

GEOGRAPHIES OF HERITAGE AUTHENTICITY: SPATIAL INTERACTION, NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE AND EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT AT MEDINA OF TUNIS

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Abstract: This study explores how space, narratives, and emotions influence perceptions of heritage authenticity among international tourists during the "Medina of Lights" festival (March 2025) in the Medina of Tunis, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979. To achieve the purpose of this research, a qualitative approach was chosen to deep-delve into the perceptions of international tourists. Therefore, semi-structured interviews with 25 tourists from 12 countries, aged from 24 to 67 were undertaken. The number of participants was acknowledged after data saturation was completed. Data were collected over six days during the festival and analyzed using the thematic analysis. Three main themes emerge from the thematic analysis, which were discussed and elaborated. First, the spatial organization of the medina structures how visitors move through the site. Places like the Zitouna Mosque serve as reference points, while narrow streets force visitors to slow down and observe their surroundings more carefully. Second, narratives shared by residents create a sense of authenticity even when adapted for visitors. Tourists accept this adaptation if they perceive genuine cultural knowledge and respect for local traditions. Third, sensory experiences during the festival create lasting emotional connections that extend beyond the visit and turn some tourists into advocates for the heritage site. The findings show that heritage authenticity does not reside only in monuments but is also built through the use of space, social interactions, and emotions experienced by visitors. The study suggests that heritage festivals can strengthen authenticity if they preserve resident presence and the sincerity of cultural exchanges. The findings send important notes to scholars, tourism planners, marketers and managers about how they could strengthen heritage authenticity via the case of Medina of Tunis.

Keywords: heritage authenticity, spatial configuration, narrative performance, emotional attachment, Medina of Tunis, heritage festival, tourist perception, cultural tourism

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INTRODUCTION

The inscription of a site on the UNESCO World Heritage List represents one of the most significant international recognitions of cultural value. Since the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972, 1,248 cultural, natural, and mixed sites have been inscribed worldwide, with the objective of preserving humanity's most exceptional heritage for future generations (UNESCO, 2025). The Medina of Tunis which was inscribed in 1979, under criteria (ii), (iii) and (v) provides a concrete illustration on this global call. Located in north-eastern Tunisia, the Medina covers nearly 280 hectares and includes approximately 700 historic monuments, such as the Zitouna Mosque, numerous zaouias and madrasas, and dense residential quarters shaped by Arab-Muslim architecture and successive dynastic influences from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries (UNESCO, n.d.; JMour, 2021). As in many World Heritage Sites, inscription generates a structural paradox. While UNESCO recognition increases international visibility and tourism-related revenues, it also intensifies pressures on heritage integrity, cultural authenticity, and residents' well-being (Chi et al., 2017; Su et al., 2016).

In Tunisia, tourism revenues increased sharply between 2021 and 2022, reaching approximately 1.1 billion dinars (Central Bank of Tunisia, 2022). This economic growth raises a persistent question: how can heritage remain a living practice while being increasingly shaped by tourism markets? Existing research has largely addressed this question through residents' attitudes toward tourism development, relying on quantitative models grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET assumes that residents support tourism when perceived benefits outweigh costs (Ap, 1992), a proposition widely supported by empirical evidence linking resident, tourist interaction quality to tourism support (Xiong et al., 2021; Styliadis et al., 2021; Gannon et al., 2021). In the Tunisian context, interaction quality has also been shown to predict residents' subjective well-being—across dimensions such as social contribution, integration, unification, and acceptance, which in turn mediates support for tourism development (Keyes, 1998; Pan et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2021).

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However, these studies have two main limitations. First, quantitative measures often conflate support for tourism development with heritage preservation, overlooking heritage as a lived cultural practice rooted in embodied knowledge, intergenerational transmission, and everyday social relations, dimensions that survey instruments struggle to capture (Çalışkan & Gökteş, 2025). Second, SET-based models tend to treat resident–tourist interactions as spatially uniform, relying on standardized interaction-quality scales without accounting for where, when, and under what narrative conditions interactions occur (Teye et al., 2002; Oviedo-Garcia et al., 2008). At the same time, heritage scholarship has long been dominated by a binary opposition between “authentic heritage” and “commodified tourism,” assuming that tourism inevitably erodes authenticity (Waitt, 2009). Recent research on heritage performance challenges this view, showing that residents actively negotiate and perform heritage in context-sensitive ways rather than simply losing authenticity (Palermo et al., 2023). Adaptive narration by artisans, for instance, often reflects legitimate cultural mediation rather than deception (Bapiri et al., 2020; Boussaa & Madandola, 2024). Yet tourists’ interpretations of these performances remain underexplored. Few studies examine how visitors perceive narrated heritage, or how emotional, spatial, and relational contexts shape judgments of sincerity versus superficiality (Hernández-Escampa & Barrera-Fernández, 2023).

