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Impact of Sustainable Cultural Contact, Natural Atmospheric, and Risk Perception on Rural Destination Involvement and Traveler Behavior in Inner Mongolia

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Abstract: Rural tourism is emerging in the tourism industry; however, little is known about traveler behaviors at rural destinations. This study explored the role of cultural contact, natural atmospheric, and risk perception in generating destination involvement and approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia. A quantitative data analysis was used to obtain the research objective. Our findings showed that cultural contact and natural atmospheric significantly increased traveler destination involvement and their approach behaviors. Cultural contact included a stronger impact on destination involvement than natural atmospheric. In contrast, natural atmospheric contained a stronger influence on approach behaviors than cultural contact. In addition, rural traveler risk perception moderated the magnitude of the effect of cultural contact on approach behaviors. Overall, the proposed theoretical framework encompassed a sufficient level of anticipation power for involvement and approach behaviors. Our findings can be helpful for inventing rural tourism development strategies in Inner Mongolia.

Keywords: cultural contact; natural atmospheric; risk perception; destination involvement; approach behaviors; Inner Mongolia

1. Introduction

For the past few decades, rural areas worldwide have undergone challenges associated with economic decline [1]. In many rural destinations, the problems associated with an ageing population, out-migration, and traditional employment loss have geared up the economic decline [2]. Given this situation, it is often believed that tourism is an effective way of increasing economic activities in such areas [2]. Indeed, many rural destinations around the world are active in developing tourism for attaining economic recovery and social revitalization [1]. More specifically, the quality of life of rural residents is improving through rural tourism, which stimulates rapid economic growth and creates more jobs [3]. Furthermore, rural tourism contributes to the local economy and social dynamic by offering various income-generating opportunities to residents [4]. Recently, rural tourism is an emerging phenomenon in the global tourism sector [5]. The local government, tourism officials, and tourism practitioners in Inner Mongolia are also eager to grow the rural tourism industry as a means of economic development and residents' life

quality enhancement. Thus, rural tourism in Inner Mongolia is currently moving forward to the growth stage from the introductory stage of its life cycle.

Despite this growth, the competition in the rural tourism market across the world, particularly in China, is however getting fierce [5]. To improve the destination competitiveness, it is essential to increase tourism destination involvement and elicit traveler approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia. Many studies in diverse hospitality and tourism contexts have endeavored to uncover what factors drive traveler involvement and positive post-purchase intentions/behaviors for a place/company/brand [6,7]. In particular, there exists some evidence that cultural contact is considered a crucial construct in generating traveler place involvement and approach behaviors for a local destination [8,9]. In addition, researchers agree that natural atmospherics or green physical environment are critical in increasing place/product involvement and traveler retention [10–13]. However, despite the importance of cultural contact and natural atmospherics in traveler behavior, little research has assessed the combined influence of these two concepts in visitor response and behaviors. In addition, scant research has been conducted to unearth the formation of rural tourism destination involvement and approach behaviors in Inner Mongolia.

Moreover, some studies showed that the associations between involvement and approach behaviors and their antecedents are not as simple as they may seem, especially in the tourism sector [14]. These researchers indicated that the relationships could be under the impact of individuals' perceived level of risk related to traveling [14]. Indeed, considering the influence of risk perception suggests having a clear understanding of traveler responses, decision-making process, and post-purchase behaviors [14]. However, despite the importance of risk perception in destination studies, little is known about how risk perception moderates cultural contact and natural atmospherics on traveler behaviors in the rural tourism context. For filling these voids, this study was designed to assess the possible effect of cultural contact and natural atmospherics on traveler involvement and approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia. In addition, we attempted to explore the moderating role of rural traveler risk perception and examine the comparative importance of cultural contact and natural atmospherics in determining involvement and approach behaviors, respectively. The conceptualization of study variables and existing literature review are presented in the next section. Subsequently, research methodology and data analysis results are provided. Lastly, the discussions for researchers and practitioners are presented.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rural Tourism Destination Involvement

The concept of involvement indicates a deep level of interest of patrons in a product/service [7]. Similarly, a high level of involvement indicates high absorption, strong belonging, and high attachment [7]. Much of the current literature on involvement pay particular attention to destination image and tourist behavior [15,16]. Therefore, the term, involvement, is interchangeably utilized with such terms as engagement, attachment, and absorption. Involvement in the present research refers to travelers' feeling of attachment and sense of belonging to rural tourism destinations in Inner Mongolia. Strong traveler involvement in a destination often maximizes their tourism experiences at the place [7]. In addition, when customers feel involved, they like the place/product/brand and often engage in purchase behaviors that are favorable for the place/product/brand [17].

