

# Destination attributes, tourist loyalty behavior and administration towards rural tourism in Jiangxi Province, China

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the development of short-distance rural tourism has ushered in important opportunities globally. Improving tourist loyalty has become one of the most effective ways to develop rural tourism due to its low cost. In recent years, China's rural tourism has made great achievements under the role of administration, and the practice is worth learning from. This study takes Jiangxi Province, a well-developed rural tourism province in China as an example, to evaluate the impact of administration on destination attributes and tourist loyalty behavior towards rural tourism. As a quantitative research, this study used a validated and reliable instrument to conduct an anonymous survey in a snowball manner through an online platform, and finally obtained valid data on 779 people from 29 provinces in China who have experienced rural tourism in 11 prefecture-level cities of Jiangxi Province. The results show that the respondents have a strong desire and loyal behavioral intention to travel to rural areas. They agreed with the attributes of rural destinations and preferred physiography. Respondents agree with administration towards rural tourism, and are more likely to perceive central administration. The study confirms that pairwise significant correlations between the three variables of destination attributes, tourist loyalty behavior and administrative perception towards rural tourism. Based on these, a rural tourism development framework that is conducive to improving tourists' loyalty behavior is proposed, and some development recommendations for different stakeholders are given to better promote the current development of rural tourism.

**Keywords:** administration, COVID-19 pandemic, destination attributes, loyalty behavioral intention, rural tourism

## **Destination attributes, tourist loyalty behavior and administration towards rural tourism in Jiangxi Province, China**

### **1. Introduction**

Under the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural areas have become popular in the tourism industry for their ability to offer less populated destinations and open-air experiences and activities. UNWTO calls on countries to seize the opportunity to cultivate the development potential of tourism in rural areas through active exploration and innovation and points out that this is a socio-economic activity that leave no one behind (World Tourism Organization, 2020). As consumers, tourists can bring a steady stream of wealth to rural tourism destinations. Among them, tourist loyalty behavior is favored because it can effectively reduce the cost of attracting new customers (Eom et al., 2020; Qu et al., 2022) and form positive word of mouth (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019).

Scholars tend to regard tourism loyalty as a comprehensive loyalty that includes two dimensions of attitude and behavior, specifically referring to recommendation to others and revisit intention (e.g., Tanford & Jung, 2017; Zou et al., 2022). However, tourism loyalty behavior should also include a series of prevariables related to personal consciousness. The model of goal-directed behavior (MGB) proposed by Perugini & Bagozzi (2001) based on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) is a more popular theory in tourism behavior research in recent years, and one of the reasons is its openness. Destination attributes are the key premise of tourist loyalty behavior (Sangpikul, 2018), and determine the future loyalty behavior of tourists (e.g., Kim, 2014; Schlesinger et al., 2020). There are few articles that directly examine the relationship between administration and tourist loyalty behavior, but Jangra et al. (2021) states that governments should ensure that visitors are satisfied with the facility so they can revisit or recommend it to others.

The Chinese government has always attached great importance to rural development and recently elevated rural revitalization as a national strategy (Xinhua, 2017). Thus, even though the development of rural tourism in China is influenced by complex factors (Chen, 2017), the important role played by the Chinese government in the development of tourism (Zuo et al., 2017) can still effectively promote the development of rural destinations and enhance tourist loyalty. Jiangxi Province, located in the central part of China, has a good development of rural tourism. The province has a good ecological environment and rich rural tourism resources (Nie & Zhou, 2019). During the National Day holiday in 2021, Jiangxi Province received a total of 65.8674 million tourists and achieved tourism revenue of 40.510 billion CNY, which was an increase of 5.19% and 4.40% respectively over the same period in 2019 before the epidemic (Gong, 2021). Jiangxi's tourism market is recovering rapidly, and rural tourism has gradually become a new engine for rural revitalization.

To sum up, the current global development of tourism in rural areas is an important opportunity. Trying to improve tourists' loyalty is one of the most effective ways to develop rural tourism, which is closely related to the attributes of rural destinations and administration. In recent years, China's rural tourism has developed a strong momentum, and its government's practice of leading the development of rural tourism is worth learning from. Taking Jiangxi Province, which is well-developed in rural tourism in China as an example, this study adds two variables, administrative perceptions and destination attributes, with the help of the open MGB, aiming to evaluate administration influence on destination attributes and tourist loyalty behavior towards rural tourism, and to construct a model of the impact mechanism of rural tourism. Specifically, it aimed to assess destination attributes towards rural tourism; to evaluate the tourist loyalty behavior towards rural tourism; to assess tourists' administrative perceptions toward rural tourism. Furthermore, the study tested the significant relationship on the three variables mentioned. Lastly, based on the result of the study, the researcher proposed a framework on rural tourism development.

