The Mediating Role of Place Attachment in the Relationship Between Authenticity and Loyalty in Traditional Villages

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Abstract: Rural tourism has emerged as a viable means for sustaining the development of traditional villages, but the success of rural tourism hinges on the authenticity of traditional village cultural landscapes (TVCLs) and the loyalty of visitors. As a result, preserving traditional village cultural heritage has become imperative as its unique landscapes face the threat of disappearing. However, methods for analysing the effect of destination authenticity on tourist loyalty are few. Place attachment (PA) is a key factor that can connect human emotions with places, but previous studies have rarely examined the mediating role of PA in the relationship between the perceived authenticity and loyalty of tourists. This study aimed to explore the link between the authenticity of TVCLs and the PA and the loyalty of tourists by adopting a simple random sampling method and conducting a questionnaire survey on 105 tourists at Gan Yantou Village, Yongzhou city. This study used SPSS statistics for the exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis and SmartPLS for hypothesis testing in order to explore the relationship between the authenticity of the TVCL and the loyalty of the tourists. The findings underscored the significant impact of the existential authenticity (EA) of the TVCL on the PA and the conative loyalty (CL) of the tourists. Moreover, PA was found to be a partial mediator in the relationship between the EA of the TVCL and the CL of the tourists. This study illuminates the pivotal role of the EA of TVCLs and the influence of PA, thereby highlighting their collective contribution to rural tourism promotion.

Keywords: Traditional village cultural landscape, Authenticity, Place attachment, Conative loyalty, Rural tourism

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, rural and village lifestyles, especially those in developing countries, have experienced a global crisis, including the disappearance or assimilation of traditional agricultural and rural cultures because of urbanisation and modernisation (Gao and Wu, 2017). As a distinct type of rural area, traditional villages have also been affected by industrialisation and modernisation (Yanan, Ismail and Aminuddin, 2024). In China, 99% of traditional villages have become "hollow villages" (Liu and Xu, 2021). Nonetheless, the villages are perceived as repositories of traditional cultural values and natural resources that must be preserved (Silva et al., 2016).

Rural tourism plays a leading role in promoting the modernisation of agricultural and rural areas, the integration of urban and rural development and the reduction of poverty in impoverished areas (Wang et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that tourism development is a double-edged sword for

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cultural heritage preservation. On the one hand, the tourism industry leverages the natural environment and the rich traditional culture of rural areas to meet the needs of tourists, thereby driving rural economic development and promoting rural revitalisation (Chi and Han, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). On the other hand, tourism may have negative consequences, such as over-tourism, environmental pollution, over-commercialisation, disruption of residents' daily lives and the entry of commercial investment, which can completely change the original appearance of a city and the atmosphere of a heritage site (Zheng et al., 2023).

Authenticity is a fundamental concept in the field of heritage and an important prerequisite for cultural landscape preservation (Shen and Chou, 2022). It is crucial for continuing local heritage, preserving regional identities and achieving the organic renewal of heritage (Yang et al., 2021). An effective culture of authenticity can increase the quality of tourists' experience and perceived value (Lu et al., 2022). This is because authenticity is a new type of consumer perceptual awareness that involves the perceived degree of truthfulness of an experience, service or product that is authentic, original, superior and unique (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Therefore, authenticity is one of the main motivations of visitors to undertake rural tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen and Duangsaeng, 2015) and thus affects visitors' subjective perception and experience of a cultural landscape, making it an indispensable element of contemporary tourism (Park, Choi and Lee, 2019). Also, authenticity can significantly affect a destination's image and is the basis for the sustainable development of rural tourism (Lu, Chi and Liu, 2015).