2.2. Approach Behavior for Rural Tourism in Inner Mongolia

Boosting customer approach behaviors is essential for a destination/company/brand [6,18–20]. Repeat visitation/purchase, word-of-mouth, and recommendation are essential facets of customer approach responses/behaviors [20–22]. The term, approach responses/behaviors, is alternatively used with loyalty responses/behaviors since customer loyalty comprises repurchase and recommendation intentions/activities as its key constituents [21,23]. From a company's perspective, eliciting approach responses results in

customer retention and recommendation behaviors favorable for the firm and its survival in the competitive marketplace [21,22]. Given this, approach behaviors in this study indicate travelers' behaviors (e.g., revisit and recommendation) that ultimately bring benefits to rural tourism destinations in Inner Mongolia.

2.3. Cultural Contact

Many travelers often make cultural contact and experience cultural activities during their visit to a local destination [24]. The concept of cultural contact indicates that visitors contact a different culture of a specific place [9]. Consistently, cultural contact in the present research refers to travelers' contact with a minority and ethnic culture of rural tourism destinations in Inner Mongolia. Unlike the archaeology literature that focuses mainly on the relation between natives and colonists when describing cultural contact [25], the tourism sector deals with the intensity of traveler cultural experiences at a local destination when conceptualizing cultural contact [9,26]. Irrefutably, an increasing number of individuals want to know a specific destination more and understand its local/ethnic culture in the contemporary tourism marketplace [24]. Therefore, cultural contact is becoming more and more crucial in the recent tourism industry [9], especially in the rural tourism sector, where cultural experience is the major aspect of its tourism product [24].

Some studies in the existing hospitality and tourism literature showed the essential role of cultural contact in explicating traveler behaviors [8,9]. For instance, in the cultural tourism context, Chen and Rahman [9] found that cultural contact is a critical driver of destination loyalty. Their research also demonstrated that cultural contact boosts visitors' memorable tourism experiences and increases intentions to revisit and recommend the place. This finding was consistent with Chandralal and Valenzuela's [8] assertion that cultural contact through experiencing diverse forms of local culture (e.g., authentic/ethnic local festivals, rituals, events, and programs) generates traveler positive response/behavior for a place and induces a memorable tourism experience. In addition, in the island destination tourism sector, Moon and Han [27], in their recent study, uncovered that cultural contact as a form of tourists' destination experiences results in enhanced destination involvement and increased loyalty. While travelling, the depth of cultural experience can differentiate the particular local destination from its rival places in the tourism marketplace [24,27]. Based on these studies, the significant relationships between cultural contact and destination involvement and between cultural contact and approach behaviors can be posited as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Cultural contact positively influences rural tourism destination involvement.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Cultural contact positively influences approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia.*

2.4. Natural Atmospheric

Nature is an effective means of providing solutions to various societal and ecological challenges [28]. In addition, individuals' psychological stress, emotional well-being, and life satisfaction are often under the influence of natural environments near their residential area and workplace [11,29]. Natural atmospheric are also considered influential to consumption behaviors and destination image [30–32]. Loureiro, Stylos, and Bellou [30] argued that the multiple factors (landscape, historical site, hotels, and infrastructure) make up the overarching sense in which tourists make decisions in a destination's atmospheric cues. Especially in the tourism sector, recent studies repeatedly indicated that the natural atmospheric induces travelers' attachment to the place and increases revisit intention [33]. Therefore, natural environments can be a crucial motivating factor for purchasing a tourism product and being absorbed into the product [10].

Natural scenery (e.g., mountains, rivers, lakes, parks, oceans), green surfaces, plants/flowers/trees are essential constituents of natural atmospheric [29]. According to Han

et al. [33], green outdoor atmospherics of a hotel building and its attributes are the critical facets of hotel product performance estimation. Similarly, Jiang et al. [10] asserted the criticality of green attributes and atmospherics in generating traveler positive responses and behaviors for a product/place. Based on this evidence, the significant associations between atmospherics and rural tourism destination involvement and between natural atmospherics and approach behaviors are hypothesized as follows:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Natural atmospherics positively influence rural tourism destination involvement.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Natural atmospherics positively influence approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia.*

2.5. Rural Traveler Risk Perception

Risk perception is frequently considered a core factor affecting traveler purchase decision-making processes/behaviors [34,35]. The scope of this concept includes potential/possible loss in diverse types, possible uncertainty regarding product/service performance, and potential safety/health risk [35,36]. Coherently, in this research, risk perception indicates that travelers' diverse types of possible uncertainty are associated with rural destination choice and tourism in Inner Mongolia. Furthermore, in customer behavior, it is indisputable that individuals perceive a certain degree of risk as vital as it influences their intention formation and future consumption behaviors [14,35,36].

