

Article

Promoting Youth Mental Health in Spiritual Tourism Through Service Design

Haoyu Dong ¹, Jun Zhang ^{1,*} and Tang Tang ²¹ School of Design, Hunan University, Changsha 410082, China; haoyudong@hnu.edu.cn² School of Design, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK; t.x.tang@leeds.ac.uk

* Correspondence: zhangjun@hnu.edu.cn

Abstract: Youth are society's vital asset, and their mental health is a priority for global public health. Spiritual tourism, through the integration of cultural and spiritual elements, promotes travelers' mental health and has emerged as a new model of service that complements traditional mental health treatments; however, this model lacks a focus on the specific characteristics and needs of the youth demographic, as well as a design perspective, which may contribute to the inability to provide long-term mental health support for youth due to insufficient social support. Therefore, this paper explores the ways in which service design can foster long-term mental health support for youth in spiritual tourism services. The paper begins with a theoretical analysis to identify the key characteristics and limitations of current spiritual tourism services while also addressing the principles of service design and the rationale for incorporating suburban experiential lodging as a case. Subsequently, qualitative methods, including ethnographic observations, demographic surveys, and in-depth interviews, were employed with eleven youth participants and three staff members to gather insights into their experiences and needs. The findings indicate that current spiritual tourism services are hindered by issues such as low accessibility, inadequate follow-up support, and design shortcomings. Furthermore, spiritual tourism services can be designed to systematically integrate the needs for natural environments, psychological identification, and social interaction, enhancing long-term mental health support for youth.

Keywords: service design; youth; mental health; spiritual tourism; suburban experiential lodging; ethnographic research



Academic Editor: Jun (Justin) Li

Received: 1 December 2024

Revised: 1 January 2025

Accepted: 4 January 2025

Published: 10 January 2025

Citation: Dong, H.; Zhang, J.; Tang, T. Promoting Youth Mental Health in Spiritual Tourism Through Service Design. *Sustainability* **2025**, *17*, 498. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17020498>

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1. Introduction

Global experts recently declared that youth mental health (YMH) is in a “dangerous phase” [1–4]. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics [5], the youth population in this study refers to individuals aged 18 to 25 (up to the 26th birthday). Multiple studies highlight the increasing recognition of the importance of YMH services [6–8], as environmental factors, such as family dynamics, friendships and social interactions, neglect or abuse, education, and employment, have a powerful and lasting impact on YMH and development during this period [1,3]; however, this landscape appears to be changing for the worse. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, YMH has been severely affected [4,9], with 74% of youths receiving primary mental health (MH) care reporting that the pandemic negatively impacted their MH and well-being [10]. Prior to the pandemic, substantial evidence indicated a growing deterioration in the MH of young people, including social communication difficulties [11,12], anxiety [12,13], depressive symptoms [14,15],

and psychological distress [16,17]. In response, various MH services have emerged, such as Early Intervention in Psychosis [7] and Emotion Regulation [4], which have demonstrated clinical, social, and economic benefits. Admittedly, there is no doubt that this innovation has provided valuable insights for strengthening MH; however, these interventions are typically hospital-based or rely on medication and clinical therapies, which inherently limit their reach. Specifically, the potential for these approaches to be scaled up and provide long-term MH support for youth is hindered owing to a lack of social support, low accessibility, and design issues; therefore, despite the potential benefits, these limitations make it clear that promoting YMH remains an urgent and unresolved challenge.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the intersection of tourism and MH, particularly within spiritual tourism (ST) services. Before delving into the concept of ST, it is essential first to understand the term tourism itself. According to the International Union of Official Travel Organizations [18], tourism refers to travel to a destination outside one's permanent residence for purposes other than business activities. Building on commonalities within the existing literature [18–23], we define ST as a new model of service that supplements MH treatment. It is a form of cultural and health tourism focused on promoting the MH of travelers through cultural and spiritual elements. It offers tangible products (material goods) and intangible services that foster self-reflection, emotional healing, and stress relief. Currently, there is a substantial body of literature that discusses the benefits of tourism for MH. Similarly, for example, Norman et al. [20] highlighted how combining yoga with cultural elements in travel enhances psychological resilience and emotional regulation. Chen et al. [24] emphasized the role of 'place attachment' in tourism, noting that emotional connections to space can foster psychological belonging. More recently, a study by Zheng et al. [21] involved how ST in Tibet influences MH through personal values, motivations, emotional transformations, and behavioral intentions. Additionally, there are several shining international examples. For instance, according to recent data released by the Bali Central Bureau of Statistics on 2 September 2024, the number of foreign tourists reached 625,665 in July 2024 [25]. Bali has increasingly recognized meditation as a health tourism activity crucial to promoting MH [26]. Moreover, Switzerland combines medical treatments with luxury wellness services, specifically focusing on "Hotels Bridging Health Care" [27]; however, most of these studies may approach the topic from a regulatory standpoint, often overlooking the specific characteristics and needs of the youth population and the corresponding social support models required. As a result, these studies struggle to fully realize the potential of the new service model to promote MH. Moreover, there is a lack of research from a design perspective. For service design (SD) practitioners and researchers, it is critical to address the needs and experiences of users and collaborating stakeholders (e.g., patients and healthcare providers) and integrate various system components (e.g., management processes and technologies) to develop effective and sustainable healthcare models [28].

SD refers to a people-centered [29,30], collaborative [31,32], and integrative approach [29,31,32] to create new service futures. It offers valuable contributions to catalyzing health system creation toward a new vision of care. For instance, typical applications of SD in healthcare include seamlessly integrating digital tools into existing processes [33], fostering interdisciplinary collaboration through tangible tools such as service maps and role experience boards [34], and enhancing inclusivity in museum experiences by designing environments tailored for dementia patients [35]. SD is increasingly recognized as a transformative force within service systems [32,36–39], evolving from discrete SD initiatives to the restructuring of service systems both internally and across systems [32,39] or enhancing the capacity for the continuous development of SD [40], with a focus on the long-term impact on consumers and society at large [41]. For example, SD has been used to challenge

deeply rooted norms and beliefs in MH services [42] and create inclusive, holistic, and community-driven MH services through co-design and relational welfare approaches [43]. Additionally, a growing body of research demonstrates the role of SD in enhancing experiential innovation in tourism [44,45], system transformation [32], and meeting the travel needs of youth [46,47]; however, traditional healthcare system design primarily focuses on eliminating disparities, understanding quantitative measures, improving efficiency, and driving incremental change [48]. Service experiences are not created in isolation and the actual degree of transformation depends on the depth of design exploration within the service system [49]. Despite the application of these fragmented SD examples within healthcare systems, the potential challenges of leveraging SD to promote YMH through ST remain largely unexplored; therefore, in the face of new YMH challenges and service models, service designers must reimagine innovative and transformative solutions to promote long-term engagement and foster a more optimistic outlook for the future.

The primary aim of this study is to explore how SD can foster sustained MH support for youth within the context of ST. To achieve this aim, this study is structured around the following research objectives: first, this study conducts a theoretical analysis to explore the challenges of current ST services for youth and develop a framework for their key characteristics; to examine the principles of SD in addressing these challenges; to analyze the potential of Suburban Experiential Lodgings (SELs) as a case study. This study applies the theoretical framework through ethnographic observations, demographic surveys, and in-depth interviews to investigate participants' experiences and needs, ultimately identifying design opportunities for improving the services. This study offers valuable insights into the design of sustainable YMH support systems in ST, emphasizing accessibility through early guidance and a comprehensive, long-term approach to service delivery.

2. Theoretical Research

This section begins by examining the challenges and characteristics of ST services in YMH, introducing the "Place–Culture–Relationship" (PCR) framework as a foundation for subsequent research. It then proceeds to theoretical pathways for SD intervention in ST, outlining its guiding principles. Lastly, the section presents SELs as a case study, justifying its role in supporting design approaches and setting the stage for the empirical study in the next chapter, which aims to integrate theory with practice.