Revisit and word-of-mouth intention are critical factors that can influence rural tourism development (Zhao and Li, 2022) and key indicators of loyalty (Chi and Qu, 2008). This idea is emphasised by conative loyalty (CL) on the loyalty scale (Park, Choi and Lee, 2019). Though authenticity is essential to traditional rural tourism, methods for analysing the impact of destination authenticity dimensions on tourist loyalty are few (Zhao and Li, 2022). According to Zheng et al. (2023), quantitative research on the dimensions of rural tourism authenticity as perceived by tourists is lacking. Li and Wang (2023) pointed out that existing studies did not jointly examine tourists' perception of traditional village cultural landscape (TVCL) protection and tourism authenticity and the importance of TVCL authenticity on tourists' emotions or subsequent behaviours. Accordingly, this study explored the relationship between authenticity and loyalty from the perspective of tourists. Place attachment (PA) is crucial for tourists to help them maintain connections with local traditions, the natural environment and their self-identity (Masso et al., 2019) and also enhance their loyalty (Zhao and Li, 2022). Authenticity is also pivotal in fostering a sense of place (Csurgó and Smith, 2022). However, previous research rarely examined the mechanisms through which PA mediates the relationship between tourists' perceived authenticity and loyalty (Yi et al., 2023; Zhao and Li, 2022).

To fill the gaps in the literature, this study explored the impact of TVCL authenticity on tourists' CL and the mediating role of PA in the relationship between authenticity and CL in the context of Gan Yantou Village in Yongzhou, China. Moreover, this study aimed to investigate the relationships between the different dimensions of TVCL authenticity and CL, as well as the mediating role of PA in the relationship. The findings of this study would enable managers to grasp the importance of the authenticity of TVCLs and their subsequent impact on tourists' PA and loyalty. Understanding how perceived authenticity can affect tourists' PA and CL will help local governments develop effective marketing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Theory of Mind

The theory of mind explains how individuals perceive and interpret the behaviour of others by considering their thoughts and needs (Shuxratovna, Kiran and Erdogan, 2023; Astington and Edward, 2010). The theory emphasises a variety of mental states, including intentions, hopes, expectations, imagination, desires and beliefs (Premack and Woodruff, 1978). Building on the theory of mind, scholars developed concepts such as the trilogy of mind, the tripartite model and taxonomy (Dennis et al., 2013). Specifically, this theory suggests considering different mental states, namely, cognition (thinking), affective (feeling) and conative (faith) (Barry and Howard, 1990).

Traditional Village Cultural Landscape

The Chinese government attaches considerable importance to the protection of traditional villages. In China, traditional villages are those formed in early times that have historical, cultural, scientific, artistic, economic and social value and recognised by experts in architecture, archaeology and the arts (Gao and Wu, 2017). In April 2012, its Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, Ministry of Culture, State Administration of Cultural Heritage and Ministry of Finance issued the "Circular on the Assessment of the Protection Potential of Traditional Villages" (Qin and Leung, 2021). By the end of 2022, six batches of villages were included in the national list of traditional villages, which consisted of more than 8,000 villages (Traditional Chinese Village Digital Museum, 2023). The initiative focuses on the traditional architectural and landscape value of the Chinese traditional villages as well as their intangible cultural heritage value, which is in line with the six cultural and four natural criteria for the selection of world heritage sites in the "Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention of the United Nations" (World Heritage Centre, 2009). The initiative also echoes the mission of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) to promote the mobility of members of poor countries in terms of cultural and social diversity of heritage (International Council on Monuments and Sites, 1965).

A TVCL can be seen as a community formed under the integrated influence of various factors, such as the region's economy, society, history and culture (Meng, 2022). TVCLs serve as carriers of the regional characteristics and historical heritage of traditional villages and the starting point and foundation of the protection and development of such villages (Shen and Chou, 2022). They can preserve a wealth of historical information in physical form and intangible traditional customs, which are key factors that can attract tourists to rural areas (Li and Wang, 2023; Tieskens et al., 2017). The development of rural tourism has gradually exposed contradictions between diverse tourist experiential demands and the singular conservation models of traditional villages (Li and Wang, 2023), which have led to issues such as over-commercialisation and the homogenisation of resources for cultural landscape development (Jia et al., 2020). In this study, TVCL primarily refers to tangible cultural landscapes encompassing transportation and various types of buildings and intangible cultural heritage, including folk culture, such as traditional crafts and religious beliefs.

