

Applying a Loyalty Mechanism to Residents and Tourists in Depopulating Areas

: Satisfaction Surveys and Interviews*

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty among residents and tourists in the context of addressing population decline. It uses the satisfaction-loyalty mechanism to examine how satisfaction influences attitudinal loyalty (recommendation intentions) and behavioral loyalty (continued residence or revisits). Data were collected through on-site surveys with residents and tourists, and analyzed using covariance-based structural equation modeling to identify causal relationships. Follow-up interviews with residents provided deeper insights and strategic recommendations. The findings reveal that for residents, satisfaction directly influences their decision to remain in a residential area, with attitudinal loyalty fostering behavioral loyalty. For tourists, satisfaction increases their likelihood of recommending the destination but has a weaker impact on their return intentions, underscoring the role of word-of-mouth in attracting new visitors. These results highlight the need to enhance resident satisfaction to prevent outmigration and foster loyalty, while also focusing on creating diverse and engaging experiences for tourists to encourage positive perceptions and attract additional visitors. By addressing the unique needs of both residents and tourists, the study offers strategies to support population stabilization and economic revitalization in areas facing demographic challenges.

Keywords Depopulating Area, Residents, Tourists, Satisfaction, Loyalty

1. Introduction

Human preferences for specific areas are often expressed through direct actions like residing in or frequently visiting those areas, reflecting what marketing studies identify as 'loyalty.' In business administration, the concept of loyalty arose as market competition grew fiercer. A loyal customer continuously chooses a specific product or service, even

when alternative options exist, because of their attachment to it. Managing loyal customers is advantageous over attracting new ones: they not only spend more on the brand but also generate positive word of mouth, enhancing brand reputation (Ganesh et al., 2000; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Consequently, nurturing loyal customers is crucial for sustained business success (Kato, 2019).

Intensified market competition parallels the challenges

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encountered by various cities striving to retain their populations amid demographic declines. In South Korea, marked shifts such as decreasing birth rates and rapid aging have escalated into pressing national issues, particularly affecting rural areas. These demographic changes are now seen as a crisis, prompting local governments to implement diverse strategies to mitigate the impact and stabilize their communities. In this context, it is crucial to prioritize policies that secure populations with high loyalty to the areas (product) to prevent shrinkage in addition to inducing the influx of population and increasing the birth rate. Additionally, since the issue of population decline is closely related to supporting the regional economy, it is necessary to also consider continuously attracting visitors, such as tourists, to the area. Indeed, attracting tourists consistently appears as one of the solutions for addressing rural population decline in South Korea.

At the local level, the duration of stay can be categorized as long-term or short-term, with long-term referring to residents and short-term to visitors. From this perspective, the goal should be to encourage long-term residents to remain and short-term visitors to return, addressing critical issues such as population decline and rural extinction. When applying the satisfaction-loyalty mechanism to behaviors associated with 'residing' and 'visiting' a specific 'place,' most studies have concentrated on tourist destinations. For example, (Yoon and Uysal, 2005) examined the causal link between tourist motivations, satisfaction, and destination loyalty, emphasizing that managing satisfaction is vital for encouraging behaviors like recommendations and revisits, which are key to destination competitiveness. In contrast, research on place loyalty from residents' perspectives remains limited. Studies such as (Shaykh-Baygloo, 2020), which investigated place attachment and loyalty, and (Gilboa and Herstein, 2012), which analyzed differences in place loyalty based on area status, reveal this gap while pointing to significant opportunities for further exploration.

Thus, this study extends the satisfaction-loyalty mechanism, traditionally utilized in business and tourism, to residential contexts. It categorizes loyalty into attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, aiming to explore and compare the structures from the perspectives of both residents and tourists. Yeoncheon-gun in Gyeonggi Province, South Korea, an area facing population decline, is selected as the case study

site. Researchers plan to conduct direct surveys with residents and tourists in key locations. Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) will be employed to analyze the data and determine the causal relationships between variables. Follow-up interviews with residents of Yeoncheon-gun are intended to further interpret the findings and suggest strategic and policy directions to combat population decline.

In the field of regional planning, investigations that simultaneously assess the perspectives of both residents and tourists within specific areas, especially concerning local sustainability, are limited. This approach bridges the gap between the extensive evidence in tourism research and the comparatively limited exploration in residential research, integrating these fields comprehensively.

II. Literature Review

1. Satisfaction-Loyalty

Loyalty, as a marketing concept, emerged to help companies increase revenue through repeat purchases while reducing the costs associated with acquiring new customers by retaining existing ones. Academically, loyalty is defined as the behavior of consistently favoring a product and repurchasing a service, even when external factors or marketing efforts could potentially influence a shift in consumer behavior (Oliver, 1999).

To build and sustain customer loyalty, it is critical for customers to experience satisfaction in their interactions with the company. Customer preference and satisfaction with a product are thus regarded as essential prerequisites for maintaining loyalty (Pritchard et al., 1999; Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). Satisfaction significantly impacts post-purchase attitudes, fostering repurchase intentions and the development of loyalty (Eggert and Ulaga, 2002; Oliver, 1980). Moreover, retaining existing customers is far more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, with the cost of attracting new customers estimated to be over six times higher (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984). Companies that successfully cultivate a loyal customer base benefit from reduced marketing expenses (Aaker, 1991) and greater market share (Ehrenberg et al., 1997).

In its early stages, the concept of loyalty was primarily

defined as “repeat purchase behavior” (Newman, 1966). Over time, research expanded to explore the processes underlying loyalty formation. Jacoby and Kyner (1973) conceptualized loyalty as being shaped through a series of evaluative stages related to a brand, while Rubinson and Baldinger (1996) emphasized the importance of considering both behavioral aspects and the formation of attitudes toward the brand in understanding loyalty.

The distinction between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty has become widely accepted. Attitudinal loyalty refers to favorable emotions held by customers and is exemplified by actions such as recommending a product or service to others. Behavioral loyalty, on the other hand, is defined as the intention to repurchase a specific product or service (Moore et al., 2015; Rivera and Croes, 2010; Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). Dick and Basu (1994) argued that a comprehensive understanding of loyalty requires an integrated approach that combines both attitudinal and behavioral perspectives, making it the most effective way to grasp the concept of loyalty holistically. Oliver (1999) further conceptualized loyalty formation as a progression from cognitive and emotional loyalty to actionable loyalty, such as repurchasing. Building on this, Back and Parks (2003) highlighted the importance of measuring both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty to fully understand loyal customers and their repurchase behaviors in the lodging industry. Subsequent studies reinforced these findings. For instance, research by Kaur and Soch (2018), Lee and Shen (2013), Saini and Singh (2020) confirmed that attitudinal loyalty precedes behavioral loyalty. Moreover, Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) and Jaiswal and Niraj (2011) demonstrated that attitudinal loyalty fully mediates the relationship between customer satisfaction and behavioral intention.

