



Niche tourism experiences: Exploring county-level tourism consumption in China

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to explore tourists' experiences in niche county-level destinations and to develop a conceptual framework linking destination attributes to tourist needs. Three Chinese county-level destinations Anji, Tonglu, and Dujiangyan were selected as case sites. A mixed qualitative approach was employed, integrating semi-structured interviews with netnographic data collected from social media platforms, including Rednote and Sina Weibo. Specifically, 118 social-media posts and 17 interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis and triangulated across data sources. The findings reveal how destination's intrinsic and extrinsic attributes interact with tourists' intrinsic and extrinsic needs. Elements of destination attributes include natural environment, local food, cultural heritage, county pace of lifestyles, and elements of tourist needs such as relaxation, emotion, escape, and social activities. It generates seven distinct experience types: sightseeing experience, adventure experience, eating-food experience, emotional experience, culture and heritage experience, social interactive experience, and media-ritual experience. Theoretically, this study advances experience theory by integrating motivational perspectives with place-based attributes, thereby deepening the understanding of niche tourism in county-level destinations. Practically, the framework connecting destination attributes with tourist needs, along with the typology of niche county-level experiences, provides international insights for advancing niche tourism development. It also provides destination managers with tools to segment visitors, guide product innovation, and design branding and social-media strategies.

Contribution/Originality: This study extends tourism experience theory by linking destination attributes with tourist motivations in county-level niche destinations, an overlooked scale in prior research. Overall, this study addresses the research gap in tourist experiences at county-level niche destinations and provides both theoretical and managerial guidance for small-place tourism development worldwide.

1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in tourism has shifted as living standards improve and travelers seek personalized experiences. Traditional attractions and major cities no longer suffice (Tan et al., 2023). Instead, many visitors are drawn to lesser-known county destinations. County-level regions located between cities and rural areas show development patterns that align closely with new consumer values. Unique natural scenery, deep cultural heritage, and vibrant folklore in these areas satisfy the desire for distinct experiences. At the same time, peaceful and slow-paced environments appeal to those seeking rest and relaxation. Social media platforms have further fueled this trend by popularizing niche counties through user-generated content. Recent data underscore the growing appeal of county-level tourism. During the May Day holiday in 2024, Tonglu County received 1,028,900 tourists, while Anji County hosted 1,676,000 visitors

(Ho, 2024). Such figures demonstrate diversified traveler needs and a segmenting tourism market (Gajdosík, 2020). Consequently, niche county destinations have emerged as a significant research and development focus.

Existing studies show that niche tourism has become a vital field addressing consumer preferences, cultural heritage, and destination competitiveness (Beigi, 2020; Hu & Chen, 2023). Research highlights how digital platforms and innovative practices enable specialized markets to flourish and integrate into mainstream tourism (Beigi, 2020; Lew, 2008). Cultural and experiential dimensions have also been emphasized, including transformative learning and heritage-based tourism initiatives (Cavender, Swanson, & Wright, 2020; Farsani, Shafiei, Adilinasab, & Taheri, 2017; Farsani, Zeinali, & Moaiednia, 2018). Despite these advances, limited attention has been paid to tourist experiences in county-level niche destinations, leaving a critical gap in the literature.

County-level tourism has emerged as an important driver of regional development, attracting attention across diverse contexts. In developing countries such as China, studies highlight its role in poverty reduction and rural revitalization through policy-led initiatives (Jiang, Shangguan, Fang, & Fang, 2022; Zhou, Zhao, Chen, & Zhang, 2024), though the effects often remain short-term and are shaped by top-down planning (Gao & Su, 2021). In developed economies, by contrast, research emphasizes market mechanisms, resilience, and risk management, with evidence from the United States showing both the redistributive logic of tourism taxes and the uneven resilience of rural counties to crises such as COVID-19 and climate events (Brown, Alvarez, Eluru, & Huang, 2021; Mills, Rosentraub, & Jakar, 2019; Watson & Deller, 2022).

