UNPACKING AUTHENTICITY IN HERITAGE TOURISM: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF DESTINATION ATTRACTIVENESS AND THE MODERATING EFFECT OF PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

Purpose: This study proposes and empirically validates the ADB (Authenticity–Destination Attractiveness–Behavioral Intentions) model to explain tourist behavior in heritage tourism. Drawing on the Affect–Behavior–Cognition (ABC) model and Means–End theory, the research conceptualizes authenticity as a multidimensional construct comprising object-based and existential dimensions. It examines its influence on perceived destination attractiveness and, subsequently, tourists' behavioral intentions. The moderating role of prior knowledge is introduced to explore variations in tourists' affective responses toward authenticity cues.

Methods: Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 222 visitors at two nationally recognized heritage sites in Binh Phuoc, Vietnam. The proposed

model was assessed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Findings: The results reveal that destination attractiveness partially mediates the effects of both authenticity dimensions on behavioral intentions. Furthermore, prior knowledge strengthens the relationship between authenticity perceptions and affective evaluations of the destination. The study advances theoretical understanding by clarifying the emotional and cognitive mechanisms through which perceptions of authenticity translate into destination loyalty in post-war heritage contexts. From a managerial perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for heritage site managers to design interpretation strategies that simultaneously evoke emotional resonance and cognitive alignment among visitors.

Keywords: heritage tourism; authenticity; destination attractiveness; behavioral intention; prior knowledge, effect

JEL classification: L83, Z32

1. Introduction

Heritage tourism has long been recognized as one of the most established and resilient segments in the tourism industry (Timothy, 2018). In the post-pandemic era, the pursuit of meaningful, culturally rich experiences has intensified, as travelers seek emotional recovery, rootedness, and connection to the past (Watson & Waterton, 2010; Rickly, 2022; Chen et al., 2024). In this context, authenticity has emerged as a central construct, influencing not only how visitors perceive cultural heritage but also how they evaluate the overall quality of their travel experiences (Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2018). Scholars have long acknowledged authenticity as a driving force in heritage tourism, rooted in both object-based and existential dimensions (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). Recent empirical studies further highlight its influence on destination satisfaction and tourist behavior (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Bilan et al., 2023; Dong et al., 2023). These updated findings reinforce that authenticity not only shapes perceived value and emotional experience but also contributes to the long-term attractiveness and competitiveness of destinations under modern challenges (Bilan et al., 2023). Yet, despite the conceptual richness of authenticity, the existing literature remains largely focused on its direct effects on tourist behavior, while neglecting the underlying mechanisms through which authenticity translates into behavioral outcomes. One such mechanism may lie in the affective evaluation of the destination, particularly destination attractiveness, a construct that plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' attitudes and intentions (Reitsamer et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2020).

To explain the underlying affective processes, this study integrates two complementary theoretical lenses. The ABC model (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960) provides a sequential framework, in which tourists cognitively evaluate the authenticity of heritage experiences, transform these appraisals into affective responses reflected in destination attractiveness,

and finally express them as behavioral intentions. In turn, the Means–End theory (Gutman, 1982) offers a value-based perspective by clarifying how specific destination attributes such as authenticity serve as means that connect to higher-order personal values, including identity affirmation, emotional connection, and intergenerational remembrance. Together, these two perspectives explain both how attitudes are formed and translated into behavior and why authenticity holds motivational significance for tourists, providing a more comprehensive and value-driven understanding of heritage tourism behavior.

Vietnam's post-war heritage provides a distinctive setting to examine how authenticity operates amid collective memory, cultural restoration, and emotional reconstruction. This context encapsulates a unique intersection of memory, resilience, and reconstruction, offering valuable insights for emerging economies where heritage serves both as cultural identity and economic resource. Despite these conceptual advancements, empirical research remains scarce in its integration of both the ABC model and Means–End theory within a unified behavioral framework. In particular, few studies have simultaneously examined the mediating role of destination attractiveness and the moderating influence of prior knowledge in the authenticity–behavior relationship. This leaves a notable gap in our understanding of how tourists cognitively process authenticity, translate it into affective responses, and ultimately form value-laden behavioral intentions in heritage tourism contexts. By combining these two theoretical perspectives, the current study develops a cohesive analytical framework that explicates both the sequential process (from cognition to conation) and the motivational structures rooted in tourists' personal values.

To address these gaps, the present study develops and empirically tests a conceptual model linking authenticity, destination attractiveness, and behavioral intentions in the context of heritage tourism. Termed the Authenticity–Destination Attractiveness–Behavioral Intentions (ADB) Model, the framework also incorporates prior knowledge as a moderating variable, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the cognitive and affective pathways driving sustainable tourist behavior. Such understanding is essential for enhancing the intellectual and economic sustainability of heritage destinations. By doing so, this research makes three key contributions: (1) it reconceptualizes authenticity as a strategic antecedent that operates through destination attractiveness to influence behavioral intentions; (2) it empirically tests the moderating effect of prior heritage knowledge on the perception of authenticity; and (3) it informs experience-based marketing strategies that leverage authenticity as a sustainable competitive advantage and a source of both destination resilience and cultural-economic revitalization.

2. Theoretical framework and Hypotheses development

Grounded in the conceptual background outlined above, this section elaborates on the proposed ADB model by developing specific hypotheses that capture the cognitive–affective–behavioral sequence and its boundary conditions. In doing so, we translate the

theoretical logic of the ABC and Means–End models into testable relationships within the heritage tourism context.