A further gap concerns the spatial blindness of heritage tourism research. World Heritage Sites such as the Medina of Tunis are internally differentiated, with commercial souks, residential quarters, and restricted spaces producing uneven geographies of access and interaction (Kadyrbekova et al., 2024; Balletto et al., 2025). These spatial hierarchies shape tourist movement and experience, yet how tourists themselves perceive spatial differentiation remains underexplored (Bobic & Akhavan, 2025). Addressing this gap requires a geographic perspective attentive to place-based meaning production (Orts Cardador et al., 2024; Konstantopoulou et al., 2024; Chen & Cheung, 2025). In this context, the 2025 edition of *Medina of Lights*, a week-long cultural festival organized by DMO Tunis-Carthage with international and institutional partners, offers a particularly relevant empirical setting. By explicitly framing heritage tourism as cultural preservation and community empowerment, and by temporarily restructuring space through light installations and curated routes, the festival renders heritage both visible and narratively staged (Destination Tunis Carthage, 2025). Building on this setting, the present qualitative exploratory study explores three interrelated research questions from the tourist perspective: how spatial configurations structure experiences and authenticity perceptions; how tourists interpret heritage narratives as authentic, performed, or hybrid; and how festival experiences shape emotional attachment and post-visit engagement. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 25 international tourists, the analysis identifies three mechanisms: spatial hierarchization shaping access and experience; narrative performance producing an “arranged yet sincere” authenticity; and emotional attachment trajectories extending from the festival to post-visit heritage advocacy. By integrating spatial, performative, and temporal dimensions, this study extends SET and offers practical insights for heritage managers navigating tensions between tourism development and preservation.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding tourist perceptions of heritage authenticity requires frameworks beyond resident attitude surveys. Although SET has long dominated explanations of resident support for tourism, it offers limited insight into how tourists themselves experience heritage, interpret authenticity, and develop emotional attachments. This section first revisits SET’s key contributions, then highlights its limits for tourist-centred analysis, and finally proposes an integrative framework that accounts for spatial heterogeneity, narrative interpretation, and emotional trajectories as lived by visitors.

1. Social Exchange Theory: Foundational Framework and Resident-Focused Limitations

Social Exchange Theory (SET), considered a cornerstone of tourism research on resident attitudes, posits that individuals support development when perceived benefits outweigh perceived costs (Ap, 1992). In heritage contexts, this framework has shown strong empirical validity for explaining residents’ support for tourism. Studies consistently find that residents who perceive positive tourism impacts, report high-quality interactions with tourists, and experience higher levels of subjective well-being are more likely to support tourism development (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Kim et al., 2013).

At World Heritage Sites, this relationship appears particularly robust. Research demonstrates that the quality of resident–tourist interactions significantly predict residents’ subjective well-being across multiple dimensions, which in turn mediates their support for tourism (Chi et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2021; Sobaih et al., 2024). Using structural equation modelling, scholars have identified complex mediation pathways in which interaction quality influences cultural attitudes and well-being, ultimately generating support for tourism development ($R^2 = 0.346$) (Gannon et al., 2021). These quantitative validations have strongly shaped heritage management practices, reinforcing the assumption that enhancing interaction quality can simultaneously improve resident well-being and contribute to heritage preservation.

However, SET theory, which is resident-centered, offers limited conceptual tools for understanding the tourism experience based on heritage authenticity. SET was developed to explain resident cost-benefit evaluations of external tourism development. It does not address core questions about how tourists interpret cultural narratives, perceive authenticity, or construct emotional attachments to places. When SET measures “interaction quality,” it does so from resident perspective (How do residents perceive tourists?), not tourist perspective (How do tourists perceive heritage and residents?). SET cannot explain what makes heritage appear authentic to tourists, why some performances seem sincere while others appear staged, or how spatial configurations shape these perceptions. Furthermore, SET treats heritage as fixed object to be evaluated, not as dynamically produced through spatial, narrative, and emotional interactions.

