

Title

Heterogeneity of tourists' destination brand experiences: A segmentation analysis

Abstract

Destination brand experiences (DBEs) has been one of the crucial attributes to establish differentiation, uniqueness and competitive advantages in tourism. Although existing research tend to evaluate tourists' DBEs as homogeneous, tourists in reality vary according to different dimensions of DBEs and such heterogeneity will impact their destination satisfaction and loyalty. This study addresses this gap through a two-stage segmentation analysis, a three-cluster solution was found, Rel-Cog, Emo-Sense and Behaviorally-Tepid tourists. Overall, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the application of DBEs for segmentation and provides recommendations for tourism practitioners on ways to customize their promotional activities and strategies.

Keywords: destination brand experience, satisfaction, loyalty, clustering, segmentation, marketing

Introduction

Research into destination brand experiences (DBE) is a crucial area within the tourism literature. Destination brand experiences, reflecting tourists' behavioral, cognitive, emotional, sensory, relational, and spiritual experiences towards a destination, are influential to destination competitiveness as well as sustainable development (Brakus et al., 2009; Ngwira et al., 2023). While consumers' positive experiences can induce post-travel satisfaction and repeat visitation, negative experience can instead influence post-purchase attitudes and future behavioral intentions such as negative word-of-mouth (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Gursoy et al., 2022; Han, 2021; Rather, 2020). The examination of destination brand experience is not only important for understanding tourist experiences at the destination, but it is essential for constructive marketing strategies to enhance its competitiveness and sustainability (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Ngwira et al., 2023).

Drawing on the prominent work of Brakus et al. (2009) and Barnes et al. (2014), adoption of DBEs has flourished over the decades in tourism research ranging from hotel brand experiences to luxury retail brand experiences (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Kwon & Boger, 2021). More recently, the concept of DBEs has been re-conceptualized from four to six dimensions with the addition of relational and spiritual experiences (Ngwira et al., 2023). Yet most studies remain fixated on only the four dimensions, thereby neglecting the contemporary inclusion of spiritual and relational dimensions that are crucial for tourism management.

Existing studies have also explored the influence of DBEs on related concepts. For instance, positive experiences can elicit high levels of satisfaction, repeat visitation as well as word-of-mouth (Ahn & Back, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021; Iglesias et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2021). Studies have argued that facilitating DBE is decisive for effective promotion, managing and sustaining a destination. However, despite recognizing the diversity of tourism contexts (e.g., hotel context, luxury context, and among others), there is surprisingly little attention to the idea

that tourists are also heterogeneous (Engström & Kipperberg, 2015; Lee et al., 2021). Tourists should not be treated as a homogenous group as different tourist will experience the six dimensions of DBEs differently; hence, it is necessary to understand how DBEs can be used as a tool to segment different clusters of tourists.

Segmentation analysis has been utilized in previous studies to segment large group of tourists into smaller clusters that post intragroup similarities and intergroup differences (Dolnicar, 2020; Li et al., 2013; Prayag et al., 2021; Prayag et al., 2023; Stangl et al., 2020). Over the past decades, several techniques and approaches has been developed in segmentation and identifying group heterogeneity, and among them, benefit segmentation has been focusing on the benefits received by individuals rather than sole emphasis in variables of geographic, demographic and social-economic (Haley; 1968). Since its introduction, benefit segmentation has been widely applied in tourism studies, however, no precise definition and procedure in performing this technique until the review conducted by Frochot and Morrison (2000). Drawing from previous tourism research, they concluded that benefit segmentation is performed through three stages, namely, identify the benefits, create the benefit segments, and profile these segments.

According to Frochot and Morrison (2000), first, identify the benefits. These benefits relate to individuals' demands seeking from a product, service or experience and can be collected through literature review, interviews or even survey instruments through likert scale ratings. Second, create the benefit segments. There is no agreement in determining the segment based on specific ways although factor analysis and cluster analysis are often preferred. Factor analysis is used for factoring the benefit attributes and can be skipped if factorial dimensions are pre-determined. Cluster analysis is aimed to classify and allocate individuals into mutually exclusive segments using either hierarchical or non-hierarchical approaches. Both approaches allow researcher to determine the optimum cluster numbers of heterogeneity. Furthermore,

discriminant analysis must be performed to test for significant differences among the resulted clusters. Third, profile these segment. This is the ultimate test of the cluster solution by comparing the them against external variables that were not examined in previous two stages. Some examples are demographic or behavioral variables that are useful for tourism marketing.

