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EXPLORING CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISTS' MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCES AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS: A MODERATED-MEDIATION APPROACH

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Abstract: Cultural heritage sites are among the world's most visited attractions. Memorable tourism experiences are multi-faceted appraisals of a visit that endure in memory. They are significant because they convert a tourist's exposure to a destination into loyalty-oriented behaviors, including revisiting and positive online reviews. This study examines how authenticity, destination image, hospitality and services influence revisit and eWOM intentions among cultural heritage tourists, with memorable tourism experiences (MTE) as a mediator, tourist engagement as a moderator. Data were collected from Indian tourists using designed questionnaires at the UNESCO site of Dholavira, India. Surveys were conducted utilizing a combination of online and offline methods. There was a total of 794 responses to this survey. Using structural equation modeling and moderated-mediation analysis, results confirm MTE's strong mediating role. Authenticity and destination image also indirectly enhanced intentions via MTE. The study establishes that MTE is a powerful strategy for converting positive perceptions into concrete loyalty. The MTE exerted a distinct mediating influence on both high and low levels of tourist engagement. The study provides a comprehensive model for understanding cultural heritage tourism and suggests both future research and practical strategies for destinations. To enhance authenticity, managers should create interactive experiences like augmented reality and workshops. Concurrently, a compelling destination image and high-quality services remain essential foundations. These insights are vital for sustainable destination management, as fostering loyalty helps ensure long-term visit. Finally, given that MTE drive loyalty, post-visit marketing should actively trigger these memories through personalized follow-ups and social media engagement.

Keywords: cultural heritage tourism, memorable tourism experiences, tourist behavioral intentions, tourist engagement, destination image, cultural authenticity

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is a vital resource for tourism, and maximum tourism destinations globally emphasize cultural heritage components (Song et al., 2025; Oliveira et al., 2024). Heritage tourism predominantly depends on cultural aspects of life, employing both tangible and intangible historical features as resources for tourism (Song et al., 2025; Bowal & Ghosh, 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Cultural heritage tourism represents an important component of the global tourism market (Richards, 2018). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2015) identifies this segment of tourism as a significant component of international tourism consumption, estimating that 40% of tourists choose their destinations based on cultural heritage offerings. Richards (2018) indicates a recent transition in cultural tourism demand from a focus on quantitative growth to qualitative changes, highlighting a growing emphasis on the pursuit of 'cultural experiences.'

Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) has emerged as a significant concept in the literature on tourist experience in recent years. The experiences of cultural heritage tourists and their structure are insufficiently explored in the existing literature. Furthermore, the understanding of the potential influencers of MTE within cultural heritage tourism remains limited (Ye et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023; Saleem & Umar, 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). This highlights the necessity for additional research to enhance and expand comprehension of cultural heritage tourists' experiences and to further the understanding of MTE within a cultural heritage tourism context.

Despite these developments, three interrelated gaps constrain theoretical development and managerial guidance. First, antecedent coverage is typically partial. Studies frequently focus on image or authenticity alone, or bundle on site services into broad experiential quality, rather than explicitly modeling hospitality and services as a distinct, site level stimulus relevant to heritage management (e.g., interpretation quality, signage, amenities, and staff interactions) (Sthapit et al., 2024). This limits diagnostic precision for practitioners who must decide where to invest to create memorable visits. Second, outcome coverage emphasizes revisit over eWOM; when advocacy is included, it is often measured as general recommendation rather than

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concrete electronic word of mouth intentions, constraining insights into digital-era behaviors that are pivotal for destination visibility (Sharma, 2022). Third, and most critically from a process perspective, conditional mechanisms are underexplored. While mediation via MTE is now familiar, empirical tests of moderation—particularly whether tourists' engagement levels condition the strength of stimulus to MTE linkages and the resulting moderated mediation (i.e., whether indirect effects via MTE depend on engagement) are notably absent in existing cultural heritage MTE studies (Sharma, 2022; Sthapit et al., 2024). To our knowledge, prior work in this stream has not estimated interaction terms for tourist engagement on stimulus to MTE paths nor reported conditional indirect effects in a unified model (Sthapit et al., 2024)

This study aims to fill existing gaps in the literature by developing and empirically testing an integrated model that connects authenticity, destination image, hospitality and services to the behavioral intentions of cultural heritage tourists, specifically focusing on revisit and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) intentions. The study also examines the mediating effect of MTE in these interrelationships. This study aimed to identify MTE as a mediator and tourist engagement as a moderator in enhancing behavioral intentions, given the experiential nature of cultural heritage tourism and the desire of tourists to create memorable experiences at cultural heritage attractions.

