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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Destination Attributes of Memorable Chinese Rural Tourism Experiences: Impact on Positive Arousal, Memory and Behavioral Intention

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**Purpose:** There is a lack of research on the composition of destination attributes of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) and their impact on tourist loyalty in Chinese rural tourism. Based on the extended SOR (stimulus-organism-response) theory, this study constructs a model of destination attributes (gastronomy, accommodation, physiography, and rural lifestyle) of MTEs on tourists' recommend intention and revisit intention under the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory in Chinese rural tourism.

**Methods:** Through the judgment sampling method, this study distributed questionnaires to the subjects who met the sampling standard in all provincial administrative regions in China. Finally, 270 valid questionnaires from 29 provincial administrative regions were obtained and the proposed hypotheses were verified using a structural equation model.

**Results:** The results show that gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle are all destination attributes of MTEs in Chinese rural tourism, and all have a positive impact on positive arousal. In addition, they are positively correlated with recommend intention and revisit intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory.

**Conclusion:** This study explored the impact mechanism of destination attributes of MTEs on tourist destination loyalty in the field of Chinese rural tourism to enrich findings pertaining to the study of MTEs in different contexts. Four destination attributes of MTEs were proposed and verified, and this study also confirmed that destination attributes of MTEs vary with respect to the research context. The new destination attribute of MTEs was discovered. The research results showed that managers can deliver MTEs to tourists through optimizing gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle, thus generating positive arousal, deepening their memory and then gaining their loyalty. In addition, the extended SOR theory proved that it could effectively and comprehensively explain the influencing mechanism of MTEs on tourist loyalty.

**Keywords:** destination attributes, memorable tourism experiences, positive arousal, memory, behavioral intention, rural tourism

## Introduction

The experience economy is a stage of economic development that advocates providing consumers with more personal memorable experiences. For enterprises, providing better experiences to consumers is the key to gaining competitive advantage and staying ahead in the future.[1] Specifically, for the tourism industry, experiences are seen as the key to success, innovation and competitiveness.[2,3] Creating memorable experiences for tourists is the essence of tourism[4] and the core of the tourism industry.[5] Therefore, in the current field of tourism research, research on topics related to memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) has attracted increasing attention from researchers.

MTEs are a multidimensional construct, currently, there is no unified consensus on the composition of the dimensions of MTEs in academia, because they may change as the research context changes,[6] which also makes researchers interested in the composition of MTEs dimensions in different contexts. Such as gastronomic tourism in Iran,[7] zoo and museum tourism in Finland,[8] forest tourism in Taiwan,[9] and island tourism in Santorini and Greece.[10] However, the existing research results supported that there is still a lack of research on MTEs in rural tourism. "Memorable experience*" and "rural tourism" or "memorable touris* experience*" and "rural tourism" or "memorable touris* experience*" and "rural travel" or "memorable

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travel* experience*" and "rural tourism" or "memorable travel* experience*" and "rural travel" were used as the search terms in the Web of Science (WOS) core collection database, the literature type is "article", and the search time range is set as "all". By May 2022, only 8 articles were retrieved, and the first one was published in 2018.

Rural tourism refers to a range of tourism activities in rural areas and is characterized by rural experiences, culture, landscape and craft consumption that on farms or in rural communities.[11] Rural tourism often provides an experience that relieves the stress of everyday city life.[12] It is a type of tourism that must not be neglected because rural tourism not only provides visitors with opportunities to get close to nature, scenery and rural culture, but also helps to support the sustainable development of rural local communities.[13] Therefore, rural tourism deserves more attention from industry practitioners and tourism researchers, both for the diversity of tourist choices and the long-term development of rural local communities. In the current research on MTEs, there are few studies specifically based on the background of Chinese rural tourism, but it deserves more attention. Presently, the beautiful leisure village model, which combines rural leisure tourism with construction of rural ecology, is a development model in Chinese rural areas, and by the year 2021, a total of 1470 Chinese villages were selected as beautiful leisure villages according to the list released by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of China.[14] This not only shows that the Chinese government attaches great importance to the development of rural tourism, but also shows that China has abundant resources in the rural tourism destinations. In addition, China also has a huge consumer group of rural tourism. In 2020, just after the outbreak of COVID-19, although the number of rural tourists in China decreased by 54.1% compared with 2019, it still reached 1.42 billion tourists.[15] Whether it is weekends or holidays, a growing number of urban Chinese prefer to spend time at the countryside.[16] To sum up, Chinese rural tourism, with its rich of rural tourism destinations and large number of tourists, deserves more attention of researchers and practitioners. For managers and relevant practitioners of rural tourism destinations, gaining the loyalty of tourists to rural tourism destinations is crucial to the long-term prosperity of a tourist destination.[17] Retaining existing customers is preferable and less costly than attracting new ones.[18] Compared with general customer loyalty, tourists' loyalty to a destination is more difficult to obtain and therefore requires more effort.[19] Researchers believe that it is very important to incorporate MTEs into the antecedents of tourist loyalty,[20–22] but only a few researchers have tried to do so.[23–25]

Through review of the existing research in this field, the following research gaps were identified:

First, rural tourism plays an important role in the development of rural communities and in enriching the travel choices of the tourists. China has abundant resources in rural tourism destinations and a large number of tourists. Hence, in order to cope with the fierce competition in the tourism industry, it is necessary to study how to deliver MTEs to tourists to gain tourist loyalty. However, few relevant studies have been conducted in the Chinese rural tourism context.

Second, there are few studies on which destination attributes belong to the destination attributes of MTEs in the context of Chinese rural tourism.

Third, although some researchers believe that it is necessary to consider MTEs as the antecedent of tourists' loyalty, few researchers have discussed it in the context of Chinese rural tourism for verifying the mechanism of influence of MTEs on tourist loyalty.

Fourth, although some researchers have applied the SOR theory to study the impact of MTEs on tourist loyalty, it should be noted that SOR theory is constantly developing. Few studies have applied the extended SOR theory to explore the impact of MTEs on tourist loyalty. Therefore, whether the extended SOR theory can better explain the influencing mechanism of MTEs on tourist loyalty needs to be studied through empirical research.

Based on the extended SOR theory, which has not been fully applied in the current research on the relationship between MTEs and behavioral intention, this study focuses on the destination attribute dimensions of MTEs in Chinese rural tourism, and proposes four destination attributes, namely, gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle, to explore their impacts on tourist loyalty-behavioral intention (including recommend intention and revisit intention) under the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory. At the same time, it also verifies whether the four destination attributes proposed in this study are the destination attributes of MTEs in the setting background. The contributions of this study are as follows:

First, this study focuses on Chinese rural tourism, an area that has limited exploration, which enriches the study of MTEs in context of different kinds of tourism.

Second, four destination attributes of MTEs belong to Chinese rural tourism are proposed and verified, these four destination attributes are a validation of the generality of some existing research findings, as well as a supplement to omissions. At the same time, it verifies that with the change in the research background, the destination attributes of MTEs may also change.

Third, the results show that MTEs have a positive impact on recommend intention and revisit intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory. This not only provides evidence that MTEs are the antecedents of tourist loyalty, but also illustrates how MTEs impact tourist loyalty. This study constructs a complete mechanism as to how MTEs influence tourist loyalty.

Fourth, the study proves that as compared to the original SOR theory, the extended SOR theory, specifically, O (organism) is expanded from emotional responses in the initial model to affective reaction and cognitive reaction in the existing model, can more comprehensively explain the influencing mechanism of MTEs on tourist destination loyalty.

Fifth, this study provides insights for rural tourism destination managers on how to deliver MTEs to tourists.

This study has the following parts: the theoretical background and hypothesis development section discusses the theoretical basis of this study and puts forward relevant hypotheses. The research methods section shows the research process of this study. The results section is a test of the research hypotheses. The discussion and conclusion section mainly includes the summary and discussion of the results, the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of the study, the limitations of the research, and future research directions.

# Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

## Theoretical Background

### SOR Theory

Different from the research of Soliman,[26] which was based on the extended theory of planned behavior to predict tourists' loyalty behavior. SOR theory was used as the basis of this study. In order to study the influence of material environment on individual emotions and behaviors, Mehrabian and Russell proposed the SOR theory based on environmental psychology, namely, stimulus-organism-response theory, which is refined based on stimulus-response theory, S (stimulus) mainly refers to various environmental factors, such as visual, auditory, taste or the overall atmosphere outside of the person, O (organism) refers to the internal structure or process that intervenes between the external stimulus and the final action or response, and in this initial model, it mainly refers to the emotional responses, R (response) refers to the behavioral response of individuals, which mainly includes two types: approach behavior and avoidance behavior, approach behavior is characterized by staying, exploring the environment or communicating with people in the environment, while avoidance behavior is the opposite.[27] In the field of tourism research, approach behaviors usually include actual approach behaviors such as attachment to the tourism experience, actual visiting and purchasing of relevant souvenirs, as well as intentional approach behaviors such as revisit intention, recommendation intention, travel intention and giving positive evaluation.[28–30] The whole model follows the following logic: stimuli are specific factors that awaken an individual's bodily processes,[31] through the processing of stimuli within the organism, ultimately leading to a response.[32]

SOR theory is constantly being enriched. Mehrabian and Russell only focused on affective responses in the O (organism) part of the original model.[27] Compared with the initial model, the O (organism) part of the current SOR theory mainly includes two types of internal reactions: affective reaction and cognitive reaction.[33] Affective reaction refers to the emotional response that occurs when an individual interacts with a stimulus, and cognitive reaction refers to the mental process, positive cognitive reaction stimulates an individual's behavioral response, while a negative cognitive reaction inhibits an individual's behavioral response.[34]

SOR theory has not been fully applied in research on the impact of MTEs on behavioral intention.[35] Moreover, in the existing studies, few studies apply SOR theory after O (organism) is extended. This study specifically refers to gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle, which belong to S (stimulus) in SOR theory. Arousal,

as an emotion,[36] refers to the emotional response of tourists to the stimulus, which triggers the tourists' memory of the whole rural tourism experience, and memory belongs to cognition.[37] Therefore, the positive arousal and memory involved in this study are the positive affective and cognitive reactions generated by rural tourists after the positive stimulus of MTEs, that is, the factors included in the O (organism). If tourists' memories of previous rural tourism experiences are positive, the behavioral intention will be generated. This study specifically includes recommend intention and revisit intention, both of which belong to intentional approach behaviors, namely, R (response).

## MTEs

Searching for MTEs in a specific setting is the driving factor for rural tourism.[38] MTEs are defined as those experiences that are positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred.[39] In the multistage experience model of Clawson and Knetsch, MTEs occur in the last stage, namely the recall stage.[40] MTEs are selectively constructed based on an individual's evaluation of tourism experiences.[39] Only those dimensions of tourism experiences that have a strong impact on individual tourists and lead to memories are considered in the dimensions of MTEs.[20] MTEs are complex and multidimensional.[41] Therefore, the study of the dimensions of MTEs has become one of the important topics in this research field.[42]

Although current studies have not formed a unified understanding of the dimensions of MTEs, they can be generally divided into two types of dimensions: personal psychological factors and destination attributes.[43] The seven dimensions proposed by Kim et al include hedonism, knowledge, meaningfulness, refreshment, novelty, local culture, and involvement,[39] which are typical representatives of individual psychological factors. Kim found that the studies of the dimension composition of MTEs from the perspective of personal psychological factors failed to clearly explain the roles of MTEs from the perspective of practice, and the research on the dimensions of MTEs from the perspective of destination attributes can improve the understanding of how the destination environment enables tourists to obtain MTEs, in this way, tourism destination managers can design the environment according to the special advantages and attractions of the destination to improve their ability to deliver MTEs to tourists.[44] Based on the study of Crouch and Ritchie,[45] Kim proposed that MTEs consist of ten dimensions, including quality of service, local culture, destination management, infrastructure, superstructure, accessibility, physiography, place attachment, activities and events, and hospitality,[44] which are typical representative of destination attribute dimensions of MTEs. Sahin and Guzel proposed some new destination attributes of MTEs for Antalya and Istanbul on the basis of this study which include novelty, gastronomy, value for money and affection.[46] Destination attributes are the collection of various components of a destination, such as the physical and natural environment and the services and facilities that attract tourists.[47] According to Kiatkawsin and Han, destination attributes can be divided into two broad categories: the first category is called inherited or endowed resources, mainly including climate, nature, heritage and local cuisine,[48] which is usually the primary factor to attract tourists to the destination.[49] The second category is called created resources, mainly including accommodation, transportation, tourism information, tourism activities, shopping, and entertainment.[48]

Consistent with the research by Kim,[44] this study takes the perspective of destination attributes to explore the dimension composition of MTEs in Chinese rural tourism. Although the study of Kim[44] is widely cited, there are some limitations: First, due to the limitation of the data sample, the generality of the research results needs to be further verified, second, the number of destination attributes included in the study is limited, and new destination attributes can be added according to the specific situation of the destination.[44] Previous studies suggested that the dimension composition of MTEs differ due to the different types of tourism destinations, tourism activities, tourists' previous experiences and cultural backgrounds.[6] Therefore, it is necessary to study the destination attributes of MTEs under the background of this study. Four destination attributes - gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle were selected to discuss whether they belong to the destination attributes of MTEs in the setting background. This discussion not only took into account both categories of destination attributes, but it also included other specific considerations.

Gastronomy is an important part of the tourism experiences.[50] Ritchie and Zins found through interviews with tourists and residents of tourist destinations that both groups believe that gastronomy is a very important cultural factor in attracting tourists.[51] Local food has the potential to create strong connections between tourists and the destination, as well as the people, history and culture, enhancing and enriching tourism experiences.[52,53] However, in the study of Kim,[44]

gastronomy is a neglected dimension.[46] In addition to the aforementioned importance and the lack of previous research, considering the background of this study, the gastronomy experience is based on authentic food that represents the local food culture,[54] and rural gastronomy is representative of rural characteristics,[55] therefore, the gastronomy experience enjoyed in the countryside has its own characteristics.

Goss-Turner found that accommodation, as tourism infrastructure, is an important part of the tourism experiences, typically accounting for approximately one-third of total tourism spending.[56] Accommodation is included in the tourist activity,[57] which is often one of the first components of tourism planning, and the quality of accommodation plays an important role in creating MTEs.[44] Vogt and Andereck emphasize the continuous provision of quality and diverse accommodation and ancillary services to promote MTEs.[58] In addition, as a supportive experience, the accommodation experience cannot be ignored in the study of tourism experiences.[59] Since tourists who are in close contact with the local culture of the destination are more likely to form MTEs, tourism projects should include opportunities to experience the local culture, and staying in traditional types of local accommodation can enhance the experience of the local culture and thus form MTEs.[39]

Kim proved that physiography is one of the destination attributes of MTEs based on the research data of Taiwan university students.[44] According to the study of Sahin and Guzel, physiography is not the destination attribute of MTEs for tourists who take coastal tourism in Antalya and historical and cultural tourism in Istanbul.[46] However, the rural physiography is representative of rural characteristics. Rural physiography only exists in the rural geographic space. The parts of physiography that can be included in rural tourism are natural resources that can best represent rural authenticity after careful selection by rural tourism managers. In Chinese rural tourism, whether physiography is one of the destination attributes of MTEs needs to be further studied.

