

Chinese Traditional Rituals Influence Cultural Identity: The Mediating Role of Sense of Place

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ABSTRACT

Cultivating local cultural identity through traditional cultural activities is of great significance for the sustainable development of cultural tourism. This research aims to explore the relationships among traditional culture, sense of place, and cultural identity to deepen the understanding of emotional and social mechanisms in cultural tourism activities. Using the Cognitive-Affective-Conative (CAC) model, combined with quantitative analysis methods and structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques, the research analyzed data from 350 participants of the Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival in Tangshan City, Hebei Province. Based on a systematic review of heritage tourism literature, the research focused on how the symbolic, normative, and interactive aspects of traditional rituals enhance residents' cultural identity by strengthening their sense of place. The findings indicate that the symbolism, orderliness, and interactivity of local traditional rituals have a significant positive impact on cultural identity, with a sense of place mediating the effect of traditional rituals on cultural identity. The research also highlights

the role of traditional rituals in fostering social interactions. Furthermore, the research sheds light on the potential role of traditional rituals in addressing challenges related to cultural activity homogenization and commercialization, providing theoretical support and practical guidance for cultural heritage preservation and local tourism management. The findings hold substantial implications for regional fisheries, cultural heritage protection, and the development of cross-cultural diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

As significant cultural activities, festivals are essential in researching place identity within geography. They serve as critical venues where local meaning and identity emerge, acting as important links between residents and their sense of place (De Bres & Davis, 2001). These events not only celebrate traditions but also strengthen the social fabric of local communities, enabling residents to engage in activities that affirm their cultural roots and shared values. Festivals actively reflect societal values, practices, and negotiations (Crang, 1998) serving as mirrors of the collective community spirit and its adaptations over time. As a branch of festival activities, festival tourism integrates tourism attributes into festivals, bringing economic, social, and cultural benefits to local areas while holding significant cultural value. With the transformation of the tourism industry and the changing needs of tourists, festival tourism has garnered increasing attention. Considering the spatial and social dimensions of culture, cultural tourism in the form of festival activities assigns cultural significance to these events from the perspective of social members.

In recent years, festival tourism has gained increasing attention as a new form of tourism that combines cultural and economic benefits. By leveraging local cultural activities to attract visitors, festival tourism showcases local traditions and provides opportunities for cultural interaction. Through participation, tourists can experience local culture and gain a deeper understanding of the community's social fabric and festive life (Timothy,

1997). As tourist demands evolve, the cultural significance and commercialization of tourism have become key focuses of academic research.

Within festivals, rituals are regarded as important forms of cultural expression. The symbolic, orderly, and interactive aspects of rituals shape the cultural significance of festivals while fostering a sense of place and cultural identity (J. Kim et al., 2013; Porananond, 2015; Zhu, 2012). However, excessive commercialization can undermine the spiritual value of rituals, reducing them to mere "symbolic consumption," which may blur community belonging and identity. Since the 1970s, "place" and "sense of place" have been prominent topics in geographical research (Tuan, 1975). Sense of place, an emotional bond between individuals and locations, is a crucial foundation for forming cultural identity. By fostering emotional attachment to specific places, a sense of place enhances individuals' sense of community belonging and plays a vital role in festival rituals. The resonance between rituals and a sense of place imbues activities with cultural significance, offering opportunities to express and reinforce cultural identity within a unique geographical and cultural context.

Although previous research has explored the relationships between rituals and identity and between a sense of place and cultural identity, few studies have integrated these elements into a unified theoretical framework for analysis, particularly under the ideology of religious tourism. This research uses the Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival in Tangshan City, Hebei Province, as a case study and

applies the Cognitive-Affective-Conative (CAC) model to examine the relationships between Chinese traditional rituals, sense of place, and cultural identity (Agapito et al., 2013). The specific objectives are (1) to explore how tourists' perceptions of traditional rituals influence the formation of a sense of place; (2) to analyze how a sense of place shapes cultural identity; (3) to determine whether the sense of place mediates the relationship between perceptions of traditional rituals and cultural identity. This research makes two significant contributions to research on religious/folk tourism festivals and cultural events. First, it further confirms the antecedents of cultural identity. Second, while the importance of the variables examined has been widely discussed, this research attempts to validate their relationships, particularly the mediating role of a sense of place. These contributions are significant theoretically and practically.

They deepen our understanding of the sense of place and cultural identity, laying a foundation for future research on the sustainable development of festival activities. The findings also provide recommendations for cultural heritage preservation and transmission policies. These improvements could enhance local residents' cultural identity with place-based festival tourism, thereby better achieving cultural transmission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical underpinnings come from the cognitive-affective-conative (C-A-C) model and ritual action theory (Houseman & Severi, 1998). We developed a conceptual model to investigate the connection between cultural identity, sense of place, and traditional rituals. Figure 1 depicts the research framework. Cognition

