Research Article

Extending ECT–TPB for Chinese Outbound Tourism: Economic, Social-Image, and Digital-Infrastructure Confirmations

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Abstract: The study contributes empirical evidence from a key Asian source market–destination pairing and offers practical guidance on expectation alignment, frontline service empathy, and transparent value signalling to strengthen loyalty outcomes. This study examines why Malaysia, despite increasing arrivals from China, continues to face challenges in converting first-time visitors into repeat tourists (Nasir et al., 2021). Drawing on Expectation-Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), the research investigates how destination image, destination service quality, and perceived value shape destination loyalty, with tourist satisfaction as a mediating factor. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. In the first phase, quantitative data were collected through surveys of 374 Chinese leisure tourists departing Malaysia between March and May 2025. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) results demonstrated that perceived value, destination image, and destination service quality all had significant direct effects on loyalty, while tourist satisfaction exerted the strongest overall influence, mediating up to 60% of total effects. In the second phase, qualitative interviews with Chinese tourists, tourism operators, and policy officials contextualised these statistical patterns, revealing that transparent pricing, Mandarin-capable service, and accurate online imagery fostered loyalty, while hidden charges, communication barriers, and unrealistic marketing discouraged repeat visits. The findings extend ECT by highlighting price-benefit and social-image confirmations, refine TPB through digital-payment control and normative influences, and provide actionable strategies for policymakers and industry stakeholders to increase repeat visitation from Chinese tourists.

Keywords: Expectation–Confirmation Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Destination Image, Destination Service Quality, Perceived Value, Tourist Satisfaction, Destination Loyalty, Chinese Outbound Tourism, Malaysia, PLS-SEM, Mixed-Methods.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been performing very competitively in the global market. Every tourist destination seeks not just to woo new arrivals, but also to keep them. (World 2025)Progressing from one-off to two or three visits to a place is a generally accepted, sustainable, and cost-effective route for growth. Known loyal travellers usually contribute more money in the longer term, say good things about their destination, opening up hitherto untapped markets; moreover, they form an absolute fixed income source.(Buhalis, 2000; Stylidis et al., 2020).Although Malaysia has seen steady growth in visitor numbers from China recently, it has not been successful in persuading these new arrivals to make return trips. In 2019, just 21.4% of Chinese tourists came back; whereas 78.6% had never been here before, according to various studies conducted by analysts at Peking University and Nasir et al. of UCSI(2021). When contrasted with those of other nearby areas, such a low rate of repeat visitation underlines a significant gap between the initial visit at one point in time or territory of new tourists and subsequent long-term patronage. Rendering these questions is not only worth doing research on but also of cutting commercial importance to all those involved in Malaysian tourism.

Two theoretical frameworks that have been widely used for tourist behavior research guide this study. Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) holds: Before their journey, tourists form a judgment of satisfaction through comparison between what they expect and the actual outcome. If the performance actually meets or even exceeds expectations, their loyalty as well as satisfaction are both strengthened accordingly; on the other hand, if it does not live up to these expectations, dissatisfaction and intentions to switch are entirely likely. As for the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), it stresses the role of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control on forming behavioral intentions, such as revisiting a destination (Ajzen, 1991). These theories together stand as a robust foundation that can be employed to explore how service quality, destination image, and perceived value all affect tourist satisfaction, with the latter then leading to loyalty. ECT and TPB integrated further: a study may thus take into account both confirmation processes (present direction) and forward-looking behavioral

drivers of intentions (future path). Nevertheless, the existing research on Chinese outbound tourists fails to meet these established standards in two ways. First, earlier studies have generally concentrated solely on motivation for travel and experiences while travelling itself (Mohamad et al., 2019; Nasir et al., 2021), which are still not enough for how post-visit evaluations mold loyalty in the Malaysian context (such "work" has been carried out). Second, most investigations relied heavily upon quantitative surveys to test relationships among constructs like destination image, service quality perception, value, satisfaction, and loyalty (Kanwel et al., 2019; Boro, 2022). This method does reveal statistical connections, but it also leaves gaps in understanding the mediating role of satisfaction and contextual factors, which encourage repeat visitation. In order to remedy these omissions, this paper adopts a mixed-methods design. Starting with a survey of Chinese tourists and followed by interviews that offer richer explanations as well as contextual depth for further understanding, in comparison to simple quantitative surveys alone.

