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Natural Beauty: Sustainable destination image and tourist loyalty in Hainan, China

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Abstract

Amid growing concerns over sustainable tourism and destination competitiveness, this study examines the influence of sustainable destination image on tourist loyalty in Hainan, China. Grounded in the sustainability perspective, it investigates four dimensions of destination image: social, cultural, environmental, and economic. Using convenience sampling, 412 valid questionnaires were collected and analysed through SPSS and PLS-SEM. Findings reveal that all four dimensions exert significant positive effects on destination loyalty. Environmental destination image demonstrates the strongest influence, followed by cultural, social, and economic destination image. These findings highlight the differentiated contributions of sustainability dimensions to fostering long-term tourist loyalty.

Keywords: Sustainable Destination Image; Destination Loyalty; Tourist Motivation; Tourist Satisfaction; Sustainable Tourism Development

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1.0 Introduction

Destination loyalty is an important indicator of tourism destination competitiveness and its capacity to sustain demand over time. It is commonly reflected in tourists' intentions to revisit a destination and recommend it to others (Tasci et al., 2022). However, destination loyalty is increasingly difficult to maintain as destinations compete for visitors whose expectations are changing and whose evaluations increasingly extend beyond conventional attractions (Sangkaew & Phucharoen, 2025). These challenges are relevant to Hainan, China, where tourism development is shaped by seasonal fluctuations, competition from alternative destinations and uneven regional development (Wang et al., 2026). Although Hainan benefits from tropical landscapes and substantial tourism resources, its long-term competitiveness depends not only on natural attractiveness but also on how visitors evaluate the destination's social, cultural, environmental and economic conditions.

Destination image is widely recognised as an important antecedent of tourists' evaluations and behavioural intentions (Chi & Qu, 2008). Conventional approaches have often examined image through cognitive and affective components, focusing respectively on beliefs about destination attributes and emotional responses to

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a place. These perspectives have advanced understanding of destination evaluation, but may not fully represent the sustainability-related characteristics that increasingly shape tourism experiences. Sustainable destination image offers a multidimensional perspective, encompassing tourists' evaluations of a destination's environmental conditions, social characteristics, cultural attributes, and economic features. Although research has begun to connect sustainability and destination image with loyalty (Lee & Xue, 2020), further empirical work is needed to establish whether the different dimensions make comparable contributions, particularly in island destinations where natural ecosystems, cultural identity, community conditions and tourism-related economic activity are closely connected. This study addresses this issue by examining the relationships between four dimensions of sustainable destination image—social, cultural, environmental and economic destination image—and destination loyalty towards Hainan. Grounded in Elkington's (1997) Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, the framework recognises the interconnected roles of social, environmental, and economic sustainability. It treats cultural sustainability as a distinct analytical dimension because heritage, local identity and traditional practices can contribute to destination distinctiveness and the continuity of tourism development (Iniesta-Bonillo et al., 2016; Lee & Xue, 2020). This is a tourism-specific operationalisation of sustainability, rather than a claim that culture is a fourth component of Elkington's original TBL framework.
The study has three objectives:

- To describe the demographic and travel-related characteristics of the surveyed tourists and examine differences in destination loyalty across these groups;
- To test the relationships between social, cultural, environmental and economic destination image and destination loyalty;
- To assess the usefulness of a multidimensional sustainability-based destination image framework in explaining loyalty towards an island destination.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability Theory and the Multidimensional Image of a Destination
Sustainability refers to a development approach that addresses present societal needs while preserving the resources and opportunities required by future generations. In tourism, this principle requires attention to the economic viability of tourism activity, the protection of environmental resources and the well-being of host communities (Mensah, 2019). Elkington's (1997) TBL framework provides a widely used structure for considering these interrelated dimensions through people, planet and profit (Figure 1). Applied to tourism, the framework highlights that destination performance should not be assessed solely through economic outcomes; it should also consider environmental integrity and social consequences (UNWTO, 2020).

