

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE ON THE DESTINATION ATTRACTIVENESS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract: Authenticity is widely recognized as a core element in heritage and cultural tourism, both as a value sought by tourists and as a critical determinant of destination attractiveness. Prior research has demonstrated a strong association between cultural heritage and authenticity in enhancing tourist experiences and perceptions of destinations. While the concept of authenticity has been the focus of scholarly inquiry for over five decades, there remains a lack of empirical studies investigating this relationship within the Vietnamese context. This study addresses this gap by examining the influence of cultural heritage on perceived authenticity and its subsequent effect on destination attractiveness in Binh Phuoc province, Vietnam. A quantitative research design was employed, using a structured questionnaire distributed to 222 domestic and international tourists visiting Binh Phuoc. The survey measured three main constructs: cultural heritage, authenticity (including object-based and existential authenticity), and destination attractiveness. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess the relationships among these constructs and to test the proposed hypotheses. The analysis confirmed that cultural heritage has a significant positive effect on both object-based authenticity and existential authenticity. Furthermore, both dimensions of authenticity positively influence tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness. These insights offer meaningful contributions for both theory development and practical strategies in promoting sustainable heritage tourism.

Keywords: Binh Phuoc, cultural heritage, destination attractiveness, object-based authenticity, existential authenticity

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INTRODUCTION

Gravari-Barbas (2018) argues that the demand for heritage tourism has become increasingly pressing in the context of modern society. The assessment of a destination's attractiveness is one of the prevalent topics in heritage tourism research. To shape the quality of the tourist experience and enhance a destination's appeal, authenticity is considered a relevant variable, particularly in the context of heritage cultural tourism (Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2020). The pursuit of authentic experiences by tourists is regarded as one of the dominant trends in the tourism industry (Apostolakis, 2003).

Consequently, numerous studies have linked the authenticity of cultural heritage to tourism destinations. For instance, Shepherd (2002) contends that accepting the causal relationship between tourism and the commodification of heritage necessitates acknowledging a related concept authenticity. This perspective has been endorsed by various researchers (Apostolakis, 2003; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Atasoy, 2021). Authenticity is recognized as a universal value and a crucial driving force motivating tourists to embark on long and distant journeys (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Naoi, 2004).

According to Kolar and Zabkar (2010), the study of authenticity is highly beneficial for understanding tourism motivations and behavior, as well as for informing strategic management decisions concerning destination management. When traveling to an authentic destination, tourists are likely to explore its unique characteristics, ultimately leading to a sense of authenticity and psychological connection (Supriono & Yulianto, 2021).

Cultural authenticity related experiences can serve as a positive emotional regulator, fostering favorable perceptions and attitudes toward the destination (Geus et al., 2015). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that there exists a relationship between cultural heritage and authenticity, which in turn influences a destination's ability to attract tourists.

Although the significance of authenticity has been widely acknowledged and the impact of cultural heritage on destination attractiveness has been empirically demonstrated by various scholars, the relationship between these factors and its effect on destination appeal has yet to be fully verified.

Thus, the primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between cultural heritage and authenticity in relation to the attractiveness of Binh Phuoc, Vietnam as a tourist destination through a quantitative approach. This research adopts a cultural heritage tourism perspective within the context of Binh Phuoc, with the aim of proposing managerial implications to enhance its tourism appeal and improve the destination's image and promotion strategies for the future.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Since MacCannell's (1973) seminal work on staged authenticity, the concept of authenticity has become central in tourism studies, particularly in the analysis of tourists' experiences at cultural and historical sites (Wang, 1999; Lu et al., 2015). Authenticity in tourism has evolved to include multiple dimensions, including objective, constructive, and existential perspectives, and has been defined as real, original, traditional, or emotionally meaningful (Sharpley, 1994; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). In the context of heritage tourism, authenticity is perceived as a key driver of tourist engagement and satisfaction (Ha & Quyen, 2021), often functioning as a foundation for customer value and loyalty (Yi et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2023). Tourists frequently seek authentic experiences when engaging with cultural heritage sites, driven by motivations linked to nostalgia, education, and cultural immersion (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Bryce et al., 2015). These motivations are closely linked to the symbolic and experiential dimensions of both tangible and intangible heritage (Kim & Littrell, 1999). Recent research highlights that perceived authenticity enhances not only visitor satisfaction but also post-visit behaviors, including destination loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Cheng et al., 2023; Uslu et al., 2023). While the significance of authenticity has been widely recognized, recent studies have moved beyond its direct impact to explore its mediating role between cultural heritage and destination attractiveness. Zou et al. (2024), for example, demonstrated that perceived authenticity of rural intangible cultural heritage significantly affects tourists' emotional and cognitive images of the destination, thereby increasing its attractiveness. Similarly, Uslu et al. (2023) found that authenticity perceptions strengthen tourists' attachment to cultural destinations and support for heritage conservation efforts. These recent findings underscore the need to integrate both material and immaterial aspects of heritage to create authentic experiences that resonate with visitors. Despite the growing body of literature, several limitations persist. First, most existing studies focus on well established heritage destinations, often overlooking emerging or underdeveloped regions such as Binh Phuoc province in Vietnam.

