



“Exploring the Nexus of Tourists’ Destination Image and Perceived Service Quality in the Context of Chinese Rural Tourism”

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KEY WORDS **ABSTRACT**

Destination image, service quality, rural tourism, quantitative-descriptive, Guangxi, China

This paper is to examine the perceived service quality among visitors and the image of the tourist attraction. Using a Questionnaire Star-rated survey, the researchers gathered online data from 400 respondents. This study employed descriptive research methodologies, along with weighted average and ranking tools. The statistical analysis included both variance and regression analyses. The results indicate that visitors are more pleased about the ecological surroundings linked with the destination image of rural tourism. On the other hand, results reveal that the least satisfaction with traffic conditions and other infrastructure helps foster unfavorable feelings among visitors. The ratings provided by tourists regarding the destination image indicate dissatisfaction. In terms of perceived service quality, tourists express the highest satisfaction with the project activities associated with rural tourism, while their satisfaction is lowest concerning the promptness of service personnel in addressing tourist requests. The ratings provided by tourists regarding perceived service quality are insufficiently high, with responses indicating agreement. Demographic variables reveal no significant difference, whereas a significant relationship exists between the image of rural tourism destinations and the perceived service quality of rural tourists. This study identifies weaknesses and proposes a development plan to preserve rural tourism in Guangxi, China.

Introduction

Farm conversions brought about by China's rapid urbanization and economic growth have resulted in low productivity, few educational opportunities, sluggish economic growth, fewer jobs, and underdeveloped areas (Ivona, 2021; Liu et al., 2023). Rural tourism includes activities based on nature, agricultural practices, rural culture, fishing, and sightseeing. Both developed and developing nations employ it to enhance rural regions (UNWTO, 2024).

Supera et al. (2024) found that stakeholder perceptions of economic challenges varied widely, including infrastructure, corporate assistance, environmental protection, and community involvement. Community-based tourism encompasses all interactions between locals and external stakeholders (Merkel & Merkel, 2023; Gabriel-Campos et al., 2021). Liu et al. (2023) and Yanan et al. (2024) highlight the positive impact of rural tourism on nonurban economies, societies, environments, leisure, and education. Four aspects of tourists' perceptions of the authenticity of rural tourism were identified by Zheng et al. (2023): interactive perception, embodied perception, visual perception, and using impression. Through acting as a bridge, local attachment has a positive impact on rural tourism's sustainable growth from an ecological, cultural, and economic standpoint. On the other hand, rural development encompasses heritage building restoration, environmental awareness, green chemistry, land preservation, ecological knowledge, green consumerism, leisure, health, food security, mental health mitigation, and nostalgia cultivation (Marques et al., 2022; Lopez-Sanz et al., 2021; Ryu et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021; Alford & Jones, 2020; Ambelu et al., 2018; Christou, 2020; Li et al., 2021).

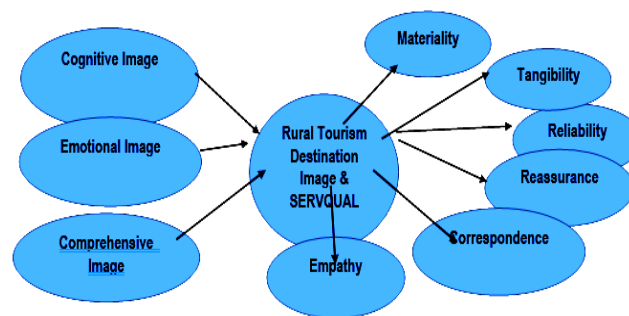


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

Literature review

Theoretical background

Rural tourism development theory

To comprehend economic developments in rural tourism, growth models must integrate interactions at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Geels, 2002, 2004). Different places have different government systems and terrains, but they provide similar services (Coenen & Truffer, 2012). Understanding the variables driving rural tourism expansion (Roberts & Hall, 2001) helps examine inequities and promote equitable development (Randelli et al., 2012). The three stages of tourism development are selecting suitable areas, rapid development, and entrenchment. Although business initially slows, local communities prioritize infrastructure and services.

Tourism organizations foster growth through structured economic activity (Turner, 1993; 1999). Rural tourist development models demonstrate how isolated communities embrace it, whether motivated by opportunities, supply factors, or economic difficulties. To attract visitors, small communities usually showcase local culture, history, and natural landscape, which improves economic stability while also instilling pride and identity. This technique not only increases economic stability, but it also helps residents form stronger bonds with their environment, thereby fostering sustainable development. Rural tourism demonstrates communities'

resilience and resourcefulness in an ever-changing environment (Streimikiene and Bilan, 2015).

