Sevicescape and Customer Loyalty of High-end Rural Homestay in China: A Case Study of Beijing

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Abstract

High-end rural homestay is an emerging accommodation product in China in the context of rural revitalization. This study aims to explain its servicescape and explore the relationship between the servicescape and customer loyalty in high-end rural homestay. The study adopts user-generated-content analysis with grounded theory to identify the dimensions and relevant attributes of servicescape in 1502 reviews of high-end rural homestay in China, which was reported by customers on the Tujia.com platform. A total of three dimensions comprising Physical Environment, Social Environment, and Complementary offering and twelve attributes were constructed and used in this study. The findings from the attributes highlighted that physical environment are more frequently than those in social environment, while this reversed in the reviews of loyal customers. Moreover, loyal customers' reviews and ordinary customers' are compared to figure out that there are some differences between the specific attributes (rural setting, service attitude, visitor-to-visitor interaction, visitor-to-staff interaction, homestay location, local cuisine, entertainment/leisure activities), which are more frequently contributing to customer loyalty, thereby providing relevant theoretical and managerial information.

Keywords:

Servicescape, Customer Loyalty, High-End Rural Homestay, Beijing

1 Introduction

The World Tourism Organization (2017) states that rural tourism has become a significant business area globally, especially in China. The consumption of the rural tourism is growing. In China, homestay has become a significant part of rural consumption. Overall, rural homestay relies on the rural location and natural environment and rural ways of life. Rural homestay industry recorded 3 million consumers, creating revenue of more than 22.6 million dollars as of July this year, which is 3.5 times that of the same period in 2019.

High-end Rural Homestay (HRH) is a high-quality as well as high-price accommodation product, which has significant differences from the urban hotels (Qiao,2021). HRH is very popular among Chinese tourists because of its considerable service, unique architecture design as well as the natural environment. As a matter of fact, according to Beijing Statistics Bureau (2023), about 11.3% of the Beijing population visit rural territories for sightseeing 1 to 2 times every week. And 83.6% can accept the price below 600RMB to be well-accommodated in rural homestay. The statistics above argue that HRH has taken a large segment of the tourism market in China.

A systematic literature review emphasized the increasing importance of rural homestays as a fresh rural offering. However, there are only 51% of the existing literature had regarded homestay as an independent research topic area, and only 16% is studying on the subject of tourists or customers (Zain ul et al, 2021). There is no universal definition of homestay, but generally it refers to a type of accommodation operated by local residents who own the houses. Rural homestay has been previously researched in context of the community-based tourism, mainly about the role of rural homestay (Bachok & Hasbullah et al. 2018) and consumer behavior and motivation (Chin et al. 2018; Hanim et al. 2014). Overall, studies of rural homestay still remain relatively under-researched.

High-quality tourist experiences in rural regions are mostly determined by the surroundings and the servicescape (Chen,2021). Servicescape is a concept from the subject of environment psychology, and it can be regarded as a specific environment perceived by customers, which will further affect customers' emotion and purchase intention (Kotler,1973). Servicescape can be regarded as a service physical environment where a service process occurs and customer experiences are created (Bitner,1992). Servicescape theory as a valuable model has developed measurement scales adapted to explore the tourism experience-scape (Chen, Suntikul, & King,2020). Against this background, we decided to explore the HRH servicescape through user-generated content (UGC) posted by consumers in Beijing, in an attempt to explain why HRH is so appealing. Servicescape model was constructed using reviews from the UGC, because reviewers' content is more credible and valid. Furthermore, respondents cannot be misguided by the interviewers or questionnaires items, which will help in better analyzing of customers perception and experience. Previous studies prove that servicescapes tends to affect customers' loyalty intentions in a range of contexts. The

satisfying customer experience is a core competitiveness which has an essential influence on business finance through establishing the customer loyalty (Halvorsrud et al, 2016).

Hence, this paper aims to have a better understanding of servicescape and customer loyalty regarding their high-end homestay in rural areas by means of analyzing UGC.

