



DESTINATION BRAND IDENTITY AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN ACCESSIBILITY AND TOURIST PERCEPTION: PROMOTING BAMA YAO AS POTENTIAL WELLNESS TOURIST DESTINATION IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the impact of accessibility and destination brand identity on Chinese wellness tourist perceptions. It considers Bama Yao autonomous district's growth towards longevity tourism and contributes to empirical work on the Chinese wellness tourism market. This quantitative research incorporated a post-positivism paradigm with the non-probability convenience sampling method to collect paper-based questionnaires: a total of 346 were coded for data analysis. The results demonstrated that accessibility positively influenced destination brand identity and tourist perceptions. Equally destination brand identity positively influenced tourist perception. Meanwhile, destination brand identity mediated the relationship between accessibility and tourist perception for wellness tourism destinations. However, the cross-sectional study's results cannot be generalizable, and the sample may be one of its limitations. The present study provides policymakers and practitioners with the theoretical and practical basis to understand and predict tourists' perceptions of wellness tourism destinations in China.

KEYWORDS

Bama Yao autonomous district, destination brand identity, push and pull theory, tourist perception, accessibility, wellness tourism destination

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1. INTRODUCTION

Wellness tourism is usually understood as when tourists undertake a journey specifically to improve their well-being and health (Piatto Clerici et al., 2024). In contrast to medical tourists who embark on trips to search for

a way to cure their illnesses (Wang et al., 2024), wellness tourists focus on pursuing relaxation during their stays through activities such as spas, massages, hiking and so on (Phuthong et al., 2023). China has been identified as one of the most rapidly growing wellness markets with an increase from \$12 billion to \$30 billion by 2018 (Eyefor



Travel, 2018). In 2021, China became the second-largest market in the wellness field valued at \$19.9 billion (Stasha, 2023), meaning that wellness tourism has become a popular form of relaxation for the Chinese people. Historically, ancient books record that Chinese wellness medical practices can be dated back to as early as 1000 BC (Quintela et al., 2016), resulting in the establishment of *yangsheng* culture in China (Wanning, 2016). The word *yangsheng* first appeared in Zhuangzi's Taoist literary text known as *Zhuangzi: Health preservation aster* (Yang, 2018). In Chinese the character *yang* means keeping healthy, while *sheng* refers to life and survival (Zhang & Cheng, 2012). The *yangsheng* principle in Taoism refers to activities that help individuals maintain their physical and mental health while promoting longevity through methods such as qigong, bigu, wushu etc. (Jenzen, 2008). In China, nearly all wellness tourism-related literature has been published in Chinese using either the terms 'yangsheng tourism', 'longevity tourism' or 'longevity yangsheng tourism' instead of wellness tourism. The difference between these usages and the language used in publications has led to a great gap between China and the global wellness tourism market.

Bama Yao autonomous district (abbreviated as Bama) is known to be among the fastest-growing wellness tourist destinations in the world (Huang & Xu, 2018). Early in the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), Emperor Guangxu (1875–1908) bestowed a plaque on which was written *Wei ren zhe shou* [*Only the kind live longer*] to a Yao centenarian Deng Chengcai who lived in Bama (Zhao, 1995). Bama was famous due to the number of centenarians living there, and this remains the case even up to the present. In 2020, out of Bama's 0.23 million residents, there were 5974 above the age of 80, and 102 living in the area were centenarians (Bama Yao Autonomous County Statistical Bureau, 2021). Bama is the only wellness location in the world where the number of centenarians has continued to rise steadily through the years (Bama Yao Autonomous County Statistical Bureau, 2021). Thus, Bama is regarded as the most attractive longevity tourism destination in China. Accordingly, Bama was selected as a study site because (a) the region is the most famous destination due to its unique *yangsheng* culture and activities; (b) Bama's unique tourism has rarely been studied in the literature previously; and (c) longevity tourism attracts large numbers of tourists not only from nearby cities but also from distant parts of China (e.g. Harbin and Mudanjiang). Thus, Bama's tourists are considered to be typical of travellers to other wellness destinations in China.