Researchers in the extant tourism studies have made empirical endeavors to unearth the function of risk perception in generating customer approach decisions/behaviors [14,35]. Quintal et al. [35] examined the role of risk perception in the tourism sector. Their research result showed that traveler risk perception has a considerable influence on his/her attitude and approach decision formation. In their research in the airline sector, Han et al. [37] explored the role of perceived risk. Their empirical findings revealed that the relations among air traveler attitude toward an airline product, confidence in the product, and approach intentions for the product are under the influence of perceived risk. Finally, in the international tourism context, Chua et al. [38] investigated the role of risk perception in generating traveler short-term and long-term approach behaviors. They uncovered that the degree of the relationship power between approach behaviors and their antecedents are significantly affected by traveler risk perception. Based on these studies that emphasize the importance of risk perception in traveler behavior, the following hypotheses were developed:

Hypothesis 5a (H5a). *Rural traveler risk perception has a significant influence on the relation between cultural contact and rural tourism destination involvement.*

Hypothesis 5b (H5b). *Rural traveler risk perception has a significant influence on the relation between cultural contact and approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia.*

2.6. Proposed Research Model

A research model of this study, which was developed based on the above-mentioned theoretical background, is exhibited in Figure 1. The theoretical framework depicts the hypothesized associations among cultural contact, natural atmospherics, rural tourism destination involvement, and approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia. In addition, rural traveler risk perception was incorporated into the framework as a moderator. Finally, the model had five research hypotheses.

Figure 1. Proposed research mode.

3. Research Method

3.1. Measurement Tools

The measurement instruments were borrowed from existing studies [9,21,22,30,37–39]. Multi-items and a 7-point scale, which ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7), were used. Specifically, to measure cultural contact, a total of 5 items were used. For the assessment of natural atmospheric, we utilized 3 items. To evaluate rural traveler risk perception, 3 items were used. In addition, we utilized 3 items to measure rural tourism destination involvement. Lastly, to evaluate approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia, a total of 4 items were used. The items’ internal consistency reliability was confirmed by Cronbach’s α and composite reliability (CR). All of the values had excellent reliability, exceeding the suggested cut off level of 0.60 [40]. The average variance extract (AVE) values constant was higher than the minimum recommended cut off level of 0.50 [41]. Above all, the measurement model results meant the data adapted the proposed theoretical model and tested the structural model (Table 1).

Table 1. Measurement model assessment.

Measurement	Average	S.D.
Cultural contact (CR = 0.902, AVE = 0.649, α = 0.900)		
The minority culture that I experienced is authentic.	5.600	1.208
The ethnic culture of Inner Mongolia left a great impression on me.	5.663	1.123
The place where I stayed has programs to learn about local history.	5.723	1.366
I’m interested in Mongolian culture.	5.773	1.249
Folk villages represent the life and culture of minority people authentically.	5.490	1.289
Natural atmospheric (CR = 0.884, AVE = 0.719, α = 0.882)		
The natural scenery of Inner Mongolia is appealing to me.	5.893	1.197
The natural scenery of Inner Mongolia is very attractive to me.	5.737	1.194
The natural scenery is the reason that I visited Inner Mongolia.	5.897	1.218

Table 1. *Cont.*

Measurement	Average	S.D.
Rural traveler risk perception (CR = 0.856, AVE = 0.665, α = 0.855)		
I can't find others to go with me to Inner Mongolia.	3.933	1.703
I don't really feel it's safe to visit Inner Mongolia.	3.907	1.872
I have a lack of understanding of Inner Mongolia.	4.167	1.823
Rural tourism destination involvement (CR = 0.919, AVE = 0.790, α = 0.907)		
Inner Mongolia means a lot to me.	5.660	1.413
I am very attached to the place where I stayed.	5.517	1.348
I feel a strong sense of belonging to the place where I stayed.	5.510	1.542
Approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia (CR = 0.903, AVE = 0.700, α = 0.911)		
I will revisit Inner Mongolia in the future.	5.610	1.105
I will expend effort on revisiting Inner Mongolia in the future.	5.873	1.144
I will recommend others to visit Inner Mongolia for traveling.	5.693	1.139
I will encourage others to visit Inner Mongolia for traveling.	5.850	1.160

