

Construction Mechanism of Tourism Attractiveness in Historical and Cultural Districts Based on Tourist Perception under Culture-Tourism Integration

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Abstract: With the increasing emphasis on cultural tourism, urban regeneration, and the protection of heritage resources, historical and cultural districts have become key platforms for integrating cultural heritage with tourism development. This study constructs a tourism attractiveness mechanism grounded in tourists' perceptions within the context of culture-tourism integration. Using a mixed-methods design that combines in-depth interviews, field observations, and structured questionnaire surveys, the research identifies three core perception dimensions: cultural perception, environmental perception, and service perception. On this basis, it examines how the richness of cultural content, the degree of innovation in presentation, and the holistic, immersive nature of culture-tourism experiences jointly shape perceived attractiveness. A structural model is developed to clarify the dynamic relationships among these variables and to test the direct and indirect effects of perception dimensions on overall destination attractiveness. The empirical results indicate that enhancing visitor engagement through participatory, interactive, and immersive cultural experiences is crucial for sustaining the competitiveness, vitality, and long-term development of historical and cultural districts. The study enriches theoretical discussions on tourist perception, experiential value, and destination attractiveness under integrated development, and offers practical implications for planners and managers seeking to optimize spatial design, cultural programming, and service quality in historical and cultural districts.

Keywords: tourist perception; cultural tourism; tourism attractiveness; heritage destinations; urban regeneration; visitor experience

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

With the growing trend of cultural tourism and urban renewal, historical and cultural districts have emerged as important destinations that blend cultural heritage with tourism development [1, 2]. These districts not only represent the cultural memory of cities but also act as vital nodes for regional tourism development. However, the effectiveness of cultural-tourism integration largely depends on the perceptions and experiences of visitors. Constructing a tourism attractiveness mechanism based on tourists' perceptions can help better align development strategies with visitor expectations, thereby promoting sustainable development of historical and cultural districts.

1.2. Research Status at Home and Abroad

International research has examined cultural tourism integration through models such as the heritage experience framework and place-making theory, highlighting the importance of tourists' emotional and cognitive responses. Domestic studies, on the other hand, have concentrated more on infrastructure, cultural authenticity, and balancing preservation with utilization in historic areas. While some investigations have addressed visitor satisfaction and loyalty, there has been limited systematic exploration of the mechanisms driving tourism attractiveness from the perspective of visitor perception, particularly in the context of integrated cultural and tourism development [3].

1.3. Research Objectives and Content

This study aims to establish a mechanism for evaluating the tourism attractiveness of historical and cultural districts based on tourists' perceptions, emphasizing the integration of cultural and tourism elements [4]. The research focuses on identifying key perception dimensions, analyzing their influence on perceived attractiveness, and developing a conceptual framework to guide practical integration strategies. By employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study offers theoretical and practical insights into enhancing the tourist experience and promoting cultural value.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Analytical Framework

2.1. Tourist Perception Theory

Tourist perception theory emphasizes the process by which tourists form impressions, evaluations, and emotional responses to destinations, attractions, and travel-related experiences. This theory is rooted in the understanding that tourists are not passive recipients of information but active participants in constructing meaning through a combination of cognitive appraisal, affective reactions, and sensory experiences. These multi-dimensional inputs contribute to the formation of an overall perception of a destination. Such perceptions are often influenced by pre-visit information sources such as media portrayals, word-of-mouth, and promotional materials, as well as on-site interactions including service quality, local culture, and environmental aesthetics [5].

In the context of historical districts, this theory is particularly relevant as these spaces often carry rich symbolic and cultural meanings. Tourists not only evaluate the physical environment but also interpret cultural narratives, architectural styles, and local traditions, which can evoke a sense of nostalgia, curiosity, or learning. These subjective interpretations play a key role in determining tourist satisfaction, shaping behavioral intentions such as recommending the site or revisiting, and building destination loyalty [4]. By applying tourist perception theory, researchers and planners can better understand how various experiential elements are internalized by visitors, leading to more effective cultural heritage management and experience design.

2.2. Tourism Attractiveness Construction Theory

Tourism attractiveness refers to the set of features and attributes that make a destination appealing to visitors. This concept is typically understood as a combination of core resources and attractions, such as natural scenery, heritage sites, and local culture, along with supporting elements like accessibility, accommodation, signage, and public services. Intangible or psychological factors, including perceived uniqueness, emotional appeal, and symbolic meanings, also play a significant role [6]. In cultural tourism, attractiveness extends beyond physical allure to encompass the depth of cultural engagement and the degree to which tourists find meaning, inspiration, and relevance in their experiences. A particularly critical component in this context is authenticity—the extent to which cultural expressions, performances, and representations are perceived as genuine or credible. Additionally, aesthetic appeal, including visual harmony, contributes significantly to the overall attractiveness.