Theory of Reasoned Action

The Fishbein model posits that individual beliefs and emotions regarding an object's attributes play a crucial role in shaping tourists' attitudes and behaviors, by the Theory of Reasoned Action. Beliefs and emotions shape visitors' perception of a destination, and the influence of their generational group significantly shapes this perception (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975; Fishbein, 1979).

Emotional Appraisal Theory

Emotive appraisal theory suggests that individuals' cognitive assessments of their environment trigger emotions, which influence attitudes, behaviors, and motives, providing insights into the relationship between authenticity and contextual variables (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Zhao et al., 2024).

Role of Rural Tourism

Damnet et al. (2024) established that the travel behaviors of Thai visitors engaged in agritourism showed no statistically significant variations. Several important things must happen for rural communities to work well: the variety of economic activities must grow, which helps people stick together through organization and association; activities aimed at local or Republican authorities must be coordinated; human and social capital must be increased; and activities involving marginalized groups must be initiated, as shown by Curciuc et al. (2021). Rural tourism serves as a vital strategic sector and a significant contributor to rural development, gaining importance in regional economies (Polukhina et al., 2021). In general, rural tourism in Bangladesh is satisfied with community support, cleanliness, and service quality, but not with recreational opportunities (Kabir et al., 2022).

Destination image of Rural Tourism

Tourist satisfaction and cultural identity are heavily influenced by the authenticity, impression of the place, and breadth of the visitor experience. Infrastructure, government help, tourism services, and natural factors all contribute to a destination's perceived worth (Zhao, 2024; Chi & Giao, 2024). While solid infrastructure, efficient government backing, and high-quality tourism services raise perceived value and encourage repeat visits, a well-designed destination image boosts satisfaction. To succeed in today's competitive tourist business, destinations must promote authenticity and customer excellence (Chi & Giao, 2024; Oyunchimeg et al., 2022; Serigar et al., 2021).

In addition, rural tourism, with its traditional appeal, attracts visitors seeking authentic experiences. The results indicated that the higher-order construct of rural tourism performance had a strong and favorable influence on the responsiveness of rural tourism services (Chi & Han, 2021). It has grown in popularity following the pandemic due to nature-based habitats, well-being activities, and safer surroundings (Rosalina et al., 2021; Da Silva et al., 2021). Possible limitations are internal resources, outside forces, and public space modifications (Rosalina et al., 2021). Conversely, rural tourism increases rural production, handicraft, and socioeconomic development (Mwesiumo et al., 2022). With visitor satisfaction and destination trust somewhat affecting these connections, Zheng et al. (2022) discovered that destination image enhances tourist energy-saving behavior and loyalty.

Perceived service quality of rural tourism

Zeithaml (1988) and Parasuraman et al. (1985) defined perceived service quality as a customer's assessment of a service's excellence based on its performance, as cited in Liao et al. (2022) and Rita et al. (2019).

Chen et al. (2024) found that tourists' perception of rural tourism quality and place connection significantly influence their ecologically responsible conduct, with place attachment and identity mediating the relationship. Purchasing intention was positively correlated with perceived service quality by Liao et al. (2022).

Brand image and customer satisfaction fully mediate service quality and purchase intention. The findings show that brand love considerably increases brand image's indirect effect on service quality and purchase intention. Chen et al. (2023) discovered that perceived value and behavioral intention have an impact on tourist behavior, with all players positively influencing consumption. Rural tourism is a major market segment globally (An & Alarcón, 2021; Chi & Han, 2021). Conversely, poor brand love reduces the indirect effect of brand image on these variables. There was no correlation with customer service e-service quality. Rita et al. (2019) found that e-service quality affects customer behavior statistically.

Significant relationship between the tourist perceived quality of rural tourism and tourists' destination image of rural tourism

Supera et al. (2024) found positive correlations between economic and socio-cultural capital, suggesting interconnected advantages and challenges of rural tourism.

However, ecological capital's absence suggests ecological challenges are distinct from positive impacts, suggesting a complex relationship.

Baptista et al. (2024) found that visitor satisfaction has a big effect on destination loyalty, which leads to repeat visits and good word-of-mouth, and that destination image has a big effect on perceived value and behavior after a visit (Zhang & Niyomslip, 2024). Chi et al. (2024) noted that tourism infrastructure, hospitality,

culture, and the rural environment significantly influence the quality, value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions of tourists. Ryglová et al. (2017) indicate that factors like natural attractions, gastronomy, housing, transportation, local hospitality, cleanliness, safety, pricing, and staff proficiency do not have a significant impact on destination quality.

Results And Discussion

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics shows that female tourists slightly outnumber male tourists, with a majority of respondents being young, middle-aged, and elderly. Educational attainment is highest among bachelor's degree holders, accounting for 38.80% and college degrees, respectively. Monthly income, mainly from 2001 to 6000 yuan, directly influences tourism decisions, requiring rural tourism destinations to design products that meet affordability.

