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Antecedents of tourist loyalty in China's Kangyang tourism: The influence of destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and affective commitment

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Abstract: Background: Kangyang tourism, a wellness tourism niche in China, integrates health preservation with tourism through natural and cultural resources. Despite a growing interest in Kangyang tourism, the factors driving tourist loyalty in this sector are underexplored. **Methods:** Using a sample of 413 tourists, this study employed Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) to examine the influence of destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and affective commitment on tourist loyalty. **Results:** The findings reveal that destination image and service quality positively affect tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and loyalty. Tourist satisfaction and affective commitment are identified as critical drivers of tourist loyalty. Notably, affective commitment plays a stronger role in fostering loyalty compared to satisfaction. **Conclusion:** These results highlight the importance of a positive destination image and high service quality in enhancing tourist loyalty through increased emotional and psychological attachment. The findings inform strategies for stakeholders to improve Kangyang tourism's growth by focusing on emotionally engaging experiences and service excellence.

Keywords: tourist loyalty; Kangyang tourism; destination image; service quality; tourist satisfaction; affective commitment

1. Introduction

In recent years, the global tourism industry has witnessed a burgeoning trend toward wellness and health-conscious travel, driven by increasing awareness of personal well-being and a desire for experiences that promote physical, mental, and spiritual health (Balcioglu, 2024; Bushueva, 2020). This shift in tourist preferences has led to the emergence and rapid growth of Kangyang tourism, a unique form of wellness tourism that emphasizes health preservation through natural and cultural resources, which emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature (Pan et al., 2019; Zeng and Li, 2021). Kangyang tourism, rooted in traditional Chinese health philosophies, integrates wellness activities, ecological conservation, and tourism to promote holistic well-being (Bushueva, 2020; Huang and Li, 2024). It includes various activities such as traditional Chinese medicine practices, physical fitness, a nutritious diet, spiritual cultivation, and environmental conservation. This form of tourism addresses the health and wellness needs of tourists and contributes to sustainable tourism development by promoting ecological preservation and cultural heritage (Cheng et al., 2017).

In China, the emergence of Kangyang tourism is particularly significant due to

the country's growing aging population and increasing prevalence of sub-health conditions (Zeng and Li, 2021). The "Healthy China 2030" Planning Outline by China's State Council has emphasized the development of health industries, including Kangyang tourism, as a national strategy to enhance the quality of life, reduce healthcare costs, and stimulate economic growth through sustainable tourism practices (Chen and Wang, 2024). Moreover, according to China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Kangyang tourism aligns with Chinese government initiatives to promote traditional Chinese medicine and wellness practices as part of the country's cultural heritage. As such, Kangyang tourism holds immense potential for improving public health and fostering economic and environmental sustainability in China.

Existing literature extensively explores various aspects of tourism loyalty, particularly in relation to destination image, service quality, and tourist satisfaction. For instance, destination image, comprising cognitive and affective components, significantly influence tourist satisfaction and loyalty by shaping tourists' perceptions and experiences (Crompton, 1979; Jeong and Kim, 2019). Service quality, defined by the discrepancy between customer expectations and actual service received, is also a critical determinant of tourist satisfaction and loyalty (He et al., 2018; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Moreover, affective commitment, distinguished by emotional attachment and identification with a destination, is crucial in cultivating long-term relationships and loyalty among tourists (Cheng et al., 2016; Sanz-Blas et al., 2014). However, while loyalty has been extensively studied in general tourism contexts (Mai et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2023), there is a scarcity of research focusing on loyalty within wellness tourism, and even less so within Kangyang tourism in China. Considering the unique attributes of Kangyang tourism, including its emphasis on health preservation, traditional Chinese culture, and government support, understanding tourist loyalty in this context is particularly relevant for China's tourism industry. Furthermore, given the strategic importance of Kangyang tourism in China's national health and economic development policies, studies on tourist loyalty can provide valuable insights for sustaining and enhancing this sector (Zhu et al., 2024).

Despite the extensive research on tourism loyalty, there is also a notable gap in understanding the specific factors influencing tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism. Most studies have focused on general tourism without delving into the unique attributes and requirements of Kangyang tourism, which combines health preservation with tourism activities rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, it is imperative to thoroughly investigate the antecedents of tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism, considering the distinctive elements of this niche sector and its strategic importance in China's national development plans. The guiding research questions are:

1) How does destination image influence tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and loyalty in Kangyang tourism?
2) How does service quality shape tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and loyalty in Kangyang tourism?
3) How do tourist satisfaction and affective commitment impact tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism?

