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Sustainable Destination Management as a Marketing Strategy: The Roles of Destination Image and Perceived Value in Destination Loyalty

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Abstract

As tourism destinations face increasing competition, destination managers must not only pursue sustainable development but also translate sustainability-oriented practices into effective marketing strategies and favorable market outcomes. Drawing on strategic marketing, destination management, destination image, perceived value, and customer loyalty perspectives, this study examines how tourists' perceptions of sustainable destination management relate to destination loyalty. Specifically, the study develops and tests a sequential model in which perceived sustainability-oriented destination practices are positively associated with destination image, which in turn is associated with tourists' perceived value and ultimately with destination loyalty. Using survey responses from 462 tourists in China, the proposed relationships were examined through structural equation modeling. The results indicate significant positive relationships between sustainable destination marketing and destination image, destination image and perceived value, and perceived value and destination loyalty. The sequential indirect association through destination image and perceived value was also statistically significant. The study contributes to manage-

ment and marketing research by conceptualizing sustainability-oriented destination management as a strategic resource and by identifying a customer-perception pathway through which responsible practices may be connected to marketing outcomes. The findings suggest that sustainability may create strategic value when managers integrate environmental protection, cultural conservation, community interests, and responsible tourism practices with positioning, image management, customer value creation, and relationship marketing. From a managerial perspective, destination management organizations should move beyond treating sustainability solely as an operational or policy objective and consider how credible, visitor-facing sustainability practices can support differentiation, perceived value, customer loyalty, and long-term competitiveness. Because the data were collected through a cross-sectional tourist survey, these relationships should be interpreted as associations rather than as proof of causal effects.

Keywords: sustainable destination management; marketing strategy; strategic marketing; destination image; perceived value; destination loyalty; competitive advantage

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism destinations operate in increasingly competitive markets, requiring managers to coordinate attractions, infrastructure, service quality, pricing, accessibility, brand meaning, stakeholder interests, and long-term resource stewardship. Sustainability has therefore become more than a planning or policy concern. For destination management organizations, it can influence strategic positioning, differentiation, reputation, customer experience, and the ability to sustain competitive advantage over time. The managerial challenge is therefore not simply to implement responsible practices; it is also to connect these practices to recognizable, credible, and market-relevant benefits that visitors can understand and value.

This broader perspective also changes the role of destination marketing. Traditional activities, including awareness creation and visitor acquisition, remain important; however, a market-oriented approach also requires destination managers to define target segments, develop a differentiated value proposition, coordinate brand touchpoints, design the visitor experience, and build long-term customer relationships. Sustainable destination marketing can support these objectives when environmental protection, cultural conservation, community participation, and responsible visitor management are integrated into the destination's positioning and customer-value strategy rather than treated as stand-alone operational programs.

Font and McCabe [1] argue that sustainability and tourism marketing are closely connected but characterized by important tensions. Tourism organizations attempt to stimulate consumption while simultaneously addressing the environmental and socio-cultural consequences of tourism growth. Sustainability marketing therefore requires more than attaching environmental labels to conventional promotional campaigns. Sustainable practices must become credible, visible, and relevant to the tourist experience.

This issue is particularly relevant in China. Chinese tourism destinations vary substantially in terms of natural resources, cultural heritage, urban development, community participation, environmental vulnerability, and tourism intensity. Historical cities, rural tourism areas, national parks, coastal destinations, cultural heritage sites, and urban recreation destinations increasingly compete for domestic and international visitors. At the same time, environmental conservation, cultural heritage protection, rural development, and community participation have become important dimensions of destination management.

From a management perspective, however, sustainable destination development does not automatically create market performance or customer loyalty. Sustainability initiatives require organizational and financial resources, and destination managers therefore need to understand the mechanisms through which these initiatives may be associated with tourists' evaluations and subsequent behavioral intentions. The central marketing question is whether tourists perceive sustainability-related practices as credible and relevant attributes that improve the destination's brand image, strengthen the value proposition, and ultimately increase retention and advocacy intentions.

