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Exploring the impact of user-generated content and tourist satisfaction on destination loyalty in China's ethnic tourism: The moderating role of cultural intelligence

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of user-generated content (UGC) and tourist satisfaction on destination loyalty in ethnic tourism through the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and examines the moderating role of cultural intelligence in this process. Ethnic tourism attracts tourists seeking cultural diversity and authenticity through its unique customs and traditions. The surge of UGC on social media is altering and reshaping tourist behavior, posing new challenges for ethnic tourism destinations in fostering loyalty. This quantitative study collected data from a survey of 328 tourists who had visited ethnic tourism destinations. The results show that UGC and tourist satisfaction positively impact destination loyalty, with the latter having a more significant effect. Additionally, UGC positively affects tourist satisfaction, which underscores the impact of social factors on individual perceptions and evaluations when consuming tourism products that cannot be experienced in advance and are characterized by uncertainty. The study also shows that cultural intelligence has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. This shows how important it is to have cultural intelligence when dealing with cultural shock. This study deepens the comprehension of destination loyalty and offers valuable insights into the sustainable development of ethnic tourism.

Contribution/Originality: This study concentrates on tourists' destination loyalty in ethnic tourism, a tourism segment underexplored in current literature. It focuses on the moderating effects that TPB suggested and gives real-life examples of how UGC, tourist satisfaction, and cultural intelligence affect loyalty to a destination. The findings offer valuable insights for developing loyalty strategies for ethnic tourism destinations.

1. INTRODUCTION

The appeal of ethnic tourism stems from its cultural exoticism and authenticity, drawing tourists who seek to escape the daily routine and immerse themselves in unique local customs (Wang, Shen, & Ye, 2020). In China, governments at various levels have promoted ethnic tourism as an effective means to alleviate poverty in ethnic villages with unique cultures or landscapes (Tian, Stoffelen, & Vanclay, 2023). This approach has created diverse livelihoods for ethnic villages, reduced their heavy reliance on agriculture, and increased local socio-economic mobility (Li, Knight, Luo, & Hu, 2020).

According to a report by a Chinese consulting firm, the market size of China's ethnic tourism is projected to reach 1.4 trillion RMB in 2024, representing a 16.7% annual growth rate and accounting for 24.1% of the total domestic tourism revenue. Furthermore, it is expected to maintain stable growth over the next five years, reaching a market

size of 2.5 trillion RMB by 2028 (Planning, 2023). These data indicate a growing interest in ethnic tourism among tourists. Therefore, various regions continuously innovate and upgrade ethnic tourism products to attract more tourists. In this competitive and challenging environment, how ethnic tourism destinations can seize a larger market share and gain sustainable competitive advantages has become a pressing issue.

Previous research indicates that repeat tourists are crucial for sustainable tourism development (Yang, Isa, & Ramayah, 2022). For tourism destinations aiming to maintain or improve their position in the fierce competition, establishing strong and lasting relationships with tourists and fostering destination loyalty is key to success (Al-Okaily, Alzboun, Alrawadieh, & Slehat, 2023). Tourists who demonstrate higher loyalty typically extend their stay and engage in a greater number of activities at the destination (Stylidis, Woosnam, Ivkov, & Kim, 2020). Moreover, (Xu et al., 2023) found that these loyal tourists generally exhibit reduced value-sensitivity and a heightened readiness to spend. Even slightly reducing the cost of retaining tourists can significantly increase the profitability of the tourism destination (Singh, Ps, & Bashir, 2024). However, current research on destination loyalty within ethnic tourism is relatively limited, although it holds considerable significance for the sector.

Tourist satisfaction is thought to be one of the most important factors that affects destination loyalty (Elbaz, Abou Kamar, Onjewu, & Soliman, 2023; Sangpikul, 2018; Stavrianea & Kamenidou, 2021). However, some scholars argue that satisfaction does not guarantee loyalty, even though loyal tourists are indeed satisfied (Santoso, 2019). Other factors and synergistic effects also impact destination loyalty (Kim, 2018). With the rise of Web 2.0 technologies, more than merely creating better products or services is required to establish and maintain long-term connections with tourists (Xu et al., 2023). The surge in user-generated content (UGC) has transformed and reshaped tourist behavior. On social media, tourists have shifted from passive receivers of tourism information to active creators, sharing their experiences and collaborating with others (Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018). UGC not only provides visual cues to attract potential tourists and shape their expectations of specific destinations but also influences their travel decisions (Nguyen & Tong, 2023). Although research on UGC's impact on tourist satisfaction (Narangajavana Kaosiri, Callarisa Fiol, Moliner Tena, Rodríguez Artola, & Sánchez García, 2019) loyalty behavior (Xu et al., 2023) and behavioral intentions (Latif, Malik, Pitafi, Kanwal, & Latif, 2020; Mehmood, Liang, & Gu, 2018; Nguyen & Tong, 2023; Pahlevan Sharif & Mura, 2019) has been conducted, there is currently no evidence on how UGC affects tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in ethnic tourism.

Tourists typically conceptualize destination loyalty as their intention to revisit and recommend (Kim, 2018; Lee & Xue, 2020; Wang, Wang, Zhang, & Wang, 2021). In this regard, previous studies often employed the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to explain (Cahigas, Prasetyo, Persada, & Nadlifatin, 2023; Choy, Or, & Liu, 2024; Stylos & Bellou, 2019) which states that the attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control decide an individual's behavioral intentions. Ajzen (2020) clarified that because past evidence only revealed the main effect of perceived behavioral control, its status was considered equal to that of attitude and subjective norm. However, the original formulation of TPB designed it to act as a moderating variable, influencing the relationships between attitude and subjective norm with intention. To date, only a few studies Ho, Goh, and Chuah (2022); La Barbera and Ajzen (2020) and La Barbera and Ajzen (2021) have tested the moderating effects proposed by TPB, and their findings have been inconsistent. Therefore, it is necessary to examine this in ethnic tourism further to help reach a clear consensus.