2.3. *Integrated Theoretical Framework from a Culture-Tourism Perspective*

From the perspective of culture-tourism integration, it is essential to establish a theoretical framework that captures the interdisciplinary and experiential nature of cultural tourism. This framework brings together insights from place attachment theory, experiential marketing theory, and co-creation theory, forming a comprehensive model to understand how tourists engage with and interpret cultural spaces. Place attachment theory posits that individuals develop emotional and psychological bonds with places through meaningful experiences. In the context of historical or culturally significant districts, tourists may form attachments based on personal resonance with the heritage, aesthetics, or symbolic meanings of the locale. These emotional connections enhance satisfaction and foster destination loyalty, often motivating repeat visits and sustained interest in the preservation of cultural spaces. The strength of this attachment is influenced not only by the destination's tangible elements but also by the interpretive depth and cultural storytelling encountered during the visit. Experiential marketing theory emphasizes the design and delivery of immersive, memorable, and emotionally engaging experiences. Rather than focusing solely on the functional attributes of a destination, this theory encourages destination managers and cultural stakeholders to create narratives, sensory experiences, and interactive encounters that allow tourists to feel connected to the culture in a deep and personal way. In a cultural-tourism context, experiential marketing manifests through curated performances, guided storytelling, hands-on workshops, and the use of technology (e.g., AR/VR) to enhance the visitor's journey. These practices contribute to a value-rich perception of the destination, enhancing both its attractiveness and emotional impact. Co-creation theory introduces the idea that value is jointly created by the service provider and the consumer [7]. In cultural tourism, this implies that tourists are not merely observers but active agents in shaping their own experiences through dialogue, participation, and interpretation. Whether it is learning a traditional craft, engaging in cultural festivals, or interacting with local residents, tourists contribute to the authenticity and vitality of the cultural experience. This participatory approach aligns with contemporary trends in tourism, where travelers seek authentic, customized, and socially engaging experiences, rather than standardized consumption.

By integrating these three theoretical components, the framework offers a multi-layered understanding of how cultural destinations can be managed, interpreted, and experienced. It suggests that the perceived attractiveness and sustainability of a historical district depend not only on its physical and cultural assets but also on how these assets are emotionally internalized, experientially designed, and collaboratively interpreted by visitors. This approach also underscores the importance of feedback loops, where tourists' perceptions and behaviors influence ongoing cultural presentation and destination development strategies [8].

3. Research Methods and Data Sources

3.1. *Research Design*

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to thoroughly investigate tourist perceptions and their influence on the appeal of historical and cultural districts [9]. By integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques, this approach provides a nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of the research questions.

Qualitative data are gathered through in-depth interviews with tourists, local business owners, and tourism administrators, as well as field observations of tourist behavior and interactions within the districts. These methods reveal subjective experiences, emotional reactions, and cultural interpretations that are not easily quantifiable. Open-ended interviews focus on exploring tourists' perceptions of authenticity, aesthetic appeal, and cultural resonance, while field notes document the environmental and behavioral dynamics shaping visitor experiences.

Quantitative data are collected using structured questionnaire surveys designed to measure specific constructs related to tourist perception, including service quality, cultural immersion, environmental satisfaction, and destination loyalty. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data enables triangulation, enhancing the validity and depth of the findings [10].

To analyze the complex interrelationships between perception variables and tourism attractiveness, the study utilizes Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) as its primary analytical technique. SEM facilitates the simultaneous testing of multiple relationships among latent constructs and observed variables, making it highly suitable for this research [2]. This method provides empirical support for the theoretical framework and identifies causal pathways linking perception to tourist behavior and destination competitiveness.

3.2. Target Groups and Sampling

The research focuses on tourists who visit prominent historical and cultural districts in China that exemplify the country's urban heritage tourism development. The selected sites include Sanfang Qixiang in Fuzhou, Kuanzhai Alley in Chengdu, and Pingjiang Road in Suzhou. These districts were chosen for their unique cultural characteristics, well-preserved urban structures, and popularity among both domestic and international visitors [11].

