

# Explaining Sustainable Competitive Advantage in Rural Tourism Destinations in Southwest China: The Roles of Digital Access Convenience and Place Attachment

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**Abstract:** This study investigates how the service marketing mix (7Ps) contributes to Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) in rural tourism destinations, highlighting the mediating roles of Digital Access Convenience (DAC) and Place Attachment (PA). Using survey data from domestic tourists who participated in rural tourism activities in Yunnan Province, Southwest China (N = 604), the proposed model was tested via structural equation modeling with bootstrapped confidence intervals. The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity. The structural results indicate that all seven 7Ps dimensions significantly and positively predict DAC, with Physical Evidence showing the strongest effect. For PA, Product, Price, Place, People, Process, and Physical Evidence exhibit significant positive effects, whereas Promotion is not significant. With respect to SCA, Product, Place, Promotion, Process, and Physical Evidence have significant positive direct effects, while Price and People are not supported. Moreover, DAC positively predicts both PA and SCA, and PA positively predicts SCA. Bootstrapping confirms that PA mediates most 7Ps–SCA relationships (except Promotion), and DAC provides significant indirect pathways from each 7Ps dimension to SCA. Overall, the findings demonstrate that rural destinations can strengthen sustainable competitiveness by enhancing digitally enabled service accessibility and fostering place-based bonds, with process reliability, credible physical evidence, and accessibility-related factors playing particularly salient roles.

**Keywords:** service marketing mix (7Ps); digital access convenience; place attachment; sustainable competitive advantage; rural tourism; Yunnan; structural equation modeling.

## Introduction

Tourism is rebuilding amid intensifying ecological and socio-economic pressures. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution increasingly shape how destinations are planned, governed, and evaluated, while post-pandemic recovery has renewed tourism's role in stimulating local employment and regional growth (Omar et al., 2024). Yet tourism expansion can also amplify emissions, waste, water stress, and sociocultural disruptions when development outpaces governance and service capacity (Baloch et al., 2022). These tensions are especially acute in rural destinations, where ecological fragility and culturally embedded life worlds constitute the very assets that tourism commodifies. As a result, sustainability in rural tourism is not only an environmental imperative but



also a competitiveness challenge: destinations must create value for visitors without degrading the ecological and cultural foundations that enable long-term performance (Hu et al., 2025).

Within this global context, China has elevated sustainable tourism—particularly sustainable rural tourism—as a strategic instrument aligned with ecological civilization and rural revitalization. Policy support and market demand have accelerated rural tourism development and diversified rural tourism products, while digital platforms have become central to how destinations attract visitors, coordinate services, and communicate experiences (Yang, 2024). However, rapid platform-driven visibility does not automatically translate into sustainable destination performance. Rural destinations may gain strong online exposure but still face fragmented service delivery, inconsistent price transparency, uneven personnel capability, and weak process integration (Han et al., 2025). When digital promises cannot be matched by on-site experience, visitor satisfaction and loyalty deteriorate, reputational risks increase, and the path toward sustainability becomes fragile.

Southwest China, and Yunnan Province in particular, provides an analytically important setting in which these tensions are highly visible. Yunnan’s rural tourism landscape combines ecological sensitivity, rich ethnic cultures, and fast-growing tourism demand, while also being deeply embedded in China’s digital tourism ecosystem (Shaohui & Liping, 2022). In such contexts, competitiveness depends not only on resource endowments or scenic attractiveness, but on whether destinations can deliver coherent end-to-end experiences that integrate what is offered, how it is priced, how it is accessed, how it is promoted, and how service encounters are executed. This emphasizes a managerial and theoretical question: which components of the service system systematically generate sustainable competitive advantage in rural destinations, and through what mechanisms?

Despite sustained scholarly attention to sustainable rural tourism, two limitations remain salient. First, existing work often prioritizes macro-level interventions (e.g., infrastructure expansion, policy frameworks, ecological zoning, community development) while providing comparatively less predictive clarity on how micro-level service design is converted into long-term, sustainability-aligned competitive advantage in rural destination settings (Zhang & Zhang, 2026). Second, although digitalization is widely acknowledged, it is frequently treated as contextual rather than modeled as a measurable mechanism that shapes tourists’ evaluations and behavioral outcomes (Tan et al., 2025). In practice, tourists increasingly rely on digital touchpoints across the travel journey—from information search and trip planning to booking, navigation, and post-visit sharing (Bilan et al., 2024). When access to destination services is perceived as easy, efficient, and reliable, tourists are more likely to experience reduced effort, fewer uncertainties, and smoother service consumption, which can translate into stronger destination evaluations (Yacoub et al., 2025). This study conceptualizes this mechanism as Digital Access Convenience (DAC) and argues that its role in rural tourism competitiveness remains under-examined.

To address these gaps, this study develops and empirically tests a service- and technology-oriented framework for explaining Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) in rural tourism destinations, using Yunnan as the focal context. The model positions the 7Ps service marketing mix as the upstream driver and examines whether the 7Ps influence SCA directly and indirectly through Digital Access Convenience and Place Attachment (PA). Specifically, consistent with the research objectives, the study tests: (1) the effects of the 7Ps on DAC, PA, and SCA; (2) the effects of DAC and PA on SCA; (3) the effect of DAC on PA; and (4) the mediation pathways through which service design translates into sustainable advantage.