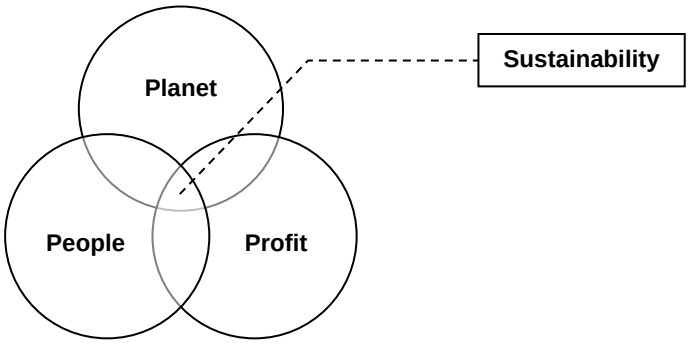


Fig. 1: Conceptual Representation of the TBL Framework
(Source: Elkington, 1997)

Culture is closely connected to social sustainability, but it can be analytically useful to distinguish cultural resources from broader social conditions. Social sustainability concerns matters such as community well-being, inclusion, safety and relationships between visitors and residents. Cultural sustainability concerns the protection and continuity of heritage, local identity, traditional knowledge and cultural practices. As Table 1 presents, tourism studies have identified cultural considerations alongside economic, social and environmental dimensions (Agyeiwaah et al., 2017). Accordingly, this study retains the TBL perspective as its overarching foundation while operationalising sustainable destination image through four related but distinct dimensions: social, cultural, environmental and economic destination image.

Table 1. Dimensions of sustainability

Thematic category	Number of cases	Case coverage (%)	Thematic classification
Economic	27	100	Core
Social	26	96	Core
Environmental	26	96	Core
Cultural	14	52	Core
Policial	9	33	peripheral
Institutional and managerial	8	30	peripheral
Technological	4	15	peripheral

(Source: Agyeiwaah et al., 2017)

2.2 Destination Loyalty

Destination loyalty refers to favourable attitudes and behavioural intentions towards a destination, particularly intentions to revisit and recommend it to others (Stylidis et al., 2020; Tasci et al., 2022). It is important to distinguish intended loyalty from actual repeat visitation. A tourist may revisit because of convenience, family obligations or limited alternatives, while a tourist with strong revisit intentions may not have the opportunity to return. Loyalty measures therefore commonly capture both revisit intentions and advocacy, including positive recommendations and word-of-mouth. Following this approach, the present study conceptualises destination loyalty as tourists' favourable intentions towards Hainan, including their willingness to return, recommend the destination and communicate positive evaluations.

2.3 Sustainable Destination Image and Destination Loyalty

Social destination image refers to tourists' perceptions of local hospitality, public safety, social inclusion, community cohesion and interactions between visitors and host communities. Intergroup Contact Theory proposes that positive interactions between members of different social groups can reduce social distance and encourage favourable attitudes (Allport, 1954). In tourism settings, welcoming residents, helpful service personnel and a safe social environment may help visitors feel accepted and comfortable. Such perceptions can improve destination evaluations. Positive social interactions may also support favourable word-of-mouth (Yuan & Vui, 2023). Therefore:

H1: Social destination image is positively associated with destination loyalty.

Cultural destination image concerns tourists' perceptions of local heritage, identity, historical resources and traditional practices. Cultural attributes can distinguish one destination from another and provide opportunities for meaningful experiences. Visitors who value local traditions and heritage may develop stronger positive evaluations and an interest in returning. Cultural participation and authentic experiences have been linked to tourist satisfaction and emotional connections (Kim & Malek, 2017). Distinctive cultural experiences may also motivate visitors to recommend a destination. Accordingly:

H2: Cultural destination image is positively associated with destination loyalty.

Environmental destination image captures tourists' perceptions of natural landscapes, cleanliness, air and water quality, ecological protection and environmental management. These attributes are especially relevant to island destinations, where natural ecosystems are central to tourism appeal. Clean beaches, attractive landscapes and effective conservation may enhance perceived destination quality and the recreational value of a visit. Visible environmental responsibility may also reinforce confidence in the destination's long-term attractiveness. Prior work has identified the relevance of environmental perceptions to sustainable tourism and tourist loyalty (Kusumah, 2024). Thus:

H3: Environmental destination image is positively associated with destination loyalty.