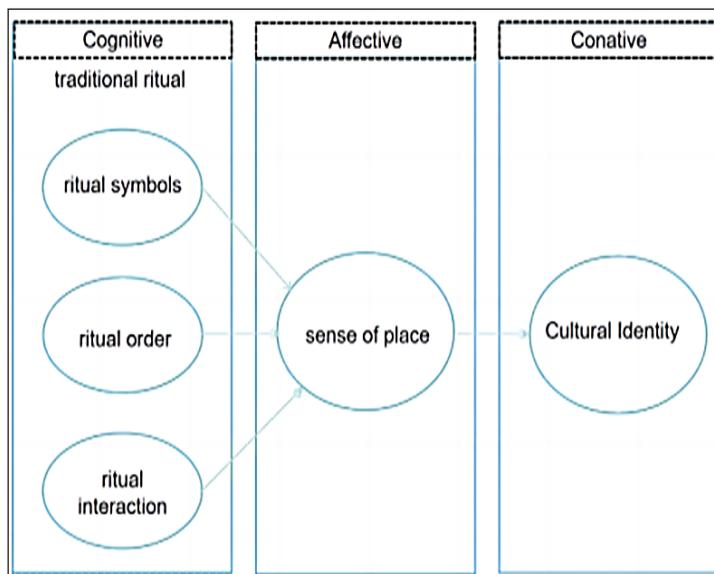


Figure 1. Research framework

refers to a person's beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts about a problem or object. Affect is an individual's emotions or feelings about a problem or object. Finally, conation refers to a person's feelings about a problem or object. This is how the C-A-C model breaks down decision-making (Agapito et al., 2013). In other words, cognition determines emotion, and emotion leads to conation. More importantly, the link between conation and cognition is mediated by human emotions.

Using our research model with the C-A-C model, we discovered that the cognitive part of traditional rituals includes ritual symbols, order, and interaction. The three items point to the emotional part of the model, that is, the sense of place. The single item of sense of place points to the conative part of the model: Cultural identity. Traditional rituals are residents' cognitive response to local culture, sense of place is residents' emotional response to local culture, and cultural identity is residents' conative response to local culture. Ritual action theory is a social science theory that aims to explain the role and significance of rituals (e.g., religious rituals, social rituals) in society and culture. This theory reveals the central role of ritual in maintaining social structure and cultural inheritance, showing how ritual affects individual and collective behaviors, beliefs, and identities. Ritual action theory provides theoretical support for this research; we explore whether traditional rituals should be considered key drivers of residents' sense of place and cultural identity.

Sense of place is an important emotional dimension in developing local culture. It describes a combination of people and nature, and it is a special and universal emotional connection (Tuan, 1974). It refers to the subjective views that people have about where they are and how significant a place is to them personally and to a community (Hay, 1998). Consequently, we incorporate the emotive component of visitors' and locals' sense of place into the C-A-C model.

Numerous studies have documented the influence of traditional rituals on a person's sense of place and cultural identity (Hassanpour & Soltanzadeh, 2022; Santiago, 2023). Further research into the links between traditional rituals and a sense of place is warranted, given the evidence that both influence cultural identity. This research investigates the mediating role of a sense of place through quantitative methodologies. In addition, we test our conceptual model with community member data.

Traditional Rituals

As symbolic activities in daily life, rituals carry social functions and cultural significance, making them important research subjects in religious studies, anthropology, and sociology. At the same time, rituals have become one of the core themes in heritage studies and tradition within folklore research. In ritual studies, scholars' initial understandings of rituals have expanded beyond traditional anthropological religious classics to encompass various aspects

of social life (Bell, 1992). Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander's "theory of ritual action" (Houseman & Severi, 1998, p. 185) emphasizes the role of ritual behavior in shaping social life and maintaining social order. This theory highlights the performative characteristics of rituals, arguing that ritual actions symbolically enhance social integration, identity, and the reproduction of cultural meanings (Turner, 1970). The concept of "ritual symbols" holds specific meanings and functions in particular cultural and social contexts and conveys values, beliefs, or emotions (Turner, 1970). Sulaeman et al. (2021) researched Indigenous rituals, showing that ritual symbols not only shape participants' understanding of devotion, prayer, and hope but also specifically strengthen the shared beliefs of community members through these symbols. Furthermore, cultural festivals based on ritual social practices and their symbolic meanings are considered cultural activities that transcend the mundane, constructing residents' connection to and experience of the sacred world (Alonso-Vazquez & Ballico, 2021). Much of the analysis of the relationship between symbols and cultural festivals remains at the symbolic level, lacking an in-depth discussion of how these symbols influence the sense of place.

The concept of "ritual order" originates from the theory of sociologist Émile Durkheim. He argued that rituals promote social stability and integration by reinforcing the collective consciousness of group members (Durkheim, 2016). Modern

studies have further explored the impact of ritual participation frequency on community belonging and social well-being. Research by Sohi et al. (2018) and Xygalatas (2019) found that ritual participation can enhance the mental health and group cognition of minorities. However, these studies primarily focused on religious communities and have not delved into the specific impact of religious order on the sense of place in cultural festivals.

The "interaction ritual theory" emphasizes that social power is activated through interactions between people, where emotional energy in interactions is sparked and connected to symbolic meanings (Collins, 2004). This theory suggests that through ritual interactions, individuals can form stronger social bonds, enhancing positive emotions and behaviors (Baker, 2019; Droppe, 2023). While these studies reveal the emotional value of ritual interaction, there is still a lack of research on how it shapes participants' sense of place in cultural festivals.

