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Influence of First-Time Visitors' Perceptions of Destination Image on Perceived Value and Destination Loyalty: A Case Study of Grand Canal Forest Park, Beijing

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 pandemic, urban forest parks are becoming increasingly significant for recreation and relaxation, not just for urban residents but also for tourists. This study empirically examined the structural relationships among first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty through structural equation modeling. Additionally, the mediating influence of perceived value and the moderating effect of gender were investigated as well. The Grand Canal Forest Park in Beijing was selected as the case study. In total, 486 questionnaires that were considered to be legitimate were gathered and afterwards analyzed. The results revealed that first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image can positively and significantly affect their perceived value and destination loyalty. In addition, perceived value partially mediates the relationship between first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image and destination loyalty. Moreover, the findings of the examination of the moderating effects showed that gender has substantial moderating effects on the relationships described above. The theoretical and practical implications, limitations and future research of the current study are also discussed.

Keywords: perceptions of destination image; perceived value; destination loyalty; urban forests; the grand canal forest park

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1. Introduction

People's travel and their daily life have been significantly impacted as a result of the pandemic [1–5]. In order to relieve physical and mental stress, natural destinations with less population density (such as urban forests) are usually the first choice for people. Numerous studies have shown that engaging in recreational activities in urban forests can not only assist individuals in coping mentally with a negative emotional condition but can also help people physically improve their health status [6–10]. For example, through a questionnaire study, Beckmann-Wübbelt et al. revealed that the residents of Karlsruhe and Rheinstanden in Germany increased their visits to urban forests during the COVID-19 pandemic [11]. However, the majority of previous studies examined the need for urban forests from the perspective of local residents or repeat visitors; first-time visitors' recreational experiences in urban forests have largely been ignored. Limited research has been carried out to examine the differences between first-time and repeat visitors, and they have shown important differences in loyalty [12–14], satisfaction [15,16], destination image perceptions [17,18], activity patterns, etc. [19,20]. This line of research appeared promising and was the focus of this study.

A good tourism experience for visitors in urban forests can help them perceive the image of the city, improve their satisfaction and destination loyalty, and ultimately promote the economic development of the city [10,21–23]. According to the theory of tourism destination image, visitors will have an overall evaluation of the destination in the process

of tourism activities [24]. Under the influence of cognitive psychology, when visitors' perceived value of the destination exceeds their expectations, they will have a stronger willingness to revisit it and make recommendations [24]. The psychological attachment and trust to the destination generally indicates the high loyalty of tourists to the destination [25,26]. However, the existing studies on destination image have mainly focused on exploring the impact of perceived destination image on the tourism economy and development of the tourism industry at the national level or provincial level [27,28], while research on the influence of visitors' perceptions of destination image on their perceived value and destination loyalty at the individual level is still insufficient, especially for first-time visitors in urban forests.

In addition, recent research has suggested that men and women may have quite different motivations, experiences, attitudes and behaviors when traveling [29–32]. For example, Jia et al. claimed that the different perceptions of destination image by men and women will significantly affect the formation of perceived value and destination loyalty [30]. In spite of the fact that a number of researchers have investigated gender differences in tourism experiences, very few of them have examined the moderating role that gender plays in the relationships among visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty.

This study aimed to fill the aforementioned research gaps. In particular, the following are the precise objectives of this study: (1) investigating the structural relationships among the perceptions of destination image, perceived value, and destination loyalty from the perspective of first-time visitors that have stayed at least one night in urban forests; (2) examining how gender acts as a moderating factor in the structural relationships. The Grand Canal Forest Park in Beijing was chosen as the research case for this study.

2. Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

2.1. The Role of Urban Forests during COVID-19

Existing studies have basically showed that urban forests refer to the sum of all kinds of trees in urban areas, which take urban forest green spaces, urban gardens, urban greening, etc. as the carrier, and integrate social benefits, ecological benefits and economic benefits [5,33–35]. In recent years, because of the impact of COVID-19, urban forests, as an important green space in cities, have received unprecedented attention [10,36,37]. The urban forest has become an extremely important place for the public to have fun, enjoy themselves, improve their mental health, etc. [25,31,38]. For instance, in and around Burlington, Vermont, USA, 80.6% of the residents in the area indicated that their demand for urban forests was increasing [11]. However, most of the existing studies have explored the demand for urban forest parks from the perspective of urban residents, and there is a lack of in-depth discussions on the recreational experience in urban forest parks from the perspective of first-time visitors.

2.2. Visitors' Perceptions of Destination Image, Perceived Value and Destination Loyalty

The image of a tourist destination refers to the sum of the beliefs, imaginations, impressions, prejudices and emotional thoughts of a person or group regarding a destination, which profoundly affects tourists' decision-making, behavior, cognition, experience, loyalty, evaluations, etc. [39–45]. Research on destination image has attracted the close attention of many scholars [21–23,46,47]. In line with attitude theory, Gartner divided destination image into three dimensions, namely, cognitive image emotional image, and conative image. Cognitive image refers to the beliefs and knowledge of tourists about the destination, which reflects tourists' evaluation of the attributes of the destination [48]. Emotional image is the emotional response of tourists to the attributes of the destination [48]. Conative image is the possibility of tourists visiting the destination within a certain period of time [48].

