

Research on the Brand Construction of Rural Tourism in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region

Shuiling Wu, Chunze Ou*

Guangdong Ocean University, Yangjiang, Guangdong, 529500, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: As China strategically promotes the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas and accelerates the development of an agricultural powerhouse, there is also significant attention on the cultural and tourism aspects of rural revitalization. Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (hereinafter: GZAR), known for its ethnic diversity and renowned for rural tourism development in China, serves as a valuable reference for other regions in terms of rural tourism models. This study aims to explore brand building strategies for GZAR's rural tourism, analyze its current status and potential in the tourism market, and propose innovative methods for brand construction. Through literature review, field investigation, in-depth interviews, and case analysis, this paper will systematically examine the characteristics of GZAR's rural tourism resources while identifying existing issues related to "brand influence, professional talent, product attraction, cultural inheritance, and resource protection." Consequently, this study proposes exploratory measures such as enhancing brand awareness and strengthening brand construction among GZAR's rural tourism enterprises; improving talent training programs to establish a more proficient workforce within GZAR's rural tourism sector; innovating brand marketing and communication techniques to enhance the appeal of Guangxi's rural tourism products; reinforcing the preservation efforts towards GZAR's rural tourist resources while effectively safeguarding local ethnic cultures; all with an aim to promote sustainable development within Guangxi's rural tourism industry while enhancing its overall brand value.

Keywords: Guangxi Zhuang

**Autonomous Region; Rural Tourism,
Product Brand; Brand Building;
Sustainable Development**

1. Introduction

The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, as an important gathering place for ethnic minorities in China, plays a significant role in promoting the balanced economic development of the country and the unity of the nation and social stability. In recent years, in response to China's important strategic deployment of "comprehensively promoting rural revitalization and accelerating the construction of a strong agricultural country," a series of policies and measures have been formulated to vigorously promote the implementation of rural culture and tourism projects, and continuously advance the empowerment of rural revitalization through culture and tourism [1]. However, in the development process of rural tourism in GZAR, there are deficiencies in brand construction such as insufficient cultural connotation of tourism products, imperfect marketing system, and insufficient resource integration. Therefore, by analyzing the current development status and potential of GZAR's rural tourism in the tourism market, and exploring the brand-building strategies of rural tourism in GZAR, it is helpful to propose innovative methods for brand construction and promote the good development of rural tourism in GZAR.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Brand and Current Research Status

Brand is a multifaceted symbol that encompasses various components, including brand attributes, name, packaging, historical reputation, and more

[2]. In the context of rural tourism, the rural tourism brand integrates specific application scenarios related to rural production, living conditions, and ecology. The Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA) took the lead in applying brand theory to the field of tourism theory and practice at the "Tourism Market Branding" themed annual conference in 1998 [3]. Since then, research on tourism brands has gradually increased, and rural tourism, as an important field of the tourism industry, has also received more attention in terms of brand construction.

Under the extensive application of brand theory and the influence of rural tourism's rich scene characteristics, numerous research findings have emerged regarding the connotation and composition of rural tourism brands. These encompass studies from a brand construction perspective, which emphasize that key components of rural tourism brands include brand positioning and local identity cognition [4-6], brand strategy and promotion [7-9], as well as brand management [10,11].

Additionally, some scholars have taken the perspective of stakeholders in the tourism industry and argued that the connotation and composition of rural tourism brands should also consider the role of multiple stakeholders, including government guidance [12,13], residents' perceptions, tourists' interactions and experiences [14,15], and the role of tourism participants (small entrepreneurs and volunteers, etc.) in shaping rural tourism brands [16,17].

The rural tourism brand is a complex composite symbol that involves multiple stakeholders, including government, enterprises, residents, and tourists. It encompasses various aspects such as brand positioning, creation, promotion, and management. Brand positioning serves as the foundation by leveraging the destination's resources, products, and services to offer tourists a unique travel experience. The creation and promotion of rural tourism brands represent a concentrated embodiment of elements like name, logo design aimed at distinguishing it from other destinations while facilitating

recognition and satisfaction of spiritual enjoyment for tourists. Rural tourism brand management acts as the guarantee by managing the established brand in later stages to drive continuous development of the entire rural tourism destination management and enhance overall competitiveness.

