

From Determinants to Behavioral Outcomes: The Role of Rural Tourism Destination Image in Shaping Recommendation and Revisit Intentions

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the determinants and outcomes of rural tourism destination image, focusing on rural homestays in China. Based on Destination Image Theory and Place Attachment Theory, it examines how destination location, natural and cultural attractions, infrastructure, gastronomy, accommodation, rural lifestyle, and local community shape tourists' perceptions and intentions, especially intention to revisit and intention to recommend. A total of 378 valid questionnaires were collected and analyzed using PLS-SEM. The results show that destination location, cultural attractions, infrastructure, gastronomy attractions, accommodation attractions, rural lifestyle, and the local community significantly improve rural tourism destination image. Natural attractions do not show a significant effect. Rural tourism destination image has a positive effect on perceived destination quality, perceived value, and destination attachment. Destination attachment also increases tourists' intention to revisit and intention to recommend. Memorable tourism experience strengthens the relationship between DAM and revisit intention, but it does not significantly influence the relationship between DAM and recommendation intention. This comprehensive exploration aims to provide actionable strategies for rural tourism stakeholders in China to foster sustainable tourism growth and meaningful visitor experiences.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Destination image, Place attachment, Perceived value, Behavioral intentions

JEL Classifications: M31, Z32, D12

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism, as an important component of China's tourism sector, plays an increasingly prominent role in promoting rural revitalization and facilitating urban-rural integration (Fang et al., 2023; Li, 2025). The emerging business models represented by rural homestays and experiential tourism are gradually becoming important forms of leisure consumption for residents. With the rise of the experience economy and the deepening implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, rural tourism is gradually shifting from a primary form focused on sightseeing to a comprehensive consumption model centered on experience, emotion, and identity formation (Wang and Lee, 2025). Rural areas, characterized by advantages in natural environment, cultural resources, and

distinctive lifestyles, have become a new choice for urban residents' short-distance leisure and emotional return (Niu et al., 2026).

Tourists' evaluations of rural tourism destinations are no longer based solely on their objective attributes, but are increasingly reflected in their perception of the destination's overall image, their subjective perception of the quality and value of the experience, and the resulting emotional connections and behavioral responses (Zhu et al., 2025). Destination image is considered a key antecedent variable influencing tourists' decision-making and experience evaluation (Hamdy et al., 2024). The image of a rural tourism destination is not a single-dimensional concept, but rather a combination of multiple attributes, including the destination's

location, natural landscape, cultural appeal, infrastructure, culinary appeal, accommodation conditions, rural lifestyle, and the image of the local community (Yi et al., 2024). These elements collectively shape tourists' overall cognitive framework of rural tourism destinations and play a crucial role in travel decisions, experience evaluation, and subsequent behavior.

Existing research indicates that destination image is a key antecedent variable influencing tourists' decision-making and behavioral intentions, with perceived quality and perceived value playing significant mediating roles (Atasoy and Eren, 2023; Li et al., 2025). Furthermore, the emotional attachment formed between tourists and their destinations is considered a crucial psychological basis for explaining revisit and recommendation intentions (Rui et al., 2024). However, related research largely focuses on the direct relationships between individual constructs, neglecting the systematic pathways through which multidimensional destination images further influence emotional attachment and behavioral intentions via perceived evaluation mechanisms. Particularly in rural tourism contexts, multiple attributes such as natural environment, cultural resources, lifestyle, and community atmosphere collectively shape tourists' overall perceptions (Zheng et al., 2025), and the integrated mechanism by which these factors affect emotional attachment and behavioral intentions still lacks an integrative explanation.

Furthermore, with the development of experience-oriented tourism, memorable travel experiences are increasingly becoming important contextual factors influencing tourists' attitudes and behaviors (Li et al., 2023). Profound and positive travel memories may strengthen tourists' emotional identification with their destinations and amplify the impact of emotional attachment on behavioral intentions (Kim et al., 2022). However, existing research rarely incorporates memorable travel experiences into the analytical framework of the relationship between tourists' emotions and behaviors, and its moderating mechanisms have not been fully validated. Based on this, this paper starts from the context of rural tourism and constructs a research model that takes a multi-dimensional destination image as the starting point, and then uses perceived quality and perceived value to influence place attachment, which in turn affects revisit intention and recommendation intention. At the same time, a memorable tourism experience is introduced as a moderating variable to systematically reveal the intrinsic connection between tourists' cognition, emotion, and behavior, in order to provide a theoretical basis and practical inspiration for the shaping of rural tourism destination image and experience management.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Destination image formation theory

Destination image formation theory (TDI) is a core theoretical framework in tourism cognition research, its development dating back to the 1970s, first explicitly proposed by Hunt (1971). TDI refers to the comprehensive cognitive, emotional, and overall impression formed in an individual's mind after encountering relevant information about a destination, possessing both

cognitive and emotional dimensions (Gallarza et al., 2002). The cognitive dimension reflects an individual's rational evaluation of objective attributes such as natural landscapes, cultural resources, infrastructure, and service quality, representing the accumulation of "known" information; the emotional dimension reflects an individual's subjective emotional inclination towards the destination, such as liking, identifying, or disliking (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Its essence is not the objective attributes of the destination itself, but rather the tourist's subjective perception and psychological construction of these attributes, serving as a crucial psychological bridge connecting destination supply and tourist demand.