2.1. Behavioral Intention

Within the ABC framework, behavioral intention represents the conative component that translates tourists' affective evaluations such as destination attractiveness into future-oriented behavioral tendencies. Behavioral intention has been extensively investigated in tourism literature as a key predictor of actual behavior, particularly in relation to repeat visitation, customer loyalty, and post-consumption evaluation of destinations (Oppermann, 2000). Tourist satisfaction, derived from service quality and overall experience, significantly influences future behavioral intentions, such as willingness to revisit or recommend the destination to others (Ratnasari et al., 2020; Prayag & Ryan, 2023). Retaining existing tourists is considered more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, highlighting the managerial importance of understanding tourist behavior (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010). According to Jang et al. (2015), behavioral intention plays a crucial role in forecasting tourism consumption patterns and developing targeted marketing strategies. Oppermann (2000) further suggests that previous travel experiences shape tourists' destination image and information-seeking behavior, thereby influencing future behavioral responses. In tourism research, behavioral intention is commonly operationalized through intentions to revisit, recommend, and engage in positive word-of-mouth (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Chen et al., 2024). Williams and Soutar (2009) argue that tourists with satisfying experiences are more likely to share favorable impressions with peers. Thus, behavioral intention serves as a vital construct for understanding consumer decision-making and for informing destination management strategies aimed at enhancing long-term competitiveness and sustainability (Ariffin & Mansour, 2018; Li & Du, 2025).

Accordingly, within the proposed ADB framework, behavioral intention serves as the conative outcome of the cognitive–affective–behavioral chain, driven by tourists' perceptions of authenticity and their affective evaluations of destination attractiveness. While behavioral intention reflects the conative outcome, its formation fundamentally depends on tourists' cognitive and affective evaluations, particularly authenticity and destination attractiveness.

2.2. Authenticity

Authenticity is a central concept in heritage tourism studies, first conceptualized by MacCannell (1973) to explain tourists' pursuit of real and meaningful cultural experiences. Subsequent research has expanded on this notion, exploring its impact on place perception, cultural interpretation, and emotional connection with destinations (Cohen, 1988; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Boyd, 2012). Sharpley (1994) defines authenticity as the perception of being real, genuine, and rooted in historical or cultural tradition. In tourism,

authenticity is often linked to the perceived originality and uniqueness of attractions and experiences (Nguyen, 2020).

Recent empirical studies have revisited authenticity as a multidimensional construct shaped by both cognitive and affective processes. Park et al. (2019) demonstrated that *constructive* and *existential authenticity* significantly enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty, revealing that intangible cultural meanings can be transformed into tangible heritage experiences through tourists' interpretation and engagement. Similarly, Chen et al. (2024) confirmed that the *experiencescape* of cultural heritage sites comprising natural, social, sensory, and functional dimensions positively affects perceived authenticity, while *existential authenticity* mediates the relationship between experiential environment and revisit intention. These findings suggest that authenticity extends beyond objective evaluation to include emotional immersion and co-created experiences that enhance memorability. Zhao et al. (2024) further established that authenticity plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural uniqueness and strengthening destination image, which in turn fosters tourist satisfaction. This aligns with affective appraisal theory, underscoring authenticity as a critical antecedent to affective evaluations such as destination attractiveness and satisfaction. Thus, authenticity not only enhances the perceived cultural value of heritage sites but also operates as a psychological mechanism driving emotional resonance and behavioral intention.

From a theoretical perspective, authenticity encompasses both *object-based* and *existential* dimensions (Wang, 1999; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Object-based authenticity refers to tourists' perceptions of the inherent qualities of tangible cultural artifacts, while existential authenticity emphasizes self-discovery, emotional engagement, and personal immersion during the travel experience. Recognizing its multidimensional nature, this study adopts both object-based and existential authenticity to examine their respective impacts on destination attractiveness and behavioral intentions. In doing so, it also acknowledges authenticity's strategic role in enhancing the perceived performance and value of heritage destinations, thereby fostering sustainable cultural heritage tourism and long-term visitor loyalty (Li & Du, 2025).

2.3. Destination Attractiveness

Destination attractiveness refers to tourists' affective and cognitive evaluations of a destination's capacity to satisfy their motivations and preferences (Formica & Uysal, 2006). It encapsulates the perceived benefits, symbolic meanings, and experiential value offered by a destination, all of which significantly influence tourist choice and satisfaction (Lee et al., 2010). In heritage tourism, attractiveness is closely tied to the cultural and historical resources that form the destination's identity (Richards, 1996; Apostolakis, 2003). As tourists increasingly seek authentic and meaningful cultural experiences, heritage assets act as core pull factors that enhance the destination's competitiveness and emotional appeal (Nuryanti, 1996; Palmer, 1999).

Recent scholarship has redefined destination attractiveness as a multidimensional and

affective construct, integrating cognitive evaluation, emotional engagement, and perceived value under contemporary challenges. Bilan et al. (2023) demonstrated that tourism attractiveness is built upon economic, cultural, environmental, and social pillars that jointly determine a country's ability to sustain tourism competitiveness, particularly under crisis conditions. Their findings highlight that the cultural and environmental dimensions are essential drivers of tourism resilience and long-term appeal. Similarly, Nian et al. (2023) confirmed that *Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) attractiveness* exerts a strong positive influence on destination attachment and tourist satisfaction, emphasizing that affective bonds mediate the relationship between perceived heritage value and behavioral responses. In line with this, Pinke-Sziva et al. (2024) found that smart technologies such as digital sightseeing, smart attractions, and interactive infrastructure enhance the perceived attractiveness and distinctiveness of small-scale heritage destinations, enriching visitors' affective engagement and decision-making processes. Collectively, these studies suggest that destination attractiveness transcends functional attributes to encompass emotional and symbolic dimensions that foster tourist attachment and satisfaction.

