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# Research on Behavior Intentions of Tourists Based on the Rural Image Perception

Jiajing HU\*, Changjiang TAO

Sichuan Agricultural University, Dujiangyan 611830, China

**Abstract** During the construction of new socialist countryside, rural tourism has presented its irreplaceable strategic significance in balancing urban and rural development, and in building a socialist harmonious society. It, therefore, has drawn sustained attention both from the government and the academics. By empirical research, a conceptual relationship model has been established of rural image and behavior intentions of tourists. The general rural image in rural tourism is comprised of rural scenery, rural architecture and rural culture image. Furthermore, the overall rural image has a positive effect on tourists' willingness to pay a premium price, to recommend and to repeat purchase. At the end of this paper, reasonable suggestions have been proposed for rural image enhancement aimed to promote the attractiveness of rural tourism, and to enhance the tourists' positive behavior intentions.

**Key words** Rural image, purchase intention of premium, Recommended purchase, Repeat-purchase

## 1 Introduction

Rural tourism first came into being in the middle 19th century, and then until 1980s, rural tourism was getting more prevalent and standard in Europe and America. In China, the full development of rural tourism has been greatly pushed by the policy of pro-poor tourism. In 1998, the "urban and rural tourism" program motivated the initial development of rural tourism in China. The activity of "harmonious urban and rural tourism in China" caused wide attention in 2007. With the construction of new rural countryside in socialism, the development of city and countryside, and harmonious society, rural tourism has played an irreplaceable role during this development. Nowadays, as the economy in China grows fast and the holiday policy is getting more and more reasonable and sound, Chinese have much more disposable income and time. Rural tourism becomes popular because of its close distance, reasonable price and convenience, and is the primary way to get rid of urban noise and to return to nature<sup>[1]</sup>. Based on the practice of rural tourism, researches on rural tourism are carried out from both macroscopic and microcosmic aspects. The focus is about the poverty-relief through rural tourism, development of rural tourism product, quality of rural tourism service, rural tourism planning, social effect of rural tourism and consumer behavior, *etc.* However, there are few studies on the rural image and behaviors such as positive recommendation and payment premium. Therefore, through questionnaire and analysis, the influences of rural image on the behaviors of rural travelers have been put forward and the rural image restructure is stressed to push forward the sustainable development of rural tourism.

## 2 Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1 Rural image

The word image is a relatively abstract

noun. In psychological terms, image is defined as "the organization and integration of human and environment", "psychological image or impression", integration of truth and feeling, a kind of emotional response to certain experience or things. As professor Ditcher says, image is a kind of general or all-round concept instead of single characteristic<sup>[2]</sup>. Xiao Kai mentioned the concept of rural image in 1999, which is opposite from Kevin's urban image. For the first time, rural image is defined as the common psychological image in human brain during the development history of countryside, and it is an essential invisible tourism resource, including rural scenery and rural cultural image<sup>[3]</sup>. Deng Yanping and Liu Keshu classified rural image into different layers, namely filed, air, water, building, bridge, culture, and agriculture<sup>[4]</sup>. Li Hezhang said in 2009 that the rural scenery is composed of rural natural landscape, living scenery, and agricultural production<sup>[5]</sup>. Professor Yang Zhengzhi said rural culture is the core attraction of rural tourism and the soul of rural tourism<sup>[6]</sup>. Xiong Kai *et al.* pointed out that the rich traditional culture embodies the rural culture image. In 2009, Cao Shuiqun proposed the restructure of rural image from natural ecological environment and cultural ecological environment<sup>[7]</sup>. Liu Weiyang considered that natural ecology is an essential sensing factor which reflects rural tourism development<sup>[8]</sup>. He proved the existence of rural scenery and cultural image. The rural scenery in ecological aspect is visible, while the cultural image is indirect. Therefore, as one kind of human residence pattern, countryside reflects the organic integration of human and nature, which provides possibility for urban tourists to return to nature, and to seek harmony. Considering these opinions above and the significant characteristics of rural tourism, rural image is defined in this paper as the psychological image of tourists on the nature, building and cultural image embodied by physical environment. This psychological image is then named the general rural image. A hypothesis is made as followed: H1: Rural natural landscape image, rural architecture image, and rural culture im-

age have a positive influence on and all together reflect the general rural image