Over time, the focus of county-level tourism research has shifted from purely economic outcomes to broader cultural and experiential dimensions. Findings from both China and the United States indicate that community support and visitor attraction depend not only on economic benefits but also on cultural context and lifestyle values (Bu, Kong, & Ye, 2021; Látková & Vogt, 2012). Yet, most studies remain quantitative, with limited qualitative inquiry into tourist motivations. As tourism scholarship increasingly moves from macro-destinations to micro-regional experiences, county-level destinations bridging urban and rural spaces offer a valuable lens to understand contemporary travel behavior.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how tourists' needs interact with destination attributes to produce distinct experience types in niche county-level destinations through a combined netnography and interview methods in three Chinese counties: Anji, Tonglu, and Dujiangyan. To make these aims explicit and to guide the analysis, this study has two research questions:

RQ1. What distinct types of tourism experiences emerge in niche county-level destinations?

RQ2. How do destination attributes interact with tourists' needs to shape distinct experience types?

Answering these questions is beneficial to generate a grounded typology of niche-county experiences, enrich theoretical understanding, and inform practical strategies for destination development and branding.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Niche Destination Tourism

Research on niche destination tourism has evolved to encompass diverse perspectives, ranging from consumer behavior and destination competitiveness to cultural heritage and transformative experiences. Hu and Chen (2023) highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped Chinese tourists' preferences, revealing a growing inclination toward cultural exploration, social experiences, and nature-based destinations, with health risk perceptions influencing destination choice. In contrast, Beigi (2020) investigated niche tourism potentials in rural Iran through activity-based segmentation, emphasizing community support and socio-economic opportunities while noting challenges in marketing and environmental management. At a broader level, Bunghez (2021) underscored the global trend toward niche tourism, arguing that niche segments are poised to transform mainstream tourism through their economic and social integration. Similarly, Lew (2008) theorized the "Long Tail" effect, showing how digital platforms

enable highly specialized tourism products to thrive despite limited mass demand, thereby expanding the geographies of niche consumption.

Other scholars have examined the role of niche tourism in creating unique cultural and educational experiences. Cavender et al. (2020) demonstrated how travel to the niche destination of Ikaria facilitated transformative learning among students, conceptualized through a phenomenological framework. Farsani et al. (2017) further expanded the cultural dimension by investigating herbal medicine-based tourism and music tourism in Isfahan, Iran, proposing innovative strategies such as workshops and guide training for integrating traditional heritage into tourism while addressing tourists' awareness and interest in niche cultural products. Gheorghe (2014) and Kelly, Kelliher, Power, and Lynch (2020) extended these discussions by analyzing emerging niches in Romania and senior tourism, respectively, stressing both the adaptive capabilities of micro-firms and the growing importance of demographic specialization.

From a managerial perspective, Cillo, Rialti, Del Giudice, and Usai (2021) emphasized how big data analytics enhances online reputation management and competitiveness for niche destinations, suggesting that technological tools are crucial for sustaining visibility in the crowded digital marketplace. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that niche tourism is not only a response to shifting consumer demands but also a strategic avenue for destinations to differentiate themselves, leverage cultural and natural assets, and strengthen resilience in dynamic environments.

While existing literature collectively suggests that niche destinations are both a strategic choice in response to shifts in consumer demand and an innovative testing ground for integrating cultural, natural, and digital management practices, there is still a research gap concerning the tourism experience of county-level niche destinations. This presents an important research opportunity to enrich the areas of both niche destination and county-level regional tourism.

2.2. County Tourism

County-level tourism has become an important driver of regional development and has attracted increasing attention from various research perspectives worldwide. Comparative studies across different national contexts highlight both shared and unique features of development. In developing countries such as China, research often emphasizes the policy role of tourism in supporting economic growth and poverty reduction. For example, Jiang et al. (2022) evaluated rural tourism cooperatives in Sichuan Province, while Zhou et al. (2024) examined the link between tourism and multidimensional poverty reduction in Guizhou Province. Both studies demonstrate how county-level tourism is designed to promote rural revitalization through industrial integration. Similarly, Gao and Su (2021) analyzed the effects of the "Outstanding Tourism City" designation and found that policy labels may boost urban tourism in the short term but are less effective at the county level, reflecting the limitations of top-down planning.