Second, although many studies acknowledge the importance of authenticity, few adopt a mediational model to examine how authenticity serves as a bridge between cultural heritage and destination attractiveness. This results in a fragmented understanding of authenticity's role within the tourist decision making process. Third, the literature tends to generalize authenticity without differentiating between object-based and existential dimensions, despite evidence suggesting that these may influence tourist perceptions and behaviors in distinct ways (Wang, 1999; Iqbal et al., 2022). Moreover, the context specific nature of authenticity is often underestimated. As Nuryanti (1996) argued, authenticity is inherently subjective, and what is considered authentic by one visitor may not be by another. The rapid commercialization of heritage tourism further complicates this perception, potentially diminishing the integrity of cultural experiences (Iqbal et al., 2022). This issue is particularly relevant in developing countries, where heritage commodification is often viewed as a means of economic development rather than cultural preservation. In light of these research gaps, this study aims to investigate the mediating role of authenticity in the relationship between cultural heritage and destination attractiveness, focusing on an emerging destination Binh Phuoc, Vietnam. By integrating recent empirical findings and applying a structural model to test authenticity's multidimensional influence, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of heritage tourism in Vietnam.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Authenticity

According to Atasoy (2021), etymologically, the term "authenticity" originates from the Greek word "authentēs" and encompasses two meanings. The first refers to a person with authority, while the second denotes something handcrafted by an individual. In the context of art, this term is associated with the root meaning of something created by a particular artisan or forger and relates to the uniqueness of an artwork (Bendix, 2009). Over time, the concept has been extended to various tourism products and is now widely employed by tourism managers and marketers to manage the brand authenticity of a destination (Ha & Quyen, 2021). External indicators such as decorations, colors, and the overall spatial atmosphere of a destination may influence the overall assessment of its authenticity (Jang et al., 2012). Moreover, original artifacts and activities also serve as markers for evaluating the authenticity of a destination (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Therefore, destinations where cultural heritage constitutes a core component of the experience provide an ideal context for researchers and management agencies to examine how tourists' perceptions of authenticity influence their evaluation of a destination (Ha & Quyen, 2021).

The act of tourists walking among artifacts in an open space tourist site to observe and experience relics is a key factor attracting them to a destination (Atasoy, 2021). Authenticity is a crucial concept in marketing the cultural heritage of a destination (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Consumers make purchasing decisions based on the perceived genuineness of a product or service. Occasionally, manufacturers and marketers utilize authentic imagery to boost sales (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). The commercialization of traditional cultural aspects can enhance a destination's appeal while simultaneously creating a new synthetic culture for the local community, which carries intrinsic cultural value. Consequently, numerous scholars argue that the quality of a tourist destination is improved through authenticity (Lu et al., 2015; Mura, 2015). Accordingly, the concept of authenticity is described as a driving force behind heritage tourism consumption, whether as an experience or as an individual's perception of an attraction or a specific destination attribute (Apostolakis, 2003). Domínguez-Quintero et al. (2021) explain that the authenticity of cultural heritage can be a crucial factor enabling tourists to attain high-quality experiences at a destination. These perspectives suggest that authenticity significantly influences tourists' overall evaluations and is regarded as a key antecedent of a positive destination image (Naoui, 2004; Frost, 2006). Thus, the authenticity of cultural heritage is considered a determinant of a destination's attractiveness to tourists, and its presentation emerges as a criterion for future tourists in selecting destinations (Atasoy, 2021).

From a consumer-based approach, this study adopts the argument of Kolar & Zabkar (2010) that authenticity is a contextually relevant evaluation shaped by tourists' experiences with a site, culture, object, or destination. Authenticity

pertains to tourists' enjoyment and perception of the genuineness of their experiences concerning a cultural attraction. Consequently, research on tourists' authenticity experiences has been categorized into existential authenticity and object-based authenticity (Wang, 2007; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Ha & Quyen, 2021). According to Kolar & Zabkar (2010), managers must recognize the distinction between object-based authenticity and existential authenticity, as they pertain to different entities (e.g., objects/products versus personal experiences/existential tourism), necessitating separate considerations. This distinction exists to facilitate deeper research into tourists' authentic experiences at heritage sites.