3.2. Survey Questionnaire Development and Data Collection

The draft survey questionnaire version included these measures for research constructs, research explanation, and inquiries for demographic information. This initial questionnaire version was pre-tested with tourism researchers. Based on this pre-test result, a slight modification and improvement on the questionnaire were made. The final version of the questionnaire was made through academic experts' reviews and improvement. A field survey was conducted in tourist sites (The Mausoleum of Genghis Khan) in Inner Mongolia. We contacted the Mausoleum of Genghis Khan tourist guide to collect data. The survey was conducted from 6 July 2020, to 26 July 2020, when we went to collect data during "Tsagaansurek" (the Genghis Khan shrine for spring ritual in Mongolia). Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, "Tsagaansurek" was canceled in 2020. With fewer tourists than last year, we took about 3 weeks to collect the data. The questionnaires were distributed to domestic tourists who visited Inner Mongolia. In addition, the surveyors distributed the questionnaire to individuals who were traveling to Inner Mongolia. In particular, the surveyors approached visitors of Inner Mongolia and asked their willingness for survey participation. Upon the agreement of their participation, the surveyors thoroughly explained the research and its purposes. In addition, the respondents were requested to read every question and fill the questionnaire thoroughly. Finally, the completed questionnaire was returned onsite. Through this procedure, a total of 378 respondents were collected. After eliminating incomplete responses (e.g., only answer a portion of questions) and straight-line responses (e.g., selecting "Agree" for all questions), 300 usable responses were obtained. These responses were utilized for analysis for the achievement of our research objectives. According to the rate of sample size (n) to the number of model parameters (q), the sample size proved to be sufficient because it exceeded the recommended sample size of 90 (18 parameters $\times$ 5 observations for each parameter) [42,43].

3.3. Demographic Information of Samples

In Table 2, 184 participants were female travelers whereas 116 participants were male travelers. About 54.7% of the respondents reported that their age is less than 30 years old, followed by between 31 years old and 60 years old (45.0%), and more than 60 years old (0.3%). In terms of education level, most participants reported that they held a college degree (56.0%), followed by graduate degree holders (21.3%), high-school diploma holders or less (17.7%), and other professional degree holders (5.0%). Regarding the visit frequency to Inner Mongolia, about 40.7% indicated that it was their first time to travel to Inner Mongolia, followed by 2–3 times (26.0%), over 6 times (24.3%), and 4–5 times (9.0%). Of the participants, about 50.7% reported that they were traveling with a tour group, followed by traveling with family/relatives (38.0%), traveling alone (6.3%), traveling with others (5.0%). When the travel purpose was asked, most respondents indicated for pleasure (69.7%).

Table 2. Demographic information of samples ($n = 300$).

Categorize	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	184	61.3
	Female	116	38.7
Age	Less than 30 years old	164	54.7
	Between 31 and 60 years old	135	45.0
	More than 60 years old	1	0.3
Education level	High-school diploma	53	17.7
	Collage degree	168	56
	Graduate-degree	64	21.3
	Other professional degree	15	5.0
Visit frequency	First time	122	40.7
	2–3 times	78	26.0
	4–5 times	27	9.0
	Over 6 times	73	24.3
Travel type	Tour group	152	50.7
	Family/relatives	114	38.0
	Alone	19	6.3
	Others	15	5.0
Purpose	Pleasure	209	69.7
	Business and professional	20	6.0
	Visit local friends/relatives Conventions	57	17.2
	Not specified	46	13.8

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model was created by using the confirmatory factor analysis. The generated model had the acceptable level of goodness-of-fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 230.330$, $df = 124$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.857$, RMSEA = 0.054, CFI = 0.974, IFI = 0.975, TLI = 0.968). All values of composite reliability were above Hair et al. [41] suggested cutoff of 0.70 (cultural contact = 0.902, natural atmospherics = 0.884, rural traveler risk perception = 0.856, rural tourism destination involvement = 0.919, approach behaviors = 0.903). This demonstrated the internal consistency of the construct measures. AVE values were generated. The generated values all exceeded the Hair et al. [41] minimum threshold of 0.50 (cultural contact = 0.649, natural atmospherics = 0.719, rural traveler risk perception = 0.665, rural tourism destination involvement = 0.790, approach behaviors = 0.700). In addition, the values surpassed the correlation (squared) between variables. This result demonstrated the convergent and discriminant validity of the measures. Table 3 showed the details about the measurement quality testing.

