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KEY SUCCESS FACTORS OF CHONGQING HOMESTAYS: PLS-SEM INSIGHTS FOR POLICY VIA SERVICE DOMINANT LOGIC

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Homestays have become a key component of experiential tourism, yet the mechanisms through which strategic resources shape customer behaviour remain insufficiently understood. Drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), this study conceptualizes Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF)-comprising Product Innovation (PI), Business Process Innovation (BPI), and Destination Attributes (DA)-as a second-order strategic capability. We propose and validate a relational-cognitive-affective mechanism in which HSF activates the Host–Guest relationship (HGR), which subsequently shapes perceived value (PV), customer satisfaction (CS), and customer behaviour (CB). Using PLS-SEM with 588 guest surveys and qualitative triangulation from 25 interviews, the findings confirm a robust sequential pathway (HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB). HGR emerges as a proximal activation mechanism rather than a downstream experiential outcome, extending SDL with a relational initiation perspective. The results highlight that strategic resources enhance behavioural outcomes only when supported by relational engagement and value interpretation. The study offers practical implications for homestay operators and policymakers in Chongqing and ASEAN destinations, who aim to enhance capability deployment, relational service, and community-based tourism development.

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Introduction

Across Asia, homestays have evolved from marginal family businesses into important drivers of tourism and cultural sustainability. In China, policies promoting the "experience economy" have accelerated homestay development. Chongqing illustrates both opportunities and challenges: urban homestays gain visibility, while rural eco-cultural sites remain vulnerable to fluctuating demand. Persistent issues-theme similarity, weak digitalization, and uneven service quality-highlight the need to understand how resource configurations shape guest experience and behavioural outcomes. These patterns illustrate the value of uncovering how resource configurations translate into guest experience and behavioural outcomes.

Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) emphasizes experience co-creation and the centrality of perceived value and satisfaction in shaping guest responses (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Resource-Based View (RBV), in turn, explains performance through valuable and inimitable resource bundles such as design capabilities, location, and digital competence (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2007). Yet SDL and RBV are often applied independently, leaving unclear how strategic resources are activated during host–guest encounters or how they produce behavioural outcomes. Research on relational warmth, emotional connection, and cultural interaction suggests their importance, but the underlying activation mechanisms remain theoretically underdeveloped.

This study addresses four gaps. First, product innovation, process innovation, and destination attributes are usually modelled as separate capabilities. Second, HGR is often treated as a downstream experiential outcome rather than an early-stage mechanism. Third, PV and CS are often examined independently instead of as a relational–cognitive–affective sequence (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2016).

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Finally, limited research explores these mechanisms in complex mountain–urban destinations or assesses their ASEAN relevance. Together, these gaps highlight the need for a coherent process theory of homestay success.

To address this, we integrate SDL and RBV into a mechanism-based framework. Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF) are conceptualized as a second-order reflective construct composed of Product Innovation (PI), Business-Process Innovation (BPI), and Destination Attributes (DA) (Rungraweewan et al., 2022).

We argue that HGR functions as a proximal activation mechanism through which HSF influences PV and CS, ultimately shaping Customer Behaviour (CB). This yields the sequential mediation chain HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB, offering a unified explanation of how strategic resources are mobilized, interpreted, and consolidated throughout the guest journey (Gallarza et al., 2011).

This reconceptualization positions relational activation-not resource possession-as the starting point of experiential value formation.

Empirically, we test the model using PLS-SEM with 588 valid guest responses and complement the analysis with 25 semi-structured interviews. This mixed-methods design strengthens construct validity and reflects best practices in tourism research. The qualitative evidence contextualizes the model within Chongqing's diverse urban-rural homestay environments.

This study makes three contributions. First, it bridges RBV and SDL by explaining how strategic resources become operant through relational activation (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Second, it reframes HGR as an initiating mechanism that drives experiential value formation. Third, it validates a sequential mediation model that clarifies the resource-relationship-value pathway and offers suggestions about homestay governance in Chongqing and EU-ASEAN destinations.

Overall, the study advances a transferable strategic-relational-experiential mechanism for understanding homestay development in emerging tourism contexts.

Research objectives

1. To conceptualize and empirically validate Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF) as a second-order construct comprising Product Innovation (PI), Business Process Innovation (BPI), and Destination Attributes (DA).

2. To assess the mediating roles of Host–Guest Relationship (HGR), Perceived Value (PV), and Customer Satisfaction (CS) within an integrated SDL–RBV mechanism.

