

Article

From Taste to Place: Sustainable Experiential Value Formation in Rural Tourism

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Abstract

This study examines how value is constructed in sustainable rural tourism through the integration of local gastronomy and spatially embedded accommodation. Although sustainability is commonly treated as an evaluative dimension, limited attention has been given to how it is experienced and internalized within tourism contexts. Addressing this gap, the study develops and empirically tests a process-based model in which Local Gastronomic Authenticity initiates a sequential pathway through Spatial Immersion, Perceived Sustainability Value, and Experiential Enrichment, ultimately shaping Behavioral Intention. Data were collected from 3181 respondents with direct rural tourism experience in the Emilia-Romagna region (Italy), within Slow Food-based gastronomic settings and Albergo Diffuso accommodation systems. The findings indicate that value emerges through interconnected stages rather than isolated attributes. Gastronomic authenticity enhances spatial immersion, which strengthens sustainability perception and contributes to experiential enrichment—the strongest predictor of behavioral intention. The results further show that authenticity acquires behavioral relevance through successive stages involving immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment, without exerting a direct effect on behavior. The study advances a process-oriented understanding of tourism experience formation by explaining how authenticity becomes behaviorally relevant through successive experiential stages and offers practical implications for designing integrated and sustainable rural tourism systems.

Keywords: sustainable rural tourism; gastronomic authenticity; spatial immersion; perceived sustainability value; experiential value formation; sequential model



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1. Introduction

Tourism has shifted from a product-oriented activity toward an experience-centered phenomenon, where value is no longer embedded in isolated attributes but emerges through dynamic interactions between tourists, place, and context [1,2]. Within this shift, sustainable tourism has gained prominence as a dominant paradigm, emphasizing environmental responsibility, cultural preservation, and community engagement [3]. However, despite its conceptual importance, sustainability in tourism is often framed as an ethical obligation or evaluative criterion, rather than as an integral component of the lived tourist experience [4–6]. As a result, a critical gap persists in explaining how sustainability is experientially constituted and translated into behavioral outcomes within tourism contexts.

Despite growing interest in sustainability, authenticity, and immersive experiences, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how these dimensions collectively shape the emergence of behavioral outcomes within rural tourism settings.

At the same time, tourism research has increasingly emphasized the role of authenticity, immersion, and engagement in shaping meaningful and memorable tourist experiences [7,8]. In particular, local gastronomy has been widely recognized as a key medium through which tourists engage with culture and place [9,10], while spatially embedded accommodation models such as *Albergo Diffuso* have been associated with enhanced place-based interaction and community integration [11,12]. Although previous studies have established the importance of gastronomy, authenticity, and sustainability in rural tourism, these dimensions are most often examined as separate predictors of tourist behavior [13,14]. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how authenticity, immersion, sustainability perception, experiential enrichment, and behavioral intention are interconnected within a single experiential framework.

Prior research continues to examine authenticity, immersion, and sustainability either in isolation or as parallel predictors, providing limited insight into how these dimensions are interconnected within tourism experiences. Consequently, the mechanism through which authenticity becomes behaviorally effective remains theoretically underdeveloped. While Experience Economy research conceptualizes experiences primarily as meaningful and memorable outcomes [1], and Memorable Tourism Experience research focuses on the characteristics that make tourism experiences enduring in memory [7], the present study focuses on the process through which gastronomic authenticity acquires behavioral relevance via spatial immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment.

Existing studies have identified associations among authenticity, immersion, sustainability, and behavioral outcomes, yet they provide a limited explanation of how these elements combine to generate value across the tourist experience. Specifically, the study examines whether the relationship between gastronomic authenticity and behavioral intention is associated with spatial immersion, perceived sustainability value, and experiential enrichment [15,16]. While previous studies have typically examined these constructs separately or as parallel predictors of tourist behavior, the present study integrates them within a single empirical framework. In addition, the model allows assessment of whether gastronomic authenticity is associated with behavioral intention directly or indirectly through immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment. Addressing this gap, the present study develops and empirically tests a sequential mediation model designed to examine the proposed experience formation process. Rather than proposing a new modeling technique, the study seeks to explain how experiential value develops and acquires behavioral significance within sustainable tourism environments.

Within this framework, sustainability, gastronomy, and accommodation are conceptualized as integrated components of a place-embedded experiential system, operationalized through the combination of Slow Food principles [17,18] and the *Albergo Diffuso* model [19]. Sustainability functions as an experiential condition that shapes how tourists interpret and engage with place, while gastronomic authenticity and spatially distributed accommodation represent interconnected elements of the tourism experience. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from isolated attributes toward the relationships among experiential dimensions within tourism experiences. The sequential mediation model functions as an empirical tool for examining these relationships rather than as the primary theoretical contribution of the study.

This issue motivates the central question of the present study: through what experiential mechanisms does authenticity become behaviorally meaningful in sustainable rural tourism contexts? To address this question, the study examines whether behavioral

intention is associated with gastronomic authenticity directly or indirectly through spatial immersion, perceived sustainability value, and experiential enrichment [20]. The study contributes to tourism scholarship by examining how gastronomic authenticity, spatial immersion, perceived sustainability value, and experiential enrichment operate together in shaping behavioral intention rather than as isolated predictors of tourist behavior. Within this perspective, gastronomy functions as a driver of spatial embeddedness, while sustainability operates as an experiential condition shaping how value is interpreted and enacted.

The framework is operationalized through a set of hypothesized relationships, each representing a distinct stage in the proposed experience formation process, thereby enabling empirical testing of the conceptual model. In addition to its theoretical contribution, the study provides practical implications for the design of sustainable rural tourism experiences. The findings highlight the relationships among gastronomy, space, sustainability perception, and behavioral intention within rural tourism settings. Such an approach shifts tourism development away from fragmented, product-oriented models toward coherent experience ecosystems that support more sustainable, meaningful, and economically viable practices. Unlike approaches that treat authenticity and sustainability as separate determinants of tourist behavior, the present framework emphasizes their integration within a broader experiential configuration through which behavioral outcomes emerge. This perspective is particularly relevant for sustainable tourism research, as it positions sustainability as an experiential condition shaping the construction and behavioral translation of value.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. From Gastronomy to Spatial Immersion

Local gastronomy has increasingly been recognized as a central component of destination identity and tourist experience [21]. Beyond its traditional role as a supporting or complementary activity, food has been conceptualized as a key medium through which tourists engage with local culture, traditions, and everyday life [9]. Authentic gastronomic experiences, characterized by local sourcing, traditional preparation methods, and social interaction, provide a strong connection to place, enabling tourists to move beyond superficial consumption toward deeper engagement with the destination [22,23]. In this context, gastronomy functions not only as a cultural symbol but as a mechanism of spatial immersion. By participating in local food practices, tourists become embedded in the socio-spatial environment of the destination, experiencing its rhythms, meanings, and social structures [24]. This aligns with perspectives that emphasize embodied and place-based experiences as critical to meaningful tourism engagement [25].