Authenticity

Authenticity, which refers to originality, can be defined as the value of specificity in the form of cultural landscapes that can withstand the threat of change (Rahmi and Setiawan, 2020). Authenticity plays a vital role in scientific research on conservation planning for and the heritage-related development of cultural landscapes, making it a fundamental principle of modern heritage conservation (Yang et al., 2021). Authenticity is a new type of consumer perceptual awareness that involves the perceived degree of truthfulness of an experience, service or product that is novel, authentic, original, excellent and unique (Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

Authenticity is commonly conceptualised from three perspectives: objective authenticity (OA), constructive authenticity (CA) and existential authenticity (EA) (Chen, Huang and Hou, 2020; Wang, 1999). OA refers to the authenticity of artefacts and events (Belhassen and Caton, 2006). Feng and Sha (2007) posit that the overall appearance of traditional villages and the antiquity of their streets and buildings serve as the primary criteria for tourists' assessment of their authenticity. For CA, Bruner (1991) and Duncan (2014) suggest that authenticity is not absolute or static but rather a collective projection of tourists' beliefs, expectations, preferences and perceptions. EA, which was first proposed by Wang (1999), diverges from object-based authenticity and focuses on the quest for one's true self through tourism activities. It is distinct from the objective and emphasises the participatory and subjective freedom of visitors (Li and Wang, 2023). Therefore, this study adopted OA, CA and EA as the facets of tourists' perceived tourism and TVCLs to elucidate their subsequent emotional and behavioural intentions towards TVCLs.

Place Attachment

PA refers to the formation of emotional bonds with a place in terms of its cultural traits, social environment and natural environment (Low and Altman, 1992). A developing body of literature suggests that PA reflects and gives positive meaning to one's feelings about a place, enhances one's self-esteem, sense of meaning and sense of belonging, and plays a vital role in developing people-place relationships and strengthening emotional empowerment (Scannell and Gifford, 2017). Moreover, PA can exert a significant impact on individual and collective behaviours (Wang et al., 2022). Masso et al. (2019) demonstrate the significance of PA to tourists in maintaining connections with local traditions, the natural environment and their self-identity. Kyle, Graefe and Manning (2005) indicate that having a strong PA in a destination will motivate tourists to invest their time, effort, money and other resources in the destination and encourage positive behaviours such as word-of-mouth promotion and repeat purchases. Scholars also noted the impact of PA on TVCLs and tourism (Abukarki, Uzunahmet and Onur, 2023; Pantelidis, 2021; Shen, Geng and Su, 2019; Yi et al., 2023). Meanwhile, PA is considered to be influenced by the perception of place authenticity. Gross and Brown (2006) suggest that authenticity serves as a predictor of PA. However, the literature has not thoroughly explored how tourists develop loyalty to places through destination authenticity and PA (Zhao and Li, 2022).

Conative Loyalty

In marketing, brand loyalty is defined as a customer's preference for and willingness to buy a particular brand over another (Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Based on this definition, place loyalty can be defined as a resident's choice to continue living in one place over another (Gilboa and Herstein, 2012). Meanwhile, loyalty in tourism manifests as visitors' willingness to revisit a destination and their inclination to recommend it to others (Chen and Tsai, 2007). Loyalty can influence positive word-of-mouth and revisit intentions, thus serving as a key indicator of future behaviours and informing our understanding of tourist behaviour dynamics (Park, Choi and Lee, 2019). CL, which reflects consumers' behavioural intention to continue using a brand in the future, stands out as the strongest predictor of behavioural loyalty (Barr and Choi, 2016). Hence, this study investigated the effects of OA, CA, EA and PA on CL to identify sustainable strategies for rural tourism development in TVCLs.

Research Hypotheses

Relationship between traditional village cultural landscape authenticity and place attachment

Yi et al. (2023) argue that tourists perceive authenticity as a prerequisite for PA. Ram, Björk and Weidenfeld (2016) prove that PA is a predictor of tourists' perceived authenticity. Meanwhile, Li and Wang (2023) assert that the authenticity of cultural landscapes moderates PA to a certain extent, including the cognitive and affective aspects that cultural landscapes provide, as well as the cognitive and affective aspects that tourists create for the place assigned to the landscape meaning. Jiang et al. (2017) and Zhu and Chiou (2022) posit that the value and authenticity of cultural landscapes inspire increased attachment. Thus, this study proposed three hypotheses:

> H1a: OA positively affects PA.
>
> H1b: CA positively affects PA.
>
> H1c: EA positively affects PA.