Ethnic tourism is characterized by high customer cultural diversity, with cultural shocks and poor cross-cultural adaptation reflected in various aspects (AlSaleh & Moufakkir, 2019). Cultural differences can exacerbate the gaps in relationships between tourists and the destination, thereby affecting their travel behavior (Yang et al., 2022). Therefore, from a cross-cultural perspective, ethnic tourism necessitates that tourists possess the capability to navigate and comprehend potential cultural differences. Cultural intelligence refers to tourists' capacity to adjust to destinations with diverse cultural contexts (Frías-Jamilena, Sabiote-Ortiz, Martín-Santana, & Beerli-Palacio, 2018). Existing literature has already emphasized its importance in cross-cultural environments (Bal & Kökalan, 2022; Paparoidamis, Tran, & Leonidou, 2019; Yang, Zhou, Fan, Yin, & Qu, 2023), noting that individuals with high cultural

intelligence have stronger adaptability and are better able to handle and moderate issues beyond their cultural environment. However, cultural intelligence's role in cross-cultural adaptation within ethnic tourism has not yet been systematically discussed.

Given the gaps above, this study sets out two research objectives: a) to investigate the relationship between UGC, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty, and b) to explore the moderating role of cultural intelligence in the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. To achieve these objectives, this study constructs and tests a research framework grounded in the TPB. Our contribution to the literature is threefold. First, we offer empirical evidence regarding the connections between UGC, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty in ethnic tourism. Second, this study supports the moderating effects proposed by the TPB. Finally, this study establishes a novel model to explore the relationships between UGC, tourist satisfaction, cultural intelligence, and destination loyalty in ethnic tourism. Following this introduction, the study proceeds with a literature review, research methods, key findings, research significance, and limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) says that an immediate antecedent of a particular behavior is executed intention, which is determined by an individual's attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control (Ajzen, 2020). According to what people have learned in past, they are more likely to do something when they have a positive attitude, see it as normal, and feel like they have more control over their behavior (Cahigas et al., 2023; Wang, Yeh, Chen, & Huan, 2022). However, in a study on common issues in TPB, Ajzen (2020) explained that perceived behavioral control was initially suggested as a variable that moderates the associations between attitude and subjective norms regarding behavioral intention. Past research, having only identified its main effect, regarded it as a straightforward factor shaping behavioral intention. This oversight may be due to methodological and scope limitations (La Barbera & Ajzen, 2021). Although latest studies have started to scrutinize the potential moderating influence of perceived behavioral control, the findings reported thus far remain inconsistent (Ho et al., 2022; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020, 2021).

While the TPB has garnered substantial evidence in explaining tourist destination loyalty and behavioral intentions (Cahigas et al., 2023; Choy et al., 2024; Stylos & Bellou, 2019), it still has some limitations. Firstly, the TPB emphasizes the instrumental component of attitudes, neglecting the affective component (Liu, Zhu, Cui, & Zhang, 2023). Secondly, subjective norms as a broad factors have a hard time capturing the results of intentions when people choose to do something (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Thirdly, the TPB overlooks cultural differences and fails to account for an individual's cultural background impact on behavior and behavioral intentions (Yuzhanin & Fisher, 2016). To improve its ability to explain and predict, the TPB needs to be changed based on specific situations and research questions, even though it has been tested in different tourism settings (Nguyen & Tong, 2023).

This study's primary goal is to investigate the phenomenon of destination loyalty among tourists in China's ethnic tourism. In this study, the original attitude construct of the TPB was modified to tourist satisfaction, aiming to address the TPB's lack of focus on personal emotional beliefs. Some scholars argued that satisfaction is synonymous with attitude, but satisfaction precedes post-consumption attitudes in both time and causality (Oliver, 1980). When investigating destination loyalty, tourists' attitudes are reflected in their evaluations of the most recent visit, which manifests as tourist satisfaction. Additionally, UGC replaced subjective norms because tourists consider such information more authentic and reliable (Xu et al., 2023) influencing their decisions and behavioral intentions. The variable that controls tourists' behavior was changed to cultural intelligence, which acts as a moderating factor. The goal was to learn more about tourists' behavior intentions by looking into the moderating effect. Figure 1 presents the research framework of this study.

2.2. Destination Loyalty

Destination loyalty represents tourists' strong and enduring preference and emotional attachment to a destination (Jamaludin, Sam, Sandal, & Adam, 2018) and it is the cornerstone of building destination brand value. Previous studies have mainly used three approaches to measure destination loyalty. The behavioral approach emphasizes tourists' actual behavior, reflected in the frequency of repeat visits (Suhartanto, Brien, Primiana, Wibisono, & Triyuni, 2020). However, this approach may lead to false loyalty as it fails to differentiate between genuinely loyal tourists and those whose visits are motivated by economic or practical considerations (Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014). The attitudinal approach focuses on tourists' positive attitudes towards the destination (Jeong & Kim, 2020). Although it is capable of gauging loyalty levels, from highly disloyal to extremely loyal, it was criticized for its limited ability to predict actual behavior (Suhartanto et al., 2020). The composite approach integrates behavioral and attitudinal perspectives, suggesting that tourists who exhibit behavioral loyalty towards a specific destination hold positive attitudes (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). Although existing literature has not reached a consensus on the approaches for measuring destination loyalty, it is usually operationalized as revisit intention and recommendation intention (Kim, 2018; Lee & Xue, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Thus, this study also adopts these indicators to assess tourists' destination loyalty in ethnic tourism.