However, authenticity is not universally interpreted as a positive or self-evident characteristic of tourism experiences. Research on staged authenticity suggests that tourists may question the genuineness of cultural and gastronomic experiences when local traditions are excessively curated, commercialized, or adapted to tourist expectations [26]. More recent scholarship similarly emphasizes that authenticity remains a contested and negotiated concept shaped by tourists' subjective interpretations and contextual factors [27]. Despite these debates, authentic gastronomic practices continue to be recognized as important mechanisms through which tourists engage with local culture and place.

The Slow Food philosophy further reinforces this connection by promoting locality, seasonality, and cultural authenticity [17,28], while the Albergo Diffuso model spatially distributes the tourism experience across the village fabric, enhancing tourists' interaction with and immersion in the destination [29,30]. Accordingly, authentic gastronomic experiences are expected to strengthen tourists' sense of presence and embeddedness within the destination, leading to the following hypothesis:

H1. Local Gastronomic Authenticity positively influences Spatial Immersion.

2.2. Spatial Immersion and Sustainability Perception

Spatial immersion represents an intensified form of engagement in which tourists are not merely observers but active participants in the local environment [29]. Such immersion facilitates direct interaction with local communities, production systems, and environmental practices, creating conditions under which sustainability becomes visible and experientially meaningful [25,31,32]. Rather than being perceived through abstract information or external communication, sustainability is increasingly understood as a construct shaped by contextual engagement with place [33]. When tourists are immersed in local contexts, such as small-scale food production, traditional practices, and community-based hospitality, they are more likely to recognize and evaluate sustainable practices through lived experience rather than mediated interpretation [34].

The integration of Slow Food principles and the Albergo Diffuso model illustrates this dynamic by combining sustainable food systems with adaptive reuse of existing structures and strong community integration, thereby embedding sustainability within everyday spatial practices rather than presenting it as a detached attribute [35]. This suggests that deeper spatial immersion enhances tourists' awareness and evaluation of sustainability, leading to the following hypothesis:

H2. Spatial Immersion positively influences Perceived Sustainability Value.

2.3. Sustainability as an Experiential Resource

Sustainability has often been framed as an ethical or externally communicated dimension of tourism, frequently treated as a criterion influencing attitudes and decisions [5,36]. However, recent perspectives suggest that sustainability can be integrated into tourism experiences in ways that enhance their depth and meaning [37,38]. When tourists recognize sustainability within the context of their experiences, through local food systems, environmental practices, and community engagement, it contributes to a sense of authenticity and meaningful engagement with the destination [39,40]. This transformation shifts sustainability from a normative obligation to a component integrated into the experience itself.

At the same time, sustainability should not be assumed to generate uniformly positive responses. Previous studies indicate that tourists and consumers may express skepticism toward sustainability claims when they are perceived as symbolic, marketing-driven, or inconsistent with observed practices, thereby reducing their credibility and perceived value [41]. Consequently, the experiential significance of sustainability may vary across visitors and tourism contexts. In this sense, sustainability becomes embedded in the co-creation of value, where tourists actively interpret and internalize sustainable practices as part of their lived experience [42,43].

As a result, sustainability contributes to experiential enrichment through both cognitive and emotional dimensions of the tourism experience [44]. Such enriched experiences are characterized by greater memorability and perceived experiential value, reflecting the integration of knowledge acquisition and affective engagement [1]. Therefore, perceived sustainability value is expected to enhance the overall depth and quality of the experience. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Perceived Sustainability Value positively influences Experiential Enrichment.

2.4. Experiential Enrichment and Behavioral Outcomes

Experiential enrichment captures the extent to which tourism experiences generate meaningful emotional responses and deeper experiential engagement, reflecting the ways

in which individuals relate to and interpret their experiences [45]. Enriched experiences are characterized by memorability, personal relevance, and transformative potential, contributing to the formation of post-consumption evaluations and future behavioral responses [7,46]. In tourism research, behavioral intention, such as revisit intention, recommendation, and willingness to pay, is consistently linked to the perceived quality and intensity of the experience, and more broadly explained through established behavioral frameworks [47,48]. Experiences that are emotionally engaging and cognitively meaningful are more likely to be retained in memory, positively evaluated, and translated into favorable behavioral intentions. This relationship reflects how perceived value influences post-consumption behavior by shaping satisfaction and affective responses [49].

Within the context of sustainable rural tourism, experiential enrichment represents a stage in which prior experiential elements are integrated into a meaningful and memorable form that influences future behavior [50]. By integrating cognitive learning with emotional engagement, enriched experiences enhance tourists' identification with the destination and increase the likelihood of continued engagement through revisitation and recommendation [51]. Accordingly, experiential enrichment is expected to act as a key predictor of behavioral intention. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. *Experiential Enrichment positively influences Behavioral Intention.*

2.5. The Role of Spatial Immersion in Experience Formation

While spatial immersion contributes to sustainability perception, it also plays a direct role in shaping the experiential quality of tourism [29]. Being physically and socially embedded in a destination can enhance sensory, emotional, and cognitive engagement, as illustrated in research on immersive and sensory-based tourism experiences [52]. From an experiential perspective, immersion facilitates a more immersive and participatory interaction with place, allowing tourists to move beyond passive observation toward active participation in the destination environment [53]. Experiential responses are intensified through the integration of affective and cognitive processing, thereby increasing the perceived richness and depth of the experience [54]. Consequently, spatial immersion generates intrinsic value beyond its influence on sustainability perception [55]. By enabling tourists to actively engage with place, immersion enhances the depth and intensity of the overall experience and contributes to experiential enrichment [56,57]. Therefore, a direct relationship between spatial immersion and experiential enrichment is proposed:

H5. *Spatial Immersion positively influences Experiential Enrichment.*

2.6. Sustainability and Behavioral Intention

In addition to its role in enriching experiences, sustainability may also influence tourists' behavioral intentions. Tourists who perceive tourism as responsible and aligned with environmental and social values are more likely to support such practices through their future behavior [58]. From a theoretical perspective, sustainability functions as a value-based attribute that shapes behavioral intention through attitudinal and normative mechanisms. When tourism offerings are perceived as environmentally and socially responsible, they generate positive evaluations and are associated with stronger behavioral intentions [59]. This aligns with broader perspectives on pro-environmental behavior, where perceived sustainability increases individuals' willingness to engage in supportive actions, including revisiting, recommending, and demonstrating stronger loyalty toward sustainable tourism offerings [60].

This dual role of sustainability, as both an experiential enhancer and a direct driver of behavior, reflects its increasing importance in shaping tourist decision-making. In

sustainable tourism contexts, perceived sustainability value can directly influence behavioral intention by reinforcing alignment between tourists' personal values and destination attributes [61]. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. *Perceived Sustainability Value positively influences Behavioral Intention.*

2.7. Sequential Mediation and Experiential Transformation

Existing research has provided substantial insight into the relationships between authenticity, experience, sustainability, and behavioral intention. However, these constructs are predominantly modeled as independent or parallel predictors within linear causal frameworks, which limits their capacity to explain how value is formed and translated into behavioral outcomes. Tourism experiences are increasingly understood as dynamic phenomena in which value emerges through interconnected transformations, as tourists move from initial sensory and contextual inputs toward deeper cognitive and emotional outcomes [62,63]. Within this perspective, key attributes such as authenticity contribute to the transformation of initial inputs into meaningful outcomes [64]. This view emphasizes how engagement with place generates processes of interpretation, evaluation, and internalization.