This study enriches the current body of tourism literature by providing empirical evidence on the antecedents of tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism, a sector that uniquely integrates wellness tourism with traditional Chinese cultural practices and

government-backed health initiatives. By examining the roles of destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and affective commitment, this research offers insights into the unique dynamics of Kangyang tourism and extends the theoretical understanding of loyalty within wellness tourism in a Chinese context. Given that loyalty is a critical factor for the sustainable development of tourism destinations, understanding loyalty in Kangyang tourism is especially relevant to China, where the government is actively promoting health and wellness tourism as part of national strategies. By exploring how destination image, service quality tourist satisfaction, and affective commitment influence loyalty, this study provides valuable knowledge that can help enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of Kangyang tourism destinations in China. Moreover, this study has practical implications for tourism stakeholders, including policymakers, tourism operators, and service providers. Understanding the key factors influencing tourist loyalty can help stakeholders develop targeted interventions to improve service quality, enhance destination image, and foster strong emotional connections with tourists. Ultimately, this study seeks to support the growth and sustainability of Kangyang tourism, contributing to public health and economic development.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Destination image and tourist satisfaction

Destination image encompasses the collection of beliefs, ideas, expectations, and impressions individuals hold regarding a particular destination (Crompton, 1979; Kim et al., 2013). It comprises both cognitive and affective components, where the cognitive component involves beliefs and knowledge about the destination's attributes, and the affective component involves feelings or emotional responses elicited by the destination (Pike and Ryan, 2004). A positive destination image significantly enhances tourist satisfaction by shaping expectations and enriching the overall travel experience (Allameh et al., 2015; Jeong and Kim, 2019). Recent studies continue to support this relationship, emphasizing the importance of destination image in various tourism contexts, including wellness tourism (Kim and Lee, 2023; Li et al., 2022). In Kangyang tourism, where health and wellness are central themes, a destination image that effectively communicates unique health benefits and experiences is crucial for enhancing tourist satisfaction (Zeng and Li, 2021) (Wang and Pei, 2021; Zeng and Li, 2021).Therefore, Hypothesis one was put forward:

H1: Destination image positively affects tourist satisfaction in Kangyang tourism.

2.2. Destination image and affective commitment

Affective commitment in the field of tourism refers to the emotional attachment and identification a tourist feels towards a destination, often driven by shared values and positive experiences (Sanz-Blas et al., 2014). A favorable destination image fosters affective commitment by evoking positive emotional responses and strengthening the tourist's emotional bond with the destination (Wu and Chang, 2020). Recent research highlights the importance of affective commitment in predicting tourist loyalty, particularly in wellness and health tourism contexts (Kazakov and

Oyner, 2021). In Kangyang tourism, the integration of health preservation, ecological resources, and cultural heritage contributes to a unique destination image that enhances affective commitment. Tourists engaging in Kangyang tourism seek holistic and enriching experiences, deepening their emotional attachment to the destination (Zeng and Li, 2021). As a result, it was hypothesized that:

H2: Destination image positively affects affective commitment in Kangyang tourism.

2.3. Destination image and tourist loyalty

Tourist loyalty refers to the likelihood of tourists revisiting a destination or recommending it to others (López-Sanz et al., 2021). A favorable destination image positively influences tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend the destination, thus enhancing overall loyalty (Fang et al., 2023; Mai et al., 2019). Moreover, the affective component of destination image, which involves tourists' emotional responses to a destination, has been identified as a crucial factor in fostering customer loyalty. Positive emotional experiences at a destination can lead to a stronger attachment and a higher likelihood of revisitation (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). This emotional connection can create a loyal tourist base that contributes to the enduring prosperity and sustainability of a tourist destination. Destination image's impact on tourist loyalty is particularly relevant within the realm of Kangyang tourism, where the well-being and health benefits associated with the destination's natural and cultural resources are pivotal. As Kangyang tourism integrates health preservation with tourism activities, a favorable destination image encompassing attributes such as a clean environment, rich ecological resources, and effective health services can strengthen tourists' overall satisfaction and loyalty. Based on these arguments, it was hypothesized that:

H3: Destination image positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.

2.4. Service quality and tourist satisfaction

Service quality often refers to the discrepancy between customer expectations and perceptions of the received service (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In the context of tourism, service quality is perceived as the visitor's evaluation of the service delivery process associated with their trip experience (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017). Tourist satisfaction, on the other hand, refers to the emotional response resulting from the tourist's experience at a destination (Jebbouri et al., 2022). It is the extent of the favorable emotional response elicited by a tourist's experience at a destination (Rahman et al., 2023). The connection between service quality and tourist satisfaction is crucial because higher service quality can lead to higher satisfaction levels, thereby enhancing a destination's competitiveness (Min, 2016). The development of Kangyang tourism has involved substantial investments in improving the ecological environment, transportation, reception facilities, medical care, and sports infrastructure, all of which contribute to the perceived service quality by tourists. Ensuring high-quality service enhances tourists' overall satisfaction, meeting their expectations for health preservation and well-being (He et al., 2018; Min, 2016). Hence, hypothesis four was proposed:

H4: Service quality positively affects tourist satisfaction in Kangyang tourism.

