Rural homestay experiencescape: Scale development and its emotional and cognitive paths to guest engagement behaviour

Highlights:

1. A holistic six-dimensional framework for the rural homestay experiencescape was developed.

2. The relationship between experiencescape and guest engagement behaviours in rural homestays was investigated using a mixed research approach.

3. Guest feelings and place attachment, but not guest judgments, mediate the relationship between the experiencescape and guest engagement behaviour.

Abstract:

This study uses a mixed research approach based on the stimulus–organism–response framework to explore the experiencescape of rural homestays and its emotional and cognitive pathways to guest engagement behaviour (GEB) while investigating the mediating roles of guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment. The results reveal that six dimensions of the rural homestay experiencescape were identified: sensory, functional, social, natural, cultural, and hospitality culture components, which predicted guest feelings, judgments, and place attachment. Guest feelings and judgments positively impacted place attachment, and all three factors positively influenced GEB. Additionally, guest feelings and place attachment mediated the relationship between the rural homestay experiencescape and GEB. This study carries both theoretical and practical implications.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amid global trends of urbanization and rural transformation, rural development has garnered increasing international attention as a critical focus (Liu et al., 2023). Rural homestays play a pivotal role in this transformation by alleviating poverty and preserving indigenous cultures, sparking widespread discourse (Qiu et al., 2024). In China, rural homestays have become a cornerstone of rural economic revitalization, with their numbers soaring to approximately 130,000 by the end of 2022 (Peng et al., 2024), bringing with it challenges such as a decline in distinctiveness, authenticity, and overall experience quality (Ye et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2022). As guest expectations for unique experiences rise, competition among rural homestays has intensified (Xing et al., 2022), increasing the pressures on operators to stand out (Feng et al., 2021). At this juncture, the concept of "experiencescape" offers marketers a valuable analytical medium for differentiating products through the design of experience-driven offerings (Z. Chen et al., 2020). It also serves as a critical lens for evaluating the delicate balance between supply, demand, and the nuanced perceptions of place and experience (Cederholm, 2012).

Despite existing research on experiencescapes in the hospitality industry, few studies have focused specifically on rural homestays (Awan et al., 2021; K.-H. Chen et al., 2023; Cui et al., 2024; M. A. Mody et al., 2017). At the same time, for tourism accommodations in rural areas, optimizing the experiencescape design has become crucial for enhancing guests' hedonic benefits and extraordinary experiences (Mei et al., 2020). Existing research on rural homestays tends to focus on fragmented factors influencing guest experiences, including sensescape (Jiang et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2024), physical and social environments (Jiang et al., 2022; M.-Y. Wang et al., 2023; Xu & Gursoy, 2020; T. Zhang et al., 2023), and hospitality practice (Qiu et al., 2024), with few studies adopting comprehensive theoretical frameworks to examine the synergistic

interplay of multiple experiential factors holistically. Additionally, while some scholars have employed Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy four realms model to expand and develop a scale for experiencescapes in Airbnb (M. Mody et al., 2019; M. A. Mody et al., 2017), offering valuable insights into accommodation experiencescapes, these scales cannot be directly applied to rural homestays. On the one hand, the experience economy model is broadly applicable to guest experience studies in various contexts (Veloso & Gomez-Suarez, 2023). Still, its application to experiencescape research does not clearly distinguish between the experience itself and the stimuli present in the environment where the experience occurs (Pizam & Tasci, 2019). This distinction is critical because the guest experience is fundamentally a bottom-up perceptual process shaped by external stimuli (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). On the other hand, rural homestays possess unique spatial characteristics that differentiate them from Airbnb and traditional hotels, offering rich spatial meanings that go beyond mere lodging, reflecting rural landscapes, cultural symbolism, and embodying the ancient Chinese philosophy of "the unity of heaven and mankind"(Run, 1997). Therefore, the deconstruction of specific dimensions of the rural homestay experiencescape remains both essential and significant.

Challenges and limitations exist not only in the design of specific experiencescapes but also in the examination of their impact mechanisms (Agapito & Sigala, 2024; Lin et al., 2022), particularly in the context of rural homestays, where guest engagement behaviour (GEB) has emerged as a critical tool for fostering business growth, reducing costs, and gaining competitive advantages (Guo et al., 2020). Some scholars have explored, through qualitative research, the role of urban coffee shop experiencescapes in promoting the formation of GEB (Kwame Opoku et al., 2023). However, empirical studies in tourism and hospitality have largely focused on how experiencescapes influence revisit intention (K.-H. Chen et al., 2023; Meng & Cui, 2020) and

subjective well-being (Awan et al., 2021; Cui et al., 2024), with few studies have explored the mechanisms by which the experiencescape influences GEB in rural homestays, making this research particularly meaningful and valuable.

To address the research gaps identified, this study develops a rural homestay experiencescape scale based on Pizam and Tasci's (2019) experiencescape framework to address fragmented attention to environmental stimuli in rural homestay experiences. It also employs Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to elucidate the "black box" of how the rural homestay experiencescape influences GEB. Pizam and Tasci's (2019) experiencescape framework integrates the perspective of multiple stakeholders, encompassing all elements that shape the guest experience in the consumption environment, categorized into six components: sensory, functional, natural, cultural, social, and hospitality culture. It serves as an effective tool for gaining a deep understanding of the complexity of experiences (Kandampully et al., 2023). The S-O-R framework, which outlines the pathway from external situational factors to individual behaviour through environmental stimuli, psychological states, and behavioural responses, has been extensively utilized in tourism and hospitality research (K.-H. Chen et al., 2023). In this study, the concept of experiencescape clarifies the rationale and significance of the variable ("why"). At the same time, the S-O-R framework provides the theoretical foundation for the research model and the relationships among variables ("how"). Specifically, this study conceptualizes the experiencescape as the set of environmental elements encountered by guests. Guest feelings, judgments, and place attachment arise as psychological states evoked by environmental stimuli, while GEB functions as the behavioral outcome. This approach is based on the following: First, rural homestays benefit from abundant natural landscapes and vibrant rural culture due to their distinct geographical locations, offering

guests a deeply immersive lodgment experience (Dey et al., 2020). Consequently, the experiencescape can justifiably be viewed as a potent environmental stimulus. Second, interactions with rural homestays often lead guests to form emotional bonds, perceiving the rural homestay as a "home," a concept known as place attachment (Peng et al., 2024). At the same time, guests experience subconscious psychological, emotional, and cognitive reactions; emotionally, they may feel tranquillity, peacefulness, and security within the rural homestay (Deb et al., 2023; Xing et al., 2022), while cognitively, they assess its value for money (Feng et al., 2021). These reactions foster two mediated psychological states: guest feelings and guest judgments, which are considered indicators of guest-brand resonance within the experiential consumption and marketing paradigm (Duman et al., 2018). Along with place attachment, these factors are recognized as key antecedents influencing GEB (Keller, 2013; Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019). Therefore, it is feasible to consider guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment as the organismic factors in this study. Furthermore, the study examines the influence of guest feelings and judgments on place attachment, as well as their parallel mediating effects.

