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From Affective Atmosphere and Tourists' Memorable Tourism Experience to Their Loyalty Towards Rural Tourist Destinations: A Hybrid SEM–fsQCA Approach

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Abstract

Rural tourism strategies in underdeveloped countries have gained popularity in recent years due to rural tourism's significance in the sustainable development of society. Thus, by integrating affective event theory in the context of rural tourism, the present study underscores the formation of tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations based on the perspectives of affective atmosphere and memorable tourism experience for rural tourist destinations. Drawing on 541 valid samples from tourists to Xidi and Hongcun, which are famous rural tourist destinations in China, both SEM and fsQCA were employed to capture the linear effects and configurational pathways leading to tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations. The results indicate that conviviality, therapeutics, authenticity, and playfulness significantly enhance tourists' memorable tourism experience, which subsequently strengthens their loyalty to rural tourist destinations. Complementing these findings, the fsQCA results reveal multiple equifinal and causally asymmetrical configurations associated with high loyalty. Through the combined use of symmetric and asymmetric approaches, this study offers a more holistic understanding of the formation of destination loyalty and provides theoretically grounded and practically meaningful insights for rural tourism development and strategic destination management.

Keywords: rural tourist destination; destination loyalty; affective atmosphere; memorable tourism experience



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1. Introduction

Tourists usually experience distinctive atmospheres in the environment when visiting tourist attractions or destinations [1]. These atmospheres generate emotions through tourists' bodily feelings within specific locales, termed "affective atmospheres" [2–4]. In contrast to the traditional concept of atmosphere, which focuses on the consumers' perception of physical and human factors [5,6], affective atmosphere serves as a unique approach based on the generation of affect through the experience of a place, particularly concentrating on individuals' subjective mental states and emotional responses stimulated by the surroundings [2,7,8]. Although they are intangible and fleeting, affective atmospheres function as essential mediators that enable emotion exchanges between tourists and destinations, thereby enhancing tourists' emotional engagement and connections with the destinations [9]. Affective atmospheres, with their compelling influence on the tourism

experience, can be treated as effective tools for designing tourism environments to promote tourists' emotional responses [7].

Affective atmospheres are pervasive across diverse tourism destinations, among which rural tourism destinations represent particularly salient sites, as emotional and sensory experiences are closely intertwined with everyday landscapes, social interactions, and rhythms of rural life. Unlike highly staged attractions, rural tourism destinations rely on natural environments, vernacular spaces, and host–guest interactions to cultivate atmospheres of tranquility, nostalgia, and conviviality, which immerse tourists in distinctive affective experiences. These rural destinations usually integrate multiple experiential elements such as agricultural practices, local gastronomy, cultural traditions, and slow-paced lifestyles within relational rural spaces, enabling tourists to encounter layered and shared affective experiences through embodied participation [10,11]. Recognized as place-based destinations where emotional, social, and material elements converge to shape visitors' perceptions and behaviors, rural tourism destinations therefore provide an appropriate and valuable context for affective atmosphere research [12,13].

With the significance of affective atmospheres in the realm of tourism, research gaps remain in conceptualizing and validating this concept, especially in rural tourism. Firstly, most of the existing research on affective atmospheres is mainly in the explorative stage and uses a qualitative approach [8,14]. Limited research has been conducted with a quantitative approach to measure and validate the concept. In the context of theme parks, Hu et al. have empirically validated the affective atmospheres [7]. Compared to the significance of rural tourism and its strong connection with affective atmospheres, it is essential to fill in the research gap by identifying and validating the measurement scales associated with affective atmospheres empirically. Secondly, as for rural tourism destinations, as typical spaces that provide tourists with a memorable experience, the relationship between factors constituting affective atmospheres and tourists' memorable tourism experience (MTE) has not been investigated. A subsequent consideration is that the influences of the affective atmosphere provided by rural tourism destinations and tourists' memorable experiences obtained from the atmosphere on their destination loyalty have not yet been explored; these influences are very important, and essential for the sustainable development and rural revitalization of rural areas. This research could be beneficial for rural tourism destinations or attractions, allowing them to better uncover the dynamics of how to effectively design and control affective atmospheres which, afterwards, build deeper and stronger emotional bonds with tourists, to maintain the sustainable development of rural tourism.

In addition, recent published studies have highlighted the growing importance of understanding visitors' psychological responses and experiential attributes across various tourism contexts. For instance, Chang et al. emphasized that characteristics of market segmentation play a critical role in shaping sustainable tourism behaviors, suggesting that emotional and experiential differences among visitor groups may influence how atmospheres are perceived [15]. With findings similar to this notion, Kim and Hyun demonstrated that contextual emotional factors, such as tourism ethnocentrism and pandemic-related anxiety, can significantly shape domestic travel intentions, reinforcing the importance of affective processes in visitor decision-making [16]. Additionally, Li et al. showed that stakeholders' perceptions of service importance strongly affect evaluations of tourism experiences, implying that the experiential qualities embedded in rural tourism environments merit deeper empirical investigation [17]. These findings collectively support the need to further examine how affective atmospheres and emotional experiences operate within rural destinations, thereby providing a meaningful foundation for the present study.

