

Research on the Brand Construction of Rural Educational Tourism in Hailing Island

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Abstract: With the transformation and upgrading of China's tourism industry, coupled with an increasing emphasis on quality education, educational tourism has emerged as a prominent research topic in domestic tourism. Rural educational tourism, as a nascent branch of educational tourism, amalgamate the characteristics of rural tourism and educational tourism to offer tourists opportunities for experiential learning and inquiry-based exploration using rural resources. Despite rapid development in the educational tour industry, there exist regional imbalances and internal disparities that necessitate brand building efforts to foster long-term growth. Hailing Island, an area abundant in unique cultural and ecological resources, exhibits immense potential for developing rural educational tourism; however, it currently faces challenges such as inadequate transportation infrastructure, limited information dissemination channels, and outdated marketing strategies. By applying the "brand gene" theory, this research explores a path towards establishing a strong brand identity for rural educational tourism in Hailing Island through measures including clarifying brand positioning, innovating product development approaches, implementing effective marketing strategies, and fostering community participation management. These initiatives aim to enhance brand awareness while facilitating seamless integration between rural tourism and educational tourism to drive economic development in rural areas and contribute to their revitalization.

Keywords: Rural Educational Tourism; Brand Building; Hailing Island; Brand Gene

1. Introduction

In recent years, educational tours have emerged as a significant topic in domestic tourism research due to the transformation and upgrading of China's tourism industry, along with the government's increasing emphasis on quality education [1]. These tours serve as a catalyst for reforming quality education and offer a novel approach to exploring the transformation of tourism. Simultaneously, rural tourism has witnessed substantial growth alongside the continuous development of rural construction in China. This sector has partially adapted to meet the rising consumer demand for short-distance leisure and vacation trips among urban residents, thereby enhancing their quality of life. Furthermore, it plays a pivotal role in promoting rural industrial prosperity and revitalization.

Nowadays, rural educational tourism as a new direction of integration for the rural tourism industry, is based on the consideration of the rich educational resources in rural areas. Whether it is the unique rural folk culture or the ecological environment that is different from the urban scenery, it can provide the necessary tourism resources for educational tour development. On the other hand, it is based on the needs of tourism consumers. With the continuous development of social economy and the continuous promotion of urbanization, the problems of space compression in rural areas and the impact of rural culture caused by new urbanization are increasingly being paid attention to. More and more tourists are eager to seek spiritual comfort in the fast-paced era through rural "slow" educational tours.

Despite the increasing popularity of educational tours in general, there still exist certain deficiencies in their development, including regional and industry disparities, inadequate recognition of educational tour enterprises and products, as well as a lack of clear awareness among tourists. Therefore, it is

imperative to establish a strong brand image for rural educational tourism to facilitate the sustainable growth of the educational tour industry.

2. Current Research Status at Home and Abroad

The concept of rural educational tourism lacks a unified definition in the academic community, both domestically and internationally. Drawing on previous research, this paper proposes the following definition: rural educational tourism refers to a purposeful journey that combines research and inquiry-based learning, with rural areas as the destination and rural tourism resources as its foundation. The main attractions of such travel include local customs, natural scenery, among others.

2.1 Research on Rural Educational Tourism: Current Domestic and International Studies

Among them, the academic community has extensively examined the theoretical foundation of educational tours, encompassing their definition and connotation. Consequently, research on rural educational tourism primarily emphasizes the integration of exploration and practical application. The key accomplishments in this field by both domestic and foreign scholars are concentrated in the following areas:

Firstly, Zhao Wen Dong, Chen Ya Pin, and Wang Jun Hui (2020) employed the "four-layer integrated" analysis method to explore and harness the abundant rural educational tourism resources of the Hani terraced fields from a geographical perspective. They initiated their investigation by considering four layers encompassing natural geographical elements, livelihoods, institutions, and culture [2]. Conversely, D. CaPrar et al. (2011) combined education tourism with rural tourism based on differentiation theory. By integrating natural resources found in rural areas with farmers' lives and activities such as flower display courses, crop learning courses, and farm cooking courses; they designed distinctive rural tourism products that delved into the educational and cultural functions of these regions. This approach created a positive agricultural image for tourists originating from urban as well as rural environments [3]. Furthermore, studies have also explored the

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exploration and utilization of rural educational tourism resources through market supply-demand perspectives primarily focusing on "resource supply exploration" and "market demand research". Among them is Zang Lina and Ren Qian's (2017) proposal that educational tourism development should be harmonized with local tourism resources while considering aspects like resource evaluation, market positioning, product development, interpretation systems promotion/marketing strategies along with guarantee mechanisms [4]. From a market demand research standpoint McGladdery C.F. et al.'s (2017) analysis of South African high school students' educational tourism needs led to corresponding market development strategies being proposed [5], whereas Bpp Learning Media's (2011) demand analysis of student groups aimed at exploring logical relationships behind educational tourism market development etc., was conducted [6].

