

# DESTINATION BRANDING AND MARKETING OF HAINAN IN THE EYES OF CHINESE MAINLAND TOURISTS

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**Abstract.** Hainan's status as a popular tropical tourist destination in China is facing increasing competition and changing visitor expectations, making it necessary to re-evaluate its branding and marketing strategies. This study examines the perceptions of Chinese mainland tourists regarding Hainan's destination image, focusing on the alignment between its brand positioning and visitor experiences. Using a combination of quantitative surveys (with 600 respondents) and qualitative analysis, the authors evaluate important factors such as natural attractions, cultural depth, service quality and the effectiveness of digital marketing. The results reveal that 60% of tourists prioritise natural scenery, while only 15.5% value cultural experiences. This highlights a risk of homogenisation. Service attitude (32% of complaints) and pricing transparency (26%) are identified as key areas for improvement. Furthermore, 75.5% of respondents rely on the internet for travel information, underscoring the potential for enhanced digital engagement. Based on these findings, the study proposes the following actionable strategies: integrating Li and Miao cultural elements to differentiate the brand; improving service training and pricing regulations; and optimising social media campaigns on platforms such as Douyin. By aligning projected and perceived images, Hainan can enhance its competitiveness as a multifaceted global destination. This research makes a valuable contribution to the literature on destination branding by providing empirical support for Keller's brand equity model in the context of emotional drivers and demographic segmentation. It offers policymakers and marketers practical insights.

**Keywords:** Hainan, China, tourism, brand perception, tourism competitiveness, digital engagement, service quality, cultural authenticity, marketing optimisation.

**JEL Classification:** Z32, Z33

## 1. Introduction

Hainan, one of China's most prominent tropical tourism destinations, has long been celebrated for its sun-drenched beaches, lush rainforests and warm year-round climate. This is encapsulated in its brand positioning as "Sunny Hainan, Vacation Paradise" (Pan & Wu, 2020; Gao, 2009). However, despite these natural advantages, Hainan faces challenges in setting itself apart from other tropical destinations and in responding to the changing tastes of mainland Chinese tourists. While existing research highlights the island's strengths in terms of its natural scenery, it also points to significant criticisms relating to service

quality, pricing transparency and weak cultural offerings (Pan & Wu, 2020; Guan, 2013). Furthermore, although online marketing and social media have become pivotal in shaping destination images (Li & Zhang, 2023), Hainan's efforts in this area fall short of international benchmarks, such as New Zealand's "100% Pure" campaign (Dioko, 2016).

Current studies on Hainan's tourism branding predominantly focus on functional attributes, such as infrastructure and natural resources, while neglecting the emotional drivers of tourist behaviour (Keller, 1993; Gao, 2009). Furthermore, there is a paucity of granular data concerning how different

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people perceive Hainan's brand and whether these perceptions are aligned with their personalities and lifestyle preferences. For instance, while young tourists may seek "stylish vacation destinations", empirical evidence to support this alignment is still lacking. Furthermore, the role of cultural authenticity in enhancing Hainan's distinctiveness, as evidenced by successful international cases such as British Columbia's integration of indigenous culture (Cristòfol et al., 2024), remains under-explored.

Consequently, this study is timely and relevant for Hainan's tourism development, as it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of mainland Chinese tourists' perceptions of this island and its marketing efforts. The research combines quantitative survey and qualitative analysis to illustrate how various tourist segments evaluate Hainan's natural and cultural offerings, service quality, and value proposition. The study places particular emphasis on the examination of the concept of "self-congruity", defined as the alignment between the personalities of Hainan and its visitors, and its influence on their satisfaction and loyalty. The study also critically assesses the effectiveness of Hainan's current marketing strategies across both traditional and digital platforms, identifying opportunities for innovation and improvement. In doing so, it draws lessons from successful international examples while remaining grounded in the specific context of Chinese tourism preferences and behaviours.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge the theoretical and practical divides that currently exist. In principle, this integration of customer-oriented brand equity models with empirical data on demographic and emotional factors offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding image formation. In practice, the findings offer policymakers and promoters actionable insights to enhance digital engagement, deepen cultural integration and address service-related challenges. This will ultimately strengthen Hainan's identity as a world-class destination that blends natural beauty, cultural depth and modern accessibility seamlessly. In an era of increasingly complex traveller expectations, this study verifies whether Hainan's brand resonates authentically with its audience, fostering long-term loyalty and competitiveness.