Despite reflecting the cultural characteristic of longevity, its poor accessibility (transportation) had failed to keep up with the tourism boom, resulting in the unsuccessful promotion of Bama to the public. While the influence of accessibility on tourist perceptions regarding destinations has been investigated in the past,

most researchers have focused on the fairness factor affecting the disabled (Israeli, 2002). The connection between accessibility and tourist perception is still insufficiently explored (Wang et al., 2021). In particular, most of the previous studies considered the influence of accessibility on destination selection at city or national level (Wu & Chen, 2022). However, accessibility is also always the key to promoting tourism development for small and medium-sized destinations, and few studies have investigated its influence on perceptions towards a particular destination (Hu et al., 2012).

Moreover, tourist perception is an important process for conceptualizing destination image (Tukamushaba et al., 2016). Understanding this perception and the experience of the industry would be useful in contributing to marketing efforts and offering specialized activities in the health tourism field (Nazem & Mohamed, 2016). However, investigations of such perceptions are mainly focused on developed Western nations and pay little attention to Asian tourists' (Lim et al., 2014), resulting in an insufficient understanding towards a particular tourism type (e.g. wellness) in the literature (Tukamushaba et al., 2016).

In addition, the push and pull theory has been widely applied to studies of tourist motivation in the health and wellness industry (Tuzunkan, 2018). Push and pull are two aspects used to study motivation in their decision-making process (Su et al., 2020). Personal travel motivations (push factors) are affected by background, education, culture and past personal experience. Pull factors, on the other hand, are destination attributes, strongly linked to on-site attractions. Nevertheless, previous research in the health and wellness sector based on this theoretical foundation mainly focuses on investigating push motivations (Tuzunkan, 2018). The extension of the theory into pull motivations, influencing selection of a wellness destination, is rather challenging for scholars and has yet to be undertaken. In particular, accessibility and destination brand identity have been conceived as separate important pull predictors in influencing perceptions and behaviors (Chen et al., 2017; Saraniemi & Komppula, 2019). However, previous studies seem to ignore the effects of accessibility on brand identity, and subsequently, perceptions and behaviors (Wu & Chen, 2022) regarding wellness activities in tourism marketing.

Therefore, this study developed a conceptual model of the linkages between accessibility, destination brand identity and tourist perceptions towards visiting wellness destinations in China. The main research objectives are (a) to test the effect of accessibility on destination brand identity and tourist perception individually; (b) to test the effect of destination brand identity on tourist perception; and (c) to test the mediation effect of destination brand identity between accessibility and tourist perception.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. PUSH AND PULL THEORY

This research adopted push and pull theory (Dann, 1977; Su et al., 2020), and this has been integrated into the conceptual model. The push and pull model has been applied by many scholars in the tourism domain (Cai, 2002), particularly when investigating motivation in the health and wellness sector (Tuzunkan, 2018). The push factor can be regarded as concerning the socio-psychological factors that motivate behavior including a desire for relaxation, wanting to escape mundane environments, prestige, wanting to enhance kinship or relationships, seeking to explore or evaluate oneself, or hoping to create opportunities that facilitate social interaction (Dryglas & Salamaga, 2018; Wang et al., 2021). The pull factor is identified as a destination's attributes and attractions (Mak et al., 2009) with previous tourism-related health studies being identified as the destination's infrastructure, environment and cultural heritage (Huang & Xu, 2018; Nazem & Mohamed, 2016). Although the push and pull theory has been applied to marketing studies developed to analyze tourist perceptions and behavior, little in the literature has explored this theory in terms of wellness in China. In the present study, accessibility and destination brand identity are considered as pull factors that affect tourist perceptions to visit wellness destinations. Figure 1 illustrates the application of push and pull theory in this study.