In conclusion, existing literature provides a rich theoretical foundation for understanding the mechanisms of ritual symbols, order, and interaction. However, there is a lack of systematic analysis of how these three elements collectively influence the sense of place, especially within the complex social system of cultural festivals. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by constructing a three-dimensional model of rituals (ritual symbols, order, and interaction) to explore how they shape the sense of place. The significance of

this research lies in (1) enriching the theoretical framework of traditional ritual research by linking ritual studies with the sense of place and (2) providing indirect support for the planning and sustainable development of cultural festival activities, thereby enhancing the community's cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Sense of Place

Sense of place is one of the core concepts in human geography, widely used to describe the complex and profound relationship between humans and their geographical environment (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013). It emphasizes the emotional connection between individuals and specific places, typically shaped by cultural and social factors (Tuan, 1974). Research has shown that a sense of place is a unique emotional experience formed through the interaction between people and their environment (Sloan, 2003; Steele, 1981). This concept reflects people's lifestyles and values and can shape their attitudes and behaviors. Sloan (2003) explored the role of culture and religion in forming place awareness and how this process can help reestablish a sense of community belonging. These studies highlight the importance of culture and religion in shaping a sense of place, but there is still limited exploration of this mechanism from a multidimensional perspective.

Since the 1990s, scholars have gradually deconstructed the sense of place into several sub-concepts, including place dependence, place attachment, and place identity (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000). Among these,

place attachment is a multidimensional concept that includes place identity and dependence (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Yuan et al., 2019). Place identity refers to the socialization process individuals or groups achieve through their interactions with the environment. This process involves cognitive and emotional aspects and forms a social role identity through a sense of belonging to a specific place (Proshansky et al., 1983; Stedman, 2002). However, the logical relationships between these sub-concepts have not been fully explained, and the interactions under different conditions require further research. The academic community generally acknowledges the dynamic and constraining nature of the sense of place, with concepts like place attachment, place identity, and place dependence overlapping (Hernández et al., 2007; Lalli, 1992; Stedman, 2003; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). However, different studies present contradictory definitions and dimensions for measuring the relationship between the sense of place. Some view it as an individual's overall emotional connection to the environment. In contrast, others conceptualize it as a composite of emotional and functional dimensions, posing theoretical and methodological challenges for research design.

In recent years, the sense of place has been introduced into tourism research and has become an important indicator for predicting the emotional connection between tourists and local residents (Hernández et al., 2007; Stedman, 2003). Patwardhan et al. (2020) found that attachment directly

affects destination loyalty through emotional solidarity, while their research also expanded the applicability of a sense of place in tourist behavior research. However, it did not fully explore how a sense of place influences the interaction between residents and tourists and how this interaction shapes the cultural meaning at the community level. Although existing literature has explored the sense of place from multiple dimensions, there are still gaps, such as the specific manifestations of the sense of place within cultural and religious contexts and their impact on community development and how a sense of place shapes the emotions and behaviors of residents and tourists in complex socio-cultural contexts, such as cultural festival activities. These limitations hinder the overall understanding of a sense of place and present challenges for its practical application. This research will serve as a comprehensive framework for a sense of place and explore its applicability in cultural festival contexts. It will provide new perspectives on the theory and practice of a sense of place.

Cultural Identity

The concept of identity was first introduced by Freud and later refined by the scholar Eriksen (2001) into multiple dimensions, including national, collective, and cultural identities. Over time, the concept of cultural identity has gradually expanded and developed in various disciplines. Existing research mainly focuses on individual cultural identity, socio-cultural identity, and their pathways of realization, but there

are still some theoretical and practical debates and gaps. Many scholars have explored the theoretical logic of tourism in promoting cultural awareness. For example, how tourist destinations enhance and maintain visitors' cultural awareness today (Butler et al., 2014; Pretes, 2003), as well as how tourism resources related to martial arts contribute to national and ethnic recognition (Pretes, 2003). These studies suggest that tourism is not only an ideological experience of culture but also an important tool for cultural development. Most research has focused on tourists' perspectives, neglecting the dynamic role of local residents' cultural tourism resources in the tourism context. Furthermore, existing studies have systematically explored the dynamic mechanisms of different types of cultural tourism resources within the tourism context.

In the fields of religion and folk culture, cultural identity formation is often closely related to community participation (Bankier-Karp, 2023). Research shows that through participation in ritual activities or cultural festivals, community members can transform their identity recognition into cultural-level cognitive identity (Schwartz et al., 2008). However, the local cultural identity created through cultural heritage and how this identity is impacted by external cultures and commercialization in tourism remains an under-researched issue (Xingfu & Lin, 2014). Cultural identity affects individual self-awareness and is closely linked to well-being and community belonging. The research by Gao (2022)

shows that cultural identity significantly influences tourists' well-being, and this sense of identity is often closely related to a sense of place. Additionally, Račiūnaitė-Paužolienė (2022) pointed out that cultural and religious heritage, through its deep integration with indigenous religious sites and communities, shapes a unique urban identity. While these studies reveal the potential positive effects of cultural identity on individuals and social aspects, how the diversity and complexity of cultural identity in cross-cultural and cross-regional contexts affect tourism experiences still requires further exploration. This research aims to explore the generation and reproduction mechanisms of cultural support in the interaction between residents and tourists from the perspective of cultural tourism and analyze its comprehensive impact on individual well-being and community belonging. It will provide theoretical support for understanding the multi-level mechanisms of cultural identity practices and offer recommendations for cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism development policies.