2.2 Rural image and behavior intention of rural tourists

According to the theory of planed behavior, behavior intention is the judgment of certain people towards certain behavior, which reflects the willingness of some people towards certain behavior. All possible behavior influences affect interactively people’s final behaviors with the function of willingness<sup>[9]</sup>. Sutton’s study on planned behavior theory shows that the determinants of behavior intention are attitude, self norm and behavior control. Among them, attitude plays an indisputable role. As to the measurement of behavior intention, there are two representative measurements. One is presented by Ajzen &Driver from four aspects including purchase consideration, purchase recommendation, repeat purchase, and defects intolerance. The other is PZB presenting service disparity model, in which five measurement dimensions are given as loyalty, brand redirection, payment behavior, external complaints, and internal complaints<sup>[10]</sup>. Even though different terms are used in these two kinds of measurement, they are similar in nature. In relevant studies on tourism behavior intention, three factors, purchase recommendation, purchase intention of premium and repeat purchase intention are taken into account.

In the study of the influences of behavior intention of tourists, certain scholars, regarding attitude as the intermediate variable, have explored the relationships between tourists’ destination image and revisiting willingness. Li Hong suggested that the attraction of travelling destination comes from commercialized tourism service, primitive image and special atmosphere<sup>[11]</sup>. In other words, those three above make up the image of tourism destination. Juaneda said in 2007 that the positive image of sightseeing spot helps to improve the willingness of tourists and affects the information of surrounding people<sup>[12]</sup>. On the basis of customer perceived value, some scholars some scholars have studied the behavior intention in rural tourism. Zeithaml pointed out that the perceived value of rural tourists originates from their perceived progress and result of rural tourism. The influence of perceived value

on repeat purchase happens during the attitude’s influencing behavior intention of tourists. Guo Xudong proved that tourists would revise the image of destination after they have experienced the services. The result of revision would determine whether tourists will come back or not<sup>[13]</sup>. Through investigation of tourists, Geng Xianhui found that there is a significant correlation between tourist satisfaction towards natural and ecological sightseeing and their willingness to return<sup>[14]</sup>. In order to further explore the relationship between the general rural image, one of the important components of rural destination image and the behavior intention of tourist, the following hypotheses are proposed;

H2;the general rural image has positive impacts on rural tourists’ intention of premium

H3;the general rural image has positive impacts on rural tourists’ purchase willingness

H4;the general rural image has positive impacts on tourists’ repetitive purchase intention

3 Research approach

The questionnaire adopted is designed on the basis of related literature review of studies on rural image and behavior intention. It mainly contains items concerning tourists’ perception of rural image, their behavior intention and demographic characteristics. Rural image perception includes fourteen items, such as rural layout, road, building, natural landscape, ecological environment, rural custom and sightseeing. To measure the rural image, the Rick scale (1 – 5 points, ) is applied. The higher the score, the higher perception level is. The behavior intention of tourists is identified by ten questions, such as willingness to pay premium, to recommend to others, and to purchase again. With the same Rick scale, the higher the score, the stronger the behavior intention is.

The six members of the investigation group have distributed 600 questionnaires to tourists in Sanshenghua Countryside, Youainongke Countryside and Huanglongxi in Sichuan Province. Among them, 566 valid samples have been collected, with the effective rate of 94. 3%. The features of sample structure are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The demographic characteristics of samples

		Mentioned times	Referral rate // %			Mentioned times	Referral rate // %	
Gender	Male	302	53.3	Profession	Civil servants	64	11.2	
	Female	264	46.7		Staff	321	56.8	
Age	Below 15-year-old	3	0.5		Retiree	46	8.1	
	16 – 25 years old	247	43.7		Students	93	16.4	
	26 – 40	221	39.1		Others	42	7.5	
	41 – 60 years old	93	16.4		Personal monthly average income//Yuan	≤1000 Yuan	28	4.9
	Education	Doctor/master	35			6.1	1001 – 3000	223
atainment	Bachelor/college	286	50.6	3001 – 5000		274	48.4	
	Senior high/Junior high	209	37.0	≥5000		41	7.3	
	Below Junior high	36	6.3					