Thus, the present study would be conducted to, firstly, validate the multiple constructs relating to affective atmosphere in rural tourist destinations. Secondly, the casual rela-

tionships between affective atmosphere, MTE and tourists' destination loyalty would be empirically determined. Moreover, in addition to the use of structural equation modeling to identify the linear relationships among research variables, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) would be performed to explore and compare the configurations leading to tourists' destination loyalty to rural tourism destinations [18–20]. Collectively, the present study would provide the theoretical implications and practice management strategies for rural tourism management and operation from the perspective of affective atmosphere construction and the creation of MTE. More importantly, the symmetrical and asymmetrical methods would be performed together to, basically, explore the associations among antecedents and outcomes, and better uncover the complex multi-factorial and concurrent causality which largely explains the complicated social phenomenon [21,22].

2. Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

2.1. *Affective Events Theory*

Weiss and Cropanzano first introduced affective events theory to explore how external factors shape people's subjective experiences and reactions within certain environments [23]. Initially, the theory originated from the field of organizational behaviors. Later, it was applied in the context of tourism and hospitality because, based on this theory, affective events such as significant occurrences, specific locations, or memorable moments could influence an individual's subjective states, which, subsequently, could promote shifts in an individual's emotional responses which could be used to explain many phenomena in the area [24]. For instance, Lee et al. have applied the theory to explore the relationship between service failure and complaint behavior among tourists with disabilities [25]. More recently, Hu et al. have applied the theory in the field of theme parks to validate the affective atmosphere as well its antecedents and outcomes [7]. Thus, as affective event theory has suggested, affective events trigger emotional responses and attitudinal changes [23], implying that the affective atmosphere generated by various stimuli could profoundly foster tourists' emotional connections with a destination.

2.2. *Affective Atmosphere*

Affective atmosphere, which was first conceptualized by Anderson, refers to the collective affective force that emerges through the interactions among people, places, and material environments [2]. Rather than residing solely within individuals or physical settings, affective atmosphere exists in the relational spaces between subjects and the object/subject relationship, and between the definite and indefinite factors that enable us to reflect on affective experience as occurring beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity [2]. This term is derived from the notion of "atmosphere", which is perceived as either an impersonal or transpersonal intensity encompassing the transmission of feelings, mimetic waves of sentiment and a profound feeling of place [26,27]. Consequently, affective atmospheres could be defined as assemblages of shared feelings emerging from the interactions between people and their cultural and material surroundings and conditions [14].

In the context of tourism and hospitality, affective atmosphere produces emotions through people's feelings as elicited by physical encounters which could act as catalysts in the formation of landscapes across various settings and enhances our grasp of socio-spatial dynamics. Naturally, it has increasingly been recognized as an important antecedent of tourists' emotional and behavioral responses. Unlike traditional environmental attributes that focus on the physical qualities of destinations, affective atmosphere emphasizes the emotional climate generated through multisensory environments, social interactions, and shared experiences. It shapes tourists' emotional engagement by fostering feelings of

belonging, comfort, excitement, and interpersonal connectedness, thereby enriching the overall tourism experience [2–4].

Empirically, various studies have been conducted to consistently demonstrate the positive influence of affective atmosphere across diverse tourism and hospitality settings and the multiple dimensions of affective atmosphere. Specifically, Hu et al. [7] applied this term in the context of theme parks, firstly validating the subdimensions of affective atmosphere, which are conviviality, therapeutics and playfulness, respectively. Moreover, their study further determined that affective atmosphere could positively impact on visitors' brand love, which is like the findings revealed by studies of Hamby and Jones [28].

Likewise, Muhammad et al. have identified that the store atmospherics, which comprise store design factors, ambient factors and social factors, could positively impact on consumers' store loyalty through their hedonic experience [29]. Chang et al. [15] have determined that the place-based atmosphere of coffee shops would positively affect consumers' place attachment and, subsequently, influence their attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. More importantly, in addition, a study by Li et al. found that tourists' MTE was affected by the night tourism atmosphere [30]. As for B&Bs, a study by Liu et al. has uncovered that the atmospheric spatial, cultural and social environment can trigger customer loyalty through emotional experience [31]. Rural B&Bs are characterized by intimate host–guest interactions, local cultural immersion, and shared everyday practices, making them especially conducive to the formation of affective atmospheres. Such environments not only provide physical comfort but also facilitate emotional resonance, interpersonal interaction, and a temporary escape from everyday routines.

