SOME RURAL ATTRACTIONS WHICH ATTRACT TOURISTS

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ABSTRACT

Developing rural tourism is a comprehensive strategy for improving the rural economy. The Structure Equation Model (SEM) approach was applied to test how attraction and experiential values of a rural region affect the tourists' satisfaction and their decision to revisit. After interviewing 353 tourists during their trip to Hakka County, Miaoli, Taiwan, the new finding of this study is that rural life and culture are more attractive than rural scenery to tourists. This implies a strong preference for tourists to experience agricultural knowledge and engage with rural life and farming work. Furthermore, the experiential response generated from the indirect mediation effect of satisfaction had a significant effect, supporting the concept that satisfaction brings additional experiential values to the intentions of tourists to revisit and thus creates more revisit opportunities to those tour sites.

Contribution/ Originality
The study explores that rural life and culture are more attractive than rural scenery to tourists which implies the tourists' strong preference for experiencing agricultural knowledge and engaging with rural life. Further, the indirect mediation effect of satisfaction had a significant effect on supporting the concept that satisfaction brings additional experiential values to tourists' intention to revisit and thus creates more revisit opportunities to those tour sites.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism refers to tourist activities in rural areas or non-urban territory where tourists engage in leisure and rural pursuits with aspects of emotional and spiritual experiences (Jepson and Sharpley, 2015; Liu, 2008; Oppermann, 1996). Since emotional experiences in rural development influence tourist preferences, the development of rural tourism has become the primary boosting momentum for the advancement of rural prosperity (Huang *et al.,* 2016). This further helps to form the win-win strategies which not only benefit tourists for their satisfaction but also local residents which results in higher employment and income as well as better quality of life (Choenkwan *et al.,* 2016).

However, aside from the expense incurred by the tourists themselves, the characteristics of tourist attractions, whether travel experiences can be shared or recommended via social media, and the likelihood that tourists will revisit tourist destinations in the future may be taken into account (Sameer *et al.,* 2016). Accordingly, a rural area that lacks the potential for commercial images, a distinctive natural landscape, or a planned interactive environment may not appeal to tourists.

Of the many factors that affect consumers' decisions on tour destinations, attraction is seen as an inherent behavioral intention (Leiper, 1990). Tourist preferences for a tour destination typically exert a positive influence on tourist satisfaction, while the characteristics of different destinations create a diverse attraction network for tourists. In other words, rural attractions with distinctive characteristics, such as a farmers' auction market may appeal to tourists (Ea *et al.*, 2015; Choenkwan *et al.,* 2016; McKercher and Koh, 2017).

Based on consumer experiences, consumer value can be seen as an interactive and relativistic preference whose value lies not in its purchase but in the associated consumer experience (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Holbrook, 1996; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Simelane *et al*., 2016; Lee *et al.,* 2017). Accordingly, creating memorable experiences for tourists has become a core value of the tourist industry (Knobloch *et al.,* 2017). For tour business, providing a memorable tour and continuously developing new tourist products will generate positive word-of-mouth communication (Knobloch *et al.,* 2017) and will enhance their competitiveness and sustainability (Ritchie *et al.,* 2011). Because the cost of attracting potential tourists is often higher than that of tourists who already have experience in the tour, the development of tourist attractions is increasingly dependent on those revisit tourists. Thus, an insight into the revisit intentions of tourists has become an important research topic (Assaker *et al.,* 2011; Chew and Jahari, 2014).

