

FROM RURAL AUTHENTICITY TO TOURIST LOYALTY: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCES

Rahab^{1*}, Siti Maghfiroh²

^{1*}Management Department, Faculty of Business and Economics, Jenderal Soedirman University, Indonesia

²Accountancy Department, Faculty of Business and Economics, Jenderal Soedirman University, Indonesia

*Email corresponding author: rahab@unsoed.ac.id

Abstract

Rural authenticity has become a central source of memorable tourism experiences in rural destinations, as tourists increasingly seek meaningful encounters with local culture, community life, natural landscapes, culinary heritage, and traditional practices. This study conducts a systematic review of 23 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025 from Scopus and ScienceDirect to examine how rural authenticity contributes to the formation of memorable tourism experiences (MTE) and how these experiences influence tourist loyalty. Following the PRISMA protocol, the review combines bibliometric analysis and content analysis to identify dominant themes, antecedents, and outcomes of MTE in rural tourism and related experiential contexts. The findings show that rural authenticity is expressed through destination attributes, cultural heritage, community engagement, local gastronomy, agritourism activities, and emotionally meaningful encounters. These elements become influential when transformed into memorable experiences through novelty, learning, involvement, emotional engagement, and perceived meaningfulness. MTE subsequently strengthens tourist loyalty through satisfaction, destination image, place attachment, revisit intention, and positive word-of-mouth. This review contributes a conceptual pathway linking rural authenticity, MTE, and tourist loyalty, and offers practical implications for rural destination managers seeking to design authentic and loyalty-enhancing tourism experiences.

Keywords: rural authenticity, memorable tourism experience, rural tourism, tourist loyalty, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has gained increasing scholarly and managerial attention as an alternative to mass tourism. The growing demand for sustainable, authentic, and meaningful travel experiences has encouraged tourists to visit rural destinations that offer natural landscapes, local culture, village hospitality, agricultural activities, heritage, and everyday community life. In this context, the tourist experience becomes a central determinant of destination competitiveness because rural destinations often compete not through large-scale infrastructure, but through authenticity, emotional value, and the uniqueness of place-based experiences.

In rural tourism, authenticity represents a core experiential resource because it reflects the perceived genuineness of local culture, community life, natural landscapes, traditional practices, culinary heritage, and everyday rural activities. Unlike mass tourism destinations that often rely on standardized attractions and commercialized services, rural destinations derive their competitiveness from place-based uniqueness and locally embedded experiences. Therefore, rural authenticity can serve as an important starting point for understanding how memorable tourism experiences are formed and how these experiences subsequently influence tourist loyalty.

Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) is one of the most relevant concepts for explaining how tourists evaluate and remember their travel experiences. MTE refers to tourism experiences that are positively remembered and recalled after the trip (Kim et al., 2012). Prior studies show that MTE can influence destination image, satisfaction, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Kim, 2018). However, much of the existing MTE literature has focused on general tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, hospitality, and ecotourism, while studies that specifically synthesize MTE in rural tourism remain limited.

Rural tourism provides a distinctive setting for MTE research because memorable experiences in rural areas are strongly shaped by community interaction, cultural authenticity, natural scenery, local food, emotional bonding, and participation in local activities. These elements are different from standardized service encounters in urban or mass tourism destinations. Understanding how these elements contribute to MTE is important for rural destination management, especially in developing countries where rural tourism is frequently linked to community welfare, local entrepreneurship, cultural preservation, and sustainable development (Yanan et al., 2024).

This study aims to systematically review existing studies on MTE in rural tourism and related contexts. Specifically, this article addresses two research questions: (1) What factors contribute to the creation of MTE in rural tourism contexts? and (2) How does MTE influence tourists' attitudinal loyalty toward rural destinations? The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to integrate scattered findings on MTE, rural tourism, authenticity, community participation, emotional engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty into a conceptual framework that can guide future empirical research and rural destination marketing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Authenticity as the Foundation of Rural Tourism Experiences

Rural authenticity is a central concept in rural tourism because it reflects the perceived genuineness of local culture, traditional landscapes, community life, agricultural practices, culinary heritage, and everyday village activities. In rural destinations, authenticity is not only attached to physical attractions, but also to social relations, local narratives, cultural meanings, and the atmosphere of place. Tourists who visit rural destinations often expect experiences that are less standardized and more closely connected with local identity. Therefore, authenticity becomes an important experiential resource that differentiates rural tourism from mass tourism.