Rural lifestyle is a destination attribute factor in rural tourism.[60] The traditional rural lifestyle is a basic component of rural tourism experiences.[53] However, few studies regarded it as one of the dimensions of MTEs, and most of the existing studies are from a Western perspective, believing that most tourists have limited interest in the rural lifestyle.[61,62] Furthermore, the research of Reisinger et al shows that due to the existence of cultural differences, Eastern and Western tourists are different in evaluating destination attributes and tourism consumption habits.[63] It remains to be studied whether Chinese tourists who travel to Chinese rural destinations consider the rural lifestyle, as mentioned above.

## Positive Arousal

In the study of Oh et al, arousal is defined as the intensity of the physiological response to a stimulus on the continuum from calm to excitement, which is considered an emotion after tourism experiences.[36] Kim et al proposed that arousal is a physiological or psychological state that is stimulated or activated,[64] representing the degree to which a person feels enthused and active in the consumption experience.[65] It also refers to a person's self-stimulated emotional level.[66] In the field of tourism, arousal is often regarded as the psychological state of being stimulated or activated and as the emotion after tourism experiences.[38,46,67] Positive arousal refers to the positive halo effect formed in the attitude immediately after the evaluation of the destination or accommodation.[68] Positive arousal includes joy, ecstasy, interest, happiness, love, and so on.[69] Because it's easier for people to remember experiences that contain emotional arousal,[70] Loureiro and Kastenholz emphasize that in the context of rural tourism, rural tourists need experiences that bring positive arousal to generate positive affect.[71]

In the current research, few studies have explored the relationship between the destination attributes of MTEs and positive arousal. With further research, some researchers have found that using positive arousal as a mediating variable between the destination attributes of MTEs and memory is helpful to better explain the effect of the destination attributes of MTEs on memory.[46]

## Memory

Memory means remembering some certain events.[72] Memory is an active and constructive process of acquiring, storing and retrieving information for decision-making.[73] There are two types of memory, namely, semantic memory and episodic memory, semantic memory stores information related to the tourist destination name or the name of the place visited, and episodic memory stores the details of the tourism experiences.[74–76] Episodic memory is also called

autobiographical memory or an individual's recollection of personal events at a specific time and within a specific context.[77] People store their tourism experiences in autobiographical memory,[78] therefore, MTEs are considered as a type of autobiographical memory.[39] Talarico and Rubin indicated that special, surprising, unexpected and emotional experiences can form very vivid and lasting memories in the mind of individual.[79] Individuals are more likely to keep memories of highly positive events than negative events.[80]

Memory plays an important role in future tourism decisions,[81] and Kim et al emphasize the necessity to bring memory into the tourism experiences study.[39] In the current research on the relationship between MTEs and tourist loyalty, satisfaction is often applied as a mediating variable[10,19,82–84] and is often considered an antecedent of tourist loyalty,[85] however, other studies have shown that satisfaction alone does not create loyalty to a destination.[22] Previous studies have shown that MTEs are stored in memory, and memories are an important information source for tourists to decide whether to revisit a destination in the future.[86]

## Behavioral Intention

Loyalty is mainly studied from two perspectives: behavioral loyalty related to consumers' repeated purchases and attitudinal loyalty related to consumers' psychological commitment.[87] The research of Soliman and Abou-Shouk confirmed that behavioral intention has a positive impact on behavior.[88] In tourism research, behavioral intention is often used to reflect the loyalty of tourists, and behavioral intention is attitudinal loyalty.[10,35,68] In the study of tourist loyalty, the perspective focused on attitude is the most appropriate, because tourists will be loyal to the destination, even if they do not visit it many times.[89,90]

Behavioral intention refers to an individual's tendency to show a behavior,[91] which is highly correlated with behavior and is an effective method to predict individual behavior.[92] In tourism research, the behavioral intention of tourists usually refers to the willingness of a tourist revisiting a tourism destination and providing recommendations about it to family and friends.[93] Revisit intention involves the likelihood that tourists will return to a tourism destination.[35] Recommend intention refers to the psychological behavior of encouraging family members, colleagues, and friends to use something that the recommender likes.[21] The revisit intention and recommend intention of tourists are important indicators to measure tourist loyalty.[94]

## Hypothesis Development

### Gastronomy and Positive Arousal

Tourism and gastronomy are seen as hedonic products.[95,96] Therefore, when tourists experience gastronomy in rural tourism, they are engaged in hedonic consumption. When consumers engage in hedonic consumption related to the positive emotions of the consumption experience, they will experience the emotional response of arousal.[97,98] The study of Sahin and Guzel also confirmed that gastronomy experienced in tourism leads to positive arousal.[46] Therefore, this study speculates that the more rural gastronomy can meet the hedonic consumption experience needs of rural tourists, the stronger positive arousal will be generated by tourists. To sum up, this study puts forward the following hypothesis:

H1: In Chinese rural tourism, the gastronomy experienced in rural tourism destinations is positively associated with positive arousal.

## Accommodation and Positive Arousal

Research of Kim shows that infrastructure is the destination attribute of MTEs,[44] while accommodation is included in the category of the infrastructure of tourism destinations. Since arousal is a psychological state when tourists are stimulated or activated, it is an emotion that takes place after tourism experiences.[38,46,67] These emotional states that are activated in tourism are associated with memorable experiences.[99] An accommodation experience is a common event in the tourism context. The study of Sthapit on tourists who obtain accommodation experience through Airbnb showed that, due to the different qualities of accommodation services, tourists' accommodation experience vary greatly, which may lead to positive or negative emotional arousal.[100] Positive arousal is the positive halo effect that develops in the attitudes formed immediately after the evaluation of the accommodation.[68] Therefore, this study speculates that rural accommodation, which exists as rural tourism infrastructure, when

it meets the requirements of rural tourists, tourists are likely to make positive comments and form a good rural accommodation experience, which will lead to the positive arousal of tourists. The better rural tourists evaluate the rural accommodation experienced, the stronger the positive arousal generated. To sum up, this study puts forward the following hypothesis:

H2: In Chinese rural tourism, accommodation experienced in rural tourism destinations is positively associated with positive arousal.

## Physiography and Positive Arousal

Physiography includes natural landscapes, natural areas, flora and fauna.[48] Previous studies have examined the effects of physiography on arousal from the perspective of auditory, visual and tactile sensations.[101–104] As an important element of nature tourism destinations, the natural soundscape has been widely recognized as an important perceived element and ideal experience for tourists in nature tourism destinations.[101] Jiang studied the connection between the sound landscape in the natural landscape and the emotions of tourists from the perspective of the auditory senses, which shows that the natural soundscape significantly affects the emotional arousal of tourists.[102] Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez found that visual stimuli provided by natural landscapes with biosphere content have a positive impact on arousal, in addition, people prefer green landscapes with water and familiar biota, and the visual stimulation of both landscapes can trigger arousal.[103] Yamauchi et al showed that, compared with simple visual or tactile interaction, tactile and visual multisensory interaction with plants effectively enhanced the arousal level.[104] Therefore, this study speculates that rural tourists either visually appreciate the natural landscape in rural physiography, have intimate contact with the natural areas and flora and fauna through tactile touch, or listen to the various natural sounds, which all trigger emotional arousal. Moreover, the more positive the evaluation of rural physiography experienced through viewing, touching and listening, the stronger the positive arousal will be. To sum up, this study puts forward the following hypothesis:

H3: In Chinese rural tourism, the physiography experienced in rural tourism destinations is positively associated with positive arousal.

