

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enhancing Sustainable Rural Tourism Through Memorable Experiences: A Means-End Chain Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The preservation of natural and cultural assets in rural destinations, while providing memorable experiences to tourists, has become a crucial concern for policymakers and destination management organizations. This study employed a means-end chain (MEC) approach to explore how tourists' memorable experiences align with the core principles of sustainable tourism development in rural destinations. The analysis of the collected data from multiple cases in a developing country context identified 11 MECs, 17 attributes, 16 consequences, and 10 values. These findings shed light on the factors that drive tourists' experiences and emphasize the significance of integrating sustainable practices to enhance tourists' overall experiences while preserving the authentic charm and integrity of rural destinations. The findings also offer practical implications for destination managers to enhance tourists' experiences while supporting the long-term sustainability of rural areas.

1 | Introduction

Rural tourism is widely acknowledged for its potential in revitalizing and boosting growth in rural areas (Lenao and Saarinen 2015; Su et al. 2019; Chen et al. 2023). It offers tourists an opportunity to experience authentic rural life, art, culture, and heritage in natural settings, thereby benefiting the local economy and facilitating meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities (Pesonen and Komppula 2010; Nagaraju and Chandrashekar 2014). Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant shift in tourists' preferences toward secluded and natural destinations (Marques Santos et al. 2020). Rural areas have emerged as a favored alternative to urban tourism, appealing to travelers seeking a break from the pressures of city life (Vaishar and Štastná 2022). This increasing demand for rural destinations has led to their development in the tourism context. Understanding tourists' experiences in these areas is crucial

for effective planning and management, guiding their sustainable growth and development (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021a, 2021b).

To ensure the sustainable growth of rural tourism, optimizing local resources, meeting diverse end-user needs, and enhancing tourists' satisfaction through memorable experiences are vital (Kastenholz et al. 2012; Seyfi, Hall, and Rasoolimanesh 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021a, 2021b). Memorable experiences in tourism refer to positive and subjective memories that remain long after a visit (Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick 2012). By focusing on creating environments conducive to memorable experiences, rural destinations can achieve sustainable tourism development (Torres-Moraga et al. 2021). These memorable experiences also influence visitors' future travel decisions and play a key role in their intentions to revisit or recommend a destination to others (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021a, 2021b; Hosseini, Cortes Macias, and Almeida Garcia 2023).

While the significance of memorable experiences in tourism has been widely acknowledged in previous studies (Sthapit et al. 2024; Hosseini, Cortes-Macías, and Almeida-García 2024; Rodrigues et al. 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021a, 2021b; Seyfi, Hall, and Rasoolimanesh 2020), there is still a dearth of research exploring the relationship between memorable experiences and sustainable tourism development, particularly in rural destinations within developing countries. Although some studies have examined factors shaping memorable experiences in different contexts (e.g., Sthapit et al. 2024), the efficacy of emerging technologies, such as augmented reality, in creating memorable tourism experiences (e.g., Jiang et al. 2023), and the development of measurement scales for memorable tourism experiences (e.g., Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick 2012), the specific connection between memorable experiences and sustainable tourism development in rural destinations remains understudied. Understanding how memorable experiences connect with sustainability is a worthwhile area of investigation. It holds the potential to shed light on how sustainable practices can be integrated into various domains of human experience, such as travel and consumption. By exploring this interface, researchers and practitioners can uncover novel ways to engage individuals in sustainable behaviors and promote environmentally conscious decision-making. Moreover, investigating the connection between memorable experiences and sustainability has the potential to enhance the overall quality of life, as it may lead to the development of more meaningful and fulfilling experiences that align with sustainable values. Addressing this research gap is crucial for destination managers to align memorable experiences with sustainable practices, thereby enhancing tourists' experiences while preserving the natural and cultural assets of rural areas, benefiting both the environment and local communities. Additionally, limited research has explored the association between values related to the attributes and outcomes of memorable experiences in rural destinations. Furthermore, the understanding of how these identified values relate to the principles of sustainable tourism is also lacking. To fill these aforementioned gaps, the present study employs a mixed methods approach, integrating a means-end chain (MEC) framework, to investigate three key research questions: What attributes and consequences contribute to tourists' memorable experiences in rural areas? Which values are associated with these attributes and outcomes? How do these values relate to the principles of sustainable tourism? The integration of the MEC framework facilitates the examination of the relationships between attributes, consequences, values, and sustainable tourism principles, providing a holistic analysis of these key research questions. By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the interaction between memorable experiences, values, and sustainable tourism in rural destinations.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Memorable Rural Tourism Experiences

A memorable tourism experience is one that remains vividly remembered and easily recalled by visitors after their visit (Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick 2012). Researchers have identified several factors that contribute to the memorability of an experience, including emotional feelings, cognitive evaluations,

and encountering new events (Coudounaris and Sthapit 2017; Hosseini, Cortes Macias, and Almeida Garcia 2023). Emotional thoughts play a significant role in memory formation, as events linked to strong emotions are more likely to be remembered (Tung and Ritchie 2011). Furthermore, cognitive evaluations, such as the meaningfulness and challenge of an experience, contribute to the retention of memories (Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick 2012). The significance of memorable tourism experiences lies in their influence on visitors' decisions for future travel. Past memories serve as valuable sources of information in the decision-making process, motivating tourists to revisit specific destinations (Chandralal and Valenzuela 2013; Tsai 2016; Hosany, Sthapit, and Björk 2022). To examine memorable tourism experiences, Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) developed a quantitative scale that covers various domains, including hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty (Chen and Rahman 2018). Studies have also demonstrated that memorable experiences strengthen increased engagement in tourism activities among travelers (Tsaur, Yen, and Chen 2010; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021a, 2021b).

Creating memorable experiences in rural tourism relies on understanding the unique attributes and attractions of the destination, as well as the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the visitors. Each individual's experiences are specific to them, and rural tourism destinations must grasp tourists' expectations, tastes, and interests to craft experiences that leave a lasting impression (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021a, 2021b). The impact of memorable experiences extends beyond the visit itself and becomes a critical dimension of competition for rural tourism destinations (Seyfi, Michael Hall, and Fagnoni 2019). Memorable experiences influence visitors' perspectives and act as catalysts for recommending the destinations to others (Ye et al. 2021). (Kock et al. 2019). Repeat visits and the repetition of memorable tourism experiences contribute to the competitiveness and economic sustainability of destinations. The willingness of tourists to revisit also directly enhances the quality of life for local residents. Creating memorable experiences for tourists motivates local residents to adopt pro-environmental behaviors (Zhang et al. 2020; Lee et al. 2024). By recognizing that maintaining tourism resources and attractions in their place of residence can enhance their quality of life through attracting tourists, residents are motivated to preserve and sustain these resources.

