A Study on the Sustainable Development Mechanism of Destinations from the Perspective of Visitor Experience: The Case of Mogan Mountain

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Abstract. Sustainable development of destinations is a critical way to achieve a balance between human beings and nature, the environment and development, helping to maintain the long-term healthy development of the economy, society and the environment. However, studies have focused on the influence of local residents and development operators on the sustainable development of destinations, but have not explored the sustainable development mechanism from the perspective of tourists, which needs to be further improved and enriched. Therefore, the article takes Mogan Mountain as the object of analysis and explores the sustainable development mechanism of the destination from the perspective of tourists. First, the article analyses tourists' experiences through grounded theory to discover the relationship between tourists' satisfaction and the destination. On this basis, the article tries to construct a sustainable development mechanism from the tourists' perspective. There are the discovery about the study. (1) Tourists have an essential influence on the operation and development of a destination through the mechanism of "decision-experience-feedback". (2) Tourists not only test the sustainability of a destination in three dimensions: economic, social and environment, but are also an essential part of the sustainable development of a destination in terms of environment and culture. (3) Tourists are also an important part of the sustainable development of a destination in terms of environment and culture.

Keywords: Tourism experience · Visitor satisfaction · Sustainability · Grounded theory

1 Introduction

Sustainable development, as the main direction of current development, refers to the ability of productive activities to meet today's needs without compromising future generations possibilities [1, 2], has been introduced to tourism [3]. Studies have found that sustainability in tourism is related to these three dimensions based on the economic, environmental and social impacts of tourism in modern society [4]. Sustainable tourism reduces the negative environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism activities

to achieve ecological sustainability, economic viability and ethical and social equity [5]. Therefore, sustainable development research can help guide tourism development positively. However, current studies mainly consider the sustainable development approach of destinations from the perspective of destination operators and local residents. Although these studies can quickly promote the construction of sustainable development mechanisms for destinations from a macro perspective, they do not balance the relationship between tourists, local residents and destination development operators in the construction of sustainable development. To develop a healthy and sustainable development model for tourism destinations, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) should pay attention to the role of the mobility-filled tourists and the uncertainty-filled visitor experience in destination development. To further explore the study, using Mogan Mountain as the background, based on the grounded theory, the feasibility of constructing a sustainable development mechanism from the perspective of tourists will be explored through the destination tourism experience of tourists as the research basis.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Tourist Experience, Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Development

In the era of the experience economy, the tourism experience, is often defined as the process by which tourists observe or participate in a destination and the resulting psychological feelings [6]. Tourism should focus more on providing exciting experiences than other industries, as experiences have become a tourism core [6]. Past research has shown that the quality of the experience directly affects visitor satisfaction [7]. Visitors not only choose to revisit the destination with high tourists' satisfaction, but also recommend it to others through positive reviews of the location; whereas low satisfaction is associated with a poor image of the destination and may damage the destination's market reputation [8]. Moreover, the impact of negative experiences of tourists in these low-satisfaction destinations is much more significant than the impact of positive experiences on tourists' future behaviour [9]. Thus, the quality of the visitor's tourism experience is central to the success of the tourism product [10], and not only a central determinant of loyalty behaviour [11] but also the competitiveness and sustainability of the destination [12]. Therefore, studies on focusing on and improving negative tourism experiences and visitor satisfaction is an important strategy to enhance competitive advantage and promote destination development in the contemporary competitive tourism market.

2.2   Sustainable Tourism

The term 'sustainable development' dates back to the late 1980s [13] and is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [14]. In tourism, Muller addresses sustainability in terms of: (i) economic health; (ii) cultural health; (iii) the well-being of local people; (iv) the conservation of natural resources; and (v) visitor satisfaction [15]. In particular, visitor satisfaction plays a crucial role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations [16]. Sustainable tourism development should not only positively

impact local communities, governments and investors in the present and future [17], but also ensure higher satisfaction from tourists [18]. Previous research has found that tourists who are satisfied with their tourism experience share a positive attitude about the destination with relatives and friends to invite others to visit the destination with high loyalty [19]. Therefore, achieving tourism's sustainability goals requires higher quality tourism experiences [20], with a continuous increase in tourist satisfaction [5, 21].