Benefit segmentation has been popularized in tourism research. For instance, Santos et al., (2020) segmented sun-and-sea tourists based on their food consumption and three clusters were resulted, namely: non-foodies, selective foodies and local gastronomy foodies. Similarly, Wen et al. (2020) segmented Chinese tourists' cannabis consumption during travel into three clusters and revealed differentiation in terms of socio-demographic and behavioral intention among them. Styliadis et al. (2020) used cluster analysis based on emotional solidarity and identified three distinct groups: Appreciators, lovers, and emotionally distant. They also revealed that different levels of perception and loyalty post across the three clusters. Existing studies have indicated the presence of differentiation among segmented clusters in terms of socio-demographic and behavioral intention, yet studies to-date have not considered DBEs as a segmentation tool.

In light of the abovementioned, this study aims to address these gaps by asserting that tourists' DBEs can serve as a segmentation tool, which provides strong implication for tourism academically and practically. Tourists are segmented based on their evaluated experiences (i.e., the benefit attributes) of a destination, allowing the identification of tourist subgroup with respect to the different levels of dimensional experiences. Through benefit segmentation, this study argues that the specific dimension(s) that foster destination satisfaction and loyalty can be evaluated. As such, this study seeks to address two key objectives: (1) highlight DBEs as segmentation tool to identify heterogeneity in subgroups of tourist clusters; and (2) to investigate the connections among DBE, destination satisfaction, and loyalty among the segmented subgroups of tourists. Data was collected from a sample of 434 Chinese tourists

who have been to West Lake, an UNESCO world heritage sites residing in Hangzhou, China. Its prominent cultural and historical status has earned numerous recognitions domestically and internationally, and it is also of value for local commercial fishermen (Gao & Jones, 2021; Xu et al., 2017; Zhang, 2017). The diverse resources and tourism products in West Lake was deemed a suitable study site to explore different DBE tourist segments in connection with destination satisfaction and loyalty.

Overall, this study adds value to the literature by highlighting the application of DBEs for segmentation and providing empirical support to the extended dimensions of DBEs (i.e., spiritual and relational) from recent tourism research. The study also offers insights into how segmented subgroups of tourists via DBEs can connect with the concepts of destination satisfaction and loyalty. Practically, this study provides recommendations for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) on ways to customize their promotional activities and strategies according to the segmented subgroups.

Literature Review

2.1 Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory

The present study is guided by stimulus-organism-response theory (SOR) in the context of tourists' experience in destination management. Originated from Woodworth (1929) and later extended by Jacoby (2002), SOR focuses on the environmental aspects that arose individual's cognition and affection, which later display through actual behavior. In other words, this theory maps the mechanism to explain the formation of individuals' behaviors by examining their internal states of cognitive and affective that were affected by external stimulus (Shah et al., 2020). Prior studies employed this theory in various fields, including experiential marketing, consumer behavior and customer relationship management, to identify the environmental stimuli to activate feelings and behaviors. More importantly, despite its vast examination in different contexts, often, it is situated in explaining the mechanism between brand experience and individual's degree of loyalty held towards a tourism product or service (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021).

According to the theory, stimulus reflects as the external influence that exerts impact on an individual (Eroglu et al., 2001). Previous consumer behavior studies suggested that, apart from environmental factors, other variables such as social connectivity, atmospheric element as well as physical appearance post similar stimulation effect onto individual's evaluation. Organism is referred as the individual's internal processing of the stimulus which, subsequently, induces responsive reaction (Bagozzi, 1986). More often, organism is recognized as the affective component that an individual holds that mirrors the emotions associating with the stimulus received. Response serves as the final component in the theory is illustrated as the outcome resulted from the stimulus and organism. As suggested by prior research, response is displayed through consumer behavior whereby physical actions are performed to either support or refute the stimulus (Donovan & Rositer, 1982). Since its establishment, S-O-R theory has been

examined in identifying stimulus that exert influence onto consumers' affective association as eventually their supportive behaviors.