Conceptually, this framework treats sustainable competitive advantage as an outcome of coordinated service-system design rather than a static attribute of a destination. It argues that the 7Ps shape tourists’ experience quality and value judgments, but that these effects are strengthened when service delivery is supported by convenient digital access and consolidated through place-based psychological bonding (Elgarhy & Moustafa, 2022). In this sense, DAC functions as a process mechanism that reduces friction and uncertainty in service consumption, while place attachment captures the deeper emotional and functional ties that make destination preference more resilient over time.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it advances sustainable rural tourism research by reframing competitiveness as a service-system outcome and by operationalizing the 7Ps in a rural destination context. Second, it strengthens digital tourism scholarship by introducing Digital Access Convenience as a central, measurable mechanism linking service design and destination performance in rural settings. Third, it enriches destination competitiveness research by modeling Place Attachment as a psychological pathway through which improved service design and digital access translate into more durable forms of advantage.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops hypotheses. The methodology section describes the research design, measurement, sampling, and analytical procedures. Results are then presented, followed by discussion of theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### 2.1 The 7Ps as a service-system design logic in rural destinations

Rural tourism competitiveness increasingly depends on whether a destination can systematically design and deliver coherent service experiences across multiple stakeholders and touchpoints (Dumitru & Cosma, 2023). The extended service marketing mix (7Ps)—Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence—captures this “service-system” logic by specifying the key managerial levers through which destinations shape value creation, expectation formation, encounter quality, and tangible credibility. In platformized tourism markets, these levers also determine how effectively services are translated into digitally accessible and psychologically resonant experiences, which ultimately matters for long-term destination performance (Zhang & Chen, 2024).

### 2.2 The 7Ps → Digital Access Convenience (DAC)

Digital Access Convenience (DAC) reflects tourists’ perceived ease and efficiency in accessing destination information and services through digital touchpoints across the journey (e.g., search, booking, navigation, communication, payment) (Bilan et al., 2024). In rural contexts—where information gaps and service fragmentation are common—DAC becomes a critical experiential infrastructure because it reduces uncertainty and coordination costs (Johnson & Vlachokyriakos, 2024). Conceptually, the 7Ps should strengthen DAC because each “P” can reduce friction in the digital service journey: product clarity supports informed search, transparent pricing reduces perceived risk, integrated place/access improves wayfinding and access, promotion improves information availability, people and process enhance responsiveness and reliability, and physical evidence strengthens credibility and reduces ambiguity. Therefore, each marketing mix element is expected to positively affect DAC.

H1a: Unique and culturally embedded product attributes positively influence tourists’ perceived digital access convenience.

H1b: Transparent and fair pricing strategies positively influence tourists’ perceived digital access convenience.

H1c: Convenient physical location and well-integrated digital navigation systems positively influence tourists’ perceived digital access convenience.

H1d: Digital and integrated promotional strategies positively influence tourists’ perceived digital access convenience.

H1e: Service personnel’s responsiveness and digitally mediated interactions positively influence tourists’ perceived digital access convenience.

H1f: Streamlined and technology-supported service processes positively influence tourists’ perceived digital access convenience.

H1g: Clear and reliable physical and digital evidence positively influence tourists' perceived digital access convenience.

### **2.3 The 7Ps → Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA)**

Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) refers to a destination's ability to maintain superior performance over time through advantages that are valuable, durable, and difficult to imitate (Elgarhy & Abou-Shouk, 2023). In rural tourism, such advantage is rarely produced by a single attraction; rather, it emerges from consistent experience delivery, trust, reputation, and differentiated value propositions (Manosuthi et al., 2026). The 7Ps represent the core managerial architecture through which destinations build these outcomes. Distinctive products and credible physical evidence support differentiation; fair pricing and reliable processes support trust; accessible distribution improves market reach; effective promotion strengthens visibility and expectation alignment; and capable personnel improve encounter quality. Accordingly, each "P" is expected to positively contribute to SCA.

H2a: Unique and culturally embedded product attributes positively contribute to sustainable competitive advantage.

H2b: Competitive and transparent pricing strategies positively contribute to sustainable competitive advantage.

H2c: Strategic location accessibility and integrated digital channels positively contribute to sustainable competitive advantage.

H2d: Consistent and innovative promotional efforts positively contribute to sustainable competitive advantage.

H2e: High-quality personnel interaction and service expertise positively contribute to sustainable competitive advantage.

H2f: Efficient and adaptive service processes positively contribute to sustainable competitive advantage.

H2g: Distinctive physical and symbolic service evidence positively contributes to sustainable competitive advantage.

### **2.4 The 7Ps → Place Attachment (PA)**

Place Attachment (PA) captures tourists' emotional and functional bonds with a destination and is especially salient in rural tourism where place-based authenticity, cultural meaning, and nature immersion constitute the core experience (Li et al., 2025). The 7Ps are expected to foster PA by enabling coherent, meaningful, and comfortable experiences: product and promotion can intensify symbolic meaning and narrative identification; people and process shape the warmth and reliability of encounters; place/accessibility supports functional dependence; and physical evidence reinforces authenticity cues and memorability. Therefore, each marketing mix element is expected to enhance PA.

H3a: Unique and culturally meaningful product attributes positively influence tourists' place attachment.

H3b: Fair and transparent pricing practices positively influence tourists' place attachment.

H3c: Accessible location and integrated navigation systems positively influence tourists' place attachment.

H3d: Promotional narratives and digital storytelling positively influence tourists' place attachment.

H3e: Interpersonal interactions with service personnel positively influence tourists' place attachment.

H3f: Efficient and seamless service processes positively influence tourists' place attachment.

H3g: Culturally resonant physical and symbolic evidence positively influences tourists' place attachment.