On the basis of Gartner's research, Baloglu et al. replaced conative image with overall image, and believed that overall image was an organic integration of cognitive image and emotional image, and mainly applied the cognitive dimension and emotional dimension

to assess the destination image [49]. Furthermore, San et al. found that the destination image was composed of cognition and emotion in a study of 807 tourists in resorts, and believed that the two dimensions can be used to more accurately evaluate the destination image [50]. On the basis of this research background, this study used the cognitive and emotional dimensions to better measure the destination image.

Previous studies have usually assessed visitors' perceptions of destination image from four aspects: perceived image of the natural and social environment (PINSE), perceived image of the tourism infrastructure (PITI), perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere (PIHCA) and perceived image of emotion (PIE) [51–54]. Among these, the first three aspects belong to perceptions of cognitive image, and the last one reflects the perceptions of emotional image (see Figure 1).

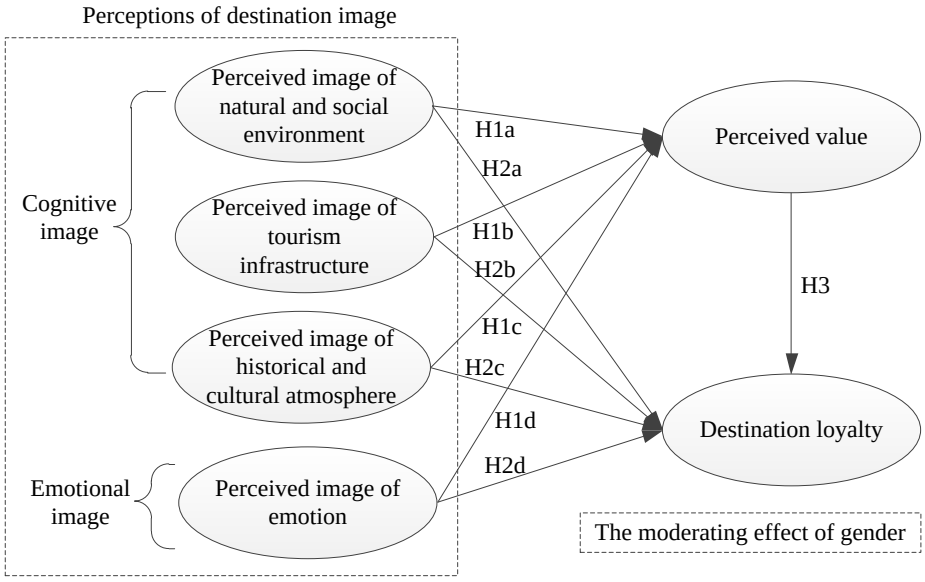

Figure 1. The conceptual framework of this study.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the present study.

The perception of destination image is an important factor affecting tourists' perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty [55]. Stevens (1992) argued that perceived value is the evaluation of tourists regarding the products or services they experience at tourist destinations [56]. During COVID-19, tourists often chose to go outdoors for relaxation and recreation [5]. In this process of experience, the products or services experienced by tourists will eventually form an image in the minds of tourists in the form of perceived value [57]. Perceived value can help to estimate the value of a destination through the difference between the perceived benefits and the destination experience's costs, and ultimately to make informed decisions and evaluations [58,59]. In the research of Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., it was pointed out that perceptions of destination image directly affected tourists' perceived value and satisfaction [51]. Similarly, Lee et al. also indicated that the perceptions of destination image helped to improve the tourism experience and, at the same time, enhances tourists' perceived value [22]. In line with the preceding discussion, the first four hypothesis are as follows:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): *The perceived image of the natural and social environment significantly and positively affects visitors' perceived value.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): *The perceived image of the tourism infrastructure significantly and positively affects visitors' perceived value.*

Hypothesis 1c (H1c): *The perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere significantly and positively affects visitors' perceived value.*

Hypothesis 1d (H1d): *The perceived image of emotion significantly and positively affects visitors' perceived value.*

Destination loyalty indicates that tourists have high psychological attachment and trust in tourist destinations, and repeat purchases and product recommendations are usually taken as important criteria for measuring destination loyalty [24,60–62]. Existing studies have shown that the perceptions of destination image are important factors influencing destination loyalty [24,63]. For example, the research of Chi et al. showed that the perceptions of destination image can help enhance tourists' destination loyalty [47]. The study of Hernández-Lobato et al. reached a similar conclusion [64]. They believed that the perceptions of destination image were an important prerequisite for destination loyalty. In addition, the empirical research on Orlando by Kim et al. also confirmed that perceived value has a significant impact on destination loyalty [65]. Gallarza et al. used the LISREL model to study the travel behavior of college students and found that perceived value profoundly affected the formation of loyalty [66]. Therefore, it is reasonable to offer the following hypotheses in light of the facts presented above:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): *The perceived image of the natural and social environment significantly and positively affects visitors' destination loyalty.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): *The perceived image of tourism infrastructure significantly and positively affects visitors' destination loyalty.*

Hypothesis 2c (H2c): *The perceived image of historical and cultural atmosphere significantly and positively affects visitors' destination loyalty.*