This study makes four distinct contributions. First, it advances the nomological network of the experiencescape, extending its application within the rural homestay context. Second, it innovatively incorporates the experiencescape perspective into GEB research and empirically examines how the rural experiencescape influences GEB by identifying its potential dimensions, offering a novel perspective for exploring the relationship between experience environment and GEB. Third, the study sheds light on the importance of guest feelings, judgments, and place attachment as psychological states rooted in experiences. By identifying these factors as mediators in the relationship between the rural homestay experiencescape and GEB, this study contributes incrementally to the literature on guest feelings, judgments, and place attachment.

Fourth, the study provides crucial managerial insights for rural homestay operators, guiding them in effectively designing experiencescapes to stimulate GEB, deliver extraordinary guest experiences, and enhance competitiveness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Experiencescape

The concept of "experiencescape," emerging from the shift from a service-centric to an experience-centric economy, underscores the importance of consumer participation and immersion in the environment (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). O'Dell and Billing (2005) first defined "experiencescape" as a functional space of interaction between different stakeholders, which can capture how experiences are produced and consumed in a meaningful, holistic way. This concept embodies the Gestalt psychological approach, emphasizing how all elements within the consumption environment collectively contribute to creating a holistic, immersive experiencescape (Pizam & Tasci, 2019) rather than solely focusing on physical and social components (Kandampully et al., 2023). Pizam and Tasci (2019) integrated a multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary perspective into the concept of the experiencescape. They defined it as a multidimensional construct comprising sensory, functional, social, natural, cultural, and hospitality culture components within the consumption environment, which together shape the experiences of guests, employees, and stakeholders, resulting in either positive or negative responses to products, services, brands, and companies.

Research on experiencescapes has primarily focused on destinations, single spaces, and the hospitality industry (Table 1). Some studies have employed qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and text analysis, to explore the dimensions of experiencescapes and contribute to the

development of theoretical frameworks in specific contexts (Z. Chen, 2022; Fossgard & Fredman, 2019; Kwame Opoku et al., 2023; Mei et al., 2020; Ruan et al., 2023), empirical research assessing their multidimensionality is still uncommon (Hallmann et al., 2021). In recent hospitality-related studies, two major research frameworks have emerged: Pine and Gilmore's (1998) four realms of the experience economy model and Pizam and Tasci's (2019) six-component experiencescape framework. On the one hand, M. A. Mody et al. (2017) applied the experience economy model to explore eight dimensions of the experiencescape in the accommodation context: entertainment, aesthetics, escapism, education, serendipity, localness, communitas, and personalization. Subsequently, M. Mody et al. (2019) built upon this foundation by adding the dimension of hospitality. Similarly, K.-H. Chen et al. (2023) focused on guest experience while exploring the dimensions of the wellness experiencescape in SPA hotels, which include health promotion treatments, mental learning, unique travel experiences, and a healthy diet. Although the experience economy model effectively examines diverse consumption experiences (Veloso & Gomez-Suarez, 2023), its application to experiencescape research does not distinguish between the experience itself and the stimuli present in the environment where the experience occurs (Pizam & Tasci, 2019). On the other hand, some researchers have largely adopted Pizam and Tasci's (2019) six-component framework, using a quantitative approach based on existing literature to discuss the impact of luxury beach resort hotel experiencescape on guests' subjective well-being (Awan et al., 2021). Meanwhile, others have conceptualized the home-based accommodation experiencescape as a one-factor multidimensional construct (Cui et al., 2024; Meng & Cui, 2020). However, this overly generalized approach neglects the distinct contributions of each component, potentially undermining the framework's capacity to capture the intricacies of the home-based accommodation experiencescape effectively.

Moreover, experiencescape research in tourism destinations and single spaces has also largely aligned with Pizam and Tasci's (2019) six-component framework (Hu & Chen, 2024). First, physical elements are primarily categorized into the functional components of the experiencescape, including space presentation, the physical environment, access to resources, auxiliary elements, etc. (Fossgard & Fredman, 2019; Kwame Opoku et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2022; Mei et al., 2020; Ruan et al., 2023; Zong et al., 2023). Second, elements of social experiences such as social interaction, perceived crowdedness, and supporting behaviours are all part of the social components of the experiencescape (Z. Chen, 2022; Kwame Opoku et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2022; Mei et al., 2020; Radic et al., 2021; Ruan et al., 2023; Zong et al., 2023). Third, the sensory components of the experiencescape are reflected in the five sensory experiences or multisensory integration (Fossgard & Fredman, 2019; Peng et al., 2024; Ruan et al., 2023; Zong et al., 2023). Fourth, connections with nature, location, and landscape scenery constitute the natural components of the experiencescape (Fossgard & Fredman, 2019). Fifth, elements related to the cultural components of the experiencescape include key attractions, cultural displays, etc (Lin et al., 2022; Ruan et al., 2023; Zong et al., 2023). Finally, tourism souvenirs, destination services that meet tourists' needs, and attraction guidance constitute the hospitality culture components of the experiencescape (Fossgard & Fredman, 2019; Ruan et al., 2023; Zong et al., 2023).

Drawing on the above literature review, Pizam and Tasci's (2019) six-component experiencescape framework has emerged as the preferred framework among scholars, surpassing Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy model in experiencescape research. This framework is increasingly adopted to delve into the complex of experiencescapes across diverse contexts, providing a comprehensive and systematic approach to analyzing the wide array of

elements integral to guest experiences (Kandampully et al., 2023).

Table 1. An overview of experiencescape themes.

Author (s)	Construct	Method	Stakeholder perspective	Dimensions
1. Research in hospitality				
Awan et al. (2021)	Luxury beach resort hotel experiencescape	Quantitative	Guests	Sensory, social, functional, natural, and cultural
K.-H. Chen et al. (2023)	wellness tourism experiencescape	Mixed	Multi-stakeholders	Health promotion treatments, mental learning, unique travel experience, healthy diet
Meng and Cui (2020); Cui et al. (2024)	Home-based accommodation Experiencescape	Quantitative	Guests	Unidimension
M. Mody et al. (2019)	Accommodation experiencescape	Quantitative	Guests	Hospitableness, entertainment, education, escapism, aesthetics
M. A. Mody et al. (2017)	Accommodation experiencescape	Quantitative	Guests	Education, escapism, entertainment, esthetics, personalization, serendipity, localness, communitas
2. Research in single space				
Kwame Opoku et al. (2023)	Urban coffee shop experiencescape	Qualitative	Multi-stakeholders	Environment, human-to-human interactions, and solo destination experiences
Radic et al. (2021)	Cruiseship dining experiencescape	Quantitative	Guests	Perceived crowdedness, dining atmospherics, interactions with other guests
Mei et al. (2020)	Farm tourism experiencescape	Qualitative	Farm tourism operators	physical environment, interaction, and participation
3. Research in destination				
T. Hu and Chen (2024)	Coastal tourism experiencescape	Mixed	Tourists	Sensory, functional, social, cultural, natural, hospitality culture, and auxiliary components
Zong et al. (2023)	Hanfu tourism experiencescape	Mixed	Multi-stakeholders	Cultural, social, sensory, destination hospitality culture, technological, functional component

