

## Article

# Analysis of the Mediating Role of Place Attachment in the Link between Tourists' Authentic Experiences of, Involvement in, and Loyalty to Rural Tourism

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**Abstract:** The sustainable development of rural tourism is conducive to awakening “sleeping” resources, upgrading the industrial structure in rural areas, enhancing the revitalization ability of rural areas, accelerating the construction of cultural tourism, and promoting the strategy of rural revitalization. The loyalty of tourists has been considered as an important construct to describe the relationship between rural tourism growth and travelers’ future behavioral intentions. This study aims to integrate the relationship between authentic experience, involvement, place attachment, and loyalty into rural tourism research. The results of the study showed that tourists’ authentic experience and tourism participation have a significantly positive effect on place identity and place dependence (two different dimensions of place attachment), and authentic experience significantly positively affects involvement. Place identity and place dependence greatly and positively affect tourist loyalty. Furthermore, place dependence and place identity play a comprehensive mediating role in the relationship between authentic experience, involvement, and loyalty. The research findings provide a theoretical foundation and a point of reference for rural destinations in developing additional strategies and initiatives.

**Keywords:** rural tourism; authentic experience; involvement; place attachment; loyalty

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## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism plays a leading role in advancing the modernization of agriculture and rural areas, the integration of urban and rural development, and the reduction of poverty in impoverished regions. As an essential component of tourism, rural tourism is characterized using rural resources consisting of rural and farming-related customs, scenery, terroir, and customs, which entice tourists to visit, experience, study, and participate in other tourism-related activities. The countryside has a green and suitably natural environment and a traditional culture rich in local characteristics, which can meet the needs of a wide variety of tourists, such as urban residents seeking to relax and experience historical and cultural complexes, and has become the focus of tourism development.

China’s rural tourism has attracted considerable attention over the recent decade. The Chinese government has incorporated rural tourism as a key component of its rural regeneration strategy into national policy. Since 2020, when outbound tourism, inbound tourism, and inter-provincial tourism were severely impacted by the pandemic, the demand for tourism in the form of local surroundings tourism, rural pastoral tourism, and rural camping tourism has increased, and rural tourism has seen a period of rapid expansion [1]. Nonetheless, in the context of the transformation of tourists’ consumption patterns from

functional to experiential consumption, the development of rural tourism is plagued by issues such as the uneven quality of development, which makes it difficult to generate long-lasting attractions, and generally produces low tourist loyalty. Recently, tourism researchers have focused on tourist loyalty, and tourism managers have increasingly realized that the degree of tourist loyalty is a significant indicator of whether a tourist destination has an edge in tough market rivalry and sustainable development [2].

Tourists' behavior has drawn significant attention from the academic tourism community as travelers are key stakeholders in tourism destinations. This topic has emerged as a significant research hotspot and the frontier of modern tourism. Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the factors that affect rural tourists' loyalty, with most of these studies concentrating on the perceived worth and image of the tourism destination [3–5]. However, the extent to which these research findings illustrate the link between devoted rural tourists is limited. Further research is required to understand how tourist loyalty develops in the setting of rural tourism. Authenticity, involvement, and place attachment are important theoretical concepts for explaining tourists' attitudes and behaviors in the context of industrial heritage, historical, and cultural block tourism [6–9].

To better understand the formation process of rural tourist loyalty, this study aims to create a structural equation model to investigate the effects of variables such as authenticity, involvement, and place attachment on rural tourist loyalty. The study contributes to the development of rural tourism by developing the theoretical basis of tourist behavior, decision-making, tourism experience, tourism planning, tourism geography, etc., to promote the development of unique cultures in rural areas; give proper play to the benchmarking effect of urban–rural integration and new rural construction; and enable rural tourism to achieve sustainable development goals while advancing the overall requirements of the rural revitalization strategy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Loyalty

Loyalty is a deep-rooted commitment that sees customers willing to repeat purchases or patronize the original product/service consistently [10]. The concept of tourist loyalty originated from the wider notion of customer loyalty, which represents a certain emotional preference and psychological commitment of tourists to particular destinations. The willingness to return to the same destination and the word-of-mouth effect on friends and/or relatives are important dimensions that are used to evaluate tourist loyalty [11]. Research on factors influencing tourist loyalty and its influencing mechanisms has been one of the research hotspots in tourism academic circles. Loyal tourists can promote the competitiveness of tourist destinations and maintain the sustainable growth of tourism revenue. Tourist loyalty is a complex concept, and its formation may be impacted by many factors. Tourist characteristics, the tourism environment, the characteristics of tourism products or services, and other factors, may affect it.