Relationship between traditional village cultural landscape authenticity and conative loyalty

Some studies revealed that tourism authenticity can positively impact tourist loyalty (Fu et al., 2018). In cultural heritage tourism, perceived authenticity can affect destination loyalty (Yi et al., 2018). Scholars determined that the higher the level of authenticity perceived by tourists during the travel process, the higher their likelihood of developing a lasting attraction to travelling and a vivid destination image, the higher their likelihood of having a satisfying travel experience and the stronger their referral intention and willingness to revisit the destination (Yu, Gong and Zhang, 2017). Previous studies categorised authenticity as OA and EA and confirmed their relationship with loyalty (Bryce et al., 2014; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Yi et al. (2018) identified a limited number of studies that explored the link between authenticity and loyalty in the context of cultural heritage, whereas Park, Choi and

Lee (2019) showed that EA does not affect CL. The impact of the different types of authenticity on loyalty has been debated; thus, this study proposed another three hypotheses:

> H2a: OA positively affects CL.
>
> H2b: CA positively affects CL.
>
> H2c: EA positively affects CL.

Authenticity, place attachment and conative loyalty

Yuksel, Yuksel and Bilim (2010) and Köse (2021) believe that PA is an essential indicator of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. Zhao and Li (2022) suggest that PA does not only directly affect tourist loyalty but also mediates the relationship between authenticity and loyalty. Yi et al. (2023) believe that PA can mediate the relationship between perceived authenticity and loyalty and Wang et al. (2022) propose that PA plays a fully mediating role in the relationship between authenticity, experience and loyalty. Based on the discussion, this study proposed four hypotheses:

> H3: PA has a positive effect on CL
>
> H4a: PA mediates the relationship between OA and CL.
>
> H4b: PA mediates the relationship between CA and CL.
>
> H4c: PA mediates the relationship between EA and CL.

Figure 1 displays the conceptual framework based on the study's discussion and developed hypotheses.
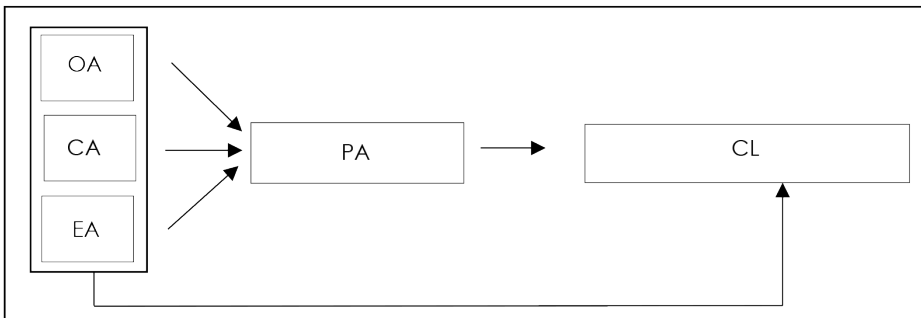

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

METHODS

Study Area

The research site was the village of Gan Yantou in China (as shown in Figure 2). The village compound was first built during the Jingtai period of the Ming Dynasty (1450–1456) and completed in 1904 (Bozhang, Yue and Yuxuan, 2017; Yining, 2023). The village was the first to be certified in the first batch of traditional villages in China (Traditional Chinese Village Digital Museum, 2023). It was listed as the "Famous Historical and Cultural Village of China" and the "National Key Cultural Relics Protection Unit" in 2007 (Bozhang, Yue and Yuxuan, 2017; Yining, 2023) for its ancient building complex is one of the largest and most complete old residential groups in Southern Hunan. Moreover, it is one of the most representative villages in the Central-Western Hunan region, known for its courtyard-style and three-joined-room residential architecture. In other words, the village is one of the most representative villages in the integrated area of South-Central Hunan (Weiwei, Ge and Kunlun, 2021).
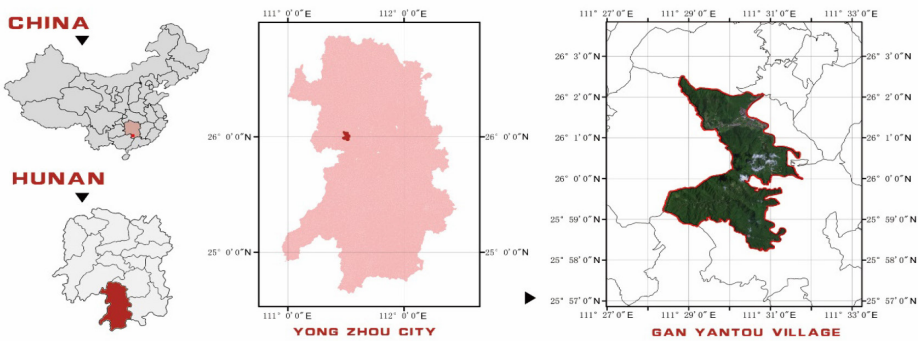