To understand tourist experience of heritage, we require frameworks attending to how tourists actively construct meaning through navigation of space, interpretation of narratives, and emotional engagement. This requires shifting from SET’s cost-benefit calculus to what we term a “spatial-performative-emotional” framework.

2. Toward a spatial-performative-emotional framework: understanding tourist experience of heritage authenticity

Spatially, heritage sites are internally differentiated geographies where tourist experience varies according to location, accessibility, and intentional spatial design. Recent geospatial analysis of Mediterranean heritage destinations reveals clustering of tourism pressure in specific zones while other areas remain marginal to tourist attention (Balletto et al., 2025). These spatial patterns are not natural but deliberately produced through infrastructure, signage, lighting, and accessibility design (Bobic & Akhavan, 2025). The Medina of Tunis illustrates this spatial heterogeneity in a very concrete way. Commercial souks concentrate tourist flows, upper residential quarters remain relatively insulated, and religious or family spaces maintain clear restrictions. The way tourists move around these areas, and how they perceive them as authentic heritage or generally as tourist destinations, strongly shapes their overall sense of authenticity (Li & Li, 2022). Spatial accessibility and intentional design do more than organize movement; they communicate signals about heritage value, cultural significance, and the boundaries of visitor legitimacy. Understanding tourist perceptions therefore requires close attention to how space itself structures meaning making.

From a narrative perspective, heritage authenticity is not a fixed quality embedded in ancient objects but a relational meaning produced through presentation, narration, and context. The long-standing binary opposing “authentic heritage” to “commodified tourism” assumes that performance necessarily threatens authenticity (Wang, 1999). Recent research complicates this view. Tourists do not uniformly reject performed heritage; instead, they distinguish between performances perceived as honest, culturally grounded, and respectful, and those seen as exploitative or misleading (Palermo et al., 2023; Bapiri et al., 2020). When residents consciously adapt narratives for visitors while maintaining genuine knowledge and cultural respect, tourists often interpret this as legitimate mediation rather than deception (Boussaa & Madandola, 2024). Recent empirical evidence confirms that narrative-based guiding, when integrated with sensory stimuli, significantly strengthens tourists' memory of and emotional connection to heritage sites (Chan et al., 2025). What matters, then, is not whether heritage is performed, but how it is performed. Tourists tend to perceive an “arranged yet sincere” authenticity—curated yet narratively honest and emotionally credible—constructed through narrative context and perceived resident sincerity (Hernández-Escampa & Barrera-Fernández, 2023).

Emotionally, attachment to heritage unfolds through dynamic trajectories shaped by sensorial immersion, perceived authenticity, and emotional resonance. Rather than a static outcome, attachment emerges through lived experiences at heritage sites. Sensorially rich encounters—architecture, light, music, and human presence—often generate emotional connections that go beyond historical knowledge. These experiences follow “bottom-up spillover” processes, whereby positive, context-specific emotions extend into broader well-being, concern for preservation, and post-visit advocacy (Konstantopoulou et al., 2024; Chen & Cheung, 2025). Unlike residents, whose attachments are rooted in long-term familiarity, tourists develop attachment through short but intense moments of immersion. Such temporally bounded experiences can produce lasting effects, shaping behaviors such as recommendation, information-seeking, and support for heritage conservation (Li et al., 2021; Chen & Chen, 2010). More specifically, discrete positive emotions such as joy, love, and positive surprise have been shown to directly predict place attachment and recommendation intentions among international heritage tourists (Li et al., 2025). Capturing tourist attachment therefore requires a temporal perspective linking on-site emotions to post-visit engagement. Heritage festivals make these mechanisms particularly visible.

By temporarily reorganizing space through curated routes and light installations, foregrounding narrative performances, and intensifying emotional immersion through music and collective gathering, festivals expose how heritage authenticity is spatially structured, narratively constructed, and emotionally experienced. As such, they provide concentrated temporal windows for observing how tourists navigate space, interpret heritage narratives, and develop emotional attachments.