3. To test the causal pathways linking HSF to experiential evaluations and customer behaviour (CB) using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

Literature review

Service-dominant logic and value co-creation

SDL conceptualizes value as co-created through provider-consumer interaction rather than embedded in products. In hospitality, value emerges through resource integration, experiential participation, and relational engagement, especially in culturally embedded homestays.

Authenticity, emotional resonance, and co-created meaning shape perceived value and loyalty (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Recent SDL research stresses experiential immersion, emotional alignment, and customer-firm interaction as bases for value creation.

Existing SDL research often emphasizes downstream evaluations and offers limited insight into how strategic resources activate relational mechanisms early in service encounters (Osman et al., 2023).

In homestays, where personal interaction and cultural immersion are paramount, comprehending early relational mechanisms is crucial. Hospitality co-creation studies also show that service design, interactive cues, and affective climate shape guest interpretations.

This study extends SDL by positioning HGR as the proximal activation mechanism through which strategic factors influence cognitive and affective evaluations, rather than because of satisfaction. This change highlights that relationship moments start the process of creating value from experiences, instead of just improving it, supporting the idea that relationship signals help create value in experience-based services.

Resource-based view and strategic capabilities in homestays

RBV posits that companies achieve enduring competitive advantage via valuable, scarce, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources. In homestays, strategic resources include design innovation, process innovation, and location-based cultural or environmental attributes. Resource orchestration, dynamic capabilities, and experiential design increasingly shape competitive advantage in tourism (Teece, 2007).

Research highlights organizational learning, digital capability, and cultural capital as drivers of tourism performance. Yet most studies examine these resources separately, limiting RBV's explanatory power in micro-hospitality.

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To address this limitation, we conceptualize Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF) as a second-order reflective construct combining product innovation, business process innovation, and destination attributes. This responds to calls to model resource bundles rather than isolated variables. Although destination attributes are often treated as contextual inputs, we conceptualize them as strategically mobilized VRIN resources. When embedded into design, storytelling, and service scripts, DA creates unique competitive advantages.

Integrating PI, BPI, and DA into one capability bundle captures the synergistic nature of resource orchestration, often overlooked in fragmented RBV applications. This bundled view also lays the foundation for explaining how multiple resource dimensions jointly influence downstream experiential processes.

Host–guest relationship as relational activation mechanism

HGR refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural interactions occurring during service encounters. Previous studies typically view HGR as an outcome of service quality, trust, or satisfaction. However, in homestays, relational interaction is not an output but the core of service.

Theories of emotional labour, relational embeddedness, and cultural co-experience argue that early-stage relational cues-such as warmth, empathy, and narrative exchange-strongly shape guests' cognitive frames and affective interpretations. Hospitality research increasingly shows that emotional resonance and social presence strongly influence guest perceptions and engagement.

Yet HGR is still commonly treated as downstream, underestimating its role as the mechanism that activates strategic resources. This misalignment creates conceptual fragmentation and prevents a full understanding of value formation in experiential hospitality contexts.

This study reframes HGR as the activation mechanism linking HSF with PV and CS, providing a theoretically coherent, process-based model of value co-creation. This relational activation perspective aligns SDL with RBV by showing how intangible relational capabilities mobilize and translate strategic resources.

Perceived value and customer satisfaction in sequential experience processing

PV is defined as consumers' overall assessment of service utility shaped by emotional, functional, and symbolic elements (Gallarza et al., 2011; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2016).

CS represents an affective appraisal of whether the experience meets expectations.

Prior work often treats both constructs as independent predictors, not as components of a sequential chain, despite their widespread study in the tourism field. Experience processing theories suggest that consumers first interpret stimuli cognitively before forming affective reactions, implying a natural sequence: PV → CS. This is consistent with hierarchical value and cognition-affect models.

Moreover, studies have yet to integrate this sequence within a broader relational and resource-based mechanism. Recent tourism research highlights how cognitive and affective evaluations accumulate across interaction stages. This study positions PV and CS as central nodes translating strategic factors into behaviour. In this study, PV and CS operate as central nodes translating strategic factors and relational activation into behavioural outcomes.

Customer behaviour and loyalty in small-scale hospitality

Satisfaction, relational warmth, experiential authenticity, and cultural immersion influence CB. Tourism loyalty literature highlights experiential distinctiveness, emotional resonance, and meaningful engagement.

Existing studies emphasize service quality and destination image but rarely integrate strategic resources, relational mechanisms, and experiential evaluations (Osman et al., 2023).

