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Exploring the Formation of Behavioral Intention Toward Rural Tourism via Sensory Experience and Memorable Tourism Experiences, a Case Study in Henan, China

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the formation of tourists' behavioral intentions toward rural tourism by analyzing sensory experiences and memorable tourism experiences. The research was conducted through a case study in Henan, China. Using a quantitative approach, a survey was conducted where 490 participants completed a face-to-face questionnaire. The findings from the partial least squares structural equation modeling revealed that out of the five sensory experiences, only touch has a statistically significant and positive impact on behavioral intention. On the other hand, sight, sound, taste, and smell do not have a meaningful influence. In contrast, all five senses exhibited substantial beneficial effects on memorable tourism experiences. Memorable tourism experiences emerged to act as a mediator between the five senses and behavioral intention. This study is a pioneer attempt in the field of rural tourism, using the embodiment perspective to explore the mechanisms and connections linking sensory experiences, memorable tourism experiences, and behavioral intentions. The findings offer significant theoretical insights and practical contributions to advance the research and industry of rural tourism.

KEYWORDS

Rural tourism; sensory experience; memorable tourism experiences; behavioral intention; PLS-SEM; China

Introduction

Rural tourism focuses on visiting and experiencing rural or countryside destinations as opposed to urban or traditional tourist spots (Lane, 1994; Middleton, 1967). It encompasses the endeavor of travelers to engage in authentic and immersive experiences in rural areas by actively engaging with the local culture, traditions, and natural environment. It is an expanding sector within the wider tourism business, appealing to tourists who are interested in genuine, less popular experiences (Fakfare et al., 2021; Guan & Huang, 2022; Tănase et al., 2022).

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Rural tourism provides economic opportunities for local communities while also contributing to the preservation of natural landscapes and cultural traditions. Many rural destinations aim to improve their socio-economic well-being by utilizing rural tourism, which serves both financial and social purposes (Helgadóttir & Dashper, 2021; B. Li et al., 2020; Rosalina et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these locations encounter a notable obstacle in the form of the homogeneity of their tourism offerings (Cui & Zhang, 2022; Lv et al., 2024). This phenomenon arises from the presence of comparable tourism resources and geographical characteristics across destinations located in the same geographic area. Consequently, these places face difficulties in differentiating themselves, resulting in a scarcity of distinctive features that could appeal to a wider variety of tourists.

The homogenization of rural tourism experiences also stifles innovation, limits the potential for revenue generation, and dilutes the authenticity of the local culture and environment (Xie et al., 2022; Yousaf & Fan, 2020), ultimately challenging the destination marketing of rural tourism destinations (Lv et al., 2024). In addition, it might lead to population explosion in popular regions while disregarding lesser-known but equally valuable rural sites, which is detrimental to the sustainable growth of the latter. Therefore, the task of enhancing the competitiveness, reputation, and appeal of rural tourism areas has emerged as a crucial concern for these locations. Previous research has primarily focused on examining the growth of rural tourism by analyzing prominent case studies. These case studies are used as representative examples to determine strategies for enhancing their competitiveness and appeal (Xie et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Despite the fact that lesser known or less established rural tourism locations make up the majority of rural tourism development, experts have mostly disregarded them.

Additionally, studies have investigated the components that influence the loyalty, attachment, and behavioral intention of rural visitors through diverse models and viewpoints, along with to economic development and the supply of rural tourism (Kastenholz et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2020). Previous study has focused on the influence of objective environmental variables and subjective psychological factors on tourists' experiences and behavior, but has overlooked the significance of tourists' sensory experiences (Fakfare et al., 2021; H. Li et al., 2023). Therefore, there is a restricted investigation on the significance of human sensory encounters in tourism experiences.

This paper aims to examine the challenges of sustainable development in rural tourism destinations, specifically focusing on the homogenization of experiences, decreased competition, and reduced attraction. Embodiment perspective was utilized to explore how sensory experiences and memorable tourism experiences influence behavioral intention toward rural tourism. A case study was conducted in Henan, a province with a rural population

accounting for 44.57% of its total population (about 50 million people) residing in around 45,000 administrative villages among a variety of landscapes such as mountains, plains, basins, hills, and loess plateaus, in the central region of China. The findings are anticipated to generate significant advancements for the growth of rural tourism by offering novel theoretical frameworks and practical knowledge.

Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

A sensory experience arises when environmental stimuli elicit a response from the five senses (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Wörfel et al., 2022). The sensory organs of individuals, such as the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin, play a crucial role in acquiring external information and influencing their perceptions and psychological processes (Yang et al., 2021). The Embodiment Theory, which investigates the interplay between the human body and the surrounding environment, highlights that the tourism experience is shaped by physical sensations and encounters (Yin et al., 2023). Undoubtedly, the sensory aspect of tourism encounters is a captivating field of research that can offer useful understanding of how tourists interact with their environment. It encompasses the various sensory inputs – sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell – that travelers encounter during their journeys (H. T. Chen & Lin, 2018; Kastenholz et al., 2020).