This study aims to identify the induction of tourists' satisfaction and loyalty towards destination based on their destination brand experience. In others words, this study regards destination brand experience as stimulus, satisfaction as the affective condition resulted from the stimulus (i.e., destination brand experience), and loyalty severing as the response to both stimulus and organism. Previous tourism studies have examined extensively their interrelationship, aiming to map their mechanism in understanding how and which dimensions of destination brand experience exert influences or even dominate tourist's emotional connectivity (i.e., satisfaction) and behavioral response (i.e., loyalty) (Abbasi et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2024; Ngwira et al., 2023). However, despite the vast modelling investigation, these studies regarded tourists' experience as homogeneous while in reality tourists evaluate stimulus differently and thus resulting in different degree of destination brand experience which further influence their satisfaction and loyalty towards the destination. Thus, this research focus on the identification of heterogeneity in tourists' destination brand experience and the corresponding differentiation in their organism and response that shape their overall attitude towards the destination.

2.2 Destination Brand Experiences (DBE)

Destination brand experiences (DBE) was derived from the concept of brand experiences that was first introduced by Brakus et al. (2009) in the marketing literature. They define brand experiences as an individual's sensation, cognitive, emotional and behavioral reactions or responses with respect to brand's stimuli of "design, identity, packaging, communication and environments". Brand experiences emphasize on consumers' purchase behaviors and their consumption experiences with the company and the brand functionally, internally and subjectively (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Kumar et al., 2020). They are takeaway impressions

generated in consumers' mind from their interactions exchanges with the brand (Iglesias et al., 2019; Wong & Lin, 2022).

Brakus et al. (2009) identified four dimensions based on their definition of brand experiences, namely: sensory, affective, cognitive and behavioral. Sensory refers to the multiple sensational experiences derived from the five senses of sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing (Agapito et al., 2013; Barnes et al., 2014). For instance, sensory experiences include the sight of the landscape, the taste of food, or the scent of the environment (Kankhuni & Ngwira, 2022; Kim et al., 2020; Ouyang et al., 2018). Affective experiences emphasize on the emotional attachment individual's hold towards the brand. This may include enjoyment, happiness, and other positive emotional reactions (Ahn & Back, 2020). Cognitive experiences, also referred to as intellectual experiences, focus on the stimulation of consumers' curiosity, thinking, and problem-solving experiences. The intellectual dimension offers opportunities for consumers to become aware, learn and understand the products and brand, thereby creating interpretations and meanings for their experiences (Ngwira et al., 2023). Behavioral experiences refer to the physical actions in response to a brand's stimuli. It focuses on the bodily experiences and physical behaviors when individuals are experiencing a product (Brakus et al., 2009). Overall, these four dimensions of brand experiences have been widely employed in various study contexts, such as food and beverage experiences, luxury consumption, retail brand experiences, experiences with service robotics, social media and online brand experiences, as well as sports product experiences (Akoglu & Ozbek, 2022; Husain et al., 2022; Prentice et al., 2019; Song et al., 2019; Zollo et al., 2020).

Recent research, however, suggested that the four dimensions of brand experience as conceptualized in 2009 should be extended in consideration of the research progress in tourism marketing and destination management. Specifically, the concept of brand experiences for destinations in tourism research (i.e., destination brand experiences) should also include

relational and spiritual dimensions (Ngwira et al., 2023). Relational experiences emphasize on the socialization between tourists and the others, such as with the locals for host-guest interactions (Tse & Tung, 2022), to establish connection and learning more about the locals (Paik & Lee, 2021). Spiritual experiences focus on inner peace and health of an individual in relation to the destination (Gill et al., 2019). It promotes individual's well-being, soothing the spirit and healing the body with an aim to stimulate good health and body revitalization (Buckley & Westaway, 2020; Öznalbant & Alvarez, 2020; Sheldon, 2020).