The relevance of authenticity in rural tourism is closely related to tourists' search for meaningful and emotionally engaging travel experiences. Traditional villages, agritourism destinations, rural gastronomic sites, heritage villages, and ecotourism areas provide opportunities for tourists to interact with local people, observe traditional practices, taste local food, and participate in activities rooted in rural life. These interactions allow authenticity to be experienced directly rather than merely observed visually. Previous studies suggest that rural tourism contributes to sustainable development when it preserves cultural identity, benefits local communities, and provides meaningful experiences for visitors (Yanan et al., 2024).

Memorable Tourism Experiences as a Psychological Mechanism

Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) refers to tourism experiences that are positively remembered and recalled after the trip has ended (Kim et al., 2012). Kim et al. (2012) developed one of the most widely used MTE scales, consisting of hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty. These dimensions indicate that memorable experiences are not limited to pleasure, but also include learning, emotional renewal, cultural interaction, personal meaning, and active participation.

MTE is conceptually different from ordinary satisfaction. Satisfaction is commonly formed as an immediate evaluation of a service encounter, whereas MTE has a longer psychological effect because it remains in tourists' memory and may influence future destination-related attitudes. Kim (2017) found that MTE affects loyalty behavior directly and indirectly through destination image and satisfaction. Thus, MTE can be understood as a psychological mechanism through which destination attributes, including authenticity, are transformed into positive attitudes, attachment, and loyalty.

From Authenticity to MTE in Rural Tourism

The pathway from rural authenticity to MTE occurs when authentic rural attributes are experienced as distinctive, meaningful, emotionally engaging, and personally relevant. Natural landscapes, traditional architecture, local food, cultural rituals, agricultural activities, and community hospitality may become memorable when tourists are actively involved in interpreting and participating in them. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) show that authenticity, visitor engagement, and destination image contribute to MTE and behavioral intentions in heritage tourism, a finding that is highly relevant for rural destinations because many rural attractions depend on heritage, identity, and local culture.

Community engagement strengthens this pathway. Interaction with residents, participation in local activities, cultural exchange, and storytelling enable tourists to encounter rural authenticity through social experience. Chen and Rahman (2018) found that cultural contact and visitor engagement contribute to MTE and destination loyalty. In rural tourism, this means that authenticity should not be treated merely as a promotional claim, but as an experience-design principle embedded in community participation, interpretation, hospitality, and local narratives.

Emotional experience also plays an important role in transforming authenticity into MTE. Tourists tend to remember experiences that generate joy, nostalgia, relaxation, surprise, social bonding, or personal meaning. Tiwari et al. (2023) emphasize the role of human emotions in shaping MTE and revisit intention, while Karagöz and Ramkissoon (2023) show that nostalgic emotions can strengthen meaning in life, subjective well-being, and revisit intention. These findings suggest that rural authenticity becomes more influential when it produces emotional resonance rather than only factual knowledge about the destination.

From MTE to Tourist Loyalty

Tourist loyalty refers to tourists' favorable attitude, psychological commitment, emotional attachment, willingness to recommend, and intention to revisit a destination. In rural tourism, attitudinal loyalty is particularly important because repeat visitation may be constrained by distance, travel cost, time, or tourists' desire to explore new places. Even when tourists do not immediately return, they may still develop loyalty by recommending the destination, sharing positive stories, and expressing emotional attachment.

MTE contributes to tourist loyalty because memorable experiences remain in tourists' minds and influence future destination preferences. Positive memories may enhance satisfaction, strengthen destination image, create place attachment, and encourage word-of-mouth. Studies on heritage tourism, ecotourism, culinary tourism, and rural winery tourism consistently indicate that emotionally rich and meaningful experiences are associated with revisit intention, recommendation behavior, and other loyalty outcomes (Li et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Shoukat et al., 2023; Teng et al., 2022).