The research used another method: at first, a quantitative phase was carried out, and then the data were further analysed in a qualitative phase. The model was empirically tested by examining Chinese tourists leaving Malaysia in its quantitative phase, using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This has provided substantial statistical evidence for direct and indirect relations between destination image, destination service quality, perceived value, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. This was followed by a qualitative phase in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese tourists, tourism operators, and government officials to understand the results more fully in the environment. By this means, the qualitative findings were not collected in a vacuum but sprang directly from the quantitative outcomes, providing a richer explanation for why the statistical patterns are as observed. The logic at work is both of explanation and diagnosis.

This design of the study has several advantages. In theory, it modifies ECT and TPB 's integration by adding a mediating step that satisfaction is necessary before one can develop loyalty totally, namely the confirmation phase (or perhaps more generally any factor not connected to attitude or intention). In practice, certain service issues and policy areas - such as the lack of a common pricing standard, staff who understand Mandarin, compatibility of digital payment methods, realistic promotional pictures with no airbrushing involved - directly affect people's decisions to return. For Malaysia's tourism sector, this gives a solid basis for action on how to encourage the loyalty of Chinese visitors and see future policy strategies. From this study, we see how a sequential explanatory design can fill in the gap between statistical modelling and actual practice, something that benefits both academic research and professional life.

The remaining parts of this article are organized as follows.

The second part will discuss the manifold of destination image theory, destination service quality theory, and also perceived value and satisfaction, plus loyalty, and bring forward the hypothesis based on the theories of Special Confirmation Thoughts and Theory of Planned Behavior. The third part will describe the tandem mixed-methods design in a process of sequential explanation, which actually consists of a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. The fourth part contains both phases of findings: statistical conclusions with qualitative understanding.

The fifth part lays out the theoretical and applied significance of this research, while in the sixth Section we summarize our main contributions that close questions from one area only to open others as well as limitations and what form future lines should take.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES
A) Expectation–Confirmation Theory and Outbound Tourism
ECT is one of the most widely applied models in consumer behaviour research. It explains satisfaction as the outcome of a comparison process: travellers form expectations before purchase, compare actual experiences with those expectations, and then arrive at a confirmation or disconfirmation judgement (Oliver, 1980). When expectations are met or exceeded, confirmation occurs and satisfaction strengthens; when they fall short, disconfirmation leads to dissatisfaction. In tourism studies, this mechanism has consistently been shown to link perceptions such as destination image, service quality, and perceived value to satisfaction and, ultimately, to behavioural intentions (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020).

However, applying ECT directly to international tourism often overlooks the diversity of cues that matter in different cultural and market contexts. Chinese outbound tourists in particular are influenced not only by general service delivery but also by specific confirmations tied to economic fairness, social-image gains, and infrastructure support (Elphick, 2024). Post-pandemic recovery has amplified these priorities: price sensitivity has heightened, destination reputation has become a social marker, and digital/linguistic support has become a baseline expectation

for travel convenience (Latif et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2024). For these reasons, ECT requires contextual refinement to capture the nuanced drivers of satisfaction and loyalty among Chinese tourists.

B) Integrating TPB: Norms and Control Cues

The TPB complements ECT by shifting attention from satisfaction alone to the broader set of factors that shape intentions. According to TPB, behaviour is predicted by three antecedents: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In tourism, attitudes often reflect the overall satisfaction judgement, subjective norms reflect the social pressure to engage in or endorse certain travel behaviours, and perceived control reflects the ease or difficulty of making the trip (Jamalludin et al., 2022).

While TPB has been widely applied in travel research, it often treats norms and control as generic constructs (Abbasi et al., 2021). For Chinese outbound tourists, however, these dimensions manifest in highly specific ways. Norms are shaped not only by peer pressure but also by social-image considerations - the reputational and symbolic status attached to visiting particular destinations (Stylidis et al., 2020). Similarly, control is not only about physical accessibility but also about digital and linguistic infrastructure (Elphick, 2024). For example, the availability of Mandarin-capable staff, WeChat Pay or Alipay acceptance, and user-friendly online booking systems can substantially enhance perceived behavioural control by reducing barriers and increasing confidence in the destination experience. Incorporating these refinements makes TPB more sensitive to the actual cues Chinese tourists use when forming loyalty intentions.

C) Economic, Social-Image, and Infrastructure Confirmations

Drawing on the integration of ECT and TPB, there are three distinct confirmations that shape satisfaction and loyalty, as argued in this paper.