Rural tourism experiences are driven by various motivations, interests, and activities. Some tourists seek tranquility and serenity in picturesque locations, while others desire engaging outdoor activities or opportunities to connect with loved ones in attractive settings. The allure of villages lies in their history, culture, traditions, and poetic charm, attracting tourists with diverse interests (Sidali and Schulze 2010; Kastenholz et al. 2018). Interacting with hosts in family tourism accommodations allows tourists to immerse themselves in local culture, strengthening engagement with traditions and providing access to social life. Nowadays, many tourists seek experiences in places that offer comfortable facilities and services while preserving the authenticity and charm of rural areas (Kastenholz, Marques, and Carneiro 2020).

Memorable experiences align with the goals of sustainable tourism development, as they shape a positive perception of the destination and have a lasting impact on visitors. (Pandža Bajš 2015).

While there has been significant research on tourists' experiences in various tourism destinations, the link between memorable experiences in rural tourism and their impact on sustainable development remains an under-researched area. Kastenholz et al. (2018) addressed social patterns and found that tourists who interact with local people in rural areas have more enjoyable and satisfying experiences, leading to increased purchases of local products and positively influencing the sustainability of destinations. One significant effect of these social bonds is the creation of place attachment. According to Ramkissoon et al. (2012), establishing social relations is one of the dimensions that contributes to the formation of place attachment, which occurs through social interactions in destinations. Additionally, Vada, Prentice, and Hsiao (2019) demonstrated that memorable tourism experiences significantly impact place attachment, regardless of whether tourists visit the destination for the first or second time. As tourists seek enjoyable and memorable experiences during their visits, the role of enjoyment as a motivational resource for tourism products can contribute to the sustainability of the tourism industry by strengthening place attachment and loyalty to destinations. Once place attachment is established through memorable experiences, individuals' perceptions of the place and their subsequent behaviors, such as satisfaction, loyalty, and pro-environmental behaviors, are affected (Park, Lee, and Lee 2017; Pai et al. 2024). In fact, place attachment is the most crucial factor influencing pro-environmental behaviors and the overall sustainability of destinations (Wang, Lai, and Liu 2021).

Rural areas have significant potential to provide visitors with attractive, emotional, and meaningful experiences (Kastenholz, Marques, and Carneiro 2020). These regions offer a diverse range of unique local resources and qualities that can contribute to the success and sustainability of rural destinations. It is essential for these experiences to be deeply rooted in the local community and its offerings. In terms of memorable tourism experiences, Lee and Lee (2021) conducted research on different dimensions and their impact on family cohesion. They found that participation had the strongest impact, followed by arousal and meaningfulness. Novelty had a relatively weak impact, while refreshment did not have a significant influence. This implies that active engagement and involvement in the experience, along with emotional and meaningful connections, contribute to creating lasting memories for families. The study by Ye et al. (2021) emphasizes the importance of memorable experiences as a critical aspect of competition for rural tourism destinations. They highlighted that ordinary experiences, such as perceived quality and satisfaction, as well as extraordinary experiences, including perceived novelty and enjoyment, contribute to the creation of memorable experiences. These experiences significantly influence visitors' perceptions of the destination and motivate them to recommend the destination to others, particularly among foreign tourists.

3 | Research Method

3.1 | Data Collection

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The data collection process involves administering a mental involvement questionnaire to tourists who have stayed at least one

night in selected tourism villages during the tourism season, from early spring to early autumn. The villages were selected from three cities in Khorasan Razavi province, Iran, namely Mashhad, Neyshabur, and Binaloud, which are known to attract a higher number of tourists compared to other cities in the province. Khorasan Razavi province was chosen due to its tourism attractiveness, diverse tourism villages, and representation of rural tourism throughout the country. Nineteen villages were identified as tourism destination villages by the province's tourism organization and included in the study. As the exact number of tourists choosing these specific rural areas as tourism destinations was unknown, the researchers employed Cohen's formula to determine the required sample size for answering the mental involvement questionnaire. According to the sample size formula, the number of participants was determined to be 384, with an average of 20 questionnaires completed in each village. The study consists of five stages aimed at identifying the attributes, consequences, and values of tourists' memorable experiences. Firstly, a questionnaire was designed based on Zaichkowsky's (1985) questionnaire, incorporating semantic differential scales to measure tourists' mental involvement with the rural tourism destinations. Subsequently, an interview guide was prepared, and pilot interviews were conducted to refine the data collection process. The main interview guide was developed based on the feedback received from the pilot interviews and consultations with experts in rural tourism. To enhance the validity of the study, the interviews were conducted by the researchers themselves. The study comprises the following five steps:

3.1.1 | Step 1: Designing the Questionnaire

A questionnaire was created based on Zaichkowsky's (1985) questionnaire, using semantic differential scales to measure tourists' mental involvement with the selected rural tourism destinations. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, and respondents scoring higher than 83 were chosen for the interviews (Lee, Chao, and Lin 2018).

3.1.2 | Step 2: Preparing the Interview Guide

An interview guide with a set of questions was prepared to guide the interviewer if needed.

3.1.3 | Step 3: Pilot Interviews and Main Interview Guide

Pilot interviews were conducted with five volunteers to refine the interview method. The main interview guide was designed based on feedback from pilot interviews and consultations with experts in rural tourism.

