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Stirring the emotions: modelling the role of emotions in developing satisfaction and loyalty in tea tourism experiences¹

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ABSTRACT

Tea tourism, defined as tourism based on experiencing tea and its production, is an increasingly popular type of tourism. It is based on a complex set of cultural practices and is notable for its ability to stir the drinker's emotions. This study investigates the role of emotions in tea tourism by proposing and testing an empirical model that incorporates dimensions of tea culture with measures of emotion. Based on data from 415 Chinese and Korean tourists visiting a well-known tea-growing region of China, the study analyses the effects of five dimensions of tea tourism experiences on tourists' emotions, based on a combination of the stimulus-organism-response and pleasure-arousal-dominance models. It also examines the relationships between these emotions and destination brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, satisfaction, and attitudinal loyalty. Relating was the most influential factor in generating pleasure, while acting had the greatest influence on arousal and dominance. Dominance had the strongest impact on brand equity and satisfaction, which in turn drove loyalty. The study also explores how demographic variables affect these experiences and their outcomes. The results highlight significant differences across demographic groups, emphasising the need for tailored tea-tourism programmes to enhance satisfaction and loyalty.

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Brand; emotion; experience; loyalty; satisfaction; tea

1. Introduction

Understanding how various types of tourism create and deliver experiential value is crucial for the development of effective destination strategies (Prebensen et al. 2018). This study focuses on how tourism experiences are delivered and consumed, using tea tourism as a vehicle to explore how specific tourism experiences can be designed to enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Tea tourism is a widespread, fast-growing, but still relatively understudied instance of tourism (Sarkar et al., 2021). It is a complex service-product, based not only on enabling tourists to see how tea is grown, processed, and sold, but also giving them the opportunity to learn about its history and culture (Shen & Chou, 2022) and – most importantly – to experience drinking it.

Tea tourism has become a key component of the tourism industry, not only in China, Japan, and India but also in other tea-producing regions such as Korea, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Kenya (Cheng et al., 2010). The demand for tea tourism is associated with its cultural status in countries where it

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is widely consumed. Due to the long history of international trade in tea, this includes not only the tea-producing regions but also some countries that are very distant in geographical terms such as the UK and Canada. Tea is, indeed, considered the national beverage in many countries, although consumers in different countries often have a strong preference for specific types and brands (Gupta et al., 2022).

Most research on tea tourism has focused on the supply side (e.g. Cheng et al., 2010, 2012; Jolliffe, 2004; Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009), with a predominance of narrative discussion and case studies (Chen et al., 2021). Research on the demand side of tea tourism is, meanwhile, comparatively scarce, particularly in respect to consumer behaviour. It is widely understood, however, that the production, trading and drinking of tea presents those who witness it and participate in it with a wide range of sensory inputs that can affect their emotions (Yan & Yue, 2020). This should not be surprising, given that tea-drinking is known to stimulate all five classical senses and, thereby, is able to 'stir the emotions'. In Europe, tea has long been known colloquially as the 'cup that cheers' (Reade, 1884, p. 104).

The role of emotions in the consumption of tourism products and services is, indeed, increasingly being recognised as critical to understanding tourism experiences (Hosany et al., 2021). Strong emotional responses can make tourism experiences more memorable, which can, in turn, strongly influence tourist satisfaction and loyalty (J. H. Kim, 2010). Emotional responses are believed to be inextricably linked to the sensory stimuli presented to tourists, which include not only seeing but also tasting, listening, touching, and smelling (Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016).

Only a relatively small number of studies have, however, attempted to analyse the emotional dimension of tea tourism (e.g. Liang & Lai, 2023; Su & Zhang, 2022). The insights from these studies are valuable for integrating emotional customisation into tea tourism strategies and policies, but more comprehensive research is needed. It is presently unclear, for example, how emotions relate to brand equity, and how this may link to behavioural outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty. The aim of this study is to address this gap by investigating how emotional responses to tea tourism experiences can inform the broader understanding of tea tourism experiences.

2. Literature review

This section will present an overview of the literature on tourist experiences in the tea tourism domain, beginning with a review of studies that have investigated the nature of the tea tourism experience. Section 3 will then look specifically at studies that have examined the role of emotions in tourism, how emotions affect brand equity, and finally how this relationship may link to further behavioural outcomes including satisfaction and loyalty.

2.1. Conceptual outline of the tea tourism experience

Tea tourism involves harnessing tea-related resources to deliver tourism experiences. In the case of tea tourism, such resources include not only sites of tea cultivation, processing and trade (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009) but also landscapes associated with tea cultivation (notably, tea gardens), museums, sites of social and historical interest related to tea, and various products related to tea (Cheng et al., 2012; Jolliffe, 2004; Liang & Lai, 2023). The latter can include fancy teas, handicrafts, and foods that have tea as an ingredient (Yilmaz & Kumar, 2023). Tea ceremonies, which can involve not only drinking tea but also dance, music, and even comedy, are important in the performance of tea culture in several countries (Liang & Lai, 2023). Tourists also experience tea through festivals, which can include events such as tea-related exhibitions and fairs (Y. K. Lee et al., 2013).