Destination loyalty, as a strategic asset, is essential for the sustainable development and longevity of a tourism destination. Therefore, scholars have investigated it in various tourism contexts. Suhartanto et al. (2020) examined tourists' destination loyalty in creative tourism. Stavrianea and Kamenidou (2021) focused on tourists' destination loyalty in island tourism. Other studies have explored destination loyalty in agritourism (Leo et al., 2021) dark tourism (Wang et al., 2021) health tourism (Elbaz et al., 2023) and heritage tourism (Piper, Prete, Palmi, & Guido, 2022). However, to date, no research has addressed this issue in ethnic tourism.

In determining the factors influencing destination loyalty in ethnic tourism, prior findings have offered valuable insights. Tourist satisfaction has proven to be a prerequisite for destination loyalty across various tourism contexts, but its importance varies. For example, Sangpikul (2018) and Stavrianea and Kamenidou (2021) identified tourist satisfaction as the most crucial factor influencing destination loyalty. However, in some studies, Suhartanto et al. (2020) found its importance is lower than other key antecedents. These findings suggested that when investigating destination loyalty, besides tourist satisfaction, other factors and synergistic effects should also be considered (Santoso, 2019).

2.3. Tourist Satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction represents tourists' overall response to the tourism products or services offered by a particular destination (Chi, Lee, Ahn, & Kiatkawsin, 2020). Previous studies have often used the expectation-disconfirmation model to assess tourist satisfaction. However, Kim (2018) argued that it is difficult for tourists to evaluate before visiting a destination and experiencing the product. Moreover, Lu, Su, Su, Zhao, and Zhang (2022) initially employed the model to measure satisfaction with functional goods. Since ethnic tourism is a hedonic and experiential product, this model may only capture part of tourist satisfaction. Therefore, overall satisfaction is considered a more appropriate evaluation method (Kim, 2018; Li, Liu, & Soutar, 2021).

Evidence indicates a direct and positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty (Elbaz et al., 2023; Sangpikul, 2018; Stavrianea & Kamenidou, 2021). In creative tourism, Suhartanto et al. (2020) observed that tourist satisfaction positively influenced their destination loyalty. Regarding sustainable tourism, Lee and Xue (2020) revealed a positive correlation between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. Thus, when tourists experience satisfaction with the offerings of an ethnic tourism destination, whether in products or services, they exhibit a greater propensity to return or endorse it to their acquaintances. Building on the previous discussion, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_1: Tourist satisfaction has a positive relationship with destination loyalty.

2.4. User-Generated Content (UGC)

The public creates user-generated content (UGC) and primarily disseminates it online (Xu et al., 2023). It exists in various forms on the Internet, including text, photos, videos, music, and audio (Ricardo, Sánchez, & Labrada, 2022). Since UGC is produced willingly and autonomously by tourists, it is generally perceived to be more reliable and credible than content published by tourism service providers (Mehmood et al., 2018).

The tourism industry encompasses both rational/factual UGC and emotional UCG (Cheung, Leung, Cheah, & Ting, 2022; Xu et al., 2023). *Rational/factual* UGC includes practical information about specifications and values of products and services (Wang, Kirillova, & Lehto, 2017) typically involving ticket prices, opening hours, transportation routes, site explanations, event information, and descriptions of hotels and services at the destination (Cheung et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023). Emotional UGC expresses positive atmospheres, feelings, and emotions about products and services (Wang et al., 2017) generally related to tourists' actual experiences and their fondness and satisfaction with the destination (Cheung et al., 2022). Overall, rational/factual UGC influences tourists' cognitive perceptions of the destination, while emotional UGC affects their emotional perceptions (Xu et al., 2023) contributing to determining tourist behavior together. However, existing research either considers UGC as a general concept (Mehmood et al., 2018; Nguyen & Tong, 2023) or discusses the roles of the two types of UGC separately in promoting tourist intentions and loyal behaviors (Cheung et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023). Few investigations have thoroughly examined UGC as a higher-order construct incorporating these two dimensions, particularly within ethnic tourism.

Since UGC has been applied to the tourism industry, its powerful marketing capability has fundamentally redesigned tourist behavior (Latif et al., 2020) drawing significant academic interest. Narangajavana Kaosiri et al. (2019) examined how UGC sources affect tourist satisfaction, finding that the source of UGC affects tourists' expectations. Once they consume tourism products or services, they compare their experiences at the destination with their expectations, reflecting their level of satisfaction. According to Nguyen and Tong (2023) passive exposure to tourism-related UGC positively influences tourists' travel desires, attitudes, and intentions. Moreover, Cheung et al. (2022) revealed that UGC (rational and emotional) positively affects tourists' perceived value, enhancing impulsive purchases and future purchase intentions, with rational UGC having a more substantial influence. Conversely, Xu et al. (2023) found that emotional UGC exerts a greater impact than rational UGC and that UGC indirectly affects tourists' destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction. Despite current research on UGC being in its early stages, existing evidence helps propose the following hypotheses:

H_2: UGC has a positive relationship with tourist satisfaction.