2.1. *Spiritual Tourism Services for Youth*

The youth stage is a critical transition period from adolescence to adulthood, characterized by dynamic and developmental sensitivity [3,5,50]; however, these characteristics of young individuals have not yet received sufficient attention in two main aspects. In the First, many young people face constraints related to travel costs and journey time. A regional survey by Marriott International [51] revealed that over two-thirds of affluent Gen Z (18–24 years old) and Millennial (25–41 years old) travelers plan to prioritize nearby travel destinations in the coming years. Some scholars argue that ST services have successfully integrated tourism and healthcare, particularly in tourist cities with luxury wellness programs and accommodations [26,27]. By contrast, others highlight that high living and healthcare costs, coupled with the extended time off required, make such services inaccessible to young travelers [52,53]. Second, design limitations within ST services make it challenging to support YMH in the long term. While wellness centers are thought to offer MH benefits through immersive experiences such as spas, yoga, meditation, and natural therapies, critics argue that these interventions are typically limited to the duration of the visit and lack follow-up mechanisms [20]. Furthermore, dissimilar to older age groups, young individuals prioritize social experiences, authenticity, sustainability, and digital

connectivity [54]. As a result, these conventional approaches may fail to capture youth interest, limiting their willingness to participate in services. To summarize, traditional ST services face challenges to implement because of young individuals' abilities or lack of resources. Thus, judging from all the relevant evidence, ST services must be tailored to the specific needs of youth, considering affordability, endurance, and engagement.

To accomplish this, this paper contributes by advancing the conceptual clarity of ST and delineating three analytical dimensions—Place, Culture, and Relationship—that, in combination, provide a characteristic framework (as shown in Figure 1) for understanding the diversity of elements intentionally designed to support YMH.

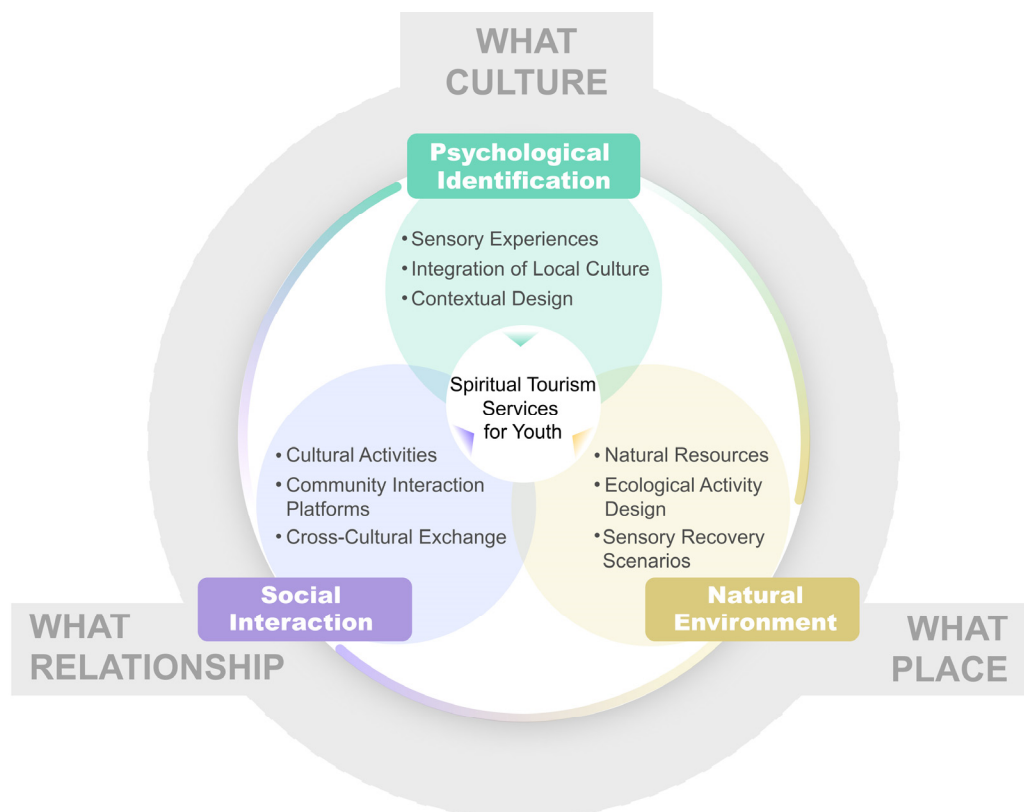


Figure 1. The “Place–Culture–Relationship” Framework: Characteristics of Spiritual Tourism Services for Youth.

- The first dimension, place, describes the vital role of natural environments as destinations in ST. In other words, ST reduces psychological stress and promotes psychological resilience through green spaces (e.g., forests, mountains, and mountain resorts) [55,56] or blue spaces (e.g., lakes, rivers, and oceans) [57,58]. More specifically, Schmude et al. highlight the therapeutic potential of natural resources such as water, salt, and air, which are central to improving MH and well-being in tourism [59]. Additionally, natural experiences are enhanced by integrating accommodation with activities. For example, experiential accommodations in Moganshan, Hangzhou, offer activities such as rural farming and outdoor yoga, enabling visitors to connect with nature [60]. Furthermore, sensory recovery scenarios are related to MH restorative potential. In the same vein, Sona et al. [61] hold the view that natural environments integrating multiple sensory stimuli (e.g., visual, auditory, and olfactory inputs) have been proven to enhance emotional recovery, reduce fatigue, and improve overall health. To further theorize the connection between natural environments and YMH, we draw on the work of Lawrance [62], who highlights that closer connections to nature result in better psychological outcomes for young people. More generally, this suggests that

natural environments could enhance mental resilience and well-being through youth exposure, engagement, and immersion in nature [62]. Compared with expensive services, natural environments are more likely to directly meet the need for affordable and accessible MH support for youth; however, evidence-based studies hardly play a role in promoting health tourism offers [59]. Thus, the lack of studies and applications of the health benefits of natural environments highlights an opportunity to bridge the gap between research on ST and YMH.

- The second dimension, culture, refers to psychological identification as a core component of ST services, aimed at enhancing travelers' self-identity and emotional ties with local culture. To begin with, as argued by Mohseni et al. [63], sensory experiences in a place can influence one's self-identity. Similarly, Jelinčić and Šveb [64] found that incorporating visual cues from art in tourism environments can influence emotional responses. Additionally, the Rural Art Roadshow in Tasmania combined art therapy and community events as a traveling art exhibition to reduce stigma, foster social inclusion, and encourage positive MH conversations [65]. In addition to that, it is necessary to emphasize how ST shapes a sense of identification in contextual design. For illustration, some rural guesthouses in China integrate cultural features into contextual activities, including celebrating the Bai ethnic group's Torch Festival, hosting manor parties, and organizing tie-dye workshops [66,67]. Similarly, at Australia's Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park, the Anangu Aboriginal community invites visitors to learn about their customs and spiritual values through walking tracks, aboriginal art galleries, and a specially designed tourist center [68]. These examples demonstrate that travelers are connected with diverse natural, cultural, and spiritual elements through contextual engagement, thereby enhancing the immensity of their experience. More recently, youth reshaping self-identity and travel are closely linked [69]. This indicates that meaningful activities foster emotional connections, motivating youth participation, while engagement in local cultural activities helps reshape self-identity. Overall, design experts can leverage young people's sensitivity to destination traditions and beliefs to foster spiritual dialogue and collaboration in SD. In this method, they become part of an ongoing and broader change process that they support and facilitate but cannot fully control [70].
- The third dimension, relationship, emphasizes social interaction in the youth community and among diverse cultural groups. First, socializing through cultural activities contributes to MH. To illustrate, Douglas et al. [71] highlight the intermediary role of activities in the relationship between tourists' cultural tourism motivations and destination choices, which is crucial in improving their well-being. Liu et al. [72] underscore the significance of traditional Chinese Hanfu festivals in promoting social interactions that contribute to emotional engagement. Second, incorporating a social network perspective into MH promotion is critical. For example, Douglas et al. [71] stress the impact of community and social status on tourists' participation in cultural activities. Additionally, Liu et al. [72] suggest that homogeneity (i.e., the tendency of individuals to connect with others with similar backgrounds) is a fundamental characteristic of network communities. Third, several studies have highlighted the significant value of cross-cultural exchange. Specifically, meaningful engagement with local culture and communities through active participation rather than passive observation, as seen in traditional tourism, fosters deeper connections and enriches the travel experience [73]. Recently, some youth social initiatives have emerged, such as the Youth Hostel in Essaouira, offering activities themed water sports [74]. ONETWOMA, as a lifestyle platform, has initiated "show-style" social travel, where young people team up to share similar travel habits [75]. Thus, providing them with platforms or communities