2 Literature Review

2.1 High-end Rural Homestay in China

Homestay is a type of accommodation product for visitors staying in a local resident's house so as to experience the local life (Mura, 2015). The initial homestay business development in mainland China referred to Taiwan and Japan, however, some Chinese elements were adopted which makes them different from those used in Taiwan and other regions (Long & Liu et al., 2018). The history of the HRH industry in China is still new, however they have grown rapidly in rencent years due to their differences in services of offering high-end quality and unique cultural context, different from traditional B&B (Table 1).

Table 1: Difference Between traditional B&B and HRH in China

	Traditional B&B	HRH in China
Dining	usually serve breakfast only	usually serve all meals
Bathroom	sometimes not private	usually private
Accommodation	usually provided spare rooms in a family	usually transformed from the idle residence with the superior designed environment
Advertisement	word-of-mouth	social media, online travel agency, individual marketing place
Rooms number	2 to 5 rooms	4 to 14 rooms
Business	usually not the host's primary business	usually the host's primary business
Supervise	usually not regulated because of the small size	usually supervised by tourism administration

There are also some differences between HRHs and traditional hotels in their operation standard, business model, as well as cultural theme (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). HRH focuses on the family-style accommodation, friendly relationship between the hosts and tourists, and personalized facility and homely hospitality, increasing the loyalty to the HRH (Mura, 2015). Qiao (2021) explained why the price of high-end rural homestays is higher than traditional urban hotel through exploring the customer internal factors and external environmental variables. Zhao et al. (2020) used cluster analysis to figure out the differences between demographic groups in terms of homestays' functional perceived value, emotional value, and social value, which can

explain the reason why customers love to choose the rural homestay as an accommodation choice to some extent. However, it did not demonstrate the homestays' offering systematically. Ma et al. (2022) set up an evaluation system to assess the tourist experience of rural homestay in coastal area in China, but coastal area cannot represent all the rural regions. Overall, the related research is very limited. Especially, there is a lack of research on servicescape and loyalty of HRH, which is essential to establish a correct development strategy for the rural homestay industry.

2.2 Servicescape and Its Implications on Customer Loyalty

Nowadays, people become more and more aware of servicecapes. Tourist experiences is likely to be various depending on the servicescape (Chao et al., 2021). Servicescape is a comprehensive concept and established framework coined by Bitner (1992), who addressed the servicescape as a physical environment where a service process takes place and experiences are created. According to Fredman & Wall-Reinius, et al. (2012) classified servicescape into two dimensions of natural and artificial factors, while Meng et al. (2017) argued that the servicescape was composed by substantive staging and communicative staging. Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) proposed a logical servicescape framework comprising physical, social, as well as natural environment. Hence, in general, similar dimensions and attributes have been developed and could be adapted in servicescape analysis.

In the context of tourism, previous studies have adopted servicescape theory in the researches of eco-tourism (Oviedo-García & Vega-Vazquez, 2019) and medical tourism (Loureiro, 2017). In addition, servicescape theory has been adapted to fit specific contexts, such as a winescape (Quintal et al. 2015), a hotelscape(Alfakhri et al., 2018), a ruralscape(Chen et al., 2023). In particular, a winescape comprises four dimensions including vineyards, wines, services, and tourist interactions (Quintal et al. 2015). Alfakhri et al. (2018) coined the term of "hotelscape", suggesting that the elements of hotel interior design can trigger consumers' emotions, which in turn influence behaviors. According to study by Chen et al. (2023) the conceptualization of the ruralscape established focusing on physical environment, social environment, and complementary offering.

The high-quality experience in rural homestay is determined mostly by service environment. Furthermore, physical surroundings, interactions with the host, leisure activities, and other tangible or intangible factors can directly affect tourist experience. Thus, the servicescape theory can be used to explore the HRH customers' perception and experience.