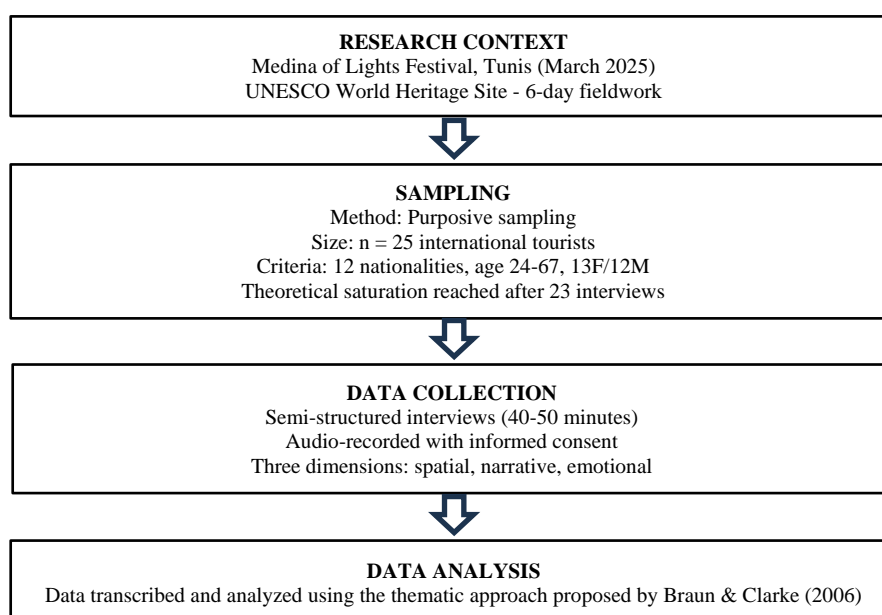


Figure 1. Research Methodology Framework

METHODS

Research design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach grounded in interpretive epistemology. We focused on tourists' perceptions and how they experience and construct the authenticity of heritage. More precisely, we examined how visitors navigate space, interpret heritage narratives, and develop emotional attachments.

From this perspective, tourists do not passively receive heritage messages; they actively produce meaning through interaction with spatial configurations, resident narratives, and sensorial immersion (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Goodson, 2004). Figure 1 summarizes the overall methodological framework adopted in this study.

Case context and sample

The data were collected during the Medina of Lights festival, which took place in the Medina of Tunis from March 15 to 22, 2025. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 international tourists encountered in the medina and in nearby accommodations. We used purposive sampling to cover a wide range of visitor profiles based on their socio-economic characteristics (Table 1; Figure 2).