2.3. Memorable Tourism Experience

The term of MTE was postulated by Kim et al., and is an experience that is memorably remembered and reconstructed selectively by a tourist when describing a trip and a tourist destination [32]. Unlike momentary emotions experienced during travel, MTE emphasizes the long-term psychological impressions that remain in tourists' memories and continue to influence their subsequent evaluations and behavioral decisions, which has been well-confirmed in the context of tourism and hospitality [33–36]. For the conceptualization and constructs of MTE, Kim et al. have developed a 24-item MTE scale within seven domains, namely, hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, novelty and involvement [32]. Since its introduction, MTE has become one of the most influential concepts in tourism experience research, especially in rural tourism, because the success of rural destinations increasingly depends on their ability to provide authentic, meaningful, and emotionally engaging experiences that remain in tourists' memories long after the trip has ended, which subsequently motivates their post-trip behavioral intentions such as satisfaction, loyalty, etc. [32,33,37]. That is, MTE has been widely recognized as a critical predictor of tourists' future behavioral intentions and an essential indicator of tourism destination success.

More specifically to rural tourism settings, Ye et al. have explored the antecedents of the memorability of rural tourism for domestic and international tourists, and the significance of MTE on tourists' satisfaction has been confirmed [36]. Moreover, Tao et al. have empirically determined that rural B&B guests' MTE was affected by the nostalgia of the guests and the perceived value of the B&B, which afterwards impacted the behavioral intentions of the guests towards rural B&Bs [37]. These findings suggest that MTE is not generated solely by physical attractions but also by the emotional and social environments in which tourists are immersed. Furthermore, Steinkbeck and Munar have applied the concept of affective atmosphere to explore children's museum experiences, and indicate that atmospheres are phenomena which are the core of the sensory leisure experience [38].

Therefore, it could be inferred that when tourists perceive a stronger affective atmosphere in rural destinations, the tourists are more likely to have emotionally rich experiences and MTE. Hence, based on the above-mentioned discussion, the following hypotheses were developed.

H1. *Tourists' perception of the affective atmospheres of rural tourism destinations has a positive impact on the tourists' memorable tourism experience.*

H2. *Tourists' memorable tourism experience has a positive impact on destination loyalty.*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Area

The tourism-based development of traditional villages in Huangshan city, which is located in the agglomerated area of Anhui, Zhejiang and Jiangxi, has reached a certain level, gaining popularity throughout the whole country. Within this area, Hongcun and Xidi are two famous historic villages designated as World Cultural Heritage sites in 2000 and represented as being the most typical instances of rural tourism development in China [39,40]. Therefore, these two rural tourist destinations were selected as research areas and, further, tourists visiting these two destinations have been recruited as our respondents.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Procedure

Tourists who had the experience of visiting these two villages within the last year are the potential respondents of the present study. Both online and offline questionnaire-based surveys have been conducted. For the online survey, the developed questionnaire was coded using Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn) which is one of the most common sites for voting, testing and collecting data in the mainland of China [41].

After the survey was developed, a unique QR code and link were generated for respondents to access the questionnaire. The questionnaire was posted in the tourism communities associated with several major social media platforms in China, such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu and Weibo. The questionnaire was open from 10 October to 24 October 2025, which was right after the National Day holiday. Initially, 323 samples were collected. After the deletion of two responses with missing information, 321 valid samples had been collected online. For the offline survey, the researchers performed an on-site survey in the two destinations on 25–26 October 2025 and 1–2 November 2025, two weekends. As a result, 231 samples were collected. After the removal of 11 samples with missing information, 220 valid samples had been obtained for further data analysis. Collectively, with the combination of the online and offline surveys, a total of 541 samples were used for the formal data analysis, with a validity rate of 97.65%.

3.3. Questionnaire Design and Measurement Scales

A self-administered questionnaire was developed to explore the antecedents of tourists' destination loyalty from the perspective of affective event theory; this included the environmental features and events and, afterwards, the affective reactions. In the first section, questions concerning the socio-demographic characteristics of potential respondents, such as gender, age, educational background, etc., were asked. Secondly, the main body of the questionnaire contains measuring items for the research variables. First, at the beginning, for the affective atmosphere of the rural tourist destination, four subdimensions were applied, based on the studies [7,8,14,42,43]; these were conviviality, therapeutics, playfulness and authenticity. Specifically, the conviviality, which captures the happiness and cheerfulness that atmospheres evoke in tourists, was measured by six items based on the studies [7,8]. As for the therapeutic dimension, it mainly refers to the indicators of a warm,

amicable, touching, romantic and eudemonic element that correlates with love [44–46]. As for the playfulness, concerning the enjoyment of a playful atmosphere contained in the rural tourist destination, five measuring items were applied to assess this construct [47]. The last subconstruct, authenticity, has been well-investigated in the context of rural tourism, and in this case, it was measured by seven items adapted from the studies [48,49].

Afterwards, questions pertinent to the constructs of MTE and tourists' destination loyalty would be asked. In detail, tourists' MTE was measured by seven items adapted from studies [32,37]. Finally, tourists' destination loyalty was measured by five items derived from the studies [50–52]. All measuring items of each construct were assessed by a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from 1, representing "strongly disagree", to 7, standing for "strongly agree".