In the field of rural tourism, destination image formation theory has high applicability (Pavlie et al., 2021). The core appeal of rural tourism destinations lies in their unique natural ecology, folk culture, and idyllic lifestyle. Its emphasis on the cognitive-affective duality aligns with the interaction between rural tourism visitors' cognitive judgments and emotional experiences regarding ecological quality. This theory distinguishes between indirect and direct information during the stimulus input phase, helping to explain how tourists construct images through rural tourism promotion and on-site experiences (Stylidis, 2022).

2.1.2. Place attachment theory

Place Attachment Theory is a core theoretical framework for studying the relationship between humans and their environment (Giuliani, 2003). Its development can be traced back to the 1970s, with Relph (1976) laying the foundation with the concept of "sense of place," and later formally defined and systematically developed by Taylor et al. (1985). Place attachment refers to the complex of emotional connection, cognitive identification, and behavioral dependence formed between an individual and a specific physical environment and its social relationships (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). The functional dimension, place dependence, reflects an individual's rational judgment of whether a place can meet their activity needs and achieve their behavioral goals, embodying the practical value of the place. The affective dimension, place identification, reflects an individual's subjective tendency to incorporate the place into their self-concept, generating a sense of belonging and emotional attachment, carrying the emotional meaning of the place (Hammit et al., 2006). Its essence is not the objective attribute of the place itself, but rather the subjective emotional connection gradually constructed by the individual in their interaction with the place; it is a key psychological link connecting individual behavior and environmental characteristics.

Place attachment theory has been widely used in research on rural tourism. Rural tourism provides a cognitive basis and emotional vehicle for attachment through authentic natural ecology, local cultural traditions, and a slow-paced lifestyle (Pantelidis et al., 2024). Its emphasis on the functional-affective duality aligns with the interaction between the functional satisfaction and emotional resonance experienced by rural tourists in their pastoral experiences. This theory's focus on the physical environment, social environment, and personal experience helps explain how tourists gradually develop an attachment to rural destinations through on-site experiences, emotional investment, and memory accumulation (Raymond et al., 2010).

2.2. Rural Tourism

The tourism consumption market across China consists largely of rural travel, and rural homestay accommodations have become an increasingly popular option (Bi and Yang, 2023). The concept of homestays started to appear in rural settings adjacent to urban centers during the early 1990's, and this practice continues today, with business owners referring to their establishments as "farmhouse inns (Sachaleli, 2022)." Farmhouse inns are generally small in size and generally operated by families who reside in rural areas (Li et al., 2026). Visitors who choose to stay at a farmhouse inn while visiting China's countryside have the opportunity to experience the rural lifestyle, eat food that was produced by local farmers, such as free-range chickens, ducks, pork, or seasonal vegetables, and participate in a variety of different types of basic rural activities (e.g. working on a farm; picking fruit/vegetables) (Sandua, 2024). In many cases, innkeepers offer simple overnight accommodations to their customers as well (Sandua, 2024).

Among the different forms of tourism in China, rural tourism is notable due to its distinct characteristics and offerings. Rural tourism focuses on natural scenery/nature, agricultural opportunities and rural activities; whereas urban tourism is predominantly focused around history, shopping and entertainment. With the serenity of the countryside, visitors have access to hiking, agricultural opportunities and wildlife viewing (Chen et al., 2023). When tourists participate in rural tourism they are immersed in local culture. This allows them to visit communities, practice traditional crafts and immerse themselves into daily rural life in ways other forms of tourism do not provide (Chan, 2023). Rural tourism accommodations are generally designed with regard to their natural and environmental surroundings (Samper-Mendrvil et al., 2025). However, because of obstacles such as geographic locations and a lack of capital, rural tourism lacks the necessary foundation to create competitive branded products to compete with other types of tourism (Mohamed Al Matris, 2023). Rural tourism also suffers from a lack of differentiation between products, unclear positioning of products and lack of long-term appeal (Jia et al., 2022). In addition, varying levels of quality in service and lack of adequate public services causes ineffective communication between supply and demand which negatively impacts the overall experience of rural tourists.

2.3. Hypotheses Development

2.3.1. Formation of multidimensional destination image

The location of a rural tourism destination is a critical factor in shaping its perception and attractiveness to potential visitors. It is believed that destinations with well-developed transport infrastructure, i.e., airports, highways, and railways, are more attractive and convenient to tourists (Abdullah et al., 2023). According to Destination Image Formation Theory, natural attractions constitute core cognitive image attributes that shape tourists' beliefs about a destination's environmental quality, authenticity, and recreational value (Nematpour et al., 2025). Cultural resources represent key cognitive image attributes that allow tourists to form beliefs about a destination's identity, authenticity, and historical depth. The cultural experiences have a unique attraction to the tourists (Kay Smith et al., 2022). Infrastructure constitutes a core component of the functional

(cognitive) image, shaping tourists' evaluations of convenience, safety, and service quality. Rao et al. (2022) argue that the presence of quality infrastructure, such as transportation, sanitation, telecommunication, and health services, can improve the tourist experience significantly by making it convenient and safe (Apriyanti, 2024).