The concept of customer loyalty has been recognized an important variable to identify the success of a corporate or a product (Oliver, 2010). Therefore, Middleton et al. (2012) argued that tourism destinations can be regarded as a product to build tourist loyalty, attracting the tourists produce post-behaviour such as repurchasing (revisiting) or recommending to others. Revisit behavior is emphasized by Oliver (2010) to be the most significant manifestation of loyalty. Kotler et al. (2014) pointed out two

indicators in predicating customer behavior intention which are repurchase and recommend the product positively. Excellent servicescape plays an important role in providing customers with great sensory experiences as well as warm feelings (Carneiro et al., 2019). Hence, servicescapes can contribute to customers' loyalty positively in a range of contexts. The satisfying customer experience is a core competitiveness which has an essential influence on business finance through establishing the customer loyalty. According to Harris, et al. (2008), servicescape variables are associated directly with the customer repurchase intention and consumer loyalty. Andres et al. (2016) investigated that a positive social servicescape could lead to consumer loyalty and the recommendation intentions. Quintal et al. (2015) argued that the service staff and complementary offering of winescape have significant effects on tourists' loyalty. Lin et al. (2019) addressed that overall restaurant satisfaction could be decided by distinctive visitor-to-visitor interaction, one of the social servicescape attributes. Hence, we believed that the perceived servicescape in the HRH would be different between ordinary customers and loyalty customers.

2.3 Various UGC analysis techniques

UGC (User-Generated-Content) refers to the content generated online by users, such as the travel note reported by tourists and the reviews reported by customers. Generally, manual coding has been a major approach to quantify the complex information and unstructured review data (London & Moyle,2017; Pan. et al, 2014).

In the context of tourism, UGC has usually been analyzed to construct tourist experience dimensions. There are increasingly a number of scholars using UGC to explore tourist satisfaction, destination image (Bigne, et al., 2019; Li & Stepchenkova, 2012). Previous study by Shi, Xie, & Zeng, 2020 demonstrated the rural tourists' behavioral motivation using grounded theory to analyze online travel notes. However, regarding rural homestay, there are few researches using UGC conducted to explore the specific issue. Hence, the present study is conducted to capture tourist perception and experience more effectively.

3 Methodology

Beijing, the capital city of China will be chosen to be studied. According to the Beijing Culture and Tourism Administration, as of July 2023, there are a total of 4,965 homestays in the countryside of Beijing. The theme of "rural yard" and "Great Wall" homestay brands are more appealing. According to the report of High-end Rural Homestay in 2021, most of rural homestay are operated by some intellectual elites who return back to their hometowns or villages from urban regions of Beijing. The hosts of homestays usually appear in the reception area and public space, and the guests can obviously feel the strong host culture of homestays. The opening time of rural homestay in Beijing was concentrated in the year of 2017 and 2018, thus the majority of owners have entered the industry for a relatively short period of time, which means the whole industry needs more attention. 48% of rural homestays in

Beijing are small-volume, with 4 to 8 rooms. The revenue source is relatively single, with 40% of rural homestays' revenue are from room sale and food & beverage, while only 21% of homestay has the organic agriculture products for sale and 9% has provide entertainment and experiential activities for customers. In conclusion, high-end homestays in Beijing's countryside have high-quality talents involved in operation and management. The income resources mainly depend on rooms and food; thus, they have obvious shortcomings in the development of local products and activities.

To identify the servicescape regarding the HRH, an inductive qualitative approach, suggested by constructivist grounded theory (GT), was adopted in the research. Specifically, systematic coding was used to analyze data and identify customers' experience and perceptions, so as to make a construction of the framework of homestay servicescape. We use Octoparse to collect data. Octoparse is an online data collection tool, which is designed for simulating the behavior of people browsing the web, and generating an automated collection process through a simple click on pages. We use ROST Content Mining System User Manual Version6.0 (Rost CM 6) to analyze data. Rost CM 6 is a Chinese text analysis software, which can help users to analyze and process text quickly and accurately by the functions of word segmentation, word frequency statistics, text clustering. The procedure of text collection and coding kept the cycle going until reaching the saturation (Charmaz, 2003) and to ensure reliability and credibility of the result, 2 scholars have been invited to conduct the same steps of systematic coding.

 Participants' perception of the homestay's service environment is coded into three dimensions constructing the HRH servicescape: 1) Physical Environment (PE); 2) Social Environment (SE); 3) Complementary Offering (COF). For participants perception on loyalty that is associated with servicescape, the study explored the customer reviews with the expression of "revisit", "visit again", "recommend to others". 234 online reviews were selected as expressing the emotion of loyalty out of the 1502 reviews from 8 selected homestays.

