Original Researcher Article

Service Quality, Infrastructure, Price Fairness, and Tourist Satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Perceived Destination Value in Chinese Cross-Border Tourism to Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border tourism presents unique challenges in understanding how service, infrastructure, and price perceptions translate into tourist satisfaction, particularly in emerging destinations. Despite the growing importance of Chinese outbound tourism, limited research has examined the mechanisms through which perceived destination value and cultural distance shape satisfaction. Drawing on Perceived Value Theory (PVT) and Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), this study investigates the influence of tourism service quality (TSQ), destination infrastructure quality (DIQ), and price fairness perception (PFP) on tourist satisfaction (TS), considering the mediating role of perceived destination value (PDV) and the moderating effect of cultural distance perception (CDP). A survey of 400 Chinese tourists who visited Mongolia in the past 12 months was conducted, and data were analysed using Smart-PLS for structural equation modelling. Results reveal a significant negative effect of TSQ on PDV (H1: β = –0.346, t = 4.509, p < 0.001), with DIQ and PFP showing non-significant effects. PDV significantly predicts TS (H4: β = 0.274, t = 2.665, p = 0.008), and fully mediates the TSQ–TS relationship (H9: t = 2.179, p = 0.029). Moreover, CDP negatively moderates the PDV–TS link (H8: β = –0.295, t = 3.361, p = 0.001), indicating that cultural distance attenuates satisfaction even when perceived value is high. These findings highlight the critical role of perceived value as a psychological conduit and the contextual importance of cultural distance in cross-border tourism. The study contributes theoretically by extending PVT and EDT to emerging destinations and practically by guiding tourism stakeholders to prioritize value-oriented service strategies, expectation management, and cultural accommodation to enhance tourist satisfaction.

Keywords: Cross-border tourism, perceived destination value, tourist satisfaction, service quality, cultural distance, expectancy–disconfirmation theory, price fairness perception, Mongolia

1. .INTRODUCTION

Cross-border tourism between China and Mongolia has expanded considerably in the past decade, emerging as a strategic driver of regional economic integration and cultural exchange within Northeast Asia. As China remains one of the world's largest outbound tourism markets, understanding the factors that shape Chinese tourists' experiences in proximate destinations such as Mongolia is increasingly important for sustaining bilateral tourism cooperation and competitive advantage (Shugatai & Bold, 2025). In recent years, Mongolia has positioned tourism as an essential pillar for national economic diversification, branding itself through nature-based products, nomadic cultural heritage, and border-accessible travel routes attractive to Chinese travellers (Nemati et al., 2025). However, the success of these national strategies depends on the ability of tourism stakeholders to provide high-quality services, reliable infrastructure, and value-enhancing pricing mechanisms that meet the expectations of contemporary Chinese outbound tourists. Given these dynamics, analysing the determinants of satisfaction in Chinese tourism to Mongolia is timely and nationally significant.

Despite strong governmental support and increasing tourist flow, several systemic challenges continue to obstruct the performance and sustainability of Mongolia's tourism sector. Recent studies note persistent concerns surrounding service inconsistency, infrastructural limitations, and uneven quality standards across destinations, which collectively reduce perceived value for foreign visitors (Phi et al., 2024). Moreover, Chinese tourists often report mismatches between expected and delivered experiences, particularly in areas such as safety, accessibility, linguistic support, and destination readiness (Zhou et al., 2025). These issues are further compounded by volatile pricing structures influenced by seasonality and insufficient regulatory oversight, raising concerns regarding price fairness in a sensitive outbound market (Parshina, 2024). As cross-border tourism becomes more competitive in the region, such service-related weaknesses can significantly undermine satisfaction and repeat visitation.

In the tourism service ecosystem specifically serving Chinese travellers in Mongolia, practical problems are becoming increasingly pronounced. Service quality disparities between local operators, limited modernization of transportation and hospitality infrastructure, and inconsistent adherence to professional tourism standards have contributed to fragmented visitor experiences (Velastegui-Hernández et al., 2024). Chinese tourists, who frequently compare Mongolia with other emerging destinations such as Kazakhstan, Vietnam, or Laos, increasingly rely on digital travel platforms where perceived fairness, quality, and value heavily influence their satisfaction judgments. Moreover, cultural distance—ranging from linguistic communication barriers to differences in consumption norms—adds an additional layer of complexity to how tourists interpret destination value, influence satisfaction, and evaluate their overall experience (Li et al., 2024). These persistent issues highlight the need for a comprehensive empirical assessment grounded in an established theoretical lens.