## 2. Methods

**Research design** - Based on the openness of MGB, the researcher added two variables, administrative perceptions and destination attributes, to focus on the quantitative study of the influence of administration on destination attributes and tourist loyalty behavior towards rural tourism. Therefore, the research objectives were determined, and on the basis of referring to the literature related to the determination of variables in recent years, a questionnaire was designed in combination with the actual situation to form a data collection tool instrument. The researcher obtained the data by distributing questionnaires to people who have had rural tourism experience in Jiangxi Province across the country. After data analysis and discussion, the researcher proposes a framework for rural tourism development accordingly.

**Data collection instrument** - Through literature reviews and combined with the actual research, the researchers drafted the instrument, which was modified according to the feedback of 23 respondents, and then invited three authoritative industry experts to verify, and finally, the data collection instrument composed of four major parts was determined. The first part is Profile of the Respondents. The second part, Destination Attributes towards Rural Tourism, refers to the scales of Kim (2014) and Moon & Han (2018) and combines research practices to identify 9 sub-variables including local culture, activities and events, hospitality, specialized facilities, destination management, accessibility, quality of service, physiography, and place attachment, and 33 specific items. The third part, Tourist Loyalty Behavior towards Rural Tourism, is modified by the scale of Park et al. (2017) to obtain a total of 7 sub-variables including 5 antecedent variables, desire and loyalty behavior intention, and 29 items. The fourth part, Administrative Perceptions towards Rural Tourism, mainly based on Liu et al. (2020) research and related documents, identified 2 sub-variables of central administration and local administration, and 13 items. Except for the first part of Profile, the items in the other three parts were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The instrument was further pilot tested by 33 respondents to determine its reliability. The results show that its Cronbach Alpha values are all greater than 0.9, and the reliability is excellent.

**Data gathering procedure** - Due to the irregular recurrence of the COVID-19 epidemic, this study used the “Wenjuanxing” platform, an early self-service professional online questionnaire survey in China, to conduct an online anonymous survey in a snowball manner. In order to better screen the proposed participants and ensure that the answers are effective, the researchers specially indicated in the obvious position of the poster that “the respondents need to have leisure or tourism experience in the rural areas of Jiangxi in recent years” and made special emphasis in the description. In order to avoid repeated submissions, the researcher specially set the same mobile phone or computer to answer only once. The survey period was from May 1 to 18, 2022, covering 29 provincial-level administrative regions in China, and a total of 1,213 questionnaires were returned. After excluding the questionnaires with the frequency of leisure or tourism in rural areas in Jiangxi Province in recent years was 0, the completion time was less than 100 seconds, and the answers were basically the same, and 779 valid questionnaires were finally obtained, with an effective rate of 64.2%.

## 3. Results and Discussion

**Table 1**

*Summary table on destination attributes towards rural tourism*

Key Result Area	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Local Culture	3.85	Agree	5
Activities and Events	3.79	Agree	6
Hospitality	4.04	Agree	2
Specialized Facilities	3.73	Agree	8
Destination Management	3.96	Agree	3
Accessibility	3.88	Agree	4

Key Result Area	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Quality of Service	3.76	Agree	7
Physiography	4.07	Agree	1
Place Attachment	3.72	Agree	9
Grand Composite Mean	3.87	Agree	

*Legend:* 4.50-5.00=Strongly Agree;3.50-4.49=Agree=2.50-3.49=Moderately Agree;1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 1 summarized the destination attributed towards rural tourism. The composite mean of 3.87 indicates that the respondents agreed on the destination attributes. Physiography (4.07) topped on the list followed by Hospitality (4.04) and Destination Management (3.96). All items were rated agree. Physiography is the most popular aspect of Jiangxi rural tourists. Although the survey of this study shows that a small number of tourists think that the scenery of Jiangxi rural tourism destinations is not amazing enough, in general, the superior physical geography Physiography should be the most prominent attribute feature of Jiangxi rural tourism destinations. The superiority of Physiography has always been an important business card in Jiangxi, and many studies have confirmed this view (Xie et al., 2017; Nie & Zhou, 2019). The research of Eusébio et al. (2017) also shows that rural tourists are more concerned about the natural environment of the destination.