3.1.4 | Step 4: Conducting Interviews Using the Means-End Chain Technique

The researchers employed the MEC technique during the interview process to explore the relationship between tourists' memorable experiences and sustainable tourism development

principles. The interviews began with a brief introduction, where the participants were informed about the goals of the interview, and their consent was obtained for recording purposes. This step aimed to ensure data accuracy and improve reliability. During the interviews, the researchers initially asked questions about the rural tourism destinations, aiming to understand the participants' perspectives. Subsequently, they explored into exploring the attractive and interesting attributes of these destinations. Typically, each interviewee identified 4–6 cognitive elements related to these attributes. The researchers selected the attributes that appeared to be the most significant to the interviewees as the starting point for the chain-ladder method. The interview process continued with the question “why is that important to you?” based on the respondents' answers. This iterative process unfolded as the interviewees shared their thoughts and experiences associated with the rural destinations. Unconsciously, the interviewees linked the attributes of the rural destinations they experienced to their personal values or consequences. This process continued until the interviewees could no longer provide further responses. On average, each interview lasted between 20 and 30 min. To ensure a focused analysis, the researchers selected interviewees who reported higher mental involvement with the destination. This approach aimed to extract specific mental patterns that aligned with the attributes of rural tourism destinations. All interviewees had visited the selected rural tourism areas, as their firsthand experience was expected to facilitate sharing their memorable experiences. The researchers determined that interviewing 35 participants was sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation (Table 1). The mental maps obtained from the interviews, extracted using the member control method (Creswell and Poth 2016), were then presented to the interviewees. Their final comments and approval were sought to enhance the accuracy of the extracted items, ensuring the fidelity of the findings.

3.1.5 | Step 5: Means-End Chain Technique Analysis

The MEC technique was utilized in this study to explore the relationship between tourists' memorable experiences and the principles of sustainable tourism development. This technique has been widely employed in tourism marketing research to investigate tourist experiences and motivations (Jiang, Scott, and Ding 2015; Bapiri, Esfandiar, and Seyfi 2021). Rural tourism services offer unique experiences that lead to specific consequences and values. The MEC approach is valuable for understanding tourists' behavior and the significant aspects of their thoughts. By using the MEC technique, it becomes possible to identify the distinct values and programs that tourists associate with tourism events and how these programs influence their behaviors, experiences, and satisfaction (McIntosh and Thyne 2005). Typically, studies employing the MEC technique utilize a semi-structured interview known as laddering to identify the elements of consumer MECs. The laddering technique involves a series of questions, such as “why is that important to you?,” with the main objective of uncovering the relationships between the main conceptual elements: attributes of the product (A) (i.e., tourism service), consequences of consuming the product (C) (i.e., tourism service), and individual values of the consumer (V) (Krystallis 2015). This interview technique allows respondents to freely express themselves, provide lengthy

responses without interviewer restrictions, and select multiple outcomes for each attribute or multiple values for each consequence (Bapiri, Esfandiar, and Seyfi 2021). After extracting the product attributes, which serve as the starting point, in-depth interviews are conducted. The data collected from the laddering technique are analyzed, and a semantic table is constructed to summarize the direct and indirect connections among As, Cs, and Vs. The most frequently recurring connections are then represented in a hierarchical value map (HVM), a tree diagram that illustrates the connections between all levels of abstraction (Pezeshki et al. 2019).

4 | Results

Upon examining the attributes of the respondents in the mental involvement questionnaire, it was found that 53.7% of the participants were female. The largest age group represented was between 26 and 34 years old, accounting for 41.9% of the total population. In terms of education, 36.8% of the respondents held a bachelor's degree. Additionally, 50% of the participants reported having visited rural destinations once (Table 2). Regarding the individual attributes of the respondents in the MEC interview, 51.4% of them were female. The majority of the respondents (57.1%) fell within the age group of 26–34. Furthermore, 60% of the participants held a bachelor's degree, and 43% had visited rural destinations more than three times. In terms of occupation, 54.3% of the participants were employed in government jobs, while 45.7% were self-employed (Table 3).

After transcribing the interviews, a coding process was conducted to analyze the data. This process resulted in the identification of 44 codes, which were utilized in the subsequent steps of analysis (Table 4). The codes were categorized into three main groups: attributes, consequences, and values. Each category was further divided according to the three key dimensions of sustainable development: environmental development, socio-cultural development, and economic development. The attributes category consisted of 17 codes, representing the various characteristics and qualities associated with rural tourism destinations. The consequences category included 16 codes, representing the outcomes or effects resulting from experiencing these destinations. The values category comprised 10 codes, representing the personal beliefs, principles, or ideals associated with the rural tourism experience. This systematic categorization allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the different elements that emerged from tourists' experiences of rural tourism destinations within the context of sustainable development. It provided a structured framework to analyze and understand the relationships among attributes, consequences, and values and their alignment with the dimensions of sustainable development.

The HVM of attributes, consequences, and values presents an integrated cognitive structure of the attributes of a sustainable tourism destination, derived from tourists' experiences in rural tourism destinations. The map identifies 17 attributes, 16 consequences, and 10 values that emerged from the memorable experiences of tourists in rural destinations. The map highlights the interconnected relationships between different elements. The study aligns with the findings of Breiby et al. (2020), which emphasize the importance of considering three general principles

TABLE 1 | The profile of interviewees.

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Job	Number of trips	Score of mental involvement
1	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Photographer	Three and more	105
2	26–34	Male	BA/BSc	Teacher	Three and more	100
3	26–34	Male	BA/BSc	Accountant	Once	105
4	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Housewife	Twice	101
5	50–59	Male	BA/BSc	Government employee	Once	92
6	26–34	Male	MA/MSc	Psychologist	Once	82
7	26–34	Female	PhD	Doctor	Once	97
8	26–34	Female	MA/MSc	Architect	Three and more	100
9	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Music teacher	Twice	85
10	26–34	Male	PhD	Self-employer	Three and more	82
11	35–49	Male	MA/MSc	Self-employer	Once	86
12	35–49	Male	BA/BSc	Teacher	Once	84
13	35–49	Male	MA/MSc	Civil engineer	Three and more	83
14	35–49	Male	BA/BSc	Government employee	Three and more	85
15	50–59	Male	MA/MSc	Self-employer	Three and more	83
16	26–34	Female	MA/MSc	Teacher	Twice	83
17	35–49	Male	BA/BSc	Self-employer	Once	96
18	50–59	Female	PhD	Government employee	Three and more	83
19	35–49	Female	MA/MSc	Teacher	Three and more	84
20	35–49	Male	BA/BSc	Government employee	Three and more	90
21	50–59	Male	BA/BSc	Government employee	Twice	105
221	26–34	Female	MA/MSc	Government employee	Once	93
23	26–34	Female	MA/MSc	Government employee	Once	90
24	26–34	Male	BA/BSc	Self-employer	Three and more	99
25	18–25	Female	BA/BSc	Government employee	Once	97
26	35–49	Male	MA/MSc	Teacher	Once	83
27	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Lawyer	Three and more	105
28	35–49	Female	BA/BSc	Teacher	Twice	105
29	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Self-employer	Three and more	84
30	26–34	Male	BA/BSc	Self-employer	Twice	85
31	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Nurse	Once	92
32	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Teacher	Once	96
33	18–25	Female	BA/BSc	Photographer	Three and more	87
34	26–34	Male	PhD	Self-employer	Twice	85
35	26–34	Female	BA/BSc	Government employee	Three and more	84

when dealing with sustainable tourism: preserving environmental quality, providing high-quality experiences for tourists, and enhancing the quality of life for the local hosts. In the next stage of the research, the relationship between the identified values

and the principles of sustainable tourism development was further explored, shedding light on the key factors and strategies necessary for fostering sustainable tourism practices in rural destinations.