Traditional Rituals, Sense of Place, and Cultural Identity

The connection between traditional rituals and a sense of place has frequently come up in conversations about tourism with cultural heritage (Hassanpour & Soltanzadeh, 2022). The clearer the residents' cognitive understanding of symbolic meanings in festive rituals, the higher their perception of a sense of place (B. Zhang & Shu, 2022). The local uniqueness of the Mazu image

enables it to transcend language barriers and territorial boundaries, evoking primal emotions within individuals (Rodríguez-Campo et al., 2021). According to Rodríguez-Campo et al. (2021), the participation of tourists in festival rituals occurs from two threshold positions, where hedonism serves as a precedent for satisfaction assessment and the future intentions of participants. Moreover, threshold experiences have a two-dimensional structure composed of individual transformations and festival rituals.

As traditional rituals constitute a multidimensional structure and exhibit a positive correlation with a sense of place, more research is necessary to fully comprehend how each aspect of traditional rituals affects a person's sense of place. In simple terms, cognitive perceptions of ritual symbols, order, and interaction may be considered key antecedents to a sense of place. Treating each facet of traditional rituals as a first-order structure helps us understand their relative importance and potency with regard to the sense of place. In light of the previous debates, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1a: Cognitive perception of ritual symbols positively influences the sense of place.
- H1b: Cognitive perception of ritual order positively influences the sense of place.
- H1c: Cognitive perception of ritual interaction positively influences the sense of place.

Sense of place and cultural identity are inherently connected, with residents' identification with local culture based on their sense of place identity. Kovacs (2007) suggests that place attachment strengthens cultural identity. Further research indicates that the stronger residents' sense of place identity, the stronger their cultural identity. A sense of place is also essential to tourism growth in terms of cultural assets. Cultural heritage tourism suffers when residents do not feel a sense of attachment to or dependence on their location, which impedes the development of identity and culture. Fu and Luo (2023) argue that, in cultural heritage tourism development, the cultural identity of tourists and their emotional engagement with cultural heritage must be taken into account. They suggest building a theoretical framework that takes into account cultural identity, travel experiences, place attachment, contentment, and intention to return to confirm that place attachment and cultural identity are positively correlated. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Festivals' sense of place has a positive influence on cultural identity.

According to Santiago (2023), investigating how religious rituals affect cultural identification reveals how important religious rituals are to the creation, preservation, and negotiation of cultural identity among a variety of religious traditions and cultural backgrounds. Cognitive awareness of ritual symbols, order, and interaction in traditional rituals can enhance intergenerational dialogue,

promote cultural education, facilitate inter-religious communication, encourage ritual adaptation, support community engagement, and collaborate with cultural organizations. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to achieving the goals of sustainable community tourism (Macbeth et al., 2004; Pongponrat & Chantrodoan, 2012).

Figure 1 depicts the network of relationships that we have discussed up to this point. We suggest that each dimension of traditional rituals has direct and positive effects on the sense of place in the H1a, H1b, and H1c stages. In H2, we posit a direct and positive influence of a sense of place on cultural identity. Furthermore, based on previous research findings, we elucidate the direct positive correlation between each dimension of traditional rituals and cultural identity. Scholars often examine cultural identity as an intermediary variable in the form of tourist emotions (Agapito et al., 2013). The application of cultural identity to the C-A-C model as research of tourist intentions is less common. Based on the relevant literature, we anticipate that a sense of place will be a beneficial mediator in the interaction between traditional rituals (in all their aspects) and cultural identity. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Festivals' sense of place acts as a positive mediating factor in the relationship between traditional rituals and cultural identity.

METHODS

Questionnaire Survey

There are two sections to the questionnaire. The first section contains 13 items that

measure important variables. There are 15 elements for customary practices: Six items for ritual symbols (S; Lu et al., 2015; Nguyen & Cheung, 2016; Wynveen et al., 2012; Y. Zhang, 2021), five items for ritual order (O; Anistratenko, 2021; Sohi et al., 2018; Xygalatas, 2019), and four items for ritual interaction (IN; Bonner, 2010; W.-H. Kim & Chae, 2018). There are seven items for a sense of place (P; Patwardhan et al., 2020; S.-N. Zhang et al., 2019) and nine items for cultural identity (ID; Fu & Luo, 2023; C. X. Zhang et al., 2019). In the first section of the questionnaire, every item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with one being 'strongly disagree' and five being 'strongly agree,' to standardize the data and reduce errors. Five questions make up the second section and are designed to gather demographic information (gender, age, occupation, education level, and period of residency). The survey questionnaire was translated from English into Mandarin. A back-translation process confirmed the questionnaire's accuracy (Brislin, 1970). Please refer to Appendix A.