H_3: UGC has a positive relationship with destination loyalty.

2.5. Cultural Intelligence

Frías-Jamilena et al. (2018) introduced cultural intelligence into tourism research, which describes tourists' ability to adapt to different cultural destinations. This concept originates from Sternberg (1986) intelligence model, which includes four dimensions: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. Metacognitive intelligence is the ability to understand and gain cultural insights: cognitive intelligence is the use of common sense and cultural knowledge to understand the norms, customs, and beliefs that exist in different cultural settings; and behavioral intelligence is the skill of managing and controlling social behavior in cross-cultural communication (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015). However, some scholars argued that the motivational dimension is not pertinent to cultural intelligence since it focuses on an individual's willingness to engage, whereas the other dimensions relate to the interaction capability in cross-cultural settings (Thomas et al., 2015). Nonetheless, most empirical studies continue to focus on all four dimensions (Van Dyne et al., 2012). As Ang and Van Dyne (2015) stated, these dimensions are merely different aspects of measuring cultural intelligence, and an individual with cultural intelligence must master all dimensions, not just one. Therefore, this study considers cultural intelligence a holistic concept, emphasizing tourists' ability to adapt and effectively function within destinations with different ethnic cultures.

Previous studies have extensively confirmed the significance of cultural intelligence in diverse cross-cultural settings. For example, Paparoidamis et al. (2019) found that the association between service quality and customer loyalty varies with the cultural intelligence of frontline employees. In analyzing how scholars' cultural intelligence affects the connection between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction, Bal and Kökalan (2022) observed that this positive correlation strengthens as scholars' cultural intelligence increases. Furthermore, Yang et al. (2023) demonstrated that tourists' cultural intelligence enhances the positive effect of flow experience on perceived authenticity and satisfaction. Taking into account the preceding discussions, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H_5: The higher the cultural intelligence, the better the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

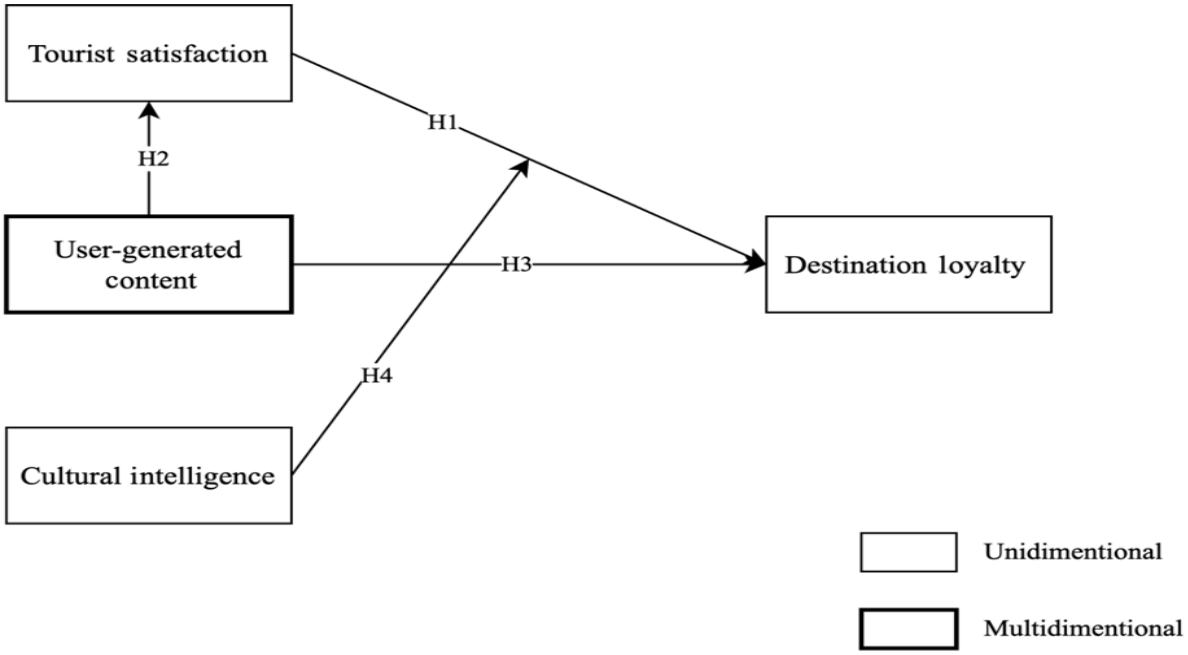

Figure 1. Research framework.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Site and Target Respondents

Guizhou Province is one of the eight ethnic provinces in China, and 18 ethnic minority groups have resided here for generations. As of 2023, the province boasts 161 tourist attractions and 81 historical and cultural relics. According to official statistical reports from various ethnic provinces, Guizhou Province has led in total tourism revenue among these ethnic provinces for eight consecutive years since 2012. However, due to the pandemic's successive influence, the ethnic tourism growth in the province has slightly lagged in the past two years. Given the current strong demand for ethnic tourism and the intense competition within this sector, Guizhou Province needs to enhance its market position not only by innovating and upgrading ethnic tourism products but, more importantly, by increasing the number of repeat tourists and the revenue they generate. Therefore, Guizhou Province is an ideal research site for this study.