In addition, investigations of rural tourism have shown that satisfaction and revisit frequency have an impact on tourists' revisit intentions (Antón *et al.,* 2017). Therefore intense analysis of revisit intention is also regarded as a key economic factor that could affect the tourist industry as well as rural tourism (Jang and Feng, 2007). While numerous existing tourist studies focus more on destination characteristics, experiences, and satisfaction, the mediating effect of satisfaction, which is a notable feature of rural tourist research, is rarely discussed. Based on rural tourist perspectives, this study plans to investigate related cases of rural leisure tourism of Taiwan and to explore how attraction and experiential values in terms of tour projects and attractive products affect tourist intentions to revisit the same sites. The findings could be used as a comprehensive reference for rural communities in relation to designing tourist activities and experiences to further steer tourist development in regenerating rural communities.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Framework

2.1.1. Attraction

Attraction refers to the motivation of internal force (inherent behavioral force) that affects consumers' decisions and pushes them toward attractions (Leiper, 1990); this is also known as the "first power" in tourist development (Gunn, 1997). Attraction is chiefly focused on culture, nature, activities, recreation, and entertainment, and tourists are also attracted by natural scenery, buildings, artificial landscapes, and special festivals (Swarbrooke, 2002). Rural attractions with distinctive characteristics appeal greatly to tourists (Choenkwan et al., 2016), while attractive tourist markets also draw consumers to visit (McKercher and Koh, 2017).

The development of rural tourism is also one of the winning strategies for potential agriculture enhancement (Choenkwan et al., 2016). In their study, Cai and Combrink (2000) came up with the push-pull theory of tourist motivation. According to that theory, the tourist attraction of rural destinations comprises the push factors that motivate tourists to travel, such as education, physiology, health, social events, and conspicuousness, while the pull factors include other aspects that appeal to tourists; for example, natural landscapes, rural life and culture, and convenient transportation.

2.1.2. Experiential value

Experiential value is essentially untouchable, but the perceptions consumers gain from the process of experiencing is long-lasting (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Based on consumer research, people tend to be fascinated by intangible experiences that benefit them mentally; for example, experiencing a feeling of fun (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Holbrook, 1996), a sense of happiness, a desire to flee, or the urge to enjoy a fresh impetus (Weinberger et al., 2017).

Such "experiences" learned through experience could be considered the most popular "product" of the tourist market (Knobloch et al., 2017). Through the process of experiencing, consumers are guided to make accurate decisions in the presence of a credible behavior which allows them to live a meaningful life as a result (Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2013). Through authentic experiences, tourists will gain personal experiential values from various interactions in the course of their travel (Sheth et al., 1991).

The experiential perceptions of consumers typically involve five aspects: namely, sense (sensory experience), feel (affective experience), think (intellectual experience), act (behavioral experience), and overall (Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2013). Furthermore, these experiential values also extend to consumers' return on expenditure, the quality of service they experience, and their aesthetic perceptions and pleasure (Mathwick et al., 2001).

2.1.3. Satisfaction and revisit intention

In assessing the important aspects of consumers' experiential values, satisfaction is measured based on the tourists' expectations of their scheduled travel tours and their actual perceptions of their destination after they arrive (Del Bosque and Martin, 2008). Zeithaml et al. (1996) defined willingness to revisit a destination as the intention to return to a place but also the willingness to recommend it; in other words, it amounts to the cognitive difference between consumers' pre-purchase expectations and their actual post-purchase perceptions.

Westbrook (1987) suggests that satisfaction is usually the mediating variable of the consumers' willingness to repurchase. Lin et al. (2003) explored tourist revisit intentions in relation to scenic coastal areas with this framework. The results supported that satisfaction positively affects tourists'

behavioral intentions, deepens their perceptions of the tourist experience, and significantly affects tourists' intentions to revisit a destination.

2.2. Hypotheses

Two approaches are adopted to explore the travel value of tourists in this study. One is the investigation of interests combined with consumer values, and the second one is the concept of experiential values, which has drawn increasing attention among tour operators recently (Komppula and Gartner, 2013).

Experiential marketing has also been applied by many researchers to measure tourist experiences by influencing tourist satisfaction (Cai and Combrink, 2000; Shen et al., 2005). Leask et al. (2013) suggested that to meet the needs of all generations for traveling, agents may adopt segment-based experiential marketing strategies to attract tourists.

Sameer et al. (2016) showed that tourist satisfaction brings about tourist loyalty, and this affection toward the destination will exert a direct influence on tourist satisfaction and their intentions to recommend the attractions. If a tourist's image in accordance with the experience is pleasant, this will then increase the tourist's intention to revisit the destination. Although destination attributes play a key role with tourists choosing a place to visit, how to fulfill the typical travel wishes of the tourists and present enjoyable travel experience are more important with regard to meeting tourists' expectations (Gannon et al., 2017).