In contrast, research in developed countries such as the United States often focuses on the roles of markets, crisis response, and resilience. Mills et al. (2019) studied the spatial effects of tourism tax policies in Florida counties and found that visitors bear most of the tax burden, reflecting the logic of market-driven systems. Studies on COVID-19 impacts by Han, Goetz, Eades, Entsminger, and Arbogast (2023) and Watson and Deller (2022) showed that rural U.S. counties were more resilient in employment during external shocks, largely because of their population density and economic structure, including their ability to attract demand for remote tourism. Brown et al. (2021) provided further evidence by showing how Florida's coastal counties remain highly vulnerable to climate risks such as tropical cyclones.

Shared research themes have also evolved over time. Early studies of county tourism primarily examined economic benefits and poverty reduction. More recent research has shifted toward exploring quality of life and cultural values. For instance, Látková and Vogt (2012) in rural U.S. communities and Bu et al. (2021) in Yanggu

County, China, found that community support for tourism depends more on cultural context than on economic returns. These findings help explain why travelers are increasingly drawn to county-level destinations.

In terms of methods, most existing studies rely on quantitative analysis, while qualitative approaches to tourist motivations remain limited. As global tourism research shifts from macro-destinations to micro-regional experiences and from efficiency to quality of life, county-level areas located between cities and rural regions exhibit development patterns that closely align with new consumer values. Building on this trend, this study explores types of tourism experiences in niche county-level destinations from the perspective of travelers' consumption motivations.

3. METHODS

This study selected Anji County in Huzhou, Dujiangyan County-level city in Chengdu, and Tonglu County in Hangzhou as research sites. These destinations appeared both in the "Top Ten County-Level Destinations" list in the 2024 May Day Holiday Travel Report published by Ctrip and in the "Top 100 County-Level Tourism Powerhouses" ranking for 2024 (Luo, 2024; Trip.com Group, 2024).

3.1. Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining netnography and semi-structured interviews.

3.2. Data Collection

This study collected two types of data, including posts and comments on social media platforms related to niche tourism experiences, and interviews from niche county-level regions.

In the first phase of netnography, the researchers collected data from Rednote and Sina Weibo, two prominent online communities in China. Rednote is a widely used social media platform and online community that covers a broad range of topics, including travel, sports, and marketing (Yu, 2024). Similarly, Sina Weibo, comparable to Twitter in the United States, boasts over 340 million monthly active users, with a significant portion comprising young consumers (Zhao, Zhang, Ming, Niu, & Wang, 2023).

Both platforms are well-known in China for facilitating diverse community activities and enabling users to share tourism experiences. Posts and comments related to niche county tourism were collected through keyword searches, including "Anji travel experience," "Dujiangyan travel," "Is Dujiangyan worth visiting," and "Tonglu tourism." An initial search yielded approximately 1,025 posts and 10.24 million views. To ensure relevance and timeliness, only content published between July 2020 and July 2025 was retained, and posts had to include personal reflections or experiences rather than merely mentioning destinations. After screening, 118 article-type posts were selected for coding.

As the second step of our data collection process, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with travelers who had visited at least one of the three destinations. Interviewees were recruited through social media invitations and travel forums. Initially, twelve in-depth interviews were completed. During the revision stage, the researchers conducted an additional five interviews, bringing the total to seventeen participants. Each interview was conducted with the full consent of the participants and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed iteratively alongside the 118 social-media posts (Rednote and Sina Weibo) to allow data triangulation.

The five additional interviews did not produce new higher-order themes or additional experience types, indicating that thematic saturation had been reached for the purposes of this exploratory study. Table 1 summarizes the updated demographic information of interview participants.

Table 1. Interviewee sample.

Number	Destination	Age	Gender
A1	Anji	28	Female
A2	Tonglu	27	Female
A3	Dujiangyan	25	Female
A4	Tonglu	22	Female
A5	Anji	27	Male
A6	Dujiangyan	24	Male
A7	Dujiangyan	27	Female
A8	Anji	23	Male
A9	Dujiangyan	36	Female
A10	Tonglu	20	Male
A11	Tonglu	37	Male
A12	Anji	33	Female
A13	Tonglu	34	Female
A14	Dujiangyan	38	Male
A15	Tonglu	43	Male
A16	Dujiangyan	46	Male
A17	Anji	48	Female

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis guided the data processing. Thematic analysis is particularly valuable in gaining a deeper understanding of the factors influencing niche tourism experiences.

