

Review

Reverse Tourism: A New Opportunity for the Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism

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ABSTRACT: Against the backdrop of homogeneous mass tourism, reverse tourism, as a trend where tourists avoid popular destinations and pursue niche experiences, is reshaping the paradigm of rural tourism development. This paper systematically analyzes the connotation, framework, and feasibility of reverse tourism using comparative analysis, model derivation, and practical verification. The study reveals that reverse tourism is characterized by three key dimensions: reflection on the essence of tourism, aberration in tourist behavior, and distinction in tourist experience, forming a dynamic cycle mechanism of “willingness-behavior-experience”. Additionally, centering on tourists is crucial for constructing the analytical framework, classifying visitors based on their travel participation history, and creating a role transition matrix, which helps uncover the endogenous driving forces of tourist behavior. Furthermore, evolving tourist demands, improvements in rural public services, and the successful replication of “small yet beautiful” models have created favorable conditions for implementing reverse tourism in rural areas. Finally, the virtuous cycle of “protection-development-benefit” formed by supply-demand coupling provides a systematic solution for rural revitalization that balances ecology, culture, and economy. This paper systematically expounds the theoretical logic, mechanism, and practical path of reverse tourism as a new paradigm for rural tourism transformation, offering research conclusions with both theoretical innovation and practical guidance for promoting rural sustainable development.

Keywords: Reverse tourism; Rural tourism; Rural sustainable development

1. Introduction

As the view count of the “Reverse Tourism” topic surges on TikTok and hotel bookings in off-the-beaten-path destinations increase tenfold, the tourism industry is undergoing its most profound transformation since the rise of Mass Tourism [1]. This transformation reflects not only a shift in tourist behavior but also a collective reexamination of the “meaning of travel [2]”. In Greece—instead of flocking to the blue-domed churches of Santorini—travelers now descend into underground mines, imagining the bustling scenes of workers from bygone eras [3]. Similar transformations are occurring in conflict zones. Beyond its pilgrimage tourism, Palestine is leveraging traditional cuisine and rural landscapes to attract



visitors, seeking to alter prejudices shaped by conflict [4]. These seemingly “unconventional” travel practices actually represent a critical re-evaluation of the essence of tourism: when Venice’s gondola canals are overwhelmed by giant cruise ships [5], must humanity redefine “the meaning of travel”?

Addressing the challenges of homogenized modern tourism, a return to rural destinations offers compelling solutions [6]. Indeed, global travel patterns increasingly reflect this shift, representing a profound reimagining of the fundamental principles of tourism. Rural areas, characterized by limited modern development, are emerging as vital cultural preservation centers, ecological rehabilitation bases, and community revitalization laboratories [7]. Furthermore, engaging with these environments often prompts a voluntary transformation in visitors, moving them beyond passive consumption towards active stewardship [8]. Through participation in activities such as ecological monitoring or traditional agricultural practices, tourists develop a sense of responsibility for the preservation of these spaces. This evolving role facilitates role-shifting, dissolving the traditional distinction between tourists and residents and fostering a more equitable relationship of co-creation. This form of reverse tourism, focused on rural areas, transcends mere spatial relocation, becoming a laboratory for tourism essence redefinition [9].

Grounded in the aforementioned industrial transformations and critical challenges, this paper employs a research approach centered on conceptual analysis, literature synthesis, and framework innovation. Initially, by examining global instances of reverse tourism, we deconstruct its connotation, analyzing it through three interrelated perspectives: tourism essence reflection, tourism behavior aberration, and tourism experience distinction. This multifaceted approach facilitates a nuanced comprehension of the core principles underpinning reverse tourism. Subsequently, the study synthesizes the existing body of literature on reverse tourism, categorizing research according to geographical scope, subject focus, and methodological approaches. Furthermore, predicated on the central role of tourists, we construct an analytical framework to guide future research on reverse tourism. Finally, we explore the potential of reverse tourism as a novel opportunity for contemporary rural development and its contributions to rural sustainable development. This research contributes to the interdisciplinary field of rural tourism and sustainable development by providing a framework for addressing the challenges of homogenized tourism development and enriching our understanding of the meaning and purpose of travel.

2. The Connotation of Reverse Tourism

While “alternative tourism” in its conventional sense broadly refers to tourism that deviates from the mass tourism model [10], we propose the term “reverse tourism” instead, as it more precisely encapsulates the logic of reverse reconstruction inherent in contemporary tourism transformation. This choice leverages the semantic richness of the Chinese character “反” (fǎn, meaning “reverse” or “opposite”) to vividly convey the systematic reversal of traditional tourism paradigms. This simultaneously echoes the practical trend of tourists actively avoiding popular destinations and pursuing niche experiences, and establishes a unified logical anchor for analyzing shifts in the essence, behavior, and experience of tourism through the core concept of “reverse tourism”. This terminological precision enables us to develop a threefold analytical framework.

Compared with “alternative tourism” in its conventional sense, “reverse tourism” emphasizes the intentional reversal of mainstream tourism norms, highlighting a comprehensive inversion that spans destination selection, experiential forms, and value pursuits. It provides a more targeted conceptual tool for the subsequent in-depth discussions centered around tourism essence, tourism behavior, and tourism experience. These three dimensions correspond respectively to reflection (反思, fǎnsī) on the essence of tourism, aberration (反常, fǎncháng) in tourist behavior, and distinction (反差, fǎnchā) in the tourist experience, accurately capturing the paradigm shift characteristics of twenty-first-century tourism as it evolves towards reverse reconstruction.

2.1. Tourism Essence Reflection

Conflicts of interest among tourists, residents of tourist destinations, and tourism developers, along with the multi-dimensional tensions stemming from these interactions, exert significant impacts on the development of the tourism industry and prompt critical examinations of the essence of tourism [11]. These conflicts are mainly manifested in aspects of development concepts, cultural connotations, and social relations (Table 1), through the mechanisms outlined in the following analysis.

Table 1. The main perspectives of tourism essence reflection.