Digital media further extends the influence of MTE on loyalty. Tourists increasingly share memorable experiences through social media, online reviews, travel blogs, TikTok, Instagram, and other digital platforms. In this context, MTE may generate electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), which is especially important for rural destinations with limited formal marketing capacity. Tourist-generated content can communicate authenticity, emotional value, and local uniqueness to wider audiences.

Research Gap

Although MTE has been widely studied in general tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, ecotourism, and hospitality contexts, studies that specifically synthesize the pathway from rural authenticity to tourist loyalty through MTE remain limited. Existing research often discusses authenticity, experience, and loyalty separately, while the mechanism through which rural authenticity becomes memorable and subsequently shapes loyalty is still underdeveloped.

Furthermore, many studies focus on behavioral loyalty, particularly revisit intention, while giving less attention to attitudinal loyalty as a psychological outcome. In rural tourism, attitudinal loyalty is highly relevant because tourists may not frequently revisit the same rural destination, yet they may still develop emotional attachment, positive attitudes, and strong recommendation intentions. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by systematically reviewing prior studies to explain how rural authenticity contributes to MTE and how MTE strengthens tourist loyalty.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative systematic literature review design to analyze scholarly articles that examine MTE and related experiential constructs within rural tourism and adjacent tourism contexts. The review covers publications from 2015 to 2025 to ensure contemporary relevance. Article searches were conducted in Scopus and ScienceDirect because both databases provide access to credible and widely indexed tourism and hospitality research.

The literature search was conducted on March 22, 2025 using two Boolean search strategies. The first query was: ("memorable tourism experience" OR "meaningful tourism experience") AND ("antecedent") OR ("loyalty" OR "attitudinal loyalty") AND ("rural tourism" OR "village tourism"). This query was intended to identify antecedents of MTE and its relationship with loyalty in rural tourism. The second query was: ("memorable tourism experience") AND ("consequences"), which was intended to capture studies discussing the outcomes of MTE, particularly satisfaction, loyalty, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth.

The screening process followed the PRISMA protocol to ensure transparency in identifying, selecting, and evaluating the literature (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). Inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, written in English, published between 2015 and 2025, and relevant to MTE, rural tourism, or closely related experience-based tourism contexts. Exclusion criteria included non-journal publications, non-English texts, opinion pieces, editorial notes, policy documents, and studies unrelated to MTE or rural tourism.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer was used to identify keyword co-occurrence patterns and thematic clusters. Second, content analysis was applied to synthesize the selected studies based on antecedents of MTE, emotional and experiential dimensions, destination image, satisfaction, attitudinal loyalty, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth. Content analysis enables systematic interpretation of textual materials in relation to a specific research context (Krippendorff, 2004).

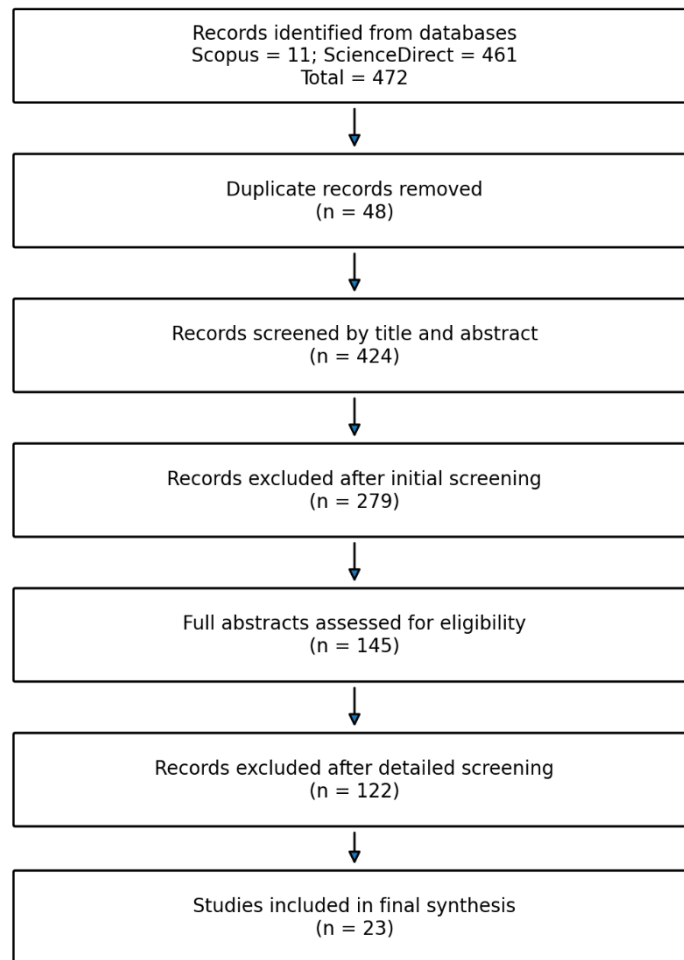


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of article selection

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Search Results and Article Selection