for peer interactions or cross-cultural exchanges can foster connections and support that traditional therapies may not achieve; however, current travel programs lack innovation that is closely tied to MH, especially in integrating cultural experiences, platformization, and interactive elements.

Notably, these dimensions are not isolated but interwoven, collectively influencing YMH. For instance, Aulet and Duda [76] focus on spiritual sanctuaries that integrate cultural and natural elements. According to their perspective, exploring how destinations further combine cultural elements (such as meditation or rituals) with natural environments may address the needs of youth and enhance MH. That is, when these dimensions work synergistically, they can form an integrated system of emotional support, cultural identity, and social adaptation, which fosters the sustainable development of YMH. In addition, this framework, compared with traditional health intervention models, reflects potential innovation. The latter typically focuses on biological and medical psychological interventions, such as various forms of psychotherapy and, less commonly, psychiatric drug treatments [7]. Many individuals also require specialized care, such as emotional management [4]; however, existing approaches often overlook the diverse and holistic psychological needs of youth. Those seeking MH services require symptom relief and strategies for overall well-being [7]. A comprehensive public MH strategy must equally prioritize both health promotion and the treatment of mental disorders [7].

In combination, ST must move beyond individual interventions and challenge conventional perspectives on YMH by integrating the three key dimensions. This approach would create a multi-layered service that aligns more closely with the everyday life practices of youth. It is important to note that the PCR framework provides a systematic understanding between ST and the promotion of YMH, offering ongoing solutions. As such, it is a valuable framework for participants seeking to promote or influence YMH through ST.

2.2. Service Design Intervention in Spiritual Tourism

As the field of SD continues to expand, designers have increasingly recognized the importance of human-centered, collaborative, and systematic approaches, developing methods such as participatory design, stakeholder collaboration, and interdisciplinary design. This section connects existing SD research with the PCR framework, emphasizing three guiding principles—human-centered design, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and system resource reorganization for addressing service challenges in ST. Understanding how these principles contribute to the dimensions of ST forms the foundation for designing services that promote YMH.

First, human-centered design advocates highlight users' emotional and practical needs, thus fostering new services for the future [56,77]. It is reflected not only in optimizing service delivery but also in the direct involvement of users in the process [78,79]. Hackett et al.'s study demonstrates how identifying key touchpoints within co-designing can enhance the quality and experience of care for YMH services. This means that design teams facilitate the co-design process [80], simultaneously empowering users and stimulating imagination for the future [38]. Specifically, involving young people in the design process in ST ensures that the services align with their unique needs. In other words, the dimensions that can be developed within ST allow services to be tailored to meet the needs of youth, ensuring that the services are effective and engaging. Designers can gain insights into users' expectations and feedback through user interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations. This process strengthens users' sense of ownership and emotional connection to the service process, providing emotional support for designing service scenarios.

Second, stakeholder collaboration acknowledges the interconnected roles of various participants in shaping the service experience [81–83]. In the public health field, involving

multiple stakeholders in the design process offers several notable advantages, including enhanced feasibility [81,82], improved effectiveness [84–86], cultural sensitivity [84], influence on participants' emotions and behaviors [85], shaping sustained experiences [84], and fostering more profound understanding and empathy [86]. Additionally, this collaborative process can involve the direct engagement of key stakeholders, such as service beneficiaries, to develop new solutions [83]. Alternatively, it can lead to the creation of objects, mechanisms, and infrastructures that facilitate value co-creation [83]; therefore, in the context of ST, it is essential to include end-users (e.g., young tourists) and service providers (e.g., hotels and local communities) in the design process. This ensures that the design integrates a broad range of values and addresses the specific operational details of service delivery, such as product innovation and operational processes [82]. Designers' core competencies in this context are closely linked to the quality of knowledge generated [32,83]. Specific tasks, for example, employing ethnographic methods to interpret current practices [87,88], emphasize the task and the entire usage process, including stakeholders within particular contexts. Meanwhile, continuous feedback and adaptation should be allowed during the shared experience process to generate meaningful insights and initiate scalable and transferable design outcomes [86]. This process-oriented approach suits SD thinking well [89]. Tools such as stakeholder mapping can also identify key roles and interdependencies [90].

Finally, systemic resource reconfiguration involves the integration of resources at different levels to create a cohesive and innovative vision [91], which encompasses the design of individual experiential elements and their orchestration [92]. The recent literature has emphasized that SD approaches can support the transformation of social structures into design materials that can be utilized to create more effective services [91]. In this context, designers can work across different levels of abstraction, understanding the details of user needs and service interactions and the broader systemic impacts on society [42,83]. For instance, Jelinčić et al. [64] demonstrated how sensory stimuli, such as artistic visual cues, can evoke specific emotional responses to facilitate participants' emotional connection with the environment and culture in museums. From the perspective of service ecosystems, understanding how behavioral agents alter existing system patterns requires focusing on the cognition of these agents [32]. This understanding enables service providers to interact with service recipients in appropriate ways. Consequently, service systems can adopt a more integrated approach, avoiding fragmentation and localized optimization that could hinder the overall health and feasibility of the system [28]. Thus, these findings suggest that by understanding YMH needs and managing YMH experiences, the integration and co-evolution of ST system components, both within and across system components, might be achieved. Specific design work can leverage technology, digital tools, and collaborative design methods to reimagine new service models [28]. For example, the service elements model, which includes Who, What, Why, When, Where, and How, provides a structured and holistic perspective for redesigning service processes [93]. Furthermore, tools such as journey maps [94] and service blueprints [95] assist in visualizing customer touchpoints, identifying pain points, and optimizing end-to-end experiences.

Therefore, this integrated conceptualization highlights that promoting a shared vision for YMH can be achieved through integrating PCR dimensions. As such, this approach can be scaled up and down across different levels (e.g., youth tourists, staff, and organizations), thus directing a roadmap for a series of initiatives toward a broader scope of YMH promotion. This allows SD also to help participants experience smooth and coherent value co-creation across various subsystems. Although SD has proposed valuable insights and goals for the innovation of ST services, it has not been widely applied. The paper will take these SD principles to guide the data collection and design phases, thus leading to the development of innovative YMH solutions.