Gastronomy functions as an experiential attribute that simultaneously contributes to cognitive image (cultural identity, uniqueness) and affective image (pleasure, enjoyment, emotional attachment). Food festivals or culinary tours can provide immersive experiences that enrich the tourist's understanding of the region (Yeboah and Ashie, 2024). Lodgings are not just the places that people stay at; they can also be their attractions, providing special insight as to what the locals are like and live (Gelbman, 2022). As Gordan et al. (2022) and Sun et al. (2023) emphasize, distinctive accommodations such as boutique hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, or agritourism farms contribute significantly to the destination's attractiveness. Rural ways of life are also a major tourist attraction, as clients who visit such places want to get out of urban settings and experience nature and interact with locals. DTI highlighted that rural lifestyle experiences represent symbolic and experiential attributes that shape tourists' affective image by evoking feelings of relaxation, nostalgia, and social connection. Tourist attractions in the form of community-based tourism, in which participants of the local community share the important role of hosting and interacting with the visitors, can make the tourists' experience more authentic and immersive (Liang, 2022). Accordingly, we propose the hypothesis:

- H₁: Destination Location has a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.
- H₂: Natural Attractions have a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.
- H₃: Cultural Attractions have a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.
- H₄: Infrastructure has a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.
- H₅: Gastronomy Attractions have a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.
- H₆: Accommodation Attractions have a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.
- H₇: Rural Lifestyle has a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.
- H₈: Local Community has a significant positive impact on the image of rural tourism destinations.

2.3.2. Destination image and tourists' responses

Destination image as a multi-faceted concept affects how tourists perceive and evaluate different attributes of destinations (Trang et al., 2023). It has been demonstrated in previous research that the destination image has a significant effect on the emotional and behavioural responses of tourists, including how much attachment they develop to the destination. With rural tourism, there could be intense levels of emotional attachment due to the unique nature of rural settings, cultural authenticity, and immersive experiences, which may result in the formation of destination attachment (Pantelidis et al., 2024). A destination that has a positive image may enhance perceived quality, as it aligns with the expectations and

desires of tourists for unique and authentic experiences. According to Atasoy and Eren (2023), when a positive destination image corresponds with the tourists' desires for novelty and authenticity, perceived value will be enhanced. The perceived value associated with a well-cultivated image that highlights the uniqueness of rural life (e.g., traditional crafts, culinary and scenic rural experiences, etc.) and provides satisfaction to visitors through meeting their expectations will be elevated. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H₉: The rural tourism destination image has a significant positive impact on destination attachment.
 H₁₀: The rural tourism destination image has a significant positive impact on perceived destination quality.
 H₁₁: The rural tourism destination image has a significant positive impact on perceived value.

2.3.3. Perceived destination quality, perceived value, and place attachment

Perceived quality is defined as tourists' evaluation of the attributes and services offered by a destination, which directly influences their satisfaction and emotional attachment (Tabaeian et al., 2023). Destination quality refers to a combination of different aspects, such as accommodation, service, and infrastructure, among other things, that are found in a destination. High perceived quality fulfills tourists' expectations, resulting in enhanced satisfaction and deeper emotional connections, thereby fostering destination attachment (Tran et al., 2022).

Perceived value of the destination that includes functional, emotional, and social dimensions is an important driver in the determination of destination attachment. It can be defined as the perceived utility of tourists in their travel that they perceive to be based on the experience they get as a result of traveling against the expenses paid (Kim et al., 2023). High perceived value can enhance tourists' attachment by delivering satisfying and memorable experiences that meet or exceed their expectations (Pujiastuti et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). According to Qiu et al. (2024), tourists who feel that the destination is of high value will be in a better position to form a strong emotional connection to the destination, which will translate to strong destination attachment. This study hypothesizes that:

- H₁₂: Perceived destination quality has a significant positive effect on destination attachment.
 H₁₃: Perceived value has a significant positive effect on destination attachment.

2.3.4. Destination attachment and behavioral intentions

Destination attachment, characterized by emotional bonds between tourists and destinations, plays a crucial role in influencing tourists' intention to revisit. Previous studies have demonstrated that destination attachment significantly affects tourists' loyalty and behavioral intentions (Alimohammadirokni et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2022). The type of emotional bond developed with the rural destination can be profound, especially insofar as rural tourism is concerned, due to the fact that in such settings, tourists are typically in search of specialized, unique, and authentic experiences (Nguyen-Viet and Van Nguyen, 2023).

Destination attachment not only influences tourists' intention to revisit but also their willingness to recommend the destination to others. The relationships created between the tourists and the destinations regarding their emotional connections may become one of the positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) messages (Ferreira et al., 2025). Tourists who feel a strong attachment to a destination are more likely to share their positive experiences, thereby enhancing the destination's reputation and attractiveness (Alimohammadirokni et al., 2026). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.

- H₁₄: Destination attachment has a significant positive effect on intention to revisit.
 H₁₅: Destination attachment has a significant positive effect on recommendation intention.

2.3.5. Mediating role of perceived quality and perceived value

The role of perceived destination quality as a mediator in the relationship between destination image and attachment is significant, as it bridges tourists' cognitive and emotional reactions. The significance of this mediating relationship is emphasized by Tasci et al. (2022) and Yuan and Vui (2023), who state that a well-formulated destination image can improve the level of quality perceptions, which, in its turn, promotes the further strengthening of emotional attachment. Previous studies, such as those by Saut and Bie (2024), underscore that perceived quality not only fulfills tourists' expectations but also enhances their satisfaction and loyalty. This is attributed to the fact that in most cases, tourists rely on destination image to form their expectations before their arrival. The tourists will have an increased predilection to become emotionally attached to the destination in the case of meeting or surpassing these expectations with reality, as shown in the perceived quality (Hussain et al., 2023).