Economic destination image concerns to tourists' perceptions of affordability, price fairness, infrastructure, commercial convenience and value for money. Perceived Value Theory suggests that consumers evaluate value by comparing perceived benefits with the costs incurred (Zeithaml, 1988). In tourism, reasonable prices and services that correspond to expenditure may improve evaluations and revisit intentions. Price fairness is also relevant to post-consumption evaluations and behavioural intentions (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Economic attractiveness, however, should not be reduced to low prices: visitors may accept higher costs when they perceive service quality and experiences to justify the expenditure. Favourable perceptions of economic value may therefore strengthen destination preference and recommendation intentions (Musa et al., 2025). Accordingly:

H4: Economic destination image is positively associated with destination loyalty.

By using a quantitative approach, the proposed conceptual is illustrated in Figure 2.

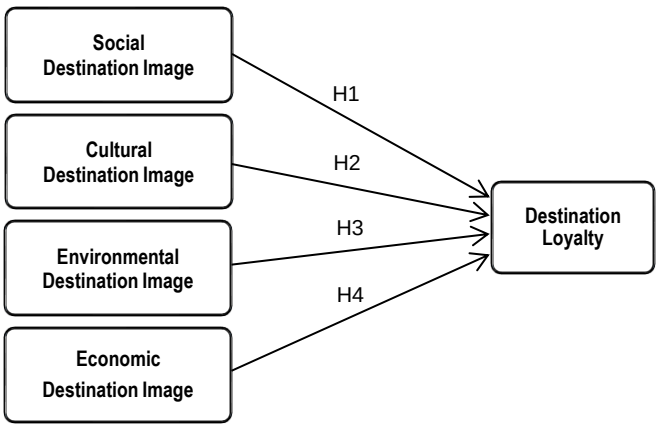


Fig 2: Proposed conceptual framework

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Measurement Instrument

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional approach, with data obtained through a self-completion online survey administered via WenJuanXing. The survey instrument comprised two main sections. The first gathered respondents' demographic profiles and travel characteristics, covering respondents' age, gender, highest educational level, marital and family status, occupation, duration of stay, previous visitation frequency, and main travel motivation (Table 2). The second section assessed five latent constructs through measurement items adapted from established studies and modified to reflect the Hainan tourism context (Table 3).

Table 2. Demographic and travel-related characteristics

Dimension		Items
A.	**Age**	18-29; 30-39; 40-49; 50 years and above
B.	**Gender**	Male; Female; Prefer not to say
C.	**Educational attainment**	High school; Diploma; Undergraduate; Postgraduate; Others
D.	**Marital and family status**	Single; Married with no children; Married with one child; Married with two or more children
E.	**Occupation**	Student; Self-employed; Professional/Managerial; Government employee; Retired; Freelancer
F.	**Length of stay**	Same-day visitor; Overnight visitor
G.	**Number of previous visits**	Once; 2-3 times; More than 3 times
H.	**Primary travel purpose**	Vacation/Leisure; Business/Work; Academic/Research; Visiting family/friends; Lifestyle travel

Table 3. Measurement constructs, items and sources

Construct	Item number	Item
Social Destination Image	SDI1	Visitors from different backgrounds feel socially welcomed in Hainan.
	SDI2	Local communities appear harmonious and cohesive.
(Ap & Crompton, 1998;	SDI3	Residents seem to maintain a good quality of life alongside tourism.
Choi & Sirakaya, 2006;	SDI4	Tourism development appears socially balanced.
Seraphin et al., 2018)	SDI5	The destination presents a positive and inclusive social atmosphere.
	SDI6	Feel safe and secure while traveling in Hainan.
Cultural Destination Image	CDI1	Hainan offers festivals and events that feel culturally authentic.
	CDI2	The local cuisine in Hainan reflects genuine regional traditions.
(Echtner & Ritchie, 1993;	CDI3	Hainan has a unique cultural identity that distinguishes it from other destinations.
Kusumah, 2024;	CDI4	Cultural activities in Hainan allow visitors to meaningfully participate in local traditions.
Lee & Xue, 2020;	CDI5	Hainan effectively preserves and protects its valuable cultural heritage.
UNESCO, 2003)	CDI6	Local arts and crafts in Hainan demonstrate genuine artisan skills.
	CDI7	Hainan respectfully showcased its ethnic minority cultures.
Environmental Destination Image	EDI1	Hainan is a clean and visually well-maintained destination.
	EDI2	The natural scenery and landscapes in Hainan are well preserved.
(Echtner & Ritchie, 1993;	EDI3	Water environments (beaches, lakes, rivers) in Hainan appear clean.
Kusumah, 2024;	EDI4	The air quality in Hainan feels fresh and unpolluted.
Lee & Xue, 2020)	EDI5	Hainan demonstrates visible efforts toward nature conservation and biodiversity.
	EDI6	Environmentally responsible practices (e.g., recycling, green transport) are evident in Hainan.
Economic Destination Image	ECI1	Hainan offers good value for money compared to other similar destinations.
	ECI2	Good public transportation system.
(Echtner & Ritchie, 1993;	ECI3	Good public infrastructures.
Kusumah, 2024;	ECI4	Tourism appears to benefit the local economy fairly.

