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Rural Tourism Households Adapting to Seasonality: An Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract: The inherent vulnerability of tourism poses a substantial challenge to maintaining the productivity and stability of livelihoods among rural tourism households. Although tourism seasonality significantly influences the livelihood activities of rural tourism households, research exploring how they adapt their livelihood strategies to achieve optimal outcomes is limited. Employing an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design that combines thematic analysis and fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), we investigated the relationship between the livelihood strategies and outcomes of rural tourism households under the influence of tourism seasonality in the Lijiang scenic spot of China. The results indicate that livelihood strategies adopted by rural tourism households include “Tourism Persistence”, “Seasonal Employment”, and “Seasonal Farming” during the off-season and “Extending Working Hours”, “Increasing Staffing Input”, and “Increasing Capital Input” during the peak season. Furthermore, these strategies form flexible combinations to realize livelihood outcomes, with “Extending Working Hours” being a necessary condition. The findings also revealed that the four configurations of seasonal livelihood strategies in the two patterns significantly contributed to high livelihood outcomes. One is named “Peak-Season Driven Pattern”; the other is named “Peak-Off Blend-Driven Pattern”. These findings provide theoretical and practical insights for sustainable livelihood research.

Keywords: rural tourism; tourism seasonality; sustainable livelihood; thematic analysis; fsQCA



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1. Introduction

Local governments often integrate rural communities with tourism development to alleviate poverty and promote sustainable development [1,2]. Such efforts have reshaped the livelihood activities of rural households, creating new opportunities and uncertainties [3–5]. Since the development of tourism in rural areas has been emphasized as the embedding of tourism in rural communities [6], related studies have mainly discussed the transformation of traditional livelihoods into tourism livelihoods [7–10]. However, rather than a process from A to B, transforming rural households’ livelihood strategies is a continual positive adjustment to changing environments and circumstances, ultimately leading to livelihood diversification [11]. As a determinant of livelihood diversification, seasonality significantly impacts the livelihood strategies chosen by rural households [12]. Depending on their specific endowment of resources, rural households adopt different combinations of livelihood strategies to reduce the adverse effects of seasonality on their annual income [13]. In rural communities deeply integrated with tourism, the tourism livelihood strategy has become a vital livelihood strategy employed by many rural households [14]. Consequently, seasonal fluctuations in tourism activities result in the discontinuity of livelihood strategies for

rural households involved in the tourism industry (hereinafter referred to as rural tourism households) [15], prompting them to seek complementary and alternative livelihood strategies [16]. This transformation in livelihood strategies brings about a rhythmic combination of traditional and tourism livelihoods over time, subsequently affecting livelihood outcomes [17]. Although sustainable tourism livelihoods in the research field of rural tourism have been widely discussed, there remains a shortage of empirical research investigating the transformation of livelihood strategies in the context of tourism seasonality as well as combinations of livelihood strategies that can improve the livelihood outcomes of rural tourism households.

Therefore, we aimed to elucidate the relationship between the seasonal livelihood strategies of rural tourism households and livelihood outcomes, given that the diversification of short-term adjustments when facing tourism seasonality can complicate the interactions between livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes. The study focuses on two questions: what seasonal livelihood strategies have been made by rural tourism households to cope with the uncertainty of tourism seasonality; what combinations of seasonal livelihood strategies can achieve optimal livelihood outcomes? To address this, thematic analysis was used to identify the seasonal livelihood strategies of rural tourism households, followed by fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to explore the relationship between seasonal livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes. The Lijiang scenic spot in China was selected as the study area because of its continuous and in-depth tourism development, resulting in the diverse integration of tourism and traditional livelihoods. This setting provided an ideal context for investigating the impact of tourism seasonality on rural tourism households' sustainable livelihoods. This study aims to provide a different perspective on sustainable livelihood research and deliver insights into how rural tourism households can optimize their livelihood strategies amid tourism seasonality.

This study contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it sheds light on the impact of tourism seasonality on household livelihood. Using mixed methods, this study systematically examines the seasonal responses of rural tourism households at the Lijiang scenic spot, identifying their seasonal livelihood strategies and the impact of these strategies on livelihood outcomes. Second, it introduces a configurational perspective to the empirical study of sustainable livelihoods by employing fsQCA. We adopted a configurational perspective to explore the impact of seasonal livelihood strategy combinations of rural tourism households on livelihood outcomes at the Lijiang scenic spot. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review on sustainable livelihoods and tourism seasonality. Section 3 details the research methodology, data sources, and profile of the study area. Section 4 presents the empirical study results, including the thematic analysis and fsQCA results. Section 5 presents the discussion of this study. Finally, Section 6 concludes this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable Livelihood

Chambers and Conway (1991) proposed a sustainable livelihood approach for addressing rural poverty in which livelihoods are sustainable when they can adapt to and recover from external risks while enhancing capabilities without compromising natural environmental resources and development opportunities for future generations [18]. To develop a systematic paradigm for sustainable livelihood research, the Department for International Development (DFID) developed a widely recognized framework for sustainable livelihood analysis. This framework places people at the center of the study, considers the fundamental changes in the scale and structure of livelihood capital of subjects under the influence of vulnerability contexts, and selects appropriate livelihood strategies to respond to transforming structures and processes to achieve the goal of livelihood outcomes [11].

In peripheral areas, tourism is perceived not only as a development tool but also as a sustainable livelihood approach that can improve the livelihood of rural households and their adaptive capacity in a vulnerable context [14]. Existing studies on sustainable

livelihoods in tourism often use the DFID sustainable livelihood framework for analysis, which examines the interrelationships among livelihood capital, livelihood strategies, and livelihood outcomes, including the evaluation of capitals, strategy transformations, and differences in outcomes attributed to different strategies [19–22]. Among these, livelihood strategies, which are at the core of rural household responses to external changes, have garnered significant attention [9,23,24]. Livelihood strategies encompass the choices and combinations of activities adopted by rural households to achieve their livelihood objectives, such as production and investment [11]. In the context of tourism as an external force, rural households' livelihood strategies can be broadly categorized into tourism and non-tourism types [10]. Scholars argue that tourism strategies can enhance sustainability and therefore encourage rural households to actively choose these strategies for improved livelihood outcomes [3,25]. Some even claim that earning income through tourism livelihood strategies is more advantageous than other types of livelihood activities and that specialized tourism livelihood is a sustainable “developmental pattern” [26]. However, tourism livelihoods are subject to seasonal variations and unexpected events, which may lead to potential volatility and uncertainty in relying solely on tourism [27]. Therefore, diversifying livelihoods by combining both tourism and traditional strategies over different periods and locations is an effective measure to mitigate livelihood risks [6,17].