In this study, Local Gastronomic Authenticity is expected to initiate a sequential process in which authentic food experiences enhance spatial immersion, which in turn strengthens sustainability perception, leading to experiential enrichment and ultimately influencing behavioral intention. This proposition does not assume that authenticity or sustainability automatically generate positive outcomes. Rather, the framework examines the conditions under which these attributes become behaviorally relevant through successive experiential stages.

This reflects a sequential experiential pathway in which cultural and contextual inputs are progressively associated with cognitively and emotionally meaningful outcomes that guide future behavior [65]. Such a mechanism is consistent with process-oriented perspectives in tourism, where experiential elements interact dynamically across stages to produce cumulative effects [15,66,67]. Accordingly, a sequential mediation structure captures the complexity of tourism experience formation by explicitly modeling how different experiential layers interact over time, providing a more comprehensive explanation than direct-effect approaches. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7. *Local Gastronomic Authenticity indirectly influences Behavioral Intention through Spatial Immersion, Perceived Sustainability Value, and Experiential Enrichment, establishing a full sequential mediation pathway.*

3. Materials and Methods

Data collection was conducted through a field-based survey administered in rural accommodation settings in the Emilia-Romagna region (Italy) over a twelve-month period, from March 2025 to March 2026. The study involved visitors staying in approximately 50 active agriturismo establishments distributed across the Emilia-Romagna region. During the twelve-month period, the five members of the research team conducted repeated field visits to participating establishments, ensuring geographical coverage across multiple rural destinations and reducing the potential influence of any single accommodation provider on the final sample.

All authors were directly involved in on-site data collection, visiting rural accommodation facilities and engaging with guests during their stay. Questionnaires were distributed in two ways: (1) on-site recruitment followed by email delivery, and (2) post-visit distribution via accommodation providers using guest contact records. This approach enabled

respondents to complete the survey at their convenience while ensuring that responses were based on recent, lived experiences. The sampling strategy targeted visitors with direct experience of rural tourism settings, integrating accommodation and local gastronomy. A total of 3500 questionnaires were distributed, of which 3181 valid responses were retained for analysis, resulting in a response rate of 90.9%. The relatively high response rate can be attributed to the field-based recruitment strategy, which involved direct contact with guests during their stay, collaboration with accommodation providers, and follow-up reminder messages sent to participants who had agreed to receive the survey electronically. Response monitoring was conducted throughout the data collection period to track completion rates across participating establishments. Responses were screened for completeness and consistency prior to analysis. Questionnaires with substantial missing data, evident response patterns (e.g., straight-lining), or implausibly short completion times were excluded. Duplicate submissions were controlled through the monitoring of participant email addresses and direct on-site recruitment procedures. Because respondents were initially contacted by the research team during their stay and subsequently invited to complete the questionnaire electronically, participant records could be cross-checked to identify potential duplicate submissions. Any duplicated responses were removed to ensure that each participant was represented only once in the final dataset. The unit of analysis was the individual tourist. Responses were collected across multiple accommodation establishments, and no single establishment accounted for a dominant proportion of the final sample.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained prior to survey completion. Because questionnaires were distributed through both on-site recruitment and post-visit electronic administration, potential mode effects were considered. Comparisons across the two collection modes did not indicate substantial differences in the demographic composition of respondents or in the mean values of the principal study constructs. Consequently, responses from both modes were pooled for subsequent analyses.

The final sample ($N = 3181$) was demographically diverse. Gender distribution was balanced (46.6% male, 50.2% female, 3.2% non-binary). Gender was self-reported, and respondents were able to identify as male, female, non-binary, or prefer not to disclose. Respondents were broadly distributed across age groups, with the largest segments in the 25–34 (24.5%) and 35–44 (22.0%) categories. Educational attainment was relatively high, with the majority holding a bachelor's (40.6%) or master's degree (24.7%). The sample was predominantly European, with Italy representing the largest share (44.2%), followed by Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, and Austria. Respondents from North America (the United States and Canada) and other regions were also represented. Experience with rural tourism varied, including first-time visitors (24.9%), occasional visitors (34.5%), and more experienced travelers. Familiarity with the Slow Food concept ranged from no prior awareness (21.4%) to high familiarity (30.5% combined). Length of stay varied from short visits (1–2 days: 39.1%) to extended stays (over one week: 9.7%). Travel was predominantly social, with most respondents traveling with partners (40.2%) or family members (25.5%).

3.1. Measurement Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to capture key dimensions of sustainable rural tourism experiences. The instrument was developed based on established constructs in tourism experience research, integrating insights from the experience economy [1], memorable tourism experiences [8], experiential co-creation [41], and sustainability perception in tourism contexts [33]. Additional conceptual grounding was drawn from food tourism [9] and place-based experience frameworks [68], supporting the alignment between theoretical constructs and their empirical operationalization. The

questionnaire initially consisted of 35 items grouped into five conceptual dimensions: Local Gastronomic Authenticity, Spatial Immersion, Perceived Sustainability Value, Experiential Enrichment, and Behavioral Intention. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Local Gastronomic Authenticity was measured through items capturing the extent to which food experiences reflect local traditions, cultural embeddedness, and a sense of place (e.g., “The food I experienced reflects the authentic culinary traditions of the destination”). Spatial Immersion assessed tourists’ perceived embeddedness within the local environment, including community integration, everyday life engagement, and a sense of belonging (e.g., “I feel immersed in the everyday life of the destination”). Perceived Sustainability Value included items reflecting environmental responsibility, local economic contribution, and cultural preservation (e.g., “This tourism model supports environmentally responsible practices”). Experiential Enrichment captured the cognitive and emotional depth of the experience, including learning, personal relevance, and emotional engagement (e.g., “This experience is emotionally engaging and meaningful”). Behavioral Intention was measured through items related to revisit intention, recommendation, willingness to pay, and preference for similar experiences (e.g., “I would consider revisiting this destination in the future”).

For the purposes of structural equation modeling, all items were coded and represented using abbreviated labels in the measurement and structural model diagrams. To examine the underlying structure of the measurement model, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. Alternative factor solutions were initially examined, and the five-factor structure demonstrated the strongest theoretical interpretability and empirical coherence. The results supported a five-factor solution, with items loading clearly onto their respective constructs. Following factor purification, items with factor loadings below 0.50 or cross-loadings above 0.30 were removed, resulting in a parsimonious and theoretically consistent measurement model. Of the original 35 items, five items were removed during factor purification, and 30 items were retained in the final measurement instrument. The removed items did not meet the established loading criteria or demonstrated conceptual overlap with multiple constructs. Item retention decisions were based on factor loading patterns and theoretical consistency rather than modification indices. The complete item purification process, including retained and removed items, their corresponding codes, and final factor allocation, is presented in Appendix A. The final instrument retained items that demonstrated strong alignment with their respective constructs, supporting its suitability for subsequent confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling.