Object-based authenticity, a concept proposed by Wang (2007), seeks to address debates surrounding tourists' authenticity experiences. It can be understood as tourists' evaluation of the inherent characteristics of objects or their perceptions of these objects. Essentially, the formation of this concept aims to assess whether tourists perceive a particular object as authentic (Ha & Quyen, 2021). In contrast, existential authenticity relates to tourism activities that tourists experience. Wang (2007) suggests that existential authenticity derives from existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice. Similarly, Neumann (1992) argues that one of the primary motivations for travel is the pursuit of life, self-exploration, and the understanding of one's true self.

Destination Attractiveness

Measuring the attractiveness of a destination is essential for understanding the factors that encourage people to travel (Formica, 2002). Lee et al. (2011) agree that the better a destination meets tourists' needs, the stronger its competitive position against other destinations. Therefore, the primary value of destination attractiveness lies in its pull effect, which influences tourists' decision-making (Kim & Lee, 2002). Mayo & Jarvis (1981) further elaborate that destination attractiveness is a combination of the relative importance of personal benefits and the perceived ability of a destination to provide these benefits. This attractiveness is enhanced by specific attributes that define the destination, such as attractions, infrastructure, services, and the people delivering these services. A destination becomes more appealing when it possesses a greater number of desirable attributes (Vengesai et al., 2009). Thus, one of the most common ways to assess whether a destination is attractive is to examine its key attributes. However, Krešić & Prebežac (2011) argue that the attractiveness of destinations varies depending on the type of tourism and the preferences of visitors. Some attributes may be appealing to certain tourists while being less relevant to others. Consequently, identifying and understanding the factors that influence destination attractiveness is crucial, as they serve as a valuable decision-making tool in planning, marketing, and developing strategies for effective resource allocation (Vengesai et al., 2009; Hai et al., 2023).

The Impact of Cultural Heritage on the Binh Phuoc destination attractiveness

Cultural heritage experiences have become a key motivator for travel. In heritage tourism literature, many scholars agree that cultural heritage itself is the most influential factor in determining tourist participation (Richards, 2000; Poria, 2006). For instance, Richards (2000) argues that tourists visit heritage destinations for three primary reasons: the historical value of the site, learning and education, and recreation. Similarly, Poria (2001) examined the heritage sites of the Wailing Wall and Masada in Israel and confirmed that the intrinsic characteristics of heritage sites are the core elements of heritage tourism.

Nyaupane et al. (2009) also found that, for cultural heritage sites in Arizona, USA, the primary attraction for tourists was the opportunity to visit archaeological sites, particularly those with well structured heritage interpretation. Yi et al. (2023) argue that heritage sites function as major tourist attractions, and the stronger their appeal, the more capable they are of drawing visitors from greater distances (McKercher, 2002). Palmer (1999) also asserts that heritage designation has become an important tool for attracting visitors to various destinations. The more compelling and engaging the heritage resources at a given destination, the stronger their pull effect on tourists (Apostolakis, 2003). Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis for this study is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Cultural heritage positively impacts the attractiveness of Binh Phuoc as a tourist destination.

The Impact of Cultural Heritage on Object-Based Authenticity and Existential Authenticity

The cultural heritage of a destination is a cultural configuration that combines tangible elements (e.g., landscapes, buildings, artifacts) and intangible elements (e.g., folklore and traditions) associated with historical and cultural landmarks (Caton & Santos, 2007; Yi et al., 2022). According to Richards (1996), culture and heritage, as a dynamic process, attract tourists seeking authenticity and meaning through their travel experiences.

The relationship between cultural heritage and both existential authenticity and object-based authenticity has been extensively examined (Handler, 1986; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Kolar & Zablar, 2010; Ha & Quyen, 2021).

Kim and Jamal (2007) argue that disregarding the significance of cultural artifacts in relation to tourists' authentic experiences would be a mistake. Based on empirical measurements, Kolar and Zablar (2010) conclude that cultural motivators including historical sites, cultural landmarks, and historical events positively influence tourists' perceptions of both types of authenticity, namely object-based authenticity and existential authenticity. This aligns with the findings of Ha & Quyen (2021), who suggest that when tourists appreciate historical buildings, architectural heritage, ancient materials, as well as landscapes, events, and tranquil atmospheres, they derive greater cultural value from the destination. Li et al. (2017) identified that cultural heritage factors (such as architectural heritage, traditional customs, and folklore) positively influence tourists' perceptions of existential authenticity. At destinations, tourists can witness traditional production methods, participate in traditional rituals or cultural performances, purchase souvenirs, and listen to stories or legends (Boyd, 2012; Mura, 2015). These activities distinct from everyday life experiences enable tourists to feel a sense of self fulfillment and freedom from rigid societal roles (Li et al., 2017). Based on these arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Cultural heritage positively impacts existential authenticity.

Hypothesis 3: Cultural heritage positively impacts object-based authenticity.