Table No. 1 Respondent's Profile

| Demographic Characteristics | | % |
|--|--|-------|
| Gender | Female | 56.80 |
| | Male | 43.20 |
| Age | 20-29 | 29.50 |
| | 50-59 | 23.90 |
| Level of education | Bachelor's degree | 38.80 |
| | Junior college | 26.50 |
| Monthly income | 2001-4000 yuan | 30.80 |
| | 4001-6000 yuan | 20.50 |
| Occupation | Self-employed | 20.20 |
| | Travel industry worker | 18.20 |
| Frequency of visit rural tourism destination | Once a year | 27.20 |
| | Three times a year | 26.20 |
| Amount spent on rural tourism | 1001-3000 yuan | 26.80 |
| | 3001-6000 yuan | 25.20 |
| Length of stay in rural tourism | 4-7 days | 25.20 |
| | 7-10 days | 14.20 |
| Information channel | Television, radio, website | 58.25 |
| | Print media | 51.50 |
| Motivation to visit rural tourism | Recommendation from friends and relatives | 46.00 |
| | Relax and relieve stress | 55.75 |
| | Taste the specialties with delicious cuisine | 53.00 |
| | Experience the ethnic culture | 42.25 |

The majority of tourists in rural areas are self-employed for 20.20% of the workforce. To attract these consumers, scenic spot projects should focus on team-building activities. Rural tourism frequencies are low, requiring improvements in satisfaction and return rates. Rural tourism frequency is low, with tourists participating three times a year or less. Budget allocation for rural tourism is low, with 1001-3000 yuan spending the most. Raising quality and product prices is necessary to improve satisfaction and return rates. The research indicates that the involvement of rural tourism residents in digital transformation strengthens their empowerment across individual, gender, political, and social dimensions, thereby improving technical skills and fostering gender equality (Lapuz, 2023).

Most tourists stay in rural tourism for less than 7 days, with 2–4 days accounting for 26.75% and 4–7 days for 25.2%. To enhance tour content and extend tourists' stay, rural tourism should be promoted through multiple channels, including TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and recommendations. Rural tourism should be promoted in a variety of ways to improve tour content and make tourists stay longer. This will help build connections between rural which will improve tour content and create industrial clusters (Li & Zhao, 2021).

Table 2. Rural Tourism Destination Image.

| Rural Tourism Destination Image | WM | VI |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Cognitive Image | 3.8975 | Agree |
| Emotional Image | 3.8975 | Agree |
| Comprehensive Image | 3.885 | Agree |
| Composite Mean | 3.90 | Agree |

Table 2 shows a summary of rural tourism destination scored 3.90 on cognitive and emotional images, with a comprehensive image score of 3.885. Tourists rated the ecological environment,

travel excitement, and relaxation as high, while enjoyable trips, good infrastructure, and unique culture were low. Cognitive and affective images positively influence place dependence and identity (Li & Zhao (2021). Accordingly, sustainable rural tourism and perceived value significantly influence purchase intention, while destination image has a negligible effect (Budiatmo et al., 2024). Tourist satisfaction influences travel motivations and destination image (Tang et al., 2022), while traditional souvenirs, village atmosphere, authenticity, and entrance prices dissatisfy tourists (Sari & Lestari, 2021).

Table 3. Perceived Service Quality in Rural Tourism.

| Perceived Service Quality | WM | VI |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Materiality | 3.886 | Agree |
| Tangibility | 3.86 | Agree |
| Reliability | 3.8975 | Agree |
| Reassurance | 3.8725 | Agree |
| Correspondence | 3.8475 | Agree |
| Empathy | 3.8825 | Agree |
| Composite Mean | 3.87 | Agree |

Table 3 shows tourists' average value of rural tourism service quality is 3.87, with the most reliable being 3.8975 while correlation score is the lowest (3.8475). Rural tourism sites offer unique project activities, with business-savvy service staff, low word error rate, and accurate personalized services scoring highest. Research indicates a positive correlation between purchasing intention and service quality, with brand image and customer satisfaction mediating this relationship (Liao et al., 2022) while Rita et al. (2019) found no correlation. Rural tourists are satisfied with rural tourism services, with quality positively influencing satisfaction but not assurance or empathy (Zhang, 2024). Perića et al.'s (2020) study highlights the importance of RURALQUAL in assessing service quality in rural tourism, enabling owners to gather feedback and develop effective strategies.