Livelihood diversification refers to the process through which rural households build a varied range of activities and social support systems to enhance their standard of living and resilience to livelihood risks [15]. Most scholars categorize rural households' livelihood diversification according to the proportion of income obtained from farming, labor, and tourism activities in their overall household incomes [28,29]. They then used descriptive statistical analysis to compare the differences in livelihood outcomes attributable to each strategy [9,30]. These studies affirm the positive impact of tourism livelihood diversification on rural household sustainability. Nonetheless, livelihood diversification extends beyond mere income diversification; it also entails broadening the range of available options and opportunities, highlighting the significance of flexibility [25,27,31,32]. This aspect becomes particularly critical during seasonal shifts as individual livelihood diversification manifests in the short-term, flexible, and ongoing selection of various livelihood strategies [31].

2.2. Tourism Seasonality

While tourism development in rural communities has led to improvements in livelihood capital and the diversification of livelihood strategies for rural households, the inherent uncertainties of the tourism industry, particularly tourism seasonality, also present challenges to the livelihoods of households [33,34]. Tourism seasonality refers to the temporary imbalance between demand and supply over time, primarily characterized by fluctuations in critical factors such as the number of tourists, employment, and prices [35]. Seasonality in tourism is influenced by natural and institutional factors [36,37]. Natural seasonality results from cyclical variations in natural phenomena such as temperature and precipitation [36,38], which are particularly pronounced in remote and peripheral areas [39]. Institutional seasonality arises from fluctuations in social norms and customs, such as holidays, which significantly impact tourism seasonality [40,41]. Some scholars argue that tourism seasonality has potential benefits, including providing tourism practitioners with the opportunity to repair equipment [42], as well as facilitating ecological restoration [35,43] and capitalizing on seasonally inexpensive labor [44]. However, seasonality is often considered a negative factor in tourism development as it places considerable pressure on the sustainability of the tourism industry [45]. For instance, seasonal fluctuations can result in unstable employment relationships, leading to seasonal employment and hidden unemployment among tourism practitioners [46]. Furthermore, tourism practitioners must take advantage of the brief peak season to secure sufficient capital to ensure year-round business income. This discontinuity in income generation may compel practitioners to seek alternative income sources [46].

To mitigate the adverse effects of seasonal uncertainty, most studies recommend demand regulation strategies for tourism firms or destinations [6]. These strategies can be broadly categorized into product and market diversification [47]. Product diversification entails offering a wide range of tourism products, particularly during the off-season, to stimulate sluggish demand [48]. Market diversification involves reducing the risk of reliance on a single market by expanding and targeting new markets [45]. Nevertheless, tourism practitioners in remote and peripheral areas, especially those from rural households with limited resources and expertise [49], often face challenges in effectively responding to seasonal shocks through the mentioned strategies. Consequently, rural tourism households can only adjust their lifestyles and livelihoods when confronted with seasonality [6]. Su et al. (2019) examined the livelihood strategies of various rural households during low- and high-tourism seasons, emphasizing the need for increased attention to seasonality in sustainable livelihood studies [34]. However, current research on livelihoods affected by tourism seasonality has been limited to examining formal coordination between tourism livelihoods and traditional livelihoods and lacks empirical studies on the potential combination of livelihood strategies under the influence of seasonality and the evaluation of their livelihood outcomes.

3. Materials and Methods

Based on the DFID's sustainable livelihoods framework, this study deconstructs "seasonality", a core factor in the "vulnerability context". As outlined in this framework, seasonality exerts both direct and indirect influence over individual livelihood strategies, thus molding livelihood outcomes. To sharpen the study's focus, seasonality is segmented into two distinct periods—peak season and off-season—enabling an in-depth examination of the livelihood strategies employed by rural tourism households during these phases. We employed an exploratory sequential research design that involves initially investigating exploratory issues using qualitative methods and subsequently applying the results of the qualitative research to the quantitative research phase [50]. Specifically, the first phase involved a thematic analysis to explore the seasonal livelihood strategies of rural tourism households. The second phase developed a structured questionnaire based on the results of the thematic analysis and then used fsQCA to examine the relationship between seasonal livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes of rural tourism households (Figure 1).

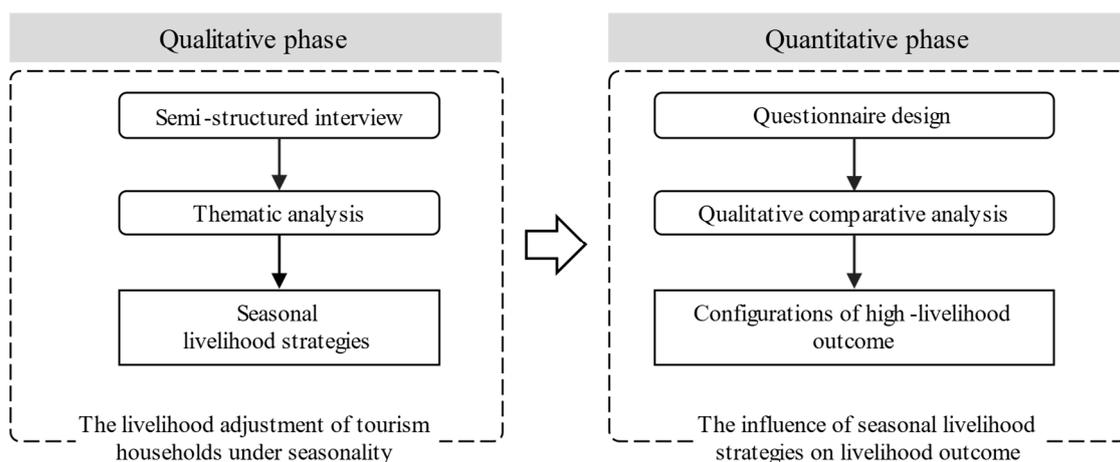


Figure 1. Overview of the research framework.