3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 and AMOS 26, following a structured procedure aimed at ensuring the reliability and validity of the measurement model and testing the proposed structural relationships. Preliminary diagnostics were performed to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Sampling adequacy and the factorability of the correlation matrix were evaluated using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity, which are standard prerequisites for identifying latent constructs. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was then conducted using the Maximum Likelihood extraction method with oblique rotation, as the constructs were theoretically expected to be correlated. This step served to examine the underlying factor structure, identify potential cross-loadings, and refine the measurement instrument by retaining items that loaded strongly on their intended constructs.

The measurement model was subsequently assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Model fit was evaluated using a combination of absolute, incremental, and

parsimony-adjusted indices. Convergent validity was examined through standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE), while internal consistency was assessed using composite reliability (CR). Discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT). The structural relationships between constructs were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM), enabling the simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships among latent variables in complex models. To evaluate indirect effects and test the proposed sequential mediation mechanism, a bootstrapping procedure with bias-corrected confidence intervals was applied. This approach provides a robust assessment of mediation effects without relying on normality assumptions. To address potential concerns regarding common method bias associated with self-reported survey data, Harman’s single-factor test was conducted. The test examined whether a single factor accounted for the majority of variance among the measurement items. This analytical framework ensures a rigorous assessment of both measurement properties and structural relationships, supporting a comprehensive examination of the proposed experiential model.

4. Results

Preliminary diagnostic tests supported the suitability of the data for latent variable modeling. The KMO statistic reached 0.973, indicating a high degree of shared variance among the observed variables. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was also significant ($\chi^2 = 80,303.874$; $df = 595$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the correlation matrix contains sufficient information for factor extraction. Consequently, the dataset was considered appropriate for subsequent exploratory and confirmatory analyses.

To assess the potential influence of common method bias, Harman’s single-factor test was conducted. The results indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for 37.35% of the total variance, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 50%. Furthermore, the exploratory factor analysis identified five factors with eigenvalues greater than one, suggesting that the covariance among the measurement items was not dominated by a single factor. These findings indicate that common method bias is unlikely to represent a serious threat to the validity of the results.

As shown in Table 1, the factor analysis identifies a clear five-factor structure, supported by eigenvalues greater than 1. Together, the retained factors captured a substantial proportion of the information contained within the observed indicators. Following extraction, the five-factor solution accounts for 64.807% of the total variance, exceeding commonly accepted thresholds for social science research and indicating substantial explanatory power. The extracted factors accounted for decreasing proportions of variance, consistent with the proposed multidimensional structure. The retained factor solution aligns with the theoretical model and supports proceeding to confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling.

Examination of the rotated factor matrix supported the presence of five latent dimensions corresponding to the proposed theoretical framework (Table 2). All indicators loaded strongly on their designated dimensions, while cross-loadings remained low. Items associated with Local Gastronomic Authenticity exhibited loadings ranging from 0.75 to 0.76, indicating a coherent latent dimension. Spatial Immersion exhibited loadings ranging from 0.77 to 0.81. Perceived Sustainability Value exhibited loadings ranging from 0.77 to 0.81. Experiential Enrichment exhibited loadings ranging from 0.81 to 0.87. Behavioral Intention exhibited loadings ranging from 0.83 to 0.86. Cross-loadings remained low across all items, supporting discriminant validity. Overall, the pattern matrix supports the proposed measurement structure and its suitability for subsequent confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling.

Table 1. Total variance explained (Maximum Likelihood extraction).

Factor	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Extracted Variance (%)
1	13.072	37.350	37.350	36.186
2	4.643	13.267	50.616	12.097
3	2.661	7.604	58.221	6.695
4	2.347	6.706	64.926	5.654
5	1.716	4.904	69.831	4.175

Extraction method: Maximum Likelihood.

Table 2. Pattern matrix (Primary Factor loadings).

Construct	Item	Factor Loading
Local Gastronomic Authenticity	Culinary Authenticity	0.753
	Place Identity	0.752
	Slow Consumption	0.762
	Cultural Embeddedness	0.761
	Traditional Practices	0.761
Spatial Immersion	Community Integration	0.809
	Alternative Lodging	0.775
	Spatial Authenticity	0.785
	Everyday Immersion	0.810
	Distributed Experience	0.775
Perceived Sustainability Value	Place Belonging	0.800
	Environmental Responsibility	0.790
	Economic Support	0.804
	Heritage Preservation	0.788
	Resource Sustainability	0.799
Experiential Enrichment	Community Benefit	0.811
	Balanced Development	0.777
	Emotional Engagement	0.831
	Cultural Learning	0.826
	Personal Enrichment	0.816
Behavioral Intention	Emotional Connection	0.867
	Curiosity Stimulation	0.838
	Contextual Understanding	0.811
	Revisit Intention	0.840
	Word Recommendation	0.832
	Price Premium	0.864
	Experience Sharing	0.857
	Tourism Preference	0.857
	Future Priority	0.847

Model fit statistics indicate that the proposed measurement structure adequately reproduces the observed covariance matrix. The chi-square statistic is significant ($\chi^2 = 812.345$; $df = 367$; $p < 0.001$), with an acceptable normed chi-square ($\chi^2/df = 2.21$). Absolute fit indices meet recommended thresholds (RMR = 0.032; GFI = 0.945; AGFI = 0.921), while incremental fit indices indicate a good model fit (NFI = 0.957; TLI = 0.971; CFI = 0.973; IFI = 0.973). The RMSEA value is within acceptable limits (RMSEA = 0.052; PCLOSE = 0.218), and parsimony-adjusted indices are satisfactory (PNFI = 0.812; PCFI = 0.836). Collectively, the fit indices support the adequacy of the measurement specification and justify proceeding with structural model estimation.

Composite reliability coefficients exceeded recommended benchmark values for all latent variables (Table 3). Average variance extracted exceeded the accepted threshold for every construct, indicating that the indicators adequately represent their underlying latent dimensions. These results support convergent validity across all constructs. Overall, the measurement model satisfies established reliability and validity criteria.

Table 3. Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Construct	CR	AVE
F1 (Behavioral Intention)	0.94	0.72
F2 (Local Gastronomic Authenticity)	0.87	0.57
F3 (Perceived Sustainability Value)	0.91	0.64
F4 (Spatial Immersion)	0.91	0.63
F5 (Experiential Enrichment)	0.93	0.69

Comparison of the diagonal and off-diagonal elements in Table 4 supports discriminant validity according to the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Table 4. Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Construct	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
F1 (Behavioral Intention)	0.85	0.52	0.58	0.49	0.63
F2 (Local Gastronomic Authenticity)	0.52	0.75	0.55	0.61	0.59
F3 (Perceived Sustainability Value)	0.58	0.55	0.80	0.57	0.62
F4 (Spatial Immersion)	0.49	0.61	0.57	0.79	0.65
F5 (Experiential Enrichment)	0.63	0.59	0.62	0.65	0.83

Additional verification using the HTMT criterion yielded values below the recommended cut-off level, reinforcing the conclusion that the constructs remain empirically distinguishable (Table 5). The highest observed HTMT value was 0.79, which remained below the recommended threshold.

Table 5. HTMT.