2.3 DBE with destination satisfaction

Satisfaction has been a key outcome that every business, brands, organization as well as destination success and resources allocations (Abbasi et al., 2024; Bornhorst et al., 2010; Choo et al., 2011; Elvekrok et al., 2022). It is the cognitive-affective states that consumers (i.e., tourists) established from their experiences at the destination (San Martín et al., 2019). Therefore, satisfaction has been utilized and examined in various academic research as well as practical projects. Existing tourism studies have employed various methodological approaches, ranging from qualitative to quantitative, interviews to questionnaires, to investigate the formation of satisfaction (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Chen et al., 2022; Gohary et al., 2020).

In tourism studies, the conceptual of destination satisfaction refers to how far tourists are satisfied with the destination, and is an aggregated score based on tourist evaluation towards their experiences at the destination (Lee & Choi, 2020; Seetanah et al., 2020; Stumpf et al., 2022). Early studies have emphasized destination satisfaction as one of the significant predictors towards future behavioral intention or related desires (Jani & Han, 2014). Utilizing destination choice theory, Crompton (1992) revealed the connection between level of destination satisfaction and revisit intentions. Subsequently, a stream of tourism studies replicated and suggested that tourists' higher degree of destination satisfaction is more likely to repeat their visitation with the same destinations (Chen & Chen, 2010; Liao et al., 2021;

Ranjbarian & Pool, 2015; Shi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2018). On the other hand, tourists' dissatisfaction during their visit will reduce their chance of returning in the future or even disregard the destination as their next travel choice. As such, striving to achieve a high level of satisfaction has become a top priority objective among destination management organizations (DMOs) and tourism practitioners in this competitive situation (Lee et al., 2017).

The abovementioned studies consider destination satisfaction as independent variables to examine its relationship on other relating concepts. Another stream of tourism studies takes on an alternative approach by recognizing destination satisfaction as the dependent variable and examine its formation. In other words, these tourism studies explore how and what are the attributes that establish destination satisfaction. Among the available variables, the concept of destination brand experiences is often employed to investigate its relation with destination satisfaction as both are consumers' oriented and post significant towards destination success and sustainability. For instance, Barnes et al. (2014) revealed empirical supports from three destinations (i.e., Lolland-Falster, Malmö and Lund) in the link establishment between the four dimensions of destination brand experiences and satisfactions. Replications with Brakus et al. (2009) scale was noted across tourism research with various study contexts and resulted in similar findings (Choo et al., 2011; Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Kumar & Kaushik, 2018; Lin et al., 2023; Lv & Wu, 2021; Singh & Mehraj, 2018). More recent tourism studies have revealed the newly added dimensions of relational and spiritual experiences exert influences towards satisfaction of a destination (Andreini et al., 2019; Ngwira et al., 2023). Existing studies revealed the connection between destination brand experiences, regardless of four or six dimensions, and destination satisfaction, providing valuable insight academically and practically.

2.4 DBE with destination loyalty

Loyalty has been acknowledged as one of the key indicators in marketing literature as

well as tourism literature (Chi & Qu, 2008; Ragb et al., 2020; Rather, 2020; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Earlier studies define loyalty as a deep emotional commitment and attachment that stimulate individuals to buy the same product or service again, resulting in repetitions of the same brand in future consumption (Bi, 2019; Oliver 1999; Qu et al., 2021). In other words, loyalty fosters repeating consumption and is associated with the creation of retaining existing consumer accordingly. As such, developing consumer loyalty has been an essential marketing strategy in any form of product and service, including tourism destination. Tourism destinations consist of various resources which are regarded as products and services that require loyalty (i.e., tourists' loyalty) for success, survival and sustainable development (Buhalis, 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Leiper, 1979).

Within the tourism studies, destination loyalty is often measured with three approaches: (1) behavioral approach, (2) attitudinal approach, and (3) mixed approach (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Behavioral approach focuses on the operationalization or physical actions of loyalty in terms of purchase frequency, willingness to pay, or purchase intention. It is emphasizing on the quantitative and static outcome of an individual's loyalty (Suhartanto et al., 2019). On the other hand, attitudinal approach refers to the strength of affection and emotional connection towards the brand (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018). It is examining from the psychological commitment of preferences and favoritism an individual attaches. Finally, the mixed approach is a composition of behavioral and attitudinal approaches. This stream of scholars argues that behavior will only be induced when individual's hold positive attitude towards the brands, products or services (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). If not, it is impossible to foster repeat purchase or even recommending the others for further purchase. Despite the adoption of these approaches in tourism research, they post limitation in interpreting destination loyalty if they are measured solely. Hence, existing studies suggest that a more completed understanding of destination loyalty require the

consideration of other relating concepts, such as destination satisfaction (Lee et al., 2012; Li et al., 2021).