## 2. Literature Review

### Brand positioning and image perception

Destination branding differs significantly from traditional product branding due to its multidimensional attributes and stakeholder complexity (Keller, 1993; Pike, 2005). Hainan must achieve differentiation by focusing on brand awareness, perceived quality and loyalty, as emphasised in Kevin L. Keller's (1993)

customer-based brand equity model. The model's focus on the differential effect of consumers' memory structures is what makes it special. By anchoring brand value in the way tourists mentally associate Hainan with specific positive attributes (e.g., unique landscapes or cultural experiences), a measurable framework is provided to translate abstract destination characteristics into tangible competitive advantages. Charlotte M. Echtner and J. R. Brent Ritchie (1993) further proposed a new framework for evaluating destination images, integrating functional attributes (e.g., natural resources) and emotional attributes (e.g., relaxation experiences). This framework is particularly suitable for Hainan's situation (see Wu, 2011; Gao, 2009). For instance, Hainan's current positioning as "Sunny Hainan, Vacation Paradise" highlights natural advantages but risks homogenization with other tropical destinations (Pan & Wu, 2020).

Tourists from Mainland China have been observed to demonstrate an ambivalent sentiment towards Hainan, characterised by a high level of satisfaction with natural landscapes, yet concurrent criticism of service quality and pricing (Guan, 2013; Pan & Wu, 2020). A text analysis conducted by Ctrip, a major travel platform in China, revealed that 85.57% of the reviews were positive, yet negative keywords such as "traffic congestion" and "overpriced shopping" frequently appeared (Pan & Wu, 2020, p. 73). Xu Xuan and Huang Xuebin (2023) analysed user-generated content (UGC) in the form of comments on Hainan tourism from 2019 to 2022. They used the TSE model and Gephi software to find that positive comments from visitors to Hainan accounted for over 80%, and that cultural tourism resources were more likely to evoke positive emotions (p. 188). Gao (2009) proposed a 'positioning-branding-image' model, urging Hainan to adopt a distinctive strategy of integrating tropical ecology with the ethnic heritages of the Li and Miao peoples, in order to bridge the gap between the government's "projected image" (i.e., the image shaped by the media and online platforms) and the 'perceived image' of tourists (i.e., authentic experiences). In 2011, Wu Hong criticised Hainan's over-reliance on common tropical themes such as "coconut breeze", advocating the integration of natural and cultural resources, and the use of mysterious symbols (e.g., Li and Miao totems) to strengthen emotional connections with visitors. In their 2018 study, Wang Hua and Liu Yan examined the impact of cultural elements on Hainan's tourism image, concluding that the organisation of festivals focusing on the Li and Miao cultures had a significant effect on tourists' perceptions of "cultural uniqueness". This finding aligns with the assertion made by Greg Richards and Julie Wilson in 2006 that cultural authenticity is a fundamental element of positive tourism images.

### Marketing strategies and digital innovation

A study by Huang Yuanhao, Lai Qifu and Lin Feifei (2023) shows that the intensity of social media usage influences travel intentions via acceptance of user-generated content and destination image (with full mediation). This suggests that social media should be leveraged for word-of-mouth marketing and negative information management. This finding is consistent with that of Xiang Zuo and Ulrike Gretzel (2010), who established that social media plays a pivotal role in the search for travel information, thereby supporting the need for digital marketing. Yu Zhaochen (2019) believes that, as internet technology continues to develop, new network audio-visual tools are playing an increasingly important role in communicating urban images. As emphasised by Szpak, Modrzyńska & Dahl (2024), digitalisation is necessary for creating the "smart" element of cities, but numerous standards exist for implementing digital solutions. These findings can also be applied to Hainan, helping to create a more sustainable and tourist-friendly environment.

However, compared to international benchmarks such as New Zealand's "100% Pure", Hainan's digital communications are inconsistent. The Explore Hainan YouTube channel underperforms due to its infrequent updates and limited interactivity (Wang, 2024), while domestic platforms (e.g., Douyin) struggle to cater to the specific preferences of mainland tourists, such as younger groups' interest in "rainforest adventures" and "duty-free shopping" (Cheng & Zhou, 2024). Cheng and Zhou (2024) criticised the over-reliance on traditional marketing channels, proposing the "new media marketing" strategy. This strategy leverages platforms such as Douyin and RedNote to promote niche products (e.g., the Li and Miao festivals and wellness tourism) via live streaming and user-targeted content, thereby enhancing engagement. Hainan could also learn from Sanya (Hainan's second-largest city and a popular holiday destination) by using the influence of celebrities and video clips and promotions to increase its exposure (Tang, 2020).

Song Zhanghai (2000) emphasised the need to balance "perceivable" elements, such as beaches, with "unperceivable" cultural resources, such as folklore and myths. This echoes Tang's (2020) proposal to reposition Sanya as "Beautiful Sanya, Vacation Paradise" by integrating Li village experiences with modern marketing tools. Both studies emphasise the need for Hainan to move beyond superficial promotion and develop immersive cultural experiences, such as in-depth Li and Miao cultural tours.