Within the proposed Authenticity–Destination Attractiveness–Behavioral Intentions (ADB) model, destination attractiveness represents the affective component in the cognitive–affective–conative sequence. It functions as the mediating mechanism that translates tourists' cognitive evaluations of authenticity into emotional resonance and behavioral intentions such as revisit and recommendation. By conceptualizing destination attractiveness as a value-laden and emotionally charged evaluation, this study underscores its central role in linking perceived authenticity to sustainable tourist behavior and heritage destination resilience. Consistent with the Means–End perspective, destination attractiveness also reflects how tourists link perceived authenticity (means) with higher-order personal values (ends), such as emotional fulfillment and self-identity.

2.4. The Relationship Between Object-Based and Existential Authenticity

According to Kolar and Zabkar (2010), authenticity reflects tourists' enjoyment and perception of the genuineness of their experiences at cultural heritage sites. These perceptions pertain to both the objects encountered and the existential dimension of the experience, representing two distinct constructs object-based authenticity and existential authenticity. Carson and Harwood (2007) argue that the link between these two forms of authenticity lies in activity; what individuals do (e.g., hiking, camping, shopping) forms the contextual basis through which authentic experiences may or may not be achieved. Although Wang (2000) suggests that existential authenticity can occur independently of physical heritage, subsequent research indicates a more intertwined relationship. Carson and Harwood (2007), as well as Kolar and Zabkar (2010), argue that meaningful self-reflection and emotional engagement are often anchored in interactions with tangible objects and cultural settings. In the context of Binh Phuoc, for instance, walking through preserved wartime trenches or observing original relics may serve as a catalyst for personal

contemplation and identity exploration thus blurring the line between object-based and existential dimensions. Reisinger and Steiner (2006) similarly maintain that existential authenticity involves individuals interpreting themselves in relation to objects. Waitt (2000) confirms that historical validation often depends on physical artifacts, and Kim and Jamal (2007) emphasize the role of cultural objects such as traditional buildings or attire in facilitating authentic experiences. Yang (2023) further contends that existential authenticity is enabled through engagement with heritage objects, which in turn allows tourists to express and discover their true selves. This relationship has been empirically validated by Atzeni et al. (2022), who found that object-based authenticity positively affects existential authenticity in heritage tourism experiences. Understanding this relationship within the ADB framework clarifies how tourists' cognitive evaluations of tangible heritage elements evolve into affective, existential experiences that subsequently shape destination attractiveness and behavioral intentions. Therefore, this study posits a significant relationship between object-based and existential authenticity.

H1: Object-based authenticity positively influences existential authenticity.

2.5. The Influence of Object-Based and Existential Authenticity on Destination Attractiveness

Previous research highlights that tourists primarily rely on physical attributes at destinations to evaluate authenticity (Waitt, 2000; Naio, 2004). Most tourists are not equipped with expert knowledge, so they depend on tangible indicators when forming authenticity judgments. Wang (1999) proposed object-based authenticity as a broad construct encompassing both objective and constructive authenticity. While the former relies on the indisputable genuineness of objects, the latter is rooted in tourists' perceptions if a reconstruction feels real, it may be perceived as authentic regardless of its historical accuracy (Ha & Quyen, 2021). Recent empirical evidence by Phat et al. (2025) further supports this view, demonstrating that authenticity serves as a mediating mechanism linking cultural heritage to destination attractiveness, thereby reinforcing the role of object-based authenticity in validating heritage experiences and enhancing the perceived appeal of destinations. However, despite this empirical support, further examination is required to test these relationships within emerging heritage destinations such as Binh Phuoc, where heritage tourism development is still in its nascent stage. On this basis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Object-based authenticity positively influences destination attractiveness.

In contrast, existential authenticity is largely driven by tourists' emotional engagement with activities (Wang, 1999). As Olsen (2002) and Ram et al. (2016) argue, such experiences are constructed through social interactions and contextual relationships between places, objects, and themes (Yi et al., 2018). For example, tourists visiting war relics such as the Ta Thiet Base in Binh Phuoc may engage in role-playing or immersive activities that recreate the emotional atmosphere of past conflicts. Despite modern restorations, such activities can evoke strong emotional responses and enhance perceived authenticity. From

a Means–End perspective, object-based and existential authenticity also serve as pathways to higher-order personal values, which in turn strengthen destination attractiveness. Consistent with this perspective, Phat et al. (2025) provide empirical evidence that existential authenticity significantly contributes to destination attractiveness through its ability to generate affective connections and immersive heritage experiences. This aligns with the affective component of the ADB framework, where existential authenticity functions as a key emotional pathway enhancing perceived destination attractiveness. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

H3: Existential authenticity positively influences destination attractiveness.

2.6. The Influence of Object-Based and Existential Authenticity on Behavioral Intention

As argued by Gilmore and Pine (2007) and Ram et al. (2016), heritage tourists often seek unique, meaningful experiences. Authenticity perceptions offer insights into how tourists evaluate destinations and form future behavioral intentions (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010). Ariffin and Mansour (2018) emphasize that tangible heritage provides physical assurance for future visitations, enhancing tourists' confidence in recommending destinations to others. For example, Bryce et al. (2017) found that diasporic tourists pursue both object-based and existential authenticity in their journeys, even when providers construct an imagined past to meet expectations Similarly, Viking heritage sites in Europe employ reconstructed towns, costumes, and events to recreate the past. These reconstructions significantly shape tourists' authentic experiences (Halewood & Hannam, 2001; Coskun, 2021). For instance, visitors to Ta Thiet Base in Binh Phuoc often express intentions to revisit after engaging in immersive wartime reenactments that blend object-based and existential authenticity. Engaging directly with these environments fosters appreciation for heritage and increases the likelihood of revisiting or promoting the destination (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010). From a Means–End perspective, authenticity not only shapes behavioral intention through cognitive evaluation but also by fulfilling higher-order personal values such as identity affirmation and nostalgia. Recent findings by Chen et al. (2024) further confirm that both object-based and existential authenticity exert significant effects on revisit and recommendation intentions. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Object-based authenticity positively influences behavioral intention.
H5: Existential authenticity positively influences behavioral intention.
Within the ADB framework, these effects represent the direct cognitive–conative pathways, complementing the affective mediation of destination attractiveness.