In addition, tourism based on sustainable development principles should also take full account of the three dimensions of economic, social and environmental protection [13, 22, 23]. First, sustainable tourism is closely linked to environmental protection in destinations. The UN has developed several future guidelines for sustainable tourism that provide crucial environmental indicators for tourism, including climate change mitigation, pollution reduction, renewable energy use, waste disposal, etc. [24, 25, 26]. Meanwhile, sustainable tourism also influences the social dimension of destinations in terms of employment equity (SDG 8) and local cultural preservation (SDG 11) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10) [27], to reconcile the social dimension present in destinations. However, sustainable tourism is not only about nature conservation or socially responsible business, but the vital issue of competitiveness also needs to be addressed as well, as tourism competitiveness is considered one of the main economic dimensions of sustainable development [4]. Therefore, research on sustainable development should balance the relationship between the economic, social and environmental dimensions.

2.3 Review of Research

Overall, current research notes the importance of tourist satisfaction for the sustainable development of destinations. However, current research more often takes the perspective of government, managers and local residents as the direction of research on the sustainable development of destinations. Whereas destination sustainability is not only built between tourism development operators, government and local residents [17], research should also focus on the perspective of tourists, a key player, to uncover the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination sustainability [5]. Therefore, the article will take Mogan Mountain as the context and explore the tourist-led sustainable development mechanism of the destination by exploring the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination development through the perspective of tourists' experience in the destination. In theory, this study deepens the research on the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination, and is also a tentative exploration of building a sustainable development mechanism for the destination with tourists as the main body. In practice, the study provides a guiding direction for sustainable development in Mogan Mountain, and the model also applies to tourist destinations in other regions.

3   Study Design

3.1   Mogan Mountain

Mogan Mountain whose rural tourism strategy has become a successful model for rural tourism in China, the Mogan Mountain Model, is located in Deqing County, Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province. However, the Chinese government proposed a rural revitalisation strategy in 2017, which requires the development of the Mogan Mountain destination needs to be holistic and explore a sustainable approach to development.

3.2   Research Methodology

Glaser and Strauss proposed the grounded theory approach in the 1960s [28]. Then there are three main versions: objectivist, post-positivist and constructivist [29]. The research requires the objective conditions of position and perspective through layer-by-layer coding of texts with the natural emergence of theories and conclusions. Thus, based on classical rooting theory, open-ended, axial and selective coding of textual data is used to conceptualise, propositions and theorise the raw textual data (189 Mogan Mountain travel notes with 87,437 Chinese characters) which is accessed from Xiaohongshu App randomly.

3.3   Operational Processes of Grounded Theory

3.3.1   Open Coding

Then, with the help of Nvivo software, the researcher repeatedly read the extracted notes and viewed the writer's description of Mogan Mountain from a spectator's view, performing initial coding (labelled AC). Because of the rich descriptive language used for the destinations, concepts related to the same phenomenon will be clustered into a category based on the logical relationships between them. In the process of categorisation, the phenomena, content and interrelationships between the initial categories are repeatedly compared, and concepts with similar spatial practices and content ideologies are logically grouped based on existing spatial-local research, taking into account the similarities and possibilities of the conceptual dimensions of existing research findings. After categorisation, 30 concepts (labelled AAC) were obtained from 977 initial codes, and 17 categories (labelled A) were generated.

3.3.2   Saturation Test

In July 2022, the researcher again randomly collected the latest 10 Mogan Mountain destination blog texts from the Xiaohongshu app to test the theoretical saturation of the constructed conceptual model. The results showed that no significant new concepts and relationships were found within the obtained 30 concepts and 17 categories, and no new relationships were found between the main categories. Therefore, the theoretical model constructed in the study can be considered saturated.