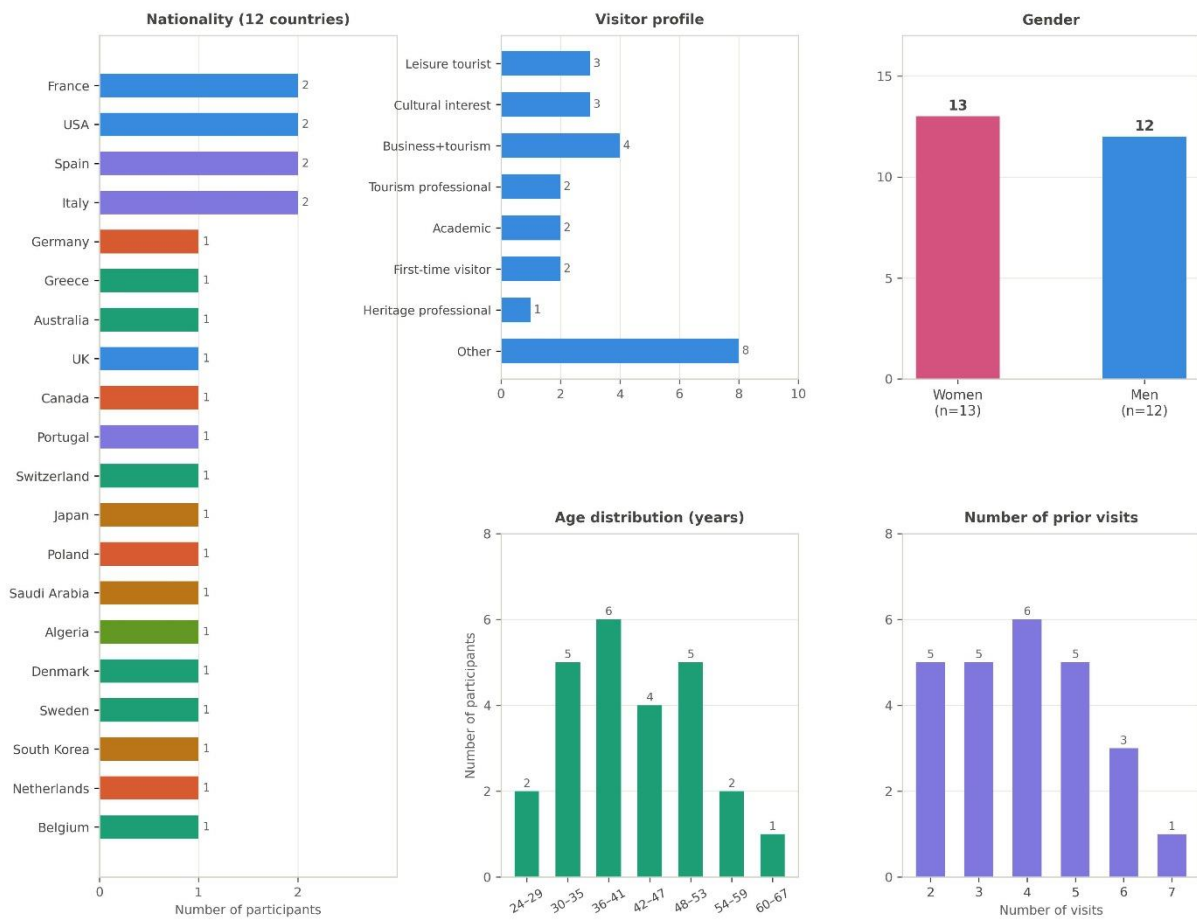


Figure 2. Participant profiles (n = 25)

The sample included tourists from 12 countries across four continents, aged between 24 and 67 years, with balanced gender representation (13 women and 12 men). Participants' backgrounds varied widely, including academics, tourism professionals, cultural practitioners, business travelers, and leisure tourists, as well as both first-time and experienced heritage visitors. During the data collection phase in the field, commonalities gradually emerged in the participants' accounts. The last two interviews did not offer any fundamentally new perspectives; they primarily served to confirm previously observed trends. At this stage, it can reasonably be considered that the study has reached its theoretical saturation.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

ID	Age	Gender	Nationality	Visit Duration (days)	Heritage Background
I1	42	M	USA	3	Cultural interest
I2	38	F	UK	4	Tourism professional
I3	55	M	France	5	Professor
I4	31	F	Spain	4	Cultural visitor
I5	47	M	Germany	2	Business + leisure
I6	36	F	Netherlands	3	Visitor
I7	52	M	Italy	6	Heritage professional

I8	29	F	Belgium	4	Cultural interest
I9	44	M	Canada	2	Leisure tourist
I10	35	F	Portugal	5	Architecture interest
I11	50	M	USA	3	Leisure tourist
I12	33	F	France	2	First-time visitor
I13	48	M	Greece	6	Academic
I14	40	F	Switzerland	5	Business visit + tourism
I15	56	M	Denmark	7	Tourism professional
I16	34	F	Spain	3	Member of a cultural association
I17	45	M	Saudi Arabia	2	Business visit + tourism
I18	39	F	Australia	5	Science communicator
I19	51	M	Poland	3	Academic
I20	37	F	Italy	2	Corporate professional
I21	43	M	Algeria	6	Business visit + tourism
I22	30	F	Japan	2	First-time Medina
I23	49	M	South Korea	4	Entrepreneur
I24	36	F	Sweden	5	Anthropologist
I25	54	M	UAE	3	Senior professional

Data collection

The interviews were carried out over a six-day period, from March 16 to March 21, 2025. Each conversation lasted approximately between thirty-two and thirty-eight minutes and, with the agreement of the respondents, was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. The interview guide was organized around three central dimensions derived from the research questions: the spatial experience and accessibility of the setting, the interpretation of heritage narratives and performances, and the emotional experience and sense of attachment generated by the event.