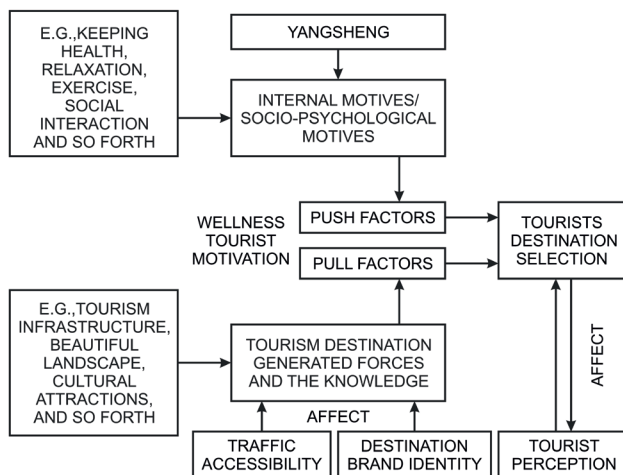


Figure 1. The application of push and pull theory in this study
 Source: Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Chen et al. (2008), Crompton (1979), Gnanapala (2015), Uysal and Jurowski (1994), Tukamushaba et al. (2016)

2.2. THE IMPACT OF ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is a basic concept in transport geography and metropolitan planning (Chen et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2010), and a vital factor to assess the strength or potential of a city's development (Antunes et al., 2003). Accessibility

always concerns the main activity locations (e.g. home, workplace) and the transportation services offered to assess relative advantages (Wu & Miller, 2001). Within tourism marketing, previous studies on perceptions and accessibility behavior have only addressed industrial companies' perspectives and indicated their significance (Wang et al., 2021). However, recent studies have shown that accessibility appears to have a significant value in shaping a tourist's decision-making process (Wang et al., 2021) since accessibility can be understood as a tourists' trade-off between travel (e.g. physical distance or travel time) and the cost required (Wu & Miller, 2001). Adequate infrastructure, locations and facilities are necessary for improving tourists' perceptions and satisfaction (Tukamushaba et al., 2016). However, research on the connection and relationship between accessibility and wellness tourism development is still insufficient (Kovačić & Milošević, 2016). Specifically, Chinese scholars often concentrate on large and medium-sized cities, with little attention being granted to medium and small-sized cultural tourist destinations (Hu et al., 2012). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between accessibility and tourist perceptions towards visiting Bama wellness tourism destination.

Moreover, the attractiveness and popularity of a tourism destination is heavily influenced by its accessibility (Jian & Juan, 2013) because this is a significant factor that builds destination brand identity (Wu & Chen, 2022). On the one hand, accessibility reflects the ease with which tourists may access predetermined locations in their travelling, a crucial factor when selecting a destination (Darcy & Dickson, 2009; Wong & Zhao, 2016); on the other hand, accessibility is a reflection of the development of destinations (Sorupia, 2005). Certain studies have demonstrated how accessibility affects the destination competitiveness and whether tourists decide to visit these places or not. For example, accessibility is a primary concern for tourists when they select their wellness destinations, and sufficient infrastructure and amenities are important to improve brand identity (Tukamushaba et al., 2016) because tourists expect their accessibility needs to be satisfied (Hacıa, 2016). In addition, Jian and Juan (2013) demonstrated that accessibility is a critical spatial characteristic of regional tourism resources. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: There is a significant relationship between accessibility and destination brand identity as regards Bama wellness tourism destination.

2.3. THE IMPACT OF DESTINATION BRAND IDENTITY

A brand is an idea of a product or service (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Indeed, destination branding is a combination of all attributes associated with a place and offers

potential tourists a destination image that distinguishes it from others (Campelo et al., 2014). Accordingly, brand identity is regarded as a location's essence (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2019) since tourism destinations should promote a recognizable brand to differentiate and identify their competitive advantages over others (Ashton, 2015). Practitioners usually present and manage destination branding as a marketing method for attracting people (Choo et al., 2011) because a strong brand identity not only helps to articulate and communicate its position to target tourists, but also implies what practitioners will and can do over time (Kneesel et al., 2010). Thus, brand identity can be regarded as the perception of a place reflected in images retained in a tourist's memories (Cai, 2002), or the images posted by a destination to promote its brand are part of its identity (Anand & Kumar, 2023).