The analysis of the data obtained from the ladder interview revealed the presence of 11 main MECs. These chains demonstrate the clear relationship between the cognitive structure of rural tourists and the sustainability of rural tourism destinations. In Table 5, the direct and indirect connections of these chains from attributes to consequences and values are presented. According to Reynolds and Gutman (1988), the

numbers on the left side of the decimals in each cell indicate the frequency of direct connections between two cognitive categories at different levels of abstraction. Conversely, the numbers on the right side of the decimals in each cell represent the frequency of indirect connections between the cognitive categories. For instance, in MEC 1, the attribute “preserving historical elements” has 11 direct connections with the consequence “preserving the originality and identity of the village.” This indicates that respondents mentioned this direct connection 11 times during the laddering interview. Furthermore, there are 10 indirect connections between “preserving historical elements” and the value “meaning making.” This implies that during the laddering interview, when the researcher explored the cognitive categories related to “preserving historical elements,” respondents pointed out “meaning making” 10 times at the level of values.

TABLE 2 | The profile of study participants responding to mental involvement questionnaire (Zaichkowsky's questionnaire).

Variable		Percent
Gender	Female	53.7
	Male	44.9
Age	18–25	17.6
	26–34	41.9
	35–49	35.3
	50–59	4.4
Education	Elementary degree	1.5
	Middle school degree	0.7
	Diploma	25
	Associate	8.8
	BA/BSc	36.8
	MA/MSc	19.9
	Higher	5.9
Number of trips	Once	50
	Twice	11.8
	More than 3 times	36

4.1 | Means-End Chain 1

In total, this specific MEC includes 21 direct connections and 10 indirect connections, as indicated in Table 5. As depicted in Figure 1, the attribute “preserving historical and cultural elements” is linked to the consequence “preserving the originality and identity of the village.” Based on the experiences of rural tourism destinations, the respondents perceived that preserving historical and cultural elements such as old mosques, old castles, and special traditions of the villages is crucial in maintaining the real identity and originality of the villages. This, in turn, leads to the value of “meaning making” for tourists. The preservation of historical and cultural elements, along with its associated consequences and values, falls under the category of “socio-cultural development” dimension. The historical and cultural elements of villages serve as manifestations of the past lifestyle, originality, and identity of their residents. By preserving these elements, tourists are provided with the opportunity to

TABLE 3 | The attributes of participants responding means-end chain technique.

Variable		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	18	51.4
	Male	17	48.6
Age	18–25	2	5.7
	26–34	20	57.1
	35–49	9	25.7
	50–59	4	11.4
Education	BA/BSc	21	60
	MA/MSc	10	28.6
	PhD	4	11.4
Number of trips	Once	13	37
	Twice	7	20
	More than 3 times	15	43
Job	Government employee	19	54.3
	Self-employer	16	45.7

TABLE 4 | Summary of content codes.

Category type	Category	Frequency	Type of sustainability	Category type	Category	Frequency	Sustainability
Attributes	Unspoiled and natural landscape	35	Environmental development	Consequences	Tourists' stay	25	Socio-cultural development
	Healthy air	30			Convergence between the host society and tourists	26	
	Flora and fauna diversity	10			Familiarity with rural lifestyle	25	
	Various local products	15			Having more memorial experiences	16	
	Peace and comfort of village environment	20	Socio-cultural development		Feeling fresh	5	
	Simple living of villagers	12			Strengthening the nostalgic feeling	6	
	Hospitality and intimacy	28			Creating economic diversity	18	Economic development
	Safety of village	10			Packaging products	30	
	Local foods	8			Reconstructing traditional architecture	20	
	Social vitality	15			Entrepreneurship and job creation	30	
Consequences	Diversity of tourism attractions	13			Inexpensive tourism	10	
	Preserving historical and cultural elements	21		Values	Preserving the biodiversity of destination	20	Environmental development
	Handicrafts	25	Economic development		Preserving the quality of the environment	17	
	Accommodation experience (Ecotourism residence)	19			Cultural interaction and coexistence	19	Socio-cultural development
	Suitable costs and prices	13			Familiarity and learning	22	
	Infrastructure and welfare facilities	30			Meaning making	19	
	Traditional and simple texture of village	23			Loyalty to destination	30	
	Preserving natural capitals	26	Environmental development		Tourists' engagement	20	
	The peace and comfort of tourists	30	Socio-cultural development		Empowering local people	23	Economic development
	Preserving rural identity and originality	15			Poverty reduction	23	
	Being exciting	5			Ethical consumerism	19	
	Experiencing new tastes	5					

TABLE 5 | Means-end chains.

MEC1> : Preserving historical elements ➡ Meaning making = Socio-cultural dimension of sustainability					
Code	Preserving historical elements	Preserving the originality and identity of village	Meaning making	Total	
Preserving historical elements	0.0	11.10	0.10	11.10	
Preserving the originality and identity of village	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.10	
Meaning making	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
			Total	21.10	
MEC2: The peace of villages' environment ➡ Meaning making = Socio-cultural dimension of sustainability					
Code	Peace of village environment	Psychological peace of tourists	Meaning making	Total	
Peace of village environment	0.0	15.0	0.11	15.11	
Psychological peace of tourists	0.0	0.0	7.0	7.0	
Meaning making	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
			Total	22.11	
MEC3: Hospitality and friendliness ➡ Cultural interaction and coexistence = Socio-cultural dimension of sustainability					
Code	Hospitality and friendliness	Convergence between the guests and the host	Cultural interaction and coexistence	Total	
Hospitality and friendliness	0.0	18.0	0.15	18.15	
Convergence between the guests and the host	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	
Cultural interaction and coexistence	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
			Total	28.15	
MEC4: Hospitality and friendliness ➡ Tourists' involvement = Socio-cultural dimension of sustainability					
Code	Hospitality and friendliness	Getting memorable experiences	Tourists' involvement	Total	
Hospitality and friendliness	0.0	20.0	0.8	20.8	
Getting memorable experiences	0.0	0.0	6.0	6.0	
Tourists' involvement	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
			Total	26.8	