2.2 Current Status of Rural Tourism Brand Research

Numerous research findings have been conducted on the current status and improvement strategies for rural tourism brand development, both domestically and internationally. Among them, foreign scholars have initiated research on rural tourism at an earlier stage, with recent emphasis placed on exploring countermeasures for enhancing rural tourism brand construction. Some scholars have highlighted the significant role of traditional production elements such as rural agricultural products in Japanese rural tourism's brand development [18]. Others have emphasized the importance of brand identification and positioning within destination branding strategies for rural tourist destinations by monitoring visitor perceived value [19]. Furthermore, certain researchers have identified that constructing a successful rural tourism brand necessitates enhancing the participation consciousness of development stakeholders (farmers) while strengthening local resource development (authenticity) [20]. Additionally, other studies have underscored the significance of spatial discourse in constructing not only regional but also national brands by examining how Japan's Nagano Tsumago Post Town and Bali's Penglipuran Village present their ethnic-rural images [21]. It is evident that when exploring measures to improve rural tourism branding efforts, scholars often approach this topic from perspectives centered around "people" and "things". This involves investigating various subjects' and elements' influence levels on rural tourism branding before proposing targeted improvement measures accordingly.

In terms of the development timeline of rural tourism, theoretical research and

practical exploration in China lag behind Western countries, particularly in the relatively late initiation of rural tourism brand construction. Currently, research on rural tourism brand construction primarily focuses on economic benefits while neglecting other aspects. Therefore, the exploration of rural tourism brand construction in China initially involved learning from foreign development experiences through comparative analysis and subsequently combining these findings with the current situation and challenges faced by rural tourism brand construction in China to propose contextually appropriate countermeasures. Among them, scholars generally believe that key issues within the current state of rural tourism brand construction in China include weak brand awareness, unclear positioning, lack of connotation, insufficient professional personnel for branding efforts, inadequate communication and innovation endeavors. Among them, some scholars have analyzed the developmental process of rural tourism branding in Japan and integrated it with the current status of rural tourism brand construction in China to propose that rural tourism brands should be established based on agricultural product branding. Furthermore, they suggest creating branded rural tourism products while preserving their inherent rural characteristics [22]. Some scholars, from the perspective of rural tourism industry development, emphasize the pivotal role of government in constructing rural tourism brands. They advocate for a comprehensive exploration of the cultural essence underlying these brands, establishing a clear market position, and implementing effective brand image construction [23]. Additionally, certain scholars have examined the brand value of rural tourism across different stages of development and emphasized the interplay between "visitor needs," "destination characteristics," and "destination core attractions." They put forth corresponding measures to enhance these brands [24]. Moreover, there are scholars who specifically exemplify the creation of rural tourism brands in southern Jiangsu province. They propose enhancing three aspects: service quality improvement; enriching brand cultural connotation; and refining brand image [25].

In summary, there have been many similar studies in the academic community, but it can be observed that in the current state and countermeasures analysis of rural tourism brand construction, whether from a macro perspective to study the overall rural tourism brand construction of the country, or from a micro perspective to put forward targeted brand construction countermeasures based on specific cases, or by summarizing the advanced rural tourism brand construction experience of foreign countries for learning, to some extent, they all point out the "common" problems in the process of rural tourism brand construction: namely, unclear positioning, insufficient connotation, and the need for innovative marketing. At the same time, the current scholars' ideas and achievements in exploring ways to enhance rural tourism brand construction are particularly concerned with the roles and impacts of various subjects (government, farmers, travelers) and various elements (such as rural industries, inns, and agricultural products) in the brand construction process. These will provide a clearer direction for further in-depth exploration and practice.

3. Theoretical Framework

Rural tourism, as a crucial element of the contemporary tourism industry, possesses the attributes of intangibility, unity of consumption and purchase, and non-storability. With the rapid advancement of tourism, there has been an emerging issue of homogenization in various regions' tourism products, which adversely impacts travelers' inclination to travel and hampers the sustainable development of local economies.

Therefore, exploring the construction of the GZAR rural tourism brand can effectively accentuate its core values, establish distinctive features, highlight its unique personality, and accomplish the objective of attracting consumers. By differentiating its products and services from competitors, it can foster a close relationship with tourists and guide their consumption behavior. To emphasize the local characteristics of GZAR rural tourism and create an iconic brand for this region, further exploration is necessary to unveil the exceptional allure based on place attachment theory.

Consequently, this study primarily discusses based on the theory of sense of place. The

sense of place theory originated from the academic concept of "topophilia," emphasizing the geographical behaviors, cultural attachments, and emotional connections between people and places [26,27]. The domestic tourism academic community started researching the sense of place relatively late. Scholars have successively explored the development, formation mechanisms, influencing factors, and object research of the sense of place theory from abroad, considering it a complex multidimensional structure, specifically including place attachment, place identity, place dependence, place significance, and a sense of belonging [28,29]. In addition, some scholars have divided the objects of sense of place research into "tourists, residents of tourist destinations, and tourist destinations" themselves, believing that the relationship among the three is interwoven and multi-leveled [30].