Table 3. Result of the data quality testing ($n = 300$).

Research Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (SD)	CR (AVE)
1. Cultural Contact	1.000					5.650 (1.056)	0.902 (0.649)
2. Natural Atmospherics	0.790 ^a (0.624) ^b	1.000				5.842 (1.082)	0.884 (0.719)
3. Rural Traveler Risk Perception	−0.023 (0.001)	−0.059 (0.003)	1.000			4.002 (1.585)	0.856 (0.665)
4. Rural Tourism Destination Involvement	0.706 (0.498)	0.605 (0.366)	−0.079 (0.006)	1.000		5.562 (1.319)	0.919 (0.790)
5. Approach Behaviors for Rural Tourism	0.814 (0.662)	0.836 (0.704)	−0.050 (0.003)	0.656 (0.430)	1.000	5.853 (1.072)	0.903 (0.700)

Note. Goodness-of-fit statistics for the measurement model: $\chi^2 = 230.330$, $df = 124$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.857$, RMSEA = 0.054, CFI = 0.974, IFI = 0.975, TLI = 0.968. ^a Correlations between constructs. ^b Squared correlations.

4.2. Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model was created. The structural model included a proper level of goodness-of-fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 175.618$, $df = 84$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.091$, RMSEA = 0.060, CFI = 0.975, IFI = 0.976, TLI = 0.969). The structural analysis results are reported in Table 4 and Figure 2. The hypothesized model in general sufficiently explained the variance in destination involvement and approach behaviors. In particular, approximately 58.6% of the total variance in rural tourism destination involvement was accounted for by its determinants. In addition, about 89.7% of the variance in approach behaviors for rural tourism was accounted for by its predictors within the proposed theoretical framework.

Table 4. Result of the structural analysis ($n = 300$).

Hypotheses	Paths	Coefficients	T-Values
H1	Cultural contact → Rural tourism destination involvement	0.773	5.379 **
H2	Cultural contact → Approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia	0.405	4.081 **
H3	Natural atmospherics → Rural tourism destination involvement	−0.008	−0.061
H4	Natural atmospherics → Approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia	0.568	5.696 **

Variance explained: R^2 (rural tourism destination involvement) = 0.586. R^2 (approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia) = 0.897. ** $p < 0.01$. Goodness-of-fit statistics for the structural model: $\chi^2 = 175.618$, $df = 84$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.091$, RMSEA = 0.060, CFI = 0.975, IFI = 0.976, TLI = 0.969.

Figure 2. Structural analysis and invariance assessment results.

The hypothesized effect of cultural contact on destination involvement was tested. As anticipated, the impact of cultural contact on destination involvement was significant ($\beta = 0.773$, $p < 0.01$). This finding supported our hypothesis. The proposed relation between cultural contact and approach behaviors was evaluated. Our results showed the significant linkage from cultural contact to approach behaviors ($\beta = 0.405$, $p < 0.01$). The finding supported Hypothesis 2. Next, the hypothesized effect of natural atmospheric was examined. Results showed that the relationship between natural atmospheric and destination involvement was not significant ($\beta = -0.008$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported. The effect of natural atmospheric on approach behaviors was assessed. Our finding revealed that the association between natural atmospheric and approach behaviors was significant ($\beta = 0.568$, $p < 0.01$). This finding supported Hypothesis 4.

4.3. Metric Invariance Assessment

An empirical test for metric invariance was conducted in order to examine the moderating role of rural tourism risk perception. The responses were divided into high and low risk perception groups on the basis of a K-means cluster analysis result. The high-risk perception group had 137 responses whereas the low-risk perception group had 163 responses. Afterward, we generated a baseline model containing both risk perception groups. Within this baseline model, all loadings were equally restricted. Our finding showed that the baseline model had an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 310.867$, $df = 179$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.737$, RMSEA = 0.050, CFI = 0.965, IFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.959). Figure 2 and Table 5 included the detailed outcomes of the invariance test.