Lee & Xue, 2020)	ECI5	Tourism in Hainan appears to benefit locally-owned businesses and residents.
	ECI6	Prices in Hainan are transparent and fair for tourists.
Destination Loyalty	DL1	Desire to return to Hainan in the near future
	DL2	Hainan is an attractive travel destination
(Wu, 2016)	DL3	Availability to promote Hainan to others
	DL4	Willingness to urge friends and relatives to visit Hainan
	DL5	Willingness to speak positively about Hainan

3.2 Population and Sampling

The study focused on non-resident visitors to Hainan, operationally defined as individuals aged 18 years or older who did not hold a Hainan household registration (hukou) and had travelled to the province within the preceding 12-month period. This requirement ensured that participants possessed sufficiently recent destination experience to provide informed assessments. Given the absence of an accessible sampling frame covering the eligible population, a non-probability convenience sampling technique was adopted. The online survey facilitated access to individuals meeting the specified eligibility requirements. The initial data collection yielded 510 questionnaires. Following data screening, 98 responses were removed: 67 due to substantial missing information, 13 for failing to satisfy all three eligibility requirements, and 18 because of uniform response patterns across most measurement items. Consequently, 412 usable questionnaires were retained for subsequent analysis.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Respondent Profile

The final sample comprised 412 respondents (Table 4). Participants aged 18–29 represented 39.8% of the sample and those aged 40–49 represented 34.2%; the 30–39 and 50-and-above groups accounted for 11.9% and 14.1%, respectively. Female respondents represented 52.7%, male respondents 43.7%, while 3.6% not to report their gender. Most respondents held an undergraduate degree (57.5%), followed by diploma qualifications (23.5%). Single respondents accounted for 46.6%, while 28.6% were married with one child. Freelancers constituted 45.1% of the sample, the largest occupational category. Most respondents were overnight visitors (87.1%), and 61.7% had visited Hainan once. Leisure or vacation was the principal travel purpose for 79.1% of respondents.

Table 4. Respondents' Demographic Characteristics (N = 412)

No.	Demographic variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	**Age**	18–29	164	39.8
		30–39	49	11.9
		40–49	141	34.2
		50 years and above	58	14.1
2	**Gender**	Male	180	43.7
		Female	217	52.7
		Prefer not to say	15	3.6
3	**Educational attainment**	High school	24	5.8
		Diploma	97	23.5
		Undergraduate degree	237	57.5
		Postgraduate degree	54	13.1
4	**Marital and family status**	Single	192	46.6
		Married with no children	48	11.7
		Married with 1 child	118	28.6
		Married with 2 or more	54	13.1
5	**Occupation**	Student	64	15.5
		Self-employed	38	9.2
		Professional/Managerial	69	16.7
		Government employee	30	7.3
		Retired	25	6.1
		Freelancer	186	45.1
6	**Length of Stay**	Same-day visitor	53	12.9
		Overnight visitor	359	87.1
7	**Number of previous visits**	1 time	254	61.7
		2-3 times	86	20.9
		More than 3 times	72	17.5
8	**Primary travel purpose**	Vacation/leisure	326	79.1
		Business/work	19	4.6
		Academic/research	6	1.5
		Visiting family/friends	44	10.7
		Lifestyle travel	17	4.1