3.1. Study Area

The Lijiang scenic spot, situated in the northeastern part of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China (Figures 2 and 3), is by far the world's largest and most picturesque karst landscape excursion area. As one of the earliest tourist attractions in China to open to international visitors, the Lijiang scenic spot is well-regarded both domestically

and internationally. The rural area in the Lijiang scenic spot experienced continuous and in-depth tourism development, resulting in the diverse integration of tourism and traditional livelihoods. The focal point of the study area is the karst landscape and local climatic conditions that significantly shape its tourism development. The peak tourism period spans from May to October, coinciding with the summer vacation when the water level and temperature of the river are optimal, making it an opportune time for visiting Lijiang by boat or bamboo raft. Conversely, the remaining months constitute the off-peak tourism season. The impact of pronounced seasonality on the livelihood activities of rural tourism households has compelled rural tourism households to adopt strategies to manage these fluctuations. Consequently, the prosperity of the tourism industry and the significance of tourism seasonality make this setting an ideal context for investigating the research objectives of this study.

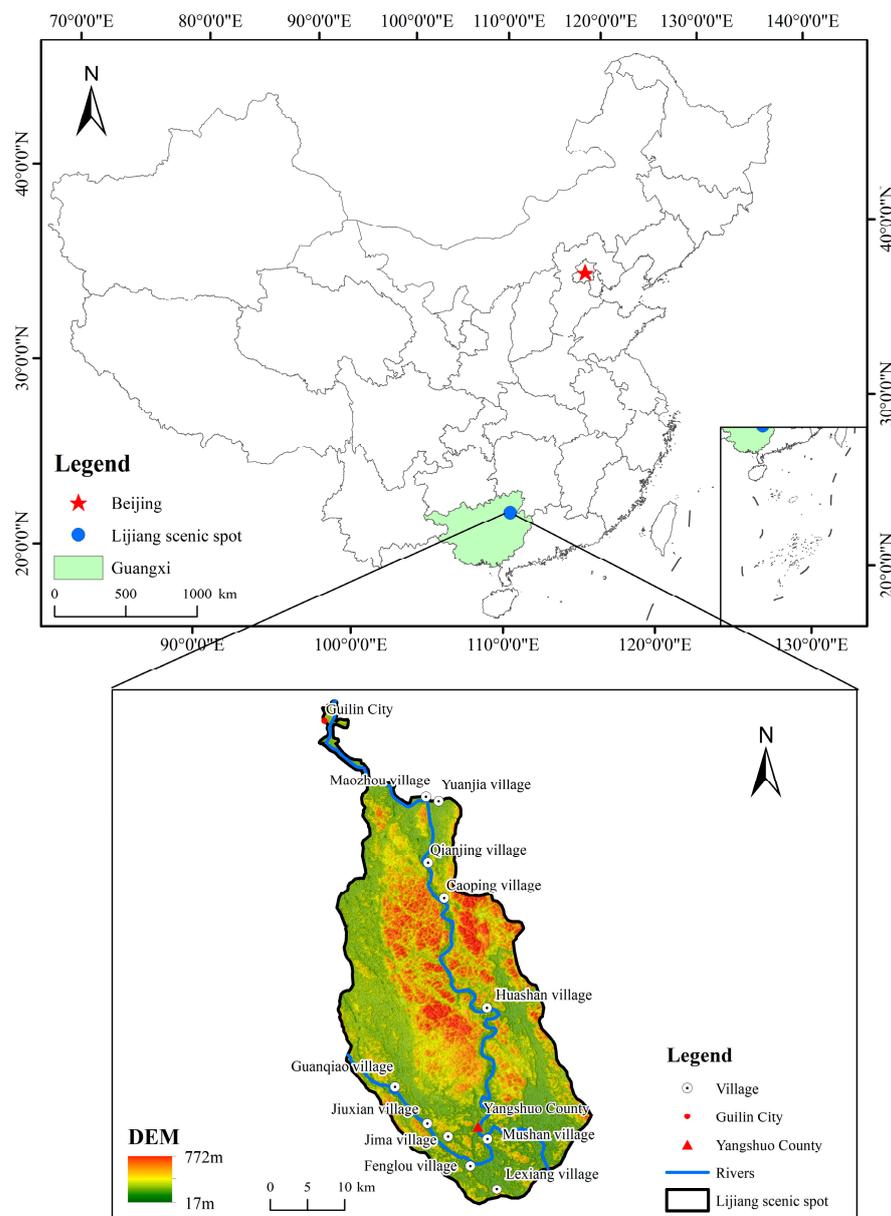


Figure 2. Location map of the Lijiang scenic spot.



Figure 3. Photographs by the authors: (a) bamboo rafts on the Lijiang River; (b) juice stall on the bamboo raft pier.

3.2. Qualitative Phase

In May 2021, 2 days of semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the seasonal livelihood strategies of rural tourism households and how these strategies should be combined. We chose four riverfront villages for interviews due to their convenient accessibility for rural tourism operations, demonstrating a distinct mix of traditional and tourism livelihoods. The interview questions were designed based on previous studies on tourism seasonality and sustainable livelihoods. The primary focus of the interviews was on the impact of tourism seasonality on livelihood strategies, with related questions addressing the characteristics of tourism seasonality and the reasons for the seasonal livelihood strategies chosen by rural tourism households. Four types of tourism practitioners (shop holders, stall holders, tourism employees, and catering and accommodation runners) were chosen as interviewees, collectively representing the predominant business types among local rural tourism households. The questions were deconstructed and explained by researchers to ensure that the interviewed households could easily grasp our study and provide precise information. Each interview lasted between 10 and 30 min and was conducted in 40 rural tourism households (coded as I-1-I-40) in Lijiang scenic spot.

The audio content of the interviews with the rural tourism households was recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes within qualitative data [51], was then employed to extract the livelihood adjustments made by these households. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that is unconstrained by specific theories or frameworks, allowing researchers to identify and interpret key features of the data using inductive and deductive logic guided by the research question [52]. The inductive logic of thematic analysis is data-driven, suggesting that it does not require any predetermined theory or framework for the data to fit into [51], making it well-suited for exploratory research questions. In this study, thematic analysis under inductive logic helped interpret the seasonal livelihood strategies chosen by rural tourism households, given the scarcity of research focusing on the impact of tourism seasonality on micro-subjects within the field of sustainable livelihoods.