### **2.5 Digital Access Convenience (DAC) → Place Attachment (PA)**

Beyond technical functionality, DAC can act as an experiential enabler. When digital access is convenient, tourists face fewer disruptions, perceive greater control, and can allocate more attention to exploration, immersion, and meaning-making (Li et al., 2025). These conditions are conducive to forming stronger emotional and functional bonds with the destination. Hence:

H4: Digital access convenience positively influences tourists' place attachment.

### **2.6 Digital Access Convenience (DAC) → Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA)**

In digitally competitive markets, DAC can function as a destination capability that supports SCA by improving perceived reliability, lowering transaction costs, strengthening trust, and enabling smoother experiences that translate into favorable evaluations and retention-related outcomes (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). Therefore:

H5: Digital access convenience positively contributes to sustainable competitive advantage.

### **2.7 Place Attachment (PA) → Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA)**

PA represents a deeper psychological asset linked to loyalty tendencies, advocacy, and resistance to substitution (Tasci et al., 2022). In rural tourism, where place uniqueness and experiential meanings are difficult to replicate, stronger attachment is likely to translate into more durable market positioning (Pantelidis et al., 2024). Thus:

H6: Place attachment positively contributes to sustainable competitive advantage.

### **2.8 Mediation of Place Attachment between the 7Ps and SCA**

The effect of service-system design on SCA may not be purely direct; it can be realized through tourists' psychological conversion mechanisms. PA provides a coherent mediation pathway: well-designed marketing mix elements create experiences that foster attachment, and attachment consolidates durable advantage through stronger preference and supportive behaviors (Das Guru et al., 2024). Accordingly, PA is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between each "P" and SCA:

H7a: Place attachment mediates the relationship between product attributes and sustainable competitive advantage.

H7b: Place attachment mediates the relationship between pricing strategies and sustainable competitive advantage.

H7c: Place attachment mediates the relationship between place accessibility and sustainable competitive advantage.

H7d: Place attachment mediates the relationship between promotional strategies and sustainable competitive advantage.

H7e: Place attachment mediates the relationship between people-oriented service quality and sustainable competitive advantage.

H7f: Place attachment mediates the relationship between service processes and sustainable competitive advantage.

H7g: Place attachment mediates the relationship between physical and symbolic service evidence and sustainable competitive advantage.

### **2.9 Mediation of Digital Access Convenience between the 7Ps and PA**

DAC can also serve as a "translation mechanism" through which the 7Ps become experientially usable and psychologically meaningful. When service elements are well designed, tourists should experience more convenient digital access; this reduced friction and enhanced controllability then facilitates attachment formation (Zeng & Chen, 2025). Thus, DAC is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between each "P" and PA:

H8a: Digital access convenience mediates the relationship between product attributes and place attachment.

H8b: Digital access convenience mediates the relationship between pricing strategies and place attachment.

H8c: Digital access convenience mediates the relationship between place accessibility and place attachment.

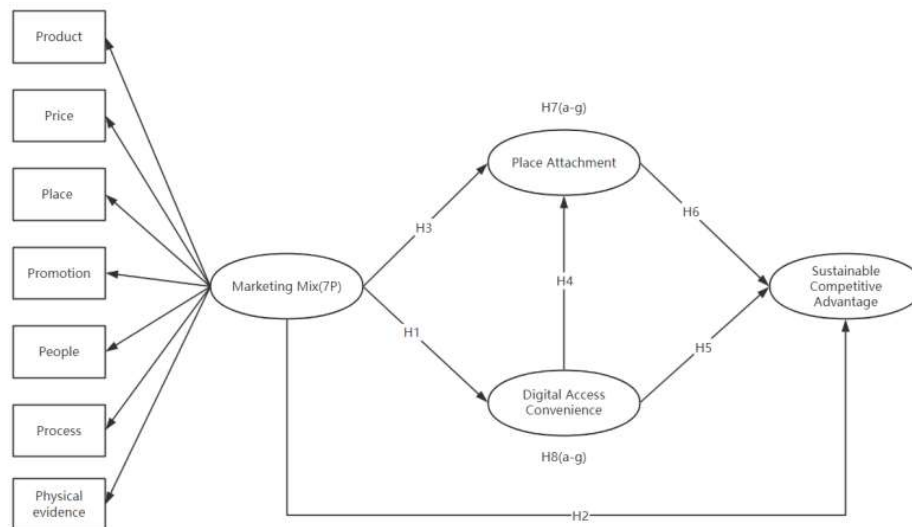
H8d: Digital access convenience mediates the relationship between promotional strategies and place attachment.

H8e: Digital access convenience mediates the relationship between people-oriented service quality and place attachment.

H8f: Digital access convenience mediates the relationship between service processes and place attachment.

H8g: Digital access convenience mediates the relationship between physical and symbolic service evidence and place attachment.

The model diagram is shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Sustainable Rural Tourism Behavior**

## Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey to test the proposed model linking the service marketing mix (7Ps) to Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA), with the mediating roles of Digital Access Convenience (DAC) and Place Attachment (PA), in rural tourism destinations in Yunnan Province, Southwest China. The target population comprised domestic Chinese tourists aged 18 or above who had participated in rural tourism activities in Yunnan within the past 12 months. Using purposive sampling with screening questions, data were collected via a mixed-mode procedure—an online questionnaire (Wenjuanxing) distributed through social media channels and on-site administration by trained assistants at rural tourism locations. After data screening and cleaning, 604 valid responses were retained; a pilot test ( $n = 30$ ) was conducted to refine item wording and survey flow, and pilot cases were excluded from the final sample.

All constructs were measured using multi-item scales adapted from established instruments and contextualized to Yunnan rural tourism, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly

agree). The 7Ps were operationalized with 25 items across Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence, while DAC, PA, and SCA were measured with validated multi-item

scales specified in the measurement tables. The achieved sample size exceeded common SEM guidelines (minimum 5 observations per indicator) given 61 indicators, supporting robust estimation.