The Impact of Object-Based Authenticity on the Attractiveness of Binh Phuoc Destination

Object-based authenticity is a concept proposed by Wang (2007) to address debates regarding tourists' experiences of authenticity. Boorstin (1961) suggests that the understanding of authenticity is based on the characteristics, level of experience, and state of the object. Accordingly, authenticity has been conceptualized through three philosophical approaches: objective, constructive, and existential. From an objective perspective, authenticity refers to a scientifically or historically verified artifact either an original or at least a perfect replica (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Object-based authenticity, which exists externally to the tourist, is an inherent characteristic of an object, such as a product, an event, a cultural artifact, a monument, or a site (Naoi, 2004; Cook, 2010). In cultural heritage tourism studies, authenticity assessment is based on evaluating various elements of a destination, including lifestyle, activities, artifacts, structures, and products. The extent to which these tourism objects are deemed authentic heavily depends on expert evaluation. An asset is deemed authentic based on professional knowledge, and objective authenticity is recognized when tourism objects are certified by credible sources (Ha & Quyen, 2021). For instance, historical revolutionary sites in Binh Phuoc, such as Ta Thiet Base, possess objective authenticity because they have been carefully assessed by experts in the field and officially recognized by the Vietnamese government as a national special relic.

Meanwhile, constructive authenticity offers an alternative perspective, arguing that reproduced or reconstructed objects can still be perceived as authentic (Cohen, 1988; King, 2006). According to constructivist theory, reality is an outcome of human interpretation and construction, making it non static (Wang, 1999). Each person may interpret the visited objects differently and assess their authenticity based on their knowledge (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). This implies that constructive authenticity is achieved through subjective interpretation rather than inherent attributes. For example, although structures at Ta Thiet Base have been restored, they have become an integral part of the heritage site. Over time, they attain authenticity (Reisinger & Steinner, 2006). Ha & Quyen (2021) argue that a fundamental aspect shared by both objective and constructive authenticity is the essential role of tangible objects in shaping authenticity. Waitt (2000) and Naoi (2004) suggest that authenticity primarily relies on the physical attributes of a tourism destination. Regardless of how authentic these attributes are, tourists require tangible cues upon which they base their evaluations. Most tourists lack the expertise to make professional assessments of objective authenticity. Consequently, Wang (2000) proposed object-based authenticity, which encompasses both objective and constructive dimensions. This concept is designed to determine whether tourists perceive a particular object as authentic (Ha & Quyen, 2021). Accordingly, visiting and examining cultural heritage sites that ensure object-based authenticity (both objective and constructive) serve as a key factor in the attractiveness of a tourism destination. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4: Object-based authenticity positively impacts the attractiveness of Binh Phuoc as a tourism destination.

The Positive Impact of Existential Authenticity on Destination Attractiveness

Existential authenticity is a concept related to the activities and experiences tourists undergo during their travels (Leigh et al., 2006). Wang (1999) argued that existential authenticity is a subjective experience, serving as an alternative mode of tourism that emphasizes tourists' openness to their experiences within the constrained spaces that tourism offers (Brown, 2013). Accordingly, Wang (2000) introduced two dimensions of existential authenticity: Intrapersonal authenticity (self-feelings and self-making) and Interpersonal authenticity (family and community relationships). Emotions and experiences associated with existential authenticity are socially constructed (Olsen, 2002). Tourists perceive existential authenticity by forming relationships with places, spaces, objects, and themes in tourism (Ram et al., 2016; Yi et al., 2018). This entails seeking authentic experiences through sensations, emotions, relationships, and self-exploration (Boyd, 2012).

In other words, existential authenticity is a subjective feeling, a perspective, and a dimension that enhances the attractiveness of a tourist destination. For instance, Daniel (1996) observed that although the modern rumba dance differs significantly from its original form, the passion of the dancers influences tourists, immersing them in the performance and allowing them to experience a sense of exhilaration and self-expression. Applying Daniel's (1996) example to Binh Phuoc's historical revolutionary sites, such as Ta Thiet Base, tourists may not see the original war era bunkers, as they have been renovated. However, through engaging guidance from site staff, tourists can try crawling into the bunkers and experiencing a simulation of wartime conditions. This immersive interaction creates unique and emotional experiences, helping visitors deepen their understanding of Vietnam's wartime history. Thus, the proposed hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 5 Existential authenticity positively impacts the attractiveness of Binh Phuoc as a tourism destination.