Ruan et al. (2023)	Night tourscape	Qualitative	Tourists	Space presentation, night atmosphere, merchandise, night activities, crowds, and culture display
Z. Chen (2022)	Intangible cultural heritage experiencescape	Qualitative	Multi-stakeholders	supporting and coordinating, observing, reporting
Lin et al. (2022)	Destination experiencescape	Mixed	Tourists	Key attraction, auxiliary element, physical environment, atmosphere, social factor
Fossgard and Fredman (2019)	Nature-based tourism experiencescape	Qualitative	Service providers	Adapting to guests' needs, access to resources, experience facilitation, risk management, crowding management, connection to place

2.2. Role of Experiencescape in Rural Homestay

Rural homestays refer to a distinctive form of accommodation where tourists have the opportunity to stay with local families in rural settings, thereby immersing themselves in the region's culture, cuisine, and community activities (Dey et al., 2020). Previous research on the environmental factors influencing rural homestay experiences has often taken a fragmented approach, focusing on specific aspects. First, from the perspective of sensory experiences, Peng et al. (2024) examined the composition of the sensescape in rural homestays and empirically demonstrated that it positively influences guests' mental health and place attachment, thereby enhancing their pro-environmental behaviour. Similarly, multisensory aesthetic experiences have been shown to have a positive impact on guests' memories of their stay (Jiang et al., 2022). Secondly, the physical and social environments, including elements such as interior decoration, design, facilities, equipment, room views, and the interactions between hosts and guests, as well as among guests themselves, play a crucial role in shaping guests' emotional responses, place

attachment, and perceived value (M.-Y. Wang et al., 2023; Xu & Gursoy, 2020; T. Zhang et al., 2023). Lastly, regarding hospitality practices, Hemmington (2007) noted that rural homestays provide a distinct hospitality experience, differentiating them from traditional hotels and shared accommodations like Airbnb. Unlike traditional hotels with a one-sided service model and Airbnb's often impersonal interactions, rural homestays foster a collaborative environment between hosts and guests across four key dimensions: objects, services, information, and emotions (Qiu et al., 2024).

Run (1997) emphasized the unique spatial characteristics of rural homestays, which evoke vivid rural imagery by blending rural landscapes with deep cultural symbolism. For example, W. Wang et al. (2022) specifically emphasized the cultural distinctiveness of rural homestays in their integration of local traditions and heritage, transforming traditional lodging into a distinctive cultural journey and offering innovative, locally-inspired tourism experiences. Dey et al. (2020) further explored guests' motivations for choosing rural homestays, identifying the attraction of the rural natural environment as a pivotal factor influencing their decision.

In summary, although the unique appeal of the natural and cultural elements of rural homestays has been recognized, comprehensive exploratory research remains lacking (Dey et al., 2020; W. Wang et al., 2022). In this context, the concept of experiencescape provides a valuable analytical framework for integrating the synergistic effects of multiple experiential stimuli (Z. Chen, 2022). Furthermore, as the experiencescape is understood as a holistic and context-specific concept (Radic et al., 2021), contextualizing and operationalizing the rural homestay experiencescape could provide deeper insights into guests' overall experience.

2.3. Proposed Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

2.3.1. Theoretical Basis

The SOR theory, introduced by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) in environmental psychology, explains how external stimuli impact organisms' internal states and behaviours. Widely applied in hospitality research, the SOR framework is suitable for studying the effects of microscale spaces on individual psychology and behaviour (K.-H. Chen et al., 2023). This study adopts the SOR framework, considering the experiencescape as a stimulus that evokes emotional and cognitive responses, including guest feelings, judgments, and place attachment, which ultimately influence GEBs.

2.3.2. Guest Feelings and Guest Judgments

Guest feelings refer to a brand's ability to provoke an emotional response through the experiences guests have with it, while guest judgments reflect the personal opinions and evaluations of guests regarding the brand's products or service experiences (Keller, 2003). The former is based on guests' emotional responses (e.g., calmness, security, social approval, self-respect) during the consumption experience, while the latter relies on information and rational analysis by guests, focusing on cognitive assessments of the quality, credibility, consideration, and superiority of the products or services to meet their needs (Duman et al., 2018; Keller, 2003). H. Kim (2012) indicated that products or services offering intangible, symbolic benefits that provide sensory enjoyment have greater potential to elicit emotional responses from guests toward the brand. Furthermore, greater guest judgments toward a specific favoured brand may be enhanced when the product or services category exhibits high utilitarian value in terms of tangible attributes, including quality and credibility (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). The rural homestay environment encompasses both tangible elements, like facilities and amenities, and

intangible elements, such as interpersonal experiences (Peng et al., 2024). Thus, this study posits that higher guest evaluations of the rural homestay experiencescape result in greater guest feelings and judgments.

In the experiencescape framework posited by Pizam and Tasci (2019), the experiencescape triggers guests' cognitive (beliefs, opinions) and emotional (feelings) responses. Although research into the impact of experiencescape on guest feelings and judgments is sparse, it has been empirically proven that experiencescape can influence emotional responses (M. Mody et al., 2019; Pantouvakis & Gerou, 2023; Radic et al., 2021). Furthermore, based on information processing theory, the process of individual information handling starts with the encoding and interpretation of environmental cues (Engel et al., 1986). Existing research indicates that guests often stimulate their rational thinking about products or services based on their perception of service environment elements, leading to cognitive evaluations of products or services (Li, 2021). Based on these findings, this study proposes two hypotheses:

H1: The experiencescape of the rural homestay positively influences guest feelings

H2: The experiencescape of the rural homestay positively influences guest judgments

2.3.3. Place Attachment

The concept of place attachment, as defined by environmental psychologists, is the relationship between individuals and their residential environment (Lewicka, 2010). The most widely applied dual-dimensional model of place attachment consists of place identity and place dependence (Lewicka, 2011). Place dependence refers to the functional need of individuals or groups for specific locations, whereas place identity focuses on emotional attachment, with individuals or communities perceiving places as extensions of themselves for self-definition

(Williams & Vaske, 2003).

The concept of place attachment, which plays a vital role in experiences (Io & Wan, 2018), can develop between individuals and environments, homes, objects, or landscapes (Tim, 2004). Given that place attachment emerges from experiential interactions between individuals and the environment, it can be posited that a meticulously curated rural homestay experiencescape—encompassing sensory ambience, facilities, social interactions, natural surroundings, cultural elements, and hospitality—significantly elevates guest experiences, thereby fostering a stronger attachment to rural homestays. First, Peng et al. (2024) conducted a study on a sample of guests at rural homestays in China and found that the sensescape (comprising sensory and cultural components) of rural homestays has a positive impact on place attachment. Second, the social servicescape (including social and hospitality culture components) and the physical servicescape (functional components) of short-term accommodation rental are also key factors influencing place attachment (Xu & Gursoy, 2020). Finally, natural resource areas (natural components) are often considered the optimal locations for forming functional attachments for a place (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Therefore, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H3: The experiencescape of rural homestay positively influences place attachment

Scannell and Gifford (2017) posited that place attachment involves the cognitive-emotional connection that develops between individuals and significant settings, and through community members' descriptions of reasons for place attachment, it was found that such reasons encompass feeling peace, safety, a sense of accomplishment, loved (similar to a sense of social support), etc. Furthermore, the concept of guest feelings, based on guests' emotional responses, has been validated by numerous studies highlighting the crucial role of measured guest emotional responses in shaping their attachment to a place (Hosany et al., 2017; Io, 2018).