The mediation of perceived value between the destination image and attachment is based on the fact that it transforms the image to perception of the mind that is considered as emotional attachment (Nawaz and Rasool, 2025). Although destination image can be said to be the initial attraction, the perceived value improves the entire process of experience, thus resulting in more attachment (Mengkebayaer et al., 2022). Tourists tend to develop powerful emotional attachments when they place a high value on their experiences at the destination. This confirms the significance of the perceived value as a mediator between the cognitive attitude towards image and the attitude based on feelings, concerning attachment (Nawaz and Rasool, 2025). This suggests the following hypotheses.

- H₁₆: Perceived destination quality has a mediating effect on the relationship between Rural tourism destination image and destination attachment.
 H₁₇: Perceived value has a mediating effect on the relationship between Rural tourism destination image and destination attachment.

2.3.6. Moderating effects of memorable tourism experience

It is pivotal to add that memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) contribute positively to destination attachment and convert it into a physically quantifiable desire to visit again. These aspects and factors of MTEs include hedonism, novelty, involvement, and

meaningfulness, which create a long-term memory of a tourist (Hosany et al., 2022). Studies reveal that MTEs strengthen the connection between attachment to the destination and their intentions to revisit it by giving them powerful memories, which, according to tourists, are the experiences they want to revisit (Shin et al., 2023; Sihombing et al., 2024). Meanwhile, MTEs significantly enhance tourists' willingness to share their experiences and recommend the destination to others. The newness, engagement, and significance MTEs have make them likely to get tourists to share good experiences (Nguyen, 2024). These experiences generate deep emotional and mental impressions that encourage the tourists to talk positively about the destination. Based on the above discussion, we propose the following hypotheses.

H₁₈: Memorable tourism experience has a moderating effect on the relationship between destination attachment and tourists' intention to revisit the rural destination in the context of rural tourism in China.

H₁₉: Memorable tourism experience has a moderating effect on the relationship between destination attachment and tourists' intention of recommendation in the context of rural tourism in China.

Integrating the above theoretical perspectives, this study proposes the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data Collection

Given the large and geographically dispersed target population of rural tourists in China, the survey method was chosen as the primary data collection technique. This study employed Wenjuanxing, a widely used online survey platform in China, to distribute the questionnaire via QR codes (Chen et al., 2024). Although SEM is widely applied in social sciences, behavioral research, and management studies, there is no absolute consensus on the minimum required sample size (Raoprasert and Islam, 2010). We follow Hair et al. (2012), who recommend 150-400 samples for

more stable estimates. Screening questions at the beginning of the questionnaire ensured that participants met the study criteria (e.g., prior rural homestay experience or participation in rural tourism activities), with ineligible responses automatically excluded. All participants confirmed informed consent, guaranteeing voluntary participation, anonymity, and data confidentiality.

A total of 427 questionnaires were collected. After removing 22 incomplete responses, 8 outliers, and 19 responses that did not meet the screening criteria, 378 valid responses were used for analysis. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

3.2. Questionnaire Design

All measurement scales were adopted from existing literature. Specifically, Destination location was adapted from Lee et al. (2019) and Styliadis et al. (2020); natural attractions from Kim and Ritchie (2014) and (Chi and Han, 2021); cultural attractions from Chen and Rahman (2018) and Prayag (2009); infrastructure from (Yilmaz, 2017); gastronomy attractions from (Ant01 et al., 2019); accommodation attractions from (Chen and Chen, 2010); rural lifestyle from (Coudounaris and Sthapit, 2017); and local community from (Ramkissoon et al., 2013). Rural tourism destination image was adapted from (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999), perceived destination quality from (Chen and Chen, 2010) and (Gallarza et al., 2015), perceived value from (Chen and Tsai, 2008), destination attachment from (Williams and Vaske, 2003), memorable tourism experience from (Kim et al., 2012), intention to revisit from (Tsai, 2016), and recommendation intentions from (Kim and Ritchie, 2014). Before the main data collection, a pilot test was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the survey instrument.

3.3. Analysis Tools and Techniques

Data analysis was performed utilizing SPSS 26.0 and SmartPLS, which is a variance-based structural equation model (SEM) approach that allows for the simultaneous estimation of both a measurement and structural model (Henseler, 2017). Thus, it