This study evaluates the relationships between experiential values, attraction, satisfaction, and tourist revisit intentions based on four hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Attraction positively influences experiential values.
Hypothesis 2: Experiential values positively influences satisfaction.
Hypothesis 3: Experiential values positively influence the tourists' intention to revisit.
Hypothesis 4: Satisfaction positively influences the tourists' intention to revisit.

We also plan to examine the mediating effect of tourist satisfaction between experiential values and revisit intention. The research framework is shown below (see Figure 1).
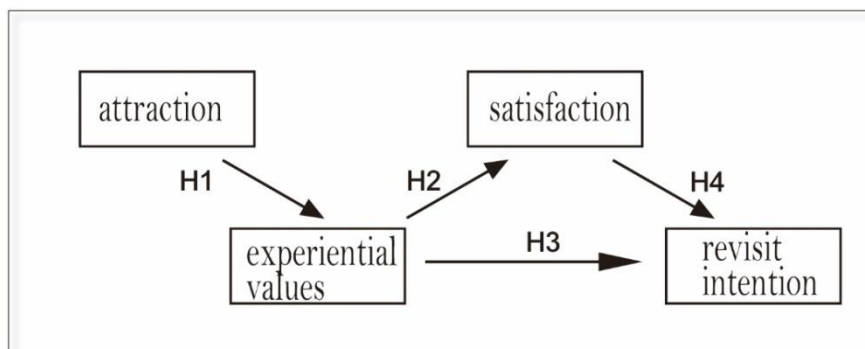

Figure 1: Research framework

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The 353 questionnaires were collected during July and September of 2015 with an effective rate of 88.25%. In summary, many of the tourists (195; 55.2%) were from central Taiwan (see Table 1). Most of the tourists were female, at 248 (70.3%), while 128 tourists stated that they were aged 45–65 (36.3%). A total of 140 tourists reported having a bachelor degree (39.7%), and 101 were engaged in business (28.6%). Income of less than 25K NTD per month was claimed by 163

(46.2%), while 168 stated that they travelled with their families (47.6%). 178 tourists (50.4%) travelled less than three times for the number of domestic travel trips taken in 2014.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the sample (N=353)

Category	Item	Number	Percentage (%)
Residence	North	158	44.8
	Central	195	55.2
Gender	Male	105	29.7
	Female	248	70.3
Age	Under 14	40	11.3
	15–24	35	9.9
	25–34	47	13.3
	35–44	30	8.5
	45–64	128	36.3
	65 and above	73	20.7
Education	Elementary and below	44	12.5
	Junior high school	46	13.0
	Senior high school	100	28.3
	College	140	39.7
	Master and above	23	6.5
Times of domestic travel in 2014	1-3	178	50.4
	4 – 6	153	43.4
	7 – 9	21	6.1
	10 or above	21	6.1
Occupation	Student	76	21.5
	Business	101	28.6
	Government official	17	4.8
	Agriculture	2	0.6
	Retirement	97	27.5
	Other	60	17.0
Monthly income	Less than 25K	163	46.2
	25K–40K	101	28.6
	40K–55K	53	15.0
	55K–70K	18	5.1
	70K and above	18	5.1
Travel companion	Alone	13	3.7
	Family	168	47.6
	Couple	5	1.4
	Friend	140	39.7
	Coworker	9	2.5
	Other	18	5.1
	None	22	6.2

3. RESULTS

3.1. Indicator analysis and reliability analysis

To check whether discrimination was associated with the indicators in the questionnaire, an item analysis was first done before confirmatory factor analysis to examine the relevance of each indicator item in the questionnaire. Comparisons of extreme groups were used in the item analysis, and the samples were divided in a 27% to 73% split. A paired sample t-test was taken to check the discrepancy in the means of the indicators for the two groups.