(Continues)

TABLE 5 | (Continued)

MEC5: Simple living and social vitality ➡ Familiarity and learning = Socio-cultural dimension of sustainability						
Code	Simple living	Social vitality	Familiarity with the lifestyle of villagers	Familiarity and learning	Total	
Simple living	0.0	0.0	8.0	0.5	8.5	
Social vitality	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.6	10.6	
Familiarity with the lifestyle of villagers	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.0	12.0	
Familiarity and learning	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
			Total		30.11	
MEC6: Natural and unspoiled landscape, healthy air, flora and fauna diversity ➡ Preserving biodiversity = Environmental dimension of sustainability						
Code	Flora and fauna diversity	Natural and unspoiled landscape	Healthy air	Preserving natural capitals	Preserving biodiversity	Total
Flora and fauna diversity	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.0	0.5	9.5
Natural and pristine landscape	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	0.7	20.7
Healthy air	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.0	0.5	12.5
Preserving natural capitals	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.15	0.15
Preserving biodiversity	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
				Total		41.32
MEC7: Old and simple texture of the village, preserving historical and cultural elements ➡ Preserving the quality of the environment = Environmental dimension of sustainability						
Code	Old and simple texture of the village	Preserving historical and cultural elements	Reconstructing traditional architecture	Preserving the quality of the environment	Total	
Old and simple texture of the village	0.0	0.0	13.0	0.10	13.10	
Preserving historical and cultural elements	0.0	0.0	9.0	0.6	9.6	
Reconstructing traditional architecture	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	

(Continues)

TABLE 5 | (Continued)

MEC7: Old and simple texture of the village, preserving historical and cultural elements ➡ Preserving the quality of the environment = Environmental dimension of sustainability					
Code	Old and simple texture of the village	Preserving historical and cultural elements	Reconstructing traditional architecture	Preserving the quality of the environment	Total
Preserving the quality of the environment	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total					32.16
MEC8: Various local products, handicrafts ➡ Ethical consumerism = Economic dimension of sustainability					
Code	Handicrafts	Various local products	Packaging	Ethical consumerism	Total
Handicrafts	0.0	0.0	15.0	0.9	15.9
Various local products	0.0	0.0	7.0	0.6	7.6
Packaging	0.0	0.0	0.0	21.0	21.0
Ethical consumerism	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total					43.15
MEC9: Accommodation experience, diversity of attractions, handicrafts ➡ Empowering local people = Economic dimension of sustainability					
Code	Accommodation experience	Diversity of attractions	Handicrafts	Entrepreneurship and job creation	Empowering local people
Accommodation experience	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.0	0.6
Diversity of attractions	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.0	0.5
Handicrafts	0.0	0.0	0.0	15.0	0.7
Entrepreneurship and job creation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.0
Empowering local people	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total					40.18

(Continues)

TABLE 5 | (Continued)

MEC10: Handicrafts ➡ Poverty reduction = Economic dimension of sustainability						
Code	Handicrafts	Economic diversification	Poverty reduction	Total		
Handicrafts	0.0	12.0	0.5	12.5		
Economic diversification	0.0	0.0	8.0	8.0		
Poverty reduction	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0		
			Total	20.5		
MEC11: Security, infrastructural and welfare facilities, costs, and ➡ loyalty to destination = Socio-cultural dimension of sustainability						
Code	Security	Infrastructural and welfare facilities	Costs and prices	Tourists' staying	Loyalty to destination	Total
Security	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.0	0.6	9.6
Infrastructural and welfare facilities	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0	0.15	25.15
Costs and prices	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.7	10.7
Tourists' staying	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	20.0
Loyalty to destination	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
			Total	64.28		

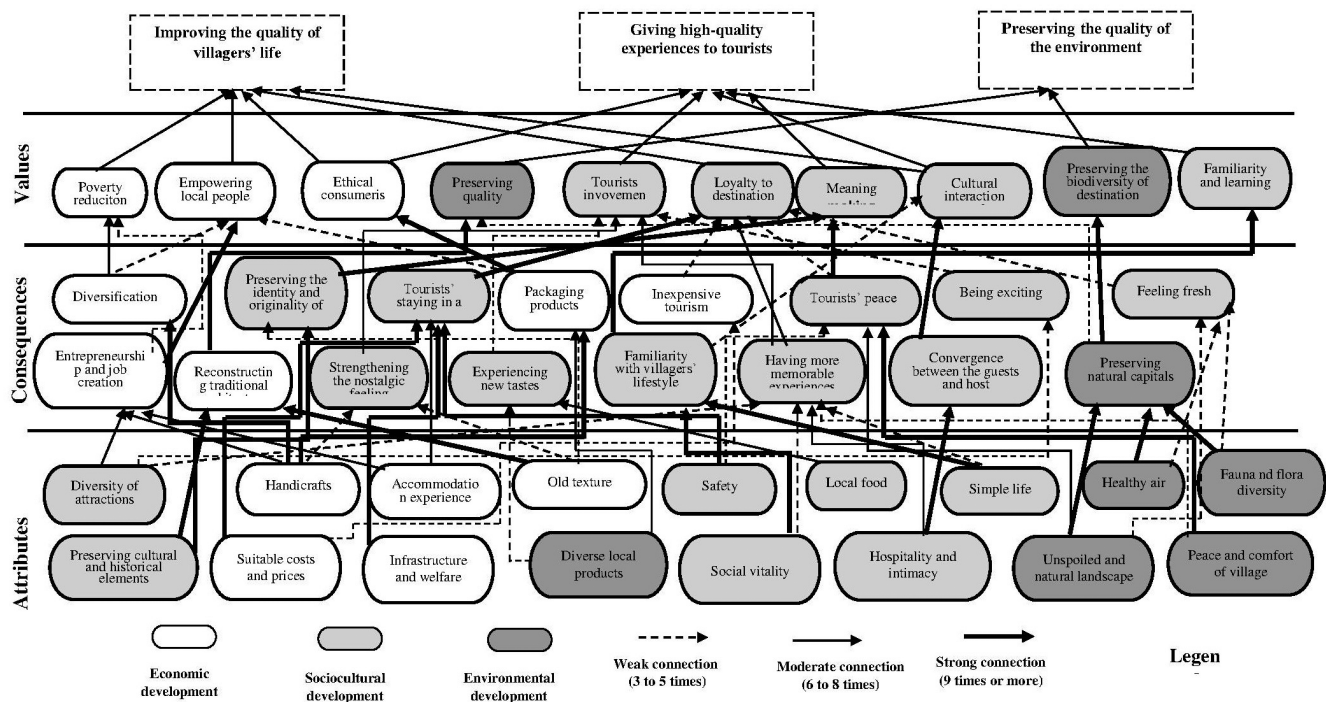


FIGURE 1 | Hierarchical value map of tourists' experience of destination.