This omission matters theoretically and practically. Tourist engagement—a composite of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with the site. It may amplify or dampen how destination image, authenticity cues, and on-site services are internalized into memorable experiences (Prebensen et al., 2013). For example, highly engaged visitors might more strongly translate authenticity signals into meaningfulness and knowledge acquisition, whereas less engaged visitors may be more responsive to tangible service elements that scaffold interpretation (Zatori et al., 2018). If so, the indirect effects of stimuli on revisit and eWOM via MTE are unlikely to be uniform. Modelling engagement as a moderator thus aligns with the S-O-R premise that organismic states arise from an interaction between stimuli and the visitor's involvement and addresses the heterogeneity observed in facet level MTE effects across heritage settings (Bhandari et al., 2024).

The present research develops and tests an integrated moderated mediation model of cultural heritage tourists' MTE and behavioral intentions. Building S-O-R framework, we specify theoretically grounded stimuli—destination image, perceived authenticity, and on-site hospitality and services which are expected to shape MTE as the central organismic state (Nian et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2025). We then link MTE to two distinct responses that matter for cultural heritage sustainability: revisit intention and eWOM intention (Pratminingsih et al., 2024). Extending prior work, we position tourist engagement as a moderator of the stimulus to MTE relations and estimate conditional indirect effects from each stimulus to both outcomes via MTE. This design allows us to ask not only whether destination image, authenticity, and services matter, but also for whom (at different engagement levels) and by how much in terms of downstream loyalty and advocacy (Nian et al., 2023). In sum, this study seeks to offer a more complete account of how MTE are formed and how they translate into both return and eWOM behaviors in cultural heritage tourism. The findings aim to inform scholars seeking to refine S-O-R based experience models and practitioners tasked with designing services and interpretive environments that create not only memorable, but also loyalty (revisit intentions) and eWOM intentions to cultural heritage visits (Nian et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2025).

Dholavira – A Window into the Harappan World

Recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2021, Dholavira has placed Gujarat among the states with the highest number of such global recognitions in India (UNESCO, 2021). Spread across 100 hectares on Khadir Island in the Great Rann of Kutch, the site is one of the largest and most sophisticated settlements of the Indus Valley Civilization, thriving roughly 4,500 years ago (Shinde, 2016). Locally called Kotada, the city reveals a striking example of early urban planning. Its layout comprises a fortified citadel, middle, and lower towns, all connected by carefully designed streets and underground drainage channels (Possehl, 2002). Dholavira's ingenuity lies in its water management system—a series of reservoirs and rainwater harvesting techniques that supported life in the otherwise arid desert conditions (Bisht, 2015). Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India have yielded a treasure of artifacts: pottery, jewelry, seals, tools, animal figurines, and even imported vessels, suggesting trade with faraway Mesopotamia (Lal, 1997). Most fascinating are large stone inscriptions in the still-undeciphered Indus script possibly the world's earliest examples of public signboards (Possehl, 1996). The city also featured structures resembling a stadium, offering insight into social or ceremonial gatherings (Bisht, 2015). Dholavira's history reflects the rise, maturity, and eventual decline of Harappan society. After a period of prosperity, the settlement saw abandonment, later reoccupied by people who lived in simpler circular houses, marking a shift from an urban to a rural lifestyle (Shinde, 2016). This transformation gives Dholavira a timeless message: civilizations adapt, simplify, and evolve in response to changing circumstances. Today, the site stands not only as Gujarat's pride but also as a reminder of the resilience and creativity of ancient societies, making it an invaluable key to understanding our collective past (UNESCO, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Cultural heritage tourism (CHT)

Cultural heritage tourism is a significant segment of the global tourism industry defined by travel directed toward experiencing the authentic manifestations of a place's history and culture (Ghosh et al., 2025). This includes engaging with tangible assets, such as historic sites, museums, monuments, and architectural ensembles, as well as intangible cultural heritage, such as festivals, rituals, culinary traditions, and performing arts (Saeed & Al Atrees, 2025; Ghosh & Sofique, 2012). The core motivation for participants is to gain a deeper understanding and connection with the past, people, and traditions of a destination, moving beyond passive sightseeing to seek authentic and educational experiences (Richards, 2018; Prosenjit & Sofique, 2012). India's primary tourism attractions include its rich cultural heritage, diverse landmarks, historic monuments, and the remarkably advanced 4,500-year-old Indus Valley settlement at Dholavira, which is

recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Thus, cultural heritage tourism has the potential to promote cultural attractions, economic development, community revitalization, and cultural preservation preserve the built heritage of a destination, rehabilitate old urban areas, and promote community pride, solidarity, and economic development (Song et al., 2025; Boussaa & Madandola, 2024). However, it also presents critical challenges, including the need to balance tourist access with conservation imperatives, manage the potential for commodification that may dilute cultural authenticity, and ensure that tourism benefits are distributed equitably within local communities (Wani et al., 2025; Silberberg, 1995).