2.5. Service quality and affective commitment

Service quality in the realm of tourism is assessed by visitors based on their entire trip experience, encompassing various dimensions of service delivery (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017). The expectation-disconfirmation theory suggests that customers form their perception of service quality by comparing their pre-service expectations with the actual service received (Mackay and Crompton, 1988). High service quality is achieved when the actual service meets or exceeds expectations, which is crucial in fostering a strong psychological and emotional connection, known as affective commitment, with the service provider. The nature of affective commitment, featuring emotional attachment and a strong identification with the service provider (Wu and Chang, 2020), suggests that tourists tend to develop a strong emotional bond with the Kangyang tourism service providers when they perceive high-quality services. This bond is built on the shared health and well-being values central to the Kangyang tourism experience (Sanz-Blas et al., 2014). This is supported by findings that indicate service quality as a critical determinant of affective commitment, influencing both customers' and employees' emotional connections and cooperation intentions (Guo et al., 2010; Hsieh and Hsieh, 2013). In health and wellness tourism, where trust and satisfaction are paramount, service quality plays a crucial role in developing affective commitment. Tourists who perceive high-quality services are more likely to develop a strong emotional bond with the destination. Therefore, it was hypothesized that:

H5: Service quality positively affects affective commitment in Kangyang tourism.

2.6. Service quality and tourist loyalty

Tourist loyalty, often seen as a subset of consumer loyalty, refers to the desire or inclination of tourists to repeat their visit or recommend the destination to others (González et al., 2017). Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that high service quality positively correlates with increased tourist loyalty (Cong, 2016; Mai et al., 2019). This correlation posits that when service performance exceeds expectations, tourists are more likely to develop loyalty towards the service provider (Parasuraman et al., 1988). This relationship is particularly crucial in the tourism sector, as high service quality meets tourists' expectations and enriches their overall experience, making them more likely to return and recommend the destination (Rahman et al., 2023). In the realm of Kangyang tourism where the unique combination of health preservation and ecological resources demands high standards of service, high perceived service quality in Kangyang tourism can enhance tourists' overall experiences, leading to increased satisfaction and a higher probability of returning to the destination or recommending it to others (Mai et al., 2019). Hence, hypothesis six was proposed:

H6: Service quality positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.

2.7. Tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty

Tourist satisfaction, defined as the emotional or affective evaluation of a tourist destination's offerings (Jebbouri et al., 2022; Rehman et al., 2023), plays a crucial role in determining tourist loyalty. This satisfaction arises from the overall positive experiences tourists have during their visits, which can encompass various dimensions

such as the quality of services, natural attractions, and cultural experiences. Tourism research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Tourist loyalty typically manifests in two primary forms: the intention to revisit the destination and the intention to recommend it to others (Cong, 2016). These loyalty intentions are critical as they contribute to sustained tourism growth and economic benefits for the destination. Empirical studies have shown that satisfied tourists tend to exhibit repeat visitation behaviors and provide favorable word-of-mouth endorsements. For instance, Muntean et al. (2023) suggest that tourists who experience high satisfaction levels are more inclined to cultivate a profound attachment to the destination, reflected in their loyalty behaviors. In the context of Kangyang tourism, as tourists achieve physical, mental, and spiritual harmony through Kangyang activities, their overall satisfaction with the destination is likely to increase (Zeng and Li, 2021). This heightened satisfaction can subsequently foster a strong sense of loyalty, encouraging tourists to revisit and promote the destination. Therefore, it was hypothesized that:

H7: Tourist satisfaction positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.

2.8. Affective commitment and tourist loyalty

Affective commitment, a psychological state where individuals maintain a stable and enduring relationship due to emotional attachment, shared values, and identification, plays an essential role in fostering tourist loyalty within Kangyang tourism. In this context, affective commitment is not merely about satisfaction with the services provided but about the emotional bond tourists develop with the destination. This bond can be attributed to the holistic and health-centric experiences that Kangyang tourism offers, which resonate deeply with tourists' desires for a healthy and balanced lifestyle (Kazakov and Oyner, 2021). As tourists engage in health and wellness activities, such as traditional medicine and ecological conservation, they develop a deeper emotional connection to the destination (Pan et al., 2019; Zeng and Li, 2021). The emotional involvement and identification with the wellness tourism experience fosters a strong desire to sustain a relationship with the destination, thus promoting loyalty (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Moreover, affective commitment is strengthened by trust and satisfaction, which are essential for successful long-term relationships (Wu and Chang, 2020). In Kangyang tourism, trust in the quality and authenticity of wellness services, combined with high levels of tourist satisfaction, enhances affective commitment. This, in turn, leads to higher tourist loyalty as individuals are more inclined to return to a destination where they have formed a strong emotional attachment. As a result, hypothesis eight was proposed:

H8: Affective commitment positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.

Table 1 provides an overview of the hypotheses. **Figure 1** illustrates the conceptual model, detailing the hypothesized relationships among the constructs.