International case studies offer valuable insights. For instance, successful destination branding relies on consistency and emotional resonance. British Columbia strengthened brand unity through the #ExploreBC hashtag, integrating nature and indigenous culture narratives (Cristòfol et al., 2024);

New Zealand leveraged the *Lord of the Rings* effect to create an "adventure paradise" image, transforming fictional narratives into tangible tourism appeal (Morgan, 2004). Joan C. Henderson (2000) explored the branding process of "New Asia–Singapore" and proposed six identifying characteristics of brand personality: globalist, young, exciting, modern Asia, responsible, and comfortable. Hainan can draw lessons from Singapore's positioning of its brand traits and enhance its own brand influence and attractiveness by shaping an international image, creating a young, vibrant and comfortable atmosphere, building unique experiences, showcasing regional culture, and strengthening responsibility.

### Competitiveness and stakeholder collaboration

In their 2014 study, Xu Wenhai, Deng Yingying and Pi Jun compared Hainan with Hawaii, identifying significant disparities in hardware infrastructure (58.19 vs. 94.98, on a scale from 0 to 100), social civility (31.03 vs. 94), and cultural branding (52.56 vs. 88.72). The authors called for strengthened resource integration, improved resident literacy, and intensified international marketing. While focused on international markets, research on the impact of the pandemic (e.g., Lu & Atadil, 2021) underscores the importance of 'safety and hygiene' for mainland audiences. Given this background, Hainan could emphasise its commitment to ecological protection and health and wellness improvements in its marketing to maintain visitors' trust in the brand through transparent communication. Zhu Zunan (2020) employed the Diamond Model and principal component analysis to identify issues in Hainan's coastal tourism, such as concentrated inbound tourist sources and inadequate infrastructure. The author emphasised that the number of international flights is a key influencing factor, and proposed countermeasures including government support and product development. Lu Jing (2021) constructed an evaluation system from the perspective of tourists' perception, revealing that Sanya performed poorly in brand competition environment and core capabilities. The study calls for policy optimization and cultural connotation excavation to enhance competitiveness. The two studies under consideration, which adopt contrasting macro-industrial and micro-perceptual perspectives, both highlight the paucity of research on tourist emotional drivers and the fit between brand personality and tourists' self-image (Zhu, 2020; Lu, 2021).

### Research gaps and future directions

However, the extant research in this field is subject to two major limitations. Firstly, there is a limited understanding of the dynamic preferences of mainland tourists. Secondly, there is a lack of focus on the emotional drivers of tourist behaviour. The majority of extant studies address overall image perception,

yet they generally lack granular statistics on how different demographic groups (e.g., age, travel frequency) interact with Hainan's brand. Furthermore, while functional attributes have been extensively researched, there is a paucity of studies on how "self-consistency" (e.g., alignment between brand personality and tourists' self-image) influences loyalty (Keller, 1993; Gao, 2009). For example, empirical data is required to ascertain whether young tourists view Hainan as a 'stylish holiday destination' and if this aligns with their lifestyle preferences. Based on a review of previous studies, this research project aims to conduct an in-depth study of the brand image and marketing perception of Hainan as a tourist destination among mainland Chinese tourists.

### 3. Findings

#### Sample distribution

A total of 600 valid questionnaires were collected for this research survey. The respondents came from a variety of age groups and backgrounds. The 18–25 age group accounted for 32.7% of respondents, the 26–35 age group for 28.1%, the 36–45 age group for 18.1%, the 46–55 age group for 10%, and the under-18s and over-56s for 5.4% each. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 51.8% of respondents being male.

In terms of the number of visits to Hainan, the data shows that the largest group of respondents (30.2%) visited the island once (Fig. 1), followed by those who visited twice (21%) and three to five times (18.8%). Those who had never visited Hainan (15.2%) and those who had visited five times or more (14.8%) ranked at the bottom.

#### Travel preferences analysis

The data presented in Fig. 2 show the distribution of travel purposes among visitors to Hainan. Based on the responses, "on vacation" appears to be the most popular reason for visiting (65.5%), suggesting that Hainan is primarily a tourist destination. "On business" and "visiting relatives" follow with much smaller proportions (12.7% and 15.4%, respectively), while 6.3% of respondents selected the "others" option.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the preferred travel style is evident. The predominant category, accounting for 51% of the total, is "leisure travel". This is followed by the "backpacker-style" category, which accounts for 25.4%, and "experience-based" travel, accounting for 23.6%.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the data set contains people's selections for various travelling activities, which were obtained through a multiple-choice question. The predominant motivations for visiting Hainan were identified as "beach vacation" (78.1%) and "local cuisine" (71%). The choices of respondents were as follows: "duty-free shopping" (55.4%), "rainforest adventure" (45.5%), "historical exploration" (31%), "folk culture" (32.7%), and "sports/eco-tourism" (40%). The responses indicated that 5.4% of respondents selected the "others" category, suggesting that the provided options were not exhaustive.