## Rural Lifestyle and Positive Arousal

The rural lifestyle is the rural landscape represented by authentic lifestyles and folk customs, which is also a unique rural form of tranquility.[105,106] Zhang and Xu mentioned two types of landscapes of tourism destinations: the social symbolic landscape, which refers to symbols, signs and handicrafts with social collective significance, will affect tourists in a unique subcultural way and have unique significance for tourists; and the restorative landscape, which refers to an environment where visitors can escape from everyday life, become fascinated and live in harmony.[107] The rural lifestyle, as a rural landscape, is connected to both of the above-mentioned landscapes. Symbols, signs and handicrafts with rural folk customs are the manifestation of the collective culture of rural society, which is unique to rural tourists and belongs to the social symbolic landscape. The tranquility of the rural form allows tourists to escape the daily hustle and bustle of the city and is an expression of the restorative landscape. Zhang and Xu showed that both social symbolic and restorative landscapes have positive effects on emotional arousal.[107] In addition, although tranquility describes an emotional state of low arousal, it contains positive emotional states, such as peace, calm, relaxation, joy, happiness, satisfaction, comfort, and serenity.[108,109] As a unique rural form of tranquility, rural lifestyle is associated with positive arousal. Therefore, this study speculates that the higher the recognition of the social symbolic and restorative landscape of the rural tourism destination, that is, the more positive the evaluation of the rural lifestyle, the stronger the positive arousal of the tourists. To sum up, this study puts forward the following hypothesis:

H4: In Chinese rural tourism, the rural lifestyle experienced in rural tourism destinations is positively associated with positive arousal.

## Positive Arousal and Memory

Since arousal is an emotion,[36] positive arousal is a positive emotion. The emotional aspects of past experiences help people remember those experiences better.[110] Memory is affected by one's arousal state.[111] Researchers believe that

higher levels of arousal help aid in memory formation and long-term memory.[112] In the field of tourism, some researchers have reached similar conclusions.[46,68,113–115] Therefore, this study speculates that in rural tourism destinations, the stronger positive arousal will lead to the deeper memory. To sum up, this study puts forward the following hypothesis:

H5: In Chinese rural tourism, positive arousal is positively associated with memory.

## Memory and Recommend Intention/Revisit Intention

Many tourism scholars have emphasized the role of memory in tourist behavior,[39,116,117] in particular, the impact on tourists' revisit intention is obvious.[86,118] Both marketing and tourism research has found that the decisions of consumers and tourists are influenced by their memories of past experiences.[23] Wirtz et al believe that the memory of past tourism experiences is the best predictor for making similar tourism decisions in the future.[119] Marschall highlights the influence of memory on destination choice, as tourists usually revisit places in connection with positive memories of previous trips for nostalgia.[120] Positive memories of a destination increase the likelihood that first-time tourists' revisit intention.[121] According to the study of Zhang et al, autobiographical memory has a positive relationship with revisit intention, and the memory discussed in this study focuses on autobiographical memory.[122] Some studies in the field of tourism have shown a positive relationship between memory and behavioral intention (including recommend and revisit intention).[68,123] Therefore, this study speculates that in rural tourism destinations, the more positive and profound the memory is, the greater the impact on recommend intention and revisit intention. Therefore, the hypotheses adopted are as follows:

H6: In Chinese rural tourism, memory is positively associated with recommend intention.

H7: In Chinese rural tourism, memory is positively associated with revisit intention.

## The Chain Mediating Effect of Positive Arousal and Memory

Previous studies show that positive arousal, memory and post experience behavior are the outcome variables of experience dimensions.[36,114] Good experiences lead to positive emotions,[72] and MTEs lead to positive arousal. Loureiro found that in the context of rural tourism, positive arousal will impact memory positively.[68] Hassan and Soliman found that arousal has an impact on revisit intention.[124] Sahin and Guzel also confirmed that positive arousal and memory are the results of MTEs, and both can mediate the relationship between MTEs and behavioral intention.[46] To sum up, this study speculates that in rural tourism destinations, the higher the tourists evaluate the four destination attributes of gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle, the more likely the tourists are to have stronger positive emotions, that is, positive arousal. Stronger positive arousal brings the deeper memory of rural tourists. Memory is an important information source for making future behavioral decisions. Therefore, the hypotheses adopted are as follows:

H8: In Chinese rural tourism, the destination attributes of MTEs (gastronomy, accommodation, physiography, and rural lifestyle) have a positive impact on recommend intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory.

H9: In Chinese rural tourism, the destination attributes of MTEs (gastronomy, accommodation, physiography, and rural lifestyle) have a positive impact on revisit intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory.

To sum up, this study proposes the research model shown in Figure 1 according to the extended SOR theory.

# Research Methods

## Sampling Design and Data Collection

Judgment sampling is a non-probability sampling technique, which requires the researcher to select the sample on the basis of certain appropriate characteristics, and if the researcher has some knowledge of the appropriate characteristics required of the sample members and needs to satisfy some specific purpose, the method of judgment sampling can be

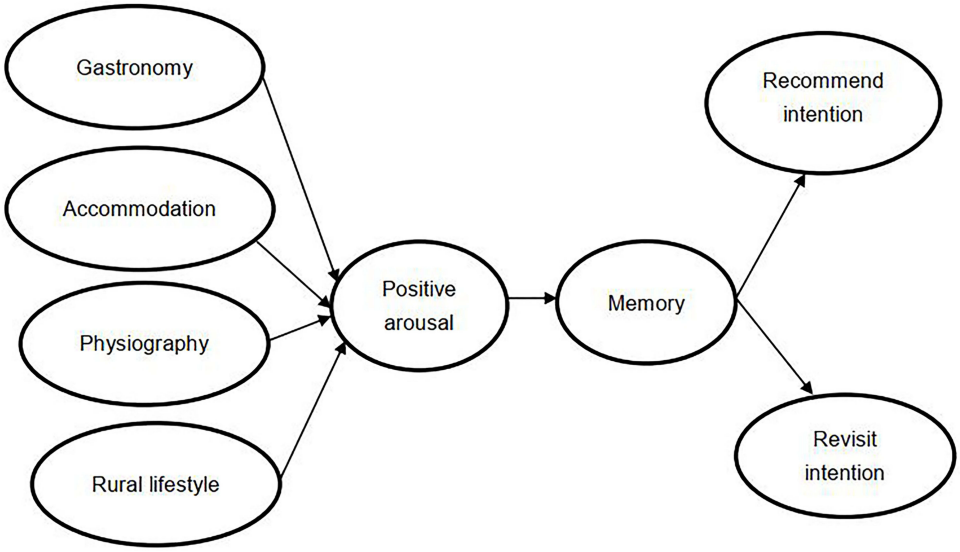


**Figure 1** Research model.

used.[125] Chinese tourists who have experienced rural tourism in China between 2020 and May 2022 are the population of this study. The time range is limited in order to meet the general requirements for data collection in this research field, which will be explained in the next paragraph. However, this study intends to obtain the data of Chinese mainstream rural tourist groups. The research of Zhou et al was referred to ascertain the characteristics of the mainstream groups of rural tourism in China.[126] Primarily on the basis of occupational characteristics, Zhou et al indicate that the majority of Chinese rural tourists are middle-class and office workers living in urban areas.[126] For the definition of China's middle class, this study took the study of Lu as a reference, including office workers, private entrepreneurs, professional and technical personnel, managers, individual business owners, and state and social administrators.[127] To summarize, considering the specific purpose of this study and the preferred characteristics, the method of judgment sampling was adopted to collect data.

Since this study focused on the stage after the end of tourism, the time interval range between the end of rural tourism and the implementation of the survey must be considered. Based on the relevant literature in this research field, researchers usually took tourists who have had tourism experiences within 2 years,[35,38,128] 3 years[43] or 5 years[39,44,129,130] from the survey implementation point as the survey objects. Therefore, this study specifically limited the tourism time range of the respondents from 2020 to May 2022, which is in line with a time range requirement of the existing research data collection on MTEs.