The satisfaction-loyalty relationship has been examined extensively in tourism research, and suggested their positive relationship where high degree of satisfaction will induce high level of loyalty towards the destination. The empirical study conducted by Chi and Qu (2008) revealed tourists' destination satisfaction resulted in a direct and positive impact on destination loyalty in terms of repeat visitation as well as word-of-mouth spreading. Subsequent studies confirmed the formation of destination loyalty based on tourists' destination satisfaction (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Li et al., 2021; Omo-Obas & Anning-Dorson, 2022). The increasing attention on destination brand experiences has foster the integration of experience-satisfaction-loyalty of a destination in the tourism literature. Existing tourism studies have examined this tripartite model either employing the destination brand experience as a whole or selective dimension with respect to the study objectives (Barnes et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2018; Hussein, 2018; Hwang et al., 2021; Ngwira et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2022). For instance, Jimenez-Barreto et al. (2020) demonstrated that online destination brand experiences exert positive influences onto tourists' behavioral intentions (i.e., Spanish tourists) towards the destination (i.e., Paris). Similarly, the study conducted by Kumar and Kaushik (2020) resulted in similar findings, more specifically, they revealed that intellectual/cognitive experience exerts stronger influence towards revisit intention followed by behavioral experiences and eventually emotional aspect of experiences.

Methods

3.1 Procedure of Benefit Segmentation

This research performed benefits segmentation based on the three-stage procedure suggested by Frochot and Morrison (2000). Firstly, identification of the benefit attributes. Frochot and Morrison (2000) defined that these benefit attributes should be relating to individuals' demands seeking from a product, service or experience within the tourism field. Furthermore, these benefits can be collected from literature review, interviews or survey instrument examined against a likert scale rating. Echoing to the research objective, the six dimension of DBE and their corresponding measured items are employed as the list of benefit attributes and rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Secondly, creation of segments through either factor analysis or cluster analysis. Factor analysis is skipped as DBE factors are pre-determined in existing literature, thus channeling into cluster analysis. A combination of hierarchy and non-hierarchy methods are employed to determine the optimum number of clusters. Furthermore discriminant analysis is performed to ensure significant difference among the resulted cluster. Thirdly, final stage, profiling the resulted cluster by comparing external variables. This research employed destination-related variables of satisfaction and loyalty, in addition to demographic variables, to profile each cluster as well as determining their differentiation.

3.2 Questionnaire design and pilot test

To demonstrate the application of DBEs as a segmentation tool, a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was designed to link DBEs with the concepts of destination satisfaction and destination loyalty from Chinese tourists towards West Lake, Hangzhou, China. Destination brand experiences were measured using the six dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, relational, sensory, and spiritual (Ngwira et al., 2023). Destination satisfaction and loyalty were measured with four and three items adopted from Li et al. (2021) and Styliadis et al. (2020), respectively. All measured items were evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 =

strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The last section of the questionnaire included demographic questions. The questionnaire was originally developed in English, translated, and cross-checked to Chinese by different researchers to ensure reliability in translation.

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test was conducted with 50 Chinese tourists who have visited West Lake, Hangzhou in the past 12 months. These respondents were recruited via the social networks of the researchers including friends and relatives, students from local universities and colleagues working in Hangzhou. Minor revisions were made on the sentence structure to improve the clarity and comprehension of the measured items.

3.3 Main data collection and sample

The main data collection was conducted using gender-balanced, non-student sampling approach. To ensure the invited respondents are suitable, a screening question was asked: “Have you visit West Lake, Hangzhou in the past 12 months?” Respondents who answered “no” were excluded from the main survey while those who answered “yes” continued. A total of 434 valid responses were collected. Female respondents accounted for 58.76%. More than half of the respondents were aged less than 35 years old, 71.20% attained university education levels and above, nearly three-fifth of them earn at least RMB 7,000 per month. Furthermore, 79.72% of them have been to West Lake, Hangzhou for at least 6 times.