Sample and Data Collection

This research collected data through informal interviews and questionnaires. The informal interviews served as a pre-survey for the questionnaire, providing contextual support and supplementary information for subsequent quantitative analysis. These interviews were conducted in a relaxed, unstructured conversational style, relying on the interviewer's observation and impromptu guidance. The

interviewees primarily included individuals involved in the village committee's festival organization. The interviews focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the festival's historical background and cultural significance. The interviews took place on March 22, 2023, mainly at the local village committee office, aiming to uncover key themes potentially overlooked in the questionnaire design. This pre-survey design ensured the questionnaire's content was more targeted and comprehensive, benefiting the questionnaire's development and aiding the interpretation of quantitative data by providing cultural and social context. The second data collection phase occurred between May 10 and May 20, 2023. Quantitative data for this phase were primarily obtained through questionnaires distributed during the Mazu Cultural Festival in Canshakou Village. A total of 350 valid questionnaires were collected using random sampling. The research focused on local residents, as the festival's small scale and regional characteristics of folk culture primarily attracted participants from the local community (residents of Caofeidian District, Tangshan City, Hebei Province). While some tourists also participated, most came from nearby areas of Tangshan, with a few from other provinces or countries. Therefore, the research concentrated on local residents' participation and festival experiences. Data collection heavily relied on the researcher's local identity and connections (i.e., social and personal networks). Communicating in the local dialect with different groups reduced

the socio-cultural distance between the respondents and the researcher, effectively reflecting a “local” identity. All participants were informed beforehand of the study’s purpose. The questionnaire data were primarily collected in the Mazu Cultural Tourism Zone, including the Mazu Cultural Plaza, the Canshakou Ancient Temple Complex, and the Canshakou Village Committee.

Data Analysis

Regression analysis serves as the foundation for PLS-SEM, a kind of structural equation modeling (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982). Because PLS-SEM can simultaneously manage reflective and formative model structures, it is more practical than general linear structural relationship models for handling complex causal interactions. It is less strict on sample size, randomness, and normal distribution of data. Additionally, PLS-SEM can effectively handle noisy data and missing values while demonstrating good predictive and explanatory capabilities. The PLS-SEM model can handle errors caused by variable measurements well, even with small sample data. It is particularly suitable for exploratory and explanatory research (Sarstedt et al., 2023). In this research, the partial least squares method was employed to construct a structural model examining the impact of traditional festival rituals on cultural identity. The data processing and calculations were carried out using SmartPLS 4.0.

We used a three-step procedure to examine the suggested model and hypothesis correlations, as well as to validate and create the survey questionnaire. We developed the questionnaire and evaluated the aspects of our primary constructs (traditional rituals) in the first phase, and analyses of validity and reliability were carried out in the first inquiry. Composite reliability (CR) values, Cronbach’s α values, average variance extracted (AVE) values, and cross-loadings were used for testing. The second stage involved investigating the unidimensionality of cultural identity and sense of place and proving the measurement model’s overall factor structure. In the third stage, we conducted a structural model examination through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to obtain the results of the structural equation testing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sample Profile

Table 1 displays the respondents’ basic information. Of the participants, 48.86% were men and 51.14% were women. Most of the responders were between 31 and 60 (60.28%). About 32% of the respondents held a bachelor’s degree. Occupationally, students constituted 26.86%, employed individuals made up 50.28%, and retirees accounted for 22.86% of all respondents. Over 66% of the participants had been residing in the Caofeidian district of Tangshan City, Hebei Province, for over 10 years.

Table 1
Profile of the respondents (n=350)

Characteristics	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	171	48.86
Female	179	51.14
Age		
18–25	50	14.29
26–30	39	11.14
31–40	83	23.71
41–50	63	18.00
51–60	65	18.57
≥61	50	14.29
Education		
Primary or below	72	20.57
Junior high school	85	24.29
Senior high school	81	23.14
Bachelor’s degree	62	17.71
Master’s degree or above	50	14.29
Occupation		
Student	94	26.86
Serving officers	176	50.28
Retirees	80	22.86
Years of local residence		
1–5	48	13.71
6–10	71	20.29
11–15	70	20.00
16–20	57	16.29
≥21	104	29.71

Measurement Model

The PLS-SEM analysis and estimation can be broken down into two parts, with each step concentrating on validity and reliability analysis, path coefficient analysis, and model predictive ability estimation

for the structural model (G. Zhang et al., 2020). SmartPLS 4.0 was used to assess the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Reliability testing was conducted using two indicators: CR values and Cronbach’s α coefficient. A CR value above 0.7 is recommended in exploratory research, and a Cronbach’s α coefficient greater than 0.7 is acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). A number greater than 0.5 for the AVE indicates the viability of using a variable (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982). The latent variables exhibited strong internal consistency (see Table 2), where the CR values varied from 0.870 to 0.960 and the Cronbach’s α coefficients from 0.806 to 0.954, all exceeding the fit threshold of 0.7.

All AVE values for the latent variables, ranging from 0.605 to 0.737 and all exceeding 0.5, showed strong convergent validity and a plausible interpretation of the latent variables. High reliability and validity enhance the credibility of data analysis and provide a solid foundation for theoretical model construction. A high AVE (Average Variance Extracted) value signifies good convergent validity and reflects that the questionnaire design closely aligns with the research theme. This level of validity ensures that the empirical analysis of the model is more persuasive, especially in multidimensional variable analyses, where it helps eliminate interference caused by poor measurement design. When studying complex social variables such as cultural identity or place attachment, a high AVE value enhances the credibility and explanatory power of research conclusions.