In marketing research, Grisaffe and Nguyen (2011) utilized qualitative methods to summarize the antecedents of customers' emotional attachment to brands, which, as judged by guests, include the quality of the product or service, value for money, competitive superiority, and positive attitudes evoked by a personalized "fit" with needs. Duman et al. (2018) also indicated that tourists' feelings and judgments of tourist destinations impact attitudinal attachment. Therefore, this study posits the following hypotheses:

H4: Guest feelings positively influence place attachment

H5: Guest judgments positively influence place attachment

2.3.4. GEB

Van Doorn et al. (2010) defined GEB as actions that extend beyond traditional guest roles, including providing feedback, participating in activities, assisting in product development, writing reviews, making recommendations, and other behavioural expressions likely to influence the firm and its brands. In hospitality, confirmed antecedents to GEB include guest experience evaluation (Guo et al., 2020), relationship quality, company identification, self-enhancement, social integration (Romero, 2017), hedonic and utilitarian value (Bravo et al., 2023).

According to the place theory, the attachment of guests fosters their intimate engagement with the destination business (M.-Y. Wang et al., 2023). For example, Amer and Rakha (2022) revealed that guests' place attachment to hotels has a positive impact on GEBs, notably willingness to suggest and word-of-mouth. Loureiro and Sarmento (2019) noted that emotional attachment to a destination enhances visitor engagement behaviour, knowledge sharing, referrals, and social influence. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Place attachment positively influences GEBs

According to the consumer-based brand equity theory, when guests interact with specific products or services, internalizing and reflecting upon improved emotional and cognitive reactions will stimulate guests' active engagement behaviours, indicating a willingness to go beyond mere purchases and invest time and effort into the brand or company (Keller, 2003, 2013). Moreover, GEB serves as a critical relationship marketing variable, guest emotional responses are considered a key predictor (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Furthermore, individuals' behavioural responses are typically driven by their cognitive evaluations—guest judgments (Duman et al., 2018), meaning that when guests evaluate specific products or services as worthwhile, they tend to engage with the brand or company. VO et al. (2020) demonstrated that the guests' judgments of the quality of e-services on hotel websites directly and positively impacted GEBs. Souki et al. (2023) also confirmed that guests' judgments of perceived value for money would directly positively influence GEBs. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

H7: Guest feelings positively influence GEBs;

H8: Guest judgments positively influence GEBs

2.3.5. The Mediating Effects of Guest Feelings, Guest Judgments, and Place Attachment

Based on previous empirical studies, research has suggested that guest emotional responses (M.-Y. Wang et al., 2023), guest cognitive responses (Li, 2021; T. Zhang et al., 2023), and place attachment (Xu & Gursoy, 2020) mediate between the service environment and behaviours. In this study, based on the SOR framework, the rural homestay experiencescape was considered the stimulus, with guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment as the organisms and GEB as the response variable. This implies that guests perceive greater feelings, judgments, and stronger place attachment from the rural homestay experiencescape, leading to more active

engagement behaviours. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H9: Guest feelings mediate the effect of rural homestay experiencescape on GEB;

H10: Guest judgments mediate the effect of rural homestay experiencescape on GEB;

H11: Place attachment mediates the effect of rural homestay experiencescape on GEB

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

Given the lack of a validated scale for rural homestay experiencescape, one of the objectives of this study is to identify the dimensions and measures of rural homestay experiencescape. To achieve this, the study required rich data and thus adopted a qualitative research approach (Smith, 2016). While the majority of scale development studies rely on systematic literature reviews to generate item pools, qualitative data can yield more profound insights into a theoretical construct, particularly when the existing body of literature on the subject is limited (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). The scale development process in this study followed the widely recognized scale development procedures proposed by Churchill Jr (1979). The entire research adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative phases.

In the qualitative phase, this study reviewed the literature on rural homestay experiences and conducted semi-structured interviews with guests who had stayed at rural homestays in China within the past year, as well as operators with over five years of experience. The aim was to discuss measures of rural homestay experiencescape. In the quantitative phase, questionnaire surveys were conducted based on the interview results and existing literature to validate the research model. The subsequent sections provide an overview of each phase of the study.

3.2. Scale Development

3.2.1. Phase 1. In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Purposeful sampling was adopted to ensure that the views of respondents were heterogeneous (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Potential interviewees were identified by searching for users who had posted reviews of their rural homestay experiences on social media within the past year. While some users used alternative terms to describe rural homestays, such as "agricultural homestay" or "cottage homestay," this study adhered to the standardized term "rural homestay" as defined by Janjua et al. (2021) in rural homestay research. To streamline the selection process and maintain a strict focus on the research objectives, only users who explicitly used the term "rural homestay" were considered for participation. This approach led to the identification of 26 rural homestay guests who had stayed in rural homestays within the past year, along with 3 operators with over five years of experience in rural homestay management. After confirming their willingness to participate, 19 guests and 2 rural homestay operators were selected for interviews. The sample had a balanced gender distribution, with the majority of respondents aged between 26 and 35 (47.6%) representing various cities across China.

Interviews were conducted from October to December 2023, both face-to-face and via phone or video conference, in Mandarin. Following Yin's (2015) effective questioning techniques, we used questions like "What, how, and why did it happen?" and "Your thoughts on the events?". These helped reduce researcher bias and clearly and concisely capture the interviewees' perspectives. The interview framework of this study followed Pizam and Tasci's (2019) theoretical framework, comprising six key questions: *What kind of environment or atmosphere do you think rural homestays are trying to create, focusing on sensory experiences, functionality, social interactions, nature, culture, and hospitality culture?* Each session lasted about 45

minutes, was digitally recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and included additional observations. Data saturation was reached by the 16th interview, with no new information emerging. To ensure theoretical saturation, five more interviews were conducted, but they were repetitive and similar to earlier data, so no further interviews were conducted.