The data collection from UGC was retrieved from Tujia.com, called "China's Airbnb". There are more than 110 thousand homestays registered on the platform of Tujia.com, are located in more than 150 destinations in China. 8 HRHs located in different districts surrounding Beijing was selected based on the Beijing TOP 10 Most Popular Ranking on the Tujia.com. The data were collected using Octoparse in August 2023. Table 2 shows the HRH servicescape dimensions established and gathered from UCG, while table 3 shows HRH servicescape dimensions and relative frequency in reviews reported between Loyal Customers(LC) and Ordinary customers(OC). Through contrasting the relative frequency of loyal customer and ordinary customer (see Figure. 3), attributes such as rural setting, service attitude, visitor-to-visitor interaction, visitor-to-staff interaction, homestay location, local cuisine, entertainment/leisure activities contribute more to customer loyalty.

Table 2: HRH servicescape dimensions and relative frequency

dimensions	subsections	relative frequency %	total %
Physical Environment（PE）	scenery\landscape	10.7%	30.0%
	architecture\building	12.0%	
	natural atmosphere	5.4%	
	rural setting	2.0%	
Social Environment（SE）	service attitude	9.5%	28.0%
	visitor-to-visitor interaction	7.1%	
	staff-to-visitor interaction	11.5%	
Complementary Offering（COF）	homestay location	3.4%	42.0%
	guest room	16.8%	
	facility	8.1%	
	local cuisine	9.1%	
	entertainment\leisure activity	4.5%	

Table 3: HRH servicescape dimensions and relative frequency in reviews reported by Loyal Customer and Ordinary Customer

| sections	subsections	Loyal Customer(LC)		Odinary Customer(OC)	
		relative frequency %	total %	relative frequency %	total %
Physical Environment（PE）	scenery\landscape	8.2%	26.1%	11.4%	31.1%
	architecture\building	11.6%		12.1%	
	natural environment	3.9%		5.8%	
	rural setting	2.3%		1.9%	
Social Environment（SE）	service attitude	13.0%	31.9%	8.5%	26.9%
	visitor-to-visitor interaction	7.2%		7.0%	
	visitor-to-staff interaction	11.7%		11.4%	
Complementary Offering（COF）	homestay location	4.1%	42.0%	3.1%	42.0%
	guest room	15.9%		17.1%	
	facility	7.4%		8.3%	
	local cuisine	9.2%		9.1%	
	entertainment\leisure activity	5.4%		4.3%	
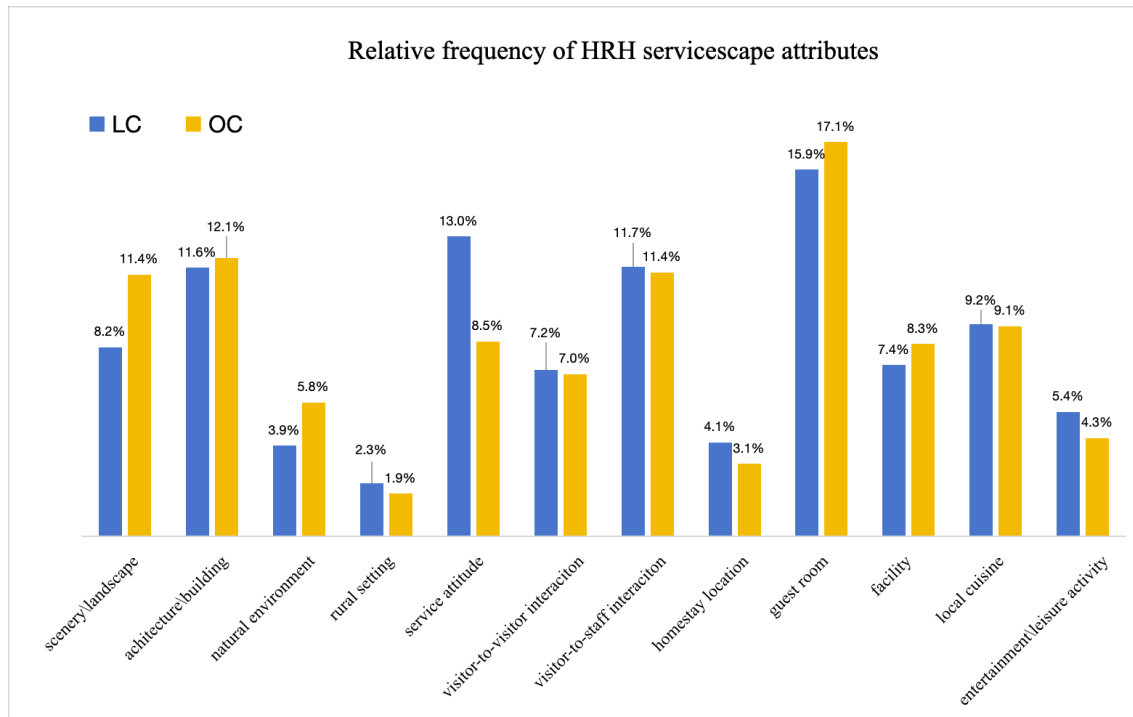
Figure 1: Relative Frequency of HRH servicescape attributes