Customer loyalty formation is not uniform across all products, which has led to studies exploring loyalty development in various product categories and customer segments using diverse indicators. For example, in the case of durable consumer goods like automobiles, where the product lifecycle is long, directly measuring repurchase intentions can be challenging. Instead, loyalty is often assessed through related factors, such as customer satisfaction or recommendation intentions, which influence repurchase behavior (Kato, 2019). In online environments, customers are exposed to abundant information that facili-

tates behavioral changes, complicating the management of loyal customers. Consequently, researchers have emphasized the need to segment the process of loyalty formation and identify its influencing factors more precisely (Jaiswal and Niraj, 2011).

Loyalty has also been conceptualized as a complex and sequential construct (Lee et al., 2007) and the effects of loyal customers can vary depending on the characteristics of the product or target audience, making it essential to distinguish between the different stages of loyalty. Loyalty can manifest not only through personal repurchase behavior but also through recommendations to others, which can drive the acquisition of new customers. This underscores the importance of studying and understanding loyalty by clearly delineating its various stages.

2. Place Loyalty

Research on loyalty originated in marketing-related business activities, products, and services but has since been applied across various fields, including tourism and leisure. In this context, place loyalty has been widely studied, particularly in connection with destination satisfaction, with numerous studies exploring its relationships and refining measurement methods over time.

In tourism, where specific places or destinations are ‘consumed’ as ‘products,’ loyalty is influenced by visitors’ positive and satisfying experiences. Key measures for assessing tourist loyalty include their intention to return to the same destination and positive word-of-mouth recommendations shared with friends and relatives (Chi and Qu, 2008; Oppermann, 2000; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). From this perspective, studies have been conducted on destination loyalty (Lee et al., 2007; Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Yuksel et al., 2010) as well as on loyalty to specific locations where leisure activities take place, such as urban parks and natural areas (Lee and Shen, 2013; López-Mosquera and Sánchez, 2013). Visitors who are satisfied with their experiences at a destination are more likely to revisit the location (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Kozak, 2002; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Yoon and Uysal (2005) explored the causal relationships between push and pull motivations, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. They emphasized the importance of meticulously managing tourist satisfaction, as it fosters positive post-pur-

chase behaviors—such as recommendations to others and revisits—that are crucial for maintaining and enhancing the competitiveness of tourist destinations.

In tourism research, destination loyalty is often measured by integrating questions about revisit intention and recommendation intention (Chi and Qu, 2008; Oppermann, 2000; Styliadis et al., 2022; Tasci et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). However, as mentioned earlier, some studies have measured the dimensions of loyalty separately. For example, Prayag and Ryan (2012) divided loyalty into revisit and recommendation intentions. Although they did not investigate the causal relationship between these dimensions, their findings showed that satisfaction with the destination significantly influenced both. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2014) measured the relationships between destination image and various loyalty dimensions (attitudinal, behavioral, and composite), identifying differences in the degree of influence. However, like earlier studies, they did not examine the causal relationships among the dimensions of loyalty.

One study that did consider the causal relationships among loyalty dimensions is Yuksel et al. (2010). They revealed a progression from destination attachment to satisfaction, and subsequently to loyalty. Their findings highlighted that satisfaction significantly influences each loyalty dimension and that affective loyalty (emotion-based attitude) strongly impacts conative loyalty (revisit intention). Similarly, Lee and Shen (2013) explored destination loyalty in the context of urban park users walking their pets, confirming that attitudinal loyalty precedes behavioral loyalty.

Lee et al. (2007) further analyzed factors influencing loyalty formation among individuals engaging in leisure activities in forests. They found that recommendation intention significantly impacted actual revisit behavior. However, satisfaction did not directly influence revisits; rather, it affected revisit behavior indirectly by mediating the formation of recommendation intention.

By contrast, research on place loyalty in urban settings has been relatively limited. From the perspective of residents, place loyalty can be understood as the choice to continue living in a place over other places (Gilboa and Herstein, 2012). Unlike behavioral loyalty in customers who repeatedly purchase a product, high place loyalty does not necessarily equate to having lived in a place for a long time. It is

important to consider that place loyalty may vary depending on an individual's economic and social circumstances. In Shaykh-Baygloo's study (2020), when residents were asked about their preferred city to live in, less than 1% chose Baha-restan, indicating that an individual's intention to live in a particular place can differ from their current residence due to personal circumstances. Consequently, it was suggested that instead of measuring place loyalty based on the duration of residence, it would be more appropriate to view subjective preference for living in a specific place as a measure of place loyalty (Gilboa and Herstein, 2012).

Meanwhile, in both urban planning and tourism research, the concept of place attachment—closely related to place loyalty—has been extensively studied. While place attachment is often described as an affective bond with a place, numerous studies in urban contexts have demonstrated that it also contributes to behavioral outcomes such as residential continuity and civic engagement (Lewicka, 2011; Shaykh-Baygloo, 2020; Zenker and Rütter, 2014). In tourism and leisure studies, place attachment has been primarily linked to destination preference, revisit intentions, and other loyalty-related behaviors (Lee and Shen, 2013; Prayag and Ryan, 2012; Yuksel et al., 2010).

Synthesizing these findings suggests that place attachment encompasses both emotional bonds and behavioral tendencies such as staying, engaging, or recommending. Consequently, just as place attachment has been treated as an antecedent to satisfaction and loyalty in tourism research, in the context of residents, it can similarly be understood through its established relationships with residential satisfaction and continuity. This suggests that, for residents, loyalty can be seen as the behavioral expression of place attachment.

A study by Chang et al. (2014), which simultaneously considered the perspectives of residents and tourists, offers valuable insights. The research analyzed how different types of involvement influenced festival satisfaction and revisit intention by dividing participants into resident and tourist groups. The findings revealed that residents exhibited higher revisit intentions when satisfied, whereas this relationship was not as evident among tourists. Tourists, driven by a preference for seeking new experiences, showed less significant connections between satisfaction and revisit intention. This highlights the differing perceptions and behaviors between

short-term visitors (tourists) and long-term residents experiencing the same location. Consequently, further research expanding on these distinctions is necessary to deepen understanding.

Residents' loyalty to their place of residence plays a crucial role in shaping the area's image and communicating that image to both fellow residents and outsiders. Despite its significance, research on residents' loyalty in population-declining areas remains limited, particularly studies that differentiate and analyze the various dimensions of loyalty. Considering that "people" are essential for the sustainability of such areas, it is critical to assess, manage, and enhance factors influencing attitudinal loyalty—reflected in recommendation intentions—and behavioral loyalty, such as the willingness to continue living in the area. By applying the concept of loyalty, it becomes possible to clarify the interrelationships among various factors—such as recommendation intention and willingness to reside—that have traditionally been measured separately in urban settings. Moreover, adopting an approach that simultaneously considers both residents and tourists is essential for deriving effective policy implications in areas where the sustained presence of both groups is critical.