There is mounting evidence that "seeing with the mind's eye," "hearing with the mind's ear, and 'tasting with the mind's tongue' influence the evaluations and behavior of consumers (Elder & Krishna, 2022). It is thus possible to distinguish a destination from others by utilizing sensory attributes to establish the destination's unique identity (Kah et al., 2022). H. Li et al. (2023) discovered that sensory marketing has become crucial for advertising and promotion, offering immersive sensory experiences to visitors can increase their level of involvement with a site. Similarly, Lam et al. (2022) verified that sensory marketing, specifically through taste, sight, and touch, directly affects tourists" intention to return. Scholars have also revealed that a stronger message has a greater effect on one or more senses: sight, smell, sound, taste and touch (Manojkumar et al., 2021). These studies primarily examine the sensory marketing approach, highlighting the clear correlation between sensory perception and behaviors. Nevertheless, there is a lack of extensive research on how it might be strategically applied in the tourism industry (H. Li et al., 2023). Although limited research has been conducted on certain types of tourism, such as culinary tourism and wine tourism. Santos et al. (2019) discovered that the sensory attributes of sound, smell, and touch significantly influence repurchase behavior in the context of wine tourism. However, there is a scarcity of studies examining the relationship between sensory experience

and behavioral intention in rural tourism, particularly in the context of rural tourism that is closely linked to tourists' sensory perception.

According to the previous debate, it is probable that the five senses assist rural tourists in forming perceptions of the environment and impacting their behavior toward rural tourism destinations. This study thus hypothesized that:

H1. Sight positively influences tourists' behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

H2. Sound positively influences tourists' behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

H3. Taste positively influences tourists' behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

H4. Smell positively influences tourists' behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

H5. Touch positively influences tourists' behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

Memorable tourism experiences encompass distinctive, influential, and enduring moments or interactions that travelers hold dear and recollect long after their expedition has concluded (Hosany et al., 2022; J. H. Kim, 2014). These memorable encounters, which are based on tourism experiences, have important practical consequences for managing destinations, improving competitiveness, and promoting sustainable development. The recollections of previous encounters exert significant sway on the future choices of tourists, emphasizing the significance of memorable tourism experiences (Gerou, 2022; Huang & Bu, 2022; Monika et al., 2022). When choosing a travel or holiday destination, tourists typically prioritize remembering these notable places and experiences (Anaya & Lehto, 2023). Therefore, several scholars argue that memorable tourism experiences are the most dependable indicators of future behavior, providing valuable insights that are essential for both managing tourism destinations and protecting the environment (Anaya & Lehto, 2023; X. Chen et al., 2020; Hosany et al., 2022). Atasoy and Eren (2023) present supplementary evidence to bolster the notion that a memorable tourism experience holds greater significance than an ordinary one. They demonstrate that the choices travelers make in recalling their tourism experiences have a significant impact on their decision-making. There is a growing body of research on the impact of memorable tourism experiences on tourists' behavioral intentions in various tourism contexts. It is crucial to assess

the significance of rural tourism, as it fulfills extra roles in contemporary society, such as promoting social interaction and offering possibilities for diverse experiences. However, further research is still required. Therefore, this study formulated the following hypothesis:

H6. Memorable tourism experiences positively influence tourists' behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

Sensory stimulation may significantly impact tourists' memories of their travel experience (Sthapit, 2019), leading researchers in the field of tourism to thoroughly investigate memorable tourism experiences in conjunction with other factors. Prior research has already confirmed a direct correlation between sensory stimulation and memorable tourism experiences. Agapito et al. (2017) found a higher likelihood of tourists visiting destinations with perceived rich sensory experiences, resulting in more enduring memories. Esau and Senese (2022a) proposed that sensory-driven experiences assist wine tourists in identifying a destination's unique characteristics, whereas Mehraliyev et al. (2020) discovered that negative sensory experiences have a stronger impact on online review ratings compared to positive sensory experiences, given the differing weights assigned to the five senses. Buckley (2022) confirmed the significant roles of the five senses in creating memorable tourism experiences, particularly in wildlife encounters, with sight being the most prominent followed by sound and smell, and less frequently, touch or taste. Previous research has primarily focused on sensory sensitive marketing in tourism, which emphasizes the experiences that tourists can have through a limited number of senses. However, these studies have overlooked the potential for multiple sensory experiences in rural tourism. In reality, rural areas offer a wealth of sensory stimuli that can greatly enhance the tourism experience. By capitalizing on these stimuli, rural destinations can create unique and memorable experiences that attract and keep tourists. Based on the previous discussion, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H7. Sight positively influences memorable tourism experiences in rural tourism.

H8. Sound positively influences memorable tourism experiences in rural tourism.

H9. Taste positively influences memorable tourism experiences in rural tourism.

H10. Smell positively influences memorable tourism experiences in rural tourism.

H11. Touch positively influences memorable tourism experiences in rural tourism.

Not all studies have consistently supported a significant and direct relationship between sensory experience and behavioral intention. In sensory marketing, Torabi et al. (2021) conducted a case study of ETKA chain stores in Iran and found that customers' sensory experiences are likely to have a direct and significant impact on their emotions, but this may not translate into a significant impact on their word-of-mouth intentions. Similarly, M. Kim et al. (2021) found no direct relationships between sensory perceptions and behavioral intent in store-based retailing. Conversely, Carissa et al. (2020) studied consumers' behavioral intention in Indonesia's music concert industry and indicated that sensory experience ranks third in influence, following memorable experience and social experience.