Meanwhile, least on the rank is place attachment (3.72) followed by the specialized facilities (3.73) and quality of service (3.76). This means that place attachment is the least recognized attribute of Jiangxi rural tourism destinations. One of the reasons may be that rural destinations in Jiangxi Province do not care enough about traditional rural culture, and the other is that the emotional connection between tourists and the destination is weak. Although Jiangxi Village is attractive with its advantages (Huang & Ge, 2022), the efforts of developers and the administrative intervention of the government (People's Government, 2022) have made it interesting for many tourists. However, many rural tourist destinations in Jiangxi have destroyed the original rural culture in the development (Chen & Zhang, 2019), resulting in the gradual disappearance of the landscape that carries the memory of tourists' rural life, resulting in the decline of tourists' cultural identity to the countryside, which in turn affects tourists' place attachment (Ouyang, 2015). On the other hand, the emotional bond between tourists and the place strengthens over time (Yuksel et al., 2010). However, due to the short stay time and low frequency of visits (Wang et al., 2017), rural tourists cannot deeply appreciate the unique attraction of local culture and its connection with themselves, which affects their evaluation of place attachment to rural tourism destinations in Jiangxi (Kong et al. 2019).

**Table 2**

*Summary table on tourist loyalty behavior towards rural tourism*

Key Result Area	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Attitude	4.18	Agree	1
Subjective Norm	3.94	Agree	2
Perceived Behavioral Control	3.78	Agree	4
Positive Anticipated Emotion	3.88	Agree	3
Negative Anticipated Emotion	2.72	Moderately Agree	7
Desire	3.51	Agree	6
Behavioral Intention	3.69	Agree	5
Grand Composite Mean	3.67	Agree	

*Legend:* 4.50-5.00=Strongly Agree;3.50-4.49=Agree=2.50-3.49=Moderately Agree;1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 2 summarized the assessment on the tourist loyalty behavior towards rural tourism. The composite mean of 3.67 indicates that the respondents agreed on their loyalty behavior. Attitude (4.18) topped on the list followed by subjective norm (3.94) and positive anticipated emotion (3.88). All items were rated agree. In the context of the implementation of China's rural revitalization strategy, the benefits of rural tourism have been recognized by all sectors of society. Under the situation of normalization of COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control and zoning control, rural destinations are favored. Therefore, the assessment of the respondents' attitude

towards rural tourism topped the list. Xie et al. (2017), Yang et al. (2021) and Xiang (2021) clearly stated in their studies that rural tourism can bring tangible benefits to various stakeholders. Tang et al. (2022) also believed that although the current epidemic situation has improved, under the normalization of epidemic prevention and control and regional control, rural areas in the suburbs of cities have become the preferred destinations for people to travel.

Meanwhile, least on the rank is Negative Anticipated Emotion (2.72) followed by the Desire (3.51) and Behavioral Intention (3.69). The evaluation of Negative Anticipated Emotion is far lower than other indicators, which shows that rural tourism has not become an activity that people must participate in, and rural destinations in Jiangxi Province are not enough to become a pure land for people's souls. Although the countryside can make people enjoy the tranquility and real slow life (Zhu, 2018), Huang & Ge (2022) pointed out in their research that there are still various problems in rural tourism destinations, which make tourists lack spiritual dependence.

**Table 3**

*Summary table on administrative perceptions towards rural tourism*

Key Result Area	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Central Administration	4.20	Agree	1
Local Administration	4.08	Agree	2
Grand Composite Mean	4.17	Agree	