➢ **Economic confirmation (Perceived Value, PV):** PV refers to a judgment about what the consumer thinks he/she will receive, given what they have paid. For Chinese consumers who have tight budgets of their own to begin with in the new third-tier city era and 2008 post-SARS, fair cost-benefit judgments are therefore important. There's no room for mistakes on this one, or you're out more than just money (Hasan et al., 2020). If tourists believe that at Malaysia there's a reasonable balance of cost and benefits - value for money in accommodation facilities, transparent pricing schemes for all sorts of things from tickets on buses or trains through to parking lots fees ranging between small change up to Benjamins, and plenty of good experiences around town today - this type of confirmation is achieved and satisfaction will rise.

➢ **Social-image confirmation (Destination Image, DI):** DI is the beliefs and impressions tourists hold of a place prior to their visitation. For Chinese travelers, images such as these are not purely cognitive; they carry social meanings and associations. By visiting places which are perceived safe, up-to-date, and full of vibrant local flavor (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Stylidis et al., 2020), each of which confirms these expectations into effect, that destination will naturally bring about word of mouth recommendations.

➢ **Infrastructure confirmation (Destination Service Quality, DSQ):** DSQ is taken completely in this study to be extensive. It covers both common service attributes (reliability, empathy, responsiveness) and infrastructure-enabled support systems. For Chinese tourists, there is also a range of infrastructure expectations, including digital matters such as whether they can use e-wallets in the destination region, whether WiFi is accessible to them, or if Mandarin-speaking staff are available (He et al., 2020). When these expectations are provided, satisfaction is increased, and tourists will be more willing to return.

In the present study, by modeling economic, social-image, and infrastructure confirmations as PV, DI, and DSQ, the paper takes the integration of ECT's focus on expectation confirmation and the TPB's concern with perceived control and social norms.

D) Hypothesis Development

Based on the framework above, seven direct hypotheses are proposed.
➢ H1: DI positively influences DL.
➢ H2: DSQ positively influences DL.
➢ H3: PV positively influences DL.
➢ H4: DI positively influences TS.
➢ H5: DSQ positively influences TS.
➢ H6: PV positively influences TS.

➢ H7: TS positively influences DL.

Tourist satisfaction (TS) is expected to serve as a mediating mechanism that transmits the effects of the three antecedents to loyalty outcomes:
➢ M1: TS mediates the relationship between DI and DL.
➢ M2: TS mediates the relationship between DSQ and DL.
➢ M3: TS mediates the relationship between PV and DL.

These hypotheses are consistent with the empirical evidence of this study. The above research shows that DI, DSQ, and PV will all have a significant long-term influence on TS. Furthermore, the direction of this finding holds for DL as well, resulting in the fact that TS has a large and statistically significant effect on DL. Which hypothesis is most likely to be supported by the observed data?. The inclusion of direct and mediated paths allows for testing whether confirmations operate solely through satisfaction or retain independent influence on loyalty. A diagram that summarises the results of the extant consumer theory and TPB models is presented in Structure 1. This study proposes an extended ECT–TPB framework in which economic (PV), social-image (DI), and infrastructure (DSQ) confirmations shape satisfaction (TS) and, directly and indirectly, destination loyalty (DL). Satisfaction is positioned as the central mediator, while paths from DI, DSQ, and PV to DL capture the possibility of residual direct effects. The model integrates expectation–confirmation with segment-specific normative and control cues, reflecting how Chinese tourists interpret fairness, social reputation, and digital/linguistic support in forming loyalty intentions. The proposed framework of analysis is presented in Figure 1.
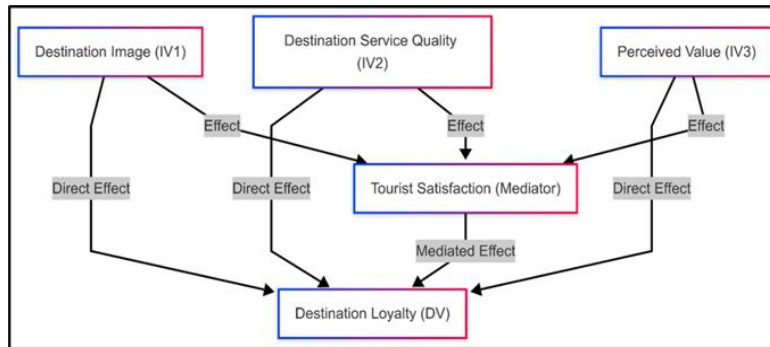