### 2.2. Authenticity

Authenticity is defined as a new consumer sensibility that involves perceptions of the extent to which novel, real, original, exceptional, and unique experiences, services, or products, are genuine [12]. MacCannell introduced the concept of “authenticity” in the sociological studies of tourist experience and motivation. Since then, authenticity has been an active topic of study among tourism researchers. From the perspective of authenticity, the landscape of the tourist destination is not simply regarded as a modern consumer product but is considered a symbol of the past, an indication of the era and mode of life, and the concept of authenticity implies the local tradition's retention. Authenticity represents a relative concept in the existing tourism research. Authenticity can be separated into object-related authenticity and activity-related authenticity, and this has become the consensus among most scholars.

Object-related authenticity includes constructivist authenticity and objectivist authenticity. Constructivist authenticity has a symbolic meaning and is the result of social construction. Therefore, constructing authenticity is subjective and variable, contextually determined, and even ideological, and with time, objects that were not regarded as real before are very likely to become real objects in later periods. Objectivist authenticity uses the “originality” of tourism resources to verify their authenticity, which is considered relatively fixed. Existential authenticity is to use the tourist subject—the tourist—to verify whether it is true or not. It can be a special state of self-existence caused by tourism activities, and to a certain extent, it may have no connection with the tourist object [13]. The perception of authenticity is the main output of tourists’ choices in the service link, and it is also an important component of overall tourists’ experiences. Considering the important role of the subjective perception of authenticity in their evaluation of the tourism experience, this study examines rural tourists’ perception of authenticity [14].

### 2.3. Involvement

Originating from social judgment theory and the concept of self-involvement in social psychology, the theory of involvement was developed in the consumer behavior field and is considered a critical psychographic construct due to its influence on individuals’ attitudes and decision-making [15]. Involvement embodies the idea that individuals recognize the degree of relevance and importance of something relative to their own needs, values, and interests and then pay different attention to things [16]. In the tourism context, involvement can be defined as the extent to which tourists are interested in an activity and their affective responses arising from that activity. Tourist involvement can be conceptualized from three perspectives—attraction, self-expression, and centrality to lifestyle [17].

### 2.4. Place Attachment

The concept of place attachment derives from the theory of place as explicated in geography, and the theory of attachment as explicated in psychology. Tuan took the lead in linking place theory and attachment theory, and found that individuals have a relatively special attachment relationship to certain places, and he described this special “human–environment interaction” relationship as “Topophilia” [18]. Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) formally explained the relevant definition of place attachment, that is, the sense of belonging of individual tourists to particular tourist destinations, and further constructed the widely used two-dimensional structural theoretical framework—place dependence and place identity [19]. From the perspective of emotion, place identity reflects the relationship between the identity of tourists and the physical environment of the destination. It means that the physical or symbolic attributes of the tourist destination can stimulate identification on the part of tourists with their tourism activity experience. Place dependence starts from the function, which means that the tourist destination provides the necessary environment and conditions to meet the tourist activities, thus creating the functional dependence of the tourist on the destination. Place attachment has an important impact on the behavior of individuals and groups. Studies have found that tourists’ strong sense of place attachment to destinations can prompt them to invest time, energy, money, and other resources, and lead to positive behaviors such as word-of-mouth communication and repeat purchases [20].

### 2.5. Hypotheses

Rural tourism is a tourism development model that takes rural pastoral life scenes, residential lifestyles, community folk customs, etc., as its main content. The core of its attraction is the authentic “rurality” that brings tourists a real rural experience. Rurality is, therefore, considered by the World Economic Cooperation Organization as the central and unique selling point of rural tourism. The authenticity of each village has become the core content of its tourism development, which is related to whether rural tourism can maintain its competitiveness. Based on this, rural tourism authenticity research is mostly combined with the sustainable development of the rural tourism economy, focusing on

the proposed rural tourism localization strategy, or research on the development model of indigenous peoples and communities. Sharpley (2003) pointed out that sustainable development and environmental issues are the core of rural tourism development, and the essence of sustainable development is localization, so sustainable tourism development must always rely on the preservation and enrichment of local authenticity. Daugstad (2008) observed that even in Norway, the Alps, and other places where natural scenery prevails, the landscape of heterogeneous agricultural activities is regarded as an important part of the tourism economy. Farmers are the components and managers of landscape quality, and tourists' participation in agricultural activities and exposure to real life can greatly increase the attractiveness of tourist commodities. Royo-Vela (2009) also revealed, through empirical research on rural tourism in Spain, that "feeling real experience" is one of the most important factors for tourists to undergo an aesthetic experience and can prompt local consumers to revisit it many times. MacCannell (1973) mentioned that the motivation of contemporary tourists is actually to search for authenticity, so the authenticity of tourism activities is conducive to encouraging tourists to join in relevant tourism activities, establish connections with tourism destinations, and form positive emotional responses [21].