4 Investigation results

4.1 Reliability and validity assessment of measurement scales According to the KMO and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity,

KMO equals0.828, larger than the sig level 0.5, which proves common factors exist. According to principle analysis method, and by three times of circling, there are four factors which are renamed

as general rural image, natural landscape image, rural architecture image and rural culture image. The accumulated respective contribution rate is respectively 33.7%, 44.9%, 57.05% and 71.39%. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of rural scenery and rural tourists' behavior intention are 0.839 and 0.843, which means the questionnaire is effective.

#### 4.2 The perception level of rural image and its composition

In terms of mean value, the rural tourists' perception level of the natural landscape image is the highest, up to 4.01, which suggests the tremendous attraction of travelling destination with ecological environment and natural landscape. Rural construction image comes next, and its mean value is 3.67. The lowest value comes from the rural culture image, only 3.12. The standard difference of the mean value of the above dimensions is above 0.66. In other words, tourists' perception of rural image varies greatly.

In order to discuss the relationship among perceived factors of rural image, this paper has conducted correlation studies on the general rural image with the other three factors, the rural scenery image, rural construction image, and rural culture image by dint of weighed mean method. The relevant coefficients are respectively 0.533, 0.433 and 0.393. This indicates that there is correlative independence between the general rural image and the other three dimensions. Considering the general rural image as the dependent variable, while rural scenery, rural architecture, rural culture image as the independent variables, we get this regression equation, the general rural image =  $1.085 + 0.449 * \text{rural natural landscape image} + 0.282 * \text{rural architecture image} + 0.232 * \text{rural culture image}$ .

**Table 2** Principle matrix of rural image table after circulation

Project	Component			
	General rural image	Rural scenery image	Rural architecture image	Rural culture image
Rural life	0.779			
Harmony with nature	0.737			
Relaxation	0.727			
Folk culture	0.632			
Rural cuisine	0.554			
Rural flavor	0.542			
Ecological environment		0.722		
Green image		0.639		
Natural scenery		0.615		
Rural layout			0.737	
Buildings			0.727	
Rural road			0.519	
Agriculture				0.813
Rural custom				0.811

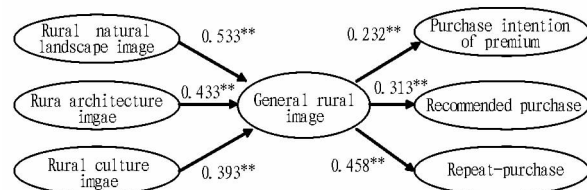
Note: Extraction method includes main principle, circling method and standard Kaiser circling method.

#### 4.3 Influence of rural image towards the behavior intention of tourists

According to the mean value of behavior intention of rural tourists, tourists' willingness to pay premium is the lowest, only 2.87. In other words, tourists are not willing to pay for extra

products, such as fresh air, ecological byproduct or agricultural cuisine, which might be related to tourists' expectation towards rural tourism. Generally, tourists take rural cuisine, live rural house, and agricultural work participation as granted in rural tourism. The positive recommendation of purchase gets the highest value, up to 3.98, which indicates that tourists are likely to recommend such purchase to others. The mean value of the willingness to purchase again is 3.55, which proves again that compared with other tourism forms, rural tourism is a kind of repetitive purchase.

According to the correlation analysis, the general rural images can positively impact tourists' willingness to pay premium, to recommend and to purchase again. Their respective relevant coefficients are 0.232, 0.318, and 0.458. The general rural image has the greatest influence on tourists' willingness to purchase again, followed by purchase recommendation and then payment premium. The influence of general rural image towards behavior intention of rural tourists is shown in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1** The Relationship between general rural image and the behavior intention of rural tourists