Figure 2. Gan Yantou Village location map

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was prepared in English. The collected data were analysed using SPSS 27.0 and the partial least squares structural equation modelling tool (SmartPLS) 4.0. Firstly, a reliability analysis was conducted using SPSS and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed on OA, CA and EA using the principal component method to reduce the number of variables and identify the underlying structures in the data. Overall, 13 items were used to measure OA (four items), CA (three items) and EA (six items). The data were checked for suitability to the particular type of analysis. In this study, the rotated component matrix was calculated to eliminate the extreme correlations between the different variables and then the correlations between the variables were assumed to be moderate for the factor analysis. Secondly, the hypothesised relationships depicted in Figure 1 were measured through path analysis using SmartPLS 4.0.

This study measured destination authenticity using a measurement scale from a previous study. Authenticity included a total of 12 measurement items in three dimensions: OA, CA and EA (Wang, 1999). The PA measure was adopted from the literature and consisted of four items (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006; Nanzer, 2004; Yuksel, Yuksel and Bilim, 2010). Loyalty was measured to determine the participants' CL and improvement, which was based on previous research questionnaires and consisted of five items (Back and Parks, 2003; Fu, 2019; Han, Kim and Kim, 2011; Park, Choi and Lee, 2019; Wu and Lai, 2023; Yuksel, Yuksel and Bilim, 2010). All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Survey Procedures and Sample Size

The questionnaire survey was conducted mainly in the residential community, tourist attractions, village squares and parks of Gan Yantou Village. Visitors over the age of 18 years to the traditional village of Gan Yantou were selected as the study population. Data collection was conducted from February to May 2024. The questionnaire was self-administered and the respondents were told no right or wrong answer existed for each question. Although the respondents did not complete a consent form, they verbally agreed to participate in the study after they read the instructions and the research explanation. Before the formal survey, a pretest was conducted on 30 tourists, who were selected through simple sampling, to assess the psychometric properties of the survey instrument. Some minor changes were made to the initial questionnaire after the 30 participants completed the pretest. For this study, an *F*-test was conducted using G*Power to help researchers determine the appropriate sample size during the research design phase and avoid the issue of having a sample size that is either too large or too small (Faul et al., 2007). The test used an alpha of 0.05, a power of 0.80 and a medium effect size of ($f^2 = 0.15$). In most social science studies, 80% is considered the minimum acceptable power (Lenth, 2001). G*Power utilised in this study determined the appropriate sample size, considering the five predictors and the minimum required sample size of 92. Simple random sampling was conducted to select the participants who met the predefined inclusion criteria. Initially, 184 questionnaires, which exceeded the required sample size, were distributed to the potential respondents. Of the 184 distributed questionnaires, 140 were returned. After 35 questionnaires were excluded due to the respondents' incomplete or erroneous responses, resulting in 105 valid questionnaires used for the subsequent analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Respondents' Profile

The analysis of the demographics of the TVCL visitors yielded several noteworthy results (as shown in Table 1). Among the 105 respondents, 47 (44.8%) were male and 58 (55.2%) were female. Most of the respondents were between 18 years old and 39 years old, accounting for 72.4% of the total number of respondents. Most of the tourists (66.6%) were residents of Yongzhou city. The survey also showed that the tourists were relatively well-educated, with 61.9% holding a bachelor's degree and only 18.1% of the respondents had an education level below primary

school. Most of the respondents were first-time visitors (57.1%) and in terms of their travel frequency, 71.4% reported travelling infrequently. As for the frequency of their communication with the villagers, 61.9% of the respondents reported a low frequency of communication. Regarding their information sources, 50.5% of the visitors identified "Word of mouth" and 25.4% answered "Internet".