During the interactive coding process, analysis and interpretation involved the classification, coding analysis, and contextualization of communicative acts (Kozinets, 2010). To ensure the completeness and rigor of the data analysis, the classification process was conducted independently by the first author and two postgraduate researchers, adhering to systematic and rigorous procedures (Kozinets, 2010).

After marking a rich and detailed set of information, three rounds of coding were performed based on two value dimensions (Kozinets, 2010).

The data was analyzed separately by two coders. The coders used inductive methods to identify new themes, with coding conducted in three stages. The first stage involved basic coding, while the second stage expanded on this with more generalized codes, resulting in thematic coding.

In the first stage, the coders read the codes and marked important words. All textual data were read in full, and initial codes related to travel motivations and experiences were assigned (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Li, Su, Zhang, & Mao, 2018). Second, similar codes were grouped into second-order themes through constant comparison. Third, these themes were integrated into higher-order dimensions by seeking theoretical explanations and ensuring coherence across themes.

This three-step coding process produced a comprehensive framework of niche county tourism experiences. Figure 1 shows the data structure.

4. FINDINGS

The findings are presented in relation to the two research questions and are structured into three sections: destination attributes, tourist needs, and the typology of niche tourism experiences. The interaction between destination attributes and tourist needs in shaping tourism experiences is shown in Figure 2 and summarized in Table 2.