The Mediating Role of Object-Based Authenticity and Existential Authenticity in the Relationship Between Cultural Heritage and Destination Attractiveness

Fritz & Lester (2016) define a mediating variable as one that explains the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable. In other words, a mediator helps clarify why an independent variable affects a dependent variable. Empirical research by Kolar and Zabkar (2010) demonstrated that authenticity is not an independent concept but should be understood as a mediating factor between cultural motivation and tourists' perceptions and behaviors regarding a destination. Based on these findings and previous hypotheses related to authenticity, this study proposes that authenticity serves as the central link between cultural values and destination attractiveness. Naoi (2004) argued that physical artifacts are crucial for perceived authenticity in heritage sites. However, rather than directly evaluating authenticity

based on the originality of objects, Steiner & Reisinger (2006) and Kolar & Zabkar (2010) emphasized that authenticity can be reconstructed through material objects, for example, how these artifacts inspire visitors. The role of authenticity lies in evoking emotions, perceptions, and connections to history rather than solely preserving original artifacts. Research shows that tourists often seek unique experiences in heritage tourism (Ram et al., 2016). Their perception of authenticity can provide deep insights into whether a destination is attractive or not (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010).

Furthermore, object-based authenticity provides physical reassurance that tourists will have a consistent experience in future visits (Ariffin & Mansour, 2018). When tangible evidence supports authenticity, tourists gain confidence in recommending the destination to others. For example, Viking heritage sites in Europe have been recreated to enhance tourism (Halewood & Hannam, 2001). These sites offer authentic Viking era experiences, including historical costumes, goods, and events (Coşkun, 2021). This reconstruction of material authenticity attracts tourists seeking a historical experience, demonstrating that object-based authenticity enhances destination attractiveness. Thus, the proposed hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 6: Object-based authenticity mediates the positive relationship between cultural heritage and the attractiveness of a destination.

The existential aspect of authenticity relates to tourists' emotions and perceptions, including spiritual uniqueness and a connection to history (Chhabra et al., 2003; Naoi, 2004; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). A crucial component of perceived authenticity is the sense of enjoyment and emotional connection when visiting cultural heritage sites (Goulding, 2000). These emotional experiences make a destination more appealing to visitors. Tourists are drawn to destinations that offer meaningful and immersive experiences (Bryce et al., 2017). In cultural tourism, visitors desire to relive past lifestyles, even for a short moment (Chhabra et al., 2003). For example, tourists at Binh Phuoc's Ta Thiet Base may experience wartime conditions by crawling into bunkers and engaging in interactive historical activities, deepening their emotional connection to the past. According to Ramkison & Uysal (2010), authenticity strengthens tourists' perceptions and behaviors when consuming cultural attractions. Thus, existential authenticity enhances appreciation for cultural heritage and, in turn, increases destination attractiveness. Thus, the proposed hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Existential authenticity mediates the positive relationship between cultural heritage and the attractiveness of a destination.

Based on the above hypotheses (H1 to H7), the conceptual framework of the study is illustrated in Figure 1. This model demonstrates the proposed relationships among cultural heritage, authenticity dimensions (object-based and existential), and destination attractiveness.

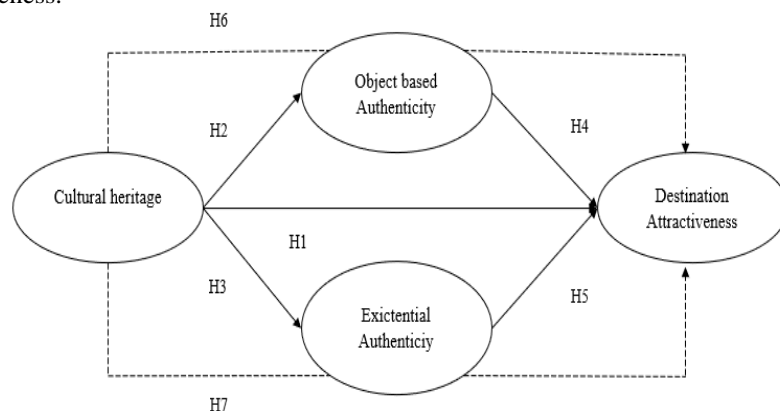


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a survey based approach using a structured questionnaire across three main phases: 1/ Designing the initial measurement scale and conducting a preliminary survey: This phase involves drafting and refining the questionnaire to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity of the measurement items. 2/ Conducting the main study with actual tourists: The finalized questionnaire is distributed to tourists visiting cultural heritage sites in Binh Phuoc, 3/ Data processing and conclusion drawing. Data processing and conclusion drawing: The collected data is analyzed to derive meaningful insights and conclusions. The questionnaire is designed using a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to assess various aspects of authenticity and destination attractiveness. To investigate the relationship between cultural heritage, authenticity, and its impact on the attractiveness of Binh Phuoc as a tourist destination, this study employs direct survey methods. The target respondents are tourists who have visited major cultural heritage sites in Binh Phuoc, specifically: Ta Thiet Base Historic Site, The End Point of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (including the Ho Chi Minh Trail End Point Exhibition Area and the Diplomatic House). These sites were selected because they are designated as Special National Heritage Sites and attract a significant number of tourists. The data collection took place from March to April 2024. Following the research design of Adie & Hall (2017), the survey sites were chosen to ensure clear entry and exit points, allowing verification that respondents had actually visited the heritage sites before completing the questionnaire. Regarding the sampling method, Boomsma (1982) recommends a minimum sample size of 100 or 200 cases for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis, while Bentler & Chou (1987) suggest at least 5 to 10 cases per parameter. Given that the current study includes 19 measurement variables, the minimum required sample size is 190. To ensure sufficient valid responses, 230 questionnaires were distributed, and 222 valid responses were collected and used for analysis. Throughout the survey process, demographic factors were carefully considered to ensure the representativeness of the study sample.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