2. Behavioral intentions: revisit intention (RI) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

Behavioral intentions, particularly revisit intention (RI) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), are critical metrics for assessing tourist loyalty and destination success in the tourism industry (Hung & Khoa, 2022). RI reflects a tourist's conscious plan to return to a destination, while eWOM represents their willingness to share positive experiences online. These intentions are powerful outcomes of a satisfying and memorable tourism experience, directly influencing future visitation and a destination's reputation (Rather, 2021). Revisit intention is the dominant outcome in heritage MTE research, with consistent evidence that MTE (or closely related experience constructs) predicts intentions to return (Zhang et al., 2018). Advocacy-oriented outcomes are less frequently modeled. In an on-site heritage sample, MTE influenced eWOM via satisfaction (Chen & Chen, 2010), indicating that memorable experiences can mobilize visitors as communicators, not only as repeat customers. Another study links local culture to recommendation intention through MTE and destination image (Rather, 2021), offering a proxy for advocacy behaviors in cultural tourism contexts. Nonetheless, explicit, multi-item measures of eWOM intention as distinct from general WOM or recommendation—are seldom incorporated, limiting insight into digital amplification pathways in cultural heritage tourism.

3. Theory: S–O–R framing in cultural heritage tourism

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework is a foundational psychological model used to understand how environmental factors influence an individual's internal states and subsequent behaviors. Originally derived from the field of behaviorism (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The S–O–R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework is a psychological model that explains how external factors trigger internal processes to produce a behavioral outcome. Originating from behaviorism but later expanded to include cognitive elements, it posits that a Stimulus (S) from the environment (e.g., an advertisement, a website design, or a physical setting) is first processed by the internal state of the Organism (O), which encompasses the user's or consumer's cognitive and affective mental processes, such as their perceptions, attitudes, emotions, and thoughts. This internal processing then leads to a Response (R), which is the resulting overt behavior or action, such as making a purchase, expressing loyalty, or avoiding a product. Foundational work shows that perceived or destination image influences MTE, and MTE, in turn, predicts revisit intention (Kim et al., 2012); this mediation logic has been replicated in heritage-relevant contexts, although the breadth of antecedents and outcomes varies across studies (Kumar & Dhir, 2022). Related research introduces heritage-salient antecedents (e.g., authenticity) and demonstrates their effects on experience/MTE and downstream loyalty (Yi et al., 2018), further embedding the S–O–R perspective in cultural heritage settings.

THEORETICAL MODEL AND FORMULATION OF HYPOTHESIS

The conceptual model of S-O-R serves as the foundation for the integrated framework that this study builds (Figure 1). This suggests the following constructs and related hypotheses about the variables influencing travellers' desire to behavioral intentions.

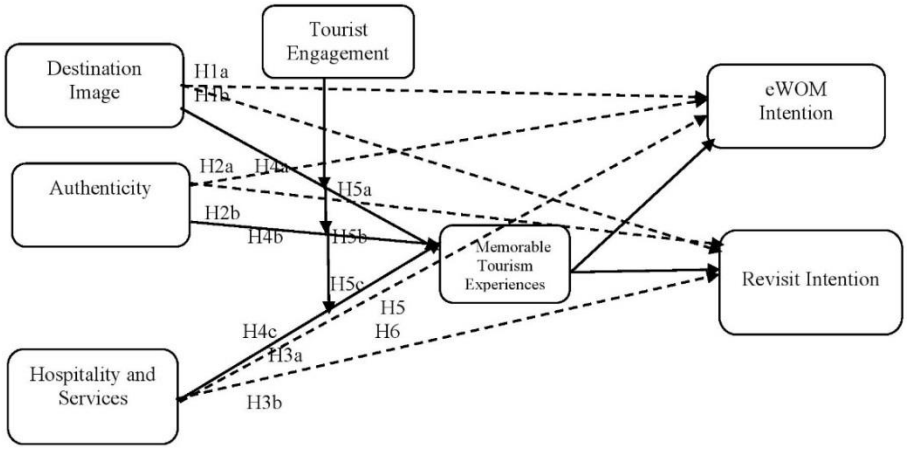

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

1. Destination image (DI)

Destination image (DI) is a composite of cognitive and affective appraisals of a place and it has well-documented positive association with MTE and revisit (Zhang et al., 2018). According to Zhang et al. (2018) perceived image (country and destination) enhances MTE, which subsequently elevates revisit intention, positioning MTE as a mediator in the image-loyalty pathway. In a heritage-oriented setting, DI and MTE were validated and linked to revisit intention, reinforcing the relevance of the image→MTE→revisit chain for cultural heritage sites (Kumar & Dhir, 2022). Further, DI can appear as a

mediator alongside MTE between experience quality and revisit intention (Chen & Tsai, 2007), implying that image formation and MTE may operate in tandem to transmit upstream influences to loyalty. Taken together, the literature supports DI as a central antecedent within S–O–R models of cultural heritage tourism, often acting through MTE to shape revisit.