Table 5. Result of the invariance model assessment.

Linkages	High Group of Rural Tourism Risk Perception (N = 137)		Low Group of Rural Tourism Risk Perception (N = 163)		Baseline Model (Freely Estimated)	Nested Model (Constrained to Be Equal)
	β	T-Values	β	T-Values		
Cultural contact $\rightarrow$ Rural tourism destination involvement	0.724	2.663 **	0.893	5.735 **	$\chi^2 (179) = 310.867$	$\chi^2 (180) = 312.273^a$
Cultural contact $\rightarrow$ Approach behaviors for rural tourism	0.065	0.340	0.552	4.468 **	$\chi^2 (179) = 310.867$	$\chi^2 (180) = 318.460^b$
Chi-square difference test: ** $p < 0.01$			^a $\Delta\chi^2 (1) = 1.406$, $p > 0.05$ H5a: Not supported ^b $\Delta\chi^2 (1) = 7.593$, $p < 0.01$ H5b: Supported			

The generated model was then compared to a nested model where a specific path linking two variables is equally constrained across the groups. The result showed that the linkage from cultural contact to rural tourism destination involvement did not statistically differ between two groups ($\Delta\chi^2 (1) = 1.406$, $p > 0.05$). Hence, the proposed influence of risk perception on the linkage from cultural contact to rural tourism destination involvement (Hypothesis 5a) was not supported. Yet, the link from cultural contact to approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia was significantly different between high and low risk perception groups ($\Delta\chi^2 (1) = 7.593$, $p < 0.01$). This result supported the proposed moderating influence of rural traveler risk perception on the relation between cultural contact and approach behaviors (Hypothesis 5b).

5. Discussion and Implication

With a lack of understanding of rural tourism in Inner Mongolia, this research attempted to comprehend visitors' involvement and post-purchase behaviors. A survey method and a quantitative approach were used. A confirmatory factor analysis, structural analysis, and metric invariance assessment were employed as key data analysis techniques. The present study uncovered the alleged role of cultural contact and natural atmospheric in generating destination involvement and approach behaviors for a rural tourism destination in Inner Mongolia. The hypothesized conceptual framework encompassing the strong associations among research constructs sufficiently accounted for the variance in

involvement and approach behaviors. In addition, the integration of rural traveler risk perception and its influence on our study model was discovered to be critical for better understanding of such post-purchase behaviors that are positive for the destinations. Our empirical findings are helpful when destination marketers and tourism officials invent valuable tactics for traveler retention and attraction. Moreover, the present study made an enormous contribution to enriching the extant literature about rural traveler behaviors in Inner Mongolia.

When travelers make cultural contact through experiencing cultural activities at a certain destination, their attitude and behaviors toward the destination often become positive [9,44]. Our findings showed that cultural contact among rural travelers increases their destination involvement and approach behaviors in line with this indication. Especially, travelers' cultural contact has a more significant influence on destination involvement than natural atmospherics. Indeed, Fisher's Z-test demonstrated the comparative importance of cultural contact on involvement ($p < 0.01$). Given this, to boost rural tourism destination involvement, it is unavoidable to deal with cultural contact. The existing studies showed that cultural contact plays a vital role in tourist behaviors [8,9,24]. Agritourism as a part of rural tourism can improve local, sustainable tourism. Significantly, the destination's unique identity and culture can highlight its authenticity and become more attractive [45,46]. Ger (aka "Yurts"), as traditional accommodation spaces for Mongolian people, was also one of the most distinctive features of Mongolian nomadic life. A previous study points out that cultural contact can improve tourist destination involvement and loyalty [25,26,47]. According to current research results, the destination hotel industry combines traditional Mongolian accommodation to make unique hotels. Destination practitioners, therefore, should make a diverse investment in developing various cultural contact programs. Offering the visitors an opportunity to contact the destination's traditional/authentic culture (e.g., Ordos wedding ceremony, traditional Mongolian events, Mausoleum of Genghis Khan) would eventually result in visitors' sense of belonging to rural tourism destinations in Inner Mongolia.