The questionnaire was designed and distributed on Credamo, a smart research platform. The data collected on the platform was approved by the international authoritative journals: the articles of Gai and Puntoni[131] and Su et al[132] were published in the Journal of Consumer Research and Annals of Tourism Research, respectively. In this study, only the participants registered with the real name system in Credamo were selected as the respondents. According to the standards set for judgment sampling, and also to reflect the situation of rural tourism in China as much as possible, the questionnaire was distributed in all provincial administrative units in China, and the occupations of the participants were limited to the six types of occupations as per the standards of judgment sampling, so as to achieve accurate delivery of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed with selection question. Only the participants who answered "Yes" to the question: "Have you participated in rural tourism in China between January 2020 and May 2022" were allowed to answer the following questions. At the same time, the nationality, the specific date for rural tourism, the times of rural tourism, and the location of rural tourism destinations (If the participants had more than one time rural tourism experiences during this period, they were asked about the location of the destination where they had the most memorable rural tourism experiences) were considered to check whether the participants were suitable for filling in the questionnaire. Eligible participants could fill the online questionnaire via smart phones, tablets and computers, and received cash

rewards after completing it. At the same time, in order to ensure the quality of data, this study conducted quality control for the participants, which was set in the background of Credamo: 1) participants who had used the research platform at least 30 times to ensure that they were familiar with its operation; 2) the credit score of the participants was greater than or equal to 80 points/100 points, and the historical adoption rate was greater than or equal to 80% to ensure that the participants were serious enough; 3) only one person from an area having coverage of 10 Km was allowed to answer, to prevent questionnaire survey agencies from answering; 4) intelligent man-machine verification was sent to prevent the machine from answering; 5) repeat answers were not allowed; 6) participants were not allowed to forward the questionnaire; 7) participants should allow to obtain their IP address in order to verify their locations.

The sample size should be at least five times the number of model parameters,[133,134] so at least 125 samples are required for this study (25 parameters×5 observations for each parameter). In this study, 270 valid questionnaires were finally obtained. The sample size is 10.8 times the number of model parameters, in addition to the above mentioned criteria, combined with some studies in the field of tourism, such as Xiang et al[57] and Zhou et al,[135] which show the sample size meets the requirements.

## Measurement Scales

The scales selected are all derived from mature scales. Since the original language of the scales selected was English and the respondents were Chinese tourists, it was necessary to translate and back-translate the scales to reduce the problem of inequality caused by cultural differences.[136] In addition, the content of the scale was also integrated with the rural tourism background of this study in the translation. After completing the translation and back translation, the questionnaires were submitted to experts in tourism research for review, and the contents of the questionnaire were further amended according to the opinions of experts.

The five-point Likert scale was used to measure the variables, with "1" representing "strongly disagree" and "5" representing "strongly agree". Gastronomy was measured by the three items used in the research of Sahin and Guzel.[46] Accommodation was measured by the three items used in the research of Kiatkawsin and Han.[48] Physiography was measured by the three items used in the research of Kim.[44] Rural lifestyle was measured by the three items used in the research of Han.[60] Positive arousal was measured by the four items used in the research of Kastenholz et al.[38] Memory was measured by the three items used in the research of Oh et al.[36] Recommend intention was measured by the three items used in the research of Chen and Rahman.[22] Revisit intention was measured by the three items used in the research of Chen et al.[35]

## Data Analysis

Data analysis involved in this study was completed by online application software SPSSAU (Statistical Product and Service Software Automatically). SPSSAU has powerful data analysis functions, including more than 300 data analysis methods such as reliability analysis, validity analysis and SEM analysis. Articles published in well-known journals also use SPSSAU to process data, such as those by He et al[137] and Zhang et al[138] were accepted by Medical Science Monitor and Disease Markers, respectively. The data analysis procedure was as follows: First, the data were tested for normality and common method variance (CMV). Second, a structural equation model (SEM) was used to verify the model. According to the two-step modeling approach recommended by McDonald and Ho,[139] the reliability and validity of the measurement model were evaluated by confirmatory factor analysis. The structural model and path effects were then evaluated by SEM analysis. In addition, the bootstrap method was used to test the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory, to verify the hypotheses proposed in this study.

## Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, males accounted for 42.2% of the 270 respondents. Ninety percent of tourists were between the ages of 21 and 40. Office workers (39.3%) and professional and technical personnel (27.8%) were the two largest groups. In addition, 88.9% of the tourists had traveled to rural tourism destinations in China twice or more during the period. The 270 respondents came from 29 provincial administrative regions in China. The rural tourism destinations were distributed in 28 provincial administrative regions in China, with Zhejiang, Guangdong and Shanxi as the top three.

**Table 1** Demographic Profile

| Demographic | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| Male | 114 | 42.2 |
| Female | 156 | 57.8 |
| **Age** | | |
| 18–20 years | 1 | 0.4 |
| 21–30 years | 125 | 46.3 |
| 31–40 years | 118 | 43.7 |
| 41–50 years | 18 | 6.7 |
| 51–60 years | 8 | 3.0 |
| 60 years above | 0 | 0.0 |
| **Occupation** | | |
| Office workers | 106 | 39.3 |
| Individual business owners | 10 | 3.7 |
| State and social administrators | 32 | 11.9 |
| Managers | 41 | 15.2 |
| Private entrepreneurs | 6 | 2.2 |
| Professional and technical personnel | 75 | 27.8 |
| **Times of rural tourism** | | |
| 1 time | 30 | 11.1 |
| 2 times | 99 | 36.7 |
| 3 times or above | 141 | 52.2 |

# Results

## Normality Test and Common Method Variance Test

First, it was found through analysis that the absolute value of the kurtosis coefficient of all items in this study was between 0.097 and 4.190, less than 10, meanwhile, the absolute value of the skewness coefficient was between 0.006 and 1.939, less than 3, and therefore, the data of this study can be accepted as normal distribution.[140] This provides a prerequisite for the study to use the maximum likelihood estimation method to estimate the model parameters.

Second, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to test the CMV effect. Through Harmon's one-factor test, the results showed that the maximum covariance explained by one factor was 14.819%, which is less than 50%, indicating that there is no obvious CMV problem in the data of this study.[141]

## Measurement Model

The goodness of fit indices of the measurement model was as follows: $\chi^2$=255.730, df=247, $\chi^2$/df=1.035<3, GFI=0.930>0.9, RMSEA=0.011<0.10, RMR=0.023<0.05, CFI=0.997>0.9, NFI=0.922>0.9, NNFI=0.996>0.9, which indicates that the measurement model fitted well.[142]

The measurement model in this study belongs to the reflective measurement model. For reflective measurement model, composite reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity are usually used to evaluate it.[143] Cronbach's α and composite reliability (CR) are adopted to evaluate the composite reliability of construct.[144] As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's α of each construct in this study ranged from 0.735 to 0.873, in addition, the composite reliability of all constructs in this study ranged from 0.771 to 0.883, which exceeded the cut-off value of 0.7.[145] Hence, the composite reliability of constructs in this study was good.