#### Brand perception analysis

Figure 5 is a radar chart showing people's initial impressions of Hainan. The majority of survey respondents (85.5%) selected "tropical climate", followed by "beach resorts" (80%) and "local food" (60%). In contrast, answers such as "pricing", "folk culture" and "transportation" (40%, 35.5% and

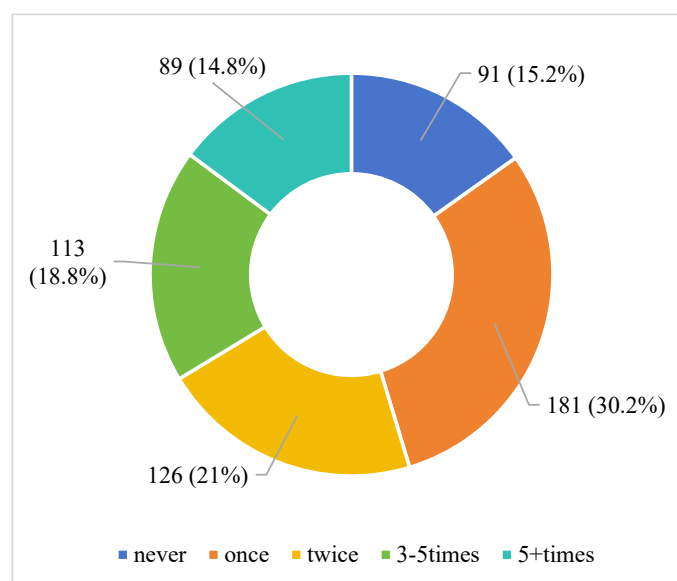
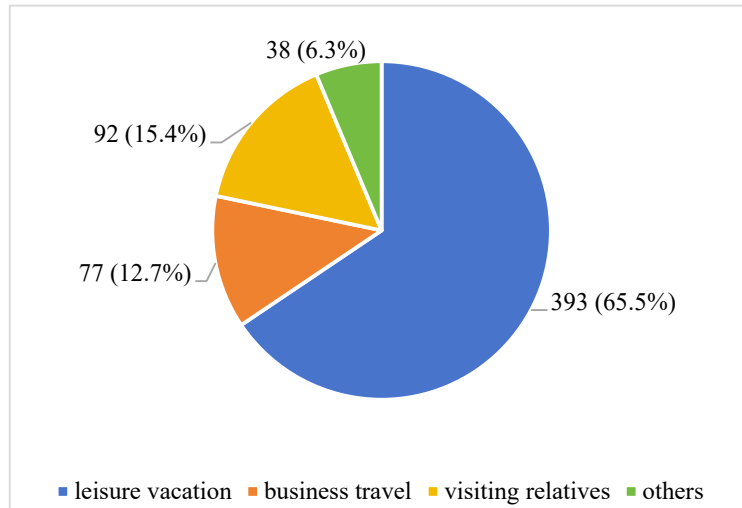