It is widely acknowledged, meanwhile, that the sensory elements of tourist experiences have cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Oh et al., 2016). By interacting with the destination offer, tourists construct personalised tourism experiences, which rely on their senses and reflect their emotional state during these interactions (Otto & Ritchie, 1996). Since tourism experiences

are complex and dynamic, measuring them remains a significant challenge for researchers. Recent studies have therefore focused on identifying the emotional dimensions related to specific types of tourism, rather than tourism experiences in general. Studies have focused, for example, on rural tourism (Kastenholz et al., 2016), medical tourism (Ghosh & Mandal, 2019), cultural tourism (Seyfi et al., 2020), and virtual-reality tourism (Wei et al., 2023). Schmitt (1999), meanwhile, suggests that marketers should view consumers as not only rational but also emotional, and should thus create experiences that have aspects related to sensing (through sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell), feeling (the stimulation of inner feelings and emotions, such as excitement), thinking (cognitive and problem-solving experiences), acting (bodily and behaviour experiences, such as nature experiences) and relating (experiences that involve relating to other people). This framework has sometimes been used in tourism research (T. H. Lee & Chang, 2012; T. T. Li et al., 2021). Such studies suggest that the relative importance of these dimensions differs according to the characteristics of the destination and travellers' demographic characteristics.

Figure 1 provides a conceptual model of tea tourism experience, which includes factors relating to tea and tourism, and encompasses five experiential dimensions: sensory, which concerns sight, touch, smell, sounds and taste; feeling, which has emotional responses such as moods and emotions; thinking, which is associated with deliberate processes; acting, which concerns aspects of the customer's experience related to the offer and its consumption; and, relating, which are connected to a customer's reference group or culture.

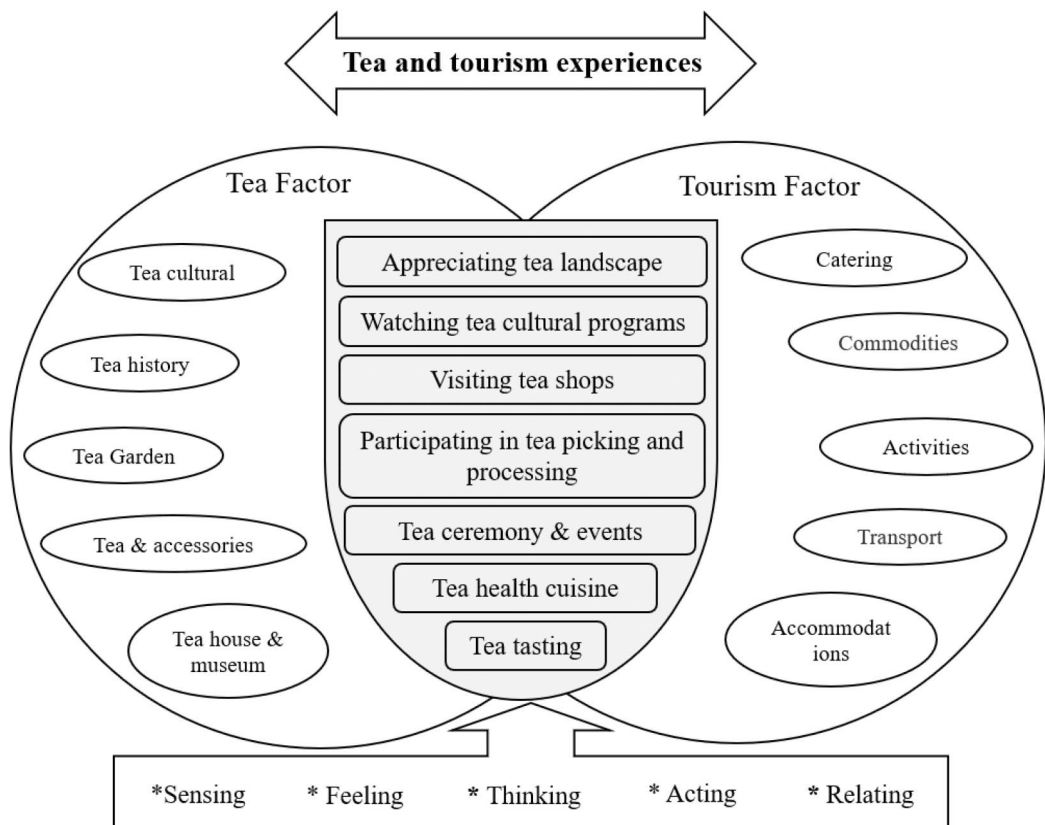


Figure 1. Conceptual integration of tea and tourism experiences.

2.2. Tea tourism experiences and tourists' emotional responses

While the arousal of emotions is widely held to be a vital determinant of tourist satisfaction (Malone et al., 2018), researchers have taken a variety of approaches to understanding and measuring their relationship. Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model, for example, provides a theoretical framework for examining the mediating role of emotions in shaping the impact of the physical environment on an individual's behaviours. It suggests that environmental stimuli evoke emotional responses from the actors, or 'organisms', which in turn influence their behavioural reactions. This model has been widely applied in a range of contexts, including tourism research (Chang et al., 2014; M. J. Kim et al., 2020).