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A) Design & Rationale

Then the research design was carried out in two stages. The second quantitative stage saw whether these hypothesized associations held up in survey data, examined using PLS-SEM analysis--whereas the subsequent phase served both to interpret and build upon statistical findings derived from its strong and excellent appearance of both composite nature as a sociology textbook. The flow of the explanation provides numerical results first, followed by rich-language elaboration. This uses the English language (interesting in itself). The overall sequence is summarized in Figure 2, which indicates how we first moved from the collection and quantitative analysis of data through to a follow-up in Africa, then integrated both strands.
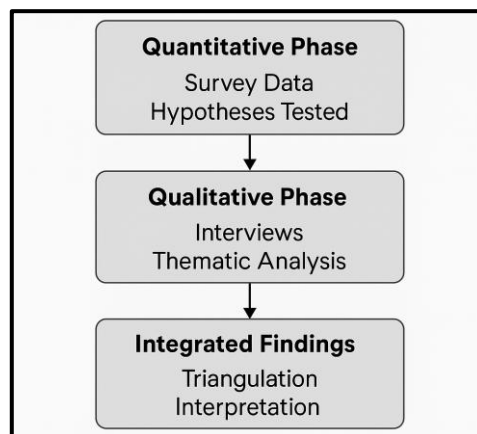
Figure 2: Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Design

B) Phase 1: Quantitative Method

➤ **Population, Sampling, Sample Size:**

Chinese leisure tourists visiting Malaysia were the population of inquiry in this quantitative phase. A stratified sampling plan was used to represent key tourist profiles (e.g., Free Independent Travelers (FITs), group travellers, repeat visitors). The planned sample size followed Krejcie & Morgan's guidance (≈384 for 95% confidence, 5% margin). 390 was the field target; 374 responses were collected - sufficient for PLS-SEM power needs.

➤ **Instrument Development and Pilot:**

The questionnaire was bilingual (Mandarin/English), containing 10 demographic items and 30 Likert-scale indicators (three per construct). To ensure clarity, accuracy of translation, and reliability, we carried out a pilot test with 30 Chinese tourists; subsequent lexical refinements were made to the draft. Core constructs (destination image, perceived value, destination service quality, tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty) drew on validated scales from prior studies, adapted to the context.

➤ **Data Collection Procedures:**

Survey administration occurred March–May 2025 using Microsoft Forms, distributed via airport QR codes, hotel desks, tour-operator lists, and WeChat groups; two automated reminders raised completion rates.

➤ **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Analyses followed a standard PLS-SEM workflow using SmartPLS: descriptive statistics, measurement model evaluation (reliability/validity), and structural model estimation with bootstrapping, aligned to the thesis plan. The quantitative phase's purpose was to test the theory-driven hypotheses on direct and mediating pathways among the constructs.

C) Phase 2: Qualitative Method (Explanatory Follow-Up)

➤ **Sampling and Participants**

Guided by Phase-1 findings, the study conducted ten semi-structured interviews (April - June 2025) with: (i) three experienced Chinese tourists (mix of FITs and repeaters), (ii) five tourism operators (hotels, tours, F&B), and (iii) two destination-marketing/policy officials (MOTAC/state DMO). Code saturation was reached by interview eight; two further interviews confirmed stability.

➤ **Protocol and Procedures**

An interview guide - refined from the pilot work - was used to explain and contextualise the quantitative patterns (e.g., the role of transparent pricing, language support, digital payments, and image realism). Interviews (20–50 minutes) were conducted face-to-face, via Microsoft Teams, or by email when needed; all were recorded/transcribed with consent and returned for member checking.

➤ **Qualitative Analysis**

Data was analysed in QDA Miner using open coding and thematic analysis to surface mechanisms underlying the survey relationships and to probe propositions deriving from Phase-1 results. This inductive work is explicitly positioned to explain the earlier causal patterns identified by PLS-SEM.

D) Integration of Methods (Mixing)

➤ **Design integration**

The study follows a sequential explanatory flow - quantitative comes first, qualitative second - so the interview phase is purpose-built to explain the survey results (see Figure 2).

➤ **Methods integration**

a. Sampling linkage: Survey-identified profiles (e.g., FITs, package travellers, repeaters) inform purposive sampling for interviews.
b. Instrument linkage: Constructs tested in PLS-SEM (image, service quality, value, satisfaction, loyalty) are translated into interview prompts to explore the "why" behind significant paths.