Furthermore, the development of domestic educational travel relies heavily on policy support. Upon reviewing the relevant policies implemented in our country, it becomes evident that most of them are focused on promoting educational travel in primary and secondary schools. Consequently, current academic efforts in rural educational tourism course construction primarily concentrate on designing courses and evaluating their effectiveness at these educational levels. For instance, scholars Chen Yingying and Lin Derong (2020) conducted a theoretical analysis to identify the reasons behind conducting educational travel and subsequently developed a theoretical framework to elucidate its learning mechanism, thereby providing valuable guidance for achieving educational goals through educational travel [7]. Additionally, other scholars emphasize integrating local rural educational tourism resources and exploring various dimensions of course content. Scholars Cui Yongqian and Cui Runyu (2021), for example, examined Jingtangshan's red-themed educational travel activities as an illustrative case to propose integrating red-themed tourism resources into curriculum design and establishing dedicated research centers for studying course content and constructing suitable bases for educational travels [8].

Thirdly, research should be conducted on the

establishment of rural educational tourism bases. With the increasing popularity of educational travel activities, different regions have capitalized on their resource advantages and developed study bases that are tailored to local conditions. For instance, Ding Yunchao (2018) and Yang Yongfeng, Yuan Jun et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of building study bases based on rural tourism resources and organizing study activities that showcase distinctive local characteristics to foster sustainable economic development[9,10]. Wu Qing and Hou Pei et al. (2020) propose a development plan for rural educational tourism bases in Huilong Town, Guangdong Province, which follows a "core-ring-multiple points" approach and focuses on core-driven development with radiating effects across multiple locations by classifying and qualitatively evaluating the educational resources available in ancient villages within Huilong Town [11].

Furthermore, in the realm of rural educational tourism, researchers have conducted practical explorations to address the developmental challenges and propose corresponding measures. Notably, scholars such as Zhang Quanwu (2018), Xu Mingbo (2019), Wu Junhe (2020), among others, have shed light on the current state of educational tour development across different regions[12-14]. They have emphasized issues like inadequate overall planning, insufficient funding and management mechanisms. Consequently, they advocate for further theoretical research to strengthen the foundation and improve top-level design planning. Additionally, Ma Bo and Liu Meng (2020) have analyzed the attributes, systematics, and tourism aspects of educational tours for junior and middle school students from a theoretical perspective. Their analysis underscores that successful tourism development in this domain necessitates collaboration among multiple departments[15].

2.2 The Current Research Status of Rural Tourism Brand Construction in Domestic and International Contexts

Brand construction refers to the strategic process undertaken by brand owners to establish a favorable brand image through meticulous planning, design, management, and promotion. This aims at augmenting product popularity and expanding market share by

leveraging brand awareness, thereby fostering loyal consumer groups and achieving enhanced profitability returns[16].

Among them, the brand represents a multifaceted symbol encompassing brand attributes, name, packaging, historical reputation, and other elements[17]. The concept of branding was initially introduced by TTRA (Travel and Tourism Research Association) during the "Branding in Tourism Marketing" conference in 1998 [18]. This declaration marked the application of branding theory to both tourism theory and practice. Subsequently, research on tourism branding has witnessed significant growth. In particular, rural educational tourism - an emerging field within the tourism industry - involve the integration of rural production, living conditions, and ecological specific application scenarios based on this foundation.

Firstly, according to the definition and connotation of brand building, scholars such as Fiona Wheeler et al. (2011), Dong Wenjing and Wang Changsen (2018), Jiang Qin and Wu Xuecheng (2019) have emphasized the need for rural tourism brand building to integrate consumers' multi-perspective experiences, comprehend consumer brand cognition, and clarify brand positioning [18-20]. Secondly, based on this foundation, scholars including Bodil (2014), Ran Yan (2015), Deng Shidian, Guo Qingguo, Zhou Jianming (2018), as well as Jiang Zhi, Ma Jun, Huang Jingfan (2019) have further enriched the connotation of rural tourism brand building by highlighting the significance of brand strategy elements encompassing promotion and management[21-24].