Data analysis followed a two-step SEM procedure. The measurement model was assessed via reliability and validity checks (e.g., KMO = .755; significant Bartlett's test; CFA-based convergent/discriminant validity), followed by structural model estimation to test direct paths and mediation. Indirect effects were evaluated using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples; 95% confidence intervals). To assess common method bias, Harman's single-factor test indicated the first factor explained 28.4% of variance (<50%), suggesting common method bias was unlikely to substantively bias the findings.

## Results

Table 4.1 presents the demographic profile of the 604 respondents. Most participants were aged 18–28 (221, 36.6%), followed by 41–50 (163, 27.0%) and 29–40 (144, 23.8%), while older groups accounted for smaller shares (51–65: 55, 9.1%; 65+: 21, 3.5%). The sample was female-dominated (377, 62.4%) compared with males (227, 37.6%). In terms of education, the largest group held a vocational/technical diploma (220, 36.4%), followed by a bachelor's degree (187, 31.0%), with smaller proportions reporting a master's degree (99, 16.4%), high school or below (60, 9.9%), and a doctoral degree (38, 6.3%).

**Table 0.1 Sample Information**

Information and options	Frequency	Percent	
Age	18-28	221	36.6
	29-40	144	23.8
	41-50	163	27.0
	51-65	55	9.1
	65 and above	21	3.5
Gender	Male	227	37.6
	Female	377	62.4
Highest level of education completed	High school or below	60	9.9
	Vocational/technical diploma	220	36.4
	Bachelor's degree	187	31.0
	Master's degree	99	16.4
	Doctoral degree	38	6.3

Table 4.2 reports the descriptive statistics and distributional properties of all measurement items. Overall, the item means cluster around the mid-to-high range (approximately 3.51–3.67), indicating generally positive evaluations across the 7Ps dimensions, Digital Access Convenience (DAC), Place Attachment (PA), and Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA). Standard deviations are fairly consistent (about 0.94–1.06), suggesting adequate response variability. All items show negative skewness (roughly -0.65 to -0.88), implying responses tend to lean slightly toward higher agreement, while kurtosis values are modest (approximately -0.60 to 0.09) and remain within commonly accepted

thresholds for approximate normality. Taken together, these results indicate no serious departures from normality, supporting the suitability of subsequent CFA/SEM analyses.

**Table 0.2 Descriptive Statistics Results**

Study variables	Items	Mean	S.D.	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Value	S.E.	Value	S.E.
Product	D1	.560	.976	0.703	.099	0.332	.199
	D2	.670	.015	0.808	.099	0.132	.199
	D3	.610	.019	0.765	.099	0.271	.199
	D4	.550	.007	0.753	.099	0.141	.199
	D5	.460	.013	0.721	.099	0.212	.199
Price	I1	.560	.026	0.697	.099	0.322	.199
	I2	.620	.939	0.804	.099	0.160	.199
	I3	.512	.012	0.703	.099	0.263	.199
	I4	.660	.978	0.801	.099	0.210	.199
	I5	.553	.013	0.705	.099	0.250	.199
Place	L1	.590	.959	0.884	.099	.082	.199
	L2	.590	.004	0.724	.099	0.317	.199
	L3	.570	.994	0.747	.099	0.196	.199
	L4	.542	.014	0.723	.099	0.256	.199
	L5	.544	.999	0.717	.099	0.210	.199
Promotion	M1	.620	.968	0.820	.099	0.071	.199
	M2	.590	.971	0.788	.099	0.119	.199
	M3	.630	.031	0.723	.099	0.232	.199

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	M4	P	3	0	-	0	-	0	
	.580	.943	0.691	.099	0.420	.199			
People	E1	P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
	.580	.033	0.826	.099	0.167	.199			
	E2	P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
	.580	.005	0.725	.099	0.401	.199			
	E3	P	3	0	-	0	-	0	
	.580	.995	0.783	.099	0.252	.199			
E4	P	3	0	-	0	-	0		
.590	.987	0.747	.099	0.269	.199				
E5	P	3	0	-	0	-	0		
.579	.998	0.745	.099	0.311	.199				
Process	S1	P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
	.630	.063	0.765	.099	0.277	.199			
	S2	P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
	.510	.026	0.655	.099	0.597	.199			
	S3	P	3	0	-	0	-	0	
.570	.964	0.756	.099	0.148	.199				
S4	P	3	1	-	0	-	0		
.570	.011	0.785	.099	0.306	.199				
S5	P	3	1	-	0	-	0		
.569	.022	0.732	.099	0.313	.199				
Physical Evidence	H1	P	3	0	-	0	-	0	
	.590	.946	0.759	.099	0.195	.199			
	H2	P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
	.540	.040	0.701	.099	0.432	.199			
	H3	P	3	0	-	0	0	0	
.580	.959	0.848	.099	.086	.199				
H4	P	3	1	-	0	-	0		
.550	.022	0.846	.099	0.124	.199				
H5	P	3	1	-	0	-	0		
.554	.024	0.812	.099	0.152	.199				
Digital Convenience	Access	AC1	D	3	1	-	0	-	0
		.670	.022	0.682	.099	0.319	.199		
		AC2	D	3	0	-	0	-	0
		.590	.974	0.755	.099	0.245	.199		
		AC3	D	3	1	-	0	-	0
		.610	.005	0.728	.099	0.317	.199		
AC4	D	3	1	-	0	-	0		
.620	.013	0.745	.099	0.260	.199				
AC5	D	3	1	-	0	-	0		
.554	.032	0.699	.099	0.324	.199				
AC6	D	3	0	-	0	-	0		
.577	.987	0.745	.099	0.274	.199				