III. Methodology

1. Study Areas and Research Design

This study aimed to extend and validate the satisfaction-loyalty mechanism for tourists and residents, applying it to the case of population-declining areas in South Korea where tourism is crucial for rural economic revitalization. Yeoncheon-gun in Gyeonggi Province was selected as the study site. In many population-declining areas in South Korea, where foundational industries are lacking and significant improvements in living conditions are difficult to achieve, local governments have actively promoted tourism spending as a key economic strategy (Xu and Yang, 2025). The effectiveness of tourism as a response to population decline has also been empirically demonstrated in recent research (Oh, 2025).

Yeoncheon, in this context, is a depopulating area with structural limitations in attracting industry and residents. As a result, Yeoncheon has primarily focused on tour-

ism-driven economic revitalization. The area draws a substantial number of tourists due to its unique assets, including dark tourism sites related to war and peace, a UNESCO Global Geopark, and designated biosphere reserves—making it a prominent destination for ecotourism. These characteristics made Yeoncheon a fitting site for exploring the relationship between satisfaction (both residential and visit) and loyalty, leading to its selection for surveys and in-depth interviews. Prior to data collection, the survey procedure was approved by Seoul National University IRB (No. 2209/003-008). In the survey, data on satisfaction and loyalty toward the area were collected using a 7-point Likert scale, targeting both residents and tourists. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with residents who also work as tour guides, incorporating open-ended questions similar to those in the survey regarding satisfaction and loyalty. These interviews aimed to validate and interpret the survey findings.

2. Conceptual Models

In this study, loyalty, which has often been used as a single variable in previous research, was categorized into attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. For the sustainability of the area, it is essential to promote the continuous residence and visitation of people. Hence, 'attitudinal loyalty,' measured by the intention to recommend the area to others, and 'behavioral loyalty,' measured by the intention to continue living or visiting, were used to explore the relationship with satisfaction towards the area of residence/visit. Model 1, based on previous studies, was specified to examine the impact of residential/visit satisfaction on both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Model 2 was designed such that while satisfaction influences both types of loyalty, attitudinal loyalty also impacts behavioral loyalty (See <Figure 1>).

3. Survey

The survey was conducted in Baekhak-myeon and Jangnam-myeon, located in the southwest of Yeoncheon-gun (See <Figure 2>). With assistance from a resident, this study employed on-site survey methods and administered surveys between September and November 2022 at Baekhak-myeon and Jangnam-myeon. The survey target-



Figure 1. Conceptual model

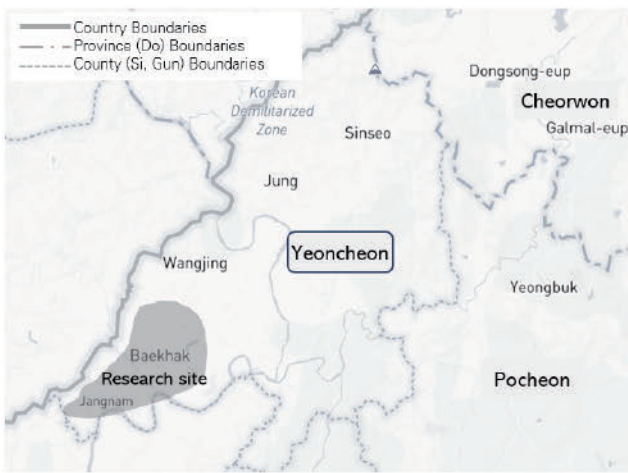


Figure 2. Research site

ing residents was conducted at community hubs, including administrative welfare centers, village events venues, and local shopping districts. Concurrently, the survey focusing on tourists was conducted at a local festival venue that attracts many visitors. Questionnaires were distributed to individuals who demonstrated a willingness to participate in the study. To enhance response rates and the sincerity of responses, respondents were incentivized with gifts, such as umbrellas or gift cards worth KRW 5,000. The expenses associated with the survey were supported by funding from (Name of Institution-to be added later).

The survey consisted of approximately two pages of questions, developed in Korean, based on prior research in both tourism (Lee et al., 2007; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Tasci et al., 2022; Yuksel et al., 2010) and urban studies (Gilboa and Herstein, 2012; Shaykh-Baygloo, 2020). These questions targeted aspects of satisfaction and loyalty from the perspectives of both residents and tourists. To ensure responses were contextually relevant, the survey was tailored to distinguish between residents and tourists—residents answered questions based on the area of residence, and tourists based on

the area of visit. Attitudinal loyalty was assessed through the intention to recommend their residential or visitation site. Behavioral loyalty was measured by the intention of residents to continue living in their current area and the intention of tourists to revisit the area. Responses were captured on a 7-point scale, and demographic information such as gender, age, years of residence (for residents), and number of visits (for tourists) was also collected.

4. Data Analysis

This study employs a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to analyze the data, utilizing R studio ver. 4.2.2 and Smart PLS 4.0 software. SEM is instrumental in validating measurement tools, such as survey questionnaires, that capture latent variables that are not directly observable. Additionally, SEM is an effective method for empirically testing hypotheses that predict relationships between these latent variables. (Kim et al., 2021) The following fit indices were calculated to determine how the model fit the data: if the ratio of chi-square to its degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) is lower than 3 is good fit (Kline, 1998; McDonald and Ho, 2002; Iacobucci, 2010); Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI) indices should be above 0.9 (Bollen, 1989; Hu and Bentler, 1999); Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSRA) should be ideally below 0.05 or 0.08 (Kline, 2005); Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) should be 0.08 or less (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

Normality was assessed by examining skewness and kurtosis. According to Kline (1998), skewness should not exceed ± 3.0 , and kurtosis should not exceed ± 8.0 to assume normality. For the residents' response dataset, skewness ranged from -0.912 to -0.244, and kurtosis ranged from -0.919

to -0.196. These values indicate that the data distributions are slightly negatively skewed, but they fall well within the acceptable range for normality. For the tourists' response dataset, skewness ranged from -0.831 to -0.343, and kurtosis ranged from -0.497 to 0.692. Similarly, the data distributions are slightly negatively skewed, with kurtosis values close to that of a normal distribution. These also fall comfortably within the acceptable range for normality.