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

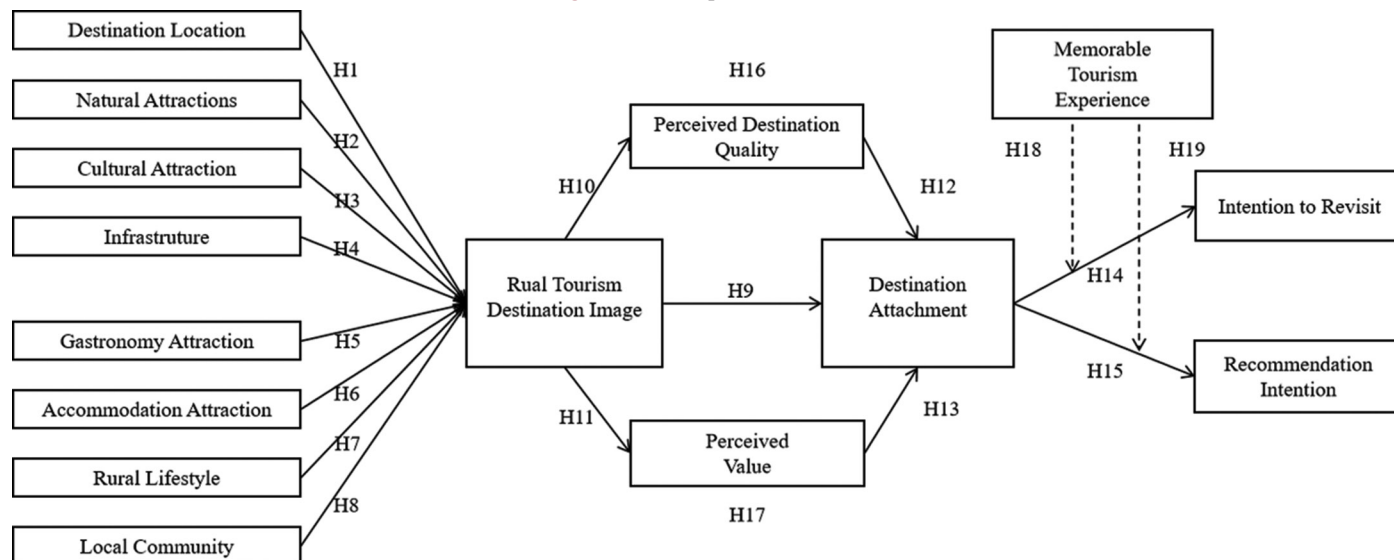


Table 1: Demographic profile

Total number of respondents (n=378)		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	185	48.94
	Female	193	51.06
Age	18-29	98	25.93
	30-39	136	35.98
	40-49	104	27.51
	50-59	27	7.14
	Above 60	13	3.44
Education Level	High school or below	126	33.33
	Bachelor's degree	189	50.00
Occupation	Postgraduate/Master's degree	56	14.81
	Doctoral degree	7	1.85
	Student	74	19.58
	Employee (private sector)	178	47.09
	Employee (public sector)	89	23.54
	Self-employed	17	4.50
	Retired	13	3.44
Monthly household income	Unemployed	7	1.85
	RMB0-3000	52	13.76
	RMB3001-6000	127	33.60
	RMB6001-9000	142	37.57
	RMB9001-12000 above RMB12,000	46	12.17
Rural tourism experience	Yes	378	100.00
	No	0	0.00
Total		378	100.00

Table 2: Construct reliability and validity

Construct	Items	Loadings	VIF	CA	rho_a	rho_c	AVEs
DL	DL1	0.839	2.019	0.853	0.896	0.897	0.686
	DL2	0.772	1.956				
	DL3	0.882	2.038				
	DL4	0.817	1.799				
NA	NA1	0.758	1.866	0.839	1.013	0.884	0.658
	NA2	0.899	1.797				
	NA3	0.798	1.845				
	NA4	0.781	1.782				
CA	CA1	0.884	1.807	0.848	0.958	0.89	0.67
	CA2	0.752	1.865				
	CA3	0.777	1.959				
	CA4	0.854	1.954				
IF	IF1	0.886	1.76	0.814	0.849	0.888	0.725
	IF2	0.818	1.775				
	IF3	0.85	1.842				
GA	GA1	0.817	1.829	0.842	0.848	0.894	0.678
	GA2	0.84	2.019				
	GA3	0.827	1.745				
	GA4	0.808	1.843				
AA	AA1	0.841	1.912	0.827	0.84	0.896	0.742
	AA2	0.871	1.766				
	AA3	0.872	2.03				
RL	RL1	0.895	1.836	0.854	0.981	0.892	0.675
	RL2	0.838	1.913				
	RL3	0.752	2.025				
	RL4	0.795	2.057				
LC	LC1	0.834	1.911	0.836	0.836	0.89	0.67
	LC2	0.798	1.672				
	LC3	0.808	1.782				
	LC4	0.833	1.925				
RTD	RTD1	0.792	1.775	0.863	0.864	0.901	0.646
	RTD2	0.795	1.867				
	RTD3	0.814	1.951				
	RTD4	0.812	1.916				
	RTD5	0.806	1.874				
PDQ	PDQ1	0.797	1.73	0.855	0.86	0.896	0.633
	PDQ2	0.767	1.762				
	PDQ3	0.829	2.042				
	PDQ4	0.802	1.921				
	PDQ5	0.781	1.729				
PV	PV1	0.828	1.883	0.841	0.848	0.893	0.676
	PV2	0.828	1.884				
	PV3	0.846	1.922				
	PV4	0.787	1.755				
DAM	DAM1	0.752	1.563	0.835	0.837	0.883	0.602
	DAM2	0.796	1.813				
	DAM3	0.732	1.561				
	DAM4	0.812	1.853				
	DAM5	0.786	1.731				
MTE	MTE1	0.826	1.929	0.851	0.853	0.9	0.692
	MTE2	0.837	1.905				
	MTE3	0.825	1.899				
	MTE4	0.838	2.011				
IRV	IRV1	0.82	1.693	0.798	0.808	0.881	0.712
	IRV2	0.838	1.642				
	IRV3	0.872	1.8				
RIT	RIT1	0.873	1.85	0.812	0.818	0.888	0.726
	RIT2	0.831	1.664				
	RIT3	0.852	1.868				

is frequently used in predictive-oriented as well as exploratory studies. The analysis of the data collected during the research study will begin by carefully cleaning the dataset to ensure accuracy and reliability of the estimates derived from the analyses performed. Each of the completed questionnaires will first be checked for completeness; any questionnaires missing key data required for analysis will be excluded from further analyses. The dataset will then be examined for the presence of outlier responses using both statistical techniques (e.g., z-scores, boxplots) as well as the researchers' (i.e., author's) subject matter expertise related to rural tourism in China in order to identify response patterns that are not reasonable (Francom, 2025). Specific attention will be given to identifying response bias via the identification of uniform (i.e., straight-line) patterns of responses as well as inconsistent internal patterns of responses (e.g., an individual responding with strong attachment to a destination but reporting no intention to return nor recommend). All illogical and contradictory responses will be flagged and deleted from the data set prior to further analyses (Meade and Craig, 2012).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Common Method Bias