To select target respondents, this study employed a purposive sampling method. Specifically, four screening questions were used to identify the final survey participants: 1) Are you at least 18 years old? 2) Are you a tourist rather than a local resident? 3) Have you visited any ethnic tourism destinations in Guizhou Province? 4) Have you perused public media content on the Internet about ethnic tourism destinations in Guizhou Province? Regarding the appropriate standards for actual data collection, we used the G*Power technique (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009; Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022) for evaluation. The final determined minimum sample size was 85.

3.2. Measures

Cultural intelligence was assessed with eight items adapted from previous literature (Yang et al., 2023). Four items adapted from Abbasi, Kumaravelu, Goh, and Singh (2021) were used to assess tourist satisfaction. UGC was considered a second-order construct with two dimensions: factual UGC (3 items) and emotional UGC (7 items). These items were adapted from Xu et al. (2023). Destination loyalty was measured using four items adapted from Wang, Liu, Huang, and Chen (2020). Except for the dependent variable (destination loyalty), which was measured using a 7-point Likert scale, all other items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree." A marker variable was also included to detect common method variance (CMV), followed by Lindell and Whitney (2001) guideline. Seven items adapted from Miller and Simmering (2023) were used to assess the marker variable. The questionnaire for this study comprised seven sections: 1) screening questions, 2) UGC, 3) tourist satisfaction, 4) cultural intelligence, 5) respondent information, 6) destination loyalty, and 7) the marker variable. Since all measurement items were adapted from English literature, the initial draft of the questionnaire was composed in English. It was then translated into Chinese by two bilingual tourism scholars who are native Chinese speakers, followed by a back-translation into English to verify the content accuracy. In addition, we conducted a pilot test before the final data collection. Per the previously mentioned criteria, thirty tourists were invited to participate in the pilot test. The results showed that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all items spanned from 0.835 to 0.977, with each value surpassing the benchmark of 0.7 suggested by Hair et al. (2022) indicating good internal reliability.

3.3. Sampling and Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in early November 2023, lasting for one month. Five trained research assistants briefly interacted with tourists in the departure hall of Guiyang Longdongbao International Airport to gather data. After elucidating the research objectives and securing the consent of the participants, the research assistants asked screening questions to identify eligible respondents for the survey. Ultimately, we collected 359 questionnaires, of which 328 valid ones were utilized for subsequent data analysis, resulting in an effective response rate of nearly 91%.

Based on the collected sample data, male tourists accounted for 46.3% (152 individuals), and female tourists accounted for 53.7% (176 individuals), indicating a relatively balanced gender ratio. The average age of the tourists ranged from 26 to 55 years. Regarding educational attainment, most respondents had completed undergraduate education (36.9%), with 71 respondents (21.6%) holding a postgraduate degree. Additionally, most respondents chose to travel with a spouse or partner (38.7%), followed by those traveling with family or relatives (26.2%). Table 1 displays the participants' demographic profile.

Table 1. Respondents profile (n = 328).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	152	46.3%
	Female	176	53.7%
Age	18-25	28	8.5%
	26-35	66	20.1%
	36-45	85	25.9%
	46-55	76	23.2%
	56-65	48	14.6%
	66 and above	25	7.6%
Education	Primary school	26	7.9%
	High/Secondary school	60	18.3%
	Undergraduate	121	36.9%
	Postgraduate	71	21.6%
	Vocational/Technical	39	11.9%
	Others	11	3.4%
Type of visit	Alone	30	9.1%
	With spouse/Partner	127	38.7%
	With family/Relative	86	26.2%
	With friends/Colleagues	67	20.4%
	Others	18	5.5%

4. RESULTS

Considering the research framework's complexity, which includes four constructs, one being a second-order construct (UGC), we used partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with Smart PLS version 4.1.0.3 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2024) for data analysis. PLS-SEM does not assume normality and is capable of managing small sample sizes (Chin, Marcolin, & Newsted, 2003). In addition, PLS-SEM demonstrates greater flexibility when analyzing moderating effects (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler, Hubona, & Ray, 2016). The data analysis follows the two-stage approach Hair et al. (2022) proposed, examining the measurement model and then evaluating the structural model. Before model evaluation, we conducted CMV detection. Since the data were gathered through a cross-sectional survey from a single source, CMV issues may arise (Jordan & Troth, 2020). To address this, we included a marker variable to observe changes in the R^2 values of the research model after adding the construct (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Table 2 shows that when the marker variable (Lin, Huang, & Hsu, 2015) was added the R2 values of all endogenous constructs did not change by more than 10%. Therefore, the CMV issue does not warrant concern in this study.

Table 2. Common method variance detection.

Variables	R square		Increment rate (%)
	Baseline model	MV model	
Tourist satisfaction	0.265	0.286	7.92%
Destination loyalty	0.384	0.414	7.81%

Note: MV = Marker variable.

4.1. Measurement Model

In evaluating the measurement model, we adopted the criteria recommended by Hair et al. (2022) and Ramayah, Cheah, Chuah, Ting, and Memon (2018) focusing on the convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 3. Measurement model.

First-order construct	Second-order construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Cultural intelligence		CQ_1	0.798	0.932	0.632
		CQ_2	0.737		
		CQ_3	0.811		
		CQ_4	0.814		
		CQ_5	0.814		
		CQ_6	0.790		
		CQ_7	0.789		
		CQ_8	0.808		
Destination loyalty		DL_1	0.899	0.936	0.785
		DL_2	0.887		
		DL_3	0.883		
		DL_4	0.875		
Emotional UGC		EUGC_1	0.876	0.959	0.770
		EUGC_2	0.892		
		EUGC_3	0.878		
		EUGC_4	0.868		
		EUGC_5	0.870		
		EUGC_6	0.885		
		EUGC_7	0.872		
Factual UGC		FUGC_1	0.910	0.928	0.812
		FUGC_2	0.888		
		FUGC_3	0.904		
	UGC	Emotional UGC	0.958	0.951	0.975
		Factual UGC	0.992		
Tourist satisfaction		TS_1	0.837	0.903	0.699
		TS_2	0.828		
		TS_3	0.825		
		TS_4	0.855		

Note: AVE = Average variance extracted; CR = Composite reliability; UGC = User-generated content.