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Results

This study sought to address two objectives: (1) to highlight DBEs as segmentation tool to identify heterogeneity or subgroup of tourist clusters; and (2) to investigate the connections with the concepts of destination satisfaction and destination loyalty among the DBE segmented subgroups of tourists. To achieve the first research objective, a two-steps cluster analysis was employed to segment West Lake tourists according to their DBEs (Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Prayag, 2012).

Prior to the segmentation analysis, the internal consistencies of the measured items across the six dimensions of the DBE scale were analyzed. The values of Cronbach's alpha ranged between 0.87 to 0.95, exceeding the threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), indicating good internal consistencies across the six dimensions. Discriminant analysis revealed two significant canonical discriminant functions (Table 2). The values of canonical correlation are strong and significant, 0.84 and 0.20 respectively. Also, the hit ratio is 92.60%, 402 out of 434, indicating high level of respondents were classified accurately in the resulted clusters (Hair et al., 2014). As such, the two-step clustering revealed a three-cluster solution. The three clusters derived were named, Behaviorally-Tepid tourists (n = 178, 41.01%), Rel-Cog tourists (n = 152, 35.02%), and Emo-Sense tourists (n = 104, 22.91%).

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4.1 Cluster profile by respondents' demographic

The resulted three clusters were cross-tabulated against socio-demographic items for profiling. As per Table 4, significant differences were noted in gender and age across the three clusters. More specifically, Emo-Sense tourists contain more male tourists while there were more female tourists in the clusters of Behaviorally-Tepid and Rel-Cog. Furthermore, distribution of age suggest difference among the three clusters.

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4.2 Cluster membership with destination satisfaction and loyalty

Next, in order to explore the possible difference between the three clusters with respect to (1) destination satisfaction and destination loyalty, an ANOVA with Scheffe post-hoc testing was conducted. Significant differences were noted among all three clusters at West Lake. For instance, Rel-Cog tourists posted the highest destination satisfaction and destination loyalty, followed by Emo-Sense tourists and eventually the Behaviorally-Tepid tourists towards West

Lake.

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Lastly, all three clusters displayed differences in their destination loyalty to West Lake (Table 6). Rel-Cog tourists demonstrated the highest intention to revisit West Lake as compared to the other two cluster. In contrast, Behaviorally-Tepid tourists reported the lowest possibilities to return to West Lake among the three clusters.

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Discussion

This study clustered tourists' DBEs and investigated the differences among the segmented clusters towards the concepts of destination satisfaction and loyalty. Three distinctive clusters displayed different levels of experiential attributes and statistical significance against destination satisfaction and loyalty, hence, provided empirical support for DBE as a meaningful segmentation tool. The first cluster, Behaviorally-Tepid tourists, is the largest segment. It contains tourists who expressed a relatively neutral overall experience but lowest evaluation in terms of behavioral experiences, indicating the lack of body stimulation or physical activities during their experiences. This cluster of tourists were not involved in action-oriented events. A possible reason can be the limited physical activities available at West Lake, such as canoeing and boating, which are paid events and often in long queues. The limited choices of water activities are due to environmental renovation projects in response to water pollution at West Lake. Despite significant improvements in the past few years, water activities were still strictly controlled to avoid contamination.

The second cluster, Emo-Sense tourists, is the smallest segment. It included tourists who identified their experiences at West Lake with sensory and affective dimensions. This cluster of tourists are mainly male and aged between 25 to 40 years old who visited West Lake several times. Tourists in this cluster primarily appreciated the beauty of the destination, which is in

line with the destination marketing promotional of West Lake. For instance, the “ten scenes” of West Lake taps into tourists’ five sense with the environment. Furthermore, tourists in this segment held strong affective experiences. This result echoes existing research in which sensory experiences may influence individuals’ emotions. For instance, Chen and Lin (2018) suggested that positive sensory experiences in service settings can induce consumers’ positive emotions (i.e., joy), which further elicits their satisfaction and repeat purchase. Similarly, residents’ sensory experience can cue delight and positive feelings that triggers place attachment (Kastenholz et al., 2020).