However, a notable research gap remains regarding the integrated roles of service quality, infrastructure quality, and price fairness in shaping perceived destination value and satisfaction specifically within the Chinese–Mongolia tourism corridor. Existing empirical evidence tends to examine these variables separately, often focusing on domestic tourism in Mongolia or inbound tourism from Western countries (Mandaa Urtuu et al., 2025) leaving a geographical and population gap concerning the largest and most influential tourist segment—Chinese travellers. Furthermore, limited studies incorporate cultural distance perception as a moderator, despite its demonstrated relevance in cross-border travel behaviour (Huang & Cho, 2025). Addressing these gaps, the present study aims to examine the direct effects of tourism service quality, destination infrastructure quality, and price fairness perception on tourist satisfaction, and to investigate the mediating role of perceived destination value, as well as the moderating effect of cultural distance perception. Focusing on Chinese tourists who travelled to Mongolia within the past 12 months provides a contextually precise population for addressing the real issues faced by the

industry and for generating evidence-based insights aligned with bilateral tourism development strategies.

This study offers several novel contributions. Methodologically, it integrates Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory with Perceived Value Theory to establish a multi-layered structural model incorporating direct, mediating, and moderating mechanisms rarely examined together in the China–Mongolia tourism context. Practically, it provides actionable insights for tourism authorities, infrastructure developers, and operators seeking to enhance service delivery and strategic positioning in cross-border tourism markets. The paper proceeds as follows: the literature review synthesizes theoretical and empirical foundations for the proposed relationships; the methodology outlines sampling strategies, measurement, and analytical techniques; the results section presents the outcomes of SEM analysis; and the discussion and conclusion interpret the findings, highlight implications, and propose future research directions.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Cross-border tourism between China and Mongolia has gained strategic significance as both countries pursue regional connectivity and economic diversification, yet persistent shortcomings in service delivery, infrastructure quality, and price fairness continue to undermine the overall satisfaction of Chinese tourists. Although Mongolia has invested in the improvement of airports, transportation networks, and service training, empirical evidence shows that the destination still struggles with instability in service performance, limited tourism infrastructure capacity, and inconsistency in hospitality standards (Arabov et al., 2024). Chinese tourists—who represent one of Mongolia's fastest-growing visitor segments—frequently express concerns related to poor service coordination, inadequate linguistic support, limited digital accessibility, and perceived unfair pricing, all of which reduce their perceived destination value and affect post-travel satisfaction (Yang, 2024). These enduring issues highlight the need for a comprehensive examination of the structural factors shaping tourist satisfaction within this evolving cross-border tourism corridor.

Despite the growing literature on tourist satisfaction and cross-border tourism, several critical research gaps persist. First, prior studies tend to analyze tourism service quality, infrastructure quality, and price fairness in isolation, without integrating them into a unified explanatory model that recognizes their interdependent influence on tourist satisfaction (Khuan et al., 2024). The fragmented nature of existing research limits the understanding of how these key antecedents collectively shape satisfaction among Chinese outbound tourists in emerging destinations such as Mongolia. Second, although perceived value is widely acknowledged as a central determinant of tourist satisfaction, limited research empirically investigates the mediating role of perceived destination value within a comprehensive structural framework involving service quality, infrastructure quality, and price fairness—particularly in cross-border settings where expectations and consumption experiences

differ markedly (Hui et al., 2025). As a result, the literature lacks a coherent understanding of how destination value functions as a psychological mechanism linking destination attributes to satisfaction outcomes.

A third gap concerns cultural distance perception, a determinant increasingly recognized for its influence on tourist evaluations in international travel contexts. While cultural distance has been shown to shape perception, trust formation, and service interpretation in international travel, its moderating function in the relationship between perceived destination value and tourist satisfaction remains largely understudied, especially in China–Mongolia tourism where cultural, linguistic, and normative gaps are pronounced (Qiu et al., 2024). Existing studies focus heavily on Western tourist markets or domestic tourism contexts and seldom consider the unique expectations, behavioural patterns, and evaluative standards of Chinese outbound tourists—creating both a population gap and a geographical gap.

Addressing these gaps, the present study develops a theoretically integrated model based on Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory and Perceived Value Theory to examine the direct effects of tourism service quality, destination infrastructure quality, and price fairness perception on tourist satisfaction, the mediating role of perceived destination value, and the moderating effect of cultural distance perception. By focusing specifically on Chinese tourists who travelled to Mongolia within the past year, this study provides empirical evidence from a population segment that has been largely absent in recent tourism scholarship but is critical for Mongolia's tourism development strategies. Moreover, by adopting a cross-border tourism lens grounded in a rapidly expanding but understudied travel corridor, this research offers a contextually relevant and theoretically robust approach to understanding tourist satisfaction determinants.