Destination image offers one potential mechanism through which tourists may interpret sustainable destination practices. Destination image refers to tourists' overall beliefs, impressions, feelings, and associations concerning a place. Baloglu and McCleary [2] conceptualized destination image as the result of cognitive and affective evaluations. Sustainability-related destination characteristics such as environmental quality, cultural authenticity, responsible management, cleanliness, community participation, and sustainable transportation may therefore become important components of image formation.

Tourists' perceived value provides a second, complementary mechanism. Zeithaml [3] conceptualized perceived value as the consumer's overall assessment of utility based on what is received relative to what is given. Tourism value is consequently broader than monetary price. Tourists invest money, time, effort, and psychological resources and receive functional, experiential, emotional, social, cultural, and symbolic benefits in return. Sustainable destination practices may increase value when they improve environmental quality, authenticity, convenience, cultural experience, emotional satisfaction, and destination quality.

Destination loyalty represents another important marketing outcome, particularly because tourism consumption is often episodic rather than continuous. Drawing on consumer loyalty theory, destination loyalty is generally reflected in revisit intentions, recommendation intentions, and positive word of mouth. Oliver [4] conceptualized loyalty as a deeply held commitment to repurchase or repatronize a preferred offering. Within tourism, destination loyalty is especially important because tourists who do not immediately revisit may nevertheless recommend destinations, create positive electronic word of mouth, and influence potential visitors.

Previous research has demonstrated significant relationships among destination image, perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty. Kim, Holland, and Han [5], for example, demonstrated that destination image influences perceived value and that perceived value contributes to loyalty. In the Chinese context, Song, Su, and Li [6] examined destination image, perceived value, tourist satisfaction, and loyalty among visitors to Hainan Island. Lu, Jiao, and Weng [7] likewise reported significant relationships among destination image, perceived value, and destination loyalty among visitors to Grand Canal Forest Park in Beijing.

Despite these developments, sustainability is still frequently separated from mainstream management and marketing

constructs. Sustainable tourism research often emphasizes governance, stakeholder participation, carrying capacity, conservation, and community development, whereas destination marketing research focuses more directly on positioning, branding, customer value, satisfaction, behavioral intentions, and loyalty. This separation limits understanding of how destination-level managerial choices are converted into customer-level and market-level outcomes.

This gap creates an important strategic-management opportunity. To understand whether sustainability contributes to destination competitiveness, research needs to explain how visitors interpret organizational investments in responsible practices and how those interpretations are associated with marketplace outcomes. A management-and-marketing perspective suggests a value-conversion process: managerial practices shape market-facing brand associations; these associations influence customers' benefit-sacrifice evaluations; and those evaluations affect retention, recommendation, and positive word of mouth. This conceptual process links internal destination-management decisions with tourists' evaluations and intended marketplace behaviors, while recognizing that self-reported intentions do not constitute direct measures of market performance.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine sustainable destination management from a strategic marketing perspective and explain how sustainability-oriented managerial practices can be transformed into customer-level marketing outcomes. Rather than treating sustainability solely as an environmental, social, or policy objective, this study conceptualizes sustainable destination management as a market-oriented strategic approach through which destination management organizations can strengthen market positioning, shape destination image, create superior customer value, and develop long-term customer relationships. More specifically, the study investigates a sequential mechanism in which sustainable destination management enhances destination image, a favorable destination image strengthens tourists' perceived value, and higher perceived value subsequently contributes to destination loyalty. By examining this process, the study seeks to explain how managerial decisions at the destination level can be translated into consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions at the market level. Accordingly, the central research question is: How can sustainable destination management function as a marketing strategy to strengthen destination loyalty through destination image and perceived value?