In heritage tourism, the allure of authenticity can bring new meaning to the tourism experience by encouraging tourists to explore the cultural knowledge of heritage sites [22]. Zhang et al. (2019) have shown that tourists can perceive the authenticity of tourist destinations and improve their experiences by influencing tourists' travel involvement [23]. Lin and Hsu (2022) found that tourists' authentic experiences can enhance their place attachment and have a direct or indirect positive impact on the cultural tourism destination support for sustainable development [24]. In research on heritage tourism, Lin and Liu (2018) found that the authenticity of heritage tourism destinations can promote tourist loyalty directly [8] wing assumptions:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Authentic experience has a significant positive impact on tourism involvement.*

**Hypothesis 2.** *Authentic experience has a significant positive impact on place dependence.*

**Hypothesis 3.** *Authentic experience has a significant positive impact on place identity.*

**Hypothesis 4.** *Authentic experience has a significant positive impact on loyalty.*

**Hypothesis 5.** *Place dependence mediates the effect of authentic experience on loyalty.*

**Hypothesis 6.** *Place identity mediates the effect of authentic experience on loyalty.*

Previous studies have found that the degree of involvement and frequency of participation in tourism activities can be used to predict the degree of tourists' attachment to the destination. Involvement has become a key factor affecting the emotional connection between tourists and the destination. In a study on railway tourism by Williams et al., it was revealed that tourists' place attachment is affected by the frequency of use of recreational space and the degree of involvement. In a survey of 705 international tourists in hotels, Prayag and Ryan (2012) found that tourist involvement positively affects place attachment, which, in turn, affects tourist satisfaction and the willingness to recommend and revisit [25]. Lee and Beeler (2009) regard tourist involvement as a prerequisite for their satisfaction and intention to visit in the future. In a study of festival tourism, compared with less tourism-involved tourists, tourists who were highly involved in activities during festivals, were more satisfied with their experience and expressed a greater willingness to return [26]. Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 7.** *Tourism involvement has a significant positive impact on place dependence.*

**Hypothesis 8.** *Tourism involvement has a significant positive impact on place identity.*

**Hypothesis 9.** *Tourism involvement has a significant positive impact on loyalty.*

**Hypothesis 10.** *Place dependence mediates the effect of tourism involvement on loyalty.*

**Hypothesis 11.** *Place identity mediates the effect of tourism involvement on loyalty.*

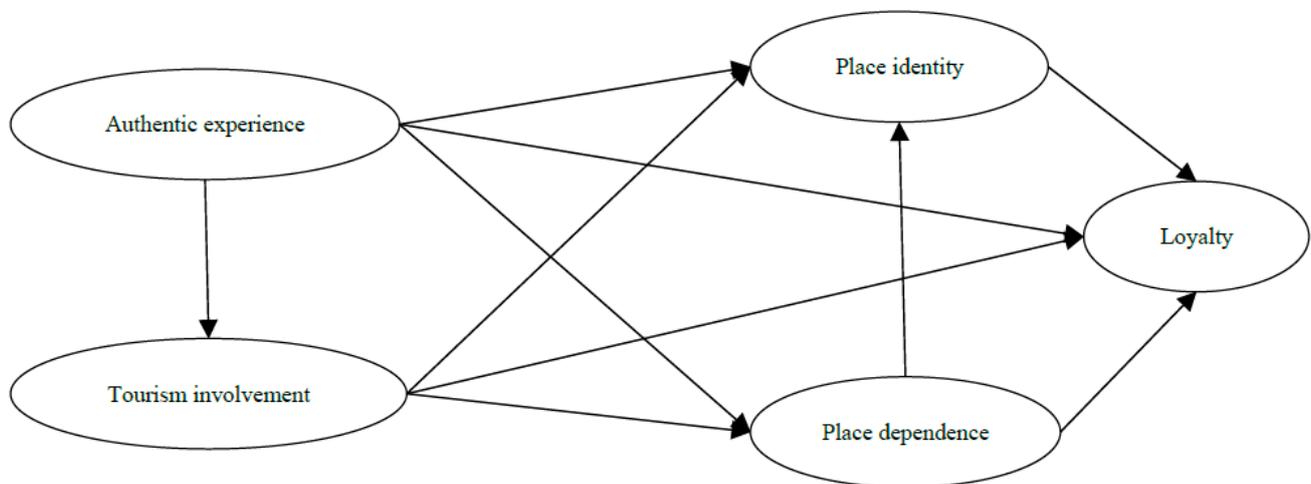
In many differentiated contexts, several studies have verified that place dependence has a significant positive impact on place identity, and place attachment can also directly affect tourists' loyalty to tourist destinations. Zhou et al. (2022) summarized a comprehensive framework on place attachment and tourist loyalty, and 22 different hypotheses were put forward from these 56 studies. The results obtained using the meta-analysis method reveal that place attachment and its dimensions are positively related to tourist loyalty, which includes tourist behavior loyalty, attitude loyalty, and composite loyalty [27]. Villages are often valued because the experiences they provide satisfy people's longing and desire for traditional culture and "free" living. Tourists can easily establish an emotional connection with the place while traveling, thereby generating a sense of belonging and loyalty. Therefore, in the context of rural tourism, the following hypotheses are put forward:

**Hypothesis 12.** *Place dependence has a significant positive impact on place identity.*

**Hypothesis 13.** *Place dependence has a significant positive impact on loyalty.*

**Hypothesis 14.** *Place identity has a significant positive impact on loyalty.*

Based on the above assumptions, a rural tourism research model is constructed, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Research model of tourist loyalty in traditional village tourism.

### 3. Methods

Wuyuan County is a green pearl embedded in the junction of the three provinces of Jiangxi, Anhui, and Zhejiang. Because of its beautiful ecological environment and profound cultural heritage, it was selected as a national leisure agriculture and rural tourism demonstration county as early as 2011. Wuyuan rural tourism began in 1993. After nearly 30 years of continuous transformation and upgrading, Wuyuan's entire area of 2967 square kilometers has been rated the only national 3A-level scenic spot in the country. It has 1 national 5A-level scenic spot and 4A-level scenic spot. Thirteen counties in the country have the most scenic spots above 4A level, and Jiangxi Province has had the most tourists for 12 consecutive years. It has successively won awards as a "National 'Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets' practice innovation base; a national forest

tourism demonstration county; a national rural tourism resort experimental area; a national ecological civilization construction demonstration county; China's tourism strong county, and China's excellent international rural tourism destination" and more than 30 "national brand" gold business cards.

The measurement items of research variables refer to the design of existing scholarly papers to ensure that the scale has high content validity. The items are measured using a Likert 5-level scale. The research questionnaire covers two parts, the survey of demographic characteristics and the measurement of salient variables. The research subjects are tourists who are in a rural tourism environment or who have had rural tourism experience. Offline data collection was carried out from June 15th to July 1st, 2022. A total of 600 questionnaires were returned, and 517 valid questionnaires were retained. The effective valid return rate was 86.17%.

The measurement of the authentic experience refers to the research of Nguyen (2015, 2020) et al. [14,28,29], 8 items, including responses such as the following: "I felt the real way of life of the local residents", "I could experience local traditional cultures", "The overall architecture and exhibits reflect actual buildings of the past", "a calm and peaceful atmosphere is created here", "rural tourism creates opportunities for self-discovery", "through rural tourism, I can break through the limitations of daily routines", "through rural tourism, I realize the psychological needs of satisfaction", and "through rural tourism, I can get along with others more harmoniously".

Referring to the research of Williams (1992) et al. [19], the measures of place identity include: "I identify with the culture here", "I have strong feelings for this place", "The experience here has great meaning to me", and "I have a strong sense of belonging here". The measures of place dependence responses include: "this place provides an environment that other places cannot provide", "compared to other places, this place provides me with a better experience", "this is the best place to travel", and "tourism activities here are more important than other places".

The measurement of involvement refers to the research design of Kyle (2003) and Michael (2008) and others [30,31], covering three levels, namely, attraction, centrality, and self-expression, among which the measurement items of attraction include: "I like rural tourism"; centrality measurement items include responses like: "rural tourism has a close relationship with my daily life"; and self-expression measurement items include: "rural tourism can reflect my style and taste", and "rural tourism can reflect my personality".

Loyalty measures include the three measurement items: "If I have the opportunity, I will choose to experience rural tourism next time", "I will recommend rural tourism to people around me, such as relatives or friends", and "I will say positive things about rural tourism to those around me [10].