5. Interview

Interviews were conducted with 12 residents of Yeoncheon-gun, all of whom also work as tour guides. These individuals were selected to provide a dual perspective, combining their roles as both residents and professionals who closely interact with tourists. As front-line professionals, tour guides manage and shape the tourist experience (Rabotić, 2010), making them well-suited to explain tourists' experiences and behaviors. The initial participant in the survey conducted in the research case site was a Geopark guide residing in Yeoncheon-gun. From this starting point, a snowball sampling method was used to introduce acquaintances, leading to one-on-one online interviews with a total of 12 residents. The interview questions were as follows: 1) Length of residence and reasons for moving (if they moved there), 2) Whether they plan to continue residing there, 3) Whether they have ever recommended their residence to others, 4) How tourists typically learn about this place and decide to visit, and 5) What strategies should be implemented to encourage tourist revisits. Each online interview lasted approximately 30 minutes per person.

IV. Results

1. Survey

1) Survey Respondent Characteristics

A total of 424 participants, comprising 189 residents and 235 tourists, took part in the survey. In the residents' survey, 172 out of the 189 collected responses were utilized for analysis, after discarding incomplete responses. Similarly, for the tourist survey, 231 out of the 235 survey responses were included in the analysis, after excluding 4 cases with incomplete answers that failed to measure a specific concept. Upon

examining the composition of survey respondents in both the resident and tourist groups, it was found that there was sufficient variation, confirming its appropriateness for use in inferential statistical analysis.

2) Measurement Models

〈Table 1〉 presents the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results. In the residents' model, the ratio of chi-square to its degrees of freedom was 2.036, indicating a good fit. Additional fit statistics were as follows: CFI = 0.983, SRMR = 0.038, and RMSEA = 0.078. In the tourists' model, the ratio of chi-square to its degrees of freedom was 2.308, indicating a good fit. Additional fit statistics were as follows: CFI = 0.983, SRMR = 0.023, RMSEA = 0.075.

All the scales satisfied the internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (above 0.7), Composite Reliability (CR) tests (above 0.7, Fornell and Larcker, 1981), and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values (close to or above 0.5, Bagozzi, 1994), showing that all scales had high reliability and validity. Therefore, the internal validity of the measurement model was adequate in both groups.

The intercorrelations between construct pairs were further examined to assess discriminant validity (see 〈Table 2〉). All construct pairs were less than the square root of each construct's AVE estimates, providing discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2009). Therefore, based on the model fit indices and consistency with prior research, the measurement model was considered acceptable.

3) Structural Models

Model 1 (Figures 3 and 4) examines the effects of satisfaction on each loyalty dimension. In the model for residents, the impact of residential satisfaction on both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty was significant (0.616 and 0.758, respectively). However, the model did not meet the fit indices required ($\chi^2/df = 3.094$, RMSEA = 0.110, SRMR = 0.104, CFI = 0.964, NFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.951). Similarly, in the model for tourists, the paths from visit satisfaction to both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty were significantly demonstrated (0.854 and 0.750, respectively). However, the model did not satisfy the required fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 4.567$, RMSEA = 0.124, SRMR = 0.115, CFI = 0.953, NFI = 0.941, TLI = 0.941).

Model 2 (Figures 5 and 6) incorporates the causal relation-

Table 1. Factor items, internal consistency, and convergent validity

Code	Indicator	Mean (S.D.)	Standardized loading
Resident model			
Residential satisfaction (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.935$, CR=0.936, AVE=0.785)			
RS_1	This town is an appropriate place to live.	5.152 (1.669)	0.876
RS_2	This town is a happy place to live.	5.164 (1.746)	0.922
RS_3	This town is a comfortable place to live.	5.246 (1.726)	0.908
RS_4	This town has a positive atmosphere for living.	5.282 (1.695)	0.836
Attitudinal loyalty (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.964$, CR=0.965, AVE=0.902)			
AL_1	I would encourage my family and relatives to live in this town.	4.657 (1.875)	0.904
AL_2	I would recommend this town to my friends as a place to live	4.661 (1.902)	0.976
AL_3	I would recommend this town to my colleagues as a place to live	4.593 (1.958)	0.976
Behavioral loyalty (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.934$, CR=0.937, AVE=0.832)			
BL_1	I plan to remain a resident of this town rather than moving elsewhere.	5.468 (1.804)	0.863
BL_2	Ten years from now, I will still be living in this town.	5.494 (1.863)	0.967
BL_3	I intend to continue living in this town in the future.	5.450 (1.962)	0.903
Tourist model			
Visit satisfaction (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.962$, CR=0.962, AVE=0.864)			
VS_1	I am happy with my decision to visit this place.	5.732 (1.244)	0.889
VS_2	My trip to this place was well worth the money spent.	5.632 (1.282)	0.922
VS_3	I believe choosing this place for my holiday was the right decision.	5.675 (1.280)	0.956
VS_4	I am satisfied with my overall experience here.	5.636 (1.258)	0.950
Attitudinal loyalty(Cronbach's $\alpha=0.975$, CR=0.975, AVE=0.908)			
AL_1	I would recommend this place to my family.	5.437 (1.334)	0.953
AL_2	I would recommend this place to my friends.	5.435 (1.378)	0.981
AL_3	I would speak positively about this place to my colleagues.	5.422 (1.351)	0.964
AL_4	I would recommend this place if asked for advice.	5.396 (1.385)	0.912
Behavioral loyalty (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.950$, CR=0.950, AVE=0.825)			
BL_1	I would revisit this town.	5.342 (1.486)	0.923
BL_2	If I were given the chance, I would continue to holiday here.	5.238 (1.435)	0.900
BL_3	I am willing to make repeated visits to this place.	4.991 (1.506)	0.893
BL_4	I would take the time to visit here again.	5.095 (1.432)	0.919

Table 2. Latent variables correlation matrix (Fornell-Larcker criterion) discriminant validity

Resident model			
	Residential satisfaction	Attitudinal loyalty	Behavioral loyalty
Residential satisfaction	0.886		
Attitudinal loyalty	0.575	0.950	
Behavioral loyalty	0.669	0.676	0.912
Tourist model			
	Visit satisfaction	Attitudinal loyalty	Behavioral loyalty
Visit satisfaction	0.929		
Attitudinal loyalty	0.782	0.953	
Behavioral loyalty	0.703	0.859	0.909