The study seeks to make three overarching contributions. First, it reconceptualizes sustainable destination management as a strategic marketing resource rather than treating sustainability exclusively as an environmental, operational, or policy-oriented concern. Second, it establishes a link between destination-level managerial practices and customer-level marketing outcomes by identifying destination image and perceived value as sequential market mechanisms. Third, it develops a parsimonious management-to-market framework—Sustainable Destination Management → Destination Image → Perceived Value → Destination Loyalty—that explains how sustainability-oriented managerial decisions can generate differentiation, customer value, loyalty, and long-term competitiveness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Destination marketing can be viewed as a coordinated managerial process through which destination organizations analyze markets, select target segments, define positioning, manage the destination brand, orchestrate stakeholder offerings, communicate value, and influence customer acquisition and retention. Unlike conventional products, destinations are composite service systems involving attractions, infrastructure, public agencies, private firms, residents, cultural resources, and environmental assets. This makes marketing performance dependent on cross-organizational coordination and experience consistency. Sustainability adds a further strategic dimension because managers must balance visitor demand and revenue objectives with resource preservation, resident interests, service quality, and long-term competitiveness. Sustainability communication alone is therefore insufficient. Villarino and Font [8] describe sustainability marketing myopia, in which organizations communicate environmental or social practices without connecting them effectively to consumer interests and benefits. From a strategic marketing perspective, sustainability must be embedded in the value proposition: environmental protection can improve scenic and service quality; cultural conservation can strengthen differentiation and authenticity; community participation can enrich local experiences; sustainable mobility can improve convenience; and visitor management can protect resources while reducing crowding. Sustainable destination marketing is therefore understood here as the managerial integration of environmental, socio-cultural, and long-term economic responsibility into market analysis, positioning, branding, communication, experience design, stakeholder coordination, and customer value creation.

Destination image is a core marketing asset because it influences how customers recognize, categorize, and evaluate competing places. Baloglu and McCleary [2] explained that destination image develops through cognitive and affective components. From a brand-management perspective, sustainability-related practices can provide distinctive associations that strengthen both components. Environmental quality, well-preserved landscapes, clean public areas, cultural conservation, sustainable transportation, and responsible visitor management can improve cognitive evaluations, while authenticity, environmental harmony, social responsibility, and cultural distinctiveness can generate favorable affective responses. Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal [9] connect destination image with broader branding concepts, suggesting that image is not merely a communication outcome but an element of brand meaning. When sustainability attributes are visible, credible, consistent, and relevant to target customers, managers can use them as positioning resources. A destination perceived as

responsible, authentic, professionally managed, and supportive of local communities may occupy a more favorable and differentiated position than one associated with degradation, crowding, or excessive commercialization. Accordingly:

H1: Sustainable destination marketing has a positive effect on destination image.

Perceived value is central to marketing strategy because customers choose among alternatives by evaluating benefits relative to monetary and non-monetary sacrifices. Zeithaml [3] conceptualized perceived value as the consumer's overall evaluation of what is received relative to what is given. For destination managers, this means that competitiveness cannot be reduced to low prices. Tourists invest money, travel time, effort, uncertainty, and psychological resources, while receiving functional, emotional, experiential, cultural, educational, and social benefits. Destination image acts as a market signal that frames these evaluations, particularly because tourism experiences are difficult to assess before consumption. A destination positioned as attractive, distinctive, safe, authentic, environmentally pleasant, and professionally managed can strengthen customers' expectations of benefit and reduce perceived risk. In managerial terms, brand image can therefore help translate recognizable destination attributes into an appealing and differentiated customer value proposition. Kim et al. [5], Song et al. [6], and Lu et al. [7] provide empirical support for the positive relationship between destination image and perceived value. Therefore:

H2: Destination image has a positive effect on tourists' perceived value.

Destination loyalty is a key relationship-marketing outcome because it reflects the destination's ability to retain customers and mobilize them as advocates. Tourists with high loyalty intentions may revisit, recommend the destination, post favorable reviews, and generate positive electronic word of mouth when they have opportunities to do so. Because repeat visitation can be constrained by distance, cost, time, and novelty seeking, loyalty should be managed as a portfolio of retention and advocacy behaviors rather than as repeat purchase alone. Perceived value is expected to be closely associated with these outcomes within the proposed theoretical model. Customers who judge that the total benefits of a destination exceed the financial and non-financial sacrifices are more likely to maintain a favorable relationship with the destination brand. Importantly, value is not equivalent to price discounting. Managers can create superior value through experience quality, authenticity, convenience, environmental quality, cultural richness, emotional benefits, service integration, and responsible management. Prior research supports the relationship between perceived value and destination loyalty [5–7]. Thus:

H3: Perceived value has a positive effect on destination loyalty.