H1a: Destination image positively influences eWOM intention

H1b: Destination image positively influences revisit intention

2. Authenticity (AT)

Authenticity (AT) is a core value proposition in cultural heritage tourism (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Studies differentiating object-based (attributes of artifacts and physical remains) and existential (self-related) authenticity show that these perceptions foster more memorable experiences and are linked to revisit and recommendation outcomes via MTE or closely related experience constructs (Yi et al., 2018). For instance, in Iranian heritage sites, authenticity (and related sincerity in visitor–local interactions) stimulated MTE, which connected to loyalty outcomes (Rather et al., 2022); in Egyptian heritage contexts, authenticity increased "tourist experience," which fully mediated authenticity's effects on revisit intention and place attachment (Elsayed & Ahmed, 2022). Supporting evidence from temple tourism also implicates cultural authenticity within broader "cultural elements" that shape MTE and revisit (Kumar & Dhir, 2022). This stream collectively positions authenticity as a cultural heritage important stimulus that works primarily by deepening the experiential meaning captured by MTE.

H2a: Authenticity positively influences eWOM intention

H2b: Authenticity positively influences revisit intention

3. Hospitality and services (HS)

Compared to image and authenticity, explicit modelling of on-site hospitality and services as a distinct antecedent to MTE is sparse in the cultural heritage literature identified here. The closest analogs are studies of "experience quality" or "destination attributes," which partly encompass service-like elements and show positive, at least partial, transmission of effects to revisit via MTE and/or DI (Chen & Chen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2018). However, few heritage models isolate on-site services (e.g., interpretation quality, signage clarity, amenities, cleanliness, staff interactions, crowd management) as their own construct feeding MTE. This leaves a diagnostic gap for site managers seeking to target operational levers most likely to render visits memorable and loyalty-generative. Based on these proxies, a reasonable assumption is that well-delivered on-site services should enhance MTE in heritage contexts, but direct tests remain limited in the current corpus.

H3a: Hospitality and services positively influence eWOM intention

H3b: Hospitality and services positively influence revisit intention

4. Mediating role of memorable tourism experiences (MTE)

MTE represent a central concept in contemporary tourism research, shifting the focus from measuring simple customer satisfaction to understanding the profound, long-term memories that shape a tourist's behavior and identity. An MTE is defined as a tourism experience that is positively recalled and remembered after the visit or event has occurred and is recognized for its high level of significance and emotional intensity (Kim et al., 2012). Empirical heritage studies commonly operationalize MTE using the Kim et al. (2012) dimensions and examine their links to behavioral intentions. Results also indicate facet-level heterogeneity: in a UNESCO heritage temple context, some MTE components differentially predict image, satisfaction, and revisit, suggesting that not all memorable facets are equally consequential for loyalty. These findings motivate modeling MTE at a higher-order level while remaining attentive to potential differences across its first-order dimensions in heritage environments.

H4a: MTE mediates the association among (a)DI, (b)AT, (c) HS, and eWOM intention

H4b: MTE mediates the association among (a)DI, (b)AT, (c) HS, and revisit intention

5. Moderating role of tourist engagement (TE)

Visitor heterogeneity likely conditions how stimuli convert into MTE. Tourist engagement encompassing cognitive attention, emotional involvement, and behavioral participation. It offers a theoretically plausible moderator of stimulus to MTE relationships (Rather et al., 2022). For instance, authenticity cues may be more effectively internalized by highly engaged visitors (through meaning-making and knowledge acquisition), while lower-engagement visitors might rely more on scaffolding from services (e.g., interpretive guides, signage) (Bryce et al., 2015). Despite this plausibility, the empirical heritage MTE literature reviewed here does not report interaction terms testing engagement as a moderator on stimulus to MTE paths, nor does it quantify conditional indirect effects (moderated mediation) from stimuli to loyalty outcomes via MTE (Hayes, 2022). Given observed variability in the potency of MTE facets for predicting intentions and evidence that different antecedents act through MTE, incorporating engagement as a moderator is a logical next step to explain why stimulus to MTE links (and their downstream effects) may differ across visitor segments.