Three indicators—factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR)—are frequently used to measure convergent validity.

Because the framework has second-order construct, we first checked the convergent validity of first-order factors and then the second-order factor. As shown in Table 3, all factors' loadings, AVE, and CR exceeded the critical values of 0.708, 0.5, and 0.7 (Hair et al., 2022) indicating that all items are reliable and valid.

The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion was used to check the discriminant validity of this study (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

This indicator provides different evaluation standards based on conceptual similarity, including ≤ 0.85 (conceptually different) and ≤ 0.90 (conceptually similar). In this study, the HTMT values for all constructs met the strict requirement of ≤ 0.85, as shown in Table 4. This showed that the constructs were different from each other.

Table 4. Discriminant validity (HTMT).

Constructs	CQ	DL	TS	UGC
Cultural intelligence				
Destination loyalty	0.245			
Tourist satisfaction	0.231	0.605		
UGC	0.129	0.478	0.566	

Note: CQ = Cultural intelligence; DL = Destination loyalty; TS = Tourist satisfaction; UGC = User-generated content.

4.2. Structural Model

A bootstrapping method with 10,000 resamples was used to test the proposed hypotheses' path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and standard errors on the structural model (Hair et al., 2022).

The results indicated a significant positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.411$, $p < 0.001$), a significant positive relationship between UGC and tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.515$, $p < 0.001$), and a significant positive relationship between UGC and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.263$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

In addition to the direct relationships, the moderating relationship was consistent with our prediction. Cultural intelligence significantly moderated the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.184$, $p < .001$).

In other words, the higher the tourists' cultural intelligence level, the stronger the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty (as shown in Figure 2). Hence, H4 was also supported. Table 5 presents the results of the hypothesis testing.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Std. beta	Std. dev	t-value	p-value	PCI LL	PCI UL	f^2
H1: TS → DL	0.411	0.054	7.640	p<.001	0.319	0.496	0.194
H2: UGC → TS	0.515	0.049	10.464	p<.001	0.428	0.590	0.360
H3: UGC → DL	0.263	0.053	4.918	p<.001	0.175	0.351	0.081
H4: CQ*TS → DL	0.184	0.054	3.403	p<.001	0.101	0.275	0.068

Note: 90% confidence interval with a bootstrapping of 10,000 was used; PCI LL = Percentile confidence interval lower limit; PCI UL = Percentile confidence interval upper limit. CQ = Cultural intelligence; DL = Destination loyalty; TS = Tourist satisfaction; UGC = User-generated content.

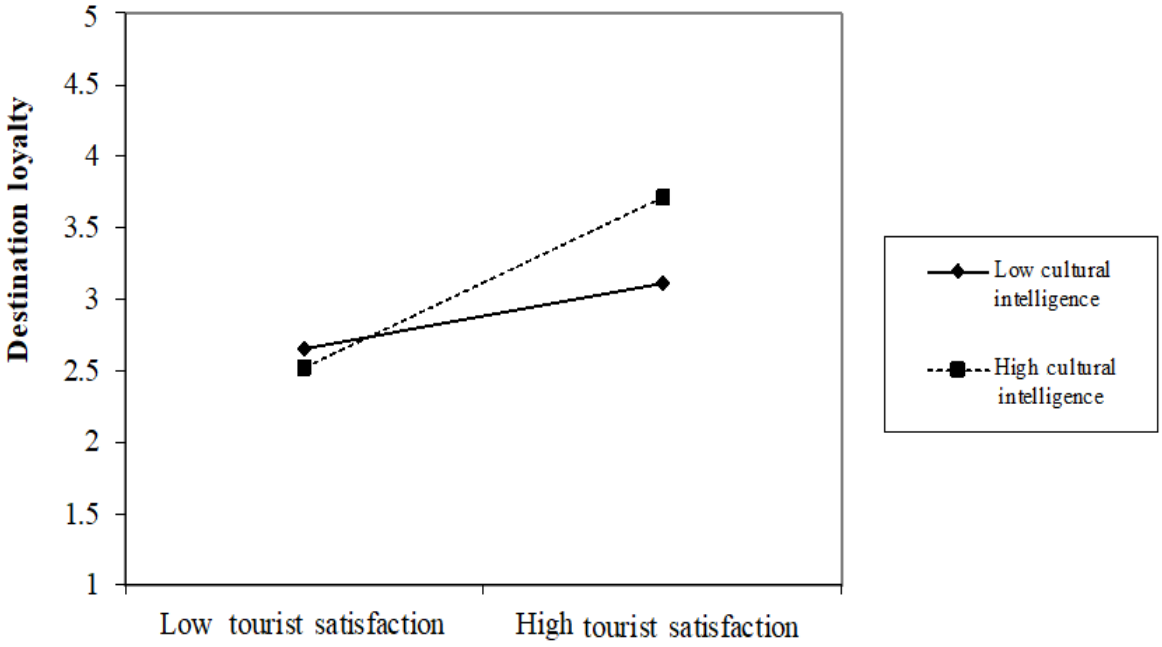

Figure 2. Interaction plot.