3.3.3 Axial and Selective Coding

After the basic semantic scoping, the text data is axially and selectively coded, resulting in the three basic dimensions of destination choice, destination experience and feedback (Table 1).

(1) Destination choice dimension

Table 1. Dimensions and components of the online visitor travel experience

Main Category	Category	Subcategory	Conceptualisation
(D-1) Destination selection	(C-1) Destination decision factors	(B-1) Other factors	(A-1) Recommendation from others
		(B-2) Self-factors	(A-2) Destination selection
(D-2) Destination experience	(C-2) Environmental factor perception	(B-3) Positive environmental perception	(A-3) Scenic views
			(A-4) Eco-friendly
		(B-4) Negative environmental perception	(A-5) Environmental pollution
			(A-6) Ecological issues
	(C-3) Social factors perception	(B-5) Negative social perception	(A-7) Planning issues
			(A-8) Human environment issues
			(A-9) Management issues
			(A-10) Infrastructure issues
		(B-6) Positive social perception	(A-11) Reasonable prices
			(A-12) Gastronomy
			(A-13) Good human environment
(D-3) Destination feedback	(C-4) Visitor satisfaction	(B-7) Dissatisfaction	(A-14) Non-recommended destinations
			(A-15) Abandonment of destination
		(B-8) Satisfaction	(A-16) Recommendation of destination
			(A-17) Return destination

The destination selection dimension is a prerequisite for the tourist experience and coordination of the tourist's pre-travel destination decisions, including other people's factors and self-factors. In the destination decision stage, the visitor's destination choice is influenced by external and internal factors. For example, tourists wrote in their notes that they "had been watching Mogan Mountain on a TV show, so they came with friends to play" (AC43). With the recommendation from the media or friends, decision-makers can have a basic knowledge of the destination, which has an important influence on the decision maker's choice of destination. However, with the influence of various external factors, only the tourists make the final decision: "We did many tips, compared a lot, and finally chose Mogan Mountain" (AC854).

(2)   Destination experience stage

The destination experience dimension has the most significant number of primary codes and includes two subgenera: perceptions of environmental and social factors. The dimension emphasises tourists' experiences of local factors when travelling to a destination. Due to the different experiences of tourists at the destination, the experience of the same factors may vary among tourists.

Regarding the environment, some visitors maintain a positive attitude towards Mogan Mountain's natural scenery and ecology. In their travel notes, these visitors report that they witnessed a "fairy-like sea of clouds" (AC356) and "close interaction with small animals" (AC353) in Mogan Mountain. The visual and tactile impact of these trips gives visitors to Mogan Mountain a sense of the region's harmonious relationship between people and nature. Some visitors, however, have a negative attitude towards the environment in Mogan Mountain. Some visitors to Mogan Mountain find that "the huts at the bottom of the mountain are full of rubbish" (AC 132). These negative messages about the environment not only pose a challenge to the local ecology, but also convey a negative image to visitors. In addition, some tourists found during their trip that "the mountains are full of bamboo forests and bamboo shoots, and many tourists dig them secretly" (AC326). Tourists, as part of the destination management, can not only perceive and evaluate the destination but participate in the conservation and destruction of the destination's environment.

On the other hand, visitors have different attitudes towards the social factors of the Mogan Mountain destination. Some visitors maintain a positive attitude towards the social factors of Mogan Mountain in terms of food (AC653), price (AC45) and human environment (AC684), while others have a negative attitude. In their travel notes, these visitors point out the shortcomings of Mogan Mountain in planning (AC724), services (AC276), management (AC380) and infrastructure (AC86), in terms of social factors. These negative social factors not only lead to dissatisfaction during the experience, but may also influence the planning of the trip and make it less likely that the visitor will recommend the destination to others.

