INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 15, Issue 4, (2025) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

Perception of Accessibility and Tourist Participation Behavior: Mediating Role of Customer Delight

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To Link this Article: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i4/25194 DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i4/25194

Published Date: 19 April 2025

Abstract

Tourist participation behaviors play a vital role in enhancing the competitiveness of tourist destinations. However, few studies conducted in the field of tourism have explored the antecedent variables that affect tourist participation behaviors. This study aims to analyse the effect of perception of accessibility on tourist participation behavior, the effect of perception of accessibility on customer delight, the effect of customer delight on tourist participation behavior, and the mediating effect of customer delight between perception of accessibility and tourist participation behavior. Quantitative approaches through the use of survey were used in this study. Data were collected using questionnaires involving 396 group tourists who have previously visited Xi'an. Respondents were chosen using multistage sampling technique. To analyse the data, descriptive analysis and covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) were used. The findings showed that perception of accessibility positively affect participation behavior and customer delight. Further, customer delight positively affect on participation behavior. This study also showed that customer delight served as partial mediator between perception of accessibility and participation behavior. This research contributes to the participation behavior literature by considering perception of accessibility and customer delight as antecedent variables and quantifying their influences on tourist participation behavior. The findings of this study can serve as a reference for tourist destination managers when they conduct marketing practices.

Keywords: Perception of Accessibility, Customer Delight, Participation Behavior, Tourist, China

Introduction

As society and the economy develop, living standards improve, and leisure time increases, the tourism industry is experiencing rapid growth (Cui et al., 2016). With the rapid development of the tourism industry, the study of tourist behavior has gradually become a

focal point in both academic and practical fields. During the tourism experience, tourist behavior is influenced not only by external environmental factors but also driven by psychological and emotional factors. In recent years, research on tourist participation behavior has shown that the level of behavioral involvement directly impacts the overall image of the destination, service satisfaction, and future behavioral intentions. Therefore, exploring the key factors that influence tourist participation behavior holds significant theoretical and practical value.

Perception of accessibility is one of the key factors that tourists consider when choosing a tourist destination. Accessibility encompasses not only the convenience of geographical location but also the availability of transportation options and the affordability of travel costs. Customer delight is a positive emotional state that is typically triggered by service experiences that exceed expectations. As a highly positive emotional response, customer delight has been widely studied in relation to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intentions. In the context of tourism, the feeling of delight may serve as an important bridge linking the perception of accessibility to participation behavior. Specifically, when tourists perceive a destination as easy to reach, they may experience a positive emotional reaction, which in turn can enhance their willingness and intention to participate in tourism activities. Based on the above background, this study aims to explore the relationship among perception of accessibility, customer delight, and participation behavior, with a particular focus on the mediating role of customer delight in this process. By constructing a theoretical model and conducting empirical analysis, this study not only deepens the understanding of the driving factors behind tourist participation behavior but also provides practical insights for destination managers to optimize service design and enhance the tourist experience.

The main contributions of this study include the following: First, it clarifies the direct impact of perception of accessibility on tourist participation behavior. Second, it reveals the mediating mechanism of customer delight between the two. Third, it provides data support and theoretical foundations for optimizing resource allocation and improving service quality in tourist destinations.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Perception of Accessibility

Perception of accessibility refers to “how easy it is to live a satisfactory life with the help of the transport system” (Lättman et al., 2018). This definition encompasses, but is not limited to, the accessibility of the transport system itself, the convenience of reaching it, and the perceived opportunities and ease of leading one’s desired life (e.g., the ability to access preferred activities) with its support. Transport is a fundamental prerequisite for tourism, serving as a crucial link that connects tourists to their destinations (Tóth & Dávid, 2010). Therefore, in the tourism context, perception of accessibility includes the following three aspects: there are many alternative ways to get to tourist destination; there are many convenient ways to get to tourist destination; there are many convenient transportation possibilities for getting around in tourist destination (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2017).

Customer Delight

Studies have shown that even satisfied customers are not always loyal customers (Torres & Ronzoni, 2018). Against this background, customer delight was introduced in the late 1990s

(Oliver et al., 1997). Since then, numerous scholars have explored the construct across a wide range of contexts (Barnes et al., 2021; Barnes & Krallman, 2019). Customer delight refers to a positive emotional state that individuals experience when their expectations are exceeded to an unexpected and surprising extent, and it is defined as "emotion composed of joy, exhilaration, thrill, or exuberance" (Oliver et al., 1997). Customer delight can be seen as a blend of joy and surprise (Dey et al., 2017). In addition to understanding the concept of customer delight, it is equally important to examine how researchers have operationalized the construct in previous studies. Oliver et al. created a widely adopted scale for assessing customer delight which contains three key emotions: happiness, surprise, and delight (Oliver et al., 1997). Customer delight was seemed as an emotional response triggered by an unexpectedly high level of positive performance, and it can be measured using three specific items: delighted, happy, and elated (Finn, 2012). Other researchers assessed customer delight using emotional indicators such as gleefulness, elation, and feelings of pride (Ahrholdt et al., 2017).