Guided by the theory of local identity, this study not only facilitates understanding of consumer willingness to consume tourism products and its emotional influencing factors, but also enhances the participation of resident-based producer groups in tourist destinations. Furthermore, it explores the integration of local emotions and imagery into tourism products, endowing them with rural cultural and emotional value connotations. Ultimately, this research provides feasible ideas for brand construction in GZAR rural tourism.

4. Analysis of the Current Status and Barrier Factors of Gzar Rural Tourism Brand

4.1 Current Status of Gzar Rural Tourism Brand

From the perspective of tourism resource endowment, GZAR possesses abundant rural tourism resources. It not only boasts world-class natural landscapes, distinctive coastal resources, globally renowned longevity resources, and the mysterious and diverse frontier features, but also possesses a variety of ethnic minority customs and characteristics. By 2024, GZAR boasts a total of 53 nationally recognized rural tourism key villages and towns, along with 5 integrated rural revitalization demonstration areas focusing on agriculture, culture, and tourism in GZAR.

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Additionally, there are 761 four-star or higher-rated rural tourism areas (farmhouse inns), as well as 49 ecological and cultural tourism demonstration towns and 399 ecological and cultural tourism demonstration villages. These achievements encompass various prefecture-level cities such as Nanning, Liuzhou, and Guilin. Moreover, several bases have been established to showcase China's rural tourism entrepreneurship potential including the Longsheng Longji Terrace Scenic Area and Yangshuo Aishanmen Village. The total number of rural tourists in GZAR reached 250 million in 2023, representing an impressive increase of 85.5% compared to the previous year. Additionally, the revenue generated from rural tourism amounted to approximately 22.65 billion yuan, reflecting a substantial growth rate of 78.3%.

According to statistics provided by the Department of Culture and Tourism of GZAR, there are a total of 715 rural tourism areas (agritainment) in GZAR that have been awarded a four-star rating or higher. The towns of Guling Town in Mashan County, Nanning City; Zhongdu Town in Luzhai County, Liuzhou City; Dayu Town in Lingchuan County, Guilin city were recognized as the initial group of national rural tourism key towns (townships). Additionally, Zhongliang Village in Xixiangtang District, Nanning City and Pinglin Village in Bama Yao Autonomous County, Hechi City were acknowledged as part of the second batch of national rural tourism key villages. Furthermore, Lujia Village located within Xiufeng District is among the first set of 16 characteristic villages established across GZAR.

In recent years, the rural homestay industry in the entire district has experienced significant growth, witnessing an increase of over 10,000 diverse homestays. Among them, three have been recognized as Grade A tourist accommodations and another three as Grade B establishments. These thriving homestay enterprises have played a pivotal role in fostering rural revitalization and elevating the industry's standards. It can be asserted that rural tourism has emerged as a crucial catalyst for local economic development and rural rejuvenation within GZAR presently. Consequently, exploring strategies to enhance the branding, specialization, and concentration of rural tourism across the entire district has

become a paramount subject of scholarly discourse.

4.2 Analysis of Brand Building Problems in Gzar Rural Tourism

4.2.1 The Brand Influence of Gzar Rural Tourism Enterprises Is Insufficient

Despite the current relatively stable performance of rural tourism in GZAR, the overall rural tourism industry still remains fragmented and underdeveloped, lacking enterprises with influential brands and lacking strong competition from leading rural tourism enterprises.

On one hand, the rural tourism industry in GZAR exhibits a small industrial scale, simple industrial chain, dispersed layout, and predominantly comprises numerous small and medium-sized tourism enterprises as well as individual households. This organizational structure is relatively loose and results in limited foreign exchange earnings from tourism, leading to unsatisfactory performance.

On the other hand, representative enterprises in GZAR's rural tourism sector lack strong leadership roles and operate with a single business model that fails to meet the requirements of economies of scale. These enterprises do not possess prominent benchmark advantages or strong market competitiveness. Additionally, there is a poor sense of cooperation among them, hindering the establishment of sustainable long-term cooperative relationships with both local and external tourism enterprises. Consequently, they have been unable to establish a relatively stable source of tourists or harness the dividends of tourism effectively. As a result, this sector lacks the driving force necessary for innovative development within the industry and has yet to achieve true "big tourism" patterns.