Content analysis identified initial items describing the rural homestay experiencescape. In aligning with the methodology outlined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), two coders engaged in a meticulous three-step coding process to systematically organize the interview transcripts. One of the coders, a professor well-versed in content analysis techniques and research on Chinese rural homestays, alongside the author of this manuscript, independently scrutinized meaningful excerpts from the transcripts, pinpointing fundamental units of analysis pertinent to rural homestay experiencescape. The coding endeavour was streamlined through the use of NVivo 14.0, a qualitative research software package, enabling the identification of thematic patterns within the interview data. Initially, every coder independently reviewed sentences in the interview transcript that held significant meaning and identified foundational analytical units related to the rural homestay experiencescape from these sentences. For example, the sentence "A large table that can also hold drinks, made entirely from genuine, solid raw wood, with two or three logs bundled together, and the legs of the table also made of pure raw wood (Guest 3)" was condensed into a condensed meaning unit about "large table made from genuine, solid raw wood." Through a comparative analysis of valid analysis units based on their differences and similarities, a total of 357 of the 384 valid units were classified into 56 categories. Then, 50 of the 56 valid categories were further distilled into 6 overarching components. The intercoder reliability metrics for this coding procedure were robust, with coefficients of 0.92 (357/384) for the unit categorization and 0.88 (50/56) for the category classification, surpassing the established

reliability threshold of 0.8 and thus demonstrating a high level of consistency in the categorization outcomes (Kassarjian, 1977).

By subjecting qualitative data from interviews to content analysis, this study substantiated Pizam and Tasci's (2019) six-dimensional research framework for experiencescape. Concurrently, the interviews facilitated the identification of aspects not covered in the existing literature on experiencescape, and the entire scale comprises a total of 50 items. To further test the credibility of the aforementioned dimensions, the study surveyed 27 professionals related to rural homestays, all of whom were Chinese nationals, including 9 guests with extensive rural homestay experience over the past year, 7 doctoral students, and 3 professors specializing in tourism and hospitality management, 5 industry experts from homestay associations, and 3 rural homestay operators with over five years of experience. This diverse group provides a wide range of perspectives on rural homestay experiences. Initially, it defined each dimension and asked respondents to classify items based on their understanding, facilitating reverse categorization. Comparing these results with initial classifications confirmed the reliability of the dimensions and items. Of the 27 questionnaires distributed, 25 were considered valid after discarding two for incomplete data.

After conducting a descriptive statistical analysis of the questionnaire data, the results and methodologies were summarized as follows: (1) Fully consistent with pre-classification: All 25 respondents' outcomes for 19 items completely aligned with pre-classification, leading to their full retention. (2) Essentially consistent with pre-classification: For 31 items, more than 50% of respondents' classifications were fundamentally consistent with the pre-classification. Consequently, after the reverse classification survey, all 50 items were retained.

3.2.2. Panel Review

To further ensure the content and face validity of the questionnaire, a panel was formed consisting of three tourism academic experts and three doctoral students, all of whom were Chinese nationals and highly acquainted with the study's content. The three experts had considerable knowledge of research related to rural homestay and were very familiar with the general process of scale development. Following Churchill Jr's (1979) method, the items were assessed for their similarity, relevance, and ambiguity regarding one of the six dimensions of the rural homestay experiencescape. Subsequently, expert ratings were scrutinized through ANOVA analysis to determine if any items exhibited statistically lower relevance compared to others within a particular dimension. Following this comprehensive evaluation, the researchers retained a selection of 50 items for further consideration.

3.2.3. Phase 2. Questionnaire Surveys

The study's questionnaire survey included both exploratory and confirmatory phases. At the beginning of the questionnaire, two screening questions were set to identify eligible respondents: whether participants had stayed in rural homestays in Mainland China within the past year and the name of the rural homestay. Only those who answered "yes" and provided the name of the rural homestay were allowed to complete the survey. In the main survey addressing the research model, this study adopted Gehlbach and Barge's (2012) approach of intermixing items throughout the survey. This method involves arranging items from different but related constructs within the same section, ensuring that items from the same construct are not placed adjacent to one another. This technique helps mitigate bias caused by respondents' anchoring and adjustment when items are presented in a specific order, which could otherwise result in

artificially high inter-item correlations, inflated scale reliability, and inaccurate correlations between constructs. The survey was conducted via the paid sample service Wenjuanxing, a widely used professional online survey platform in China with more than 1 million daily active members in its database, to maximize coverage of Chinese individuals aged 18 and above. Additionally, it offers key advantages such as broad geographic reach, alleviating the issue of homogeneity in the appearance of rural homestays within the same region (Peng et al., 2024) while also balancing cost-effectiveness and time efficiency. Upon receiving our sample request, the platform randomly distributed the online questionnaire link to qualified panel members. During the exploratory phase, data collection commenced in August 2024, yielding 716 responses, of which 582 valid responses (Sample 1) were retained for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the rural homestay experiencescape. In the confirmatory phase, data collection was conducted in September 2024. Out of 824 distributed questionnaires, 717 valid responses (Sample 2) were retained. Responses that were incomplete, repetitive, excessively fast, or provided unverifiable rural homestay details were excluded. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of both samples.

Table 2. Sample characteristics

	Sample 1 (N=582)		Sample 2 (N=717)	
	n	%	n	%
Age in years				
18 to 25	143	24.6%	129	18.0%
26 to 35	239	41.1%	266	37.1%
36 to 45	156	26.8%	233	32.5%
46 to 55	32	5.5%	58	8.1%
55 or older	12	2.1%	31	4.3%
Level of Education				
Junior high school or below	5	0.9%	21	2.9%
High school	63	10.8%	41	5.7%
Technical secondary school	34	5.8%	82	11.4%
Undergraduate	288	49.5%	337	47.0%

Associate degree	121	20.8%	120	16.7%
Postgraduate Degree	71	12.2%	116	16.2%
Monthly Income				
3000 RMB and below	120	20.6%	90	12.6%
3001-6000 RMB	196	33.7%	191	26.6%
6001-10000 RMB	180	30.9%	251	35.0%
Above 10000 RMB	86	14.8%	185	25.8%
Gender				
Male	283	48.6%	364	50.8%
Female	299	51.4%	353	49.2%

3.3. Study Instrument

This study adapted existing scales to measure variables beyond demographics and the rural homestay experiencescape while ensuring translation accuracy into Chinese through standard back-translation. Given its superior reliability and validity (Churchill Jr & Peter, 1984) and reduced interpolation needs (Finstad, 2010), a seven-point Likert scale was chosen over a five-point scale. Specifically, Guest feelings and judgments were measured using 8 items (Duman et al., 2018). Place attachment, including place identity (4 items) and place dependence (4 items), was measured with Williams and Vaske (2003)'s scale. Guest engagement behaviour was measured following Leckie et al. (2021). The final questionnaire included 43 items, each rated on a scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree").

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis involved several stages, with the use of statistical packages, including SPSS 27.0 and Amos 26.0. To begin, SPSS 27.0 was utilized for conducting descriptive analysis and assessing data reliability. Using the data from the pilot study, an EFA was conducted on the scale of the rural experiencescape to identify the underlying factors. Then, Harman's single-factor test

(Podsakoff et al., 2003) and multicollinearity tests were performed. Finally, Amos 26.0 was used to perform Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships between constructs and assess the measurement model's validity and reliability. SEM, widely used in social science research, allows simultaneous testing of relationships among multiple constructs, making it ideal for this study's aims (Byrne, 2016).