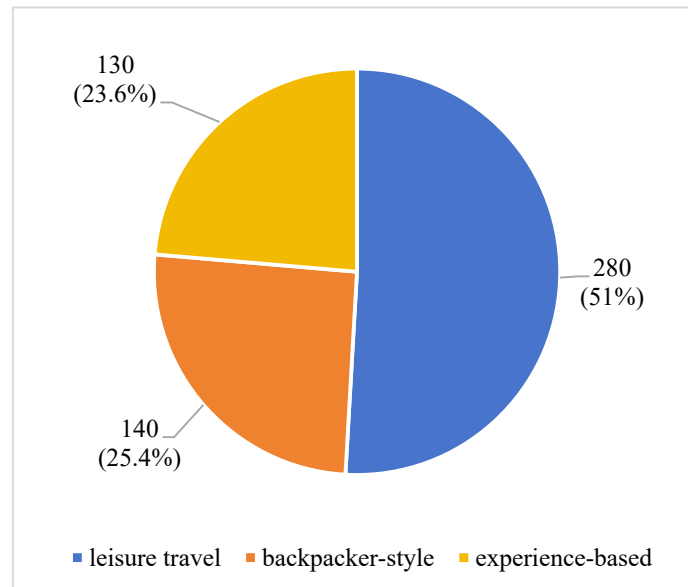
Figure 1. Number of visits to Hainan

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results



**Figure 2. Travel purpose distribution**

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results



**Figure 3. Preferred traveling style**

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results

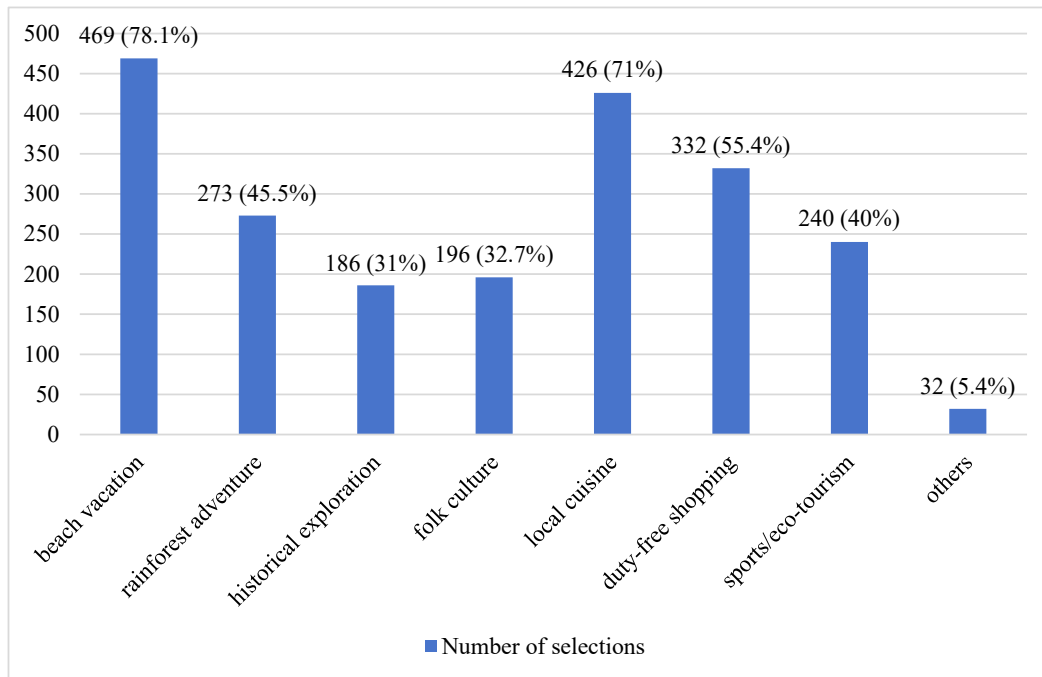
25.5% respectively) were selected less frequently. Additionally, 5.5% of respondents selected "other aspects".

As illustrated in Figure 6, the most appealing aspects of Hainan are clearly delineated. It is evident that "natural scenery" accounts for the majority of the total (60%). Furthermore, 15.5% of survey respondents identified "cultural experience" as a key aspect, followed by "service quality" (11%), "unique cuisine" (10%), and "others" (3.5%).

Fig. 7 shows the budget distribution of visitors in Hainan. The largest group of respondents (31%)

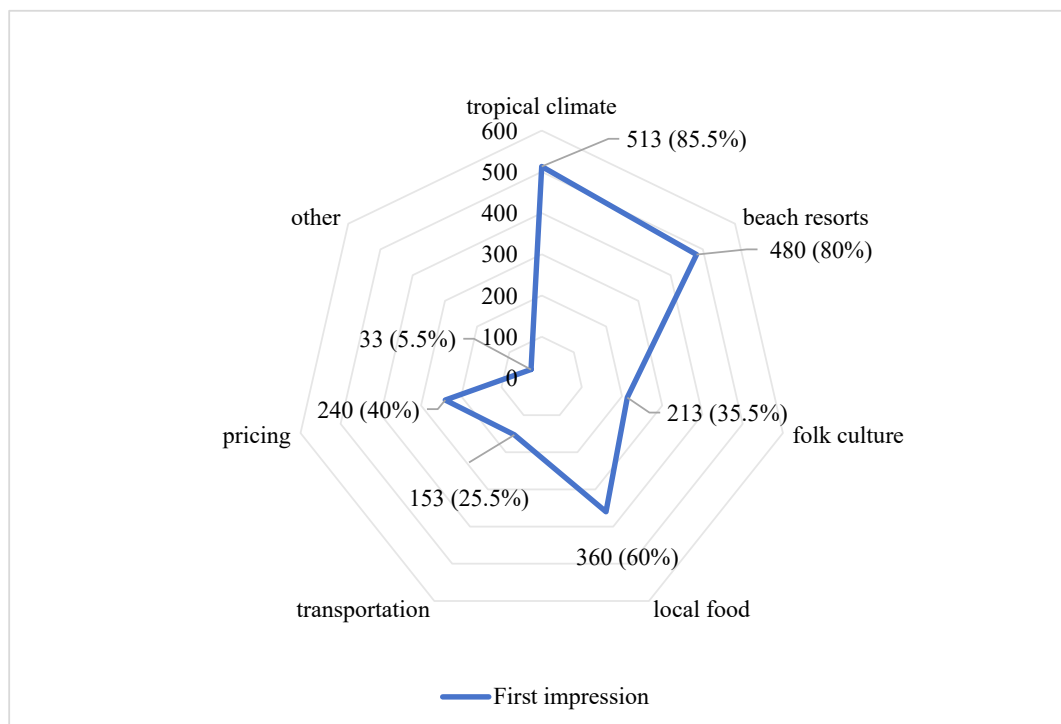
spent 3000-4000 RMB for their travel to Hainan, followed by those who spent 2000-3000 RMB (25.5%) and 4000-5000 (20%). Lower budgets (below 2000 RMB) were declared by a minority (10%) of the survey takers, whereas 13.5% identified their spending as "above 5000 yuan".

