate moderating variables, such as tourist involvement or cultural distance, to examine their boundary conditions within the main pathways. Furthermore, investigating additional mediating mechanisms, such as emotional responses or social influences, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the formation of behavioral intention.

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