The search process retrieved 472 articles from Scopus and ScienceDirect. The Scopus database produced 11 articles, while ScienceDirect produced 461 articles. After removing 48 duplicate records, 424 articles were screened based on title and abstract. A total of 279 articles were excluded because they were not aligned with the focus of the study, such as articles discussing tourism in general without addressing MTE or rural tourism.

Further abstract assessment excluded 107 articles because they did not directly discuss the relationship between MTE, its antecedents, or its consequences. From the remaining eligible articles, additional screening was conducted based on explicit relevance to rural tourism, meaningful or memorable experience, and tourism loyalty outcomes. This process resulted in 23 articles selected for in-depth analysis. The selected articles were then mapped according to research context, methodology, and contribution to the understanding of MTE in rural tourism.

Table 1. Selected articles included in the systematic literature review

No.	Author(s)	Context and method	Main contribution to this review
1	Zhao et al. (2023)	Tourism memory; survey and experiments	Tourism memory influences revisit decisions through episodic future thinking.
2	Yanan et al. (2024)	Traditional villages; SLR	Rural tourism supports sustainable development and authentic village experiences.
3	Yang et al. (2024)	Rural gastronomic tourism; text and image analysis	Environmental and cultural elements shape memorable gastronomic experiences.
4	Tiwari et al. (2023)	Heritage, cultural, nature and adventure tourism; SEM	Human emotions influence MTE and revisit intention.
5	Teng et al. (2022)	Rural winery tourism; SEM	Visitor experience, emotions, and trust shape rural winery loyalty.
6	Vada et al. (2019)	Tourists' behavioral intentions; SEM	Hedonic and eudaimonic travel goals shape MTE and behavioral intentions.
7	Shoukat et al. (2023)	Local culinary experience; PLS-SEM	Co-creation, novelty, and influencer engagement shape memorable culinary experience and revisit intention.
8	Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021)	Heritage tourism; mixed methods	Authenticity, engagement, and destination image shape MTE and behavioral intentions.
9	Organ et al. (2015)	Food festivals; longitudinal SEM	Engagement and emotions influence satisfaction and subsequent behavior.
10	Moore & Donaldson (2016)	Community-based rural tourism; fieldwork	Culturally grounded tourism contributes to rural development and visitor engagement.
11	Li et al. (2021)	Ecotourism; PLS-SEM	Experience dimensions influence destination image, satisfaction, and loyalty.
12	Kim et al. (2022)	Tourism memory; experiments	Tourism memory valence, vividness, and emotional intensity influence behavioral intention.
13	Karagöz & Ramkissoon (2023)	Nostalgia and well-being; PLS-SEM	Nostalgic emotions strengthen well-being, meaning in life, and revisit intention.
14	Huo et al. (2023)	Rural tourism residents; mixed methods	Resident participation and trust shape tourism impacts and experience quality.
15	García-Pérez & Castillo-Ortiz (2024)	Gastro-tourism; SLR	Memorable gastro-tourism experiences influence satisfaction, loyalty, and WOM.
16	Cunha et al. (2020)	Rural tourism entrepreneurs; qualitative case study	Lifestyle motivations and sustainable practices shape visitor experience.
17	Fan et al. (2023)	Guest experience; PLS-SEM	Experience dimensions influence well-being and e-WOM intention.
18	Dai et al. (2024)	Heritage landscape; linguistic mixed methods	Authenticity, self-congruity, and involvement influence MTE and behavioral intention.