Results indicated that all the variables discriminated well. Subsequently, a reliability analysis was carried out to identify the internal consistency of the questionnaire, and modified indicators with a total correlation of lower than 0.50 were deleted from the scale. The *Cronbach's α* coefficients displayed in the reliability analysis of the latent variables were all over 0.80 (0.84~0.90), and it can thus be inferred that this questionnaire is reliable. Descriptive statistics and reliability detection of the four latent variables of the model are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Results of the reliability measure (N=353)

Dimensions	Number of items	Mean	S. deviation	Cronbach's α
Attraction	7	6.457	3.836	0.851
Experiential value	9	6.459	4.459	0.886
Satisfaction	7	6.472	3.875	0.900
Revisit intention	3	6.605	1.578	0.840

3.2. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

In this study, a modification index (MI) was used to delete the indicators whose standardized estimates were lower than 0.5 or which had high variance in order to improve the model fit. Goodness of fit (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and comparative fit index (CFI) were applied to measure the model fit in structural equation modeling (SEM) (Fan and Sivo, 2005). Table 3 shows the GFI analysis of the research model, where χ^2/DF = 1.864, GFI = 0.929, AGFI = 0.900, RMSEA = 0.050, TLI = 0.960, and CFI = 0.966. These statistics indicate that a good fit was achieved.

Table 3: Goodness-of-fit measures for the structural equation model

Goodness-of-fit measure	Index	Criterion
χ^2/DF	1.864	<3.0
GFI	0.929	>0.80
AGFI	0.900	>0.80
RMSEA	0.050	<0.08
TLI	0.960	>0.90
CFI	0.966	>0.90

Notes: χ^2 = chi-square, DF = degree of freedom, GFI = goodness-of-fit index, AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, TLI = Tucker-Lewis index, CFI = comparative fit index, (+): acceptability

Three types of convergent validity in the measurement model are described as follows: (1) Factor loadings serving as index variables explain the correlation of each variable to the underlying factor. The larger the factor loadings, better the expression of the factors. The recommended factor loadings from the results ranged between 0.6 and 0.95; (2) Composite reliability (CR) is used to measure the internal consistency of the factor variables, and a CR value > 0.7 is considered; and (3) Average variance extracted (AVE) is used to assess discriminant validity with an AVE > 0.5 considered (Hair *et al.,* 2013). As shown in Table 4, the CR in the four latent variables was between 0.831 and 0.896, presenting good internal consistency. In addition, the AVE of the latent variables mostly reached the standard threshold of 0.5 or above.

Table 4: Results of exploratory factor analysis of the standardized model

Latent variables and measured indicators	Estimate	SMC	SE	T-value	CR	AVE
Attraction (engagement in rural tourism)					0.831	0.623
A6 Able to experience natural resources (natural resources)	0.753	0.567				
A7 Able to experience rural life and culture (life and culture)	0.856	0.733	0.085	14.730***		
A8 Able to experience rural landscape resources (landscape resources)	0.754	0.569	0.098	13.649***		
Experiential values (experience gained from rural tour engagement)					0.847	0.499
C1 I perceived the beauty of rural areas (sense of beauty)	0.699	0.489				
C2 I gained knowledge and pleasure (pleasure)	0.727	0.529	0.077	12.661***		
B1 I felt sensual enjoyment (sensory experience)	0.694	0.482	0.078	12.130***		
B2 I felt warmth and enthusiasm from rural villages (affective experience)	0.674	0.454	0.075	11.784***		
B3 I gained knowledge about rural industry (intellectual experience)	0.756	0.572	0.074	13.149***		
B4 I'm pining for rural life and activity engagement (behavioral experience)	0.732	0.536	0.085	12.753***		
B5 I'll be more aware of rural tourism development (overall experience)	0.657	0.432	0.077	11.500***		
Satisfaction (personal experience of this rural tour)					0.896	0.591
G2 I'm satisfied with the content (experiencing content)	0.838	0.702				
G1 I'm satisfied with the environment of the rural community (rural environment)	0.728	0.530	0.060	15.481***		
G3 I'm satisfied with the schedule (schedule arrangements)	0.820	0.672	0.058	18.404***		
G4 I'm satisfied with the safety of the facilities on site (facility safety)	0.670	0.449	0.063	13.850***		
G5 I'm satisfied with the food and beverage arrangements (catering arrangements)	0.733	0.537	0.055	15.619***		
G7 I'm satisfied with the overall activity (overall activity)	0.810	0.656	0.052	18.070***		
Tourist's intention to revisit					0.841	0.639
D1 I will participate in rural tourist activities if there's a chance (revisit)	0.741	0.549				
D2 I'll recommend rural tourist activities to my friends and family (recommendation)	0.831	0.691	0.073	14.763***		
D3 I'll share the rural tourist experience with my friends and family (promotion)	0.823	0.677	0.071	14.650***		