4 Result

The research objective is to explore the critical factors of rural homestays servicescape. The online review present variously abundant, in-person experiences, so that 3 dimensions of the HRH servicescape: 1) Physical Environment (PE); 2) Social Environment (SE); 3) Complementary Offering (COF), could be identified through analyzing the participants' perceptions of the homestay's service environment. Result found majority of comments concentrate on the attributes associated with COF (42%), followed by PE (30%), SE (28%).

4.1 Physical environment in HRH

In the physical environment, people's perception is about homestay's surroundings and setting, include scenery/landscape, architecture/building, natural environment and rural setting. The highest mentioned in physical environment is architecture\building (12%). Further, the reviews addressed the courtyards and villas, such as the size of the villas and the style of the courtyard. This is in line with the study of Shi et al. (2020), pointing out that the concept of "courtyard complexes" distinguished rural destinations from other types, which can explain the reason that most people mentioned about the courtyard. The second attributes in PE are scenery/landscape (10.7%). The relative comments addressed mostly are mountains, sunrise and sunset. For example, the customer review says "The large lawn in front of the restaurant is the perfect place to relax and enjoy the mountains and the sunset". This is because the Beijing area is surrounded by mountains, and most of rural

homestays are located in the mountains, which provides a good view of mountains. The next important attribute in PE is natural atmosphere (5.4%). In tourists' reviews, people were likely to have "quietness" connected to the atmosphere of homestay's surrounding, due to the feeling of tranquility of nature, for example an individual like escaping from the hustle and bustle of the city. In addition, the tourists appreciated the fresh air in the countryside very much, making people feeling restorative. This is in line with the study of Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011), arguing that natural environment is a necessary part of a logical servicescape framework. The last attribute in PE is rural setting (2%), which is also the smallest factor in the overall servicescape. The relative comments addressed farmland, farmer, and local production scene.

4.2 Social environment in HRH

In the social environment, people's perception is about homestay's service staff and other customers, include service attitude, visitor-to-visitor interaction, visitor-to-staff interaction. The SE attributes mentioned most frequently focused on staff-to-visitor interaction (11.5%). The significance of staff-visitor interaction has been proved in the study of Lin & Mattila (2010). Most customers interacted very well with the service staff. The staff not only helped the customers solve all kinds of facility issues but also introduced the scenic spots to customers. Therefore, the customers showed great gratitude to the staff. The second attribute in SE is service attitude (9.5%). The tourists' reviews used "enthusiastic", "considerate" to describe the host and staff's service attitude. They believed that HRH had friendly, consistently courteous, professional, efficient staff. The third attribute in SE is visitor-to-visitor interaction (4.1%). Some customers shared their experience with other visitors in the public region of the homestay. They thought visitor-to-visitor interaction had a positive effect on their perception.