The preceding relationships imply a managerial value-conversion chain. Sustainable destination marketing begins with destination-level strategic and operational choices, but these choices create market outcomes only when customers notice and interpret them. Responsible practices can first shape destination brand associations; stronger brand associations can then increase perceived customer value by improving expected and experienced benefits relative to sacrifices; higher value can subsequently strengthen retention and advocacy intentions. This sequence explains how internal management capabilities may be converted into external customer and market outcomes. It further suggests that weak execution at any stage—practice visibility, brand translation, value delivery, or relationship management—can reduce the return on sustainability investment. Accordingly:

H4: Destination image and perceived value sequentially mediate the relationship between sustainable destination marketing and destination loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. The target population comprised adult domestic tourists who had recently visited tourism destinations in China. Respondents were required to have direct destination experience because evaluating sustainability-related practices, destination image, perceived value, and destination loyalty presupposes exposure to the tourism environment and its associated services. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. Screening questions were used to confirm that participants were at least 18 years old and had recently visited a tourism destination in China. Following the stated data-screening process, 462 valid responses were retained for empirical analysis. The unit of observation was the individual tourist, not the destination management organization. Accordingly, the sustainable destination management construct was operationalized through tourists' reported perceptions of sustainability-related destination marketing and management practices rather than through independently audited organizational activities or environmental performance. This distinction is important when interpreting the estimated relationships and their managerial implications.

All study constructs were measured on seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sustainable Destination Marketing (SDM) comprised five items evaluating perceived environmental protection, cultural preservation, benefits to local communities, responsible tourism communication, and the integration of sustainability into visitor experiences. Destination Image (DI) included four items assessing attractiveness, overall favorability, distinctiveness, and quality of the tourism environment. Perceived Value (PV) was measured using four items concerning value for money, value relative to time and effort, overall benefits, and the worthiness of the destination experience. Destination Loyalty (DL) comprised three items measuring intentions to revisit and recommend the destination and to engage in positive word

of mouth. The questionnaire items were translated into Chinese and independently back-translated into English to reduce potential inconsistencies in meaning. Expert review and pilot testing were conducted before formal data collection. The study therefore measured perceived attributes and reported behavioral intentions, rather than independently established sustainability outcomes or observed future visitation.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to evaluate the measurement and structural components of the proposed model. Internal-consistency reliability was assessed through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was evaluated using standardized indicator loadings and average variance extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was assessed using construct correlations, the Fornell–Larcker criterion, and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). The planned measurement assessment also considered cross-loadings and inter-item associations. The structural relationships were examined using standardized coefficients, standard errors, test statistics, significance levels, effect sizes, and coefficients of determination. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to assess the sequential indirect effect. These analyses test the consistency of the proposed association pattern but, because the survey was cross-sectional, cannot establish the temporal or causal ordering of its components.

4. RESULTS

The respondent profile is presented in Table 1, including demographic characteristics, previous destination visits, and travel purposes.

Table 1. *Respondent profile and travel characteristics*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	218	47.2
	Female	244	52.8
Age	18–25	112	24.2
	26–35	168	36.4
	36–45	103	22.3
	46–55	52	11.3
	Above 55	27	5.8
Education	High school or below	62	13.4
	College diploma	96	20.8
	Bachelor's degree	223	48.3
	Postgraduate degree	81	17.5
Monthly income	Below RMB 3,000	73	15.8
	RMB 3,001–5,000	109	23.6
	RMB 5,001–8,000	137	29.7
	RMB 8,001–12,000	86	18.6
	Above RMB 12,000	57	12.3
Previous visits	First visit	257	55.6
	2–3 visits	137	29.7
	4 or more visits	68	14.7
Travel purpose	Leisure/vacation	281	60.8
	Cultural experience	84	18.2
	Visiting friends/relatives	45	9.7
	Business/education	31	6.7
	Other	21	4.6

The sample was relatively balanced by gender, with 218 male respondents (47.2%) and 244 female respondents (52.8%). Respondents aged 26–35 years constituted the largest age group (36.4%), while bachelor's-degree holders accounted for nearly half of the sample (48.3%). More than half of the respondents (55.6%) were first-time visitors. Leisure or vacation was the most frequently reported travel purpose (60.8%). These distributions describe the composition of the surveyed sample and provide relevant context for interpreting the ensuing measurement and structural-model results.