This research introduces a full sequential chain-HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB-that captures the multi-stage nature of value formation and its translation into behavioural outcomes, addressing a major conceptual gap in the homestay and tourism literature (Yacoub et al., 2025).

This integrated chain shows how resource bundles, relational cues, and experiential processing all work together to change how customers act.

Integration of SDL and RBV: a unified mechanism-based framework

This study integrates SDL and RBV to explain resource activation and value co-creation. RBV identifies the strategic assets (HSF), while SDL explains how these assets are enacted through relational mechanisms (HGR) to shape experiential evaluations (PV and CS).

Relational interaction thus becomes the interface that activates strategic resource capabilities that translate into loyalty (Mayaka et al., 2019). By combining these perspectives, the framework advances a process theory of homestay success that connects resources, relationships, experience, and behaviour.

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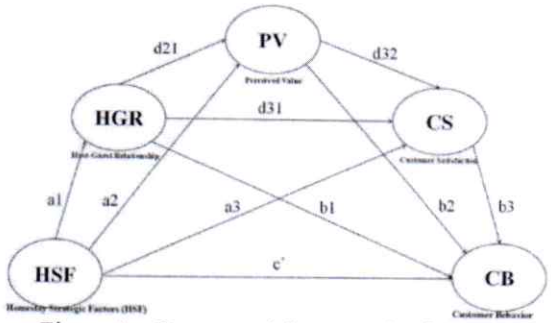


Figure 1 - Conceptual framework of the study (Integrated SDL–RBV Model)
(made by the authors)

Fig. 1 summarizes the conceptual model.

Hypothesis development

Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF)-including product innovation, business-process innovation, and destination attributes-shape guests' initial perception of service quality and experiential potential by configuring valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Teece, 2007). Well-designed spaces, efficient processes, and distinctive contextual cues reduce interaction barriers and foster emotional openness, particularly in small-scale homestays where design and service scripts are tightly coupled. Thus, HSF is expected to strengthen the Host–Guest Relationship (HGR).

This mechanism reflects RBV's premise that resource bundles activate guest engagement when effectively mobilized during early encounters.

H1: HSF positively influences HGR.

HGR is central to experiential hospitality, where interpersonal warmth, cultural interpretation, and social presence act as triggers for value formation. Consistent with SDL, relational engagement functions as an activation mechanism that guides how guests interpret offerings, evaluate benefits, and form affective responses rather than serving as a mere outcome of satisfaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Accordingly, strong relational cues should enhance both cognitive assessments and affective evaluations.

H2: HGR positively influences PV.

H3: HGR positively influences CS.

H4: HGR positively influences CB.

Experiential processing suggests a cognitive-affective sequence: guests first assess Perceived Value (PV), which then shapes their emotional satisfaction (CS), ultimately driving loyalty-related behaviours such as revisit intention and recommendation.

This hierarchy aligns with cognition-affect-behaviour models, where value judgments precede emotional responses and subsequent behavioural outcomes.

H5: PV positively influences CS.

H6: PV positively influences CB.

H7: CS positively influences CB.

Although relational mechanisms play a primary role, innovation and destination-related resources may also exert direct experiential influence by shaping perceived authenticity, functional quality, and symbolic meaning. In homestay contexts, integrated strategic configurations combining design innovation, process efficiency, and place-based attributes can enhance perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty beyond relational effects alone.

Thus, HSF may produce additional direct effects on experiential evaluations and behavioural responses, complementing the relational pathway.

H8: HSF positively influences PV.

H9: HSF positively influences CS.

H10: HSF positively influences CB.

Research methodology

Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design integrating PLS-SEM with qualitative triangulation from semi-structured interviews (Hair et al., 2017). The quantitative component tests the sequential mediation model, while the qualitative component enriches interpretation and contextual validation. This integrated design aligns with best practices in hospitality research, where relational and experiential constructs require both statistical verification and contextual grounding.

PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for predictive, theory-building models involving second-order constructs and serial mediation, while qualitative insights improve theoretical saturation and clarify relational mechanisms.

Sampling and data collection

A structured questionnaire was administered to homestay guests across urban and rural clusters in Chongqing. Of 700 distributed questionnaires, 588 valid responses were retained.

Demographics show balanced representation across gender, age, education, and travel purpose. Power analysis confirmed the sample exceeded requirements for detecting medium effects in a five-construct mediation model (Hair et al., 2017; Sarstedt et al., 2022). Non-response bias checks showed no significant differences.