2.3. Suburban Experiential Lodgings in Spiritual Tourism

According to previous studies of distinctive accommodation types in travel (e.g., locally themed hotels, homestays, and bed and breakfasts (B&Bs)) [96–98], SEL can be defined as an accommodation service that consists of three elements or components: local culture, natural landscapes, and social activities. As shown in the illustration, Mount Mogan stands out as one of China's premier SEL tourist destinations, incorporating symbols of Jiangnan Mountain culture, natural elements, and handicrafts into the interior design. It also offers activities such as camping and farming experiences to help guests relax and immerse themselves in the local lifestyle [60]. Recent studies show the significance of such elements contributing to MH support in the context of accommodation. For instance, studies by Tao et al. [98] demonstrate that positive and meaningful interactions between hosts and guests in B&Bs significantly impact both parties' mental and emotional well-being. Similarly, Yin and Zhao [99] highlight how rural B&Bs integrating local culture and natural environments provide multidimensional benefits, including promoting individual health. In conclusion, rather than emphasizing only the outcomes of single design elements as most prior distinctive accommodation does, SELs offer a refreshed perspective on providing integrated services for participants to promote MH.

Additionally, there has been a change in demand for the SEL sector. In 2021, the Chinese distinctive accommodations market rebounded to approximately 30 billion RMB, a climb from 22 billion RMB in 2019 [100]. Similarly, the United States hotel, resort, and cruise market is expected to reach USD 345.96 billion in 2024, with a projected compound annual growth rate of 6.8% from 2025 to 2030 [101]. These trends highlight the growing significance of distinctive accommodations, including SEL, within the global tourism industry. Furthermore, according to the "2022 China B&Bs Industry Development Report", the younger demographic, particularly Generation Z, has increasingly become the primary consumer group for experiential lodging [102]. Their travel needs extend beyond leisure and relaxation, with a demand for accommodations that bring them closer to nature and offer social activities.

In summary, SELs can serve as a typical case in ST services for promoting YMH, with their design factors related to MH closely aligned with the PCR framework. Further investigation is needed to explore support systems for YMH within SELs, explicitly examining the underlying factors influencing YMH, including 'causes' and 'behavioral patterns'. These findings can subsequently inform new practical design opportunities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore youth behaviors and psychological health needs within ST services. To capture the actions and cognitive experiences of different stakeholders, youth, and staff in SELs, the research integrates ethnographic methods supplemented by a user profile survey, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. The advantage of ethnography lies in its ability to elucidate participants' beliefs within everyday contexts [103], providing a relevant methodology for studying cognition [104]. This approach is increasingly applied in cognitive science to understand cognition in daily life (e.g., Dahlbäck et al. [105]). Integrating these methods helps uncover insights into processes that are difficult to observe directly, thereby offering new perspectives on the nuances of participants' behaviors and experiences. Dissimilar to quantitative methods, which rely on numerical data, qualitative approaches allow for a deeper exploration of the underlying thoughts and motivations behind individual behaviors [106]. This makes it particularly suitable for investigating the complex MH needs and behavioral patterns of youth and other stakeholders in SELs.

3.2. Procedures

The research process is divided into three key stages, as shown in Figure 2.

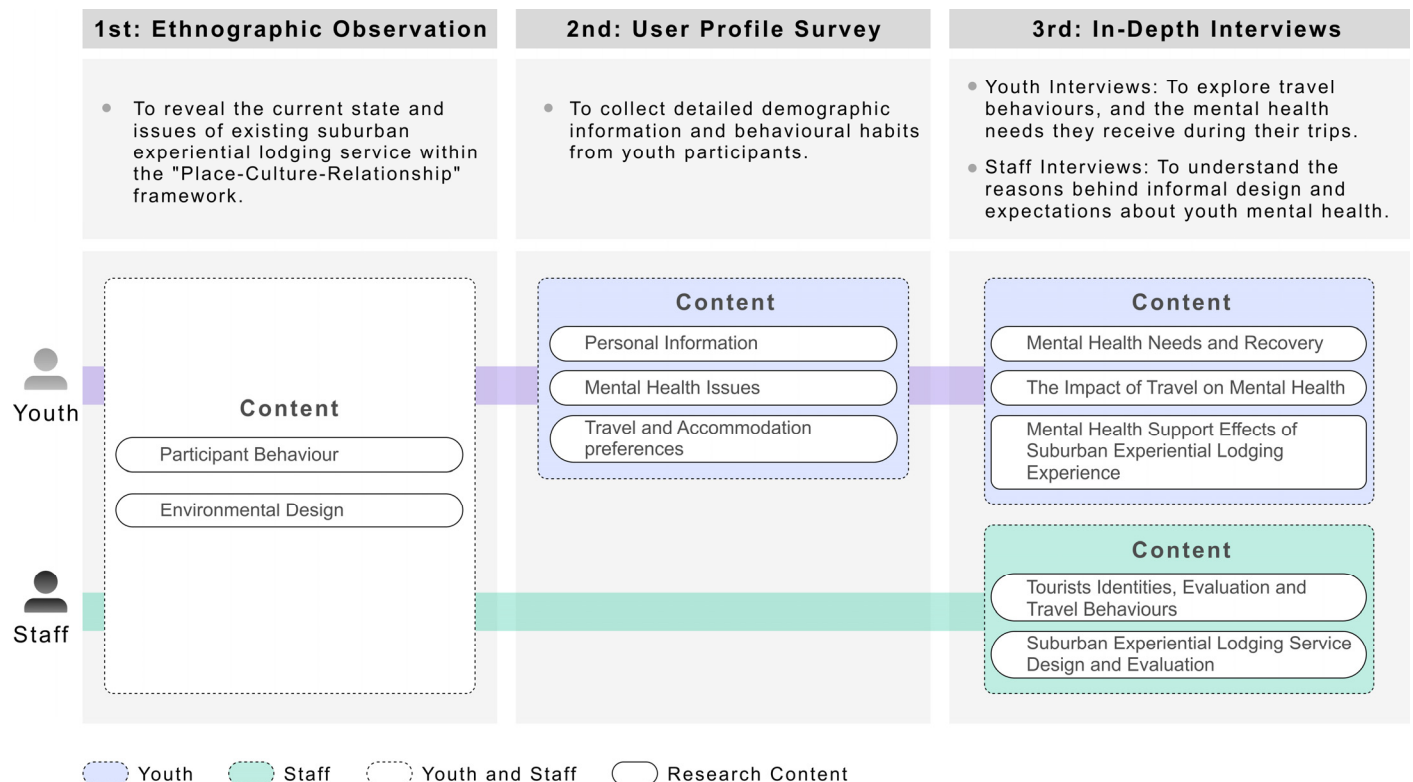


Figure 2. Research procedures.

1. Ethnographic Observation

The observation aims to reveal the current state and issues of existing SEL within the PCR framework. Through ethnographic observation, the research team documents the participant behavior and environmental design in SELs. The focus of the observation includes:

- Participant behavior: Analyzing participants' actions, routes, and interactions during their travel experience.
- Environmental design: Documenting the design of spaces for accommodation and activities.

2. User Profile Survey

This survey collects detailed demographic information and behavioral habits from youth participants. The primary areas of investigation include:

- Personal information: Gender, age, occupation, etc.
- MH issues: Including stress, anxiety, and other MH issues, as well as social needs.
- Travel and accommodation preferences: Investigating travel frequency, types, and choices.

3. In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews are conducted after the user profile survey and ethnographic observations. The interviews will follow a semi-structured format, with separate sessions for youth participants and homestay staff.

- Youth interviews aim to explore travel behaviors further and the MH needs they receive during their trips. Additionally, the impact of travel on MH will be assessed, including how PCR factors influence emotional recovery. In particular, whether youth

participants experience MH support, such as emotional healing or cognitive recovery through their SEL experience.

- Staff interviews aim to understand the reasons behind informal design and expectations about YMH. The interviews will explore tourist's identities, evaluations, and travel behaviors. Additionally, the discussion will include the design of both specialized and general SEL services, examining how they contribute to YMH within the framework of PCR.