2.7. The Relationship Between Destination Attractiveness and Behavioral Intention

In cultural heritage tourism, indigenous cultural experiences are often the primary

attraction and a key differentiator in a highly competitive global environment (Richards, 2021). As Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and Moscardo et al. (1996) suggest, distinctive attractions and heritage activities are essential motivators for destination choice. According to Genc (2022), travelers engaged in local cultural participation tend to prioritize authenticity and uniqueness in their experiences. Apostolakis (2003) further distinguishes between *core* and *peripheral* heritage attractions, each appealing to different market segments and experiential expectations.

For example, tourists at Sun City Resort in South Africa engage with Batswana culture through dance, cuisine, and handicrafts at the Segaetsho Cultural Village (Douglas et al., 2024). Similarly, visitors to the Ta Thiet Base in Binh Phuoc often report that the site's historical ambience and preserved wartime relics enhance its attractiveness and motivate intentions to revisit. Such experiences heighten emotional engagement, perceived value, and attachment to place factors that collectively strengthen tourists' behavioral intentions.

Empirical evidence supports this relationship: Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011) found that cultural attractiveness strongly predicts repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth, a finding further reinforced by Gursoy et al. (2021). Within the ADB framework, destination attractiveness functions as the affective mediator that transforms tourists' cognitive evaluations of authenticity into conative behavioral responses. This affective mechanism reinforces the theoretical coherence of the ABC model and underscores destination attractiveness as a pivotal driver of sustainable revisit and recommendation intentions in heritage contexts. Accordingly, this study proposes:

H6: Destination attractiveness positively influences behavioral intention.

2.8. The Moderating Effect of Prior Knowledge

Consumer knowledge plays a critical role in identifying product attributes and benefits, shaping attitudes and behaviors (Ratchford, 2001). Prior knowledge is defined as stored information about specific destinations in individuals' memory (Wang et al., 2014). In heritage tourism, it influences the depth of cultural engagement and perceived authenticity (Yu & Xu, 2019). Recent empirical studies reinforce this view. For instance, Maulina et al. (2022) found that prior knowledge significantly enhances perceived value and revisit intention among visitors to the Old City of Jakarta, highlighting its role in shaping affective and behavioral responses in heritage contexts. Similarly, a study conducted at the Wenchuan Earthquake Memorial Museum in China revealed that prior knowledge significantly moderates the relationship between tourists' perceptions and their evaluative and behavioral outcomes, underscoring its importance as a boundary condition in heritage interpretation (Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, García-Almeida (2021) emphasized that knowledge transfer processes embedded in heritage interpretation can shape or distort perceptions of authenticity, influencing the overall competitiveness of destinations.

Lau (2010) emphasizes that prior knowledge informs tourists' ability to assess authenticity, while Cohen (1979) and Yang & Wall (2009) highlight how misconceptions may arise

from limited knowledge. Tourists with heritage knowledge are more likely to experience emotional resonance and perceive higher levels of authenticity (Poria & Airey, 2003; Bigley et al., 2010; Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2021). Prior knowledge influences how individuals interpret authenticity cues, determining whether such cues evoke affective resonance or remain cognitively superficial. For instance, many respondents at Ta Thiet Base indicated that standing near wartime trenches or viewing authentic artifacts enhanced their emotional engagement, especially when they had pre-existing knowledge about the Vietnam War. From an ABC perspective, prior knowledge can intensify the affective response derived from authenticity perceptions, while from a Means–End perspective, it aligns authenticity cues with deeper value-driven motivations. Within the ADB framework, prior knowledge functions as a boundary condition that strengthens or weakens the cognitive–affective link between authenticity and destination attractiveness. However, empirical studies examining the moderating role of prior knowledge in emerging heritage destinations remain scarce, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where heritage tourism is still evolving. Based on these arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:.:

H7: Prior knowledge of object-based authenticity positively moderates its effect on destination attractiveness.

H8: Prior knowledge of existential authenticity positively moderates its effect on destination attractiveness.

Based on the analysis of the theoretical framework and the development of hypotheses related to the research topic, the proposed conceptual model is illustrated as follows:
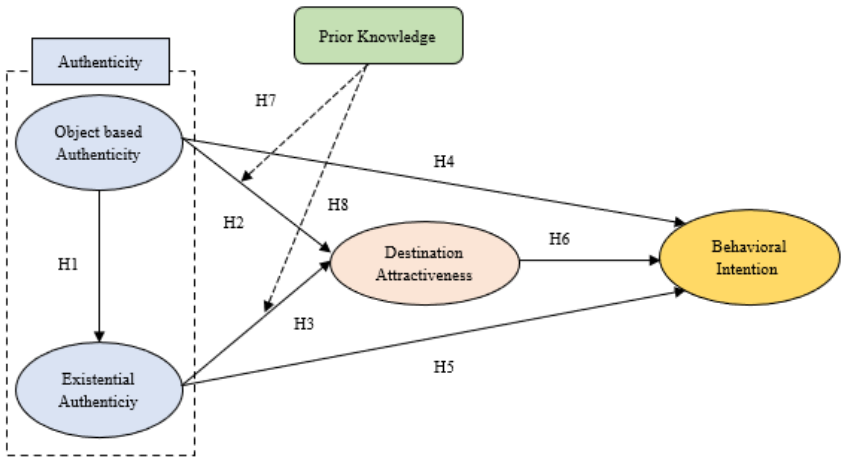

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model of Destination Attractiveness and Tourist Behavioral Intention

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Site and Heritage Context

This study was carried out in Binh Phuoc Province, situated in the Southeastern region of Vietnam. The province is home to over 40 officially recognized cultural heritage sites, many of which are associated with the Vietnam War and national reunification. Two nationally significant heritage sites were purposively selected as research locations: the Command Base of the Liberation Army of South Vietnam (1972–1975), commonly referred to as the Ta Thiet Base, and the Terminal Point of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which houses an artifact exhibition center and a reconstructed diplomatic liaison house. Both are designated as Special National Heritage Sites by the Vietnamese government.