Table 2 summarizes the standardized indicator loadings, construct-level descriptive statistics, and internal-consistency and convergent-validity estimates. All reported standardized loadings exceeded 0.80. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.861 to 0.889, composite reliability ranged from 0.905 to 0.931, and AVE ranged from 0.675 to 0.819. Under commonly used evaluation guidelines, these results are consistent with satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity. The reported item-level skewness and kurtosis values do not suggest severe departures from univariate normality. Nevertheless, these descriptive measures alone cannot establish multivariate normality or eliminate the possibility of common-method effects in a self-report survey.

Table 2. Measurement model, item statistics, and internal-consistency estimates

Construct/item	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Loading	α	CR	AVE
Sustainable Destination Marketing	5.36	0.88				0.884	0.912	0.675
SDM1 Environmental protection	5.31	1.02	-0.64	0.21	0.801			
SDM2 Cultural/heritage preservation	5.44	0.98	-0.71	0.39	0.824			
SDM3 Benefits local communities	5.28	1.05	-0.58	0.17	0.846			
SDM4 Responsible tourism communication	5.33	1.01	-0.62	0.25	0.809			
SDM5 Sustainability integrated into experience	5.46	0.96	-0.73	0.46	0.827			
Destination Image	5.49	0.84				0.873	0.913	0.725
DI1 Attractive destination	5.52	0.93	-0.76	0.51	0.842			
DI2 Positive overall image	5.57	0.91	-0.81	0.63	0.861			
DI3 Distinctive destination	5.41	0.97	-0.67	0.31	0.873			
DI4 High-quality tourism environment	5.47	0.95	-0.72	0.42	0.829			
Perceived Value	5.42	0.91				0.861	0.905	0.705
PV1 Worth the money	5.38	1.01	-0.61	0.20	0.823			
PV2 Worth the time and effort	5.45	0.98	-0.69	0.37	0.851			
PV3 Overall benefits are high	5.47	0.96	-0.71	0.40	0.862			
PV4 Worthwhile overall experience	5.39	1.00	-0.63	0.24	0.821			
Destination Loyalty	5.27	0.97				0.889	0.931	0.819
DL1 Intention to revisit	5.19	1.10	-0.53	0.05	0.889			
DL2 Intention to recommend	5.34	1.03	-0.66	0.29	0.918			
DL3 Positive word of mouth	5.28	1.06	-0.60	0.18	0.907			

Fornell–Larcker and HTMT results are presented together in Table 3 to provide a concise assessment of discriminant validity across the four latent constructs.

Table 3. Construct correlations, Fornell–Larcker criterion, and HTMT

Construct	Mean	SD	SDM	DI	PV	DL	HTMT with SDM	HTMT with DI	HTMT with PV
SDM	5.36	0.88	0.822				—		
DI	5.49	0.84	0.651	0.851			0.731	—	
PV	5.42	0.91	0.588	0.682	0.840		0.667	0.768	—
DL	5.27	0.97	0.522	0.608	0.693	0.905	0.594	0.687	0.784

Note: The bold diagonal values represent the square roots of AVE. Off-diagonal values in the SDM–DL columns represent construct correlations. HTMT coefficients are reported in the final three columns. The square root of AVE for each construct exceeds its corresponding inter-construct correlations. In addition, all HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.85. Discriminant validity is therefore supported.

Table 4 presents the estimated standardized structural paths and their reported statistical tests. All three direct-effect hypotheses were supported by significant positive path coefficients. Perceived sustainable destination marketing was positively associated with destination image (H1: $\beta = 0.651$, $p < 0.001$); destination image was positively associated with perceived value (H2: $\beta = 0.682$, $p < 0.001$); and perceived value was positively associated with destination loyalty (H3: $\beta = 0.693$, $p < 0.001$). The results are consistent with the hypothesized sequence linking sustainability-related destination perceptions, image formation, tourists' value evaluations, and intended loyalty. These cross-sectional associations should not be interpreted as independently verified causal effects of management interventions.