3.3. Context

The ethnographic observation took place at the Caoding brand collective space (Caoding), formerly known as "Happy Retirement Home" [107,108]. It is located in the picturesque Yuelu Mountain Scenic Area in Chachang Village, Changsha, China, about 20 min from the city center. The space offers lodging and dining services, attracting young people to participate in cultural activities, parties, and creative markets. Notably, Chachang Village is a key platform for youth entrepreneurship and social engagement, hosting various cultural events such as art festivals, book clubs, and meditation sessions [109]. As a result, it has become a central hub for ST and social interactions among the youth demographic. Given its representativeness, Caoding was selected for this study as a typical SEL in the context of ST, providing valuable insights into YMH needs.

3.4. Participants

It is essential to select a sample that aligns with this study's objectives and from which valuable insights can be drawn; therefore, this study employs purposive sampling, a commonly used method in qualitative research that typically uses small, purposefully selected samples to provide rich case studies [110]. While this sample may not fully represent the entire youth demographic or participants of SELs, its selection is guided by the research objectives' relevance [111]. To enhance the effectiveness of this small sample, a snowball sampling strategy was also used, identifying cases or participants through individuals with prior knowledge of the environment and research [112]. As a result, in-depth and over-time data will be collected from 14 participants, thereby strengthening these data's validity [110].

Recruitment was conducted via social networks and word of mouth. Participants were informed of the aim and procedures. They also were provided with informed consent to review data security, anonymization, and their right to withdraw. Participation was voluntary, and no monetary compensation was provided.

This study involved two groups of participants, as shown in Table 1. The first group comprised 11 youth participants, aged 23 to 26, who completed surveys and interviews. This group included 6 females and 5 males, the majority of whom were full-time university students (9/11) with bachelor's degrees or higher. They demonstrated diverse travel preferences, including natural healing, cultural experiences, adventure, and relaxation, reflecting various travel motivations and MH needs. One participant had previously attended an event organized by the Caoding. The second group consisted of 3 staff members from Caoding, including a manager, brand planner, and front desk receptionist, who participated in interviews. Their ages ranged from 30 to 50 years, with 8 years of experience managing the facility. One participant had 19 years of experience in the guesthouse, including management roles in well-known tourist cities such as Lijiang and Sanya. Although the sample size is relatively small, it provides sufficient data to analyze MH promotion from both service providers' and recipients' perspectives, along with their needs and expectations.

Table 1. Participants' information.

Group	Number of Participants	Age (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Gender (F:M)	Travel Preferences (Top 3)	Travel Frequency (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Experience in Travel (Range)	Participating Study
Youth (Y1–Y11)	11	24 $\pm$ 1.1	6:5	Nature Therapy, Cultural Experience, Relaxation Travel	4.5 $\pm$ 1.5 times/year	3–7 times/year	UPQ, IDI
Staffs (ES1–ES3)	3	44 $\pm$ 7.3	1:2	N/A	N/A	8–19 years of experience	EO, IDI

Code description: Y: Youth; ES: Staffs; EO: Ethnographic Observation (1st Method); UPQ: User Profile Questionnaire (2nd Method); IDI: In-Depth Interviews (3rd Method). “N/A” stands for “Not Applicable”. Data was sourced from the user profile questionnaire.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the School of Design, Hunan University (Grant No. 2021003). Through continuous dialogue and observation, the research enhances transparency and ensures participants' understanding. Data collection took place from November 2021 to November 2024, involving two rounds of observation, one survey, and three interviews. All data were documented through written records, photographs, and video recordings, facilitating deeper discussions during interviews and informing subsequent analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify core themes and sub-themes through coding, matrix mapping, and clustering in collaboration with four research team members specializing in SD. The relevant literature was also reviewed to support the discussion. Data analysis focused on identifying patterns and comparing observed behaviors with participants' self-reported attitudes from the survey and interviews.

4. Results

Through ethnographic observation, surveys, and in-depth interviews, this study primarily analyzes the themes related to YMH needs concerning ST services and those associated with SEL services. The first section focuses on YMH needs, addressing the three dimensions of ST: Place, Culture, and Relationship. The second section examines SEL services, including an analysis of environmental design and user demographics. The results are described in greater detail below.

4.1. Youth Mental Health Needs

4.1.1. Place Dimension

The research findings demonstrate the positive effects of natural landscapes on emotional support and relaxation, with a tendency to choose destinations that offer a tranquil atmosphere. Respondents indicated that they experienced emotions such as serenity (Y6-IDI-6 and Y8-IDI-3), insignificance (Y2-IDI-3), and comfort (Y6-IDI-6) during these trips. One respondent mentioned: “The healing effect of natural landscapes, especially ocean views, allows me to relax fully in a quiet, undisturbed environment” (Y3-IDI-1). Another young person noted that the experience of deep breathing during hiking helped them disconnect from city life, thereby alleviating psychological stress (Y5-IDI-2). Additionally, youth placed particular importance on the multisensory experiences provided by natural environments, including fresh air, bright sunlight, and tactile interactions with trees. Such immersive experiences enhanced psychological and physical relaxation (Y8-IDI-1, Y8-IDI-2, and Y4-IDI-1). These findings provide tangible natural sensory resources that allow young people to evoke emotional responses using sensory stimuli such as visual and auditory elements, thereby strengthening their connection with the environment [113].

SELs are favored by youth for their integration of local design elements and relaxing atmosphere. Several respondents highlighted that the combination of natural surroundings and local cultural style in the design of SELs felt much more inviting compared with the standardized interior design of hotels. Moreover, interactions with hosts and other guests enriched social interaction and novelty experience (Y1-IDI-10, Y1-IDI-5, Y2-IDI-8, Y1-IDI-12, and Y7-IDI-12). Additionally, pet-friendly spaces were considered an important factor in providing emotional support (Y4-IDI-16); however, this study also revealed specific challenges. A few respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of services or the infrastructure, which negatively impacted their overall experience. For example, one respondent commented, “Although the design of the SEL was unique, the service and lighting were not up to expectations, which ultimately affected my stay” (Y11-IDI-10). The staff also emphasized that accommodation design should balance technology features and emotional warmth, meeting convenience needs while providing a cozy living experience for guests (ES3-IDI-1).

In summary, the choice of destinations with tranquil atmospheres and enhanced sensory experiences in nature aligns with the MH needs of youth. Integrating natural and cultural elements in SEL is more likely to engage young people. Moreover, travel destination preferences reflect a combination of their desire for nature and social interaction promoting emotional experience; however, realizing these benefits fully requires providing high-quality infrastructure and accommodation services.

4.1.2. Culture Dimension

The design of SEL activities plays a critical role in enhancing psychological healing effects. The respondents mentioned that certain pleasant interactive activities, such as crafting and yoga classes, significantly contribute to psychological recovery. For instance, one staff member (ES1-IDI-1) emphasized that Caoding focuses on developing a unique suburban tourism model rather than replicating urban tourism formats from other cities. By leveraging geographic advantages, they offer creative activities and pioneer a semi-tourism model that combines suburban tourism and accommodation. Currently, seemingly ordinary suburban markets and food tasting activities are popular, with plans to organize diverse activities in the future, such as group card games, matchmaking events, and bonfire parties, in order to leave unforgettable memories for participants (ES1-IDI-2). One respondent (Y7-IDI-12) stated that participating in a swing dance ball organized by the SEL with people who shared interests helped them relax through food and tea, expanded their social circle, and taught them stress-relieving skills. Notably, one of the accommodation’s staff members (ES2-EO-1), a professional swing dancer, organized this activity to create a rural living experience with a cultural tourism focus.

According to user feedback, the following factors influenced their participation in activities:

- Innovative and enjoyable activities that offer psychological relaxation by allowing young people to escape daily concerns temporarily.
- Flexible scheduling that accommodates rest and daily routines, enhances participation willingness.
- Activities provide an interactive space for guests, enhancing the appeal of the event and facilitating the formation of social connections among friends, guests, and strangers.

