

THE INFLUENCING FACTORS AND MECHANISMS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN SHAANXI PROVINCE, CHINA*

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Abstract

The sustainable development of rural tourism has become a critical concern amid rapid tourism expansion and increasing pressures on rural environments and cultures. This study investigates the key influencing factors and underlying mechanisms driving the sustainable development of rural tourism in Shaanxi Province, China. Drawing on the sustainability prism framework, the research proposes an integrated model incorporating place attachment, community participation, and tourism industry innovation as core determinants of rural tourism sustainability. Quantitative data were collected from tourism practitioners in six representative rural tourism destinations in Shaanxi Province through a questionnaire survey, yielding 522 valid responses. Structural equation modeling was employed to test the proposed hypotheses and examine the relationships among variables. The results reveal that place attachment and community participation exert strong and significant positive effects on the sustainable development of rural tourism, while tourism industry innovation also

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contributes positively, though with a comparatively weaker influence. These findings enrich the theoretical understanding of sustainable rural tourism by highlighting the combined and differential impacts of social–psychological, community-based, and innovation-oriented factors. Practically, the study provides policy-relevant insights for local governments and tourism management agencies, emphasizing the need to strengthen residents’ emotional bonds with place, enhance inclusive community participation mechanisms, and foster innovation capabilities within the rural tourism industry to achieve long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Sustainable Development, Place Attachment, Community Participation, Tourism Industry Innovation

Introduction

For a long time, rural tourism has served as a strategic tool to alleviate poverty, absorb surplus labor, and safeguard unique cultural traditions, playing a pivotal role in rural development (Ezeuduji, 2013), optimise the industrial structure of rural areas(Wang, 2013), and promote coordinated urban-rural development, with broad prospects for growth(Ying, Jiang, & Zhou, 2015). Shaanxi, a renowned tourism province in China, has leveraged its favourable geographical conditions and rich cultural resources to develop rural tourism as a catalyst for economic expansion and rural revitalization in its countryside. However, against the backdrop of rapid growth in rural tourism, certain destination communities have prioritised short-term economic gains over long-term planning. This approach has resulted in severe damage to local ecosystems and cultural resources, significantly undermining the sector's sustainability. Furthermore, many destinations have failed to fully leverage local strengths to develop distinctive cultural tourism brands, resulting in severe homogenisation of tourism products and services that undermines competitiveness. These issues

constrain the sector's sustainable development. Therefore, advancing sustainable rural tourism in Shaanxi necessitates identifying key influencing factors and pathways, alongside targeted improvement measures and recommendations.

In recent years, the rapid development of rural tourism has attracted the attention of some scholars, yielding certain research outcomes. However, research on the sustainable rural tourism remains relatively weak. Most studies focus solely on the role of individual influencing factors, such as stakeholders (Panzer-Krause, 2020; Liu et al., 2020), institutionalization (Khartishvili, 2019; Calza, 2018) and tourism attractions (Sykes & Kelly, 2016; Murray & Kline, 2015), lacking exploration of the interrelationships among multiple factors and their integrated impact on rural tourism sustainability. Furthermore, existing studies predominantly evaluate individual rural tourism destinations (Chi & Han, 2021; Xue & Kerstetter, 2019), resulting in findings that lack generalizability. Therefore, based on extensive literature review and expert consultation, this paper constructs a research framework for the sustainability of rural tourism in the study region and proposes research hypotheses. Through in-depth analysis of the research data, it clarifies the influence pathways of key factors to inform and guide the sustainable development of rural tourism in both theory and practice in Shaanxi, China.

Objectives

The main research objectives of this thesis include:

- 1) To identify the important influencing factors and mechanism of sustainable development of rural tourism in Shaanxi Province, China;
- 2) To investigate the important influencing factors and mechanism of resilience of rural tourism communities in Shaanxi Province, China;
- 3) Explore the mechanism of the sustainable development of rural tourism on the resilience of tourism communities in Shaanxi, China;

4) To put forward suggestions on promoting the sustainable development of rural tourism in Shaanxi Province, China.

Literature Review

1. Sustainable Development of Tourism

In the 1970s, the concept of sustainable tourism development was used to be called “new tourism”, “destination life cycle model”, “carrying capacity” (Hardy et al., 2002). Sustainable tourism development aims to strike a critical balance by addressing economic, environmental, social, and cultural considerations. It is guided by the dual purpose of mitigating tourism's negative impacts and maximizing its positive outcomes for local communities and the environment alike (Ramdhan Kurniawan, 2024). The World Tourism Organisation also recognises that the pursuit of sustainable tourism entails the continuous assessment of its effects and the consistent delivery of a high-quality visitor experience (UNWTO, 2004).