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Analysis

The demographic characteristics of the relevant samples are summarized in Table 1, and the proportions of males and females respondents in the sample were 46.23% and 53.77%, respectively. Approximately 32.50% of the respondents were under the age of 20, and 28.43% of the respondents were between the ages of 20 and 29. In terms of educational level, around one-third of the sample had a college degree. The monthly income of the respondents was concentrated in the 3000–5999 yuan bracket (34.62%).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	239	46.23%
Female	278	53.77%
Age		
Under 20	168	32.50%
20–29 years old	147	28.43%
30–39 years old	118	22.82%
40 years old and above	84	16.25%
Education		
High school/technical secondary school and below	98	18.96%
Junior college	168	32.50%
Undergraduate	156	30.17%
Master’s degree or above	95	18.38%
Monthly income		
Below 3000 yuan	139	26.89%
3000–5999 yuan	179	34.62%
6000–7999 yuan	123	23.79%
8000 yuan or more	76	14.70%

#### 4.2. Reliability and Validity Test

##### 4.2.1. Exploratory Factor Analysis

According to Wang’s research, the “authentic experience” is divided into object-related authenticity and existential authenticity. Exploratory factor analysis was used to analyze the construct validity of all the measurement items of authentic experience. The results (as shown in Table 2), reveal that the factor loadings of all topics exceed 0.5, the cumulative variance contribution rate is 74.446%, and the factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 are retained. The analysis showed that the KMO value was 0.899, and the significance of the Bartlett sphericity test was 0.000 (<0.01), so the authentic experience measurement tool had good construct validity.

**Table 2.** Exploratory factor analysis.

Authentic Experience	Measurement	Factor Loading
Object-related authenticity	I felt the real way of life of the local residents	0.836
	I could experience local traditional cultures	0.833
	The overall architecture and exhibits reflect actual buildings of the past	0.821
	A calm and peaceful atmosphere is created here	0.819
Existential authenticity	Rural tourism creates opportunities for self-discovery	0.847
	Through rural tourism, I can overcome the limitations of daily routines	0.837
	Through rural tourism, I realize the psychological need for satisfaction	0.830
	Through rural tourism, I can get along with others more harmoniously	0.729

Variance explained (%): 74.446; Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy: 0.899; Bartlett’s test of sphericity: 3289.441; Significance: 0.000.

##### 4.2.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

There are too many items in the measurement performance. If the original item is used for modeling, it is very likely to have a relatively high parameter estimation bias. This paper adopts relevant suggestions to package the items by means of internal consistency, uses Amos 23.0 to conduct confirmatory factor analysis, and generates a measures model including authenticity, involvement, place dependence, place identity, and loyalty. It is estimated by the maximum likelihood estimation method (as shown in Table 3). The model has a good fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.895$ ; CFI = 0.966; GFI = 0.928; NFI = 0.949; SRMR = 0.031; RMSEA = 0.060), and the factor loading of each latent variable is between 0.718 and 0.963, which is greater than the recommended value of 0.7. Composite reliability

(CR) and Cronbach's alpha were calculated to assess the internal consistency between the measurement items for each latent factor, and the results showed that both CR and Cronbach's alpha were greater than the suggested value of 0.7. The average variance extracted (AVE) value was calculated to evaluate the convergent validity of the research variable measurement, and the results showed that the AVE was between 0.649 and 0.858, all above the recommended value of 0.5. The Cronbach's alpha was between 0.877 and 0.947, all above the threshold level of 0.7, which proves that the reliability of each latent variable is high. The usual method used to test discriminant validity is to compare the correlation coefficient between the latent variables and the size of the square root of the AVE of each latent variable [32]. Table 4 shows that the correlation coefficients between the latent variables in this study are in the range of 0.268–0.674, and the square root of AVE is greater than the average extraction and is in the range of 0.806–0.926, indicating that the latent variables have good discriminant validity.

**Table 3.** Confirmatory factor analysis.

Observed Variable	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Authentic experience1	0.777 ***	0.887	0.662	0.885
Authentic experience2	0.794 ***			
Authentic experience3	0.846 ***			
Authentic experience4	0.835 ***			
Involvement1	0.718 ***	0.884	0.657	0.879
Involvement2	0.863 ***			
Involvement3	0.872 ***			
Involvement4	0.779 ***			
Place dependence1	0.742 ***	0.880	0.649	0.877
Place dependence2	0.850 ***			
Place dependence3	0.841 ***			
Place dependence4	0.784 ***			
Place identity1	0.842 ***	0.920	0.744	0.918
Place identity2	0.925 ***			
Place identity3	0.896 ***			
Place identity4	0.780 ***			
Loyalty1	0.963 ***	0.948	0.858	0.947
Loyalty2	0.890 ***			
Loyalty3	0.924 ***			

$\chi^2/df = 2.895$ ; CFI = 0.966; GFI = 0.928; NFI = 0.949; SRMR = 0.031; RMSEA = 0.060.