The five senses, by perceiving the world via various elements, allow individuals to form their understanding of the surrounding environment, which in turn affects their consumption behaviors (Brochado et al., 2021). For instance, vision is the most important sense on-site (Elvekrok & Gulbrandsøy, 2022); smell is closely linked to pleasure, emotion, and memories (Trang & Lee, 2018); direct touch of food in sampling and consumption contexts in retailing may enhance consumer enjoyment (Madzharov, 2019); and sound, in the form of artificial intelligence-driven music biometrics, influences customers' purchase decisions making (Rodgers et al., 2021). Hence, sensory stimuli have a favorable impact on experiences that are easily remembered, subsequently leading to a beneficial influence on the intention to act in a certain way. Previous studies have attempted to examine the mediating effect of memorable tourism experiences, but there is a lack of research on the role of memorable tourism experiences in connecting sensory perception and behavioral intention in rural tourism. Therefore, the mediation hypotheses were formulated as follows:

H12. Memorable tourism experiences mediate the relationship between sight and behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

H13. Memorable tourism experiences mediate the relationship between sound and behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

H14. Memorable tourism experiences mediate the relationship between taste and behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

H15. Memorable tourism experiences mediate the relationship between smell and behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

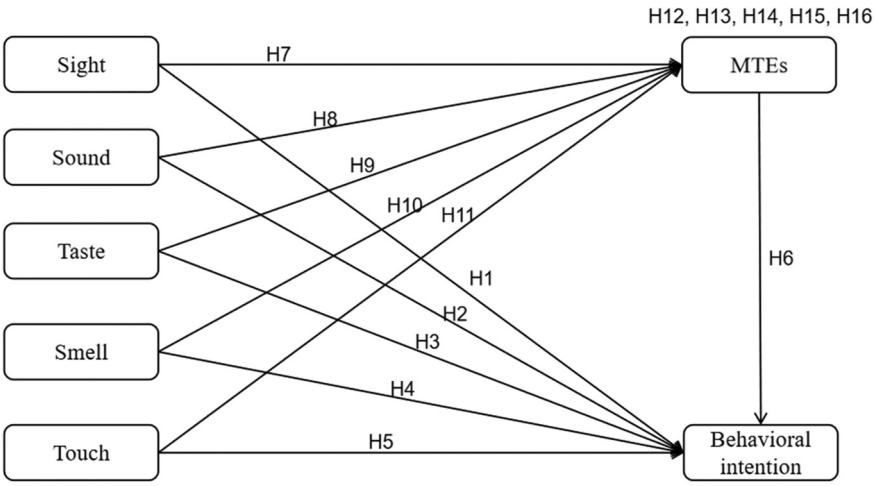

Figure 1. The proposed research model.

H16. Memorable tourism experiences mediate the relationship between touch and behavioral intention toward rural tourism.

Methods

Measurement instrument

The proposed model (Figure 1) was evaluated using a qualitative survey methodology. A questionnaire was created consisting of two separate sections: one for collecting demographic information and the other for measuring constructs using multiple-item scales that were modified from earlier research. The primary components of sensory experience encompassed the five modalities of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These dimensions are enabled by the sense organs of humans and allow individuals to perceive visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile experiences. Stone et al. (2022) utilized the senses of sight, smell, taste, and texture in their research on food and beverage activities, revealing a strong connection between these senses and memory. M. Kim et al. (2021) identified seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and touching on as primary methods through which consumers gather product information. Therefore, drawing from these prior investigations, the five fundamental dimensions of sensory experiences assessed in this study were sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, totaling 20 items.

The measurement of memorable tourism experiences in this study comprised seven dimensions (i.e., hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty) across 24 items (J. H. Kim et al., 2012). Memorable tourism experiences were assessed as a reflective-formative second-

order construct, as all seven dimensions together establish the construct, and no single dimension can fully represent its meaning. A higher-order formative construct is crucial, providing a robust means of testing and evaluating the construct.

Behavioral intention in this study encompassed three dimensions, i.e., intent to return, word of mouth, and recommendation (Y. Kim et al., 2022; Rather & Hollebeek, 2021), measured with three items. The demographic profile part was designed to collect data on the sample's characteristics, such as age, gender, education level, and income.

Study setting and sample

Four national and provincial rural tourism destinations in Luanchuan, Linzhou, Gongyi, and Qixian in Henan, China, were selected for their significance in representing rural tourism development. First, Luanchuan holds a position among China's top 100 tourist counties, while Linzhou and Gongyi are recognized among the 100 potential counties in the national county tourism development plan. Lastly, Qixian is listed in the first batch of provincial-level tourism demonstration zones in Henan Province. These locations are notable exemplars that have played a pivotal role in promoting local rural tourism development, garnering attention, and motivating other regions to cultivate their rural tourist sectors.

The target population of this study comprised of rural tourists in the aforementioned four sites. After obtaining rural tourist statistics from local government reports, the minimum sample size was determined by utilizing two tools: G*Power software and the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator. These tools were employed to carry out mathematical computations and guarantee precision in the process of determining the sample size. As an additional measure, the Krejcie and Morgan's table was used for verification.

Data collection and analysis

Using purposive sampling, the developed questionnaire survey was administered to eligible respondents who met the following selection criteria: 1) rural tourists and 2) over the age of 18. Data collection took place face-to-face from January 2023 to March 2023 in the main commercial streets and tourist entrances of specific locations: Chongdugou (Luanchuan), Shibanya (Linzhou), Zhulin (Gongyi), and Zhaozhuang (Qixian). A total of 575 questionnaires were distributed using the mobile phone scanning function for electronic questionnaires.