The discussions were guided by open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely express their views. Depending on availability and circumstances, interviews were conducted either on-site during the festival activities or later in nearby locations such as cafes and hotels. All participants were informed of the study's objective at the outset and gave their consent. To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities were replaced with coded references (I1 to I25).

Data analysis

All interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using the thematic approach proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis began with several careful readings of the transcripts to familiarize the researchers with the participants' narratives. We first created base codes from the data, then grouped similar codes into sub-themes, and finally organized these into broader themes. This process identified three main themes: (1) Spatial configuration and accessibility, (2) Narrative performance and perceived authenticity, and (3) Emotional attachment and post-visit engagement. To improve the reliability of the analysis, two researchers independently coded the first five interviews and discussed their findings until they reached a consensus on a common coding structure. One researcher then analyzed the remaining interviews, while the other regularly reviewed the work to ensure consistency. The study received ethical approval before data collection, and all participants provided informed consent.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Geographies of heritage

The results show that tourists do not experience the Medina of Tunis as a single, fixed heritage site. Instead, they see it as a living and layered urban space where daily life continues alongside tourism. Religious practices, craft activities, and local social interactions are still present, and visitors clearly notice this. For many of them, this everyday life is what makes the Medina feel authentic, rather than a place prepared only for tourists. Some places help visitors find their way. The Zitouna Mosque, for example, is often mentioned as a central reference point that guides movement inside the Medina. Tourists also talk about the gates, narrow streets, and small passages that mark the entry from the modern city into the old Medina. Passing through these spaces feels like stepping into a different world, socially and culturally, and sometimes even into another time. Getting lost from time to time is not seen as a problem. On the contrary, when visitors lose their sense of direction, they slow down, look more carefully, listen, and use all their senses. These moments help them connect more deeply with the place and strengthen their feeling that the experience is real and meaningful.

Overall, space plays an important role in shaping heritage as something lived and changing, not staged or frozen. Tourists value the richness, the layers, and the everyday rhythm of life they observe in the Medina.

Finally, Table 2 summarises the main sub-themes of heritage experience and shows, through direct quotations, how tourists perceive, move through, and emotionally connect with the Medina of Tunis.

Table 2. Geographies of heritage

Sub-themes	Significant Verbatims
The Medina as a living space	"The Medina isn't just for taking photos. It moves. People are everywhere—living, working, just hanging out.... You can really feel that it's alive. It's authentic." (I3)
	"Here, the houses aren't empty like in some old cities in Europe. Families have been here for generations—that's what completely changes the vibe." (I8)
Centrality of the	"Honestly, it doesn't even matter where you start. You just walk through any gate and boom; you always

Zitouna	end up at the Zitouna. It's the Medina's heart, literally. Everything just revolves around it." (I10)
	"The mosque isn't just a monument, it's a landmark. When I get lost, I always look for the Zitouna." (I15)
Symbolic boundaries (gates, passages)	"Passing Bab Bhar is like changing worlds. You leave the modern city behind to step into another era." (I6)
	"The gates aren't just physical; they mark a 'click' in your head. You feel like you're entering a bubble." (I19)
Positive wandering and disorientation	"It's all narrow and turns every which way, but that is the beauty of it. You can lose but that's the goal. It gives you this urges to see what's hidden a bit further ahead." (I14)
	"In the Medina, you can't walk fast like usual. You inevitably end up slowing down to look around and listen to all the sounds." (I22)

Theme 2: Heritage Performance and Authenticity Perceptions

The findings show that tourists understand authenticity in the Medina of Tunis through what people do every day, not only through buildings or monuments. They pay attention to ordinary activities such as craft work, religious practices, and daily social exchanges, and see these as key elements of authenticity. Artisans, for example, are viewed as people who carry real skills and experience, not as actors following a prepared script. Even when visitors notice that some practices are adapted for tourists, they do not immediately see them as fake. Instead, they judge authenticity based on whether the activity feels sincere, continues local traditions, and respects cultural meanings. Tourists are also aware of the tension between protecting heritage and meeting the needs of residents, which shows how difficult it is to preserve heritage while keeping it alive. Overall, authenticity appears to be something built through relationships and interaction, grounded in everyday social life rather than in the absence of tourists. Table 3 presents the main sub-themes and direct quotations that illustrate how tourists perceive authenticity in the Medina.