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4.** Means, standard deviations, correlation coefficients, and discriminative validity.

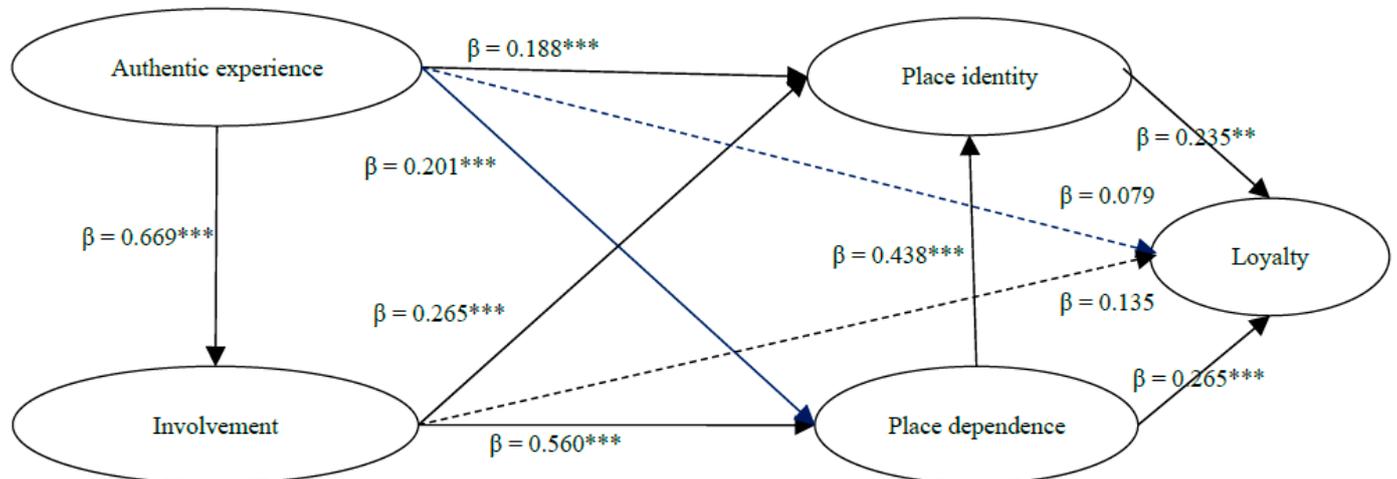
Variable	Average Value	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5
(V1) Authentic experience	4.267	0.814				
(V2) Involvement	4.140	0.601 **	0.811			
(V3) Place dependence	4.043	0.523 **	0.612 **	0.806		
(V4) Place identity	4.179	0.571 **	0.632 **	0.674 **	0.863	
(V5) Loyalty	3.427	0.268 **	0.258 **	0.370 **	0.372 **	0.926

Note: The diagonal bold value is the square root of the AVE value. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

#### 4.3. Hypothesis Testing

Structural equation model verification results are shown in Figure 2, and they show that the structural model has a good goodness of fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.895$ ; CFI = 0.966; GFI = 0.928; NFI = 0.949; SRMR = 0.031; RMSEA = 0.060). The results show that the authentic experience significantly and positively affects involvement ( $\beta = 0.669$  \*\*\*), and hypothesis 1 is thereby supported; the authentic experience significantly and positively affects place identity ( $\beta = 0.188$  \*\*\*) and place dependence ( $\beta = 0.201$  \*\*\*), and hypotheses 2 and 3 are thereby supported; involvement has significantly positive effects on place identity ( $\beta = 0.265$  \*\*\*) and place dependence ( $\beta = 0.560$  \*\*\*), hypotheses 7 and 8 are thereby supported; place

dependence has a significantly positive effect to place identity ( $\beta = 0.438^{***}$ ), and hypothesis 12 is thereby supported; loyalty is significantly and positively influenced by place identity ( $\beta = 0.235^{**}$ ) and place dependence ( $\beta = 0.265^{***}$ ), and hypotheses 13 and 14 are thereby supported; authentic experience ( $\beta = 0.079$ ) and involvement ( $\beta = 0.135$ ) have no significant impact on loyalty, so hypotheses 4 and 9 are not supported.



Model fit:  $\chi^2/df = 2.895$ ; CFI = 0.966; GFI = 0.928; NFI = 0.949; SRMR = 0.031; RMSEA = 0.060.