experience a sense of meaning, reflect on the past, and perceive the authenticity and identity of the village. These experiences leave a lasting impression in tourists' minds, making their visit a memorable one. Many tourists who visit rural areas seek to reconnect with the identity and originality that have been overshadowed and forgotten in urban environments. Creating conditions in rural destinations that allow tourists to find meaning in the elements and lifestyle of the villages directly aligns with one of the principles of sustainable tourism development, which is providing high-quality experiences for tourists. When tourists can experience a genuine connection with the historical and cultural elements of the destination, it enhances the overall quality of their tourism experience.

4.2 | Means-End Chain 2

Chain 2, including 22 direct connections and 11 indirect connections, illustrates the strong linkage between the attribute of "peace and silence of village environment," the consequence of "peace and comfort of the tourist," and the value of "meaning making." "The attribute peace and silence of village environment" emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned attributes by the interviewees, and it is connected to the consequence "peace and comfort of the tourist." The tourists expressed that experiencing the "peace and quietness of the village environment" leads to a state of "psychological peace and comfort," which in turn, results in the value of "meaning making" for them. The tranquility and serenity of the rural environment provide a sense of comfort to the tourists, freeing them from the stresses and worries of urban life. The quietness of the rural setting allows tourists to reflect on the meaning of life and their own selves, leading to memorable and profound experiences. This state of peaceful contemplation contributes to the value of

"meaning making" for the tourists. As previously mentioned in Chain 1, when rural destinations offer an environment conducive to tourists finding meaning in life and their experiences, they effectively provide high-quality experiences. This aligns with one of the key principles of sustainable tourism development, which aims to deliver exceptional and meaningful experiences to tourists.

4.3 | Means-End Chain 3

Chain 3 is a significant MEC with 28 direct connections and 15 indirect connections. The attribute of "hospitality and friendliness" holds great importance for tourists visiting rural destinations, as 80% of the respondents mentioned this attribute. This attribute is linked to the consequence of "convergence between the guests and the host," which, in turn, leads to the fulfillment of the value of "cultural interaction and coexistence." This value is associated with the socio-cultural dimension of development. The hospitality and friendliness displayed by the villagers, reflecting their warm and welcoming behavior toward tourists, fosters a sense of convergence and camaraderie between the guests and the host community. This creates an atmosphere of harmony, reducing conflicts between tourists and local people. Consequently, this positive interaction results in the value of "cultural interaction and coexistence," promoting meaningful exchanges and communication between tourists and villagers. This value of cultural interaction and coexistence not only creates memorable experiences for tourists but also has a positive impact on the quality of life and cultural awareness of the local villagers. The formation of this positive cultural exchange leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures, enriching the overall tourism experience and fostering a sense of mutual respect.

4.4 | Means-End Chain 4

In MEC 4, a total of 26 direct connections and 8 indirect connections are observed. The attribute “hospitality and friendliness” in this chain is connected to two significant outcomes: “getting memorable experiences” and the value of “tourist involvement.” Through their hospitality and friendly communication with tourists, villagers create an environment that allows tourists to have memorable experiences. This warm and welcoming atmosphere not only helps tourists disconnect from the stresses of urban life but also encourages them to engage in a good communication with the rural lifestyle. As a result, tourists become mentally involved with the situation and feel a strong connection to the rural environment. The good communication established with the villagers may even lead tourists to participate in physical activities and assist in agricultural activities, further enhancing their involvement with rural life. This active involvement in rural activities contributes to tourists’ memorable experiences of rural areas. Consequently, the value of “tourist involvement” itself becomes a key element in providing high-quality experiences to tourists. Hospitality and friendliness, along with its consequence of “getting memorable experiences” and the value of “tourist involvement,” are situated within the socio-cultural dimension of development. This MEC highlights the significant role of the local community in shaping tourists’ experiences in rural areas.

4.5 | The Means-End Chain 5

This chain has 30 direct connections and 11 indirect connections. The attributes “simple living” and “social vitality” were mentioned by the interviewees and are linked to the consequence of “familiarity with the lifestyle of villagers.” This familiarity with the unique lifestyle of the villagers, characterized by their simple living and vibrant social vitality, is rarely experienced in urban areas. As tourists observe and become familiar with this distinctive lifestyle during their visit, it leads to the value of “familiarity and learning” among them. The contrast between the simplicity of rural living and the vibrant social connections of the villagers captivates tourists’ attention and stimulates their curiosity to learn more about this way of life. The process of watching and experiencing this lifestyle fosters a sense of familiarity and learning, leaving a memorable experience in the minds of the tourists. Understanding and learning about the villagers’ lifestyle provides tourists with valuable insights into a different way of living, enriching their overall travel experience.

4.6 | Means-End Chain 6

This chain includes 43 direct connections and 32 indirect connections. The attributes “natural and unspoiled landscape,” “healthy air,” and “flora and fauna diversity” hold significant importance for the participants. These attributes are unique features of rural areas and play a significant role in attracting tourists to these destinations. The most significant consequence of these attributes is “preserving natural capitals,” which, in turn, leads to the value of “preserving biodiversity.” Tourists are drawn to rural areas primarily to experience the green and healthy natural environment, which offers a stark contrast to the various forms of pollution prevalent in urban cities. These

attributes, along with their consequence and value, fall within the environmental dimension of development. By preserving the value of “biodiversity,” rural areas not only provide high-quality experiences to tourists but also actively contribute to the preservation of the environmental quality of the villages. This aligns with one of the key sustainable principles of tourism development—the conservation and protection of natural resources.