Table 2
Trust level analysis

Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Ritual Symbols (S)	S1: I perceive the positive influence of the Mazu female image on the social identity of local women.	0.852			
	S2: I am able to enjoy delicacies during the festival that I don't usually have.	0.839			
	S3: I feel safe during the festival.	0.875	0.932	0.944	0.737
	S4: The local temples make me sense the profound history of Mazu culture.	0.872			
	S5: The ritual worship ceremonies make me feel solemn and serious.	0.863			
	S6: The festival effectively showcases the local historical and cultural heritage.	0.850			
Ritual Order (O)	O1: I believe that ritual activities are open and inclusive.	0.770			
	O2: I adhere to specific ritual norms and customs during ritual activities.	0.811			
	O3: I think participating in this festival ritual enhances community awareness.	0.772	0.806	0.870	0.626
	O4: I believe that participating in this festival ritual is essential for maintaining social harmony.	0.811			
	IN1: Experiencing the process of this ritual makes me feel excited.	0.795			
	IN2: Participating in this ritual brings me comfort.	0.818			
	IN3: I have good interactions with others during the ritual process.	0.791			
	IN4: The relationships among people at the ritual site are harmonious.	0.751	0.847	0.890	0.617
Sense of Place (P)	IN5: The reactions of others to the ritual have influenced me.	0.772			
	P1: This festival is very special to me.	0.753			
	P2: This festival holds great significance for me.	0.816			
	P3: I have many wonderful memories of this festival.	0.787			
	P4: When I have been away from this area for some time, I really want to come back.	0.796	0.893	0.915	0.605
	P5: I wouldn't do what I do in this place anywhere else.	0.744			
	P6: For the activities I enjoy doing, there is no other place that compares to this area.	0.787			
P7: During this festival, I feel close to the other people participating.	0.762				

Table 2 (continue)

Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Cultural Identity (ID)	ID1: I am aware of the historical development of Mazu culture.	0.743	0.954	0.960	0.729
	ID2: I am aware of the cultural value of the heritage of Mazu culture.	0.884			
	ID3: I am familiar with the cultural artifacts in the heritage of Mazu culture.	0.894			
	ID4: During this trip, I took pride in Mazu's diverse cultural heritage.	0.804			
	ID5: I have deep respect for the historical figures in the past of the tourist destination.	0.862			
	ID6: I have a strong interest in heritage culture.	0.875			
	ID7: I would take the time to learn about the heritage of Mazu culture.	0.879			
	ID8: I would participate in cultural tourism activities related to this heritage.	0.858			
	ID9: I would purchase cultural tourism products related to this heritage.	0.871			

Discriminant validity was tested through the cross-loading matrix of observed variables. Table 3 reveals that the factor loadings of each variable's items are higher within their variable than in other variables. An additional examination was conducted using the correlation matrix, wherein

discriminant validity is present when a variable's AVE value surpasses the square of its correlation with other variables (Kline & Santor, 1999). The AVE values for every latent variable in the sample data (Table 3) satisfy the need to be larger than the square of the correlation with other factors,

Table 3
Cross loading

	ID	IN	O	P	S
ID1	0.743	0.215	0.220	0.293	0.223
ID2	0.884	0.247	0.201	0.344	0.206
ID3	0.894	0.280	0.208	0.293	0.222
ID4	0.804	0.240	0.232	0.312	0.223
ID5	0.862	0.278	0.163	0.293	0.212
ID6	0.875	0.301	0.189	0.310	0.214
ID7	0.879	0.321	0.215	0.309	0.213
ID8	0.858	0.274	0.225	0.305	0.270
ID9	0.871	0.282	0.214	0.294	0.193
IN1	0.238	0.795	0.343	0.372	0.256
IN2	0.279	0.818	0.217	0.363	0.238
IN3	0.293	0.791	0.273	0.348	0.163
IN4	0.229	0.751	0.258	0.346	0.277
IN5	0.201	0.772	0.183	0.301	0.224
O1	0.233	0.240	0.770	0.310	0.219
O2	0.150	0.280	0.811	0.390	0.215
O3	0.150	0.285	0.772	0.357	0.284
O4	0.253	0.224	0.811	0.319	0.223
P1	0.314	0.321	0.311	0.753	0.271
P2	0.345	0.375	0.312	0.816	0.288
P3	0.271	0.315	0.375	0.787	0.292
P4	0.290	0.364	0.355	0.796	0.323
P5	0.171	0.385	0.315	0.744	0.325
P6	0.298	0.327	0.322	0.787	0.238
P7	0.259	0.323	0.397	0.762	0.259
S1	0.284	0.185	0.199	0.282	0.852
S2	0.193	0.237	0.286	0.324	0.839
S3	0.189	0.267	0.288	0.319	0.875
S4	0.258	0.264	0.264	0.347	0.872
S5	0.219	0.326	0.248	0.333	0.863
S6	0.180	0.229	0.240	0.269	0.850

demonstrating strong discriminant validity. Since the AVE value is the average of all squared multiple correlations within the same latent variable, SMC is the square value of the standardized factor loading of the measurement item under each latent variable; when making comparisons, a square operation needs to be performed (G. Zhang et al., 2020), as shown in Table 4. As Henseler et al. (2015) note, PLS-SEM will overstate factor loadings while underestimating the degree of variable correlation – that is, the AVE value will be overestimated, so the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) should be added to the discriminant validity analysis. Leguina (2015) states that the discriminant validity test can be passed if the HTMT value between two distinct latent variables is less than 0.85. The results of the discriminant validity test are displayed in Table 5. In

cultural studies, the boundaries between latent variables may blur due to conceptual overlaps, and relying solely on AVE values might not be sufficient to accurately assess discriminant validity. HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) values, as a more conservative and sensitive indicator, serve as a complementary validation tool, ensuring the theoretical reliability of the measurement model.