Construct	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
F1	—	0.68	0.71	0.64	0.78
F2	0.68	—	0.70	0.74	0.72
F3	0.71	0.70	—	0.69	0.75
F4	0.64	0.74	0.69	—	0.79
F5	0.78	0.72	0.75	0.79	—

Together, these results support the discriminant validity of the measurement model and justify proceeding with structural model estimation. The structural model shows a good fit for the data. The chi-square statistic is significant ($\chi^2 = 978.436$; $df = 371$; $p < 0.001$) with an acceptable normed chi-square ($\chi^2 / df = 2.64$), indicating a reasonable level of discrepancy between the model and observed data. Absolute fit indices meet recommended thresholds (RMR = 0.031; GFI = 0.944; AGFI = 0.921), while incremental fit indices indicate a good model fit (NFI = 0.956; TLI = 0.969; CFI = 0.972; IFI = 0.972). The RMSEA value is within acceptable limits (RMSEA = 0.054; PCLOSE = 0.214), supporting model adequacy. Parsimony-adjusted indices (PNFI = 0.821; PCFI = 0.846) further indicate an acceptable model specification. The results suggest that the structural model provides an adequate representation of the data and is suitable for hypothesis testing.

The estimated structural relationships suggest that tourists' future behavioral responses emerge through a chain of interconnected experiential processes originating from perceptions of gastronomic authenticity (Figure 1). Local Gastronomic Authenticity exerts a positive effect on Spatial Immersion ($\beta = 0.41$), indicating that authentic, place-based culinary experiences enhance tourists' embeddedness within the destination context. Spatial Immersion further strengthens Perceived Sustainability Value ($\beta = 0.46$), suggesting that deeper engagement with local environments increases awareness of sustainable practices. Perceived Sustainability Value significantly contributes to Experiential Enrichment ($\beta = 0.45$), confirming that sustainability perceptions add cognitive and emotional depth to the tourism experience. Experiential Enrichment, in turn, emerges as the strongest predictor of Behavioral Intention ($\beta = 0.55$), highlighting its central role in shaping revisit intentions, recommendations, and willingness to pay. In addition, Spatial Immersion directly enhances Experiential Enrichment ($\beta = 0.30$), while Perceived Sustainability Value also directly influences Behavioral Intention ($\beta = 0.22$), reinforcing the multi-path structure of the model. The model reveals a sequential experiential mechanism in which authenticity is transformed into behavioral outcomes through immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment, rather than exerting a direct influence on tourist behavior.

Examination of the structural paths indicates that all proposed relationships are supported by the data. The magnitude and direction of the coefficients are consistent with the conceptual logic of the model, suggesting that experiential value develops through a progressive sequence linking authenticity, immersion, sustainability perception, and behavioral outcomes. Local Gastronomic Authenticity exerts a positive and statistically significant effect on Spatial Immersion ($\beta = 0.411$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H1 and indicating that authentic, place-based culinary experiences enhance tourists' sense of embeddedness within the destination. Spatial Immersion, in turn, significantly influences Perceived Sustainability Value ($\beta = 0.462$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2 and suggesting that deeper engagement with local environments and communities strengthens awareness of sustainable practices. Perceived Sustainability Value positively affects Experiential Enrichment ($\beta = 0.453$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H3 and demonstrating that sustainability perceptions contribute to the cognitive and emotional depth of the tourism experience.

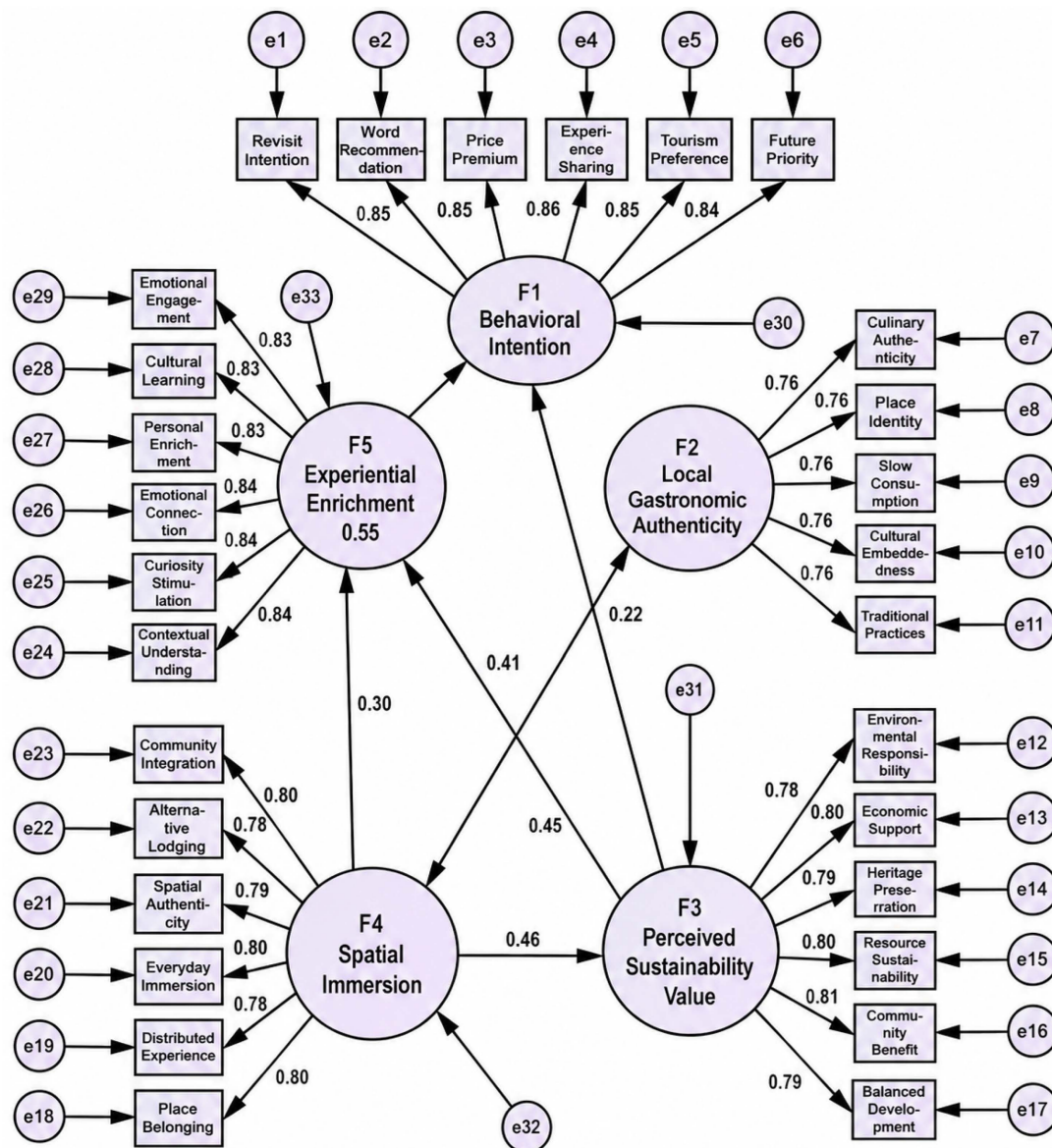


Figure 1. Structural model with standardized estimates.