To ensure the study captures a broad and representative range of tourist experiences, a stratified random sampling method is utilized. The sample is stratified based on key demographic and psychographic variables, such as age, gender, education level, travel motivation (e.g., cultural learning, leisure, photography), and visitation frequency (first-time versus repeat visitors). This approach facilitates the comparison of perception patterns across different subgroups and enhances the generalizability and reliability of the research findings.

Tourist participants are recruited through on-site interception at popular locations within the districts, as well as through online tourism forums and social media platforms. This dual-channel recruitment strategy increases the diversity of the sample and reduces potential location-based biases.

3.3. Data Collection and Processing

Data collection in this study was conducted through a combination of digital and paper-based questionnaires, distributed both on-site and online. On-site distribution involved direct interactions with tourists at selected historical districts using tablets and printed forms, while the online survey was disseminated through tourism-related platforms and social media channels to reach a broader and more diverse audience. The design of the questionnaire was informed by existing research on tourist perception and tailored to the specific context of cultural tourism in Chinese historical districts.

The questionnaire included multiple dimensions relevant to the research framework, aiming to capture how tourists evaluate their experiences in terms of environmental quality, cultural atmosphere, service satisfaction, integration features, and overall perception of the destination. Environmental quality referred to aspects such as cleanliness, infrastructure, and accessibility. Cultural atmosphere focused on elements like heritage authenticity, local identity, and artistic or symbolic expressions within the space. Service satisfaction was measured by tourists' responses to hospitality, convenience, and the effectiveness of signage and guidance systems [12]. Integration features explored the extent to which cultural and creative elements, interactive activities, and technological enhancements contributed to the visitor experience. The final section of the survey assessed tourists' overall impression, satisfaction, and intention to revisit or recommend the site.

Once collected, the data were systematically coded and input into SPSS software for preliminary analysis. This stage included descriptive statistics, reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha to ensure internal consistency, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to

identify latent constructs within the perception variables. After refining the data structure, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were performed using AMOS to validate the measurement model and test the proposed relationships among constructs [13]. The modeling process allowed for the examination of both direct and indirect effects among variables, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how tourist perception influences the attractiveness and sustainability of historical cultural districts.

4. Construction of Tourist Perception Dimensions and Structure

4.1. Cultural Perception

Cultural perception refers to the extent to which visitors recognize, interpret, and emotionally engage with the cultural attributes of a destination. In the context of historical and cultural districts, it encompasses tourists' awareness and appreciation of local history, customs, traditions, and artistic expressions. This perception is shaped through a combination of tangible and intangible cultural elements, including historical architecture, traditional crafts, folk performances, dialects, and narrative storytelling that convey the identity and spirit of the place [14].

The role of cultural perception is particularly significant in enhancing the destination's symbolic and emotional value. When tourists perceive a destination as culturally rich and meaningful, they are more likely to develop a sense of connection, nostalgia, or curiosity, which positively influences their overall experience and satisfaction. Moreover, elements such as well-preserved heritage buildings, immersive cultural exhibitions, and participatory cultural activities provide a multi-sensory framework through which cultural perception is formed and deepened. As such, cultural perception constitutes a core dimension in evaluating the attractiveness of a historical district and is integral to fostering destination loyalty and the sustainability of cultural tourism.

4.2. Environmental Perception

Environmental perception pertains to how tourists assess the physical, visual, and sensory aspects of the destination environment. In historical and cultural districts, this includes evaluations of cleanliness, spatial organization, pedestrian accessibility, greenery, lighting, soundscapes, and overall aesthetic harmony. A well-designed environment not only supports functional needs but also enhances the emotional and psychological comfort of visitors. Importantly, environmental perception is closely tied to the authenticity and experiential depth of a heritage site. A visually cohesive and well-maintained space, where traditional architectural styles are respected and modern interventions are sensitively integrated, can reinforce the historical narrative and allow visitors to feel more immersed in the past [5]. Conversely, signs of disorder, over-commercialization, or environmental degradation may diminish tourists' sense of place and weaken their engagement. Thus, positive environmental perception contributes to the construction of a coherent and immersive experience that is both enjoyable and memorable, ultimately strengthening the destination's tourism appeal and competitiveness.