Table 4. Differences in Assessment in Tourism Destination Image and Rural Tourist Perceived Service Quality when grouped to Profile Variables

| Rural Tourism Destination Image | F-value | P-value | Interpretation | Decision |
|--|---------|---------|-----------------|------------------|
| Sex | 0.003 | 0.955 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Age | 0.922 | 0.467 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Highest Educational Attainment | 1.315 | 0.264 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Monthly Income | 1.155 | 0.331 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Occupation | 1.372 | 0.225 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Frequency of visit rural tourism destination | 1.824 | 0.123 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Amount spent on rural tourism | 1.523 | 0.195 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Length of stay in rural tourism this time | 0.375 | 0.826 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Rural Tourist Perceived Service Quality | | | | |
| Sex | 2.713 | 0.100 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Age | 0.301 | 0.912 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Highest Educational Attainment | 1.882 | 0.113 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Monthly Income | 0.763 | 0.577 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Occupation | 0.527 | 0.788 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Frequency of visit rural tourism destination | 0.420 | 0.794 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Amount spent on rural tourism | 2.360 | 0.053 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |
| Length of stay in rural | 0.578 | 0.678 | Not Significant | Failed to Reject |

Table 4 shows that the p-values were greater than 0.05, there were no significant differences found in how people rated the image of rural tourism destinations and the quality of the services they received based on their gender, age, highest level of education, monthly income, occupation, number of visits to rural tourism destinations, amount spent on rural tourism, or length of stay in rural tourism. There are no big differences in how tourists rate the image of rural tourism destinations and how good they think the service is when they are broken down by gender, age, highest level of education, monthly income, occupation, number of visits to rural tourism destinations, amount spent on rural tourism, or length of stay. However, income level does not change the destination image or visitation frequency. The quality of service, opinions of the location, and frequency of trips change significantly depending on educational level (Aksöz & Cay, 2022). Ryglová et al. (2017) found no significant impact on destination quality. While gender has little bearing, the age of the visitor determines the relevance of quality elements. We verified the most important determinant of the visitor's return to the site, which is the factor of cordial acceptance by residents. On the other hand, the impact of the destination's service and goods prices did not demonstrate this effect.

Table 5. Relationship between Tourism Destination Image and Perceived Service Quality.

| | r-value | p-value | Interpretation | Decision |
|-------------------|---------|---------|----------------|------------------|
| Destination Image | 0.527 | <0.001 | Significant | Failed to Reject |

Table 5 illustrates that there is a significant relationship between destination image and perceived service quality since the computed p-value is less than 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, assessment in destination image affects the assessment in perceived service quality. Zhao (2024) reveals a positive correlation between visitor satisfaction, experience depth, authenticity, and destination image, preserving cultural uniqueness while Chen et al. (2024) found that tourists' perception of rural tourism quality influences ecologically responsible conduct. On the other hand, Chi et al. (2020) found that tourism infrastructure, hospitality, culture, and the rural environment significantly influence the quality, value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions of tourists.

Proposed Rural Tourism Development Plan

Key Results Area/Objectives. The development plan aims to enhance rural tourism in Guangxi, China, focusing on the 20-29 demographic profile, aiming to improve destination image and perceived quality.

Strategies/Activities. Encouraging rural tourism enhances visitor satisfaction, strengthens community cohesiveness, and improves the service quality of rural tourism.

Outcomes. Emphasizing their natural beauty and cultural legacy strengthens ties in society. Through economic growth, this cooperative approach enhances the local experience and promotes social enrichment for guests as well as for the people. The study emphasizes how local tourism is influenced by natural beauty and cultural legacy, thereby stressing the need of economic growth and improvement of social experiences for both people living here and guests.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism is predominantly occupied by young, middle-aged tourists aged 20-29, with a bachelor's degree and

monthly income between 2001 and 6000 yuan. The majority of tourists visit three times a year, spend around 1001-3000 yuan, and stay for 2-4 days. Tourists learn about rural tourism through TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, and family recommendations, motivated by relaxation, pressure relief, special food, and minority culture experience. The overall perception of service quality in rural tourism destinations is generally agreed upon by tourists. The assessment of rural tourism destination image and service quality does not significantly differ based on factors such as sex, age, education, income, occupation, frequency, spending, and duration. There is significant relationship between rural tourism destination image and rural tourist perceived service quality.

Recommendations

It is highly recommended to improve rural tourism infrastructure by improving transportation, catering, accommodation, and entertainment. It also focuses on developing ecological tourism by utilizing natural resources for projects like forest exploration and national sports. The plan also promotes traditional local culture, personalized travel programs, and local cuisine. This study has a measure to propose strategies for the preservation of rural tourism.

Limitations And Recommendation For Future Research

China's natural environment supports rural tourism, prompting future studies to explore other variables for international tourists and visitors, creating a new mediating variable for future research.

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