These two sites collectively attracted approximately 85,000 visitors in 2023, accounting for nearly 70% of all heritage tourism visits in Binh Phuoc (Binh Phuoc Province E-Portal, 2024). While Ta Thiet Base offers an immersive outdoor battlefield environment with preserved bunkers and original trenches, the Terminal Point presents a more curated indoor experience focused on interpretive exhibits and historical education. This contrast provides an empirical basis for analyzing how different settings evoke object-based versus existential authenticity.

Moreover, both sites are deeply symbolic of national resilience and collective identity, which, according to Timothy and Boyd (2003), often trigger stronger emotional and reflective responses from visitors. These characteristics make them ideal for testing the ADB model, which emphasizes the dual influence of authenticity on both cognitive recognition and affective immersion. The settings thus offer a rich contextual backdrop for exploring how perceived authenticity enhances destination attractiveness and drives behavioral intentions among heritage tourists.

Sampling Procedure. A formal on-site survey was conducted between March 15 and April 20, 2024, targeting tourists visiting the two selected heritage sites. To ensure variability in responses, data collection was carried out on both weekdays and weekends. A non-probability sampling technique was employed, and following Adie and Hall (2017), entry and exit points were established to ensure that all respondents had actually visited the heritage sites. Demographic diversity among respondents was also considered to enhance representativeness.

Sample Size and Data Collection. According to Boomsma (1982), a minimum sample size of 100–200 cases is required for structural equation modeling (SEM), with Bentler and Chou (1987) recommending 5–10 observations per estimated parameter. Given the 22 observed variables in the current study, the minimum required sample size was 110. To ensure adequacy, 250 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 222 usable responses. The data were screened for completeness and consistency before analysis.

Data Analysis. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for

exploratory research and small to medium sample sizes, as well as its effectiveness in modeling complex relationships with latent constructs. The analytical procedure involved two stages: (1) evaluation of the measurement model to assess reliability and validity (including indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted), and (2) assessment of the structural model to examine path coefficients, effect sizes (f^2), coefficient of determination (R^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). Moderating effects of prior knowledge were also tested through interaction terms and multi-group analysis. Table 1 presents a detailed summary of the constructs, individual measurement items, and their theoretical sources.

Table 1: Constructs, Measurement Items, and Theoretical Foundations

Code	Items	Scale
Object based Authenticity		
AUTO1	This site is officially recognized as a cultural heritage site.	Likert 1 - 5
AUTO2	The heritage at this site reflects key historical stages of the local area.	
AUTO3	Artifacts and events at this site are authenticated by experts.	
AUTO4	The information provided about the heritage is both accurate and engaging.	
AUTO5	The heritage assets are well-preserved.	
AUTO6	Souvenirs reflect the distinctive cultural identity of the site.	
Sources: Kolar & Zabkar (2010); Shi et al. (2018); Lee et al. (2021)		
Existential Authenticity		
AUTE1	This visit offers meaningful insight into the wartime period represented at this site.	Likert 1 - 5
AUTE2	During the visit, I felt connected to the history and related figures.	
AUTE3	I enjoyed the tranquil and reflective atmosphere of the site.	
AUTE4	I empathized with my feelings and emotions at the destination.	
AUTE6	Visitors here interact with one another in an authentic way.	
Sources: Kolar & Zabkar (2010); Lee et al. (2021)		
Destination Attractiveness		
DA1	This site has a famous and appealing history.	Likert 1 - 5
DA3	This site uniquely integrates history with modernity.	
DA4	The local people's culture makes this place special.	
DA5	This site hosts appealing cultural events and festivals.	
Sources: Nghi et al. (2021) ; Pratminingsih et al. (2022)		

Behavioral Intention		
BI1	I would like to visit Binh Phuoc as a heritage destination.	Likert 1 - 5
BI2	I intend to visit Binh Phuoc in the near future.	
BI3	I will positively recommend Binh Phuoc to friends and family.	
BI4	If possible, I plan to revisit Binh Phuoc.	
Sources: *Ramkissoon & Uysal (2010, 2011); Loureiro et al. (2019)*		
Prior Knowledge		
PK1	Compared to my friends, I am more familiar with the heritage attractions I have visited in Binh Phuoc.	Likert 1 - 5
PK2	Before visiting, I already knew about the cultural history of Binh Phuoc.	
PK3	Compared to my friends, I am more familiar with the heritage sites I have visited in Binh Phuoc.	
	Sources: *Kerstetter & Cho (2004); Lee et al. (2021)*	

Note: All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

4. Results Analysis

To evaluate the proposed Authenticity – Destination Attractiveness – Behavioral Intentions (ADB) model, this study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The analysis followed a two-step procedure recommended by Hair et al. (2021), including assessment of the measurement model and structural model.

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed in terms of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. All constructs exhibited satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.752 to 0.905 and composite reliability (CR) scores exceeding the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.622 to 0.706, surpassing the recommended minimum of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), thereby confirming convergent validity.

Most retained indicators exceeded the 0.70 loading threshold, ensuring strong indicator reliability. One destination attractiveness item was retained despite a slightly lower loading because it captured essential conceptual content for this construct. Its inclusion did not impair convergent validity (AVE > 0.50). All other retained indicators demonstrated outer loadings above 0.70, except for four items (AUTE5, AUTO7, BI5, and DA2), which

were removed to improve overall model fit. Discriminant validity was further confirmed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT), with all inter-construct correlations below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), indicating satisfactory construct distinctiveness.