4. RESULTS

4.1. EFA of Rural Homestay Experiencescape

A descriptive analysis of sample 1 revealed a normal distribution, with absolute values of skewness (from -0.458 to -0.056) and kurtosis coefficients (from -1.362 to -0.875) below 2 and 7, respectively (H.-Y. Kim, 2013). The KMO measure was 0.897, and Bartlett's test of sphericity demonstrated statistical significance ($p<0.001$), suggesting that the data is appropriate for factor analysis. Principal component analysis (PCA) followed by Varimax orthogonal rotation was employed to determine the factor structure of the rural homestay experiencescape. Utilizing specific criteria for factor extraction, a six-component solution was derived, ensuring eigenvalue >1, factor loading score >|0.50|, adherence to the Scree plot (all components with steep decline were preserved), and meaningfulness of the extracted components (Churchill Jr, 1979; Nunnally, 1978). 26 items displayed low factor loadings (<0.5), and 1 item lacked clear alignment with their respective factors, resulting in their exclusion. Subsequent PCA with the remaining 23 items yielded a meaningful six-factor solution, where all items loaded as anticipated without cross-loading. These six dimensions collectively accounted for approximately 63.612% of the total variance and each met Nunnally (1978)'s criterion of α>0.60, indicating high internal consistency or reliability (Table 3).

Table 3. Underlying dimensions of a rural homestay experiencescape (N=582)

Construct	Items	Factor loadings					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Sensory component	Pleasant fragrance of nature (e.g., fragrance of flowers)	0.741					
	Harmony of architectural colours with the natural environment	0.751					
	Good texture of materials (e.g., use of natural materials)	0.719					
	Overall cleanliness	0.814					
	Comfortable furniture in guest rooms	0.634					
Functional component	Clear informational signage (e.g., directional signs)			0.808			
	Interesting interpretative signage for the landscape			0.669			
	Modern equipment			0.748			
	Photographic backdrops and props imbued with rural elements			0.742			
Social component	Sociable guests						0.794
	Friendly homestay host and staff						0.770
	The attractive appearance of the host and staff						0.789
Natural component	Reflection of natural flora in landscape					0.772	
	Attractiveness due to natural elements					0.797	
	Functionality of layout due to natural elements					0.806	
Cultural component	Familiarity with rural folk cultural symbols (e.g., rural homestay stories, dialects, etc.)		0.782				
	Dress similarities		0.790				
	Behavioural similarities (e.g., engagement in agricultural activities)		0.783				
	Lifestyle similarities (e.g., slow-paced life)		0.796				
Hospitality	Welcoming overall culture				0.640		

culture	Meeting the needs of guests					0.814	
component	Detail-oriented approach					0.807	
	Duties fulfilment and going above and beyond					0.776	
Cronbach Alpha		0.800	0.829	0.789	0.789	0.790	0.777
Variance explained (%)		12.332 %	11.672 %	10.814 %	10.763 %	9.151 %	8.881 %

4.2. Common Method Variance and Multicollinearity Tests

In this study, procedural safeguards were implemented to manage the Common Method Variance (CMV) by guaranteeing anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary aspect of participation during data collection. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first component accounted for 34.712% of the total variance in the data, which is below the 50% threshold value (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Consequently, common method bias was not a concern in this study. Subsequently, Multicollinearity assessment through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) revealed no issues, with all VIF values ranging from 1.382 to 1.856, well below the threshold of 5.0.

4.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

CFA was performed to verify the reliability and validity of the measurements. Data normality was confirmed following H.-Y. Kim (2013), with skewness (from -0.912 to -0.231) and kurtosis (from -0.902 to 0.155) values within the acceptable range, across 717 samples. The model demonstrates a good fit (L.-t. Hu & Bentler, 1998): $\chi2=1113.209$, $\chi2/df =1.383$, RMSEA=0.023, SRMR=0.0238, GFI=0.934, NFI=0.944, RFI=0.937, IFI=0.984, TLI=0.982, CFI=0.984. As shown in Table 4, the factor loadings ranged from 0.709 to 0.907, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.5. Each construct demonstrated composite reliability (CR)

values ranging from 0.854 to 0.910, surpassing the recommended threshold of CR >0.6, and the average variance extracted (AVE) values for each construct fell between 0.562 and 0.739, surpassing the suggested cutoff of 0.5. Consequently, the scale exhibited robust convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, Table 5 indicated that the square roots of the AVE values exceeded correlation coefficients among concerned variables, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4. Reliability and convergent validity (N=717)

Constructs/Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Standard loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Sensory component				0.865	0.562	0.865
Pleasant fragrance of nature (e.g., fragrance of flowers)	4.77	1.69	0.744			
Harmony of architectural colours with the natural environment	4.83	1.676	0.775			
Good texture of materials (e.g., use of natural materials)	4.8	1.686	0.735			
Overall cleanliness	4.82	1.661	0.782			
Comfortable furniture in guest rooms	4.93	1.663	0.709			
Functional component				0.892	0.673	0.891
Clear informational signage (e.g., directional signs)	4.95	1.777	0.814			
Interesting interpretative signage for the landscape	4.85	1.812	0.795			
Modern equipment	4.93	1.805	0.805			
Photographic backdrops and props imbued with rural elements	4.98	1.731	0.866			
Social component				0.865	0.682	0.863
Sociable guests	4.61	1.702	0.858			
Friendly homestay host and staff	4.64	1.72	0.880			
The attractive appearance of the host and staff	4.31	1.706	0.732			
Natural component				0.894	0.739	0.892
Reflection of natural flora in landscape	4.95	1.61	0.907			

Attractiveness due to natural elements	4.94	1.587	0.872			
Functionality of layout due to natural elements	4.82	1.701	0.796			
Cultural component				0.885	0.659	0.885
Familiarity with rural folk cultural symbols (e.g., rural homestay stories, dialects, etc.)	5.07	1.613	0.791			
Dress similarities	4.99	1.638	0.820			
Behavioural similarities (e.g., engagement in agricultural activities)	5.03	1.615	0.840			
Lifestyle similarities (e.g., slow-paced life)	4.94	1.623	0.794			
Hospitality culture component				0.873	0.632	0.873
Welcoming overall culture	5.09	1.584	0.789			
Meeting the needs of guests	5.03	1.635	0.797			
Detail-oriented approach	5.01	1.655	0.788			
Duties fulfilment and going above and beyond	5.12	1.643	0.805			
Guest feelings				0.854	0.594	0.853
Staying in this rural homestay, I felt peaceful and calm	4.73	1.796	0.804			
Staying in this rural homestay, I had no worries about my safety	4.64	1.712	0.760			
When I told those around me that I stayed at this rural homestay, they all gave me positive feedback	4.71	1.748	0.799			
Staying in this rural homestay, I felt a sense of accomplishment	4.61	1.691	0.716			
Guest judgments				0.878	0.644	0.878
I think the rural homestay I stayed in is of high-quality	5.02	1.712	0.812			
Overall, I believe that my stay at this rural homestay is good value for money	4.74	1.68	0.762			
I have a positive attitude towards this rural homestay as a tourist	4.85	1.733	0.800			