Hypothesis 2d (H2d): *The perceived image of emotion significantly and positively affects visitors' destination loyalty.*

Hypothesis H3 (H3): *Visitors' perceived value significantly and positively affects their destination loyalty.*

The preceding discussion demonstrated that visitors' perceptions of destination image have considerable positive influences on their perceived value, and visitors' perceived value also has substantial positive impacts on their destination loyalty. To a large extent, perceived value acts as a moderator in the relationship between the perceptions of destination image and destination loyalty [58,65,67]. In the study of cultural heritage tourists in Macao, Wang and Leou (2015) found that a positive destination image prompted tourists to have better perceived value, which, in turn, affected tourists' loyalty to the destination [68]. The following hypothesis is thus offered, based on the information presented above:

Hypothesis H4 (H4): *Perceived value mediates the relationship between visitors' perceptions of destination image and their destination loyalty.*

2.3. The Moderating Effect of Gender

Psychological research shows that gender differences will cause significant differences in tourists' travel experience, and the content and emotional responses experienced are also different [5,10]. It was suggested by Weng et al. that men and women have different emotional experiences, and that women are more likely to express feelings of fear and sadness than men do. Bendall-Lyon et al. also showed that there are significant differences in consumer loyalty caused by gender differences [69]. Thus, gender may moderate the

relationships among the perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty. On this basis, the last three hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 5a (H5a): *Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between the perceptions of destination image and perceived value.*

Hypothesis 5b (H5b): *Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between the perceptions of destination image and destination loyalty.*

Hypothesis 5c (H5c): *Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived value and destination loyalty.*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Description of the Research Case

The Grand Canal Forest Park is located in Tongzhou District, Beijing (Figure 2). It is built around the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal and has a profound history of water transportation. Its total area is 7.13 square kilometers. Since its opening in 2011, the Grand Canal Forest Park has formed an overall layout of 1 river, 2 banks, 6 areas and 18 scenes, and has won the favor of many tourists and local residents because of its good ecological environment, the beautiful and comfortable environment, the profound historical and cultural heritage of the canal, and its obvious location advantages. In 2019, it received 4.27 million tourists. Through the influence of COVID-19, the number of tourists in 2020 and 2021 decreased slightly, reaching 2.17 million and 2.23 million, respectively. As an ecological urban forest park, the oxygen bar along the ancient canal became an important recreational destination for urban residents and tourists during the pandemic.

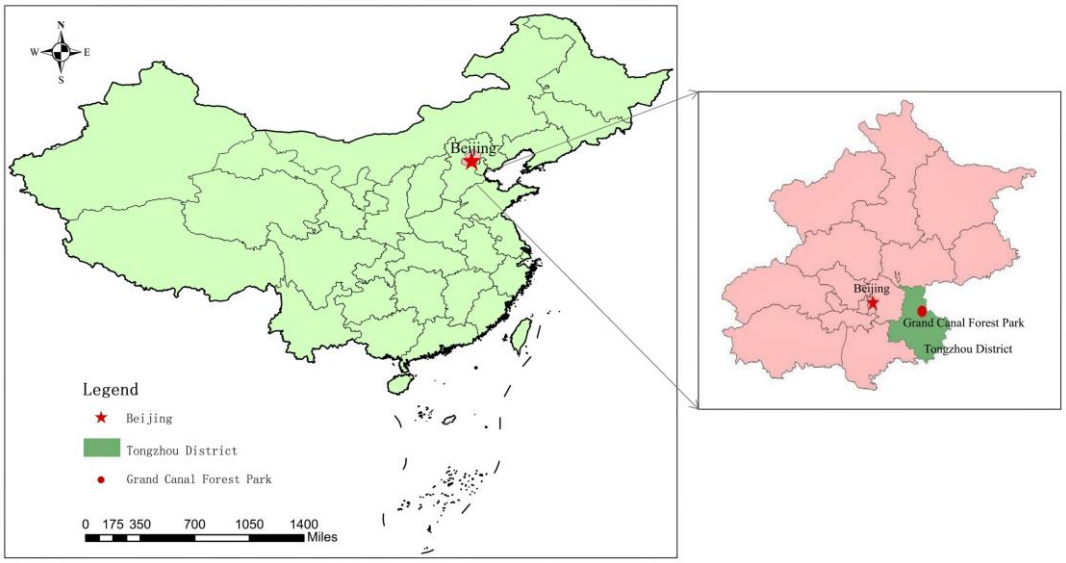

Figure 2. Location of the Grand Canal Forest Park in Tongzhou District, Beijing.

3.2. Questionnaire Design

For the purpose of data collection, a questionnaire was developed. There were two separate sections included in the questionnaire. The first section centered on the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. In the second part of the questionnaire, the measurements of the six important constructions were designed. The six constructs were the perceived image of the natural and social environment, the perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, the perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, the perceived image of emotion, perceived value and destination loyalty.