➤ **Interpretive integration**

Quantitative findings are presented first; qualitative themes are then woven in to explain patterns (e.g., how different value dimensions shape satisfaction), yielding a cohesive narrative from what to why.

➤ **Validity gains**

Mixing supports triangulation - combining statistical generalisability with contextual depth - enhancing internal and ecological validity.

As the research unfolds, the idea that it is integrated is retrospectively made clear. By and large, the research goes through phases in collocation, and thus quality strengthens more than if a phase were left exposed to chance.

E) Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness
- **Quantitative:** Internal consistency (e.g., Cronbach's alpha/composite reliability), convergent and discriminant validity, and model assessment followed the thesis protocol for rigour.
- **Qualitative:** Credibility and dependability were supported through saturation, member checking, reflexive memos, and an auditable coding log.
- **Triangulation** across strands enhanced internal and ecological validity.

F) Ethics
Approval of the research ethics board was obtained before starting to collect data. Procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation and anonymity, de-identification of sensitive data necessary for research purposes; restricted access to certain data; transparent reporting practices throughout all stages so that nothing need be misleadingly omitted from final reports; and finally, unbiased interpretation with peer debriefing.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSES

A) Respondent Profile and Descriptive Statistics
In Table 1, you can find a summary of the travel and that of 374 respondents. Demographically, the sample is characterized by balanced genders, with the largest age group being 31–45 years. Most of the people interviewed were employed in private industry and had at least a bachelor's degree. As for travel characteristics, 68% had been to Malaysia previously, and most people took trips in the form of organized bus excursions--group tours like this were very popular in those days. The huge dominance of opening holiday tour packages and also checking New Zealand influences this profile.

Reports on Descriptive Statistics for these five constructs are given in Table 2. In each case, the mean exceeded the midpoint of the 5-point scale, indicating generally favourable evaluations. DSQ registered the highest mean (M = 4.24, SD = 0.67), meaning strong perceptions of infrastructural support, while TS (M = 4.20, SD = 0.70) and DL (M = 4.22, SD = 0.71) also ranked highly. DI (M = 4.18, SD = 0.65) and PV (M = 4.12, SD = 0.66) were a bit lower but still positive. This pattern indicates that for respondents, infrastructural confirmations were particularly important, while economic fairness (PV) society was positive but partially contested.

Table 1 - Demographic profile and travel characteristics of respondents.

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	183	49
	Female	191	51
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Age group	18–30 years	83	22
	31–45 years	150	40
	46–60 years	92	25
	61 years and above	49	13
Educational level	Secondary school or below	48	13
	Diploma / Technical certificate	59	16
	Bachelor's degree	238	63
	Master's degree or higher	29	8
Occupation	Student	76	20
	Self-employed	19	5
	Private sector employee	174	47
	Government employee	69	18
	Retired	36	10
Income (monthly)	Below ¥5,000	81	22
	¥5,001–¥10,000	143	38
	¥10,001–¥15,000	86	23
	Above ¥15,001	26	7
	Prefer not to say	38	10
Region of residence (China)	Eastern (e.g., Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang)	99	27
	Northern (e.g., Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei)	102	27
	Southern (e.g., Guangdong, Fujian)	86	23

	Western (e.g., Sichuan, Chongqing)	87	23
Visited Malaysia before?	Yes	254	68
	No	120	32
If yes, how many times?	Once	121	33
	2–3 times	162	43
	More than 3 times	91	24
Type of travel	Independent (self-planned)	110	29
	Group tour (organised)	264	71
	Mixed (some independent, some organised)	0	0
Purpose of visit	Leisure/Holiday	51	14
	Visiting Friends/Relatives	47	12
	Honeymoon	55	15
	Cultural Experience	112	30
	Shopping	56	15
	Other	53	14

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and reliability of constructs

Construct	Mean	SD	α	CR	AVE	Loading range
DI	4.18	0.65	0.883	0.924	0.662	0.792–0.834
DSQ	4.24	0.67	0.874	0.918	0.670	0.803–0.847
PV	4.12	0.66	0.861	0.908	0.679	0.808–0.853
TS	4.20	0.70	0.942	0.952	0.650	0.783–0.829
DL	4.22	0.71	0.958	0.965	0.702	0.807–0.872

B) Measurement Model Evaluation

Measurement adequacy was evaluated prior to structural testing. Item loadings surpassed recommended thresholds, internal consistency was strong (α and CR > .70), and AVE values indicated convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). Discriminant validity was examined using Fornell–Larcker and HTMT. The square roots of AVE (on the diagonal) exceeded inter-construct correlations, and HTMT values remained below conservative cut-offs, supporting construct distinctiveness (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). Cross-loading inspection showed each indicator loaded highest on its intended construct. Together, these checks confirm that DI, DSQ, PV, TS, and DL are empirically separable and measured with precision. Full matrices are provided in Table 3.