For data cleaning and descriptive analysis, the Windows software SPSS 26.0 was used. It offers a user-friendly platform for statistical analysis in social science and behavioral research (Yockey, 2017). Via SmartPLS 4.1, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the research model, as it

enables the analysis of both latent constructs (unobserved) and manifest variables (observed) within the framework (Hair et al., 2019). As a result, 85 responses were eliminated for the same option for all questions, even though none of them contained missing values. 490 responses in total were gathered for further examination in the final database. The study utilized a two-stage strategy, incorporating the repeated indicator technique, to examine the measurement model that includes both first order and second order constructs. PLSpredict was regarded as the most straightforward way to assess the predicting abilities of the PLS path model.

Results

Sample characteristics

Out of the 490 respondents (Table 1), the majority, accounting for 89%, were tourists from the local province of Henan, with a smaller percentage from other provinces. Females comprised more than half of the respondents,

Table 1. Demographic profile ($N = 490$).

Demographic: Profile	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	205	41.8
	Female	285	58.2
Education	Primary School	2	0.4
	Secondary School	42	8.6
	High School and Secondary Vocational school	51	10.4
	Junior School	76	15.5
	Bachelor	239	48.8
	Master	69	14.1
	Doctor	11	2.2
	Others	0	0
Age	18-27	249	50.8
	28-37	116	23.7
	38-47	72	14.7
	48-57	39	7.9
	58 and above	11	2.9
Occupation	Management	45	9.2
	Technical worker	10	2
	Government	33	6.7
	Professional	71	14.4
	Agricultural worker	15	3.1
	Self-employed	22	4.5
	Service worker	17	3.5
	Housewife	18	3.7
	Student	198	40.4
	Retired/Not in the workforce	18	3.7
	others	43	8.8
Monthly income Level (CNY)	Below 3000	232	47.3
	3001-5000	107	21.8
	5001-7000	88	18.0
	7001-9000	32	6.5
	9001 -11,000	12	2.4
	11001 -13,000	5	1.0
	above 13,000	14	2.9

totaling 58.2%. A significant proportion of respondents had completed at least a Junior School education or higher, with bachelor's degree holders representing the highest percentage at 48.8%. Occupations among respondents were diverse, with students comprising the largest percentage. Regarding monthly income, approximately 87.1% of respondents reported a monthly income below 7000 CNY. The age distribution showed that young people aged 18 to 27 accounted for the majority at 50.8%, followed by the age group of 28 to 37 at 23.7%.

The measurement model

In the first stage of PLS-SEM analysis, the repeated indicator technique approach was employed to assess the measurement model. Validation of the measurement model involved examining the validity and reliability of all latent variables (Table 2). The first-order latent variables were established by checking the indicator loadings and cross-loadings. Items SO3 (0.513) and SM4 (0.685) were removed due to a low loading value below 0.7. Additionally, items SO4, SM1, MK1, MN1, and MR2, which exhibited significant cross-loadings with different constructs with a difference below 0.1, were deleted. All remaining indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for indicators in the first-order constructs were below 5.0, ranging from 1.229 to 3.386.

Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.730 to 0.876, exceeding the recommended minimum level of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency reliability. Composite reliability values (CR) were also above the recommended limit of 0.7, ranging from 0.731 to 0.880, confirming the reliability of internal consistency. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were greater than the threshold of 0.5, ranging from 0.652 to 0.863, verifying convergent validity. Discriminant validity of the first-order reflective constructs was assessed using both the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio and Fornell-Larcker's criterion. The majority of HTMT values were below 0.85, with a few slightly above 0.9 (Table 3). Upon analyzing the confidence interval generated using the bootstrapping technique in Smart PLS with 5000 resamples, it is evident that the empirical 95% confidence interval does not encompass a value of 1. This suggests an acceptable degree of discrimination. Therefore, the discriminant validity has been established.

Validation of the second-order constructs was based on the data derived from the first-order latent scores. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.730 to 0.953, while CR values all above 0.7, both exceeding the recommended limits. AVE values ranged from 0.653 to 0.854, all above the 0.5 threshold. Thus, reliability and convergent validity were achieved. Discriminant validity has been effectively demonstrated, as indicated by all HTMT values being below 0.85, except for two values

Table 2. Assessment of measurement model.

Latent variable	Item	Outer loading(Before)	Outer loading (After)	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Sight	SI1	0.773	0.772	0.821	0.831	0.653
	SI2	0.859	0.859			
	SI3	0.868	0.868			
	SI4	0.725	0.725			
Smell	SM1	0.861	Delete	0.829	0.829	0.854
	SM2	0.868	0.924			
	SM3	0.887	0.924			
	SM4	0.685	Delete			
Sound	SO1	0.775	0.829	0.730	0.731	0.652
	SO2	0.783	0.856			
	SO3	0.513	Delete			
	SO4	0.713	Delete			
	SO5	0.745	0.732			
Taste	TA1	0.884	0.884	0.876	0.880	0.801
	TA2	0.909	0.910			
	TA3	0.892	0.892			
Touch	TO1	0.814	0.814	0.842	0.843	0.678
	TO2	0.843	0.843			
	TO3	0.835	0.835			
	TO4	0.801	0.800			
Hedonism	MH1	0.843	0.843	0.869	0.869	0.717
	MH2	0.844	0.845			
	MH3	0.848	0.847			
	MH4	0.853	0.853			
Involvement	MI1	0.879	0.880	0.867	0.868	0.790
	MI2	0.895	0.894			
	MI3	0.893	0.892			
Knowledge	MK1	0.865	Delete	0.841	0.841	0.863
	MK2	0.881	0.928			
	MK3	0.910	0.930			
Local culture	ML1	0.910	0.910	0.875	0.876	0.801
	ML2	0.875	0.875			
	ML3	0.900	0.900			
Meaningfulness	MM1	0.892	0.891	0.848	0.849	0.767
	MM2	0.869	0.870			
	MM3	0.866	0.866			
Novelty	MN1	0.835	Delete	0.876	0.876	0.801
	MN2	0.874	0.888			
	MN3	0.896	0.907			
	MN4	0.867	0.891			
Refreshment	MR1	0.862	0.890	0.852	0.852	0.771
	MR2	0.749	Delete			
	MR3	0.847	0.872			
	MR4	0.864	0.873			
Behavioral intention	BI1	0.888	0.890	0.865	0.865	0.787
	BI2	0.885	0.886			
	BI3	0.888	0.887			