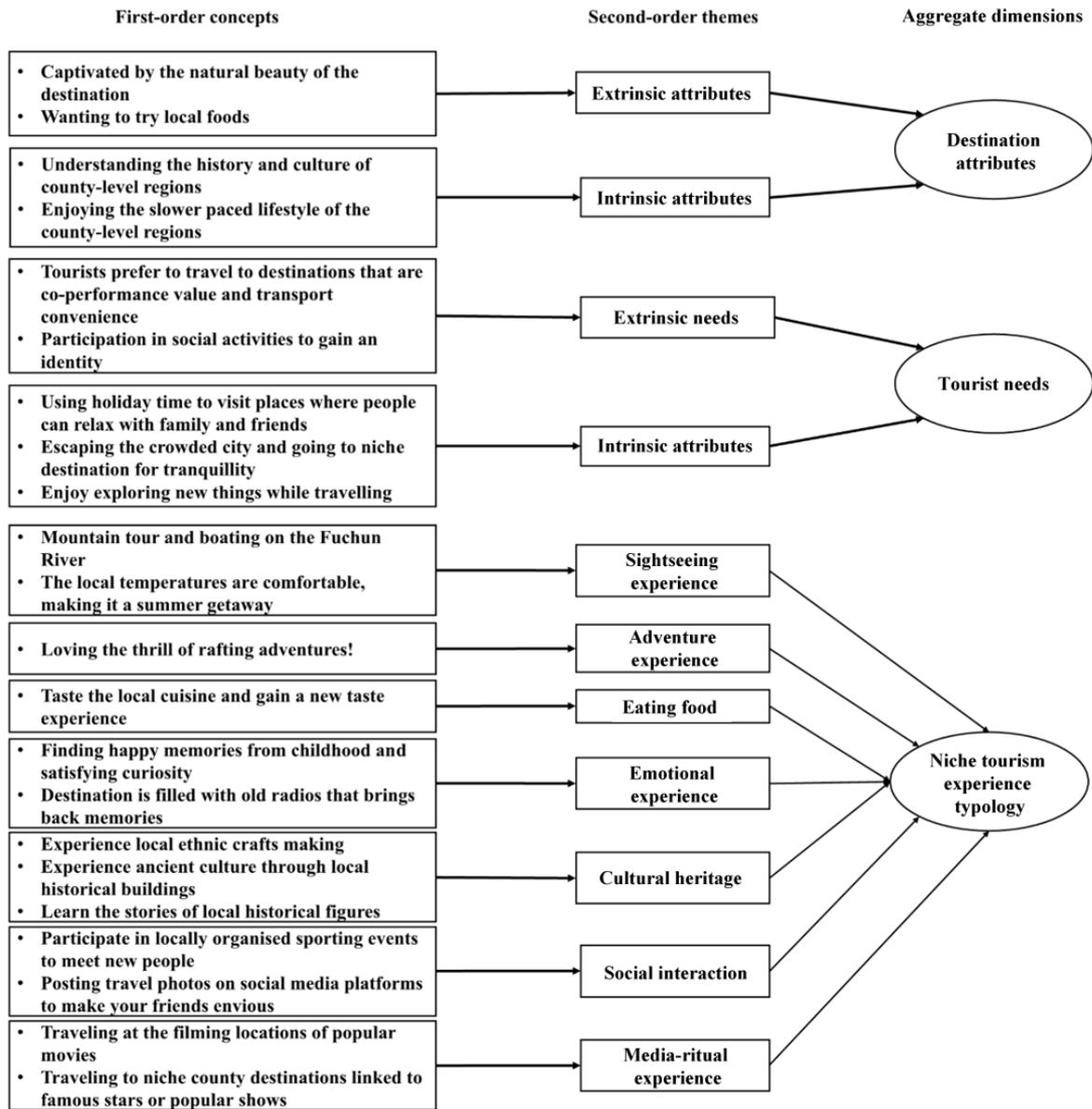


Figure 1. Data structure.

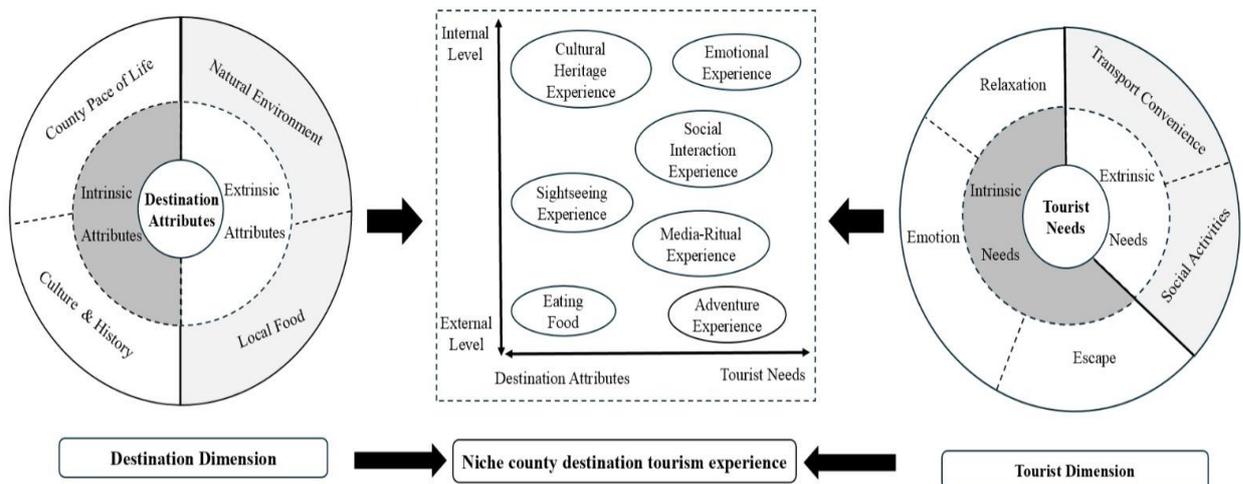


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of niche county-level tourism experiences.

Table 2. Summary of Niche County-Level Regions Experience Typology.

Experience type	Definition	Key destination attribute	Primary tourist need
Sightseeing experience	Visiting scenic viewpoints and lesser-known landscapes for exploration and seasonal relief.	Natural environment	Cost-performance value, Escape
Adventure Experience	Outdoor, thrill-seeking activities that combine excitement with scenic engagement.	Natural environment	/
Eating-food experience	Seeking local snacks and signature dishes as a central motive for travel and place-based identity.	Local food	/
Emotional experience	Visits driven by childhood memories, curiosity, or nostalgia that produce strong affective responses.	History	Emotion, Relaxation
Culture and heritage experience	Participation in traditional crafts and immersive encounters with historical sites and stories that foster temporal immersion.	Culture & history	/
Social interactive experience	Travellers satisfy their need for social interaction by participating in community events and sharing travel activities online.	County pace of life	Social activities
Media-ritual experience	Travel motivated by media exposure (filming locations, celebrity visits) that produces shareable, ritualized moments.	Cultural events / Filming locations	Social activities

4.1. Destination Attributes

The analysis reveals that county-level destinations are characterized by both extrinsic and intrinsic attributes. On the extrinsic side, tourists are often captivated by the natural beauty of mountains, rivers, and rural landscapes, while local cuisine serves as an additional attraction. As one interviewee emphasized, *“The first thing that impressed me was the fresh air and the local dishes. It felt authentic and different from the city”* (N7).