Table 1. Summary of hypotheses.

| Hypothesis	Relationship
H1	Destination image positively affects tourist satisfaction in Kangyang tourism.
H2	Destination image positively affects affective commitment in Kangyang tourism.
H3	Destination image positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.
H4	Service quality positively affects tourist satisfaction in Kangyang tourism.
H5	Service quality positively affects affective commitment in Kangyang tourism.
H6	Service quality positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.
H7	Tourist satisfaction positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.
H8	Affective commitment positively affects tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.
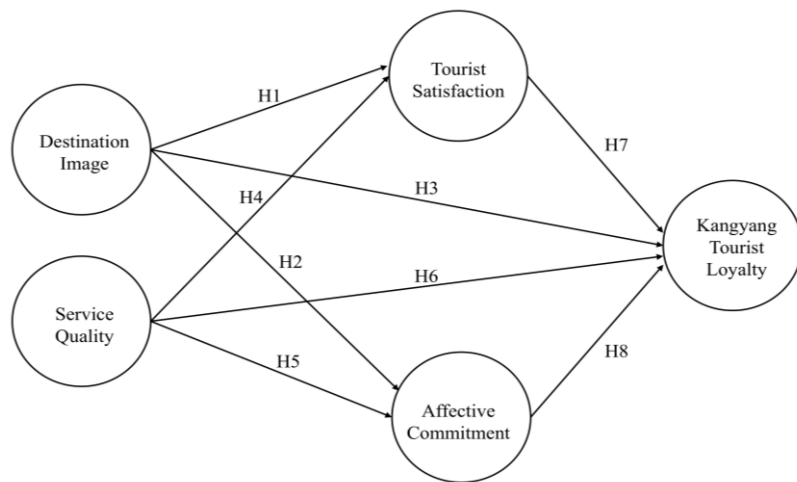
Figure 1. Research model.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The research was carried out involving travelers staying at different Kangyang tourism resorts in Panzhihua city. Data collection occurred over a period of approximately two months, from 20 December 2022 to 23 February 2023. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to assess the relationships between destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and tourist loyalty.

The investigation employed was convenience sampling method. Tourists who were available and willing to participate during their stay in these locations were approached. The final sample consisted of 413 respondents. In terms of gender, the sample comprised 164 males (39.7%) and 249 females (60.3%). The age distribution of the participants varied significantly, with 108 participants (26.2%) under 30 years old, 55 participants (13.3%) between 30 and 49 years old, 58 participants (14.0%) between 50 and 60 years old, and 192 participants (46.5%) over 60 years old. Participants' professional backgrounds were diverse, including 56 civil servants (13.6%), 55 individuals from public institutions (13.3%), 42 freelancers (10.2%), 72 enterprise employees (17.4%), 57 teachers (13.8%), 26 doctors (6.3%), and 105

participants (25.4%) from other professions. This wide range of professional backgrounds enhances the robustness of the study by incorporating perspectives from various sectors. The education levels of the participants also varied, with 19 individuals (4.6%) having education up to junior high school and below, 42 participants (10.2%) having completed senior high school, 77 participants (18.6%) holding an associate bachelor's degree, 224 participants (54.2%) with a bachelor's degree, and 51 participants (12.3%) possessing a master's degree or higher.

3.2. Measures

The constructs in this study were assessed using well-established scales. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability and validity of the scales were thoroughly examined to ensure robust measurements.

Tourist satisfaction was assessed using the scale developed by Rahman et al. (2023), ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of tourists' overall contentment with their experiences. This construct demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.856.

Affective commitment was measured with Fullerton's (2005) scale, which captures tourists' emotional attachment and commitment to the destination. This scale's reliability was 0.838.

The scale developed by Campón-Cerro et al. (2017) was utilized to measure tourist loyalty, reflecting the likelihood of tourists revisiting and recommending the destination. The reliability of this construct was 0.875.

The destination image was gauged using the scale by López-Sanz et al. (2021), providing insights into tourists' perceptions of the destination. The Cronbach's alpha for destination image was 0.957, indicating high internal consistency.

Lastly, service quality was evaluated through the scale developed by Eid et al. (2019), focusing on various aspects of the service provided to the tourists. The reliability for this construct was 0.910.

The items used to measure each construct are presented in Appendix **Table A1**.

3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in two main stages using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 and AMOS 26 for Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM). In the first stage, we performed preliminary data screening to check for inconsistencies and missing values. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample. Cronbach's Alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency reliability of the constructs.

In the second stage, we employed Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using AMOS 26 to validate the factor structure of the model and assess both convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. CFA confirmed that all items loaded significantly onto their respective factors, ensuring strong construct validity. The model demonstrated acceptable levels of reliability and validity, as evidenced by Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values, all exceeding the recommended thresholds.

For hypothesis testing, CB-SEM was conducted using Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE). The fit of the structural model was evaluated using several goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (x^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Path analysis was then performed to examine the relationships between constructs. The structural model results provided robust support for all hypothesized relationships.

4. Results

4.1. Common method bias test

In our study, we utilized Harman's single-factor test to investigate the potential presence of common method bias. The analysis revealed that a single factor explained 38.13% of the total variance. According to conventional thresholds, common method bias is considered a critical issue if a single factor explains more than 50% of the variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Given that our result is well below this threshold, we can conclude that common method bias is not a prominent concern in this study.