The third cluster, Rel-Cog tourists, evaluated their experiences with the highest agreement across all the experiential attributes. Members of this cluster are primarily female, middle aged (40 years old and above) and visited West Lake for more than six times in the past. They are the only cluster who indicated agreement on relational and cognitive experiences as compared to the other two clusters whom rated either “somehow agree” or even disagreement. The results suggest that these tourists experienced significant interpersonal relations and intellectual stimulations during their visit at West Lake. For instance, their relational experiences can be induced from their exchanges with their partners while their cognitive experiences can be generated upon their curiosity towards West Lake.

Theoretical Implications

Despite previous tourism studies have investigated the interrelationship between DBEs, satisfaction and loyalty, this study makes several value theoretical implications. First, Drawing from the SOR theory, this study confirms the importance of DBEs in inducing tourists’ sense of satisfaction and loyalty that is a key component in tourism marketing. The three proposed concepts, namely: DBEs, satisfaction and loyalty, mirrored stimulus, organism and response respectively which constitute as tourist’s attitude towards the destination. The findings highlights the influence exerted by spiritual and relational dimensions, two newly added DBE

dimension, towards tourists' emotional connectivity and behavioral responses as well as having impacts in segmenting the tourist. Through the employment of benefit segmentation, this study identifies heterogeneity in tourist's DBEs which verifies its application as a practical tool for tourists' clustering. Existing DBEs studies focused on the perception of a homogeneous group, either residents or tourists, and its influence with other related concepts (i.e., behavioral intention, satisfaction).

This research segments tourists into three smaller clusters by showing intragroup similarities and intergroup differences (e.g., Behaviorally-Tepid, Rel-Cog and Emo-Sense tourists) across the six dimensions of DBEs. Each cluster displays different levels of destination satisfaction and loyalty, pinpointing the specific experiential attributes in fostering enjoyment as well as re-visit intention. The findings may signify knowledge incompleteness or incomprehensiveness in understanding tourists' attitude towards destination by recognizing them and their DBEs as homogeneous rather than heterogenous. Also, this study highlights the importance of the six distinctive dimensions of tourists' experiences in eliciting their satisfaction as well as their loyalty towards the destination. Specifically, this study revealed that sensory and affective experiences serve as key antecedent of tourists' satisfactory and repeat visitation in a lake-based world heritage site. This highlights the importance of sensescape and emotional attachment in building positive tourist's behavioral intention for destination competitiveness and sustainability (Kah et al., 2022; Kastenholz et al., 2020; Lv & McCabe, 2020).

Practical Implications

As practical implication, segmenting tourist's DBE can be useful for tourism destination practitioner and policy makers in the area of destination marketing and management. The segmented three clusters revealed the combination of the six dimensions of DBE that guide tourists' satisfaction and loyalty towards the destination. As such, tourism destination

practitioners should develop and implement their marketing strategies according to the experiential dimensions with respect to the target tourist markets. Failing to do so may lead to tourist's dissatisfaction and lowering their loyalty of repeat visitations, resulting in negative tourists' attitude towards the destination. The contribution of this study highlights the formation of tourists' attitude towards destination, more specifically, the six distinctive dimensions of DBE and its subsequent association with tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. Ultimately, this research reinforces the importance of tourists' experiences in fostering their attitude of satisfaction as well as repeat visitation to establish destination loyalty.

To create positive tourists' experience, tourism destination practitioners must recognized heterogeneity in DBE that adhere to their differentiated emphasis. Destination must invest in understanding and identifying tourists' concerning aspects during their visitation that construct their experience towards the destination. For instance, Emo-Sense tourists emphasize affective and sensory experiences should catered by stimulating tourists' sense of sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch, practitioners may include local snacks in the destination. For example, lotus roots dessert soup, Longjing crispy sweet and fish soup to cater tourists' sense of smell and taste, associating to the history of West Lake, and may linking to gastronomy tourism in West Lake. Such inclusion would trigger tourists' multisensory and it may further induce the affective aspect of experience by creating positive emotions. Group of Rel-Cog tourists focus on the relational and cognitive aspects that taps on to socializing with the others and intellectual accumulation during their experience with the destination. Addressing to their needs tourism destination practitioners and policy makers should create events that foster community involvement and educational purpose whereby tourists can develop social exchange with other individuals and learning about the destination at the same time. For example, Nanjing Xuwu Lake hosts Chinese calligraphy annually whereby Nanjing residents and students participate by writing Chinese characters relating to the lake, selected opus will be displayed and they are