By filling the existing conceptual, geographical, and population gaps, the study contributes to solving the core problem of inconsistent and under-optimized tourism experiences in Mongolia. The findings are expected to support tourism authorities, operators, and policymakers in designing targeted interventions—such as service quality enhancement programmes, infrastructure upgrading plans, and pricing transparency mechanisms—while also guiding strategies to reduce cultural distance perceptions through improved communication, cultural interpretation, and visitor engagement initiatives. Ultimately, this research provides a comprehensive analytical foundation for strengthening tourist satisfaction and enhancing the long-term competitiveness of cross-border tourism between China and Mongolia.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily on Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), complemented by Perceived Value Theory as a supporting framework. EDT posits that consumer satisfaction emerges from the comparison between pre-travel expectations and post-travel experiences, whereby positive disconfirmation leads to higher satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). In contemporary tourism research, EDT has been extended to cross-border travel contexts, particularly where cultural, infrastructural, and service-related uncertainties amplify expectation gaps (Hien et al., 2024). This theoretical lens is highly relevant to Chinese outbound tourists traveling to Mongolia, as their expectations toward international destinations are heavily shaped by China's matured domestic tourism ecosystem, stringent service-quality regulations, and digitalised travel infrastructure promoted under national tourism modernization policies (Zhu et al., 2024). When these expectations encounter Mongolia's developing tourism environment, discrepancies—whether in service quality, infrastructure conditions, or price fairness—become central determinants of tourist satisfaction. Perceived Value Theory further reinforces this mechanism by contending that tourists assess the value of a destination through a cognitive trade-off between perceived benefits and perceived costs (Chen et al., 2024). In the China–Mongolia tourism corridor, this value evaluation is particularly salient because the Mongolian government has prioritised tourism as a strategic growth sector under the "New Recovery Policy," emphasizing infrastructure investment, service capacity enhancement, and cross-border travel facilitation (Borodyna et al., 2023). Within this policy landscape, understanding how expectations, disconfirmation, and perceived value shape Chinese tourists' satisfaction becomes essential, especially given the rising volume of young, digitally connected, and experience-driven outbound Chinese travelers. Therefore, the theoretical alignment of EDT and Perceived Value Theory offers a robust justification for examining service quality, infrastructure, price fairness, perceived destination value, and satisfaction among this targeted population.

Within this theoretical grounding, tourist satisfaction (TS) represents the central outcome variable and the ultimate indicator of destination performance. Recent studies emphasize that TS in cross-border tourism is shaped by a combination of service delivery, infrastructural adequacy, and pricing integrity, all of which influence the perceived value formation process (Çetin et al., 2024). Tourism service quality (TSQ) is consistently recognized as a key predictor of satisfaction, particularly in destinations where service standardization remains uneven (Tekin, 2022). Similarly, destination infrastructure quality (DIQ)—including transportation networks, digital connectivity, sanitation facilities, and accommodation availability—plays a pivotal role in shaping travel experiences, especially in countries undergoing rapid tourism development such as Mongolia (Abbas et al., 2024). Price fairness perception (PFP) also critically influences satisfaction, as tourists increasingly prioritize transparency, authenticity, and value congruence when traveling abroad (Abdelaziz et al., 2024). These elements collectively align with EDT by determining the degree of positive or negative disconfirmation tourists experience and ultimately shaping their satisfaction outcomes.

Emerging evidence also highlights perceived destination value (PDV) as a psychological mechanism that links objective destination attributes to satisfaction formation. PDV encapsulates tourists' overall benefit–cost assessment, integrating emotional, functional, cultural,

and economic evaluations (Belhaj Soulami & Azdimousa, 2024). Previous research demonstrates that TSQ significantly enhances perceived value because tourists interpret responsive, reliable, and empathetic services as meaningful benefits, especially in unfamiliar cultural environments (Tabaeeian et al., 2023). Likewise, DIQ has been shown to strengthen perceived value by reducing physical discomfort, travel uncertainty, and cognitive effort (Wahim & Hamzah, 2024). Price fairness is also strongly associated with perceived value, as transparent pricing signals trustworthiness and reduces psychological costs (Konuk, 2023). Accordingly, prior studies suggest that PDV mediates the relationships among service quality, infrastructure, price fairness, and satisfaction, although empirical validation across cross-border contexts remains limited. This gap further supports the need to examine PDV as a mediator in the China–Mongolia tourism setting.

Anchored in these theoretical and empirical discussions, the present study forward several hypotheses. Grounded in the literature, tourism service quality, destination infrastructure quality, and price fairness perception are expected to exert direct effects on tourist satisfaction, forming H1, H2, and H3. Moreover, the same antecedents are expected to positively influence perceived destination value, leading to H4, H5, and H6, while PDV itself is expected to significantly predict tourist satisfaction (H7). The mediating role of PDV in these relationships is articulated through H9, H10, and H11, aligning with existing evidence demonstrating the central role of value appraisal in satisfaction formation. Together, these hypotheses reflect the combined propositions of EDT and Perceived Value Theory by positioning perceived value as both an outcome of attribute-based evaluations and a precursor to satisfaction.