19	Damnet et al. (2024)	Agritourism; methods	mixed	Agritourism innovation and sustainability shape MTE and loyalty.
20	Chen (2023)	Bicycle tourism; PLS-SEM		Tourist engagement and tourism attributes influence MTE and behavioral outcomes.
21	Chi & Giao (2024)	Emerging destination; SEM		Destination image and emotional value affect satisfaction and return intention.
22	Chen et al. (2020)	Destination branding; PLS-SEM		Brand authenticity and self-congruence influence engagement and loyalty.
23	An & Alarcón (2021)	Rural tourism preferences; discrete choice experiment		Rural tourism attributes influence tourist preference and satisfaction.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on selected articles

Bibliometric Patterns

The bibliometric analysis identified four thematic clusters. The first cluster focuses on psychological and emotional aspects of memorable experiences, including MTE, revisit intention, engagement, place attachment, and tourism memory. This cluster indicates that emotional experience and memory are central mechanisms connecting tourism experience with loyalty outcomes.

The second cluster includes sustainability-related and alternative tourism themes, such as agritourism, well-being, tourism, and theoretical study. This cluster reflects the growing relevance of agritourism and sustainable tourism to the MTE discussion. The third cluster contains destination image, experience, loyalty, and satisfaction, showing that MTE is frequently connected to destination evaluation and post-visit behavioral outcomes. The fourth cluster contains rural tourism as a relatively isolated keyword, indicating that explicit integration between rural tourism and MTE remains underdeveloped. This confirms the relevance of the present review.

Table 2. Main bibliometric clusters identified in the review

Cluster	Main keywords	Interpretation
Cluster 1	MTE, revisit intention, engagement, place attachment, tourism memory	Emotional and psychological memory mechanisms
Cluster 2	MTEs, agritourism, well-being, tourism, theoretical study	Sustainable and alternative tourism experience
Cluster 3	Destination image, experience, loyalty, satisfaction	Destination evaluation and loyalty outcomes
Cluster 4	Rural tourism	Underexplored link between rural tourism and MTE

Source: Authors' bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer

Factors Driving MTE in Rural Tourism

The content analysis shows that MTE in rural tourism is shaped by a combination of destination attributes, authenticity, community engagement, aesthetic and sensory experiences, emotional engagement, and interactive activities. Destination attributes such as natural beauty, rural landscapes, traditional villages, cultural heritage, and local food provide the experiential foundation for memorable rural tourism. However, these attributes become memorable only when tourists perceive them as meaningful, distinctive, and emotionally engaging.

Authenticity appears as a recurring antecedent of MTE. Rural destinations offer authenticity through local traditions, heritage, traditional food, agricultural practices, local narratives, and everyday community life. Authenticity strengthens tourists' perception that the experience is

genuine and locally rooted. In this sense, rural tourism marketing should avoid over-commercialization that may weaken the perceived authenticity of the destination.

Community engagement is also central to MTE formation. Direct interaction with residents, participation in cultural practices, local storytelling, and involvement in community-based tourism activities make tourists feel socially and emotionally connected to the destination. This finding is especially relevant for village tourism because residents are not only service providers but also cultural interpreters and experience co-creators.

Emotional dimensions such as nostalgia, joy, bonding, relaxation, and personal meaning further strengthen MTE. Rural tourism often evokes nostalgia through traditional landscapes, village atmosphere, local food, and slower rhythms of life. Interactive activities such as agritourism, ecotourism, rural gastronomy, and heritage interpretation can deepen involvement and transform passive sightseeing into meaningful participation.

Impact of MTE on Attitudinal Loyalty

The reviewed studies consistently suggest that MTE contributes to attitudinal loyalty. Tourists who experience strong and positive memories tend to show higher revisit intention, stronger willingness to recommend, and more favorable attitudes toward the destination. In rural tourism, this relationship is particularly important because loyalty is not always expressed through immediate repeat visitation. Instead, tourists may express loyalty through recommendation, advocacy, positive storytelling, and e-WOM.

MTE influences attitudinal loyalty through several mechanisms. First, memorable experiences enhance satisfaction by creating positive evaluations of the destination. Second, MTE strengthens destination image because tourists' memories become part of how they interpret and describe the destination after the trip. Third, MTE creates emotional attachment and place bonding, particularly when tourists experience authenticity, local hospitality, and meaningful cultural contact. Fourth, MTE encourages WOM and e-WOM because tourists are more likely to share experiences that are emotionally strong and personally meaningful.