Regarding the model's explanatory power, the coefficient of determination (R^2) is the most commonly used indicator (Hair et al., 2022). The R^2 value ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating stronger explanatory power. According to Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2011) R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, or 0.25 can be benchmarks for strong, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively. The R^2 value for tourist satisfaction in this study is 0.265, which means that UGC explains 26.5% of the variation in tourist satisfaction, which is a moderate level of explanatory power. The R^2 value for destination loyalty is 0.384, indicating that UGC and tourist satisfaction explain 38.4% of the variance in destination loyalty, demonstrating moderate explanatory power.

Given that R^2 primarily measures in-sample predictive power, this study also employs the PLS-predict technique to evaluate the out-of-sample predictive power of the model. PLS-predict, proposed by Shmueli et al. (2019) is a procedure that generates predictions at the construct or item level and uses ten-fold cross-validation to verify predictive relevance. If all errors (PLS-LM) are negative, the model demonstrates high predictive power. Conversely, if all errors are positive, the predictive relevance remains unconfirmed. If the majority of errors are negative, the model demonstrates medium predictive power, and if only a small portion of the errors are negative, the model shows low predictive power (Hair et al., 2022; Shmueli et al., 2019). In this study, all errors were negative (as shown in Table 6), indicating high predictive power.

Table 6. PLS-predict.

Item	Q^2_predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	LM_RMSE	PLS-LM
DL_1	0.175	1.276	1.282	-0.006
DL_2	0.150	1.273	1.306	-0.033
DL_3	0.157	1.287	1.308	-0.021
DL_4	0.140	1.302	1.330	-0.028

Note: LM = Linear regression model; PLS-SEM = Partial least squares structural equation modeling; RMSE = Root mean square error.

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although the critical role of destination loyalty in achieving sustainable development of tourist destinations has been widely discussed, there is still a lack of evidence from ethnic tourism. In addition, current studies that simultaneously incorporate tourist satisfaction, UGC, and cultural intelligence into the destination loyalty model are rare. This research suggests a new way to look at the connections between tourist satisfaction, UGC, cultural

intelligence, and destination loyalty in ethnic tourism that is based on TPB. The findings support the TPB hypothesis that an individual's behavioral intentions are shaped by individual evaluations and social influence, with perceived behavioral control playing a moderating role (Ajzen, 2020). Specifically, tourists' destination loyalty toward ethnic tourism is influenced by tourist satisfaction and UGC, and the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty varies according to the tourists' cultural intelligence level.

As with most other studies Al-Okaily et al., (2023); Lee and Xue (2020); Suhartanto et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2021) the results show that tourist satisfaction has a direct and positive effect on destination loyalty. The overall evaluation made by tourists regarding the products and services offered by ethnic tourism destinations influences their subsequent intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to others. If their evaluation is positive, they are more inclined to revisit the ethnic tourism destination for new experiences. As novelty-seeking is inherent to tourists, sometimes, even if they are very satisfied with a destination, they might not revisit it in the future (Lv & McCabe, 2020). However, they would be inclined to recommend the ethnic tourism destination as a preferred option to friends and family.

This study confirms the significant positive relationship between UGC and tourist satisfaction. Previous studies have discussed the impact of UGC sources on tourist satisfaction (Narangajavana Kaosiri et al., 2019) and UGC's effect on tourist attitudes (Nguyen & Tong, 2023). This study's findings supplement the existing knowledge. UGC on social media not only encompasses objective descriptions of the ethnic tourism destinations but also includes tourists' feelings and emotional expressions after their experiences. When tourists who have visited an ethnic tourism destination are exposed to relevant UGC, they form evaluations of the services, products, experiences, and feelings at the destination, shaping their satisfaction. Positive UGC leads to positive evaluations (satisfaction); conversely, negative UGC leads to negative evaluations (dissatisfaction). This finding also confirms the influence of social pressure on individual evaluations (Wang, Yeh, Chen, & Huan, 2022). Under uncertain circumstances, the impact of social opinion on attitudes and behaviors is enhanced (Bae & Chang, 2021) which is particularly evident in the tourism sector.

Together with earlier research on the link between UGC and behavior intentions (Mehmood et al., 2018; Nguyen & Tong, 2023) this study finds a positive link between UGC and destination loyalty. Two possible explanations are proposed for this positive relationship. First, UGC on social media is updated in real time. When tourists who have visited an ethnic tourism destination are exposed to relevant UGC, they might gain the latest information about activities, performances, or exhibitions at the destination, prompting them to revisit (Xu et al., 2023) or recommend it to others. Consequently, tourists may revisit the same ethnic tourism destination for different experiences. Second, according to the social comparison theory, exposure to UGC can motivate a mechanism of benign envy (Latif et al., 2020). Tourists may develop an intention to visit driven by a desire to uphold or boost their self-evaluation (Tesser, 1988) or because upward comparisons lead them to seek similar superior advantages (Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2004). Notably, tourist satisfaction exerts a stronger influence on destination loyalty than UGC, confirming previous research identifying tourist satisfaction as the most important antecedent of destination loyalty (Sangpikul, 2018; Stavrianea & Kamenidou, 2021).