Note: Sight (SI), sound (SO), Taste (TA), Smell (SM), Touch (TO), Memorable tourism experiences (MTEs), Behavioral intention (BI).

that were slightly above 0.9 (Table 4). The majority of VIF values are below 3.3, except for novelty (4.503), refreshment (4.088), and involvement (4.596), which are over 3.3 but below 5. In addition, the empirical 95% confidence interval created through bootstrapping in Smart PLS does not contain the value of 1 (Table 5). This indicates that there is sufficiently discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant validity- HTMT matrix (first order).

	Behavioral intention	Hedonism	Knowledge	Local culture	Meaningfulness	Novelty	Refreshment	Sight	Smell	Sound	Taste	Touch	involvement
Behavioral intention													
Hedonism	0.711												
Knowledge	0.766	0.815											
Local culture	0.698	0.792	0.790										
Meaningfulness	0.666	0.781	0.839	0.813									
Novelty	0.722	0.917	0.894	0.859	0.865								
Refreshment	0.780	0.845	0.870	0.908	0.867	0.892							
Sight	0.566	0.605	0.570	0.654	0.550	0.581	0.589						
Smell	0.563	0.585	0.611	0.613	0.565	0.629	0.578	0.710					
Sound	0.598	0.614	0.579	0.633	0.616	0.596	0.676	0.920	0.689				
Taste	0.533	0.573	0.604	0.593	0.591	0.629	0.574	0.718	0.942	0.724			
Touch	0.633	0.635	0.546	0.646	0.600	0.590	0.629	0.724	0.707	0.773	0.666		
involvement	0.762	0.846	0.915	0.817	0.928	0.907	0.934	0.599	0.580	0.654	0.573	0.599	

Table 4. Discriminant validity- HTMT matrix (second order).

	Behavioral intention	MTEs	Sight	Smell	Sound	Taste	Touch
Behavioral intention							
MTEs	0.785						
Sight	0.566	0.639					
Smell	0.563	0.640	0.710				
Sound	0.598	0.673	0.920	0.689			
Taste	0.533	0.637	0.718	0.942	0.724		
Touch	0.633	0.653	0.724	0.707	0.773	0.666	

Table 5. Confidence intervals (second order).

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	5.0%	95.0%
MTEs <-> Behavioral intention	0.785	0.785	0.730	0.837
Sight <-> Behavioral intention	0.566	0.567	0.496	0.634
Sight <-> MTEs	0.639	0.639	0.583	0.692
Smell <-> Behavioral intention	0.563	0.564	0.489	0.636
Smell <-> MTEs	0.640	0.640	0.579	0.700
Smell <-> Sight	0.710	0.710	0.635	0.779
Sound <-> Behavioral intention	0.598	0.599	0.520	0.676
Sound <-> MTEs	0.673	0.673	0.609	0.735
Sound <-> Sight	0.920	0.921	0.875	0.967
Sound <-> Smell	0.689	0.690	0.607	0.768
Taste <-> Behavioral intention	0.533	0.533	0.463	0.601
Taste <-> MTEs	0.637	0.637	0.582	0.690
Taste <-> Sight	0.718	0.718	0.654	0.777
Taste <-> Smell	0.942	0.943	0.905	0.981
Taste <-> Sound	0.724	0.725	0.655	0.792
Touch <-> Behavioral intention	0.633	0.634	0.562	0.702
Touch <-> MTEs	0.653	0.653	0.592	0.711
Touch <-> Sight	0.724	0.725	0.660	0.786
Touch <-> Smell	0.707	0.707	0.629	0.781
Touch <-> Sound	0.773	0.773	0.702	0.841
Touch <-> Taste	0.666	0.667	0.596	0.734

The structural model

The results indicate that the dimensions of sight, sound, taste, and smell have non-significant effects on behavioral intention (Table 6), as H1 ($\beta = 0.023$, $p = .322$), H2 ($\beta = 0.028$, $p = .303$), H3 (β=-0.041, $p = .242$), and H4 ($\beta = 0.055$, $p = .59$) were rejected. However, H5, which examined the relationship between touch and behavioral intention, was accepted ($\beta = 0.159$, $p = .004$). H6 ($\beta = 0.584$, $p = .000$), which investigated the effect of memorable tourism experiences on behavioral intention, was also supported. Likewise, H7 ($\beta = 0.135$, $p = .000$), H8 ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = .002$), H9 ($\beta = 0.172$, $p = .003$), H10 ($\beta = 0.132$, $p = .021$), and H11 ($\beta = 0.236$, $p = .000$) were all significant, validating the positive effects of all five sensory dimensions (sight, sound, taste, smell and touch) on memorable tourism experiences (Figure 2).