4.2. Validity and reliability

According to **Table 2**, all items exhibited factor loadings exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating a strong association with their respective constructs. For instance, the factor loadings for the destination image items ranged from 0.855 to 0.902, for service quality items ranged from 0.767 to 0.907, for tourist satisfaction items ranged from 0.722 to 0.887, for affective commitment items ranged from 0.693 to 0.814, and for tourist loyalty items ranged from 0.655 to 0.801. These high factor loadings suggest that the items are good indicators of their respective latent constructs.

As shown in **Table 2**, all constructs demonstrated high levels of internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha values were 0.957 for destination image, 0.910 for service quality, 0.856 for tourist satisfaction, 0.838 for affective commitment, and 0.875 for tourist loyalty. Similarly, the CR values also exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, with values of 0.958 for destination image, 0.914 for service quality, 0.862 for tourist satisfaction, 0.843 for affective commitment, and 0.880 for tourist loyalty. The results validate the reliability of the measurement scales used in this study.

As presented in **Table 2**, all constructs in this study had AVE values well above the 0.50 threshold, with destination image at 0.765, service quality at 0.726, tourist satisfaction at 0.611, affective commitment at 0.643, and tourist loyalty at 0.596. These findings confirm that the constructs have good convergent validity, as the items correlate well with their respective constructs.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity.

Variable	Item	Mean	SD	Factor loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Destination Image	DI1	4.03	0.525	0.886	0.957	0.958	0.765
	DI2	4.02	0.521	0.888			
	DI3	4.00	0.526	0.860			
	DI4	3.99	0.480	0.902			
	DI5	4.00	0.483	0.860			
	DI6	3.99	0.492	0.867			
	DI7	4.05	0.480	0.855			
Service Quality	SQ1	4.04	0.486	0.896	0.910	0.914	0.726
	SQ2	4.01	0.467	0.907			
	SQ3	3.96	0.503	0.767			
	SQ4	4.08	0.494	0.827			
Tourist Satisfaction	TS1	4.67	0.525	0.722	0.856	0.862	0.611
	TS2	4.36	0.656	0.729			
	TS3	4.46	0.584	0.887			
	TS4	4.36	0.580	0.743			
Affective Commitment	AC1	3.92	0.579	0.748	0.838	0.843	0.643
	AC2	3.93	0.574	0.814			
	AC3	4.00	0.591	0.693			
Tourist Loyalty	TL1	4.07	0.581	0.737	0.875	0.880	0.596
	TL2	4.01	0.537	0.801			
	TL3	3.83	0.587	0.655			
	TL4	4.11	0.586	0.800			
	TL5	4.00	0.640	0.695			

Note: SD, Standard Deviation; CR, Composite Reliability; AVE, Average Variance Extracted; DI, Destination Image; SQ, Service Quality; TS, Tourist Satisfaction; AC, Affective Commitment; TL, Tourist Loyalty.

According to **Table 3**, the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the correlations with any other construct. For instance, the square root of the AVE for destination image (0.874) was higher than its correlations with service quality (0.831), tourist satisfaction (0.342), affective commitment (0.759), and tourist loyalty (0.616). This pattern was consistent for all constructs, thereby supporting the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion).

	DI	SQ	TS	AC	TL
DI	0.874				
SQ	0.831***	0.852			
TS	0.342***	0.348***	0.782		
AC	0.759***	0.783***	0.378***	0.802	
TL	0.616***	0.628***	0.374***	0.628***	0.772

Note: DI, Destination Image; SQ, Service Quality; TS, Tourist Satisfaction; AC, Affective Commitment; TL, Tourist Loyalty. *** $p < 0.001$.

4.3. Model estimates and hypothesis testing

The fit of the structural equation model was assessed through the examination of several indices to determine the adequacy of the model in explaining the antecedents of tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism. The obtained fit indices are as follows: $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.836$, GFI = 0.918, AGFI = 0.898, NFI = 0.947, IFI = 0.975, TLI = 0.972, CFI = 0.975, RMSEA = 0.045, SRMR = 0.0379. Each index demonstrates an acceptable to excellent fit, indicating that the model provides a good representation of the dataset.