Table 3 - Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker matrix and HTMT).

	DI	DSQ	PV	TS	DL
DI	**0.813**	0.620	0.580	0.661	0.683
DSQ	0.620	**0.819**	0.632	0.712	0.692
PV	0.580	0.632	**0.825**	0.684	0.706
TS	0.661	0.712	0.684	**0.806**	0.752
DL	0.683	0.692	0.706	0.752	**0.837**

HTMT: Max HTMT = 0.82 (below 0.85 threshold)

C) Structural Model: Explanatory and Predictive Power

The structural model demonstrated substantial explanatory power (Table 4). The antecedents explained 64.8% of the variance in TS ($R^2 = 0.648$) and, together with TS, explained 78.2% of the variance in DL ($R^2 = 0.782$). Predictive relevance was confirmed with $Q^2 = 0.534$ for DL, and global fit was acceptable (SRMR = 0.056).

Effect sizes (f^2) on DL were small for DI (0.060) and DSQ (0.035), small-to-moderate for PV (0.080), and medium for TS (0.220). This pattern reinforces the centrality of TS as the key predictor of loyalty while showing that PV contributes meaningfully alongside mediated effects.

D) Direct Effects

As hypothesised, DI, DSQ, and PV all exerted significant effects on TS: DI → TS ($\beta = 0.30$, t = 5.21, p < .001), DSQ → TS ($\beta = 0.40$, t = 6.54, p < .001), and PV → TS ($\beta = 0.28$, t = 4.98, p < .001). These findings confirm that economic, social-image, and infrastructure confirmations each raise tourist satisfaction.

TS strongly influenced DL ($\beta = 0.45$, t = 8.01, p < .001), underscoring its mediating role. Among the antecedents, PV retained the strongest direct effect on DL ($\beta = 0.20$, t = 3.90, p < .001), while DI ($\beta = 0.17$, t = 3.45, p = .001) and DSQ ($\beta =

0.12, t = 2.25, p = .025) also contributed but more modestly.

E) Mediation Analysis

Mediation testing confirmed that TS partially mediated the relationships between DI, DSQ, PV, and DL (Table 4). The indirect effects were significant: DI → TS → DL (β_indirect = 0.135, t = 4.10, p < .001, VAF = 44%), DSQ → TS → DL (β_indirect = 0.180, t = 4.85, p < .001, VAF = 60%), and PV → TS → DL (β_indirect = 0.126, t = 3.95, p < .001, VAF = 39%). These results indicate that satisfaction acts as the dominant channel through which confirmations convert into loyalty, but residual direct effects also remain - especially for PV, where value-for-money judgments influence loyalty even beyond satisfaction.

Table 4: Structural and mediation results

a. Direct effects

Path	β	t	p	f²
DI → TS	0.30	5.21	< .001	0.152
DSQ → TS	0.40	6.54	< .001	0.232
PV → TS	0.28	4.98	< .001	0.118
DI → DL	0.17	3.45	.001	0.060
DSQ → DL	0.12	2.25	.025	0.035
PV → DL	0.20	3.90	< .001	0.080
TS → DL	0.45	8.01	< .001	0.220

b. Indirect (mediated) effects via TS

Indirect path	β_indirect	t	p	VAF
DI → TS → DL	0.135	4.10	< .001	44%
DSQ → TS → DL	0.180	4.85	< .001	60%
PV → TS → DL	0.126	3.95	< .001	39%

F) Qualitative Findings

The qualitative interview provided deeper insights into how Chinese tourists and tourism stakeholders understand satisfaction and loyalty triggers in more subtle ways. However, the quantitative model formalized three antecedents of satisfaction — DI, DSQ, PV — interviews made clear that these constructs have meaning in practice. Three themes emerged.