Traditionally, the sustainable development of tourism encompasses the three core aspects: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. However, establishing equilibrium among the three foundational pillars proves challenging without institutional management, mediation, and facilitation of growth (Eden et al., 2000; Spangenberg, 2002; Spangenberg & Valentin, 1999). Consequently, Spangenberg & Valentin (1999) of Germany's Wuppertal Institute developed a sustainability framework termed the Sustainability Prism, employing four dimensions of sustainability: the institutional dimension, the economic dimension, the ecological dimension, and the socio-cultural dimension. These four dimensions collectively represent the holistic concept of sustainable development.

2. Place Attachment

Place attachment is regarded as a positive emotional tie an individual forms with a specific place (Low, & Altman, 1992; Giuliani and Feldman, 1993; Altman and Wohlwill, 2012). An individual's sense of place attachment refers to both, social and emotional connection formed with any site, like, one's home place, institution of learning, place of work, town, or country (Shouran et al., 2019). Local attachment denotes the psychological attachment of people to places (Man Cheng et al., 2022). The first research conducted by the early scholars revolved around place attachment in the sense of the built environment. There has been subsequent research in residents' relationships to resource and tourism dependent neighborhoods (McCool & Martin, 1994; Vorkinn, 1998; Vorkinn & Riese, 2001) as well as to the 'special places' within those neighborhoods (McCool & Martin, 1994). Place attachment can be examined in terms of the relevance of "special places" (Eisenhauer et al., 2000) to local residents and the relationship that tourists have to recreational and tourist destinations (Williams et al., 2001; Warzecha & Lime, 2001).

While many models of place attachment have been proposed (Shumaker & Taylor, 1983), the environmental psychology literature emphasizes that place attachment consists of two main components: place dependence and place identity (Proshansky et al., 1983; Williams et al., 1992). Researchers have shown that place attachment can be measured by place identity and place dependence (Yuksel et al., 2010; Eusébio et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2014; Ganji et al., 2021). Within academic discourse, some researchers argue for an expanded theoretical framework of place attachment, introducing centrality to lifestyle as a key component (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000). The data gathered from the Appalachian Trail in the U.S. support the existence of a correlational model of three factors: emotional attachment, functional attachment, and social connection (Kyle et al., 2005). Local attachment integrates several core

psychological dimensions, namely dependence on, identity with, emotional connection to, and social bonds within a place. (Ramkissoon et al., 2013).

3. Community Participation

Community participation constitutes a form of voluntary, active engagement through which individuals exercise the rights and responsibilities inherent to citizenship. These participation opportunities may include involving in self-governance processes, reacting to authoritative decisions that have an impact on individual's lives and cooperating with others in making decisions to address problems that affect them all (Tosun, 1999; Trinh, 2021). According to various stakeholders, community participation is an effective approach of sustainable tourism development. Because it is considered to ensure better protection of natural, rural, and cultural resources, enhance the capacity of host communities, and improve their socioeconomic well-being. The sustainable rural tourism is not the exclusive domain of the government, nor can it be achieved by a powerful rural tourism organization alone. As a collective endeavour, the sustainable development of rural tourism requires more than just government support or a dominant organization. This process employs a collaborative approach that combines strategic tourism planning, policymaking, and management with the active involvement of local communities, indigenous groups, and residents (Saito & Ruhanen; 2017).

Community participation in tourism development entails the involvement of the community as a key stakeholder in the formulation and carrying out of tourism plans and associated critical matters. Various studies show that resident involvement in the decision making processes at the community level results to improved resource mobilization during crises (Donoghue & Sturtevant, 2007), reduced unequal power distribution in community rights and interests (Magis, 2010), and creation of long term sustainable development goals (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011).

4. Tourism Industry Innovation

According to Stockdale (2001) and Fagerberg and Goinho (2004), the innovation is the force of the country's growth and the country's prosperity. In terms of management strategies, creativity and innovation are regarded as key components of organizations and destinations. (Richard Sharpley, 2005). Regarding tourism industry, Hjalager (2002), and Hall & Williams (2008) have pointed out that research is going on as to the innovation in tourism industry but the theoretical framework for innovation in tourism industry requires some refinement. Hjalager (2002) also considers that the factors of tourism innovation could be external to the sector. This initiative will drive innovation through collaboration with diverse partners beyond the tourism sector. New approaches in tourism is classified into four categories: product innovation, which encompasses the creation of new or substantially modified goods or services for market introduction; process innovation, which pertains to the implementation of new or enhanced production techniques or delivery systems; organizational innovation, which involves the establishment of new or altered organizational frameworks or management approaches; and marketing innovation, which centers on the execution of new or updated marketing strategies designed to broaden sales markets (Afriyie et al., 2020).