Table 4. Structural path results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI	f ²	Decision
H1	SDM $\rightarrow$ DI	0.651	0.044	14.80	<0.001	[0.563, 0.734]	0.736	Supported
H2	DI $\rightarrow$ PV	0.682	0.040	17.05	<0.001	[0.601, 0.756]	0.869	Supported
H3	PV $\rightarrow$ DL	0.693	0.037	18.73	<0.001	[0.618, 0.762]	0.923	Supported

Table 5 reports the explained variance and the overall model-fit statistics. The estimated model accounted for 42.4% of the variance in destination image, 46.5% of the variance in perceived value, and 48.0% of the variance in destination loyalty. The reported fit indices suggest an acceptable fit under the thresholds presented in the table: the χ^2/df ratio was below 3.00; CFI, TLI, IFI, NFI, GFI, and AGFI exceeded 0.90; and RMSEA and SRMR were below 0.08. These indices describe the fit of the specified model to the analyzed responses, rather than independently validating the underlying causal interpretation.

The sequential indirect association was evaluated through a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The corresponding estimate, uncertainty measures, and hypothesis decision are reported in Table 6.

The reported sequential indirect effect was statistically significant because its 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero. The estimated standardized indirect effect was 0.308 (bootstrap SE = 0.037, $t = 8.32$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.238, 0.381]). Its magnitude is consistent with the product of the three constituent path coefficients, $0.651 \times 0.682 \times 0.693 \approx 0.308$. This result supports H4 as a statistical indirect association and is consistent with the

proposed sequential pathway from perceived sustainable destination marketing through destination image and perceived value to destination loyalty. Because exposure, mediators, and intended outcomes were measured at the same time, the proposed temporal ordering remains theoretical rather than directly established by the survey design.

Table 5. *Explained variance and overall model-fit statistics*

Indicator	Result	Recommended guideline	Interpretation
R^2 Destination Image	0.424		42.4% explained
Adjusted R^2 Destination Image	0.423		Moderate
R^2 Perceived Value	0.465		46.5% explained
Adjusted R^2 Perceived Value	0.464		Moderate
R^2 Destination Loyalty	0.480		48.0% explained
Adjusted R^2 Destination Loyalty	0.479		Moderate
χ^2/df	2.184	<3.00	Acceptable
CFI	0.957	>0.90	Good
TLI	0.949	>0.90	Good
IFI	0.958	>0.90	Good
NFI	0.936	>0.90	Good
RMSEA	0.051	<0.08	Good
SRMR	0.043	<0.08	Good
GFI	0.928	>0.90	Good
AGFI	0.908	>0.90	Good

Table 6. *Sequential mediation results*

Hypothesis/effect	Relationship	Effect	Bootstrap SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI	Decision
H4	SDM $\rightarrow$ DI $\rightarrow$ PV $\rightarrow$ DL	0.308	0.037	8.32	<0.001	[0.238, 0.381]	Supported

5. DISCUSSION: MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

The study develops a strategic marketing framework explaining how sustainable destination management, when deployed as a marketing strategy, contributes to destination loyalty through destination image and perceived value. The findings are consistent with all four hypothesized associations and suggest that credible sustainability practices may be managed as a market-facing resource rather than viewed solely as an operational, regulatory, or policy obligation. First, tourists' perceptions of sustainable destination management practices were positively associated with destination image. For managers, this indicates that environmental conservation, heritage protection, community participation, responsible transportation, cleanliness, and visitor management can serve as inputs to positioning and brand strategy. These practices communicate signals about quality, responsibility, authenticity, and managerial competence. Their marketing value, however, depends on visibility, credibility, and consistency across customer touchpoints. The finding therefore extends destination-image thinking toward brand management: sustainability-related practices can become image-forming stimuli and sources of differentiation when they are integrated into the customer experience and communicated in benefit-relevant ways.

Second, destination image was positively associated with tourists' perceived value. Managerially, this means that brand image is not merely a promotional output; it is an economic and psychological mechanism that shapes customers' evaluations of the destination's value proposition. Favorable associations can increase the perceived benefits of the trip, reduce uncertainty, and make the overall experience appear more worthwhile even when monetary costs are unchanged. This reinforces the need for destination organizations to manage brand consistency across advertising, digital content, service encounters, physical environments, mobility systems, cultural experiences, and stakeholder interactions. The result is consistent with Kim et al. [5] and evidence from China reported by Song et al. [6] and Lu et al. [7].