As suggested by Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis involves five distinct steps [51]. (1) Familiarizing oneself with the data and noting ideas in preparation for coding: During this phase, the researchers carefully collated and read through the transcript multiple times. And they made notes about initial ideas and impressions of rural households' livelihood strategies. (2) Coding to create the initial codes: As they continued coding as comprehensively as possible for seasonal livelihood strategies, they constantly referred to the data, ensuring that they captured a wide range of responses. (3) Analyzing the codes generated in the previous phase and grouping them into subthemes based on their similarities: This

process allowed them to organize the data into meaningful and manageable clusters, facilitating a deeper understanding of seasonal livelihood strategy. (4) Reviewing and refining the subthemes iteratively to create overarching themes: With the subthemes identified, the researchers examined whether the codes within each subtheme coherently represented a particular aspect of the specific seasonal livelihood strategy. (5) Defining the essence of each theme while clarifying which aspects of the data were captured by each theme: While defining the themes, the researcher provided a clear description of what each theme represented by including relevant quotations and excerpts from the interviews.

3.3. Quantitative Phase

3.3.1. Questionnaire Design

To collect comprehensive data on livelihood adjustments, a questionnaire was developed based on the thematic analysis and a literature review of sustainable livelihoods. The outcomes of the thematic analysis guided the formulation of closed-ended questions along with their respective answers. Additionally, insights from the sustainable livelihoods research were utilized to develop evaluation indicators for assessing the livelihood capital of rural households and their corresponding livelihood outcomes. The questionnaire comprised three parts: the first involved evaluating livelihood capital and assessing livelihood outcomes. Livelihood capital consists of five components: natural, physical, human, social, and financial capital (Appendix A). The annual income of rural tourism households was used to assess the livelihood outcomes. In the second part, a series of closed-ended questions explored the primary reasons for the participation of rural tourism households in the tourism industry and their main modes of involvement. Section 3 investigated the seasonal livelihood strategies and combinations employed by rural tourism households.

Questionnaire surveys were conducted for 5 days in the Lijiang scenic spot in October 2021 and May 2022, respectively, encompassing the sample household types identified during the interview phase. Researchers provided guidance and assistance for individuals who were older or less educated and unable to independently complete the questionnaire. A total of 669 valid questionnaires were collected in 12 villages (as shown in Figure 2) based on the selection criteria of the qualitative phase. From this dataset, a sample of 388 households involved in the tourism industry was selected for further analysis to address specific research objectives.

3.3.2. fsQCA Method

In this study, we apply fsQCA to assess the influence of rural tourism households' seasonal livelihood strategies on their livelihood outcome. Unlike conventional quantitative research that treats variables as independent and examines their isolated impacts, often overlooking their interdependence, fsQCA stands out [53]. Rooted in a robust theoretical framework incorporating set theory, Boolean logic, and fuzzy logic, fsQCA excels in unraveling intricate causal relationships and conditions leading to specific outcomes [54]. This versatile method offers both qualitative and quantitative characteristics, making it well-suited for exploratory research [55,56]. Qualitatively, fsQCA adopts a theory or case-oriented approach, while quantitatively, it employs a Boolean algorithm based on set theory to calibrate and compute data memberships. Notably, fsQCA introduces memberships that range from 0 (absent) to 1 (fully present), enhancing precision in explaining complex causal relationships and setting it apart as a methodological approach with distinct advantages over traditional research methodologies. Therefore, the fsQCA was used to investigate how the seasonal livelihood strategies of rural tourism households, as causal conditions, affected their livelihood outcomes through interdependent effects.

In this study, the relevant analysis was conducted using the fsQCA software (version 3.0; University of California, Irvine, CA, USA), following the steps outlined below.

- (1) Selection of relevant cases. To focus on the direct impact of tourism seasonality on tourism livelihoods, this study selected 388 rural tourism households as case studies.

- (2) Identification of the causal conditions and outcomes. Based on the results of the thematic analysis, multiple seasonal livelihood strategies of rural tourism households were used as causal conditions. Annual household income was selected as the livelihood outcome.
- (3) Calibration of causal conditions and outcomes. Calibration is the process of assigning a set membership to each case [57]. The indirect calibration method was employed in the present study using quartiles as anchors for the outcome, with the 75th percentile as the full membership point, the 50th percentile as the crossover point, and the 25th as the full non-membership point [58,59]. A dichotomous approach was used to calibrate causal conditions, with 0 indicating full absence and 1 indicating full presence. Additionally, to avoid theoretical difficulties at the cross point (0.5), we subtracted a small constant of 0.001 [60].
- (4) Necessity analysis of causal conditions. The purpose of this analysis was to discuss the extent to which the set of outcomes constitutes a subset of the set of causal conditions [61]. Following Schneider et al.'s suggestion, a single causal condition with a consistency score no less than 0.9 is identified as "almost always necessary" for the occurrence of the outcome [62].
- (5) Generation of a truth table. Based on the fuzzy-set membership matrix obtained from the calibration, all combinations of causal conditions that could lead to the outcome were found using the fsQCA software. In this step, three thresholds need to be set: case frequency, which is used to simplify the combinations, and row consistency and PRI consistency, which are used to evaluate whether the causal conditions are a subset of the outcomes. Referring to the recommendations of Rihoux et al., in this study, the case frequency threshold was set to 2, the raw consistency threshold was set to 0.8, and the PRI consistency threshold was set to 0.7 [58,63].
- (6) Analysis of the truth table. This step focused on analyzing the sufficiency of combinations of causal conditions for the outcomes [63]. The truth table produces three types of solutions with different complexities: complex, intermediate, and parsimonious solutions. Intermediate solutions with moderate complexity were the primary choice for reporting the results [64].
- (7) Robustness analysis. The most commonly used robustness tests for fsQCA involve changing the calibration anchor points and analysis threshold [65]. If there is no substantial change in the configurations and their consistency and coverage after changing the relevant parameters, the results of the fsQCA are robust. In this study, the methods of changing the calibration anchors of the outcome and increasing the raw consistency threshold were used for the robustness analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Seasonal Livelihood Strategies of Rural Tourism Households

The researchers thematically analyzed the transcribed data from 40 semi-structured interviews. After familiarizing themselves with the data, they developed two themes, off-season and peak-season livelihood strategies, and identified the connotations of each. The thematic analysis process is illustrated in Table 1, where the initial seventeen codes are at the bottom layer, six subthemes are formed by combining codes of the same nature in the middle layer, and, finally, the subthemes are further categorized to form two core themes in the top layer. Through this process, insights into the seasonal livelihood adjustments of rural tourism households within the study area were acquired.