Previous studies demonstrated how destination brand identity influences perceptions in tourism marketing. For instance, Aaker (1996) indicated that recognizing the important role of brand identity is a key element to achieving a successful tourism brand and attracting more tourists, while destination experiences significantly affect brand identification (Ashton, 2015). In addition, the branding process increases the tourist's identification with the area, which subsequently influences perception and loyalty (Kumar & Kaushik, 2018). Meanwhile, perceptions of a destination are typically shaped by the familiarity of tourists with it (e.g. accessibility, facilities, amenities) (Herrero et al., 2017). In particular, the process of branding can also greatly affect its value as perceived by tourists, which means that the brand identity of a destination can also be seen in terms of a tourist's perceived value recognition (Mohd Yusof & Ismail, 2014). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₃: There is a significant relationship between destination brand identity and tourist perception as regards visiting Bama wellness tourism destination.

H₄: Destination brand identity mediates the relationship between accessibility and tourist perception as regards visiting Bama wellness tourism destination.

2.4. TOURIST PERCEPTION

Tourist perception is regarded as the process of the image formation of a destination in tourists' minds (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), and this process typically includes emotional, affective, and cognitive components to help people form a holistic picture of the destination that they intend to visit or are visiting (Gnanapala, 2015). Tourist perception is an important process for conceptualizing a destination image, but it has received little attention in tourism marketing (Tukamushaba et al., 2016). Understanding perceptions and experience

in the tourist industry would be useful in contributing to marketing efforts and offering specialized activities in the health tourism field (Nazem & Mohamed, 2016). However, investigations of destination perceptions are mainly focused on developed Western nations and pay little attention to an Asian tourist's perceptions (Lim et al., 2014). Estimating factors that affect perceptions of longevity in *yangsheng* tourism in Bama would be a novel and attractive research subject. Therefore, based on an understanding of the push and pull theory discussed above, this study updates a theoretical framework (see Figure 2) to assess the impact of these possible factors on tourist perceptions in Bama.

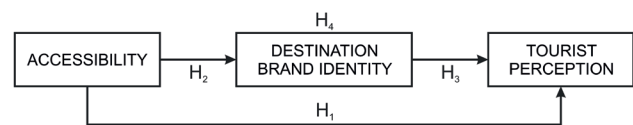


Figure 2. Conceptual research model
Source: authors' own work

3. METHOD

3.1. MEASURES

The post-positivism paradigm, which derives from a merger of positivist and interpretivist theories (Panhwar et al., 2017), was deployed in this present study as the research philosophy. Post-positivism concentrates on the subjectivity of reality while not neglecting the impersonal stance posited by logical positivists (RePrac, 2016). A quantitative research approach was used and primary data were gathered from a questionnaire survey. The first section of which included six items that captured socio-demographic background information from the respondents, including gender, marital status, age, place of residence and frequency of engaging in *yangsheng* or longevity activities. The second section involved the independent variables: six items on accessibility were adapted from Adeleke and Ogunsusi (2019), Tverijonaite et al. (2018), Vural Arslan et al. (2018), Pechlaner and Hammann (2006) and Konecnik (2002); five items on destination brand identity were adapted from Pechlaner and Hammann (2006), Fuchs and Reichel (2006), Tverijonaite et al. (2018), Gnanapala (2015) and Konecnik (2002). The last section focused on the dependent variable, tourist perception, and five items were adapted from Tverijonaite et al. (2018), Fuchs and Reichel (2006) and Konecnik (2002). In addition, a closed questionnaire was distributed to respondents using a seven-point Likert scale: 1 corresponded with *I very strongly disagree*, while 7 corresponded with *I very strongly agree*.

3.2. DATA COLLECTION

The anonymous questionnaire distributed through this survey was used to collect tourist information through travel agencies and tourism locations from December 2019 to September 2020. Data was gathered from wellness tourists by using a paper questionnaire in Bama. To ensure the adequacy of the sample, the primary data of this research was collected from Baimo Cave, Baimo Town, Bama Town and Poyue Village, which are locations that most domestic tourists visit in Bama. Only visitors who intended to visit Bama, have been to Bama or were present at the targeted locations were involved in the investigation. Tourists over the age of 15 were surveyed, as those below were considered unable to financially support their wellness trips.