H5a: TE moderates the mediating impact of MTE on the connotation among (a) DI, (b) AT, (c) HS, and eWOM' intention

H5b: TE moderates the mediating impact of MTE on the connotation among (a) DI, (b) AT, (c) HS, and revisit intention

RESEARCH APPROACHES

1. Data collecting and sampling

During February and March of 2025, at the main historical sites in Dholavira, information was collected from Indian tourists using designed questionnaires. Surveys were conducted utilizing a combination of online and offline methods. People who had been to the historical places in Dholavira and had posted about them on social media (Facebook,

Instagram, etc.) were surveyed online using data collected from many travel agencies. A total of 368 people filled out the 600 online surveys. Following the elimination of insufficient surveys, 327 valid questionnaires were retained for the investigation. Famous historical sites in Dholavira, including as the Harappan Site, Fossil Park, and Khadir Bet Island, were the locations of the offline survey. The 600 surveys that were used in the traditional paper format. After removing any surveys that were determined to be invalid, the research used 467 genuine questionnaires. There was a total of 794 responses to this survey. The breakdown of the respondents' demographics in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics (n=794)

Category	Particulars	Frequency	%	Category	Particulars	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	443	55.79	Educational Qualification	School education	127	15.99
	Female	351	44.21		Undergraduate	382	48.11
Age	18–30	218	27.46		Postgraduate and above	285	35.89
	31–40	191	24.06	Profession	Service	397	50.00
	41–50	175	22.04		Business	191	24.06
	51–60	143	18.01		Others	206	25.94
	Above 60	67	8.44				

2. Measures and the creation of instruments

The measurement instruments for each construct in this study were adapted from established scales in existing tourism and marketing literature to ensure content and face validity. The survey questionnaire was designed in English and subsequently translated into the local language of the data collection site by a professional bilingual translator. A back-translation procedure was then employed by a second independent translator to ensure conceptual equivalence and accuracy between the two versions (Brislin, 1970). A pilot test with 30 respondents was conducted to assess the clarity, readability, and appropriateness of the questionnaire, leading to minor refinements in the wording of a few items. The construct of destination image was measured using a multi-dimensional scale capturing both cognitive and affective evaluations. The four items were adapted from the works of Zhang et al. (2018) and Chen & Tsai (2007). Perceived authenticity was measured using a five-item scale that captures the overall authentic character of the destination and its offerings, drawing from the scales of Kolar & Zabkar (2010) and Yi et al. (2018). This construct was operationalized with a four-item scale focusing on the quality of on-site services and hospitality. Items were adapted from studies by Chen & Chen (2010) and Parasuraman et al. (1988).

Tourist engagement comprising three reflective dimensions. This approach is consistent with the conceptualization of customer engagement by Hollebeek et al. (2014) and its application in tourism by Rather et al. (2022). The mediating variable, MTE, was measured using a three-item scale developed and validated by Kim et al. (2012). The intention to return to the destination was measured with five items adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1996) and subsequent tourism studies (Zhang et al., 2018). The intention to eWOM in positive online advocacy was measured with three items based on the scales of Pandey & Sahu (2020). In addition to these constructs, the survey included questions pertaining to demographic characteristics and trip-related information (e.g., first-time/repeat visitor, travel party, length of stay) to describe the sample profile.

Table 2. Reliability and validity (convergent) assessment

Constructs	Items	Loading	Outer VIF	CR	AVE
Destination Image (DI) Cronbach Alpha = 0.790	DI1	0.785	1.558	0.792	0.613
	DI2	0.774	1.665		
	DI3	0.806	1.697		
	DI4	0.767	1.445		
Authenticity (AT) Cronbach Alpha = 0.874	AT1	0.812	2.000	0.887	0.662
	AT2	0.807	2.215		
	AT3	0.842	2.266		
	AT4	0.764	2.134		
	AT5	0.838	2.305		
Hospitality and Services (HS) Cronbach Alpha = 0.910	HS1	0.884	2.797	0.914	0.788
	HS2	0.923	3.860		
	HS3	0.896	3.198		
	HS4	0.846	2.177		
Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) Cronbach Alpha = 0.827	MTE1	0.861	1.869	0.827	0.743
	MTE2	0.876	2.015		
	MTE3	0.849	1.799		
Revisit Intention (RI) Cronbach Alpha = 0.906	RI1	0.842	2.207	0.907	0.728
	RI2	0.865	2.685		
	RI3	0.876	3.002		
	RI4	0.867	2.742		
	RI5	0.815	1.970		
eWOM Intention (EWI) Cronbach Alpha = 0.832	EWI1	0.890	2.104	0.848	0.748
	EWI2	0.894	2.178		
	EWI3	0.808	1.679		
Tourist Engagement (TE) Cronbach Alpha = 0.800	TE1	0.871	1.828	0.805	0.714
	TE2	0.824	1.610		
	TE3	0.840	1.749		