All of the items that were used to measure the variables were obtained from previously developed scales that were found in the existing research. Specifically, the perceived image of the natural and social environment, the perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, and the perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere had 3 items, 5 items and 7 items, respectively. These measurement items were adapted from the studies of Wu (2001), Wang (2011), and Zhang et al. (2017) [53,70,71]. The assessment of the perceived image of emotion was adopted from the studies of Lin (2017) and Stylidis (2017), consisting of 4 items [72,73]. In addition, in line with the research of Gallarza and Saura (2006) and Lee, Yoon, and Lee (2007), perceived value was divided into 3 dimensions, namely functional value (2 items), the emotional value (3 items) and the overall value (3 items) [66,74]. The measurement of destination loyalty was adapted from the studies of Chi and Qu (2008) and Weng et al. (2021), consisting of 2 items [47,75].

A Likert scale with five points was utilized for the analysis of the measurement items. Respondents were given translated Chinese versions of the items initially created in English [76–78]. To ensure the quality of the translation, a round of back-translation was conducted. In addition to this, a pilot study of 60 individuals was carried out to ensure that all participants understood the questionnaire without ambiguity. The participants were requested to fill out a test questionnaire and offer comments on the measurement scales and language used in this questionnaire. As a result of the comments provided by the participants, a few of the questions that were not obvious were modified in order to increase clarity in connection to the context of the current study.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The formal data collection process was conducted in the Grand Canal Forest Park from July to August 2022. Four well-trained research assistants were employed to collect the data. In this survey, the selection of research samples was mainly based on two criteria. Firstly, the respondents had to be over 18 years old. Secondly, the respondents had to be tourists (excluding local residents) who were visiting the Grand Canal Forest Park for the first time and had stayed at least one night. The qualified respondents were then directed to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the statements made in the questionnaire and how they related to their current situation [79]. After completing the questionnaire, the respondents each received a small gift as a token of appreciation. During the course of this study, 500 questionnaires were handed out to participants, 492 of which were returned; 486 valid questionnaires were obtained after excluding incomplete questionnaires, with an effective rate of 97.2%.

In this present research, the data were analyzed by using both SPSS 20.0 and Amos 21.0. Specially, this study firstly conducted a descriptive statistical analysis on the demographic information of the sample. Secondly, the data were put through a series of tests to determine their reliability and validity, and were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Finally, a test of the structural model, hypothesis tests, and analyses of the mediation effects and moderation effects were carried out.

4. Results

4.1. Description of the Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 provides an outline of the demographic information that pertained to the sample. It can be discovered that the proportion of male (51.9%) and female (48.1%) tourists was roughly equal. In addition, about half of the tourists (49.4) were between the ages of 18 and 35 years. Only 21% of the tourists had high school education or lower, and the rest of the tourists (79%) had an associate degree or higher. About one-quarter of the tourists (25.3%) reported their occupation as employee of an enterprise. Approximately 80% of tourists reported that their personal monthly income exceeded 3000 RMB.

Table 1. Description of the demographic characteristics.

Variables		Frequency (n = 486)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	252	51.9
	Female	234	48.1
Age	18 to 22 years	67	13.8
	23 to 35 years	173	35.6
	36 to 45 years	118	24.3
	46 to 55 years	56	11.5
	56 to 65 years	45	9.3
	Over 65 years	27	5.6
Education	High school or below	102	21.0
	Associate degree	143	29.4
	Bachelor's degree	155	31.9
	Master's degree or above	86	17.7
Occupation	Enterprise employee	123	25.3
	Self-employed or owner	109	22.4
	Student	96	19.8
	Government official	63	13.0
	Professionals, teacher or technical	78	16.0
	Other	17	3.5
Personal monthly income (RMB)	Less than 3000	101	20.8
	3001–6000	114	23.5
	6001–10,000	156	32.1
	10,001–15,000	83	17.1
	More than 15,000	32	6.6

4.2. Testing the Measurement Model

4.2.1. Reliability Test and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The results of the reliability tests are shown in Table 2. It can be seen that the value of Cronbach's α coefficient of the overall scale was 0.951. In particular, the values of Cronbach's α coefficient for the perceived image of the natural and social environment, the perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, the perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, the perceived image of emotion, the functional value, the emotional value, the overall value and destination loyalty were greater than 0.8. According to the results in Table 2, it can be concluded that the values of Cronbach's α coefficient for all variables were greater than 0.7, and the scales thus had good reliability [80].

Table 2. CFA results.

Variables	Mean (SD)	Factor loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Perceived image of the natural and social environment			0.871	0.693	0.870
The climate of this place is comfortable	3.66 (1.04)	0.830			
The nature of the place is beautiful	3.70 (1.02)	0.867			
The people of this place are warm and friendly	3.75 (1.02)	0.798			
Perceived image of the tourism infrastructure			0.897	0.636	0.896
The accommodation conditions are comfortable	4.16 (1.11)	0.812			
The sanitary conditions of this place are great	3.79 (1.07)	0.770			