Factor loading, composite reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are commonly used to evaluate the convergent validity.[146] As shown in Table 2 that the factor loadings of the measurement items ranged from 0.645 to

**Table 2** Measurement Model Analysis

| Construct and Items | Factor Loadings | Composite Reliability (CR) | Cronbach's α | Average Variance Extracted (AVE) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gastronomy** | | | | |
| GAS1: The rural destination offers good opportunities to experience local food | 0.764 | 0.779 | 0.735 | 0.541 |
| GAS2: The rural destination offers good opportunities to try rural cuisines | 0.766 | | | |
| GAS3: The rural destination offers availability of different gastronomic experiences | 0.673 | | | |
| **Accommodation** | | | | |
| ACC1: Accommodation quality of the rural destination is good | 0.746 | 0.821 | 0.814 | 0.604 |
| ACC2: The rural destination has a variety of accommodation options | 0.769 | | | |
| ACC3: Standards of accommodation of the rural destination can meet requirement | 0.816 | | | |
| **Physiography** | | | | |
| PHY1: The rural destination has different ecology zones | 0.730 | 0.796 | 0.784 | 0.566 |
| PHY2: The rural destination has well preserved areas | 0.711 | | | |
| PHY3: The rural destination has awe-inspiring landscapes | 0.812 | | | |
| **Rural lifestyle** | | | | |
| RL1: The rural destination has a simple lifestyle | 0.740 | 0.818 | 0.812 | 0.600 |
| RL2: The rural destination has an authentic folkway | 0.798 | | | |
| RL3: I can feel stress-free in the rural destination | 0.785 | | | |
| **Positive arousal** | | | | |
| PA1: My stay there was interesting | 0.834 | 0.883 | 0.873 | 0.656 |
| PA2: My stay there was enjoyable | 0.645 | | | |
| PA3: My stay there was exciting | 0.858 | | | |
| PA4: My stay there was stimulating | 0.881 | | | |
| **Memory** | | | | |
| MEM1: I have wonderful memories of the rural destination | 0.670 | 0.771 | 0.764 | 0.531 |
| MEM2: I will not forget my experience at that rural destination | 0.697 | | | |
| MEM3: I will remember many positive things about that rural destination | 0.811 | | | |
| **Recommend intention** | | | | |
| RECI1: I would recommend this rural destination to my relatives, friends and colleagues | 0.766 | 0.805 | 0.801 | 0.579 |
| RECI2: I would say positive things about this rural destination | 0.737 | | | |
| RECI3: I would encourage my relatives, friends and colleagues to visit this rural destination | 0.779 | | | |
| **Revisit intention** | | | | |
| REVI1: If I could, I would come to this rural destination again | 0.649 | 0.799 | 0.792 | 0.573 |
| REVI2: I will always consider this rural destination to be my first destination choice | 0.767 | | | |
| REVI3: I have a strong intention to visit this rural destination again | 0.843 | | | |

0.881, all greater than 0.6, which was an acceptable range.[35] The CR values of all constructs were over 0.7, and the AVE values were over 0.5, indicating that the measurement model had good convergent validity.[146–148]

According to Fornell and Larcker, good discriminant validity is indicated if the AVE square root values of all constructs are over the absolute values of the correlation coefficients between this construct and other constructs.[146] As shown in Table 3, all constructs' AVE square root values were over the absolute values of the correlation coefficients between constructs, and this indicated the distinctiveness of every construct in this study was significant. In addition, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was used to determine the discriminant validity. In Table 3, the numbers above the diagonal represent the HTMT values between pairwise constructs. In general, the HTMT value less than 0.85 (sometimes 0.90 is used as the standard) indicates that there is discriminant validity between the two constructs.[144] As can be seen from Table 3, all HTMT values in the table lay within the standard range. To summarize, the measurement model applied in this study passed the discriminant validity test.

## Structural Model Analysis and Hypothesis Test

The goodness of fit indices of the structural model was as follows: $\chi^2$=354.242, df=262, $\chi^2$/df=1.352<3, GFI=0.903>0.9, RMSEA=0.036<0.10, RMR=0.047<0.05, CFI=0.969>0.9, NNFI= 0.964>0.9, which indicated that the structural model fitted well.[142]

According to the research of Hair et al, collinearity should be fully considered when analyzing the structural model, and variance inflation factor (VIF) is usually used for judgment.[144] If VIF is less than 5, it indicates that no problem of multicollinearity exists.[144] VIF values in this study were less than five and ranged from 1.712 to 4.184, indicating that there was no multicollinearity problem in this study.

Moreover, the coefficient of determination values ($R^2$) was adopted to reflect the in-sample predictions of the structural model. Specifically, $R^2$ (positive arousal)=0.531, $R^2$ (memory)=0.430, $R^2$ (recommend intention)=0.409, and $R^2$ (revisit intention)=0.385. The value of $R^2$ lay between 0 and 1, with higher values being better.[145] On the basis of the research of Jannesari et al, the value of $R^2$ greater than or equal to 0.25, 0.50 and 0.75 reflects that the in-sample prediction of the structural model was weak, moderate and substantial, respectively.[143] Overall, the $R^2$ values in this study were satisfactory.

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, the path coefficients need to be analyzed. Table 4 shows the path coefficients of the model. It can be found that gastronomy has a significant positive effect on positive arousal ($\beta$=0.227, $p$=0.004), so H1 is accepted. Accommodation has a significant positive effect on positive arousal ($\beta$=0.274, $p < 0.001$), so H2 is accepted. Physiography has a significant positive effect on positive arousal ($\beta$=0.302, $p < 0.001$), so H3 is accepted. Rural lifestyle has a significant positive effect on positive arousal ($\beta$=0.206, $p$=0.003), so H4 is accepted. Positive arousal has a significance positive effect on memory ($\beta$=0.656, $p < 0.001$), so H5 is accepted. Memory has a significant positive effect on recommend intention ($\beta$=0.640, $p < 0.001$), so H6 is accepted. Memory has a significant positive effect on revisit intention ($\beta$=0.620, $p < 0.001$), so H7 is accepted.

**Table 3** Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratios)

| | GAS | ACC | PHY | RL | PA | MEM | RECI | REVI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **GAS** | **0.736** | 0.464 | 0.373 | 0.478 | 0.568 | 0.568 | 0.286 | 0.276 |
| **ACC** | 0.376 | **0.777** | 0.335 | 0.162 | 0.485 | 0.594 | 0.485 | 0.541 |
| **PHY** | 0.278 | 0.271 | **0.752** | 0.390 | 0.580 | 0.467 | 0.240 | 0.151 |
| **RL** | 0.382 | 0.136 | 0.314 | **0.774** | 0.492 | 0.322 | 0.070 | 0.132 |
| **PA** | 0.463 | 0.408 | 0.485 | 0.420 | **0.810** | 0.715 | 0.333 | 0.284 |
| **MEM** | 0.430 | 0.468 | 0.366 | 0.258 | 0.583 | **0.729** | 0.614 | 0.606 |
| **RECI** | 0.223 | 0.391 | 0.194 | 0.057 | 0.281 | 0.483 | **0.761** | 0.655 |
| **REVI** | 0.220 | 0.439 | 0.123 | 0.102 | 0.242 | 0.477 | 0.531 | **0.757** |

**Note**: The bold numbers on the diagonal represent the square roots of AVE, the numbers below the diagonal represent the correlation estimates, and the numbers above the diagonal represent heterotrait-monotrait ratios.

**Abbreviations**: GAS, gastronomy; ACC, accommodation; PHY, physiography; RL, rural lifestyle; PA, positive arousal; MEM, memory; RECI, recommend intention; REVI, revisit intention.

**Table 4** Path Coefficient Results

| X | Y | Unstd. | Std. | S.E. | z | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gastronomy | Positive arousal | 0.428 | 0.227 | 0.148 | 2.897 | 0.004 |
| Accommodation | Positive arousal | 0.309 | 0.274 | 0.077 | 4.019 | 0.000 |
| Physiography | Positive arousal | 0.324 | 0.302 | 0.074 | 4.407 | 0.000 |
| Rural lifestyle | Positive arousal | 0.236 | 0.206 | 0.080 | 2.958 | 0.003 |
| Positive arousal | Memory | 0.441 | 0.656 | 0.053 | 8.321 | 0.000 |
| Memory | Recommend intention | 0.886 | 0.640 | 0.120 | 7.409 | 0.000 |
| Memory | Revisit intention | 0.636 | 0.620 | 0.093 | 6.823 | 0.000 |

**Abbreviations**: Unstd, unstandardized coefficients; Std, standardized coefficients; S.E., standardized error.

**Table 5** Chain Mediating Effect Results

| Item | Effect | BootLLCI | BootULCI | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gastronomy⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Recommend intention | 0.045 | 0.013 | 0.061 | 0.000 |
| Accommodation⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Recommend intention | 0.031 | 0.010 | 0.068 | 0.038 |
| Physiography⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Recommend intention | 0.042 | 0.019 | 0.075 | 0.004 |
| Rural lifestyle⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Recommend intention | 0.031 | 0.012 | 0.058 | 0.008 |
| Gastronomy⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Revisit intention | 0.048 | 0.014 | 0.060 | 0.000 |
| Accommodation⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Revisit intention | 0.033 | 0.012 | 0.065 | 0.014 |
| Physiography⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Revisit intention | 0.045 | 0.021 | 0.076 | 0.001 |
| Rural lifestyle⇒Positive arousal⇒Memory⇒Revisit intention | 0.034 | 0.014 | 0.059 | 0.004 |

**Note**: BootLLCI represents lower limit of 95% interval in bootstrap sampling, BootULCI represents upper limit of 95% interval in bootstrap sampling.