Table 3. Heritage performance

Sub-themes	Significant Verbatims
Everyday authenticity	"The thing I love most in this place is that nothing is manufactured. It's far from being an attraction park. You see the shops and the little cafes and restaurants. They are an integral part of the Medina and its beauty" (I2)
	"Even when you feel there's a touristy side to it, you can feel that it's the neighborhood life that takes over." (I11)
Memory of crafts and gestures	"The craftsman explained his craft to me as if I were a family member. It wasn't a speech learned by heart. we feel that he was truly sharing something with me" (I7)
	"When I see a 70-year-old artisan still working, I tell myself that if no one takes over, this whole treasure will be lost." (I24)
Rituals and sacred temporalities	"On Fridays or during Ramadan, the Medina is not the same at all... The atmosphere changes completely; you feel the whole neighborhood vibrating differently" (I13)
	"What happens at the Zitouna during prayer is sacred... Even the visitors respect that moment." (I18)
Tensions between conservation and modernity	"It's all well and good to want to preserve it, but the medina isn't something frozen in time. You can feel it needs to live. I think we need to find a balance between the two." (I15)
	"We're so focused on protecting the stones that we sometimes forget about the people. We feel that the rules are so strict that they end up discouraging everyone" (I21)

Theme 3: Emotional Attachment and Post-Visit Trajectories

The results show that tourists build emotional ties to the Medina mainly through lived and sensory experiences, not only through historical information. Participants talk about feelings of closeness, nostalgia, and connection created by sounds, smells, religious spaces, and encounters with local people. These emotions often stay with them after the visit and influence their wish to return or to talk about the experience with others. Emotional attachment is also linked to the idea of continuity. Visitors express concern about protecting heritage for future generations and keeping traditional practices alive. Spiritual places and meaningful local figures strengthen this emotional bond and help visitors feel attached to the place.

Overall, these emotional paths show that even short visits can lead to long-term interest in heritage, turning tourists into informal promoters of the Medina. Table 4 presents the main sub-themes and selected quotations that illustrate emotional attachment and post-visit engagement.

Table 4. Attachment and emotional Trajectories

Sub-themes	Significant Verbatims
Deep affective attachment	"I lived here and it stayed within me. Even if I leave, I always end up missing the Medina; I have to go back." (I14)
	"I feel a strong connection to this place. It's not just about architecture; it's about its soul. The walls speak; the people welcome you warmly" (I25)
Intergenerational transmission	"I wanted to bring my children to show them what the place is like and how people live here. I want them to experience it for themselves, not just see what they see on TV" (I19)
	"These days, young people have their minds elsewhere; they no longer pay attention to these traditions. I take the time to tell them stories, to explain the reasons behind everything" (I24)
Spirituality and symbolic anchoring	"Sidi Mahrez is much more than a monument or a tomb. It's a spiritual landmark for many people." (I16)
	"It's truly our guiding light. We don't just go there to pray; it's where we often meet. It's like a place where heaven and earth meet in the heart of this souk" (I21)
Post-visit extension	"The last time, after I left, I kept the smell of the spices, the sounds, the colors with me." (I12)
	"The Medina stays with you—we took so many souvenir photos—it's not a visit you forget quickly." (I17)

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that tourists do not experience the Medina of Tunis as a single, uniform heritage site. Instead, it is a space with many layers, where the layout and movement within it shape how visitors perceive authenticity. This fits with earlier studies that highlight the importance of spatial differences in tourist destinations (Kadyrbekova et al., 2024; Pai et al., 2023). Tourists mention important landmarks like city gates—Bab Bhar and Bab Jdid—and the Zitouna Mosque. Passing through these points feels like stepping into a different time and culture. Getting slightly lost is not seen as a problem; visitors appreciate the Medina’s complexity. In fact, the difficulty of navigating the space itself gives a sense of authenticity, because it is not simplified or made too easy for tourists (Li & Li, 2022).

The everyday life of the Medina also matters. Residents go about their daily routines, artisans work, and families live there—these ongoing activities help visitors feel the place is real.

One tourist said: *"It is not a frozen backdrop. It is a place where people truly live, pray, and work"*. This contrasts with historic areas that are emptied for tourism, where heritage can feel disconnected from daily life. In the Medina, authenticity comes from being inhabited—what we can call “inhabited authenticity”—which is different from museum-like or fully curated heritage (Boussaa & Madandola, 2024; Palermo et al., 2023).