However, some respondents pointed out that the lack of participation was related to the professionalism of the organizers and the activities themselves. For example, one respondent (Y7-IDI-6) mentioned that although certain activities were enjoyable, they lacked depth and professionalism, particularly in the traditional craft field. This suggests that accommodation activities need to emphasize professional depth and personalized design.

In conclusion, young people are particularly interested in integrating cultural activities into ST services, especially within SELs, because of their engaging nature, flexible scheduling, and social interaction platforms; however, the activities' design, organizational quality, and professional depth significantly affect participation levels and the extent to which the destination's culture can be deeply integrated into the experience.

4.1.3. Relationship Dimension

The frequency and type of social interactions significantly impact MH. Most respondents believe that frequent social interactions help alleviate sadness and increase well-being. One respondent (Y3-IDI-4) stated, "Being with my friends makes me happy and allows me to temporarily forget about work-related stress." Interactions with strangers also became a focal point of this study. Many respondents reported that engaging with strangers brought fresh insights, captivating narratives, and a sense of challenge, contributing to psychological growth (Y6-IDI-10, Y2-IDI-17, and Y9-IDI-9); however, a few respondents mentioned feeling anxious in unfamiliar social situations (Y5-IDI-5). This suggests that moderate social interaction, particularly with acquaintances, aligns more with the social habits of youth.

Furthermore, this study revealed that the positive psychological effects of travel are difficult to sustain. Most respondents indicated that the social relationships formed during travel typically remained at the level of adding friends on social media or liking posts without expanding their social circles (Y5-IDI-16, Y10-IDI-8, and Y11-IDI-9). Additionally, the lack of psychological follow-up support and long-term strategies after travel—such as continued access to post-trip activities and the continuity of related events—further limits the sustainability of these psychological benefits (Y3-IDI-31 and Y11-IDI-14). As these narratives indicate, many individuals seek to establish or strengthen interpersonal relationships through travel, enhancing the value and meaning of the experience.

However, existing social platforms, such as WeChat (a popular Chinese social media app), lack targeted designs to support these needs, leading to a lack of channels and methods to maintain these connections; therefore, strengthening post-trip psychological support, such as promoting follow-up activities and providing convenient communication channels to maintain friendships formed during travel, could help extend the duration of these positive effects.

4.2. Suburban Experiential Lodging Services

4.2.1. Environment Design

The primary services offered by SELs include accommodation, food offerings, and recreational activities. Currently, recreational activities are primarily organized on a one-time basis, leveraging the geographical advantage of being near the Yuelu Mountain Scenic Area, offering activities such as lawn barbecues and mountaintop light meals. According to observation materials, SELs facilitate social interactions among guests through shared living, eating, and activity spaces, as illustrated in Figure 3. First, in terms of shared and flexible spaces, common areas such as the lounge area, movie zone, and outdoor lawn dance area provide an interactive platform for long-term tenants, short-term visitors, and event participants. The flexible design of these spaces allows guests to adjust their usage according to their needs, offering open areas suitable for group activities and private rest spaces catering to individual privacy; however, there are still some shortcomings in the design of the lodging. First, overcrowding during events due to large numbers of participants and the limited number of staff in large spaces may lead to delayed service responses, such as water delivery or catering services. Second, due to the lack of modern transportation options (e.g., subways or buses), tourists often have difficulty finding the

entrance and experience challenges with luggage handling, which negatively impacts the overall service experience.

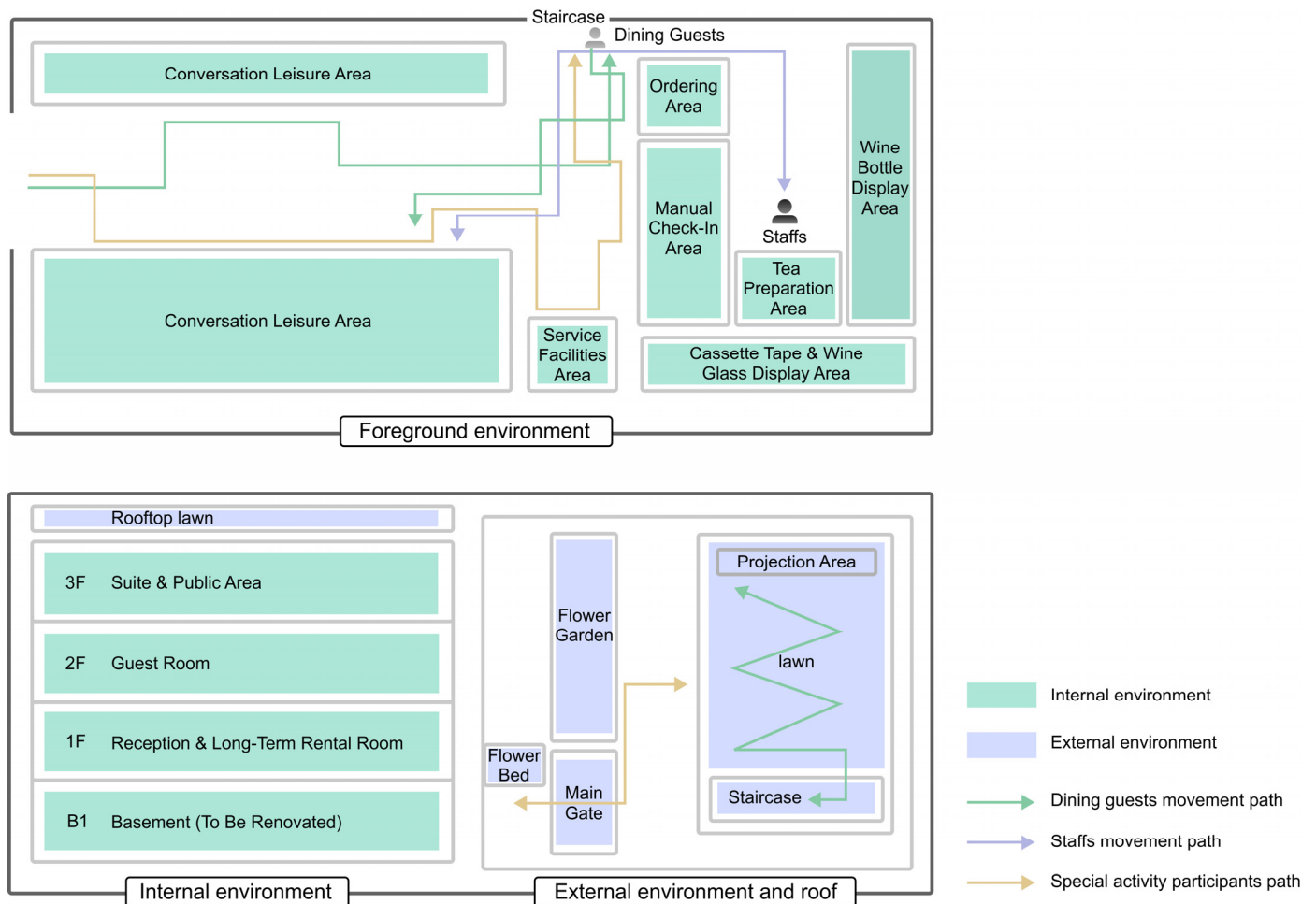
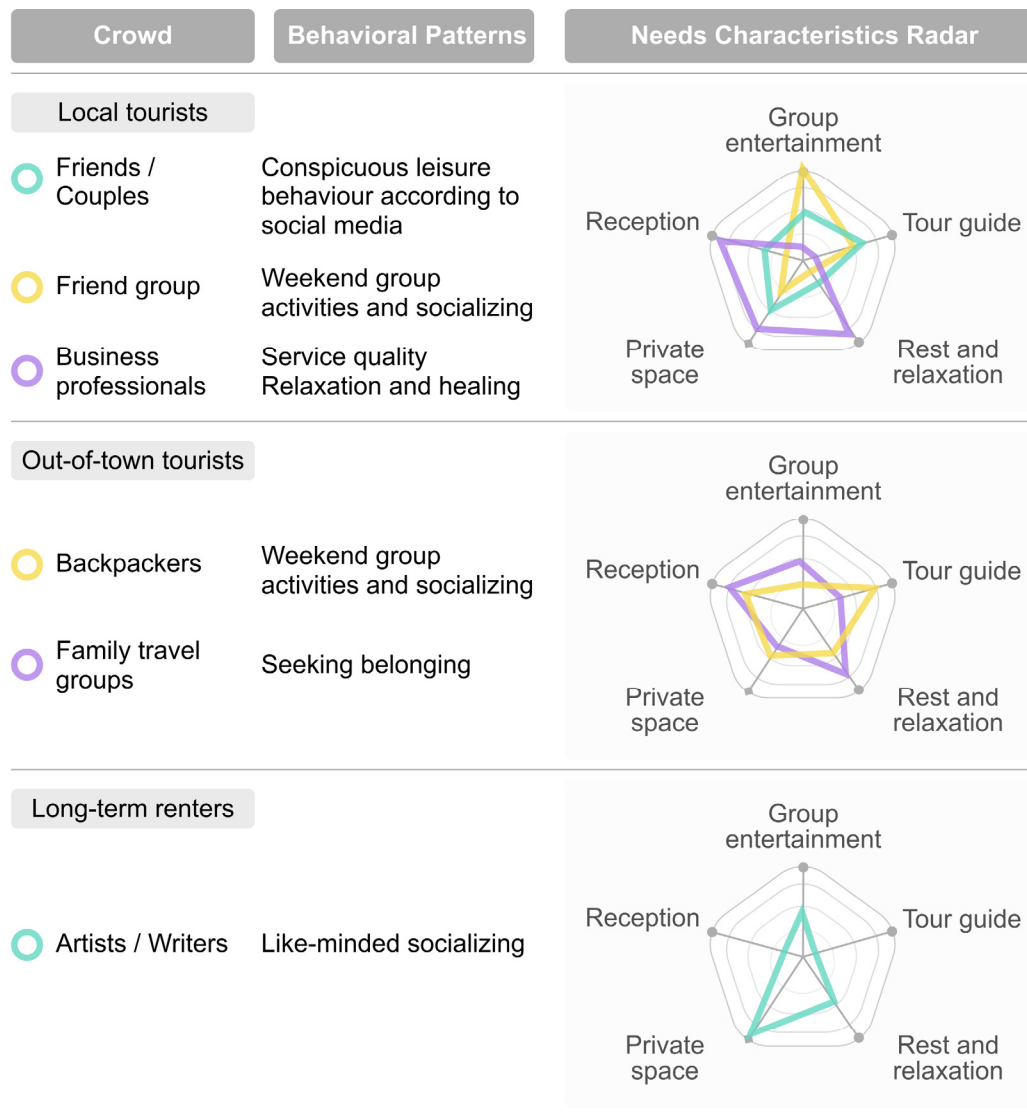