4.1.1. Off-Season Livelihood Strategies

An off-season livelihood strategy refers to the choices made by rural tourism households when normal tourism operations are hindered by a lack of demand during the off-season. The subthemes include "Tourism Persistence", "Seasonal Farming", and "Seasonal Employment".

Table 1. Process of thematic analysis.

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Example Quotes
The livelihood strategies in the peak season	Extending working hours	Overtime	<i>"Getting off work might extend to around 10 o'clock or even later at night"</i> (I-19)
		Intensive shift	<i>"We need to work in shifts all day"</i> (I-3)
		Extended opening time	<i>"During the peak season, we close two hours later"</i> (I-33)
	Increasing staffing input	Hired labor	<i>"We need to hire around five to six additional staff members for adequate coverage"</i> (I-31)
		Self-family labor	<i>"During summer vacation, my son will assist, ensuring ample family labor for the peak season"</i> (I-1)
	Increasing capital input	Procurement of raw materials	<i>"During the peak season, I diversified my goods a bit"</i> (I-8)
		Procurement of equipment	<i>"We surely need to prepare more equipment"</i> (I-35)
		Expansion of building	<i>"The influx of tourists is significant, leading us to rent the adjacent storefront"</i> (I-24)
		Employee salaries	<i>"Employees were each paid approximately two thousand yuan for their work"</i> (I-31)
	The livelihood strategies in the off-season	Seasonal farming	Rising rent
Vegetable planting			<i>"I usually grow vegetables, and if there's a excess, I sell them"</i> (I-4)
Rice planting			<i>"We'll harvest grain, eliminating the need to purchase rice"</i> (I-6)
Livestock breeding			<i>"We engage in various activities, including poultry farming like raising chickens and ducks"</i> (I-4)
Fruit planting			<i>"I still have several acres of orchards at home; just working here isn't sufficient"</i> (I-19)
Seasonal employment		Working non-locally	<i>"If there's an extended period without a turn to row the raft, we'll consider seeking work opportunities outside"</i> (I-3)
		Working locally	<i>"Our entire region is engaged in the tourism industry, offering temporary jobs such as restaurant servers and more"</i> (I-15)
Tourism persistence		Shop-keeping	<i>"You need to keep the store open during the off-season due to your financial investment"</i> (I-2)

“Tourism Persistence” is a single seasonal livelihood strategy chosen by most rural tourism households, particularly those with commercial buildings and tourism employees. Commercial building investments often involve long-term contracts and substantial monetary investments. Thus, closing during the off-season results in significant financial losses. As one respondent mentioned, “*You need to keep the store open during the off-season due to your financial investment*” (I-2). As employees of tourist attractions, if the attractions are still in operation during the off-season, the relevant workers need to persist in their work even with a few tourists, although the working hours may change. For example, one respondent stated the following: “*In the peak season, we start to work at 6 o’clock and finish at 18 o’clock; during the off-season, we finish at 17:30*” (I-36). In contrast, stallholders have greater flexibility and usually choose to close during the off-season: “*... basically, November and December have very low demand, and there are not many people, so we do not set up the stall. Those two months are always rainy and very cold, so we quit*” (I-6).

Off-season farming activities involve rural tourism households, which utilize agricultural resources to their fullest extent. Land resources are the core agricultural assets of households and provide the basis for engaging in agricultural production activities: “*... nearly all the households in the surrounding villages have land and usually grow crops. For example, fruit accounts for a significant portion*” (I-1). On the one hand, by planting cash crops, households can obtain a certain economic income: “*I still have several acres of orchards at home; just working here isn’t sufficient*” (I-19). In contrast, farming activities related to subsistence crops provide households with the materials necessary for survival. For example, one respondent stated the following: “*... (off-season) you know, we are going to collect grain, so we do not need to buy rice. Setting up a stall here is just to earn a little money*”. (I-6).

“Seasonal Employment” is an effective way to make full use of idle labor during the off-season, especially for households with little or no land: “*... We have sold our fields; the field near the dock used to be ours, and we have sold it to the tourism company*” (I-12). The low tourism demand in the off-season significantly reduces the economic returns of households while also releasing some of the family labor within the tourism industry: “*If there is little business with few people, and if there aren’t that many people needed, we have to find something else to do. We will go to find some temporary work*” (I-7). “*If there’s an extended period without a turn to row the raft, we’ll consider seeking work opportunities outside*” (I-3).

4.1.2. Peak Season Livelihood Strategies

Peak season livelihood strategies refer to the resource allocation choices made by rural tourism households within the tourism industry when there is a surge in tourism demand. The subthemes included “Extending Working Hours”, “Increasing Staffing Input”, and “Increasing Capital Input”.

In the face of surging tourism demand, “Extending Working Hours” is the least costly and most straightforward seasonal livelihood strategy chosen by rural tourism households. In particular, the “Extending Working Hours” subtheme is most evident for rural tourism households whose employers mandate working hours. As the interviewee (I-3) said, “*... we need to row the raft without a break all day when there is a huge crowd of people. ...*”. As for other types of rural tourism households, their working hours are entirely under their control according to the flow of tourists, but they also generally express a willingness to extend their working hours flexibly: “*In the peak season, from 8 am to 10 pm, we are at a time of busy. But the busiest time is not now (afternoon), is lunchtime and dinnertime*” (I-7).

“Increasing Staffing Input” is a pivotal strategy for rural tourism households to expand their production capacity and take full advantage of tourism demand during the peak season, as the tourism industry is labor-intensive. Staffing inputs of rural tourism households can be broadly divided into “self-family labor input” and “hired labor input”. Those rural tourism households with relatively small production scales can meet their labor needs by utilizing their families’ workforce; as the interviewee (I-1) said, “*During summer vacation, my son will assist, ensuring ample family labor for the peak season*”. Slightly larger catering and accommodation households need to hire labor to adequately serve the

continuous flow of tourists: “During the summer, we need to hire around five to six additional staff members for adequate coverage” (I-31).