Dimension	Perspectives	Explanations	Cases
Development Concept	Growth Priority vs. Protection Priority	The over-reliance on high-density development models of mass tourism often leads to ecological overload. The adoption of decentralized development models of reverse tourism significantly reduces environmental pressure.	Kılıçaslan et al., 2011 [12] Pasgaard et al., 2021 [13]
	Community Exclusion vs. Community Participation	Mass tourism generates community exclusion due to capital-driven interests and benefit monopolization. Reverse tourism achieves collaborative governance through community participation and benefit sharing.	Giampiccoli et al., 2021 [14] Crăciun et al., 2022 [15]
	Inter-regional Homogeneity vs. Inter-regional Diversity	The standardized development of mass tourism leads to inter-regional homogeneity. The cultural protection of reverse tourism promotes inter-regional diversity.	Hong et al., 2024 [16]
Cultural Connotation	Cultural Commodification vs. Commodity Culturalization	Mass tourism reduces local culture to consumptive symbols of exotic charm. Reverse tourism preserves local cultural authenticity through intact scene experiences.	Isaac et al., 2019 [17]
	Cultural Technologization vs. Technology Culturalization	Mass tourism drives the full takeover of tourism operations by digital technology. Reverse tourism emphasizes the enablement of sustainable cultural dissemination by digital technology.	Zhao et al., 2023 [18]
Social Relationship	Guest Mentality vs. Host Mentality	Tourists consume local culture as “gazers” in mass tourism. Tourists break down geographical barriers as “hosts” in reverse tourism.	Molz et al., 2013 [19]
	Benefit Leakage vs. Benefit Localization	The operating profits often flow to external enterprises in mass tourism. The local economies are supported through “disintermediation” in reverse tourism.	Markwick et al., 2001 [20] Mtapuri et al., 2021 [21]
	Social Exclusion vs. Social Inclusion	Mass tourism often overlooks the rights of local residents. Reverse tourism focuses on enhancing the participation rights of local residents, especially marginalized groups.	Kalisch et al., 2023 [22]

2.1.1. Development Concept Reflection

Reflections on tourism development concepts expose inherent contradictions in the dominant “growth-first” paradigm of mass tourism. Defined by high-density development and driven by external capital [14], mass tourism marginalizes local communities in fair benefit distribution, while standardized scenic development worsens regional cultural homogenization. This logic triggers a vicious cycle: the blind pursuit

of scale economies causes ecological degradation [12], capital monopolies intensify community exclusion, and rapid replication leads to unavoidable homogenization. By contrast, reverse tourism centers ecological protection as a core premise: decentralized development and minimal-intervention facilities ease environmental pressure [13,16]. Meanwhile, community-participatory planning breaks capital monopolies to build localized revenue mechanisms [15], fostering differentiated development via unique local cultural assets and shaping a sustainable “protection-empowerment-diversity” trajectory.

2.1.2. Cultural Connotation Reflection

Reflections on cultural connotations highlight the distortion of cultural essence in mass tourism. Obsessed with economic growth, mass tourism often commodifies local culture into consumable symbols for tourists [10]. Moreover, digital technologies used solely for service standardization cause dual alienation: cultural commercialization and technologization. In contrast, reverse tourism innovates by reconstructing culture-tourism relations. It prioritizes authentic, immersive experiences to preserve cultural authenticity [17], turning culture from a “consumed commodity” into a “perceivable way of life”. Digital technology shifts from an efficiency tool to a driver of cultural empowerment, focusing on documenting and spreading local knowledge. This change fundamentally challenges the “development-first” logic, emphasizing cultural value over pure economic gain and enabling sustainable cultural transmission via living inheritance and innovative expression [18].

2.1.3. Social Relationship Reflection

Reflections on tourism social relationships focus on reconstructing host-guest roles [19]. In mass tourism, the binary structure of tourists as “gazers” and locals as “the gazed” leads to superficial tourism consumption, unfair distribution of benefits, social exclusion, and even local discontent [20,21]. By contrast, reverse tourism dismantles geographical and cultural barriers, cultivating a “host mentality” in tourists to build more equitable and interactive host-guest relationships. This role shift creates a disintermediated revenue model, keeping economic benefits within local communities. Meanwhile, local residents, especially marginalized groups, gain social recognition by engaging in tourism services, transforming tourism from a capital-dominated exclusive industry into a community-shared inclusive practice [22]. Essentially, it marks an agency shift, empowering locals from passive recipients of tourism development to active subjects who rebalance rights and interests.

2.2. *Tourism Behavior Aberration*

The divergent understandings of tourism essence precipitate markedly different patterns of tourist behavior. In tourism practice, diametrically opposed conceptual frameworks emerge: the “attraction-activity-centric” approach, which prioritizes pre-determined itineraries and attraction-based experiences, contrasts with the “local-life-centric” approach, which emphasizes authentic immersive experiences and independent exploration. The former often leads to predetermined itinerary adherence, while the latter fosters engagement with local culture and spontaneous discovery. These differences manifest across multiple dimensions of tourist behavior, including destination selection, activity engagement, and consumption patterns, revealing a spectrum of choices (Table 2).

Table 2. The main perspectives of tourism behavior aberration.