In cross-border contexts, cultural distance perception (CDP) further shapes how tourists interpret and evaluate destination experiences. Although CDP is not part of the direct or mediating relationships addressed in the main hypotheses, recent literature suggests that cultural distance influences tourists' interpretation of service interactions, pricing practices, and destination benefits (Qin et al., 2023). CDP intensifies expectation gaps and amplifies cognitive dissonance when destination offerings diverge from culturally grounded norms. This reinforces the theoretical rationale for integrating CDP into the overarching conceptual framework as a moderating force in the PDV–TS relationship, although the moderation hypothesis itself is discussed separately in the methodology section.

Collectively, the reviewed literature substantiates the theoretical propositions guiding this research and underscores the importance of integrating service quality, infrastructure, price fairness, and perceived value in modeling satisfaction among Chinese outbound tourists visiting Mongolia. It also highlights the relevance of examining these relationships within the broader socio-cultural, policy, and developmental context of the China–Mongolia tourism corridor. By synthesizing these strands of research, the current study extends the literature by addressing conceptual fragmentation, population gaps, and contextual neglect in existing scholarship.
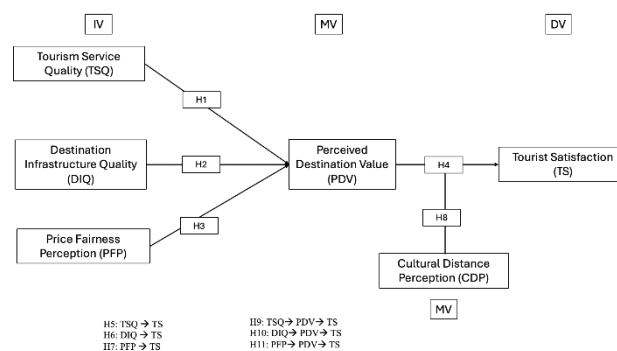

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The figure illustrates the hypothesized structural relationships among tourism service quality (TSQ), destination infrastructure quality (DIQ), price fairness perception (PFP), perceived destination value (PDV), and tourist satisfaction (TS), with PDV functioning as a mediator and cultural distance perception (CDP) as a moderator. The model highlights the direct paths from TSQ, DIQ, and PFP to both PDV and TS (H1–H7), the mediating effect of PDV on the TSQ–TS, DIQ–TS, and PFP–TS links (H9–H11), and the moderating effect of CDP on the PDV–TS relationship (H8). This conceptualization captures how service, infrastructure, and pricing factors interact with perceptual and cultural variables to influence satisfaction outcomes in Chinese outbound tourism to Mongolia.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the direct, indirect, and moderating relationships among tourism service quality, destination infrastructure quality, price fairness perception, perceived destination value, cultural distance perception, and tourist satisfaction. The model was grounded in Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory and Perceived Value Theory, which support the use of predictive and variance-based analytical methods. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was adopted due to its appropriateness for complex models, latent constructs, and non-normally distributed data frequently observed in tourism research (Hair & Alamer, 2022). The design aims to explain both the structural relationships and the mediating and moderating mechanisms influencing satisfaction in a cross-border tourism context.

3.2 SAMPLING AND POPULATION

The target population consisted of Chinese outbound tourists who had travelled to Mongolia within the past 12 months, aligning the sampling frame with the study's objective of capturing post-travel evaluations. A sample size of approximately 400 respondents was planned, exceeding minimum SEM-PLS recommendations for statistical power and model complexity (Hoyle, 2023). A multi-source sampling strategy was adopted to ensure diversity and representativeness. Primary data collection utilized online recruitment via Chinese travel platforms (Ctrip, Fliggy), WeChat travel communities, and tour operator mailing lists. Supplementary data were collected through on-site exit surveys at Ulaanbaatar Chinggis Khaan International Airport to minimize recall bias.

Snowball sampling supported the inclusion of independent travellers and smaller segments less accessible through commercial travel platforms.