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of demographic characteristics

Demographic Characteristic		Frequency (*N* = 105)	%
Come from	Yongzhou city	70	66.6
	Hunan Province	14	13.3
	Other provinces	19	18.1
	Other countries	2	1.9
Age	18 years old to 29 years old	53	50.5
	30 years old to 39 years old	23	21.9
	40 years old to 49 years old	2	1.9
	50 years old to 59 years old	6	5.7
	60 years old or older	21	20.0
Gender	Male	47	44.8
	Female	58	55.2
Education	Elementary	19	18.1
	Middle school	8	7.6
	High school or secondary school	13	12.4
	University or post-secondary school	58	55.2
	Postgraduate	7	6.7
Tourism frequency	Frequently	22	21.0
	Rarely	75	71.4
	Never	8	7.6
Communication frequency	Frequently	32	30.5
	Rarely	65	61.9
	Never	8	7.6
Information sources	Travel agency	8	7.6
	Word of mouth	53	50.5
	Internet	24	22.9
	Travel brochure	4	3.8
	Others	16	15.2
Experience	First visit	60	57.1
	Revisit	45	42.9

Reliability Analysis and Discriminant Validity

Although the scale used in this study adopted established measures, adjustments were made to accommodate the unique characteristics of the study area and participants. Specifically, certain items were modified to fit the specific context of traditional villages. This study started with an EFA of the scale items. Principal component analysis was conducted for the EFA. The rotated component matrix helped explain the underlying factor structure in the data (as shown in Table 2) while the results for the reliability test is shown in Table 3. An absolute loading value greater than 0.4 is considered to be significant (Field, 2013). Based on the study results, one item of EA variable was excluded from the further analysis as its factor loading was less than the threshold of 0.4. Thus, the model demonstrated good discriminant validity (as shown in Table 4).

Table 2. Authenticity rotated component matrix based on factor analysis

Items	Component		
	1	2	3
OA 1	0.433	0.743	0.319
OA 2	0.259	0.858	0.237
OA 3	0.392	0.553	0.465
OA 4	0.396	0.757	0.155
CA 1	0.116	0.351	0.827
CA 2	0.246	0.163	0.888
CA 3	0.349	0.162	0.804
EA 1	0.666	0.403	0.264
EA 2	0.819	0.218	0.192
EA 3	0.668	0.438	0.316
EA 4	0.684	0.332	0.310
EA 6	0.822	0.275	0.163

Table 3. Reliability test results (N = 105)

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
OA	0.895	4
CA	0.889	3
EA	0.900	5
PA	0.920	4
CL	0.947	5

Table 4. Discriminant validity

Discriminant Validity-Fornell-Larcker Criterion					
	CA	**CL**	**EA**	**OA**	**PA**
CA	0.905				
CL	0.473	0.908			
EA	0.598	0.789	0.846		
OA	0.626	0.59	0.786	0.874	
PA	0.459	0.834	0.808	0.645	0.899

Note: AVE = Average variance extracted. Diagonal elements are the square roots of the AVE of each construct.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

This study implemented the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS to validate the model's direct and indirect effects and test the mediating effects. The bootstrap method was run 10,000 times in SmartPLS to conduct the bias correction and obtain the percentile level of the 95% confidence intervals.

The hypothesis testing results are depicted in Figure 3. Figure 3 presents the path coefficients and p-values of the inner model and the outer loadings and p-values of the outer model. Consistent with the literature (Behzadi et al., 2010), statistical significance was determined at a *p*-value of < 0.05 and the corresponding *t*-values exceeded 1.96 (Li and Wang, 2023). The R^2 values of the structural model of the endogenous latent variables were interpreted as a "Large" = 0.75, "Medium" = 0.50 or "Weak" = 0.25 effect (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011), which indicated the good fit of the model to the data.