The input of the means of production can make full use of human resources to enhance production capacity and promote output maximization during the peak season. As the production scale of some rural tourism households is small, capital investment is mainly for the purchase of consumable equipment and raw materials required for catering and accommodation. “In peak season, there are a lot of people, so we surely need to prepare more equipment and raw materials, such as bedding and kitchen supplies” (I-35). For rural tourism households that usually set up stalls in scenic spots, capital input is mainly directed toward expanding the variety of goods sold. As one of the interviewees said, “During the peak season, I diversified my goods a bit. Now, in the off-season, there is less variety” (I-8).

4.2. The Relationship between Seasonal Livelihood Strategies and Livelihood Outcome

4.2.1. Individual Necessary Conditions

Before conducting the sufficiency analysis, a necessity analysis of the causal conditions was performed (Table 2). Of all the seasonal livelihood strategies, including presence and absence, only “Extending Working Hours” had a consistency score above the threshold of 0.9. This means that configurations leading to the presence of high livelihood outcomes must include the seasonal livelihood strategy of “Extending Working Hours”. In addition, the presence or absence of other seasonal livelihood strategies was not necessary for achieving high livelihood outcomes.

Table 2. Necessity analysis of a single condition.

Causal Conditions	High Livelihood Outcome
	Consistency
Tourism Persistence	0.885
~Tourism Persistence	0.115
Seasonal Employment	0.352
~Seasonal Employment	0.648
Seasonal Farming	0.306
~Seasonal Farming	0.694
Extending Working Hours	0.987
~Extending Working Hours	0.013
Increasing Staffing Input	0.812
~Increasing Staffing Input	0.188
Increasing Capital Input	0.112
~Increasing Capital Input	0.887

Note: “~” indicates the absence of a condition.

4.2.2. Analysis of Sufficiency

According to the results of interviews and questionnaires, rural tourism households within the study area did not limit themselves to a single seasonal livelihood strategy. Instead, they employ diverse combinations of strategies that result in different livelihood outcomes. Since “Extending Working Hours” during the peak season is a necessary condition for high livelihood outcomes, this condition should be set as “present” for the intermediate solution. Other causal conditions, whether present or absent, may also lead to favorable livelihood outcomes. Table 3 shows that the six seasonal livelihood strategies yielded the four configurations that achieved the highest livelihood outcomes. In the parameters presented in the results, the coverage of a configuration refers to the percentage of cases that can be explained. Consistency reflects the degree of membership in a given configuration. The overall consistency of the solution was 0.915, which is above the threshold of 0.8. In this study, the core and peripheral conditions of each configuration were distinguished by comparing the causal conditions between the intermediate and parsimonious solutions [56]. Specifically, the conditions appearing in both solutions are the core conditions, which significantly impact the outcome. In contrast, the conditions that

only appear in the intermediate solution are peripheral conditions, which have less impact on the outcome.

Table 3. Configurations to achieve high livelihood outcomes.

Causal Conditions	Configurations			
	S1a	S1b	S1c	S2
Tourism Persistence	●		●	⊗
Seasonal Employment		●	●	●
Seasonal Farming	⊗	⊗		●
Extending Working Hours	●	●	●	●
Increasing Staffing Input	●	●	●	⊗
Increasing Capital Input		⊗	⊗	●
Consistency	0.895	0.945	0.953	0.915
Row Coverage	0.116	0.029	0.035	0.010
Unique consistency	0.097	0.010	0.016	0.010
Overall consistency		0.913		
Overall coverage		0.152		

Note: “●” indicates the presence of the core condition; “⊗” indicates the absence of the core condition. “●” indicates the presence of the peripheral condition; “⊗” indicates the absence of the peripheral condition. Blank indicates that no matter whether the condition is present, it will not affect the results.

The four configurations can be categorized into two patterns by comparing the core conditions and interpretation logic of the configurations. Pattern 1 is named “Peak Season Driven Pattern”, which includes S1a, S1b, and S1c. Pattern 2 is named “Peak-off Blend-Driven Pattern”, which contains only S2.

The Peak Season Driven Pattern reveals that high livelihood outcomes can be achieved by combining seasonal livelihood strategies with ‘Increasing Staffing Input’ and ‘Extending Working Hours’ as core conditions, along with various peripheral conditions. In S1a, the peripheral conditions include “Tourism Persistence” and “~Seasonal Farming”. In S1b, peripheral conditions include “Seasonal Employment”, “~Seasonal Farming”, and “~Increasing Capital Input”. Finally, in S1c, the peripheral conditions include “Seasonal Employment”, “Seasonal Farming”, and “~Increasing Capital Input”.

The case information for these configurations shows that rural tourism households in pattern S1 make significant cumulative investments in tourism and experience a relatively low marginal effect of capital investment during the peak season. Consequently, capital investment during the peak season is unlikely to rapidly improve tourism reception capacity. Moreover, as most rural tourism households in pattern S1 are focused on accommodation and catering, family labor alone cannot meet the surge in tourism demand during the peak season. Therefore, hiring staff to expand tourism reception capacity is vital for the full use of peak season demand. S1a is intended for rural tourism households that depend heavily on tourism for their livelihood. Additionally, rural tourism households have high levels of education, which enables them to effectively leverage their skills to mitigate the negative impact of the low season on tourism operations. The rural tourism households in S1b are less involved in tourism than those in S1a. The proportion of their annual income derived from working outside has increased significantly, which gives them a chance to achieve high livelihood outcomes regardless of whether they persist in tourism operations during the off-season. In S1c, the dependence of households on tourism is further reduced, and household income sources are more diversified compared to the previous two configurations, which allows households in S1c to achieve high livelihood outcomes.

The Peak-Off Blend-Driven Pattern demonstrates that high livelihood outcomes can be achieved by combining seasonal livelihood strategies with the core conditions of “Extending Working Hours”, “Increasing Capital Input”, and “~Tourism Persistence” along with the peripheral conditions of “Seasonal Employment”, “Seasonal Farming”, and “~Increasing Staffing Input”.