	D	3	1	-	0	-	0
	AC7	.614	.012	0.722	.099	0.333	.199
	D	3	1	-	0	-	0
	AC8	.625	.015	0.741	.099	0.261	.199
Place attachment	P	3	1	-	0	-	0
	A1	.600	.008	0.741	.099	0.308	.199
	P	3	1	-	0	-	0
	A2	.610	.019	0.822	.099	0.088	.199
	P	3	1	-	0	-	0
	A3	.590	.025	0.701	.099	0.316	.199
	P	3	0	-	0	0	0
	A4	.640	.987	0.786	.099	.022	.199
	P	3	1	-	0	0	0
	A5	.580	.013	0.865	.099	.011	.199
	P	3	1	-	0	-	0
	A6	.600	.026	0.828	.099	0.107	.199
P	3	0	-	0	-	0	
A7	.590	.964	0.668	.099	0.414	.199	
P	3	1	-	0	0	0	
A8	.620	.026	0.828	.099	.002	.199	
P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
A9	.611	.012	0.734	.099	0.301	.199	
P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
A10	.611	.014	0.802	.099	0.111	.199	
P	3	1	-	0	-	0	
A11	.579	.012	0.702	.099	0.311	.199	
P	3	0	-	0	0	0	
A12	.603	.988	0.758	.099	.024	.199	
Sustainable Competitive Advantage	S	3	1	-	0	-	0
	CA1	.580	.022	0.740	.099	0.285	.199
	S	3	1	-	0	-	0
	CA2	.530	.057	0.670	.099	0.424	.199
	S	3	1	-	0	-	0
	CA3	.610	.006	0.743	.099	0.207	.199
S	3	1	-	0	-	0	
CA4	.577	.012	0.741	.099	0.277	.199	
S	3	1	-	0	-	0	
CA5	.545	.041	0.678	.099	0.312	.199	
S	3	1	-	0	-	0	
CA6	.611	.012	0.755	.099	0.210	.199	

Table 4.3 reports internal consistency results for all constructs. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values range from 0.747 to 0.915, indicating acceptable to excellent reliability across the measurement scales. The seven 7Ps dimensions demonstrate solid consistency (Product 0.790, Price 0.747, Place 0.780, Promotion 0.842, People 0.822, Process 0.814, Physical Evidence 0.847), while the mediator constructs also show strong reliability (Digital Access Convenience 0.847; Place Attachment 0.915) (Wang et al., 2023). Sustainable

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Competitive Advantage likewise meets the reliability threshold ( $\alpha = 0.755$ ). Overall, all constructs exceed the commonly recommended minimum of 0.70, supporting the use of these scales for subsequent CFA/SEM analyses.

**Table 0.3 Reliability Statistics**

Study variables	Number of questions	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Product	5	0.790
Price	5	0.747
Place	5	0.780
Promotion	5	0.842
People	5	0.822
Process	5	0.814
Physical Evidence	5	0.847
Digital Access Convenience	8	0.847
Place attachment	12	0.915
Sustainable Competitive Advantage	6	0.755

The data were suitable for factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.953, indicating excellent sampling adequacy, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2(741) = 11784.012, p < .001$ ), suggesting that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix and that the items shared sufficient common variance to proceed with exploratory/confirmatory factor analysis and subsequent SEM (Wang et al., 2023).

**Table 0.4 KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.953
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	11784.012
	df	741
	Sig.	.000

Table 4.5 shows that the measurement model demonstrates good convergent validity and composite reliability. All standardized factor loadings are acceptable, ranging from 0.684 to 0.792, with most items above 0.70, indicating that the indicators adequately represent their corresponding latent constructs. Composite reliability (CR) values are all above the recommended 0.70 threshold (0.757–0.915), suggesting strong internal consistency across constructs. In addition, average variance extracted (AVE) values meet or exceed the 0.50 criterion (0.510–0.583), confirming that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators on average (Cheung et al., 2024). Overall, these results support the reliability and convergent validity of the scales for subsequent structural model testing.

**Table 0.5 Convergence Validity**

Latent variables	Observation indicators	Factor loading	CR	E	AV
Product	PD1	0.707	0.85	6	0.54
	PD2	0.785			
	PD3	0.750			

	PD4	0.732				
	PD5	0.713				
Price	PI1	0.765	4	0.87	2	0.58
	PI2	0.782				
	PI3	0.744				
	PI4	0.745				
	PI5	0.777				
Place	PL1	0.722	3	0.85	7	0.53
	PL2	0.722				
	PL3	0.767				
	PL4	0.741				
	PL5	0.710				
Promotion	PM1	0.766	5	0.86	3	0.56
	PM2	0.758				
	PM3	0.734				
	PM4	0.770				
	PM5	0.721				
People	PE1	0.726	9	0.84	0	0.53
	PE2	0.745				
	PE3	0.764				
	PE4	0.696				
	PE5	0.707				
Process	PS1	0.735	5	0.81	4	0.52
	PS2	0.684				
	PS3	0.722				
	PS4	0.753				
	PS5	0.714				
Physical Evidence	PH1	0.751	7	0.84	2	0.58
	PH2	0.732				
	PH3	0.774				
	PH4	0.792				
	PH5	0.778				
Digital Access Convenience	DAC1	0.734	8	0.84	3	0.58
	DAC2	0.786				
	DAC3	0.739				
	DAC4	0.792				
	DAC5	0.736				