Methodology

From a methodological perspective, this quantitative study obtained data from a questionnaire survey of tourism practitioners in representative rural tourism destinations in Shaanxi Province, China (specific survey locations include Yuanjia Village in Xi'an, Fucha Town in Jingyang, Bailu Cang in Bailu Yuan, Ge Pai Village in Ge Pai Town, Lantian County, Qingmu Town in Hanzhong, and Huayang Ancient Town). From March to May 2025, a total of 570 questionnaires were distributed, with 522 valid responses, yielding a response rate of 91.6%. Following

the collection of survey data, a series of analyses were performed, including descriptive statistics, reliability testing, validity assessment, and factor analysis were conducted using SPSS 26.0 statistical analysis tools. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied with the aim of assessing the model fit, ultimately determining the links between variables in the research model with AMOS 26.0 statistical analysis software.

Results

1. Reliability Testing

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients is used in this study to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha values are deemed acceptable at 0.7 or above, commendable at 0.8 or above, and superior at 0.9 or above. The larger the coefficient, the higher the reliability of the scale.

Table 1 Reliability Analysis

Latent variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
ID	0.839	4
ED	0.859	3
ECD	0.912	5
SD	0.853	3
SDT	0.918	15
PA	0.926	8
CP	0.824	3
PI	0.865	4
MI	0.819	4
TII	0.872	8

Note: ID=Institutional Dimension; ED=Ecological Dimension; ECD=Economic Dimension; SD=Socio-cultural Dimension; SDT=Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism; PA=Place Attachment; CP=Community Participation; PI=Product innovation; MI=Marketing innovation; TII=Tourism Industry Innovation.

Table 1 summarizes the experimental findings: the SDT variable contains 4 variables and 15 items, and the total Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.921. The Cronbach's α coefficients of the sub-dimensions are 0.839, 0.868, 0.912, 0.853, respectively. The PA variable contains 8 items, Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.926; the CP variable contains 3 items, Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.824; the TII variable contains 2 variables and 8 items, with a total Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.872; the Cronbach's α coefficients for the sub-dimensions were 0.865 and 0.819. The Cronbach's α coefficients of all the scales are greater than 0.8, indicating that the reliability level of the questionnaire meets the standard, the scales have good internal consistency and reliable, and the questionnaire can be used as a research tool for this study.

2. Structural Equation Model Fitting Test

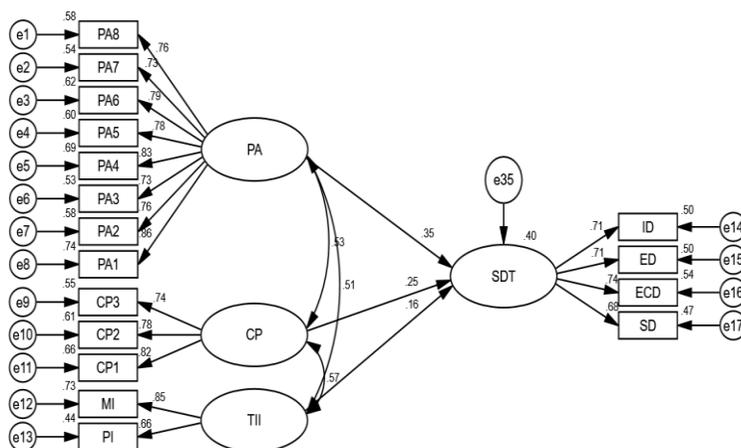


Figure 1 Standardized Path Estimation of Structural Equation Model

Table 2 Model Goodness-of-Fit Index

Reference index	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Statistical value	2.205	0.948	0.93	0.947	0.964	0.97	0.048
Reference value	<3	>0.8	>0.8	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08
Conclusion	Qualified	Qualified	Qualified	Qualified	Qualified	Qualified	Qualified

The model fit statistics summarized in the table 2, the fit index situation is: $\chi^2/df=2.205$, greater than 1 and less than 3; $GFI=0.948$, $AGFI=0.93$, both greater than 0.8, $NFI=0.947$, $TLI=0.964$, $CFI=0.97$, all greater than 0.9; $RMSEA=0.048$, less than 0.05, indicating a very good fit. Given that the model's fit indices meet all required thresholds, we can proceed to interpret the path relationships within the model.