Natural atmospherics was uncovered as a prominent variable in influencing rural traveler behaviors. Coherent with extant studies [30–33], our finding stressed the importance of these natural surroundings as a key driver of approach behaviors for rural tourism. However, this study's relationship between natural atmospherics and destination involvement does not support the previous research [10,47]. Previous studies have shown that natural atmospherics and green buildings make a person's emotional well-being, such as heathlands and natural vegetation [11,29]. This study produced results that corroborate the findings of the previous research. Based on this evidence, destination practitioners should make maximum use of rural destinations' natural atmospherics in inducing visitor positive responses and behaviors. For instance, enhancing the visibility of natural outdoor surroundings in diverse tourist places (e.g., hotel guestrooms, hotel lobby area, cafés, restaurants, museums) by increasing glass windows and glass walls can be efficient. In addition, practitioners should invest diverse resources in greening the grey surfaces of the buildings. The previous studies have demonstrated the association between natural atmospherics and destination tourism competitiveness [48]. Hence, increasing green surfaces (green walls, vertical garden, green rooftop) can help create visitors' perception/belief that they are in the middle of nature, which eventually helps them feel mental well-being and have a stronger approach decision.

The present study revealed that the association between cultural contact and approach behaviors was under the significant impact of rural traveler risk perception. The cultural contact and approach behavior relation was stronger in the low-risk perception group ($\beta = 0.552, p < 0.01$) than in the high group ($\beta = 0.065, p > 0.05$). This finding indicated the significant moderating role of rural traveler perception, implying that tourists who have low-risk perception at a similar level of cultural contact, actively engage in approach behaviors for destinations in Inner Mongolia than those who perceive high tourism risk. The findings agree with prior studies, which showed risk perception is a key factor influencing

the tourist approach behaviors and purchase intention [14,35–37]. From the theoretical point of view, the present study deepened the conceptual framework explaining the formation of traveler approach behaviors for rural tourism destinations by satisfactorily taking risk perception and its effect into account. Our result also broadened the extant knowledge regarding the moderating role of risk perception to the rural tourism sector. Practically, for the efficient increase of traveler approach responses, destination marketers must minimize any possible factor that induces risk perception among visitors when traveling to rural destinations at Inner Mongolia.

The present study has several limitations. First, the major aspect of the present study centered on the cognitive process. Nevertheless, some recent studies asserted the emerging role of affect/emotion variables in tourists' post-purchase decision-making process and behaviors [49,50]. Therefore, it is also recommended for future research to consider the impact of affective/emotional process and cognitive factors for better explication of rural tourists' behaviors in Inner Mongolia. Second, this research utilized a field survey methodology. To reach a broader range of samples, employing an online survey method is recommended for future studies.

6. Conclusions

Rural tourism has quickly evolved into an important strategy in China [1,3]. Inner Mongolia was the first region in China to achieve the status of an autonomous ethnic region and the third largest province in China. The city is rich in tourism resources because of its unique natural atmospherics (e.g., grasslands, deserts, forests) and ethnic cultural contact (e.g., nomadic lifestyle, Naadam festival, the Genghis Khan Mausoleum).

This research entailed a survey questionnaire of 300 tourists who visited Inner Mongolia. Due to the lack of the previous study of rural tourism in Inner Mongolia, the present study has argued that cultural contact, natural atmospherics, destination involvement, and approach behavior for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia. Cultural contact can enhance cross-cultural interactions in a culturally distinct environment [24]. The previous study shows that Western tourists prefer to experience local life, which elicits higher satisfaction [24]. Inner Mongolia as a minority area, it is necessary to examine marketing strategies aimed at international tourists. This research has also shown that natural atmospherics has significantly affected approach behavior for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia. Natural landscape destinations play an important role in attracting tourists [30,31]. Inner Mongolia is fascinating for its unique natural landscapes. Especially, grasslands are the pillar of its tourism resources (e.g., Hulunbuir grassland, Xilamuren grassland, Xilingol grassland, et al.). Hence, local governments need to promote sustainable economic growth while preserving the area's pristine environment.

The risk perception has been designed as a moderate value method to evaluate cultural contact, tourism destination involvement, and approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia. The current study findings demonstrated the moderating role of risk perception in cultural contact, destination involvement, and approach behaviors for rural tourism in Inner Mongolia, thus having a critical practical and theoretical meaning. Risk perception influences tourist attitudes to visit the destination [35]—for example, global pandemics such as COVID-19, safety issues, climate and natural disaster risk. To reduce and minimize the risk, the tourism organization needs to provide various information on the destination. Overall, this research can be helpful for tourism enterprises and local governments developing tourism strategies and promote Inner Mongolia tourism.

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