Dimension	Perspectives	Explanations	Cases
Tourism Choice	High-Profile Attractions vs. Low-Profile Attractions	Popular attractions are the first choice in mass tourism. Remote villages, ecologically sensitive areas, and even geopolitical conflict zones are beginning to gain favor in reverse tourism.	Chebli et al., 2021 [23]
	Checklist Driven vs. Participation Driven	“Hit-and-run” photography for quick check-ins constitutes the main content of mass tourism. A shift from “passive sightseeing” to “active participation” emerges in reverse tourism.	Yang, 2019 [24]
	Consumption Oriented vs. Goal Oriented	All-inclusive packages covering food, accommodation, transportation, and sightseeing are the norm in mass tourism. Self-planned low-intervention approaches are the pursuit in reverse tourism.	Belias et al., 2018 [25]
Tourism Activity	Attraction Activity Centric vs. Local Life Centric	Tourists are confined to participating in activities dictated by attractions in mass tourism. The active engagement in diverse local festivals and rituals is embraced in reverse tourism.	Partanen et al., 2025 [26]
	Self Isolation vs. Active Engagement	Tourists flash in and out like bubbles and fail to integrate into the local community in mass tourism. Tourists leverage multiple platforms to break down barriers and actively engage in reverse tourism.	Stavroula G et al., 2020 [27]
	Excessive Entertainment vs. Balanced Edutourism	All aspects of tourism are turned into entertainment in mass tourism. Educational themes are appropriately integrated into tourism activities in reverse tourism.	Vergopoulos et al., 2019 [28] Medeiros et al., 2021 [29] Jang et al., 2021 [30]
Tourism Consumption	High-Carbon Consumption vs. Low-Carbon Consumption	High-carbon consumption in mass tourism is driven by high-energy transportation and large-scale facilities. Low-carbon consumption in reverse tourism is achieved through localized travel and eco-friendly facilities.	Che Leh et al., 2021 [31]
	Material Consumption vs. Non-Material Consumption	Tourists in mass tourism are filled with large quantities of “symbolic” products. Tourists in reverse tourism are more willing to pay a premium for cultural experience programs.	Kalisch et al., 2023 [22]
	One-Time Consumption vs. Repeat Consumption	The one-time check-in visits to standardized attractions prevail in mass tourism. The repeated visits driven by emotional connections emerge in reverse tourism.	Mtapuri et al., 2021 [21]

2.2.1. Tourism Choice Aberration

Mass tourism favors popular attractions due to its well-built “convenience ecosystem”. Mature information channels, standardized facilities, and pre-packaged itineraries reduce decision-making costs and improve travel safety, but they also trigger potential experiential crises [23]. Crowded sites push tourists into a “quick check-in and instant sharing” cycle fueled by symbolic competition; widespread commercialization turns destinations into homogenized “souvenir factories”, weakening experiences and stripping cultural connotations. Reverse tourism innovates by resisting this “tyranny of convenience” [24,25]. Avoiding crowded landmarks and embracing “low-convenience”, unstandardized spaces, it drives

tourists from passive consumption of ready-made experiences to active creation of unique encounters. With moderate information ambiguity and unstandardized facilities, reverse tourism replaces passive meaning reception with immersive cultural interpretation, revealing a core contradiction: mass tourism undermines authentic experiences by overemphasizing “convenience”, while reverse tourism rebuilds experiential value by consciously embracing “inconvenience”.

2.2.2. Tourism Activity Aberration

Mass tourism, defined by “attraction-centricism”, reduces tourists to passive “landscape consumers”, simplifying host-guest interactions into transactional “service-reception” relations and creating a “tourist bubble” that separates visitors from authentic local life [26,27]. In contrast, reverse tourism centers on “local life involvement”. It encourages active exploration of unstructured scenes and uses social platforms and digital tools to break physical and cultural barriers. Notably, its activities often integrate controversial or educational themes [28–30], driving a shift from pure “sensory entertainment” to “critical cognition” and inspiring reflection on the possible “instrumentalization of activities” in tourism.

2.2.3. Tourism Consumption Aberration

Mass tourism follows a “high-carbon, material-intensive, disposable” consumption model. Large-scale transport and facility operations expand ecological footprints, while standardized goods, such as mass-produced souvenirs, prioritize symbolic value over practical use. A “visit-and-leave” mindset further makes consumption transient. By contrast, reverse tourism pursues sustainable transformation via three key shifts. First, it builds low-carbon supply chains by prioritizing public transport and eco-friendly accommodation [31]. Second, it boosts local economic benefits by supporting local handicrafts and community catering. Third, it prioritizes intangible consumption, such as intangible cultural heritage experiences, over material goods [22]. Notably, repeat visits stem not just from attractions but also from an emotional connection to local culture [21]. This marks a fundamental shift in consumption motivation, from “external symbolic display” to “internal value resonance”.

2.3. Tourism Experience Distinction

Tourism experience, as a direct reflection of tourism behavior, profoundly embodies the variations in the underlying concepts. The opposition between egocentrism and ecocentrism not only shapes distinct patterns of tourism behavior but also generates significant disparities in the experiential dimension. These differences clearly epitomize variations in the understanding of tourism essence. Spanning across sensory dimensions from visual experiences to psychological perceptions, each dimension intertwine with the conflict of these two concepts, therefore prompting an in-depth exploration and facilitating a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms behind tourism experiences (Table 3).

Table 3. The main perspectives of tourism experience distinction.

Dimension	Perspectives	Explanations	Cases
Visual Experience	Artificial Landscape	Not only bear obvious traces of modification, but they are even completely human-created.	Pasgaard et al., 2021 [13]
	vs.		
	Natural Landscape	Have almost no traces of modification and are even undeveloped.	
	Standardized Symbols	High uniformity of industrial design dominated by commercialization.	
vs.			
Personalized Symbols	Unique adornments filled with a humanistic atmosphere influenced by rural society.		

Lifestyle Experience	Fast-Paced Life vs. Slow-Paced Life	Fast-paced tourism with constant location changes via hopping on and off vehicles. Slow-paced tourism through staying here or walking through neighborhoods.	Lazarevic et al., 2024 [33]
	Material Excess vs. Minimalist Philosophy	Material excess involves not only surplus consumption but also substantial waste problems. Minimalism advocates the philosophy of “less is more”, emphasizing sufficiency and a return to authentic needs.	Pirselimoğlu et al., 2014 [34] Chen et al., 2022 [35]
Psychological Experience	Pursuing Stimulation vs. Desiring Tranquility	Intense sensory stimulation releases inner stress. Undisturbed plain life restores a fatigued body and mind.	Huang et al., 2013 [36]
	Conquest Feeling vs. Integration Feeling	Tourists are driven by egocentrism to leave traces everywhere. Tourists are prompted by ecocentrism to achieve identity integration.	Kaltenborn et al., 2011 [37]

2.3.1. Visual Experience Distinction

The visual experience of mass tourism suffers from dual flaws: artificialization and standardization. Excessive modification creates artificial landscapes that undermine natural authenticity, while standardized commercial features erase local uniqueness. By contrast, reverse tourism provides a twofold alternative. First, it prioritizes unspoiled natural landscapes, with untouched wilderness and pristine beaches resisting superficial “Instagrammable” makeovers to deliver authentic visual textures [13,32]. Second, it revitalizes cultural visual uniqueness through integrated traditional and modern architecture, immersive intangible cultural heritage displays, and artistic reinterpretation of rural landscapes. This reconstruction creates experiential contrasts rooted in daily authenticity, shifting visual perception from consumption of commercial symbols to the interpretation of local narratives.