These results confirm that the measurement model possesses sufficient psychometric robustness for subsequent structural analysis. The multidimensional constructs of authenticity were empirically distinct and theoretically coherent, reinforcing the rationale for differentiating between object-based and existential dimensions. Table 2 presents the results for internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability) and convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted – AVE), all of which meet or exceed recommended thresholds, thereby affirming the unidimensionality and internal coherence of the measurement model.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
AUTE	0.887	0.889	0.917	0.689
AUTO	0.905	0.910	0.927	0.679
BI	0.797	0.802	0.868	0.622
DA	0.861	0.866	0.906	0.706
PK	0.752	0.756	0.857	0.667
PK*AUTE	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
PK*AUTO	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

In addition, discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), as shown in Table 3. All HTMT values fall below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), indicating that each construct is empirically distinct from the others. These findings collectively validate the adequacy of the measurement model for subsequent structural model evaluation.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	AUTE	AUTO	BI	DA	PK	PK*AUTE	PK*AUTO
AUTE							
AUTO	0.458						
BI	0.697	0.605					
DA	0.709	0.610	0.716				
PK	0.269	0.228	0.246	0.298			
PK*AUTE	0.254	0.213	0.340	0.348	0.108		
PK*AUTO	0.215	0.137	0.336	0.317	0.050	0.325	

4.2. Structural Model Evaluation

After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized relationships and assess the overall model fit. This section evaluates the structural model by examining model fit indices, explained variance (R^2), path coefficients, and effect sizes (f^2). The results provide robust support for the theoretical model.

4.2.1. Model Fit Assessment

The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of the estimated model was 0.062, which falls below the recommended threshold of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), indicating a good model fit. Additional model fit indices also confirmed the adequacy of the model: d_ULS = 0.979, d_G = 0.314, and Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.852. These values reflect both absolute and incremental fit, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.057	0.062
d_ULS	0.811	0.979
d_G	0.317	0.314
Chi-Square	566.222	549.972
NFI	0.848	0.852

These findings confirm the structural integrity of the proposed ADB model, suggesting that the complex relationships embedded in the dual-framework theory are statistically valid and parsimonious within the tourism context.

4.2.2. Explained Variance (R^2 Values)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the proportion of variance explained by the exogenous variables. The model explains 53.1% of the variance in Destination Attractiveness (DA), 47.4% in Behavioral Intention (BI), and 17.1% in Existential Authenticity (AUTE), as shown in Table 5. These R^2 values suggest that the model provides strong explanatory power, particularly for DA and BI, two key constructs in heritage tourism behavior.

Table 5: R^2 and Adjusted R^2 Values

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
AUTE	0.171	0.168
DA	0.531	0.523
BI	0.474	0.469

This level of variance explained supports the theoretical assertion that authenticity and perceived attractiveness jointly drive intention. The empirical grounding of DA as a mediating construct bridges the gap between emotional and behavioral dimensions in tourist experience modeling.

4.2.3. Path Coefficients

All hypothesized direct relationships were statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$). AUTO significantly predicted AUTE ($\beta = 0.414$) and DA ($\beta = 0.308$), while AUTE had strong effects on DA ($\beta = 0.414$) and BI ($\beta = 0.323$). DA also significantly influenced BI ($\beta = 0.267$), and the interaction terms involving prior knowledge showed meaningful moderation effects on DA. Table 6 presents the detailed results.

Table 6: Direct Path Coefficients

Path	β	t-value	p-value
AUTO → AUTE	0.414	8.150	0.000
AUTO → DA	0.308	6.167	0.000
AUTO → BI	0.240	3.058	0.002
AUTE → DA	0.414	8.567	0.000
AUTE → BI	0.323	5.797	0.000
DA → BI	0.267	4.142	0.000
PK → DA	0.106	2.211	0.027
PK*AUTE → DA	0.130	2.255	0.024
PK*AUTO → DA	0.143	2.474	0.014

The significance and strength of these direct paths empirically confirm the hierarchical flow proposed in the conceptual model from object-based cues to cognitive-affective states and ultimately to behavioral outcomes thus substantiating the integrated framework.

4.2.4. Effect Size (f^2)

Cohen's f^2 values were computed to assess the magnitude of each predictor's

contribution. AUTO and AUTE exhibited medium effects on DA and BI, while other predictors had small but significant effects. These findings highlight the central role of authenticity perceptions, while also validating the theoretical importance of prior knowledge as a moderating influence.

Table 7: Effect Sizes (f^2) and Interpretation

Path	f^2	Effect Size
AUTO → AUTE	0.206	Medium
AUTO → DA	0.162	Medium
AUTO → BI	0.076	Small
AUTE → DA	0.279	Medium
AUTE → BI	0.120	Small
DA → BI	0.070	Small
PK → DA	0.022	Small
PK*AUTE → DA	0.028	Small
PK*AUTO → DA	0.034	Small

These findings reiterate the theoretical centrality of authenticity perceptions, while also validating the nuanced influence of personal knowledge contexts. They collectively reinforce the proposition that the intersection of ABC and Means–End frameworks provides a comprehensive lens on heritage tourism behavior.