To reduce measurement bias, constructs used established Likert scales adapted from prior studies (Osman et al., 2023).

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Common method variance (CMV) assessed via Harman's single-factor test showed the first factor explained under 40% of variance, indicating no major concern (Seočanac, 2024).

The sampling strategy ensured coverage of distinct homestay clusters, supporting generalizability across diverse experiential and relational contexts.

Table 1 - Sample characteristics of homestay guests (N = 588)
(made by the authors)

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Location Type	Urban districts	352	59.86
	Rural counties	236	40.14
Gender	Female	312	53.07
	Male	276	46.93
Age Group	18-25	128	33.00
	26-30	117	19.90
	31-40	105	17.91
	41-50	73	12.44
	51-60	61	10.45
	60 or above	37	6.30
Tourist Origin	Domestic	545	92.63
	International	43	7.37
Education Level	Junior high school or below	35	5.97
	High school	64	10.95
	Associate degree	266	45.27
	Bachelor's degree	207	35.16
	Master's degree or above	16	2.65
Homestay Spending (per stay)	Below RMB 200	116	19.73
	RMB 201-300	88	14.93
	RMB 301-500	241	40.96
	RMB 501 or above	143	24.38

Measurement instruments

All constructs were measured with reflective indicators. HSF was modeled as a reflective second-order construct comprising PI, BPI, and DA. PI and BPI items came from innovation-capability literature, and DA items from tourism studies.

The hierarchical model was estimated using the two-stage approach for reflective-reflective designs.

HGR was measured using emotional, cognitive, and interactional indicators. PV and CS used established multi-dimensional tourism scales.

CB included revisit intention, recommendation likelihood, and advocacy.

Items were pretested with operators and experts to ensure clarity, contextual fit, and content validity.

The use of established scales enhances reliability, and the second-order specification of HSF allows a holistic assessment of strategic capability bundles rather than isolated resource elements.

Qualitative component: interviews and coding procedures

To complement the survey, 25 interviews were conducted with operators and guests across varied homestay clusters. Interviews explored innovation, relational warmth, cultural storytelling, experiential value, and behavioural intentions.

Transcripts were analyzed using open-axial-selective coding. Two coders developed initial codes, consolidated themes, and resolved discrepancies to ensure reliability. Member-checking with four operators confirmed thematic accuracy. This protocol strengthens qualitative credibility and supports the mixed-method design.

The qualitative analysis provided contextual explanations for relational activation and value-formation patterns, supporting interpretation of PLS-SEM results.

Data screening and analytical procedures

All quantitative analyses used SmartPLS 4.0. Missing values (<1%) were replaced using mean substitution. Normality via skewness and kurtosis fell within acceptable PLS-SEM limits. VIF values were below 5.0, indicating no multicollinearity.

SRMR = 0.053 (below 0.08) indicated a satisfactory model fit. Additional metrics (d_ULS, d_G) were also acceptable.

The two-stage approach estimated the second-order HSF. Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) tested path significance and sequential mediation.

PLSpredict assessed predictive performance by comparing PLS-SEM errors with LM and IA benchmarks. Continuous response analysis examined how HSF variations influence relational, cognitive, and affective responses.

These procedures ensure robust evaluation of measurement validity, structural paths, predictive accuracy, and the behavioural sensitivity of the sequential mechanism HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB.

Research results

Sample profile

A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed, and 588 valid responses were retained after screening. Respondents represent a diverse mix across gender, age, education, and travel purpose. Missing values (<1%) were replaced using mean substitution. Skewness and kurtosis fell within acceptable thresholds, confirming approximate normality for PLS-SEM. VIF values were below 5.0 for all indicators, indicating no multicollinearity.

These results confirm the adequacy of the dataset for estimating a higher-order, sequential mediation

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model, consistent with recommendations for PLS-SEM.

Measurement model evaluation

The measurement model was assessed using standard PLS-SEM criteria. Indicators exhibit satisfactory psychometric properties. All standardized loadings exceed 0.70, indicating strong indicator reliability. Cronbach's α and Composite Reliability (CR) values exceed 0.70, indicating internal consistency. AVE values exceed 0.50 for all constructs, confirming convergent validity.

HTMT values below 0.85 establish discriminant validity. The second-order construct HSF was estimated using the reflective-reflective two-stage approach. PI, BPI, and DA loaded strongly on HSF, supporting its conceptualization as a strategic resource bundle.

Together, these results demonstrate strong measurement reliability and validity, enabling a robust test of the structural mechanism.