Tourists do not automatically see performed or “staged” heritage as fake. They make a clear distinction: performances that feel sincere and grounded in local culture are seen as authentic, while those that seem purely commercial or artificial are not. For visitors, performance is not about tricking people, it is a way to share heritage in an honest and respectful way. This challenges the old idea that heritage is either “authentic” or “commodified” (Waitt, 2009). For example, artisans may explain their craft differently for tourists but still keep the work genuine. One visitor said: *"With the weaver, I forgot I was a visitor. He spoke so naturally, as if sharing a family secret."* Residents take part in what can be called “situated performance”—carefully sharing their knowledge while staying true to everyday life (Boussaa & Madandola, 2024). What matters to tourists is whether the experience feels real and meaningful.

Visitors also notice the tension between protecting heritage and residents’ daily life. Comments like *"We want to preserve, but people also have to live; finding the right balance is not easy"* show that tourists understand heritage cannot be frozen in time or residents ignored. Keeping heritage alive in a sustainable way requires both protecting traditions and supporting people’s livelihoods (Jmour, 2021).

Tourists often develop strong emotional bonds through experiences that engage all the senses—listening to music, noticing the architecture, interacting with people—beyond just learning history. These feelings often last after the visit and influence behavior, such as recommending the site, coming back, or promoting heritage to others. This reflects a kind of “bottom-up effect,” where a specific experience encourages broader positive actions (Konstantopoulou et al., 2024; Chen & Cheung, 2025).

Festivals, with their short time frame, lights, and organized performances, make these experiences more immersive and accelerate attachment (Li & Li, 2022). In this way, tourists can become informal ambassadors for the heritage site. Our findings suggest that SET should go beyond focusing only on residents. Traditionally, SET links residents’ attitudes toward tourism with their support for it (Ap, 1992; Xiong et al., 2021). But it does not fully explain how tourists themselves create meaning. For visitors, authenticity emerges from the combination of spatial layout: lively, inhabited, and complex spaces, narrative honesty: performances that feel real and culturally respectful, and emotional impact: experiences that touch the senses and emotions. Sustainable heritage tourism works best when spaces remain inhabited and residents’ performances are genuine. Festivals succeed when they show these spatial, performative, and emotional layers rather than trying to display “pure” heritage—which is both impossible and undesirable.

Implications

This study adds the missing dimensions of space, performance, and time to SET. It shows that “support for tourism” and “heritage as lived practice” are not the same and need separate frameworks. Tourist attachment comes from spatial complexity, sincere narratives, and emotional intensity—factors that surveys of residents alone cannot capture.

Managers and festival organizers should protect the complexity of spaces and residents’ presence; avoid simplifying or emptying the area. They should treat resident performances as genuine cultural sharing, not as commodified entertainment. In addition, they should design experiences that engage the senses, not just provide information. They need to include residents in shaping narratives to ensure cultural accuracy and community values. The Medina of Lights festival shows that careful planning of space and time can enhance authentic experiences without harming social or spatial integrity.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how the layout of space, the performances of residents, and the emotions of visitors shape the way tourists perceive heritage authenticity during the Medina of Lights festival. We found that tourists appreciate the complexity of the Medina and the visible presence of its residents. Moments of getting a little lost or disoriented were not seen as negative; rather, they helped visitors slow down, observe, and engage with the place in a deeper way. Authenticity was judged less by the absence of performance and more by the sense of sincerity and respect for local culture. Visitors accepted performances and explanations that felt honest and culturally grounded.

Immersive and sensory experiences strengthened tourists’ emotional attachment, influencing how they remembered the visit, their desire to return, and their willingness to share or recommend the Medina to others. These findings show that heritage authenticity is not a fixed property, but something created through the interaction of space, resident practices, narratives, and visitor emotions. Preserving authenticity, therefore, means keeping performances real and spaces inhabited.

This study focused on a festival context, which may be different from everyday tourism, and although qualitative saturation was reached, the results are not statistically generalized. Future research should include residents' perspectives and follow visitors over time to see whether the attachment created by festivals leads to lasting engagement with heritage.

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