These findings have important implications for rural destination management. Rural destinations should not only promote attractions, but also design experience journeys that connect tourists with local people, local stories, sensory experiences, and emotional meanings. Digital marketing should be used not merely to advertise destinations, but also to stimulate storytelling, user-generated content, and post-visit memory sharing.

From Rural Authenticity to Tourist Loyalty through MTE

The reviewed studies indicate that rural authenticity functions as a foundational element in the formation of memorable tourism experiences. Authenticity is expressed through local culture, traditional landscapes, culinary heritage, community interaction, agricultural activities, and heritage-based practices. These elements provide tourists with distinctive and emotionally meaningful encounters that differentiate rural destinations from standardized mass tourism settings.

The pathway from rural authenticity to tourist loyalty is not direct in a purely functional sense. Rather, authenticity becomes influential when it is experienced, interpreted, and remembered by tourists as meaningful. In this process, MTE acts as a psychological and experiential mechanism that transforms authentic rural attributes into favorable tourist attitudes. Tourists who perceive rural experiences as authentic are more likely to develop emotional engagement, place attachment, satisfaction, and positive destination memory.

Consequently, MTE strengthens tourist loyalty by encouraging revisit intention, positive word-of-mouth, recommendation behavior, and long-term attitudinal commitment. This finding suggests that rural tourism managers should not treat authenticity merely as a promotional label, but as an experience-design principle. Authenticity must be embedded in local storytelling,

community participation, cultural interpretation, culinary experiences, and sustainable tourism practices to create memorable experiences that support tourist loyalty.

Conceptual Pathway from Rural Authenticity to Tourist Loyalty through MTE

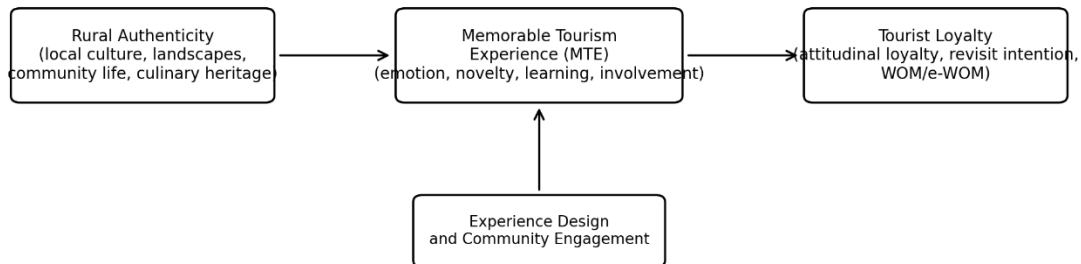


Figure 2. Conceptual framework from rural authenticity to tourist loyalty through MTE

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review concludes that rural authenticity is a key experiential foundation for creating memorable tourism experiences, which subsequently strengthen tourist loyalty in rural destinations. Authenticity becomes influential when tourists experience local culture, community life, traditional landscapes, culinary heritage, and rural activities as meaningful, emotionally engaging, and personally relevant.

The review also confirms that MTE contributes to attitudinal loyalty through satisfaction, destination image, emotional attachment, revisit intention, WOM, and e-WOM. In rural tourism, attitudinal loyalty is strategically important because tourists may not always revisit the same destination immediately, but they may still recommend it, share positive stories, and develop strong emotional attachment.

The practical implication is that rural destination managers should move beyond attraction-based promotion and focus on authenticity-based experience design. Authenticity should be embedded in community participation, cultural storytelling, local gastronomy, agritourism, heritage interpretation, and sustainable tourism practices. Such strategies can help rural destinations create memorable experiences that support satisfaction, recommendation behavior, and long-term tourist loyalty.

This study has several limitations. First, the review only used Scopus and ScienceDirect, so relevant articles from other databases may have been excluded. Second, the study relies on published articles in English, which may limit the representation of local rural tourism research. Third, this study is conceptual and does not empirically test the proposed framework. Future research should conduct empirical validation using quantitative methods such as SEM-PLS or SEM-AMOS, qualitative case studies in rural destinations, or mixed-method designs. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine whether strong MTE actually leads to sustained loyalty and repeat visitation over time.

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