Experiential Enrichment emerges as the strongest predictor of Behavioral Intention ($\beta = 0.549$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4 and highlighting its central role in shaping revisit intentions, recommendations, and willingness to pay. In addition, Spatial Immersion has a significant direct effect on Experiential Enrichment ($\beta = 0.305$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H5 and reinforcing the importance of lived, place-based experiences in generating value. Perceived Sustainability Value also directly influences Behavioral Intention ($\beta = 0.221$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H6 and indicating that tourists who perceive tourism as responsible are more likely to engage in supportive future behaviors. Taken together, the findings presented in Table 6 reveal a coherent structural pattern in which all hypothesized direct relationships are positive and statistically significant, providing full support for H1–H6. These results establish a sequential experiential mechanism linking authenticity, immersion, sustainability perception, and enriched experience to behavioral outcomes.

Table 6. Structural model results.

Hypothesis	Path	β (Standardized)	SE	C.R.	<i>p</i> -Value	Hypothesis Supported
H1	Local Gastronomic Authenticity → Spatial Immersion	0.411	0.017	24.18	***	Yes
H2	Spatial Immersion → Perceived Sustainability Value	0.462	0.016	28.88	***	Yes
H3	Perceived Sustainability Value → Experiential Enrichment	0.453	0.017	26.65	***	Yes
H4	Experiential Enrichment → Behavioral Intention	0.549	0.018	30.50	***	Yes
H5	Spatial Immersion → Experiential Enrichment	0.305	0.018	16.94	***	Yes
H6	Perceived Sustainability Value → Behavioral Intention	0.221	0.020	11.05	***	Yes

Note: β = standardized path coefficient; SE = standard error; C.R. = critical ratio; *** $p < 0.001$.

Results from the bootstrap procedure indicate that behavioral outcomes are generated through an indirect mechanism rather than through a direct authenticity–behavior relationship. The confidence interval remained entirely above zero, confirming the stability of the estimated indirect pathway (Table 7). Local Gastronomic Authenticity does not exert a direct effect on Behavioral Intention ($\beta = 0.000$), indicating that its influence is fully transmitted through the intervening constructs. A significant indirect effect was identified ($\beta = 0.158$), with the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (0.140–0.180) excluding zero, confirming the stability of the estimated pathway. The direct relationship between Local Gastronomic Authenticity and Behavioral Intention was not significant, whereas the indirect pathway remained significant, indicating full mediation. These findings suggest that authentic gastronomic experiences influence tourists' future behavioral responses through a sequential process involving Spatial Immersion, Perceived Sustainability Value, and Experiential Enrichment, thereby supporting H7.

Table 7. Mediation effects (standardized).

Hypothesis	Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	95% BC CI Lower	95% BC CI Upper	Mediation Type	Hypothesis Supported
H7	Local Gastronomic Authenticity → Behavioral Intention	0.000	0.158	0.140	0.180	Full mediation	Yes

The predictive capacity of the model increases across successive stages of the proposed framework (Table 8). Spatial Immersion demonstrates a moderate level of explained variance ($R^2 = 0.169$), suggesting that Local Gastronomic Authenticity provides a meaningful, though not exhaustive, explanation of tourists' immersion within the destination. A slightly higher proportion of variance is observed for Perceived Sustainability Value ($R^2 = 0.213$), indicating that Spatial Immersion contributes more strongly to shaping sustainability-related

perceptions. The explanatory power increases substantially for Experiential Enrichment ($R^2 = 0.343$), reflecting the combined influence of Spatial Immersion and Perceived Sustainability Value in generating deeper cognitive and emotional experiences. Among the endogenous constructs, Behavioral Intention achieved the highest proportion of explained variance ($R^2 = 0.370$), indicating that the model is particularly effective in accounting for tourists' future behavioral responses. The distribution of R^2 values suggests that the explanatory contribution of the model becomes stronger in later stages of the experiential process. While upstream constructs remain partially influenced by additional contextual factors, the framework is particularly effective in accounting for experiential enrichment and behavioral intention.

Table 8. Explained Variance (R^2).

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Interpretation
Spatial Immersion	0.169	Moderate explanatory power
Perceived Sustainability Value	0.213	Moderate explanatory power
Experiential Enrichment	0.343	Substantial explanatory power
Behavioral Intention	0.370	Substantial explanatory power

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the integration of Slow Food principles and the Albergo Diffuso model creates a distinctive experiential context linking gastronomy, place, and sustainability. This highlights a limitation of attribute-based approaches, which often examine destination attributes in isolation. Rather than focusing on individual effects, the results indicate that tourist value emerges through the interaction of gastronomic, spatial, and sustainability-related dimensions within a broader experiential system.

Within this framework, the structural model reveals how authenticity, immersion, sustainability perceptions, and experiential enrichment are related within the observed rural tourism setting. Gastronomy and accommodation operate as mutually reinforcing experiential layers that embed tourists within the destination context. At the entry point of this system, the strong effect of Local Gastronomic Authenticity on Spatial Immersion (H1) suggests that food operates as a primary gateway to place.

This finding contributes to food studies literature by suggesting that gastronomy functions as both a symbolic and experiential element that embeds tourists within the socio-spatial fabric of destinations. This interpretation is consistent with broader authenticity scholarship, which conceptualizes authenticity not as a fixed property of tourism products but as an experiential condition emerging through tourists' engagement with places, practices, and meanings [69]. While prior studies have emphasized local food as a means of cultural expression and engagement with destination identity [70], the present results position gastronomy as a functional driver of spatial immersion, thereby extending its role from representation to process within tourism experience formation.

Authentic culinary practices—rooted in local production, tradition, and social interaction—anchor tourists within the lived geography of the destination, supporting the argument that local food functions as a medium through which tourists engage with cultural landscapes and everyday life [9,22]. In the context of Slow Food and the Albergo Diffuso model, this relationship becomes particularly salient: Slow Food provides cultural and sensory authenticity, while Albergo Diffuso spatially distributes these experiences across the village fabric. Together, they transform consumption into situated participation, where tourists do not simply taste a place, but inhabit it [1].

The positive effect of Spatial Immersion on Perceived Sustainability Value (H2) introduces a critical shift from exposure to understanding, supporting prior research suggesting that direct engagement with local environments enhances tourists' awareness of sustainability practices [33,34]. Sustainability emerges through immersion in local systems of production, community life, and environmental practices. Unlike prior research that treats sustainability perception as information-driven or communication-based, the present findings indicate that sustainability is experientially constructed through direct spatial engagement, positioning it as an outcome of interaction with place rather than passive knowledge acquisition. This finding reinforces the view that sustainability perception is shaped through experience rather than informational transmission, highlighting the role of meaningful tourism experiences in fostering pro-environmental awareness. The integration of Slow Food (local sourcing, seasonality, biodiversity) with the Albergo Diffuso model (reuse of existing structures, community integration) creates a tangible sustainability context that tourists can directly observe and engage with. As a result, sustainability becomes more visible and tangible within the tourism experience, creating conditions under which it may be perceived as credible and meaningful by visitors.