Emotions themselves can also be analysed through multidimensional approaches. An example is the PAD approach of Mehrabian and Russell (1974), which proposes three dimensions that can be used to describe an individual's emotional state: pleasure, arousal, and/or dominance. It is said to be one of the most influential theories to understand emotional responses (Xia et al., 2023) and has been widely employed in the tourism context by writers such as Bigné et al. (2005), Hung et al. (2019) and X. Li et al. (2019). S. Li et al. (2015) presents a review of the various methods that are either currently or could potentially be used to measure tourists' emotions. The emotional dimension of tea tourism has, however, rarely been the subject of empirical investigation (an exception being the study of Xia et al. (2023), which explored the potential of a new tea product to serve as a tourist attraction). It is likely, however, that tea tourism experiences stimulate emotional responses, as tea naturally contains caffeine, long known as a powerful stimulant (Hamilton-Miller, 1995). It is also probable that tea tourism has emotional effects even if the tourists do not actually drink tea during the experience. Many people enjoy the smell of tea and enjoy its taste even when the caffeine has been removed. Emotional responses may also be related to sight and even sound, for example the sound of a cup of tea being poured. Any measure of the emotional responses to tea tourism experiences must therefore aim to encompass the full range of components that define experience-based value (Mathwick et al., 2001).

3. Hypothesis development

Given the likely complexity of the relationships between emotions and other variables involved in the tourism experience, it was considered most appropriate to employ the most well-established approach: Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) pleasure-arousal-dominance (PAD) model. The PAD model has been widely used in the tourism context, which will allow for comparisons to be made (Bigné et al., 2005; Hung et al., 2019). Crucially, the PAD model aligns seamlessly with the SOR framework guiding this study, effectively capturing how tea tourism experiences evoke emotional responses that influence outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty. The PAD model therefore serves as a concise, validated, and widely accepted approach for measuring tourists' emotions. The five main hypotheses to be addressed in this study are summarised graphically in [Figure 2](#).

3.1. Emotional responses to tourism experiences

Numerous studies in the field of tourism and consumer behaviour suggest that sensory-rich experiences can evoke strong emotional responses. The PAD approach aims to measure common affective dimensions that differentiate between such emotional responses, focusing on pleasure, arousal, and dominance. pleasure refers to the degree to which an individual finds an experience to be agreeable or pleasant, with 'pleasant' and 'unpleasant' anchoring the valency continuum. 'Arousal', meanwhile, pertains to the activation of internal states of energy, anchored on a continuum from 'quiet' to 'excited'. 'Dominance', meanwhile, relates to how much one feels in control of a given situation anchored from 'dominant' to 'controlled'.

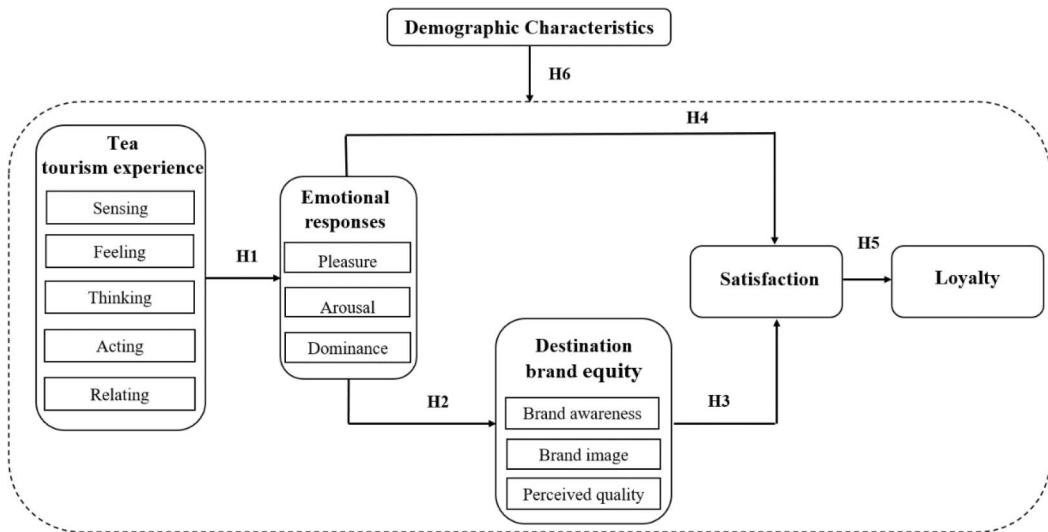


Figure 2. The conceptual model.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) highlighted that the creation of memorable experiences is often tied to sensory engagement, which in turn plays a critical role in how consumers emotionally connect with a product or service. In the context of tea tourism, tea drinking involves a rich tapestry of sensory experiences, including the aroma, taste, texture, and visual appeal of tea, as well as the ambiance of the tea-drinking environment. These sensory stimuli are expected to evoke emotions such as pleasure, arousal, and dominance, which are key components of the emotional response framework.

Quan and Wang (2004) showed that tasting and experiencing local cuisine significantly enhances tourists' emotional experiences. As drinking tea involves similar sensory interactions, tea tourism experiences may be expected to elicit similar emotional responses. Caskey et al. (2021), meanwhile, found that sensory stimuli, such as the aroma and taste of coffee, play a crucial role in how consumers connect emotionally with a culinary experience. Accordingly, the present study adopts the following hypotheses:

[Hypothesis 1] Tea tourism experience has a significant impact on emotional response.

H1a. The tea tourism experience has a significant impact on pleasure.

H1b. The tea tourism experience has a significant impact on arousal.

H1c. The tea tourism experience has a significant impact on dominance.