Participation Behavior

Customer participation behavior can be defined in both broad and narrow terms. In a broad sense, customer participation behavior includes diverse forms and degrees of customer involvement and engagement in the value creation process (Yi et al., 2011). From a narrow perspective, customer participation behavior refers to the active involvement of customers in the creation and delivery of services (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015). Customer participation behavior is considered an expected and necessary in-role behavior (Roy et al., 2020). Customer participation behavior can also help enhance service quality (Amorim et al., 2014; Heinonen et al., 2013). Researchers believe that customer participation behavior consists of four dimensions, namely: information seeking, information sharing, responsible behavior and personal interaction (Yi & Gong, 2013). In the specific context of tourism, tourists represent a category of customers within the industry. Tourist participation behavior refers to the various processes through which tourists take part in the production of tourism services, reflecting their willingness to seek, share, and engage in responsible actions related to relevant information (Yang et al., 2024).

Hypothesis Development

Perception is the primary mechanism through which humans cognitively interact with and make sense of the world around them. Perception has long been a significant focus in the field of tourism research (Yining et al., 2023). A substantial body of research has examined the impact of perception on behavior. For instance, a tourist's risk perception of a destination can affect their behavior, leading to a shorter stay or the selection of a safer destination with comparable attractions (Thapa et al., 2013). When customers perceive a service to be superior to other existing products, they are more willing to gather information related to the product, participate in marketing activities, and interact with service personnel. Therefore, customers' perceptions of accessibility might be reflected in their customer participation behaviors. Accordingly, the hypothesis was formed:

H1. Perception of accessibility positively affect participation behavior.

The cognition-affect theory suggests that individuals first perceive and process events in their environment before experiencing the related emotional responses. Cognitive processes are regarded as essential prerequisites for the development of emotions (Hongmei et al.,

2011). Positive perceptions can trigger positive emotional responses. When a product provides tourists with a positive consumption experience, it can lead to customer delight (Jiang, 2020). Accordingly, the hypothesis was formed:
H2. Perception of accessibility positively affect customer delight.

In the field of marketing, research has shown that customer delight has a significant impact on customers' behavioral intentions (Foroughi et al., 2019). Research consistently demonstrates that customer delight is positively linked to outcomes such as repurchase intentions and favorable word-of-mouth (Barnes et al., 2020). In tourism, the joy experienced during a trip often motivates individuals to share their travel experiences (Jiang, 2020). Hence, customer delight may motivate tourists to actively engage in participation behavior. Accordingly, the hypothesis was formed:
H3. Customer delight positively affect participation behavior.

According to the cognition–affect–behavior theory, cognitive responses influence emotional responses, which in turn affect behavioral outcomes (Hsu & Lin, 2016). Perception of accessibility, customer delight and participation behavior correspond sequentially to the three components of the cognition-affect-behavior theory. Throughout the travel experience, a positive perception of accessibility elicits feelings of delight in tourists, which in turn fosters their participation behavior. Therefore, customer delight may function as a mediating variable in the relationship between perception of accessibility and their participation behavior.
H4. Customer delight mediates the relationship between perception of accessibility and participation behavior.

Methodology

Study Area

Xi'an, located in central China's Shaanxi Province, is one of the country's most historic cities and a cradle of Chinese civilization. As the starting point of the ancient Silk Road and the capital of 13 dynasties, including the Qin and Tang, Xi'an is rich in cultural heritage and historical landmarks. The city is home to world-famous attractions such as the Terracotta Army, the Ancient City Wall, and the Big Wild Goose Pagoda. It was honored with the designation of "World Historic City" by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1981 (Jun-hui & Yong-hong, 2019). According to the 2024 May Day holiday tourism trend report released by Ctrip, Xi'an Receives three labels during the May Day holiday in China: domestic popular destinations, destinations favored by the post-2000s generation, and inbound tourism hotspots (CNR.cn, 2024).

Sample and Data Collection

This study selected group tourists in Xi'an, China, as the research sample and used a multi-stage sampling method to choose tourists from three travel agencies as survey participants. During the data collection process, the researcher designed a structured questionnaire to measure key variables such as perception of accessibility, customer delight, and participation behavior. The questionnaire was distributed via the Wenjuanxing platform which is the first and largest domestic online questionnaire survey platform (Yan et al., 2021). A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, and 438 valid responses were initially collected. During the data screening phase, 42 invalid and incomplete questionnaires were excluded based on criteria of completeness and consistency, resulting in 396 valid

questionnaires, with a valid response rate of 66%. The data from these valid responses provided a reliable foundation for subsequent statistical analysis and model validation.