Furthermore, cultural intelligence's moderating role is verified. This supports earlier research on the role of cultural intelligence in cross-cultural settings (Bal & Kökalan, 2022; Paparoidamis et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2023): the relationship between tourists' satisfaction and destination loyalty gets stronger as their cultural intelligence grows. In ethnic tourism, tourists' ability to adapt to different ethnic cultures and operate effectively within them is crucial. Tourists who are more culturally intelligent can better understand and accept the effects and discomforts of cultural differences. This helps them have a better experience when they visit places with lots of different cultures and customs. Consequently, the higher the tourists' cultural intelligence, the stronger the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study provides an intellectual contribution to the existing literature on ethnic tourism. Firstly, it investigates the relationships among tourist satisfaction, UGC, cultural intelligence, and destination loyalty. Previous research has not examined these variables within the same model; thus, this study provides new pathways for developing ethnic tourism destinations and long-term relationships with tourists. Some scholars (Sangpikul, 2018; Stavrianea & Kamenidou, 2021) agree that satisfaction plays a bigger role than user-generated content (UGC) in determining destination loyalty. This study upholds the notion that tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend an ethnic tourism destination are primarily determined by their satisfaction with their most recent visit.

Secondly, this study is among the first to operationalize UGC as a higher-order construct comprising rational and emotional dimensions to examine its impact on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. On the one hand, we respond to the call for expanding the investigation of UGC's influence on tourist behavior (Narangajavana Kaosiri et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017). On the other hand, this study complements the existing literature, as previous research always separately discussed the effects of the two forms of UGC on tourist perceptions and loyalty behaviors (Cheung et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023). This study confirms UGC's positive role in shaping tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

Lastly, it offers empirical evidence in support of TPB's proposed moderating role. There have been many studies that use TPB to look into destination loyalty, but the most recent ones (Cahigas et al., 2023; Choy et al., 2024) mostly looked at how perceived behavioral control affects tourist's loyalty behaviors. Following Ajzen (2020) latest interpretation, this study modifies the construct to cultural intelligence according to the research context and examines its moderating effect. The findings underscore the pivotal moderating role of tourists' cultural intelligence on the linkage between their satisfaction and loyalty toward an ethnic tourism destination, confirming its cross-cultural adaptability in ethnic tourism.

5.2. Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, this study offers valuable insights into the sustainable development of ethnic tourism. First, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and marketers should prioritize enhancing tourist satisfaction, as it is crucial for fostering destination loyalty. Specifically, DMOs should ensure that their staff receive high-quality training and regular assessments to improve their service awareness and capabilities. Excellent service is not only reflected in a friendly and welcoming attitude but also in providing professional tourism information and promptly responding to tourists' needs. In addition, DMOs should organize dedicated teams to regularly inspect and maintain the infrastructure of tourist attractions to ensure the safety and comfort of tourists during their stay. For ethnic tourism destinations, marketers should focus on authenticity and interactivity when organizing festivals and performances, allowing tourists to experience genuine customs and culture, thereby enhancing their engagement and experience at the destination.

Second, marketers should encourage tourists to share their experiences at ethnic tourism destinations on social media through various means. For instance, unique themed photo spots or check-in points can be set up at attractions to attract tourists to capture and disseminate images via their social media platforms; regular photography contests can be organized, with different awards (such as "Best Scenic Photo," "Most Creative Video," etc.) to increase tourist participation; thematic hashtags can be created on social media, encouraging tourists to use these tags when sharing UGC, with high-quality UGC being showcased and rewarded; and a "loyalty program" can be established to collect tourists' travel diaries, incentivizing those who actively share UGC with points, coupons, or free tickets.

Finally, DMOs should establish a systematic UGC monitoring mechanism and cooperation plan. By analyzing UGC, DMOs can identify key factors affecting tourist satisfaction and areas needing improvement. This helps optimize the tourist experience and provides data support for destination marketing strategies. For negative reviews

in UGC, DMOs should respond promptly, demonstrating sincerity and capability in resolving issues, which can enhance tourists' trust and satisfaction with the destination. Moreover, DMOs can collaborate with key opinion leaders (KOLs) and influencers in the tourism sector, inviting them to visit the destination and share their experiences, leveraging their influence to attract more tourists to the ethnic tourism destination. These measures can strengthen the interaction and connection between tourists and ethnic tourism destinations, enhancing their satisfaction and destination loyalty. Ultimately, this will help increase the competitiveness of ethnic tourism destinations and support the sustainable and enduring progression of ethnic tourism.

6. CONCLUSION

This study sets stage for future exploration of the complex mechanisms underlying tourist behavior patterns and destination loyalty in ethnic tourism. It followed Yang et al. (2023) to explore cultural intelligence's moderating role in tourism research and supported the recent discoveries on TPB (Ho et al., 2022; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020, 2021). However, investigating the moderating effect of perceived behavioral control is still in its infancy, and more evidence from tourism research is needed. By understanding these dynamic relationships more deeply, ethnic tourism destinations can establish more precise strategies to achieve sustainable development goals.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research

Despite this study yielding valuable insights, there are several limitations. First, this research relies on cross-sectional surveys to collect data. While this method can include rich information, it may face challenges in content validity. Future research could collect data across various periods or incorporate additional techniques, such as interviews. Second, the study only covers ethnic tourism destinations in the Chinese context. The study findings may have limited applicability due to variations in ethnic cultures. Future research could validate the proposed model in different countries and regions to provide more evidence of UGC's positive role in shaping tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. Finally, the proposed framework shows only moderate explanatory power regarding destination loyalty. Future research could build on the existing model by incorporating additional variables relevant to the research context and objectives, thereby facilitating a more exhaustive comprehension of the phenomenon.

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