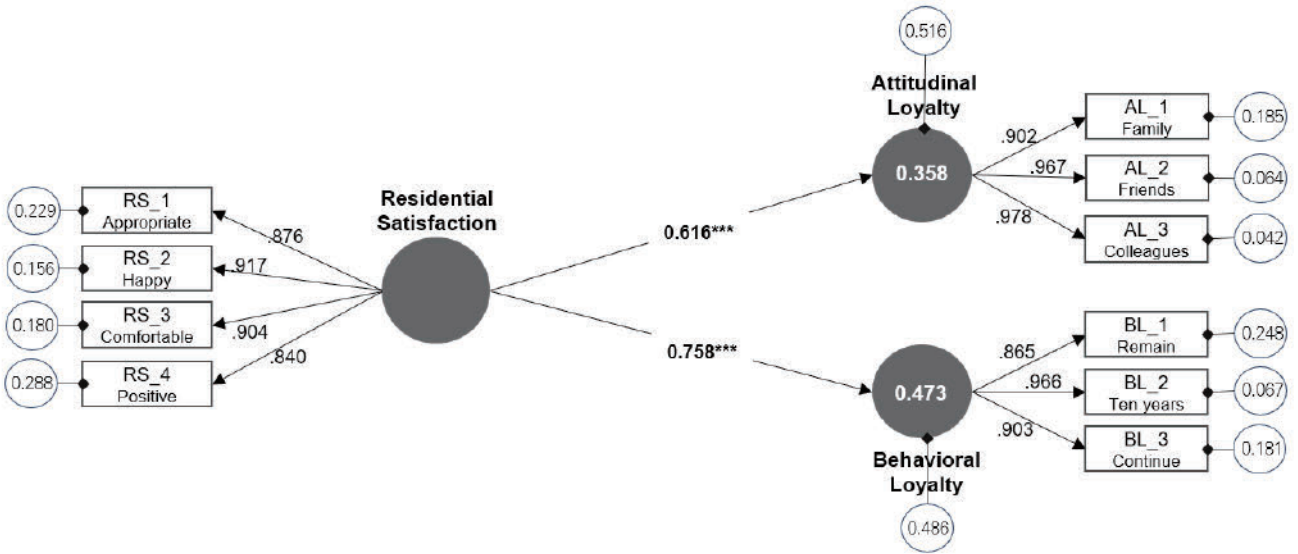


Figure 3. Structural model 1 (residents)

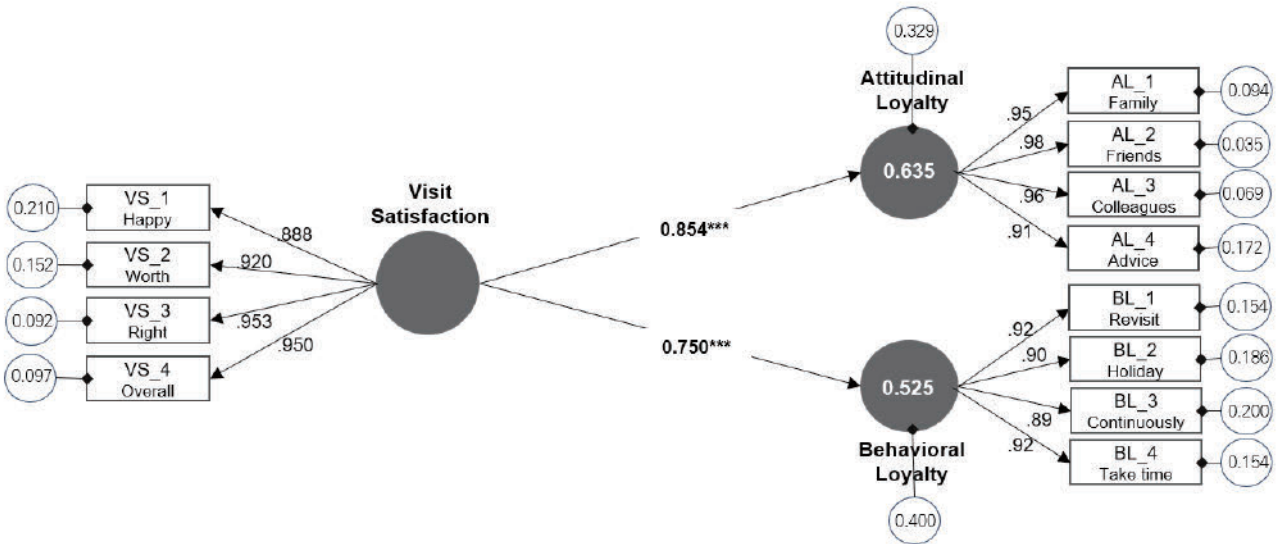


Figure 4. Structural model 1 (tourists)

ship between attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty, adding a path where attitudinal loyalty influences behavioral loyalty into the model. In the resident model, all paths were significant ($p < 0.01$), and all model fit indices met the required standards ($\chi^2/df = 2.036$, RMSEA = 0.078, SRMR = 0.038, CFI = 0.983, NFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.976). The tourist model also met all the required model fit criteria ($\chi^2/df = 2.308$, RMSEA = 0.075, SRMR = 0.023, CFI = 0.983, NFI = 0.971, TLI = 0.978). While visit satisfaction had a direct and significant impact on attitudinal loyalty ($p < 0.01$), it did not directly affect behavioral loyalty, instead influencing it indirectly through attitudinal loyalty.

As indicated by the path coefficients in <Table 3>, the

impact of residential satisfaction on behavioral loyalty was greater than its impact on attitudinal loyalty, with the direct effect (0.463) being more substantial than the indirect effect (0.276). However, in the tourist model, the impact of visit satisfaction on behavioral loyalty was not significant, indicating that the indirect effect (0.646) was more substantial.

2. Interview

1) Interview Participants' Characteristics

Among the total of 12 participants interviewed, 7 had resided in Yeoncheon-gun for about 10 years after relocating, and 5 had lived there for over 20 years. The respondents