*Legend:* 4.50-5.00=Strongly Agree;3.50-4.49=Agree=2.50-3.49=Moderately Agree;1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 3 summarized the assessment of the administrative perceptions towards rural tourism. The composite mean of 4.17 indicates that the respondents agreed in general on their administrative perceptions on rural tourism. Central Administration (4.20) topped on the list followed by local administration (4.08). All items were rated agree. A series of administrative actions of the central government are mainly aimed at guiding the development of rural tourism in the country. While local governments are also actively involved in strategy formulation and implementation and make decisions based on their own initiative in the strategy formulation process, their decisions are dictated by the structural constraints of the central government. The central government has made great publicity and reports through various channels, so that the strategy and various guidelines and policies on rural tourism are deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. In addition, tourists' personal travel experience in local villages further strengthens their perception of the central government's rural tourism administrative behavior. Therefore, tourists have a strong administrative perception of the central government's rural tourism. Research shows that in China, residents trust the central government more than local government residents (Zuo et al., 2017). Liu et al. (2020) firmly believe that the attention, guidance and incentives of the Chinese central government are the driving force behind the development of rural tourism. Although the central government is not directly involved in rural tourism, its administrative actions often guide local rural tourism development (Wang, 2020). Appropriate central government policies and guidance are essential elements of effective rural tourism management (Liu et al., 2020).

Local governments, mainly under the guidance of central policies, carry out specific coordination, management and provision of services for the development of rural tourism. However, at present, the administrative scope of Jiangxi local government is limited and its administrative capacity is low. In addition, when rural tourists encounter problems, they do not deal with them in a timely manner or actively. These all lead to the low evaluation of the administrative perception of the local government by rural tourists. The research of Liu et al. (2020) shows that although local governments also play a "guiding" role in the key decision-making process of local tourism development, they mainly play a service role by directly managing tourism practices, coordinating businesses and residents to provide services and solve problems. Zhang & Wang (2020) believe that in recent years, Jiangxi local governments have developed specific implementation policies that are suitable and conducive to local rural tourism development in accordance with the major policies for rural tourism development issued by the central government, but there is still much room for improvement.

**Table 4***Correlation between paired variables*

Paired Variables	rho-value	p-value	Interpretation
Destination Attributes & Tourist Loyalty Behavior	0.633**	0.000	Highly Significant
Destination Attributes & Administrative Perceptions	0.522**	0.000	Highly Significant
Tourist Loyalty Behavior & Administrative Perceptions	0.515**	0.000	Highly Significant

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Table 4 shows correlation between paired variables. It was observed that the computed rho-value of 0.633 indicates a strong positive correlation between destination attributes and tourist loyalty behavior toward rural tourism and also shows statistically significant correlation ( $p=0.000$ ). Being perceived by tourists and attracting tourists is the primary function of the reason why the countryside has become a tourist destination. The tourist destination itself is a value provider for tourists (Lin & Kuo, 2016), and tourists hope that the multiple attributes of the destination can provide them with a rich experience (Rejikumar et al., 2021). The destination attributes of rural tourism directly affect the experience effect of tourists, which is an important factor of tourist loyalty behavior. Similarly, Kim (2014) argues that the attributes of the destination determine the loyalty behavior of tourists, which is a stronger driving force for tourists' future behavior; Moon & Han (2018) pointed out that the multiple attributes of the destination are the premise of tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention. Research by Campón-Cerro et al. (2017) further proves that rural tourism destination attributes have a positive impact on tourist loyalty.

As seen in the table, the computed rho-value of 0.522 indicates a moderate positive correlation and shows statistically significant correlation between destination attributes and administrative perceptions toward rural tourism ( $p=0.000$ ). Governments in developing countries play a central role in creating an environment for tourism development (Kubickova & Martin, 2020). Of course, the central and local governments also play a crucial role in the development of rural tourism destinations in China, as they need to be supported by effective tourism policies (McLennan et al., 2014). In turn, government inaction can affect the attributes of rural tourism destinations. Poor government management, irrational planning and lack of coordination can hinder the development of the destination; and problems in the destination must be managed by the government (García-Buades et al., 2022). In addition, under the background of the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, the central and local governments are jointly committed to improving the economy of rural areas and improving the quality of life of residents, which further strengthens the influence of government administration on the attributes of rural tourism destinations. Zhang et al. (2021) argue that government tourism policies can significantly affect the development and prosperity of a destination. Research by Wang et al. (2022) shows that central and local governments have highly consistent initiatives.