Place	.495	.526	.737 **							
Promotion	.543	.449	.517 **	.758						
People	.533	.587	.568	.536	.733 **					
Process	.499	.567	.551	.444	.574	.724 **				
Physical Evidence	.474	.566	.571	.502	.535	.532	.763 **			
Digital Access Convenience	.561	.610	.611	.552	.608	.575	.643	.764 **		
Place attachment	.553	.596	.649	.469	.604	.597	.584	.665	.757 **	
Sustainable Competitive Advantage	.548	.414	.552	.510	.479	.561	.564	.579	.581	.714 **

Note: The diagonal is the square root of the corresponding dimension AVE  
 PD: Product; PI: Price; PL: Place; PM: Promotion; PE: People; PS: Process; PH: Physical Evidence; DAC: Digital Access Convenience; PA: Place attachment; SCA: Sustainable Competitive Advantage.  
 \*\*\*: P<0.001.

Table 4.7 summarizes the structural model results and hypothesis testing. For the antecedents of Digital Access Convenience (DAC), all seven 7Ps dimensions show significant positive effects (H1a-H1g accepted), with Physical Evidence → DAC exhibiting the strongest association ( $\beta = 0.240, p < .001$ ), followed by Place ( $\beta = 0.156, p = .006$ ) and Price ( $\beta = 0.152, p = .013$ ). Regarding direct effects on Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA), Product ( $\beta = 0.199, p = .002$ ), Place ( $\beta = 0.108, p = .048$ ), Promotion ( $\beta = 0.118, p = .047$ ), Process ( $\beta = 0.207, p = .002$ ), and Physical Evidence ( $\beta = 0.187, p = .004$ ) are significant, whereas Price ( $\beta = -0.174, p = .121$ ) and People ( $\beta = -0.037, p = .581$ ) are not supported. For Place Attachment (PA), Product, Price, Place, People, Process, and Physical Evidence have significant positive effects (H3a, H3b, H3c, H3e, H3f, H3g accepted), while Promotion → PA is not

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significant ( $\beta = -0.049$ ,  $p = .301$ ). Finally, the hypothesized links among the core constructs are supported: DAC  $\rightarrow$  PA ( $\beta = 0.213$ ,  $p < .001$ ), DAC  $\rightarrow$  SCA ( $\beta = 0.120$ ,  $p = .041$ ), and PA  $\rightarrow$  SCA ( $\beta = 0.159$ ,  $p = .021$ ), confirming that both digital access convenience and place attachment contribute positively to sustainable competitive advantage (Ali et al., 2023).

**Table 0.7 Direct Path Effects**

Hypothesis	Path	$\beta$	S. E.	C. R.	P	Results
H1a	AC PD $\rightarrow$ D	0.1	0.0	2.0	0.0	Accepted
H1b	C PI $\rightarrow$ DA	0.1	0.0	2.4	0.0	Accepted
H1c	AC PL $\rightarrow$ D	0.1	0.0	2.7	0.0	Accepted
H1d	AC PM $\rightarrow$ D	0.1	0.0	2.2	0.0	Accepted
H1e	AC PE $\rightarrow$ D	0.1	0.0	2.2	0.0	Accepted
H1f	AC PS $\rightarrow$ D	0.0	0.0	1.9	0.0	Accepted
H1g	AC PH $\rightarrow$ D	0.2	0.0	4.4	***	Accepted
H2a	CA PD $\rightarrow$ S	0.1	0.0	3.0	0.0	Accepted
H2b	A PI $\rightarrow$ SC	-	0.0	-	0.1	Rejected
H2c	A PL $\rightarrow$ SC	0.1	0.0	1.9	0.0	Accepted
H2d	CA PM $\rightarrow$ S	0.1	0.0	1.9	0.0	Accepted
H2e	A PE $\rightarrow$ SC	-	0.0	-	0.5	Rejected
H2f	A PS $\rightarrow$ SC	0.2	0.0	3.1	0.0	Accepted
H2g	CA PH $\rightarrow$ S	0.1	0.0	2.8	0.0	Accepted
H3a	A PD $\rightarrow$ P	0.1	0.0	2.2	0.0	Accepted
H3b	PI $\rightarrow$ PA	0.1	0.0	1.9	0.0	Accepted
H3c	A PL $\rightarrow$ P	0.2	0.0	4.4	***	Accepted
H3d	PM $\rightarrow$ P	-	0.0	-	0.3	Rejected

	A	0.049	50	1.034	01	
H3e	PE→P A	0.1 19	0.0 56	2.2 13	0.0 27	Accepted
H3f	PS→P A	0.1 32	0.0 51	2.6 00	0.0 09	Accepted
H3g	PH→P A	0.0 86	0.0 48	1.9 84	0.0 49	Accepted
H4	DAC→ PA	0.2 13	0.0 62	3.6 12	***	Accepted
H5	DAC→ SCA	0.1 20	0.0 55	2.1 22	0.0 41	Accepted
H6	PA→S CA	0.1 59	0.0 64	2.3 03	0.0 21	Accepted
<p>Note: PD: Product; PI: Price; PL: Place; PM: Promotion; PE: People; PS: Process; PH: Physical Evidence; DAC: Digital Access Convenience; PA: Place attachment; SCA: Sustainable Competitive Advantage.</p> <p>***: p&lt;0.001.</p>						

Table 4.8 presents the bootstrap mediation results (bias-corrected 95% CIs). Place Attachment (PA) significantly mediates the effects of Product, Price, Place, People, Process, and Physical Evidence on Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) (H7a, H7b, H7c, H7e, H7f, H7g supported), with the strongest indirect effect observed for Place → PA → SCA (effect = 0.041, CI [0.016, 0.093]). In contrast, Promotion → PA → SCA is not supported (H7d rejected) because its confidence interval includes zero (effect = -0.008, CI [-0.029, 0.001]) (Wang et al., 2020). In addition, Digital Access Convenience (DAC) significantly mediates the relationships between all seven 7Ps dimensions and SCA (H8a–H8g supported), as none of the bias-corrected confidence intervals include zero; among these, Physical Evidence → DAC → SCA shows the largest indirect effect (effect = 0.030, CI [0.003, 0.070]). Overall, these findings indicate that the 7Ps enhance sustainable competitive advantage not only directly, but also indirectly through tourists’ psychological bonding with the destination and their perceptions of convenient digital access.