Intrinsic attributes, by contrast, relate to the cultural and lifestyle dimensions of county-level regions. Tourists value opportunities to engage with local history, traditional crafts, and heritage sites, as well as the slower pace of everyday life. One participant reflected, *“I liked how people here live more slowly, without the constant rush. It gives you a sense of calmness”* (N12). Together, these attributes provide a foundation that shapes the distinct experiences available in niche destinations.

4.2. Tourist Needs

In terms of needs, the data illustrates the coexistence of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations that guide travel choices. Extrinsicly, tourists seek destinations that offer convenience and co-performance value, including accessible transportation and cost-effectiveness. Social participation also plays a role, as tourists aspire to construct identity through interactions and online sharing. For example, a respondent noted,

“Posting my trip on Rednote lets my friends know I have discovered a unique place” (N34).

Intrinsic needs, meanwhile, highlight the importance of family bonding, relaxation, and escape from urban pressures. County-level destinations provide a tranquil environment that enables tourists to detach from crowded metropolitan life. Moreover, novelty-seeking emerges as a recurring theme, as visitors express excitement about exploring something new. As one interviewee explained, *“I enjoy coming to small places where I can try things I’ve never done before”* (N3). These needs directly inform the ways in which destination attributes are perceived and translated into tourism experiences.

4.3. Typology of Niche County-Level Regions Tourism Experience

4.3.1. Sightseeing Experience

Sightseeing in niche counties centers on lesser-known landscapes and local specialties that offer exploration, seasonal relief (e.g., cooler summer getaways), and cost-effective escapes from crowded cities. Many visitors prefer these nearby destinations for convenient, affordable trips that still deliver striking natural scenery. As one participant noted.

“Tonglu really lives up to its reputation: the mountains and rivers are breathtaking, breezes are cool, and it is far less crowded than major cities. It’s the perfect summer getaway with children” (N1).

“I have been looking forward to the Deep Blue Project in Anji, it feels like a mini Iceland. The scenery really surprised me with its beauty, and traveling to Anji is much more affordable than flying to the real Iceland” (N2).

4.3.2. Adventure Experience

The adventure experience is mainly associated with rafting programmed at the destination. Rafting is one of the most popular summer activities among tourists, and this activity provides visitors with the feeling of being in a flowing landscape painting. During the process of rafting, tourists can have an exciting and thrilling experience while traveling through the rapids, as well as enjoying the landscape scenery along the way in a kayak and feeling the cool experience of splashing water. As the interviewer mentioned.

“It is really too happy to go rafting in summer, exciting and cool! It is really thrilling to rush down on top of the kayak, and the feeling of the water splashing on your face is icy cold and so comfortable”(N59)!

4.3.3. Eating Food

Beyond climate and scenery, gastronomy plays a key role in tourists’ experiences at niche county destinations. Visitors seek out local snacks that are unavailable in major cities. Many participants described themselves as food lovers who travel specifically to taste regional specialties, noting that sampling these snacks brings them satisfaction and happiness. Signature items include Yu’s green bean cake, black sesame dumplings, rice sieve crawl, and Tonglu patty cake. As one participant explained,

“Eating is definitely the top priority when traveling, and the pickled fish at Red List – Spring River Pickled Fish Restaurant is very good and doesn’t taste the same as the pickled fish elsewhere. I also bought a local aunt’s homemade Tonglu mochi, filled with bean paste and sesame; its flavor is memorable and well worth the trip” (N20).

4.3.4. Emotional Experience

Emotional experiences arise from nostalgia, childhood curiosity, and personal connections to sites, producing strong affective responses when travelers encounter landscapes or artifacts tied to memory. One participant reflected,

“I learned about Dujiangyan in school and always wondered how grand it must be. Seeing it in person today, I find the water conservancy project truly amazing” (N3).