The most prevalent categories in which visitors expended their financial resources are illustrated in Figure 8. The most commonly chosen activities are "shopping" (80%), "dining" (70%) and "accommodation" (60%). Other notable customer choices include "transportation" (50%) and "entertainment" (40%).



**Figure 4. Preferred tourism activities**

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results



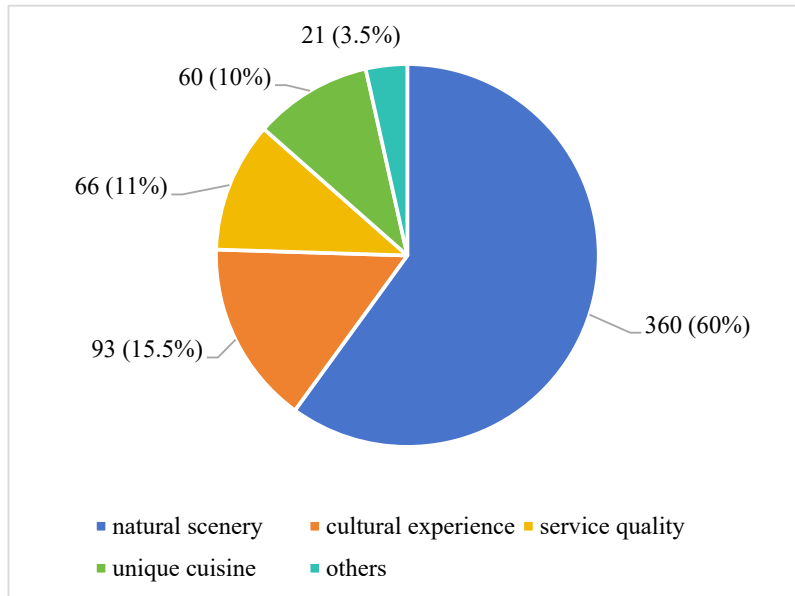
**Figure 5. First Impressions of Hainan**

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results

Figure 9 shows the most common sources of information about Hainan among visitors. The most popular source was "the Internet" (75.5%), followed by "friend recommendations" (60%) and "TV ads" (25.5%).

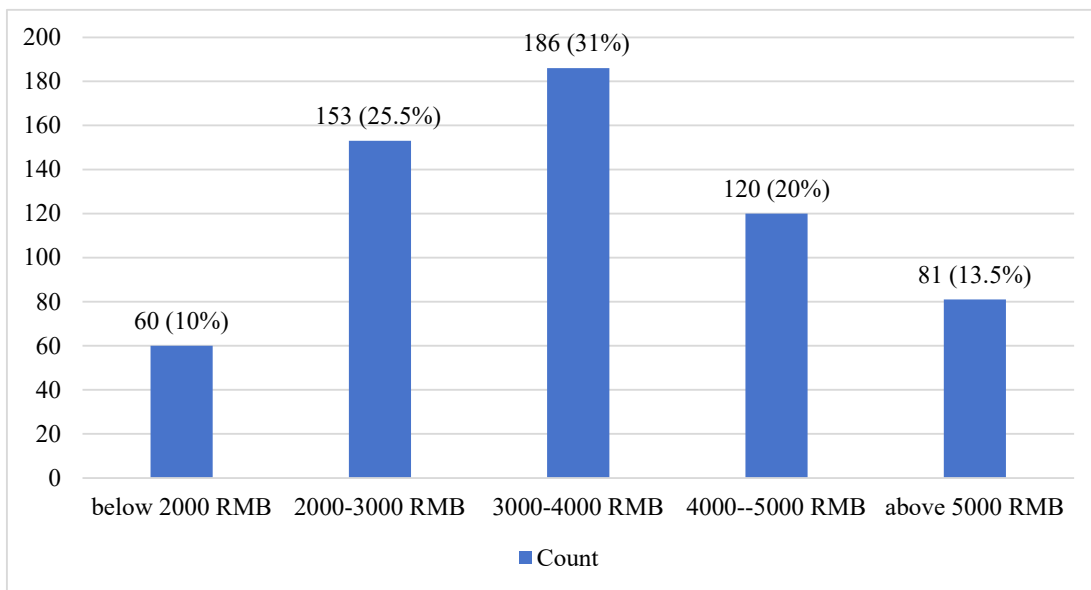
A majority of people also selected other options, such as "travel fairs" (14.5%) and "others" (10%).