Measures

This study adopted the perception of accessibility scale proposed by previous researchers (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2017). It contains 3 items. The study adopted the customer delight scale which was proposed by Ahrholdt et al. (Ahrholdt et al., 2017). It has 5 items in total. The study adopted the participation behavior scale which was proposed by Yi and Gong (Yi & Gong, 2013). The rationale for using this scale is its widespread application in service-related contexts (Hsieh et al., 2018). As this study focuses on Xi'an as the research area, the term "destination" in the relevant questionnaire items was replaced with "Xi'an" to make it easier for respondents to understand and answer the questions. For example, "There are many alternative ways to get to this destination" was modified to "There are many alternative ways to get to Xi'an".

Given that the original scales were not developed in Chinese, this study adopted the back-translation method to ensure linguistic accuracy and content consistency of the questionnaire. First, a bilingual administrative expert fluent in both Chinese and English translated the original English questionnaire into Chinese. Then, another independent expert who was unfamiliar with the original content back-translated the Chinese version into English. Finally, the researchers compared the back-translated English version with the original questionnaire item by item to identify potential translation discrepancies and made necessary revisions to ensure consistency in both language and conceptual meaning, thereby laying a solid foundation for the validity of data collection.

The study utilized the three aforementioned measurement instruments. Alongside demographic variables such as gender, age, educational level, and monthly income, participants responded to questionnaire items using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A higher score on an item reflects a greater level of perception and agreement with the statement presented in the questionnaire.

Results

Sample Characteristics

This study conducted a sample structural analysis of 396 valid questionnaires to understand the basic information of the participants. For demographic characteristics, descriptive analyses were employed, including frequency and percentage calculations. Table 1 clarify profile of the respondents .

Table 1
Demographics Information

	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	211	53.3
	Female	185	46.7
Age	20 or under	4	1.0
	21-30	98	24.7
	31-40	94	23.7
	41-50	83	21.0
	51-60	62	15.7
	60 or above	55	13.9
Education	High school or below	36	9.1
	Diploma	92	23.2
	Bachelor	211	53.3
	Master	43	10.9
	PhD	14	3.5
Monthly	3000 or less	24	6.1
Income	3001–5000	228	57.6
	5001–8,000	103	26.0
	8,001or above	41	10.4
Total		396	100

Measurement Properties

Validation of measurement models involves several key steps: assessment of the model fit, assessment of the composite reliability, and assessment of the validity (convergent validity and discriminant validity).

This study employs two kinds of overall model fit indices: absolute fit indices and incremental fit indices. Among them, the absolute fit indices include: χ^2/df, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Incremental fit indices include Comparative Fit Index(CFI). All these values fall within the acceptable range (Table 2). Therefore, this model could fit the data.

Table 2
Goodness-of-Fit Measures for the Measurement Model

Fit indices	Reference standards	Measurement results	Comments
CMIN/DF	1-3	2.296	The required level is achieved
RMSEA	＜0.08	0.057	The required level is achieved
CFI	＞0.8	0.973	The required level is achieved
GFI	＞0.8	0.953	The required level is achieved
AGFI	＞0.8	0.928	The required level is achieved

Validating a measurement model involves assessing its reliability and validity to ensure it accurately and consistently measures the intended construct. This study investigated the

interrelationships between perception of accessibility, customer delight, and participation behavior. The reliability test results of each scale (Table 3) indicated that all variables received composite reliability values greater than 0.6 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), ranging from 0.821 to 0.885. This indicates that the questionnaire used in this study was reliable. Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all variables ranged from 0.50 to 0.659, with all values exceeding the 0.5 threshold, thus supporting convergent validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Furthermore, the square root of the AVE for each facet was greater than the correlation coefficients between any pair of facets, indicating adequate discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) (Table 4).

Table 3
Results of CR and AVE

Latent Variable	Measure Item/ Dimensions	Factor loadings	CR	AVE
Perception of accessibility (PA)	There are many alternative ways to get to this destination	0.83	0.821	0.606
	There are many convenient ways to get to this destination	0.70		
	There are many convenient transportation possibilities for getting around	0.80		
Customer delight (CD)	Overall, I am delighted by the visit.	0.74	0.874	0.582
	I (will) gleefully talk about the visit.	0.76		
	I am elated about the visit.	0.83		
	I am proud to be visiting this destination.	0.72		
	The visit has been an unforgettable experience.	0.76		
Participation behavior (PB)	I have asked others for information about this destination	0.73	0.885	0.659
	I provided necessary information so that the employee could perform his or her duties.	0.80		
	I followed the employee's directives or orders.	0.83		
	I was friendly to the employee.	0.88		

Table 4
Discriminant Validity

Variables	PA	CD	PB
PA	0.606		
CD	0.340	0.582	
PB	0.460	0.540	0.659
Square root of AVE value	0.778	0.763	0.812

Hypothesis Testing

Structural equation modeling was conducted to measure the associations among perception of accessibility, customer delight, and participation behavior. The fit indices (χ^2 /df =2.296, $p < .001$, GFI = 0.953, AGFI = 0.928, CFI = 0.973, and RMSEA = 0.057) supported the appropriateness of the structural model. Table 5 displays the standardized path coefficients derived from the analysis of the proposed structural model.