Table 2. *Cont.*

Variables	Mean (SD)	Factor loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
The experiential activities were entertaining	3.77 (1.03)	0.740			
The leisure and entertainment facilities are perfect	4.02 (1.07)	0.884			
The scenic spots in this place are not crowded	3.78 (1.07)	0.773			
Perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere			0.928	0.647	0.927
The historical sites of this place are well preserved	3.79 (1.14)	0.806			
There are many historical ruins in this place	3.71 (1.17)	0.836			
Visiting this place allows me to feel the spirit of history	3.60 (1.05)	0.773			
This place can embody the effect of patriotic education	3.70 (1.11)	0.796			
There are many tourist activities in this place	3.69 (1.06)	0.810			
The activities in this place are full of characteristics	3.66 (1.11)	0.785			
There are many kinds of tourist souvenirs in this place	3.71 (1.11)	0.822			
Perceived image of emotion			0.886	0.661	0.886
Traveling to this place is relaxing	3.88 (1.00)	0.843			
Traveling to this place is exciting	3.83 (0.97)	0.798			
Traveling to this place is delightful	3.78 (0.95)	0.758			
Traveling to this place is unforgettable	3.90 (1.01)	0.850			
Perceived value					
Functional value			0.863	0.760	0.863
Visiting this place is reasonably priced	3.96 (0.96)	0.856			
Compared to the travel expenses, I got reasonable quality from visiting this place	3.94 (0.94)	0.887			
Emotional value			0.849	0.653	0.847
Visiting this place give me pleasure	3.80 (0.94)	0.843			
Visiting this place makes me feel better	3.76 (0.95)	0.831			
This place is a destination that I enjoy	3.75 (0.93)	0.747			
Overall value			0.853	0.661	0.853
The choice of visiting this place is a good decision	3.80 (0.92)	0.818			
I had good results from visiting this place	3.70 (0.92)	0.858			
Visiting this place is valuable and worth it	3.76 (0.93)	0.759			
Destination loyalty			0.841	0.726	0.840
I would like to revisit this place if possible	3.94 (0.85)	0.872			
I would like to recommend this place to my friends	3.90 (0.86)	0.831			

Note: Fit indices: $\chi 2/df = 1.595$, NFI = 0.943, CFI = 0.978, GFI = 0.929, AGFI = 0.911, RMSEA = 0.035 and SRMR = 0.029.

Additionally, confirmatory component analysis (CFA) was utilized in order to assess the measurement model. The results of the model's fit indices are presented in Table 2. All the model's fit indices satisfied the thresholds, suggesting that the measurement model matched the data nicely (see the model's fit indices in Table 2) [62,78,81].

4.2.2. Validity Test

The convergent validity and discriminant validity tests were used to make a primary evaluation of the validity test. The correlation between different components of a single variable is what is meant by the term "convergent validity" [61]. As presented in Table 2, the composite reliability (CR) was more than 0.6, while the average variance extracted

(AVE) was greater than 0.5. This demonstrates that the latent variables had a high degree of convergent validity according to the criteria established by Hair et al. [82].

The validity of discriminating among distinct variables is referred to as the discriminant validity [81]. The discriminant validity is good, according to Hu and Bentler, when the square root of AVE exceeds its coefficient of correlation with other variables [83]. The results of the discriminant validity test are shown in Table 3. The correlation coefficients of each variable ranged from 0.362 to 0.608. Therefore, the fact that the square root of the AVE for each variable was larger than the coefficient of correlation with the other variables is evidence that the variables had strong discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Variables	PINSE	PITI	PIHCA	PIE	FV	EV	OV	DL
PINSE	**0.832**							
PITI	0.473 **	**0.797**						
PIHCA	0.499 **	0.608 **	**0.804**					
PIE	0.455 **	0.380 **	0.460 **	**0.813**				
FV	0.549 **	0.476 **	0.497 **	0.368 **	**0.872**			
EV	0.571 **	0.362 **	0.372 **	0.480 **	0.517 **	**0.808**		
OV	0.567 **	0.433 **	0.488 **	0.475 **	0.563 **	0.538 **	**0.813**	
DL	0.622 **	0.542 **	0.574 **	0.529 **	0.523 **	0.490 **	0.566 **	**0.852**

Notes: ** < 0.01. PINSE, perceived image of the natural and social environment; PITI, perceived image of the tourism infrastructure; PIHCA, perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere; PIE, the perceived image of emotion; FV, functional value; EV, emotional value; OV, overall value; DL, destination loyalty. These abbreviations have the same meaning in the following tables.

4.3. Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

4.3.1. Test of the Structural Model's Goodness-of-Fit

In order to validate the normality of the data, skewness and kurtosis tests were performed. The results demonstrated that the skewness fluctuated between −1.426 and −0.336, and the kurtosis fluctuated between −0.546 and 1.375. Thus, it was concluded that the data followed a normal distribution [80].

In addition to this, the structural model consisting of the latent variables was subjected to the goodness-of-fit test. According to the findings, the structural model had a satisfactory match to the data as well ($\chi 2/df = 1.650$, NFI = 0.951, CFI = 0.980, GFI = 0.939, AGFI = 0.922, RMSEA = 0.037 and SRMR = 0.031) [80,82,83].

4.3.2. Hypotheses Tests and the Analysis of the Mediating Effects

The structural equation model was applied in order to validate the study's hypotheses, which have been stated above, and the results are shown in Table 4 and Figure 3. The standardization path coefficients of H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d were 0.441 ($p < 0.001$), 0.098 ($p < 0.05$), 0.096 ($p < 0.05$) and 0.175 ($p < 0.001$), respectively, demonstrating that the perceived image of the natural and social environment, the perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, the perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and the perceived image of emotion of visitors had significant positive impacts on the perceived value of the urban forest park. Therefore, H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d were all supported.