Table 1 presents the four main potential issues with tourism in Hainan, as identified through an



**Figure 6. Most attractive aspects of Hainan tourism**

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results



**Figure 7. Travel budget distribution**

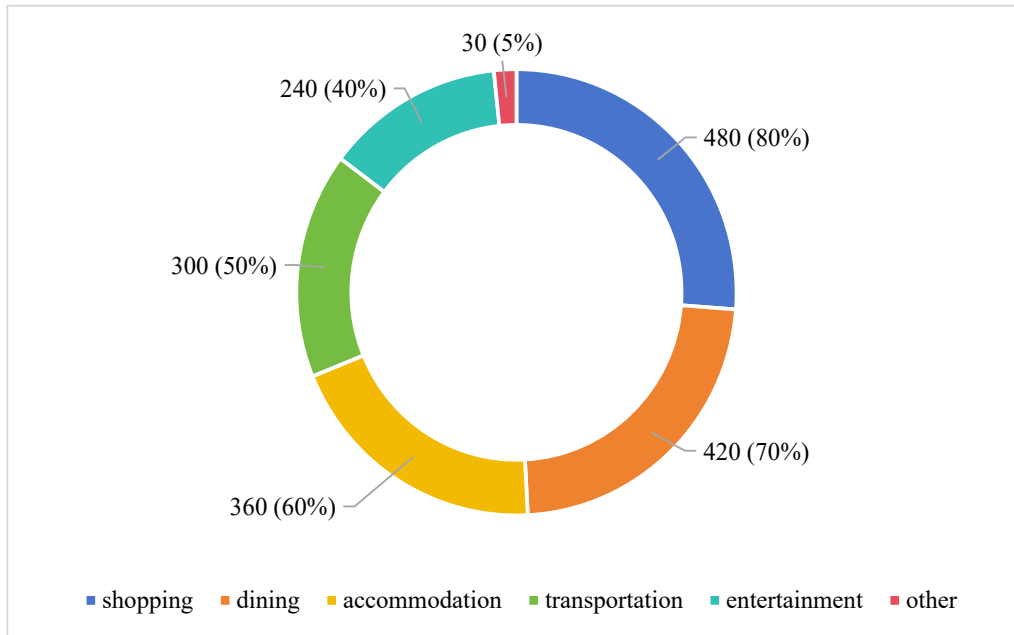
Source: developed by the authors based on survey results

open-ended question. These are presented alongside representative comments. The first issue is "service attitude", mentioned by 176 respondents (32%). This is followed by "price transparency" (143 mentions, 26%), for which the representative comment is "Overpricing exists in seafood markets". "Traffic congestion" has been identified by 121 respondents (22%), with "severe road congestion during holidays" as a representative comment. 88 survey takers (16%) mentioned also "lack of cultural depth" ("Beyond natural scenery, lacks profound cultural experiences").

#### 4. Discussion

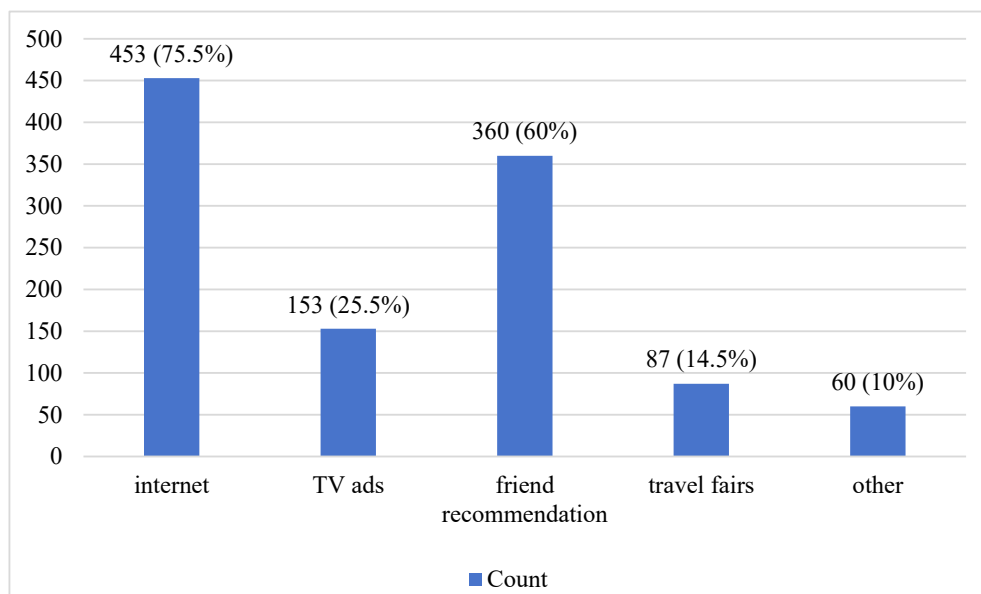
This study reveals several insights into how Chinese tourists from the mainland perceive Hainan as a tourist destination. They highlight the island's strengths and areas for improvement. There are some interesting discoveries and their implications:

The dominance of natural scenery as the primary attraction is noticeable, with insufficient development of cultural experiences. Data confirms that Hainan's current positioning as "Sunny Hainan, Vacation Paradise" effectively capitalises on its natural assets:



**Figure 8. Preferred money spending categories**

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results



**Figure 9. Information channels about Hainan**

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results

60% of respondents identified natural scenery as the most attractive element. The findings confirm the accuracy of Keller’s (1993) customer-oriented brand equity model with regard to the importance of making a strong impression. However, the weak appeal of cultural experiences (15.5%) supports Pan and Wu’s (2020) warning about the risk of homogenisation with other tropical destinations.

Service quality and pricing transparency are considered the two main problems for Hainan. Service attitude (32% of complaints) and lack of price transparency (26%) were identified as significant issues, with comments frequently highlighting overpricing and a lack of awareness of service standards. These findings corroborate previous research (see, for example, Pan & Wu, 2020; Guan, 2013) and highlight the importance



Table 1

**The main issues in Hainan's tourism**

Issue type	Mentions	Percentage	Representative comments
Service attitude	176	32%	1. Some scenic spot staff lack service awareness 2. Service staff often have a bad attitude after collecting money
Price transparency	143	26%	1. Overpricing exists in seafood markets 2. The prices of air tickets and hotels have skyrocketed during the peak tourist season
Traffic congestion	121	22%	1. Severe road congestion during holidays 2. Electric bikes are parked haphazardly on the road
Lack of cultural depth	88	16%	1. Beyond natural scenery, lacks profound cultural experience 2. Insufficient publicity of historical resources

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results

of Hainan addressing its service standards and pricing practices in order to improve tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

The internet is the main source of information about Hainan as a tourist destination, but there is room for improvement in digital marketing. Internet-based information (75.5%) and recommendations from friends (60%) are the most popular ways of learning about Hainan, while traditional methods such as TV adverts (25.5%) are less popular. This emphasises the critical role of digital marketing and social media in shaping Hainan's brand image. However, the study also notes that Hainan's digital efforts, such as its YouTube channel, underperform when compared to international benchmarks. Therefore, strengthening digital engagement on platforms such as Douyin and RedNote could help to better align with the preferences of mainland tourists.

The study highlights a disconnection between Hainan's projected image (focused on natural beauty) and tourists perceived experiences (lacking cultural depth and service quality). To bridge this gap, Hainan could develop immersive Li and Miao cultural experiences to differentiate itself from other tropical destinations, implement training programs and stricter regulations to address service and pricing issues, adopt a more dynamic and interactive social media strategy to engage younger tourists, and promote adventure and eco-tourism alongside leisure offerings to attract a broader audience.

## 5. Conclusions

This study comprehensively investigated Chinese mainland tourists' perceptions of Hainan's destination branding and marketing, with a view to enhancing the island's competitiveness in the global tourism market. The findings of the study indicated that Hainan's natural landscapes, cited by 60% of respondents as the primary attraction, are its strongest

assets. However, this heavy reliance on natural beauty has been identified as a potential risk factor, with Pan and Wu (2020) noting that only 15.5% of respondents highlighted cultural experiences as a key draw. This observation highlights the potential for brand homogenisation with other tropical destinations.

It was determined that service quality and pricing transparency were significant issues, with 32% of complaints pertaining to service attitudes and 26% concerning pricing issues. Despite the Internet being the dominant source of information for 75.5% of respondents, Hainan's digital marketing efforts have been criticised for their lack of precision and consistency, resulting in a failure to meet the specific preferences of different tourist segments.

Four practical recommendations aimed at strengthening Hainan's brand are proposed: first, develop immersive cultural experiences based on Li and Miao traditions; second, implement service and pricing reforms, including staff training, digital price-tracking systems and certification programmes; third, optimise digital marketing on platforms such as Douyin and Little Red Book, and encourage user-generated content; and finally, reposition the brand using the dual narrative framework of "Tropical Luxury × Cultural Exploration".

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample is biased towards younger respondents (60.8% of respondents were aged 18–35). Secondly, the study is dependent on self-reported data. Future research could employ experimental designs to investigate emotional drivers, compare brand perceptions among different groups of people, and quantify the return on investment (ROI) of digital and cultural initiatives. Hainan can transform into a world-class, multifaceted destination by integrating cultural authenticity, improving service quality and innovating digital marketing, thereby securing a sustainable competitive edge in the global tourism market.

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Received on: 07th of July, 2025

Accepted on: 16th of August, 2025

Published on: 24th of September, 2025