Overall, Tab. 2 indicates robust measurement properties suitable for structural model evaluation.

Table 2 - Measurement model evaluation
(made by the authors)

Panel A. Indicator reliability and convergent validity					
Construct	Indicators	Loadings	α	CR	AVE
BPI	BPI1 / BPI2 / BPI3 / BPI4 / BPI5	0.899 / 0.878 / 0.867 / 0.830 / 0.767	0.903	0.928	0.722
CB	CB1 / CB2 / CB3 / CB4	0.879 / 0.910 / 0.901 / 0.864	0.911	0.938	0.790
CS	CS1 / CS2 / CS3	0.859 / 0.855 / 0.844	0.813	0.889	0.727
DA	DA1 / DA2 / DA3	0.915 / 0.934 / 0.929	0.917	0.947	0.857
HGR	HGR1 / HGR2 / HGR3	0.877 / 0.877 / 0.744	0.784	0.873	0.697
PI	PI1 / PI2 / PI3	0.851 / 0.874 / 0.842	0.817	0.891	0.732
PV	PV1 / PV2 / PV3	0.884 / 0.893 / 0.801	0.824	0.895	0.741
Panel B. Discriminant validity (HTMT)					
Construct	CB	CS	HGR	HSF	PV
CB	-	0.848	0.836	0.802	0.821
CS		-	0.845	0.839	0.828
HGR			-	0.810	0.846
HSF				-	0.867
PV					-

Structural model and hypothesis testing

Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was used to assess structural paths. Model fit was satisfactory (SRMR = 0.053 < 0.08), and VIF values were below recommended thresholds, indicating no collinearity issues.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

As shown in Tab. 3, the model demonstrates strong explanatory power:

R^2(CB) = 0.678

R^2(CS) = 0.606

R^2(PV) = 0.623

R^2(HGR) = 0.472

All Q^2 values are above zero, supporting predictive relevance of endogenous constructs.

These values indicate that the integrated SDL–RBV mechanism captures a large proportion of variance in experiential and behavioural outcomes.

Table 3 Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Predictive Relevance (Q^2)
(made by the authors)

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Q^2	Predictive Relevance
HGR	0.472	0.471	0.469	Yes
PV	0.623	0.622	0.548	Yes
CS	0.606	0.604	0.507	Yes
CB	0.678	0.676	0.519	Yes

Key path coefficients are as follows (all $p < 0.01$):

Path Coefficients

Tab. 4 presents the structural results. All hypothesized paths are significant ($p < 0.01$). Key effects include:

HSF → HGR ($\beta = 0.687$): strong relational activation effect

HGR → PV, CS, CB: confirms relational influence across cognitive, affective, and behavioural stages

PV → CS, CS → CB: supports the cognitive-affective-behavioural sequence

HSF → PV / CS / CB: modest but significant direct effects

These findings validate the proposed sequential chain HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB and demonstrate that relational engagement is the central mechanism translating resource bundles into experiential and behavioural outcomes.

Mediation analysis

Bias-corrected bootstrapping confirms the significance of all indirect pathways. The full multi-stage mediation HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB is significant, supporting the theorized process model.

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Table 4 - Structural model results (β, t, p, f^2)
(made by the authors)

Path	β	t-value	p-value	f^2	Supported
HSF → HGR	0.687	26.924	0.000	0.894	Yes
HSF → PV	0.488	10.518	0.000	0.333	Yes
HSF → CS	0.342	6.923	0.000	0.118	Yes
HSF → CB	0.199	5.250	0.000	0.043	Yes
HGR → PV	0.370	7.537	0.000	0.192	Yes
HGR → CS	0.294	4.409	0.000	0.097	Yes
HGR → CB	0.265	5.713	0.000	0.088	Yes
PV → CS	0.229	2.918	0.004	0.050	Yes
PV → CB	0.198	3.508	0.000	0.044	Yes
CS → CB	0.271	4.332	0.000	0.090	Yes

Significant sub-paths include:
HSF → HGR → PV
HGR → PV → CS
PV → CS → CB
HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB

These results reveal that strategic resources influence behaviour primarily through relational activation and experiential processing rather than through direct effects alone.

Robustness checks and continuous response analysis

Continuous response analysis examined how changes in HSF affect downstream constructs. Key patterns include:

HSF → HGR: consistently positive, confirming relational sensitivity to strategic factors.

HSF → PV: stable positive slope, indicating cognitive responsiveness.

HSF → CS: weaker response, suggesting satisfaction is shaped more by relational and experiential cues than by resources.