2.3.2. Lifestyle Experience Distinction

Mass tourism features accelerated consumption and material excess. Frequent transfers and rigid itineraries limit in-depth engagement, while profit-driven overconsumption causes resource depletion and alienation. By contrast, reverse tourism delivers a paradigm shift via three aspects. First, it adjusts temporal perception, easing urban fast-paced alienation through slow tourism, immersive farming experiences and digital detox programs [33]. Second, it breaks “tourist isolation” by blurring host-guest boundaries, fostering community interaction via shared accommodation, role-reversal activities and intergenerational cultural exchange. Third, it embraces minimalism to reject material excess, using simple eco-lodges [34,35], authentic traditional cuisine, and work-for-stay arrangements to refocus on essential needs. This elevates tourism from indulgent consumption to active life participation.

2.3.3. Psychological Experience Distinction

The psychological experience of mass tourism relies on a unidirectional “stimulation-release” mechanism, using high-intensity entertainment to ease stress through sensory engagement. However, it reinforces tourists’ sense of “otherness” and “conquest mentality”, potentially alienating them from the environment. By contrast, reverse tourism adopts a bidirectional “tranquility-integration” path for well-being. It provides urban residents with a buffer space of undisturbed nature and slow rural life, facilitating physical and mental recovery and alleviating modern life anxieties [36]. Furthermore, it replaces anthropocentrism with ecocentrism, transforming tourists from “landscape conquerors” to “local integrators” via participatory experiences. This fosters existential integration through cultural identification and reverence for nature [37], representing a shift from “external entertainment” to “internal growth” in tourism philosophy.

3. The Analytical Framework of Reverse Tourism

3.1. Summary of the Analytical Framework

Reverse tourism research focuses heavily on rural areas, marginal regions, and ecologically or culturally sensitive zones (Table 4). These areas, preserving natural authenticity, traditional rural cultures, or unique landscapes, embody core principles of reverse tourism: de-standardization and experience prioritization [38]. However, attitudes of tourists, local residents, and tourism practitioners vary notably [39]. Tourists increasingly shift from standardized mass tourism to personalized, immersive reverse tourism for authentic experiences. Driven by market differentiation and competition, practitioners actively develop non-standardized products and services. Meanwhile, residents balance cultural preservation and economic development, leading to mixed views rather than outright rejection of mass tourism [40]. Thus, single qualitative or quantitative methods fail to meet the multi-dimensional research needs for reverse tourism, with mixed-methods research emerging for holistic, nuanced interpretations.

Current reverse tourism research follows an “observe-then-grasp” paradigm, yet it insufficiently emphasizes tourists as core experiential agents. Existing studies mostly conduct retrospective analyses of established phenomena, focusing on descriptive accounts of observed processes. Few explore tourists’ motivations, psychological drivers of behavior, and key experience evaluation dimensions. This post-hoc summarization results in merely phenomenological summaries, lacking prospective analysis of tourist behavioral patterns and hindering systematic practical guidance.

Table 4. Summary of the analytical framework.

Section	Categories	Characteristics	Support
Research Regions	Urban Areas	Focus on non-mainstream spaces Issues of over-commercialization or social inequality	Analyze de-landscaping approaches in urban tourism Reveal the “tourist bubble” phenomenon
	Rural Areas	Preservation of traditional agricultural culture Low-intensity natural ecological development	Investigate the impact of slow tourism on experiential depth Study the role of agricultural participation models
	Special Locations	Dependence on unique natural/cultural heritage Ecologically sensitive environments	Explore low-intervention tourism models Study mechanisms for balancing ecological protection and experience
	Peripheral Regions	Multi-country/cultural comparative research Focus on marginal landscapes	Validate the universality of reverse tourism theories Analyze the influence of cultural differences
Research Subjects	Tourists	Shift from standardized to personalized consumption Pursuit of immersive experiences	Decode driving factors of behavioral motivations Analyze mechanisms of experiential contrast formation
	Local Residents	Support community tourism for cultural preservation Oppose over-development for economic interests	Evaluate the role of community participation in sustainability Examine the balance between economic benefits and cultural protection
	Tourism Practitioners	Promote non-standardized products Focus on market differentiation	Study the impact of enterprise strategies on model diffusion Analyze market differentiation paths
Research Methods	Qualitative	Ethnography, in-depth interviews, case studies Focus on cultural decoding and social relations	Explore experiential essence and cultural connotations Analyze complex issues like host-guest power dynamics

Quantitative	Questionnaires, statistical models, big data analysis Focus on behavioral patterns and quantitative indicator validation	Measure experiential indicators Validate sustainability data
Mixed	Combination of qualitative+quantitative Multi-dimensional	Integrate advantages of qualitative and quantitative data Conduct comprehensive analysis of multi-dimensional correlations

3.2. Revision of the Analytical Framework

3.2.1. The Basic Model Based on the Central Role of Tourists

To address prior research limitations, this study refocuses on the tourism core subject: the tourist [41]. Tourism activities stem from tourist needs, so the logic of reverse tourism must also center on tourists as key actors. Tourists’ pursuit of authentic experiences and rejection of standardized offerings reflect their intrinsic motivations [42]. As a starting point, willingness captures tourists’ critique of conventional tourism and their drive for reverse tourism. Behavior embodies this willingness, as seen in choosing rural or marginalized destinations and engaging in distinctive activities such as farming and community interactions. Experience, as behavioral feedback, includes emotional resonance, cultural identification, and environmental responsibility gained from reverse tourism. These three elements form a dynamic cycle: willingness drives behavior, behavior shapes experience, and experience reinforces willingness (Figure 1). This framework (Willingness-Behavior-Experience Model, abbreviated as WBEM) clarifies the internal motivation mechanism of reverse tourism and provides a tourist-centered analytical path, guiding tourism research back to its core principle of prioritizing tourist needs.