The paths from perception of accessibility to participation behavior (β = 0.310, p < .001), from perception of accessibility to customer delight (β = 0.337, p < .001), and from customer delight to participation behavior (β = 0.431, p < .001) were positively significant. Thus, H1, which proposed that perception of accessibility positively affect participation behavior, was supported. H2, which proposed that perception of accessibility positively affect customer delight, was supported. H3, which proposed that customer delight positively affect participation behavior, was supported.

Table 5
Structural Model and Hypotheses Test

Path relationships	β	t-value	Results
H1: Perception of accessibility → Participation behavior	0.310	5.488	Supported
H2: Perception of accessibility →Customer delight	0.337	5.618	Supported
H3:Customer delight → Participation behavior	0.431	7.306	Supported

In the mediation effect test, The bootstrapping technique is the main method (Rahman et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). As shown in Table 6, the non-standardized indirect effect of perception of accessibility on participation behavior is 0.117. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval of indirect effect is [0.058,0.213] which does not include zero. Therefore, it indicates that the indirect effect is valid.

The non-standardized total effect of perception of accessibility on participation behavior is 0.367. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval of total effect is [0.248,0.498] which does not include zero. Therefore, it indicates that the total effect is valid. The non-standardized direct effect of perception of accessibility on participation behavior is 0.250. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval of direct effect is [0.114,0.405] which does not include zero. Therefore, it indicates that the direct effect is valid. Z values of non-standardized total effects, non-standardized indirect effects, and non-standardized direct effects are 5.734, 2.925 and 3.425 respectively. This also demonstrates that total effect, indirect effect, and direct effect are significant. Therefore, the mediating effect is a partial mediation. Thus, H4, which proposed that customer delight mediates the relationship between perception of accessibility and participation behavior, was supported.

Table 6
Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of the Hypothesized Model (from PA to PB)

	Point Estimate	Product of Coefficients		Bootstrapping	
				Bias-corrected percentile 95% CI	
		SE	Z	lower	upper
Unstandardized total effects	0.367	0.064	5.734	0.248	0.498
Unstandardized indirect effects	0.117	0.04	2.925	0.058	0.213
Unstand-ardized direct effects	0.250	0.073	3.425	0.114	0.405

Note: 1,000 bootstrap samples, PA=perception of accessibility, PB=participation behavior

Discussion and Limitations

This study explored the interrelationships between perception of accessibility, participation behavior and customer delight. The results revealed that perception of accessibility positively affects customer delight and participation behavior. Customer delight positively affects participation behavior. This study found that customer delight partially mediated the relationship between perception of accessibility and participation behavior.

This study offers meaningful theoretical and contextual contributions to the tourism literature. Theoretically, this finding complements previous research on tourist destinations in certain aspects and enriches the research on the antecedents of tourist participation behavior. Furthermore, by establishing a direct and indirect link between perception of accessibility and tourist participation behavior, mediated by customer delight, the study integrates cognitive (perception), affective (delight), and behavioral (participation behavior) dimensions within a single explanatory framework. This integration extends the cognition-affect-behavior (CAB) theory and provides empirical support for its applicability in tourism settings. In other words, it deepens the application of the cognition-affect-behavior theory. It should not be ignored that this study introduces customer delight as a key affective mediator in the link between environmental perceptions and behavioral responses, which has been underexplored in prior studies.

Contextually, the study focuses on Xi'an, a heritage-rich destination in China, offering insight into how perception of accessibility shape tourist behavior in historically and culturally significant environments. Given the increasing demand for personalized and emotionally engaging travel experiences, the findings underscore the importance of designing convenient accessibility that not only facilitate movement but also enhance customer delight, thereby encouraging tourist participation behavior. This research thus bridges a gap in existing knowledge by easy accessibility within affective tourism experiences and offering insightful implications for destination management and service design.

This study had some limitations. First, the study used a self-report approach to measure perception of accessibility, participation behavior and customer delight. This approach may have resulted in response bias. Second, the use of a cross-sectional design may have limited

the ability to draw definitive causal inferences from the findings. Thus, future studies are encouraged to adopt a longitudinal design to strengthen causal inference. Additionally, future research could further investigate whether moderating variables influence perception of accessibility, participation behaviors and customer delight.

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