After the initial design of the questionnaire, it was reviewed by three graduate students majoring in tourism and hospitality and two others who were experts in the field. Several minor revisions were made based on their suggestions, and final agreement was reached among them. Moreover, a greeting letter was located at the very beginning of the questionnaire; it informed respondents that if they agreed to continue the questionnaire, their consent was thereby obtained.

3.4. Analytical Methods

Structural equation modeling (SEM) and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) were both applied to explore the symmetric and asymmetric relationships among the affective atmosphere of the rural tourism destination, tourists' memorable experiences, and loyalty. SEM is a variable-oriented technique which concentrates on the linear relationships among research variables, and it treats independent variables as competing to explain the variation in the dependent variables [53]. Contrastingly, the fsQCA method is a case-oriented technique that focuses on the combinational effects of condition variables on the outcome variable which explain how the multiple pathways and solutions lead to the same outcome. Furthermore, this method also allows for multi-finality, in which identical conditions can lead to or contribute to different outcomes, and conjunctural causation, where causal configurations of conditions can be either necessary or sufficient to achieve the outcome [54,55]. In this case, SEM was conducted by utilizing AMOS 27.0 version and fsQCA was performed by fsQCA 3.0 version. In addition, the descriptive statistics were obtained by using SPSS 27.0 version.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Among the 541 valid samples, 279 samples were from female respondents, accounting for 51.57% of the total sample, followed by 262 male respondents, with a proportional share of 48.43%. As for their occupations, 243 subjects were students, followed by 113 subjects who were company staff. The other 185 samples were from official servants, retired men/women, freelancers and others. As for the educational background, over half of the respondents held a bachelor's degree or above (288 samples, 53.23%). Furthermore, the skewness and kurtosis values of all measuring items were determined to be within the threshold values of ± 1.96 and ± 2.58 , respectively, indicating that there is no issue concerning the normality.

4.2. Common Method Bias

The common method bias was ascertained by Harman's one-factor test. It has been suggested [56] that if a single component explains 50% or more of the covariance among research variables, this suggests the possible existence of common method bias. Thus,

exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted, and it was unearthed that no single component explained more than 31.87% of the variance, indicating there is no concern related to the common method variance issue in this case.

4.3. Results of SEM

4.3.1. Results of Measurement Model

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the overall fit of the conceptual model. Based on the CFA results, the model fit indices were determined to be $\chi^2/df = 1.924$, RMSEA = 0.041, GFI = 0.895, IFI = 0.947, TLI = 0.943 and CFI = 0.947, which are all at the acceptable level. The properties related to the measurements are indicated in Table 1. For the CFA, the composite reliability (CR) values were determined to be between 0.862 and 0.929, all exceeding the threshold value of 0.7 [57,58], indicating that the multiple items of each construct were highly reliable and internally consistent. Moreover, except the AVE value of authenticity, which was determined to be 0.482, slightly lower than 0.5 but still greater than 0.36, all values of AVE for the other research constructs were determined to be greater than the recommended value, varying from 0.516 to 0.656 [59], indicating good reliability. In terms of the convergent validity, it has been confirmed that all the indicators under a latent variable must have high loadings of more than 0.6 [57,59]. In these results, all factor loadings are greater than 0.6, ranging from 0.620 to 0.904, indicating the acceptable convergent validity.

Table 1. Results for reliability and convergent validity.

Construct and Measuring Item	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Conviviality (Con)		0.884	0.563
Con1: I felt the joyful atmosphere of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.694		
Con2: I can feel the relaxing atmosphere of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.733		
Con3: When I visited the rural tourist destination, I felt relaxed.	0.821		
Con4: I felt the escaping atmosphere of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.653		
Con5: I may experience a sense of surprise toward the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.904		
Con6: I felt the vivid atmosphere of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.663		
Therapeutics (Ther)		0.929	0.651
Ther1: The rural tourist destination I visited provides a eudemonic atmosphere.	0.738		
Ther2: I felt the warmful atmosphere of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.697		
Ther3: I think I am attracted by the amicable atmosphere of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.828		
Ther4: I like the touching atmosphere of rural tourist destination I visited.	0.843		
Ther5: I felt the romance of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.862		
Ther6: I think I am healed after visiting the rural tourist destination.	0.848		
Ther7: I can have the feeling of well-being after visiting rural tourist destination.	0.818		
Playfulness (Pla)		0.862	0.656
Pla1: The rural tourist destination provides me with immersive atmosphere.	0.659		
Pla2: There is a sense of adventure that I can feel from the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.781		
Pla3: I can feel the amusing atmosphere of rural tourist destination I visited.	0.760		
Pla4: I think the rural tourist destination I visited has a fantastical atmosphere.	0.794		
Pla5: There is something novel in the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.727		
Authenticity (Aut)		0.866	0.482

Table 1. Cont.