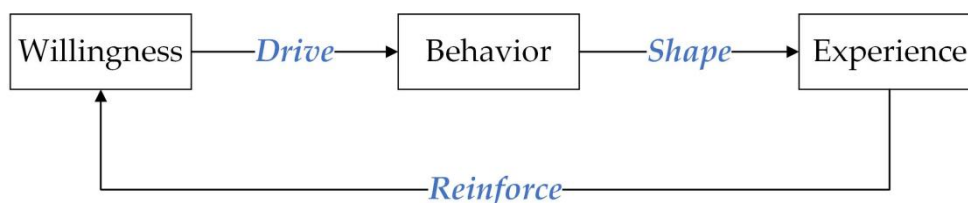


Figure 1. A simple analytical framework of tourism research.

Specifically, the framework operationalizes each construct with clear measurement approaches and testable hypotheses to support empirical validation (Figure 2). Willingness and Experience are measured via 5/7-point Likert scales to capture tourists’ subjective attitudes and evaluations, while Behavior is quantified using objective indicators such as destination choice, activity frequency, stay duration, and local consumption. Three positive hypotheses formalize the reinforcing cycle: H1 (Willingness → Behavior), H2 (Behavior → Experience), and H3 (Experience → Willingness). These relationships will be examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), analyzing path coefficients, *t*-values, and *p*-values to empirically verify the endogenous motivational mechanism of reverse tourism.

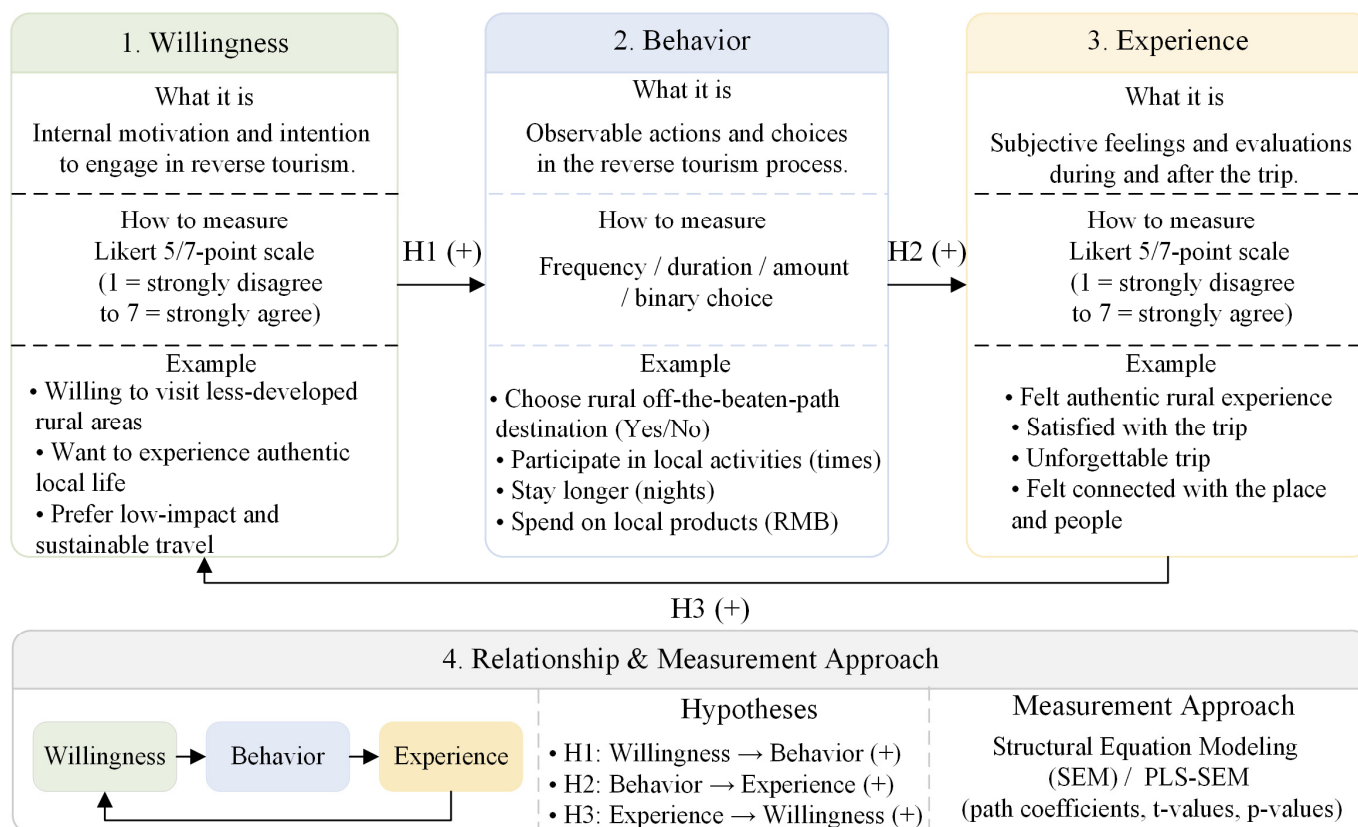


Figure 2. Hypothesized structural model by WBEM of the tourist in reverse tourism.

3.2.2. The Refined Model Based on Categories of Tourist Groups

In the context of system analysis applied to tourism, a tourist’s history of participation serves as a critical anchor for understanding their behavioral logic [43]. Variations in tourists’ perceptions of their travel motivations, destination choices, and experiential preferences are fundamentally rooted in the cumulative experiences shaped by iterative cycles of intention, behavior, and experience [44,45].