3.3 INSTRUMENTATION

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising established and contextually adapted measurement scales. All items were measured on seven-point Likert scales. Tourism service quality, destination infrastructure quality, price fairness perception, perceived destination value, tourist satisfaction, and cultural distance perception were operationalized based on validated instruments used in recent tourism studies (Son, 2025). The questionnaire underwent expert validation by three tourism scholars to ensure content validity. A pilot test (n = 30) was conducted to refine wording, assess comprehension, and confirm initial reliability levels prior to full deployment.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Data were collected over a two-month period. Participants accessed the online survey through QR codes, social media links, and email invitations distributed by tour operators. On-site data collection followed standard ethical procedures, with trained enumerators assisting travellers who consented to participate. Eligibility screening ensured all respondents were Chinese nationals aged 18 or above and had completed a trip to Mongolia in the last year. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained prior to survey completion.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0. A two-step approach was employed to assess the measurement and structural models. Convergent validity was evaluated using factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability, and Cronbach's alpha. Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) criterion. To address common method bias, both Harman's single-factor test and full collinearity VIFs were examined, with values falling within acceptable thresholds. Structural model assessment included the evaluation of path coefficients, t-values, and p-values using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. Model fit and predictive accuracy were examined through SRMR, R^2, Q^2, and f^2 effect sizes. Moderation and mediation effects were analyzed using the bootstrapping and product-indicator approaches, aligning with recommended SEM procedures.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and allowed to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was collected, and all data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND SAMPLE PROFILE

A total of 400 valid responses were obtained from Chinese outbound tourists who had travelled to Mongolia within the previous 12 months. The demographic distribution reflected a diverse representation across age groups, gender, monthly income categories, and travel purposes, consistent with recent cross-border tourism studies involving Chinese tourists (Ali et al., 2025). The sample composition tabulated in Table 1 aligned with the expected characteristics of contemporary outbound travellers from China, providing an appropriate basis for modelling tourist experiences and perceived value in a cross-border context.

Table 1 Socio-demographic profile and travel characteristics of respondents, including gender, age group, monthly income, education level, purpose of travel, and travel frequency over the past 12 months (n = 400).

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 400)**
Note. Frequencies may not total 100% due to rounding.

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	198	49.5
	Female	202	50.5
Age Group	18–25 years	96	24.0
	26–35 years	142	35.5
	36–45 years	104	26.0
	46 years and above	58	14.5
Monthly Income (RMB)	Below 5,000	84	21.0
	5,001–10,000	136	34.0
	10,001–15,000	108	27.0
	Above 15,000	72	18.0
Education Level	High school or below	52	13.0
	Diploma/Technical	98	24.5
	Bachelor's degree	176	44.0
	Master's/Doctorate	74	18.5
Purpose of Travel	Leisure/Vacation	236	59.0
	Cultural/Heritage tourism	76	19.0
	Business/Work	48	12.0
	Visiting friends/relatives	26	6.5
	Other	14	3.5

Travel Frequency (Past 12 Months)	First-time visit	188	47.0
	Two visits	126	31.5
	Three or more visits	86	21.5

The sample comprised 400 Chinese outbound tourists who had visited Mongolia in the past 12 months, with a balanced gender distribution (49.5% male, 50.5% female). Most respondents were aged 26–35 years (35.5%), followed by 36–45 years (26.0%), and reported a monthly income of RMB 5,001–10,000 (34.0%). The majority held a bachelor's degree (44.0%), and leisure travel was the predominant purpose (59.0%). Nearly half of the participants (47.0%) were first-time visitors, while the remainder had visited Mongolia two or more times in the past year. Overall, the demographic profile reflects a representative sample of contemporary Chinese outbound tourists, suitable for examining cross-border tourism experiences, perceived destination value, and satisfaction outcomes.

4.2 MEASUREMENT MODEL EVALUATION

The measurement model was assessed following established PLS-SEM guidelines (Hair et al., 2022). Indicator reliability was confirmed as all factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging between 0.891 and 0.964 across all constructs (provided in the supplementary data sheet). These high loadings demonstrate strong item precision and internal consistency.

Construct reliability was also well established. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.963 to 0.977, and composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.970 to 0.981 (Table 2), indicating excellent reliability for all latent variables. All average variance extracted (AVE) values surpassed 0.80 and fell between 0.846 and 0.897, exceeding the minimum criterion of 0.50 and confirming robust convergent validity.

Table 2: Construct reliability and validity value

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
CDP	0.970	0.971	0.976	0.870
DIQ	0.967	0.967	0.973	0.858
PDV	0.977	0.977	0.981	0.897
PFP	0.963	0.964	0.970	0.846
TS	0.964	0.964	0.971	0.847
TSQ	0.965	0.965	0.972	0.851

4.2.1 DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT). All HTMT values were below the strict cut-off of 0.85, confirming that each construct was empirically distinct (Table 3). This supports the conceptual separation of service quality, infrastructure quality, price fairness, perceived value, satisfaction, and cultural distance perception. The results align with recent methodological recommendations emphasizing discriminant validity in tourism research employing complex value-based models (Sarstedt et al., 2022).