RESULT

1. Model of measurement

The dependability of all indicator and the model's internal consistency reliability can be used to check if the measurement/outer model is resilient (Hair et al., 2017b; Ringle et al., 2020). We can see the measurement model's output in Table 2. According to Hair et al. (2019), construct consistency is considered good when Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values are greater than 0.7. The convergent validity is established by factor loading values reaching 0.7 and average variance extracted (AVE) values above 0.5. The study's constructs' discriminant validity was evaluated according to the guidelines given by Fornell and Larcker (1981). As seen in the top diagonal of Table 3a, the square roots of the AVE values for each construct were larger than the correlation coefficients between the construct and other constructs. Further, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) criterion, which stipulates that the HTMT value must be less than 0.85 (Table 3b) in order to assess discriminant validity (Henseler et al, 2015). This allows us to conclude that our model has discriminant validity (Table 4). According to Hair et al (2017), a decent model fit is achieved when the SRMR is less than 0.08 and the normed fit index is greater than or equal to 0.97. Since all of the necessary values are met, we can say that the measurement model is legitimate.

2. Common method bias (CMB)

The CMB was evaluated because of the singular origin of the data. The statistical remedies employed comprised the marker variable technique (Malhotra et al., 2006; Lindell & Whitney, 2001), demonstrating that CMB was not a significant factor. Furthermore, the single-factor test developed by Harman (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986) was performed. The single-factor test conducted by Harman indicates that the total variation accounted for by one factor is 25.72, significantly lower than the 50 percent benchmark (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The absence of a single dominant factor suggests that CMB does not pose a substantial threat to the validity of the findings. Furthermore, each of the VIF values are under 5, suggesting that multi-collinearity is not present (Hair et al., 2019; Ghosh & Jha, 2024).

Table 3a. Discriminant validity
Fornell-Larcker criterion

	AT	DI	EWI	HS	MTE	RI	TE
AT	**0.813**						
DI	0.533	**0.783**					
EWI	0.575	0.553	**0.865**				
HS	0.519	0.532	0.621	**0.888**			
MTE	0.551	0.586	0.561	0.582	**0.862**		
RI	0.643	0.582	0.680	0.639	0.596	**0.853**	
TE	0.560	0.500	0.452	0.471	0.705	0.535	**0.845**

Table 3b. Discriminant validity
Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) – Matrix

	AT	DI	EWI	HS	MTE	RI	TE
AT							
DI	0.630						
EWI	0.665	0.677					
HS	0.564	0.618	0.708				
MTE	0.633	0.719	0.670	0.669			
RI	0.703	0.680	0.778	0.700	0.686		
TE	0.662	0.621	0.548	0.548	0.846	0.625	

3. Structural model assessment

The results provide strong support for the proposed model. First, all three independent constructs (Table 4) authenticity ($\beta = 0.075$, $p < 0.05$), destination image ($\beta = 0.199$, $p < 0.001$), and hospitality and services ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$) were found to be significant positive predictors of MTE, with HS exhibiting the strongest effect. Second, MTE itself was a powerful and significant predictor of both eWOM intention ($\beta = 0.561$, $p < 0.001$) and revisit intention ($\beta = 0.597$, $p < 0.001$). Third, the mediation analysis (Table 6) confirmed that MTE fully mediates the relationships between the three antecedents and the two outcome variables, as all indirect paths were significant. Furthermore, the model demonstrated strong predictive power, with an R^2 value of 0.616 for MTE (Table 7)., indicating that the three antecedents explain a substantial portion of its variance. Regarding moderation (Table 5a), tourist engagement was found to significantly moderate only the relationship between authenticity and MTE ($\beta = 0.071$, $p < 0.05$). The moderating effects of TE on the paths from destination image and hospitality and services to MTE were not statistically significant.