Based on the analysis of the case study, rural tourism households in S2 exhibit a lower level of dependency on the tourism industry. Consequently, these households allocate minimal investment in tourism operations and experience a relatively high marginal effect of capital investment during the peak season. Furthermore, these households possess a relatively high human capital index, reducing the need to hire additional staff. Relying predominantly on farming and labor as their primary income sources in the low season, rural tourism households in S2 possess the flexibility to forego the “Tourism Persistence” strategy if confronted with a substantial decline in tourism demand during the off-season. This capacity enables them to attain favorable livelihood outcomes while making relatively modest resource investments.

4.2.3. Robustness Analysis

To enhance the reliability of this study, the raw consistency threshold was raised to 0.85. The resulting new configurations aligned well with the existing configurations, leading to a slight decrease in overall consistency from 0.915 to 0.912. However, this value remained above the 0.85 consistency threshold. Second, a robustness check was performed by adjusting the calibration of the outcome. Full membership, crossover, and full non-membership were set to the 80th, 50th, and 20th percentiles, respectively, resulting in configurations consistent with the existing ones. Although the overall consistency decreased from 0.915 to 0.88, it remained above the consistency threshold of 0.8. The robustness analysis results suggest that the fsQCA findings of this study are robust.

5. Discussion

5.1. Discussion of Empirical Results

In response to the seasonality inherent in tourism, rural tourism households implement various seasonal livelihood strategies. These strategies encompass “Tourism Persistence”, “Seasonal Employment”, and “Seasonal Farming” during the off-season and “Extending Working Hours”, “Increasing Staffing Input”, and “Increasing Capital Input” during the peak season. Distinctions between these strategies during the off-season and peak season primarily depend on their underlying factors. During the off-season, strategies are influenced by the industries in which rural tourism households are engaged. In contrast, in the peak season, they are shaped by the allocation of resources by households to the tourism sector. Both qualitative and quantitative data analyses illuminate the deep-rooted integration of tourism within rural communities, owing to its prolonged history of tourism development. Consequently, tourism has become a pivotal income source for rural households, particularly those directly involved in the tourism sector. During the peak season, the surge in tourism demand presents substantial revenue-generating potential, compelling rural tourism households to actively participate in tourism-related activities and allocate resources judiciously to optimize annual incomes [66–68]. Thus, disparities in peak-season livelihood strategies primarily manifest through resource allocation. In contrast, during the off-season, characterized by low tourism demand and a supply exceeding demand, rural tourism households often encounter impediments to their tourism-related activities. This prompts them to seek alternate livelihood strategies [34,69,70]. Consequently, differences in off-season livelihood strategies correspond to the industries pursued by rural tourism households.

Seasonal livelihood strategies during the peak season serve as the core driving force for the high livelihood outcomes of rural tourism households. The results reveal that the core conditions are primarily concentrated in the seasonal livelihood strategy of the peak season, where “Extending Working Hours” is the necessary condition to achieve high livelihood outcomes, and “Increasing Staffing Input” is the most frequent core condition (except necessary conditions). The fluctuation in tourism demand during the low and high seasons necessitates that rural tourism households take advantage of the surge in tourist flow and high unit prices during busy months/weeks to obtain sufficient income [71–73]. Tourism, being labor-intensive, heavily depends on a substantial workforce to cater to

tourists [74], especially during peak seasons when demand is high [75]. Similar to research on seasonal staffing needs, most rural tourism households retain only a basic labor force and increase the input of temporary labor during the peak season. In contrast, few maintain a stable labor force and adjust working hours to cope with seasonality [76].

Though not the optimal choice, configuration S1a was more frequently adopted among rural tourism households among the four configurations for achieving favorable livelihood outcomes. Configurational information indicates that S1a had the highest raw coverage, implying that relying on year-round tourism livelihoods was the prevalent approach among the examined rural tourism households. However, this configuration exhibited the lowest consistency, suggesting its limited explanatory sufficiency about favorable livelihood outcomes [63]. Previous research on sustainable tourism livelihoods suggests that integrating tourism with traditional livelihoods is imperative to leverage existing resources effectively [77,78]. Thus, solely depending on “Tourism Persistence” during the off-season may not be optimal or sustainable, considering livelihood diversification and benefit maximization. However, the findings from interviews and questionnaires indicate that rural tourism households that exclusively engage in the tourism industry throughout the year may not make decisions based on maximizing family income, which is consistent with prior research [79–81]. Rural tourism households commonly identify family attachment as the primary reason for not participating in seasonal work during the off-season despite the potential for maximizing economic benefits.

Among rural tourism households, limited livelihood diversification is a prevalent choice. Among the four configurations that yield favorable livelihood outcomes, three configurations (S1a/S1b/S1c) demonstrate that coupling tourism livelihoods with specific traditional livelihoods can result in favorable livelihood outcomes under the influence of tourism seasonality. Only S2, characterized by nearly the lowest raw consistency, reveals that integrating tourism livelihoods with two traditional livelihoods can yield favorable livelihood outcomes. This aligns with existing research on livelihood diversification, suggesting that while diversification can mitigate livelihood vulnerability to some extent through diversified income streams, excessive diversification disperses already limited livelihood resources, leading to reduced production efficiency and sustainability [82].

5.2. Implications and Practical Implications

These findings suggest potential theoretical implications for sustainability. Firstly, the investigation into how livelihood adjustments unfold within rural tourism households, influenced by tourism seasonality, contributes to the enrichment of adaptation theory. By discerning and illuminating specific strategies employed during both high and low seasons, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the decision-making dynamics within households. This perspective sheds light on the intricate ways in which households adapt to the challenges posed by tourism seasonality, advancing adaptation theory. Additionally, the examination of livelihood adjustments during tourism seasonality highlights the delicate equilibrium that rural households attempt to maintain between tourism-related activities and their traditional livelihoods, enhancing the understanding of livelihood diversification theory. Moreover, the research delves into the micro-level intricacies of resource allocation within rural tourism communities. By uncovering the complex decisions rural households make to optimize their livelihood outcomes, this study contributes to the theoretical perspective that explains how these communities allocate resources in response to seasonal variations.