3.2. Role of emotional responses in shaping destination brand equity

Emotions and brands are widely understood to be intimately related. This is because brands are often constructed around emotions, with business organisations using emotions to raise awareness of the brand, attract customers to it, and to maintain their brand attachment (Fournier, 1998). As such, the emotions people feel when buying something can significantly impact on its brand equity (Gobe, 2001).

Various studies have found that tourists tend to choose their destination through a process of comparison that is shaped by their perceptions of its brand value (N. Lee & Kim, 2023; Tešin et al., 2024). Few studies have, however, investigated the impact of tourists' emotional responses to the experiences they receive at a destination on their brand equity (H.-K. Kim & Lee, 2018). Measures of destination brand equity have, however, been found to be good predictors of tourists' satisfaction, as well as behavioural intentions such as repurchase and referral (Chi & Qu, 2008).

The present study divides destination brand equity into three dimensions: brand awareness, brand image and perceived quality. In the tourism context, the first of these, brand awareness, signifies a tourist's knowledge of a particular destination or its presence in their minds within a given context (Sartori et al., 2012). Brand image, sometimes interchangeably referred to as 'brand associations', reflects the set of perceptions attached to the tourism experience, incorporating various individual perceptions of its attributes that may or may not align with objective reality (S. Kim & Lehto, 2013). Brand quality, meanwhile, is a holistic judgment based on the excellence or overall superiority of a brand (Fayrene & Lee, 2011). Tourists' emotional responses to the destination brand have the potential to shape any of these. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are adopted:

[Hypothesis 2] Emotional response has a significant impact on destination brand equity.

H2a. Emotional response has a significant impact on brand awareness.

H2b. Emotional response has a significant impact on brand image.

H2c. Emotional response has a significant impact on perceived quality.

3.3. Formation of tourist satisfaction

Satisfaction is a multidimensional concept linked closely to individual's evaluations of their consumption experience (Danaher & Arweiler, 1996). As such, satisfaction plays a crucial role both in understanding how such experiences are formed and in predicting individuals' responses to them (Dedeoğlu et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2022). Tourist satisfaction relates to individuals' overall evaluation of their tourism experience, reflecting the degree of alignment between their expectations and actual experiences (Lin & Kuo, 2016). Previous studies have found that both emotions and destination brand equity can have a significant positive effect on tourists' satisfaction (San Martín et al., 2019). Shi et al. (2022) found that brand awareness can have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. Consistent with such research, the present study hypothesises brand equity to be an important determinant of satisfaction. For the purposes of this study, therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

[Hypothesis 3] Destination brand equity has a significant impact on satisfaction.

[Hypothesis 4] Emotional response has a significant impact on satisfaction.

3.4. Effect of satisfaction on loyalty

The relationship between satisfaction and consumer loyalty has been extensively researched (e.g. Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; X. Lie et al., 2019). Loyalty may be understood as an attitudinal or behavioural variable, the former relating to the consumer's intentions to purchase the product and the latter focusing on their actual purchases. This study adopts an attitudinal approach to loyalty for two reasons. First, individuals' desire for variety in tourism experiences justifies exploring future intentions rather than past behaviours (San Martín et al., 2019; Williams & Soutar, 2009). Secondly, the behavioural approach may not distinguish well between genuine and superficial loyalty (Kha, 2008).

For the purposes of this study, attitudinal loyalty encompasses two primary dimensions: the intention to repurchase and the willingness to recommend the brand (Izogo, 2016). The former reflects the consumer's inclination towards making future purchases (Chiu et al., 2014), while the latter indicates their intention not only to maintain a relationship with a firm but also to serve as a credible source of influential information for other potential users (Maxham, 2001). The role of satisfaction as a significant antecedent of attitudinal loyalty has been widely confirmed in the tourism context (Eid et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2014). The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

[Hypothesis 5] Satisfaction has a significant impact on loyalty.

3.5. Effect of demographic characteristics

Demographic variables are considered key factors influencing tourists' experiences and emotional responses (Zhao et al., 2020). Tourists of different age groups exhibit significant differences in travel preferences and satisfaction levels (Otoo et al., 2020). Additionally, gender differences can affect tourists' emotional responses and brand perception (Yang et al., 2022). Tourists with higher income levels tend to show greater recognition of brand equity and loyalty (Tran et al., 2021). The impact of education level on travel experiences and emotional responses is also important, as tourists with higher education levels usually have higher expectations for tourism products and services (Tran et al., 2021). The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

[Hypothesis 6] Demographic variables have significant effects on tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

H6a: Age has a significant effect on tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

H6b: Gender has a significant effect on tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

H6c: Income has a significant effect on tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

H6d: Education level has a significant effect on tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

H6e: Nationality has a significant effect on tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

4. Methods

This study aims to identify the emotional responses of tourists as they participate in tea tourism experiences and to identify how these emotions are related to satisfaction, destination brand equity, and loyalty. Data were collected to test the proposed structural model shown in [Figure 2](#), using a survey of tourists to the Mount Wuyi tea producing area in China. This section begins with a brief discussion of the context of the study, followed by a description of the design and implementation of the survey, and the analysis of the resulting dataset.

4.1. Study context

China's tea planting areas account for 62.1% of the world's total (ITC, 2020). There are four major tea-producing areas in China, each with different varieties and qualities of tea, different tea histories and different tea cultures to attract tourists. Tourism is playing an increasingly vital role in supporting economic development in all these areas, generating incomes, jobs and foreign exchange earnings (Gong, 2021). Most tea tourists in China are domestic tourists (Yu, 2020), although increasing numbers of international tourists are now visiting China to experience its tea tourism offer. Most of these are from South Korea (MCT, 2020).