Likewise, the computed rho-value of 0.515 indicates a moderate positive correlation and shows statistically significant correlation between tourist loyalty behavior and administrative perceptions toward rural tourism ( $p=0.000$ ). Some administrative behaviors of the government can be directly perceived by tourists, which in turn affect their loyalty behaviors. However, the relationship between government administration and tourists' loyalty is more of an indirect relationship, because government administration needs to act on the destination before it can be perceived by tourists. Conversely, the feedback of tourists after experiencing in rural destinations will help the government find out the advantages and disadvantages of rural tourism development in time, and then carry out rural tourism administration targeted. Huang (2021)'s research shows that the role of government has a positive and significant impact on tourist experience; Tang et al. (2018)'s research also shows that there are symbiotic factors between the government and tourists. Su et al. (2021) pointed out that with the development of social media today, tourists have absolute feedback power, which makes the role of tourists in rural tourism destinations and the government more obvious.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher proposes an administration-led rural tourism framework that is conducive to improving tourist loyalty, as shown in Figure 1. The central and local administrations are the subjects of rural tourism administration. They can effectively guide, regulate, manage and boost the development

of rural tourism, which is a powerful guarantee for the sustainable development of rural destinations, and is of great significance for tourists to enhance their trust and loyalty to the destination. Rural destinations are suppliers of rural tourism products. To a large extent, the destination attribute is a concrete manifestation of administration and profoundly affects the loyalty behavior of tourists. Tourists are the experiencers and consumers of rural tourism, and their loyalty behaviors are the guarantee for the sustainable development of the rural destination economy. Likewise, honest feedback from tourists is an important direction for destination and government efforts.