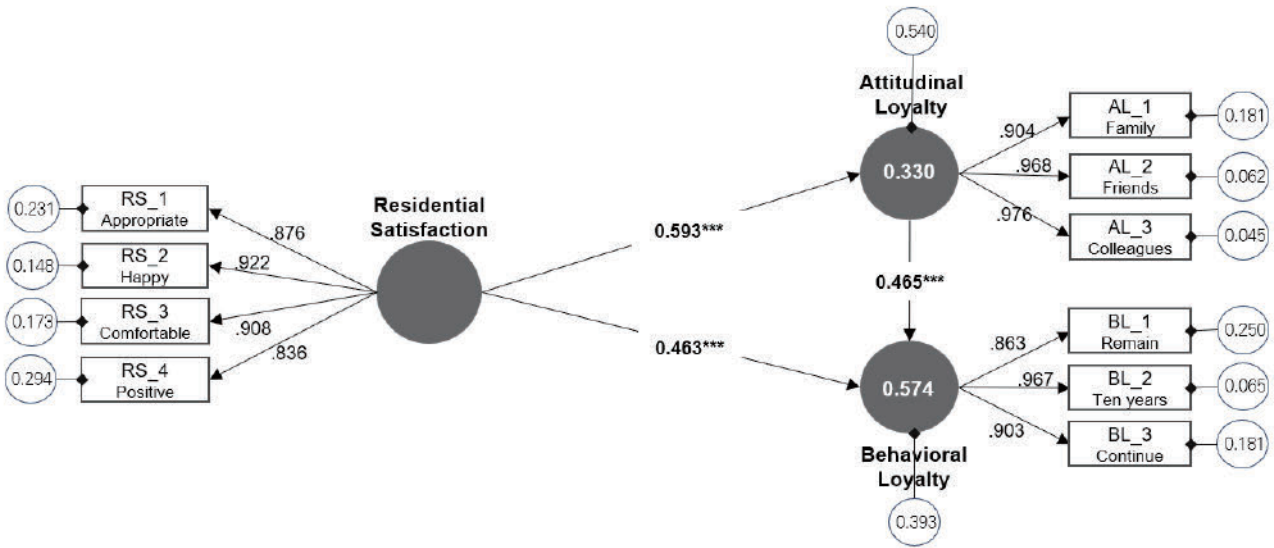


Figure 5. Structural model 2 (residents)

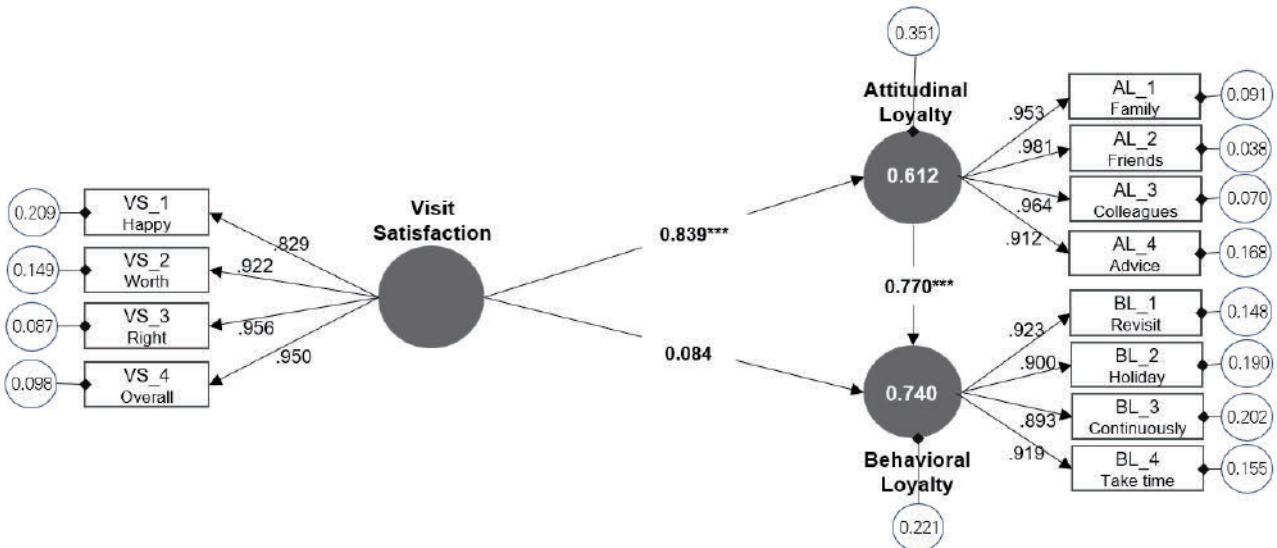


Figure 6. Structural model 2 (tourists)

Table 3. Estimates for the structural model

Resident model		
Path	Coefficients	t values
Residential satisfaction → Attitudinal loyalty	0.593***	7.868
Residential satisfaction → Behavioral loyalty		
Direct	0.463***	5.909
Indirect	0.276	
Attitudinal loyalty → Behavioral loyalty	0.465***	6.264
Tourist model		
Path	Coefficients	t values
Visit satisfaction → Attitudinal loyalty	0.839***	14.839
Visit satisfaction → Behavioral loyalty		
Direct	0.084	1.257
Indirect	0.646	
Attitudinal loyalty → Behavioral loyalty	0.770***	11.689

***p<0.01

consisted of 6 males and 6 females, with 7 in their 50s, 5 in their 60s, and 1 in their 70s (see <Table 4>). All participants were actively engaged as Geopark guides or travel guides in Yeoncheon-gun, interacting directly with tourists.

2) Residents' Loyalty

In responses to questions about the duration of residence and reasons for relocation, residents who had lived in Yeoncheon for approximately ten years reported that their reasons for moving included: acquaintances living in the area (3 respondents), returning to their hometown in Yeoncheon (2 respondents), moving for farming purposes (1 respondent), and other reasons for relocating to a rural area (1 respondent). These responses indicate that recommendations from others have indeed had a positive influence on their decisions to move. The experience of recommending Yeoncheon to others was relatively common among interviewees who have relocated there. Residents who have lived in Yeoncheon for over 20 years mentioned that while they consider it a good place for retirees, they generally do not recommend it to others.

G (10 years residence): *"While giving tours and learning more about Yeoncheon, I realized there are so many wonderful and historic places here. As I introduced the area to friends who visited, they found it amazing. It's so close to Seoul, and because of that, I even started recommending it as a good place to live."*

J (11 years residence): *"I actually recommend Yeoncheon to younger families with kids, especially for raising children up to*

high school. I take part in forest activities with my kids, and it's so different from Seoul. There's no fierce competition, and each child is valued, making one-on-one education truly possible ..."

C (60 years residence): *"No, I don't. Before turning 60, I actually used to tell people to live elsewhere."*

E (45 years residence): *"I don't think I've really recommended living here. I don't recall ever encouraging my relatives or anyone else to move here."*

Most residents interviewed expressed no intention of leaving their current place of residence. Deciding where to live is influenced by various personal, social, and economic factors, making it a more cautious and challenging decision compared to simply purchasing a general product. Participants explained that their decision to relocate or stay is not only influenced by their own desires but also by considerations involving their spouses, children, and financial circumstances, which sometimes lead them to hesitate despite a desire to move.