(3)   Destination feedback dimension

The destination feedback dimension can reflect their satisfaction in the destination. For example, tourists who are satisfied with the destination, "I would like to climb it
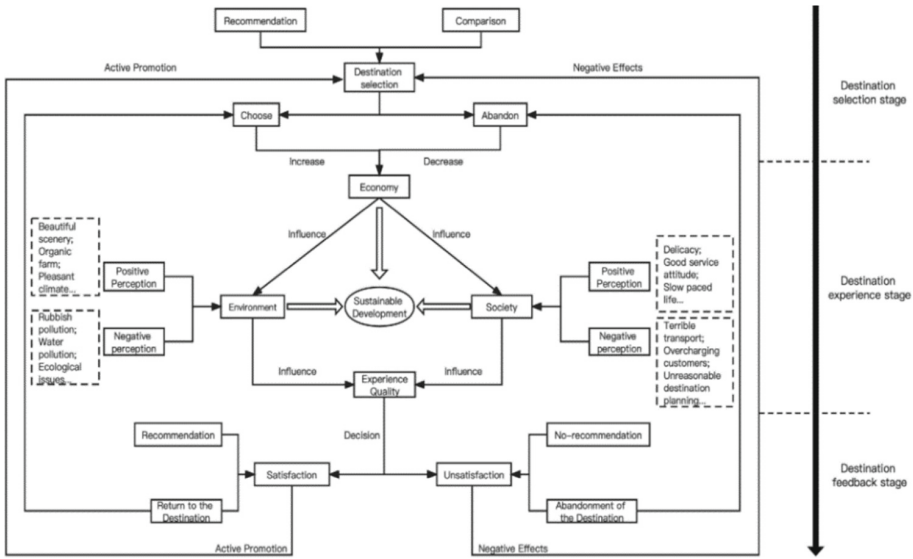
Fig. 1. Building sustainable destination development based on visitor experience

again next time" (AC95), and some tourists recommend to others that "families travelling should bring their children" (AC242). On the other hand, low levels of satisfaction with a destination can also lead to negative feedback about the destination and harm their future trips and the destination decisions of others. For example, a visitor indicated that "he would not go back" (AC37) and suggested to other tourists "go anywhere but Mogan Mountain scenic area".

4   Sustainable Destination Development Framework Based on Visitor Experience

4.1   Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Development

Visitors are the subject through the development of the destination, as they are not only the destination experiencers, but also the one who chooses the destination and gives feedback on the destination experience. During the preparation phase of the trip, although various external factors influence it, only the visitor is the key to the destination selection, directly deciding whether to choose the destination. At this stage, the visitor can actively 'compare many' (AC854) destinations or passively receive information about 'Mogan Mountain's reputation' (AC427) to help them make the final decision. Once the destination has been selected, the visitor travels to the destination to start the travel experience. However, the visitor's perception of the destination is not just about the various tours available at the destination, but begins on arrival. All of the experiences, including "arriving at the airport and driving" (AC86), "ordering food" (AC45), and "taking an online taxi" (AC254), give the visitor a different perceptual image of the destination. In addition, visitors also visualise the interior of the destination in environmental aspects

such as landscape and ecology, and management aspects such as service and queuing. In the visitor feedback phase, the visitor's experience at the destination directly influences the level of satisfaction. These travelers' willingness to generate positive word of mouth largely relied on their satisfaction level [30]. Visitors even choose to revisit the destinations with high satisfaction [4], which encourages the visitors to choose the destination in the destination selection phase. The destination will receive more visitors and the destination will be able to achieve a virtuous circle in visitor numbers and destination branding. However, low satisfaction levels can damage a destination's market reputation, and a poor image of these destinations can encourage potential visitors to abandon them at the selection stage. Therefore, as a subject, the 'decision-experience-feedback' cycle reflects the relationship between visitor experience, satisfaction and selection, and the importance of satisfaction for a destination's sustainability and long-term development.