Construct and Measuring Item	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Aut1: I think the rural tourist destination I visited makes me feel the local forms of life.	0.759		
Aut2: I felt the representative atmosphere of the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.750		
Aut3: I can feel the authentic atmosphere of rural tourist destination I visited.	0.646		
Aut4: I can feel the calm atmosphere created by the rural tourism destination I visited.	0.633		
Aut5: I felt the peaceful atmosphere created by the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.620		
Aut6: I felt the harmonious atmosphere created by the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.633		
Aut7: I think the rural tourist destination I visited provides me with the bond with the local.	0.794		
Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE)		0.881	0.516
MTE1: I felt excited about have a new experience of visiting this rural tourist destination.	0.657		
MTE2: This rural tourist destination is the place that I always want to visit.	0.753		
MTE3: The activities I experienced in this rural tourist destination is something unique.	0.730		
MTE4: By visiting this rural tourist destination, I learned more about myself.	0.722		
MTE5: I have closely experienced the local culture.	0.692		
MTE6: By visiting this rural tourist destination, I think I learned some new culture.	0.634		
MTE7: By visiting this rural tourist destination, I felt revitalized.	0.823		
Destination Loyalty (DL)		0.851	0.535
DL1: I think I will be a loyal tourist to the rural tourist destination I visited.	0.661		
DL2: I will visit it again on my next rural tourism trip.	0.718		
DL3: I could like to recommend this place to people who ask my advice of rural tourist destination.	0.700		
DL4: I will give the positive word-of-mouth to people who ask about it.	0.683		
DL5: I will visit this place again in the future.	0.876		

Notes: CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted.

Finally, the discriminant validity was assessed by using the square-rooted AVEs compared to the correlation coefficients among the research variables. Table 2 presents the results for discriminant validity. As suggested in [60], all values of square-rooted AVE on the diagonal are higher than the correlation coefficients between the research variables of the matrix. Overall, both convergent and discriminant validity have been approved as showing acceptable construct validity [61].

Table 2. Results of discriminant validity.

Variables	Con	Ther	Pla	Aut	MTE	DL
Con	0.750					
Ther	0.380 **	0.807				
Pla	0.352 **	0.457 **	0.810			
Aut	0.330 **	0.419 **	0.384 **	0.694		
MTE	0.355 **	0.441 **	0.414 **	0.406 **	0.718	
DL	0.333 **	0.419 **	0.348 **	0.367 **	0.317 **	0.731

Notes: ** represents $p < 0.01$.

4.3.2. Results of Structural Model

After confirming the reliability and validity of the research variables and measuring items, the structural model assessment was conducted. Firstly, the model fit was confirmed by the determination of the following properties: $\chi^2/df = 2.046$, RMSEA = 0.044, GFI = 0.889, IFI = 0.940, TLI = 0.935 and CFI = 0.940. Table 3 displays the results for the proposed hypotheses. All proposed hypotheses have been confirmed. Specifically, for the influence of affective atmosphere of the rural tourist destination on tourists' MTE, it was empirically confirmed that the conviviality ($\beta = 0.162$, $p < 0.001$), therapeutics ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$), playfulness ($\beta = 0.203$, $p < 0.001$) and authenticity ($\beta = 0.199$, $p < 0.001$) could positively influence tourists' MTE. Based on the path coefficients, it could be determined that the therapeutic atmosphere provided by the rural tourist destination had the strongest impact on tourists' MTE, followed by the playfulness and the authenticity. Furthermore, tourists' memorable tourism experience has a positive influence on their destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.379$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, all proposed hypotheses have been confirmed.

Table 3. Results of hypothesized paths.

Hypotheses	Std. Beta	S.E.	C.R.	p-Value	Results
H1a: Con $\rightarrow$ MTE	0.162	0.005	2.848	<0.001	Supported
H1b: Ther $\rightarrow$ MTE	0.231	0.046	3.799	<0.001	Supported
H1c: Pla $\rightarrow$ MTE	0.203	0.046	4.169	<0.001	Supported
H1d: Aut $\rightarrow$ MTE	0.199	0.047	4.409	<0.001	Supported
H2: MTE $\rightarrow$ DL	0.379	0.058	7.662	<0.001	Supported

Notes: S.E. = Standardized error, C.R. = Critical ratio.

4.4. Results of fsQCA

As the outcome and condition variables in fsQCA are regarded as separate sets, it was essential and of primary importance to convert the data into set membership scores through calibration. In fsQCA, the conditions must be calibrated to form fuzzy sets with values of 0–1 [62]. This is the process of data calibration, which assigns each set member a value for each case. The present study employed the direct calibration method, which is the most commonly applied approach in studies using fsQCA. Consistent with previous research, the lower quartile, median, and upper quartile of each condition variable were used as the three qualitative anchors for calibration. These thresholds correspond to full non-membership, the crossover point, and full membership, respectively, allowing the original variables to be converted into fuzzy-set membership scores ranging from 0 to 1 [63]. Based on the standard provided by Moreno et al. [64] and confirmed by the study of Zheng et al. [22] in the context of a tourism study, each variable's calibration standard for a full non-member was set to the 0.05 percentile, the 0.5 percentile was used for the intersection, and the 0.95 percentile was used for a full member. Table 4 presents the results for the data calibration of each variable.