Furthermore, the level of marketization in rural tourism in GZAR is relatively low, and there exists a lack of awareness and initiative among tourism enterprises to integrate into the market. The coordination between market segmentation and differentiated strategies in rural tourism is inadequate, while promotional methods remain limited. Enterprises fail to effectively attract customers based on their unique characteristics, resulting in weak marketing efforts and consequently a

diminished market share.

4.2.2 Lack of Professional Talents for Rural Tourism Brand Construction in Gzar

With the continuous evolution of the "tourism+" and "+tourism" phenomena, the tourism industry is undergoing a gradual transformation in terms of its scope and depth, leading to an increasingly blurred demarcation between tourism and other sectors. Consequently, the advancement of brand establishment within rural tourism in GZAR necessitates highly proficient professionals with multidisciplinary expertise.

Tourism talent is crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainable development of the tourism industry. Currently, there is a dearth of professional and innovative talents in rural tourism in GZAR, particularly evident in the scarcity of skilled tourism administrative personnel and enterprise managers. Challenges include an inadequate talent pool, an imbalanced talent structure, and uneven distribution of talents. Notably, there is insufficient focus on building high-quality tourism teams. Furthermore, there lacks a unified and scientifically recognized standard for assessing tourism talents, resulting in limited recognition for such individuals. Additionally, the absence of specialized policies to attract tourism talents contributes to their insufficient recruitment.

Furthermore, the establishment of a comprehensive training system for the rural tourism industry in GZAR is still pending, and there exists a lack of close collaboration between enterprises and tourism colleges regarding talent development. The process of integrating production, learning, and research is relatively sluggish, while the human resource management system remains immature. Moreover, existing tourism managers often exhibit deficiencies in professional knowledge and advanced management experience. In the absence of adequate professional support, workforce mobility tends to be high with insufficient training in essential business skills during operations. Consequently, this leads to irregular daily management practices within rural tourism establishments in GZAR, resulting in subpar business operations and diminished service quality that impedes long-term sustainable growth within the tourism industry.

4.2.3 The Appeal of Rural Tourism Products in Gzar Is Inadequate

The rural tourism products in GZAR lack distinctive brand features as a whole, and their thematic positioning is limited. There exists intense price competition, with a dearth of tourism products showcasing core attractions. Particularly, high-quality rural tourism destinations are scarce in terms of flagship products and main projects that stand out. Widespread issues include low visibility and the inability to harness brand effects.

Secondly, the rural tourism in GZAR has not fully harnessed the intrinsic brand essence of its cultural and tourism resources, thereby failing to clearly reflect its cultural significance. The integration of geographical and cultural characteristics from different rural areas in GZAR with its cultural and tourism resources has not been effectively accomplished, particularly in terms of product branding positioning. Consequently, there is a relative weakness in brand positioning resulting in significant homogeneity issues that obscure the distinctive features of GZAR's rural tourism destinations. Moreover, the products offered are relatively limited and fail to cater to the diverse needs of tourists, especially those traveling from distant locations; thus diminishing their maximum appeal.

4.2.4 The Erosion of Ethnic and Folk Cultures In Rural Tourism in Gzar

There are numerous ethnic villages in GZAR that possess distinct local cultures, which present an advantageous opportunity for the development of rural and ethnic tourism. However, these villages are situated in remote areas with intricate terrain and limited transportation infrastructure, resulting in economic impoverishment. With the rapid pace of urbanization, young laborers from these villages often opt to seek employment opportunities in cities due to insufficient allure within their communities. Consequently, there is a looming risk of cultural discontinuity and loss among ethnic minorities' heritage. Simultaneously, certain ethnic villages have succumbed to excessive commercialization following tourism development without establishing a virtuous cycle between the tourism economy and cultural preservation efforts. The endeavor to excavate and showcase cultural heritage remains inadequate

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while external influences continue to impact the original culture, leading to alterations in local residents' production methods and lifestyles that compromise the authenticity of ethnic minority culture. The threat of cultural alienation during the process of tourism development is escalating, thereby diluting regional characteristics. Additionally, conflicts arising from disparities in distributing tourism benefits have strained relations between locals and tourists, impeding efforts towards community coordination and ultimately hindering overall progress within this sector. As a result, rural tourism in GZAR has predominantly been characterized by scattered attractions lacking cohesive branding initiatives or a unified brand image.

4.2.5 The Conservation Efforts for Rural Tourism Resources in Gzar Are Inadequate.

Here are abundant high-quality tourism resources in rural areas of GZAR, and their development process brings about evident economic benefits. However, the environmental impact of tourism is not adequately valued, resulting in an imbalance between economic development and environmental protection. Insufficient allocation of tourism interests for sustainable development, inadequate efforts to protect tourism resources, and insufficient implementation of protective measures have hindered the sustainable development of tourism.