4.2 Visitor Experience and Destination Sustainability

Visitors are the testers of a destination's sustainability, while the visitor experience is an effective way to test a destination's sustainability. The mechanism (Fig. 1) reflects the different frameworks of economic, social and environmental aspects of the visitor experience to demonstrate the potential for sustainable development of a destination. During the visitor experience phase, visitors can visualise the state of the local society and environment, while negative visitor experiences can directly reflect sustainability problems in the destination. Visitors to the Sword Pond found "a few dirty leaves floating on the water, and it stinks!" (AC654), pointing out the shortcomings of the destination in sustainability. In addition, there are potential interactions between these feedback elements across different frames. For example, when a tourist asks for a taxi online, he is "charged an extra 10 yuan by the driver" (AC254). It not only reflects problems in the management of the destination, but also harms the local economic order.

On the other hand, the feedback from tourists after their experience influences their destination selection, which directly impacts the local economy. At this stage, more tourists' choices mean more revenue for the destination, and economic development can contribute to improved environmental protection and the social quality of the local community. However, excessive economic development can also harm direct local environmental and social aspects. For example, overloading destinations, while generating more revenue for the local community, can result in 'too many queues' (AC177), which not only creates problems for the social management of the destination, but also puts a massive strain on the local environment. Therefore, the sustainability of a destination requires not only a consideration of the economic, environmental and social factors of the destination, but also a balance of these factors from an integrated perspective, and the visitor experience is the key to reflecting and testing the social, environmental and economic aspects of a destination's development.

4.3 Tourists: Participants in the Sustainable Development of Destinations

Tourists are not only the testers of sustainable development in local destinations, but also the participants in sustainable development. As consumers, tourists bring economic benefits to the destination in terms of transport, accommodation and sightseeing tours, and

positively and negatively influence the local society and environment. "Many tourists secretly dig bamboo shoots" (AC326), and these actions by tourists can have a large number of negative impacts on the ecological environment of the destination. Therefore, tourists' environmental awareness and ethics play an essential role in the environmental sustainability of a destination. In addition, "Yu Village Cultural Street is also very commercialised: milk tea, rice wine, the kind of accessories you can find everywhere…" (AC77), and the original local cultural environment has disappeared. Once a traditional culture is transformed into a tourism resource, the unconscious cultural exchange between tourists and local residents is bound to increase. Traditional culture is bound to be gradually assimilated and no longer an original reproduction of its original form. To achieve healthy coordination and development of tourism with local society and culture, DMO should pay attention to the role of tourists in the sustainable development of culture, and the presentation of local culture, for the holistic development of local culture, in a coordinated and benign way, avoiding the 'island effect' and minimising the negative impact on local culture caused by the development of tourism activities. Meanwhile, the DMO should minimise the negative impact of human factors on local culture caused by tourism activities, while local culture can develop, change and innovate according to its inherent laws.

5   Conclusions

In the article, the researcher conducted a root theory analysis with the help of online texts about Mogan Mountain shared by tourists on online platforms, and extracted three main categories, four categories and eight subcategories. The coding of the main category reveals that tourists influence the development of a destination in a continuous cycle of three stages:' selection - experience - feedback'.

There are many different perceptions about the destination among tourists in the cycle. These positive perceptions contribute to the satisfaction of the destination, attracting more visitors with a positive destination image and creating a virtuous cycle between visitors and the destination. Negative perceptions of a destination can lead to more tourists abandoning the destination, which not only deteriorates the relationship between tourists and the destination, but also hinders the development of the destination. Therefore, DMO should not overlook the role of tourists in destination development. In addition, the code also reflects that tourists, as experiencers and participants in destination development, contribute to the construction of sustainable development mechanisms in destinations from social, economic and environmental perspectives. Visitors' perceptions of a destination's social, environmental and economic aspects help destination managers study the destination's sustainability, while these visitors themselves are part of the sustainable development of the destination with an inextricable relationship. DMO should closely integrate tourists into their development plans when building sustainable development mechanisms.

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