Note: SMC = squared multiple correlations; SE = standard error; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

According to the correlation of the latent variables and measured indicators shown in Table 4, the primary attraction of rural tourism for tourists is being able to experience rural life and culture (A7), rural landscape resources (A8), and natural resources (A6), with a "β" of 0.856, 0.754, and 0.753, respectively. This supports the findings of previous studies that rural attractions with distinctive characteristics are appealing to tourists (Choenkwan *et al.,* 2016). The result also supports that rural life and culture are more attractive than rural scenery to tourists. Through Experiential values perspectives experience gained from rural tour engagement in intellectual experience (I gained knowledge about rural industry, B3, β = 0.756), behavioral experience (I'm pining for rural life and activity engagement, B4, β = 0.732), pleasure (I gained knowledge and pleasure, C2, β = 0.727) are higher than sense of beauty (I perceived the beauty of rural areas, C1, β = 0.699). And through Attraction perspectives engagement in rural tourism in life and culture (able to experience rural life and culture, A7, β = 0.856) is higher than landscape resources (able to experience rural landscape resources, A8, β = 0.754). Therefore the new finding of this study is that rural life and culture are more attractive than rural scenery to tourists. The experience types favored by tourists were knowledge (B3) and action (B4) activities, with β value at 0.756 and 0.732, respectively. This highlights the tourists' strong preference for experiencing agricultural knowledge and engaging with rural life and farming work. "Knowledge and Pleasure received from the rural tour" (C2), with a "β" of 0.727 was found to be the most prized experiential value for tourists during participation in rural tourism.

This suggests that tour agents need to add more pleasurable aspects to intellectual and behavioral experiential activities when arranging tour activities with high experiential values. Experiencing content (G2) and schedule arrangements (G3) attained a "β" of 0.838 and 0.820, respectively, which reflects satisfaction with rural tourism. Indicators D2 and D3, which present the willingness to recommend the tour to family and friends, and word of mouth earned the most recognition from consumers with a "β" of 0.831 and 0.823, respectively.

3.3. Analysis of the structural model and hypothesis testing
The empirical results are shown in Table 5. Attraction, experiential values, experiential values, and satisfaction are all positively influenced experiential values in H1, satisfaction in H2, tourists' intention to revisit in H3, and tourists' intention to revisit in H4 with β values at 0.719, 0.816, 0.324, and 0.508, respectively. This result showed that all the hypotheses of this study were proven. In addition, the experiential value generated from the indirect mediating effect of satisfaction had a β=0.414 with the t-value at 0.738, supporting the idea that satisfaction brings more experiential values to tourists' revisit intentions and creates more revisit opportunities as well. The direct and indirect effects are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 5: Results of the structural path and hypotheses

	Structural path hypotheses	Standardized	T-value	Result
H1	Attraction→ Experiential Values	0.719	10.118***	supported
H2	Experiential Values→ Satisfaction	0.816	12.349***	supported
H3	Experiential Values→ Revisit Intention	0.324	3.505***	supported
H4	Satisfaction→ Revisit Intention	0.508	5.418***	supported