Figure 2 illustrates the validated structural model, including significant standardized path coefficients, R^2 values, and outer loadings. The diagram clearly depicts the sequential influence of object-based authenticity (AUTO) on existential authenticity (AUTE), destination attractiveness (DA), and behavioral intentions (BI), with moderating effects of prior knowledge (PK) on the authenticity – attractiveness relationships.
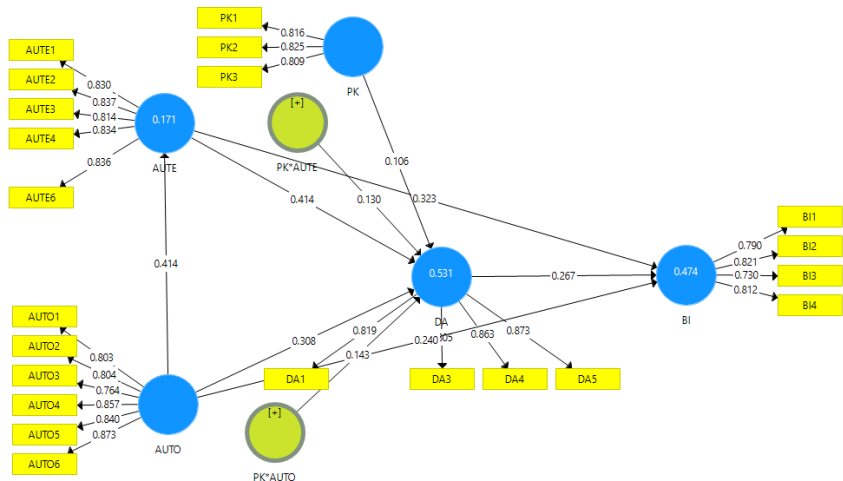
Figure 2. Final Structural Model with Path Coefficients and R² Values

4.3. Mediation and Moderation Effects

Bootstrapping results (n = 1000) further revealed several significant mediation paths. The sequential mediation from AUTO to BI via AUTE and DA confirms a dual-stage mechanism in which both authenticity dimensions work in tandem to enhance destination attractiveness and behavioral outcomes. Notably, AUTE → DA → BI (β = 0.111, p < 0.001) emerged as a particularly robust pathway.

Table 8: Indirect Effects – Mediation Analysis

Indirect Path	β	t-value	p-value
AUTO → AUTE → DA → BI	0.046	3.107	0.002
PK → DA → BI	0.028	1.990	0.047
AUTE → DA → BI	0.111	3.673	0.000
PK*AUTO → DA → BI	0.038	1.980	0.048
AUTO → AUTE → BI	0.134	4.943	0.000
PK*AUTE → DA → BI	0.035	2.039	0.042
AUTO → AUTE → DA	0.171	5.698	0.000
AUTO → DA → BI	0.082	3.252	0.001

These findings reveal that authenticity influences behavioral intention not only through direct channels but also through layered affective appraisals (DA), affirming the theoretical relevance of combining the ABC and Means–End frameworks.

4.4. Multicollinearity and Predictive Relevance

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged between 1.000 and 1.945, all well below the recommended cut-off of 10 (Hair et al., 2021), confirming the absence of multicollinearity.

Table 9: VIF Values

Predictor	BI	DA
AUTE	1.655	1.311
AUTO	1.437	1.246
DA	1.945	
PK		1.096
PK*AUTE		1.194
PK*AUTO		1.144

Note: All VIF values < 5, confirming absence of multicollinearity.

Stone-Geisser's Q^2 also supported predictive relevance values greater than zero for all endogenous constructs, affirming the model's out-of-sample explanatory capacity. These empirical validations provide strong support for the proposed dual-theoretical model, addressing the identified research gap in the Introduction section regarding the lack of integrated cognitive–affective-value frameworks in heritage tourism research. The model not only fits the data statistically but also aligns theoretically with the complexity of tourist decision-making in cultural contexts.

5. Theoretical Contributions and Strategic Implications

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the theoretical advancement of heritage tourism research by integrating the ABC model (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960) and the Means–End theory (Gutman, 1982) into a unified framework the Authenticity – Destination Attractiveness – Behavioral Intentions (ADB) model. The findings reaffirm that both object-based and existential authenticity significantly shape tourists' affective appraisals of destination attractiveness, which in turn influence their behavioral intentions. In doing so, the study not only confirms the direct effects of authenticity on behavior, as previously discussed by Kolar and Zabkar (2010) and Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011), but also empirically validates the mediating role of destination attractiveness an affective construct that has often been underemphasized in past models (e.g., Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Chhabra, 2010). This

study is among the first to empirically test an integrated ABC–Means–End framework in an emerging post-war heritage context, thus extending its applicability beyond traditional cultural tourism destinations. Recent studies further reinforce this integration of affective and cognitive mechanisms. Rickly (2022) emphasized that authenticity functions as an emotional accomplishment rather than a static attribute, while Chen et al. (2024) and Li & Du (2025) confirmed that both object-based and existential authenticity affect satisfaction, memorability, and long-term loyalty through affective pathways. These findings support the theoretical assertion that authenticity should be examined as a dynamic process linking perception, emotion, and behavioral intention rather than as an isolated construct.

Theoretically, the integration of Means–End reasoning provides deeper explanatory power by highlighting how authenticity attributes are cognitively processed and linked to personally meaningful values through the affective channel of destination attractiveness. Understanding the means–ends linkages is especially useful for destination positioning, as value-based differentiation tends to be more sustainable than attribute-based imitation (Vriens & Hofstede, 2000). In this regard, the study supports the argument that affective appraisals rather than merely perceptual judgments constitute a crucial mechanism in the formation of tourist loyalty and intention. This argument also aligns with emerging heritage tourism literature suggesting that affective constructs mediate more complex motivational outcomes than traditional satisfaction models propose (Fang et al., 2024; Pinke-Sziva et al., 2024). These works demonstrate that emotional engagement with cultural or smart-heritage experiences is a decisive factor linking authenticity with destination competitiveness and visitor loyalty.