In fsQCA, the term "necessary condition" refers to a factor that must be present whenever the outcome occurs. Therefore, prior to conducting configurational analyses, it is essential to examine whether each individual condition satisfies the criterion of necessity [63]. Conditions are necessary when the consistency score exceeds 0.9 [22,65]. Table 5 indicates the results of necessary condition assessment for high level of destination loyalty. As shown in the table, values for the consistency of all conditions were lower than 0.9, varying from 0.497 to 0.774. Thus, it can be concluded that no necessary condition existed affecting high levels of tourist destination loyalty for rural tourist destinations.

Table 4. Data calibration for the condition and outcome variables.

Variables	Calibration		
	Full Non-Member	Intersection	Full Member
Conviviality	3.17	4.83	6.67
Therapeutic	3.00	5.57	6.14
Playfulness	3.80	5.60	6.40
Authenticity	3.71	4.71	6.57
Memorable	3.57	4.71	6.14
Tourism Experience			
Destination Loyalty	3.80	5.60	6.40

Table 5. Results of necessary condition analysis in the model for tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations.

Condition Variable	Destination Loyalty		~Destination Loyalty	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
Conviviality	0.685	0.721	0.608	0.570
~Conviviality	0.592	0.629	0.702	0.665
Therapeutics	0.774	0.706	0.665	0.541
~Therapeutics	0.497	0.625	0.638	0.715
Playfulness	0.720	0.699	0.634	0.548
~Playfulness	0.534	0.621	0.651	0.674
Authenticity	0.683	0.741	0.582	0.562
~Authenticity	0.596	0.615	0.732	0.673
Memorable				
tourism experience	0.689	0.717	0.628	0.581
~Memorable				
tourism experience	0.597	0.643	0.694	0.664

~refers to "negated".

As suggested [62,66], sufficiency analysis was performed using a consistency benchmark of over 0.8 and 0.7 was set as the PRI consistency threshold. As for the case frequency threshold, over two cases were settled and over 80% of the sample has been retained. Table 6 presents the results of configurational paths to tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations. Moreover, following the symbolic representation [66], ● and ○ denote the core causal conditions that are present and absent, respectively. And the blank cells indicate the irrelevant conditions that might be absent or present in a configuration.

Table 6. Configuration assessment for a high level of tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations.

Condition Variable	Destination Loyalty (Configuration)			
	1	2	3	4
Conviviality	●		●	●
Therapeutics		●	●	●
Playfulness	●	●	●	
Authenticity	●	●		●
Memorable tourism experience			○	●
Raw coverage	0.484	0.501	0.357	0.41
Unique coverage	0.056	0.074	0.050	0.019
Consistency	0.832	0.836	0.874	0.871
Overall coverage			0.626	
Overall consistency			0.804	

Notes: ● represents the presence of a core causal condition, ○ represents the absence of a core causal condition.

The result for configuration 1 suggested that for the cultivation of tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations, it is essential to provide a convivial, playful and authentic atmosphere to arouse their affection towards the destination. The consistency of this configuration (0.832) exceeds the acceptable threshold. Configuration 2 consists of the condition variables of therapeutics, playfulness and authenticity, with a consistency value of 0.836. Configuration 3, covering the presence of conviviality, therapeutics, authenticity and the absence of MTE, has accounted for 0.874 of the consistency. Finally, configuration 4 uses conviviality, therapeutics, authenticity and MTE to explain the combinational paths to tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations. And its consistency was determined to be 0.871, exceeding the threshold value of 0.8.

Lastly, the robustness test in this case was performed by adjusting the consistency threshold level from 0.8 to 0.85. Based on the results, no substantial changes were identified in the configuration number, components, or the consistency and coverage parameters [22]. Thus, the reliability of the results of the present study could be guaranteed.