Nostalgic feelings are also evoked through locally sold vintage products old radios, sewing machines, and gramophones that recreate the ambiance of past eras. These artifacts trigger memories and a sense of continuity with history. As one visitor observed,

“Wenmiao Street is filled with old radios, sewing machines, and gramophones. Each item tells a story and brings back memories; the street’s atmosphere feels like stepping into a different time, and it makes for great photos” (N27).

4.3.5. Cultural Heritage Experience

Ethnic-craft experiences involve hands-on participation in traditional practices (e.g., white tea harvesting in Anji), offering ritualized engagement, learning, and authenticity through direct involvement. One participant described the ritual in detail.

"I finally came to Anji to fulfill my dream of tea picking! It was white tea harvest season, so I followed the tea-picking women up the mountain, dressed in an apron and hat, carrying a small bamboo basket. Every step felt ceremonial: we picked leaves by hand, then the local guide showed us the ancient frying method. The whole experience lasted about two hours, and we tried every stage of tea production. It was a deeply engaging activity" (N65).

Heritage experiences enable tourists to engage directly with local culture and history in niche county destinations. Because these areas are less commercialized, they often preserve original historical sites. Visitors can explore ancient buildings and walk along traditional pathways, creating an immersive sense of the past. One participant reflected.

"Walking along the cobblestone paths in Shamao Village and seeing more than 140 ancient buildings from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, I felt as if I had traveled through time and space" (N77).

Heritage experiences also deepen understanding of important historical figures. After listening to historical stories, they gained insight into the engineering feats and social impact of the original irrigation system's builders. These encounters help tourists appreciate both the physical heritage and the human stories behind it.

4.3.6. Social Interaction Experience

Interactive experiences occur at community events and participatory activities (marathons, local matches, workshops), which promote active involvement, social bonding, and local engagement. For example.

"I am a football fan, and I came to Dujiangyan to watch a local match. The atmosphere was vibrant, and I met two local fans. Dujiangyan's football team enjoys a reputation here that rivals even some national squads" (N105).

Social experiences reflect tourists' search for a slower lifestyle in county-level regions and opportunities to display this lifestyle via social media. The trips satisfy social connection, escape from urban stress, and cost-performance considerations. For example.

"City life is really too crowded; buses, subways, and streets are packed everywhere. On my holiday today, I finally escaped the city crowds and traveled to Anji. Here, living costs are low. I can drink a cup of tea, post in my WeChat Moments, and my friends have to give me a nod of approval, saying they envy these simple and beautiful days" (N119).

4.3.7. Media-Ritual Experience

Media-ritual experiences relate to tourists' interest in celebrities, films, and TV shows. As social media spreads, visitors become curious about filming locations or cities that celebrities have visited. In media studies, this is called "Media Rituals" (Couldry, 2005). Tourists often use platforms like Renote and Sina Weibo to find niche county destinations linked to famous stars or popular shows, and then plan trips there. For example, some participants traveled to Dujiangyan because celebrities Deng Chao and Dili Jeba had visited the site. Others decided to visit the filming locations of the variety show *Our Beautiful Life* after watching it and admiring the scenery. For example:

"I wanted to see the filming site of the TV drama because it looked so beautiful on screen" (N125).

5. CONCLUSION

This study constructed a conceptual framework of niche county destination tourism to further explore tourists' experiences in niche county destination tourism based on destination attributes and tourists' needs. Combining two research methods, web ethnography and in-depth interviews, this study collected 118 posts and interviewed 17 tourists. The results showed that niche county destination attributes and tourists' needs were composed of two dimensions: extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Additionally, nine types of niche county destination tourism experiences were developed. Therefore, this study makes both a theoretical and practical contribution to the study of niche county destination tourism.

5.1. Theoretical Implication

This study explores niche county destination tourism by linking three key elements: destination attributes, tourists' needs, and tourists' experiences into a single conceptual framework. Unlike most prior research that focused on either niche destinations or county-level tourism alone, this study integrates both contexts (Chi & Han, 2021; Farsani et al., 2017). This study shows that tourists' preferences in niche county destinations often relate to local culture, social interaction, and natural ecology (Hu & Chen, 2023), which confirms earlier findings in niche tourism. However, unlike previous studies, this study finds that shopping rarely motivates visits to niche county areas (Hu & Chen, 2023). By revealing how attributes, needs, and experiences connect, this study offers a new perspective on niche county destination research.