HSF → CB: modest slope, consistent with multi-stage mediation.

These findings reinforce that HGR is the primary interface through which strategic factors begin influencing cognitive and affective evaluations.

Predictive power (PLSpredict)

PLSpredict was used to assess out-of-sample predictive accuracy. Results show:

PLS outperforms the IA benchmark across all CB indicators, demonstrating strong predictive utility.

PLS and LM perform similarly, with PLS slightly superior on several indicators.

Table 5 Mediation Analysis Results (Bootstrapping, 5,000 samples)
(made by the authors)

Indirect Path	β	t-value	p-value	95% CI (BCa)	Supported
HGR → CS → CB	0.080	3.149	0.002	[0.034, 0.133]	Yes
HSF → HGR → CB	0.182	5.428	0.000	[0.123, 0.254]	Yes
HSF → CS → CB	0.093	3.157	0.002	[0.038, 0.153]	Yes
HSF → HGR → CS	0.202	4.212	0.000	[0.116, 0.304]	Yes
PV → CS → CB	0.062	2.839	0.005	[0.019, 0.106]	Yes
HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB (full chain)	0.016	3.198	0.001	[0.005, 0.025]	Yes
HSF → HGR → PV	0.254	7.026	0.000	[0.186, 0.329]	Yes
HGR → PV → CS → CB	0.023	3.116	0.002	[0.008, 0.037]	Yes
HSF → PV → CS → CB	0.030	2.455	0.014	[0.008, 0.057]	Yes
HSF → HGR → CS → CB	0.055	3.100	0.002	[0.023, 0.093]	Yes
HSF → HGR → PV → CS	0.058	2.911	0.004	[0.019, 0.097]	Yes
HSF → HGR → PV → CB	0.050	3.054	0.002	[0.022, 0.087]	Yes
HGR → PV → CB	0.073	3.071	0.002	[0.033, 0.127]	Yes
HSF → PV → CB	0.097	3.263	0.001	[0.044, 0.161]	Yes
HSF → PV → CS	0.111	2.620	0.009	[0.032, 0.199]	Yes

Table 6 - Predictive power (PLSpredict Results)
(made by the authors)

Construct	Q^2_predict	RMSE	MAE	Predictive Power
CB	0.519	0.696	0.547	Medium-High
CS	0.507	0.705	0.533	Medium
HGR	0.469	0.731	0.583	Medium
PV	0.548	0.675	0.536	Medium

All Q^2_predict values are positive, supporting predictive relevance.

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Thus, the model not only explains relational and experiential mechanisms but also predicts customer behaviour with meaningful accuracy.

Qualitative triangulation

Qualitative insights from 25 operators and guests corroborate the quantitative mechanism:

Destination attributes shape perceived value through iconic scenery, cultural framing, and atmospheric cues.

HGR emerged as the dominant determinant of guest evaluation, with emotional warmth and everyday conversational practices repeatedly emphasized.

Innovation practices-such as smart check-in and personalized design-enhance perceived value but require capability alignment.

Urban versus mountain settings reveal contextual differences in safety, accessibility, and ambience.

Relationship maintenance practices (community building, personalized recommendations) align with the identified CB outcomes.

Overall, the qualitative findings strengthen the causal interpretation that strategic resources must be activated relationally before influencing cognitive and affective responses, fully supporting the sequential mechanism identified in the SEM results.

Discussion

Overview of key findings

The empirical results show a clear pattern of how strategic factors influence guest experiences in homestays. First, all relationships in the proposed model are statistically significant, indicating that guests' relational, cognitive, and affective evaluations are interlinked and unfold progressively rather than independently.

Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF) strongly affect the early relational stage, enhancing host–guest interaction and subsequently shaping perceived value and satisfaction as experiences accumulate. This confirms that strategic resources exert influence primarily when activated through relational engagement.

Second, the multi-mediator structure is confirmed, with several indirect pathways showing meaningful effects on customer behaviour (CB). The results show that neither perceived value nor satisfaction alone explains behavioural outcomes; rather, their combined sequence exerts the strongest influence. This validates the theorized relational-cognitive-affective chain and demonstrates that experiential judgments accumulate rather than operate in isolation.

Third, the structural model exhibits solid explanatory and predictive performance. R^2 values for PV, CS, and CB show that the model captures substantial variance in experiential outcomes. PLSpredict further confirms excellent predictive accuracy, with all key indicators outperforming benchmark models. This highlights the model's robustness and its usefulness for forecasting hospitality outcomes.