Given that the data of this study were all from self-administered questionnaires, and all variables were measured at the same time point, the research results may be influenced by common method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). CMB refers

to observational variability caused by systematic factors such as measurement tools, response methods, or environments (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). Harman single factor test is a commonly used method to evaluate this issue. This study indicates that the first

principal component had an eigenvalue of 13.586, explaining only 23.027% of the total variance, far below the critical threshold of 50% (Harman, 1976). This result strongly indicates that there is no significant CMB in this study.

4.2. Measurement Model Results

This study evaluated the construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement model. Following the recommendations of Hair Jr. et al. (2021), internal consistency was tested using Cronbach’s Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) indices, where CA and CR values should be >0.70, and AVE values should be >0.50 (Hair Jr. et al., 2021). As shown in Table 2, all measurement indices met these criteria, indicating that the measurement model constructed in this study has good reliability and validity and a reliable measurement basis. Furthermore, discriminant validity was tested using the HTMT ratio (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 3 indicates that HTMT values are well

below 0.85 to ensure good discriminability among latent variables (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015).

4.3. Structural Model Results

Hypothesis testing is the critical step of verifying theoretical models and hypotheses in this study (Hair Jr. et al., 2020). This study used a bootstrapping method (5000 samples), combined with t-tests and P-values to conduct hypothesis testing. As shown in Table 4, the destination image prerequisites (H_1 - H_8) of RTD, 7 hypotheses are supported: DL ($\beta = 0.146$, $T = 2.865$, $P = 0.004$), CA ($\beta = 0.116$, $T = 2.009$, $P = 0.045$), IF ($\beta = 0.169$, $T = 3.033$, $P = 0.002$), GA ($\beta = 0.098$, $T = 1.986$, $P = 0.047$), AA ($\beta = 0.108$, $T = 2.170$, $P = 0.030$), RL ($\beta = 0.109$, $T = 2.130$, $P = 0.033$), LC ($\beta = 0.342$, $T = 8.265$, $P < 0.001$), Only NA ($\beta = -0.027$, $T = 0.467$, $P = 0.640$) was not supported. TD has a significant impact on DAM ($\beta = 0.408$, $T = 8.349$, $P < 0.001$), while RTD has a significant impact on PDQ ($\beta = 0.387$, $T = 8.139$, $P < 0.001$) and PV ($\beta =$

Table 3: HTMT ratio

	AA	CA	DAM	DL	GA	IF	IRV	LC	MTE	NA	PDQ	PV	RIT	RL	RTD	MTE×DAM
AA																
CA	0.289															
DAM	0.156	0.076														
DL	0.187	0.342	0.128													
GA	0.350	0.305	0.107	0.246												
IF	0.357	0.458	0.084	0.383	0.320											
IRV	0.097	0.101	0.420	0.131	0.094	0.304										
LC	0.091	0.064	0.492	0.081	0.076	0.092	0.494									
MTE	0.049	0.045	0.410	0.065	0.052	0.054	0.106	0.108								
NA	0.266	0.548	0.080	0.391	0.318	0.421	0.055	0.082	0.033							
PDQ	0.077	0.079	0.407	0.087	0.087	0.107	0.535	0.523	0.062	0.119						
PV	0.039	0.070	0.405	0.199	0.115	0.075	0.423	0.428	0.174	0.044	0.416					
RIT	0.038	0.049	0.467	0.038	0.040	0.063	0.115	0.110	0.480	0.051	0.058	0.114				
RL	0.172	0.422	0.075	0.397	0.135	0.487	0.045	0.059	0.090	0.528	0.169	0.046	0.096			
RTD	0.312	0.175	0.604	0.128	0.240	0.154	0.527	0.564	0.140	0.071	0.446	0.451	0.300	0.063		
MTE×DAM	0.153	0.032	0.501	0.055	0.038	0.039	0.050	0.147	0.362	0.045	0.025	0.038	0.262	0.040	0.218	

Table 4: Hypotheses results

Hypotheses	Relationships	β	Mean	Std	T statistics	P-values	Result
H_1	DL-RTD	0.146	0.146	0.051	2.865	0.004	Supported
H_2	NA-RTD	-0.027	-0.024	0.057	0.467	0.64	Not Supported
H_3	CA-RTD	0.116	0.116	0.058	2.009	0.045	Supported
H_4	IF-RTD	0.169	0.168	0.056	3.033	0.002	Supported
H_5	GA-RTD	0.098	0.097	0.049	1.986	0.047	Supported
H_6	AA-RTD	0.108	0.108	0.05	2.17	0.03	Supported
H_7	RL-RTD	0.109	0.109	0.051	2.13	0.033	Supported
H_8	LC-RTD	0.342	0.344	0.041	8.265	0	Supported
H_9	RTD-DAM	0.408	0.408	0.049	8.349	0	Supported
H_{10}	RTD-PDQ	0.387	0.391	0.048	8.139	0	Supported
H_{11}	RTD-PV	0.388	0.392	0.047	8.284	0	Supported
H_{12}	PDQ-DAM	0.142	0.144	0.055	2.611	0.009	Supported
H_{13}	PV-DAM	0.134	0.135	0.053	2.513	0.012	Supported
H_{14}	DAM-IRV	0.454	0.46	0.061	7.407	0	Supported
H_{15}	DAM-RIT	0.233	0.233	0.057	4.111	0	Supported
H_{16}	RTD-PDQ-DAM	0.055	0.056	0.023	2.424	0.015	Supported
H_{17}	RTD-PV-DAM	0.052	0.053	0.022	2.336	0.02	Supported