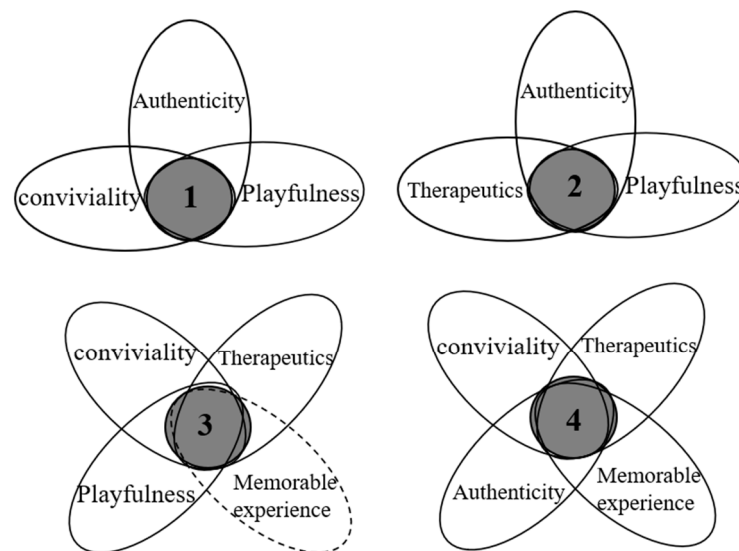
5. Conclusions

Tourists' loyalty to a destination contributes greatly to the sustainable development of rural tourism. Based on the affective atmosphere and MTE, this study explores the mechanism of the formation of tourists' destination loyalty from the theoretical foundation of affective events theory, with a research approach combining structural equation modeling (SEM) and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to comprehensively explore and identify the mechanism and the complex configurations of tourists' loyalty to rural tourist destinations.

In line with the prior studies, SEM findings confirmed the significant and positive influence of the sub-dimensions of the affective atmosphere in rural tourism on the formation of MTE and afterwards, a tourist's loyalty to the destination. Among the diverse subconstructs of affective atmosphere, tourists' MTE was most impacted by the therapeutic atmosphere provided at the rural tourist destination, which is very in line with the apparent trend in rural tourism towards beneficial healing and restorative results [11,46]. Such restorative feelings are more likely to be encoded into long-term memory because emotionally meaningful experiences are generally remembered more vividly than routine tourism activities. This finding further supports the argument that MTEs are not solely generated by novelty or excitement but also by feelings of comfort, healing, and emotional well-being [37,67].

Moreover, the significant relationship between tourists' MTE and their destination loyalty has been discussed and confirmed by prior studies in the wide range of rural tourism. For example, Tao et al. have confirmed that rural B&B tourists' MTE positively impacts their behavioral intentions [37]. The question has been thoroughly explored, and it has been confirmed that fsQCA is useful in complementing SEM and explaining the complexity of behavioral outcomes such as saving behaviors [22], tourism entrepreneurship [62], green-practice behaviors of tourism employees [68], and so forth in these tourism settings.

The fsQCA results uncover four combinational paths driving tourists' destination loyalty. Figure 1 presents the configurations for tourists' loyalty, as scrutinized by fsQCA. Configuration 1 concentrates on the social bonding, enjoyment and authenticity created without a therapeutic atmosphere and tourists' MTE, which emphasizes that favorable tourism experiences trigger positive emotions that subsequently shape loyalty-related attitudes and behaviors. And this is very in line with the core of affective events theory [69,70].



Notes: Core causal conditional present: ellipse with a black-line border;
 Core casual conditional absent: ellipse with a dotted-line border;
 Irrelevant condition to the configurations: no ellipse is displayed.

Figure 1. Configurations of tourists' destination loyalty to rural tourist destination.

Configuration 2 mainly focuses on the healing and immersive path to destination loyalty, containing therapeutics, playfulness and authenticity of the affective atmosphere. Configuration 3 reveals the effect of the absence of MTE and the co-presence of conviviality, therapeutics and playfulness, relative to the destination loyalty of tourists. This result is very interesting and surprising because it implies that loyalty emerges from ongoing emotional comfort and satisfaction, rather than peak or extraordinary memories, which is different from the studies [35,71]. The last configuration, configuration 4, is the most comprehensive configuration, containing the social connection, emotional restoration, and authentic context as well as the memory formation, uncovering that rural tourism delivers complete experiential richness and that destination loyalty can be reinforced cognitively, emotionally, and socially. In addition, the absence of playfulness could be interpreted as showing that deep emotional and social meaning can substitute for playful elements, indicating that the essence of rural tourism could be the meaning-seeking instead of the simple playfulness [72].

Overall, these findings extend the current understanding of rural tourism by demonstrating that destination loyalty is not driven by a single factor but emerges from multiple alternative configurations of experiential and emotional conditions. More importantly, the results suggest that the affective atmosphere of rural tourism is not merely a consequence of the physical environment but is substantially co-created through the host–guest interactions which constitute the key strength of rural tourism. This is because, compared with urban attractions, rural tourism destinations provide greater opportunities for direct communication between visitors and residents, that is, the host–guest interaction, which includes the interactions at B&Bs, and those of farmers or community members with tourists [73,74]. Through everyday conversations, local hospitality, participation in agricultural activities, and the sharing of local customs and stories, tourists develop feelings of welcome, trust, and social connectedness. These interpersonal encounters transform rural destinations from physical consumption spaces into emotionally meaningful social spaces, which is the affective atmosphere studied in the present research. Consequently, destination loyalty is shaped not only by destination attributes but also by the quality of social relationships

that tourists establish with hosts and local communities. This highlights the importance of adopting a configurational perspective in examining tourist behavior and provides valuable insights for fostering sustainable development in rural destinations.