## 5 Management implications for rural tourism development

Customer loyalty is a psychological phenomenon, a sense of belonging or a sense of dependence on specific products and services. This psychological commitment will give rise to lasting purchase and consumption, as well as purchase recommendation towards others. On the other hand, with an obscure but indisputable relationship with it, the destination image contributes a lot to the formation of customer loyalty, the level of which is, otherwise, representatively reflected by customers' behavior intention. From this point of view, customer loyalty can be considered as the middle variable between the general rural image and tourist behavior intention. The relationships established between the general rural image and the behavior intention of rural tourists in this paper will help build positive rural image, and then encourage repeat purchase, positive purchase recommendation and payment premium. As a result, the rural tourism will be greatly promoted with higher levels of customer loyalty and satisfaction. Based on the above analyses, the following implications can be drawn out:

**5.1 With protection of ecological environment and construction of rural climate to establish a sound natural landscape image** Professor Liu Deqian considers the rural attraction as a combination of unique customs, scenery and culture concerning countryside geography and farming, and that rural tourism means to attract tourists coming to relax, to experience and to enjoy coun-

tryside life<sup>[15]</sup>. The motivation of tourists is to enjoy natural beauty and to experience the particular rural life. Therefore, during the development of rural tourism, great importance should be laid on original ecological system, never putting the local vegetation, flora and fauna under possible threats. For example, the provision of rural flavor diet with the indigenous, rare or even nationally protected flora and fauna should not be served, only to meet the needs of few tourists. Furthermore, the idyllic village image should not be artificially shattered due to the introduction of modern agricultural technology and equipment. All in all, the ecological environment should be protected to create a remarkable rural atmosphere, and to build up sound natural landscape image, which is one critical component of the core appeal of rural tourism.

**5.2 With the integration of new technology, and new concept to build remarkable rural architecture image** The main rural architecture includes village dwellings, ancestral halls and original temples, *etc.* The rural dwellings in different regions or different nationalities should have their own indigenous characteristics with unique and distinguished image. As to the original ancestral halls, old houses and temples, high preservation and protection should be taken as the prior policy, with only appropriate and necessary repairs for the sake of their originality. They are carriers to deliver rural culture to tourists. During the rural architecture image establishing, on one hand, the practical and aesthetic functions of rural dwellings should be taken into account. In the mean time, they need also be integrated naturally into the around environment to improve the overall environment. They should not be either stereotyped western-style buildings or completely different courtyards. On the one hand, adaptive ecological technology, such as solar energy, natural ventilation organizations, light environment design, eco-system design, and biogas utilization can be adopted<sup>[16]</sup>. As one of the advanced building technology nowadays, the adaptive ecological technology advocates the integration and coordination of eco concept with specific rural geographical conditions. It will help to build a rural architectural landscape not only beneficial to local lives and production but also to the tourism development.

**5.3 With in – depth Cultural decoration to enhance distinguished rural cultural image** According to the above analysis, the rural tourists have the lowest level of perceived image of rural culture, which suggests the loss of cultural heritage, cultural atmosphere, as well as cultural carrier. Deng Yanping *et al.* (2007) consider rural culture composed of the antique, vulgar and elegant. Among them, the antique is embodied by the "archaic" elements, such as ancient folk art, classical country house. The vulgar, implied in the elements, like the folk country diet, countryside farming and local customs. Take Wuyuan as an example, generally considered most beautiful countryside in China, it has created a well-known near-perfect village cultural mood, making full use of its unspoiled beautiful rural landscape, and the rich ancient Huizhou cultural heritage. In fact, in addition to the controversial folk art, folk culture, farming culture, in the process of

building new socialist countryside, the rural villagers' the pioneering spirit, harmonious and friendliness with each other, *etc.* are also an integral part of the rural culture. Thus, the development of rural tourism needs to actively explore the evolution of rural culture, to dig its unique charm and manifestations. Tourism products with strong local cultural atmosphere under protection will become popular among various tourists.

## 6 Limitations and Future Research

Through statistics analysis, the relationship between rural image and rural tourists' behavior intention has been built so as to explore the routs to sustainable development of rural tourism. Because of the limited number of samples and ingestion locations, study result needs further improvement. With large rural areas and abundant rural resources in China, how to develop rural tourism, to construct distinguished rural image and to attract more tourists with higher loyalty should become the future research focus.

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