Consequently, in the study of reverse tourism, tourists can be categorized based on their participation within the preceding year.

- N—first-time participants lacking prior tourism experience;
- M—regular experiencers who mainly participate in mass tourism;
- R—regular experiencers who mainly participate in reverse tourism;
- MR—those with diverse experiences spanning in both.

Drawing on these four categories, this study constructs a multi-dimensional tourist profile framework (Table 5) to hypothesize group-specific traits across motivation, preference, consumption, and intention. N-type first-time participants exhibit curiosity-driven, safety-focused choices with uncertain future travel plans. M-type mass tourism experiencers prioritize mainstream convenience and standardized experiences, tending to repeat mass tourism. R-type reverse tourism experiencers pursue authenticity, favor marginal destinations and local engagement, and intend to continue reverse tourism. MR-type mixed experiencers show flexible, balanced preferences across mainstream and niche travel, with potential shifts toward niche tourism.

Table 5. Profiles of four tourist types.

Dimension	N	M	R	MR
Core Characteristics	No prior travel experience	Mainstream travel habits	Pursuit of authentic experiences	Flexible and diverse experiences
Travel Motivation	Curiosity/desire to try	Relaxation/entertainment	Authenticity/value resonance	Balance/multi-purpose
Destination Preference	Popular places (with high perceived safety)	Well-known attractions	Rural areas/marginal destinations	Combines mainstream and niche
Activity Preference	Passive sightseeing	Attraction-based activities	Local life participation	Mixed activities
Consumption Pattern	Budget-sensitive	Package-oriented	Experience-oriented/low-impact	Selective and balanced
Experience Evaluation	Lack of reference	Focus on convenience	Focus on depth and meaning	Compare and optimize
Future Intention	Uncertain	Likely to repeat mass tourism	Likely to repeat reverse tourism	May shift toward niche travel

Based on the static tourist profiles, this study further develops a group transition analysis framework to identify drivers and constraints of shifts between different tourist types (Table 6). As shown, N-type participants’ transitions are shaped by time/budget limits, social influence, and diverse interests; M-type tourists may shift to R-type due to aesthetic fatigue and awakened critical consciousness, while R-type tourists face convenience inertia when returning to mainstream tourism; MR-type mixed experiencers exhibit flexible, bidirectional exploration patterns.

Table 6. Transition drivers of tourist groups in reverse tourism.

From\To	N	M	R	MR
N	—	Time/budget limits	Influenced by others	Diverse interests
		Convenience appeal	Information exposure	Multi-factor motivation
		Lack of alternatives	Curiosity for novelty	Openness to try
M	—	Travel barrier	Aesthetic fatigue	Diversified needs
		Lack of time/budget	Service homogenization	Seek balance
		No strong motivation	Awakening of critical consciousness	Expand experiences
R	—	Information gap	Lack of infrastructure	Occasional return to mainstream
		High participation threshold	Convenience pull	Comparative experience
		Unclear benefits	Habit inertia	Broader perspective
MR	—	Initial trial	Convenience priority	Deeper exploration
		Low experience	Mainstream attraction	Pursuit of meaning
		Cost consideration	Social influence	Higher expectation

To further, the group conversion matrix (Figure 3) developed by above analysis systematically illustrates the dynamic evolution between these distinct roles. Each transition between roles encompasses core triggers (indicated above the transition arrow), auxiliary triggering conditions (indicated below), cyclical pathways, and transformation feature identifiers (represented by ellipses).