4.2 Differences in Destination Loyalty across Respondent Groups

Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were applied to assess whether destination loyalty differed across demographic and travel-related groups (Table 5). Significant differences were observed by educational attainment, $F(3, 408) = 12.463$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .084$; marital and family status, $F(3, 408) = 3.364$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .024$; occupation, $F(5, 406) = 4.762$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .055$; number of previous visits, $F(2, 409) = 10.099$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .047$; and main travel purpose, $F(4, 407) = 5.511$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .051$. No statistically significant differences were found by age, $F(3, 408) = 1.278$, $p = .281$; gender, $F(2, 409) = 0.004$, $p = .996$; or length of stay, $t(410) = -0.975$, $p = .330$. Tukey HSD comparisons indicated that respondents with postgraduate qualifications reported higher loyalty than others. Undergraduate respondents also reported higher loyalty than diploma holders; the undergraduate–high-school comparison was borderline ($p = .050$). Respondents married with two or more children reported higher loyalty than single respondents ($p = .034$). Freelancers reported higher loyalty than students, professional/managerial employees and retired respondents. Respondents who had visited Hainan more than three times reported higher loyalty than first-time visitors (mean difference = 2.394, $p < .001$). Those travelling for lifestyle purposes reported higher loyalty than those travelling for vacation or leisure (mean difference = 3.945, $p = .001$). Educational attainment had the largest observed group effect ($\eta^2 = .084$), followed by occupation ($\eta^2 = .055$), travel purpose ($\eta^2 = .051$) and visit frequency ($\eta^2 = .047$).

Table 5. Differences in destination loyalty across demographic and travel-related characteristics (N = 412)

Characteristic	Test	Test statistic	p-value	η^2	Significant post hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD)
Age	One-way ANOVA	$F(3, 408) = 1.278$	.281	.009	—
Gender	One-way ANOVA	$F(2, 409) = 0.004$	.996	<.001	—
Educational attainment	One-way ANOVA	$F(3, 408) = 12.463$	<.001	.084	Postgraduate > High school (MD = 4.15, $p < .001$); postgraduate > diploma (MD = 3.78, $p < .001$); postgraduate > undergraduate (MD = 1.91, $p = .010$); undergraduate > diploma (MD = 1.87, $p = .001$). Undergraduate > high school was borderline (MD = 2.24, $p = .050$).
Marital and family status	One-way ANOVA	$F(3, 408) = 3.364$	.019	.024	Married with 2+ children > single (MD = 1.756, $p = .034$).
Occupation	One-way ANOVA	$F(5, 406) = 4.762$	<.001	.055	Freelancer > student (MD = 2.002, $p = .011$); freelancer > professional/managerial (MD = 2.072, $p = .005$); freelancer > retired (MD = 2.525, $p = .049$).
Length of stay	Independent-samples t-test	$t(410) = -0.975$	.330	.002	—
Number of previous visits	One-way ANOVA	$F(2, 409) = 10.099$	<.001	.047	More than 3 visits > 1 visit (MD = 2.394, $p < .001$).
Primary travel purpose	One-way ANOVA	$F(4, 407) = 5.511$	<.001	.051	Lifestyle travel > vacation/leisure (MD = 3.945, $p = .001$).

Notes. η^2 is eta-squared, calculated as the between-groups sum of squares divided by the total sum of squares. For length of stay, η^2 was estimated from the reported t statistic and degrees of freedom. Mean differences (MD) are calculated as the first group minus the second group; ">" indicates the group with the higher mean.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

The results shown in Table 6 support internal consistency reliability and convergent validity for the five constructs. outer loadings ranged from .688 to .877. Two indicators—SDI4 (.688) and CDI6 (.698)—were marginally below .70. They were retained because the construct-level reliability and convergent-validity statistics met the reported criteria. Composite reliability ranged from .900 to .925, exceeding the commonly applied .70 criterion, while AVE ranged from .597 to .701, above the .50 threshold (Hair et al., 2019). The reported HTMT values ranged from .250 to .516, below the conservative .85 criterion (Hair et al., 2019). The results therefore indicate that the social, cultural, environmental and economic image constructs and destination loyalty are empirically distinguishable in this sample (Table 7).