4.7 | Means-End Chain 7

This chain includes 32 direct connections and 16 indirect connections. The attributes “old and simple texture of the village” and “preserving historical and cultural elements” were highly valued and mentioned by the tourists. These attributes are closely linked to the consequence of “reconstructing traditional architecture,” which, in turn, leads to the value of “preserving the quality of the environment.” The tourists’ attention to the “old and simple texture of the village” and the efforts made to “preserve historical and cultural elements” indicate their appreciation for the originality and identity of the villages. These attributes evoke a sense of nostalgia and cultural significance, making them important aspects of the tourists’ experience. The consequence of “reconstructing traditional architecture” is a response to the tourists’ interest in preserving and reviving the historical and cultural heritage of the villages.

4.8 | Means-End Chain 8

This chain includes 43 direct connections and 15 indirect connections. The attributes “handicrafts” and “various local products” were highlighted by the interviewees and are closely connected to the consequence of “packaging” and the value of “ethical consumerism.” The existence of various local handicrafts and products in rural tourism destinations is seen as an appealing attribute by tourists. The respondents believe that if these products are appropriately packaged, they are more likely to purchase them from the villagers. This act of purchasing local products and handicrafts to support the local industry and preserve traditional crafts is known as “ethical consumerism.” By engaging in ethical consumerism and buying local products, tourists actively contribute to the improvement of the villagers’ quality of life. Supporting local businesses and industries helps enhance the economic livelihood of the villagers, leading to better opportunities and socio-economic development within the community. The value of “ethical consumerism” aligns with the goal of improving villagers’ quality of life, which is a vital aspect of sustainable tourism development.

4.9 | Means-End Chain 9

This chain includes 40 direct connections and 18 indirect connections. The attributes “handicrafts,” “diversity of attractions,” and “accommodation experience” were highlighted by many respondents and are connected to the consequence of “entrepreneurship and job creation” and the value of “empowering local

people.” Tourists participating in the study expressed their willingness to pay for high-quality products and experiences, which include various natural and man-made attractions, handicrafts, and experiencing rural ecotourism accommodations. These attributes play a crucial role in attracting tourists to rural destinations and enhancing their overall experience. The consequence of these attributes is “entrepreneurship and job creation.” When these attractions and accommodation experiences are present in the villages, it creates opportunities for local entrepreneurs to establish businesses and create jobs. This fosters economic empowerment within the local community, allowing them to take charge of their economic future. The value of “empowering local people” is strongly connected to the entrepreneurial and job opportunities created through these attributes.

4.10 | Means-End Chain 10

This chain includes 20 direct connections and 5 indirect connections. The attribute “handicrafts” was mentioned by respondents and is linked to the consequence of “economic diversification and poverty reduction” and the value of “poverty reduction.” Tourists expressed that purchasing handicrafts produced by the villagers is of significant importance to them, as these handicrafts serve as unique souvenirs representing the originality and identity of the rural tourism destinations. This appreciation and support for local handicrafts have a profound impact on the economic activities in rural areas. The presence of handicrafts in rural tourism destinations contributes to economic diversification within the local community. As tourists purchase these handmade products, it fosters economic opportunities for the local artisans and entrepreneurs, encouraging them to engage in various economic activities beyond traditional forms of income. The consequence of “economic diversification and poverty reduction” is closely tied to the value of “poverty reduction.”

4.11 | Means-End Chain 11

This chain includes 64 direct connections and 28 indirect connections. The attributes “infrastructural and welfare facilities,” “village security,” and “suitable costs and prices” were also mentioned by the tourists and are connected to the consequence of “sustainability” of tourists in the village, leading to the value of “loyalty to destination.” Tourists highlighted the importance of infrastructural and welfare facilities, such as well-maintained roads and parking lots, village security, and suitable costs and prices. These attributes play a vital role in creating a conducive environment for tourists to stay longer in rural areas. The consequence of these attributes is the “sustainability” of tourists in the village, which is manifested in their extended stays in the destination. When tourists find that the village offers convenient facilities, a safe environment, and reasonable costs, they are more likely to prolong their stay and fully immerse themselves in the rural experience. The consequence of “sustainability” leads to the value of “loyalty to destination.” When tourists have a positive and satisfying experience during their stay, they develop a sense of loyalty to the destination. This loyalty translates into their willingness to recommend the destination to others and consider revisiting the village in the future.

5 | Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between tourists’ memorable experiences in rural areas and the principles of sustainable tourism. The MEC technique was employed to identify the attributes, consequences, and values associated with these experiences, resulting in the establishment of 11 chains. The findings of the study revealed a total of 10 values that contribute to tourists’ memorable experiences in rural tourism destinations. These values include preserving biodiversity, maintaining the environmental quality, promoting cultural interaction and coexistence, fostering familiarity and learning, creating meaning, encouraging loyalty to the destination, enhancing tourists’ involvement, empowering local communities, reducing poverty, and promoting ethical consumerism. These values include a wide range of elements that have the potential to create diverse, attractive, and meaningful experiences for tourists. The alignment of these values with the dimensions of sustainable tourism development indicates that providing memorable experiences in rural destinations can positively impact the sustainability of the tourism industry. By incorporating and promoting these values, rural destinations can strive toward sustainable tourism practices, benefiting both the tourists and the local communities (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021a, 2021b).

Indeed, previous research highlights the significance of memorable experiences in creating a sense of attachment and belonging to a destination (Kastenholz, Marques, and Carneiro 2020; Vada, Prentice, and Hsiao 2019). When tourists feel connected to rural areas, they are more likely to contribute to the preservation and improvement of the sustainability of these destinations. This connection between memorable experiences, attachment to the destination, and sustainable tourism development is crucial for the long-term viability of rural areas. By prioritizing the creation of memorable experiences in rural destinations, sustainable tourism development can be fostered. This involves understanding and catering to the needs and preferences of tourists, as well as providing opportunities for meaningful and authentic experiences. The findings of the current study, which establish a comprehensive network of tourists’ cognitive aspects of memorable experiences, offer valuable insights for local and national tourism managers. With a focus on providing memorable experiences, rural destinations can enhance tourist satisfaction and ensure the long-term sustainability of their tourism offerings. By developing strategies that align with the identified attributes, consequences, and values associated with memorable experiences, tourism managers can create an environment that maximizes the potential for positive and lasting impressions on tourists. This, in turn, contributes to the overall sustainability of the destination and promotes the well-being and satisfaction of both tourists and local communities.