As shown in Table 5, the analysis of the direct effects reveals significant relationships: EA → CL (β = 0.387, *p* = 0.009, *t* = 2.372), EA → PA (β = 0.801, *p* = 0.000, *t* = 7.759) and PA → CL (β = 0.572, *p* = 0.000, *t* = 4.252). All the *p*-values were < 0.05, all the *β*-values were β > 0 and all the *t*-values were *t* > 1.96. Thus, the results supported H1c, H2c and H3. Moreover, the analysis of the indirect effects revealed the indirect effect of EA → PA → CL (β = 0.458, *p* = 0.000, *t* = 3.517), which supported H4c.
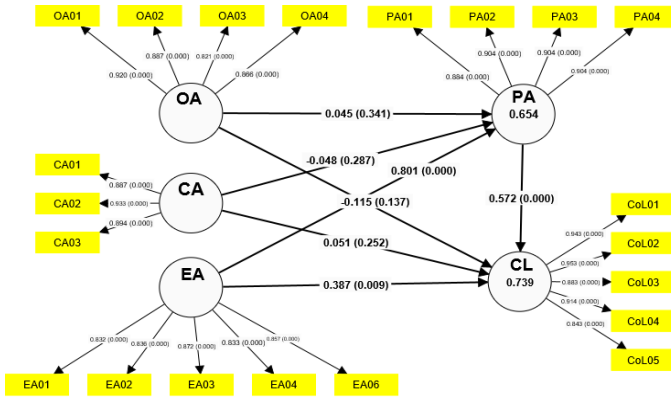
Figure 3. Structural model estimates

Table 5. Path coefficients analysis and specific indirect effects

Hypothetical		β	Sample Mean	SD	*T*-Statistics	*p*-Values	Supported
Path Coefficients Analysis							
H1a	OA → PA	0.045	0.043	0.109	0.41	0.341	No
H1b	CA → PA	−0.048	−0.051	0.086	0.561	0.287	No
H1c	EA → PA	0.801	0.805	0.103	7.759	–	Yes
H2a	OA → CL	−0.115	−0.114	0.105	1.092	0.137	No
H2b	CA → CL	0.051	0.057	0.076	0.669	0.252	No
H2c	EA → CL	0.387	0.358	0.163	2.372	0.009	Yes
H3	PA → CL	0.572	0.596	0.134	4.252	–	Yes
Specific Indirect Effects							
H4a	OA → PA → CL	0.026	0.026	0.066	0.387	0.349	No
H4b	CA → PA → CL	−0.028	−0.028	0.051	0.544	0.293	No
H4c	EA → PA → CL	0.458	0.482	0.130	3.517	–	Yes

Notes: β = Original sample; SD = Standard deviation.

The variance accounted for (VAF) values can determine the predictive strength of the model. A VAF value greater than 80% represents a fully mediated effect, a VAF value between 20% and 80% represents a partially mediated effect and a VAF value of less than 20% represents a nonmediated effect (Temeng, Ziggah and Arthur, 2021). This study's VAF value of 53.6% indicated that PA had a partially mediated effect.

Table 6. Mediating variable analysis

Independent Variable	Mediator	Dependent Variable	Direct Effect (Observed/ Total Effect)	Indirect Effect (Observed/ Total Effect)	Total Effect	VAF	Hypothetical
OA	PA	CL	−0.115 (1.092)	0.026 (0.387)	−0.089	−29.2%	Not supported
CA			0.051 (0.669)	−0.028 (0.544)	0.023	−121.7%	Not supported
EA			0.387 (7.759)	0.458 (3.517)	0.845	53.6%	Supported

DISCUSSION

Traditional villages with a wealth of cultural heritage are gradually becoming popular tourist destinations, with the cultural landscapes of such villages serving as the main attraction (Shen and Chou, 2022). The core task of TVCL development is to sustain the sense of place and collective memory of traditional villages whilst exploring tourists' perception of cultural landscapes and pursuit of authenticity (Li and Wang, 2023). The concept of authenticity is widely examined in the context of heritage sites and historic districts (Chen et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2017; Prawitasari and Setiadi, 2023; Yi et al., 2017, 2024; Zhao and Li, 2022). This study is the first to construct a conceptual framework of the relationship between OA, CA, EA, PA and CL based on the theory of mind, with the Gan Yantou traditional village as the research object.