4.3 Complementary offering in HRH

In complementary offering, people's perception was regards to homestay's facilities convenience and other tangible products, include homestay location, guest room, facility, local cuisine, entertainment\leisure activity. Most frequently mentioned in complementary offering is in its guest room (16.8%), which is also the biggest factor in the overall servicescape. Further, the comments emphasized on maintenance issues, such as room cleanliness. The customers also emphasized the room's size and noise, which affect their experience a lot. The second attribute in COF is local cuisine (9.1%). Local cuisine is a key factor in the tourists' authentic experience while in rural homestay (Wang et al., 2015). The customers' reviews associated "abundant" and "tasty" with local cuisine provided by the homestay. The food material used were freshly produced from the local farmland. The third attribute in COF is on facilities (8.1%). "Kitchen" was mentioned mostly because many customers would like to cook themselves during their stay. Other facilities mentioned in reviews include swimming pools, balconies, cafes, parking areas, reading room etc. The fourth attribute in COF is entertainment/leisure activity (8.1%). A number of people had a BBQ party in the courtyard, while others liked drinking a cup of tea and chatting with their friends and

families. There were some water-based and outdoor activities in summer, such as swimming, steaming-trekking, climbing, hiking etc. The last attributes gathered in COF is homestay location (3.4%). Most HRH locates in some small villages, far away from the city center. Some customers emphasized the accessibility of the homestay.

4.4 HRH servicescape and customer loyalty

For customer loyalty, the study identified 234 online reviews in expressing "customer Loyalty". Through the UGC analysis, the result showed that physical environment and social environment are dimensions that are significantly different between loyal customers and ordinary customers. Social environment became much more important in loyal customers' review, while complementary offering did not show statistically significant differences. The result is consistent with the previous studies by Andres et al. (2016) and Lin et al. (2019) emphasizing the social servicescape have a positive influence on consumer loyalty. From the study, 7 attributes and specific elements were found to affect customer loyalty (Table 4).

Table 4: The representative elements contributing more to customer loyalty

Dimension	Attributes	Representative Elements
Physical Environment	rural setting	village, organ agriculture, farm, farmer
Social Environment	service attitude	enthusiastic, helpful, pet-friendly, kid-friendly.
	visitor-to-visitor interaction	chat, share the public region, family, friends
	visitor-to-staff interaction	reservation, pick up, inquire, guide, help, express gratitude
Complementary Offering	homestay location	location, road condition, accessibility.
	local cuisine	fresh vegetable, farm eggs, healthy food.
	entertainment/leisure activities	climbing, hiking, water-based activities, party, karaoke.

5   Implications and Conclusions

This paper aims to have a better understanding of servicescape and customer loyalty regarding high-end homestays in rural areas by means of investigating their online reviews. The study acknowledges some theoretical and managerial implications. The present study argues that those customers experiences in the high-end rural homestay can be constructed under the servicescape theory using grounded theory. This process of conceptualizing is new in the existing research which allow us introduce them (3 dimensions and 12 attributes) as study variables in future researches about the rural homestay and tourist experiences. Secondly, although all of the servicescape dimensions and relevant attributes are existing in ordinary customers' review, there are some differences among them. This argues, on the one hand, that the servicescape dimensions we constructed can be used as a measurement for customer loyalty. On

the other hand, some dimensions and attributes indeed seem to more obviously characterize customer loyalty.

For managerial implications, firstly, the HRH managers have to have a clear understanding of the servicescape components in the homestay. In this study, we found the servicescape of HRH scale can be defined by 3 dimension including physical environment, social environment, and complementary offering, 12 relevant attributes including scenery/landscape, architecture/building, natural environment, rural setting, service attitude, visitor-to-visitor interaction, visitor-to-staff interaction, homestay location, guest room, facility, local cuisine, entertainment/leisure activity. Thus, the managers might use the scale dimensions to evaluate their own service advantage and disadvantage, so as to further improve the strategic plans. In addition, the HRH managers need to focus on the dimensions that most characterize customer loyalty. The present study recommends the host should design more activities for participants in different seasons, which is going to make customer feel more loyal to the accommodation.

In conclusion, the study helps having a better understanding of servicescape and customer loyalty regarding their high-end homestay in rural areas using UGC, which has been regarded as an effective data source to obtain customers' perception and to capture the dimensions. This research is conducted using qualitative analysis of the comments, which is the limitation of this study. Future research might try to provide some empirical evidence by designing a systematic measurement scale and do the questionnaire test. Moreover, taking Beijing as a case study impedes applying the results to other cities or regions. The future research should expand the analysis to other rural regions.

6   About the author

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