➤ **Price fairness as economic confirmation.**

First, a fair price relative to service quality was the most immediate test of satisfaction for these Chinese tourists. Respondents recounted cases where a transparent package price, the items included, and no hidden fees served to cement Malaysian travel services in their trust. By contrast, people complained about lists without individual prices or added charges, both seen at billing time and after it. Such situations might not only result in lost sales but also affect future recommendations. This view was echoed by the tourist operators, who believe that if you do not offer competitive yet transparent pricing (preferably with all incidental costs spelled out on paper for visitors before arrival), there can be no hope of attracting, let alone keeping, those insatiable visitors from China. These insights reveal that PV is a morally as well as a rational confirmation of efficiency and yield.

➤ **Social image as reputational confirmation.**

In their travels, however, both tourists and operators talked about destination image in social terms. Malaysia's rich culture and reputation as an exceptionally safe place to visit — linked with the graciousness both inside and outside hallways of the hotel, when one is well away from home, for example–is a basis for pride. For their part, tourists reported that sharing happy travel experiences on social media would consolidate their own reputation among friends. Despite this, the stakeholders emphasized that the multiracial character of Malaysia, together with the natives' friendly treatment, made Chinese visitors come out of their hearts proud of their choice of destination. In this, DI acts as a kind of collective recognition that is brought about not just by one's own experiences but when it has been received and acknowledged by others.

➤ **Infrastructure and linguistic readiness as control confirmation.**

Infrastructure-enabled service quality was consistently highlighted as a decisive factor in reducing travel friction. Tourists valued the presence of Mandarin-speaking staff in hotels and attractions, which made them feel welcomed and in control of their experience. Similarly, the ability to use Chinese digital payment systems such as WeChat Pay or Alipay was seen as a major facilitator, providing confidence and convenience in everyday transactions.

Tourism operators confirmed that such provisions are increasingly expected by Chinese travellers and that failing to provide them often led to negative evaluations. These findings show that DSQ extends beyond traditional service attributes to encompass digital and linguistic infrastructure as critical enablers of loyalty.

➢ **Integration of themes.**

When they are operating in unity, price fairness, reputational image, and infrastructure readiness (both in terms of software and hardware) are not marginal concerns but rather preconditions for normal business. Without them, not only will service levels drop, yielding fewer satisfied customers, but it will also have a direct, physical impact on the number of returning customers. Based on these qualitative insights, we see the project as able to turn DI, DSQ, and flower loyal customers' explanations into measures of economic effect, as well as infrastructure perception. The quantitative analysis to follow depends on this view. Table 5 provides a summary of the main points discussed and samples of illustrative testimony.

Table 5: Qualitative Themes and Illustrative Evidence

Theme	Description	Illustrative Evidence
Economic confirmation (PV)	Fair pricing and transparency in costs are essential for satisfaction.	Tourists valued packages with clear inclusions and no hidden fees; operators stressed that opaque pricing damages trust and reduces recommendations.
Social-image confirmation (DI)	Destination image operates as a reputational and status-related gain.	Tourists highlighted Malaysia's multicultural image and safety record as sources of pride when sharing experiences on social media; operators linked reputation to peer influence.
Infrastructure confirmation (DSQ)	Service quality extends to digital and linguistic support that enables control.	Tourists described Mandarin-speaking staff and Chinese e-wallet acceptance as major facilitators of confidence; operators noted these are increasingly expected by Chinese travellers.

G) Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative results reinforce each other. The interviews highlighted the importance of price fairness, social-image, and digital/linguistic infrastructure as loyalty triggers. The quantitative model confirmed these same constructs - PV, DI, and DSQ - as significant predictors of satisfaction and loyalty, with satisfaction explaining the bulk of the variance in loyalty. The alignment of findings across methods strengthens confidence in the extended ECT–TPB framework and its applicability to Chinese outbound tourism.

V. DISCUSSION

A) Expectation–Confirmation Theory for Outbound Tourism

This shows that DI, DSQ, and PV each have contributed significantly to tourist satisfaction. This bears out the central idea of ECT--people's expectations, when fulfilled, make them feel satisfaction and then bring about loyalty (Oliver, 1980). The findings also indicate, however, that the content of "confirmation" is far more varied than Western readers can take in. For Chinese tourists heading overseas, confirmation includes economic justice and fair play, an international reputation, as well as service-quality-related inheritable brand names and technological infrastructure in online communication tools/languages therein This expansion point requires that ECT be made flexible enough to take into account specific cues, which give satisfaction in totally different cultural and technological environments.