Measurement Model Assessment

To ensure the robustness of the measurement model, several statistical criteria were examined. As detailed in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated strong reliability, with outer loadings consistently above the 0.70 threshold. Similarly, Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeded 0.70 for each scale, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. In addition, convergent validity was established through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Following Fornell & Larcker (1981), all AVE values surpassing 0.50 confirm that the observed indicators effectively represent their respective latent constructs. To assess discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was applied. Table 2 presents the inter-construct correlation matrix, where the square roots of AVE (diagonal values) are higher than the off-diagonal correlation coefficients.

This result supports adequate discriminant validity among the four key constructs: Cultural Heritage (HA), Object-Based Authenticity (AUTO), Existential Authenticity (AUTE), and Destination Attractiveness (DA). With the measurement model exhibiting acceptable reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, the next step involves assessing the structural relationships among the constructs. To examine the structural validity of the proposed model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed. This technique allowed for the assessment of both direct and indirect relationships among the latent constructs. As summarized in Table 3, all estimated direct paths are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), providing empirical support for hypotheses H1 to H5. Specifically, Cultural Heritage (HA) exerts a strong positive influence on Destination Attractiveness (DA), both directly and indirectly through its impact on the two dimensions of authenticity.

Table 1. Reliability Assessment of Constructs

Variable Code	Constructs	Outer Loading	CA	CR	AVE
Cultural Heritage (HA)			0.896	0.900	0.761
HA1	The heritage site is recognized as a cultural heritage	0.903	Source: Yu & Littrell (2003); Loan & Thanh (2014)		
HA2	Unique artistic architecture and handicrafts	0.868			
HA3	The heritage site has an engaging historical narrative, preserving numerous revolutionary relics	0.856			
HA4	The heritage site hosts numerous attractive events and activities	0.863			
Object-Based Authenticity (AUTO)			0.890	0.897	0.602
AUTO1	Cultural heritage sites reflect the past across different historical periods of the locality	0.711	Source: Kolar & Zabkar (2010); Shi et al. (2018); Ha & Quyen (2021)		
AUTO2	Cultural heritage sites are well-preserved	0.780			
AUTO3	Artifacts and events of cultural heritage sites are authenticated by experts	0.798			
AUTO4	The overall architecture and historical imprints of cultural heritage sites create interest	0.785			
AUTO5	The restoration of cultural heritage structures remains true to the original (architecture, interior, artifacts, etc.)	0.799			
AUTO6	Souvenirs reflect the distinctive characteristics of cultural heritage sites	0.762			
AUTO7	Information about cultural heritage sites excites me	0.792			
Existential Authenticity (AUTE)			0.837	0.869	0.665
AUTE1	Enjoy the peaceful atmosphere at cultural heritage sites	0.808	Source: Kolar & Zabkar (2010); Ha & Quyen (2021)		
AUTE2	Gain deeper insights into different historical periods of local heritage sites	0.775			
AUTE3	Feel connected to history, legends, and historical figures	0.851			
AUTE4	Feel immersed in the space of cultural heritage through participation in on-site activities	0.827			
Destination Attractiveness of Binh Phuoc (DA)			0.907	0.908	0.782
DA1	Binh Phuoc is my top choice for travel	0.850	Source: Loan & Thanh (2014); Nghie (2019)		
DA2	Binh Phuoc attracts me more than any other destination	0.887			
DA3	I would like to spend more time exploring and experiencing this place	0.896			
DA4	Overall, Binh Phuoc is an attractive destination	0.903			

Table 2. Discriminant Validity - Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	AUTE	AUTO	DA	HA
AUTE	0.816			
AUTO	0.560	0.776*		
DA	0.551	0.598	0.885*	
HA	0.371	0.410	0.693	0.873