Furthermore, in the context of rural tourism brand construction, it is crucial to consider the perspectives of various stakeholders. Notably, Zhao Aimin, Chen Chen, Huang Qianqian (2016), and Chen Bo (2020) have emphasized the role of government guidance stakeholders[25,26]. Additionally, Wang H., Xiong L., and R. Gage (2021), as well as Lu Zhengying, Zhang Wei, and Tang Jing (2009), have highlighted the significance of residents and tourists as stakeholders by emphasizing resident perception, tourist interaction, and experience in brand construction[27,28]. Moreover, Broegaard RB (2020) and Cheng Qian (2020) have underscored the influence of small-scale entrepreneurs and volunteers as

key tourism stakeholders in shaping rural tourism brands[29,30].

Thirdly, strategic research on brand building is crucial. It primarily focuses on the challenges faced during brand establishment and proposes solutions to mitigate external influences that may impact the brand's reputation. Cui Guangye and Ma Longlong (2020) suggest establishing a brand synergy system[31]. Ana et al. (2013) emphasize the significance of brand identity and positioning in rural tourism destination branding strategy by assessing tourists' perceived value[32]. Sonia Catrina (2016) highlights the necessity of enhancing farmers' participation consciousness and developing local resources to construct a successful rural tourism brand, particularly in exploring Romania's authenticity[33]. Furthermore, scholars such as Zhou Jianming and Guo Qingguo et al., 2015 argue that strengthening brand involvement is essential in addressing trust crises and maintaining effective brand construction[34].

In summary, extensive research findings on brand building and tourism brand building have been conducted both domestically and internationally. These findings will provide clear directions for further academic exploration and practical implementation of the brand construction of rural educational tourism on Hailing Island. Similarly, the branding of rural educational tourism is a complex composite symbol that involves multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, enterprises, residents, and tourists. It encompasses various aspects such as brand positioning, brand creation, brand promotion, and brand management. Among these elements, brand positioning serves as the foundation by leveraging the destination's own resources, products, and services to offer unique travel experiences to tourists. The process of creating and promoting the rural educational tourism brand represents a concentrated embodiment of different elements like name selection, logo design, and overall destination aesthetics. This aims to differentiate it from other tourist destinations while facilitating easy recognition or satisfying spiritual enjoyment for visitors. Furthermore, rural educational tourism brand management acts as a guarantee by effectively managing the established brand in later stages. This ensures that the overall management of the rural educational tourism destination

continues to develop continuously, enabling enhanced competitiveness.

2.3 Literature Review of Existing Studies

Currently, within the academic community in China, 2016 is widely acknowledged as the year when educational tourism began to gain attention, while 2018 marked its significant growth[35]. In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in academic research on topics such as "educational tourism," "rural educational tourism," and "brand building." However, this research is constrained by its relatively late start and limited exploration of rural educational tourism. Furthermore, there is a need for further investigation into the deep integration of "rural tourism" and "educational tourism." On another note, it is crucial for stakeholders involved in rural educational tourism (such as educational tour enterprises and rural areas) to capitalize on current policy advantages by fully developing rural educational tourism resources. This will not only promote economic development but also drive rural revitalization. Therefore, exploring effective strategies to establish a stronger brand presence for rural educational tourism becomes imperative amidst an increasingly competitive landscape.

3. Analysis of the Current educational of Rural Educational Tourism on Hailing Island

Hailing Island is situated in the southwest coast of Guangdong Province, close to the Pearl River Delta, and holds a strategic position in Guangdong's west within Yangjiang City. It not only ranks as the fourth largest island in Guangdong Province but also stands among China's top ten most beautiful islands. Moreover, it boasts numerous distinctive rural research and educational tourism resources including Gu Liao Village (an ancient village from the Song Dynasty with a rich historical background), Ping Lan Village (a wetland mangrove forest characterized by its excellent ecological conditions), and Shan Di Ancient Village (a thriving B&B town with unique features). Additionally, being an important node on the ancient Silk Road, Hailing Island possesses exceptional Maritime Silk Road culture along with remarkable Dan family culture that has garnered significant attention from esteemed

educational tourism institutions. Consequently, several research and study bases have been established.

However, due to its historical emergence as a coastal tourist destination, Hailing Island encounters challenges in the development of rural educational tourism, including transportation inconveniences and limited information and communication infrastructure. Moreover, despite possessing abundant resources for rural educational tour development, Hailing Island relies predominantly on traditional offline promotion and marketing techniques, lacking notable achievements in brand establishment and consequently failing to gain recognition within Guangdong Province or even nationwide.