The standardization path coefficients of H2a, H2b, H2c and H2d were 0.217 ($p < 0.01$), 0.134 ($p < 0.01$), 0.119 ($p < 0.01$) and 0.136 ($p < 0.01$), respectively. The results suggest that the perceived image of the natural and social environment, the perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, the perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and the perceived image of emotion of visitors had significant positive impacts on their destination loyalty. Thus, H2a, H2b, H2c and H2d were all supported. Additionally, the standardization path coefficient of H3 was 0.342 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that visitor's perceived value had significant positive effects on their destination loyalty. Therefore, H3 was also supported.

Table 4. Standardization path coefficients and results of testing the hypotheses.

Hypothesis Paths	Estimate	S.E.	t	*p*	Results
H1a: PINSE→PV	0.441	0.047	9.405	***	Support
H1b: PITI→PV	0.098	0.042	2.311	0.021	Support
H1c: PIHCA→PV	0.096	0.040	2.437	0.015	Support
H1d: PIE→PV	0.175	0.036	4.826	***	Support
H2a: PINSE→DL	0.217	0.074	2.948	0.003	Support
H2b: PITI→DL	0.134	0.048	2.798	0.005	Support
H2c: PIHCA→DL	0.119	0.045	2.669	0.008	Support
H2d: PIE→DL	0.136	0.044	3.070	0.002	Support
H3: PV→DL	0.342	0.123	2.780	0.005	Support

Note: *** < 0.001.

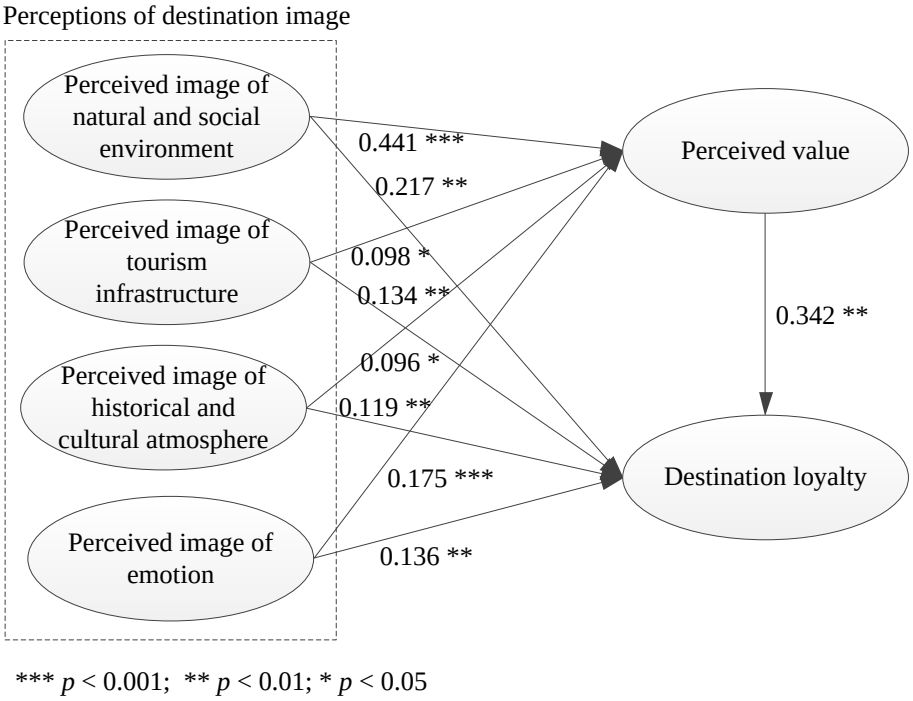

Figure 3. The results of testing the hypotheses.

4.3.3. Analysis of Mediating Effects

In the current study, the perceived value served as the mediating variable. This research utilized the bootstrap methodology in order to assess the mediating effect. Specifically, 2000 sample tests were carried out, and the total effect, indirect effect and direct effect were calculated (Table 5). The results demonstrated that the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect (mediating effect) of PINSE on destination loyalty was 0.032 to 0.300, and the 95% confidence interval was 0.039 to 0.303. Neither result contained 0. The findings thus indicate the mediating role of perceived value in the effects of PINSE on destination loyalty. Similar conclusions can be drawn for the effects of PITI, PIHCA and PIE on destination loyalty. In addition, the direct effects of PINSE, PITI, PIHCA and PIE on destination loyalty also existed. Thus, H4 was supported. It can be concluded that there is a partial mediation of the mediating impact that perceived value has. In other words, perceived value might impact visitors' destination loyalty both directly and indirectly.

Table 5. Results of the analysis of mediation effects.