Moreover, by incorporating prior knowledge as a moderator, the study addresses scholarly calls for greater attention to individual-level cognitive conditions that shape heritage interpretation (Poria et al., 2006; Yu & Xu, 2019). While prior knowledge can enhance authenticity perception, existing research has noted that tourists often possess limited cultural understanding due to differences in educational background and intrinsic interest (Calver & Page, 2013). This disparity highlights the importance of creating value-based interpretation frameworks that can resonate with varying levels of knowledge and involvement. As previous studies suggest, the interaction between prior knowledge and involvement is bi-directional higher knowledge fosters deeper involvement, and vice versa (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003). Recent findings by Xu et al. (2022) further show that even tourists with initially low cultural literacy may still exhibit a strong desire to engage with and learn from heritage contexts once emotionally immersed. These insights reinforce the importance of incorporating both cognitive preparedness and affective resonance into future theoretical models. Additionally, Maulina et al. (2022) and García-Almeida (2021) provide empirical support for this proposition by demonstrating that prior knowledge significantly enhances perceived value, interpretive authenticity, and revisit intention. These studies underline that heritage experience quality depends not only on material attributes but also on the degree of informational and cultural preparedness visitors bring to the encounter.

The ADB framework introduced in this study offers a nuanced lens to explore tourist

engagement in heritage settings, particularly by revealing how authenticity perceptions evolve into emotional appraisals and guide future behavioral choices. By articulating the cognitive affective value sequence and highlighting the role of prior knowledge, the model bridges theoretical and practical gaps providing a culturally grounded yet scalable tool for understanding heritage tourism dynamics in post-war destinations like Binh Phuoc. In post-war heritage contexts such as Vietnam, where cultural memory and identity reconstruction shape visitor experience, this integration clarifies how authenticity operates as both a cognitive and moral mechanism. Rather than functioning only as a measure of historical truth, authenticity becomes a means of emotional reconciliation and value reaffirmation, sustaining destination loyalty and heritage resilience.

5.2. Practical Implications

Practically, heritage site managers should balance the conservation of material authenticity through expert curation, verified interpretation, and artifact preservation with the design of emotionally resonant experiences. In Binh Phuoc, this may involve guided storytelling by veterans, interactive exhibits, or immersive reenactments that allow visitors to emotionally connect with the site's historical gravity. Such dual strategies not only enhance destination attractiveness but also foster sustainable, memory-driven tourism. However, these efforts should also recognize the delicate balance between heritage conservation and experiential commodification (Rickly, 2022). Over-curation or excessive dramatization may distort historical integrity, while insufficient engagement risks emotional detachment. Effective management thus lies in curating authenticity as both a material and affective value, ensuring that emotional interpretation strengthens rather than replaces historical truth.

Second, enhancing prior knowledge among visitors should be a strategic priority. Given its moderating role in the authenticity–attractiveness relationship, site managers can invest in pre-visit materials, such as interactive guides, narrative-based heritage apps, or educational briefings. These tools not only bridge knowledge gaps but also amplify tourists' sensitivity to authenticity cues, thus increasing the emotional and experiential value of their visit. Recent empirical evidence (Maulina et al., 2022) confirms that visitors with higher prior knowledge demonstrate stronger perceived value and revisit intentions. Thus, knowledge enrichment initiatives are not merely educational interventions but strategic levers for enhancing affective involvement and destination competitiveness.

Third, experience design should consider the diversity of visitor backgrounds. Since not all tourists arrive with equal levels of heritage knowledge or cultural interest, interpretation frameworks should accommodate both novices and enthusiasts. A tiered communication approach offering layered information and flexible engagement formats may ensure broader impact across visitor segments. In doing so, heritage sites can strengthen destination attractiveness, encourage repeat visitation, and foster positive word-of-mouth key elements of sustainable destination development. Integrating participatory storytelling and community-led interpretation (Fang et al., 2024; Bilan et al., 2023) can also expand

the social and economic impact of heritage tourism. By empowering local residents and veterans as narrative agents, heritage governance shifts from preservation for tourists to co-creation with communities an essential transition for long-term sustainability and resilience in post-war destinations.

6. Conclusion

This study advances heritage tourism theory by validating the ADB model, which synthesizes cognitive–affective–value processes in explaining tourist behavior. It demonstrates that object-based and existential authenticity influence behavioral intentions both directly and indirectly, with destination attractiveness serving as a robust mediating mechanism. The incorporation of prior knowledge as a moderator further refines our understanding of how tourists interpret, evaluate, and internalize authenticity cues in heritage settings.

Beyond these empirical findings, the study reveals that authenticity in post-war heritage operates not only as a measure of historical accuracy but also as an emotional and social process. It enables visitors to connect with collective memory, rediscover identity, and engage in reflective reconciliation with the past. In this way, authenticity becomes a catalyst for emotional healing and cultural continuity an especially meaningful insight for societies shaped by historical conflict.

While the findings contribute to both theory and practice, limitations remain. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and the focus on two heritage sites in Binh Phuoc, Vietnam, may limit generalizability. Although the sample size met statistical requirements, future studies should expand the scope to enhance generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches across diverse cultural settings to verify the general structure of the ADB model. Further exploration of additional mediators, such as emotional attachment or destination image, could deepen the understanding of affective mechanisms in heritage experiences. Moreover, emerging digital tools such as virtual heritage, interactive storytelling, and augmented interpretation deserve investigation as potential pathways that extend authenticity into hybrid physical–digital environments.

This study addresses the previously underexplored intersection between affective value formation and authenticity in post-war heritage destinations. The ADB model provides a theoretically grounded and empirically validated lens for examining how authenticity transforms from perception to emotion and finally to behavior. Strategically, it offers a foundation for integrating authenticity, emotional value, and sustainable competitiveness into heritage management and policy. By linking affective engagement with destination resilience, the model highlights authenticity as both a cultural and developmental resource essential for creating meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable heritage experiences.

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