Table 3. Results of Direct Relationship Assessment

Hypothesis	Relationship	Impact Coefficient (β)	P values	Conclusion
H1	HA \rightarrow DA	0.693	0.000	Accepted
H2	HA \rightarrow AUTE	0.371	0.000	
H3	HA \rightarrow AUTO	0.410	0.000	
H4	AUTE \rightarrow DA	0.211	0.000	
H5	AUTO \rightarrow DA	0.274	0.000	

Results of SEM Model Analysis

P-Value Analysis: Fisher (1922) stated that most researchers use a significance threshold of 5% for the P-value to determine statistical significance. The analysis results indicate that the P-value for all relationships in the model is less than 0.05. This confirms that all proposed hypotheses are accepted with 95% confidence. Additionally, all impact coefficients are

positive, indicating that the relationships in the model are positively correlated. Given that the P-value for all relationships remains below 0.05, it can be concluded that all factors exert a direct influence within the proposed research model.

Table 4. Results of Indirect Relationship Assessment

Hypothesis	Relationship	Impact Coefficient (β)	P values	Conclusion
H6	HA \rightarrow AUTE \rightarrow DA	0.078	0.000	Accepted
H7	HA \rightarrow AUTO \rightarrow DA	0.112	0.000	

To further examine the mediating role of authenticity in heritage tourism, the study employed bootstrapping analysis to test two indirect pathways. As shown in Table 4, both indirect effects HA \rightarrow AUTE \rightarrow DA (H6) and HA \rightarrow AUTO \rightarrow DA (H7) were found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming that authenticity acts as a meaningful intermediary in the relationship between cultural heritage and destination attractiveness. These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how the two dimensions of authenticity Object-Based (AUTO) and Existential (AUTE) interact to shape tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness. The findings underscore the critical role of authenticity in enhancing the overall attractiveness of Binh Phuoc as a heritage tourism destination. Collectively, these results not only validate the theoretical assumptions of the model but also highlight the pivotal role of authenticity in translating cultural heritage into meaningful tourist experiences, an insight particularly relevant for emerging heritage destinations such as Binh Phuoc. Figure 2 provides a synthesized depiction of the validated model, highlighting the strength and direction of the structural relationships. This visual representation enhances comprehension and offers empirical clarity to the conceptual framework. These empirical insights lay a strong foundation for the subsequent discussion of theoretical and managerial implications, particularly in the context of heritage destination development.

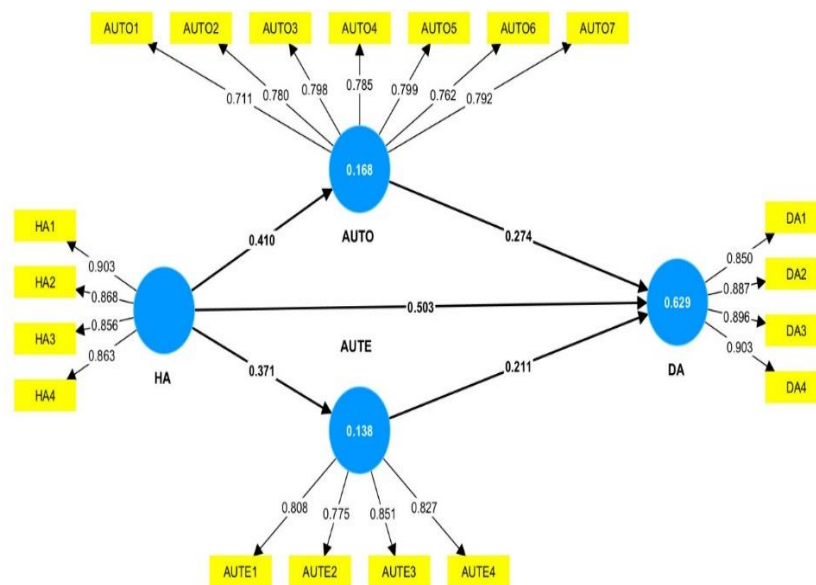


Figure 2. Theoretical Model of the Study

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results of the measurement model validation and SEM analysis, the hypothesis regarding the relationship between cultural heritage and authenticity, positively impacting the attractiveness of a destination, has been verified. This contributes to bridging the research gap in this field. Theoretically, the research findings reaffirm that cultural heritage is a key factor in attracting tourists to heritage tourism destinations (H1, $\beta = 0.693$, $p = 0.000$).

This aligns with the findings of Apostolakis (2003), who posited that the convergence of heritage and tourism activities signifies the emergence of heritage resources as attractions. This argument is further emphasized by Kolar and Zabkar (2010), highlighting that the cultural role of heritage attractions, along with their potential for knowledge enrichment and discovery of new sites, is crucial for cultural tourists. The hypothesis concerning the positive impact of cultural heritage on both existential authenticity and object-based authenticity has also been confirmed (H2, $\beta = 0.371$, $p = 0.000$; H3, $\beta = 0.410$, $p = 0.000$). Chhabra et al. (2003) demonstrated that heritage tourism knowledge influences perceived authenticity. Therefore, destination managers must package their products authentically to provide cultural value, educational insights, and historical narratives for tourists (Park et al., 2019; Sorrentino et al., 2020).