Consequently, the moderated-mediation effects (Table 5b) were only confirmed for the path involving authenticity (TE x AT -> MTE -> eWOM/RI). The model fit (Table 8) was assessed using standard criteria. The SRMR value of 0.079 for the estimated model is below the 0.08 threshold, indicating good approximate fit. Furthermore, the reduction in both the d_ULS and d_G values from the saturated to the estimated model suggests our theorized model is more parsimonious and exhibits better fit. The NFI value of 0.904 also exceeds the 0.90 threshold for acceptable fit. While the chi-square statistic was significant. Overall, the results demonstrate strong support for the model's fit with the data.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	T statistics	P values	2.50%	97.50%	Decision
AT -> MTE	0.075	2.257	0.024	0.011	0.143	Supported
DI -> MTE	0.199	5.231	0.000	0.125	0.273	Supported
HS -> MTE	0.228	5.526	0.000	0.151	0.312	Supported
MTE -> EWI	0.561	17.930	0.000	0.498	0.620	Supported
MTE -> RI	0.597	18.906	0.000	0.534	0.657	Supported

Table 5a. Moderation Effect

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	T statistics	P values	2.50%	97.50%	Moderation Effect
TE x AT -> MTE	0.071	2.091	0.037	0.000	0.134	Yes
TE x DI -> MTE	-0.039	0.906	0.365	-0.120	0.046	No
TE x HS -> MTE	0.012	0.269	0.788	-0.078	0.103	No

Table 5b. Moderation Effect

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	T statistics	P values	2.50%	97.50%	Moderation Effect
TE x DI -> MTE -> EWI	-0.022	0.909	0.363	-0.067	0.026	No
TE x AT -> MTE -> EWI	0.040	2.083	0.037	0.000	0.076	Yes
TE x HS -> MTE -> EWI	0.007	0.269	0.788	-0.044	0.057	No
TE x DI -> MTE -> RI	-0.023	0.912	0.362	-0.070	0.028	No
TE x AT -> MTE -> RI	0.042	2.088	0.037	0.000	0.080	Yes
TE x HS -> MTE -> RI	0.007	0.269	0.788	-0.047	0.060	No

Table 6. Mediation analysis

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	T statistics	P values	2.50%	97.50%	Mediation Effect
AT -> MTE -> RI	0.045	2.211	0.027	0.006	0.086	Yes
HS -> MTE -> EWI	0.128	4.970	0.000	0.081	0.182	Yes
DI -> MTE -> RI	0.119	4.943	0.000	0.073	0.166	Yes
HS -> MTE -> RI	0.136	5.100	0.000	0.087	0.192	Yes
AT -> MTE -> EWI	0.042	2.198	0.028	0.006	0.082	Yes
DI -> MTE -> EWI	0.112	4.988	0.000	0.068	0.156	Yes

Table 7. Structural Model Quality

Endogenous Variables	R^2	Q^2	Exogenous Variables	F^2
Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE)	0.616	0.599	DI	0.061
			AT	0.080
			HS	0.082
Revisit Intention (RI)	0.356	0.436	MTE	0.553
eWOM Intention (EWI)	0.315	0.363	MTE	0.459

Table 8. Model Fit

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.057	0.079
d_ULS	1.244	1.080
d_G	0.477	0.357
Chi-square	2373.805	2951.622
NFI	0.835	0.904

DISCUSSION

The key objective of this research was to develop and empirically test a moderated-mediation model that elucidates the formation of memorable tourism experiences (MTE) and subsequent behavioral intentions among cultural heritage tourists. The model investigated the direct effects of destination image (DI), authenticity (AT), and hospitality and services (HS) on MTE, the mediating role of MTE in the association amongst these antecedents and behavioral intentions (revisit intention (RI) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)), and the moderating influence of tourist engagement (TE). The findings offer substantial theoretical contributions and practical implications, which are discussed in detail below.

This study's findings align with and extend previous research in several meaningful ways. The confirmed positive impact of authenticity on MTE reinforces its established role as a cornerstone of the experience of CHT (Zhou et al., 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Seyfi et al., 2020; Yi et al., 2018). For cultural heritage tourists, the perceived genuineness and historical veracity of a site are fundamental to creating a deep and lasting impression. Our finding that this relationship is strengthened by tourist engagement is a crucial extension of existing literature. It suggests that the effect of authenticity is not uniform; it becomes significantly more potent in creating a memorable experience when tourists are highly engaged (e.g., through active participation, learning, and emotional connection). This supports the proposition by Rather et al. (2022) that engagement acts as a catalyst, deepening the tourist's connection to the core offerings of a destination.

The significant influence of destination image on MTE is aligned with the findings of scholars like Zhang et al. (2018), who posit that pre-visit cognitive and affective evaluations shape on-site experiences. A positive and compelling image of a heritage destination sets expectations and frames the tourist's perception, making the formation of a memorable experience more likely. However, the finding that tourist engagement does *not* moderate this relationship is intriguing. It implies that

the effect of destination image—often formed through marketing and secondary information—may be more foundational and stable. Its impact on MTE might be more consistent across different levels of engagement, whereas the effect of an on-site, tangible factor like authenticity is more susceptible to amplification by a tourist's active involvement.