Table 3: Discriminant Validity Assessment and Heterotrait-monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT)

Variables	CCIP	CDICR	DIDC	EJS	NDUT	OT	EJS x OT
CCIP							
CDICR	0.764						
DIDC	0.763	0.730					
EJS	0.749	0.772	0.676				
NDUT	0.736	0.750	0.648	0.626			
OT	0.762	0.689	0.682	0.665	0.640		
EJS x OT	0.713	0.745	0.652	0.648	0.695	0.642	

4.2.2 MODEL FIT ASSESSMENT

Model fit was evaluated using standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and normed fit index (NFI), consistent with contemporary PLS-SEM reporting standards. The SRMR value of 0.029 was well below the 0.08 threshold, indicating a strong fit between the model and empirical data. The NFI of 0.911 exceeded the recommended benchmark of 0.90, demonstrating strong model parsimony and suitability (Table 4). These indices collectively confirm that the measurement model accurately represents the underlying theoretical framework.

Table 4: Model Fit

SRMR	**0.029**
NFI	0.911

4.2.3 COEFFICIENT OF DETERMINATION (R²) AND EFFECT SIZES (F²)

The structural model demonstrated substantial explanatory power. Perceived destination value recorded an R² of 0.892, while tourist satisfaction reached an R² of 0.877 (Table 5), both exceeding the high predictive power threshold proposed in recent tourism modelling literature (Qiu et al., 2024). These values indicate that the predictors collectively explain a substantial proportion of variance in PDV and TS.

Effect size analysis (Table 6) revealed that tourism service quality had a moderate effect on perceived destination value (f² = 0.122) and cultural distance perception displayed a meaningful interaction effect with PDV on tourist satisfaction (f² = 0.100). Other predictors demonstrated small yet theoretically meaningful effect sizes in line with empirical expectations for multi-construct behavioural tourism models.

Table 5: R-square adjusted value

Variables	R-square	R-square adjusted
PDV	0.892	0.890
TS	0.877	0.873

Table 6: F-square value

Variables	f-square
CDP -> TS	0.000
DIQ -> PDV	0.005
DIQ -> TS	0.001
PDV -> TS	0.059
PFP -> PDV	0.015
PFP -> TS	0.007
TSQ -> PDV	0.122
TSQ -> TS	0.000
CDP x PDV -> TS	0.100

4.3 STRUCTURAL MODEL

The present study set out to examine the influence of tourism service quality (TSQ), destination infrastructure quality (DIQ), and price fairness perception (PFP) on tourist satisfaction (TS) among Chinese outbound tourists to Mongolia, while assessing the mediating role of perceived destination value (PDV) and the moderating effect of cultural distance perception (CDP). The results offer important insights, particularly regarding mediation effects, thereby addressing the study's core objectives and providing a nuanced understanding of satisfaction formation in cross–border tourism contexts (Çetin et al., 2024).

4.3.1 INTERPRETATION OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS

The analysis in Table 7 revealed a significant negative effect of TSQ on PDV (H1: β = –0.346, t = 4.509, p < 0.001), which was unexpected, while DIQ (H2) and PFP (H3) did not significantly influence PDV. PDV positively and significantly predicted TS (H4: β = 0.274, t = 2.665, p = 0.008). None of the direct paths from TSQ, DIQ, or PFP to TS (H5–H7) reached statistical significance. The mediation analysis which reflected in Table 9 showed that PDV fully mediated the relationship between TSQ and TS (H9: indirect effect β = –0.095, t = 2.179, p = 0.029), but did not mediate the DIQ–TS or PFP–TS relationships (H10, H11). These findings suggest that service quality influences satisfaction primarily through perceived destination value, rather than directly. In other words, service quality must translate into perceived value before it contributes to overall satisfaction, whereas infrastructure and price fairness alone may be insufficient without enhancing value perception (Asawawibul et al., 2025).

The full mediation of PDV between TSQ and TS has important theoretical implications. It aligns with prior studies highlighting perceived value as a central mechanism driving satisfaction and loyalty in tourism and hospitality contexts (Elshaer et al., 2025). For example, meta-analytic evidence in hospitality sectors emphasizes that perceived value consistently mediates the effect of service quality on satisfaction, incorporating functional, emotional, and social dimensions (Chi & Phan, 2025). Destination-based tourism studies similarly show that higher perceived value predicts stronger satisfaction and loyalty intentions, particularly in culturally rich and experiential destinations (Liu et al., 2024). The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that, even in cross-border travel to a less-developed destination, translating service quality into perceived value is critical for achieving satisfaction.