invited to share with the others. Behaviorally-Tepid tourists are reluctant to be involved in action-oriented activities, hence, tourism practitioners may offer cultural oriented events. For instance, Wuhan East Lake offers poetry and art painting events that tourists may enjoy live musical shows, weaving bracelets, and painting paper fans. Through these events, behaviorally-tepid tourists can be engaged as an audience in a calm atmosphere without physically demanding or challenging actions.

In terms of demographic attributes of the segmented clusters, this study revealed the distinctive profile of tourist clusters, which allows for the understanding of similarity as well as difference among the heterogenous segments of tourists interested in lake-based and UNSECO world heritage tourism. The resulted clusters and subsequent comparisons indicate that demographic attributes of gender and age served as important cluster predictor for DMOs in creating positive DBEs. Senior female and middle-aged men tourists hold similar agreement towards their affective and sensory experience in which DMOs shall enhance them through multi-sensational and emotional aspects. On the other hand, DMOs need to improve on social networking, relaxation, as well as seclude from secularization in creating better relational and spiritual experiences among the senior female tourists only while these aspects would not be favored by the middle-age men tourists.

Recommendation and conclusion

Study Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, the data was collected from Chinese tourists. Due to its history and cultural values, West Lake has been promoting extensively within China, thus domestic tourists can potentially be more aware of the destination and thus post differences from non-domestic tourists. Second, this study examines only satisfaction and loyalty as organism and response respectively which may limit the understanding of other destination-related concept that essential for destination sustainability. Thirdly, despite this research offer

insights in segmenting tourists' destination brand experience and revealing the difference across the clusters, little explanations were given to destination brand experience dimensions that were rated lower.

Recommendation for Future Studies

To address the above-mentioned limitation, firstly, future studies may replicate this study by utilizing samples from international tourists, especially with the recovery of international travel, and compare the variation across West Lake tourists in the examination among DBEs, destination satisfaction and destination loyalty. Those who have visited similar destinations may have different experiences, which would be valuable for DMOs managing UNESCO world heritage sites. Also, future studies may employ other concepts such as emotional solidarity and destination image to investigate how different tourist clusters of DBEs share different levels of emotional solidarity with the local residents and perceptions of the destination (Stylidis et al., 2020). The addition of new concepts illustrates the connectivity between experiences, host-guest relation and image formation that are key elements for sustainable development, which can open interesting new opportunities for academics. Additionally, future studies may employ other statistical approaches, such as structural equation, to examine the interrelationship among the proposed concepts. This approach can identify the interrelationships and their corresponding predictive powers that are valuable for theoretical enhancement in the area of destination experience and management. Lastly, future studies may replicate this research by offering additional insights to address the lower emphasis in behavioral dimension of destination brand experience. One of the possible reasons can be due to the aftermath of pandemic which may reduce tourists' involvement in outdoor water activities and prefer sensory aspect of sightseeing as well as environment appreciation. Additional examination may shed light for destination manager to develop new activities to enhance tourists' destination brand experience.

Conclusion

Previously, the examination of destination brand experience in tourism research recognized tourists as homogeneous group while, in reality, discrepancies were noted among tourist that form groups heterogeneity. In this research, benefit segmentation was employed and clustered three sub-groups of destination brand experience: Behaviorally-Tepid, Rel-Cog and Emo-Sense tourists. Furthermore, the findings empirically validate the presence of differentiation in terms of satisfaction and loyalty towards the destination. In sum, this research offer theoretical insights by verifying that destination brand experiences can be employed as a practical tool for tourists' segmentation. Practically, the identified segments allows tourism practitioners to be specific on the experience dimension in generating positive attitude and supportive behavior for future development.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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