Hypothesis Testing

The validity and reliability studies confirmed the questionnaire's validity and reliability. Then, using SmartPLS 4.0 software, structural equation modeling was performed on the sample to assess the five hypotheses. Figure 2 depicts the path diagram for the relationship between traditional rituals and cultural identity. This is consistent with previous research on the role of cultural

Table 4
Analysis of discriminant validity

	ID	IN	O	P	S
ID	0.854				
IN	0.317	0.786			
O	0.243	0.328	0.791		
P	0.359	0.442	0.438	0.778	
S	0.257	0.295	0.298	0.366	0.859

Table 5
Analysis of HTMT discriminant validity

	ID	IN	O	P	S
ID					
IN	0.352				
O	0.284	0.391			
P	0.387	0.508	0.514		
S	0.273	0.329	0.342	0.400	

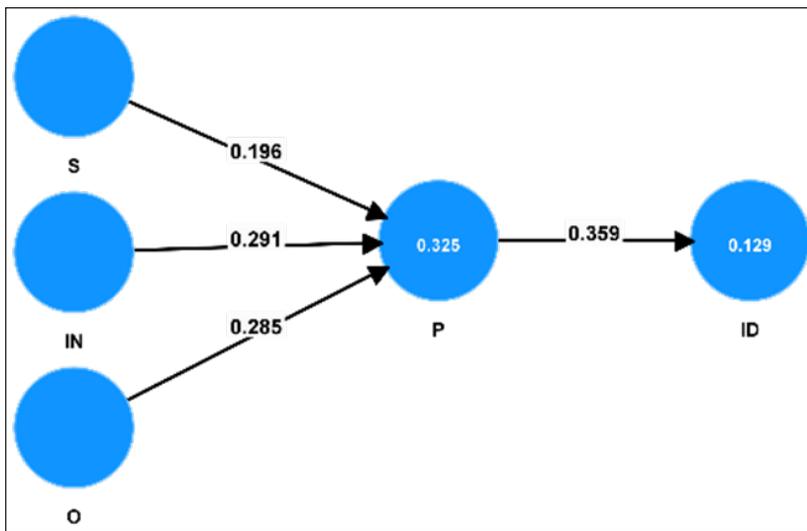


Figure 2. Results of hypothesis testing

practices (Ashworth, 2020; Morabito, 2024). As Table 6 shows, regarding the impact of different types of traditional rituals on the sense of place, ritual symbols ($t=3.907$, $P<0.001$), ritual order ($t=5.304$, $P<0.001$), and ritual interaction ($t=5.277$, $P<0.001$) all have a positive influence on the sense of place. Therefore, H1a, H1b, and H1c are supported. Ritual symbols carry cultural memory and evoke emotional resonance among participants through visual, auditory, or tactile forms (Sulaeman et al., 2021).

This echoes Hobson's insights, who emphasized that standardized behaviors and processes in rituals convey cultural stability and continuity (Hobson et al., 2018). Their impact on the sense of place may stem from reinforcing participants' memory and emotional connection to a location through repetitive activities. Through interpersonal interactions, emotional bonds among participants are established, further enhancing the formation of a sense

of place. This suggests that traditional rituals are not merely cultural practices but also serve as vehicles for community connection. Table 6 also indicates that sense of place ($t=3.326$, $P<0.001$) positively influences cultural identity. Thus, H2 is supported. As a bridge between culture and individuals, the sense of place connects individuals to physical locations (e.g., geographic position). It strengthens cultural belonging on a psychological level through emotions and memories. Participants may recall-related cultural traditions through memories of specific locations, thereby deepening cultural identity. The influence of a sense of place on cultural identity is likely multidimensional, operating through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels. A sense of place may trigger cognitive cultural memories, emotional identification, and a willingness to engage in cultural practices (Liu et al., 2024; Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Table 6
Structural model results

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
IN -> ID	0.233	0.236	0.055	4.222	0.000
IN -> P	0.293	0.296	0.056	5.277	0.000
O -> ID	0.126	0.127	0.059	2.128	0.033
O -> P	0.282	0.283	0.053	5.304	0.000
P -> ID	0.213	0.213	0.064	3.326	0.001
S -> ID	0.155	0.155	0.055	2.804	0.005
S -> P	0.197	0.198	0.050	3.907	0.000

The Mediating Effect of a Sense of Place

To estimate the paths of direct and indirect effects in the model, a bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples was conducted, and the results of the significance tests for the structural equation were obtained (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As Table 7 shows, the direct path ($t=2.804$, $P<0.01$) and indirect path ($t=2.453$, $P<0.05$) between ritual symbols and cultural identity are both significant, indicating that sense of place partially mediates the relationship between ritual symbols and cultural identity. Moreover, the results indicate that a sense of place partially mediates the relationships between ritual order, interaction, and cultural identity. Therefore, H3 is supported. These results are consistent with the theory proposed by Scannell and Gifford (2010), who

emphasized the mediating role of spatial attachment in forming cultural identity.