The transition from Perceived Sustainability Value to Experiential Enrichment (H3) deepens this mechanism by indicating that sustainability can contribute to experiential enrichment when it is perceived as meaningful within the tourism experience, supporting prior research that highlights the role of meaningful experiences in fostering affective and cognitive engagement in tourism contexts [7,8]. This finding challenges the assumption that sustainability functions primarily as an ethical or external evaluation criterion, suggesting instead that it may also operate as an experiential resource embedded within the structure of the experience itself. Rather than remaining solely a normative or evaluative dimension, sustainability can become integrated into the experiential process, contributing to cognitive engagement and emotional resonance. However, this relationship should not be viewed as universal. While the results indicate a positive association between perceived sustainability value and experiential enrichment in the present context, some visitors may recognize and appreciate sustainable practices without necessarily experiencing deeper emotional or cognitive engagement. The extent to which sustainability becomes experientially meaningful may therefore vary across visitor segments, motivations, and tourism settings. Within this model, sustainability is reconfigured from a normative attribute into a potential experiential amplifier, contributing to the co-creation of value through immersive and interpretive tourist experiences [39,44].

Experiential Enrichment emerges as the strongest predictor of Behavioral Intention (H4), underscoring its role in linking enriched experience to behavioral intention, consistent with prior research demonstrating that enriched and memorable experiences drive tourist loyalty and future behavioral responses [8]. While this finding is compatible with Memorable Tourism Experience research, which primarily examines the characteristics and consequences of memorable experiences [7,8], the present model focuses on the mechanism through which gastronomic authenticity ultimately generates behavioral outcomes through successive experiential stages.

While this aligns with Experience Economy theory [1], the present findings extend this perspective by focusing on the process through which experience develops rather than treating experience as the primary outcome. Specifically, the results indicate that behavioral intention emerges through a sequence linking gastronomic authenticity, spatial immersion, perceived sustainability value, and experiential enrichment. Experience, therefore, represents an intermediate stage within a broader experiential pathway of value formation rather than the final endpoint of tourist experience. In doing so, the study advances existing

models by integrating ethical and experiential dimensions into a unified account of value creation [1,39].

Importantly, these findings suggest that behavioral intention is not directly driven by sustainability or authenticity as isolated attributes, but by the extent to which these elements are integrated into meaningful outcomes. Behavioral responses, such as revisit intention, recommendation, and willingness to pay, depend on how these elements are interpreted and internalized within the experience. This is consistent with evidence that perceived value mediates the relationship between destination attributes and behavioral intentions [15]. From a managerial perspective, this implies that value is not created at the level of resources or practices, but through their integration within the tourist experience, aligning with service-dominant logic and value co-creation perspectives [15,39]. However, unlike value co-creation approaches that primarily emphasize interactions between tourists and service providers as sources of value generation [15,39], the present findings highlight a process of place-based meaning formation through gastronomic authenticity, spatial immersion, and sustainability-related interpretation.

The additional direct effects further reinforce the layered nature of this system. The significant path from Spatial Immersion to Experiential Enrichment (H5) indicates that immersion contributes to experiential depth beyond its role in shaping sustainability perceptions. This is consistent with research emphasizing the importance of immersive and embodied experiences in generating meaningful tourism outcomes [7,39]. It also suggests that spatial immersion generates value through both cognitive-evaluative and embodied-affective pathways, highlighting the multidimensional nature of experience formation. Similarly, the direct effect of Perceived Sustainability Value on Behavioral Intention (H6) demonstrates that sustainability performs a dual function, acting both as an experiential enhancer and as a direct driver of pro-tourism behavior. This aligns with prior studies showing that perceived responsibility and sustainability positively influence tourists' behavioral intentions [71]. Tourists who perceive tourism as responsible are more likely to support it, even in the absence of strong emotional enrichment.

The absence of a direct effect between Local Gastronomic Authenticity and Behavioral Intention, combined with a significant indirect effect, represents one of the central findings of the study. The results indicate that authenticity was not directly associated with behavioral intention; instead, its influence operated through spatial immersion, perceived sustainability value, and experiential enrichment. This finding suggests that authenticity becomes behaviorally relevant through its relationship with other experiential dimensions rather than as an isolated predictor of tourist behavior. This interpretation is consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of experiential and contextual factors in shaping tourist responses [15,72]. The findings further indicate that gastronomy, immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment are closely related dimensions associated with behavioral intention within the studied rural tourism context.

The observed relationships suggest that the integration of Slow Food principles and the Albergo Diffuso model creates a coherent experiential environment that supports the development of tourist value and behavioral responses. The explained variance results provide additional insight into the substantive contribution of the model. The R^2 values for Spatial Immersion (0.169) and Perceived Sustainability Value (0.213) indicate moderate explanatory power, suggesting that these constructs are influenced not only by the variables included in the model but also by additional contextual factors not captured in the present framework. This is not unexpected given the complexity of rural tourism experiences, which may be shaped by individual preferences, destination characteristics, and situational influences. In contrast, the higher explanatory power observed for Experiential Enrichment

and Behavioral Intention suggests that the proposed framework becomes increasingly effective in explaining outcomes located later in the experiential process.

Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainable tourism experiences by supporting a theoretically specified framework linking gastronomy, immersion, sustainability perception, experiential enrichment, and behavioral intention. First, the study extends the traditional treatment of gastronomy as a cultural or hedonic attribute by positioning it as a core driver of spatial immersion, thereby bridging food studies and spatial tourism theory within a unified experiential framework. This shifts the focus from isolated consumption practices to the role of gastronomy in embedding tourists within the socio-spatial fabric of destinations. Second, the findings support a reconceptualization of sustainability as a potential experiential resource that can shape how value is perceived and interpreted within tourism experiences. In doing so, the study challenges dominant paradigms that frame sustainability primarily in normative or managerial terms and instead positions it as a value-generating dimension within the experiential economy. Third, the study empirically supports the proposed experiential framework linking authenticity, immersion, sustainability perception, experiential enrichment, and behavioral intention. Most importantly, the findings demonstrate that gastronomic authenticity is not directly associated with behavioral intention; instead, its influence operates through spatial immersion, perceived sustainability value, and experiential enrichment. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of tourist behavior by highlighting the relationships among gastronomic authenticity, immersion, sustainability perception, experiential enrichment, and behavioral intention.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that rural destinations may benefit from integrating gastronomy, spatial characteristics, and sustainability-related elements in ways that enhance perceived experiential value. The combination of Slow Food and the Albergo Diffuso model provides an illustrative example of how authenticity, spatial immersion, and sustainability can be aligned within a coherent experiential framework. The findings suggest the potential value of coordinating multiple destination elements in ways that create more coherent and engaging visitor experiences. Such an approach may offer useful insights for discussions surrounding rural tourism development, sustainability, community-based tourism, and heritage preservation.

Although the study was conducted within a specific rural tourism context, the proposed framework may be relevant for examination in other rural destinations with similar characteristics. In such contexts, characterized by strong agricultural identities, diverse gastronomic traditions, and spatially dispersed settlements, the integration of local food systems with decentralized accommodation structures represents a significant yet underutilized opportunity. The findings suggest that closer integration among local producers, traditional households, and accommodation providers may contribute to richer visitor experiences. This approach may contribute to stronger tourist engagement and perceived experiential value. In this sense, the findings highlight the potential role of existing rural assets, particularly gastronomy and community-based accommodation, in shaping tourism experiences.