This study focuses specifically on the experiences of tourists visiting Mount Wuyi, a tea-producing area in China. The tourism offer includes attractions related to the cultivation of tea, e.g. tea gardens and farms, as well as the tea trade, tea tasting, and other attractions featuring the area's tea culture. These attractions include 'Impression Da Hong Pao', a live multi-media performance event that interprets the history, cultivation, and culture of Dan Hong Pao tea. The event is hosted in the Wuyi Tea Garden and represents an innovative integration of culture and tourism (People's Information, 2021). Between July and August 2023, almost 3.2 million tourists in total visited the tea-related attractions of the Mount Wuyi area (Minbei Daily, 2023).

4.2. Measurement scales, data collection and analysis

Based T. T. Li et al. (2021), a total of 44 items were used in this study. The five dimensions of the tea tourism experience were measured using 17 items: five for the sensory dimension (one for each of the senses) and three each for the feeling, thinking, acting and relating dimensions. Following informal on-site interviews with tea tourists, it was decided to include 'feeling refreshed' as one of the items in the 'feeling' dimension. This was considered especially relevant in the context of tea drinking, which is known to have a strong emotional element. Emotional responses were measured using nine items adapted from Z. F. Li et al. (2015) and Hosany and Prayag (2013): three each for pleasure, arousal, and dominance. Brand equity was measured using 10 items in three groups – three for brand awareness, three for brand image, and four for brand quality – based on S. S. Kim et al. (2018). Satisfaction was measured on five items based on Son & Lee (2011) and Jeong et al. (2020). Finally, loyalty was measured using three items adapted from (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018). Likert-type scales were used in each case, ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. After implementing a pilot study of 100 respondents, some minor changes were made to the questions to enhance the content validity of the measurement items.

Using the online questionnaire survey, WJX's 'Survey Mobile', tourists were approached and asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire. The questions were initially developed in Chinese and then translated into Korean. Both the Korean and Chinese versions were reviewed by two bilingual researchers to verify linguistic equivalence and accuracy.

A total of 415 questionnaires were distributed and collected. After excluding incomplete or insincere responses, 411 valid questionnaires were obtained for empirical analysis. Since convenience sampling was used, every effort was made to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample by monitoring demographic characteristics such as age, gender, nationality, and experience. The data were then analysed using SPSS version 21.0, and input errors were statistically processed after all observed variables were calibrated by frequency analysis and descriptive statistical analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Demographic profile

The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Most respondents were female (72.7%), and the majority were Chinese (93.7%, the remainder being South Korean). Approximately half (52.8%) were in the 18–30 age group, 42.6% reported average monthly incomes in the range of 3000–9999 RMB, and the majority (87.4%) held a bachelor's degree or greater level qualification. Students accounted for 36.3% of the total.

The higher proportion of female respondents in the dataset can be attributed to the significant impact of the so-called 'female economy' on tea culture (UNICOM, 2023). In the new tea beverage market, female consumers outnumber male consumers, with many brands specifically targeting women through products like health teas and beauty teas. Additionally, women are active in promoting tea culture on social media and often start tea-related businesses. The rise of women's status in the workplace has also fostered office tea-drinking culture.

5.1. Exploratory factor analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 17 tea tourism experience variables to identify their underlying dimensionality (Table 2). The measure of sampling adequacy was suitable for factor analysis, with an overall sample fitness (KMO) value of 0.921 and an approximate value χ^2 of 7318.506 ($p = .000$) for the Bartlett test of sphericity, showing a significant value. Five factors explained the tea tourism experience, and the total explanatory power was 86.805%. Factor 1 'sensory' (23.4%) and mostly related to visual elements. Factor 2 (16.4%) covered 'relating' as they

Table 1. Demographic data.

Items	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	112	27.3
	Female	299	72.7
Nationality	China	385	93.7
	Korea	26	6.3
Age	18–30	217	52.8
	31–40	104	25.3
	41–50	47	11.4
	Over 50	43	10.5
Monthly disposable income (RMB/USD/EUR)	Below 3000/420/390	131	31.9
	3000–9999/420–1400/390–1300	175	42.6
	10,000–20,000/1400–2800/1300–2600	105	25.5
	Above 20,000/2800/2600	35	8.5
Education	High school and below	25	6.1
	Junior college	27	6.6
	Bachelor's degrees	221	53.8
Occupation	Postgraduate and above	138	33.6
	Management	35	8.5
	Production/Sales/Marketing	30	7.3
	Full-time student	149	36.3
	Technician	34	8.3
	Civil servant	27	6.6
	Other	136	33.1

Note: 1 RMB \approx 0.14 USD; 1 RMB \approx 0.13 EUR.

were to do with being familiar with other participating tourists. Factor 3 (15.9%) represented 'acting', which were the most related to behaviour change. Factor 4 (15.6%) covered 'emotional' factors and was related mainly to excitement. Factor 5 (15.4%) covered 'thinking' and related mainly to the imagination. The factor load value for the five factors was more than 0.40, indicating their validity for assessing tea tourism experiences.