In this study, the bootstrap method was applied to examine the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory. The number of bootstrap sampling was set to 5000 and the confidence level is 95%. Table 5 is obtained. It can be seen from Table 5 that all chain mediating paths do not contain 0 in the 95% interval and all chain mediating effects are positive, which proves that gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle had positive effects on recommend intention and revisit intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory, respectively, so H8 and H9 are accepted.

# Discussion and Conclusion

## Conclusion

With Chinese rural tourism as the background, the judgment sampling method was employed and an online questionnaire survey was conducted on 270 Chinese tourists who had experienced rural tourism in China from 2020 to May 2022. The study explored the destination attributes of MTEs and its effect on tourist loyalty. Based on the extended SOR theory, this study proposed a model to explore the mechanism of the impact of the destination attributes of MTEs on tourist loyalty. The results show that the four destination attributes experienced by Chinese tourists in Chinese rural tourism destinations, namely gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle, all have a positive impact on positive arousal, and so is the relationship between positive arousal and memory. Moreover, memory has positive impacts on recommend intention and revisit intention, furthermore, the destination attributes of gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle all have a positive impact on recommend intention and revisit intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory. It also shows that the destination attributes of gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle are the destination attributes of MTEs in the context of this study.

Rural gastronomy is representative of the rural characteristics,[55] it provides an important way for tourists to understand the rural tourism destinations. Chinese rural gastronomy emphasizes local materials and highlights local characteristics, both in cooking methods and raw materials. Rural accommodation, as a carrier of rural culture, enables close contact of the tourists with the culture of the rural tourism destinations, and the closer the connection with the local culture, the more likely it is to form MTEs.[39] In Chinese rural tourism, a variety of rural homestays with local cultural characteristics help in overcoming the distance between the tourists and the local culture. The definition of rural tourism refers to the consumption of rural landscapes which is a part of a series of activities,[11] and physiography is the carrier of rural landscapes. The vastness of the Chinese land allows for diverse physiography between villages, enriching the memory of the tourists with regard to their experiences. The rural lifestyle proposed in this study includes the authenticity and folk customs of the countryside as well as a unique rural form of tranquility.[105,106] In addition, an important function of rural tourism is to provide an experience that relieves the stress of everyday city life,[12] and rural lifestyle enables realization of such a function. The four destination attributes discussed above play significant roles in Chinese rural tourism, which are the reasons why they can become the destination attributes of MTEs in the context of this study.

The four destination attributes of MTEs that were verified in this study are both different and related to those mentioned in the previous studies. In previous tourism studies which explored Istanbul and Antalya, gastronomy was identified as a destination attribute of MTEs.[46] This study also arrived at the same conclusion, which reflects the importance of gastronomy to the tourists. Accommodation is a part of the infrastructure, which is a destination attribute of MTEs as per the study of Kim.[44] The results of this study show that as an infrastructure, the role of accommodation in providing supportive experiences in rural tourism cannot be ignored. Whether physiography is a destination attribute of MTEs has been controversial in the previous studies, which is supported by the findings of Kim[44] and contradicted by the findings of Sahin and Guzel.[46] The results of our study show that physiography has a greater impact on rural tourists in China than on the cultural and historical tourists in Istanbul and the coastal tourists in Antalya, as per the study of Sahin and Guzel.[46] Rural lifestyle is a new destination attribute of MTEs, which was proposed in the context of this study. As compared to the previous studies, this destination attribute supplements the existing research.

The study of Sahin and Guzel is one of the few existing studies that have confirmed the impact of destination attributes of MTEs on behavioral intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory.[46] This study is similar in that gastronomy has been proved to be a destination attribute of MTEs. However, the study of Hosseini et al indicates that MTEs may vary in different research contexts.[6] As this study differs from the types of tourism studied by Sahin and Guzel,[46] one is rural tourism, and the other is historical and cultural tourism and coastal tourism, so the destination attributes of MTEs are not completely consistent. Physiography was removed from the list of destination attributes of MTEs by Sahin and Guzel.[46] This study not only confirms that physiography is a destination attribute of MTEs, but also positively influences recommend intention and revisit intention through the chain mediating effect of positive arousal and memory. At the same time, this study proved that the two destination attributes of MTEs, namely accommodation and rural lifestyle, can also have a positive impact on recommend intention and revisit intention through the same chain mediating effect, which has rarely been explored in previous studies.

## Theoretical Contributions

This study has the following theoretical contributions: First, throughout the existing research on the relationship between MTEs and tourist loyalty, most of them start from the dimension of personal psychological factors of MTEs.[8,35,84] There is no explicit discussion of the question of how destinations can deliver MTEs to tourists,[44] and few studies have been carried out on the background of Chinese rural tourism. Different from the existing research, this study starts with the destination attribute dimensions of MTEs and takes Chinese rural tourism as the background, which is a supplement to the existing research.

Second, this study did not directly and completely copy the widely cited research results of Kim.[44] It took into account the research settings to propose and verify the destination attributes of MTEs in the context of Chinese rural tourism. This study shows that gastronomy, accommodation, physiography, and rural lifestyle experienced in Chinese rural tourism destinations lead to positive arousal and thus have a positive impact on memory. According to the definition of MTEs proposed by Kim et al,[39] it can be verified that the four destination attributes proposed in this study are the

destination attributes of MTEs in the Chinese rural tourism destinations. In addition, Kensinger have explored that people are more tend to memorize experiences that contain emotional arousal,[70] which could also prove the four dimensions that lead to positive arousal in our study are the destination attributes of MTEs. This is also in line with the research of Zare that MTEs under specific tourism types should have new dimensions.[149] The rural lifestyle in this study is a new dimension of destination attribute of MTEs under the specific tourism type. Therefore, when it comes to some distinctive tourism types, the destination attributes of MTEs that are exclusive to this tourism type can be explored on the basis of previous research.

Third, the gastronomy dimension is neglected in the study of Kim,[44] but this study, consistent with the study of Sahin and Guzel,[46] confirms that gastronomy should be included in the destination attributes of MTEs. This study shows that although the research results that have been widely cited have not covered the entire destination attributes of MTEs, new destination attributes of MTEs should be identified in different research contexts to supplement the existing research results.

Fourth, this study proves that destination attributes that provide supportive experiences can be the destination attributes of MTEs. This study confirms Sthapit et al that accommodation experience as a supportive experience cannot be ignored in research regarding tourism experiences.[59] Experiencing something new or different from everyday life is inherent in tourism, and this experience is referred to as peak experience, which mainly includes some scenic spots that account for the main motivation for the tourist to travel, and tourism experiences include both peak experiences and supportive (extensions of daily life) experiences, such as sleeping and transportation.[150] But if an overemphasis on peak experiences leads to neglecting supportive experiences, it can have a negative impact on the overall tourism experiences.[59] Therefore, when studying the destination attributes of MTEs, especially for the purpose of discovering new destination attributes of MTEs, in addition to the destination attributes that provide peak experiences, due consideration should be given to those that provide supportive experiences.