Building on existing literature in niche and county tourism, this study integrates destination features and personal needs to advance theory. Earlier research explored tourism attitudes and preferences in niche contexts, and separate studies addressed county-level tourism development (Chi & Han, 2021; Cillo et al., 2021). Yet, few have examined how tourists' needs and destination attributes interact in niche county settings. This study confirms that geographic resources, cultural heritage, and local cuisine are key attraction factors that align with studies of county tourism (Chi & Han, 2021; Pattiyagedara & Fernando, 2020). Regarding tourists' motivations, this study shows that emotional memories, leisure and relaxation, and the desire for adventure influence travel choices. These motivations echo concepts of place attachment and recreational tourism (Luo, Lam, & Fan, 2020). Moreover, the psychology of "reverse tourism" the wish to escape crowds and assert individuality also plays a role in niche county travel decisions.

Finally, this study refines existing tourism experience theory by identifying nine distinct experience types in the niche county context. Previous research categorized tourism experiences as natural, gastronomic, emotional, and adventure-related Björk, Prebensen, Rääkkönen, and Sundbo (2021). This study extends these categories to include mediated ritual experiences, drawing on Couldry (2005)'s concept of media rituals. These results also support the idea that social media significantly shapes how tourists perceive and engage with destinations (Li, Liu, & Xie, 2022). Together, these contributions deepen the understanding of both the structure and diversity of tourism experiences in niche county regions.

5.2. Practical Implications

First, by summarizing destination attributes, tourists' needs, and experience types in niche county tourism, this study offers guidance for sustainable development. The distinctive natural scenery, cultural heritage, and slow-paced lifestyle of niche counties strongly appeal to today's travelers. Destination managers should design attractions that leverage local resources while preserving authenticity. Moreover, they should tailor tourism offerings to different age groups to broaden the market. For example, family travelers with children or elderly relatives could enjoy child-friendly eco-activities such as fish or shrimp catching and swimming, while adults might prefer rafting or camping. By addressing varied preferences across age cohorts, managers can attract a wider audience and enhance the destination's overall appeal.

Second, understanding tourists' emotional, cultural, historical, and media-driven experiences can inform more effective promotion strategies. Social media users often discover destinations through celebrity visits or film and TV locations. Managers can build on these connections partnering with celebrities or highlighting popular filming sites and use platforms like Weibo and Rednote to share engaging stories and visuals. Such targeted campaigns can boost destination visibility and spark interest among potential visitors.

Finally, building and maintaining a strong reputation is essential. Recognitions such as Tonglu's title of "China's Most Beautiful County" a designation granted by the government carry credibility and draw tourists. Destination managers should collaborate with government agencies to strengthen cultural soft power and craft a persuasive brand image. Coordinated efforts in branding and word-of-mouth promotion will help niche county destinations establish a compelling reputation and sustain visitor flows.

This study also has implications for international tourism management. Although this study focuses on county-level destinations in China, the typology of niche-county experiences and the linking of destination attributes to tourist needs have transferable implications for niche tourism worldwide. Managers of comparable destinations in different national contexts can use the seven aggregated clusters identified in this study as a practical segmentation tool to design targeted products, coordinate cross-sector partnerships, and prioritize investments that align with both intrinsic and extrinsic visitor motivations. Destination managers and policymakers should integrate digital-platform strategies with place-based authenticity to amplify reach while avoiding over-commercialization. Moreover, international tourism planners should treat typology as a diagnostic framework for resilience planning and for cross-national benchmarking and adaptation.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. Firstly, it only examined niche county destinations in the Chinese region, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other regions. Future research could conduct cross-regional studies on tourism in niche county destinations to identify differences between regions, thereby enriching and improving relevant theories on tourism in such destinations. Secondly, the impact of social media content on tourists' travel behavior in niche county destinations requires further investigation to better understand its role in destination promotion. Finally, this study combined internet data and field survey data but primarily employed qualitative research methods. Since qualitative methods cannot measure relationships between variables, future research could utilize quantitative methods to quantify the number of tourists engaging in specific types of tourism experiences and test some of the hypotheses proposed in this study.

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Transparency: The author states that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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