Third, perceived value was positively associated with intended destination loyalty, underscoring the potential importance of customer-value management in long-term destination performance. Sustainability initiatives should therefore be evaluated not only by implementation cost or environmental output but also by their capacity to improve the benefits customers experience. Investments in environmental quality, cultural conservation, mobility, community programs, and visitor management can contribute to loyalty when they improve convenience, authenticity, experience quality, emotional benefits, or confidence in the destination. This suggests a managerial shift from cost-centered sustainability decisions toward value-based investment decisions, while recognizing that sustainability outcomes remain important in their own right.

The strongest theoretical and managerial contribution concerns the sequential mediation in H4. The statistical results are consistent with a value-conversion model in which tourists' perceptions of sustainable destination marketing relate to

intended loyalty through destination image and perceived value. Conceptually, sustainability practices represent upstream organizational inputs; destination image represents a market-positioning and brand perception; perceived value captures the customer's evaluation of the value proposition; and loyalty represents an intended relationship-marketing outcome. This chain connects destination management decisions to customer-based market performance and clarifies why sustainability initiatives may fail to generate loyalty when they are poorly communicated, weakly experienced, or disconnected from customer benefits.

The sequential mechanism also clarifies the distinction between sustainable destination management and sustainable destination marketing. A destination may implement strong environmental or social policies that generate important public and stakeholder benefits without materially changing customer perceptions. Conversely, strong promotional claims without corresponding operational performance can create skepticism and damage brand credibility. Effective management therefore requires strategic alignment among actual practices, stakeholder delivery, positioning, communication, customer experience, brand image, and perceived value. In this sense, marketing is not an after-the-fact communication function; it is part of the managerial system through which sustainability is designed, delivered, interpreted, and converted into market value.

This study makes several contributions to management and marketing research. First, it reconceptualizes sustainable destination management as a strategic marketing resource rather than treating sustainability exclusively as an environmental, operational, or policy-oriented concern. This perspective shifts the theoretical focus from whether destinations implement sustainable practices to how managers can strategically leverage such practices to influence market perceptions and customer behavior. Second, the study establishes a link between destination-level managerial practices and customer-level marketing outcomes. By identifying a positive association between tourists' evaluations of sustainable destination management and destination image, it highlights image as a potential market-based mechanism through which managerial practices become meaningful to visitors. Third, the study integrates customer value theory into the sustainable destination management framework. A favorable destination image is strategically important not simply because it reflects positive associations, but because it is also associated with greater perceived value among surveyed tourists. Fourth, the study develops a sequential mechanism connecting management strategy with customer loyalty: Sustainable Destination Management → Destination Image → Perceived Value → Destination Loyalty. This framework connects strategic management with branding, customer value, and consumer loyalty perspectives within a single model. Finally, the study suggests that sustainability and competitiveness need not be regarded as inherently competing managerial objectives. When sustainability-oriented practices are effectively integrated into market strategy and customer value creation, they can become strategic resources that strengthen differentiation, customer relationships, and long-term destination competitiveness.

The findings provide several important implications for destination managers and destination management organizations. Most importantly, sustainability should be managed not only as an operational responsibility but also as an integral component of destination marketing strategy. Managers should evaluate environmental protection, cultural conservation, community participation, sustainable mobility, and responsible visitor management in terms of both their sustainability outcomes and their potential contribution to market positioning, destination image, and customer value. From a strategic marketing perspective, destination managers should incorporate sustainability into destination positioning and differentiation by identifying sustainability-related attributes that provide distinctive customer benefits and embedding them in the destination value proposition. Managers should also treat destination image as a strategic brand-management asset and ensure consistency among managerial practices, marketing communication, brand positioning, and actual visitor experiences. In addition, destination managers should adopt a customer-value orientation when designing sustainability strategies, asking not only whether an initiative produces environmental or social benefits but also how customers experience and value those benefits. Sustainability-oriented marketing strategies should further be supported by market segmentation because customer groups may respond differently according to environmental awareness, cultural interests, travel motivations, price sensitivity, and previous visitation. Finally, destination loyalty should be managed as a long-term customer relationship rather than evaluated solely through repeat visitation; recommendations, positive word of mouth, online reviews, and social-media advocacy can also create substantial market value. Overall, sustainability becomes strategically valuable when it is actively managed as part of the destination's marketing system and converted into a differentiated destination image, superior perceived value, stronger customer relationships, and sustainable competitive advantage.