Dolnicar et al. (2014) suggested that the sample size prepared for tourism studies should be at least 70 times the number of variables, the sample size for this study was calculated through formulas whose results indicated that the sample size here should be at least 210. In order to calculate the required size for this study, the

response rate from the questionnaire collection was considered. After distributing questionnaires to the respondents, staff assisting the survey reminded them to complete it. The expected response rate was beyond 85% therefore, a minimum of 247 should be collected to enable data analysis in the subsequent phase. Finally, after performing both direct and archival screening methods, 346 samples were determined as an appropriate size for this study.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Cronbach's alpha coefficient and principal component analysis with the varimax rotation were conducted to validate the underlying basic structure of key dimensions in this research. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied using the AMOS version 23.0 to test the research model. The results of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) demonstrated that all scales used formed adequate measurement models, thus offering evidence for their construct validity.

Table 1. Demographic information ($n = 346$)

Items	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	159	46.0
	Female	187	54.0
Age	15–25	49	14.2
	26–35	57	16.4
	36–45	75	21.7
	46–55	46	13.3
	56–65	60	17.3
	66–75	30	8.7
	76–85	27	7.8
	86–95	1	0.3
Marital status	96 and above	1	0.3
	Single	108	31.2
	Married	116	33.5
	Separated	31	9.0
	Divorced	75	21.7
Place of residence	Rather not to say	16	4.6
	Northern China	94	27.2
	Southern China	152	43.9
	Western China	30	8.7
Had you heard about <i>yangsheng</i> or longevity culture before?	Eastern China	70	20.2
	Yes	299	86.4
	No	36	10.4
Have you previously joined any <i>yangsheng</i> or longevity activities?	Rather not say	11	3.2
	Within the last 12 months	86	24.8
	12 months or more but less than 2 years ago	86	24.8
	2 years or more but less than 3 years ago	40	11.6
	3 years ago, or more	30	8.7
	No	101	29.2
	Rather not say	3	0.9

Source: authors' own work.

4.1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The demographic profile and personal information of the respondents are stated in Table 1 and there were 159 (46%) males and 187 (54%) females. More than a hundred individuals reported that they were single (31.2%) and 33.5% married. Regarding residence, individuals living in Southern China accounted for the highest number, with 152 representing 43.9% of the sample group. Moreover, the majority of Bama tourist respondents (24.8%) stated that they have engaged in *yangsheng* and longevity activities within the last 12 months or the past two years.

4.2. EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS (EFA)

The acceptable value of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test should be 0.80 or above (Hazra, 2013), and the cut-off value for Cronbach’s alpha should be 0.7 (Tengku Ismail & Sulaiman, 2010). Specifically, the results of the varimax rotation EFA demonstrated that the KMO measure achieved a sampling adequacy value for items

(KMO > 0.80) with 0.822. Therefore, the collected data are appropriate for data analysis (Eyduran et al., 2010). Cronbach’s alpha for all values in this research was greater than Tengku Ismail and Sulaiman’s (2010) recommended threshold of 0.7, thus indicating that internal consistency is appropriate and acceptable (i.e. accessibility = 0.843; tourist perception = 0.816; destination brand identity = 0.787). For this study, 0.6 is considered the recommended cut-off factor loading (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), while items with poor factor loadings of less than 0.6 were discarded through the validation test process.