Fifth, in contrast to the research results of Sahin and Guzel,[46] but similar to the research results of Kim,[44] physiography is confirmed as one of the destination attributes of MTEs in the context of this study. This also confirms the findings of Hosseini et al that in different research contexts, the dimensions that constitute MTEs may change.[6] Therefore, researchers should hold a critical attitude towards the destination attributes of MTEs that have been found in the existing studies, and specific analysis should be carried out in light of specific research backgrounds.

Sixth, rural lifestyle is rarely mentioned in existing studies. In addition to confirming that it belongs to one of the destination attributes of MTEs, this study also verifies the view of Reisinger et al that Eastern and Western tourists are different in evaluating destination attributes.[63] Therefore, researchers should fully consider the differences between Eastern and Western tourists when exploring the destination attributes of MTEs in the context of same type of tourism.

Seventh, the SOR theory has not been fully applied to study the impact of MTEs on behavioral intention.[35] Meanwhile, the SOR theory is constantly evolving. Comparing with the existing research of Chen et al,[35] which proved that the SOR theory is appropriate to explain the influencing mechanism of MTEs on behavioral intention. This study not only uses the SOR theory but is also one of the few studies that apply the extended SOR theory, which takes the affective reaction of positive arousal and the cognitive reaction of memory as chain mediators in the study of the impact of MTEs on behavioral intention. The results show that a chain mediating effect exists. On the one hand, it shows a more complete mental process of tourists' recommend intention and revisit intention due to MTEs. On the other hand, it also proves the rationality of the extended SOR theory in the research on the impact of MTEs on behavioral intention. This study provides suggestions for future research, which can introduce more factors belonging to affective reaction and cognitive reaction for an O (organism), so as to explore the psychological activities of tourists in-depth.

Finally, satisfaction is often considered an antecedent of tourist loyalty,[85] but another study shows that satisfaction itself cannot make tourists loyal to the destination.[22] This study found that the destination attributes of MTEs, positive arousal, and memory should also be included in the study of the antecedents of tourist destination loyalty, providing more theoretical perspectives for the acquisition of tourist destination loyalty.

## Managerial Implications

The results of this study have managerial implications for how rural tourism destination managers and industry practitioners operate rural tourism. The results show that the destination attributes of gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle belong to the destination attributes of MTEs, and all have a positive impact on tourists' recommend intention and revisit intention through positive arousal and memory. Although this study is based on rural tourism in China, the destination attributes of MTEs found in this study, such as gastronomy and physiography, are also destination attributes of MTEs in other tourism types, which show that the results of this study can be generalized to other extent. In terms of the overall guiding idea of management, managers and industry practitioners need to establish the idea of experiential marketing to improve the experience of tourists in rural tourism destinations.

Rural tourism destination managers and industry practitioners should mobilize the positive emotions of tourists to deepen their positive memories of the countryside. A breakthrough can be made in the way of contact with tourists and the design of tourism projects. Managers and employees should always pay attention to the influence of the surrounding environment on tourists' emotions in the process of communication with tourists, to consciously mobilize tourists' positive emotions, which makes tourists form positive memories, increases the tourists' recommend and revisit intentions, and provides a guarantee for the acquisition of stable tourist sources in rural tourism destinations. The design of tourism projects should fully rely on the advantages and characteristic destination attributes of rural areas, and take the positive emotions, such as pleasure and happiness, generated by tourists after experiencing the project as the guiding principle. Combined with this study, design of tourism projects can take into consideration these four aspects:

First, based on ensuring the authenticity of rural gastronomy, rural tourism destinations should actively promote ecological gastronomy, cooking techniques, rural recipes, and diversified development of gastronomy types. Providing a variety of online and offline channels for tourists to access rural gastronomy, so as to improve the convenience of tourists' during their stay. Rural tourism destinations can also obtain feedback from tourists through timely communication, and use this as a reference for the improvement and adjustment of gastronomy.

Second, while maintaining the localized characteristics of rural accommodation, operators should differentiate their accommodation styles so that tourists can obtain a variety of accommodation experiences in the same rural tourism destination. Tourists with specialized knowledge and backgrounds are encouraged to participate in the design of rural accommodation to strengthen the connection between them. Managers should pay attention to tourists' accommodation experiences and comprehensively improve their quality from the comfort, facilitation, safety, hygiene level and characteristics perspectives. The accommodation feedback of tourists can be obtained in time through a survey questionnaire of tourists' accommodation experiences, and the problems and advantages of tourists' responses can be sorted out and classified for reference for future decision-making. Managers should actively take advantage of the word-of-mouth effect among the tourists. They should not only set up self-media channels to communicate with the tourists, but also encourage the tourists involved in accommodation design to spread their designed works through various modes of self-media. The standard accommodation quality management system should be introduced, and the skills and service awareness training of accommodation staff should be emphasized to improve the accommodation experiences of tourists.

Third, protecting rural physiography, and carrying out the idea of ecologically sustainable development in the development of rural physiography plays an important role in rural tourism destination management. Rural tourism destinations should hire physiography development professionals to make comprehensive plans for the development of rural physiography.

Fourth, the unique folk cultures should be explored and protected in the countryside. To organize, record and preserve them in a standardized manner, rural folk cultures should be included in the design of rural tourism projects. For example, by holding rural folk culture festivals with different themes, displays of rural folk culture can be realized. According to the feedback of tourists in each themed activity, rural folk culture can be selectively integrated into the design of tourism projects. Rural tourism destinations should establish a folk culture inheritance and training system and standardize the training of folk culture inheritors. Balancing the relationship between commercialization and rural

tranquility that emerges during the development of rural tourism destinations could eliminate the damage to rural tranquility caused by commercialization.

In summary, combined with the results of this study, it can be seen that the optimization of the four destination attributes of rural tourism destinations, namely gastronomy, accommodation, physiography and rural lifestyle, will help the tourists in forming MTEs and gain tourist loyalty. However, in reality, each village has different advantageous destination attributes. Therefore, for the optimal arrangement with respect to the above mentioned four destination attributes, it requires the manager to fully consider the existing situation and give priority to the development of destination attributes with a good basis. If the existing basis of these four destination attributes is not much different, considering the limitation of human resources and financial resources, based on the results of this study, the four destination attributes have a descending influence on tourist loyalty: gastronomy, physiography, rural lifestyle and accommodation. Managers can arrange the optimization of rural tourism destination attributes in this order.

## Limitations and Prospects

The limitations of this study are as follows: First, this study only focuses on four destination attributes of MTEs, and the destination attributes are limited. Second, the results of this study are only for Chinese tourists who have had experiences in rural tourism in China, and the generality of the results needs to be further verified. Third, this study does not consider the issue of demographic differentiation of MTEs of tourists within the same context. Fourth, although the methodology of sample selection was based on the studies of Zhou et al[126] and Lu,[127] which reflected the mainstream tourist source market of China's rural tourism, the sample was selected by employing the judgement sampling method which may not be fully representative,[125] therefore, the individual market groups need to be further studied in future research.

Future research can be expanded in the following aspects. First, more destination attributes in the same context should be further studied. Second, existing research results can be applied to new research backgrounds to verify generality. Third, future research could assess the model with a larger sample of tourists from different countries with different characteristics. Fourth, scholars may consider the longitudinal approach to investigate how memories impact behavior. Fifth, in addition to the six types of tourists' occupation involved in this study, tourists engaged in other types of occupation in China, such as freelance tourists, can be included in the sample in future research. Last but not least, future research should investigate constructs that may moderate the impact of the destination attributes of MTEs on tourism outcomes.

## Ethics Statement

This study is guided by the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments or similar ethical standards. All procedures are approved by The Institute for Sustainable Development at Macau University of Science and Technology. All of the participants are anonymous and volunteered to participate in the study and their information will be kept strictly confidential. In the revised manuscript all participants provided informed consent.

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## Disclosure

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