**Table 0.8 Indirect Effect Bootstrap Analysis**

Hypot thesis	Mediation path	Ef fect value	E S	Bias-Corrected 95%CI		Resu lts
				Lo wer	Up per	
				H7a	PD→PA→ SCA	
H7b	PI→PA→S CA	0.0 15	0. 017	0.0 03	0.0 46	Acce pted
H7c	PL→PA→S CA	0.0 41	0. 032	0.0 16	0.0 93	Acce pted
H7d	PM→PA→ SCA	- 0.008	0. 014	- 0.029	0.0 01	Rejec ted
H7e	PE→PA→S CA	0.0 18	0. 020	0.0 02	0.0 51	Acce pted
H7f	PS→PA→S CA	0.0 20	0. 018	0.0 07	0.0 56	Acce pted

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H7g	PH→PA→ SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted
H8a	PD→DAC →SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted
H8b	PI→DAC→ SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted
H8c	PL→DAC →SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted
H8d	PM→DAC →SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted
H8e	PE→DAC →SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted
H8f	PS→DAC →SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted
H8g	PH→DAC →SCA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	Accepted

Note: PD: Product; PI: Price; PL: Place; PM: Promotion; PE: People; PS: Process; PH: Physical Evidence; DAC: Digital Access Convenience; PA: Place attachment; SCA: Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

The table 4.9 reports bootstrapped direct effects with bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. Overall, most paths are statistically robust because their confidence intervals do not include zero. For Digital Access Convenience (DAC), all seven 7Ps dimensions exhibit significant positive effects, with Physical Evidence → DAC showing the largest effect (0.253, 95% CI [0.158, 0.338]), followed by Place → DAC (0.169) and Price → DAC (0.145). For Place Attachment (PA), all 7Ps dimensions have significant positive effects except Promotion → PA, which is non-significant (-0.026, 95% CI [-0.108, 0.061]); notably, Place → PA is the strongest predictor (0.317, 95% CI [0.211, 0.418]), and DAC → PA is also significant and positive (0.224, 95% CI [0.116, 0.341]). Regarding Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA), Product, Process, Physical Evidence, Place, and Promotion demonstrate significant positive direct effects (e.g., Product → SCA = 0.247; Process → SCA = 0.227; Physical Evidence → SCA = 0.244), whereas People → SCA is not significant (0.001, 95% CI [-0.115, 0.104]) and Price → SCA is negative but marginal (-0.125, 95% CI [-0.231, 0.005]). Finally, the core structural links are supported, as both DAC → SCA (0.150, 95% CI [0.024, 0.259]) and PA → SCA (0.147, 95% CI [0.051, 0.269]) are significant and positive, reinforcing the roles of digital access convenience and place attachment in explaining sustainable competitive advantage (Wang et al., 2020).

Table 0.9 Total Effects

Effect path	Effect size	SE	Bias-Corrected	
			95%CI	
PH→DAC	0.253	0.081	0.158	0.338
PI→DAC	0.145	0.086	0.053	0.246
PL→DAC	0.169	0.095	0.057	0.276
PM→DAC	0.113	0.073	0.025	0.191
PE→DAC	0.127	0.087	0.033	0.237
PS→DAC	0.095	0.073	0.002	0.169
PD→DAC	0.120	0.091	0.014	0.222

PH→PA	0.152	0.088	0.062	0.268
PI→PA	0.137	0.079	0.046	0.223
PL→PA	0.317	0.095	0.211	0.418
PM→PA	-0.026	0.073	-0.108	0.061
PE→PA	0.153	0.091	0.045	0.256
PS→PA	0.154	0.079	0.057	0.238
PD→PA	0.154	0.085	0.049	0.246
DAC→PA	0.224	0.095	0.116	0.341
PH→SCA	0.244	0.097	0.137	0.360
PI→SCA	-0.125	0.087	-0.231	0.005
PL→SCA	0.180	0.098	0.069	0.295
PM→SCA	0.126	0.081	0.023	0.214
PE→SCA	0.001	0.095	-0.115	0.104
PS→SCA	0.227	0.083	0.124	0.310
PD→SCA	0.247	0.094	0.140	0.355
DAC→SCA	0.150	0.105	0.024	0.259
PA→SCA	0.147	0.094	0.051	0.269
<p>Note: PD: Product; PI: Price; PL: Place; PM: Promotion; PE: People; PS: Process; PH: Physical Evidence; DAC: Digital Access Convenience; PA: Place attachment; SCA: Sustainable Competitive Advantage.</p>				