The study results highlighted three main points. Firstly, the EA of a TVCL significantly influenced tourists' CL and directly affected PA. However, the effects of OA and CA on PA and CL were not significant. This finding implies that tourists prioritise perceived EA during their travels. By visiting local historical buildings and experiencing overall unity, unique traditions and spiritual authenticity, tourists may develop a preference for traditional villages and an appreciation for their local characteristics. Therefore, rural tourism can help a destination avoid the pitfalls of commercialisation and effectively preserve its local architecture, landscapes, culture and history. Moreover, some studies suggest that OA and CA can positively influence PA and CL (Luo et al., 2024; Zhao and Li, 2022). However, the results of this study differ, thereby indicating that variations in the research site and participants will affect the outcomes. Although this study did not explore the relationship between OA, CA and EA, previous research indicates that OA and CA can influence EA (Bryce et al., 2014; Domínguez-Quintero, González-Rodríguez and Paddison, 2020). Thus, TVCLs demonstrate unique authenticity, which is crucial for attracting tourists. Future traditional village developments should fully consider the authenticity of TVCLs and the quality of their core attractions to prioritise tourists' psychological needs.

Secondly, EA and PA directly influenced CL, but the influence of EA on CL was weaker than that of PA. The results indicate that in the construction of TVCLs, local attributes must be fully considered and local characteristics and cultures should be

deeply understood and promoted to prevent the loss of local features, achieve the transmission and development of the cultural landscapes and enhance tourists' loyalty to rural tourism.

Thirdly, PA acted as a mediating variable in the relationship between EA and CL. This finding underscores the importance of protecting the authenticity of a destination in enhancing tourists' perception and exploring and highlighting local characteristics in TVCL development. In developing tourism activities, practitioners should use local features to guide their planning and prioritise projects that are aimed at preserving and developing authentic cultural landscapes. The approach can strengthen the emotional loyalty of tourists and promote the sustainable development of the tourism industry.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the hollowing out of traditional villages, along with the homogenisation and commercialisation of tourism, are factors that contribute to the loss of authenticity and sense of place. This study, which was grounded in the theory of mind, investigated how TVCLs promote sustainable rural tourism through the cognitive, affective and conative processes perceived by visitors. Although existing research utilising the theory of mind focused primarily on smart tourism (Shuxratovna, Kiran and Erdogan, 2023; Tavitiyaman et al., 2021), a significant research gap remains in the context of rural tourism development within traditional villages. Therefore, this study explored the pathways of authenticity, PA and CL to envision the future direction of rural tourism, thereby extending the application of the theory of mind to diverse domains.

The current research also addressed the dearth of quantitative studies in the field, as prior research relied predominantly on qualitative approaches. By examining the impact of TVCL authenticity on tourists' subsequent behaviours, this study contributes to the literature (Li and Wang, 2023) and broadens understanding of rural tourism development strategies. The results of the current study show that tourists' perceived authenticity of rural tourism will help their formation of PA on a destination, which will trigger their CL. This finding indicates that the authenticity of TVCLs must be protected and enhanced to create local characteristics and promote the sustainable development of tourism. Furthermore, the mediating role of PA highlights the importance of the sense of place, which must be embedded in the development of traditional villages to foster the deep attachment of tourists. Tourists can gain unique, exclusive and place-based rural tourism experiences through the authenticity and sense of place of cultural landscapes that facilitates creative construction for the protection and development of TVCLs, generates word-of-mouth effects and enhances the attractiveness of tourist destinations. Therefore, in rural tourism development, the preservation and transmission of the authenticity and sense of place of TVCLs are critical practices that can address the current issues of hollowing out, commercialisation and homogenisation in traditional village development.

LIMITATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

This study has several research limitations. Firstly, the data were collected from a traditional village in Yongzhou city, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. Further research may test the reliability of the results by using samples from different regions. Secondly, this study investigated only one dimension of loyalty; thus, in-depth research is necessary. Thirdly, this study examined only the mediating effect of PA. Future studies can consider other mediating variables that can impact authenticity and loyalty. Lastly, this study considered only tourists' perspectives and did not consider the views of different groups on TVCLs. Hence, future research can focus on the needs of various groups of people.

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