Figure 3. Space Distribution Map in Caoding.

4.2.2. Service Groups

Interviews with three staff members were conducted to understand the types and needs of the current SELs' end-user groups, which include local tourists, out-of-town tourists, and long-term renters, as illustrated in Figure 4. Overall, local tourists constitute the primary audience, with specific demands for group entertainment, guided tours, relaxation therapy, private spaces, and reception services. These groups exhibit certain demographic and need variations, with the core service users being friend groups, couples, or backpackers, each seeking different experiences: group activities for socializing on weekends, conspicuous leisure behavior according to social media (e.g., posting about a visit for platforms such as Xiaohongshu), and local culture and social belonging. The secondary core group consists of artists or writers who seek like-minded individuals for social interaction. In contrast, business professionals, out-of-town couples, and family tourist groups represent the weakest service connections, with their primary motivations being high-quality relaxation and family-oriented activities. Interviews with staff also revealed that the core user group consists of young individuals attracted to local social activities through social media, further refining the core service demographic.



Note: "Xiaohongshu" refers to the Chinese social media platform; "check-in" refers to the activity of posting about a visit or experience

Figure 4. End-User Groups of SEL Services in Caoding.

Furthermore, a summary of the relationships between the aforementioned end-users and existing service providers involved in ST services is presented through a stakeholder map (see Figure 5). The value chain comprises three primary types of relationships: material, informational, and financial. The roles are distributed across different levels of interest within SELs, specifically core, supportive, and expansive. The most closely connected roles include homestay owners, various user types (including youth), and activity organizers. These stakeholders directly engage in activities and aspects of the homestay and ST services that are more relevant, such as the technology reception system and the online travel agency platform as physical touchpoints, along with other staff members within the homestay serving as interpersonal touchpoints to support the service collectively. The expansive layer includes a broader group of service providers within the more extensive social support system.

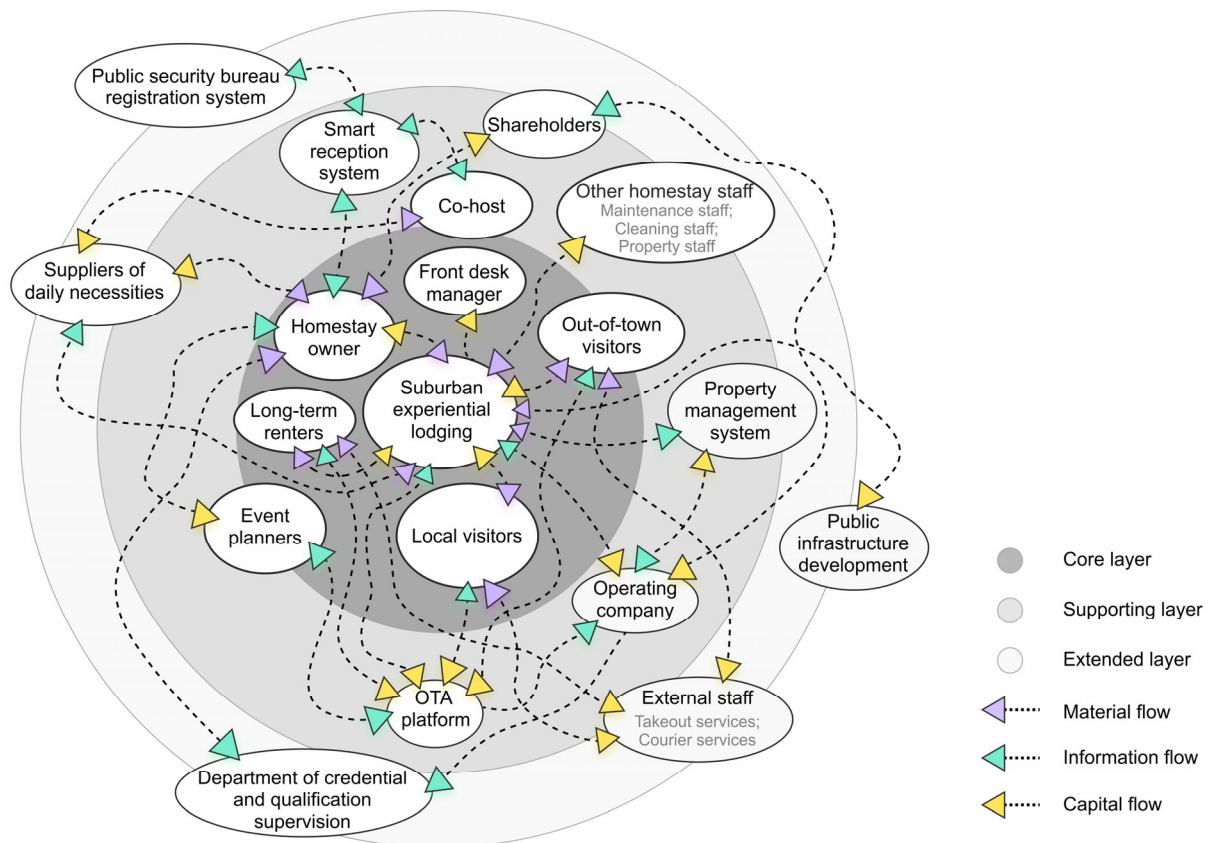


Figure 5. Stakeholder map of SEL Services in Caoding.