Especially in rural tourism destinations, inadequate environmental management systems have resulted in chaotic tourism development and construction that deviates from unified planning. Timely disposal of tourism waste is lacking, leading to poor sanitary conditions that diminish tourists' travel satisfaction and tarnish the reputation of the destination. Additionally, there is a prevalent practice of demolishing old buildings and replacing them with modern reinforced concrete structures in ethnic tourism villages. This not only erodes traditional architectural landscapes but also disrupts the consistent aesthetic appeal of the destination, potentially creating disharmony for visitors.

5. Strategies for Brand Construction of Rural Tourism in Gzar

5.1 Enhance Brand Awareness and Fortify the Brand Construction of Rural Tourism Enterprises

GZAR rural tourism enterprises should enhance their brand awareness and actively collaborate with the government through guidance and market operations, leveraging government-related policy support and incentive measures to establish a shared understanding of brand building between the government and enterprises. By formulating a comprehensive long-term brand development strategy, clarifying brand positioning, and shaping a distinctive rural tourism brand with GZAR characteristics, these enterprises can further shape a unique brand image through innovative differentiation strategies.

Additionally, active engagement in inter-enterprise cooperation and exchange, establishment of a cooperative network for strategic brand development, sharing of resources for brand building, and joint promotion can foster the formation of a robust industrial cluster that enhances overall competitiveness and market share

5.2 Reinforce the Cultivation and Recruitment of Talents to Establish a More Robust Team of Professional Rural Tourism Personnel in Gzar

The development of rural tourism in GZAR should actively strengthen cooperation with higher education institutions through the establishment of relevant professional courses, the creation of tourism talent training bases, and the cultivation of composite talents that align with industry demands. Simultaneously, it is essential to implement a talent inflow plan by offering preferential policies and creating a favorable development environment, such as scholarships, internship opportunities, and career advancement plans. This will attract exceptional rural tourism professionals from other provinces and municipalities to contribute to the GZAR rural tourism industry. Additionally, proactive measures can be taken to conduct training programs related to rural tourism management and professional skills in collaboration with expert think tanks like universities. These initiatives aim to enhance the proficiency levels and service standards of existing personnel.

5.3 Enhanced Brand Marketing and

Communication Strategies for Promoting the Appeal of Gzar Rural Tourism Products through Innovation

The rural tourism products in GZAR should enhance the comprehensive development of their own rural tourism resources and create tourism products with distinctive regional characteristics. By thoroughly exploring the potential of local cultural and natural resources, it is possible to develop tourism projects and experiential activities that embody local features.

Furthermore, modern marketing methods can be employed by utilizing digital tools and social media platforms to establish close collaborative relationships with travel agencies, online travel agencies (OTAs), and other partners. This will help enhance the online visibility and brand influence of GZAR's rural tourism sector, expand targeted marketing efforts, promote storytelling through emotional marketing strategies, and ultimately increase product appeal. Simultaneously, continuous innovation in both products and services is necessary to cater to diverse tourist demands, elevate overall tourism experiences, as well as avoid homogeneous competition.

5.4 Strengthen the Protection of Rural Tourism Resources in Gzar and Effectively Preserve and Transmit Rural Ethnic and Folk Culture

While promoting rural tourism in GZAR, it is crucial to effectively develop and utilize rural tourism resources for the preservation and transmission of local ethnic culture. This can be accomplished through the establishment of cultural heritage protection zones, provision of support to intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and integration of diverse ethnic cultural elements into tourism activities to facilitate an authentic local cultural experience for tourists. Simultaneously, it is essential to ensure that local communities benefit from this process, fostering a virtuous cycle of cultural preservation and sustainable tourism development.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the current state of rural tourism in GZAR presents numerous challenges pertaining to brand influence, professional talent, product attractiveness, cultural heritage, and resource preservation. These issues

significantly impede the development potential and market competitiveness of rural tourism in GZAR and necessitate comprehensive strategies for resolution.

Therefore, it is imperative to enhance brand awareness and fortify the branding efforts of rural tourism enterprises in GZAR as a means to further advance its brand construction and development. Additionally, there is a need to prioritize talent training and recruitment initiatives aimed at expanding the professional workforce dedicated to rural tourism in GZAR. Furthermore, innovative approaches towards brand marketing and communication are essential for augmenting the appeal of products associated with rural tourism in GZAR. Lastly, safeguarding and preserving the resources integral to rural tourism in GZAR must be prioritized alongside effective measures for protecting and perpetuating ethnic traditions and folk culture.

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