5.2. Scale reliability and internal consistency

A variety of methods were used to test scale reliability and internal consistency. First, the study found Cronbach's alpha above the recommended 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) for all 44 scales (Table 3). The evolution of eigenvalues of various scale correlation matrices was then studied. The first eigenvalue was clearly higher than the rest, and the second eigenvalue was less

Table 2. Factor loadings for the tea tourism experience scale.

Items	F1: Sensing	F2: Relating	F3: Acting	F4: Emotional	F5: Thinking
S1	.826				
S4	.816				
S3	.796				
S5	.771				
S2	.771				
R16		.876			
R17		.854			
R15		.843			
A13			.868		
A12			.825		
A14			.820		
F6				.850	
F8				.845	
F7				.805	
T10					.832
T9					.829
T11					.809

Notes: TE, tea tourism experience; S, sensory; F, feeling; T, thinking; A, acting; R, relating; Loadings less than 0.50 have been omitted to improve readability.

than one. This pattern indicates one dominant factor underlying the scale, supporting unidimensionality. In five of the scales (tea tourism experience, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty), there was one indicator that, when eliminated, increased the Cronbach's alpha value. The reliability test was used to determine the internal consistency of the five extracted factors measured, and Cronbach's α coefficients were found to be above 0.9. However, since the increase was modest and, in those cases, the corresponding weight was greater than 0.80, it was decided not to eliminate any of them.

5.3. Differences based on demographic characteristics

According to an analysis of differences based on demographic characteristics, as shown in the appendix, the average loyalty score was 4.10. There were significant differences in tea tourism experience, emotional responses, brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty based on age, with the 18–30 age group scoring the highest. Groups with lower monthly incomes (<390 EUR) scored significantly higher in emotional responses, brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty. Groups with lower educational levels (high school and below) scored significantly higher in tea tourism experience, emotional responses, brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty. Occupation has a significant impact on emotional responses and brand equity, with civil servants scoring the highest.

5.4. Hypothesis testing

The fit of the structural model was evaluated by employing the R-squared coefficient. The results are shown in Table 4, with nonsignificant paths excluded to improve readability. The R^2 coefficients were all classified as 'medium' or 'high' (Hair et al., 2014), denoting that the model represents the data well.

6. Discussion

This study found partial support for a significant relationship between tea tourism experience and tourists' emotional response, partially supporting the overall H1 (that tea-tourism experiences elicit strong emotional responses from those who take part in them). This is in keeping with the findings of studies by Xia et al. (2023), Shi et al. (2022) and Su and Zhang (2022). More specifically, the relationship between tea tourism experience and pleasure was fully supported. The relationship between tea tourism experience and arousal was only partially supported, the 'thinking' element of the experience not being significantly related to arousal. The relationship between tea tourism experience and dominance was only partially supported, the 'feeling' element of the experience not being significantly related to dominance. All other relationships were, however, confirmed, suggesting that tea tourism, in the majority of its dimensions, tends to draw strong emotional responses from those undertaking it.

The study also found that 'relating', which is often stressed in tea-tourism experiences, had the greatest effect on pleasure, while 'acting' had the greatest effect on arousal and dominance. Tea tourists evidently find pleasure in the social aspects of tea tourism, including relating with other tourists as well as attraction staff. The latter could include, for example, tour guides, museum staff and those conducting tea ceremonies. The emphasis on acting with respect to stimulating emotions related to arousal and dominance, meanwhile, may be associated with the task of tea picking or the serene ebb and flow of a tea ceremony.

The study found a significant positive relationship between emotional responses and brand equity (H2). This confirms the findings of Liang and Lai (2023), which found a link between emotions and brand image specifically in the case of tea tourism. The present study goes further, however, to examine the role of different emotional responses. Emotional responses related to dominance had the greatest effect on not only total destination brand equity but also brand awareness and perceived quality. Pleasure, meanwhile, had the greatest effect on brand image, as well as a major

Table 3. Internal consistency.