B) Refining the Theory of Planned Behaviour

The findings also extend TPB by clarifying how subjective norms and perceived behavioural control operate in this segment. Norms were found to be closely tied to destination image, with reputational and social "face" considerations reinforcing behavioural intentions (Stylidis et al., 2020). Perceived control was shaped less by physical accessibility and more by infrastructure cues, such as Mandarin-capable staff and the availability of Chinese e-wallet systems. These elements reduce perceived barriers and strengthen tourists' sense of control, consistent with TPB's framework (Ajzen, 1991) but more concretely specified for the outbound Chinese market. Together, these insights suggest that TPB requires segment-specific operationalisation rather than generic measurement.

C) Mediation by Tourist Satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction is the most powerful direct prediction of destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.45$, $p <.001$), and its highest proportion of indirect effects (VAF = 39 - 60%). This supports its role as mediator theory in expectation–confirmation logic and confirms that it is the engine of loyalty construction (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). But the presence of still significant direct effects, particularly from PV ($\beta = 0.20$, $p <.001$), indicates that satisfaction cannot completely absorb the influences of antecedents. Economic fairness delivers an independent tug on loyalty, implying that destinations must manage both evaluative

and attitudinal channels at once.

D) Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to theory. First, it shows how ECT can be extended to include economic, social, and infrastructural different sorts of confirmations that are especially key features of Chinese outbound tourism. Second, it modifies TPB by making clear that norms and control beliefs are not abstract but rather grounded in certain its, like reputation and digital infrastructure. Third, the paper combines thematic and quantitative modeling, informing theory with qualitative themes and models that are highly contextualized. The result demonstrates how theory can meet local constructs in an evolving way, maintain explanatory power (R = 0.782 for DL). These together develop a more detailed framework of study into satisfaction and loyalty in international tourism.

E) Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the findings identify concrete levers to strengthen satisfaction and loyalty among Chinese visitors.

➢ **Economic confirmation (PV):** Ensure transparent and fair pricing, avoid hidden charges, and clearly communicate value-for-money across packages and services.
➢ **Social-image confirmation (DI):** Project reputational benefits by highlighting Malaysia's cultural diversity, safety, and hospitality in marketing campaigns, reinforcing the "face" value of travel.
➢ **Infrastructure confirmation (DSQ):** Invest in Mandarin-speaking frontline staff, expand acceptance of Chinese digital payment systems, and provide seamless connectivity to reduce friction and enhance control.

Taken together, these implications suggest that destinations must view loyalty-building not as a generic exercise but as a culturally attuned strategy. For Malaysia, securing Chinese loyalty requires aligning expectations with delivery across fairness, reputation, and digital readiness - thereby positioning the country as both welcoming and reliable in a competitive outbound market.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study extended ECT and the TPB to the context of Chinese outbound tourism, using Malaysia as the focal case. By reframing DI, DSQ, and PV as social-image, infrastructure, and economic confirmations, respectively, the study demonstrated how these constructs shape TS and DL. Quantitative results from 374 Chinese tourists confirmed that all three antecedents significantly influence satisfaction and loyalty, with TS emerging as the strongest single predictor of loyalty ($R^2 = 0.782$). Mediation analysis further showed that satisfaction transmits a large portion of these effects, although PV retained a significant direct pathway, underscoring the independent salience of fairness judgements.

Theoretically, the study contributes by refining ECT to account for culturally specific confirmation cues and by specifying how TPB's subjective norms and perceived control operate for Chinese tourists. Norms are largely reputational, tied to the social-image gains of destination choice, while control is expressed through digital and linguistic infrastructure that reduces barriers and builds confidence. Together, these refinements highlight the need to adapt established theories when applied to diverse source markets.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data were collected in a single country context (Malaysia), limiting the generalisability of findings across other destinations. Second, the cross-sectional design captures tourist evaluations at one point in time, whereas loyalty formation is a dynamic process. Third, while qualitative insights enriched the framework, a larger qualitative sample could provide further depth.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting multi-destination comparisons across ASEAN to examine whether similar confirmation cues operate in different contexts, by applying longitudinal designs to track how satisfaction and loyalty evolve across repeat visits, and by employing multi-group analyses to compare segments such as free independent travellers, package tourists, and repeat visitors. Such studies would further refine ECT–TPB and strengthen its applicability in explaining loyalty across diverse outbound markets.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that securing Chinese tourist loyalty requires more than delivering generic service quality. Loyalty is built through the confirmation of fairness, social-image expectations, and digital/linguistic readiness. By extending ECT and TPB in these ways, the study contributes to a richer understanding of satisfaction and loyalty formation and offers destinations actionable levers to strengthen their position in a highly competitive outbound market.

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