accommodation					
This rural homestay is a superior choice compared to alternatives	4.94	1.699	0.833		
Place identity				0.888	0.665	0.888
This rural homestay is very special to me	4.95	1.679	0.849		
I strongly identify with this rural homestay	4.93	1.615	0.816		
I am very attached to this rural homestay	4.94	1.611	0.827		
This rural homestay holds significant meaning for me	4.82	1.667	0.767		
Place dependence				0.859	0.605	0.859
In terms of my travel accommodation experience, there is no other place that can compare to this rural homestay	4.83	1.693	0.812		
I get more satisfaction out of staying at this rural homestay than any other	4.62	1.685	0.733		
Staying at this rural homestay for travel accommodation is more important than staying at any other place	4.69	1.637	0.773		
I wouldn't substitute any other rural homestay for my travel accommodation experience at this rural homestay	4.83	1.622	0.790		
Guest engagement behaviour				0.910	0.716	0.909
I say positively about this rural homestay to others	5.02	1.763	0.859		
I encourage friends and relatives to stay at this rural homestay	4.93	1.731	0.841		
If someone seeks my advice, I recommend this rural homestay	4.93	1.756	0.825		
I provide feedback about my stay experience at this rural homestay	5.03	1.717	0.858		

Table 5. Discriminant validity

	GEB	GJ	PD	PI	GF	HOSP	CULT	NAT	SOC	FUNC	SENS
GEB	**0.846**										
GJ	0.509	**0.802**									
PD	0.456	0.570	**0.778**								
PI	0.487	0.500	0.588	**0.815**							
GF	0.531	0.455	0.465	0.545	**0.771**						
HOSP	0.437	0.445	0.436	0.544	0.488	**0.795**					
CULT	0.478	0.476	0.429	0.547	0.418	0.495	**0.812**				
NAT	0.387	0.437	0.448	0.491	0.413	0.463	0.472	**0.860**			
SOC	0.303	0.397	0.355	0.475	0.365	0.429	0.450	0.392	**0.826**		
FUNC	0.457	0.508	0.429	0.489	0.486	0.526	0.500	0.448	0.394	**0.820**	
SENS	0.453	0.496	0.483	0.512	0.512	0.518	0.534	0.529	0.489	0.550	**0.750**

Note: The diagonal of the matrix displays the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE)

4.4. Hypotheses Testing

The research hypotheses were tested using a Structural Equation Model (SEM). The overall model fit indices suggest an acceptable fit for the data (L.-t. Hu & Bentler, 1998): $\chi2$=1181.519, $\chi2$/df =1.400, RMSEA=0.024, SRMR=0.0289, GFI=0.929, NFI=0.940, RFI=0.936, IFI=0.982, TLI =0.981, CFI=0.982. The structural model, nearly identical to that of the measurement model, effectively elucidates the construct relationships. All eight analyzed direct paths were found to be significant and positive (p<0.05).

The impact of the rural homestay experiencescape on guest feelings (β=0.654, t=11.657, p< 0.001) and guest judgments (β=0.669, t=12.651, p<0.001), both having a significant positive impact. It significantly and positively influences place attachment (β=0.716, t=8.460, p<0.001). Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 are supported. Guest feelings (β=0.131, t=2.523, p=0.012) and guest judgments (β=0.152, t=2.899, p=0.004) both significantly positively influence place attachment. Therefore, H4 and H5 are supported. Place attachment (β=0.417, t=5.144, p<0.001) has a significantly positive impact on GEBs. Therefore, H6 is supported. Guest feelings (β=0.192, t

=3.442, $p<0.001$) have a significantly positive impact on GEBs. Therefore, H7 is supported.

Guest judgments (β=0.135, t=2.387, p=0.017) have a significantly positive influence on GEBs. Therefore, H8 is supported.

The mediating role of guest feelings, judgments, and place attachment in the relationship between rural homestay experiencescape and GEB was examined using Jose's (2013) bootstrapping analysis. The bootstrap samples were set at 2000 with a 95% confidence level. Following Macho and Ledermann's (2011) technique, the direct, indirect, and total effects of the experiencescape on GEB through guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment were derived, along with p-values and confidence intervals (Table 6).

Table 6. Test of mediation

| Paths | Estimate | 95% BC (Bootstrap analysis) | | p-value |
		Lower	Upper	
Experiencescape-Guest feelings-Guest engagement behaviour	0.125	0.030	0.220	0.008
Experiencescape-Guest judgments-Guest engagement behaviour	0.090	-0.023	0.185	0.108
Experiencescape-Place attachment-Guest engagement behaviour	0.299	0.140	0.470	0.002

The study found significant indirect effects of rural homestay experiencescape on GEB, mediated by guest feelings and place attachment, confirming Hypotheses 9 and 11. However, the path "Rural homestay experiencescape-Guest judgments-GEB" had a standardized indirect estimate of 0.090 (p=0.108), indicating a non-significant mediating effect and leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 10.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

Despite the recent interest in "experiencescapes" and "GEB," there is a significant scarcity of quantitative studies linking the two. Furthermore, a validated measurement scale for experiencescape in the context of rural homestays is lacking. Thus, this study examined the mechanism through which rural homestay experiencescape influenced GEBs. It employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative content analysis with quantitative questionnaire data, to reveal six components of the rural homestay experiencescape: sensory, functional, social, natural, cultural, and hospitality culture components, addressing previous calls for more research on the behavioural outcomes of the experiencescape and its mechanisms' effectiveness (Kandampully et al., 2023; Pizam & Tasci, 2019).

The Amos results indicated that the rural homestay experiencescape positively influenced guest feelings and judgments, as well as place attachment. Furthermore, the empirical evidence presented showed that guest feelings and judgments had a positive impact on place attachment. Additionally, guest feelings, judgments, and place attachment positively influenced GEBs. The results imply that when guests experience positive experience environment cues in rural homestays, they tend to activate emotional responses (guest feelings) and cognitive responses (guest judgments) associated with the rural homestays, evoke a place attachment towards the rural homestay environment, and go beyond the transaction itself, with future intentions to invest energy, effort, and time into rural homestay (GEB). Guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment play different mediating roles in the impact of rural homestay experiencescape on GEBs. Compared to guest feelings and place attachment, guest judgments do not seem effective in effectively linking the rural homestay experiencescape with GEB.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study is the first comprehensive assessment of rural homestay experiencescapes, revealing a cutting-edge social phenomenon within the rapidly expanding rural homestay sector. It theoretically advances the nomological network of the experiencescape, extending its application within the rural homestay context. Previous research on rural homestays has only deconstructed the concept of experiencescape in a fragmented way, focusing on aspects such as the sensescape of rural homestays (Jiang et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2024), physical and social environments (Jiang et al., 2022; M.-Y. Wang et al., 2023; Xu & Gursoy, 2020; T. Zhang et al., 2023), hospitality practice (Qiu et al., 2024), while nature and culture are also two aspects of rural homestays that deserve attention. As W. Wang et al. (2022) stated, traditional culture and heritage are highly unique resources for developing locally distinctive and innovative rural homestays. The cultural dimension of the rural homestay experiencescape developed in this study is measured through four items, covering daily life folklore culture (e.g., dressing), production and trade behaviour folklore culture (e.g., agricultural activities), rural folklore cultural symbols (e.g., dialects, stories as linguistic folklore), and the slow-paced lifestyle. Rural folklore cultural symbols represent cultural familiarity and are a cultural experience in themselves, while the other three items reflect cultural similarity. The natural dimension of the rural homestay experiencescape is measured by three items, including natural flora landscape, attractive natural elements, and the functionality of layout due to natural elements, which aligns with Pizam and Tasci's (2019) framework. The six-dimensional framework validated in this study responds to Kandampully et al.'s (2023) call for the application of a comprehensive theoretical framework to address the fragmented research on experiences, and it also differs from the highly generalized and unidimensional conceptualizations of home-based accommodation experiencescapes (Cui et al., 2024; Meng & Cui, 2020). Additionally, unlike studies that rely