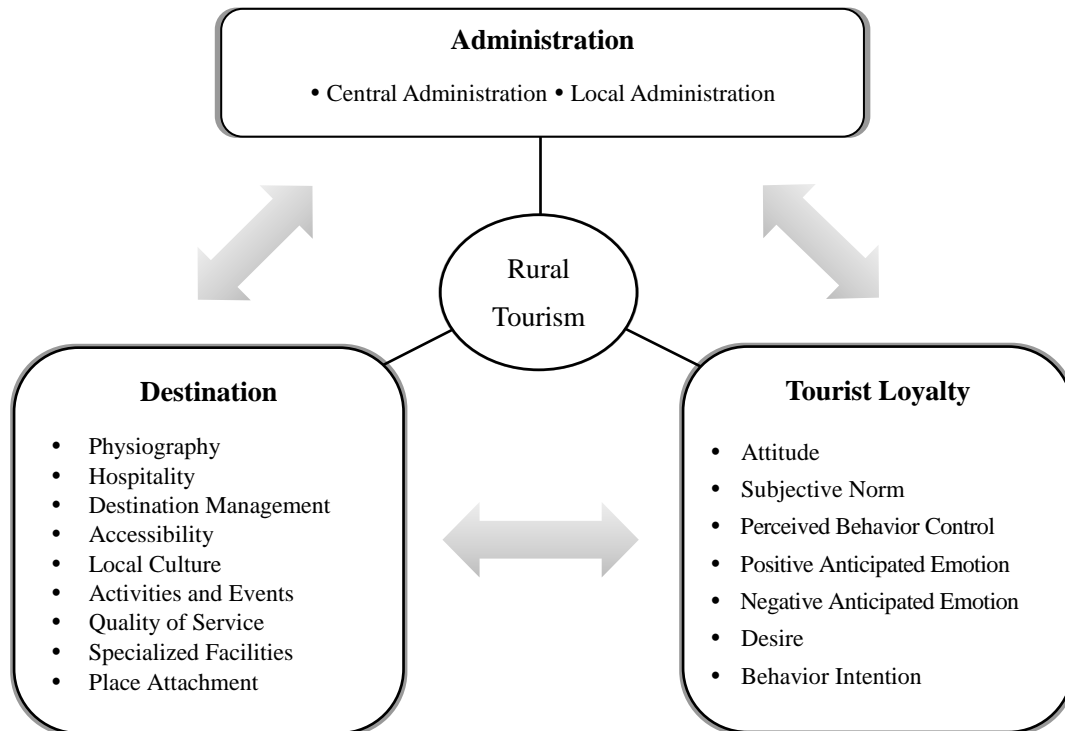


Figure 1. An Administration-led Rural Tourism Framework

The attributes of the destination directly affect the experience effect of tourists and determine the loyalty behavior of rural tourists. Destinations are providers of tourist value (Lin & Kuo, 2016). The first thing a tourist must do when choosing a rural destination is to measure the destination attributes, as this helps to identify and recreate the self (Truong et al., 2018) and evoke positive emotions (Wei et al., 2019), resulting in a memorable experience (Castellani et al., 2020; Kim, 2014), which determines the formation of loyalty behavior intentions such as revisiting and recommendation of rural tourists (Kim, 2014). Specifically, all the attribute elements have a great impact on the loyalty behavior of rural tourists. Among them, physiography, hospitality, destination management, accessibility, and local culture have a greater impact on the loyalty behavior of rural tourists. Tourist loyalty is an intangible value of rural tourism destinations, which can bring a steady stream of tourists to the destination. Tourists are important bottom-up agents and co-creators of tourist destinations (Speake & Kennedy, 2019). Revisit intent and referral to others are the two most commonly used measures of travel loyalty (Choo et al., 2016; Tanford & Jung, 2017), as it reduces the cost of attracting new customers (Eom et al., 2020; Qu et al., 2022) and enhances positive word of mouth (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019). This can bring a steady stream of tourists to the destination, which is conducive to the sustainable development of the rural tourism destination economy.

Of course, the mutual relationship between the destination and the loyalty of tourists requires the government to support and guarantee it with administrative means. Central and local governments play a crucial role in the development of rural tourism destinations in China, as they need to be supported by effective policies (McLennan et al., 2014). The administration can ensure that the development direction of rural tourism is

sustainable. While promoting the development of rural economy and improving the quality of life of residents, government administration can also improve the hardware or software attributes of rural tourism destinations in a targeted manner. More importantly, it can make the personality of the destination more prominent, thereby attracting more tourists. The development of rural destinations is, to a large extent, a concrete manifestation of administration. For example, the well-preserved nature and heritage of rural destinations are largely the result of government intervention; the continuous improvement of infrastructure and supporting services in rural destinations, prominent product features, high popularity, good tourism order, and even harmony among stakeholders are all the results of active government administration.

The administration's strong propaganda and supervision of rural tourism can be directly perceived by tourists, and then effectively influence their loyalty behavior, because the government is authoritative and credible. For example, rural tourism promotion and reporting by the government with its unquestionable credibility will make tourists believe in the authenticity of the destination, and thus generate the desire to revisit; the government actively supervises and deals with various problems encountered by tourists in the process of rural tourism, which also has a positive impact on tourist loyalty behavior. The feedback of tourists on the rural experience will help the government to carry out targeted rural tourism administration. In today's age of media for everyone, tourists have absolute power to give feedback on the rural experience. The truthful feedback of tourists can enable the government to timely discover the problems affecting the loyalty of tourists in the development of rural tourism, and then carry out targeted administration. Honest feedback from tourists should be an important basis for administration.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

##### *4.1 Conclusion*

Among the destination attributes towards rural tourism in Jiangxi Province, respondents favor Physiography the most, while Place Attachment ranks last. On the whole, the respondents agree that they have Desires and Loyal Behavioral Intentions towards rural tourism in Jiangxi Province; agree with the antecedent variables, especially optimistic about Attitude among them, while moderately agree with Negative Anticipated Emotion. Respondents agree with administration towards rural tourism, and they are more likely to perceive central administration than local. Pairwise significant correlations between the three variables of destination attributes, tourist loyalty behavior and administrative perception towards rural tourism were confirmed. Based on the results of the study, the researcher proposes an administration-led rural tourism framework that is conducive to improving tourist loyalty.

##### *4.2 Recommendations*

For the administration, the central administration should continue to deepen the guidance on the development of rural tourism throughout the country and pay special attention to playing the core role in promoting the high-quality and sustainable development of rural tourism from the perspective of software, so as to protect the natural environment and local culture that the rural areas were proud of. Local administrations should follow the guidance of the central and gradually implement various rural policies in a pioneering manner, flexibly adjust and allocate resources, funds, and other essential support among different rural destinations dynamically. For rural destinations, Jiangxi Province should take the natural environment as an important attraction. Rural destinations should seize the opportunity of the hot development of rural tourism under the COVID-19 pandemic and give tourists an unforgettable experience. The marketers and managers should pay more attention to the emotional dimension of products, try to build a warm environment for tourists, and design products from the perspective of multi-dimensional sensory experience. For rural tourists, they should follow ethics, and it is particularly important to spread truthfully. From an integrated perspective, measures, or policies for formal and informal dialogue among tourists, governments and destinations can be considered to facilitate



continuous exchanges between different actors (Su et al., 2021).

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