Finally, qualitative insights complement the quantitative findings by showing how design cues, cultural ambience, and interactional warmth shape guests' impressions and reinforce the relational-experiential progression. Operators consistently emphasized that emotional resonance and communication quality are central to guest evaluation, grounding the model in realistic homestay practice.

Overall, the findings depict a coherent multi-stage process in which strategic inputs shape relational engagement, which then cascades into cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes. This unified pattern supports the mechanism HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB and strengthens the SDL–RBV integration.

Theoretical implications

Based on these findings, this study contributes in three main ways by clarifying how strategic resources, relational dynamics, and experiential evaluations interact in small-scale hospitality contexts.

Theoretical contribution 1: reframing strategic resources through relational activation.

This research enhances the Resource-Based View (RBV) by demonstrating that innovation and destination attributes influence outcomes via relational activation rather than through direct effects. Rather than inherently creating value, these resources function as latent capabilities that must be enacted through interpersonal interaction before shaping experiential outcomes. This reframes strategic resources as "relationally operant," extending RBV toward a process-based understanding more suitable for intimate service environments.

Theoretical contribution 2: advancing SDL by positioning HGR as a proximal mechanism.

A key advancement is repositioning the host–guest relationship (HGR) as a proximal mechanism that initiates value formation, rather than a downstream result. The strong HGR → PV and HGR → CS paths reveal that emotional and cultural resonance guide how guests interpret design cues and service processes, offering a mechanism-based explanation of co-created value in homestays.

Theoretical contribution 3: establishing a sequential value-formation chain (HGR → PV → CS → CB)

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The validation of the sequential mediation process contributes a more structured model of guest experience formation.

By showing that PV leads to CS, which then drives behavioural intentions, this study clarifies the layered psychological pathway through which homestay experiences translate into loyalty outcomes. This integrated chain advances SDL by empirically specifying how relational, cognitive, and affective stages interact within a strategic resource framework.

Comparison with previous studies

The findings corroborate and extend existing research in several ways:

Prior studies emphasized authenticity, destination image, and service quality as drivers of perceived value and loyalty. This study demonstrates that strategic resources influence these outcomes primarily through relational activation rather than direct effects.

Whereas earlier work treated HGR as an experiential consequence, the present model shows that relational cues act as early-stage catalysts for value interpretation.

Conceptualizing HSF as a second-order capability aligns with dynamic capabilities research, yet few homestay studies have integrated innovation and destination attributes into a unified VRIN-based construct. This bundled approach avoids fragmented variable treatment and captures the synergistic nature of resource orchestration.

The validated sequential chain supports SDL arguments about experiential layering and provides direct evidence from a relational service environment where emotional labour and interpersonal engagement are central.

Practical implications for homestay operators

The findings provide several actionable insights for homestay practitioners:

Investing in strategic factors alone is insufficient. Product and process innovation must be complemented by relational practices-including warmth, empathy, personalized communication, and cultural storytelling-to activate value co-creation.

Enhancing HGR should be prioritized. Operators should invest in host training, emotional labour management, and interaction skills to strengthen relational bonds.

Value communication is essential. Because PV is a key mediator, operators should highlight cultural uniqueness, comfort, and experiential meaning through design and digital engagement.

Satisfaction-building requires consistency. Emotional reliability across touchpoints helps convert experiential value into loyalty and advocacy.

Overall, these implications emphasize synchronizing strategic, relational, and experiential dimensions within integrated service design.

Policy implications

Policymakers in Chongqing and similar mountainous urban-rural regions can use these findings to improve tourism planning and destination management:

Support ecosystem-level innovation by fostering collaboration networks between homestays, local artisans, and cultural organizations.

Develop training systems that strengthen hosts' relational competencies-not only operational skills.

Encourage differentiated development based on cultural and environmental assets, aligning with RBV's resource uniqueness principles.

These mechanisms also provide policy insight for ASEAN destinations, where community-based homestays rely heavily on relationship-driven value creation (Saviera, 2025).

Boundary conditions and contextual sensitivity

The effects identified here may be especially salient in high-context cultures such as China, where interpersonal warmth and relational cues strongly influence evaluations and behaviour. In low-context cultures, the strength or sequencing of these pathways may differ (Yacoub et al., 2025). Future comparison studies could test cultural moderation of the relational-cognitive-affective chain.