Table 6. Measurement Model and Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Outer loading	CR	AVE
SDI	SDI1	0.826	0.907	0.622
	SDI2	0.717		
	SDI3	0.822		
	SDI4	0.688		
	SDI5	0.793		
	SDI6	0.869		
CDI	CDI1	0.750	0.912	0.597
	CDI2	0.789		
	CDI3	0.811		
	CDI4	0.781		
	CDI5	0.747		
	CDI6	0.698		

	CDI7	0.826		
EDI	EDI1	0.835	0.925	0.672
	EDI2	0.836		
	EDI3	0.755		
	EDI4	0.840		
	EDI5	0.877		
	EDI6	0.770		
ECI	ECI1	0.719	0.9	0.602
	ECI2	0.757		
	ECI3	0.771		
	ECI4	0.799		
	ECI5	0.864		
	ECI6	0.734		
DL	DL1	0.790	0.921	0.701
	DL2	0.839		
	DL3	0.831		
	DL4	0.869		
	DL5	0.856		

Table 7. Discriminant Validity (HTMT ratio)

	CDI	DL	ECI	EDI	SDI
CDI					
DL	0.459				
ECI	0.273	0.389			
EDI	0.273	0.516	0.298		
SDI	0.283	0.428	0.34	0.25	

The structural model results support all four hypotheses (Table 8). Social destination image was positively associated with destination loyalty (β = .211, SE = .040, t = 5.233, p < .001, 95% CI [.134, .290]), supporting H1. Cultural destination image also had a positive association with loyalty (β = .249, SE = .038, t = 6.559, p < .001, 95% CI [.175, .325]), supporting H2. Environmental destination image showed the largest coefficient (β = .321, SE = .042, t = 7.624, p < .001, 95% CI [.238, .402]), supporting H3. Economic destination image had a smaller but statistically significant positive association with loyalty (β = .134, SE = .038, t = 3.507, p < .001, 95% CI [.062, .212]), supporting H4. All confidence intervals excluded zero. The effect-size estimates show a similar ordering: environmental image had the largest f^2 (.146), followed by cultural image (.088), social image (.062) and economic image (.025). Under conventional benchmarks, these estimates indicate small effects, with the environmental effect approaching a medium effect. The results therefore suggest that environmental and cultural perceptions make comparatively stronger contributions among the four dimensions tested, while the economic dimension has a more limited incremental contribution. VIF values ranged from 1.134 to 1.178, providing no indication of problematic collinearity among the predictors.

Table 8. Structural model assessment and hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (LL)	95% CI (UL)	f^2	VIF	Decision
H1	SDI → DL	0.211	0.04	5.233	<0.001	0.134	0.29	0.062	1.134	Supported
H2	CDI → DL	0.249	0.038	6.559	<0.001	0.175	0.325	0.088	1.178	Supported
H3	EDI → DL	0.321	0.042	7.624	<0.001	0.238	0.402	0.146	1.136	Supported
H4	ECI → DL	0.134	0.038	3.507	<0.001	0.062	0.212	0.025	1.163	Supported

Note. β = Standardised path coefficient; SE = Standard error; CI = Confidence interval; LL = Lower limit; UL = Upper limit; f^2 = Effect size; VIF = Variance inflation factor. Bootstrap confidence intervals are based on the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles.

5.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

The research investigated how the four components of sustainable destination image relate to tourists' loyalty towards Hainan as a tourism destination. All four hypothesised relationships were positive and statistically significant. Environmental destination image had the largest path coefficient, followed by cultural, social and economic destination image. The findings suggest that tourists' loyalty evaluations are associated not only with destination attractiveness but also with perceptions of environmental quality, cultural identity, social conditions and economic value. The study contributes to destination image research by applying a sustainability-oriented, multidimensional framework to destination loyalty. Nevertheless, the relatively modest f^2 values indicate that sustainable destination image is one part of a wider explanation of loyalty, rather than a comprehensive account of it. Two limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses exclusively on Hainan, China, which may constrain the generalisability of its findings to other tourism destinations with different geographical, cultural, and economic characteristics. Second, the research examines domestic tourists, limiting the extent to which the findings can be extended to international visitor markets. Future research could conduct comparative studies

across different island and coastal destinations and examine differences between domestic and international tourists.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study provides evidence that social, cultural, environmental and economic perceptions are each positively associated with loyalty, while also identifying differences in their relative contributions in the Hainan context. In particular, the study underscores the need to embed sustainability principles within destination development strategies and long-term planning, thereby supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

Authors Contribution to Study

Author 1: Conceptualisation and writing – original draft. Author 2: Data collection, formal analysis and interpretation. Author 3: Writing – review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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