E (45 years residence): *"Personally, my dream is to live in an apartment at least once. But I can't make a move because my husband won't budge ... So, I think I'll just keep living here ..."*

B (10 years residence): *"When I first moved here, I planned to leave because farming didn't go well. But I ended up settling down because of the kids."*

3) Tourists' Loyalty

Residents who serve as UNESCO Geopark or tourism

Table 4. Interview participants

	Gender	Age	Duration of residence	Reasons for residing (Reasons for choosing to reside)
A	Male	60s	6 years	Became aware of Yeoncheon due to relatives residing there
B	Female	50s	10 years	Became aware of Yeoncheon due to relatives residing there
C	Male	60s	60 years	Resided since elementary school
D	Male	60s	60 years	Resided since elementary school
E	Female	50s	45 years	Resided since middle school
F	Male	60s	11 years	Moved from a nearby area (Goyang city) for rural settlement
G	Female	50s	10 years	Became aware of Yeoncheon through an acquaintance
H	Male	50s	5 years	Returned to hometown (originally from Yeoncheon)
I	Female	50s	7 years	Followed a spouse who moved for farming
J	Female	50s	11 years	Husband, originally from Yeoncheon, returned to hometown
K	Female	50s	25 years	Moved due to husband's job
L	Male	70s	40 years	Relocated to start a business

guides reported encountering tourists primarily from areas near Seoul City. They noted that recommendations come not only from personal connections but also through indirect channels like online platforms and broadcast media. Older visitors, those over 60, often discover local festivals and attractions through television and other promotional outlets. In contrast, younger visitors tend to find Yeoncheon through social media or are drawn by opportunities such as camping. The respondents observed a significant number of repeat visitors, with the revisit rate estimated between 30% and 40%. This estimate closely matches the findings of prior surveys conducted by the researchers, which reported a revisit rate of 40.7%.

D: *“There are a lot of repeat visitors. When we ask, ‘How many times have you been here?’ or ‘Is this your first visit?’ there are, of course, some first-timers. But in terms of tours, there are a significant number of repeat visitors. Even on city tours, most participants are repeat visitors.”*

H: *There are people who say, ‘I visited Jaemin Waterfall about 10 years ago,’ or ‘I came here 5 years ago.’ Some mention coming here previously with friends for a gathering and now returning for another visit.”*

I: *“These days, repeat visits seem to be more common. Visitors come back, sometimes bringing others with them to places like Jaemin Waterfall. They enjoy tea, breathe the fresh air, and leave feeling refreshed. There are also events held at various historical sites, which align with specific seasons or periods, drawing people back. . .”*

J: *“As for repeat visits, I think they only account for about 30% to 40%, based on my impression.”*

However, while efforts to attract tourists through recommendations and encourage repeat visits are essential, the respondents also discussed the area’s limitations and aspects needing improvement. Concerns were expressed that visitors who come based on recommendations might be disappointed, which could hinder the creation of loyal customers. Specifically, in the case of Yeoncheon, the site of this study, it was noted that the scale and development of tourism infrastructure are inadequate compared to other areas. Therefore, there is a need to create elements that can compensate for these regional limitations.

F: *“One of the biggest weaknesses is that it’s very one-off. People visit once, but there’s no follow-up or connection after that. For example, this area doesn’t have the stunning landscapes of places like Gapyeong or Yangpyeong, nor the impressive mountain ranges of Pocheon or Cheorwon. It also lacks the well-organized features that make other areas stand out.”*

L: *“Some visitors who came to places like Jaemin Waterfall or Horogoru said they enjoyed it and shared their experiences with their acquaintances. However, among those acquaintances, about 5 out of 10 would question, ‘Why would you recommend a place like this?’ Many visitors expressed that while they had high expectations coming here, their experience didn’t quite live up to those expectations.”*

They argued that to enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty, it is crucial to move beyond passive touristic offerings that merely involve seeing, eating, and stopping. Instead, there should be an active development of programs that integrate experiences, education, and relaxation.

C: *“It’s important to focus on transforming this area from simply a place for eating, sightseeing, and leisure into a haven where urban people can experience something new and take on challenges while also finding a place to relax.”*

E: *“I’ve realized that many campers and young visitors are coming to Yeoncheon because it’s close to Seoul. I think it would be great to focus more on this aspect. These visitors are mostly younger people, so I feel there should be more efforts to promote other activities happening in nearby villages to them.”*

V. Conclusion

Customer loyalty toward general consumer goods has been extensively studied due to the availability of large purchasing datasets (Kato, 2019). However, loyalty formation varies across products, prompting research on diverse product categories and customer segments. In this study, to measure loyalty towards ‘areas’, attitudinal loyalty (based on the intention to recommend to others) and behavioral loyalty (intention to continue residing or revisiting) were considered essential to manage, as they contribute to population growth and revitalization. By examining the connections and disconnections between residential/visit satisfaction and these loyalty dimensions, the findings of this study

are significant in that they move beyond satisfaction-based approaches and demonstrate how the concept of loyalty can help identify specific behaviors through which residents and tourists may contribute to mitigating population decline and revitalizing the local economy.

While satisfaction-loyalty research focused on specific 'areas' has predominantly been conducted in the tourism sector, studies examining how residents' satisfaction with their place of residence leads to loyalty have been limited. Moreover, this study goes beyond the satisfaction-loyalty mechanism identified in prior studies by differentiating loyalty into attitudinal and behavioral components, and it examines the precursor relationship between these two forms of loyalty in both residents and tourists. The findings, revealed through structural equation modeling, are as follows.

First, structural equation modeling revealed that attitudinal loyalty precedes behavioral loyalty among both residents and tourists. This supports Oliver's (1999) conceptual framework on loyalty formation and is consistent with findings in business and tourism research (Lee et al., 2007; Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). Notably, this study extends those findings by confirming this sequential relationship specifically in the context of residents—a perspective rarely examined in loyalty research.

In the resident model, satisfaction exerted a direct effect on both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. Importantly, the direct effect of satisfaction on behavioral loyalty was observed only among residents. This suggests that some residents may be satisfied with their living environment and intend to remain there, even if they do not necessarily intend to recommend the area to others.

Secondly, interviews with residents provided insights supporting both identified paths in the model. Specifically, long-term residents who have not lived in other cities showed a direct path from satisfaction to behavioral loyalty. These residents, primarily aged 50–60 and above, expressed satisfaction with their living area and intentions to continue residing there, yet they were not active in recommending it to others. These individuals can be considered loyal residents content with their situation, but passive in influencing new residents to move in.

In contrast, residents who had moved to the area reported recommending it to others and expressed intentions to

continue residing there. This suggests that migrants, who can compare their experiences with other areas, may be more proactive in encouraging new residents to move in. Leveraging their strong sense of loyalty could therefore support community-based strategies for attracting and retaining new populations, for example by involving them in promoting rural migration programs or connecting them with prospective newcomers.

However, as indicated in interviews with residents, the decision to move is influenced by a complex array of factors beyond satisfaction with the living area or recommendations from others. These factors include employment, age, family circumstances, and other personal, social, and economic considerations. Therefore, merely relying on recommendations is insufficient to drive relocations.

Policy efforts should go beyond improving satisfaction with the living environment to intentionally cultivate attitudinal loyalty—for instance, by reinforcing place identity, fostering community cohesion, and building a strong sense of belonging. This attitudinal loyalty can then be translated into behavioral loyalty, such as sustained residence or advocacy, through concrete incentives including housing support, employment opportunities, and settlement assistance. Moreover, understanding the primary age groups, family configurations, and motivations of these migrants is essential for designing targeted and effective support measures.