The R^2 values indicated the strong explanatory power of the structural model, whereby memorable tourism experiences accounted for 53.5% of the variance in behavioral intention and the five senses accounted for 47.5% of the variance in memorable tourism experiences. Further, the large effect size, f^2, of

Table 6. Results of structural model.

Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	Result
H1.SI -> BI	0.023	0.026	0.050	0.461	.322	Reject
H2.SO -> BI	0.028	0.030	0.055	0.514	.303	Reject
H3.TA -> BI	−0.041	−0.042	0.058	0.699	.242	Reject
H4.SM ->BI	0.055	0.054	0.055	0.998	.159	Reject
H5.TO -> BI	0.159	0.160	0.060	2.657	.004**	Accept
H6. MTEs -> BI	0.584	0.582	0.054	10.844	.000***	Accept
H7. SI -> MTEs	0.135	0.137	0.051	2.658	.004**	Accept
H8.SO -> MTEs	0.151	0.151	0.052	2.893	.002**	Accept
H9.TA -> MTEs	0.172	0.172	0.063	2.737	.003**	Accept
H10.SM -> MTEs	0.132	0.130	0.065	2.037	.021*	Accept
H11.TO -> MTEs	0.236	0.237	0.049	4.823	.000***	Accept
H12.SI -> MTEs -> BI	0.079	0.080	0.031	2.556	.005**	Accept
H13.SO -> MTEs -> BI	0.088	0.088	0.031	2.819	.002**	Accept
H14.TA -> MTEs -> BI	0.101	0.100	0.038	2.654	.004**	Accept
H15.SM -> MTEs -> BI	0.077	0.076	0.039	1.995	.023*	Accept
H16.TO -> MTEs -> BI	0.138	0.138	0.030	4.538	.000***	Accept

Note: * means sig < 0.05, ** means sig < 0.01, *** means sig < 0.001.

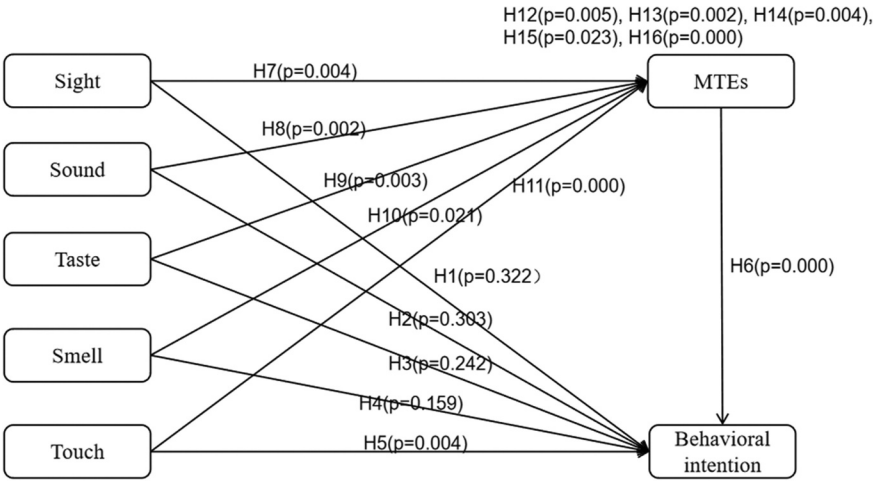

Figure 2. Results of structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM).

0.385 shows that memorable tourism experiences exhibited the most substantial influence on behavioral intention, followed by touch. In terms of the impact on memorable tourism experiences, touch only had a small effect ($f^2 = 0.054$).

PLSpredict, based on the concepts of separate training and holdout samples for estimating model parameters and evaluating a model's predictive power (Shmueli et al., 2019), was employed in the second order. The results indicate that $Q^2_{predict}$ was greater than zero, ranging from 0.260 to 0.367, and PLS-SEM < LM for all indicators (Table 7); therefore, the model had high predictive

Table 7. Plspredict assessment of manifest variables.

	Q^2 predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	PLS-SEM_MAE	LM_RMSE	LM_MAE
BI1	0.261	0.706	0.557	0.719	0.569
BI2	0.260	0.682	0.533	0.693	0.542
BI3	0.275	0.650	0.523	0.660	0.531
Hedonism	0.366	0.798	0.651	0.812	0.652
Knowledge	0.321	0.826	0.653	0.845	0.673
Local culture	0.398	0.778	0.616	0.786	0.619
Meaningfulness	0.338	0.816	0.631	0.830	0.642
Novelty	0.367	0.798	0.630	0.804	0.636
Refreshment	0.364	0.799	0.627	0.806	0.641
involvement	0.359	0.803	0.624	0.811	0.645

Note: Behavioral intention (BI).

power. Notably, the investigation of the mediating effect in this study revealed that memorable tourism experiences play a significant partial mediating role between the dimensions of sensory experience and behavioral intention, with H12, H13, H14, H15, and H16 being accepted.

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions

The present study investigated the relationships between the five dimensions of sensory experiences, memorable tourism experiences, and behavioral intentions in the setting of rural tourism. A quantitative approach was used to assure precision and thoroughness. The study has drawn comprehensive findings with robust empirical support by including pertinent variables into the research framework, collecting survey data from a representative sample, and utilizing PLS-SEM to analyze the structural relationships among the variables. These findings provide valuable insights into both theoretical and practical expertise in the field, offering an extensive understanding of how behavioral intention is formed in rural tourism.