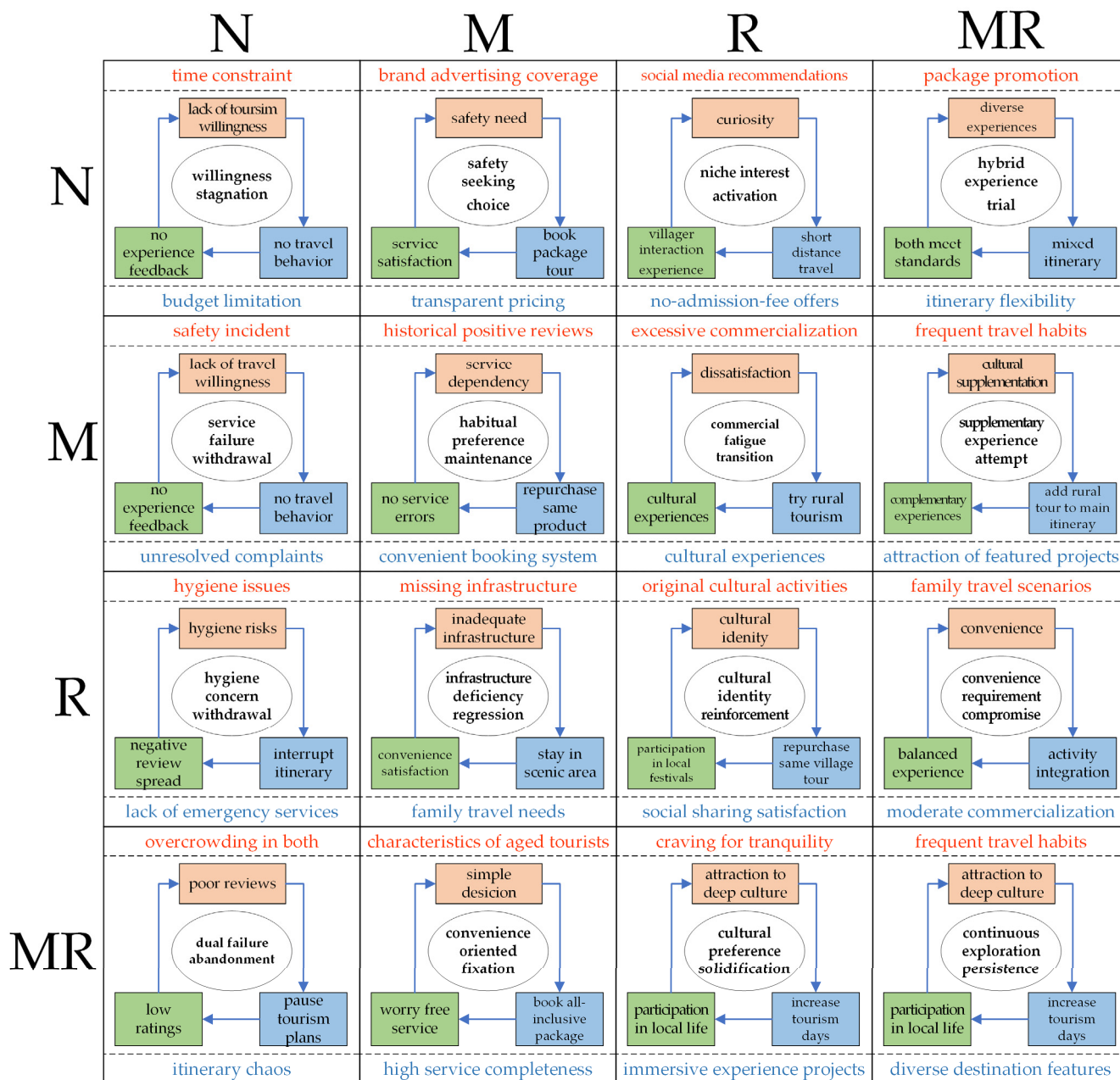


Figure 3. A matrix of tourist role transformation by.

For example, in the N-M transition, limited by time constraints, budget constraints and other practical constraints (trigger), the will to travel that has not yet sprung up comes to a standstill (willingness to freeze), which ultimately manifests itself in the abandonment of the behavioral choice to travel (no travel practice), and the lack of experience prevents the formation of a closed loop of feedback (the continuation of the experience gap). In the M-R transition, the over-commercialization of scenic spots and the homogenization of services lead to the collapse of the willingness to rely on standardized services (standardized service collapse). In the M-R transition, aesthetic fatigue caused by over-commercialization of scenic spots and service homogenization triggers the collapse of reliance on standardized services (awakening of critical consciousness). Tourists then actively choose rural settlements and marginal destinations (behavioral shift), gain cultural identity and value resonance through localized experiences (practice validation) [46], and ultimately reinforce their reverse tourism preference, completing the role transformation.

Built on the “participation history-trigger point-cycle mechanism”, this framework provides a systematic methodological pathway for academic research and practical application. Academically, game-

theoretic models analyze interactions between tourist groups and destinations [47]; structural equation modeling validates causal paths [48], and Markov models simulate the dynamic evolution of tourist groups [49]. Grounded theory coding of interview data reveals in-depth mechanisms [50], while complex network analysis identifies key nodes in the transformation network of tourists and attractions [51]. This multi-method approach advances interdisciplinary theoretical development. Practically, the framework guides the creation of differentiated products, niche marketing, and facility optimization based on trigger point features, and facilitates the establishment of a dynamic monitoring system [52]. Supported by experience thresholds and state transition probabilities, the system tracks real-time changes in group structure, delivers early warnings for key triggers, and optimizes resource allocation and service provision [53]. By linking theoretical analysis and real-world practice, this framework forms a sound methodological system. It refocuses tourism research on human behavior and drives the industry toward science-based, evidence-oriented, high-quality development.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Why Is a New Opportunity for Rural Revitalization*

4.1.1. Existent Demand

The overemphasis of mass tourism on iconic scenic spots sustains the industrial civilization's material-scarcity mindset. Tourists pursue mainstream landmark attractions to accumulate social capital (especially the conversation fodder), while rural destinations are marginalized due to the lack of recognisable symbols and topical value. Rapid urbanization has reinforced the stereotype of rural backwardness, established urban tourism as the dominant market model, and hindered rural tourism development. Meanwhile, capital monopolies over landscape presentation and information dissemination further reduce the public visibility and market attractiveness of rural tourism destinations.

Nevertheless, societal changes have profoundly transformed such tourism demand patterns. Growing household incomes have shifted tourist pursuits from quantitative experiential accumulation to the qualitative search for unique and authentic travel experiences [54]. Social media generates a disenchantment effect and facilitates reverse grassroots marketing, weakening the popularity of overhyped scenic spots and granting niche rural areas greater public exposure [55]. In addition, post-pandemic psychological stress has made slow-paced, low-risk rural spaces crucial psychological buffers for urban residents [56]. The widespread advocacy of low-carbon, sustainable development has also spurred rising demand for low-intervention tourism. This demand transition represents a shift from industrial to ecological civilization in the tourism industry, allowing rural areas to transform traditional disadvantages into intrinsic strengths. Accordingly, rural spaces have reshaped their developmental identity, evolving from symbols of backwardness into ideal tourist destinations and core carriers of reverse tourism.

4.1.2. Viable Supply

Demand-supply alignment constitutes the foundation of sustainable tourism development, whereas persistent supply-demand mismatch inevitably triggers structural market imbalances [57,58]. Under the mass tourism paradigm, rural areas face inherent developmental constraints, including insufficient spatial resources, supporting facilities, capital, and labor. Coupled with tourists' negative stereotypes of rural areas, rural regions have long lacked a robust capacity for tourism development.

The rise of reverse tourism enables the systematic transformation of rural supply systems, converting traditional developmental bottlenecks into competitive advantages that adapt to emerging market demands [59]. First, rural depopulation has created abundant idle spaces, which avoid tourism development conflicts and provide exclusive carriers for authentic ecological experiences [60]. Second, the comprehensive implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy has upgraded rural infrastructure, including roads,

electricity, and communication networks, effectively remedying long-standing public service deficiencies [61]. Third, emerging asset-light operation models and diversified financing channels resolve traditional funding constraints, supporting the construction of small-scale, high-quality rural tourism projects. Fourth, driven by urban employment pressure and rural benefit-sharing mechanisms, local villagers and returning youth have shown strong enthusiasm for participation, forming a collaborative “host-guest co-creation” service model [62]. This systematic restructuring of spatial and human resource supply helps rural areas eliminate supply-side failures, realize effective demand-supply matching, and build solid operational capacity for reverse tourism development.