Items	M	SD	Factor loading	Cronbach's α	
Tea tourism experience					
<i>Sensing</i>					
I was able to experience visual things (landscape, dimension, Daehongpo Performance) through tea tourism	4.27	.850	.920	.940	
I was able to experience auditory things (natural sounds, songs, etc.) through tea tourism	4.15	.907	.929		
I was able to experience tactile things (landscape, tea, etc.) through tea tourism	4.28	.862	.924		
I was able to experience olfactory things (smells, etc.) through tea tourism	4.38	.800	.924	.933	
Tea tourism made me feel excited	4.36	.791	.931		
<i>Feeling</i>					
Tea tourism made me feel excited	4.18	.869	.901	.920	
Tea tourism made me feel my mood was refreshed	3.99	.925	.913		
Tea tourism is new and novel	4.12	.878	.897		
<i>Thinking</i>					
Tea tourism provides creative ideas	3.97	.901	.897	.931	
Tea tourism makes me think creatively	3.92	.907	.873		
Tea tourism stimulates my curiosity	3.96	.922	.885		
<i>Acting</i>					
Tea tourism changes my lifestyle	3.77	1.09	.909	.964	
Tea tourism changes my behaviour	3.67	1.04	.871		
Tea tourism makes me feel physical dynamic power	3.81	.983	.919		
<i>Relating</i>					
Tea tourism provided a chance to participate with other tourists	4.17	.877	.963	.952	
I feel familiar with other tourists participating in tea tourism	4.10	.885	.933		
Tea tourism creates bonds with other tourists	4.00	.925	.945		
Emotional responses					
<i>Pleasure</i>					
I was happy during the tea tourism trip	3.91	.874	.940	.959	
I enjoyed the tea tourism trip	4.05	.831	.918		
I was comfortable during the tea tourism trip	4.07	.826	.932		
<i>Arousal</i>					
I was excited during the tea tourism trip	3.83	.966	.944	.946	
I was thrilled during the tea tourism trip	3.81	.972	.930		
I was motivated during the tea tourism trip	3.68	.971	.945		
<i>Dominance</i>					
I was mentally stimulated during the tea tourism trip	3.85	.946	.928	.926	
I felt a sense of control during the tea tourism trip	4.01	.874	.924		
I had an influence during the tea tourism trip	3.92	.910	.913		
Destination brand equity					
<i>Brand awareness</i>					
I know a lot about tea tourism	3.47	1.04	.924	.938	
Tea tourism is considered a good type of tourism	3.77	.941	.871		
I look forward to tea tourism	3.89	.941	.884		
<i>Brand image</i>					
Tea tourism is well differentiated as a brand	4.05	.854	.924	.945	
I am favourable toward the tea tourism brand	4.05	.824	.912		
Tea tourism is a unique and charming brand	4.06	.834	.894		
<i>Perceived quality</i>					
The quality of tourism infrastructure is good	3.90	.903	.931	.945	
Tourism service is of good quality	3.98	.872	.918		
Residents are kind	4.03	.845	.933		
It is a reliable tourism destination	4.02	.900	.929	.945	
<i>Satisfaction</i>					
Overall, I was satisfied	4.16	.765	.924		
I am satisfied with the service I received	4.10	.801	.923	.955	
I think it was the right decision to choose Wuyi Mountain	4.04	.801	.937		
I am satisfied compared my expectations before my tea tourism trip	4.09	.777	.944		
I am satisfied given that the time and money invested	4.07	.819	.932	.952	
<i>Loyalty</i>					
I will try tea tourism again next time	4.15	.806	.925		
I will recommend tea tourism to others	4.12	.840	.925	.952	
I will prefer a tea tourism destination first next time	4.03	.882	.952		

Table 4. Hypothesised path coefficients.

Structural paths	Unstandardized coefficient	Std. error	Standardized coefficient	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1: TE → ER						Partially supported
S → P	.192	.054	.180	3.559	.000	
F → P	.160	.044	.166	3.605	.000	
T → P	.094	.044	.098	2.134	.033	
A → P	.159	.038	.192	4.204	.000	
R → P	.256	.043	.275	5.974	.000	
H1a: TE → P	$R^2 = .538; F = 96.353; P = .000; DW = 1.817$					Supported
S → AR	.173	.064	.140	2.708	.007	
F → AR	.214	.053	.192	4.064	.000	
T → AR	.057	.052	.052	1.095	.274	
A → AR	.393	.045	.410	8.774	.000	
R → AR	.080	.051	.074	1.567	.118	
H1b: TE → A	$R^2 = .520; F = 87.902; P = .000; DW = 1.456$					Partially supported
S → D	.192	.062	.168	3.109	.002	
F → D	.083	.051	.081	1.633	.103	
T → D	.123	.050	.120	2.433	.015	
A → D	.236	.043	.265	5.427	.000	
R → D	.213	.049	.213	4.332	.000	
H1c: TE → D	$R^2 = .469; F = 73.565; P = .000; DW = 1.305$					Partially supported
H2: ER → BE						Supported
P → BA	.263	.054	.233	4.856	.000	
AR → BA	.197	.050	.201	3.961	.000	
D → BA	.370	.052	.352	7.115	.000	
H2a: ER → BA	$R^2 = .452; F = 113.873; P = .000; DW = 1.548$					Supported
P → BI	.308	.044	.314	7.005	.000	
AR → BI	.238	.040	.281	5.908	.000	
D → BI	.229	.042	.251	5.426	.000	
H2b: ER → BI	$R^2 = .521; F = 149.474; P = .000; DW = 1.924$					Supported
P → BI	.279	.046	.275	6.039	.000	
AR → BI	.199	.042	.228	4.699	.000	
D → BI	.309	.044	.328	6.975	.000	
H2c: ER → PQ	$R^2 = .503; F = 139.525; P = .000; DW = 1.843$					Supported
BA → S	.124	.033	.157	3.729	.000	
BI → S	.296	.039	.326	7.635	.000	
PQ → S	.363	.039	.412	9.342	.000	
H3: BE → S	$R^2 = .620; F = 223.686; P = .000; DW = 1.123$					Supported
H4: ER → S	$R^2 = .542; F = 162.706; P = .000; DW = 1.125$					Supported
P → S	.327	.039	.368	8.392	.000	
AR → S	.144	.036	.187	4.018	.000	
D → S	.254	.038	.306	6.769	.000	
H5: S → L	.934	.031	.830	30.086	.000	
	$R^2 = .542; F = 162.706; P = .000; DW = 1.125$					Supported

Notes: TE, tea tourism experience; S, sensory; F, feeling; T, thinking; A, acting; R, relating; ER, emotional responses; P, pleasure; AR, arousal; D, dominance; BE, destination brand equity; BA, brand awareness; BI, brand image; PQ, perceived quality; S, satisfaction; L, loyalty; DW, Durbin-Watson.

influence on tourists' satisfaction. The tea tourism experience evidently provides a wide range of sensory stimuli that tea tourists receive, process and find pleasurable, and these sensory experiences are clearly imprinted in the brand image of tea tourism and the destinations where it takes place.