Table 5: Results of the moderated path analysis

Hypothesis	Path	β	Mean	Std	T-values	P-values	Result
H_{18}	MTE×DAM -IRV	0.147	0.149	0.044	3.326	0.001	Supported
H_{19}	MTE×DAM ->RIT	0.012	0.012	0.036	0.343	0.732	Not Supported

0.388, $T = 8.200$, $P < 0.001$); The impact of PDQ on DAM is significant ($\beta = 0.142$, $T = 2.611$, $P = 0.009$), while the impact of PV on DAM is significant ($\beta = 0.134$, $T = 2.513$, $P = 0.012$); DAM had the strongest impact on IRV ($\beta = 0.454$, $T = 7.407$, $P < 0.001$), and also had a significant impact on RIT ($\beta = 0.233$, $T = 4.111$, $P < 0.001$). The mediation hypothesis (H_{16} - H_{17}) is also supported, as RTD has a significant indirect effect on DAM through PDQ ($\beta = 0.055$, $T = 2.424$, $P = 0.015$), and also has a significant indirect effect on DAM through PV ($\beta = 0.052$, $T = 2.336$, $P = 0.020$). Overall, there are 16 hypotheses supported in this study, with only H_2 not supported.

4.4. Moderation Analysis Results

The study also examined the moderating effects of MTE on IRV and RIT. The results showed in Table 5 that hypothesis H18 was significantly supported, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.147$, $T = 3.326$, and $P = 0.001$ ($P < 0.01$), indicating that the interaction between MTE and DAM has a significant positive moderating effect on IRV, meaning that MTE enhances the positive effect of DAM on IRV (Figures 2 and 3). In contrast, hypothesis H_{19} was not supported, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.012$, $T = 0.343$, and

$P = 0.732$ ($P > 0.05$), indicating that the interaction between MTE and DAM has no significant effect on RIT, and the moderating effect is not established.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This study is based on destination image theory and develops a model to examine the factors that shape destination image and affect tourists' perceptions and their behavioral intentions. It also examines the moderating effect of memorable tourism experiences and reveals the comprehensive mechanism through which destination image affects tourists' revisit and recommendation intentions.

First, seven destination image antecedents were supported, indicating that destination location, cultural attractions, infrastructure, gastronomy attractions, accommodation attractions, rural lifestyle, and local community significantly enhance tourists' perception of the rural tourism destination image. However, Natural Attractions had no significant effect on RTD, possibly because most rural destinations already possess certain natural landscapes, making it difficult to create a differentiated advantage (Turok, 2009). At the same time, tourists tend to focus more on factors that provide unique experiences, such as community atmosphere, cultural experiences, and infrastructure, which play a more important role in shaping RTD than ordinary natural landscapes (Carneiro et al., 2015; Chirita and Chirita, 2023).

Furthermore, the results indicate that RTD has a strong positive influence on both PDQ and PV, which were shown to mediate the relationship between RTD and DAM. This indicates that tourists' perceptions and experiences of destination products and services can partially explain how RTD influences behavioral intentions, highlighting the importance of service quality and experiential value in shaping tourist decisions (Chen et al., 2023; Yang, 2024).

Additionally, DAM positively affects tourists' intention to revisit and recommend, supporting the idea that emotional attachment and identification contribute to revisits and recommendations, and thus emotional attachments are critically important for tourist behaviour (Bui and Quyen, 2025; Nawaz et al., 2025). Finally, regarding the moderating effect, the results revealed a significant strengthening effect of Memorable tourism experiences on the link between DAM and IRV, but a non-significant effect of Memorable tourism experiences on the association between DAM and RIT; therefore, enhancing memorable tourist experiences can amplify positive evaluations of destinations and increase intent to revisit, while its influence on intent to recommend will likely be limited and subject to individual variances in social behaviour (Chen et al., 2020).

5.2. Theoretical Implications

There are many theoretical impacts on rural tourism research based on the empirical findings. First, this article will expand the antecedents of rural tourism destination image to include eight antecedents rather than the one-dimensional approach in prior studies (Atasoy and Eren, 2023). It has been demonstrated that

Figure 2: Moderation plot (IRV)