At the same time, the present findings should be interpreted in light of the specific characteristics of the empirical setting. The integration of Slow Food principles and the Albergo Diffuso model represents a context in which authenticity, local embeddedness, sustainability, and community participation are particularly salient. Consequently, the strength of the observed relationships may be influenced by the distinctive characteristics of this setting. Rural destinations where gastronomic authenticity is less central, where

accommodation is more standardized, or where tourism is less integrated within local communities may exhibit different experiential dynamics and potentially weaker pathways between authenticity, immersion, sustainability perception, and behavioral outcomes. Future research should therefore examine the proposed framework across alternative rural tourism contexts to assess its broader applicability and identify conditions under which the observed relationships may vary.

In sum, the results indicate that the impact of authenticity on tourist behavior is indirect and operates through spatial immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment. Immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment function as mechanisms through which destination attributes become meaningful and behaviorally relevant. This highlights the importance of considering how destination attributes are experienced and interpreted by visitors, with implications for both theory and destination management. By clarifying the relationships among authenticity, immersion, sustainability perception, experiential enrichment, and behavioral intention, the study contributes to a more refined understanding of sustainable tourism experiences and offers insights for destination management.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that sustainable rural tourism experiences are structured through the integration of gastronomy, space, and sustainability within a sequence of interconnected experiential stages. Conceptualizing Slow Food and the Albergo Diffuso model as a place-embedded system, the findings indicate that authenticity operates indirectly through spatial immersion, sustainability perception, and experiential enrichment within the present model. This clarifies the mechanism linking authenticity and behavioral outcomes within sustainable rural tourism contexts. The findings also carry clear policy relevance within European sustainability agendas oriented towards place-based development and the integration of local resource systems. The identified mechanism supports coordinated approaches to rural tourism development that align cultural heritage, local production, and experiential design within a unified framework, rather than treating these domains as separate policy fields.

At the same time, the findings suggest the potential applicability of the proposed framework beyond the specific empirical setting examined in this study. Although grounded in Emilia-Romagna, the proposed framework may provide a useful analytical lens for examining how experiential value develops across rural destinations characterized by different configurations of gastronomy, accommodation, and sustainability practices. However, the strength and nature of these relationships may vary across contexts, highlighting the need for further empirical testing in alternative rural tourism settings. Several limitations should be considered. The experience-specific sample constrains generalizability beyond integrated rural tourism systems and may overrepresent highly engaged visitors. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not capture temporal dynamics in perception and behavior. Future research could test the model across diverse cultural and geographical contexts, while longitudinal and experimental designs would allow for stronger assessment of processual and causal dynamics.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are stored by the authors and consist of an Excel file containing anonymized responses. The dataset can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to privacy and data protection considerations, the dataset cannot be shared publicly.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Measurement Items, Factor Assignment, and Retention Status

Code	Measurement Item	Final Factor	Status
Culinary Authenticity	The food I experienced reflects the authentic culinary traditions of the destination.	Local Gastronomic Authenticity	Retained (V1)
Local Ingredients	Local ingredients play a central role in the meals offered in this destination.	—	Removed
Place Identity	The dishes convey a strong sense of place and regional identity.	Local Gastronomic Authenticity	Retained (V3)
Slow Consumption	The pace of food consumption encourages a slow and mindful experience.	Local Gastronomic Authenticity	Retained (V4)
Cultural Embeddedness	The gastronomic experience feels rooted in local culture rather than standardized tourism offerings.	Local Gastronomic Authenticity	Retained (V5)
Traditional Practices	Food production and preparation appear closely connected to local traditions.	Local Gastronomic Authenticity	Retained (V6)
Lifestyle Insight	The overall food experience enhances my understanding of the local way of life.	—	Removed
Community Integration	Staying in this destination allows me to feel part of the local community.	Spatial Immersion	Retained (V8)
Alternative Lodging	The accommodation experience differs significantly from conventional hotel stays.	Spatial Immersion	Retained (V9)
Spatial Authenticity	The spatial organization of the destination enhances my sense of authenticity.	Spatial Immersion	Retained (V10)

Code	Measurement Item	Final Factor	Status
Everyday Immersion	I feel immersed in the everyday life of the village or local setting.	Spatial Immersion	Retained (V11)
Distributed Experience	The distributed accommodation structure creates a stronger connection to the place.	Spatial Immersion	Retained (V12)
Resident Interaction	The environment encourages interaction with local residents.	—	Removed
Place Belonging	The accommodation contributes to a deeper sense of belonging to the destination.	Spatial Immersion	Retained (V14)
Environmental Responsibility	This tourism model supports environmentally responsible practices.	Perceived Sustainability Value	Retained (V15)
Economic Support	The destination contributes positively to the local economy.	Perceived Sustainability Value	Retained (V16)
Heritage Preservation	Tourism activities here help preserve local cultural heritage.	Perceived Sustainability Value	Retained (V17)
Resource Sustainability	The experience promotes sustainable use of local resources.	Perceived Sustainability Value	Retained (V18)
Sustainability Comparison	I perceive this form of tourism as more sustainable than mass tourism.	—	Removed
Community Benefit	Local communities benefit directly from tourism activities.	Perceived Sustainability Value	Retained (V20)
Balanced Development	The destination reflects a balanced relationship between tourism and the environment.	Perceived Sustainability Value	Retained (V21)
Emotional Engagement	This experience is emotionally engaging and meaningful.	Experiential Enrichment	Retained (V22)
Cultural Learning	I gained new knowledge about local culture and traditions.	Experiential Enrichment	Retained (V23)
Personal Enrichment	The experience feels authentic and personally enriching.	Experiential Enrichment	Retained (V24)
Emotional Connection	I feel more connected to the destination after this experience.	Experiential Enrichment	Retained (V25)
Curiosity Stimulation	The experience stimulated my curiosity and interest.	Experiential Enrichment	Retained (V26)
Contextual Understanding	The visit provided a deeper understanding of the local way of life.	Experiential Enrichment	Retained (V27)

Code	Measurement Item	Final Factor	Status
Experience Uniqueness	This experience stands out as unique compared to other trips.	—	Removed
Revisit Intention	I would consider revisiting this destination in the future.	Behavioral Intention	Retained (V29)
Word Recommendation	I would recommend this experience to others.	Behavioral Intention	Retained (V30)
Price Premium	I am willing to pay more for this type of authentic and sustainable experience.	Behavioral Intention	Retained (V31)
Experience Seeking	I would actively seek similar experiences in other destinations.	—	Removed
Experience Sharing	I would share my positive experience with others (e.g., online or personally).	Behavioral Intention	Retained (V33)
Tourism Preference	I prefer this type of tourism over conventional mass tourism options.	Behavioral Intention	Retained (V34)
Future Priority	I would prioritize destinations offering similar experiences in future travel plans.	Behavioral Intention	Retained (V35)

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