Figure 2. Hypothesis test results. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

We set the standard as Bootstrap's sample size of 5000, with a confidence interval of 95%, to test the mediating effect of place identity and place dependence. The results (as shown in Table 5) reveal the mediating effect values of "authentic experience  $\rightarrow$  place identity  $\rightarrow$  loyalty" and "authentic experience  $\rightarrow$  place dependence  $\rightarrow$  loyalty" are  $\beta = 0.044$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) and  $\beta = 0.053$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). The mediating effect values of "involvement  $\rightarrow$  place identity  $\rightarrow$  loyalty" and "involvement  $\rightarrow$  place dependence  $\rightarrow$  loyalty" were  $\beta = 0.062$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) and  $\beta = 0.148$ , ( $p < 0.05$ ), respectively. In addition, the direct effect of the authentic experience and involvement on the degree of loyalty is not significant, and it is concluded that place dependence and place identity play a complete-mediating role in the relationship between authentic experience and involvement in loyalty. Hypotheses 5, 6, 10, and 11 are thereby supported.

Table 5. Bootstrap mediation effect test.

Path	Standardized Effect	Standard Error	Bias-Corrected 95%CI			Percentile 95%CI		
			Lower	Upper	<i>p</i>	Lower	Upper	<i>p</i>
Authentic experience $\rightarrow$ Place identity $\rightarrow$ Loyalty	0.044	0.022	0.012	0.104	0.004	0.006	0.092	0.013
Authentic experience $\rightarrow$ Place dependence $\rightarrow$ Loyalty	0.053	0.032	0.010	0.134	0.010	0.010	0.134	0.010
Involvement $\rightarrow$ Place identity $\rightarrow$ Loyalty	0.062	0.030	0.016	0.143	0.003	0.009	0.127	0.010
Involvement $\rightarrow$ Place dependence $\rightarrow$ Loyalty	0.148	0.056	0.056	0.272	0.001	0.059	0.280	0.001

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of rural tourism authentic experience, involvement, and place attachment on tourists' loyalty. By integrating authenticity theory, involvement theory, place attachment theory, and loyalty theory, this study constructs a structural equation model of rural tourist loyalty to promote the integration

and development of theories and make up for the lacunae of rural tourism research in tourist behavior research. Additionally, it echoes the existing research results of place attachment, involvement, and authenticity in different contexts, and further clarifies the relationship between the different factors, providing a reference for subsequent research on tourist behavior. This study has the following three findings:

First, this study found that rural tourists' authentic experience had an indirect effect on loyalty, and that place attachment played a full mediating role in the relationship between authentic experience and loyalty. The authenticity perceived by tourists in rural tourism can help to form place identity and place dependence with a destination and thus generate loyalty. The countryside has its own unique authenticity in terms of the cultural landscape, and this authenticity forms an integral part of the tourist experience. Rural tourists pay attention to the authentic experience while traveling. The more that tourists experience authenticity through local architecture and amenities, arts and crafts, food, or folklore events, the more likely they are to feel disconnected from everyday life and express more free, authentic, and relaxed emotions than usual. To remain authentic and unique, rural tourism must avoid the commodification dilemma in a way that preserves local architecture, amenities, and traditional culture and history. As the direct manager or supervisor of the village, one of the key tasks of the local government is to protect the authenticity of the objective attributes of the rural tourism resources and the quality of the core attractions. It should adhere to the principle of authenticity, and under the premise of protecting the originality, reality, and continuity of the core village scenic spots' resources, conduct moderate tourism development and usage in the countryside. Tourism managers should be able to strike a balance between conservation and the development of rural tourism while achieving long-term, sustainable development goals. Authenticity is often closely related to difference, and tourists spare no effort in pursuing a unique tourism experience, which requires all destinations to fully exploit the differences in rural cultural heritage resources in tourism functions, tourism attributes, tourism value, and tourism vehicles, and strive to provide tourists with multi-dimensional differences. With the advancement of the wider society and the economy, the growth of tourists' experience and the upgrading of tourism knowledge, people are gradually not only limited to the cultural heritage itself to obtain a tourism experience, but will gradually focus on themselves to explore their true selves. The rural protection and utilization project should be carried out around the changing laws of tourists' psychological needs so that tourists can fully feel the authentic experience when visiting the rural cultural landscape. The rational development of the countryside needs to focus on the authenticity of the cultural heritage itself, and the authenticity of the psychological needs of tourists to experience it. Simultaneously, when companies develop rural tourism, they should ask not only what kinds of activities cultural heritage tourism can provide for tourists, but also what kinds of goals tourists hope to attain from cultural heritage tourism. Appropriate and reasonable rural tourism development lies in successfully combining the authentic connotation of heritage and the authentic experience of tourists. Generally, operators of rural tourism destinations need to try their best to explore the overlapping relationship between the authenticity of rural tourism resources and the authenticity of tourists, and to promote the best fit through tourism development.