In summary, at a more micro level than the collaborative model proposed by Gong et al. [114], the above summary of service groups represents a general model that needs to be sustained rather than a rigid template to be followed precisely. By better understanding participants' roles, relationships, and value exchanges, new YMH needs can be integrated, and tensions and conflicts between these parties can be addressed.

5. Discussion

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the research findings, explores the design opportunities within SEL services, and proposes specific design strategies based on actual needs. Additionally, it discusses this study's strengths, limitations, and future directions.

5.1. Service Design Opportunities

This section applied SD principles to develop ST, positioning youth and participants within the value network as sources of unique knowledge. Insights from research participants contribute to SD by enhancing the understanding of sensitive and complex topics related to YMH. Based on these findings, three key design strategies are proposed to inform future ST practices.

First, the boundaryless living experience strategy seeks to transcend traditional spatial boundaries, thus enhancing the emotional value of accommodation spaces. The research findings indicate that youth are particularly drawn to travel destinations with natural landscapes, seeking emotional support and psychological healing from these environments. In this context, the natural environment in ST is not merely a static landscape experience but an immersive, holistic space that provides physical and mental enjoyment. Furthermore, psychological perception, social behavior, and physical space are mutually constructed [115,116]. As such, design can break traditional physical boundaries of en-

closed spaces by utilizing natural resources (e.g., mountain trails, trees, and lawns) to create openings that connect the interior and exterior spaces, stimulating social interaction. Additionally, youth prefer multisensory natural experiences, which deepen their connection to nature. These findings are consistent with the work of Jelinčić and Šveb [64], who highlight the role of artistic visual and audiovisual stimuli in enhancing emotional responses in tourism; therefore, designers can integrate natural environments into more interactive spaces, such as forest hikes and ecotherapy, to enhance psychological healing through multisensory experiences, including touch, smell, and sound.

Second, the multicultural immersion strategy fosters collaboration among participants in cultural activities to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of new service concepts. Research indicates that youth not only seek therapeutic benefits from immersive natural landscapes but also aim to enrich their travel experiences through cultural activities, deepening their connection to local culture. The demand for shared experiences, such as traditional folk activities and handicraft-making, reflects a shift from individual “identity” to a broader “cultural identity” that engages the larger group, guiding design direction [117]. Furthermore, the depth and interactivity of cultural experiences are crucial factors in this process; therefore, designing activities that integrate local culture and nature, such as historical tunnel hikes or village folklore performances, can strengthen cultural identity and emotional bonds. Additionally, collaboration with local communities, artisans, and tech providers can drive innovation in recreational activities, souvenirs, and accommodation environments. Numerous studies highlight the role of digital technologies, such as virtual reality, AI, and immersive media, in enhancing cultural activities [118–120]. These technologies enable personalized and enriched cultural experiences. Thus, designers should leverage new craftsmanship and smart technologies, utilizing smart sensors and mobile devices to capture visitor needs, adjust activity settings, and optimize resource allocation. By integrating data analysis platforms that enable real-time data exchange, service innovation, convenience, and cost-effectiveness can be enhanced [28].

Third, the community interaction enhancement strategy involves developing a highly interactive, user-engaging platform through a blended online and offline community. The research findings indicate that personal interests drive both youth participation in travel and social interactions, as well as influence staff decisions regarding activity themes. Notably, the concepts of novelty and interest are closely linked, with novelty emerging from interest and possessing the potential to spark human curiosity [121]. According to Lu et al. [96], community interaction fulfills the youth’s need for social connections and supports the development of the SEL brand. Based on these insights, the opportunity for SD lies in creating a “hybrid community” that fosters shared interests and meaningful connections. Specifically, thematic social activities are organized offline within the homestay space, enabling young people to engage in local traditions while fostering connections among travelers. Online communities allow digital networks or matching platforms to social display and integrate shared experiences into the travel experience, helping participants stay connected with like-minded individuals after the trip, thus providing long-term emotional support. These platforms can also post activity information, share travel stories, and encourage offline participation, forming a positive feedback loop that enhances sustained interaction between the brand and the youth community. Additionally, young people have expressed that a relaxing natural environment cannot fully generate psychological benefits without adequate social connections; therefore, this study also emphasizes the critical role of social support in enhancing the psychological benefits of natural experiences. A key SD opportunity lies in integrating nature-based activities with social interactions.

5.2. Strengths and Limitations

There are certain advantages from the SD perspective, particularly in analyzing design opportunities for ST services in experiential homestays. This approach allows the integration of the “human-centered” design philosophy into real-life contexts, providing actionable frameworks and suggestions for optimizing homestay spaces. Furthermore, designers can systematically reorganize existing assets and establish community connections based on the three characteristic dimensions of ST, thus better aligning with the needs and expectations of young people. Additionally, from a research methodology perspective, using an integrated ethnographic approach offers distinct advantages. This method enables researchers to build an interactive bridge with participants based on their life experiences, obtaining more authentic perceptions and insights. Through this approach, this study reveals participants’ behaviors and needs, offering a deeper understanding of the underlying emotions and motivations and providing empirical support for SD. This study offers valuable insights into experiential homestay SD by enhancing the service experience through boundaryless spaces, dynamic activities, and intelligent lifestyle systems.

However, there are certain limitations. First, applying and validating the model in later stages is challenging. The current research focuses on analyzing guest needs, but further exploration is required to implement these design strategies and validate them in broader, real-world settings. Thus, future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of SD solutions. Additionally, due to the small sample size, the validity of this study is generated through research and analysis rather than through generalizability. This may lead to potential biases in the conclusions, as the young participants are primarily based on those with better travel experiences and MH status. This might limit the scope of differences and perspectives among youth at various developmental stages. Moreover, it would be insightful and beneficial to include local community members or neighboring SEL owners to gather diverse opinions, which would further contribute to the feasibility of the SD; therefore, further research could increase the sample size among service recipients and providers. When exploring a specific group, it is crucial to accumulate sample cases to systematically understand how young people use ST to promote MH and identify SD variations rather than simply generalize results [111].

6. Conclusions

This study explores how SD can provide continuous MH support for young people through ST. The research findings indicate that young people tend to choose travel destinations focused on natural landscapes, believing that the natural environment effectively reduces stress and promotes psychological recovery. At the same time, social interaction and cultural experience activities play a significant role in MH. Based on these findings, the designers’ core task is establishing group connections and reorganizing existing assets. Boundaryless home experiences, multicultural immersion, and enhanced community interaction can all be regarded as supportive strategies in SD, which facilitate the emergence of innovative ST services targeting young people. The contribution of this study lies in revealing the characteristics and practical impact of SD on YMH in ST, offering design strategies for future service practices. Future research should further validate the effectiveness of these design strategies and explore broader stakeholder involvement.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.D., J.Z. and T.T.; methodology, H.D.; validation, H.D.; formal analysis, H.D.; investigation, H.D.; resources, H.D. and J.Z.; data curation, H.D.; writing—original draft preparation, H.D.; writing—review and editing, H.D., J.Z. and T.T.; visualization, H.D.; supervision, J.Z. and T.T.; funding acquisition, J.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Humanities and Social Sciences of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, grant number 22YJA760107.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Design, Hunan University (protocol code 2021003 and date of approval 11 October 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are unavailable due to privacy restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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