Similarly, destination morphology (e.g., river-view vs. mountain eco-cultural sites) may moderate the impact of strategic resources and relational engagement. Environmental characteristics may shape how HSF is interpreted, suggesting a need for context-sensitive extensions of the model.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations:

It focuses on a single region; future research should examine other provinces or ASEAN destinations to assess model generalizability (Sroypetch et al., 2025).

Longitudinal data could better capture the evolution of relational dynamics and strategic resource deployment.

Future studies may incorporate digital touchpoints, emotional labour variables, or cultural intelligence to refine understanding of relational activation.

Despite these limitations, the unified SDL–RBV mechanism proposed here offers a transferable foundation for explaining experiential hospitality in diverse relational service environments.

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Conclusion

This study advances understanding of how strategic resources affect customer behaviour in homestays by integrating RBV and SDL into a unified mechanism. The results demonstrate that Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF) affect behavioural outcomes primarily through a relational-cognitive-affective sequence: HSF strengthens the Host–Guest relationship (HGR), which enhances perceived value (PV) and fuels customer satisfaction (CS), ultimately driving loyalty-related behaviours. This validated chain (HSF → HGR → PV → CS → CB) offers a coherent explanation of how resources are mobilized, interpreted, and transformed into experiential value.

By empirically verifying this mechanism, the study demonstrates that resource deployment alone is insufficient; resources generate value only when activated through relational engagement and processed through layered experiential evaluations.

By repositioning HGR as an activation mechanism, the study extends SDL and clarifies the relational foundations of experiential hospitality. Treating PI, BPI, and DA as a bundled VRIN-based capability further enriches RBV and highlights the strategic importance of resource orchestration in small-scale tourism enterprises.

Together, these insights advance theory by integrating strategic capability and experiential co-creation within a single process-based framework.

These insights integrate strategic capability and experiential co-creation into a single mechanism and highlight that relational activation-not resource possession alone-drives satisfaction and loyalty.

The mechanism also holds relevance for ASEAN destinations, where community-based homestays depend heavily on cultural embeddedness and interpersonal warmth. Future research may examine cross-cultural moderators, digital touchpoints, and longitudinal relational dynamics to refine the proposed framework.

Exploring how technological mediation, cultural norms, or environmental settings influence the relational-experiential chain represents a promising direction for comparative research.

Suggestions

Drawing on the integrated SDL–RBV mechanism, the findings indicate that strategic resources generate customer loyalty primarily when activated through relational engagement, suggesting several implications for operators, destination managers, and policymakers.

For homestay practitioners, cultivating meaningful host-guest interaction is essential, as interpersonal warmth, cultural storytelling, and personalized communication serve as the relational interface through which product and process innovations take effect. Embedding innovation within local cultural identity enhances authenticity, while coherent journey design-consistent communication and small gestures-reinforces the PV–CS progression.

Operators should prioritize host training, emotional labour management, and narrative-based service design to systematically strengthen HGR as the first-stage activation mechanism.

Long-term loyalty can be supported by community-building practices, tailored recommendations, and co-created activities that deepen emotional attachment.

Digital tools-such as personalized messaging, post-stay engagement, and curated cultural content-can also extend relational warmth beyond the physical stay.

At the destination level, policymakers should prioritize capability building by offering training in digital tools, relational service, and cultural interpretation, thereby enabling operators to fully activate Homestay Strategic Factors (HSF). Developing differentiated, resource-based clusters-river-view, mountain-eco, and cultural circuits-can enhance competitiveness. Cross-sector collaboration can enrich experiential value, while improved infrastructure, accessibility, and signage reduce experiential friction.

Chongqing's mountainous geography and urban-rural hybridity further necessitate context-specific measures such as targeted digital training in counties like Wulong and Youyang, standardized host-guest interaction guidelines to professionalize relational service, differentiated development strategies for urban and rural homestays, and enhanced transport and digital infrastructure to support experiential coherence.

Adopting zoning-based and capability-based development strategies can help local governments match resource strengths with relational and cultural assets.

These mechanisms also offer actionable implications for ASEAN destinations, where community-based and culturally embedded homestays similarly rely on relational engagement as the foundation for experiential value, satisfaction, and loyalty.

Because many ASEAN tourism contexts emphasize cultural authenticity and interpersonal connection, the validated mechanism provides a transferable blueprint for designing relationally oriented and resource-sensitive homestay strategies.

The model validated in this study thus provides a transferable framework for designing relationally

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oriented, resource-sensitive tourism strategies across comparable cultural and regional contexts.

Its process-based logic can guide practitioners and policymakers seeking to build sustainable, experience-driven homestay ecosystems.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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