As discussed by Ma et al. (2023), Mahira et al. (2023), and Zhao et al. (2023), ritual symbols, as symbolic expressions of culture, can directly evoke participants' cultural memories and emotional resonance, thereby enhancing their sense of cultural identity. The sense of place serves as a mediating variable, playing a critical role in strengthening the relationship between ritual symbols and cultural identity. This indicates that ritual symbols do not directly influence cultural identity through their visual or symbolic significance, but indirectly enhance it by fostering participants' emotional connection to a place. The normative structure of ritual order and the social nature of ritual interactions together shape individuals'

Table 7
Sense of place mediating effect model

Path	T statistics	Direct effect	P-value	T statistics	Indirect effect	P-value
S -> P -> ID	2.804	0.155	0.005	2.453	0.042	0.014
O -> P -> ID	2.128	0.126	0.033	2.825	0.06	0.005
IN -> P -> ID	4.222	0.233	0.000	2.781	0.062	0.005

sense of belonging and security within a place. This emotional bond further impacts their cultural identity. Ritual symbols, order, and interactions collectively form the cultural landscape of a specific place. This landscape, filtered through participants' cognition, creates a unique memory of the place. Through such cognitive memory, the sense of place becomes a vital bridge to cultural identity.

Table 8
Hypothetical results

hypothesis	conclusion
H1a	support
H1b	support
H1c	support
H2	support
H3	partial mediation

In summary, traditional rituals significantly and positively influence the sense of place through ritual symbols, order, and interaction (all $P < 0.001$), fostering its formation by enhancing participants' cultural memory and emotional resonance. Moreover, as a mediating variable, the sense of place partially mediates the relationship between traditional rituals and cultural identity (all $P < 0.05$). The sense of place connects individuals to specific locations and strengthens cultural belonging through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, ultimately deepening cultural identity (Table 8). Ritual symbols, order, and interaction collectively shape the cultural landscape of a specific place, serving as a vital bridge between the sense of place and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This research explores the impact of traditional rituals and sense of place on tourists' cultural identity during festivals, providing significant insights for both theoretical and practical applications. The findings confirm the beneficial effects of traditional rituals, characterized by symbolic, orderly, and interactive elements, on the sense of place (H1a, H1b, and H1c). This discovery further enriches the knowledge framework regarding the relationship between traditional rituals and the sense of place, demonstrating that enhancing the symbolic, normative, and interactive aspects of rituals can significantly improve the sense of place. For investors and communities, designing and promoting festival rituals rich in symbolism and interactivity is essential to strengthen residents' attachment to their locality and improve their attitudes toward tourism development. Additionally, this research offers a new pathway to address development bottlenecks in festival tourism by demonstrating the applicability of ritual behavior theory in cultural festival tourism.

The research also supports H3, indicating that an enhanced sense of place fosters an increased sense of cultural identity. In the context of the Mazu Cultural Festival, the sense of place serves as a critical emotional variable, where participation in traditional rituals enhances residents' attachment to their locality and further strengthens their cultural identity. This finding validates the core role of the sense of place within the C-A-C (Cognitive-Affective-Conative) paradigm, offering a new perspective for exploring cultural identity formation.

The theoretical innovation of this research lies in its systematic elucidation of the intrinsic logic between traditional rituals, sense of place, and cultural identity. It emphasizes the synergistic role of ritual symbolism, normativity, and interactivity in cultural identity formation, providing a new theoretical framework for folk culture tourism. Moreover, it expands the application of cultural identity in tourism intention and festival experience, offering policy recommendations for the sustainable development of local cultural activities. Despite the progress made, this research has certain unmet goals and limitations. First, the scope of the study is limited. It focuses solely on traditional rituals as a single factor influencing cultural identity without delving into other critical intrinsic attributes of Mazu cultural tourism (e.g., the spiritual connotations of belief or the economic benefits of festivals). These factors may also play key roles in shaping cultural identity and sense of place. Second, the study's focus on local residents as its primary subjects may restrict the generalizability of the findings, as it does not fully cover external tourists or participants with different identities. Third, while emotions are examined as a mediating variable, the research lacks an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted nature of emotions (such as emotional dimensions or specific experiential differences). This may limit the comprehensive understanding of the role of emotions in cultural identity and sense of place formation.

The findings and limitations of this research have also raised new questions and potential research directions: Exploration of

multiple factors: Future studies could further investigate the multifaceted attributes of Mazu cultural tourism, including its spiritual significance, economic impacts, and social interactions, to construct a more comprehensive analytical framework. Analysis of group differences: Research should examine variations in cultural identity and sense of place across different personality types, age groups, and life experiences to reveal the diversity of festival experiences. Expanded application of emotional variables: Consider treating emotions as a moderating variable or exploring their multifaceted mechanisms under different contexts to better understand their impact on cultural identity. Validation of cultural and regional differences: Future research should go beyond the current study's regional focus to investigate the applicability of the C-A-C model in diverse cultural contexts, thereby validating the model's universality. Empirical research on traditional rituals: It is necessary to verify the influence of traditional rituals on the sense of place and cultural identity in more practical settings, particularly in terms of their specific forms and mechanisms across different types of festivals.

This research has made significant progress in exploring the relationships among traditional rituals, sense of place, and cultural identity. However, it has not fully achieved all research objectives, leaving some issues for further investigation. By explicitly discussing the attainment of research goals and limitations and proposing future directions based on the findings, this research lays a solid foundation for

the theoretical exploration and practical development of folk festival cultural tourism.

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