The results of the hypothesis testing are illustrated in **Figure 2** and summarized in **Table 4.** The path analysis results strongly support the hypothesis that destination image significantly and positively influences tourist satisfaction (H1). The path coefficient for this relationship is 0.191 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a robust positive impact. Similarly, the effect of destination image on affective commitment (H2) is also strongly supported, with a path coefficient of 0.480 ($p < 0.001$). This demonstrates a highly significant positive relationship between destination image and affective commitment. The hypothesis that destination image has a significant and positive influence on tourist loyalty (H3) is also validated. The path coefficient for this impact is 0.233 ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, the results affirm that service quality significantly impacts tourist satisfaction (H4), with a path coefficient of 0.213 ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, the effect of service quality on affective commitment (H5) is significantly positive, as indicated by a path coefficient of 0.541 ($p < 0.001$). This underscores the critical role of service quality in fostering affective commitment among tourists. The analysis also supports the hypothesis that service quality positively affects tourist loyalty (H6), with a path coefficient of 0.224 ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the results indicate that tourist satisfaction has a significant and positive influence on tourist loyalty (H7), with a path coefficient of 0.151 ($p < 0.01$). Lastly, the hypothesis that affective commitment positively influences tourist loyalty (H8) is supported by a path coefficient of 0.250 ($p < 0.01$).
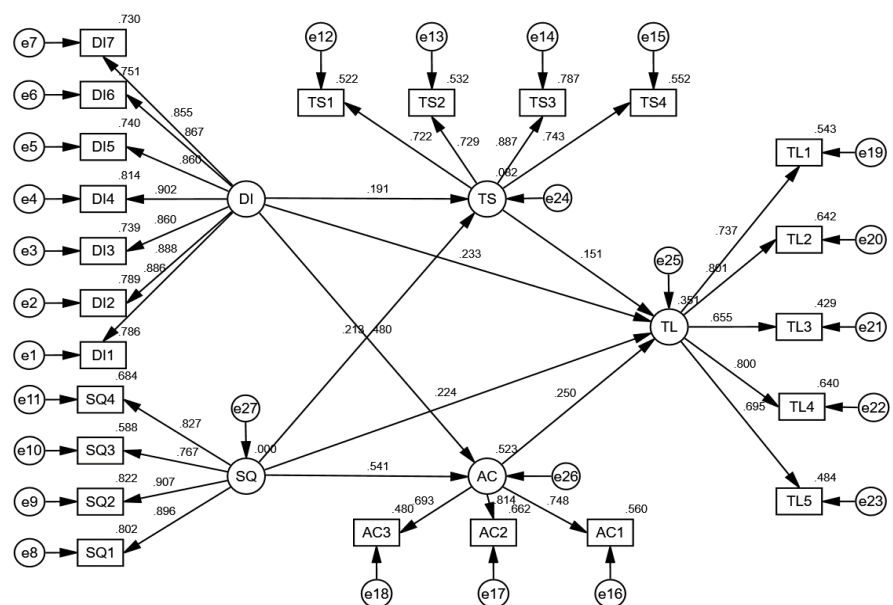

Figure 2. SEM results.

Note: DI, Destination Image; SQ, Service Quality; TS, Tourist Satisfaction; AC, Affective Commitment; TL, Tourist Loyalty.

Overall, these findings provide strong evidence for the proposed relationships in the conceptual model. They demonstrate that destination image and service quality significantly and positively affect tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism. At the same time, tourist satisfaction and affective commitment positively affect tourist loyalty. These insights are crucial for understanding the antecedents of tourist loyalty and guiding effective tourism management and marketing strategies in Kangyang tourism.

Table 4. Results of path analysis.

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	*p*-value
H1	TS ← DI	0.191	0.042	3.606	***
H2	AC ← DI	0.480	0.042	9.659	***
H3	TL ← DI	0.233	0.055	3.695	***
H4	TS ← SQ	0.213	0.046	3.942	***
H5	AC ← SQ	0.541	0.047	10.456	***
H6	TL ← SQ	0.224	0.063	3.298	***
H7	TL ← TS	0.151	0.055	2.950	0.003
H8	TL ← AC	0.250	0.086	3.001	0.003

Note: DI, Destination Image; SQ, Service Quality; TS, Tourist Satisfaction; AC, Affective Commitment; TL, Tourist Loyalty. *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

The findings provide significant insights into the antecedents of tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism, highlighting the crucial roles of destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and affective commitment. These findings support and extend existing literature on tourism loyalty while offering unique perspectives on the rapidly growing Kangyang tourism sector.

The strong positive effect of destination image on tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and tourist loyalty aligns with previous research in various tourism contexts. For instance, our findings echo the study by Allameh et al. (2015) who confirmed that a positive destination image enhances sport tourists' satisfaction. The significant influence of destination image on affective commitment corroborates the work of Chi and Han (2021) and Han et al. (2019), who highlighted the role of destination image in fostering emotional bonds with tourists. Furthermore, the direct impact of destination image on tourist loyalty supports the findings of Zhang et al. (2014) and Mai et al. (2019), underscoring the importance of a favorable destination image in encouraging repeat visits and positive recommendations. Chiu et al. (2016) confirmed that both cognitive and affective images positively influence satisfaction, which subsequently enhances loyalty. Similarly, studies in island tourism by Ramseook-Munhurrun et al. (2015) and Kusdibyo (2022) emphasized that a favorable destination image, particularly its cognitive and emotional dimensions, plays a critical role in fostering loyalty. However, an interesting contrast was noted by Reyes and Dael (2023), who found that a highly favorable image may not always translate into loyalty due to other moderating factors, such as guest service quality. Our study extends these findings by applying them specifically to Kangyang tourism, a context

where the destination image is intrinsically linked to health and wellness attributes. This unique aspect of Kangyang tourism may explain the particularly strong relationship between destination image and affective commitment observed in our study. The emphasis on health preservation and ecological resources in Kangyang tourism likely creates a more profound emotional connection with tourists, as suggested by Zeng and Li (2021).