Second, this study found that involvement has a significant positive impact on place attachment, and place attachment plays a complete mediating role in the relationship between involvement and loyalty. Involvement helps tourists establish emotional connections. Tourists who participate in tourism activities in rural tourism destinations are generally more likely to have an emotional identification with the destination and dependence on tourism functions, and ultimately form loyalty to a tourism destination. In the past, many scholars have taken involvement as a multi-dimensional concept to explore the impact of different dimensions on place attachment and loyalty. The research results in these different contexts found that different dimensions of tourism involvement have different degrees of influence on each dimension of place attachment, which indicates that the relationship between the dimension of involvement and the dimension of place attachment is

unstable. This paper confirms that in the context of rural tourism, authenticity has a direct and positive impact on tourism, which is complementary to other extant research. This requires the operation and management of rural tourism to fully stimulate the authentic experience of tourists and increase tourists' involvement. As earlier related research has shown, many tourists want a temporary escape from their lives by immersing themselves in the experience of a tourist attraction. The restrictions of everyday life make people lose themselves, and they want to rediscover themselves through tourism activities. Therefore, seeking the authentic, traditional atmosphere of destinations is an important driving factor for tourists to travel in rural areas, arrive at destinations to participate in tourism activities, and achieve a higher degree of involvement. The key to rural tourism is to build an authentic social space and atmosphere. Therefore, the design, structure, layout, and materials of rural tourism development should always be in harmony and unity with the original appearance, and the necessary restoration and reconstruction should follow the principle of "restore the old" and pay attention to the intangible assets and cultural heritage of the area. Moreover, the relevant departments of rural cultural relics' management should not only pay attention to the protection and development of material attractions, but also carry out more intangible projects and activities related to local history, culture, and folklore to increase the opportunities for tourists to participate in and experience historical sites in depth. Additionally, "authentic" and "primitive" are buzzwords that attract tourists' attention to monuments and other attractions. Therefore, in tourism marketing, using symbolic elements representing rural attributes to attract tourists' attention and activate potential tourism demand is recommended.

Third, place attachment played a full mediating role in the relationship between the authentic experience and tourist involvement with loyalty. The physical or symbolic attributes of rural tourism destinations can arouse tourists' positive identity and dependence through the travel experience, thereby ensuring their loyalty to rural tourism destinations. Existing studies have found that place attachment is usually built based on host–guest interaction. Therefore, rural tourism destinations should improve the host–guest interaction in the process of rural tourism, stimulate the willingness of host and guest to create together, and encourage tourists to form higher place dependence and place identity. The more that tourists experience authenticity through local architecture and amenities, arts and crafts, food, or folklore events, the more likely they are to feel disconnected from everyday life and express more free, authentic, and relaxed emotions than usual. Tourists are more likely to interact intimately and comfortably with local strangers than usual. In fact, in the process of tourism development, residents are key stakeholder groups, and their behavior has a certain impact on the tourist experience and the perceived value obtained. Under these circumstances, local residents in rural areas play a vital role in the development of rural tourism. They should cultivate the sense of ownership of the residents toward the destination, enhance the characteristics and pride of local tourism development, and participate in tourism reception activities. Local residents can try creating an authentic environment for tourists, arouse their interest, and guide their participation in indigenous culture. This will be more conducive for tourists to break through psychological boundaries, establish further emotional connections with rural tourism destinations, generate greater identification with a place and dependence on it, and then form higher loyalty to rural tourism destinations.

## 6. Limitations and Expectations

This study has several limitations. First, this study has not considered the differences in rural tourism behaviors of different demographic groups. Future research can compare and contrast the differences in tourism behaviors of different gender and age groups. Second, this study only analyzes the factors affecting tourist behavior in rural tourism from the perspective of tourists. In the future, the factors that affect tourists' behavior can be found from the perspective of residents of rural tourist destinations. Third, this research only selects two tourist sites and adopts the method of questionnaire collection,

and the depth of the research conclusion may be somewhat limited. Through in-depth case research, the typical tourism behavior of different types of rural tourists can be compared in the future by combining interviews and experiments.

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