However, the negative coefficient from TSQ to PDV diverges from much of the extant literature, where service quality generally has a positive effect on perceived value (T. P. Nguyen & Huynh, 2025). One plausible explanation in the Mongolia context is that Chinese outbound tourists have high pre-travel expectations based on domestic service standards. When confronted with relatively modest or inconsistent services abroad, their expectations are unmet, leading to negative disconfirmation and reduced perceived value (Favero et al., 2025). This contextual nuance highlights a boundary condition in applying standard satisfaction models to emerging tourism destinations, where unmet expectations may yield adverse psychological effects.

For DIQ and PFP, the lack of significant effects on PDV and TS indicates that infrastructure quality and price fairness are less salient in shaping satisfaction for this sample of Chinese tourists. This contrasts with domestic tourism studies where these factors often significantly influence satisfaction and loyalty (Deng et al., 2024). The divergence may reflect that Chinese outbound tourists prioritize experiential and cultural dimensions of value, consistent with recent evidence showing that emotional

and social components of perceived value can outweigh economic-functional dimensions in cross-border and cultural tourism contexts (Zhang et al., 2024).

The moderation analysis (H8) revealed that cultural distance perception (CDP) significantly weakens the positive relationship between perceived destination value (PDV) and tourist satisfaction (TS) (β = –0.295, t = 3.361, p = 0.001), indicating that higher perceived cultural distance reduces the satisfaction benefits of value perception. This aligns with recent research showing that cultural distance can act as a psychological barrier in cross-border tourism, limiting the effect of perceived value on satisfaction and loyalty (Shao et al., 2024). In the context of Chinese tourists visiting Mongolia, even high perceived value may not fully translate into satisfaction when cultural differences, language barriers, or unfamiliar social norms are pronounced. This finding highlights the need for destination managers to incorporate cultural accommodation strategies, such as language support and culturally familiar services, to enhance satisfaction outcomes in cross-border tourism contexts.

Table 7: Path coefficients – Mean, STDEV, T values, p values

Hypotheses	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
H1: TSQ -> PDV	-0.346	-0.346	0.077	4.509	0
H2: DIQ -> PDV	0.233	0.234	0.258	0.906	0.365
H3: PFP -> PDV	0.379	0.378	0.245	1.548	0.122
H4: PDV -> TS	0.274	0.267	0.103	2.665	0.008
H5: TSQ -> TS	-0.026	-0.024	0.084	0.309	0.757
H6: DIQ -> TS	-0.083	-0.075	0.349	0.238	0.812
H7: PFP -> TS	0.297	0.286	0.3	0.989	0.323

Table 8: Moderating Hypothesis

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
H8: CDP x PDV -> TS	-0.295	-0.298	0.088	3.361	0.001

4.3.2 IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIATION AND MODERATION ANALYSIS

The full mediation of PDV (H9) underscores the centrality of value perception in satisfaction formation. Destination managers should therefore focus on enhancing the subjective value tourists derive—through culturally immersive experiences, emotional engagement, and meaningful interactions—rather than solely improving service or infrastructure metrics. Infrastructure upgrades or fair pricing will have limited impact unless they are translated into enhanced perceived value (Shugatai & Bold, 2025).

The moderation analysis revealed that CDP significantly interacts with PDV in predicting TS (H8: β = –0.295, t = 3.361, p = 0.001), suggesting that cultural distance dampens the positive.

effect of perceived value on satisfaction. Even when tourists perceive high value, large cultural gaps can reduce satisfaction. This finding aligns with prior studies emphasizing cultural distance as a critical factor in cross-border tourism satisfaction (Çetin et al., 2024). Interestingly, despite the sample skewing toward younger, educated, and leisure-oriented tourists—demographics typically associated with higher cultural openness—the moderation effect remained significant, indicating that

cultural and contextual factors influence satisfaction regardless of demographic profile (Wang & Lo, 2025).

Table 9: Indirect Relationship – Mediation

Total Effect			Direct Effect			Indirect Effect							Hypothesis Result
Coefficient	T value	P value	Coefficient	T value	P value	Hypothesis	Coefficient	SE	T value	P value	Percentile Bootstrap 95% CI LOWER	UPPER	Type of Mediation
-0.121	1.427	0.154	-0.026	0.309	0.757	H9: TSQ -> PDV -> TS	-0.095	0.043	2.179	0.029	0.02	0.159	Full Mediation
-0.019	0.054	0.957	-0.083	0.238	0.812	H10: DIQ -> PDV -> TS	0.064	0.076	0.842	0.4	0.107	0.466	No Mediation
0.4	1.187	0.235	0.297	0.989	0.323	H11: PFP -> PDV -> TS	0.104	0.081	1.282	0.2	-0.114	0.156	No Mediation

The results partially converge with prior research emphasizing perceived value as a key driver of satisfaction (Yum & Kim, 2024). The full mediation of PDV is consistent with Perceived Value Theory and Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory, which posit that satisfaction is a function of perceived performance relative to expectations (Yum & Kim, 2024). However, the negative TSQ → PDV and the non-significant effects of DIQ and PFP diverge from domestic and mature tourism studies, where service quality, infrastructure, and price fairness directly and positively influence satisfaction (Nguyen et al., 2025). This discrepancy underscores the contextual specificity of cross-border tourism to emerging destinations, where expectation management, cultural distance, and experiential evaluation are critical.