Beyond its theoretical implications, the findings of this study hold practical value by offering recommendations to both rural tourism households and local governments. Rural tourism households are advised to conduct a comprehensive analysis of their available resources and family versions when making seasonal strategy decisions, given that excessive diversification will lead to inefficiencies and dilute overall income benefits. Local governments should provide targeted measures at different stages of the tourism seasonality. During peak seasons, when strategies like “Extending Working Hours” and “Increasing

Staffing Input” are pivotal, labor market interventions are needed. Investments in training programs and restrictions on low-paying but high-intensity work can enhance the quality and availability of seasonal labor. During the off-season, when “Tourism Persistence” may not be the sole optimal strategy, support for non-tourism sectors is needed: leading the establishment of cooperatives or collective marketing initiatives, enabling rural tourism households to expand their customer base for off-season agricultural products and handicrafts. Ultimately reducing their overdependence on tourism income.

5.3. Limitations and Prospects

Initially, the scope of this study was confined by the availability of data, concentrating solely on the static associations between seasonal livelihood strategies and corresponding livelihood outcomes. However, tourism destinations continually evolve; therefore, future studies could adopt a dynamic perspective, enabling a comparative analysis of pertinent research questions across varying stages of tourism development and different types of destinations.

Moreover, the exclusive reliance on the annual income of rural tourism households as a measure of their livelihood outcomes is a limitation. While this metric pertains to economic sustainability, the intricate web of social relationships suggests that economic sustainability may not be the sole pursuit of rural tourism households. Consequently, future research could formulate a diversified set of livelihood outcome indicators to comprehensively assess the impact of seasonal livelihood strategies on livelihood outcomes.

Finally, the six seasonal strategies delineated in this investigation may predominantly apply to rural tourism destinations exhibiting conditions analogous to those detailed in the present study. It is essential to acknowledge that the scope of this research may not encompass the intricacies of diverse geographical landscapes, such as plateaus and coastal areas, where the seasonal strategies of farmers potentially diverge considerably. To construct a comprehensive understanding of the seasonal strategies adopted by farmers in various rural tourist areas, it is imperative to facilitate a deeper exploration through succeeding research endeavors. Furthermore, determining the optimal amalgamation of seasonal livelihood strategies—ones that engender the most favorable livelihood outcomes—warrants meticulous validation grounded in extensive empirical analyses.

6. Conclusions

By employing a sustainable livelihood framework, our study enhances the understanding of how seasonal fluctuations in tourism shape rural livelihood outcomes. We exploratively examined the seasonal composition of livelihood strategies and employed the fsQCA method to scrutinize their impact. Within the rural tourism destinations, the trajectories to improved livelihoods are intricately linked to the choice of seasonal strategies. The main results demonstrate the following: (1) Tourism households in the study area adopt six seasonal livelihood strategies in response to tourism seasonality, and they will form varied combinations. (2) “Extending Working Hours” is a necessary condition, and all other seasonal livelihood strategies must be combined with it to contribute to high livelihood outcomes of tourism households. (3) Based on the degree of dependence on tourism, the four configurations of seasonal livelihood strategies that lead to high livelihood outcomes can be divided into two patterns: one is named the “Peak-Season Driven Pattern” and the other is the “Peak-Off Blend-Driven Pattern”. These findings underscore the importance of adjusting strategies to accommodate inherent seasonality in rural tourism. Our analysis sheds light on effective approaches for sustaining rural tourism and fortifying local livelihoods. Moreover, this study highlights the utility of fsQCA for unraveling the intricate interplay between seasonal strategies and their livelihood implications, contributing to methodological advancements in this domain.

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Appendix A. Household Livelihood Capital Index

Indicators	Sub-Indicators	Interpretation and Assignment
Natural capital	Cultivated land resources	Cultivated land area assignment (0 mu = 0; 0 mu < area < 5 mu = 0.5; 5 mu ≤ area < 10 mu = 0.75; 10 mu ≤ area = 1) × Cultivated land quality assignment (very good = 1, relatively good = 0.75, general = 0.5)
	Orchard land resources	Orchard land area assignment (0 mu = 0; 0 mu < area < 5 mu = 0.5; 5 mu ≤ area < 10 mu = 0.75; 10 mu ≤ area = 1) × Orchard land quality assignment (very good = 1, relatively good = 0.75, general = 0.5)
	Woodland resources	Woodland area assignment (0 mu = 0; 0 mu < area < 5 mu = 0.5; 5 mu ≤ area < 10 mu = 0.75; 10 mu ≤ area = 1) × Woodland quality assignment (very good = 1, relatively good = 0.75, general = 0.5)
Physical capital	Housing resources	Distance from the main road: Less than 25 m = 1, 25–50 m = 0.75, 50–75 m = 0.5, More than 75 m = 0.25
		Area: More than 150 m ² = 1, 100–150 m ² = 0.75, 50–100 m ² = 0.5, Less than 50 m ² = 0.25
		Structure: Civil house = 0.25, Brick and wood house = 0.5, Brick and concrete house = 0.75, Concrete house = 1
		Age: Within 5 years = 1, 5–10 years = 0.75, 10–20 years = 0.5, More than 20 years = 0.25
Durable goods		Floor: One = 0.25, Two = 0.5, Three = 0.75, Four and above = 1
		Truck = 1, Car = 0.8, Agricultural machinery = 0.6, Motorcycle/Electric motorcycle = 0.4, Other appliances = 0.2
Human capital	Population size	Number of household size
	Educational attainment	Each member's educational background: Below primary school = 0, Primary school = 0.25, Junior high school = 0.5, High school = 0.75, College and above = 1
	Labor force	Full labor force = 1, Half labor force = 0.5, Non labor force = 0
Social capital	Social Connections	Whether there are village(town and above) cadres among relatives and friends: Yes = 1, No = 0
	Community relations	Frequency of participation in community activities: Frequently = 1, Sometimes = 0.5, Seldom = 0
		Frequency of contact with neighbors: Frequently = 1, Sometimes = 0.5, Seldom = 0
	Access to relief	Relatives and friends = 1, Relatives or friends = 0.5, None = 0
Financial capital	Government training opportunities	Whether received free skills training from the government: Yes = 1, No = 0
	Government subsidies	Whether accepted subsidies from the government: Yes = 1, No = 0
	Difficulty of loaning	Easy = 1, General = 0.5, Difficult = 0
	Income sources	Four and above = 1, Three = 0.75, Two = 0.5, One = 0.25, Zero = 0

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