Therefore, as a representative case study for rural educational tourism destinations, Hailing Island possesses the potential to positively impact the long-term development of local rural educational travel. By analyzing and summarizing its developmental and branding experiences, this research not only contributes to the formulation of new strategies and ideas for local brand construction but also provides valuable experiential references and theoretical foundations for similar initiatives in other regions.

4. Theoretical Foundations and Strategies for Establishing the Rural Educational Tourism Brand in Hailing Island

The "Brand Gene" theory is a composite theory that integrates the brand theory of marketing with the gene theory of cell biology and applies it to industrial management, cultural management, etc. The concept of brand gene represents an information system associated with products and holds significant cultural significance in brand management. It encompasses multiple genetic information from product genes and cultural genes, serving as the fundamental basis for determining brand evolution [36]. Therefore, the application of brand gene theory is crucial in the process of rural study tourism brand construction on Hailing Island. It is essential to initially identify and further refine the unique genetic makeup of the rural study tourism industry in this region, and subsequently integrate the theory of brand gene into practical implementation for accelerating the establishment of effective branding effects.

This approach will enable rural study tourism to possess a distinctive genetic composition, thereby facilitating its sustainable development. The following specific aspects can be explored:

The first step is to explore the brand positioning and core brand attributes of rural educational tourism in Hailing Island. Leveraging the abundant rural educational and tourism resources available, the brand positioning should effectively capitalize on the advantages of rural resource endowments, harnessing the inheritance of core brand attributes rooted in Maritime Silk Road culture and Dan family culture. By integrating rural tourism with educational tours, a comprehensive experiential model encompassing both education and tourism can be created.

The second objective is to develop and innovate research and educational travel products centered around the core gene of Hailing Island rural research and educational travel, in order to enhance its brand influence. In comparison with traditional research and educational travel routes, Hailing Island rural research and educational travel should focus on the development of its cultural core gene's connotation, providing tourists with profound cultural cultivation and appropriate services. Therefore, specific considerations can be made to organize the development of unique cultural research and educational travel experiences such as "Dream Walking on the Maritime Silk Road and Reviving the Dong Family Wedding. Thirdly, the brand gene marketing strategy and promotion for rural educational tourism on Hailing Island should be implemented to enhance the quality of educational travel services. Corresponding service standards need to be formulated as well. By precisely segmenting the consumption groups for rural educational tourism on Hailing Island, differentiated brand gene marketing strategies can be adopted, and the themes of educational travel can be refined. The optimization of combining educational travel products with supply should also take place, integrating the core gene of local distinctive cultural brands in order to improve the quality of rural educational tourism services.

The fourth step involves establishing a collaborative management mechanism that encourages community participation and

stakeholder engagement in rural educational tourism on Hailing Island, while embracing the principles of sustainable development and environmental protection. In order to effectively uphold the brand construction and development of rural educational tourism on Hailing Island, it is imperative to ensure the rational preservation and scientific utilization of the island's original ecological educational environment. Therefore, active involvement from the community and concerted efforts from stakeholders are essential for sustaining the brand development of rural educational tourism on Hailing Island.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, the theory of brand gene suggests that the development of rural educational tourism on Hailing Island should focus on refining its core brand gene, which encompasses the unique cultural genes of both Maritime Silk Road culture and Dong family culture. Therefore, leveraging rural resource endowments to develop a distinctive brand positioning for rural educational tourism is crucial. Based on this, a differentiated brand gene marketing strategy should be adopted to innovate tourism products in Hailing Island. Furthermore, community participation and stakeholder engagement are essential for promoting continuous development of rural educational tourism.

Based on the aforementioned research, on one hand, through an exploration of the pertinent issues surrounding rural educational tourism on Hailing Island, we can unearth and develop a greater wealth of educational resources within this domain. This will enable the younger generation to better immerse themselves in traditional rural culture and agricultural civilization during their engagement with rural educational tourism. Consequently, they will acquire knowledge that extends beyond what is imparted solely by schools, families, and society at large. Moreover, this will facilitate the optimization of educational outcomes.

On the other hand, by delving into brand construction within rural educational tourism, we can also encourage scholars to contemplate how best to enhance the integration between rural tourism and educational tourism. This endeavor aims to more effectively harness China's abundant rural tourism resources while

promoting synergy among various aspects of rural industries. Ultimately, it seeks to drive economic development in these areas and contribute significantly towards revitalizing rural communities.

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