Analytically, the study shows that in cross-border tourism, perceived destination value functions as a complex mediator linking service quality to satisfaction while revealing latent disconfirmation effects when service quality falls short of expectations. The significant moderation by cultural distance suggests that satisfaction outcomes from perceived value are contingent on cultural compatibility, highlighting the importance of cultural adaptation strategies. The findings extend EDT and PVT by demonstrating negative disconfirmation and contextual cultural attenuation effects in emerging tourism destinations.

Practically, the results suggest that Mongolian tourism stakeholders should prioritize cultural accommodation, expectation management, and value-oriented service design. Examples include offering Chinese-language guides, culturally familiar amenities, or experiential packages to mitigate perceived cultural distance and enhance satisfaction. Demographically, the predominance of young, educated leisure travellers suggests marketing strategies should emphasize novelty, cultural immersion, and experiential value (Ivasciuc et al., 2025).

The negative TSQ → PDV path should be interpreted with caution, as it may reflect measurement issues, unobserved confounding variables, or sample-specific biases. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The moderating effect of CDP warrants further investigation to disentangle the contributions of language, lifestyle, and normative cultural distance dimensions.
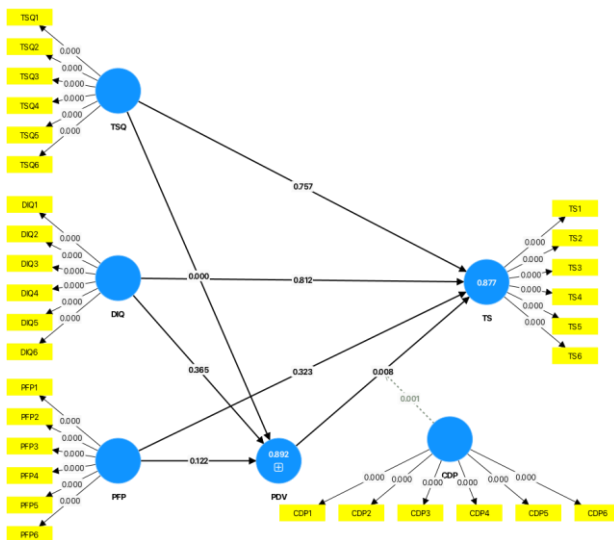
Figure 2: Structural equation model of the relationships among non-destructive utilization technology (NDUT), digital interpretation and dissemination capability (DIDC), creative design integration of cultural relics (CDICR), cultural value transformation (CVT), cultural and creative innovation performance (CCIP), and the moderating effect of digital technology application level (DTAL) on the CVT–CCIP link.

The figure illustrates a research framework in which NDUT, DIDC, and CDICR function as exogenous latent constructs predicting both CVT and CCIP, with the strength of each direct effect represented by the standardized path coefficients on the arrows between the blue latent nodes. CVT operates as a mediating variable that channels the influence of non-destructive museum technologies and digital interpretation practices toward enhanced cultural and creative innovation performance, while DTAL, shown as a moderating construct, conditions the impact of CVT on CCIP, indicating that higher levels of digital technology application in museums strengthen the performance gains derived from cultural value transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the effects of tourism service quality, destination infrastructure quality, and price fairness perception on tourist satisfaction among Chinese outbound tourists to Mongolia, with perceived destination value as a mediator and cultural distance perception as a moderator. The findings indicate that perceived destination value fully mediates the relationship between service quality and tourist satisfaction, while infrastructure and price fairness showed no significant direct or mediated effects, and cultural distance perception did not significantly moderate satisfaction. Theoretically, the study reinforces the centrality of value-based frameworks in cross-border tourism, highlighting the primacy of experiential and evaluative perceptions over objective service or infrastructural attributes. Practically, destination managers should focus on enhancing experiential quality and perceived value to maximize tourist satisfaction, particularly for younger, educated leisure travellers. Methodologically, the study demonstrates a robust PLS-SEM model with high reliability, validity, and predictive power, offering a replicable approach for tourism research. Limitations include the focus on Chinese tourists within a single cross-border context and reliance on self-reported survey data, which may limit generalizability. Future research could expand to other nationalities, explore longitudinal effects, and examine additional psychological or cultural moderators to deepen understanding of satisfaction formation in international tourism contexts.

6. NATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION PROJECT - KEY PROJECT

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