4.3. CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS (CFA)

Politis (2005) proposed that the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) of each construct should exceed 0.5 and 0.7 respectively (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 2, the AVE of all three constructs was above 0.5, and all variables’ CR values exceeded 0.7, meaning the convergent validity of the construct is adequate.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model

Construct (Cronbach’s alpha)	Items	Factor loading	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Accessibility (A) ($\alpha = 0.843$)	A1. Geographical location of Bama affects my decision to visit Bama	0.809	0.883	0.559
	A2. Parking conditions affect my decision to visit Bama	0.796		
	A3. Transportation safety affects my decision to visit Bama	0.787		
	A4. Transportation system affects my decision to visit Bama	0.762		
	A5. Time saving in transportation affects my decision to visit Bama	0.669		
	A6. Congestion concerns affect my decision to visit Bama	0.646		
Tourist perception (TP) ($\alpha = 0.816$)	TP1. I am pleased that I decided to visit Bama	0.791	0.867	0.566
	TP2. Visiting Bama is very valuable for me	0.784		
	TP3. I feel that visiting Bama is a rest and relaxation decision	0.738		
	TP4. Bama is a good place to develop tourism business	0.731		
	TP5. I will recommend Bama to my colleagues, friends, and relatives	0.714		
Destination brand identity (DBI) ($\alpha = 0.787$)	If you have been/will visit to Bama, how important is:		0.850	0.532
	DBI1. Climate	0.775		
	DBI2. Friendliness of the local people	0.767		
	DBI3. Quality of the accommodation	0.726		
	DBI4. The destination can be easily reached	0.688		
	DBI5. Purified water and foods	0.685		

Source: authors’ own work.

Table 3. The correlation between constructs

Construct	Accessibility	Tourist perception	Destination brand identity	AVE	MSV	ASV
Accessibility (A)	0.748	–	–	0.559	0.024	0.022
Tourist perception (TP)	0.139	0.752	–	0.566	0.035	0.027
Destination brand identity (DBI)	0.156	0.188	0.729	0.532	0.035	0.030

Note: AVE – average variance extracted, MSV – maximum shared variance, ASV – average shared variance.
Source: authors' own work.

For discriminate validity, maximum shared squared variance (MSV) and average shared squared variance (ASV) values should be lower than average variance extracted (AVE) values (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020). Table 3 shows the values of the square root of the AVE were all greater than the inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), suggesting that an adequate discriminant validity for all constructs in the current research.

4.4. STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING (SEM)

The model fit values of SEM test show that the chi-square minimum/degree of freedom (CMIN/df) value returned is 2.187, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.925, adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = 0.899, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.059, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.935, and incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.936. Summarily, the recommended

measurement model in this research implied a good fit with the collected data. The results of this study are tabulated in Table 4. Furthermore, bootstrapping is used in the second mediating process to assess the mediation effect (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Hayes, 2009) by observing the estimated standard error, point estimate, bias-corrected confidence intervals, and bootstrapped percentile for mediating effects. This analysis reported results with unstandardized estimates (Marsh et al., 2004) (see Table 5).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research attempts to examine accessibility and destination brand identity concerning tourist perception of *yangsheng* wellness destinations in China. Nowadays, travel for wellness reasons is booming

Table 4. Hypothesis testing results

Items	Parameter	Unstandardized estimates	Standardized error	Critical ratio	p-value	Standardized estimates
H ₁	Accessibility → tourist perception	0.223	0.104	2.137	0.033	0.138
H ₂	Accessibility → destination brand identity	0.202	0.066	3.059	0.002	0.213
H ₃	Destination brand identity → tourist perception	0.413	0.119	3.465	***	0.243

Note: *** denotes p-value < 0.001.

Source: authors' own work.

Table 5. Illustration of standard and bootstrap mediation methods

Effect	Point estimate	Product of coefficients		p-value	Bootstrapping			
		SE	Z-score		bias-corrected 95% CI		percentile 95% CI	
					lower	upper	lower	upper
Total effects (c)	0.307	0.120	2.558	0.010	0.076	0.558	0.082	0.567
Indirect effects (a × b)	0.083	0.042	1.976	0.048	0.018	0.192	0.017	0.187
Direct effects (c')	0.223	0.117	1.906	0.057	0.003	0.456	0.004	0.465

Note: Unstandardized direct, indirect and total effects of the hypothesized model (mediator); estimates are unstandardized, unstandardized estimating of 1000 bootstrap sample; SE – standardized error, Z-score measures the distance between a data point and the mean using standard deviations, CI – confidence interval.