## Discussion and Conclusion

Using survey data from rural tourists in Yunnan (N = 604) and SEM with bootstrapped confidence intervals, this study examined how the 7Ps service marketing mix contributes to Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) through Digital Access Convenience (DAC) and Place Attachment (PA). The results show that all seven 7Ps dimensions significantly and positively predict DAC, indicating that service-system design is consistently translated into tourists' perceptions of digitally enabled accessibility and ease of service use. Among these effects, Physical Evidence demonstrates the strongest association with DAC, suggesting that credible tangible cues and their platform-mediated representations play a particularly important role in reducing uncertainty and friction in rural tourism consumption. For PA, most 7Ps dimensions exhibit significant positive effects; however, Promotion does not significantly predict PA, implying that promotional communications alone are insufficient to generate deeper place-based bonds unless they are reinforced by substantive on-site experience and service delivery. With respect to SCA, Product, Place, Promotion, Process, and Physical Evidence have significant positive direct effects, while Price and People are not supported. This pattern suggests that durable advantage in rural destinations is more strongly grounded in experiential differentiation, accessibility, operational reliability, and credible service cues than in price-based positioning or personnel-related perceptions as stand-alone drivers.

Beyond these direct effects, the core mechanism model is supported. DAC positively predicts both PA and SCA, and PA positively predicts SCA, confirming that rural destination advantage is strengthened when tourists experience lower digital friction and develop stronger place bonds. The mediation results further demonstrate that PA mediates most 7Ps → SCA relationships, except Promotion, whereas DAC provides a significant indirect pathway from each 7Ps dimension to SCA. Taken together, the findings position DAC as a pervasive process mechanism linking service design to

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strategic outcomes in platformized tourism markets, while PA functions as a psychological consolidation mechanism that converts coherent service experiences into more durable destination advantage.

These findings also offer several points of theoretical comparison with prior research. First, the significant effects of all seven 7Ps dimensions on DAC support recent tourism and service research suggesting that digital convenience is not produced by technology alone, but by the extent to which

destination services are coherently designed, clearly communicated, and reliably delivered across touchpoints (Qi et al., 2024). This extends prior smart tourism discussions by showing that tourists' perceptions of digital access convenience in rural destinations are shaped by the broader service-system architecture rather than by isolated digital functions (Rush et al., 2025). Second, the non-significant effect of Promotion on PA is noteworthy. While previous place-based tourism studies have emphasized the role of narratives, symbolic communication, and destination storytelling in fostering emotional connection (Li et al., 2025), the present findings suggest that promotional messages alone may be insufficient to produce deeper attachment when they are not matched by substantive, on-site experiential conditions. Third, the non-significant direct effects of Price and People on SCA indicate that not all service dimensions contribute equally to long-term competitive advantage. This differs from more generalized service marketing assumptions and suggests that, in rural tourism settings, sustained advantage is more likely to emerge from process reliability, accessibility, and credible experiential cues than from price positioning or personnel quality in isolation (Lasisi et al., 2025).

This study offers three main theoretical contributions to the tourism and destination management literature. First, it advances research on sustainable rural destination competitiveness by showing that SCA can be explained through a service-system configuration perspective rather than through resource endowments alone. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from static destination attributes to the coordinated design and delivery of experience systems. Second, it strengthens smart tourism research by introducing Digital Access Convenience as a strategic and measurable mechanism that connects service design inputs to both attachment formation and competitiveness outcomes, thereby enriching existing explanations of how digitalization operates in rural tourism contexts. Third, it extends place-based tourism research by clarifying that place attachment is driven more by substantive experiential and functional conditions than by promotion alone, thereby distinguishing expectation formation from deeper place-bond formation in rural destinations.

The results suggest several practical priorities for rural destination managers and local stakeholders. First, destinations should treat Physical Evidence as a credibility anchor and ensure that tangible service cues, such as cleanliness, signage, facilities, safety standards, and environmental aesthetics, are consistently maintained and accurately represented across digital channels, given its strong links to both DAC and SCA. Second, improving Place-related accessibility, including transport connections, last-mile mobility, navigation support, and platform-integrated wayfinding, should be prioritized because it is the strongest predictor of place attachment and also supports digital convenience and competitive advantage. Third, the strong role of Process indicates that destinations should standardize and digitize key service procedures, such as booking confirmation, check-in and check-out, complaint handling, refunds, and queue management, to ensure reliability across dispersed rural stakeholders. Fourth, the non-support for Price and People as direct predictors of SCA implies that price-based competition is unlikely to generate durable advantage and that personnel effects may be realized primarily when embedded within consistent processes and credible service evidence. Finally, while Promotion contributes to SCA directly and via DAC, its non-significant effect on PA suggests that promotional narratives should be managed as expectation-alignment tools and should avoid over-promising, with information completeness and usability emphasized to reduce pre-visit uncertainty.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference; future research could adopt longitudinal designs to capture how DAC and PA evolve and how SCA accumulates over time. Second, the data are self-reported and drawn from a single regional context; replication across different provinces or rural destination types would strengthen generalizability.

Third, future studies may incorporate objective digital performance indicators, such as response time, platform rating dynamics, and conversion metrics, and examine potential boundary conditions, such as tourist segments, destination maturity, and seasonality, that may moderate the strength of the service–digital–attachment pathways.

Based on quantitative SEM evidence, this study demonstrates that sustainable competitive advantage in rural tourism can be meaningfully explained through a service-system lens. The 7Ps

consistently enhance tourists' digital access convenience, and both digital access convenience and place attachment contribute positively to sustainable competitive advantage. Results highlight that durable advantage is most strongly supported by process reliability, credible physical evidence, and place/accessibility conditions, whereas price and people do not independently generate sustained advantage in this context. Overall, the findings suggest that rural destinations can build more resilient competitiveness by reducing digital friction, ensuring coherent service delivery, and fostering stronger place-based bonds rather than relying on price competition or promotion-driven visibility alone.

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