The research purpose in the context of rural tourism was to examine the impact of the five aspects of sensory experience on memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intention. The findings demonstrated that the five sensory dimensions of sight, sound, taste, and touch exert a beneficial influence on the formation of memorable tourism experiences. These findings are consistent with other research that suggests sensory stimuli could possess diverse impacts on long-term memories.

Esau and Senese (Esau & Senese, 2022b) suggested that wine tourism has the potential to enrich tourism experiences by establishing enduring connections with a destination through sensory encounters. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that not all senses carry equal significance in shaping the overall tourist experience (Mateiro et al., 2018). Vision has been noted as the most crucial quality factor contributing to tourist satisfaction, followed by sound, taste, and

smell (Elvekrok & Gulbrandsøy, 2022). Furthermore, prior research has indicated that olfactory encounters may not have a substantial influence on the experiences of tourists (Shao & Lin, 2021). When one sense is deficient, the other senses can compensate and offer a complete sensory encounter.

Rural tourism destinations can improve their competitiveness by boosting sensory experiences for tourists, in response to the homogenized rural tourism experiences impacted by cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic characteristics in individual places. Thus, it is important for rural tourism destinations to carefully plan infrastructure improvements that closely match tourists' sensory experiences, offering diverse sensory engagements and creating memorable tourism experiences through product promotion and innovation. For example, hosting unique events, providing authentic local food experiences, and facilitating interaction with the natural environment. In essence, successful rural tourism destinations must go beyond visual stimuli and provide experiences that engage all the senses (Brochado et al., 2021).

The study found that the sensations of sight, sound, taste, and smell had little impact on behavioral intention, however touch has a beneficial influence. These findings align with other research that suggested there are indirect connections between sensory experience and behavioral intention, typically influenced by emotions and experiences. For instance, Torabi et al. (2021) found in their investigation of ETKA chain stores in Iran that the sensory experience of customers has a direct influence on their emotions, but it has a relatively less effect on their intents to spread positive word-of-mouth. In store-based retailing, M. Kim et al. (2021) discovered that there was no direct relationship between sensory perceptions and behavioral intentions. In a separate study, Carissa et al. (2020) determined that sensory experience ranked as the third most significant element influencing behavioral intention toward Indonesia's music performance sector, behind memorable experience and social experience. This research indicate that sensory experience has a favorable impact on remembering memories, which in turn influence behavioral intention. Therefore, the most effective strategy for developing rural tourism may involve investigating and identifying the factors that influence tourists' intentions through exciting their senses and creating unique and memorable experiences. For instance, towns that include visually striking architecture, lively commemorations of history, captivating narratives, sophisticated and interactive technological platforms, and tranquil areas for relaxation have the potential to evoke a range of emotions, thoughts, and encounters, so enriching the entire tourism experience.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study demonstrated a notable and positive influence of touch on behavioral intention, indicating that under specific situations, sensory experience might directly affect behavioral intention. This could be attributed to the fact that touch facilitates a direct connection between products and individuals, enabling prompt assessment. Rehman

et al. (2022) verified that sensory experience had a beneficial impact on the behavioral intention of male gamers engaged in playing PUBG (Player Unknown's Battlegrounds). In the tourism context, the tactile sense of tourists can provide authentic feelings and trust in the destination, subsequently influencing behavioral intention. C. Chen et al. (2021) highlighted touchpoints as interactional bridges linking tourism destinations and tourists. Additionally, touch is often associated with consumers' purchase intentions in restaurants and supermarkets, where it is used to assess the weight or quality of items (Agapito et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2022). Since touch is considered the most sensitive sense, it could serve as a link between sensory experience and behavioral intention in rural tourism (Willard et al., 2012). Therefore, for rural tourism destinations, providing touchable products could result in highly favorable tourist behavior and strengthen the connection with tourists. Examples encompass platforms that facilitate the immersion in old farming instruments, traditional handcraft creation, local food cooking or harvesting, and other activities that integrate authentic cultural components.

Another goal of this study was to investigate whether memorable tourism experiences mediate the relationship between sensory experiences and behavioral intentions. The study investigated the immediate effects of memorable tourism experiences on behavioral intention. The findings were consistent with previous research conducted in various tourism settings, demonstrating a positive influence of memorable tourism experiences on behavioral intention (Anaya & Lehto, 2023; X. Chen et al., 2020; Hosany et al., 2022). Furthermore, the research revealed that memorable tourism experiences indeed act as a mediator between the five senses of sensory experience and behavioral intention, a finding supported by prior research. Stone et al. (2021) proposed that travelers who are driven by gastronomic and beverage encounters are more inclined to associate these experiences with their recollections in comparison to other travelers. Mehraliyev et al. (2020) established that consumer evaluations are affected by both positive and negative sensory encounters, with negative encounters exerting a more pronounced influence on online review ratings. Additionally, Z. Li et al. (2022) investigated the influence of short-form videos on specific brand experiences and offline behavioral intentions, highlighting the auxiliary role of visual stimuli in shaping brand experiences. Similarly, Yu et al. (2019) underscored the significant role of memorable tourism experiences in word-of-mouth and visitors' intentions to revisit forest recreation destinations, with dimensions such as refreshment, local culture, and involvement profoundly impacting the latter.