Source: authors' own work.

around the world (Phuthong et al., 2023) and in China (Yen et al., 2021). As a popular method for Chinese people to keep healthy, longevity *yangsheng* tourism has been gradually accepted in Chinese society in modern times (Zhou et al., 2023). Although it is still in its infancy, it provides vast business opportunities and strengthens the overall market competitiveness in China's wellness industry (Wang et al., 2020). An increasing number of people are interested in acquiring knowledge of China's wellness tourism market. Although a huge source little is understood about the characteristics, motivations and preferences of wellness travelers (Liu et al., 2022) but there is reason to believe that this study will help to bridge the Chinese wellness market to the global industry.

This study assumes a relationship between accessibility and tourist perception. The results show that accessibility has a significant and positive association with tourist perception ($\beta = 0.138, p < 0.05$), indicating H_1 is supported. The result is confirmed by Le-Klähn and Hall (2015), who investigated differences in tourist perceptions of the level of accessibility (e.g. public transport use) by tourists between rural and urban destinations. Quintal et al. (2014) also proved that accessibility has a significant and positive association with perceptions by comparing local and international visitors' perceived services in the destination.

This study has examined the relationship between accessibility and destination brand identity. According to the statistical results, it has shown that accessibility is positively associated with destination brand identity ($\beta = 0.213, p < 0.05$). Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported. This agrees with previous studies on the relationship between accessibility and destination brand identity (e.g. Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Schabbing, 2018) which show its importance in the tourism industry.

This study has assumed the relationship between destination brand identity and tourist perception. The results demonstrate that brand identity indeed has a significant and positive association with tourist perception ($\beta = 0.243, p < 0.05$), thus supporting hypothesis 3. This potential relationship is also supported by Šajinović (2016), who verified brand identity as one of the most significant factors in perceptions of tourism service quality and products. Features of a personalized brand can affect the mentality of tourists visiting a destination. Meanwhile, Della Corte et al. (2015) investigated the main elements that can influence tourist satisfaction in wellness destinations and also verified that there is a relationship between destination brand identity and tourist perception.

Furthermore, the indirect effect (0.017 to 0.187, with a point estimate of 0.083) and total effect (0.082 to 0.567, with a point estimate of 0.307) are statistically significant at the 0.05 level (p -value < 0.05). The direct effect (0.004 to 0.456, with a point estimate of 0.223) is not statistically

significant at the 0.05 level with a p -value = 0.057. The result of the bootstrap test confirmed the existence of a positive and significant full mediating effect for destination brand identity between accessibility and tourist perception (unstandardized indirect effect = 0.083, $p < 0.05$). Based on 1,000 bootstrap samples, it returned 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals of indirect effect ($a \times b$) (0.018, 0.192), direct effect (c') (0.003, 0.456) and total effect (c) (0.076, 0.558) excluding zero, thereby supporting the conclusion that there is an indirect effect between accessibility and tourist perception through the mediating effect of destination brand identity.

5.1. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The push and pull theory has been widely applied by scholars in the tourism field, but few have explored theory in terms of wellness tourism in China. China's *yangsheng* lifestyle has existed for thousands of years but is rarely discussed in the wellness tourism industry (Liu et al., 2022). Although wellness and *yangsheng* concepts have long been established in the Chinese mind and remain a philosophical school of thought in Chinese history, they have not been comprehensively developed as tourism concepts (Turner, 2023). This study applies the push and pull theory to develop a *yangsheng* tourist perception framework in which the three dimensions of accessibility, destination brand identity and tourist perception were all combined for analysis. The results of this study have provided further insights to broaden the view of wellness tourism in China by investigating how accessibility and destination brand identity affect tourists' perceptions. It should be highlighted that this research is among the earliest attempts to connect push and pull theory to *yangsheng* tourists' perceptions.