Notes: *** represents p<0.001

Table 6: Direct and indirect effects

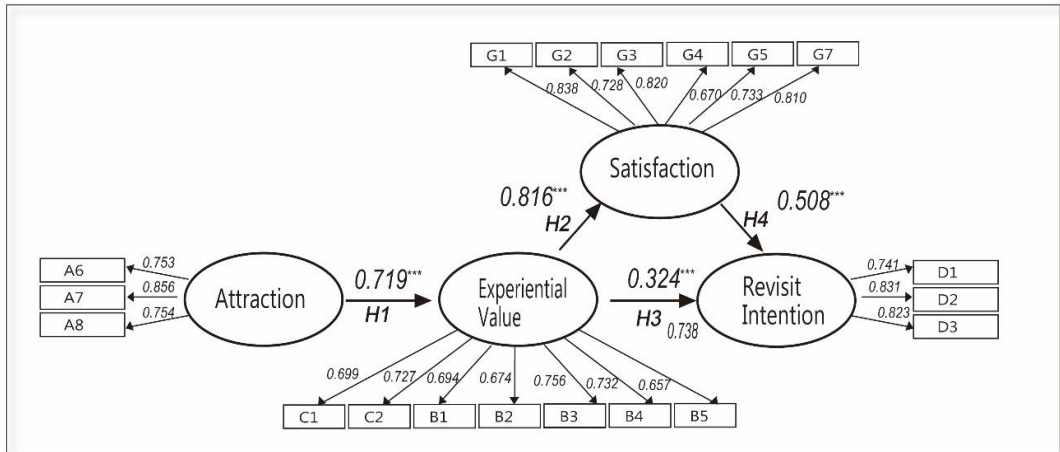|	Structural path hypotheses	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
H1	Attraction→ Experiential Values	0.719	-	0.719
H2	Experiential Values→ Satisfaction	0.816	-	0.816
H3	Experiential Values→ Revisit Intention	0.324	0.414	0.738
H4	Satisfaction→ Revisit Intention	0.508	-	0.508

Figure 2: Empirical result of the structural model

4. DISCUSSIONS

This study proves that tourism attraction positively influences the tourists' experiential values and their intention to revisit rural tourism by using the linear structure method. In addition, the experiential response generated from the indirect mediation effect of satisfaction had a significant effect, supporting the notion that satisfaction brings additional experiential values to tourists' revisit intentions and thus creates more revisit opportunities to those tour sites. In the face of an increasingly stable tourism market, how to enhance the economic development of the community by enhancing the willingness of tourists to visit has become an important issue. This paper proposes the following strategies based on the results.

Enhance rural tourism by shaping the distinctive characteristics of rural culture. Rural communities should have a deep understanding of their own cultural attributes through regenerating activities in farming and living. Residents can develop traditional life and offer tourists a chance to appreciate details and aspects of the local culture in a new way.

Based on the diversity of agricultural products in the neighbouring rural communities, theme-based activities can be undertaken to promote seasonal agricultural products, and the seasonal characteristics of the destination can be conveyed to the tourists during the tour to enhance tourist expectation of the next trip. Offering farming experience in this area should be considered. The farming activities provide pleasurable experiences to tourists through planting, weeding, or harvesting operation on the farms. The visitors' impression of the villages is enhanced by these interactions with the environment and community, and these involvements may mean they visit again.

Cater to tourists' experience for farming tour planning with more intellectual and behavioral experiences. Planning a tour involves choosing an appropriate tour module to satisfy the tourists' experiences of satisfaction. Moreover, our findings suggest that those revisited tourists feature activities in those farming experience with knowledge and field operation, which suggests that considering more activities of these types when planning tours would encourage tourists to visit again.

Since tourists expect to gain the most pleasure from their travel, offering such experiences, fulfilling the tourists' needs and forging some unexpected enjoyable travels are decisive elements in satisfying tourist expectations. Of these experiential values, the characteristics of rural life and culture are particularly attractive to tourists. Therefore, communities should not only emphasize

the attraction of rural culture and natural scenery (Leask *et al.,* 2013) but satisfy the experiential values of the destination for revisit decisions.

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