4.3. Service Perception

Service perception reflects tourists' subjective evaluations of the quality, efficiency, and cultural alignment of services provided within the destination. This includes aspects such as the availability and accessibility of tourism facilities, the friendliness and professionalism of service staff, the clarity of signage and informational materials, and the overall comfort and convenience of the visitor experience. In the context of historical and cultural districts, service perception also involves the degree to which services are embedded with cultural characteristics and storytelling elements that enhance the thematic coherence of the visit. High-quality services act as both functional and emotional

support systems that improve visitor satisfaction. Personalized, culturally sensitive services—such as multilingual guides, interactive mobile applications, or souvenir products rooted in local heritage—can enrich the visitor's engagement with the site and encourage deeper cultural exploration [12]. Furthermore, service excellence contributes to positive emotional responses, repeat visitation, and the generation of word-of-mouth promotion, all of which are essential for sustaining a destination's attractiveness in a competitive tourism landscape.

5. The Impact Mechanism of Culture-Tourism Integration on Tourism Attractiveness

5.1. Diversity of Integration Content

The diversity of cultural-tourism integration content plays a pivotal role in shaping tourists' perceptions and overall satisfaction. Integration content refers to the various cultural and tourism elements embedded into the visitor experience, such as thematic exhibitions, local festivals, traditional performances, heritage-based creative products, and immersive guided tours. When these elements are designed to reflect the historical and cultural identity of the destination, they not only offer educational value but also evoke emotional resonance.

A rich and varied integration content portfolio caters to the heterogeneous interests and motivations of tourists, thereby enhancing their sense of novelty, engagement, and discovery. For instance, an exhibition on local craftsmanship can appeal to cultural enthusiasts, while a food festival showcasing regional culinary heritage may attract leisure tourists. The inclusion of interactive workshops or live demonstrations can further increase participation, transforming passive observation into active involvement [5, 7]. Moreover, when the content is thematically coherent and closely aligned with the district's cultural narrative, it deepens the authenticity of the experience and contributes to a more memorable and meaningful journey. In this way, content diversity directly enhances perceived tourism attractiveness and strengthens the district's competitiveness in the cultural tourism market.

5.2. Innovation in Integration Methods

Innovative methods of cultural-tourism integration serve as important drivers for enhancing tourist experiences and differentiating destinations in a highly competitive environment [3]. These methods leverage technological advancements and interdisciplinary collaboration to deliver more personalized, engaging, and immersive cultural encounters. Notable approaches include digital storytelling platforms that allow tourists to access historical narratives through mobile devices, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies that recreate past environments or simulate cultural scenes, and cross-sector partnerships that integrate art, design, education, and technology into tourism products.

Such innovations respond to the evolving expectations of modern tourists, particularly younger generations who seek interactivity, self-expression, and deep cultural immersion. For example, an AR-enabled walking tour that overlays historical imagery onto present-day streets can bridge temporal distances and make intangible heritage more tangible. Similarly, collaborations between cultural institutions and creative industries can result in unique souvenirs or performances that reflect local identity in contemporary formats. These innovative methods not only enhance tourists' emotional engagement and sense of participation but also encourage revisitation and positive word-of-mouth, reinforcing the long-term vitality of cultural tourism destinations.

5.3. Holistic Integration Experience

A holistic integration experience emphasizes the seamless and coherent fusion of cultural narratives, spatial organization, and service provision throughout the tourist journey [1]. This perspective goes beyond individual attractions or events and focuses on the overall logic and flow of the experience as tourists move through different spaces and engage with various activities within the district. The success of this integration hinges on the consistency and continuity between cultural themes, physical environment, and support services.

For example, a historical district that guides visitors from an introductory exhibition space to a themed commercial street, and finally to a tranquil leisure zone—while maintaining a consistent narrative thread and visual style—creates a smooth and layered experiential arc [14]. The transitions between cultural display areas, consumption spaces such as restaurants and craft shops, and resting or reflection areas like tea houses and courtyards should be designed to minimize disruption and enhance immersion. Additionally, well-integrated services such as multilingual guides, culturally themed signage, and responsive customer support contribute to a sense of coherence and comfort. This holistic experience reinforces the district's image as a multifunctional, user-friendly, and emotionally compelling destination, ultimately enhancing its attractiveness and sustainability from both cultural and commercial perspectives.

6. Conclusion

This study establishes a comprehensive framework for constructing the tourism attractiveness of historical and cultural districts through the lens of tourist perception under cultural-tourism integration. It identifies cultural, environmental, and service perceptions as key dimensions, illustrating how the richness, innovation, and wholeness of integration efforts shape the overall attractiveness mechanism. The findings offer practical implications for destination managers, emphasizing that enhancing tourists' multi-sensory and emotional experiences through participatory and culturally immersive strategies is crucial for long-term competitiveness. Future research could further investigate the longitudinal effects of perception-based attractiveness and its influence on community participation and heritage sustainability.

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