The significant positive influence of service quality on tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and tourist loyalty aligns with a substantial body of existing research. For example, our findings support those of Chen and Chen (2010) and Su et al. (2015), who found service quality to be a key determinant of tourist satisfaction in heritage and city tourism contexts, respectively. The strong correlation between service quality and affective commitment in our study is particularly noteworthy and extends the findings of Guo et al. (2010) and Fullerton (2005) to the Kangyang tourism context. This robust relationship might be attributed to the health-oriented nature of Kangyang tourism, where high-quality services are crucial for building trust and emotional attachment. However, some studies suggest that service quality's impact may not always be direct. For example, Kartini et al. (2023) found that satisfaction mediates the relationship between destination image and loyalty, highlighting the complex interplay between these variables.

Our results also confirm the positive influence of tourist satisfaction and affective commitment on tourist loyalty, supporting the findings of Chi and Qu (2008) and Tanford and Jung (2017). However, our study reveals that in the context of Kangyang tourism, affective commitment has a more substantial influence on loyalty than satisfaction. This finding diverges somewhat from traditional tourism studies, where satisfaction is often the primary driver of loyalty (San Martin et al., 2013). The stronger influence of affective commitment in Kangyang tourism could be attributed to the emotional and psychological engagement inherent in health and wellness tourism, as suggested by Kazakov and Oyner (2021). In Kangyang tourism contexts, tourists seek more than just a transactional experience—they aim for long-term wellness benefits and emotional attachment to the destination (Zeng and Li, 2021). Interestingly, our study revealed that service quality has a stronger direct impact on tourist loyalty than destination image. The heightened importance of service quality in Kangyang tourism could be due to the specialized nature of health and wellness services offered, where the quality of medical care, accommodation, and recreational activities directly impacts tourists' experiences and future behavioral intentions.

While destination image and service quality positively influenced tourist loyalty, factors such as perceived value and some aspects of service quality, such as amenities, did not directly lead to increased loyalty. Previous research in other tourism contexts has similarly shown that not all service dimensions have the same weight in influencing loyalty (Hermawan et al., 2019). Vo Thanh et al. (2018) noted that satisfaction acts as a mediating variable, and its direct impact on loyalty can be diminished depending on external factors like novelty-seeking behavior or environmental value. Therefore, future studies should explore these indirect pathways more extensively, especially in wellness tourism, where emotional attachment and personal values play critical roles.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the existing tourism literature by exploring the relationships between destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and tourist loyalty within the context of Kangyang tourism. It provides insights into how these factors interact in a niche tourism sector that combines wellness and ecological preservation. While the study highlights the importance of destination image and service quality, it is important to temper the emphasis on affective commitment as the dominant predictor of loyalty. Although our results show a stronger relationship between affective commitment and loyalty compared to satisfaction, this finding may not be generalizable across all forms of wellness tourism or other tourism sectors. Emotional attachment to a destination in Kangyang tourism could indeed play a more significant role, given the wellness-oriented nature of the sector. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the strength of this relationship might vary depending on different tourism contexts, particularly those that do not emphasize health and wellness to the same degree. Additionally, while this research advances the understanding of Kangyang tourism by highlighting the psychological engagement required for fostering tourist loyalty, it is necessary to recognize that affective commitment's prominence may reflect the specific characteristics of Kangyang tourism destinations rather than a broader application to other tourism types. This calls for caution in overgeneralizing the findings to other contexts where destination image or service quality might play a larger role than affective commitment.

6.2. Practical implications

The findings also provide valuable practical implications for tourism stakeholders, particularly those involved in the growth and management of Kangyang tourism destinations. By understanding the key antecedents of tourist loyalty in this specific context, stakeholders can formulate more targeted measures to attract and retain tourists, ultimately leading to the sustainable growth of the Kangyang tourism industry. However, while it is suggested that strong destination image and high-quality services can foster tourist loyalty, it is important to recognize that these factors might not equally guarantee loyalty across different tourist segments. For example, not all tourists may prioritize emotional attachment as a driving factor for loyalty, and some may be influenced more by service reliability or practical considerations such as accessibility and cost. Therefore, while the implications of this study are valuable, they should be applied in a targeted manner that takes into account the diverse motivations and needs of different tourist demographics.

Given the strong effect of destination image on tourist satisfaction, affective commitment, and loyalty, it is crucial for Kangyang tourism destinations to cultivate a positive and distinctive image. This can be accomplished through marketing initiatives that specifically emphasize the unique health and wellness attributes of the destination, such as its natural environment, traditional Chinese medicine practices, and specialized health facilities. Emphasizing the authenticity and quality of these