3. Path Analysis

Table 3 Pathway Coefficient Test for the Structural Equation Model

H	Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
H1	SDT \rightarrow PA	0.347	0.032	5.952	***
H2	SDT \rightarrow CP	0.248	0.042	3.805	***
H3	SDT \rightarrow TII	0.160	0.068	2.416	0.016

Note: *indicates $P<0.05$, ** indicates $P<0.01$, *** indicates $P<0.001$. Note: SDT=Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism; PA=Place Attachment; CP=Community Participation; TII=Tourism Industry Innovation.

The path coefficient between PA and SDT was 0.347 (C.R. = 5.952, $p < .001$), demonstrating a key driver for of PA on SDT and supporting the hypothesis.

The path coefficient between CP and SDT is 0.248, with a C.R. value of 3.805 and a corresponding significance level of $P < 0.001$. Consequently, CP has a marked positive effect on SDT, thus validating the hypothesis.

A significant positive effect of TII on SDT was observed, as evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.160 (C.R. = 2.416, $p < .05$), providing empirical support for the hypothesis.

As evidenced by the data from the above table 3, the path coefficients (Estimate) of all hypothesized paths (H1-H3) are positively correlated with statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the positive relationships between the variables are all valid. The above path coefficient test results show the statistical results support the theoretical assumptions and have high explanatory power. PA and CP had a strong positive effect on SDT, and TII had a relatively weak effect, indicating that SDT was mainly driven by PA and CP. If the model is used for management decision-making, priority should be given to the improvement of PA and CP.

Discussion

1. Place attachment and sustainable development of rural tourism

The results demonstrate that place attachment serves as a major contributing factor for the sustainability of rural tourism. Consistent with the research of (Cheng & Wu, 2015; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2008; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001; Cheng et al., 2022), the stronger an individual's place attachment, the greater their inclination toward environmentally responsible behaviors, which reflect their endorsement of sustainable tourism. Consistent with findings from (Bajrami et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2022), the stronger

community residents' attachment to a specific area, the more positive their attitudes toward sustainable tourism development. In other words, rural tourism operators' attachment to a particular place contributes significantly to their attitude towards sustainable development of community tourism.

2. Community participation and sustainable development of rural tourism

Quantitative research findings of this paper demonstrate that community participation plays a vital role in advancing sustainable rural tourism. Consistent with Agwu's (2013) findings, the research demonstrates a significant positive association between local engagement and sustainable rural tourism development. Making community participation an integral component of tourism project governance, from planning to implementation, constitutes a key policy imperative for sustainable development. This research outcome aligns with the conclusions of studies by Lekaota (2016) and Tola et al. (2024). Therefore, it is suggested that local management should improve the awareness and participation capacity of tourism practitioners through education and training, so that they can better participate in community affairs.

3. Tourism industry innovation and sustainable development of rural tourism

Quantitative research findings indicate that tourism industry innovation has a more significant positive influence on the sustainable development of rural tourism, but the strength of its influence is not as strong as the two factors of place attachment and community participation. Aligning with prior research (Loureiro, 2019; Heslinga et al., 2019; Kuščer et al., 2017; Liu & Cheng, 2018), The present study provides further evidence that innovation is intricately linked to the sustainable tourism.

The research results prove that tourism operators have insufficient understanding on the function of the travel industry innovation in driving sustainable, high-caliber growth in rural tourism, and their innovation capabilities

are relatively limited. Therefore, in the future, it is necessary to enhance the cultivation of the innovative awareness and ability of tourism practitioners. Especially in the digital age, it is urgent to improve the ability of tourism practitioners to innovate rural tourism products by using digital technologies (such as digital museums, VR/AR, etc.) to provide tourists with immersive rural cultural experiences, as well as to carry out precise marketing by using big data and other technologies.

Recommendations

The quantitative research results of this paper indicate that place attachment, community participation and tourism industry innovation are three important influencing factors affecting tourism sustainability at the research sites. Based on the above research results, corresponding policy suggestions can be provided for local governments and tourism management departments. Objectively, These measures fosters sustained innovation and significant economic gains in local tourism, while simultaneously contributing to the protection of the local ecological environment and rural culture. In addition, due to the limitations of the author's research capabilities and conditions, there are also some deficiencies in this study: First, no horizontal comparative study on sustainability of rural tourism in different tourist destinations was conducted; Secondly, this paper did not explore the possible influence mechanisms of other variables such as tourist satisfaction on the sustainable development of rural tourism. Therefore, the conclusions drawn might not be complete enough.

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