Secondly, theoretical implications also concern the interplay of accessibility, destination brand identity and tourist perception on the push and pull model. Although results from the previous literature demonstrated that accessibility and destination brand identity are both verified as pull factors that are independently associated with tourist perceptions (Chen et al., 2017; Saraniemi & Kompola, 2019), little attention has been devoted so far to investigating the interplay of these three factors (Wu & Chen, 2022). Our results demonstrate that accessibility positively influences destination brand identity, and subsequently, tourist perceptions concerning visiting wellness destinations. This study, using the case of Bama, is the first to examine whether destination brand identity mediates the relationship between accessibility and tourist perception.

Furthermore, the relationship between tourism accessibility and perception is still insufficiently explored (Wang et al., 2021) although accessibility is an essential factor for building destination brand

identity (Wu & Chen, 2022). Besides, few works have investigated the influence of accessibility on tourist perceptions of a particular destination (i.e. destination brand identity) (Hu et al., 2012). This study's results show that accessibility positively influences destination brand identity and tourist perceptions towards visiting wellness destinations respectively. The framework and propositions provide a first step toward developing a foundation for a greater understanding of the role of accessibility and brand identity in tourist perception, particularly in the wellness field. These results have begun to determine the influencing factor of tourist perception from a pull factor (i.e. accessibility and brand identity) perspective empirically.

5.2. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a practical stance, this work presents a novel research direction for practitioners of China's wellness tourism sector. Firstly, Bama's tourism bureau and local government should continue to develop both the accessibility of *yangsheng* tourist destinations and advertise the *yangsheng* brand to the public to improve tourists' perceptions. Establishing a convenient transportation infrastructure will contribute to building effective *yangsheng* branding for Bama. In other words, although efforts are in place to develop a high-speed rail network in the region, such efforts will arguably have little effect on developing longevity and *yangsheng* tourism. This is because tourists' perceptions will not improve by developing accessibility without the mediating effect of *yangsheng* brand identity and promotion. Destination brand identity and marketing promotion of *yangsheng* tourism is the most important factor in improving tourist perceptions and transforming the local government's investment in tourist facilities into profits. Therefore, there seems to be a pressing need to implement an effective governance system in Bama *yangsheng* tourist locations.

Second, highlighting the key competitive characteristics related to promoting *yangsheng* wellness tourism in Bama is necessary. For instance, the alkaline water found there is usually regarded as a competitive advantage for the *yangsheng* tourism industry. The local government should advertise this spring water as one of the most popular resources to attract wellness tourists. Practitioners can amplify the goodness of the water found in Bama for health and well-being. As a result, Bama spring water could be an important product used by the local government as a channel to attract tourists. Referring to the study outcomes, the respondents claimed that climate conditions, the friendliness of the local people, the quality of accommodation, and a destination that can be easily reached were all attractive as destination brand identities that influence perception towards visiting Bama. Thus, the local government and

practitioners should adjust their marketing strategies to satisfy tourists' needs and wants.

In addition, this research investigated the accessibility and destination brand identity that influenced tourist perceptions within the context of China's traditional *yangsheng* longevity tourism. This fresh study may be beneficial to provide a benchmark methodology to analyze the *yangsheng* tourism market in Bama. As such, local government bodies and related businesses can use this research to conduct marketing predictions for the *yangsheng* tourism industry and identify market changes to direct their actions and businesses.

5.3. LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations present in the findings of this investigation. Firstly, due to time and resource constraints, the nature of this study is cross-sectional. Therefore, the results cannot represent all settings and need to be confirmed in future studies. Secondly, more than 10 per cent of respondents had never heard of *yangsheng* tourism before and more than 20 per cent had never engaged in *yangsheng* tourism, however they still participated in the investigation. The results should be replicated in the future to confirm their reliability and usefulness. Thirdly, this study has a very limited scope, i.e. Bama. Hence, the outcomes cannot represent all populations, and the framework should be applied in different places. Moreover, there is a high correlation between tourist perception and destination image (Tukamushaba et al., 2016), and destination image is an important reliable predictor of tourist intentions to visit (Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, future research should expand the current study's framework from destination image to increase its usefulness.

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