offerings is essential, as tourists seeking Kangyang experiences are likely to be discerning and health-conscious. Collaborations with reputable health and wellness organizations can further enhance the destination's credibility and appeal. Moreover, showcasing positive tourist testimonials and leveraging social media platforms can effectively communicate the destination's appeal and foster a strong emotional connection with potential visitors. However, it is necessary to avoid over-promising in marketing messages. The complexities of providing holistic well-being experiences mean that service providers must carefully align their offerings with tourists' expectations to avoid dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, the results underscore the critical role of service quality in shaping tourist experiences and fostering loyalty in Kangyang tourism. Therefore, tourism operators and service providers should prioritize service excellence across all touchpoints of the tourist journey, including investment in staff training to enhance their knowledge of Kangyang principles and their ability to deliver personalized and attentive service. Regular service quality assessments and feedback mechanisms should be implemented to identify areas for improvement and ensure that service delivery consistently meets or exceeds tourist expectations. Furthermore, embracing technology can enhance service quality by providing effortless booking processes, personalized recommendations, and efficient communication channels. While this study suggests that high service quality is crucial for tourist loyalty, it is important to recognize that in Kangyang tourism, the definition of service quality is multifaceted and extends beyond traditional service dimensions. It also encompasses wellness-specific elements like medical care, diet, and physical wellness programs. Therefore, stakeholders should focus on maintaining a balanced service delivery that meets the holistic wellness needs of tourists.

Recognizing the significant influence of affective commitment on tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism, stakeholders should strive to create emotionally engaging experiences that foster a strong bond between tourists and the destination. This can be achieved by designing genuine and engaging experiences that enable tourists to connect with the local culture, traditions, and natural environment. Offering opportunities for personalized wellness programs, interactive workshops, and community engagement can further enhance emotional attachment. However, while creating such experiences is vital, it is also important to recognize that not all tourists may form strong emotional bonds with the destination. The focus on emotional engagement should be balanced with practical considerations like service reliability, accessibility, and affordability to cater to a wider range of tourists. Additionally, loyalty programs that reward repeat visitation and encourage positive word-of-mouth marketing can help strengthen emotional connections. By fostering a balanced approach that combines emotional engagement with high-quality, reliable services, Kangyang tourism destinations can cultivate lasting relationships with tourists and inspire repeat visits, without risking over-promising.

7. Conclusion

This study elucidates the pivotal roles of destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and affective commitment in fostering tourist loyalty within

Kangyang tourism. The findings demonstrate that a positive destination image and high service quality significantly enhance tourist satisfaction and affective commitment, which in turn bolsters tourist loyalty. Notably, affective commitment emerged as a stronger predictor of loyalty than satisfaction, highlighting the unique emotional and psychological engagement inherent in Kangyang tourism. These insights provide theoretical contributions to tourism research and practical implications for stakeholders aiming to cultivate sustainable growth in Kangyang tourism by emphasizing the holistic and enriching experiences that resonate with tourists' wellness aspirations.

8. Limitations and future directions

Although this research offers significant insights into the antecedents of tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism, it is important to recognize several limitations. Firstly, the research is geographically limited to specific Kangyang tourism destinations, which may not capture diverse experiences in other regions or countries. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study might restrict the capacity to infer causality among the constructs. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to understand the dynamic relationships over time better. Finally, while this research focused on destination image, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and affective commitment, other factors such as personal health motivations and social influences could also significantly influence tourist loyalty. Future research can explore these additional variables to provide a thorough understanding of tourist loyalty in Kangyang tourism.

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Data availability statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available from the corresponding author upon request.

Ethical approval: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the School of Health and Wellness at Panzhihua University (Approval code: No. HRECA22-004 and date of approval: 10 October 2022).

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Appendix

Table A1. Items used to measure constructs.

Construct	Item	Question	Source
Tourist Satisfaction	TS1	I truly enjoyed visiting Panzhihua.	Rahman et al., 2023
	TS2	My needs have been fulfilled by coming to Panzhihua.	
	TS3	This tour has surpassed what I anticipated.	
	TS4	I'm happy with the time and money I invested in this place.	
Affective Commitment	AC1	I feel emotionally attached to Panzhihua.	Fullerton, 2005
	AC2	This travel experience has a great deal of personal meaning for me.	
	AC3	I feel a strong sense of identification with Panzhihua.	
Tourist Loyalty	TL1	I consider myself a loyal visitor.	Campón-Cerro et al., 2017
	TL2	I will visit Panzhihua on my next tourism trip.	
	TL3	I will visit Panzhihua again in the future.	
	TL4	I will recommend Panzhihua to people who ask my advice.	
	TL5	I will tell other people positive things about Panzhihua.	
Destination Image	DI1	I identify Panzhihua with ease of Kangyang.	López-Sanz et al., 2021
	DI2	I identify Panzhihua with a favorable climate.	
	DI3	I identify Panzhihua with opportunities for well-being activities.	
	DI4	I identify Panzhihua with aimed at both adults and families.	
	DI5	I identify Panzhihua with good road communication networks in the area.	
	DI6	I identify Panzhihua with relaxation.	
	DI7	I identify Panzhihua with pleasant.	
Service Quality	SQ1	Tourism employees in Panzhihua have sufficient knowledge and skills.	Eid et al., 2019
	SQ2	Tourism employees in Panzhihua understand my needs.	
	SQ3	Tourism employees in Panzhihua are courteous and friendly.	
	SQ4	Tourism employees in Panzhihua handle my questions efficiently.	