6. Discussions

6.1. Theoretical Implications

Given the research findings, this study offers several theoretical implications for the literature of rural tourism by integrating affective events theory with a configurational perspective through a research approach combining symmetry and asymmetry. First, this research extends the application of affective events theory into the rural tourism context by demonstrating that tourists' destination loyalty is formed through an affect-laden experiential processes rather than solely through cognitive evaluations, while at present, affective events theory has been mainly applied in the field of human resource management and its application in the tourism and hospitality context has been limited [75,76]. In line with the content of affective events theory, results derived from SEM validate that the sub-dimensions of affective atmosphere, that is, conviviality, therapeutics, authenticity, and playfulness, serve as affective stimuli that shape tourists' MTE and subsequently, the formation of their loyalty to a rural tourist destination. This has been confirmed in the realm of theme parks. These finding advances tourism theory by empirically validating AET's core proposition, namely, that emotional events trigger affective reactions which in turn influence attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, which is still an underexplored domain in rural tourism.

Second, this study contributes to the MTE literature by clarifying its role as an important but non-universal mechanism in the formation of destination loyalty. While SEM results support the effect of MTE between affective atmosphere and loyalty, fsQCA reveals that MTE is not a necessary condition for destination loyalty. Specifically, in the findings for configuration 3, it was demonstrated that destination loyalty can emerge even in the absence of MTE when conviviality, therapeutics, and playfulness are all present. This finding challenges the dominant assumption in tourism studies that peak or extraordinary memories are indispensable for loyalty formation, and highlights the importance of process-oriented, emotionally sustaining experiences.

Third, by adopting fsQCA, this study advances tourism research beyond linear and symmetric causal explanations and provides strong evidence for equifinality and causal asymmetry in tourists' destination loyalty formation. The identification of four distinct configurations illustrates that no single affective atmosphere dimension in association with MTEs independently determines loyalty. Instead, destination loyalty results from different combinations of affective conditions, each representing a unique experiential pathway. This configurational insight responds to recent calls for embracing complexity theory in tourism studies and demonstrates the limitations of relying solely on net-effect models such as SEM. Finally, the sub-dimensions of affective atmosphere built based on the previous literature were validated in this case, which develops a research foundation for subsequent research to explore the influence of affective atmospheres in rural tourism; these are playfulness, conviviality, authenticity, and therapeutics, respectively [76,77].

6.2. Practical Implications

In light of its practical implications, this study offers valuable insights for rural tourism destination managers, planners, and policymakers seeking to enhance tourists' destination loyalty and thus promote the sustainable and high-quality development of rural tourism. Firstly, it was suggested that destination managers should recognize that there is no single optimal strategy for cultivating destination loyalty. The fsQCA results reveal multiple

effective configurations, suggesting that rural destinations can achieve loyalty through different experiential designs depending on their resource endowments and development stage. Destinations with strong social and cultural capital can emphasize conviviality and authenticity, while those with natural landscapes and tranquil environments may focus on therapeutic and restorative experiences.

Moreover, based on the analytical results, the strong role of therapeutic atmosphere in shaping MTE highlights the growing importance of rural tourism as a healing, well-being-oriented and restorative product or destination [31,77]. Thus, rural tourist destination operators should intentionally design spaces and activities or construct the affective atmospheres that promote relaxation, stress relief, and emotional restoration. Nature-based activities, slow-paced itineraries, wellness-themed accommodations, and opportunities for quiet reflection could be installed or employed for creating the therapeutic atmosphere of the destination. Moreover, importantly, a warm and emotional host–guest interaction could assist in the creation of an affective atmosphere at the rural tourist destination, which could distinguish them from other tourist destinations. These elements can significantly enhance tourists' emotional responses and foster long-term loyalty, especially in post-pandemic tourism markets. Finally, policymakers should adopt a configurational mindset when formulating rural tourism development strategies. Rather than imposing standardized development models, policies should allow destinations to leverage their unique affective atmospheres and cultural contexts based on their tourism resources. Thus, supporting training programs for local hosts to enhance conviviality, protecting cultural authenticity, and investing in therapeutic landscapes can collectively strengthen destination loyalty and ensure sustainable rural tourism development.

6.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged which also provide several directions for future research to explore. First, the data collection scope was limited to two cases, which to some extent, may limit the generalizability of the findings to other types of destinations or cultural settings with different types of atmospheres. Future studies could apply the proposed SEM–fsQCA integrated framework to different rural regions, countries, or comparative urban–rural contexts to validate the robustness and cross-cultural applicability of the identified configurations. Second, this study relied on cross-sectional survey data, which restricted its ability to capture the dynamics of the affective atmosphere and tourists' destination loyalty over time. Hence, a longitudinal research design or experimental approach could be used to better identify the dynamics of affective atmosphere and the complexity of MTE in determining loyalty.

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