Third, in the tourist group, visit satisfaction significantly influenced recommendation intention (attitudinal loyalty) but did not have a direct effect on behavioral loyalty. This finding supports the staged nature of loyalty formation identified in previous tourism studies, indicating that high satisfaction with a destination does not automatically lead to revisits. For example, Lee et al. (2007) found that satisfaction influenced attitudinal loyalty among forest recreationists but did not directly affect behavioral loyalty. Similarly, Chang et al. (2014) observed that while satisfied residents tended to show higher revisit intentions, this was not necessarily true for tourists. The tendency of tourists to seek new experiences (variety-seeking) can negatively impact revisit intentions, underscoring the need to account for this factor in policy design.

However, because decisions about short-term visits are relatively easier to make than decisions about residency,

recommendations from others (e.g., “someone visited and said it was great”) can be highly effective in attracting new tourists. Therefore, activities aimed at enhancing visitor satisfaction, coupled with targeted efforts to increase recommendation intentions—such as incentives for tourists who share experiences on social media—are expected to be effective in attracting more visitors. Beyond simply improving satisfaction, strategies should aim to build attitudinal loyalty through unique, place-based experiences and compelling storytelling that strengthen emotional connections. To promote behavioral loyalty in the form of repeat visitation, targeted marketing, loyalty programs, and personalized incentives can be employed to encourage tourists to return.

Tourists’ continuous visits, which boost local spending, contribute to economic vitality (Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, in depopulating areas, tourism is expected to have positive effects on job creation, economic revitalization, and the maintenance of local infrastructure (Canavan, 2013; Deng et al., 2022). Although an increase in tourist numbers may not directly lead to population growth in such areas, it can help sustain the local economy by compensating for the reduced spending of a shrinking population. Accordingly, managing loyal visitors becomes important, as their word-of-mouth effects can be leveraged, and the development of content that encourages repeat visitation is crucial.

Interviews highlighted the need to move beyond simple sightseeing and dining tourism to activities that encourage repeat visits, such as hands-on experiences, educational programs, and positioning the area as a retreat for urban residents. Instead of relying on visitors returning to see the same attractions, the areas must actively provide new experiences for repeat tourists. From a policy perspective, the focus should shift from developing landmarks or mass tourism attractions to creating diverse narratives and experiential programs unique to the area. Additionally, efforts should be made to establish recreational and leisure spaces that are easily accessible for populations in nearby metropolitan areas.

Lastly, in contrast to the tourist group, the resident group showed a stronger direct relationship between satisfaction with their place of residence and the intention to continue living there, rather than satisfaction leading to improved recommendation intentions. This indicates that when residents are satisfied with their living environment, they are

more likely to make a personal decision to remain rather than actively recommending it to others. As Gilboa and Herstein (2012) highlight, place loyalty is closely tied to a resident’s subjective choice to continue living in a place rather than being influenced solely by external factors. Furthermore, loyal residents can play a significant role in reinforcing the image of their community, contributing to its branding efforts and overall appeal to both internal and external audiences. Therefore, it is essential to prioritize measures that enhance satisfaction among current residents to prevent outmigration and maintain the vitality of the community.

Previous research on the satisfaction–loyalty relationship (Kato, 2019; Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984) has demonstrated that strengthening the loyalty of existing customers is more efficient than attracting new ones. Building on this understanding, a key finding of the study is that, beyond a satisfaction-centered model, policies should prioritize highly satisfied and loyal residents and tourists.

This implies that efforts should not only focus on attracting new residents but also emphasize improving the living conditions of current residents and encouraging satisfied tourists to revisit. In depopulating rural area like the research site, where essential infrastructure may be lacking but the natural and cultural environment is a major asset, both residents and tourists reported high satisfaction with the tranquil and nature-oriented setting. Therefore, it is important to identify the factors contributing to satisfaction for both groups and to manage the area in a way that balances development and conservation. In doing so, satisfied residents and tourists can serve as catalysts for attracting new residents and visitors.

Policy approaches should move beyond simply enhancing satisfaction to address the full satisfaction–attitudinal loyalty–behavioral loyalty pathway identified in this study. Specifically, policymakers should develop strategies to convert satisfaction into attitudinal loyalty, and then further into sustained behavioral outcomes.

However, because residents and tourists stay in the same place with different purposes and durations—residents on a long-term basis and tourists on a short-term basis—the factors that influence their satisfaction are inevitably different. Tourists often prioritize novelty and stimulation, whereas residents tend to value stability and everyday

convenience. The increase in tourist numbers and associated development can lead to overcrowding, which may undermine the quality of life for residents, particularly in rural areas where tranquility is highly valued. Chang et al. (2014), in their study on local festivals, also noted that residents tend to prefer the preservation of identity, community values, and tradition, while tourists are more drawn to novelty and excitement—highlighting the need to reconcile such needs conflicts.

Therefore, models that seek to address both residents and tourists in depopulating areas must be grounded in a nuanced understanding of each group's distinct priorities, alongside strategies for effectively managing potential conflicts (Xiong et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). To this end, it is crucial to foster an environment where residents are encouraged and empowered to actively engage with tourists. Tourism policies and destination branding strategies should meaningfully incorporate the roles and cultural values of residents, while preserving the area's unique identity and heritage. Furthermore, local guidelines and codes of conduct that promote mutual social responsibility should be clearly communicated and actively implemented.

This study's limitation is that the model did not fully incorporate the wide range of factors that may influence loyalty. However, many previous studies in tourism and marketing have also concentrated on the satisfaction–loyalty link, often restricting the scope of variables considered (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2015; Saini and Singh, 2020). This study extends such frameworks by including the resident perspective and by differentiating between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty to explore their respective impacts.

Although satisfaction was the only antecedent variable in the model, which narrows the scope of interpretation, the study attempted to compensate for this through supplementary in-depth interviews. Even so, the issue remains a constraint of the current approach, and future studies should build on the exploratory findings from the interviews to develop a more comprehensive model.

This study's findings are particularly relevant for Korean cities facing population decline and seeking to revitalize their areas by attracting numerous tourists. Accordingly, it is vital to segment various demographic groups interacting with the area, managing their satisfaction and loyalty to

sustain and cultivate loyal residents and tourists. In academia, Japan, experiencing demographic decline early in East Asia, has begun to classify visitors who develop lasting relationships with areas as 'relationship population (*kankei jinko*)' (Inoue et al., 2022), highlighting the need for future studies to expand models that consider multiple demographic groups simultaneously, thereby deepening our understanding of spatial sustainability and demographic challenges.

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