Hypothesis Paths	Path Effects	Effect Size	Bias-Corrected 95% CI		95% CI	
			Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
PINSE→PV→DL	Total	0.368	0.265	0.471	0.262	0.468
	Indirect	0.151	0.032	0.300	0.039	0.303
	Direct	0.217	0.038	0.398	0.016	0.280
PITI→PV→DL	Total	0.168	0.067	0.274	0.070	0.275
	Indirect	0.034	0.004	0.099	0.001	0.087
	Direct	0.134	0.030	0.237	0.033	0.238
PIHCA→PV→DL	Total	0.152	0.061	0.246	0.060	0.241
	Indirect	0.033	0.002	0.097	0.001	0.088
	Direct	0.119	0.028	0.224	0.021	0.213
PIE→PV→DL	Total	0.196	0.113	0.283	0.113	0.286
	Indirect	0.060	0.012	0.139	0.011	0.136
	Direct	0.136	0.036	0.233	0.036	0.232

4.4. Moderating Effect of Gender

In order to investigate the moderating impact that gender has, a structural equation model with two groups of participants (male vs. female) was constructed. The results are outlined in Table 6. It can be found that, for both groups, the coefficients of the influence of PINSE and PIE on visitors' perceived value were 0.505 for males ($p < 0.001$) and 0.347 for females ($p < 0.001$), and 0.157 for males ($p < 0.01$) and 0.186 for females ($p < 0.001$), respectively, which are all significant at the level of 0.01. However, the coefficient of the influence of PIHCA on visitors' perceived value was 0.082 for males ($p > 0.05$) and 0.114 for females ($p > 0.05$), which did not reach the range of significance. In addition, the coefficient of the influence of PITI on perceived value for the male group was 0.028 ($p > 0.05$) and was 0.219 ($p < 0.01$) for the female group.

Table 6. The moderating influence of gender.

Hypothesis Paths	Male Group			Female Group		
	Estimate	t	*p*	Estimate	t	*p*
H1a: PINSE→PV	0.505	7.705	***	0.347	5.049	***
H1b: PITI→PV	0.028	0.554	0.579	0.219	2.993	0.003 **
H1c: PIHCA→PV	0.082	1.632	0.103	0.114	1.823	0.068
H1d: PIE→PV	0.157	3.033	0.002 **	0.186	3.681	***
H2a: PINSE→DL	0.102	0.794	0.427	0.324	3.729	***
H2b: PITI→DL	0.223	3.588	***	−0.064	−0.822	0.411
H2c: PIHCA→DL	0.096	1.574	0.115	0.141	2.213	0.027 *
H2d: PIE→DL	0.176	2.571	0.010 *	0.068	1.206	0.228
H3: PV→DL	0.369	1.783	0.075	0.464	2.967	0.003 **

Note: * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

Additionally, for the male sample, the coefficients of the influence of PINSE, PIHCA and perceived value on visitors' destination loyalty were 0.102 ($p > 0.05$), 0.096 ($p > 0.05$) and 0.369 ($p > 0.05$), respectively, which are not significant. However, the coefficients of the influence of PITI and PIE on visitors' destination loyalty were 0.223 ($p < 0.001$) and 0.176 ($p < 0.05$), respectively, reaching the range of significance. For the female sample, the coefficients of the influence of PINSE, PIHCA and perceived value on visitors' destination loyalty were, respectively, 0.324 ($p < 0.001$), 0.141 ($p < 0.05$) and 0.464 ($p < 0.01$), which are all significant at the level of 0.05. However, the coefficients of the influence of PITI and PIE on visitors' destination loyalty were −0.064 ($p > 0.05$) and 0.068 ($p > 0.05$), and did not reach the range of significance.

In summary, the findings revealed that gender played a substantial moderating role in the relationships among visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty. Moreover, for female groups, the image of the natural and social

environment, the image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and perceived value promoted destination loyalty better than for male groups. However, the image of the tourism infrastructure and the image of emotion promote destination loyalty better for male groups than for female groups.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The present research makes several important theoretical contributions to the field of perceptions of destination image and destination loyalty. First, this is one of the first attempts to empirically investigate the demand for urban forest parks from the standpoint of first-time visitors. Because of the influence of COVID-19, urban forests have garnered an unprecedented amount of research interest [10,36]. However, majority of existing research has focused on examining urban residents' need for urban forest parks and their recreational experiences. For instance, more than 80% of residents living in Burlington, Vermont, USA, reported that their need for urban forests increased significantly during COVID-19 [11]. Although urban residents are an important group for experiencing urban forests, first-time visitors' visits to urban forests have been neglected. There are great differences between first-time visitors and urban residents in terms of travel motivation, travel time, consumption willingness and travel behavior [62]. Therefore, it is extremely important to explore the perceptions and behavior of first-time visitors in urban forests. The present study fills this research gap well.

Second, this is one of the first empirical studies to examine the structural relationships among first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty. Previous studies on destination image have mostly concentrated on investigating the influences of destination image on local tourism development at the macro-level [27,28], but the micro-level perceptions of destination image of first-time visitors on their perceived value and destination loyalty remain scarce in the tourism literature. This research fills this research gap, and the findings reveal that first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image significantly and positively affected their perceived value and destination loyalty, and first-time visitors' perceived values also had positive and significant influences on their destination loyalty. This is consistent with prior research indicating that the perceptions of a destination's image are a significant component influencing the perceived value and loyalty of first-time visitors. When first-time visitors' perceived value surpasses their expectations, they are more likely to return and engage in recommendations [24,55].