Thus, within the field of rural tourism, the process of enriching travelers' lasting tourism experiences by actively using all five senses is a potent tactic for bolstering local competitiveness, surmounting the obstacles of uniformity, and fostering sustainable performance and competitive advantage. Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the possible adverse consequences of memorable tourism

experiences in the context of rural tourism development since they can greatly influence tourists' impressions. Hence, the primary goal of rural tourist development should be to prioritize the provision of high-quality positive experiences by means of innovation and promotion.

Theoretical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this paper emphasizes the importance of adopting a holistic view grounded in embodied experiences when investigating the behavioral intentions of rural tourists. This research represents a pioneering effort in empirically evaluating the relationships among the variables under study, particularly within the context of rural tourism, thereby contributing to the advancement of scholarly discourse in this field. Firstly, this study offers a theoretical framework for understanding the formation of tourists' behavioral intention in rural tourism, thereby enriching the research perspectives in this domain. While previous studies have indicated the positive influence of the five senses on memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intention (Elvekrok & Gulbrandsøy, 2022; Liu et al., 2022)., this study introduces a new research context that adds depth to the literature on rural tourism.

Furthermore, this research contributes to existing theory by constructing and examining a comprehensive theoretical framework that encompasses variables related to sensory experiences, memorable tourism experiences, and behavioral intentions. By presenting an empirically validated integrated framework, this study sheds light on the impact of sensory experiences in rural tourism, thereby enhancing the understanding of the complex relationships between the five senses of sensory experience, memorable tourism experiences, and behavioral intentions. Additionally, by highlighting the mediating role played by memorable tourism experiences within the rural tourism context, this study adds another layer of theoretical significance to the literature, deepening the comprehension of how sensory experiences influence memorable tourism experiences and, consequently, behavioral intentions.

Practical implications

Managers, practitioners, and policymakers in rural tourism destinations, especially lesser-known ones, can use this study's insights and actionable recommendations to improve sustainable development by understanding tourists' behavioral intentions.

The research reveals managers and practitioners that sensory experiences are holistic encounters that favorably influence behavioral intentions through memorable tourism experiences, which are directly linked to behavioral intention. It emphasizes the necessity of understanding that tourists' impressions of places and environments are significantly influenced by their physical sensory

experiences, which affect their judgments and behaviors (Brochado et al., 2021; Lee & Min, 2022). Consequently, practitioners should prioritize creating unforgettable, five-sense tourist experiences. Offering distinct tourism items for different tourist sectors helps overcome homogenization. Tourism development projects should emphasize cultural architecture, inventive cuisine, exciting festivals, and immersive activities to boost destinations' competitiveness and sensory appeal. Managers can incorporate tourists' sensory experiences into innovative management techniques that balance local societal requirements and industry growth. This method can provide unique growth trajectories and increase local community participation. Traditional food streets, vivid performances, showcasing local environmental features, offering tourists opportunities to experience local culture can all improve the tourist experience and deepen their connection to the destination.

For policymakers, this study enables an alternative perspective on sustainable rural tourism development in less-known places facing uniformity and lack of competitiveness and attractiveness. The present research focuses on tourists' sensory experiences rather than environmental conditions, transportation infrastructure, destination engagement, or imagination (An & Alarcón, 2021; Putri et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021) With a "turn to the body" approach, this study emphasizes the importance of tourists' sensory experiences – sightseeing, smelling, tasting, touching, and hearing. Focusing on sensory experiences can improve tourism products and supply chains. For instance, In Shibanyan, Linzhou, environmental improvements and attractions like light displays, culinary avenues, and family-friendly recreational activities are being implemented to attract local tourists, especially during holidays. In Chongdugou, Luanchuan, multiple development tactics are used to boost the homestay business and create a rural tourist destination. By promoting high-quality sensory tourism experiences, officials may combine recreational themes with infrastructural development creates shared areas for residents and tourists, creating a balanced relationship between the tourism sector and the community at large.

Limitations and future research

Although this study provides helpful insights, it is important to recognize specific limits that may inform future research areas. The main method used to collect data was a quantitative approach, employing self-administered questionnaires. To deepen comprehension, future studies should investigate qualitative or mixed-method methodologies, using a variety of instruments for collecting data. Implementing this diverse strategy may result in a more intricate comprehension of sensory experiences in rural tourism.

Future research should also investigate particular domains, such as the impact of sensory experiences on memory, the emergence of memorable

tourism experiences associated with sensory encounters, and the formation of comprehensive sensory experiences in situations where certain senses are lacking during specific journeys or activities. Furthermore, it is crucial for future studies to determine effective methods for utilizing sensory experiences to enhance the distinctive allure of rural tourism sites. Considering the financial limitations in rural regions, the implementation of innovative approaches centered around sensory experiences could present fresh opportunities for the growth of tourism.

Additional study should also prioritize gaining a more profound comprehension of each aspect of sensory perception. It is worthwhile to investigate why touch has a beneficial impact on memorable tourism experiences and behavioral intentions, whereas other senses do not. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine how rural tourism sites might cater to guests with impairments who may have limited sensory experiences. Moreover, conducting a longitudinal study would offer significant knowledge regarding the enduring effects of sensory practices on the effectiveness and durability of rural tourist development. Similarly, undertaking comparative research across various areas or historical periods could provide useful insights into the efficacy of sensory methods in varied circumstances. By tackling these topics, we may advance our knowledge of sensory experiences in tourism and create a more thorough and comparative understanding, which will help us establish more successful strategies for the growth of rural tourism.

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