The result that hospitality and services (HS) had the strongest direct effect on MTE underscores the critical importance of the service environment, even in experience-driven cultural tourism. These finding echoes previous studies that highlight the role of quality infrastructure, helpful staff, and clean facilities in complementing the core attraction (Chen & Chen, 2010). A poorly managed service environment can detract from even the most authentic heritage site. The non-significant moderating effect of TE on the HS-MTE path suggests that the importance of basic hospitality and service quality is universally high for all tourists, regardless of their engagement level. It is a fundamental hygiene factor that must be met to facilitate any memorable experience. The powerful mediating role of MTE between all three antecedents and behavioral intentions (RI and eWOM) provides robust empirical evidence for its central place in the tourism behavior model.

This fully aligns with the foundational theory of MTE, which posits that it is the memorability of the experience that ultimately drives future behavior (Kim et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2012). Our results confirm that DI, AT, and HS work primarily by enhancing the memorability of the trip, which in turn motivates tourists to return and recommend the destination to others. The strong R^2 values for RI (0.356) and eWOM (0.315) further affirm the critical link between memory and action in tourism.

This study set out to integrate three heritage-salient stimuli—destination image, perceived authenticity, and on-site hospitality and services—into a S–O–R model in which memorable tourism experiences (MTE) operate as the organismic conduit to two distinct behavioral intentions: revisit and eWOM. Interpreted alongside prior evidence, these results position MTE as the central mechanism through which heritage cues translate into loyalty and advocacy, while identifying engagement as a boundary condition for how strongly stimuli are internalized into memorable experiences.

Implication

1. Theoretical implications

This study provides important theoretical insights by validating and extending the existing framework of MTE within the specific context of CHT. The findings confirm the established role of destination image, authenticity, and hospitality as direct antecedents to MTE, thereby reinforcing foundational theories in tourism behavior (Chen & Chen, 2010; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). However, the study's primary theoretical advancement lies in its nuanced exploration of tourist engagement as a moderating variable. The result that engagement only strengthens the relationship between authenticity and MTE, but not destination image or services, is a critical insight. It suggests that the formation of memories is not a uniform process.

The effect of a pre-formed cognitive evaluation (destination image) and a foundational service factor (hospitality) is more consistent, while the impact of a core experiential attribute (authenticity) is highly dependent on the tourist's active involvement and emotional investment. This provides a more refined, conditional understanding of the MTE formation process, moving beyond direct effects to identify the specific boundary condition under which a key antecedent becomes most potent.

2. Managerial implications

The findings provide actionable strategies for destination marketers and managers of cultural heritage sites. Firstly, since authenticity's impact is magnified by tourist engagement, managers must move beyond passive display to create interactive and immersive experiences. This can be achieved through augmented reality apps that bring history to life, hands-on workshops in traditional crafts, or guided storytelling sessions that foster a deep emotional connection. Secondly, the strong direct effects of destination image and hospitality services underscore their non-negotiable importance. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) must continue to cultivate a compelling and accurate brand image, while site managers must ensure impeccable service quality, cleanliness, and visitor facilities, as these elements form the essential foundation for a positive experience. Finally, given the powerful mediating role of MTE in driving revisit and eWOM intentions, post-visit marketing campaigns should be designed to trigger these positive memories, such as through personalized emails featuring photos or encouraging visitors to share their stories on social media.

Limitations and upcoming research guidelines

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that present avenues for future research. First, the data were collected from a specific cultural heritage context. Replicating this study in different cultural settings would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies tracking tourists' perceptions from pre-trip to post-trip could provide stronger causal evidence. Second, this study focuses on visitors in a cultural heritage destination. Future studies are suggested to investigate our integrated framework on revisit and eWOM intentions in other tourism contexts. Third, the model explored tourist engagement as a moderating variable. Future research could consider other potential moderators, such as cultural background, prior knowledge, or visit motivation. Finally, we propose that perceptions of authenticity will affect plans to revisit and engage in electronic word-of-mouth within this context. Future research is necessary to evaluate the magnitude of this link and its association with tourists' opinion of security.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study successfully employed a moderated-mediation approach to unravel the complex mechanisms behind the formation of MTE and subsequent behavioral intentions in the cultural heritage context. It affirms that destination image, authenticity, and hospitality/services are pivotal antecedents to MTE, which in turn is a critical driver of loyalty. The key theoretical advancement lies in identifying the boundary condition of this relationship: tourist engagement acts as a significant moderator only for the path from authenticity to MTE. This nuanced finding highlights that while service quality

and destination image provide an essential foundation, it is the synergistic combination of authentic assets and highly engaged tourists that most powerfully forges the unforgettable memories that define truly exceptional heritage tourism.

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