Third, this research investigated how gender acts as a moderator in the connections among first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty. Previous research demonstrated that men and women differ in terms of their tourism experiences, motivation and behavior [5,31,32,84–86]. For instance, Dagher et al. discovered that gender influenced customers' attitudes to their green shopping behavior [29]. Weng et al. found that gender was an important factor affecting visitors' recreational experience, environmental attitudes and environmentally responsible behavior [10]. Similar findings were also obtained in the present study. According to the findings of the analysis of the moderating effects, the relationships among first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty were significantly influenced by the visitors' gender. For the female group, the image of the natural and social environment, the image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and the perceived value promoted destination loyalty better than for male groups. However, the image of the tourism infrastructure and the image of emotion promoted destination loyalty better for male groups. It is intended that this study will serve both as a foundation for more research to be conducted in this field, as well as being a catalyst for other research that is of considerable importance.

5.2. Practical Implications

The current study has substantial practical implications for the management and sustainable development of urban forest parks. First of all, the managers of the Grand Canal Forest Park should understand that the experiencers of the urban forests include not only urban residents but also tourists. Thus, marketing to tourist groups should be strengthened. The Grand Canal Forest Park has a long history and cultural significance as a canal. Since its opening in 2011, it has become a model of the fusion of culture and tourism. Managers should focus on creating and improving the tourism image of the Grand Canal Forest Park. It is highly necessary to present its tourism image to tourists from all over the country and even from all over the world. With the easing of entry and exit policies after the COVID-19 pandemic, international and domestic tourism will recover quickly in the near future. The managers of the Grand Canal Forest Park should seize this opportunity to promote an increase in tourists and the sustainable development of tourism.

Second, it is recommended that the managers of the Grand Canal Forest Park pay attention to improving the image of this tourist destination. The results of the empirical analysis indicated that first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image are the primary determinant of perceived value and destination loyalty. Moreover, the destination image can be generally divided two dimensions (cognitive image and emotional image), in line with previous research [48]. The perceptions of cognitive image can usually be assessed by perceived image of the natural and social environment, the perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, the perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and the perceptions of emotional image are examined by the perceived image of emotion [51–54]. The findings show that the perceived image of the natural and social environment, the perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, the perceived image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and the perceived image of emotion all had positive and significant effects on visitors' perceived value and destination loyalty. Thus, the managers are encouraged to improve the tourism image of the Grand Canal Forest Park in the abovementioned four subdimensions, increase the perceived value of tourists, and improve tourists' revisit and recommendation behaviors. In addition, the research of Kim et al. showed that the infrastructure affects visitors' satisfaction positively [87], and the research of Della et al. indicated that adequate infrastructure and environmental hygiene are conducive to preserving the image of tourism destination [88]. Therefore, the managers of the Grand Canal Forest Park are recommended to pay attention to improving the tourism infrastructure and creating a good atmosphere, which will help visitors have a better experience.

Third, it was found that the structural relationships among first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty varied between men and women. The moderating effect results demonstrated that the image of the natural and social environment, the image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and the perceived value could better promote the destination loyalty of female groups. In addition, the image of the tourism infrastructure and the image of emotion could better promote destination loyalty of male groups. In light of these findings, one important suggestion could be offered to the managers of urban forest parks, which is that the policymakers of urban forest parks should consider the distinctions between men's and women's demands and provide a variety of leisure activities so that each gender may perceive the aspects of the destination image that are significant to them.

6. Conclusions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, urban forest parks became more and more important places for leisure and recreation, not only for urban residents but also for tourists. The current research empirically examined the structural relationships among visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty through structural equation modeling, and also explored the moderating effect of gender in the aforementioned influencing relationships. The results reveal that first-time visitors' perceived image of the natural and social environment, perceived image of the tourism infrastructure, perceived

image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and perceived image of emotion positively and significantly affected their perceived value and destination loyalty. Additionally, the mediating effect of perceived value was investigated as well. The results demonstrate that perceived value partly mediated the relationship between first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image and destination loyalty, showing that first-time visitors' perceptions of destination image can not only directly influence destination loyalty, but also indirectly affect first-time visitors' loyalty through perceived value. Furthermore, the moderating effect of gender was also explored and verified in the present study. The findings indicated that gender had significant moderating effects on visitors' perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty. For female groups, the image of the natural and social environment, the image of the historical and cultural atmosphere, and the perceived value were more effective for promoting destination loyalty than they were for male groups. However, the image of the tourism infrastructure and the image of emotion increased destination loyalty among male groups more effectively than in female groups.

Although the current study has established a solid platform for future research, it still has limitations. First, this study examined the relationships among perceptions of destination image, perceived value and destination loyalty from the perspective of first-time visitors. Future research is highly recommended to compare the differences in the structural relationships between urban residents and tourists. Second, this study only assessed the moderating variable of gender; future research may include additional moderating factors, such as age. Third, just one study site was analyzed in this research. Subsequent investigations are welcomed to be conducted at various case sites to verify the conclusions reported in this study. Fourth, there is no doubt that the motivations and tourism experiences of different groups of visitors (e.g., weekday and weekend visitors, first-time and repeat visitors) are significantly different, so future research is advised to compare the differences among different groups of visitors.

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