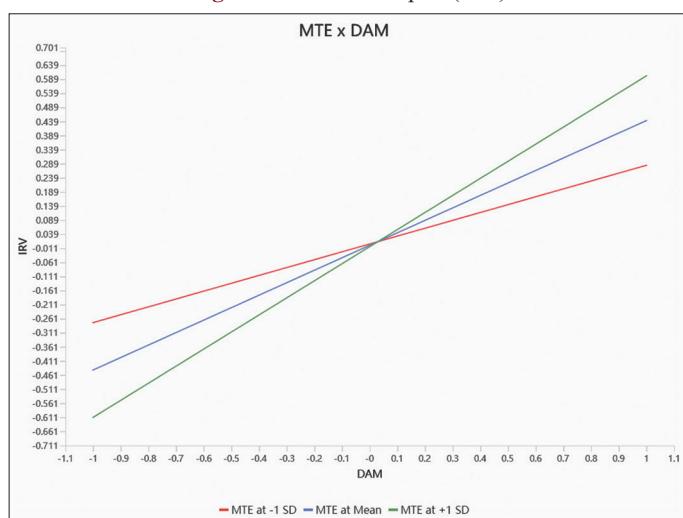
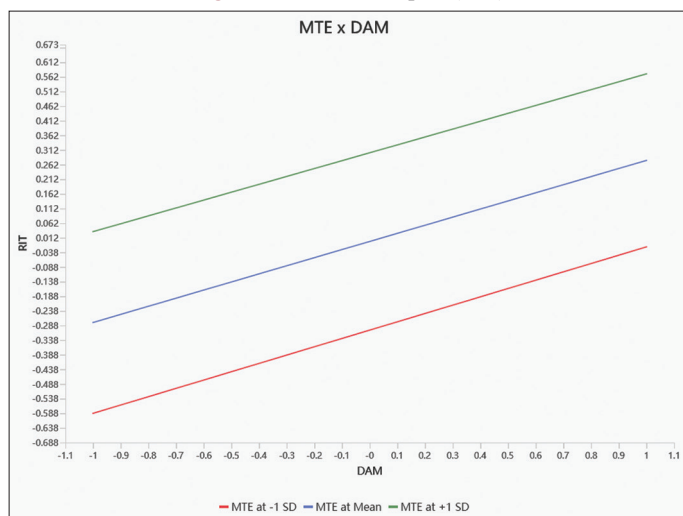


Figure 3: Moderation plot (RIT)



RTD represents a broad-based perception of place; this means that RTD is based on factors such as community environment, quality of life, available services and amenities, and the cultural attributes of a destination — and not simply on the existence of natural resources. This research refines the antecedent theory of destination image (Atasoy and Eren, 2023).

Second, this study provides an additional, more theoretical basis for understanding the influence of rural tourism destination images on Destination Attachment. This study demonstrates that RTD acts independently and retains significant predictive value in understanding how tourist destination images will affect their feelings of belonging, identification, and emotional dependence to a destination, thereby serving to reinforce the cognitive base upon which tourists form destination attachment (Dandotiya and Aggarwal, 2023).

Third, this study has clarified the primary role of DAM in influencing how tourists will return and recommend to others. Overall, the results demonstrate that there is a strong positive effect to be able to return again and to recommend to others associated with their experience as a DAM has had a strong positive impact on both intentions (Mittal et al., 2022). Therefore, these findings provide additional evidence regarding the importance of including a DAM in the tourism researcher's intention models, as well as support the appropriateness of applying affective behavioral theory to rural tourism contexts (Huang and Bu, 2022).

Fourth, this study also found there are asymmetrical moderating effects of memorable tourism experiences on the boundary condition theory for the behavior of tourists. The results suggest that memorable tourism experiences will positively moderate the relationship between DAM and IRV; however, the results do not indicate that this will positively moderate the relationship between DAM and RIT. Therefore, there are asymmetrical effects associated with the moderation of relationships associated with tourists' intentions to return versus recommend.

5.3. Managerial Implications

This article gives some very useful ideas for rural tourism destination management and development. The first idea is that using a systematic model to define a rural tourism destination's image is very important. Research has shown that the local community, built environments and cultural attractions have the most influence on a destination's image (Chen et al., 2023). On the other hand, natural attractions have much less impact on a destination's image so tourism managers need to focus on enhancing the community environment and developing cultural resources and improving the built environment rather than relying solely on natural resources. By preserving rural lifestyles and creating an authentic rural experience, tourists will greatly enhance their overall feelings toward rural tourism (Tang et al., 2025).

The second idea presented in this article is that developing the quality and value of the experiences of the tourists that visit rural tourism destinations is an ongoing process. Destination managers should develop standard service procedures for their tourism business operations as well as develop service delivery

methodologies for improving tourism employment, and developing and providing supporting services such as accommodation, food and beverage, and sightseeing experiences (Bakalo et al., 2025). At the same time, developing reasonable prices and offering enhanced experiences will increase the visitors' perception of value for rural tourism (Chen et al., 2023).

Another important area of focus should be to develop an emotional connection for tourists through attachment to the destination they are visiting. This can happen through agricultural experiences; by participating in folk activities and through cultural interaction programs (eg, local crafts). In addition, tourist relationships can be maintained, and emotional connections created, with membership programs and through online communities (Li et al., 2024).

Lastly, to make an impact with tourism experiences, we need to create unforgettable experiences for visitors. Creating unique and engaging experiences will improve visitors' ability to recall these experiences and help them participate more. The more memorable these experiences are, the more likely visitors will want to return, and as a result, increase their likelihood of telling others about their positive experience (Zhou et al., 2023).

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study also has several limitations. First, the geographical area of the sample was narrow because it was primarily based on rural tourist destinations. Secondly, this research was conducted using a cross-sectional questionnaire, which could limit the ability to reflect any dynamic change in tourists' perception, feelings, and behavioural intentions over time. Thirdly, individual characteristics of the tourists and the influence on the research model of environmental factors external to the individual are not adequately reflected within the model, suggesting further potential for improving the explanatory capability of the model assumption (Baghirov et al., 2023). Future studies would benefit from broadening the geographical representation of the sample by combining both online and offline surveys. Likewise, if individual and environmental variables of the tourists were included in future research, the explanatory capabilities of the model could be improved (Wu and Blake, 2023).

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