solely on guest perceptions and use the expanded four realms of the experience economy to conceptualize Airbnb experiencescapes (M. Mody et al., 2019; M. A. Mody et al., 2017), this study integrates both operator insights and guest perceptions, offering a different perspective on measuring rural homestay experiencescapes. It also advances research on the relationship between guests' holistic experiences and their subsequent behaviours and intentions in rural homestays.

Second, drawing on empirical evidence from a rural homestay context, this study extends and deepens existing GEB research by incorporating the concept of experiencescape from an experience environment perspective and developing an integrated model that elucidates the mechanisms influencing GEB. A substantial body of research in the hospitality field has already focused on a guest-based perspective, investigating the influence of factors such as relationship quality, guest trust, guest identity, guest goals, and guest resources on GEB (e.g., Romero, 2017; Vo et al., 2020). However, from an experience environment perspective, existing research has only qualitatively explored the potential relationship between experiencescapes (i.e., urban coffee shop experiencescapes) and the formation of GEB (Kwame Opoku et al., 2023), while empirical studies have primarily focused on the effects of physical environments and interpersonal social factors on GEB within experience environment (Li, 2021; M.-Y. Wang et al., 2023). In this context, this study developed and validated a theoretical framework from the experiencescape perspective, which attempts to present the synergistic effects of more diverse experiential elements within the experience environment on GEB. Furthermore, this study compensates for the scarcity of GEB research in guesthouses compared to luxury brand hotels (Hao, 2020), thereby offering a fresh perspective and a robust framework for advancing GEB research in the accommodation industry and further enhancing the understanding of the role of

experiencescapes in GEB.

Finally, this study contributes to the research on guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment. To further investigate the relationship between rural homestay experiencescape and GEB, this study examined the mediating roles of guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment as underlying theoretical mechanisms. Although previous research has separately explored the roles of emotional responses, cognitive responses, and place attachment in a mediated environment (Li, 2021; M.-Y. Wang et al., 2023; Xu & Gursoy, 2020), their integration into GEB research, particularly in rural homestays, remains underexplored. As Ortegón-Cortázar and Royo-Vela (2019) observed, natural stimulus-based commercial environments can trigger both emotional and cognitive responses. This study, therefore, synthesizes these constructs into a unified model to assess their parallel mediating effects. The findings demonstrate that guest feelings and place attachment, as elicited by the rural homestay experiencescape, serve as crucial mediators of GEB, providing additional insights into the mechanisms through which experiencescapes drive GEB. These results largely support the view that emotional responses can positively impact individual attitudes and behaviours (Radic et al., 2021). However, the mediating role of cognitive responses in this study is notably inconsistent with previous research (Li, 2021). Therefore, the findings of this study hold significant implications for the research on guest feelings, guest judgments, and place attachment. By introducing these three constructs as mediating mechanisms in the GEB literature, this study enriches the development of guest feelings, guest judgments, and attachment theory within the accommodation industry context, and encourages further discussion of guest judgments as a mediator.

5.3. Practical Implications

First, the rural homestay experiencescape scale developed in this study integrates the insights of operators with the perceptions of guests. This scale offers a valuable tool for academia to measure experiencescapes and provides actionable guidance for the strategic design of rural homestay experiences. To optimize GEB, rural homestay operators should incorporate the six key components: sensory, functional, social, natural, cultural, and hospitality culture into the experience design and promotion of their offerings. The impact mechanism between the rural homestay experiencescape and GEB, as demonstrated by the research model, provides strong support for these recommendations.

Secondly, the empirical results of this study indicate that place attachment serves as the most significant mediator between the rural homestay experiencescape and GEB. Therefore, rural homestay operators should prioritize enhancing guests' place attachment, which includes place identity and place dependence. Through semi-structured interviews, this study found that although rural homestays typically provide guests with modern functional facilities and personalized services beyond their duties, these rural homestays still emphasize "rurality" as their main selling point, which refers to rural culture. In light of this, rural homestay operators can further explore rural folk cultural symbols, such as dialects, traditional festivals, and stories, and present them through interactive activities like traditional games, folk arts, and musical or dance performances. By offering these immersive cultural experiences, they can deepen guests' place identity, thereby fostering a stronger sense of place attachment.

Finally, guest feelings, rather than guest judgments, served as a mediator between the rural homestay experiencescape and GEB. Thus, guest feelings related to calmness, safety, social approval, and a sense of accomplishment also deserve the attention of rural homestays. Semi-structured interviews reveal that beyond folk cultural experiences, rural homestays' appeal

significantly derives from offering a temporary idyllic retreat from urban life, enabling guests to reconnect with a slower-paced and healthier lifestyle. As observed by Huang et al. (2024), rural homestays, with their restorative natural landscapes and relaxed pace of life, have increasingly become a preferred choice among senior travellers seeking a lifestyle transition. Thus, rural homestay operators should not only assist guests in establishing a healthy, slower-paced lifestyle but also guide them to appreciate the natural landscapes to attain inner calmness, encourage them to communicate and connect with their social relations, and enhance guests' confidence to improve their feelings.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

Firstly, although rural homestays are a global phenomenon, the data for this study were collected solely from China, which may limit the external validity of the findings. It is essential to recognize that the development and perception of rural homestays can vary significantly across different cultural and national backgrounds (Dey et al., 2020). To improve the generalizability of the findings, future research could consider conducting cross-cultural comparative studies that encompass diverse cultural and national contexts (Jones & Jing Guan, 2011). Secondly, this research treats the six components of the experiencescape as independent dimensions without accounting for their potential interrelated effects. Third, this study's qualitative analysis utilized coding, which is inherently subjective. Future research could incorporate more objective qualitative analysis methods, such as semantic analysis software, to further validate the qualitative findings. Finally, data were collected using an online survey methodology, requiring guests to report on their most recent experiences at rural homestays. Given the potential challenges associated with accurately recalling every detail of their stay, the

results may be influenced by recall bias. To mitigate this issue, future research could adopt a longitudinal study design, which would likely reduce the impact of recall bias on the findings.

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