The attributes most frequently mentioned by respondents, such as the natural environment, handicrafts, welfare facilities, peace, and the preservation of historical and cultural elements, play a crucial role in enhancing tourists’ memorable experiences. Strengthening these attributes in rural destinations can not only increase tourist satisfaction and loyalty but also contribute to socio-economic and environmental development, ultimately leading to the sustainability of tourism in these areas. The analysis of

data from interviews further supports the notion that memorable experiences aligned with the principles of sustainability are the ones that remain in tourists' minds and are highly cherished. Thus, rural destinations that can cater to tourists' desires for peace, authentic culture, and the preservation of the destination's originality are likely to attract repeat visitors who contribute to the destination's long-term stability and preservation.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of creating and promoting memorable experiences in rural tourism destinations. By aligning these experiences with the principles of sustainability, rural areas can enhance their appeal to tourists, leading to increased visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Fostering sustainable tourism development can help rural destinations overcome sustainability challenges and pave the way for a thriving and sustainable tourism industry. By prioritizing the needs and desires of tourists and offering unique and meaningful experiences, rural destinations can build a loyal and supportive visitor base, contributing to the long-term viability and success of the local tourism industry.

6 | Conclusion and Implications

6.1 | Theoretical Implications

The relationship between tourists' memorable experiences and the enhancement of sustainable rural tourism principles has been given limited attention in the existing literature. While previous research has explored tourists' memorable experiences (Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick 2012), many of these studies have predominantly focused on the impact of experiences on future behavioral intentions (Chandralal and Valenzuela 2013; Gohary et al. 2020) or the development of scales to measure experiences (Chen and Rahman 2018; Kim 2014). This study aims to expand upon the existing literature by specifically examining the intersection between tourists' memorable experiences and the principles of sustainable rural tourism. By utilizing the MEC technique to extract notable experiences of tourists in rural destinations in Iran, this study goes beyond the scope of previous research. It identifies the attributes, consequences, and values associated with these memorable experiences, shedding light on how they can align with sustainability principles. This extension of theoretical understanding moves beyond the sole consideration of memorable experiences' impact on tourists' future behavioral intentions (Gohary et al. 2020).

Furthermore, this study adopts a multidimensional approach to comprehend sustainable rural tourism by exploring the interconnected aspects of tourists' memorable experiences. By examining the attributes, consequences, and values related to these experiences, the study transcends a singular focus on environmental sustainability (Breiby et al. 2020; Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris 2023). It offers a more comprehensive perspective, identifying 11 distinct MECs that drive tourists' memorable experiences in rural destinations, while also exploring how these experiences align with the core principles of sustainable tourism development in rural areas.

Additionally, existing research on tourists' memorable experiences in rural tourism contexts (e.g., Kastenholz et al. 2018; Ye

et al. 2021) has not thoroughly explored the comprehensive network of cognitive aspects that contribute to these experiences. This knowledge gap highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes and decision-making factors shaping tourists' memorable experiences in rural destinations. To bridge this gap, our study employs the MEC technique to establish a comprehensive framework of tourists' cognitive aspects in rural tourism. By identifying and examining the interconnected attributes, consequences, and values, we gain a holistic understanding of the factors that influence tourists' experiences in rural destinations.

Moreover, the study highlights the significance of emotional and transformative elements in shaping tourists' memorable experiences in rural destinations. By exploring the emotional connections, personal transformations, and authentic interactions associated with these experiences (Ye et al. 2021), the study deepens our understanding of the psychological and emotional dimensions of rural tourism (Kastenholz et al. 2018).

6.2 | Practical Implications

The findings of this study hold practical applications that can benefit managers and planners of rural tourism destinations. Understanding the remarkable attributes of tourists' memorable experiences in rural areas allows destination managers to provide desired services, leading to greater satisfaction and positive behavioral intentions among tourists. By emphasizing the obtained consequences and values, rural tourism destinations can move toward complete sustainable tourism development. Policy makers in rural tourism destinations can make more informed decisions by having precise information about tourists' interests and tastes, contributing to the flourishing of the rural tourism sector. Moreover, incorporating the identified attributes into marketing and advertising efforts for rural destinations creates a positive image in tourists' minds before their travels, attracting more visitors and enhancing the destinations' competitiveness in the tourism market. The main chains identified in this study can serve as a foundation for decision-making in rural destinations, helping them leverage their unique capacities and provide exceptional experiences to tourists. As this study addresses the perspectives of tourists on sustainable tourism development and their desired experiences, it contributes to the literature on this topic and provides valuable insights for local managers in addressing sustainable tourism challenges. By using the findings of this study, local managers can successfully market and advertise rural destinations, attracting more tourists and effectively addressing the challenges of sustainable tourism.

Tourism managers can use identified attributes like natural environment, handicrafts, welfare facilities, and historical elements to design tailored experiences aligned with tourists' interests. This enhances satisfaction, fosters attachment, and leads to increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. Sustainable tourism strategies are guided by MECs and associated values like preserving biodiversity, empowering local people, and ethical consumerism. Emphasizing hospitality and friendliness leads to positive outcomes like cultural interaction and coexistence. Local communities can actively engage with tourists, share traditions, and offer authentic rural lifestyle experiences.

Preserving natural landscapes and biodiversity requires collaboration between local authorities and tourism managers to implement eco-friendly practices and sustainable guidelines. Familiarity and learning play a role in preserving cultural heritage and traditional lifestyles. Communities can safeguard their identity, promote traditional craftsmanship, and share local customs to enrich tourists' experiences and preserve culture. Successful sustainable tourism relies on collaboration among local communities, tourism operators, and governmental authorities. Engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes fosters a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for rural tourism growth.

6.3 | Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was limited to 384 participants, potentially restricting the representativeness of the results. A larger and more diverse sample would offer a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' experiences and preferences in rural destinations. Additionally, the study focused on specific rural areas in Iran, namely Khorasan Razavi province, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other rural destinations with different cultural and geographical contexts. Comparing tourists' experiences in different rural destinations, both within Iran and across different countries, will provide valuable insights into cultural variations and the factors influencing memorable experiences in diverse settings. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data from questionnaires and interviews, introducing the possibility of response bias. Participants might provide socially desirable answers or inadvertently misrepresent their experiences. Moreover, the study's emphasis on tourists' memorable experiences may be influenced by memory bias, as participants may recall specific positive or negative experiences more vividly, potentially affecting the accuracy of their responses. The cross-sectional design of the study captured data at a specific point in time, which limits the ability to analyze changes in tourists' experiences over time. A longitudinal study could offer valuable insights into the evolution of tourists' perceptions and experiences in relation to sustainable tourism principles.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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