A significant positive relationship was found between brand equity and satisfaction (H3), confirming the role of brand equity in driving satisfaction. This is in keeping with studies by Chi and Qu (2008) and San Martín et al. (2019), albeit not of tea tourism specifically. The largest effect was from overall quality, suggesting that while brand awareness and brand image may be important in shaping satisfaction, tourists tend to derive satisfaction from the overall quality of the experience they receive, for example in terms of the quality of the infrastructure or the friendliness of the local people. A significant positive relationship was also found between emotional response and satisfaction (H4). This confirms the role played by emotions in shaping tourist satisfaction. Pleasure and dominance were found to be more influential than arousal, which may be related to the relatively

sedate nature of tea growing and drinking cultures. Lastly, a significant positive relationship was found between satisfaction and loyalty (H5), and the relationship among tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty among tourists in China's tea-producing regions. While studies such as Eid et al. (2019) and Zhang et al. (2014) have found this relationship in the general tourism context, this study confirms it in the specific instance of tea tourism,

The findings provide support for some of the sub-hypotheses in H6, indicating that demographic variables significantly influence the variables of interest. Age had a significant effect on tea tourism experiences, emotional responses, destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty. Younger tourists showed higher scores in emotional responses, particularly arousal and dominance (H6a). Regarding income, meanwhile, lower-income groups showed significantly higher scores in emotional responses, especially arousal and dominance (H6c). Education level had a significant effect, lower-educated tourists scoring higher in tea tourism experiences and emotional responses (H6d). No significant effects were found, however, regarding gender (H6b) or nationality (H6e) on any of the variables included in the model.

7. Conclusions

This study has identified the empirical relationships among tea tourism experiences, emotional response, brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty for tea tourists in one of the tea-producing regions of China. This section will now consider the theoretical contributions of the study, its limitations and recommendations for future research.

7.1. Theoretical contributions

The study offers the following theoretical contributions. First, studies on tea tourism have been limited in number and in scope. While cultural tourism experiences have been widely analysed, no previous study has undertaken an empirical analysis of the antecedents and consequences of tea tourism experiences. This study is significant in that it has applied concepts that had previously been applied in the field of tea tourism to develop to address hypotheses relating to how tea tourism experiences are formed and how they build attitudinal loyalty. The results point to the importance of understanding how tea tourism experiences generate emotional responses and how these responses build satisfaction and loyalty. The results also demonstrate the importance of brand equity in creating satisfaction and, again, building loyalty.

Second, the study also contributes to knowledge by applying the SOR framework to examine how tea tourism experiences (stimuli) elicit emotional reactions (organism) leading to destination brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty (responses). Adopting this approach allows the five experiential dimensions of tea tourism experiences to be examined, those being sensing, feeling, thinking, acting, and relating. The results validate the applicability of SOR theory in predicting tourists' satisfaction and loyalty based on their tourism experiences and emotional reactions. They also enrich SOR theory by incorporating multidimensional experience factors as stimuli and the PAD model for measuring emotional response. Including the five experiential dimensions provides a more granular understanding of the stimuli that generate emotional responses and outcomes of tea tourism.

Third, the study confirms the importance of a new dimension of feeling, which is 'feeling refreshed'. This variable was identified during interviews during the piloting stage of the survey. The importance of this new variable in specific context of tea tourism experience was then confirmed through the data analysis performed in this study. Finally, several demographic variables, including age, income, education, and occupation, had a significant moderating effect on many of the relationships in the model. This emphasises the need for cross-cultural considerations to be included in the theorisation of tea tourism.

7.2. Limitations and future research

Although this study offers important insights, it has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, obtaining a fully randomised sample was not possible because the researchers did not have access to the relevant characteristics of tourists, such as booking records, which would have enabled randomisation in selection to have taken place. Due to limited financial resources and the in-person survey method employed, the sample size was limited to what was manageable in the timescale available. The small size and non-representativeness of the sample may limit the generalizability of the conclusions. Indeed, respondents were all from China and Korea, which may not fully represent the experiences of tea tourists from other nationalities. Future research can expand the sample size to explore differences among more nationalities and better understand how such differences affect the tea-tourism experience.

Another limitation was that the study was conducted in a single area, which being Fujian, one of China's major tea-producing regions. This was again due to the limited resources available to the researchers. While Fujian is representative of tea culture, the findings may not be generalisable to other tea tourism destinations with different cultural, environmental, and economic contexts. Future research should aim to include multiple destinations to enhance the generalizability of the results. This discussion meanwhile underscores the need for tourism researchers to consider both direct and indirect measures of cultural differences when examining tourist behaviours. By integrating measures of perceived cultural distance in future studies, researchers could further clarify the mechanisms through which culture influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

Future research could also further consider the moderating effects found in this study, including nationality, age, education, and occupation. The model presently treats the size of the effects as being the same regardless of the socio-demographic characteristics of survey respondents, so more advanced statistics will be needed. An analysis of these moderating effects could allow tea tourism providers to better target the strategies suggested here, should they choose to adopt them.

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