While there has been much debate regarding the commodification of heritage, the fundamental purpose of heritage commodification is not to destroy its authenticity but to reveal its exchange value (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). In reality, cultural authenticity has been preserved and respected until recent years (Castéran & Roederer, 2013).

Tourists regard cultural heritage as an essential aspect of modern travel, seeking authentic experiences that are incomparable to other types of tourism (Mura, 2015). According to Song et al. (2017), authenticity is a critical factor in meaningful experiences, and the desire for authentic experiences is a key motivation for tourists, alongside nostalgia and social distinction (Lu et al., 2015; Leong, 2016). The arguments above, combined with the findings of this study,

confirm the significant role of existential authenticity and object-based authenticity in positively influencing destination attractiveness (H4, $\beta = 0.211$, $p = 0.000$; H5, $\beta = 0.274$, $p = 0.000$).

The research also validates that object-based authenticity and existential authenticity serve as central mediators linking cultural heritage to tourism destination attractiveness (H6, $\beta = 0.078$, $p = 0.000$; H7, $\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.000$).

This represents a novel finding compared to previous studies, as Kolar and Zabkar (2010) emphasized the mediating role of authenticity in shaping tourist loyalty. Overall, this research contributes to a better understanding of destination attractiveness by evaluating the impact of cultural heritage and, more specifically, the central role of existential and object-based authenticity within the context of Binh Phuoc, Vietnam.

Managerial Implications

To enhance Binh Phuoc's attractiveness to tourists, destination managers should focus on improving and strengthening elements such as cultural heritage, object-based authenticity, and existential authenticity. Destination managers of cultural heritage sites should pay attention to the overall architectural integrity, ensuring that restoration efforts remain true to the original structures. Souvenirs should reflect the unique characteristics of the heritage sites, and informational materials should be engaging and comprehensive. Tourists visiting heritage sites often seek immersive experiences related to the authentic cultural environment. Therefore, heritage tourism destinations should offer tourists authentic experiences that enhance their personal engagement. From this perspective, marketing managers should focus more on innovative storytelling techniques to enhance tourists' perception of existential authenticity.

Specifically, existential and object-based authenticity can be reinforced through architectural structures, historical events, and activities at sites such as Ta Thiet Base and the Ho Chi Minh Trail End (Reception House), allowing visitors to perceive them as authentic and historically significant. Currently, the original and reconstructed elements at Ta Thiet Base and the Ho Chi Minh Trail End are well organized. For instance, besides being introduced to the underground tunnels and trenches preserved in their original form by tour guides, visitors can participate in activities such as crawling through tunnels and exploring the underground shelters where revolutionary soldiers once worked at Ta Thiet Base. Similarly, at the Reception House, visitors can not only observe the reconstructed working and guest reception areas but also examine historical artifacts displayed in the museum, such as portraits of prominent leaders in the Vietnam People's Army, military equipment, and supplies used during the legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail operation.

These arrangements allow tourists to fully immerse themselves in the historical ambiance and authentically experience the historical phases of both heritage sites. Additionally, creating a tranquil and immersive atmosphere at heritage sites allows tourists to connect with historical narratives, legends, and historical figures, thereby fostering an authentic and memorable experience. Symbolic and reconstructed elements must be carefully curated to enable tourists to imagine and appreciate the heritage while maintaining a delicate balance between original objects and reproductions. This approach ensures that the historical integrity of the heritage sites is preserved. These efforts play a crucial role in positively shaping authenticity based tourism experiences. Beyond offering distinct experiential value, authenticity driven tourism also fosters tourists' awareness of sustainable heritage conservation. Moreover, these positive experiences contribute to generating favorable online reviews and word of mouth recommendations, encouraging friends and family members to visit the destinations. Positive word of mouth promotion serves as a crucial driver in attracting additional visitors, ultimately enhancing the competitiveness of heritage tourism destinations in the current market landscape.

Research limitations

Examining these relationships provides a deeper understanding of the interactions between these variables within the context of cultural heritage tourism, specifically in Binh Phuoc. This study adds value to the discourse by highlighting the central role of existential and object-based authenticity in shaping destination attractiveness. However, this study has several limitations. The data were collected using convenience sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Although the sample size (222 respondents) meets analytical requirements, it remains relatively small.

Future research should consider increasing the sample size to enhance representativeness and extend the study model by incorporating additional relevant concepts, such as intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity, which may further influence the relationships examined in this study. This presents an avenue for future research development.

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