4.1.3. Feasible Realization

The inherent interplay between demand and supply compels rural reverse tourism toward a “Small yet Beautiful” paradigm [63]. On the demand side, tourists increasingly seek profound local immersion and authentic cultural experiences, necessitating differentiated offerings to satisfy personalized preferences. Concurrently, the characteristics of rural areas, including underutilized resources and infrastructural constraints, naturally favor low-intervention, asset-light development models. This approach mitigates the tensions inherent in large-scale projects while preserving the indigenous character of the locale, making it a compelling choice for both tourists and local communities.

Haotang Village, located in the authors’ region, exemplifies this strategy. This artistically conceived hamlet rigorously adheres to principles of minimal environmental impact, reflected in its policy of “no mountain leveling, no pond filling, and no tree felling”. The village has repurposed vacant farmhouses into accommodations that retain the traditional rammed-earth architectural style of Southern Henan Province, designed agricultural experiences centered around artistic paddy fields and Tea Stream Valley [64], and implemented a “housing equity participation + cooperative operation” model. This model ensures villagers’ active involvement in tourism development and equitable profit-sharing. This asset-light, experience-focused strategy has transformed Haotang Village from a declining rural settlement into a nationally recognized destination.

Since being recognized as a national beautiful rural demonstration village in 2013, Haotang Village has sustained over a decade of stable development. Its long-term operational practice fully validates the practicability and sustainability of the “Small yet Beautiful” reverse tourism model, demonstrating that this community-based, low-intervention development path is not a short-lived trend but a reliable and replicable approach for rural high-quality revitalization.

Inspired by this success, Xinyang City has further implemented a “Courtyard Economy” development strategy, extending rural tourism to the micro-level of individual household courtyards [65]. By encouraging villagers to transform their family compounds into distinctive homestays, intangible-cultural-heritage workshops, and rural restaurants, the strategy cultivates a diversified landscape in which “each household presents unique scenery, each courtyard emanates distinctive charm”, effectively integrating tourism into the fabric of daily life coupled with the extensive, rapid, and precise dissemination of social media: “*Scenes everywhere to roam, Affordable joy for all to own*”.

4.2. Why Does It Facilitate Rural Sustainable Development

Reverse tourism emphasizes de-commercialization and experiential travel, attracting visitors to rural areas with pristine natural landscapes and distinctive local cultures. Its core concepts of low-impact development and community participation are highly consistent with rural sustainable development theories. It establishes a demand-led and supply-adaptive interactive restraint mechanism [66]. Tourists’ preference for original ecology and authentic rural life motivates local communities to protect ecological and cultural resources and retain local features. This interaction forms a virtuous cycle where protection and

development reinforce each other through community participation and sustainable consumption. Ultimately, it guides rural areas toward small-scale, high-quality, and sustainable growth and realizes coordinated development of nature, culture, the economy, and society.

5. Conclusions

This study investigates reverse tourism as a novel paradigm for reshaping rural tourism development and its potential to foster rural sustainable development. The principal findings are threefold.

- (1) A systematic comparison of mass tourism and reverse tourism, focusing on tourist motivations, behaviors, and experiences, elucidates the inherent logic of tourism development transformation. The pursuit of authentic experiences among tourists emerges as the central impetus for this transformation, while the principles of de-commodification and locality emphasis in reverse tourism reflect the evolutionary trend from a capital-driven to a community-co-created paradigm. The resultant bi-directional mechanism of “demand guidance-supply adaptation” offers a robust framework for understanding sustainable tourism transformation. This comparative analysis culminates in a theoretical framework of “motivation-trend-path” for tourism transformation, providing a foundation for future research.
- (2) By centering on tourists, the study develops an analytical framework of “willingness drives behavior—behavior shapes experience—experience reinforces willingness”. Based on their tourism participation history, tourists are categorized into four distinct groups with nuanced differences in their motivational mechanisms identified. This refined framework, viewed through the lens of tourist behavioral dynamics, not only reveals the internal mechanism of reverse tourism but also underscores its forward-looking nature through a differentiated multi-group analysis. This offers operational tools for precise market segmentation and experience design.
- (3) By analyzing the realistic coupling mechanism of demand upgrading and supply transformation, the study demonstrates the feasibility of implementing reverse tourism in rural areas. The alignment between tourists’ experiential needs and rural landscape values fosters demand transformation; the strategic allocation of resources to improve rural infrastructure under the rural revitalization strategy enhances supply capacity; and the replication of successful models such as “Beautiful Countryside” and the “Courtyard Economy” creates conducive conditions for rural reverse tourism. The resultant “protection-development-benefit” closed loop, operating under a logic of “demand-supply-realization”, mitigates the ecological risks associated with large-scale mass tourism and offers a systematic solution for rural sustainable development by restraining unsustainable development pressures.

In summary, through comparative analysis, framework construction, and feasibility demonstration, this study systematically articulates the theoretical logic, mechanism, and practical path of reverse tourism as a novel paradigm for rural tourism transformation. These findings provide both theoretical innovation and practical guidance for promoting rural sustainable development.

Statement of the Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language editing, including grammar and spelling checks and improving the clarity and readability of the text, as the authors are non-native English speakers. The research conception and design, data collection and organization, data analysis, and interpretation of the results were carried out entirely by the authors. After using this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, C.Y. (Chao Yu) and C.Y. (Chenao Yang); methodology, C.Y. (Chao Yu), C.Y. (Chenao Yang) and Z.Z.; investigation, C.Y. (Chenao Yang), Z.Z., Y.L., C.H., Y.F. and J.W.; resources, C.Y. (Chenao Yang), Z.Z., Y.L., C.H., Y.F. and J.W.; curation, C.Y. (Chao Yu); writing—original draft preparation, C.Y. (Chao Yu) and C.Y. (Chenao Yang); writing—review and editing, Z.Z., Y.L., Y.F. and J.W.; visualization, C.Y. (Chao Yu), C.Y. (Chenao Yang) and Z.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

As a review article, the references cited in the article are all from publicly published papers.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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