Several limitations should be considered. First, the research design was cross-sectional. Although the cross-sectional design allowed relationships among the constructs to be identified, it could not fully explain changes in tourist perceptions over time. Longitudinal studies could examine whether sustainability perceptions create lasting changes in destination image, perceived value, and destination loyalty. Second, the empirical investigation was conducted among tourists who had visited tourism destinations in China without restricting the sample to one specific destination category. Tourists may have interpreted sustainability differently across historical cities, national parks, rural destinations, coastal areas, and urban tourism environments. Future research could therefore focus on one clearly defined destination or systematically compare different destination categories. Third, the conceptual model was intentionally parsimonious. Other constructs that were not

included in the present study may also contribute to sustainable destination loyalty, including satisfaction, trust, destination attachment, authenticity, environmental consciousness, memorable tourism experience, and tourist engagement. Fourth, destination loyalty was measured primarily through behavioral intentions. Although these measures captured tourists' intentions to revisit, recommend, and engage in positive word of mouth, they did not directly measure actual post-visit behavior. Future studies could combine survey data with actual revisitation, online recommendation behavior, or social-media engagement. In addition, the data represent one survey-based assessment of tourists' perceptions and do not provide independent destination-level measures of sustainability performance or managerial implementation. The term sustainable destination management should therefore be understood here as a perceived marketing-and-management construct rather than an audited record of organizational practice. Measuring the predictor variables, intervening constructs, and loyalty intentions with the same questionnaire also creates a potential for common-method influences. Reporting procedures for assessing such influences, together with fuller details of questionnaire recruitment, fieldwork dates, sampling locations, and the expert-review and pilot-testing process, would strengthen interpretation and reproducibility. Fifth, the present study did not examine potential moderating variables. Environmental consciousness may strengthen responses to sustainable destination marketing, while previous visitors may evaluate sustainability differently from first-time visitors. Younger tourists may also place different levels of importance on sustainability compared with older tourists. Future research could investigate these potential moderating effects. Sixth, the study focused on Chinese domestic tourists and therefore did not establish whether the proposed mechanism operated similarly among international visitors. Comparative studies could investigate whether the relationships among sustainable destination marketing, destination image, perceived value, and destination loyalty differ between Chinese domestic tourists and international visitors.

6. CONCLUSION

This study develops an integrated management-and-marketing framework explaining how sustainable destination management, deployed as a marketing strategy, can contribute to destination loyalty through destination image and perceived value in China. The central conclusion is that sustainability can function as a strategic resource only when destination organizations successfully convert responsible management practices into customer-relevant market value. The empirical findings are consistent with a sequential association pattern: perceived sustainable destination management is related to a more favorable destination image; favorable image is associated with higher perceived value; and perceived value is associated with stronger intended destination loyalty. Destination image and perceived value also form a statistically supported sequential indirect pathway connecting perceived sustainable destination management to loyalty intentions. The framework therefore connects upstream managerial choices with downstream brand, customer-value, and relationship outcomes. For destination marketing organizations, the implication is that sustainability strategy, market positioning, brand management, experience design, stakeholder coordination, and customer relationship management should be treated as an integrated system. Environmental protection, cultural conservation, local participation, sustainable mobility, and responsible visitor management become strategically valuable when they are credible in operations, visible at customer touchpoints, meaningful to target segments, incorporated into destination brand image, and experienced as superior value. Under these conditions, sustainability can support both responsible destination management and long-term market competitiveness.

Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the preparation and revision of the manuscript, according to the submitted authorship declaration.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Data availability

The study analyzed questionnaire responses from 462 participants. The individual-level survey data are not included in this article. Requests for access to de-identified data may be directed to the corresponding author and considered subject to participant consent, applicable privacy requirements, and relevant institutional approval. Any approved sharing of de-identified records would need to comply with these conditions.

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